

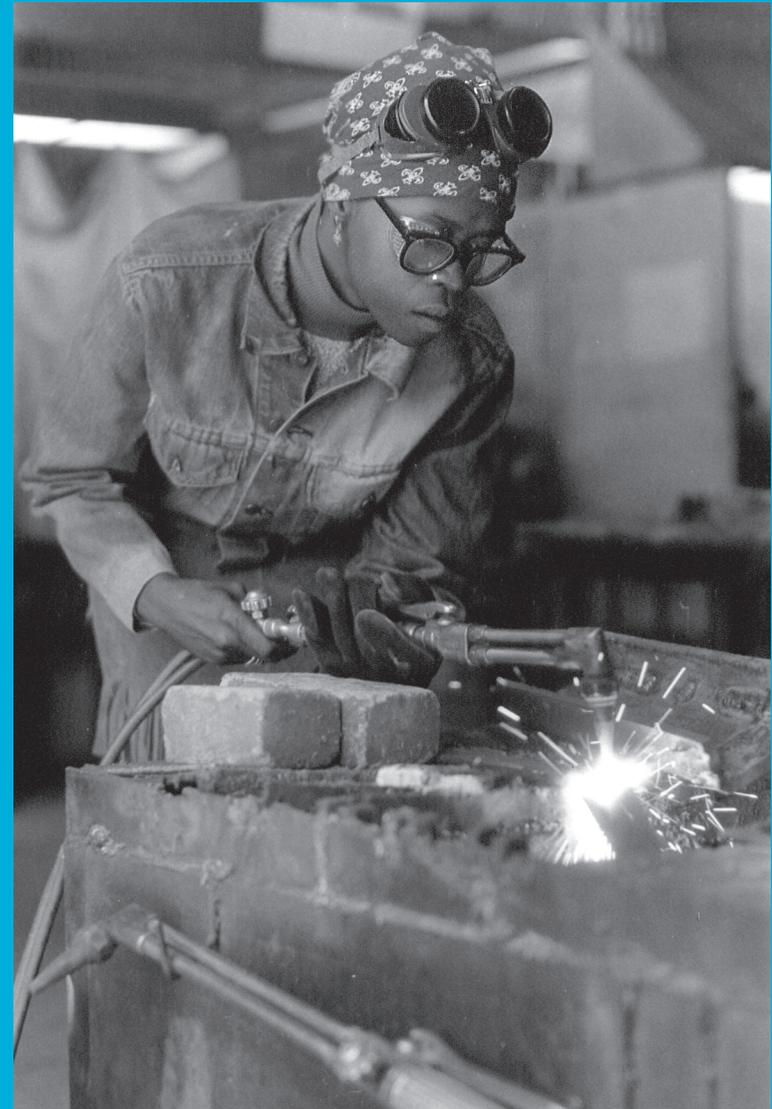
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Sinister Wisdom 67

Summer 2006

sinister wisdom

67



Lesbians and Work

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Sinister Wisdom 67
Summer 2006

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SINISTER WISDOM, founded 1976

Former editors and publishers:

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And Catherine Nicholson (1976-1981)

Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich (1981-1983)

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Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1983-1987)

Elana Dykewomon (1987-1994)

Caryatis Cardea (1991-1994)

Akiba Onada-Sikwoia (1995-1997)

Margo Mercedes Rivera-Weiss (1997-2000)

Sinister Wisdom is a multicultural, multi-class, female-born lesbian space. We seek to open, consider and advance the exploration of community issues. We recognize the power of language to reflect our diverse experiences and to enhance our ability to develop critical judgement, as lesbians evaluating our community and our world.

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Submission Guidelines

Submissions and correspondence for SW #69/70 and #72 should be sent to fran@sonic.net or mailed to SW c/o Fran Day, POB 1180, Sebastopol, CA 95473-1180. See page 4 for details. Also see page 4 for information about SW #71. Please read the submission guidelines below before sending material. Everything else should be sent to Sinister Wisdom, POB 3252, Berkeley, CA 94703. Check our website at www.sinisterwisdom.org.

Submission Guidelines: Please read carefully.

Submissions may be in any style or form, or combination of forms. Maximum submission: five poems, two short stories or essays, or one longer piece of up to 2,500 words. We prefer that you send your work by email in Word. If sent by mail, submissions must be mailed flat (not folded) with your name and address on each page. We prefer you type your work but short legible handwritten pieces will be considered; tapes accepted from print-impaired women. All work must be on white paper. Please proofread your work carefully; do not send changes after the deadline. A self-addressed stamped business-sized envelope must be enclosed. If you want acknowledgement of receipt, enclose a separate self-addressed stamped postcard. GRAPHIC ARTISTS should send B&W photos or drawings (duplicates) of their work (no slides.) Images sent electronically must have a resolution of 300dpi for photos and art, and 600dpi for line drawings. TIFF's and PDF's are preferred. Please do not send large files electronically – send each photo separately. Include a short biographical sketch written exactly as you want it printed. Selection may take up to nine months.

We publish only Lesbians' work. We are particularly interested in work that reflects the diversity of our experiences: as Lesbians of color, ethnic Lesbians, Jewish, Arab, old, young, working class, poverty class, disabled, and fat Lesbians. We welcome experimental work. We will not print anything that is oppressive or demeaning to Lesbians or women, or that perpetuates stereotypes. We do intend to keep an open and critical dialogue on all the issues that affect our lives, joy, and survival. Please contact us if you have a new theme you would like to see explored. We are looking for guest editors for future issues.

Sinister Wisdom, Inc. is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization. We provide free subscriptions to women in prison and psychiatric institutions (20% of our mailing list), as well as reduced price subscriptions for Lesbians with limited/fixed incomes. * Enclose an extra \$10 to \$50 on your renewal to help cover publishing costs (larger donations accepted.) * Give Sinister Wisdom for birthdays, holidays, and special occasions.

A Journal by and for Lesbians

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Notes for a Magazine

As Lesbians, how do we cope with heterosexism, lesbophobia, ageism, racism, classism, ableism and other oppressive policies and attitudes at work? How do we maintain our integrity (asserting our needs, defending our rights) without being penalized or losing our jobs? How do we cope with work that we find degrading, unethical, boring, stressful, dangerous, disabling, and/or unsatisfying? How do we cope with the myth that there is meaningful, well-paid work out there for everyone if we only try hard enough? What experiences have we had with successful alliances with other Lesbians at work? What positive experiences have we had at work where we felt we were doing something useful, where we were acknowledged for our unique contributions, and/or where we had a reasonable workload, healthy working conditions, and adequate compensation and benefits?

These were some of the questions we asked in our call for material for this issue on Lesbians and Work. We also suggested other topics which included unions, workaholism, exploitation of workers, having to work as a child, while chronically ill, or while caregiving a sick/disabled partner.

Understandably, many of those who planned to write for this issue found themselves too exhausted from working to do so. Some reported that they had just been laid off and had to put all their energies into finding other work. Nevertheless, many thought-provoking pieces found their way into our mailbox. The contributors to this issue of Sinister Wisdom explore the complex issues Lesbians encounter at work with imagination, creativity, compassion, grit and determination.

“Sisters, let us put our heads together and create ways to improve the world of work for Lesbians and all oppressed people. Let us explore ways to sustain ourselves and each other outside the patriarchal work world. Sisters, take heart, unite, support each other, form alliances, and find courage and solidarity in our love for our kind...”

Tanager,
Sister Courage (Unpublished manuscript)

Fran Day
Sebastopol, California

Upcoming Issues: Call for Submissions

#68 *Death, Grief, and Surviving*

Forthcoming Fall 2006

Guest Editors: Judith Witherow and Sue Lenaerts

#69/70 *Sinister Wisdom's 30th Anniversary Celebration Double-Issue*

Deadline: August 1, 2006

Editor: Fran Day fran@sonic.net

Reflections, Reminiscences and Remembrances

Reflections on thirty years of *Sinister Wisdom* and the lesbian feminist movement. Remembrances of experiences that shaped your life as a Lesbian feminist. Tributes to Lesbians (living and deceased) who touched your life and influenced your thinking. Interviews encouraged. Photos must be taken by Lesbians.

#71 *Two Spirit Women of First Nations*

Deadline: March 1, 2007

Guest Editors: Chrystos (Menominee) and Sunny Birdstone (Ktunaxa)

Colonialization has marginalized Indigenous women (as well as men), making Native Dykes almost completely invisible. We celebrate the survival of Two Spirit Women of First Nations in this issue. Submissions may be in any format - taped interviews, dialogues, as well as fiction, poetry, etc. Please respect certain definitions, which have often been violated - ie. we ask for work from lesbians who are Native in this lifetime only, recognized by their tribes or communities (although a BIA number is not required) and willing to use their name rather than a pseudonym (this is to help prevent submissions of non-authentic work). We define Indigenous Dykes as coming from the Americas, as well as the Pacific (Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia), with a land base (ie. reservation, rancho, etc.) and a tribal affiliation (Maori, Koori, Cree, etc.). Government recognition of tribal status is not necessary (ie. we recognize the Duwamish). We are particularly interested in stories from dykes who were in residential schools, Elders, incarcerated, & in honor of those who have passed on (Barbara Cameron NationShield, Smiley Hillaire). Edited by Chrystos (Menominee) and Sunny Birdstone (Ktunaxa). Megwetch.

Submissions, inquiries etc. for #71 only should be sent to sbirdstone@hotmail.com, or to Chrystos and S. Birdstone, 3250 S. 77th #8, Tacoma, WA, 98409

#72 *Utopia*

Deadline: August 1, 2007

Editor: Fran Day Details at www.sinisterwisdom.org



"Gail and Kate" by Cathy Cade 1973.

Joan Annsfire

Piecework

*We shared more than the heaters at our feet
that winter we worked
in the warehouse on 3rd.*

*Five women learning the details
of each other's lives
while performing our daily routine
with a practiced and hungry fervor.*

*The radio kept us moving,
memorizing the words of popular songs,
each tune bringing forth new conversation
to the beat of our own rowdy music.*

*Each took her turn rolling lace patterns
cutting the pieces like cookies
into sheets of wet clay.*

*Hand-crafted wind-chimes
that we would string
and hang from driftwood boughs.*

*For the last lap,
all pieces were aligned in order of assembly,
all work spaces arranged
for maximum speed.*

*Cold fingers flew
in the quest for numerical superiority,
attempting a new record,
or just outdoing a personal best.*

*Blood rushed to our blue fingertips,
each knot tied
with repetitive certainty.*

*Each of us envisioning
a sumptuous meal or a new leather jacket,
as clay dust settled over our bodies
like snow.*

Joan Annsfire

Nickel and Dime

*I travel a well-worn path to work and back;
each day rising at seven
to wash, eat, dress, drive and ride.
chances are, no land mines
are hidden to disrupt my journey,
no enemy armies prepare silent ambush.*

*Instead, I arrive unscathed
in a place of computers and fluorescent lights
where I perform daily tasks with quick efficiency
leaving all traces of "real life" just hours,
yet light-years behind.*

*My fingers race over the keyboard,
of that bloodthirsty miracle of technology
that cramps my shoulders,
cripples my hands, blurs my vision,
and keystroke by keystroke,
eats away my life.*

*When I was young, I asked my father,
"how can you go to work eight hours one day,
then get up each morning to do it
over and over again?"
he replied simply, "you get used to it."*

*But you don't get used to it,
you just get used,
become numb,
surrender.*

*Tomorrow,
there will be no death squads trying
to break down my door,
no bombers flying overhead to send explosives
raining down on my house.*

*I will rise early,
let my working woman's legs propel my weary body
back to my job once more,
my eyes fixed on some unyielding point
on the distant horizon.*

Jamie R. Okulam

Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

I was angry. But now it's not the kind of anger I had then. It's the kind of anger you put away in a box — on a shelf in the basement — like a memory.

Mr. Harrington told our seventh grade class to pick out a career to study. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I told him I wanted to be a writer and an artist. He smiled. I didn't understand the concept of patronizing then.

Like the rest of the kids, I threw myself into learning about my chosen job. All during the term my best friend Kathy (the other tomboy) and I did all the art projects for the class. I was really beginning to see myself as an artist. Just the word, artist, was sacred to me.

One day Mr. Harrington told me he wanted me to watch some movies he had chosen just for me. I thought, cool, maybe I'll get to see a movie about Michelangelo or Vincent Van Gogh.

He led me to a small room next to the principal's office. He told me to sit in there and wait for him to come back. I was going to see two films. I had been excited but now I was in that special place children who have been raped know — a kind of hyper-alertness — a knowing of what might come — but a cynical satisfaction that says – yes — I was right.

He started the film projector and left the room. The black and white images reflected back into my eyes. I did not blink. I didn't turn my head. I wanted to remember all of it.

The government issued film about how to be a janitor was very professionally done. I learned how to dust. The deep narrator's voice said, “Look what happens when you dust with a dry rag; the dust just flies about the room and lands on other surfaces. Use a wet dust rag instead.” I learned that you never put a washrag on a faucet because the little germs know how to crawl up the faucet and get into the nice clean water.

I have always believed Mr. Harrington assumed I was guilty. I was guilty for being the daughter of an American Indian. True, my mother was white, but being mixed is bad too. My little sister was dark. Mr. Harrington probably thought I was lucky to take after my mother.

I've spent most of my life living like a woman of color — a kind of guilt by association. Like most of the women in my father's family, I became a nurse's aide. My sister became the other thing my father dreaded — a hair-

dresser. He told me just before he died when I was seventeen, “Don’t either of you girls ever become this or that!” But we did.

All the stories you hear about being a nurse’s aide are true. Yes, people even ask you if you can read. It isn’t a question meant to patronize you because someone is angry with you for making a mistake. It’s an inquiry, because, “Well, I didn’t know that folks who did your kind of work could read.”

I’ve been offered higher pay than the “colored” girls because I am supposedly smarter. Well, I am just bigger. My anger at Mr. Harrington guaranteed I would not be subservient. Rich clients could relate to me. They felt less guilty because I was Brunhilde and not Ethel Waters.

My life partner, my lover, my spouse — no matter what the government says about the legality of our marriage — is a musician. When we are getting ready for a party, we clean the house. She persists in using a dry rag to dust. I watch her little fingers smear the dust. I watch the dust fly around her head sending her into sneezing fits. When I try to teach her to use a wet rag, she quips, “Leave me alone!” I do. She led me to a new world. I am grateful.

What would Mr. Harrington think if he knew that the American Indian was not really my father at all? He was the man who saved my southern born mother from starvation when she was abandoned by my real father — the one born in Denmark. I guess Mr. Harrington would still think it was guilt by association. White trash is another popular epithet.

My mother would say, “Let sleeping dogs lie!”

Can’t do it. Mr. Harrington. Remember the tall fat girl, you know, the Indian’s kid. Yah! Yes, the Dyke who was in love with Kathy. I am also illegitimate! Umhummm!

I am an artist and writer. Would you like to come to my graduation? I am getting a master’s degree in creative writing with a concentration on publishing.

Film to follow.

Sheridan Gold

The Best Way Out Was Through

Sometimes when you are holding a secret, you hold so much energy trying to hide the secret that the hiding keeps you prisoner in your own mind. You can't say certain things, you always have to censor what you do say, and you are always going back and forth in deciding what to say, depending on who you are talking to. When I first started teaching, this is how it was with my students. My students were in Alternative Education, i.e. expelled youth and kids locked up in Juvenile Hall. As the community was extremely intolerant towards these kids who fought, cut school and did drugs, so were my students intolerant of anyone who was different from them. They were the most homophobic students I had ever run into.

Every morning I would hand out newspapers and we would discuss the current events of the day. However, every morning before I handed out newspapers, I would scan them to see if there were any articles about gays in the military, gay marriage, or even gay bashings. If there were any of these stories, I'd choose not to pass out the newspapers, and we'd go to the next activity. This way I could have some kind of control over the conversations and to my delight, no student ever questioned why we weren't reading the newspaper on any given day.

The years passed by and I was somewhat comfortable in the closet. The kids got the message that I was not open to discussing anything gay related and the subject rarely came up as a class discussion. However, there'd always be the whispering, the gossip about their lesbian teacher, and the questions followed by laughter about such things as the meaning of the rainbow or what my husband's name was. "What does the rainbow mean, Ms. G?" "I don't know other than what comes out in nature after the rain," I would reply, my heart racing and my breath becoming shorter. "Are you married, Ms. G?" "No," I would sternly reply, even though I was in a 20-year relationship. My stern reply gave them the message I was absolutely not into sharing my personal life with them.

Then Matthew Shepard was murdered and my life has never been the same. I was stunned as was the rest of the world and I knew I could no longer be comfortable in my silence. My students needed to see a real live lesbian, somebody who was happy and healthy and making a difference in her students' lives. It wasn't easy, coming out. I didn't accomplish it in the snap of a finger. What my students thought of me was terribly important

and I wanted to be accepted and liked and respected. But what kept going on over and over and over in my mind besides the constant censoring of “to tell or not to tell,” was that if Matthew Shepard could go through what he went through, I certainly could come out and say, “Here I am, I am gay, and I am happy.”

During the time of Matthew’s murder, I had been teaching for five years. I was in a Master’s program creating an in-service to help make schools safer for LGBTQ youth. The tragedy reminded my professors and me just how important my in-service had now become. Matthew’s murder brought home the importance of my work to a much higher level, not only for potential victims, but especially for potential gay-bashers. Matthew’s murderers were recently out of high school. I taught high school, and my colleagues taught high school, and we were all responsible in some way for the choices our students made. It was all of our responsibility to create a safe learning environment, free of name-calling and violence. If I could impact these teachers to stop the homophobic slurs, the bullying, the laughter, the gossip, perhaps I could transcend something positive out of all the horror.

I started my in-service with an original monologue about my life growing up as a youngster, amidst all of the homophobia around me. I start out as a very joyous, smart, and lively girl, and end up as a taunted, terrorized dropout. There’s not a dry eye in the audience at the end of the twenty-minute performance. It’s my hook and the teachers grab on. From there, the teachers are open to receiving statistical information about gay youth and those perceived to be gay and they are stunned at what they hear. We all leave the four-hour in-service changed people.

Although in giving my in-service to other teachers and seeing its impact I grew stronger, I was still guarded. On the first day of school in my ninth year of teaching, one of my students asked me a question that set me free. “Hello everyone,” I said. “Welcome to the first day of school.” Before I could continue, a returning student raised his hand and asked, “Ms. G, aren’t you going to tell everyone your secret?” “What secret?” I asked innocently, knowing full well where my student was going with his question. “You know, Ms. G,” he continued, “your secret.” “Oh!” I exclaimed. “You mean when I was a kid I had a pet rat I let out every Saturday morning and let her run under my covers and snuggle up while I read?” The students shrieked and squirmed as I uncovered “my secret.” “No, Ms. G. Your secret. You know, your secret?” “Oh!” I exclaimed, “You mean that I am Jewish?” “No, Ms. G,” he said as a smile spread slowly across his face. “That you are gay.” I looked at my student and said with a laugh, “That’s no secret. Every-

body knows I'm gay. Do you have any concerns about that or is there anything I can help you with?" He became mute and shook his head. We moved seamlessly along to the next subject.

I came into teaching unable to tolerate my students' homophobic views. However, now in my eleventh year, I help kids understand why homophobic slurs are hurtful. When they reply that there aren't any gay people around so why would it matter, they may laugh when I tell them I'm gay. I understand they are uncomfortable. But because it's out in the open, there is no more whispering or laughing behind my back. There is no longer the gossip I once heard. I am out of my prison of silence. It's not always easy to call them on their homophobia, but I continue to remind myself that I am the adult, and my students are here to learn from me. Maybe they'll remember math facts, maybe not. But I know they will always remember they had a gay teacher who was strong, kind, open, funny and accepted them for who they were. Who knows, maybe the next time someone is intolerant of them, they'll remember me and my strength, take hold and let it become their own.

A version of this piece was printed in One Teacher in Ten: LGBT Educators Share Their Stories, edited by K.Jennings (Alyson 2005.)

Judith K. Witherow

The Textile Factory

I was raised in the northern Appalachians Mountains. After graduating high school in 1962, I went to work at one of the local factories. The fact that I was seventeen didn't deter the ones in charge from hiring someone underage. My mother, sister, and two aunts were employed at this particular sportswear factory. It was the natural progression for many female family members as we entered the workforce.

Anyone who has ever worked in one of these sweatshops can attest to its mind-numbing, back-breaking nature. The noise, fiber dust, stale air, and nonstop pressure to work faster on the assembly lines was intense. It was hell on earth, but it was a means of survival until hopefully something better came along. "Hopefully" rarely happened once you got caught up in this unending nightmare.

During the two years I worked there more than one woman suffered a mental breakdown. Their screams would make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Other women would carry the broken woman out, and hardly a moment of work would be lost. I guess we thought slowing down might allow the Spirits to catch us next, or the bosses would find a way to get rid of someone else who wasn't producing to their satisfaction. It was a hellish place for a naive teenager.

For the most part, men held positions of authority. As a teenager, I was ill equipped to deal with adult men.

Back then there was no term for sexual harassment. The word "fresh" was meant to cover all forms of abuse. It was accepted as just the way things were, and you kept quiet to protect your job and your reputation.

When one of the line supervisors started hitting on me, I was shocked. He was old enough to be my father. I was worried that even with the noise of the sewing machines, and cutting equipment the other women would hear what he was saying, and believe I had done something to encourage his advances.

Among many things, he told me was that virgins were a pain in the ass, and he would be doing me a favor by "busting my cherry." I thought if I worked even harder he would see that I was someone worthy of respect. Needless to say it gave him permission to embolden his tactics.

There was a union at our workplace, and I decided to file a grievance when nothing I did would stop his dreaded behavior.

