

SINISTER WISDOM





SINISTER WISDOM 18

Editors and publishers: Michelle Cliff & Adrienne Rich

Typesetting and paste-up: C & H Publishing Services,
Shelburne Falls, Mass.

Special thanks to: Janet Aalfs, Liza Deep Moss, Cathy
Flum, Angela Giudice, Paula Gottlieb,
Ann Holder, Oattie Lockie, Nancy
Sunflower, Susan Wolfe, Toni Yancey,
Eve Zaremba, and Cate

Cover: *The Winds of Change*, ink drawing, by Wendy Cadden

Printed by New Victoria Printers, Lebanon, N. H.

ISSN: 0196-1853

The editors wish to thank Persephone Press for permission to publish Chrystos, "I Walk in the History of My People," Gabrielle Daniels, "Millicent Fredericks," hattie gossett, "billie lives! billie lives!," and Barbara and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table," all of which are included in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Founding editors: Harriet Desmoines & Catherine Nicholson

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Published quarterly.

Individual subscriptions: 4 issues \$10; 8 issues, \$18

Out-of-U.S.: 4 issues \$12; 8 issues \$21 (U.S. dollars, please).

Institutional: 4 issues \$15. Supporting: \$25 and up.

Free on request to women in prisons and mental institutions.

Sample copy: \$3.60 (postage included).

SINISTER WISDOM P.O. BOX 660 AMHERST, MA 01004

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MILLICENT FREDERICKS

"I would like to write the life of Millicent. But saints' lives are difficult to do. . . . A Negro is a concept. . . . Millicent perhaps . . . becomes a symbol of what they have to endure. . . . The very first day she came to me sent by my mother and she sat sewing, the thread rolled to the floor and I picked it up for her. This gesture established the quality of our relationship. . . . I would like to devote my life to the recognition of the Negro's equality, but I always feel ineffectual in political battles . . . one can only win by force or trickery. . . . She has fine features, which a Gauguin would have enjoyed painting . . . "*

Only for the sake of art
 Millicent, do you rise
 tall from the ink
 in the pupils you sought
 dark and wide
 taking you in like the letters
 you would have performed
 scratched indelibly
 on slated memories, chalk dust
 gold on your fingers. A teacher.

From A to B
 from Antigua to Harlem
 is no giant step. Brown syrup
 from the cane stills of home
 stick like skin
 adheres to the sharpened ribs of shanty girls
 running careless like your husband
 from responsibility
 catches white heat rubbing shoulders
 on the New York trolley, the floors and windows
 sucking the strength from your maid's fingers
 your teats dribbling the same tar sweetness on
 to your smacking children the same curse.

Beyond introductions
 the thread of your lives intersected,
 ran from the tangled nest in the sewing basket.
 The spools dared equality. Two aliens
 two mothers well met, living on little thanks.
 The pin money feebly spread out

*Gunther Stuhlman, ed., *The Diary of Anais Nin*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Vol. III (1969) pp. 35-36, 45, 48, 298; Vol. VI pp. 77, 180.

for Dad and his drink, Patchen
A pair of shoes for the youngest, the press
Pressure. Glimpses in the lilt
of clipped English from both sides of the ocean:
Harlem clubs, black street gangs cutting up
a son, the broken families and the literati
dining on themselves.

the mending to be done, the mending of words,
the hunger knit in the growling guts
of the mind. Publish, publish our cries.

You the ministrant
above the small white face
which was but one seam,
pinched in emergency in the creeping taxi
is your last conscious scene.

No curtain calls in the proceeding pages,
in the wake of her saving move to California,
you continue
to rummage through days-old bread,
trickle-down shops. The killing routine
she admired of you, and because of you
escaped to write, to cable Henry
ever the last sum. "The writer," she said,
"must be served and taken care of,"
lessening the time
you could afford for breath
to clean your own home for Sunday meetin'.

Perhaps to dust off your teacher's diploma
with more care.

No islander, despite her praise
Gauguin could not have traced
the furrows in your face,
the buried seeds waiting in vain
for spotlight to flower
a smile, Madonna, smile please . . .

In your uniform
you were like every one of them
prowling for a day's work
and then, like no other. I have learned
from such self-denial,
martyrs and saints are made
or forgotten.

WOMAN'S WORTH

BEGINNING FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

In virtually all existing cultures, women's work, though usually invisible to the male eye, sustains the economy and subsidizes the profits, leisure time and higher standard of living enjoyed by individual men, private corporations, and male-dominated governments. In spite of this, women live almost universally without the corresponding economic, political and social control over their lives that such a crucial role should mean. How does this happen?

Traditionally social scientists and economists have looked at women's lives through male eyes, and have only seen those aspects of women's lives which overlap men's. They therefore tend to understand and to categorize women's experiences only in male terms. These analyses totally disregard the major components of women's lives which men never share, and which differ dramatically from men's experiences.

Therefore, when we look at women's place in the economy, we cannot begin from traditional male concepts of what is valuable and productive, and what are commodities. We must begin from women's perspectives. We must question and reevaluate all the institutions and concepts with which men have defined, measured and understood the economy, and develop a woman-centered perspective for attempting to understand women's lives cross-culturally.¹

The most basic and widespread division of work is that between men and women. Women the world over perform a wide variety of services for their families (from childcare and home maintenance to subsistence agriculture), which often enables those in a more powerful position—men—to pursue other interests such as religion, government and art. This has a further effect on women's position. Since women do the least specialized, low-status work, they do not have the same access to the crucial resources that would enable them to wield more power within their families and their communities. Because women are identified with their work in and around the home, they are told that they are incapable of more. They are denied access to other work, paid less, given less property, and permitted little or no control over the resources of their families and society. In other words, the position of women in the family is used to prevent them from holding equal power in society. Ironically those persons who do the work that sustains personal and future life have the least power and prestige.

Women are one-third of the world's formal labor force, and do most of the "informal" work, but receive only 10 per cent of the world's income

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and own less than 1 per cent of the world's property.² A 1957 study of thirteen states in India found that roughly two-thirds of the women received wages that were 60 to 80 per cent of those paid to men.³ In many western industrialized countries women's formal participation is lower and they earn 40 to 70 per cent of what men earn.⁴

Women's continued low-cost production of services is so crucial to patriarchal economies that most cultures go to great lengths to insure that women will continue to see this work as their natural realm and as an expression of their love for their families. Thus women undergo tremendous socialization in heterosexuality to insure that they see men as primary in their emotional, sexual, and material lives, and that their unpaid work in the home is mystified as love. Therefore the extent to which lesbianism is rejected by a given culture reflects the degree to which that culture has a vested interest in maintaining a rigid division of labor and power by sex within the family and outside the home. In this sense, the freedom of sexual preference, especially for lesbians, is a barometer of women's options, or the repression and exploitation women experience.⁵

When women's work is ignored or undervalued, there is often strong class stratification, which almost always involves racial and religious oppression as well. A model of women doing menial, subservient work for men who have more power, resources, leisure time, and a higher standard of living, has been replicated in most cultures on a class and racial basis. (This model is also replicated when third-world nations service western countries which receive all the benefits of the poorly-paid labor and the resources that the third-world countries have produced.)

FERTILITY AND PHYSICAL INTEGRITY

Social attitudes towards women's reproductive capacities actually form one part of a broader gauge of women's status. By women's "sexual and physical integrity" we mean the sum total of all societal values and institutions affecting woman's sexuality and physical well-being. This broad range includes the socialization, legal and economic institutions and social punishments that covertly and overtly induce women to heterosexuality to insure their further unpaid labor; the sexual taboos, restraints and customs that demean or harm women, ranging from ignorance about their bodies leading to perpetual pregnancies, to forbidden sources of female sexual fulfillment including masturbation, relations with other women or choice in male partners, to female circumcision; the dominant healing profession's treatment of women; and interpersonal forms of violence against women, from rape to battering and sexual harassment.

All these social forces are deeply rooted in attitudes towards women that reflect women's power in society at large. And they all serve economic functions, usually insuring women's continued production of children and household labor at no cost to society, and men's control over women and thus over their products. Cross-culturally, the higher a woman's status is, the less subject she is to violence and repressive sexual customs, and the more tolerance she will experience as a single, childless, and/or lesbian woman.

MINIMAL, TOKEN AND NEGOTIATING POWER

Using the criteria and perspectives discussed above, we have developed an alternative women-centered way of looking at and understanding the economic organization of cultures throughout the world. We will be exploring several examples of cultures which fall into the following categories:

1. Societies where women have *minimal power*: minimal access to crucial resources, low valuation of their capacity to reproduce and little freedom in it, high incidence of violence against women, and infrequent occasion to share experiences, support and resources.
2. Societies where women have *token power*: varying access to resources, including paid work, though little substantial power to affect those institutions in which they participate; varying perspectives on reproductivity, usually involving mixed messages which change as men's needs change (including the male-dominated government's need for more workers); and some freedom to create networks, though these networks may be undermined when they become effective bases for change.
3. Societies in which women have *negotiating power*: greater access to resources often different from men's resources, enough economic independence and leverage to give them a social bargaining tool; high valuation and support for their reproductive work; and highly developed networks for support and change.

All three of these categories exist within a basic patriarchal context. Even in societies where women hold negotiating power and have (or have had) a higher status than in any other cultures we know of, men still subtly or overtly hold the greater prerogative in all areas and women still service men in the home free of charge. Within each category women's experiences are very different. The power of women in cultures around the world exists along a continuum. We have grouped cultures together into these three categories along the continuum, based on the criteria we discussed.

The kind of culture that women live in always determines the specific strategies they will use in gaining control over their lives (or in simply trying to survive). Male processes of change, whether through "development" or revolution, often completely ignore or bypass women, if they don't actually exploit them more deeply. Depending on whether women have minimal, token or negotiating power, changes in their lives come through creating, developing or increasing the potential for networking, access to resources and paid work, or developing and strengthening alternative institutions through women-centered networks. In each and every culture, however, women's networking is essential to the building of an independent power base that would allow them to take back the expropriated money, time and control over their lives, step by step.

SHE WHO SOWS DOES NOT REAP

If women are really doing work, people have argued smugly, then what do they *produce*? To answer this question we must reconsider what we mean by work and productivity, and closely examine who is benefiting by the work that women do. As one sociologist pointed out, "while there are

no ready measures to analyze women's contributions through their 'non-productive' labor to a family's or a nation's ability to produce, no one expects to get along without these unmeasurable contributions."⁶

Much of what women do is service work; yet because it is done within their homes or compounds for members of their own family, it is not considered to be service work in the traditional sense of the word. It is considered "personal" and no compensation is given. Even though most of what women produce is used by others, no exchange is visible outside the family. When a woman prepares meals for her own family, it is seen as an act of love as well as one of duty. If someone were to do this same work for non-related people in a restaurant or fu-fu bar (where pounded yams and stew are sold in West Africa), then it would be seen as productive work by male standards and paid for—either in the form of a wage by the restaurant owner, or by the profits of the fu-fu bar (although it may not be registered in national production and census statistics, unless women earn a regular salary there). When a woman cares for sick family members, it is seen as a natural response to a personal or family crisis. Done in a hospital, this would be seen as work and paid for with a wage. When a woman teaches her children how to talk or how to take care of themselves and begin to help with family and social responsibilities, or when she teaches them the customs of her culture, it is seen only as a natural extension of her ability to give birth to, and nurture, the child. When this same work is done in a daycare center for other women's children, or when it is expanded to include reading, writing and other skills in school, then it is seen as work for which money is paid.

Home maintenance work done for one's family is not seen as work. Such work is paid for in others' homes, yet then the wage is poor, since the job is viewed as an unskilled extension of unpaid work in the home. The domestic worker in many countries works all day in others' homes, then returns to her own at night to do the same work free of charge for her family. This work is so despised, and domestic workers are treated so badly, that there is even an international slave trade in domestic workers. Many women acquired in third-world countries are sent to Europe and the United States to work as domestics. Paraguayan peasant women are recruited for prostitution at weekends and forced to do domestic work during the week.⁷

Frequently, across cultures, women's work makes possible a higher standard of living enjoyed by men alone. Men eat out, drink with the boys, and have their own cars or bicycles, while their wives are at home keeping the household up and caring for the children. Women's subsistence work in many African villages leaves men working in far-away towns freer to spend their wages on bicycles to get to work, radios to hear the news, western clothing to wear to work, drinking, recreation, etc. They also spend money for "wifely" services in the form of meals out, prostitutes, laundry services, etc. Men enjoy a higher, more westernized standard of living, while the women and children live a more impoverished life-style in the villages. Most of men's wages go into their own consumption, while the total product of women's time goes almost entirely to support not

only themselves but also their children, the elderly, and unemployed or retired men. A 1941 study done in Zambia found that 70 per cent of the men spent two-thirds of their adult lives away from their villages, and sent only 10 per cent of their wages back to their families, where three-quarters of the women lived.⁸ In Zambia, as long as not more than half the adult men are away from the villages permanently, the farming system can "function normally." Around Lake Nyasa, women can sustain the work with 60 to 75 per cent of the men absent.⁹

When husbands leave their wives, alimony and child support payments often are not paid at all, or are quickly discontinued, leaving women with the total burden of child support. Ninety per cent of child support payments in the United States are discontinued before the child is self-supporting, 75 per cent after five years and 80 per cent after ten years.¹⁰ When one considers that 22 per cent of USA households are headed by women, the magnitude of women struggling to support children with no financial help while their husbands usually earn higher incomes is staggering.¹¹

Women's work produces a great savings, both to the men who don't have to pay for household services and to the entire society which has been organized so that a huge amount of socially necessary labor is done for free or is vastly underpaid. The work women do free of charge represents a considerable saving in terms of money that would have to be spent to maintain a household.

"Potential money" is a term we have developed to describe that value which accrues to unpaid or underpaid services performed or goods produced. Potential money represents savings or profit to the persons or institutions not paying for, but receiving the benefits of this work. In turn, this value represents a loss to the person performing the work, though it is not usually given a monetary value.

This savings is made possible through unpaid and underpaid work. Yet because the economy is structured without taking it into account—treating it as non-work or less valuable work—actual cash usually does not exist to pay for it. The value of potential money exists, but in a latent state; it cannot be utilized without the intervention of an outside force, just as potential energy exists as a latent force and cannot be used and is not manifested until it is transformed into kinetic energy. It is a value that has never been monetized but could be, and the economy rests on top of it. The entire economy is sustained by and functions as a result of this "invisible" labor.

An example of potential money can be seen in the economic value of polygyny in traditional Yoruba society. One study observes that:¹²

wives contribute much more to the family income than the value of their keep and that the dignity and standing of the family is enhanced by an increase of progeny. . . . The Yoruba farmer argues that the increased output from his farms obtainable *without cash expense when he has wives to help him* outweighs the economic burden of providing more food, more clothing and larger houses. (emphasis added)

Women in prisons throughout the world are paid nothing or next to

nothing for performing services such as laundry, stitching, and flag-making—work that is not recognized in employment or production statistics. At the same time, there exists almost no training to prepare women with skills that can provide them with alternative sources of income when they leave prison. Most women prisoners in the USA are only given “good time” off their sentences as an incentive to do the work. And if they refuse to work, they are not permitted to leave their rooms, and may be put into solitary confinement for their “disruptive” behavior. Here, again, as with prostitution, the nature of the service work, the conditions under which it is done and the stigma attached to the “bad women’s” lives all combine to provide a justification for their slave labor. That prison work is close to slave labor is illustrated by the fact that women in the Ohio Reformatory for Women earn from 2 to 4 cents an hour. Women at the Federal Reformatory at Alderson, Virginia, receive \$15 a month, at the most, for industrial work making road signs, license plates, benches and tables for parks, uniforms, pajamas and bedding for state institutions, etc. Prisons, depending on the locality, and whether they’re run by the Federal Government or the county, have different rules, regulations and wage scales, but the average wage for women in prison in the USA is 19 cents an hour, for six or seven days a week’s work.¹³

In the USA Federal prison industries are run by a private company, which makes \$2.5 million a year from one prison alone, the Federal Reformatory for Women at Alderson, Virginia.¹⁴ The tremendous multi-billion dollar profits would be even greater if the items produced were sold on the open market where they would fetch far higher prices than those paid by the government, the sole buyer.

Low-paid or unpaid prison work, the international slave trade and sexual harassment of working women, all provide more potential money through women’s unpaid and underpaid work.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

A totally new framework for change based on women’s experiences and perspectives and an independent power is essential so that women’s energy can be directed to their own behalf rather than reinforcing their subservience to patriarchy. The kinds of changes that must take place for such a framework to evolve are profound. Most of the strategies for change that women have used take place within the limits of a patriarchal context.

The particular form of women’s struggles to make changes in their lives depends in large part on whether the women live in a culture where they have minimal, token or negotiating power.

In cultures where women have only minimal power, their energies have usually gone into individual survival. They struggle with unwanted marriages, malnutrition, exhaustion, and many work-related diseases. Some women decide that their only option in crisis situations is suicide. Women’s efforts in these societies are often directed towards developing networks through which to transform their survival strategies to change, to share work or make demands, or fight for reproductive control, more money for their work, and access to technological aids. Their collective action attempts to

consolidate their long hours of work and protect their survival mechanisms. In these countries women are essentially fighting for the tools with which they can gain some control over their lives, which would allow them to make further changes.

Women in token power societies usually have some of the basic rights that women in minimal power societies are fighting for, though such rights are often revoked as the needs of the dominant male culture change. Though their protection of women varies according to whether or not a woman's class, race or religious identity gives her minimal or negotiating power as a subgroup, token rights usually are recognized by the dominant culture though often not enforced. This gives individual women more tools to fight with in oppressive situations. With their survival somewhat more secure, they make attempts to consolidate reforms into undeniable rights for women, to move toward establishing a separate power base as women—a lobbying force and power effective enough not only to pressure for changes in women's lives, but to maintain those changes once they have been won.

In these countries women's struggles often focus on the acquisition and maintenance of the right to reproductive freedom, access to resources, and to increased opportunities for women in every area of life so that they are less segregated into the most menial, lowest-paying jobs. In some countries women organize services not provided by the society (such as battered wife shelters and rape crisis centers) to protect and improve the quality of their lives. Other women are demanding that housework be socialized or that men share it. In some countries, women's political caucuses push for the election of officials that are more sensitive to women's issues. These actions are oriented toward increasing the freedom of women and attempting to preserve those rights that have been granted.

In the few cultures where women have negotiating power, they already have a power base and are sometimes using it to make further needed changes in their lives. In cultures where women's power is being usurped, their efforts have gone towards fighting the deterioration of their status. Although these women are united and working together, they still have a long way to go before they achieve either equality with men, or a qualitative transformation of power based on new values grounded in women's experience.

A WOMAN'S CULTURE ACROSS CULTURES?

To say that women share a common culture, similar values and responses to their environment, is *not* to say that all women in all cultures identify with each other, or that their shared culture is experienced or manifested in the same way. The point is not that all women think, act and respond to the dominant culture in the same way, but that their biology, their relationship to the economies in which they live and perhaps even their history, structure their experience in similar ways. Women can only know and understand this underlying structure of similarities in their lives if they explore the differences in these experiences. Though the same values are manifested differently in different cultural contexts, they still share char-

acteristics different from those of the men in women's lives and have the potential to become bonds between women's lives across cultures.

The value in exploring the concept of a women's culture lies in shedding some light on the many forms by which patriarchal cultures exploit women, and the many mechanisms which women have devised, both to survive their hostile worlds and to begin to change them.

To understand other women's experiences is to strengthen each woman's potential for change—to give her new tools and new understandings of what has worked for women in other situations and the myriad ways patriarchal cultures have found to maintain women's subservience. Ultimately it will be through the joining of women of diverse, rather than similar, experience, with diverse priorities and strategies, that a powerful movement with the capacity for truly broad-based change can be built. Difference can only be divisive when it is feared and not understood.

The same social and economic forces have not affected each woman identically. The characteristics of the dominant male culture make a great difference, as do the class, racial, ethnic and religious background of each woman within each culture. These other social forces are so strong that often women do not identify with each other across these (male-defined and male-maintained) boundaries. Many Latina, Native American, Asian-American, Black or white women married to working-class men in the United States, for example, are hard put to identify with white women married to upper-middle and upper-class men.

Sisterhood, or a shared culture, does not mean that every woman in every culture necessarily identifies more closely with women from other cultures and experiences than with the men in her own world. It means, rather, that each woman encountering sexual, racial or class exploitation in her work-life shares the same relationship to the male economy as her female peers, both at her paid work place and in her home. It means that each woman could benefit most by discussing her problems and experiences with women in similar situations, at the same worksite, for example. With these other women she shares a common experience, culture and perspective, forming one of the variants of women's culture. And with these other women she can unite to begin to create changes in their lives. Women working for change with other women of similar experiences then might unite in coalition with women from differing experiences, to push for bottom-line changes that affect them all.

The element of conscious identification with other women is not a primary factor in considering the question of a woman's culture. Many women are not aware of identifying with other women. They experience their lives as focused around their families and the men in their lives, yet share their feelings about these lives, and look for solace and support with each other. Whether women consciously identify more closely with each other or with the men in their lives is simply a determinant of women's ability to make changes in their lives. Carol Oliver, in her article "On Black Feminism and Culture," expands on the importance of one's culture in forming one's world view:¹⁵

Cultural resistance is the fight for autonomy—self-determined survival and growth. Assimilation is the expected passive reaction . . . that requires some level of adaptation. . . .

These two ways of defining the self and viewing the world have evolved from the fundamental need for survival in a completely hostile, antagonistic, dehumanizing foreign environment.

When women look to men's culture for definition and identify more closely with the men in their lives, they are less able to act in their own behalf. When women internalize their adaptation strategies and live for male approval, their culture begins to approach a "shadow culture" rather than an independent source of support, respect and growth. The extent to which women are conscious of and grounded in their own (women's) culture, and feel the gap between their lives and the view of the dominant male culture, is the extent to which they are able to become independent, and to use their women's space, not for letting off steam, but for growth and change.

WOMEN'S CULTURE AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Most women experience their lives and values as separate from men's even if they do not consciously see this as a difference in culture. These distinct values are useful in that they offer women a source of support in a hostile environment, and make possible various strategies for their physical and emotional survival. Men have also tolerated women's culture because they also benefit from women's continuing to produce for them. While women's quality of placing the needs of others before their own makes their networks extremely supportive, such networks exist within a patriarchal framework that is largely sustained by this same characteristic. Unless women's cultural values can be used to generate change through the development of a female power base, women's culture will continue to function largely as a survival mechanism for women, and a source of free labor for men.

For a society to so profoundly question and restructure its social priorities and institutions as to equally reward women for *all* their work, it would have to be fundamentally nonexploitative in its world view and all social stratification and inequities would be addressed in the process. Every woman's economic independence and equality would necessitate the breaking down of all other social barriers as well. A new social order, based on equal structuring of work, rewards and power, would be ushered in. To begin to see women's experience for the slavery that it is will fundamentally transform the thinking and the history of the world.

NOTES

1. Batya Weinbaum has developed a unique approach in the last chapter of *The Curious Courtship of Marxism and Feminism*, South End Press, Boston, 1979.
2. United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, Newsletter, no. 3, 1980.
3. Esther Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1970, p. 74.
4. Magda Cordell and John McHale, *Women in World Terms*, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1975, p. 39. "Women Workers Today," US Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration, Women's Bureau, 1976, p. 8.
5. . . . See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, University of Chicago Press, Summer 1980. [Eds.: See also Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, Diana Press, Baltimore, 1975.]
6. Hannah Papanek, "Development Planning for Women," *Signs*, Vol. 3, no. 1, Autumn 1977, p. 16.
7. Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1979, p. 58.
8. G. Wilson and M. Wilson, *Analysis of Social Change*, Cambridge University Press, 1945, cited in Achola Pala and Ann Seidman, "A Model of the Status of Women in Africa," paper presented at the Women and Development Conference, Wellesley College, June 1976.
9. Boserup, op. cit., pp. 78-79.
10. Anne Hillerman, "Mothers Face Welfare When Child Support Fails," *The New Mexican*, May 11, 1980, p. D-1. Lisa Leghorn and Betsy Warrior, *Houseworker's Handbook*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, p. 35.
11. Staff Report, US Commission on Civil Rights, "Women and Poverty," June 1974, p. 3.
12. Boserup, op. cit., p. 41.
13. Kathryn Burkhart, *Women in Prison*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York, 1973, pp. 282, 283, 231, respectively.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 283.
15. Carol Oliver, "On Black Feminism and Culture," from unpublished letter distributed by Audre Lorde to women in the Northeast Black Feminist Network.

THE INHERITANCE

How we have each labored
 to create this civilization,
 most of us against our will,
 without our knowledge, thrilled,
 enthralled, appalled or stalled
 in this industrial serfdom
 known as "modern man";
 this card game with its temporary flush,
 founded on the village skills of
 ancient women and their men, distilled
 drop by drop from all the liquors
 of our many lives, that electrifying
 amber glow, that aura of what
 our bodies do and know,
 that history we can tell and show,
 so trivially classified as "work"
 and "workers."

Trivially classified, enlisted,
 tagged—
 brought from an old
 Old Country
 in small sacks,
 the scientific-magic of our
 former ages,
 bagged like the wind
 and sold, breath by breath,
 solo by solo, riff by riff
 and measure after measure, as if
 it were all free, and not
 accumulated treasures
 of complex creatures
 such as you, me. The wind.
 A tree.

The grandfather wind, the
 mother tree, the message
 delivered like genès, like fruits or
 language given to a child,
 accumulated patterns to be
 used or listened to, as recipes

or tools or principles,
the voices
passed along a long wind, the
whistling of a dancing bird
upon a dancing tree: Nothing is free,
everything belongs to one another,
nothing begins new, everything has
a mother, a father and a story.

March, August, 1980

BEETS

These certainly are the queen's jewels
that you have given us, oh webster,
these most edible rubies
of an iron smell with unexpected leafy hair;
how they reek of dirt from caverns
underground, pulled up from caves with steep
clay sides and sounds of seeping
water, thick and resonating
in a bass voice. Down inside we see
staining the rounded wall
is old candle char and the rust-brown
painting of a bison lying on her side,
in labor. Below is stamped a child's
small handprint, certainly yours
oh webster, painter, inventor, weaver
of labor and water and these,
these deep red beets, these rubies
from the crusty chambers of the
musky, moist, most dark old earth.

March 1980

Webster refers to a spirit, from an old word, "female weaver"

Chapters 9 and 10 of FOLLY

Folly and Martha, close friends and next-door neighbors in a trailer park, are two of the leaders of a strike by women garment workers in Liberty, North Carolina. Folly's daughter, Mary Lou, has gotten a job at the A&P on the recommendation of Lenore, a literate high-school drop-out butcher, whose lesbianism Folly has been warned to protect her daughter from. Lenore's mother, Evelyn, has become a scab. Lenore's lover, Betsy, has gone off to work on the Alaskan pipeline and sends letters from afar. Martha moved in with her mother, Daisy, after Daisy suffered two disabling strokes.

