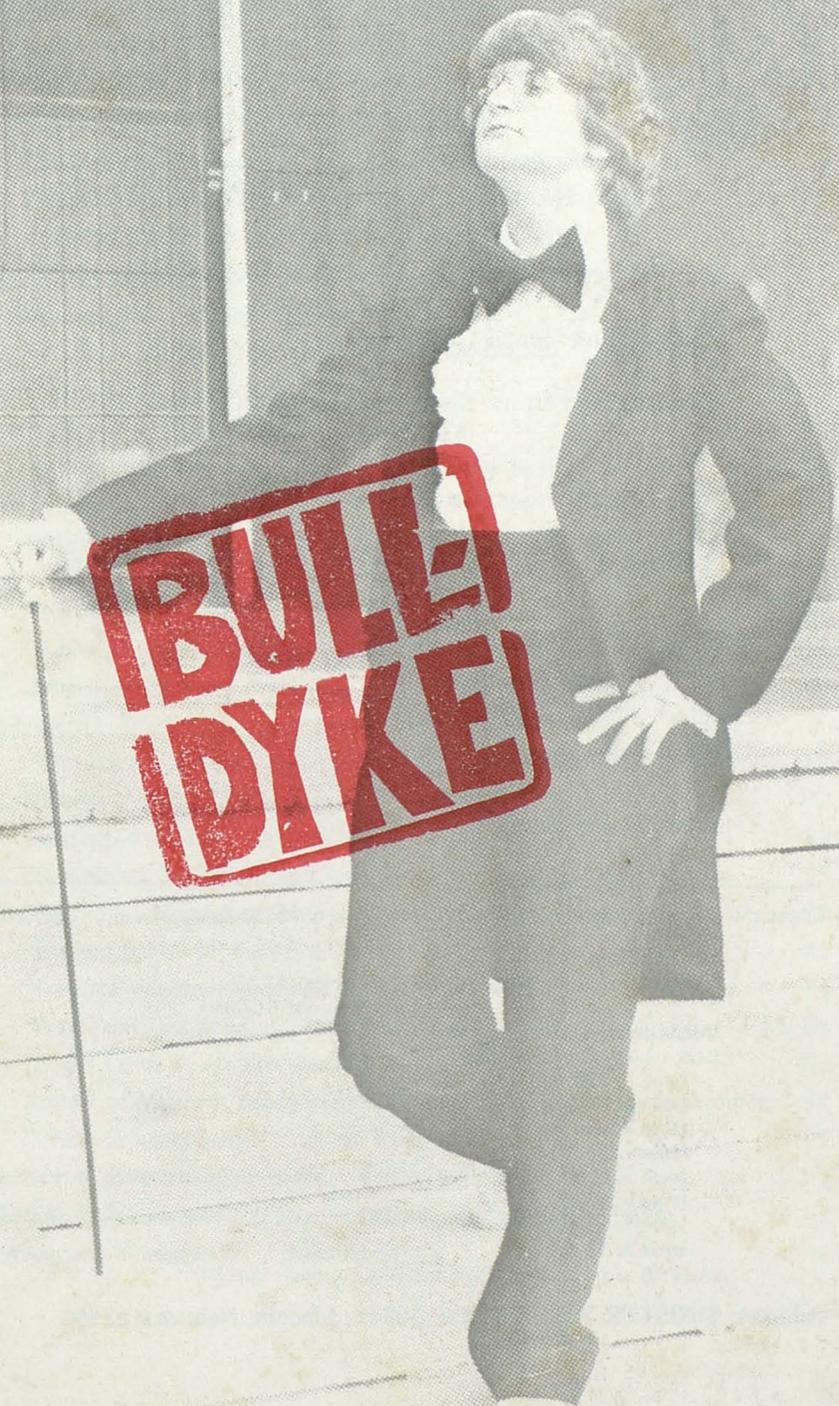


# SINISTER WISDOM



**BULL  
DYKE**



# SINISTER WISDOM 9

*A Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian  
Imagination in All Women*

SPRING 1979

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# dyke re-search



—photo from the collection of the  
LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES

## IN AMERICA THEY CALL US DYKES:

## NOTES ON THE ETYMOLOGY AND USAGE OF "DYKE"

*The women-loving women  
in America were called dykes  
and some liked it  
and some did not . . .*

Judy Grahn, from "A History of Lesbianism"

In *Sinister Wisdom 6*, five Lesbians spoke intensely and articulately concerning the silences in our lives and how patriarchal language has been used against us, how the fears of vulnerability and censure check our tongues, rendering us powerless, isolated, and invisible. How the power to name is the power to be. Lesbians have long been the object of vicious "name-calling" designed to shut us up, make us shrivel and slink away. *Dyke* is one of the words that has been negatively and violently flung at us for more than a half century. In the Lesbian/Feminist 1970s, we broke the silence on this tabooed word, reclaiming it for ourselves, assigning to it positive, political values. The reclamation of *dyke* has also necessarily involved an historical/etymological search for its origins. Our generation of Lesbians has been stymied, mystified, and intensely curious as to how and why we have come to call ourselves *dykes*.

The term appears to have originated in the United States. Although *dyke* is used in England, the terms *lesbian*, *Sapphist*, and *butch* have been traditional there (Partridge 1968). In the United States, *dyke* is a cross-cultural term found in both Anglo-American and African-American slang. In African-American slang, *dyke*, as it stands alone, does not seem to have been in widespread use as of 1970, but more commonly appeared in combination with *bull* to form *bull-dyke*, signifying an "aggressive female homosexual," *bull-dagger*, *boon-dagger*, and *bull-diker* being variations. *Bull* was/is used in Black culture to indicate Lesbian (Major 1970; Berry 1972).\*

The earliest known references using *dyke* or *dike* (an earlier? spelling no longer in wide usage today) to describe "masculine" Lesbians, or Lesbians generally, date to circa 1920s-1930s, indicating at least a half century of usage.† Partridge indicates that *dike* denotes a "female homosexual" and

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\**Bull* was a tabooed word circa early twentieth century, not to be used in mixed company, signifying "the male of the species." Less offensive terms like "top cow" were often substituted. *Bull bitch* was a rural term applied to "masculine" women (Wentworth 1944; Wentworth and Flexner 1975).

†Earlier, at the turn of the century, *dyke* was one of many slang terms denoting the vulva (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904:338).

that the term comes from the combination *bull-dike* (Partridge 1968), which was used among Black people as early as circa 1920s-1930s (*AC/DC Blues* 1977). Godfrey Irwin, a compiler of tramp and underworld slang, likewise supports this definition of *bull-dike* in a letter to Partridge dated September 18, 1937. During the thirties, *bull-dike* was also being used among prison inmates at Sing Sing to indicate a woman who practiced oral sex on men (Haragan 1935, as quoted by Partridge 1968). It is interesting that the homosexual *bull-dike* and the heterosexual *bull-dike* were both associated with so-called “unnatural” and socially unapproved sexual behaviors. This is one of many connections existing between homosexual slang, heterosexual slang, and woman-hating slang.\* By the 1940s we find *dike* or *dyke* listed in slang dictionaries to indicate “masculine woman,” being synonymous with other words signifying “Lesbian” (Berrey & Van Den Bark 1942, 1947).

In the pre-Liberation forties, fifties, and sixties, “Lesbian slang” was often role-related. *Dyke/dike* and *butch* were used to signify “masculine” Lesbians who wore “men’s clothing” (Stanley, June 24, 1977; Aldrich 1955:54). “Feminine” Lesbians were *femmes* or *fluffs* (*Vice Versa* 1:6, November 1947). Among Midwest Black Lesbians the words *stud* and *fish* were used respectively (Sawyer 1965). Special terms indicating varying degrees of “mannishness” were formed by adding prefixes, for example: *bull-dyke*, *diesel dyke*, *stompin’ diesel dyke*. As Lesbian linguist Julia Stanley indicates, *dyke* in our own time, the Lesbian/Feminist seventies, has undergone a change in meaning from a once pejorative term to a politically charged definition. This has occurred within the liberation movements of Lesbians and gays. “To be a dyke or a faggot,” writes Julia, “refers to one’s political identity as a gay activist . . . but redefining old terms that have been pejoratives for so long is not an easy process, nor is it something that takes place overnight. Among women, new definitions are being made among usages of old terms. As we redefine the old pejorative labels making them our own, what we choose to call ourselves also takes on political meaning, defining one’s political position” (Stanley 1974:390-391).

The personal is political. The personal is also historical. On many levels we Lesbians today have experienced historical/political transformations. Sometimes it is possible to recall an exact time and place where transformations occurred. Although I don’t ever recall having used the word *dyke* in the old pejorative sense, I do remember when I first began using *dyke* in a liberated sense. It was late 1973; I had just “come out” via the Lesbian/Feminist Movement. During a conversation with an older Lesbian friend who had come out years earlier without the aid of a movement, I referred to the two of us as *dykes*. Her reaction was equivalent to “Hey, wait a minute! Watch yer mouth!”, as if I had uttered some terrible obscenity. She then proceeded to enlighten me as to the older, negative meaning. But, I said, I don’t see it that way at all. To me *dyke* is positive; it means a strong, independent Lesbian who can take care of herself. As I continued with the movement, *dyke* took on even stronger political implications than “activist.” It signified woman-identified culture, identity, pride and strength—women,

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\*See “Sexist Slang and the Gay Community: Are You One, Too?” by Julia Stanley and Susan W. Robbins. Available from J. Stanley, Department of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588.

alone and together, who live consciously and deliberately autonomous lives, no longer seeking definitions or approvals according to male values. Soon my older friend also began identifying positively with the word *dyke*.

Exercising this new power of self-definition, we now have a variety of names and definitions with which to describe our many political selves. Our Lesbian lifestyle is very diverse, and our use of language and choice of names and definitions reflect our many cultural, racial, ethnic, class, regional, and political backgrounds, as well as our generational perspectives. Today the straight world continues to use *dyke* in the old pejorative sense. There are a number of Lesbians who do also, and are repulsed by it. These Lesbians may not have been exposed to the current movement, or, being concerned with their status and survival in the straight world, they may reject the term as harmful. There is also a segment of the Lesbian population which grew up, came out, and participated in the earlier Lesbian culture before 1970 who retain the negative definition they have always known. So the definition of *dyke* has changed only for *some* Lesbians, not for all.

There are some questions to be wondered about. If *dyke* has different definitions today, is it possible that there were different definitions in earlier times? Did all Lesbians before the 1970s generally define *dyke* negatively? Was it such a distasteful term, or were there those Lesbians who felt a sense of pride at being labeled *dyke*? What did it mean to them? Where did the American tradition of the "mannish" Lesbian as *dike/dyke* come from?

The term *dike* or *dyke* had probably been around to some extent before the 1930s-1940s when it first began to be documented in slang dictionaries. Slang terms often originate among special groups, some of which are "outcasts" of mainstream society whose members feel alienated from the values of the dominant culture. Such groupings may be based on age, race, ethnic, or class background. Among such groups have been the younger generation, Blacks, hoboes, criminals, street people, artists and writers, gays and Lesbians. The creation of new words and new definitions for old words serves a social and political purpose: it may constitute an act of power and rebellion for those who feel and are powerless; or it may provide a sense of validation and identity denied by the dominant culture, thus becoming a source of social/cultural cohesion and pride—a language of one's own. A new language helps to articulate a new society. Some slang terms may even be adopted by the dominant culture, eventually becoming "Standard English," or they may fall into disuse or remain the linguistic property of the special group. Slang terms may be collected and listed in published lexicons, dictionaries, and thesauri. Definitions may change with time. These are slow, complicated evolutions influenced by social, economic, political, and intellectual ideas and events in the dominant culture and among those outcast groups.

Currently, there are several theories concerning the etymology of *dyke* or *dike*, which are threaded together by the androgynous concept of the "manly-woman." Several have to do with ancient Greek legends. Poet Elsa Gidlow raises the possibility that the word *dyke* may have had its origins in the Greek word *dike*, that is Athene, the "manly-woman" who is the principle of total order (Stanley, June 24, 1977). There is also the related Flexner and Wentworth (1975) hypothesis that *dike* probably came from *hermaphrodite*,

Pair of *New York Times* cartoons shows Mary Walker being grabbed by a cop for wearing trousers . . .



. . . while less “modest” hoopskirted women go free.

*“Wear my clothes just like a man . . .*

*Went out last night / with a crowd  
o my friends / them upstairs womens /  
cause I don’t like no mens / it’s  
true I wear a collar and a tie . . .  
they sho got to prove it on me.”*

—Ma Rainey, “Prove It on Me Blues” (1928)

the *-dite* being “clipped” off and later evolving into *dike*, due to a regional (Coney Island??) mispronunciation. Cordova adds support to this hypothesis when she reports conversations with older Lesbians who indicate the folk belief that the root word of *dyke* was once *hermaphrodite*, with its origins in the Greek myth of Hermes and Aphrodite who join to create the androgynous creature (Cordova 1974:22). Of the *-dite* to *dike* theory, Julia Stanley comments: “For reasons of my own, I’ve never bought the *-dite* to *dike* explanation, primarily because /t/ hardly ever becomes /k/ in natural languages. I’m not saying it’s impossible, especially in an unstressed syllable, where an alveolar *might* be heard as a velar, just that it’s unlikely” (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

My own recent research has turned up an interesting, but never before cited, usage of *dike* dating from late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, representing another possible, and perhaps more viable, origin, based in the social customs of the people rather than in classical allusion. Both Schele de Vere (1871) and Clapin (1902) in their compilations of Americanisms indicate *dike* as denoting a man in full dress, or merely the set of male clothing itself. Schele de Vere says this is a “peculiar American cant term, as yet unexplained.” Clapin, however, indicates that *dike* likely resulted from the corruption of the Old English *dight* (Anglo-Saxon origin). *Dight* meant to dress, clothe; to adorn, deck oneself (Johnson, 2nd ed., 1827). In listing *dike*, Mathews (1951) indicates a possible connection between *dight* and the English dialect *dick*, both of which meant “to deck or adorn.” By 1856 *dight* was cited by Hall as being nearly obsolete in the United States, while *diked* and *diked out* were in use. The word *dike* probably came to America with the English at the time of colonization, but once in America other usages may have developed. Both Clapin and Schele de Vere indicate that *dike* was not only used as a verb, but also as a noun to describe a person of either sex who was all dressed up. However, *dike* as a person or as a set of clothing most often referred to the male sex.

There is growing evidence that during this same time period a number of women in both the United States and Europe were adopting male attire, both permanently and on occasion. Katz has called some of these women “Passing Women” (Katz 1976: Ch. 3). These women dressed, lived, voted, worked—literally “passed”—as men in the mainstream culture. Some were of the middle and upper classes, or were artists. Others were independent, working class women who took on the guise of men in order to survive in a world where women had few options. As “men,” these women, some of whom were Lesbians, married other women and raised families. They could live and enjoy their lives with women and still participate in the greater opportunities and privileges awarded to men. This choice was often based in explicit or covert feminism. When discovered, however, these women were often punished by society—arrested, fined, imprisoned, exposed, and forbidden to wear male clothing. Sometimes the contemporary media picked up on the appearances of these “she-men,” and a number of rather sensational articles appeared, accompanied by photographs and drawings. Some of these graphics which are reproduced in Katz indicate women dressed in a “full set of male clothing”—from hat to suit, to cane or umbrella, watch fobs and chains, to vests and shoes. Lesbians and other radical women—such as the feminist Mary C.

Walker, Harriet Hosmer, and Edmonia Lewis, the Black/Native American sculptor—were also dressing in much the same manner in the United States and Europe, not especially for the purpose of “passing” as *men*, but for the real and implied emotional, political, and social freedoms inherent in the male costume.

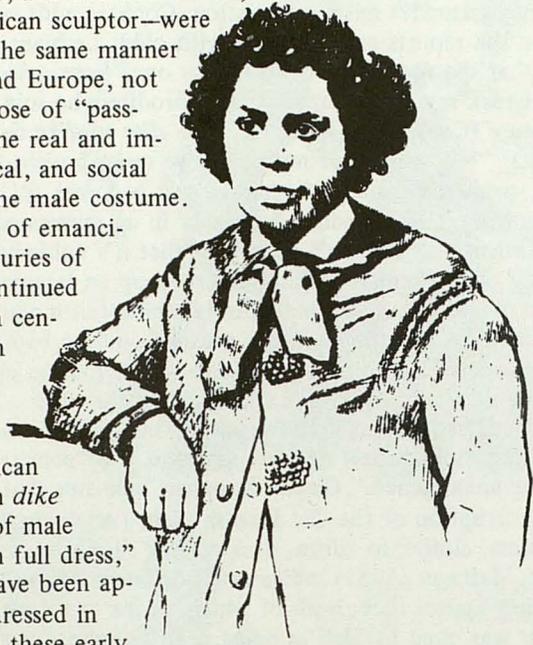
This radical expression of emancipation (which has centuries of tradition behind it) continued well into the twentieth century and included both women of color and white women.

It seems possible that in the American culture where the term *dike* denoted “the full set of male clothing” or “a man in full dress,” this term could also have been applied to *women* who dressed in such clothing. Possibly these early radical women, dressing and passing in male clothing, both permanently and on occasion, were in fact our first *dike* sisters in America.

Again, Julia Stanley, who feels that the above etymology for *dyke* is the most viable she has heard, comments: “Your proposed etymology doesn’t exclude the possibility that Wentworth and Flexner were correct in their hypothesis. That is, you may have come up with the ‘missing link’ in the semantic development of the word *dyke*, since it is stretching it a bit to relate it to the Germanic *ditch*” (Stanley, June 24, 1977).

If my hypothesis is correct, it could further be proposed that the meaning of *dike* was changing during the time period from the late nineteenth century to circa 1930s-1940s, that *dike* had begun passing from a predominantly positive male and/or neutral meaning to a derogatory female slang term. Linguistically, it may have gone through a process called “degeneration of meaning.” By the 1930s *dike*, preceded by the equally tabooed *bull*, had been assigned sexual and derogatory meanings which could be applied both to Lesbians and to heterosexual women practicing tabooed sexual behaviors. By the 1940s-1950s-1960s the pejorative term *dike/dyke* was almost exclusively applied to “masculine” Lesbians, with other meanings becoming more obscure, though not yet obsolete. Linguists have found that this “process of degeneration” is a pattern often occurring to words which make such a male to female transition.

For this same period of possible linguistic change, there is growing evidence indicating a general altering of attitudes toward women’s relationships with



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Sketch of Edmonia Lewis from *Profiles of Negro Womanhood*

each other.\* Increasingly more negative aspects were being assigned to such relationships in the twentieth century than had been assigned them in the nineteenth century. Medical and psychiatric science was labeling such relationships “unnatural,” “degenerate,” and “sick.” All manner of “masculine” characteristics of both a biological and psychological nature were attached to Lesbian women, as well as to other women who “deviated” from traditional, “god-given,” (male-defined) “female roles.” Speculating once again—since words and their meanings are used to reinforce the values of a given society, it may be that the linguistic change described above was related to the social/political change concerning definitions of Lesbianism and female sex roles. If a concept is assigned negative values, then the language used to describe that concept will also assume negative meaning. The language becomes a vehicle by which the value is perpetuated. Thus *dike*, once used to describe a well-dressed male, becomes a vulgar and hateful epithet to be hurled at women who rebel against confining roles and dress styles.

It is interesting to note how our “new” radical definitions echo the “old” radical traditions as signified by the term *dike/dyke*. Betty Birdfish, a friend in Chicago, wrote to me about a Lesbian dance to be held there, and how “wimmin are talking about ‘dyking themselves up’ for it.” In my next letter, I asked Betty exactly what that meant—“dyking ourselves up.” She responded:

About ‘dyking ourselves up’: I think it can mean a whole lot of things. In general, dressing up so one feels most beautiful, most proud of herself. I’ve seen that take many forms in the dyke community, at events. For example, Allison with her hair in corn rows and beads, wearing African garb. Or Jogie with a tuxedo and panama hat. Or Beverly looking like a gypsy with loose-flowing clothes, jewelry, scarves and wearing scented oil. Or wimmin with tailored blazers and slacks and vests. Or even wimmin with long-flowing ankle length skirts or dresses. Many interpretations. Many expressions. For me ‘dyking myself up’ has been getting more definite in its expression lately. For the dance I wore a pair of high-waisted black slacks, a white shirt with tie and pin, and a black satin, double-breasted, padded-shouldered, very tailored, old jacket. I felt very strong and beautiful in it. Before the dance, I had ‘practiced’ dyking myself up in a more radical way: I put on a different long sleeve shirt with collar and a silk tie that has wimmin together painted on it. I put my hair up in a bun, very close to my head so that it looked short, and put on a ‘man-nish’ (I wish I had another word) straw hat. I looked like old-timey photos of Lesbians who you know had longer hair, who put it up, dyked up in suits, waistcoats, or tuxedos. I liked the way I looked, but wasn’t ready to go ‘out’ yet in full dyke array. So I modified it for the dance. For me, ‘dyking up’ means the tailored suit: elegant, comfortable and strong. I guess I don’t see this wear as just a ‘masculine’ privilege—but clothing that wimmin/dykes can wear to feel good in. I think I’m no longer as afraid of feeling ‘butchy’: to work on my body, to develop muscles and strength, to be more active physically (sports, karate, etc.), to move with more force, strength, confidence. I’m realizing how stifled I’ve been by society which condemns this development in wimmin. And I realize how our own

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\*See Carroll Smith Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs* 1:1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; Alice Echols, “The Demise of Female Intimacy in the Nineteenth Century or ‘There wasn’t a Dyke in the Land,’” unpublished paper, n.d., 34 pp.

dyke community continues to condemn it by labelling it 'butchy' and therefore 'male-identified' and therefore wrong. I don't care anymore (in my head—but not yet in my gut) about all those condemnations—I want to grow in ways I know I've always wanted to.

(Betty Birdfish, August 4, 1977)

For the Lesbian of yesteryear, getting "diked up" may have had the same exhilarating, liberating, and fearful effects it has for contemporary Lesbians, but even more so since few women at that time wore pants. To wear "male clothing" before the advent of trousers for women and the so-called "unisex" fashions of today, was indeed radical and revolutionary. It signified a rebellion against male-defined roles for women, which "women's clothing" symbolized and perpetuated by rendering women passive, dependent, confined, and vulnerable. Yet this autonomous act of rebellion also made women vulnerable to punishment, ridicule, and ostracism.\*

*Dike/dyke* need not remain a vulgar epithet of self-hate, shame, and negativism, a term signifying "masculine." This is the definition which a heterosexist, dyke-hating society has formulated and which many Lesbians past and present have unquestioningly accepted. By defining some of us as "men" and some of us as "women," society has sought to divide us, to create inequality based on heterosexual roles, thereby defusing the political power of *women loving women*, reducing it to a pseudo-heterosexuality which, according to their thinking, is both artificial and inferior to the "real thing." *Dike/dyke* still remains a word hidden in history. But this new etymology suggests the possibility of some quite radical origins. Rather than wincing at the word *dyke*, we might better remember and commemorate those early Lesbians and feminists who refused "women's clothing" and "women's roles." They may have been our first dyke sisters.

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\*It should be noted that these vulnerabilities were not experienced by women *only* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As late as 1968, Lesbians were being arrested in Dallas and Houston, Texas for wearing "men's clothing." See: "Special Release to the Ladder." *The Ladder* 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):40-41; "Who Can Tell Boys from Girls." *The Ladder* 13:1/2 (October/November 1968):41-42.

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-

## THIRTEENTH MOON

i

mornings sallow as a sick child  
days running damply one  
into the other

Persephone

bitter as pomegranate  
winds a woolen muffler round her throat  
writes disillusioned letters  
to her mother

slowly the river

freezes

radiators clank and whine  
all over the city, sending up grime  
marking walls  
with secret messages

ii

Shetland ponies' velvet noses  
snort tiny clouds into the afternoon  
as pink-cheeked Atalanta comes racing  
round the park  
leaving dazed loiterers scattered in her wake  
like wormy apples, looking  
for Artemis

who ambles lanky in flannel pants  
and padded coat, her quiver slung  
carelessly over her shoulder

they kiss

exchange the latest gossip  
then strip down to their karate gear  
ready for a few swift kicks

iii

night gales send stragglers scurrying along the sidewalk  
like dead leaves at the foot of some

concrete and steel Olympus  
where colored lights blink their interminable code  
where Hera reigns  
behind her curtained face her courage flames  
blood simmers in her womb

heavy as soup

spoonful by spoonful

she feeds the baby secrets

*it was not Zeus who lived the cycle of transformations!  
it was I who loved Leda - Io - Danaë!*

the moon listens

ripens

swells

explodes with irrepressible laughter  
as housewives drop their ladles, dustcloths, brooms  
embracing each other in fragrant rooms  
all over the city

## MALLIA

the red earth is ready for planting  
the mountains crouching  
    over the backbone of this island  
        for thousands and thousands of years  
are tired  
    grey and wrinkled in the August sun  
with their muzzles between their paws  
    they will not growl at us

still we step warily  
    not touching  
shading our eyes  
the crickets suddenly silent

sheltered among banana trees  
a donkey in foal nibbles dry grass  
    the island people say  
        only donkeys mate in May, and we  
have been wise enough to wait  
for our season

    I am no lovesick Pasiphaë  
and you no god in rut disguised

late rays light the field for us  
stumbling in the furrows  
holding our breath as if expecting  
    the ruins miraculously to become palaces  
    the labyrinth to wind itself  
around us

    why?

        drawn

    to each other again and again  
as an archaeologist returns to a much-loved  
landscape

    we find only empty jars

        questions

swarm unanswered in the air like gnats

climbing the coast road toward town  
the sunset blinds us

    you turn

away  
this is not the place for my discoveries  
what I came for was the planting the red earth  
    but hear in your body volcanoes rumbling  
    and the dull clank of spade on stone

—*Jacqueline Lapidus*

## LESBIAN ORIGINS SEX RATIO THEORY

I am a Lesbian Feminist sociologist. This paper will challenge the heterosexism of patriscience because heterosexism is the major basis of male supremacy. By patriscience, I mean the misogynist, male supremacist science which claims to be objectively neutral, but is in fact sexist, racist, classist, ageist, and heterosexist. Patriscience equals modern male science of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries (although its roots trace back to ancient Greek patriarchy). While most patriscientists are male, some are female. These are women, with little or no feminist consciousness, who identify more with the privileges of their male colleagues than with the women's liberation movement's critique of patriscience.