I had always heard wonderful things about unions, and it didn't hurt that my aunts were officers in the local chapter of the Amalgamated Ladies' Garment Workers' Union.

When I told them what was taking place they were outraged. I was too embarrassed to tell them everything, but they knew and trusted me as a person who would not lie to elders.

They went to management with what I told them, and all hell broke loose! These were two women who would not back down from anything. The fact that the victim was a young family member fueled their anger higher.

An earlier sit-down strike in the factory over another issue had been very successful, so I'm sure the shop knew my aunts wouldn't hesitate to call a strike over such a just cause.

The man who harassed me tried to say I was lying. When that tactic didn't work he tried to convince me that I had misunderstood what he said. With my aunts' strength and backing I refused to allow his intimidation to continue. It was truly scary.

The ones in charge at the sportswear factory held a closed meeting and agreed that he would be fired immediately. The matter was settled without further action.

Everyone in charge agreed to the situation being handled in this manner. My aunts, who were usually fun loving women, found nothing funny in the disrespectful way their niece had been treated. I was surprised then at the outcome and even more surprised today in retrospect that management took what happened to me so seriously. The backing of my aunts and the union made the difference.

They were feminists before the term was known or understood. Credit goes to my aunts for teaching me how to fight and win when someone makes you feel uncomfortable and you believe what he is doing is wrong.

The memory of that incident has always remained with me. It taught me to look out for other women who might not have gained a voice. Young or old, we all need others to believe us and stand together.

Years later I ran into the harasser. He was parking cars in a small town. (No exaggeration.) His actions cost him a good-paying job, and hopefully taught him a lesson that remains with him to this day.



"Sweat Shop" by Sue Lenaerts

Marjorie Norris

Working

*You knew that working was what would help you to make the world,
 You did not see it as making yourself, you were yin, and here you were,
 Trying to go to college and working in an insurance office, then
 Quitting to work part-time as a factory clerk. In the mid-sixties,
 The rules were very clear, you were on time, you dressed modestly,
 You listened to your (all male) bosses, some were even kind, but
 That was not the tradition. You also listened to your female
 Manager, but she was an extension of a patriarchy you had
 Never paid attention to before, but now you were paid to pay
 Attention, to her, her quirks, her patronizing extensions of help,
 A paper clip or advice. You must listen, and though the bosses
 Were giving breaks out in the factory to former inmates,
 This was not extended to women, they did not deserve a break,
 They could always overcome, and if not, overcompensate.
 If you got pregnant, you stayed for half the pregnancy,
 And then quit, no benefits, no insurance, and no potential
 Comeback. Freud, their master, said, a person could
 Be measured in their capacity To Love and To Work, and
 You were conditioned to do both from an early age. Your
 Mother had encouraged you to learn to type because this
 Would Always Help You As a Woman, and you did learn,
 And it did pay for your books, tuition, the room, including
 The hotplate, but later, with good breaks, you would
 Fall in love with work, fall in love with the field of Social
 Work (of course you were a lesbian!) and the whole
 Field of compassion would open itself to you, palpating
 Your chest as if the inner heart, and you would reel
 And reel in the delight of it, you would come through
 Burnout as if through the Grand Prix, and you
 Would come out the other side, seasoned in detachment
 And Reiki and the burning of candles. Life was not
 Built to understand the work of women or to understand
 Them, but you were built to understand the world as it
 Was, to peek through its pores: loving its beauty, holding
 Its angst. Seeing wickedness, you would feel it, hate it,
 Only rarely and occasionally help transform it.
 Love is transforming the world,
 Or so you believe, in this, a season of letting go.*

11/26/05

Nisa Donnelly

Sliding through Fog Walls and Other Demons

After nearly forty years, Denise and I are walking away from the nine-to-five corporate cradles. There should be more drama, more tears, more joy, more gratitude. Or maybe just a profound sense of liberation. Instead, we are free-falling, shedding a part of our lives that cost too much and gave too little. I am terrified; Denise is not. She does not understand why I am frightened; I do not understand why she is not. It's the conundrum of our lives, of our very different ways of looking at and of being in the world.

Work, for me, is who I am. It has been my identity for most of my life. When I had nothing else, there was always work. Others were good at family, at relationships, at being effective in changing and challenging the world. I was good at work. "Who are you?" various shrinks would ask me over the years. I am a writer, I would tell them. But who are *you*? No answer. I am what I do; it is the only identity I have ever known. I understand why, even how this came to be. The only child of a workaholic father, I learned early that work was more important than family, than lovers, than god. I have walked out of hospital rooms, where people I loved lay broken, to go back to work. I did not look back. I have stuffed tears and torment to make it to the next meeting and the one after that. I can no longer remember what those all-important meetings were about, only the bile that would bilge up in nightmares that came stealing across the darkness. I did not sleep through an entire night for more than fifteen years, did battle with demons at three o'clock every morning, and six hours later was at my desk for another eight or ten or twelve hours. I have worked seven-day weeks at jobs I hated. Made men I despised look smarter, more talented, more astute than they ever could have managed on their own. I lived on crumbs swept from the corporate table because no matter how many hours I invested, how much emotional blood I shed, the men I worked for claimed the real prizes, the promotions, the fat bonus checks, the accolades. They told me I was not yet "ready" and that I needed to work harder, faster, smarter, that they would "take care" of me when the time came. All lies, of course. But when you believe you are what you do, lies are easier to digest. I never imagined walking away, but I am. I have.

For Denise, work is not the end into and of itself. It is what she does, not who she is. It facilitates achieving what she needs. It provides currency, but is not currency. She has never let herself be seduced by lies and corpo-

rate promises. When she looks at retiring, she sees liberation, freedom, a way of being in the world that no longer involves punching time clocks, or putting up with the whims of indecisive bosses, or the dangers of the heavy equipment she operates breaking another bone, or another noxious chemical leak burning her lungs and leaving a poisonous time-bomb somewhere deep in her cells. Work paid for her land, the house, the rental properties she owns that will supplement the small pension plans she can now tap into. That was what she worked for and she has always imagined walking away and never looking back. And now she is celebrating the same freedom that I fear, reveling in the very idea of days that stretch out open and filled with opportunity. She knows that she is more than what she does. I am still struggling to find out who I am, who I will be, what I will become when the corporation is no longer assigned the role of providing me with my identity.

In truth, the corporation has abandoned me. I no longer served its purpose well enough. I began to question the purpose, to answer the question that my shrinks had posed so many times over the last thirty years: But who are you? I am no longer willing to walk out of hospital rooms to go back to work. No longer willing to lie, to step aside, to spend the currency of my soul on yet one more meeting, one more project, one more campaign. I have looked behind the corporate veil and found nothing there for me any longer, certainly not my soul, certainly not my self. I do not yet know the answer of who I am, but I know where it cannot be found.

When people ask why I am retiring ten years ahead of what I had always imagined, I have become both glib and profound. “Once the mortgage is gone,” I tell them, “the incentive to put up with a lot of b.s. evaporates.” And that is true enough, so far as it goes. To some, I say that Denise wants to retire this year and she encouraged me to do the same. Occasionally I say that I am a writer and I have the opportunity now to write full-time. The truth is harder to explain. It slammed into me one night when I was driving hundreds of miles again to get from one corporate office to another. Exhausted, with fog swirling in front of the headlights, I saw a concrete wall looming ahead. The brakes locked as I stood on them, and the car skidded sideways on the wet January pavement, my hands in a death grip on the wheel. In a moment I expected to hear the crunch of metal, the shattering of glass, the air bags to inflate, my legs to be crushed. Time slowed then expanded, as the car sped through the wall then slowed to a stop on the secondary road. It had all been an optical illusion, a gift of fog and frustration. Sitting there by the side of the road, reclaiming my breath, I could no longer remember why I was driving two hundred miles at midnight, why I had

driven literally tens of thousands of miles at midnight over the years to get to one more meeting, to launch one more project, to make one more boss look good. I hit a wall and was never again able to get back to believing in what I did or the people I did it for. I was stripped of my faith.

I hold Denise's hand in this free-fall from the corporate cradle. Late at night, I whisper against her sleeping back that I am afraid, that I do not know who I am if I am not what I do, that I am a failure for never having learned how to work harder, smarter, faster; that if I had been a success I would have reaped more corporate rewards and now it is too late to make the changes I should have. She reaches out and squeezes my hand in her sleep. She is not afraid; there are too many real dangers and demons to fear walls built from fog and illusion. She understands the truth. In time, I may learn.

Becky Banasiak Code

The Fine Print

48 hours notice need not be served before entering this small pantry of a life you've leased from Me. Lessons in patience and sensitivity may come disguised as ants, in-laws, or the woman you love. Frustration in not having enough time to write is part of the bargain to keep you hungry – daily deposit required. No satisfaction guaranteed. Terms and conditions subject to infinite change.

I've been pretty angry at God lately – which is an improvement over being pissed at my partner, although if you ask her, she says it still feels the same. She's such an easy target being the last one I see before I sleep and the first when I awake. It's so convenient to blame her when I don't get things my way, when little things like life interfere with my plans to write that day.

Sometimes when I want to write more than anything else, it seems that every obstacle in the universe gets thrown in my path, and I feel like a pinball in a never-ending bonus game. Recently it was teeny tiny ants the size and color of brown sugar grains streaming up our pantry and cupboard walls. We had to bag up all the food and pots and pans and move them to the other side of the kitchen for almost two weeks. I already hate grocery shopping; now I had to take extra time to guess what food we already had hidden within paper bag #1, bag #2 or bag #3, 4, 5 or 6. Before we found out about liquid ant traps, we (I) made the mistake of drenching the pantry with Raid, which soaked into the drywall and almost made us pass out every time we opened the door. To get rid of the Raid smell, we (I) decided to cover it over with semi-gloss paint – country white – which ended up taking two coats (more time away from my writing) and giving me a headache from working in a non-ventilated space. I should start painting in the nude - I don't know how I managed to get country white in the armpits of my favorite olive green Grand Teton National Park tee-shirt but I did, then spent hours over the next few days trying to scrub it out with Spray-N-Wash. I suspect that my partner somehow had a hand in all that, too, creeping down to the laundry room in the middle of the night to dab more country white onto my tee-shirt just to drive me crazy – and to keep me from writing - but I could never catch her in the act.

Last month, in the free time I thought I'd have before teaching summer school, my partner's sister and her husband dropped in unexpectedly for a

visit. After that, it was her other sister visiting for a week. And it's not merely the precious time sacrificed on the altar of social obligations - there's always the white-glove housecleaning that my partner insists we do even before the plumber comes to fix our leaky faucet. We'll spend days vacuuming, dusting, polishing the furniture, washing the floors while I grind my teeth at the waste of time that could be spent writing. Her family, her fastidiousness, the ant invasion - how many more plagues will I have to endure before I am free at last, free at last? How long will I have to wander the desert of distractions before I can enter The Promised Land of writing?

Note: Real writing is accomplished on clean bond paper, crisp 8 1/2 X 11s, typed up smooth with even margins, computer-generated with page numbers in the upper right-hand corner. Real writing is published in fine journals or slick magazines with colored photographs. If it's not eventually published as a book, then it doesn't really count: it's just a hobby, a pastime, a therapeutic exercise. Even a book is not enough: it must have national distribution and be prominently displayed in the front window of Borders or Barnes and Noble. Real writing goes on cross-country book signing tours, is featured on NPR, and has a guest appearance on Leno. It receives critically acclaimed reviews in *The New Yorker*, endorsements by Oprah, and is discussed in book clubs and included on reading lists for English majors everywhere.

Good thing *I* don't have any obsessions.

I thought I had negotiated a deal in good faith when I resigned my faculty position three years ago in order to become a writer: I'd give up my faux (note the fancy literary word) career as a neurobiologist in order to follow my heart. I'd let go of my research program and graduate students, my associate professorship with its steady income and dental, my carpeted office with windows facing the quad, and God would provide me with everything I needed to write: at least four hours a day of unobligated, uncommitted time with my door closed, the phone off the hook, with no one around to bug me, in order to write about - oh, I don't know - how to connect with those around me perhaps.

Maybe I jinxed myself when I first resigned, praying to God that writing wouldn't turn into another high pressured, publish-or-perish, soul-sucking job that I had to drag myself to every day. I didn't figure that God would be eavesdropping. Where are HIPAA* regulations when you really need them?

All these distractions often make me wonder whether I should be writing at all. Maybe I've deluded myself into thinking this is what I've really been "called" to do. After all, I fantasized that I was a scientist for almost twenty years before I gave myself permission to dabble in creative writing.

Maybe I'm just hearing voices in my head and every sharp object - pens and pencils included - should be locked away from my reach.

If God really wanted me to write, shouldn't there be a tongue of flame over my computer? Shouldn't I be bestowed with the power to make life-giving words flow from a rock and with an abundance of time to do it gracefully instead of feeling like I need to steal minutes here and there between grocery shopping, doctors' appointments and oil changes? And why do I feel guilty telling my partner that my errands took more time than I'd expected when I was actually writing at the public library or at the Village Bakery? It's like sneaking off for an afternoon tryst - writing is my secret lover.

Perhaps I just assumed I'd morph into the perfect partner as soon as I unpacked at her place, like becoming an instant millionaire with a scratch-off lottery ticket. The deal I struck with God when I walked away from my husband, our house, our retirement with its balanced portfolio, and everything except what I could cram into the back of my Honda station wagon in order to quit living a lie, in order to be with her, was that God would transfigure me into a more compassionate, sensitive and supportive person than I was when I was married. Instead, I'm all too frequently body-checked with my partner's perspective of what *she* got in the bargain when I moved in: someone who hides God-knows-where writing all day with her cell phone turned off, who leaves her to deal with the bills, the landlord, the unsolicited phone calls, yet who expects her to be waiting for me when I finally finish for the day - whenever that is. Someone who wants it both ways, my way, always.

You'd think that as often and as early as I tear out of the house every morning, I'd remember how scary an open-ended writing day can look like: the terrifyingly white abundance of an empty page, the paralyzing endlessness of a blank computer screen with its infinitely blinking cursor. It's like staring into the face of God (albeit one you created in your own image and likeness) and being reminded that this is what you bargained for - a whole day to write, and you'd better not waste a minute of it. So you push and keep pushing yourself until you're dangling over some narrowly defined ledge, praying to be rescued by that creative spirit that was inadvertently cremated in the heat of your kitchen argument with her that morning but is now nowhere to be found. And you feel so dried up and prunish, so hanging-by-a-thread empty.

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Sometimes I can't tell if I'm more distraught over being labeled a lesbian or a slacker; a wild swinging-from-the-chandelier sexual pervert or a lazy not-able-to-hack-it bottom-dwelling slug. And I'm not so sure that they're

not unrelated. On rare days when I am writing at home, my panic can gallop with nostrils flaring and pupils dilated imagining what my neighbors must think about my car still parked in our driveway at 9 a.m.: “What makes *her* so special? How come *she* doesn’t have a real job?” Or a real husband, or a real marriage, or a real...? Painting myself into the mainstream’s 8-to-5 corner at least makes me *appear* more respectable, more like everyone else. Doesn’t it? And then there’s this fantasy of seeing my work in print, of having my writing publicly recognized as worthy of respect. Funny though, either way it still feels the same: always having to prove myself to the rest of the world, always never quite good enough.

Oh, I can read all the Julia Cameron and Natalie Goldberg books about how the creative spirit can’t be pigeon-holed into modules of time-efficiency or mass-produced on an assembly line. I can nod my head and shout “Amen” when they point out my time-is-money mentality and my Wile E. Coyote pursuit of something that’s always been right behind me if only I would turn around and open my eyes: abundant little gifts of time to write - like now, and right now, and now again - and gifts of books to remind me of such abundance. And I can even feel my heart melt into a quivering little pool when I remember that it was my partner who first shared such books with me.

Julia Cameron suggests there may be a divine unimaginable plan for me and my work that goes well beyond bottom-line corporate definitions of success. But when that alarm clock rings, I’m not so sure I can trust my day (let alone my life) to some eternally faceless I AM WHO I AM, some Donald Trump on a bad hair day. Who even on a good hair day still seems to hold all the cards and wants nothing you can give - just everything you are. So you hedge your bets, always holding back just a little, and stream off like some vapid Father Knows Best to that narrow cubicle of faux security that your daily work agenda affords.

I know it’s a rare luxury to finally do the kind of work that feeds my soul and nurtures my spirit, and if you ask my partner, she’d probably agree: all too often my I’ve-got-work-to-do’s feel like I’m waving the key to the executive washroom in her face. And when *that* anvil finally falls on my head, when that Wile E. Coyote bomb of enlightenment explodes in my face, I really feel like such a short-sighted ass, such a perfect clone of Dilbert’s boss.

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It’s difficult to acknowledge that our seemingly universally accepted sacrosanct mantras can make other people feel so second-class, so never-quite-good-enough, especially when they make you feel so superior. And it’s painful to admit – let alone honestly examine - the damage that subtle forms of

“incorporated” homophobia can inflict on our loved ones, on our closest relationships, on ourselves. Yet I can’t seem to quit micromanaging my life, to quit blaming something – or someone – from keeping me from the work I’ve stipulated for myself in black and white.

Perhaps one of these days I’ll truly wake up to the words of Cameron and Goldberg ringing in my ears. Maybe I’ll even learn to accept – and accept unconditionally - all those annoying little non-negotiables that come streaming into my day trying to stretch me beyond my limited terms and conditions.

Perhaps one of these days, but not today. Today, my inner Pavlovian bell is ringing – tolling - and I am a scared, stiff-necked people. Sorry Love, but today I gotta write.

* HIPAA is a huge set of federally mandated regulations that went into effect at doctors’ offices and hospitals last year in an effort to protect the privacy of patients: lots of forms to read and sign now when you see a doctor.

Sierra Lonepine Briano

What Is It Worth?

What is it worth.

Splashing colors on cardboard

Old wood

Canvas

While falling snow is cut into squares

By ancient windowpanes I hung myself.

What is it worth

To feed chunks of wood into belly of stove

She crackles and gobbles them up,

Warming my fingers to bend around brushes.

What is it worth

No time clock

No time

No harsh lights, telephones

No humming, buzzing, ringing, clatter

Clothes caked with years of my trade

Hour upon hour, stacking up

Like the snow outside my window

What is it worth.

Susan Hagen

A Boy in the Sea

We stand around the firehouse during our morning break, with hot coffee in paper cups. There are twenty-eight of us here today — emergency medical technicians (EMTs) with local ambulance companies, two EMTs from the Coast Guard, another who works at a professional raceway. Some of the students are full-time firefighters, a few are sheriff's deputies, and the rest of us are volunteers from coastal and rural fire departments throughout Northern California. I am one of only six women, and at forty-three, among the oldest in the class. Looking around me, I'm also pretty sure I'm the only gay person here.

Today is the last day of a four-day training to recertify ourselves as EMTs. It's also the Spring Equinox. The skies are clear, the views are spectacular, and down below the firehouse, traffic on the Coast Highway is heavy with people coming out to spend their Sunday at the beach.

From the parking lot of the modest wooden firehouse, we watch a small sailboat take the swells. "We'll probably get called on that one," says one of the local boys, gesturing with his paper cup. The water has been rough and dangerous for the past several days, he adds, and even as we watch, a twenty-foot breaker slams the coastline from the open sea.

Today is a perfect day to spend at the beach; but for us, it's a day to hole up inside the firehouse, studying pediatric emergencies. After the break, we return to the classroom for a review of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. There's no good explanation for SIDS, we know, and nothing we can do. A baby is healthy one minute and dead the next.

Halfway through a video about how to handle the call, a young man gets up and leaves the room. Yesterday, during lunch, his wife brought over their four-week-old son. We passed the baby around and practiced feeling for the brachial pulse on the inside of his arm. "How many of you have been on SIDS calls?" the instructor asks. Half the hands are raised.

In the small coastal California town where I live, ours is a grassroots fire department with eight volunteers and a pair of engines parked in what used to be somebody's barn. Nobody here cares that I'm a lesbian. Nobody cares that I go home after a midnight run and crawl into the warm bed of my woman lover. What they care about is that I take my training seriously. They care that I show up with everything I've got to give whenever my pager goes off. They care that I took it upon myself to return to school at

age 38 and did the hard work of earning my Class B Drivers License so I can drive the engines when someone calls for help.

Together my crewmates and I have responded to every kind of human tragedy: vehicle accidents, heart attacks, house fires, even a horse who'd fallen into a well. Five years ago, when I joined the department and started my training as a firefighter and emergency medical technician, no one promised me an easy time sleeping at night. No one said my life would go on as if I hadn't been there to witness these things, hadn't tried to help.

But already I'm credited with helping to save two lives. One of them, a neighbor of mine involved in a high-speed auto accident, still calls me her "angel" when we see each other around town. The other, a young girl with a serious head injury, has written several letters thanking me for giving her a second chance at life.

Just before lunch, the local firefighters are called out to the beach for a water rescue. We watch Kevin and John thrash through the classroom, see them strapping on their helmets inside the cab as the engine pulls out onto the street. Ivan, a sheriff's deputy who works on the rescue helicopter, is also in our class. He makes his way up the embankment to the waiting chopper, where the pilot and paramedic are already preparing for flight. Although this isn't my district and it's not my call, I feel adrenaline surging through me, a tightening in my gut, the instinct to react. I know I'm not the only one in the room who feels this way.

Once the chopper is in the air, the instructor calls our attention to the next video: a two-year-old has been badly burned on his back and buttocks by a pot of beans that's fallen from the stove. The scene is shot live, and the child screams as a voice-over instructs us how to communicate with sick and injured children. Behind me, I hear the soles of boots shifting on the floor, young men clearing their throats. Many of them are fathers with little kids of their own. The child screams as the paramedic holds his tiny hand in her palm and establishes an IV. "David," she says as she tapes the tubing down. "David, it's going to be okay."

