

SINISTER WISDOM 28

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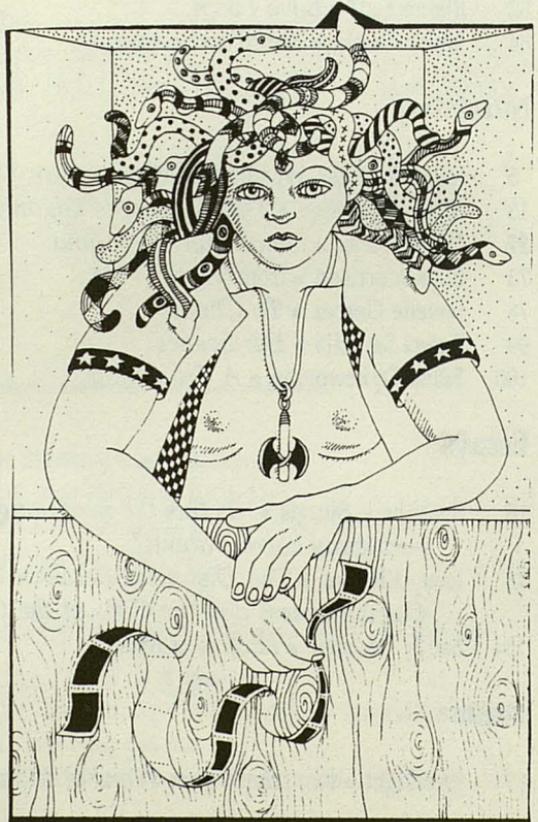
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Sadie Rakusin
zana

This issue of Sinister Wisdom is dedicated to Barbara Deming

whose death this last year leaves many lesbians, fighters for justice,
women concerned about survival on this planet, bereft.



Liron Bourla

Menu for an Unassuageable Hunger

The Appetizer:

My mother makes a bowl of porridge.

With her own hands, my mother prepared a bowl of porridge for my breakfast. Her hands shook: she had just flung a small plate to the floor.

"I wish I'd thrown it," she said quickly to my father, an instant before it struck. He was washing while she dried. She had, of course — thrown it, that is, so that splinters shattered all across the worn, beige linoleum — but she'd had to call it an accident. He could become violent in a minute, and then everything would fly apart.

When last night's supper dishes were all clean and dry and stacked away, and the broken sideplate swept up and dumped in the dustbin whose lid flipped up when you stepped on the pedal, she got the square green box of Tiger Oats out of the cupboard and began to make my porridge. It was winter, and raining out of sheer resignation. The sky had been a dull, opaque grey for days. Warm porridge is so kind on comfortless mornings, especially when you put raisins in the pot so they get soft and plump, and then sprinkle loads of sugar over it all in a mottled porcelain bowl.

My mother's hands still trembled as she stirred her tea. I spooned my porridge. I was empty but not hungry, my stomach a fist. The sugar melted into clear threads as I stirred and stirred. She was pale as china. Her eyes were dead and pulpy. I felt the fear sprout in the pit of my belly and shoot up into my lungs.

"Thank you, Mummy," I said. "Thank you for my porridge." She looked at me as though she might never see me again.

"Don't worry," she said. "Grownups have fights, and then it's over." Her voice grated over the lie.

"I'm not worried," I lied back. "I love you, Mummy." Her grateful, loving glance drenched me with misery. She stopped stirring and gulped down all her tea before lowering the cup and smiling at me. By the circles around her eyes, she might have been starving. I scraped smudges of cold paste together around the edge of my bowl and swallowed hard. I was late for school again.

I rose from the table and went to hug her. The intensity of her grasp boiled through my small body until I couldn't tell my own frightened breathing from hers. Finally, I fell free and ran to my father's car, the porridge a lump of glue in my stomach. Rode all the way to school beside his familiar rage. He scribbled his customary note on the back of an envelope: Please excuse Jennifer for being late.

When I got home, she was gone.

The Entrée:
There is always plenty to eat.

I require special feeding. From the start, no-one could feed me. Not even my mother, who was supposed to know, though nobody told her how. No-one had fed her, either. Dark, sweet warmth should have filled me at her breast until in perfect safety I overflowed, oblivious, half-dreaming; but that soft body expelled me, then had nothing more to give. I drew and drew on it and was not nourished.

Imagine a kitchen. In the center of the kitchen, which is not large, a table, the kind with tubular legs and a red formica top. Possibly there is a tablecloth. At the head of the table sits the father. His viciously unhappy wife is at his right, or else she is serving from a pot on the stove, behind him. On his left sit two small girls, sister and sly step-sister, each eyeing different loopholes and grasping at different conclusions.

The eldest, also a girl, faces him from the foot of the table. Behind her is the porcelain sink and beyond that, the back door. She has a slight click in her jaw, and it can be heard as she chews, a rhythmic counterpoint to the silence that follows the rasp of the woman's chair, everyone having been served.

I love food. I love caressing the indulgences crowded into my cheerful refrigerator. I love combining and juxtaposing, proposing outrageous contrasts of texture and flavor, rerunning old favorites, constructing impossible extravagances. I love playing over the cans of anchovies and peas, chili and olives in my kitchen cupboard. Breathing between the boxes of tabouleh and macaroni cheese. Handling the fat jars of rice and artichoke hearts and honey. I love spreading peanut butter and marmalade on matzoh and crackers and dark rye bread. I love having food here in my house, food that I love, love in my house.

When the oldest girl comes home from school, she goes first to the kitchen. Inside the refrigerator, she knows, are milk and cheese and probably other excellent tidbits wrapped in waxed paper or tinfoil or sealed in Tupperware containers. She seldom pays attention to these things, however, as they are not for her. These things are for guests, or for the children, who need them for their bones and their teeth.

But the breadbox is easy and free. Usually, there is a good white loaf there, and from this she cuts two slices and butters them. She makes a pot of tea and drinks it black, with plenty of sugar, as she eats her bread and butter. Sometimes a cup of tea is finished while the last slice of bread is not. Then she pours another cup and stirs in more sugar. At other times, the bread is all gone while the pot is half full. Then, she cuts and butters another slice. Often she is alone in the kitchen with her tea and bread for what seems like hours, after she gets home from school.

Warmth fill my belly. Sweet swelling heavy warmth like cake rising in the pan as it leavens, spongy and moist and thick, steaming and sighing in its dark oven. Like oatmeal must feel at its own heart, when it bubbles rich in the pot and the honey streams off the spoon in rivulets and is drawn into that hot and secret love. Warmth fill me, quiet and essential and safe and enveloping and hold me, hold me. For Christ's sake, hold me.

There is a problem. The father and his wife are not in agreement. She serves food first, as always, onto his plate. Her movements are mean and sharp. She clenches the spoon as she might an enemy's throat. The two small girls are next. The sister is weeping with terror. The stepsister takes her food smirking, but uneasy. Then the oldest girl. She thanks the woman several times, makes certain her plate is squarely in front of her, attends to her manners. She chews cautiously and swallows whole, so as not to annoy with her clicking jaw. The woman serves herself and sits, but does not eat. The silence stretches longer and thinner and longer and then.

The woman stands suddenly and snatches her plate to throw it with great force against the wall. Yellow curry oozes down the sweating paint, lumps of meat and carrot and dull green peas sliding down to congeal among the shards. The impact shakes loose a cupboard door, which swings slowly open and hangs over the mess. The silence has not been broken.

After a while, the oldest girl stands and goes to clean up the debris. As she rises with a handful of splinters and gravy, she strikes her head on the open cupboard door. She cries quietly as she works: not from the pain, but because things come out of nowhere and hit you, even when you're taking the best possible care.

Nothing else matters. It is imperative that I eat, immediately is not soon enough. I should already have eaten many times what I have eaten. What I eat should have heft, should carry density and real weight. What I eat should force great channels open in my body, should fill all hollow spaces and push against the straining walls; it should suck to every part and make solid what is insubstantial. What I eat should crowd most especially into my belly, should cram and bloat this vast, extraordinary vault, this innocent and undefended womb where my power sleeps like a stupid, drunken giant.

Silence. Their forks click on their plates. Suburban trains can be heard rumbling by from time to time as they carry boisterous girls and boys home to happy families and hearty suppers. Silence, except that no matter how carefully she chews, her jaw clicks. Some whimsical bone plays light percussion against the void surrounding, each time she bites down on her potato or her mutton. She chews to the left, to the right, she chews lightly, she chomps down hard, it's no use. Her jaw clicks as she eats.

The father is bitter about his destiny, and irritable. He holds his knife poised above his chop and looks straight at her over the kitchen table. His wife, absorbed in her own fury, continues to eat with the air of one irrevocably disgusted by all she encounters. The sister stops breathing and waits wide-eyed, paralyzed. The other child's face flushes with anticipation and glee. A picture of respectful receptiveness, the older girl swallows an unchewed mouthful and sits very still while the mass tears a path through her chest. At last, the father speaks.

"Do you," he says, "have to make so much bloody noise when you eat?"

I make great noise with my pleasures. I howl as orgasms rage through my organs. I gasp in galleries and scream at concerts. Having been touched by the promise of tenderness, I drive away shrieking raw delight. I moan and sigh and make frequent appreciative remarks when food, especially, pleases me. I crack bones with my teeth to suck out the tender marrow, then chew the gristle so it crunches and snaps between my jaws long after everyone else has finished. With beans and noodles I like to make soft, wet sounds, to blend the grainy starches with my tongue. I conduct eloquent conversations while I eat, parting warm sodden wads to ease the words thickly through. I demand that food salute my tongue gladly, with noisy greetings; that it make merry in my mouth; that it coax my shameless body to unfettered response, in a chaos of loud and joyful celebration.

A Sherbert.

Dear heart, how time has run away with us. Has it been just a year since we called it love, wanting something more? Vividly I remember the oysters caressing our throats, the wicked coffee, that mousse. You poured into my eyes and fed me chunks of lobster, the butter dripping clear as my heart from your reckless thumb. "Take it with your mouth full," you crooned. I never dreamed that meal could end.

Only a year, and now you give my birthday cake to the waitress. You shame me with complaints at my only restaurant. I'm wasting away from the hunger, but you aren't paying attention. You should be coaxing me, the spoon shimmering with liquid understanding; you should lick the overflow from my chin. But you eat alone instead, growing pale and querulous. This cold drizzle of power has seeped through these pores too long. My stomach hardens against it.

*The Dessert:
The revenge.*

Oh, you cheap, you joyless lovers. You mean and restless women, who count out your love as though it can never be replenished; who skim the cream from your pleasure in case it should be spent, who breathe sour sorrow over all our desires. Oh, you misers, disgust is your discipline, you cringe from your own moldy leftovers. Fear cools to skin over your eyes, the chill of certain hunger tightens your jaws. Your mouths are useless for loving.

Wait, stay quiet. I have a bathtub full of butter right here. I have a closet crammed with cheesecake. Hold still, I'm stroking it through your hair. I'm packing your throats, I'm parting your buttocks, lie still. I'm stuffing you like turkeys. Are you beginning to feel?

Hang on, now, there's more — I'm two women, thirteen, nine million coming at you, pelting you with chicken fat and unspeakable brews, delicious! I have a dump-truck, I'm heaping pâté on your heads, piling figs around your thighs.

Are you drowning? Good. Are you soggy and breathless with forbidden pleasure, does the richness overwhelm? Are you too bloated to tense yourselves against the glut? Good, good. I'll leave you then, pale dough in secret ovens, leave you to marinate and swell, to moan and simmer until you're just as tender as truffles. I'll be patient as you've never known me, I'll wait and wait till you're swooning in your creamy crusts, till you're mellow and yielding as the ripest cheese.

And then, my loves, I'll wade back through the stew to find you. I'll come for you where you sputter like sweet, fat cherries in the breast of a pudding. I'll singe my fingers to pick you out, my darlings, and I'll eat you, one by one. Burning my tongue. Smacking my lips as I go.



Cheryl Clarke

journal entry: qualification

*(I'm a compulsive over-eater and this poem
is about that.)*

it began for me like many others:
not having for a long time
not having at critical moments
i wanted comfort
stroking
someone to sleep with
when my sister ran away.

having had i knew the ways of comfort
touching.
i taught myself to get it how i could:
on the run
quick
as much as i could stuff into me
at once.

the quest for food
became the central
the rising
the falling
action of my life.

comfort, joy, success
whet my appetite for more
and marijuana.
i wanted everything at once
giving to get more.

mornings:
the pot first —
the best friend since my sister
always calling me
making me feel good about myself
making me miss her
taking risks to have her.
the record player next —
essential to the writing process.
then a yolky gravy burst all over
that bland dixie delicacy
half pound of breakfast meat on the side
any form of sugar, white flour, and butter
baked and dunked in four cups of coffee before
noon.

noon:

extra mayo

or extra cheese

on.

coke, pepsi, and

dairy is always a comfort for taurus.

a midafternoon raid on the vending machines —

more pernicious than one-armed bandits.

driven by desire for what i had to hold

in check til later.

feeling good.

my appetites primed.

people are food.

food is people.

one or the other

or both. both.

i didn't know it for a long time.

when who i want denies me

i eat something.

or buy something.

or smoke something.

if i don't have a lover, i eat,

listen to blues, won't write

and am never home.

if i have a lover,

i eat, play rock 'n' roll, write love poems,

and take many sick days.

one night after a day of not getting what

and who i wanted

during a nicotine jag

a caffeine binge

a streak of intense doping

the music loud and constant with otis redding

who reminds me of potato chips and beer nuts

i turned to the refrigerator:

nothing

and no gas to drive to the 24 hour

gourmet 'foodtown' but half a jar

of peanut butter
and 23 stale breadsticks.
i ran out of peanut butter
before i ran out of breadsticks
vowing each to be the last
dancing between the record player
and breadbox
night fast approaching dawn
and for every toke i took
every sip of coffee
every record i played
i ate.
later, after 3 hours of sleep,
i amazed at my amusing lack of control.
got up.
began the daily regime without breakfast.
ate lunch in honor of someone's leaving.
went to the working class 'foodtown'.
avoided the peanut butter shelf.
bought matzos.
picked up a pack of cigarettes.
rolled some reefer.
and came to you with my compulsions full blown.

it began for me like many others
calling you late at night
for language and intellect
two irresistible foods
after so much dulling.

the urge to consume never leaves.
i'm learning to take my time
instead of swallowing you whole

and resisting projecting to the end of sex
so i can raid the refrigerator,
smoke a cigarette
and pass off into dreams
of sugar, dough, caffeine light and sweet.

o o o

The Woman of Gigantic Proportion

They do not know how the woman of gigantic proportion got that way. Some say she began like the rest of us, but unlike the rest of us, continued to believe in her possibilities until she grew out of the span of most mortal eyes. Some say her bigness is a legend, dusty as sand. Some say she's the ghost of a woman grown huge with grief from the loss of her wayward daughters, who haunts the twilights and dawns, swathed in vapors and moaning through holes in the wind.

I, who have met the woman of gigantic proportion, do not believe any of these, entirely. She is no legend or mournful ghost. She's as visible and as untouchable as the moon, has more faces than temptation and sleuths around cities and towns with an eye sharper than Sherlock's and a mission far more weighty in import.

Often when the woman of gigantic proportion goes out for a walk, she dresses up behind thick glasses, spills out of bright, lime-green polyester pants and checkered acrylics, rolls her stockings to her knees, mutters while she waits for the bus and drools at stoplights. Sometimes, without warning, she laughs, and pulls her lips back on rows of endless ivory beads strung in unison down to the gate of her cavernous throat. This woman moves thighsome, lithesome along, dares stares and gives in to no one — she gathers round gaping eyes like grapes off a laden vine, eats them, and grows wider.

Behind this disguise the woman of gigantic proportion is watchful. She knows about the Sirens, that they don't always stay on lonely islands calling to fickle hormones. Knows they call too from the hips and lips of her trussed-up daughters: small bottles, thin threads and skinny heels holding up a thousand suckling hopes. Her daughters have forgotten her face, the bigness of their ancestry. The woman of gigantic proportion knows what to do, and walks with her eyes wide and ears sharp, plotting entrances and looking for likely vessels.

The woman of gigantic proportion is cagey, like any successful sleuth, and ignores limits. Skin, skies, dead-ends, barbed wire, nettle fields, imbedded pasts, oceans, tight lips, closed doors, none of these stop her. Changeable as wind, she pops out of her formidable mass of flesh whenever it suits her and travels — vaporized, liquified, magnified, wherever she wants to go. Propelled by dreams and carried by sighs, she has travelled to regions of hearts and minds so dark they defy description, so wondrous they cannot be believed. In her packed or airy essence she holds keys, many keys.

The woman of gigantic proportion slipped into me insidiously, through a crack in my skin I thought I had healed. She settled there first, just beneath the surface. Slowly, my fingers, before gripped in politeness, in clinging, in refusal, loosened. Now, running along the day's predictable walls they find openings smaller than shrew's teeth through which all of me can slip quicker than the blink of an eye. Skins unfold their velvet at my touch. Barriers vanish. Deaf to the sweet calls of the Sirens, their spell slips off me like an old skin. O how I swell with this woman inside me! In every space I'm in the corners curve to hold me. My dry sponge — desert — cracked lip understanding soaks her up, and I bloom into bigness.

I cannot explain this phenomenon to my friends. They think I am holding back major details of my life — a time in the Orient, riverruns down the Nile, a past or future life I'm still in the midst of living. Once I would fight them, defend myself. Now I am elastic. I ooze like a mudslide. I stand before their suspicious faces, their accusations, and slowly begin to widen. Imperceptibly, from the back of my ribs like she has shown me. Soon (they do not know how it has happened) they are no longer in front of someone they do not understand. The words just thrown from their lips like darts are hanging in another history. Somewhere in their bodies are small pulses, beats matching mine. We meet, like the rings around rain falling in water.

I am more careful these days. I've quieted my cackling assumptions and look twice at what calls to me before I answer. I don't knock against the world as hard as I used to. It's almost as if I'm afraid she'll leak out if I tear myself. But I know better. The woman of gigantic proportion does not depart with the night breath. I do not wake in the morning flat like old ale. I do not wake up two weeks later in the same bed, desert flowers withered around my feet and a tongue as thick as a hunk of stale bread. This huge, green-hipped, waddling, toothy old fool. This left-over legend. This monstrous mother-eye who wafts through her children as if we were hollow chimes hanging on trees. She has set herself up in the dome of my heart. I know she will stay, but not all of her. That trickster! That ephemeral face! Just tonight — I am still swelled, still larger than my little life — I have seen her. She slipped out of my pores, like she does, and settling like fog in the evening, softly and hugely covered everything. And I know tomorrow, when the red tongue of sun first licks at the dawn, I'll see her again. Rising steamy from the top of the river, rolling around defiantly under the sun and finally, near noon, departing, maybe south, scheming and squinting her eye, watching sharp for her daughters, for tiny holes to slip through, for tunnels she can re-arrange to end in herself. 



Fauna Yarrow

Susanna J. Sturgis

"Is this the new thing we're going to have to be
politically correct about?"

P.C.: politically correct. I have two rubber stamps that I use indiscriminately on outgoing correspondence, one reading "politically correct," and the other (of course) "politically incorrect." I do not like to believe that we are swayed, or even influenced, by prevailing dogmas. I use "p.c." and "p.i." lightly, ironically, in jest. For me "p.i." denotes independence and originality, and "p.c." suggests an absence of humor and a lack of flexibility. Someone who is p.c. would probably not duck to get through a low doorway.

In her excellent essay "Traveling Fat,"¹ Elana Dykewomon describes her experiences as a fat poet-writer on the road giving readings. At the request of reading organizers in one city, she prepared a brief statement on some fat liberation issues: she explained that the selling of diet drinks and the unavailability of t-shirts in multiple-X sizes made it unsafe for fat women to attend women's events. When she made the statement at a reading in another city, the response that reached her, second hand, was, "Is this the new thing we're going to have to be p.c. about?"

Although this woman was presumably encountering fat liberation for the first time, she was already dismissing it as "the new thing we're going to have to be p.c. about." It is unlikely that she would then turn her critical attention to the essential feminist issues that fat activists have raised — to, for instance, the diet industry, which uses billions of women's dollars to tell us that our bodies are not good enough. It is unlikely that she would bother to try to imagine what it is like to be perpetually too big for "standard" sizes, in feminist t-shirts as well as required-for-work clothes.

And I was chastened to realize that, though the fat liberation movement has deeply affected my life, I recognized myself in this woman. I recognized her exasperation, since I have felt it too: oh, god, something else I'm supposed to feel guilty and shut up about. Reading Elana's essay, hearing over and over again that woman's response, convinced me once and for all that p.c./p.i. is more than a joke.

Like our double-headed axe, political correctness has two edges. Pushed to identify what exactly *is* p.c., even we who ridicule the concept will list important feminist goals and ethics. When I say that someone is "too p.c. for words," I am usually not criticizing her specific beliefs and commitments. What I mean is that in espousing and/or implementing them, she tends to be self-righteous, humorless, and inflexible. She produces silence and mistakes it for agreement.

Communication breaks down easily, particularly among feminists who strongly disagree with each other. Whether the subject is sexuality, spirituality, confronting oppressive behavior, or participating in electoral politics, our public explorations tend to degenerate quickly into a series of mortar barrages between two bristling camps, with

a sizable neutral zone of unnatural quiet between them.

So many truths lie submerged and even unimagined, yet we have developed, and are skillfully using, a variety of techniques to deflect and dismiss issues that we do not want to deal with. I believe that this much-ridiculed concept of political correctness is one of those techniques, and that it contributes profoundly to the difficulties we frequently experience as we struggle to speak and work together. Political correctness simplifies, and the way of truth is to be complex.

I think that it is the very complexity of feminism that makes the simplicities of p.c./p.i. so attractive. Since feminism is a struggle with many, many fronts, trying to cover more than a few at once is a fast route to overextension and burnout. Many of us nevertheless want to, or think we should, be doing it all, and we react to the resulting frustration in different ways. We drop out and do nothing. Or, once we acknowledge that we can't do everything, we say, "Well, then, we should ALL do this particular thing."

Our various attempts to influence each other usually have a much more immediate, visible effect than our challenges to patriarchal institutions and ethics. One's certainty and sense of purpose may be affirmed by making converts; or maintaining doctrinal purity may be the overriding concern. Either way, it isn't hard to persuade oneself that flexibility and tolerance are no virtues when our feminist goals are so essential and so long overdue.

Feminism is a worldview, a philosophy, a politic, a way of interpreting what happens and has happened, and of developing strategies to empower women of many backgrounds and circumstances. Most of us have grown up disempowered: we have learned that our part is to obey laws, or perhaps to evade them very discreetly, rather than to make, remake, or repeal them.

Grounded in the connection of personal and political, feminism emphasizes the ethical self-determination of each woman, working always in cooperation with her community and the natural world around her. A woman becomes a feminist as she realizes that the rules society applies to her are dangerous and constricting. She comes to understand that the language she speaks warps all of her senses. For many women, becoming a feminist means rejecting, or radically transforming, her designated place in the world. But becoming a feminist does not automatically free any of us from the contradictory ways of our particular heritage.

When in the early 1980s our discussions of feminist sexuality burst into the open, it immediately became apparent that our differences on these issues were great and deeply felt, and that our impatience and inexperience in dealing with this gut-felt diversity were combining into an overload of contradictions and frustrations. In some cases this overload was "resolved" by defining some women out of the movement — "excommunicating" them² — because their actions and/or ideas did not fit into a particular definition of feminism.

After more than a decade of theorizing and organizing, we are still finding it impossible to devise unambiguous, comprehensive definitions of "feminist" and "feminism".

This ambiguity has caused us no little trouble. Tolerance for constant uncertainty and change varies from woman to woman and for each of us over time. We are pressed by nonfeminist theorizers and activists who will not respect a theory that lacks a polished finish. How comforting it would be if we could only lay out a few rules, a few thou shalt and thou shalt nots, by which to decide which of us is doing it right. Since consciousness is just about impossible to assess, these rules would naturally have to deal primarily with our outward behavior.

What further complicates the issue is the obvious but overlooked fact that outward correctness is often, in many ways, better than nothing. It's safer and more pleasant to walk through the world without being constantly threatened by physical or verbal abuse. Sometimes an individual's willingness to avoid sexist behavior in public, for example, will lead to a lasting change in his or her consciousness. It may, however, become a kind of shield, a garment worn outside in order to avoid criticism. Underneath, nothing may change.

Some roots of political correctness

Living in a movement where behavior is heavily emphasized brings out the chameleon in us. Many of us have learned along the way, whether from earliest childhood or at the onset of adolescence, that behavior matters most of all; in practice, you can think anything you want as long as it doesn't show. The rules the adults laid out for us were myriad, often incomprehensible and capriciously enforced, always undebatable. Sometimes we muttered discontent among our siblings, climbed trees in our party dresses, or escaped from the stodginess of it all by retreating to a quiet corner or sneaking out of the house.

When we got to school, unless we were very fortunate, we learned that sitting still and doing what you were told was far more important than curiosity, enthusiasm, creativity, or originality. In history we were rewarded for learning lists of dates, battles, and famous men; in science it was parts of the body or the periodic table; in English it was standard grammar and poetic forms. Again, unless we were lucky in our teachers, family, and peers, unless we somehow developed the ability to see behind the lists, we never sensed the currents of history, our connections with the earth, the immense, miraculous possibilities of language.

What we learned at home and school prepared us for dealing with the larger society. We have forgotten all the lists but this much we remember. Don't make waves. Defer outwardly to those more powerful than you. You can mutter all you please in private, you can even speak in opposition — as long as you behave. These are not the virtues of a transforming social movement. As radical feminists, we have had to unlearn much.

If so many of patriarchy's lessons, subtle and explicit, have taught us that behavior is what matters, a feminist might well be suspicious of any movement phenomenon that by accident or by design delivers the same message. Good manners may make my life and many others safer and more comfortable in the short run, but in the long run they can present a formidable roadblock. Even when behavior changes and the words change, the motivating consciousness may go unchallenged. All that matters is that our

behavior is beyond reproach.

Gradually, however, the pressure builds up. Presented over the years with one rule after another, a woman adapts and adapts, or pretends to adapt, until, when yet another prescription presents itself, she sneers, "Is this the new thing we're going to have to be p.c. about?" Fat liberation is still a new and vulnerable movement; for the time being, it's a handy, *safe* place to channel all the resentments that can't be voiced on other issues. When fat is generally accepted as a cause of oppression, the snide remarks will be directed elsewhere.

Because we avoid examining the workings of p.c./p.i., we generally criticize only the particular aspect(s) of political correctness that chafe us personally. By dismissing p.c./p.i. as a phenomenon that affects only "minor" (as defined by us, of course) issues, we are able to overlook the fact that there are correct, coercive, usually simplistic lines on every other thing that concerns us: race and racism, class and classism, sexuality, reproductive rights. It's a mistake to assume that a line is not a line just because we agree with it, or because the issue is agreed to be crucial.

In a recent *Lesbian Connection*, an Oakland, California, lesbian wrote, "Political correctness grew from an innocent wish to transcend our racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, lookism, ageism, religionism, ableism, etc."³ Political correctness may indeed be rooted in our "innocent" wish to transcend our constricting attitudes, but much of its coercive power and persistence derives from other, older, less idealistic sources — gleaned from our upbringings, the survival tactics of manipulation, silencing, and intimidation. It is given force by our urgency, by our understandable but impossible desire to undo generations of oppression in a year or so.

Since we have recognized and developed the essential connection between personal and political, feminists are in a good position to understand what can happen when correct behavior is emphasized to the neglect of inward growth and transformation. Consciousness raising (CR), for instance, has been the single most important strategy of the feminist movement because it encourages all women to value and speak their lives, enabling us to build our movement, organizations, and theories from the ground up. Once CR becomes part of a virtually obligatory program, however, it becomes something that many of us were once intimately familiar with: the required class. We know how to respond to required classes. We do the minimum required to get by. We may emerge at the end basically unchanged but with the necessary credentials: "I was in a CR group on . . ." I've done my bit.

Ideally, consciousness having been raised, either by individual effort or with a group, we perceive things differently. Privileges whose presence or absence we once took for granted now have historical context and political significance. We are less likely to make unfounded romantic or patronizing assumptions about other cultures, or to react angrily when someone points out our mistakes. We recognize habits and attitudes of our own that need changing, and we begin to change them. We go into the world prepared to make a difference. We will confront Xist behavior when we encounter it and respond sensitively when confronted ourselves.

Confrontation, like CR, is a valuable tool, and like CR it can become useless. As con-

sciousness raising may come to mean no more than a course in etiquette or diplomacy, confrontation carelessly used becomes more effective for intimidating or manipulating people than for showing them necessary truths about their own behavior or about others' lives. The ongoing firefight that has taken place in the sky above our discussions of sexuality is a form of confrontation — confrontation become a hostile exchange of loaded words: "sexual fascist," "anti-feminist," "neo-Nazi," "classist," "racist".

These are important words for describing certain acts, attitudes, and institutions. They are also effective weapons. In the heat of debate, passionate feminists tend to shoot first, ask questions or consider the subtleties later (if at all). Taking cover is a more pressing priority than looking to see where the bullets are coming from or what they are made of. After a few heart-stopping pyrotechnic struggles, we learn something about prevention: how to avoid drawing fire in the first place.

This is nothing we haven't learned at home, in school, on the job, in the street. It's so basic a part of our lives as women that we do it without thinking. We risk rape on the streets; we restrict our movements. We risk abuse from men; we avoid antagonizing them. We are trashed for being competent, original, creative, or "difficult"; we pretend to be otherwise. We hear the ridicule heaped on fat women; we compress ourselves into small shapes. In each case, we pretend to be, and eventually become, less than we are.