Heterosexism is an ideology of patriarchy which economically sanctifies heterosexuality—especially procreative intercourse—as sacred and ordained by imaginary patriarchal gods, as the *only* normal purpose of sex, while at the same time criminalizing homosexuality as a perversion, a sickness, an abnormality, or as a crime. Heterosexism is still dominant ideology in the American social sciences reflecting American society, which is extremely homophobic.

A heterosexist social system is a stratification system which gives straight people privileges, social status, economic incentives and rewards to be exclusively heterosexual by taking away the civil rights and social status of lesbians and gay men.

Heterosexist attitudes include the assumption that lesbians do not really exist, that heterosexuals are the only people in the world. Heterosexism is also the Weltanschauung which assumes that butch-femme role play is biologically determined, natural, and normal—as if butch and femme are the only sex roles women and men know how to play. Heterosexism is the intersection of the economy and ideology of male supremacy with heterosexual supremacy.

Now I will examine three sex variables—societal sex ratios, female sexuality, and sex segregation—in relation to the three related problems of the origin of human society, the origin of women's oppression, and theory of women's liberation. I begin first with sex theory of origin, then present a theory on the origin of women's oppression, then I will present cross-cultural sex data to support these theories, and return to theory of women's liberation in the end.

**Social Origin:** I begin with the theory that the origin of human society is characterized by: high female-low male societal sex ratios in the adult or total population or both; incest; year round homosex segregation, excepting heterosexual mating intervals; and a year round prevalence of female asex, homosex, and bisex compared to the relative infrequency of exclusive heterosexual.

This suggests that early human social organization closely resembles the social organization of the predominantly female primate herd. I submit that social relations between adult females form the basis for primate social organization, both human and non-human, as the mother-daughter unit is the original and continuing base of the primate family.

The majority of males born into early human society are segregated *outside* the perimeters of the female community at adolescence, whereas the majority of females born live *inside* the community of origin. Thus, the prevalence of homosexuality I posit occurs in two separate places in relation to the community of origin. Lesbianism occurs *within* the perimeters of the female community, while male homosexuality is a prevalent feature of male life outside the female community.

An important point here is that from the beginning, female society is equivalent to society itself. That is, society is always at core gynosociety. Female homosocial relations are critical to the formation and maintenance of the family, community, and society. Due to both sexism and heterosexism, patrisociologists generally miss this point and falsely assume that society is sex neutral.

While exclusive heterosexuality may be present at origin, as I would expect all sexuality modes are, exclusive heterosexuality is not the numerical, original norm for the entire socio-sexual world of non-human and human primates. Female sexuality inside original society may be asexual, lesbian, or bisexual year round. Heterosexuality is practiced for reproductive purposes only.

No one to date has adequately answered the human sexuality question of origin, as to which came first: asexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, or heterosexuality? Patriscientists who claim heterosexist origins, i.e., those who assume that no lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, or asexuals exist originally and insist that only exclusive heterosexuals populate the original world, are in no empirical position to substantiate their heterosexist ideology.

Patriscientists have never produced a shred of evidence to prove that lesbians are not present at social origin. It is my position that patriscientists must prove their assumption that all prehistoric dead women are exclusively heterosexual before they can correctly conclude that no lesbian, asexual, or bisexual females exist in early society. These heterosexist generalizations cannot be proved regarding living women in present society, much less the dead of prehistory. Yet heterosexists still function under the impression that the burden of proof is on lesbians to prove lesbian existence, when they have yet to establish the veracity of their assumption that all historical and prehistorical women are straight. Later in the paper, however, I will present brief empirical evidence of lesbianism among several hunting and gathering societies and lesbianism across all observed non-human primate and mammalian society, which strongly suggests that lesbianism probably obtains at origin since, in the social sciences, the literatures on gatherer-hunters and non-human living primates are widely used as methodological tools in the reconstruction of early prehistoric human society.

Perhaps the most interesting point to be grasped in any theory of sex and society is that until the actual incidence of lesbianism, celibacy, bisexuality, and male homosexuality is known, the actual incidence of heterosexuality remains unknown. This applies to either prehistoric or historic society. Heterosexist patriscientists seem to miss this point entirely, by omitting or under-reporting lesbian and gay phenomena.

But the total sexuality per society is equal to the sum of these four relative frequencies of: homosexuality, asexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality. Obviously, the value of heterosex cannot be solved without knowing the other values since each is only a ratio of total societal sexuality. In other words,

sociologists will never know how many straight people there are in society until they know how many lesbians, gays, asexuals, and bisexuals there are in society.

Now to conclude this section on social origin, I will reiterate the major theory that the origin of human society is characterized by: high female-low male societal sex ratios; incest; year round homosex segregation, except heterosexual mating intervals; and a year round prevalence of female asex, homosex, and bisex compared to the relative infrequency of exclusive heterosexual.

**Patriarchal transition, the beginning of women's oppression**, is characterized by: (1) a mass societal shift from the original, prehistoric high female-low male sex ratios to the historic high male-low female sex ratios of patriarchal transition and early patriarchy, then later to the near equal sex ratios of established and late patriarchy, which is accomplished by (2) gynocide and female infanticide, (3) by decreasing female-increasing male social space through the mass heterosexual integration of *all* adolescent and adult males into female society, (4) causing chronic rape, i.e., forced female heterosexual, (5) which marks the start of the male "energy-capture" of female sexuality and, thus, reproduction. The mass heterosexualization of women simultaneously begins the persecution of non-heterosexual women, i.e., lesbians, spinsters, celibates, as well as non-monogamous heterosexual women such as prostitutes, and so-called "frigid" heterosexual women.

These are major sexual conditions which precede the institutionalization of the economic oppressions of women which Engels describes in *Origin*. Further research into more sex variables may yield other sexual preconditions for the establishment of the oppressions of women. More research into the role heterosexual incest plays in the development of the patriarchal family should prove extremely relevant to the origin of women's oppression.

I suggest that the first enduring heterosexual relationship is the mother-son relation, followed by the sister-brother relation. Patriarchal biology maintains that the husband creates the father who then creates the son. My sociology reverses this sequence; I suggest that the son is the first male to reside with mother as lover. The son becomes the first residential and social father who creates the role of the residential husband.

The incest taboo may have effected patriarchal transition in that the ban on mother-son and brother-sister sex alters social organization in at least two ways: (1) the incest taboo may cause the entrance of male strangers into female society, which had previously allowed only select adult male kin in positions of close physical proximity to females; and (2) if previously sons and brothers were selected as fathers and are then replaced by male strangers, both the biological and social power of brothers and sons is usurped—thus oedipal jealousy may have a biological basis, rather than just being a mythical or psychological drama.

I theorize that the reason why a woman's brother is regarded as the social father of her children in matrilineal societies still extant in late patriarchy is due to the brother's prior biological paternity of his sister's children in earlier matrilineal systems.

Up until this point, everything I've said is purely theoretical. It is impossible for me to empirically prove all the theories just presented, especially in the

five minutes left this speech. However, I will now briefly build an empirical case to support two of my major theories regarding the origin of human society.†

The two sex hypotheses I will empirically support now are: (1) that the origin of society is characterized by high female-low male sex ratios; and (2) that lesbianism obtains at social origin.

Consider sex ratios first. Using ninety-two total population societal sex ratios drawn from the *Human Relations Area Files* at City University in New York in May 1978, I found that sixty-two percent of these societies have near equal sex ratios, twenty-four percent have high female-low male sex ratios, and fourteen percent have high male-low female sex ratios.

I also checked for adult sex ratios among these ninety-two societies, treating anyone fifteen years of age or older as an adult. There was information on the adult sex ratio on sixty of the ninety-two societies studied. My results show that, of the sixty adult sex ratios, over half were near equal, over a third were high female, and only seven percent were high male sex ratios. This evidence only demonstrates that not all societies have near equal sex ratios, as patri-scientists tend to falsely assume.

Originally, I had intended to study only the societal sex ratios of hunters and gatherers since most of my hypotheses concern prehistoric society. However, due to lack of sex ratio information of hunters and gatherers, this proved impossible. Nevertheless, twelve societies in my world sex ratio sample turned out to be hunters and gatherers. I found that seven out of these twelve gatherer-hunter societies have high female-low male total population sex ratios; this is equivalent to fifty-eight percent. More information is needed on hunting and gathering sex ratios before any conclusive results are found. However, this available data does support my hypothesis.

Generally, I found that high female-low male sex ratios (adult or total population) are modally associated with: hunting and gathering, matrilocality, absence of stratification, approval of homosexuality, extended family, mother-child household, non-urban society, and sororal polygyny.

Near equal sex ratios are modally associated with: patrilineality, patrilocality, independent family, nuclear household, complex stratification, urban society, condemnation of homosexuality, monogamy.

High male-low female sex ratios are modally characterized by: patrilocality, lineal family and household, non-urban society, absence of stratification, monogamy.

This evidence supports my contention that gynosociety is characterized by high female-low male sex ratios, while patriarchy is characterized by either near equal or high male-low female sex ratios (although further research is needed to test these hypotheses).

Now consider lesbianism. My cross-cultural lesbian sample contains thirty societies where lesbianism is recorded in the social science literature; these thirty societies are distributed unevenly across all world regions: six societies in Africa; four in the Circum-Mediterranean; two in East Eurasia; five in the Insular Pacific; ten in North America; and three in South America. The time

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†Those interested in the full hypothesis tests should read my dissertation, which is on microfilm at the University of Michigan under the title: "An Hystorical and Cross-Cultural Analysis of Sex Ratios, Female Sexuality, and Homo-Sexual Segregation Versus Hetero-Sexual Integration Patterns in Relation to the Liberation of Women." Write: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

of these thirty societies where lesbianism is reported ranges from Athenian society in 450 B.C. to A.D. 1957. This means that I excluded from the sample all societies where Lesbian Feminist Liberation movements have appeared since 1957.

Incidentally, I am working on the societal level, not the level of individual lesbians; my research case is society, specifically societies where the presence of lesbianism is recorded in social science literature and is at the same time cross-indexed in G.P. Murdock's 1957 "World Ethnographic Sample." I use Murdock's information on the total society in order to comparatively study lesbian sexuality across society.

My results show that lesbianism crosses all types of subsistence: hunting and gathering, agriculture, fishing, and animal husbandry. It is important to note here that twenty percent of my lesbian sample comprises societies where hunting and gathering is the dominant subsistence. This evidence alone disproves the erroneous assumption that lesbianism is a "product of decadent, bourgeois capitalist society."

Furthermore, lesbianism crosses all types of plant cultivation, all households, all settlement patterns, and all marriage forms except polyandry. Lesbianism crosses all major forms of family, marital residence, mean size of local communities, marital exchange, social stratification, and post-partum sex taboos. I conclude from this data that lesbianism is geographically, socially, and economically widespread across human society; and that patriscientists generally ignore the empirical expanse of female sexuality due to their heterosexism.

Cross-specially, lesbianism has been observed among: baboons, gibbons, chimpanzees, domestic cats, horses, lions, rabbits, dogs, pigs, sheep, guinea pigs, cattle, rats, mice, hamsters, goats, porcupines, elephants, bats, hyenas, raccoons, donkeys, and porpoises.

Since there is evidence of lesbianism among human hunters and gatherers, and among all observed primate and mammalian society, this suggests that lesbianism obtains at human origin. And if lesbianism obtains at the origin of society, then there is nothing "unnatural" about the phenomenon, either socially or biologically. This brings me back to my original point that the social science bias against lesbianism is more ideologic than scientific.

This concludes the empirical part of this paper. Now consider several theories of women's liberation.

**Women's Liberation:** There are numerous avenues to the liberation of women. The possibilities outlined here are not the only routes out of patriarchy, but they are each capable of the empirical test. The real empirical test of any liberation solution to the oppressions of women will be conducted by grass roots women themselves, not in an academic paper or in a social science laboratory. The thirteen theoretical solutions I see are:

1. Female guerilla warfare and sabotage of patriarchal states.
2. Female abolition of the recognition of "fatherhood." Collective female refusal to tell men who are the "fathers" of their children. This can be accomplished by the simple method of straight women never sleeping with only one man for any length of time, but always having at least two male lovers. This method is based on the assumption that mass high rates of "illegitimacy" will destroy paternity, "father-right," and the patrilineal family.

3. Collective female secession from nationalist, patriarchal states to form an international collectivity of women committed to creating new gynosocieties.

4. Female separation from patriarchy and individual men. Individual women can leave men sexually, emotionally, socially, politically, economically, and ideologically, thereby refusing to perform wageless services for men. A mass exodus of females from the high heterosexually integrated areas of patriarchy to remote borders to form all-female colonies is one liberation solution.

5. Female reproductive strikes; the refusal to bear patriarchy any more sons until female demands are met.

6. Increased female rates of heterosexual frigidity, celibacy, and lesbianism—which decreases the rate of female heterosexual monogamy, thus interrupting the mass production of “fathers” and sons.

7. Some Marxist solutions which are helpful for the liberation of women are, of course, the abolition of the patriarchal family, heterosexual monogamy, the State, private property, the patriarchal church and male religions.

8. Female economic sabotage of patriarchy using the male supremacist sexual division of labor against itself. That is, across sexist divisions of labor, women are economically segregated into housework, food preparation and production, health care, education, child care, socialization, and other service sectors, and—in industrial societies—clerical sectors. These are critical areas of societal maintenance, the disruption of which would prove problematic for the continuance of patriarchy. Indirect or direct revolts in these female sectors should make the female future interesting.

9. Strengthening female social-political-economic organization, female solidarity and social ties, and female social networks—which disrupts the patriarchal process of isolating women from the female community, and thus reduces the casualties of women scarred by patriarchal oppressions.

10. Development of a high female collective consciousness regarding male supremacy and patriarchy—which should lead to a female reexamination of mother-son relations, and the development of non-patriarchal socialization of sons by mothers.

11. Development of high female-low male societal sex ratios at all levels of social organization. Near equal and high male sex ratios, which are characteristically institutionalized in patriarchy, are the source of the dangerously high rates of rape, child molestation, and violence against female and children. The female community must close ranks and select only those few men who respect women's liberation to live inside female society. Sororal polygyny may be more liberating for straight women than heterosexual monogamy.

12. Female political struggle for the redistribution of earth space, which is at present completely dominated by male states. The creation of all-female spaces for women to escape the male violence and oppressions of patriarchy is necessary for the liberation of women. Females have the right to preserve at least fifty-two percent of earth space from male exploitation, destruction, and pollution of the female environ. Women need not only one homeland, but many. And finally:

13. Women will not be liberated until lesbians are liberated, as lesbians will not be liberated until women are liberated. That is, women's liberation cannot be achieved until female sexuality is set free at last.

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## LESBIAN LITERATURE & CRITICISM

*The following three pieces grew out of the 1978 MLA panel on "Lesbians and Literature: Transcending the Boundary between the Personal and the Political." The panel was chaired by Susan Wolfe; participants were Harriet Desmoines, Susan Leigh Star, Bertha Harris, and Mary Daly.*

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Harriet Desmoines

### THERE GOES THE REVOLUTION . . .

For six months the title of this panel has been inducing in me a kind of quiet panic. I'd write down "the personal and the political in Lesbian literature . . ." and promptly lose the piece of paper I'd written it on. When I finally sat down to the typewriter, I discovered that I was in a full-blown state of hysterical paralysis. It was not "the personal" that was paralyzing me. Since Catherine and I started *Sinister Wisdom* almost three years ago, Lesbian writing has more and more come to be the focus of my life, my context, the air I breathe. And it doesn't panic me to say what that has meant for me personally: it has meant my sanity. Lesbians have given me many things I never had before—but my most favorite thing about Lesbians is that they have given me for the first time names for the world which accord with my own deepest perceptions. Human-being literature never did that for me. It's the written and spoken words of Lesbians that have shown me a world I can understand, withstand, and stand with.

In my more splendid moments, I think that the survival and well-being of Lesbians is all the political justification Lesbian literature could ever want or need. But that's playing fast and loose with the word *political*, which has to do with the Big Picture, the human race. So, most of the time when I think about politics and Lesbians, I feel exactly like this very bitter stanza from Jan Clausen's poem "dialectics"<sup>1</sup>:

i am a lesbian, forfeit  
the universal. i cannot  
tour Cuba in comfort  
nor read my poetry  
to rooms with kind men in them  
smiling kindly  
to halls with well-heeled poetry  
lovers in them  
clamoring for the truth.

In the face of Cuba, kind men, well-heeled poetry lovers, and “the truth,” I feel very small and very paralyzed: me, sir? I am a lesbian—there goes the universal, there goes humanism, there goes the revolution, there goes history, there go “the people,” there goes the freedom train, and I just *turned in my ticket*.

Catherine once taught me what to do when you don't know what else to do: you go play with the dictionary. So I went and played with the dictionary and discovered that the word *political* is related to the word *police*. They have the same root, which leads me to believe that just possibly coercion may be inherent in the ways the word *political* has been used. Playing further, I discovered that *police* and *politics* come from the Greek word for city, *polis*, which in turn is supposedly derived from an Indo-European word meaning fortress. That gave me four words to mess with—*political*, *police*, *city-state*, and *fortress*—and they all smelled to me somehow spermatic.

Which is why, for conversation among Lesbians—and particularly for conversation about our work, whether that is organizing or teaching or farming or healing or writing—for all these conversations, I would love to be able to declare a ten-year moratorium on the word *political*. The unvoiced assumptions that underlie its use are patriarchal—that is, falsely universal. And I don't believe that I'm the only dyke in the country who needs to be inoculated against those assumptions. If “being political” still means to us—even in the very very back of our heads; at even the most subterranean levels of consciousness—being citizens of *their* city-states, politic defenders of *their* polis, second-line troops defending *their* fortresses, then the Lesbian writing I'm seeing and wanting to see more of is not political and shouldn't be described as political. It is not engaging in or taking sides in patriarchal politics—patriarchal politics being that which can be succinctly characterized as Boys A versus Boys B and to hell with whoever gets caught in the crossfire, including the raped women of Bangladesh.

Patriarchal politics has worked for the last maybe five thousand or so years on the basis of mass delusion, and the background of the word *politics* gives clues as to what that delusion may be. Men must imagine that their city-states and their fortresses and their police and their political movements are going to protect them against something. However, it's clear that the most dangerous animals are male homo sapiens, and their political institutions don't protect them from each other; on the contrary, their political institutions make them more dangerous to each other. Therefore, their political behavior is irrational; it can't be reality-based since it doesn't work *toward* survival, it works against survival. Their fortress in the wilderness is a delusion, a mindbox, a university of dead universals, a defensive system erected against the wild, against nature, against the real-ness of every real thing. And the conceptual cornerstone of that defensive system that protects no one from no thing is the very unreal (and very snotty) human-being-as-king-of-the-beast theory.

Human males appear to have put “mankind” in a conceptual box and everything else outside and underneath that box. Women they place ambiguously at the boundary, sticking half in and half out of the human-being box. And their solution to our ambiguity in their own minds has been to enslave

us, to try to bring our wildness under male control, to hunt and rape, tame and exploit us as they have done with all other life forms outside their fortress. Of course, the conceptual box enclosing "mankind" keeps splitting, exponentially splintering, into males A versus males B, males A-1 versus males A-2, and so on, whence arises that din of competing voices, all screaming mother-fucker and shooting at each other. And it is extremely difficult for us when we're caught in the crossfire to remember—or even care—that these are factional infights, that they are battles taking place inside the same fort—and that outside the fortress, outside and beneath the walls of the fantasy fortification, the earth quakes, the wind howls, and the real world begins.

The real world begins outside and beneath patriarchal politics. There's a very useful paragraph in Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor" that I keep seeing quoted: "Truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet." Just so, when we look beneath the surface of what patriarchal politics *says* is going on in the world, when we look at what's swept under the carpet, when we look at the seamy side of life, as my mother would say—we can see the multiple threads and knottings that are the connections between women. And it is *these* connections between women that Lesbian writing focuses on: the connections that do not appear on the surface of so-called "universal" literature; the connections that escape the sweep of so-called "universal" revolutions; the connections that are part of the wilderness that patriarchy erects its defenses against—connections which, paradoxically, exist in the heart of their human-being fortress. A central taboo in patriarchy is the taboo against women consorting with women—and yet that tabooed consorting, allying, connecting has gone on and goes on in front of their noses, and men and most women don't think it's real.

These connections between women form what there is of a genuine social fabric in human societies—in contrast to which, patriarchal social theories, patriarchal political theories, look very much like castles in the air, or flying carpets to nowhere. The point of Lesbian writing, insofar as I can perceive it, is with words, with language, to make the connections between women real to us, real in our own minds. And that process of making-real what is already under our noses amounts to a kind of exorcism of patriarchal politics.

In 1975 Julia Stanley wrote an overview of Lesbian Novels that was published in the *Margins* issue on "Lesbian Feminist Writing and Publishing."<sup>2</sup> In that article, she traces fifty years of the Lesbian novel from *The Well of Loneliness* to *Riverfinger Women*, and she shows how the consciousness of the novels begins to change, how that exorcism of patriarchal politics begins to occur. In the pre-1970s novels Lesbians are only intermittently real-to-ourselves; we are described as inhabiting a nightworld of dreams and shadows, an enchanted forest that is most often shattered in the end by the violent intrusion of the "real" world. But with the Lesbian feminist movements comes a basic conceptual shift in the novels: from what the so-called "real" world thinks of us, to what we think of ourselves and each other. The focus

remains on women with women, but now the women are not seen through patriarchal eyes, we are seen as real-in-ourselves; as Julia puts it, we have moved into our own lives.

A similar conceptual shift in which what is right under our noses, the connections between women, is finally endowed with full reality occurs in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. *Sula* is not a novel by a Lesbian about Lesbians, but in her essay in *Conditions*, Barbara Smith shows in convincing detail how to read it as a Lesbian novel.<sup>3</sup> I'm really butchering the novel and Barbara's reading of it by giving a plot summary, but in case you don't remember—the main characters Nel and Sula are girlhood best friends; Nel marries and Sula leaves town so their friendship is interrupted. Their friendship is finally destroyed when Sula comes back home and starts whimsically fucking around with Nel's husband. Sula dies young and she dies alone, believing that Nel will never remember their girlhood together, "the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price." But the last thing she thinks as she stops breathing is, "Well, I'll be damned, it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." And twenty-five years after Sula is buried, Nel finally does recognize what they had together, the secrets they had kept between themselves, the wildness they shared . . . she remembers what those days meant, the reality of them, and what the reality of their loss means. The reality that Nel and Sula created together is, it seems to me, what Lesbian literature is all about.

Many feminists get very upset when we start talking about a Lesbian imagination in all women, or when we start trying to place novels like *Sula* in relation to a tradition of Lesbian writing. So I want to end by very briefly saying why I think we need *all* the connections between women examined with a Lesbian consciousness and why I want those examinations recognized as Lesbian. First of all, because of the way women are. The partition of the body that patriarchy tries to effect does not work very well with us, and it's not so easy after all to categorize and isolate the sexual from the nonsexual when it's going on between women. The word *Lesbian* points to the erotic tone of everything that happens between women—between mothers and daughters, between sisters, between students and teachers, between girl friends. And if thinking about that makes you feel as nervous as it makes me feel, then I think we can agree that the energies we generate between ourselves in all our heavy-duty connectings are tabooed in patriarchy because those energies are powerful—and scary—and it's about time we tapped into them. Secondly, *Lesbian* means that women can be everything to each other; and that's an insight that I don't care to have partitioned off into some subculture of women's culture. Finally, *Lesbian* is a lush and slippery word, and it works like voodoo. The fear of it has turned many a woman into a zombie; and the love of it can be the release of an inner spring.

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#### NOTES

1. in *waking at the bottom of the dark: poems by Jan Clausen*, 80 pp., \$3.50 (including postage) from Long Haul Press, P.O. Box 592, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215.

2. "Uninhabited Angels: Metaphors for Love" in *Margins: A Review of Little Magazines and Small Press Books*, No. 23, issue edited by Beth Hodges.

3. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in *Conditions: Two* (1977), \$2.50 from *Conditions*, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215.

## MELANCHOLIA, AND WHY IT FEELS GOOD . . .

Between the time I delivered some thoughts on the state of lesbian writing at the MLA 1978 Convention, and now, The Masked Bandit and I packed 38 suitcases, one dog and one cat—and abandoned the frozen North Fork of Long Island for Southern California. The experience was not unlike Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. We told the clerk at the American Airlines counter how lucky she was that we were not Elizabeth Taylor: had we been Elizabeth Taylor, we would have had 40 pieces of luggage each.

