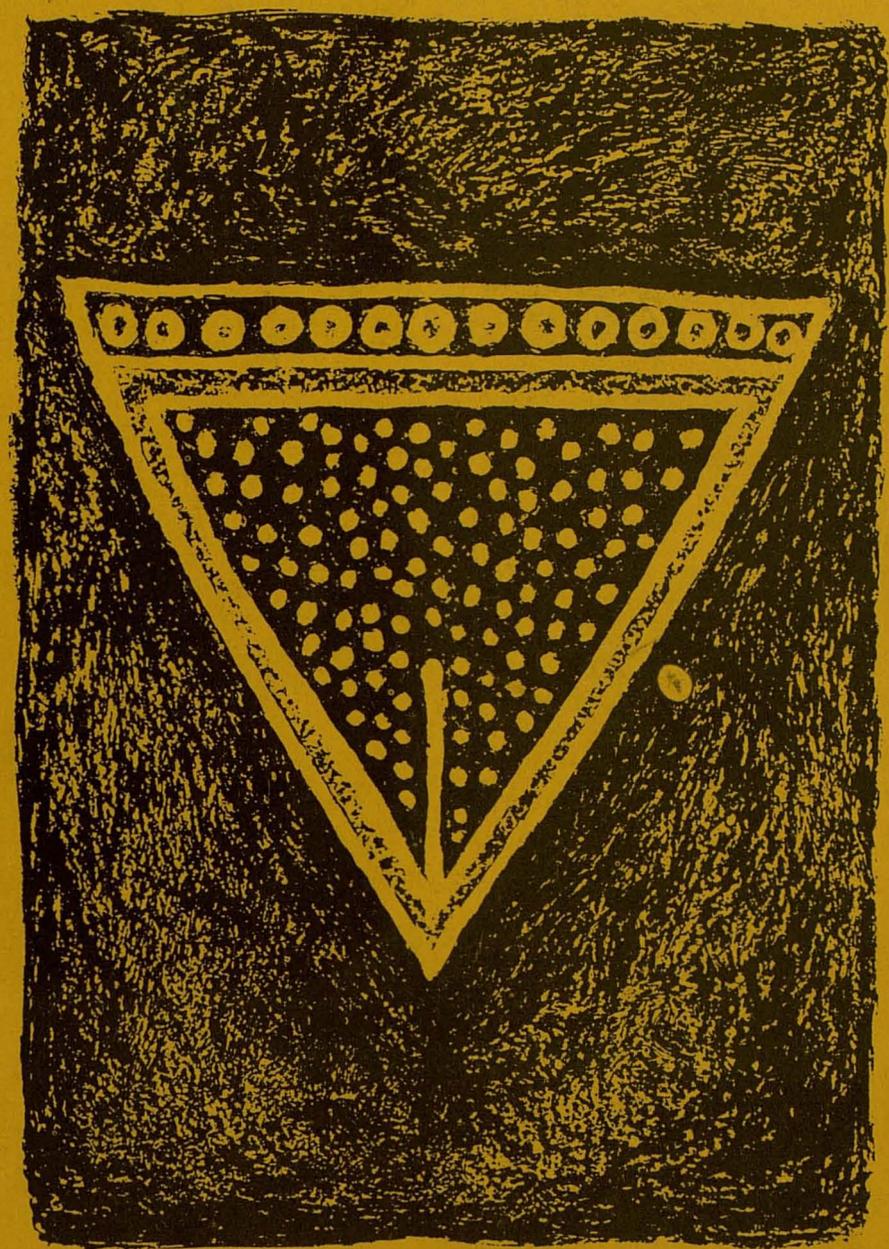


SINISTER WISDOM





SINISTER WISDOM 17

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NOTES FOR A MAGAZINE

As Adrienne and I take on the editorship of *Sinister Wisdom*, I think about the ways lesbian/feminists must work to rededicate ourselves to a women's revolution. I see the need to bring up the idea of revolution because it can so easily become obscured. And as women we tend not to think in terms of revolution. The historian Blanche W. Cook has said that revolution is a process, not an event. It is a process which requires courage and vigilance. Theory and nourishment. Criticism and support. Anger. And it requires love—for ourselves—for each other. We are women and we have been taught to love: men children. Seldom—if ever—each other. Seldom—if ever—ourselves. We have been taught—and the dominant culture continues to tell us—to direct our affection outward: not inward. To choose to love both ourselves and each other is a revolutionary choice.

As a young woman I dreamed of a woman who would love me. I had been fortunate—I had been deeply loved by a woman when I was a child. After her death I withdrew into this longing for a woman who would draw this emotion from me again. And who would give it back. Who would hold me and stroke me and let me sleep close to her.

When I next loved a woman, we became lovers, but this was not a withdrawal. Another level of life opened to me, in which I experienced a release of velocity and momentum which seemed only right and well deserved.

The love of woman lover for woman lover—as I have experienced it—is the most private of emotions. I cannot share this love with any other woman—but I can work to allow it to inform relationships with other women. Then this love becomes a source of sustained revolutionary commitment.

As a Renaissance historian I dissected love. The love described by the syphilitic misogynist Paul in Christian theology. The love described by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who based their theories on those of the gynephobic slavocracy which was fifth-century Athens—among other patriarchal states. This love—these loves combined—had at its base male bonding and female oppression. Love was “conceived” by these men as a source of power; in fact, as a power in itself. It was the motive force of their universe. This happened in an age called by many “golden”—in which women were burned at the stake. In which the men in power engaged in all forms of slavery. In genocide. This was a sadomasochistic era. An era of pornography.

And in 1972 I thought that this love had something to do with me. That in it I could love myself. In fact, I almost lost myself: as a woman lesbian woman of color.

But I still hold to the idea of love as power: to connect touch reach each other—and smash old patterns of self-hatred woman-hatred.

We live in a culture in which the word *love* masks other emotions and is used to justify varied forms of oppression and objectification. What June Jordan has named "a steady-state deep caring and respect" seems in the mainstream almost nonexistent. We live in a culture the Renaissance helped create. In which slavery and genocide are sanctioned. And the power remains in the same hands.

As I try to write this, I am struck by how corny it feels to me to be writing about love. Writing about love can make you feel corny, and it can make you feel self-righteous. And so I need to say that I am serious and want to be taken seriously. That by love I do not mean easy escapism into another woman's arms. And I need to say that I am not self-righteous—I am in struggle to love and trust women in my day-to-day life. We need to allow ourselves complexity in our feelings toward each other. We need to admit our anger as well as our love for each other. But we must avoid endangering our emotions with oversimplification. This is a time for us in which we are beginning to face issues which are complicated but which will bring us, through our efforts, into another place on the lesbian/feminist continuum. I think of Elly Bulkin's essay on racism, which appeared in *SW* 13; Barbara Macdonald's essay on ageism and the youth culture, which appeared in *SW* 16; the work in the disabled women's issue of *off our backs*; the work in the "Disobedience" issue of *Feminary*; the Persephone Press anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga; the dialogue between Black and Jewish women edited by Beverly Smith in *Conditions* 7. The issue which all these address is the issue of difference between women, of division between women. It is an issue which some lesbian/feminists claim is diversionary, others claim is nonexistent. But unless we continue to address ourselves to this matter of difference and division, I do not think love between us is possible. Not a love which will translate into power and in turn bring forth revolution.

I have been traveling around this country this past year. In one particular place I listened to a woman say that she felt she had been taught all her life to be "nice." She felt this expectation of *niceness* to be a constant oppression. She reserved the right not to be *nice*, she told me. This woman was a young lesbian. We had this conversation in a woman's center. When a fifty-year-old straight woman called the center—because she was going through a divorce and did not know whether she was going to make it—only one woman agreed to speak to her; and this woman was an outsider.

This incident stayed with me, and I began to think about the idea of *niceness* and how many of us have been taught this as girls and conditioned in it throughout our lives. I thought how *niceness* is connected to quiet, speechlessness, silence. How *niceness* can also mean politeness, passivity, inaction. I wondered how much the expectation of *niceness* is a constant for women which crosses race, class, ethnic lines. And I also wondered what the opposite of *niceness* is. I decided it is both anger and love. Both are emotions which demand action; both are emotions which women have been traditionally denied for ourselves.

These are some of the thoughts I have as Adrienne and I take on the editorship of *SW*. I approach this editorship with a certain degree of ambivalence. I am a thirty-four-year-old woman. A lesbian. A woman of color. I have just begun to write, and I am selfish about my writing and my time. But I have made a lifetime commitment to a revolution of women. I want to serve this revolution. And I want this revolution to be for *all* women. I want *Sinister Wisdom* to continue to be informed by the power of women. I want to make demands on this magazine, and I want other women to make demands on it also. I want these demands to include courage and vigilance. Theory and nourishment. Criticism and support. Anger and love.

Michelle Cliff

In their first issue, in 1976, Harriet and Catherine described the founding of *Sinister Wisdom* as a political action. We reaffirm that purpose here. We believe that no art, no writing, exists that is not ultimately political. That language and images have the capacity to bolster privilege and oppression, or to tear away at their foundations. We believe that what we read affects our lives. That the images we look at influence how we see. That there are pictures and words that numb us, dull us, keep us circling in one place, others which can challenge us to the quick, heal and empower us.

At the most bedrock level, lesbian/feminist publishing is concerned with making women visible, in the sense in which Marilyn Frye uses that term in her essay in this issue—visible as we do *not* find ourselves in the “straight” misogynist world of imagery and naming. And not some few women, but the diversity of women whose passion and labor are the pulse-beat of this planet. But why “lesbian/feminist”? To see women from a perspective that does not accept the structures of enforced heterosexuality is something different from accepting those structures and choosing to focus on women, as many journals, women’s studies programs, art shows, “special issues” of periodicals, or conferences have done.

In the past decade or more a network of lesbian/feminist presses and publications has grown around the country. What this means to us is that we are not alone: at a time of escalated sexual and racial terrorism, and that economic terrorism which demands silence and compromise as the price of a job, *Sinister Wisdom* is part of a political and social web of resistance. In recent years we have seen that network documenting the beginnings of intensive dialogue among women across racial lines, with the appearance of *Conditions 5* (and articles in other issues); *Azalea: A Magazine by & for Third World Lesbians*; recent issues of the Southern lesbian/feminist journal *Feminary*; the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, published by Persephone Press; to name a few milestones. We believe it is no accident that much of this process has been initiated and pursued by lesbian/feminists, both women of color and white women. For as lesbians, we are all marginal in our com-

munities of origin: we all know the meaning of erasure, stigma, otherness, separation.

In 1975, in their introduction to *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, a collection of essays from the early lesbian journal *The Furies*, Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron wrote of lesbian/feminism as "a commitment to women as a political group which is the basis for a political/economic strategy leading to power for women, not just an 'alternative community.'" As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, feminism was being actively invited into the "alternative culture" of the "new age." Many all-women events were becoming more and more like enclaves, often accessible only to women who were "child-free," young, physically strong, or to those with a little extra money. Many lesbians were "coming-out" into ready-made separatist spaces, ill-informed or uninformed about the realities of earlier lesbian lives, the existence of lesbian/feminist theory, the history of women's liberation, or the lives of women unlike themselves. As Barbara MacDonald wrote in "Look Me in the Eye" (*SW* 16), the "lesbian community" often looks like a youth culture—with all the political implications of the youth culture, as tolerated and manipulated by patriarchy.

To imagine yourself always, every day, in every choice or act of your life, as living in history (herstory): as being part of an historical process, the process of the liberation and empowering of women; and to try to live, work, and treat with others as if your behavior as an individual had the power to affect that process, for better or for worse—that is perhaps the hardest thing of all, the thing we are lured to forget when we are offered enclaves of women-like-ourselves or feminism and lesbianism as "alternative communities." As Martha Courtot has written in this issue:

imagine me a woman like yourself though different
who knows for women of our time for women of conscience
there can be no private escape routes

As to *Sinister Wisdom*, we are concerned more than anything else with the substance of what we will publish. We are not striving for mass circulation; we want to try to keep growth—with its attendant practical concerns—balanced against strength and honesty of content, and we do believe in the diffusion effect of *getting the work out*, even as a small magazine. We want to publish material which makes explicit the experience of women who have often been erased or unheard even within lesbian communities. We want to see a continuing documentation of dialogues on race, and what must inevitably come on their heels, and already is—a wholly new, woman-identified dialogue on class—what that division has meant for all kinds of women, in concrete, womanly terms. We are not interested in work which is limited to claiming some hierarchy of oppressions. The oppression of women is too complex to be wadded into one vague concept, and every principled formulation that each woman can bring to it is necessary and precious.

We seek artwork which depicts the diverse work and environments of

our lives, which challenges traditional white male images of women and the presumptions of the "art world" itself. We want interviews with women who don't usually get interviewed; diary extracts; exchanges of letters. We ask for "narratives"—what some people call "fiction"—because so many women are writing somewhere between autobiography and made-up tale, and truth is not limited to mere fact. We look for poetry which connects lesbian sexuality and passion with the ways lesbians are living in the world beyond the bedroom; we also want poems which examine freshly, from a lesbian and feminist perspective, anything in the universe.

We believe that many more women should be writing theory. The word "theory" has bad associations for some: abstract writing, rhetoric, something detached from practice, from action, from daily needs. Yet theory can take many forms. Catherine Risingflame Moirai's poem "Taking Back My Night" in this issue is on one level a theory of patriarchal language-imagery. Theory essentially means thinking, reflecting on, what has happened to us and drawing some kind of general principles from that. The earliest feminist theory of the late sixties and early seventies was derived from the highly specific, intensely personal, activity of consciousness-raising. Yet "theory" still has the forbidding associations of a cerebral, chilly, essentially male activity. Unfortunately, when we explore our concrete experiences without theory-making, we are left with isolated instances, feelings of victimization, therapy insights, perhaps, but no sense of how these experiences belong to a larger whole, or how we can move out from them not just as individuals but *with* large numbers of other women. So *SW* welcomes writers who are "doing theory" and inventing new forms in which to present it.

Sinister Wisdom has, from the first, published work by "straight" women or by women who saw themselves so at the time. We will continue to choose work which participates in a lesbian perspective, which does not assume a heterosexually-centered universe, and which we feel to be of value for lesbians, however the author or artist chooses to identify herself. That women are the theme or subject matter is not enough; we seek work in which women are *visible* in Frye's sense:

If the lesbian sees the woman, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. . . . The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she can *be* seen; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, author perception. . . . With that, there is the dawn of choice, and it opens out over the whole world of women.

We will do whatever we can to encourage and incite work which will make *SW* a resource for women of conscience for the years immediately ahead—years in which timidity and complicity will be increasingly purveyed as appropriate responses to institutional terrorism. We need the best of your imagining, your thinking, your documenting of reality, your wit, anger, criticism, and love.

Adrienne Rich



photograph by Marian Roth

THE NEW VICTORIA PRINTERS

Situated on the border between New Hampshire and Vermont are two women-owned and operated companies, New Victoria Printers and New Victoria Publishers. These two corporations are housed in an old carriage-house in downtown Lebanon, New Hampshire. It all got started five years ago, when three women printers found ourselves out of jobs. We got together with another woman who had the promise of some money, and decided to start our own print shop. With the help of the Haymarket Foundation we found \$10,000, which we used to renovate the space, buy a camera, two offset presses, and bindery equipment, then opened for business. We chose the name New Victoria Printers after Victoria Press, a print shop in London in the 1860s owned by Emily Faithful, who employed only women. She published and printed a magazine called *Victoria Magazine*, which advocated the rights of women. Our logo is taken from an early portrait of Simone Weil, but she has become her own persona, affectionately called Vicki.

Our original goals were to do quality offset printing; to print for women's and other alternative groups at a discount; to pay ourselves a reasonable wage; and to provide ourselves with a mutually caring environment in which to work. Basically we were attempting to maximize control over our workspace and our lives.

From the start we were committed to collectivism, and organized ourselves so that each of us had equal say in decision making. Many of our old ideas about hierarchies and division of labor have been challenged through this process, and it has taken us a while to learn to balance the amount of energy put into our working relationships with that put into production. But we have continued to be committed to this process and feel that it is one of the best ways to put into action our feminist principles.

After about a year as a commercial print shop we decided to form a publishing company so that we could produce our own work as well. We began by advertising for manuscripts and forming a board of editors from among local women. A year and a half later, our first book, *Fire Under Water*, poems by Miriam Dyak, was in print. Our second book, *Tilt*, is an anthology of writings, music, photographs, and art by women of northern New England. The third, also by Miriam Dyak, is a very intense, continuous poem about the death, over nine months, of the man she was living with, and is called *Dying*. And our most recent is a children's book with photographs and drawings about a girl who searches for things that are brown like her—*Noelle's Brown Book*. Currently, we are working on an anthology of women's science fiction and fantasy, *Woman Space*, which is now in the printing process. Also, this year we look forward to publishing a historical study, *The Heterodoxy: A Club for Unorthodox Women* by Judith Schwarz.

None of our books have made us any money beyond paying for themselves, with perhaps a little left over to start the next one. In fact, they have been capitalized primarily by the print shop, by our volunteer labor and that of community women, and by the US government through a National Endowment grant, an occasional CETA worker, and the New Hampshire Council on the Arts. And although the publishing and the printers are two separate nonprofit corporations, the ability to publish seems almost wholly dependent on the existence of the print shop. We feel that we are operating on a fairly fine, at times indistinguishable, line between being part of the commercial establishment and being an alternative women's press. From what we have read, however, most feminist print shops which have printed only for women, or who have focused entirely on publishing works for women, have not been able to succeed financially. Maintaining this balance seems to be a matter of survival for us.

It has been a struggle at times to keep it all together. Commercial printing is a very competitive business, especially in our area, and also very pressured with trying to meet deadlines. And publishing has never been profitable for any but the very large corporations. It is, for most of us in feminist publishing, a labor of love and of political commitment. That is why we are especially happy to be printing the National Women's Health *Network News*, which has helped us, over the past year and a half, to see the possibility of becoming a more exclusively feminist press. When we started *Network News*, their circulation was 1400; it is now up to 8,000 bimonthly (we do everything including the bulk mailing). And we have also just begun this quarterly.

And even though there is a small but wonderful women's community here, we always feel the need for connections with other women around the country, and for feedback on what we are doing. We are interested in hearing what you would like to see in print. We publish T-shirts (silk-screened) and cards in addition to books, and are always looking for inspiration and ideas for these. We are open to printing apprenticeships as well, in which an organization or individual author can self-publish by becoming part of the actual printing process. We have done this with poetry, and recently gained a collective member who put out a novella by covering material costs, doing labor exchange, and apprenticing, so producing *Her Voice in the Drum* (ReBecca Béguin; Lichen) with distribution strictly to feminist bookstores.

Despite some of the difficulties of trying to keep two feminist businesses alive and well in Lebanon, New Hampshire, it certainly has its rewards. It is wonderful to work together with other women and to be in charge of our workspace. Beyond this we feel it is very important for women to own and operate the means of production. Not only does this break down the stereotypes about women and machines, but it gives us the real power to print words women want to read. It is at present the basic tool our movement has for communicating with one another.

Beth Dingman

with assistance from: Claudia Lamperti, Barbara Hirschfeld,
ReBecca Béguin

and indirectly the other members: Petey Becker, Bonnie Lou Arnold 9

TAKING BACK MY NIGHT

- I. There are nights when the fear
drifts like fog when there is no one
here no one but me. I dread
the walking in the dark
fantasize the shapes of men white
as death stalking me. I hold
my breath when I open the door and
lock it behind me to shut out
what was or what might be.

I stroke my quilt,
the quilt left abandoned in a stall
triangles of black, deep red, blue
given me by women who loved each other,
made by some unknown woman
from necessity and flour sacks.

I wonder what child woke, afraid
under that quilt
and if a woman woke, afraid
beneath a man quick to anger.

I remember a child waking
hot with fever and pain
like a needle through the ear
with every heartbeat, huge, invisible:
I remember standing in the bed
screaming into the dark
where there was no help, no answer.

I learned familiar things
changed in the dark:
even the glass of milk by the bed
turned to poison over night.
Familiar face turned monster:
I woke, afraid,
hearing the monster stumbling down the hall
to punish me.
I woke to run, to hide
under the bed, under the table,
if I were quick,

if I slept light,
if there were enough light
to see where to run.

I learned vampires wore black capes
and fled the dawn.
Evil witches wore black
and had dark hair.
Gentle Cinderella was blond,
like the good fairies.
I loved Snow White because her hair
was dark like mine.

In church I learned about
horns of light, shining souls,
the valley of the shadow,
seeing through a glass darkly,
cast into outer darkness:
God, he
created light and found it good.
At school I learned about
bright ideas, bright students,
Dark Ages, the dark night of the soul,
the Dark Continent.
Everywhere I learned
little white lies,
free white and twenty-one,
blackmail, blacklist,
blacken his reputation,
black sheep,
black as the grave,
Darkies.

My grandmother wanted me
to be a pale lady.
I tried; then I tried
to kill myself. I learned hell
is very bright.
I decided to live;
I decided to live
well. I decided
not to be a lady;
I decided to live
beyond the pale.

II. Here we walk holding hands
without light

we guide ourselves
by the feel of the path
by the darker
patterns of trees against the sky.
Sometimes I close my eyes
learning to trust myself to find the way
learning to trust my loves to guide me.

I have to trust the dark to garden.
I lay down the sheets of straw,
the old hay, the gathered leaves
between the plants. Beneath the mulch
the worms make earth rich
and all the sweetness of the world begins.
I feed the worms, and celebrate
as they multiply, and remember
I will feed them again, and better,
someday.

I have to trust the dark.
When we go to the garden
each morning we find
tomatoes ripened overnight.
The pear trees are heavy, breaking;
we pick the fruit and carefully
wrap each one to sweeten
away from sun.
At last on the kitchen shelves
the jars glow in shadowed peace
where light will not steal color.

When daylight fades
my tired body praises
the shorter day bringing rest.
Long winter nights are the goal,
the reward, the time to recover
from the bright hard times.

III. I sit reading by the fire:
the abolitionist writes
the dark races are more intuitive
gentle not good at math.
The philosopher declares
the dark side, the yin
is cold and feminine.
The rabbi contrasts
Sabbath white and pure with Lilith
dark and evil, who refused to be laid

down, Lilith made of earth
and kept beyond the outer wall.

I am thinking about women
wearing veils and wigs and rings
and words
hidden so men can stay
bright and pure.

The definition of what we are
is will they kill us for it?
have they ever not killed us for it?

Watching sparks rise
I remember the smell of sizzling hair
when my brother set
the match to mine.

I read that in a certain village
the pyres seared against the black
magic cat knowledge
til one woman left alone
watched the men for enlightenment.

I remember a picture from my father's
state: a ring of white
space around a charred black body
whose first crime was being dark;
the white men stood with rope and torch
making proud offering
open to the camera.

Later in an eastern paper city
under a sudden August sun women
ran with flaring hair
to a river already boiling.

I watch the flames rise
remembering all the bright
final solutions.

Some nights we hear dogs
calling on the hills.
We know men can change their mind
about their game.
My love dreams that they are hunting here;
she dreams that they are hunting us.

Where we share common fate
and cause
there we may also choose a new
definition: in the darkness, she
rises strong and free
and finds it good.

Tonight I will walk in darkness
feeling my way home
by the curve of the earth
feeling my way to sleep
by the curve of a woman.
If I wake in the night
she will soothe me.
If the men in white come
she will not desert me.

I have to trust the dark.
I have to trust myself.
I am learning to love myself.
I have not let them kill me;
I have not let myself die.
I am still learning to walk
where I am afraid.

SHE KNEW WAYS

She knew ways to lift herself straight off the face of the earth into her own arms of love. She danced—the body alone doesn't make the dance, movement comes through a spirit releasing flesh. She appeared at a standstill, but felt built for speed, lightning slim and bright to meet each event that came along and not go under.

She touched her lips, retracing a woman's kiss. Nikki had just left, having told her no ever so gently. Imani breathed deep and closed her eyes. She'd done her part well—opened to the strong attraction and followed desire. Openly she'd said to the woman: For a while now I've wanted to be something to you, like how you be to me.

It took a tough lesson in love to say aside her suit of armor, to open her heart, to hear the answer: no. Her usual course of action was to remain silent, to close down all dreams and expect nothing if she braved even to recognize the flesh of her desire. But with Nikki, she'd put out for the friendship and finally gathered courage enough to speak about love.

Fresh air and sunlight stung through surfacing tears and anger. Imani chafed under the elements healing her exposed flesh. She'd extended her arms, been embraced and then set on her way. She owned many strengths now, and so being more, more was demanded each new day. She swallowed, took another deep breath. Strange, the space that never got filled didn't ache unsatisfied. No defiant thoughts of food drink pills to fill or drown her yearning reared up. She'd learned how to pray and not expect an exact fit. She sensed something new—the secret place she'd sought long and hard to wrestle from outside activity. She'd never suspected pain could take her there, but she touched on dignity and self-respect. Her character still held stiff with stubbornness and arrogance, but she centered on a sense of herself.

Her spiral had passed another starting point. She stepped from a line of many-breasted warriors who nursed and cared for themselves, who milked love and passed blood easily. Once again she'd turned around, grown and switched places. Her rightful place was as pupil, not master of life. The child whined and dragged out its case so an adult could show up in her skin. She didn't like the cards on this deal but picked them up to play her hand. Gladly she'd give what she could when she could in amounts she honestly had to offer.

Uppermost in her mind she loved . . . Nikki for sure, but beyond the woman, Imani just plain loved. She turned inside and knew ways to lift herself like those night sisters dancing with rhythms incredible: moves a-

rose whiplash from water—so smooth in release, so fast in return. She called the place to mind; in twilight the women rose up for a dance with one another and once again a vision opened to Imani; this time she didn't try to shut down her mind, she'd free the memories. Life's lines traced through the dance.

The soft haze of sadness set aside, memory moved her limbs. With eyes bright and shining, some phantom partner helped her around. Vague outlines of her life patterns fell into place and clicked. Unfolding eruptions unearthed her spirit while she, wide awake and dreaming, stood dazed, rooted in the moon's light.

Half-drunk and reeling pink and orange, the moon Herself sat outside Imani's window. Life stood up with a different flavor in this place where girl children freely walked the nights naked. Imani understood she had actually drawn down the energy to learn from these sisters, to step in this dance of dark women with fine eyes and proud muscles.