The ethics of vulnerability

In an excellent and important essay, "Vulnerability and Power,"⁴ Sarah Lucia Hoagland has written that women have developed vulnerability as a strategy to obtain some limited, individual control over those who have power over us. Some manifestations of this strategy are acting helpless, running down other women, and denying connections with feminists, lesbians, radicals, and/or separatists — all in order to make men feel competent, necessary, and comfortable. These self-protective responses can become so ingrained that we resort to them automatically, even in feminist contexts.

To illustrate the danger of translating any of these tactics into lesbian ethics without very close scrutiny, Hoagland uses an incident from Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground*⁵, a series of stories that envision a lesbian-feminist utopia. Margaret has escaped from the male-controlled city after being raped and dressed in armor as a "joke". Seja, one of the lesbian separatist hill women, finds her and is unable to communicate with her. To show that she means no harm, Seja kneels down and exposes her neck to the armed (with a sword) and distraught Margaret.

This incident ends "well", i.e., Seja is not hurt. Hoagland's point is that the episode could easily have ended tragically for both women.

By using vulnerability to transform Margaret's fear, Seja is forcing Margaret to choose between killing a woman or letting loose her own armor, her defenses. And in choosing to let loose her armor, Margaret must still her anger, contain it. Yet it may be too soon for Margaret to do this: it may be time instead for her to vent her rage and thus to assuage her wounds.

Margaret could have killed Seja and been saddled with a lifetime of guilt and regret.

As Hoagland points out, Seja's strategy

is based on the practice among some animals of exposing their bellies, necks, or genitals to other members of their pack. The problem is that such behavior establishes dominance and a dependence which comes with a form of security, but it does not establish trust among equals.

Hoagland asks "whether vulnerability ever comes with *no* strings attached... Even in the best of contexts," she writes, "to use vulnerability as a tool is to take a 'short-cut through another's personality'"⁶ — to control the outcome of the situation by limiting the other's options. This use of vulnerability avoids the risk of bonding, which "lies in a willingness to take the next step, to change the relationship, to lose the security of predictableness".

Displaying the vulnerability that Hoagland describes has become a prescribed feminist tactic for dealing with the isms. A woman confronts a member of an oppressor group. The oppressor is not supposed to explain, argue, defend him- or herself, or do anything but agree, apologize, and promise to take steps toward changing his or her Xist behavior. Following the prescribed sequence reliably has the effect of short-circuiting anger, yet one can do all this without changing, or committing oneself to changing, consciousness.

I sometimes hear comments made in "safe" spaces that suggest that the changes wrought in these interactions are frequently superficial and short-lived. My own resentment festers, bringing up the bitter taste of childhood encounters with an angry parent, whose power coupled with fury could erase the nuances and sometimes the entire truth of a situation. Why? I come from a very privileged background and am relatively privileged even now. Why do I see myself as the silenced child? The following incidents provided me with some clues, and thus sparked some ideas on how to avoid reducing important issues to "the new things we're going to have to be p.c. about".

In *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* 37 a poem appeared. It was called "some like indians endure" and it began "i have it in my mind that/dykes are indians". In the biographical note that followed, the poet, Paula Gunn Allen, was identified as "Lebanese-American," when in reality she is Laguna/Sioux-Lebanese-American. Not only does this (partially) describe who Paula Gunn Allen is, it was particularly significant for this poem. It assured the reader that this was not a non-Indian trying to romanticize either dykes or Indians.

In the following issue of the journal, the *Common Lives* collective described the incident, acknowledging their racism in omitting Allen's tribal affiliation. They wrote,

We further compounded the situation by failing to take immediate, aggressive actions when we first discovered the omission after the books came off the press. We did not inform Paula and we distributed the books without informing our readers. We did not take responsibility for what we'd done until after Paula called us to express her anger and to challenge us on our racism.⁸

The collective further described how the incident had grown out of their unexamined white privilege and the mundane pressures of publishing a magazine.

Common Lives/Lesbian Lives 6 brought to light a similar incident. A story by

Jewish lesbian Judy Freespirit was published in issue 3; without consulting the author, the editorial collective had deleted the last paragraph of her story, thinking that it was "stronger without the last three lines". The author saw those lines as very important, "significant to me because they were a twist of a Jewish joke ('It might not help, but it wouldn't hurt.')"⁹ The Common Lives collective apologized for its anti-Semitism and cultural bias.

By examining the Common Lives collective's exchanges with Paula Gunn Allen and Judy Freespirit, I want to take a closer look at two specific points. One is the way in which certain highly charged words can be used to bludgeon, intimidate, and silence rather than to identify and challenge. The other is the peculiar power reversal that frequently takes place among feminists, progressives, and others who are committed to addressing these matters of oppression and oppressiveness.

Loaded words and fake emotions

"The New Feminism I am committed to building," wrote Paula Gunn Allen to *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*,

is one which never lets fantasies, noble, romantic imaginings, or learned emotions (I call them "fake" emotions because they are conditioned, not spontaneous) interfere with reality-based understandings and actions.¹⁰

Allen's "fake emotions" encompass the kind of political correctness that goes no deeper than outward behavior. Our learned responses — fear, silence, superficial change, the parroting of required formulas — do indeed "interfere with reality-based understandings and actions".

What struck me about both of these episodes is that, once the issues of racism and anti-Semitism were raised, some significant underlying questions were pushed aside. What was emphasized was who did it and to whom; what was actually done was somewhat obscured. The collective omitted a crucial part of Paula Gunn Allen's biographical statement, then did not take immediate steps to inform her and correct the error. They lopped a paragraph from Judy Freespirit's story without consulting the author. If my work — the work of a white upper/middle-class anglo-saxon ex-protestant lesbian writer — were handled in this manner, I too would have good cause to be angry.

In effect, what was done was racist and anti-Semitic. In practice, as the collective members themselves pointed out, it resulted from carelessness, ignorance, and deadline-itis. In personal interactions, these cause a great deal of oppressive behavior. They also cause a great deal of pain and grief that cannot — because of who does it and/or whom it is done to — be classified under any of the identified isms. These underlying questions — of honor, of editorial responsibility, of feminist ethics — tend to get buried under all-sense-numbing barrages of loaded words.

The various oppressions have developed differently, and they operate differently. Yet, although none is exactly like another, the similarities suggest that, at least on the personal level, there are some common causes: ignorance of other women's lives, the assumption of sameness, fear of difference, laziness, carelessness, insensitivity. Learn-

ing the isms as a list of disparate elements obscures those connections and makes it all the harder for us to understand each other. In the end, learning lists teaches us to be good at learning lists. Learning the underlying shared characteristics, on the other hand, enables us to recognize the oppressions and cruelties and omissions that no one else is yet talking about.

Learning lists, ironically enough, brings us around to the very situation that we say we are trying to avoid. Someone else has to point out and describe whatever is to go onto the list — and very often the only "someone else" who has the credibility and insight to identify the "whatever" is a member of the oppressed group.

Power reversals

When I, a woman, confront a pro-feminist man, a curious dynamic comes into play. Usually when around men, I do the tiptoeing and hope that I can get through before one of them blows up, but when I tell a pro-feminist man that he has said or done something sexist and offensive, I put *him* off balance. Because of the man's political commitment, our relative positions are reversed. The reversal is *situational*: it lasts only as long as the relatively privileged participant allows it. If the pro-feminist man decides that he doesn't care about feminism any more, that no woman is going to tell him what to do, or that I am just an unreasonable man-hater, my influence ends.

As my own anger about fat oppression boils to the surface, I have erupted more than once at an insulting remark or a familiar but erroneous assumption. What happens? A woman cowers. She adds fat oppression to her p.c. list. She doesn't say fat-oppressive things around me. Behind my back, however, she strongly suggests that being fat is not only *physically* unhealthy, see what it's done to Susanna's mind. Or maybe she just yells that I am full of shit.

Temporary they assuredly are, yet these power reversals are real and must be considered in devising and revising strategies. History and experience may justify my anger, but if I believe that my pro-feminist co-worker and my fat-oppressive friends are sincere, I do not want them to cower ritualistically to protect themselves from what I say. I remember too well being corrected by those who had power over me. I remember how I tuned them out, said what I was supposed to say and secretly crossed my fingers. This learned response to threat from above became automatic with me; I still practice to unlearn it.

Political commitments, coupled with the pressure to be correct, work other reversals too. To "pass," for instance, generally means to present oneself as, or to let oneself be taken for, a member of a more privileged group. In conversation among (say) white middle-class people, to reveal that you or your parent is a janitor is to risk being erased by the stereotypes of your listeners. Among feminists and radicals, though, it isn't unusual to find a person from the upper or upper-middle class passing for middle, or even working, class. The motives for both kinds of passing are similar: a woman believes either that her own truths are not good enough,¹¹ or that acknowledging membership in the group in question will lessen or destroy her chance of acceptance as an individual. Some of these pressures come from within. Others are imposed by a

community's standards of acceptability.

On ready-to-wear words

Consider the difference between sending a friend a birthday card with a preprinted message and writing and/or drawing your own. By extensively advertising their products, the card companies manage to persuade a lot of people that by not using canned sentiments you prove that you do not care enough to send the very best. Use your own words, your own drawings, and your own handwriting and you will be thought a cheapskate. But by using those cards exclusively you risk losing your capacity to speak in your own words.

In 1983, *Women: A Journal of Liberation* published my "Class/Act: Beginning a Translation From Privilege," an essay about coming from an upper-class background. When I wrote "Class/Act" (1981), I had not heard the voices of fat women writing of fat oppression and fat liberation. In my journal there were long, raw screams of pain at the harassment, the rejection, and the isolation that my life as a fat woman was full of. As I worked to begin translating my class privilege into radical feminist/lesbian terms, I could not even imagine translating my personal knowledge of fat issues from my private journal into my public writing. When I reread "Class/Act," I admire it but I think to myself, "This makes my life look easy."

In retrospect it's easy to understand. Because the privileges of class and race have been much discussed, many helpful words were readily available for me to use. Had Michelle Cliff, Audre Lorde, and others not published works on these subjects, my own work would have been much more difficult. But for my experience of fat oppression I had no words. Though I was a writer, it did not occur to me that I could start making my own. In classic, prefeminist fashion I thought, "If there are no words, it is because the subject is not worth discussing."

Who decided that the subject was not worth discussing?

In exploring the issue of political correctness, I confronted this question in several forms. Who decided that this was significant while that was not? Who decided that these were the words we would use? Who decided that this was correct and that incorrect? Sometimes I could identify the group that put out these priorities, phrases, or ideas. Then I would ask myself why I was letting myself be swayed or intimidated. Because "they" got there first, they had access to print, they had greater numbers — they had the words.

A catchy phrase would surface in a publication. It would be quoted and requoted, used as epigraphs, used to name organizations. It might once have been a resonant, clever, or eloquent phrase, but pretty soon I would groan when I heard it coming. A living phrase had lost its power and come to be a mere insignia, a kind of verbal shorthand that conveyed the user's group affiliation but little about her person. Politically correct.

Who knows exactly how or when a living phrase or image becomes stale? Who knows when a basic feminist goal becomes just another form of political correctness, something that one does in public but ridicules or ignores in private? Over and over

again, ferment turns to orthodoxy, new words become clichés. Even a volcano's molten lava cools and turns solid. Must feminism inevitably become a politic of thou shalt and thou shalt nots, of public correctness and private resentment?

To prevent this, a first step is to push ourselves beyond the ready-to-wear words and ideas that we have inherited from the academy, from the left, from the psychologists, and even from our own feminist predecessors. Opening up language involves flexibility, experiment — play. Among feminists Mary Daly is one of the best at this; although she is often called "heavy", what keeps me coming back to *Gyn/Ecology* is its humor, its whimsy, its playfulness. So many of those who made essential criticisms of the book — particularly about its cultural myopia — regularly missed its humorous spirit, were so resolutely humorless and inflexible in their own approach, that for years I could only perceive an either/or choice: be playful, provocative, and culturally solipsistic like Daly, or pedantic, self-righteous, and anti-racist like her critics. It was Audre Lorde's moving, compassionate, still-unanswered "Open Letter to Mary Daly"¹² that showed me a way beyond the either/ors.¹³

Beyond political correctness

In the past, reformers and radicals have battled over which was more important: inward psychological and moral transformation or the transformation of social institutions. Each faction has had its way in various times and places, and both have led to dead ends and betrayed revolutions. Radical feminism demands the transformation of both at once. In theory it makes perfect sense: new institutions growing from our needs and beliefs while we shed the old ways of relating and develop some new ones. In practice it's like dancing on a razor blade. It's a constant temptation to jump to one side or the other, and if you do manage to stay in the middle — it often hurts. Try working in a feminist business sometime. Try living in the world.

Things are never as clear as they look on paper. Years ago I burned out working in collectives because many women seemed to think that calling ourselves a collective made us one. The power-over dynamics in those so-called nonhierarchical collectives gave me headaches. One equally exasperated co-worker said something that I've remembered ever since: "The problem is that none of us can stand to be uncomfortable for more than five minutes."¹⁴ Yet learning to work in collectives when we've been brought up for hierarchies has to be a discomfiting process.

We must start from where we are, with habits and defenses brought from the worlds we want to change, with ideas, situations, and other people that are not acceptable, simple, correct, and/or "attractive". For the last several years, the most vital currents in the feminist movement have been those of women exploring and developing theory, fiction, and poetry from the particular circumstances of their lives.¹⁵ Publications and organizations are growing around the lives and goals of women from many backgrounds, of many interests. We are making new words, insights, and priorities because the old ones didn't fit.

Some warn that we are becoming too specialized: everyone has her own book, her own group. Often the warning comes from those who do not see that we have been too

specialized — too white, too privileged by class and education — from the beginning and that as a movement we are finally becoming less so. Where we have found, and will continue to find, strength in the recognition of similarity, now we must find it also in the celebration of difference. Since many of the groups we belong to have been at odds for generations and centuries, this discovery and celebration will be a challenging, often threatening, process.

Women sometimes say that focusing on (presumably tangential) issues like fat oppression will divert attention from "more important" concerns. For me, white, upper class, and fat, the exact opposite was true. It was as a fat woman — not simply as a woman, or as a lesbian — that I understood what it's like when your mere presence offends and angers a total stranger. It was as a fat woman that I learned what it's like to be erased and excluded — to accept erasure and exclusion as inevitable — to be resentfully grateful for the occasional offers of inclusion — to feel from within the effects of my own corrosive rage.

Being both outsider and insider, white and female, upper class and lesbian, educated and fat, has given me what Marilyn Frye calls binocular vision: the capacity to see from two angles at once.¹⁶ For that anonymous woman on Elana Dykewomon's travels, fat oppression was yet another ism to be inscribed on a lengthening list, another rule to learn, another subject to watch your mouth about. For me it provided a key, a will to go beyond the "oughts" toward a transformation of consciousness, toward a gut understanding of how I oppress as well as how I am oppressed.

There are many other keys. Being female, for instance, or being lesbian, or being the only heterosexual woman in an openly lesbian group. Being working class, or mixed class, or mixed blood. Difference — whatever it is, inborn or chosen, that locks you out of simplicities and generalizations and forces you to find your own way and your own language — provides many of the keys. Being different in some ways does not miraculously allow you to understand all forms of difference. It can enable you, though, to realize that there are women whose ways you don't know at all; it can remind you to be flexible, empathetic — to listen with care.

Years ago we recognized that the personal is political and the political, personal. Radical feminism pushes us both inward and outward — out into the world and in toward our own sources and particularities. We do not expect ourselves to be perfect. We try not to pounce at the first sign of imperfection. We try not to create movements and communities where a woman has to pass for something she is not in order to be taken seriously and treated with respect, where she is encouraged to keep silent or to maneuver cagily through the minefield of p.c./p.i. We are, after all, each of us the woman for whom we are creating a world. Every one of our voices is needed.

Any woman's silence is a flaw in our foundation, a flaw that weakens the growing whole more surely than any dissent or disagreement. The responsibility is twofold: not to silence others, and not to let ourselves be silenced. Neither is easy.

NOTES

¹In *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*, edited by Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser, Aunt Lute Book Co., 1983, pp. 144-154.

²I borrow the phrase from Karen Lindsey, who used it in "Debate, Don't Excommunicate," in *Sojourner*, February 1983.

³In *Lesbian Connection*, vol. VI, no. 4, August/September 1983. This article, one of the first I've seen that refers to the harmful effects of p.c./p.i., discusses ways to make our movement less vulnerable to government infiltrators and provocateurs.

⁴In *Sinister Wisdom* 19, winter 1982, pp. 13-23.

⁵Published 1978 by Persephone Press; reprinted 1984 by Alyson Publications.

⁶This echoes a phrase in Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying." It appears in Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, W.W. Norton, 1979, and also as a pamphlet from Motherroot Publications, 214 Dewey Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15218.

⁷*Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* 3, spring 1982, pp. 75-78. Lest anyone be tempted to take these remarks as a condemnation of this vital quarterly, I want to say that CL has shown great courage and lesbian commitment from its first issue. By openly discussing its editorial process, the CL/LL collective took a major, probably terrifying, step toward ending some particularly frustrating silences.

⁸CL/LL 4, summer 1982, p. 107.

⁹CL/LL 6, winter 1982/3, p. 45.

¹⁰CL/LL 4, summer 1982, p. 109.

¹¹For this also I am indebted to Adrienne Rich's "Women and Honor," cited above.

¹²In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, Persephone Press, 1981, pp. 94-97; reprinted 1983 by Kitchen Table Women of Color Press), and also in *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde, The Crossing Press, 1984.

¹³Daly's disciples, I should add, are oftentimes as adept as her critics at bleeding the resilience and humor from her work. They don't play or expand any frontiers; they take Daly's words and apply them like a fresh coat of paint to a variety of subjects and settings. The new color may be pleasing to the eye, but it neither transforms nor reveals anything new about the underlying structure — as Daly's own work often does. In the hands of those who lack her spirit, Daly's innovations congeal, surprise no one, become clichés.

¹⁴I do not know how many times I have quoted this remark, whose truth becomes more clear, important, and many-faceted with age. This is the first time I have used it in print, so I want to credit Lorraine Biros, with whom I share a Gemini birthday. For the last four years we have inaugurated each new year in good politically incorrect style by discoing to the strains of "Macho Man." Each year more women join in.

¹⁵Cherríe Moraga discusses this "theory in the flesh" in *This Bridge Called My Back*. "A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity." (p. 23)

¹⁶In *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* by Marilyn Frye, The Crossing Press, 1983. ". . . (M)arginality opens the possibility of seeing structures of the dominant culture which are invisible from within it. . . . Most of us (gay men and lesbians) know that straight world from the inside and, if we only will, from its outer edge. We can look at it with the accuracy and depth provided by binocular vision." (From the essay "Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separation," pp. 128-151. The quotation cited appears on p. 148.)

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Four Poems About Fat

PORTRAIT #1.

She once dieted down to a size 18,
got a lover and lost her virginity.
That was a hundred pounds ago;
she hasn't been touched
in seven years,
and doesn't expect to be.
She owns two dresses
and a robe — size 52;
doesn't go out unless it's
absolutely necessary.

Last year she almost died
from a boil on her thigh
which got infected
even though she'd doctored it
with over-the-counter medications
and kept it antiseptic.
By the time she called for help
she was near delirium.
The doctor called her a fat slob
and said she deserved her fate.
She was *not* too sick to care.
Next time she may choose to die.

She baby-sits
for less than minimum wage
with children
too young to criticize.
She has a college degree
in English;
wanted to be a teacher;
now she reads a lot.
Her parents pay the rent,
for which she writes
good-daughter letters
every week.
She drinks herself to sleep.

She has thin blond hair
which she fixes
in a graceful chignon.
Her hands are delicate.
She blushes easily
and her eyes are large
and pale, pale blue,
almost lavender.
When she smiles,
her face is radiant;
but she doesn't much.

PORTRAIT #3

By the time she'd had
her second child,
she passed 200 on the scale.
Her husband wouldn't
sleep with her;
he said fat was disgusting.
It took her over a year
to diet to her former size,
and then she left him.
She's back to normal now.

PORTRAIT #4: WEIGHT LOSS

"She looks so good," they said,
"so healthy and so good!"
But I was shocked to see her,
angular now and hard,
her neck a cypress tree,
tendon roots all visible
and anchored to
a jutting collar bone.
At first I didn't recognize
that she's someone I know
and I had to stretch to recall
how it was she used to be.
Still the same quick wit
but somehow sharper
now that her face
has lost its soft.
She never used to wear
a low necked blouse.
It's sad she kept
her shoulders covered
all that time
when they were beautiful.
But it seems there's no one here but me
who mourns the loss.

An Affirmation

To be chanted daily by every woman who has ever dieted, while looking in a full length mirror (and as needed in trying social situations).

Here I come walking
my fat all around me,
flouncing and bouncing
like layers of ruffles;
a fancy and fine way
to decorate bones.

Here I come striding,
like ocean waves rolling,
my thighs two huge whales
at play in the sea.
Make way for the Venus
embodied in me.

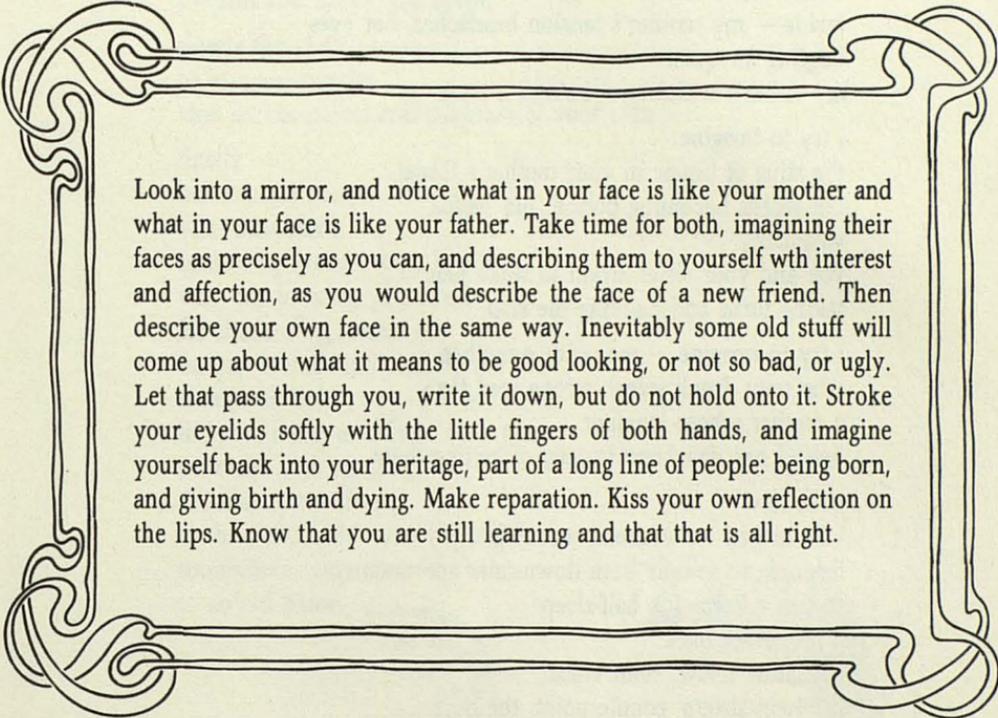
Here I come dancing,
flesh jigging and dimpling,
breasts swinging, hips giggling,
a vast celebration —
like party balloons
and streamers festooned.

Here I am sitting,
the Buddha incarnate,
the tide of my body
welling round me;
the universe grounded,
a wide spreading tree.

Here I come billowing
and roiling and rumbling,
like thunderclouds swelling
to scatter the dry.
Don't be fools fighting lightning;
take heed, clear the way.

I'm the GRAND mother,
BIG sister, GREAT daughter,
insuring survival,
the fat of the land.
And I *cannot* wither
lest *all* pass away.

Spell to Separate Your Parents from Yourself,
and
to Connect with Them Again.



Look into a mirror, and notice what in your face is like your mother and what in your face is like your father. Take time for both, imagining their faces as precisely as you can, and describing them to yourself with interest and affection, as you would describe the face of a new friend. Then describe your own face in the same way. Inevitably some old stuff will come up about what it means to be good looking, or not so bad, or ugly. Let that pass through you, write it down, but do not hold onto it. Stroke your eyelids softly with the little fingers of both hands, and imagine yourself back into your heritage, part of a long line of people: being born, and giving birth and dying. Make reparation. Kiss your own reflection on the lips. Know that you are still learning and that that is all right.

for a friend, for the child inside her

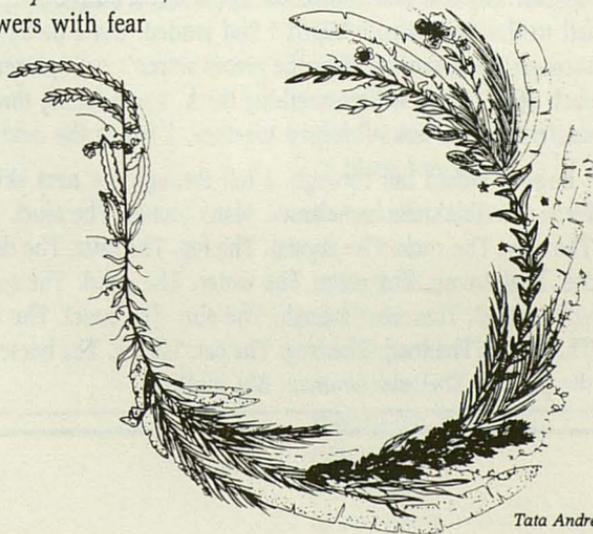
your chosen name
like new skin
covering the wound of your childhood
i've tried to imagine — me, with a family
whose anger always turned
inside — my mother's tension headaches, her eyes
begging for quiet
my father's withdrawal behind a book
i try to imagine
the sting of liquor in your mother's throat,
her words becoming poison, her hands
weapons
you and your sister afraid to wake her
taking turns and ducking the slap
i try to imagine — me, with a mother
who only drank sweet, strong iced tea,
a mother whose laughter
healed her daughters instead of cutting them
even now
i lie in bed on weekend mornings
listening to sounds from downstairs apartments,
and in a homesick half-sleep
it all comes back:
my father's low, calm voice,
my twin sisters' counterpoint, the dogs
barking and scuffling,
the smell of toast and coffee,
and i'm curled again in my single bed upstairs
then i think of you as a child
tied to your bed
from nine at night to whatever time
your parents woke up
the morning after their party —
they didn't want you
bothering the guests

i think of you in your dark bedroom,
wrists and ankles chafed,
muscles stiffening, and your tears
streaming slow
time passing so slow — i can't
imagine it

i only dropped one syllable from my name
you needed to change yours entirely
you wore it at first
like a child playing dress-up, the fabric
too stiff and heavy, too bright

slowly the cloth began
to fit your muscles,
took on the colors and contours of your skin

finally
becoming a second skin, a spell
your new name
spoken by women who love you,
who call to bring you closer
for the healing, sweet oil
on the wounds inflicted by the first
woman to hold you — let us
lift you in our arms and rock you
over and over, singing
the music you chose
to the child inside you that still,
somewhere, answers with fear
to an old name.



Tata Andres

The Beginning of Briar Rose's Dream

The inside time. Winter. The time of chaos. The time when things come apart. The time when the structures that are no longer useful fall apart. The time before the new forms have begun to come together. The time of chaos. The time of fear that nothing will come. The time when nothing comes. The time of wanting to hold on. The time of falling. The time of falling and falling and nothing is there. The time when the only thing there is faith that there will be something there. The time when nothing is there. The time of letting go and falling. The time of falling and falling. The time of falling asleep.

I fell asleep. I fell into the chaos. I fell into the endless chasm, into the nothingness. I fell into my sleep ing time. I let go of the edge. I fell through the first skin. I saw nothing. I fell through nothing. I saw more nothing. I fell to the next skin. I thought I had landed. I fell through the next skin. Now there were pieces flying past me. My mother's whisper. My father's command. The golden plates. The wise woman's eye. Her other eye. Her spinning wheel. My father's horses. All of them. My mother's ring. The whisker of the wise woman's cat. Her cat's eye. Its other eye. I fell to the next skin. I thought I had landed. I fell through the next skin. Now the pieces flying past me were unknown to me. They had no names. I could not name them. They only called to my fear. My fear was enormous. I was surrounded by my fear. I fell through my fear. I fell to the next skin. I hoped I had landed, but I thought now maybe I hadn't. I fell through the next skin. Now the pieces weren't even pieces. They weren't separate from each other. They were something thick. I was falling through something thick. It was unclear, but it was all joined together. I fell to the next skin.

I knew I would fall through. I fell through the next skin. Now what was thick had form. The thickness had names. Many names. The mud. The earth. The land. The soil. The clay. The rock. The crystal. The fog. The mist. The drop. The tear. The blood. The ice. The stream. The river. The water. The pond. The sea. The ocean. The grass. The willow tree. The oak. The ash. The elm. The hazel. The briar. The spider. The snake. The lizard. The toad. The frog. The cat. The ox. The horse. The animal. The people. All the people. The wise woman. My mother.

heritage — for my grandmother

buried and
living in a locket
you glow
in the center
of my dreams
white light
edges your body
bending
over washboard
bruising out stains
you are a piece of ore
that ticks
emitting light and eons
— generations
in one body
bent over mine
bruising my
solitary sleep

old-country farm
grandmothers
leaning on
plow-horses
hay-wagons
nursing babies
in the furrows
grandfathers
leaving behind fields
to follow a black sun

down a hole
you light up
the new country —
nights
shape of a bottle's mouth
brawls under a yellow moon
over worn-out clothes
over love
gasping for breath
in black lungs
the grandchildren
stand clean
unfreckled by coal
you feed us
raisin-speckled bread
sweet butter
smooth our hair —
stained hands
penetrating
to our bones

Marie

Two shopping bags
hitting against thin knees,
and a scarf for church
almost reaching white ankle socks

she left 45 years
taking what she came with,
a Brooklyn accent
and five familiar blocks.

