

SINISTER WISDOM





SINISTER WISDOM 21

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*Bashert**

These words are dedicated to those who died

These words are dedicated to those who died
because they had no love and felt alone in the world
because they were afraid to be alone and tried to stick it out
because they could not ask
because they were shunned
because they were sick and their bodies could not
 resist the disease
because they played it safe
because they had no connections
because they had no faith
because they felt they did not belong and wanted to die

These words are dedicated to those who died
because they were loners and liked it
because they acquired friends and drew others to them
because they took risks
because they were stubborn and refused to give up
because they asked for too much

These words are dedicated to those who died
because a card was lost and a number was skipped
because a bed was denied
because a place was filled and no other place was left

These words are dedicated to those who died
because someone did not follow through
because someone was overworked and forgot
because someone left everything to God
because someone was late
because someone did not arrive at all
because someone told them to wait and they just
 couldn't any longer

* *ba-shêrt*: inevitable, (pre)destined

These words are dedicated to those who died
because death is a punishment
because death is a reward
because death is the final rest
because death is eternal rage

These words are dedicated to those who died

Bashert

These words are dedicated to those who survived

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because their second grade teacher gave them books
because they did not draw attention to themselves and got lost
in the shuffle
because they knew someone who knew someone else
who could help
them and bumped into them on a corner on a Thursday afternoon
because they played it safe
because they were lucky

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because they knew how to cut corners
because they drew attention to themselves and always got picked
because they took risks
because they had no principles and were hard

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because they refused to give up and defied statistics
because they had faith and trusted in God
because they expected the worst and were always prepared
because they were angry
because they could ask
because they mooched off others and saved their strength
because they endured humiliation
because they turned the other cheek
because they looked the other way

These words are dedicated to those who survived
because life is a wilderness and they were savage
because life is an awakening and they were alert
because life is a flowering and they blossomed
because life is a struggle and they struggled
because life is a gift and they were free to accept it

These words are dedicated to those who survived

Bashert

1. *Poland, 1944: My mother is walking down a road.*

My mother is walking down a road. Somewhere in Poland. Walking towards an unnamed town for some kind of permit. She is carrying her Aryan identity papers. She has left me with an old peasant who is willing to say she is my grandmother.

She is walking down a road. Her terror in leaving me behind, in risking the separation, is swallowed now, like all other feelings. But as she walks, she pictures me waving from the dusty yard, imagines herself suddenly picked up, the identity papers challenged. And even if she were to survive that, would she ever find me later? She tastes the terror in her mouth again. She swallows.

I am over three years old, corn silk blond and blue eyed like any Polish child. There is terrible suffering among the peasants. Starvation. And like so many others, I am ill. Perhaps dying. I have bad lungs. Fever. An ugly ear infection that oozes pus. None of these symptoms are disappearing.

The night before, my mother feeds me watery soup and then sits and listens while I say my prayers to the Holy Mother, Mother of God. I ask her, just as the nuns taught me, to help us all: me, my mother, the old woman. And then catching myself, learning to use memory, I ask the Mother of God to help my father. The Polish words slip easily from my lips. My mother is satisfied. The peasant has perhaps heard and is reassured. My mother has found her to be kind, but knows that she is suspicious of strangers.

My mother is sick. Goiter. Malnutrition. Vitamin deficiencies. She has skin sores which she cannot cure. For months now she has been living in complete isolation, with no point of reference outside of herself. She has been her own sole advisor, companion, comforter. Almost everyone of her world is dead: three sisters, nephews and nieces, her mother, her husband, her in-laws. All gone. Even the remnants of the resistance, those few left after the uprising, have dispersed into the Polish countryside. She is more alone than she could have ever imagined. Only she knows her real name and she is perhaps dying. She is thirty years old.

I am over three years old. I have no consciousness of our danger, our separateness from the others. I have no awareness that we are playing a part. I only know that I have a special name, that I have been named for the Goddess of Peace. And each night, I sleep secure in that knowledge. And when I wet my bed, my mother places me on her belly and lies on the stain. She fears the old woman and hopes her body's warmth will dry the sheet before dawn.

My mother is walking down a road. Another woman joins her. My mother sees through the deception, but she has promised herself that never, under any circumstances, will she take that risk. So she swallows her hunger for contact and trust and instead talks about the sick child left behind and lies about the husband in the labor camp.

Someone is walking towards them. A large, strange woman with wild red hair. They try not to look at her too closely, to seem overly curious. But as they pass her, my mother feels something move inside her. The movement grows and grows till it is an explosion of yearning that she cannot contain. She stops, orders her companion to continue without her. And then she turns.

The woman with the red hair has also stopped and turned. She is grotesque, bloated with hunger, almost savage in her rags. She and my mother move towards each other. Cautiously, deliberately, they probe past the hunger, the swollen flesh, the infected skin, the rags. Slowly, they begin to pierce five years of encrusted history. And slowly, there is perception and recognition.

In this wilderness of occupied Poland, in this vast emptiness where no one can be trusted, my mother has suddenly, bizarrely, met one of my father's teachers. A family friend. Another Jew.

They do not cry, but weep as they chronicle the dead and count the living. Then they rush to me. To the woman I am a familiar sight. She calculates that I will not live out the week, but comments only on my striking resemblance to my father. She says she has contacts. She leaves. One night a package of food is delivered anonymously. We eat. We begin to bridge the gap towards life. We survive.

2. *Chicago, 1964: I am walking home alone at midnight.*

I am walking home alone at midnight. I am a student of literature, and each night I stay in the library until it closes. Yet each night, as I return I still feel unprepared for the next day. The nature of literary movements eludes me. I only understand individual writers. I have trouble remembering genre definitions, historical dates and names, cannot grasp their meaning, significance. A whole world of abstractions and theories remains beyond my reach, on the other side of a wall I cannot climb over.

So each night, I walk home clutching my books as if I were a small school child. The city is alien. Since coming to America, this is my first time away from a Jewish neighborhood, Jewish friends, and I feel isolated, baffled at how to make a place for myself in this larger, gentile world which I have entered.

I am walking home alone at midnight. The university seems an island ungrounded. Most of its surrounding streets have been emptied. On some, all evidence of previous life removed except for occasional fringes of rubble that reveal vague outlines, that hint at things that were. On others, old buildings still stand, though these are hollow like caves, once of use and then abandoned. Everything is poised. Everything is waiting for the emptiness to close in upon itself, for the emptiness to be filled up, for the emptiness to be swallowed and forgotten.

Walking home, I am only dimly aware of the meaning of this strange void through which I pass. I am even less aware of the dangers for someone like me, a woman walking home alone at midnight. I am totally preoccupied with another time, another place. Night after night, protected by the darkness, I think only of Elza who is dead. I am trying to place a fact about her, a fact which stubbornly resists classification: nothing that happened to her afterwards mattered. All that agonized effort. All that caring. *None of that mattered!*

At the end of the war, friends come to claim her. With the cold, calculated cunning of an adult, the eight year old vehemently denies who she is. No she is not who they think. Not a Jew. They have made a mistake. Mixed her up with another Elza. This one belongs here, with her mother.

She is simply being scrupulous in following her parents' instructions. "Do not ever admit to anyone who you are. It is our secret. Eventually we will come for you. Remember! *Never admit who you are!* Promise!"

Four years later, the war is over. Her parents dead. She is still bound by her promise. This woman *is* her mother. Her parents' friends know better. The woman has been kind, has saved her. But she is a Pole and Elza is a Jew. Finally, the bribe is big enough and the child released. Elza becomes an orphan.

And afterwards? She is adopted and finally seems to have everything. Two parents. Two handsome brothers. A house. Her own room. She studies Latin and does translations. Is valedictorian of her class. Goes away to college. Has boyfriends, affairs. Comes to New York. Works. Begins graduate school. Explicates Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot. Marries.

But none of it matters. She cannot keep up. The signs are clear. She is a poor housekeeper. Insists they eat off paper plates. She buys enough clothes to fill all her closets. But nothing soothes her. Finally she signs her own papers. Is released within a few months. I finish college and leave for Europe. Three weeks later, she checks into a hotel and takes an overdose. She is twenty-five years old.

Fearing I too might be in danger, my mother instructs Polish Jews resettled in Paris and Tel Aviv: "Don't tell her!" And to me she writes: "Elza is in the hospital again. There is no hope." I am suspicious, refer to her whenever I can. I am alert. Sense a discomfort, an edge I cannot define. I think I know, but I never dare ask. I come home. Seven months after her death, I finally know.

A story she once told me remains alive. During the war, the Polish woman sends her to buy a notebook for school. She is given the wrong change and points it out. The shopkeeper eyes her sharply: "Very accurate. Just like a Jew. Perhaps you are a little Jewess?" And Elza feels afraid and wonders if this woman sees the truth in her blue eyes.

Another memory. Elza is reading accounts of the war. She cannot help herself, she tells me. An anecdote explains something to her. A woman in a camp requests a bandage for a wound. And the guard, so startled by her simplicity and directness, makes sure she gets one. That woman, Elza tells me, refused to stop acting like a human being. Jews, she concludes, made a terrible mistake.

I am walking home alone at midnight. I am raw with the pain of her death. I wonder. Is it inevitable? Everything that happened to us afterwards, to all of us, does none of it matter? Does it not matter what we do and where we live? Are there moments in history which cannot be escaped or transcended, but which act like time warps permanently trapping all those who are touched by them? And that which should have happened in 1944 in Poland and didn't, must it happen now? In 1964? In Chicago? Or can history be tricked and cheated?

These questions haunt me. Yet I persist with a will I myself do not understand. I continue reading, studying, making friends. And as the rawness of Elza's death eases and becomes familiar, as time becomes distance, I find myself more and more grounded in my present life, in my passion for words and literature. I begin to perceive the world around me. I develop perspective.

I see the rubble of this unbombed landscape, see that the city, like the rest of this alien country, is not simply a geographic place, but a

time zone, an era in which I, by my very presence in it, am rooted. No one simply passes through. History keeps unfolding and demanding a response. A life obliterated around me of those I barely noticed. A life unmarked, unrecorded. A silent mass migration. Relocation. Common rubble in the streets.

I see now the present dangers, the dangers of the void, of the American hollowness in which I walk calmly day and night as I continue my life. I begin to see the incessant grinding down of lines for stamps, for jobs, for a bed to sleep in, of a death stretched imperceptibly over a lifetime. I begin to understand the ingenuity of it. The invisibility. The Holocaust without smoke.

Everything is poised. Everything is waiting for the emptiness to be filled up, for the filling-up that can never replace, that can only take over. Like time itself. Or history.

3. Brooklyn, 1971: I am almost equidistant from two continents.

I am almost equidistant from two continents. I look back towards one, then forward towards the other. The moment is approaching when I will be equidistant from both and will have to choose. Maintaining equidistance is not a choice.

By one of those minor and peculiar coincidences that permanently shape and give texture to our lives, I am born on my father's twenty-eighth birthday. Two years later, exactly three days after his thirtieth and my second birthday, he is dead in the brush factory district of the Warsaw Ghetto. His corpse is buried in a courtyard and eventually the spot blends with the rest of the rubble. The Uprising, my birth, his death — all merge and become interchangeable. That is the heritage of one continent.

In one of the classes that I teach, all the students are Black and Puerto Rican. I am the only white. Initially, the students are nervous, wondering if I will be a hard task master. I am nervous too, though I do not yet have a name for it. After a few months together, we grow accustomed to each other. I am trying to understand my role here. That is the heritage of the other continent.

And now, approaching my own thirtieth birthday, approaching the moment when I will be equidistant from the two land masses, I feel some kind of cellular breakdown in my body, a sudden surging inside me, as if flesh and muscle and bone were losing definition. Everything in me yearns to become transparent, to be everywhere, to become like the water between two vast land masses that will never touch. I desire to become salt water, to establish the connection.

I am almost equidistant from two continents.

April 17, 1955. I have been asked to light one of the six candles. I stand on the stage in the large, darkened auditorium, wait to be called, wait to accept the flame, to pass it on like a memory. I am numb with terror at the spectacle around me. I fear these people with blue numbers on their arms, people who are disfigured and scarred, who have missing limbs and uneasy walks, people whose histories repel me. Here in this auditorium, they abandon all inhibitions, they transform themselves into pure sound, the sound of irretrievable loss, of wild pain and sorrow. Then they become all flesh, wringing their hands and covering their swollen eyes and flushed faces. They call out to me and I feel myself dissolving.

When it is time for me to come forward, to light the candle for those children who were burned, who were shot, who were stomped to death, I move without feeling. And as I near the candelabra, I hear them call out the common Yiddish names: Surele. Moyshеле. Channele. Rivkele. Yankle. Shayndele. Rayzl. Benyomin. The names brush against my face, invade my ears, my mouth. I breathe them into my lungs, into my bones. And as the list continues, guided by their sounds, I cross the stage and light the sixth and final candle. It is my fourteenth birthday.

I am almost equidistant from two continents.

March, 1971. There are twenty-eight people in the class. Eighteen women, ten men. Some married. Some single. Alone. With children. With parents and grandparents. Nieces. Nephews. They are here because they have not met the minimum standards of this college. This class is their special chance to catch up. Subject and verb agreement. Sentence fragments. Pronoun

reference. Vocabulary building. Paragraph organization. Topic sentence. Reading comprehension. Study skills. Discipline. All this to catch up, or as one student said to me, his eyes earnest: "I want to write so that when I go for a job they won't think I'm lazy."

I am required to take attendance. I check through the names, call them out each morning. James. Reggie. Marie. Simone. Joy. Christine. Alvarez. Ashcroft. Basile. Colon. Corbett. White. Raphael. Dennis. Juan. Carissa. Lamont. Andrea. Fragments of their lives fall before me. The chaos and disorganization. A mother needing help in filling out forms in English. A sick child. Hospital regulations. A brother looking for a job. Another brother in trouble. Welfare red tape. Unemployment payment restrictions. Waiting lists. Eviction. SRO. The daily grind interrupting their catching-up, and the increasing sense that with each day missed, they fall further behind.

I am almost equidistant from two continents. I look back towards one, then forward towards the other. There is a need in me to become transparent like water, to become the salt water which is their only connection.

March, 1971. Marie wants to study medicine. She concedes it's a long haul, but, as she says, "It's only time. What difference does it make?" Slightly older than the others, she lives alone with her daughter. To some of the women's horror, she refuses to have a telephone, does not like to be intruded upon. When necessary, she can always be reached through a neighbor. She rarely misses class, on a few occasions brings her daughter with her, who sits serenely drawing pictures. Facing Marie, I sometimes do not know who I am and wonder how she perceives me. She seems oblivious to my discomfort. She is only focused on the class, always reworking her assignments, reading everything twice, asking endless questions to make sure she really understands. One day, at the end of the hour, when we are alone, she asks: "What are you?" I am caught off guard, know the meaning of the question, but feel the resistance in me. I break it down and answer quietly: "A Jew." She nods and in that moment two vast land masses touch.

Each continent has its legacy. The day I reach my thirtieth birthday, the age of my father's death, I am equidistant from both.

And as the day passes, everything in me becomes defined again. I am once again muscle, flesh, bone. America is not my chosen home, not even the place of my birth. Just a spot where it seemed safe to go to escape certain dangers. But safety, I discover, is only temporary. No place guarantees it to anyone forever. I have stayed because there is no other place to go. In my muscles, my flesh, my bone, I balance the heritages, the histories of two continents.

4. *Cherry Plain, 1982: I have become a keeper of accounts.*

There are moments when I suddenly become breathless, as if I had just tricked someone, but was afraid the ruse would be exposed and I'd be hunted again. At those moments, the myths that propel our history, that turn fiction into fact, emerge in full force in me, as I stare into the eyes of strangers or someone suddenly grown alien. And when I see their eyes become pinpoints of judgments, become cold and indifferent, or simply distanced with curiosity, at those moments I hear again the words of the Polish woman:

Very accurate. Just like a Jew. You are perhaps a little Jewess?

At moments such as these I teeter, shed the present, and like rage, like pride, like acceptance, like the refusal to deny, I call upon the ancient myths again and say:

Yes. It's true. All true. I am scrupulously accurate. I keep track of all distinctions. Between past and present. Pain and pleasure. Living and surviving. Resistance and capitulation. Will and circumstance. Between life and death. Yes. I am scrupulously accurate. I have become a keeper of accounts.

Like the patriarchs, the shabby scholars who only lived for what was written and studied it all their lives

Like the inhuman usurers and dusty pawnbrokers who were quarantined within precisely prescribed limits of every European town and who were as accurate as the magistrates that drew the boundaries of their lives and declared them diseased

Like those men of stone who insisted that the *goyim* fulfill the contracts they had signed and who responded to the tearful pleas of illness, weakness, sudden calamity and poverty, with the words: "What are these to me? You have made me a keeper of accounts. Give me my pound of flesh. It says on this piece of paper, you owe me a pound of flesh!"

Like those old, heartless, dried up merchants whose entire lives were spent in the grubby *shtetl* streets that are now but memory, whose only body softness was in the fingertips worn smooth by silver coins, whose vision that all that mattered was on pieces of paper was proven absolutely accurate, when their *złoty*, francs, and marks could not buy off the written words Żyd, Juif, Jude

Like these, my despised ancestors
I have become a keeper of accounts.

And like all the women, the wives and daughters, the sisters and aunts, the nieces, the keepers of button shops, milliners, seamstresses, peddlers of foul fish, of matches, of rotten apples, laundresses, midwives, floor washers and street cleaners, who rushed exhausted all week so that *shabes* could be observed with fresh *challah* on the table, who argued in the common tongue

and begged for the daughter run-off to the revolution
and the daughter run-off with a *shegetz*
who refused to sit *shiva* and say *kaddish* for a living child
who always begged for life
who understood the accounts but saw them differently
who knew the power of human laws, knew they always counted no matter what the revolution or the party or the state
who knew the power of the words Żyd, Juif, Jude

who cried whole lifetimes for their runaway children
for the husbands immobilized by the written word
for the brother grown callous from usury
for the uncle grown indifferent from crime, from bargaining,
from chiseling, from jewing them down

Like these, my despised ancestors
I have become a keeper of accounts.

I do not shun this legacy. I reclaim it as mine whenever I see the photographs of nameless people. Standing staring off the edge of the picture. People dressed in coats lined with fur. Or ragged at elbows and collar. Hats cocked on one side glancing anxiously toward the lens. Or standing ashamed a coarse wig awkwardly fitted. The shabby clothes. Buttons missing. The elegant stance. Diamond rings. Gold teeth. The hair being shaved. The face of humiliation. The hand holding the child. A tree. A track. A vague building in a photograph. A facility. And then the fields of hair the endless fields of hair the earth growing fertile with them with their bodies with their souls.

Old, rarely seen types. Gone they say forever. And yet I know they can be revived again that I can trigger them again. That they awaken in me for I have felt it happen in the sight of strangers or someone suddenly grown alien. Whenever I have seen the judgment the coldness and indifference the distanced curiosity. At those moments I teeter shed my present self and all time merges and like rage like pride like acceptance like the refusal to deny I answer

Yes. It is true. I am a keeper of accounts.

Bashert

A Personal Reading of *This Bridge Called My Back*

This essay is a record of some of the questioning and searching I've done about my own racism and about racism in "the wimmin's movement." I begin in my own life, trying to push beyond fear and guilt, bringing anti-racist analysis to my relationships and attitudes. From my personal experience, I move to my involvement with radical feminism with the same anti-racist scrutiny. Finally, I look at lesbian separatism, the ideology on which I base my politics.

I

Like many white feminists, I was introduced to politics through the civil rights and poor people's movements of the late sixties. I grew up in a white working class neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia, in a family with middle class roots and aspirations and southern manners and values. My mother loved history and my parents talked about politics, especially during the early days of desegregation. Being a Republican in the south at that time meant you were middle-of-the-road to liberal, and my mother believed that desegregation was a moral issue. She has told me how in the fifties she and her best friend, who had a daughter my age, decided that even though they felt threatened by integration in the schools, they knew that segregation was wrong. Still, my schools were not integrated until my junior year in high school when a small group of black students gathered nervously together in front of the cafeteria the first day of school.

Racism has been an issue in my life as long as I can remember, and I credit my mother with planting the seeds of consciousness. Memories: being spanked for using a racial epithet; at about age six or seven asking my mother why most black people were poor, having observed the black ghettos on a Sunday afternoon drive in downtown Richmond, and her explanation of slavery and its curse; story telling, Mama talking about her childhood, describing the racism of a small town in South Carolina. With my family I attended a presbyterian church in which the minister preached against racism, and I remember my parents' support of him in the midst of the controversy his preaching provoked.

But there were so many mixed messages. My mother told me about World War II and the Holocaust, and tried to explain why it was wrong for me to try to be a christian missionary to my Jewish friends. On the other hand, my parents had no Jewish friends, and sunday school taught that Jews couldn't go to heaven. As an adolescent I argued with teachers and schoolmates that blacks should have the same rights as whites, yet I was shocked and nervous when blacks started shopping at the "better" department stores in downtown Richmond. It made my parents nervous, too, and we started shopping at the new shopping centers growing up in suburbia. I recall the shame and confusion that accompanied these subtle and unspoken changes in our shopping habits.

The summer of 1968, after my fresh(wo)man year in college, I lived and worked with young black and white wimmin and men in a special project sponsored by the presbyterian church. The intentions of the program were liberal (it was called "Samaritans in the City"), but the growth of individual participants was enormous, and the experience radicalized many of us. We lived in the dormitories of a seminary, and for most of us, it was the closest we had ever been to people who were different from us—in race, class, educational background.

During that time I formed several close relationships with black wimmin and men, and though my bonding with wimmin was deeper and longer lasting than those with men, none of these relationships endured to the present time, so I question why.

The relationships I formed with black men at the time were mostly sexual. On one hand the relationships were little different from my relationships with white men, in that sex was almost always the basis for relationships with men—even though I was for the most part sexually naive and inexperienced. At the same time that I resist seeing the relationships as different from my relationships with white men, I ask myself whether racist sexual stereotypes were attracting me. I don't know. At the time I thought I was simply responding in a non-discriminating way. The longest and most significant of these relationships began and ended abusively, which raises for me the question of why I participated in it—a question which all lesbians who were at some time heterosexual ask ourselves anyway, but a question which becomes convoluted under the scrutiny of anti-racism. Probably I was experiencing three things: my heterosexual self-hate that settled for so little from all the men I knew, my naive and confused racism that al-

lowed me to set lower standards for black men than white men, and my racist guilt that justified any bad treatment toward me as racial anger. In one sense I probably expected less from black men than white, but at the same time I believed black men would be more capable of a deep, sensitive connection that I'd not experienced with white men. It didn't occur to me that the problem with my relationships was heterosexuality.

In Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* there is a white woman who marries a black man. During the course of the novel this woman changes from a bright college co-ed to a sloppy, drugged housewife who sleeps with all the men in their black neighborhood, earning everyone's contempt, and clinging desperately to her husband even though he hates the sight of her. In her disillusionment with the emptiness of the white middle class, she tries to absorb an identity which is not hers, losing herself in the process.

My own life could have turned out that way. That summer I got pregnant, had neither the resources nor the money to get an abortion in those pre-legalized days (1968), begged and pleaded with the father to marry me or help in some way, which he would not. My parents were horrified first that I was pregnant at all, and secondly that I was pregnant by a black man. They refused to give me any assistance so that I could keep my baby, which was what I desperately wanted to do.

It was my first and most significant lesson in the colonization of wimmin—the white middle class culture's taboo on illegitimacy—and the most direct lesson in racism I will probably ever experience. Painfully I remember how racism wove the trap I was in, the doctors and social workers and my parents all adamant and united: the obstetrician who, appalled when I told him the father was black, offered to perform a therapeutic abortion, provided I would say I had been raped, which I would not; the social workers who pressured me into adoption, never offering the first suggestion of how I might live if I decided to keep my baby; my parents terrified of the ostracism they thought the family would suffer with an illegitimate black child. Recognizing all this is not to see myself as a victim, but to understand the time and place in which I made my decision, and how racism rendered me powerless to live with and care for my own child.

The other thing I am trying to understand about this experience is how racism corroded the bonding between myself and black wimmin. The black wimmin I knew during that time were kind,

generous, loving. One woman took great risks to help me find an abortionist, though unsuccessfully. Another black woman lived with me during much of my pregnancy, loaned me money, and was the only person I knew who supported my wish to keep my child. My decision to give my baby up shocked and disappointed her—our cultures viewed illegitimacy differently. Later, unmarried, she too gave birth to a child. There was never any question that she would keep her baby, though their life together would not be easy.

A year or two after her child was born, we gradually stopped seeing each other. I had gone back to college; she was working to support herself and her son. Again, racism wove a trap that I had neither the perception nor the courage to break. True, it could have been just one of those things, two friends gradually having less and less in common. But the reason we had so little in common was because I returned to the safety and privilege of my white skin.

Since that time and until fairly recently, my circle of close friends has remained all white, and over the years I have found myself at a distance from the black woman I once knew, and from my own experience. Getting close to that experience again, remembering it, telling my story, opening my life to new experiences and friendships, is the making of a new and stronger anti-racist commitment.

II

I began seriously raising questions about the racism of white lesbian feminists after reading Elly Bulkin's "Racism and Writing" in *Sinister Wisdom* 13. I began reading *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa,¹ analyzing racism in the political activities I've worked on, especially taking to task my lesbian separatism.

This Bridge raises many questions for me; it contains voices I have not heard or heeded before—not because they weren't around, but because they were drowned out by the relatively homogeneous, white lesbian culture I and my friends had constructed and naively called "boundary dwelling." I was already becoming dissatisfied with how easy thinking was becoming.