Anyone watching would see a woman intent on a vision—lovely and gone from this world: brown, red, moon-dusked, glistening dark and dreamy, a woman ravaged by her own splendor, choked and overfull of inner fire—looks that so often get wasted by some man adorning himself. But Imani's eyes had always followed women as far back as she could remember in this life and, she knew, in previous ones. She recognized a woman in the circle as somehow herself, who when she danced showed a strong line of thigh—the chekere lifted a mane of dread, the beads rattled the gourd wind.

The step to join this spirit family was as far as Imani ever remembered of the journey. When the visions first came, she reared away from what made way as if in answer to her questions. She tried to shut down and push them back, but gradually became willing to look on what simply waited for her recognition. With effort she rode the balance between this other-world awareness and familiar consciousness that could translate the waves of energy. She felt the need to see her way through to a particular message beyond the hope that lifted her, but still hadn't made it all the way home.

Well, that's it for the day, she addressed her reflection, thinking: I can't believe I'm this handsome, frankly amazed at the large eyes still soft with brooding, the face smoothed and sheened by youth, the lines clean to the bones shaping all the lovely places. She wore a muscular frame under her clothes, yet slenderness gave her a vulnerable quality. She posed for an even stronger appearance, figuring that would decrease the number of men who hit on her, but men always had something to say and it mattered little whether she appeared a straight femme or stomping butch: the look of a young boy served her well.

The clock on the steeple outside her window frowned 8:15. She lived half a mile from the park and so needed only to put the cowbell and chekere in the knapsack where the lapa lay neatly folded. A light run paced crosstown would bring her loose and ready to perform. The group had pulled together in stops and starts, but after a year hanging with each other around dance and drum, they formed a unit tight enough to perform the

city parks with whoever showed up, pass the hat and share some cash after the applause.

Friday night brought down the first round of tourists eager to check Greenwich Village. Washington Square sponsored a full concert of city rhythms. The players showed up on roller skates bikes two legs running around the park or inside chasing volleyballs dribbling soccer balls. All manner of music from machines mean enough to ride the subways back to a cappella innocence lived in the hub of the village. Guitar-playing hard-times-blues-singing white boys from comfortable homes came to profile in the night. Broken-down winos still hung in there, young bloods soon to take their places sold loose jays smoke coke all kinds of pills and drugs so much finer than wine they ought to be illegal.

Imani entered at the southeast corner and saw Nikki, Dana and Lynn heading towards her along Washington Square South. Her gear unloaded, she stretched her limbs. The four women exchanged spare greeting. At rehearsal/over business/on a night to hang, only fatigue tempered by mercy might end the conversation. When they came together to pull an audience, they stored energy for the ripe time.

Everyone ready, they started down a pathway to set up an area around the concrete circle bordering the fountain. Nikki placed a hand on Imani's nappy head, saying, "What's happening dreads?" Imani answered with an arm around her friend's shoulder. She stroked Nikki's back for the minute, thinking, A year ago I'd have to hate her just to cope. She breathed deep, appreciating this handiwork by the Goddess—she thought along lines of a Goddess, of Sisters Who came before her and Whose spirits guided her growth. That same Goddess had laid out the brilliant summer night where the moon shone a smiling genius and the stars jeweled the blue.

Nikki and Dana settled on the edge of the fountain, pat out a yan valu, the Haitian rhythm so like the water, and began. Their drums gathered the people. With Lynn at her side, Imani did a ceremonial step as they awaited the mixed bag of curiosity and cynicism that contained their audience. The two dancers carved the semi-circle of space they'd need for movement.

Imani didn't keep her usual watch on the people, and many had gathered around. She held to a stillness inside and the majesty of the night. She didn't want to see the slick drugs passing or the eyes that hungered after woman flesh. Her gaze followed the waves in the trees where their leaves swelled up under one another. The trees stood, an ancient village of women who had seen many human lives come and go and who knew better than to get excited over them.

Nikki was walking her drum round the eager circle, many of them seeing a woman pregnant with rhythm for the first time. Even the skeptics felt her tap the well to a mighty pulse as she walked with the drum talked with the drum called spirits to shower everyone with the same joy she realized with the drum. Dana stayed seated as always, locked dead in meditation, a slight smile remaining on her face.

Her spirit sufficiently roused by rhythm, Imani's movements emerged, saying yes to the heart beat, now is the time to head to the source of my joy power beauty delight gratitude and love. The impulse cued her chekere,

and along with Nikki, she too rattled rhythm of life pouring a bead song. Imani stalked the circle, a syncopated powerhouse inviting people to join her. Follow me, she wanted to tell them. Shake loose everything that's killing you and binding your wings and denying your truth.

Her body flowed free to praise to love to expect the good and the best as her natural right to life. Moved beyond cares and shyness, the truth she stepped to called everyone to take up for greater forces, to link in the ritual cleansing, to return home to the inner well and tap clear waters.

She set the chekere down to ride a solo approved by ancient family. Way outside bounds into expanded forms, Imani focused energy to tell the spirits all that had been done to her, speaking first as a child come crying to her mother how people didn't treat each other fair; that they laughed at one another for sport and didn't behave with courtesy and respect.

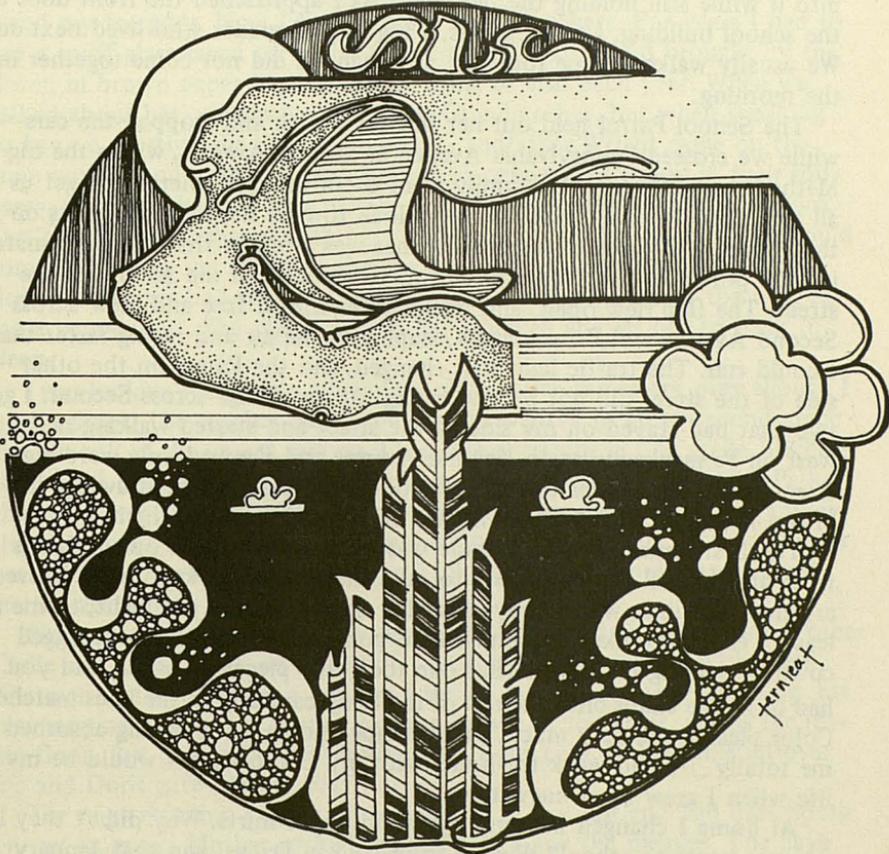
She came out, her head wrap working from her neck up and down through her spine, telling how some stole the life blood of others and then sold it back in diluted forms, that the food packed poison and neither air nor water flowed clean and free. Fiercely she rattled her beaded locks and pushed past the demons insecurity fostered: these she shoved outside the door in one slam stroke that rose from her belly slithered through her chest and in triumph tossed back her head. She uncovered wounds at the core—the times people judged her unkindly for not lining up the way their attitudes implied she should, the times they wouldn't let her just live true to who she was. She unleashed all the wrongs ever done her so she could roam free of their weight.

She turned to Lynn and put out the song two women sing to one another naked of masks. They frolicked and romped and played and then, kicking high, moved off together in twin movements, in triumph, in glory. The dance cleansed from the inside out—nothing more needed be said. The drums had the last word and brought the conversation to a close.

Nikki then took the helm, for she too had gone to the well shared inside and brought back plenty clear water. She pumped and poured and lifted beyond human spaces. Lynn came back, giving it all up—sharp prancing and high stepping. Even Dana acknowledged life force outside the communion with her spirits.

Imani wasn't sure if she were really in the park or if she existed in the place of her visions. Easily she grasped the meaning she'd strained so hard after. She danced again, eager to bring the precious knowledge to the people around her: I see it now—there never was an ending, maybe not even a beginning, just what's always here waiting for us. We're part of something that's the same always and forever—the song of my heart that springs from the source, before even a thought of separation. We're meant to learn and grow and be ourselves however we come out. There's nothing wrong with me, she gloried, love counts more than all the mistakes. This truth I've been dreaming of lives in everyone. We're all part of the same piece—the shit and the sunshine. We're supposed to connect to the place where there aren't any differences—touching wide and pure and free and see: the love is how we lift ourselves. I remember so clearly now—nobody can tell

me it's not true. We can go back to the love we all shared when we were young and from some other place. My spirit dances this song, and rising with the glory, she lifted herself straight off the face of the earth into the magic where all things are possible, her arms reaching out to love.



drawing by Sharon Fernleaf

TEXAS SKETCHES

The bell rang. I grabbed up my drawings and hurried out of the classroom, stopping outside to pick my blue long coat from the hook. I wrestled into it while still holding the portfolio. As I approached the front door of the school building, I met Charles, a big second grader who lived next door. We usually walked home together, although we did not come together in the morning.

The School Patrol held out her flag on a stick and stopped the cars while we crossed Pennsylvania Avenue at Second Avenue, where the big Methodist church was. My family went there when Mother could get us all to. As we started down the long block toward the railroad tracks on the Hump, a big gust of wind came that was stronger than the rest, snatching the portfolio from my arms. It hit the ground in the middle of the street. The flap flew open, and my pictures ripped free and blew across Second Avenue and Pennsylvania, leaping in the air and racing faster than I could run. The traffic light had changed, and the Patrol on the other side of the street did not see me trying for my things across Second. I got two that had stayed on my side of the street and started walking sadly west on Pennsylvania again. Second Avenue and Pennsylvania were big streets that I was never to cross without help. Besides, the drawings had blown far down the street by now. I could no longer see them.

The first semester of first grade was over. We had kept our drawings from art class all year and were to take them home to keep now. I loved art class. My lines were always straight, and my colors just right, to me at least. I especially liked the blue-suited policeman and the brown-legged cowboy wearing his chaps. That one took two pieces of paper, and you had to fit the chaps onto the rest of the body carefully so the lines matched. Color pleased me very much, as did shape and shade. Drawing absorbed me totally. I could work for hours with my Crayolas. Art would be my life when I grew up. I knew that.

At home I changed into my jeans and warm shirts. Why didn't they let us wear pants to school? Winters were cold in Dallas, and that January wind stung my legs red. When Daddy came home, I ran to meet him.

"Have you got anything in your dinner box for me?"

"I don't know. Maybe you'd better look in and see."

Opening the large metal box, I found the thermos bottle clamped in the lid, but I passed quickly over it beneath the paper towel in the bottom. There it was. Just as I thought from having shaken the box before opening it, a Hershey bar, with almonds! Not every day, but some days, Daddy brought me something special. On others, he was not hungry for all Mother gave him, so he brought his potato chips or cupcakes home

again. I could always have them, but usually I had to wait till after supper. Too often though, the lunch box held only a bolt he had found lying on the dock or in the lot where the six-wheel trucks parked. Daddy always saved everything, as did Mother. They were frugal (the Depression, I think, when Papa Bird split matches twice and sometimes four times so they would last longer), but they were not stingy.

Supper was fried potatoes, as usual. I loved them. Mother made them kind of soft with onions cooked in there. The grease sizzled and snapped when she turned them over. Red beans were there also, as usual. I loved them too. We had them every day and tonight was no exception. Corn-bread, sliced tomatoes, and sliced onion came also with fried Spam. I loved my tea glass. Now I had a goblet like the others. For years I had to use a snuff glass saved for us by Grandmother Wright and brought by the dozen in brown paper bags when she came to visit each year. When we talked about her, we always called her Grandmother, but when speaking to her we mostly called her Grandma. Grandfather Wright came on the train with Grandmother. They always had peppermint candy in their suitcases. Grandmother ate hers mostly at night. When they came, they took Dot's room that I shared with her. The crackling of the candy sacks would sometimes wake me at night, and there would be Grandmother, bending down beside her bed with her suitcase pulled out from under the bed, eating a peppermint. She said it settled her stomach and let her go back to sleep.

I was looking forward to a few days off between semesters, even though I liked school. The teacher had asked me if I wanted to go to second grade the last half of the year; I said no. I had lots of friends in first grade, Michael, Sisi, and I loved Miss Parker, my first grade teacher. So I told Miss Parker that I did not want to go to second grade because I did not know anyone there. I would be afraid of all those new people. (Oh well, I knew Charles, but he didn't count.) So I would go back to my old room when school started again next week.

Since there was no school the next day, I could stay up late. My brother Clyde and Doris, his soon-to-be wife, took me to the movies with them. The man in the uniform, a bellhop I think, danced all over everything, his feet tapping wildly. Up on the counter, down on the chair, across the marble floor. But before the movie was over, I got cold. Chills came all over me and Doris gave me her coat too.

The next morning I woke up feeling bad. I was hot and had dark spots on my stomach. Mother rocked me and said I had the measles. For days and weeks I had to stay in bed. The fever burned my skin like the time I had fallen in the fire and burned my arm when we lived in Sherman. The doctor said I must stay covered and drink hot tea. God, how I hated him. Stupid old Dr. Frye, saying to keep covered when I was so hot I could hardly breathe. I kicked the sheet and blanket off and Mother and Daddy pulled them up again. Fighting, I cried and screamed, and they poured the tea, hot, so hot, down me with a spoon. Dr. Frye wanted the measles to "break out," whatever that meant. It was supposed to be bad for you if the measles did not break out. Warmth was supposed to help. My fever

hung at 105 degrees for what seemed like days to me. Then the sweat popped out and I began to get cooler. The blankets could come off and I slept under the sheet. But still, only people who had had the measles could come visit, and they did not stay long.

While I was sick, we kept the shades down. The room was dark. It was to protect my eyes. Dr. Frye said light would hurt them. As I felt better, I began sitting up. I liked to play Flinch. When you saw two cards alike in the middle of the table, you quick slapped them with your hand. The first to slap them got those two cards.

Mother, Dot, and I were playing one evening when I was about well. Dr. Frye said it was okay now. When we started the game, things looked okay, just a little shadowy. Before the evening was over, I had to quit; the cards were very blurred, and I could not tell the spots apart.

I do not know how long before my parents figured out I could not see. We started going to many doctors. Light hurt my eyes and made them water. Mother would put my sunglasses on, but I still had to shut my eyes and hold her handkerchief over my face. Mother and Daddy did not like what any of the doctors said, so they would take me to another. We would get up in the middle of the night and drive for hours to get to another office. Finally, Dr. Block, my Dallas eye doctor, told them to take me to Marshalltown, Iowa, to the Woolf Eye Clinic. Money was a problem, but the church and neighbors gave us some, and the three of us went to see Dr. Otis Woolf senior, Otis junior, and Henry, Otis junior's brother.

Mama Lyles said I would be just fine when I came home, so I was glad to go but scared of an operation.

They looked in my eyes and saw the same cloudy thing the other doctors saw. Dr. Henry was the funniest. I liked him best. He teased me and said I was from "Taxes" because he thought that was the way I said *Texas*.

Otis junior operated on my right eye and removed a cataract. He put a metal shield over my eye and taped it down so I would not rub my eye while it had stitches in it. While I was in my hospital bed, Mother and Daddy brought me a radio. It had a large knob to turn for the stations and a small one with a raised animal face on it. I felt of it but could not tell what it was, no matter how hard I tried. I was very sorry. They wanted me to be able to tell it was a deer.

When Dr. Otis junior took my shield off, nothing had changed. I still could not see anything. He said it might take time, but that time has not come.

We were all sad on the way home. I was nine now. It was 1951. The summer was hot and Missouri and Kansas were flooded. We could get no water at public places and had to drink soda pop all the way to Texas. One is good when there is no water around, but after two days with no water, sodas do not taste good. They left sweet, thick stuff in my mouth, which I hated.

We stopped in Arkansas to see some places in the Ozarks. In a little gift shop I found a plastic cigar whose end lit up when you bit the holder. I loved it and played with it all the way to Dallas, asking every five minutes, "Mother, is it lighted up now?" The battery grew weak, and to my

sorrow I lost it before reaching home to show it to Bill, my brother who still lived at home with us. Nevertheless, I explained it to him repeatedly, and Mother, Daddy, and I assured him he would have liked it if he had seen it. Bill assured me that he would have, every time I told my story again.

School

Shortly after recovering from the measles, while still visiting all those Texas ophthalmologists, Dr. Block told my parents about another family with a blind daughter one year younger than I. Mother and Daddy visited the School for the Blind in Austin, but did not like it. So they wanted me to go to school in Dallas. Dallas had no schooling for blind children, so Dr. Block thought my parents and Sarah's parents should meet, for they wanted schooling for her in Dallas also. The four of them contacted our state representative, Mr. Parkhouse, and began trying to persuade him to make schooling available to blind children in Dallas. While the legislative process took its winding course, the Sacks, who were rich, brought a teacher to Dallas who was to be my nemesis for the next six years.

While we waited for Miss Collier to come from Austin, Mama Moon, Sarah's governess, taught us to play with clay and build with blocks. I did not like the blocks as well as I liked my log cabin set I had gotten for Christmas. I would build a house and a corral and fill them with the horses and cows that I had also gotten for Christmas. That's what I liked best to play with in the winter, but summers I spent outside. I climbed trees and played with the rocks from the driveway, which became horses in my hands. With mounds of dirt I fashioned corrals, garages, and a bridge from the dirt up to the sidewalk. The dirt I hauled in my tiny dump truck, which I got around the corner at Pop's grocery. I liked the rocks that were sloped on one side so my index finger could rest on them. They also needed a point to tap the ground to supply the sound of hooves. The extra slick ones that were black were my favorites. My name was Jud Mason, and I owned ranches all over my front yard. When on my feet, I rode a stick horse, one of Mother's old brooms. The straw provided a fine grip, as does a horse's mane.

When on my stick horse, I was anyone: Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, or Slick Gun Blacky. The latter was my villainous self, who could ride faster and draw a gun faster than anyone else alive. I swaggered as I rode my horse slowly through the back yard, alert to any sound that would reveal the presence of my enemy Charles.

Leaving my horse to shelter flat on the ground, I would spring into the chinaberry tree, the trunk that pointed toward the house. It sloped just right to form a good fork for a seat a few feet up, where Mother could just grab my foot when she wanted me to come down and I did not.

In the tree I drove nails—two side by side to hang my hammer on so it would be handy for driving more nails. Single nails were spaced at strategic places, from which I hung my buckets made of cans with nail holes poked in each side and bailing wire strung through them for handles. Bill and Daddy showed me how to drive the nails through the cans and to cut

the wire with wire cutters, then to bend it over into a *U* to go through the holes.

In these cans I stored hundreds of the hard, green, smelly berries. This stock was to throw at anyone who became my enemy. Often I played alone and the enemy was of my own imagining; these I always beat. Other times my enemy was Charles. We chunked at each other across the hog wire fence with barbed wire strung along the top to keep people from crawling over it. The posts were small trees, some of which crooked before quite reaching the top strand. Others forked and the wire rested between the prongs.

Charles's yard had no chinaberry tree, so he had to gather what I threw at him and send them back as return fire. Neither of us hit very often.

Warfare took on different characteristics as we learned other weapons from Bill and his friend. Rubber guns came in at one time. These were cut with a saw from wood. They were basically straight barrels which turned in a ninety-degree angle and widened into a square or rectangle handle, depending on the size of the scrap of wood you had scrounged. The other end of the barrel had a horizontal notch cut or sawed into it. On the back of the handle, you nailed a clothespin, with the snapping part pointing up. Getting the clothespin off the handle was the tricky part. You took the pin apart, used two tiny nails, and hoped you did not split the wood. Then you had to put the pin together again, which my hands were hardly strong enough to do. Fortunately, Bill or even Mother would help out.

Your ammunition was cut from old inner tubes from cars. With the scissors, I would cut a half-inch strip, going across the tube from one side to the other. This created a large rubber gun that was then stretched from the notched end of the barrel, along the barrel, and clamped in the pin. To fire, you squeezed the pin. I don't think I hit many people, but I ran and played like the rest. We always shot low. The cardinal rule was not to hit, throw, or shoot anyone in the face, for "You'll put out somebody's eye" we were told over and over.

I am surprised we did not put out someone's eye or life, for we also took up making and warring with steeple shooters, a twisted coat hanger formed into a *Y* with rubber bands loosely strung across the point. From this we shot steeples, which we made from inch-long sections of coat hangers, again cut with the wire cutters and bent in the vice into *U*-shaped missiles. These we never shot at people, for they were too dangerous—well, almost never.

I climbed trees, chased pigs (I don't know where they came from, they just came down the street one day, as did the white horse we caught and kept till the owners came), made toys, and ran. Ran outdoors, climbed on garage tops, and shimmied up into the child-size cage with wire sides (rumored to be a squirrel cage, but we never saw any in there).

While at the Sacks', upstairs in Sarah's quarters, Mama Moon toiled on. Shapes, colors, textures, scissors, paper, paste. Okay stuff, but not very active. No noise, no going downstairs except when Hetty fixed lunch or Mrs. Sack played the piano and we listened to classical music and did

movements on the floor. Later I learned Sarah herself had not been allowed downstairs for the first five years of her life. Her father, a nice but distant man, had not been able to accept Sarah's blindness. She was premature and lost her sight in the incubator from too much oxygen, as have thousands of premature babies. Even after discovering the cause, often the choice is death or blindness. Blindness being the lesser of the two choices, doctors and parents rightfully save the children.

Sarah's father felt guilt and shame at her blindness, built an upstairs large bedroom and bath, and put her in it with Mama Moon from Padukah. A loving woman, Mama Moon could not make up for the affection Sarah missed and is still looking for.

We could go out on the terrace when the weather was warm. Sarah had a large tricycle with a chain like a bike. I loved it. The terrace was smooth; the bike glided across it smoothly, bumping only over the small lines etched in the cement, as was the way then. There was an iron rail around the terrace, except for one set of stairs. Mama Moon stood there to protect us against falling. I would plan to have a large cement area in my house when I grew up so I could ride a bike or skate as far as I wanted to go.

All of this was nice as "school," but it was not home. Little did I know that the worst was yet to come. In the fall of 1950, when I was eight, Miss Collier came to teach us. Schools were still not ready to take us, so we went to the Unitarian church at Normandy and Preston Road in North Dallas. They had a large playroom for the children at church, which we used for school during the week. We got swings for the yard and had piano lessons and band in the chapel. I learned quickly to go out the classroom door, turn right a few feet, and then fade left to hit the water fountain. I loved cold water and still do. Anything cold, really, and I even learned to like hot tea with milk as an adult.

Sarah was slower to learn how to get places. She would follow me and then shove me aside to get at the fountain first. I hated her but did not push back. Mother told me not to. Hitting and pushing other children was not right. Bill and I fought, but when we would start, we would have to put on the boxing gloves and go outside. He was eight years older but not mean, so I came out all right.

No matter how I protested, Sarah pushed me. She had a shrill, high voice and whined a lot. Miss Collier always gave her my things and spoke sharply to me while speaking nicely to Sarah. I believed money lay at the root of it. I knew she hated me because I was poor. Miss Collier came to my house only once, and my family and I were stiff and uncomfortable the whole time. I played the piano for her but hated it and could feel her eyes on my back while I played. Miss Collier stayed at Sarah's house till she got one of her own. I heard the Sacks paid her salary that first year.

When I was nine, we started to Ben Milam School. My parents kept fighting, along with other parents who had flocked to the Unitarian church class with their blind children. By the time we went to Ben Milam, we had Douglas, Tommy, John, and Tommy Lucks as well as Sarah and myself. About 1950, Texas passed a law providing for a teacher and materials for blind children in public schools where five or more children were present.

Although we lived all over Dallas, we all gathered in Ben Milam for school. It made it hard to make friends at home, but I liked it much better than the School for the Blind, which I later attended, which was like a prison and the kids were funny acting. Oh yes, Rudy McClung came to school at the church also. He was the kid Miss Collier hated worst of all. I know now he needed to learn independence, but then I thought her unnecessarily sharp with him and his brother, who later joined us when he was old enough.

Douglas threw temper tantrums, yelling "bitch" and "shut up" at Miss Collier, kicking her and pinching her. She got very angry but never hit him as I recall. My family almost adopted Douglas, for his parents had abandoned him. He was a little strange after living in foster homes all that time, Mother said. As in all other things, my parents asked my opinion. I wanted Douglas, but they finally decided they were too old to take a second visually impaired child. He could see some but had many personality problems as well as perhaps a little brain damage.

John St. John was quiet. I hardly remember him. Tommy Lucks had a limp, wore thick glasses, and had a crush on me for years, so I did not like him. My true love was Tommy Godsey. He liked to run and play. He wore glasses also, and we had great fun running relays and whirling on the merry-go-round at Ben Milam. Before we reached junior high, Tommy was dead of the cancer that had affected his vision in the first place.

Years later, I called Miss Collier, at my parents' urging, when I was home from college. They swore she was proud of me and had always liked me and wanted to hear from me. I telephoned her and found an old, friendly woman. We had trouble making conversation at first, but we hit upon the time-honored practice of catching each other up on what had happened to us and common acquaintances in the six years since I had seen her last. Then she brought up Sarah, who was living in Berkeley after the death of both of her parents by heart attack only a few months apart. As my wariness crept over me to be on guard against her praise of Sarah, she said, "You know, Betty, I tried so hard to help Sarah. She had so much catching up to do. You were always so quick to learn and independent. Your parents loved and helped you and fought for that law, and let you climb trees when they were terrified, but they kept their mouths shut and let you do it. I see now you may have thought I did not care about you, but I did. I am very proud of you. Even though I did not help much, you are making it, while Sarah has had a nervous breakdown and had to leave Berkeley."

She went on to tell me of the room built upstairs for Sarah and Mama Moon to stay for five years. I felt ashamed of having disliked her for so long, but still could not like her. I understood the dynamics of what was going on. She was adding to the independence I was learning, but kindness is good for capable children too. I wonder if she told me the truth.