They were good streets,
and backyards
with grapes that shaded six children
as she planted and picked
fine red tomatoes for sauce.

It took a long time to leave him
in that cobblers store,
so many years of banging and pounding
to restore the marks on her face.

The shopping bags weren't too heavy,
he had the house,
seven empty chairs in the living room.



from Letters to Mama

The Pinto Express

April 14

Dear Mama,

Well, I got me another job. It's with the hospital. I drive around the city to various clinics and pick-up stuff from their labs. Mostly test tubes of blood, bottles of urine, swabs of viral matter, biopsy samples and the like. I take it all back to the hospital here, after making sure that it's properly labeled. Then our lab people analyze it, do all kinds of tests on their fancy machines and write reports on their findings. After that, I deliver the results back to the doctors at the clinics.

Oh ya, they're teaching me how to do the billing and book-keeping, too.

The pay's not real good, but I like the driving part of the job alot. They gave me a little Pinto to use. It's purple on the outside and black inside. Real easy to drive.

On my morning route, I usually fit-in a stop at Dunkin Donut for a cup of coffee and a glazed french twist or a custard filled. A couple of the boys-in-blue are usually hanging out there when I stop. Regulars, ever since they discovered the prostitution ring working out of the place a few months ago.

Afternoons, I like to stop at the Dairy Queen. A vanilla cone dipped in chocolate and sprinkled with crunchies tastes mighty fine about two-thirty.

Love,
Jo

April 29

Dear Mama,

It's quite a trick to time my route so I don't get slowed down at a railroad crossing and have to wait for some twenty-minute-long freighter turtle its way past my street. But when it does happen, me and my Pinto get comfortable and wait it out. Sometimes I even take my shoes off and hang my feet out the window. I read the names on the box cars and wonder what's inside. When an empty car passes by, I imagine myself hopping on and riding the rails all the way to the ocean. You know, to see the prairies and mountains and desert. And checking out Hollywood before switching trains and coming back through southern Canada. . . I see the caboosse pass and a flagman waving.

"Good-bye," I say and wave back. The gate lifts and I drive on to the next stop on my route.

Love,
Jo

May 6

Dear Mama,

Did I tell you that I have to stop once a day at Greyhound? I pick-up boxes of things sent down from a hospital up north for our pathologist here to examine.

On Friday I ran into Ruby at the station and chatted with her for a few minutes. She was on her way home for the weekend. Said the city was really getting on her nerves. She seemed awful homesick to me. Did she drop in for a visit? I told her you'd be mighty pleased to see her again.

Love,
Jo

May 19

Dear Mama,

I never realized just how many fire trucks and ambulances are out on the city streets every day til I got this job. Why just yesterday I was headed for the last stop on my route when I heard sirens. I checked the rear view mirror and spotted the flashing red lights of an ambulance. By then I was stopped at an intersection with a car on each side of me waiting for the signal to change. I figured one of us had better move so the ambulance could get through. Since neither of them budged, I started to. Well, half way across the street I hear the siren right next to me instead of behind. I turned my head and there was another ambulance headed right for me! I thought I was a goner for sure. Fortunately, my foot automatically floored the gas pedal and saved me from getting broad-sided by one ambulance and possibly rear-ended by another. I sure was scared for a minute there, you know.

I drove those last few blocks to the clinic, trying to breathe easy and calm down. My heart felt like it was going sixty miles an hour. When I walked into the lab I must have still been shaking like a leaf and looking like I had seen a ghost. Jeanie, the lab tech, made me sit down in her blood-drawing chair and tell her what happened. She got me to laugh about it. That sure helped to shake off the fear.

All the excitement of the day really wore me out. I slept like a log last night.

Love,
Jo

May 26

Dear Mama,

Ruby called last night. What a surprise! She told me that she did stop-in to visit you and Gerri. She said you two were real life-savers for her. When I asked how so, she got all quiet for a minute there. I wondered if I was getting too personal. But then Ruby started-in on telling me how her heart was broken because Pearl had up and left her for a younger woman. Mostly I listened to Ruby pour out her heart. I know she was crying because her voice was shaking so, and I heard her try to blow her nose real quiet-like a few times. Oh mama, Ruby is hurting so bad and feeling old as the hills. I just wanted to hug her close then so she'd feel better.

If you were here, I know you'd be telling me that Ruby will be OK and that all we can do now is to have a shoulder ready for her to cry on.

Before Ruby hung-up, she told me that I sure was my mama's daughter. I felt right proud to hear that. And I told her she could call me any time.

Mama, Ruby made me feel so grown-up by her talking with me like she did last night.

Love,
Jo

June 9

Dear Mama,

My days with "the pinto express" are numbered.

The hospital just hired two more drivers and leased another car because more of the clinics around the city are interested in our service.

My boss told me I'd be responsible for training and managing the new drivers. He said I would continue to be fully responsible for doing the billing and book-keeping. Then he tells me my favorite part of the job—the driving—will be cut back to three hours a day. When I asked him how much of a raise I was getting, he said: "None". Then he went on to say that in six months all three of us would be evaluated and maybe then I'd get a raise.

So after I train Roberta and Patti, I'll be looking for another job. Maybe I can get in at U.P.S. They're unionized and their drivers make three times the wage that I get here.

Love,
Jo

Bringing Home the Bacon

July 30

Dear Mama,

I guess Mr. Fraser at Job Service got real tired of me calling him every day about whether they were interviewing yet for new U.P.S. drivers.

He called me at home last night and said, "Oscar Mayer is taking applications tomorrow from seven to nine in the morning. If you go, be there early."

Well, mama, I called a taxi and was out there at 4 a.m. There already were fifty people ahead of me in line. The good news is that I got my application in before they closed the door to Personnel.

They'll be calling me tomorrow or the next day to say if I get to go on to the next step—the physical. After I pass that, they'll make me a job offer!

Love,
Jo

August 5

Dear Mama,

They hired me! About a hundred of us got in. They put us in Bologna, Bacon, and Kill. We're the lucky ones. Over a thousand people had showed up wanting jobs and were turned away.

Twenty-five of us started together in Bacon. We're called scalers. (That makes me think of fish, not bacon.) We weigh out estimated half-pounds of bacon strips as they come rushing down a conveyor belt. If it weighs too much, we pull off a slice. If it's not enough, we add a slice. When a full slice is too much or too little, we use our scissors to cut part of a slice to balance the weight to exactly one half-pound on our scales. Then we toss it on the upper conveyor belt and send it on to the wrapping machine. That's about all there is to the job. Pretty easy, huh.

Right now the hard part is trying to keep up—to work fast enough. The other night my meat was piling up and all I could think of was an old "I Love Lucy" show. It was the one where Lucy was working in a candy factory on the assembly line. When her bon-bons started piling up, she began eating them to get rid of them. Well, my supervisor came over and helped me catch up before I resorted to such drastic action. Thank God!

Love,
Jo

August 9

Dear Mama,

My joints have been aching. It's because of the cold temperature at work. I know it has to be that cold there. When it's not, the slices of bacon stick together like they were glued and that slows down our work. If it gets too cold, the slices fall apart and then it takes extra time to rearrange them for packaging after we get the weight right.

Pretty soon I'll be used to all this. In the meantime I take a long, hot soak in the tub when I get home.

And no, mama, I don't smell bad from working there. Inside the plant there isn't any stink. The bad smell is outside. It comes from the smoke stacks after they burn the parts of the pigs and cows that people wouldn't want to eat.

Love,

Jo

August 13

Dear Mama,

Thursday night I was trying to work too fast. Thinking about bonus pay instead of watching what I was doing. I went to trim a slice of bacon and I cut right through my glove and into my finger. It wasn't anything serious, really. But because I was bleeding, they took me off the line and sent me to the nurse. She had me soak my hand in some chemical stuff until the bleeding stopped. Then she bandaged my finger.

I felt bad because I lost my bonus pay for the night. And because I was off the line, I made all the other women lose their bonus, too. I felt worse about that.

My finger is fine now and I'm being more careful at work.

Love,

Jo

August 19

Dear Mama,

Did I tell you they gave me a skid to stand on while I work? Makes me taller. I can work faster. My legs don't hurt so much as when I was standing on the concrete floor.

Our line is working so well together now that we're getting bonus every night. You know I never made money like this before. I earn more in one week here than I did working a whole month at the hospital. Can you believe it?

I hope pretty soon I'm not so tired from working. I mean I would like to have enough energy left over to enjoy spending some of this "big money".

Love,

Jo

August 26

Dear Mama,

Bad news. Our foreman told us last night that the bacteria count on the meat was too high. He said that made the supermarket shelf-life too short. Then he told us they were going to have to shut down our shift until they found the source of the problem.

All of us who got hired last month know we won't be called back to work. We haven't worked long enough to get into the union and so don't have job protection. My last day is Friday.

I'm sorry, mama.

Love,
Jo

September 4

Dear Mama,

On Monday morning I went down to Job Service. I wasn't alone. All the women from Bacon were there standing in the unemployment line. We got to talking, started laughing about feast or famine and making jokes about bringing home the bacon. The time went pretty fast.

I'll be getting unemployment compensation checks. Because the pay was so good at the "weiner works", my UC checks will be the maximum. . . higher than if I was working my old job at the hospital right now. This is kind of like a paid vacation! Of course it won't last long, so I'll start calling Mr. Fraser again every day about any U.P.S. openings. It kind of worked for me before. Maybe it'll work again.

Mama, can I come home for a couple days? I miss you.

Love,
Jo



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Stress Management

Everything is going along quietly and suddenly one girl begins to scream. If you don't move quickly. . .everyone in the room is screaming. — Manager of an AMD semi-conductor plant in Malaysia.

The stress management classes in the Valley
had not described
the appropriate exercises
to manage
the screams
of women upon row
of women conducting semi-lives:
1,000 bonded chip leads a day
equals three dollars and fifty cents
equals six days a week
and no money left for the seventh
equals headaches, eye strain, exhaustion.
Stress that defies
the measurements devised
for civilized levels of Silicon tension.

Here, the beauty classes
cannot distract
women forced to moonlight
as prostitutes.
The company picnics do not relax
women living 16 to 3 rooms
in a furnitureless house.
Here, management's "open-door" policy
cannot force women to explain
why they are screaming.

So, here the management classes teach
that unions are the greatest source of stress.
They teach that exhaustion
is the best antidote for organization.
They teach that while "worker freedom"
may do the job at home
chain-link fences work best here.

What the management classes
can not teach
is how to stop the screams.

Armed Recruit

"There will be no show of
emotion while in formation, girl!"

Her long river clay eyes baked
in slimy tracks of his smile,
country dust/sow's swill.

"There will be no crying here.
Where in hell do you think you are,
at a wedding?"

Peach orchards flashed hot in winter
and her fingers tensed
rigor mortis on loose trigger.

"I hope you never give birth, female.
I'd hate to think you'd bring more
of your kind into the world.
That would be pathetic."

The rifle,
utterly clean/richly oiled
like skin under her eyes
spoke its well-rehearsed lines into
the CO's brain. He fell like
leaves back home
and the red Georgia rain
oozed into dirt at her
precisely-spaced feet.



Exhaustion Poem

Maria Medina punched me out
while I scrubbed a tub.
I took no breaks, no lunch.

She marked my card at 4:03.
I worked an hour free.

My tag says "Alma"
so the guests know a name.
My vacuum says "Betty."
My cart says "Grace."

Dorothy in Office Work

As though new scarves could alter the color of her hair,
as though the snoring dictaphone could call back the carpet of those
unrolling roads,
as though an IBM and instant-printing xerox could distract her from
the stormclouds that once hauled her toward Oz,
as though she could return to being ordinary,
as though she'd never seen her name scrawled across the angry witch's sky,
as though she'd never wandered through spook-infested woods and slapped
in fright the frightened lion,
as though her hands were born to a secretary's pencils,
she tries the role, she hangs up ferns beside the wide black files,
she fits whatever she's given inside the standard margins.

Blackbird, Fly

As I leave the spit-gray factory,
crowds of black birds drift
up into the cumulus
like released balloons.

I hold the wings of my fingertips
in my coat pocket.

Irena Klepfisz

The Distances Between Us: Feminism, Consciousness and the Girls at the Office

An Essay in Fragments

For Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz who insisted I write it.

I am indebted to a number of people who helped me think through many of the issues raised in this piece: Gloria Anzaldúa, for her sympathy, feedback and dialogue; Esther Hyneman, for dialogue, feedback, and editing; Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz for dialogue, editing, and, above all, editorial patience; Bernice Mennis for consciousness-raising around the issue of shame and for helping me get past the block; Judy Waterman for ongoing dialogue over the past two years, criticism, feedback, and willingness to read it "just one more time."

My acknowledgement of these women's support in no way indicates their endorsement of positions that I take.

This essay is based on my experiences doing office work, something I have done on and off for the past 25 years, supporting myself through college and graduate school as a typist, receptionist, medical transcriber, and librarian's assistant (file clerk). This was not unusual. In the late '50s and through the '60s most students at my college, CCNY,¹ and most graduate students at the University of Chicago worked (stipends and government loans never sufficed; men usually got added income from wives). During this period, office work seemed to me necessary and tolerable because I assumed it was temporary. While I was sensitive to many of the inequities, I did not really focus on them. I assumed they would not be my problems. I was looking forward to a teaching career. I received my Ph.D. in 1970.

Between 1969 and 1973, I had a full-time teaching job as an assistant professor of English in New York City. When enrollment dropped, the teaching market was already glutted and I, along with non-tenured faculty across the country, was laid off. While I have done some adjunct teaching since then, I have never held another full-time teaching position.

After a year collecting unemployment, I fell back on my office skills. For the past 10 years, with breaks for adjunct teaching and editorial work, I have held what seems an infinite number of jobs — frequently 2 or 3 part-time jobs at once. These were usually higher level office positions such as legal secretary, proofreader, copyeditor. In addition, I taught Yiddish for a while, tried my hand at Yiddish translation, and taught creative writing workshops at home. But always sandwiched in was simple office work: typing, answering the phone, xeroxing, filing, and more recently word processing. My income has never been steady, always uncertain. I remain constantly worried about where the next job will materialize.

¹ City College of New York was free at the time, yet there was hardly any student I knew who did not work at least one part-time job.

In the mid-'70s it was still possible to survive by working part-time, but by the end of the decade, I had to return to full-time secretarial work — first in a law office, later in a school for disturbed boys, finally and more recently, in a posh psychiatric hospital. During this four-year period which ended in November, 1983, I managed to carve out one block of uninterrupted time — eight months unencumbered by a job — that allowed me to write. I had saved some money and received support from my mother and then from a grant. One thread: my livelihood.

The second thread: my writing. Since I began to publish in the early '70s, my writing itself has brought me virtually no income. I have self-published or been published, have accumulated a substantial number of credits, but as for money, in 11 years, I have earned a total of \$695 from contributions to anthologies.² As an editor of *Conditions*, I received \$1,200 for 4½ years of work.³

Where the threads converge. *Keeper of Accounts* was the collection I worked on during my eight month "break" in 1981-82. Though I have so far made no money from it, it has been the positive response to that collection that has freed me, at least for now, from office work. *Keeper* has made me better known as a writer, thereby qualifying me for a number of creative writing jobs and for a writer-in-residence grant.⁴ Since November, 1983, I have lived on income from these as well as from adjunct teaching in two different colleges. It has been a relief.

I offer these details about my work history, my career as a writer and a teacher, and my economic situation because I want to be clear that I am not writing from the perspective of an office worker who has only done office work and has never had other kinds of opportunities. Clearly, for a long time my life had all the markings of upward mobility, and the Ph.D. was intended to place me solidly in the middle class. It was a course I had chosen and which I was not ashamed of. It was only the economic situation that checked these plans.

My history is not unique in this sense; I believe there is a far greater mixture and mix-up of education, class, and economic insecurity among women than feminists recognize. Some of the reasons for this I discuss in this essay. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, in one of our numerous dialogues, pointed out that on the whole our movement has too often equated the issues of class and race, thereby obscuring the need for a separate analysis of each. One result has been an erasure of the white working-class experience. A white woman — and especially a Jew like myself — is usually

² My first collection of poetry, *periods of stress*, was self-published through Out & Out Books and later distributed by me directly. I borrowed money for this venture and never broke even. My contributions to *Lesbian Poetry*, *Lesbian Fiction*, and *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* have netted a total of \$145 and a complimentary copy of each anthology. When Persephone Press went bankrupt, it had already distributed almost 2,500 copies of my second collection, *Keeper of Accounts*, but I had received no royalty payments. Ultimately I borrowed \$1,500 to buy the remaining 2,400 from Alyson Press to whom the books had been sold. *Sinister Wisdom* is currently distributing *Keeper* and I am expecting royalty payments. The biggest royalties I have ever collected were for an essay anthologized in *Why Children?* (The Women's Press Ltd., London: 1980). Editors Stephanie Dowrick and Sibyl Grundberg shared profits equally with contributors; so far I have received approximately \$550.

³ This was not from a salary, but from a \$5,000 editorial grant which the collective received from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines and split four ways.

⁴ This was awarded by the New York State Council on the Arts, 1984.

assumed to be middle class, while a woman of color — especially Black, Hispanic, or Native American — is usually assumed to be working class, or poor, which is often, but not inevitably, true.

My own experience in the movement substantiates Melanie's analysis. Much of the impetus for this article has stemmed from my frustration and anger at what I have observed: distortion and erasure of the lives of women I have worked with at various jobs; ignoring, misunderstanding, and romanticization of my own experience. The resistance to clarity has, predictably, been greatest from middle class and downwardly mobile women who have never felt and thus simply do not understand economic traps and limitations.

Because the office experience is not my life's work either, because I expect that the next 10 years will be like the last, with office work comprising only part of my working life, because I expect to continue benefiting from my writing and my training as a teacher, I too cannot completely convey what it means to remain 25 or 35 years typing at a desk and never to have any other options. And while I have frequently been broke, have been and am constantly in debt, I have never been the poorest of the poor. But I have experienced the sense of entrapment and futility that office work can bring for periods long enough to enable to me to glimpse their meaning. For this glimpse I feel peculiarly indebted, knowing that had my life gone according to my class, I would have known no work but office work; and had my life gone according to my plans, my knowledge of this kind of working life would have been almost non-existent. In fact, this knowledge and my friendship with other office workers have been the only benefits of the experience.

I keep asking myself why I need to write this — what it is that I need to say. As often happens with my writing, the title comes first: "The Distances Between Us." The "us" — my sisters in the women's movement (however, one defines it) and the women in the offices I work in — who talk disparagingly about that movement, about "libbers," about how they like to have doors opened for them, about the poor "spinster" living down the road.

I did not say my "sisters in the offices I work in" because I'm not used to writing or reading that phrase. My failure. Our failure. But sisters they are with a connection I feel strongly despite our different lives, our different levels of consciousness, despite the fact that most of the time I cannot be open about myself as a dyke, a Jew, a writer. But then, am I fully myself in the women's movement when the life I lead — the experience of office work and economic pressure — is not part of the feminist consciousness? So there is distance there too.

This essay represents my attempt to balance a perspective in a movement I am deeply committed to — the feminist movement. I want to view the world, or at least the immediate society in which I function, not only from the vantage point of a deliberate, conscious lesbian/feminist, but also from the vantage of those women who seem to reject feminism theoretically, but obviously need a feminist movement because they are affected by women's issues — including class, work and economics about which they are the experts and can teach us. Too often these women are excluded because they do not have the correct political language or consciousness. Ironically, much of our

political rhetoric includes their condition and living circumstances. And yet how often do we dismiss them or put down their perspectives as uninformed and unenlightened because *they* do not talk like *we* talk, do not operate from the same framework.

March 11, 1983: The deadline for this essay is almost past and nothing that looks like an essay has yet emerged.⁵ I have a pile of separate sheets of paper with first-draft notes: memories, observations, half-formulated ideas and theories, questions, suggestions for answers, reminders to look up certain passages. Most of these have been jotted down at high speed on my office IBM selectric, usually when I should have been doing something else and was tense that I might be caught.

These separate sheets physically embody part of what it is I want to write about. What it is like to be an alert, thinking human being absorbed, assaulted by mindless, unintelligent work. The fragmentation. The sense of being scattered. What it is like not to have time to think, to consider an idea and follow it through to its logical conclusion. This condition — devoid of logic because it is irrational, devoid of structure because it is aimless, devoid of theme or thesis because it is pointless — is not unique to me just because I happen to want to write. Rather it is the common experience of many working people, an experience that I have observed and shared primarily with those who do office work.⁶ Most of the office workers I have met are not writers and do not want to be; nor are they lesbians or conscious feminists. Yet how often between transcription tapes, during extended coffee or smoke breaks, on those Friday afternoons that seem endless — how often have I heard them speak of the sense of deprivation, of being robbed, the sense of loss that I happen to experience in relation to my writing. Eight hours a day, five days a week, we all lose possibilities, lose self.

I am stuck with this paradox. Those who do not share this life of aimless, meaningless work, those who do not sit and feel day after day go to waste, simply do not know, cannot, I believe, fathom the depth of its destructiveness. They do not know, and yet they think they know, frequently creating theories about it, stating how work and economic issues are important, yet how we must move past them towards "deeper" or "higher" ones. Poor and working-class women know that a lot of the time these are the *only* issues; no wonder, therefore, they find such theoretical writing — not too difficult as some would have us believe — but too abstract, too divorced from their own daily struggles.

My own experience has taught me that work and economic issues are essential starting points for feminist discussions, ones which cannot be quickly skipped over. They affect us psychologically, affect our personalities, our creativity, our ways of thinking, affect our relations with each other. Unfortunately those of us who understand this through direct experience — well, the experience itself frequently blocks us from communicating what we know. After all, how many of us have the time or space to pull

⁵ As this indicates, I have been trying to finish this essay for the past year and a half.

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa pointed out that this is true of those who also do physical and factory work or for that matter any kind of work not involving the self.

together our knowledge and observations? How many of us have the energy, in fact, both to absorb the experience and to convey it to others in whatever form? And this is precisely the trap in which I now find myself. Knowing. Yet not being able to speak.

Fact 1: My life at this time does not allow me to write the traditional essay: beginning, middle, end — state your thesis clearly; develop the argument; illustrate appropriately; smooth out transitions; refine the logic, conclude. And I really do not want to produce such an essay, but rather something that is closer in form to my way of life and, equally important, closer to the process of my writing.

The fragmentation of this piece, therefore, is not unlike the fragmentation of the lives of those of us who have no time to ourselves. The leaps, ellipses, zigzags are the result of a specially developed thought process, one that is not linear because it is always interrupted, frequently free-associative and haphazard, rarely schematized. We think. But we think differently. Sudden realizations, half-finished paragraphs, an outline, a sketch. But not smooth development, ordered philosophy.

Fact 2: If those of us stuck in these situations are going to say anything at all, then we must say it in non-traditional ways. We must speak in leaps, in zigzags, in incomplete parts. To wait until we can speak smoothly and completely is to doom ourselves to silence.

Inside and Outside

I frequently talk about being in the "real" world as opposed to the feminist or lesbian circle. What is the opposition I set up?

Everything outside the feminist movement is the "real" world. This consists of the institutions, the office and office workers at my current job, my family and friends "from before." When I think this way, do I mean the feminist world is "unreal?"

Not so much unreal as sifted. To some degree. To a great degree. The "movement" world — the inside — is created through choices. We choose the people we want to work with, we choose the causes we want to work on, we choose the feminist institutions we want to create. None of this is absolute, but certainly it seems true to a greater degree than in the "real" world — the outside. Because we are so used to these choices, coalitions are frequently difficult to make. We think we have a choice about whom we work with. And there are people we choose *not* to work with.

Outside

I have no control over the circumstances in the office I work in. I look for a job and usually take what I can get, hoping for a decent salary or benefits or a manageable travelling time — all the considerations surrounding work. But I do not choose the other people in the office, just as I do not choose other members of my family, just as I do not select who can be a Jew or woman. These all come with birth. And working circumstances come with the job.

What always astonishes me is how quickly people whom I have never seen before begin to exert enormous power and influence over my life. My boss could be constantly proving his authority by demanding I let him know when I need to leave my desk

and go to the bathroom. My supervisor might hate her job, be frustrated with the administration and take it out on me by constantly dropping in to see "exactly what you are doing." The supply person might take a disliking to me and not give me a good transcribing machine. When you consider that you must spend 8 hours a day, 5 days a week dealing with any or all of this, life can become a complete nightmare. It is not easy just to say: I guess I'll leave and find something else. Not in these times when jobs are scarce, when you're middle-aged and no longer can "pretty up" some man's office, when you've been conditioned by poverty not to leave any job.

Given these circumstances, most women in offices know it's to our advantage to pull together. There are always exceptions, the ones sucking up to the supervisor or boss; but these individuals are easy to spot because of their isolation. There is no faking around this issue. Most of us know who the enemy is, even if we are very different from each other. In the office, we rarely mistake what side of the line we are all on.

Inside

We act as if we always have a choice. We are insulted when asked to associate or join with someone we disagree with or dislike. We try as much as possible to pick and screen those around us.

This is probably an exaggeration.

This is probably not an exaggeration. Look at the in-fighting, the pulling apart, the trashing and back-stabbing. We confuse who the real enemy is, frequently fingering each other. We act as if we can afford to pick and choose. And we can't.

Two Episodes

Outside: I am being interviewed for a secretarial job. I have made a mistake in this application by admitting, not that I have a Ph.D. (which I know never to admit to in these situations), but that I have an M.A. The job as advertised seemed to require some research and editing experience. I misread. My prospective boss, a psychiatrist, worries that I'm overqualified. Would I be bored? he asks. I've been asked this question before whenever the issue of my education has come up. The implication is, of course, that the more educated you are, the more tedious the work will seem.

Does he think women with a high school degree find transcription and typing interesting and stimulating? What kind of hierarchical conception of human beings does this psychiatrist have? How is it that a well-educated man, supposedly trained in sensitivity, does not have any idea that every single secretary around him sees through his arrogance and condescension and is repeatedly outraged by them? And to what degree does he — and those like him — have to dehumanize office workers in order to maintain this limited view of them?

Let me put it another way: what deliberate ignorance and callousness to people — high school drop-out and Ph.D., secretary, housewife, athlete, construction worker, farm worker — would allow for the conclusion that anyone would find this work anything but boring?

Inside: Another writer has just finished reading my short story "The Journal of Rachel Robotnik." The story is about a woman office worker — and a writer — trying to find time to write, trying to cope with the tensions between other transcribers in her steno pool and their boss, trying to find some balance in her chaotic life. My friend, a political writer, proud of her political awareness and commitments, likes the story very much, but confesses: "I've always wanted to write about office work. But it's so boring. I've never been able to do it." At first I am stunned. Then I feel rage at the ignorance, insult of the remark. *Office work, I know is very boring, very boring indeed. But the people who do office work are not.* Certainly not any more than any other people. My friend knows she must be aware of the "working class," must "reach out" to *them*, but in her own life, what she does is distance. For her the work and the people are one and the same: only boring people would spend a lifetime doing boring work. No wonder she — and others like her — can't build personal or political bonds with working-class women.

Inside and Outside: One night when I had a bad case of insomnia, I remembered these two episodes and suddenly realized that in *both* the word "boring" loomed large — though the judgment came from two people seemingly opposed politically and ethically. Neither my boss (and he finally hired me) nor my politically correct friend with her guilt toward the working class sees the woman office worker for what she is: as complex a human being as the political writer wanting to make an impact on the world through her radical political analysis; as complex a human being as the head of a research department of a modern psychiatric hospital, claiming to have insight into the psyches of others. As complex and as simple. But only those who have allowed themselves to look beyond the occupation label and made personal contact and shared experiences will know that.

I have encountered extraordinary arrogance and ignorance concerning working-class people, often from feminists who are well educated, of middle-class backgrounds, and who pride themselves on their political analyses, their raised consciousness and awareness, and their critical appraisal of privileges. Some examples:

—I review a novel about a waitress and ask for some feedback. On one note I receive the following question: Given that this novel is written in different voices and from different perspectives, should you not deal with the fact that a working-class woman will not understand it?

Why should she not understand it?

—I present a poem to a workshop that I am leading. It describes a working-class woman who — among other things — mentions that she believes in seeing things "aesthetical." Members of the workshop object. How could such a woman know such a concept, much less the word itself?

Why should she not know it?

—A woman tells me about a political group in which members decided to use the word "ain't" in their flyers so that the group would seem like "one of the people."
No comment.

—Another woman tells me of rewriting leaflets primarily in monosyllables so the "masses" could understand them better.

No comment.

—A "downwardly mobile" dyke tells me she's going to get unemployment. It's not very much, but she's decided to collect anyway even though it seems a lot of trouble and somehow, she implies, is demeaning to fill out all those forms and stand on line once a week.

What must she think of the rest of us who line up obediently and to whom it never occurs that we should do otherwise because we have no choice?