Not that I was feeling guilty about my life or politics, just bored. I had made peace with the kind of politics that worked in my life and that included me—a white, university educated, radical lesbian—within its definition. I had burned out on the issues that offered the widest range of diversity—battered wives, reproductive freedom,

anti-militarism—and the homophobia of straight wimmin and the misogyny of leftist males. My decision to work on primarily lesbian or lesbian-only issues was a positive decision to preserve my mental health. I helped establish a lesbian newsletter and a lesbian bookstore, and I began my own work as a serious feminist writer. How I have grown from reading and talking about *This Bridge Called My Back* involves a widening of focus and a clarification of my definitions; an awakening to experiences other than those of the white, largely middle class range of experience from which I emerged a lesbian separatist.

Reading *This Bridge* has made me aware of my own stereotyping and misconceptions of wimmin of color, stereotypes which served to reinforce for me a lesbian separatist politics not actively involved in anti-racist work. In my guilty avoidance I reasoned that wimmin of color are bitter, angry, and despairing of any relationship with white wimmin—thus there were no wimmin of color in my separatist circle. Because I want nothing to do with men or heterosexual wimmin, who as a class oppress me, I reasoned that wimmin of color want nothing to do with me, a white woman—relieving myself of responsibility for their exclusion in the work I was doing.

So it is with recognition and relief that the stereotypes fall away as I read of lesbians of color struggling against homophobia, the same homophobia I experienced in the battered wimmin's movement and from the left. Erasure. Audre Lorde challenging white academic feminists to hear the voices and acknowledge the presence of lesbians and of wimmin of color ("The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," pp. 98-101). The economics of being Other:

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is just plain being poor. [Cherríe Moraga, "La Güera," p. 29]

Pain and isolation.

Woman love. . . . Do not dare even consider the possibility of a love relationship with a Latina, a Cuban woman, even to dream that I could find such a partnership. . . . What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? [Mirtha Quintanales, "I Come with No Illusions," p. 148]

Alienation, rejection.

The black lesbian . . . must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community, some of whom seem to have forgotten

so soon the pain of rejection, denial, and repression sanctioned by racist America. [Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," p. 130]

From this recognition that lesbians of color, like myself, experience alienation and invisibility as lesbians, it becomes easier for me to cross the bridge to the feelings of alienation that wimmin of color feel in the white wimmin's movement. Even so, the section on racism within the wimmin's movement is the most difficult, the most challenging part of the book for me as a white feminist. Writing about it now I realize that this information is just beginning to settle into my understanding.

The articles in *This Bridge* which most challenge my assumptions and experience are "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away from Me," by Chrystos; "The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin," by doris davenport; and "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," by Barbara and Beverly Smith, which I will discuss in another section. These three articles, more than any others in the book, give me some new ways to think about white feminists' commitment to ending racism, and about lesbian separatism as a practical ideology for feminist revolution.

Chrystos is a Native Indian woman who writes about her disillusionment with the wimmin's movement, and particularly with white lesbians. She recalls her years of doing shitwork in a wimmin's coffeehouse and bookstore, memorizing wimmin's names and faces, washing dishes and nourishing sisters, only to have wimmin barely remember who she was or what she did. She remembers backbiting and cliquishness, and writes with disappointment, "I have felt less understanding between races & from many lesbian women than I do from some straight people" (p. 69).

When I first read these words I felt an unbidden defensiveness for the wimmin's movement—*we aren't really that bad*—with an exclusive assumption of who "we" are! Then I remembered an Indian woman who worked on the battered wimmin's shelter project with me, who said she had often experienced racism within our group. Why hadn't I noticed the racism when it occurred? I asked myself at the time. But curiously, I didn't ask her what she meant, and I'm not sure why. I remember feeling embarrassment, as though I had been caught or found out, without even knowing what had happened.

Perhaps she meant that someone (*not me*) said something *insensi-*

tive to her, I thought. It didn't occur to me that she might have meant there was something in our practices or philosophy that ignored the needs and realities of wimmin of color, and more specifically, the needs of Indian wimmin in that Kansas town. My failure to explore this with my friend was probably due to my own defensiveness, a certain kind of laziness of the mind that resists change, and most of all the fear that it was *me* who was racist. As a white woman I find that it has been very difficult for me to translate newly discovered racist patterns into anti-racist action. The fear of feeling guilty triggers resistance and avoidance of situations and information that can increase awareness.

The issue of racism in feminist organizations appears again in "The Pathology of Racism." Here, Doris Davenport offers an analysis of how and why racism operates among white feminists:

When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we are seen in only one or two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests. [p. 86]

According to Davenport, white feminists cling to their stereotypes of black wimmin as being more sensual, less cerebral, and less political than white wimmin.² In what she calls a "brief but necessary digression," she turns these stereotypes around to tell the "whole truth" about how some black wimmin really perceive white wimmin, and she lists a number of responses such as physical aversion and repulsion to white skin, body odor, and "they can't dance" (p. 87).

Davenport's stereotyping of white feminists in this passage, and my own confused response (alternately anger, laughter, sadness), reminds me of a time many years ago when I laughed insincerely in a restaurant as a black man friend, pointing out a white baby at the table next to us, derided "ugly white babies." My laughter in this instance was over-compensation: more a symptom of liberal guilt and self-hate than true anti-racism. And so Doris Davenport's "digression" becomes personal, not because she says nasty things about white wimmin, but because the defensiveness I felt while reading her essay touches that place in me where I have felt white racism most deeply: the place where the trap of guilt and denial prevents me from understanding myself, from committing more of myself to the anti-racist struggle, and from bonding with wimmin of color.

Trapped into the guilt/denial mechanism, I lacked a political analysis that recognizes the inter-connectedness of oppressions.

Somewhere deep down (denied and almost killed) in the psyche of racist white feminists there is some perception of their real position: powerless, spineless, and invisible. Rather than examine it, they run from it. Rather than seek solidarity with wimmin of color, they pull rank within themselves. Rather than attempt to understand our cultural and spiritual differences, they insist on their own limited and narrow views. In other words, they act out as both "white supremacists" and as a reactionary oppressed group. . . .

The fact is, white wimmin are oppressed; they have been "colonized" by white boys, just as third world people have. . . . As a reactionary oppressed group, they exhibit a strange kind of political bonding or elitism, where white wimmin are the only safe or valid people to be with; all others are threatening. [pp.88-89]

Davenport's language in this article is strong and angry and can certainly evoke guilt and defensiveness in white wimmin. As the title of the article states, it is written as a conversation with third world wimmin, not for the gentle instruction of white wimmin. Davenport's essay is a passionate, angry indictment of both racism and misogyny, a statement that makes connections between oppressions.

III

Reading Cherríe Moraga's preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, I bristled when she singled out LS three paragraphs into the article: "The lesbian separatist utopia? No thank you, sisters" (p. xiii). Again, my guilt/resistance mechanism. By the time I got to "Across the Kitchen Table" by Barbara and Beverly Smith, I had my feet firmly on the bridge built by the essays I was reading, and I was ready to hear more. It was helpful to me that Barbara and Beverly, rather than off-handedly scapegoating LS for racism in the wimmin's movement, provide a clear-headed and persuasive analysis of the shortcomings of LS for feminism, especially as it relates to wimmin of color.

One charge against LS is that it is "only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege" (p. 121). My response to this is that I don't know *anyone* who rigidly practices LS for very long, and it's certainly true that anyone who does, lives a life deprived of privilege and of all but the barest necessities of life, at that. For me, LS is a philosophy that I practice to whatever extent feasible, rather than a lifestyle formula that I follow fanatically. But it is certainly white-

skinned privilege that allows me to even think in terms of separatism, since I have no immediate survival issue that ties me to white men. As Barbara points out, white wimmin are in "a critical and antagonistic position" (p. 121) in relationship to white men. Wimmin of color, on the other hand, share oppression with men of color.

Much of the controversy surrounding LS comes from the huge gap between theory and practice. Barbara Smith asserts that as a philosophy, LS doesn't adequately explain and analyze the roots of all oppression, nor does it take steps toward solving oppression. For theory, there is very little written and distributed by separatists about LS *per se*. In *Sinister Wisdom* 18, Adrienne Rich reviews some of the written material, but most of separatist theory is an oral tradition, a set of shared beliefs, bits and pieces from books like *Gyn/Ecology* and popular matriarchal re-creations. Most separatists that I know believe that once most cultures were matriarchal; that men, through the use of force and cultural manipulation, gradually conquered the matriarchies and instituted their own religions and institutions; and that after subjugating the wimmin of their society, tribe, or nation, they went about conquering other peoples—hence racism.³ By this theory, patriarchy came into being first, then racism. Thus by separating ourselves from the patriarchy (men), wimmin take the first steps toward dismantling it.

But, as Audre Lorde says, "... beyond sisterhood, is still racism" (p. 97 of *This Bridge*). Barbara and Beverly Smith point out that the belief that sisterhood in and of itself will eliminate racism indicates a dangerous lack of understanding of racism—a deficiency which serves to further perpetuate oppression. The separatist theory has the result of seeming to rank oppressions: if sexism came first it deserves our first attention. The assumption that men invented racism often gives white wimmin an excuse for not taking responsibility for *our* racism, regardless of where it comes from.

The most persuasive argument that Barbara and Beverly make against LS is that it is "the politics without a practice" (p. 121). As an ideology, I think this is true; LS ideology offers no concrete way of changing the world. It is a passive politics in that it does not move beyond resistance (like sitting on a path, obstructing the way, so that people have to go around you), and that it purports to re-create a past in some visionary future that most of us will never live to see—if the planet still exists.

The *practice* of LS is to have nothing to do with men or male institutions,⁴ inasmuch as that's possible to do and still survive. This can

be and usually is a very powerful kind of action, an act of resistance. Marilyn Frye describes it as a taking power, control.⁵ Defined another way, resisting the taboo against disconnecting from men is boundary breaking. I don't want to under-rate the significance of this kind of boundary breaking (lesbians are also doing other important boundary breaking, such as creating a distinctly lesbian art, or practicing magic); but for me boundary breaking in this sense is not enough. Desperately, urgently, I want to change the world and save the planet.

Individually, many lesbian separatists are active in changing the world. In my own community of the past few years, Lawrence, Kansas, lesbian separatists are almost the only lesbians doing anything of a political nature, as lesbians. There lesbian separatists in the past few years have established a wimmin's bookstore and a growing lesbian newsletter. Both of these activities have attracted non-separatist lesbians, and the newsletter in particular has generated discussions long overdue for that community, especially discussions about racism. An anti-racism CR group is meeting, and a good portion of the participants are lesbian separatists. Other issues initiated by or involving separatists there include violence against wimmin, pornography, and drug and alcohol dependency. Lincoln, Nebraska, and Minneapolis come to mind as midwest communities in which I personally know individual lesbian separatists speaking out, writing and organizing around lesbian issues, significantly around race, class, age, looks, and drug and alcohol dependency.

Nevertheless, Barbara and Beverly Smith articulate some of my own dissatisfactions with lesbian separatism, primarily the myopic tendency to oversimplify. My own LS comes from despairing of a future in which we can all live peacefully and freely on the Earth. Separatism as an end in itself, by gender or race, however effective it may be for a specific struggle in a certain time, is a failure of global vision.

It is simply not possible to separate ourselves from the problems of the world. There is "nowhere to run" from nuclear rain or chemical wastes, and as western economies are hurtling into chaos and depression, lesbians, along with all economically marginal peoples, are finding ourselves closer and closer to the literal edge of survival. Survival politics and skills—back-to-the-land, understanding and using magic, natural healing—were not invented by lesbian separatists. Indeed, there is a very strong and ancient movement of spiri-

tuality and survival led by Native Indian wimmin and men.

What I think needs to happen with LS, as with other ideologies within the wimmin's movement, is a re-examination and dialogue from the perspective of racism and other global problems. Not dialogue about men, but dialogue about wimmin, all wimmin, in all our differences and similarities.

LS can grow as an ideology and provide valuable leadership to the wimmin's movement if separatists begin to focus on wimmin in the present, in the complexities of survival in the patriarchy. There is too much emphasis on ancient European matriarchies and a Wanderground future, blinding us to separatist survival tactics we can learn from our real mothers and sisters, and to things we can learn from differing cultures.

In *Conditions: Seven*, for example, Paula Gunn Allen writes about lesbians in American Indian culture prior to European contact. Wimmin and men spent a great deal of time apart, not because they were unequal, but because of the difference in their spiritual powers. She describes the separations and "points of confluence" between wimmin and men, guided by the great and unique powers possessed by each individual.

Spheres of influence and activity in American Indian cultures were largely divided between the sexes: there were women—goddesses, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunts, shamans, healers, prophets and daughters; and there were men—gods, fathers, uncles, shamans, healers, diviners, brothers, sons. What went on in one group was often unknown to the other.

There were points of confluence, of course, such as in matters pertaining to mundane survival. . . . Men and women got together at certain times to perform social and ceremonial rituals, or to undertake massive tasks such as hunts, harvests, or wars. There were certain reciprocal tasks they performed for one another. But in terms of any real sense of community, there were women and there were men.⁶

I don't mean to suggest that what Paula Gunn Allen is describing is anything like modern day lesbian separatism, but she does provide a spiritual, survival-directed vision of a way that wimmin and men can co-exist.

And this, it seems to me, is part of the value of LS for the wimmin's movement. It is one more option for wimmin, it is a legitimate and powerful choice for wimmin, a choice to be respected.

The patriarchy is so enormous, so pervasive, so complex, that there is room for and necessity within our revolution for many approaches. Lesbian separatism has a unique and liberating power for

wimmin. There are problems that can and/or need to be worked on in lesbian-only groups: drug and alcohol dependency, pornography and rape, racism among lesbians, personal healing of all kinds. There are also many problems that lesbians should be working on that need to be done in coalitions (though again, there should be room for lesbian-only caucuses or affinity groups): wife assault, nuclear energy, U.S. imperialism, poverty and hunger, protection of non-human species . . .

The LS uncompromising vision of a world without men is both its weakness and its strength. On one hand, the strict exclusion of men does not recognize the complexity of racism in the lives of wimmin of color or of anti-Semitism in the lives of Jewish wimmin, and the multitude of issues and problems created by institutional racism and anti-Semitism. But it is also true that LS consistently refuses to sacrifice wimmin in the ordering of the "isms." There has been too much evidence of male betrayal in every important social movement in america, from abolition to ecology to gay rights, for wimmin to expect anyone but wimmin to fight the patriarchy.

The greatest strength that LS brings to the wimmin's movement, and the reason that I still identify as a lesbian separatist, is the recognition and articulation that for thousands of years, indeed in all of recorded history, men all over the world have been waging war against wimmin. In the west this war has taken the form of witch burnings; random violence; the massive anti-female propaganda of the church, madison avenue, pornography, "art" and enforced heterosexuality. For all its erasures and shortcomings, the value of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* is the evidence of world-wide patriarchy and the atrocities committed against wimmin by men of every race and nationality.

LS will grow when separatists refuse to allow the ideology to focus on narrow, rigid issues such as what lesbian mothers should do with their male children, or the biological determinism of the mutant theory. LS is not a rigid set of rules. For me, LS is an approach to understanding and fighting my oppression. As I gain a deeper understanding of my own oppression as a lesbian, of the way in which all oppressions are connected (including the rape of the planet), I must stretch my mind and my politics to include those "isms" which are not directly part of my personal experience. In this way, LS is the best means for me to work toward my vision.

IV

As I examine my own racism and discuss racism with other white

wimmin, I have found that my greatest anxiety is the fear of digging into my own past and sharing it with others. Looking back through my journal, remembering conversations, I find that I've had a chip on my shoulder, that I've believed my story was unique, that no other white woman has experienced anything so devastating as being separated from her child. Until I recognized that this was the source of my fear and pain, I unconsciously resented anyone who hadn't suffered the same experience. I react the same way to discussions about class: I resent wimmin who have had more privilege than me, and I don't want to hear their stories or reveal my own.

While white wimmin together need to talk about changing our racist patterns and beliefs, there is much we can learn about our racism by listening to wimmin of color. More than anything else in many years, *This Bridge Called My Back* has helped me move. It is a book full of hope, full of pain, full of celebration, full of good, clear thinking. I think about the wimmin in this book, wimmin sharing the joy and terror in their lives, and I think about my own life, about my own scars. I remember the lessons of my childhood, my mother's ambivalent but sincere belief that racism was wrong in spite of the contradictions she lived; and the bridge I've longed to cross, the bridge between fighting racism and fighting misogyny: two commitments in my life, one made years ago, the tasks forgotten; the other, more recent, a glorious obsession becoming stagnant.

I think of a poem by Chrystos, "Ceremony for Completing a Poetry Reading":

Within this basket is something you have been looking for
all of your life
Come take it
Take as much as you want
I give you seeds of a new way
I give you the moon shining on a fire of singing women
I give you the sound of our feet dancing
I give you the sound of our thoughts flying
I give you the sound of peace
moving into our faces & sitting down . . .
[pp. 191-92 of *This Bridge*]

And other gifts: the gifts of listening to one another; of sharing our stories; of recognizing our differences and our similarities; of intuiting, thinking, analyzing; of constructive criticism. The reciprocity of these gifts will enable us to forge a vision together, and then to make that vision real in the world.

NOTES

1. Persephone Press, Watertown, Mass., 1981; all further references internal.
2. Another stereotype that some white feminists hold is that the politics of wimmin of color are male identified, that wimmin of color give their first loyalty to men of color and ultimately to the patriarchy. This makes it easy for white wimmin not to seriously consider the concerns and experiences of wimmin of color, and it relieves the guilt.
3. In some instances, conquering invaders imposed patriarchal institutions on matriarchal or matrilineal groups, most notably the white Europeans on the American Indians.
4. In most discussions I have had with non-LS white wimmin, *men* are always the crux of the controversy. Resistance that arises at the suggestion of separating from men, even among lesbians who practice that separation in their lives, is always frustrating and prevents any useful dialogue on the subject.
5. Marilyn Frye, "Some Reflections on Separatism and Power" (East Lansing, Mich., Tea Rose Press), 1977.
6. Paula Gunn Allen, "Lesbians in American Indian Cultures," *Conditions: Seven*, 1981, p. 79.

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Separatism Revisited

I

I started calling myself a “separatist” in late 1970/early 1971. I did not actually write the words “I no longer consider myself a separatist” until about a month ago. When I wrote that sentence I had great difficulty in getting my fingers to hit the right typewriter keys. I jumped up and down and walked from one room to another. I did not have a clear idea about why I had finally come to that decision until a few weeks later when I sat down and started writing this response to Rich’s Notes for a Magazine (“What Does Separatism Mean?” in SW #18, Fall 1981).

In addition to Rich’s piece I have recently read in *The Lesbian Inciter* #8 (April 1982) “The Evolution of Lesbian Separatist Consciousness” by Sidney Spinster. Spinster’s piece stirred many things in me—especially because it was the very first time in all these years that I have seen a description/discussion of a separatist paper called *Spectre* that I and my then-lover put out for about a year in ’71-’72. These two articles helped me to focus my thoughts and discipline myself into thinking things through.

I had a difficult time with Rich’s Notes. She asks what separatism has meant in “our movement.” Whose movement? What movement? A serious answer would require a detailed description of all separatist positions. This would be difficult since many separatist discussions were “for separatist eyes only.” Also many separatists have never written anything. And how do you document influence? What has been the theory? I don’t think there has ever been “a” theory. How many women lived the theory in practice? Who is ever to tell? Who gets to say “yes, she did” . . . “no, she may claim to have lived it, but she didn’t”? Why is it important to know? We all know that it has never been a mass movement. There doesn’t seem to be a definition that all separatists agree on. Is there a commonly accepted definition of lesbian/feminist?

The questions seem distant—away from the reality of separatism as an activity. Rich herself seems to have problems with the original questions, for at the end she writes: “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” (p. 90).

This reformulation doesn't help me much. I do not understand what she has in mind by “kinds of conscious identity” and I strongly disagree with her assumption that built into every act of separation is an act of withdrawing from pain.

Separating from males was simply the easiest act of my life. Differences that we choose not to deal with can be many things besides painful . . . for instance they can be a source of frustration—a waste of time to try to sort out. They can be a distraction.

When I first called myself a separatist in 1970, there was no great body of writing . . . no established ideology. I remember the old Iowa City paper—*Ain't I a Woman*. I remember feeling strength from the things they described. I don't even remember how concretely they talked about separatism. We made contacts with other “separating” lesbians through writing *Spectre*. We met a group called “Those Women” who were later to become the *Furies* collective. Very quickly we discovered that we had big differences. Separation started very early between separatists themselves.

I called myself a separatist because I was “separating” like crazy—no working with males . . . straight or gay—nor with straight women—nor with lesbians who related to males . . . or to straight women, etc. (You are probably laughing by now.) It wasn't ideology. It was activity! In becoming a separatist I made enormously powerful and energy-giving decisions. I not only broke with males—I basically broke with my whole former life connections. I WANTED TO DO IT. It was not imposed from outside or from on high and it was not done for the sake of being “pure.” It was done in the process of living and fighting. I do not regret those separations. I have not tried to remake any of them.

During those years, I would get very excited when I heard about or from other separatists. For all of us, I guess, that jubilation never managed to last very long. It always seemed that we had seriously different values, attitudes, priorities, etc. However, I would still insist on calling myself a separatist. We stopped writing *Spectre*. We tried a small collective. That failed. We kept going . . . appearing/disappearing . . . sending short letters here and there—identifying ourselves as RED DYKES . . . trying to establish connections. We never were successful and the reasons are numerous.

Getting back to Rich—my own experience of those years taught me that there is nothing that you can assume to be true—nothing that you can really specifically know in advance when someone calls herself a separatist. I don't think there are any specific beliefs or actions that all separatists meaningfully share. However, what I have noticed is that as the published writing by lesbians who call themselves separatists grows, there has developed a kind of cluster of issues/topics that seem to get discussed most frequently. Among these are:

1. spirituality/goddess
2. matriarchy/amazons
3. parthenogenesis
4. genetic inferiority of males
5. world without males
6. primacy of sexism/heterosexism in the list of oppressions
7. self-sufficient lesbian separatist colonies.

Now when I first started writing this, I wrote a reaction to each of the above topics. I was frequently snotty. I seem to have a position at odds with the usual lesbian separatist discussion or attitude. What I was thinking at that time was that I was no longer a lesbian separatist *because* my view or reactions to these topics was so very different from some vague consensus.

Spinster's historical presentation helped me see differences between the '70s separatists and the mid-'70-to-now separatist discussions. When I became a separatist, the main question that we asked had to do with who you would work with . . . a "separating" kind of question. We were trying to gain that separate space . . . a space where we could do our work. What our work was—what concerns—what would get done in that space that separation would provide was a complete unknown. What I experience as "separatism" these days seems to be the answer to that question. Seeing things this way has helped me understand the last twelve years of my life better. I was a separatist because I fought for and gained that space. I am no longer a "separatist" because I am not interested in what has been planted and is nurtured in that space. It is not because I don't have the right answers. It is not really because I am on one side of the argument and they are on the other. I simply don't want to be talking about those issues—let alone spend time and energy taking sides. I have left "separatism" as I left the male-dominated left years before—because staying was a distraction. I had/have other things I need to be doing before I die.

II

This seems to break into two parts naturally. For twelve years now I have jumbled together a lot of things and called them "separatism." It has taken me a long time to understand that and to unravel the knotted-up threads. 1970 was an incredibly important time for me—it was the beginning of a radically different life. I have those kinds of feelings about right now. There are lots of similarities—feeling unclear, unknowing of where things will lead, the lack of ideology or a model. Both then and now I feel alienated not just from this society, but from the people with whom I am supposed to have a lot in common. The impetus for movement now as then is very intense feelings and beliefs and a pressing need to find new ways to work and struggle and live.

Some things are different. I am much stronger now. My years as my kind of separatist gave me the space to make important changes in my life—how I relate to the world, and others. I am more in touch with my feelings and able to express them. That does have its costs. I am a very angry person. Those years of challenging and being challenged helped me become more honest and gutsy. It is not that I have learned to be fearless, rather I have learned to be afraid and then push myself through that fear—to not be paralyzed by it.

There are some things that I can say to give an idea about where I am. After all, if it is so clear to me that I have little interest in the topics that seem to be most frequently discussed by lesbians calling themselves separatists, and I am not, in addition, involved or interested in creating a "lesbian" culture—what the hell am I wanting to talk about? The following is a sort of simple list of some of the topics/issues that I want to be focusing on:

1. the ongoing discussions of racism
2. the implications of embracing ethnic identities
3. family relationships / family and the state / relationships of obligation
4. new kinds of social relationships—not based on blood or guilt
5. different ways of describing and analyzing "class" differences
6. role of the US government, corporations, unions, and people in exploiting the rest of the world
7. my own involvement in that exploitation and my relationship to struggles in other countries
8. abuse of kids in this society
9. recognition of my advantages and my role as an oppressor

10. the closet as security
11. various ways that I/others might make their resistance not only known but felt
12. oppressed groups and the idea of “my fair share of the American pie”
13. coalition politics
14. non-mass movements / small autonomous groups / no vanguards
15. how to relate to the “politics of the ’80s” that I hear so much about
16. anger / hostility; directness / indirectness; politeness / manipulation
17. evaluating activity in terms of its “effect” on others
18. redefining what, in fact, counts as “activity”

I am struck, as I type this that I am not listing specific lesbian or women’s issues. That is not because I am not interested—it is because they are the basic assumptions of my life and of my approach to problems. In an early *Spectre* we wrote something like . . . “lesbian oppression is always having to talk about lesbianism and nothing else.” My lesbianism and what I feel is its political significance is just *there* . . . and it is from that vantage point that I need to begin to put many things together in a more connected way.

I want to talk about all the above topics in very experiential and not abstract terms. I want to avoid the jargon of the Left (which I cannot stand to listen to) but I also want to avoid what I feel is the developing jargon of the lesbian writings and analysis that I have been reading. Just as the Marxist notion of “class” and a whole bunch of other terms are too narrow to really understand or explain our reality, so the use of the term “patriarchy” and other similar phrases is not very enlightening. If our descriptions of the realities—the relationships of this world—are ridiculously simple and uninformative, certainly our analysis and our actions chosen on the basis of that analysis will be doomed. The purpose of analysis and criticism is not to distort but rather to describe so that we can better understand and act. I want to write and do write as a person in struggle.