HOLDING FAST

"Holding fast to one's roots
is the foundation of courage."

Lao-Tsu

One: A Dream of Water

face down in the stream
the water is dark

with rivers of light pushing toward the sea

my face rests against the earth

water tries to enter my mouth my nose
water dark water runs down my ear
which closes itself to warning

who is here to pull me up?

this is a drowning stream and i am pulled
into deeper water than you know

a sly something whispers sleep, sleep
and water enters me a forgotten memory
an old friend mother, bedtime kisses
the sweet smell of a wet apron

and sleep

Two: The Foundation

early i was promised
to a skin of loneliness

each year it stretches wider

like a highway
in the middle of america
three a.m.

no one awake but a trucker
oblivious to the mouths of the dark
which are opening to the silence

then the night and the highway
and the trucker become
one yawning mouth of silence

and then
the sirens begin

here is the foundation of courage
the building to last
the unswayable body of truth
sunk deep in the past

while sirens surround

Three: The Dream of Falling
A Universal Symbol

i am in a large old building
in an unidentified city
there are many women here with me

you are here with me

seven floors under us the earth shudders again
steel beams bricks unbreakable glass
lie at our feet do not step in the glass

do not stand under beams that are ready to fall
do not move too quickly do not panic

the floor we are standing on which once
seemed as firm to us as the faces of our fathers
is getting ready to collapse

we can hear the whining and creaking of wood
unsettling itself beams giving way

one move from any of us could bring the building down
and all of us with it including you
all of us falling through the air like birds
thrown from the nest too late to learn to fly

so we are moving very carefully very slowly
we are trying not to argue about which
is the correct direction
our separate rhetorics are buried beneath the debris

we are simplified now
we must find a way down through the core
of a building which is getting ready to fall

when you move away from me
nimble footed and thin
i realize you have your escape route planned
it is private and predictable
it does not include me

i remember my large body and the places i have come from
which taught me early not to expect too much
which taught me i did not understand the rules

i am afraid now to take a step in any direction
whether away from you toward you or down

Four: Class Background

we sit in this room discussing "class"
measuring ourselves by how many tvs we had
how many courses at dinner
who ate white bread and who ate whole wheat

we pretend to agree that there are attitudes
which oppress
we do not mention these attitudes

here in this room each week
the core of myself unwinds slowly
a paper curled tight unto itself

hidden between the strips i find ancient messages
of dread
a contempt of self wound deeper
than any love can reach

how can i tell you this?
how can i show you my wounds
without dying a little?

as i leave this room tripping over
my clumsy dirty self the poor girl with stains
on her dresses with hand me down clothes
tangles in her hair a faraway look in her dark eyes
the girl who balances herself and her rage
on the railroad tracks each day who promises
not to surrender
the child who was never good enough
who never learned the rules because she knew
she had not made them
tripping over this self i wonder if i will ever learn
to trust myself again

and i wonder how i ever talked myself
into trusting you

Five: Holding Fast

still we know the building is falling
around us

we carry this knowledge with us
into our public lives
and some of us have private escape routes
and some of us are still trying to convince ourselves
we deserve to escape
and some of us want to blow the whole building up
just to prove our point

i admit to ignorance

i do not yet know how to pull myself up
from the drowning stream without abandoning my sisters

i do not yet know how to make myself stay awake
while the past tears through me a crazed animal
blind and innocent to the wreckage
it surrounds me with

holding fast to one's roots
is the foundation of courage

but my roots are with the lonely dead
dug deep under basement obsessions

and just now i am surrounded by myself
a litter of paper strips come apart
torn into pieces
they cannot be glued back together
they are highly combustible

while you edge closer to the door
taking back your fathers name
using the lessons your mother taught you

i am trying to hold myself fast

Six: Survival Systems

the dark wealth of my hillbilly mother's face
refuses to abandon me

my grandmother blackeyed and furious
uneducated except by life continues to teach me
she insists i survive

contrary to reports my sisters are not trapped
on the inside pages of True Story magazine
although their lives resemble paper
it is tough and not easily destroyed

my father the house-painter the cab-driver
dead at fifty-four not able to support his family
holds me still in his loving smile
and the ten year old i am hangs on

Seven: Possibilities

when you think of me imagine me in a building
getting ready to collapse

imagine you are there also
will we help each other?

imagine me a woman with wild hair
falling out of the window of the tower

will you catch me?

imagine me the woman her face in a stream
falling into sleep

wake me up help me to arise
and i will teach you a new way to see

imagine me a woman damaged
who has pulled herself out of a suicidal rage
that has lasted most of her lifetime

imagine me a woman who has refused to damage her daughters

imagine me a woman like yourself though different
who knows for women of our time for women of conscience

there can be no private escape routes

imagine us all together surviving long enough
to know and love each other for the first time

WHORES

The best houses do not exhibit the women in cages.

*The Nightless City or the History
of the Yoshiwara Yukwaku*, 1899 report
on a red-light district in Japan

Male sexual domination is a material system with an ideology and a metaphysics. The sexual colonialization of women's bodies is a material reality: men control the sexual and reproductive uses of women's bodies. The institutions of control include law, marriage, prostitution, pornography, health care, the economy, organized religion, and systematized physical aggression against women (for instance, in rape and battery). Male domination of the female body is the basic material reality of women's lives; and all struggle for dignity and self-determination is rooted in the struggle for actual control of one's own body, especially control over physical access to one's own body. The ideology of male sexual domination posits that men are superior to women by virtue of their penises; that physical possession of the female is a natural right of the male; that sex is, in fact, conquest and possession of the female, especially but not exclusively phallic conquest and phallic possession; that the use of the female body for sexual or reproductive purposes is a natural right of men; that the sexual will of men properly and naturally defines the parameters of a woman's sexual being, which is her whole identity. The metaphysics of male sexual domination is that women are whores. This basic truth transcends all lesser truths in the male system. One does not violate something by using it for what it is: neither rape nor prostitution is an abuse of the female because in both the female is fulfilling her natural function; that is why rape is absurd and incomprehensible as an abusive phenomenon in the male system, and so is prostitution, which is held to be voluntary even when the prostitute is hit, threatened, drugged, or locked in. The woman's effort to stay innocent, her effort to prove innocence, her effort to prove in any instance of sexual use that she was used against her will, is always and unequivocally an effort to prove that she is not a whore. The presumption that she is a whore is a metaphysical presumption: a presumption that underlies the system of reality in which she lives. A whore cannot be raped, only used. A whore by nature cannot be forced to whore—only revealed through circumstance to be the whore she is. The point is her nature, which is a whore's nature. The word *whore* can be construed to mean that she is a cunt with enough gross intelligence to manipulate, barter, or sell. The cunt

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wants it; the whore knows enough to use it. *Cunt* is the most reductive word; *whore* adds the dimension of character—greedy, manipulative, not nice. The word *whore* reveals her sensual nature (*cunt*) and her natural character.

“No prostitute of anything resembling intelligence,” writes Mencken, “is under the slightest duress . . .”¹ “What is a prostitute?” asks William Acton in his classic work on prostitution. “She is a woman who gives for money that which she ought to give only for love . . .”² Jane Addams, who worked against the so-called white slave trade, noted that “[t]he one impression which the trial [of procurers] left upon our minds was that all the men concerned in the prosecution felt a keen sense of outrage against the method employed to secure the girl [kidnapping], but took for granted that the life she was about to lead was in the established order of things, if she had chosen it voluntarily.”³ Only the maternal can mitigate the whorish, an opposition more conceptual than real, based on the assumption that the maternal or older woman is no longer desired. Freud writes Jung that a son approaching adulthood naturally loses his incestuous desires for the mother “with her sagging belly and varicose veins.”⁴ René Guyon, who argued for male-defined sexual liberation, writes that “[w]oman ages much sooner. Much earlier in life she loses her freshness, her charm, and begins to look withered or over-ripe. She ceases to be an object of desire.”⁵ The mother is not the whore only when men have stopped desiring her.

Guyon, in whose name societies for sexual freedom exist today, held that women were defined exclusively by their sexuality, which was essentially and intrinsically the sexuality of the prostitute. “Woman’s sexual parasitism,” writes Guyon, “is innate. She has a congenital tendency to rely on man for support, availing herself of her sexual arts, offering in return for maintenance (and more, if she can get it) the partial or complete possession of her person.”⁶ This propensity for exchanging her body for material goods is her sexuality, her purpose, her passion, and consequently “[s]ale or contract, monogamy or harem—these words mean little to her in comparison with the goal.”⁷ For this reason, Guyon contends that even the so-called white slave trade—the organized abduction of lone or young or destitute women for the purposes of prostitution—cannot be construed as forcible prostitution:

How hypocritical it is to speak of the White [*sic*] Slave Trade only as a means for recruiting the ranks of prostitution. The White [*sic*] Slave Trade is universal, being carried on with the consent of the “slaves,” since every woman has a specific sexual value. She must sell herself to the highest bidder, even though she cheat as to the quality of the goods.⁸

Like most male advocates of sexual freedom (the unrestrained expression of male sexuality), Guyon theoretically and repeatedly deplors the use of force; he simply never recognizes its existence in the sexual use of women.

Typically, every charge by women that force is used to violate women—in rape, battery, or prostitution—is dismissed by positing a female nature that is essentially fulfilled by the act of violation, which in turn transforms violation into merely using a thing for what it is and blames the thing if it is not womanly enough to enjoy what is done to it.

Sometimes "consent" is construed to exist. More often, the woman is perceived to have an active desire to be used by the male on his terms. Great Britain's Wolfenden Report, renowned for its recommendation that legal persecution of consenting male homosexuals cease, was also a report on female prostitution. The Wolfenden Report stressed that "there are women who, even when there is no economic need to do so, choose this form of livelihood."⁹ The Wolfenden Report recommended increasing legal penalties against prostitutes and argued for more stringent enforcement of laws aimed at prostitutes. Male sexual privilege was affirmed both in the vindication of consensual male homosexuality and in the advocacy of greater persecution of female prostitutes. At the same time, women's degraded status was affirmed. The whore has a nature that chooses prostitution. She should be punished for her nature, which determines her choice and which exists independent of any social or economic necessity. The male homosexual also has a nature, for which he should not be punished.

This desire of the woman to prostitute herself is often portrayed as greed for money or pleasure or both. The natural woman is a whore, but the professional prostitute is a greedy whore: greedy for sensation, pleasure, money, men. Novelist Alberto Moravia, like many leftist writers seemingly obsessed with the prostituted woman, writes in an assumed first-person-female voice to convey the woman's pleasure in prostitution:

The feeling I experienced at that moment bewildered me and, no matter how or when I have received money from men since, I have never again experienced it so clearly and so intensely. It was a feeling of complicity and sensual conspiracy . . . It was a feeling of inevitable subjection which showed me in a flash an aspect of my own nature I had ignored until then. I knew, of course, that I ought to refuse the money, but at the same time I wanted to accept. And not so much from greed, as from a new kind of pleasure which this offering had afforded me.¹⁰

The pleasure of the prostitute is the pleasure of any woman used in sex—but heightened. The specific—the professional whore—exists in the context of the general—women who are whores by nature. There is additional pleasure in being bought because money fixes her status as one who is for sex, not just woman but essence of woman or double-woman. The professional prostitute is distinguished from other women not in kind but by degree. "There are certainly no women absolutely devoid of the prostitute instinct to covet being sexually excited by any stranger,"¹¹ writes Weininger, emphasizing both pleasure and vanity. "If a woman hasn't got a tiny streak of a harlot in her," writes D.H. Lawrence, "she's a dry stick as a rule."¹² The tininess of Lawrence's "streak" should not be misunderstood: "really, most wives sold themselves, in the past, and plenty of harlots gave themselves, when they felt like it, for nothing."¹³ The "tiny streak" is her sexual nature: without a streak of whore, "she's a dry stick as a rule."

There is a right-wing ideology and a left-wing ideology. The right-wing ideology claims that the division of mother and whore is phenomenologically real. The virgin is the potential mother. The left-wing ideology claims

that sexual freedom is in the unrestrained use of women, the use of women as a collective natural resource, not privatized, not owned by one man but instead used by many. The metaphysics is the same on the Left and on the Right: the sexuality of the woman actualized is the sexuality of the whore; desire on her part is the slut's lust; once sexually available, it does not matter how she is used, why, by whom, by how many, or how often. Her sexual will can exist only as a will to be used. Whatever happens to her, it is all the same. If she loathes it, it is not wrong, she is.

Within this system, the only choice for the woman has been to embrace herself as whore, as sexual wanton or sexual commodity within phallic boundaries, or to disavow desire, disavow her body. The most cynical use of women has been on the Left—cynical because the word *freedom* is used to capture the loyalties of women who want, more than anything, to be free and who are then valued and used as left-wing whores: collectivized cunts. The most cynical use of women has been on the Right—cynical because the word *good* is used to capture the loyalties of women who want, more than anything, to be good and who are then valued and used as right-wing whores: wives, the whores who breed. As Kate Millett writes: “. . . the great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction and care of the young.”¹⁴

Men of the Right and men of the Left have an undying allegiance to prostitution as such, regardless of their theoretical relationship to marriage. The Left sees the prostitute as the free, public woman of sex, exciting because she flaunts it, because of her brazen availability. The Right sees in the prostitute the power of the bad woman of sex, the male's use of her being his dirty little secret. The old pornography industry was a right-wing industry: secret money, secret sin, secret sex, secret promiscuity, secret buying and selling of women, secret profit, secret pleasure not only from sex but also from the buying and selling. The new pornography industry is a left-wing industry: promoted especially by the boys of the sixties as simple pleasure, lusty fun, public sex, the whore brought out of the bourgeois (*sic*) home into the streets for the democratic consumption of all men; her freedom, her free sexuality, is as his whore—and she likes it. It is her political will as well as her sexual will; it is liberation. The dirty little secret of the left-wing pornography industry is not sex but commerce.

The new pornography industry is held, by leftist males, to be inherently radical. Sex is claimed by the Left as a leftist phenomenon; the trade in women is most of sex. The politics of liberation are claimed as indigenous to the Left by the Left; central to the politics of liberation is the mass-marketing of material that depicts women being used as whores. The pimps of pornography are hailed by leftists as saviors and savants. Larry Flynt has been proclaimed a savior of the counterculture, a working-class hero, and even, in a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* signed by distinguished leftist literati, an “American Dissident” persecuted as Soviet dissidents are. Hugh Hefner is viewed as a pioneer of sexual freedom who showed, in the words of columnist Max Lerner, “how the legislating of sexuality could be fought, how the absurd anti-play and anti-pleasure ethic

could be turned into a stylish hedonism and a lifeway which includes play and playfulness along with work."¹⁵ Lerner also credits Hefner with being a precursor of the women's movement.

On the Left, the sexually liberated woman is the woman of pornography. Free male sexuality wants, has a right to, produces, and consumes pornography because pornography is pleasure. Leftist sensibility promotes and protects pornography because pornography is freedom. The pornography glut is bread and roses for the masses. Freedom is the mass-marketing of woman as whore. Free sexuality for the woman is in being massively consumed, denied an individual nature, denied any sexual sensibility other than that which serves the male. Capitalism is not wicked or cruel when the commodity is the whore; profit is not wicked or cruel when the alienated worker is a female piece of meat; corporate bloodsucking is not wicked or cruel when the corporations in question, organized crime syndicates, sell cunt; racism is not wicked or cruel when the black cunt or yellow cunt or red cunt or Hispanic cunt or Jewish cunt has her legs splayed for any man's pleasure; poverty is not wicked or cruel when it is the poverty of dispossessed women who have only themselves to sell; violence by the powerful against the powerless is not wicked or cruel when it is called sex; slavery is not wicked or cruel when it is sexual slavery; torture is not wicked or cruel when the tormented are women, whores, cunts. The new pornography is left-wing; and the new pornography is a vast graveyard where the Left has gone to die. The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too.

NOTES

1. H. L. Mencken, *In Defense of Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1922), p. 187.
2. William Acton, *Prostitution* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969), p. 118.
3. Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1914), p. 40.
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. J. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Manheim and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 503.
5. Rene Guyon, *Sexual Freedom*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 239.
6. Guyon, *Sexual Freedom*, p. 198.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
9. John Wolfenden, *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957), p. 80.
10. Alberto Moravia, *The Woman of Rome*, trans. Lydia Holland (New York: Manor Books, 1974), p. 88.
11. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p. 219.
12. D. H. Lawrence, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1953), p. 69.
13. Lawrence, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, p. 69.
14. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), p. 119.
15. Max Lerner, "Playboy: An American Revolution of Morality," *New York Post*, January 10, 1979.

PRESENT DANGER

1

She watched them turn and walk away. Single file. The way they had walked down the narrow path to her cabin four days ago.

The fat one gestured with his rifle. "Don't follow us." He turned back up the path.

The threat was real. She felt it. Sat silent as the four men heaved and grunted up a small rock face and tromped up the stream.

She paused only until they were out of sight, then tied her blanket in a roll around her waist and moved away from the stream. The forest darkened around her as she entered, pushed back branches, made a place for her head and shoulders to weave through the dense underbrush. She went about fifty yards, then sat and watched the path she had come through.

Her mind focused on the image of their retreating backs. She recreated the picture of them, one by one, climbing the rock face and disappearing. Then she would imagine one turning away from the others, coming back silently to kill her.

But no one came up the path. She must have sat, her back against the rough tree trunk, knees pulled up to her chin, for several hours. If one had come back down the stream, he hadn't seen where she had gone into the woods.

She was alone for the first time since they had come. The first time in four days. As the solitude settled around her, sensation began to return. Her eyes burned from staring up the path. She blinked and looked to one side, moving head and neck cautiously. Green, she registered. Sitting in deep shade she noticed the dark moss, ferny ground cover. A few yellow brown leaves had filtered to the forest floor. No sound of other humans since the men had gone beyond range. Noise. Her own body breathing. Water. Birds. Insects.

She stood slowly and began to move toward the stream again. At the edge of the underbrush she looked around. They were gone. Her eyes burned, her throat was dry. Every muscle felt torn. Her vagina was raw with a searing pain. Taking off her boots, then her sweater, pants, and shirt, she put her feet into the icy water. She moved deliberately, ignoring the cold. Slowly she sat and submerged her whole body.

2

As she lay back in the water of the Adirondack stream, her head began to ache from the cold. Water washed over her face. She inhaled tentatively, then blew bubbles of air outward. Her face was an icy mask. She wanted to be numb.

"We're heading northwest," they had said the night before when they had reached the stream. "You can go south. You should find something." Laughter.

At dawn she had wanted to ask for a knife, matches, some of their food, but no words came. They had turned and left her with only a single blanket.

Sitting up in the stream, she looked down at her thighs under the clear brown water. Red scratches ran along the top of her inner thigh from just above her knee to her crotch. The young one, she thought, he'd never take his pants off. His zipper had raked her. She wouldn't ask him to move it. He was ashamed to let the other men see him. He wouldn't drop his pants, just worked vigorously, his zipper cutting her with each thrust.

Her limbs felt fragile in their stiffness as she lifted herself slowly out of the water. Pulling her long dark hair back, she wrung the water out of it, shivered, looked up at the late September sun through the heavy layers of pine branches. About one o'clock, she guessed, climbing onto a rock midstream where the sun struck more directly than at the woods' edge.

She lay in the relative warmth of the afternoon sun, but could not rest. The acrid odor of burnt logs from last night's camp fire lingered under the pine. She was still where they had left her. Better to move, stay warm moving.

The stream bed to the south looked passable. Large rocks had been dropped randomly by a retreating glacier. And gravel. She looked downstream for a moment, then tied her boots, wrapped sweater and blanket around her waist, and started to pick her way from rock to rock.

She had no sense of destination, knew direction only vaguely. She had no illusions about retracing the direction they had come. The men had bushwhacked through heavy underbrush, using compasses, carrying water. Two landmarks, she thought, the tracks and the stream. The second day they had crossed the railroad tracks, running north and south the length of the forest, a symmetrical steel anachronism, they had seemed, moving in and out of the tangled underbrush. And the stream. She stopped frequently to drink, assuaging her thirst and hunger with water, realizing as she did so that she must stay with the stream to survive.

Now she tried to remember what she knew about the wilderness. She wasn't out of place there. But camping and canoeing were things done with equipment, with friends, and food and fire. Survival camping? Even then the survivor got a tin cup, a knife, and some matches. She had one blanket. And some knowledge. Don't eat mushrooms and bright-colored berries.

But what could she eat? Her stomach contracted in pain, a distinct and familiar pain. She had been hungry before. If she could focus on this discomfort, maybe she wouldn't notice the sharp burning pain in her crotch with each step forward.

When they had forced her out of the cabin—two of them, then her, then two of them, single file down the narrow path to the pond and out

into the bush—she had gone without protest. She had stopped speaking. The passivity she had adopted, complying mutely with their demands, was her bid for survival. To resist, she saw the first day, was to give them an excuse to kill her, at least to brutalize her more fiercely.

The dynamic was easy to see. Her friend Jamie had two dogs. One, Jamie said, would attack when it was scared. If you didn't scare it, it wouldn't hurt you. The other dog feared nothing, hunted and killed for sport. Startled by a woodchuck, the first dog would bark ferociously, terrified enough to hold the chuck at bay. The second dog would come bouncing up happily, sniff curiously at the hysterical barker, then kill the woodchuck. It was a deadly combination.

She had come to the cabin alone, leaving work early on Friday and driving the hundred miles quickly. She had gone straight to the woodpile for the key Jamie had left her. Instead of unpacking the car, she had begun to split wood in the early autumn twilight. Not because she needed it to burn; she knew Jamie would have left the wood box full inside the cabin. She needed the stretch of her body, the violence of impact. Before darkness stopped her, she had split nearly a quarter of a face cord. Placing the cut log on the block, swinging the maul behind her, sliding her hand down the smooth handle as it arched over her head and slammed into the log end.

When she had first seen Jamie split a log, she thought it seemed an impossible skill for her to learn. Jamie was a tall woman; Susan was just average height, slightly built with thin hands and wrist bones.

"You put your body weight behind it, Susan," Jamie had explained. "Swing with your whole body."

"But how am I going to hit the top of that little log?" she had asked in exasperation. "How do you hit the center of it each time?" Her ax bounced off the side of the wood block again.

"Just like playing tennis," Jamie had insisted. "Keep your eye right on what you want to hit."

It worked, and Susan had loved the sense of powerfulness, of energy directed, released, effective.

Unlocking the cabin in twilight, lighting the kerosene lantern, she felt a sense of peace return. She was glad to be alone, glad Jamie had taken the dogs with her on her short trip south. She poured a glass of wine, then read Jamie's note pinned under the lantern: "Sorry to miss you. Lots of tomatoes ripe in the garden. Make yourself at home and call me next week."

Susan kindled a small fire in the stove for company and then pulled out Jamie's fluffy down sleeping bag. She arranged her back against the sofa and began to read, dozing gradually, and then slept deeply without dreams.

Picking her footing as she stepped from boulder to boulder, Susan felt hunger making her awkward. She hadn't eaten a real meal since the Saturday the men had first come. Now it was Tuesday. She had tried to fast once after reading Doris Lessing's *Four-Gated City*. Skipping breakfast

wasn't hard, nor even lunch. But when she had come home to her apartment, sipped a glass of water and lemon juice, she couldn't think about anything except the food she might be preparing and eating. She knew it would be days before she experienced the heightened perceptions and insights Lessing had described, and she realized, sitting dizzily on the bed, how silly this was. She had to go to work the next day and the next, could not indulge in a long and quiet isolation in a peaceful room in a house someone else was taking care of. She had gotten up from the bed, fixed a bowl of soup and an omelet, and eaten them too quickly. It was her only attempt at fasting.

Now she recognized the light-headed and dizzy feeling of prolonged hunger. She supposed there must be something she could eat growing in the stream bed or at the edge of the forest. But summer was past with its abundant variety of berries, and she couldn't think what else there might be. If Jamie were here, if Jamie were here, part of her mind chanted as she looked vaguely along the stream bed for something to eat. Images of Jamie leading her class of seven-year-olds around the edge of the playground, pointing out the delicate sharp bud hidden under the protective stem of the leaf, naming the trees and plants, putting names and pictures together with finely drawn details. "It's what makes you a good teacher," she'd told Jamie once, "and you'd be a great detective, I'll bet." Susan was joking, but it was one of the differences between them that mattered: that Susan saw only the broader shapes of things, recognized familiar forms and never focused on a detail. She knew the birds by their color, some trees by their shape and a lifelong familiarity, had an instinctive liking or disliking of the people she met, but rarely examined her responses to them or looked closely at the texture and environment of their lives.

Vegetable food was green, she knew, and looked at the brown reeds and cattails without bothering to pick one. In a muddy backwash she found some green shoots and broke them off, sniffing tentatively at the stems. Inoffensive. She put her tongue out and licked the smooth white lower stalk. No taste. She bit into it. The flavor was musky and slightly muddy. The reed was sinewy, not tender, and the tough celerylike strings wouldn't chew. But some of the pulp dissolved, and she swallowed it and walked on slowly, chewing the stems and looking for other food.

5

When she had awakened that morning in the cabin, curled still in front of the fireplace, she couldn't at first remember why she was there. The place itself was familiar; she had come to the cabin many times in the three years since Jamie had moved there. As she lay looking at the dark rafters overhead and the flagstone chimney climbing up the wall, she felt peaceful, completely rested—stiff from the thin foam pad on the hard wood floor—but rested. Jamie's cabin always did this for her. She loved the freedom of isolation, the physical presence of the mountains, watching the shift of color and tone as the seasons changed. She came for Jamie's companionship, but more, she sometimes thought, for the quiet of the country and the sense of knowing herself again that Jamie's cabin and the mountains had always seemed to give her.

She thought again, as she pattered around the kitchen, lighting the gas burner to melt butter, cracking the eggs, that she was glad to have the time to herself. She took the eggs out in the sun on the back porch. The night had been cold, but the sun could still warm the air by midmorning. She sat back on a wide wood porch chair, stretched her legs up to the porch railing, and started to eat her breakfast.

She remembered the eggs and her complacency as she climbed around a small waterfall, carefully picking her footing down the broken rock face. She remembered the eggs, not because of her hunger, but because she had been so relaxed, so self-secure as she sat on the porch. What had happened? What had she done wrong? What could she have done differently to escape the horror of the last few days? Alone. Shouldn't have come alone. Careful. Careful? What did I do? What did I do wrong?

It had been irrevocable from the moment she had heard the branches snapping in the underbrush and then looked and seen the four men walking down the path toward the cabin, rifles slung over their shoulders, too early for any legal hunting season.