Arrogance. Contempt. But above all — incredible ignorance. The "masses" out there are stupid, uneducated, unreachable unless you speak to them in kindergarten English. They are not people with a different way of living, surviving, with their own perspective. They are inferiors. To most middle-class feminists, as to most middle-class non-feminists, working-class women remain mysterious creatures to be "reached out to" in some abstract way. No connection. No solidarity.

A Feminist Consciousness

A memory from the late '70s: I am teaching a course: Introduction to Women's Studies. It is summer and we meet four times a week in the evenings. The class is a typical New York City mixture of Third World and white women, middle-class and working-class, gay and straight, Jew and Christian, old and young.

Before I started teaching, I had been warned that women registering for it would probably have a low level of consciousness on feminist issues in general. This turns out to be too true. Though they live in New York City, not one has ever stepped inside a women's bookstore (at the time there were three) or attended a women's event (and there were dozens). Most are here out of a conscious curiosity as well as an unconscious pull towards feminism. And so we spend a great deal of time on what is basically consciousness-raising. After about three weeks they are much more sensitive, more aware of sexism, of feminist perspectives and analyses. Initially very skeptical, they are now frequently angry.

At the midpoint in the course, I assign a story from the violence issue of *Heresies*, a story about a family outing at a lake.⁷ As I remember it, no overt violence takes place; but throughout the outing the father bullies the wife and children incessantly. The class discusses domestic violence, the different degrees, levels, types. Without thinking very much about it, I ask casually: "Well, what about the mother? What do you think of her? After all, she's fairly passive. Do you think she can be reached?"

The answers come quickly. No. Absolutely not. She's beyond help. Maybe this is naive of me, but I am genuinely shocked. Most of the women in the class seemed in her condition only three weeks before. And now — they deem her a hopeless case: *She's the type that never changes*. Why, I wonder, do they give up on her so quickly? Why do they distance themselves from her?

Suddenly I am angry. Everything we've been doing for the past three weeks seems worthless. What's the point if there is no identification, no empathy? So I return the

⁷ Anita Page, "The Pleasure Outing," *Heresies* #6 (1978), pp. 27-33.

next day and make a very clear statement: I refuse to let them give up on this character. I tell them I am willing to sit in silence for the remainder of the course until they come up with some kind of satisfactory answer in relationship to the woman in the story.

And so we sit. And I wait. No one is particularly comfortable. The silence goes on for a long, long time. And then finally one woman blurts out: "What the hell is she supposed to do? Just pick up the kids and go? Where? And do what?"

And with that question, with what is clearly an identification with the woman's perspective and options, the class is off. They begin a serious discussion of choices. Of helplessness. Of indoctrination. Of breaking through the indoctrination — what makes it possible, what blocks it. Of available support systems. Of support systems that should exist but do not. Of the feelings that led them to register for the class. The fact that the class existed. The fact that they knew someone who encouraged them. And on and on.

What they bridged at this point was the distance their consciousness created between themselves and other women who had not reached the same point. They *remembered* and *integrated* their past experiences with their new perceptions. They realized that a young mother with two children, with no independent income or social support will tolerate a great deal from a cruel husband. Her remaining with him might not be just stubborn resistance to feminist ideas of women's strength and independence, nor her "ineducability," but rather a realistic acceptance of the circumstances which allow her and her children to survive, even if painfully.

A Recent Interpretation: When I described this episode to Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, she remarked that when people first discover new parts of their identity, their tendency is to strengthen their self-perception by separating themselves from those who do not share it. This solidifies one's new position. We see this frequently with just-out lesbians who can't bear heterosexual women, or newly born radicals who scorn all who are not politicized like them.

Still, if this type of separating is a necessary stage of the process, it should be only temporary. For when consciousness does nothing except separate us from each other, it is useless. Maybe worse than useless. It is divisive.

I have watched feminists with such "raised consciousness" be contemptuous of the office worker who wears make-up and worries about her weight (never mind if these might be legitimate concerns in relation to her job). Such a judgment reveals: one, that the working-class woman is seen as completely passive, having to be changed by others and having nothing to offer; and, two, that her experience as well as her being are deemed too lowly. This analysis frequently passes for "consciousness" or "being political," again separating those who are from those who aren't. In this context, being political means being morally superior.

I am reminded of Anzia Yeziarska who, in her story "Brothers," wrote: "Education without a heart is a curse." And a raised consciousness without a heart is not only a curse, but a fraud.

February 22, 1983: Why do we always assume that having a "raised consciousness" or "political awareness" is desirable? I remember my initial exhilaration after finishing Tillie Olsen's *Silences*. Though much of the content was not "new" — my background had already clued me in to many of the limitations that this book describes — I had never really thought about silencing in such a systematic way, nor had I thought about how it applied to myself as a writer.

For example, I had always characterized myself as "not very prolific." This was not said defensively, just descriptively. I did not produce much. It hadn't occurred to me that the circumstances of my life did not lend themselves to my being prolific because most of my energy was expended on trying to support myself. Writing was, of course, important, but not *most* important. It was not anything I cried about. Who cries about such things? Certainly no one I knew while growing up. I was taught that everyone works. And no one expects any pleasure from it. You just do it. And writers are no exceptions.

I read *Silences* at a time when I was taking my writing more and more seriously. As I said, the initial realization of the various barriers — sexist, social, economic, racial — that silence us, that prevent us from externalizing our vision and experiences of the world was exhilarating: certain discrete perceptions suddenly fell into place and created a pattern in the midst of complete chaos.

But as the recognition took hold, as it sank deeper into my consciousness, as the true implications of that pattern became clearer, as I realized the full force of the "givens" of my life in relation to my writing, I began to experience a tremendous upheaval — a period of intense rage and pain. I became acutely aware, in a way I had not been before, of all my limitations.

I read *Silences* in 1979 during a short three-month "break" from work. Afterwards, I began working full-time in a law office. I had begun to write the story "The Journal of Rachel Robotnik." Every day during that period, while typing, while transcribing, while xeroxing, while filing, I would think: I could be writing. I could be writing my story. I could be working on many stories, on many poems. I went through a period of intense self-observation, of focusing on the exact meaning of what I was living through. Day after day completely wasted in meaningless work. Getting up every morning. Crowding into the dilapidated subway. Other people crowding around me. Empty, bleak days. All I could think was: I am wasting, wasting everything in me. For almost a full year I counted and measured every minute, every second in my life that was being wasted. The constant calculating was excruciating.

The rage was soon accompanied by an envy that worked like a high-powered microscope, making visible and enlarging differences, magnifying what others had and what I did not have. A writer I knew who didn't need to work was looking for a room so she could write in seclusion and peace; her home, she said, was chaotic. I envied her, could barely look directly at her when she explained "her problem." Another woman was taking time off because she was feeling scattered and just couldn't focus (she had income from sources outside of her job). Someone else went away on vacation to unwind. Someone else was just staying home. I envied them and sometimes hated

them. I could not forgive them for not being in my position.

These were the kinds of emotions that erupted in me as I awakened to the limitations of my growth as a writer. Envy is a horrible thing, especially when directed at what is not within our control. It is like raging at a thunderstorm. It is stupid. It eats you up.

But I felt it. And it came with the perception that consciousness brought. At the time, there was nothing I could do about my condition. And so I yearned for the time when I was oblivious to it.

I remember another feeling I experienced during this period. Every morning I would take the train from Brooklyn and get off at 42nd Street and Grand Central Station in Manhattan. I would hurry through the station surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of other people, all also rushing to get to work on time. Thousands of us would bunch up near the escalators that took us up into the Pan Am Building, a short cut to the Helmsley-Spear Building where I worked. As I waited, completely surrounded by masses of people, completely lost among them, and then as I began to move upward on the escalator and saw those above me getting off and those below me still crowded and waiting patiently, I would be overcome with a feeling I can only imagine close to mystical. I, raised an atheist and completely non-spiritual in my approach to life, would be overcome with such a sense of oneness with the people around me, such a sense of being with them — a feeling I had never before nor since felt. I knew we were all lost together, that we were all being eaten up, swallowed up as if we were on a large conveyor belt feeding us to oblivion.

At those moments, I neither envied nor raged. I felt enormous peace with everyone. I knew I was sharing a basic experience with thousands of people. I did not feel alone.

Wasting a Life

A memory: I am meeting a friend who is working for the "Fair Hearings Court" of the State of New York. She transcribes the court proceedings of welfare recipients who challenge decisions on a local level.

The transcribing pool is in the midst of a vast floor space — on the edges are crates filled with files, desks piled on top of each other. Smack in the center of this upheaval — there's no way to tell if they're moving in or moving out — there are 10 transcribers sitting in two rows facing each other. At the head of the two columns sits the supervisor, a woman who used to be one of the girls. She has risen through the ranks and along the fringes. Behind each row of transcribers are a few other desks with extra space around them — state bureaucrats. And then the cartons, crates and stacked office furniture. Large windows look out on the State Capital. Outside, I can see the enormous towers built by Rockefeller in honor of himself. His labyrinthian highways run under this plaza, unnecessary highways which required the demolition of century-old bridges.

The transcriber who is my friend is also a sculptor of massive structures that seem to push themselves out of the studio, that always seem to demand more space than she can provide. Karen is sitting, one of the girls, dressed in typical "bohemian" fashion — bright green Indian pants, a burning pink blouse, her long black hair defiantly loose

and the grey streaks quite unashamedly visible.

She sits the third one down. She is facing a young woman who has her hair cut punk, defiantly green. Karen sits and transcribes. She is wearing boots, her foot is on the pedal, the headset over her ears. I stand for a moment and watch her silently. She cannot see me.

Later she will tell me how not a single case that she has transcribed during the past three months, not a single welfare recipient who has come for a hearing in order to increase payments or be reimbursed for a refrigerator, for an electric bill, for nursing care, for food — *not a single one* has won a case in the state's "Fair Hearings Court." And how can they? she asks. The state picks the judge, the prosecutor and the defending lawyer. So why should anyone win?

I look at Karen and watch her foot press the pedal.

Stupid is not the word for it. Criminal.

And I know that I could walk along these two rows of women and stand and watch each one and say the same thing:

Stupid is not the word for it. Criminal.

I am attending a feminist brunch. An intense discussion develops around the issue of women's lives and the lack of opportunity, the repression, oppression, the exploitation. One woman becomes extremely upset, indignant because she cannot bear to think that her mother's life has been a waste. Some women try to comfort her. I do not say anything. I know, of course, that no person who has exhibited kindness, caring and support can be said to have wasted her life entirely. But I also know the bitter fact that most lives are incredibly wasted, that the opportunities for developing identity, for receiving pleasure, for achieving a sense of self-worth are limited and, not only underdeveloped, but in most cases not developed at all — because no one thinks that a housewife, or a mother, a typist has anything to develop. It simply has never occurred to most people. And that judgment is passed on through the silence surrounding them.

I do not say anything. But I know that this woman's mother has probably wasted a lot of her life, just as I have wasted periods of my life. And there is no getting away from that knowledge.

Art and Other Callings

I have been asking myself why I always focus on the artist. I focus on her because art — in my case writing — is the most obvious yardstick I have to measure the waste in my own life. I do not know what yardsticks to use for others, for most people have not been allowed to see their own possibilities. Art, after all, is not the only means to self-expression and though some of my co-workers might — given the chance — want to be artists, others might want to be organizers, engineers, philosophers, full-time housewives and mothers, physicists, athletes, activists, greenhouse keepers, animal doctors, furniture strippers.

How easily do I and many of the feminists I know accept the fact that some of us are born with "talent" that should be nurtured and supported, without considering the

implications of labelling and naming *only* talents associated with art or professions. In doing that, aren't we implying that those born without a specific, *visible* talent are automatically meant to be transcribers or xerox machine operators or factory workers?

Sometimes I wonder if, in fact, most formally educated people do believe just that. Just as an artist or doctor must have the proper, conducive working atmosphere to flourish, so the secretary or office worker must have the proper, conducive working atmosphere for her calling. So how can we help her? How can we nurture and support her? Musak perhaps? Good lighting? A self-erasing selectric typewriter? A word processor?

When people think in these structures, when they separate the artist, intellectual, or professional and think of her as a person apart, as special, as disconnected from the "masses," from the assembly line, from the stenographic pool, they reveal their basic distance from working people. When feminists think in these structures, our commitment to helping the "non-artist," the "ordinary" woman becomes nothing more than a desire to make her *more comfortable in the current social order*, a failure to see the separate value of her life. Such distancing denies our connection to her. For while we place ourselves outside that order by virtue of our "unique talent," we doom her to remain forever inside the xerox room or steno pool. That is not radical thinking. That is plain elitism.

November 30, 1982: Talked to Nina this morning. She is the cook for the staff — psychiatrists, administrators, office workers. She makes our lunch. She works fast. Uses all her free time to read. I wonder about her. She's tough. Used to work in a gas station. Raised dogs. Yes, I wonder about her.

Said to me she didn't like working. Said she's wishing her whole life away. (She's only 22). Isn't it terrible, she asked, to live just for 2 days out of 7, and to wish the other 5 away?

Bonding

Given external facts, friendship between Elizabeth and me would seem impossible. Born a Catholic in a small Massachusetts town where she lived all her life, she was the oldest of four children. Went to work immediately after high school at the same psychiatric hospital where I met her more than 20 years later. Learned about sex by typing charts. Married at 20. Did not say much about Kenneth except that he never complained and was a good father. Had three children. The oldest boy had visual problems, hated school, was denied graduation until he passed a certain reading test. Elizabeth had worked with him almost every day since he entered second grade. The second boy just began college, the first one to do so in his family. The "baby," a girl, is still in high school. All worked. Elizabeth was exactly my age when we met: 41. She returned to work in this hospital about a year before I arrived.

I am a Jew, a survivor of the Holocaust, a lesbian, an author of two books of poetry, a Ph.D., a teacher, an activist, I have never married and have no children. I knew a great deal about Elizabeth within a couple of months. Until I left, almost a year later, Elizabeth only knew that I was a Jew, a survivor, that I aspired to write, and that I had

a roommate.

Yet Elizabeth and I did become close friends. I admired her and listened as she analyzed and reflected on her life at home and at the office. She taught me about the hospital and kept rejecting my suggestions for greater efficiency and accountability with: "Haven't you learned they're not interested in your opinion? That they don't care what we do or how often? That they simply don't care?"

She hated her job with a passion, but saw no way out. She was in constant crisis. Five adults, all needed transportation to jobs and schools, and cars and motorcycles were forever breaking down, kids getting into accidents, bills constantly popping up and out of control. She said she felt cheated because she could never enjoy the house whose mortgage she and Kenneth were killing themselves to pay off — she was either in the hospital typing or at home cooking and cleaning. Once, I came into her room when she was collating a long monograph and was moving from desk to table. She said: "Irena, I feel like a corkscrew, just driving myself deeper and deeper into the grave." And then she began to turn in place and say: "Work. Grocery. Home. Work. Grocery. Home."

She understood basic feminist principles, though she openly rejected any feminist labels. She analyzed the structure of male thinking in relation to organizations and stated that men simply could not diversify and do more than one thing at a time while women had learned to play multiple roles in the home. She was sure if the women took over the hospital, it would make more sense.

Yet she was devoted to family and the job. I would try to convince her, for example, to take a day off because she was totally depleted and exhausted — that "sick" did not mean exclusively "physically ill." It was hard for her to accept this; she thought it a form of lying. She felt responsible to the doctors. They relied on her. She refused to fudge or short change anyone, even though they constantly short changed her.

I understood her attitude. She wanted to salvage some sense of integrity. It was through her job and her family that she saw any possibility for achieving self-esteem. And so typing a report, quickly and flawlessly, was important. Meeting all deadlines was important. Never lying was important. Though I had things outside of the office that gave me a sense of worth — my writing, my political work — I too would often set goals for myself so I could have some sense of achievement during the day.

Still, I lied all the time, determined to use every sick day I could. I had no shame about it and Elizabeth and the others knew what I was doing. Yet no one blamed me or guilt-tripped me. They simply accepted me and my behavior. Elizabeth was particularly giving, enjoying our differences. She liked hearing about my outings to New York City, about my mother, about the woman I lived with — though that relationship was never clarified. She sympathized when I was really bored or disgusted. She sympathized when I was broke. And I was always eager to hear about her life, about how she had grown up in this town, her pre-marriage innocence, the progress of her kids in school, and to give any kind of advice based on my own experience outside the office. She in turn advised me patience, showed me short-cuts and pitfalls of the institution, and became a model of how to live without envy and constant rage. I tried to help her

make more room for herself, pointing out the kids were old enough to take over more responsibility. I also felt helpless and stymied, as with other friends, because I could not get her to break a lifelong pattern of self-sacrifice. At times I would feel angry and frustrated, especially when I found her asleep, her head resting on her typewriter. She countered: "It's not so much that we're not as good as we were. We're just not as good for as long."

Elizabeth made me feel privileged because I had reasonable hope that eventually — in a year or so — I could leave. I would get a break, if only temporary. I knew what one free week would have meant to her. Talking to her month after month, I realized over and over again, no matter how deeply unhappy I was, how depressed, that it was not the same as her unhappiness, as her depression. She made me feel the great difference between us and our lives.

And yet this difference did not separate us. It was possible for us to share equally — to share the particular strengths we had developed from our different lives. We formed a close bond based on a common experience of trying to cope with nonsensical regulations and the callous behavior of our bosses. Elizabeth made me more conscious than ever that her life was like so many others — devoured by meaningless work. She made me conscious of the kinds of lives so many women lead and the waste of it. As she put it: "You know, Irena, when I got out of high school in '58, no one thought I should do anything but type."

1982: A Photograph

Source: A local upstate New York paper.

Content: Two people shaking hands.

He is older. The president of a college. It is obviously graduation. He is dressed in an elaborate cap and gown — inverted collar, tassles, colored stripes, a multitude of folds evoking complexity, emeritus, honorary, distinguished, doctor.

She is young, very young. She is wearing the plainer costume: black cap and gown. No frills.

It is graduation.

They are shaking hands.

She has just received an award from the Secretarial Arts Department for "outstanding achievement in typewriting."

A Soap Opera

She was not glamorous. That is important. Because receptionists are always supposed to be glamorous. But Sandy was 35, wore casual make-up, clothes that were clearly frayed at the edges.

It took me a while to piece together the full portrait. Initially, Sandy struck me as happy-go-lucky. She was always laughing and joking whenever I came into the main office to pick up mail or do my xeroxing. She talked a lot about her kids, about her baby, twelve-year-old daughter, who was now wearing her "training" bra; about her fourteen-year-old son who had decided he was a "breast man" and not a "leg man." She was divorced and talked a lot about crushes she had and dreamed out loud about

meeting someone, about trying to show interest without overstepping the limits of ladyhood, about the middle-aged man at the post office who was interested in her but who she couldn't abide because, after all, he was balding.

She talked endlessly about all this. It all seemed fairly usual, simple.

But Sandy's life and history were complicated, so complicated that some people — mainly the administrators of this special school for boys — laughed behind her back and called her life a soap opera.

Her health, it turned out, was poor. She had kidney problems and she was taking special medication for arthritis. One day I noticed a black and blue mark on her arm and, without thinking, asked about it. She blushed, and then confessed that her brother had beaten her. Many family members were alcoholic, she herself was one, though she was sober now. The night before one of her brothers had arrived drunk. She shrugged and blushed again.

She also had custody problems. The arrangement was not permanent. Custody was reassigned on a monthly basis. And it was partly contingent on her ability to support the kids, pay her mortgage, her fuel bills, etc. She kept reassuring me that her husband was really a nice guy and loved the kids.

Since she had been hired to replace someone who had gone on maternity leave, Sandy had no job security, or benefits. She was earning \$3.25 an hour working a 40-hour week (not including lunch).

Her "responsibilities" included switchboard, typing, xeroxing, collating, and filing. She worked in the main office of the school. I was a secretary, but in a different building. Compared to other secretaries — there were six of us in all — Sandy was not very good. Her work at the switchboard and xeroxing was fine. But her typing was filled with errors and misspellings, her filing sloppy and confused. Most of us would help her out whenever we were in the main office; but we could never give her all the help she really needed.

One day towards the end of the summer, she got sick — sun stroke complicated by the arthritis medication she was taking. She collapsed and was rushed to a hospital. She remained critical for a few days and then finally stabilized. After two weeks, she was back home.

The day after she got home, the supervisor called and gave her two week's notice. Another secretary came to stay with her. She could not get out of bed yet. She had absolutely no money. She was worried about custody.

Another woman had been interviewed for the position. But when it came time to negotiate the salary, she refused the \$3.75 (50¢ more than Sandy was getting). Not anticipating any problems, the supervisor had fired Sandy before the other woman had actually accepted. Now the school was stuck.

Shameless, as always, the supervisor called Sandy. Forget what we said.

And, of course, she did. What else was she supposed to do?

The other secretaries tried to make her deal with the situation, emphasizing that the administrators had no scruples, that this could happen again, that Sandy needed to get a firm commitment. It was obvious the woman she had replaced was not returning and

that the administration was not going to offer the job to Sandy. She had to clarify the situation. If they refused to make a commitment, she had to start looking for something else — *now*.

Sandy listened, but was afraid to move. And then things changed. The supervisor gave notice and was replaced by a Mrs. Conroy. Everything got very quiet. We all sat tight and watched. It could get better. It could get worse.

We told Sandy that there might be some hope since Conroy was new. We urged her to talk to her and finally she did. Though it was now the end of October and though Sandy had been working for the school since April (eight months!), Conroy told her she would be put on 3-months probation. If she did well, the job was hers.

We were appalled. We knew it was a set-up. Clearly they intended to let her go. We told Sandy she *had* to start looking for another job, *had* to start *now*. But she just smiled. She felt hopeful. She was going to work hard, get her typing speed up, and then she'd become a permanent employee.

A couple of weeks later, her car broke down. She had no money to fix it. She lived about 25 miles from the school. During the next week, she hitched, once walked 12 miles, a couple of times got rides from people who deposited her at the office at 7 a.m. and picked her up at 8 p.m. She was keeping up, but barely. She was beginning to apply for jobs.

And then one day, they fired her. It was November, the week before Thanksgiving.

Oppression

Inside: There's a romance about it, a romance by middle-class women who feel guilty about their privileged backgrounds. Downwardly mobile, guilt-ridden, they embrace the status of the oppressed and wear it like a badge. They point with pride to how little they have, able to measure it by what they've given up. They are, they claim, clerical workers, office workers, struggling with the injustices of the capitalist system.

Outside: I do not believe anyone really chooses to be a clerical worker, though I know many women might say they do. I believe that most people have never had the opportunity to examine what their true potential is and so the selection of clerical work is not done in a framework of complete freedom. Most women are told they are without potential — intellectual, athletic, artistic — are raised to fear responsibilities outside of the home and to question their ability to deal with non-domestic issues.

My experience in offices is that clerical workers, who are the lowest in status and pay in the hierarchy of office workers, despite all conditioning, dream privately and sometimes quite openly about doing something else. Most never do and instead spend endless years doing the worst office shit work, 8 hours a day, 5 days a week. They spend this time in dead-end rooms, usually the useless corners or walk-in closets of large suites, rooms blocked off for files that don't need air or light. These women work for years, stooped over folders or climb ladders to reach drawers close to the ceiling. Dusty, dirty, boring, unhealthy work, endless index cards, endless folders, staples, paper clips, punched holes, reorganizing, pulling, shuffling, filing.

They do this when they are nine months pregnant, when they can barely bend, when they are too exhausted to move, do it till the day before the baby is born. And then,

two weeks later, after the delivery, they are back while a sister or a grandmother takes care of the newborn. Whenever you walk into their workspace, that dark area that nobody else wants, they greet you eagerly, chat, show photographs of the baby, try to delay your departure.

There are some who hold two or three part-time jobs in different offices. Some sneak in books, take correspondence courses so they can develop new skills and perhaps one day become a secretary.

These are the clerical workers I have known. They do not think about their status with pride or with shame. It is simply where they are in this society. The work they do is not a ticket to anything. And the only thing they get for it is a very, very small paycheck.

In the hospital where I worked, *each* doctor received an \$11,000/year *raise* between October, 1982 and January, 1983. In January, 1983, each secretary received a \$10/week raise. Out of thirteen women, not one had been earning more than \$10,400 a year (\$200/week before deductions) and, because health insurance went up that year, a number of secretaries took home less in '83 than they had in '82.

Victim

A woman was once describing a friend of hers to me — someone who was always hurrying from one part-time job to another, trying to piece together a living, always in a kind of frenzy and chaos that I know well. Perpetual deadlines. Different focuses. Irregular schedules. The woman concluded her long detailed description by commenting: "I don't think she'll ever get it together."

I swallowed hard. I had completely identified with the woman in the story. Get it together? I thought. With what assumptions does this woman operate? Who gets it together? How many people in this society ever get it together?

Most of us fail miserably at it. And we're meant to. Yet, we cannot accept the concept of ourselves as totally victimized, totally done in. We must feel some measure of possibility in our lives, for how else could we ever hope to gain any degree of control?

So victim? Yes and no, I suppose. I know a lot of people — skilled and hard working — who cannot get it together the way society wants them to. They do not meet current needs — whether that be typing skills or computer knowledge. They have many other skills — skills to care for the old, skills associated with compassion and patience, skills to build and construct, skills to teach and awaken. Are we to say they are playing victim, that they're not taking responsibility for their lives because they cannot, however hard they try, get their typing speed up or learn to use a word processor?

How glib. Would we ever say to anyone outraged at sexism, you've got to accept the givens of this society? But how quickly we say — accept your lot because you've chosen it or otherwise you would have gotten out long ago and "gotten it together."

Money

Feminists have barely learned to say the word to each other. How afraid we are to talk about it. Whenever the subject is broached, we run as if on hot coals and don't

stop until we reach a cool spot. Talk about anything but that.

A woman I know has so much more than me. She has a good job — good pay, benefits. She is secure, takes vacations. Another woman doesn't have to work at all. Both leave, take long, what seem to me luxurious periods of time off. I say good-bye to them. Wish them well. And I mean it. But I also think, why them, not me?

Another woman I know has so much less than me. In her eyes I am rich. She works as a chamber maid, is dependent on tips, is never quite sure how much she'll take home. She can never save, thinks it's a real luxury that I can take a day off with pay because I have sick leave. She thinks it's good that I have a day to write. And she means it. But she also thinks. Why her, not me?

Women sit around a table. Perhaps they're planning a benefit. Perhaps they're writing a statement. Perhaps they're organizing to participate in a conference in another city. One glances impatiently at her watch and calculates the cost of the babysitter. Another is thinking of the cost of a round trip ticket out of town and if she can afford to go. Still another feels depressed because she has to work that day and can't afford to take off. But they do not mention it. Some don't even think about the differences between them. Some do and feel guilty. Others want them to feel guilty. Others don't give a shit. *But no one talks about it.*

Shame and Humiliation

When Need Becomes Shame and Asking is Begging

November 10, 1984: I have postponed and postponed finishing this piece. I must finish it, I tell myself. But I am blocked, have been blocked for over a year now on an issue that sticks in my throat. It is the issue of shame and humiliation.

How can I write about this without exposing my own sense of shame? How can I write about this without confessing that just publishing this article about economics and money is intertwined with shame and humiliation? A shame that stems from early poverty. A shame that stems from my having internalized the worst of Jewish stereotypes. That because I'm a Jew, I must be rich. And if I say, no, I am not rich, then I am hiding my wealth, trying to get out of something.

I remember the first time I heard that some people would rather die in a burning building than run out and be seen naked. At the time, I could not quite grasp the depth of shame that could force someone to accept death rather than be exposed.

For the past year or so I have been thinking about this phenomenon, *the power of shame* over our lives, over my life — its power in stopping me from completing this essay, for example. I have been trying to sort out the times when I have felt ashamed as if I had done something wrong when, in fact, I had done nothing; to sort out the circumstances in which I have felt humiliated.

Need. I feel shame in feeling need, a shame that I associate with my early childhood of not having, of always wanting, of feeling that not to have a dress, a game, a toy made me somehow deficient, beneath, below, less than — *apart*.

That is, if those I am with have more. For if others share my circumstances, there is no shame. What occurs is complete understanding, camaraderie: a comparing of notes,

of swapping suggestions, of exchanging strategies — how to write a check and not have it bounce if the account is empty; which gas station gives credit; how to get an advance; etc.

But when the need is visible and public in the presence of those who are above it, or who have power to choose to help or not, who could bestow their resources, use their privileges, call it what you will — then *need becomes shame and asking feels like begging.*

Why?

I think back to group situations where assumptions are made, assumptions I do not share. It might be a question of which restaurant to go to. Or whether we should go to an event I want to attend but can't afford. Or even a discussion of whether the price of a certain book is reasonable. And what is reasonable? *How can something be reasonable if I can't afford it?*

I think about these situations and my own sense of exclusion — of wanting to be a part of a group and feeling I can't, of having to draw attention to it, knowing I will embarrass everyone, knowing I will be the wet blanket and burst the happy bubble of togetherness.

And what is it I really want of them? To carry me? Do I have any right to ask anything, I who have not gotten it together?

Sometimes, I think, all I want is the issue acknowledged. That in itself. But above all, I want someone else to raise this issue, someone for whom money is not a problem, but who recognizes that her framework, her "reasonable cost" is not necessarily everyone's.