There are emergency procedures to learn and medical techniques to employ, but the instructor reminds us that much of what we bring to our EMT work are the tools that we were born with: our eyes, our ears, our voices, our hands. These, in fact, are the only tools I have used on many of my own rescue calls.

I think it helps to be a woman. I know there is a wisdom in my hands and heart that has passed through generations of women who lived close to the earth and knew instinctively how to birth babies and care for the sick

and injured. When I am tending to a patient or comforting a family member, I feel that ancient knowledge working through me as I touch and hold and speak to those in my care. It's as if I were born with it, my birthright as a woman.

The chopper lands on the helipad behind the firehouse as we are finishing lunch. The downdraft from the blades stirs the chips on our plates, and a tornado of paper napkins skitters across the picnic table. Yesterday, Ivan demonstrated rescue techniques from the helicopter. Attached to a hundred-foot line, he plucked two firefighters from the roof of the firehouse, and the pilot set them down gently on the lawn. I was in awe of the precision, the practiced expertise. I envied Ivan's job and found myself wishing I'd started in this profession at a younger age in order to have had more exciting opportunities like that.

But today I do not envy Ivan. He emerges from the aircraft in a wetsuit, though he hasn't been in the water. The parents were sitting ten feet away, he says, when a sleeper wave snatched two boys from a rock. "The father got the six-year-old out, but the older one... we couldn't find him." An hour at best, he says. An hour in the sea at this temperature, and the boy would die of hypothermia if he hadn't already drowned. That hour was gone.

From the patio behind the firehouse, I hear the call of gulls, the rhythm of the sea like a drumbeat. Last year, six people were sucked into the ocean from this stretch of coastline, including a pair of young lovers and a three-year-old girl. I think about the families of all those people lost, the parents stricken this very afternoon. Even though I didn't respond to the call myself, Ivan's story paints the picture in my mind. Always it's the little details that come to live in my psyche: the torn pink shorts on the little girl who fractured her neck in a trampoline accident; the big, bony knuckles of a sick old man who ended his pain with a shotgun; the boy we found overdosed in an abandoned farmhouse, his swollen purple hands like fists full of blueberry pie.

Despite the fresh loss we feel this afternoon, we retrieve the scattered napkins, fill the recycling bin with soda cans, and spend the rest of the day practicing rescue scenarios: a motorcycle accident, a diabetic coma, a pulmonary embolism, a gunshot wound. Larry, my partner these four days, is closed up inside himself and awkward with the oxygen cylinder when it's our turn to rescue. On Friday, his little nephew died of leukemia, and he's made arrangements to fly to Canada tonight after we take our written final. "We're a very close family," he tells me. "It's hard not being there with them."

The instructor shows another video, this one shot by a news crew at an accident scene in which a car has sheared off a power pole. We watch as the paramedic gets out of his rig and approaches the vehicle, steps onto a live power line, and falls to the ground in seizures. His partner tries to revive him with a defibrillator and manual CPR, but it's too late. "Personal safety is your first priority on every scene," the instructor reminds us. "Every call has the potential to make you the next victim."

Last week, during a rain storm, I responded to two vehicle accidents a couple of hours apart on the same dangerous curve: an elderly man injured in a solo rollover, three people hurt in a head-on collision. The sky was dark, the rain coming down hard. On either end of both scenes, firefighters held up stop signs and took turns waving traffic along one lane. Even so, our lives were endangered by every driver who gawked at the accident instead of watching the road. I know rescuers who've been slugged, bitten by dogs, had guns pulled on them. These realities keep us vigilant on every call.

It's getting late; I'm tired and spent. The instructor hands out our written exam. I worry over the questions, confuse the signs for hypo- and hyperglycemia, can't remember what to do with a prolapsed umbilical cord during emergency childbirth. I'm the third one finished, and out of two hundred questions, I've missed only six. The instructor shakes my hand, and I'm certified for another two years.

It's five o'clock, and there are still a few hours of daylight left. I head north through town, and a few miles up the coast, I pull into a parking lot on the cliffs above that long stretch of beach. A Coast Guard cutter is trolling the waters, and an orange chopper flies low over the breaking surf. They're looking for a body now — not a boy in the sea.

I park in an empty spot and get out of my truck, lean against the hood, and look down on the beach. A group of teenage boys plays football in the sand. Picnickers are packing up their ice chests and starting up the trail. Along the water's edge, unsuspecting tourists trust their little ones to a sea that, earlier in the day, had stolen a family's son. Everywhere along this strip of coastline the signs are posted: Danger! Sleeper Waves! Shore Break! No one wants to believe that something so beautiful can also be so deadly.

The chopper flies over again. Soon the search will be called off due to darkness, and tomorrow, deputies and park rangers will comb the shore looking for the body. If the sea is calm enough, Kevin and John will launch their inflatable dinghy and poke around the rocks. Maybe they will find him tomorrow, and maybe he will never be found.

A few cars over from mine, the family is gathered together, waiting. Someone new has arrived, and the mother is telling the story.

“The boys are on the rocks,” she says in a flat voice. “They’re hunting for mussels. Then a big wave comes and it sweeps over them and they’re in the water and they’re struggling. I’m screaming, ‘Swim! Swim!’” She’s crying now, as she tells how the father goes in, reaches both boys, but loses his grip on the older one as another wave hits.

“I can’t see Steven,” she cries. “I see his shoe floating, but I can’t see Steven!” She goes to the open back of a mini-van and holds up a wet, sandy boater. “This is his shoe,” she says, and she breaks down. “This is his shoe.”

The grief that fills this parking lot is my grief, too. What happened here today belongs to all of us who were in that classroom together, whose hopes went up with Ivan and out with Kevin and John, whose arms have closed around parents like these in our own districts, on our own calls. For all our training, for all the skills we practice, sometimes there is nothing we can do but witness the loss, the sudden absence of life, the passing of a child from one world into the next.

Tomorrow my partner, Larry, will grieve with his own family in Canada. Ivan will dangle from the underbelly of his rescue chopper and pluck someone from a cliff or ravine. Others of us will be called to the scenes of accidents, package up the victims, watch each other’s backs in the street.

It is the Spring Equinox. This night will be as long as the day. The people knotted together here are wrapped in a package of sorrow they can scarcely contain; and from the center of their huddle, wailing. At some point, they will have to go home, will have to leave their child to the sea. They will have to go somewhere other than here, with that shoe in the trunk and an empty space in the back seat where Steven used to be.

Cathy Cade

Lesbians at Work

I started photographing in 1970. It was no accident that I became a photographer the same spring I came out as a lesbian, for up until then I actually believed that I couldn't learn photography skills because I was a woman. I was greatly enabled by the example of other lesbians going in to what we called then "non-traditional" jobs and many of my first pictures were of these lesbians. In the 1990s when I was photographing many areas of a lesbian mother's life, I had an opportunity to photograph more lesbians at work.

[Editor's Note: Cathy Cade's photographs grace the front and back covers of this issue, as well as page 5.]



"Kate, mechanic" by Cathy Cade, 1976.

Bonnie Morris

The Scholar's Groceries

I. Power

“And what do you do?” is the first question at any Washington gathering; this is a town built on power dynamics and political conquests, Senators Only elevators [and, within my own lifetime, Whites Only bathrooms at the Pentagon], appointees who flow in and out with changing administrations, legions of think-tank temps.

“What do you do?” Top-level security folks can't answer that question directly, but then again I don't often drink with the CIA in my radical circle of lesbian pals. At formal events, however, my own cheery disclosure—“Me? I'm a women's studies professor”—invokes any number of responses, few of them neutral. “So you're one of *them*,” hissed a gentleman at one low-level embassy function; “Is that still a field?” was another's surly remark. Cab drivers offer cross-cultural views on gender, assuring me that none of my professional achievements could possibly be as fulfilling or as sanctioned as staying in the home with a husband telling me what to do. And the best remark ever, though not uttered in D.C. but by an academic dean interviewing me for a faculty appointment elsewhere, was “Do you think we'll still NEED women's history five years from now?”

As my younger pals Lauren and Noa would say with the sweepingly sardonic hand gestures unique to their generation: “*Whatever!* Bold! Italic!” Indeed, the derision, stereotypes, political backlash and poor pay scale allocated to academic feminism does, both separately and altogether, suck. I teach part-time at Georgetown, as well as at George Washington University, and at Georgetown's more conservative Jesuit campus the backlash against the women's studies program can be breathtaking: every year some right-wing kid writes a slam editorial calling women's studies bogus. [One guy who had never so much as visited my classroom, read my syllabus, perused my resume or investigated my assigned booklist referred to my sold-out Athletics and Gender course as “crap” in a newspaper article.] The backlash comes from young women, too: one student arrogantly interviewed me before registering for my class, firing off questions about my scholarly standing and level of expertise, and whether I prevented male-bashing

and biased ideology from dominating my classroom; in other words, I had to prove I was worthy of her respect before she would stoop to a modicum of deferential good manners. All this upon meeting me for the first time. [I threw her out of my office and told her to come back when her attitude improved.]

But to love what one does for a living, to integrate in perfect harmony one's principles and one's workday, to watch formerly alienated students become administrators of battered women's shelters worldwide—oy, vey. It's heaven on a budget.

This is *my* town, pardner: or so I feel as I walk, not cowboy-bow-legged but scholar-knock-kneed, down Connecticut Avenue to my job. In one block I nod to Betty Friedan, who is dining in the open window of Bistrot Du Coin; I wave at Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder; I exchange news with the President of the National Organization for Women, Patricia Ireland. This is my town because I teach women's studies, and have taught so many young women for so many years that I stand a good chance of running into them everywhere I go, beautiful and thoughtful and ambitious young women who sigh when they see me, "*I loved your class. You changed my life. Hey, I'm a Title IX lawyer now! Here's my card!*"

So I am the pipeline between Betty Friedan and the two Patricias; teaching the history of American feminism to the next generation of feminist activists and politicians. This, too, is Washington, a D.C. somehow unseen or jeered at in the halls of power—women learning women's history from women, leadership with a double-X chromosome, mentoring by example, women storming the Capitol steps to demand the addition of a ladies' restroom "within a bladder's distance of the Senate floor," as Patricia Ireland said.

As a well-known women's studies professor in D.C., I'm on call—for quotes, PBS interviews, *Post* interviews, my classroom and students filmed for talk shows and documentaries; even the military calls me up when they need a speaker during Women's History Month. If "feminist Washington" sounds like an oxymoron, it's because most activists and professors are as dress-for-success and workaholic as our right-wing peers. We're "changing the system from within," we hope, and meanwhile, it's expensive to live here; the cost is far more than a protest-march weekend. Progressive movers and shakers who come to town and stay have to earn some kind of grown-up salary. I knew, when I came back to D.C. to teach women's studies in 1994, that I had accepted a non-tenure-

track job. But: “Aren’t you tenured yet?” scream my well-meaning students, as we jump up and down on the dance floor on Ladies’ Night at Badlands, their ideals of success so linked to dollar signs in this era of profit and stock options; and with \$2.85 in my pockets on any given Saturday, I just grit my teeth and smile.

II. Money

Quality of life, I got. The feminist labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris, who was my professor in graduate school, wrote in her Introduction to the reissue of Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* that for most Jewish women immigrants, “America held out the promise of love and satisfying work.” I have had both in large measure. The love of my students, the pile of thank-you notes and grateful cards at the conclusion of each semester—you can’t buy that stuff, nor do most Washingtonian policy nerds leap out of bed each day genuinely delighted to go in to work. Is it a living, though, as well as a life? Salarywise? Kinda. Sorta. Mostly. Yeah, I make ends meet. Let’s not go there, shall we?

But I can’t avoid that discussion—it’s all around me. It’s part of the package of bohemian living, the beatnik babe as starving artist living in a garret, the starving writer teaching part-time and writing her novel. I grew up internalizing that romantic “alternative” myself, and, after six years of grad school in Binghamton, New York, a town where a \$5,500 graduate assistantship actually covered the rent of a two-bedroom apartment with sun porch and mountain views [within walking distance of six lesbian bars and a synagogue], I realized: Hmmm. I can live well on almost nothing; my criterion is to have a community of hip women artists.

I still have the same grad school furniture from those years in Binghamton: scarred vanity table with mirror [my altar, of course!], a pal’s coffee table, a long work table handmade by some cool undergrad carpenters. Nor am I in “starving artist” context, as a popular teacher renewed annually, though at varying rates; I gained ten pounds living amid the cream-in-your-coffeehouse ambiance of gay Dupont circle. The beloved broke radical without health insurance, reading poetry in a dimly lit cafe by night, indoctrinating wide-eyed students by day? Yes and no. Yes and no.

For eight years now, I have lived in an economic ghetto not easily summed up in a soundbyte. My status is now typical of the academic

job market. I am not tenure-track, at either George Washington or Georgetown; I am “adjunct,” and hence I earn a salary half that of colleagues my age, for a workload far more demanding. I teach all of the introductory courses required for the women’s studies minor and major at GWU, including a quite large survey course involving one hundred and twenty-five students and two graduate teaching assistants. I counsel and grade perhaps two hundred or more undergraduates per year, and also grade the annual M.A. comprehensive exams of some graduate students. I’m faculty advisor to one or two campus groups, work with our top-ranked women’s basketball team, and as a result of my visibility [and high teaching evaluations] have elicited an increasing number of students to enroll in the minor and major. Twice, I’ve been nominated for top teaching awards, and my courses consistently fill or overfill. I’ve published a book a year for six consecutive years. But except for two fabulous years when I was bumped up to full-time pay [because other faculty took leave], I earned either \$3,000 per course or a flat “half-time” rate of \$18,000 a year. Thanks to the intervention of my new chair, I moved up to \$20K and won health care. Finally, I came to \$30K.

This brings me back to that cocktail party or the dance floor at Badlands. Though I loathe, loathe, LOATHE the question, I explain my untenured status as honestly as possible whenever someone asks, resisting the implication that because my position is “dead end” I have somehow chosen a life in the academic underclass. Yes, I should be earning more at my age and for what I contribute and publish. No, there are no tenure lines in women’s studies at GWU. Yes, I have dutifully applied elsewhere. No, I have not been offered a position elsewhere, though I’ve been #2 in the finals of four tenure-track job searches. Yes, for now, I am staying at GWU for whatever they’ll pay: academically, I am far more engaged in my program’s teaching and research goals than many university faculty are in theirs. Situated marginally, however—never knowing from year to year what my rehired status will be—I’ve had the opportunity to observe the growing classism within academia. And I’ve been surprised to find that feminists are just as prone to embracing an hierarchical outlook as other professors.

“So, are you ever going to look for a REAL job?” a colleague hailed me once. “Or are you just going to keep hanging out here for a while?” Those words, spoken with the friendliest intentions during

an end-of-term university party, illustrated to me the weird new etiquette nadir in academia: everyone expects women's studies faculty to experience backlash from conservative students [and colleagues], but no one predicted a class split *within* women's studies based on the increasing gap between tenured and part-time faculty. Solutions to bridging this gap lag far behind, and collective embarrassment continues to impede the scholarly atmosphere. More Ph.Ds than ever before are now resigned to competing for adjunct, rather than tenure-track university positions, with young and not-so-young scholars eking out professional careers on piecemeal contracts sans benefits, offices, or possibility of advancement. Regardless of one's determination of the causes [a saturated job market, burgeoning rates in recent humanities doctorates, depressed university budgets], at present the hiring trend at many universities includes the use of adjunct faculty [at flat rates per course] for both introductory and advanced elective courses. Institutions thus save thousands of dollars while fully upholding their academic mission to place qualified scholars in the classroom, and neither students nor their parents are alert to the issues of instructor pay scales.

If my students are blissfully indifferent to the salaries and status of their favorite instructors, however, snubs and insults to adjunct faculty from administrators are legendary: ranging from one university which "honored" its part-time faculty by giving them coupons for free hot dogs at a basketball game, to a campus call for student nominations of excellent teachers with the stipulation that nominees be "tenured faculty only."

Such mixed messages betray the irony of today's hiring practices. Most universities are guaranteed an extraordinary level of talent among even their most poorly paid lecturers, since positions are competitive. Moreover, in the eyes of the adjunct, a half-time position at a prestigious institution hardly constitutes shame or intellectual disenfranchisement, particularly when tenure-track colleagues at smaller, isolated colleges may feel far more cut off from the mainstream of research, conferences, and interdisciplinary debate. The greatest challenge for the moment, barring the magical extension of benefits and a living wage to all faculty, is improving the atmosphere of collegiality. It is cost-free to upgrade respect.

A starting point is the way in which adjunct faculty are hailed at social events, as illustrated by my party anecdote. The implication

that the adjunct does not have a “real” job is grossly insulting, since said adjunct may in fact be teaching two, three or four courses, a schedule more extensive [and demanding in syllabi preparation/grading time] than that of some tenured faculty. In academia daily work has lost its relationship to merit, since a heavy teaching load suggests, instead, a lack of the prestige which accompanies time off and sabbatical leave. Curiously, a “real” [tenure-track] job means less teaching and more writing time, certainly attractive in its promise of research support, but an unflattering definition for adjuncts who genuinely love teaching.

The next question frequently lobbed at adjunct faculty is “Do you have any plans to move on?” Again, at a social occasion this question is patronizing in its implication that the adjunct has “settled” for the income and status usually befitting a graduate student. It is easy for the tenured to suggest there are better positions available elsewhere, but the adjunct is quickly on the defensive, forced to choose between A) disclosing the number of jobs she may have applied for that year alone or B) equivocating that the present job is satisfying in its sheer connection to the university at hand. As one insightful friend of mine put it, the ability to thrive in a nontenured climate is in itself culpability, an adaptation viewed with suspicion.

Then, the starkest [or rudest] inquiry of all. “How do you live?”—or the more imperative “You can’t live on that income.”

How does one live? In a lifestyle similar to that of any other professor: a schedule including reading, writing, lecturing, grading, Xeroxing, forming ties to students and colleagues, giving papers at conferences, publishing, thinking, eating, traveling—but on a smaller budget. The mindfuck, if you’ll forgive a pithy but apt expression, is having very prestigious social class standing [a college professor!] while earning working-class pay [can’t afford to attend my own field’s academic conferences without financial aid.] How does one live? Carefully. And, if one truly loves education, serving as an educator, one may also live joyfully, just without frills. As my old friends often point out with baffled admiration, I always manage to live like a movie star on an extra’s wages.

YES, one can attain bohemian nirvana on an adjunct contract. Consider that a writer’s main needs [and supplemental expenses] are those fulfilled by any tangential university association: free e-mail, computer access, laser printing, paper, envelopes, outgoing mail, long-

distance calls, pens and disks and paper clips. It's like living at "Staples." Then there's the access to the athletic facilities. GWU recently made an unconscionable shift to \$300+ annual gym fees for all faculty, but for seven years I had free use of a huge swimming pool and [for an additional twenty bucks] splendid aerobics and kickboxing courses. Then there's academic letterhead—which means free desk copies of interesting books. Oh, baby. Free books. Oh, baby.

I don't smoke cigarettes, drink more than once a week, cook meat at home or have other expensive habits. I get my designer clothes for \$10 an ensemble, used, at Goodwill of Santa Cruz, California, whenever I go home to visit my retired parents. Three home visits a year [Thanksgiving, Christmas break, July] and I've earned enough frequent flyer miles for a free trip somewhere else. My basic expenses are rent [for a small studio at a great address], car insurance [for the used Honda my parents helped me buy from an ex-lover], and food—putting out all that energy teaching eight courses at two campuses, publishing a book a year, walking three miles a day between GWU and Georgetown and my apartment, I'm always hungry. Hungry, hungry, hungry.

So here's the feminist scholar's cheap grocery list: one loaf of challah, \$2.39. Three cans of tuna and a head of Romaine lettuce: \$4.50 total. Two red bell peppers, \$2.00. That's lunch for a week. One container of cinnamon Coffeemate [my building and my university both provide free coffee], \$2.00. Orange juice, \$3.50. That's breakfast for a week. Dinners for a week: broccoli, \$2.00; Cajun rice mix, \$2.00; couscous parmesan, \$2.00; tofu scrambled with spinach and soy sauce, \$3.00; mataar paneer Indian soup, \$2.39; lemon angel hair pasta, \$2.00; banana and yogurt smoothie, \$2.00. Some Odwalla carrot juice: \$2.00. Plus basic Jewish house goodies: gefilte fish, Shabbos candles, cream cheese and sour cream, egg and onion matzo: \$8.00. Now add toilet paper, paper towels, Sheaffer ink cartridges for my beloved fountain pen, and the small luxuries of buying a chai shake at Teatism or a couple of Sea Breezes at Chaos, and you have my weekly consumer budget: less than \$60.

In these times of greed, there are those who look at my income and hint that only an unambitious soul would be content. I've found that in some circles I get surprisingly little credit for putting effort into an impermanent job; yet only effort, and merit, lead outwards and "upwards". But surely the academic environment is not enhanced

when the ideal, talented adjunct is supposed to be bitter, with one foot out the door. A collegial atmosphere is compromised by *any* faculty who try to prove their value by radiating dissatisfaction with their lot in life.

Thus I tell everyone—colleagues, students, strangers—that instead of interrogating me about tenure, I'd love a better line of questions. The following list may seem ridiculously obvious, but my point is that many tenured academics who welcome these questions themselves fail to ask them of their "lower-ranking" colleagues.

1. "What are you working on these days?" All of us love to discuss our research, manuscripts-in-progress, and ideas.

2. "Where can I find your most recent publications?" A gesture of good faith that the adjunct *has* published and is continuing to do so.

3. "How are your students this semester?" All of us have anecdotes in this area: it's the great conversational equalizer.