6

Retching violently, she vomited back the pieces of long stringy green her stomach rejected. She leaned on a rock, pressed her forehead against the pebbly cold surface, and waited for the spasms to pass. Exhausted and chilled, she began to look for some shelter for the night. In the waning light she moved away from the noise of the stream into the shelter of the deeper forest. The blanket—now wrapped around her arm and shoulders—was an old wool army-surplus one, warm, but not warm enough for near-freezing temperatures. And the damp. She had been soaked the first night in the forest clearing, sitting defiantly, back against a tree, soaked by the heavy dews that came when days and nights carried such temperature extremes.

When she had walked out of the house that Sunday, she had carried nothing with her. "We'll take her along," they had said, and she had not known what that meant, not understood where they were going, believed really—in that level just below conscious thought—that they were walking her into the woods to kill her, and she had taken nothing but the clothes she had been wearing.

And if she had not kept up, she wondered. If she had not been able to walk as quickly, climb as well, if her shoes had been thin instead of sturdy, if her pace had slowed them, what then? Would they have left her sooner, closer to home? Or would they have just shot her, turned a rifle on her for sport, as one had threatened? "Watch it," he had said when she stumbled, stopped to catch her breath. "I'll tie you to a tree and use you for target practice." Better, she supposed, to be lost this far in, than tied to a tree, even five miles from the cabin, slowly starving. Or bleeding. Or dead.

A more heavily wooded copse to her left seemed promising, and she picked her way carefully through the top branches of a tree that had fallen. At the base of the trunk several branches crisscrossed, and she pulled others from the ground onto the trunk, creating a small cave, about a foot tall

and long enough to crawl into. She wrapped her blanket around the length of her body, sat on the ground, and inched feet first into her shelter. Shivering, eyes wide open, she watched dark obscure the shapes around her. She tried not to think, not to remember, but as her physical activity ceased, her thoughts moved frantically, repetitiously, staccato.

The whiskey. Must have been that. Always got worse after the whiskey. Why did they do it? Other men think these things. Don't do them. Other men drink whiskey. Already breaking the law. Deer jacking. Do it every year. Got dull. Did they do this every year? Other men have fantasies, but he . . . The voices stopped. She was sitting with her back to a tree. Cold. Dulled. They had finished eating. They sat at the fire, passing the flask.

"What's that you got there, Jack? Something for the girl?" Her brain went gray, winced without movement. She had thought they would forget her.

"Hey, girl, come over here," he commanded. "We got something for you." Laughter. Always the laughter. She sat without moving. Her pulse speeded, and she felt the blood heat her face. She needed to swallow but couldn't. The lackey stood up, walked to the tree, and pulled her to her feet, shoving her by her elbow toward the fire. Jack sat, feet stretched in front of him, fly open, cock erect.

"Hey, honey," he grinned, "it's getting cold out here. I want you to take those jeans off and sit down here on top of me and keep it warm." Lackey was grinning, the fat one giggled. The boy swigged another shot of whiskey.

She did not move. Head bowed, this command she could not follow. She could not take part in her own humiliation.

The lackey jogged her elbow, then slapped his hand across the side of her head. When she did not respond, he tore her pants down and, holding her arms above her head, forced her onto Jack's lap.

7

In the dream she was sleeping, but the covers kept slipping away. Her hands were weak as she tried to pull on the edges of the blankets. She knew there was a reason she could not keep the covers up and if she could only remember what it was, she wouldn't be cold. It was her own fault, her own fault, the voice said. Then her bed was on a boat that rocked and rocked and she felt the ocean under her and the voice said hold on, hold on or you'll roll off, hold on, but her hands were weak and numb and she thought if I can only wake up from this sleep, I'll be fine. She opened her eyes. There was only the dark and the sound of the ocean rolling and sobbing, and she saw that her bed was a cradle with sides and knew she couldn't fall out but only wanted to pull the blankets up so she could be warm.

She woke just before dawn, as the birds started to talk, and turned painfully onto her back. She had slept in a curl on her side all night for warmth, and her shoulder and arm had no feeling. As the light returned, she watched the branches move against the sky, the voices silent within her.

Movement made her arm tingle, then shot streaks of pain from elbow to hand. As movement displaced the warmth of her shelter, her body started to tremble violently, a shiver that began at her core and pulsed outward to the extremities. Walk. She knew she had to start walking. Warm up. Wrapping the blanket sarape-style around her arms and shoulders, she began to move through the denser forest toward the noise of the stream.

At the stream she drank, then sat and took off her boots. She had carefully removed her socks each night and tucked them around her waist to dry, sleeping with the heavy leather boots unlaced on her bare feet. Now she pulled the dry socks on, laced the boots tight. Standing, she was hit by dizziness so extreme she had to bend down again. She needed food, she knew that, needed food to go on walking, and yet she could see nothing edible. Rising more slowly, she began to step from boulder to boulder down the stream bed.

Susan thought that if she concentrated on seeing something to eat, she was likely to find it. She wanted to believe most firmly in the control of her conscious life. "Accidents rarely happen," she told Jamie. "If you're looking for something, it will come. A lover. A new job. We prepare ourselves, make ourselves receptive, then change can happen to us."

"That's naive," Jamie had countered. "You can't really believe you have that much control."

Susan wasn't sure. But it was an attitude that helped her live.

8

The path of the stream had been growing less and less steep. Gradually there were fewer rocks for her to step onto, and she found herself forced to the edge of the stream, to walk on the bank, where footing was less secure and tangled branches made her progress slower and slower. Then she was at an impasse. Water spread on all sides, lying in pools among the limbs of fallen trees. A dam. Beavers chewing, building, backing up the stream.

She walked out on a log to survey the marshy bog confronting her. Sitting on the edge of the log, her feet dangled only inches above the murky water. Exhaustion became fixed in her mind as she began to count the steps around the muddy tangled expanse. She sat slumped on the log, no energy for anger or grief.

She was a child again, lost in the endless tangles of childhood dreams, nightmares of being lost and alone, not fantasies but sleeping dreams over which she had no control. Wandering through the maze of a forest, lost in the midst of thousands of strange adults in a place she could not recognize, she woke calling, heard no answer, no voice answer. Woke in the night not knowing her own bedroom, sobbing and sobbing, until her mother heard and came and stood beside her in the dark. "Did you have a bad dream, honey?" "I got lost, Mommy."

The thought—half-formed and present from the first moment—that she might be rescued, came more to her mind as she sat gazing up into the wide blue expanse of sky. She looked for a plane, someone to come and find her. Why aren't they looking for me? Surely someone's noticed I'm

gone. But who? Jamie might have noticed that the cabin was messed up, but one of the men had locked the door again and another had driven her car out of the clearing around Jamie's cabin and parked it a mile up an old logging road. Someone find it. Let someone find it. Mommy, I'm lost.

She had walked through the woods with the four men for two days, looking as they came over a rise or into a clearing, looking for other people. But there were none. Hunting season was weeks away, and summer was over. The enormous expanse of forest seemed deserted. She was alone.

Sitting on the log, she knew vaguely that she had lost the sense of clarity that had carried her through her first day alone. Relief at being alone, free, and alive left little room for fear. Now part of her doubted that she would survive. To survive meant going on, going on alone, perhaps for days. It was never a question of whether to try or not to try. She never envisioned walking out into the marsh until she lost her footing and drowned. She had endured much in order to survive. What she doubted now was her ability to endure.

She reached out a hand and pulled absently on one of the cattails growing out of the mud. Ugly. Then she ran her thumb along the stiff fuzzy brown head. She no longer felt hunger, but knew her body craved food. Pulling the cattail toward her, she thought there might be something inside it she could eat. It came up from the mud, slurping as the mud sucked its roots. Nothing in the head. She pulled apart the stem. It was dry and woody, the leaves tough and fibrous. She looked at the roots, covered with mud and mucous-gray slime. Nothing, nothing at all.

But she dipped the roots in the water and swished off some of the mud. On one side of the root clump she saw light-colored pointed fingerlike roots sticking out. She broke one off and washed it cleaner. Brown petals of leaf covered a glistening shell-pink root. She broke it in half and bit the smooth surface. Not bitter. She chewed slowly, remembering her attempt at eating the day before.

She ate two, then stopped, waiting to see what her stomach would do, gathering in other plants as she waited. She walked the length of the log, tugging gently at the cattail stems, coaxing them out slowly, rinsing off the pale pink protrusions, and laying them in a corner of her folded blanket.

By noon she had eaten and rested and gathered food for the journey. Finding this food was a gift, she thought. But she felt, too, a renewed confidence. She had found food. The frightening tangle of underbrush around the pond seemed to recede. She tied the blanket in a pouch around her waist and walked back up the stream until she came to dry land on either side. She decided to cut east through the forest, then angle back to the stream below the marsh. She thought the railroad tracks might parallel the stream bed. But if she didn't cross them, at least she'd get back to the stream before dark. Taking a drink of fresh water, she turned then and walked into the forest.

"Keep your eye on what you want to hit," she remembered Jamie saying. Spotting a tree fifty feet due east, she began to move toward it. The

old pine forest had shaded out most of the undergrowth, making passage seem fairly easy at first. Stepping over fallen branches, ducking under closely woven bare dead pine branches sticking out like spikes from the tall trunks, Susan picked her way toward the first tree. Checking the sun and the clearing where the stream had run, she picked another tree and started toward it. Two, three, four. She had imagined the bog to be about two miles long, a mile wide. Five, six. She paused to pull a briar away from her pants leg. On the fiftieth tree, she would begin to move east and south again. On the hundredth tree she would cast back toward the west and pick up the stream. Unless she came to the tracks.

Counting, moving in a chosen direction, munching on the cattail roots, she felt her sense of clarity returning. She was thirsty. But she was on a path of her own choosing.

She loved the smell of the tall conifers, the sense of grandeur she felt in them when she stood at the base of one and looked straight up its trunk to the sky. Solitude, she thought, that's what it was. Surrounded by other pines, yet each one of these huge old trees seemed to stand alone in the forest.

As a child she had learned that all of New England had been pine forest once, that the Indians knew that the deer loved the fresh pine shoots, and that pine trees could only grow in acid soil. So every year the Indians burned a part of the forest back, keeping the soil acid and making new pine growth for the deer. The pine seeds hid in the pine cones during the fire and, when it was over, started to grow.

She had thought it was good of the Indians to do that for the deer, but she was not pleased to learn that the Indians needed the deer for food and clothing. She only wanted to imagine the delicate-bodied doe in the spring, stepping daintily through the forest, nibbling with white teeth the new pine growth.

She wondered now, as the undergrowth became thicker and less passable, whether the four men had killed the deer, found them in their passage to winter feeding grounds and killed them. Killed them before the hunting season, before they had reached their natural protection higher in the mountains. For a moment she saw the blood and torn flesh, and then she saw herself, tied to a tree, torn and bleeding.

Stop. She told her mind, stop. Leaning exhausted against a tree, she realized that the way ahead was more and more difficult. Large trees had fallen, not just dead branches. And thick green undergrowth was coming up in the light left by their falling. She was hot now, and the ground was sloping upward. She spotted a tree at the top of the incline and moved toward it, hoping for a clearer view of her direction.

She wondered why they wanted the deer, those gutted carcasses, fur matted with blood, piled up in a truck. Money? What were they worth? Did they use them for food like the Indians? She thought not.

Sweating, she struggled to the top of the hill by pulling herself over a fallen tree. She could look across the gully to the next rise. There, stretching through the forest, were the silver rails lying across the dark railroad ties. She sat abruptly as relief loosened her body. They were there, in front

of her, running for miles through the tangle of forest and swamp. She had only to cross the gully.

She started over the rocky ledge and down toward the trees. They were much younger, much shorter now, and they were deciduous, she realized. She saw the shades of brown and light green ahead of her, not the heavy dark green of the older pines. Puzzled, she continued to climb down toward the gully bottom.

Before she reached the young woods, she knew. A windfall. It stretched for miles. Hundreds of large old pines blown down in a huge swath of wind, blown down and lying on the ground, rotting as the young trees grew up in the open light, healing the forest's wound. She stood looking at the hundreds of feet of fallen trees lying between her and the railroad tracks, fallen trees, split, wrenched out of the earth, roots twenty feet tall where they were pulled out of the rocky soil.

She walked back up to the ledge and sat, dropping the blanket behind her, pulling off her sweater. It was warm, too warm for a late afternoon at the end of September. A fine haze covered the sun. She rested her head on her arms. The bog behind and to her right. To the north the men with their rifles. A windfall ahead to cross. And tonight, she thought wearily, rain.

10

Resting, then dozing on the hard rock, she dreamed of going north where the men with their rifles hunted the delicate-bodied doe with soft brown eyes. Where the men with their guns and knives shot and killed and dismembered and left bleeding corpses behind. She dreamed of their camp fire at night and of their rifles piled together under a tree and of herself creeping into the camp where they slept, whiskey on their breath and blood on their hands. And she dreamed she would pick up one of the rifles and walk toward the shapes of the sleeping men with blood on their hands. And she would raise the rifle and fire it at the four sleeping shapes. Fire it again and again and again.

She woke at dusk, chilled, feeling light raindrops on her face, thinking, I should have done that, I should have followed them that first day and at night crept into their camp and shot them all.

And while she climbed back toward the pine forest, looking for a tree that would give her some warmth for the night and shelter from the coming rain, she imagined the looks on their faces, imagined killing Jack first, and then the lackey. But she wanted them to wake up and see what was going to happen. She wanted them to be afraid of her. And she wanted the fat one to squeal and the boy to look unbelieving as she fired shot after shot into their writhing bodies. She could kill them, she knew she could kill them. She could kill them.

Taking the blanket off her shoulders to move more freely, she remembered that it had belonged to the boy. They had goaded him into taking her that night when she lay on the ground where Jack had dumped her from his lap. He had come reluctantly and worked back and forth on her, his face grimacing as if with pain, his zipper scratching her thigh. When

the boy was through, she had stood and pulled on her jeans. Then walked out of the firelight circle and sat again with her back to the tree. The boy had brought the blanket and dropped it beside her. As the night got colder, she had wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, curled with her back against the tree, and shivered until dawn.

Now she carefully pulled small green pine branches off the larger boughs, twisting each stem to avoid peeling the bark. She arranged the branches along the frame of the shelter she had constructed, needles down, to shed the rain. Remedy enough in a shower, she knew, but useless if the rain turned into a downpour. Wrapping the blanket around the length of her body, she inched into the shelter without disturbing the branches, then pulled the fragrant pine boughs closer and wrapped them like arms around her.

Listening to the rustle of the rain in the pines, she lay and wondered what she ought to do tomorrow. No point in going back. She wasn't even sure where back was. She wouldn't go north. The men had probably killed the deer and left the forest by now. But to the north was more wilderness, unpopulated forest. She had to get south. She would have to cross the windfall. That was brutal work. In her condition she might slip, turn an ankle, break a limb, trying to climb over or around the enormous tree trunks.

She told herself she ought to be glad. She knew where the tracks were now, knew exactly what it would take to get out. Tomorrow she would find food and then start across the gully. She should be glad. But anxiety, not relief, pushed blackly against her eyelids, sapping her sense of confidence in her body, her ability to go on. "I should have killed them," she whispered again.

As she thought of her dream, and remembered the feeling of the rifle in her hands, against her shoulder, she wondered again why they hadn't killed her. Had they been so sure she wouldn't find her way out? They had never been threatened by the idea that she might confront them some later day. That she could have them arrested for illegal hunting. Or rape. She thought that second. The anxiety tightened her backbone as she imagined seeing them again, trying to tell someone what they had done to her. She knew she'd rather kill them. It would be easier to pick up a rifle and shoot them than to hike into a village and find a sheriff and tell him what they had done to her. Yes, they had been sure that she would never tell anyone, even if she could walk out of the forest and into a village. They had never been afraid of her.

Hunger knotted her stomach and distracted her thoughts. She needed food, she would feel better if she found more food. But the thought of cattail roots turned the spasm in her stomach to nausea. She wanted food that had an odor, food with flavor, food that was warm or even hot.

Moving her weight off her shoulder, she turned on her stomach. Around her the forest came to life. Nocturnal feeders moved through the underbrush with rustling feet. A raccoon sniffed the pine branches she had spread over her, then moved on. She heard a fox catch a burrowing shrew in the windfall over the ridge.

Her sleep was light, dreams scattered. For a moment she drove a car on a wide road toward a place she had to be. And then she realized the car was only a bicycle, and she worked harder to pedal up the rolling hills. As she worked and breathed harder, the bicycle became a tricycle with little wheels and she still had to go up the hill and behind her was a wagon tied to her tricycle with a little girl in it, and her legs were stiff and cramped with pedaling. Waking and shifting her body to straighten her legs, she thought of Jamie and imagined herself walking back into the cabin and wondered what she would say. Would Jamie know something was wrong? Or would she have to begin, "Guess what happened the other day?" Her throat ached with wanting comfort, and tears trickled down her nose. "Oh, God, I want to get out of here, just let me be home," she whispered into the pine leaves.

She remembered Saturday morning, how she was resting in the sun, drinking a third cup of coffee, her feet propped on the porch railing in front of her. The sun was warm on her face. And then there was the crackling in the underbrush, and she looked up . . . her mind refused the memory. No. No. Just the sun and the front porch. But the crackling in the underbrush persisted, and she looked up and saw the four men walking single file down the path toward the cottage, rifles slung over their shoulders, too early for any legal hunting season.

She had stood as they approached, stood on the porch with the cup of coffee in her hand, stood on the porch so she was taller than the men who were walking up the path. But they had not stopped. They had not stopped and asked permission. They had walked up onto the porch and lounged against the railing.

"Hey, honey, got a cup of coffee for us?" Jack had asked.

And then she began to lose her perspective, began to lose the small bit of control she had created over the memory by knowing it was past and she was lying wrapped in a pine-bough shelter somewhere deep in the forest.

"No," she had said, thinking of the pot she had just emptied.

He laughed. "Yes, you do," he said.

"Hey, a girl like you ought to have some hospitality for nice guys like us," chimed in the shorter man.

She saw that the four of them were around her. She felt them pressing toward her, even while they leaned—apparently at ease—on the porch. They were around her, and she felt the menace in Jack's voice when he said, "You'll bring us some coffee, won't you?"

She was afraid. She hesitated, then turned toward the cabin door, thinking she would lock it as she went in. But the smaller man moved first and held it open for her in mock chivalry, and Jack had followed her into the kitchen. Moving jerkily, she filled the kettle with water and lit the gas jet with a match. As she shook the match out, Jack grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him.

She jerked her hand away, fear turning to anger. "I don't like that," she said, moving away from him. "What do you think you're doing?"

He had just laughed and leaned against the refrigerator.

"Hey, Jack, you're not going to take that, are you?" asked the little one, his voice a goad. "Come on, she's a pretty little piece." Then they both moved toward her, rough hands on her clothing as she struggled to break away and the kettle started to shriek on the stove.

"Hey," Jack shouted sharply, slapping her hard, his knuckles grazing her jaw. "Cut it out, or I'll hurt you." Her teeth ached from the slap, and her arms were bruised. He smiled. "I don't want to hurt you. We just want some pussy."

The fat man and the boy were watching from the kitchen door.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice monotone dazed. No one answered her.

Jack moved toward her. "Don't move," he warned. "Just stand still and you won't get hurt."

He stood in front of her and put her hand on his cock, swollen under his pants. He unfastened her pants and slid them down to her ankles. She did not move. Two of the men took her arms and pulled her backward over the table. No no no, she was saying, but the memory went on relentlessly. Went on while Jack pulled her sweater up over her breasts, stripped her pants off her ankles, went on while the men grinned and breathed and Jack pushed forward and rammed between her spread thighs, and she screamed with the tearing pain, screamed silently. She was screaming, but no one could hear her, screaming, but there was no noise, and her tears made everything wet around her.

12

She could still feel Jamie's hand on her hair when she woke, the long gentle caress moving down the side of her face. A dream of comfort and warmth and tenderness.

Rain had soaked her blanket and clothes. She touched her hair. It was wet, clinging to her head. Rivulets ran through the pine needles she was lying on. She was not at home. Jamie was not there. Warily, she thought for a moment she could not go on. Then her body started to shake with chill, and she eased herself out of the wet blanket and stood to stretch. The world around her was green and brown through a filter of gray rainy mist. Leaving the sodden blanket lying on the ground, she began to walk down toward the gully.

Mist rose from the heavy vegetation in the windfall. The rain had stopped, and the windless dawn seemed hushed and tentative. As she walked, her body moved sluggishly, half alive, a foreign thing, barely under her control.

She had done nothing wrong, she told herself, nothing to deserve punishment. She did not understand a hatred so deep that it lit on any random victim. She had been there. That was all. It had nothing to do with her. Nothing to do with her.

Then she caught the lie. Yes, it had everything to do with her. It had happened to her. They did this to me. They did this to me. I'll kill them. Jesus, I'm going to kill them. Fury exploded whitely. Dizzy, distracted, she knelt on the ground, her body rocking back and forth, back and forth. They did this to me. I'll kill them, I'm going to kill them. There was ang-

uish and necessity in the thought.

She was caught in a trap of frenzied anger and hatred. Kill them. Kill them. She rocked oblivious to the stones under her knees, the damp hair falling forward over her face. Body clenched tightly, she rocked, and the anger washed over her, submerged her. She was no longer separate; her body had no beginning and end; skin no longer separated herself from the forest floor where she rocked and rocked, clenched in a fist of hatred. The tiny kernel of herself dissolved and spread like dye on the water, marking the location for a moment, then merging, floating outward, sinking.

Gradually her pulses slowed. She let her shoulders loosen and began to consciously draw one slow breath after another. Her throat felt sore, and a shiver started deep in her stomach. She sat without moving for a long time, then brushed the hair away from her face with a slow motion. The sun came out palely on her left, almost over her shoulder.

She rested in the sun, drained and battered. No context of her own knowledge or experience could explain what had happened. Lost control. I really lost control. It was the only point she could focus on as she sat on the forest floor, staring down at the tangled windfall growing below her at the foot of the ridge. She sat, mentally touching each side of her bruised self, testing, probing, remembering. She felt her body had grown very small.

Her mind played images: I got lost, Mommy. She walked to the woodpile and picked up the ax. Four men walking up the path. Jamie tucking a note under the lantern, walking out of the cabin. The doe stepping delicately through the underbrush. Four men walking up the path. The ax. The rifles lying stacked under a tree. Jamie's voice, Keep your eye on what you want to hit, Susan. Walking out of the cabin, two of them, then her, then two of them. She crouched on the forest floor, paralyzed. She could not think why she should go on walking.

She imagined herself never moving from the forest floor, lying curled, ceasing to breathe after a while, the autumn-leaves floating down to cover her in gold and brown. That was not the comfort she wanted. She wanted to be warm and alive and stroked. It was a desire she could not relinquish.

She stood and began to walk again, deliberately, slowly angling sideways down the slope. At the edge of the gully she paused and looked across the young forest. From this height it seemed to her a sea of green and gold, as she looked at the rounded rise and fall of brush. She entered the windfall. The light surrounded her in translucent green, the sun catching fine mist that sprayed off the leaves as she passed.

Under the slanting trunk of a shattered pine, she paused. In its shade were clusters of ferns, damp moss, and tall spiked day-lily leaves. Digging down, she pulled up the tendrils of day-lily roots. Knuckles, orange knuckles, clung to the fibrous root, crunchy and sweet. They grew wherever the shade was too deep for briars and saplings. They would grow here while the young trees struggled for light and filled the scar in the old forest.

She struggled up to the trunk of the fallen pine tree. She looked back for a moment at the other pines, tall, lining the sky behind her, each a solitary splendor. Then she slid down the other side and continued to work her way across the gully.



photograph by Marian Roth

ELEGY

—for the Mt. Tamalpais
Pt. Reyes victims—

May my rage
take back
the mountain
on which you died.
May my hands
forever be
a weapon
to your memories.
May my ears
ring with
your silenced
un-heard cries.
May my legs
always carry
the weight of
your shattered
lives.
May my lungs
breathe
for all of you
under wilderness
skies.
May my anger
move
the mountain,
and may
the mountain
forever move me.

Historical Footnote: In 1980 seven people were killed while hiking in and around Mt. Tamalpais and the Pt. Reyes shoreline. Six of these victims were women. One man is thought responsible for these violent crimes; he has not been apprehended.

AFTERIMAGES

However the image enters
 its force remains within
 my eyes
 rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
 wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
 learning to survive
 where there is no food
 my eyes are always hungry
 and remembering
 however the image enters
 its force remains within
 A white woman stands bereft and empty
 a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson
 recalled in me forever
 like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep
 etched into my visions
 food for dragonfish that learn
 to live upon whatever they must eat
 fused images beneath my pain

II

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson
 A mississippi summer televised.
 Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain
 a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat
 her fingers tarry for a moment on the chimney
 now awash
 tearless and no longer young, she holds
 a tattered baby's blanket in her arms.
 In a flickering afterimage of the nightmare rain
 a microphone
 thrust up against her flat, bewildered words
 "we jest come from the bank yestiddy
 borrowing money to pay the income tax
 now everything's gone. I never knew
 it could be so hard."
 Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud
 caked around the edges
 her pale eyes scanning the camera for help or explanation
 unanswered
 she shifts her search across the watered street, dry-eyed
 "hard, but not this hard."

Two tow-headed children hurl themselves against her
hanging upon her coat like mirrors
until a man with ham-like hands pulls her aside
snarling "She ain't got nothing more to say!"
and that lie hangs in his mouth
like a shred of rotting meat.

III

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till
his 15 years puffed out like bruises
on plump boy-cheeks
his only Mississippi summer
whistling a 21 gun salute to Dixie
as a white girl passed him in the street
and he was baptized my son forever
in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year
when I walked through a northern summer
my eyes averted
from each corner's photographs
newspapers protest posters magazines
Police Story, Confidential, True
the avid insistence of detail
pretending insight or information
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins
his grieving mother's lamentation
the severed lips, how many burns
his gouged out eyes
sewed shut upon the screaming covers
louder than life
all over
the veiled warning, the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body
fingered by street-corner eyes
bruise upon livid bruise
and wherever I looked that summer
I learned to be at home with children's blood
with savoured violence
with pictures of black broken flesh
used, crumpled, and discarded
lying amid the sidewalk refuse
like a raped woman's face.

A black boy from Chicago
whistled on the streets of Jackson Mississippi
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do
his teachers

ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone
in the name of white womanhood
they took their aroused honor
back to Jackson
and celebrated in a whorehouse
the double ritual of white manhood
confirmed.