If the above list gives an idea as to topics—what about activities? **WHAT CAN I DO?** is a haunting, all too frequently paralyzing question for a lot of us. It is real important to me that I begin to figure out a variety of ways of living out active resistance to this society.

I have a limited imagination and so, here for now, is my fumbling start:

1. Obviously it comes to mind that I want to write about these different topics. In 1970 I thought that writing was a way to change things—change people. I don't think *Spectre* had much effect on anyone. However, I can raise issues that I feel are important, and writing helps me work through things and get clearer. It is also a way of bridging some of the isolation that I feel . . . a way of reaching out.

2. When I think of writing, I think of doing another paper like *Spectre*. It seems that most lesbian papers/journals are basically "literary" efforts. Some are a sort of "news of the month in review" or a series of disconnected articles. I cannot expect anyone to publish more than one of my pieces per issue. Doing my own paper would provide the space to discuss a variety of issues, to try to develop a coherent analysis to tie this variety together, and to develop a strategy for action.

3. Study groups. There are specific things that I want to learn about—read, share, have intense discussions and even arguments about. The danger of a study group is that it can become distant, academic and boring—not vital.

4. Small autonomous groups. That is one of my goals—to find people with whom I can share my life and work.

5. Guerrilla theatre/agitation/encounters: small groups that work out activities that offer some alternative to the "let's have a march" approach to life in these United States.

6. Guerrilla bands . . . small groups that would make our resistance and insurgence felt. The image of the "Shirley Temple gang" from June Arnold's *Sister Gin* comes to mind and brings a smile.

There have to be more and varied things. I am not one for conferences or demonstrations. I need to be finding other ways to fight. I don't think the old ones have been very productive or successful. As I said before, I have a limited imagination.

For me this is a new beginning. I would like dialogue, ideas, suggestions, criticisms—public or private. I even went to the post office yesterday and got a mailbox—always a marker for trying again. You can write me at:

Lois Addison
Box 2745
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

Red Jordan Arobateau A Different Kind of Black Lesbian Writer

It was a cool, beautiful San Francisco day in September when Margaret Cruikshank did me a great kindness by driving me to Oakland to meet Red Jordan Arobateau. I had long wanted to meet the writer, after being introduced to her work in Judy Grahn's *True-to-Life Adventure Stories, Vol. 1*.

Her story, "Susie Q" (spelled Suzie Q in the episode), had left an impression on me, stirring questions which sought answers. My main problem was with her racial identity. Was she black? The story spoke of blackness as only a black woman could know it, written in the singular vernacular of black street language. The experiences of Suzie Q, a whimsical, vacillating black lesbian prostitute, who moves with insight and foresight in the murky subculture of the streets, were indeed a rarity to black lesbian writing.

This type of black female character, lesbian or heterosexual, has been largely ignored or glossed over in the whole of Afro-American literature by black female writers. Various reasons can be surmised for the neglect. Many Afro-American women who write, exist in an academic environment. Here, they are riveted in the isolated, lofty tower of scholarship, research, and pedagogy. The literary black female writers usually focus on allegorical symbolisms, women in search of a quest, or the ennobling of black women. Other writers are involved in political rhetoric, or self-serving pursuits.

The experiences and lifestyles of most black women writers have been far removed from the social, economic, and political milieu of the subterranean ghetto. *The* streets are unknown to them, except as a place to fear at night, or to get from one end of town to another. Ho's, pimps, drug dealers, dope addicts, and boosters are invisible to their lives and unimportant to their writing.

Red Jordan Arobateau's Suzie Q brought a new protagonist to black lesbian fiction, springing to life the black lesbian street woman in all her hard glaring reality. The story, too, places the black prostitute in the personalized role of being human, rather than portrayed as a piece of meat to be exploited in pornography, or in such as the Iceberg Slim pimp stories.

Despite this, when I asked around about the author, few people knew of her or had read her work. None whom I contacted could tell me the racial origin of the woman with the strange name. Fortunately, when in San Francisco, I got her telephone number from the owners of the Old Wives' Tales Bookstore, where I purchased her self-published novel, *The Bars Across Heaven* (1975).

After we met, the author shared another publication with me, her sole remaining copy of *Five Stories* (1977). The book had a tattered green, heavily stapled paper cover, which held together 235 numbered typewritten pages produced by Red Jordan Press. From this, Suzie Q emerged for Judy Grahn's collection.

All but one of the five stories on the cover were scratched out. The book contained only three: "Ladies Auxillary of the Left," "Alexander D'Oro 1944—To Infinity," and, of course, "Suzie Q." With the exception of Suzie Q, the stories are autobiographical. The longest, "Alexander D'Oro 1944—To Infinity," is a first-person narrative by June "Flip" Jordan, which tells of her high-school friend, Robert "Bobbie" Blake Goldberg, alias Alexander D'Oro, their circle of friends, lovers, and what it was like to grow up poor, black, and gay. Daring to be different, they tried to ease their painful loneliness, sharpened by societal repressions, by "staying drunk or fucked up on pills." They had no role models, and few ventured to help them. Gays had not yet developed a "positive culture of self help." It is a classic rough-hewn documentation of young, black gay life on the South Side of Chicago during the liberal-scaring fifties.

The tongue-in-cheek "Ladies Auxillary of the Left" follows Red to San Francisco and the women's liberation movement. The atypical style of the author, combined with the improvised idioms of black street jive rap, replete with their sound spellings, weave the stories together in a believable pattern.

When Margaret Cruikshank deposited me at Red Jordan Aroba-teau's small, modest house, half-hidden by gnarled trees and bushes, a smiling woman greeted me at the door. Red had warned me over the telephone that she "looked white." She did look white or possibly Latina, with her fair skin and "white folks straight hair." She was dressed in a pair of faded jeans, a plaid blue flannel shirt, and boots.

I followed her into a front room almost devoid of furniture, save for three old vertical files, a small table, and three hard chairs. We sat down opposite each other. I noticed that she smiles easily and often. She appeared relaxed, slouched in the chair. She has a warm earthiness about her. As I began my questions, I discerned that she

likes to talk. Information and discoveries sprang forth, allaying my curiosity.

The thirty-seven-year-old author was a product of a mixed marriage, which had a profound effect on her life and writing. Her father was born in Honduras, and came to live in Chicago, where there were few Spanish-speaking people. He married a light-skinned black woman with "tight hair," which, when straightened, made her, too, look white. Red resembles the black side of the family, except for inheriting her father's "straight hair." Hair has always been a pinnacle of black conversation, and throughout the talking, Red frequently referred to her "straight hair."

She described her family life as having been "terrible," filled with emotional stress. An only child, she was closer to her father than mother. Her father was "something out of this world," and she loved him dearly. When her father left home, she went with him. She never saw her mother again after the age of seventeen.

Living with her father, she led an independent life. An average high-school student, she went to college for a year, but finding it a big "social affair," dropped out. Her grandmother and mother were college graduates. There is unmistakable pride in her disclosure.

To look white, but think and feel black, has caused lifelong psychological and social problems for her. Particularly around white women who take her for white. Unlike Michelle Cliff, she has never passed for white. To cope with her emotional frustrations, she has joined the Mongrels, a group of women born of mixed heritage. The organization serves as a refuge for the women who meet, discuss, and relate to each other. She has had both white and black lovers. Her "lady" now is black.

She devised her name by putting an "A" in front of Robateau. Jordan was her black grandmother's name, which to her was racial and biblical. Fifteen years ago, she had a hairdresser as a lover, who colored her hair red. She liked it, for Red denotes passion. She readily categorizes herself as a "passionate person." Eroticism dominates her themes.

At the age of fifteen, she was browsing through books on a drug-store rack and came across a lesbian novel. Perusing the pages, she read about a woman "running her hands over another woman's breast." The words electrified her. Putting the book down, she said to herself: "This is what I am!" Even before, she had crushes on her female teachers, and a couple of male ones, whom she found out were gay. As a child, she knew that she was different.

The gay scene in Chicago, as described in "Alexander D'Oro

1944—To Infinity,” was depressing in her time. Gays were harassed by Mayor Daley’s police force. It was difficult to find women like herself, and she was lonely without a lover. Eventually she read about the flower people’s peace and love offerings in San Francisco, and of the gay life. In 1967, she left Chicago to go where flowers of peace and love were supposed to bloom.

There, to support herself through the years, she held almost “any type of job.” She has been a cook, cleaning woman, dishwasher, waitress, and caretaker for disabled people. Once, she landed a good job selling credit cards over the telephone. With the commissions, she bought two houses. Subsequently, she sold the houses and bought the one in which she lives. Now she wants to move. The neighbors are noisy. Trash strews their yards.

A black cat stalked majestically in, eyed me inquisitively, then jumped up in her mistress’s lap. “This is Mary,” Red smiled. “Do you like cats?”

Not having been around cats, I couldn’t say, although I have a natural tendency to like all animals. I skirted the question with a comment: “I have two dogs.”

Placing Mary back down on the floor, she laughed. “I have twelve cats and two dogs!”

She began to write when she was thirteen years old. Poetry, short stories, and long rambling things. Getting up, she crossed over to the file cabinets. “Look,” she said, pulling out the drawers, “this is all the stuff I’ve been writing for years.”

The drawers bulge with completed and uncompleted works. I thought: *Whee-e-e! She must hold the world’s record for being the most prolific unpublished black lesbian author in the country!* Proudly, she announces that she has written thirty-seven novels on both gay and straight themes. Quickly she reads out the names of her books: *Ash Can Betty*, *Garbage Can Sally*, *Flea Market Molly*, *Electroshock Doctor*, *White Girl*, and *Boggie Nights*, *Party Lights*. Titles suggestive of pulp novels.

She writes in her bedroom and can “bat out a novel in a month.” When finished, she xeroxes five copies, binds the typed pages with paper covers, and hand-staples them.

The Bars Across Heaven has a more professional appearance, with a slick printed cover and offset type. This is a book for which she is known and has been reviewed. It continues the life experiences of Flip Jordan on the ghetto streets of Oakland. Flip lives on welfare checks, food stamps, and penny ante rip-offs. She hobnobs

with “ho’s” whom she pays for their services. Flip desperately searches for the woman of her dreams and money, but in reality all she wants is to find peace, joy, and love.

About the characters in her book, Red says: “I’ve lived in some way experiences in the books. I’ve been around it. I’ve seen it personally.”

In encountering the street life, she has tried drugs, which ended when she was hospitalized. But through all of the sordidness, she kept herself “clean,” remembering the middle-class upbringing which served as a buffer.

She has been trying to get published in the last twenty years with no success. She attributes this to a “spiritual thing.” God isn’t ready for her to get published yet. She realizes that she needs an editor to help refine her work. Nevertheless, she continues to write, for writing brings to life her experiences, life, and energy, and the people whom she meets to capture on paper.

She is on unemployment compensation. Jokingly, she calls herself “retired.” After all, she points out, look at all the work gone into her writing through the years. Some people retire after twenty years, don’t they? All she requires is enough to feed her cats and dogs.

Her life has altered dramatically since the death of her father nine years ago. She had been an atheist most of her life, but when her father died she became a christian, as he had been. Her new religious zealotness has turned some people off from her. There are those who are alarmed by the christian fundamentalist waves sweeping the country, fearful of the political effects on their lifestyles, ideas, and personal freedom. But her religious beliefs are becoming part of her writing, particularly her call-and-response poetry.^o She has reconciled her lesbianism with her christianity, and can even be witty about it. She said, “I prayed to Jesus: You can take the lesbian from me, but please, just don’t make me straight!”

Red is a member of the Metropolitan Community Church, which was founded for christian gays and lesbians to worship freely and without hostility. Tightening her gaze on me, she inquired if I went to church. I responded negatively. She quickly asked if I had *ever* gone to church. I nodded yes, thinking there were few black people of my generation who hadn’t attended church or been *made* to go sometime in life. Immediately, I was invited to Sunday services with her. I declined because of another engagement, but felt it would have been interesting to see her in the mansion of her Lord.

^oCall-and-response originated in Africa. It is a preacher-to-congregation type song.

Nobody's People

"Mirror, mirror on the wall,
whose the fairest of them all?"

"That's an interesting accent you have, are you from the South?"
Asked the man.

She looked into space, tan face cold; profile of keen features.
Her first impulse was to slap him, but stayed cool.

"Where do you come from?" The man persisted. He was white.

"My Mommas wound." She replied with venom.

"Where was that?"

"I can't remember, when she dropped me I wasn't thinking about
what *state* it was, I was too busy looking around me wondering
'what's it gonna be like?'"

"What race are you? If you don't mind me asking."

This question has persued me since before I learned how to
talk—in infrences, facial expressions of curious people who saw me.

I am one drop black.

Raised black. This is the killer—your culture. What is *home* to a
person.

By physical appearance one could easily say I'm white mixed
with Native American. Nose & high cheek bones like an Indian. But
I have nothing in common with that culture —envision them
sitting around talking about things I don't know—Teepees, and the
wilderness. Deer hunting.

& I'm a nigger to my heart.

This is what it bes like.

On my birth certificut are two words; NEGRO and SPANISH under
Race for my mother & father, respectively. My mother was yellow,
& dad a latin from South America. I resemble a black maybe to an
anthropologist—faint traces in my face that must be studied to be
seen, or recognized on instinct in an instent.

Thru grammar school & high school, misunderstanding blacks
taunted me; made fun of me being so light. "Oh her nose is so big."

“Oh, she’s got a *pale* face. *OOOWEE!* I wouldn’t want to be that *pale!*” Whites avoided me—once they heard the rummor; “she’s part black.” Or, “she associates with the Coloreds.” & not really one of them.

Age 9, 10, I wondered why white girls shunned me. When I got older branching out from my Afro-American neighborhood and went into the larger world, when mixing with whites—inadvertently ‘passing,’ finally the question would spill out of their lips—“what nationality are you?” They wanted to justify the strange cast to my skin—not quite white; other impercievable characteristics. I told them I had Negro blood. They didn’t like me too well after that.

I think back to age 13, the time my father took me aside & told me: “You can be anything you want to be!” But I didn’t *want* to be anything! I wanted to be like mother & her family—Colored.

When he first told me this, it put words to my fears—“you can be anything.” Freedom frightened me. ‘I’d rather be *something!*’ A lable has confort.

So what am I? White? Black? Latin? Mixed?

There’s always been people like me.—Quadroons. All down thru herstory since my forebarers from Africa mated with those, Caucasian.

Not black, but black. This is why I can’t be among my people in the same way as others. This is how I was raised—Colored; it is my home, and when too long gone, am hongry for my roots!

It is a passionate and angry thing, generating fierce emotions. Making me want to kick ass, but I won’t.

A round table in a tavern; black women seated. A dark skinned woman walks in, boougiose; dressed to her teeth; she greets those at the table giving all the soul-hand shake, except for the one pale skin person. With her, the black woman switches up and shakes hands like white folks do. This point was not missed on the sister.

Later, I’ve forgotten the incident, am talking to an Asian woman when Miss Thang comes back over & speaks—aloof, her voice from a cool height like an inquisitor. “I been wanting to ask you something . . . I *heard* you were black! This woman was talking about you. She said ‘she’s black,’ and I was suprised.”

“People are talking about me? Who? What’s her name!”

“That’s not important!” She drew back a little, a nasty smile played in her expression: “I *mean*, you don’t *look* black, and you

don't *act* black. To me, black is somebody who *looks* and *acts* black!"

The woman was silent, she'd been thru it before.

What an effort to put on the trappings of being black—if you don't possess them already—to curl her naturally straight hair into an 'fro; to perfect black english when she was raised in a home of 'proper speaking.'

The cold voice continued, "You know I see your lips, your nose . . . your *hair!*" Words dripping like acid. "How much black *are* you? One sixteenth? One 32nd?"

"One half."

The Asian sister intrupted, "Why are you comming on to her so angry?"

The black woman yelled, "I just want to know! Somebody say's the lady's black! I want to know is she? I couldn't tell!" She cried, defensivly. "She doesn't act black! She doesn't look black! She doesn't talk black!"

Insult after insult rolled out of her mouth; the black woman was angry, trembling with rage. The light complected woman only sat back, allowing the woman to convict herself.—She was tired of explaining. She'd been thru this scene a million times before. And made enough explanations to last her a lifetime. People wanting to mess with her just to get rid of their own frustrations.

"She hates white people." Said the Asian lady afterwards.

"She does that to everybody. I think it's for her ego. She *has* to."

"She acts like Miss *It*."

"Just ignore her. I know her. I'm gonna make her appologize."

"She want to act shitty, I can too."

"Ignore her, she's drunk."

"Bitch is drunk. I don't get drunk. And I don't trust *nobody*."

"I'll *make* her appologize." The Asian woman stated in a firm voice, eyes squinted in anger.

Around them, the sea of gay life was in full swing.

Many bars are a mixture of women & men, gay & straight, & all races. In them are danger trips with hostile men. And physical violence.

This particular bar, WOMANTIME was exclusively women—Middle class/bougiose. But women wounded each other just as deeply in the privacy of that smokey club with their words—glares of their eyes, knife edge like the karatee back hand

chop—without knives. Hurt, not by lunging across the room fists flying, but the more advanced physiological warfare, of the emotions. Acid on an intellectual level.

And subtly they turned a persons color against them and used it for hate.

She thought: 'I have been confronted hundreds of times; and this is how it's always been—hostile.'

She was not in grammar school anymore; "I stop worrying about them so much and worry about me."

In adult life, I spend 90% of my social life after dark, in clubs or partys. Lighting does strange things to skin complexion. It can make Latino's & fair blacks look like whitefolks.

A yellow nigger like an Aryan with a tan.

'Those black women in the bars,' she thought; 'they hate my guts because they don't know what I am. Some have heard lies about me, some know the truth, but they don't know who I am.'

Scenes such as these bring a lot of paranoia.

Here I am calling people 'Sister & Brother,' and not even looking like a sister or brother myself.

A mass of straight hair down to my sholders.

What race am I?

If I stay in the sun all summer and under a sunlamp by winter my skin is a shade darker. I could perminate my hair into an Afro to look black, and fit in; but to mee that's a lie. In the past it's been a hardship; —that's what people are made of, hardship.

I've started believing in myself, so I can be free.

Got to be what I feel.

New York City

A white woman asks me; "What Nationality are you? Basque?"

"Basque?"

"It's in the Southern part of France."

"No,"

"Italian?"

"No, *guess again.*"

"You must have an Indian grandparent."

Then she told her.

"OH!" Drawing back. "Well! You don't *look* like it!" Her white

face flushes red. Suddenly the relationship between them has changed. The power balance must be readjusted. "OH. That must have been difficult for you, growing up!" (A few say. "Oh, you've had it easy!")

Or, "Excuse me!" And they walk away and avoid me like death.

In this world which literally bows down and worships anything but God, praises people for their whiteness—or their blackness, they can't have an attitude about me! They don't know what I am. They don't know much about my subject.

So politely, people don't mention me. Pretend I don't exist. My presence makes them uncomfortable. I'm too allusive—they can't pin me down.

Technically I'm a freck—so people avoid me, or, race talk when I come around.

I am the leper Jesus talked about.

I am the one who the world casts out.

The one they said to Jesus—'why are you associating with her?'

Whites ask another white—"Why do you talk to her? she's not white!"

Blacks hiss at blacks. 'leave that honkey alone!'

I am that one.

The one in question.

When we are different to the mainstream, the majority points the finger of scorn —and informs us we are lepers. We have the disease called, 'you-don't-belong-to-my-people.'

They put lepers in a prison, because we are the wrong color.

So lepers band together and be strong.

I am a leper with no one to join with.

An outcast from the outcasts. Outcast and outcast again.

There are no lepers in Jesus Christ.

Case in point:

Afro American's—the lepers of AmeriKKKa. Black people who are decendent from Africa, mixed with white, Indian, Asian & other.

Visable Characteristics:

Dark complexion

Kinky hair
Thick lips & nose

Invisible Characteristics
Soul

Black Power & Black Pride

This has been a tremendous up lift to Afro Americans; coming together as a race begging to love itself. And to feed itself inspiration. To be proud of it's characteristics both visible & invisible, and to build an economic support system for it's own.

Black Power & Black Pride.

It took the despised word—'black' the word our parents & grandparents only whispered—the word that meant stigma; misfortune, and raised the word up in an uplifted fist. Took the word 'black' and made it a Crown. Black is beautiful! Glory filtering down the ladder from slavery in pride of our roots, into the future of black children.

Black is Beautiful made people come together and take care of business.

Afro Americans working in cooperation.

It was a breakthrough. But, as any illusion, including white supremacy, it had it's flaws. Some became obsessed to the point that Black is Beautiful became synonymous with Hate Whites. With Hate anything not Black.

My skin is not black.

These genes I carry in my body, that can show up in African-Trait offspring; one drop of black blood and a history of growing-up-Colored, is not enough. It is a tenuous hold on *blackness*.

So, she dropped out of her Momma's wound, grew like Topsy and went out into the highways & byways of the world, a lost lamb.

In pain she turned from God. We who are wanderers, people who have no places, in our troubles we search . . . taking whatever amount of time we need to be healed.

She was not even sure what love was like—the voluntary kiss of one mouth to another; a pelvic thrust accompanied by affection. Had seldom known it. That long deep reaching tongue between 2 people. The calling by a pet name. The days spent together in familiarity of a married couple. The voluntary cumming together in oral

love of each others sex, without a bribe; of alcohol, or cash. Not a one night stand. Mostly she had known pickups, 2 week long 'affairs,' then, dialing a phonenumber, no answer. A handfull of dates with flowers then, 'I'm sorry, but . . . ' or, 'I've got something to tell you . . . ' The empty bed at night.

She didn't know how to be with people.

Didn't know how to belong in the human race in general.— Was selfconscious, shy, paranoid. . I mean, wouldn't you be? Being a labelless entity? A misunderstood stranger? A mixed so & so, that nobody knows your name? She had a lot of frustration which came out in rage. Cussing, putting her fist thru doors. Wouldn't believe after raising so much hell what she really wanted was peace.

She was proud. Was arrogant. She wore mens suits.

She had knocked but hadn't found a door.

The world; they lost a lot by not knowing her.

Los Angeles California:

My lover, a white woman says: "You're a black woman."

Chicago Illinois:

My psychiatrist informs me; "You are white." (He also tells me it's wrong to be a lesbian. He is white. And not homosexual. This is brainwashing.)

San Francisco California

Leaving a bar one night talking two 3 black sisters just met them: "Pardon me, can I ask you a question? — Don't take offence, but what race are you?"

"Part black," she says; & is thinking, 'here goes the whole thing again.'

"No, I don't believe it." Says the woman sitting next to her.

"Part black." She states again in a low voice.

"Nobody is part black."

"Look at her hair." someone says. "Look." Reaching out, fingering her straight fine hair with nare' a curl. But she grabs the finger and points it back at the woman—who is a yellow bitch with soft, semi-curly hair. "LOOK AT YO' HAIR!" She sez back-at-her. "Well . . ." Sez the yellow gal, making a face.

"No such thing as half black. If you're part black you all black." The first sister declares.

"Multi-race."

“Well . . .” The sister says, begrudgingly; resigning herself to the facts; “one drop of black, you’re black.” Hating to acknowledge that this white-appearing stranger is of the same race as she.

As if this ‘white person’ could be one of them.

This hated white looking type is actually one of their own.

This person can be white and can be black simultaneously.

That this person can claim the privilege of being black while still looking white.

Star filled night.

All it does is serve to remind me again that I am not black, but something different. I am part of the Afro American family—if they choose to take me in by the old laws of slavery, where one drop of African blood constitutes a Negro,—and also by my experience—in my formative years, and by relatives, Colored & black. But more often I am tolerated. Seen as different.

We who are, must forge a new identity for ourselves.

Meet a white sister in South Carolina.

Go home, take her to bed.

Wake up, daylight. My yellow belly on her lilly white one.

We talk. I mention, “I’m part black.” Hesitant. Without blinking her big blue eyes she says;

“I knew you were.”

“Oh.”

“I was raised in the South, remember?”

The South—land of slavery, the cradle of misogyny.

“You white.”

Black woman informs me—she herself is fair, curly not Afro hair, but obviously black. Technically 3/4ths white. Mother Caucasian, father half Caucasian, half black.

“You white!” She yells. Hate sputters out of her.—Or is it hurt?

In the dim lights of the car she rants: “THERE’RE 5 RACES, BLACK WHITE, BROWN, YELLOW & RED!” She lists them on her fair fingers; “YOU AIN’T BLACK, YOU AIN’T YELLOW, YOU AIN’T RED, YOU WHITE!” Accusing.

“BITCH IS GONNA LOOK AT ME AND TELL ME SHE AIN’T WHITE! ALLRIGHT! YOU BLACK THEN!” she yells, taking a wild guess.

“No. I’m not black! This skin is not black!” Says the woman firmly, holding up her fair fair arm.

"I never seen no nigger with hair like *that!*" she says. "Yo' hair and a white girls hair are the same! You *White!*" She screams, showing her teeth like a cornored dog. "I don't care about your grandmammy, yo' racial heritage! It's what yo' is *now!* You is *W.H.I.T.E!*" She screams so loud her eyelids turn into slits as a jackolantern.

And I feel in my guts that terrible frustration when a free spirit and an imovable solid exchange blows. & tightening in my chest, walling up in cement in the region of the heart. A living entity—a heart, tissue that palpitates, can't live in cement it cracks. It needs to bust loose!

Rejected by both white & black; she was rejected by everyone, so found God.

Whites found she wasn't one of them.

Blacks didn't know her.

