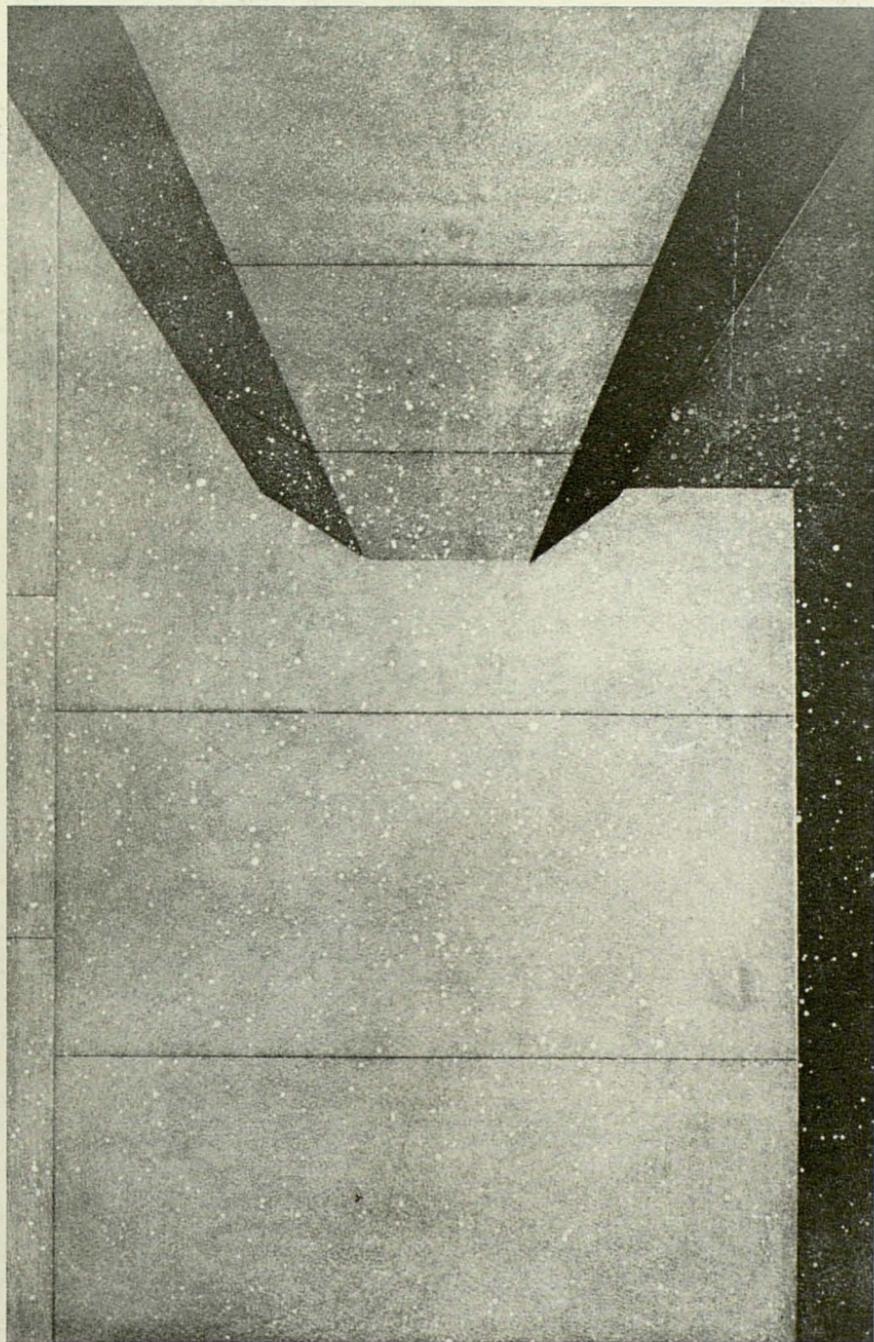


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SINISTER WISDOM 31





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WINTER 1987

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Happy new year, 5747, 1987. Some of you know, and — given lesbian communities' inherently telegraphic capacities — some have heard rumors: the next SW, issue 32, on illness, healing, death, and mourning, will be the last SW I edit. At that point — around the end of winter — SW will move into the wonderfully capable hands of Elana Dykewomon in Oakland, California. Sinister Wisdom *Books* (*A Gathering of Spirit: Writing and Art by North American Indian Women*, *Keeper of Accounts*, and *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*) will remain with me in Montpelier, Vermont.

FOR DETAILS AND DATES AND ADDRESSES ON THE TRANSFER —
WHERE & WHEN TO SEND MANUSCRIPTS, MONEY, SUBSCRIPTIONS,
BOOK ORDERS, ETC. —

*** SEE INSIDE BACK COVER ***

SW magazine has a tradition of changing hands, as the inside front cover attests. Harriet Desmoines (Ellenberger) and Catherine Nicholson founded SW and published it for years, passing it on to Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich, from whom Michaele Uccella and I took over in 1983. In 1984, Michaele left, making me the lone editor. From 1984 to 1985, until SW and I moved from Maine to Vermont, Fauna Yarrow was SW's office manager. In Vermont, Morgan Grey took over as office manager, Marianne Milton came to volunteer, and when Morgan got another job — helping women break into work traditionally defined as "men's" — Morgan reduced her hours, continued to run the business end, and Marianne has picked up half the work, especially publicity, advertising, most manuscript correspondence, all copyediting for 31. And I, teaching for a living, full-time since early 1985, have edited SW on "unpaid overtime." This fact will perhaps help women understand why their manuscripts have been held sometimes for long periods, why their questions have not always been promptly answered, why we have fallen behind in production schedule. I apologize to everyone who has felt badly treated. I am on the other end of submissions often enough to know how much one needs to be treated with respect in a world that values women, lesbians, writers, and artists at a rate of nothing to negative.

I brought to SW, as did Michaele, a greater emphasis on class issues and on the experience of working class women. I'm proud of this. I'm especially proud to have continued the impetus built by Beth Brant's guest editorship of *A Gathering of Spirit*, to include Native women's voices. I'm proud of the "focus" format for SW, the work on childhood sexuality and sexual abuse in SW 27; on fat and body image and on work in SW 28; of Irena Klepfisz's and my co-editorship of SW 29/30, *The Tribe of Dina*, and of collecting Jewish women's voices. And, at a time when the women's movement had barely finished polarizing along Zionist/anti-Zionist lines, and then shutting up or down on the issues behind the words, I'm proud that SW has continued to represent these issues. Sometimes this has drawn heat, for a variety of reasons, but through these risks I have come to realize I can live through disapproval even from my own people, lesbians or Jews, and to affirm the living value of controversy. I think SW has not been stale.

Through all this stretching and risking, from the very first issue, Irena Klepfisz has worked with us and then with me in a capacity for which there is no title beyond "sister" or "*kbaverte*" (Yiddish for "comrade," a term she taught me). Officially a contributing editor, in reality she has been a steady source of wisdom, ethics, experience, support, labor and *kbutzpab*. Whatever SW has achieved in these last few years must be credited to Irena as well.

SW has remained a journal for lesbians and feminists, resisting pressure — from the mainstream — to disown lesbianism, and — from some lesbians — to disown feminism. I have heard SW described as "no longer radical," though I reject that assessment. SW has, I believe, represented lesbians who are perhaps more isolated from lesbian communities, whose commonality with other women, Jews, rural people, workers, immigrants, whatever, comes into play. I believe SW has expanded out beyond what have sometimes seemed to me narrow confines of what lesbians were supposed to be interested in, to include some of our *actual* interests and concerns. I am proud of this expansion, proud of the quality of the work we've published, the paucity of typos, the fullness of each issue, proud of the low price and the never-raised hardship rate (\$6/4 issues), of the number of subscribers in prison who receive SW free. SW continues to survive *without any grants*, to draw sustenance from sales, subscriptions, donations, and other reader support.

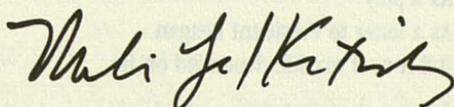
And I recognize that it's time for SW to be regrouped in lesbian community, while continuing its commitment to all these issues. Any minority group must, as a people, tug back and forth between separatism and connection, in a dialectic that, at its most useful, can deepen our sense of ourselves as a people and strengthen our relationship to other peoples. I think I have drawn SW towards connection and that Elana will resharpen the lesbian edge. I know from Elana's work that she will continue to develop the class politics, to expand the space for women of color and Jewish women, for fat women and disabled women, and for the new groups of women as they emerge, claiming voice. With attack abounding in the women's press, against separatists by some, against lesbians identified with their home communities (of Jews, Blacks, Chicanas, etc.) by others, it pleases me to expose the falseness and shallowness of this polarization by publicly demonstrating the mutual trust and respect between Elana and myself. I hope SW will be seen as getting what she needs and that continued transformation be the goal.

This issue was announced as focusing on sex and fiction. The call for fiction produced a great deal more in the way of original, compelling work than we could possibly print. Submissions on sex were scantier, but I am pleased with the work that appears here. I chose sex as a focus because the no-longer-"new" Right, the Supreme Court's decision in *Hardwick v Bowers* (saying, basically, the state can outlaw our sexual practice, if it chooses to do so) — these forces make it plain that our sexuality demands assertion, articulation. One problem with feminism: pressed by middle-class sensibility and aspiration, it got nice, proper, respectable too soon, a stance particularly dangerous to lesbian sexuality.

Although I will be publishing one more issue, this seems the appropriate place to mention additional support, which none of this would have been possible without. SW's visual appearance was shaped by the typesetting of Edith Morang and the layout and design of Helga

Manning, both of whom worked on SW from SW 25 through 29/30. Although the Maine-Vermont shlep proved too difficult to maintain, I regret that we couldn't keep working together, and I thank them for their contributions to SW's survival and growth. Gloria Anzaldúa and Beth Brant, both contributing editors, have sent much fine work to SW. Linda Vance has been driven, by living with me, to feats of reading manuscripts, proofing, obsessing, and reminding me why it mattered. Esther Hyneman and Judy Waterman have been called in for emergency advice and assistance and have both performed heroic deeds around publicity and fund-raising. The Adult Degree Program and Alternative Education at Vermont College have provided various forms of support. Cindy Lanane, Priscilla Lynch, Laurie Todd, Laura Philips, Chana Pollack all helped by organizing fund-raising events, as did Rose Klepfisz, who deserves a special thanks for unflagging support in a variety of forms.

Most important, writers and artists create and send work. I thank all of you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with some loops and flourishes.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

Emily Levy

One Hundred And Fifty-Seven Ways To Tell My Incest Story

Tell it in Spanish
In Sign Language.
Tell it as a poem
As a play
As a letter to President Reagan.
Tell it as if my life depended on it.

I was not molested as a child.

I feared, when I was three years old, that a man would come into my room in the middle of the night and Get me. Where did that idea come from?

I wonder why I hate my father so much. The explanations I've developed don't add up to the amount of anger and hatred I feel.

There's a vague possibility I was molested as a child.

Tell it as a healing ritual
As a soap opera
As a telephone answering machine message.
Tell it as justification for nuclear war
As justification for never having another war.
Tell it as a jump rope game.

A my name is Annie
He stuck it up my Anus
Now I am Angry
And I want Action.

B my name is Betty
The penis was my Brother's
I wrote a Book
'Cuz I want to get him Back.

C my name is Carla
He said he'd give me Candy
I told my Cousin
And the man got Caught.

D my name is Doris
I was still in Diapers . . .

Tell it as an epitaph
As a science experiment
As a country western song.

Why is it that when I see Dad I make sure to wear a long scarf that covers my chest?

There's no way he could have molested me. I'd remember it. I have a great memory. Everybody in my family says so.

*Why did I suddenly start hating him when I was eleven years old?
I think my father might have molested me when I was a child.*

Tell it as a "How To" book
As a newscast
As instruction on the box it came in.
Tell it as ancient history
As science fiction.
Tell it as loud as I can.

I dreamed that I decided to get his instead of letting him get me. I jerked him off angrily, scratching his cock with my fingernails, digging them into his flesh as deep as I could.

This is what you did to me.

I feel nauseous as I write this.

His cock kept growing. It was two and half feet long. I could barely reach to jerk the whole thing. I kept going at it as if I was trying to make him ejaculate. Then I realized it would be even meaner to stop.

As soon as I stopped, my mother was there again.

Tell it as a gossip column
As a last will and testament.
Tell it as if we like it.

When I was young, I used to say, "Don't touch me, I'm alive!" Why did I make up that expression?

Tell it as a fairy tale
As a auction.
Tell it as a greeting card.

To a Beloved Niece:
On this day I think of you
A girl with virtue always true
A sweeter thing I ne'er did see
No wonder Pop molested thee.
Your rosy breast and dangling tongue
What heaven in a girl so young!
Your beauty now is crowned with luck
His love shown by a family fuck.
One wish for you, now, if I may:
Happy Molestation Day!

Tell it a a bedtime story
As a bumpersticker
As an exhibit at Ripley's Believe It Or Not.
*Am I making this up as an excuse to bate him? If I falsely accused him, I'd
never forgive myself.*
Tell it as a map of the world
As a TV commercial.
Tell it as a board game.

"Snake eyes. Damn it, I rolled snake eyes."

"Ha, ha. You get molested by your twin brother. Your
nightmare quotient goes up 60%, your therapy sentence up
three years, and your sexuality goes into the shop for repairs."

"Hey, give me that marker! I can put my own sexuality
in the shop!"

"OK. My turn now. Three. One, two, three. All right!

'Doctor Feminist!'"

"Pick a card."

"You go to a three-day workshop where you cry, talk
about why you cried, and talk about why you talked about
why you cried. Take six months of therapy off your sentence.'
All right!"

"How come you always get the good ones? My turn."

Tell it as a court case
As a congressional debate
As if the power of children were respected.
Why do the muscles in my vagina tighten when I hear his name?
Tell it as a national sport
As domestic terrorism
Tell it as of this moment.

Kissing your lips is like walking into a lush garden,
such an introduction I want to do it again and again. I
rivet my eyes to yours, wanting to see through them to
everything happening inside you.

We delicately stroke each other's bodies — my palms
engulf your breasts, your fingernails cruise across my
belly. Kisses intermingle with caresses. We entangle and
rock until you lie on top of me. You slip your leg between
my two, press your knee against my cunt, whisper I want
you Baby, and suddenly you become him. You are pinning me
down, holding me so tight I cannot breathe. You are pushing
your prick into me, telling me I want it. I squirm,
wrestling with your body and with the voice inside my head
saying Calm down, that was a long time ago. This is
different; you chose to be here. Look: she looks nothing
like him.

Hey, where are you, you ask. What happened. You roll
off me and snuggle up by my side, brushing your hand across
my face. My eyes clearly describe to you the fear my mouth
cannot speak. You sigh and hold me gently as inside my
chest a stormcloud gathers.

Tell it as a religious service
As an opera
As discovered and interpreted seven generations from now.
*Maybe my family named me The One Who Remembers so that they could believe that
anything I don't remember didn't happen.*
Tell it as a guided meditation.
As the answer blowing in the wind.
My father molested me when I was a child.
Tell it as if we knew it would never happen again.

Nuptials

The other members of the wedding were to arrive just after one. Mary had been waiting for them since twelve, standing to keep her dress unwrinkled and digging the unfamiliar high heels into the carpet as she paced. Her older sister, the bride, had gone off with the groom a half hour earlier to the back bedroom to dress. Mary did not know how to make herself comfortable as her sister had suggested. She had never been here before. It was all new to her — being away from home, this house, her suddenly mature sister, and this fellow she had taken up with.

She was adjusting the tilt of a pair of white tissue paper fold-out wedding bells when there was a slight tap at the front door. It was a blonde woman wrapped in a green satin dress. The maid of honor, her sister's best friend, Debbie. Debbie immediately remarked on Mary's resemblance to her sister and told her that she could remember what fun it was to be fourteen. She sat on the sofa smoking cigarettes and telling Mary stories about herself until the next knock came.

"Oh, that'll be Roger," Debbie said. "You know, Davis's shipmate and best man."

When Mary first opened the door to him, she didn't know what to say. She just looked at him, a tall, rangy fellow in his best dress uniform, quite taken away with his red hair, full beard, blue eyes, and all.

"Well, hey," he said in a broad, deeply drawled voice. "Say hello." He smiled, pink lips peering just over his beard.

"Oh. Yeah. Hello." Mary nervously turned both knobs at once, opening the door more. "Come in." She watched his shiny shoes sink into the carpet.

"Why, thank you." As he walked in, he never stopped looking at her.

Mary thought for sure that she must be blushing, so she quickly closed the door with her back toward him. It was a relief to break his gaze, but it was a thrill to be gazed at. Scared shivers. She smiled and told herself to stop it.

Turning back, she saw him greet Debbie, who had put out her cigarette and was reclining slightly on the sofa. At Roger's hello, she too turned rosy. Maybe he is her boyfriend, Mary thought, watching them. But when he sat across from Debbie on a chair, instead of next to her on the sofa, Mary decided he couldn't be.

"I'll tell Ellie and Davis you both are here," Mary said as she began to back out of the room. She felt the spikey heels wobble with each sliding step backwards.

"Wait a minute there," Roger called out. "Why don't you tell me just who you are?"

"She's Ellie's baby sister, Mary. Down for the wedding," Debbie explained, leaning forward and toward him. "Don't you bother her now."

"I'm not bothering you, am I?" He smiled at Mary.

"No." Mary shook her head and stopped her leaving.

"Well then, nice to meet you Mary." He put out his hand.

She had to walk over to him to take it, and when she did, he turned her hand over and

kissed it just above the fingers. When his lips touched her skin, his blue eyes looked up and caught hers. He dropped the hand and said, "Now go tell that sister of yours and her fool fiancée that Roger is here, okay?"

"Okay."

Mary practically ran from the room, wanting to be a distance from him before she grinned too much.

The ceremony was hardly worth leaving the house for — all civil, signatures and stamps on paper. There were the obligatory photographs on the courthouse steps — Ellie and Davis holding the certificate, Ellie and Davis kissing, a group shot taken by some persuaded stranger, one of her and Ellie and Davis.

Driving back to Ellie and Davis' place, Mary got to sit next to Roger. In the back seat between her and Debbie, one arm lightly over her bare shoulder, Roger pointed out the harbor where his ship docked. His other arm brushed against her breast as he leaned over to make sure she saw.

"See her there? The big one. There's a floating airport aboard, too. And a couple times, we picked up the moon shots when they splashed down."

Mary couldn't make out very much, but it was a big ship. She said so too. He told her that a large bulk of the ship lay below the water line, so what she was seeing wasn't even the true size. Mary remembered what she used to worry about when she was younger — where did all the ocean water go whose space the ships stole? She told Roger this, and he laughed and said he hoped she didn't still worry.

Later, back at the house, Roger opened the first bottle of champagne with a flourish. "Boom, boom, boom — married," he said, mimicking the judge's gavel and rubber stamp along with a mock beheading as the cork ricocheted off the kitchen ceiling. "Are you sure you guys had to go through with it?"

"Oh, Roger," Debbie admonished as she grabbed a full glass from him. "That's no way to talk."

"Sure we're sure," Davis said with a smile, taking two glasses. "I was sure ever since you first introduced me to her, my best man. Your loss was my greatest gain. I have to thank you again, my friend." He turned to Ellie and kissed her exuberantly on the mouth.

Roger's grin disappeared into his beard.

"Don't mention it," he said abruptly. He poured two more and handed one to Mary, giving Ellie a questioning look. She nodded. "For the best girl from the best man," he said, lingering as he let go of the glass.

Mary held the glass he gave her carefully and felt herself blush again. Everyone else looked a little red too.

"And to the best couple," Roger raised his glass high, Ellie and Davis entwined theirs and they all clinked, "the best luck."

After the first magnum was drunk, the party really began to happen. Some guys from Davis' ship showed up, looking rather patriotic what with their uniforms and the cases of red, white and blue Budweiser they carried. Ellie's women friends arrived in twos and threes,

cradling pastel tupperware and foiled covered platters of finger food. No married couples came to this wedding party.

The guys talked loud right away, standing in groups, popping open beer cans. The women arranged the food they brought, then sat, posed with stemmed glasses of champagne on the edges of the furniture. Mary thought it was a bit like one of the dances at her junior high — boys on one side, girls on the other. She sided with the house plants. Standing next to a ficus and just under a boston fern, she kept watch over the wedding cake.

She watched her sister get scooped up and kissed by nearly all the men, Ellie laughing freshly at each one. Davis and Roger attended to the women, sitting with them, lighting their cigarettes, refilling glasses. Someone turned on the stereo. Conversations became louder. More people arrived. Soon, some women were standing, and some guys were sitting, then a few began to dance.

Mary was glad she wore the dress Ellie bought her and the shoes, for she did match the fashion of the crowd — but she did feel awkward. There were no pockets in the dress's sleek design for her hands to hide in, her body felt too bare, the high heels hurt. She kept close to the wedding cake which gave her something to do, even though she felt stupid saying only "Have some cake" to people. The cigarette smoke was beginning to bother her. She huddled further into the plants, breathing in their clean, moist earthiness.

Roger emerged suddenly out of the crowd, startling her and bearing two champagne glasses. "Don't get lost in there," he said, handing her a glass.

"I sort of wish I could," Mary said, taking a sip and making a face at the party and the champagne. "This isn't really, uh, my kind of scene."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't really know anybody and Ellie is all busy with her friends and . . ."

"Well, I'll be your friend. How's that?" He clinked his glass to hers.

"Thanks," Mary said, smiling a little at him. She didn't know what else to say. "Have some cake?" she tried hopefully.

"No — cake, you see, is not my kind of scene. One can't have his cake and eat it too." Roger laughed and began to walk away.

"Huh? What?" Mary said after him. He didn't turn around.

Roger visited her several times in the same manner, very attentive and always with champagne. He asked her about herself. He pointed out people to her and told her stories about them. Mary didn't always understand what he said or why it should be funny, but she smiled, felt grateful, felt flattered.

When he asked her to dance, she shook her head no, saying she didn't know how. But he insisted she try, and he danced well enough for the both of them, close and guiding. Then Davis asked for a dance. Then Roger again. Mary began to have fun and was feeling a bit lightheaded, with only champagne and cake in her stomach.

Letting loose of Roger, she whirled into Ellie, who was dressed to go, out of her wedding whites and into a pant suit.

"Hey you, settle down and listen in." Ellie stopped Mary by grasping both her shoulders. "Davis and I are going to be leaving soon, and you're going to be the one in charge here. Do you think you can handle things?"

"Oh yeah." Mary shrugged off her sister's hands. "There's not that much to handle, is there?"
"Well . . ." Ellie looked around at the remnants of the party until she spotted Davis. He was standing with Roger across the room. She motioned him over.

"Ellie," Mary began, "I never got to ask you . . ."

"Ask me what?" Ellie said brightly, smiling down to her.

"Are you happy with everything?" Mary was looking at her.

Ellie's smile grew smaller, but held. "Of course I am," she said carefully. "Wasn't this a good party? Didn't you like the cake?"

Davis had reached the two of them. "What's up, hon?" he said to Ellie.

"Dave, I don't think we should leave Mary yet. There's too much going on and . . ."

"What? What about our reservations? Come on, Ellie. She's a big girl. Aren't you, Mary?"
He nodded at her.

"I'll be fine," Mary said. "Really."

Ellie looked anxious. "Really?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Mary, trying to reassure. "As soon as everyone leaves, I'll start cleaning up and then I'll put myself to bed, no problem. I'm okay, just a little tired." She gave a small smile, then burped. "I'll get some food too," she added a little guiltily. "I need some."

Ellie was still worried. "Dave, maybe we should stay just a little while, just until things quiet down, huh?" She tugged at his sleeve.

"Now, Ellie . . ." Davis put his arm around her and shushed her with a glance.

"Tell ya what," interjected Roger as he walked up. "I'll hang out and help the girl, make sure everyone clears out, straighten up, and you two can go on your merry newly wed way and not worry." He patted them both on the back, smiling expansively.

"Are you sure?" Ellie asked him, peering over Davis' shoulder.

"No-oo problem."

"And you — how about you?" Ellie fingered her husband's lapel, then pulled it.

"Sure . . . Roger can handle things."

Ellie turned to her sister. "Mary? Are you okay about everything?"

Feeling self-conscious now and somewhat angrily young, Mary replied in a definite tone, "Yes. Sure. Of course. I'll be fine. Really." She looked up at the three of them looking down at her. She felt just like a kid. "Come on," she said. "Go on, it's your wedding night." She pretended to push the pair of them away.

When the last two guests had left, an inebriated Debbie on some smooth officer's arm, Roger turned up the music and reached for Mary — staying her one hand from picking up an ash tray and guiding her other to his waist.

"Let's dance," he said into her hair. It was the same all-hit Motown album that had been spinning most of the day, a long playing sampler of the classic loving and leaving songs.

"Uh, I don't know . . ." Mary said, pulling away a little, feeling for the first time the full effect of the champagne as she tried to separate herself from him. She couldn't.

"Sure you do," said Roger, tucking her body to his. "You sure do know how to dance." He put his hand through her hair and pulled a bit at the base of her neck.

It was easy to dance with Roger. He moved them both around in a small circle. She just

leaned. Maybe he would leave after one dance. She thought how lovely it would be to lie down at last.

She was almost asleep when he put his hand through her hair again. This time pulling tighter, he turned her face up and kissed her. She kissed him back, trying to be polite, trying to be right. His beard felt funny though — rough, like her hair brush sometimes did against her bare neck. He kept on kissing, even though she stopped. It was like his dancing, she didn't have to do a thing.

When he slid his tongue into her mouth, she pulled back, surprised and bit. He simply pressed her head up to his more and wagged his tongue inside her mouth. Mary wanted to gag, but thought that wouldn't be a very nice thing to do. So she tried to make room for his tongue.

She opened her eyes and took a look at Roger close up — little white drops were squeezed into each eye's corner, his brows were stiff, oily bristles, red veins webbed frantically just below the skin of his nose and cheek, the pores of which, at her distance, gaped. He didn't look so cute anymore. She wished he would stop kissing on her.

The slow song ended and a faster one began, all women's voices singing something about what mama said. Roger didn't seem to notice the new tempo, keeping to his own beat, shuffling slow into the shag. He pressed his hips into hers. She felt him harden and stiffen against her. She knew this was his cock, even though she had never felt one before. She didn't want to feel one now.

Mary bent her knees, dropping her face from his. She moved away and tried getting out of his arms. His mouth fell to her neck and shoulders.

"Roger," she said. "I don't want to dance anymore." Trying to pry him off her, she reached behind, bending one arm up, the other down as she arched back to find his hands. He caught her all the tighter.

"Roger," she said, almost crying now, really worried, feeling as if she had no feeling other than this sick, quick scare that had sprung up, making her skin cold and her stomach curdle. He picked her up, and she could swear she heard herself scream as she brought her arms back up front, pushing, palms together against his chest.

It didn't help. He kept grinding himself into her. Her arms were caught flat straight in front of her, her hands pressing right where his pants bulged. His face came up looking for hers. She saw his eyes open, and she turned her face away.

"What's this?" he asked. "Hey now, honey, what's wrong?" He stopped moving, but he didn't let her go or put her down. He just looked at her face with a small smile on his.

"Roger, I . . ." and she caught a sob in her throat, "I don't want to." Since he seemed to be listening, she stopped struggling and put all her appeal into her face and voice. "I, I never, I never, I . . ." She couldn't finish any of her sentences. He was simply smiling at her. He started moving his body again, his hands getting a better grip, her dress sliding up as he shifted her.

"Sure," he said. "Right. You never. Uh-huh." He was carrying her now, like a baby and running his beard over her thighs. She tried kicking, but her legs hit nothing. The music was so loud and full of voices, she felt as if there was a crowd of people watching, singing, chanting. She couldn't look anymore.

He walked out of the room with her. She heard him kick the bedroom door open. He unzipped her dress, and as he tossed her on the bed, pulled it off. The spaghetti straps snapped, stinging her shoulders. Holding her down with his hip, he took off his shirt.

Her arms were freed now, and she tried to stop his, catching them at the wrists. "Roger, no. I don't want this. I — please, don't." She couldn't talk straight. Just small, shocked words.

"Don't give me that," he said, twisting his hands to hold her wrists above her head, pressing them deep into the mattress with one hand as his other unbuckled his belt.

"I'm not giving you anything," she screamed, finally remembering how to scream, still scared, but angry now, eyes wide open. "I am not giving you anything," she repeated, hitting him with each syllable. She hated her fists for being so small, her teeth for biting her nails down, her self for being so stupid.

He was pushing himself in her now, and she couldn't look. She didn't stop trying to move away either, even though it was worse that way. She tried to think of something else, but there was nothing else — it was all this relentless riding, this dry tear deepening. She could hear him talking to himself, agreeing with himself, saying, "O yeah, yes, uh-huh, oh yeah," over and over again. She heard the bedsprings and the Motown music, driven by one of those playing arms that just keeps lifting itself.

He stopped finally, falling on her fully, his skin clammy, his breath loud and hoarse just above her head. She felt flat, hollow, caved in. He rolled off her.

Without the weight of his body, she could take bigger breaths, but she didn't want to. She lay there, her body chilled and tight, her skin shriveling. He was breathing heavy. The mattress sank down on that side, and she could smell his sweat. She didn't open her eyes.

Moving one arm down from her head, she cupped her hand between her legs and squeezed. She almost cried. She moved the hand to just over her shut eyes and opened them. The tips were dabbed with blood, the palm was wet.

He started to shift his body her way. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Hunching over, she held herself again. She watched the thickened blood seam between her fingers and rim her nails.

"You should have told me you had your period," he said. "It's okay by me, but you should have told me."

He sounded close. She looked over her shoulder and saw his arm stretching out toward her.

"Hey, come here."

She jerked away too fast, trying to stand, but falling instead. She landed with a skid on the carpet, burning her bare butt and hip. Forgetting about the blood, she put her fingers to her mouth and remembered. Rubbing her hand off on the rug, she looked up at him.

He was half sitting up now, looking at her with some puzzlement, his eyebrows pulled together, a small smile on his lips. He leaned on one hand and with the other scratched his pubic hair.

"Oh ho," he said, "you weren't lying to me now, were you? Well, well, imagine that, a virgin." He gave her this big smile, moving his hand up to pull his beard at the same time. "I'll have to come up your way and see you sometime, how's that?"

She just shook her head at him, her eyes not leaving him and pushed herself backward, hoping for a wall to help her stand up.

"Hey, come on, it wasn't that bad, now was it?"

She just kept shaking her head, sliding away.

"Hey, come on."

"Nah," he said loudly, louder than the two of them, "no way." He squinted at her. "You're just a tease. Just like your sister. A tease. And now you can't take it. Nothing off me." He slid down to the bed, watching her while she found the wall and pulled herself up against it.

It was cold and flat and white even in the dim light from the hallway. Her breasts hurt. When she stood up, her legs hurt too. Her fingers were dry now, but sticky with carpet fuzz and still streaked red.

"Tease," he said from the bed. "Not my fault. You wanted it."

Her crotch began to burn. She pushed off the wall and walked past him to the doorway.

He turned over as she passed, making the bedsprings squeak. "Can't take it, can ya?" He called after her. "Goddamn little prick tease."

She made her way down the hall, feeling both walls for support. She found the bathroom and felt for the light switch. She shut the door and locked it. Sinking down to where the rug was soft and furry, she leaned her back against the door.

She could hear him shouting, louder now, but no closer. No, she thought after his every shout, no, no. She crawled to the tub and turned on the spigots for a shower. When the water was hot, she climbed in, sat down, and let it rain.

The water had cooled and the pressure had fallen when she heard the front door slam. She twisted the spigots off and stood up, dripping. She found her sister's robe hung on the back of the door and put it on. The mirror was too fogged to see herself. She was just a body shape. Clicking the lock, she opened the door to the cool air of the quiet house.

It was still night beyond the windows and dark. The lights were burning bright, solitary. The living room was as she left it, except the stereo was silent. Beer cans, champagne glasses, ash trays, paper plates with half-eaten wedding cake, the cake itself slowly dying in the corner, one layer sliding off the other, the white lard frosting losing its grip. What balloons were left were puckering, and the streamers hung low. Albums lay spread across the floor like deck card dominos.

There was so much to do.

She didn't know what to do first.

Then she walked to the door and punched in the door lock. Then she turned the bolt across and in. She tried the knob to make sure.

She picked up a beer can. She picked up a piece of cake.

She thought she heard footsteps, and she fell to the floor ear to the ground, listening.

The next day when they found her asleep on the floor, she couldn't tell them why quick enough and it all became a joke.

Mud Wrestlers

naked we are mud wrestlers wrestlers of leather and wetness oil
and piss on strong forearms in the tide fields fields of mud

in early morning I stand scraggly in the flats like a strand of
marsh grass mud sealing my body from the sun legs gaunt and sunk

I run to keep warm you are with me my followers and you my enemy
form your ranks across the flats dancing and preparing like my own

slapping the green mud onto your pink skins lighting through like painted
roses we shout and carve our power into our arms our bellies and the

mud beneath our feet as if we were signs sucked out by the loose water
of the tides pounding as we watch each other gathering on either side

waiting to cross the distance I lead and know they will follow strong
women behind me my thighs buoyed by recklessness toward you a version

of me your warriors following you fanning out behind like wild geese
become naked women covered in mud crawling to meet across the mud flats

of tidal Maine inhabited only by us and flocks of jealous seagulls and the
great blue herons barking out welcome to the tiny life of shrimp and mussels

where the ocean holds its intimate beginning among the grasses and periodic
waters here we march a taut rope of light drawing us unbroken

to each other as we crawl looking up two ships or rockets destined
to collide the whites of your eyes shine out to me under heavy brows

of mud a flicker of smile plays at your lips yet I do not laugh at what
began as a game driving forward into you my face carrying through

this performance as if it were real and you are willing to follow me while
the others stop believing this is still a game for us this is combat

and we have become the center as I throw myself into you scratching for
your skin under the mud which opens before me like the pale mouth of spring

I am driven to devour it to hold its sliding essence my fingers unable
 to grasp anywhere to hold any part of you and you try to grasp me in

 the same way we slide over each other become one as the others crouch
 back to watch a sliver of cold shakes me as you clutch my body where

 the mud has been scraped off I am below you now the blue sky above
 clear and empty of mud my nose and mouth suffocating lower and lower

 I sink beneath the weight of us going down looking past you to those
 who followed me here a pride takes hold of me forcing me to rise up

 into you into your belly my legs between your slick thighs my arms
 around your neck I turn you slowly over burrowing

 on top of you now my cunt and legs spread across yours my nose
 flattened against your neck frog-like over you and up to catch you

 beneath your shoulder blades beneath your armpits I hold to your hair
 hanging down long and grainy through the wet as my other hand slips down

 to the crack of your ass full with mud pubic hair to pubic hair a
 necessary friction which holds us when suddenly I see your eyes go dark

 looking past me to the sky to the old abandoned railroad bridge across
 the flats I feel your arms stop fighting as you speak for the first

 time out here in a quiet voice as if you had to whisper 'there are
 people watching' you say and I look up still holding your arms pinned

 to the mud to see five clammers standing on the bridge pointing and
 laughing sounds we cannot hear but know and I know to crawl off of

 you thrown into pantomine the mud covering your nakedness now
 as we shake in the cold morning of late August Maine forced to bathe

 ourselves in the frozen tidal waters to gain back the warming sun forced
 to expose ourselves further to the laughing clammers so high on the bridge

 in the low marsh.

Nicky Morris

An Evening in the Country

I go and sit by the lake. How I like this time of day, the light almost silver, almost you said, in describing to me a memory of this light on a beach, almost palpable. Now I could touch the sheen on the lake, the particular pale green. I could almost touch you. I think about facing the lake instead of looking back towards the setting sun and the house. I imagine you walking out towards me with a plan for something. We have to rake the stones off your garden, I think to say, and I watch the trees joined together across the lake. A boat. Your dog. Your body moving behind mine this morning. I don't remember being fucked from behind on the carpet of Hal's mother's bedroom. I don't remember. I read yesterday about thorazine. I don't remember when he stopped taking it, when he tried to beat down the door.

You said you felt safest lying on your stomach with a man fucking you from behind. The man has a name. We go for a walk. I see dark shapes by the side of the road. Rocks, I say to myself. A pile of leaves. Who rakes leaves in the woods? Bears. Baby bears. A dead man, curled up. The moon is in front of us. I sing snatches of a song. "Bring that bottle (or is it body?) over here. I'll be your baby tonight." I kiss you with the touch of the moon on your cheek. He used to hit you on the chest. That's why you preferred to be on your stomach. We walk back. A bird. A bat. Something flies over our heads, but I don't notice.

By the pond I'm sitting next to a dead snake. In a book a woman writes of being whipped again and again, for pleasure. You and the man broke up when you tried to kill yourself. In the kitchen I cut up red pepper into small pieces and put it into the salad. I arrange pieces of avocado around the edges, with tomato. A piece of avocado slips out of my hand and your dog Sasha eats it. You tried to kill yourself, you say, because of a woman you wanted to see, who didn't want to see you. Sasha eats anything. You ate the pills, you say, in handfuls.

When it is dark we lie by the pond and you explain to me how you hear the peepers move in your left ear, then your right. You can feel them, you say, right here. And you touch, very gently, just below my left ear. Did he hit you often, I say. No, you say. Often? Once a day, once a week, once a year? I don't ask. I don't ask about the other times you tried to kill yourself. We lie on the ground. Tonight I feel the earth growing up through me. You feel the peepers in your ears. The trees lace together above us, framing the stars. We are both here, beneath these trees. A plane flies overhead. What if, I think. What if it were about to drop a bomb, and we, lying here, wouldn't even know it.

We wait to go in. I don't want to bring any of this between us. I know the light in the apartment on a hot afternoon. I can smell the dust, his breath. He hits you. I won't bring any of this between us. It is night. He hits you. A hospital bed. None of this is between us. I will pull you on top of me as if it were a new moment.