As feminists, we pride ourselves on our "awareness" of class. Our events invariably have the "more if you can/less if you can't" tag attached to the entrance fee, hardship rate for journals, sliding scales. And yet, I know that many women who cannot afford the standard price will not admit it because to admit it is to admit to failure, to inadequacy — to admit to something shameful — the fact of not having gotten it together. Often, it is the feminist with the middle-class background, downwardly mobile, who pridefully puts down her dollar at a five-dollar event. Many women I've known who stem from poor backgrounds, from a life of welfare and unemployment, a life of piecing it together, barely, week by week, day by day, would rather die than admit to their present poverty. Everything in their upbringing, everything in this society says that "failure" (and that is equated with economic dependence) is their own fault, a deficiency in them. They have not worked hard enough to "succeed" in the climb — it is all their fault, they should have tried harder.

**TRAIL OF 2 LIVES THAT DISINTEGRATED LED TO LONELY
DEATHS ON AN ICY DAY** — by Nathaniel Sheppard, Jr. (*The New
York Times*, February 3, 1983)

This article has been hanging over my desk now for a year and a half. The first few paragraphs read as follows:

Chicago, Feb. 2—The lifeless bodies of Norman and Anna Peters were found, wrapped in tattered blankets against the January cold, on the icy seats of the dilapidated 1971 station wagon that had become their home. With no resources and no place to go, they had died of carbon monoxide poisoning, presumably while running the car's engine in an effort to keep warm.

It was the sad final chapter to the tale of the disintegrating lives of two ordinary people, a struggling blue-collar couple who exemplified the lives of a sizable part of America. Theirs had always been a difficult existence, a constant struggle to make ends meet for a family of seven with an income from Mr. Peters' periodic employment as an equipment mover. . . .

The Peterses had been a proud and private couple who had maintained a code of silence about their personal problems. It was a silence that often extended to their children.

The Peterses had lost their home — unable to keep up mortgage payments. Financially depleted by hospital costs to correct the birth defects of a child who had died 15 years ago, plagued by alcoholism and unemployment, Norman and Anna saw no way out. Their life had been an endless series of crises — member of the Riggers Local 136, the machinery movers' union to which Norman belonged, commented:

"There was no reason for them to sleep in a car. We would have figured out some way to help. If Norm had just come in, you can always get the guys to give five, ten dollars, fifteen dollars each. If only we had known."

But they didn't know. Norman did not say anything. Anna did not say anything.

When I decided to lead my first writing workshop in Brooklyn around the winter of 1976-77, I began to experience enormous anxiety when it came time to advertise. I needed to put up posters locally as well as in gay bars and women's bookstores in Manhattan. I felt enormous resistance to doing this and I kept procrastinating. Finally, a friend walked with me up 7th Avenue in Brooklyn and the signs went up.

POETRY WORKSHOP

led by

IRENA KLEPFISZ

author of *Periods of Stress*
an editor of *Conditions* magazine

My paralysis went beyond any insecurity over my ability to lead such a workshop. Like everyone else, I have self-doubt, but never to the degree of near incapacity. It was only after trying to sort it out and understand it, that I realized that for me the placing of such an advertisement was a public admission that I needed money, that I was doing this *only* because I needed money.

And I really did need the money. It didn't seem to matter that I was providing a service. My name was appearing in huge, shameless letters and announcing, just as shamelessly, that I was broke. Of course, no one necessarily knew; after all there are many writers who lead workshops for the pleasure of teaching or for even the prestige. And no one looking at my advertisement could distinguish me from them. Still, I knew of my need. *I knew* I was dependent on people signing up. And it was that sense of need, of dependence that paralyzed me.

When my mother and I came to the United States in 1949, we lived on charity from Jewish organizations. We occupied one room — the living room of a one bedroom apartment — and shared the kitchen with an older Jewish woman who did piecework in the garment district. We lived in this room for four years and much of this time my mother earned some money as a seamstress — doing alterations (taking up hems, taking in waists, puckering shoulders, and tightening darts) and sometimes creating originals of her own design. It was a difficult existence — uneven in income, very crowded and depressed, completely suffused by what we had just managed to survive in Europe.

The charity we were living on was never clearly defined for me. My mother wanted to protect me and tried to hide it. But it could not be completely blocked from my consciousness and instead what was strongly communicated was that we were not to refer to it. When pressed, we were, in fact, to lie about it. It was a source of shame.

Once someone she knew offered to print advertising cards for her. Since she wanted to build her list of customers, my mother accepted and soon there were hundreds of cards to be distributed.

ROSE KLEPFISZ

Seamstress

Originals and Alterations

Building -1, Apt. H-22

We took the cards and went out to the newer buildings of the cooperative complex we were living in. I was about 10 at this time and I found it all very exciting. We rode in the elevator to the 14th floor and then began slipping the cards under each door. For reasons I could not understand, if someone stepped out of an apartment, my mother would immediately slip into the stairwell. She did not want to be seen.

Everything about this endeavor seemed magical. The modern building, the elevators, the cards with my mother's name, the feel of the cold metal bannister as I ran down the stairs, skipping, jumping, leaping off the last four steps on to the next landing, rushing out into the hall ready to push more cards under the doors. But if someone stepped out of an apartment, my mother would immediately slip into the stairwell. She did not want to be seen.

She did not want to be seen.

You must ask, a friend once advised.

Yes, I thought, she is right. But my tongue could not form the words and at different moments I have been like the person in a burning building *willing to die rather than stand bare with my need*. I know that I could pass up the opportunity of a lifetime because of this deep-rooted shame. Some, I know, would categorize such behavior as "playing the victim." I don't agree. The person overwhelmed by shame, unable to move while the flames inch closer and closer and the heat becomes more and more intense — that person is not playing victim. Rather she is paralyzed by a socially learned lesson so deeply absorbed it has become almost an instinct life itself cannot counter.

The opportunity of a lifetime. Let it pass rather than ask or inquire. It is too humiliating to acknowledge the power of others over you, your dependence on them. It

is too humiliating to think that you might risk asking and they will turn you down. It is too shameful to wonder why you must go through this, why you do not have such power. Why it is that you have failed and have so little control over your own life.

You must ask, a friend once said.

Inside and Outside

What is real? What is feminist?

What is inside? What is outside?

All false distinctions, something I've known all along. There is no inside or outside. I do not live in two worlds. I live in one. The economics of the "real" world are not separate from the "feminist" world, even though the attitudes are often different. And this fact is one we ought to begin paying more attention to. For example:

—Women working in a battered women's shelter decided to unionize because they feel "their labor was exploited." The workers in Women Against Abuse (Philadelphia) stated that they did not view their problems as "isolated" and that "they have talked with staffs in other programs who have similar problems and concerns."⁹

—A feminist editor rejects a reconsideration of distribution of profits in an author's contract on the basis that such notions are "child-like" and inappropriate for the "real" world. The same editor sympathizes with protests of clerical workers over conditions and salaries, prints pamphlets about these injustices. Still she tells an author to "grow up" and face "real" facts when it comes time to sign a contract.

—A political organization becomes financially stable enough to hire women to do the paper work. Immediately a hierarchy is established. Political activists — feminists — have become employers and now must relate to employees, in this case also feminists, whose work is inevitably more mechanical and less prestigious.

—A number of writers protest treatment by *The New York Native* and publish their statement in other gay papers. They maintain that gay institutions must have economic responsibility to their workers and are not exempt from the standards that would be applied to mainstream institutions.

—A Woman's Studies Department has its "own" secretary or "shares" one with another department. She is, of course, an employee of the school. But how do members of the department deal with her and use her?

—A writer complains she received only a token honorarium for her contribution to a feminist anthology, and that out of 25 contributors, only the editor made any money. Why, she asks, is this woman not sharing some of the profits? Isn't she living off the work of others? Isn't that what we fight against in all other places? Why should this be the exception?

—A collective gets a grant and is able to pay one of its members for some of the shit work all have shared so far. On what basis is the person chosen? The neediest? Or the one with skills because she already has the experience? And when she messes up, another member, without thinking, says angrily: "But you're being paid!" And suddenly behavior that was tolerable as a volunteer is totally unacceptable. What happens

⁹ *Womannews*, July/August 1984, p. 8.

when our commitment turns into a job?

—A three-day feminist conference is scheduled for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. All working women are automatically excluded from participating in two-thirds of the activities. The feminist organizers have forgotten that we live in one world and that some of us do not have the luxury of stepping out of it even for a minute.

But if society has taught us to be ashamed over *not having* money and privilege, some feminists' romance with oppression has also made them ashamed over *having* money and privileges. The result has been a kind of dishonesty, a fudging around economic issues, of falsifying backgrounds and current possibilities, of blurring distinctions, of ignoring or denying power and achievements. With all our emphasis on truth, on breaking taboos — why is it that so much lying occurs around economic issues?

I remember that among the first feminists I met some were downwardly mobile and considered oppression a status symbol. Some had higher degrees. Some were college drop-outs. A predominant criticism was directed at anyone who had any education beyond high school. Because I was new to feminism and still naive, because I wanted to be accepted, I did not challenge attitudes which even then, in my heart of hearts, I knew to be wrong. Instead, I went along to such a degree that in my first book of poetry I was too embarrassed to list the Ph.D. in my biographical note. I — an immigrant, a Holocaust survivor, despite economic obstacles, having worked 20 hours a week through most of graduate school and full time during the summers, having managed to overcome psychological odds and traumas — I, Irena Klepfisz received a Ph.D. Truly something to be ashamed of.

How utterly crazy, when I think about it now. How utterly crazy.

The aspirations of most people—security, pleasure, leisure, meaningful work, creative and intellectual pursuits—are to be supported. These desires and dreams are not shameful. In supporting them, we are showing solidarity with working people, for whom these are luxuries and not givens.

Feminism cannot be separated from the economic realities of our society, and, as feminists, we need to face the economic unity of our lives; we must also learn to identify those of our actions that fall short of our best hopes. There is no such thing as purity. We must be willing to recognize and name powers and privileges that we do have and assess their significance and usefulness. And we must all recognize that these are not constant, but sometimes change in different contexts.

Sitting at various conferences, workshops, collective meetings, I have often marvelled at our ability to articulate perfect political theory while remaining insensitive and stubbornly ignorant to the life of the feminist sitting right next to us. At those moments, I have understood why so many women — deeply oppressed by sexism and economic necessity — find feminism and feminist theory abstract and irrelevant. At these feminist events, I too have sometimes felt alienated from discussions of sexism,

homophobia, racism, or anti-Semitism, though all these touch me personally. But the fact that there is no allusion to the working day from which I've just emerged or to the economic pressures which I carry with me has frequently made these discussions seem highly theoretical and left me estranged and angry.

It has occurred to me that it would be a good idea every once in a while to begin meetings with a 10-minute round robin so that each woman could say how she had spent the day and thereby ground the group. The differences between us, not only in terms of work, would then be clarified as each woman's assumptions, framework, and mental state on that particular evening become evident. The political discussion, no matter what its focus, would, I believe, be ultimately enriched and informed by the immediacy and concreteness of this information. We would then be not simply feminists speaking about feminist issues, but feminists rooted and bound in different ways in the same society — stating our frustrations *as well as* our pleasures and achievements. At the end of the meeting, members might want to do another round robin, this time focused on what each woman was going to be doing the next day. Thus, the political discussion would in some way be framed by and connected to our daily lives.

I offer this suggestion even though I know it is fraught with obvious dangers: self-hate, breast-beating, envy, anger, guilt-tripping, and lying. But I think, also, this kind of process contains the possibility of a much deeper view of our differences at any given moment and their relationship to our politics.

Above all, such a process might actually help all of us articulate the words we most fear and face the discomfort of our economic and class differences. For we need to put an end to the shame and guilt surrounding both power and powerlessness. We can begin with direct questions, of ourselves and each other:

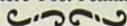
—What should I do with what I have? Share it? Keep it? Give it all away? Will you talk to me about your life? Will you help me understand? Can I learn from your strength? Will you tell me how I can be most useful to you? *Can you trust me?*

Difficult questions. As difficult as:

—Can I ask without shame? Can I show my strength? Can I stop equating all power with money? Will you listen to me? Will you give up some control? Will you see my need and not blame me—or fear me? *Can you trust me?*

And always the underlying question: *How do we work together?* For if we want liberation for women, then we're committed to building a society in which these distances—of class and economics—dissolve, and all our authentic differences—cultures, personalities, sexualities, talents, and aspirations—emerge and are equally nourished.¹⁰

¹⁰ I'm indebted to Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz for her discussion of the feminist movement's failure to address class issues in her unpublished essay, "Is There Post-Feminism Before Women's Liberation?"



from *Tryst/Triste*

The following words are taken from a longer manuscript which was written primarily to explore musical ideas, responses to music and to the pressures of a musical career.

The word "Triste," when it appears in the upper-left corner of a piece of music, is a direction to the musician to play the piece sadly.

from December 9, 1982

I return to this journal easily and contentedly, probably because I am not a writer. It is often not easy to return to the harp.

I jumped into a deep, freezing mountain pool once at dawn. Beginning the day's practicing is similar to that. I crack my spine a few times and adjust the height of my bench, open the window a bit to admit light and air, arrange my piles of music and pry the cover off my new Taktell metronome (this is rather like trying to bash open a coconut). I place my hands on the strings. This is the moment at which I'll discover how well I really slept last night — will I be foggy, or alert? Lately I am usually foggy. The alert days are great — steam rises noisily in the old radiators while I give of my muscle and emotion and thought until exhausted. It amazes me that such things as how sensibly I've been eating, what's on my mind, how clean my hair is and how long it's been since my last orgasm all determine how I play — as do, I'm sure, dozens of other factors of which I'm unaware. Even what I have dreamed the previous night can surprisingly shape this early morning practice time.

I am good at hiding pain. I mean mental pain; no doubt I'm vocal enough about physical pain. But I smile so much that a great deal of hurt is well masked. I never discuss my personal life with Ann (though I'd like to, for what is more personal to me than this harp playing stuff?) But when I sit down to play I can't hide pain. It's in my fingertips and they fumble or drag when my heart is heavy, they betray my secrets, they tell all. Wrong notes fly away from me into the thin studio air. The pedals make awful stinging noises. This fumbling and stinging has happened a lot in lessons this fall. Ann says nothing, she doesn't reprimand, but I wonder if she thinks I'm not working. How often I've wished for the luxury of a little time away from the harp. But now I have the opportunity to take the spring semester off, and it's a horrible thought, I won't do it! I seem to *need* the early morning orchestra rehearsals after the late, soul-searching nights. I need the regularity of lessons and the steady stream of new, untried notes to conquer. And I need the fellowship of other musicians — they are wacky, they are sensitive, they are sad, they are loud, they are jittery, and above all they are beautiful, and I love them. We come from all parts of the world to be together in this colorful Conservatory. In the rather dumpy cafeteria which I love and to which I

return day after day I am surrounded by voices: a smooth French accent, excited Korean, sounds of solfege being practiced, relaxed and expansive laughter, tight little conversations of deadlines and grades. My friend Nancy is a jazz vocalist. She has long, curly red-brown hair and eyes that are nearly the same exotic color. We put our feet up on the ugly orange plastic chairs and divide a bag of parsley, munching happily and washing it down with Tab. The caffeine is undoubtedly very bad for me, but Nancy's effect on me is the opposite of caffeine, very calming. A Zen sort of person, not like me (thoroughly Western, Christian, and neurotic!)

If musicians are not neurotic innately, the stresses of the music business must eventually make them that way. All of the performing makes for an uncomfortable degree of vulnerability and aliveness. We probably all long to sleep better than we do.

from December 13, 1982

I am so immersed in music all day that when I come home in the evening, sometimes there is no sound more refreshing than silence.

Silence is not passive.

My teacher, Ann: she is so organized, and so calm. Nothing seems to perturb her. No matter how hectic her schedule becomes, however crammed with the Symphony, the Pops, the Chamber Players, concertos, tours, teaching, Tanglewood, trips to Japan, France, Nova Scotia; she always looks rested and lovely — always. Her hair is perfect. Her eyes are clear. She may admit to being tired, but I rarely see it. On the telephone she is invariably calm and cheerful. I am awed by the strength of her technique and by her physical beauty. What do my obligations amount to, compared to hers? Yet I am the one who arrives at lessons tired and disoriented, she never does. Ann is unfailingly patient and diplomatic. She does not raise her voice. Why, then, am I so afraid of her? I suppose it's because, for all her civility and serenity, I have a frightened feeling in my gut for how high her standards are. I cannot imagine what would happen if I were to go unprepared to a lesson. Ann wouldn't shout, but the sky would probably fall.

The standards are never off my mind. Her standards haunt me waking and sleeping. How many days until my next lesson? And after a year and a half of lessons with Ann, I've not relaxed before her yet, not for one instant. No minute inaccuracy slips past her. She sees it all — each finger — always.

I am not like Ann. I do not have her control. She teaches methodically, I learn erratically. Technique, technique — how fast can I move my fingers? How many notches on the metronome this week? And always, can I produce more sound?

from December 18, 1982

In the autumn of my nineteenth year I spent three days and nights alone in the North Carolina wilderness. My dreams were vivid.

Most of the time it rained. I had no shelter, only a wool sweater, a wool cap, and my

sleeping bag. My leg was injured; four tiny ulcers had formed over a scratch, so I moved about very little. I dressed my leg with gauze bandages and filled my water bottle at the creek, sterilizing the water with a few drops of iodine. I lay on the ground on my back and watched the bats sweeping overhead. A bee stung my ankle. I fell asleep when it grew too dark to watch the bats and woke when the first light came into the sky. The quiet rhythm of day followed by night, no subdivision of time into hours, no human voices, no demands, felt both frightening and ineffably right. When I returned to civilization I could not abide advertising, make-up, fashion, Muzak. Getting out into the woods clears away a lot of debris. Those days were a stark, hard grace. Cold rain-drops pelting my face woke me in the middle of the night. The third day I sat by the swollen creek and sang songs. This was my baptism of loneliness.

Going into the practice room is a recapitulation of this loneliness, which is why it takes a certain amount of courage to walk through the door and shut it, saying, now I must practice. But when we make music together, when we play chamber music, it is, at its best, a celebration that kills loneliness, kills the very word loneliness, letter by letter. It is, at its best, an intimacy so complete that I used to have a recurring dream that I was making love to someone or we were playing chamber music — I was never quite sure which it was.

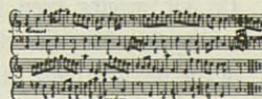
Sometimes I play so well in the practice room, and then I am downcast. No one heard. No one was there to share it. So what does it matter? I have this in me, but I can't give it away; what does it mean?

A young doctor said to Jewel today, "Medicine is like music. You and I are the same age. We've gone through the same number of years of training. We feel the same degree of responsibility. The difference is that I never need to worry about money, never again."

I worry about money until my stomach burns. We all do, I guess. We borrow thousands to complete these degrees. A twenty-four year old acquaintance of mine will make monthly repayments until she is fifty-one.

But the physician's training doesn't start until the beginning, or maybe the end, of the bachelor's degree. The musician's training begins much earlier, at the age of four, or six, or eleven; with youth orchestras and private lessons and parties and overnights missed in order to get the practicing done. It begins with an adult concept of discipline imposed upon a child who, in most cases, simply cannot carry it, but must do her best.

In how many ways can a person be creative simultaneously? When I've a sexual outlet my creative power is poured into it. When I don't have a sexual outlet, I write and I play my harp and I go running. Everywhere there are artless corners to be filled. When I'm sexually replete I see no artless corners.



Shirley Glubka

Something Pulled at Me

Farm smells disturbed my mother. She hated the chickens,
their dirtied eggs, shit on the floor of the coop.

Worse than that their bloodied necks, the axe in her hand.

She determined a course for herself: up the rope
that dangled, tantalizing, from clouds; the rope an immaculate
construction of words, sentences, paragraphs to be grasped
one by one, hand over hand, until, in the higher altitudes,
they become ideas, knowledge, beauty, truth, being:
respect.

Somewhere above the clouds: respect.

If ever the clouds end: respect.

I myself was raised as cleanly as possible,
ignorant of crop dirt and animal perversities,
a town girl in farm country.

The smells of my childhood are print smells—paper, ink, books,
the uncontaminated dust of libraries.

Also incense, candles, clean priest smells.

Nothing, however, is perfect. On Sundays in the pew ahead of us
sat a farmer. He reeked of garlic sausage.

From Introit to Final Benediction: my poor mother: garlic sausage.

At eighteen I climbed into the convent like a child coming home to bed at night:
the upper bunk, clean sheets, one blanket.

The rope of braided abstraction was firm in my hands.

At twenty-three, still wrapped and veiled,
I had first sex. Do not imagine here lust springing out
like a jack-in-the-box, a sudden exit. Do not
imagine a figure dancing free and naked away from
catechism pages,

Sunday sermons,

the strict gaze of the Novice Mistress.

Do not imagine even a tired seeker

emerging with satisfaction from the final tunnel

of the terrible maze of the Summa Theologica, her body carried
sweetly alive in her exhausted arms.

We went, avoiding boards that creaked, down midnight halls
to narrow beds and let our long white nightgowns touch.
Some nights we kissed. On wild and rare occasion, hands were let loose.
My sex that year was like the first thin juices of creation;
squeezed from nothing, pale, and of uncertain flavoring,
still it was a sort of scrawny miracle, a fact.
My sex, unlikely, inappropriate, existed.

If there was a map for going on from there, I didn't know it.
Something pulled at me, weak as a toddler's hand with a distracted mother;
this way, it said, for no apparent reason.
Something pulled at me, persistent as a toddler's hand with a distracted mother
and I followed with my body, half my mind, and large unclear intentions.
We went gathering, my little sex and I,
through a stretch of rounded common coming over years,
through rough dry nights and silken places bright with red
or hushing down to pleasure blue,
through quirky growth
whose brambles rolled at last to merely texture adding interest.
We collected smells and all available varieties of touch.
We picked the fruit of language and community, we grew a history.
And here we are at forty, alive and lesbian and learning still.

Last year on the island we had chickens.
Predictably, their shit was copious.
It waited, silent, under the long clothes line on laundry days.
It offered itself, apparently innocent, even generous,
to the deeply indented soles of my shoes; and stank when squashed.
I thought of the young Harriet, my mother, forced to farm.
But there was Ginny, who smells so good to me,
sitting down beside the chicken house she built
and watching by the gentle evening light
her chickens.

Over months I learned:
that there is comedy and tragedy in chicken life,
adventure, duty, pride, and social strife;
that eggs are individual,
small from a hen who lacks practice,
sometimes speckled,
sometimes such a smooth brown sculpture in the hand
that contemplation, not eating, is wanted;
that even the ridiculous chicken shape,
splayed feet, pin head,
becomes magnificent when sunlight strikes the blue-black feathers
and a prism-split of color leaps at me. ☺

To Choose

Jo sat impatiently waiting for Gail to ring the doorbell as if it were still 1964 and they were back in high school. She'd swept her aunt's rambling, Roxbury apartment three times, even under the bed in her tiny room at the back. In spite of this attention it was the same shabby (but now spic and span) flat it had always been. The same from its worn linoleum to the cracks in the ceiling paint that Gail and she used to look up at and create fantasies around on nights that Gail slept over. Jo's Aunt Irene was out at her weekly pokeno game and would be home at 10:45 precisely, just a little more winded now by the three flights of stairs she'd been climbing for twenty years.

Jo picked at her newly cut Afro, which Gail had not seen yet. Most things had not changed since Jo went away to college. Despite the "movement" her neighborhood and friends remained as she had left them. There were a few more children on the block; the apartment buildings were a bit more shabby but some facts remained immutable. Jo still knew that she was a woman wanting to be with women. It was a reality she'd accepted since that first night with Gail six years ago. They'd been sixteen and best friends. The wanting had not been a loud shout beating against Jo's breast but a low hum in her throat like the soloist at Concord Baptist Church.

The thing Jo remembered most about that first night with Gail was the laughter. They'd watched the beginning of "East Side/West Side" on television and seen an uncharacteristically absurd segment before they rushed off to bed to beat Aunt Irene's arrival home. Laying in bed giggling over the show, they let the energy of adolescent desire sit atop their humour like oil and water rippling in a storm. The laughter shook them until they were weak. With no preparation or calculation they began to talk about sex. It was not a new topic. They were teenagers living in Roxbury. Wit and words were their particular hobby. Sex and speculation about it was daubed on the sidewalks and tenement stair wells of every building they lived in. Along with the words, laughter embodied the essence of sensuality for Jo. A good laugh was as important as good sex, a friend or love; and with Gail she'd had all three. On that first night the powerful fear of rejection was a hyperbolic energy thrusting them into the grammatical third person but it did not stop them.

"If someone wanted to try kissing another girl. . ."

"Or doing it with her."

"Right, doing it," Jo had agreed, not sure what "doing it" meant specifically, but sure she wanted to.

"If someone wanted to try doing it with another girl," Gail went on, "it doesn't mean there's anything wrong with her, right?"

"There don't have to be anything wrong with her just to try it."

"And if either of them don't like it they could just stop and choose not to do it any more, right?"

"Right!"

With that contract they moved into each other's arms for the first time. There were no lessons. Gail translated her backseat experience with boys into the real thing. When she pulled Jo onto her a sigh of relief and expectation escaped them both. The sweet smell of cornfields that Jo had come to associate with Gail filled the small, girlish bedroom, settling over the rhythmic breath and rustling comforter. The slow roll of Jo's hips brought fire to Gail which she fed with her own need. For a brief moment Jo was startled at the massiveness of her desire. She realized she had never thought about Gail "sexually". Not envisioned her here beneath her as she was now. She'd thought about Gail's legs sometimes. She loved to look at them and the dark hair imprisoned between the nylon and the firm beige of Gail's calf. The desire had been sure, intrinsic but not specific. Never as specific as fucking. That was something people did in "adult" books, kept hidden under the mattress. Neither her Aunt Irene who joked intimately with the men on the block nor Gail's mother who was young and pretty and went out every Saturday night seemed likely to engage in anything resembling what Jo had read about in those stolen books.

Yet here with Gail's wetness dampening her thigh and her own irretrievable desire to press her lips to that wetness, Jo knew, at sixteen, this was it. And it was much more than they'd described in those books. More than what she'd seen at the Uptown Movie Theatre. Sandra Dee and Troy Donahue had kissed and breathed heavily, leaving a fog on the screen; but whether it was their blondness or the distance of celluloid, what they expressed never culminated in the laughter and chaos of desire that Jo felt at that moment.

For four years Jo and Gail explored that loving on Wednesday's pokeno night and Saturday date night until they fell asleep drained of dreams. They spilled desire into each other's hands and mouths like a torrential, cleansing storm that blew up twice a week. At school they watched each other, jealous, yet indulgent lovers; the laughter always between them. Nothing changed except that Jo's heart beat furiously when she saw Gail coming down the hall. Whenever someone talked about wearing green on Thursdays or made bulldyke jokes, Jo sucked her teeth but the words were not hers yet to be claimed or denounced.

For Gail it was sex, not so different from that she'd experienced in the back of her boyfriend's Ford, except she really liked Jo. Neither openly acknowledged the intensity of their connection. Questions had no validity or resonance within their arena.

"Why're you spending the night at Janet's house?"

"Basketball practice went late and her mother's car is in the shop."

"Umph!"

Together again, the click of the light going off was a dam broken. Their arms encircled each other and words disappeared. Gail's tight small body learned to fit between Jo's long dark legs as if they were matching parts. Neither movies, ball games or church dances approximated the reality of their nights together. Their boyfriends became a topic, a joke they shared. Flirtations were a diversion, but never a subterfuge. They were not yet aware they needed one. It was normal for teenaged girls to be

inseparable and proprietary.

They speculated whether other girls in the school shared their kind of secret but were ultimately oblivious to the rest of the world. Even for Jo, who had poured over a copy of *The Well of Loneliness* discovered in her aunt's closet, literary and local reality was unconnected to them. They'd protected and exiled themselves unconditionally. Their love and desire were a "thing" they had, nothing that could be named or testified to, except in high pitched passion when they both sang out in joy and satisfaction. This unnamable left them both quiltless but alone.

They were lovers who remained friends. It had been Gail who rented a car and drove Jo and her suitcases up to Waltham to college. She, who joked and cajoled Jo until she let go of her fear of being the lone black stranger in a suburban, white university. She made the separation as natural a part of their relationship as the loving.

It was Jo who wrote to Gail every Monday night, newsy, gossipy, friend letters with questions about who was pregnant back home and who was in jail. Jo arranged a private dorm room so Gail could come up for the weekend and they could make love. Jo dropped classes for a week to be with Gail when she almost died from an illegal abortion. Neither questioned the other's devotion nor its nature. They acted as if the sun shone on their every moment. "And perhaps it did." Jo thought now, waiting for Gail. Perhaps it was the sunlight which had blinded them to the rest of the world for the past few years.

Jo sat like a camper awaiting inspection. Her body was still, while her thoughts darted around through the years, from Roxbury to Waltham and back. The last paper she had due for her sociology class fought for her attention. Graduation was only two months and one paper away. There was nothing to think about really, only typing and Gail.

When the bell finally rang, Jo remained still; her heart jumped. She rose to answer the second ring, her body stiff. She opened the door knowing exactly what to expect: Gail, small body, light brown skin, large dark eyes under a thick head of hair that fell in the same permanent, Clairol curls around her face. The last few years had rendered no changes. Gail was Gail: everything Jo had ever wanted.

They held each other tightly, the laughter picking up from where it left off the last time they'd been together. The laughter and the words tumbled out of them freely.

"So what, you an African now, huh?" Gail said with her hands in Jo's hair.

"Yeah, yeah." Jo answered preening to the touch.

"You gonna give me a little tribal dance?" Gail asked, her inflection carrying about three more paragraphs than the question.

"Naw, you heathen thing, I thought I'd just put you in the pot and eat you!"