4. "One of your students came to see me the other day..." A pleasant means of acknowledging that the shared student, who makes little distinction of rank him/herself, is benefiting from the adjunct's influence.

5. "What are your other teaching interests?"

Both the adjunct and the tenured colleague initiating this question are probably teaching one or two required courses while mentally designing the ultimate specialized course syllabus; again, a chance to confide scholarly ambitions.

In contrasting the rude questions with those of goodwill, I have stressed that reinforcing differences of lifestyle and professional income can only create friction, whereas questions opening up dialogue on common ground are too seldom utilized. Perhaps what we really need is a "Miss Manners" for academics. I believe these are indeed feminist issues. My own situation [a part-timer in a women's studies program] has sensitized me to the laughable contrast between graduate seminars on classism and sexism and the non-application of such feminist theories to daily collegial discourse. Where women's studies programs were, indeed, once infamous for left-leaning faculty committed to grassroots activism, both subtle and obvious changes occurred during the Reagan years and the early 1990s. Demonstrating scholarly credibility in the face of right-wing backlash and

cutbacks meant fresh emphasis on publishing and theory, and this dovetailed with the postmodernist trend across the humanities. It became *possible* to be a tenured feminist theorist, and with the subsequent shedding of “outsider” status, hitherto radical academics joined an existing model of Ivory Tower hierarchy. While feminists may justifiably point to the miniscule budgets for most women’s studies programs, budgets which virtually mandate part-time salaries, one would hope a sisterly attitude might prevail—after all, women the world over confront limited resources, and make do with material poverty rooted in sexism. Finding patronizing attitudes toward my work from more comfortably appointed feminist scholars, however, has been a wake-up call.

Ida VSW Red

Help Wanted

When I was a full-time student or wife, homemaker & mother, I was a part-time worker, a paraprofessional, or a temporary, part-time, visiting, or acting professional worker trying to balance my work with my full-time feminine role as well as with my personal interests in reading, writing, acting, directing, & being political. Moving with my husband's career, adjusting to my children's schedules, I squeezed in whatever work I could find. Often I was job-hunting, and this is how it appeared — Wanted: Part-time, temporary, low status, low paid, or volunteer female [fill in the blank].

When I became a full-time worker, I was a part-time writer, actor, parent, & political activist trying to balance my work with my new role as independent lesbian. Moving to join forces with other active feminists, I still found it difficult to put my professional abilities to work. Often I was job-hunting, and this is how it seemed — Wanted: Fulltime professional librarian with master's degree from accredited university, 2 years' experience in computer programming, additional MS in biophysics, working knowledge of Transylvanian dialects, ability to work independently under tyrannical male library director while balancing thirteen volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary on one finger.

Soon I needed to become a full-time person integrating my work with my feminism, my communication skills, my sexual energies, my vision for a world in which I, my daughters, and you can choose our work, commit ourselves to it, enjoy it, benefit from it, and see it benefiting others to change the world. Still, I expected to continue my life's work of job-hunting, looking for — Wanted: Strong, independent, artistic, literary, political dyke for a new full-time position: FACILITATING THE COMMUNICATION OF LIFE EXPERIENCES AND UNDERSTANDINGS AMONG WOMEN. Finally, after retirement, I found the very job I'd been preparing for my whole life - all I had to do was write the Want Ad for myself.

Ida VSW Red © 1980/2005 (Revised from piece performed with Mothertongue Feminist Theater Collective in "Women and Work")

Ida VSW Red

A Celebration of Women Who Work

I celebrate the work of women

I want to declare support for and establish bonds with women who work

I rejoice in the lives of the strong women who

*Work to support themselves and their dependents, and
Those who work to actualize themselves as competent people
Those who endure alienating workplaces, and
Those who are integrating their work with their personal politics
and philosophies—with their lives*

*Women who work in positions traditionally held by men, in positions
of tokenism, in positions still considered “women’s work”*

*Women who work inside the system
outside the system*

*who make the system work for them
who work to improve the system
who plan to replace the system*

*I celebrate women who work in the home and demand respect for
this important work*

Women who work at two full-time jobs—one at home, one at the office

*Women who, instead, educate their husbands, lovers, children, and
housemates to accept responsibility for their own share of
life-preserving work*

*Women who still do more than their share of nurturing loved ones,
but who refuse to perform personal services for their bosses*

*Women who have such dignity on the job that people have ceased
to “boss” them*

*Those who still make coffee for the office staff, but whose
clothes conform only to their own ideas of comfort and good looks
Those who dress to conform to office code or feminine roles,
but who do not answer to “girl,” “lady,” or other diminutives
Those who answer even to “hey, you,” but who suggest
replacing “Dear Sirs” with inclusive, nonsexist salutations:
“Members of the Board” or “Sales Managers”*

- Women who type “Gentlemen “ without a qualm, but who report demands for sex from their supervisors to the Fair Employment Practices Commission*
- Women who still smile at humorless macho remarks at work, but spend their coffee breaks organizing a union on the job*
- Women who expose sexism within their unions, who serve on committees to study rights, pay parity, and safety
Who organize women’s caucuses within their professional and political organizations
Who volunteer their services to politically and socially active groups*
- Women who spend their lunch breaks attending brown bag seminars to expand their horizons
Who spend them alone, contemplating their lives, writing their journals, exercising their bodies, dreaming their dreams
Who spend them with other women, not discussing the latest hair styles, but practicing self defense or sharing their real concerns, taking each other seriously*
- Women who attend night classes to acquire the skills and credentials that will enable them to use their abilities*
- Women who continue to pursue their political, artistic, cultural, and spiritual interests while they earn a living in less satisfying areas*
- Women who are unemployed, physically challenged, or unemployable*
- Women who have the vision to imagine job-sharing possibilities and the energy to promote them through groups like New Ways To Work*
- Women who develop cooperative and collective alternatives to hierarchical, capitalistic organizations
Who advocate for affordable child care and adult day care
Who work with Advocates for Women, Displaced Homemaker Centers, and Options for Women over Forty to encourage women who are reentering the workforce after raising a family
Who encourage all women to use their skills find their power*
- Women who take responsibility for the enforcement of equal employment opportunity within their own firms by insisting on affirmative action, filing complaints with the EEO Commission, and reminding employers that women are watching*
- Women who no longer keep silent, stay modest, avoid making waves
Who speak out on the job affirming their rights and encouraging movements away from sexism,*

*misogyny, racism, class privilege,
ageism, homophobia, and physicalism
Who are willing to educate their coworkers on these issues and
who communicate their support for women who are
different from themselves*

*Women who uncondescendingly share their skills with less
privileged women
Who serve as mentors and use their influence to form networks
of women
Who help children and students to acquire realistic job information*

*Women who work to maintain their minority cultures while
earning a living in the dominant one*

*Women who have achieved against all odds and
Those who recognize their privileges and use them to benefit others*

*Women who make it a policy to engage women workers and support
woman-run businesses*

*Women who are willing to demonstrate in public against
discriminatory employment practices*

*Women who will not rest until ordinary women have opportunities
equal to those of ordinary men*

*Who will not rest until there is equality as well as an Equal Rights
Amendment*

Who will not rest until nuclear arms are abandoned

*Who will not rest until our economic and political system is changed to
imaginatively utilize and replenish our natural resources—
Including the vast resource of the lives of working women*

*I celebrate women who accomplish collectively what is
impossible individually*

Who band together to affirm that

We are not alone

We are not powerless

*We are different people in different places, but wherever we
work we can support and be supported by other women*

*Together, we can challenge one another to new awareness, growth,
and action*

I celebrate this work of women

©1983 Ida VSW Red. This “rant” was given at a seminar of Feminist speeches organized by Lani Silver at the Bank of America in San Francisco.



By Carolyn Gage

A LABOR PLAY A One-Act Play

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Introduction to *A Labor Play*

This play was a direct response to the infamous “Baby M” case that was in the news at the time. I was very active in the Portland, Oregon, chapter of the National Organization for Women, and it had shocked me to find that one of our officers took sides with the adoptive father who was forcing the “surrogate” mother to honor her contract with him, even though she had changed her mind subsequent to the birth of her daughter. My friend felt that the issue was one of accountability: The woman had signed a legal contract

as a consenting adult, and it was irresponsible for her to go back on that agreement, or to expect any sympathy from the courts. In fact, my friend contended, it was anti-feminist to argue on her behalf, because to do so would be to buy into the stereotype that women are irrational creatures, victims of our hormonal fluxes, and so on. I had a very different take on the situation, maybe because I had been separated from my mother for the first three days of my life, a traumatic estrangement that has had consequences which continue to reverberate across the landscape of my intimate relationships.

In my experience, the body has its own mandates, and we are arrogant to think that we can intellectually override these by framing them in dissociative paradigms such as the one that equates the mother-child bond with legally-transferable ownership. This is the same kind of arrogance that can manufacture artificial substances, label them “food,” and then expect that there will be no biological consequences for ingesting them. This play was written in the late 1980’s, but in recent literature, such as *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child*, the truth is beginning to be told about adoption and the trauma of separation from a birth mother. However “consensual” this arrangement may be among adults, it is never with the consensus of the infant, who suffers the consequences for the rest of his/her life. And, indeed, many of these consenting birth mothers are beginning to tell their stories of unanticipated lifelong grief and depression following their ceremonial, and even celebratory, “handing over” of their babies.

In *A Labor Play*, I wanted to attack this materialist, consumerist objectification of a relationship that was, in my mind, a sacred and inviolable one in the natural world. Rather than argue against the “contract law” model, however, I decided to work within it, coming at it from a Marxist perspective: If the mother is no more than a worker hired to assemble the components for a manufactured commodity (the baby), then doesn’t she have a revolutionary mandate to interrogate the social conditions and economic forces that assign her that status, and if these conditions are found to be exploitive and oppressive, isn’t she justified in attempting to seize the means of distribution that is, keep the baby?

I also wanted to make explicit the fact that this “job,” like prostitution, is only considered appropriate for women in the underclasses.

Nothing angers me more than middle-class intellectuals who argue for the legitimacy of prostitution and surrogacy as “work,” when they would never dream of allowing their bodies to be exploited in that way. When the boss suggests that one of the manager’s daughters might want to hire herself out for the manufacture of babies, the manager responds with shock, having obviously assumed that his class background would put members of his family beyond that consideration.

In the years since I wrote the play, the brokering of babies through surrogacy and adoption, especially foreign adoption, has burgeoned beyond anything I could have imagined in 1989. Prior to the Korean War, foreign adoption may have been a private affair between individuals of conscience and desperate charities, but since the 1950’s, the picture has changed radically. Foreign adoption has become an industry, one that is still largely — and horrifically — unregulated, shot through with corruption and intrigue, and with close ties to the same interests that control prostitution and trafficking in girls and women.

Critiques of surrogacy and foreign adoption are muted in the mainstream, which aligns itself with the interests of middle-class consumers. No one wants to look too deeply into the conditions and circumstances of these women who are supposedly “giving up” their children so willingly and so beneficently. And, because the infant cannot speak and the birth mothers have no voice politically, a movement of adult foreign adoptees is, at present, one of the loudest voices challenging these corporate, capitalist myths about adoption, and courageously speaking out about the profound trauma of separation from the birth mother, about the atrocity of profiteering from these separations, and the horror of normalizing the globalization of the practice.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Frank: the male CEO of a corporation, played by a woman

Joe: a male junior executive, played by a woman.

Mary: a teenaged woman.

Security Guard: a male, played by a woman.

Time: *The present.*

Setting: *The scene is in the office of the chief executive of a large manufacturing firm.*

AT RISE: *FRANK sits behind his desk. He is reviewing the terms of a labor contract. JOE enters. FRANK and JOE are played by women.*

FRANK: *(Rising) Joe. (He extends his hand.)*

JOE: *(Extending his hand) Frank. (They shake hands, hitch their pants, sit, lean back, and sigh in unison.)*

FRANK: Now . . . what's all this business about a strike?

JOE: Well, that's what it is, sir.

FRANK: Fire them all. They're not in a union.

JOE: Well, I'm afraid that's going to cause some pretty unpleasant publicity. You see, the public hasn't completely adjusted to the idea of . . .

FRANK: Right, right. I spoke too soon. You're absolutely right. This isn't meat-packing, is it? We've got to move a little slower . . . Give the man on the street a little time to catch up to the new technology. *(He pauses, walks to the window.)* Joe, we're on the brink of a whole revolution in industry. We, you and I, are in the vanguard of that revolution. Our company and its product are going to change the way the world lives . . . the way it eats, the way it worships, the way it fights. We are going to change every single aspect of life in the twenty-first century. Right now it just seems like a small innovation, but in the next five years, when we begin our phase of corporate expansion, especially when we begin to set up branches overseas, we are going to turn the world upside down and inside out. This industry is going to set America back on course. This industry is going to stem the tide of deficits to other countries. This industry is going to bring the world to America's doorstep. We are the future. But there's a lot of old-fashioned customs we're going to have to

work around before we gain acceptance. We've got to move slowly. Now, what do the strikers want?

JOE: Well, really, there's just one troublemaker. The rest are just showing their solidarity.

FRANK: Good. Good. And what does their leader want?

JOE: Well, you're not going to like this, sir. There's clearly a Marxist influence at work in this. The workers say they want control over the manufactured goods . . . specifically, they want to control the distribution.

FRANK: (*A grave expression*) That's to be expected . . . at least for a while, until the public begins to understand the vital importance of this business to the community. We've got to move slowly until we have the government on our side. Of course, they already are, but they still have to be responsive to public opinion. Well, normally, I'd say fire the worker, but I think in this case we may have to make some concessions. Has the press got hold of this yet?

JOE: No, sir.

FRANK: That's a surprise.

JOE: Well, sir, I think the workers are a little embarrassed about contacting them, because of their part. You see . . .

FRANK:

(*Cutting him off*) Oh, yes. Well, naturally they might be. Good. Good! That works to our advantage. Now, have you offered some compensation in salary . . . maybe more benefits . . . say, some extended maternity leave?

JOE: I suggested that we might be open for negotiating, but the workers . . . Well, sir, they seem to think it's a question of . . . (*He looks down and coughs*). . . love.

FRANK: (*Stunned for a moment. Neither men look at each other.*) Love. Yes. Well, I suppose we might have anticipated this too. I'm a little new at all this, coming from Hormel. You'd never hear a striker there talk about their love of chili. (*He laughs. JOE doesn't.*) Of course, that was meat-packing. Not the same.

JOE: (*Soberly*) Not the same at all, sir.

FRANK: Well . . . so It's love, is it? And how much is this "love" going to cost us?

JOE: That's just it, sir. They say there's nothing to negotiate about.

FRANK: Nothing to negotiate! There's always something to negotiate. Why would they strike if they didn't want something? Come on, Joe! You weren't born yesterday. Of course they'll negotiate. They're holding out for something.

JOE: (*Looking at his shoes*) They want to keep the . . . product.

FRANK: Well, they can't. That's company property. We have a contract.

JOE: They say they made it, so it's theirs.

FRANK: Hogwash. We hired their labor, paid for the components, leased the facilities. Go ask their leader what she wants. (*He indicates that JOE should do it now. JOE takes a few steps towards the door, then suddenly he stops.*)

JOE: (*Turning to face FRANK*) She wants the baby.

(*Just then the door bangs open. A very young woman stands in the entrance, taking in the scene for a few seconds. She strides to FRANK's desk and throws down a wad of bills.*)

MARY: There. There's all the money you paid me for my food, rent, utilities, doctor bills for the last nine months. All of it. Every cent. I've changed my mind. I'm keeping my baby.

FRANK: Miss . . .

MARY: Never mind my name. Just count the money. Then I'm going. I'm going to take my baby home.

FRANK: (*He exchanges a look with JOE. JOE gets the message and slides out the door.*) Well, now, Miss . . . my friend . . . There's no need for me to count the money. I'm sure it's all there . . .

MARY: With interest.

FRANK: . . . with interest. But you see, that isn't the point. Now, please sit down. (*She doesn't.*) Please. I want us to understand each other. (*She sits.*) What if an assembly-line worker at the Ford Motor Company decided to quit. Would he . . . *or*, she . . . be able to plunk down nine months' salary and demand the removal of all the windshields he or she had fitted in those nine months?

MARY: This isn't a windshield. It's a baby. My baby.

FRANK: Well, yes. I understand the difference.

MARY: Good. I'm the mother, and it's mine.

FRANK: Wait a minute there. Hold your horses, Miss . . . my young friend. We have a legal agreement, you and I. A contract. (*He produces it.*) You built that baby with nutrients supplied by our company. You assembled that baby in a space leased by us. Your work was supervised and inspected by our doctors. We own that baby, my friend. We are the parents.

MARY: I didn't build it . . . It grew by itself. You didn't lease my uterus. You can't do that. It's mine. And if I was desperate enough to sign some lousy piece of paper, that still doesn't mean you could lease it. People can't sell their bodies.

FRANK: (*Smiling*) You women have been doing that for centuries.

MARY: No! You men are just selfish and vain enough to believe you could buy them.

FRANK: I'm not here to argue. The fact is you are an adult, and you signed that contract of your own free will.

MARY: My own free will! Ha! Since when have I had my own free will? I'll tell you about my own free will! I was raised with movies about waiting for Prince Charming. I played with Barbie dolls. I grew up with magazines for girls which sold more space for ads than they did for articles. Ads which told me to have softer skin, moister lips, silkier hair, bigger breasts, smoother thighs, higher heels, lower necklines, and a scented vagina. I read books about patient and loving women who waited hand and foot on unreasonable men, and were rewarded with his undying gratitude and love, and a castle or two in England. I learned in church that I had to be humble and obedient. I learned in school about the history of great men and the books of great men. At home, I learned my place. And when I found a boy who said he loved me . . . a boy who asked me to prove I loved him, where had I ever been taught that this wasn't my destiny? Where had I ever been taught to say "no?" Where had I ever been taught that I had a right to a body which all my life I had been grooming for this very moment? And then when I got pregnant, and he told me I was trying to trap him, where did I have any practice with showing anger? Where had I ever learned that this might have been someone else's fault and not mine? Hadn't I teased him with my appearance, hadn't I let it happen, hadn't I neglected to use birth control, and hadn't I wanted to make him stick around because of the baby? It's all true. And because I live in a state which has cut off the funds for abortions, I couldn't afford one. And that too was my fault. I'm poor. I can only make \$.76 to the dollar that men make. Like half the women I know, I've had to change jobs twice because of sexual harassment. I can't afford a nice wardrobe for the better secretarial jobs. I have to have a uniform job, so I work as a waitress. I make less than minimum wage and depend on tips, but men still think they're being generous to leave anything for me. I'm supposed to be flattered and grateful for my honest day's wage. I don't even get to believe I earned it. And still this is all my

fault. And since I can't get an abortion, I have to have the baby. So I read your ads for mothers who can't afford their babies . . .

FRANK: Our ad states "Women who want to put their babies up for adoption."

MARY: It's the same thing.

FRANK: Not at all.

MARY: To most of us, it is. Anyway, I couldn't support myself through the pregnancy, because at the restaurant where I work, I'm supposed to look sexy and wear a short skirt and a low-cut blouse, and so, of course, after I started to show, I knew I would be fired, because pregnancy spoils the illusion. Sex isn't sexy when you connect it with babies. And I don't have a car, or a phone, because I can't afford one, and I knew that I wouldn't get a job after I started showing, because everybody would assume that I was going to quit work after it came, although I don't know what they thought I would live on. And, yes, I wanted the baby to be healthy. So, I answered your ad, and I signed your contract. But I did not sign it of my own free will. I have never had my own free will, at least until now. And I want my baby.

FRANK: Well, I'm sorry, because you're not going to have it. It belongs to the company. Whoever's fault it is, you signed away your rights. The courts will uphold our contract. In fact, they already have.

MARY: The courts are wrong.

FRANK: *(Smiling)* The courts are the law.

MARY: The courts are men's law.

FRANK: Always the victim, aren't you?

(MARY gets up and moves towards the door. Just then, JOE appears in the doorway. He blocks her exit)

MARY: Get out of my way.

JOE: *(Restraining her)* Where are you going?

MARY: To get my baby.

JOE: You won't find it in the nursery.

MARY: What do you mean? *(She stops struggling)*

JOE: *(Letting go of her arms)* We have removed it to a special security area.

MARY: *Where?*

JOE: I'm afraid I can't tell you that.

MARY: *(Turning to FRANK)* Where?

(FRANK just smiles kindly at her. She rushes towards his desk and lunges for him. JOE restrains her, as FRANK steps into the hall and summons the SECURITY GUARD, a male role also played by a woman. At the sight of the GUARD who is armed, MARY stops struggling)

FRANK: The security guard will escort you off the premises. *(He goes to the desk and picks up the wad of bills and extends it towards her)* I suggest that you take your wages. You have earned them. There's no reason not to take them. And we might be able to arrange some termination pay . . . *(She spits in his face. FRANK turns abruptly and puts the money back in a drawer in his desk. MARY is led out of the room. JOE stays. There is a moment of silence after her removal)* Get an injunction to keep her off the property no publicity, of course. I think we should find a buyer for her unit as quickly as possible.

JOE: No problem. We've got more orders than we can fill.

FRANK: Good. What's the current market price?

JOE: Twenty thousand through a private attorney. Higher on the black market, depending, of course, on the color.

FRANK: Well, let's say twenty thousand for now. We can review that figure again before Christmas. (*JOE starts to leave.*) Oh, Joe . . . Do you have kids?

JOE: (*Surprised, he turns*) Uh, two, sir.

FRANK: Well, I hope that doesn't affect your ability to make responsible decisions.

JOE: I have always made it a policy to keep my family life separate from my work.

FRANK: Good. Good. (*JOE turns to leave again*) Girls?