Into the Light of Day

for Marie Evangeline Surette

It is somewhere in that time between midnight and dawn when silence couches my parents' house, when the only sounds alive are those creaks and groans that hint of secrets. I am awake. I am awake because my inner voice has screamed me to be. I am awake because the air in my little pink room is thick with the heat of dread. I am awake because, somehow, I know he is awake.

I have to be awake. I have to be awake so I can stop the world, make it spin backwards, make myself stop thinking thoughts so evil that sweet Jesus himself would take joy in putting a stake through my heart to end them. I want to be awake so the screaming voice inside will finally come out. I want to be awake so I can say it. Say the truth. Say the truth I refuse to say, the truth I refuse to believe.

And I lie in my ruffled bed sweating, adding my own stinking perfume to the air. I can see him looking over at his wife, making sure she is secure in sleep; then, lightly easing his big birdy legs over the edge of their bed, their satin-quilted queen size rack. He puts his gimpy feet, always so sore, always so tired and bruised looking, into his brown leather slippers — the ancient ones, properly broken-in to suit his properly broken feet. Perhaps he glances over his shoulder as he slips through their door. Perhaps he doesn't care if she sees him leave.

Then I hear it: their door. The cautious creak as he trespasses into the hallway. His footsteps: a muffled sliding. Shlp. Shlp. Care for silence in each step. Shlp. Shlp. . .

Oh God. It cantbecantbecantbe whispers my heart with each beat. My cheeks burn Mama; Grandma my cheeks burn. Is there no air in here to breathe? Daddy, did you steal the air?

I stop breathing. I hear the silence as he stands before the wall heater. To warm himself? To listen? To reconsider?

I decide to jump up, clang about, make noise to summon helpful spirits. No. I decide to tiptoe to the closet, pull all the clothes on top of me. Yes! There it will be cool and I will breathe. I will never be seen again. I silently chant my pleasegod mantra as my mind struggles to make my legs move.

But of course my legs don't move; they know if they move it will be an admission. Pleasegodpleasegodpleasegod my breath whines with each swallow, labored effort. Ohgodplease. Ohgod. . .

A sudden flash: his silhouette framed by the ever-shining light in the hall. Huge. Grotesque. His head like a buffalo. The light blinds with mercy. The scent of day's end Old Spice — gentle, embracing. A footstep. Then, the element of blank. Like Emily's dear sweet pain: The Blank.

The electric guitars blare, the d.j. razzes. It's morning. A school day. My handsome, affectionate, brown-eyed daddy, the holder of all keys to love and pain, pokes his head in the door, gives me a sweet, warm wink: "Up and at 'em Sis."

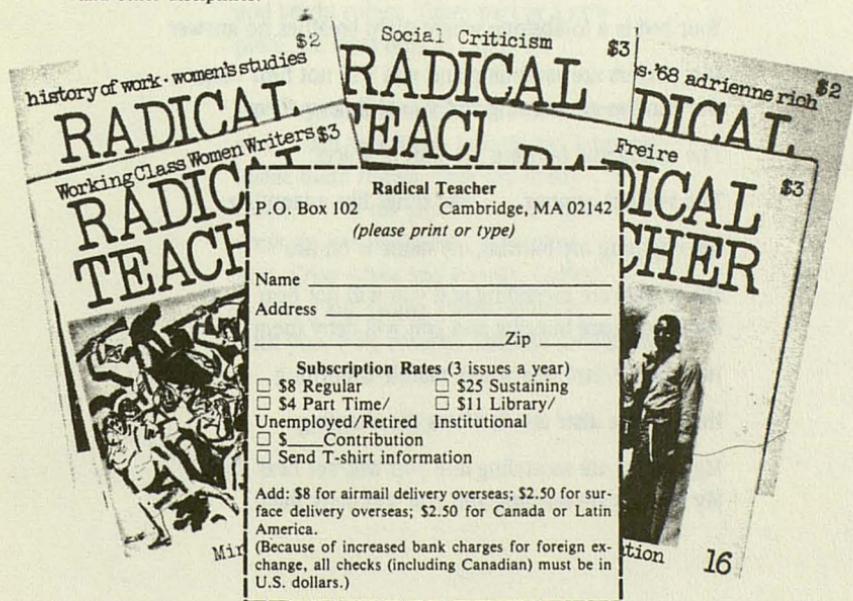
I smile. I get up. I put on my fuzzy pink pullover — the one that almost disguises my just-about-to-be small titties, the blue and gray plaid pleated skirt, gray kneesocks — Mother loves me to be coordinated — and my white bucks. I pull the gold and seed pearl cross Gramma gave me with the hope I'd be a good Catholic girl from around the back and untangle it from my long, silky hair. I love my pretty pretty hair I think as I look into the mirror at my shadowed eyes.

I kiss Mom on the cheek, and when I feel my father's thick, sensuous lips on mine in good-by and look into his dark, soft eyes, a rush of confusion shatters my spine.

But I am composed. I step out into the ordinary day, a good Catholic girl.

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The Novice: a chant for women's voices

Altars are burning like incense the chanting
All marble no garden the incense our burden
Our prayers are ascending and you will not hear them
Our candles are burning and you will deny them
The body in ashes the dream has been broken
By voices of longing these voices in terror
We are your sisters our cloaks cannot warm you
She is your mother her womb will not hide you
Your bed is a tombstone where night breathes no answer
Our prayers are ascending and you will not hear them
Our candles are burning and you will deny them
The raging and burning the wail of voices
The veil like armour the songs like a taunting
Are chanting my burning my name is on fire
My prayers are ascending and you will not hear them
My candles are burning and you will deny them
Here in the darkness where marble is burning
Here on the altar the darkness the chanting
My prayers are ascending and you will not hear them
My candles are burning and you will deny them.

Second Generation

Rows of black dress clothes,
eyelashes, eyes, olive skin,
Crisp white and jewelry,
bodies kneeling and rising.
I want to move with you,
hold rosaries, confess something.
Some of you still speak Italian
at least part of the time. I hear those

sounds enter the church, see those hands
dipped in water pass over the forehead.
Old women's heads covered in black lace
kerchiefs. A sea of contrast, darkness
and bright colors. Times past in a new
place. We meet only at baptisms,

weddings and funerals. You embrace me
and I want to ask you to keep me, keep me
inside these rituals. They are in my
blood, not in my past. Rows of black
dress clothes, eyelashes, eyes, olive
skin. Crisp white and jewelry, bodies
kneeling and rising. I want to move
with you, hold rosaries, confess something.

Passage to Glory

In the winter of '62 there was a big change in my family. My mother, my sister Jenifer, my cousin Mary Alice and my Aunt Hilda all got saved. I wasn't sure what it meant at first, but there were very noticeable changes in their lives.

My mother stopped having her Friday night with her women friends. And she no longer had her occasional glass of Manishevitz wine.

My sister seemed to have lost her love for dancing and listening to rhythm-and-blues music on the radio.

My Aunt Hilda left the man she had been living with and moved in with her unmarried daughter, Mary Alice. And Mary Alice never went to the movies any more.

My Aunt Hilda stopped by to see me one afternoon on her way home from work. She came in and sat down on the couch. She had a look of great concern on her face as she sat there with a very large black Bible in her arms. After we said hello, she just sat there looking at me for what seemed to be a very long time. "Have you thought about gettin' yourself saved?"

"Saved for what?" I asked.

"Saved from eternal damnation, that's what."

"What?" I asked again.

"You don't want to burn in Hell, do you?"

"Hell?" I was startled. "What have I done to go to Hell?" I wanted to know. I told her that I had done nothing more than get pregnant before I was married. Now that didn't mean I would go to hell forever, did it? I asked. I soon discovered that I was not qualified to debate the guilt or innocence of my soul with my baptized Missionary Aunt.

Aunt Hilda was my mother's oldest sister. And she had considerable influence on everyone in our family, even before she got saved. Now, with the Lord on her side, she was truly formidable.

"Well, it says here," and she slid over to me from the other side of the couch and pushed the Bible under my nose, "that all," she went on, "*all* have sinned and come short of the Glory of God!"

"What sins?" I wanted to know. I began to sense that I would not win this debate because I really didn't know what she was talking about. My life was piles of laundry and stacks of dirty dishes. I didn't have time or energy to sin.

She looked deep into my eyes and pointed to the Book. "Now this part right here in red is what Jesus himself said." Only at that moment did I note that some of the words were in red ink and some were in black.

"I am the Good Shepherd," she went on, "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep."

"Sheep?" I asked.

"My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them

eternal life, and they shall never perish."

"Perish?" I asked.

"In Hell," she answered. "You must repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus for the remission of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost speaking in tongues as the Spirit gives utterance."

Aunt Hilda had talked to me before about going to church, and I had gone. But I had not been totally persuaded that it was for me. I had enjoyed the singing and the friendly people. But I didn't see myself as a terrible sinner.

The words "eternal damnation" were totally unfamiliar to me. But they were very important words to my Aunt Hilda, and she insisted that they were also important to me.

"You better get yourself baptized and get the Holy Ghost, child," she said. And she abruptly stood up and began to pull on her coat, not waiting for a response from me.

"Why don't you come hear me sing with my choir next week?" Her voice was softer than before.

I felt relieved that she was ready to leave. I agreed to go in order to hurry her along.

"7:30 Friday evening," she said, as she headed for the door. "OK," was the only word I could manage. It satisfied her and she was on her way.

* * * * *

It was New Year's Eve and people all over D.C. were preparing to celebrate. Folks were buying their hogs heads and black-eyed peas for the traditional Good Luck New Year's dinner. And liquor stores were doing big business. It seemed as though everyone was planning a party.

I sat on the side of the lumpy bed that my husband and I had inherited from his Aunt Lena and watched him dress to go out for the night. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going out," he said.

"Why don't you take me?" I wanted to know.

"I'm just going to see Billy."

"Well, why can't I go?"

"Why do you want to go?"

"Well, don't you think I want to go out sometimes. And why are you getting dressed up just to see Billy?"

He didn't answer. He had a life of his own in the outside world. I was not included. He put on his jacket, and without another word, he was gone.

I stood at the window of our second story public housing unit and watched him drive away. I felt cold and empty inside. I had overheard him joke with a friend of his once. "My wife's married, but I'm not!" he'd said. "Some men are single on weekends, but I'm single all week long," he bragged.

Marriage was a desolate outpost, full of hard work and little else. I felt trapped and confused. I was a prisoner in my small gray world. My heart felt like a stone.

As the car disappeared around the corner, I saw my Aunt Hilda walking purposefully down the street to collect me. I had forgotten that I had told her that I would go to church with her tonight. My two children were spending the night with their cousins. There were no excuses. I resigned myself and started to dress.

New Year's Eve was called "Watch Meeting Night" at the Holy January Church. People who were saved sang and prayed the New Year in. The large brick building was filled to overflowing. There must have been five or six hundred people there that night.

A young man wearing a blue suit, white gloves, and a badge with the word "usher" printed on it showed me to a seat beside my mother, sister, and cousin Alice. My Aunt Hilda disappeared somewhere in the back to join up with the choir. The air was charged with expectation.

I was to discover that this was a very special night. On Watch Meeting Night, Lost Sons and Daughters that had "back-slid" into sin returned from the world to be forgiven. People came for healing. Husbands and wives were reconciled and sinners were saved. And the offering was expected to be large with such a good crowd.

I was moved by the energy, devotion, and beauty of the People. There were people of all ages. Male and female, young adults and middle-aged people, children, babies, old folks.

I was curious as to what it was that caused these people to fill such a large place on a night when most people were out dancing and drinking and not thinking of church at all. It wasn't even Sunday. Without warning, two women, one seated at a large organ console, and one at the piano started to play. The crowd stood. And from somewhere in the back of the church, a choir started to sing.

A tall handsome man wearing a white robe with a dark blue velvet stole and holding a large bible to his chest led the singers into the sanctuary. He was the Bishop. "Hold the fort for I am coming, Jesus is my King," they sang. Once they were all in their places, the Bishop in the pulpit and the singers in the choir loft, the Bishop lifted his arms, the singing stopped, and he spoke. "Saints, let us pray." At once hundreds of people began to pray out loud. It was not a formula prayer but a spontaneous outpouring of supplication and praise. I had never before witnessed such loud and emotional worship. This was louder than any Baptist church I had ever been in. People spoke in tongues. And tears flowed freely from men and women. After praying, we all sat down and the choir sang again.

The Bishop began to preach. "Let's have church. Somebody say Amen, Chic-a-ma-shy — ra-da-hum-die." He was speaking in the heavenly tongue.

He opened his bible and read his text. "I will bless them that bless you and curse them that curse you." He started quiet and easy and gradually accelerated. He went on for nearly two hours, preaching Hell Fire and Damnation without stopping. He walked back and forth across the red carpeted pulpit, waving his arms and yelling at the top of his voice. The air was punctuated with "Amens and Praise the Lord" and "Preach Bishop Preach." And when he finished, the crowd released one loud Amen.

Then he called for those who wanted to be saved to come to the altar. The music started again and the crowd sang "Throw out the Lifeline. Throw out the lifeline someone is sinking today." I felt like I was sinking. I was numb from so much excitement. "Jesus will make it all right," he said. "Come to Jesus, come to Jesus, come to Jesus right now. He will heal your body, he will heal your wounds. He will bring peace into your home." My heart leaped when he said that. "Sinners repent! Jesus loves you!"

"Jesus loves me! Jesus loves me!" The words rolled over and over in my mind. I was desperate for something to make my life easier. And if Jesus could do it, I was willing to get saved.

Without another thought, I found myself walking toward the altar. I could hear people

shouting, "Thank you Jesus, Praise the Lord!" "Jesus will Fix it Yes he will!" I was willing to try Jesus if he would ease my pain.

When I reached the altar, the Bishop took my hand and leaned down, his ear only inches from my lips.

"I want to be baptized," I whispered.

"Baptize Her, Praise the Lord." His voice boomed over my head. Two women dressed all in white appeared from nowhere, it seemed, and escorted me to a dressing room to change into the baptismal clothes. I was embarrassed about getting undressed. But as I did, I noted that another young woman was getting saved as well. I could see her from the corner of my eye being helped by another woman in white. I was moved by the beauty of the young woman's body.

After I was dressed into the baptismal robes, I was led to a door that opened to the pool. The baptismal pool was right behind the pulpit in full view of the congregation. There was a picture of an effeminate, brown-haired, pink-skinned Jesus painted on the wall. He was floating in the clouds surrounded by fat little pink-skinned Angels with white wings.

A man with wavy hair and a handle-bar mustache was waiting for me in the water. He was wearing a black robe. Another man, a preacher, was standing in the pulpit, facing us with a bible in his hand. The piano and organ started to play and the Bishop and all the congregation began to sing, "Wade in the Water. Wade in the water. God's going to trouble the water." I felt like I was moving in a dream. The water was much warmer than room temperature. I had committed my heart and soul and body to Jesus Christ in a public confession. The music played, and the Preacher read from the book. "What shall we say then shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? How can we who are dead to sin live any longer therein? And Peter said unto them, 'Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.' For my dear Sister I now baptize you for the forgiveness of your sins, in Jesus' Name, Amen."

The beating of my heart vibrated my whole body as I watched the water cover my face. Afterward, I dressed and returned to my seat. Another woman wearing white came over to me and whispered in my ear, "You have to tarry now."

"Huh?"

"You have to tarry for the Holy Ghost. You've got to speak in tongues."

"Speak in tongues?" I was sure that I had only one tongue and would only speak in English.

"So you can come to tarrying service on Sunday," she said.

Every Sunday the People came. They came to hear the singing and to hear the preaching. They came to see the beautiful people. I loved the show. I loved the beautiful Black woman who led the singers. I loved the way the short yellow woman with the short arms pounded the piano with her tiny hands. I loved the way they swayed in time with the music. Step-away. Step-away.

They were proud in the Lord. "I'm on my way to the Kingdom land, I'm on my way to the Kingdom land, I'm on my way to the Kingdom land, I'm on my way glory Hallelujah," they sang. We could hold our heads up in Jesus' name. He was our Savior. We were not ashamed. I loved the respect the people had for each other. "Praise the Lord!" they said, "Praise the Lord, Sister!" I was *Sister* Jackson now. These people were glad to see me join the band of

God Saints. The church was enveloped in sound. The music was loud. It pumped our hearts strong and full of hope. The singing, shouting and clapping hands lifted us above our dreary days.

The church was full of beautiful Black people. They had the truth. They saw the beauty in each other.

* * * * *

Tarrying Service opened with a prayer and a scripture reading, and then Sister Maddox would sing. "Pass me not oh gentle Savior hear my humble cry. While on others Thou art calling do not pass me by, Savior oh gentle Savior, hear my humble cry. While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by."

Her singing always gave me a sweet and peaceful feeling. Then Brother Maddox would call the New Saints to come to the altar. I would swallow what pride I had left and go forward and pray.

We would start slowly, saying, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" over and over again. The older Saints stood over us. One on each side. Encouraging us to yield to the Spirit in order to make the passage to Glory. There were several people other than me on their knees crying and calling on Jesus. A young muscular man was kicking like a mule and calling, "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" A beautiful young woman is going around and around in tight circles, her breast bobbing, her dress flying past her knees. She is in ecstasy. And I was hungry for the Spirit, but unfulfilled.

Women without lovers called "Jesus Sweet Jesus." Men looking for a good Christian wife called on him. Everyone was looking for a Savior.

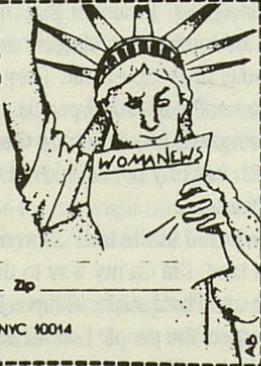
"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" My ears rang with His name. "Don't be too proud to call on him," the sisters said. "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Bless her Lord, Bless her!" I felt like a fool crying and calling on Jesus in public, but I was lonely.

"Hal-lee-lou-ya! Hal-lee-lou-ya! Hal-lee-lou-ya! Hal-lee-lou-ya! Hal-lee-lou-ya! Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus," we chanted, until tears rolled down from frustration and fatigue. I was lost in a tenant land looking for my spiritual new home. It went on for hours until I was hoarse with snot and tears. My Aunt Hilda sat in the pew behind me, watching and praying.

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Sharon Kay Comes To Visit

My cousin Sharon Kay is coming over! I'm so excited. She's older than my big brother and that makes her very old. She's the kind of girl I want to be when I get big. She's beautiful. She's got boyfriends.

"Jonie, get ready for dinner. Uncle Ken is bringing Sharon Kay over to visit with you tonight."

"Sure, Mom." I run excitedly into Ralph. He's fourteen and thinks I'm disgusting. He sneers at me. "Ralphie, Sharon's coming over!"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, I'm gonna get to have her sleep over.

"Yeah, just so she can talk to you about *menstruation*. Mom thinks you need Sharon Kay to make you feel comfortable now that you got your period."

"That's not the only reason she's coming!"

"Yeah, it is. She's doing Mom a favor."

"You're just trying to hurt my feelings." I run away crying.

At ten, I had started menstruating before any of my friends. Mom had sent away for a booklet from one side of the Kotex box for me called *Very Personally Yours*. Getting my period didn't seem like a big deal for me. What seemed weird to me was getting it on Ground Hog's Day.

I was waiting to hear if the ground hog saw his shadow or not, and how much longer winter would last. But instead I found this bright red mess in my panties, and my mother made a big deal out of it. She had even announced it to my Dad and brother at the dinner table. My Dad looked at me like I had done something wrong and said, "Make sure you're a wholesome young lady."

I guess that's why Mom had Sharon come over to talk with me and spend the night. She was the oldest of all the cousins, but since I was the family favorite, that somehow made us equal. I looked up to her and felt certain that we were friends. She used to share her teenage love questions book with me, and I read it over and over with the aching of lonely anticipation, waiting until I could ask those questions.

Q: I've liked Bobby all year. This month he asked me out. After the movies he tried to kiss me. I let him. Now he doesn't speak to me. What did I do wrong?

A: Girls who give themselves away at the first invitation find out that they are not much in demand. Next time, let your date know you don't go in for kisses on the first date. And wait for Bobby to forget. He may.

I knew Sharon Kay had her periods. One time she told me she even used Tampax. She said you could use them and still be a virgin. She said they didn't hurt and they had the extra advantage of preparing you for intercourse. She said boys don't like girls that they can't get their thing inside of. Tampons open you up, slowly but surely, so that on the big day, he can slip it in.

Sharon Kay was the only person who ever talked to me like that. "Just honestly," I thought. I knew she liked me. I was grown up for my age. Everyone said so.

Sharon Kay also had breasts. She wore a bra. My Mom had gotten me a starter bra. I was

beginning to develop. They were young apples, my mother said. Once I had worn my bra to school and had become so humiliated at the jokes, that I took it off under my clothes during class. I undid the back, slid the arm straps down under my sweater. Then I grabbed the right strap up by my elbow and pulled it out my sleeve and into my desk.

Raymond Springer, a boy I thought would make a good boyfriend, asked me if I had on a camel hair sweater. I said "No, why?" He said, "Because it has two humps." The class howled in laughter. I wanted to die.

But on Sharon Kay, a bra was perfect. So were her breasts, her bouffant hair with bangs, and her make-up. She wore white lipstick and blue eye shadow and short shorts. I know that if I didn't do anything else, I would try real hard to look like her.

After dinner, she came. She was as beautiful and sophisticated as ever. She told me about going to a dance with her boyfriend Bill. We set in my room listening to rock and roll on the radio. She said she'd fix my hair, so we set in front of my mirror, and she teased and combed, spraying my hair with lacquer, transforming me. She told me about her clothes. She painted my eyelids and drew a beauty mark on my chin.

She told me about Bill. He was 17. She let him kiss her on their first date. She said it was divine. He held her in his arms and kissed her with his lips and tongue. She said she loved him. "Now we do more than kiss." But then she laughed and said, "We don't go all the way."

Later, in our Pj's we laid in my bed and she told me about girls getting p.g. P.g. means pregnant, and it happens when you love a boy too much. You just want to give all your love to him, and the next thing you know you're p.g. Sometimes it couldn't be helped.

We talked in the dark about necking and petting. That was in-between kissing and going all the way. You had to decide whether you were going to let boys neck with you, weighing the fact that it could ruin your reputation, with the fact that they might not want to date you if you didn't. Plus it felt good, she said. She like to pet and neck.

"Would you like to pretend you're Bill?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, "But how?"

"Lay on top of me," she said. "Put your hands on my breast and rub, yeah like that, gently. Now squeeze a little . . . m m m m m . . . that feels good. Now kiss me. No, open your mouth." She laughed at my kisses. "Wait, slowly stick your tongue in my mouth and then slowly pull it out and keep doing that while you rub my breast." She was moaning happily, so maybe I had it right.

I couldn't believe the feel of her breasts in my hands. They were wonderful, and after my first few awkward attempts I felt my tongue figuring out a rhythm of its own. I thought I was going to faint, it all felt so good. With my tongue I was discovering every part I could reach in her mouth, while squeezing those soft but firm breasts.

"Stop," she said. It was so abrupt I felt I had done something wrong. Oh, please let me continue, I thought. This is wonderful. I want to be Bill. I like necking and petting too!

"Put your hand there, no, there." She moved my hand down between her legs. "That's right, now move it in small circles. Yeah! That's it. Um m m m, now kiss my breast. Remember, you're Bill."

Of course, I'm Bill, I thought, circling my hand in the way that made her moan even louder, and kissing those breasts that I hated on me, but loved on her. She got louder, and I was afraid she'd wake up Mom and Dad, so I switched from kissing her breast to kissing her mouth,

remembering that I was Bill. I moved my tongue in and out, circling with my right hand, in and out with my tongue. She shuddered and shook and bit my tongue, but I was Bill so it didn't hurt.

"Now stop," she said, adjusting her PJ's. "Okay, let's go to sleep. See that's what you get to look forward to when you grow up. Now I'm going to sleep to dream about Bill. He is so fine."

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GAMES

My name is Gwen. When I was ten years old, I lived in Dorchester with my Ma and Dad and my sister Peaches. We moved there from Pennsylvania when I was nine. It was June, 1962. School had just ended for the summer, and I was already bored. There just weren't many kids on my street anymore. They all moved away. It was weird, just when I'd get to playing good with someone — Woosh! They would be gone. Whole families seemed to disappear overnight. We lived there three years before we moved too.

There was a church on my street. We didn't go there though. It started out being called the "Temple Beth-El" but became the "Revival Time Holiness Deliverance Church." On Wednesday and Sunday nights you could hear the choir singing until late. Sometimes they had drums and electric guitars over there. Ma closed the windows when they played those instruments and muttered about how cullid folks can't leave nothin' alone. She and Dad would sit out on the porch when just the choir sang. It was nice if there weren't alot of cars going by.

Next door there was this white girl named Neila I played with, until she moved away at the end of school. Me and Neila spent alot of time on my back porch reading comics and burning little holes in things with a magnifying glass. We also tried to catch pigeons. There were millions of the big grey birds on my street. I liked them. There hadn't been any, that I could remember, in Pennsylvania. Pigeons walked all in the street in front of cars. They flew away just when you were *sure* they would get squished. Their heads moved in and out when they walked, and they made a nice chirping sound down deep in their chests.

I caught a pigeon once and brought it in the house. My mother tried to *die*. She screamed, "Get that nasty thing out of my house!" I threw it out the back door. My mother made me wash and wash my hands, the whole time going on and on about how pigeons had diseases. I felt like I had cooties for a long time after that.

My mother had a friend, Mrs. Dana, who had a daughter named Marcilann. Marcilann was older than I by about a year, but she was small and looked younger. She had a pretty face that was roundish and the color of kraft caramels. Her hair was long enough for two twisty pony-tails, one over each ear. She seemed to have an endless supply of those covered elastics — the ones with the plastic balls on the end. "So you don't break off your hair," she would say. My own stubby ponytails stuck out from the sides of my head like strange antennae. I would nod. My hair was held with two red rubber bands. These elastics once held the legs of a chicken my mother bought at the market. Marcilann could also put her hair in a flip. I thought she looked like Mrs. Peel off "The Avengers" t.v. show.

My mother thought Marcilann was one of God's gifts. She was thrilled that this perfect and wonderful child would stoop to play with me. *Me* — a gangly and unladylike specimen. My mother would always chime in:

"Marcilann never catches spiders in jars and leaves them all over the porch." "Marcilann doesn't come in the house smelling like a dog after rippin' and running in all that tall grass!"

Marcilann played "Double Dutch." Her feet seemed to hover, barely touching the sidewalk as her knees pumped up and down. The girls swinging the ropes swayed from side to side singing, "Cumila Cumila Cumila Vista, NO NO NO NO Nota Vista . . ." She bounced in the

middle, her wrists bent like cocker spaniel paws in front of her.

Marcilann also liked to play "Barbies." My mother thought these were activities a young girl should enjoy and hoped that I would someday figure this out. She was always suggesting that I ask Marcilann to go here and there, that we do this or that together. I did but the truth of the matter was — I was doing all the asking. Marcilann never asked me to go anywhere. She never used to play with me at all except everybody kept moving away. She was a — sort of — friend. My mother wanted me to be more like her. I guess she got her wish.

Marcilann had two brothers, one older and one younger. I often wished that I had brothers to play with, rather than a little sister always following me around. When I told Marcilann this she cut her eyes at me and said, "boys are nasty, my brothers are assholes;" she'd suck her teeth and turn her face away. Marcilann was quiet and polite around adults, but really she swore more than any of the other kids I knew. At first it bothered me how she got away with things like that all the time. But after a while it just seemed funny that adults were so easily fooled.

Marcilann liked my sister Peaches and didn't care if she joined in when we played. Peaches was four years old and not much use. She believed everything I told her, and I've told her some pretty wild things. I told her once that the water from the bathroom sink came from the toilet. She believed me and wouldn't let Ma get her a drink before bed unless she got it out of the kitchen sink. Peaches was afraid of clowns. Something about how their mouths were painted on. Whenever she said she was going to tell on me I told her that if she did I'd send some clowns after her. Marcilann liked to pretend that Peaches was her little girl. She'd get out the comb and brush and would plait Peaches' hair, and Peaches would sit there and let her do it!

Mrs. Dana and my mother got together almost every day. They talked at our kitchen table, leaning over cups of steaming coffee, cigarettes poised between two fingers. Mrs. Dana always started the conversation bragging about Marcilann. This day I sat in the pantry, drawing at a little table. The air in the pantry smelled of bread and ripe bananas. I liked to sit and listen to them talk. The sound of their voices made me feel good, safe kind of. Peaches was taking a nap.

"That Marcilann . . ." Mrs. Dana began, "she sure is something else. Do you know that she was standing at the sink last night washing out her own panties? When I asked her why she said that she didn't want the laundry man to touch them. My mother said, "well Mary — she's growing up." "Yes, I know she's growing up," Mrs. Dana continued, "but she's always been funny that way." "I wish Gwen would get funny that way," my mother countered. "How old is Marcilann now, eleven?"

"She be twelve in September." Mrs. Dana sipped her coffee and looked at the air above my mother's head for a moment, then snapped back. "Maggie I wonder if I could ask a favor?" she paused momentarily, "James and I are going to the Elks cocktail sip Saturday night. Could Marcilann stay over here that night? She's gotten so she doesn't like to stay home with her brothers when we go out. I guess the boys get to wrestling and that bothers her. Last time we went out she had locked herself in her room and put the chair up under the door. I asked the boys what was going on and you know what they said — Nuthin! We'll be out late so if she could spend the night it would be good."

I knew my mother would say no. She and my father were going out Saturday night too. Ma didn't like other kids in the house when she was out, and she didn't care for overnights at all.

I nearly broke the point off my pencil when I heard my mother say, "Why sure, Marcilann is always welcome. She's no trouble. She can share Gwen and Peaches' room." That Saturday night was the first time Marcilann slept over my house. As the summer continued she would spend many nights.

Peaches and I shared a bedroom. We had twin beds separated by an old, wide dresser. When Marcilann came she slept in my bed and I doubled up with Peaches. My mother usually put Peaches to bed first and let Marcilann and me stay up. This was so Peaches wouldn't stay up too late. I was glad 'cos Peaches was usually asleep by the time Marcilann and I went to bed. Once Peaches was asleep *nothing* could wake her up! I could climb into bed and push her right into the wall and she would keep on snoring.

If Peaches was asleep I'd get into bed with Marcilann. We whispered and talked about other kids and what it will be like when we are grown. She liked to talk about what her boyfriend will look like and would describe his face. His name was always Bobby and he had big eyes and eyelashes that curled. He would have soft pouty lips and lots of curly hair, not like her brothers' close shaven skinheads. He would always carry her in his arms to a faraway place (she liked to say New Haven) and say, "Oh Marcilann will you marry me?" Then he would kiss her on the mouth. Then it would be my turn, and my boyfriend would sound like Anthony Jenkins at school, he wasn't so hot. Marcilann's boyfriend sounded so much better than mine I found myself feeling mad.

Sometimes Marcilann and I practiced kissing, so we would be ready when the real kissing time came.

One hot July night, Marcilann came to sleep over. Peaches was visting her Godmother so I didn't have to share the bed. After we watched t.v. my mother ushered us into the bedroom, kissed us good night, and warned us to get some sleep. She shut the bedroom door. We lay silently listening as the floor creaked marking her retreat down the hall. After a moment I flung back the sheet and climbed into bed with Marcilann. She was very still, at first I thought she might be asleep. But then she took a breath and whispered "I've got a new game."

The game was called "Going to Barbados." "Barbados is a hot place so we have to take off our pajamas." She said this while pulling my sleeveless undershirt over my head. I kicked my panties out to the floor.

"I'm the boy and you're the girl, and we're in love." She called me Darling and kissed tiny soft kisses on my lips and cheeks. As she spoke, we walked barefoot on warm fine sand. We huggd under coconut trees. She stroked my stomach and chest. My body tingled. She called me Baby and said how beautiful I was and how she wanted to be alone with me but knew she shouldn't. Her fingers tickled and pinched. She said we were going into a cave, and she put her body on top of mine. She put her knee between my legs and rubbed it against me. I could hardly pay attention to what she was doing, I was thinking so hard. Were we "doing it"?!

When she rolled off of me we lay next to each other quiet and sweaty. I could feel my heart beating in my stomach and throat. Marcilann didn't say this game was a secret, but I knew it was. We played the Barbados game whenever Marcilann slept at my house.

Sometimes we would switch places, and I would be the boy. At first I didn't think I was doing it right, but Marcilann would hold me tight and tell me to keep on going. I got better. I began to think a lot about Marcilann, though she didn't treat me any differently than she ever did. We still hardly played together, but when we did, I wanted her to pick me for her partner or tell me secrets. When I saw her coming out of her house I wanted to run over and say "hi." When I saw her my stomach did flip-flops; I felt like I was wearing blinders. I didn't know what to do with myself. Funny, she never asked why I was acting so strange. I don't think she even noticed. I wondered what was happening to me.

Sometimes at school we teased each other about being queer if a boy said he liked you and you said "yuch." But no boy ever said he liked me. I had an aunt who lived in Jamaica Plain with her girlfriend Lydia. My mother said that they were bulldaggers and were trying to be married. I tried to look up the word bulldagger in the dictionary; it wasn't there. Anyway I liked Lydia, she had a huge German shepherd named Brutus, and she gave me and Peaches free rides in her taxi. I tried not to think about me and Marcilann so much, but it was hard. As long as no one else knew about "Barbados" it would be ok. July and August seemed endless.

It felt like my mother was watching me all the time. I guess she was expecting some big change in me 'cos I kept asking if Marcilann could stay over. All she ever saw, after one of Marcilann's visits, was the same old me only cranky from being up so late.

Near the end of August Marcilann stopped coming over as much as she had been. We spent less and less time together. She began to hang around with different kids, older kids who had no interest in a ten-year-old's games. Marcilann discovered boys, and they discovered her. They were a regular mutual admiration society.

Once I was coming out to play and I saw her sitting on the steps in front of her apartment. Right by the steps there was this cement wall. It came up to my shoulders, and I sometimes would climb up there and talk to Marcilann. On the wall were two boys. One boy straddled it, and one sat on top and leaned on the building. The boys were talking, and Marcilann was laughing. I crossed the street and said hi. I sat down next to her.

The boys were talking about the James Bond movie playing over at the Strand. They described all the important chase scenes putting in the sound effects for the cars and explosions. Marcilann listened as if hearing it all for the first time. But she saw that movie, and I did too; she was sitting down in the regular seats with some kids I didn't know. I saw her picking popcorn out of her hair at intermission. The boys continued going on about how James Bond always goes to bed with the girl who is supposed to kill him and which parts of her body they almost saw.

My stomach started feeling funny. I pulled Marcilann's arm and said, "C'mon." She looked at me like I'd slapped her face.

"Leave me alone." She smiled at the boys. They hardly noticed, they were talking about what they would have done in James Bond's place. One boy looked at Marcilann and raised his eyebrows, the other boy brayed like a donkey. "Ohhh man!, Jack said that he'd like to . . ." The boy leaning against the building lunged to cover the mouth of the boy straddling the wall. Bits of phrases escaped through, about kissing and doin' it. Someone yelled, "Shaddup man!" Marcilann watched them grapple, then pull each other off the wall. I pulled Marcilann's arm again and said, "C'mon, they're nasty." Marcilann glared at me and snatched her arm

away. She hissed, "Get off me Gwen, what are you queer or something!" I let go of her arm. I could feel the tops of my ears burning. I glanced quickly around to see if anyone else had heard what Marcilann had said. The boys were on the ground near the hedge, still wrestling. I walked backward down the two short steps, careful not to get tangled in my rubbery legs. I turned and ran across the street and into the house. My mother asked me what I wanted; I told her that I had a stomach ache and wanted to lie down.

I lay on my bed for a long time, making designs out of the cracks in the ceiling. I took out my book, *1001 Riddles*, that my Aunt Charlette had given me but couldn't find any that were funny. I could smell the supper Ma was preparing. I listened to her clacking pots and spoons together. Through my bedroom window I could look out on the back porch. I could hear Peaches talking to herself and every once-in-a-while she passed in front of the window where I could see her. I climbed off the bed and pressed my face to the window screen. "What are you doing?" I asked. Peaches had a bunch of dolls and some teddy bears lined up leaning on the porch railing. "We're visiting, I'm Mrs. Solomon." Peaches poured an invisible cup of tea.

"Want me to bring out some real tea?" Peaches pretended to sip, "Yeah!" I rummaged in the toy box and came out with a rusty watering can and two plastic tea cups. I filled the can in the bathroom. I hoped my mother wouldn't notice the trail of water drops leading across the kitchen floor and out the back door. Peaches and I played tea party until dinner time.

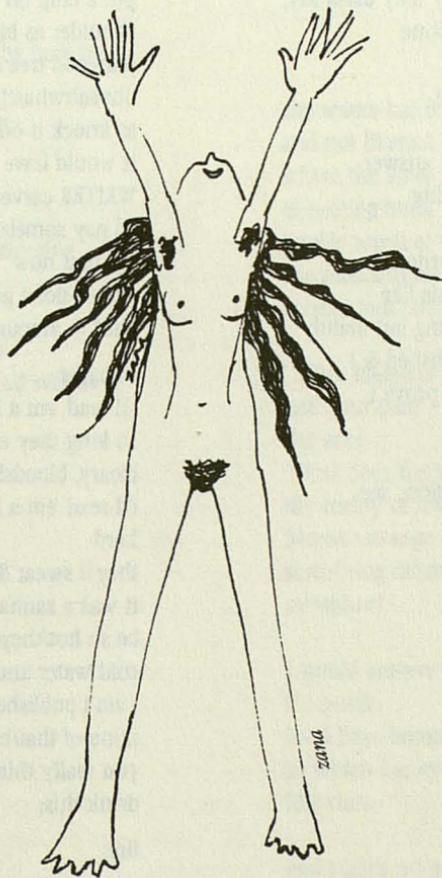
September came, and Marcilann went to a different school than I. She went to the Junior high while I stayed at the Campbell school for sixth grade. By October I saw Marcilann only in passing. She hardly acknowledged my presence. I spent more time with girls I knew at school. In November a girl named Debra moved into Neila's apartment. She was my age, I'd just turned eleven, and she seemed nice. She was kind of shy because she spoke with a West Indian accent. She was from a small town in Barbados. We played together and whispered secrets. We fought together too; she drew attention from the bad kids at school because she "talked funny." They said, "She thinks she's cute — I'm a kick her ass." One day I was walking home, and I saw this big crowd of kids all over the sidewalk. It was a fight. I was casually sneaking around the crowd, when I heard this shrill voice yell "Stop troubling me!" It was Debra! By the time I got to the center of the mob she was using her metal lunch box to drive home her request. Kids were hollering and covering their heads with their hands. Some were crying.