"We can do that with or without the pot!"

Once again the rest of the world disappeared. Graduation became only a word in the dictionary as did wedding, bridesmaid and husband. Just words they could make up jokes about or words they'd heard in the movies. Gail said, "Sam is picking me up tomorrow morning, here."

"Good." Jo said as she closed the door to her small bedroom, not hearing or caring about the outside. She did not think about typing her paper or ironing her simple

bridesmaid dress or Sam, tomorrow at the courthouse.

She remembered the smell of freshly succulent corn and it turned into the starchy, aroma of their coming. She listened for the slapping of their wet bellies, one against the other, the sound of fleshy thighs rubbing against the stiff hairs.

There was no thought of stopping the events as they moved on course. The tide of tradition and history was still the natural order of things and a wedding was not unexpected. There were no words with which Jo could say "don't" because her desire was still only a soft sound and "lesbian" meant only Stephen Gordon or the white, middle-aged Daughters of Bilitis, those shadowy figures hidden in the back pages of little newspapers.

No one had ever said to love each other was bad. There had been too many other bad things to worry about. So they'd done it and never thought about the words that went with it. Those came later, along with the knowledge that love, like everything else, rested on a series of choices. Things might have been different if: if she knew some other way; if she knew some other lesbians; if she'd only hold on to Gail this morning.

Dawn came and Jo found herself awake, listening to Gail's shallow breaths. Just before her Aunt Irene called out to tell them to come to breakfast, Jo realized this had been the last time. She lay still with the knowledge and her mind went blank. A window closed, light no longer entered making room for thoughts, plans or laughter. Jo heard the scuffing sound of her aunt's slippers coming down the hall from her own bedroom.

"You girls gonna sleep right through the wedding? Come on now, that boy gonna be here soon!"

As usual, Gail's eyes just opened and she was awake, aware of Jo's stillness. For once she had nothing to say, no pun, no laugh. She closed her eyes again as if she could pull those years back inside of her and give them to Jo all over again. But she became distracted by the worry that her mother would not be dressed in time for the ceremony. She decided she'd call as soon as she showered. Gail opened her eyes again to see Jo smiling down at her. Gail said softly, "Thank you." Then she hopped from the bed, her feet light on the cool linoleum as she darted down the hall to the bathroom. The water from the shower was a comforting touch.

Jo turned on the radio, that way her aunt knew she was really awake. Jo could hear her down the hall at the ironing board and she smelled sausage cooking. By the time Jo had showered, Gail was already sitting at the kitchen table in her slip, putting butter on her grits, while Aunt Irene poured homemade things out of the refrigerator onto the table, each a special wedding gift.

Jo went back to her room for a moment listening to the thudding of her heart. It blended with the rhythm of a deep moan at the back of her throat. The sound was heavy and broad and stretched across her throat blocking the air. Jo stood holding onto the worn edge of the dresser. Her mouth opened in pain before the mirror. The rumble inside pushed higher and her mouth moved soundlessly. A noise pulled itself out, pulled taut with the effort and rode the air as a high pitched wail of loss. The sound could not be heard over the quiet normality of the whistling tea kettle and the insistent sound of Sam's car horn from the street. A choice had been made for the moment. 

Love Poem

I dreamed of you last night, woman.
I dreamed your tongue
searched for the salt of my body
the way deer searches for the vein of salt
dripped through the forest
by some hunter
who has her in the sights
of his rifle.

I dreamed your fingers
split me open
the way my Grandma's fingers
split the chicken belly and breast open,
digging for the liver and other meats.

I dreamed I cried your name, woman,
the way wolf cries her loneliness
on long winter nights
stunned by the beauty
of moon on snow.



Barbara Hammer still from Stone Circles

Janice Gould

Small Subversions

*after a Hungarian film
shown at Pacific Film Archive
Fall, 1983*

In 1955,
 (a year before you were born,
just before my father lost his job)
two young women met in Hungary.
They met at a newspaper
where they both worked.
(You were premature,
my father was an outlaw)
One woman was a lesbian,
the other woman had a husband.
They met at a newspaper,
and they fell in love.
(It somehow makes sense
that you were premature—
out of nine pregnancies,
only two survived—
perhaps that is why
your bones are so slight.

Any my father lost his job
when the government purged him
from the sanctified world
of the defense department.
After that we moved north
and made a new life)

In Hungary, in 1955, two women met
they went away together
 to the country,
there they made love
 for hours
in sheds, in barns, in mama's house.
When they came back to the city
their lives were never the same:

their thoughts were filled with one another,
they contrived to meet in various places,
a park bench in the middle of a green lawn
on a cold day in November

just after a rain.

They must keep their gloves on
and their scarves about their necks.
They sit very close, huddled against the wind,
almost they look like children.
They kiss. For one moment
the world vanishes

(for one moment,

it seems there is only you,
your mouth and eyes,
the way your clothing smells of sweat
and skin, how your blood warms
and warms beneath the pressure
of our embrace)

Then the police arrive.

The women are searched, separated.
The lesbian is taken to headquarters
for further questioning.

(After that, my dad worked like a maniac,
sometimes eight days a week.
Our home, it never was the same.
My dad must show he could support us,
for perhaps he was afraid
wondering always why such a small subversion
should cost a life)

The lesbian had learned
of some government bribes and cover-ups
on a collective farm in the country.
She meant to expose the situation.
The other woman would no longer
sleep with her husband. She admitted,
defiantly, her love for her friend.
One day when she was taking a bath,
her husband looked for his army pistol.
He took it from its case
and shot her.

In 1955, in Hungary,
two women met,
as human beings they met, they loved,
they worked, they committed acts
of subversion

and respect,
pushing, as lovers blindly push,
against the boundaries,

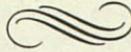
the constraints
of State and social order. That is why
in Hungary, in 1955, the lesbian
was found dead, half submerged
in a river at the edge of a forest,
shot several times in the head
and heart, and this frontier
represents the boundary
of her beautiful land.



two scenes from

Word of Mouth

This play is a skeleton, a series of suggested scenes/events. Mayo and Sensa are driving across country to attend (reluctantly) Mayo's sister's wedding. These two excerpts are scenes that happen along the way.



(Mayo goes around truck in blackout coming up to front left tire as lights come up on gas station/truck stop. JoJo enters. Sensa begins to speak. She is cut off by JoJo reading aloud wild women bumperstickers on back of car such as: "The Future is Female," "Castrate Rapists," etc.)

JoJo: *(after reading)* Hi. I'm JoJo. Fill her up? *(starts to do so)*.

Sensa: Hi. Uh yes. Well how much is it?

JoJo: Cheapest. You all better be careful riding around this part of the country with those bumperstickers.

Mayo: Any part of the country.

JoJo: Yeah. I guess that's so. Want something to eat? We got *(long detailed list of shit food)*.

Mayo: Can't we go inside?

JoJo: Closed.

Mayo: How come?

JoJo: Oh, renovations. Had a couple of good old boys in here last week. Shot the place up. Blood and guts all over the floor and walls. You want a burger?

Mayo: Jesus. Were you here?

JoJo: Oh yeah.

Mayo: What did you do when they started shooting?

JoJo: *(moves closer to the car)* What do you think? I got my butt out of there to my car, grabbed my shotgun and displaced one of those fuckers myself. Bastard used to come in here every night. Sitting in my station talking about "brown sugar this, brown sugar that." Leave me two nickels for a tip, "That's one for you and one for your girlfriend, Sugar." Well that's all for him.

Mayo: God. Why didn't you quit?

JoJo: Easy to talk about quit, white girl.

Mayo: Yeah. Sorry. But aren't you scared you'll get caught?

JoJo: Shit no. All that shooting going on — no one sees me going or coming back. I give 'em some female hysterics when I come back in. Just for good measure. *(she tops up gas tank, replaces gas cap, returns hose to pump)*. Yeah. Opportunity knocks, you got to open the door. There's one harassed woman and a bunch of kids out there breathing a lot easier and sleeping better nights knowing their good for nothing drunk and mean old man ain't gonna be showing up no more. That'll be \$19.87 for the gas.

(Sensa hands over the money).

Sensa: That really happen?

JoJo: Maybe.

Sensa: Or maybe it's like an inspirational message?

JoJo: Maybe. Remember what I said about those bumper stickers now. Something to be said for caution and slow stealth. So long now.

BLACKOUT

(Lights up on Mayo and Sensa driving. Sensa is driving. Mayo is eating a salad out of a bowl and feeding some to Sensa who is also eating a sandwich.)

Mayo: Does Kala know you're coming?

Sensa: No.

Mayo: Well have you heard from her recently? She . . .

Sensa: She's seriously deranged. I saw her last time. Last year or two years ago I guess. I hadn't heard, so I went to New York. On a plane. Just borrowed the money. Scammed some, and went.

Mayo: You hate planes.

Sensa: Yeah. I do. I hate planes.

(Lights fade on driving pair. Sensa gets out of the car and walks over to Kala's apt scene as lights completely out on car and up on apt. Tiny lower east side tenement special. Mattress on the floor, minimal furnishings. Walls and ceilings covered with forest service maps. Kala is on the bed looking at maps through binoculars. She does not respond to Sensa throughout this scene. Sensa speaks mostly to Mayo/audience but sometimes appeals directly to Kala. Kala does not respond.)

Sensa: She sits — rather, lies — on her bed and studies her maps. Through binoculars. See the maps are pinned to the walls and ceiling. Every inch is covered. With wilderness maps. The kind you get from the forest service that tell where the towns and cities finally stop and the trees begin again. It's her study. At least that's what she calls it. Learning the escape routes. Only she never goes out anymore. I told her. . . I told her all the maps in the world weren't gonna help if she didn't get up off that bed pretty soon. I asked her; I said, "You're so busy studying the Sangre de Cristos, all right, here's one for you, how do you get from your mattress to any

highway out of New York City?" Any highway I said. She couldn't tell me. She just sat there and thought about it but the best she could come up with was the 23rd St. entrance to the West Side Highway. 23rd St. is an exit ramp. And the West Side Highway. . . the West Side Highway's been closed for ten years.

(Pause as Sensa surveys scene, perhaps reaches ever so slightly toward Kala, but pulls herself back.)

Sensa: *(to herself, Mayo, Kala)* I don't go to wakes.

(Slow fade on Kala's space as Sensa goes to car, lifts up hood. Lights up on car. Mayo in the driver's seat. Sensa has opened tool box and taken a wrench to the engine.)

Sensa: Try it again. *(sound of engine turning over but refusing to start.)* Again. *(Mayo revs and revs it without success)* All right. All right. Shit.

(Mayo gets out of car. Comes around to look into engine. Looks long.)

Mayo: It's something simple.

Sensa: How do you know?

Mayo: It has to be something simple. The goddess would not allow something complicated to be wrong with this vehicle because she knows that as women we have been discriminated against in that we did not get to spend our formative years messing around with cars. For this I am eternally grateful and trust in her wisdom and mercy to get us the hell out of here before a car full of rednecks should happen by. Amen. Now I will take out my crystal and ascertain the cause of the trouble. You should take a nap. You're getting cranky.

(Mayo proceeds to start swinging her prism gently back and forth asking yes or no questions, such as, Is it the starter motor? etc. Sensa, disgruntled, looks at the car, kicks a tire, and goes to lie down. She falls asleep and in her dream: she astral travels to Jojo and Kala's Soyburgers (sign to that effect) where Kala is working on a soyburger. This scene will take some production to establish its dream quality.)

Kala: *(sees Sensa)* Hiya.

Sensa: Kala! You got out of bed.

Kala: Sure. What happened. I finally focused in on all those little map symbols and realized they were uranium mines and dams and military reservations. It hit me. It's dangerous out there. I can't just escape to the wilderness. I've got to save her first. So I've been reading up, and looking around, speaking out some.

(Jojo walks in).

Sensa: JoJo!

JoJo: Hey Sensa. What it is. What it is.

(Kala and JoJo commence to pack soyburgers into boxes.)

Sensa: So you two — you're together?

JoJo: Yeah. We fix soyburgers and foment revolution. Keeping our eyes and ears open for opportunities knocking, you know. Been going up to the state legislature lately. Checking them out. You wouldn't believe what they're doing up in that pork barrel, Sensa. All kinds of plans to "develop the resources," you know. They're talking national sacrifice areas and nuclear waste dumps and all kinds of shit. That's all right. Let them talk. We got some plans for those boys. Wait and see. Opportunity, she be knocking any time now.

Sensa: You be careful. I mean — you know. Be careful.

Kala: That's all right. We're real low key. Only talking about it now because we're all in this dream together. Good time to talk about things you can't talk about otherwise.

Sensa: Yes. Astral communication. We'll have to keep working on that. But . . . Kala?

Kala: Sensa?

(JoJo exits a bit before this.)

Sensa: I miss you sometimes. Your physical presence and all. I, I miss you. Do you think maybe you could remember to write to me — anything — a postcard — and let me know where you are — on the physical plane I mean?

Kala: You came to see me on a plane last time, didn't you?

Sensa: Yes, I did, and I hate planes. I just want to know you're all right. Yes. Well I see you're all right. I kind of. . . Well I was looking forward to seeing you in New York. I mean I was scared to see you because I didn't know. . . Last time I came to see you — you scared me.

Kala: You wanted me to act right.

Sensa: Don't pull that sanctimonious crazy person act on me. I wanted you to snap out of it before they took you off to Bellevue. They. . . Oh Kala. We were so close and then you went off on this private crazy trip.

Kala: I had to.

Sensa: Well I had to go to San Francisco too.

Kala: OK. I understand that. You were tired of keeping it together for me. You split. OK.

Sensa: OK. Hell, it's not OK. I may never get over it. Kala, since this is a dream — couldn't you just throw your arms around me and beg me to take you back?

Kala: *(laughing)* No. Not even in a dream.

Sensa: Is it because I deserted you?

Kala: Sensa, you are such a Catholic. "No guilt. No blame." Remember? You taught me that.

Sensa: I am an ex-Catholic. And just remember. You deserted me. This dream is making me tired and I need my strength because the truck's broken down and Mayo, Mayo. . . Kala, I made Mayo promise she would stay with me forever.

JoJo: *(re-entering on Sensa's last line)* Good Luck. Kala, we have a delivery to make. I can do it myself if you want.

Kala: No. It needs two.

Sensa: OK, well, I'll go, I guess.

JoJo: Hey, you can't leave without trying the product. *(JoJo hands Sensa a wrapped soyburger from the box she's brought onstage with her. Sensa bites in.)*

Sensa: Oh good. Very good. You got any little packets of ketchup or salt?

Kala: *(laughing)* Sensa.

Sensa: Oh. Right. Sugar and salt. Right. Packaging. Right. I'm cool *(still eating)*. Listen, I'm just going to eat this and go. I hate goodbyes you know, so I'll just turn around now. *(She does. They leave. She gives some farewell sign with her back turned and returns to her sleeping position on the truck. Mayo is still asking the pendulum. After, Is it the fuel pump? — sounds of two motorcycles going by and screeching to a halt. Sensa starts waking up. Two people in full motorcycle drag stride onto the stage. They stand for a moment taking in the scene.)*

Sensa: *(fully waking up and seeing them)* *(to herself)* Oh shit.

(They stride over to her. One continues on to the vehicle. They lift up helmets. They are women.)

* * * * *

(Lights up on early morning camp. Snake Shade. Fairly well established. A group of women are practicing t'ai chi to soft flute music. Others are eating or drinking tea around communal kitchen. There is a whole life going on which is very important to establish during all of the time in S. Shade. Mayo and Sensa are watching this scene from a distance, unobserved by the participants. At the right moment, the t'ai chi ceases. There is a pause and someone switches on a portable box and some of the t'ai chi group and some of the breakfasters and all of the kids join in to some jumping tune on the order of "Bad Girl." Towards the end of this Mayo and Sensa enter the scene, perhaps dancing, perhaps just walking in. I think dancing. When it is over, they take melons or whatever fruit they have brought out of their pack and start handing them around. All eat and talk and kiss and hug, etc. It quiets down a bit.)

Osa: So where are you two headed?

Mayo: New York. My sister's getting married. *(growling from some of the younger sisters.)*

Osa: I was married once.

Mayo: How long did it last?

Osa: Two weeks. It wouldn't have been that long — but everyone was on the side of the marriage, telling me to "give it a chance." So I did. Two weeks.

Rita: Mine lasted six months. Everything was all right for the first two months. Not great, but all right. Then he started complaining that I didn't get his laundry as clean as his mother, and what was wrong with me, I wouldn't go down on him, I wasn't a real woman. So I stopped doing his laundry and sleeping with him, and one day I put all his nasty clothes right out on the stoop with all his other things and left him a note telling him to go find himself a real woman — good luck, motherfucker.

(General laughter and reaction to her story.)

(A call is heard announcing the arrival of Carrot Juice loaded down with books and papers which are almost but not quite falling from her arms. Mayo and she embrace and she acknowledges Sensa.)

Carrot: Oh, I'm so glad to see you. I have just millions of things to show you and tapes; I'm doing music now too. Really mostly music and pictures. The printed word is just the past. I mean not as far as I'm concerned. In no way. The printed word has saved my life on many, many occasions. Without books my childhood and early womanhood would have been a great deal more painful than they were. I . . . well, you know all about that. Now — how long are you staying, because then I'll know how much you can take in. There are several women's reggae tapes I want you to hear and then all this new Celtic Rock I've got and . . .

Mayo: *(interrupting)* Carrot — only until tomorrow. We're on our way to New York City. Pat's getting married.

Carrot: *(searching for who Pat is)* Pat? Pat? Pat. Yes. Canning St. Your sister Pat is getting married. We met at Canning St.

(At "Canning St.," another part of the performance space lights up and the story Mayo now tells is danced silently by a group of women.)

Mayo: Canning St.! Right!

Rita: What's Canning St.?

Mayo: In Berkeley. Carrot Juice had this crazy warehouse on Canning St. Three floors of this condemned building with gaping holes in the floors and boarded up windows.

Carrot: *(with great fondness)* Oh, Canning St. That was the best work space I ever had. Loads and loads of room. Everything filed and organized.

Mayo: Organized! Boxes, you mean. Boxes and boxes and stacks of books and magazines and comics. And rats. On the third floor there were rats.

Rita: Ugh. Mayo, you lived there?

Mayo: Oh, yeah. We all did. About thirty of us moved in when we had to leave the mountain. Thirty women and kids with all their worldly possessions.

Carrot: It was the beginning of the end, but what could I do? They needed a place.

Mayo: The first two floors were totally taken up with beds and hammocks. We had one coleman stove to cook on and everyone was fighting.

Carrot: Very distracting. It got to the point where I had to move the files up to the third floor. Luckily, Carla was there and knew what to do about the rats.

Osa: What did she do?

Carrot: Shot them. She had this rifle. I believe it was a twenty-two, and she just sat up all one night on a stack of Scientific Americans, and shot them down as they came out to nibble the files.

Rita: Oh my God.

Mayo: Yeah, it was gruesome. Just two days after rat-kill night, I get a call. My sister Pat is in town and she's on her way over. The place is complete chaos. Carla is undergoing some very complex ritual to cleanse her of the blood of the dead rats. There's little candle stubs burning all over the floor.

Carrot: Terrible fire hazard.

Mayo: Carla's friends are chanting in some unknown language. She's sitting in the middle of the room, covered with ashes, weeping and howling. The noise level is beyond belief.

Carrot: And the groceries. Don't forget the groceries.

Mayo: Oh, yes! There's about \$300 worth of groceries that have mysteriously appeared in the kitchen. We have no money — no foodstamps. Dust Storm is sitting there earnestly apologizing to Carrot about getting a little carried away with her provider karma, while her gang of teen dykes is scurrying around hiding these huge vats of peanut butter and fifty pound bags of brown rice. Meanwhile, two of them are at the window watching for the man, and who should they spot coming up the walk?

Carrot: Your sister Pat.

Mayo: My sister Pat. At which point they give the alarm, being very hyped up on stolen ice cream. The entire mad scene — Carla, the chanting, the hiding of the food. Dust Storm's earnest apologies — everything stops. Everyone's eyes are rooted to the door. My sister Pat walks in.

Rita: *(hushed voice)* What did she do?

Mayo: She stood there. The smile was starting to fade from her face. Her eyes were trying to take in all the people and why *they* were staring at *her*. And I said, "It's my sister, Pat." There was a big sigh of relief and everyone went right back to what they were doing.

(Laughter)

Carrot: Two days later the police did come — or someone like the police. Health inspectors? I don't know. But we had to leave fast.

Rita: Where did you go?

Mayo: Well, Dust Storm and the gang had been out looking for a place because we just had to get that act out of the city. We holed up at one of those white boy ashrams for a few days, and somehow she found us and took us in five broken down cars to this beautiful place on the Yuba River. Lots of space. No. people. Everyone took off their clothes and calmed down. We lived off Dust Storm's groceries for the rest of the summer.

(pause)

Carrot: Oh, damn.

Mayo: What?

Carrot: Well, if I'd known we were going to talk about Canning St., I would have hooked up the tape recorder.

(Chorus of No's)

Carrot: But listen, this is our herstory. We're always digging and scratching around for our past and it's so hard 'cause Women hardly ever made it into their records.

Rita: Or got cut out later.

Carrot: Or cut up, or burnt up. And the children coming, they'll want to know about us. What we did, how we thought.

Rita: How we survived.

Carrot: Yes.

Mayo: But part of our survival is not telling. Women can't afford to set it down in names, dates, and places. Never could.

Rita: Right. We just tell each other in those undertones the man can't hear. In the kitchens and laundromats and ladies rooms. *(pause)* Me and my sister once spent a whole hour talking in a Ladies Room at the Port Authority in NYC. She was going away and it was killing us both to separate. But the husbands were with us and we couldn't get down, you know. So we just sat in a stall and held each other for an hour and told all the things we never told anyone else. *(pause)* Mayo, you go see my sister. She's back in the city. I'll give you her address. She's by herself with her kids. Trying to work and go to school. You go see her. Don't bring a tape recorder. Just remember.

Carrot: OK, OK. Word of mouth. Come on. Come on, Mayo. There's not much time and so much material.

Mayo: I'm coming. Rita, Irene's here?

Rita: In solitary. But she'd be glad to see you. Carrot'll show you.

Carrot: *(collecting papers)* It's on the way.

(They exit, lights go down on main camp. Women have been dispersing for last little bit. Sensa has left already. Mayo and Carrot walk. We feel them getting deeper in, to more isolated place, maybe branches projected behind them moving as they walk in place.)

Carrot: *(as they are walking)* Listen, I'm just going to drop you off at Irene's. When you're finished there, just follow the path to my place.

Mayo: Come with me.

Carrot: No way.

Mayo: Why?

Carrot: Because I don't need to be an invisible bystander at the great reunion.

Mayo: I wouldn't make you feel that way.

Carrot: Oh yes you would. The two of you together is a massive ego trip I can do without. Course I feel that way about most couples.

Mayo: We're hardly a couple.

Carrot: Here it is. Later. *(She exits.)*

(Mayo finds herself in Irene's camp, which was there and is now lit or has just come smoothly on. At any rate, Irene is there stripping poles with a hatchet. Mayo approaches. Irene turns at sound and sees Mayo. Turns back to her work. Pause.)

Irene: I guess you're real. Not an apparition. Are you real? *(Looks again)*. Yes, you're real. Sometimes. . . I'm alone a lot. Sometimes women visit — their shadows come. Sit right down and talk for hours. Or yell. Susan comes and yells at me about how I done her wrong. And I did. I did. *(Turns to Mayo)* Hi Mayo. *(Mayo comes to her. They embrace)*.

Mayo: What are you working on?

Irene: Oh, just cleaning some poles. Build myself a winter shelter. You staying?

Mayo: No. Me and Sensa, we're on our way to New York for my sister. She's getting married.

Irene: Is that good?

Mayo: I don't know. I'm tired of thinking about it.

Irene: Then don't. Here *(gives her hatchet)*, strip a few poles for your old mama.

(Mayo begins stripping).

Mayo: Rita says you're in solitary.

Irene: Yes. Self-imposed. *(She laughs)* I'll tell you, nobody objected when I made that decision. Can't blame them. I was pretty far gone when I got here. Hadn't been sober in three months and no intention of stopping. Smuggled in a case of beer and started recruiting drinking friends and lovers. Like before. Like always.

Mayo: What happened?

Irene: One day Rita came on over to where me and a couple of others were having a mid-morning shot. She just stood there looking at me. Not saying a word. Just looking. Well everyone got the message, 'cause they all put down their cups and sort of melted into the woods. And then it was just her and me. I was pretty high, but I couldn't think of nothing to say to turn it into a party. So I looked at the ground. Pretty soon she comes up to me and kneels down so we're the same height. She reaches out her hand, and real gently, lifts up my face so we're eye to eye. She gives me a minute to focus and then she says, "Irene, get sober or get your white trash act out of here. You've got twelve hours." Then she got up and left. When she was half-way across the field, she turned and yelled back, "And you better pick up everyone of those fucking pop-tops while you're at it too."

Mayo: You got told.

Irene: I got told. So I sat there, finished up whatever was laying around in half-empty cans, and started picking up pop-tops. Kept going 'til I cleaned the place up, then laid down on my bed and stayed sick as a dog for a week. *(Pause. Mayo strips wood.)* Mayo, it took me a month to get back to feeling good this time. I'm just now having the strength and concentration to work, and I need to work. Every morning, I lie in my bed and watch the sun come up and plan my slip. Where I'm gonna get it, and where I'm gonna drink it, what I'm gonna do, who I'm gonna tell off. Everything. *(pause)* I'm talking too much. Living alone. I'm learning to talk out loud to myself — that it's OK — but it's hard. I think of the bag ladies and I'm afraid to get that loose.

Mayo: You going to AA?

Irene: Some. I try to get there at least once a week.

Mayo: What's it like?

Irene: Pretty Christian. But accepting. They know I'm from the "girl's camp" — that's what they call it — but we're all alcoholics and that's all we have to deal with. I even got myself a sponsor. Betty. She's an old farmer lady. Been sober for twenty-five years, but she still comes to meetings and sometimes I go over to her house and we all sit down and eat together. Then me and Betty go for walks. She tells me the names of the wild flowers. We talk.

Mayo: *(who has perhaps grown impatient with this AA talk, which she has heard before)* Have you been doing any painting?

Irene: Not really. Seems like painting and drinking go together for me. Did some wildflower studies for Betty, though.

Mayo: Bet she loved them.

Irene: She did. Now I'm tired of talking about me and my addictions. Tell me about you.

Mayo: Me and Sensa are living in a house with three other women and two kids. Sensa's cooking at this Italian restaurant. We usually have the overflow from the battered women's shelter at our house, so it's fairly crowded there, but it works out most of the time. I'm still working at the hospital. I have some of your paintings in my room and the food one in the kitchen.

Irene: Is that, "Breakfast in Bed"?

Mayo: Yes.

Irene: Great. I thought I lost that one when they impounded my truck in Denver.

Mayo: No. I have it. You were out of it and don't remember. One of the Denver women called me and I went up there to the car jail and got all your stuff out.

Irene: That was you?

Mayo: That was me.

Irene: Well, thanks Mayo. I'd really like to see some of that work again sometime.

Mayo: Well, I could send it to you, but. . .

Irene: No. No. It would just get ruined here. You keep it. I like to think of it up somewhere women can see it.

Mayo: You could come for a visit and see it yourself.

Irene: That's a long trip, Mayo. But who knows. Betty's always wanted to see the Pacific. Maybe she and I will jump in her old pickup someday and take a trip. She said she had a dream that I was going to be the one to open new doors for her.

Mayo: I'd love it if you came. We could run all over town — go to the thrift stores and try on clothes, like we used to. And Irene, you wouldn't believe the music. There's so much really good music around. And the galleries. You could see all your old friends. They're always asking about you and . . .

Irene: (*interrupting*) Mayo, Mayo. You're going too fast. One day at a time.

Mayo: Come on, Irene, you can at least think about how much fun we'd have.

Irene: No, I can't. Because then I'm living in the future. I need to live in the present, Mayo.

Mayo: Well shit, Irene, I have to say that all this AA stuff is too much if you can't even let yourself imagine a visit to your old friends.

Irene: I'm an alcoholic. There's certain ways I have to live my life. I have to accept my limitations, same as anyone else with a disease.

Mayo: Does that mean you never paint another picture?

Irene: That's it, isn't it? You want me to be the great Lesbian painter. That's cause you're from the suburbs.

Mayo: I want you to be the woman you are, and yes, that woman is a great painter.

Irene: Mayo, I never painted a picture without at least a bottle of bourbon a day. How many more paintings you think I got left in me at that rate?

Mayo: Irene, I . . .

Irene: Let's see: figure about two months per painting, that's sixty bottles each, with a month or two in between to dry out. What do you say, Mayo? Five? Six? That's 360 bottles of bourbon. I don't want to die, Mayo. Not like that.

Mayo: *(because the discussion is ended)* I'm sorry, Irene.

Irene: It's all right. I just had to make you see what it means to be a drunk.

Mayo: You're not a drunk.

Irene: I am, Mayo. If you're my friend, you'll accept that. Until you do, you'll just be stuck with regrets. No regrets. It's what I'm trying to learn. It's a good lesson. Hell, maybe I'll never paint another picture, but I painted a few good ones in my time. And maybe in ten years I'll be able to pick up a brush and put down all the colors in my head without alcohol.

Mayo: No regrets. I'll work on it, Irene. That's all I can do.

Irene: That's all I'm asking. *(pause)* Hey Mayo, Monkey on your back?