CHAPTER 9

Mary Lou and Lenore had gone to supper together at the diner, then back to work until nine. When they met at the time clock on the way out, Lenore invited Mary Lou to stop by her place for a beer or a cup of coffee, and Mary Lou said yes right away. Since she'd started working, she had been searching for ways to assert the feelings of being grown up that came with laboring for someone other than her mother, and Lenore was the best example she had of what a woman of independence could be. She remembered her mother's set conviction that Lenore was too old for her and felt the energy of rebellion as she slid in the passenger side of the car. A 1968 Oldsmobile, it was ten years old but looked new. Lenore had waxed the two-tone exterior shiny, and the interior was spotless. The few times Lenore had picked Mary Lou up at school, Mary Lou had felt convinced that anyone watching couldn't help but notice she was getting into one of the most well-cared-for cars in town. She couldn't wait to get her license. Not that it would take her far. She couldn't imagine when she'd ever be able to get a car unless she went to work full time. Even if she did, and her mother would never permit it before she finished high school, the family would need her earnings, especially as long as the strike was on. She could dream. That was about all.

"What'll you have?" Lenore asked.

"What are you having?"

"I think I'll make a pot of coffee."

"I'm not too big on coffee."

"How 'bout a beer? Or grape soda?"

Mary Lou took a long time deciding because she really wanted to have the same thing as Lenore, but she couldn't stand coffee. Learning to drink it was one of the measures of adulthood that she didn't savor any more than having a splinter removed. She thought she'd like to have a beer, but she'd have to try to get some chewing gum before she went home so her ma wouldn't smell it on her. Also, she didn't like the idea of drinking beer alone. As if she were a mind reader, Lenore said, "Maybe I'll have a beer, too, if that's what you'd like."

"Split one with you," Mary Lou volunteered.

"Make yourself comfortable while I get it."

Mary Lou, hands in her jeans pockets, wandered automatically over to the bookcase. The thing that had stuck most in her mind since her first visit to Lenore's was the fact of that bookcase with its three long rows of books. Everyone knew Lenore as the butcher at the A&P, and Mary Lou was sure most of them figured her for anything but a brain. She was a good butcher. That was as far as Liberty could think. But Lenore had read as many books as anybody she had known in her life, and Mary Lou found herself amazed by that.

Mary Lou's hand went to the last book on the shelf; she pulled it out and looked at the cover. *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism*: two authors—Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, one male and one female, Mary Lou thought. She stuck it back on the shelf as fast as she could without being conspicuous. Her hand felt as if she had touched something red hot. She put it back in her pocket. Wow, she thought, be cool. Her eyes went to the frame photograph of Betsy that sat on top of the bookcase—Betsy in her work shirt and overalls ready to go to work welding. She had known about Lenore before, hadn't she? She just hadn't thought about it directly. Wow. Wow . . . kept popping into her head. So what else is new, she said to herself. Act normal.

She slumped down into the big armchair with her beer while Lenore sat on the floor facing her, her back up against the bookcase. Mary Lou couldn't get herself to be as cool as she wanted to be, but tested her voice. "It must be neat to have a place of your own."

"Yeah, I like it. You can keep things the way you like them."

"No little brothers bugging you to death."

"I wish I could have my little sister here," Lenore said.

"Where is she?"

"Out at the house with my mother."

Mary Lou had never really known why Lenore had left home but assumed she'd done it out of sheer desire for her independence as that was the reason Mary Lou was thinking along these lines for herself. Lenore told her about her fights with her mother. She searched the backs of her own hands as she talked, keeping her eyes away from Mary Lou. Then she told her about her mother scabbing. "It's weird telling you this," she said, "your ma being one of the main organizers for the strike and all. I tried to talk her out of it, but getting her to listen to me, that's just about hopeless. I feel bad about her doing it."

Mary Lou's first reaction was to be shocked. She didn't expect to know any of the scabs. She had pictured them much like the word—crusty, degenerate, not-quite-human people. True, she didn't *know* Lenore's mother, but she knew *her*. She avoided thinking further about who Lenore's mother might be, and gathered herself by remembering her mother talking about the scabs. "Ma says the scabs make things harder for them, but it's really the owner their fight is against. So I don't think you should feel so bad. Besides, you got me a job and that's a help to my ma."

Lenore looked straight at Mary Lou then. "I suppose." Her eyes were

a deep green but full of light. She had a gold cap on one of her front teeth, otherwise her face was soft and even. "Anyway, I'd like you to meet Perry some day. She's a neat kid."

"I did," Mary Lou said. "That one Saturday I was here."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot."

Lenore went back to the refrigerator for another beer, leaving Mary Lou with her feelings about Perry. She remembered her round, sweet face, her eyes eager for Lenore's attention, her dimples which deepened with her smile. Mary Lou yearned to be cared for the way she could see Lenore cared for Perry. And Betsy. Though with Betsy maybe Lenore's caring was something different. This was confusing and distressing because she wanted to be able to talk easy with Lenore, and if she were a lesbian, how could she then sit in that chair and talk casually away to her? She wouldn't let her know she had seen the book. If Lenore didn't know that she knew, if she could keep cool, then nothing would be different.

Lenore refilled both of their glasses, and Mary Lou took a long swig. She realized she was beginning to feel giddy. Lenore got back down on the floor, only this time she stretched out flat on her back and closed her eyes, let her arms fall to her sides, took a deep breath, then let the air out in a sigh. Mary Lou watched her make this effort at relaxation, while trying to picture her elsewhere—inside a secret life—a dark bar. She imagined Lenore standing up against a wall, dragging hard on a cigarette, her eyes darting about, trying to make out the contours of others in this wicked, beer-smelling place, her body defined and tensed against the probable intrusion of strange touch. Her mother was a scab. Only trouble was none of this fit with the Lenore who got her the job at the A&P. She felt as if she were doing a puzzle and was down to the last space with only one piece left, and she had to turn it around and around and upside down, and still it wouldn't seem to fall into place.

Lenore sat back up and found Mary Lou's eyes on her. "Pardon the desertion," she said. "Just tryin' to get that store out of my bones."

Mary Lou felt caught. Lenore always seemed to know what she was doing. She was orderly, and straightforward in her thinking. Perhaps Betsy would go to a dark bar but not Lenore. "What do you hear from Betsy?" she asked.

"She's fine. Working hard and stashing away her wad, and I reckon she'll be up there another year or so."

Mary Lou hadn't really known Betsy other than to recognize her. In fact, she hadn't known Lenore either until after Betsy had left for Alaska. There wasn't anybody in Liberty that didn't at least know of Betsy since she'd gone off, displaying such rare courage as to wake up the memory of the gold rush.

"Must be cold up there," Mary Lou said.

"That is for sure."

Maybe they were just good friends, she thought. Maybe that was one way of being lesbian—having no use for men and pairing up with your best friend and helping each other out. "You must miss her," she said.

"Sure do. We been like this," Lenore closed two fingers tight together, "ever since we were little girls."

Maybe Lenore wasn't a lesbian with Betsy, maybe it was with someone else. They couldn't have been lesbians when they were little girls. Mary Lou finished off her beer and went home.

The following Saturday night found Mary Lou at the drive-in movies with Roland, fighting him off the whole time. When he had asked her that morning, she realized she had given him extra attention all week, putting on a smile whenever he passed her in the store. Whatever was known as flirting—a phenomenon she had never associated with herself—was probably what she was guilty of. It had felt awkward and uncomfortable—the sensation of underpants on backwards. In fact, Mary Lou had rarely had a date and didn't know why. Boys most often didn't ask her out. The ones she liked she felt shy with, and her shyness seemed to erase her from their vision. The only ones who ever asked her out were the ones classified by the other girls as leftovers. Usually she said no, but thinking so much about Lenore being a lesbian, she had decided she ought to try to date more.

The movies hadn't been going ten minutes when Roland started with his wet kisses. Mary Lou had expected they might talk and get to know each other a little, but she hadn't been able to think of what to say before he had moved in. She had struggled with him, feeling as if they were engaged in a territorial battle, the territory under siege—her body. His hands had fought for possession everywhere she didn't want them; she had arrested them here, there, moved them away, only to find him coming on again, stronger, more insistent, almost hostile. She realized she didn't know him at all. She was sexually excited, but she didn't want to be. She felt pinned. She remembered her daddy when she was small, flexing the muscles of his arm until they bulged and holding it out to her, saying, "Hit me . . . hit me harder . . . I can't even feel it . . . you sure you're hitting me?" She remembered the feeling of futility as she hurt her own small, tough fists, packing them into him with her full power.

They ended with Roland giving up on everything else and locking her hand up against his penis and riding it. She figured what the hell. She figured if he didn't mind getting off to an instrument, her hand could afford to be the instrument. For now. She could feel his zipper, and she thought about her mother at her machine, sewing zipper after zipper, handling the empty crotches of zillions of pairs of pants. She thought of Skeeter and Tiny running around after a bath with their noodles and balls dangling, extra parts, vulnerable with their lack of muscle. She worried about how easily they could be pinched. About Roland's, she didn't worry. She waited and wished he would hurry up. She felt humiliated by her own participation, and she wanted to be home, safe and free and able to think.

When he left her off in front of her trailer, he cooed, "Sweet girl, I want to go out with you again real soon," holding her chin firmly in his hand so she couldn't look away.

"Yeah, Roland. I'll see you at work. I gotta go in now." He gave her

one last, sloppy kiss before releasing her.

All the next week, Mary Lou built up her nerve to ask Lenore if she could come over after work Saturday night. She had hoped Lenore would suggest it herself, but she hadn't. Roland hadn't asked her out either, but she worried that he would. The nights she'd worked, he'd come up behind her and bumped her with his skinny rear end, as if accidentally. She had been cool in her responses, but that seemed to be the way he preferred it. Friday afternoon he stood at the meat counter where he could see down the soup aisle while she stacked the new shipment of Campbell's and she saw him staring at her and licking his lips. She couldn't wait until he got off and Lenore came on, and as soon as she saw Lenore, she asked her, "You doing anything after work tomorrow?"

When Lenore said no, she asked if she could come over and talk, and it was settled that she would. And Roland came, sure enough, walking jaunty down the aisle, asking her to the movies again.

"Sorry, I've got other plans," she said.

"What you doing?"

"Visiting Lenore."

"Oh, oh, oh," he said. "You watch out, baby." He made his voice extra deep. "Roland knows. You ain't her type."

"You're obnoxious," Mary Lou said. She could feel blood flushing in her face. She wanted to know what he meant, but she knew better than to ask him.

"I try," he said. He ran his hand across the back of her jeans, possessively, as he walked away.

Lenore bought a six-pack as they were leaving the store. Mary Lou offered to split the cost with her when her paycheck came, but Lenore said it was on her. "I hope I'm not contributing to the delinquency of a minor," she said.

"I guess not. My ma lets me drink beer at home with her sometimes."

Lenore's apartment was exactly the way Mary Lou had remembered it—contained and clean, nothing out of place, nothing strewn around. The books were in their same places, including the one she had taken out to look at. She pictured her own apartment being just like this—a home for every object, every piece of furniture. In the trailer they were forever moving things around, chairs from the dining room over to the front of the T.V., dishes from the table into the sink so homework could be done on the table, dishes back to the table or the counter or the drainer because they didn't all fit in the cupboards or the sink. Something was always lost. Someone was always on a search. Mary Lou imagined herself living in a place like this, and once a week she would have her mother and Skeeter and Tiny over for dinner. When they were gone, she would put away the dishes again and not take out more than one of anything again for the next week.

"Want a glass or a can?" Lenore asked.

"Can's fine."

They both sat on the floor. "What's on your mind?" Lenore asked her.

"Nothing much." Mary Lou looked away and neither of them spoke for a moment. Finally she asked, "What do you think of Roland?"

"Roland Tucker?"

Mary Lou nodded.

"I think he's a turkey."

Mary Lou laughed. "That's pretty good." She thought of Roland's penis and a turkey neck and laughed some more.

"I get along okay with him as long as I just have to pass him at the time clock. We hardly ever work at the same time."

"I went to the movies with him last weekend," Mary Lou admitted.

"Oh," Lenore became guarded. "How was it?"

"Well, I wouldn't of minded seeing the movie, if he'd let me."

"He was on the make?"

"You might say."

"From what I hear, he always is."

Mary Lou could feel the intensity of Lenore's dislike for him filling up the room. "He is a turkey," she said. "I didn't give him a thing." She knew it wasn't true as soon as she said it and suspected that Lenore did, too. They were sitting in silence, contemplating this, when the phone rang. Lenore picked it up, and surprised, turned to Mary Lou. "For you." Mary Lou's heart shot adrenalin out to the ends of her limbs. No one knew where she was except Roland.

It was Folly saying Daisy was having another stroke. The ambulance was coming and they were taking her into the hospital. "I want you to see her," she said, "in case she dies. I know how she loves you."

"Oh, Ma." Tears formed in her eyes and Mary Lou's throat closed up so she couldn't speak more.

"I know it's hard," Folly said. "Can you get someone to bring you down to the hospital?"

"Yes, Ma. Okay. I'll be there. I'll get Lenore to take me right over."

Lenore stood, restless and helpless, as Mary Lou told her what had happened. "My grandma . . . she's having another stroke. She's not really my grandma. She's Martha's mother. She lives next door."

"Come on. I'll run you over to the hospital." Lenore was already collecting her keys and her handbag.

"I think I have to use your bathroom," Mary Lou said.

"Go ahead."

While Mary Lou splashed cold water on her face to try to calm herself, Lenore paced the room, looking for a place to put the energy that was in her arms. She saw Roland, an octopus with his arms crawling all over Mary Lou trying to make her, and she couldn't even open her arms to soothe her without worrying that someone might think she was weird.

She unlocked the door on the passenger side first, and when Mary Lou was seated, she pressed the door closed securely with both arms, as if the car door might be capable of communicating her embrace. Then she went around and got in herself and drove them to the hospital.

CHAPTER 10

Mary Lou put her books in the chair in the corner of the room and went to Daisy's bedside. Daisy was asleep as she had been every day since they'd brought her to the hospital—semi-comatosed—the doctor said. When he jabbed her feet with pins, Daisy groaned. Sometimes she seemed to come partly awake and would utter a long wailing series of "oh, oh, oh, oh's." Mary Lou had spent hours of the past few days watching and wondering what Daisy could feel in her coma.

Right then she was very still. Her body looked as if it were turning into a skeleton. Her arms were on top of the sheet, and Mary Lou noticed that her left hand wasn't fisted up anymore the way it had been for years from earlier strokes. Mary Lou froze for a second, thinking that maybe Daisy was dead. She had had this moment every day for the past week at the beginning of her visit. She stared at Daisy's chest; trying to detect movement. She thought she could see movement. Then she thought she had made it up. She hadn't ever seen a dead person. Would she be able to tell? Would Daisy's hand go back up into a fist? *Please, Daisy, don't die*, she prayed, but she prayed less fervently than she had earlier in the week. The only one she had ever known to die was her real grandmother on her mother's side and that had been when she was only five, and she hardly had a clear memory of her. And her real grandmother had never lived next door. She felt like an adult when she thought of the idea of having to go on without Daisy. She put her hand on Daisy's arm and felt reassured by the warmth of Daisy's skin. There were red splotches under her nearly transparent skin on her forearm. Mary Lou covered the ones on her right arm with her own hand and watched Daisy's left arm. When did these splotches come? They seemed to appear between one visit and the next. She thought maybe if she watched long enough she would see one come.

What would become of Daisy if she died? Mary Lou's mind brought that question to her over and over, then seemed to brake at thinking further. She didn't believe in Heaven or Hell because her mother had never followed any religion. Her ma said people soaked up religion to try to feel full when they were hungry. "I try to keep us in enough food," she said. That was fine for eating, but what about death, Mary Lou wondered. She tried for a minute to believe in Heaven and think of Daisy dead, Daisy's body floating in some heavenly sky. That picture did not seem at all right to her. She thought of Daisy in a grave. She felt a hollow feeling inside herself. She understood then, in the passage of that moment, that this was what her feelings were about—the lonely hollow of Daisy's absence in her own life.

Daisy stirred and let out a long sigh which brought Mary Lou up to full attention. She opened her eyes and stared at Mary Lou with a stern look. Mary Lou was astounded that Daisy looked so wide awake and stared back. Daisy formed her lips as if she were going to say something. When she opened and closed her mouth, nothing came out but, "ef . . . ef . . . ef . . . ef . . ."

"What?"

"ef . . . ef . . . frumbled," she said. Then she closed her eyes and smiled. Spit bubbles formed on her lips behind the word.

"I know," Mary Lou said. "I remember. That was my word."

She tried to get her back. "Gramma . . . gramma?" Mary Lou repeated louder and louder, but Daisy seemed to have gone back into the coma.

Mary Lou remembered their game. She must have been about seven or eight because Daisy hadn't had her first stroke yet. Her mother was working second shift. The bus would bring her and Skeeter home from school and drop them off a few minutes before Folly had to leave for the factory, unless something happened to make them late. A substitute driver, a fight on the bus, a kid forgetting his books—what it was didn't matter—just the knowing that they were going to be late and probably miss their mother was upsetting to Mary Lou. She understood that her ma would be in trouble if she waited for them and was late for work. Still, when they got to the door and Folly wasn't there, she felt small and insignificant. She knew they were more important than her job, but the proof was lacking. She would take Skeeter by the hand then, and they'd walk over; Daisy would be watching out the back door for them, Tiny already with her. Mary Lou would sulk those days and Daisy had to prod her into playing with anything. "What's the matter?" she would ask.

"Nothin'."

"You look pretty mucky."

"I do not."

"You do so."

"Do not."

"How do you feel?"

"Not mucky."

"Yucky?"

"Leave me alone." Mary Lou would say this with great scorn as if to declare it the final word.

Daisy would change to an appeasing voice. "Come on, sugar. Give me a word. Try me out with a new one. Make one up."

"Frumbled," Mary Lou had said.

"I know exactly how you feel," Daisy had said as soon as Mary Lou had come up with the word. "I've felt that way sometimes myself."

Mary Lou didn't believe her at first, but then Daisy went around the trailer saying, "This whole day has been right frumbled from start to finish. First the pilot light went out. Then I had to wait two hours for Shelby Johnson to get off the party line so I could call about it. While I wasn't watching, my coffee boiled. I tell you, girl, I know what you mean. Frumbled is a pretty good word for it."

Mary Lou had ended up laughing at Daisy. She tried to think of the other words. Grotchetty, barrowed, urchy, meech. Meech was a scream with me in it. There were more she couldn't remember. She searched Daisy's face, but it didn't look frumbled. Maybe because she had said it. One always felt better afterwards—at least Mary Lou had. She went to the chair and started on her homework, glancing from time to time at Daisy. She couldn't see her face but she could see her chest through the bars of

the bedrail, and she imagined she saw it rise and fall each time she looked.

Folly and Martha came straight to the hospital room from their stint on the picket line, said Hi to Mary Lou, and went one to each side of Daisy. They were sweaty and grimy, Folly with a dirty smudge on her face which Mary Lou was sure she didn't realize was there. When she thought of them marching back and forth with their signs, Mary Lou was fiercely proud to know them and wished she were a few years older and a worker at the factory so she could be out there picketing, too.

"Daisy the same?" her mother asked.

"She is now . . . but she opened her eyes and spoke to me before."

Surprised, they both turned to her. "What'd she say?" Martha asked.

"Frumbled."

"What?" Folly asked.

"Frumbled. It's a word we used to say in a game when I was little." Mary Lou got up and looked down on Daisy. "She opened her eyes up and stared straight at me and she stuttered a little and then she said 'frumbled,' clear as day."

"What's it mean?" Martha asked.

"It's hard to explain," Mary Lou said. "It means frumbled." She caught Folly's look which was one of no messing around, kid. "Sort of like frustrated and mixed-up feeling. Like nothing's going right today."

Martha was listening carefully. "Do you think she was trying to say something else?"

"Nope. She even smiled, like she was playing with me."

"Then what happened?" Folly asked.

"Nothing. She closed her eyes again and went back out. I tried to call her, but I don't think she heard me." Mary Lou tried to remember if the smile had stayed for a while or what. Why hadn't she kept track. Daisy's lips looked dry and lifeless now, and Mary Lou couldn't really picture the smile.

Martha leaned over Daisy, jostled her arm gently and called her, "Ma . . . Ma . . ." Her voice was husky. "Can you hear me, Ma?" Nothing from Daisy. Martha tried a few more times, then moved away from the bed over to the window. She looked weary and depressed.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Folly asked.

"Y'all go on and have one," Martha said. "I'll stay with her a bit."

Mary Lou was reluctant to leave, but her mother signaled her, and together they went down to the cafeteria. There was nothing to watching Daisy when she was like this, yet they had all hung close to her for a week now, with growing anticipation. Mary Lou was glad she had been alone with her when Daisy had spoken, although she felt badly that she wouldn't wake up for Martha.

She sipped at her coke and kept to herself. The cafeteria was empty except for them and the maintenance man who was mopping the floor. He had indicated the dryest corner to them and they had taken two chairs and turned them over on their legs and sat down. Now they looked out

on a sea of chair legs poking up from the tables around them, and Mary Lou was casting through visions of living in an upside-down world.

"So fumbled is when nothing goes right," Folly said.

"Frumbled."

"That's what I meant. It sounds like this day."

"What happened?" Mary Lou looked at her mother and noticed the smudge again.

"Couple of Fartblossom's boys tried to run us over."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. That's what *I* said. I couldn't believe it. They came aiming right for us. I jumped one way and Martha the other or they'd have smeared us both. The other girls saw, too, from where they were sitting in the car. We all chased after them into the parking lot like a flock of banshees, hollering at their backs. You should'a heard the language. We told them what we thought of them."

"You shouldn't be walking in the road," one of them said out the window." Folly's voice was shaky. "God damned bastards. They had to get men to do it, too. I bet they tried to get those women who are scabbing to run us down, but you can't get women to do stuff like that. It ain't in 'em. It's in men."

Mary Lou felt panic at the idea that her mother was in danger. Her strong, loud, outrageous, speak-out mother. She had always imagined her protected by making enough of a fuss to scare others around her. Now, suddenly, she realized that was what made her a target. "You must've been scared," she said.

"You better believe it. I moved as if I had the flight of a flushed-out quail. You never knew your ma to have wings, did you? Neither did she, before."

"You think they'll try it again?"

"I wouldn't put it past 'em, but probably not. They figure they got us scared now . . . and that fear'll wear on us. Some of the girls already started talking this afternoon about shouldn't we go back."

"You think they'll do it?"

"Over my dead body," Folly said, fuming. She was quiet for a minute. Then she softened. "I don't know. Maybe we should. I sure wish Daisy hadn't gotten sick now. I was counting on her for good sense."

"How come you think she talked to me, Ma?"

"I don't know. Maybe cause you're someone special to her. Then again, maybe just because you happened to be there when she woke up."

When they got back to Daisy's room, Folly asked Martha if she saw any difference. "She seems more peaceful," Martha said. "Still asleep."

The three of them stood looking down on Daisy in silence, each taking in her meaning to themselves. Finally Folly interrupted this meditation. "I guess we ought to go fix supper. You ready, Martha?"

"I think I'll stay, if you wouldn't mind coming back for me later."

"Sure . . . or if you want to come home for supper with us, I'll come back down with you for the evening."

"Thanks," Martha said. "I think I'll stay now. I'll get something to eat later."

Mary Lou reached over and caressed Daisy's delicate, wrinkled cheek with the back of her hand. "I'll see you Wednesday, Daisy. I gotta work tomorrow. You sleep well." Then she got her books and went out to wait in the hall for her mother. She felt foolish talking to Daisy in front of Folly and Martha, but she was glad she had done it anyway because she had a feeling that Daisy could hear in her sleep. A superstition. Her ma didn't believe in superstition anymore than she believed in religion.

As they went out the Emergency Room entrance to the parking lot, Mary Lou remembered standing in that doorway the Saturday night before, waiting for Daisy's ambulance. A hot night but she had been practically shivering. She had wanted Lenore to drop her off and leave, had not wanted her mother to see Lenore, but Lenore had come in with her, gone to the desk and found out Daisy wasn't there yet, moved Mary Lou back out the doorway, saying, "Let's wait right out here." Mary Lou had never told her she wasn't supposed to be making friends with her. It would be embarrassing to say that her mother thought she was too old. That would make her ma sound like a stooge, which she wasn't. Anyway, she was glad she didn't have to wait alone. They had heard the siren coming closer and closer, Mary Lou's heart following the urgency of its pressing sound. Daisy had looked pale, pale white on the stretcher. Suddenly Mary Lou had realized that the siren had stopped, leaving a large, blank emptiness in her ears, almost like deafness, and that Lenore was gone. Daisy's eyes had fluttered as they had carried her past Mary Lou. They had been cloudy was the impression she had, but it had all happened so fast, and she wasn't sure Daisy had even seen her.

As they got in Martha's car, Mary Lou realized how far off she was from getting her own. Folly didn't even have one. They shared this one with Martha, chipping in for gas and some of the repair bills. She didn't even know if her mother would let her learn to drive on Martha's car. She stored this subject away in a place in her brain which she reserved for things to talk about the next time she caught her ma in a real good mood.

She remembered Daisy saying frumpled and the soft feel of her cheek. "What's for supper?" she asked her ma.

"I don't know. We'll have to think of something."

"Y'all probably think I'm an idiot, talking to Daisy when she's asleep."

"Maybe . . ." Folly said.

"I just got a feeling . . ."

"You can go ahead and talk to her all day far as I'm concerned."

"Making a fool of myself," Mary Lou added.

"What's it matter?" Folly said. "Look girl, don't let no worry about being a fool get in your way. You feel you should talk, talk. No sense holding your tongue when it's got an urge to move."

"I got a feeling Daisy hears us talking, sometimes."

"I think she's pretty far gone, but I sure hope she'll give Martha a word."

"Martha's pretty upset, isn't she?"

"I reckon she is," Folly said. "It's been hard on her, being out on the strike and then having Daisy in the hospital the way she is. Not that one thing has anything to do with the other. But it does tend to work on you that way. Here we are speaking out against the bosses and the way they run the show down there, and the same time here's Daisy, laid low and silenced. It works on you to feel like she's taking our punishment. Martha ain't a fearful woman, but I reckon she's scared that Daisy's going to die; like as not she's scared, too, we're not getting anywhere with this strike and it's all gonna come to naught."

"You scared, Ma?"

"Here and there I am, but I ain't gonna let fear rule me. When you do that is when you gotta wonder if your life's worth living. You ought to see some of them girls over to the mill . . . show them a union card and their teeth start to chatter . . . it's a wonder they don't fall out." Folly wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. They don't speak their fears, they chatter them. All that does is spread 'em around, far as I can see. They're the ones who'll be first in line behind someone who's going to stick out her neck to get them something, but if the one with her neck stuck out moves aside, you watch out. They won't step forward unless it's time to cash in.

"You go right on talking to Daisy. You speak up whenever you think it's right to. There's plenty out there waiting for someone else to speak up for them . . . you don't need to be one of 'em."

Mary Lou took in her mother's words while inside her head she talked to Daisy: *Daisy don't die. Daisy, can't you hear. I know you can hear. They need you for the strike. You're a strong woman, Daisy. You always come back. We'll have a picnic out in the yard. I'll stop by your trailer every afternoon, except the days I work. I have to go straight from school to work some days. We love you, Daisy.* Tears in her eyes, she kept her head turned as if she were looking out the window as they drove the rest of the way home.