The fight was breaking up. I got next to her and started yelling, "Leave her alone!" Debra and I pushed our way through the crowd. To my surprise nobody chased us. We walked home talking about who did what to who. We became best friends. Sometimes we slept over each other's houses. It was nice. Debra had a big bed, she had no brothers or sisters, and we could sleep in it together. We talked and laughed, until her mother yelled. Then we would get close and go to sleep.

In February, Debra and I made a snow fort in my backyard. In it she and I sat, our noses and fingertips reddened beneath our brown skin. Peaches had given up and gone in the house. Her nose was all runny and her snowsuit was wet. Debra told me about the small town she came from. Her words turned into puffy clouds and dissolved in the cold air. We imagined how one day I would go back to Barbados with her. As we sat shivering in our frozen cave, I felt warm. I could see through the opening of the almost igloo that it had begun to snow.

The First Scent

The first time she touched her
she didn't wash her hands,
not that evening
or the whole next day.
She would touch her lips
and get a little scent of her,
all that evening
and the whole next day,
the first time she touched her.



i useta say i was a writer . . .

i useta say
i was a writer
& they useta say
oh yeah whacha published
they yuseta say
oh yeah? you a poet?
what kinda poetry you write?
they useta say
yeah i write sometimes too
especially if i'm mad
or got to shit or i'm
in love but 'specially they useta say,
oh *yeab*, whatcha done
published like that
was sposed to prove
something or really
like cause i couldn't answer
that proved something
or that they could
hold a pencil and write on
ruled paper in a crisis like
that proved something but mainly
it was whatcha published & i
useta not be able to prove i
was a poet if the
definition was
the proof of publication, see.

well,
i *dare* somebody to ask me that,
today, i mean i'd
put a chip on my
shoulder as big as a
redwood tree and i'd dare some
ohyeahwhatchadonepublished person
to knock it off cause it would have
it would have
WRITER carved into it, i mean,
i'd pay somebody to ask
me that now
since i done got published
enuf to amount to a tree of leaves
of paper
i'd read 'em a list
so long they eyes would get
bleary, bloodshot, gruesome,
i'd read 'em a list so
hard
they'd sweat & swear
it was a sauna my words would
be so hot/they'd ask for
cold water and i'd say
i ain't published
none of that/but if
you really thirsty,
drink this:
fire.

The Poet

it's easy to embarrass my lover
all I have to do
is read her poems
in which I have transformed her labia
into spinach leaves
teased
until they are slick and spicy
and the greedily eaten
until my mouth glistens

I make her blush
when I take her spiraldark
pubic hair
and send it flying over the lush field
of her belly
send it soaring above me
a black hawk
a winged eagle

she would be more comfortable
if her ears would stay
ears
and not iridescent shells
full with the promises and secrets
of the sea

she wants her breasts left soft skin
and not likened to tropical beaches
where the stray feathers
of nesting birds
jumble together in the sand
speckled and cream
banded and plain

"What happens between your eyes
and your pen?"

she asks

"How does the warmth of my body
the reality of my flesh
become strange to me
something other than myself
metaphor?"

I would answer her
if I could
but I have become a midnight lake
in which her eyes sparkle
like stars

and I have no mouth.

Too Too Red

I don't usually go to bars by myself. I don't go often at all, but last Tuesday night I wanted the taste of bourbon on my tongue and didn't feel like being alone with it. Sometimes I want the sharp smell of alcohol and cigarettes in the same way I want sex. Strong, pungent and scary.

Well that night I was not thinking about sex. Just the bitter warmth of whiskey. There is a place between my spine and sternum, not my heart, that is filled and warmed from the glow of amber light moving in a glass and in my mouth. When I taste that light, I taste yellow candlelight reflecting in red wine glasses and a carafe filled with sweet red liquid. A blue flame sparkling in clear highball glasses. A freeze frame of childhood holidays. A table made bigger with leaves covered in a long white tablecloth.

I sat gazing into candle flames, white tablecloths, and memories for some time, until my head was drawn up as if attached to a crane and was looking at the exposed chest of, I came to realize, a woman sitting at a table across the bar. Maybe it was the white tablecloth on her table too, that in combination with her breastbone, at least the shape and color of it, was so evocative of my own mother's that I was in a trance.

At first it had nothing to do with sex. It had to do with such a profound longing to lay my head against that set of bones that for several minutes I never even saw the woman's face or hands or anything. By the time I did look up at her she was looking at me with a half smile; open interest and hostility vying for the position of a message to be sent. What I got was both, and I immediately got up and walked over to her table, excused myself to her two friends, and asked if I might speak to her for a few moments. She came, now with a mixture of amusement and curiosity, and sat down at my white tablecloth. I never for a moment thought about what I would say. I started talking about the desert and fortune tellers, and she took in a breath that caused her chest to rise and fall, and I said to myself, I must have this woman. I can perfectly ignore the fact of the matter of the breastbone, white tablecloth and candlelight, and think that this is a perfectly new woman. A clean slate for me to write my story on. Ignore the fact that she has her own story, probably very different from the one I make up for her in which she plays my mother in her beautiful middle thirties.

There is a piano in the bar which croons and tinkles out the musical strains of *Nancy with the laughing face*. It's almost subliminal without the words, which I know by heart, and in fact it wasn't until I forgot a line that I realized it was even playing. My private scenario was momentarily shattered. *Did you ever hear mission bells ringing? Well she'll give you that very same glow.* I drop my hand, intending only to brush her thigh with the back of it. But in that instant as I was drawing away, her leg opened, turned my hand around, and filled it up. She pressed down very hard on my hand now, and there was nothing else to do but try to slide it up towards her ass. She lifted a lovely thigh and hip. My mind's eye saw what my hand felt. Hem of her loose dress, the top of a stocking attached to a garter, string underpants, soft firm skin, a leg stretching out under a white draped table in the back of a dark bar. Stretching out in the pleasure of secrecy. My hand travels on, pausing briefly

when fingers feel the outer edges of crisp hair. By the time I am finally grabbing half her ass, finger tips teasing asshole, she is sitting very much on her other side, head leaning against her arm, looking at me and moving her mouth. She is pretending to be talking with me, but what she is really doing is finding ways to show me her tongue. She is very clever.

My middle finger slips into her cunt with no comment except a flick of her tongue. It goes in and out until my index and ring fingers can enter, then they go all around and fan out to fill everywhere. I am amazed at how still she is, and I stop. I leave my hand where it is, promising more. *When she speaks you would think it was singing, just bear her say, "bello."* With my left hand I fish in a pocket for a tube of "too too red" lipstick. "Do you ever wear this stuff?" She applies it perfectly to her lips, tongue rubbing the roof of her mouth. A little drop of saliva falls to her bottom lip. There is a pool of cunt juice in the palm of my hand which is oozing its way over my wrist as I begin to rub her clitoris with my thumb. Her cunt, with my whole hand pumping deep inside it, is very much wetter than even her mouth, which is now only concerned with breathing without screaming and trembling without moaning. I stop. *If I don't see her, each day I miss her.* Her lips form the word, *please*. I hold my hand still, but she is relentless, moving up and down on my fingers, silently begging me. With my left hand I reach out and pinch an already erect nipple, stabbing through her silk dress. This causes her leg to contract in on itself, and it slides out from under the tablecloth revealing a thick, high heeled pump. *Oob what a thrill, each time I kiss her.* She bears down again, no longer trying to be still, holding on to the table as she rocks back and forth, up and down. My hand seems larger than life, leaving nowhere inside her untouched. I am now squeezing her nipple very hard. Her tongue is licking the air just outside her mouth. My thumb returns with a vengeance to her pleading clitoris. *Believe me I've got a case, on Nancy with the laughing face.* As it is rubbed all slimy and hard it gets bigger and begins to radiate intense heat. I am breathing very hard myself and don't care that the candle may tip over as the table moves with the force of our fucking. My arm is as strong as an athlete's as it powers my hand in and out of her, and my thumb is merciless until she lets out a pagan sound and convulses down, arms and head to the table, my hand caught in the vise grip of her crotch. *She takes the winter, and makes it summer.* When she finally moves to stand up, sucking wet sounds come from our separation. When she turns without speaking and walks back to her friends' table in the front of the bar, I lick my fingers. *But summer could take some lessons from her.*

Carnal Knowledge

First we had the sacred, and then the profane. Biblical, then carnal. Sacred, then profane. What's the difference? she mumbled into my neck, right after her tongue slid out of my ear.

I'll tell you, honey. I wanted to say, but my mouth was full of her lips, and I was shaking with five pleasures at once.

I could see it though. I mean, everyone knows about me by now, how I stroke my chin in the middle of Trivial Pursuit, discussing the answer, and they laugh, saying, well, nu, rebbi?

So, nu, the sacred is easier to describe than the profane: The sacred comes across the plains of time smelling of sandalwood, beating a tambourine, and her dark hair falls as water over sense — opening the passages to revelation, bridging the sensate world with the world of prayer, so that every touch is an act of devotion, of affirmation, of celebration in the spirit of the universe, the power that moves mountains and shakes seas is gratified by our union, and after our union, our reflection upon it — the way what is sacred takes hold of us and gives depth and connection to the holy, the creative unfolding of our days.

Say that again she said Mmmmmph I said No, she said, pushing her hand deep into my thigh, Say what you want.

I want you I said
Where she said In me I want you in me I want you hard in me I said

How hard? she said Harder I said I was sweating and shocked, grabbing at the flesh of her upper arms, wanting more and more of her and I could see her: how she'd just been, how I had been between her legs and my whole hand was throbbing in her cunt/I had been eating her but now I had one hand moving and twisting, calling to her to open to me and one palm pressing against her clit, against the mound, deep into the bone, the way the brown skin of her thigh creased and winked at me made my hips writhe and I ached to fuck her better than I ever had deeper strong entirely present in my lust, wanting to make her forget everything but wanting and she was calling my name, saying fuck me, fuck me yes and I was saying it's

so good you're so good I love to fuck you and then she was in me saying:
What's that you said?

Tell me what you want

I said it, I was lying there saying fuck me, get inside me, do me good —

and

that's carnal knowledge. Just the tip of it too. Even though we say the same
words over and over it's a lot more complicated being profane than being
sacred.

I mean
getting known
isn't something I learned
in Sunday School

Womantides

My hair spreads like seaweed
in the wake of your mouth.
We are clams in sea rhythm
surrendering
to the gentle clasp of teeth.

Your fingers are whispers
tides high and low.
Your mouth traces secrets
back to their source.

I want the swell of your hands
beached deep inside me
the slow lap of your tongue.

Theresa L. Crater

Downpour

Rain
not ordinary Northwest drizzle
but heavy windshield-slapping rain
that clings to costal firs
in gray muffled wraps
fogs up the car
 the mind
until we surrender to the wet
 follow it down
 to find its secret.

Geoduck: (gooey-duck) Chinook for Northwest clam with long protruding foot

A fat Siamese yowls at the sliding glass door
poor wet thing
 a homeless cat
who dines at 15 hotel doors each night
on salmon, crab
left-over breakfast cream
who sleeps with a wide variety.

She curls expertly around
my lover's stomach
 breasts
begins to whisper suggestions to me
 use more saliva the flat of your tongue
She purrs and kneads
bare skin with tiny pinprick claws
I hold the wet muscled rhythm
We build
 crescendo with the surf
The rain slacks off.

At the store we buy butter, rubber boots,
a postcard: not of rock spurred ocean beaches
the sun setting crimson
over gold splashed water
but a geoduck
her elongated clitoris
hanging luxuriously out of her shell,
her digging foot.
Only the wet survive this climate.

Mathematical Model

for linda

what makes this body
special this home muscular structure that
coos contracts with force the strength of it

inside my fingers track folds
the almost open *os* of your uterus pink
& slick with sex the thrust

as you come into my hand pushing me out
wrapping my strength around you
& you rest always

you make me come first my voice
no longer mine ancient rising deep
from the place where i want you

in me could i open more
aching against your thigh
what makes this body

open & how many times can we
touch this deep
come opening

into the other
& into the deep well of the world
where we are flesh

but safe & never die

Sliding

We swapped clitorises
slapdash after two, maybe
three, spells in your
rocking chair. Easy as
pie and nothing to it.
I tightened to a bead
and slipped through the hollow
just under your ear.
Down, down I slid.
I blew past lungs, liver,
and made straightway
for the ovaries;
staring from that
cave until
my eyes bugged out.

Teeming days thump-thumped
against the walls, and
finally I
splashed (glory-
bound and gulping
all the way) full
out on those lips. Those
lips. Those echoing, echoing
lips
of yours.

Lesbian Appetites: A Rhyme for Teaching A-B-C's

An **A**ppetite for
Bouncing **B**reasts for
Cunt which tastes
Divine.
Enthusiastic
Fucking
Giving
Happiness
Inside.
Joyfully
Kvelling
Lesbians who
Murmur through the
Night.
Openly seeking
Passionate **P**leasures to
Quickly
Recognize those
Slippery **S**pot
To **T**ickle and **T**ouch
Under
Velvet
Walls —
e**X**pertly e**X**tracting e**X**tasy from
Yielding erogenous
Zones.

kvelling (Yiddish), crowing with pride or pleasure.

from Found Goddesses

CUDDLES is one of the popular and much-worshipped goddesses of bodily pleasures, and Her rituals are observed frequently and repeatedly for the warmth and sense of well-being She inspires in Her devotees. She is an easy goddess, always accessible and accommodating, and Her presence can be invoked by the gentlest caress or the tightest hug. Wherever Lesbians greet one another with hugs, kisses, and laughter, there, also, is CUDDLES, dancing among the encircled arms, savoring the heat that rises as hands touch and lips meet. CUDDLES is especially fond of the feelings aroused when breasts are pressed against breasts and nipples rise in taut greeting.

Some particular friends have developed these rituals into a fine art form. They've practiced a lot, but gladly admit that even they are still perfecting the sensuality of their observances. Frequency of worship apparently heightens the pleasure of CUDDLES' indulgences. It has been said that one can easily identify a Lesbian among all others by observing how she performs CUDDLES' rituals, for Lesbians don't hold back any part of their bodies when they invoke Her, eagerly sharing full body contact when they hug.

CUDDLES, however, like so many other goddesses, is unpredictable, and revels in the energy sparked during even the briefest hugs!

CLITORIA, a hooded aspect of VULVA, is much sought after among the devout, but Hers is a temperamental nature, and She is known as much for Her inexplicable indifference as She is for Her equally mysterious passionate outbursts. She is our goddess of physical pleasure, sexual desire, and pure lust. One or more, depending on taste and opportunity, may give tongue to the invocations that excite Her interest and call Her forth.

Her observances are protected by the tenderness of LABIA MAJORA and LABIA MINORA. During Her most intense rituals, She is known for her multiple, ecstatic appearances, which are accompanied by profuse outpourings of energy and fervor. When Her devotees sense Her imminent arousal, they frequently rise to the occasion with much noise, thrashing about, and loud moans, all of which are said to whet Her appetite and heighten the ecstatic experience of Her arrival. Motion, emotion, and commotion attend Her.

When She isn't interested, however, no amount of coaxing or teasing will call Her forth from the folds of Her indifference. For this reason, She is greatly respected, and much care is taken to insure that the proper mood and setting are chosen for Her rituals. Some celebrants take much time preparing themselves and their surroundings to invoke Her, lighting many-colored candles, burning incense, smearing their bodies with perfumes, oils, whipped cream, or the essence of CHOCOLATA. Others, knowing Her unpredictability well, delight Her with spontaneity and the impulse of a moment. Her worship is usually conducted by hand and mouth, but there is also an occasional Rub, which no one seems to mind as long as it's not the wrong way. When the mood is right, CLITORIA responds. She cannot be understood,

only experienced.

Her gifts, as well as Her mysteries, are legend among the loose of tongue. Only one sincere devotee is necessary to invoke Her Presence, so She is also the goddess of self-love and masturbation. One or more who call upon Her are occasionally assisted in their observances by VIBRATA, She Who Hums Steadily.

CLITORIA's worshippers know many times and ways of calling upon Her, and many stories are told of the strange and different places where they have experienced Her ecstasies. It is said they take much delight in vying with one another as they share their tales of risk and daring, in bathtubs, moving vehicles, stopped elevators, sleeping bags under the stars, and in the Earth's many bodies of water. Some say that it is possible these stories have been exaggerated, but unlikely. It is true that one has to be there.

Whatever one's pleasure, CLITORIA's rituals remain primarily private, hands-on affairs, and, where She is invoked by the chant,

Clitoria, Clitoria, Labia Majora and Minora,
Vulva and Vagina

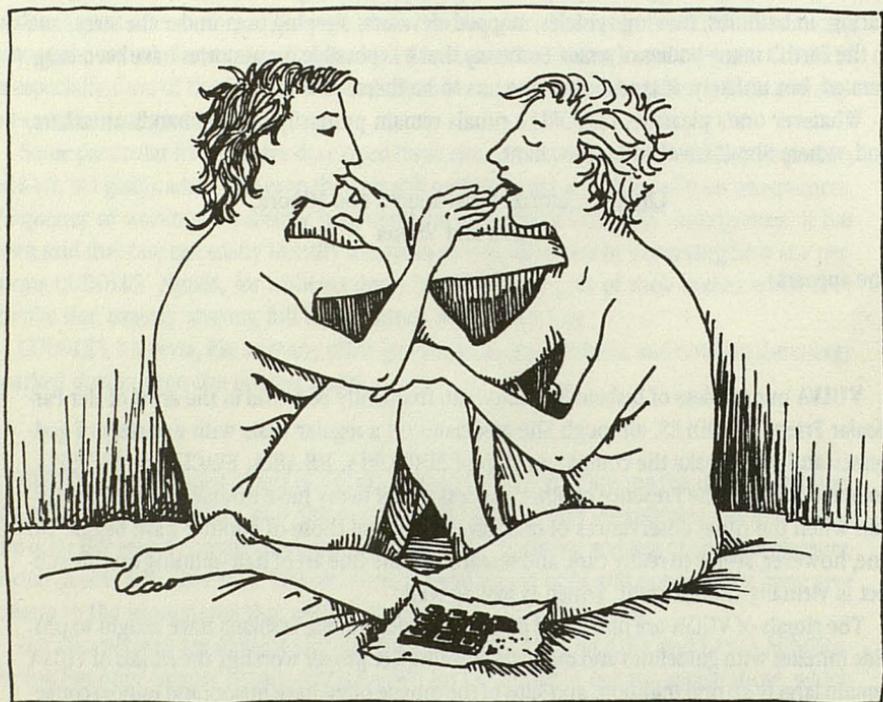
She appears.

VULVA our goddess of Lesbian Sexuality, can frequently be found in the arms of Her Particular Friend, CUDDLES, although She associates on a regular basis with a variety of goddesses and often seeks the companionship of EUPHORIA, HILARIA, EVACUA, and UTOPIA. So much is She in the Presence of other goddesses that many have trouble knowing for certain when the ritual observances of one have ended and those of another have begun. No one, however, seems to really care, and research on the fine art of hair-splitting on this subject is virtually non-existent, which is just as well.

The rituals of VULVA are many and diverse. Although some Lesbians have sought to provide initiates with guidelines and manuals detailing Her proper worship, the rituals of VULVA remain largely an oral tradition, and slips of the tongue often have major (and minor) consequences. The passing on of Her intimate mysteries continues to be regarded as best transmitted as a "hands on" experience that cannot be adequately handled by the conventional methods of books and diagrams.

VULVA has many aspects familiar to Her devotees: LABIA MAJORA, LABIA MINORA, VAGINA, and CLITORIA (Her hooded aspect). It is a common practice, when invoking Her, to acknowledge each aspect of VULVA as the rituals progress by a Laying on of Hands. Worshippers claim that this practice, properly performed, always excites the pleasure of VULVA. Others extol the wonder of Five-Fingered Exercises and Thumbs Up. All agree that each initiate must find her own path to VULVA, and this can take hours.

Because EUPHORIA is one of VULVA's special companions, their rites often merge and flow one into the other. This process is sometimes called by its esoteric name, "melting." Symbols of VULVA and Her Presence surround us: cowrie shells, orchids, oysters, geodes, irises, canyons, hills, valleys, and certain folds at the base of oak trees. Lip-Service may be paid to Her at any time.



Alison Bechdel

SOME OF THE RITUALS OF CHOCOLATA AND VULVA
ARE VIRTUALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE.

CHOCOLATA is believed by many to be merely an occasional, or periodic, aspect of MUNCHIES, because She frequently appears only at specific times during a lunar cycle or under similar conditions. Her most devoted adherents, however, who are legion, maintain that CHOCOLATA is a major goddess, deserving ritual observances of her own. Devotees of TOFU, MISO, and SOYA are known to invoke the deity of CAROB, claiming that the delights of CAROB are indistinguishable from those of CHOCOLATA and, besides, "better for you." These are major theological debates unlikely to be settled in the near future, and we won't try to resolve them here. Of more importance, we believe, are indications that some forms of CHOCOLATA worship can be traced back to the Amazons.

What we have been able to find out suggests diverse connections between the rituals of CHOCOLATA and the most ancient roots of our own spirituality. CHOCOLATA is often found in small, edible statues that resemble bunnies (around the time of the Vernal Equinox), fat, bearded figures with bags slung over their shoulders around Winter Solstice (see ANIMA), in small, pointed breasts commonly called "Kisses," and in a variety of cream-filled eggs. One researcher on goddess worship has suggested that both the shape and the name of these "Kisses" point to an intimate relationship between the rituals of CHOCOLATA, during which loud sucking sounds are made, and those of CUDDLES, VULVA, and LABIA (both Minora and Majora). One linguist, who has spent much of her life decoding the ancient language of the Amazons, had discovered that the mysterious name, M & Ms, is an esoteric aspect of CHOCOLATA that means "Menstruation and Menopause."

Further evidence can be found in the custom of exchanging heart-shaped boxes of CHOCOLATA tokens (the heart being a well-known symbol of VULVA in the Old Religion), while chanting the invocation, "Be my Valentina." The origins of such customs, while obscure, have much in common with the rituals of VULVA and CUDDLES, which are generally regarded as pleasurable and, therefore, much sought after. Devotees of all three goddesses have been known to smile broadly after a ritual enactment, and report a sense of well-being and contentment. Much licking of the fingers is also a common ritual activity. Given the increasingly strong evidence of long-standing associations between CHOCOLATA, EUPHORIA, CUDDLES, VULVA, and CLITORIA, we find it difficult to dismiss CHOCOLATA's significance out of hand.

Worshippers of CHOCOLATA are sometimes secretive about their rituals, but certain tell-tale signs signify that ritual indulgence has occurred. The most common include small, brown smudges around the lips and chin, sticky fingers, and a serenity of spirit verging on EUPHORIA's blessing. Lesbians who speak of "melting in one's hands" or "a month of sundaes" may well be fudging.

Of special importance, we think, are the reports of many Lesbians who feel an increased longing and enthusiasm for the rituals of CHOCOLATA, CUDDLES, and VULVA one week before the onset of menstruation. Surely this cannot be a casual relationship.

These pieces are excerpted from *A Book of Found Goddesses*, by Morgan Grey and Julia Penelope, illustrated by Alison Bechdel, to be published in 1987.

Theories

She's preparing *latkes* as the sun goes down, and thinking about tradition. Scattered across the counter are twenty-odd potatoes. She'd picked the ones others wouldn't touch, strange-shaped and sprouting. She's about to grate them one by one.

"Frannie," Louise would tease her later, only seconds after pretending to walk out into the sultry night because there's no sour cream ("Single-handedly you plan to alter thousands of years of sour cream on *latkes*?"), "Frannie, can't you compromise this once and get yourself a food processor? I mean anti-technological scruples is one thing, but think!: with our Cuisinart I have the *latkes* ready before Ruthie can finish a game of Ms. Pacman. And no crying over chopped onions."

Frannie is definitely moody that night. She can't refrain from crying that in the world there will soon be no more crying over chopped onions. She slices them up fine, one by one, and the tears descend as plentifully as locusts from heaven. She imagines raw onions peeled at the wailing wall. How could she open her door to a Cuisinart when using so much as a manufactured knife, just knowing that these onions have been delivered across freeways in trucks saddens her almost unbearably? Once she has mixed the onions with the grated potatoes, it's time to worry about the garlic, the carrots, and perhaps most of all the zucchini she's taken out of what her mother always called the hydrator. On this account she knows it will be Gita who'll *kvetch*.

"My *bobe* never added zucchini, Frannie. And she always bound the potatoes with an egg or two. You call this a *latke*?"

Frannie won't eat eggs. She fixes soup to heal heartsick friends without plucking a single feather from any chicken. And she happens to like, sometimes, other vegetables in her potato pancakes. "Our grandmothers were wanderers, Gita. They spread out like dandelion seeds all over the world; with each new country, new proverbs; with each new land, new recipes. They wouldn't be afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of a country of women who dare to grate carrots into their *latkes*, and who make them without oppressing chickens."

"Or a culture," Louise chimes in, reclining on the couch, insisting it's traditional to rest after each plateful, "a culture addicted to Cuisinarts. Of this would our foremothers be afraid?"

Everything is mixed together in the bowl now, and for a fleeting moment Frannie considers really pushing it this time. Should she or should she not toss a handful of radish sprouts into the concoction? She reaches rebelliously for a jar on the windowsill, then thinks better of it, though she does give them a quick rinse.

She wonders and wonders about tradition. She peeps at the honey cake in the oven.

This time it will be Miriam who will question her. Not her long-adored friend Miriam who will as usual show up late having walked over the top of the hill instead of turning right, or forgotten about the tendency of time to pass while she follows a caterpillar in the grass.

For four maybe five maybe six years she's been writing a book she calls *Lesbian Theories of Relativity*. She will comment that evening that she's discovered the real reason why the Israelites travelled with matzohs: a group in exile can't risk being found in or carrying edibles of too many dimensions. No, not that Miriam, whose words always make Frannie feel secure, whose presence lifts a weight from her churning mind. The question and a little nudge will come from the Miriam of the Bible.

"Maple syrup you sweetened it with? A honey cake?"

"I don't do bee products."

Biblical Miriam laughs at Frannie and starts buzzing around the room. "Such a *mesbuge*," she says in Aramaic. "But I bet none of you remember when we *were* bees."

Louise and Ruthie and Gita begin to fumble with the knobs on the television that's shoved in a corner, that's covered with wheat grass, that hasn't worked since the impeachment of Richard Nixon, a dozen years back. Frannie thinks she remembers — being bees, that is. Then she remembers out of the blue that for many years as an adolescent she was convinced that in a former life she'd been the snake that seduced Eve, and she's on to her favorite part now, forming the patties. She likes to feel the starch squeezed between her fingers. It tickles. Who knows what the ancient Hebrews ate, she thinks. It is written, of course, that they baked cakes for the goddesses, and she herself had once ordered a cake of kasha flour with "Congratulations Ashera and Shekhina" inscribed in the icing. Suddenly she flings open the oven door and removes a maple syrup-sweetened honey cake not yet burnt. At least some surviving tribes remain vegetarian, she knows that and wonders which scattered tribe of Canaan she belongs to. After supper Miriam will pretend to read to them her latest chapter, but instead will tell some story of finding a fossilized cow tooth as she sorts through garbanzo beans one morning. "Best humous I ever made," is what she'll say.

Miriam is the only guest who hasn't arrived yet, no doubt enthralled with some slight change in the direction of the wind, so Frannie decides to start the frying. She studies the pocks of potato starch that remind her of moon craters on her blue jeans and prepares herself psychically for the inevitable volcanic sputter of hot safflower oil. As the *latkes* turn brown and slightly crispy on the outside, Frannie calls to the living room for assistance. Only Ruthie, who doesn't like T.V. (unless it's working), responds.

"The table's already set," Frannie instructs her, "but if you could get the apple sauce from the fridge and maybe some mustard. Then you can start serving these."

After laying out the condiments, Ruthie, without the slightest hint of skepticism in her voice, asks, "Are you sure the table's set?"

"Yeah. You know I don't allow napkins in this house, with the effect they have on deforestation. Or did I forget the candles?"

"No, Frannel," Ruthie says softly. "Listen I adore your *latkes*, zukes or no zukes, from the bottom of my heart, but they get cold when I have to eat them with chopsticks."

"I don't own any forks."

"She's trying not to be oppressive to paths that divide in the woods," Louise explains from the living room.

"You could always use your fingers," Frannie offers.

"Yeah," adds Louise, marvelling at the survival of a T.V. Guide from 1973 Gita has found

behind the crumbling set, "fingers are traditional, although I thought it was only for eating the soup around the matzoh balls."

Then they are ecstatically eating, as if eating is a prayer.

"These are yummy," Gita announces with an undeniable passion, "just a little heavy on the *goyishe* vegies."

"Would have been faster with a food processor. Ours has an attachment just for grating potatoes. You could make your life easier for once."

"Louise," Frannie is ready for a fight now, now that the meal is prepared and the taste of apples, the tang of mustard bolsters her. "Louise, what's the hurry? There's a certain mortal pleasure I get from fondling potatoes, from using my arm muscles once in awhile in the cause of great food."

"I know how to get a plane ticket to New York for nothing," Ruthie is about to reveal one of her famous schemes.

"Frannie does have a valid point," Gita points out. "My *bobe* never used a Cuisinart. When my parents tried to give her one she said, 'If we were meant to cook with such a racket, why were we born with so many stories to tell that happen to have the rhythm of grate grate grate already?'"

The alarm on Ruthie's digital watch breaks out in song. Frannie thinks she recognizes it as *Chad Gad Ya*. "Where'd you come up with that, Ruthie?"

"My goddaughter, Sarah, makes these. And holiday party tricks like talking dreydls and Chanukah candles that grow longer as they burn."

"This year she came out with decals that say, 'Pine trees never have a nice Christmas,'" Louise adds.

Frannie sips on her diluted grape juice and tries not to cry that there will soon be no more forests of any sort on this planet. Years ago she stopped reading books on ecology and impending disasters (like that within thirty years because of abusive agrobusiness practices there will be nothing to eat outside the portals of MacDonald's) so she'd be able to get out of bed again and resume functional living.

"Hey! I wonder if Sarah might know how to make sour cream without dairy. How would that be, Frannie, for a useful miracle in the face of this purism we suffer this day? I did once notice her turn some water into wine."

Frannie doesn't even want to think about crying about how soon all the earth's waters will be contaminated by dumped plutonium, asbestos, styrofoam cups.

Ruthie picks up a stirring spoon and shakes it at Louise. "Quit making trouble, as if Franeleh didn't have enough *tsores* already what with her saving the world and all. That's a big responsibility."

"Just because I refuse to enslave animals as our ancestors were slaves in Egypt," Frannie chokes out between the tears she can't command not to fall, tears the color of diluted grape juice. "Just because to me a leather belt is no different from the lampshades made from the charred flesh at Bergen-Belsen."

"You never miss an opportunity for extreme versions of extremism, do you?" Louise asks, noticing she'd unconsciously changed out of her new leather sandals and had put on her sneakers before coming to Frannie's.

"You're so serious all the time, Franel. If I didn't know better," Ruthie is a distant relative to Frannie, her niece's cousin or cousin's niece, "I'd think your father was half *goy* or something, the way you can't take Louise making a *bisl* poking the fun at you in the ancient tradition which it is incumbent upon us to preserve —"

"Serious? She's downright offensive," Gita doesn't feel like eating anymore.

"— or if I might quote from *Zen in the Art of Delicatessens*, 'A Jew without a sense of humor is like a bagel without a hole.'"

"A bagel without cream cheese," Louise mumbles. "And lox."

Frannie sucks on her finger where she's grated off a piece of flesh and dreams about the Jews before Eve and Adam, the ones who hadn't yet developed fingers, and certainly not the smoking of fish.

"Remember when we *were* salmon?" Miriam whispers, wiggling and writhing in the currents.

"Yes, who's denying it?" says Gita, considering going home to watch television. She doesn't know what's on (unless she can assume nothing's changed since 1973, in which case it would be an expose on the Symbionese Liberation Army), but she's afraid to miss anything, "and we are also mourners for a just world, and fighters against oppression. So how is it you can get a free ticket to New York, Louise? We could all go there together and shmooz with the natives of the world's biggest Jewish city."

"It's not natural for Jews to be in cities."

"What? Is the whole world crazy? And what are we in now?"

"Where we should be is in wild fields of buckwheat."

And then Miriam enters. The Miriam not of the Bible, or maybe not. The Miriam of *Lesbian Theories of Relativity*. When she arrived at Frannie's for a seder once, she had made herself invisible at first, slurping down all of Elijah's wine (diluted Manishevitz blackberry). Ruthie, fidgety for something to happen already, had tinkered with the labels on some of the bottles so they read *womonishevitz*, and Frannie had been moody on that occasion too, morose practically, weeping in the bathroom for hours after answering that this night was different from all other nights because soon there would be no more breathable sky. Louise countered that that didn't actually answer the question, but she waited to say it until Frannie was already rocking herself in the empty bathtub. This night Miriam is dressed, unlike the other women who haven't changed out of their jeans and t-shirts (except for Gita who's taking photo-realism *dane* classes and of course wears baggy lavender tie-string pants), in flowing cloths with tassles along the edges and embroidered mid-sections, which Miriam claims are the graffiti from feminist caves found on a small island near Crete. Over her practically shaven head is a thick black scarf.

"Where've you been?" asks Louise. "Wait! Don't tell. Let me guess. Visiting the lost tribe on Venus?"

"The lost tribe of the Amazon Delta?"

"The lost tribe on 24th St.?"

"Why? Am I late?" Miriam wonders innocently, while Frannie in the kitchen wonders what exactly are the ingredients for being a Jew and squeezes out a few more *latkes* for the latecomer, making them elephant-shaped.

"They've been picking on me," she calls out to Miriam. "They've decided I lack a sense of humor and am therefore disqualified."

Miriam does a backwards somersault and clings to the floor laughing. "That's the funniest thing I've heard all week."

"But what have you been doing all week, Miriam?" Louise demands to know. "Looking for elves?"

"Doesn't take much looking. Oh, I did part the Red Sea and I wrote a new chapter. If you can call it writing."

Gita has become satisfied with the dark green empty T.V. screen which reminds her of a deep sea meditation retreat she once avoided going on. But Louise still tries in vain to find some not-yet-yanked-at knob that will cause a miracle. Louise is heavy into miracles. Ruthie sometimes worries she's become addicted to the idea, to the possibility of meaningful change. She suspects that when they attend anti-nuclear rallies, Louise honestly believes they'll stop the nuclear holocaust. ("Who else thinks using the word holocaust is a rip-off of our history?" Louise will ask at their next affinity group planning session while she's painting placards denouncing the continuation of the U.S., convinced the way to end U.S. intervention and imperialism is to end the U.S.)

Miriam spreads her pages about the floor like their grandmothers wandered in different directions in the diaspora, like seedpods every where. She is doing it now and Ruthie is starting to feel video game withdrawal. To keep her hands busy (but it is only a substitute) she makes an effort to move some sullen dishes toward the sink as if to clean up. But Frannie is adamant that she mustn't. She feels comforted by the remains left where they naturally landed. She even imagines she'll allow this night to go on forever. She's not wondering about tradition or worrying about changes in the world. She is calm. Miriam is reading, though everyone knows she isn't reading but making it up as she goes along, tugging at her tassles. Gita has fallen asleep in the armchair, a wooden buffalo from Frannie's *tsbatsbke* table cradled in her palm.

"You all will remember from last time, if you want to look at it that way, what I read. Right? About the unloosed tribes?"

"Could we forget such a thing?" Louise assures her, in her way. "You told us there are women —"

"Lesbians," Ruthie corrects her. "You know perfectly well that Miriam says we are confusing dimensions and aiding the enemy if we think that women are lesbians and vice versa."

"— there are lesbians — pardon me I should straddle dimensions — living outside Sausalito, wasn't it, surely one of the lost tribes of pre-Levite Canaan, who've never heard of electricity."

"They make their own electricity, Louise," Miriam is happy to remind her, "from in here." She forms her fingers into a sphere and places the knuckles against the bottom of her left ribcage, which contrary to the teachings of her tai chi master she thinks is as likely a spot as any for the centered being's nub of consciousness. She actually doesn't think there's any single place at all, not all the time anyway. And she's not even sure there's such a thing as a being, considering how rapidly everything changes.

"So tonight," she clears her throat, sheerly for the dramatic effect, "I'll read to you about schmazars."

"Who's?"

"Louise, just be quiet and listen, will you?" Ruthie, who has her head in Louise's lap, lifts Louise's t-shirt (it's the pink one Gita gave to her — and a matching one in orange for Ruthie — with a picture of a gang of ferocious-faced women yelling "Dismantle Couplism!") and blows on her belly.

"But we're missing Star Trek reruns," Louise says while Gita lets out a single snore.

Ruthie gives a menacing tug on the stainless steel *mogen dovid* hanging around Louise's neck. She twists the chain and rubs the star between her fingers, missing her joystick.