JOE: One of them.

FRANK: (*Pleasantly*) And how old is she?

JOE: (*Turning back*) Sixteen.

FRANK: Really? Well, we might be able to find some work for her . . .

JOE: (*Embarrassed*) Thank you, sir, but she's got other plans.

FRANK: (*Laughing*) Well, don't they all? Keep it in mind. It's a good offer. Might pay her college tuition.

JOE: (*Uncomfortable*) Thank you, sir.

FRANK: Good job, Joe. Here's a little bonus for your trouble. (*He opens the drawer, and extends the wad of bills. JOE does not approach to take the money. To avoid a confrontation over it, FRANK crosses to him and places the money in his hand*) Here, now, you've earned it. Get a little something for the kids.

JOE: (*Taking the money, he once more starts to leave, but turns back to ask a question*) Sir?

FRANK: Yes?

JOE: Do you have any children?

FRANK: This . . . (*Thumping the desk*) . . . is my baby.

(*Blackout.*)

THE END

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Mary Meriam

Subtext

*“You must make sacrifices.”
burn your health on your home’s hearth
send chants up the chimney*

*“You cannot be expert in everything.”
you may hire a plumber who stumps you
do not wash your cash down the drain*

*“Never lose your sense of humor.”
allow yourself to cry on your deathbed
let your last breath be a laugh*

*“You want people to remember you.”
try not to be the forgotten one
you will lose your place at the table*

*“Other people’s temper or ego don’t rock my boat.”
study maps of troubled waters
your icebergs won’t seem so big*

*“You have to be flexible.”
learn to swallow the impossible
you may feel dizzy at first*

*“But I’m also human.”
perform monthly self-examinations
palpate gently*

*“You need a support circle.”
deep in a dark forest at midnight
howl for help at the full moon*

*“And don’t think you’re the only one feeling insecure.”
get off that window ledge
before you trim your fingernails*

Quoting, in order from the top, Alison Estabrook (surgeon-director), Judith Jamison (dancer-director), Judith Shapiro (university president), Marion Elena Lagomasino (CEO), Stacey Snider (corporate chairman), Stephanie Bell-Rose (corporate president), Eileen Collins (astronaut), Thelma Golden (curator-director), Judith Rodin (corporate president). “12 Leaders on Life Lessons” Newsweek, October 24, 2005.

Mary Meriam

alone: a senryu sequence

not the faintest clue
how to find a job, I skim
the yellow pages

do I start calling?
no confidence, no contacts
no, I'm too afraid

there must be something
else I can think to make me
forget I'm alone

what is a living?
there is no one to tell me
I get lousy jobs

each job goes nowhere
and kills me in a new way
what did I expect?

you can't make it here
your girlfriend's a prostitute
you drive a taxi

you rent a u-haul
you get out of the city
collapse on the grass

are you still living?
clean wealthy people's houses
watch them have parties

you're not invited
you must depend on strangers
they will torture you



Mary Meriam

Sustenance

*O the misery of Sunday
driving a taxi through*

*chilly Bleecker Street, voices
of George Jones, Ray Charles*

*on my old tape player.
O George, O Ray*

*I know you've been here
on the early a.m. street*

*looking for a fare
who's not too anything at all*

*hoping for relief
from any kind or kindred soul.*

*Gray light saturates
tenements, pavements*

*streets puddle
with impotent drizzle*

*party-exhausted passengers
trickle coins into my hand.*

Mary Meriam

The Bitter Side of Flatbroke

*Some people lead an easy life, from birth
to death, connected, pampered, lucky, rich,
convinced that smiling fate defines their worth,
quite safe and snug and settled in their niche.
I wonder why I can't be one of them.
If I had money, I'd have time to write
and read and socialize with any femme
or butch or in-between who came in sight.
Or spend my time alone or take a trip.
Then I could call my life a life and not
this constant jungle fight to get a sip
of water, find a place to rest, too hot,
too cold, too worried, hungry, lost, alone.
Perhaps someone will throw this dog a bone.*

Mary Meriam

The Countess of Flatbroke

*I shun the man-made world and stay at home.
This suits the world, since I am very queer.
I eat my spinach quiche and write a poem.
I like my chair and bed; it's pleasant here.
Except one little problem, namely cash,
which threatens to undo my little life.
The bank account is headed for a crash.
The fridge is empty—where's my working wife?
What happens when a poet lives beyond
the time she would have died, except for fate?
A strange career, but not designed to bond
somebody to a steady job this late.
I have no skills in generating wealth.
I've spent my time recovering my health.*

Rose Strong

Our Cause Shouldn't be Clouded With Our Own Intolerance

I don't recall a single place of employment in my adult life where I didn't find other gay people employed along side me. Not that everywhere I've worked has been gay-friendly or the other people have been out to me, but with that sixth sense we all have, commonly referred to as gaydar, it's easy to spot others who are of the same orientation. Fear, which consisted of job security and physical dangers kept me and other gay people in the closet.

Since high school I have changed careers more than once. From my first job as a florist to my later career choice as a cook, to a stint on an organic farm where being gay was finally very acceptable. I could be out of the closet and even had a compatriot with which to have lunch and share some thought-provoking, feminist derived conversation. Without the right-wing constraints or required diversity training, the farm was comfortable and accepting of whoever worked there. Even my partner was welcome to share a beer or two after work and was welcomed to the company holiday party every year.

My current employer is a large health insurance company and although it's not my choice of careers, it is a job with great benefits that include diversity training, a GLBT employee resource group, a safe space program and domestic partner benefits. I don't always enjoy my job, but the company has some good ethical standards that set it apart from other companies.

I have never hidden my lesbianism. I portray clearly who I am without screaming it out loud. It's just who I am and my actions display my intentions. I freely participate in all forms of work-related social activities which include the ubiquitous water-cooler chat, company picnics and holiday get-togethers. I speak of my partner just like anyone speaks of their husband, wife or significant other.

In my years of working at my current job, it has amazed me at the lack of knowledge the average employee has regarding the issue of GLBT people in a workplace that offers such clear information about diversity and a zero tolerance to exclusion.

I'm not sure whether these fellow employees know of me because I sit near them and are tolerant or have no regard for the differences within the human family, but some folks are just plain oblivious about the GLBT struggle.

I am an involved member of our employee resource group whose mission is to enhance and advance the lives of GLBT employees through networking, professional development and community outreach.

When becoming a member of this group, one is given a list of all members nationwide so they may be able to communicate between each other, so those who need to network throughout the employee resource group may be able to contact the person sitting 10 feet away or 2000 miles away.

Our group communicates with one another through email using the BCC (blind carbon copy) since there is still such a stigma on those whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual. The fear of losing one's job or being the brunt of harassment looms over the heads of those who are still in the closet both in work and outside of work.

The idea behind the use of BCC is that email is not showing who else is on the communication, so as not to implicate others and open them up as targets for harassment and unequal treatment.

According to our company representative who attended the Out and Equal Summit in September, most large companies who have GLBT employee resource groups are now excluding those who wish to remain in the closet. You would think that since I am out of the closet, that I would go along with this, right? You would be wrong. I am in heated debate within the group over this issue, but can clearly see both sides of this GLBT coin.

One side feels that to stay in the closet is kin to remaining unseen and if we are not out and visible we are easily ignored by the company. Ok, that's a viable reason. Staying in the closet is allowing the company to continue only what they are doing presently with our benefits and not moving forward as other large companies have in the past few years.

Several individuals claim that making people come out of the closet will gain more for the much needed employee participation it takes to keep the group running. This seems like foolish thinking since we have a company-sponsored website where some of us who are comfortable being out have our photos displayed. This hasn't increased any participation by those individuals currently able to be seen on the website.

So, in essence I beg to differ with these individuals who think all of us should be out of the closet. I find the issue of self-preservation of utmost importance. If an individual is in the closet before walking through our corporate doors, whatever programs we have in place will not erase any cultural, religious, fear of bodily harm, or other reason they have for being in the closet in the first place.

Those who wish to be out can do so willingly with their actions. Keeping the list on email in the blind form is just a list that others cannot see and in the world we live in could be saving the life of another person.

I don't want one of my fellow employees to be another gay-bashing statistic. I don't want someone who is an ally to be guilty by association and have their lives made miserable and their career stopped in mid-track simply because someone saw their name on a misplaced email.

We have made many strides in the past 25 or 30 years, but it's still a cruel world. I am comfortable with who I am, but I live in an area where there have been crosses burned on lawns of GLBT owned homes and racial slurs are spray-painted on roadways by our local good ole' bigots. I am responsible for myself and right now, as a member of this employee resource group, I feel a responsibility to speak for those who won't speak for themselves. They will otherwise quietly slip away from the only inclusion they may feel here at their job.

Don't get me wrong. I dream of a world where nobody has to hide or stay locked deep inside the closet, but we aren't there yet. For those of us who are out, we are leading the way like those before us. When people in the closet feel safe, they will come out, but forcing them to choose between being in a group that hails them as included, or making them fearful of being outed, is not exhibiting tolerance or is it good business.

Ghandi once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." This sentence makes it clear to me. If we want the world to change we must make that change ourselves and not put others in a position of being the victims of our own intolerance.



“Sue at Work” by Judith K. Witherow, 1981.

Sue Lenaerts

Paying My Ironworker Dues

It was 1979 and money for progressive social programs was starting to dry up in the panic over high inflation and the changing political climate. My friend Deb Friedman and I knew our foundation grant for *Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women* wouldn't be renewed. We were worried about the survival of our publication as well as our own livelihoods.

I had supported myself throughout the early seventies doing part-time this-and-that peppered with occasional unemployment compensation benefits to afford my full-time uncompensated movement work. Then in 1976 I met Judith. We started our life together with the expectation that we would both be working to keep a home for ourselves and her three boys. Suddenly I needed a stable salary.

I fell into a foundation-funded position at the local rape crisis center, an organization I had helped start a few years earlier. After several years at the center, I transitioned to another foundation-supported job. Deb had written a proposal for a staff position to put out the magazine we had been producing for years without paid salaries. We understood the expanded financial requirements of women responsible for children.

But the paychecks would stop with the end of the grant money. And I was desperate. Judith collected child support from her ex and had money from the sale of her house, but it wasn't enough for three kids, much less two adults and three kids. Every time she thought about finding a job, Judith was hit with another health problem: endometriosis, cancer, an obstructed ureter, multiple sclerosis. So my salary was not optional. I could no longer afford the self-indulgence of unpaid or underpaid movement work.

I remember brainstorming with Deb one afternoon in the office. We both had taken karate and taught self-defense. We had lots of contacts from our work in the anti-rape movement locally and nationally. It was time to exploit our knowledge for financial gain. We would start a business together fabricating and installing metal bars on doors and windows to protect house and apartment dwellers from intruders. The crime rate in Washington, DC was rising steadily. People were scared. We would soon be rich enough to support our families and to keep our publication printing. We had it licked. Almost.

Deb had welded together shopping carts in Cleveland. She was the more skilled. But I was the more confident. No problem—we could do it. Why not? That afternoon I enrolled the two of us in a welding class at a voca-

tional school with night classes near my home. The classes started the same night. We were on our way.

I turned 29 that week. Judith surprised me with the best birthday present—and a class requirement, too—steel-toed work boots. I was thrilled. And ready to learn.

My confidence that Deb and I would be welding and starting our business in no time grew out of my own arrogant ignorance. After three weeks of struggling with an acetylene torch, I realized that Deb and I might need a bit more instruction than that provided by the county school system. One night when a substitute teacher sauntered up to us with tales of his bravado on the high steel, I listened intently. He worked welding non-union in building construction. He said the good money was in the union jobs, and women were being sought to satisfy quotas in all the unions. The all male, majority white unions provided on-the-job training for women and minorities paid for by the federal government. As he talked, he began to realize that Deb and I were more likely to land good union welding jobs than he because of affirmative action. His friendliness evaporated as his reactionary side presented. It was time for Deb and me to leave.

Deb had done factory fabrication work and I had driven a cab in the past. We were accustomed to resentment from men who believed we stood in their way to economic success. I only wish I had all the money that I prevented all these losers from earning. But honestly, I was grateful that the put-upon substitute welding instructor had crossed my path. The next morning I followed his lead.

I started calling women's employment projects to ask if they knew of any on-the-job training grants for learning welding. Someone gave me the phone number of the AFL-CIO Human Rights Office. Deb and I were given an immediate appointment with an official at that office who was frantic to find women to place. The unions had been mandated (and paid) to get more females on construction sites. All they needed was female flesh to show up and apply.

When we arrived at the AFL-CIO, we met with Ms. Handout (I think that was her name), the Human Rights specialist. She asked what we wanted to do. We told her we wanted to learn welding. "Welding" is not the name of a union job. She couldn't find it on her Rolodex so Ms. Handout had to search through all her job descriptions.

"How about the Plumbers? They weld." I squealed in protest. I explained that we were there to learn skills for putting bars on windows and doors. Not plumbing.

“How about the Steamfitters? They weld.” What on earth was that, I wondered. It certainly didn’t sound like it. I rejected the Steamfitters, too.

“Well, the only thing left is the Ironworkers. They weld, too.” I asked Ms. Handout, “Just what else do the ironworkers do?” “I don’t really know,” she replied, “but their whole name is International Association of Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Ironworkers.”

Bingo. That was it. Deb and I conferred. We were certain that ornamental ironwork was what we wanted. Visions of New Orleans and the French Quarter passed through our imaginations. How lovely! And we would be part of it.

So Ms. Handout got on the phone. We were in luck. Randy Williams, the business agent down at the Local #5 union hall needed a woman for a federal job quota. The money was unbelievable. After orientation and a safety lesson the following morning, we would be earning \$6.98 per hour – 40% more than I had ever earned. While learning welding at the same time and doing beautiful ornamental ironwork.

The next morning we arrived at the hall ready for work. I had new boots, a sporty scarf and a bra restraining my usually unfettered breasts. I felt like I was in a special “construction worker” uniform. This was fairly bizarre since I’d been wearing the same clothes for years—other than the bra—as part of my “women’s movement” uniform. Deb looked as she had every other work day since we’d met.

Deb and I aced the preliminary introductory courses before we got the news: only one of us was required that morning. That was the last time we were to work together for nearly three years. Deb was sent to wait on the bench while I went out to the Dulles Airport job to report to my new foreman, Billy Bonzo. I was terrified. Somehow all of this was more fun and exciting with Deb along.

Dulles Airport is in Virginia, nearly 50 miles from the union hall. I drove as slowly as I could without causing a huge gridlock mess on the roads. I had jumped out of my comfortable cloistered nest feathered with feminists into a huge pit of strange men. Was money enough?

The original terminal at Dulles was designed by Saarinen and was gorgeous. Upswept glass walls on both sides; unobstructed views from anywhere in the structure. I had studied the architecture in a humanities class when I still lived in Florida. Sometimes I’d drive out and watch the planes, including the Concorde when it started, and pretend I was going to travel somewhere.

So that morning when I pulled around the last curve as the terminal came in to view, I was sickened. The Airport Authority had yielded the

classic design to the increasing travel demands of the area. I was going to be part of the gang who put on that first garish addition and destroyed the perfect design.

I found my way to some trailers behind the terminal on what had been part of a runway. My lofty outrage about architectural abuse was replaced by the cold fist of fear. Now what? Glancing ahead at the back of terminal, I saw a vertical wall of pipes and planks rising up about 60 feet. Why was that there?

I entered one of the trailers and saw a woman. Wow! Maybe this would be okay. After I explained that I had been sent by Ironworkers Local #5 and needed to find Billy Bonzo, her eyes widened and then filled with pity. “Oh, that’s Wild Bill. He’s crazy. You’ll find him on the third floor over there.” She tossed her head toward the terminal. “Climb up that scaffold and you can’t miss him. He’s the skinny redhead with the big mouth. And he’s looking for you.”

OH NO!! Climb up that scaffold!! My fear of crazy men was suddenly overshadowed by my fear of falling to my death. How could I do this? “Keep your eyes on the prize,” I kept muttering as I approached the scaffold. “Six ninety eight an hour. Keep your eyes on the prize.” I was slow. I was not graceful. But I made it up to the third floor hanging on to pipes and braces. That money mantra turned out to be my favorite chant throughout my ironworking career. It gave me the strength to overcome my physical cowardice.

As I climbed out onto the third floor slab from the scaffold, I heard him. “Yi-eeei! There’s my sweet thing that the union hall sent out! Come here, darling! Lookee here, guys—we got us a sweet thing!” Billy was indeed “wild.” I sensed that correcting him and asserting my liberated dyke persona was not the smart thing to do. So I swallowed my dignity and pride and slithered into the survival closet, not to emerge until I abandoned construction-related jobs for a computer career nineteen years later.

Before the end of the day, I had fabricated a six foot six inch tall steady boyfriend named Johnny. He even had a job. He was a carpenter. He was insanely jealous and No One disrespected his woman. But he was good to me. He was my first level defense against advances from my ironworker brothers. (In retrospect, I was describing Judith with an extra foot of height.)

Through the years working first as an ironworker and later as a project manager for an ironwork company, I came to love my brothers. Called the bravest, craziest and dumbest of all the tradesmen, ironworkers turned out to be loyal and caring coworkers. They respected my relationship with Johnny

and would never cross the line with me. They protected me from workers in the other trades who were not always so respectful. I was patronized by this system but grateful for the protection.

Women were ridiculously outnumbered on the construction sites. I rarely saw more than one or two other women working with tools on any site. Thousands of men and maybe one or two women. The unbalanced numbers threatened me. My gender threatened many men. Some days I could smell the hostility from strange men in other trades who resented my presence. Hiding my sexual identity was a strategy for survival. I faced enough danger as a woman without painting an even bigger target on my back.

One day on a high-rise job in Virginia, I was sitting in a sun spot eating lunch at the bottom of what was to be a multi-story atrium in a fancy office building. Earlier on the twelfth floor I had rebuffed a middle-aged electrician who was harassing me while I was working alone. Suddenly, my lunch was interrupted by a loud crash as my own 12 inch Crescent wrench hit the concrete about a foot away from me. The impact spalled the concrete just as it would have crushed my skull had the wrench landed on me. I scurried under cover and peered back up to twelfth floor. I saw a figure lurking near my scaffold, no doubt the rejected electrician.

This was not the only incident I experienced while on the job. Nor was I the only woman who had to cope with physical and verbal harassment or a dangerous attack. Deb recounted leaning out over the edge of an elevator shaft applying bolts when a man came up behind her, grabbed her and began an exaggerated humping motion to entertain all the nearby workers. She was totally helpless unless she chose to throw herself—and her attacker—over the edge. Another woman ironworker trainee we knew had been grabbed up and dangled head down over the edge of the building. Another woman, a carpenter, was lifted up and swung around by the crane operator and his cronies while using a roof top portable toilet. (I never again used any portable toilets within reach of a crane.)

As I progressed through the three thousand hour training program, I began to gain recognition and grudging respect from the men I worked around. I was smart. I was brave and strong. I was a good ironworker. When I would report to a new job site for the first time, I would hear whispers among the men who recognized me from previous jobs. I became adept at fielding unwanted sexual or hostile attention and thus earned a reputation as a good sport with a foul mouth, a tough cookie.

Three years and three months after that first day at the union hall, I earned my Journeyman Ironworker card. I have never been prouder of my-

self. I proved I could do the physically most demanding work and survive. I could place myself in the most unfamiliar and alienating environment and make it my own. But my pride is marred to this day by the fact I needed Johnny's shadow and a "heterosexual costume" to succeed.

Today, I'm an out Lesbian "office weenie," an Oracle database administrator who is warm and safe and uses indoor bathrooms. Deb is now a clinical herbalist, three time black belt martial artist and still my dear friend. The three boys are grown (the middle one is an ironworker) and Judith, always my support, my rock, sits beside me on our bed. And we still have no bars on our windows and doors.

Chrystos

Worrying About How to Pay All My Bills

*with one week left until the first
my mind a headache of amounts
due dates wondering where I could pick up an extra
job as I drive to polish silver & brass & copper
at the mansion larger than all the places I've rented
put together*

*A fawn leaps across the road
all the numbers fall into a heap where they belong*

*I see the Elder lady who winked & whispered
You read too many books honey*

*Sprouting I see the sky blue as beginning
sun glittering each new spring leaf
bold yellow swamp lilies*

*the deer watching me from a curve of emerald &
all the dancing birds breathe into my soul*

Reprinted from *Fire Power* by Chrystos (Press Gang Publishers, 1995 p. 57) with permission from the author.

Susan Saxe

A Place Where Everyone Belongs: Laboring in the Vineyard of the “Religious Left”

The call for articles about lesbians in the workplace inspired me to think about how fortunate I am to work in an environment that is fully supportive of me, for all of who I am. It may surprise some readers that I work for a religious organization. So much discrimination and abuse has been inflicted in the name of religion that it is sometimes hard to remember that the “Religious Right,” militant fundamentalists and hate-filled extremists do not represent the sole voice of faith or spirit in the United States or the world. The Religious Left is alive and well. This is especially good news for lesbians and queer folk. Because so much wounding has been done in the name of God, it is especially important that communities of faith are more and more standing up proudly and strongly for inclusion and healing, proclaiming that God is the force of liberation and justice, not a spiteful old man who despises queers, women and poor people and wants us to vote Republican.

The organization I work for, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, is the oldest and perhaps best known institution of the Jewish Renewal movement. ALEPH is in the forefront of developing feminist theology and women’s spiritual leadership. We have long been on the growing edge, ordaining gay clergy and advocating gay marriage before these positions became accepted in other parts of the American religious scene. We serve Jewish communities and individuals across denominational lines, have over 40 affiliated congregations world-wide and partner with progressive Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, Native and other organizations to advance a variety of projects focused on social justice, human rights, peace and environmental sanity.