THE FIRES OF AUTUMN: WOLF CREEK, 1980

The small planes buzz angry in the sky
the sun is a long time coming over the ridge
heat comes slow these days but
anger buzzes in our skies

in Takilma the marijuana merchants rise,
press economic boycott muscle up against
the busts
across our gulch a helicopter
drops purple toxin on an unsuspecting deer

We drown in peaches and tomatoes, bounty
panics, we are burdened with corn—

We take in woodsmoke, warning
signal Fire is always possible, like love,

The Earth asks
to be delivered—

. . . even the wheatlight grass
lies down to wait for rain,

And anger in our hearts flays out, in the
night, with the shower, breaking to fall—

Harvest astounds us, Earth,
her plenty spills, we rush—
Catch her
from the vine.

ALISTINE GLODINE

My name is Alistine. That means Little Alice in French. I never liked the name because I always have to spell it out for people. I was named for my grandmother on my father's side, Alistine Guerin from Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Since I've been up north and married to Harold, everyone calls me Ali.

My husband's name is Harold Thornton Coss. The Thorntons came from Chillicothe, Ohio. Before that they go way back to the Declaration of Independence. Matthew Thornton was the last one to sign. My husband is easy, like my father and grandfather. He's shy and likes me to do the talking. Zella Thornton was his mother's name. She was a big woman and possessive! The summer before she died of a heart attack, she and her husband, Dr. Coss, were coming east to visit us. Dr. Coss was a small-town doctor from Saunemin, Illinois. His first patient had a toothache so he laid him down on the floor and put his knee on his chest to hold him still and yanked his tooth out with a pair of pliers. But his wife, Zella, my mother-in-law, was a big woman and possessive. They were coming to New Jersey to meet their first grandchild, Thornton, our little baby boy. My mother-in-law was dedicated to finding fault. I thought I'll fix her. I planned to clean the house from top to bottom, starting with the basement on up through the attic. I didn't want her to have one thing to criticize me for. But they came two days early and she caught me in the basement with a bandana on my head looking like the wrath of God. She wanted to keep her two sons for herself. Harold was the oldest. She told him not to marry me because I was from New Orleans and that meant I was part colored. She never let up. But then the next summer she dropped dead from overweight and high blood pressure. My husband doesn't take after her at all. He's sweet and easy and likes to swim and play tennis. He's a good provider. He started out as a ceramics engineer in Lompoc, California, for the Celite Company our first two years of marriage. Then JM bought them out and transferred Harold east. He's a real company man. I didn't tell my daughter that we had met on a train, until after she married that rat. Oh, how I was licking my wounds while her husband's mother was licking her chops on their wedding day. She's too good for him. She works hard and he doesn't lift a finger around the house. I had always told my daughter that Harold and I were introduced, in order to set a good example. But she ended up with that rat. My poppa worked for the Southern Railroad. He was the master mechanic. Went to work at age seven when his father died running the sugar blockade during the Spanish-American War. In the winter my father carried a freshly cooked hard-boiled egg in each hand on the way to work to keep his hands warm. He got us free trips and after I was eighteen in the summer I'd get girl friends together—Nellie Mae, Louise, Ina, and my sister Clare—for trips to Galveston, El Paso, Los Angeles, and even New York City. One night we all got locked up in the Palisades Amusement

Park. The nightguard finally came along to let us out at three in the morning. Oh, we had fun on those trips. On the train to L.A., the windows open and the cinders flying, I met Harold in the club car. At the time he was engaged to a woman named Elizabeth. After we were married I asked him why he married me and not Elizabeth. He said it was because I had bigger breasts. My wedding dress was brown and I had bought it on sale. He said on our wedding night he hated brown. It was the only color he didn't like.

Momma liked Harold. He was her favorite in-law. Momma always said I liked my daughter best. "The girl's everything. The boy's nothing." But that was not accurate. I loved my little boy and four years later I wanted a little girl. When Clare arrived I couldn't believe my eyes. My own walking, talking real live doll. I had been sure I'd never have a girl. All her baby clothes were blue, her brother's. And strangers would lean over into the carriage and say, "What a darlin' little boy." I'd be so thrilled to say, "No, that's Clare Millicent." We had a boy's name picked out, William John after my poppa. There was such a flurry in the hospital to name her. I thought, Dixie or Dagmar. But Harold said, "No, no. Let's just name her after your sister." My son is a junior. We always called him Thornton to distinguish him from his father. When he got to high school he changed his name to Hal. He's an outdoorsman and a track star, and he was the most colicky baby. We never got any sleep, either one of us. The doctor had me waking him up for his four o'clock feedings like they did in those days. And I wasn't allowed to pick him up when he cried. My daughter escaped all that nonsense, but I've always wondered how those arbitrary feeding times affected my boy. Momma laughed when Dr. Spock changed his mind and said little children can eat again when they are hungry and sleep again when they are tired. She never did believe in four o'clock feedings.

Momma has always been my best friend. Oh, I had a lot of social friends, pot luck suppers, bridge parties. I always came home with the prize. But I was sick a lot and it was always my momma who came right up from New Orleans to help out with the children and take care of Harold. Momma and I corresponded every day. Her parents were from France, Lyons, and we'd correspond in French and talk in French in front of the children when we didn't want them to understand. Momma and I made sure they didn't learn any French when they were growing up. We wanted them to be all American. They were half yankee and half rebel and we wanted them to also be all American. My sister and I were close once we were grown up. When I was one and a half years old my sister was born and I was given to Granmere and Granpere to live with. And Nenaine, Momma's unmarried sister. She had a little hump on her back and never married. Granmere kept her for herself. She was sweet, sweet, sweet. The most giving person in the world. Nenaine was like a saint. Granmere was strict and she'd boss the pants off Granpere and treat him like a child. He ran a grocery store on Euterpe Street right around the corner from Melpomene where they lived and he was easy, easy, easy. Let the customers run up bills. Granmere raised Cain when she'd find out people didn't pay cash. "Mon Dieu, seigneur, appechez-moi!—My God in

Heaven, help my soul!" I never really understood why Momma gave me to live away from her. I'm told I was a very active child. Weekends I'd visit my parents and be so sad Sunday nights when Nenaine would take me back. When it was time to leave I'd hear Poppa singing my little sister to sleep. Granmere used to punish me by making me sit in a chair. One time she put the chair in the pantry and closed the door. Nenaine came and whispered to me through the keyhole not to be scared. I was not alone in being afraid of Granmere.

In spite of all those early years, I still consider Momma to be my best friend. She came out and rescued me in California when a doctor said I had spots on my lungs and put me in a sanitorium the first year I was married. There was nothing wrong. We found out he was crooked. He owned part of the sanitorium. I've been sick a lot of my life, though. When my children were six and ten I just couldn't go on any longer after a series of major operations. I broke down for almost a year. I've spent a good deal of my years recovering from surgery. Doctor's mistakes. So many doctors have made medical mistakes on me I couldn't begin to count them on one hand. Women's problems they call it. Keep cutting me open and making a mess. I've always been healthy in an everyday way—never had a cold or headache as far back as I can remember.

I taught English and memorized a lot of poetry. Some of my favorite recitations are from Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. "Surgeons must be very careful/When they take the knife!/Underneath their fine incisions/Stirs the Culprit—Life!" And of course, "How do I love thee, let me count the ways." I like to shop the sales and entertain with dinner parties. I have to nap each afternoon. My husband died when the children were sixteen and twenty years old. I moved back down south to live with Momma and Poppa. Then Poppa died six months after Harold. It was the saddest sight in the world. He said, "Go call Jo." He called her Jo. He said, "Josie, I'm played out. It's just going to be a few minutes and then I'll be gone. I'm going far far away, Jo, and you're never going to see me again. It's black black where I'm going." Momma and Nenaine said they'd move in with me, but they didn't. They went to live with my brother Bill, nine years younger than me.

When Bill was born you'd have thought the millennium had arrived. Jesus Christ himself. Everything was Bill, Bill, Bill. Nenaine told me when I'd gone to live with her and Granmere I used to introduce myself—"Hello, My name is Alistine. I'm two years old and I'm daddy's boy." Nine years later they got their real child—Bill.

Anyway, since my husband died I've gone back to teaching school—the lower grades as a substitute. I work every week in the winter. I know how to handle the little ones, but over third grade they give me trouble. So I only take calls for third grade or under. The children call me the lady with the blue hair. You know those rinses turn out a little dark sometimes on my prematurely grey hair. I was white by the time I was thirty. People called it platinum blonde like Betty Grable.

My daughter's at college—free. It's a land grant college and my son's gone to work in his father's company. I tell him he's got big shoes to

fill. Their father was a genius—the most wonderful man who ever walked the face of the earth. But I worry about my children without a father. He left me enough to give them each a college education. He said on his deathbed, “Alistine, you have enough to educate the children.” I got a good price for the house in New Jersey. An old economics professor here in New Orleans who’s always been sweet on me offered to invest it. I live very parsimoniously. Is that the word, sparingly, thrifty. Poppa watched every penny and I learned it from him. So I can give my children everything they need.

I live alone. I wouldn’t ever want to live with my children. My daughter and I write several times a week. Not every day as Momma and I did. But we’re close. I taught her how to drive a shift car in City Park. I was patient and determined she wasn’t going to get yelled and screamed at by some man like my husband did teaching me to drive. She is popular with boys. I tell her it’s just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as with a poor man. Love comes along later. She’s like me and needs to find someone to take care of her. Majoring in theatre, there’s nothing she can do with that. My son prefers his Aunt Clare. He lived with her so much when I was sick. That’s my fault. She’s more like his mother to him. He doesn’t have much to do with me. Everything’s Aunt Clare, Aunt Clare. Always throwing up to me the way Aunt Clare does things. Why can’t I be more like her.

Now Momma’s dead. Poor Momma. She suffered so at the end. Should have had a colostomy but they didn’t give her one. The last time I saw her in the hospital in Lafayette she said, “Ali, Ali, this is terrible. Do you think God is punishing me with all this suffering because I didn’t have all the babies he wanted me to have?” She had used a pessary, birth control. A young Catholic woman. She had been valedictorian of her class at the Sisters of Mercy convent. I wonder what she thought she’d do with her life. Her valedictorian address is in French and so full of good intentions. The next day Bill didn’t call me to tell me she had died. I walked into her hospital room and her bed was empty. Mattress stripped. No sign of Momma in the room. I almost collapsed. Thank God, Tommy was with me. Bill never called to tell me she died in the night. I found out my mother was dead by walking in to visit an empty hospital bed.

Tommy’s the man I married ten years after Harold died. He was a childhood friend from Abita Springs. Near the end Momma said to me, “Remember the swing on the front gallery at Abita, Ali. Is the swing still there? And the hammock on the other side?” We hadn’t had the cottage in Abita for years. Her mind was gone. Tommy used to wheel me around in my baby carriage. He was widowed. I knew his wife, Anne. I had been widowed for ten years living alone, and now there’s Tommy.

But Momma and Nenaine had gone to live with Bill. After Poppa died I bought a duplex house on Willow Street with the money from Martine Avenue and Momma and Nenaine were going to move in with me from Broad and Esplanade. They were getting too old to live alone. They were going to live upstairs because it was roomier and I would live downstairs, with a room for Clare when she came home from col-

lege for summers and weekends. Then momma said they'd live downstairs if I'd move upstairs so they wouldn't have stairs to climb. Then when I moved upstairs, they said I should rent out the downstairs and they'd move up with me. Then Bill offered for them to go live with him and Elise in Lafayette and of course Bill could do no wrong. The millennium had arrived again. So I moved back downstairs and rented out the upstairs. Then I sold the house and rented a small apartment in a big old fourplex on State Street in the Garden District. It had a wall of windows on one side of the living room. Ina, my best friend from Jackson Girls' School, told me how to fix up the place on a shoestring. My daughter loved to come home for weekends from time to time from Baton Rouge to date William Cunningham and George Sale. She could have married William Cunningham. He's a big doctor in New Orleans now. Or Armand LeBlanc who's vice-president of one of the biggest banks in New Orleans. We'd sleep on twin beds (only one bedroom and we'd share it) and whenever the phone rang at 7:00 A.M. on weekdays I'd place my hand on the receiver without picking up and we'd say together, "Hear it not, Duncan, for 'tis the knell, that summons thee to heaven or hell." And then I'd say, "Good morning," and hope to get a substitute teaching assignment for third grade or under—the lady with the blue hair. Momma had white white hair. It was long and full and silky right up to the end. She said, "When I die take Nenaine with you. Don't leave her alone here with Bill. Let her die in your arms." But I didn't. I should have. Nenaine died alone at ninety-eight. I should have listened to Momma. Nenaine was more like a mother to me when I was young during all those years with Granmere.

You know ever since I was a little girl I had wanted to be a nurse. But Poppa said no. His daughter was not going to be a nurse to strange men. He wouldn't hear of it. Said I could teach school and get married. They wanted to send me to Normal School—teacher's school. That's where my sister went. But I thought, I'll fix him. Ina and I went to Sophie B. Wright High together and one day we were going uptown through the Garden District on the St. Charles Belt streetcar. We passed Tulane University right across from Audubon Park and Sophie B. Newcomb College for women and I said, "Ina, Ina, what's that? What is that?" And she said, "That's the university." And I said, "Can I study to be a teacher there?" And we went and found out about it and we each attended Sophie B. Newcomb College together. We got Marie Lopez to go too. We were the poor outsiders. I carried my lunch in a paper bag because we couldn't afford to eat where the sorority girls went. And I never could invite any of them to my home. Nenaine and I were back with Momma and Poppa then because Granmere and Granpere had died. They lived down by the railroad near Jackson Barracks and the levee. But I got a B.A. degree in History and English and so did Ina in Art. And we had all those wonderful summer trips free on the railroad to Galveston, El Paso, and Los Angeles, where I met Harold, and even to New York City. I never liked teaching. I taught for one year and then met Harold on the train that summer. I hated teaching. Always wanted to be a nurse but Poppa wouldn't hear of it.

It's just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as with a poor man. Har-

old wasn't rich, but he was educated and a good provider. He aged well up to fifty-two when he died of cancer in 1952. He was a genius in his field—insulation. He planned the insulation for the first nuclear submarine, the *Nautilus*. And he had nine patents. Look at *Who's Who in Engineering*, 1948. My daughter—I was licking my wounds at her wedding (her mother-in-law was licking her chops)—I said to Clare on the way to the church, "Divorce him once you get that MRS. before your name. Every woman needs a handle on her pitcher. It's a man's world and you'll be more respected with an MRS. in front of your name." But she never listened to me. I told her I was in love with Neal Hartman. I met him that summer in Galveston. He held my face up to his with his two hands and told me how beautiful I was—that my heart's love was shining just for him. But I knew he'd come to no good. He gambled. I loved him but he'd be grief. And then there was Ferroherrera from Ecuador. He gave me those black velvet paintings from Ecuador that Clare has now. He wanted me to marry him in the worst kind of way and go back to live in South America. That's what I should have done. He's a millionaire dentist today living in Quito. We still correspond once or twice a year. I wrote to him when Harold died and he wrote back and said he'll always love me, his Alistinita. But Momma had said, "No, Quito, Ecuador is too far away for my little girl to be." Momma and Poppa didn't want me to leave New Orleans much less the country. That's who I should have married. There's a Ferroherrera statue right in downtown Quito. He sent me a postcard of it. There would have been no Clare and no Thornton and no his children. There would have been our children. Other children in the world. Maybe Momma was right when you look at the big big trouble those southern hemisphere countries are in today. The rich people down there keep the poor people too poor. We certainly learned our lesson with the New Deal. You can't have something for nothing if you're rich.

My daughter does exactly as she pleases. Never listens to me. After twelve years she divorced that rat. Did everything for him. Shopped, cooked, cleaned, took dictation, typed, drew his bath, ironed his suits and shirts, washed out his socks—things even Harold always did for himself. She waited on that man hand and foot. Thank God they never reproduced. She should have married William Cunningham. Then she'd be down here in New Orleans living close to me. Instead she's up north in New York City living with a girl friend. She works so hard. I tell her get married to a rich old geezer. You and Annlee can live together with him. Or become an executive secretary. Women need a man in this world. She's so positive. She thinks she knows it all. What's she going to do in her old age with no children? For age and want work while ye may. No morning sun lasts the whole day.

I helped her to go back and get another degree. She's a psychotherapist now and still mixed up in that theatre business she'll never make a dime from. She should be down here with me now that Tommy's dead. She told me a few years ago that she's a hermaphrodite—one of those women who lives with women. Whatever you call it. I told her I have all I can do just getting through the day. To deal with that one would take extra work talking to a psychiatrist. I have enough to do with my own people problems. And I don't sleep at night and my heart palpitates. I told her I was

sorry but I just can't work on understanding that one. I was too old. She should be married to William Cunningham and we could be living down here together in New Orleans.

Next thing you know she and her brother have me in New York in something called an adult home. My daughter's got some nerve making all these arrangements for me. I'm the mother. She's the daughter. I wanted to stay in New Orleans after Tommy died. After all, New Orleans is my home, even though I did live with Harold for twenty-nine years in the east. Harold is buried down there in the family vault out at Metairie with Momma and Poppa and Nenaine.

My son is happily married living in the southwest and providing me with the most beautiful granddaughter and grandson a woman could ever want. He's a naturalist and outdoorsman extraordinaire, far away from the kind of company life his father chose. And my daughter's friend, Annlee, is like a daughter to me. Now I have two girls. She is a Ph.D. professor of something or other and just wrote a book about that man who wanted to be president—the one who ditched the girl in the water. I asked Annlee if that was a made-up name. I told her my grandmother gave me a made-up middle name I never used. Glodine. What would I be sounding like with two made-up names. My daughter said, "Mother, you always told me Alistine meant little Alice in French." Well, I just made that one up a long time ago. Alistine Glodine. Can you imagine giving that name to a child? My Momma didn't have any say in the matter. I told Annlee she took my daughter away from me and she blushed. But that's all right. They're both my girls and I like living up here near them. Not with them, but near them.

My daughter says I did all right with what their father left me. I've saved my whole life for my old age because I've never wanted to live with my children. I can take care of myself now financially. I tell my daughter, save, save for your old age. No morning sun lasts the whole day. I'm sorry I never went to Europe. I had always wanted to see Notre Dame. I've been to Quebec City and Lake Louise and Banff and Yellowstone, where a bear scared my sister Clare half to death. She slept out on the porch of the cabin and in the morning she woke up with a big brown bear breathing into her face, a paw on each side of her head. She screamed and it ran. Was probably after some bacon we had packed and left out there. When Harold and I were first married we'd take my sister along on trips. She married late—one of Harold's friends from college. And my brother Bill would join us. We had a lot of fun in those days. But I never crossed the ocean.

I like being back up north near my girls. I have no one left in New Orleans. My daughter says I always have known how to get myself taken care of or some crazy thing like that. I told her it's time you know some facts. Don't tell Annlee or your brother's wife, but my grandfather on Poppa's side was not from Protestant Ireland. He was from southern Ireland. And Granmere and Granpere on my Momma's side were not from Lyons—they were from Gascony. I had never planned to tell her, but I thought I'll fix her. She's got some nerve minding my business. Making arrangements for me. She says I am her business, but that's all right. I tell her just remember, I'm the mother. You're the daughter.

ORANGES OUT OF SEASON

My mother would give me an orange, as big to me as an orange summer moon is now, and a little green lime which I'd name Baby and I'd help them set up housekeeping under this row of wooden shelving. One side of the fruitstand was the bedroom, one the living room, and one the kitchen. This front area here was the yard. The orange was Mama. Oh, I know it sounds silly, but that's why I say I been in this business almost half a century. You think I'm kidding? By the time I was five I worked after school, after *kindergarten*, dragging out bags of trash or empty crates. My father would give me a nickel for the afternoon. One day I asked for five pennies instead of a nickel for the gumball machine at Izzy's, the ice cream shop over there, across the street—see? between the cleaners and the bakery—and he started me off waiting on customers, making change.

Oh, my family's been here a long time, Sandy. Long before I took over and started hiring lazy babydykes like you. I pay you to help me and all you want is to hear stories about this place, the neighborhood. You know, people say all the time things are so different, but how do they say it? The more things change, the more they stay the same? Am I right? Yeah, the kids still come by, like I did, from the Sister school, in plaid pleated skirts and little white blouses. Can you believe I was ever that little? Um-huh, till I was about thirteen I was a regular shrimp like you. Then by the time I'm seventeen I'm five foot eight. Never did gain the weight to go with it. Look up there, middle of that next block, that's where I learned to shoot baskets. *Now* if I was seventeen and five-eight I'd probably get a scholarship to one of them Catholic girls' colleges snapping up the girl basketball players. So I'm teaching the little ones how to get snapped up. Yeah, I coach a team. Ten-, eleven-year-olds. Call themselves the New York Nukes. I know, I know, it's a crappy name. Don't even sound like a girls' team, but they voted for it. Give 'em more spunk, anyhow: can't beat the deadliest team in Queens. Am I right?

Oh, I got the fruitstand from my dad. Yeah, he died when I was twenty. I'm supposed to look just like him now my hair's gray. I stoop like him. From lifting all these crates *you* should be heaving. My mother died not much after that. I had to come in and help—if I hadn't, my mother would've killed herself trying to pick up the fruit out at Hunt's Point 4:00 in the morning, set up, run the store till 6:00 at night. She wouldn't have hung on the ten years she did. I was only supposed to be helping her. But, shit, she was sixty! She couldn't handle it. Yeah, I was born real late. She had seven before me. Practice makes perfect, you know! What—I'm not perfect? You're fired! How do you like that? Contradicting the boss. Here, let's at least fix up these pears. Poked half to death from these fussy housewives. Wait, that one's a mess, can't sell it, chuck it.

No, they were all girls. None of us was *expected* to help out here. I just liked it. Loved it, as a matter of fact. They sent me to business college after St. Andrews and I learned bookkeeping, so I worked a year in the city. On 44th St., why? No, she must work for a different company. She'd be up on the next block if she works for them. Yeah, I loved it too. But it wasn't home, if you know what I mean. I wanted to work here. But my father, he wasn't ready to retire. "What would I do?" he always asked when Ma mentioned it. Oh, and complaining he didn't have a son to take over the business. I *told* him I'd take it, but he thought I was going to be like my sisters and be a full-time mother. Can you believe it? Every damn one of them housewives on Long Island. What are *you* laughing at—you that I picked up from the gutter!?! Seven straight sisters and then me? You're right, it *is* funny. And they're all real short! A bunch of cackling midget hens! Stop it, stop it, Sandy, you're making me cry I'm laughing so hard. There, see, you dropped a pear—and here comes Mrs. Gonzalez. The rush is going to start, wait and see.



That wasn't bad, really it wasn't. This is only your first day, Sandy. Sometimes it's so slow I think I'm going bankrupt, then all of a sudden we get twice as many as that and I don't know how I'm going to handle it. That's why you're here, for all the good you're doing me. Did you see that big blonde with the short hair? Reminded me of Sophie, my old partner. No, no, I'm not going to tell you about her until we get some work done around here. What's to do? Lazy Brooklyn dyke. They didn't teach you to work over there? No wonder the Dodgers moved out. They were embarrassed to be from Brooklyn. Only kidding. I got nothing against Brooklyn. Just glad I was born in Queens. Come on, start hauling that fruit out from under the stands. No, no, the apples first. Here, put the green ones here, they got to pass them to get the eating apples, then they'll think of making pies. That's called merchandising. Sophie taught me that. Right side up, you backwards Brooklynite!

No, she was almost a real partner. Fought her off tooth and nail. She'd say, "Henrietta." (I was named for my father. They figured I was the last chance for a son. And Sophie always called me that when she was going to lecture me.) Anyways, she'd say, "Henrietta, you need vegetables in here. And to run your vegetables you need a partner." And I'd run her out of the store, even though she was working for me by then. This is where I met her, too, I tell you that? The delicious next, the red delicious. Or should we go green, yellow, red? No, use the contrast. Put up the red delicious. Then the yellow. Here comes the milkman. Sophie's the one got me to put in the milk and bread, too. Thank goodness. I put it in a whole year before Nicky, who runs the vegetable stand two doors down, came. The ladies got in the habit of buying here and Nicky had to give those items up after six months. Didn't Sophie gloat then.

Oh, she was gay alright. Sophie was, but I wasn't. Well, ckaay, maybe I was, but I was the last to know it. When you were nine? Impossible. Now, Sophie, maybe *she* could have come out that early. She was something else. I didn't know she was gay at first, but I knew she was real special.

First time I saw her my heart kind of heated up, you know how it is? What am I asking you. You're too young to know anything, you just *think* you know it all, smart aleck. Shut up, maybe you'll learn something. This is what I get, hiring a seventeen-year-old drop-out. What are you sitting on the orange crate for? You can't do no work if you fall and break your ass. That thing won't hold you. As a matter of fact, I'm going to put you on a diet starting now. When Kathy brings lunch around I'm going to tell her to lighten up on yours. Yes, Kathy that I was with at the bar. She always brings lunch. Before her lunch rush at the diner. Over on Roosevelt Avenue, right across from where you got off the subway. She's the cook there. Good cook. That's why I married her. Only kidding. Twenty-three years we been together. Well, you better believe it, because it's true. And that's something else I have Sophie to thank for. Learning to work hard at loving.

Anyway, I look up from this table of fruit we used to have right here, parallel to the front—it was all open then. I'd sit behind it to wait on customers. The scale was there, paper, the books, knives. It was my "office," but there was fruit displayed on it too, whatever was out of season, to catch the customers' eyes. That was my father's idea. He'd always call one thing out of season, even if he couldn't get anything that week that was really out of season. He thought the ladies would splurge on something special. And it worked. That week, I was using navel oranges. They're never really out of season if they grow in the right climate with the right care. But they were sure out of season for this neck of the woods. I'd cleaned off every one of them and they was sitting there shining: rough, bright orange balls, a surprise at Christmas time. And I'm leaning down behind them, doing the books for the day or something. It was a slow time of day and I look up through this orange kind of glow from being surrounded by the oranges and working on them and all and there's this short-haired blonde, almost as tall as me, with big gold hoop earrings. She was—misty looking—is the only way I can say it, with this orange haze around her and this real *physical* look about her. She looked like the word "sensuous" sounds. With these full lips like you'd have to kiss. And blue eyes, hungry looking, behind these almost matching blue glass frames.

What are you laughing at now, ignoramus? Remember we're talking 1957, over twenty years ago. People wore glasses like that then. Yes, even lesbians. Sure she was wearing a skirt. Women wore a lot of skirts in those days. Besides, she was visiting her grandmother. Sophie was on a Christmas layoff from the factory where she worked. A sewing machine operator. No, it was a lousy job. Hour after hour bent over the machine. One of those heavy industrial ones. Stitching leather. Now, that's a tough job. And getting paid lousy. She'd gotten fired a lot of places, that's why she was working there. But I didn't know that then. So she was shopping for her grandmother who was sick over Christmas. Sophie was, oh, caring. Do anything for you. Shopped here every day of her vacation, bringing her grandmother fresh fruit on her way from the subway.