IV

“if earth and air and water do not judge them
who are we to refuse a crust of bread?”

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor
(what did she pay to never know its price?)
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment
and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

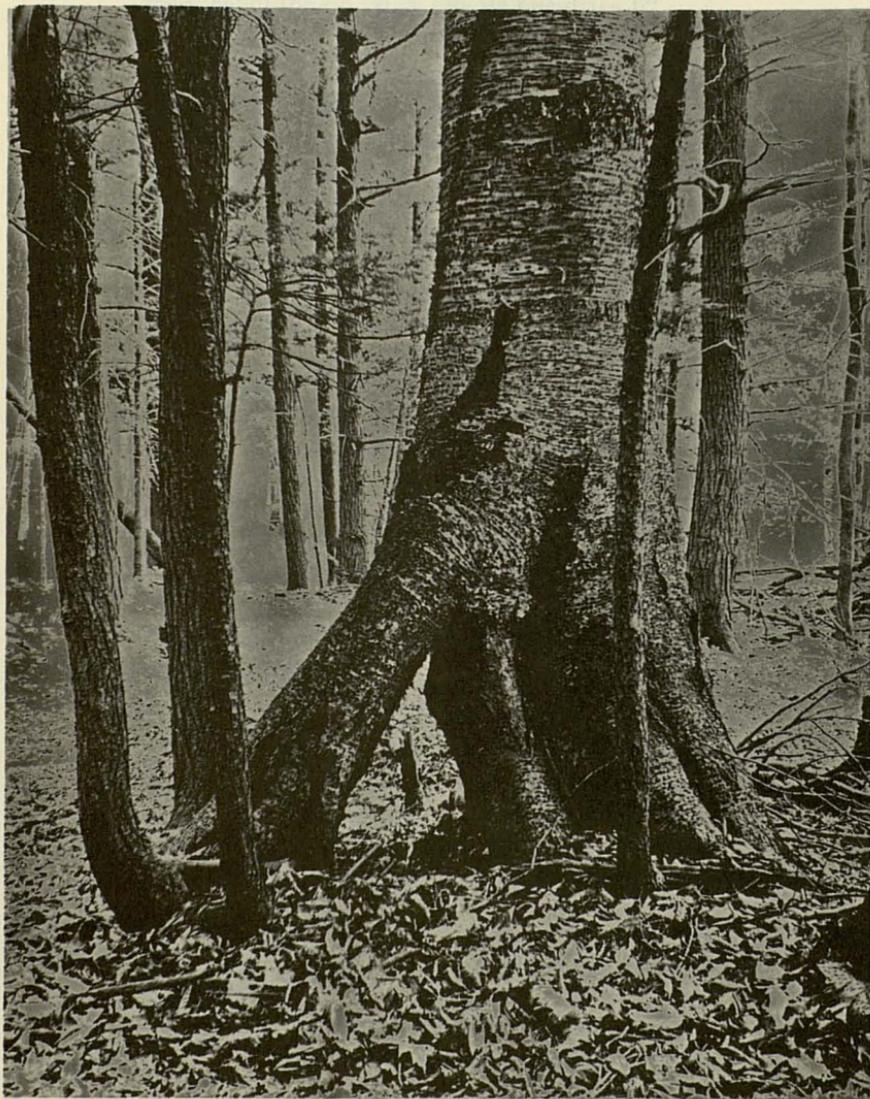
“Hard, but not this hard.”

Her face is flat with resignation and despair
with ancient and familiar sorrows
a woman surveying her crumpled future
as the white girl besmirched by Emmett’s whistle
never allowed her own tongue
without power or conclusion
unvoiced
she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor
and a man with an executioner’s face
pulls her away.

Within my eyes
the flickering afterimage of a nightmare rain
a woman wrings her hands
beneath the weight of agonies remembered
I wade through summer ghosts
betrayed by vision
hers and my own
becoming dragonfish to survive
the horrors we are living
with tortured lungs
adapting to breathe blood.

A woman measures her life’s damage
my eyes are caves, chunks of etched rock
tied to the ghost of a black boy
whistling
crying and frightened

her tow-headed children cluster
like little mirrors of despair
their father's hands upon them
and soundlessly
a woman begins to weep.



TO BE AND BE SEEN:

METAPHYSICAL MISOGYNY

I

In the spring of 1978, at a meeting of the Midwestern Division of the Society for Women in Philosophy, Sarah Hoagland read a paper entitled "Lesbian Epistemology," in which she sketched the following picture:

Individuals and cultural groups form their basic pictures of the world in a way determined by their conceptual schemes—the frameworks of concepts and "givens" which shape what is thinkable and what is unthinkable. In the conceptual schemes of phallogenocracies there is no category of woman-identified woman, woman-loving-woman or woman-centered-woman; that is, there is no such thing as a lesbian. This puts a lesbian in the interesting and peculiar position of being something that does not exist, and this position is a singular vantage point with respect to the reality which does not include her. It affords her a certain freedom from constraints of the conceptual system; it gives her access to knowledge which is inaccessible to those whose existence *is* countenanced by the system. Lesbians can therefore undertake kinds of criticism and description, and kinds of intellectual invention, hitherto unimagined.

Hoagland was urging lesbian-feminists to begin this work, and she herself began to try to say what could be seen from that exceptional epistemic position.

Some critics of that paper, bristling at the suggestion that lesbians might be blessed with any exotic powers or special opportunities, were quick to demand a definition of the word "lesbian." They knew that if a definition of "lesbian" featured certain patterns of physical contacts as definitive, then the claim that phallogenocratic conceptual schemes do not include lesbians would be obviously false, since phallogenocrats obviously can and do wrap their rapacious minds around verbal and visual images of females positioned in such physical contact with each other. And they knew also that on the other hand any definition which is more "spiritual" (so to speak), such as *woman-identified-woman*, will be flexible enough to permit almost any woman to count herself a lesbian and claim for herself these exciting epistemological privileges.

Other critics, who found Hoagland's picture engaging but were loathe to glorify the conditions of exile, pressed for a definition of "lesbian" which would be both accurate and illuminating—a definition which would shed light on what it means to say lesbians are excluded from phallogenocratic

conceptual schemes, and which might even provide some clue as to what lesbians might see from this strange non-location beyond the pale.

These pressures combined with the philosopher's propensity to view all orderly procedure as beginning with definitions, and the assembly was irresistibly drawn into trying to define the term "lesbian." But to no avail. That term is extraordinarily resistant to standard procedures of semantic analysis. It finally dawned on me that the elusiveness of the meaning of the term was itself a clue that Hoagland's picture was right. If indeed lesbians' existence is not countenanced by the dominant conceptual scheme, it would follow that we could not construct a definition of the term "lesbian" of the sort we might recommend to well-intentioned editors of dictionaries. If a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will not be adequate to the defining of a term which denotes it. If Hoagland's picture is right, then whatever we eventually do by way of defining the word "lesbian," it will evolve within a larger enterprise, and cannot be the *beginning* of understanding and assessing that picture.

Another way of beginning is suggested by the observation that women of all stripes and colors, including lesbians but also including non-lesbians, suffer erasure. This is true, but it also seems to me that Hoagland is right: the exclusion of lesbians from phallocratic reality is different and is related to unusual knowing. The difficulty lies in trying to say just what this *means*. In order to get a handle on this we need to explore the differences and the connections between the erasure of women generally and the erasure of lesbians.

It turns out that the explanation of how and why we are outside the scheme reveals what it is we can see and know from our odd position, and that in turn reveals what a lesbian is. What we are can be understood in terms of our distinctive knowledge and seeing. It is our wicced connection with women that is the crux of our difference.

I start with a semantic reminder.

II

Reality is that which is.

The English word "real" stems from a word which meant *regal*, of or pertaining to the king.

"*Réal*" in Spanish means *royal*.

Real property is that which is proper to the king.

Real estate is the estate of the king.

Reality is that which pertains to the one in power, is that over which he has power, is his domain, his estate, is proper to him.

The ideal king reigns over everything as far as the eye can see. His eye. What he cannot see is not royal, not real.

He sees what is proper to him.

To be real is to be visible to the king.

The king is in his counting house.

III

I say, "I am a lesbian. The king does not count lesbians. Lesbians are not real. There are no lesbians." To say this, I use the word "lesbian," and hence one might think that there is a word for this thing, and thus that the thing must have a place in the conceptual scheme. But this is not so. Let me take you on a guided tour of a few standard dictionaries, to display some reasons for saying that lesbians are not named in the lexicon of the King's English.

If you look up the word "lesbian" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* you find an entry that says it is an adjective that means *of or pertaining to the island of Lesbos*, and an entry describing at length and favorably an implement called a lesbian rule, which is a flexible measuring device used by carpenters. Period.

If you have picked up enough gossip to suppose that a lesbian is a homosexual and you look up "homosexual," *Webster's Third International* will inform you that "homosexual" means *of or pertaining to the same sex*. The elucidating example provided is the phrase "homosexual twins" which means *same-sex twins*. The alert scholar can conclude that a lesbian is a same-sex woman.

A recent edition of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* tells us that a lesbian is a woman who has sex, or sexual relations, with other women. Such a definition would be accepted by many speakers of the language and at least seems to be coherent, even if too narrow. But the appearance is deceptive, for this account collapses into nonsense too. The key word in this definition is "sex"—having sex or having sexual relations. But what is having sex? It is worthwhile to follow this up because the pertinent dictionary entries obscure an important point about the logic of sex. Getting clear about that point helps one see that there is semantic closure against recognition of the existence of lesbians, and it also prepares the way for understanding the connection between the place of *woman* and the place of *lesbian* with respect to the phallogocentric scheme of things.*

Dictionaries generally agree that "sexual" means something on the order of *pertaining to the genital union of a female and a male animal*, and that "having sex" is having intercourse—intercourse being defined as the penetration of a vagina by a penis, with ejaculation. My own observation of usage leads me to think these accounts are inadequate and misleading. Some uses of these terms do fit this dictionary account. For instance, parents and counselors standardly remind young women that if they are going to be sexually active they must deal responsibly with the possibility of becoming pregnant. In this context, the word "sexually" is pretty clearly being used in a way that accords with the given definition. But many activities and events fall under the rubric "sexual," apparently without semantic deviance, though they do not involve penile penetration of the vagina of a female human being. Penile penetration of almost anything, especially if it is ac-

*The analysis that follows is my own rendering of an account developed by Carolyn Shafer. My version of it is informed also by my reading of "Sex and Reference," by Janice Moulton, *Philosophy and Sex*, eds., Baker and Elliston (Prometheus, 1975).

accompanied by ejaculation, counts as having sex or being sexual. Moreover, events which cannot plausibly be seen as pertaining to penile erection, penetration, and ejaculation will in general not be counted as sexual, and events that do not involve penile penetration or ejaculation will not be counted as having sex. For instance, if a girlchild is fondled and aroused by a man, and comes to orgasm, but the man refrains from penetration and ejaculation, the man can say, and speakers of English will generally agree, that he did not have sex with her. No matter what is going on, or (it must be mentioned) *not* going on, with respect to female arousal or orgasm, or in connection with the vagina, a pair can be said without semantic deviance to have had sex, or not to have had sex; the use of that term turns entirely on what was going on with respect to the penis.

When one first considers the dictionary definitions of "sex" and "sexual" it seems that all sexuality is heterosexuality, by definition, and that the term "homosexual" would be internally contradictory. There are uses of the term according to which this is exactly so. But in the usual and standard use, there is nothing semantically odd in describing two men as having sex with each other. According to that usage, any situation in which one or more penises are present is one in which something could happen which could be called having sex. But on this apparently "broader" definition there is nothing women could do in the absence of men that could, without semantic oddity, be called "having sex." Speaking of women who have sex with other women is like speaking of ducks who engage in arm-wrestling.

When the dictionary defines lesbians as women who have sex or sexual relations with other women, it defines lesbians as logically impossible.

Looking for other words in the lexicon which might denote these beings which are non-named "lesbians," one thinks of terms in the vernacular, like "dyke," "bulldagger," and so on. Perhaps it is just as well that standard dictionaries do not pretend to provide relevant definitions of such terms. Generally, these two terms are used to denote women who are perceived as imitating or dressing up like, or trying to be, men. Whatever the extent of the class of women who are perceived to do such things, it obviously is not co-extensive with the class of lesbians. Nearly every feminist, and many other women as well, have been perceived as masculine or as wishing to be men, and most lesbians are not so perceived. The term "dyke" has been appropriated by some lesbians as a term of pride and solidarity, but in that use it is unintelligible to most speakers of English.

One of the current definitions of "lesbianism" among lesbians is *woman-loving*—the polar opposite of misogyny. Several dictionaries I checked have entries for "misogyny" (hatred of women), but not for "philogyny" (love of women). I found one which defines "philogyny" as *fondness for women*, and another dictionary defines "philogyny" as *Don Juanism*.^{*} Obviously neither of these means *love of women* as it is intended by lesbians combining the vocabulary for ways to refer to themselves. According to the dictionaries, there is no term in English for the polar opposite of misogyny nor for persons whose characteristic orientation toward women is the polar

^{*}Ellen Schell brought this one to my attention.

opposite of misogyny.

Flinging the net wider, one can look up the more Victorian words, like sapphism and sapphist. In the *Webster's Collegiate*, "sapphism" is defined just as *lesbianism*. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* introduces another twist. Under the heading of "sapphism" is an entry for "sapphist," according to which sapphists are those addicted to unnatural sexual relations between women. The fact that these relations are characterized as unnatural is revealing. For what is unnatural is contrary to the laws of nature, or contrary to the nature of the substance or entity in question. But what is contrary to the laws of nature cannot happen . . . that is what it means to call these laws the laws of nature. And I cannot do what is contrary to my nature, for if I could do it, it would be in my nature to do it. To call something "unnatural" is to say it cannot be. This definition defines sapphists—that is, lesbians—as *naturally* impossible as well as *logically* impossible.

The notion that lesbianism is not possible in nature, that it is nobody's nature to be a lesbian, has a life of its own, even among some people who do know factually that there are certain women who do and are inclined to do certain things with other women and women who sincerely avow certain feelings and attitudes toward women. Lesbianism can be seen as not natural in that if someone lives as a lesbian it is not assumed that that is just who, or how, she *is*, but that it is some sort of affliction, or is a result of failed attempts to solve some sort of problem or resolve some sort of conflict (and if she could find another way, she would take it, and then would not be a lesbian). Being a lesbian is understood as something which could be nobody's natural configuration but must be a configuration one is twisted into by some sort of force which is in some basic sense "external" to one. "Being a lesbian" is understood here as certain sorts of people understand "being a delinquent" or "being an alcoholic." It is not of one's nature the way illness is not of one's nature. To see this sense of "unnatural" one can contrast it with the presumed "naturalness" of the heterosexuality of women. As most people see it, being heterosexual is just being. It is not *interpreted*. It is not understood as a consequence of anything. It is not viewed as possibly a solution to some problem, or as a way of acting and feeling which one worked out or was pushed to by circumstances. On this sort of view, all women *are* heterosexual, and some women somehow come to *act* otherwise. On this view, no one *is*, in the same sense, a lesbian.

Almost every lesbian has had at one time or another the following adventure: she tells someone she is a lesbian and the response is "no, you aren't." Simple straightforward and explicit denial. The denial is often followed up with some explanation such as (1) you have just had some unfortunate experiences; (2) you're too nice to be like that; or (3) you are my daughter, my daughter is not a lesbian. All of these meet your plain assertion with the plain and self-confident assertion that you are either self-deceived or lying. The other one *knows* that you are not a lesbian. This remarkable confidence suggests that they have prior knowledge that you *could* not be a lesbian. It is like the confidence I would have that

an animal presented to me as the product of a cross between a dog and a cat could not be a cross between a dog and a cat, whatever else it was.

There are people who do believe in the real existence of perverts and deviants. What they share with those who do not is the view that the behaviors and attitudes in question are not natural to *humans*. One's choice, then, when confronted with someone who says she is a lesbian, is to believe her and class her as not fully or really human, or to class her as fully and really human and not believe that she is a lesbian.

Lesbian.

One of the people of the Isle of Lesbos.

It is bizarre that when I try to name myself and explain myself, my native tongue provides me with a word that is so foreign, so false, so hopelessly inappropriate. Why am I referred to by a term which means *one of the people of Lesbos*?

The use of the word "lesbian" to name us is a quadrifold evasion, a laminated euphemism. To name us, one goes by way of a reference to the poet Sappho (who used to live there, they say), which in turn is itself an indirect reference to what fragments of her poetry have survived a few millennia of patriarchy, and this in turn (if we have not lost you by now) is a prophylactic avoidance of direct mention of the sort of creature who would write such poems or to whom such poems would be written . . . assuming you happen to know what is in those poems written in a dialect of Greek over twenty-five hundred years ago on some small island somewhere in the wine-dark Aegean Sea.

This is a truly remarkable feat of silence.

The philosopher John Langshaw Austin, commenting on the connection between language and conceptions of reality, said the following: "Our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetimes of many generations."*

our
common stock of words
men have found
distinction is not worth drawing
connection is not worth making

Revealing as this is, it still dissembles. It is not that the connections and distinctions are not worth drawing and marking, it is that men do not want to draw and mark them, or do not dare to.

IV

When one says that some thing or some class is not countenanced by a certain conceptual scheme, or that it is not "among the values over which the variables of the system range," or that it is not among the ontological commitments of the system, there are at least three things this can mean. One is just that there is no simple direct term in the system for the thing

*From "A Plea for Excuses," *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 130.

or class, and no very satisfactory way to explain it. For example, it is in this sense that Western conceptual schemes do not countenance the forces or arrangements called "Karma." Indeed, I don't know whether it is suitable to say "forces or arrangements" here, and that is part of the point. A second thing that can be meant when it is said that something is not in the scope of the concepts of the scheme is that the term which ostensibly denotes the thing is internally self-contradictory, as in the case of round squares. Nothing can be in both the class denoted by "round" and the class denoted by "square," given what those words mean. A third thing one can mean when one says a scheme does not encompass a certain thing is that according to principles which are fundamental to the most general picture of how things are in the world, the thing could not exist in nature. An example of this is the denial that there could be a beast which was a cross between a dog and a cat. The belief that such a thing could exist would be inconsistent with beliefs about the nature of the world and of animals which underlie vast chunks of the rest of our worldview. *Lesbian* is the only class I have ever set out to define, the only concept I have ever set out to explain, that seemed to be shut out in more than one of these ways, and as the considerations reviewed here seem to show, it is shut out in all three. You can "not believe in lesbians" as you don't believe in the possibility of "doggie-cats" or as you don't believe in round squares; or you can be just unable to accommodate lesbianism in the way many of us cannot accommodate the notion of Karma—the concept of Karma doesn't articulate suitably with the rest of my concepts; it can't be worked in to my active conceptual repertoire.

The redundancy of the devices of closure which are in place here is one of the things which leads me to say that lesbians are *excluded* from the scheme. The overdetermination here, the metaphysical overkill, signals a manipulation, a scurrying to erase, to divert the eye, the attention, the mind. Where there is manipulation, there is motivation, and it does not seem plausible to me that the reason lies with the physical details of certain women's private lives. The meaning of this erasure and of the totality and conclusiveness of it has to do, I think, with the maintenance of phallocratic reality as a whole, and with the situation of women generally *apropos* that reality.

V

At the outset I said lesbians are not real, that there are no lesbians. I want to say also that women in general are not countenanced by the phallocratic scheme, are not real; there are no women. But the predicament of women *apropos* the dominant reality is complex and paradoxical, as is revealed in women's mundane experience of the seesaw of demand and neglect, of being courted and being ignored, being actively persecuted and idly overlooked. The observations which lead me to say there are no women in phallocratic reality themselves also begin to reveal the elements of the paradox. These observations are familiar to feminists; they are among the things we come back to again and again as new layers of their meanings become accessible to our understanding.

There are two kinds of erasure of women which have by now become "often noted." One is the conception of human history as a history of the acts and organizations of men, and the other is a long and sordid record in western civilization of the murder and mutilation of women. Both of these erasures are extended into the future, the one in fiction and speculation, the other in the technological projects of sperm-selection for increasing the proportion of male babies, of extra-uterine gestation, of cloning, of male-to-female transsexual reconstruction. Both sorts of erasure seem entwined in the pitched religious and political battle over the control of female reproductive functions (the fights about abortion, forced sterilization, contraception, the conditions of birthing, etc.), which can be seen as a feud between males who favor centralized control by the state and males who favor de-centralized control by individual men.

A reasonable person might think that these efforts to erase women reveal an all-too-vivid recognition that there *are* women—that the projects of ideological and material elimination of women presuppose postulating the existence of the objects to be eliminated. In a way, I agree. But also, there is a peculiar mode of relating belief and action which I think is characteristic of the construction of phallocratic reality, according to which projects of annihilation actually presuppose the *non*-existence of their targets. This mode is an insane reversal of the reasonable procedure of adjusting one's views so that they accord with reality as actively discovered: it is a mode according to which one begins with a firmly held view, composed from fabulous images of oneself, and adopts as one's project the alteration of the world to bring it into accord with that view.

A powerful example of this strange practice was brought to my attention by Harriet Desmoines, who had been reading about the United States' expansion across the North American continent. It seems that the white men, upon encountering the vast and rich midcontinental prairie, called the prairie a *desert*. They conceived a desert, they took it to be a desert; and a century later it is a desert (a fact which is presently obscured by the annual use of megatons of chemical fertilizers). Did they *really* believe that what they were seeing was a desert? It is a matter of record that that is what they *said* they saw.

There is another example of this sort of practice, to be found in the scientific and medical realm, which was brought to my attention by the work of Eileen Van Tassell. It is a standard assumption in the disciplines of human biology and human medicine that the species consists of two sexes, male and female. Concrete physical evidence that there are individuals of indeterminate sex is erased. Individuals whose primary or secondary sexual characteristics are indeterminate are surgically and/or chemically altered, or categorized as monstrous—not human. In this case, as in the case of the rich and living prairie, erasure of fact does not prove that the fact was believed, and destruction of concrete objects does not prove that the existence of the objects was recognized; these are, on the contrary, *ways of acting on the belief* that those are not the facts and the belief that no such objects exist.

If it is true that this mode of connection of belief and actions is characteristic of phallocratic culture, then one can construct or reconstruct beliefs which are fundamental to that culture's conceptual/scientific system by inspecting the culture's projects and reasoning that what is believed is what the projects would make to be true. As noted before, there are and have long been ongoing projects whose end will be a world with no women in it. Reasoning back, one can conclude that those whose projects these are believe there are no women.

For many of us, the idea that there are no women, that we do not exist, began to dawn when we first grasped the point about the non-generic so-called "generic" "man." The word "woman" was supposed to mean *female of the species*, but the name of the species is "Man." The term "female man" has a tension of logical impossibility about it that is absent from parallel terms like "female cat" and "female terrier." It makes one suspect that the concept of the species which is operative here is one according to which there are no females of the species. I think one can begin to get a handle on what this means by seeing how it meshes with another interesting phenomenon, namely the remarkable fact that so many men from so many stations in life have so often declared that women are unintelligible to them.

Reading or hearing the speeches of men on the unintelligibility of women, I imagine they are like people who for some reason can see everything but automobiles and are constantly and painfully perplexed by blasts and roars, thumps and bumps, which they cannot avoid, control, or explain. But it is not quite like that, for such men do seem to recognize our physical existence, or at least the existence of some of our parts. What they do not see is our souls.

The phallocratic scheme does not admit women as authors of perception, as seers. Man understands his own perception as simultaneously generating and being generated by a point of view. Man is understood to author names; men have a certain status as points of intellectual and perceptual origin. Insofar as the phallocratic scheme permits the understanding that women perceive at all, it features women's perceptions as passive, repetitive of men's perception, non-authoritative. Aristotle said it outright: Women are rational, but do not have authority.*

Imagine two people looking at a statue, one from the front, the other from the back, and imagine that the one in front thinks the one in back must be seeing exactly what he is seeing. He cannot fathom how the other can come up with a description so different from his own. It is as though women are assumed to be robots hooked up to the senses of men—not using senses of our own, not authoring perception, not having and generating a point of view. And then they cannot fathom how we must be wired inside, that we could produce the output we produce from the input they assume to be identical with their own. The hypothesis that we are seeing from a different point of view, and hence simply seeing something he cannot see, is not available to a man, is not in his repertoire, so

**Politics* I 13, 1260 a13.

long as his total conception of the situation includes a conception of women as not authoritative perceivers like himself; that is, so long as he does not count women as men. And no wonder such a man finds women incomprehensible.

VI

For the reasons given, and in the ways indicated, I think there is much truth in the claim that the phallogratic scheme does not include women. But while women are erased in history and in speculation, physically liquidated in gynocidal purges and banished from the community of those with perceptual and semantic authority, we are on the other hand regularly and systematically invited, seduced, cajoled, coerced, and even paid to be in intimate and constant association with men and their projects. In this, the situation of women generally is radically different from the situation of lesbians. Lesbians are not invited to join—the family, the party, the project, the procession, the war effort. There is a place for a woman in every game: wife, secretary, servant, prostitute, daughter, janitor, assistant, babysitter, mistress, seamstress, proofreader, cook, nurse, confidante, masseuse, indexer, typist, mother. Any of these is a place for a woman, and women are much encouraged to fill them. None of these is a place for a lesbian.

The exclusion of women from the phallogratic scheme is impressive, frightening, and often fatal, but it is not simple and absolute. Women's existence is both absolutely necessary to and irresolvably problematic for the dominant reality and those committed to it, for our existence is *pre-supposed* by phallogratic reality but it is not and cannot be *encompassed* by or countenanced by that reality. Women's existence is a background against which phallogratic reality is a foreground.

A foreground scene is created by the motion of foreground figures against a static background. Foreground figures are perceptible, are defined, have identity, only in virtue of their movement against a background. The space in which the motion of foreground figures takes place is created and defined by their movement with respect to each other and against the background. But nothing of the background is *in* or is *part of* or is *encompassed* by the foreground scene and space. The background is unseen by the eye which is focused on foreground figures, and if anything somehow draws the eye to the background, the foreground dissolves. What would draw the eye to the background would be any sudden or well-defined motion in the background. Hence there must be either no motion at all in the background, or an unchanging buzz of small, regular, and repetitive motions. The background must be utterly *uneventful* if the foreground is to continue to hang together, that is, if it is to endure as *a space* within which there are discrete *objects* in relation to each other.*

I imagine phallogratic reality to be the space and figures and motion which constitute the foreground, and the constant repetitive uneventful activities of women to constitute and maintain the background against which this foreground plays. It is essential to the maintenance of the fore-

*My thought here is influenced by the work of Susanne K. Langer, especially *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (Princeton University Press).

ground reality that nothing within it refer in any way to anything in the background, and yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background. It is useful to carry this metaphor on in a more concrete mode—thinking of phallocratic reality as a dramatic production on a stage.