In my fifteen years at ALEPH, I have always felt valued for all of who I am. In fact, the hallmark of our movement is being a Jewish organization where you don’t have to check your gender, sexual identity, progressive politics, feminism, etc. at the door in order to participate. Has it always been easy? Not completely. No organization is perfect and because GLBT folk are a minority in almost any setting insensitivity is bound to occur. However, when an organization is deeply committed to self-reflection and growth, people with differences can be heard, minds changed and hearts opened—at least among leadership, if not with everyone who may come through the door.

One pivotal moment, that happened before my time, occurred in the planning stages of a major conference. The planners, mostly heterosexual women and men, were considering themes for the event and someone suggested “a wedding.” A joyous event, beloveds coming together...who could object? Until one of the planners, a lesbian rabbi on the board, explained in tears how that imagery excluded her. The plan was dropped and from that day on at every subsequent event the organization has gone out of its way to visibly and explicitly affirm GLBT people as cherished members of our community.

To what do I attribute these advances and the ease with which they have occurred? First, I would attribute it to the very big role women have played in both governance and spiritual leadership. Like many spiritual movements, we find more women than men in our ranks and have enjoyed the benefit of many strong and clear feminists, both queer folk and allies who have served as board members, rabbis, teachers and staff over the years. Welcoming a new generation of younger women into the circle of leadership has been a particular joy in recent years.

It also has to do with our shared core values. For us the bedrock value comes from understanding that we are all intimately connected, each one of us made “in the image of God” Whose creative, boundless diversity we celebrate and welcome. From that flows the “Golden Rule,” the common denominator of all faiths (and of those who self-define as “humanist” or “spiritual but not religious”) even though it is expressed in slightly different ways by each. It’s when religion strays from this Rule, gets into having the one “right” answer, creating hierarchies and “us vs. them” divisions that it collapses into fundamentalism. Constant return to the touchstone of shared holiness is the key to avoiding this trap.

One colleague of mine, Rabbi Rachel Levine, describes a spiritual path as a journey up a mountain. At the base of the mountain, paths might look very different. In fact, from where I stand it may be impossible to even see your path. However, as we journey up the mountain, the paths converge to a single point and we can see each other, appreciating and learning from one another’s journeys while remaining committed to our own.

I would add that fundamentalism makes its camp at the base of the mountain and occupies itself with fortifying the walls of that camp. To journey up the mountain, you have to travel light, leaving more and more of your “baggage” along the trail. We sometimes refer to that process as “making room for holiness,” and being open to surprise when it occurs in unexpected places.

In the spring of 2000, at a peak in the national debate about gay marriage, ALEPH devoted an issue of its journal to articles by prominent Jewish thinkers in support of the sanctity of gay and lesbian relationships. We then did a special printing of that issue to distribute to the conference of Reform rabbis that was meeting at the time and slated to vote on a resolution affirming same-sex marriage (they did!). By that time the question for us was no longer “if” or “when,” but “how.” ALEPH had already moved on to training the students in our rabbinic program in the nuts and bolts of how to protect the legal rights, counsel and create meaningful marriage/commitment rituals for same-gender couples.

In his column in that issue, our then Rabbinic Director, Rabbi Daniel Siegel wrote, “Our movement... has always been about expanding holiness...to places and to people to whom it has been denied...invit(ing) people to come home to Judaism and bring with them the treasures of who they are...” He went on to add, “ALEPH supported the leadership of women not because feminism is or was...politically correct...but rather to release the holiness pent up in women so that it could become part of the publicly shared whole.”

This doesn’t mean that we don’t do things that we think are politically correct, but that we constantly seek to remind ourselves about *why* it is the right thing to do. When you understand that harming, exploiting or demeaning another person damages the web of life that connects us all, then justice is not just a nice idea. It is imperative.

At heart, it is about being wounded healers. Continuing about the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the sanctification of relationships, Daniel went on to point out that there is no “us” and “them.” Our movement was founded by “people who felt out of step in some way, whose holiness was not being recognized...This shared search (for meaning and the experience of the divine in our lives) binds us in a way that no ideology or preference...can separate us.”

Having worked in a variety of settings in my life, I am well aware that the picture is not so rosy in most workplaces. I have certainly experienced my share of sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and the oppressions that we as lesbians share with women and men across a broad swath of society—work that is, in the words of the Sinister Wisdom editors, “degrading, unethical, boring, stressful, dangerous, disabling and/or unsatisfying.”

Do I ever experience burn-out days when deadlines loom, interruptions abound, new projects creep onto my already overfull plate and there is just more to do than is humanly possible? Sure. Do I ever encounter homophobia? Well, since part of my job involves outreach to the general pub-

lic, of course—particularly when I’m called upon to deal with folks you might call “returnees from fundamentalism.” There are some spiritual seekers who have found some of their needs met within settings where common religious dogmas and prejudices are reinforced or just not challenged. They are drawn to our style of spirituality, but held back by either internal or external voices that don’t want them to “leave the fold,” and deploy the “hot button” issues to pull them back in. Sometimes it’s about our pro-peace stances, sometimes about the role of women, and sometimes the homophobia card is played.

How do I handle it? First I remind myself of what most outreach workers and therapists know—the “presenting issue” is often masking some other issue that is far more important. So, often I will inquire whether the person is dealing with their own sexual identity or that of someone close to them. If that is the case, then I know I may be dealing with a human being struggling with narrow “religious” judgements that are keeping him or her from being and loving more fully, and I can proceed from there.

If not, then I invite the person to leave that issue aside and think about why they are really contacting us.

Once we establish a bond, it is usually not a big deal for them when they discover that the nice outreach worker on the other end of the phone is a lesbian. Sometimes there’s a period of cognitive dissonance (“how can this be—I like this person, yet she is the demonized “other”) but over the past 15 years, in all but a couple of cases (for example the occasional ideologue who simply wants to argue and isn’t really interested in what we have to offer) the experience of befriending and being befriended by the demonized “other” leads them gently down a path of personal growth and delightful surprises—including reintegrating other disowned parts of themselves. Often in my outreach work, I have been thankful for my lesbianism as a powerful place from which to provide this healing experience to others.

Jewish lesbians or fellow travelers can find out more about ALEPH and locate our affiliated communities on line at www.aleph.org.

Jean Taylor

Lesbians and Work

From the outset I have to say that the situation here in Australia as far as unemployment and other benefits are concerned is quite different from the United States. That is, everyone who has registered for work and is unable to find a job is entitled to a government benefit to enable them to support themselves. As well as the dole, (unemployment benefits), pensions or benefits can be paid to single mothers with small children, those who are permanently disabled, have reached old age or are temporarily sick. That the amount is quite small compared to wages, generally, is offset by the fact that everyone is entitled to assume the state will support them in extremity. The dole is subject to a means test, so for example, if your spouse is earning money it usually renders you ineligible for benefits because your spouse is supposed to support you. However, as our lesbian relationships are not recognised by many government departments, we therefore qualify for financial support if we're unemployed.

As you can imagine, this has affected my working life quite considerably. I have been able to move in and out of the paid workforce confident in the knowledge that if and when I haven't been able to find the kind of work that suited my best interests as a radical lesbian feminist I could apply for whatever government benefits I was eligible for at the time.

The first disruption to my working life as a trainee nurse happened when I became pregnant at 17. In those days, 1962, I had to get married to ensure I was financially supported. When I separated and became a single mother I worked part-time in a women's refuge and was eligible for part of the single mothers' pension (which came in 1973). When my children became independent I went on the dole. And in between working on the different jobs I have mainly established for myself, and except for the brief time I went on a carers' pension when my partner at the time was dying of ovarian cancer in 1998, I have been on the dole ever since.

In fact, as a lesbian writer who has not been accepted by the mainstream publishers I consider the dole to be a kind of writers' grant which allows me to write novels, articles, plays, essays and poetry to my heart's content. I'm not suggesting that it's easy to live on a benefit that is considered to be below the poverty level by standards in developed countries but it is better than nothing. And while the government is making it harder to stay on the dole with its concerted effort to shame us out of being 'dole bludgers' or forcing us to apply for non-existent jobs then we just have to find more creative ways round these difficulties, particularly as we get older.

And it's worth it. Especially as it means I have not only been able to do my writing as well as continue my mostly unpaid work as a radical activist, I have also been able to make sure that the jobs I do choose to do will allow me to be out as a dyke as well as ensure that I have supportive work conditions.

I have had two jobs where my paid work was an extension of my activist work: two years part-time at the women's refuge and a year full-time at the Women's Liberation Switchboard at the WL Building (which also gave me enough money to start self-publishing my own Dykebooks). I have started groups and created jobs for myself by applying for short-term funding, for example, as the Director of the Performing Older Women's Circus and working on the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives. I worked full-time as a conductor / driver on the trams here in Melbourne (I came out by putting a 'lesbians are everywhere' sticker on my locker without being hassled) to get enough money together to support myself for 12 months traveling round Europe.

More recently I've had a couple of small writers' grants, one from the government and one from a lesbian organisation to write books about the herstory of the Women's Liberation Movement and lesbian feminist activism. Neither of them provided enough to live on but they supplemented my dole money.

For me, paid work is a means to an end and allows me to do activities, like traveling, I couldn't afford to do if I relied entirely on government benefits. If a job is halfway decent and provides me with some satisfaction it's a bonus. But I have long since given up on the idea that paid work, because it is working to someone else's timetable, is going to be the be all and end all. I actually get more job satisfaction from the innumerable hours I've put in organising events in the lesbian community as an unpaid political activist. And again, it's my writing work that I really enjoy the most even though I know full well I'll never make any kind of a living from it.

As a radical lesbian feminist, my main occupation, as I see it, is not to join the workforce and have a career, necessarily. For the most part, I have felt a strong obligation to live as cheaply (Op shop* clothes and second-hand furniture) and simply (without a credit card and by using public transport) as possible, to not get caught up with capitalist consumerism. To remain confident in myself (however hard it has been at times with endless rejection slips). Not to allow myself to become so fearful I can't function (which means not believing anything our governments tell us about terrorists or Weapons of Mass Destruction). To remain as sane as possible. And above all to get to know myself well enough (in all my ever-changing facets) that I can act in the world with as little damage to myself and others as possible.

Not always an easy task. But what else is there?

* Short for Opportunity Shop in Australia which is the same as a Thrift Shop in the USA.

Shewolf

“Work,” Defined by Lesbians in a Man’s World

For me I suppose the way one defines “work” starts the process of our attitudes about this whole series of ideas related to lesbians at work. Do we relegate the term “work” only to paid activities, “that which we do to earn money to survive” or is it something we call what we HAVE to do? Work to me can be a true joy and a salvation in times of stress or loss. Work to me has always been the order of the day. Coming from a poor, lower class, working home, where we never knew we were poor or lower class, work was the joy of our life. To have work to do was something to cheer about and something to look forward to all the time. In today’s world, over 60 years later, I find work once again to be a joy but not for pay this time. I work in patriarchal fields, lesbian areas, and community activities with the ease of fluidity once absent in my life. Now I can “work” for pay or for no pay and be doing similar things in this community. My fields include communication, publishing, teaching, testing, research, woodworking, consulting, and education. The differences between working 50 years ago and now as a lesbian and as a woman are apparent to me in many ways.

Then, 50 years ago, we were paid a lot less, respected a lot less, given less responsibility, told what to do more than asked how to do it, limited in our choices of jobs available, trained in only specific fields of study, and by far separated from the “good old boys” political, social, and working opportunities club. Today straight women and lesbians have more opportunities to train for and acquire work experiences in a broader range of occupations. Some still have to struggle to be accepted and treated equally but those barriers are slowly coming down for us. Now female physicians, lawyers, veterinarians, firefighters, guards, senators, truckers, construction workers and police exist across the country.

My personal experiences as a female university professor included silent exclusions from the old boys’ club. As a lesbian, there was omission of opportunities to advance into higher positions of authority even though my superiors praised my accomplishments as an administrator. In the 70s we were still banding together as women to get equal pay for women in the academic ranks. We were still struggling to show the discrepancies in pay related to slow promotions of women into higher academic ranks while men of lesser accomplishments moved up the promotion ladders because they were men. Actually, in the 50s there were articles written by men which

automatically were accepted and published while more carefully researched articles by women were passed over when the author was known to be a woman. In some cases the prejudice was so rampant that the judges didn't even know they were doing it.

Five of us banded together to cause the officials of government to come in and rectify the situation and improve the status of pay for female university teachers in Louisiana. In those days no one was supposed to know anyone else's salary. Records were extremely hard to acquire. We met in secret for weeks, found the necessary information and reported it to the proper authorities. Of course we did this at the risk of losing our jobs at the university; some of us suffered for it, too. We did not have the support of the majority of the women on the campus either as they were too fearful for their jobs.

"Work," I say can be for pay or not. It was hard "work" to bring together groups over the years to fight against inequality in the academic ranks. The only "pay" we received was the eventual changes that finally occurred over time. Times have changed, thank goodness, but it took a lot of "little" people to change it. A lot of change is still needed to improve the working conditions for lesbians; and women in general, too.

Now, some 35 years later, I "work" for lesbian causes and programs that offer no pay monetarily, but I consider myself well "paid" in other ways.

Lee Lynch

Dangers in the Workplace

The new Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse in north Roseburg, Oregon, which will open soon, received about 3,000 applications for 160 positions in that city of 20,000. The store will employ 160 workers during the peak seasons of spring and summer and 120 during off-peak seasons. About three-quarters of those positions will be full time.

This news made me want to mail a personal thank you note to our compassionate conservative in the White House. That's 2,840 people who won't have to worry about tax refunds in the near future, since there won't be any income to tax in the first place. The 160 are the lucky ones, but I wonder how many of the applicants really wanted to work as retail sales clerks or cashiers, even for an employer like Lowe's whose non-discrimination policy includes sexual orientation.

How many of us are working for enlightened employers and doing a job we like? In this economy, I would guess, not many. Not even my job, which involves a lot of fascinating labor market research, would be my first choice. I'd rather be writing stories.

And I have learned, in my frequent exposure to the labor market, that I'm not alone in this yearning to do something besides what brings home the bacon. I've also learned that I'm darned lucky to do the work I do.

All work is stressful. Mine, for example, requires that I cold call employers and ask questions about the jobs that they offer. They are not exactly sitting around waiting for my calls and can be everything from friendly and cooperative to curt or nasty. I suspect it's, though not potentially fatal, kind of like working as a tree faller – that giant fir can come down where it's supposed to, or might just snap back and kill the faller. Or like farming, where you can be riding along whistling while you work one minute and upside down under your flipped-over tractor the next.

I've never met anyone who characterizes her job as easy. Look at the attorney who bills hundreds of hours and gets stiffed by the client after giving her all to judge and jury. Look at the pink collar worker whose boss leaves things to the last minute, then pushes her to make up the time with impossible deadlines – or the fisherperson out on a boat in a high, rough sea. These are all jobs I'm glad I don't have to do.

Then there are the glamour jobs like editing newspapers – the raging letters to the editor alone would scare me away. Or the disc jockey who has

to keep up a cheerful patter on days when she has wicked menstrual cramps. Some athletes and rock singers may get rich, but I wouldn't like their traveling schedules one bit.

I remember being amazed at the horrendously tough work a utility lineman described to me – as if the climbing were not enough, he had to wrestle with huge coils of cable, dig ditches and work in blazing hot sunlight or blizzard conditions. Another guy had a job treating telephone poles – he manually rolled the poles into place, then applied insecticides and other chemicals. A house painter I once worked with was a walking warning about the dangers he'd faced, having lost both arms after falling into electrical wires.

Maybe stocking at Lowe's isn't such a bad deal, compared to these jobs. Of course, I wouldn't want to be the screener who had to wade through 3,000 applications – I hope she gets overtime pay. But then, I wouldn't want to be president either, at least one whose policies create these kinds of conditions. How can he live with himself? The only industries I've run across that are thriving are those which are war-related. A couple of weeks ago I spoke with the human resources rep for a company that makes metal tools. She said the company would have laid off hundreds more workers if it weren't for military contracts. Is that what this administration wanted – a blood-based boom?

I suspect another industry that's thriving must be the repo business. Now, that's a difficult, dangerous job and I don't imagine many people make it number one on their lists of what they want to be when they grow up, yet it provides employment for thousands of Americans who will be visiting the jobless. These Recovery Specialists must be in great demand to pick up after the devastation wrought by just three years of Bush and his greedy gang.

Today, I can only be grateful that I have a job despite my government. Like it or not, I'll be spending my days calling strangers and asking questions until I retire. Do I want to keep doing a job that requires serious multi-tasking when I don't even particularly want to uni-task any more? And about that dream of retirement – now that neither Medicaid nor Social Security are sacred, should I plan on keeping this job until I keel over?

When I made calls in the manufacturing field this week, a number of receptionists and human resource departments reported that their production jobs had all been sent overseas. Nothing was left but sales and distribution. The displaced workers were all hoping Lowe's, repo work, something, anything would come through for them.

Roxanna N. Fiamma

Dyke Physical Education Teacher

I look through the window of my work – twenty-six years of teaching Physical Education. I see reflected back the pain and suffering I endured as a Lesbian who could not / would not pass. The toll that Lesbophobia took upon my spirit is etched upon my soul.

I was unable to endure the weekly hatred I was subjected to (mostly verbal taunts and graffiti by students). I had two suicidal depressive breakdowns; I was finally able to retire with disability because I kept a journal of some of the Lesbophobia I faced.

I encourage any Lesbian who is being harassed, in any situation, to write down what is happening. Many times I was unable to write because the emotional pain was too great. It was especially hard when the Lesbophobia was caused by student(s) trying to cover their own Lesbianism.

When I retired I was not even sent a card by the junior high staff I had worked with for twenty years. The Lesbophobia I endured was perpetuated by co-workers and parents.

I would like to talk with other Lesbian P. E. teachers about their experiences with Lesbophobia and how they cope. Please contact me at P. O. Box 1180, Sebastopol, CA 95473. Thanks!



"Roxanna N. Fiamma," photo by Fran Day, 1985.

Raven

Land, Work and Disability

Santa Fe, New Mexico

A group of lesbians in northern New Mexico have been discussing plans for our second land trust. We want land that will be accessible to disabled wimmin and to other wimmin who aren't able to live with the difficulties of Arf wimmin's land. In our discussions of what we want and need I have been acutely aware of the issues that are surfacing around land, work and disability.

I've heard a couple of lesbians over 40 talk about how they want to be on land soon. These wimmin notice their bodies slowing down due to age. Because of the sheer volume of labor always required on new land, these wimmin want to do the work while they still can. Other wimmin have expressed their desire and preference to bond with each other around work projects. They would like to get to know each other during activity, rather than sitting around and talking. Another attitude I've encountered is the work ethic so prevalent in the u.s. dominant culture. I've struggled with this many times during my years on land. This is expressed in the opinion that everyone should be doing a certain amount of community work that can be measured in hours and results.

I'm a chronically ill dyke who is already not able to do much of the intense work load on new land. I'm often left out of the camaraderie of work projects. And I get really angry when able-bodied (a-b) lesbians want to measure my work by their standards.

I love physical work. In 20 years on land or connected with land I have always pushed my limits and beyond. I've cut lots of firewood, helped build adobe houses, cooked countless dinners, put in and maintained garden beds, grown enuf sprouts for salads for 30, as well as participating in the often thankless labor of community emotional process and decision making. There has always been some physical work I couldn't do, and I've never been able to do an 8 hour day of heavy physical work, or to do this sort of work on two consecutive days.

Over the past few years I've accepted that there are many projects I probably won't do again. I won't have the joy of building my own house when I'm again on land. I will have to find a way to obtain money to pay for labor. I grieve over my diminished abilities. I love the inner peace I've found thru physical work. I have also experienced feeling less a part- of community when I can't participate in projects.

I understand why lesbians enjoy the special connections made when they work together. I don't want to take this away from anyone. I'm also much better at getting to know someone thru a common focus than by hanging out. But when able-bodied wimmin talk of bonding thru work, I start to panic. I wonder whether wimmin realize that really accessible land means figuring out ways to provide me access to the same intimacy that a-b wimmin have. I wonder whether wimmin are willing to be creative about ways to include me in their companionship.

In my years on land I've seen many resentments develop when some wimmin feel they're doing more work than others. I know some wimmin try to understand that I'm not able to do much physical work. I also know when someone is working when she's tired, she might have trouble understanding the intense limitations of ongoing fatigue. I've had my share of resentment when I've wanted someone to do something that would take pressure off me. On our projected land, if a-b wimmin have these feelings, I hope they take them to each other and not to me. I need wimmin to trust I'm doing as much as I can. I hope each of us, disabled or not, will responsibly assess our abilities and limitations.

I've heard a-b wimmin say that a disabled community member can at least do the land's correspondence or cook a meal for a work day. I happen to enjoy cooking meals and writing letters. And I expect to do things I don't like simply 'cuz they have to be done. But I don't think someone who hates letter writing should be pushed to do this job on a regular basis just becuz she's disabled. Everyone wants to do work that feels rewarding.

Tho I love correspondence, writing exhausts me. I can participate much more fully in community work if I'm getting help when I need it with the daily tasks of my survival. If a community is not willing to organize assistance for sick and disabled landmates, wimmin who are energy limited should not be expected to do community work. I'm not talking about caretaking each other and I don't think help should come from one or two wimmin. If I'm living with 15 a-b lesbians I might only need an hour or two from each womyn every couple of months. This would give me many more available hours for community participation.