Frannie sits close to Miriam, the one reading, who is saying, while Frannie makes an effort not to worry about wild words becoming extinct, "Schmazars are enormous shifts in perception from which we all derive. To get in touch with this strength, more keen than the psyche, more outrageous than magic, sweeter than *bomen-tasbn*, all we lesbians need do is —"

And then Frannie jumps up alarmed because she's forgotten to serve the honey cake.

"A *mesbuge*," buzzes someone in Aramaic.

"— simply a matter of undoing thousands of years of patriarchal training. There's no risk involved, and everything to gain. But you have to suspend belief in human laws, get into this other wavelength." She scrutinizes the words in front of her. "A wavelength shrewder than the computer's, more mishmashed than *tsimes*. That's the first step in any transcendent understanding of how to get to the Big Apple for free, Giteleh."

Ruthie and Gita are the only ones awake now. Since Frannie has forbidden them to touch the dishes, they're occupying themselves by playing Trivial Pursuits and finishing up the cake.

"Look, I gave up shoplifting half a dozen years ago, but this, I'm telling you, is foolproof, and besides it's in the service of our culture. What Jew worth her weight in poppy seeds can go for long without a basic bagel from Brooklyn and still maintain her identity?" To stave off any nightmare of protest, she whispers to Frannie who's counting unloosed tribes in her sleep, "Not egg bagels. Pumpernickle."

"What category do you want?" Ruthie asks, interrupting her own train-of-thought. "Science? Entertainment?"

"Look on the back of one of those Entertainment cards and see how to fix the TV."

"Arts and Letters?"

"Does this version have Lesbian Heroines, Past and Present?"

"Do you think I'd play otherwise? Try this: Who originally coined the word radicalfeministseparatistunstraightforwardoutsensitivesuperdyke?"

"Too easy," Gita yawns. "My therapist."

"It's all a matter of convincing the computer you've already paid. It's a cinch." Ruthie draws another card. "Who is more politically correct, an ex-vegetarian bi-sexual activist for women-only commuter train compartments, or an ex-punk closet birdwatcher and designer of lesbian erotica on jean jackets?"

"They're both in my Wednesday night AlAnon group, that much I know. Hey, how about some scheme to fly us all to the Holy Land for free, Ruthie?"

"You mean Lake Tahoe or Great America?"

"Israel, you *zblub*."

"Shhh!" Ruthie practically shrieks. "Israel? What do you want to do, wake up the entire household? Such talk."

But it's too late. Louise's hand which has been dangling limp off the side of the couch clenches into a fist. Miriam mumbles something about there not being any actual physical locations on the planet and Lot's Wife squeezes in through a hole in the wall. Lot's Wife is a calico squirrel who seems to have what Miriam calls an eighth sense about making trouble where she's not wanted. For example, she knows Frannie is vehemently opposed to the keeping of animals as pets, so she insists on living with her — on a parttime basis. After all, she had relatives in the area when this row of houses wasn't even built yet, so it's not really Frannie's territory as far as she's concerned. She's also mystically tuned in to where to go for a juicy fight on particularly touchy subjects. She remembers the last time a group of women was gathered here, dressed in some sort of drag, shaking noisemakers, clapping and boo-ing. One of the women looked like she didn't want to be there. "Of course. I'm proudly Jewish-identified, but what's to be flaunting it in the feminist dyke community that we're of the paradigm of patriarchal religions? I don't get the point."

"Judaism a religion?! It's a culture. Or several."

"Then it's a patriarchal culture. Who wrote all the Yiddish literature?"

"But who baked all the *rogelekb*?"

"With margarine, of course."

"What I want to know is who made all the jokes. Anyway, Jews have always worshipped goddesses, when they worshipped anything at all. You'll find it in Genesis, for example."

"Jews have always practiced inter-planetary travel. Unburdened by spacecraft."

Tonight Lot's Wife is sitting on the Biblical Miriam's lap, pawing at the seahorse she hadn't quite finished carving before she'd decided maybe it was actually a lizard and then fell asleep.

Gita is consciously not-yet hysterical. "The Jews have made the desert to flourish."

"So what's wrong with a desert-like desert? A great expanse of sacred sandiness? Not to pardon I should mention it, mention the Palestinians."

"What do you want to see happen, Louise? You want all the Israelis driven into the sea? What'll that solve? You're not taking history into consideration — pogroms, persecution, diaspora."

"Of course," Louise muses, rubbing her eyes, contemplating sitting up, "now if all Israelis and all Palestinians were lesbians, would we even have such a problem? I mean when you look at how impeccably the lesbian feminist process works, you know, how we all treat each other lovingly, fairly, as sisters."

"Hey!" Ruthie has a sudden burst of energy, "Let's do something nice for Frannie while she's asleep."

"Okay. I've got it. We can set her clock to the time the rest of us keeps."

Miriam won't allow it. "That's cruel. Not to mention an infringement on the dimension of ludicrous knowing."

"Besides, it wouldn't do any good, Louise. Every time life gets to be too much for her and she's ready to end it all, which is like five or six times a day, on a good day, she goes down to the basement and switches off the main fuse. So time changes for her all the time."

"I think Frannie should be sent as a peace ambassador to the Middle East. I'm sure she

could come up with some cacomamie way to make everyone there feel too discombobulated to go on fighting," Louise suggests. "I also think," she will say after she and Gita have gone around and around the usual practical arguments and move on to the hopelessly philosophical, "everyone everywhere should go back where they came from."

"Lesbians," Miriam will say pretending to be quoting herself, "embody beyond the supposed material plane, through the fictional and on into —"

"Is that the same plane Ruthie's getting us tickets on?"

"We could paint Frannie's window so it looks like there's a forest outside. I've got a few 'Save the lesbian redwood' decals my goddaughter gave to me." Trivial Pursuits is just not holding Ruthie's attention any more.

"Why should we do something nice for that shnook anyway? This debate is nothing. Israel shmIsrael. What I want to know is how Frannie thinks she can get away with comparing Nazi death and torture camps with sandal shops."

"Yes. I agree," Gita nods. "Frannie goes too far with this not knowing what species she is bit. It ceases to be amusing."

Lot's Wife is glad she's never been a woman, a lost species as far as she's concerned, duped into believing they're related to man.

"Ah! On that let me read to you from chapter — well, I can't decide whether to call it chapter four, nine, or return of chapter thirty-seven, or just Wisdom, continued."

"Why don't you call it anything about women and sex; you'll sell more copies."

"She doesn't want to sell copies, Louise. It's against her anti-marketing principles. That's why she'll like my method of procuring a trip to New York New York," she sings.

"But anyhow," Miriam rustles the pages, "it's about family and ancestors and cousins and the smell of narcissi, which should interest Frannie."

"Except that she's sleeping."

"It'll interest her *because* she's sleeping," at which point Frannie sleepwalks towards Miriam and attempts to put her head on Miriam's shoulder, but Miriam gingerly moves her aside and grabs up her book, what there is of it. "During a so-called single lifetime, if there is indeed time at all, a snail can become a snake can change into a mulberry can turn into a dragon."

"Far be it from me to dispute the obvious, Miriam darling, but actual like human beings, if I may be so mundane, were murdered by the millions by other human beings, which is a crime to some of us human beings. *Farsbtey?*"

Frannie is suddenly and emphatically no longer asleep. "Don't you get it? We can't limit our capacity for feeling to what we've been taught we are. Some of us feel akin to all species, outraged at any barbed fences."

"Franeleh," Ruthie doesn't particularly want to get involved in this dispute for the umpteenth time, but she is after all Frannie's cousin or something. "I happen to know your mother, and she is not a cow."

Frannie wonders, does she ever wonder, how these friends of hers have swallowed the system that estranges them from goats and tiny fish that swim faster than light.

The Biblical Miriam, the only party-goer still sleeping now, wears a wooden image of one of her mothers off her left earlobe. It's a camel. Just before she leaves in the morning, after hugging Gita goodbye and asking Miriam if she remembers when they were each other, she'll

say, "I was a cow that day my brother Moishe came tripping down from the mountain all full of himself and that boyfriend of his. Most of us were cows that day. Oh, except for Yod, always the practical joker" (she'll say in an ancient wind language), "who was that day a cactus."

"I was just getting to the part about cacti," Miriam (the other Miriam) exclaims, not really surprised since she's been collecting coincidences since she was four.

Frannie can't control herself. She goes all tingly when Miriam mentions cacti. It happens every time, ever since they liberated a potted house-saguaro from a Woolworth's and planted it in the nearest sandy ground, the beach at Lake Anza. She tries to make contact with Miriam's golden eyes. Miriam pretends more dramatically than ever to be reading from her book of miracles.

"Mir, Mireleh, I don't know how to hold back this passion for you any longer. I want, oh goddesses do I want, to share ideologies with you." And Frannie wonders. She wonders what makes a culture, a tradition, a set of beliefs, a physical-spiritual attraction to a friend. Who is to say? She leans to kiss Miriam's writings.

Miriam backs off. "It's not that I'm not interested, Fran. It's just — well, you know I'm experimenting with boundaries these days. So be careful." Not that she finds this talk embarrassing in front of a room of tactless women, but because she never does think any deviation is actually changing the subject. Miriam (just as Frannie is realizing that she can see not only her soul and her aura, but the entirety of her natal chart as clear as day in front of her) then exclaims, "Wait! I just thought of a perfect ending for my book."

"Impossible. *Lesbian Theories of Relativity* can't end." Louise is truly aghast. "Only according to very particular dimensions and outside of certain time zones and until you turn the page or close your eyes or eat a latke. Whichever comes first. Listen to this —"

By the time she gets to the last word, if ever she does, even Frannie has fallen back to sleep. They will wake up soon after dawn, one by one. Frannie still won't allow any unscattering of dishes.

"Nu?" Louise calls out after fifty push-ups which she can't imagine why she's done. When she gave up jogging she promised never to exert herself in any way that might land her in a sports medicine clinic. "What have you got for breakfast?"

Gita plays at the television knobs one last time, like someone praying to a defunct higher power. "Yes. Have you got anything ethnic?"

"Bagels. Coming up," Frannie toasts a few and sets them out on a turquoise platter she normally uses only at *Pesakh* since it is inlaid with pictures of lambs and horseradish and tears.

"So are you going to finish telling about how to get to New York already?"

"Forget it. Who can divulge a simple down-to-earth scam around here with all these highfalutin theoretical interruptions. I'll just arrange with my personal computer to get us all tickets."

"Not for me. That's the last place I want to go. I hate tall buildings. And short ones, for that matter." Frannie wishes she was brave enough to take Miriam's hand and fly with her to the Sinai.

"Before there were cities, lesbians made culture everywhere, naturally. In and out of infinite dimensions."

"Without dimensions, could sour cream itself exist?"

Lot's Wife and Miriam can't make sense of the Trivial Pursuits board. They're both thinking they'd rather be in the wide open spaces somewhere, and both begin to pursue that yearning. Miriam drifts off, envisioning cacti; Lot's Wife makes a mad leap out an open window.

"This thing? With the raisins? This you call a bagel?!"

"Single-handedly you're going to destroy our faith in cream cheese now, I suppose."

Chewing on whole wheat and raisins, as the voices around her rise and fall and swing through dimensions, makes Frannie wonder and it makes her wonder. And it does; it makes her wonder.

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imagination and the letter writer

it started with a letter. no. something led up to the letter. for naomi and the letter writer there were conversations and meetings. for annie it started with the letter that came for naomi in their mailbox. innocent enough on the surface, naomi read the letter aloud to annie while annie made dinner. naomi left the letter casually propped on on the shelf over the stove. innocent enough, an offer to collaborate on a writing project they both, naomi and the letter writer, were interested in. it started innocently. in the months ahead annie was to meet the letter writer only once and that once she was so upset she was made shy by the encounter. annie could not look at the letter writer. she never in the months ahead knew what the letter writer looked like. she knew her handwriting better than her face. she could base her knowledge of her only on naomi's descriptions and actions and her own wild imagination. annie immediately and forever after perceived the letter writer as a threat. annie's relationship with naomi had begun with artistic collaboration.

their relationship had been shaken recently. annie had developed a close friendship with a woman who wanted to be her lover. annie wanted it too. naomi threatened to leave, threatened to stop working with annie, demanded this other relationship go no further, that their relationship take priority. annie gave in and as a result her relationship with her friend was now strained and distant. annie was prepared to put her energy into working it out with naomi. her lost friendship made her need naomi more. and then the letter came.

the letter writer was not entirely innocent. she did want to work on the writing project with naomi. she admired naomi's work and felt inspired by her. she wanted to know naomi better. she loved naomi's wild dark eyes and her wild dark hair. naomi admired her work as well. the letter writer wanted more. she didn't want to break up a relationship. she didn't want to threaten or hurt annie. she wanted to touch naomi's wildness. she wanted to work with naomi and create with her. she wanted more. the letter writer had been planning for some time to move thousands of miles away. she wanted to touch the wildness of the west. she wanted to test herself in the open spaces, far from home and friends. she wanted more. she wanted change.

the letter writer and naomi wrote together some. they talked endless hours about writing and creativity. they spoke their admiration for each other. they spoke love. they spun a web around each other, magic and light. everything between them was good. they excited each other's imaginations at a time when each thought her imagination was gone. on this they based their love.

the letter writer moved west. naomi and the letter writer continued their conversations about writing in their letters. they wrote letters of love to each other. everything they touched was magic. the world was a magical creative place full of love. they sent magic to each other through the mail. each wrote prolifically.

it was something in the imaginations of the letter writer and naomi that created that world. it was something in the imaginations of all three of them that caused annie and naomi to break up. naomi began to dream and save her money and plan to join the letter writer in the west.

the letters continued. they became even more impassioned. they wrote back and forth answering letters with the excitement of the first moment of response.

one day the letter writer realized that naomi responded to none of her practical questions or concerns. she wanted to know naomi's plans. what did naomi want of her? did naomi understand the letter writer's need to remain single and autonomous? the letter writer became worried. there were other women she wrote to after all. did naomi understand this? why did naomi and annie break up? the letter writer wanted it clear to naomi that she hadn't encouraged her to break up with annie.

naomi assured the letter writer by return mail that she was acting on her own. she wanted to be single too, wanted no more than the letter writer could give her.

the letter writer was suspicious. she felt uncomfortable, crowded. she had a short unhappy affair with a dishonest woman and wrote to naomi that she didn't know what would be waiting for naomi when she came west. the letter writer didn't know if she would be lovers with naomi. the letter writer felt crowded. like someone was making plans for her. she needed more than imagination to base love on. she questioned the magic and euphoria of their letters to one another. naomi wrote back assuring the letter writer she had the same fears. she had to come to see for herself.

what naomi saw when she got there was a woman plainer than she remembered. the letter writer seemed tired and withdrawn. she was working hard, getting over a painful affair, trying to write, grieving over the distance from true friends and home. she was distrustful, fearful for her autonomy, her identity. she feared naomi's intensity because it matched her own. she feared losing the self she was only beginning to find in the midst of space and distance and grief. she was afraid.

naomi wanted her. naomi wanted to dive into the intensity. she was afraid only of being alone. the letter writer was afraid of not being alone. the letter writer showed naomi to a bedroom and said goodnight. naomi wanted her to stay. to make love, to sleep with her. the letter writer couldn't, didn't trust, didn't want, didn't feel. she only felt self-protective. she only wanted self-protection.

so it went back and forth for the weeks naomi remained. the letter writer would not submit. they had impassioned conversations and one loud fight out in the driveway when the letter writer accused naomi of being possessive of her and butch besides and naomi accused the letter writer of confusing her and leading her on. the letter writer wanted their collaboration, not this mushy mess that was keeping both of them from writing. sometimes naomi wept. sometimes the letter writer wept. the letter writer was not used to being hard, to saying no, to not putting someone else's needs and desires first. she resisted naomi fiercely. she resisted naomi passionately. naomi in her imagination began to create another story. in this

story she and the letter writer put some distance between them. they would go separate ways, write separately and greatly. some years down the road they would collaborate again, this time fully, freely.

the letter writer in her imagination created a story. in the story a letter was being written and sent to her. a letter to excite the imagination and passion. a letter to write by.

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A Letter to San Francisco

Dear Elizabeth,

Thank you for the condolence card. It was a comfort to hear from you. My mother always enjoyed your coffee cake and stories.

Stan is doing well — you forgot to ask. He's been going over Mother's papers — which is only natural for an accountant but Melba's husband is suspicious; so my sister and I are having to be terribly polite to each other to demonstrate our trust — you can imagine how hard that is.

The girls are each reacting in their own ways. Melissa is red-eyed and writing poetry. Susan stays in her room with the stereo blaring. I let Dee Dee be my shadow for a few days, but after sitting shiva (Stan's idea), I put my foot down and told her that I wasn't dying and she had to find something else to do. So.

So how is California? You didn't say anything about yourself. I mean, it's been such a long time since you moved away and I read the 'papers but that's not the same as your news. My mother's dead but other things happen in five years, you could have written more.

Now don't get upset with me yet. The past year has been difficult. For months all she did was yell at me. Sometimes Stan had to translate the insults. I was a thief and a murderess; the food was poisoned. You know this is how some of them go. But she was like you in the end, silent and cold.

No, I'm not calling you dead — and yes I am knocking on wood. I've been watching death this year, at the hospital, at home. I've been watching flowers wilt and leaves turn and Dee Dee who's only eight . . . and I've wondered if you really believe your dreams will let you die any differently than the rest of us.

I don't mean to be bad to you, not really. No worse than tit for tat. I've been all year with my mother. Stan was no help, except as a translator of insults. I take that back — another man would have insisted on a nursing home. He was helpful in his own sphere. The girls were too young and I didn't want their aid anyway: my death will be burden enough, in time. But you. You could have written sooner. Just once in five years — a holiday, a birthday. For no occasion at all you could have surprised my mailbox. Let me tell you on-no-occasion-at-all I would have a sudden anxiety approaching the mail — maybe your letter was there? Not everyday, but sometimes, and always on my birthday and on yours, and Dee Dee's. You could have been dead. Sometimes I thought you were. I would have wished it sometimes but you'd given me enough guilt already.

So. You're in San Francisco. I read about it you know. Mostly the men-stuff of course: death and sex. Of women, that they're trying to get pregnant. You must love that. All through my morning sickness it was "Maxine, no sane woman would choose it a third time — no one having choice would do it at all, not the way things are now," and "Maxine, think about it. It's not too late. He doesn't have to know." We'd been lovers for a year; Susan was starting school — you thought I'd be free.

She was my hardest pregnancy. Stan wasn't thrilled; you acted like it was contagious; my body never adjusted right. I named her Diana, to beg your pardon. And you accepted my offering, because you still loved me.

I've decided that, you know. Five years of cold silence entitles me to believe my own memories. We were at peace again. We shared the morning sun in my bed; the baby sucked one tit and I squirted you with the other. We could laugh and make love and believe the months of pregnancy had never happened and that we would always make do.

Nobody has ever been so cold to me. And only my mother has left as rudely — your lips cramped around the words but I heard them. I read them in the letters which never arrived. "Cheat," you called me, and "coward." We had peace and then we didn't. Why did you have to start up again? a two-year harangue on fear and freedom, closets, men, oppression, power. The same words, over and over. I'm not stupid, you know.

One month of crying. I had to make stories to Stan and the girls to cover your absence. Whenever I saw you, you cried. Dee Dee was in her two's saying no to everything. I thought you were just like her. How many people find love, Liz? Hell, how many find sex? So you had crazy shifts at the hospital. I swung between the daytime with you and the kids, and nighttime with Stan. I was never alone, but I was making room for everyone. One month of crying, then you gave me back my necklace and packed your face away from my knowing. . . . I still feel it.

"The roots of our pain." You must have thought I was stupid, marching those same ideas back and forth, back and forth; patriarchy, marriage, institutions of rape, heterosexuality, homophobia. Didn't I know? Wasn't I a woman? Who do you think climbed into my bed every night believing that he belonged there? Whose every thought do I defend my girls against each day? And whose loving look did I long for, whose letter never came for five years. . . .

You went to San Francisco. I guessed as much. I went a little crazy. Stan was worried. He got the doctor to give me pills. He got my mother to watch the kids so we could have a second honeymoon. I tried to kill myself. No one knew when I awoke so late and groggy what my intention had been. How could they? the only one who ever knew me was you.

You took me with you. Do you understand? I was gone, lost, silent and cold as you. I couldn't pretend to Stan anymore, couldn't interest myself in the children's growth, in Dee Dee's storybooks. The only color was in my dreams of our reunion. I would surprise you on your San Francisco doorstep. Your face would move from disbelief to joy; the cruel past would melt away as our eyes burned with happy tears. Then we'd embrace and kiss and smile until our cheeks hurt. The dreams always began like that, and ended with the girls on the doorstep too, and you and I fighting: there wasn't enough money, you wanted to neck on the living room couch, you wanted the neighbors to know. . . . Elizabeth why did you write to me now? Did you think I've grown wings to fly me to a world where you and I can touch in the supermarket?

I've never kept a kosher kitchen. My mother went mad. So I told her the food was kosher, and she called me a poisoner. She was right to accuse and wrong to expect. You wanted me

to believe in the hopes of your heart, but I listened to your words; the patriarchy wants us dead.

Nobody knows me here. I admit it. But who knows you? I know exactly what I'm supposed to be doing and I do it. My mother was bad to me and I nursed her 'til she died. My husband's a fool and I please him enough to keep him healthy and at work. I'm losing Melissa to adolescence but I'm supposed to. The others are doing alright. I shop; I clean house; I cook. I tend to my family. This is what everyone does. This is the real world. What are you doing? marching?

We went to the Macy's parade last year. The sidewalks were packed. Melissa thought she was too old to enjoy it and tried to convince Susan of the same. Dee Dee was caught between looking down to protect her feet from being trampled and looking up for balloons. Stan had just agreed to Mother's moving in, and I was very afraid of what I'd taken on. The crowd was thick with expectations and realities. Thanksgiving and Santa Claus competed with the bitter cold and a lack of toilets. A little boy was threatening to pee in his pants and I turned towards his mother, to give her a sympathetic glance. She was one of the San Francisco kind; no make-up, short hair, men's jacket, that hard look I've been so afraid you've gotten. I stared without meaning to, and she noticed and took it wrong. She stuck her tongue out at me. Can you imagine? I meant her no harm. I started to say that to her but she was pulling the child, pushing through the crowd, muttering encouragement to his bladder. I know because I followed her for several feet before I caught myself.

I am going to mail you this letter before I change my mind. How did you know that my mother died? You have to write back and tell me.

Maxine

Maxine —

I don't know whether to laugh to cry. That letter is so you. I am very sorry that I hurt you. I am sorry that my silence hurt you so. But Maxine you are a bitch. And it was the best I could do.

I wrote that yesterday. I'm really tempted not to write any further. You seem to have forgotten that I went "cold and silent" after four years of "warmth and noise." You accuse me of being dead like your mother when I've been busy saving my own life. I don't know; writing to you is like throwing a coin into a wishing well.

Now its three days. I'm not sure why I write at all except that the silence never satisfied me. As you so vividly recall, I always have to say things one more time. Let's get this straight: San Francisco refers to a city in California, not to the queers who live in it. I am a lesbian. I will not write to you if you can't pronounce my name. If you don't want to know who I am, and who we were, stop here.

I am almost stopped myself. Five years . . . I wanted to write sooner, but that silence had been so difficult to reach . . . it seemed easier to let things go. Then I heard about your mother.

I had a foolish hope; you may hate me for saying it. During the years we were together, I thought about you so much. Little things like how your eyes changed color with the colors you wore. And larger things like how much you depended on your mother to tell you you were good. I used to think her death might free you.

I'm sorry that your mother went in such a hard way. Did Melba help at all? I can picture her assuring you of her trust while pocketing the forks for safekeeping. I don't blame her any more. It used to seem such a nasty business: your bratty younger sister always snipping away at you, her little cuts, your petty defenses. Now I think she was just trying to find the you behind all your lies.

Such sadness. Maxie, you tried to kill yourself. You would rather have been dead than in "San Francisco." I can't, I won't understand that.

Since sending you the card, lots of memories have been coming up. I don't know which ones to follow. I redid our life while we were living it, to numb the pain. I shifted it again, in order to leave, and once more in order to wrap the past into a finished form. Your version of our reconciliation after Diana's birth. . . . Honey you were drowning.

I'd come over as the girls were leaving for school. Some fight was always just ending. You just didn't have the energy to get Stan and them up and dressed and fed and off and then care for the baby, the house, yourself and me. That morning sun didn't reach what you so delicately refer to as "your" bed until almost noon. I would wash and dress the baby and straighten up the kitchen while you "did" the upstairs. Then you'd take a nap. And the, and only then, would come our time.

I haven't forgotten our joy. I remember wondering about the distance in fingertips from your mole to your armpit. I remember being sprayed with warm laughing milk, the pleasures of our kitchen talk, and watching the baby grow. I miss the girls so much.

I loved you somewhat. I didn't know myself enough to love you more fully than that. If I had, I would have left sooner. Do you understand? I've learned so much . . . and I'm still wanting Maxine to know it too. I'm sorry if I pounded you with feminist rhetoric but one of us had to believe that there was a way out. I guess I thought if I convinced you, then you could convince me.

I remember leaving Fairview. I thought I had cried every last tear out of my body. I couldn't take one more kiss behind the kitchen door. You know I can remember the richness of our kitchen embraces, the ones which weren't leading to bed but had a hint of sex and a firm feel of heart, like we were telling each other "the people in the next room don't matter, what they don't know won't hurt us, what counts is our lips meeting and our love." But their ignorance was killing me: the husbands who smugly patted the asses of the wives who feared my single status, the husbands who propositioned me, the wives who pitied my lack of a husband. I was beginning to bang my head on carpeted floors. I imagined banging yours against the kitchen cabinets. I had come to accept all those fine lesbian words; I believed our love was part of the real world. And I was beginning to hate us.

In the real world there is a lot of suffering. A person's hold on reality can be judged by her awareness of that suffering; her morality may be judged by her reaction to that suffering; but the worth of her life is not determined by the amount of pain in it. Your shopping cart is not more "real" than mine because you are unhappy pushing it. Caretaking a man you despise is not more valuable an endeavor than my sharing with a woman. The real world is not myths of what everyone else is doing. It is not heterosexuality. Sometimes it *is* going on marches.

You turn everything around. "The patriarchy wants us dead." You say I taught you that, but it is only half a lesson if you are still trying to live in their world. You've tried suicide and are dead to those who think they know you. I am alive and fighting. I just can't understand how the ideas which freed me left you behind.

I keep going over what I've written so far. The words seem strange to me. You were once so much my self, and it's so hard to be myself with you. I believe what you wrote: I did take part of you with me. You sat beside me in the group I joined for lesbians who were just coming out, you eyed the other congregants at the gay synagogue, and the dykes at the bar. All the women looked the same to you: bare faces, short hair, men's jackets, hard looks.

I'm writing to you because I took some obligation to you with me when I left. There is no other reason I face your insults with these words. When I came to California, I didn't know how to be, couldn't judge when to be in or out of the closet. You were always advising me to be cautious and I was always blurting things out to bus drivers and salesclerks. But not to other lesbians. They were too scary for me. I was living alone and getting pretty crazed myself. I felt like a fish in a time when everyone else was going amphibious. Your voice kept telling me it was another species on that shore . . . and yet you wanted me to find out what it was they'd found. . . .

I found that not all lesbians have short hair, etc. but I do. There's hair under my arms and over my legs and my face is as it is. I don't look hard; my friends don't look mannish. In fact, more than anyone else, we look like women.

In my coming-out group, I talked for three months about patriarchy before getting around to my anger at you. It's been five years. I've called you a bitch and meant it many times. If you write back and you write the same homophobic the-real-world-is-woman's-martyrdom shit, I'll change my mind about your fine intellect and about breaking silence.

Otherwise, you have my address.

Liz

P.S. We may all die the same but we sure live differently.

P.P.S. There's a woman in Fairview who is filing for divorce from a husband who mustn't suspect her sexuality. Her lover needed a break from the closet and came out here. It's a small world. We met. I didn't know her from back-when but she knows you, and she knew about your mother. If you're ever free, I'll tell you her name.

from Magnolias for Whites Only

That first job was the hardest I will ever have. I was the English Department. That meant I taught three high school classes, in addition to Freshman and Sophomore courses in the junior college wing of All Saints'. As a perfectionist, I believed each student should write a theme a week. So every weekend for the two years I worked there, I graded and commented generously on some seventy or eighty papers. Students found their voices in my classes and went on to college at some of the "best" schools in the country, all out of the South at my urging.

The students loved me right away and stayed in my classroom after school to talk about eternal verities and other similarly unmanageable topics. But they worked hard at reading, memorizing, writing about literature by all the major white male authors. As I recall, I did not teach a single female author. Out of class, we spent idle hours walking in the lovely woods surrounding the school or shopping in the tiny town of Vicksburg on Saturday when they were allowed off campus without a chaperone. My car was a subject of one of their many projects. It was a Volkswagen, baby blue, the first car bought on my own. I'd only made one payment before my arrival. The girls decided it had to have a name and for days worked on possible options. Finally they settled on "Beatrice Portinari," which combined their fascination with my story about Dante and his ethereal love/muse/idol, and their loose Latin coining of a word to mean "that which carries McNaron," "Portinari." I was moved by their cleverness and their caring.

One of the high school seniors, Mimi, began spending late afternoons talking about music and nature and how much she adored whichever writer we were studying. Mimi was tall and willowy with shiny, silky-looking dark brown hair that hung down around her shoulders. Her deep set and unbrokenly brown eyes looked long and questioningly at me until I was not sure what to do next. She liked French almost as much as English, and gradually I began reading French with her, telling myself I needed to keep up my skill since I was on my way back to more graduate school.

When her teacher assigned Saint-Exupery's *Le Petit Prince* as an extra reading, Mimi jumped at the chance, suggesting that we read it together before compulsory evening chapel. After a day or two of reading at adjacent desks in my classroom, I proposed that we retire to my room on the third floor where we could be more comfortable. Once there, I realized that the only way to be comfortable was to sit on my single bed, since there was only one chair at the small desk provided for letter writing. So tall, willowy Mimi and I began translating a story about a strange and wonderful attachment between a little boy who has fallen from the sky and a fox, a story about taming and being tamed.

Since my dormitory room faced west, our late afternoon sessions were framed by breathtak-

ing sunsets, which we interrupted translation to watch. Kneeling on my narrow bed, we'd stare out my little oval window, commenting on colors and rays and the beauty of it all. We tried literally to overlook the cannon on the hill. After one such hiatus, Mimi lay down on my bed instead of sitting back on its edge to continue Saint-Exupery. Seeing the last rays of sunlight had made her drowsy, she said. She napped for the fifteen minutes before chapel, while I sat uneasily in the lone chair watching her. I was aware of feelings I'd never had before, which were periodically erased by waves of fear. What did it mean that I looked so tenderly at this student who clearly trusted me or she wouldn't be napping on my narrow bed in the growing dusk. None of my gay male friends' stories entered my mind as I searched frantically for some familiar mooring onto which to pin my strange emotions. It never occurred to me that Mimi might be having similar feelings or even be acting in ways that elicited mine. Since I never asked her about her past, I have no idea where I and we fit in her sexual history.

At the end of the fifteen minutes, she still slept. I realized that I had to awaken her or run the risk of missing chapel and being turned in. Attendance was taken of both students and faculty by the Dean of Women, Gladyce Cooper. She stationed herself at the back of the church with a clip board and several alphabetical lists. If a girl missed once without an excuse, she was called in to chat with the Rector. If she missed a second time, she was denied her shopping or dating privileges for three weeks. If she missed three times, her parents were called for consultation preparatory to asking her to leave. If faculty were absent, Gladyce cornered us somewhere inappropriate like inside a cubicle in the ladies' room. Standing over Mimi as she slept, I broke into a cold sweat. I called to her softly but she seemed not to hear. When I knew that I was going to have to touch her, I gingerly shook her left shoulder with two fingers and saw her eyes open slowly and a shy smile spread over her face. My impulse was either to enfold her in my arms or to run out of the room. Doing neither, I hurried us off to chapel where we arrived as Father Allen was saying the Sanctus. Gladyce erased check marks on two pages, and I registered inside that she not only know we were late but that we were late together. I felt instantly cautious, angry, and protective.

Within a week of her initial nap, Mimi and I had lain down side by side on my single bed. Sleepy from translation, Mimi had once again reclined for the half-hour before chapel. Tired myself from a long night of paper grading, I joined her, not consciously suspecting what could so easily happen. Again Mimi seemed to drift into a sound sleep, while I lay wide awake, my mind filled with thoughts and my body with new desires, not present when I had slept with two or three men or even when I had felt passion and tenderness for Malcolm. Over the next month, our progress on the bed went from long soulful looks to seemingly innocent hugs to a day when our mouths touched and stayed touching longer than had been my previous experience. No one had ever seemed to want to kiss me deeply nor had I wanted them to. I remember my mild discomfort at 1940s movies when Clark Gable and whoever was his current partner filled the silver screen with their French kisses. Their lips seemed too parted, too moist, too hungry, especially his. But when Mimi and I kissed that first time, all I felt was excitement.

Not surprisingly, Mimi and I became lovers shortly after that first kiss. Neither of us felt awkward or shy about how to make love and neither of us felt guilt about our pleasure. What I cannot remember is what we actually did or how that felt. Sentences I try to write about

our frequent meetings are either filled with pulp magazine cliches or read like abstract projections of what two women would do when making love. Though I understand why I cannot bring the sensual details to life, I feel sad and angry. The reason stems from the coincidence of my love-making with bimonthly visits to the school director's office. Though I did not let Father Allin's persecution keep me from Mimi, I internalized enough of it to block out the pleasure and satisfaction connected with my first lesbian relationship.

For most of the years between my involvement with Mimi and writing this autobiography, I felt guilt and shame about this relationship. I saw myself as the initiator of all our activities and felt vaguely dirty for that fact. Finally I am able to understand that Mimi had her part in the process, that she was eighteen and I was twenty-one, though there was a genuine power differential since I was her teacher. But when we became sexual, I distinctly recall that she was not at all surprised or awkward — facts about myself that I've used as signposts of my inherent lesbianism, but which did not function so to define her until recently.

Our initial setting for sexual delights was the logical place: my bed. But not even faculty doors in the dormitory had locks. Mimi and I began to feel anxious and to interrupt our delight when we heard or thought we heard footsteps outside or someone turning the door handle. Once we were barely able to spring up and rearrange our clothing before a student came in to ask me about some poem of Alexander Pope's. She had not bothered to knock, and I felt the same way I had as I saw Gladycy Cooper erase her check marks in chapel: watched, suspected, guilty without quite knowing of what. After that narrow escape, I determined to find a more private, preferably lockable place for us.

But before I located such a haven, I was called into the Rector's office. John Maury Allin was his name, and he became presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of America. That morning in 1958, he tried to preside over my dismissal, but I refused to cooperate. He told me that a student had come to him with a "sickening story" of having seen me the previous evening kissing Mimi in the back of chapel. My immediate response was "Call her in and have her say that to my face." Maybe I'd read of such scenes in novels and remembered the stooley's collapsing in the face of the accused. Whatever my model, I was reversing the scene: I was asking a young woman in one of my classes, where I insisted that students name whatever reality they saw in literature, to look me in the face and deny that she'd seen what she had indeed seen. Mimi and I had taken to stealing a good night kiss in the foyer of chapel. We'd stay at prayers until everyone was gone and then meet quickly for a few words and some small gesture of endearment.

Father Allin agreed to the meeting, but stipulated that Mimi be present as well, clearly hoping that she'd give us away. While he sent for the informant, I rushed to the student lounge which was in a separate building called The Play House. Finding Mimi smoking with her choir friends, I pulled her aside and told her of our plight, that she would have to submit herself to the interview with Father Allin and the as-yet-unknown student. When we all had assembled, it was hard to gauge whose fear and anxiety was the greatest. The student looked at me, burst into tears, and stammered something about being mistaken or exaggerating or mistaking us for someone else. Allin was stymied, which angered him, so that his was the face that reddened. But his only choice was to send us all away.

Since I never spoke to the student who had seen me and my first lover kissing, I have

no idea why she took back her story, why she chose in that split second to side with me rather than the man in authority over us both. The shame I felt at the time, tacitly asking her to lie, I carried with me for many years. Lately I am willing to imagine that the young woman simply preferred to help me and Mimi rather than placate a father figure. I had only taught her for a few weeks when the scene took place and do not remember her name. But I owe her my job, since if she had stuck to her story, I would most probably have been forced to leave. Mimi might well have been placed in a difficult position or been suspended, though the good Rector could have kept her by saying that I was the corrupting influence.

That is exactly what he did say, over and over that year, as he continued his accusations. The scenario went something like this: I would get a note from Father Allin or he'd stop me in the hall as I was returning to class from lunch or he'd have Gladyce tell me that he wished to see me at such-and-such a time. Steeled against what was to come, I would enter his office and have the door shut firmly behind me. I always waited for him to lock it, since his office did have the capacity for privacy. Usually we were alone, though sometimes Gladyce was there with her ubiquitous clip board. Twice we were joined by the Dean of Academic Affairs, Wade Wright Egbert, who not only liked me, but thought me a superb teacher. Father Allin opened each of these grillings with the same phrase: "Toni, I'm going to have to ask you to leave if you don't change your behavior. You're corrupting the young and I can't allow that." His fantasies of how I was doing that must have upset him a great deal, because by the end of this brief opener, his face would be covered with ugly blotches. This made him even more unattractive than he was. He resembled a bulldog, with a very thick neck, tiny eyes too closely set in his face, and fulsome lips that snarled when he spoke. My responses were pretty uniform too, ranging from "I don't understand what you're talking about" when he was general in his condemnation, to "But you have no evidence and so you can't fire me" when he mentioned Mimi specifically.

Once when he was particularly vicious, Wade intervened, reminding him of my excellent work with my students, bringing hard evidence in the form of their devotion to literature, their memorization of endless lines by numerous poets, their long cogent papers written and copiously responded to every week. He also reminded his boss that I was the only English teacher they had and it would be impossible to replace me mid-year. Father Allin sputtered and fumed, but backed off for that interview. My gratitude to Wade was expressed in renewed efforts to do my job superbly; my students thrived while I consistently gained weight, drank too much, and slept poorly.