Elizabeth *who?* she asked.

Nevertheless, I have bought a guide to the homes of the stars and have learned that Rita Hayworth is furious with Glenn Ford because his TV antenna is blocking her view. Rita *who*, you ask? The Pacific surf wakes me in the morning. There is a flower here called Star Jasmine whose scent, at night, transfixes me in my faux pas.

In brief, I have lost or mislaid the typewritten observations some were happy enough to hear at the MLA. Thus, the digression on Rita Hayworth, and Stars, above. Rule Number One: Until you have seen Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, you do not know the meaning of lesbianism. Above all things, I hope a rumor reaches the East that Bertha has gone Hollywood . . . .

But no matter: with a little concentration, it all comes rushing back. We were to address ourselves to that immemorial subject, the relationship between politics and literature; the immemorial *lesbian* relationship. Susan Leigh Star and Harriet Desmoines did that very thing, very well. They even said new things about a subject nearly as old now as radial tires. Retreading; swerving dangerously around hapless school children; the Mary Martin lunch boxes flew in the air; I felt my canines enlarge at the smell of the blood they drew. Mary Daly, however, confined herself to herself, not unexpectedly. Except for her essay in spontaneity, which took the form of insult (but I am as accustomed to hearing my ideas called "deranged" as I am to hearing my expression of them called "finely honed").

I said that I had already said about all there is to say on the subject of lesbian literature and its political implications at the first forum on homosexual literature the MLA ever sponsored. I called that finely honed work "The Purification of Monstrosity: The Lesbian As Literature." ("As" because there is not, and never will be, "lesbian literature" per se, as there is Russian literature, Black literature, etc. "Monstrosity" because we belong somewhere between the literature of horror and terror, and the Romantics.) I have not yet published this paper (for reasons best kept cunningly close to my chest). Thus I cannot (can I?) blame the public for its continued fuzzy thinking on the matter . . . . That would be (wouldn't it?) tantamount to accusing an 18th century Polynesian of Popery because he has not yet embraced Methodism. It is all a matter of opportunity, isn't it?

It interests me to see how political functioning eventually particularizes itself in individuals. Mine has come to be appearances as the Death's Head at the Feast of Love. The Tipper-over of the Apple Cart. The Fly in the Syrup. Etc. When lesbians gather to congratulate each other on having successfully produced a body of work that makes all previous work both vile and irrelevant to "female-identification"—it is my duty to point out that the body of work that has shattered Western civilization does not exist. I congratulate them on having produced true confessions, folklore, religious ecstasy and myth. And downwardly-mobile sitcoms à la Horatio Alger in reverse. I congratulate lesbian writers of fiction and poetry who would have written no matter what: Cather and the sexy mid-west; O'Connor and sexy Catholicism; Mary Shelley and the sexy monster; the Brontes who *invented* modern lesbianism out of the Romantic movement (which encouraged the outlaw life, pantheism and strange music in my ears far more than modern feminism has).

A discussion of "lesbian sensibility" in writing is a discussion of the Romantic temperament: a love affair with freaks and monsters; a loathing of both mother and father (unless changed into gothic forms); sexual fascination with the "underdog" (which has nothing to do with class consciousness). Just for starters. Lesbian sensibility is in the work of P.B. Shelley (as well as M.W. Shelley); Blake; Nabokov; T. Williams; Dostoevsky. And Kingsley Amis and Euripides. As well as in Barnes; M.F. Beal (an attraction for well-wrought violence); Arnold, etc.

There exist novels and poems *about* lesbianism and the activities of lesbians that do not have lesbian sensibility (Lawrence's *The Fox*; Jane Rule's *The Desert of the Heart*—but Rule's *This is Not for You* is more sensibility than subject: like Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle") . . . .

Of course, Joyce was wrong when he insisted that art be uncontaminated by politics. But marching to the extreme opposite of his injunction does not make right of wrong. It makes a "separate but equal" wrong; wrong because of the onerous inhibitions lesbian-feminist politics seek to place on the writer of genuine talent; wrong because these inhibitions are becoming (almost) a standardized prosody without which "lesbian" writing is not the real thing (there is a near-parallel in the 18th century's regard for the couplet and what it might, and might not, express). Since both good and bad lesbian writers want to be "politically correct" (i.e., admired and bought and read by lesbians), politics must bend to aesthetics rather than otherwise. Immediately. People who write from the "lesbian sensibility" write against the rules. The political rule is to purge oneself of classism, racism, ageism, elitism, sexism. Etc. The literary rule is to purge oneself of nothing. There is no such thing as a *bad* writer who is classist, racist, ageist, elitist, sexist. Etc. Only good writers have these interesting avenues of prejudice open to them: and good writers come from all backgrounds and economic classifications; in all colors and from all ethnic persuasions (saving the middle class: which never produces good writers); in all ages (save those who are twenty-five or younger). The difference between literature and tract is mule-headed prejudice: from which spring those qualities that make literature more interesting than life—wit, irony, eccentricity, paradox, illusion and sarcasm.

“Outside” I am a vehement devotee of the party line. “Inside” (here) I must profess (without fear of capital punishment) in the interests of literature and its uncertain future a (selective) loathing of the young and a (selective) pleasure in the aged; that I enjoy the company of Irish Catholics and am put to sleep by those who worship the goddess (all proper homosexuals are put off by fertility rites; our interest in the agricultural is limited to a dozen long-stemmed American Beauties). That capitalism, like all forms of injustice, is sexier than communism. That reading books (at least one a day; and the second should be a murder mystery) will breed revolution (if that’s what you want) more surely than consciousness raising (at least revolution more appropriate for lesbians than for hippies).

I believed, once, that lesbians were the incarnation of metaphor, paradox, dream, iconoclasm, illusion, sarcasm, wit, irony: the stuff of literature. I was thinking of women like Djuna Barnes (more talked about, I suspect, as a “foremother”—how she must shudder if she hears it!—than read), and Berenice Abbot and Janet Flanner and Romaine Brooks and Renee Vivien; of great lovers and phrase-makers like Natalie Clifford Barney. Of great Sherman tanks like G. Stein. I was thinking of myself, too.

When I run into lesbian writers who believe they will learn their craft and traditions from Indian chiefs, witches, theologians, therapists and narcissists: I run them down. I have taken up roller skating along with Southern California. As Vivien Leigh so poignantly expressed it: “As God is my witness!” I will never read another lesbian tale that is about victimization or female genitalia: *It Was a Dark and Stormy Night . . . .* (to be continued).

## CRITICISM: FORM AND FUNCTION IN LESBIAN LITERATURE

*I was very disturbed and at times angry as I sat listening to Bertha Harris's talk at the "Lesbians and Literature" session of the 1978 MLA convention. I realized afterwards that her talk raised for me some essential questions about the form and function of criticism in our literature. What follows, therefore, is not a direct, point by point refutation, but rather a reaction to the context in which the talk was presented, its purpose, its assumptions, its tone.*

## I

Through conscious or unconscious intent, the organizers of the convention had scheduled two lesbian events, a "Lesbians and Literature" session and a performance by Deidre McCalla and Llena de la Madrugada, for 7 p.m. on the last night of the convention. Though it was too late for rescheduling, all the participants involved refused to compete with each other and insisted, despite the circumstances, that both events would take place. Discussion and planning logistics of course took time, and McCalla, who began late and who was forced to shorten her concert, did not finish until 8:30, when the lesbian literature session should have been over.

At this point, those attending (more than 200) were told to move to another floor. More time lost. And then finally, a little after 9 p.m., the literature session got under way. But not without further loss, for the feminist publishing panel (consisting of representatives from various feminist presses) had been scheduled for that hour. Again everyone agreed that both events would take place. But the literature panel did not end until almost 11, and, though a handful of women stayed for an informal discussion, most (including a number of the scheduled panelists) left out of sheer exhaustion. Thus, the feminist publishing session never took place.

So after months of planning and preparation by members of the gay caucus, members of the women's caucus, and individuals who had expected to give presentations, the final tally for the events scheduled was: one session completed; one session shortened; one session entirely lost.

I've reconstructed these events because I think they are typical of the circumstances under which lesbian literature exists today. In one form or another, deliberately or accidentally, it is continuously being thwarted, sabotaged, limited, never given the space and breadth it needs and deserves. What survives does so always at an incredible price and under severe restrictions; what survives is almost always an exception, requiring far more planning and effort than equivalent establishment projects. As lesbian/feminist writers, editors, publishers, teachers, students, and organizers, we have all had to recognize the grim fact that more time and energy goes towards countering resistance to a project than to the project itself. Frequently we are exhausted before we even begin any meaningful work. How often can one hear the

response to a new suggestion: "It's a good idea, but it makes me tired just thinking about it." It is as if lesbians were subject to a different force of gravity, requiring them to use four times more energy to complete a simple mechanical task than those living on Main Street, U.S.A.

Bertha Harris might view the above as another version of the narrative of "victimization" which she so abhors. I view it, however, as a necessary reminder that any space and time lesbians manage to wrest for themselves must never be taken for granted, must never be wasted. And it is because of this depressing reality that I was far more upset with Harris's remarks about the state of lesbian literature than I might have been had there been a dozen other panels and a dozen other occasions to discuss that subject. As it was, there was only one, and I felt frustrated and at moments angry at what I perceived to be the misuse of a hard-won opportunity.

## II

Harris's critique had an uncomfortably familiar ring to it, for the criteria and assumptions underlying it were almost identical with those of male critics who belittle the literature of women, especially lesbians. What we write, we are told is not significant because it is focused on such unimportant matters as our bodies, our sexuality, our lovers, our mothers; and when we manage to divert our attention away from these subjects, we mistakenly bypass timeless issues and focus our writing on such temporal topics as economics, race, survival, oppression (narratives of "victimization"). And so, though we have written some "interesting stuff," we have failed to produce what male critics call "great" or "universal" works of art, works touched by that elusive spark of "genius," works that are—to use that forbidding term—"masterpieces."

I do not want to mock Harris, but I do think that the theory of "great" literature which she advocates has always been and will always remain destructive to women. It views literature as a kind of commodity, as a marketable product, and awards blue ribbons and prizes to those products which it deems "universal" and "timeless." It never admits, of course, that the products which are most prized are almost exclusively based on men's experiences. Such an "aesthetic"—if one can call it that—obviously precludes the possibility of having "great" literature derived from the lesbian experience.

I personally have never viewed literature, i.e., writing, in this way. For me it is a process, and in the case of lesbian literature, an evolving process, one which hopefully will grow more complex and rich as more women become involved in it. I never thought its aim was to win the Nobel Prize in Literature; rather I assumed its aim was to form new means of expression for various kinds of experiences, perceptions, and points of view that until recently have been either ignored or suppressed.

But process always implies steps, development, growth. As a poet, I know that I will probably work as hard on my "failures" as on my "successes," and that I can't even begin to write my "successes," can't develop any skill and understanding for them, without writing through the "failures." In other words, there are no shortcuts, no ways to skip the things you need to write. In that context, the terms "success" and "failure," "major" and "minor" lose all meaning.

And I believe this is also true for the evolving process we call "lesbian literature." We cannot skip over into full maturity by remaining silent until

a "genius" comes along to speak for us; if we do, we will end up waiting forever and produce nothing. Instead, I think we have to recognize what we are experiencing as a literary movement, try to understand it, try to control it, try to be reflective about it. Above all, we must make sure—and I think criticism is the only way of doing this—that it is meeting *our* needs and *our* standards as lesbian/feminist writers, not the needs and standards of male critics.

Furthermore, I believe it is a complete misreading of the current literature to conclude that we are too focused on certain subjects, that we have written them to death. On the contrary, I think lesbian writers have just begun their explorations, have just begun their experiments with language and narrative, with new ways of writing about our bodies, our sexuality, our lovers, our mothers, our children; they have just begun to address their writing to basic issues involving economics, race, survival, oppression. Frequently, these beginnings are not satisfactory; and when they are not, they must be criticized. But it would be destructive to both our movement and to our literature if we followed Bertha Harris's advice and simply stopped and turned elsewhere.

### III

In her opening statement, Harris remarked that our criticism is "so much better" than our literature. She was, however, referring to a specific type of criticism, the kind directed at the society in which we live, at the literature supported by that society, etc.; in other words, a feminist criticism directed *outward*.

Feminist self-criticism, i.e., feminist criticism directed *inward*, directed at ourselves and what we write, however, has been almost nonexistent. And with good reason. The feminist and lesbian/feminist literary movement has been too busy simply surviving and existing. Either viciously attacked or completely ignored, lesbian/feminist writers and critics have put almost all their energy into supporting feminist projects, publicizing feminist presses, strengthening and expanding the network that has been building up in the last seven or eight years.

Without this kind of major effort, much of what has been produced would have never reached any lesbian audience (and much has been produced, and yes lesbians do read). But one of the serious side effects of focusing entirely on our survival has been that support and critical evaluation have grown to be considered mutually exclusive. In our desire to show solidarity, to encourage and applaud efforts of fellow writers, to establish the kind of atmosphere conducive to creativity, we have frequently been totally uncritical, as if criticism were equated with lack of support, lack of appreciation, or worse yet, with divisiveness.

As always, practical consideration also fostered this situation. The uncritical, sometimes self-congratulatory atmosphere has, I think, been the direct result of the limited space we can offer for careful, thoughtful evaluation. In view of these limitations, it has made far more sense to dwell on our achievements than on our shortcomings, especially when we've been so conscious of the effort behind every work that is published. Thus, many editors have frequently chosen to review only what they consider "the best," or "the most attacked," thereby ignoring the bulk of literature coming out of the feminist presses. One of the sad results of this is that the full scope of what is being published

by presses and self-published by individuals has never been really surveyed. Works that were perhaps experimental and not completely "successful" in their experiments, works that ventured awkwardly into new areas, have received little recognition, evaluation, or credit for their existence. As always, limited circumstances and opportunities have created unnatural priorities.

But this kind of situation is both unproductive and self-defeating. Without being melodramatic, I believe that criticism must begin to play as important a function in our movement as fiction, poetry, and other literary forms; for it is one of the most vital means of opening up discussion and debate, of exchanging and examining ideas, of pinpointing weaknesses, of demanding excellence, of making conscious and deliberate what is frequently accidental and haphazard. It is also a way of making editors, publishers, and writers accountable to the community that they represent and from which they expect support. And I really believe that if we do not give criticism this kind of function, we are in great danger of allowing our literature to grow stagnant and smug, and ultimately of undoing, through self-satisfaction, all of our recent achievements.

#### IV

At the convention, Bertha Harris presented us with the kind of criticism I hope lesbian/feminists will reject. It followed quite strictly the male model: it was patronizing in its material, flippant and belittling, intent on drawing attention to the critic by exhibiting how clever/nasty she (or he) could be; it preached broad, vague generalities as self-evident truths in a tone that was superior and arrogant; its few specifics were deliberately so outrageous (e.g., "*The Great Gatsby* is a model lesbian novel.") as to render the criticism useless.

I hope that as lesbian/feminist writers, we can evolve a more constructive form of criticism, one that is sharp and to the point, one that will help us find new directions and standards for our writing, and one that, at the same time, reflects what George Eliot called our "best-self." I would like to see open, specific discussions and evaluations of the kinds of works being published by commercial presses, our presses, newspapers, journals, and by individuals. I would like to see criticism address itself to some of the issues which are vital to our literature: the struggle between non-elitism and intellectualism, between politics and art, between experimentation and aesthetic standards, between individual artistic integrity and accountability to the community, between support and criticism, etc. Each reader can fill in the issues on which she has been silent. And I would like to see in these discussions references to specific names of writers, titles of books, and quotations of relevant passages.

None of us are particularly at ease in giving criticism directly or publicly; none of us are particularly at ease in receiving it. But I think that we must learn to do *both*, must learn to be honest if we as individual writers and as a collective movement are to continue developing. Recently two journals began publishing feminist criticism of women's works. *The Feminist Review* and *Motherroot Journal*, though not lesbian publications, are devoted exclusively to reviewing books by women. Perhaps their appearance at this time is an indication that we have grown strong enough and self-sufficient enough to enter a more reflective stage in our evolution.

# LESBIAN LIVES

FICTION

POETRY

PHOTOGRAPHS



*photo by Barbara H. Bradford*

## TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

*The following is the final section of a five-part story which concerns a day in the life of Alice, a lesbian living in Brooklyn, New York with Jackie, her nine-year-old daughter. The story's title comes from the slogan on a poster which Jackie, despite complaints from her mother, has declined to remove from the door of her room. The woman named Morgan, referred to several times, is a political activist friend of Alice's with whom Alice has lately found herself in disagreement. As Section V begins, Alice and Jackie are rather nervously anticipating the arrival of Leah, Alice's ex-lover, who is coming to dinner.*

V. 7:20 P.M.

*If only Billie Holiday had been a dyke she'd have been really together.* Alice can no longer remember which of her acquaintances once uttered this ridiculous statement, but neither can she play her Billie Holiday records without thinking of it. They are stacked on the machine now, along with her Bessie Smith records. *Bessie Smith, who was, sort of, and bled to death anyway, folks.*

Content, her house clean around her, Alice walks from room to room sipping wine. She is wearing a long cotton skirt which half contradicts the statement made by her cropped hair. *Their pain on vinyl. Do I use their pain? Do I have the right?* But the doubt is only incidental; she can't help that she's happy, hearing their voices.

*And how long since I've felt so relaxed before Leah? So I must be free now. Freer.*

Reckless with wine, she decides to use the Tarot to confirm this. *If only Morgan the materialist could see me now.* The cards are in their traditional place in the drawer of the small night table by her bed. Seeing them smudged in places, some of the corners bent back, she wonders whether she ought to treat them more carefully, keep them wrapped in velvet as the books advise. But she is a busy woman, can't really afford the luxury of the occult. The powers that be, it seems to her, will just have to accept that fact.

At one time Alice believed she had a good intuitive grasp of the cards but, dilettante, she never studied them properly. Now she uses them so seldom that even her intuitions are blunted, rusty. Like a child who can't yet read the text, she's free to place her own interpretations on the pictures. And they do please her, the images of beautiful women she turns up, Strength, the Queen of Swords, the Nine of Pentacles. Picking the significator, she feels no suspense; it is almost an afterthought. Except that the card she turns over is the Devil, that hideous, mocking image, the hateful, naked

little heterosexual pair chained at the foot of the throne. Bondage. Bondage to false ideas. *Well, you were fishing for compliments. See what you get?*

"What's that, Mom?"

Alice jumps. "For christ's sake, Jackie, knock." One of the drawbacks of living in a railroad apartment is that there is always an excuse for a child to come barging through one's bedroom on the way to the front of the house.

"Sorry. What're you doing?"

"Haven't you ever seen my Tarot cards before?" Better for Jackie to have caught her smoking. "They're fortune-telling cards. I use them for fun sometimes."

"Oh, we studied that in school. It's a superstition."

Alice is offended. "Well, not quite. A superstition is like when you think it's bad luck if a black cat crosses your path, or Friday the 13th. . . ."

"It is so. Miss Gordon said fortune telling's a superstition."

"All right then, it's a superstition." *You're lucky I don't trundle you off to L.A. and sign us up for some wigged-out wicce cult.*

"Ooh, gross, that man and lady are naked." And Jackie skips off to her own room, whence the TV blasting at unacceptable levels announces she's trying to tune out Leah's arrival. Yet she dashes for the door the minute the buzzer rings.

"Did you know my Mom is superstitious? She does fortune-telling."

"Why hello, Jackie. Is your Mommy at it again?" Leah stands panting at the door, half a pound of camembert in hand. Her exaggeratedly playful tone could perhaps have been suitably addressed to a six- or seven-year-old. Why can't she see it's an insult to the contemporary Jackie, with her tight jeans, her hands-on-hips stance, her studied pre-adolescent flippancy? Alice, watching, is irritated, so she goes right back to the kitchen. But Leah follows almost immediately.

"Are you two speaking?"

Leah doesn't answer. She's looking good in jeans, a dark green corduroy jacket, a bright scarf knotted at her throat. *She is about to be a success* Alice thinks half-contemptuously, and not for the first time. *Five years at the outside.* She can already see the articles, the photographs of paintings: first *Ms.* and then the *Village Voice*, or maybe the other way around. Then a small piece in the *Times*.

"Would you like some cheap white wine? I'm afraid that's all I have."

Despite chronic cash-flow problems, Leah usually manages to keep on hand a decent brand of whiskey. Style: that is the quality which, in Leah, covers a multitude of failings. *Whereas all I have is a certain tenacity.*

For example, Leah never cleans. When she and Alice lived together this was a disaster, the apartment a shambles, Alice critical, nagging. But now in Leah's cavernous loft the mess somehow disappears, everything seems as it should be: jungle of plants, odd sticks of furniture retrieved from other people's garbage, dust, clutter, paintings.

"I'd love a glass of wine. I've gone off the hard stuff for a while."

"Don't tell me you've reformed."

"Not voluntarily. Doctor's orders."

"Leah, why?"

"My stomach." She shrugs, embarrassed, half-pleased, maybe. "Nothing too significant, really. A precaution."

"Is success getting to you?"

"Alice, one lousy grant. It would keep a successful painter in the Hamptons for two months."

"All the same, I was jealous when I heard. In addition to being pleased for you, of course." Jealous, yes, as one might be to hear that one's ex-lover had finally moved in with someone. For all the time they had lived together Leah's painting had been at the bitter heart of their quarrels. *I am an artist. I belong tragically alone, making my art. Free of you and your snivelling brat I'd show what I could do* was not quite what Leah had ever said, but it was what she had felt, had ultimately acted on.

"Don't forget, I'm going to be forty in the spring. A grant, a show—it's not a hell of a lot, not at my age."

"Never mind that, how is your work going?" Alice the purist, the non-artist, means that this is what counts; money and fame shouldn't matter.

"Oddly enough, quite well."

"Fantastic."

"I'm actually a little afraid to talk about it, for fear of something going wrong. But it's as if I finally had the courage for all these things I've only imagined before."

"I'm glad."

But really Alice is, this moment, aghast at the stupidity, the sheer waste of their breakup. Of course Leah had needed a loft, but that had been a technicality. She could have had everything she has now; they could still be together.

Naturally they'd had a few other problems; what they jokingly called their "interfaith relationship," for example. They made light of it ("my goyische girlfriend," said Leah) and held feminist seders for which Alice, the better cook, made matzoh ball soup; but then they would get into terrible fights because Alice happened to make the wrong remark about Israeli foreign policy. It was not that Leah approved of Israeli foreign policy either, but that Alice was somehow not authorized to express an opinion about it.

There was also Jackie.

"And you, how do you like being on the dole? Better than working at that gruesome place, I'll bet."

"I don't know yet. I'm still too worn out to tell."

"Poor Alice. But I'm sure you'll bounce back within a couple of weeks; you have so much energy." Yes, Alice, the workhorse, the one with all the energy, the one who can stand shit jobs and motherhood. "Which reminds me, I was going to ask you whether you'd like to meet me in town tomorrow. I was planning on going to the Nevelson exhibit at the Modern."

"I wish I could. I've already promised Morgan to go to a demo tomorrow in New Jersey," Alice replies pointedly. She is tired of hearing about Art.

"Morgan the Commissar? You still see her?"

"Leah, please, spare me your animosities. Actually, I don't see much of her right now, but the demonstration is important and I'm going anyway. I'd like to go to a show with you sometime."

All of this, Alice notes with relief, is just comfortable sparring, nothing like the confrontations and acute pain of even six months ago. Stir-frying, she enjoys a vague anticipation of something pleasant. What is it, the wine,

the prospect of a good dinner not eaten alone? The ritual examination of motives commences. *Am I safe, now, here, in this pocket of time? With food, with a friend I know well enough not to have fear surprises? Is it true I don't have to worry right now, I'm okay, death doesn't matter even, or politics?* She doesn't know. She is just drunk enough to want to stand there forever over the wok, stirring, so that she makes the mistake of asking Leah to go tell Jackie it's time to say goodnight.

Leah reports back cold-eyed, furious.

"Her Highness desires me to inform you that she's planning to stay up and watch Starsky and Hutch."

Alice sees she has blown it with both of them. Her first impulse is to go and slug it out with Jackie, who knows she is not allowed to stay up and watch Starsky and Hutch, not even on a non-school night, not in this house. But then the food will get cold and there will be a knot in Alice's stomach so she can't enjoy it, and Leah will only frown harder, withdraw further.

"I'm sorry, it was my mistake. I shouldn't have sent you in there."

"No, you shouldn't."

Leah and Jackie always had such a strange involvement—an intricate dance of avoidance it was, really. Leah thought she had the worst of it. *Always being the one left over, not the real mother*, she said. Not seeing how torn Alice felt, how in the middle. *But do you really want a child?* Alice said. Of course it was the wrong question.

"Jackie still thinks about you a lot, you know. Every so often she'll mention you out of a clear blue sky, like the other day she said, 'Leah likes moussaka, doesn't she?' Then when I try to talk about you she changes the subject."

"I can understand that."

"I'm sorry, let's forget it, let's eat." Time enough to have it out with Jackie tomorrow.

Candles, a real tablecloth, the rice done just right. How pleasant to cook for someone, to eat with someone, to use chopsticks. *And perhaps I really will change, learn all about protein complementarity and cook for my friends on food stamps. Rice, beans, whole wheat bread.* She imagines the apartment filled with light, with lives in motion, she the facilitator.

"Leah, do you ever feel like you'd like to change your life?"

"In what way?"