The motions of the actors against the stage-settings and backdrop constitute and maintain the existence and identities of the characters in a play. The stage-setting, props, lights, and so forth are created, provided, maintained, and occasionally rearranged (according to the script) by stagehands. The stagehands, their motions, and the products of those motions are neither in nor part of the play—neither in nor part of the reality of the characters. The reality in the framework of which Hamlet's actions have their meaning would be rent or shattered if anything Hamlet did or thought referred in any way to the stagehands or their activities, or if that background blur of activity were in any other way to be resolved into attention-catching events.

The situation of the actors is desperately paradoxical. The actors are absolutely committed to the maintenance of the characters and the characters' reality; participation as characters in the ongoing creation of Reality is their *raison d'être*. The reality of the character must be lived with fierce concentration; the actor must be immersed in the play and undistracted by any thought for the scenery, props, or stagehands, lest the continuity of the characters and the integrity of their reality be dissolved or broken. But if the character must be lived so intently, who will supervise the stagehands to make sure they don't get rowdy, leave early, fall asleep, or walk off the job? (Alas, there is no god nor heavenly host to serve as Director and Stage Managers.) Those with the most intense commitment to the maintenance of the reality of the play are precisely those most interested in the proper deportment of the stagehands, and this interest competes directly with that commitment. There is nothing the actor would like better than that there be no such thing as stagehands, posing as they do a constant threat to the very existence, the very life, of the character, and hence to the meaning of the life of the actor; and yet the actor is irrevocably tied to the stagehands by his commitment to the play. Hamlet, of course, has no such problems; there are no stagehands in the play.

VII

All eyes, all attention, all attachment must be focused on the play, which is Phallocratic Reality. Any notice of the stagehands must be oblique and filtered through interest in the play. Anything which threatens the fixation of attention on the play threatens a cataclysmic dissolution of Reality into Chaos. Even the thought of the possibility of a distraction is a distraction. It is necessary to devise devices and construct systems which will lock out the thought-crime of conceiving the possibility of a direct and attentive focus on anything but Reality.

The ever-present potential for cosmological disaster lies with the background. There is nothing in the nature of the background that disposes it to be appropriately tame; it is not made to serve the foreground, it is just there. It therefore is part of the vocation of phallocratic loyalists to police

attention. They must make it radically impossible to attend to anything in the background; they must make it impossible to think it possible to fasten one's eye on anything in the background.

We can deduce from this understanding of the motivation, *what it is* that phallographic loyalists are motivated to forbid conceiving. What must not be conceived is *a seer* for whom the background is eventful, dramatic, compelling—whose attention fastens upon stagehands and their projects. The loyalists cannot just identify such seers and kill them, for that would focus the loyalists' own attention on the criminal, hence the crime, hence the object of the crime, and that would interrupt the loyalists' own attention to Reality.

The king is in his counting house. The king is greedy and will count for himself everything he dares to. But his greed itself imposes limits on what he dares to count.

VIII

What the king cannot count is a seer whose perception passes the plane of the foreground Reality and focuses upon the background.* A seer whose eye is attracted to the ones working as stagehands, the women. A seer in whose eye the woman has authority, has interests of her own, is not a robot. A seer who has no motive for wanting there to be no women; a seer who is not loyal to Reality. We can take the account of the seer who must be unthinkable if Reality is to be kept afloat as the beginning of an account of what a lesbian is. One might try saying that a lesbian is one who, by virtue of her focus, her attention, her attachment, is disloyal to phallographic reality: she is not committed to its maintenance and the maintenance of those who maintain it, and worse, her mode of disloyalty threatens its utter dissolution in the mere flick of the eye. This sounds extreme, of course, perhaps even hysterical. But listening carefully to the rhetoric of the fanatic fringe of the phallographic loyalists, one hears that they do think that feminists, whom they fairly reasonably judge to be lesbians, have the power to bring down civilization, to dissolve the social order as we know it, to cause the demise of the species, by our mere existence.

Even the fanatics do not really believe that a lone maverick lesbian can in a flick of her evil eye atomize civilization, of course. Given the collectivity of conceptual schemes, the way they rest on agreement, a maverick perceiver does not have the power to bring one tumbling down—a point also verified by my own experience as a not-so-powerful maverick. What the loyalists fear, and in this I think they are more-or-less right, is a contagion of the maverick perception, to the point where the agreement in perception which keeps Reality afloat begins to disintegrate.

The event of becoming a lesbian is a reorientation of attention in a kind of ontological conversion. It is characterized by a feeling of a world dissolving, and by a feeling of disengagement and re-engagement of one's power as a perceiver. That such conversion happens signals its possibility to others.

*The influence of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* should be obvious, here and elsewhere, in this essay.

Heterosexuality for women is not simply a matter of sexual preference, any more than lesbianism is. It is a matter of orientation of attention, as is lesbianism, in a metaphysical context controlled by neither heterosexual nor lesbian women. Attention is a kind of passion. When one's attention is on something, one is present in a particular way with respect to that thing. This presence is, among other things, an element of erotic presence. The orientation of one's attention is also what fixes and directs the application of one's physical and emotional work.

If the lesbian sees the woman, the woman may see the lesbian seeing her. With this, there is a flowering of possibilities. The woman, feeling herself seen, may learn that she *can be* seen; she may also be able to know that a woman can see, that is, can author perception. With this, there enters for the woman the logical possibility of assuming her authority as a perceiver and of shifting her own attention. With that there is the dawn of choice, and it opens out over the whole world of women. The lesbian's seeing undercuts the mechanism by which the production and constant reproduction of heterosexuality for women was to be rendered *automatic*. The non-existence of lesbians is a piece in the mechanism which is supposed to cut off the possibility of choice or alternative at the root, namely at the point of conception.

The maintenance of phallographic reality requires that the attention of women be focused on men and men's projects—the play; and that attention not be focused on women—the stagehands. Woman-loving, as a spontaneous and habitual orientation of attention, is then, both directly and indirectly inimical to the maintenance of that reality. And therein lies the reason for the thoroughness of the ontological closure against lesbians, the power of those closed out, and perhaps the key to the liberation of women from oppression in a male-dominated culture.

IX

My primary goal here has not been to state and prove some rigid thesis, but simply to *say* something clearly enough, intelligibly enough, so that it can be understood and thought about. Insofar as I am making claims, they are these: Lesbians are outside the conceptual scheme, and this is something done, not just the way things are. One can begin to see that lesbians are excluded by the scheme, and that this is *motivated*, when one begins to see what purpose the exclusion might serve in connection with keeping women generally in their metaphysical place. It is also true that lesbians are in a position to see things that cannot be seen from within the system. What lesbians see is central to what makes them lesbians and their seeing is why they have to be excluded. Lesbians are woman-seers. Upon coming to see women, one is spat summarily out of reality, through a cognitive gap and into negative semantic space. If you ask what became of such a woman, you may be told she became a lesbian, and if you try to find out what a lesbian is, you will be told there is no such thing.

But there is.

End Note:

In the spring of 1979 I had the unique pleasure of working up a version of this paper to deliver as a talk for an all-lesbian audience at the Michigan Statewide Lesbian Political Action Conference in Lansing. It was the only time I have ever composed a talk for an all-lesbian group, and it was wonderfully liberating and challenging to write for an audience for whom nothing I wanted to say or think would be "going too far." It removes all the usual excuses for editing oneself, and leaves one simply facing the abyss with nothing to do but jump. I thank the organizers of that conference for being so brash as to have an all-lesbian conference. The present version of the paper grew out of a version delivered to Midwestern SWIP in the fall of 1978, a version composed for the above-mentioned conference, and another version prepared for and delivered at Cornell University (Women's Studies and the philosophy department) in the fall of 1980.

**What do
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19th century pioneers,
indochinese refugees,
black lesbians and activists
from the peace and
womens movements have
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CONTEXTS

for Tillie Olsen

"Dollars damn me." —Herman Melville, as cited in *Silences*
*"I have no patience with this dreadful idea that whatever you
 have in you has to come out, that you can't suppress true
 talent. People can be destroyed; they can be bent, distorted,
 and completely crippled."* —Katherine Anne Porter, *ibid.*

I.

I am helping proofread the history
 of a dead language. I read out loud
 to an old man whose eyes have failed
 him. He no longer sees the difference
 between a period or a comma, a dash
 or a hyphen, and needs me for I under-
 stand how important these distinctions are.

The room is crammed with books, books
 he had systematically tagged for future
 projects—now lost. Sounds pour out
 of me. I try to inject some feeling
 and focus, concentrate on the meaning
 of each linguistic phrase. On the edge
 of my vision, he huddles over a blurred
 page, moves his magnifying glass from line
 to line, and we progress. Time passes.
 My voice is a stranger's, sensible and
 calm, and I, the cornered, attentive hostess,
 listen in silence as it conjectures the his-
 tory of languages long dead without a trace.
 How, I wonder, did I become what I am not?

I request a break. The sounds cease.
 I check the clock, calculate, write
 figures in a notebook. I am numb
 and stiff, walk up and down the hall,
 stare into busy offices. I wait.
 I wait for something forgotten, something
 caught and bruised: a brown feather,
 a shaft of green light, a certain word.
 I bend, drink water, remember stubborn
 clams clinging to the muddy bottom.

II.

The building across the street
has an ordinary facade, a view of the park
and rows of symmetrical spotless windows.
Each morning, the working women come to perform
their duties. They are in starched white,
could pass for vigilant nurses keeping
order and quiet around those about to die.
And each morning, idle women
in pale blue housecoats, frilled and fluffed
at the edges, stare out of double windows,
waiting for something to begin.

With whom would you change places, I ask
myself, the maid or the mistress?

III.

The clock sucks me back. I calculate the loss,
return to the books, his unrecognizing eyes.
He is unaware of the pantomime outside,
feels no rage that I and the world are lost
to him, only mourns the words dead on the page.
We begin again. I point to the paragraph,
synchronize the movement of eye and mouth,
abandon all pretense of feeling. Silently I float
out, out toward the horizon, out toward the open sea,
leaving behind the dull drone of an efficient machine.

*I am
there again, standing by the railing, watching
the whales in their narrow aquarium, watching
their gleaming grace in the monotonous circle, watching
how they hunger for fleshly contact, how the young keeper
places his human hand in their rough pink mouths,
rubs their tongues, splashes them like babies. I cannot
watch them enough, but feel deeply ashamed for I know
the price.*

With a shock I realize we are not together,
that he is lost, caught in a trap.
He sounds the words over and over, moves
the glass back and forth, insists there is
a lapse in meaning. I sit silent, tense, watch
as he painfully untangles the subtle error, watch
as he leans back exhausted saying: "I knew something
was wrong! I knew from the context that something
was wrong!"

IV.

At the end of the day I stack the galleys, mark an x where we've been forced to stop. He is reluctant to let me go, anxious, uncertain about the coming days, but I smile, assure him they'll be all the same. Alone, I rush for the bulb-lit train, for the empty corner of the dingy car, then begin the struggle against his vacant stare, against the memory of the crowded shelves.

It is a story, I tell myself, at least a story, that one Sunday when I refused to go to work. Fifteen, bored with inventory and week-end jobs, I stayed in bed and, already expert, called in sick. Her rage was almost savage, wild. She paced through the apartment, returned to me again and again saying "*Get up! Get up now!*" as if I was in mortal danger. But nothing would move me from my bed, from the sun cutting through the iron fire escape outside, from the half-finished book about the man and the whale. "It's not that much money," I called to her.

And then her inexplicable silence. At first she sat in the kitchen, fingering the piece of cloth, staring absently at the teacup. Finally she got up, began pinning the pattern. Soon I heard the clean sound of the scissor against the kitchen table, then silence again as she basted. Much later that day, she worked on the machine, and still she did not speak to me, just let the bobbing needle make its own uninterrupted noise. And as I went to bed new with the excitement of that sea of words, filled with my own infinite possibilities, she continued sewing, fulfilling her obligation for the next day's fitting.

V.

The blind man balances easily in the rocking car. He moves among us, sings, shakes a tin cup. Most of us think it's all a con, but it makes no difference. Pose is part of necessity.

Riding each evening through the echoing tunnels,
I've begun to believe in the existence of my own
soul, its frailty, its ability to grow narrow,
small. I've begun to understand what it means
to be born mute, to be born without hope of speech.

INDIGENOUS ACTS

NATIVE ORIGIN

The old women are gathered in the Longhouse. First, the ritual kissing on the cheeks, the eyes, the lips, the top of the head; that spot where the hair parts in the middle like a wild river through a canyon. On either side, white hair flows unchecked, unbinded.

One Grandmother sets the pot over the fire that has never gone out. To let the flames die is a taboo, a breaking of trust. The acorn shells have been roasted the night before. Now, Grandmother pours the boiling water over the shells. An aroma rises and combines with the smell of wood smoke, sweat, and the sharp, sweet odor of blood.

The acorn coffee steeps and grows dark and strong. The old women sit patiently, in a circle, not speaking. Each set of eyes stares sharply into the air, or into the fire. Occasionally, a sigh escapes from an open mouth. A Grandmother has a twitch in the corner of her eye. She rubs her nose, then smooths her hair.

The coffee is ready. Cups are brought out of a wooden cupboard. Each woman is given the steaming brew. They blow on the swirling liquid, then slurp the drink into their hungry mouths. It tastes good. Hot, strong, dark. A little bitter, but that is all to the good.

The old women begin talking among themselves. They are together to perform a ceremony. Rituals of women take time. There is no hurry; time stands still.

The magic things are brought out from pockets and pouches. A turtle rattle made from a she-turtle who was a pet of the woman's mother. It died the night she died, both of them ancient and tough. Now the daughter shakes the rattle, and mother and she-turtle live on. Another Grandmother pulls out a bundle that contains a feather from a hermit thrush. This is a holy feather. Of all the birds in the sky, hermit thrush is the only one who flew to the Spirit World. It was there she learned her beautiful song. But she is clever, and hides from sight. To have her feather is great magic. All the women pass around the feather. They tickle each other's chins and ears. Giggles and laughs erupt in the dwelling.

From that same bundle of the hermit thrush, come kernels of corn; yellow, red, black. They rest in her wrinkled, dry palm. These are also

passed around. Each woman holds the corn in her hand for a while before giving it to her sister. Next come leaves of Witch Hazel and Jewelweed; Dandelion roots for chewing, Pearly Everlasting for smoking. These things are given careful consideration, and much talk is generated over the "old" ways of preparing these concoctions.

A woman gives a smile and brings out a cradleboard from behind her back. There is much nodding of heads, and smiling, and long drawn-out ahhhhhs. The cradleboard has a beaded back that a mother made in her ninth month. An old woman starts a song, the rest join in:

Little baby
Little baby
Ride on Mother's back
Laugh, laugh
Life is good
Mother shields you
Mother shields you

A Grandmother wipes her eyes, another holds her hands and kisses the life lines. Inside the cradleboard are bunches of moss taken from a menstrual house. This moss has staunched rivers of blood that generations of young girls have squeezed from their womb walls.

The acorn drink is reheated and passed around again. A woman adds wood to the fire. She holds her hands out to the flames, almost in supplication. It takes a lot of heat to warm her creaky body. Another woman comes behind her with a warm blanket. She wraps it around her friend and hugs her shoulders. They stand quietly before the fire.

A pelt of fur is brought forth. It once belonged to a beaver. She was found one morning, frozen in the ice, her lodging unfinished. The beaver was thawed and skinned. The women worked the hide until it was soft and pliant. It was the right size to wrap a new born baby in, or to comfort old women on cold nights.

A piece of flint, an eagle bone whistle, a hank of black hair, cut in mourning; these are examined with quiet, reverent vibrations.

The oldest Grandmother removes her pouch from around her neck. She opens it with rusty fingers. She spreads the contents in her lap. A fistful of black earth. It smells clean, fecund. The women inhale the odor; the metallic taste of iron is on their tongues, like a sting.

The oldest Grandmother scoops the earth back into her pouch. She tugs at the strings, it closes. The pouch lies between her breasts, warming her skin. Her breasts are supple and soft for one so old. Not so long ago, she nursed a sister back to health. A child drank from her breast and was healed of evil spirits that entered her while she lay innocent and dreaming.

The ceremony is over. The magic things are put in their places. The old women kiss and touch each other's faces. They go out into the night. The moon and stars are parts of the body of Sky Woman. She glows on, never dimming, never receding.

The Grandmothers go inside the Longhouse. They tend the fire, and wait.

ROBBING PETER TO PAY PAUL

Her hands moved slowly across the quilting boards. Brown hands with many wrinkles, liver spots. Swollen hands, old hands, though the woman they belong to can't be much older than sixty.

The top of the quilt has been pieced together by the daughters of the not so old woman. Now the final work is being done. The top is stitched to a bottom layer, a bed sheet that Grandma has dyed. Sandwiched in between are thick, fluffy clouds of cotton batting.

This pattern, called Robbing Peter To Pay Paul, looks quite uncomplicated, but a woman's eye can detect the intricacy of the design. Each block is a mirror image of the one beside it, only in a different color and material. So the eyes are dazzled by bright colors next to somber ones, dark colors next to light. Each square has robbed a little scrap of cloth from the other.

"Mother, you'll go blind," my aunts would say. Grandma would just laugh as she pulled her eye glasses from her face and wiped her tired eyes. "I only have one block to go, just one more. Beth Ellen, do you have those needles threaded yet?" And I would painstakingly thread the needles with eight year old fingers. The needles were Number Six, for quilting. The ends were blunted, like Grandma's life, away from the Mohawk Reserve in Canada.

Grandma belonged to the Turtle clan. She passed this on to her children and grandchildren. Her quilts were the shell that covered her, protected us from a white world. Her quilts were a time traveling; a remembrance of her mother, a recollection of a former life that was certain in its certainties.

Stitch by stitch, block by block. The hands moving across the boards; stealing scraps of cloth to begin a new square. Stealing time for one more block, just one more.

MOHAWK TRAIL

for Denise

There is a small body of water in Canada called the Bay of Quinte. Look for three pine trees gnarled and entwined together. Woodland Indians, they

call the people who live here. This is a reservation of Mohawks, the Real People. On this reserve lived a woman of the Turtle clan. Her name was Lydia, and she had many children. Her daughters bore flower names; Pansy, Daisy, Ivy, and Margaret Rose.

Margaret grew up, married Joseph of the Wolf clan. They had a son. He was Joseph too. Eight children later, they moved to Detroit, America. More opportunities for Margaret's children. Grandpa Joseph took a mail order course in drafting. He thought Detroit would educate his Turtle children. It did.

Joseph, the son, met a white woman. Her name is Hazel. Together, they made me. All of Margaret's children married white. So the children of Margaret's children are different. Half blood, half breed, Uncle Doug used to tease us. But he smiled as he said it. Uncle was a musician and played jazz. They used to call him Red. Every Christmas Eve, Uncle would phone us kids and pretend he was Santa. He would ask, "Were you good little Indians or bad little Indians?" We, of course, would tell tales of our goodness to our mothers and grandmother. Uncle would sign off with a ho ho ho and a shake of his turtle rattle. He died from alcohol. He was buried in a shiny black suit, his rattle in his hands. Around his neck, a beaded turtle.

Some of my aunts went to college. Grandma baked bread and pies, Grandpa peddled them in the neighborhood. It helped to pay for the precious education. All of my aunts had skills, had jobs. Shirley became a dietitian and cooked meals for kids in school. She was the first Native American in the state of Michigan to ever hold that position. She was very proud of what she had done "for her people." Laura was a secretary. She received a plaque one year, from her boss, proclaiming her speed at typing. Someone had painted a picture of an Indian in headdress typing furiously away. Laura was supposed to laugh, but she didn't. She quit instead. Hazel could do anything. She worked as a cook, as a saleswoman in a 5 and 10 cent store. She made jewelry out of shells and stones, and sold them door to door. Hazel was the first divorcée in our family. It was quite thrilling to be the niece of a woman who went against the grain. Elsie was a sickly child. She didn't go to college, but worked in a grocery store, and minded women's children for extra money. She would catch the streetcar in winter, all bundled up in Grandma's coat, and wearing bits of warmth from her sisters' wardrobes. It was the fear of everyone that Elsie would catch cold or something worse. When Aunt Elsie did die, it wasn't from cold or flu. She died from eight children and cancer of the womb and breast. Colleen became a civil servant. Serving the public, selling stamps over the counter. Auntie is the youngest child of Margaret and Joseph. She is the quietest, the dreamiest, the kindest. After marrying white men, my aunts retired their jobs. Then they became secret artists, putting up huge amounts of quilts, needlework, and beadwork in their fruit cellars. Sometimes, when the husbands and children were asleep, my aunts would glide to the cellar

and gaze at their work. Smoothing an imaginary wrinkle on the quilt, running the embroidery silks through their fingers, threading the beads on the small loom; turning the red, blue, and yellow stones into a work of art. By day, the dutiful wife. By night, weaving, beading, quilting their souls into artifacts that will be left behind after death, to tell the story of who these women were.

My father worked in a factory, making cars he never drove. Mama encouraged Dad to go to college. Grandma prayed that he would go to college. Between these two forces, Dad decided to make cars in the morning and go to school at night. Mama took care of children for money. One night I awoke to the sounds of my father crying. "Hazel, I don't know if I can make it. I'm tired, so tired." Mama took his hand and said, "You must do this. For your daughters, your son, and most important, for Margaret and Lydia." So Dad continued and eventually became a quiet teacher. He loved his work. Mama still took care of kids. There were so many debts from school. We wore hand-me-downs for years. Dad had one suit to teach in. When he wore his beaded necklace, some of the students laughed. His retirement came earlier than expected. The boys in his Indian History class beat him up as they shouted, "Injun Joe, Injun Joe." My mother stopped taking care of children. Now she takes care of Father and passes on the family lore to me.

When I was a small girl, Grandpa taught me Mohawk. He thought I was smart. I thought he was Magic. He had a special room that was filled with blueprints. When and if he had a job, he would get out the exotic paper, and I sat quietly, watching him work. Grandpa Joseph told me stories while he worked. Stories of Broken Nose and Long Nose, who would frighten bad children into becoming good. But I, who was so good, need not fear. His room smelled of ink and tobacco and, sometimes, the forbidden whiskey. These times were good. When Grandfather died, I forgot the language. But in my dreams I remember, Raksotha Raoka: Ra.

Margaret had braids that wrapped round and round her head. It was my delight to unraid them every night. I would run the brush from the top of her head, down through the abundance of silver that was her hair. Once, I buried my face in it. She smelled like smoke and woods. Her eyes were like smoke too. Secret fires, banked down. I asked her to tell me about the Reserve. She told me her baby had died there, my father's twin. She told me about Lydia. Lydia had dreams of her family flying in the air, becoming seeds that sprouted on new ground. The earth is a turtle where new roots bear new fruit. Bittersweet. "Lydia gave me life," Grandma said. Grandmother, you have given me my life.

Late at night, pulling the quilt up to cover me, she whispered; Don't forget who you are. Don't ever leave your family. They are what matters.

I would like to thank my lover, Denise Dorsz, for her active support and comfort and for helping me to get in touch with Margaret again. I would like also to thank Michelle Cliff and Linda Hogan, who have given me spiritual as well as technical assistance.

SOURCES OF POWER

i. room

mammaw came out to the room where i sleep
to tell me that susie's son had called
that he said his mother was a fine woman and
then
she stood silent at the rail
in the kind of silence
that begs the physical to intervene
that only touch can end
she stood there silent
and i sat silent drawing in my lap
anxious to finish the sketch
i was making of perk's fish

yesterday her best friend from childhood died
her friend susie
who she played in the mud with
and hid from their brothers with
susie who sold her eggs
and meat and tomatoes
when she still lived back home
susie died
and still i would not physically console her
afraid to be the first to enter her grief
of the thousands of years
that she's had to grieve alone
i shuddered to think of a lifetime of not being held
when in sorrow
of gaining no comfort
when sad, lonely, aching,
of having no hand to reach to
in mid-sleep after a nightmare during a bad night
i shuddered to think of my power to enter
yet still i could not

i was afraid to touch her
afraid to
break the long never spoken practice
afraid to touch my mother's mother
we don't touch much anyway
my family

we are strangers
known only by the shine of our skin
i claim others more closely
than this blood kin

last night i was afraid of the power
i had to hold her
afraid of the energy
that would be released
ashamed that i would not care enough
that i did not love her enough
to touch her
so i stayed in my chair comfortable
and let her suffer in her dark room alone

ii. sources of power

i have known for years now
how to breathe a breath of moon
at midnight through the window
when all other sources seem gone
how to take a breath of sun and wind in morning
how to bathe in the ocean, swim naked in summer
how to use the wind the waters the sun for power
as i also use the moon

women have long harnessed the wind
turned sun into energy
used water for generations to power us
if only she'd known of her own power sources
then i might not have feared mine as much

we take our energy from the elements
from storms and stars to keep us going
we refuel in woods and waters
when all other sources are expired
we know how to quietly without greed
take only what we need to refuel and then continue
when all other sources are blocked
when we are deprived of and refused each other
when our children are hungry
when we become hopeless
when our men turn mean
when they beat us turn us inside out
when they beat us turn us inside out
when there is no support for difference
when we are used and used and used again
we have known how to tap reserves

the moon the waters the sun the wind
to refuel and then continue

if only she'd known she had power
but everytime she grew some connection to the sources
grew some life she could refuel from
he'd mow it down
like he mowed down a row of her favorite rose bushes
not long before he died
—ah he was sick he didn't know what he was doing
he was a sick man
the cancer was making him crazy

if only she'd known
had had some way to refuel
if only she'd known she had power

iii. him dead

now that he's been dead ten years
she begins to speak against him:

nobody knows what kind of problems i had with that man
even his appendicitis was my fault:
that damned cabbage you fixed for supper, he said

now that he's been dead ten years
i could begin to touch her but
i am too small to ask the questions
that matter

did you love him mammaw
did he ever hit you
did you make love often
was it good
did he please you
did he ever say i love you

i am afraid of the answers
too weak to shoulder her truths
so she cried and grieved and slept alone last night
with her thoughts of susie
her friend from georgia
susie whose diseases finally caught up to her

no we weren't no kin, but you see, we were raised up together
jest like we was

we were fifty years distanced in that room
three generations apart
each a world that made us different

i was afraid to enter her truths
afraid to shoulder her sadness
i was too small to touch her
afraid of the power i held to enter

did you love him mammaw
did he ever hit you
did he ever say i love you



photograph by Beth Karbe

BOYS AT THE RODEO

A lot of people have spent time on some women's farm this summer of 1972 and one day six of us decide to go to the rodeo. We are all mature and mostly in our early thirties. We wear levis and shirts and short hair. Susan has shaved her head.