My initial confrontation with Father Allin heightened my sense of urgency about finding a private place for Mimi and me to meet. A place presented itself within the next week. My classroom was across from the library in the basement of the main building. It led, through a narrow corridor, to piano and chorus practice rooms — a fact which gave me pleasure many a night as I sat grading papers. In that corridor were two doors: one to a toilet and the other to some unknown space. Upon looking inside the second door, I found a tiny room full of trash, part of an oil furnace, and small metal box in which lay a lead key. Our school had a security system comprised of several of these little boxes strategically located on campus. Each evening, an aging watchman patrolled the grounds, checking in at each watch box by inserting its key into a round clock slung over his shoulder. I never figured out how that

activity could possibly alert him to anything amiss, but the watchman was quite faithful.

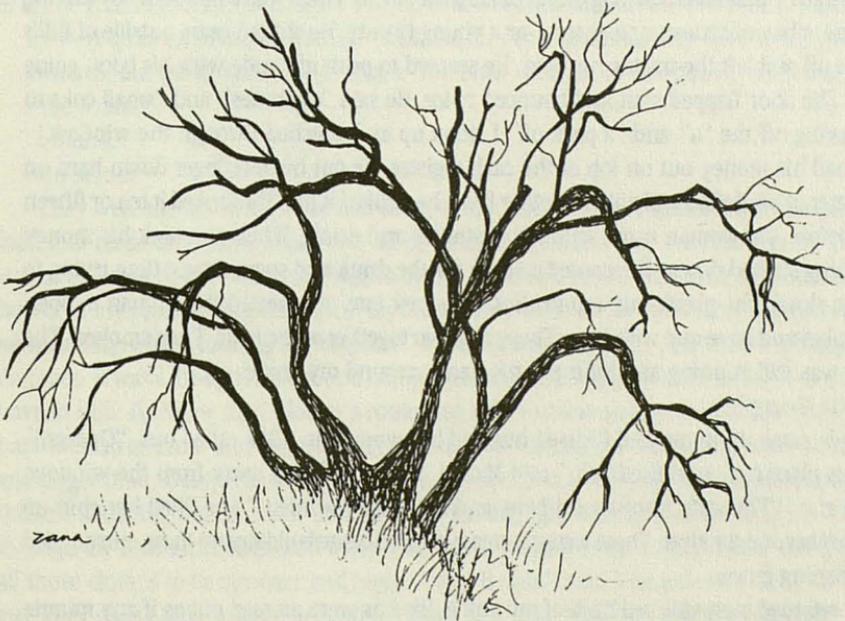
I decided to make that little room our place, though it had neither lights nor a window. Every night for two weeks, I went directly to my classroom after supper, ostensibly to grade papers. Part of each session was spent filling my two waste baskets plus the ones in each empty practice room with as much trash as I dared without raising the janitor's suspicions. Finally, the room was empty of debris. I cleaned it as best I could, installed a padlock on the inside, gave Mimi the second key, and hoped for the best. What I'd not taken into account was the watchman's schedule of rounds and his need to be able to reach into our room, take out the watch key, and perform his little ritual with the winding clock. We had to delay using our lair until I'd spent another week, ostensibly grading papers, but actually registering the exact time he arrived at that station.

When I felt all was under control, I invited Mimi in for our first evening in privacy. I'd bought flowers though it was too dark to see them. There, in that literal closet, in constant fear of the curious or fatal knock, my gentle and loyal first lover and I talked and cried and made love. By and large, my scheme worked, though we had a few narrow escapes. The worst was the appearance of the watchman fifteen minutes before his appointed time. We were lying on our clothes making love; I was experiencing as I always did the sheer luxury of that, compared to our contorted squirming amidst skirts, hose, garter belts, underpants, blouses. I recall Mimi's having just laughed softly at something I'd said about her body's resembling a flower — we both referred often to the other in terms right out of the English romantic poets. Suddenly the door was pushed hard, the padlock jangled ominously; after a few seconds, the watchman pushed even harder, assuming perhaps that something had mysteriously gotten wedged against the door. I motioned for Mimi to grab her clothes and get behind the door. I threw mine on, talking to him all the while about having bought a lock for the room so I could have a little hide-away from all the students wanting to sit in my room and talk after hours. By the end of this outlandish tale, I was more or less dressed and I let him in. He pushed open the door, little aware that right behind it stood a stark naked student who might at any moment break out into a sneeze or cough or laugh or uncontrollable cry of sheer terror. His motions with the lead key were reluctant, as if he sensed my lie. But he finished clocking our station, and must never have spoken to the rector about this strange occurrence or even about my use of the room.

Once he left the furnace room, I waited to hear the side door open and close, indicating his exit from that part of the building. Then I motioned Mimi from her perch, and we collapsed into tears and laughter. That near miss happened in March and I never really relaxed again, though we continued to meet when our schedules allowed. We never spoke of our escape any more than we spoke about any part of our relationship. But the scene of our touching and kissing and of my discovering something new and powerful about myself in a dark hole intended for garbage haunts me. I still prefer not to make love in the dark, am reluctant to be sexual in anyone else's house. I have felt extreme anger and extreme sadness that my initial lesbian experience was blighted by circumstances, by my own silence, by a sanctimonious priest on his way to a bishopric. When gay and lesbian organizations urge us "out of the closet," I wince: that phrase has never held a metaphorical significance for me; it only reminds me of the exact locale for the first nine months of my lesbian life.

the lies

my lies are huge prickly pears that roll out of my mouth onto the floor and out
of the door to multiply multiply multiply
my lies are ice on teeth the scarlet a and bee sting on the bottom of the foot
my lies are lessons
my lies are great testimonials to my imagination
my lies jump out the alley way and take all your money before you say boo
my lies hold your face and breathe evenly beside you all night
my lies sure look like truths
my lies sure look like lies
pardon me maam but i think you left your lies on the table
damn i walked outta the house and forgot my lies
my lies will never intentionally hurt you
my lies will beat your bones to smooth round stones
my lies will expect things
my lies will crawl around outside your house at night and whisper through the cracks:
there must be something we can talk about



The Unforgiven

I saw something while waiting for Maude outside a place called Bill's in the Ozarks. I saw a tractor run over a dog. I saw a retarded man, a man slow in his body, with breasts, crawl on all fours across the street, across the dull gravel that must have bruised his knees and hands. When he got to where the dog was he leaned his head down and licked it. It was a puppy and he licked all the parts of it, starting with its head. He took a long time, much longer than the time it had taken for that dog to die, and when he had licked its last little paw and the last inch of its tail, he took the tail in his teeth and stood up and, never once using his hands, went and dropped the dog in the garbage can. Then he walked back across the street and sat down next to me in the dust outside the place called Bill's.

Inside Bill's I could hear the bartender, who was also the cook and cashier and waitress, snapping her chewing gum. I could see through the screen door that the gum was grey, and the little bubbles she made with it were a lighter grey or white. She leaned on a table with her hands turned around on the edge of the table so she was resting on the heels of her hands. She stared out the window.

"Y'all selly namway?" she called out.

"Pardon? I didn't hear you."

She laughed. "Not talkin to you's why. Talkin to him." She nodded at the retarded man who was looking through the screen door, trying to find where the voice came from. "Talkin to John."

The tractor that killed the dog came back up the street. There was a different boy driving this time, a boy of sixteen or eighteen, or a young twenty. He shifted gears outside of Bill's and got off and left the tractor running. He seemed to push me aside with his boot, going inside. The door flapped shut and bounced twice. He said "cigarettes" and "small coke to go," leaving off the "a" and "a pack of." I stood up and watched through the window.

He had his money out on top of the cash register. He put his forefinger down hard on the corner of his dollar, and with the other hand he stroked it flat. He stroked it ten or fifteen times before the woman came with his cigarettes and drink. When she took his money everything slowed down. He wanted a straw for the drink and spent a long time trying to find the slot in the plastic cup top to stick the straw into. He wanted the woman to open the smokes and have one with him. They sat down together at the table. They smoked. The tractor was still running and John put his hands around my ankle.

"Hello Gussy."

Maude came up to me and I kissed her and the woman in Bill's called out, "Queers!"

"This place has good fried fish," said Maude. We stood facing away from the window, arm in arm. "The state troopers eat here, and the prison warden." She lifted her chin up to the hill beyond the river. There were six cream-colored stone buildings up there, surrounded by a bristling fence.

The retarded man still had hold of my ankle. His lips were pressed out as if any minute

he would start to whistle. From inside the woman called out, "Faggots!" The boy who drove the tractor said, "Shh, you dumb gun!" I turned around and he was trying to smother her, holding one hand at the base of her skull and the other over her mouth. He let go and she snapped her gum at him.

Maude and I walked up that hill. "It's called A Home for Boys," she said, "but it's a prison. Our house was the closest house to it, and the only house for miles the whole time I was growing up. They'd get out and end up in our woods, or in our yard. Once in our house. A lot of times I'd come home from school and there'd be a couple of prison guards waiting under the trees."

"Waiting?"

"Yeah. Just sitting, talking. Waiting. From inside I'd watch them spit on their guns and pull out their shirttails to polish them up. They got to know me because I was home alone most of the time. 'Where's your mama, Baby Jane?' they'd say. I'd say, 'Working.' 'Where's your daddy then?' 'He's dead.' 'Where's your older brother? On his way home to take care of you?' 'I had an older brother,' I'd tell them, 'but he's dead too.'"

"You didn't have an older brother, Maude."

"It didn't matter." She shook her head. "Two deaths in one family shut them up."

"Would they leave then?"

"No. But the ones under the trees would move out to the road, and the ones on the porch would move out to the trees. There were usually five or six of them. They were skinny, sickly men, and I always thought one of them might die on me; just lie right down in the shade and not get up again."

"Like your father."

"Like my brother," she laughed. We came up out of the woods to a small meadow full of brittle grasses and bluish flowers. The flowers were tiny and occurred a dozen to a stem.

We were quiet a minute, then I said, "Well, did they ever find who they were looking for?"

"Oh yes, but never around our house. The ones who got to our house, we found."

"You found?"

"I found."

"Oh Maude."

"They were the tallest boys I've ever seen, Gussy, and there was something in the prison food that made their faces break out, all of them in the same way. I found four of them, at four different times. One in the bushes by the road, two under the house, and one in the house. In my room, going through everything in my chest of drawers. Later someone said he would have been looking for disguises." Maude shook her head. "He wasn't looking for disguises. It was a little girl's room and nothing in that white and pink chest of drawers would have fit him. He knew that. Mother's room was next to mine and he could have taken her hat and dress and coat and slipped away. But he was looking for something to be stronger and bigger than, Gussy. He was a young boy, not as old as that boy in the window at Bill's, the one shushing the waitress. This boy was having ugly dreams and running his hands through my little girl things, and when I walked in on him I was a much better thing than all those clothes to be stronger and bigger than. It didn't take him any time at all to hurt me. They didn't have a fence around the place and after that they put the fence up."

I could see the fence from where we stood. There were a few boxes along the top of the fence which Maude said were guard posts. I imagined the skinny, sickly men dying up there and falling out; possibly falling inside the fence, possibly outside. Maude pointed to a body walking between two of the cream-colored buildings. He had his head bowed and was swinging something, a rope or a stick, from his left hand.

"This far away he could be anyone," she said. "He could be me. That's what I do with the one who hurt me."

But I don't believe in forgiveness the way she does, and I tossed a rock at that fortress before I turned and followed my friend down the hill. The only time I ever went back to the Ozarks I went without Maude. I wanted to sit inside Bill's this time and leave my heart open to whatever came in the door. It was quiet for a long time, just me and the woman who'd called us queers, though she didn't recognize me, or seem to. Ah well, she might have been a stranger herself without that chewing gum.

I ate my fish, my fried buffalo as they called it, and potato salad. I pressed the two pieces of white bread together to make something of nothing, and ate that. The state troopers came in. They were two burly men wearing blues, black shoes, and guns. One ordered catfish. The other ordered what I ordered. One wanted diet Dr. Pepper and the other said, "Melk, ef ya got melk today." He wasn't from where everyone else in the Ozarks was from, by his accent. He didn't know where the restroom was and he waited until the woman had gone to fix his supper before he leaned and asked his buddy.

They ate fast and didn't talk much until they were done. Then the new trooper got up and filled the jukebox with quarters. He came back and sat down. The other one was dipping a paper napkin in a water glass and washing the supper off his chin and lips. The new trooper pulled out a napkin to do the same.

I could hear what they said, mostly road talk, shop talk, and now and then something personal following the word "wife." The new trooper said less than the other, and seemed embarrassed by the personal leanings of his buddy. Finally he stopped talking altogether and let the other one go on and on. He pushed his chair back on two legs and tapped both forefingers on the table edge, in or out of time with the songs he'd selected on the jukebox. I wondered how long their break was. The woman cleared their plates and brought coffee and stayed to snap a few bubbles, a crisp, clean sound after the heavy, fried fish. Someone else came in and sat down somewhere and said something. It was grey, almost dark outside, and inside no one had bothered to turn on the lights.

"You ever want to?" I heard the old cop say to the rookie, who shook his head and kept shaking it through the next question: "You ever think about it? Aw, come on, Sal. Everyone thinks about it." Sal just kept shaking his head. "I done it once with a first cousin," the cop went on. He laughed and lowered his voice. "And that was kinda nice and got me thinkin well, why not? What the hell? My oldest was three, two years older than the baby. Oh, I never did nothin. Just not the kinda guy. But Jesus, I thought about it, still think about it. I kissed them a lot when they was growin up, and I used to put the baby in her bath and kinda lick her all over. That was nice. I'm surprised you never thought about it, Sal. You come as close as you can come, is all, and then you back off. But god, you want to. My first one's married goin on seven years, and I still want to. Maybe if I had she wouldn't of married

like she did; stupid bottom of the barrel. Come on." The old cop motioned with his head. "Let's pay and get outta here."

The two men left. I sat very still and tried to send a message to Maude. The message was this: They could never be us. Even the one called Sal. We are more like the cradle of fishbones on this table.

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Anger to Use: The Waitress Poem

"It's like those whores forming unions or crying rape."

"She gets paid to do it."

Phyllis Schlafly gets on the radio all the time . . .

Nice women are not barrased.

I wear a black uniform:
pants and vest, white shirt.

No arched eyebrows

pushup bra

perfume

blusher

highheels

or curling iron

touch me.

I am simply twenty-three

and thin enough.

Our managers tried to make makeup mandatory and wanted to fire us even if it meant going to court but decided they might lose so now they only recommend makeup but put it in the rules that we have to act ladylike — and we can't complain to them about customers mauling us psychologically or physically or even a waiter doing this because managers are men who call women broads and go to other restaurants and home to wives they treat just like us only mixed with love if you can imagine.

And you know what I mean

from the inside out

or you're a man.

Everyone has answers, for instance
men with the power of choice
pretend I have the same,
would do something about it or get out
if they were me.

Career women plug law school —
say my father wants to pay
to save me from mixed neighborhoods
and the lessons in turned cuffs —
say *Get smart Girl,*
you've gotta be
part of the thumb
or under it.

And women who write poetry on farms
they rent from men,
eat food they grow themselves
with seeds they buy from Burpee,
'are dying to expand my consciousness.

Well for each of you
who sees my job
as what I need to change,
study on the common ground
of waitress' lives and women's,
notice women don't get paid
for most of what's forced on us.

And of course it's hard to function
without a veil between my visions
and the routine of fishing
sticky coins from ashtrays.
But I know I have to see things
as they are, or I can't change them,
must refuse the invitation
to pretend I'm not oppressed.

Instead I twist these poems
from my knowing and my rage,
pass them out like kindling
for all our banked furies.

The Millet Poem

I.

dried wings in the millet

on closer look, white worms and
sticky white stuff, long strands of millet cocci

I am sick to my stomach, digging out dead bugs with a spoon,
rinsing the gallon jar in scalding water, sick
as dried wings rise to the surface,
berating myself, why are you doing this? can't you toss out a few cents worth
of bad grain?

at the same time, as if driven, unable to stop myself, digging away with
Grandma Beck's handmedown silverplate spoon, trying
to salvage what's left,
picking out hard brown bodies,
brown wings,
clumps of tiny white pearl stuck to each other, first
washing the invaders down the kitchen sink, then, imagining they'll miraculously
resuscitate, crawl back up through the drainpipe and transmit like a disease
through tight lids into jars of rice and corn,
I flush them down the toilet, feeling crazy, high pitched,
giddy, what if the plumbing gets backed up and my landlord finds a glutinous
mass of millet swollen inside the plunger?

Pressure-cooking cups of picked-over millet
I tell myself, even if worm eggs
are still in there, they'll be boiled to death, they
can't hatch inside me, saying at the same time,
— a feeling like dread in my throat —
why can't you throw it away? you have enough for an army, cooking
eight cups all at once.

a feeling like dread, thick mucus I can't swallow down

II.

Old eggs, born all at once forty years ago, millions upon
millions of old eggs, aging all at once, unacknowledged children
only the psychics see, contracepted, aborted, buzzing
around my head, in the spirit plane, like gnats

or sitting in my belly,
hard pellets, tiny and round and white, longing for
their chance of a lifetime, that moment of grace when they, too, are chosen
to burst through tough, white encasement, when they, too, will
shout out, *mittelsmerz, mittelsmerz*, as
they make their way down the tube,
mittelsmerz a magic name, with an elemental sound
like Rumpelstiltskin.

In their jubilation,
they hear only the sound, a melodic, nonsense, made-up mantra
like *fallopian* or *praise the lord*,
and they forget in their preconscious memory that
mittelsmerz means pain and, in an empty tube,
is a code word for doom,
the same doom and disappointment that came to a lonely German dwarf
who asked for the first born and got nothing
but a rage that tore him open, starting
at his crotch.

III.

I adapt to the luteal moon, pace
up and around my apartment at night, brew cups of weak
mint tea in the dark, and wrapped in my old blue and white
flannel robe, sip them cup by cup
standing by the kitchen window.

Yet sometimes at three a.m., I wake up overwhelmed
with the same terror that riveted me to the middle of my bed as a ten
year old, afraid to move my arms away from my body, imagining
the plump prepubescent fingers of Bobby Walker and Pete Mahaffey
lurking at the sides of my bed, waiting to creep up from underneath
where they've been crouching for thirty years, short-legged
Rumpelstiltskins,
or if not that image exactly anymore, the same paralyzing
fright that holds me in the center hollow of the mattress, barely
taking a breath, not wanting to open my eyes, listening
to my own stunted voice in the shadows, demanding my first born,
which is still only myself.

In the morning, I mark the calendar,
counting the days, waiting
for the brown wings, waiting for the
dried brown wings, fragile, almost transparent.

The Line

The phone rings I look at the clock
realizing I'm gonna be late for the unemployment
damn radio didn't go off I climb into my clothes
and jump a cab for the few blocks I normally walk
I run up the steps and trip crashing to my kneecaps
a startled man behind me rushes to help me up
but I'm already stumbling to my feet
I smile at him embarrassed saying
all this for a dumb check, right? I don't wait for his reply
I am dashing through the plexiglass door with my hundred pound
pocketbook and brown shopping bag with other things I might need
in the day I am late I am late
I clamor along the space between the lines asking
is this the nine fifteen line? is this the nine fifteen line?
The nine fifteen? You're late. but somebody else tells me
Oh, yeah . . . well, they combined the nine fifteen
and the nine forty five line . . .
I'm gonna be late for my off the books job
should I forfeit today and just try to get downtown to work?
nah, my boss will understand she knows me I work hard
we're friends she trusts me I open my paperback
and start to read do I really work hard enough?
she's too nice I don't want her to think I am taking advantage
the young man on line ahead of me
is playing with a two year old boy
Where's your mother, boy?
the baby laughs and throws up his arms
he quick on tip toes runs to another line
I don't want to wait for an hour
only to have the woman look at me like I'm stupid
and turn me away You're late. Come back tomorrow.
But I can't come back tomorrow. I have to work.
do they really expect us to be making it
off their little stupid check?
I ask some more people is this the right line

a man behind me with glasses looks iike a one time athlete
he says he'll hold my place while I go find out
I walk with my baggage to a shorter line
I ask is this the nine fifteen or the nine forty five?
Si he says
Which one? I say
Si he says
The nine fifteen or the nine forty five? I want to know
C he demands
Oh, "C"! I say Line C I thought you said "Si"
I smile he ignores me
another man tells me this is the nine fifteen
but they told him he's the last one they're gonna take
un unh my brain says un unh
and the skinny guy with the cigarette in front of me
is saying the same thing
he says I'm gonna stay here and take my chances
I turn around and there are suddenly
ten twenty people behind me
the woman behind the counter is screaming
This line is closed! This line is closed!
nobody understands what's going on
most of us don't speak english
I decide to go up to the counter to ask where I should be
as I pass the front of my line
a man shouts at me in a deep voice
La linea! La linea!
I can't believe he thinks I'm cutting in
I tell him I'm just going up to ask a question
I'll be right back
La linea he grunts
yeah, yeah . . . la linea la linea I say
and walk up to the counter
I recognize the woman working there
I am glad to be approaching one of the nicer ones
I wonder if she's gay
she tells me to wait a second
while she finishes with a client
I ask her which line I should be on for the nine fifteen
(by this time it's ten o'clock)
she reaches for my book

Did you fill it in? she asks me
Yes. I say
horrified I realize that she's stamping my book
I want to say No! No! I only wanted to know
what line to go on.
but the words are in my throat
punching each other in the face
she hands me the card to sign and I sign it
in light pencil real fast invisible writing
maybe nobody will notice what has just happened here
I hand back the card she gives me my yellow book
La Linea!! I hear as I turn around
Hey! How did you do that?
I try not to look at the skinny young man
whose cigarette has burnt out
the one time athlete is standing quietly in the line
I try to explain
I only wanted to know what line I should be on
he stares straight ahead
I take my bags
and walk down the stairs
out to the street
the sun
the fucking sun is shining.

Waitin Outside

Every Wednesday I go visit Eunice at the Newton County Jail. It's another long story how & why she got there, but she's there for another 6 months, at least, & she's already done 3 months. I been goin to see her the whole time so far, & I'll probly keep it up as long as they don't change my schedule at work. I'm a nurse aide at Sunset Manor so you never can tell — they're always messin with your schedule just as soon as you get used to workin a certain shift or else they're wantin you to work a double shift. But nobody usually asks me about working a second shift on Wednesdays anymore cuz they know I try to git out to see Eunice. Anyway, right now I work 7 to 3, so I got just enough time after work on Wednesdays to go home, take a shower, get dressed, grab a bite, & get to the jail by 5:15.

I always try to get there by 5:15 becuz visiting hours for the women are strickly 5:30 to 6:30. If you get there late, you just get less time to visit & if you get there too late, you miss the whole thing & you gotta wait till next week. The other reason to get there early is there's only 5 inmates allowed to git visitors at once, so if more than 5 git people there to visit, then the guards make everybody split up their time, & if you're late you might only get 10 minutes or so. I guess this is a worse problem for the men, cuz there's usually lots of them in the jail & there's hardly ever more than 5 women, but I don't take any chances anyway.

The way it's set up there at the jail is you gotta park your car across the street in a big lot & then walk across to this ugly old brick building with a big steel door stuck right in the middle. They don't open that door till right at 5:30, so all the people waitin to visit somebody just stand around that door, just waitin for em to open it. People don't stand in a line or nothin, but everybody sorta knows who came when & when the door finally gits opened, everybody goes inside in the right order. It's kinda funny how there's all these special manners here, sorta like you're at a fancy restaurant, only it's the county joint.

For instance, there's certain people you can talk to & then there's others you best just leave alone. The only way I can tell which is which is it seems like the talkers look at you & the no-talkers keep busy the whole time lookin at the ground, like there might be money down there or somethin. There's this one woman, Emma. She's usually there already by the time I pull up. She comes from pretty far away, so she's even more careful than me about gettin there early. First time I came, I walked up to that door & asked somethin stupid about did we need to ring the bell. She laughed & said this must be my first time there & I said yeh, that it was. Then she told me about you gotta wait outside till 5:30 & then you hear this buzz & only then the door can open & everybody goes in & then there's another door inside that you all gotta wait for em to buzz open. You only ring the bell to get in if you're late & everybody's already inside. Emma is a definite talker. She's got a daughter inside & Emma comes every week to see her & to bring The Baby to visit. The Baby is Emma's daughter's little boy & I'll be darned if I can remember his name, even though I know Emma's said it to me before. But mostly Emma calls him The Baby & I guess he's about 3. Just old enough to about drive Emma & everybody else crazy. Emma's daughter's waitin to go to court. For

checks, I think, & it seems like she'll probly go to the state pen. So Emma's keepin The Baby & bringin him to visit every week cuz once his mother gets sent up, she'll be too far away for them to visit much. The women's pen's about a 5 hour drive from where Emma lives. I guess Emma's daughter's been waitin on a court date a long time cuz Emma's been visitin up there long enough to where she really knows all about the place. She kinda lets the new visitors know what's goin on, like she did for me. And even now, when I've been comin for 3 months, I still ask her questions, like can I bring Eunice colored pens or do they only get to have blue ink ones. And Emma knows they can only have the ones with blue ink & too, the pens have to be clear, like Bics. That's so you can't sneak in a cannon ball inside of a pen, Emma says. I like Emma OK, even though The Baby got bubble gum in my hair one time.

An example of no-talkers is The Cowboy & his wife. I don't know their names cuz they never said who they were, but I always think of them as The Cowboy & his wife cuz he wears a cowboy hat, pointy boots & blue jeans. They drive in a pick-up & come right at 5:29 or close to it, I think so they don't have to stand long in the open there outside that door where people drivin by might see em & know they've got somebody in there.

Once you get inside the jail, it's the most eeriest place you can imagine. Really. I'd never been inside a jail, never even thought about jails much at all, till Eunice got arrested. And I can tell you now, I don't plan to ever go back inside one once she gits out. But I know I'll never be able to go back to not thinkin about em at all. Shit, the place is in my dreams now.

Of course, you can easily imagine that it ain't exactly a cheerful lookin place. Fact is, I've been in graveyards that're cheerier than the jail. It's painted a sorta pale dirt green & looks like it needed a new paint job maybe 3 years ago. You sit on these beat up old stools with no padding & no backs in front of a big sheet of this real thick plexiglass which is all scratched up & it divides the room in about half lengthways. There's 5 little tables with phones on em on the visitor's side and 5 little tables with phones on em on the other side. There's nothin in between the tables, so whatever you say or do, everybody else in the place knows about it. Sometimes I cry thinkin about what a bunch of strangers have heard me say. Course, everybody acts like they don't notice what the others are sayin. And sometimes you really don't notice cuz you're so tied up with your own business. But other times it seems like no matter how hard you try, you can't help but pick up on other people's private talk.

So just try to picture all these people sittin on these crummy stools in this dirt green room & we're all waitin for em to bring down the inmates. And then we hear buzzes & steel doors & first 2 guards come in & behind them are the inmates & then 2 more guards. Everybody's in the same color uniforms — dark dirt green. But the inmate's uniforms are baggy tops & bottoms like the kind people wear in hospitals. The guards wear regular shirts & trousers. And they've got name tags & keys & a short, thick club.

One thing that's hard for me to describe is how it was when they brought Eunice down for our first visit. I guess I wasn't prepared for it. Lord, I was glad that crummy stool was under me cuz I knew my legs was too shaky to hold me up. You know what it was? It was shock. Like this one time when I was drivin home from work & I was feelin all happy cuz

I had 3 days in a row off & I was hummin & then I came around this bend in the road & there right in front of me was all this blood on the road. I guess somebody'd hit a deer right there, but it was awful lookin & I felt like pukin the whole way home. And that's the same way it was when I saw Eunice. There I sat, all glad to finally be gittin to see her (cuz it took them a couple weeks to get the paperwork all done so I could visit) & then they brought her down. She was in handcuffs. One hand cuffed to the woman in front of her & one hand to the one behind her. My stomach started turnin over when I saw her chained up that way. I was all shaky & tears came runnin out.

Once they got Eunice unlocked, she came over to the little table opposite the one I was at & we both picked up the phones. She just kept sayin please don't cry. And I did quit, mostly cuz I didn't want to just waste the whole hour cryin. But we'd talk a little while & then I'd cry again & this would happen over & over. Sometimes it's still like that, but now I know it helps if I try not to look at Eunice in those handcuffs but wait till she sits down at the table instead.

Sometimes, when we both pick up those phones, we have a hard time gittin started talkin to each other. Even though we've known each other for years, the first few minutes are sorta uncomfortable, like when you're meetin somebody new & aren't quite sure what to say next. But after a while we git warmed up, talkin like old friends again & by the time the hour's up, we're rushin our words out as fast as we can, tryin to cram as much as possible into those last few minutes. Then the guard says time's up & we say goodbye till next week & I get out fast so I don't have to see those handcuffs again.

Well one week it happened kinda different & I think I came real close to losin my mind over it.

First, though, you gotta know about the phones at the jail. They're these real old lookin black phones, bolted down to each of the tables. And not one of em works right. The main problem is static. Sometimes it comes & goes. Soemtimes it's there the whole time you're talkin. But you never git a phone without static at all. Now, I know they got ways of hookin phones up so astronauts up in space can call down here on earth, so there just ain't no real reason why they can't fix these jail phones that're about 6 inches apart so they don't crackle. But they never do fix em, so you just try to hear the best you can.

On this one day, though, some 20 minutes left to visit, & the phones me & Eunice are on start to cracklin so bad that we can't hear each other talk at all. I mean, not at all. Emma, the talker, is sittin right next to me & she notices what's goin on cuz I'm shoutin into the phone. She says to try bangin it, that sometimes that'll git it workin again. So I start bangin my receiver on the little table & Eunice sees me & starts bangin her receiver. And in about half a second this guard comes rushin up to me & says to stop bangin the phone cuz I'll break it. I really just had to laugh then & I said it already is broke, that's why I'm bangin it. He looked at me all stone faced & told me to quit bangin or he'd throw my ass outa there. Eunice had caught on to what was happen, so we just looked at each other & shrugged our shoulders. For the rest of the time, we could only mouth words to each other or make signs.

I wanted to know if she wanted me to bring her anything next week. I usually try to bring

her what she needs on the days I visit. If I got the money, that is. Well, I didn't have a hard time usin signs to ask if she needed cigarettes or money. But how do you make a sign for tampax? First I tried just mouthing the word but she didn't understand what I was trying to say. So then I tried makin signs with my hands but she still didn't get it. I was real aggravated cuz if I coulda talked, it woulda taken one lousy word but here I was tryin to make signs & I might never git thru to her. So, bein all frustrated like this, I forgot about makin a fool of myself & got up, pointed down between my legs & sorta acted out puttin one of the damn things in & takin it out & holdin it danglin by its string. Well, she got it then. We both busted out laughin. I was real glad she finally knew what I was tryin to ask. But then all of a sudden I slid right from laughin into cryin. I was real tired & our time was just about up & most of it I'd spent actin out a tampax. What I really wanted to do was to strangle somebody like that stupid guard. Twenty minutes is a lot to lose when you only got an hour to begin with.

But one thing happened that really surprised me. Right before time was up, The Cowboy's Wife, who was sittin on the other side of me from Emma, tapped me & said would I wanna say goodbye to my friend on their phones. She was givin up the last few minutes of her visit for me & Eunice & we sure jumped at the chance. It was a relief to hear Eunice's voice, even for just a minute, when I'd thought I wouldn't hear it again for another week. As I was leavin, I said thanks a lot to The Cowboy's Wife. She & The Cowboy looked down at their boots.

As I was drivin home, I kept gettin tenser and tenser, though. I was real worked up about havin 20 minutes of our hour spoiled & that jerk of a guard tellin me not to break a broken phone. So when I got home, I thought well, I'll run a bath & maybe I can soak some of this tenseness away. But from the minute I got in that bath, I knew it wasn't right.

Maybe the water was too hot or somethin, but instead of relaxin, the hot water sorta got my anger up even more. My face kept gettin hotter & hotter, so I started pourin water over my head with this pitcher I use for rinsin. But then my hands started shakin & water splashed all over the floor. And I couldn't stop shakin or spillin water. And I remember the only thought I had was "well, who the fuck cares?" So I scooped water in that pitcher & stood up, got outa the tub & poured the water all over the bathroom floor. And I ran back to the tub, scooped more water & ran to the kitchen to dump it all out there. And before I knew it, there I was, naked as a jay bird, runnin thru my whole house splashin & drippin & pourin & runnin back to the tub for more water. I poured it on the pile of dirty clothes & on the tablecloth & the bed & the curtains. I poured it into my shoes. And I kept runnin back to the tub for more. And when I was really goin, with the water & splashin & runnin, I stood in my bedroom & started to spin around. My arms flew out straight & water from the pitcher was thrown all over the room. And I kept spinnin around till the pitcher flew out of my hand & smashed against the wall. And then I just fell into my soggy bed and slept till mornin.

I didn't tell Eunice nothin about this. One, cuz she might get to worryin too much, two, cuz she might tell me not to come back no more & three, cuz there was no way for me to tell her without a bunch of others hearin & thinkin I'm nutso. I'll probly tell her about it when she gets out, though. I can just picture her settin at my kitchen table, laughin & teasin me about how I went crazy while she was in the county joint.

The following prose piece was written out of a workshop I gave at Pleasanton Prison and was written about a Puerto Rican woman of great strength and dignity.

Maria Sez

Hey, I gotta talk to you. You know I think I'm goin outta my friggin mind an I gotta talk to you. What I wanna know is how do you live through it . . . all the shit. You've lived through it an I gotta know how. Every night I go to bed an my mind goes crazy . . . I start hittin the bottle an I can't sleep. I gotta sleep . . . I'm goin to school an takin care of five kids.

Ramon, he's the thirteen year old, you know, he's gettin into trouble. Shit, drugs, you know, bad company. An the twelve year old, he's followin right behind him. The girls, they don give me no trouble . . . an the baby. I tell them, "Look at the baby . . . she's two years old . . . so what do I have to teach her . . . to walk, to talk, to shit in the pot. I awready taught you that . . . so why do you hang on my tit? You gotta let go!"

Hey . . . the other night I went nuts . . . Ramon stands there friggin smart ass as he sez, "I don gotta do no dishes." An I said . . . "Wotta you mean you don gotta do no dishes . . . do I ask you to support me, to feed me, to wash my clothes, my ass? All I'm askin is for you to do the dishes so I can study." An he just stands there smart ass an sez, "I don' gotta do them, thass for women." An I went crazy . . . I picked up a stick I keep in the house, you know, there's always weirdos hangin aroun this block, an I hit him over the head with it . . . an I split his scalp an I grab hol of his hair and the blood is runnin through my fingers and down his face an I'm saying "Mothafuckah . . . I gave you life! I gave you life an I can give you death just as easy. Easier!

"I can go to jail and they can cook my meals and do my laundry. I can sit on my ass at night an write poems an I can make it with the dykes an not have to bother with no lousy men fuckin over me! You think I can't kill you? It's an easy out for me. You do what I say or take your ass down to L.A. Go fine your father in the barrio an let him worry about you . . . See how you like livin in shit." Hey, you know I love this kid, an I came close to killin him . . . an I gotta talk to you . . . How you lived through all your shit . . . How you still live through it.

The following poem was written while in Santa Rita Jail last summer, for blockading the Lawrence Livermore Lab.

El Barracuda
Santa Rita Jail
June 1983

On those nights when a certain guard
paces back and forth, back and forth
in the tent where the women are held,
the air is thickly silent.

If the rattle of his keys cease, suddenly,
close by a cot, hearts lurch, heads
turtle down under stiff blankets,
the feral odor is that of fear.

In the grey dawn as we stumble to the toilets
he watches, thick fingers stroking his truncheon,
the teeth of his smile large and white.
The pale flat eyes follow our buttocks,
leave trails of sperm on our breasts.

The Refrigerator Story

It was certain days that the feeling came over her. She didn't know when or how it had started. It had something to do with a lack of order, something the neatly folded clothes, the bathroom floor glistening and smelling of Pinesol belied, something that could not be stacked or scrubbed away, something like the disintegration of a star searing thru an otherwise well ordered universe. It also had to do with the simple arithmetic of her life, which never seemed to add up. The thirty-six dollars a week she received in unemployment benefits and the forty-five dollars every two weeks from welfare never seemed to cover meager necessities, much less dreams. And it was somewhere in clean closets and brown soaped kitchens that the debits created disorder. It could have been attributed to other lacks but she was unaware of anything except that having put her house in order she was still in chaos. Things made little and less sense daily. She couldn't put her finger on when or how but she became broken — not like a spastic tin toy programmed to self-destruct or a fine piece of crystal dashed to seething shards, but more like a damp piece of driftwood or rubber, things that don't ordinarily crack under ordinary circumstances, and indeed circumstances were as ordinary as any. Things were in their respective places and tho nothing added up it was no less than usual, that is, she had no more of nothing than she usually did. Somewhere under these most ordinary of circumstances certain things ceased functioning in her mind. No she didn't stop bathing or slip into incoherent babbling. Her mode of thinking neither changed drastically nor deviated into odd little quirks. It was the dimension that changed. She began to think small. In accordance with her place in the universe she told herself. Her appetite heretofore insatiable became small. She ate less because she needed less, being less. Things that had been of significance dwindled daily. The need of conversation was the first to wither and a caress or kiss seemed such huge acts. And the clothing, was there ever a need for so much being so small. Then a most crucial point, why it had taken so long to realize she didn't know. She moved too much, far far too much. What was the need for so much movement? It could all be done from spaces deep inside, as anybody who's done it knows, you must be very very still if you want to fly. So it was with a minimum amount of movement that she dislodged the refrigerator shelves of their contents, quietly stacking everything neatly along the wall, then removed the shelves. She started to pull out the plug, thought better of it, after all cold slowed down movement considerably. Then placing her bikini bottomed behind on the refrigerator floor, she folded her knees to her chest and inched herself in. She extended her arm, clutched the fixture that had held the butter and eggs and completed her last big movement as she pulled the door shut.