So, in the final anaylisis, it comes back to the Spirit. Maybe all this hell on earth has been to show us the way to God—the only escape route. I mean, I'm rejected everywhere I go in concrete, material, *facts*. Not black enough, not truely white, I don't hablé español.

I love it—just get so totally rejected, so, become totally free!

Jesus wants an army of people who have alligence to no other thing but love. —God is love.

To no other doctrin—because they all prove false.

For us to share space with no emotions of fear, hate; just love. We stand together in the world as at a party & rub elbows—so accept eachother.

"The stone that has been rejected has become the cornorstone." —I can't get that phrase out of my mind.

In the Last Days they were sitting in the bar kissing & hugging like there was no tomorrow.

The pagen dance. So many humanbeings are living a life totally constituted by it.

They bow down to warped powers and let other people walk on their backs while they make fanfare, waving plumes as servants before the eunuchs; as eunechs for the master. Applauding each other in the wrong they do.

I am Red.

A child of God.

Woman come up to her; jet black, fat & short & say's "I'm talking to you because I like white women."

'She thinks I'm white!'

An acquaintance: "You're black, don't be ashamed of it!"

'I'm not. Just sick of having to explain myself all the time.'

By 35 she ran out of steam. 'Don't care who knows what I am. Just gonna live on this good earth.'

Today, my woman is yellow as I am, but looks black—except under bar lights when she can pass off as a white sister. Her hair is naturally blond.

"Kids in school use to give me hell about that. 'Who do you think you are? Why do you dye your hair? Isn't your natural hair color good enough for you? Why do you have to be different, you a nigger like we is!'"

"I got sick of telling them my hair was naturally blond. (Her eyebrows are too) Finally I just stopped. Let them think what they want."

She sat at the kitchen table. A bowl of Gumbo on the stove.

Suddenly, she could no longer stand it! Remembered being knocked down by hostile blacks. The taunts from yesteryear—the jeers in black taverns. She recalled a man jumping at her, knocking her down to her knees; she remembered the rage at the sight of her own blood—the feeling of futility... remembered nearly being killed by niggers. Asswhippings, mouth whippings. Niggers wild-angry because they fucked up theyselves.

She ran out of the house & thru the ghetto.

Back thru the neighborhood, the byways of my people—the members of this dis-placed African race, in AmeriKKKa. The world has ripped love from us, clamped red hearts in iron jaws of a garbage disposal of racial laws & color barriers & discrimination. "I'M ANGRY! SO ANGRY! BECAUSE I AM A MINORITY!"

"TOO LONG BEEN TREATED LIKE A NOBODY! GODDAMN IT!"

She raced up to the first black she saw—by a barbeque shop.

"I'M NOT BLACK!" She yelled. Thrusting a pale arm out in front of the mans face she hollored; "MY SKIN IS NOT BLACK! NOT BROWN! MY FEATURES AIN'T NEGROID. I'M NOT BLACK, SO WHAT AM I? TELL ME WHAT I AM!!!!!"

The man stood, looking down at her. His face was ebony—color of the Queen of Spades.

The woman yelled; "I'M A VICTIM OF RACISM MORE THAN ANYBODY! AT LEAST YOU'RE BLACK! I'M NEITHER ONE!" She confronted the tall man.

"NIGGERS IS FOREVER TALKING ABOUT 'OUR PEOPLE THIS,' 'OUR PEOPLE THAT,' 'OUR PEOPLE HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO!'" She mimicked in a mock tone; "I HAVE NO PEOPLE." She said. She was ready to die. "FOR THE LONGEST TIME, I'VE HAD NO POSITIVE IDENTITY!" A crowd of people in the barbeque house looked at her. Startled, black, imovable. "BEFORE BLACK WAS BEAUTIFUL, BLACKS HAD A UNITY—EVEN THO IT WAS NEGITIVE—NIGGERS! 'HEY NIGGER!' 'SAY NIGGER, WHAT'S HAPPENING!' YOU HEAR IT EVERY DAY! NOBODY CALLS ME NIGGER!" Said she, "UNLESS THEY KNOW MY MAMMY AND MY GRANDMAMMY!

"I'D RATHER BE *SOMETHING!* A LABLE! IT'S *CONFORTABLE!*"

She stood there and sinned in the sight of heaven. Got angry at those people staring at her in the barbeque house—did a stupid thing; and here she was baptized in water & in the Holy Ghost and at the very gates of heaven, she said:

"OHHHWEEEE I WANT *VENGENCE!!* BACK AT 'EM! IT'S UGLY! IT'S WRONG! WHAT THEY'VE SAID ABOUT ME! WHAT THEY'VE TRIED TO DO TO ME! I WANT TO DESTROY ALL OF THEM!

"THEY LOOK AT ME AND HATE, BECAUSE OF MY WHITE FACE!"

Shaking her fist at the crowd she yelled; "LOOK! BLACK SISTER AND BROTHER, OTHER BLACKS LOOK AT YOU, YOU ARE A 'SIS, OR 'BRO!—BUT THEY LOOK AT ME, AND THEY HATE. THIS IS NOT TRUE SISTERHOOD! THIS IS NOT UNITY!"

She assailed them all: "OOHHWEEEEEE GOD I WANT *VENGENCE!* JESUS! DESTROY IT BECAUSE IT'S EVIL! RACE IS CORRUPT! THE POWER PEOPLE GIVE TO RACE DIFFERENCE!"

She whirled back to face the stoney face blackman who glared down at her.

"I'M GOD'S PEOPLE! THAT'S THE BLOOD I CLAIM! I DISOWN EVERYBODY ELSE!" And she spat on the sidewalk by his feet; her face in disgust; a grimace, making a downward motion, shoving her hands palm down as if pushing something ugly.

The tall black man opened his mouth; "I am the black sheep of America." He moaned.

"I am not responsible." He shrugged.

"I'm harmless." He shifted his giant weight from one foot to the other.

"My father was white, my mother is Marylin Monroe." He said, holding his hands, black side down, palms up as if to catch the rain and walked away.

Next week in the bar, the bogiouse sister came up to her appologized.

'We each have our own cross to bear.' The woman thought . . 'she's appologized, but I still have to live with it.' The woman left, but the burdon was still on her.

But as I said before, the fight is not between black and white, woman against man, but between some people against some people.

I'm not going to break my heart in a cold white world, or loose my mind in a black stupid one.

Racism—I live it, believe me. I live it more honey, then you can believe; not belonging to anybody's race. *Nobody's*.

My experiences are different then most of yours.

No black complexioned person has ever gone thru the unique hell I go thru.

No white can understand the depth of it.

Only a person who claims the blood of a race they don't look like.

We are something different.

New realization of myself & what I am—an exact defination;

Nobody's people!

But my own self!

It is predicted that eventually race polirazition will cease. As slowly the planet becomes a huge metropolis, intermixing, in super-sonic travel & economic exchange; in 10 generations there will be no more black, white, yellow, or red; just a range of brown to tan—a lot with slant eyes.

The bible declares we are all part of each other & all of us are part of God.

Personally I must say, I'm sick of black people. Not black rights, or black struggle which I support; but blackness. And also tired of whiteness and everybody's lousey little supremacy.

So will do the best I can, will sing my guts out on this page!

I take out my pen as a weapon to slay evil social practices which are killing us.

Currently, this is the winter of the soul. Everybody is out for themselves—a human race, humans racing to distruction—not a human family.

Those words which have been said to me were a shellshock, it's strong to think about. The shit I been thru—it's on a daily basis every day, drip drop drip dropping acid. Because we live in races and walk in classes and unite in tribes & take up guns against the

rest. I can never be free of it in the outside world, but must be free on my inside!

And *these* words in this story, this is my slap back. This is the ass-kick. The payback—translated into finer energy!

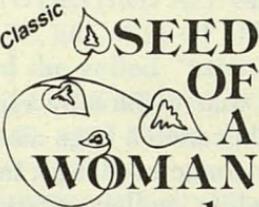
My enemys & their insults; I turn them into books.—I also make my enemys look like fools whenever possible.

I could choose the easy way; I too could sit back comfortable, adapting the style of the master race; or tan my skin one shade darker and perminite the strands of my hair into curls so I would belong; one in a family of oppressed people and point the finger of scorn. But for all who hate me,

the pen is mightier then the sword.

The stone that was rejected has become the cornorstone.

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because you don't hassle me

because you don't hassle me
and because we both know
what boredom is
and have been alone
and lonely
and because we have tried
to know and feel and be everything
and have choked on the ocean
trying to swallow it whole
and because you are the only woman
I have ever met
who also sold her blood for ten dollars
when she was out of money
and knows about drinking coke
and running around the block
when you're anemic
to get your blood count up high enough
for them to take it
and because you don't put on anything
not anymore

7.16.77

March Blizzard

For two days
wind blew snow sideways.
Night fell white, at dawn
cows loomed in gradual light
on a frozen plain.

Two days
we lived together in one room
and hauled wood shrinking from the pile.
The snow stretched on for miles.
All night we stumbled up to feed the blaze
and basked in sudden heat. The cracks and pops
would filter into sleep. I shifted sides
as muscles tightened bones. The whole house
creaked and groaned.

I ate while the world froze.
Beans bubbled, cornbread hardened
on the stove. I piled fat against cold ribs
and stupor sank me deeper into dreams—

the rock sinks
the bottom the stream
the house where nothing lasts
the child she eats the day
and gets up empty from her table
ransacks the house then
watches behind crystal panes
night swallow the sun

Banked fires
smoulder and flame.
The house was frigid every other room.
Snow drifted under doors. Words froze the air.
She said the words I never want to hear:
*I am angry because you are not clean,
you left the kitchen in disorder.*
The blizzard moves inside me,
cold with anger hot with shame.
The stove creaks and shudders
with a sudden flame.

This is the day
that winter never ends.
The spring that comes tomorrow
comes too late. I sleep uncovered,
touch the pulse of hate.

I have wrapped anger

I have wrapped anger like a tourniquet
around a wounding,
stemming the flow of memories

I have worn bitterness like a flannel shirt
against freezing,
covering an exposure

I have thrown exhaustion in blankets
over a crying,
quieting a useless desire

and still I lie awake at night
stripped bare by her silence
and I break again

Memorial for a Friend

*There is no suicide in our time
unrelated to history. . . .*

Denise Levertov,
To Stay Alive

I want to say
that as your image fades
you will sleep
like a slender blonde root
in the moist dark banks
of our memory.

I want to say
that even there
you are busy drawing sense and light
for us, as
often you drew us to see
light mix milky
in the tea, smooth
its gold hands across
the sheets, or flood
through bottles and fatten
like pears
on the tablecloth.

And I want to say
that I believed you
when you raised my hands as I drowsed
for the first time after
your death, and said
that we worried too
much — that everything
was going to be
just fine.

But I must ask
how fine and just it is
that the one woman
who found you
is now unable to snip
the cord of that memory
of you — strung up
in our dark cellar
like a sausage?

How just is it
that your friends — each hoping
to diffuse that
image — picked some
detail: a footstep, the stool, our voices
rushing up
the stair

only to find the image
multiply
and divide
into private visions of your pain
far worse than any
you imagined we would see
had we glimpsed you
crazy with fear, or
crying. Instead

we saw you nod, and
smile, and seem to take
into your house the comforts
we each offered you like
bread, hundreds of
loaves of
bread, stacked
up in
your room, and you
a woman starved to death
in Amerika.

Because we loved you
because we are used to turning to you
for sense and light
we struggled to draw
poetic sense
political light
from the roots of your last
decision.

But on that day the October light
still fell
soft and insensitive
on the angles of this house
we shared. Outside
people mailed letters, drank
coffee, turned
corners in
cars.

Inside there is still a screaming:
What of this revolution you so restlessly
hungered for, with
the rest of us? What of
revolution that is not only a pressing
into new ground, but also
a turning, over
and around,
a turning, sometimes
sleepless and
crying — but turning
in each other's arms?

Shall that too sleep deep
within the dark banks
of our memory?

b a/b s

four years of posturing
acting as if i love myself
 because i ought to
 because someone has to and it might as well be me
 because if i donot no one will

four years alone
confined solitary in this immediate world
 it just is not as simple as classes papers tests and grades
 it just is that there is this incongruity
 it just is the interpretation/perception of it all
 classsexracism

four years in this place
where the foundation of my self
was lost to me
 not so bright
 not so privileged
 not so e x t r a o r d i n a i r e

four years to find
it doesnot make a difference
in the larger scheme of things
away from this fairytale land
 despite the crewnecks one hundred percent shetland wool
 despite sperry topsiders
 despite levi jeans and cords

four years and nothing has changed
though i have been enlightened
educated my consciousness raised
my b a will not get me a cup of coffee still
 in some places in the south
 and newengland
my b a will not foster equal treatment at least
 in this country two counts still to be considered
my b a / belonging to this female of color
 will not be visible if perchance
 i am walking alone at night / and why shouldnot i /
 even on pennsylvania avenue washington

irrelevant newengland liberalartsinstitution

because
it just is
not so
despite
my b a

four years

posturing
alone
in this place
to find
nothing has changed

Anmarie Wagstaff

The Night the Crackerbox Closed

Only Lou would have the nerve to wake me at 5 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Dressed in wilted bar clothes and reeking of cigarette smoke and beer, she and Allison draped themselves on my sofa. After staying in L.A. until the bars closed at two, they had stopped for breakfast in San Fernando, and had just arrived back in Joshua-ville. Lou didn't tell me this, she didn't need to, that was her Saturday night ritual. But her smug silence annoyed me.

"Jeri, you got any Pepsi?" asked Allison. "My mouth feels like a cotton ball."

Half-asleep, I looked from one to the other. "Do either of you happen to know what time it is?"

Lou glanced at her watch. "Mine seems to have stopped. What time do you have, Allie?"

"Five after five."

Lou carefully set her watch, then smiled at me.

"For Christ's sake," I burst out. "Would you mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"Bad news," Lou said.

"Don't you have any Pepsi?" Allison asked again. "I'm about to die of thirst."

"What's so bad it couldn't wait until nine? I'd hate to think what you'd do if I woke you up this early."

"You wouldn't dare," Lou said.

I glared and dropped into a chair. There was nothing to do but endure the visit. "There's Pepsi in the refrigerator."

"Good—get me one, too," Lou told Allison.

Allison groaned, and shuffled into the kitchen. "She can't be twenty-one," I said.

"No, twenty next month I think."

The propriety of taking minors to the bars was one of our recur-

rent disagreements. Lou waited, but I was too tired to argue. She pulled out a flattened pack of Raleighs and offered me one. I glared disdainfully and she lit up. The tiny flame in her hand twitched unsteadily, illuminating the fine translucent lines that crisscrossed her face like a net of flies' wings. She was thirty-four years old—prematurely grey. The silver strands she had once been able to pluck out in weekly sessions in front of her mirror, now streaked through her coal-black rug of hair like spotlights. She coughed and I winced. "It's my health," she muttered.

"This better be good," I said.

She shrugged. "The Crackerbox is closing. Next Saturday's their last night. I thought you might want to know."

I laughed. "Why should I care? I haven't been to a bar in years."

"I'm aware of that."

Allison reappeared with two Pepsis and a bag of stale corn chips. "Isn't it awful?" she asked. "Poor Marie—she has three kids, you know."

"Don't tell me Marie's still tending bar."

"What did you expect?" Lou asked. "Everyone else to stop coming just because you did?"

"Come on, Lou, what do you want? You didn't get me up at 5 a.m. just to annoy me. If you're here to ask me to go to the Crackerbox next week, forget it. I'm sorry for Marie's sake. But you know how I feel—there are better places to socialize."

"Stuff it," Lou said. "I didn't come here to ask you to go to the bar next week, I'm here to collect on a favor, an old one." She paused.

"So?"

"So—I want you to be there next Saturday." I met Lou's gaze—she was serious. "You haven't forgotten?"

"No . . . I'll be there."

I assumed my debt to Lou very early in our relationship—it was during the summer of my initiation. That is, the summer I discovered being a lesbian in Joshuaville meant drinking Coors, smoking Raleighs, and loving Lou. She waited six years to collect.

My father had been transferred to Joshuaville in December. I sulked into town in June—a week out of high school. I wanted to stay in Atlanta, but my parents had scheduled a summer in Europe and somebody had to feed the cat and the goldfish. They left in mid-June and I was alone.

There were only a handful of lesbians in Joshuaville that summer

—hardly enough to form a softball team. In fact, at game time on the opening night of city league, they could only muster eight players, and were forced to draft a ninth from the stands. The umpires were already planning their pizza order, when a wiry, sun-bronzed woman with a shy grin approached, introduced herself as Devon and asked if I would like to play. Dazed at being singled out of the opening night crowd, I nodded and followed her into the dugout. Introductions were briskly made and without further ceremony I was handed a glove and sent to right field.

The logic behind my selection was not revealed until some time later. It seems the one factor that weighed most in my favor was that no one had ever seen me before. In Joshuaville, where softball is a summer necessity, the spectators are as regular as the participants, and frequently as caught up in the rivalries and feuds. For this reason, every other spectator in the bleacher was well-known—well-known to be straight. On the other hand, I was a dykey-looking question mark. My hair was cut very short; I was wearing Levis and a t-shirt; and, according to Devon, I was staring at them. For Devon, that was enough. The others were more hesitant, but with forfeit time approaching, and a ninth lesbian still not in sight, Devon was given the go-ahead.

By the third game I was playing first base and had convinced myself that at least half of the team was gay. The majority of teammates, being equally perceptive, had agreed that I was an authentic dyke. But not until the fifth game did we get past inquiring looks.

When I arrived at the park, Devon, Melinda, and Blair were sitting on the grass behind the bleachers. An embarrassed silence greeted my approach. I assumed I'd interrupted something and was about to make some excuse to walk away, when Melinda blurted out, "Devon has something to ask you."

"I do not," countered Devon, blushing fiercely.

"Then you owe me a six-pack," said Melinda.

I knew there could be only one question worth a six-pack. My heart skipped a beat, then pumped rapidly. "Go ahead—ask," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. The other two sauntered off toward the drinking fountain, leaving Devon and me alone. An embarrassed silence followed. "What was your bet?" I finally asked.

"Either you know already or I've lost it," she said, curling a long blade of grass around her finger.

"I think I know."

"Well then—say it."

"I can't—you haven't asked yet."

She smiled shyly. "Why should I ask if you already know the question?"

"Because I might be wrong."

"But you're not."

"I can't be sure."

"I'm telling you—you're right."

I hesitated, then shook my head. "If you're so sure, why don't you ask?"

"Okay, I will." There was a long pause.

"When? Next Christmas?"

"Okay already. Give me a minute to phrase it." There was another long pause.

"It's not that hard to phrase."

"Okay—then you phrase it."

"Why should I be the one to say it?"

"Say what?"

I took a deep breath. "That you're gay and so am I." After that the rest was easy.

Lou played catcher. She had a reputation for being "tough" and no inclination to let it lapse. She dived snarling after pop-ups, guarded homeplate like a two-ton truck, smoked in the dugout, cussed incessantly, and was thrown out of one game for throwing her bat on a called third strike. I was afraid of her. If she sat at one end of the bench, I took care to sit at the other. At the parties to which our games, won or lost, were always a prelude, she was disc jockey, drink maker, dance leader, and the one whose mood dictated whether or not the party would "go." In return for her social gifts, we provided her with all the food, beer, and love she needed.

Lou was also a self-taught mechanic, as Devon informed me when my Volkswagen developed a cough and a lurch. I had my doubts, but asked her to take a look at it anyway. She arrived the next Saturday morning dressed in freshly laundered overalls and a snug-fitting black t-shirt that contoured her tight-coiled muscles. Carrying a heavy wrench, she looked invincible. After a short test drive and a moment's muttering, she asked when the car had last been tuned up. When I confessed I couldn't remember, she glanced at me in disbelief and opened her toolbox. Inside, the meticulously arranged wrenches, pliers, and screwdrivers glittered in the sunlight like polished silverware. I complimented her organization.

She grunted and said, "People who don't take care of things don't deserve to have them."

All morning I "assisted" Lou. For the most part this meant giving her work an audience and keeping her supplied with beer. Only occasionally was I allowed to hand her a tool. By mid-afternoon the tune-up was complete and Lou scrubbed and changed clothes. She was drinking my last beer when I made the mistake of pulling out my checkbook. She looked at me in hurt amazement. "We're friends, aren't we?" I assured her we were. "Then put that thing away."

"I can't let you do it for nothing," I protested.

"I wouldn't do it for nothing," she answered. "I've done you a favor, now you do me one. Come with Devon and me to the bar tonight."

"I wish I could," I said. "But I'm underage in California."

Lou laughed. "If that's all that's stopping you, forget it."

I had never been to a gay bar. It was one thing to sit in the corner of Devon's living room, chug beer, and cough on Raleighs. But to go to a bar in L.A.! What if the place were raided? or if there were a fight? or if some diesel dyke with slicked-back hair tried to pick me up? No doubt Lou and Devon would get plastered, then I'd be left to fend for myself. I panicked and reached for the phone. I even went so far as to dial Lou's number, but at the sound of her voice, hung up. I was as intimidated by Lou as I was by the unknown horrors I'd face at the bar.

From the outside, the Crackerbox looked like a small warehouse. There were no neon lights, just one glaring bulb shining on a sign above the door. We parked a half-block away and walked back up the street. I stayed between Lou and Devon, trying not to look at the dark windows where I imagined hidden eyes might be witnessing my approach.

At the door a broad-hipped woman with a flat nose greeted us. "ID's and a dollar cover charge." My heart fluttered when I handed her the license Lou had given me. She glanced at it and unhooked the rope across the entrance.

I followed Lou and Devon toward the rear of the half-filled room. In one corner a couple of women played pool, a few more sat at the bar. The rest were scattered among about twenty small tables crammed into the back half of the room to make space for a dance floor. When we crossed it, no one was dancing. Lou slid a

couple of tables together, and I sat down between the two of them. A long-legged waitress wearing jogging shorts and a football jersey walked by with an empty tray and Lou ordered two pitchers of Coors.

At the front of the room, on a small raised platform, stood a stereo flanked by two six-foot speakers. A disc jockey rocked back and forth tapping her foot, sorting through stacks of albums. At the first break in the music she picked up her microphone and bleated, "Welcome to the Crackerbox, where the music never stops. After a bout with the flu Marie's back behind the bar tonight. Be sure to say hello. And don't forget about our buffet dinner tomorrow at four, and remember—no cover charge on weeknights so come on in and see us."

A woman asked Lou to dance. She accepted, exposing my left side, and I risked a glance at the table of women next to me. A bulky woman with a double chin was talking. "It would have been easier if the guy had never shown up. Foul ball? What foul ball? I swear he didn't even see it. And then the other team comes yelling at me. But it was his call; what could I do? Lucky the game wasn't close. The Barons would have lynched him." Her friends were laughing and shaking their heads. One had her arm around the woman beside her. They didn't look too threatening.

Our beer arrived and I downed half a glass. Devon looked at me strangely. "Hey Jeri, are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Why do you ask?"

"You look a little funny, that's all. How do you like the place? Is it much different from the bars in Atlanta?"

"Oh, not much. I guess these places are pretty much the same."

More women were arriving, mostly in groups. Those who came alone either immediately attached themselves to a group or took a seat at the bar. Lou flitted from table to table, greeting women by name, tossing out compliments, and collecting free beers.

"Want to dance?" Devon asked.

"No thanks. I really don't feel too good."

"Well, maybe if you didn't drink so fast," Devon said gently. My face flushed. Drinking was the one inconspicuous thing I could think to do.

The dance floor filled for every song now. All the tables were taken, and as the bodies packed closer together I felt less exposed. At a table close by two women sat across from each other, leaning forward, talking intently under the music. They looked very young,

about my age. When a woman nearby knocked her drink to the floor, they didn't look up. They danced only once, to a slow song, and returned to their table holding hands.

Devon pointed me toward the restroom and I took my place at the end of the line. "Good crowd," the woman next to me said. It was the double-chinned umpire. "I've never seen you before. Do you come here often?"

"No, this is my first night."

"Really? Where are you from?"

"Atlanta," I said. "But now I live in Joshuaville."

"Then you're with Lou's crowd."

I nodded.

"That Lou's a special lady. When she misses a Saturday, everybody knows it."

When I found our table again, Devon was dancing and Lou had returned. "They must think I need a babysitter," I thought. "At least they'll never ask me to come again." I lowered myself into a chair and refilled my glass.

"Having a good time?" Lou asked.

"Sure," I said, guzzling the warm beer.

"This is my favorite bar," she told me. "I go to the others now and then for a change, but this is my home turf. Come with me, I want you to meet someone."

Lou nudged a path through the crowd as I swayed along behind her. There were two empty stools at the bar and we sat down. At the other end, a short, skinny, middle-aged woman with kinky black hair was simultaneously taking orders, wiping down the counter, and mixing drinks. As I watched her quick synchronized movements, my head began to spin. When business slowed, she came to our end of the bar and leaned against the counter. "Well, Lu-Lu, what you doing off the dance floor?"

"Come to see my old pal, of course."

"Ha! Don't need to sweet-talk me, honey. You know I don't give out free beer."

"You ought to the way you water them down."

Marie made a motion as if to slap Lou across the face. "Hush your lying mouth, girl. We lose any more business, we'll have to close down. And then what would you do?"

"There are lots of bars in this town."

"Ha! There's only one Crackerbox. No other bar would put up with you week after week."

Lou laughed. "Marie, I want you to meet a friend. This is Jeri."

Marie squinted. "You're robbing the cradle again, Lu-Lu. This one don't belong in here yet." Lou laughed again and Marie said to me, jerking a thumb in Lou's direction, "Your friend here's a good woman, but she's a bad influence on young ones like you. You try to imitate her, you end up with trouble. They ought to make her wear a sign that says 'Lou Miller may be hazardous to your health' or 'For mature audiences only.'"

"Mature audiences?" Lou asked in astonishment. "And here I thought I was strictly X-rated."