"In any way. Don't you ever think about going someplace else and starting over?"

Leah considers, chopsticks poised in her elegant fingers. Leah always eats slowly, delicately, as though thoroughly considering each bite. Alice gobbles.

"Sometimes I get sick of New York, like everybody else. But since I need to be here for my work I don't think about it that much. I just steer around the garbage cans, look the other way when I come down in the morning and find some old guy crashed out on my doorstep."

The wine is getting to Alice. "Sometimes, on a bus or something, I amuse myself making lists of all the things I still have time to do. *You still have time to become an ultra-left adventurist, rob banks, kill politicians, get life plus thirty. You still have time to learn to speak fluent Russian, Chinese, Swahili. You still have time to get a job in some godforsaken Midwestern*

town, wait tables, marry a truck driver. Why is the idea that I *could* do those things important to me? I couldn't really. They're not in character."

"Still, if you did, they'd be in character because you did them. Feminist art is art done by a feminist; what is in character for Alice is whatever Alice does."

"Really? I'm not sure. Remember how you used to talk about not having a child? You gave that reason: that having a child wasn't the sort of thing you would do."

"But of course I said that to make it easier on myself." Leah's matter-of-factness about this surprises Alice. "It was a choice, but at the time it was too painful for me to see it that way."

"Really? So you're past it. Good for you." Alice hesitates, then plunges. "To tell the truth, I've been thinking a lot lately about having another kid."

"Seriously?"

"Semi."

"Have you thought about how you'd handle it with Jackie?"

"Christ, Leah, how should I know?" But it is, of course, precisely the proper question. "Jackie's hardly a kid anymore, we seem more like a pair of roommates every day. How long am I supposed to keep making major life decisions on the basis of Jackie's needs?" This is an exaggeration; Alice has made few major decisions on the basis of Jackie's needs. It's all the minor ones made daily over the years that have worn her out, that constitute the real sacrifice. "The only thing you pledge yourself to when you have children is that you won't abandon them. It's not a monogamous relationship."

"But Alice, why? I'm not saying you shouldn't; I just don't understand." Leah seems to be speaking out of simple friendly concern, and Alice is touched. Two years ago she'd have been too absorbed in her own ambivalences to consider the subject so disinterestedly.

"I've thought about it a lot, and I just don't know why. I've tried to forget about it, too, because it certainly would be a hell of a lot simpler. Jesus, I'd be fifty-five before I was through."

"Indeed. I think about that every time I go someplace and see all these grey-haired feminists with their last-chance babies."

"But all the same, I can't quite talk myself out of it. There's this image of me with the baby that keeps coming back. Thinking about it makes me feel free. Then I think maybe it's just a power trip, the idea of willing a life. Is that legitimate? I don't know, and I don't know how to find out, short of actually doing it."

"How would you do it, by the way?"

"You mean financially? Welfare, probably. I could always work off the books."

"No, I mean how would you get pregnant?"

"I have no idea. I mean, I have lots of ideas, ranging from medically-supervised artificial insemination to sleazy one-night stands at periods of peak fertility. I'm sure if I want a baby I can manage it."

"What if it's a boy?"

Alice grimaces. "What a wet blanket you are. What if it has Down's syndrome, what if it has flippers instead of feet?"

"Oh Alice, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be obnoxious. I just want to say be careful. Funny things can happen with these decisions. At our age—"

"At our age what?" At thirty-three, Alice has never considered herself to be of an age with Leah.

"It's hard to get older and not have what you want. It's too easy to settle for the wrong thing. That's all I meant. I wish you the best, you know that."

"Leah, you understand I'm just telling you about this fantasy I have. I mean I haven't decided." Alice is frightened, like five-year-old Jackie, willful on a street corner, terrified suddenly when her mother would walk away.

"I understand."

"You're lucky, you know. You make something permanent. You can look at a room full of paintings and say: there's my life. That's what I did. You get twice as much that way, your life doubled."

"Do I? I'm never quite clear about that."

"Don't you?"

"I think not. I always want it to be that way, but then there's the old anxiety. It doesn't matter what I painted yesterday. Am I still alive? Can I still paint? I never shake it. Do you know, it's given me this fucking ulcer, I'm sure it's not anything about 'success,' it's just that. Can I still see? Can I still paint?"

"Well, I'm getting an ulcer too, Leah, and I don't paint." Alice is sorry now she mentioned the baby; she feels let-down, depressed.

"That's just my point. Maybe the same thing that's giving you your ulcer is giving me mine. Painting is a way of being alive, it involves all the same problems. You don't just do it once and for all. In fact I think the idea of the artist producing these great final objects is a very male thing."

"Leah, you know how skeptical I am about certain ideas being male and others female."

"Well, it makes sense. The first art was probably made by women, and it was made to be used. Can you imagine someone saying, 'Look, I made this piece of pottery, now I'll retire, I can live forever?' Of course not. It's men who spend their lives building pyramids, tombstones, monuments. In the end, of course, it's pure chance that anything survives. Some pots do, some cave-paintings, some pyramids. *We* certainly don't."

Alice, socialist-feminist, doesn't like to admit she's a bit intrigued by a theory which smacks of matriarchist tendencies. "And where does recognition fit in? Doesn't getting a grant help you feel you've done something worthwhile?"

"Of course it helps. A necessary illusion, a curtain against the outer darkness. It's pleasant to be told you've done well, but it doesn't really change anything."

"Are you saying there's no hope, then?" Alice smiles.

"Maybe. This will probably seem pretty silly in the morning."

"Yes. Let's finish the wine."

Late, Alice embraces Leah at the door, then stands behind it listening to her descending footsteps. *How odd there's nothing in the least sexual left.* For if there were, surely it would have surfaced this evening, with all the wine and speculative talk. No; that thinness, those elegant bones, are good for nothing now except to look at. What Alice wants is superabundance of flesh.

*What were we doing together at all, for that matter? Such an unlikely pair.* The realization that she really can't remember just brings back all the old pain of loss, the ache in the vanished limb. *Leah, Morgan. Do we become purer, harder as we grow older, more different from each other, more fixed in our separate personalities?* It is a grand idea, but it chills her. *I'll call Leah soon, she promises herself, maybe there's something coming up next month at the Whitney.*

Turning, her eye is arrested by the absence of a familiar irritation; "Today Is The First Day Of The Rest Of Your Life" is missing from Jackie's door. It takes her a minute to notice the small square of paper, folded many times, taped in its place. On the face of this is printed, in letters so tiny they seem to challenge her to locate the message, not "Mom," but her name.

The text is in Jackie's new, laborious script. "I'm sorry I said I was going to stay up and watch Starsky and Huch and I didnt. I cleaned my room too. Will you give me a kiss. I hope you had a plesent evening with Leah." The room Alice tiptoes into is rather unnaturally neat.

At first inclined to smile at the transparent psychology of children, Alice remembers the poster. She hunts for it with mounting urgency, as though it were important, finally locates it in the obvious place, the wastebasket, crumpled though not torn. But much too wrinkled to be resurrected.

*She did this for me. I'll talk to her tomorrow. I'll get her another, she can put it up anywhere, on the refrigerator if she wants to.* Alice, frightened, is very nearly angry, as mothers are when children dart out into the street in the path of cars, put themselves in any danger. Then, seeing how Jackie lies drawn up on the bed in the defensive posture of foetuses and nursing home patients, pity and terror claim her. *I made her. I made her. How can I betray her?*

Alice kisses her daughter, drinks a glass of water, takes a vitamin pill, flosses her teeth to forestall gum disease, lies in bed alone. Hard to sleep, but she'd better. She'll be hungover; Jackie will wake her early.

So then there is this person in bed with her. She cannot see the face but hears what the voice says. Obeys directions. And her hand moves down.

*Rockabye and good night go to sleepy little baby.*

Alice sleeps, enters the first circle of dreams.



portrait by J. Z. Grover



UNIT NUMBER 18

"We'd better turn the sheet around so the hole is at the bottom."

"What if someone sticks their big toe in it?"

"This is the last clean sheet we'll just have to take a chance."

This was also the last unit we had to clean for the day. I work with Alora at the Seaweed Motel. It is just off the highway on the outer edges of San Francisco. Alora and I work pretty well as maids together except she likes to clean with ammonia and I prefer Pinesol and she likes to tune into the soap operas on tv and I like going through people's closets and drawers—when they aren't there of course. Alora cleans the rooms while I clean the bathrooms. She runs a dust mop over the floor and after I help her make the bed she sits on it and watches her favorite soap. I slap a wet towel over the bathroom. Then to make it seem sparkly clean I slip a strip of paper over the toilet seat that says something about it being sanitary and then I put another large square paper on the shower floor so people won't slip when they shower.

One very foggy morning Alora and I pushed our carts through the courtyard to unit 18 at the far end of the motel. This caused some late sleepers to curse at us because our carts were so noisy. The people who checked out of 18 had one hell of a time the night before. The bed was in pieces wine bottles were in every corner—potato chips crunched under our feet. The towels were gone except for one dripping wet washcloth left in the shower, next to the square paper. We both moaned. Alora turned the tv on. I turned it off.

"Gawd Alora you are beginning to sound like those damn soaps."

"I am not! What's wrong with you anyway?"

"You know what you told me the other day about your sister who's having an affair with that married doctor whose wife is going to kill herself because she has a crippled dog?"

"It's true!" Alora shouted.

I said, "Alora you told me you don't have any sisters."

"And what about you telling me you met the queen of Greece when there's no such person!?"

"Hey," a voice behind us said, "the tenants are complaining." The manager stood at the door with egg stuck in his beard. "I don't mind you talking but keep it down a little." He left and Alora and I didn't speak—for the rest of the day we only said what we needed to.

I pouted and wished I worked with another lesbian instead of Alora whose boyfriend could only fix cars and talk about baseball. I never cleaned so thoroughly. I'd ram my hand into a rubber glove and scrub the living hell out of those bathrooms.

We were near the manager's unit. He was banging pots and pans and talking loudly to someone on the phone, "—no I said we do not take cats and a

deposit must be paid for the dog—umm yeah yeah—”

“Do you wanna do one more unit then break for lunch?” I asked Alora but looked at the cart I was pushing. “Tsk ok.” She mumbled something else I couldn’t hear.

I knocked twice on the door, “Maid service!” The door opened slowly. Two women stood, one on either side of the room. One with her fists pushed into her hips—hips that a leather belt was wrapped around with a long knife hanging from it. The other woman stood holding the door, an army jacket on her thick arms. Our eyes darted back and forth like they were dancing on strobe lights. A radio on the desk was playing a song called you light up my life. The strong aroma of fish frying in the manager’s unit overwhelmed me. I held the rubber-tipped finger of my glove to my mouth and cleared my throat, “Would you like us to clean your room?” “It’s alright,” the woman in the army jacket said. “We’re checking out in a few minutes.”

Alora pulled on my arm so we went and sat in the courtyard with our lunches. Alora babbled on about how she was sorry and she sure hoped I was too and then she talked about what she was going to feed whatsize name for dinner while I watched the clouds drift by and the seagulls dipping through the air and hummed you light up my life. “Aren’t you gonna eat?” Alora asked. “No you can have it if you want.” So she ate my cheese sandwich and apple. The two women checked out and drove away in a sports car with Texas license plates. For the next few weeks I not only hummed the same song over and over I thought incessantly about the two women and wondered what they did in Texas. Maybe they’re cattle rustlers or teachers. Do they live in the middle of nowhere with each other and prairie dogs and cactus? Why did they come to San Francisco? Maybe they found an apartment and are living here now. So I went to every place I could think of that gay women would go to. I remembered every feature on their faces and saw a great number of women who could almost have passed for them.

Alora was really grating on my nerves. She stopped watching the soaps and watched the game shows instead so everytime we’d get our paychecks she’d screech and throw her arms up like she’d just won a new car.

Then one day the sports car with the Texas plates appeared next to unit 18. I rushed Alora up as fast as I could and told her lies to stop her from turning the tv on. “The manager is going to find someone else if we don’t straighten up.” We were cleaning the unit next to 18 when I heard their voices—first low and angry then louder and louder, “You can get twenty fuckin years for possession—You fuckin bitch stay off my ass—”

Alora looked disgusted and banged on the door, “Come back later!” an angry voice shouted. “Please keep your voices down,” Alora said like she was talking to a room full of children, “You’re disturbing the other tenants.” One of the women stomped out and pounded down the street. The other woman said to Alora, “Shit then I’m leavin too!” and she tore off in another direction. “Okay we’ll clean the room now.” Alora sang like nothing happened.

I checked the knife left on the desk. It could have sliced a piece of hair into four strands. I picked through the open suitcase, four work shirts, two pairs of overalls, a carton of Camels, a map of California—“You wanna help me make this bed?” I pulled myself away.

One pillow lay on the floor the other had two dents on it where I was sure both their heads lay before the fight. I wanted to help them. They weren't cattle rustlers at all but big time dealers probably part of the Texas connection; or maybe one of them had a single joint and the other freaked because they are both elementary school teachers on vacation. I couldn't bear to leave the motel without letting them know I was after all "concerned" about them. So when I cleaned their bathroom I wrote on the strip of paper left around the toilet seat, "Please see note in shower" then on the square paper left in the shower I wrote—"All types of help given—call Linda the maid." I left not only my phone number but my address then rushed back later and wrote careful instructions on how to get to my apartment. Later that night I waited for a phone call then as I began to tire and the night slowed down I started feeling ridiculous. I blushed at the thought of ever facing them again. My god they must think I'm nuts. I stared down at the phone—if it rang at that moment I would have passed out from shock. I took the receiver off the hook. The next morning I called in sick. Everything seemed as usual.

Alora was back to watching the soap opera. I played hopscotch with two kids from one of the units and they thought it was very funny watching an overweight middle-aged woman hopscotching. Alora and I refused to clean a room that had a large growly german shepherd guarding the door. Alora told me at some point she was leaving. She and her boyfriend were getting married and going to move to god knows where. When we got to unit 18 I went right to the bathroom and cleaned it quickly. The two women had moved out and a new tenant was sitting on the bed watching us clean.

After lunch the manager brought the maid that would take Alora's place. "This is Sarah." "Didn't I meet you in that little bar on mission street?" I asked her excitedly. "Yeah I thought you looked familiar." Sarah wore two earrings in one ear and none in the other. She was my size and had very short hair that curled tightly on her head. We checked each other out completely while we spoke.

Alora decided to leave early. Before she left she said "Oh by the way you know those people in unit 18? They left a note for you." "WHAT!" I was nearly on top of her. "Where is it?"

"Oh I didn't keep it I threw it away."

"Well shit what did it say?"

"Tsk oh I don't know somethin like thank you and ah we got our shit together and what looked like a phone number or address or something."

"Why didn't you save it for me?!" She looked at me like I was crazy and left.

Sarah and I have been working together for some time now. She hates tv and loves snooping through people's things as much as I do furthermore we are both waiting for the two women from Texas to come back.

## A PECK FROM A PECK

your thin lips grazed my full cheek  
the matriarchy is a racist structure  
ever present in the gleam of straightened hair  
some like the nap  
greased and burning flesh  
under curling irons and bleaching creams  
thin lips and flowing tresses  
toss insults anew  
let us play  
colors come and go in light  
fire burning crosses  
lawns alight  
you've come nearer to the fire

## SHAM – NOVEMBER 7, 1976

bloody racist whore!  
maddened by your people  
I want a girl with a peaches and cream complexion  
and a full time job

such attention is uncommon to me, so I scream  
when you touch me  
healthy hair and bad teeth  
ain't nothin to me 'cause  
I will find you  
a dentist

a poem for a feather  
with hollow neck bones and protruding hips  
I remember your lips so well

*—poems by Stephanie Byrd*

## LEFTOVERS

From the second-hand shops, they had brought home bags full of blue: denim jackets, jeans, overalls and work shirts. After supper, everything had been tried on before the full length mirror, and now lay spread in a dark and pale patchwork across the double bed. Sitting crosslegged in the center, Julia held a measuring tape against the hem of the first pair of jeans. In the corner closet, the one that was seldom opened, Gina searched for hangers. But she emerged with her arms full of brightly colored garments—a tumbled load, marked by a band of rick-rack, an embroidered ribbon, an exotic eastern design trailing in a long sweep to the floor, a shimmer of acetate—dresses. In answer to Julia's questioning look, Gina offered the explanation, "I thought with all the new clothes, I should get rid of some of these." Then, softly, "I never wear this stuff anymore."

Julia watched from the middle of the denim patchwork, the marking chalk momentarily still in her hand. Watched Gina pull from the tumble a bright orange dress with a short full skirt and bands of shirring across the waist and bodice. "You used to wear that?"

"To dance in." Gina held the full skirt wide. "I loved the way the skirt danced when I did."

Julia shook her head, bending over to send the shears flying in a swift arc to their destination. "Nobody wears party dresses to go dancing."

"It's not a party dress. Just fun to dance in." Gina's back was turned now as she held the dress against her, watching herself in the mirror.

"Well, how come you don't?"

"Don't what?" The orange dress sailed across the room, to land accurately atop the heap Gina had deposited on the chair.

"Don't wear it anymore? To dance in?"

Gina was back in the closet before she answered. "I guess, you know, being with you, it would feel strange." Her voice was muffled by the rack of clothes. "I don't think I would feel . . . comfortable." She emerged again and began to be busy removing hangers.

Now Julia's scissors stopped in their course. "Gina—would you like it if I liked to get dressed up, too?"

What else could she answer? She did not lie, not to Julia. "Yes, I would. Of course I would. It's fun, sometimes. My friend Sharon and I used to do that—get dressed up for no reason and maybe go buy ice-cream cones. It was fun." She and Sharon had worn skirts to the floor and broad-brimmed straw hats. They had pretended to be Ursula and Gudrun from *The Rainbow*. They'd buy ice-cream and sit on a bench on the parkway. Sharon would watch all the men who passed. Gina would watch Sharon—Sharon wearing ribbons and

flowers around the crown of her wide-brimmed hat. "But I would never ask you to do that."

"Oh, I would never do it." Julia fingered the frayed edge of a pair of jeans, picked at the fine threads. "But *you* could."

And what would everyone think, Julia? With me in a long skirt and a summer straw hat, and you in jeans and a belt and boots? You know what they'd think. She continued to strip the clothes from their hangers and answered, "I don't mind not doing those things now. It's the past." Like wanting a wedding. Like expecting that someday someone else would pay for her hats and shoes and dresses. Like wanting a baby she could array in ribbons and flowers. Another door in her mind swinging shut, the latch clicking.

Working through the pile, she had reached a turquoise colored skirt with a deep ruffled flounce at the hem. She remembered—she'd worn it the night she and Sharon had gone to the Town Edge to hear the bouzouki players and dance the syrtos. Coming home, they had missed the last bus and it had started to rain. Sharon and Gina had walked four miles in the pouring rain, carrying their sandals slung over their shoulders, and lifting their skirts for the puddles, laughing and singing. The past.

"It still makes you feel bad, doesn't it?" Julia asked, her eyes on the needle she was threading with blue. Without waiting for an answer she went on, "You don't have to get rid of anything if it makes you feel so bad. Not on my account."

Gina paused, studying Julia's bent over head. The bright skirt alone remained in her hands. "Of course it makes me feel bad. A lot of things I remember make me feel bad." She would feel bad, and allow herself that. Not too bad—she wouldn't cry. She wasn't sorry. Just feel bad enough to maybe write a poem. "I don't mind feeling bad," she said.

Julia had stopped, too. Now she pushed the jeans she had been altering swiftly aside. The scissors clattered to the floor. "Gina. Maybe you should have stayed straight. All the things you miss—getting dressed up and going out and stuff—you'd have been much happier straight. You could have a big fancy wedding, and then you could have a kid and stay home and indulge yourself in self-pity all week, waiting for some man to take you out dancing on weekends—all dressed up."

Gina froze as the words sliced into her, plunged to her soft center, pierced her most vulnerable place, that ineradicable past when she was still straight. Julia would know how much that hurt. The tears Gina had transcended only minutes before now suddenly filled in. She turned abruptly, the blue skirt still caught in her hands, and left the room. Shut the door behind.

In the small extra room that was next to their bedroom, she held the turquoise cloth to her face, rubbed her fingers in the fabric, feeling the gloss, crushing the gathers in her hands. Julia, I won't be sorry for the way my life was before I met you. You have no right to judge that. You don't know what it was like to be straight. Maybe I did care a lot about pretty dresses and believe a lot of pretty lies. But there was much more to it than that.

The turquoise skirt fell in deep folds across her lap. There used to be beads—blue beads that matched the skirt. They must be here in this room, in the little chest that was also stuffed full of leftovers. The jewel box. She

got up and began to search through the drawers of the chest. Yes, in the corner, the jewel box, in the bottom, a fold of yellowed tissue-paper. She drew them out.

The blue beads shone in her fingers, clicked softly into a mound against the matching fabric—deeper blue than the sky after a rainfall. They were real turquoise, held together by tiny links of silver wire. Sharon had sent them to her from Mexico. Gina had been shocked when she unwrapped the little package—the beads were too valuable, too expensive, too unlikely a purchase for Sharon, trying to last out a year in Mexico on a pauper's budget. And a month later, Gina had had to wire Sharon the money to get home.

Where was Sharon now? After the Mexico episode, Gina's memories of her were distant, cloudy. For Sharon there had been a marriage, an alcoholic husband; for Gina, heart-rending letters from her, long distance phone calls at 3 a.m. Could Sharon come and stay with her? Gina always said no. No, Sharon, it's too late now. It wouldn't be the same anymore. You wanted to be his wife. I wanted you to be my friend . . . After a time, the letters and calls had stopped.

She folded the skirt and scooped up the handful of turquoise beads. I won't lie to you, Julia. I'll try to explain it to you—what it was I valued, and why I can't let you rob me of my past . . . She left the skirt where it lay, but carried the beads back with her to the bedroom. She could talk to Julia now.

But the room was dark. The new clothes had been pushed to a crumpled heap on the floor, and there was a small mound under the quilt on the double bed. Gina sat down softly beside it and drew back the edge of the quilt. Julia was asleep—curled into a knot, fast in her familiar escape from hurt, from pain. Gina sat still for a long time watching her. Julia's eyes were shut, the lashes still against her cheek, her mouth slightly open. One arm and hand were exposed, the fingers clenched in a fist shoved deep into the pillow. She looked so small—so still. I don't want you to go away from me like that, Julia. You don't have to hide from me and keep on hurting. Did I hurt you that much? How much?

Gina leaned over and brushed a wisp of curl from Julia's cheek. She let the blue beads hang from her hand, over the side of the bed, then let them go. She kissed the round curve of Julia's shoulder, her temple, kissed the hollow at her throat.



*photograph by Tee Corinne*

## THE WOMAN WHO LIVES WITH OWLS . . .

is defiant  
refuses to clean  
does not invite people in  
listens to the mutterings  
and feathershakings of dark birds  
and then writes songs

she says she is learning their language

she writes notes to people  
on the meaning of owl-talk  
she says it is deep and intricate  
she studies the reason they live on night  
as if it were an unresolvable hunger  
she puts these notes in the mouths of owls  
and they are delivered  
dropped in the laps of friends and editors  
and strangers

later, no one will look her in the eye  
they claim she writes like everyone else  
on white paper and sends them through the mail

the woman who lives with owls  
is capable of sitting  
for years in one place  
while the great tree which is her home  
divides above her the dust gathers  
and the droppings of owls  
form themselves into silences

this woman who lives with owls  
who lets them sit on her shoulder  
who practices owl-talk in the dark  
makes a witch's promise to all owl-covens  
not to reveal

this owl-woman stands herself  
always on the edge of night  
whispering long-vowelled secrets  
into the wind

the notes she writes to the world  
are written in the dark  
surrounded by creatures which can fly  
surrounded by something with a powerful  
and sharp hunger

she will tell you her words are written  
on bark pulled from the tree she lives in  
she will tell you the pen she writes with  
was taken from the body of a small owl  
who died too young

but look at her in the light  
notice the just visible pair of eyes  
slit and yellow  
which sit on her shoulder

notice the places on her body  
raw of skin and empty  
where once a feather might have grown

*Martha Courtot*

## THE BOX

Note: What follows is actually the translation into writing of an essentially spoken/heard work. The music that occurs near the end is an integral part of the story; the piece is Pachelbel's *Canon in D-Major*.

*Sinsemilla* ("without seeds") is a form of marijuana. Only the female plants are allowed to flower; males are uprooted from the area and for a mile upwind. The female, unpollinated, sends out longer and longer branches of highly resinous flowers. (*High Times* touted it as "sex-starved marijuana," but there are other ways of looking at it.) The *sinsemilla* flowers thus obtained make a powerful, creative and lucid smoke. Two sources mention a tradition in Mexico that in earlier times *sinsemilla* was grown by women only.

"Tender Buttons" is the title of a work by Gertrude Stein.

When Trudy visited the West Coast in the spring of 1984 (This is a different 1984, I want it understood.) . . . When Trudy stepped from the train in Eugene, Alice already knew that sometime during her friend's visit here they would explore together that new women's store.

As it was, they went on Thursday, and, oddly, it was snowing. Along the branches, white puffs of late snow balanced between the cherry blooms, shimm'ring, like the intermixing of tutus, blossom-colored, and white, as if two different waltzes were dancing there at once, and, strangely, melding.