Well, of course we got to talking. I can feel now the two oranges I picked up and played with while we talked that first day. I was nervous

and I juggled them, dropped them and just ran my fingers over them the whole time she was there. The skins were textured, and all the tiny grooves and pits and ridges were smooth and pleasant to find. I remember my father when I was little used to hawk the fruit on the sidewalk like when he started as a peddler. "Awrengis ow-ta *seezon*," he used to call. They'd think I was crazy if I did that now, but sometimes I wish I could. I guess that's just what they call nostalgia. Hey, you're goofing off again. And you got me doing it too. Naw, not yet. Kathy won't be here for another hour. What a teenager. You think about nothing but your stomach. I been up since 3:00, you know, and ain't eaten since then. Eat some fruit, you're hungry. Careful, gently—don't bruise the other bananas in the bunch, the ladies won't buy them. One big stomach at your age. That's all you ever think of. Alright, alright, *almost* all, you dirty little dyke. Am I right?

What did we talk about? I guess we talked about the neighborhood. That day. I don't know for sure. Mostly I remember what she looked like and the oranges. Touching them was like touching her. I never thought of that then. I mean, she didn't just come out and say, "I'm gay, come home with me." No, we must have talked about the neighborhood because she'd been visting her grandmother here all her life. She was a few years older than me, maybe twenty-three, twenty-four. Poor thing, she was from Brooklyn, too, just across the bridge, what's that section called? What do you mean, what do I have against Brooklyn? I'm teasing you, you ragamuffin diesel-dyke. You're so touchy! Hit me again and I'll make you wait on Mrs. Muller. She's rough, man. Oh, she'll plow right over our stuff, leave a mountain of poked, peeled, and smashed fruit and every display *undisplayed*. Oh, I think that's what I'll do to you, just to see you apologize to her after *she's* made a mess and bought half a dozen of the eggs we got on special and absolutely nothing else. If she ever bought enough to make it worthwhile you wouldn't mind what a kvetch she is, but she does that to every one of us: Nicky, Frankie the fish man, the butcher. Even poor Nora who runs the florists across the street—on the corner, see? She even manages to paw her flowers and leave them wilting, though Nora doesn't have to put up with her every day.

Now Nora's nice, too. She and me got together a long time ago, after Sophie left and before I met Kathy. But she couldn't handle it. Ran off and got married a couple of months after we broke up, divorced him three kids later and moved back to the neighborhood to get fat. That's her uncle's shop, Nora just runs it. Salt of the earth. She has us over for coffee a lot. She's the kind of person who's only happy single.

You want to know why Sophie left already? I didn't even tell you why she stayed yet. She did come back after that first day, I bet you guessed. Well, anyway, every day we'd talk a little longer and pretty soon she was telling me she was gay. I guess I backed off and got kind of cool because she didn't come by the next day. Or the day after. And then it was Sunday and we were closed. I took my mother to church on Sundays in those days. Then out to eat someplace. That gave her a thrill. Usually we just went to the diner, but you'd think it was Lindy's or someplace the way she got so excited. That's how I got to know Kathy, taking my mother to the diner. That Sunday I took her to a little Italian place, not

there anymore. Tiny, stuck under the El. Trains rumbled your teaspoon. I loved it. Italian places always seem so exciting to me. Romantic. Chianti bottles on the table. Red and white tablecloths. The whole bit. I caught myself being jumpy that day, though. Looking up every time the door opened. I was looking for Sophie in the only romantic place I knew. It scared me, but it made me realize I missed the big blonde queer. That was a funny feeling. Like the time me and my best friend in eighth grade, Ana, from Hungary, held hands during a movie in the school auditorium. *The Man Without a Country*, it was. Don't ask me why. Maybe because she was foreign and feeling like she didn't have a country. But that wasn't what I was thinking about. Am I right?

So the next day she comes by again, all bouncy like she never left and I say, "I thought you had to go back to work?"

"Decided not to," she says, just like that.

"How you going to live?" I ask. "Moving in with your grandmother?"

"Maybe," she answers, looking mysterious, almost like she knew what I was thinking in that Italian restaurant. And she takes off. Well, at the time my mother was still working with me and that day believe it or not she decides to fall. On a banana peel of all things. One of the bananas in that shipment was rotten and slimy and she dropped it when she took it off the bunch, then forgot about it waiting on a customer. She used to wait on the ladies those days and I did your work. So anyway, to make a long story short, she's in the hospital and then home for a long time with a broken hip. You know how older people's bones are. I didn't know it then, but she was never going to get better. Pneumonia, you know, and the whole route. Had too damn many kids if you ask me. Not that I'm not grateful that she didn't stop.

So Sophie hears this the next day when she comes by. Then around time for the rush, which is coming up now if it don't start snowing any minute. Don't it smell like snow? Come here, stick your nose out in the air. Oh, you're chicken, afraid of a little cold. I'll take you down to Hunt's Point some morning with me. It's *cold* out *then*. So Sophie shows up at rush time. Just hanging around when I'm going crazy. And I see she's starting to leave. Well, you know I didn't want that to happen.

"You want to help out?" I yell.

She walks over to where my mother's apron is hanging. One of those bibbed, white ones like I'm wearing, and starts waiting on customers, talking up a storm, pushing fruit like she owned the place. I'm amazed. After, I asked her did she ever work in a market before. "Sure," she says. "My uncle's got a candy store. I worked at the fountain for years."

"But how do you know enough about fruit to handle this?"

"I made it up," she says, winking.

You know our sales went up like crazy with her there? Cause of course she started coming around every day for the rush. Wouldn't take a cent. After about two weeks of this I told her I wouldn't let her go on bringing more money into the store without getting paid. "So make me your partner," she says.

It was so promising. I mean, I said no to the partnership at first, but I knew it was worth a try. Sophie had so much to give. And I think at that point I would have paid her just to stay around. She made me laugh so much. I really had a crush. No, it was more than that. I loved her. As a friend. Real deep. You know plums? The deep purple ones always with a thin cloud over their skins—like royalty in lace? Well, that's how I felt about Sophie. She moved me, you know? Way inside. It was warm just being with her. I felt like we could make anything work, the two of us.

Anyway, to get back to it, she asks me to make her my partner. Her grandmother will even put up money for her. Seems she's been talking to her about it. I don't want to change my father's way of doing things and Nicky, the veggie man up the street, he just opened a few months before and I like him, I don't want to cut him out. But Sophie, she works on me and finally I say to her, okay, wishing, I think, I was giving in to something else, "Okay, bring in a couple of veggies. Just a couple. Maybe potatoes and onions. Something we ain't going to lose our shirts on. And no partnership. Let me see how we do. Anything you bring in extra you get a percentage on. And we'll go on from there."

Well, Sophie went at it like her life depended on it. Later, I found out that it did. She came with me to Hunt's Point every morning whether we needed the potatoes or not. Just to "see how the market's doing," she'd say. Of course, it was only a matter of time before she'd be running over to me with a deal on stringbeans or a deal on squash. You know. Sucking me into it because she knew I couldn't resist the bargains. And it wasn't long either before she brought this little girl into the stand and introduced her to me. "My Sweetie," she called her, though I don't know why when her name was already Cookie. She was about nineteen, scrawny and real femme. Black hair teased up like a pineapple top, eyebrows ripped out and drawn on again in incredible arches, white, ghoulish lipstick. Only about five foot. I swear, she looked like a little kid at Halloween dressed up like Snow White's wicked witch or whatever she was. But Sophie, big Sophie who usually dressed in black, from her pointed, ankle-high black boots, to her short, belted black vinyl jacket, would parade her little Cookie around the neighborhood so proudly. They moved to the neighborhood to make it easier for Sophie to go with me to Hunt's Point.

Well, yeah, Sandy, I was jealous and I wasn't jealous. Sophie was so proud of Cookie, but also she was so—butch, like she owned her, you know? I felt real deep about her, but I didn't want to be *owned* by her or by anyone. That's why I wasn't married like my sisters. It was exciting for me to know I'd be with her every day and I guess we kind of, maybe teased each other because it gave us a good feeling, but, you know, I was convinced I wasn't gay because I didn't want to live with Sophie or to take her away from Cookie. I mean, Sophie used to tell me about these butches fighting over femmes and all that and I knew I wouldn't fit into it. You, you're lucky, since the liberation movement you don't have to be butch or femme and nobody thinks twice about it. Right up till Kathy I tried to be like a man. What are you laughing at? Sure I was butch.

When you're tall and not pretty or nothing, that's what you are. As soon as I came out I went out and bought myself a pair of boots just like Sophie's. Only brown. Do you believe that? Right, it *is* kind of sad. But so is the shape these bins are in. Here, you're finished with sweeping. Straighten that fruit out while I get the bookwork started. Oh, and we got to get this money to the bank before it closes. What time is it? That's good, after the rush we'll just get dribs and drabs of customers till supper-time.

Hmm. Quiet? I'm not being quiet. Just concentrating on these numbers. Yeah, I can answer a question while I work. What? How come I got no vegetables now? I don't know. I was happy when the store was a fruit-stand. I didn't really need a lot more money and after Sophie I had no taste for veggies. I was never really comfortable with them. People mess them up. Pour sauces on them, slather them in butter or sauce. Fruit is a miracle. You might have to peel it or wash it, but when that's done it's ready, perfect and whole for you to taste, juices most likely running down your chin, your eyes closed from the tartness or a groan coming out of your mouth from the sweetness. Hey—Mrs. Marseglia! Look sharp, Sandy, they're starting again. Eh, Mrs. Suarez, look at what we got, your favorite: peaches! Yeah, and nice ones. They're going to cost you, out of season, and still I won't make nothing! But I couldn't resist when I thought of how much you love them. And, lookit, I got this here basket of spoiled ones real cheap for your pies—you like? I thought so. Hey, Sandy, walk Mrs. Suarez and her peaches home, will you? She can't carry all this.



Yeah, I know she's great, my Kathy. But ain't she a good cook, too? Where else have you worked where you get lasagne for lunch, huh? Now you know why you got to work hard, I want you to earn what you're getting. And speaking of earning it, how'd you like that Mrs. Muller? Boy, didn't Kathy ever laugh when she seen you following Muller around. I'd love to see her in the diner. Kathy says there she's completely different. Thinks she's queen. Orders all sorts of stuff she hardly eats and tips like crazy. Don't even ask for a doggy bag. I can't figure it. Yeah, I think you're right, she must use everything she saves to eat out. Once a week she goes, Tuesday nights. Oh, I could go for a nap now, but we better clean up this mess or we'll never get out of here later. Am I right?

Sophie? Oh, yeah. Here's a broom. You want to know what happened to her. Ah, I don't even want to tell you. She just disappeared. All of a sudden, no Sophie in the morning. I drove off to Hunt's Point expecting her to come running after me like she had a few times when she overslept. But she didn't. And she never came to the stand. Her veggies wilted. Her potatoes grew eyes—luckily, since mine were wearing out looking for her. Sorry, vegetables make me corny. Ha! When her section, which had grown quite a bit from two items, began to smell, I just dumped it, cleaned it out and left it empty. It looked like I felt: abandoned. I'd been up to her and Cookie's place a couple of times for dinner. They were very uncomfortable evenings with Sophie playing the loving husband and tough butch.

Anyway, I knew from those visits where she lived and I went up there the first day she was missing.

Cookie was there. She was a mess. "She tried to kill me!" she whined when I asked what happened. "Your good friend did this," she yelled, pointing to a gap in her teeth. "And this," she pointed with her long red nails to her black eyes and bandages. I must have looked as if I didn't believe her because she started screaming, "Get out of my house! Go ask your friend, your good old partner what she did. I didn't do nothing. You tell her that, closet case. Now you can have her all to yourself." Of course I'd never heard that term and I was scared at all the yelling Cookie was doing at me. I mean, I was only looking for my friend. Anyway, she scared me so much I forgot to ask where to find her and I was too scared and embarrassed to go back. But I was even more desperate to know what had happened.

Luckily, Sophie had mentioned the name of the bar they went to most. I knew it was in the Village and that Sunday I hopped a subway and went down there. I found a phone book and looked the name up and then asked about five people along the way how to get there. What a little alleyway it was in. I didn't know what I'd find inside, but there were just a few short-haired women sitting around. The place was pretty dingy after being outside on a bright winter afternoon. I ordered a beer. The women ignored me. I mean, I looked just like them. So I asked the bartender, a hard-faced, good-looking woman who wore her hair in a pompadour. "Sophie? You a friend?" she looked at me with a real suspicious look. "We don't want nothing to do with Sophie, do we guys?" she said walking over to the butches. One of them got off her stool and hitched up her black denims. I felt like I was watching a Western, Sandy, I mean it. I remember all their words so good because it was like watching a play in slow motion. This one says, "Who're you?" and lights a cigarette. Then she stands there with it hanging out of her mouth. Finally they told me that Sophie was probably almost across the street from the bar at the Women's House of Detention.

I practically ran out of the bar, really thankful I wasn't gay. You're not laughing this time, Sandy, what's the matter, you don't like this story? You're right, it doesn't have a very happy ending for Sophie. I found an entrance and was told that Sophie wasn't there anymore. She'd been "violent" and got shipped to Bellevue. Well, I thought, at least it's just Bellevue, glad it wasn't the big state hospital, Creedmore. But when I ever got there . . . I hit visiting hours and got directed up to her ward. You've got to go through these heavy doors and all these guards or nurses or whatever they are check you out through thick glass and by the time I got to the lounge where I had to wait and saw first the depressed, wandering, bedraggled women, I was ready to crack up. I felt physically ill to know that strong, beautiful Sophie was locked up with them. I wondered, too, why they let her be with all these women if she was supposed to be so violent and had persuaded myself that it was all some temporary problem already resolved, when I saw why they could trust her.

Sophie was sagging. She shuffled over to me and gave me a brave little

smile, looking like she had a mouthful of novocaine. Then she sat as if she was exhausted. Drugs, I thought, finding an explanation for everything; Sophie's on drugs and they're going to get her off! But, no. Sophie was on some powerful drugs on purpose, to keep her calm. She told me what happened. Cookie was spending too much time with another butch. Sophie beat her up, didn't even realize how bad. She hung her head and shook it slowly, but didn't seem to have the energy to *feel* bad. Somebody called the cops because it would just cause more trouble to have another butch defend Cookie and they thought she might be hurt too bad for them to handle. The cops locked Sophie up because she had a record. Of beating people up, being in fights. That's why she lost so many jobs, she told me, I guess thinking that I knew more than I did about her. Worse, she'd been beating on Cookie for a few weeks. "I was good a long time, Hen," she pleaded with me as if I could make it better. "Ever since we started, you and me. I figured with a hand in a business I could straighten out and fly right. I had a great partner, a great little woman, and a great job. I could respect myself, you see? I was like everybody else. Nobody could put me down. I wasn't just a misfit, a queer, no more."

"Then why didn't you keep it up?" I asked her.

"Cookie was making eyes at this chick. I thought she was going to leave me. I was scared it was all going to fall through." Her black clothes, the same ones I guess that she was wearing when she was arrested, looked grey, were wrinkled, and there was blood here and there on them.

"Just 'cause she looked at someone else?"

"I warned her. She talked to her on the phone, she saw her at the bar. I warned her how it would be. She didn't listen to me. She didn't stop. She didn't care." Sophie cried, Sandy. I couldn't take it. She was always laughing. "I can't explain it, Hen. It's my pride. Everybody'd know if she left me. I couldn't face them all. I couldn't face you. I had to show them I could control things. That she wanted me most. She did like me best, you know."

Sophie's crying and talking kept getting louder and a male nurse came to lead her back to her room, while another nurse told me that it wasn't good for Sophie to be upset. I'd have to leave. She said there wasn't anything I could do. I left my address and number. I don't know if they never gave them to her so she wouldn't get upset or if Sophie was ashamed to get in touch. Anyway, she never did. Hey, you better let go of my hand. There's a customer at the door. You wait on her. I don't want to just now.

That was quick. What did she want, just milk? Yeah, I saw Sophie once more. No, leave the rest of the work for a minute. Why am I telling this whole story to a tough little dyke like you anyway? Because you're so tough? What does tough get you? What it gets you is Sophie. Or a life like hers. She thought being gay meant she was no good. She had to prove herself and she thought it took acting like a man to measure up. It's not hard to see things her way. In this world all we're told is that a dyke is

shit. We're all perverts and there's laws against us. Oh, god, what the world does to us. What it did to Sophie. Am I right?

Anyways, Kathy and me went to a bar out on the Island a few years ago to celebrate one of our birthdays or something. We were sitting watching the women dance. I must have seen her out of the corner of my eye without knowing it because I was already thinking of her. I often think about her in the bars anyway and this time I was wondering if I'd taken her on as a partner whether she would have felt she had more of a stake in it and maybe felt better and not started fighting again. We were sitting watching the women dance—we only dance the slow ones now, being old, you know, kid—and the song stopped, the floor cleared, and there she was, standing at the bar in her old pose. The old Sophie stand where she looks like a Texan who just struck oil. I was so glad to see her I told Kathy and started to get up.

Kathy put her hand on my arm and kept watching Sophie. I looked at her too and watched her order and down three shots in a row. Then she picked up a beer chaser. She turned toward us. She was wearing a hokey black leisure suit and boots like the old ones only square-toed with stacked heels. But she looked so washed out. Like a stick person someone had hung a stiff new suit on. I wondered if she was dying of cancer. She looked like her vegetables looked after she left and they started to rot. I looked back at Kathy and decided to get drunk. We were halfway there anyway. But I couldn't stay away. In a little while I went over to the bar, knowing Kathy was there if I needed her. Oh, I'd always wanted to touch Sophie, but now when I reached out to do it I pulled my hand away because she was repulsive to me. But for the sake of what she'd meant to me I stood there till she looked around. Her lively clear eyes were cloudy. They didn't show any light at all. I wondered if I had made a mistake and this wasn't Sophie. But when I told her who I was she kind of started, patting me on the back in a hearty manner and talking real loud, introducing me to the people at the bar. I could tell this was the nicest thing that had happened to her in a long time by the way she carried on. It was like she was showing all the people at the bar that she really did have a friend and a life beyond them. I wasn't sorry, I didn't regret having come over. It was the least I could give her, the first woman I had loved, the woman who really brought me out, without touching me.

We went back to my table and I introduced her to Kathy. My warm, loving Kathy who told me later that she felt a chill when Sophie pressed her hand. But the night is wavy in my mind, like there's a screen of heat between me and it. I guess that's my emotions, huh Sandy? Sorry about you having to get the customers. At least there's not many.

So she sat there and we told her about our life, our great love and how peaceful we feel; and about the neighborhood and the business. She smiled and nodded. She asked questions. But, Sandy, she wasn't *there*. I was sure of it, that she hadn't heard a thing we'd said, when we asked her what she'd been doing. "Well," she said, her lips just big now, kind of slack,

not full anymore, "they sure cured me. Cured me of love. I ain't been with a lady for these many years." I couldn't tell if she spoke with bitterness or not. "But I'm still gay," she boasted. "They can't take my gayness away from me. Still spend my time in the bars. Read all the new gay books and magazines. Things have changed. Sometimes I wonder if I've changed. But I don't take no chances. I stay out of trouble. I don't hit nobody no more. 'Cause you know," she warned, trying to look wise, "if you love, you hurt. Ain't no way around that."

I don't remember how Kathy got me out of that bar. Sophie broke my heart. Oh, it still hurts. My partner. My real sister, not like the hens, Sandy. My real big sister. Couldn't I have saved her? Kathy says no, she was too far gone into it even back when we met. I was still looking for myself then. She would've taken me under with her, taught me her ways. Kathy says I should thank my lucky stars I came out my own way. I know she's right.

Hey, are you crying? That's okay, little dyke, I cried too. Sophie's sad, but I figure without her, maybe my life couldn't have been so good as it is. Am I right? It's like everything here in my fruitstand. It all grows, right? Some is sweet, some sour. Life ain't always sweet to us. A lot of it is sour because we don't get much sun. Sophie came along in an ice age, as far as sunlight goes. And she didn't know how to help herself grow. Knowing what she went through, I worked at being different.

Speaking of sun, it's going down. Look, you let those Sister school kids make a mess in the nuts. Shells all over the floor. Better get the broom. Ahhh, I'm stiff. It gets harder to stand up from these crates every day. Clean out the scales, too, will you? Hey—here comes that good-looking cook from the diner done for the day! Hi, Kath, what's cooking? Besides you being tired of that joke. The kid? She'll do fine. Cares about the fruit, real gentle with it. Real gentle.

WITCHES

o how i have dreamed in the factorylines
spells of engines, the pulse
of blood along the belt
hands of women passing down black gears, leaves
& potions into flesh-boxes,
into conscious trucks roaring into night
i have dreamed women
enchanting factories, rubbing pistons into
bizarre animals, fire-animals
who leap around, sparks catching among clear eyes
steel energies rising in fire,
returning to ritual oil
& black space

*for women's bodies are
the machines that run the world,*
as witches leap
& dance on glittering joints,
now gone wild

& switchboards tying voices into
magic knots, the dark hum of the typewriters
in the tranced buildings
when women open drawers
white hares jump out, & are not gentle
or imaginary, papers squirm with worms of letters
in the tall cabinets
this sinister beginning
of a new business, women's deft hands
shredding documents of snow
from the cold roofs, & receptionists on
the ground floor
revolving doors into a strange world
*for women's minds are the
working order of life,*
as witches neatly bind
the right name to the clean paper, the paper
to the wind's spine
now spinning crazily

& waitresses at their stations
beginning to fly,
disks of plates & tables lifting the air like
cyclones, & dark whirring hats
of models blocking out the sun, beginning to drip
like blood in the posed streets
maids with rags & brooms rush to distribute
the red colors, vixen blood
doe blood, cow blood
menstrual blood offered as samples
in the supermarket, & women
at gas station pumps fill up cars & pockets with
it, & clean the windows of eyes rolling thru
with spit
& the whorls of their fingers
 for women's blood is the
 fuel of earth, & the heavy whirl
 of clouds
& dynamos & wheels of stars that witches run,
 growing closer, louder

POWER AND HELPLESSNESS IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

*A strong woman is a woman in whose head
a voice is repeating, I told you so,
ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch,
ballbuster, nobody will ever love you back,
why aren't you feminine, why aren't
you soft, why aren't you quiet, why
aren't you dead?*

—Marge Piercy, "For Strong Women," from *The Moon Is Always Female**

Really good women, really "nice" women, really sisterly women, are dead women.

Well, no. Nobody literally expects millions of us to drop down *ker-flop* clutching flowers to our bosoms like Elaine the Lily Maid of Astolat, and yet I wonder. Women are supposed to make other people feel good, to fill others' needs without having any of our own—this is the great Feminine Imperative. Such self-suppression amounts to the death of the self. Why demand such an impossibility?

All oppressed people must be controlled. Since open force and economic coercion are practical only part of the time, ideology—that is, internalized oppression, the voice in the head—is brought in to fill the gap. When people discover their own power, governments tremble. Therefore, in addition to all the other things that are done to control people, their own strength must be made taboo to them. Vast numbers of men can be allowed to experience some power as long as they expend their power against other men and against women—a desirable state of affairs since it keeps men (and men and women) from cooperating, which would be a grave menace to the powers that be. Therefore the Masculine Imperative is less severe than the Feminine one.

The Masculine Imperative means that men avoid the threat of failure, inadequacy, and powerlessness—omnipresent in a society built on competition and private property—by existing *against* others.

But the Feminine Imperative allows of no self-help at all. We exist *for* others.

But *women* are also terrified by female strength, *women* judge success in women to be the worst sin, *women* force women to be "unselfish," *women* would rather be dead than strong, rather helpless than happy.

Feminist women, too.

If you've been forbidden the use of your own power for your own self, you can give up your power or you can give up your self. If you're effective, you must be so for others but never for yourself (that would be "selfish"). If you're allowed to feel and express needs, you must be powerless to do anything about them and can only wait for someone else—a man, an institution, a strong woman—to do it for you.

*Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Copyright (c) 1980 by Marge Piercy.

That is, you can be either a Magic Momma or a Trembling Sister.

Magic Mommas are rare and Trembling Sisters are common; the taboo is so strong that it's safer to be totally ineffective, or as near to it as is humanly possible. Moreover, election to the status of Magic Momma requires some real, visible achievement, which, in a male-dominated society, is rare. Nonetheless, every feminist group contains at least one Magic Momma; success being entirely relative, *somebody* can always be elevated to MM status. (If canny group members, aware of this possibility, refuse to do, say, or achieve anything, they can be chosen for past achievement, or smaller and smaller differences in behavior can be seized on as evidence of Magic Momma-hood.) Since we are all struggling with the Feminine Imperative, one of the ways achieving women combat the guilt of success is by agreeing to be Magic Mommas.

MMs give to others—eternally.

MMs are totally unselfish.

MMs have infinite time and energy.

MMs love all other women, always.

MMs never get angry at other women.

MMs don't sleep.

MMs never get sick.

If MMs don't fulfill the above conditions, they feel horribly, horribly guilty.

MMs know that they can never do *enough*.

Like the Victorian mother, the Magic Momma pays for her effectiveness by renouncing her own needs. But these don't go away. The MM feels guilt over her achievements, guilt over not doing more (in fact, this is the common female guilt over not doing everything for everyone), and the steadily mounting rage of deprivation, as well as the added rage caused by having to feel guilty all the time.

Meanwhile the Trembling Sister has plenty to be enraged about too. Having avoided the guilt of being effective, she's allowed to feel and express her own needs, but she pays for these "advantages" by an enforced helplessness which requires that somebody fill her needs for her, since she's not allowed to do so herself.

The trouble is that nobody can.

No matter how much *being taken care of* the TS manages to wangle out of others, it is never enough. For being taken care of is exactly what she does not need. It reinforces her helplessness, while what she really needs is access to her own effectiveness—and that is something no one can give to another person.

The Trembling Sister, insisting on being given what she doesn't need and can't use, becomes more and more deprived, and more and more enraged. The Magic Momma, enraged at her enforced guilt and similar enforced deprivation, sooner or later fails to meet the Trembling Sister's needs. She may become ill or reveal some human flaw. She may withdraw, or criticize, or get angry. If MM-hood has been bestowed on her without her knowledge and consent, she may not know what's expected of her and may "sin" in ignorance.

The Trembling Sister can tolerate achievement in women only when such achievement is “unselfish”—i.e., accompanied by visible giving to everyone else and divested of visible satisfaction—and remember, it’s precisely her own effectiveness that she’s suppressing. She now has the unbearably enraging experience of being (apparently) abandoned by someone who is (apparently) enjoying the very sort of effectiveness she has made inaccessible to herself. The Magic Momma, already angry from years of self-deprivation which have turned out to be useless (since nothing she does ever satisfies either the TS or her own conscience) has the unbearably enraging experience of ingratitude and complaint from someone for whom she has worked hard and “sacrificed everything.”

Worse, neither can justify her rage, since our (usually false) social assumption that people cause their own failures happens, in both their cases, to be perfectly true. At the same time both feel their rage to *be* justified, since—according to the Feminine Imperative—the MM is right to deprive herself and the TS right to be helpless.

Put the MM and the TS together and you get the conventional female role.

You also get trashing.