Marie tousled Lou's hair and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't listen to me," she said. "I'm just jealous."

I thought Lou was marshaling me back to our table until I felt her wrap her arms around my waist. She danced naturally, and I floated in her arms like driftwood in a lazy current. Then she tightened her embrace, molding my body, like soft wax, against hers. I closed my eyes and tried not to think.

The rest of the evening I spent at our table with either Lou or Devon at my side. In between beers I smoked all of their cigarettes. I said nothing, but from within my smoky cocoon I watched the women in dazed fascination.

At one-thirty the waitress in jogging shorts collected the glasses and at two Marie pulled the plug on the music. Everyone groaned and stumbled through the smoke, trying to locate jackets, hats, and friends. I didn't move. The room had begun to spin like a sluggish carousel. Lou lifted me up, and leaning heavily against her, I tottered through the door and out into the street. With my first gulp of night air, I knew I was going to be sick. "Lou," I whispered frantically, digging my fingers into her shoulder. She lowered me gently to the ground and held my head while I threw up in the gutter.

When I woke up the next day I was lying on a lumpy tan sofa in Lou's living room. My feet were tangled in a pink blanket and when I rolled over to free them, I broke out in a cold sweat. I tried to raise my head, but a wave of nausea flattened me against the sofa. Within the hour the nausea subsided, but a much more painful queasiness replaced it. The night replayed in my head like a flawed film, in which only isolated frames flashed on the screen. Each frame spun me closer to total humiliation. When the tears came, I did not try to stop them.

Lou came in and I blinked away the evidence. "How do you feel?" she asked.

“Like I went over Niagara Falls without my barrel.”

“Good—you’ll live. Here, take some of this,” she said, handing me a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. “Guzzle this the way you did your beer last night and you’ll feel fine in no time.”

I gagged down several swallows, kicked the blanket off, and sat up. “I’m sorry about last night,” I said, focusing my eyes on the other side of the room. “I don’t know what was wrong with me. I’ve never been like that before.”

Lou shrugged. “You don’t have to apologize. You’re not special. I threw up in that same gutter once. But why didn’t you tell us you’d never been to a bar?”

So they knew that too. Not only could I not hold my liquor, but I was a liar as well. “I just didn’t want you to know,” I confessed. “It’s bad enough being so young without acting like it.”

“Now don’t go feeling sorry for yourself. You got drunk and you got sick. So what?”

“Yeah, but what a way to pay you for fixing my car.”

“If that’s bugging you—forget it. Let’s just say you still owe me. It will be nice to have somebody owe me for a change.”

“You won’t forget to collect?”

She leaned over and kissed me lightly on the forehead. “No way, love.”

Despite my shaky introduction to the Crackerbox, I went back, and for several years even earned distinction as a regular. Like Lou, I visited the other L.A. bars, but more for my education as a lesbian than because I found the Crackerbox lacking. I liked to go into a place and know all of the faces, even if I didn’t know all the names. Some of the names I never did learn. In fact, I never formed a lasting friendship with anyone I met at the Crackerbox. I arrived with the Joshuaville contingent and, for the most part, my socializing was limited to my Joshuaville friends, women I could have seen at the ball park or in their homes for a lot less trouble and expense. But I kept going back. When the rope across the door was drawn and I stepped inside, I left the other world—what some would call the “real” world—behind, and in so doing became a “social” person, a quality I never suspected myself of having, needing, or even wanting. I could dance and talk and laugh like all the people I’d envied and despised for so long.

During most of my bar years Lou and I lived together. She took care of things (like cars, the plumbing, and high-strung appliances),

while I took care of her (her hangovers, her insecurities, and her temper). In the long run, Lou was more successful than me. None of the faucets leaked and car trouble was rare, but Lou still smoked three packs a day, consumed huge quantities of junk food, and kicked doors if she didn't get her way. After three years of riding her emotional roller coaster, I moved out.

At roughly the same time I quit going to bars. At first it was to avoid seeing Lou. Later it was because Sunday mornings were too valuable to waste with a hangover. I was writing and I needed those long weekend mornings to work. Besides, I was now going through my second initiation as a lesbian—the one that taught me that being a lesbian meant eating vegetarian, reading Rita Mae Brown, listening to Meg Christian, and facing up to what I had been doing to myself every Saturday night. Week after week I had drunk myself into a stupor, releasing a week's worth of pent-up energy. It was a dead-end life, and I knew it. So I gave up the Crackerbox. It was harder than giving up Raleighs or Coors. Almost as hard as giving up Lou.

On Saturday night I was almost as scared to enter the Crackerbox for the last time as I had been for the first. Everyone knew how I felt about bars. What would they think when I showed up now? I drove down alone, hoping Lou would be too drunk to notice if I slipped out early. From the outside the Crackerbox looked the same. But when I passed through the magical rope, I found the place had been remodeled. The pool table was gone, the bar was twice as long and twice as shiny, the dance floor had been raised so that colored lights could flash up through its translucent surface, and the disc jockey, instead of standing on a platform, sat in a booth in the corner. There were also new tables and soft chairs with wicker backs.

Lou gave me the customary bar greeting—a warm hug. “Welcome back, kid.”

“When did all this happen?” I asked, disoriented by the strange surroundings. “If it weren't for the sign out front, I wouldn't know the place.”

Lou nodded. “It's been about a month now. The owner's selling it to some guy who wants to make a straight bar out of it. Fixing the place up was part of the deal. It takes some getting used to, doesn't it?”

Some friends from Joshuaville had spotted me and made frantic

motions for us to join them. Devon squeezed through the packed house to meet us halfway. I was welcomed like a lost sheep returned to the fold. They hugged, kissed, and toasted me. A beer was placed in my hand—yes, still Coors—and so as not to disappoint them, I drank it.

Devon asked me to dance. "I'm a little rusty," I confessed.

"Well, if you'd come out of hibernation more often—" She paused and I avoided her glance. "We have missed you, you know."

The dance ended and I started back toward our table. Allison grabbed my arm. "Not so fast. It's not every night I get the chance to dance with a legend."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She laughed. "Don't think I haven't heard about you. Rumor has it you're the only one that can keep up with Lou when she really gets going."

It was my turn to laugh. "Then I must have improved considerably since the last time I tried it."

After this song I slipped away to the bar. As soon as Marie was free, she brought me a beer. "On the house," she said.

"What? The first thing I ever heard you say was that you never gave out free beer."

"Then I had a job. Now I can afford to be generous. Drink up, love. Besides, the last thing I heard you say was that you'd never be back."

"That makes us both liars."

"So what else is new? Now, get away from here. Go dance. I don't have time for your talk."

I finished my beer and took her advice—I asked Lou to dance. "You haven't lost it," she told me. Neither had she.

After that I stayed on the dance floor, sloshing down drinks between songs. I danced with every woman I knew and some that I didn't. Even Marie came out from behind the bar to dance with me. My glasses fogged up, my damp clothes stuck to my body and, more than once, Lou wiped the sweat from my forehead with her sleeve. I didn't try to talk. I didn't try to think. Nothing mattered but the beat and keeping my body with it.

Around one-thirty bar crowds usually start to thin. Tonight the dance floor gradually cleared, but no one left. The lights flashed, the stereo blasted disco music, but the disco mood was gone. Lou was reeling drunk. She made her rounds through the crowd crying and hanging on everyone. Most sat at their tables in stunned silence,

like the accused awaiting the jury's verdict; but the verdict was already in.

Lou circled back to our table and sat down beside me. She leaned her head on my shoulder, crying so softly I could feel, rather than hear, her sobs. I put my arm around her and fought back my own tears.

Marie pulled the plug. The flashing lights danced unaccompanied, then darkened. No one moved. "Closing time," she said quietly. We sat in silence. I gently removed my arm from around Lou's waist and stood up. Calmly and deliberately I took hold of our table and pushed it over. The glasses, that for the first time no one had collected, shattered to the floor. The next instant tables crashed around me like dominoes. Marie picked up a chair and hurled it over the bar. Lines of smashed bottles spewed liquor in every direction. In five minutes it was all over.

Lou had not moved. She sat at the center of the ravaged room like a queen on her throne. I helped her up and she leaned heavily against me as I picked our way through the broken glass.



These photographs were contributed to *Sinister Wisdom* by Dorothy Johnson, of the Common Reader Bookshop in New Salem, Massachusetts. She found them, unidentified as to source, in a rummage sale in New Hampshire, summer 1982.



Not the first time they were together. They were together at the...
...and...
...the...
...the...
...the...



To Scratch at the Earth

for Audre

1

Once again you and your words
brush the flesh
that antiseptic strangers have bruised, misshapen,
that lovers cannot touch
because it is not just mine yet.
There is no incubation or masturbation
for this pain,

Just constant dialogue,
some words at the podium
to scratch at the earth
for the bones suspected to hide there.

We were forced to evacuate our words,
fight our way back
by way of a liferaft
we built when the doctors, nurses, family and friends
were asleep
and we roamed the white of the hospital,
wondering where to find solid veined timber
among the gauze and chemicals
to fashion our escape.

The child's jacket
thrown upon a chair,
two mittens on one umbilical yarn
hanging from sleeves,
are the jacket and one pair of mittens
and not the child
Not the child, not the child,
a six week old on chemotherapy,
limbs and face swollen —
Not the children, the women, the men
who collapse into the surgeon's
artificial limbs

There was the other way,
I too not knowing
how much I can give anymore
now that I understand
how much I must love myself
in order to keep breathing here,
In, out,
in, out,
rhythmic bellows allowing me the touches

and when I really touch
I touch the ocean and I am quite alone.

Pretending

Today the ground is a woman on her back,
unsheltered as the snow seeks refuge
upon her belly

The needles and tests
have ceased to stand out by themselves
It is one long sigh,
one longer headache
of muddy-footed soldiers marching —
The memory is poisoned as well as the veins,
the few crisp notes of a saxophone
six months buried —

Like the room she is inert,
the colorful table of flowers and cards
touch neither she nor the room,
but float there, unattached

She removes herself, pretending
she is not a rotting corpse
but a seven year old playing tricks,
pretending to be sick to miss school,

She visualizes the cancer cells,
places each cell on paper
and with scissors, bare hands, flame
destroys them
and Oh it feels so good to feel the cells
burning in her own hands

The Chosen Look

Who is speaking when the tongue
lies so quietly,
so asleep and so inside;
A magnolia blooms in my mind
but once in the light that is outside the body
the pink edges go brown

Had you come today, friend,
You could have walked with me,
helping to dismiss the leaves,
helping me to believe
that all of their last gasps are laughing ones —
ha ha

This is the right way,
the cars travelling north
to delight in the brilliant dying
of leaves

Yet in the aisle
I see another carrying cancer,
helping her daughter
choose pencils for drawings that she may never see,
and am not craning my neck
to see the chosen colors,
the chosen look upon her face

Had you come today,
Perhaps you could have begun my instruction
on how I will write with the eyes so closed

This sculpture of skulls
my brain carves under this subheading: cancer
is not a snow sculpture to melt in April
but one that will surely have grown by May,
a sculpture of colorless flesh,

Had you come today
how would I greet you, in bathrobe or song.
These floorboards can hardly support
the tired parent of this child,
the child who whimpers of losing flight time and
does not think of the New York City bums
whose wings fall forward across their shoulders
because they do not know, never knew
how to fly.

lady-unique-inclination-of-the-night



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Difficult But Not Impossible

Janet Aalfs

A review of *Outlander*, stories and essays by Jane Rule. Published in 1980 by Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302. 207 pp. \$6.95.

Outlander is a collection of stories and essays about the lives of lesbians. The author, Jane Rule, a Canadian citizen who is active in the writers', women's, and gay communities, is originally from the United States. She lived with Helen Southoff in Vancouver, British Columbia, teaching and writing, for twenty years before moving to Galiano, off the coast of B.C., where she now resides. *Outlander* is her latest book. Other works include *Desert of the Heart* (1964), *This Is Not for You* (1970), *Against the Season* (1971), *Lesbian Images* (1975), *Theme for Diverse Instruments* (1975), *The Young in One Another's Arms* (1977), and *Contract with the World* (1980).

I am writing from the perspective of a white lesbian involved in the women's movement in the United States, aware that other countries have issues and problems that differ culturally, racially, and ethnically from those in the U.S. I also know that women from other countries resent assumptions that questions of concern in the U.S. should necessarily be dealt with in a similar manner elsewhere, a form of cultural imperialism, to be sure. I am personally interested in learning as much as I can about any group of people who have been or are silenced in some way. My own desire to explore silence and how it is imposed, or chosen as a means of survival, is the basis of my questioning. *Outlander* reflects the courage it takes to speak out of imposed silences—and in doing so, makes room for the stories that have not yet been told.

The strength of *Outlander's* diversity lies in its portrayal of lesbians of different ages, class backgrounds, physical abilities—perspectives that are often overlooked. Its weakness is the absence of Third World lesbians. Rule makes many important connections about lesbians as real people with real wants, fears, hang-ups, and joys. She addresses herself at various points to the oppression of all

people. Therefore, I need to question her silence in regard to lesbians of color as more than a conscious choice to limit her scope. If it were conscious, I would want the author to make her choice clear. As it is, I assume that all her characters are white based on physical description and cultural reference, and what I learn in the essays in the latter part of the book. The inherent racism in such an exclusion needs to be examined in all areas of our life and work.

I don't expect any author to write about everyone's experiences. But I think we must ask why an author makes certain choices, whether conscious or unconscious. *Outlander* has challenged me to examine the ways I read between the lines and the assumptions I make. For instance, if I am not told otherwise, do I automatically assume a character is white because that is who I've been taught to recognize? Do I read dialogues and, based on stereotypes of speech, conclude who each character is? I believe that fiction is a reflection of values, judgments, and philosophies that an author has internalized. A character takes on these values and becomes a composite of the author's ideas and perceptions of whomever the character is meant to portray. In projecting herself into other people's life experiences enough to express deep feeling, the author must risk that her insights will have meaning to readers beyond those with similar values and perceptions. Racial boundaries are difficult but not impossible to traverse. Rule states part of the problem in her essay entitled "Reflections."

The difficulty for gay people as for other minorities is that we have so long been either ignored or portrayed in negative stereotypes that it is hard not to be a defensive audience even for our own artists. [p. 204]

And equally hard not to be defensive writers; to try to make a point while at the same time be aware, as I am, that I have a long way to go in my own process of understanding and conveying my beliefs with honesty and clarity. If an author is willing to portray, for instance, a different class background than her own, why can't she risk communicating her perceptions of someone from a different racial or ethnic background? To imagine oneself in the place of someone whom we have been taught to see as "other" in order to write about that experience, takes an immense amount of work and courage. But how else are we to know ourselves and each other? In Rule's own words:

What we have to fear and fight against is not each other but the gar-

bage in our heads that can make us see each other as symbols of the establishment, as enemies rather than as people who must learn to break the regulations together. [p. 196]

Jane Rule's stories and essays inspire me to challenge my own view of the world, my place in it, and my relationships to others. The settings and characters she describes and brings alive with her words are ones that I am familiar with in some way—whether it is a certain look in the eye, tilt of the head, or recognizable personality. Those which I have not experienced directly become a part of me through her vivid use of words. These stories are about lesbians living on the edge—"Outlanders"—outside of society's rules, and yet never totally disengaged from the ways we have been affected by society's values. Without being idyllic or tragic, Jane Rule sustains a drama that expresses the day-to-day struggles of real people's lives.

"Home Movie" reads like a film in that it is so intensely visual, sensual, tactile. It begins with Alysoun, a musician from the U.S. on tour in Greece, watching someone else's home movie through a window from a café where she sits drinking. She is brought back to her own childhood and memories of watching films that her father took of her and the rest of the family; how in order to be acceptable, she had to be something for someone else. This story shows the process of a woman learning to accept herself, her music, her feelings for women, and in that process, coming into her own. In a letter to Eudora Welty, Alysoun writes:

I've discovered that fear *is* desire, not shame or guilt or inadequacy or any of those other things. The question to ask about fear is not what are you afraid of but what do you want. If you know what you want and you can have it, then fear doesn't seem like fear at all. [p. 13]

"The Day I Don't Remember" involves the never-ending feeling of being pulled to make our lives more acceptable, especially to our families of origin—and the contortions we go through to cover over who we really are when our identity and security are threatened. It is about how the frustrations that grow out of having to "pass" tear at our heartstrings and cause rifts in the fabric of our lives.

"The Puppet Show" involves a threesome and a child. Lesbians with children have a whole set of problems to deal with that those of us who are childless can often not even imagine. This story gave me insights about some of these issues. What I appreciated most is how Rule seemed to understand the viewpoint of the child as well

as the intricacies of the three women's relationships. So often, children are not seen as the full and complicated human beings that they are. Rule is obviously committed to the honest education of young people. Her essays focus on moving away from sex-role stereotyping and increasing children's awareness of it at a young age.

I suppose that even a six-year-old could write about being "an aging lesbian," might even feel the need if she'd already suffered a couple of years at the hands of a heterosexual nurse, been reprimanded by a mother for picking forget-me-nots for the lady next door, and been told in kindergarten to stop drawing the same picture over and over again: a stick figure at the top of a pointed mountain. [p. 205]

"Outlander," the title story, is about life on the edge in an actual physical sense. In a harsh natural environment, you must be willing to accept help from people you might not otherwise be drawn to. Two women "companions" move to a farm in New Hampshire. They grow together in the struggle to weather harsh winter conditions and the various influxes of family members who have never been particularly sensitive to Ann, the main character, and her needs or desires. Ann is an alcoholic who has spent time at a sanatorium and is familiar with life on the "edge." With the help of Fran, whose role is originally a sort of nurse, Ann begins to understand her anger and where it comes from. As Fran has taken care of her, so Ann learns that she must finally care for Fran:

She did not need Fran to keep her sober. And she didn't need her cows either. She needed only her own strength to offer up for whatever Fran needed now, whatever the simple land asked, whatever the Cawes or Ganges might require tomorrow or the next day. That was the bargain, deep in debt and credit, of accounts kept only in the heart. [p. 55]

"Miss Wistan's Promise" is about the relationship between Belle, a younger, single woman and Berta, an older married woman, and the insights and advice that Miss Wistan, Belle's landlady, provides for Belle. I am particularly struck by phrases that Rule uses to describe Miss Wistan—"a prim-faced old lady," and "that extraordinary little old lady, a spinster who had spent her working life teaching little girls that intelligence is mannerly." Because the general tone of the story is one of great respect for the knowledge and experiences of Miss Wistan, these phrases, descriptions that have long been used to keep older women in their places and belittle their achievements, seem incongruous with the rest of the story. Again, I question whether these phrases were used consciously or not.

Rule's stories often leave the physical description of a character up to the imagination of the reader—her characterizations are based more on emotional composition. “Prim-faced” and “little old lady” conjure in my mind certain stereotypical images of older, especially single, women. The danger in not being more specific is that the reader can fall back into old patterns and ways of thinking about, seeing, and categorizing various groups of people. We must be scrupulous in using the English language which has developed so many ways of silencing ideas other than those of the status quo, to break the very silences it tries to enforce.

Other stories in *Outlander* include “Pictures”—two women who are lovers and live together accept a request for short-term lodging from a traveling woman and the visit brings many aspects of their relationship into question; “The Killer Dyke and the Lady,” about barriers between women of different classes and their styles of self-protection; “Lillian,” about an old love and the pain that can return even when that part of life is past and gone. The opening paragraph of this story is a marvelous description of how pain recurs “like the pages of a pop-up book, the scenes of love remain . . .” (p. 89); “In the Attic of the House,” about old age and the loss that becomes an integral part of daily life as one's friends and loved ones die; “A Perfectly Nice Man,” about the relationships between women who have been or are to become involved with one particular man and who end up more involved with each other than with him; and “Night Call,” about the impositions, boundaries, and frustrations of superficial contact between women.

My expectations of an author who is obviously committed to discovering the truth of our lives are high. Combining the story and essay form in one volume is consistent with Rule's dedication to presenting the characters she chooses as whole beings; dispensing with the separations of imagination and reason that we learn in American mass media culture at an early age. Rule's stories give us detail and in doing so break the silence of invisibility and denial that we as lesbians experience in the world. The essays create a larger framework for understanding the environment in which we live and that which we continue to create for ourselves. In combination, the vision is one of integrity and strength. In her essay on sexuality in literature, Rule speaks about relationships between equals and how “a whole new poetry beginning here”¹ can arouse a desire in the mind undivorced from the body, a desire for resolution which is neither union nor death (p. 150). Trusting the body's responses to

any given situation and acting according to what we know not only in the mind, but in the heart, allows us to experience the truth. "Preserving pain and courage and love betrays nothing but the world's hypocrisy. Our only real defense has always been the truth" (p. 193).

One of the dangers in speaking the truth is that we can become entrenched in feeling miserable about all that is wrong with the world and our lives. Jane Rule does not. She maintains a sense of humor, an irony that allows for transformation. In the midst of confusion, her characters keep fighting for dear life, often with laughter. In "Sightseers in Death Valley," a diverse group of people who would probably not choose to be together in their daily lives because of ingrained assumptions and stereotypes, make contact during the Christmas season at a tourist resort. The cast of characters includes a Jewish family trying to deal with the Christmas mania, a gay man who must contend with constant homophobic comments, and various women who are afraid to express feelings for each other because of how they might be viewed.

"At least we're not all on the same bus," Miss Jensen observes as they walk into the parking lot.

"It would have saved gas," her friend answers. [p. 117]

In "Sightseers," Rule is more specific than in the other stories in *Outlander* about the cultural biases that people hold. In this ironic portrayal of the pervasiveness of Christianity and heterosexuality, all three members of the Jewish family, close friends of the gay man, are killed in a plane crash in Death Valley while trying to escape from all the trappings of Christmas day; an isolated incident yet symbolic of the historical attempts to erase Jewish people and culture, and the existence of this oppression today. No one in the story, except the gay man, understands the significance of such a tragedy. They go on talking, trying to act as if nothing has happened, their worlds seemingly still intact. Yet they are left disquieted; the tragedy of their lives being that they are not aware of their own ignorance, biases, and lack of integrity. Rule makes it clear, without beating her readers over the head, that ignorance is no excuse. That if we are to live as full human beings, we must question our own attitudes and their effect on others who may have very different ways of being in the world.

Rule's use of irony is a thread in her writing. In "First Love, Last Love," Rule writes:

Those horribly in love discover sarcasm. When Justine complained of growing older, I told her I was hag-ridden. When she said the color of my eyes were the color of the sky, I told her hers were a smog alert. When she said I was clever with words, I fell silent. [p. 109]

The retort, the comment that calls what is being idealized into question, the "Why not? What's wrong with being other than who you always believed you were or who others see you as?" attitude. The stance of self-acceptance in a situation that calls for conformity; struggling at all times to lessen our own doubt and others' denial of who we are.

Rule does not romanticize our lives. In "Reflections," she says, "I'm more apt to feel sorry about the trouble beauty causes people than to celebrate it, and I try to spare no one real life" (p. 203). Because she does examine so many of the assumptions we are taught to make about what life is supposed to be like, I am struck by the absence of viewpoints other than mostly that of white America, despite a woman-identified cast. Still, *Outlander* paves the way for further exploration and discovery. Reading it inspired me to question myself and my perceptions. Rule's stories and essays give me a vision of hope for the future and growing older —

As my grandmothers taught me the real lessons of erotic love with their beautifully requiring flesh and speaking faces, so I would wish to teach the children I love that they are capable of tenderness and strength, capable of knowledge because of what they can see in my face, clear in pain and wonder, intent on practicing life as long as it lasts. [p. 207]

1. Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language*, W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York, 1978.



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Celebration and Survival

Elise Young

A review of *Lifetime Guarantee: A Journey Through Loss and Survival*, by Alice Bloch. Published in 1981 by Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. \$6.95. 132 pp.

Women's Voices Writing Workshop. Someone asks Alice Walker: "How can we know anybody is listening, when we write alone?"

Alice Walker says: "Get in touch with your dead. Your dead are listening to you."

Not only Barbara and my parents, not only my ancestors. The dead of my tribe. All the Jews, all the lesbians, all the women of courage.

They hear me when I type. Like thumping the ground, like stomping the feet in a tribal dance.

Alice Bloch, *Lifetime Guarantee*

Alice Bloch is the oldest of five children. Her mother died of cancer when she was nine; five years later her father remarried. In 1972, within months of each other, Alice's father's sister died of cancer and her father died of liver failure. On June 22, 1973, Alice's only sister, Barbara, died of leukemia at the age of twenty. Alice and Barbara had planned to write an article describing their experiences during Barbara's illness. It was never completed. Instead, Alice wrote *Lifetime Guarantee*, using excerpts from Barbara's journals and letters, reworked passages from her own journals, and poems by both.

This is a book that confronts issues of survival in patriarchy. Alice names her lesbianism and her writing as primary to her survival. Her identity as a Jew informs and illuminates her work. She rejects misogynist traditions of patriarchal religion and affirms her connection to a tradition of survival. Capitalism, homophobia, racism are the diseases that foster competitiveness, guilt, fear: the final stages are the cancer diseases, the leukemia that killed her sister Barbara.

The complexities of feeling between sisters are honestly explored in this book. There are the tensions of prescribed heterosexuality: "There were things I concealed from her that year, things I was afraid to tell her: that I was dreaming night after night about making love with women. I was afraid she would be uncomfortable sharing a room with me. I was afraid she would think I lusted after her" (89). This passage refers to the year that Barbara and Alice lived together in Jerusalem. Barbara writes to her friend Toni:

Thanks to Michelle, Anita, Trina, Tremor—patient readers, inspired commentators.