. . . Alice looked from the window to the bottle in her hand. This store was like a good museum, too much to absorb all at once. . . . The tape recorders, for instance, produced by a women's collective. And the strange names of some of the models: "Tape Recorder On The Edge of Time," for one. The woman who sold them once taught math; now she taught their care, repair, and their creative use. Her shop, with its cameras, tapes, and such, filled what had once been the living room of this old house. The house, once a respectable turn-of-the-century wooden fantasy, was metamorphosing again, become now a store, a women's place they called THE LIFE-AS-ART SUPPLY STORE.

Across the hall and through another doorway were windchimes, flowers, crystals of cut glass, a pile of old lace tablecloths. This, in what had once been some woman's dining room; you could see, her plate rail was still there.

In the windowed kitchen were the inevitable plants in pots. But these, grown by the nurseries at ELF, were special plants, each with some known virtue . . .

The knowledge of plants, the knowledge of plants discovered once by women called midwives, women called witches, women called shamena, the

knowledge of plants was being recovered now, through study, *and* through meditation. (For this was already in the beginnings of the Remembering.)

The women who tended nurseries at ELF, it seems, ate only fruit and nuts. They rose early, and began their work with meditation. They worked, mostly, in silence, musing, and listening for what the plants would tell them.

So here, in the kitchen, were the plants they grew, and here, beside them, the ELF series of *Plant Meditations*: three books, so far, offered as "works of fantasy." The meditations were, it said, received in the form of stories: dreams in the greenhouse, sometimes; sometimes there were visions as if from other lives. Other revelations as to the virtues of a certain plant came with the appearance of a fairy, or of a being called the "deva" of the plant. Most rarely there were characterizations of the plant seen as if from inside, as if one were conscious inside the plant itself, knowing the slow rhythms of the light.

What was not said, in these books, or anywhere, was that the information received in these meditation sessions was always carefully tried out until the women were sure they had understood it correctly. This was not said, for then all this could be called "selling patent medicines." It was not said. They printed their "fantasies," they nourished their plants, and they repaid the living this gave them with listening, and with giving thanks unto their plants.

It was not the ELF nurseries, however, who were responsible for Oregon's famous woman-grown *sinsemilla*. It was rather in the remote, high places of the state that this marijuana, legal, finally, for three years now, was grown.

In the mountains women slept all summer in the gardens,  
breathing in the white dust of the flowers,  
slept a sleep not quite like sleeping,  
knew the changes of the moon,  
saw the stars and planets moving  
out beyond the resinous flowers.

Days they walked among their plants, always searching out the male ones. If a woman found a male plant, she would meditate before it, reaching out unto its spirit, speaking thusly: "Forgive me. I must remove you. It's in the service of consciousness." And then she would pull it gently, bear it to the drying shed; from its fibres would be woven the rough, golden rope.

And as the woman walked her rounds, she greeted gladly each female she saw, called to her by name: There was Olivia, and there beside her taller Redwood stood, both now enjoying their third year of life, and giving still their copious boughs of flowers. Redwood and Olivia were matriarchs by now, legends, and with granddaughters already. The plants themselves weren't fertilized, of course. But from each, cuttings had been taken, grown beside their elder sister, and then carried, with much singing, downwind, down into the valley. There they bloomed among the others growing there among the male plants for the bearing of the seed. For some male plants there had been, who, when reached in meditation, had, in answer, spoken thusly: "Do not take me. By consciousness I conjure, in the name of love I tell you, in the plant that I am being is the seed of the Seed." So to ridgetops under stars and nights among the women came the luminous new generations.

This woman-grown *sinsemilla* was very . . . yin. With it, one seemed to notice a still place in oneself, a still place into which the world curved and resonated. "Elsa" (moon in Cancer) was a case in point. An ounceful of her flowers sold for twenty dollars in the shop upstairs. Or, if you were of a different frame of mind, there was "Laughing Grass," two dollars, and "Looking Grass" as well. One basketful of ounces had for a name a haiku. And one other, *sinsemilla* again, was the long-remembered "Doña Juana" (moon Aquarius).

. . . The pipes! Another story for another time.

Yes, it was too much to absorb all at once. Already, Alice could see Trudy's eyes glazing as she leafed through her sixth bin of women's music. Good, then she would not explore this corner today.

Trudy regained her seat by the fire, groping for her tea, her eyes on the record jacket she held. Alice returned into the afternoon light. The bottle of oil was warming in her hands. In its belly, minute bits of lavender drifted slowly downward through the oil. Around the neck of the bottle Alice noticed a ribbon, and, fastened there, a label, a drawing of the labial, labyrinthine petals of a flower. Beneath the flower, she read the words "Sapphoflower Oil."

In the end, however, she chose, not that, but a box, a round, a soft and tufted box. It was a box of, a box full of, of a secret she saved

till that same evening, when

after going home in the snow to tea, and then to bed to make love; and after talking instead, voicing fears and doubts, discussing, reassuring, and after, then, tears and after, after all, remembering touching and after English muffins after that

and after a joint, and a cigarette, smoked, respectively, smoked, reflectively, smoked in bed, the music changed to something like Bach. [Begin Pachelbel]

Something like Bach, it was. But it was not Bach, it was . . . "box," she remembered. Alice kissed between Trudy's eyebrows. "Close your eyes," she said. She drew the box from hiding. Soft, it was, a rounded, pillowed box, covered with a silken stuff.

Alice put aside the embroidered lid, and lifted out a scant handful of beads, soft pearls, essence of althea, and heal-all, in opalescent jell. Fairy bubbles, pearly baubles, warming in her hand

in the palm of a lover's hand, of a lover's hand rocking in the lips of her lover's secret mouth. Soft jell ball domes bubbling between the two woman surfaces,

reminding some, then, of Danaë,  
and of the golden rain

and then of golden rivulets

rivulets, themselves, then, melting, now,  
melting into healing balm, sweetly smelling,  
and in ever such good taste.

But short this melting is,  
and fleet the tongue must be  
to taste its nectar now,  
for now the melting, itself, is melting,  
and all is gone to scent or air,  
or rather, it had seemed, vanished into ether

leaving, then, this startled flesh  
this the hand, and this  
the hidden mouth and source  
wakened naked cell to cell.

On the floor the candlelight  
sparkled on the silken lid  
and on the name embroidered there,  
"Tender Buttons" it read.

---

"The box" is from an anthology of short stories which explore lesbian sensuality and eroticism. Look in women's bookstores this spring for *A Woman's Touch* or write Amazon Reality, Box 95, Eugene, Oregon, 97401.

Also, a tape of "the box" is available (\$4) from Time'sChild, Box 364, Ashland, Oregon 97520.

## A MEETING OF THE SAPPHIC DAUGHTERS

Lettie and Patrice almost arrived at their small apartment the same time that evening as they rushed home from classes. They quickly ate an instant dinner of hot dogs and canned baked beans, bathed, and dressed. By seven p.m., both were ready to leave for the meeting of the Sapphic Daughters.

Patrice was more excited about the occasion than Lettie mainly because, initially, it had all been her idea. Lettie had entertained other thoughts for this Friday night, which did not include being with what she was certain would be a gathering of all-white Sapphic Sisters. But Patrice, whom Lettie sometimes affectionately dubbed her Oriole Cookie, had a habit of wanting to attend events for which she, Lettie, had no heart. Like the Gurdjieff lecture and Bartók concert last week at Jefferson University, where Patrice was working on her doctorate in American literature with the aid of a fellowship. Esoteric lectures and concerts were all a part of Patrice, who was a growth product of the fifties. She was one of the first to integrate the schools in Alabama, and later became a recipient of the rush handout scholarships awarded to black students by one of the private, predominantly white, women's colleges in New England—scholarships awarded to invite Federal monies. Patrice had been around more whites than blacks. Her whole life's itinerary had been a journey through a nonidentifiable, cultureless milieu. During this time, she was one of the lucky ones who had few problems, for her physical makeup of a light complexion, proportioned features, and curly sandy hair did not cause much of a panic among those white students who feared only the color of blackness.

With Lettie it was different, for she halfway straddled another generation. Lettie had attended all-black public schools in Washington, D.C., and completed her college work at Howard University, closing her circle of blackness. Even now the pattern had not been too severed, since she taught political science at a community college in a predominantly black neighborhood. The college had a smattering of white students and a top-heavy frosting of white administrators. She knew the whites disliked her, for she made them uncomfortable with her candid outspokenness.

Even her appearance seemed a threat to them. She wore her mixed gray Afro closely cut to the shape of her round head. The deep, rich, ebony darkness of her skin reflected the mystery of her long-lost ancestors in the flowing ancestral heritage of her existence. Her dark flashing eyes could change from softness to a cutting penetration when adversely confronted. She was cynical; she knew the world, people—especially white people. About them, she would bitterly warn Patrice: *I don't care how friendly some of them are, when push comes to shove, they're white first!*

"You've tied that headpiece fifty times," Patrice snapped impatiently, watching her in front of the bureau mirror.

"Mind's someplace else—" Lettie replied shortly, now smoothing the folds of her long African dress.

"What's there to *think* about? We're just going to a meeting to hear Trollope Gaffney. The literature passed out at the college's Women's Center stated that *all* lesbians were welcome to attend."

"Uh-huh. But I'm just wondering how many *black* lesbians will be there besides us?"

Patrice garnered part of the mirror to apply lipstick. "It would be nice to find out, wouldn't it?"

"How can we when they're in the closets?" Lettie retorted.

"Well—so are we!" Patrice exclaimed in exasperation, turning to face her. "Have we come out to our colleagues, friends—students?"

"For what? To become ostracized? It's bad enough being looked upon as lepers by whites, let alone blacks. You know how blacks feel about—*bull-daggers*." Lettie spat out the epithet deliberately.

Patrice shuddered. "I hate that word—"

"So do I. But that's what our people call us," Lettie said softly. Suddenly a smile broke across her face, like sun obscuring a cloud, as she took in Patrice's shapely form outlined in a sheer summer dress the color of violets. "You look beautiful—"

"And you look beautifully militant!" Patrice laughed admiringly.

"I'm letting them know in *front* how I stand."

"C'mon, Angela Davis," Patrice teased, "let's go. The meeting starts at eight."

## II

The meeting place of the Sapphic Daughters was on the second floor above a curio shop in a shabby brick building near a battery of dilapidated warehouses. A large, husky woman with a hostile face, dressed in faded denims, stood guard at the door, blocking their entrance.

Lettie purposely lingered behind Patrice, fighting off her natural inclination to simply ignore the woman and brush past her. She heard Patrice ask with her nicest Wellesley demeanor: "Is this where Trollope Gaffney is scheduled to speak?"

The woman gave Patrice a long hard silent stare. Lettie smirked, thinking she was probably wondering if she were a nigger, and if so, where did she get that way of speaking.

"Yeah—" the guard finally grunted.

Deciding that there had been enough time spent on social graces, Lettie took Patrice's arm and forthrightly guided her past the door block. Immediately upon their entrance, they were washed by a shoal of white faces gazing at them from behind cold masks.

The meeting hall was an elongated, poorly lighted room bordering on bareness. A makeshift platform was at the front with three straight-backed chairs, a small table with copies of Trollope Gaffney's latest book, and a scratched-up podium. Decorating the wall behind was a large cardboard sign reading SAPPHIC DAUGHTERS with the interlocking Sapphic symbol beneath. Metal folding chairs had been placed in the center of the room. Along the right wall were two card tables pushed together, covered with white paper

cloths for serving refreshments. A large tin tub housed chunks of ice-sheltered beer.

Some of the women were seated, while others milled around in clover group clusters. "Br-r-r, I can feel the chill already," Lettie murmured, looking around.

"Don't be so negative. You just got here. Let's sit in the back row."

"No, indeedy! I've had enough back seat sitting in *my* lifetime!" Lettie retorted. "Front and center—"

The women seated in the fourth row they entered shifted their legs slightly to let them in. One attempted a weak smile. "I don't see *one* of us here—" Lettie observed.

"Sh-h-h—" Patrice hushed her. "I think they're getting ready to start."

Three pants-clad women strode stiffly down the aisle to the platform, feet grinding hard on the wooden floor. "That's Trollope Gaffney—" Patrice whispered excitedly, "in the center."

"How could I miss her?" Lettie retorted sarcastically, watching the little group's important accession to the stand. "She wears the same kind of clothes all the time."

Trollope Gaffney was a tall, broomstick-formed woman with a hard brittle face reflecting her forties. She was dressed in her usual attire as seen in the newspapers and on the covers of her books: tight sequined brown pants, braided shirt with a gold women's pendant embroidered on the breast pocket, and a beret. The two women flanking her were flushed with pleasure and excitement. One was young with a cupid face dotted with two splotches of rouge, and long brown hair. The other was older, tall as Trollope, and had a surly, self-important air about her.

Trollope Gaffney sat down first, cocking one leg halfway over the other, then the girl followed. The third woman stationed herself behind the podium, scowling darkly at the women who had not broken their cloistered groups to be seated.

"Please take your seats—" the woman commanded. "We want to start on time."

The groups obediently broke up as the women scattered to find empty chairs. Then the mistress of ceremony called the meeting of Sapphic Daughters to order. Before starting the program, she wanted to remind them about next Friday's potluck supper at someone named Cynthia's house; called for more volunteers to get the Sapphic Daughters' magazine out; and told them that dues had to be paid by the end of the month. Then turning to the girl behind her, she said proudly: "To begin our program, Wendy is going to read us her latest poem which is dedicated to Trollope Gaffney."

There was a smattering of light applause and a barely audible groan from the back. Wendy stood up nervously, taking a sheaf of papers from her bag. In a young, breathy intonation, she began a rapturous reading of her poem:

She is what I love  
She with her soft beauty  
who can delight me to ecstasy  
Take! me away on a cloud of  
Woman-an-ly lo-o-ve

"Sounds like the shit I used to write in junior high school," Lettie murmured.

Patrice gave her a warning glance, thankful that the seats directly beside them weren't occupied. Lettie was pragmatic, a realist. Patrice had found this out on their first meeting when they had served together on a Black Feminist panel. They had talked after the discussion, talked into the following months, and talked until they discovered each other and how they felt.

When the girl sat down, there was another polite succession of applause. The mistress of ceremony told Wendy her poem was beautiful, so tender, full of love, like only women can have for each other. Afterwards, she began reading from a stack of publicity releases to introduce the guest speaker for the evening, Trollope Gaffney.

"... one of our foremost lesbian/feminist writers. A leader, fighter—"

When she finally finished, the hall resounded with loud, appreciate hand-claps for Trollope Gaffney. When Trollope got up, the room was instilled with attentive, respectful silence.

Trollope Gaffney had a high-pitched voice that derided her aggressive, bold, mannish appearance. She was self-assured and spoke without notes, having done this so many times before. Her talk was about the gay liberation movement, where it stood now and projections of how it would be in the future. She envisioned a world community of lesbians. "We have to assert ourselves—*build*. Identify ourselves to each other—this great army of lesbian women, because we are *all* sisters-s-s. We are all *one* in the beauty of Sapphic love-e-e!"

Later when she finished, the hall's walls rocked with cheers as the women stood up. The Sapphic Sisters began crowding the platform to enclose Trollope Gaffney in a web of reverence. The young poet Wendy began selling Trollope's book as the purchasers waited patiently for autographed copies. A record player was turned on, and the nasal voices of a lesbian group singing sad ballads of women in love with women saturated the hall in a plaintive, hollow sound.

"You want a beer?" Patrice asked, let down by the cynical look naked on Lettie's face.

"Now, what was all of *that* speech about?"

"About love and building a world community of lesbians," Patrice answered, as they approached the refreshment table.

"Who needs one? If I'm going to build a separate community of *any* kind, it'll be a *black* one!"

"How much is the beer?" Patrice asked the chubby girl with yellow bangs behind the table.

"Seventy-five cents for a beer, and fifty cents for a sandwich. We got baloney, cheese, tuna fish—"

"Wham!" Lettie breathed. "They must be already starting to finance that lesbian community."

"Two beers, please—" Patrice ordered, searching her purse.

The woman on the platform who had taken charge of the program came toward them in long, swaggering strides. "I'm J.L., president of the Sapphic Daughters." Her eyes were a sharp, glittering steel blue, like a frosty clear winter's sky. She stood back on her legs, hands hooked over her belt, face closed.

"I'm Patrice and this is Lettie—" Patrice smiled, while Lettie eyed her cautiously.

"You live around here?" J.L. asked.

"Yes—" Lettie said quickly, taking the can of beer Patrice offered to her. She had played this scene years ago, many times before, going to places where colored, Negroes, niggers weren't wanted. J.L.'s question was a familiar conversation piece that dripped with subtle warning. Blacks who "lived around here" knew better than to go to places where they were not wanted.

"Hi!" Now the girl who had read her poetry came up to stand beside Lettie. "I'm Wendy—"

"Yes, we know—the poet," Patrice said. "This is Lettie and I'm Patrice."

Wendy stuck out an eager hand. "We've never had any black lesbians here before—"

"Oh?" Lettie said icily, raising the beer can to her mouth.

"We meet every other Friday. Sometimes we have rap sessions, consciousness-raising groups, and dances—"

"Do you people have any kind of an organization?" J.L. questioned, taking a cigarette from a crumpled pack in her shirt pocket.

"Frankly, we don't know any black lesbians," Patrice said, frowning.

"Or, if we *do*, they haven't *told* us," Lettie added, smiling venom.

"Do you know any?" Patrice said to J.L. She swallowed her beer hurriedly. This was a habit with her, to drink beer quickly before it got too warm and tasted like glue.

"Naw—" J.L. squinted over the cigarette smoke.

Suddenly out of a murky past, Patrice was reminded of the red-necked hill crackers in Alabama. Revulsion shivered her spine. After all the transplanted years, she was surprised that she could still remember. Painful memories are never easy to forget, like being hurt in love.

Women began drifting over to the table. A rock group record had replaced the melancholy singers, and a few couples had started to dance. Beer cans were opened, and sizzling, popping sounds interspersed with laughter.

"What brought you here tonight?" J.L. went on persistently.

"A couple of things. Primarily, we wanted to hear Trollope Gaffney. I have assigned some of her writings to my students—" Lettie replied, feeling anger warm inside her. *Maybe what really brought her here was the devil to knock hell out of the bitch.*

"And we wanted to meet others like ourselves—" Patrice added, gently.

Wendy edged closer to Lettie, gazing approvingly at her. "That's a lovely African dress—"

"Like *yourselves*?" The words were thrown like acid by J.L.

*You goddamn racist!* Lettie thought, as the beer churned sourly in her stomach. Beer and anger don't mix. White racists and black militants don't mix, and white lesbians and black lesbians are white and black people first, instilled with personal backgrounds of distrust and hostilities.

Seeing the smoldering fire in Lettie's eyes, J.L. backed away, putting out the cigarette in an ashtray on the edge of the table. "Uh—well—you see, this is a kind of *private* organization." She conjured up a weak grin which became a clown's grimace. "We meet at each other's houses sometimes and we are all—*friends.*"

"Here comes Trollope—" Wendy interrupted.

Trollope joined them, still surrounded by her network of admirers. "I'm thirsty!" she giggled shrilly.

Someone quickly produced a can of beer for her. Over the can, her eyes glistened at Patrice and Lettie. "And who are *you* two?"

Patrice repeated the introductions, watching Wendy openly gazing at Lettie from beneath heavily lidded speculative eyes. For a flashing moment, jealousy singed her. *Yes, white girl, she's good in bed to me.* Angrily, she finished her beer, throwing the can in a wastebasket.

"We have your last book—" Lettie told Trollope.

"How nice. What did you think of it?"

Patrice held her breath, waiting for Lettie's reply. She knew from long ago how Lettie could raise her husky voice and let it all come out like thunder and lightning in a brass band. Only this time, Lettie was constrained.

"The section on political freedom for women was well-taken, but there doesn't seem to be anything in any of the lesbian literature on the lesbian movement addressing itself to helping the black lesbian to become free of racism—especially *inside* the lesbian community."

Trollope looked puzzled at first, then flustered.

"Will there be freedom from racism in your lesbian world community?" Lettie went on pointedly.

"Of course—" Trollope answered stiffly, looking over and beyond them.

"I had a black lover once—" Wendy blurted out.

J.L. shot her a mean look.

"It's easy to be liberal between the sheets—" Lettie said too sweetly.

Trollope let out a squeal. "There's Tommie! I haven't seen her in *ages!*" Moving away, she smiled broadly. "Nice meeting you—Patrice and Lettie."

J.L. grabbed Wendy's hand. "C'mon—let's dance."

Wendy waved back to them as she let J.L. lead her to the dancing circle.

"Come again!"

"Got enough?" Lettie asked deliberately putting her half-finished beer can on the table. She hated beer.

"Uh-huh!"

"Then—let's go."

They left and no one said goodbye.

### III

In the bed, Lettie asked sleepily: "Now, has your curiosity been satisfied about the Sapphic Daughters, my little Oriole Cookie?"

"Umph!" Patrice grunted tiredly. "It was like crashing the D.A.R.—"

"Maybe someday, we might find that silent legion of black lesbians. But until then—"

"We stay in the closet," Patrice mumbled, moving closer to her. "It *would* be nice to know—others."

"Perhaps we do. And possibly one of these days, they'll let us know," Lettie said. "Let's go to sleep. You never know what tomorrow will bring."

## NUN IN THE LIBRARY BASEMENT

In those days when habits still counted  
I sit screaming on the cool tiles.  
Around me scatter the bits  
From Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice  
(Required for doctoral candidates  
Unless course work completed by 1958).  
A cautious A peeps mischievously out  
From the precise parenthesis of a footnote.  
My ring—still there—glistens less  
Than the Old Dutch-polished pipes.  
But a full-length mirror—jealous of any rival—  
Hurls back the naked bulbs in such anger  
My image spreads behind the paper disposal.

I am so alone the basin-drip is lover.

John-thunder in the adjoining room  
Assaults me, and she—coiffed in corpulence—  
Slides past the unconscious mirror,  
Her black absorbing at its peril the pipes.  
Her little hands come out of folds so frail  
It hurts to have them test the tepid water  
And tear at the sandpaper. They pull  
At my throat as I whisper help but she  
Lets them slip back into anonymity.  
Her flat feet ignore my wail.  
The hasty skirts, however, catch at Ransom  
And toss him gently over against a single quote.

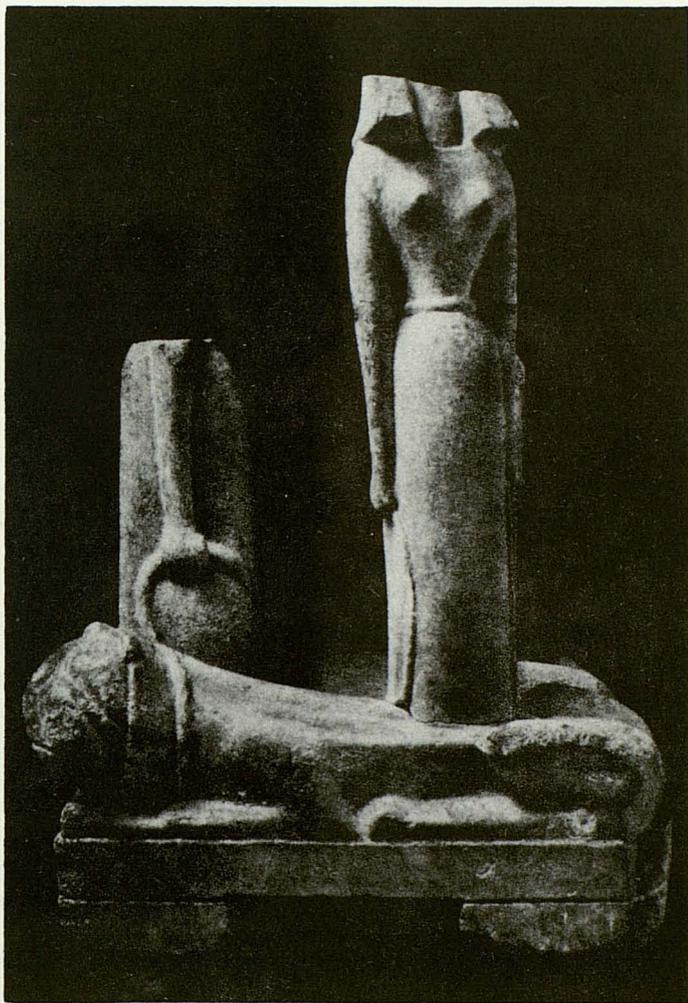
The swish is like an irritable prayer  
As the torn corners resettle.

And you, finding me later in the park,  
Watching me bathe my ring in the sun-spilled rose,  
Cannot understand my never again.  
Your moist palm is Romeo's and competent  
But your trim shoe crushes a petal

The gravel of your retreat wounds another.

—Maxine Kent Valian

# VIOLENCE



# ERASURE

## ANONYMITY AND THE DENIAL OF THE SELF

*In 1977 I bought a book which described the work of women painters in an isolated district in India. As I read the book and considered the images painted by the women, several things began to come clear to me. I had long been troubled by the determination of some women to embrace anonymity as a valid personal/political statement; the book made me think about this. The essay which follows is my attempt to articulate why I find anonymity so distressing.*

### I

Because of the nature of the works of art illustrated in this book I have preferred not to give the names of the thirty women from six villages who painted them, so that the beauty and meaning of the paintings and the fame of the artists shall not be confused.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, by the author of a recent book on the women painters of Mithila, is exercising a constraint against women which has been exercised throughout western history. By making the painters anonymous, he is removing, or attempting to remove, all expression of their/selves to be found in their work. By eliminating the names of the artists and any description of their individual personalities, their lives, the conditions under which their work was done, he is divesting the work of several levels of meaning.