(Mayo responds by laying her back over Irene's bent over back. Irene moves in such a way that Mayo gets stretched out. They reverse positions).

Mayo: Thanks, Irene. Listen, I've got to go see Carrot. She'll be beside herself by now. What are you doing later? I mean, can I come over again?

Irene: Sure, Mayo.

Mayo: What I really mean, is if I promise to be on silence, can I sleep with you tonight?

Irene: You don't have to be on silence. Why bother now? I would love to sleep with you tonight.

Mayo: It's not planning too far in advance?

Irene: Very funny.

Mayo: Sorry. I had to. I have an adversary relationship with AA. I'll see you later. *(She overcomes her reticence to kiss Irene and leaves. Irene looks after her and goes on with her work.)* 

Bar Scenes

I stand at the bar and listen to the sounds. The incomplete and slurred sentences. The hustles. It all fills my ears.

The bartender, dressed in white tight pants and no shirt runs up and down the bar. He's popping bottle caps, clinking ice into glasses, and pouring whiskies and liquors over the coldness of already melting ice cubes.

I see the drinks on the bar. I see the bottles behind the bartender, neatly lined up on the shelf to either side of the cash register. The rows and rows of comfort, numbness, beckon to me; line up to be guzzled, promising to take away my pain.

Standing here feeling the music and the heat of intoxicated bodies so close to one another, intoxicated with lust and alcohol, I can't remember who I am now, how it is now. Only how it was and who I was. I raise my hand, trying to get his attention. I am drawn to the sadness, the familiar pain, the one life I knew so well. I yearn for the familiar and predictable discomfort again.

I'm wet between my legs. I can't tell if it's sweat from dancing so hard trying to avoid the beauty of beer bottles being lifted to meet the mouths, the throats, of thirsty drinkers, or if it's desire for the ocean of waves of release waiting for me behind the bar.

What is it really, behind the bar, that I desire? What is in these bottles and bottles of vodka on the rocks and Budweiser chasers? What secrets do I keep there? What mother, father, or sister waits for me there to bring nourishment to my body in a most disastrous way?

My decision is made and my body relaxes. The bartender has finally noticed me and knows that I am thirsty and I am beckoning him to me, willing him to come and serve me. Give me what I need to keep my sanity.

My lips are dry and my throat is constricted when he stands behind the bar, in front of me. He's asking me what I'd like. He's looking through me and already clinking half melted ice into a glass for me. The vodka is on the shelf. The smell of Budweiser beer is on his breath. Just one drink. Who would know? Who would know?

"Mineral water, please. With lime."



Elana Dykewomon

A Train Ride

I was a long way from where I might be recognized. The morning had started insufferably hot, and the afternoon baked us in our individual seats. Most of the passengers sat back with their eyes shut, resembling a corridor of corpses. I was tempted to walk through the aisles placing pennies on their eyelids. I restrained myself.

It's an old trick. Divert the mind from the body's, or the spirit's, pain. Conjure up the morbid, remember your old lover, take a ride. I don't claim to have evolved any farther than the first woman who was inspired by thunder, the claws of the tiger, an infestation of lice, to chant, or simply change her gaze to some other, easier, natural wonder.

None of us has changed much. When you look out the windows, at the landscape. We age, and change to each other. But. The train suddenly lurches in the middle of a very flat, straight section. The jolt sloshes the sweat around on my body. I am annoyed and don't care at the same time. Some petty negligence. It's too hot to hold on to it.

Friday night it was cold. Actually cold. I walked by the sea with an old lover. The beach was only slightly littered, the lights from the road muddied the darkness, but still the darkness was vibrant enough for the moon's path to compel us toward the water. A certain angle of dune, a slight rise in the beach, gave the optic illusion of great distance. We did not have to walk all that far to be at the hem of the Pacific.

She liked it when I said "the ocean's hem". Many womyn like it if you are a little poetic. They don't know how much work it is. Days alone walking on the beach, a stolen trainride, for a single observation. That search, to re-imagine the familiar. I like the work, but it is hardly as effortless as I used to like it to appear.

Maybe effort changes with age. She had been working on herself, too, my ex, with a new inclination for introspection and the time to indulge it. Clearly, it had been an effort for her. We were talking about anger, and love was in it, in the subject of anger. She has been studying meditation, release, mythology, compassion. The words, the formulas she had learned, stirred me unexpectedly.

The first time I had gone to see her again, I had anticipated being merely tolerant, slightly above the practice of any organized technique, willing to lend a patronizing ear to Buddha. Fortunately, my willingness overcame my patronization. Her language was compelling, and the discussions we have now give me new ways to look at the events of my life. Re-imagine them. Release them, so that they can grow, and I can go on, with the old growth all around me.

That's a pleasant way to think of it, but it's not so pleasant, don't get me wrong. Certain forms of growth terrify me. Probably they terrify you too, if you're honest.

My ex and I must have stopped sleeping together almost ten years ago. Now when I come to visit, she wants me to lie beside her again. This has happened twice in six months, but you can see it gets to me. She is particular, still, and wants to be on a cer-

tain side of the bed, so I am left to lie under her huge asparagus fern. She remembers my fear of plants, but I say no, it's okay, and cope with the green tendrils about to suck the tender moisture of my nose.

It's like that about growth. I have no plants in my bedroom. Growth is not always pleasant. It thrives on dead and rotting things, it needs nourishment, and will take nourishment wherever it can. It can move into places it was never invited — take up the refrigerator, knock the books off your shelves. That's why I like rocks. Hard things you can hold in your hand, and believe in as finished. But I read that even collected rocks grow. That gave me pause, until I realized how slow it would be. I'd be dead long before I noticed my rutilated quartz sprouting by my bed.

Okay, even so — I like to imagine myself as a woman capable of change and depth, of learning. What we call growth. Learning and the need to control are often at odds with each other. Fortunately, I'm a Libra, so I get to go back and forth. First a little learning, then a little control. A little growth, a little rock garden.

Also I'm a Jew, so I laugh at myself right about now. My ex is also a Jew. I know that many Jews study Buddhism, so I pay attention.

I know some already. A little about the 8-fold path and bodisatvas, and Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy, but it is all high school education and reading the labels in museums.

She goes to the desert to meditate. To learn compassion towards herself first, and then towards others.

So we lie on her bed, ten years later, and speak of compassion. She is very practical. She says, "I said, 'have compassion' when my neighbor's dog kept shitting in my garden. That was a real test." She is completely serious.

I laugh and am relieved. Along with the talk of archetypes and meditation, she is the same woman struggling with the same things I do — and so many things seem so much harder for her than for me that I'm surprised.

Even in her body, for instance. She is half my weight, and the same height. I imagine if I were her size I would not hurt, I wouldn't have sciatica, arthritis, even though it's obvious this isn't true. I imagine I could run, bicycle, I would play tennis on the city courts. I would hike the Appalachian trail alone and not have to depend on trains for my long distance mobility.

But my old lover does none of those active things. She used to study karate, I remember that, but she drifted from it. Her back hurts her all the time. She says because she stopped being physical, stopped doing her exercises.

So here I must put into practice exactly what we've been talking about. I must have compassion that is neither pity nor anger, nor self-congratulation.

And this is just an example. An aside. Aside from what?

How we lie together after 10 years, speaking of compassion, how later she holds me at the cold border of water we have come to. She is wearing my jacket over her jacket, and is barefoot, shivering in the sand.

I have my arms around her, we speak of how we are amazed by our returning to

each other. But I am trying hard not to be amazed. To use the phrases of compassion as formulas like the formulas of mathematics. Precise, logical tools to apply to certain spiritual problems. As she hugs me, I try not to think about love, or need, or bodies. I look over her shoulder, out to sea, and keep thinking 'that's where my dog went when she died' — meaning the wet horizon.

I watch rows of trees disappear, come close, disappear, out the window. The world is moving. The night will be cooler here, even in the midwest. We wait for the cool night to come on the train. People wake up then, go to the bar car, look for action.

She calls that the desiring mind. As soon as we have what we want, we want something else.

I say, I know about that, but I can get beyond it sometimes — not with womyn — with womyn I am always wanting something — but in nature. I can be satisfied in myself on the journey, with a stone, with a leaf. I call that Hassidism, though, I say.

She laughs. She holds my hand. Years ago I interpreted the very same gestures to be signs of unexpressed sexual desire. Actually, I still think it's unexpressed sexual desire. Her motion towards me, towards a touching physical intimacy, where the heart can be spoken. But I stay very guarded.

I have another relationship very much like this old one. One which is not so delicate, in which I am not quite so careful. I have learned a lot about being guarded from womyn who still say they love me. It is not a question of their love. They do love me. Being wanted is not necessarily getting what you want. So I practice opening up, from a great distance. A distance from which I cannot be moved, no matter how deeply I am touched.

The train goes by lake after lake. The evening sun is beautiful on the lake water, the changing color relieves the monotony. Repetition is a simple part of the world. When I repeat myself everyone says I should go into therapy. But I don't want therapy. What I want is this train ride.

When I can do anything I want, I take a train across the country, and then come back. I get this wish less than I get what I want in love. I shouldn't be doing it now — a stolen week, money I don't have. And I didn't expect it to be so hot. Living by the ocean you forget how it is with the rest of the country. I justify what I've done by describing it as need. But it's just what I did. What I'm doing.

It occurs to me to desire her again after all this time. Because she reaches out to me, touches me. Desire occurs to me, although I will not act on it. I think how strange it is that we always expected her to be the one with lovers. She has been celibate for two years, and I have had many lovers. Not casual lovers. Heaven forfend anyone should think I'm not serious about intimacy here. And intimacy keeps occurring to me.

But more than reaching towards her, I fantasize trading places with her. I would want her leisure, her size, her solitude, her studying, her room, even her back problems. I want her to have mine — my body, the crowdedness of my life, my job, my feet, my relationships, my frustrated ambition.

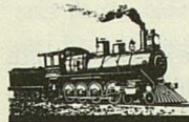
Her frustrated ambition.

Frustrated ambition. Compassion. I think of having compassion for myself, for how I loved her and how I love the other one, who is often so like her. It isn't so hard to have compassion for myself, really.

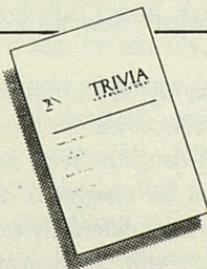
But when I think of having compassion for them, it isn't so easy. They love and hurt me, they drew so close and went so far away, they left me feeling humiliated and angry because I pushed, I wanted, I wouldn't let go of the intimacies they offered and then withdrew. That is hard to have compassion for. They want to hug me, 10 and 3 years later, and be comforted that love endures.

I stand there, hugging and enduring love as they control it. They would see it differently. They would have to find compassion for their own fear of intimacy, and whatever else has happened in them around loving me. They would not feel in control. They would see it as a new opening, the possibility of tenderness and growth; they would be scared all over again. And that too is hard to have compassion for. To have compassion for them. To let go, and still be part of that which I let go. To have the events grow again without the constraint of my anger and my need, take on new shapes, while I go on in my life.

I cried. I looked out the train window at the world turning dark, clenched my fists and cried just a little. Then I started to breathe. The night air is cool at last. And I am just riding. A long way from where anyone can recognize me.



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Half of a Map

Party. Kitchen. I'm sitting up against a high counter behind a collection of Calistoga and wine bottles, looking out into a room where women, dykes like me, stand talking. Two of them have sat down on the floor to compare shoes. One wears those soft brightly colored laced shoes that are fashionable this year. The other arches her foot to show off a pair of brown and white Spaulding saddles that she found in a secondhand store. Immediately I recall how absolutely crucial it had been, when I was a high school student in the early fifties, to wear Spauldings. And I realize I am the only woman in the room over thirty. Usually I don't notice ages, but now as I look around I see the firm cheeks, the slim or if not slim yet resilient bodies, the clear eyes and particular freshness of very young women.

They examine the laces in the shoes, thick ropes of pink and grey.

And I find myself talking, my words astonishing me. "When I was young," I say, "the boys wore charcoal grey flannel suits with pink shirts."

The women in the kitchen barely glance at me. There is a small jerky pause, and then the woman with the Spauldings says, "Oh yeah, charcoal grey, I could get into that. I could see it—and a pink shirt, hey I bet that'd look hot."

When I was young. . . I am numb, sitting there staring at a wide-hipped greenish bottle of chablis. I can't remember ever uttering that phrase before. It has pointed to a chasm that I never imagined to exist: between that presumably distant and unreachable time *when I was young*, and now. Now. . . what?! Now, according to the logic of the phrase, I am *not young*. Then am I old?

I look around the room. Any woman here under the age, say, of 27, is young enough to be my daughter. That spiffy dyke over there with the crewcut and the three earrings in a little row up the curve of her ear: I imagine her as my daughter. What an arresting thought. As it is, I am free to enjoy her loud laugh and the swagger of her thrust-forward leg, her tanned arms crossed over her silky shirt. How differently would I feel about her if she had suckled at my breast, had tested me with the demands of her growing up, had given me the delight of her developing mind and body, had loved me and then rebelled against me and finally condescended to me or maybe become my friend.

But she *could be* my daughter, and this fact stuns me. She has only heard and read of the Second World War, whereas my childhood took place under its shadow; the fifties exist for her as "Happy Days" on TV, while I lived that complicated decade as a high school and college student; there is so much that formed me that she knows nothing of.

Another woman, lounging near the doorway, draws my eye. She wears shorts, and her legs are flawlessly smooth. I am reminded of the picnic in 1979 where I first noticed the changes in my own legs. I happened to glance down at my thigh beneath the hem of my shorts, and saw a little swelling under the skin. What is this? I wondered.

And then I noticed on the inside of my calf a lumpy snake of bluish vein crawling toward my knee. Now that I saw it, it began to ache. Later I remembered my father's legs, on the rare occasions when he wore a bathing suit, his calves clutched by the bluish crooked fingers of varicose veins. So the hereditary weakness arrived. Having lurked outside the door like a shy friend, now, noticing my body's (only beginning) loss of resilience, it came furtively in to bestow its gift.

In 1982 the letters on the page of the book I was reading began to blur if I read by anything but intense sunlight. If I moved the book away—ah, there, it's better—I could find just the narrow range in which my eyes could focus. Soon my arm was not long enough to manage this. One of my students who was near my age told me I could buy magnifying glasses at the Emporium for twelve dollars. I did so, and use them now when I must.

Yet my picture of myself lags behind the actuality. For many years I thought of myself as a big rangy girl, an Irish-setter type person, longlimbed and supple, flopping about goodnatureedly. That image had little to do with the constricted ladylike creature I most certainly appeared to be through my teens and twenties. I came closer to it in my thirties after I became a lesbian, with all the freedom that choice brings, to be oneself. Still, people tell me I was often remote, and intimidating when threatened. Now sometimes I sense a person's conception of me when she looks at me, and if I am seen as an "older woman," someone weighty with years, dignified, to be deferred to, I feel like snorting raucously at the deception. No, no, I want to say, you're not *seeing me*. I'm as vital, as "experimental with my life" as you. Then if I am tired or in a position where I need to get something done, I use the deception. The deference becomes a lever to get what I want, the deception works in my favor and I let it, while knowing that this erodes me morally.

But I am only 48 years old, at the very beginning of this journey. When I think of my Aunt Helen, who is 83, who can barely see or hear, who walks with two canes and is so twisted by age that to cook a meal in her kitchen is a slow, tortuous and even dangerous endeavor that requires tremendous energy and inventive skill—when I think of Aunt Helen still insisting on cooking meals for my mother and me, I experience the vacuum of my knowledge about age. Standing at the stove, Helen shakes her head and says with the brevity that has always characterized her utterances, "Don't get old."

But my body has begun speaking to me differently than ever before, and so I am brought to these thoughts, this investigation that Helen has been engaged in for thirty years or so. I'll know more when I'm eighty, but that's no reason to keep my mouth shut now.

In the summer of 1982 I was driving across the Midwest doing a promotion tour for my book *Heartwomen*. Alone in the car, I would drive for six, eight, ten hours, arrive at a town, be interviewed by the newspaper and the radio station and that evening give a reading and slide show at a university women's center or a woman's coffeehouse or bookstore. Then I would sleep over at someone's house, get up the next morning and

drive six, eight, ten hours to the next specified town. Perhaps because this schedule was so strenuous, my period was delayed, and for weeks I endured the swollen breasts and belly, the irritability, the increased emotionality that precedes my period. In Iowa City, Iowa, I happened to examine my breasts and found several distinct lumps, and even though I knew that before my period my breasts always show such changes, I decided that cancer had finally struck. The next morning, my birthday, I awoke in a strange bed in an empty house, with a thunderstorm raging outside, and my first thought was, "I'm forty-six, I'm over the hill." That noon I went to lunch with a young woman from the Iowa City Women's Press, who, noting my depression, asked delicately, "Are you tired?" I glanced up at her, gauging whether I could lay this burden on her, but she appeared so dewy with youth that I felt the way I did in the kitchen at the party when I noticed how young everyone was. Lonely. And not able to speak of what bothered me, because I would have to start at zero and so it might take all day and even then she might not understand. "Yes," I said, "I'm tired."

Here I am reminded of an encounter with Elsa Gidlow. I and several other younger women drove Elsa, who is in her seventies, home from a poetry reading. As Elsa is a lesbian poet of a time so remote from our own, we were eager to talk with her, and asked her many questions. Elsa responded with tart half-sentences or monosyllables, her strong lined face set in an expression of restraint, until finally we gave up and drove in silence. When she had left the car, my friends wondered whether Elsa had not been feeling well or if something in our questions had been particularly annoying to her. But when I thought of it, it seemed to me that perhaps Elsa simply despaired of communicating to us a reality so different from our own, of doing this in one short automobile ride, with women she did not know and might never see again. Remembering her in the front seat, small and sinewy and elegant, her grey hair bound with a purple headband, her narrow shoulders swathed in plum-colored suede, her back resolutely straight under the barrage of questions, now I feel her loneliness.

On my return to Oakland from my promotion tour, I discovered that the cancer scare had been a false alarm this time. But a week later my period arrived with a violence I had never experienced. I was not bleeding, I was hemorrhaging. All strength left my body, and a great heat entered to take its place. I lay in bed, my flesh burning. When I did manage to get up, I was shaky and sweating, and poised on the edge of tears. I had never felt so vulnerable. All my life I had experienced regular periods with little pain. I had looked forward to my periods as a time of folding in, of taking care of myself and listening to myself. Now what I heard when I listened was a rampage. Odd how predictability brings the illusion of control, for obviously my periods had never been under my direction, and yet because I knew what to expect from them, I experienced that order that feels like control. Now my body was running riot. I had read about hot flashes, of course, but nobody had said that one's body might burn with a deep heat from one's very center for two days without relief.

In this condition I craved the comfort of my lover's understanding and acceptance. Much younger than I, yet she could sense how unprotected, how at the mercy of my

body, I felt. She tucked me into bed, brought me ice cream, stroked my head. I welcomed this special treatment. And as I lay in bed I understood something I hadn't before: that the deference paid to old people comes, when it is most genuinely offered, not just from respect for their years of experience but from the recognition of their vulnerability. They are not so insulated as we by our strong bodies and sharp sensory capacities. They become more and more fragile, prey to accident, to disease, to emotional distress.

I think of the photographer Imogen Cunningham, who had just turned ninety when I met her. My lover at the time was shooting a film about Imogen, so she spent whole days with her and often went out to dinner with her. Now and then I came along. On one occasion we were all to go out to a Chinese restaurant in North Beach, but when we arrived we found Imogen in her bathrobe, and she told us she was experiencing the vertigo that sometimes came on her and said she couldn't go with us this time. Her hair hung in a long white swatch down her back, her tiny body in the flowered robe trembled as she went to get back into bed. Sitting against the pillows, she was like a gnome, her eyes blinking at us snappishly, as she shot questions at us, always in a tone of annoyance that was meant to be, and *was*, provocative. Her flame burned brightly, but it was a small flame, her presence light. It was her skin that struck me most, for it was so delicate as to seem transparent, in places ash white, with here and there a faint blush of rose, so delicately dry-seeming that it looked as if it would tear at the touch. So little protection between Imogen and the world: no wonder she felt the need to hold people at a distance with the scourge of her wit.

It was June 1983 in the makeshift camp next to the freeway which was being used as a jail to house the three hundred women antinuclear protesters arrested at the gates of Lawrence-Livermore Laboratories. On my first day of imprisonment there, seated on the ground at a meeting in the tent, suddenly I experienced the worst pain I had ever felt. A dagger plunged deep in my jaw. Stumbling outside the tent to hold onto a guy rope, I bent forward under this agony, tears in hot rivulets down my cheeks. Three days before I had gone through the first procedure for a root canal in one of my molars. The dentist had prescribed codeine for the pain he said might come, but there had been no pain at all, and so I had not even tried to sneak the codeine into jail with me. Now, clutching the tent rope, I longed for some relief. Mercifully, the pain lessened and disappeared after a short while. But it was to return each day for the first five days of our incarceration, and impale me for some minutes. After each bout I was exhausted and could barely function for a period of time.

In the warehouse I sat on my cot for the meeting of our "cluster," the Cosmic Elders. This grouping had come about because of Sarah, a seventy-year-old indefatigable member of our affinity group who decided if she were going to jail she wanted more "white heads" with her. Here they were, in their sixties and seventies, the eldest 82. I felt privileged to be included in Cosmic Elders after a few of these meetings, for there was such accumulated political experience and wisdom in the elders that our group

generally dealt with problems more efficiently than the groups of younger women. While they struggled to understand the significance of a particular move by the sheriff or happening in the camp, our veterans quickly put the event in a political context developed over years in the labor and peace movements. The elders knew what things meant and what our alternatives were.

I soon noticed, though, that it was not easy for them to be in jail with us. Conditions were harsh for everyone, with inadequate beds and blankets, constant wind and sun, wretched food, fumes and noise from the freeway, and the subtle harrassment of the guards, but the elders brought with them additional hardships. Rose suffers from arthritis; I would watch her get up with great difficulty from her seat on the straw-littered ground. Marion has skin cancer; she wore a hat and rubbed sun-screen on her face and hands. Helen apparently has some form of neurological disease, for she often tottered and bumped into things, and her hands shook. Goldie's high blood pressure showed in her flushed cheeks and her dizzy groping for support when she got up quickly. Sitting with these women in our meetings, I rarely thought of these infirmities, for such steadfast energy came from each woman, but when I did notice something—a hesitation in speech, a shifting of stiff limbs, an attempt to shield the face from the relentless sun—I knew that my five minutes of excruciating pain each day were nothing next to this constant management of a problem, this continual dealing with discomfort or incapacity.

The elders probably did not understand before their arrests what their presence might mean to the rest of us in jail, but on the third day of our eleven long days there a crisis occurred that prompted us to call upon them, and it became clear that their contribution was essential for the cohesion of the whole group. On that day certain women made a decision, independent of the larger group, to go for arraignment. The three hundred of us had previously pledged to refuse arraignment in protest against the punitive sentences being meted out by a prejudiced judge. When these women acted against the interests of the whole group, my heart dropped; along with most other people I felt betrayed, and panic hit us. Suddenly we were in trouble, women who had been resolute and cheerful the day before becoming angry, confused and depressed. The feel of defeat was in the air.

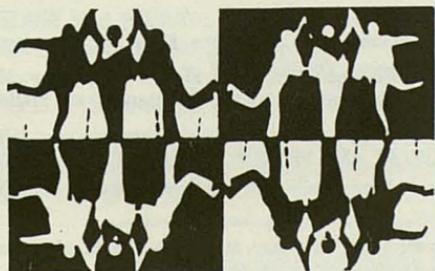
Then someone thought to ask the elders if they would speak to us that evening. After supper, we gathered, women of all ages and backgrounds and political experience, in a giant circus tent. When everyone was there — a mob of bodies sitting, squatting, standing along the walls and at the back — four or five old women came to the front of the tent. From my place against the canvas drape of the side wall, I felt the waiting silence gather, its presence so intense that the roar of the freeway fell away. Soon the voice of a whitehaired woman in a red T-shirt and jeans filled that silence. She spoke of early labor movement struggles and how, often, just before success was to come, the strikers would feel most dejected. We must never give in to that, she cautioned. Another woman told of how she had not engaged politically with others until a few years ago, had been a staunch Republican individualist, but this threat of nuclear holocaust had

brought her here with us, and she felt honored to be among us. Two more old women stood before the group, simply, unselfconsciously, to tell of the political battles of their lives and how they had managed to keep going when all seemed lost.

As they talked I could feel the mood in the tent and in myself changing. I was encouraged by these old women, I would *be them* one day, and if I could be as honest as they, as generous of myself as they were, then I could be proud to be old. A warmth, a cheerfulness began to grow in the tent. We trusted these women, we loved them for coming here with us; and in so doing we trusted each other again, began to believe once again in our collective strength.

I guess it was when I was about forty that I noticed that life is a long time. Most women over forty have lived several lives: the growing up and becoming a woman; the twenties and thirties of marriage, childraising, professional growth, searching, establishing one's lesbian identity, whatever occupied and fed us then; and the life that began when that earlier existence fell apart or drastically changed. Looking back I see that with the end of each period and beginning of the next, I knew more, could dare more, and opened myself more trustingly to life. Now at this new juncture, I feel tremendous possibility. And I know that the progress of each of our lives is not really so linear as we sometimes imagine. Elsa and Imogen, my Aunt Helen, the Cosmic Elders, the spiffy dyke with her crewcut and earrings, my 32-year-old lover, my teenage friend who has just started college: we stand not in a line reaching from the womb to the grave but in a casual group, like women at a picnic, lounging, resting after hard work, playing together, sharing our minds and bodies, living the present with all the joy and attention we can call up in ourselves.

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GOAT SONG by Dodici Azpadu. 1984. Aunt Lute. 110 pp. \$6.50

Unconventional novel which explores the lives of assorted "low life queers," the violence of the roles assigned to them by society, and, in a reversal of ancient Greek heroic conventions, the tragic fall brought about by their individual and collective lack of awareness of what causes them to abuse themselves and each other.

SATURDAY NIGHT IN THE PRIME OF LIFE by Dodici Azpadu. 1983. Aunt Lute. 95 pp. \$5.95.

Novel about a middle-aged lesbian coming to terms with her proud and aging Sicilian-American mother and with the effect male-dominated Sicilian culture has on the women who exist both inside and outside it.

ABENG by Michelle Cliff, 1984. The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 14886. 167 pp. \$6.95.

Novel which evokes in rich, allusive language the coming of age of a light-skinned Black girl in Jamaica during the 1950's and her search for connection with women both living and long dead amidst the contradictions of class, color, blood, and history in a long colonized country.

WALKING ON THE MOON: Six Stories and a Novella by Barbara Wilson. 1983. The Seal Press. 161 pp. \$5.95.

An extraordinary collection of stories which explore connections between women in radically different landscapes and stages of life — a middle-aged woman leaves her husband in Italy and joins an all-women circus, a 12-year-old girl meets Miss Venezuela at the 1959 Miss Universe contest, and a woman comes to terms with her adolescent desires while revisiting Germany.

MURDER IN THE COLLECTIVE: A Feminist Mystery by Barbara Wilson. 1984. The Seal Press. 183 pp. \$7.95.

Truly exciting mystery set amidst the everyday complexities of political struggle. Refreshing, provocative, and very true to life.

THE SOPHIE HOROWITZ STORY by Sarah Shulman. 1984. The Naiad Press. 158 pp. \$7.95.

Tart, fast paced, hilarious, and politically acute mystery populated by the foods and accents of lower eastside NYC and by an ingenious collection of urban misfits.

ANOTHER MOTHER TONGUE: GAY WORDS, GAY WORLDS by Judy Grahn. 1984. Beacon Press, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108. 324 pp. \$19.95.

Imaginative reweaving of the unbroken, subterranean threads of an ancient gay culture which lives on through our own most vital connections. Prose by the legendary lesbian feminist poet, who has been spinning daily life into mythic proportions for two decades.

WOMEN IDENTIFIED WOMEN, ed. by Trudy Darty and Sandee Potter. 1984. Mayfield Publishing Company, 285 Hamilton Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94301. 316 pp. \$11.95.

Superb collection of articles on lesbian identity, oppression, and culture which delineate both our diversity and our commonality.

NEW LESBIAN WRITING, ed. by Margaret Cruikshank. 1984. Grey Fox Press, San Francisco, distributed by Subterranean Company, P.O. Box 10233, Eugene, OR 97440. 200 pp. \$7.95.

Anthology of poetry, fiction, and essays by lesbians old and young with an extensive bibliography and helpful introduction. Especially useful to students and teachers.

THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID: CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND FICTION BY NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN, ed. by Rayna Green. 1984. Indiana University Press, Tenth & Morton Streets, Bloomington, IN 47405. 329 pp. \$12.50.

Exciting anthology of work by a group of authors who are gifted, outspoken, supportive of each other, and rooted in a powerful literary tradition. Placed in context by Rayna Green's moving introduction and extensive bibliography.

GATHERING GROUND: NEW WRITING AND ART BY NORTHWEST WOMEN OF COLOR, ed. by Jo Cochran, J.T. Stewart, and Mayumi Tsutakawa. 1984. The Seal Press. 160 pp. \$6.95.

Poetry, fiction, essays, oral history, and art work by women from the many native and immigrant traditions of the Northwest, giving collective voice to their individual struggles for self-definition in this beautifully designed collection.

STEPPING OUT OF LINE: A WORKBOOK ON LESBIANISM AND FEMINISM by Nym Hughes, Yvonne Johnson, and Yvette Perreault. 1984. Press Gang. 207 pp. \$12.95.