*Shabat really is lovely. Like a shower, like crying that brings relief.
I can't tell you how much I'm digging festive things
Shabat with candles & kerosene light & rest & sharing & visit-
ing & taking the sunshine in. (12)*

The year together strengthens their love, but also clarifies ways they are caught in roles prescribed by patriarchy: "If you want your sister to be happy, give her a man. . . . Especially if she's the older sister. Older sister should have a man before younger sister" (88). Their relationship continues to nourish them because they are open to, and learn from, each other's unique ways of experiencing the world, and because they are open to the unique gifts of that relation: "I learned sisterhood from loving Barbara. Barbara gave me some of my spontaneity and creativity. The vision was accurate: she is a part of me, in a way that I can grasp and appreciate and cherish right now" (80).

What were Barbara's choices when she learned that she had leukemia? Barbara hated hospitals, and Alice wanted to get her out. But neither at the time trusted, or knew of, an alternative. (Are there any?) A doctor was given control over Barbara: he lied to her about the seriousness of her illness to hide his ignorance and to protect the medical establishment's "right" to experiment. Only after six months, and after her father's death, does he finally admit to Alice what is never told to Barbara: "The kind of leukemia Barbara has is called 'myeloblastic.' It's the hardest kind to control. We haven't had much success treating it; in fact, Barbara's four-month remission was one of the longest I've seen. A patient's first remission is almost always the longest. Barbara is going to get sick again, and we're going to lose her" (59). Barbara's decision-making power was taken away from her at the time when she needed it most. Her friends, her work, everything that nourished her, were replaced by sterility, lies, the physical torture of medical treatments. Alice fought against this, but she also had to fight against fusing with Barbara: "I have to remind myself, as I reminded the nurses, 'I'm not Barbara. I'm Alice, her sister'" (36). She more and more rejects a system (familial, medical) that does not allow her a voice:

I confront Mom [her stepmother] in Barbara's hospital room, across Barbara's bed. I say, "Mom, Barbara's the patient here. She should have the power to decide which visitors she wants to see, and when. Her wishes should be respected."

Mom says, "Are you kidding? She's delirious. She isn't responsible for herself. I'm responsible for her. Someone has to make these decisions. Now that your father isn't here, I'm the one in charge."

I see from Barbara's expression that this is nothing new.

I don't speak to Mom again. . . . I tell Nancy, "When we leave here, I will never return to Youngstown again. Not for a goddamned funeral, not for anything. If Barbara ever gets strong enough to travel, I want to bring her to California. But I will never come back to Youngstown." (71)

Alice's decision not to return to Youngstown from Los Angeles when Barbara is clearly dying, is consistent: her courage in staying in touch with herself is an affirmation of trust between herself and Barbara. Alice told me, when we talked last October, that Barbara understood this and would have done the same. This is probably one of the most controversial decisions of the book and will stimulate creative dialogue. I think that what is critical here, is that Alice acted out of her own integrity. She did not passively, out of guilt or fear, follow a role: there is a death in the family, one must go home. The decision is also consistent with Alice's rejection of sentimentality in favor of following, and being in touch with, her own truth.

Passivity is one of the themes of this book. Alice's valuable interpretation—her turning over and over—of an event in the family referred to as "the accident," makes clear how passivity is learned. The family car, holding Barbara, Alice, Alice's younger brother Eddie, their mother who is pregnant, and their grandmother, almost rolls off of a cliff. No one is able to act to stop the car. Alice's grandmother, the only grown-up in the front, doesn't know how to drive. Alice, six years old, instructs Eddie to hold on to the backseat. Her mother opens the door in an attempt to get into the front, and falls out. The car is finally stopped by a bush and no one is hurt. The family mythology for years after is that Barbara, one year old, played with "the buttons" and set the car rolling. Alice's father never acknowledged that he failed to put on the emergency brake. Alice accurately points to the ways children are scapegoated, and to "a stupefying rigidity, a role division so strict that even a life or death test could not bend it" (123). Without the presence of "the men," her grandfather and father, the women and children are "powerless." Maintaining roles becomes more important than survival. This piece of writing is an example of the Jewish Talmudic tradition of exegesis—the continual reinterpretation and rereading of a text. Alice calls herself the exegete of Barbara's life: she turns over and over her letters, her drawings, what she knows about her life, each time gaining new insight into the forces that affected her sister. For instance, there is Alice's uncovering of racism: "A woman who treated me well and treated Barbara badly once told me

Barbara was dirty. I protested and asked for proof. 'Barbara is . . . swarthy,' she said with disgust. This was the first time I saw that racism could intervene between sisters. Barbara is 'swarthy,' I am pale. Our hair is the same dark color, but Barbara has 'Jewish hair'—kinky and unruly—and mine hangs limp and straight. Barbara has oily skin, and I have freckles" (23). Alice goes on to say that in her family she is the Litvok and Barbara, the Galitzianer. "The family mythology goes thus: Litvoks are intellectual, restrained, modest, tidy, methodical; Galitzianers are creative, messy, theatrical, outrageous, irrational. When Barbara acted wild, Dad would shake his head and say, 'The Galitzianer.' No one ever shook a head and called me a Litvok" (23). There is perhaps a relationship between this racism and the "role" Barbara was put into when the "accident" happened. We are left with a sense that Barbara was blamed because she was the youngest, because she was the "Galitzianer." "How did she stand it? How did she push away the blame, over and over? Or did she take it, accept it?" (122).

I love who Barbara is in this book—her poetry, her letters, her love and trust of Alice, her persistence. Courageous women, Barbara and Alice. I think about my own sisters; our sharing of Jewish ritual, roles we acted out with each other, our physical similarities and differences. This book illuminates for me much of what has been difficult about these relationships and much of what has been concealed by patriarchal lies. I celebrate Alice's persistence and courage in writing about the complexities of Jewish experience. I celebrate her persistence and courage in finding a form for this book that reflects the truth of her experience. A dream of Alice's—"a bearded patriarch shows Barbara and me the story of his life and tells us to write our story in the same way, and I can think of nothing to write" (111). And so she tells the story in her own way, not in the form of an analytical research paper on cancer (she tried and rejected that), or even a traditional novel (as she was encouraged by other publishers to do). The book is a form of diary. Sections representing each year from 1970 to 1981 may be one page or twenty, poetry, prose, letters, or dreams. Passages have a rhythm and life of their own, as Alice explores themes, feelings, observations. Another gift that Alice gives us in this book is her ability to put her losses into perspective:

Another friend said, "It's not fair. Your family has had too much grief. You've had more than your share."

I had never thought about this issue, but my response was immediate: "More than our share by what standards? There are places in the

world where most children starve in their first year. If we were a Vietnamese family, it wouldn't be at all unusual for me to have lost both parents and a sister by now."

She looked at me oddly. I guess she was thinking, "Denial. Alice doesn't want to face her pain, doesn't want to get angry."

Maybe. Maybe I couldn't afford to think about fairness. Maybe I didn't want to spend my life sitting on a heap of ashes and shaking my finger at the sky. Maybe my expectations were too low. Friends of my parents had lost their entire families in the Holocaust. How could I grow up knowing that, and ever expect life to be fair? How could I grow up knowing that, and not now put my own losses in perspective? (129)

This book asks us to take seriously that we must fight against racism, which threatens not only our sanity, but also our survival. And that passivity only leads to our destruction: we cannot afford to allow anyone control over our lives. We cannot afford to take the blame for the mistakes of the "fathers." Alice fights against that passivity in herself by forcing herself to "think about what I cannot bear to think about. All the clues I need are hidden there, in the unbearable" (122). She fights against it by celebrating that she is a lesbian, a Jew, a writer.

As I write this review, the second earthquake within a month has shaken the Northeast. Southern California is working its way out of mudslides that have already begun to change the shape of the landscape. Last night yet another accident at a nuclear plant was reported, in New York state. I think of the river Alice describes that was rechanneled for economic reasons. It jumped its bed and flooded homes that had been built on the original riverbed. A reporter interviewed one of the flood victims—a woman—who said: "Well, the river was here before we were. I guess it had a right to the land" (130). And I think of the last part of a letter Barbara wrote in February, 1973:

Anyway the week dragged on in there and I had one chat with the good doctor. Those miracles I believed in a year ago don't seem to be working now. The drugs work for a while, then the disease gets resistant and something new is needed. If I'm ok I may split to the East. I plan to look up this naturopath Aunt Ethel's stepson goes to in NYC who prescribes natural diet for diseases like mine. Anyway I'm curious about that! Can you understand my bitterness toward a country that pollutes everything we live in and then tells me I'm lucky for modern medicine's marvelous strides in adding time to my respite with death?

It's hard to explain but I'm angry.

Love, Barbara (68)

Photography and Feminism

Marian Roth

A review of *The Blatant Image: A Magazine of Feminist Photography*. Published by The Blatant Image, 2000 King Mt. Trail, Sunny Valley, Oregon 97497. Editors: Caroline Overman, Tee Corinne, Jean Mountaingrove, Ruth Mountaingrove, and Jan Phillips (with help from Lynn Davis). 96 pp. \$10.

The Blatant Image is a new magazine of feminist photography, and it marks a turning point in feminist and lesbian culture. For the first time, photographers have a vehicle for showing their work to the community at large; most of the artists represented have not had their work seen widely. The impact on photographers ought to be tremendous, if I can gauge from my own response. Seeing the work of so many other photographers not only inspired me to get my own work out, it filled me with a sense of communality that I have not experienced as a photographer before. Although I knew a lot of women were doing photography, I don't think I ever realized how much our work has in common, or how many women seem to be experimenting with the same visual language. It is one thing to talk about our work, and quite another to see the similarities and shared concerns in the work itself. Taken all together, the images point to a growing body of work, to a place where the concerns of individual artists converge. A sense of seriousness about photography is communicated; I can see that other women, like myself, are gaining control of the medium. *The Blatant Image* generates an excitement that comes with recognition and appreciation for the work of other women.

Looking at the photos in *The Blatant Image*, one senses a growing ability among photographers to communicate thoughts and feelings through a purely visual imagery. While the magazine gives us the opportunity to look carefully at a developing feminist photography, in its conception, layout, and ideology, it presents the reader with a tension that exists in lesbian feminist culture between a trust of the purely visual image and the traces of both a "literal" esthetic and a constraining political viewpoint.

Of all the visual arts, photography seems to have acquired a very distinctive place in the lesbian feminist community. Unlike painting or sculpture, for example, photography is not expected to present an abstract visual language; it is perceived in a very literal way. The photograph is expected to tell a story; it has come to be perceived as a visual extension of language. Photos are used in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals, often to "illustrate" or to create a mood setting for a story. The photograph does not have a life of its own as a purely visual image. Even the editors of *The Blatant Image* use photographs (which probably were sent in as image entries) to illustrate articles. There is, for example, a stunning photograph by Louise Luczak of a Black woman looking out a window, and it appears under an article about the images of Black women in films. Within the context of a photographic magazine, the pictures are still serving a "literal" and secondary function.

The lesbian feminist finds herself surrounded by a culture which is linear and literal. Photography is a visual art which lends itself to a literal use, and unfortunately this may account for its popularity. Feminists speak of creating a new non-literal, non-linear imagery, yet many women find themselves unable to understand or appreciate purely visual images. To help gain access to the visual image, there is an expectation that the artist will speak about her work, will provide verbal cues to understanding. *Sinister Wisdom*, for example, asks the visual artist to submit "comments" on her work, along with the portfolio. Even *The Blatant Image* editors asked for a 250-word statement with the photographs. Would it seem absurd to ask a writer to "comment" on her poem, or to send in 250 words along with her writings? I think so, yet we ask this of visual artists. Why?

The Blatant Image contains many articles about photographic techniques and history. In addition, there are many excerpts from the statements that the artists submitted. Some of the "comments" act to take power away from the visual work; the words explain what one can already see, robbing the image of its purely visual language. Why try to explain the beautiful composition of breasts, for example, that we find in the work of Clytia Fuller, or the expression on the face of a young man in the hospital by Shari Gladstone? Mary Beth Edelson presents a wonderfully executed collection of photographs taken at women's rituals in which she records the path of light from candles. The images are drenched in mystery, but they are accompanied by a long dry text, detailing every aspect of

the making and recording of the images. I am not arguing with those articles which explain how we, as photographers, feel about our work or process, such as Jan Phillips's wonderful essay on integrating life and work. I am speaking of a felt need to have a literal rendering of a purely visual image—to confine vision to a literal impulse. It is my feeling that the most truly revolutionary work will come when we can find a new way of seeing, and I believe that we visual artists are moving there, as the work in *Blatant Image* demonstrates. Yet so many of our notions are tied to a literal imperative at the time when we need to be free to explore the visual and tactile imagery of our collective selves. The "feminist" vision or the lesbian vision probably lies deep within our memories and experiences. It cannot be dictated. It may not be "literal."

I can only hope that the next issue of *The Blatant Image* will have fewer words, will not demand 250-word statements, and will give more space to the photographers. In this first issue, the pictures have to fight the words, and sometimes they have to fight each other for the viewer's eye. There is too much crammed together, with the visual images surrounded by a sea of words. I am sure the editors felt there was much to say, but our pictures need space to speak. Perhaps, we need to trust them more and control the urge to use words. I realized, in looking through the magazine, how important it is for me to put more trust in my own images. Like the rest of us, I have been educated in the world of the literal imperative, struggling against allowing the title of a visual image to define it. The tendency to be literal in lesbian feminist culture holds us back; many of us feel the need to be "relevant" or "correct," to tell the right story. Perhaps we fear our images might be judged "counter-revolutionary" because they look like "art for art's sake" (i.e., "no content").

The political viewpoint of *The Blatant Image* is set out by the editors in an introduction and is made into theory by Ruth Mountaingrove in her essay "Making Ourselves Real." Mountaingrove uses Susan Sontag's book *On Photography* to frame her argument that it is the responsibility of the feminist photographer to validate women's lives by taking "true" images of ourselves. According to Mountaingrove we should utilize photography to correct the portrayals of women's lives that are found in the mass media. Mountaingrove argues that if we photograph women who have been traditionally "invisible" or who do not conform to society's notion of beauty, then we will be rendering them beautiful, or at least impor-

tant, because their reality will be affirmed through the photograph. She claims Sontag as a support in this thesis. But Sontag, in her original argument, was trying to show how the mass culture uses photography as a means of experiencing reality, as a substitute for (being in) the experience. Sontag points to the tourist who goes overseas and takes a picture of the Eiffel Tower. When she comes home she has the evidence that she was there; in fact, many people seem to go on trips just to have the pictures of the experience. Because photography can be used to render the moment as a document, it has been used as a substitute for living. Unlike other art forms which we know are "interpretations" of reality, Sontag argues that photography is popular partly because it fits nicely into the mass culture's alienation from the world. It is the apparent ability to render "truth" which is both the power and the illusion of photography.

Knowing that photography can be used to represent reality does not destroy its power as a medium for communicating whatever we might wish to say about reality. Documentary photography exploits this aspect of the medium, and there are many documentary photographs in *The Blatant Image*, powerful images which move the viewer deeply. Deborah Hoffman, Leslie Parr, and Mary McNally's work come to mind. But I believe it is a confusion to argue, as Mountaingrove does, that photography can make our lives real, can affirm our lives and give them meaning. Yes, one can record something and, with artistry, communicate its importance or impact. But no one can make my life real but me; "making ourselves real" is the political task of our lives. Perhaps a good photographer can capture the quality of the life, but the life must be there first. There is a great deal of difference between bringing a picture of something to light and believing that a picture affirms its existence. Besides, a revolutionary image may not have any of the elements which Mountaingrove advocates; it may seek to communicate vision through the texture of a feeling, of a color, or by the way light hits an object. I don't think Ruth Mountaingrove wants us only to take "correct" photographs, but her argument, along with the editorial positions of *The Blatant Image*, permeate the magazine and suggest this underlying political imperative.

René Magritte, a surrealist painter, once argued that the painter cannot make the invisible visible—one can only show what is brought to light. This is profoundly true with photography, which only can show what is lit. There is a difference, he argues, between

what is hidden and what is invisible. The hidden becomes the mysterious; it is lit, but is not seen. When we bring our lives to light, they will be seen because we will be showing them. I lived in a political commune during the formative years of my art, and always felt the burden of the "right line." In fact, I did not dare take a picture of a tree for three years, thinking it was frivolous and counter-revolutionary. One day at a workshop, I brought in a picture of a tree and confessed my fears. A fellow photographer told me that on the side of the tree she could read the message, "free the Attica Brothers." I was relieved. I only hope that we do not have to continue this constraint and foreclosure of imagination any longer—how many of us have to suffer under the imperative of what we *should* be doing, as measured by some notion that we got from a classist, sexist, and racist system. I feel, that for myself, my art comes from my need to be free, and I consider this also to be the root of my political consciousness. The images in *Blatant Image* show us that we can make beautiful art which speaks truth, if only we would collectively stop trying to define and constrain ourselves with the need to be literal and correct.

The Blatant Image II will appear before the end of this year.

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Responses

Response to "Nadine Pagan's Last Letter Home":

Dear Nadine,

I got your last letter home and wanted you to have one last letter from me. You seemed to be telling me that you are very brave and very wise, more brave and more wise and more able to foresee destruction than I have been. You tell me that I am a compromiser, that I say in the face of danger, "Give a little." You blame me because I did not understand your need to wear your labrys, but you seem never to have understood that your grandmother and I would never compromise, either, in the face of danger, by wearing anything that "looked like a cross."

Your letter did not make me feel good about myself, and nothing in it recognized that I, too, am afraid or am brave—you gave me nothing in your letter to confirm me. I wondered, after I read it, how you could assume I wanted more of them—notes, and post-cards and long letters from your travels.

You are right. I do not know whether they will hunt you down because you are a woman, or a Jew, or a lesbian, or whether they will come for me first because I am less mobile, easier to find, and I am a woman, a Jew, and old. I do not know whether it is braver to remain at home and wait for them to come for me, or whether you are braver to take flight.

I do not have "the wherewithal" to travel, jobs would be closed to me, and my aging body is not flexible enough to go through the bathroom window; nor did you ask me, I noticed. But do not assume I am less brave. I have travelled. I came to this country, just as you take flight now, hoping that I could save my life as a woman and as a Jew, and that I could grow old here with integrity.

I do not understand the ending of your letter and the role you are asking me to play. For you to have such insensitivity about my own struggles, that you can indulge yourself by describing, for my benefit, your heroic death—being thrown in boxcars and burned, and that you need to fill this dream of heroism in by having me play the woman's role of mourner, grieving over your letters if I do "get to read them," sounds so male. You seem to visualize yourself as one of the favorite sons who goes off bravely to die and who wants a weeping mother waiting for his ashes. Is this lesbian?

You cannot borrow the heroism of your grandparents without having paid the price for it. Neither of us can; neither of us knows whether, in the face of true terror, we will, or will not, "give a little."

There are assumptions in your last letter that I feel I must correct. You seem to assume that I am going to serve you as your mother all your life; that, whatever happens, I will remain here in the family home waiting for postcards or notes from some state official and possibly at great risk to myself. I cannot invest in your life while you do not invest in mine. I do not want to risk my life for yours.

The same forces that pursue you, pursue me. So do not cast me in the historic role of the passive woman who stays at home to attend the funerals of the brave and who "gets to read" their last letters. I have my own life to live and its ending to take care of.

Ma

Barbara Macdonald

Nashua, N.H.

April 1982

Judith Katz responds:

I wish Barbara Macdonald had written a critical response to "Nadine Pagan's Last Letter Home" directly to me, Judith Katz, from herself, Barbara Macdonald. It isn't that I don't want to be publicly criticized or held accountable for the words I've written or the politics which those words express—further on in this response I will specifically address Barbara's objections and criticisms. But before I do, I need to say this: I have been developing the character of Nadine Pagan's mother, Fay Morningstar, for many years. I have been laboring carefully and dutifully to create a woman who is true to my experience and the experience of others—a character who speaks in a voice so particular to herself that it will ring familiar to women who know women like Fay Morningstar, as well as to women who are meeting her for the first time.

Fay Morningstar, like her daughter Nadine Pagan, is a member of a larger work in progress, *The Monster in My Mother's House* or *41 Laments*, of which "Nadine Pagan's Last Letter Home" is one element. The voice which Barbara Macdonald assumes in answering Nadine's letter is not Fay Morningstar's voice, and I don't like the idea of an imposter mother answering Nadine's letter in print. I'm not generally selfish in my creative process—I'm a terrific and open collaborator when that's what I set out to do. But this particular story—the story of Nadine Pagan and her family and friends—is one which I feel very strongly is mine alone to tell. I did not invite Barbara Macdonald or anyone else to respond to Nadine in the voice of Nadine's mother, or in the voice of any other member of Nadine Pagan's family.

In her last letter home, Nadine Pagan takes careful pains to explain to her mother the following:

- a) she is going away
- b) she is going to stop contact with her family, her mother in particular
- c) the reasons she is going away
- d) the reasons she will send no more letters home
- e) how, as a lesbian, Nadine's reasons for going underground and disappearing are not dissimilar from a Jewish person's reasons for going underground and disappearing in Europe in the 1930s
- f) she and her mother and the rest of the world have good reason to be afraid for their lives
- g) she and her mother are connected as Jews
- h) much of what Nadine herself knows and understands about the oppression and prejudice against both Jews and lesbians she has learned from her mother
- i) Nadine and her mother are psychically connected and will continue to be in contact psychically no matter what the outcome of Nadine's own story.

There is of course an unspoken message between the lines of "Nadine Pagan's Last Letter Home": Nadine is very, very angry at her mother. The spoken proof of this rage is the news that Nadine will stop sending letters home.

One reason Nadine is so angry at Fay is that she doesn't understand how a mother who has taught her so much about the compromises Jews have been forced into for generations could ask her own daughter to deny her lesbianism. In this letter home, Nadine wants desperately to show her mother that denying you're a dyke is like

denying you're a Jew, and that both denials come from the same root.

Nadine is also afraid as she writes this letter that her mother will not see or understand the correlations she is making, or for that matter, Nadine herself. So she chooses examples she is sure that her mother will understand: Nadine tells her mother the story of Anne Frank and the Nazi Holocaust.

It is very wrong to say that Nadine Pagan is "borrowing the heroism of her grandparents." Nadine is a Jewish woman who has spent two days a year reading the Haggadah at Passover time and learning the story of the Jews' escape from slavery in Egypt; she has spent many Sunday mornings of her childhood in Hebrew school reading about her people's escapes from other Jewish-hating cultures and governments in ancient times ("it was a lesson common as the chumash books I studied from in Hebrew school . . ."); and Nadine has heard stories all her life about the Nazis, the Spanish Inquisition, the pogroms in Poland, and the pogroms in Russia, from Jews like her mother who know the stories because Jews like their mothers have surely told them. So Nadine Pagan has learned this "heroism" well. It isn't borrowed—it's inherited.

The end of Nadine Pagan's last letter home is not about leaving Fay Morningstar home alone to wait for the Nazis, nor is it about leaving Fay Morningstar home alone to wait for Nadine. The end of Nadine's last letter, specifically the words, "they may shortly thereafter burn me too. If this happens, you will feel me so clearly in the air, no words will be necessary," is about a deep psychic connection which Nadine feels she has with her mother. She is not saying, "You will feel me in the kitchen while you wait for me to come home to dinner." She is not saying, "You will feel me on your deathbed while you yourself die alone." She is saying, "If they burn me, you will know as mothers and daughters have always known, that something is very wrong." Now, the other thing Nadine Pagan is saying is this: "If they burn me, then I, in my spirit body, will come back to you and you will feel me." And what this *really* means, I think, is, "Ma, in my death I will touch you in a way that you never let me touch you while I was alive."

Barbara Macdonald is afraid, I think, that Nadine Pagan is dismissing her mother—an older woman. But Nadine isn't dismissing Fay at all. She has taken great pains to carefully explain her politics, her religious beliefs, and her actions to her mother. And in her own way, Nadine Pagan has told her mother that she loves her. I believe

that Barbara Macdonald is really responding to Nadine Pagan's rage and her desire to lash out and hurt her mother. I think that when Barbara asks such questions as, "is it lesbian" or "is it male," she is asking, is it alright to show a daughter raging at her mother without forgiving her mother, and what about the mother anyway, who's going to take care of her? In this letter home, Nadine Pagan is still occupied with the problem of trying to get her mother to see and understand her. She can't forgive her mother while she's in a state of rage for feeling invisible. She won't be able to forgive Fay until the raging stops.

Now, in the evolution of daughter/mother relationships in lesbian fiction and life, I would, as much as I am guessing Barbara Macdonald would, like to see some resolution to this anger, some healing in the mother/daughter relationship, and nurturance between Nadine and Fay. I know that literary images of older women are oftentimes prejudiced and false, and that these false images can come to symbolize all older women. But I also know that many daughter/mother relationships do not resolve; and that women like Nadine are frequently angry at their mothers.

As a writer of fiction and plays, I can work toward the following:

- 1) I can tell the truth as best I can
- 2) I can inspire a kind of hope that is not false
- 3) I can engender healing by telling the truth and showing a new kind of possibility.

In concrete terms, this means that ultimately, I will write some stories that show me in relationship to my older women friends, both lesbian and heterosexual, and work at integrating those stories into the mythos I make of my own life. Right now, Nadine Pagan and her mother Fay Morningstar are still talking to me quite a bit. The urgency with which they speak, the clarity of their voices, makes me urgent. So it's their story that I have to tell now. I have to tell it as closely to the truth as my courage allows. I do this knowing, as Judy Grahn puts it so well in her "Bowl Speech," that someone is very apt to say, "... every witch must have a knife and then someone else will say hey i just cut myself on that image while someone else will take it and bury it in their enemy's heart ..." But as Grahn goes on to say, "... that is what i mean by socially useful, that is what i mean by moving art."

Northampton, Mass.

May 7, 1982

Sun Taurus / Full Moon in Scorpio

Dear *Sinister Wisdom*,

In April, 1981, I received a letter from Betsey Beaven, on Bloodroot stationery. She was writing in regard to anti-Biblical articles I'd written in *Womanspirit*; she agreed with my critique of Christianity, but was upset by my definition of "anti-Semitism," & said that many women coming to Bloodroot restaurant were also upset by it. Betsey's letter was open & friendly, & I tried to respond in kind. I wrote her a 7-page letter, elaborating my views, asking questions, & expecting an exchange of ideas & feelings; also, I told her she could pin the letter up in Bloodroot for other women there to read.