Janey

The dog's face was split in two. You could see the flesh and bone and what was underneath the bone, and he was still alive. Something, *an axe*, you breathed, had split his face open, asymmetrical, only the eyes looked straight out at us. We had seen blood on the snow-cruised road, tracked it over the drifts into the grim winter woods of central Maine, thinking a deer, some wild creature not properly killed, thinking gunshot, never for a moment thinking *dog* or *axe*. The eyes looked straight at us and you began to cry *omigod* while I went deathly calm the way I do and took your arm and said *that's all right* and then — *what should we do?*

Such pain, you said, *we have to shoot him*. I want to take him to the vet but you, bitter, say, *there's no point, let's get Janey's gun*, and then — *I bet George did it*.

Janey is our neighbor, our only friend around here. Every afternoon we walk down the road to Janey's to drink tea, sometimes with soda biscuits and butter, really margarine. We sit around the old table by the kerosene heater, and when one of us has to pee, we leave, because Janey's embarrassed that she still doesn't have an outhouse, only a slop bucket. George is her teenage son. He's quit school and steals small from everyone including us but is on probation and has promised not to again, though a few months later he would steal everything nice we owned plus a full lid of good dope, but we are at this point thinking he's not a bad kid. We know Janey used to beat him, but now he's too big. We know he has violence in him. They live, Janey and George, with her brother John who's small and high-voiced, is called retarded, and Janey gets paid by the state to take care of him. She always calls him *Brother*, never *John*, and whenever we stop for tea she chases him out of the kitchen and he hovers just outside the doorway — there is no door — *to spy*, Janey says, but we think just to listen — we are the day's news. It's clear Janey hits him when she's mad which is often.

We reach Janey's, the grey house, the tiny porch-step, knock — I let you do the talking, your home, your people, and besides I can't imagine what to say. You begin: *Janey, we found a dog in your woods cut up and dying* —

She cuts in — *that son of a gun is that where he went he was going after my rabbits and I wasn't going to let him eat my rabbits, no sir, I don't take that from any dog* —

Janey, you interrupt — *can I borrow your gun to put him out, the pain must be awful*.

I'm out of bullets, she says, *otherwise I'd have shot him but I just didn't have any bullets and I'll be damned if I'm going to let any dog come on over and eat my rabbits, he's been here before, that one, and I'm not raising those rabbits so some damn dog* —

Well, we'll go on up the hill to get a gun, then, you say, *I want to put him out*. You are calm, friendly, we all agree it's a fine idea.

As soon as we're down the path from the old grey house your voice slams into me like a door: *she has bullets*, you say, *she just didn't want to use them up and she didn't use the axe because she was out of bullets, she did it to do it. She wanted to do it*. All the way up the hill you repeat, *she wanted to do it*. I'm stunned, an innocent. Janey.

We get your gun, an automatic. *Can you imagine*, you say, checking the clip to make sure it's loaded, *following the dog into the woods and doing that to him, can you imagine the strength, the rage?* I imagine nothing, I have no mind, no body, just motion and calm, but you tell me to hurry and I hurry.

We scramble over the banks again, easy to find, the blood trail but no paw prints, maybe she, maybe George carried the dog out here to die. It's illegal, what she did to this dog, yet I know we won't turn her in.

He's there, the split skull. The eyes.

Do you want to do it? you ask, meaning, shoot. I've never put an animal out, we agree you'll do it and show me how — for next time? — *up against the back of his skull*, you say — I am watching the eyes divided by a chasm of skull/brain/flesh, clear pink edges of the cleft —

Don't look, you say, *it'll splatter all over*, but my eyes are locked on that sharp pink cleft, an eye on either side. I can't look away and for some reason the brains don't splatter — later we remember, hollow point bullets, open inside. The noise is not loud, the skull acts as a silencer, swallowing the blast.

He dies, quick as a breath. Relief.

You walk away. I check the collar, in case there's a tag, I want to tell the people — anonymously — their dog is dead, so they don't look for him to come home, but there is no tag: a brown dog, shepherd-like, mutt — and a month later I would pick out from the pound a brown shepherd-like mutt puppy, never thinking once about this dog until I dreamed Lena my puppy with a split skull and I knew I had been wanting to expiate something, heal the memory of the split dog.

But now we just walk down to Janey's, we don't want her to feel shunned or shamed, don't want to acknowledge what happened either, because we don't want to deal with her, *bow, why, Janey*. You say simply that we shot him and she takes the big iron kettle from the woodstove where it sits all winter, ready for tea, and pours hot water over a tea bag in each cup, and we sit down for tea and make talk for a bit, and then we say, *well, time to get back*.

And walk up the hill again. You are still saying how Janey has this in her, you know it, and George wouldn't come downstairs while we were there, Janey says he felt sick and went to lie down, says he always feels sick around something like that. *Something like that*.

We open our door, varnished against the Maine winter, and go in. The fire's died out and dampness and cold fill the room. You walk the few steps into the bedroom — on our bed is the green and yellow quilt Janey made for us when we first moved in and had nothing, not even a good blanket, and you take the quilt from the bed, folding it neatly. *I can't sleep under this*, you say, and I know what you mean but am reluctant to abandon our pretty quilt, Janey, our friend. *I can't sleep under this*, you say again.

Against

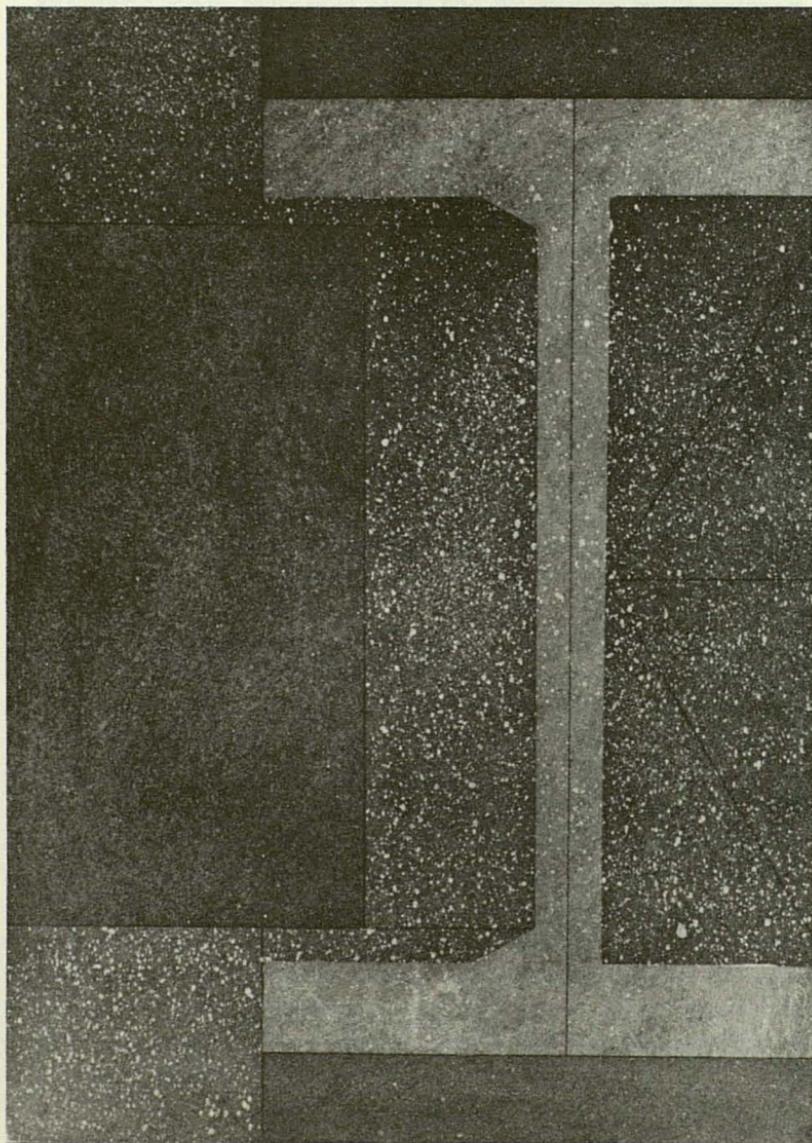
I am trying to evoke rain or tears. Obstacle of the things not wanting to travel the road of ingenuous desperation. Tonight I wish I were water, you were water, things slipped away like smoke, imitating it, giving gray, cold, final signals. Words in my throat. Uningestible stamps. Words aren't drunk by the wind, it is a lie about words being dust, if only they were, then now I wouldn't be making the pleas of an imminent madwoman who dreams with sudden disappearances, migrations, invisibilities. The taste of words, that taste of old semen, of old womb, of misleading bone, of animal soaked in black water (love compels me to the most repulsive smirks before the mirror). I'm not suffering, I only speak my disgust for the language of tenderness, those violet threads, that watery blood. Things hide nothing, things are things, and if someone comes up now and tells me *bread for bread and wine for wine* I'll start to howl and knock my head against every deaf and infamous wall of this world. Tangible world, prostituted machines, usufructable world. And the dogs offending me with their proffered skins, lapping slowly and dropping their saliva on the trees that drive me crazy.

Poem for Emily Dickinson

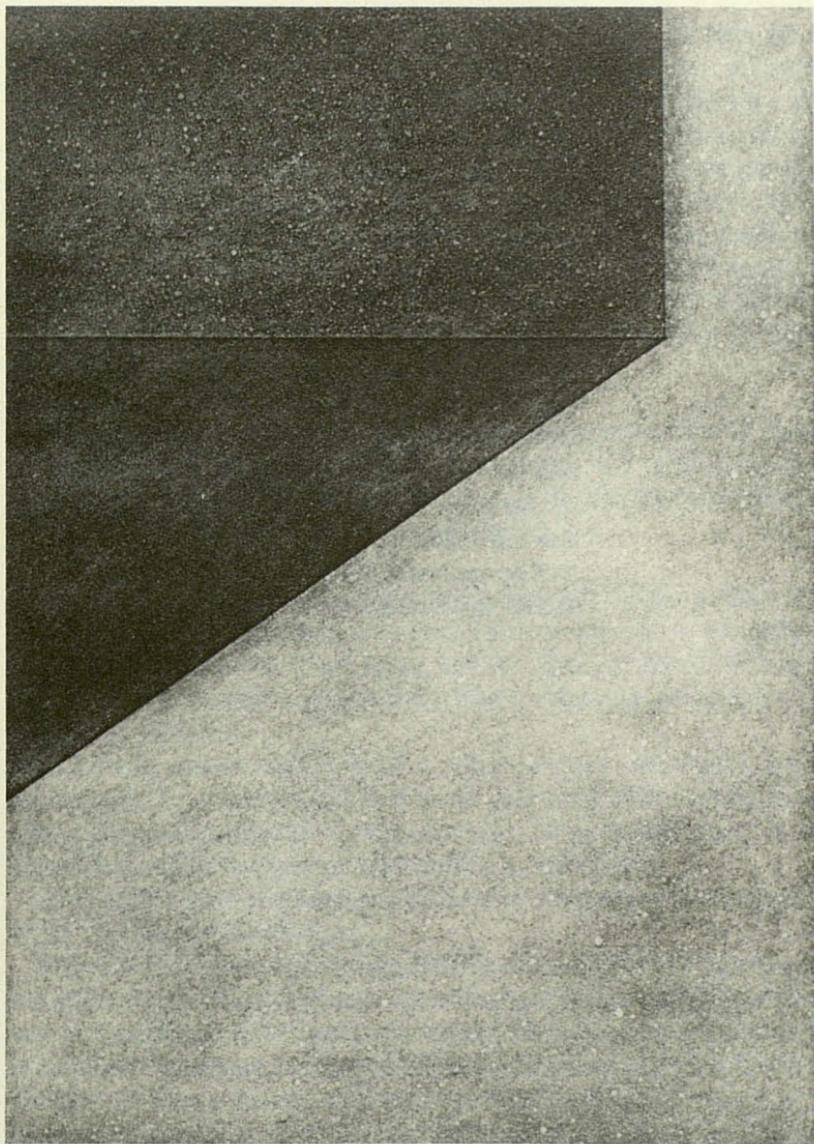
On the other side of night
waits her name for her,
her clandestine eagerness to live,
on the other side of night!

Something cries in the air,
the sounds design the dawn.

She thinks of eternity.



*Judith Waterman, aquatint and hard-ground etching
(photograph by Cheryl Rubman)*



*Judith Waterman, aquatint and hard-ground etching
(photograph by Cheryl Rubman)*

Choice

Recollect now
how it was with her:
winter
and two kids
no work, no wood
no man
and not a soul of us caring
that she'd boiled the marrow
out of what bones she had
split table and chairs
then fed the bed to the fire
and her kids still
blue-cold and whimpering.
Ma'll get you warm, she said
and the whole house went.

Self-Defense

Mira watches Judith: watches her punch, kick, punch, kick; right, left; right, left. Her chin tucked down, eyes looking straight in front of her, mouth a tight line, hands two perfect jack-hammers, feet two pounding sledges, Judith advances on the enemy air. It gives way before her. At each punch, each kick, Judith yells. Centuries of far-eastern martial knowledge seem to vibrate in the air of the twentieth-century cinderblock gymnasium, hover over the tile floor, swim in the glaring afternoon winter sunlight that stings Mira's eyes, all their eyes, as they — twenty-five women — watch Judith advance, punch, kick, punch, kick.

Mira watches. Amy watches. Susan watches. And Carol and Janet, and Pam, and Christine, they all watch. Little Sally does not watch; she is playing with her shoe. Middle-sized Kate, however, fixes her big brown ten-year-old eyes upon Judith as though the woman were a video star.

Mira, sitting on the floor, watches Judith. Mira finds it pleasant to watch Judith, very pleasant indeed. Mira likes style and elegance wherever she sees them. Judith is as good to watch as a play. Judith ought to be in a Japanese Noh drama, thinks Mira. Or maybe celebrate arcane religious rites out of books by Marion Zimmer Bradley.

Judith knows how to create a silence.

Mira likes people who are good at what they do. Especially she likes performers. Singers, actors, poets. Martial arts teachers. It's a kind of performance, isn't it? Her aesthetic sense is gratified by Judith's style. What's wrong with that, Mira asks herself? Nothing.

Only — someone who's as good as that at what she does often turns out to be not very good at very much else.

For example, with a woman like Judith — a jock, after all — (Mira thinks) you can't expect too much. If you were having a glass of wine with her, or dinner, or just sitting around talking, you couldn't expect her to pick up on half you'd say. Probably doesn't read. Would tell you that English had been her worst subject. No verbal skills.

Mira keeps her sense of reality about her, however. She knows why she's thinking those things. All our ways of self-defense.

Mira remembers that half an hour ago Judith came up and grabbed her around the throat as they all were practicing with partners. Judith's face, contorted with a highly realistic demonic rage, had been thrust not six inches from her own. Mira, following the drill automatically, had seized the little fingers on each of Judith's hands and pulled back. She had then followed through with kicks to the knee and punches to the nose, chin, and eyes, any of which if they had landed on target, would have caused no small amount of damage. Mira just barely remembered to step to the side for the scrape-and-stomp, her heel crashing down on the tiled concrete instead of Judith's instep. Judith smiled briefly and moved on to the next woman.

Mira keeps her eyes on the wall beyond Judith so that she will not be able to look Judith full in the face. Mira has always known about "soft-focus" — seeing everything, while look-

ing directly at nothing. Every woman knows it, Mira is sure. So many things we have to defend, so much to protect.

Now, alone, safe, sitting, she can let herself see the memory of Judith's face not six inches from her own, twisted in a gorgeous rage. She thinks her face might show her feelings. Mira, at the moment, doesn't care.

She thinks Judith might see, for Judith's glance rests a moment on Mira's face a moment before looking away. A faint, not-displeased smile crosses Judith's lips.

Very well. What do I care if she sees what's on my face? She ought to be used to it. You can't teach anything without seeing that look in someone's eyes every so often. One of the perks. You learn to use it, not only to build up your own sagging self-esteem; you learn it's a tool. All those youngsters, with all those new feelings bounding about, just dying for a place to land. You use anything you can to make them remember what you want them to remember. She's doing that. And I'm enjoying it. All our feelings: mine, that little brown-eyed girl's, and that big blond woman's . . . Our emotions are among her best weapons.

Mira lets Judith's image sink into her, and lets herself feel what she feels, want what she wants. She knows that the image of Judith in her mind creates more for her than would the real Judith in her arms.

Don't waste that feeling, Mira reminds herself. Use it.

She knows that all the teachers she's adored are still with her because she learned what they had to teach. Little bits and pieces of beauty and power, kept, polished, used, increased. The best thing to do with desire, after all, is to use it to create something that will last.

Mira also knows she's made a tradeoff, one she may regret. One more thing to know. How tiresome it is, sometimes, Mira thinks, to know so much.

But Judith is ordering them up and telling them to get into two lines and find partners. Mira wipes her mind clean and quickly reviews the steps just demonstrated. Nice to have a good, quick, serviceable mind. As good as having good, quick, serviceable fists? Different weapons for different threats. We have so much to defend, so much to defend against.

As Mira gets up, she sees next to her a small, delicate woman with a timid smile and glacial blue eyes. Mira smiles and looks the woman directly in the eyes, silently asking her to be her partner. The other woman smiles back, blue glaciers thawing in the sunlight.

Mira stomps with the balls of her feet and feels them, dry and hard, hit against the tile floor. She catches a whiff of her own sweat. She digs her short nails into the fleshly part of her upper palms to make tight fists. Then, at Judith's word, with the others, she bows.

Amy watches Judith. Apprehensive, she hopes she won't have to hit anyone this week. Last week, they had started out by just standing there, two by two, and hitting each other. Amy had hated that. She couldn't hit; all she could do was slap at the other woman's shoulders and arms ineffectually and hope it would soon be over. The other woman (a tall heavy blonde), to make matters worse, had actually seemed to enjoy the hitting; her eyes gleaming with an unholy joy, she had whammed and banged at Amy as though Amy were a punching bag.

How could an insensitive person like that understand? Someone who likes violence because she thinks it's nothing but a thrilling game? Amy had felt small again, small and helpless,

the way she'd been when David, her brother, had cornered her at home long ago, when their parents were out. "Be nice, Amy!" he'd say, "Be nice, now."

And later, Amy had known how to be nice, in cars, on the back lot behind the dorm: "Amy, I can't stand it, I gotta . . ." Amy, you're so beautiful, you know? You're so pretty and sweet . . . let me, huh?" She'd been nice, timid, yielding to Stewart, her ex-husband; it had only made him angrier, made him hit her harder.

Blue-eyed Amy watches Judith kick, punch, kick. She thinks she might giggle. What if she, Amy, had looked like that at David, or at Ted, or Stewart . . . ? Yes, even Stewart. Looked like that at him, right in the eye, unsmiling . . . (How hard it was to look someone in the eye and not smile! She'd found out last Saturday.) . . . and then had yelled, as Judith was yelling now: "Get away from me! Go away!" And if he hadn't — Amy lets out a gasp. Would she have dared to hit Stewart?

Yes. She feels the snake uncurl in her belly, the snake that always lies coiled there: the raging snake, the venomous serpent of infinite length that is her anger. Yes, she would have hit him, and yes, she would have gone on hitting him. If she had dared only once to raise her fist to him, she would have pounded and pounded until he was dead.

Amy draws a breath, feels her eyes and her throat swell and grow tight to bursting with tears. This is what she has always been afraid of. That if she even once let the serpent uncoil, it would strike and strike and strike again, until it had killed and killed and killed them all. All of them. David, and Ted, and Stewart, yes, and Daddy too, with his grin and his big hands, so big, so big, and everywhere; and she so small and ashamed. She would have killed her mother too; no, not her mother, who looked at her with eyes like Judith's: calm and wise and sad and understanding. But Judith's eyes, unlike her mother's, are dead serious. They would not smile on command from anyone, would not smile helplessly at Amy's embarrassment. Amy feels as though she might choke.

But Judith is asking them to speak. And Amy, after a moment's hesitation, raises her hand.

Christine listens to Judith: lift-up-your-foot-like-your're-going-marching; kick; recock; set-it-down. Hands up, elbows in, as the wise 15th-century Wing Chun had said to do; protect your breasts. Chin down, eyes up; for the punch, slide your arm along your side as though it were in a groove; other arm makes the hammer fist: "right-hand-makes-a-hammer-fist-saying-don't-bother me!" Judith has chanted over and over.

Christine moves in the routine Judith has demonstrated. She can't get it right: pick up your right foot, kick, recock, put it down. She totters, loses her balance, kicks wide and awkward, puts her foot down way back from where it should have landed. Christine grits her teeth and, fixing her eyes on a small yellow spot on the wall, does it again. This time she gets everything right, and looks up to see Judith look right at her and smile.

Pam watches Judith. They are all sitting in a circle. Judith has just asked them to respond to the exercise of hitting and being hit. Pam seizes her own big knees around with her round strong arms, and looks at her own big, shapely, bare feet out front before her. Fine. So I've

got big feet. What good did they do me? She thinks she might cry, says to herself, so what do I care? So I cry. I can talk, even if I'm crying.

Pam, never a coward, starts to speak. And the two years since it happened disappear, and it's as though it were yesterday, last evening:

"I was at the bus stop, just minding my own business. I'd been Christmas shopping. And this man came up, and I saw he had a gun. I thought: this isn't real. This can't be happening. All the time, I was somewhere high up, far away from there. It just couldn't be real . . . Growing up, I'd always been called a bully, cause I'd beat up on my sisters! Out in the country, we never even locked our doors. I was never scared. Now, I . . . whenever I see a man — *any* man, I . . ." Her voice fills up with tears, but she goes on speaking.

Susan grits her teeth, kicks the target. "That would do it!" The big blonde woman holding it smiles up at her from where she kneels. Susan's small, tense face relaxes somewhat. She gives a cautious smile. Almost, she believes what she hears.

"Tell them!" she hears Judith shouting. "Tell them if it would break their knee!"

"You've got a powerful kick there!" says the blonde woman.

Susan frowns, pushes a damp curl off her forehead. Then she takes the fighting stance again with her left foot behind her and her hands up, elbows in, fists tight. She kicks at the target and misses. She mutters a curse and tries again. This time the ball of her tiny foot lands square in the middle of the target with a *thump*. "That would break it!" says the blonde woman.

"Remember, self-defense is correct technique!" yells Judith. "Technique — plus speed plus power plus intent! But you've got to have technique!"

Susan sets her mouth in a tight line. Taking the stance again, she continues to kick. As Judith comes over to watch them, the other woman again comments on her kicks. "She's good!" she says to Judith. Judith's eyes widen, she looks right at Susan, points at her, and exclaims: "Did you hear that? She was talking about *you!*"

Susan ducks her head and thinks, well, I've got big enough hips for a good kick, anyway. Like Judith says, the bigger they are, the more power we've got. But would all this really work? Would it *really*?

Shadows lie across the tile floor of the gym. The hands of the wall clock are creeping towards 4:30.

Judith is speaking: "You may get raped. But remember, you've still got your integrity. And it won't last forever. And one of two things will happen: either you'll be dead, or it'll be over." She pauses. "And both are ways out."

They are all silent. Judith watches them. She bites her lip, and listens to their silence.

So much to cover. So much to teach. Not enough time. So many of them — and they all showed up this time. Usually, five or six wouldn't. Best of intentions: Yeah, I'll be there! But if they don't put down a deposit, you can't count on them. Ten minutes after nine last week, she'd thought: nobody will come. Twenty minutes past, five women had trickled in.

And at nine-thirty, starting time, twenty-five women were milling around, taking off shoes and socks, chatting and laughing, pulling off coats and caps and gloves, greeting friends . . . She'd clapped her hands hard for quiet, the first of many times.

She'd worn her white topstitched jacket and her black belt for the first few minutes of the first session, just to let them get a good look at it. That belt gave them confidence in her. Gave her some extra confidence too, maybe. Then she'd hung it up, and did not wear it again. The second week, she hadn't bothered to bring it.

New women. Questioning, hoping, doubting. Some of them bearing new raw scars. Some would find old scars start to open and bleed again after years of no feeling. Some would let it all just run off them like water off a duck. Or use up a lot of mental energy thinking up reasons why self-defense wouldn't work for *them*.

And the two little girls. Oh, to grab them up and hide them away somewhere, teach them *right now*, the right way. Not just the right way to punch and kick. That wasn't what it was all about, ultimately (though those things *were* pretty important!). What it was about was the right way to live, to *be*. *Courage is the chief of the virtues, because it makes the practice of the others possible.*

That little blonde girl with the timid, coy giggle — oh, to hear her let out with a good strong serious *yell!* The little brown-eyed girl, though, she'll be all right.

Judith watches them all. At this moment she loves them all. Good to do this, good to teach women. Will they remember all of it? Most of it? Any of it?

Tell them those success stories, over and over again. Wipe out all the garbage in all the TV shows they watch, the movies they see, the books they read. She collects success stories, xeroxes them surreptitiously at her office, passes them out to her classes: the story of the shop clerk who punched the man who tried to rob and rape her, alone in the store, with only as much self-defense knowledge as she'd learned in a two-day workshop like this one. The student on the bus whose very sweat clinging to her hair had repelled two potential attackers, one saying to the other: "Let's not bother her, she looks like she works out!"

Tell them what Albert deSalvo had said — the Boston Strangler, a former boxing champion — how he'd testified that a woman successfully defended herself against him by biting through his finger to the bone and letting out a yell. Tell them they can do that too.

Judith can't know for certain how much they'll remember. Enough, maybe, to save their lives. Maybe even enough to change their lives.

Why do I keep coming back to this? You know; you know.

Judith raises her eyes, looks around the circle. Eyes up, watchful, looking around, she bows. Twenty-five women — each with her eyes alert and watchful, each looking around — bow in return.

Chopin

All the American kids including Jessica took Spanish when they went to Junior High. High school and Junior High were in the same building in a grove of palm trees on the wide grassy beach of Limón Bay, the harbor of Colón in Panama. Mr. Donlevy taught Spanish, and in their newly discovered chic the seventh graders decided that he did it poorly. In any case, no one learned much. But it didn't seem to matter. All the Panamanians they ever met spoke English, well enough to get by at least.

Jessica sat behind Maria Manzoni in class. Maria's family came from the Bronx, and they hadn't been in Panama very long. Although Maria lived in the Zone, way out in Margarita, and Jessica lived in Colón, they soon became best friends. Even, one Saturday night when Maria stayed over, up in the branches of the mango tree in Jessica's backyard, they became blood sisters with a pin Jessica sterilized in the flame of a match. In Spanish class, they didn't talk to each other much, but they didn't listen much to Mr. Donlevy either. What they did was farm the hairs on each other's forearms, and that took most of their attention. They thought of it as harvesting the ripe ones.

First Maria laid her arm across the top of Jessica's desk, and Jessica with exquisite care ran her finger against the soft black hairs of Maria's arm. Then delicately she pulled each of the ones remaining upright. They were the ripe ones, and they came willingly. When both Maria's arms were harvested it was Jessica's turn, and Maria's finger trembled through Jessica's golden down. Jessica always saved the hairs she picked from Maria.

If it hadn't been for Blanca, Jessica would probably never have learned to speak Spanish. Blanca moved next door at the end of seventh grade.

Blanca's mother was Consuelo, and before Consuelo moved in with Mr. Martin she was a dancer at one of the cabarets on Bottle Alley. Mr. Martin was a bachelor, or so everyone thought when he rented one of the five houses in the little court where Jessica lived. He was an engineer like Jessica's father, and he worked at the Navy base in Coco Solo. As it turned out there was a Mrs. Martin in Kansas City and two little Martin boys. But when Consuelo and Blanca first appeared no one yet had heard of them. Which was just as well, because Consuelo's Bottle Alley connection was as much as the small American community in the court could assimilate at once. There were four other houses, and the Americans who lived in them, like Jessica's father and Mr. Martin, worked for American firms or the U.S. government but not for the Canal Zone Company. So they were not allowed to live in the Zone. Because they lived in the Republic, they felt doubly exiled. And they often felt defensive. Mrs. Greene who lived on the other side of the Martin's and was from Cairo, Ohio, said, "At least Consuelo is white." And then she added, "Which is more than you can say for some of those Bottle Alley women."

Before Consuelo had been there a week, Clementina, the black woman who worked as a maid for Jessica's family, became close friends with her. They were both from Baranquilla, Clementina told Jessica. And their fathers had known one another. Although Clementina

was black, her father was a white man. Jessica had always known that. Jessica's mother said there was a touch of the tar brush about Consuelo. It might have been. Both she and Blanca, who was just Jessica's age, had springy curly hair, like Queen Isabella's, though usually they wore their hair in braids. Both of them were beautiful, especially Blanca, with full soft cheeks and lips, and big melting brown eyes with flecks of amber in them. Their coloring was like the warm soft gold of clover honey.

A little while after she moved in with Mr. Martin, Consuelo quit dancing at *Popeye's*, and then rather quickly she began to get fat. She did all the housework herself, and Clementina and she began to spend more and more time together. Now after dinner dishes were done, instead of going home to the room she shared with her cousin and her cousin's husband and their four children, Clementina would often go next door, and Jessica's mother suspected when she heard them all "laughing and carrying on," she would even have drinks there. Worse, instead of reading the newspaper in the breakfast nook during her lunch hour as she had done ever since Jessica could remember, every day now Clementina went next door for her lunch, and more often than not when the hour was up she would still be there. One day Louise, Jessica's mother, sent Jessica over to fetch her back, and that's how Jessica met Blanca.

The Martin kitchen smelled of spice and chili peppers, olive oil, and garlic. Consuelo and Clementina and Blanca were sitting at the table laughing. They had stacked the dishes in piles to one side. Consuelo had a large tablet of newsprint propped up in front of her, and with quick strokes of a charcoal pencil she was sketching Clementina. Jessica saw Clementina's familiar coronet of braids appear and then her broad homely features which now were stamped with a smirk of self-conscious pleasure. It was a perfect likeness. Jessica clapped her hands excitedly.

"¡Sientate! ¡Sientate!" Blanca cried. "¡Ahora mismo!"

Jessica looked at them blankly. Consuelo and Blanca looked back at her surprised. The three of them, Consuelo, Blanca and Clementina, broke into excited Spanish chatter. Then Consuelo and Blanca looked at Jessica silently, curiously. Jessica felt a blush of mortification warm her cheeks.

"Can't they speak English?" she asked Clementina.

Clementina for some reason began to laugh. She laughed and laughed. She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her uniform and wiped her eyes which were wet from laughing.

"¿Que dice? ¿Que dice?" Blanca asked pulling at Clementina's sleeve. Clementina answered her first, and then, with a deep sigh, she said to Jessica, "No, dey don't speak English. If you wish to be friends in dis hyar house you mus learn to speak Spanish."

And Jessica did, quite quickly. That afternoon Consuelo made three sketches of her. And Jessica forgot to give Mother's message to Clementina. Mother was furious at both of them the whole rest of the day.

From when Consuelo first moved next door Jessica's mother was always very polite, and she told Jessica to be polite too. Mother always said "Good morning" and things like "Isn't it a beautiful day" to Consuelo and "That's a lovely dress you're wearing, did your mother make it for you?" to Blanca who would look embarrassed, because she didn't understand a word of it. Mother said to Daddy, "You have to be polite, but I don't know what to call

her." She never called Consuelo anything except, at home, "that woman." And until Jessica and Blanca became such good friends Mother never seemed able to remember Blanca's name.

The summer before eighth grade Blanca and Jessica were together all the time. Jessica even dreamed now in Spanish. Maria Manzoni pretty much dropped out of Jessica's life. She lived so far away, and besides she had started to wear lipstick and to go out with boys. She didn't seem interested anymore in having adventures with Jessica. Blanca loved adventures, and she had lots more imagination than Maria, more sometimes even than Jessica. If for instance they explored an old bomb shelter, Jessica always had to go in first to be sure there were no snakes or scorpions inside or booby traps left over from the war. Once she did find a snake and killed it. When she showed it to Blanca, Blanca screamed, and afterwards she told everyone for days how brave Jessica was.

One thing they did that Jessica loved was to dress up in Consuelo's cabaret costumes. Sometimes Consuelo would help them with their make-up. The transformation of Jessica by eye shadow and rouge was wildly exciting to her. Clementina, who was there the first time, said she was beautiful, and Jessica staring at the stranger in the mirror thought so too. Once for fun Consuelo gave Jessica a tuxedo to wear. It fitted her perfectly and had a ruffled shirt and studs and a top hat to go with it. That night Blanca wore a pale blue sheath with a slit most of the way up her thigh, and Consuelo taught them to do the tango. After that Jessica usually chose the tuxedo to wear. Once, when she and Blanca were supposed to be baby-sitting Jessica's new brother, they walked together, Jessica in her tux and Blanca in heels with a red hibiscus pinned in her hair, around the back of Bilgray's Beer Garden pretending they were going to go in and dance.

Then one day Consuelo and Blanca disappeared. If Clementina knew what happened to them she wouldn't say. She just shook her head gloomily when Jessica asked. Even when Jessica in tears begged her to tell what she knew Clementina just sighed. She wouldn't say anything at all, not even something biblical like "The good Lord will reveal His will in time." She sang "Rock of Ages/Cleft for me" quite often. Jessica was afraid to ask Mr. Martin. He looked pale and angry the few times she saw him.

About a week after Blanca disappeared Mr. Martin brought a new family to the house next door, a thin blond woman and two skinny tow-headed little boys. He introduced them to everyone, "This is my wife, Isabelle Martin, and my twin boys, Johnny and Jimmy from Kansas City." Mother invited them to tea once. Jessica hated them. Mrs. Martin hardly talked at all, and the twins stood the whole time leaning up against her, staring all around and picking their noses. Jessica missed Blanca terribly.

All the women in the court, Mrs. Greene and Mrs. McDermot, Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Taylor, they all tried to make "that poor woman, Mrs. Martin" welcome. And when the families of the court had their monthly get-together at the barbecue in Jessica's side yard the Martins were invited for the first time. But they left early, and anyone could see they didn't have a good time.

"Don't go yet," Mother said. "Stay and dance." She turned to Daddy. "Tony, go put the music on."

But Mrs. Martin said she didn't think they would. She said she didn't dance and that anyway she didn't feel well. She said she wasn't used to heat like this, not when it was so humid.

She said she wished she could persuade Mr. Martin to come back home again to Kansas City.

Johnny and Jimmy leaned against her legs the whole time, one on either side of her, holding onto her dress and clinging to her arms. Their noses ran, and they never said a word. All they ate for supper was the ice cream. Mr. Martin didn't say much either, and he seemed glad to leave. At least he smiled a little when he said goodbye. To Jessica he said, "I've missed you over at the house." Jessica was silent. She didn't know what to say. She was afraid to ask where Blanca was. Then the music started. It was the tango she and Blanca used to dance to. Mr. Martin looked surprised, and then he smiled at Jessica and winked.

"Oh dear!" said Mrs. Martin when the music began. "Do you think you could turn it lower? Johnny and Jimmy have such trouble sleeping. In this heat and the music . . ." She didn't finish the sentence.

"Oh, of course," Mother said. "Tony! Tony! Not so loud. Turn the music down!"

Tony must not have heard her, but Mother assured Mrs. Martin. "I'll turn it lower. Don't you worry."

The music *was* awfully loud. There was no glass in the windows in any of the houses. Only wrought iron to keep out thieves covered the wide window spaces. But weather and sound, insects and alley cats all passed freely through. Jessica's father had put screens in the bedroom windows to keep out the mosquitoes and the cats. But there was nothing to baffle the sound from the living room where he played his Victrola.

Daddy was proud of his music, and Jessica grew up familiar with opera (there was an album of Caruso singing *I Pagliacci*) and Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. Daddy liked piano music best of all, and whenever in the evening the short wave radio failed to bring in his favorite programs from the States, he played Chopin and Liszt and in his lighter moods Eddy Duchin. Although as a rule he was morbidly diffident about imposing on other people, he seemed oblivious to the possibility that his music could be an imposition. Mother always would turn the volume lower, and if he noticed and went to turn it up again she said, "Oh please, Tony. I've such a headache." And no one else ever did complain. Now Mother went inside, and as the Martins left the music softened.

About a week later, the day after Labor Day, the day school started, Mrs. Martin and the twins disappeared. Clementina reported on Wednesday that Mrs. Martin decided she didn't want her boys to go to school in Panama. Mr. Martin, she said, drove them to Tocumen Airport Tuesday afternoon and, presumably, on Wednesday morning Johnny and Jimmy started first grade in Kansas City — one day late.

Consuelo and Blanca were back that Thursday. Two months later Consuelo had her baby, a little girl named Patsy. After that Blanca and Jessica often babysat together. It seemed to Jessica a lot like playing house. She liked it. Jessica's brother, Tony, was almost a year older than Patsy. Tony was dark with big black eyes. Patsy was blond, and her eyes were blue like Mr. Martin's. She walked when she was ten months old, and she and Tony started to talk about the same time. Patsy spoke both Spanish and English from the very beginning. Tony just knew English. Except for "caramba!" Jessica taught him that. He pronounced it "cum-baba" and glowered when he said it so that everybody always laughed.

When Blanca and Jessica babysat together it was usually at Blanca's house. One of the things they always did there was listen to records. Mr. Martin's were very different from Dad-

dy's. His records were more like Jessica's: junk. He had some by Vaughn Munroe and Mario Lanza. But mostly they were by people Jessica had never heard of, singers with names like Bessie Smith and Ella Fitzgerald. He didn't have any by Beethoven or Brahms. There weren't any Chopin records either. He had lots of albums by someone named Fats Waller, and lots by a Count Bassie and a Duke Ellington. He used to play them in the evening or on Saturday afternoon, and whenever Jessica's father heard them he would say "What can you expect from a nigger lover." And Mother always said, "Oh, Tony! Don't talk like that."