The women painters of Mithila have, for approximately three thousand years, maintained a visual tradition with roots embedded not only in ancient Hindu religion and custom but in Cretan civilization as well:

Faces are most often drawn in profile, and their resemblance to the faces in Cretan frescoes or on Minoan pottery is striking, as is their characteristically elongated profile . . . and the wide-open eye . . . Likewise, Mithila art resembles Cretan not only because of the elongated profiles and immense eyes, but because it appears to be an extension of Mediterranean art in its use of space and even ornamental details. Cretan art died a long time ago; but an art very much like it survives today in India . . .<sup>2</sup>

By casting his description in the passive voice, the critic further removes the contact of the artist from the work: i.e., "faces are . . . drawn." Not only does this technique remove each individual artist from her work, it also precludes any suggestion that these women consciously select to maintain a Cretan tradition in their art: Why, for example, does the snake goddess appear in their work? The possibility of the survival of a tradition from one acknow-

ledgedly gynocentric culture to a group of women who are the keepers of a visual tradition handed from mother to daughter is not stressed by this masculinist critic. Rather he stresses the Hindu tradition, with its phallogocentricity; the enforced passivity of the painters; the "naivete" of their work. The critic wants the paintings to be a function of the women's role in the dominant culture; according to this argument, as far as the work is a statement of the women's selves it is in underwriting and expressing fidelity to their role. This to a large part appears to be true—these women have lived within the severely circumscribed limits of upper-caste Hindu women for centuries—still the question must be asked: What of their/selves are in these paintings?

In order to avoid questions like this one, the critic limits the link with Crete to stylistic similarities only. And again some meaning is lost: to say that the Mithila women follow a given style, which may have a source in Cretan civilization, is to say that these women have painted according to a code from which they have not wavered and to imply, therefore, that they have not the need nor the power to express their personalities in their work. By limiting the historical link with Crete to matters of style, the critic is also free to disregard the content of the work with regard to that link: It is amazing that, if style can be retained for millennia, content cannot; but to admit that the presence of the snake goddess in these late-twentieth-century paintings might have an affiliation with a tradition thousands of years ago in which women also painted would be to open up a possibility of female lineage which masculinist critics have always shunned, even suppressed.

One of the pictures in the book is a moving depiction of two women—with the customary rings through their noses. One clasps the hand of the other; the hand of one woman is on the shoulder of the other. The caption reads:

Mithila art is so female-orientated that sometimes the men do not know the names of the deities drawn or painted by their women. It is also, however, an entirely religious and symbolic art: every picture of a woman is of a gopi, one of the beloved of Krishna, or of Sita, who remains the example of a model wife for Mithila's women.<sup>3</sup>

Here, in a confused attempt to enforce the paintings of these unnamed women as part of their role, the critic contradicts himself: If the husbands of the women—and in Hindu custom, the husband becomes the household god of the wife—are unaware of the identity of the figures in the paintings, might not the women hold some secret of representation? But no, the critic assures us that even though the men cannot say what "their" women are depicting, there is no secret: all females in the paintings are either *gopis*, i.e., the women Krishna played his flute (penis) for; or Sita, the wife of Rama who chose death because she had been abducted by Ravana. Although "faithful" to Rama during her captivity, i.e., she had not allowed her/self to be raped by Ravana, she had dishonored Rama by being captured, so she "prayed to the Earth to open and take her to its bosom."<sup>4</sup>

Here again the critic wants to establish that the paintings of the women of Mithila are only visual representations of their role. But there is no such thing as a work of art which has absolutely extirpated the personality of the artist: the pressure of the brush, the choices of color, the composing of

figures—even if the figures are only religious and symbolic—all of these, and more, are elements which move toward the final work, are expressions on some level of the artist's own frame of reference, intellect, eyesight, etc. We might say that the Sistine Chapel is “an entirely religious and symbolic art” and that every figure represents a biblical presence. However, books have been written about the presence of Michelangelo's personality in the work; it would never be questioned by masculinist critics that the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel express the psyche of the artist. It would also never occur to critics to suppress the name of the artist so as not to confuse his “fame” with the “beauty and meaning” of the work.

What it comes down to is this: by removing the identity of the artist, the critic is attempting to remove the personality of that artist from her work; the work of the women of Mithila can thus be seen as maintaining a male-centered religious tradition, in which the artists themselves are objectified and made passive. To credit a woman with work that is hers is to allow her a separate existence: to see her work as the expression of a separate personality which may be threatening to the phallogocentric dominant culture.

## II

The art of pleasing . . . consists in entire self-effacement.<sup>5</sup>

The expectation of the dominant culture has always been that women will be pleasing to men; that we will efface our/selves—that we will be satisfied with, in fact long for, anonymity: this is not news. But with this realization, as with the realizations of many factors in our common past, it is necessary to investigate the effects of anonymity on our history (*matriology*) and our tradition (*matriography*) and our/selves (*matrices*), as well as to examine the details of the phenomenon more closely, in the past and present, to ensure our survival into the future. The dictionary definitions (according to American Heritage) of *matrix* include the following: (1) “A situation or surrounding substance within which something originates, develops, or is contained”; (2) “The womb”; (4) “*Geology* a. The solid matter in which a fossil or crystal is embedded. b. The impression left in a rock when an object such as a gemstone is removed.” The Latin word *matrix* originally meant a pregnant animal; later, womb. And the word derives, of course, from *mater*, mother. In my use of *matrix* as a synonym for my/self I am concentrating on the first dictionary definition and using the others as illustrations of this primary meaning: i.e., my/self is the “surrounding substance within which [expression, creativity, separation, etc.] originates, develops, or is contained”; this self is also the womb in which I nurture and finally bear the “something” of definition 1; the *matrix* is “solid matter”—it must not be elusive, neither must I, by non-naming or being silent, deny the *matrix* the nourishment it needs in order to bring forth the “something.” Our history is the *logos* of all our *matrices*: the suffix “-ology” derives from the Greek *logos*, meaning word or reason. Thus, *matriology* means the words from which we obtain knowledge of our *matrices*: It is the record of our/selves. The word *matriography* signifies the tradition of our/selves: the suffix “-graphy” meaning the illustration—by word or other means—of that to which it is attached; in this case, the illustration of the self. *Matriography* also means the study of the “gemstone,” i.e., the work released by the *matrix*.

That said, let us focus on anonymity as self-denial, as starvation of the matrix. Anonymity has, in patriarchal tradition, been linked with femininity, and passivity, and its masculinist obverse, fame, with the nonfeminine:

Thou hast a charmed cup O Fame!  
A draught which mantles high,  
And seems to lift this earthly frame  
Above mortality.  
Away! to me—a woman—bring  
Sweet waters from affection's spring.

These lines, from "Woman and Fame" by Felicia Hemans, were written by a famous woman. Famous because her verses expressed fidelity to the feminine ideal and did not question the norms of anonymity and other aspects of constraint on women—other women. She was therefore allowed to name her/self—albeit as Mrs. Hemans—and to be a successful writer: the poet laureate of the Angel in the House.

But fame is not merely the obverse of anonymity, as the phalocrats believe. It is far more complicated than that. I will use the word "fame," however, in an effort to redefine it from a feminist point of view, and to thereby understand what it has meant for women to have been warned against it, guarded from it—offered in its stead the "sweet waters" of Mrs. Heman's lines, the reward of the good, and quiet, girl. (By "fame" I do not mean the *People*-magazine sort, which I would call "celebrity," or "passive fame.")

In order to achieve fame, one must stand separate and make some statement about the self, the matrix. The "fear of success" of which women have been accused again and again is a crude statement of what we may undergo when we attempt the separation that comes with fame; when we claim as our own the gemstone which the matrix has produced. To make some statement about the self means—if it is to be positive—that one holds the self in esteem: that there is a feeling of self-worth. That I can say, without hesitation, I am separate: from husband, children, mother, father, sister, lover. Does Lily Briscoe have difficulty finishing her painting in *To the Lighthouse* because she really believes "women can't write, women can't paint"? In part, yes; she has been told this throughout her life—her knowledge of matriography affirms it. But part of her inability to finish comes from the fact that to do so would be to make a statement that she is separate and worthy, and a female. To finish her work would be to outstrip Mrs. Ramsey and thereby separate herself from the woman, now ghost, who is her mother. To outstrip Mrs. Ramsey would be to reject the feminine ideal for the female self. It would be to separate her/self from the predominant patriarchal tradition of female anonymity.

When we choose to create, and to name our creations as our own, we are engaging in a radical act of separation from which, historically, we have consistently been discouraged. As women we have been taught, and have internalized the teaching, that we are extensions of others, not our/selves, and we have been eager to plead for "sweet waters." By choosing anonymity we are choosing erasure.

Simone Weil, throughout the gradual process of self-denial which was her life, sought the perfection she discerned in anonymity. In her defense of anonymity, she uses the example of a child doing a mathematical problem: if the answer is incorrect, then it is endowed with some aspect of the child's

personality—with whatever idiosyncrasy caused the error; if correct, however, it is not, since the correct answer is perfect and therefore impersonal. In correctness the child will have attained the anonymity Weil links with perfection. This melding with perfection brings with it the absolute erasure of the personality who has acted in the first place. The perfect wife, the perfect daughter—perfectly anonymous.

### III

The average housewife . . . washed an acre of dirty dishes, a miles of glass and three miles of clothes and scrubbed five miles of floors yearly. <sup>6</sup>

And she washed and scrubbed in anonymity, melded into the feminine role.

She is anonymous by virtue of her role: by her name, taken from her husband or father; by her expected fidelity to styles of hair or dress or child-rearing; by her work, which will be for others—all these contribute to the effacing of the self, and the erasure of a particular woman's identity. We might look to the lives of women artists, whose names are now emerging, for examples of the consequences of anonymity:

#### **Mary M. Bonsall:**

This artist paints portraits, which are in private hands. <sup>7</sup>

Because her work is in private hands, Mary M. Bonsall has been removed from view.

#### **Candida Bozzino:**

In 1881 this artist entered the Ursuline Convent at Piacenza, where she continues to paint religious pictures. <sup>8</sup>

Because enclosed in a convent, directing her energies toward works which glorify the religion of the fathers, Candida Bozzino has begun the process of becoming anonymous. Perhaps the convent does not allow her to sign her name; perhaps she joined the convent in order to have the space in which to devote her/self to her painting. In any case her choice of subject matter will be limited, and her/self will be effaced in her role as bride of Christ.

#### **Margaretta Van Eyck:**

We cannot now point to any pictures as exclusively hers, as she worked in concert with her brothers. <sup>9</sup>

The family commitment which lays claim on the self of all women.

Margaretta Van Eyck was so melded with the demands of her role that her very existence is today in doubt. <sup>10</sup> She is part of a long tradition of women artists who came to their art by being the sisters, wives, daughters of painters. Those we know of are few compared to those who probably existed. The reason for this seems to be that if the wife or daughter, less frequently the sister, outlived the male relative or managed to release her/self from the relationship, she began to sign her name. Some, however, did not outlive their male relatives or did not free them/selves, and so they and their work remain in obscurity. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but I believe this is the general rule. <sup>11</sup>

**Constance Mayer:**

It is well known that Prud'hon and his pupil painted many pictures in collaboration. This led to an undervaluation of her ability, and both the inferior works of Prud'hon and bad imitations of him have been attributed to her. <sup>12</sup>

If the work of the master is bad, it may be attributed to the female student; if the work of the female student is too good, it may be attributed to the master; if the work of the female student is in the style of the master but her name is lost, it may be attributed to the "school of" the master, or perhaps to another student.

The master/female student relationship is not unlike the father/daughter, brother/sister relationship in art. The female student has little chance to express her/self while under the influence, while living out the feminine role in the master/pupil dyad.

**Jeane Mathilde Herbelin:**

Her early ambition was to paint large pictures, but Delacroix persuaded her to devote herself to miniature painting, in which art she has been called "the best in the world." <sup>13</sup>

I do not know that Delacroix was Herbelin's master, but he used the influence accorded that role. As a result Herbelin's work disappeared into minutiae as did she.

The case of Eva Gonzalés is also interesting: Her father was a well-known novelist, her master was Édouard Manet; when she exhibited her work,

Manet's influence was apparent, troubling critics who were divided between aversion to Manet and loyalty to Emmanuel Gonzalés. <sup>14</sup>

Eva Gonzalés does not figure at all. And her work unfortunately reveals an obvious effacing of the self, an anonymity of style and content, as she followed the work of her master. Gonzalés also served as Manet's model, so the relationship has the added characteristic of the artist/object—the object (female) which will be revealed by the subject (male).

Berthe Morisot was also involved with Édouard Manet; like Gonzalés she was his model. In addition Morisot was Manet's sister-in-law. In the process of painting a portrait of her mother and sister she asked Manet for advice:

He took the brushes and put in a few accents that looked very well; mother was in ecstasies. That is where my misfortunes began. Once started, nothing could stop him; from the skirt he went to the bust, from the bust to the head, from the head to the background. He cracked a thousand jokes, laughed like a madman, handed me the palette, took it back; finally by five o'clock in the afternoon we had made the prettiest caricature that was ever seen . . . My mother thinks this episode funny, but I find it agonizing. <sup>15</sup>

It is not hard to imagine the emotions Morisot must have felt at this extreme invasion of her/self. The master artist/brother-in-law/the subject-to-her-object invading her expression of self, trivializing it, taking it over, establishing his identity in it while erasing hers. Her mother, watching as her daughter's portrait of her was "revived" by the master, enjoying the honor of the master's

invasion, finally being amused. Morisot "was filled with doubts about her work," went through long periods in which she could not create; it is not difficult to see why.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, after a time, her matrix, rather than "developing" "something," only "originated" and then "contained" it.

When Manet died

she devoted herself to building up an appreciation of his work in the public mind. So intelligent were her methods that she doubtless had great influence in making the memory of his art enduring.<sup>17</sup>

And so, without the support necessary to break the constraints of role, she chose the devotion expected of us all.

#### IV

I believe that when painting, and especially when conceiving a painting, one should not give too much thought to nature. Make the color sketch exactly as one feels the colors were in nature at that time. But what counts are my personal feelings.<sup>18</sup>

To admit the personal counts is a radical act for a woman.

The author of these words was Paula Becker, the author also of a radical female imagery in art. I have written elsewhere<sup>19</sup> about the importance of Paula Becker to a woman's tradition, a female culture—to matriography. She sought, in her work, to remove the female from all aspects of masculinist idealization and to seize the images of women, all women, for women and for her/self.

Artemisia Gentileschi was another female artist who sought to establish her/self in her work. She stands firm to her experience—a magnificent example of the refusal to be anonymous—in most of her paintings. In her self-portrait she has portrayed her/self as *La Pittura*, the personification of painting: a large and powerful woman, she pays only slight homage to the conventional attributes of the personification. According to Cesare Ripa, author of the major source for these attributes during the time when Gentileschi painted, the figure who personifies painting is a female with a gag on her mouth, signifying, we are told, the speechlessness of the visual arts. Whatever the rationale for the gag, Gentileschi has removed it: her mouth is slightly open, her eyes are fixed in concentration; she is engrossed, it seems, in transferring her/self to canvas. She is consistent in her dedication to her/self and women: whether depicting, clearly and firmly, the beheading of Holofernes by Judith; the attempted rape of Susanna by the elders; the beauty of Bathsheba contaminated by David's furtive gaze; or the strong and heroic woman she personifies as *Fame*.

Gentileschi is extraordinary in the history of women artists. She was determined to survive, as a woman and a painter. Many women have not been so determined, and many, artists and nonartists, have not survived; but there is one tradition among almost all women artists which would seem to unite them in a refusal to be anonymous, in which the matrix is celebrated and carefully preserved: self-portraiture. Perhaps some knew that their names would be erased and lost. They were, after all, artists, and must have wondered "why have there been no great women artists?" Perhaps some realized that

other women artists had once existed and wished to ensure their own survival. They knew that their names might be erased, but that their faces with more difficulty would be covered over. Is that why almost all women painters portrayed them/selves? Or was it a simple personal statement of self, of separation: I may be the student of Prud'hon, or Titian, or Reni—but I am also my/self, and this is how I see my/self.

Not all women artists painted them/selves in an effort to retain and illuminate their/selves: Angelica Kauffmann, for example, perhaps the most objectified woman painter we know of, painted many self-portraits for patrons who insisted on a depiction of the artist as well as the commissioned work. (I have not looked at all of Kauffmann's self-portraits, but I doubt that we can dismiss her or others like her so easily.) There are others, though, who painted them/selves quite clearly and intentionally.

There is Romaine Brooks, for example: a lesbian-identified artist of this century. Brooks's self-portrait is a depiction of her/self in the top hat she often wore. Her extreme and beautiful face stares out of the canvas; she is dressed in black, with grey gloves—if you look very closely at the painting, moving into Brooks's gaze, you will detect another pair of eyes under the brim of the hat.<sup>20</sup>

And there is Maria van Oosterwyck: the Dutch painter of the seventeenth century, who "shocked" the dominant culture by teaching her women servants to paint. In her *Vanitas*, amid the standard objects of this particular genre of still life, is her face, reflected in a flask of *aqua vitae*: a female face staring from the water of life.

Some women painters depicted them/selves according to the classical or current rules of beauty prescribed by the dominant culture during the time in which they did their work; such is the case with many of Kauffmann's self-portraits. Many more, however, seemed intent on making a statement about them/selves as artists, and as women who were artists; many painted their bodies and faces as they were: in old age, in spinsterhood, in work clothes with the instruments of labor. Sofonisba Anguissola, Rosalba Carriera, and Berthe Morisot were three artists who depicted them/selves toward the ends of their lives. Of Morisot's self-portrait, the caption in J.J. Wilson and Karen Petersen's survey of women artists reads: "She seems to be looking into the vanishing point"—perhaps in more ways than one.

Käthe Kollwitz, Suzanne Valadon, and other women artists gave us and them/selves records of their faces and bodies and the changes therein throughout their lives: Kollwitz's lined face and rugged hands, dedicated to self-honesty; Valadon's face and breasts, the strong beauty of each, not objectified, rather subjectified.

Anna Bilinska, Mary Newton, Therese Schwartze all painted them/selves in work clothes, holding their painting tools. Gwen John, sister of Augustus, stares from her self-portraits in defiance; celebrated as an "old maid," "eccentric," with cats—less celebrated as an artist. Adélaïde Labille-Guiard has painted her/self with two women students—a clear and intentional statement about her commitment to instructing women. When she hung the painting in the Salon of 1785 it was considered "radical," "sensational," with regard to its message of female education.

I could go on. I could talk about the work of Frida Kahlo, for example. I could go on and describe hundreds more; for almost every woman painter painted her/self. I do not think that this came solely from constraint of subject, or from lack of money for models. I think these women wanted their presences visible in their work; in the most obvious and indelible way.

## V

The refusal to be anonymous, the decision to separate the self from the expectations and demands of roles, is the choice women must make if we are to survive; if a women's culture is to survive. To me this is what it means to be a feminist: not to be anonymous, not to deny the self. To be a feminist is to attempt the rescue of other women from the various constraints which culminate in anonymity; but the first responsibility is to define the self: To stand separate, alone, saying my woman's self, my matrix, is the source of my identity.

## NOTES

Sources: The major sources of women's work in art which I have used in the preparation of this paper, are two recent surveys of women artists: J.J. Wilson and Karen Petersen, *Women Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); and Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (New York: Knopf & Los Angeles County Museum, 1976). I also visited the show of women's art of which the latter title is a catalogue, to see the work first-hand. My other major source of women's work in art and details of their lives is the work of Clara Clement, *Women in the Fine Arts*, first published in 1904. (I have used the facsimile edition, New York: Hacker, 1974.)

1. Yves Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), p. 31.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

5. Virginia Woolf, *The Pargiters*, edited by Mitchell Leaska (New York: NYPL & Readex Books, 1977); Woolf is quoting a judgment attributed to Mark Pattison by his biographer, see p. 123.

6. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), p. 177, note 13; Woolf is quoting Mrs. Murphy, Home Service Director of the British Commercial Gas Association, as she was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 9/29/37.

7. Clement, p. 54.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

10. See Wilson and Petersen, p. 35.

11. This general rule is supported by various sources. See, for example, Dorothy Miner, "Anastaise and Her Sisters" (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1974), p. 22: "What the tax records bring out is that usually the woman artist had been active as the wife or daughter of a masculine professional. When he died they carried on and assumed full responsibility." Miner is talking about the results of the research of a French scholar, Françoise Baron, who investigated tax records for parts of Paris during the last ten years of the thirteenth century and a few years into the fourteenth.

12. Clement, p. 385.
13. Ibid., p. 379.
14. Nochlin and Sutherland Harris, p. 247.
15. Wilson and Petersen, p. 92; quoting Morisot's *Correspondance*, ed. D. Rouart, trans. B. Hubbard.
16. Ibid., p. 92.
17. Clement, p. 389.
18. Wilson and Petersen, p. 109; quoting diary entry dated October 1902, from *Briefe und Tagebuchblätter*, ed. S.D. Gallwitz, trans. Liselotte Erlanger Glozer.
19. Unpublished paper, "Complex and Mysterious Influences: Some Thoughts on the Lives of Women Artists."
20. I am indebted to Susan Griffin for pointing this out to me.

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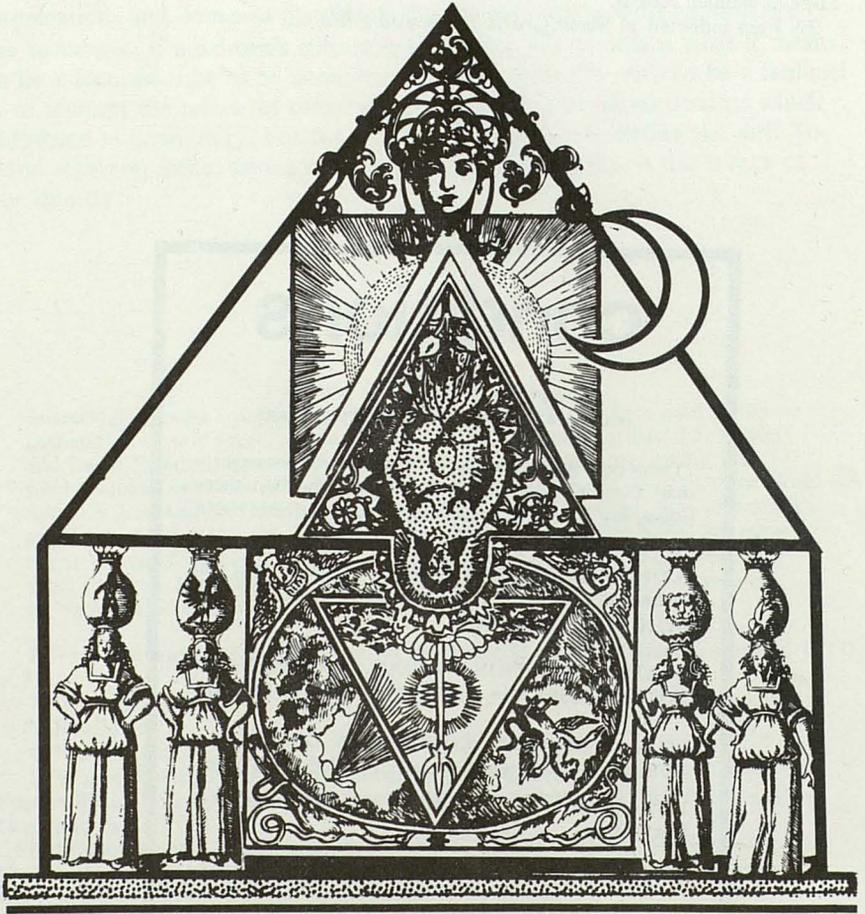
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—Swannack Leonard

graphic by Cheryl Swannack

The following piece is a fragment about the G/goddess and Her relationship to Lesbianism. It was originally part of a dialogue among six feminists about issues of women's spirituality and art to be published as part of a book about the work of a well-known (heterosexual) feminist artist with whom I have a personal and professional relationship of thirteen years. When the material for this dialogue was assembled by her for final draft, this section about Lesbianism was omitted. When it became clear to me that dialogue and negotiation were not to alter this situation, I withdrew my work with sadness and anger.