The man at the gate, who looks like a cousin of the sheriff, is certain we are trying to get in for free. It must have been something in the way we are walking. He stares into Susan's face. "I know you're at least fourteen," he says. He slaps her shoulder, in that comradely way men have with each other. That's when we know he thinks we are boys.

"You're over thirteen," he says to Wendy.

"You're over thirteen," he says to me. He examines each of us closely, and sees only that we have been outdoors, are muscled, and look him directly in the eye. Since we are too short to be men, we must be boys. All the other women at the rodeo are called girls.

We decide to play it straight, so to speak. We make up boys' names for each other. Since Wendy has missed the episode with Susan at the gate, I slap her on the shoulder to demonstrate. "This is what he did." Slam. She never missed a step. It didn't feel bad to me at all. We laugh uneasily. We have achieved the status of fourteen-year-old boys, what a disguise for travelling through the world. I split into two pieces for the rest of the evening, and have never decided if it is worse to be thirty-one years old and called a boy or to be thirty-one years old and called a girl.

Irregardless, we are starved so we decide to eat, and here we have the status of boys for real. It seems to us that all the men and all the women attached to the men and most of the children are eating steak dinner plates; and we are the only women not attached to men. We eat hot dogs, which cost one-tenth as much. A man who has taken a woman to the rodeo on this particular day has to have at least twelve dollars to spend. So he has charge of all of her money and some of our money too, for we average three dollars apiece and have taken each other to the rodeo.

Hot dogs in hand we escort ourselves to the wooden stands, and first is the standing up ceremony. We are pledging allegiance for the way of life—the competition, the supposed masculinity and pretty girls. I stand up, cursing, pretending I'm in some other country. One which has not been rediscovered. The loudspeaker plays Anchors Aweigh, that's what I like about rodeos, always something unexpected. At the last one I attended in another state the men on horses threw candy and nuts to the kids, chipping their teeth and breaking their noses. Who is it, I wonder, that has put these guys in charge. Even quiet mothers raged over that episode.

Now it is time for the rodeo queen contest, and a display of four very young women on horses. They are judged for queen 30 percent on their horsemanship and 70 percent on the number of queen tickets which people bought on their behalf to "elect" them. Talk about stuffed ballot boxes. I notice the winner as usual is the one on the registered thoroughbred whose daddy owns tracts and tracts of something—lumber, minerals, animals. His family name is all over the county.

The last loser sits well on a scrubby little pony and lives with her aunt and uncle. I pick her for the dyke even though it is speculation without clues. I can't help it, it's a pleasant habit. I wish I could give her a ribbon. Not for being a dyke, but for sitting on her horse well. For believing there ever was a contest, for not being the daughter of anyone who owns thousands of acres of anything.

Now the loudspeaker announces the girls' barrel races, which is the only grown women's event. It goes first because it is not really a part of the rodeo, but more like a mildly athletic variation of a parade by women to introduce the real thing. Like us boys in the stand, the girls are simply bearing witness to someone else's act.

The voice is booming that barrel racing is a new, modern event, that these young women are the wives and daughters of cowboys, and barrel racing is a way for them to participate in their own right. How generous of these northern cowboys to have resurrected barrel racing for women and to have forgotten the hard roping and riding which women always used to do in rodeos when I was younger. Even though I was a town child, I heard thrilling rumors of the all-women's rodeo in Texas, including that the finest brahma bull rider in all of Texas was a forty-year-old woman who weighed a hundred pounds.

Indeed, my first lover's first lover was a big heavy woman who was normally slow as a cold python, but she was just hell when she got up on a horse. She could rope and tie a calf faster than any cowboy within five hundred miles of Sweetwater, Texas. That's what the West Texas dykes said, and they never lied about anything as important to them as calf roping, or the differences between women and men. And what about that news story I had heard recently on the radio, about a bull rider who was eight months pregnant? The newsman just had apoplectic fits over her, but not me, I was proud of her. She makes me think of all of us who have had our insides so overly protected from jarring we cannot possibly get through childbirth without an anesthetic.

While I have been grumbling these thoughts to myself, three barrels have been set up in a big triangle on the field, and the women one by one have raced their horses around each one and back to start. The trick is to turn your horse as sharply as possible without overthrowing the barrel.

After this moderate display, the main bulk of the rodeo begins, with calf roping, bronco riding, bull riding. It's a very male show during which the men demonstrate their various abilities at immobilizing, cornering, maneuvering, and conquering cattle of every age.

A rodeo is an interminable number of roped and tied calves, ridden and unriden broncos. The repetition is broken by a few antics from the

agile, necessary clown. His long legs nearly envelope the little jackass he is riding for the satire of it.

After a number of hours they produce an event I have never seen before—goat tying. This is for the girls eleven and twelve. They use one goat for fourteen participants. The goat is supposed to be held in place on a rope by a large man on horseback. Each girl rushes out in a long run half-way across the field, grabs the animal, knocks it down, ties its legs together. Sometimes the man lets his horse drift so the goat pulls six or eight feet away from her, something no one would allow to happen in a male event. Many of the girls take over a full minute just to do their tying, and the fact that only one goat has been used makes everybody say, "poor goat, poor goat," and start laughing. This has become the real comedy event of the evening, and the purpose clearly is to show how badly girls do in the rodeo.

Only one has broken through this purpose to the other side. One small girl is not disheartened by the years of bad training, the ridiculous cross-field run, the laughing superior man on his horse, *or* the shape-shifting goat. She downs it in a beautiful flying tackle. This makes me whisper, as usual, "that's the dyke," but for the rest of it we watch the girls look ludicrous, awkward, outclassed, and totally dominated by the large handsome man on the horse. In the stands we six boys drink beer in disgust, groan and hug our breasts, hold our heads and twist our faces at each other in embarrassment.

As the calf roping starts up again, we decide to use our disguises to walk around the grounds. Making our way around to the cowboy side of the arena, we pass the intricate mazes of rail where the stock is stored, to the chutes where they are loading the bull riders onto the bulls.

I wish to report that although we pass by dozens of men, and although we have pressed against wild horses and have climbed on rails overlooking thousands of pounds of angry animal flesh, though we touch ropes and halters, we are never once warned away, never told that this is not the proper place for us, that we had better get back for our own good, are not safe, etc., none of the dozens of warnings and threats we would have gotten if we had been recognized as thirty-one-year-old girls instead of fourteen-year-old boys. It is a most interesting way to wander around the world for the day.

We examine everything closely. The brahma bulls are in the chutes, ready to be released into the ring. They are bulky, kindly looking creatures with rolling eyes; they resemble overgrown pigs. One of us whispers, "Aren't those the same kind of cattle that walk around all over the streets in India and never hurt anybody?"

Here in the chutes made exactly their size, they are converted into wild antagonistic beasts by means of a nasty belt around their loins, squeezed tight to mash their tender testicles just before they are released into the ring. This torture is supplemented by a jolt of electricity from an electric cattle prod to make sure they come out bucking. So much for the rodeo as a great drama between man and nature.

A pale, nervous cowboy sits on the bull's back with one hand in a glove

hooked under a strap around the bull's midsection. He gains points by using his spurs during the ride. He has to remain on top until the timing buzzer buzzes a few seconds after he and the bull plunge out of the gate. I had always considered it the most exciting event.

Around the fence sit many eager young men watching, helping, and getting in the way. We are easily accepted among them. How depressing this can be.

Out in the arena a dismounted cowboy reaches over and slaps his horse fiercely on the mouth because it has turned its head the wrong way.

I squat down peering through the rails where I see the neat, tight-fitting pants of two young men standing provocatively chest to chest.

"Don't you think Henry's a queer," one says with contempt.

"Hell, I *know* he's a queer," the other says. They hold an informal spitting contest for the punctuation. Meantime their eyes have brightened and their fronts are moving toward each other in their clean, smooth shirts. I realize they are flirting with each other, using Henry to bring up the dangerous subject of themselves. I am remembering all the gay cowboys I ever knew. This is one of the things I like about cowboys. They don't wear those beautiful pearl button shirts and tight levis for nothing.

As the events inside the arena subside, we walk down to a roped off pavilion where there is a dance. The band consists of one portly, bouncing enthusiastic man of middle age who is singing with great spirit into the microphone. The rest of the band are three grim, lean young men over fourteen. The drummer drums angrily, while jerking his head behind himself as though searching the air for someone who is already two hours late and had seriously promised to take him away from here. The two guitar players are sleepwalking from the feet up with their eyes so glassy you could read by them.

A red-haired man appears, surrounded by red-haired children who ask, "Are you drunk, Daddy?"

"No, I am not drunk," Daddy says.

"Can we have some money?"

"No," Daddy says, "I am not drunk enough to give you any money."

During a break in the music the red-haired man asks the band leader where he got his band.

"Where did I get this band?" the band leader puffs up, "I raised this band myself. These are all my sons—I raised this band myself." The red-haired man is so very impressed he is nearly bowing and kissing the hand of the band leader as they repeat this conversation two or three times. "This is *my* band," the band leader says, and the two guitar players exchange grim and glassy looks.

Next the band leader has announced "Okie from Muskogee," a song intended to portray the white country morality of cowboys. The crowd does not respond but he sings enthusiastically anyway. Two of his more alert sons drag themselves to the microphone to wail that they don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee—as those hippies down in San Francisco do, and they certainly don't. From the look of it they shoot hard drugs and pop pills.

In the middle of the song a very drunk thirteen-year-old boy has staggered up to Wendy, pounding her on the shoulder and exclaiming, "Can you dig it, brother?" Later she tells me she has never been called brother before, and she likes it. Her first real identification as one of the brothers, in the brotherhood of man.

We boys begin to walk back to our truck, past a cowboy vomiting on his own pretty boots, past another lying completely under a car. Near our truck, a young man has calf-roped a young woman. She shrieks for him to stop, hopping weakly along behind him. This is the first bid for public attention I have seen from any woman here since the barrel race. I understand that this little scene is a re-enactment of the true meaning of the rodeo, and of the conquest of the west. And oh how much I do not want to be her; I do not want to be the conquest of the west.

I am remembering how the clown always seems to be tall and riding on an ass, that must be a way of poking fun at the small and usually dark people who tried to raise sheep or goats or were sod farmers and rode burros instead of tall handsome blond horses, and who were driven under by the beef raisers. And so today we went to a display of cattle handling instead of a sheep shearing or a goat milking contest—or to go into even older ghost territory, a corn dance, or acorn gathering . . .

As we reach the truck, the tall man passes with the rodeo queen, who must surely be his niece, or something. All this non-contest, if it is for anyone, must certainly be for him. As a boy, I look at him. He is his own spitting image, of what is manly and white and masterly, so tall in his high heels, so *well horsed*. His manner portrays his theory of life as the survival of the fittest against wild beasts, and all the mythical rest of us who are too female or dark, not straight, or much too native to the earth to now be trusted as more than witnesses, flags, cheerleaders, and unwilling stock.

As he passes, we step out of the way and I am glad we are in our disguise. I hate to step out of his way as a full-grown woman, one who hasn't enough class status to warrant his thinly polite chivalry. He has knocked me off the sidewalk of too many towns, too often.

Yet somewhere in me I know I have always wanted to be manly, what I mean is having that expression of courage, control, coordination, ability I associate with men. To *provide*.

But here I am in this truck, not a man at all, a fourteen-year-old boy only. Tomorrow is my thirty-second birthday. We six snuggle together in the bed of this rickety truck which is our world for the time being. We are headed back to the bold and shaky adventures of our all-women's farm, our all-women's households and companies, our expanding minds, ambitions, and bodies, we who are neither male nor female at this moment in the pageant world, who are not the rancher's wife, mother earth, Virgin Mary, or the rodeo queen—we who are really the one who took her self seriously, who once took an all-out dive at the goat, believing that the odds were square and that she was truly in the contest.

And now that we know it is not a contest, just a play—we have run

off with the goat ourselves to try another way of life.

Because I certainly do not want to be a thirty-two-year-old girl, or calf either, and I certainly also do always remember Gertrude Stein's beautiful dykely voice saying, what is the use of being a boy if you grow up to be a man.

"Boys at the Rodeo" also appears in *True to Life Adventure Stories, Volume II*, edited by Judy Grahn and co-published by Diana Press and Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y., in June of 1981.

July 19-August 2, 1981

SEVENTH ANNUAL

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THE GARDEN

scene i

sky still bright
we weed, companionable.
she on her side of the low wall
me on mine
"they leave their shells in the ground"
she says, "see these holes? I don't know
why, they have to be dug up and
thrown away." she holds up
a transparent thing,
tissue pattern for an insect dress.
her petunias, my corn, beans, squash and I
nod amiably.

in the hills last night
two more animals
dismembered:
rectum, lip, nostril, vagina
split.
bodies left bloodless
on the unmarked grass.
something out there.
something unknown.
I straighten, groaning
wipe sweat from my eyes.
mystic impulse all around
slicing holes in air
digging bad dreams
in daylight.
sun like a corpse over me.
sky blooming deep.
a shroud.

scene ii

unmannered.
soft as night.
air keening.
sky building.

what manners these?
fear lightly easing itself over
back wall, through trees.
starshine
beginning at the edge.
her dress moves with ease, eyes
glitter, hair
so soft in evening wind, she
recalls summer nights,
arms like branches singing, body
sinking graceful into dusk.
comfort of lounge chair
holds buttocks, back, pliant neck.
she dreams of Pentecost, tongues
of flame above her shining hair,
longs for beatitude, so suited
to this place.
a manner of speaking touches her lips
lightly, careful for her carelessness,
words slip cautiously toward formation,
birds settle in for the night, crying.

daylight evaporates as she swirls
her drink, sips cold with perfect ease
against her teeth, rests against cushions
soft as dissolving clouds
overhead.
trees by the back wall
begin to stir
ominous.
sky goes dark.
she doesn't see,
she doesn't make a sound.
Pentecost shimmers
flows from her hair
between her thighs.

scene iii

light angling
volunteer's face ashen
up two days and nights
starshine is not what
got in her eyes.
he used a knife
on her vagina she tells me,
and maybe the hatchet we found
beside the bed

the blood, my god, she tells me,
outside surgery we stand
uneasy, graceless, longing
for the carelessness of birds.

scene iv

haunted
tissue paper hulls
bad dreams in daylight
no sleep in dark
before my eye
a shadow
photograph of Brazilian
Indian woman hung
by the ankles from a pole
long hair sweeping down
blowing in the laden breeze
white hunter standing next to her
spread legs. she is naked.
she is dead.

—*Paula Gunn Allen*

“The Garden” was published in *SW* 15 with one stanza missing. We are glad to reprint it here in its entirety.

 "WE SPEAK IN CODE"

A review of *We Speak in Code*, poems and other writings by Melanie Kaye with visual art by Paula King, Michele Goodman, and Lee Pickett. Published in 1980 by Motherroot Publications, 214 Dewey St., Pittsburgh, Pa. 15218. \$4.75.

"A woman who squeezes into a ball / what women already know / and whisper / does not expect good reviews." These lines from Melanie Kaye's poem "Cassandra" are a good description of what she has done in her book *We Speak in Code*, published by Motherroot Press. There is a certain kind of truth—that of naming our common experience—that calls for the response "of course," accompanied by a sense of relief. The fact that "women already know" in no way lessens the impact of this naming; frequently the relief lies in the fact that an important piece of our world has hitherto been unnamed—sometimes taboo. And this kind of writing comes out of a truly political desire to speak the unspeakable *in order to change it*: there is no thought of making pretty poems or seeking good reviews.

Melanie's book is full of such writing. In poems that are specifically about political issues ("Trojan" and "Heat Wave"), as well as in poems that give political meaning to her life experience ("City Indoors," "Jewish Food"), she conveys important truths that break down the barriers between personal and political, and creates pieces of writing that are powerful, affecting, and demand to be read aloud.

Appropriately, I found more important revelations in the section of the book called "Naming" than anywhere else. Lines like "if love were a current to turn off / I could put out the light / and sleep easy" and "loss if I care / loss if I don't care" from "Connection," as well as the poems "Trust" and "When you won't fight back," explore the fears and rage in lesbian relationships, often ignored by lesbian writers who want only to present the positive, idyllic side of lesbianism as a way of helping us move past historically damaging images. But it is time to risk the more complex truths about our relationships; time to trust our analysis enough to admit that we are flesh and blood, that the patriarchy is within us too, and that we do not lie around in meadows out of focus all day. Melanie writes of the reality and dispenses with romantic myths. In "When you won't fight back" she says, "I want to knock you off the bed / for looking so innocent / so pained," while she loses none of the joy and passion that are another part of the complex truth: "sometimes like creatures without boundaries / we enter each other's eyes / in hunger so simple / it seems holy" ("Trust").

The complete power of this book, however, does not lie in the content of individual lines or even individual poems. It seems, rather, to come from the successful blend of poet and political activist that Melanie offers in

these pages. One senses that there is an ongoing relationship between the words as a means of recording and furthering political acts, and the political acts themselves. Melanie, it seems, would not be a poet—or at least not this kind of poet—if she could not write words that cause change and if she could not do political work that she records in poems. Neither one comes first, but the two are inextricably entwined.

The connection between the words and the artwork in the book extends this political/artistic interplay. The words and images not only complement one another but work together in a way that images created to illustrate a text cannot do. The ability of feminism to integrate form and content and to show how everything is inevitably connected to everything else, is once again demonstrated here by the way the pictures and words make up a whole new form. Time and again we come up against the infuriating limitations imposed on us when we try to articulate feminism within a traditionally defined category, whether it be the teaching of women's studies within an academic discipline that clearly cannot contain it, the writing of a book that is assumed to be "either fact or fiction," or the articulation of a political position in which traditional naming forces us to divide the consciously oppressed lesbian from the unconsciously afraid would-be lesbian.

The power of word and image in *We Speak in Code* stems from the common political struggles of the women, and the fact that many of the subjects were described by artist and poet at the same time, during and after incidents experienced by both of them. *Sign*, for instance, is familiar to many women in Portland, Oregon, where Melanie and the artist Paula King distributed the poster that describes how two deaf-mute women used sign language to escape a pair of kidnappers and would-be rapists. The graphic, showing two pairs of hands signing "escape" and "cooperation," is a powerful and beautiful response to reports of the incident. There is a tension in the first half of Melanie's poem, where the two women are planning how to escape, that parallels the painstaking expressiveness of the pair of hands on the left side of the graphic, while the speed and excitement of the escape, described in the last part of the poem, reflect the controlled urgency of the other pair of hands, pushing forward with the fingers closed.

My favorite graphic is Paula's *The Takeover of Eden*, although this may be in part due to my having seen the original: a stunning piece of appliqué/quilting, the quality of which cannot be captured in print. The same is true of *The Day I Left My Vacuum Cleaner*, another of Paula's embroidered pictures, which in the book loses its contrast of color and texture. Still more unfortunate is the poor reproduction of the photograph by Lee Pickett of the Monster Basketball Team, whose members are shown wearing T-shirts by Michele Goodman. The *Monster* graphic on the shirts is invisible in the book's reproduction and the potential impact of the picture lost. Michele's *Medusa Mask*, however, photographs well and is a strong addition to the mythological section of the book, which includes poems about Pandora and Cassandra.

I think it is interesting that this book integrates not only words and images but also a wide variety of written forms. I understand that changes in literary forms indicate changes in the consciousness of women writers: traditional forms do not seem enough to contain our visions in a period of expansion and political assertion, especially when our writers insist on including material that is traditionally "not suitable subject matter" for poetry (or the novel, or the essay). Melanie's book includes many different kinds of writing, some of which I can easily label ("poem," "journal excerpt"), others, like the piece "Labyrinth," which I really cannot. This is a definite strength; the forms are being shaped to fit what the writer has to say. In the case of the two "Rituals" at the end of the book, they were written to be performed by a group of women, one at the Portland Women's Night Watch in 1978 and the other on International Women's Day, 1978.

We Speak in Code leaves one with a strong sense of collaboration, not only because it describes many collective actions but also because it presents itself as a collaborative effort. Credit is given to sources of inspiration and to women who participated in the first performances of the "Rituals," but the overall impression is not one of the "great artist" thanking those who gave her support, but rather one of a network of women working together for common political goals, the major focus of that work being, in this instance, Melanie's poetry. We are all, of course, creating a network of women, whether or not we know one another, involved in common struggles as lesbians and feminists. Writing like that of Melanie Kaye makes sense of that struggle, helps to create the network, and makes it all seem possible.

 "YOUR INVESTMENT IN HISTORY"

A review of *Waking at the Bottom of the Dark* by Jan Clausen. Published in 1979 by Long Haul Press, Brooklyn, N.Y. Distributed by Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886. 78 pp. \$3.

What we remember—those images, dreams, and moments of previous years and lives—becomes the material of much of our everyday conversation. It seems natural to remember, to compare childhood stories, coming out stories, the people who have passed in and out of our individual lives. Jan Clausen's *Waking at the Bottom of the Dark* begins with a poem, the title poem for the book, which forces the reader into memory. Who cannot remember, and identify with, "waking / at the bottom of the dark / to the love of your body"; "the sleepy child with her difficult socks"; a time when "it is good / to be out walking early"; or "the windows glazed with light / the trees shake out / their final green and gold." If poetry is experience, in this opening poem Clausen involves us directly, and the poem concludes, "o how can i remember: / it was winter. clear. the light / was shining through the crystal / park." The poems throughout this book are about how we as women and lesbians deal with such items of memory: where they come from, how they come to haunt us, how we attempt to resolve them.

In the first section of the book, we encounter ideas and images which will occur constantly throughout the following pages: memory, dreams, waking, sleep, rain, revolution. Clausen combines these images in unanticipated and unusual ways. In "the empress anastasia in new york," we begin in the rain, move through a "dream picture" into jews and concentration camps, vietnam, the bay of pigs, suex, and discover a line like "i remember my mother's soft / face skin with the / fallout scare." In the "dream picture" the narrator experiences, she is, among other things, "bored as havana / before the revolution." The poem begins in "the rain- / shaped sleep / of women / who nod in doorways / dreaming of good times," takes us through "catastrophes we do not name. / these dreams of dreamless sleep, / remembering nothing," and leaves us with the poet walking "toward rain / down a beach shining / white through the storm." We will recall this last image six poems later when, in a poem entitled "pacific," the poet says, "ocean / you blue / calm mother / heal me."

Connections between women, children, mothers, daughters, are central to the book's themes. In this same poem, "the empress anastasia in new york," we are introduced to a mother and grandmother, and the poems which follow become a weaving of the lives of grandmother, mother, daughter, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but always lives aware

of these connections. In the fifth section of "children," the poet declares, "you're / the barren daughter / illegitimate mother / cassandra / of off-color prophecies / the lumpen poet." In "struggle," a poem about the dissolving of the narrator's relationship with her lover, Clausen says, when she speaks of dividing their few possessions, "there's just / your investment / in history / her face." As we read on through the poems in this collection, we discover that our investment in history is not only our relationship with the women who are our lovers; an even stronger message which pervades the book is our investment in the lives of our grandmothers and mothers, our investment in the lives of children, our own or someone else's. We are thrust into the middle of a cycle: grandmother, mother, daughter, child. All are one; all become parts of the other. "You will spend / your life raising / other people's children," remarks the poet in the closing lines of the fourth section of "children," a section which has opened with the lines "this child hurts you / like another self." In "tantrum," also in the second section of the book, the poet clearly gives us the conflict between the adult and child (mother and daughter?) when she says, "it is a nightmare . . . / and history repeats. / you take the path, / you turn and drag her / screaming she was forced / past all the swings and fathers." In a later poem, "words for this," Clausen writes, "time / our distracted mother, grabs / our wrists / and hauls us, howling where / we would not go." In the same poem, a few lines later, she says, "it's you / i would shelter, / knowing we can- / not save- even the children / even our own skins, / tomato vines / rotting beneath / november rain."

"Stories," a poem which declares "we live / beneath one roof / with our separate stories," shows us that our stories are not separate at all. These are not poems which single out the lesbian experience as one which is different, unusual, unique; rather, they show the universalities among women. We are lesbians, but we are also mothers, daughters, children, friends. In "the kitchen window," the poet writes: "no words, you say / we slip / through the nets / of speech / mother, lover, friend." She is one of these; she is all of these. After having read in "dialectics," "i am a lesbian," and in "flying over my life," "i am a woman," we return to the final lines of the final poem in the third section of the book: "your breasts / complete me. anchor me / in this life." She is the lesbian fulfilled by her lover; she is the child who seeks the life-giving sustenance of the breast. And the poet can also place herself in the role of mother, giving birth to herself: in "dialectics" she writes, "how difficult / to live inside my story." By writing these poems, by developing the technique of words, the poet gets *out* of her story, gives birth to herself, to her own experience, to our experiences. We return, then, to the first lines of that section of the poem: "in child-birth / you focus on technique."

Throughout the poems we witness change. In "Sestina, Winchell's Donut House," one of my favorite poems in the collection, *change* is one of the six end words repeated in each of the six stanzas. Though it sometimes refers to money, we also see the darkness change, the narrator's fantasy that her co-worker could change, and the narrator's own changing of clothes.

In many poems, darkness turns to light, light turns back to dark. The seasons change: we find ourselves on "the pavement / rancid with August heat"; in "April, / vapid with pastels"; in September when "the maples / turn away from green"; or out on "flat December mornings." She looks at the women around her: "i study / the tabula rasa / of teenage bodies / the curled mothers / ten years / will turn them into." We sleep; we wake. We dream; we have nightmares. Clausen asks in the first line of "children," "what have you to fear?" and though she answers in the next two lines, "it is not / extremes," several poems later in "impermanence" she writes: "you fear, i fear extremes invite extremes." It is the extremes, the polarities, we find in these poems that give us insight into our common lives. In "words for this," we are back to the "fear of memory," yet the poems have shown us that it is memory that enlightens and brings us comfort: "our bodies remember / return through time / to the clearing." The grandmother in "grandma" who wants now to be alone remembers walking miles to the nearest farm, unafraid in the dark, though the wolves howled on the frozen shore; in the following poem, the speaker remembers walking home in the mornings in "summer's most delicate pink early light" to "sleep out the hot day alone." We see all these elements come together in a stanza from "words for this": "fear / of memory. change. / fear of falling / the oldest. and / the hunger. / how, every- / woman, we / rise."