Trashing in the feminist movement has always proceeded from “below” “upwards,” directed by the Trembling Sister (that is, those who’ve adopted the TS position) at the self-elected (or merely supposed) MM. The hidden agenda of trashing is *to remain helpless and to fail*, whatever the ostensible motivation. The payoff is to Be Good (though miserable). The TS/MM scenario is predicated on the unrealistic ascription of enormous amounts of power to one side and the even more unrealistic ascription of none at all to the other. It assumes that hurting another woman’s feelings is the worst thing—the very worst thing—the most unutterably awful thing—that a woman can do. In a world where women and men are starved, shot, beaten, bombed, and raped, the above assumption takes some doing, but since the MM/TS script requires it, it gets made. (The script also assumes that the MM has no feelings, or if she does, hurting *them* is a meritorious act.)

MMs do less harm; they can work themselves to death or—paralyzed with guilt—do nothing. Or they can encourage other MMs’ guilt or fail to discourage TS’s expectations of MMs. But discouraging a TS’s expectations of an MM is an enterprise fraught with risk, as many feminists know to their cost.

What to do?

Both parties need the confidence that self-love and self-assertiveness are not evil. The MM needs to learn that feelings of guilt are not objective political obligations; the TS needs to learn that feeling intensely conflicted about power has nothing to do with objective helplessness. The MM needs to be helped. The TS needs not to be helped.

No one originally takes either position of her own free will. The Feminine Imperative is forced on all of us. But in adulthood, and certainly within a feminist community, a woman who remains in either position is her own prisoner. The women’s community as a mystically loving band of emotional weaklings who make up to each other by our kindness and

sweetness for the harshness we have to endure in the outside world is a description that exactly characterizes the female middle-class sub-culture as it's existed in patriarchy for centuries—without changing a thing. This is not a revolutionary movement but a ghetto in which anyone seen as having achievement, money, or power is cast as a Magic Momma, whose function is to make up to everyone else for the world's deprivation and their terror of effectiveness. This is impossible. So the requirement becomes *to make others feel good* all the time, an especially seductive goal in times of political reaction when activity directed outward at the (seemingly) monolithic social structure is not only frustrating but frighteningly dangerous. So honesty goes by the board, hurt feelings are put at a premium, general fear and paralysis set in, and one by one any woman who oversteps the increasingly circumscribed area of what's permissible is trashed. Eventually, after the demons of success and effectiveness have been banished, and all the female villains who made everyone else feel miserable have left or been silenced, what happens?

The group disintegrates.

The Feminine Imperative has been faithfully served. The enemy has been driven from the ranks. Feminism has been destroyed.

Some revolutionary proposals:

Self-sacrifice is vile.

Martyrdom cults (like that surrounding Sylvia Plath), which link failure, death, and female approval, are abominable.

Anyone who ascribes enormous success, money, or power to any woman—certainly any feminist—is daydreaming.

“Uncritical support” is a contradiction in terms.

There is a crucial distinction between the personal and the political. The former leads to the latter but not automatically or without hard work.

Women are not beginners at art or politics; we need to recover our forerunners, not remain in a socially and self-imposed infancy.

Public, political activity is crucial for a political movement.

Demands for the right “tone” in women's interactions are like those statements made to us by men about *our* tone, i.e., “I would've listened to you women if only you'd been ladylike.”

Political theory is crucial for a political movement. I favor the incorporation of class analysis into feminism (*not* vice-versa) but any way of dealing with political relations between male groups will do. Unless (like J. Edgar Hoover about Communism) you think all we need to know about contemporary patriarchy is that we're agin it.

What makes the MM/TS scenario so stubborn is the hidden insistence that a woman cannot, must not, be allowed to use her power on her own behalf. Our society runs on self-aggrandizement for men and self-abasement for women; talk of self-love terrifies men (for whom it means admitting interdependence and emotionality) while women can only expect that I'm recommending brutality and callousness.

One remedy would be to remember Cicely Tyson's TV portrayal of

Harriet Tubman.* Biographers are always surprised when women like Tubman “sacrifice” their personal lives (or so the biographers assume) for a “cause.” That is, they interpret such women’s actions in terms of the Feminine Imperative. But to be General Moses was no Victorian self-sacrifice, any more than Cicely Tyson (in my opinion, the best living performer in the theatre, uncontainable in a conventionally superficial role) sacrificed something she really wanted to do in order to do her duty by playing Harriet Tubman. When Harriet Tubman said that God wanted her to lead her people to freedom, she was not submitting her will to another’s but arrogating to herself the authenticity and truth of her God, not losing herself but uniting herself with her own transpersonal dimension. Viewers who saw Tyson tuck her chin down in maidenly shyness and whisper, “Momma and Daddy, the last thing I want to do is cause you to worry,”—and then burst forth in fire, “But GOD—” knows that they have not seen anything remotely like self-sacrifice, either on the character’s part or the actress’s. An action may be hard, unpleasant, dangerous, the salvation of others—and heroically self-creating.

Nor is there anything wrong with that unless you believe that human selves—especially female selves—are intrinsically bad, or that we are a lousy species.

To insist that women challenge their own fear of effectiveness and their own guilt for behaving effectively, to insist that we both behave honestly and responsibly *and* risk hurting others’ feelings (which is hardly the worst thing in the world) is emphatically to disobey the Feminine Imperative. It’s selfish. It isn’t sisterly. It isn’t “nice.”

But it is, I’m beginning to suspect, *the* feminist act.

I haven’t, needless to say, written the above out of pure, altruistic concern for the women’s community. And I can’t envision any of it affecting those women so alienated from their own power that they feel desperately that they must have a Magic Momma (somewhere, somehow) at all costs, even the cost of being miserably helpless. But there are many women who don’t feel helpless themselves, yet feel guiltily (a) that everyone else must be, and (b) they don’t want to risk the possibility that these totally helpless and vulnerable people may create a very nasty scene. (Quite a contradiction, that!) I also violently resent being first elevated to mythological status and then slammed for it. And the insistence on this person’s hurt feelings and that one’s tremendous vulnerability and the exquisite fragility of everyone (which doesn’t prevent some of them kicking up a very nasty fuss when they don’t get what they want). People dealing with external oppression don’t act this way. (For one thing, they don’t have time.) The MM/TS syndrome is a sign of *internalized* oppression and a form of addiction; that is, since it reinforces the Feminine Imperative, the more you get, the less you have and the more you need. The scenario strikes me as class-linked; I suspect that those oppressed in a directly economic way or by open force don’t do this nearly as much—or at least that it doesn’t reach the same pitch of feverishness. However, it may be that the kind of

*A Woman Called Moses.

services women *qua* women provide—affection, admiration, R&R, personal service—require that women be controlled by ideology, since these services must be provided voluntarily at least to some degree.

Some scattered observations on the discussion in *Sinister Wisdom* 14:

Guilt: Sturgis mentions a “reaction” to trashing but then describes a situation of fearful paralysis, i.e., a continuation and systematization of the pattern.

Power/Powerlessness: An adult author is metaphorically reduced to a fourth-grader; I’m inflated to her (adult) teacher. Lesbian feminist publications are a school playground (Sturgis) or for the unskilled and incompetent (Bradley). Young is “a young and very vulnerable Sister” and I am kicking her and tearing her limb from limb.

Political theory: Sturgis calls *Retreat* “mushy” and Bradley “romantic”—does nobody remember feminist exposés of romantic love?

Honesty: I was not nice, but I took *Retreat* seriously, which seems to be more than the others are doing. Sturgis (in the MM position, but trying vigorously to get out) admits her previous review was a cop-out. Bradley merely declares the impossibility of anyone reviewing anything! Young may hurt, but *she knows what I think of her book*. According to Sturgis’s account, she could not have known from Sturgis’s *OOB* review what Sturgis thought, and she certainly doesn’t know, from Bradley’s *Response* what Bradley thinks. Does she wonder now how many other favorable or “non-judgmental” reviews were motivated by fear and guilt? Is *this* a “nice” thing to do to an author?

Personal/Impersonal: If a book review is a reviewer’s helpful, personal dialogue with a writer, what happens to the reader? If a reviewer is obliged to help and encourage, does her praise mean anything, since it is obligatory and therefore false? People’s feelings are always hurt by dispraise and a reviewer’s tone is part of a reviewer’s opinion; I am not sarcastic for fun. Although “heartbreaking” and “starvation” don’t strike me as sarcasm.

Is there more?

I think that the unexpressed, unformulated, and very bitter belief *that sexism is true* is also at work here, that is, the idea that women can’t do this or that. It’s this belief that causes the MM’s passionately angry disappointment when Unknown Woman A’s work proves to be terrible, and the TS’s conviction that the only way most women can ever have the pleasures of public success is if the few of us who have (in some magically mysterious way) gained access to the public world of culture and action will tell lies about the achievements of the others. Such a conviction adds to the pain of dispraise (which everybody of course feels) and rage at its seeming arbitrariness. *Why* is Famous Woman B saying such things about Unknown Woman A’s work when A’s only hope is for B to be nice to her? Explanations like “elitism,” “male identification,” selling out, or intoxication with fame, explain nothing; you might as well say Original Sin and be done with it. B is simply being *mean*, a dreadful act when all access to success is (supposedly) in her all-powerful hands.

There is also the problem of ignorance. Those without much access to the public world are unlikely to have had contact with the real hatchet-women of the patriarchy, or real Queen Bees, or know the conditions

under which Famous Woman B actually has to work.

For example, in *SW 15* Pamela Johnston asks if feminists really have no control over the covers trade publishers put on their books. The answer is no, none whatever. Sometimes even the editors don't. *Authorial control over the very text* of a science fiction novel is not standard in the trade and must be negotiated. It is often resented; I once lost a magazine sale by insisting that a story of mine stay as written. (How many book sales I or others may have lost by getting a reputation for being "difficult" I don't know.) Even when negotiated, an author's control over the text amounts only to veto power over the editor's or publisher's changes, "not to be unreasonably refused" (you figure that one out). Good editors don't change good authors' mss.—but "good editors" means a minority of those in the field. If I called the cover of *Motherlines* "dull," that's because the situation is so much worse than Pamela Johnston knows. I truly remembered the cover as fairly harmless (I didn't have it in front of me and edited out the rope—partly to keep my sanity and partly by confusing the paperback cover with the hardback one, which is different). But even with the rope, it was a real relief that none of the women thereupon was (a) lolling naked on the sand, fondling a giant python with her mouth open to receive same, or (b) naked save for a pointed helmet, rhinestone pasties, G-string, and claws. These are the Dutch cover for Vonda McIntyre's *Dreamsnake* and the British cover for my *The Female Man*. In 1971 a feminist memoir appeared in print under the title *I, Bitch* with a cover of a woman in leather, stiletto-heeled boots, and a whip; the covers for Francine Mezo's adventure series, published by Avon, are just as vividly unbearable. In such company *Motherlines'* cover is not an outrage; it's only dully, expectably, routinely repellent.

Did you know that the hardcover publisher of a book gets half of all the author's paperback income for ever and ever?

That one of the most famous American feminists has been on welfare and had to have money raised by others to pay her hospital bill when she fell ill?

That another, internationally known, lives on less than \$9,000 a year, out of necessity? By *farming*?

That you can publish six books in twelve years, sell 100,000 of some of them, and make less than \$2,500 a year, including money from book reviews, other non-fiction, short-story sales, and foreign sales?

I'm not complaining, but trying to demolish the illusion of the MM's enormous power and success.

There is simply no such thing. What does exist is the American—or simply modern—illusion that "celebrities" (in however tiny a community) have real, pleasure-filled lives, and the rest of us have—what, unreal ones?—and the insistence on failure and dependency that underlies such attributions of power.

To understand that no one has or can have your power, that it remains in you no matter how forbidden you feel it to be, means defying the patriarchal taboo and that's very hard. It means claiming one's own limited but real power and abandoning one's inflated notion of other women's power. It means engaging in a direct public confrontation with the patri-

archy as embodied in men and men's institutions, not concentrating on its symbolic presence in other members of the women's community.

To risk failure is bad enough. To risk success is even worse. After all, women have been burnt alive for claiming a power which was, paradoxically, not enough to save them. It's safer to be weak, safer to have someone else be strong for you and be punished for it in your place.

I believe that trashing, far from being the result of simple envy, arises from a profound ambivalence towards power. The intensity of feeling, the violent inculcation of guilt, the extreme contrast of omnipotence and powerlessness, the lack of substantive complaint,* the anger, the absolute lack of impersonality or a sense of public activity, the utter demandingness—all these echo a mother-daughter relationship in which the terrible, hidden truth is not that our mothers are strong, but that they are very weak. The complaint, "You are so strong and I am so helpless" hides the far worse one, "I am strong enough that my strength will get me into terrible trouble, and you are too weak to protect me if that happens."

For all oppressed people strength and success are double-edged: heart-breakingly desirable and very dangerous. But to "risk winning" (Phyllis Chesler's phrase from *Women and Madness*, a book to which I owe many of the ideas in this piece) is the only way out of oppression.

"Successful" feminists aren't immune to this terror of power; all the women I know feel it. We take the risk anyway. That's the only secret, not some fantastic, illusory power-fame-and-glory that some women have and others don't. I recently heard a conversation between two Lesbians, one of whom was living openly as such and one of whom was afraid to leave her marriage. The married one said, "I can't leave my husband because I'm not brave, like you." To which the other (who had left *her* husband only two years before) said, "Don't give me that. I was just as scared as you when I left my marriage, but I did it anyway. *That's what made me brave.*"

The MM/TS polarity is illusory. Both are positions in the same belief system. Both are engaged in ritually sacrificing the possibility of a woman's being effective on her own behalf, not needy and ineffective, not effective and altruistic, but *effective for herself*.

It's selfish, vicious, and nasty, and will cause everyone within a thousand miles to faint flat.

But it beats being dead.

*"Cruel," "unfair," "unkind," "After I worked so hard," not "gentle" or "positive," are typical phrases (I'm skimming back issues of feminist periodicals). The claim that someone has stopped writing or publishing as a catastrophic result also crops up. Years ago a very young (junior-high-school age) woman asked me to send her copies of all my work and the answers to three pages of questions about it for a paper her teacher had suggested; I wrote her, explaining that writers hadn't the time to fulfill such requests and referred her to her teacher, who ought to be teaching her how to do research. Her older sister then wrote me, stating that she was going to expose me in *MS*, that because of my bad behavior her sister, who had hoped to be a writer, had given up all such ambitions.

billie lives! billie lives!

yeah billie holiday lives.

shes probably got a little house somewhere with yemanya jezabel the queen of sheba and maria stewart. plus sojourner truth ma rainy ida cox lil hardin and sapphire & her mama are there. and what would they do without sister rosetta thorpe big maybelle dinah washington long tall sally & her aunt mary and fannie lou hamer? and please dont forget ruby doris smith robinson tammi terrell sara gomez and sisterwoman cuz they are probably all there too helping with the free community music and life school that billie started. and you know that anaci the original spiderman david walker chaka denmark veseley baby brother lester prez young john coltrane beanhead ray malcolm x and stephen biko probably be round the house all the time too. plus the amistad crew and shango. but its billies house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

of course we know that charlie bird parker lives cuz folks be saying and writing bird lives! all the time. they even got buttons. and this year 1980 has been declared the year of the bird. but when i woke up this morning i woke up thinking billie lives! so after i got through talking on the phone to this sister who called me up right in the middle of when i was thinking billie lives! i got up and put on a tape of an old record by billie and listened to it again for the first time in a long time while i made a pitcher of orange & lemonade and drank some. then i took the tape and went outside to sit in the sun and listen to the tape some more and write this poem down in a hurry.

cuz billie lives and i wanna call her up and make an appointment and go by and visit her one afternoon and take her some violets and orchids and some peaches (and if you dont like my peaches dont shake my tree) one afternoon when shes got a few hours when shes not too busy and shes relaxed and dont mind being bothered with somebody asking her a whole lotta questions about all kinds of stuff but the main thing i wanna ask her about is how did she do it and what did she do when she made this record that i am listening to now on this tape that had those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves that time.

oh you never heard of that record.

well to tell you the truth i hadnt either til this other sister told me about it. or rather i had heard of the record and i had even listened to it. but i hadnt heard of the effect that the record had on the bigtime daddies. thats what i hadnt heard about. you know the effect that this record had is somehow strangely not mentioned in the movie or in any of the books articles etc. that are supposed to be telling the billie holiday story. thats why i wanna ask billie about it and listen to her run it down about how it was that she had all them bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing themselves behind this record.

now you know this record had to be bad cuz it had to be taken off the radio. thats how bad this record was. as a public service it was taken off the radio cuz everytime the record played on the radio the bigdaddies would be knocking each other outta the way to get to the window and take concrete nosedives. in droves.

plus they dont play it on the radio that much even now. when they do play something by billie once every other blue moon they dont hardly ever play this. and when me and this other sister who first told me about the effect the record had when we wanted to listen to it we couldnt find nobody that we knew that had it. oh they had heard of it. but they didnt have it. so when we wanted to listen to the record we had to git on the train and ride way downtown then switch over to the path train and ride a while then switch again to the underground streetcar for a few blocks then walk a few more blocks to this special library in newark new jersey just to hear it. cuz we couldnt find it in the nyc public library though later we found out that if we had had some money and had known what to ask for we could have bought this album called the billie holiday story volume 2 which contains this song i am talking about but we didnt have no money nor did we know what to ask for.

and i cant even repeat what we had to go through to get this tape of the original 78 that i am listening to now. if you get my meaning.

anyway. this record was made august 6 1941 just 4 months to the day before the japanese took everybody by surprise with that early morning bombing raid on pearl harbor in the early summer days of billies career and it was a 78 on the okeh label called gloomy sunday subtitled hungarian suicide song with the teddy wilson orchestra. it was one of those my man is dead so now i am gonna throw myself in the grave too funeral dirge numbers (tragic mulatress division) that they used to mash on billie when she went into the studio.

it wasnt even no bad blues.

it was some of their shit and billie said okay watch this and she took the tune and she turned it around on them.

yeah. i am telling you she had them bigdaddy blip d blips leaping outta windows in droves honey.

in droves do you hear me.

i wonder what it was like when billie sang this song in person. i guess i better ask her that too when i go for my appointment. can you imagine what that was like. cuz you know billie used to sing at the cafe society downtown in greenwich village at one time which was one of them slick bigdaddies main hangout joints at that time and after billie got off work down in the village she would catch a cab and go uptown to harlem to the afterhours spot and jam and hangout and have a good time talking to people and it could possibly be that if she had sung that song during the last set at one of those cafe society gigs that while she was uptown cuttin up and stuff you know who was downtown plunging downward off the roofs of their penthouses.

and then when she woke up later that day the papers would have big headlines about who had taken the plunge during the early dawn hours. do you think billie had a good laugh to herself when she read those headlines? or are you one of those people who would say billie wasnt aware of what was going on? that she was only a po lil gal from baltimore who was just trying to sing and entertain people or that if she was aware then she was confused and heartbroken that her music was being taken in the wrong way? niggguh pullease! well but if you think like that then you dont belong in this poem so i am gonna cancel you right out. go somewhere and write yo own poem.

well anyway when i go for my appointment i am gonna ask billie about it cuz i wanna hear what she says. plus i wanna see if she will explain how she did it. did the juju women give her some kind of special herbal potions to purify her throat and vocal chords and lungs and what not. did the wise women teach her an ancient way of breathing enunciating. did she have a certain type of dream the night before the recording session during which the goddesses appeared and gave her a sign and said go ahead on in that studio tomorrow sister and turn that shit around on them bigtime blank t blanks so we can get them off our backs and move forward to a brighter day.

i wanna ask billie about it. and i wanna see if she would teach some of us how to do it too. do you think she would? when i go see her i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn to use their voices the same way billie did on this record.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but things are different now. we are more sophisticated now and we have learned some more sophisticated methods. like subliminal seduction. you know those tapes with that weird nonmusic and those hidden voices playing in the supermarkets and other stores that numb our minds and then plant suggestions in our minds that trick us into spending all our money on a buncha stuff that we dont need? and those tapes they play in restaurants and elevators and on the phone when they put you on hold? yeah that's subliminal seduction. people could ride bicycles or delivery trucks with hidden high fre-

quency killer diller tape cassettes through certain neighborhoods at certain hours.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods.

yeah billie lives.

shes probably got that house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

i wanna go see her and ask her if she will teach some of us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record i am listening to now on this tape so we can learn how to have these moderntime bigtime so & sos jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves so we can raise up offa our knees and move on to a brighter day.

saturday august 23 1980.



FEMINARY

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THE

SOUTH

Emphasizing the Lesbian Vision

published 3 times a year

Subs: \$6.50 for individuals

\$13 for institutions

P.O.Box 954, Chapel Hill, N.C. 27514

FEARS / WINTER COMING

Poke berries droop,
smear to claret underfoot.
Trees burn burgandy and ochre.
Laced to the air in broken webs
spiders shrink and die.
Between the harvest and the hunter's moon
the russet season comes.

Then morning I woke
to frost blooming in the garden,
night clenched around my headlights
on the road. I was afraid
of the coming chill,
of shadow men across the sill.
I do not know if I can live
alone this winter twenty miles from town.

For winter I wait inside,
there's no more preparation—
the earth's too soon for furrows,
the wood's stacked in the shed.
I pick jars off the shelf
after the long drive home.
The television flickers against the night
as the mind flickers the mind flickers.

The beetles and flies have died
who kept me summer company.
The night is silent of cicadas,
the wasp cells mute of humming.
Spider eggs hang nearby in neat sacks,
in globed darkness, waiting.
They have left me here alone.
When I dream, I dream of dying.
Birds flutter in the chimney
like the heart above the womb
and I am afraid to sleep.

Am I lost in the spaces of things?
the pole star pins midnight
over the meadow, the Great Dipper
rising from the woods beyond.
Orion climbs the sycamore
and Cassiopeia drinks the milk of stars
and eats the rind of worlds.

And if you're death I'm fearing,
will you land like a blaze
in the meadow past the moon
and will I step into you sideways and be gone?

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ACROSS THE KITCHEN TABLE:

A SISTER-TO-SISTER DIALOGUE

In June 1980, we sent Beverly and Barbara a number of questions regarding their experiences as Black feminists in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

Cherrie Moraga
Gloria Anzaldúa

FEMINISM: MORE THAN A "CLICK" AND A CLIQUE

C.M. and G.A.: *What do you see as the effects of the pervasiveness of white middle-class women in the feminist movement? In your experience how do class and race issues intersect in the movement?*

Beverly: . . . on Saturday night, what happened is that she was flossing her teeth after the meal. I was just so impressed with the fact that she would take such good care of her teeth. And so she said that the reason was that when she was a child her mother had saved up money for her to go and visit her grandmother or something down South. And she had been looking forward to it all year. I think that she usually went. But what happened is that this particular year she went to the dentist right before, and she had 7 cavities. And that wiped out her vacation. Because it was a matter of either/or. But of course, that's not the poorest you can get either. "My God," I said, "I bet there's hardly a white woman that we come into contact with that would have any perception of what that meant." And yet it sounded so familiar to me.

Barbara: Exactly. What we want to describe in this dialogue are the class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high-level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to.

An example I can think of and which drives me crazy is the arrogance some white women display about "choosing" not to finish school, you know, "downward mobility." But the thing is they don't have to worry about being asked "Do you have a degree," and then being completely cut out of a whole range of jobs and opportunity if they don't. Race is a concept of having to be twice as qualified, twice as good to go half as far. And I feel like at this point, in these economic times, it's like being three times as good to go half as far. No way in Hell would I give up getting a degree or some piece of paper that would give me more economic leverage in this "boy's" system. That's not necessarily a perception that white women have. In fact, I know a lot of white women who never finished college, yet are functioning in ways that if they had been Black women would be completely unavailable to them.

This ties in with another thing we had talked about in the past, which is the difference between women's politics, who come to a realization that

oppression exists say at age 22, 25, or even 18, versus Black women's and other women of color's perspective which is that your oppression is a life-long thing. There is a political savvy, I don't know what word to use, canniness—some difference in attitude I think between Black and white feminists. I think what it is, is like the surprise factor. There is virtually no Black person in this country who is surprised about oppression. Virtually not one. Because the thing is we have had it meted out to us from infancy on. And I think that when we are dealing with white women in coalitions, or whatever, that often we're at very different places about how you deal with a problem, how you think about a problem, how you react to a problem. Because they are coming from a perspective like, "Oh! I didn't know. I didn't know. I never knew until . . . I never knew until . . ." There is a difference when you come in to your politics because you're Black and oppressed on that level.

Beverly: What I would really want to talk about is why the women's movement is basically a middle-class movement. What does it mean? At least middle class in tone. I am not saying everyone in the women's movement is middle class but the thing is that I think that it is middle-class women who dominate in terms of numbers and in terms of what actually gets done, and just how things get done. What gets made the priorities and what have you.

What really are the similarities and differences between women's oppression and class and racial oppression? My perception about racial oppression and class oppression is that it's something that starts from Day One.

Barbara: You're born into it and it's grinding.

Beverly: It's grinding. And it continues. My sense about the oppression of women is that it's something that people come to often times, but not always, in a more intellectual manner. It's something that's pointed out to them. It's something that they read about and say, "Oh, yeah!". I mean even the concept of the "click," you know, that you can read about in *Ms.* magazine.

Barbara: They still have "clicks"!

Beverly: Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women's oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your life as a woman. That is a "click." Well, I mean, I guess there are "clicks" along racial lines, but the thing is they're so far back in terms of class that they're almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it's a different kind of thing.

Barbara: Another thing when you talk about experiencing racial oppression and class oppression from the very beginning, if indeed you are a recipient of those oppressions what is happening to you is from moderately bad to horrible. In other words, being Black in this country there is very little about it that is mild. The oppression is extreme. Probably the only Black people where oppression is somewhat mitigated are those who have class privilege and that is certainly not the majority of Black people here. Likewise if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you

are poor, you are working class and therefore day-to-day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on. The thing that's different about women's oppression is that you can be white and middle class and female and live a so-called nice life up until a certain point, then you begin to notice these "clicks," but I think the quality of life for the upper- or middle-class white woman is so far ahead of the quality of life for the Black person, the Black child, the working-class child or the poor child.

Beverly: I want to attempt to make comparisons between different types of oppressions. When I think of poverty, I think of constant physical and material oppression. You know, you aren't poor one day and well-to-do the next. If you're poor it's a constant thing, everyday, everyday. In some ways it's almost more constant than race because, say you're middle class and you're a Black person who is of course subject to racism, you don't necessarily experience it every single day in the same intensity, or to the same degree. Whereas, poverty is just something you experience constantly. So what I was trying to come up with is—Is there any oppression that women experience that is that total, in other words literally affects their physical well-being on a day-to-day basis.

Barbara: Can I make a joke, Bev?

Beverly: What?

Barbara: Heterosexuality. Well, moving right along . . .

Beverly: Yes, they *are* suffering . . .

Well, battering is maybe something, but not necessarily, only in some extreme incidences.

Barbara: Well, I think in a way we're almost comparing apples and pears. We don't have a language yet or a framework as to what is the true nature of women's oppression, given where it takes place and who it comes from and how. Maybe the battered woman is not beaten every day, but she has to wait on her husband every day and her children. She's either bored out of her mind or worrying and scraping, trying to make ends meet, both in the context of the nuclear family. Women's oppression is so organic or circular or something. One place on the circle is battering, one place is cat calls, another is rape, another place is the fact that no one takes you seriously even while you worked to put your husband through college. There's a whole range of stuff, that's why it's so hard to pin something down.