*The power of the Image of the Goddess is Body, is Spirit, is Work(s);*

*it is direct knowledge, is personal power in the world and collective power in the universe.*

*The psychic and physical communication which opens through our rituals is, in turn, based on a knowledge of the Nature of the universe and our Natural place in it.*

*I call this communication Lesbian.*

*But why? since women who do not name themselves Lesbian are aware of Her reality.*

*But the physical and psychic communication which women experience with one another day to day, and intensively in feminist ritual, is Lesbian—is woman-to-woman, and is an aspect of our participation in the body and spirit of the goddess; through which we know that we are not only separate (alike but different) but one, the same.*

*Spiritual Lesbianism may transcend but does not exclude the sexual connections which exist between women.*

*And Lesbian women participate in psychic/spirit knowledge through love-making, even if not held in conscious awareness or acted upon.*

*The Lesbian—who may never interact with men, or bear biological children, is yet the transcendent lover and mother of woman-and man-kind; and as an essential Virgin-by-choice-of-not-choosing patriarchal family/system, is Priestess in drawing nearer to the female creative principle.*

*And, often when I have taken a closer look at the actual relationships which heterosexual Goddess-centered feminists have with their men, I have found that their relationship to heterosexuality is Lesbian.*

*(the major focus in their lives being female-female and female-*

*Female): their relationships with men function, as before patriarchy, specifically for sexual gratification, economic viability, procreation. And their world view clearly posits a wholly female creative force, not the yin/yang principle of male/female balance.*

*Or in reality these feminists are not heterosexual at all but are celibate or Lesbian (in that they have sexual but not genital communication exclusively with women).*

*And they do not name themselves Lesbian.*

*Perhaps to be able to speak in the language and voice of most people in the world as it is presently, to avoid hostility,*

*or to confront "difference" and the pain of being human in other areas of their lives.*

*But it is important for me to use the term "Lesbian" to enlarge the space for me and every other sister in feminist struggle, and to thus make way for the New Creations of our Collective Imagination (and these will also be Great Art).*

*And naming Lesbiana Lesbian is also my personal contribution to hastening the end of the suppression of the Female Principle.*

*Ritualized Lesbian connection is a cloak of power which can lead us from individual (powerless) isolation to individual (divine) and collective (divine) strength.*

*Witches and Lesbians were and are burned for the same basic reason—because we claim possession of the feminine life force over the masculine death-centered culture.*

*But the fire is powerful in every direction, and we may also burn ourselves (up, out, in) by isolating parts of ourselves and disconnecting ourselves from ourselves (homophobia). The Goddess is Woman/We are Women.*

*Every woman alive experiences the Lesbian connection to the Goddess through having been completely connected to a Goddess—our own biological mothers; a woman who created us out of her own substance, who then banished us from the garden of eden of her body to engage in the human struggle.*

*The repugnance of Lesbiansim is the fear of the power of this force and connection ultimately symbolized in the Goddess.*

*Lesbianism makes clear, illustrates through practice, that the female principle operates in the universe—not dialectically as we might assume, but instead creates a complete context for a life-supporting cycle of birth, death and regeneration.*

*The revolution that our feminist movement visualizes is a revolution of more than changes in government or economic systems. It is the broadest kind of revolution—life against death.*

## WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

men don't take us seriously because they're not physically afraid of us.

*Ellen Willis, 1968.*

\* \*

the upstairs neighbor. if i keep typing, i can't hear his sneering voice, i can check the anxiety rising: will i have to deal with him again—or swallow myself, absorb his blaring stereo, his endlessly stupid thrumming the same out-of-whack chords on the electric guitar. practicing, no doubt, to be the next dylan (dylan, who beat his wife).

last time i asked him to turn down the volume, he snarled, "*why don't you & your friend move out?*" "*why don't you shut your mouth,*" i shout back, and he screams, "*why don't you make me? you're supposed to be the man in this relationship.*" later i hear him bellowing from upstairs, "*i'll fuck her ass.*"

in the morning my car's windshield is gooey with spit; pinned to my door is a picture of fancy condoms; a poster with my name on it, taped up in the hall, is crumpled, destroyed.

i got off easy.

(from my journal, october 30)

i was just doing dishes, afraid i'd miss some informative sound. had to keep turning off the water to listen. the man upstairs hates me because i'm queer, is threatening me.

so i do dishes, checking for sounds. at the same time, the familiar ordering act, washing dishes, hands in hot water, calms me. is this why we clean so furiously—to have one place where we are in control? i do dishes, rocking between contradictory voices:

*—you exaggerate the danger, he's a cowardly wimp*

*—you underestimate the danger, you got him mad, you don't know what you're playing with*

3 weeks ago i shouted "*shut your fucking mouth*" to a drunk man cursing me, my mother—there were 5 of us—and suddenly a second man materializes beside the car, he smashes the car window, grabbing my hair as i drive away.

to be prepared—in any instance of confronting a man—for violence. to be prepared to defend myself—or to keep my mouth shut: adjust to his noise, stomach his insults, accept his power.

these are our choices.

\* \* \*

last night i dreamed i was walking to get the car, up stark to 20th, but the street was not a street, stark was a wind-tunnel, with machines for food, half-open doors printing shadows along the walls. i am trying to run against the wind, and think, suddenly: this is dangerous

*my body is the criminal  
the fault my body's spirit*

i offer these words to explain the danger, though i don't believe them. but the danger persists, as if they were true.

\* \* \*

today's paper (november 2): in portland, a 32 year old woman getting off work in a department store, going for her car in the city center parking structure, got grabbed in the elevator and raped yesterday.

one story. according to statistics, yesterday in portland between 2-20 women got raped. between 6-60 women got beaten. the same thing will happen today. of course these are only average counts.

every day in this country a woman gets raped every minute. 3 women get beaten every minute. these are also average counts.

what am i counting if not casualties of battle?

why then don't we admit we are at war?

**every man:** has probably raped or beaten a woman; or enjoyed rape fantasies; or threatened a woman with physical force, explicitly or with gestures—stepping closer, raising his voice; at least a man he works with or socializes with, who he thinks is an ok type, has raped or beaten a woman.

**every woman:** fears rape, or lives inside limits imposed by that fear: no late night walks, no living alone, no hours of solitude by the river. if she relates intimately to men, the threat of violence has probably sufficed to keep her in line. if she is a lesbian, her comfort is that the threat probably comes from men she is not intimate with.

*since i began writing this, L-, a close friend, has been raped. she carries a knife, has fought men, though she's small—and he was big, quick. she was afraid to use her knife. now she has an infection and might be pregnant.*

in sum: if you are a woman, you have probably been raped or beaten or will be; at least a woman you love has been raped or beaten or will be.

it's easy after saying this to think of men and women as separate species, one preying on the other.

the state of war waged on all women by men who are overtly violent gives all men power. rapists and batterers are the military arm of patriarchy.

\* \*

**to stop violence against women** we have to change schools, laws, a system where a few white men make a profit off our labor; almost all films, records, record jackets, tv, toys, advertising, the junk we get sold in paper cartons at the supermarket, isolated living situations and overcrowded living situations: every difficult edge of this culture contributes directly or indirectly to violence against women.

meanwhile there's another simpler fact:

**men rape women because they can.**  
**men beat women because they can.**

the only place where rape is considered a contemptible act is in prison—by other prisoners—not because it's cruel, hateful and vicious, but because everyone knows rape is a chicken-shit crime, a crime any fool can get away with.

in fact, few rapists land in prison. white skin, professional status, money: these are buffers, protecting rapists as they protect other criminals.

as for how batterers are treated in prison—who knows? they are arrested, prosecuted and convicted even less than rapists.

cops, judges, district attorneys, and legislators are (mostly) men who don't take women seriously.

**men abuse us because they can get away with it.**

our task then is to make abuse of women more and more risky, something men *can't* get away with.

\* \*

*Inez Garcia Joan Little Yvonne Wanrow Jennifer Patri Claudia Thacker  
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Coons Carolyn McKendrick Margaret Pratt Wanda Carr Francine Hughes  
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Sandra Lowe Janet Hartwell Eva Mae Heygood Betty Jean Carter Lea  
Murphy Beverly Ibn-Thomas Mary Melerine Maxine Waltman Eva Diamond*

these are the names of resistance fighters. the names of women whose attackers did not get away with it. the men who abused them are dead. the list continues to grow.

some of these women are in prison, along with hundreds of others whose names i don't know. their history is our history of resistance. each of them has helped enlarge the possibility of resistance.

only as women choose to resist men's violence will men's consciousness change. when men are afraid of us, there will be a material base for changing their consciousness.

or at least we will be on terms of equality of fear.

**when women are as ready to stand up to men as men are ready to knock down women we can begin to talk about our common humanity.  
not before.**

\* \* \*

i am talking about women and violence. most often we experience violence as something done to us. we know it's horrible; we have learned/are learning it's not our fault. so we suffer innocently. christian or jew, christ has not been a healthy model for oppressed people.

one step up from martyrdom, we support our right to defend ourselves. we organize, attend, and try to extend to other women classes in self-defense. we focus on dislocating knees. we try not to think about differences in size, weight, fighting skills, between an average one of us and an average one of them. we are anxious not to escalate violence, so we rarely carry weapons or know how to use them.

we gloss over the fact that most successful resistance involves some kind of equalizer: a weapon.

we recognize that women who fight back fight back for all of us. but in contradiction to the service performed for all women by those who resist is the fact that each resister has suffered for performing this service: at best, a painful and exhausting struggle in the courts; at worst, prison or death. as the death penalty is reinstated or its use is extended, we need to think about this.

the question arises inevitably:

if we need men to know that committing violence against us is dangerous—  
if the use of violence is acceptable in an emergency, as a desperate choice—

**why wait for the next emergency**, for the next woman in danger to choose self-defense at great cost to herself?

**why not create our own emergencies???**

*imagine: every day in the paper, instead of a story about a woman who was attacked, raped, beaten, tortured and/or murdered—information which certainly has its effects on us—there were a story about a rapist or batterer who was beaten, shot, stabbed—even public humiliation would be better than nothing.*

**how long would it take woman-haters to get scared?**

this subject—of women organizing to do violence to men—makes us uncomfortable. we are the life-support system of the universe. we birth, nourish, and repair. how should we not shrink from committing violence?

—are we more comfortable as victims?

—is fighting for our own people a guilty act?

when we try to envision ourselves using violence, we crash against the unthinkable, a taboo.

when we feel ourselves up against a taboo, we should ask ourselves: *why is this horrible? why do we want to reject this?* if we find no reason, only vague feelings of awfulness, we want then to think about this awfulness.

as long as a rule, commandment, behavior cowers in the unthinkable corner of our brain, we have no way of knowing whether the rule is ours or theirs, in our interest or theirs.

if using violence against men in an organized fashion is in our interest, and if we have reactions of discomfort, repulsion to the idea of fighting for our own people—

then maybe we need to struggle with our discomfort.

**men don't take us seriously because they're not physically afraid of us.**

\* \* \*

one thing is clear:

whatever any of us chooses to feel, think, or do about women fighting abusive men, women continue to fight. increasingly. the question then is not, *should this happen?* —**it is happening.** the question is, *how do i choose to relate to this fact of women's resistance?*

and if this resistance heartens us with each new appearance, inspires and empowers us, the question shifts again:

**how can i take part in this resistance?**

the implications of what i'm saying do not escape me.

i am frightened to write about them openly:

there *is* danger in fighting.

there is also danger in not fighting.

---

*The thought and spirit of Paula King informs these words.*

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*“Scrambled Eggs” will appear regularly in Sinister Wisdom. I welcome comments and suggestions from readers, and would be happiest to open this space to dialogue.*

## SUTTEE

Still in her everyday  
finery, the young widow in the pit  
standing: she could not have been more than sixteen,  
the face  
illiterate, unreadable,  
the forefinger pointing upwards toward grass,  
toward sky, like a circling pole.  
She did not stop twirling her finger.  
The dry faces huddled above her—  
she watched them confidently—  
sister, mother, sister.  
Clods fell in  
against feet, against thighs, against hips;  
they watched her confidently  
as if watching a sapling  
transplanted. No one had ever  
watched the dead husband with such silence.  
Earth over  
belly, over childless  
breasts, over the long dress  
trimmed in gold:  
she did not stop twirling her finger;  
she did not stop to give one final instruction  
before earth fell in against lips.  
Open-eyed she watched  
sight covered by soil.  
It fell upon her head  
as upon a little hill.  
She did not stop twirling her finger.

Here in the riotous city  
where young children play at murder  
and older children wait by the drugstore  
in springtime, descended  
from slaves, the young widow's story  
seems a footnote in one book  
on the long mythology  
shelf in the public library.  
Here where our steps are bordered  
by daffodils and corpses  
of animals,  
the twirling finger in the sidewalk  
trips us,  
and we can't say why we fell.

—*Mary Ann Daly*

## BLESSED BE

*The transition to patriarchal religion cost the lives of nine million women in Europe. Many of them were Wicca, knowledgeable herbalists, and dedicated to healing.*

Must they scream, must they always be screaming out there? I wonder how much these Christians pay them to raise such a constant commotion? I know the people don't feel such vehement hatred, especially the women, how could they? We've delivered and cared for their children, treated their husbands, relatives, and lovers in addition to ministering to them for many years. What is this strange thinking that makes me suddenly dangerous and harmful to them? Politics and power, this new order, but where is the sense in punishing the healers? Are their few healers with their bleeding and hacking so powerful that they can cure all the ills of this vast land? I've spent my life traveling, teaching, healing, and haven't reached thousands that needed me. Surely there is more than room for all of us. But they don't really seem to care about the healing—rather that the people accept their beliefs, a male god, male priests. They must make the people swear allegiance to this new order, refute all the old ways. My beliefs, all our ancient teachings, are in direct conflict with their desire for power; the people cling so tenuously to the old beliefs that they have become inflammatory. So we must all be destroyed, as examples to the people.

Where can Iris be, in another cell like this perhaps, watching the bugs scurry through the straw and mud, leaning hopelessly against a cold stone wall. Perhaps when I sleep I can reach her, if only a quick touch through this cruel rock. Strange how walls can look so different from one another. This very prison is made of the same substance as my castle, at least it is safe now, quiet, eternal at last. After three lifetimes there, thank the Goddess, I was able to learn the spell, now it will be at peace forever.

That was surely worth the chance of arrest, my last spell to ensure my home's security. It has served me well, from the beginning this time the castle held no strangeness for me. I clambered over the ancient balustrades, up and down tapestries, over the wrought iron balconies as soon as I could toddle. Sweet voices from the stones lulled me to sleep in my crib. Flowers smiled at my touch, the well water showed me past and future clearly. How is it that I never quite believed that it would end this way? But then the water never showed a stake with its flaming logs, only this cell, so accurately mirrored in those clear waters on warm summer afternoons. It never showed Iris burning either, perhaps this isn't truly our fate or perhaps the castle wouldn't face my ignominious death, preferring to believe that I will escape all this madness to grow old slowly, graciously, always loving and healing.

There are those infernal voices again, demanding burnings. Can't they wait, let me have my few precious days? Do they really believe that I can magically weave this straw into a broom and fly through stone walls? The women's screams are always the loudest. Poor foolish women, they don't realize what this new order means for them. They aren't even granted souls by this strange philosophy. They are evil, wanton, carriers of sin, worse than their husband's lowest cur. What an odd idea it is to categorize life at all, placing one creature above the next. "Lowest cur" indeed, the black-robed man that spoke that phrase to me was so vehement, so full of hatred. How I hope Iris is venting her sarcastic anger on them at every opportunity. I'm sure she is. I don't suppose this could get any worse, unless they'd beat her. I can't bear to think of that kind of pointless cruelty.

For how many nights, lying in our huge oaken bed, safe in the castle, have we discussed this fate of ours. It seems that we've known for at least half a lifetime, but it couldn't be that long. About three years ago we heard of the first burnings, the ridiculous accusations, the hatred. Then that picture we had been seeing for so many years in the well's water began to take on some comprehensible reality. We started to understand what that reflection might mean. We had never been able to understand it before—I couldn't imagine committing any crime, especially one severe enough to put me here. The first time I saw that image in the water I was three years old. I had just found Iris in the forest and brought her home with me. She already knew how to ask the waters about her future. She had been looking at the reflection of this cold stone cell since her infancy.

Yet, somehow it never had any relevance; certainly not through the traveling years when the people seemed so grateful for our slight knowledge, our herbal cures. There were incidents of unpleasantness then, like that man who tried to rob me, but they were only the typical hazards of traveling, no hatred. In the later years when the five of us were working together in the castle teaching medical skills, there was nothing but respect, gratitude, and affection. Patients would exclaim over our energies, our happiness while we were working so hard teaching, healing, growing and processing herbs. It seems that we have loved so much, worked so hard and never felt anything but gratitude and love in return. Where then are they finding these people to howl cruelly outside my prison cell, accusing me of the most repulsive deeds? Surely they know what liars they are; would so many have come to me for treatment if they believed me a murderess? Indeed, what are these Christians offering? Position and wealth in their "new church," for the men only, no doubt. Are these offerings worth enough to justify murder, and of how many I wonder? Are the other women somewhere in this foul prison also, or have they managed to escape? Those men might have been more clever and arrested us when we were all together at the castle. But perhaps they couldn't arrest us for dispensing medicines and cleaning wounds, they had to catch one of us doing a spell. Maybe I shouldn't have been so blatant, waving my wand at the castle from the front yard, but by then I didn't care. Iris had been gone for three days—do they really have her or, please Goddess, let her have escaped.

I was tired of always being on the defensive, living in fear, and I was determined to ensure my castle's tranquillity. For the past few months as news of the persecutions coming closer reached us, Iris and I have hardly

dared to sleep at night. We lay awake watching the shadows stretching across the ceiling, wondering how many more days we have. How many more days of work and growth before it is our turn to be sacrificed as the enemies of their religion.

We've scarcely been able to comprehend the horrors that are being committed in Christ's name when his ideas are so gentle and kind. Perhaps this lack of comprehension was one factor that kept us from fleeing. On some level I couldn't accept that people who professed to believe in such good teachings could be persecuting others, yet I didn't take into account the desire for power and wealth. That is what really motivates these supposedly holy men. Besides how was I to know they were having me watched, I waited til the dead of night to do my spell.

None of us wanted to leave the people that needed us, friends that we have spent our lives treating. Certainly not to plunge helplessly, aimlessly, through the woods, dependent on others to help and shelter us, never knowing who the enemy is, where to find friends, we didn't want to flee under those conditions. Yet the thought was always in my mind, in Iris's too, that as soon as the danger was really close we would leave.

They took us by surprise, though, we thought that they were still many villages away. When Iris disappeared I was worried but I thought perhaps she had been suddenly called to treat someone and didn't have time to let me know. Perhaps she wasn't captured after all and is now making plans to set me free.

At least they can't touch the house now, can't destroy or ravage it. It is eternally safe. The soft, dewy green hues will always melt into the ancient stone walls. The carved mahogany doors, the fragile stairwell, even the old rope and wooden bucket on our magic well will always be preserved. In my next incarnation the wooden fences and delicate iron filigree draped with flowers will be as lovely as they are now. The tapestries, the oaken bed, the walls and ceilings have all drawn in a breath and wait out of time, in perfection and peace for us to return. These raving people shall not go there and destroy my home—"to keep their souls from returning," their holy men say. How little they understand of our ways and with what hatred they pursue us.

FOR KATE—VIOLENCE REVIEWED

lavender kate, and silver  
your colors do not mask words  
as you teach—  
silver scorches guilty ones  
shifting restless feet—  
but silver ignites my opiated anger—  
i know their guilt

as i remember  
my ribs crushed to walls  
hands tight squeezing breath from my neck  
as one crushes a plum in palm  
knives (honed to skin a warrior)  
pressed to my breast by  
a man who could not bear—  
to see me free

thrown on the ground  
bitch lesbian bitch—  
he could not bear—  
to see her laugh with me

no work no food  
selling my body for room and meals  
too full of stitches pain & morphine  
to do else—  
beneath businessman bellies  
cant about cold wives  
i suffocated screams  
the rape of my will—  
all for moldy pictures  
of the father of our country—  
our father, who art in hell . . .

i turned the razor back on myself with bound arms  
they had soldered my lips with liquid shame  
i spoke thru gauze veils  
hidden in a separate hut  
when my words trickled blood  
but i bit through the veil to expose my teeth—  
like tequila without salt  
now i bite

now i take up my anthame and gut shame  
to read his entrails of cancered plaster  
chant:  
Hecate, turn my blade thricefold deep to them  
for the slashes they made in me

## WAR

Dab lines of ochre and black  
across my cheekbones  
down my throat;  
circle my eyes  
with mystic blue.  
Tie tail-feathers of pheasant  
in the braids of my hair,  
and I will in yours.

Where is my circlet of bear-claws  
to guard my throat?  
Your necklace shines hard and bright  
above the soft globes  
of your breasts.  
Where are my axe and bow?  
We must go  
with the white-moon trance  
in our eyes. I have sworn a vow:

It is war.

"She's only a ten dollar broad." The whole table laughs  
as I walk quickly past them, carrying five plates of eggs.

Sing with me, as we go.  
I am afraid, for you  
and for me; yet my arm  
feels the thrust of clean anger.  
and my mouth thirsts  
for their blood. I will dip  
my breasts in red paint  
to make them fear me.

"Hey honey, more coffee! That's a good girl. Say, did you  
see that bitch . . ."

My anger is a whirling cyclone,  
she is a dervish  
striking  
again and again.  
I laugh in my anger.

"Hey, where's my food?" "I'm not your waitress." "Oh yeah, I  
guess you're not—you both look the same from here down."

I would rather  
dance with you in the circle  
of high pines beneath the moon,  
or walk the afternoon hills  
sun slanting on our heads,  
but look: light strikes  
their spear-tips,  
the stench of their coming  
taints the wind. Another time  
we can lie by the fire  
and tell long stories . . .

*-Linda McDonnell*

1.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
deliver us now  
and at the moment of our death."

My name is woman;  
I live in an impregnable cage,  
its limits set  
by the vulnerable bruised edges of my body.  
See this purple thigh?  
See my crimson smile?  
I sing as any creature sings  
in a forest fire,  
the high notes rise more intense  
because the fire is invisible;  
it's hidden cleverly,  
tucked away in stray corners of my brain-cells.  
Timers, set ticking before memory,  
cause tiny flames of pain  
to begin to lick me.  
My name is woman;  
I am so used to pain  
I find myself uncomfortable  
in any other element.

2.

"Be quiet. Go to sleep now.  
Mommy and Daddy are here."

Three-year-old girl child  
lay in her bed,  
drowsy and safe  
awake not asleep.

She saw a pink and purple  
worm-like thing above her body.  
It did not touch her, no,  
it pulsed in the air.  
It was going to touch her.  
Her screaming woke the house.  
Woke her mommy who listened  
and said, "It's not real,  
It's not real; go back to sleep,  
it's not real; it didn't happen."

3.  
"You were such a good baby, so quiet,  
you could just sit still for hours!  
You never cried."

She lay in her crib,  
infant eyes open, unfocused—  
only things very close really seen.  
Like the crib bars,  
long and square and golden.  
Her breathing sucks in and out  
like curling ocean waves,  
rolling up in swirls of pleasure  
from belly to lips and back down again.  
The space about her body seems infinite;  
full of huge beings, strange smells,  
and feelings vibrate as the dust-motes  
in the air, that catch her eyes  
and turn golden.  
A being she knows comes close.  
He touches her  
and she is enveloped in safety.  
He takes off her clothes  
and she kicks her feet in the air laughing.  
He laughs and tickles her.  
Then he places upon her  
the long purple-pink globe of flesh  
that has a life of its own.  
It covers her body  
from chest down to between her legs  
which are now forced back  
and up into the air.  
Her flesh curls inside her—  
away from both him and herself.  
She does not cry out.  
She does not let herself know  
any of the feelings  
the vast air now swirls with.

4.  
Blank it out.  
Don't let yourself know it's real.  
If it's real, you're crazy; blank it out.  
Knowledge is powerlessness.  
Blank it out.  
Knowledge is pain.  
Blank it out.  
Mother to daughter;  
Blank it out.  
Teach us to numb ourselves,  
teach us not to feel.

The memory does not come easy;  
it comes with screams that will not stop,  
it comes with tears and terror,  
it comes with shame that I felt this,  
shame that I feel this.  
The memory does not come easy;  
I tell you because I know,  
I tell you because I will not be silent,  
I tell you because I will not be silenced.

## NIGHT LOVER

Please mama, let me go to sleep tonight before they come, before

He comes mama, he comes, and he doesn't turn on the light, he

Turn it on mama, please turn it on, turn

The blanket isn't long enough, it isn't

The toes, the toes show, they show, and he

He comes mama, he comes, and he tucks me in, and

It on! mama *please* turn it on, turn

Tell him I'm sleeping, okay? tell him to go away, tell him

The blanket's okay, it's okay, it's

The lips, mama they're wet, and he licks them, and

Mama, stop clattering your coffee cups, he comes! he

The fingers pinching, and it was clay, it was

Mama, stop playing cards, he comes! he

It was clay sweating, it was like clay, it was

Just tell him I'm sleeping, just tell him

The blanket's okay, it's okay, it's

Prodding mama, and his nails, they hurt, mama they

I don't say a word, I know, I don't say a word.

It's okay mama, it's okay.

It's just the cold mama.

Just close the window.

Close the window.

I'll be okay.

—Janice Maiman

## A CHILD'S-EYE VIEW OF VIOLENCE

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A review of *Give Me Your Good Ear* by Maureen Brady, Spinsters Ink, RD 1, Argyle, N.Y. 12809, 141 pp., \$4.50.

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The first time I read *Give Me Your Good Ear* it was in manuscript form, and I didn't crawl out of bed that Saturday morning until the blankets were strewn with typewritten pages and I had found out every last thing there was to know about Frances Catherine Kelly and her mother who killed her father, and her grandmother who used to be a singer, and her fifteen-year-old friend Kirsten who had a brain tumor, and . . . The second time around, *Give Me Your Good Ear* was typeset, bound, and a lot easier to hold onto, and I was riding a trailways bus across western Iowa, reading until the light gave out. Both times I was particularly grateful to Maureen Brady for having written a double-duty novel: that is, the narrative moved swiftly enough and the style was unintrusive enough that the dyke reader could cheerfully settle down to losing herself in somebody else's life—while at the same time having her feminist brain fed with something of genuine substance. How unlikely a combination this is, I realized only later—most easy-to-read novels are so because they're a long bath in familiar poisons.