In *Waking at the Bottom of the Dark* we struggle through memory, wake from the darkness to seek the light, but find darkness coming on again. We try to see through this darkness the lives of others, our own life. We search through dreams; we peer through the rain. The poet says, "i / wake daily / to discover / the un- / accustomed fact / of our joined lives." These poems celebrate the ways that women's lives are joined, those which are obvious and those which are unaccustomed; and when she asks in one of the final poems of the book, "dialectics," "to see clearly, is that / the greatest gift?" I find myself answering "Yes."

FINDING THE PLACE THAT LIES OVER ROCK

A review of *Crazy Quilt: Poems* by Susan Wood-Thompson. Crone Press, Washington, D.C. Distributed by Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y., 14886. \$3 available in print and, for the print-handicapped reader, on cassette tape.

For Ruth, Sarah, and Nancy, teachers of English

This is the third book of poetry I have read in my life. The other two were, strangely enough, also by lesbian-feminist poets.

I say that neither by way of a boast nor to flaunt my lack of qualifications for reviewing this particular very fine book of poems. I say it for each of you who is about to turn the page in search of something about anything but poetry, for each of you who is thinking that you would rather go to the dentist than to a poetry reading. I fight a strong inclination to do the same—a legacy of high school bouts with have-to-be-read man poets whose poems had shells that cracked with much effort and yielded up only ash and a shriveled nut.

When asked "Whom do you write for?" Susan Wood-Thompson wrote, "I write for the woman who sent me a letter saying, 'Your poems make me work so hard, but it's always worth it.'" They do and it is. One of my high school English teachers once said that a work of literature was a synthesis of the writer's experience and the reader's. It is fair enough, then, for a trailblazer/poet to expect some effort from those who would follow the path she created.

In "Interpreting Signs," the poem that opens *Crazy Quilt*,

Signs of struggle
are rare to find, but probably lie
everywhere unseen.

We have to see details—
a few wild turkey feathers loose
by the creek mean

a bobcat killed and runs these hills.

In this snowscape the signs are left by other creatures and by the poet who tracks them. Reading the signs, making the connections, is the theme of this, the first of the book's four sections. That adept interpreting is essential for survival is clear in "Heritage," where

Behind me and my mother and hers
stand Navajo women on Truchas Peaks
gathering wind-twisted driftwood
shattered flint hearing in birds
and in deer trotting ten minutes away
meals mittens shoes against the roots.

Where the connections are mismade, there can be a warping guilt, as in "Fever," where a little girl links her coming blindness to being sexually abused: "Good girls/don't have that happen to them. Good girls don't/go blind." Where the connections are not made at all, there is the anguish of "Mama," in which the poet sits alone by her mother's hospital bedside. The poet cannot speak; her mother cannot hear. Both pretend that life can go on regardless.

Throughout this section it becomes clear that interpreting the signs, intuiting the connections, and asking the questions that make understanding (and poetry) possible are not innocuous activities. The poet comes secretly and silently into the dark chapel of "Territory," where the nuns also come "to say what else they believed/who else, besides the sick, they loved." She writes

I peered at the sisters' holy cards, tried each stall
expecting the trap door to hell
to drop open under my knees
for coming in moonlight
believing in fire
for not knowing
my place.

In "Frances Kerr Thompson" she reaches beyond the sterilized stories by which families often hide their more eccentric members, and she discovers more of those "signs of struggle." In the grandmother who died before she was born, the poet finds kinship with

. . . the poetry-writing
picture-painting woman
stinking and not caring
on the trolley, when
— from exile in a tasteful lineage —
my bones come home
to the wisdom of resemblance
my skin webs to the shape of her cells.

This homecoming marks a resolution, a settling, the end of the "Interpreting Signs" section. But *Crazy Quilt* is a sort of spiral; each section brings a climax that in turn begins a new process, progress, struggle. Earlier, the poet was seen "believing in fire," the flickering unseen flame in the chapel. The next, more dangerous, stage is "walking into fire," into an attempt to understand her aloof, silent mother in "After Winter Ceremonies." She finds a woman who longs to move but cannot, who fears falling asleep but cannot wake up, who is unbearably cold but hypnotized by fire:

The soft sore body billows along the floor
each point of air an icy sting
making the long way to the fireplace
crawling into the lick of flame
to get some more sleep
enough sleep at last.

Fire is the testing, the transforming, the destroying element. To survive, one cannot crawl into fire; one must walk in upright, eyes open. On the

girl child resisting the needs and changes of her body, paralyzed by the fear of "doing the thing / everyone else would have known not to do"; then it bounds exuberantly into a decidedly lesbian vision:

we kindle fires out of doors
and call each other over
our shadows flickering up along the sky
our tongues telling stories
of the death of kings.

"Crazy Quilt," the poem that names both the book and its third section, comes next to remind the reader that although visions are necessary, they are not enough. "Crazy Quilt" is an eloquent, self-revealing poem, written to a friend to explain a carelessly phrased remark. In it are the dangers, confusions, struggles, triumphs, and terrors of living on the boundary. It tells of "the cracking up":

it is here when no one eats at dusk but I alone
feel the mind turn goblin
the witches of change
change to the witches of childhood
cackling through the sandstorm
of my parents' home
just missing this time as they zoom past my head

Most significantly, after the disconnected signs of the first section of the book and the insubstantial fire of the second, "Crazy Quilt" marks the poet's acceptance of her own vulnerability and her simultaneous discovery of the kind of firm structure that enables rather than imprisons.

The cracking up is here
my house is far from orderly yet
but it is livable
built in the crevice an earthquake made.
I am crafty with strategies
for finding and building on the place
that lies over rock.

"Light Through the Door" records in journal style a period of great changes in the poet's life, deliberate changes that could not have been made without the foundation established on "the place that lies over rock." Instead of summarizing the experience after it is completed, this poem comprises the facets of days and the process of moving from one place to another. It is laced with connections made: with a lover; with light, earth, water; with women becoming closer friends and working together. And from those connections, that web, that community, comes the courage to leave a comfortable place for one unknown, to be in transit(ion).

Can we come back if we forgot something?
Can the love of women strong enough to leave
stretch out to women strong enough to stay?
This is no more my home, the place I know
for a while now I am simply *toward* another.

I wanted to go, I knew I had to go:
now just as sure, some part of my life stays.

The culmination of *Crazy Quilt*, however, is not in the leaving but in the seeing: in the long, moving, often funny, determined "Trying To See Myself Without a Mirror." Reading the signs, walking through the fire, and finding the place that lies over rock are all here in this autobiographical narrative poem that ties the book together. "Trying To See Myself Without a Mirror" is like driving straight through the terrain that the previous three sections cover on the side roads, with detours and many stops and starts. It follows a route that would not exist if the life that generated the other poems in this book had not been lived and seen. Those poems surface and echo throughout "Trying To See Myself."

The poet leaves us with a self-portrait of the artist at work; the tranquility of the scene is all the more precious for the turbulence of the life behind it, for the knowledge that life is more often turbulent than tranquil for lesbians, feminists, and poets.

Today the cold bites through the sunshine
and the wind stiffens what it blows against.
This morning I work at my desk
and she across the hall at hers
like children coloring, like nuns praying
like white-haired women knowing
that though we may die alone
we will live together
the hair falling down the sides of our faces
as we bend over our work.



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RESPONSES

I wish to comment briefly on Pamela C. Johnston's review of my book *Motherlines* in *SW* 15.

Neither the explicit and committed feminist nor any other kind of fiction writer I have ever heard of has anything whatever to say about her book's cover art unless, through some miracle of agenting or a million-dollar track-record, a clause specifically granting her cover-control has been inserted into the publishing contract and is not ignored in practice by the publisher. Small-scale specialty publishers are more flexible but usually can't put your work into the hands of as many readers as the mass-market publisher can. You consider the trade-offs and make your choice, and if you go after maximum distribution via a mass-market publisher, you don't normally get this kind of clause. Decisions about your cover-art are often made not even by your editor but by the sales and art-department staff who are credited with knowing more about what kind of cover best sells a given sort of book. These are the realities of the business, and you make your peace with them as best you can.

As for the rest of Johnston's review: With regard to authorial intention, she is simply and flatly wrong. With regard to the actual achievement—the effect of the book on the reader—she is obviously 100% right for herself and those of her mind; however, having heard from a number of readers I know that many are *not* of her mind. All in all, I expect that those who are seriously interested in the questions Johnston raises will read the book and make their own judgments, and this is not only satisfactory but the point of the whole effort. Each individual confrontation of minds through the work is the reason for trying to write books more nourishing than cotton-candy, more challenging than nursery-rhymes, more rigorous than day-dreams.

—Suzy McKee Charnas
Albuquerque, New Mexico

A few years ago I was asked to give a reading and workshop at an elite western school. What the women had decided would happen during their writing workshop was that each woman (it seems to me in retrospect to have been some hundreds, but must have been forty or fifty) would read to me a poem as I sat there. I was not to give criticism, for that would be intellectual and male.

I have given workshops that people have commented were helpful; that I was very critical and some of what I said was painful; that they carried away some kind of energy; that they learned practical information, techniques, at least addresses. Nobody from that day got anything out of it. Certainly not me.

The basic problem for me was to keep an interested smile on my face and look entranced as one poem succeeded another in a blur, while all attention was focussed on me as if to gauge by dilation of pupils or res-

piration and heartbeat the response they had forbidden me to utter. Not being able to engage the work critically meant I tended to like none of it. It felt visited on me. Certainly I did not believe any of them were serious about their work if all they wanted was that I be paid to sit and endure it. A window mannequin would have been more satisfactory conducting that workshop.

Writing for yourself or your friends is fine. A healthy amateur substratum in any of the arts produces people who understand what's really involved in that art. Studying the piano or the violin may not lead you to perform, but it may give you pleasure and it may help you appreciate someone who has spent the necessary years and passion learning how to use that instrument to capacity.

Performing publicly or publishing your work means you are addressing it to your contemporaries and to posterity and that it belongs to everybody intellectually and emotionally.

Reviewing is a thankless task I view in the same way I do tithing, as something you pay back into the community. Mostly when I review, I do so to call attention to the work of women that has not, I feel, had enough attention or enough understanding. I also review when I think something being admired is less than admirable; perhaps meretricious, perhaps dangerous. Reviewers also use on occasion a text as a way of talking about a cultural phenomenon they feel ought to be addressed. That is partly what Joanna Russ was doing in her by now notorious review in *Sinister Wisdom*.*

I am sure that Russ would have written differently if she had been reviewing for the *New York Times*. (This is speculative fiction indeed: Joanna being asked to review three lesbian novels for the *Times*.) If we cannot tell the truth as we see it, if we cannot be honest in women's publications for our own audiences, when do we tell the truth? Never? Then let's cash it all in now. If reviewing means patting on the head and on the fanny in mindless approbation whether we think what is being done is worth the price of admission or not, then it's patronizing mush. Traditional feminine behavior. "Oh, darling, you look fantastic in that dress." Then afterward, "Where did she get it? That's the sort of thing your maid gives you when she wears it out." Class example intentional, because we're discussing, after all, ladylike behavior. Be nice in public. Say something nice no matter what you think. After all, you can say in private what you like later on.

We have tons and tons of leftover middle class niceness. What we need is more intelligence, more originality, more winged women who take off and head on out, and more heroines of culture who do the thing the first time, when it is not even beautiful yet, let alone pretty. And never comfortable. Instead of trying to cut Russ down to size and make her fit into a teacup, let us enjoy her as one of our great resources. She is never easy but she is always worth the climb.

Published writers are not children bringing home drawings from school to put up on the refrigerator and not siblings to be treated exactly the

* Joanna Russ, review of Donna Young's *Retreat*, in *SW* 12

same; and feminist presses are not, as Marion Zimmer Bradley would have it, places where amateurs publish their little attempts before they grow up to mainstream presses. Feminist presses publish what is too political, too experimental, too specialized, too frightening, too hostile for the large factory presses to touch. A writer may publish her whole career with small presses, as many poets have throughout the twentieth century, as James Joyce did, and be a giant of letters.

If we are not honest in our evaluation of each other's work, where shall a feminist aesthetic arise? If we abandon the effort to set our own criteria, we have left standing the old values and failed to create our own to replace them.

—*Marge Piercy*
Wellfleet, Massachusetts

As is so often the case, you again have published material which ventilates unexamined parts of women's experience and expectations, thus exorcising some of our internalized demons. Barbara Macdonald, by her plea for younger women to "Look Me in the Eye" has broken the silence which leaves ageism so misunderstood, unexplained, unanalyzed—a concept dutifully mouthed by lesbians in the litany of social oppressions but ignored in the hard work of consciousness change.

I am writing this letter of thanks for her perceptive insights because I am afraid that the analysis she made of the power relationships between older and younger women which could serve as mind-reversal keys for us, will instead disappear without sound into the deepest well of all—the fear of age. I am sixty-two. Past sixty we are less able to play the "I don't know what you are talking about—(Not me! Not me! I'm not old like you!)" game that chills all older women's ability to seek allies for our perceptions among women only a few years our junior. Battered by doubts and isolation, we are poor at naming the source of our pain for lack of a detailed body of exchanged experience and analysis. Where are the jokes, the reversed language, the shared metaphors that defend us from our erasure by the younger members of our only community? Past sixty, invisibility is palpable, unavoidable, omnipresent.

I agree with Macdonald that "the present attitude of women in their twenties and thirties has been shaped since childhood by patriarchy to view the older woman as powerless, less important than the fathers and the children, and there to serve both." In addition to this elitist expectation, younger women suffer from mythical programming to demean the great psychological scapegoat, the mother. Since her invention by Freud as the source of all our problems and hang-ups, the mother (read older woman) has not been someone who could be trusted or followed, a further reinforcement of the point made by Macdonald about the shift in age between the leadership of the first and second waves of the women's movement in this century.

What we still have trouble acknowledging is that women are well conditioned to police each other, with the mother limiting the power of the

daughter's physical strength, confidence, and sexuality when she is young and the grown daughter doing the same thing to the old mother. Thus the Fathers do not have to expend so much energy to keep women in their place. We do it for them.

—Baba Copper
Talmage, California

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

ANTHOLOGY ON LESBIAN SEPARATISM. Julia Penelope and Sarah Lucia Hoagland are preparing an anthology on Lesbian separatism. We want it to be for ourselves (separatists), asking our questions, focusing on our issues. Presumably though, some material will focus on challenges to separatism such as the problem of male children or the charge that separatism is only a white, middle class issue. We welcome analytical essays, personal stories, fiction, graphics, poetry, etc., etc. In selecting manuscripts we will look for chronological value of material already published. As to new material, we will look for specificity of focus, politics articulated, integrity of point of view, and honesty. The anthology is for us, to spark each other and develop our ideas further. We intend that the anthology be available to wimmin only, and we may decide to restrict sale to Lesbians. We urge wimmin who don't regard themselves as "writers" to send us dictated tapes that can be transcribed. Send materials to Julia Penelope, Department of English, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68588, or Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Department of Philosophy, Northwestern Illinois University, 5500 N. St. Louis Ave., Chicago, IL 60625. Because of interest expressed and requests, we are extending the deadline to *September 1*.

AZALEA: a magazine for Third World lesbians. Publishing fiction, essays, poetry, reviews, visuals by Third World lesbians. \$2.50 single copy \$6 yearly sub \$10 yearly sub to womyn's organizations/institutions. Free to womyn in prison. *Azalea*: 314 East 91st St., SE, NY, NY 10028.

CLEIS PRESS: a feminist publishing company committed to serious woman-identified works, especially those by lesbians and women of color. Our publications will include nonfiction (resource books, political theory, autobiography, herstory, etc.), fiction, poetry, theatre. We hope to publish 3-5 books each year. Our first publications include *On Women Artists: Poems 1975-1980* by Alexandra Grilikhes, with sculpture by Jean van Harlingen, and *Fight Back: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, edited by Felice Newman and Frederique Delacoste. We will be actively looking for new projects in May 1981, and welcome manuscripts from *all* women. Please include self-addressed stamped envelope.

COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY invites submissions for a special issue on Women and Literature. We are particularly interested in papers which demonstrate a feminist approach. Deadline: Sept. 1, 1981. Guest editors for this special issue: Phyllis Mannoche and Deborah McDowell. Colby College, Waterville, Maine 04901.

COMMON LIVES/LESBIAN LIVES. A new lesbian quarterly, to appear August '81, documenting lesbian experience and thought through herstory, oral herstory, biography, autobiography, journal, correspondence, fiction, theory, photos, graphics. *CL/LL* makes special commitment to the representation of lesbians traditionally denied visibility in media. Also, we encourage lesbians who have never before thought of publishing to share their work and stories. Please submit manuscripts or graphics, and support your friends to do likewise. Individual subs \$10/yr. Descriptive flier available. P.O. Box 1553, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

LESBIAN INSIDER/INSIGHTER/INCITER. "We see this paper as Dyke space, maintained by and for Lesbians—a space to celebrate and strengthen ourselves as Lesbians." \$9 for 13 issues in U.S., \$13 in Canada, \$18 for other countries. Send to *Lesbian Inciter*, Box 7038, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, MN 55407.

TEE CORINNE poster: now distributed by Lincoln Legion of Lesbians, P.O. Box 30137, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503. Single orders: 1 poster \$3 plus \$1 postage, handling; for 2-4 posters add .20 per poster. Bulk orders (5 or more): 33 -1/3% discount plus postage. Also Tee Corinne notecards, packet of 10 (assorted) with envelopes, 1 packet \$3.75 plus .75 postage and handling; bulk orders (5 or more): 40% discount plus postage.

VALENCIA STREET, a new feminist journal, is now accepting fiction, journal writings, feminist and political analysis, book reviews, and graphics for its first issue. Women of color, working class women, women prisoners, lesbians, and young and old women are particularly encouraged to submit work. Please enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for return. *Valencia Street*, 2435 Jefferson Ave., J, Berkeley, CA 94703.

WOMYN's BRAILLE PRESS, Inc. *Sinister Wisdom* is now available on four-track cassette to womyn who are blind or physically disabled. The tapes are on loan or can be purchased through the Womyn's Braille Press, P.O. Box 8475, Mpls., MN 55408. Please write to W.B.P. for subscription information.

Karen E. Ward, a prisoner, asks women to correspond with her. She was refused her copy of *SW* because the prison regarded it as "unauthorized mail." Her address is: Karen E. Ward, no. 223472, F.C.I. no. 395, P.O. Box 147, Lowell, FL 32663.

"I am presently incarcerated at Florida Correctional Institution serving 20 years for a crime I didn't commit. Anyone wishing to write to me is more than welcomed to do so."
—Pamela Willis, 704582, P.O. Box 147, no. 424, Lowell, FL 32663.

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—ALICE WALKER in *Ms.*

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Donna Allegra is twenty-seven and Brooklyn born and raised. She began writing poetry in 1976 with the Black lesbian writers' collective Jemima. Recently she has been writing prose fiction under the influence of other writers in the Black lesbian performance group Naps. "I've been writing a journal since I was fourteen, but it wasn't until five or so years ago that I realized that my journal constituted 'writing.'" She has published work in *Azalea*, *Conditions 5*, *Essence*, *The Salsa Soul Gayzette*, and *Lesbians Rising*.

Paula Gunn Allen is a poet and writer and a member of the Laguna tribe. She lives in San Francisco.

Judith Barrington lives in Oregon and has published poems in various feminist/lesbian publications. To earn money she writes for the *Portland Women's Newsletter* (amazingly, they got a grant for a writer) and struggles to remain employed as a lesbian teacher of women's studies.

Betty Bird grew up in Texas. This is her first published narrative.

Beth Brant. "I'm a forty-year-old Mohawk/white, lesbian/feminist from the Motor City. I live with my lover and our two teenaged daughters. I am anxiously awaiting the day when I can leave the nest. This is my first published work."

Martha Courtot has published two books of poetry, *Tribe* and *Journey*. She is currently fundraising for her third book, *Night River*—donations generously accepted at 2800 St. Paul Drive, no. 259, Santa Rosa, CA 95405.

Andrea Dworkin's new book, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, has just been published by Putnam's/Perigee. They will publish her collection of lectures, *Our Blood*, in paperback in the fall. Her other books are *Woman Hating* and *The New Woman's Broken Heart*. She is currently writing a book on women and the political right in the United States.

Sharon Fernleaf. "I am a mother—this first because most else is done in between and after tending to that responsibility. Just moved to Seattle. No formal art training to date, just a love of visual expression and the powerful emotions one can bring to a work, or out in that work. So—I do freelance illustration and graphics for various papers and magazines for women."

Marilyn Frye looks, feels, and smells as you would expect a midwestern lesbian/feminist philosopher would. Any regular *Sinister Wisdom* reader could identify her in the crowd at the airport.

Judy Grahn is presently embroiled in historical research. Persephone Press will publish *Another Mother Tongue: Stories from the Ancient Gay Traditions*, and Crossing Press a new book of poems, *The Queen of Wands*.

Beth Karbe. "I am a dyke photographer primarily interested in Lesbian portraiture and the creation and preservation of images that reflect Lesbian strength, struggle, and wisdom."

Ursula Kavanagh is thirty-seven. She was born and raised in Dublin and now lives in Chicago. A graduate of the Art Institute, she designed the Great American Lesbian Art Show's Chicago poster and was a member of the Chicago GALAS collective. She survives by working as a waitress three nights a week and occasionally selling her work.

Wilyce Kim has published two small books of poetry. They are entitled *Eating Artichokes* and *Under the Rolling Sky*. She lives in Berkeley with her dog Phoenix.

Irena Klepfisz is a poet trying to devote more time to her writing. She was a founder and for four years an editor of *Conditions* magazine. A collection of her poetry, *Periods of Stress*, is available from Piecework Press. Most recently, her work appeared in *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* (Persephone Press).

Audre Lorde is a Black lesbian feminist poet who lives in New York. Her most recent book of poetry is *The Black Unicorn*, and her latest book is *The Cancer Journals* (published by Spinsters, Ink), a collection of prose dealing with breast cancer.

Judith McDaniel lives and works in very rural upstate New York and hikes and camps frequently in the Adirondacks.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai lives on a farm near Knoxville, Tennessee.

Marian Roth lives in Cazenovia, N.Y., where she works as the staff photographer at the Women's Writer's Center and teaches American government part-time at a community college. She is currently working on a photography book to be called *Connections*.

Anita Skeen was born in West Virginia and is currently teaching at Wichita State in Kansas. She is completing a book of poems about relationships between women and doing research on long poems by women.

Susanna J. Sturgis is an active member of Lesbian Heritage/D.C. and Hallowmas Women Writers. On May 1, she took a long-saved-for step and quit her job in order to work on her thoroughly lesbian novel.

Celeste Tibbets lives in Athens, Georgia, supports herself financially by working with emotionally disturbed adolescents, writes at night, and wants to one day be a farmer as well.

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Andrea Dworkin is a poet, playwright, and publisher of *Pottery House*. They also publish her *Journal* in paperback in the fall. Her other books are *Women of the Book* and *Book of Hours*. She is currently writing a book on women's poetry in the United States.

Sharon Peacock, "I'm a Mother," has been a mother for 15 years and after sending to her publisher, just moved to a new home to date, just a box of about 100 papers and the promise of a new work, or out in that work. So she's a mother of 100 papers and magazines, his work.

Merle Faye is a poet, and a writer of *Merle Faye's Poems*, a feminist philosopher, and a writer of *Merle Faye's Poems* in the crowd at the airport.

Judy Green is presently working on a book of poems, and will publish *Another Merle Faye's Poems* in the fall. She is also writing a new book of poems, and a new book of poems.

Both Karol, "I am a Mother," and *Merle Faye's Poems* are published by the creator and publisher, and they are published by the creator and publisher.

Ursula Kawaguchi is a poet, and a writer of *Ursula Kawaguchi's Poems* in Chicago. A graduate of the Art Institute, she is also a member of the Art Show's Chicago center and a member of the Chicago Art Show. She serves by working as a writer, and a writer of *Ursula Kawaguchi's Poems*.

Wilfred Kim is a poet, and a writer of *Wilfred Kim's Poems* in Chicago. He is a member of the Chicago Art Show's Chicago center and a member of the Chicago Art Show.

Irene Klipka is a poet, and a writer of *Irene Klipka's Poems* in Chicago. She is a founder and for four years an editor of *Chicago's Poems*. Her work of her poetry, *Islands of Now*, is available from *Blackwood Press*. Her work appeared in *Tribune Poetry: An Anthology* (Persephone Press).

Aviva Lurie is a Black woman, and a poet who lives in New York. Her most recent book of poetry is *The Black Unicorn*, and her latest book is *The Cancer Job* and *Published by Springer*, 1984, a collection of poems dealing with her cancer.

Judith McDaniel lives and works in very rural outside New York and other and camps frequently in the Adirondacks.

Catherine Klingfome lives on a farm near Knoxville, Tennessee.

Contributors, Please Read:

Please send all work for consideration and all business correspondence to: Sinister Wisdom, P.O. Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004. Please enclose SASE for return of work we cannot publish, and a stamped postcard if you wish acknowledgment of your work on arrival. Please double-space all manuscripts.

For artwork: Please send photographs (black and white prints only; glossy, not matte; gray tones reproduce better than sharp black/white contrasts) and line drawings (xeroxes or photos, not originals please). We would like to publish portfolios of work with comments by the artist, as well as individual pieces of artwork.

New Address for Poster: Beginning in January 1981, the sale and distribution of the Tee Corinne solarized "Sinister Wisdom" poster has been taken over by the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians. See announcement in this issue for address and prices.

Subscribers: If you move, *please* notify us as early as possible. The post office will *not* forward your magazine. It will be returned to us, at our expense, and we will have to bill you to partially cover additional postage and handling.

Back Issues (while they last): *SW 4*: "What Is a Lesbian?"; poetry by Claudia Scott, Audre Lorde; Joy Justice on separatism. *SW 5*: fiction by Flying Clouds, poetry by Minnie Bruce Pratt, Susan Leigh Star on "The Politics of Wholeness," Judith Schwarz on "Researching Lesbian History." *SW 7*: Melanie Kaye on feminism and the medical establishment; poetry by Susan Wood-Thompson, Teresa Anderson; "On Being Physically Different." *SW 15*, special issue on Lesbianism: Sexuality and Power / The Patriarchy: Violence and Pornography. *SW 16*: "Domestic History" of *SW*, 1976-1981, by Harriet and Catherine; interview by C. Colette; interviews with lesbians in prison; fiction.

SW 17

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