Beverly: I think for purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, "Well, this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

Barbara: And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that. I think maybe what we have defined as an important component of Black feminism is that maybe, for the short run at least, that's all right. We don't have to rank or separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us.

Beverly: Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle-class movement actually deal

with *all* women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to represent their own interests? I think this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face.

Barbara: What we've got to look at is what is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work. What are those issues and how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movements? I am thinking here of all the Black women who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer is a name we know, but there were countless thousands of other women whose names we don't know whose material conditions would not indicate that they would have the wherewithal to struggle politically but then they did. Even more recently, poor women have been involved in issues like tenants rights or welfare organizing, etc.

Beverly: Sometimes I think maybe twenty-five to fifty years from now we might really understand what the origins of the women's movement were, much more so even than we know today. We may lose some of the proximity, but we'll gain some of the hindsight and the perspective. One of the things we might discover is that the origins of the feminist movement were basically middle class, but there are reasons for that. Already there is analysis about that from people who are somewhat anti-feminist, Marxists and leftists that have the perception that the women's movement is just an indication that we're in an advanced stage of capitalism. They say that the fact that the women's movement developed in this country at the time it did had to do with how capitalism had developed, in other words, a high enough rate of profit or surplus. I don't know what the terminology is, exactly, but this material surplus made it possible for women to have the "leisure" to demand certain rights.

As I see it, the welfare rights movement comes out of the needs expressed and experienced by the women receiving welfare. In the same way, there is a path the women's movement has followed that originated out of the needs of middle-class women.

Barbara: Yes, I think that is quite verifiable. . . . There is just so much class conflict in this society that it is hard for people who are economically and/or racially oppressed to believe that there are some people who may experience their oppression differently. I think that this is where the laughability of the women's movement comes in. The woman I teach a class with told me how she has a friend who was teaching John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a class who had a decent number of Black students in it and the Black students refused to believe that it was about white people. *Refused* to believe, you know? John Steinbeck, Great White Novelist! That's just incredible! What it shows is the class conflict, the class division, the division that is totally enforced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situations, commonalities, etc.

THE WHITE-WASH OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

C.M. and G.A.: *By virtue of your education, what class assumptions are made about you by white feminists? How do you experience white women trying to "whitewash" you?*

Barbara: This is very complicated. There is a sociologist, a Black woman, who's here in Boston, she said something very astute about this whole issue of class. She was talking about how sociologists often confuse class with lifestyle. They will throw out all their knowledge about income level, and assume people are of a different class. So they'll see a Black family who makes \$6,000 a year, but the thing is they have books and they are stable and blah blah blah and all this crap, you know, they're trying to send their kids to college and they do and the sociologists say, "Well, then, they must be middle class." As she said so succinctly, "\$6,000 worth of money buys \$6,000 worth of goods." (That would make them poor today. Twenty years ago, working class.) It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a difference between class in that narrow sense and values, you know? Because I think we come from that kind of home . . .

Beverly: Sure. Sure.

Barbara: Where there were priorities put on things that poor working-class Black people weren't supposed to be thinking about.

Beverly: Yeah, it's very confusing. The fact that education was something that was always valued in our family, not just in our generation, but for generations back. I think that's where a lot of white feminists get confused about us. Because of the fact of the education we had and the emphasis on cultural development and on intellectual development that has been in our family at least for three generations, makes people think, well, we must of come from a middle-class background.

Barbara: Oh yeah! Sure!

Beverly: It's true, we never starved. But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I just think if they looked at the house, would they understand better what our class background actually was? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms . . .

Barbara: The fact that there was no automatic washing machine.

Beverly: The fact that when you got a chest of drawers, a dresser, and a bed in one of the bedrooms, literally there was no floor space. I think that a lot of where we came from had to do with, as you said, values and managing. One of the values is that you handled money in such a way that you made it stretch as far as you possibly could.

Barbara: Don't I remember! (*laughing*) It was a real value that you live as decently as possible on the money you do make.

Beverly: Exactly.

Barbara: There was a lot of emphasis on trying.

Beverly: Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our people are.

Barbara: In order for people to understand what our background was, in order to place us, they need to have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period. There is a cookbook, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* by these two Darden sisters. The reason why I mention it is because they have a family history in there. This was a successful Black family, and yet these people worked like hell! They were people who were ex-slaves. Almost anybody in their family who

wanted to go to a Black college could have, but that's not nearly the same thing as a family who sent all of their sons to Harvard, all of their daughters to Smith, or whatever. There's just a different social context. Even though this is a successful Black family, there is poverty, struggle, oppression, violence in the history of that family that is totally unrecognizable to outsiders . . .

Beverly: Just like within ours. You know one of the things that I've felt for a long time being involved in the women's movement, is that there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice.

Barbara: Indeed! Indeed!

Beverly: And that's very upsetting to me. It really makes me think about the choices I have made, either implicitly and less consciously or very consciously. It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise. And that's just something that is very appalling to me.

Barbara: It's just too true. It's too true.

Too appalling! I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well, do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" And I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! I realize, too, it was my regret for the past, for those July 4ths that were essentially just like the one I was watching right outside my window and for the fact that it will never be that way again. Well . . .

I don't think we can even give it to each other as peers because there is a kind of family bonding across generations that is very Black that doesn't happen.

Beverly: One of the things I was getting at is that there are ways we act when Black people are together that white women will never see in a largely white context. So I think that's one of the reasons that again, to use the phrase that was asked to us, they are able to "whitewash" us. Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I *do* mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think, "Well, why bother? Why waste your time?" If what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, *you talk in your second language*.

Barbara: This is so different from being in a Black context. For example, it just occurred to me this experience I had visiting an old friend of mine that I have known for a number of years. She was staying in this house with this regular old Black nuclear family. And the woman of the house was clearly the person who kept the whole thing together. They had food layed back! (*laughing*) And the thing is it was really a lot of fun for me to see that, "pervert" that I am—that's in quotes—dyke that I am, I could sit down at a table with these middle-aged Black women who were

playing pokeeno and be able to hang, you know? And it was very nice. I had a good time.

Beverly: Only one question, Barbara, did you play? (*laughing*)

Barbara: Yeah, I played for a little while. Throughout the day, there must have been twenty people in and out of the house. And it was no particular occasion, just twenty people in and out of the house. At one point, we were talking about television and the woman said, "Oh, Barbara doesn't watch T.V. She's an intellectual." It was a joke and I felt good enough in that context with people I hardly knew to understand that they said that with a great deal of affection. I realized they were complimenting me and being supportive for something I had accomplished. I'm sure they felt proud of the fact that Alice, the doctor, and Barbara, who teaches at U. Mass., were sitting around on a Sunday evening. And the thing is that it was not the kind of hostility that I have sometimes experienced from my so-called peers of Black women about those very same struggles and accomplishments. And it certainly is not the misunderstanding that I have gotten from white women about the meaning of that. Because of course, these people are trying to send their children to school too.

Beverly: I wonder is this the trade-off, is this what everyone who has our identity has to sacrifice? One of my constant questions is how do other lesbians of color live their lives? The other question I have is—"Is this 'fly in the buttermilk' existence a function of our feminism more than our lesbianism?" To ask the question more explicitly—Do black lesbians who do not identify as feminists and base their lives in the Black community feel this struggle? I think the answer is that they don't all the time. It's hard to figure out.

Barbara: I think the isolation is probably a result much more of being a feminist. I think this has some class factors in it. This almost takes us back to where we began because in order to be involved in this women's movement, as it stands today, you have to be able to deal with "middle-classness." And the Black women who can take it are often the ones with educational privilege.

LESBIAN SEPARATISM

C.M. and G.A.: *Is a lesbian separatist position inherently racist? Is this position a viable political position to take?*

Barbara: As we said in our collective statement (Combahee) I think we have real questions because separatism seems like such a narrow kind of politics and also because it seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege. Women who don't have those kinds of privilege have to deal with this society and with the institutions of this society. They can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess. Women of color are very aware that racism is not gender specific and that it affects all people of color. We have experiences that have nothing to do with being female, but are nonetheless experiences of deep oppression . . . and even violence.

Beverly: Maybe the reason that white women got into lesbian separatism

was because in being separatist they were separating themselves from white men, given how there is so much oppression in this world currently that white men have visited on people. In some ways they felt that they had to separate themselves from white men to even have a fighting chance.

Barbara: So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. If you define certain movement issues as straight women's issues, for example, reproductive rights and sterilization abuse, then these identifiable sexual/political issues are ones you are not going to bother with. We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing, often do zap acts. For example, they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. We sometimes think of separatism as the politics without a practice.

Beverly: One of the problems of separatism is that I can't see it as a philosophy that explains and analyzes the roots of all oppression and is going to go toward solving it. I think it has some validity in a more limited sphere. To begin to talk about being separate from men is viable. It has some worthwhile aspects.

Barbara: Many lesbians are separatists in that sense. You are very aware of the choice—that in being a lesbian you understand that you really don't need men to define your identity, your sexuality, to make your life meaningful or simply to have a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have no comprehension of the oppressions that you share with men. And you see white women with class privilege don't share oppression with white men. They're in a critical and antagonistic position whereas Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race.

What white lesbians have against lesbians of color is that they accuse us of being "male identified" because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not seeing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. And it's not like we like their sexism or even want to sleep with them. You can certainly be concerned as we are living here this summer in Boston when one Black man after another ends up dead.

Beverly: It's not only being concerned, it is observing what happens—who does racist acts and who are the targets for racism. It would be incredibly dishonest to say that racism is a thing just experienced by Black women.

Barbara: And also politically inexpedient. I think that people who define themselves as Black feminists certainly have decided that the bulk of their political work is in concert with other Black women. That doesn't mean that you're totally oblivious to the reality of racism. I feel that the one thing about racism is that it doesn't play favorites. Look at the history of lynching in this country. And also look at how Black women have ex-

perienced violence that is definitely racial. When you read about Black women being lynched, they aren't thinking of us as females. The horrors that we have experienced have absolutely everything to do with them *not even viewing us as women*.

Because if we are women some false chivalry would enter in and maybe certain things wouldn't happen. I've never read an account of a lynching of a white woman, or one who was pregnant. I think there's a difference between the old usual rape-murder that happens to all women and the lynching that happens specifically to Black women. A contemporary example of that is how Black women who are battered and who physically defend themselves are treated differently than white women by the courts. It's seen differently by the courts when a white middle-class woman murders her husband. Then it's so-called self-defense. I was just reading a case involving a Black woman in Michigan where the Black woman was sold down the river obviously because she was Black. A negative image of Black men and women got her fate delivered.

Beverly: One of the most dangerous and erroneous concepts that separatists have put forward is that other oppressions, in addition to sexism, are attributed to men only. Some separatists believe that although women are racist, when men disappear and no longer rule, racism will not be a problem. It's very analogous to people who are Marxists who say, "Well, when class oppression and racism end, definitely the oppression of women and lesbians will end." What lesbian separatists are saying is that when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have.

There is also a dishonesty that I have come across in some lesbians who although they do not regard themselves as separatists, they also do not acknowledge the separatism in their own lifestyles. Many lesbians who don't consider themselves separatists would never live with a man and would not go very far to befriend a man (although they may have a few token men in their lives), but they don't go any further than to disavow their separatism.

Barbara: I disagree with that. The so-called disavowal is, from my perspective, the lack of need to deify or glorify those very kinds of choices. Separatists get angry at the fact that I don't make much of the fact that I don't see a man socially from one end of the week to the other. I feel they are trying to collapse political positions that I do not consider in any way trivial. Who you have parties with, as far as I am concerned, is not the bottom line of defining your political commitment.

I also want to say that I don't think that white lesbian separatists are more racist than any other white women in the women's movement that we deal with. I just think it takes different forms. White lesbian separatism has almost a studied obliviousness to instances of oppression whereas another group of feminists, for example socialists, are even more sectarian. The way their racism would manifest itself—they would know that racism was an important issue but they wouldn't be dealing with it in any way

except as a theoretical radical issue. Their discomfort in dealing around women of color would be just as palpable; that attitude would be just as apparent. All white people in this country are victims of the disease of racism.

There is no such thing as a non-racist. Sometimes it's as simple as who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch. There are bunches of white women for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color.

Beverly is fixing this little teddybear. She's been doing surgery on it for the last couple of hours. The bear shows remarkable stamina, like no human being. You could say that we are having a series of operations in our lives.

Beverly: If it weren't for Barbara and her relationship with this person who is not myself, I wouldn't be dealing with it.

Barbara: I don't see that as being relevant to this conversation.

Beverly: It is relevant. I'm talking about how I got involved in this surgery.

HOMOPHOBIA IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

C.M. and G.A.: *Describe your experience in dealing with homophobic Black sisters.*

Barbara: There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own . . . I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. They make great cases for how fucked up it all is, and therefore cover their asses admirably. *Is homophobia more entrenched in the Black community than in the white community?*

Beverly: You can argue about that until Jesus comes, really.

Barbara: I really must say historically, politically there are more reasons for the Black community to be homophobic, one of them being that the women's movement has made fewer inroads into the Black community, as well as gay rights. We can assume that a community that has been subject to the ideas of the movement is going to have more consciousness. And given how up until the last couple of years the feminist movement has not touched Third World communities, we can expect their attitudes to be much as they have been in the past.

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality—you know, the "Black bulldagger" image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just as rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don't have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them.

Beverly: This country is so racist that it is possible to take many, many things and concepts that have nothing to do with race and talk about them in racial terms. Because people are so dichotomized into either black or

white, it defines a continuum. This is so strict and so overwhelming in this country, you can take things that have nothing to do with race and refer to them racially.

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things—sexuality behavior, conflicts, whatever they don't like—and saying, "That's white." Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, "Yeah, suicide is a white thing."

Barbara: Oh yeah, we used to believe that. And of course one felt all the worse for having considered it. I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange's play "for colored girls who have considered suicide." It's very brave. I mean, she's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even considered it, if it's supposed to be a white thing.

Beverly: Any behavior Black people say is despicable, they can disregard by saying this doesn't belong to the Black community. There's hardly a thing in this world in our experience that is not referred to being either Black or white, from animals on—people talking about white dogs. They weren't talking about dogs that were white in color, they were talking about dogs that belong to white people.

Barbara: So often lesbianism and male homosexuality is talked about as a white disease within the Black community. It is just so negating of our lives. Very upsetting.

C.M. and G.A.: *Are Black women more vulnerable to homophobic attack?*

Barbara: Yes, Black women are more vulnerable to homophobic attack because we don't have white skin privilege, or class privilege to fall back on if somebody wants to start a smear campaign against us. As I said in my essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," it's (heterosexual privilege) always the last to go. We don't have any of the other privileges. It really is jumping off the edge in a very fundamental way. Somebody who is already dealing with multiple oppression is more vulnerable to another kind of attack upon her identity.

Beverly: I also feel that Black women are more vulnerable to physical attack as lesbians because they're Black. The stories you hear over the years of Black lesbians being attacked for being lesbian, usually by white men!

C.M. and G.A.: *What is the relationship between Black women's resistance to identifying as feminists, and lesbianism?*

Barbara: It's real connected. Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but "lesbians" to the Black community as well. There was a considerable effort in the early seventies to turn the Black community off to feminism. You can look at publications, particularly Black publications making pronouncements about what the feminist movement was and who it reached that would trivialize it, that would say no Black women were involved, that did everything possible to prevent those coalitions between Black and white women from happening because there was a great deal of fear. Black men did not want to lose Black women as allies. And the white power structure did not want to see all women bond across racial lines because they knew that would be an unbeatable unstoppable combination. They did a very good job. You can just document those happenings during that period.

So yes, most Black women think that to be a feminist you have to be a lesbian. And if not that, then at least you have to deal with being around lesbians. And you see, that is true. It's very hard to be in the women's movement and not be around lesbians. And if you're so homophobic that you can't deal with the thought of lesbianism then you probably won't be involved. I think these things are changing. More and more Black women are becoming sensitive or sympathetic to the women's movement.

THIRD WORLD WOMEN: TOKENISM OR LEADERSHIP

C.M. and G.A.: *How, as women of color, can we prevent ourselves from being tokenized by white feminists? How do you see Third World women forming the leadership in the feminist movement?*

Beverly: One looks at that question about tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are so many possibilities of tokenization. One of the most tokenized situations that Barbara and I find ourselves in is when we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in the position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists. One of the things that helps is to get paid and to put it on that level so you don't feel so exploited.

Barbara: I think that the service Gloria thought of having and calling it "Dial a Token"—I mean that's a good thing. For one thing it puts it out there. It's saying, "Hey, I know what you're doing and I want to get paid for it."

Another thing, try not to be the only Third World person there. I was thinking of the meeting that Cherrie went to when she was here with us. And even though there were several Third World women we were still tokenized. (*laughing*) I guess that I am really talking about support as opposed to defusing tokenization.

Beverly: Given the state of things between Black and white women, we're going to be tokenized quite a bit. It's so hard to get around that.

Barbara: A solution to tokenism is *not* racial separatism. There are definitely separatist aspects emerging among the Black and Third World feminist community and that is fine. But, ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with.

This brings me back to the issue of lesbian separatism. I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What *I* really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think *that* is really radical because it has never been done before. And it really pisses me off that they think of themselves as radical. *I think there is a difference between being extreme and being radical.*

This is why Third World women are forming the leadership in the feminist movement because we are not one-dimensional, one-issued in our political understanding. Just by virtue of our identities we certainly define race and usually define class as being fundamental issues that we have to address. The more wide-ranged your politics, the more potentially profound and transformative they are.

Beverly: The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic. I so often think of the speech that Sojourner Truth made not because of the contents so much but more because of the function. She says, "Now children, let's get this thing together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let me lay it out for you." I must admit that the reason I think of it so often is that I have thought of myself in that situation. "Let me explain this to you one more time, let me take you by the hand, etc." I find myself playing that role. But there's a way though that I feel that Third World women are not in actual leadership *positions* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision. We are in the position to challenge the feminist movement as it stands to date and not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival. It is organic to our very existence.

Barbara: Thank you, sweetheart. Teddybear just gave me a kiss.

Bye Girls.

I WALK IN THE HISTORY OF MY PEOPLE

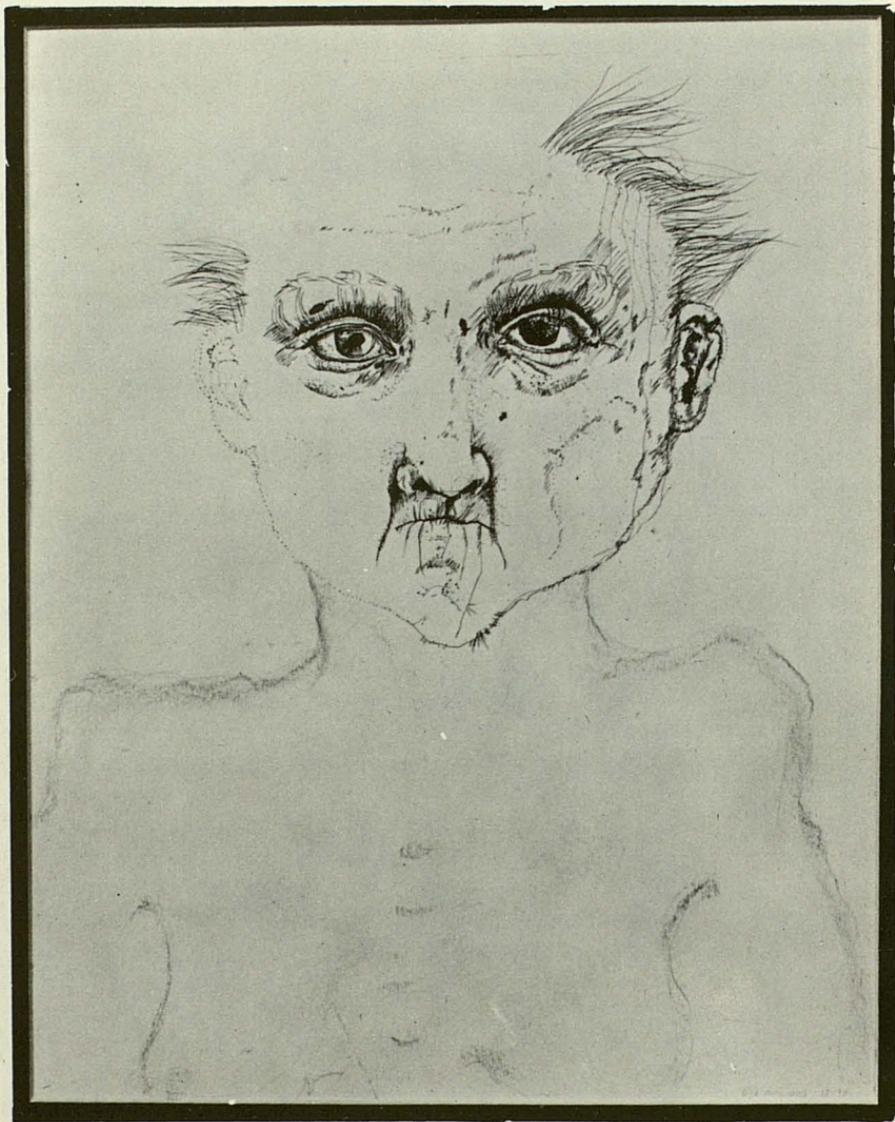
There are women locked in my joints
for refusing to speak to the police
My red blood full of those
arrested, in flight, shot
My tendons stretched brittle with anger
do not look like white roots of peace
In my marrow are hungry faces who live on land the whites don't want
In my marrow women who walk 5 miles every day for water
In my marrow the swollen faces of my people who are not allowed
to hunt
to move
to be

In the scars on my knee you can see children torn from their families
bludgeoned into government schools
You can see through the pins in my bones that we are prisoners
of a long war

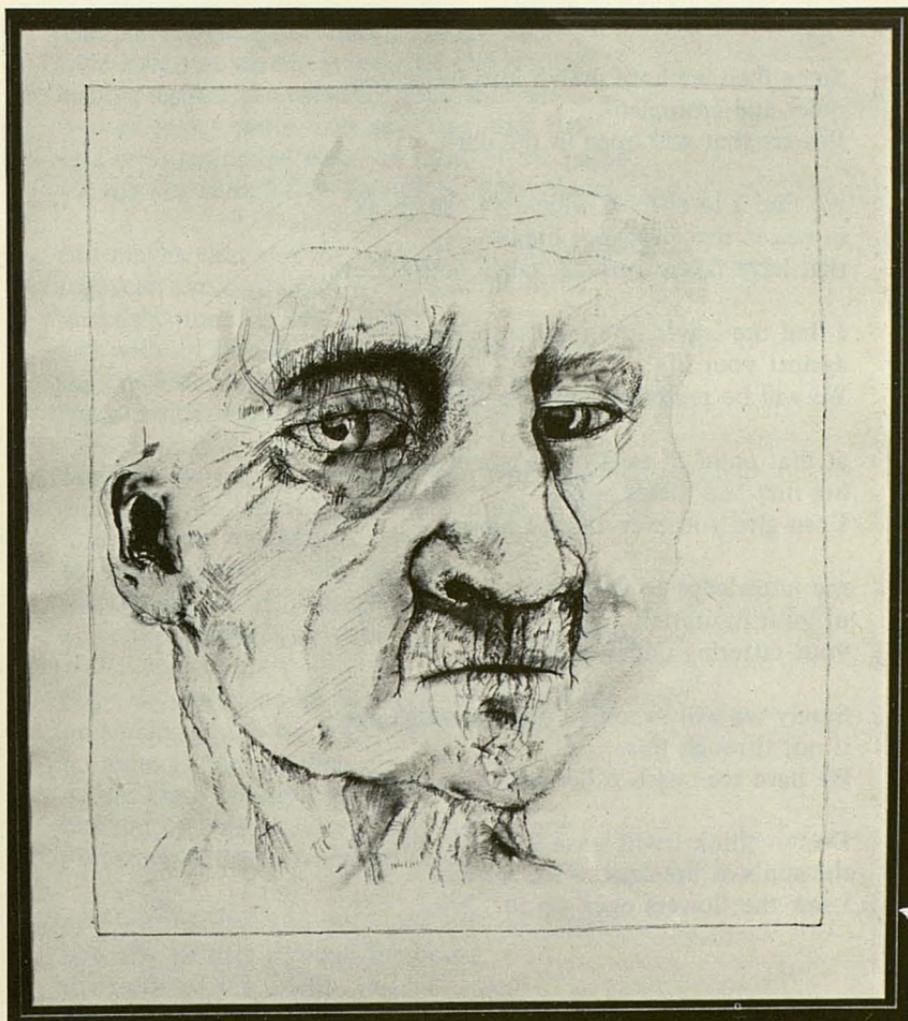
My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it
The pus of the past oozes from every pore
The infection has gone on for at least 300 years
My sacred beliefs have been made pencils, names of cities, gas stations
My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly
Anger is my crutch
I hold myself upright with it
My knee is wounded
see
How I Am Still Walking



A. menstrual sponge, pen and ink in black and brown; original 22" x 30".



B. pen and ink and pencil; original 12" x 16".



C. watercolor, pen and ink; original 21" x 24".

LINES FOR A FRIEND WHO HAS SUFFERED ADVERSITY

Since then we have drawn into ourselves
quiet and crumpled
flowers that will open in the dark.

We find a level from which we can speak
in voices that need not break
that have taken warning, taken cover. Love,

I find the leaves, the mud to press
against your life.
We will be reminded how we are intact

at that point in each of us where solid skin
has met and meets again.
I can give you everything I have

my knowledge of your voice
of your hesitation
your tattering under attack.

Surely we will become ragged through age
if not through this.
We have seen each other smooth and full.

Do not think I will leave you. I knew
the sun was breaking when we met
I saw the flowers open on the fence.

WHILE READING HELEN KELLER'S *TEACHER ON THE
FOURTH DAY OF YOUR TRIP*

The part I didn't say: that probably they
were lovers as we are lovers, the one stands
leaning against the other's breast; that she
wanted to say more than anything, that she
says with restrained force on most of the pages
I loved her completely, leaving no door closed.

But maybe that was the tone of their whole lives
together, the containment, the one point of
unsatisfaction, the one going to
bed without having—what? Or knowing what, and
the confusion of never saying *There is a
space beside you in the shape of my body.*

Suppose we grew old together and you were out of town
and I had the light of the whole house to myself
knowing you would return in time
to find the bowl of clay marbles
smooth the wood, untangle the vines
and sleep frowning or with your mouth moving.

Suppose you came home every time you went away:
no sinking in the waters
no ashes in the canyons
no car crash on any city street
but simply every time you had the chance
you stepped down from the plane

new and uneasy, and we found we had forgotten
how the air lifts through the house
the settle of the world
we made when we had made
nothing this large, this complicated
nothing that was made of life before.

Suppose you always came home
and no window had slammed on my hands
no sawblade bitten screaming to the vein
but we shyly got used to our voices again, listening
like birdwatchers in a field of dry grass, like
the wandering woman to the sudden sound of the creek.