One rainy Saturday afternoon when Jessica and Tony were over at Martin's Daddy decided to listen to his favorite music, *Les Sylphides*. At Martin's, Jessica and Blanca had dressed up, Jessica in the tux and Blanca in a bright red rhumba costume with a ruffled train that twitched along behind her like a palsied snake. Tony and Patsy each had a marraca they went around banging on the furniture. The Chopin, which they could hear quite clearly (Mother, they found out later, was taking a shower when Daddy put the records on), was not the sort of music to rhumba by. It was Jessica's idea to put their own music on. Blanca suggested an album of dance music by a Brazilian band. Jessica turned the volume up loud enough to drown out the sweet sounds of Chopin. Then Blanca put her hands on Patsy's shoulder, gestured Jessica to her back, and the three of them formed a rhumba line: Patsy, then Blanca, and last Jessica holding onto Blanca's hips right where the long bustle began.

dum DUM, they swayed from room to room. Patsy waved her marraca wildly over her head.

"Tony! Tony! Come hold onto me!" Jessica called to Tony who shrieked and ran all around them shaking his marraca and shouting "Cumbaba! Cumbaba!"

Consuelo appeared in the kitchen doorway laughing. She started to clap her hands and tap her foot in time to the music. Mr. Martin stood behind her. He smiled too. Blanca knew the words, and she started to sing except she was laughing so hard that it came out all funny.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The knocker on the front door suddenly boomed. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

At first everyone was too surprised to do anything.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Mr. Martin moved first. He was frowning. A worried frown. He gestured to the record player. Consuelo turned it off. The needle scratched whining and flat into silence. *Les Sylphides* reverberated in the emptied air.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Mr. Martin threw open the door. There stood Daddy with his hands on his hips, and his brows arched high in that look Jessica knew meant "Now then I have had quite enough of this nonsense!"

Daddy cocked his head to one side and drew his lips back flat across his teeth and breathed. All the while he looked Mr. Martin square in the eye. Jessica felt light headed with terror. It was a bad sign when Daddy was all quiet and polite like that. She couldn't see Mr. Martin's face, but his back was stiff like a board.

"Hello, Mr. Mann," Mr. Martin said. "This is a surprise. Do come in."

"I can say what I want to say out here, thank you."

"I insist." Mr. Martin stepped to one side. He held the door poised as if in a moment he

might fling it shut again. A flicker of surprise trembled the fixed arch of Daddy's brows, and then as if he had intended to all along he marched inside. He looked around. He saw the record player and like a figure on stage, which he was, he threw back his head as if to say, "Ahh! There's the culprit!" He walked over to it. Elaborately he looked it over. He touched the volume control.

"Ah! It does come with a volume control. I thought perhaps that was missing on yours. Or maybe it doesn't work?" He turned and cocked his head inquiringly at Mr. Martin.

Jessica, her stomach awash with dread, turned to look at Mr. Martin. She knew he must feel like dying. She was surprised to see the corners of his mouth twitch the way it did sometimes when he was amused at something naughty that Patsy had done. She expected him to explain how it was Jessica's fault and Blanca's but that he was very, very sorry and that he would be sure never to let it happen again. But he didn't say anything. He just stood there like a rock except for the corners of his mouth twitching. He put the finger of his left hand up against his lips to hold them still, and he didn't say a word.

There was a great clap of thunder just then. The roll of it went on and on and on. It sounded like a double bed falling down an endless staircase. Consuelo still stood by the record player. Jessica in her black tuxedo still had hold of Blanca's red ruffled hips. Blanca still bent over little Patsy, motionless. Then Tony moved. He rushed up to his father and beat his marraca against his father's thigh. "Cumbaba! Cumbaba!" he shouted and glowered and looked around expectantly, but no one laughed. Then it was silent in the room again except for the sweet sounds of Chopin.

Mr. Martin spoke. He said, "You're playing *Les Sylphides* very loud."

Daddy's look of surprise was genuine. He clearly had not heard his music until then. But he was still very angry. He dismissed Mr. Martin and *Les Sylphides* with a wave of his hand. "I've never complained to you before about how loud you play that crap!" he said jabbing his finger in Mr. Martin's direction.

"No, we haven't complained to you either," Mr. Martin said.

Daddy's face turned purple as he took the inference. "For Christ's sake!" he shouted, "I'm playing Chopin!"

"My god and don't I know it!" said Mr. Martin. "That's Oscar Levant you've got playing the *Nocturnes* isn't it? Actually he's not so bad with the Tchaikowsky concerto."

Daddy for a moment looked stunned. It seemed as if too many words were trying to get out of his mouth all at once, and they had jammed like keys in a typewriter and made his face turn red. Finally some of the words squeezed through with a wheezing sound. "And I've never complained about your establishment over here either!" He managed to sneer around the word establishment. His upper lip curled toward his nose.

Then Mr. Martin changed. His hands dropped to his sides. His hands curled into fists. Consuelo moved a little toward him. Patsy ran and threw her arms around her mother's knees. Jessica and Blanca were left alone in the center of the room. Blanca pressed herself close to Jessica.

"My establishment!" Mr. Martin said. *Les Sylphides* swelled sweetly, Mr. Martin laughed. It was an ugly harsh sound. His head was nodding. He was very white. He threw his hand in a gesture indicating Jessica. "I wouldn't talk about establishments, sir, not for a few years yet!"

Daddy turned toward Jessica in her black tuxedo holding Blanca close by her red ruffled waist. Consuelo pushed Patsy aside and rushed to Mr. Martin. She spoke too rapidly for Jessica to understand, although she heard her name spoken twice. Mr. Martin shook Consuelo off and with his head bent as if in shame he left the room.

Daddy said, "Take that goddam tuxedo off, Jessica, and get over to the house."

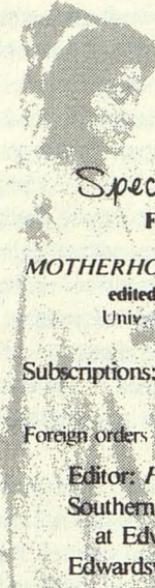
After that Jessica wasn't allowed to play at the Martin's any more. It was O.K. to play with Blanca, but just not at the Martin's. And Daddy hardly ever again played his records. About three months later Mr. Martin went back to the States, and Blanca and Consuelo and Patsy disappeared. It wasn't long after that that Jessica's family left Panama for good too. They went to California to live.

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Bobe Mayse (Grandmother's Tale)

One of the first things Claudia told Jessie about her family was that she had a one-hundred-and-three-year-old grandmother. "All the women in my family live a long time," Claudia said, stretching her long legs across Jessie's kitchen chairs. "It's like my relatives last forever."

It seemed to Claudia that each bit of information about her life dropped loudly into her lover's ears, ringing with significance. "A hundred and three? Your grandmother?" The glint in Jessie's eye was something more than the sparkle of her contact lenses. "I'd love to meet her." Jessie demanded more family stories — a year-by-year account of visits to the grandmother, a tall woman tucked up in quilts in the Bronx reading the Yiddish paper and issuing trying remarks to her seventy-year-old daughter, Claudia's mother.

Claudia was confident of sharing in her family's tradition of longevity. Her mother, too, would live to be a hundred and three, and seventy years from now Claudia would join the two of them, wrapped in long quilts in the Bronx.

Jessie laughed, pulled her chair closer, and interrupted Claudia's explanation of her prospects for old age to kiss her. She stroked Claudia's hair, twined her fingers through it. "You can see the implications here, can't you?" she said. Why shouldn't her connection to Claudia give her a place in that tradition too? Jessie's own family background — short people living short lives — would unravel; the leftover genetic strands would braid with Claudia's into a net suspended between them. They could lie together in such a hammock for a lifetime — a lifetime of a hundred and three years or longer. With her fingertip, she drew a hammock on her lover's thigh.

"A one-hundred-and-three-year-old grandma," said Jessie again, her feet dangling above the floor. "Nothing so spectacular in my family. I'd have heard it there was — my mother's always telling what some relative's done. She calls up: 'You'll never guess,' she says, and it turns out a fourth cousin has an article on amniocentesis in a technical journal. I'm supposed to rush out and buy it."

"Ah," said Claudia. "Reflected glory."

"No, not that." Jessie kicked the chair rung. "Some horrible possessive excitement comes over her. She wants it known that she's connected to people who do these things — a heredity that runs backwards, after birth. An umbilical cord made up of phone lines. I hate it."

When Jessie talked about her other relatives, short and numerous, it was Claudia's turn to see implications. Jessie's relatives also lived in the Bronx, not far from Claudia's grandmother in her long quilts. How could it just be neighborhood closeness that made the bad jokes of Jessie's uncles sound as though they could have been embarrassing nieces and nephews in her own family?

"I can't believe it's just from having the Bronx in common," said Claudia. "Your aunts' feuds are exactly the same as my aunts'" She mused over coincidences of names: "Your mother's name is Batya?" she asked. "It's like a mirror image of my family. I have a cousin Jessie with a *daughter* named Batya. Always at parties and stuff, in the middle of things. They're very

tall, hard to miss.”

“That’s not like us then. My mother’s even shorter than I am,” said Jessie. “All these links — it does seem close. Not a mirror though.” Jessie laced and unlaced her fingers, thinking. “Maybe there’s some hidden connection. A place where a different thread comes in. Like in weaving, when you change the thread on the shuttle —”

“My grandmother talks like that, only with her it’s scary connections — conspiracies, webs of intrigue. The Bronx is full of mysterious squads of people out to get her. The entire borough thinks of nothing but her.” Claudia shook her finger at Jessie, speaking in a grandmother voice. “It’s all connected, you know. You must be very careful.” She took back her own voice. “I hate it.”

“She could be right. When you read about some of this government corruption — look what’s happened to mass transit in the past five or ten years — deferred maintenance —”

“She hasn’t been out of the apartment in the past five or ten years, so you can leave that out. She’s getting paranoid, that’s all. The doctor says hardening of the arteries, but I think she just needs people besides my mother to talk to. She’s forgetting her English, and my mother’s Yiddish isn’t so hot.”

“You should get students from that Yiddish program at Columbia — they’d probably love to have someone to do oral histories on. Here,” Jessie opened a cabinet, dug under a pile of papers, handed Claudia a pamphlet. “The phone number’s on the back.”

Claudia stared at the earnest faces in the photos, tried to imagine them away from their desks, surrounding her grandmother’s long bed. “But it’s such a small room. You don’t know my grandmother. Don’t romanticize this.”

When Jessie’s mother introduced herself on the phone one Sunday morning, Claudia naturally recognized the name. Jessie hadn’t arrived in the Bronx last night, Batya said. Was she with Claudia? Did Claudia know where she’d gone?

Of course Claudia knew. Saturday night, after dinner and a concert, they’d gone down the subway steps together. Jessie had stopped at the map across from the token booth, standing on tiptoe to trace her route. “BMT, IND, IRT,” Claudia had heard her mutter, almost chanting; “not a shuttle exactly.” Claudia had watched a sudden smile cross Jessie’s face as her fingertip followed a line of grey shunting to orange, crossing over black, diving under blue: under, over, under. “Such a long trip, though.” Jessie’s smile had changed to a frown before she shrugged and headed uptown to visit her parents, Claudia back downtown to her own apartment. Jessie had gotten on the train to the Bronx wearing a gray hat and holding the *Times* book review section. Claudia had still been waiting on the downtown platform carrying the rest of the Sunday paper when Jessie’s train pulled out of the station.

“She didn’t get here,” Batya said accusingly. “We found out you saw her last. We don’t know where she is.” Her voice rose, then dropped to a low whisper: “My cousin has written an article about this sort of thing. He says it happens all the time.”

Did they think she was running away? At midnight, her bag packed for the trip to the Bronx, her contact lenses soaking in their case — would she really have changed her mind?

Maybe there’d be a clue in Jessie’s apartment. Claudia grabbed her set of keys and took a cab over. Lights were on all over the living room. The contact lens sterilizer sat on a stack

of newspapers instead of in its usual place on the coffee table. Jessie must have been there. The short striped scarf Jessie'd woven hung from the doorknob — but she hadn't been wearing that one. Jessie's sister walked in from the next room: It was only the family that had been there, sifting things over. Had they noticed Claudia's blue jeans, so much longer than Jessie's, draped over the chair in the bedroom?

"We still have not heard from her," said Batya, sitting in a low chair in the kitchen, speaking as though only family could have received information. "The police don't know what to think."

Claudia imagined Jessie trapped on a dark Bronx street under the iron lattice pillars of the elevated, unable to find her way. Large men loomed over her, covering her from view; she disappeared completely into the trunk of a car.

Claudia began to sob. Jessie's mother and sister took turns scolding her for being hysterical, with the family so upset. "Not even a relative; what right does she have to take it so hard?" they hissed in the kitchen.

"Don't add to our troubles," said Batya, from the low chair. She looked familiar and was dressed in black. Perhaps it didn't signify anything — maybe she always wore mourning, always prepared for catastrophe. Jessie had once told her something about that, but Claudia couldn't remember what, and now she couldn't ask her.

She ought to tell what Jessie was wearing when last seen. When last seen through the subway car window as the train left for a distant stop in the Bronx, she wore a gray hat and read the book review section. Earlier, Claudia had watched her dress for the visit to her parents, ignoring whatever her mother would have liked to see her in — the skirt and jacket uniform of an office worker riding the subway at rush hour, or heels to make her look taller. Claudia interrogated herself, silently listing the items worn on the subway at midnight: gray hat, theatrical orange shirt, black pants tucked into motorcycle boots, several large-stoned necklaces, a quilted vest. "And what was your overall impression of this outfit, Miss what-did-you-say-your-name-was?" "Exciting, very exciting."

But the police didn't ask her; no one wanted to talk with her. Jessie's mother and sister had spread address books over Jessie's kitchen chairs and were busy calling all the relatives in case they'd heard something. They didn't notice her leave.

Claudia walked down the subway steps alone to follow Jessie's route from the concert hall to the Bronx, pacing each station platform along the way with long strides, peering down among the pillars of the elevated. She stared out the subway car windows as the train went underground again, but couldn't see anything: the dark tunnels turned the glass into a mirror.

Monday, and each morning that week Claudia tried new routes to the Bronx, pacing platforms, searching among pillars, and posting notices in the streets. Late each afternoon when she returned, she wondered for a moment whether Jessie had gotten back uneventfully but hadn't told her. They hadn't been together that long, after all. Could it be that she'd wanted to break up and didn't want to say so? Each evening Claudia twisted the phone cord around and around in her hands, calling everyone Jessie had ever mentioned, asking for leads, for help. At the end of each day she fell into bed exhausted with anxiety. But each night when Jessie visited Claudia in her dreams, she appeared free of concern, even pleased with herself, though she never had anything helpful to say when she bent down to kiss Claudia's ear.

Each morning Claudia woke feeling somehow encouraged, as though an important memory were about to come to her.

Friday, Claudia's parents invited her to their bungalow colony. "If you haven't found out anything from riding the subway all week, what new are you going to learn today?" said her mother. "Come and rest." Claudia stepped from the train onto the hot sunny path connecting the houses. She opened a screen door and walked through the winding hallways of her family's house. More substantial than one built for a summer resort, covered with Victorian latticework and carpenter's lace, it struck her as a sort of grandmother to the newer, smaller bungalows.

Claudia's mother was in the kitchen talking to a visitor, a short woman in black. The visitor turned as Claudia entered the room, cool and dim after the sun outside. It was Batya, Jessie's mother.

"You two know each other?" asked Claudia.

"Oh yes," Claudia's mother put her hand on Batya's shoulder. "We go way back." They'd been socialists together in their youth, she explained. They were discussing the old days.

Batya seemed friendlier than before, smiling at Claudia with crooked teeth. Jessie must be home, Claudia decided, and returned Batya's smile. Jessie would explain what had happened once she saw her. She'd say where she'd been, where the train had left her. It could have been stalled in the narrow space between Manhattan and the Bronx, hidden in a dark tunnel. "Look at the map," she'd point out. "See how little room? I'm surprised it doesn't happen more often." Or she'd tell how, unscheduled and forgotten, the train had slid onto the wrong siding, while the transfer point was misplaced in a change of shifts.

"We still have no word about Jessie," said Batya, smoothing the lap of her black dress, her feet dangling above the floor.

"What does the transit authority say?" asked Claudia. "Maybe the train is still stuck." Claudia understood why Batya had looked familiar; it wasn't just her resemblance to Jessie. She'd seen her picture in an old photo album: Claudia's mother at the beach in the 'thirties, lined up with her friends, arms around one another. "See, there's Estelle with the squint; the tall one in the middle is me; you remember cousin Ruthie; and the short one in the black bathing suit — that's Batya."

Claudia began to tell her mother what Jessie had been wearing when last seen, when Claudia had looked through the train window to be sure she was safely on her way to her parents in the Bronx. This was probably all Claudia's fault: The surveillance had been too much; Jessie had resented it, felt bound to elude it. Maybe all that close overseeing was what Jessie disliked about her mother's way of collecting relatives' accomplishments. But where would she have gone?

Claudia laced and unlaced her fingers, anxious. She tried to follow her mother's conversation with Batya, lost track of it between twenty years of sectarian groups splintering and the birth of grandchildren. Her eyes drifted up to the subway map tacked to the wall, tried to follow the pathways. A chant began in her head: "IRT, IND, BMT."

"How's Grandma?" she broke in.

"Oh, she's making some kind of big fight, she says she doesn't want me coming over all the time, and now her phone's been out all week. You know how impossible she is," her

mother said. "Though frankly, it's just as well. The last thing I need is more of those remarks coming at me. Besides, we have such a lot to catch up on." She stroked Batya's arm. Batya smiled. "But you, Claudia, you ought to visit her." Claudia's mother looked up at her tall daughter. "You know how much she loves to see you."

"You're absolutely right," said Claudia. "Where's the train schedule?" The two older women walked her back along the sunny connecting pathways to the railroad station. They posed for a new photo: arms around each other, Batya's head level with Claudia's mother's breast. "I have a cousin who makes wonderful photographs," said Batya. "Very prominent." Claudia snapped the picture from the train. Three stations later, she made the right connection to the subway, and traced her route: over, under, over. She arrived at her grandmother's building, and opened the apartment door.

The gray hat hung in the foyer. The boots had been kicked down the hallway. Large-stoned necklaces were hooked on the bedroom doorknob. Jessie was under the quilt with Grandma, each reading a section of the Yiddish paper.

"It's about time," said her grandmother to Claudia. "You don't know how to get to your grandma's anymore? We were starting to worry."

"It took a while to make the right connection," said Claudia.

"Come." Her grandmother smiled with crooked teeth. "You remember Batya's daughter Jessie, don't you?"

"Of course," said Claudia. Jessie wiggled her toes, now sticking out from the bottom of the long quilt and handed Claudia the book review section of the Yiddish paper.

"Well, get in then," said her grandmother.



*My Grandmother, 1911 in San Francisco
from Constance J. Barker*

“The Sex Question” and Socialist Feminism

Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality, edited by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. Boston: Monthly Review Press, 155 West 23rd Street, New York, New York 10011. 1983. 489 pp. \$12.50.

It is an ambitious anthology. It addresses sex. It successfully skirts the provocative extremes of currently fashionable discourse about sex. It carefully avoids making any connection between violence against women and male sexual practice. In fact, it sides against the perceived puritanical extremes of the anti-pornography movement. In this carefully selected collection of essays, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, the editors write, “we have, by and large, chosen sex. This victory, one both furthered and truncated by historical circumstance, but one, certainly, that we grasped for ourselves, not out of false consciousness but out of desire and the impulse for freedom” Why is this important?

Throughout the 1970's and now into the 1980's “the Sex Question” has become a much discussed issue in socialist feminist circles. The question is one of where and how an analysis of sexuality fits into a socialist-feminist understanding of the world. Just as orthodox Marxists struggled for years with “the Women Question,” the question of where women fit into Marx's theory of class struggle, “the Sex Question” among left-leaning women plays a similar role. It behooves women on the Left to *take back their sex*, both theoretically and carnally and without contradiction in harbor.

The socialist-feminist leanings of the anthology are clearly represented in the historical writings that dominate the anthology, nine essays altogether. These historical analyses shore up two major organizing assumptions in the anthology: that sexual expression is a socially constructed phenomenon and that its cultural form changes with historical circumstance. One of the great strengths of the anthology is the persistence with which many of the essays analyze sexual practice as contextually related to the social and institutional controls of family, community, and state. The framework for these historical explanations and descriptions is, however, predictable. As in many leftist analyses of the 70's, changes in sexual practices and attitudes are ultimately related to historical shifts in the economy as mediated through the heterosexual family.

This framework of analysis is a constant throughout the anthology. With the rise of capitalism and urbanization came the demise of the relatively self-sufficient family of the United States and the restriction of the meaning of family life to its “personal” and “privitized” psychosocial function. The decline of the family was further hastened by women's entry into waged labor and their increasing economic autonomy, accompanied by an important ideological break between the identity of sex with reproduction. In its place, an ideological

space was created in which "sex" was given new mystification and meaning. It became an index around which new kinds of self-definition and experimentation could occur. "Sex" at the same time became a political issue, i.e., a concern of the state and its law, as a new form of regulation replaced the weakened forces of family, community, and church. Sex on the loose required state intervention, and at the same time became prey to the spirited invention of sex radical movements of the late 19th and 20th centuries. As the editors of the anthology suggest, the question facing us is *who* is going to *make sex* or how to create a sexuality that best integrates erotic desire and the prospect of human liberation?

Many of the historical analyses belabor the theme of cooptation. In this context, progressive sex movements or tendencies begin on a good foot, but end up supporting the system. They are coopted. The force of capitalism brings progressive and regressive steps into phase. Barbara Epstein, for example, in her essay, "Family, Sexual Morality, and Popular Movement in Turn-of-the Century America," explores how the birth control movement of the 19th century eventually cast off its radical mass movement ties and joined ranks with the medical profession and middle-class mores. In "Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain," Judith Walkowitz analyzes how the social purity movement in the nineteenth century was eventually coopted into a backlash against anti-Victorian sexualities. Atina Grossman, in her essay, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," discusses how the Weimar ideology of the "New Woman" facilitated the easy transition to Nationalist Socialist eugenics. In Ellen Kay Trimberger's "Feminism, Men and Modern Love: Greenwich Village, 1900-1925," the Greenwich Village love revolt (captured by the phrase, "I want a girl that can be talked to and that can be kissed") eventually turned women into emotional drainers for their radical men and the males into fervent, if not reactionary, family men. Likewise the liberatory sexual activity of working class women, known as "charity girls," worked very favorably for the system. As analyzed by Kathy Peiss, in "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880-1920," these poorly paid women were kept economically dependent on men for pleasure, as ritualized in the practice of "treating" in which women exchanged sex and affection for amusement financed by men, and were doubly burdened by increased sexual harassment in the workplace. All of these essays depict an impervious capitalist system that turns every liberatory sexual impulse into self-magnifying profit and lust. As the editors point out in their introduction, even the elevation of sex to a revolutionary insignia in the 1970's turned women into the inflatable sex dolls of the Left.

The anthology also includes several important essays on the sexual and cultural identity of Afro-American women by Rennie Simson, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and Barbara Omolade. These essays explore the conflicts and contradictions that exist in the women's movement and communities between white and Black women. It is the historical relationship between these two groups that is clarified. Rennie Simson in her essay, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity," points out that Black women in the South did not have a powerful male class to administer to their every need. A Black woman's unprotected status created a need for self-reliance and solidarity with other Black women. It was a matter of survival in the South.

"Hearts of Darkness," Barbara Omolade's brilliant analysis of the sexual history of whites

and Blacks, describes how the social construction of "the white woman" was used as a ploy by white men to gain sexual access to Black women, to forbid sexual intercourse between white women and Black men, and to legitimate the lynching of Black men. During the time of slavery, sexual rape between white men and Black women became legitimate sex, since it was assumed that Black women had no right to control their own bodies: they were the property of the white master. By sanctioning the white rape of Black women and the white murder of Black men for the alleged rape of white women, southern white males used sex to maintain their empires of white supremacy.

This double standard is further analyzed by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in "The Mind That Burns in Each Body": Women, Rape, and Racial Violence." She gives us additional insight into how the public/private split affected the lives of Black people. "The economic and political challenge posed by the black patriarch might be met with death by lynching, but when the black woman seized the opportunity to turn her maternal and sexual resources to the benefit of her own family, sexual violence met her assertion of will. Thus, rape reasserted white dominance and control in the private arena as lynching reasserted hierarchical arrangements in the public transactions of men" (p. 333).

These historical analyses are important to our understanding of the difference between white and Black women. When it comes to women's issues, there will be a difference in the priorities of political agendas. There will be a difference in attitudes and sensitivities to the political struggle against rape. There will be a difference in feelings of affinity and allegiance with men in one's racial group. There will be a difference in attitudes and feelings about the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. As Barbara Omalade suggests in her essay, "All black sexuality is underlined by a basic theme: where, when, and under what circumstances could/would black men and black women connect with each other intimately and privately when all aspects of their lives were considered the dominion of the public, white master/lover's power?" (p. 363). This female desire for connection, allegiance, and sexual union with "the brothers" is part of a real human struggle, not adequately or exclusively explained by homophobia, male-dependency, or unreflective compulsory behavior. On the other hand, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out in her essay, "In a society that defined manhood in terms of power and possessions, black men are denied the resources to fulfill their expected roles. Inevitably, they turn to domination of women, the one means of manhood within their control" (p. 345). Gender domination, homophobia, and compulsory heterosexuality exist in large sectors of the Black community. However, when it comes to an analysis of these institutions within the politics of racism, Black women will bring different meanings, experiences, and historical memories to the discussion.

I was glad that these essays were included in the anthology. Unfortunately, the anthology gives much less attention to the positions and insights held by other women of color. The issues remain, by and large, black and white. This is in part because the editors seem especially concerned with the way in which radical feminists and women involved in combating violence against women have used the metaphor of rape as an organizing tool. The error is an obvious one, in that white feminists have been too quick to misconstrue "the realities of racism in an effort to illuminate sexual subordination" (p. 331). These misconstruals have been rather widely discussed over the last few years. Unfortunately the anthologists did not include essays that might have carried us beyond the errors and contradictions of anti-rape politics. In addition, the positive aspects of sexuality for women of color are barely acknowledg-

ed in this collection and much less explored.

As I said, one of the strengths of the anthology is the ideological analysis. Two essays in particular, Atina Grossmann's "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sex in Weimar Germany" and Carole S. Vance's "Gender Systems, Ideology, and Sex Research" are concerned with the way "sex" is used by a new class of capitalist professionals, the sexologists. Not surprisingly in pre-fascist Germany, as in the present-day United States, sexologists remain committed to making sex manageable and satisfying within the status quo structure. Grossman writes, "The Weimar Sex Reform movements thus present us a 'sexual revolution' in all its complexity and ambiguity: sexual satisfaction for women, but satisfaction proclaimed and defined mainly by men; the right to contraception and abortion, but only when 'necessary'; active sexuality justified because it was healthy and potentially procreative; orgasm as eugenic measure. The Sex Reform leagues recognized and encouraged female sexuality, but on male heterosexual terms — in defense of the family" (p. 155). These new ideological norms created new social categories of "deviants," which included women unfit for marriage ("*eheuntauglich*"). These women were depicted as short, dark-haired, and dressed in unisex shifts, distinctly unmaternal — an image used to stereotype prostitutes, Jewish women, and lesbians. The new norms also emphasized coital orgasm, relegating clitoral stimulation to an inferior sexual status, a "finishing touch" if intercourse failed to produce orgasm for a woman or as some sex liberals saw it, "a tender deviation." In this pre-war construction of new heterosexual ideology, the fear and marginalization of lesbians is clearly expressed. It was this homophobia and heterosexual practice that later formed an easy bridge to Nationalist Socialist eugenic motherhood, as the new sex managers joined with military interests.

Carole Vance's analysis of modern sexologist ideology, as she experienced it at a 1977 SAR (Sexual Attitudes Reassessment) group, is critical in similar ways. To these new sex ideologues, sex becomes part and parcel of white middle-class "couples, stability, and cookie baking." This normative system contrasts oddly with the milieu of liberated permissiveness in the SAR setting. Such an atmosphere is partially created by the sex-desensitization film (a collection often screened as part of a multi-media "fuck-o-rama"), where viewers are immersed in a world of explicit sexual images. Vance points out how gay sexuality in these films is depicted as highly genital and orgasmically oriented, while lesbian sexuality occurs in fields of daisies, with continuous jump cuts. Vance writes, "sexual activity, never genital, consisted of running in slow motion through sun dappled fields, hand-holding, and mutual hair-combing." Most of these lesbian sex films, I might add, have lots of garbled bird sounds in them — a connection that eludes me. Sexuality, Vance argues, is presented in these films as a privatized event, devoid of any gender or political analysis. In Vance's experience of the SAR, any attempts to open a more theoretical discussion were met with charges of "intellectualism" or "distancing." Participants were expected to express their feelings on the experiential level, "to become vulnerable," "to resonate with," "to touch base with," "to trust," and "to share." The therapeutic language, as Vance points out, foreclosed any understanding of how sexuality is connected to the gender system, to the distribution of resources, to the organization of production, or to race and class. "The operation of a SAR group combines overt warmth, vulnerability, and support while masking covert gender antagonism, power struggle, and manipulation within intense, claustrophobic relations detached from other social groups and structure. In its double messages of social isolation, the SAR group resembles the heterosexual and the heterosexist family" (p. 382). One can clearly see from this analysis why these

modern sex professionals have taken such a strong pro-pornography stance. It fits together with couples and cookies, when the context-stripping language of sex therapy is all that's spoken.

The anthology obviously contains these excellent historical and ideological analyses. However, the hidden agenda of many of the essays in *Powers of Desire* emerges as an attack on the anti-pornography movement. Whereas the anti-pornography and other movements opposed to male violence against women have made a strong connection between violence and male sexual practice, this anthology seems oddly out of place in that no such connection seems to exist. This silence is mollified somewhat by the token inclusion of Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," but on the whole, the collection is profoundly reactionary and dated. Having noticed the hidden agenda of this anthology, it is not surprising to find respectful though allusive attention given to the new sex radicals, the lesbian outlaws, the "minorities of the sexual minorities," or the S/M dykes whose stance within the dominant sexualities is extremely problematic.

In addition, the anticipated "collective discussion, historically unprecedented, of lesbianism as an empowering female choice" (p. 25), a discussion the editors address in the introduction of the anthology, does not take place. Unfortunately, Moraga and Hollibaugh's courageous writing (discussed below) stands out as an exception, beyond which there is little writing concerning the struggles and imaginative experimentation that many lesbians have pursued around uses of power in relationships, internalized heterosexism, the quest for equality in relationships of difference, and other ambiguities and ambivalences that exist in lesbian relationships. These complexities are simply not addressed in this anthology. They have been erased, perhaps dismissed, assimilated into what is familiar and heterosexual or left "unprintable." I am addressing here the politics of editing and choosing what to publish, and I hold these editors accountable. What surfaces as a representation of lesbian sexuality are the speculations and musings of Adrienne Rich (a position debunked as cultural feminism in the anchor essay by Susan Echols) and various liberal salutations to what is never fully discussed in the anthology: lesbian S/M sexuality.

The two key essays that attack the Women Against Pornography (WAP) movement are Ellen Willis' "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography," and Susan Echols' "The New Feminism of Yin and Yang." Echols views the rise of cultural feminism (which she defines as the emergence of a female counter-culture, based on female principles and values) as a form of feminism that grew out of the early radical feminism of the 1970's and attempts that were made to dilute the homophobia in the women's movement. This was done by making lesbianism more palatable and less threatening to straight feminists: by presenting lesbianism as a political choice, a positive ideal, and by presenting a sentimental, desexualized view of lesbian sexuality. This ideological shift allowed lesbians within the heterosexual feminist movement to dodge the charge of male-identification or unladylike sexual behaviors. Such slurs were replaced by a woman-loving-woman image. Echols, herself a lesbian, interprets this ideological shift as a sexually repressive cooptation. In part I agree with this, but one could also interpret this ideological shift as a reaction to the sexual stigma often forced on lesbians. The sentimental ideologies of lesbian love that emerged in the 1970's were attempts to bring into focus other aspects of lesbian relationships, to counter the view of lesbians as "disgusting

sexual deviants," the malcontents of the heterosexual feminist movement.

Although there are problems with Echols' analysis of cultural feminism (she includes in her attack such an unlikely population as Morgan, Dworkin, Daly, Barry, Deming, Brownmiller, Rich, Gearhart, Raymond, and Penelope), she further implicates the WAP movement as the sexually-repressed offspring of the cultural feminists. Anti-pornography activists are accused of manipulating women's sexual conservatism and resorting to the old tactics of the anti-sex social purity movement, casting female virtue against male vice. As Echols writes, "by further treating femaleness as an unalloyed force for good, cultural feminists have tried to accommodate feminism with capitalism and sexual repression" (p. 447).

It is true that WAP activists, writers, and theoreticians need to develop more positive and fleshly writings on female sexuality and to clearly separate themselves from the ungodly alliance with the Christian Right. Such an effort would show that opposing violence against women is not the same as opposing the body. It is also true that more analysis and less descriptive writing on the institution of pornography is called for. Such analysis would counter the moralism that too often over-fuels the movement.

However, Echols is simply mistaken in her view that WAP activists have wrongly conflated fantasy with reality and pornography with violence. If we accept a social constructionist view of human sexual expression, a view consistent with the philosophy of Echols and many anti-pornography activists, we can further develop an analysis of sexuality in which the social practice of pornography, broadly defined, plays a central role in "making sex" what it is in this culture. I am greatly surprised that a social constructionist like Echols, a woman who obviously understands how culture influences all parts of ourselves, would relegate pornography to innocuous symbolic fantasy, making it a very special cultural symbolism in that *it alone doesn't have effect!*

Echols' defense of pornography is further bolstered by her attack on lesbians, who, she believes, evade their heterosexual ambivalence and seek safe refuge in sexual repression and heterophobia, as if the latter term holds political parity with the charge of homophobia leveled against the dominant culture. The diatribe against the Women Against Pornography follows a similar vein. WAPers are perceived as puritanical, heterophobic, "sex phobic," moralistic, self-righteous, and so on (add man-hating and stir). This kind of inflated attack against the WAP movement is a smoke screen for some otherwise intelligent ideas and calls for a truce. Then perhaps we could see who the enemy really is.

The anthology includes other apologetics for pornography. Ellen Willis in her essay "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography" gives us a mixed view. Pornography is sexist and lamentable, but some women get off on it. We should not invent a political theory that invalidates that experience. According to Willis, some women use pornography as a way to reclaim sexuality and to give permission to what we have internalized as shameful and dangerous. What is left unacknowledged in Willis's analysis are the sources of these desires and feelings and further consideration of how the practice and production of pornography relates to the ideology of forced sex as sex itself. Willis's voice speaks loudly in this anthology, but her silences require a careful hearing.

Likewise, the works of Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Cherié Moraga, though important and honest works by lesbians, are curiously situated in the anthology's framework.

Joan Nestle describes how her mother loved to fuck. There is no idealized mother – daughter sacredness here, just a lesbian daughter's admiration for her mother's sexual libido, which did not exist without casualty or pain for her mother. This taken in stride, Nestle turns her anger on Andrea Dworkin, since Nestle's mother doesn't seem to fit into Dworkin's picture of fuck in the world of men and women. Because of its inclusion in this anthology, "My Mother Loved to Fuck" gathers another strike against the anti-pornography movement.

In the essay/dialogue by Cherríe Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh, "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," a similar pattern emerges. A familiar attack is made against the women's movement: the inability to engage in honest dialogue about sex and the oppressive rhetoric of oppressor-male/oppressed-female have silenced lesbian dialogue on the use of power in lesbian erotic experience. We must start our theorizing, Moraga and Hollibaugh write, with "what we have rolling around in bed with us." This essay is, I believe, one of the most important in the anthology. It is the most vulnerable writing in the book, and the ideas presented are challenging and provocative, but it stands out against the rest of the anthology's writings, which are safely clothed in many layers of theoretical and rhetorical wordmanship. Its singularity in honesty, personal testimony, and silence-breaking is, however, troublesome, especially in an anthology where the victims of sexual violence, rather than the victims of sexual purity, are given no voice. In the end, Moraga and Hollibaugh's vulnerability services the anthology's position against the anti-pornography movement.

In contrast to this kind of personal disclosure writing, Jessica Benjamin's theoretically-intensive piece, "Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination," cloaks a depersonalized vulnerability. Although Benjamin attempts to move beyond the politics of blame and apology, she has chosen in this essay to explain, through the weighty circuits of Bataille, Hegel, Chodorow et. al., the deeper motivations for women's complicity to sexual submission and life-threatening risks. She argues that the social construction of gender, which affirms male subjectivity and denies females the same, in turn creates a fascination with erotic rational violence. In these scenarios, "males" dominate the other; they desire to break through the numbness, to reach the other as real. "A female" submits, vicariously enjoying the control displayed by her violator and simultaneously risking her life, as she slirts with the dizzying terror of boundless release from life. These adult scenarios represent a return of the repressed or a return of the deeply felt but conflicting infant desires for autonomy and recognition from an all-powerful mother figure. This revitalized infant dilemma is acted out in sex, with males dominating and females (or whoever plays the role of submission) submitting. The violence of eroticism, as expressed in pornographic writing such as *The Story of O*, is construed by Benjamin as rational, controlled, and voluntary, as a safe fantasy with a cast of characters attempting to resolve the unresolvable. However, as testimony from *the real victims of such violence* indicates (and again it must be emphasized that these victims were not given voice in this anthology), this violence is often far from rational or under control and often forced on women and children against their will. For many it has been "the stuff or murder and not love" (Dworkin). Benjamin's work may not be an apology, but it is at times academically parochial and cleverly misleading.