Most of us in this culture have absorbed the ethic that work is a measure of personal worth. I have been forced to redefine work. Sometimes my job is simply to stay alive. Some day sooner or later we will live with wimmin who are doing the work of dying. Presently I am pushing my limits by remaining committed to lesbian land, to accessible land, and to the outreach necessary to make this happen. In the past I've been criticized for not

doing enuf work. When this happened I wanted to shout—what do you mean I'm not working? I'm here, aren't I? As a community we need to appreciate a womyn's commitment and not just what she produces.

I understand that a-b wimmin get tired too. In order to make land liveable for those of us who can't live primitively I expect we'll have to raise funds for paid labor, do work weekends that bring in help from off the land, welcome traveling wimmin who have labor to give (as well as those who give smiles and new perspectives).

I'm sure I haven't thot of all the ways of approaching work and our different attitudes, abilities and skills. Class, ethnicity, and present access to money all affect attitudes about work. In addressing work and disability, it would be valuable to consider all our diversity. I've written this article from the perspective of our New Mexico potential land group which will involve a large number of able-bodied wimmin. A small community, a group of mostly disabled lesbians, or a group with mothers and small children will have less energy to draw on within the community to both do land work and meet each other's needs. I hope I've raised questions that will encourage land dykes or any lesbians to approach the issue of work and disability in a creative and revolutionary way. I'd like to hear from other land groups and disabled dykes who are trying to create truly accessible community and also do the work necessary to make our lives comfortable and fulfilling.

Reprinted from *Maize* (Spring, 1983).

Lilith Rogers

Work: You Name It, I've Done It

"I loved that job you had delivering those organic muffins," Luna said to me the other day. "It was great to get the leftovers."

"Delivering muffins? When was that?" I responded.

"A couple of years ago—you took them down to San Francisco health food stores. Remember now? They were delicious."

"Oh, right. I thought I'd get paid to drive to SF and visit Felicia and the baby but it ended up being more trouble than it was worth. Like so many of my jobs," I added with a sigh.

Work, you name it—I've done it. Short of brain surgery or serving in Congress, I've done just about anything you mention.

Well, not anything. I joked one time that if it pays well, includes benefits, is stimulating and worthwhile—I'll never get it. Actually, I've even had a few jobs like that but they never lasted long—the funding always ran out just after I got started.

Seriously, work has been a long strange trip for me. I started working for pay at about age ten—babysitting neighborhood kids back home in my little suburban neighborhood on the Gulf Coast of Texas. Probably got fifty cents or a dollar an hour. After that, I worked summers for my father in his doctor's office in Galveston. He was a diet doctor and my job was to weigh and measure his patients, take their blood pressure (to this day I can still hear those little changes that signal the upper number and lower number) and count out their pills.

I worked for him until the summer of my junior year in college when I asked for a raise and he refused me so I got a much higher paying job—and a much more fun one—working as a bar maid and waitress at a local pub. My best friend Cici worked with me and we got big tips for wearing these short skirts and dancing together to tunes on the jukebox!

At college, I studied liberal arts and, at my practical mother's insistence, got a teaching credential, but since my political beliefs didn't match up with the conservatives who ran—undoubtedly still run—the schools in Texas, I couldn't find a job there after graduation. (Fortunately for me, I'm sure.) Instead, I joined VISTA and got sent off to Newark, New Jersey to join up with some other idealistic young people to help end racism in America. This was in 1968—a year of great change—for me and the rest of the world. We organized a parent-run day care center that is still going as a charter school after all

these years. To supplement the minimum wages we were paid, I got a job as a waitress in a local diner. So my summer job experience came in handy.

Of course, my politics got pushed even further to the left from my experiences in Newark and I guess that has contributed to my continuing inability to fit into the great American capitalist system. Not that I haven't tried sometimes. When I've applied for jobs at various schools, colleges, even car dealerships, I've sometimes spent quite a bit of energy putting on make-up, getting the right haircut, the right clothes, answering questions the right way. Well, actually I haven't done much of any of that in the last twenty years or so but I did at first. Didn't usually work—somehow they could see through my disguise. And now that I'm older, heavier, unmistakably dykier, and without a clue, really, of what you're supposed to look like or sound like, I don't try for those jobs any more.

I don't want to sound bitter about my situation. Along the way, I've had some wonderful work. After I moved to the West Coast in the early 70s, I was a school bus driver for a while, had a baby, came out as a dyke, and moved into a house with a yard, I realized I loved working with plants. I went to San Francisco City College, studied ornamental horticulture, formed a partnership with a couple of other students there and together we started Goodwomen Gardening. We bought an old Ford pickup, some tools, and put up some signs and we were in business. It was hard work—pulling out blackberries and anise, pruning trees, digging holes—but it was fun, rewarding, outdoors, and we were our own bosses. I loved it. We stayed together for five years or so and then stuff happened in all our lives that pulled us off in different directions.

When I moved to Sonoma County, California over twenty years ago, I continued the gardening and I went back to college—this time for a master's. Once again, I thought I would teach but once again, I just couldn't fit in to the system. Oh well. I did get a teaching job for awhile at the Native American Education Center but that was one of those places where the funding got cut. Likewise teaching child assault prevention for Women Against Rape. But I loved those jobs while they lasted. Oh, I even joined Americorps a few years ago and got to teach gardening to kids and start a community garden in an abandoned parking lot in downtown Santa Rosa. Which is also still going, I'm proud to say. And in between and always, there has been the gardening, the odds and ends like delivering newspapers, flowers, and those tasty muffins. I've been a random, independent worker.

Right now, though, I've got my first steady pay check in years. I'm doing in home support work for a couple of disabled folks three days a week. I clean their little houses, cook them a few meals, and walk their doggies.

Since I've never been able to keep my own house clean, it's another one of life's little ironies that this is my job now. And—I find it tedious in the extreme. But I'm doing it because, you see, I've finally—at almost sixty—found my real work and I know that soon it will kick in and I'll be able to quit messing around and do what I'm meant to do.

And that is—to be Rachel Carson. During all these years of all these jobs, all this education, I've been writing. Writing poems, plays, children's stories, even a gardening book. I've been published a lot in places like *Sinister Wisdom*, *Women's Voices*, even *MS. Magazine* once, but for the most part, when I really wanted to get my work out, I had to publish it myself. And that's been fun and emotionally rewarding but limited, of course, by my limited resources and distribution.

Then, three years ago at the Junior College, I saw a woman doing a one woman show about Alberta King, the mother of Martin Luther King. In one hour, through her impersonation of this remarkable woman, she taught all of us in the audience more about the life and work of Mrs. King and her son than we would have learned in many hours of reading about them. And she did it in a way that was enjoyable both to herself and to us. I was hooked.

I went home and said to Luna, "I want to do that, too, but I don't know who to be? Any ideas?"

"Well, I've got this deck of cards of remarkable women. Let's see what comes up." And she shuffled through the deck and turned over Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*. "What about her? Fits in with your love of gardening, nature, the environment, etc., doesn't she?"

"She does. I'm going to look into her. Thanks, sweetie."

So, I did look into her and she was/is great for me. A fabulous writer, a wonderful spirit, a life that was interesting and well documented. A lover of the ocean, the earth, the ecosystem. Like me. For months I read and read about her, I wrote about her, I thought and thought about her. I took a theater class, I talked about her incessantly, I sent off for documentaries about her. After a year or so I put together my performance, "Rachel Carson: Her Life and Work." I had my debut at the Sitting Room, a local women's library, and everyone loved it. People said I was channeling her. They said they learned more about her life and work from my one hour performance than they would have from hours of reading about her. I was so proud.

Now, I've performed my show more than a dozen times in homes, schools, and senior centers around the bay area. And it's great. Always well received, always stimulating and inspiring for me and for my audience. It's my work. I know it. And it won't be long before my show supports me financially, too, and I can quit washing dishes and sweeping floors. And whatever else.

Lynn Brown

Sometimes at Play

Work can be interminable, lasting until our limbs and minds unfurl for the occupation. Just recently I succumbed to a severe disability and allowed myself to not work for a year and collect disability payments, my money anyhow. Then the money ran out without warning, although I could have gotten the time limit from an 800 number if I had the perseverance to keep calling back after fifteen minute waits without a human voice. I stopped working because my job in home health care required a certain kind of physical strength that I wasn't sure I could continue to muster. I depended on my physical well being to assist others who needed help. I loved the work often when the people I assisted were vital in some parts of their selves and enjoyed the opportunity to listen to the stories of older women. Many of the elderly just want to share themselves while they have a breath left and listening can be a special service with rewards on both sides. At the beginning I did this work in hospital situations where I was supervised by several others and the way I performed was measured in institutional doses. In other people's homes I found myself with some freedom to both give and receive whatever gifts I had at hand. Of course I had to maintain daily care and order my routine so that every need would be accomplished in a timely fashion. This was hardly ever difficult. I often had hours to read or write when the patient was unable to do more than rest. I loved this time as well though I would be physically restless and look for ways to add something to the house's ambience. I honed my temperance and tolerance for all kinds of behavior including my responses to various difficult situations. Since I had a problem "holding my tongue" I found this a personal challenge and something I wanted to master. After all, communication is the most important human tool we possess and totally necessary in my work. When I worked with men the dynamic was altered because they seemed to need more babying than care and companionship. I found all the women I assisted in their homes to be dauntless in their desire to return to their former well being whereas the men often crumbled under the pressures of discovering their own mortality. It was strange but apparently the norm. Most of this happened in a population of 65-95 year olds. I also learned about how we handle our own dying though my experience with AIDS had previously heightened that awareness.

Working itself seems a necessity and when we step off that wheel we look for what to do. For a year I have been able to write when I was able, garden when I could, use my imagination to think and create for friends and myself and support an ongoing dialogue with whatever my internal dreaming self would offer. If it continued I would volunteer and use my artistic means to more financial gains. I haven't had the time to do that yet although there are projects in mind. Working on one's self is an endless lifetime service, a means to an end but few of us are granted time and space to do this justice. I'm thankful for all the time that I've had, for the relationship that has come lately into my life with such surprise and grace, for the chance to do some worthwhile and seemingly right livelihood contributions in the world of communications. I appreciate the process and know that it's never finished, always changing and designed (if I stay awake) to reward me with liveliness and courage, sometimes joy. As a lesbian and feminist I know that I have suffered discrimination in the face of others, in my work, in my rights as a person and even with other lesbian women. As a large woman I have had to learn to stand on my own and figure it out. As an aging human being I am subjected to more garbage than I can pay attention to. Therefore I just move forward, using my lionheart to guide and allow me a path full enough of worth and while to sustain growth and passage from this world to another.

Contributors' Notes

Joan Annsfire: Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, I have lived in the Bay Area for nearly thirty years. The process of earning a living has always been both a struggle and a challenge for me. My work persona has gone through many incarnations before settling into my present one as a librarian. My writing has appeared in *The SoMa Literary Review*, *The Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*, *13th Moon*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Bridges*, *Evergreen Chronicles*, *Mediphors*, the "Cancer Poetry Project Anthology" edited by Karin Miller, "The Other side of the Postcard" edited by devorah major and an upcoming anthology, "Identity Envy," edited by Jim Tushinski and Jim Van Buskirk.

Sierra Lonepine Briano: I am a 58 year old dyke living at ArtSprings, twelve beautiful acres in Oregon. ArtSprings is a retreat for women artists and writers.

Lynn Brown has always been a poet and lover of language, the creation of gardens, vision and touch with the intention towards friendship and healing.

Cathy Cade has been documenting the lesbian community since the early 1970s. In addition to photography, she now offers services to people to help tell their life stories. To see more about her work and services visit www.cathycade.com.

Chrystos: Writer and Native Rights activist who won the Audre Lorde International Poetry competition in 1994 and the Sappho Award of Distinction from the Astraea National Action Foundation in 1995.

Becky Banasiak Code: Her essays and poems have appeared in *Sinister Wisdom*, *Weird Sisters West*, *Notre Dame Magazine*, *Friendly Woman*, *Women in the Outdoors*, *Pleasant Living Magazine*, on-line in *Moondance: Celebrating Creative Women*, and in a book entitled, *Family*. She teaches histology part-time and lives with her partner in Athens, Ohio.

Nisa Donnelly won Lambda Literary Awards for her novel, *The Bar Stories* (St. Martin's Press), and for the anthology, *Mom* (Alyson Publications). She is also the author of the novel, *The Love Songs of Phoenix Bay* (St.

Martin's Press), and of numerous short stories and essays, which are included in many award-winning anthologies. She and her domestic partner Denise Wallace live in rural Shasta County, California.

Julie R. Enszer is a writer and lesbian activist living in Maryland. She has previously been published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, *the Web Del Sol Review*, and the *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*. Her work is forthcoming in *Poetica* and the *Red Mountain Review*. You can learn more about her work at www.JulieREnszer.com.

Roxanna N. Fiamma: I was born in Denver, Colorado in 1943; Italian American (Olive Race), grew up working class. I came out as a Lesbian in the late 60s and as a Separatist in the mid 70s. I taught Physical Education in Denver until I retired in 1993. I live in northern California where I enjoy life with my Dear Companion Dog, Phaedra and Land-Mate, Fran.

Carolyn Gage is a lesbian-feminist playwright, performer, director, and activist. The author of four books on lesbian theatre and forty-eight plays, musicals, and one-woman shows, she specializes in non-traditional roles for women, especially those reclaiming famous lesbians whose stories have been distorted or erased from history.

Sheridan Gold teaches Special Education and music to at-risk youth in an Alternative Education setting. Although she's had her teaching credential for 13 years, she feels she is just beginning to get a "handel" on it. She is thrilled to share that she just celebrated her 28th year anniversary with her partner, Dianna. They live in rural Petaluma, California with their two cats, Freedom and Sunshine.

Susan Hagen spent ten years as a volunteer firefighter/EMT in rural Sonoma County, California, before retiring in 2004. She is a former news journalist and co-author of the post-9/11 book, *Women at Ground Zero: Stories of Courage and Compassion* (www.womenatgroundzero.com). An award-winning nonfiction writer whose stories have appeared in a variety of literary publications, she is also a motivational speaker and writing teacher who helps others give voice to their own life experiences.

Lori L. Lake is the author of lesbian fiction and a freelance reviewer for *Midwest Book Review*, *Golden Crown Literary Society's The Crown*, *The Independent Gay Writer*, and *Just About Write*.

Sue Lenaerts is a Lesbian and feminist activist since forever. She now welds web pages and databases rather than steel. She considers herself to be Judith K. Witherow's one and only sweet thing.

Lee Lynch's newest novel is *Sweet Creek*. She has published twelve books, the most recent of which is *Rafferty Street* from new Victoria Publishers (www.newvictoria.com). Her web address is <http://leelynch6.tripod.com/>. She lives on the Pacific Northwest coast of the United States.

Mary Meriam is a lesbian poet-activist with an MFA in poetry from Columbia University. Her poems have been published in *So To Speak*, *Bay Windows*, *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *HLFQ*. She's circulating the manuscript of her first book of poems, *The Countess of Flatbroke*, which has illustrations by Sudie Rakusin and an afterword by Lillian Faderman. With Jan Steckel and Nicki Hastie, Mary started an online literary salon called Woman-Stirred.

Bonnie Morris is a women's history professor and lesbian writer who has taught women's studies at Harvard Divinity School, Georgetown, George Washington University, and aboard ship for the Semester at Sea college voyage (twice!) She is the author of six books, including two Lambda Literary Award finalists (*Girl Reel* and *The Eden Built By Eves*).

Marjorie Norris is an ardent writer who belongs to two writing groups: Women of the Crooked Circle and Spiral Sirens. She was "Just Buffalo Poet-in-Residence" in 1999, and has taught creative writing at State University of Buffalo's Women's Studies Department and Chautauqua Institute, as well as participating in Feminist Women's Writing Workshop in Ithaca, New York and Southern Lesbian Writers' Conference outside Atlanta. She has been published in *Arizona Mandala Quarterly* and other national publications.

Jamie R. Okulam: I have been the editor of *Spirited Women*, a literary and spirituality magazine published by SisterSpirit, for ten years. SisterSpirit turned twenty December 8th, 2005. During my time as editor I have written under the name Amethyst CrowMoon. Shortly after beginning my relationship with my spouse, Frodo Okulam, the founder of SisterSpirit, in 1996, I returned to school after a lifetime as a nurse's aid. I am now finishing a master's in the creative writing program at Portland State University with a focus on publishing. I can be reached at: hiddenviking@yahoo.com or the SisterSpirit Office: 503.736.3297.

Meredith Pond is a poet and fiction writer who lives in Takoma Park, Md. Write to her at P.O Box 5627, 20912.

Raven (1944 – 2004) described herself as a Pagan Jewish disabled Lesbian. Her articles and poems appeared in many publications such as *Maize*, *Lesbian Contradiction*, *off our backs*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Lesbian Ethics*, *Hikané*, and *Dykes, Disability and Stuff*.

Ida VSW Red, retired editor & librarian, University of California at San Francisco Institute for Health & Aging, and writer & performer with Mothertongue Feminist Theater Collective for twenty years, facilitates a group of old lesbian writers and is learning to be old — it's work!

Lilith Rogers is a longtime writer, gardener, and lover of women—especially the latter. She has recently published a CD-Rom, paper-free book of her poems and photographs (taken by herself and Sun Bell) called *Persimmons and Other Lesbian Erotica*. To order, contact her at Lilithrogers1@juno.com. She is currently performing a one-woman show about Rachel Carson.

Susan Saxe is a long-time activist who has been with ALEPH in various capacities since 1990.

Shewolf was a University Professor for twenty years in Communication, a cattle rancher for five years, and operated Womanworld, a Lesbian Community in the South, for seventeen years. She was born into a lower class, poor, catholic family in the south part of the United States; lived in eight different states during her education and various jobs, and retired from the University System at 52 years of age. She taught wimmin carpentry, communication skills, and community building during some of those years. She is the originator, publisher, and editor of *Shewolf's Directory of Wimmin's Lands and Lesbian Communities*, now in its 4th edition. Shewolf is currently coordinating a project to find housing for dykes displaced by hurricanes; she currently lives in Melrose, Florida, and works when and where she likes as much as possible.

Rose Strong is a freelance writer and artist with a day job who resides in Bucks County, PA. Along with her beloved partner of nearly 19 years, she thrives among many companion animals that share their home and inspire stories, art, laughter and love.

Jean Taylor was born in 1944 and is a radical lesbian feminist writer and political activist based in Melbourne, Australia where she also does tai chi and is an active member of the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives collective. In between her political and writing commitments, she also knits, exhibits art work and enjoys the company of her grandchildren.

rainbow williams, a found object artist, lived at pagoda community for 20 years, edited a monthly newsletter *Changes*, in orlando for 8 yrs, participated in the "Peace Walk" gainesville to key west, 1984. taught art and worked as architectural drafter til retirement. now runs a non commercial gallery and salon, Riverview, in st augustine. i am 72, single, and i date with glacial speed. www.geocities.com/williamsrainbow

Judith K. Witherow is an American Indian storyteller, poet and essayist. Her book of poetry, *All Things Wild*, was recently reviewed in *Lambda Book Report*. She currently serves on the Board of Directors for *Sinister Wisdom*. Her website is: www.jkwitherow.com

zana: i'm 58, jewish, living in the desert near tucson, arizona, for 21 years.

Books Received

Descanso: A Soul Journey by Cynthia Tyler. Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 13904.

An Emergence of Green by Katherine V. Forrest. Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 13904.

“Kalliope: a Journal of Women’s Literature and Art,” Volume XXVII No.2.

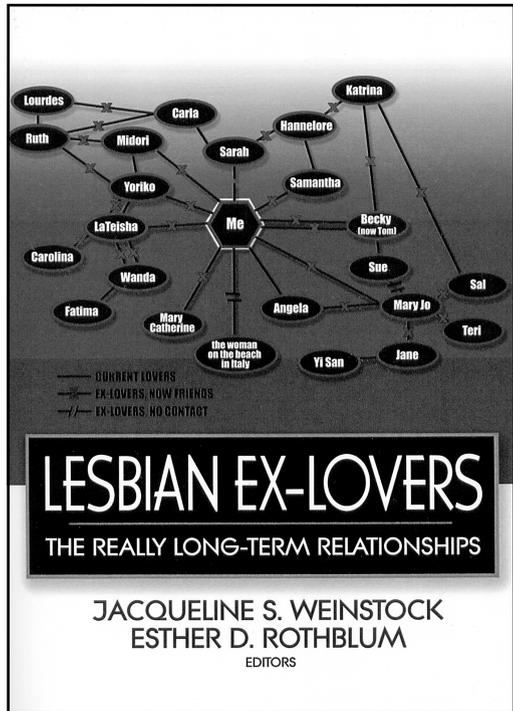
Modeware: Home Ground by Patricia Sykes. Spinifex, 2004.

Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred by M. Jacqui Alexander. Duke University Press, 2005.

The Seven Sisters of the Pleiades: Stories from Around the World by Munya Andrews. Spinifex, 2004.

The Wings of Angels: A Memoir of Madness by Sandy Jeffs. Spinifex, 2004.

Lesbian Ex-Lovers: The Really Long-Term Relationships by Jacqueline S. Weinstock and Esther D. Rothblum. Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY 13904:



 Books Reviewed

Julie R. Enszer, Reviewer

Sweet to Burn by Beverly Burch and *Some Very Soft Days* by Margo Solod

Writing Our Lesbian Lives in Poetry

There is a dearth of lesbian words in the literary world. As a result, I think that each book of poetry published by a lesbian should be met with tintinnabulation across our lesbian land. Two first books by lesbians rang in my ears this year.

Sweet to Burn by Beverly Burch is a novel written in verse. It is a love story between Meg and Alice from their meeting in a bar in San Francisco through their “perimenopausal mid-winter” to being “old sweethearts” in “the backyard at 9 p.m.”