Suppose the next day we strolled through the cemetery
together, noting the large dry leaves
peering into small houses, stained glass
angels and urns, drawers
solemn names and one sloping village
of miniature matching homes.

Suppose we walked there and didn't have to die
that day, but could mull through and note the stone
shared by Susanna Carver and Janemarie O'Hara, a year apart.
What if the airplane didn't become your grave
or the solitary walls mine, but we hung all our faith
on what we find when we walk into the open air.

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—*Library Journal*

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NOTES FOR A MAGAZINE: What Does Separatism Mean?

I am trying to think clearly, I find myself writing in a letter, *about separatism*. What has been its meaning in our movement? What has been the theory and how have women lived it in practice? Is there a term, *separatism*, which most lesbian/feminists would recognize and acknowledge in some kind of general agreement as to its definition? If I tell you that D. is a separatist, what will you think I mean? How will you imagine she lives her daily life, puts bread on her table, chooses her political community, friendships, lovers; from whom is she separating and what impels her to do this? How does she in turn view women who say they are not and cannot be separatists, whatever they may mean by this?

I have been thinking about this because I hear discussions, dialogues, confrontations in which the lack of agreed-on meaning of *separatist* or *separatism* leads to needless confusion and gaps in understanding, therefore needless and wasteful failures to connect, at a time when we feel all our connections threatened.

What follows is not an attempt at comprehensive history; these are merely notes, by one white woman trying to think clearly, going back as a point of departure to a time when

Nobody is writing, or organizing or talking publicly about women, in any way that reflects the problems that various women in the [Civil Rights and peace movements] . . . come across. . . . Perhaps we [women] can start to talk with each other more openly so we can deal with ourselves and others with integrity and therefore can keep working.

Objectively, the chances seem nil that we could start a movement based on anything as distant to general American thought as a sex-caste system . . .

This is quoted from "A Kind of Memo," dated November 1965, written by Casey Hayden and Mary King, two white women trying to review and analyze their experiences in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Meanwhile, as Cynthia Washington, a Black member of SNCC later reported,

in the late 1960's, some black women were "producing children for the black nation" while others began to see themselves as oppressed by black men. . . . The problems of womanhood have had an increasing impact on us, and the directions of our own, of my own, involvement in the women's movement are still unfolding. (Letter to *Southern Exposure*, 1977)

The intense yet halting tone of Hayden and King's "Kind of Memo" attests to what it was like to try to imagine *feminism* (let alone lesbianism) utterly without support or validation in a movement ("the peace and freedom movement") in which men were sublimely righteous about their humanitarian and egalitarian goals.

● ● ●

The above extracts come from Sara Evans's *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (Knopf, 1979). The best review of this book I've seen is by Vicki Gabriner, a white lesbian/feminist who had herself participated in the earlier movements.¹ Gabriner weaves her own story through her critique of Evans's narrative. At one point she states:

I moved away from the organized left. I stayed committed to the issues that had been important to me, but I re-thought them. I became a feminist, and then a lesbian/feminist at my center. I helped to create a lesbian/feminist politics/community in Atlanta that was basically separatist and not organizationally tied to the left although many of the womyn in the early days of the community literally "came out" of the anti-war and civil rights movements. Womyn were my lovers, my political comrades, my friends.

Here Gabriner is using *separatist* to mean specifically separation from the male left; she implies (and I for one believe with her) that women must re-think issues such as racism, class, imperialism, from a lesbian/feminist center; that by this definition at least, the separation in question is from the (largely) white male organizations allegedly dedicated to ending oppression, because no recognition of a "sex-caste system" is taken seriously in such organizations. (SNCC had made its own statement of separatism in expelling whites in 1966.) *Separatism* as Gabriner uses it does *not* imply a loss of commitment to the values (justice, peace, anti-racism) which had first fired women like her into politics. What had become necessary, and what necessitated separation from the male political movements, was a restating of these issues from a woman-identified point of view, as well as a stating for the first time of issues never before perceived as political—heterosexuality, women's unpaid work in the home, childbirth, language itself.

The process of creating an autonomous white women's movement has been long and strenuously objected to by the left, Republicans, Democrats, labor unions, the "new Right," churches, universities, etc. Women of color were forming their own separate political groups early on, but these were not—to my knowledge—described as "separatist." Toni Cade Bambara wrote in the introduction to her anthology *The Black Woman*, published in 1970:

Throughout the country in recent years, Black women have been forming work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women's workshops on the campuses, women's caucuses within existing organizations, Afro-American women's magazines. From time to time we have organized seminars on the Role of the Black Woman, conferences on the Crisis Facing the Black Woman, have provided tapes on the Attitude of European Men Toward Black Women, working papers on the Position of Black Women in America; they have begun correspondence with sisters in Vietnam, Guatemala, Algeria, Ghana on the Liberation Struggle and the Woman, formed alliances on a Third World Women plank. They are women who have not, it would seem, been duped by the prevailing notions of "woman" but who have maintained a critical stance.²

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In 1971 twelve white women of both working- and middle-class origins formed a collective in Washington, D.C., defining themselves as lesbian-feminist separatists, and soon founded *The Furies*, a paper devoted to lesbian-feminist thought and politics. Similar groups formed in a number of other cities. According to a founding member of the Furies, the central concern of lesbian-feminist-separatism at this point was neither civil rights for lesbians nor the promotion of lesbian culture; it was "the recognition that in a male-supremacist society, heterosexuality is a political institution."³ Lesbian separatism had become a necessity because heterosexual feminists accused lesbians of hostility and man-hating when they tried to raise the issue of "the ideological and institutional domination of heterosexuality" as it bolsters male supremacism; and lesbian-feminists decided to continue this analysis among themselves.

1972: In a special issue of the "liberal" Methodist journal *Motive*, edited by four members of the Furies, separatism is, however, defined in terms of refusing to work with homosexual men to put out a "gay" issue of the magazine: "At this time, we are separatists who do not work with men, straight or gay, because men are not working to end male supremacy." As early as 1973 *The Furies* was publishing letters debating whether the true separatism at issue was from male political organizations or from heterosexual feminists. The paper also attempted to analyze class differences within the group.

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1977. In an essay published in *Sinister Wisdom*, Joy Justice describes her own journey through a certain kind of separatism—a particular community in Charlotte, N.C., the effect on her of reading the "CLIT" papers distributed by lesbian-separatists in New York, of phrases like Mary Daly's *living on the boundary*. She writes,

To me lesbian separatism has always meant radical feminism without the "buts." I see two basic perspectives on the roots of sexism. There is the perspective that men oppress women. And there is the perspective that people are people, and we are all hurt by rigid sex roles.

Justice makes some interesting comments on what she sees as the theories underlying both separatism and humanism. She also depicts the extreme results of a certain kind of obsession with purity and rigidity which, at that time and in that place, separatism seemed to demand of her:

I stopped being a separatist . . . because to continue meant I would have had to do things that I did not want to do.

I would have had to stop being friends with a man who had been my friend for over seven years.

I would have had to feel guilty about being close to my sister, who was straight at the time.

I would have had to relate to everyone in the world on the basis of which box they belonged in.

I would have had to be willing to sit around and seriously discuss whether I would kill my father if it were necessary for the overthrow of the patriarchy.

I did not want to do any of these things, and other separatists wanted me to.⁴



In 1978, also in *SW*, Marilyn Frye's "Some Notes on Separatism and Power" appeared, in which she defined separatism as "control of access" which the oppressed must seize from the oppressor as a primary act of insubordination and self-empowerment. In clear yet complex terms Frye suggests why female separatism is seen as threatening by women and by men, and some of the qualities of the experience of separating. What the separatist woman is rejecting is the male right of access to the female for whatever he needs or thinks he needs. As a lesbian she rejects that right in sexual terms, but she also rejects it in terms of her presence, her space, her creativity, her availability in both emotional and material senses.⁵



Apartheid, segregation, the European ghetto, the Indian reservation: constructs of the "superior" group to ensure it will not be "mongrelized" by the "inferior"; to keep the other powerless. Compulsory heterosexuality, exclusion, invisibility, silence: constructs of the male group to deprive women of both identity and autonomy.

Separatism of Jews, of Black Nationalists, of women: those defined as less "human" than their definers, as "outside," are not only forced into but can choose separation: the negative judgment turned around, the claiming of one's identity and community as an act of resistance.



As soon as we leave a white, European frame of reference, we find cross-culturally many examples of women claiming control of rights of access: secret political societies and economic alliances (Africa), marriage-resistance sisterhoods (China), or women-only spaces such as the *jilimi* of the Aboriginal tribes in the Australian desert:

Here live widows who have chosen not to remarry, the estranged wives of violent husbands, women who are ill or visiting from another country, and all their dependent children. In fact, any woman who wishes to live free of the conflicts of heterosexual society may seek refuge in the *jilimi*. . . . The *jilimi* is taboo to all men, who must often travel long, circuitous routes to avoid passing nearby.⁶



1977. "Lesbian separatism believes that the dichotomy between women and men is fundamental, and thus it envisions an all-female world from the conviction that women must live by themselves autonomously in order to create a sane and healthy existence." (*Tribad: A Lesbian-Separatist News Journal*, Vol. I, #2, published by "a lesbian separatist collective that rents a storefront called Fort Dyke, the first lesbian-separatist space in New York City.")

Also in 1977 (from "The Combahee River Collective Statement" published by a group of Black feminists and lesbians):

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. . . . We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men, and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. . . . As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.⁷

Some questions that come to mind:

For many white women, as Vicki Gabriner notes, there is a horrible after-taste to the 1960s—having to do with the leftist cult of masculinity and violence and its usage of women in the name of “sexual liberation”—which is instantly evoked by the mention of “coalition politics.” This may have nothing to do with biological determinism. If the white lesbian/feminist chooses not to work in coalitions with men, does she also become unable to grasp the different choices of the woman of color, under white racism, to maintain survival connections with her racial community of origin—males included? Can the complexity and courage of each position be honored, its radicalism understood?

Does lesbian separatist politics imply a stereotype, a conformity which has no use for difference and which is, therefore, stereotypically racist?



1981: carolyn — Are there any black women involved?

lucina — No, there aren't any yet.

carolyn — How would they be accepted in the surrounding community? would there be a problem?

luna — I think there would be. The community, in general, is very racist. I hear people talk in town and call blacks “niggers” and the Ku Klux Klan is here. You don't see the blacks in town hardly at all. . . . We have talked a lot about how homogeneous we are as a group. . . . We've talked about doing racism and ageism CR groups . . .

mary — I can hitchhike from Louisville to here. How many black women can . . . ? . . . We want to work against the Klan. . . . They're saying they want to kill us, too.

(Interview with Spiral Wimmin's Land Co-op, in *Dinah*,
Lesbian Activist Bureau, Cincinnati, Ohio)

How will a decision to work against the Klan affect lesbian/separatist politics and strategy? Do these women have a choice, as young white les-

bians on the land in the South, to join or not to join in anti-Klan activity? What concrete circumstances made it possible for them to move to this land?

Lesbian separatists have formed their own "affinity groups" within the appallingly heterosexist and sexist anti-nuclear and ecology movements. Other feminists, not self-defined as separatists, have come away from anti-Klan demonstrations deeply angered by the reckless and provocative tactics of white leftist males toward both Klan and police, leading to situations of danger unplanned-for by the groups attending.

What makes us believe these decisions can be simple, and who wants us to over-simplify them?



At the end of *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly writes of separatism at a specifically inward level:

Crone-ologically prior to all discussion of political separatism from or within groups is the basic task of paring away the layers of false Selves from the Self.

Since each Self is unique, since each woman has her own history, and since there are deep differences in temperament and abilities, Hags should acknowledge this variety in all discussions of separatism. . . . Recognizing the chasms of difference among sister Voyagers is coming to understand the terrifying terrain through which we must travel together and apart.⁸

And surely "difference" means not just differences in "temperament and abilities" (which tend to sound like inborn qualities) but all the historical, material differences which are the contexts of all our choices.

And surely not all differences are terrifying.



An act of separation, separateness, can also be an act of connection. An all-female space is not definable simply as a space from which males are excluded. It can also be—though it is not always—a space where women who have not heard each other before *bear witness* (Sarah Hoagland's phrase) in each other's presence and describe themselves to each other, forging new strands of trust and new possibilities of movement.

It's a big leap from the Hayden-King memo ("Nobody is writing or organizing or talking publicly about women") to *Gyn/Ecology* ("Recognizing the chasms of differences among sister Voyagers"). Both are documents of separations within our recent history. So, too, are *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue* and *This Bridge Called My Back*. In the Introduction to *Conditions 5* the editors state that the lesbian/feminist work they wanted to publish could not have been published in "the traditional Black media" due to anti-feminism and homophobia in the Black community. The choice to publish the most radical material possible, in a feminist journal, seems to have been a necessary act of separation. But it was also an act of making the art and thought of radical Black women visible to a new audience, not only feminist and not only Black.

This Bridge Called My Back is intended as a bridge between radical women of color—a resource for ending fragmentations of many kinds. When the projected Third World Women's Press comes into being, it too will surely be a tool for forging connections, yet by some definitions it might be described as separatist—from the struggles of Third World men and women together, from the white-American-European feminist movement.

Importance of not twisting language in a self-serving way: words are as exhaustible as anything else and the prevailing style in America right now is to grab words like cards in a children's game, scream that they mean what we want them to mean, without taking responsibility for their meaning ever after.

If it seems that I am declining to define the projects and groupings of women of color as separatist, that is exactly true. I decline to define, partly because the problem of definition is what these notes are about; partly because there is an on-going problem with white women's definitions of the lives and actions of women of color—the problem of our own racism and that of the white mind in the patriarchal world.



. . . we no longer define ourselves as separatists. A viable revolution is going to have to include many components of society. We have been building an autonomous lesbian-feminist publishing network so that as lesbians we can make a tremendous impact on society at large. We work as lesbians, articulate ourselves as lesbians, in wanting to change the world. The changes we went through in seeing the differences between autonomy and separatism also changed Persephone. Persephone works in coalition with other groups who have the same goal: to end oppression.

(Pat McGloin and Gloria Greenfield of Persephone Press; interview in *Sojourner*, August 1981, pp. 15, 26.)



In *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community*, Sara Bennett and Joan Gibbs, a white and a Black lesbian, call for the building of a "radical autonomous lesbian movement" which would not only destroy

heterosexism and sexism, the institutions of the patriarchy, but also target domestic colonialism, the roots of racism, and imperialism—all the systems that oppress lesbians. . . . Separatism, we feel, is based on the erroneous assumption that the patriarchy is the only system that we must overthrow and seems to suggest that the needs and interests of all lesbians are somehow identical. To us, neither of these are the case. . . . More concretely, lesbian separatism ignores or relegates to a secondary status, race and class oppression, and negates the validity of a shared struggle by Third World women and men.

Also in *Top Ranking*, in an essay by Cathy McCandless, a white woman:

Money can buy you a great deal of distance. Given enough of it, it is even possible never to lay eyes on a man. It's a wonderful luxury, having control over who you lay eyes on, but let's face it: most women's daily survival still involves face-to-face contact with men, whether they like it or not.⁹

To return to Marilyn Frye:

The feminist's separations are rarely if ever sought or maintained directly as ultimate personal or political ends. The closest we come to that, I think, is the separation which is the instinctive and self-preserving recoil from the systematic misogyny that surrounds us. Generally, the separations are brought about and maintained for the sake of something else like independence, liberty, growth, invention, sisterhood, safety, health, or the practice of novel or heretical customs. Often the separations . . . evolve, unpremeditated, as one . . . finds various persons, institutions or relationships useless, obstructive or noisome and leaves them aside or behind. Sometimes the separations are consciously planned . . . as necessary . . . conditions for getting on with one's business. Sometimes the separations are accomplished or maintained easily, or with a sense of relief, or even joy; sometimes they are accomplished and maintained with difficulty, by dint of constant vigilance, or with anxiety, pain or grief.¹⁰

Is the actual practice of separatism as dynamic and evolving as it sounds in Frye's account, or as conformist and static as it appears in Justice's narrative or in *Top Ranking*?

Who decides?

Where and how do we make the distinction between separatism and autonomy?



I started writing these notes primarily for myself. In trying to come to some clearer view of what *separatism* means, I have realized that for me, at least, theory and practice are constantly tugging at each other, often entangled with each other, but they are by no means the same. I find myself wondering if perhaps the real question at issue is not separatism itself but how and when and with what kinds of conscious identity it is practiced, and to what degree any act of separation is more than an act of withdrawing from difference with whose pain we can choose not to engage.

—Adrienne Rich

SW welcomes response, admonition, criticism, comment, on the above as on all the work we publish. We will try to include in each issue pages of response and further discussion. Please let us know if you do not wish your response used in print. We would still welcome hearing from you.

NOTES

1. *Feminary*, Vol. XI, 1 and 2, special double issue on "Disobedience."
2. Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Signet Books, 1970.
3. Charlotte Bunch, "Learning from Lesbian Separatism," *Ms.*, November 1976.
4. Joy Justice, "Vision" in *Sinister Wisdom* 4, fall 1977.
5. *Sinister Wisdom* 6, summer 1978.
6. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonialization: Anthropological Perspectives*. Praeger, 1980, p. 244. For other examples, see my essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1980, p. 651.

7. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Persephone Press, 1981, pp. 213-14.

8. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Beacon Press, 1978, pp. 381-82.

9. Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett, eds., *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Classism and Racism in the Lesbian Community*. February 3rd Press, 306 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11238, 1980; pp. 2-3, 107-8.

10. Marilyn Frye, "Some Notes on Separatism and Power," in *Sinister Wisdom* 6, summer 1978.

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"THE BRIGHTEST DAY . . . THE LOUDEST THUNDER"

A review of *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde. Spinsters, Ink, R.D. 1, Argyle, N.Y. 12809. 77 pp. \$4.00.

GTH: It shames me to say that when I first read *The Cancer Journals*, I did so with deep admiration but also with a kind of "distanced," "objectified," "alien-to-myself" appreciation. However, shortly thereafter, my close friend Geraldine discovered a lump in her left breast which, within a week, was biopsied as positive. Everything changed. I returned to the *Journals*, and this time, it was a brand-new book. In fact, it was all I had to hold on to, the one recourse to which I could turn. I took my copy to Geraldine, and that afternoon, she, her lover, and I sprawled on her bed in a circle of touching laps and heads as I read Section II aloud. It was a charged experience. As Audre wanted, we each took from the work what we needed and could use—and that large taking was a sustenance and comfort which we replenished in the weeks that followed.

GMM: After I was told about the lump in my breast, clear thinking was damn near impossible. *The Cancer Journals* addressed and organized many of my concerns—and ignited some additional ones. As I read about Lorde's experience, a part of me jumped for joy because somehow I knew her experience would be in part my experience, and that somehow I could prepare for what was to come. Now, I know about the cold recovery room and the piercing pain once anesthesia wears off. It was good to learn that someone else had kept a hold on herself throughout this awesome experience. Before I went into the hospital, I knew I had to explain to myself and other women I loved my political perspective on prosthesis and breast reconstruction (which I rejected). On one of my re-readings, I took particular note of Lorde's saying that "prosthesis offers the empty comfort of 'Nobody will know the difference'" and that "the first step is that women with mastectomies must become visible to each other." I was already starting to feel alone. Being visible might not have been the cure-all, but it was better than being in the closet. Intellectually, it fit glove-like in my life as I have defined it. As Lorde predicted, it was a choice that gave me "space to come to terms with my altered life."

GTH: *The Cancer Journals* is comprised of three separate sections. The first is an essay entitled "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," which was originally delivered at the 1977 Modern Language Association Annual Convention shortly after Lorde's first biopsy had proven negative. Having been forced to contemplate death, she speaks

movingly here of the necessity to end the tyranny of silence. Section II, the heart of the book, details her cancer experience from a second, malignant tumor in September 1978 to her writing about it in February 1979—the difficulty of deciding whether to undergo a modified radical mastectomy as opposed to other non-surgical or holistic treatment, the painful stay in the hospital made endurable by the sea of woman-love which buoyed and healed her, the visit from Reach for Recovery and coming to terms with her changed physical landscape, the psychic and practical aftermath of survival. The third section is a fine polemic (in the extremely positive sense) which exposes the politics of prosthesis, “Cancer Inc.,” the total array of stupid, dangerous, destructive forces which breed cancer and other sickness in our society. Though each section is distinct, they all flow into, backwash, and enhance each other.

GMM: Section I sets up knowledge and trust in Lorde. It provides the context and motivation for her telling everything which follows. As she writes: “[Each woman with breast cancer and mastectomies] has a particular voice to be raised in what must become a female outcry against all preventable cancers, as well as against the secret fears that allow these cancers to flourish.” This first important section could be more tightly integrated, but, in general, the basic form and components of the *Journals* are perhaps perfect.

GTH: In addition to its many other merits, Lorde’s work is a valuable and unique part of the belated discussion/literature of “disability.” The May 1981 number of *off our backs* was a special issue on women and disability. Spinsters, Ink also recently published Lynn Strongin’s *Bones and Kim*, a novel about a Lesbian college professor learning to live with the physical limitations of polio. The “Body/Mind” feature of *Ms.* magazine for July 1981 spotlighted a post-mastectomy woman’s diary account of her decision not to wear a prosthesis. In general, handicapped people are pressing for visibility and voice—and societal consideration. Even as it helps raise the question of mastectomy as “handicap,” *The Cancer Journals* provides answers, and a style and perspective which make it an outstanding example of this new literature.

GMM: Seeing mastectomy as a disability may be an important way of consciousness raising and focusing attention on cancer. It does direct attention to the problem in a way which Lorde does not. However, Black women (Lorde included) do not tend to label themselves in ways which would make them feel even more oppressed/depressed. If white women choose to fight the battle from that kind of political perspective, good. But a woman of color can not afford to think of herself in a way which feels so negative.

GTH: For me, *The Cancer Journals* function on many levels. The first is simply as a source of reliable information about cancer, mastectomy, prosthesis, and the like. Before Geraldine’s experience, I would have considered myself intelligently informed on these subjects; however, caught up close in her ordeal, what I thought I knew suddenly seemed vague and insuffi-

cient, nothing which was comfortingly secure or real. It was in this mode that I initially reached for the *Journals*. Secondly, there is the sheer drama and power of Lorde's story, her conscious re-living and sharing of a gripping narrative (especially Section II). Then, there is the pleasure a reader derives from her language and literary style. For, after all, Lorde is not only a woman undergoing mastectomy, but a writer, a poet who is accustomed to making verbal art of her life:

My work is to inhabit the silences with which I have lived and fill them with myself until they have the sounds of brightest day and the loudest thunder. And then there will be no room left inside of me for what has been except as memory of sweetness enhancing what can and is to be.

The *Journals* also contain much feminist education and insight—for instance, when Lorde spells out the sexist basis for encouraging women to regard breast surgery as a cosmetic problem, or asks, "What would happen if an army of one-breasted women descended upon Congress and demanded that the use of carcinogenic, fat-stored hormones in beef-feed be outlawed?" Finally, one treasures this book for the pure inspiration it gives. Lorde lessens mystery and dread (the "immobilizing yield to things that go bump in the night") and fosters the belief that were cancer to happen to us, we too could make it through. This specific strengthening is one aspect of the total way the *Journals* brace us to answer affirmatively Lorde's challenge: "I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?"

GMM: *The Cancer Journals* is like a Book of Wisdom for me. It also functioned as a dictionary and a road map of sorts. It defined my fears, and there was no greater fear than not knowing what I feared. It organized my anxiety so that clarity was possible. I could trust Lorde's account of her experience because of her desire to be visible and its built-in rewards. Her solutions were self-assuring and embodied positive images and connotations. I am a stronger Black Lesbian for having read and re-read, and re-read *The Cancer Journals*. The *Journals* also illustrate how self-love leads to love of others/other women. Self-love is necessary before one can share something which is deep or threatening. If a person does not love and feel good about herself, then she cannot open up, reveal, and share what is there. This is one of the lessons of the book which makes it a work every woman should read.

GTH: Throughout the *Journals*, Lorde develops certain recurring themes. Chief among these are fear, work, death, anger, silence, visibility, love of women, the power of conscious living. Undergirding all of these is the issue of identity—defining the self and running the risk of being who you are. Reading the *Journals*, a woman is thus confronted with the question of her own identity, and this identity significantly determines her response to the work.

GMM: For women who have not had breast cancer, this book is a forewarning about the harmful effects of remaining silent in all areas of living. It is only because I tried so hard before cancer to make my many selves

visible for women—support that the idea of remaining one-breasted is no more devastating than it is. There *is* strength in becoming visible, because at the core of this process is freedom. For women who have had a mastectomy, *The Cancer Journals* give support for rejecting prosthesis and breast reconstruction. It is a welcome reminder that you are not alone (even though it appears that way), and that it is okay to be afraid and cry. Black Lesbian writers tend to merge, to make an absolute correlation between the personal and the political that fits. There is a connection that only a Black Lesbian can make for another Black Lesbian such that knowledge feels self-referenced (as Lorde thought, “I wonder if there are any black lesbian feminists in Reach for Recovery?”). Because I found Lorde’s experience transferable, I was not in my usual position of reading something good, but having to stop and ask myself, “Okay, good, now how does this relate to me?” It may be true that the closer the identity with Lorde, the greater the benefit from her *Journals*. Still, there is much in them for every woman who can identify with any integral part of Lorde’s self.

GTH: Clearly, Lorde is, as Adrienne Rich phrased it, “the Amazon warrior,” victorious after battle. Intermittently, I wondered about those women stricken with breast cancer who were not as strong as she, who could not surmount as easily their worries about present and future lovers, or the possible embarrassment of their children. For example, reading Sonny Wainwright’s “Disablement of Mastectomy” in the *off our backs* issue, I heard tones of regret, despair, even a kind of defeat which is absent from Lorde’s account. For those women who respond to cancer with less than Amazonian courage or who have chosen prosthesis, I hoped that Lorde’s stance was wide enough to admit them passage through her to the other side. Another of my gloomier concerns was the fear that the efficacy of those courageous women who walk through the world visibly one- or non-breasted could be subtly undermined or rendered nil. In a society where prosthesis is the overwhelming norm, being different makes the visibly mastectomized woman a “freakish” exception. Her visibility still may not change or effectively challenge the *status quo* since it is so exceptional—especially if the woman herself is already outré/other by reason of her race, sex, sexuality, or whatever. Society has ingenious ways of neutralizing us. In the face of this reality, the immensity of the struggle and the bravery of those who fight becomes even more apparent.

GMM: *The Cancer Journals* did not tell me how to live, think, or be after I chose to be a visible one-breasted woman. For example, it did not prepare me for the looks I got from people on the streets after I moved outside my nestling circle of women. The first person on the job, a woman, who stared at my chest made me panic. I felt awkward and frightened. There was a split-second urge to run, even though I knew that I would not, that my principles or something would not let me. Yet, it would have been nice if Lorde had prepared me for that moment in the same thorough way that she wrote about the hospital experience. In our society, there is no protocol for this “social” situation. To calm myself, I spoke about the operation—something the *Journals* had helped me to do. Lorde also does

not deal with sex after the mastectomy—except to mention that she was finally able to masturbate. And I kept wondering if there were a hidden meaning in that. I asked myself questions such as: “Would women look at me differently as a sexual being?” “Is a breast that they see really a crucial part of my sexual attractiveness?” In general, I wished that she had talked more on the subject. How was it for her, for her lover? I realize that this is a lot to ask, but after her sharing of all the other intimate things, one gets primed for more, for almost total telling. Lorde is obviously a sensuous woman, but here she does not really address sexuality. This must be conscious and deliberate. I wondered why, especially since this is the first and only work of hers with that kind of sexual silence.