Betsey never responded; instead, she gave my letter to Selma Miriam, who used quotes from it in her SW 19 essay "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian Community." These quotes are used to show that I am an uncaring woman, with "awful" & "dangerous" views.

I believe that a free & serious exchange of opinions & information among women is the lifeblood of feminism; & I hope I am strong enough to take criticism. I think, however, that constructive criticism among women needs to be (1) honest in methods & (2) issue-oriented. I don't feel Selma Miriam's 3 page SW attack on me was either.

First, Selma's excerpts from my letter were not honestly made. She omits whole relevant paragraphs without showing any omission, or paraphrasing the omitted material. With this quoting method, she seems to have me saying, "So what? I don't care about WW2," when in fact I said, & feel, just the opposite. She quotes prefatory examples without including the point I was making, i.e., that it doesn't make sense to call Semitic Muslims or their supporters "anti-Semitic." She accuses me of not referring to problems of the relations between women & men of oppressed cultures; in fact, I referred to this twice, in two separate paragraphs. She misuses quotes from the *Womanspirit* exchange between Jane Litwoman & I. Finally, she condemns me for saying things that I have never printed, but that were part of a personal exchange, by letter, between me & Betsey Beaven. It is Selma & SW that printed these things, not I. If I was speaking for myself, & for print, I would have quoted myself fairly.

When SW 19 came out, with Selma's essay, I wrote a long letter to Adrienne & Michelle, asking why no one involved—Betsey, Michelle, Selma, Adrienne—had taken time to inform me my letter was being excerpted; why no one seemed disturbed by Selma's quoting methods or motives; why, considering the seriousness of

Selma's adjectives, SW didn't offer me a chance, in the same issue, to defend myself.

Adrienne answered: "As to sending out an article like Selma Miriam's to each person who has been criticized or challenged in it, I doubt that any journal which publishes overviews or surveys does this—let alone is it done for book reviews." I think this totally misses the point. All the other quotes used by Selma, & journal & book review quotes used anywhere, *are taken from printed sources*. This means (1) that the writer has agreed to their publication, & (2) that readers can, if they wish, go to the printed sources to check the accuracy & fairness of the quotes against their original context. But these two points do not apply to the unauthorized use of personal correspondence, & I'm surprised that Adrienne, as a presswoman, seems not to know there is a difference. Also, I'm surprised that Adrienne, with her worldwide reputation for concern about ethical & honorable communication among women, does not seem at all bothered by the way in which my letter was elicited &, in my opinion, dishonestly excerpted.

Second, Selma's criticism of me depends on pejorative labels—"dangerous," "awful," "anti-Semitic"—& questionably-made quotes. She doesn't engage the issues. For instance, it is common today for non-Jewish women to be called "anti-Semitic" for using the term "Judeo-Christian." But many speakers & writers from Jewish backgrounds use this term; Merlin Stone refers freely to the "Judeo-Christian Bible," the "Judeo-Christian beliefs," the "Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall," the "Hebrew-Christian god Yahweh," etc. Why are only non-Jewish women zapped for using this term? If we are using it wrongly, surely this is due to ignorance, not malice. Why don't Jewish women try to *teach* us how to use it? With information, not trashing.

In the WS exchange with Jane Litwoman, I was called "insane" for writing that the "only begotten Son of God" attribute of Jesus was originally a Jewish postulate. Selma repeats this quote, indicating she also feels it is "anti-Semitic." In fact, the Jewish origin of many of Christ's attributes is a well-established fact among religious historians who have studied the Qumran texts & other Dead Sea scrolls. The Jewish Essene sects posited a Christlike "Teacher of Righteousness" who was called "the Anointed" & referred to in one of their ritual banquets as "begotten" by Yahweh; they were doing this a hundred years or so before the reputed birth of Christ. Further information can be found in John Allegro, *The Mystery of the Dead Sea Scrolls Revealed*, 1956, 1964.

Selma also finds my views “dangerous” & “awful” because I refer to the relation between the Biblical-Hebrew concept of themselves as a Chosen People, & the American “Manifest Destiny” concept which has been used as a political tool, a “divine mandate,” for the oppression & rip-off of non-Western cultures. I am being pilloried here for saying things that are common observations; they can be found in the works of Jews as well as non-Jews. Read *The Indestructible Jews* (1971) by Max I. Dimont; Dimont is a popular Zionist historian & lecturer. He writes: “It was the Christians who with sword in hand converted the pagans of Europe, thus bringing them their first knowledge of the Old Testament & its concept of manifest destiny” (p. 244, Signet Edition). Earlier in this book, Dimont points out that the English Puritans “regarded themselves primarily as Hebraists [who] took the OT as their model of government” &, arriving in America, “transformed the Jewish concept of a religious manifest destiny into a political manifest destiny, believing it was God’s will that Americans should rule the continent & the seas beyond” (pp. 344-48). Dimont’s whole book is dedicated to showing that Jews, & Judaism, have a manifest destiny to save human beings from our natural evil—which he defines as our Id, or “unconscious,” or “jungle man”—& that the political establishment of America, & then Israel, are manifestations of this God-willed destiny (pp. 383-84).

Of course, Dimont agrees with this historical development; I don’t, & I criticize the worldview from which it derives. Such criticism has been going on for a good two decades, as part of American left-liberal cultural reevaluation of the development of Western consciousness. What I said has been said much more fully & eloquently in many books; one of the most widely-read being Ted Roszak’s *Where the Wasteland Ends*; see in particular Chap. 4, “The Sin of Idolatry.”

The point here, & the issue, is that if some Jewish feminists really want to stop this exchange of ideas & information, this reevaluation of Western ontology, they are going to have to figure out a way to impose total censorship on an entire culture. I doubt this will be possible. They might try to enforce restrictions on the exchange of opinions & data among women. I hope this is not possible.

When I wrote to SW, questioning the way in which my letter was excerpted by Selma, & my name smeared with labels, Adrienne’s response was that I should try to get beyond my natural human “defensiveness for the sake of our own & our movement’s growth”; she

said "what is necessary is that we go on expanding our understanding, receiving criticism not as 'smear' but as part of the struggle we are in." No. I do *not* accept dishonest quoting methods & loaded labelling tactics as a constructive part of women's struggle, or any other honest struggle. Rather, these are the tactics of the people we are supposed to be fighting against: manipulative name-calling, coercive thought-control, attempts to censor, via labels like "dangerous," what we think, read & even write in letters. Please do not ask me to accept these tactics as part of a legitimate feminist "challenge," or anybody's political "growth." Using buzzwords like these, in this situation, is to substitute Feminist Newspeak for serious dialog.

Adrienne also pointed out to me that, in today's world, Jewish people are at risk; she suggests I should make sure my work cannot "be used by those who without any great interest in logic or scholarship, simply hate Jews & wish us dead." I agree, Jews are at risk in the modern world. There are a large number of lifeforms at risk today, including: women, feminists, gays, witches, Blacks, Hispanics, Indians, the elderly, poor people, welfare mothers, head of household working mothers, working class people, disabled people; animals, birds, trees, air, water, food, earth. A lot of us relate to several of these categories simultaneously. Why are we all at risk? In my opinion, we are at risk because of the rise of religious & economic *Fundamentalism*, which is Fascistic by definition. If this is so, why, in 1981, did Menachem Begin's government award one of Israel's highest honors, the Jabotinsky Medal, to the Rev. Jerry Falwell? Why, earlier in 1981, was Falwell honored in New York by the National Jewish Fund? Why, on March 23, 1982, was Ronald Reagan given an award, by the National Council of Christians & Jews, for his great contribution to "humanitarianism"? Do feminists, lesbians, welfare mothers, witches, etc., who are *also* at risk, have the right to question the ontological assumptions & tactical alignments underlying this apparent collusion between some conservative Jews & *precisely* those men who we consider to be the major reactionary leaders, indeed *proto-Fascists*, of our day?

I find this all very strange. I thought we had a common enemy: fascistic control over our bodies, minds & futures. This is what I am fighting; while organized conservative Jewish groups & the Israeli government are rewarding & awarding the Fascists. And I am labelled "dangerous" for questioning the religious principles underlying such alignments. What is going on here?

If we are asked, by some Jewish feminists, not to criticize the Old Testament or anything connected with patriarchal Judaism, because this could bring harm to Jews, then this principle must fairly apply to all *other* patriarchal religions, to which huge numbers of oppressed people are attached. Catholicism may not be criticized, because this might endanger Spanish Catholics, who are a persecuted minority in America. Tens of thousands of Blacks are deeply attached to different Protestant denominations; therefore, Protestant Christianity may not be criticized. Islam would become taboo also; it is a major third world religion. Taken to its conclusion, any stop-sign placed in front of religious-cultural criticism means that *feminism ceases to exist as a viable tool for critiquing women's fundamental/ontological oppression*. Does anyone really believe it is possible to get to the sources of women's global repression & exploitation *without* analyzing root institutionalized male assumptions about the nature of god, the structure & meaning of reality, the origin & purpose of human life on earth, etc., etc.? The past decade or so of feminist struggle should have shown us one thing: we as women are involved in a religious war against our sex, in a confrontation of female experience with male-originated godheads & worldviews structured insidiously into all our legal & customary institutions.

Feminism began, I thought, as a belief in the possibility of a transcultural bonding of women against the specific cultural assumptions & oppressions derived from institutionalized male misogyny. By trying to redefine feminism, by fiat, as subordinate to the interests of specific cultures, by trying to define the female sex as a subcategory of Judaism, or of any other specific male-dominated & male-advantaging worldview, you are in my opinion denying the original premise of feminism. Denying it out of existence. You are denying the possibility of female transcultural bonding as a political strategy & last-best-hope global political force. Is this really what you want to do? I can't believe that it is. I hope that it is not. Such a premise, such a possibility, is at present fragile & visionary, with real ragged edges from bitter inter-woman experience. But I hope it is not dead & gone forever.

Barbara Mor
Albuquerque, N.M.
May 10, 1982

Dear *Sinister Wisdom*,

While I have been looking forward to reading Selma Miriam's "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian Community: A Collage of Mostly Bad News by One Jewish Dyke" (SW 19), my responses to the article itself were mixed. I want to share them with you as part of the much-needed dialogue about anti-Semitism.

I greatly appreciate the courage it takes to write about an issue that has certainly not been sufficiently explored within the lesbian-feminist community—and I think it extremely positive that Selma has done so. I know that she wrote it at a time when there was even less visible, public support for confronting anti-Semitism than there is now.

As a Jewish lesbian, I find much in Selma's article that speaks to my experiences. Like her, I become increasingly angered each year by the pervasiveness of Christmas. Like her, I share political values that emerged in part from my having grown up in an Eastern European Jewish family imbued with strong union and leftist sympathies.

Selma's lengthy discussions of the positions taken by the editors of *Sisters United* and of the writing by Barbara Mor seem to me especially valuable. I feel likewise about her briefer comments about the anti-Semitic remarks made almost in passing by editors of some collections of lesbian writing. Certainly the points Selma raises in this article will contribute to further exploration of anti-Semitism in writing. Her discussion was also significant to me as one recent catalyst for my thinking about issues of Jewish identity and anti-Semitism, a process which has intensified for me over the past couple of years. And I do hear very clearly her pain, and her anger.

However, I wanted something more from this article. I think it would have been crucial for Selma to explain why, for instance, considering the minority status of women of color in the lesbian writing community (as among women writers generally) half of the examples involve women of color—sometimes as authors/editors, sometimes as critics who did not confront a text's anti-Semitism. While she refers only briefly to most of these examples and she cites such positive ones as "The Possibility of Life Between Us': A Dialogue Between Black and Jewish Women" (*Conditions: Seven*), negative examples involving women of color seem to me disproportionate.

My initial sense of this was heightened by the fact that the first extended example is from the work of Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta; the following section cites anti-Semitism in the writing/editing of several women of color; and the one after that

focuses on connections between Afro-American women and Christianity. The result, then, is that in three of the first five sections, nearly three of the first four pages of the article, race is a prevailing issue. This theme reappears at the article's end, where the lengthy quote from Sarah Hoagland's comments concludes with the focus on the tension between Jewish and Black women. The essay's final paragraph immediately follows this quote, and devotes nearly half of its content to women of color (or, more accurately, to Black women); in part, it offers some positive comments about books by Emecheta and Botswanaian novelist Bessie Head that seemed to me intended to provide "balance" for Selma's earlier criticism of writing by Black women.^o

Certainly, those of us who are white women must be free to object to anti-Semitism in the work or actions of women of color. But I am bothered by the way in which women of color are interwoven into an essay that appears to be on a far more general topic. The danger, as I see it, is that Selma's article can be read to imply that non-Jewish women of color have a disproportionate responsibility for anti-Semitism. A similar distorting effect might occur if, in an article on racism, a non-Jewish woman of color took half of her few examples from the writings of white Jewish women; returned in several places in the article to these examples or to the especially painful tensions between these two groups of women; *and* then did *not* address the implications of the unstated thesis created by these selections.

Because I believe that Selma and I share a belief in the absolutely crucial nature of attempts of Jewish women of different racial/ethnic backgrounds and non-Jewish women of color to work together, I am concerned that her article might inadvertently undermine this effort. My comments are very much directed to the effect of her article, not to its intent. It seems to me likely that the selection pro-

^oCiting Emecheta's "discussion of *pre-Christian* Nigerian values and customs" in several of her novels (p. 59), Selma describes Christianity in terms of Black people *solely* as "destructive . . . to African people" (p. 53n), or as part of the racist romanticism of some white Christian feminists who see "Black people as the truest Christ figures" (p. 53). Her closing comments, her "reassuring" sense that "all Blacks aren't natural Christians" (p. 59), skirts any acknowledgment of the possibility of deep spiritual beliefs within a Christian framework, as well as the multitudinous practical, social, political, and economic functions of the Black church, begun in slavery times, that have contributed to the survival of Afro-Americans up to the present. I think that part of the problem stems from the fact that all of the perceptions Selma mentions about Christianity and Afro-Americans come from white sources.

cess that I am questioning emerged out of the very anti-racist concerns that Selma exhibits in her comments about the negative Fundamentalist assumptions about Jews *and* Blacks in *Sisters United*, about the racism *and* the Christian chauvinism in the writing by the MCC minister. Perhaps, like me, she has been reading in the last few years a great many books by non-Jewish women of color and therefore thought first when pulling together the essay of this writing. It also seems possible to me that the examples picked emerged in some way from the frequent expectation that members of one oppressed group have of members of another such group, and the subsequently greater disappointment and hurt when an expected/longed for ally expresses prejudice or fails to discern it. I regret that the examples were not looked at more closely in terms of their source *and* the message they impart—about women of color generally, but especially about Black women, who (save for a single brief mention of a Latina) supply all of the references to women of color.

The more I thought about the article and the difficulties that must have been involved in writing it, the more likely it seemed to me that they were tied up with the risk for Selma as a white woman in doing what has rarely been done in white lesbian-feminist writing—offering principled criticism of the work of women of color. In criticizing some writing by women of color for anti-Semitism, Selma was working essentially without models for how to do so in a way that details the criticism; acknowledges the complex, often painful relationships between Jewish women and non-Jewish women of color; and expresses an appreciation of writing by women of color at the same time that she is critical of some of this writing. This is not easy to do, and I respect Selma's willingness to risk it. Yet I would like to have seen a few clear statements from Selma that acknowledged the difficulties of what she was undertaking and the complex intersection of feelings/politics/history that affected her writing of the article. Then I could have read it with a clear understanding of why references to women of color run like a sub-theme through it.

While I am in basic agreement with Selma in terms of the examples of anti-Semitic writing she uses, her citation from Emecheta's novel, *In the Ditch*, raises questions for me about the issue of anti-Semitism in fiction—as opposed, for example, to anti-Semitism in critical, historical, biographical, or theoretical works. While *exploring* the issues involved is certainly outside the province of her article, Selma gives no indication that she reads a novel differently

from how she reads these other kinds of writing. As a result of the briefness and generalness of her comments on *In the Ditch*, I came away without knowing the precise nature and extent of her criticism. While Adah, the central character, clearly has anti-Semitic responses to the Manager (i.e., "Even if the man was not a Jew he behaved like one"), Selma does not provide enough information for me to understand how anti-Semitism functions within the novel. Nor am I sure whether she is implying that the existence of Adah's statements *in themselves* make the book anti-Semitic.

Some questions need, I think, to be considered. (1) Does a separation exist between the consciousness of the author and that of the character? For instance, Emecheta writes: "He's a Jew, probably, she thought, *though she did not really know any Jews or anything about them . . .*" (p. 52; my italics). While it neither exonerates Adah's anti-Semitism nor makes it more palatable, the latter part of this sentence does indicate the author's awareness that Adah's response is the result of ignorance, of lack of contact, of limited experience, and unquestioned stereotypes; in other words, Emecheta seems to be doing something quite different from identifying with or approving her character's prejudice. (2) What happens after a character's anti-Semitism is revealed? Does she change? A few lines below where Selma stops quoting from *In the Ditch*, Emecheta writes that "in less than a month . . . the Manager was no longer a 'Jew' to her—or, if he *was* Jewish, so much better for the Jews," because of his generosity and thoughtfulness toward Adah. Her anti-Semitism remains: Adah sees the Manager as the "exceptional Jew," the one who is "different from" the others. While her perception that all Jews are not the same contains the *potential* for her to go on to rethink seriously her initial anti-Semitism, she does *not* do so in the remainder of the novel. For me, this is crucial information that Selma doesn't provide. In this connection I think back to Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland*, whose main character is a white, Jewish, heterosexual man whose initial perceptions reflect his racism, his self-hatred as a Jew, and his homophobia. It would be easy to quote him in ways that illustrate these attitudes, but, to do so without further comment would distort a novel in which his attitudes change significantly (and positively); his character is contrasted to that of his sister—an anti-racist, strongly Jewish-identified lesbian; and the perspective of the author (a white, Jewish lesbian) is clearly in accord with the sister's. While the two novels are very different, in each more information needs to be given in order adequately to

assess and convey the author's handling of anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, racism, and other issues.

While my comments here focus on Selma's discussion of *In the Ditch*, the questions raised by her criticism have barely begun to be explored vis-à-vis fiction in relation not only to anti-Semitism, but to other oppressions. Can women—Jewish or not—write responsibly about characters who are anti-Semitic? If so, how? (Can white women write only about positive Third World characters? about non-racist white characters? about racist white characters who either struggle with their racism *or* are clearly the villains of the story?) Can we develop a literary theory and practice that opposes the perpetuation of anti-Semitism (and other oppressions) through literature; recognizes such issues in fiction as point of view and the separation between author and character; *and* supports the writing of fiction that provides accurate—unidealized and unsimplified—reflections of our lives? If so, how?

I do not raise even these few questions about fiction because I think Selma (or anyone else) could have resolved them in a single article, but because I regret that she did not at least acknowledge their complexity. For instance, Selma uses several examples in which the writers or editors involved are themselves Jewish: what are the implications not just of this situation, *but* of her failure to acknowledge that she is not *only* citing non-Jewish women for their anti-Semitism, for their failures to explore or confront anti-Semitism? What about the differences of opinion among Jewish women *in some circumstances* as to what constitutes anti-Semitism in writing, particularly in "creative writing"? Is this *always* a question of different levels of awareness ("more conscious/more Jewish-identified" vs. "less conscious/less Jewish-identified")? How does individual consciousness interact with a woman's political and/or literary perspectives? What do different opinions in this area mean and how do those of us who are Jewish choose to view/respond to them? Are the differences that exist necessarily as deep as they might appear? For example, Selma characterizes *Sister United* as not "in any way specifically anti-Semitic" (p. 54); I consider the publication clearly and specifically anti-Semitic, in its assumption that Jews will be "elevated" by marriage with Christians. Do Selma and I fundamentally disagree—or are we simply using the word "specifically" in a different way, since she does feel strongly about the danger to her/me/us in their belief system? These questions, and the lack of quick answers, illustrate the many issues that re-

quire greater exploration among Jewish lesbians.

Finally, my need for strategies for political action makes me question why an article which promises to be quite encompassing is focussed mainly on writing. While I continue to see literature as a tremendously valuable area for exploration, I think we get onto extremely shaky ground when an article almost entirely about anti-Semitism *in writing* is entitled "Anti-Semitism *in the Lesbian Community*" (my italics). Among other problems, presenting one aspect as if it were the whole effectively deletes the concerns of those Jewish lesbians of all classes and backgrounds who do not see writing and publishing as a central focus of their lives.

I know that in writing this response I have been able to do no more than touch on many of the issues I've raised. I know too that I have not even mentioned other issues that we badly need to incorporate into any discussion of anti-Semitism: class, cultural differences, ethnicity within the Jewish community; the extent of systemic and institutional anti-Semitism in the here and now; the current political context for lesbian-feminist writing, for the lesbian-feminist community—the world "out there," outside that community, from the Klan and the Nazis to the white Christian men in the White House who think prayer in the schools is a good idea. But I have finally had to make the very decision that Selma herself must have made at some point: to explore some small part of the issue of anti-Semitism; to be as clear as I can at the time that I write; and to hope that my comments—and my questions—prove of some use.

Elly Bulkin
Brooklyn, N.Y.
May 31, 1982

Dear *Sinister Wisdom*,

As a Jewish lesbian feminist, I must respond to Selma Miriam's "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian Community," in *Sinister Wisdom* 19. I cannot say I *liked* the article; no Jewish lesbian likes to be reminded that her sisters in the women's movement ignore and trivialize her/our experiences and pain. I can only say that I needed to read Selma's words, needed to hear them said, and that I too long to hear non-Jews bear witness to their truth.

Too often during the past several years, I have heard non-Jewish lesbian feminists dismiss anti-Semitism—even those who claim to deplore it. Anti-Semitism, like racism, will disappear with patriarchy, they claim. As a result, they will ask: “Must we deal with it?” “Must we deal with it *now*?” “Why be divisive; why magnify our differences? Aren’t we all oppressed as women and as lesbians?” Yet, as both Jewish women and women of color have observed, the women’s culture which would ignore our differences would serve only to establish a world in which anti-Semitism and racism would persist, submerging us in a homogeneous culture as patriarchy has always done.

In recent writings by Jewish lesbians, I have been struck over and over again by our connection of visible Jewishness with “danger.” Asserting one’s identity as a Jew, or simply having others identify one as a Jew, has meant rejection, persecution, and death for us for so many centuries that I find myself both angry and frightened as I identify myself here—frightened, because I fear even my sisters will reject me; angry, because among my sisters there should *be* no fear.

It is precisely because we identify ourselves as lesbian feminists that we commit ourselves to fight against racism and anti-Semitism, using all the resources we can muster as individuals and as a movement. Speaking of her book, *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (co-edited with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott for The Feminist Press), Barbara Smith said in the May 1982 issue of *Off Our Backs*: “We begin by talking about Black feminism and the racism within the women’s movement, which implies that the women’s movement is a valid place to be putting in some energy to get it right about issues of race and class and difference . . . feminism does give this clear, no-nonsense perspective on the problems, issues, and realities that affect our lives.” That racism and anti-Semitism can be tolerated and even perpetuated within the movement is intolerable. As Gloria Z. Greenfield has put it in “Shedding” (in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck for Persephone Press): “That anti-Semitism sometimes wears a feminist cloak is irrelevant. The fact that the feminist movement accepts anti-Semitism—in any form—is very relevant. . . . Until the feminist movement confronts anti-Semitism—inside and outside, individually and collectively—the movement will continue to reflect the growing anti-Semitism of mainstream society.”

Perpetuating negative stereotypes, ignoring the experiences of women who are “different,” trivializing the Holocaust or the enslavement of Blacks or the eradication of Native American peoples and cultures—these are not harmless acts. When I witness them, whether in the words of my sisters in the movement or of the patriarchs, I smell the ovens. The real danger, for all of us, lies in silence, and in compliance. I thank Selma Miriam for her courage.

Susan J. Wolfe
Vermillion, S.D.
May 1982

Selma Miriam responds:

Barbara Mor’s letter to SW is not surprising to me. I know she is thinking that she despises patriarchy, Jewish and Christian, as I do, and that beyond that anti-Semitism is an anachronistic, semantically incorrect term to her. When Betsey wrote, she made it clear that Bloodroot was a public space, and perhaps that’s why Barbara Mor ended her letter to Betsey saying, “I hope you can pin this letter up for other women to read.” And so we concluded that she wanted the letter to be shared publicly.

I think the best answer to Barbara Mor is *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. While I doubt that the book will change Barbara’s mind, perhaps it will be useful to other women, both of Christian and Jewish origin, who haven’t thought about what it is to be Jewish at all.

I am sorry to have raised Elly’s expectations and then failed to satisfy them in my article. Since I was attempting to address only a few examples of writing within the Lesbian community and my reactions to them, I had wanted to title the article with what became the subtitle instead: “A Collage of Mostly Bad News as Perceived by One Jewish Dyke.” The editors of *Sinister Wisdom* felt this title negated the importance of the issues raised and therefore the broader title—not as accurate, I think, as the original.

As I tried to say repeatedly, I am upset and disappointed by the omission of notice of anti-Semitism in the small community of lesbian feminist writers who seem to care about the development of a lesbian morality and a politics which is not destructive to women's backgrounds and histories. It was this lack of notice which prompted me to write the piece. I was criticizing Peg Cruikshank for not doing something in public about her line in *Lesbian Path* after I called it to her attention. I was criticizing Adrienne Rich for her praise of *In the Ditch* without notice of its anti-Semitic passage. I was criticizing the white MCC minister who otherwise seemed to have an excellent understanding of how Christianity is oppressive to women. I was wondering why *Kin of A ta*, which depicts the rape of a black woman who forgives the rapist and then goes back to the world and dies to save the souls of people, is considered of such spiritual value to many lesbian feminists.