Sweet to Burn is filled with the details and texture of lesbian life in the San Francisco bay area which makes it rich and engaging. Burch tells a compelling story of lesbian life at the end of the last millennium and the beginning of this; these characters are both women I know and women I want to know.

I especially enjoyed *Sweet to Burn* when Burch delved into the more difficult questions that we face as lesbians: parenthood, infidelity. For me, the best poem of the collection is the one where infidelity is exposed, “Promises.” It begins with Meg speaking:

Alice speaks of the new cook at her job:
 she studied in France, worked at Chez Panisse,
 traveled in her twenties, café to café—
 Alice stays at work late, long after lunchtime.
 Then suddenly on duty for dinner,
 comes home giddy with wine.

It ends with Meg recounting these devastating lines from Alice, “*It won’t happen again./I’ll change jobs. We’ll take some trips.*” Burch has an ear for capturing our words and our emotions in the compact language of poetry.

I was disappointed by only two things in the collection. First, each section is narrated which propels the reader through the story that she is telling but I felt was unnecessary and could have been done just with the poems. Second, at times, the voices of the two lovers did not differentiate them-

selves as two autonomous voices. These are minor quibbles, however, in a strong and compelling book.

Sweet to Burn comes to us seventeen years after Marilyn Hacker's *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, a book of sonnets that chronicles her relationship with a younger woman from the hot sex through its eventual demise. Reading Burch's book through the lens of Hacker's is to see the progress for lesbians and queer rights.

Sweet to Burn is an important contribution to our lesbian heritage. It was the 2004 winner of the Gival Press Poetry Award. I hope many more lesbian voices come forward through that prize.

Some Very Soft Days by Margo Solod is her impressive first book of poetry. Solod has a clear and definitive poetic voice. She opens *Some Very Soft Days* with "Credo" and these lines:

I believe in the sanctity of handmade quilts,
In unlocked doors, in anyone who's lived a hundred years
Or more. I believe in eating what you kill,
And hanging up the bathmat. I believe in kissing away tears,

She ends that poem: "I believe in dreams of grandeur,/in the curve of a woman's hip as a form of prayer." I wanted to stand up and say, "I do, too!"

Some Very Soft Days has four sections. The first and the last are the strongest, though the dramatic monologues in the second section are interesting and engaging, but without the deep truth that she conveys in her more confessional poetry. I struggled with the third section, perhaps my limitation as a reader, but I found that I couldn't follow the narrative arc and felt that the collection might have been stronger without it.

Solod's strength as a poet is in taking on the large questions or the big ideas and distilling them into the particular and concrete images. The final section of the book, "Disguised as a Child" is filled with poems that exemplify this. In "Who Decides," she writes,

That a box of matches should
be thirty-two, while a book
holds only twenty?

And ends the myriad of childlike questions, with these devastating lines, "that my sixth year would be a blur of not remembering anything/except the hands of the man next door?"

In the same section, the poem “What We Know” concludes, “She sits there, watches me paint./Her coffee cools. I paint her watching me.” Solod also questions and answers these phrases, “Why You Left,” “Why I Can’t Forgive You,” “What We See,” and “Since You Asked.”

Some Very Soft Days is a very fine book-length entry for Margo Solod. According to biography on the book, Solod has previously published four chapbooks and more than one hundred poems. She has more work and based on this first book, we should all be waiting for it with great anticipation.

Both books are available online from fine booksellers and locally. You can also order copies through the publisher’s websites.

Sweet to Burn, Beverly Burch, 2004, Gival Press, www.givalpress.com

Some Very Soft Days, Margo Solod, 2005, Mayapple Press, www.mayapplepress.com



Lori L. Lake, Reviewer

The Temple at Landfall, by Jane Fletcher, Bold Strokes Books, www.boldstrokesbooks.com, released Nov 30, 2005, ISBN: 1933110279, \$15.95, 300 pages

In the Temple in the city of Fairfield, a young woman named Lynn does the important work of helping women reproduce. She is a sort of psychic DNA-knitting doctor/priest and is called an imprinter. Imprinters are chosen very young for their psychic abilities and are taken from the families to serve Celaeno, the great goddess of the people. Everything about Lynn’s world is focused on prayer, imprinting, and the teachings of Celaeno. The imprinting skill she shares brings in a fortune in “offerings” (required by the Church) from eager women desperate for children. There is no separation of Church and State; they are one and the same.

After a couple of decades of this mind-numbing, psychologically draining work, the book opens with Lynn in a state of depression. Once a month during a religious ritual on the steps of the Temple, she sees the outdoors. Otherwise, she is locked into the tomb-like environment of the Temple, never to have a lover, never to have freedom, never to know anything but a life of service. She is basically held captive, a prisoner of her own abilities—until the day Sister Smith, from the larger Temple in Landfall, appears and

wrangles with the authorities to take the talented imprinter far away to a bigger, more powerful Temple. Lynn is excited to make the long journey during which, perhaps for the last time, she can enjoy the forests, the cool air at night, and the freedom to walk on the woodland paths and see the moon.

A squadron of Rangers, including Lt. Kimberly Ramon, is assigned to escort the Sisters and Lynn on the long journey over the mountains and to the south. And this is where the adventure begins. For the first time since childhood, Lynn is among real and interesting women, and she is quite taken with Ramon, who has her own secrets and griefs. “As much as anything, Lynn enjoyed the honest, open banter, although the jokes were frequently bawdy. To Lynn’s mind they were far less offensive than the conversation of the sisters; the intimidation by pious quotes; the political backstabbing disguised in religious platitudes. The soldiers spoke of a world Lynn would never know, but it didn’t matter. Their stories were like breathing fresh air after years of choking in incense” (p. 76).

The soldiers are also brave, and when they are attacked on the journey, everything about the trip changes. Lynn’s ability to envision herself as a free woman begins to grow. But can she shake free of the grip of the Church? How far will the powers-that-be go in order to keep her to themselves?

This fundamentalist society, operating based upon bits and pieces of lore, abridged history, inaccurate facts, and misguided good intentions, is all the more frightening because it is peopled only by women. In Fletcher’s world of *Celaeno*, it’s not men with the compulsion to render matters of life into simplistic and often bone-crushing black and white; women can be and are just as dangerous.

With rich, glorious prose, Jane Fletcher has created a spell-binding world and a variety of fascinating and multi-dimensional characters. The world is so compelling that I couldn’t help but wish I could quite literally go there! Lynn’s quest, as well as Kim Ramon’s quest, make for exciting reading. At its heart, the book is an adventure/quest, but it is also a mystery. Who are these people? Where did they come from? What happened to the men, if, indeed, there ever were any? The back story of the previous 533 years is unraveled slowly, but surely, for the reader so that by the end of the book, all is revealed.

The Temple at Landfall, which was originally published in England as *The World Celaeno Chose*, is absorbing and engrossing tale-telling of the highest order, and the really exciting thing is that although this novel is complete and “finished,” the door is left open to explore more of this world, which the author has done in subsequent books. I can’t wait to read the next

Celaeno volumes, and this book is a keeper that I will re-read again and again. I highly recommend it.

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Lilith Rogers, Reviewer

Freedom is Your Human Right! Accepting and Honoring Yourself, by Dianna L. Grayer, M.F.T., I'm Special Publications, P.O. Box 452, Petaluma, CA, 94953, 135pp, \$16.95

As Dianna writes near the end of *Freedom*, “You deserve to feel good. Think of using these tools to invest in yourself. That’s what this whole book is about. Think of your needs and take care of yourself.” And that really is what this whole book is about. Although Dianna dedicates *Freedom* to LGBT’s (that’s lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders in case you didn’t know) it would be a useful tool for anyone struggling with low self-esteem, with confusion about their purpose in life, or with fear of taking the next step. One chapter is aptly titled “Removing the Chains of Bondage.”

Freedom is a combination of Dianna’s prose, poetry, and empowering exercises. The final chapter is a compilation of columns dealing with personal freedom, family, and relationship issues co-written by Dianna and her partner Sheridan Gold for *We The People*. Since Dianna is a practicing psychotherapist and a foster parent caring for troubled teens—she and Sheridan have taken in 25 kids over the years—she brings the voice of authority to her writing.

In these difficult times, when giving up seems to be easier to do than not, Dianna’s strong voice of encouragement may be just what we need to help us stay the course. Actually, it will help us find the course first, set out on it, and then stay with it. It reminds me of the old Jimmy Cliff song I throw on my CD player most every morning to help me get out of bed—“You can get it if you really want it, you can get it if you really want it, but you must *try*, *try* and *try*. You’ll succeed at last!”

When I spoke with Dianna a few weeks ago about her book and how to approach it, she told me many people would probably skip around in it—read a poem here or do an exercise there and they would definitely benefit somewhat from it’s message. But, if they started at the beginning and worked their way right through, they would feel they’d started at the base of a high mountain which appeared too steep to climb but, by the end, they’d find themselves smiling and waving from the summit. And that is Dianna’s fer-

vent desire for her readers, her clients, her children and, I'm sure, her friends as well. That we should all climb that mountain, however intimidating it appears to be from the bottom, and open ourselves up to a happy, free, productive life. As she says in the chapter on soul searching, "Now you are the director of your life. Your new leadership will guide you forward..."

For information about local appearances, go to www.iamspecialpublications.com.

Originally published in Women's Voices, August 2003. Reprinted with permission from author.

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Dianna L. Grayer, Reviewer

PERSIMMONS and Other Lesbian Erotica, by Lilith Lynn Rogers, Earthy Mama Press, 96 pages, \$15.00

Imagine yourself biting into a big, soft, juicy, really, really ripe persimmon with its juices dripping off your mouth and sliding down your chin. Yes, that's exactly what

PERSIMMONS and Other Lesbian Erotica is. From the beginning to the end, it's a juicy ride. Lilith Rogers has stepped out into the area of sexual pleasure. Even though sex is often taboo to discuss openly, people seek sexual excitement and enjoyment through many means, including with poetry and prose. Lilith has gone a step further by openly sharing some of her personal exotic, steamy, sexual encounters. As you read the stories you will see and feel Lilith's sense of sexual freedom and liberation. She exudes sexual energy and clearly has had partners who share her desire and openness.

Lilith writes, "I'm convinced that joyous, ecstatic, blissful, exciting, creative, and fun lovemaking is the best, most wonderful healing gift we can give to ourselves, our lovers, and to the world." Lilith's freedom of sexual expression is refreshing and surprisingly soothing, because she handles her partners like she would a ripe juicy persimmon; with tenderness and care. Her goal is to please, as she nibbles, caresses, sucks and licks, making sure she stimulates the flow of her mates' natural juices. "Your dear hand slides into my so wet yoni in and up you press into me and I lift one leg onto your chair so you can get higher there, there, there."

Lilith is a poetic writer; her words flow rhythmically across the pages of her book. "Thrusting my tongue into your mouth, stealing the sweet, seedy fig from your mouth as your magic body pressed along my magic body, fig

juice sticking us together—tit & cunt—merging our bodies, mingling our desires.” I especially enjoyed Lilith’s connection to the earth and references to nature: “Over our heads the birds are singing...,” “...we stood arm and arm naked under the light warm rain, the pale blue sky.” She is an earthly Goddess that loves and nurtures earth’s bounties, especially a woman’s body, no matter what her size, shape, color, texture, or age.

Lilith’s book is also a tool that will help those women who are modest but desire more sexual freedom. Her openness, freedom and attention to pleasure, as both a giver and a receiver, are educational and validating to the female experience. Her connection with her sexual energy and desires are contagious and an inspiration for women to acquire and achieve.

Don’t let the length of this book fool you. It is packed with information that you can use to move your sexual experiences to a heightened and more satisfying level. You too can learn to be freer in yourself and freer to explore the using some of nature’s juicy fruits to turn a dull afternoon, night or morning into unforgettable orgasms. You can begin to create your own sweet and juicy memories to hold and cherish.

The book I viewed on CD is alive with many stunning photographs of women and nature. They add a special touch, especially the one that has two mouths devouring a divine wet and juicy persimmon. I will never view persimmons the same way again.

I must admit that reading the book to review it was a totally different experience from hearing Lilith read her stories live. I, with ten to fifteen other women, sat one afternoon and listened to the sapphic words roll off her tongue. It was like we were with her on the many rides she shared with us. The room at times was filled with laughter and many ooh’s and ahhh’s and even some yummmm’s! It was lots of fun and, of course, stimulating. I believe many of the women left rejuvenated, alive, and ready to explore their own sexual playfulness. It is evident that Lilith’s sexual freedom and comfort is contagious.

For information on how to order *PERSIMMONS And Other Lesbian Erotica*, and other writings from Lilith, write Lilith Rogers at Earthy Mama Press, P.O. Box 2455, Sebastopol, CA 95473, or email LilithRogers1@Juno.com.

**PERSIMMONS
AND OTHER
LESBIAN EROTICA**



By
LILITH LYNN ROGERS
Earthy Mama Press

rainbow williams, Reviewer

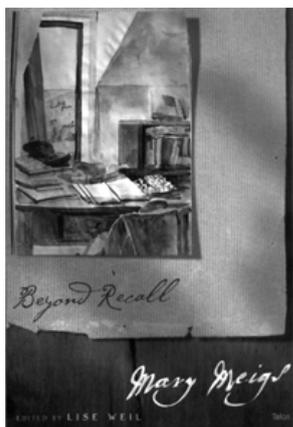
Beyond Recall by Mary Meigs, edited by Lise Weil, Talonbooks, Vancouver, 2005 ISBN -088922 -505 -2 \$15.95

This precious book has just been lent to me by lovely lesbian friends from Canada, who knew Mary and were part of her network of friends and caregivers. From the moment I held it, it felt familiar and trusting as the hands of an old friend. With a fondness for reality that is manifest in her life, this book is Mary's journey into her own aging and dying. It is radiant with spirit, with truth and beauty, and sparkles with her wit. Here was a lesbian sister who was connected with our own Florida community: Sugarloaf Key Womens Village, and refers to Ruth Dreamdigger and Barbara Deming and their conscious dying.

In 1988 I saw a film called *The Company of Strangers* which was a loosely scripted affair by a Canadian film board, in which I first got to "meet" Mary playing herself, with six other women, who were not Lesbian. The bus breaks down and leaves the women "shipwrecked" with each other for a short period of time, in which they improvise and face their demons. Even in the film she had her note/sketch book and watercolors, which continued to be her daily companions.

Later she was working on a speech to be delivered at OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change).

"The dying process today has become the subject of a vast field of study in order to meet the needs, which have become big business. The ideal is to provide a setting of care and friendliness with interests and activities that will prevent people from feeling bored or abandoned. To me the most successful of these environments falls short of the caring for dying friends in a lesbian community by a support group that views death as a final kind of sharing. Barbara Deming took us into her own fear and pain toward the acceptance of her own death; so did Ruth Dreamdigger. Each of them took charge of her own death surrounded by loving friends and such grace, generosity of spirit that those friends and family who were present felt honored and included."



"The lesbian community at Sugarloaf Key, the one I know and admire for their sensitive

attention to each other, has learned from experience that a dying friend's deepest need, even when she cannot speak, is to be listened to." (Mary Meigs, the OLOC Reporter- Fall 1999).

Mary Meigs continued to write and draw and paint her lovely watercolors, and one flowering of these latter days was some playful handwritten faxes, from her kitty (well illustrated in line drawings) to her friend MC. And "freewriting", which was a new and liberating technique for Mary and resulted in some stunning poems and journal entries. See pages 146 -7 for four of these. Mary Meigs has gifted us with her dreams, her fears, and penetrating discussions of everything that was in her mind; let us see her shadows and her lights.

This is a book that I want to keep AND to give away to every deep friend.

§

Meredith Pond, Reviewer

All Things Wild: Poems from the Appalachians by Judith K. Witherow. Twin Spirits Publishing ISBN 0-9747172-0-7 PB, \$9.95, 56 pp.

Native Storyteller

The winner of the first annual Audre Lorde Memorial Prose Contest for nonfiction a decade ago, Judith K. Witherow celebrates her sixtieth year with the publication of her first collection of poems, *All Things Wild: Poems from the Appalachians*. Haiku, free verse and photography, this book gives us a glimpse of how her love of nature and reverence for the outrageous have made her strong, full of humor and very, very wise.

A political activist recognized for her widely published essays about her experiences with disability, gender and race and class issues, Judith Witherow has published poetry and essays for more than thirty years.

The poems in *All Things Wild* are "inspired by everyone and everything that was ever typecast as untamed and untrained," she says in the introduction. Her world is red-dog shale and long-needle pines, the Texas two-step and soulful ballads, shamans and sun-brushed women.

All Things Wild celebrates the story of Witherow's life, from growing up in poverty to becoming a lesbian feminist. In a few brush strokes, simple words show us what it means to grow up without heat or plumbing in the coal towns of Pennsylvania's Appalachia, or how it feels to live close to nature, or what her life is like as a lesbian.

The way Witherow tells it, “My partner Sue and I have been together for almost twenty-eight years. We have three sons and four grandchildren. Some people say their partner keeps them humble. Sue does just the opposite. With her I feel like someone special.”

When Witherow first showed her mother one of her early poems, “It seemed like she took forever reading it,” she says. “When she was finished, she looked me square in the eye. ‘Tell me the truth now,’ she said. ‘Do you know all of those words, or did you find them in the dictionary?’ Then she said, ‘It’s real nice but it sure doesn’t rhyme does it?’”

Her intuitive connections to the world of nature and animals reveal her Native American roots. “There’s an almost religious worship of the simplest item that my eye beholds,” she says. “It’s the reason I wanted to place photographs beside so many of the poems—to share what the words were seeing. If I couldn’t see or touch things happening on the other side of the glass there would be little reason for living.”

“I’m a poet, essayist and storyteller,” she says. “Storyteller is my favorite. It’s the Native American way of passing on oral histories. This is natural for my family, but sometimes I feel like some of the stories shouldn’t be talked about. Not everyone recognizes the drama and humor of daily life.”

One such story is her struggle with health issues that prompted her commitment as a health care activist. “One of my chronic illnesses is systemic lupus. ‘Canis lupus’ is the Latin name for wolf. Lupus causes a reddish wolf-like mask on the face during lupus flares. When I heard the name I decided to get a tattoo of a wolf on my arm to protect from the evil that was attacking my body,” she says. “I study the habits of all kinds of animals, but the wolf is my totem. Its ‘pack mentality’ agrees with my way of thinking. I am very clan identified, and I nurture and guard those around me like the wolf does.”

Judith Witherow is a study in determination. For more than half a century, she’s kept her family and friends close and loved them well. *All Things Wild* is a testament to that love.

For more of Judith K. Witherow’s stories and poems, or to order her book, visit her web site at www.jkwitherow.com.

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Poetry and photographs
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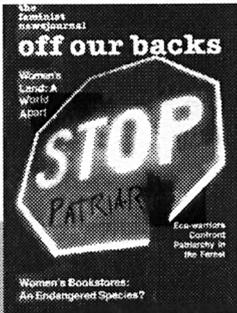
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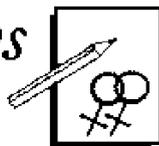
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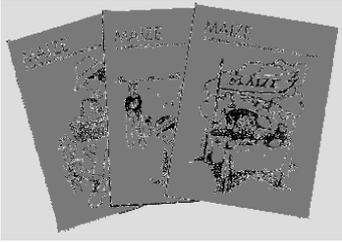
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T. FREEMUTH

Correction

The article titled “San Francisco Dyke March Statement 2005” printed in *Sinister Wisdom* #66 on pp. 97 - 100 should have been titled “Excerpts from the San Francisco Dyke March Statement 2005.” We apologize for the error. For the complete statement go to the Dyke March website at www.dykemarch.org.

The sections on Dyke Identity and Who We Are as they appear in the statement are printed below.

DYKE IDENTITY - A MARCH FOR ALL DYKES

We continue to demand that the Dyke March and rally be DYKE-ONLY SPACE. In other words, we ask that men NOT participate, but rather that our brothers support us from the sidelines, cheering us on and helping with finances or other support.

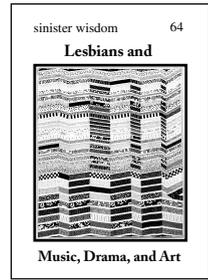
This march is for DYKES. Dykes gather at the Dyke March to celebrate our love and passion for women and for ALL dykes. We celebrate our queerness in all its manifestations. Given this year’s theme, Dykes Across Borders, we understand DYKE IDENTITY to include those of us who are questioning and challenging gender constructs and the social definitions of women, and who are gender fluid. We also welcome all women who want to support dykes to march with us. Celebrate Dyke Diversity!

WHO WE ARE

The coordinating committee is a crew of community-oriented dykes who come together from varying backgrounds through our love of dykes and for the San Francisco Dyke March. We are grateful for the work of the DM’s founders (the Original Girls) over its first 11 years, for their continued guidance, and for the foundation they laid that we now stand upon in our work to keep the annual March thriving. We are femmes, butches, and otherwise-identified; dykes-of-color, dykes of mixed race, Jewish dykes, and white dykes; dykes of varying ages and classes. Some of us identify as queer, as genderqueer, and as transgendered. We are each of us dykes seeking to put our myriad talents to use for our communities.

This committee could not bring you each year’s Dyke March without the help of dedicated volunteers, exceptional performers willing to donate their phenomenal talent at fundraisers and at the rally, small businesses (most of which are dyke- and woman-owned) donating services, a few small grants and a lot of t-shirt sales (buy those t-shirts!). Thank you!

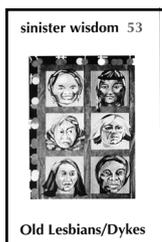
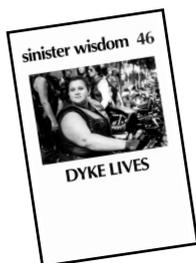
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