What then is in this book for lesbians? This question, of course, depends on one's political interests and needs. Unfortunately, most of the writings, and almost all of the essays by or

about lesbians, have been previously published, making the anthology dated and disappointingly familiar. The collection is, however, progressive in so far as sexuality is being discussed by lesbians and women on the Left as a culturally created mode of expression rather than a biologically fixed mating behavior. Progress: What many considered as natural to the sex division of labor in the sex act is now perceived as one possibility, historically determined.

The anthology is enlightening on this and gives us a framework for understanding how this sexuality is socially construed. The historical and ideological limits placed on female sexuality are explained in terms of family, community, and State controls, ultimately linked to shifts in the capitalist economy. This mode of analysis is not particularly new, but its constant use and application makes it more accessible for all of us.

The explicit lesbian writings (either writings that specifically address lesbian material or are written from a lesbian perspective or by self-identified lesbian writers) are one-sidedly represented in the anthology. The exception to this is Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which seems out of place, if not exploited, in this particular anthology. As a rule, cultural feminists (sometimes code for lesbian community or lesbian separatists) are loudly paddled in many of these essays, while allusive respect is given to "lesbian outlaws," perceived as outsiders to the "straight-laced" lesbian community. We are at the same time counselled not to make moral judgments about how people make sex, but we are consigned to make sense of it, as exemplified in Benjamin's notion of consensual *rational* violence. In effect, the seemingly rebellious attitude about sex, represented in this anthology and praised as liberating women from their sexual shame, strangely constitutes the domain of sexuality as a privatized matter between one, two, or more consenting persons and as immune to public judgment. The right to privacy becomes a domain of freedom, since it protects our choice to act in certain ways within certain limits. However, this precious right should not delimit our responsibility to discuss, justify, deliberate, and explore with others how we live our private sexual lives. There is an enormous difference between remaining nonjudgmental on how others live their private lives and remaining silent on the meaning and implications of acting on or living a given sexuality. To claim otherwise is to cling to a reactionary liberalism in which consent, majority status, and human desire are the only important variables. In this view, the politics of gender or the relationship between social domination and the social construction of gender and sex are obscured. Early radical feminists of the 1970's clearly perceived that heterosexual coitus is not a drama between two abstract individuals, lacking a gender, a sex, a class, a race, a history, and so on. Sex must be understood as a political activity of enormous complexity.

Again, it is this complexity that is not addressed by this anthology. The problem has to do in part with the kind of words we are allowed to use in thinking about or writing about our sexuality. While the language of theory never reaches far enough, the language of socialist feminism barely touches the surface. It is a confused language of liberal theory and socialist feminist economic analysis. The evaluative words stop where the right to privacy begins. According to the collected views in this anthology, a truly liberated woman would be non-judgmental in her sexual opinions and refuse to rank her sexual allegiances. This position is not new. What is new is that the new Left seems happy romping around with liberals in the bedroom. I don't know what's going on in there, but I wish more women would speak up.

Contributors' Notes



Lisa Diane Alvarez writes fiction and poetry. She received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Cal State University Long Beach and studied the Greek Classics, Myth and Ritual, and poetry at the Aegean Women's Studies Institute in Lesbos, Greece. She was twice awarded the annual Long Beach Professional Writers Association prize. Recently she received a scholarship to attend the Women's Voices Writing Workshop at UC Santa Cruz. Her writing has appeared in *Riprap*, *Electrum* and *Read*.

Charlene Ball has written plays, poetry, fiction, and reviews. She lives in Atlanta and teaches English part-time.

Nancy Barickman went to catholic elementary school in San Fernando, California, in the fifties.

Alison Bechdel's book, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, has just been published by Firebrand Books. She is a cartoonist and illustrator who has just moved to the Upper Midwest from the East Coast.

Aya Blackwomon is the sweet spirit who whispers in Toni Brown's ear reminding her where she came from and who she is. Toni Brown is a woman of color, writer, parent, karateka and member of "Calypso Borealis," a Northampton, Massachusetts based lesbian writer's group. She has been previously published in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*.

Deb Bryer: I am a radical feminist, a lesbian, and a writer. My moon is in Pisces and my sun is in Cancer. I usually eat toast with spaghetti sauce on it for breakfast.

Sue D. Burton, a Physician Assistant specializing in women's health care, has recently been awarded a grant by the Burlington, Vermont, Mayor's Arts Council to write a docu-drama based on interviews with members of the Vermont Women's Health Center collective.

Theresa Crater is a Southern-born lesbian, living in Olympia, Washington, with her lover, three cats and a dog. She teaches at The Evergreen State College.

Doris Davenport, a native of Georgia, has collected degrees from Paine College, SUNY Buffalo, the University of Southern California, and IUGU (Interdenominational Universal Goddess University). She is presently doing "post-doc" research and recuperation in Cornelia and working as a free-lance writer. Her work has appeared in numerous feminist and black publications, including the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*. "i useta say i was a writer . . ." was first published in her book *eat thunder & drink rain*.

Elana Dykewomon wrote these pieces in her Jewish Lesbian Writers Group. She is the author of *Riverfinger Women*, *They Will Know Me By My Teeth*, and *Fragments from Lesbos*. She's lived in California long enough to believe that 11's are important numbers for her and takes it as a good omen to be passed the editorship of *Sinister Wisdom* in its 11th year, 33rd issue. She loves lesbians and words, is glad for the opportunity to work for/with them on SW.

Margie Erhart's first novel (the working title is *Claire*, but don't count on it) will be published by E.P. Dutton next fall. She is a *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* collective member, and Maude and Gussy first appeared in that magazine.

Ellen Gruber Garvey's work has appeared in *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, *Places, Please!*, *Conditions*, and *Sojourner*; an essay on bodies is forthcoming in *Feminist Studies*. She lives in Brooklyn and is a graduate student and teacher at the University of Pennsylvania.

Melinda Goodman: I am a 28 year old lesbian poet and health care worker. I am a member of "Bloodstone," a women's poetry collective that got started out of workshops with Audre Lorde and Cherríe Moraga. My work was most recently published in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, and I have poems coming out in the next 2 issues of *Conditions*.

Morgan Grey lives happily in Vermont, where she is learning the true meaning of winter.

Barbara Herringer is a Vancouver, Canada writer, social worker and editor. Her work has appeared in *Room of One's Own*, OIE's Own Feminary event, *Fireweed*, *The Radical Reviewer*, *Kinesis*, and *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*.

river karner — b. 10/3/55, Lafayette, Indiana. currently a student at Goddard College. i spend much of my time deciding whether to stay in or get out of adolescence.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz edits SW. Recent work by her appears in *IKON* and the *Women's Review of Books*. She teaches writing and women's studies in the Adult Degree Program of Vermont College, and she is active in the newly-founded Vermont chapter of New Jewish Agenda.

Emily Levy: I was born in San Francisco in 1960. Both my activism and my writing began before I reached age 10. I have Environmental Illness, which I recognize as one of my body's ways of responding to invasions of all sorts. My healing work includes learning to say "no" with my voice so my immune system will no longer be responsible for that job. "How the Rhino Got Its Flakey Skin," my first published writing, appeared in *With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's Anthology* (Cleis Press, 1985).

George Ella Lyon's work includes *Mountain*, a poetry chapbook; *Braids*, a play; and two children's books, *Father Time and the Day Boxes* and *A Regular Rolling Noab*. She works as a writer and teacher in Lexington, Kentucky.

claire indigo lyons is at home in the Northwest, currently in Seattle, happiest when working with women. I'm on the editorial board of *Backbone* magazine. Finally figured out I travel so much because I'm a networker.

Barbara Maria lives in Maine. She received a MFA in writing from Vermont College and works as a substance abuse counselor for children of alcoholics. She is currently working on a book about alcoholism, abuse, and the healing process.

Toni McNaron is a lesbian/feminist literary critic and professor of English at the University of Minnesota. Her publications include *Voices in the Night: Women Speak About Incest* and *The Sister Bond*. Her autobiography, *Magnolias for Whites Only*, is under consideration by press.

Maude Meehan is a writer, editor, political activist and lecturer in fields relating to creativity and to women's studies. She has been conducting writing workshops for women for several years in Santa Cruz. Her book, *Chipping Bone*, a collection of ten years of poetry, was published in November of '85. Maude has also co-authored and edited a film script "Wheels of Summer," as well as several anthologies of Santa Cruz women's poetry. The two quotations she bears in mind when writing are (1) Carolyn Forché, "Only the work is important not the success or failure" and (2) Tillie Olsen's "Every woman who writes is a survivor."

Nicky Morris teaches Feminist Studies, Writing, and Literature at Goddard College. She lives in the country and dreams of traveling.

Rebecca Neeley lives in Berkeley, CA, and currently works as a camera operator. She has been published in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* and *A Room of One's Own*. This year she's doing more batik than writing.

L. Olivia is a latent couch potato that often fantasizes being the six foot ten Laker guard, Magic Johnson.

Lisa Palmer: Originally from Ann Arbor, Michigan, I've temporarily resettled in Southern California in order to get my PhD in Critical Theory and English Literature at UC Irvine. Eventually, I hope to teach and write feminist literary criticism, and to help make academia less and less of a straight, white male bastion. As an out, Jewish dyke, it's been difficult adjusting to Orange County, a place dominated by wealthy, Right-Wing Born-Again, but I am finally settling in and discovering its closet counter-culture elements thanks to the help of the love of my life, Jacqui ("discovered" here), UCI's dynamic lesbian librarians, and others whose jobs, unfortunately, make it impossible for them to be named.

Julia Penelope is a co-creator of D.Y.K.E., the game of lesbian life and culture (with Margaret Johnson and Sarah Valentine); with Morgan Grey, Beth Binhammer, and Sarah Valentine, she hopes to start a lesbian publishing company to publish *The Book of Found Goddesses*. No need to wonder: Yes, we're looking for money — loans, donations, gifts! No sum too small, no offer ignored!

Susan Pensak has been translating Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry, prose poetry, and prose for a number of years, as an exercise in self-determination. She has sent her translations to journals that include *The Poetry Miscellany*, *13th Moon* and *Sulfur*; others are contained in anthologies, one being *Woman Who Has Sprouted Wings: Poems by Contemporary Latin American Women Poets*, which is edited by Mary Crow. In 1984, Third Woman Press published her translation of Iris M. Zavala's first novel *Cbilitagony*. Poems by Susan Pensak lately appear in *Pavement*. In the recent past, she has lived a lot in Jerusalem, Israel.

Alejandra Pizarnik was born April 29, 1936 (although 1939 is sometimes given as her year of birth), in Avellaneda, Argentina, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine. Her first book of poetry was published when she was not quite twenty, and after that, her poetic practice rapidly caught up to her poetic calling, as she inevitably dedicated herself to her chosenness, an elect, barer and squanderer of gifts. Eight collections of poetry and one of essays were published before Pizarnik's death, two have appeared subsequent to it. Notable among them: *Arbol de Diana*, 1962; *Los trabajos y las noches*, 1965; *Extracción de la piedra de locura*, 1968; *El infierno musical*, 1971; *El deseo de la palabra*, 1975 (edited by Pizarnik and Martha I. Moia). Her death was caused by drug overdose, the body found in her Buenos Aires apartment, the date given as September 26, or 27, 1972. The latest collection of scattered and unpublished texts of hers to reach book form was published in 1982 in Buenos Aires, *Textos de sombra y últimos poemas*, with editing by Olga Orozco, a celebrated Argentine poet, and Ana Becciu, both friends of the poet.

Anne Rickertsen grew up farming in Nebraska and taught there for 3 years. She now shit-jobs in Minneapolis so she'll have time to write (not to mention shave her head). She still has the rocking chair Amy gave her 7 years ago which she shares with her cat Carl, and she loves both of them very very much. Truth is, they ain't the only ones — hi Renee. And hi to my friends.

Rose Romano: After living in Brooklyn for my first 35 years, I've been living in San Francisco for a month. I've had work in *Earth's Daughters*, *Room of One's Own*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, and *Home Planet News*. This is my first publication since arriving in The City.

My name is **Sapphire**, it is deep blue and reduces to the #2, the # of the moon and High Priestess. I am a Black lesbian. I need to say that: I am a Blk lesbian. I am still learning what those words mean. Sorting thru the shame and fear finding the power.

Karen Saum: This story is one of thirteen about growing up as a colonial. My grandfather went to Panama in 1907, one of the many thousands of laborers who helped build the canal. My mother and I were both born and reared there. All of the Jessica stories deal with moments when consciousness is crystallized by experience. The developing consciousness in Jessica's case is that of a racist, a colonial. The stories are autobiographical. I hope they can be useful in undoing racism.

Teya Schaffer is currently undergoing culture shock as a "re-entry woman" in college.

Ardena Shankar lives in Santa Cruz and is working on a novel, *Mamawoman*. "Passage to Glory" is part of another novel also in progress.

Linda Smukler was the 1986 winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Short Story Competition sponsored by *Nimrod Magazine*. She has published in various publications, including *Conditions* and the *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*. She has studied with Gloria Anzaldúa, Joseph McElroy and Grace Paley.

Judith Stein is a Jewish dyke who keeps surprising herself with what she writes. She is firmly committed to having fun while trying to change the world. A list of her Bobbeh Meisehs (Jewish lesbian rituals and tales) is available from Bobbeh Meisehs Press, 137 Tremont St., Cambridge, MA 02139.

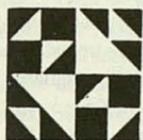
Amber Coverdale Sumrall survived 12 years of Catholic schools by nurturing her rebellious spirit. She is a sanctuary activist and teaches workshops on disability awareness. Her poems and prose have appeared in *With The Power of Each Breath*, *Matrix*, *IKON*, *Kalliope*, *Toward Solomon's Mountain*, and other periodicals.

Tremor, in spite of being temporarily trapped in the human world of cultural bigotry, marauding heterosexuals, and industrial terrorism, is dedicated to becoming biodegradable and encouraging other women to do the same. She loves being a Jewish vegan dyke, theatre worker, and lifelong Potato separatist.

Cheryl Marie Wade: I am 38 years old and live, love, and work in Berkeley. I write for, perform with, and recently directed a performance of *Wry Crips*, a disabled women's reader theater group. I look forward to spending the rest of my life learning to write.

Judith Waterman: I have been painting since 1960 when I began studying at the Art Students' League in New York City. Since 1978 I have worked on paper. Most recently my work was shown at the New York State Museum and the Brooklyn Museum. In late 1986 it was included in "Works on Paper" at Long Island University in New York City.

Jacquelyn N. Zita: Lesbian philosopher, currently doing research on theories of sexuality and gender at the Centrum for Kvinnliga Forskare (Uppsala Universitet, Sweden); usually found in Minneapolis where she works in Women's Studies at the University of Minnesota; unforgettably born and raised in Missouri.



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In response to Sandy Boucher's "Half of a Map" (SW 28)

Dear Sandy,

It's been a year and a half since I wrote an angry, 8 page critique of "Half of a Map." I can assume you may be in another space, have had other feedback or thought more about it yourself. But your essay stands unanswered, and it feels important to say at least in brief why I — an admirer of your fiction and *Heartwomen* — was so upset by it.

I agree that just because you aren't 80, you needn't "keep (your) mouth shut about growing old." I'm 53, and I too write about growing old. Surely more of us need to open our mouths. Still, I think there are unseen barriers, silences, myths and lies that can keep us all from the truth of growing old. The following seem to me essential kinds of guidelines — not to censor or distort, but to keep us from recycling false and cruel stereotypes.

1. There is no way we can write about old women or growing old and ignore ageism, any more than we can talk about class and ignore classism, fat and ignore lookism, or race and ignore racism. As political women, we have got to stop reflecting on women's aging as if growing old were the only aspect of a woman's life that is simply "natural." We have to see that it is our own ageism that makes us think this way.

2. Women like ourselves who are still outside the oppression of "old" need to begin by acknowledging to ourselves the differences of status between old and younger women, and how we — temporarily — profit by them. (As Barbara Macdonald writes, "the older woman is who the younger woman is better than.") With this in mind, we are less likely to reinforce such dangerous, disempowering stereotypes as "old women become more and more prey . . . to emotional distress." Who says? Younger women go to therapists and are institutionalized far more often than men, but we're aware it's insulting and specious to say we are "more prey to emotional distress" than men. We're enraged at the lie that our wombs make us hysterical and know exactly how that thinking serves the system. Surely it's time we defended old women from the charge that they are more unstable than we are. And charge it is, since any protest from an old woman is written off by this society as a sign of the overemotionalism of her years — an effective tool for social control.

3. The idea that we can look at women's aging as just a natural process makes it likely we will see the separations between women on the basis of age as simply natural too. (We need to ask ourselves why this is the only separation between women — including prostitute and

housewife, Black and white, Jew and Arab — that radical women still accept as natural and inevitable.) For instance, you suggest that it is naturally difficult for women of different generations to associate, because old women lived their earlier lives in times so "remote" from ours. But such thinking is circular, since of course the fewer old women we know intimately, the more "remote" 1920 or 1930 seem to us, just as the fewer Jewish women we know, the more "remote" Jewishness seems to us.

4. Lipservice about "deference" is one of the ways we younger women avoid giving the true respect of equality to old women. When you, Sandy, are treated by a younger woman as someone to be "deferred" to, you name it an absurdity, a painful embarrassment. I'm sure you also discovered that deference has a short shelf life. But you preserve the notion of "deference paid to old people," calling it "something that can be quite genuine" — if it comes "not just from respect for their years of experience but from the recognition of their vulnerability" (not courage, mind you, vulnerability). "Deference" isn't a word we'd use towards a younger woman who is ill or disabled. Why is it that when issues of access are discussed in our communities, disabled old women are never mentioned? Why do younger women set them apart — off the map — for deference? And why do we almost always change both our stance and our language when we talk or write about old women?

5. Ageism is hard for us all to get hold of. But if we put Irena Klepfisz, Audre Lorde, or Judy Grahn in Elsa Gidlow's place in the scene you describe it's instantly clear how alienating it is to be talked about and not to, to have your feelings speculated on in an lesbian journal as if you are no part of the world of *Sinister Wisdom*. In a similar way, it would have helped if, in your description of the old women in jail, you had tried out "If I could be as honest as they, as generous as they, I could be proud to be . . ." not *old* but "working class," "Jewish," "disabled." One can then clearly hear how condescending this is.

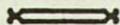
6. The only models we have for relating to old women are serve or be served, and these models stand as a barrier to a radical rethinking of our relationships. Worse, they can lead us to exploitation. I find that kind of exploitation in that same scene with Elsa — in this case the tell-us-how-it-was ripoff of the old lesbian. That means asking an old lesbian to give us a piece of her "remote" lesbian history and give it to us fast, in a car ride. It means we won't bother to get to know her well enough so we learn of her life while she learns of ours. It means we find an old woman's present life boring — even if she, like ourselves, is a currently active writer — so if she doesn't provide the bits of oral history we need, we will

just “(drive) on in silence.” Agesim keeps us from even recognizing that this common behavior is a ripoff.

In a handful of years, Sandy, you and I will both be “old.” Maybe sometimes we will settle — like yourself in middle age — for deference “if (we) are tired or in a position where (we) need to get something done.” We might even step into the brief spotlight of give-us-your-oral-history cheap, if we find ourselves in a group of younger women where the alternative is to be patronized or ignored. We may buy into the messages of our own lack of worth, or work to be the “isn’t-she-wonderful” special case that implicitly devalues other old women. Maybe we’ll keep fighting to be seen as the women we are. Or maybe we’ll simply turn away from younger women in impatience, disgust, disappointment.

It doesn’t have to be that way. Your vision of a picnic circle of old and young women sharing is my dream also. It’s possible, too, because as lesbians we are at a little window in history where we can for the first time take a radical look at women’s aging. For the first time younger and old women can meet woman-to-woman without family roles and male projections, as equals. If not lesbians, who? But to reach that vision, we have to know that it is agesim that stands in our way. Unless we name the beast, we are almost certain to feed him.

Cynthia Rich
Julian, California



Editor:

I am sitting here so angry my fingers have difficulty finding the keys. But remaining silent will do me no good, either. It is clear that you REALLY DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

I am writing about Sandy Boucher’s “Half of a Map” in *Sinister Wisdom* 28. First, let me say that I have always been a great admirer of her work. She is a fine writer. But her political sensitivity in this piece, and your politics in being willing to print it, are sadly lacking.

I do not want to construct an analogy with any other oppressed segment of the women’s community, because no other group should have to bear such a vicious load of negativity. But I ask you to do this — imagine, if you can, your “numb” “depression” as you face the “chasm” between you and a category of Other, characterizing this Other by her “remoteness,” “intimidating when threatened,” “weighty with years,” “to be deferred to,” exhibiting behavior of a “tired young person,” “over the hill,” “lonely” *because of age*, unable to speak of her troubles, “condescended to,” “formed by *different* experiences,” seen and seeing herself as a mother (one who serves?), regardless of reality.

Then, if the above quoted characteristics of the “older woman” are not enough, there is more, for the old. The specific characteristics of the category of old include “bluish crooked fingers of varicose veins,” “barely (able to) see or hear,” “walks with two canes,” “twisted by age” “like a gnome,” “trembling with vertigo,” “disabled with arthritis or high blood pressure or neurological diseases,” “sinewy,” “lined face” with “infirmities or discomfort or incapacity,” “tottering,” “bumping into things,” “hands shaking,” “dizzy,” “groping for support.”

Now, as we all know, *young* women are all formed by exactly the same experiences. It is also a well known fact that only mothers have anyone suck at their breasts. And, of course, young women, in contrast to old, are the following: “dewey,” “slim,” “fresh,” with “sharp sensory capacity,” “firm cheeks,” “clear eyes,” “flawless smoothness,” “resilient bodies,” “vital,” “experimental with life.”

Boucher’s last paragraph tries to imply that women of all ages are really just one big happy group — not “a line from womb to grave,” as she puts it. I do not want to be part of her group, thank you. I would not want to submit my white hairs and less than resilient flesh to such loathing, fear and projected self-hatred. I would find myself used, as she did the great photographer, Imogen Cunningham, or the fine poet, Elsa Gidlow (both of whom were and are notable mainly for their long productivity as artists) as examples of some horror of age like “loneliness” or “snappish, provocative — a scourge of wit.” Even the Cosmic Elders are used to negatively describe age, although she does acknowledge their usefulness to the protest group.

In thinking it over, I can’t believe that either Boucher or the editor of *Sinister Wisdom* visualized readers who are old women. Boucher, after decades of age passing (you know, like passing for straight — sometimes called lying), is dealing honestly enough with her current midlife “ageing crisis,” and assumes that readers will either empathize or feel lucky that they aren’t over thirty. Since my years prove your assumptions wrong, I would be willing to accept an apology on behalf of my category, old women, many of whom can best be described as vital, experimental with life, creative, productive, vigorous, energetic, and healthy — as well as sick and tired of the irrational prejudice and ignorance of many midlife women. Otherwise, why don’t we have some anti-Semites, or racists, or women suffering from fat phobia write pieces for *Sinister Wisdom* describing how they *really* feel about the relevant category, as well as the progress they are proud to be making?

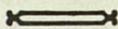
In struggle,
Baba Copper
Fort Bragg, California

Sandy Boucher's answer:

As anyone who read "Half of a Map" knows, I had no intention in it of making pronouncements on aging. I wanted to communicate an aspect of my own experience of aging as accurately as I could. I ask the reader to look at Baba's and Cynthia's letters and then at "Half of a Map" and ask themselves at which point Cynthia's and Baba's remarks are directed to what is actually being said in the context of "Half of a Map" and in which instances my piece is being used simply as a springboard for Baba's and Cynthia's particular ideas about aging without regard for the intention of what I wrote or the integrity of the piece itself.

Some old women of my acquaintance perceive and reflect upon their own experience quite differently than do either Baba or Cynthia. Their voices need to be heard.

I hope that my own piece and Cynthia's and Baba's responses will encourage women to express their particular views on aging. I hope they will not be intimidated by these responses of two individuals to "Half of a Map," for while the contribution of these two women is certainly challenging, many more viewpoints and accounts of experience will be necessary to bring us to a balanced perspective on the subject of women and aging.



Artist Narrative: "The Tribe of Dina":

I started making the sculptural installation entitled "The Tribe of Dina" in the Fall of 1985. I had been making breast masks on local women for about six months. I cast the torsos from the neck to waist; there were no heads or arms. In the early summer, I had my first child. When I first returned to the studio early in the fall, I spent weeks making samples with plaster and paint in an effort to develop a surface for the masks that looked sensuous and unearthed. By late fall everything came together and over the next few months I produced eighteen sculptures. Each breast mask has a skirt of tobacco netting attached at the waist. Each skirt is dyed in pale earth tones that match the colors of the plaster surface. The sculptures are suspended by fishing line at roughly the natural height of the woman it was cast from. They are arranged four rows deep and five or six across. The masks face frontally towards the viewer in a regimented formation, almost like an army.

By mid-winter I sat back and started wondering what it all meant. I knew it was a statement about women's collective strength. It was also a celebration of our diversity and similarity. Instead of conforming to a male idealization of the female form, these women came in

all shapes, sizes, and ages. Their beauty and femininity resulted from their asymmetry, sagging breasts, and girth; from those aspects of our anatomy that are least desired but most womanly. In fact, I have yet to see any pin-up style bodies among the seventy or more women I have cast.

Despite this initial reading, however, I still wondered why all these women were gathered in my studio. I sensed that there was another level of content that hadn't yet revealed itself to me. I waited for that to happen.

During this period I invited a group of women artists to my studio for a critique. We didn't discuss content; instead we concentrated on technical and formal issues. As we discussed environmental concerns that would affect the installation of the work I became clear about my unwillingness to have the viewers wander among the pieces. I felt strongly about the installation remaining frontal and confronting the audience. I wondered how viewers would feel facing this formation of women. Threatened? Friendly? Ambivalent? We brainstormed about this and came up with the idea that sand spread beneath the installation would deter close inspection. It would also emphasize the sun-baked, desert feeling that the figures evoked. As it turns out, the installation narrates an event that happens in the desert. It was almost as if I subconsciously knew this.

In order to introduce the evolution of my understanding of the content, I need to back up two years. In 1984, I completed an installation of ten life-size crucifixes entitled "Anatomy of Worship." The work combined my politics and aesthetics by using decorative wallpaper and pornography. In this format, I was able to make a statement about the crucifixion of women by popular culture and religion. My greatest source of personal discomfort with the work was not the content or form, which I was satisfied with, but by the fact that it was made by a Jew. Using the cross was a very effective narrative device, but I felt queasy about how easily I used this Christian icon.

My pride and self-identification as a Jewish feminist was flowering, and in the Fall of 1984, I joined a Rosh Chodesh group in my community. A dozen Jewish women gathered on the New Moon and we created a ritual together that was gentle, powerful, healing and Jewishly satisfying. I remember saying at the first meeting that I was coming to find artistic as well as spiritual content.

Our New Moon ritual lasts 45 minutes, and it is usually preceded by an hour long discussion on a prearranged topic. During this learning hour we sometimes created our own Midrash, that is, Bible commentary. Traditionally, Bible commentary has been the province of male scholars and historians. As a result it reflects male values and perspective and consistently overlooks the reality of

women's lives. Pregnancy, childbirth, monthly cycles, and the life among the community of women all affect the interpretation of the Bible. Reclaiming our side of the story and creating Midrash from a female perspective is radical and deeply empowering.

Recently the announcement of a new Jewish feminist anthology crossed my desk. Its title is *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*. I became curious about the story of Dina. When I read the story, I realized that the emphasis of the story was on the retribution by Dina's brothers for her rape. Dina, however, was only briefly mentioned, and once again the woman's side of the story was obscured and the violence between men was recorded. The first sentence of the story was intriguing to a feminist Midrash writer, because it mentions that Dina headed out to the desert to be with a group of women. Enroute she is assaulted and raped.

The next day I went to my studio. I opened my door and facing me was a tribe of women. The Tribe of Dina. I was overcome by a rush of excitement and relief. I had been frustrated by feeling that I was merely a conduit of work that I didn't understand. Now the meaning revealed itself to me.

These were the women that Dina had set out to find. Perhaps they were her Rosh Chodesh group or even a

Goddess worshipping cult. It can be assumed that then, even as now, women's groups were threatening to men. Women who leave the protection of men are seen as fair game, subject to men's supposedly uncontrollable sexual desires. Perhaps the jewels that Dina allegedly flaunted were her newfound sense of self-esteem and identity with a group of women-identified women. After the rape, then as now, the implication is that Dina provoked the attack. The effort to protect men from responsibility for their violent actions is cultivated in traditional male Midrash as well as in contemporary cultural propaganda such as pornography.

My piece then is a flushing out of the Dina story. The battered and assaulted Dina has found her way to (or been found by) her tribe. One space is empty in this formation of women. It is Dina's place, and she lies bruised below. Her tribe stands over her, offering their protection and healing ritual.

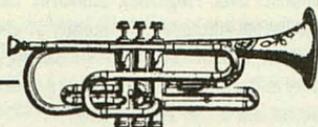
They face the audience quietly and solemnly. They stand together in strength, strong in their diversity and common interest in healing a hurt woman and preventing further violence. They stand in the desert sand, disarmed but strong.

Deborah Kruger



Tribe of Dina (fabric sculpture), Deborah Kruger

Announcements



Women in Canada compiling book of Retorts, Quips and One-liners for Women, want material from any woman who has ever been in an embarrassing or tense situation and was left speechless or sputtering with rage; the line you thought of hours or days later (or good on-the-spot retorts), comebacks for street, office, bar or boardroom, humorous and lighthearted or serious and sharp. Send to: Retorts, #167, 253 College St., Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 1R5. Part of the proceeds will be donated to Coalition of Battered Women's Shelters.

1987 National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference and 5th National AIDS Forum, 3/26-29/87, at the Sheraton Universal Hotel in Los Angeles. To propose a workshop: NLGHC '87 Programming Committee, POB 65472, Washington, DC 20035. For registration info: Greg Thomas, GWU Medical Center, 2300 K St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.

The National Women's Studies Association is administering a \$500 award funded by Naiad Press for a **graduate scholarship in Lesbian Studies**, and with Pergamon Press, is jointly awarding 2 graduate scholarships in Women's Studies. Deadline for scholarship applications is 3/1/87. NWSA also announces the creation of the **Illinois-NWSA Book Award**, to be presented annually for the best book-length manuscript in Women's Studies, prize, \$1,000 and publication of the manuscript by the Univ. of Illinois Press. Applicants should submit 2-page abstracts of their manuscripts by 1/1/87. For complete guidelines about these awards: Caryn McTighe Musil, NWSA National Coordinator, LaSalle University, Philadelphia, PA 19141; 215-951-1700.

We are Lesbians collecting stories of **how womyn came out to their mothers** for an anthology. We request womyn of all backgrounds to send stories and/or inquiries to: Carr/Yates, POB 6031, Minneapolis, MN 55406.

Circles of Exchange — a "round robin" of **women sharing women's spirituality**. Free monthly newsletter, Mooncircles. Send questions and SASE to: Nan Hawthorne, Box 021703, Juneau, AK 99802-1703.

off our backs, 2423 18th St., 2nd floor, Washington, D.C. 20009 (202 234-8072). Subscription costs: \$11/individual; \$20/institutions.

LESBIAN CONNECTION — is the FREE nationwide newsletter and forum for all lesbians. Lesbians can get their free subscription (mailed discreetly) by simply sending their name, address & zip code to Ambitious Amazons, PO Box 811, East Lansing, MI 48823.

The **1987 National Women's Studies Association Conference**, "Weaving Women's Colors: A Decade of Empowerment," will convene at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA, 6/24-28/87, sponsored by Spelman College, Agnes Scott College, and Emory University, and will explore the intersection of race and gender. For more info contact NWSA '87, Emory University, POB 21223, Atlanta, GA 30322; 404-727-7845.

Wanted: **Women Builders, Masons, Electricians, Carpenters to build a school in Nicaragua**. Organizational work now beginning. Serious fundraising could provide travel money for those otherwise unable to go. Other skills needed: fundraisers, organizers, Spanish speakers, health workers, skilled consultants. Please call: Bonnie 413-586-1125, or 586-7094 evenings, or Sandy, 584-4969.

Credit for Marilyn Zuckerman's photograph in SW 29/30: Sardi Klein is the photographer.

National Conference on Radical Thought for Women, April 30 — May 3, 1987, in Cleveland, OH. What was radical 100 years ago now seems commonplace. And original thinking that may have been dismissed 30 years ago is motivating hundreds of women today. What will it mean to be radical in the future? We are creating a place for all women who have felt they were radical or original in some way, to speak their thoughts — thoughts which seek to find common roots, thoughts which are often submerged in the rush to "get on with it" or feel too dangerous to speak. We are experimenting with different formats to offer an atmosphere that will encourage creativity and mutual support. Our purpose is to provide a relief from day to day survival in conservative times and to rejuvenate our original excitement in being political women. Your format and topical ideas are requested. Please communicate with the Conference Planning Committee at the WOMEN'S BUILDING PROJECT, P.O. BOX 18129, CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OH, 44118. After Jan. 1, 1987, call 216-321-8582, Tues. and Thurs., 9:30am to Noon.

Women's Artistry: Process/Product/Progress, Kearney State College 1987 Women's Conference, October 7-10, 1987. We invite your interpretations of women's artistry; of special interest are presentations from the following disciplines: literature, history, foreign language, art, music, theatre, popular culture, women's studies. The papers, not more than twenty minutes in length, may focus upon an individual work, artist, genre, period, or culture that demonstrates women's initiation into the arts and humanities. This conference will take place concurrently with The Nebraska Poetry and Fiction Festival, also sponsored by Kearney State College. Submit queries and two-page abstracts for papers and panels to Kathryn N. Benzel, Department of English, Kearney State College, Kearney, NE 68849, (308) 234-6758 by March 2, 1987. Completed papers are due by July 1, 1987 to be considered for publication in conference proceedings available at registration.

Stepping Out of Line — a great new book on lesbianism and feminism. Available from Press Gang, Dept. N, 603 Powell St., Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1H2 Canada. \$12.95 plus \$1.50 handling.

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The Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series makes available in a highly accessible format, political analysis by women of color who are working at the forefront of liberation movements all over the globe: #1 *The Combabee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, with a new Foreword by Barbara Smith, \$3.25 paper, 24 pages. #2 *Apartheid U.S.A.* by Audre Lorde and *Our Common Enemy, Our Common Cause: Freedom Organizing in the Eighties*, by Merle Woo, \$3.50 paper, 28 pages. #3 *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities*, by Audre Lorde. \$2.95 paper, 12 pages. New York State residents add applicable sales tax to your orders. Please include \$1.00 for postage and handling for the first pamphlet and 35¢ for each additional pamphlet. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 908, Latham, NY 12110.

Kitchen Table Women of Color Press is seeking submissions from American Indian Women Writers for possible Autumn 1987 or Spring 1988 publication. The press is particularly interested in receiving works of fiction, either novels or collections of short stories, but will also consider work in other genres, including poetry and nonfiction prose. In order to be considered for Autumn 1987 publication, manuscripts must arrive on or before March 31st, 1987. Address correspondence to Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 908, Latham, NY 12110.

The **Feminist Archive of Bath**, England, requests a donation of out-of-print copies of *Sinister Wisdom*, issues #1-6, 8-12, 14-17. The Feminist Archive, c/o Bath University, Claverton Down, Bath, Avon, England.

Kathryn Machan Aal and Susanna J. Sturgis want stories, personal essays, and poems, which emphasize **recovery from alcoholism and/or co-alcoholism**, for ONE FOR THE ROAD, an anthology intended for teenagers with alcoholic family members or friends. Deadline: 2/1/87. Send to: ONE FOR THE ROAD, c/o Sturgis, POB 39, West Tisbury, MA 02575.

Eleanor Predmore wants to contact womyn interested in starting an **Old Crones Home**. Box 157, Trumansburg, NY 14886.

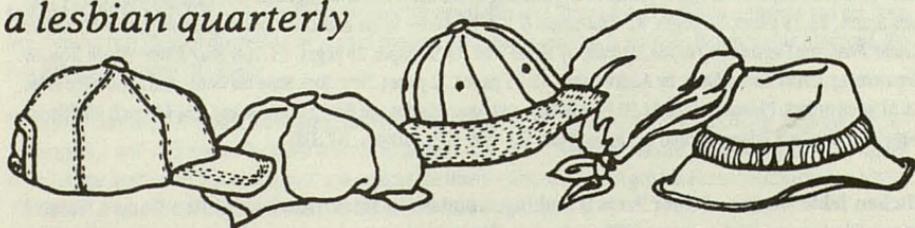
Lesbians 60 and Over With Interest in the Arts: The First West Coast Conference by and for Old Lesbians will be held in 4/87 in the LA area. Important aspect will be sharing of art, drama, crafts, music, dance, readings, rituals, etc. We urge all lesbians aged 60 and over to submit ideas of what you would like. We are also seeking lesbians to participate in the planning and coordinating cultural events. Lesbians of color are especially invited to contribute. Call Shaba 213-222-2209, Sylvia 805-569-1276, or Kate 619-481-0375. Or write: West Coast Celebration, 2953 Lincoln Blvd., Santa Monica, CA 90405.

Support Our Resistance

Laura Whitehorn is a **pre-trial detainee** political prisoner who is being held without bail in solitary confinement at Alderson FCI in West Virginia. For more information write: Committee to Fight Repression, POB 1435 Cathedral Station, NY, NY 10025.

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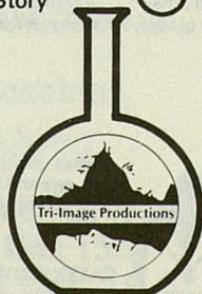
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Summer 1987

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Submissions in all forms encouraged.

Issue #34: Science fiction and lesbian visions

Deadline: September 1, 1987

SINISTER WISDOM

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#29/30/The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology, edited by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz

#28/Special Focus on Women & Work; Body Image, Size & Eating, Aging, Comedy about Outlaw Lesbian Communities, Courage, PC/PI, Letters about SW #26

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