Elly makes much of my criticism of Emecheta, to my surprise, since it was Adrienne Rich with whom I was angry. Emecheta is not, to my knowledge, a lesbian attempting to construct an ethical lesbian value system. However, if she were, should I not criticize her or other women of color if they write or speak anti-Semitically? Should I not expect that we all make such criticisms? It seems to me if we don't, then we are acting in a racist fashion indeed. Elly questions whether a writer can depict a character with an ugly trait such as racism or anti-Semitism without holding those views herself, and keep our respect. Of course she can, if she makes clear her opinion of the character's thoughts or actions by depicting other characters with opposite views or in some other commentary-sort of way. Emecheta often commented on Adah's beliefs and emotions; she surely was capable of clarifying her own position on Jews if it were in disagreement with Adah's. I'm not saying her view of Jews was entirely negative, only stereotypical and ugly.

I also think Elly is mistaken in her assumptions of what I tried to balance in my article. I did not refer to Bessie Head's writings nor to Emecheta's later works as balance; they really do mean a lot to me, a point I will elaborate on later. The balance to me was provided by the dialogue in *Conditions* VII and by Sarah Hoagland's speech. These were evidences to me of attempts within my community to transcend the divisiveness created by patriarchal thinking. While I recognize that other Jewish women were upset with Judy Simmons' poem, I myself was not. I found her anger, her need to assess her oppression and Jewish oppression understandable.

Since the result of others' concern was the "conversation" in *Conditions* VII, it was to me, positive rather than negative.

There is much in my piece that I am not satisfied with. I feel I am clumsy when I write (I do very little of it). So I felt inadequate to the job of commentary on my reactions to articles I read—just needed to record them, as a collage, and ask for evaluation by the community. The part on *Sisters United* was originally written not because I was so angry with the women who do *Sisters United*, but because I was upset when I thought that Spinsters, Ink—lesbian publishers whom I greatly admired—had advertised in *Sisters United*. When SW urged me to check this out directly and I learned that the ad had gone in without the publisher's knowledge (free), I would have dropped the whole section on *Sisters United*. But I was sent the then current issue of it by the publisher and urged by SW to keep the section. In that issue, received *after* the article was written, there were both *specifically* anti-Semitic and specifically racist passages which did seem to warrant wider notice. Therefore, those quotes replaced the criticism of the publisher which, to my relief, wasn't correct.

My final point is about Christianity, on which I do not think Elly and I will be able to agree. I do believe that the purveyors of Christianity have destroyed the history and cultures of the peoples of Africa and North and South America—wherever values were transmitted via an oral tradition. They have almost totally stamped out a diversity of heritages and it is only with difficulty that we can learn scraps about what has been lost. That is where Bessie Head's *Collector of Treasures* and Emecheta's Nigerian novels are especially precious (as are the recent attempts to collect Native American materials by Turtle Grandmother,¹ Audre Lorde's African references and glossary in *The Black Unicorn*, and Luisah Teish's column "In the House of the Mother" which appears every few months in *Plexus*).

Whether or not Christianity is presently a comfort to women of any color, it is my enemy. I may understand or forgive women for their continued association with the church but particularly spiritual, "holy" depictions such as the play in *Womanspirit* are revolting to me. They are, to me, inherently anti-Semitic. It is difficult to explain that reading about women's experience within Christianity (such as in *Lesbian Path*, or for a more recent example, Alezia Kunz's *Shangrila and Linda*) is interesting and valuable. It is when Jesus as a female is supposed to turn me on, or the mix of gospel

songs and African chants are presented as the real Christianity that lesbianism can bring to the church, just as Jesus tried to bring the good news to the Jews, that I am outraged. Sorry, but I can't believe that the Christian belief system has in any way contributed to the survival of Afro-Americans, though of course I believe that whatever bonding ethnic and oppressed groups could make have contributed to their respective survivals.

Finally, Elly is disturbed that I am writing, as she says, disproportionately about women of color. I had thought, if there was any emphasis made, it was that I reserved my severest criticism (and most space) for Barbara Mor. I was writing about the articles which struck me most, from the periodicals I read most often. As far as I know, the women I was criticizing, with the exception of the writers in *Top Ranking*, are white. I don't know why they make so much of black Christianity. Their doing so offends me, and that's what I was trying to say.

I do think that besides the broader issues of racism and anti-Semitism, there are particular questions about how minority women see and treat each other. Of course there is much more to be written about, apropos women of color and white Jewish women. I was writing about what hurt *me* most, to the community I respect most. Writing a full year ago, before I'd even heard of *Nice Jewish Girls*², before I'd seen Irena Klepfisz's article in *Womanews*³ or the issues of *Big Mama Rag* and *off our backs* on anti-Semitism, I was trying to raise the beginnings of questions.

1. For an example, order *Cogewea the Half-Blood* by Hum-Ishu-Ma, University of Nebraska Press, reprinted 1981 from the 1927 edition, from Turtle Grandmother Books (P.O. Box 33964, Detroit, MI 48232) to further evaluate the adoption of Christianity as part of the necessity of *physical* survival while one's values and way of life are wiped out.

2. Evelyn Torton Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, Persephone Press, 1982.

3. Irena Klepfisz, "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian Feminist Movement," *Womanews* (New York City), Dec/Jan. 81/82.

Dear Barbara Mor,

We will be publishing in full your letter of May 10. Our delay in being in touch with you is partly a result of my worsening arthritis. I shall shortly be having surgery, and we have held up the magazine production schedule by a month. I wanted after all the exchanges between you and SW to write you my most recent thoughts. This letter will appear in SW #21 along with yours and a reply from Selma Miriam to her critics.

It is true that in the full text of your letter to Betsey Beaven you make statements which Selma's article does not quote: among them, repeated references to the incorrectness of using the term "anti-Semitic" since both Jews and Arabs are Semites; also an acknowledgment that "Jewish women have the same double-burden of allegiance that Black women have, and American Indian-Hispanic women—a loyalty not only to their sex, but to their ethnic group, which has been under persecution for so long." You say that as an anthropologist you do not believe there is such a thing as an inferior race or group; or that there is any such thing as a superior race. From there you go on to attack the "old Hebraic idea of themselves as a Chosen People." And from here, in your letters both published and unpublished, I feel that once having made some rhetorical gestures, you are losing me.

You lose me when you ignore the critique by Jewish feminists (ongoing for at least a decade) of Judaism's patriarchal attitudes. You lose me in exhaustive paragraphs about the incorrectness of the term "anti-Semitism"—a term that nevertheless has a history, a context, and an actual usage. You lose me when you fail to appreciate the double-edgedness of "criticism" of Jewish culture by non-Jews, like the double-edgedness of "criticism" of people of color by white people—the fact that rhetorical gestures are not enough, there needs to be a felt, pervasive, principled sensitivity. You lose me when you write that Jews "seem to be saying" (seem to whom?): "Anyone who criticizes anything Jewish, past, present or future, is a Nazi." You lose me because I don't hear, in your words, any recognition of the real existence of Jewish feminist lesbians in our complicated lives, any breadth of sympathy which can move beyond your objections to the Bible or to Begin's policies, to our struggles with escalating world-wide anti-Semitism, our position as women and lesbians within the various Jewish communities, the grief and fury of the Middle Eastern wars, the use of "trans-cultural woman-bonding" as a denial of our Jewishness, the intersections of racism

and anti-Semitism everywhere. It's as though you have no imagination—and only imagination, I think, can help us as we attempt to “critique patriarchy” in cultures not our own, especially cultures we have been programmed to distrust, despise or hate.

I think there are ways in which the question of “anti-Semitism” as a term, or the need for cross-cultural feminist criticism, could be validly raised. What alienates me in your critique and your response to criticism, is that you do not seem ever to stop and imagine those on whom you are pouring out pages of words, long quotations, evidence of research. We have become abstractions for you in your search for patriarchal evil—we and the rest of Jewish women in history. You do not care, beyond the mention of it, that there is a very old Jewish secular tradition, that many, perhaps most Jewish feminists were raised in that tradition, that there is a very old Jewish tradition of protest and dissent, a tradition in which Jews have taken extreme risks and died, not just for our own people but for others suffering exploitation and persecution. You do not credit the efforts of the Peace Now movement in Israel, the strong anti-militarist position of many Jewish feminists. You show no respect for the rising of Jewish feminist consciousness, for the right of a group coming into new and needed self-awareness to name what feels threatening to us. There is a great deal of footwork in your writings, Barbara: you move from Israeli policy to Old Testament homophobia to your right to criticize Eldridge Cleaver as a misogynist to the proper meaning of “Semite”; a great deal of footwork but an absence of heartwork, and it is finally, I think, heartwork which makes possible cross-cultural criticism from a feminist perspective. It is simply not enough to say that all men are life-haters, along with some rhetorical phrases about the double burden of Jewish women.

There are many observations that you make in your letters with which I, for one, could agree. But the problem is that you insist upon intellectual agreement, in the name of trans-cultural woman-bonding, without the necessary process-work having been done. Fact can be “true,” i.e., verifiable, and still be emotionally wrong and ill-used, used for false ends. More and more Jewish feminists are engaging in the process of defining our relationship to a whole range of Jewish issues, coming as we do from a diversity of Jewish backgrounds and their sometimes conflicting perspectives. *This is our process*, and you cannot presume to tell us how it should be conducted, or how we should get on with it. Overall, I think, it is that tone, of knowing better than the outsider group how it should be

defining and conducting itself, that has always felt oppressive: what middle-class people have done to poor people, whites to people of color, the middle-aged to the old, non-Jews to Jews, men, as we know well, to women. It is that tone, wherever it comes from, that loses me, that has made it so difficult to write to you until I could identify and name for myself what underlies your many and articulate words.

Sincerely,
Adrienne Rich
July 28, 1982

Dear Adrienne and Michelle,

It's heartening to realize how fast Jewish consciousness is developing, even when this growth makes us—or in this case, me—self-critical. And so when I read in *SW 20* my review of Michiyo Cornell's and Elise Young's poetry—a review written only six months ago—I felt shame and surprise at what now seem to me glaring errors.

First, Elise's poem "A Litany of Jewish Exorcism," which is a deeply Jewish poem, concludes with a coven of lesbians purging the synagogue and smashing the "shrunken idols." In January this vision seemed to me extravagant and simplistic (as if lesbian unity were perfect), but it did not seem harmful. In June, more aware of the depth of Jewhating in our culture—and I wish I could exempt lesbian culture but I can't—the idea of any group entering a synagogue to destroy anything Jewish strikes me as frightening and dangerous. My guess is that today Elise wouldn't write the poem this way either. We have seen too much Jewhating pass under the guise of feminist critique of patriarchal religion. We have seen too much Jewhating, period.

Second, I conclude the review with a reference—"Ever since the camps, Japanese lesbians and Jewish lesbians had better know there are too many people after our lives for us to give them over easy." Today the shorthand "the camps" seems to me facile, as if the concentration camps into which Japanese-Americans were gathered and the extermination camps where the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe were gathered and killed were the same. I don't mean to rank oppression, but I also don't want to wash over the specificity of these two experiences with a catch-phrase. The better

analogy between Japanese and Jewish experience exists; it is between the Hiroshima bomb and the death camps.

Let me say too that secure as I am now in what I'm saying, I know that if Jewish women continue to do our work, then six months from now I will feel equally amazed at what I said and thought today, at what I hadn't yet seen, at the rapidity of change in our awareness.

With love and appreciation for the labor and commitment which makes this forum *Sinister Wisdom* available,

Melanie Kaye
North Windham, Maine
July 16, 1982

Announcements

A Real Professional Women's Theatre Company of Portland, Oregon, is soliciting plays and other original material for their upcoming theatrical season. Submit your work to: A Real Professional Women's Theatre Company, c/o Nancy S. Vanderburgh, 555 N.E. Fargo #1, Portland, OR 97212. Please include information on royalties, etc.

"By and About Southern Women," 1983 Southeast Women's Studies Association Conference, April 8-10, Greensboro, N.C. Send workshop and paper proposals by February 1 to Jeanette Stokes, P.O. Box 1365, Greensboro, NC 27402.

Cat's Eye: Magazine of Poetry edited by Melissa Cannon and Alice Savage. Order copies from: Cat's Eye, 1005 Clearview Drive, Nashville, TN 37205. Single copies \$2.50; sub 3/\$6.00.

Cleis Press seeks Editor for Anthology on Physically Challenged Women. The editors of Cleis Press have been interested in publishing such a book since the *oob* special issue and the Conference for Disabled Lesbians (Michigan, 1981), but feel the project must be directed by physically challenged/disabled women. Women interested in working on this project should contact Felice Newman at Cleis Press (P.O. Box 8281, Minneapolis, MN 55408, 812-825-8872) as soon as possible. Cleis Press is able to provide a significant amount of assistance to the editor(s), who would be paid in royalties after publication. The book will be published both in print and on tape.

Common Ground: Western N.Y. Women's Newsjournal. 11 issues/yr. \$11 reg. sub.; \$15 household or supporting; \$6 low income; \$25 institutional. Free to women in prisons and mental hospitals.

Jewish Women: Wanted narratives, interviews, oral histories, fiction, poetry, drama, essays, translations. For anthology—edited by Melanie Kaye and Irena Klepfisz—to depict the lives, history, creativity, resistance, and survival of Jewish women.

Submissions from and about Arabic, Ashkenazi, and Sephardic Jews from all nations encouraged. We want this anthology to represent the true range of who we are. Send manuscripts with SASE to: *Anthology*, c/o I. Klepfisz, P.O. Box 128, New Lebanon, NY 12125. Deadline: April 1, 1983.

Left Bank Books sponsors a Books for Prisoners project. Through donations and a postage grant we are able to send *free* miscellaneous books to inmates everywhere (provided institution allows them in). We offer special order books at cost, usually 35-40% off. Prisoners and others interested should write: Books for Prisoners, Box "A," 92 Pike St., Seattle, WA 98101. Donations of books and money from those on the outside always appreciated. This is a volunteer, non-profit project.

Lesbian Contradictions: A Journal of Irreverent Feminism. A new lesbian feminist quarterly for women only, to begin publication fall 1982. Commentary, analysis, reviews, humor, by and for feminists who agree to disagree. In the finest tradition of constructive feminist controversy—a tradition we will have to invent as we go along. To get your *1st issue free*, send name and address to: LC, 1007 N. 47, Seattle, WA 98103; or, LC, 2770 -22d St., San Francisco, CA 94110.

Lesbian Incest Survivors: wanted to fill out questionnaires on their experiences for book by Lesbian Incest Survivors. All responses confidential. For info/questionnaire, write: Susan Marie, P.O. Box 304, Oakland, CA 94668.

Living Breath Health Cooperative: a lesbian-feminist, inter-cultural health organization with centers in Massachusetts and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Retreats, seminars (academic credit), and treatments based on wholistic therapies. For more info. and brochure, call/write: (413) 625-9587/P.O. Box 26, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370.

Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society is soliciting manuscripts for a special Lesbian Issue scheduled for publication in Spring 1984. Unpublished scholarship on all aspects of lesbian experience will be considered, as well as new English translations of material published in other languages. The editors are especially interested in research on the following topics: international lesbianism; lesbian-feminist theory; lesbians of color; lesbian mothers; the relationship of sexuality, identity, and political consciousness in various historical and cultural contexts; lesbians and work; relations between lesbians and gay men; lesbians and the law. Inquiries regarding submissions are welcomed by the Lesbian Issue planning committee. The original manuscript, two copies, and an abstract of no more than 150 words should be sent to *Signs*, Center for Research on Women, Serra House, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305. Deadline February 1, 1983.

Trivia, a new feminist journal of ideas, will be forthcoming in Fall of 1982. P.O. Box 606, North Amherst, MA 01059.

Word Weavers, publisher of Lesbian vision, seeks manuscripts of any length for publication. Fiction or non-fiction reflecting our Lesbian reality. Send to Word Weavers, P.O. Box 8742, Minneapolis, MN 55408.

Working Class Lesbians please send oral herstory (interviews and tapes), personal narratives, journal excerpts, poetry, analyses, or short fiction for consideration in anthology of Canadian working-class lesbians. Submissions from Canadian-raised, as well as Canadian-born lesbians welcome. Please forward your ideas, suggestions, work outlines, and completed work to: Cy-Thea Sand, P.O. Box 24953, Station C, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 4G3.

The Invisible Lesbian/Feminist Printer

This is a letter about invisibility—the invisibility of lesbian/feminist-owned printshops and the women who work there. It is about how they will survive these economic and political times—or *not survive*. In particular, this is a letter about the Iowa City Women's Press and the struggles for survival that we are going through today.

By way of background: the Iowa City Women's Press was formed in 1972 by a collective of eight women. Our main reasons for forming the press were (1) to help women gain more control over their printed words and (2) to help women gain more control over their lives through access to skills. We hoped to accomplish this second aim by learning and teaching printing skills and by publishing skills manuals. The first goal came directly out of the Iowa City experiences of *Ain't I a Woman?* newspaper (published between 1970 and 1974), in which the male printers refused to print an issue that contained medical self-help photographs, saying that they would not print "pornography."

We started as a small, volunteer-run printshop in a converted garage, and we have grown into a business that employs 4-5 women full-time, with associated bindery and typesetting businesses employing another 3-4 women. For the past two years, we have chosen to concentrate more and more on printing books for lesbian/feminist publishers and self-publishing women, and on printing periodicals such as *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* and *Sinister Wisdom*. We continue to produce our two skills manuals, *Greasy Thumb* and *Against the Grain*, which are now in their fifth printing. Over the next year, we plan to reorganize the publishing arm of the Press and hope to bring out several new titles.

Two of the problems we have faced continually in the years of our existence are (1) trying to compete as an undercapitalized business in a highly capitalized industry and (2) credibility. Because we do not have the money to acquire the highly technologized printing equipment that is now the standard in the printing industry (particularly in the book-printing industry, where 140 books per minute can be printed and bound on equipment that costs into the millions of dollars), we must rely on old and inefficient equipment. The credibility problem occurs when women are unable to recognize the dilemma we are in; when they see our mistakes as the result of carelessness, instead of the material problem they are; when they see our higher book prices as the result of mismanagement instead of the struggle to be an economically viable shop.

It has been our experience that, given the opportunity, *women strive for excellence*; and we feel the quality of work we have produced is a testimonial to this fact.

In spite of these dilemmas, we continue to receive support from women who understand the importance of the continuing survival of women-owned printshops. As economic times get harder, the support is even more needed and, at the same time, more difficult to get. These goals and problems are common to all lesbian-owned printshops. We feel it is time for women to consider seriously the ramifications of not supporting these shops. In recent times, lesbians and feminists who want to produce books, periodicals, or pamphlets, have easily found cheap male printers to do it. Do we really think that in five or ten years this will be so? We have found it hard to get women publishers to understand that the labor of producing a

book goes hand in hand with the labor of writing and publishing a book. Lesbian/feminist publishers would find it inconceivable to publish a book written by a man; yet virtually all choose to have their books produced by men.

What does this boil down to? What do we hope to get out of making these problems public?

We are not asking women to pay twice as much to have their books printed by us. Nor can we produce the Madison Avenue four-color slick covers that seem necessary to sell books these days. What we hope is that women will put their political concern for freedom of the press before considerations of ease and small economic gains. We're not talking about getting rich from printing; nor are we talking about publishers not making a living from their efforts. What we are saying is that there should be enough to go around for everybody, and that how we use it is of real political significance.

What we are specifically asking is:

1. If you are a publisher of books or periodicals, consider having women-owned printshops do your printing. It is beyond our capabilities at this point to efficiently produce large runs of 300-page books. Where we can be competitive is in the area of smaller books and periodicals, such as 100-200 pages and 2000-5000 copies.
2. If you are involved in any women's organizations, ask where the letterhead, flyers, brochures, or posters are being printed. If there isn't a woman printer in your area who is capable of doing what you need, contact us for names of other women printers nearby.
3. When you go into a women's bookstore, be aware of what books and periodicals are printed by women (look for this information on the copyright page); and know that the money you pay for that book goes directly back to women, all the way down the line.

We are also asking women to think about and give us feedback on the following:

1. Would you consider paying \$.50 more for a book produced by women? This is a way for all of us to capitalize our own institutions.
2. As a bookseller, would you consider displaying women-produced books separately and explain and educate customers about the differences in prices?
3. As a publisher, even if you can't feasibly print all of your books with a feminist printer, perhaps you can print one or two books a year, especially those books that are of most importance to our lesbian culture, in a lesbian/feminist shop.

This is a critical time for the Iowa City Women's Press. We are worried about our future, both in terms of our own jobs and the continuing existence of the press.

Right now the Iowa City Women's Press is the only lesbian/feminist press in the country in which a book can be typeset, printed and bound by women. Its loss would be a significant one. The loss of any lesbian/feminist press at any stage of its development is significant. The survival of our cultural institutions — our insistence on our public selves — is an important guarantee for the survival of our individual freedom.

Barb and Joan for the Iowa City Women's Press Collective

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ERRATA

Beth Karbe was incorrectly identified as the photographer for the cover of SW 20. She in fact photographed the three paintings by Sudie Rakusin inside the issue.

Victoria Ramstetter's poem, "Lesbian Epic," was printed in SW 15 with two typos: on p. 56, line 8 should read, "The water," and on p. 58, line 15 should have a period after "squelching."

Notes on Contributors

Janet Aalfs has lived in Northampton, Mass., long enough for it to feel like home. She is a member of Calypso Borealis, a lesbian writing group, and a black belt in karate. She trains and teaches karate and self-defense to women and girls through Valley Women's Martial Arts, Inc.

Lois Anne Addison is a white lesbian who encourages irreverence and disrespect for authority. She lives in Durham, N.C., with her lover Joy, two big Bouvier dogs, Pokey and Puddle, Tar Kitty, and assorted wild birds who come to visit in the garden.

Red Jordan Arobateau: "Red is a lesbian, born again christian, mongrel, & witness on the sea of life."

Lynn Crawford has lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as a graphic artist, graduate student in social work, conga drummer, editor, and cat-keeper.

Pamela Culbreth is a lesbian writer, working on her first novel, and presently living in New York State with her lover, Ann, two dogs, and a cat. They all plan to move someplace warm, as soon as they can figure out where.

Sylvia Foley says: "Until recently, I was living the life of a lesbian-feminist-extruder-mechanic-writer. However, I cracked two ribs at work and consequently had trouble carrying around all those labels, so I dropped the extruder-mechanic segment. (I was having a tough time feigning reverence for plastic bags and men, anyway.)"

laura ragin justice: "i am a writer, a senior at wesleyan university, involved with theatre (as opposed to being a 'theatre person'); particularly concerned with writing and directing drama which represents positive images of women of color."

Irena Klepfisz is the author of a book of poetry, *periods of stress*, distributed by Crossing Press. "Bashert" is included in her new collection, *Keeper of Accounts*, recently published by Persephone Press. Her essays on anti-Semitism inside and outside the lesbian/feminist movement appear in *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. She is a member of Di Vilde Chayes, a Jewish lesbian/feminist collective.

Marian Roth lives in Provincetown, Mass. In addition to her work as an artist, she teaches both photography and political science, and is producing a book of her photographs, tentatively called *Connections*.

Mab Segrest lives in Durham, N.C., and is a member of the collective that edits *Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South*. "March Blizzard" is in her book of poems, *Living in a House I Do Not Own*, published by Night Heron Press.

Wendy Simpson lives in Sunderland, Mass. She is currently working on a book tracing her battle with cancer, and devouring information on nutrition and disease, the body-mind relationship, etc. She hopes to realize her dream of a feminist press in the Valley.

Ann Allen Shockley is an academic librarian and writer in Nashville, Tenn. Her latest book is a novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me*.

Mary Lou Tornes is thirty-one years old. She lives and works in New York City.

Anmarie Wagstaff is a lesbian living "on the boundary" in Davis, Calif.—making trouble, teaching, and going to graduate school.

Elise Young is a Jewish lesbian writer/teacher of writing, a contributor to *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* (Persephone Press), and currently writing a book called *Talking Pieces*. She lives in Western Massachusetts.

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Sinister Wisdom will be producing an issue on North American Indian women. The editor will be Mohawk writer Beth Brant (Degonwadonti), who will have sole responsibility for this project. She has written:

"We are looking for all forms of expression: short stories, graphics, essays, poetry, letters to and from women, photographs, excerpts from diaries, reviews of books, translations, oral histories and narrations, legends, and myths, just to name a few examples.

"The compilation of our words and pictures into a single issue will reflect our many diversities, such as: our differing lifestyles; our age spectrum; how we feel about issues of health; traditional images of Indian women; our class divisions (urban Indians vs. reservation Indians); our varied and multiple bloods—Indian/Black, Indian/Asian, Indian/Latina; the blending of the spiritual with our physical daily lives; our concern for our children, our grandchildren, our Elders; how our activism is reflected in our communities; the fun and strength we get from our traditions (Pow Wows, Midwinters, dances, etc.).

"All Indian women are encouraged to participate in this project. The number of educational degrees, or lack of them, is immaterial. We are looking for words and pictures from the heart; from our experience as Indian women.

"Please type manuscripts double-spaced, and send with a stamped and self-addressed envelope. Send all work by January 15, 1983, to: Beth Brant, 18890 Reed, Melvindale, MI 48122."

Contributors, Please Read: Please send all work for consideration and all business correspondence to: *Sinister Wisdom*, P.O. Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004. Please send SASE for return of work we cannot publish, and a stamped postcard if you wish your work acknowledged on arrival. Please double-space all manuscripts. Artists: please send xerox or photos of graphic work, *not* originals.

Subscribers, Please Note: If you move, please notify us as soon as possible. The post office will *not* forward your magazine. It will be returned to us, at our expense, and we will have to bill you for the additional postage and handling in remailing.

SW 21

3.50