Another odd and happy thing about *Give Me Your Good Ear* is that it's a realistic novel about the lives of "ordinary" women, written from the inside. It doesn't exploit its characters, it doesn't exploit the women's movement, it doesn't exploit Lesbians—and it doesn't even leave you with a sour taste in your mouth and recurring depressions. (Any of the above being sufficient reason to account for the two years Maureen spent trying to get it accepted before she and Judith McDaniel decided to publish it themselves.)

What *Give Me Your Good Ear* does do is tell how one woman empowers herself, breaks free of the chain of mother-crippling-daughter-crippling-granddaughter, and becomes finally "mother" to her own biological mother, in a new alliance based on the telling of the old "shameful" secrets. This sounds like a classic feminist vision—even a classic coming-out vision—and it is. But it is also believable, probably because Maureen fills in every gritty detail with the assured and economical hand of she-who-knows-what-she's-talking-about.

As the novel opens, Francie is trying to figure out how to leave Ben, a six-foot hypochondriacal leech. (Francie is a physical therapist.) In the process of extricating herself, she begins remembering her past, the specifics of growing up in a family of near-poor-but-not-destitute chicken farmers. She remembers her mother's acutely dismal wisdom: "You might as well make the best of it," Mother always said, *it* being whatever life circumstances you found yourself stuck with." She remembers her father's small continuing tyrannies: "Dad was very much like Ben in the way he could turn a good day into a bad day on the basis of just about nothing." Most importantly for Francie, she begins also to remember what her father did the night he

so humiliated his wife that she stabbed him with a kitchen knife. And she remembers the silences and denial that followed. These scenes of Francie's small-town girlhood are some of the best writing in the book, recreating a child's-eye view of restrained, everyday family violence that erupts finally into overt violence.

In the afterword Jacqueline St. Joan details the trials and tribulations of one feminist writer—Maureen—who tries to get her first novel published. The letters she quotes from commercial presses and literary agents, rejecting *Give Me Your Good Ear*, are almost predictable: “I would have preferred a more sympathetic character in Ben and a less self-indulgent Francie,” etc. The conflicting views of two feminist publishers, on the other hand, raised for me some intriguing questions. Lesbians are bound to read *Give Me Your Good Ear* as “The Making of a Sister Dyke, Part I,” so much is Francie a character who's headed our way. One feminist publisher thought that this implicit movement should be made explicit; another agreed with Maureen that adding a coming-out scene to the novel would ruin it. (I don't know about *ruin* it, but an adequately portrayed “coming out” might have doubled the page count.) One thing at least does seem clear: Maureen writes with a consciousness that Lesbian feminists can only welcome, adding as she does to our knowledge of our origins and process. My rather pious-sounding hope for Lesbian lit is that as we write and publish novels more immediately exploring our Lesbian realities, we make them as solid and complexly truthful as *Give Me Your Good Ear*.



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## CRANK SQUEAK COUGH

Above me I hear a rhythmic  
unbroken squeak  
tired and dusty as an old  
fashioned pump organ.

back and forth  
a hypnotized blacksmith's hammer call  
the windshield wipers on my car  
factory work in Des Moines IOWA  
It stops.

I hear him cough  
"Well, that's that,"  
emphatically.  
Stick it in and crank it out. Will she  
sigh? Will she say?  
will she object

Is this what she was born to know?  
The rhythmic creak of the bed, the  
strained look on his face;  
The concentration of willing the impossible  
to happen.

Sometimes 5 inches, sometimes 7  
Masters and Johnson say it doesn't  
matter. Mama didn't say  
anything at all.  
It was too unspeakable, too boorish  
stick it in and get it over with.

Above me they are moving furniture  
around.  
Opening drawers and  
padding about.

*-Kimi Reith*

## A NEW TWIST ON AN OLD LEMON THE PATRICIAN AND THE STRIPPER

A Review of the Film *Moment by Moment*

Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's latest effort, *Moment by Moment*, is being panned in the straight press as a "fizzle," "joyless," and "about as sexy as a pamphlet" (*Newsweek*, Jan. 8, 1979). In many ways I agree, though with different intentions. I believe in fact that Jane Wagner's screenplay is a comic indictment of heterosexual romance, which sure enough seems to me to be a fizzle, joyless, and not terribly sexy. The reviewers admit that the straight world needs "adversity," "explosiveness," and violence (also from *Newsweek*) in order to call a movie "romantic."

Interestingly enough, the feminist world criticizes the movie for being boring, even while deploring the violence of classic romance. Is it possible (a gasp from the crowds) that the message of the film is that heterosexuality is dismally tedious at its *best*? It's true that few of us yet exhort this patriarchal blasphemy out loud, but I'm betting that Wagner and Tomlin are outrageous enough to do it. I find *Moment by Moment* (by moment by moment . . .) to be a hilarious hoax on heterosexism if you just relax enough to get the clues.

Lily Tomlin's portraiture of a white, upper-class, avant-garde, middle-aged, suburban L.A., depressed woman in the beginning stages of divorce is just too classically stereotypical to *not* be a spoof. In fact Trisha Rawlings is similar to other Tomlin caricatures. She is, in Mary Daly's words, "The Totaled Woman." The straight press protests that even "The most *underdeveloped* Beverly Hills housewife has some personality" (emphasis mine). *Develop* comes from a Latin word meaning "to dis-wrap." I picture Trisha as a woman suffocating in a cloak of saran wrap. Who should be protesting??

The other half of this romance [sic] is John Travolta, representing the "new, sensitive" man, a working-class street kid who's still waiting for his fourteenth birthday. His "sexiness" supposedly consists of relentlessly posing in blue stretch panties in the two-dimensional genre of *Playgirl* (playBoy) *Magazine*, but it actually rests on the fact, borne out by brilliant camera direction, that he looks just like Lily. His "vulnerability" consists of begging and whimpering and cooperatively raising his arms so that the lady can remove his shirt easily (as she might a four-year-old's). The point here is that the new Man is the Old Man, in a boy's body—and still no adult capable of having a relationship with a woman. Furthermore, though his body is less "masculine," it is precisely his "maleness" that prevents him from being able to relate to the woman.

Jane Wagner's clever direction is particularly skillful in the contrasting of Travolta and Tomlin as "butch" and "femme" aspects of "androgyny." They wear the same style of clothes, shirts unbuttoned to the same exposure, with their class difference showing up in denim and satin. He swishes, she strides; her breasts peek through her shirt's opening, his hair does. Both have the same haircut and facial structure, which gives the camera a wonderful chance to play. The most successful example of cameraplay happens when Strip spies his arch enemy, Dan Santini, and Trisha spies hers, Stu Rawlings. The picture lingers first on Travolta's intense gaze, then quickly fades and rests on Tomlin's. It was this scene that made clear that the soulful comradeship of the two characters was thwarted not by the difference in class or age, as the surface indicated, but by the difference in gender.

The dancing around "androgyny" makes for some amusing role "reversals"—which are really role revisions—and displays "androgyny" for what it is; a partnership of two zombies, walking but only not-dead, soulless. These reversed revisions, far from suggesting new ways for heterosexual couples to find peace on earth, show not-so-earthly pieces of heterosexual absurdity. Travolta—appropriately called Strip—is "sexually objectified," with the camera coyly sliding down his legs as he slips out of his panties. He asserts (whines) his love for the uncommitting Trisha and begs her to admit she loves him too. She replies simply, "Strip," and finally adds, "I love you in bed." They continue in this vein for a few hilarious minutes, she telling him to strip, until he gets to the point of blurting, "I hate cheap sex!" Perhaps it is my own feminist fantasy that Wagner and Tomlin created this entire movie especially to show John Travolta posing in panties and whining, "I hate cheap sex."

The humor behind the so-called sex role reversals emerges from the realization that there is actually no difference between this "alternative" relationship and a more typical heterosexual roMANce. The supposedly erotic objectification of a man exposes itself in public as the same old same old, the old in and out, a guy playing with himself in the park and fantasizing about his attraction; it gets off short. The pseudofacts—he needs to be loved, she needs sexual gratification; he's soft (*flagellating*), she's hard (*bored*)—do not indicate an alternative relationship. She is still a mirror for his dreams and desires (he's fascinated with her beach robe inlaid with mirrors; he's fixated on his future—"I'm sure I can do anything. . . Can you think of something?"); their sexuality is still mostly confined to intercourse (who cares which one is on top?); she mothers and he suns himself. These scenes are funny because of what they're *not*, and they're not the unique relationships that are shown in the scenes of friendship, same sex.

Strip is portrayed as "emotional," but his only true emotion comes out when his lifelong friend Gregg gets killed. His relationship with Gregg is in fact a marriage, and in telling Trisha of its longevity ("The worst is over."), he is automatically reminded of Trisha's marriage ("By the way, how's your husband?"). But Trisha's close relationship is not with her husband, nor is her friendship with Naomi a marriage. It is only in the scenes with Naomi that we find out anything about who Trisha is, and one thing we learn is that she has a woman friend who cares about her. Naomi is disguised as a rich, "sexy broad," but her script unveils her:

Arriving unexpectedly at the beach house, "I talked to Stu and he really wanted to *come out*, but he couldn't. I had to *come out*, though. I should've *come out* sooner but we had to look at panelling. We really should have gotten redwood instead of cedar. Cedar feels like a *big empty closet*." (emphasis mine)

Instead of actually coming out, though, the two women go out arm in arm in search of the "wounded" Strip. The camera follows them step in step, pants and skirt, up and down the decadent Sunset Strip. Finally they get back into Trisha's snazzy Mercedes and Naomi is gazing intensely at her. T. says, "I know what you're thinking," and N. replies, "I doubt it." She then "confesses" that she was thinking "how boring shopping in Bonwits is going to be after today." That is clearly *not* what she was thinking, unless it was because T. wouldn't be shopping with her. The qualitative difference between the women's relationship and T.'s with Strip is demonstrated in the screenplay itself. The latter is quite literally a moment by moment rundown of a relationship (all that was missing was a bathroom scene), and the former has that special quality of literature, dialogue that suggests a whole dynamic.

Lesbians should also try not to miss the sisterly symbols in the decor of Trisha's beach house (as well as her lovely peach and lavender clothes). The tiles around the fireplace and all the upholstery depict images of the phoenix, ancient bird of freedom and flight. A Georgia O'Keefe type (if not original) painting decks the mantel, and a wall sculpture of an eggshape nestled in deep folds decorates the wall outside her bedroom. All these represent woman-identified energy and expose the "drama" as a hoax.

Some would say that Trish and Strip's romance made them both feel good and that the ending is left open (implying I guess that the intent is positive). I think perhaps they "felt good," or better than before, in a sort of stage of recovery, though the final return of Strip's address book marks the end of the stage. But the thread that runs throughout the film, "what a world," is really the message here. What a world we live in that wraps women's Selves in plastic, then protests at the ugliness of our suffocation. What a world this is that is controlled in all classes by organized violence. What a world that judges a woman (who in one "moment" is an architect) by her sexual desirability to a needy, self-centered boy. What a world we live in that the true alternative to women's oppression, feminist lesbianism, has to be embedded in an absurd portrayal of heterosexist changed sameness. I trust the reliably brilliant intentions of Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner to have this idea behind the scenes of dismal romance. Leave it to the dismally tedious to believe that the drama is really about alternatives. This movie is a laugh-in and I entreat everyone to go and laugh ALOUD.

## ON WRITING BIOGRAPHIES OF LESBIANS

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A review of *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* by Anna Mary Wells (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

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The study of women's lives in the nineteenth century was radically altered by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's pioneering analysis of women's letters and diaries ("The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1, 1). She provided us with a framework for comprehending the mutual passions, needs and expectations of women within the strict sexual apartheid of Victorian society. New biographies of our foremothers cannot ignore this explosive evidence.

Some biographies do not let you ignore it. Such were the lives of Mary Emma Woolley and Jeanette Marks. The virtue of Anna Mary Wells's *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* is that, much as she may have wanted to, she does not ignore the passion and commitment of their relationship.

Mary Emma Woolley was one of the pathbreakers during the coming-of-age of women's higher education. As president of Mount Holyoke College from 1901 to 1937, she expanded the school from a genteel institution for young ladies, overshadowed by its more intellectually illustrious sisters, Radcliffe and Bryn Mawr, into their respected and prestigious equal. Jeannette Marks was one of her faculty and Miss Woolley's lifelong companion.

Anna Mary Wells, a student at Mount Holyoke early in the century, knew the two women well. She intended to write a commemorative biography of the great president and succeeded, but not before certain curious questions arose along her way. There was, for example, the great scandal of Woolley's career: her strenuous objection to the choice of a man to succeed her in 1937, the first male president in Mount Holyoke's history. Wells wanted to avoid the issue, but found that it led to the even more troublesome one of Jeannette Marks. For it was generally acknowledged that Marks persuaded the diplomatic Woolley's tactless and courageous protest. And where did Miss Marks get her persuasive influence? From a lifelong relationship between the two women.

Wells did not want to pursue the relationship, but a boxful of letters persuaded her that she must (as old letters often will): "The first few [letters] that I read were ardent love letters expressed in terms that both shocked and embarrassed me." Wells unfortunately cannot quote from these letters for legal reasons, but she does confront her prejudices and, after doing so, write a quite respectable biography of

the two women. I found it refreshing to hear a biographer admit that her biases affected her project:

I had supposed myself to be open-minded and tolerant about sexual deviation, but it now appeared that I was not so at all when it occurred in women I admired and respected. I was aware and ashamed of a certain amount of prurient curiosity in my ambivalent desire to continue reading, but I became aware also that my discovery was altering my concept of the characters and careers of both women.

Wells is handicapped by an early twentieth century attitude toward lesbianism that must purge relationships between women of all sexual content, or admit them to be shameful and embarrassing. To come to terms with her feelings—and the feelings of the numerous alumnae who also knew the two women—she offers an interpretation of their relationship that I find intriguing:

My own opinion, for what it is worth, is that the relationship began in the childlike ignorance of sexual matters in which many young women of their generation were kept before marriage, and that when they became more sophisticated they voluntarily renounced all physical contact. The emotional relationship, once established, continued for the rest of their lives, altering with the years but steadily deepening until death parted them.

This analysis seems very likely to me. We'll never know, probably, just how women of this period handled their sexual feelings for one another. American and English women seldom wrote about sex. The relationship between emotional passion and genital sexuality was certainly quite different one hundred years ago than it is today. Where younger readers might disagree with Wells is in our estimation of the emotional relationship between women like Woolley and Marks. She does not like to call it lesbian or homosexual. We respond, why not? We are not so narrow, or fearful, on that point: one does not have to experience orgasm with another woman in order to live a recognizably lesbian life.

I began *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* in high excitement. Here, I thought, was the kind of biography that might help me sort out a crucial period in the history of lesbianism. Around the turn of the century, a critically different understanding arose as to the meaning of relationships between two women. Before 1900 (I use that date symbolically, not literally) passion between two women was not merely accepted but practically expected. After 1900, it became a shame and disgrace. Lesbianism did not just happen. Lesbianism is not just a descriptive term for genital sexuality between two women. Lesbianism, as we know, is a social concept that developed historically, accumulating meaning like a rolling stone. The factors surely are many and complex: feminism and anti-feminism, Freud, changing economic conditions, the war, increased sexual

knowledge, a few key literary figures. After reading the introduction to *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley*, I thought, here might be a book that began to map out the history of that period. However, the book promises more than it delivers.

Anna Mary Wells simply was not interested in or capable of developing the implications of her arguments. She never does show us how the two women developed a more sophisticated sexual understanding, if indeed they did. She does not discuss the generation gap between the two older women, who lived their overtly lesbian lives, and her sister students who saw something "vaguely scandalous" about Miss Woolley. She mentions Smith-Rosenberg's article, but seems to misinterpret it to mean that passionate language was merely a social custom of the time. She introduces the concept of sexual sublimation without exploring its influence on emotional attraction. She does not pursue the connection between the kind of lives the two women led and their commitment—particularly Jeannette Marks's—to feminism. She suggests that it was their relationship that led to the appointment of a male president in 1937, but doesn't really offer proof (a particularly unfortunate omission because one would like to know much more about the reactionary climate of the 1930's). In other words, Wells leaves plenty of room for historians of lesbianism to move in.

What she does do very well is to present the lives of two remarkable women, the daughters of nineteenth century feminism. She also shows with great sensitivity the toll that professional life could take on women (I would tend to say of all generations) in a hostile society. While Mary Emma Woolley, the older of the two, did not feel the conflicts inherent in her position as a self-achieving woman, Jeannette Marks did. I found her the more fascinating of the two—a woman who was never able to focus her talent and intelligence, a woman seemingly haunted by fears of inadequacy, a woman passionately committed to and yet jealous and resentful of her partner. I also admired her as a strong feminist fighter in her ideals, as Woolley was in her life.

It may be that the most fruitful material for feminist and lesbian historians at the present time is biography. Before deriving general theories we need a lot more empirical evidence—the evidence of women's daily lives. If so, we will certainly wield more probing tools in the dissection of our subjects than did Anna Mary Wells. But *Miss Marks and Miss Woolley* points out a useful and positive direction.

## A-MAZING WORDSEARCH I: SINISTER WISDOM



Tired of looking for patriarchal words in everything you read? Here's a wordsearch based on Mary Daly's book, *GYN/ECOLOGY*. Our first wordsearch is a "Tail Tag Wordsearch," the idea of which is to form an unbroken chain of circled words in which the last letter of one word is the first letter of the next word. The number in parentheses tells you the length of each word you're looking for, and dashes are provided for writing down each word as you find it. Start with the first word, *SINISTER WISDOM*, which is circled in the diagram. Continue by looking for a five-letter word connected to *SINISTER WISDOM* that begins with the same "M" that ends *SINISTER WISDOM*. That word is *MAGIC*, which is also circled. The next word begins with "C" and has 13 letters. Continue in this way to solve the diagram.

I am using the term *Gyn/Ecology* very loosely, that is, freely, to describe the science, that is the process of know-ing, of "loose" women who choose to be subjects and not mere objects of enquiry. *Gyn/Ecology* is by and about women a-mazing all the male-authored "sciences of womankind," and weaving world tapestries *of our own kind*. That is, it is about dis-covering, developing the complex web of living/loving relationships *of our own kind*. It is about women living, loving, creating our Selves, our cosmos. It *is* dis-possessing our Selves, enspiriting our Selves, hearing the call of the wild, naming our wisdom, spinning and weaving world tapestries out of genesis and demise.

(Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, pp. 10-11)

## YOUR WORD LIST

SINISTER WISDOM	(14)		
MAGIC	(5)		(8)
	(13)		(4)
	(10)		(5)
	(7)		(4)
	(6)		(5)
	(8)		(5)
	(8)		(7)
	(6)		(7)
	(10)		(4)
	(5)		(9)
	(6)		(4)
	(6)		(4)
	(7)		(4)
	(6)		(4)
	(9)		(4)
	(3)		(4)
	(5)		(4)
	(7)		(4)
	(5)		(5)
	(3)		(5)
	(4)		

created by Julia Penelope

## SINISTER WISDOM POSTER STILL AVAILABLE

In the spring of 1977, a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two women making love appeared on the cover of *Sinister Wisdom* 3, followed by a deluge of requests for a poster. The poster was printed in the summer of 1977: a duplicate of that cover, black on gray, 17" x 22". You can have your own for a contribution of \$3.00 toward the survival of *Sinister Wisdom* plus 50 cents to cover mailing costs. (They make nice gifts for friends, too; bulk rates available.)

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## SINISTER WISDOM ON TAPE

*Sinister Wisdom* issues 6, 7, and 8 are now on cassette tape. The recordings are made in the style of Recordings for the Blind, with the donated labor of Susan Wood-Thompson; she reads the text, describes the graphics, etc., for women who cannot read the print copies. For information on purchasing these tapes, please write SW, Box 30541, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503.

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Spell	Exact	Numena
Eggs	Tree	Season
Name	Night	Years
Rain	Spin	Gynecology
Roar	Huntress	Naming
Hear	Watch	Rotation
Each	New	Re-sister
Yore	Demon	Sister
Defy	Haggard	Nemesis
Energized	Witch	Revolution
Rage	Now	Croneographer
Grammar	Re-fashion	Magic
Healing	Glamor	Sinister Wisdom

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Becky Birtha** is a writer living in Philadelphia. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in the third world lesbians' publication *Azalea*. Also, a short story of hers will be included in *A Woman's Touch*, an anthology exploring lesbian sensuality and eroticism to be published in early summer, 1979, by Amazon Reality.

**Barbara H. Bradford** has recently moved from North Carolina to Nebraska to take pictures of Debbie in the bathtub. And would like to send hugs to Cris.

**Stephanie Byrd** is a Black Lesbian poet and the author of *Twenty-five Years of Malcontent* (Good Gay Poets Press, 1976).

**Susan Cavin** is a NYC Lesbian Separatist who writes for *Tribad: A Lesbian Separatist Newsjournal* (49-51 Prince St., NY, NY 10012) and published a book of lesbian poetry in 1973 called *Me and Them Sirens Running All Night Long*, which can be ordered for \$2.50 from Djuna Books, 154 West 10th St., NY, NY 10014.

**Jan Clausen**, an editor of *Conditions* magazine, is the author of *Waking at the Bottom of the Dark* (poems; Long Haul Press, 1979). A lesbian co-mother, she is active in the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse.

**Michelle Cliff** edited a collection of speeches and essays by Lillian Smith, *The Winner Names the Age* (Norton, 1978), and has had work published in *Conditions*.

**Tee Corinne** lives in San Francisco and is the artist responsible for the famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) Sinister Wisdom poster.

**Martha Courtot** has published two collections of poetry: *Tribe* and *Journey*. "My life has been a struggle against several imposed silences and I continue to maintain that joy is a revolutionary act."

**Mary Ann Daly**. "Born & lives in Washington, D.C. Twenty-eight, looks like an aunt who was killed by her husband in bed. Escaped aunt's fate while retaining her mannerisms. In her sister's dream, flew through space in a horse-drawn chariot with The Woman With The Big Hair. Spends most of the time wondering."

**J. Z. Grover** is a writer living in Sacramento who photographs her friends as an avocation. "I see formal portraiture as a nonverbal dialogue between sitter and photographer, the former presenting a position and the latter attempting to interpret it, to give it permanency. Because I use available light and small apertures, exposures are lengthy and most people rise to this inconvenience by addressing the camera's eye solemnly."

**Bertha Harris** is the author of three novels, *Catching Saradove*, *Confessions of Cherubino*, and *Lover*, and a co-author of *The Joy Of Lesbian Sex*.

**Julia Penelope** has been known to frequent various obscure haunts in the mountains of Nebraska and fritters away untold days and weeks by the ocean. She occasionally plays with words and has even written some of them down here and there. When she isn't mumbling incoherently, she's laughing. (Some know the joke.) Also, there are many other things to say.

**Melanie Kaye** lives in Portland, Oregon. A book of her poetry, *We Speak in Code*, will be forthcoming from Motherroot Press.

**Irena Klepfisz** is the author of *periods of stress*, a collection of her poetry. She is an editor of *Conditions*, a magazine of women's writing with an emphasis on writing by lesbians. A significant part of *Conditions* is devoted to reviewing feminist and small-press books.

**Jacqueline Lapidus** teaches English to non-majors in Paris, where she would have gone bananas long ago if not for other lesbians, feminists, and writers. Her second book, *Starting Over*, is still available from Out & Out Books.

**Linda Marie**. "I am a maid at the Ocean Park Motel in S.F. I have two children and a dog. I'm a reformed smoker. I do not belong to a coven and I eat meat plus I have other short stories that have been published and a novel titled *I Must Not Rock*, Daughters, 1977."

**Janice Maiman.** "I am a twenty-one year old Woman, studying English at the Graduate School of the University of Virginia. I studied creative writing with Joan Larkin at Brooklyn College. This is my first publication."

**Linda McDonnell** is studying to be a feminist therapist, staffs a co-op grocery store, and works on *So's Your Old Lady*, Minneapolis's lesbian/feminist journal.

**Kathryn Missett** is an artist living in the Tropics.

**Arlene Raven, Ph.D.,** is a founder of the Woman's Building and the Feminist Studio Workshop, editor of *Chrysalis* magazine, originator and co-director of the Lesbian Art Project, and has lectured and published widely on women's art and sensibility.

**Kimi Reith** is from San Diego and lives now in San Francisco. A chapbook, *Poems for My Mother and the Women I have Loved*, has recently been published by Second Coming.

**JR Roberts** lives in Cambridge, Mass., and is currently preparing to self-publish a pioneering reference work, *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography*.

**Ann Allen Shockley** is the author of the novel *Loving Her*.

**Pearl Time'sChild's** alter ego lives in the patriarchy yet, teaching philosophy for a living. She wrote "the box" during a year spent in the Oregon women's culture; currently she writes lists and lecture notes. She wants to grow up to be an author.

**Maxine Kent Valian.** "I am a professor of English at East Los Angeles College. Although I have written poetry off and on all my life, I did not begin to be published until the liberation movement loosened my spirit and my pen. "Nun" will be my first success in a feminist publication."

**Kathryn Wetzel** is a singer and songwriter, housecleaner and joke-teller living in New Haven, Conn. She hopes someday to be doing her writing and living in Maine.

**Marybeth Witt.** "I'm 26, Aries with moon in Cancer, Leo Ascendent. Am a Dianic Witch. Have been very active in wimmin's rights and gay rights, and am becoming more and more of a separatist, although that makes teaching men very difficult. Love cats, music, am a scholar, and have been writing poetry since I was 12."

**Bonnie Zimmerman** teaches women's studies at San Diego State.

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