GTH: *The Cancer Journals* is not really a journal in the strictest sense of the genre since it is comprised more of essays and commentary than actual diary excerpts (all of which occur in the Introduction and Section II). It seems that the journal entries (which are personal and poignant) are used mainly for retrospective clarification and as springboards for after-the-fact analysis. However, the work is certainly a journal in the sense that it charts profound individual change through time; it is a three-year record of crisis, struggle, and transcendence occurring from the fall of 1977 through the summer of 1980. It is a beautiful book which shines and shouts as Lorde intended it to do.

GMM: Every woman should read *The Cancer Journals* and focus on how Lorde's experience is relevant to her. Though there is more here for women of color, there is a lot that everyone should learn. The basic visibility question relates to so many issues; there is something universally good in it. Being who you are in this way helps give all others the space to be who they are.

A PLACE FOR ALL OF US

A review of *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin. Published in 1981 by Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. \$10.95.

I am the wall at the lip of the water
 I am the rock that refused to be battered
 I am the dyke in the matter, the other
 I am the wall with the womanly swagger
 I am the dragon, the dangerous dagger
 I am the bulldyke, the bulldagger

and I have been many a wicked grandmother
 and I shall be many a wicked daughter.

—Judy Grahn, 1972

The small orange volume, *Amazon Poetry* published in 1975, has blossomed into a full world—sixty-five Lesbian poets and over one hundred and forty-five poems taking us on journeys that range from the ocean bottom to the tops of glaciers, from dry gullies to South Bronx streets, from Poland to Jamaica. The poems in *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* bear witness to what we dare to see, and seeing feel, and feeling know. The breaking-down of secrets, the leaving of old territories, the desperate need to pierce through camouflage, the refusal to continue separations when they cost lives, the awareness of moments that are lives missed, the consciousness of how we lose each other—we women who should be dear to each other—through fear, through “decorum,” through “judgment,” through the crushing oppressions that can kill us and each other before our eyes. And how we love, with touch and with defiance, and how that love includes our rage at the murder of children, at the brutalization of women, at the suffering of our people because they are different—i.e., poor or Cherokee or Jewish or Chinese or Black or Chicana or Hispanic. Here is our celebration of the power that comes from saying the unsayable and walking in places we are not supposed to walk; here is our war with the powerful, who like giants tread on those they consider too small to be saved. Our refusals are here and what we say yes to—our birth places and our dying places, and our chants—that strengthen our daily lives—to earth woman and sky woman, to Seboulisa, to Eyeteco, to Medusa, to Tlazolteotle, to Orishala. We are here as a multivoiced people, singing our tales of women loving women.

Elsa Gidlow. May Sarton. Jean Mollison. Adrienne Rich. Audre Lorde. Clare Coss. Frankie Hucklenbroich. Lynn Strongin.

Many of the poems are about home, places that carry our spirit even when we are not there and that live in our spirits when we have lost them: the home of Africa, of the earth of one's people, of a lover's body, of solitude, the house blown by Southern winds. Some of the poems are about the loss of these homes, the drying up of ancestral earth, the deaths that come in the wrong places, the mothers who lose their power and the "severed daughters" (Audre Lorde, "125th Street and Abomey"). Many of these poems are written at a crossroads, at a place of shifting territory. Concerns about geography and genealogy, legacies and lost connections are both literal and metaphoric—worlds have been taken, buried like the notebooks of a mother under accumulated personas and rotting leaves. "I seek identity in a childish hand and obsolete geography" (Michelle Cliff, "Obsolete Geography"). We are called on to sift through layers of earth, of artifacts, of sanctions to find original impulses: "while I live in my body and learn from my bones / to make some less predictable sound" (Joan Larkin, "Rhyme of My Inheritance"). In the poetry of Minnie Bruce Pratt, there is a courage of homelessness combined with the living imagery of a land too well-known. The statement "Nowadays I call no one place home" is wrenched from a speaker who knows "the sounds made by those who believed they had to stay / while their hearts broke in every room of the house": a speaker who has "learned the grief of walls" ("The Segregated Heart"). Susan Wood-Thompson learns her lessons of territory and the false punishments that will be delivered for not "knowing her place" in a hushed church alcove ("Territory"). Because she is a public enemy, Susan Saxe has lost control over where she lives and celebrates that loss: "I do not have a legal residence" ("Notes from the First Year"). Several of the poets, like Paula Gunn Allen, Audre Lorde, Donna Allegra, Rota Silverstrini, Wilmette Brown, and Gloria Anzaldúa have layered geographies in their poems; continents are superimposed on each other with the truth of the encounter seeping out through the poet's double-vision.

Say that the house of sisters easy with love
 went out to welcome
 a people shades paler
 than your warm humanity

....

that their love for all each other
 was anchored in waves of differences

(Donna Allegra, "When People Ask")

Languages weave around each other, making a counterpoint of loss, pride, and love.

Didn't our mamas
 sit en la cosina
 with
 el cafe con leche
 y la religion
 as if it were all
 and

wasn't it all
just then

(Rota Silverstrini, "Unfinished")

In "Madonna of the Hills" by Paula Gunn Allen, the sacred earth holds buried homes. The quiet search for pieces of past women's lives is what gives her speaker life. The bits of recovered bone give comfort, shards of other women's selves which have been gently dug out of the earth are like discovered poems of generational connection.

She said that it gave her
a sense of peace to dig and remember
the women who had cooked and scrubbed
and yelled at their husbands
just like her. She liked, she said,
to go to the spot where she'd found
those things and remember the women
buried there.

In Allen's poem "Beloved Women," the question of how we can know who we were is poignantly explored; and the answer is not an easy one. It is filled with wonder and mystery and the knowledge of a waiting power.

It is not known if those
who warred and hunted on the plains
chanted and hexed in the hills
divined and healed in the mountains
gazed and walked beneath the seas
were Lesbians

....

Nobody knows whether those women
were Lesbians. Nobody
can say what such an event
might mean.

Time is also a home and for the most part we have been declared homeless. Because history is a gift bestowed on those who are visible, we must move backwards and forwards to repiece the fabric of our Lesbian existence.

For Irena Klepfisz, the space to exist is dearly bought. The ovens of the Holocaust reduced bodies to smoke; in the poem "Death Camp" bodies are turned into breaths that must fight each other for a passage-way to the open air.

When I pressed through the chimney
it was sunny and clear my smoke
was distinct I rose quiet left her
beneath

Klepfisz's poems are about the battle for space, the right to a foothold. She writes of a woman who is an object of curiosity, a spinster who dares to have an extra bedroom just for herself.

& they always cluck over the amount of space you require
& certainly the extra bedroom seems unnecessary & i try to
explain that i like to move around & that i get antsy when
i have the urge so that it's nice to have an extra place
to go when you're lonely . . .

. . . & i try to explain i live for myself even when in love but
it's a hard concept to explain when you feel lonely
(“they're always curious”)

Irena is an expert on enclosures, on cages, on false contexts. She knows that the ground can become foreign very easily. “How, I wonder, did I become what I am not?” (“Contexts”). In her poems, the vulnerability of one soul creates a huge time of tenderness for herself, for all of us.

Because Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin have so wisely arranged the poems in chronological order, we can see that this imagery of place, of safe or guarded territory has been a central theme in Lesbian poetry for a long time. It is present in Elsa Gidlow's poem “For the Goddess Too Well Known,” written in 1919:

At dawn I leave her
Asleep in my wakening garden.
(For what was done there
I ask no man pardon.)

Acts of sexual courage create new worlds because as we love we must say goodbye to safer territory. In the earlier poems, this knowledge of worlds risked is keener. The tension between the need to love and the recognition of the risk is dramatized by the tightly controlled structure and the erotic pressure that threatens to burst through. These poems are captured conflicts; the speakers do battle both with inner voices and historical loneliness. They are born not from a movement but from an individual woman's struggle to have a right to her passion.

Old ties go under as the senses reel.
Oh, that is where I still am most undone!
For peace with angry gods is sorely won.
(Jean Mollison, “Do you remember now
the night that we,” 1942)

Private spaces for “freaks” are essential; the bars of the forties and fifties were homes for the biologically and psychologically judged, but we did more in those allotted spaces than they ever dreamed of; when anger and belief in one's way of loving explode the shame, then these spaces can become connected worlds.

That frozen rage is what I must explore—
Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!
(May Sarton, “The Muse as Medusa”)

*Joan Larkin. Susan Sherman. Paula Gunn Allen. Judy Grahn.
Irena Klepfisz. Rota Silverstrini. Martha Courtot. Jacqueline
Lapidus. Susan Wood-Thompson. Marilyn Hacker. Susan Griffin.
Fran Winant.*

If our poets know the terror and liberation of the loss of safe places, they also know the complexity of reconnection. In the struggle to put the world back together again in a way that reflects our knowledge, painful contradictions must be faced. Jan Clausen writes of the guilt, the confusion of wrong positioning in a world where jail is the home of those who have taken unmistakable positions, where inclusion in history as they have written it is an insult.

i'm what
i have
to hate
white skin
and history
(“Dialectics”)

But it would be too easy to stop at this. Clausen pushes through to her own worth, her own battlelines, and tells us what may lie in store.

to choose reality
is to wake in chains
on stony ground
in the ice-edged desert dawn
(“Dialectics”)

Some of the poems are concerned with the transmittance of family messages, with a remembering of cultural realities that are almost too much to bear. A wisdom is needed both in the telling and the hearing.

The old black witch keeps her sources well,
and does not tell me everything at once.
Holds back the unwholesome forecast.
Re-tells the ravaged past.
Closes her misty eyes to the lines,
tightens her fist against her teeth,
draws in her breath,
gives me back my hand.
And does not tell me everything at once.
(Cheryl Clarke, “Palm-Reading”)

Tellings, revelations, narratives are battles against homelessness; they are aesthetic acts that become political for a hunted people. “give me the woman strength / of tongue in this cold season” (Audre Lorde, “125th Street and Abomey”).

*Sharon Barba. Judith McDaniel. Martha Shelley. Bobbie Bishop.
Rita Mae Brown. Pat Parker. Melanie Kaye. Honor Moore. Elise
Young. Willyce Kim. Ana Kowalkowska. Minnie Bruce Pratt.*

But the unity, the reconnection we wish for is not a cheap thing; it must have a knowledge of the anatomy of separation as part of its vision. It must also have an integrity, born of the recognition of difference, not just a verbal listing of difference or a simple raising of issues, but a deep willingness to understand our historical, cultural, and erotic complexity. “When sisters separate they haunt each other” (Adrienne Rich, “Transit”).

For some of the poets, loving women is the mark of difference, the first divider between traditions and generations. "lesbian / granddaughter who is spread so differently / on life's bread . . ." (Bobbie Bishop, "grandmother's little feet"). Adrienne Rich in her poem "Transit" speaks of another kind of separation, created by the difference of what our bodies can do. The physical and psychological terrain changes, depending on how we can move through our lives. The deep challenge is to see each other.

. . . how without let or hindrance
she travels in her body
until the point of passing, where the skier
and the cripple must decide
to recognize each other

Our own need for a monolithic community can become a separator. In an effort to end betrayals, we can create new losses by demanding simplistic responses. It is one of the ways colonization continues after the colonizer has seemingly left the occupied land. The deeper the oppression, the more tempting is the sameness of response. In her poem "Between Ourselves," Audre Lorde calls for the right to be as complicated as she is, as history has made her, and to be freed from decrees about who she should be.

if we do not stop killing
the other
in ourselves
the self we hate
in others
soon we shall all lie
in the same direction

But if we know how we can lose each other, we can begin saying no to that loss. Adrienne Rich dares us to see the danger of lost moments, to follow the truths of our way of loving.

I want to touch my fingers
to where your breasts had been
but we never did such things
(*"A Woman Dead in Her Forties"*)

For Pat Parker, knowledge of what must be jettisoned is the most powerful starting place.

i woman, i
can no longer claim
a mother of flesh
a father of marrow
I, Woman must be
the child of myself.
(*"from cavities of bones"*)

Judy Grahn in a wonderful reversal of judgment apologizes for not loving enough. Our only fault—we say to those who call our love shameful—is in

not touching enough, not sending our hands, our words, our tongues, our caring into the lives of more women.

Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and
most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly.
(from "A Woman Is Talking to Death")

*Gloria Anzaldúa. Michelle Cliff. Barbara Smith. Wilmette Brown.
Cheryl Clarke. Alice Bloch. Karen Brodine. Ellen Marie Bissert.
Esther Silverman. Becky Birtha. Alison Colbert. Susan Saxe.*

The languages of our varied experiences, of our cultural differences are here: Japanese, Spanish, Greek, Yiddish, Black English. The litanies of foods and flowers form a language of home—mangoes, cassava, tamarind, dung gwa, yams and canna lillies, eschochia, toadflax, trillium, lobelia and midnight mysteries. We can learn from these poems what colors, tastes, sounds give life to each of us. Place names become mountains we must climb to see the inner geography of the poet. Oconeechee, Durango, Peterborough, Chocorua, Dahomey, Elmina, Tule Lake, Tubero, and the F train. Yet there is a "cable of blue fire" (Adrienne Rich, "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev") that burns through the differences and connects us to each other—our Lesbian way of loving.

*Dorothy Allison. Olga Broumas. Lorraine Sutton. Ruthe D.
Canter. Jan Clausen. Sapphire. Robin Becker. M. F. Hershman.
Wendy Brooks Wieber. Eleanor Lerman. Jane Creighton.
Rebecca Gordon.*

Our loving, however, is not without penalty. We are a people in danger and Lesbians of color are in danger for layers of reasons. Thus many of the poems are filled with warnings.

They will come for
the perverts
and where will
you be
When they come?
(Pat Parker, "Where Will You Be")

because black is beautiful but currently
going out of style
(Audre Lorde, "Equinox")

Don't play in the barn where the wool is stacked
they used to warn us kids,
you'll be killed whether you've murdered anyone or not.
(Paula Gunn Allen, "Wool Season")

I expect to be shot in the back
by someone who calls me sister.
(Julie Blackwomon, "Revolutionary Blues")

Do not let them kill me
before you speak to me
(Susan Griffin, "Breviary")

Barbara Smith reminds us of the dangers from within. Racism in our own midst forces survival tactics among survivors.

She merely warns me
in a lidden tongue
that for survival
we must often play invisible,
the Masquerade,
must save our best and
darkest selves for us.

("Theft")

Along with the warnings both to our selves and to our enemies, the poets give us shouts of joy, refusals to be quiet, a dyke dance of rebellion and courage.

i never thought
i'd love the sun again
but now my fingers move
in a panic
of wanting to be burnt

(Martha Courtot, "i am a woman in ice")

Ellen Marie Bissert's poems shine both with her defiance and her knowledge of the price she may have to pay.

a menace to civilization
i cannot be trusted
i cannot be trusted with your children
your tender nubile daughters
i cannot be trusted
to perpetuate your sons
your giant dark mushrooms in the sky

("ode to my true nature")

i'll die alone & dig it
loving a woman in a black leather jacket
& walking into The Duchess with my polka-dot tie & lace shirt
this is my life & i now ask everyone to dance.

("A Romance")

Our poets remind us that what "they" want to kill us for is the way we love; that sexuality, our lovemaking, is a subversive act.

We become our deaths.
Our names disappear and our lovers leave town,
heartbroken, crazy.
But we are the ones who die.
We are the forgotten
burning in the streets

hands out, screaming,

"This is not all I am.

I had something else in mind to do."

(Dorothy Allison, "Boston, Massachusetts")

Alice Bloch quietly depicts the outlaw world of our most settled couples, who create daily securities in the shadow of calamities: "We build our common life / in the space between the laws" ("Six Years"). Many of the poems give us maps of relationships, tracing the movement of a tongue as it outlines both a thigh and a way of cherishing. In the poetry of Cherríe Moraga, a passionate caring shines through. A woman crawls into the bed of her cold-afflicted lover, heats her with her body and gives her herbal tea. We are in a recognizable world. These simple, but illegal acts of loving lead to a deeper terrain where all the reckoning goes on, where "we locate / the damage in our different parts" (Cherríe Moraga, "For Amber," when her friend Yve died of a stroke). We are all here, our bodies which defy the control of custom, our spirits which will not settle for a world where women die too easily and which urge us to take our special knowledge into a deeper place.

we left, as we have left all of our lovers

as all lovers leave all lovers

much too soon to get the real loving done.

(Judy Grahn, from "A Woman Is Talking to Death")

Kitty Tsui. Cherríe Moraga. Barbara Noda. Wendy Stevens. Donna Allegra. Osa Hidalgo-de la Riva. Felice Newman. Elly Bulkin.

What makes this anthology essential is the sense of history that both informs it and is created by it. Elsa Gidlow, the first poet in the collection, was born in 1898 and Felice Newman, the last poet, was born in 1956; thus we have a hefty period of time in which to watch change in content and style and to trace thematic connections. The editors also have arranged each poet's work in order of creation and for three poets in particular—Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Judy Grahn—we are given a spiritual autobiography by this extensive inclusion of their work. In a sense, these poets are revealing what being a Lesbian can mean in a way we have never had before—both in what they say and how they say it. For instance, Adrienne Rich in "To Judith, Taking Leave" (1962) presents her early intimations of what is possible between two women:

Judith! that two women
in love to the nerves' limit
with two men—
shared out in pieces
to men, children, memories
so different and so draining—
should think it possible
now for the first time
perhaps, to love each other
neither as fellow-victims
nor as a temporary
shadow of something better.

A later poem, "Transcendental Etude" (1977), describes how much of a home another woman has become. Rich is stricken with

....
the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves,
for that acute joy at the shadow her head and arms
cast on a wall, her heavy or slender
thighs on which we lay, flesh against flesh,
eyes steady on the face of love . . .

And while the poem is recent, it is filled with a language we have come to know, a language of symbolic and real homes, of worlds rejected and others being claimed.

Elly Bulkin makes it clear in her introductory essay, "A Look at Lesbian Poetry," that an unrepresentative history is more a distortion than a discovery. "We could stubbornly claim Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell and H.D. as lesbians—but they hardly constituted a lesbian literary tradition out of which to write a history from which lesbians, especially lesbians of color or poor or working class lesbians, could draw strength." Thus, the anthology itself is a document of Lesbian concerns, a reflection of our struggle to create a more representative Lesbian culture. With the book's critical essays, the one previously mentioned and Elly's "Lesbian Poetry in the Classroom," the contributors' notes and the resource listing,¹ the anthology is a monumental step forward in creating a fuller, richer Lesbian poetic tradition and in treating that body of work with the care and attention it deserves.

I have one plea to make: Because our own lives are so compelling, it is often easier to see one's own time and style as the *real* history while what came before, particularly if it is distasteful in some currently prevailing way, is seen as a misshapen image of the real thing. As I read the anthology, I realized a language was missing, the language of my times, the Lesbian fifties. I wanted a poem in the language of my years and way of loving—a stone butch poem, a fem poem, a passing woman's poem. I want these poems because I have heard them spoken by the women I have met and I think they are necessary to us but these poems have been silenced by shame. I ask the Lesbians of my own time to break their silence. We were not victims only, we were not shadows. Our poetry was in our actions and in our dress, in the lift of our heads and the swagger of our hips, in our clutched hands as we walked the streets of the McCarthy era. As long as we keep using the Women's Liberation Movement as the measure of authentic Lesbian experience, we are not understanding the full courage and creativity of the Lesbian people. I ask editors to listen for these poems, to listen for the language of a street butch, of a Lesbian in prison who writes poetry to her lady. The prevailing message of the seventies to Lesbians of my time was, we are ashamed of you. You did not do things in the right way. It is no accident that silence was the response. In the anthology, both Judy Grahn and Fran Winant pay homage to the courage of the bulldagger and the buldyke, but I want to hear us speaking in our

own voice, telling the tales we are burying deeper and deeper. I know there is a power and a beauty and a wonder in that telling because I have heard it.

And this is the time I say thank you to all the poets here—to Audre Lorde for her enduring work of years; to Judy Grahn for her *Common Woman Poems*, for the *History of Lesbianism*, for her memorial chant, for her words full of grit and love; to the poets who are just beginning and to the poets who are not included in this anthology but whose work I know as it comes to the Lesbian Herstory Archives scribbled on bits of paper or bound in black books; to Lesbians like Jean Sirius, Chocolate Waters, Linda Brown, Joan Gibbs, who produce their own work. You are all a part of this tradition. To those who want to write but are afraid, know we are caring listeners. And thank you to Elly Bulkin, Joan Larkin, to Persephone Press, to our bookstores and to our journals, and to us—for asking no man's pardon.²

¹An addition to the Resource Listing should be the Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletters, nos. 4-6, which give a listing of over 900 Lesbian poets, both published and unpublished. These can be sent for from the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 1258, N.Y., N.Y. 10116.

²I want to thank Michelle Cliff for her caring and careful editing of this review; her suggestions improved both the content and the style.

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— Audre Lorde, poet

GCN provides good information for the lesbian community as well as some thought provoking articles. I'm happy to read a Boston newspaper which is not afraid of my opinions, and I look forward to receiving it every week.

—Alix Dobkin, lesbian-separatist
singer/writer

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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.

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.

COMPANERAS: *Antologia Lesbiana Latinoamericana* (Latin American Lesbian Anthology): cuentos, poesia, ensayos/stories, poems, essays. c/o Juanita Ramos and Lynette Oliver, 170 Avenue C, 4-H, New York, N.Y., 10009; (212) 473-6864.

DIASPORA DISTRIBUTION: lesbian publishing and distribution alternative. *Fragments from Lesbos* (hand-printed, limited edition) by Elana Dykewoman; *Medusa's Hair: Poems of Lesbian Re-Visioning* by Elise Young; and other publications for womyn only. P.O. Box 272, Langlois, OR 97450.

FEMINIST STUDIES: Three issues annually. Individuals: 1 year, \$13; 2 years, \$24; 3 years, \$35. Institutions: 1 year, \$24; 2 years, \$46; 3 years, \$68. Foreign orders, add postage: surface mail +\$4/year, airmail +\$14/year. Single issues: individuals, \$5; institutions, \$10. Send to: Managing editor, *Feminist Studies*, Women's Studies Program, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

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.

WANTED: Writings and art work from young women ages 13-21 for anthology. Send: first-person accounts, poetry, journal excerpts, fiction, graphics, photographs. Topics should include growing up female, empowerment, taking charge of your life. SASE. Send to: Jean Costa, Chrysalis, 1757 W. Wilson, Chicago, IL 60640.

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.

THE WOMEN'S WRITER'S CENTER: An independent feminist institute offering a year-long program of writing workshops and women's literature. Write: WWC, Cazenovia College, Cazenovia, NY 13035.

"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.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Maureen Brady is working on *Folly*, her second novel. Her first, *Give Me Your Good Ear*, was published by Spinsters, Ink, in 1979 and by The Women's Press, Ltd., London, in 1981. She is a co-founder of Spinsters, Ink.

Wendy Cadden is a longtime lesbian feminist activist and artist. Her most recent show, "Drawing Strength: Images of Women," was on view at the Gallery Room in Oakland, California, early this year.

Chrystos lives on Bainbridge Island, Washington, and raises chickens and vegetables. She is a double Scorpio who will be 34 this November. She has been writing since she was 9.

Clare Coss is a playwright, poet and psychotherapist, and an artistic director with the Women's Experimental Theatre. *Alistine Glodine* is part of a book she is currently writing on her mother.

Gabrielle Daniels writes: "Millicent is part of a larger work still 'under construction' called 'Colored Women by Number.' She is with Catalina de Erauso, the Nun Ensign; with 'The Women at Point Sur' (my answer to Robinson Jeffers); with Kathleen Cleaver and Wendy Yoshimura in a particular section called 'A Woman Left Behind.'"

Liza Deep Moss lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, where she studies and practices the Healing Arts. These drawings are from a larger series on Old Womyn she did several years ago.

hattie gossett: born: central new jersey factory town / lives: northern harlem / enjoys: thinking listening conversating reading writing jazzing and acting out against all the big daddies / forthcoming book: *my soul looks back in wonder/wild wimmin dont git no blues*.

Judy Grahn's new book of poems, *The Queen of Wands*, will be published by Crossing Press. Persephone Press will bring out her *Another Mother Tongue: Stories from the Ancient Gay Traditions*.

Sara Heslep, lesbian-feminist, lives in a women's community in the Oregon mountains, and welcomes letters about our residence and our plans to purchase the land for women. Write c/o Golden, Wolf Creek, OR 94797.

Gloria T. Hull is a teacher, poet, and critic who writes extensively about Black women's literature.

Lisa Leghorn has been a feminist activist for many years; her work includes writing, teaching, lecturing, and community organizing. She has an M.A. from the Goddard-Cambridge Graduate Program in Social Change.

Lee Lynch was a frequent contributor to *The Ladder* in its last years. She is still trying to tell stories that make us cry and smile about ourselves. She has previously published under the name Beverly Lynch.

Geraldine McIntosh, a post-mastectomy woman, is an accountant who lives in Delaware. This is the first time that she has written about herself.

Barbara Mor is the editor/amender of Monica Sjoo's *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All*, published in Norway and distributed by Womanspirit.

Joan Nestle is a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation. She teaches English in the SEEK program at Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.

Katherine Parker is an artist and Finance Manager of a refuge for battered women and their children in Boston. She holds an M.A. degree from the Goddard-Cambridge Program in Social Change.

Joanna Russ is currently teaching at the University of Washington. Her latest book is *On Strike Against God*, a lesbian love story published by Out & Out Books. Other novels include *The Female Man*, *We Who Are About To*, and *The Two of Them*.

Mab Segrest lives in Durham, North Carolina, and is a member of the collective that edits *Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South*. This year she is publishing

a volume of poems, *Living in a House I Do Not Own*, with Night Heron Press in Durham.

Barbara Smith is a Black lesbian feminist activist/writer/editor. With Gloria Hull and Patricia Bell Scott, she edited *All the Blacks Are Men, All the Women Are White, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (The Feminist Press, 1981).

Beverly Smith is the director of the Black Women Artists Film Series in Boston. Her journal selection, "Diane," was recently published in the first issue of the new magazine *Common Lives, Lesbian Lives*.

Susan Wood-Thompson's book of poetry, *Crazy Quilt*, is distributed by Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886.

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SW 18

JEANNETTE FOSTER

born November 3, 1894, Oak Park, Illinois

died July 26, 1981, Pocahontas, Arkansas

courageous, pioneering lesbian scholar and poet

Her published works include: *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (New York: Vantage Press, 1956; London: Frederick Muller, 1958; Baltimore: Diana Press, 1976); *Two Women: The Poetry of Jeannette Foster and Valerie Taylor* (Chicago: Womanpress, 1976); a translation of Renée Vivien, *A Woman Appeared to Me* (Bates City, Missouri: Naiad Press, 1976).

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