Guided script for a two day workshop on lesbianism and feminism with detailed information for facilitators, as well as many practical suggestions on how to effect personal and political change. A powerful truth for shared consciousness-raising.

LOOK ME IN THE EYE: OLD WOMEN, AGING AND AGEISM by Barbara Macdonald with Cynthia Rich. 1984. Spinsters, Ink. 115 pp. \$5.95.

Angry testimony from two women who have experienced the harsh shock of ageism in our society and, unforgiveably, within the feminist movement. Their painful truths break the silence for women who share these indignities and challenge those still young to expand our horizons to include our older sisters as well as to face up to growing old ourselves.

OUT FROM UNDER: SOBER DYKES AND OUR FRIENDS, ed. by Jean Swallow. 1983. Spinsters, Ink. 239 pp. \$8.95.

Eloquent anthology describing many facets of recovery from substance abuse (day-to-day recovery, the politics of chemical addiction, how we go on) drawn from the experiences of co-alcoholics, adult children of alcoholics, and substance abuse counselors, as well as those of us who are recovering from chemical addictions.

SHADOW ON A TIGHTROPE: WRITINGS BY WOMEN ON FAT OPPRESSION, ed. by Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser. 1983. Aunt Lute. 243 pp. \$8.95.

If you are fat and haven't yet seen the strength in yourself, or if you fear fat, read this painful, powerful collection of writings.

WE ARE ALL PART OF ONE ANOTHER: A BARBARA DEMING READER, ed. by Jane Meyerding. 1984. New Society Publishers, 4722 Baltimore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19143. 320 pp. \$10.95.

Collection of writings by the late activist thinker which trace the evolution of her tough-minded insights into feminism, gay liberation, and nonviolence. A gift of love from a fighter who never retired.

BLACK LESBIAN IN WHITE AMERICA by Anita Cornwell. 1983. The Naiad Press. 129 pp. \$7.50. Collection of writings by a fearless pioneer whose vision of racial and sexual oppression has been clearly articulated for decades.

YOURS IN STRUGGLE: THREE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON ANTI-SEMITISM AND RACISM by Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith. 1984. Long Haul Press, Box 592, VanBrunt Station, Brooklyn, NY 11215. 233 pp. \$7.95.

Courageous attempt by three longtime activists to uncover and fight racism and anti-Semitism as these form part of our lived experience. Marred by the absence of an Arab-American perspective and by a disconcerting imbalance in the length of the essays (Pratt 52 pp., Smith 20 pp., Bulkin 139 pp.)

STAGE V: A JOURNAL THROUGH ILLNESS by Sonny Wainwright. 1984. Acacia Books, P.O. Box 3630, Berkeley, CA 94703. 144 pp. \$6.95.

Story of a brave woman's struggle through massive chemotherapy into remission from bone cancer and of the strength and support given by the community of women who love her.

FALLING FROM GRACE by Elly Van de Walle. 1984. Press Gang. 52 pp. \$5.95.

Powerful collection of poems which explore the struggles and personal transformation induced by radical mastectomy at age 28.

PUBLISHERS WITH MULTIPLE LISTINGS

Aunt Lute Book Co., P.O.B. 2723, Iowa City, IA 52244

Naiad Press, P.O.B. 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302

Press Gang Publishers, 603 Powell St., Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1H2, Canada

Seal Press, 312 S. Washington, Seattle, WA 98104

Spinsters, Ink, 803 De Haro St., San Francisco, CA 94107



Contributors' Notes

Tata Andres is an artist who lives in Jamaica.

Lucie Bauer recalls several years lived in isolation on a small island off the coast of Maine when her sole connection with the women's community was through the printed word. She writes in appreciation of *SW* and for women who share a similar experience.

Sandy Boucher is a midwesterner by birth, a Californian by residence and inclination. Her books include *Heartwomen* (nonfiction) and two books of stories, *Assaults & Rituals* and *The Notebooks of Leni Clare*.

Liron Bourla, born 1954, is an Israeli artist living in Jerusalem.

Cheryl Clarke (b. Wash., D.C., 5/16/47) is a black lesbian writer and feminist who lives and writes in New Brunswick, New Jersey. The poem appearing in this issue is from her new manuscript of poems, *Living as a lesbian: Poems 1976-1985*, which will be published in 1986. She is a member of the *Conditions* Editorial Collective. She is a social worker. And she is the author of *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

Laura Derr is an expressive therapist who works with psychiatric patients in Boston. She lives in Somerville with her sister whose daughter she helps to parent.

Dredlight: I'm 32 and living in New Mexico at ground zero. I've been acting, dancing, and generally hanging around theaters forever. Deserts too. I'm trying to combine the two. I'd be happy (real happy) to hear from anyone interested in producing *Word of Mouth* (write clo *SW*).

Elana Dykewomon is still writing and distributing lesbian arts through *Diaspora Distribution* with her companion-lover *Zelda* (aka *Dolphin*). She may have moved to California and play trivial pursuit on legal holidays with the other seps, but she ain't mellow yet.

Shirley Glubka is a Child Welfare Caseworker living in Prospect, Maine. She has been published in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 1983); *Conditions: Nine*; and *Naming: Poems by 8 Women*.

Jewelle L. Gomez is a poet, fiction writer and critic whose work has appeared in *Conditions*, *Essence*, *13th Moon*, *IKON*, *The Village Voice*, *Womanews*, *The New York Native*, as well as in the anthologies *Home Girls* and *Lesbian Fiction*. She is originally from Boston and currently lives in New York City.

Janice Gould: I was born in 1949 in San Diego, CA, but grew up in Berkeley. I'm a Native American (*Maidu*) lesbian writer and musician. Currently I'm working on my M.A. in English at the Univ. of Calif., Berkeley. My work appears in *A Gathering of Spirit*.

E. J. Graff lives and writes in Boston where "Blackbird, Fly" has been installed in the new Davis St. subway station. Her new pamphlet of poems, "Passionate Women," is available from New Words Bookstore in Cambridge.

Elaine Hall: I am a mixed-blood Creek lesbian, originally from Alabama. I now live in Los Angeles. I write poetry and fiction.

Barbara Hammer is a lesbian filmmaker and artist living in New York City.

Jan Hardy: I'm a writer, reader, runner, sax player, library clerk, Leo, living with a cat named Leroy and trying to love myself as much as I love other wimmin.

Heather's poetry has appeared sporadically in feminist periodicals, including *Ms.* magazine, *Motive*, and *The Ladder*, since the early seventies. She has published two books: *Watch Out Brother, I'm Here* (1971) and *Heat Lightning* (1980), available from Black Widow Publications, Oakland, CA. She is fat, middle-aged and happy, living with two cats in a witchily turreted victorian house.

Terri Jewell: I am a member of the League of Lesbian Writers (Louisville, KY branch) & the KY State Poetry Society, my work having been accepted by more than 70 publications including *Black Maria*, *Off Our Backs*, *Bay Windows*, *Telewoman*, *LesCon* & *Azalea*.

Virginia Johnson (b. 1944, Pennsylvania) has worked as a social worker, an English teacher at Queens College, has completed a graduate degree in creative writing, and is currently working towards a Ph.D. in English and American Literature.

Irena Klepfisz acknowledges that she has said enough about herself in this issue. Still, she wishes to announce that a British edition of her writing, *Different Enclosures: Poetry and Prose of Irena Klepfisz*, has just been published by Onlywomen Press, London. She is currently on the summer staff of Women's Voices Writing Workshop in Santa Cruz, CA.

Christian McEwen: Born in London, grew up in Scotland, came to the States in 1979. Worked in construction and floor refinishing, also as a gardener, counsellor and English teacher. Her work appears in *Feminary*.

Mary Moran: born in the upper peninsula of Michigan, grew up in Wisconsin, currently lives in California. Her work has appeared in *IKON*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Woman of Power*, and *A Gathering of Spirit*.

Eliza Morrison is 24, started studying harp at age 8. Received a B.F.A. degree in acting, acted in the experimental theatre movement, off-off-Broadway shows and television; spent a year with VISTA in Kentucky, working with battered women; now attending the New England Conservatory (where *Tryst/Triste* is set) and working as a free-lance harpist.

Renee Pierce works as a secretary and has been involved in the women's movement for many years. After mainly writing poetry for herself and friends, she now wants to add to the growing number of poets who voice their concern about what's happening in the world.

Linda Quinlan: I am a thirty-six year old lesbian mother from a working-class background, carrying on the tradition as a house painter. I've published in *Sing*, *Heavenly Muse*, *The Poet*, *St. Dreyfus*, and *Windhover Science Fiction*. I am a pisces with no earth signs.

Sudie Rakusin is a painter and graphic artist. Her book of 48 drawings, *Goddesses & Amazons* is available POB 88, Brooke, VA 22430.

Kateri Sardella writes short stories and poetry. She has been published in *Sinister Wisdom's A Gathering of Spirit*, various issues of *Azalea* and her work will appear in the upcoming issue of *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*, edited by Paula Ross of Berkeley, CA. Sardella is a Native American woman from Cornwall Island, Ontario and Syracuse, New York. She now lives in northern California.

Susan Stinson is a fat dyke, raised in Colorado, and now writing and working as a secretary in Boston.

Susanna J. Sturgis is finishing her first book *Leaving the Island: Writings on Love and Change*. This summer, she's leaving the best job she's ever had (book buyer for Lammis Women's Shop) and the only lesbian community she's ever known (Wash., D.C.) to move to Martha's Vineyard and write a novel.

Alice Tallmadge: This is the first piece I've had printed outside of our women's newspaper. I've lived in Eugene, OR for eight years. I see my writing as eternally wrestling with the angels, and sometimes it seems as foreign to me as daughters must sometimes be to their mothers. Because I love surprises, revelations, and the working of a mind I rarely know I have, I keep it up.

Jennifer Green Woodhull is a student of meditation and cooking. She shares her home with a number of plants and a small computer in Denver, CO, where she makes her living as a writer.

Fauna Yarrow is a sober Maine dyke who's learning to balance and blend creativity and work.

zana: i'm a disabled jewish lesbian living on arizona desert land with other wimin, learning (literally from the ground up) ways we can bring our unique selves together in community.

I have received and read the issue of *Sinister Wisdom* by Jill Drew and wanted to express to you my conflicting feelings!

First of all it is well written and an interesting account of what she experienced as a woman, a peace activist, and a totally *human* being. I am always pleased to read something that leaves me with strong feelings, leaves me musing afterwards about its meaning, discussing it with others, rereading sections and in general not just putting it aside and forgetting about it. So from that point of view I am glad she wrote it and you published it!

As with any war story there are "the good guys" and the "bad guys" and Israel as the aggressor has to be the "bad guy." There is no question that when this happened I felt (& many I knew felt) that what was happening was horrible. At first I couldn't believe that Israeli soldiers could have gone into the camps & simply murdered women & children. When it became obvious that this was in part true I felt that Israel had really done the wrong thing despite historical circumstances that led to it. So I do not condone Israel.

Yet I wish you could have had a page or two of historical perspective to set Israel's position in context. (The context, as I see it, of generations of frustration at constantly being the victim of guerilla warfare from the Palestinians plus repeated attacks against Israel by the Arab nations.)

I think it might have been good (perhaps not too late?) to have included a chapter that gave such a perspective to what happened in Lebanon. Maybe Jill would object. I don't know.

I had a particularly hard time reading the part about her visit to Jerusalem. Even here, when she is in Israel, she cannot begin to see the kind of hardship that people there have suffered from living through 30+ years of continuing warfare, always under threat from the Arab countries and completely dependent for support on a sometimes hostile world community. And although Jill talks about Jaffa, there is no context for the fact of how many Arabs have been successfully absorbed into Israel (and not kept in camps).

—Judy Kesselman
Suffern, New York

Just finished reading "To Go To Berbir" — it is all you said it is — a gripping story with a kind of poetry in its words — so emotion-packed I was teary-eyed in parts. All such a short time ago — and continuing still. . . . made me look up in my own "library" anything else I could find about Lebanon, Israel, the PLO, what countries are supporting who—

Thanks for choosing Jill's book as SW 26.

—Donolyn Hagelberg
Detroit, Michigan

I congratulate you on publishing *To Go To Berbir*, for choosing to go straight into the thicket of controversy I believe we feminist women must confront, not avoid. I thank Jill Drew for making human, for putting individual faces into what most American media characterize amorphously as the Middle East situation.

Addendum on editor's statement from SW 27:

Yes, more historical & political context would have made the issue more comprehensive but using context in another way—where else could *To Go* have been published in a context that was *not* anti-Semitic & that reached the audience *SW* does?

—Carol Keyes
Nottingham, New Hampshire

. . . *To Go To Berbir* is a treasure of insight, struggle and feeling which left me weeping and shaking when I'd finished reading it (which I did all in one sitting). . . . Jill Drew speaks this story so well, so movingly, honestly. Her courage in going to Beirut and for sharing this journal with her sisters and the world will add strongly to our understanding of the complexities of racism and hatred. Thank her for me, and tell her too, that her work, her story is growing—becoming more than "just a journal about a war." It is forming part of the truth, the living foundation of women's new world view where diversity is applauded and divisiveness, killing and hatred are abolished for peace.

I look forward to, and encourage you to take, other chances with *Sinister Wisdom*.

—Moonhawk River Stone
Albany, New York

On the night of 5/6 June 1982 I went to an informal evening of guitars and folksinging that a group of us were having about once a month. It was spring, and we decided to hold it outdoors in Hayarkon Park. We had a campfire, roasted potatoes, beer. On the way home I realized that every other car on the Haifa Highway was an army bus. . . . The next morning, the Voice of Israel confirmed what I thought I already knew. I foresaw another Litani-type campaign to "end Arab terrorism" (the Litani campaign took place in Spring 1978 following the hijacking of an Israeli civilian bus by Arab terrorists — many children on a one-day outing with their parents were among those killed) lasting a few weeks, costing "relatively light" Israeli military casualties. It was, in the end, useless. I had a rotten feeling about this new venture: I knew that while I lived in North Tel Aviv the border cities and settlements had been suffering increasing katusha attacks in the past years. I also knew that a quick, unprovoked macho foray into Lebanon would not solve that problem.

The quick foray became a "Peace for Galilee" campaign of 40-45 kilometers that became a Lebanese War. Arik Sharon wanted a *Milchemet Breira* (War of Choice) and it waited in the wings for who knows how long until the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Great Britain gave the excuse. It was a war that re-awakened every carefully buried Vietnam War memory I had — especially the one of the "Honor Roll" droning on during the Metromedia ten o'clock evening news. By mid-Summer 1982 Israeli soldiers stationed in Lebanon had their own song, unlike any other that Israeli soldiers had ever sung before:

Little airplane in the sky,

with you to Lebanon we will fly.

*There we'll fight as Sharon says we should,
and come home in crates of wood!*

A grim parody of a song these same boys and men once sang in kindergarten. And a few days ago we had our 600th military death there — a reservist corporal from a kibbutz near the Lebanese border. This kibbutz (Shamir) suffered a serious terrorist attack about a decade ago, but still the kibbutz secretary did not hesitate to condemn Sharon at the grave-side.

This is the root of what infuriates me and hurts me in Jill Drew's journal. It's not her PLO bias (I support an independent Palestinian State bordering my own) or even her Syrian bias (which I cannot

accept, but will not discuss here).

Jill Drew simply glosses over Israeli opposition to this war and the Cahen (not Kahane!) Commission in a few sentences. Do the journal's readers know that 400,000 Israelis came to demonstrate at Tel Aviv City Hall to demand a Commission of Inquiry? Do they know about the Israeli soldiers in jail for refusing a call-up to Lebanon? Have they heard of Women Against Occupation, Peace Now, Parents Against Silence, *Yesh Gvul* ("There's a Limit" — a group of reserve soldiers against the war). Are they aware of the Citizens Rights Party, the Change (*Shenui*) Party and the *Shei* Party (since disbanded, some members moving to the Citizens Rights Party, some forming the nucleus of the Progress List for Peace)? Did Drew speak to no Israeli soldier who simply, sadly told her that he hated what he was doing and wanted to go home? Do the readers come away aware that we know about the horrors we caused and are mortified by this war?

I don't for a minute doubt Drew's veracity in reporting or the sincerity of her love for the Palestinian people. But the Lebanese War is just like any other war — each side sees itself as completely justified and the other side as completely wrong. A Christian phalangist, whose daughter was locked in the attic for seven years to protect her from whom he saw as the enemy, who tossed rice and candies at advancing Israeli troops, whom he saw as liberator, would tell almost the same story as Jill Drew. Only the roles would be reversed. Unfortunately, as an Israeli bitterly opposed to this war I can't react that way, becoming one of the "gamesters at the board, squaring off one atrocity against another, until there are no atrocities left" (An Israeli fringe production used this theme a few years ago, with a divided blackboard listing "Deir Yassin"¹ on one side and "He-Lamed Hey"² on the other, with the lists progressively lengthening as the evening went on. A boxing-ring bell sounded with each new entry).

The journal mentions the Beaufort Castle. Every year on the anniversary of his death (Every year. I can't believe I wrote those words) the mother of one of the boys who died there (eight, I think) writes to the *Jerusalem Post* to remind Israelis that Begin and Sharon deliberately lied the day they told the nation that Beaufort had been taken without a single Israeli death. That, the interview with the American medical personnel testifying before the Cahen Commission and those boys "somewhere in Lebanon" singing the little airplane

song are my clearest memories of this war so far. The families of the boys who died at Beaufort returned the official letters of condolence.

To brand every Israeli as a willing participant or passive collaborator in this war is unfair. It's on the same level as Rabbi Meir Kahane's ravings about good Arabs and dead Arabs. Kahane thrives on spreading the idea that all non-Jews hate us, on telling Israeli youth that the "goyim" don't care anyway, so we should be strong and kill with pride.

Blaming all of Israel for the sins of its government — not elected directly, but formed by bizarre coalition bargaining (There are ten odd parties in the Israeli Knesset. Over twenty ran in the last election.) — is coming very close to blaming a raped woman for her dress, her manner, her walking freely where and when she wanted to — or simply for being female.

Melanie, my father survived the deathcamps, my mother Transnistria³. Can you imagine their horror at this war? My mother lived through being chased from ghetto to forest and from forest to ghetto. She spent the infamous winter of 1941/42 in the forest and knows that the best way to destroy a person is to keep uprooting them. Try to imagine how she felt when the Israelis turned off the water. A few weeks ago, the Women Against Racism held a forum in Tel Aviv. One of the speakers took part in a 1943 ghetto-uprising — Bialystock, I think. Can you hear the revulsion as she described Kahane's racism, a wave not unconnected with this war?

And Melanie, I know I promised not to exchange atrocity stories, but I have to tell this one: any Israeli would know exactly how the Sabra refugee camp mothers felt when they "stuffed the babies into food cupboards and put socks in their mouths." In 1977 there was an Arab terrorist attack in Nahariya. A young mother inadvertently suffocated her daughter when she held her hand over the child's mouth. They were hiding in a cupboard as the terrorists killed her husband and other child.

On the Hebrew calendar the days between Rosh HaShanna (the New Year) and Yom HaKippurim (the Day of Repentance) are called *HaYamim HaNora'im* — the Days of Awe, the terrible days. During those days we are commanded as Jews to look back at our sins — the sins of commission and the sins of omission. The first reports of the Sabra and Shatila massacres came through on Israeli news service just as Rosh HaShanna ended, and those days, after hearing such news, became "the worst

days of all our lives" here in Israel too. If we did not support this war, we were forced to see that not openly opposing it was just as wrong. Many Israelis who supported this war were forced to face the horrors it caused. The largest demonstration in the history of Israel proved that many of us, secular and religious, took this injunction very seriously.

In sisterhood,
Bat HaMa'avak

Tel Aviv

¹An Arab village and scene of a massacre of civilians by Jewish irregular forces in April 1948. The Hagana (later the Israel Defence Forces) was not involved.

²A convoy of 35 Jewish students carrying relief supplies to the besieged Etzion settlements ambushed and massacred by Arab irregulars in January 1948.

³A forced re-settlement location administered by Romanian and Nazi armies.



It is raining—a severe thunderstorm. My 4 year old son calls to me from the doorway, "Mom, we better buy a boat." And since I've just finished Jill Drew's book I think—"Yeah we should—but where would we go?"

When I started her diary, I felt like I was listening to a close friend sharing her journey. As I kept reading—Jill became me/I became Jill. I saw and felt her concern and her love.

There is no such thing as being proud of being an American & old hopes die hard. . .but the more I identify with women all over the world—the stronger I become as a woman—not a woman with a national identity, but with a universal one: woman. Thanks, Jill.

Addendum on editor's statement from SW 27:

1. Aren't all journals basically about reactions and not about historical context? Is the function of a journal to teach political science or to let another person feel my hurts and appreciate my uniqueness in my own situation?

2. A journal is not intended to be a resolution but a journey—something shared with different parts of myself. The resolution of an issue/belief/etc. comes with time.

—Kathian
Ohio

I am writing because I am very troubled, outraged, and saddened by the recent publication in SW 26 of Jill Drew's "To Go To Berbir". Ms. Drew's account is not an illuminating step toward the politics of reconciliation and peace to which I presume SW is dedicated, but is rather, yet another expression of the dreadful spiralling politics of hate and revenge that have raged so long and so tragically in the Middle East, and which threaten to engulf us all.

While I do not expect Ms. Drew, presenting us with her journal, to obey the journalistic conventions of who, how, where and why, I did find it very unsettling, from the outset, not to know who the woman actually was, or is, and why she chose to go to Lebanon. Is she Jewish? Is she Christian? Is she, perhaps, of Lebanese descent? Does she have a previous position or involvement in the issue of Zionism, Palestine, or the Middle East in general? Was her passionate concern for the Palestinians new and sudden, or did it pre-date the Israeli invasion? We are not told; Ms. Drew does not reveal herself, yet we are being asked to accept her version of things.

So, through the prism that is her view of things, Ms. Drew, from the outset, equates the Israeli invasion of Lebanon with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with the Nazi death camps. "I am not just hearing about genocide" she writes, "I am watching it happen. Tonight." No, Ms. Drew, no, you were not—the charge is outrageous, revolting, and just plain wrong. It does not take away from the real tragedy that was the invasion to say that it was not genocide. It is dangerous to blunt our notion of what genocide actually is to call that genocide, but it is revealing of Ms. Drew's perspective that even before the massacre, even before she even leaves the United States, she has decided that the Israelis have come not to conquer but to exterminate.

Therefore, that being her perspective, what follows in her account should come as no surprise: when Ms. Drew is finally faced with the Israeli army on September 16th, 5 weeks after her arrival, she tells a colleague: "I would like to have a gun now," and then she immediately adds "Once upon a time, I used to be a disarmament worker. . ." Once upon a time—36 days as a war-time nurse in Beirut and her lifetime commitment to disarmament has already fallen away. She wants a gun. She wants a gun to kill Israelis, and this, I will point out

is pre-massacre, a massacre that was perpetrated by Lebanese Christians against Palestinian Moslems, however complicit one thinks the Israelis were. Post-massacre Ms. Drew tells us ". . . I listened to an English physician entertain other medical workers with an account of his close friendship with an Israeli captain posted at the south end of the camps during these dreadful times. . . it will take me a long time to forgive that respected English doctor." What can she not forgive, his mere friendship with the Israeli? She goes on to say, paraphrasing the Old Testament, "And Arik, the king of Israel, went out and slew the Palestinians and their neighbors with great slaughter, and the children of Israel slew of these people many hundreds in just three days, and surely they were stronger than they." She ends this entry by telling us: "I will not forget them, and there is no forgiveness. Thus endeth the lesson." The *them* that she is referring to seems to be the Israelis. Where is her analysis of the Christian role in any of this, or some self-reflection of herself as a Christian, which I can only assume that she is. To say there is no forgiveness, end of lesson, flames only the fires of hatred. She might have said that it is too early to forgive (or, since she is, after all, an outsider, in Lebanon for 90 days, she might have said that the families of those murdered cannot be expected to forgive)—that at least leaves the door to peace open, if only in the distant future. But Ms. Drew precludes forgiveness altogether: "One massacre leads to another and the evil of the assassin lives long after he himself dies. For what remains is grief. Grief is enduring: it is the poison contaminating generation after generation. Grief gives birth to vengeance, eliminates all forgiveness. Our children are the target and we will hand them the guns."

And therein lies the most profound problem with this piece—Ms. Drew is so envenomed that she simply accepts and promotes this hopeless point-of-view. Presumably, the gun she is handing on to the children is the very one she asked for on page 52. Speaking of a Palestinian child she has befriended, she writes: ". . . do I let him run into walls, fall down, always scramble to get out of the way? Of what? Of the bombs my country makes? Until he grows older—if he makes it that far—and becomes a warrior, a fighter. Said is not just the future of his parents: he is my future." Why child-as-Warrior? Why not as peacemaker? Her anger is not redeemed, she does not seem to think, feel or even imagine

beyond her anger, and that's her central failure. Ms. Drew is entitled to her anger, she is even entitled to her hatred. But such anger and such hatred shed no light: she is desperate, hopeless, unempowered, and unable to even envision peaceful remedies. When she finally visits Israel, she is not looking to find out anything about Israel itself, but for traces of the pre-1948 Arab community. The one conversation she recounts with an Israeli is with a policeman who is described as "young and large and with a round blond face." (That very description has strange reverberations for me.) She makes no attempt to seek out anti-invasion Israelis, and she has arrived there just weeks after an Israeli crowd estimated at between 100,000 and 400,000 rallied in Tel Aviv against the invasion, a fact I do not expect her to mention, but surely she was aware of the massive internal opposition in Israel to the invasion? And, while we have been treated to her enthusiastic gushings of racial romanticism about the Arabs ("Once I read that it is the desert that gives the Arabs their pride and generosity, their courage and their passion." That's from her journal entry on the day she arrived in the Middle East, so I can only assume that she was no *tabula rasa*) the lyricism turns sour when she arrives in Israel ("Straight sensible, modern middle-class construction for a straight modern middle-class nation.")

Unfortunately, the world abounds in such literature. But in SW? Why didn't you at least invite your readership to present other points-of-view, to encourage people to really open up this discussion? You say in your introduction that "In this book the very word [Israeli] becomes painful: *Israeli* in this book—in this war—is a curse." Now curse, as you should know, is defined as "a prayer for harm to come upon one". Is that what you, as the editors and publishers, wish to be sending out, a prayer for harm to come upon the Israelis? Whose end does that serve? To be told, and so condescendingly, that "This will be scary for Jews—all too familiar with curses; but this curse we need to hear" is an outrage: I need to ask, *Who do you mean by we?* This introduction is signed by two editors, one Jewish, one not. If *we* means the Jewish editor of SW, Ms. Kaye/Kantrowitz, and the Jewish readership of SW, I wish to tell Ms. Kaye/Kantrowitz that maybe *she* needs to hear curses, but I do not. And I do not need her to tell me that I need to hear them. I do not read SW to be cursed at as a Jew, and it feels awful to be singled out like that in the in-

roduction: all Jewish readers of SW must now gather over here to be cursed at, you seem to be saying, while non-Jewish readers may simply turn the page. *Outrageous*.

As a Jew and a Zionist who has been long critical of the Israeli stand on Palestine, and as someone who was outraged by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, I am all in favor of publishing material that will encourage exploration of the difficult issues involved—even material that is sharply critical of Israel. But to publish a book that, at its root, offers hopelessness, and guns, and more killings as the solution, is a terrible mistake. If we are to survive (we, the human race) we must step out of that deadly whirlwind of hate, and we must search in ourselves for the sources of wisdom, faith and fortitude to do so. Ms. Drew fails in that, and in publishing her account, so, unfortunately, do you.

Cheryl Moch
New York City

This beautiful image [Golden Gate Headlands, California] is a counterpart to the reason I'm writing you. The scenery is so beautiful and the issue I read is so "beautiful" if I can say such a thing of your publication of Jill Drew's journal "To Go To Berbir." It's an unbearable thing to read, and I'm ashamed to say unbearable when I only have to read what she went through and even more what the people went through. I'm sure the people concerned would have thanked you for publishing the story of their miseries, and publishing it in such a "neutral" (at best) environment as America (or the world). After all what goes on in El Salvador or Guatemala is not any different. Or elsewhere. But it touches home directly and I am so full of things I could say and feel and the word thank you is just the beginning of it. And if you see Jill Drew or write to her tell her among her readers there is one who wrote to you to thank her. Many must have already done so.

—Etel Adnan
Sausalito, California

The Lebanese journal is an incredible publication. Not easy to read through as a Jew. Not easy to touch that war, which Jill forces me to do. My eyes are open a lot further. Thank you for publishing it.

—Linda Smukler
Brooklyn, New York

I appreciated your statement re: the "Berbir" issue of *SW*. It was full of seriousness and complexity. . . feminists must be aware and educated about Middle East issues. This morning I was terribly shocked by Indira Gandhi's death (assassination). Though the violence of our times terrifies me, it is somehow still somewhere else—i.e. until I count the women I know who've been murdered, raped, assaulted, or attacked in the last five years. And then it's close. The importance of "Berbir" is that it shows us what it is like on a daily basis to live with violence, death, pain. And I know nothing of this so comfortably tied to my desk.

Cheryl Clarke
New Brunswick, New Jersey

For a long time I have been debating with myself whether I should reply, explain, or put into perspective the numerous articles published in almost every magazine and newspaper across the U.S.A. about the "Israeli invasion of Lebanon". I have not, because I am tired of justifying and fighting pure ignorance. Nevertheless upon reading your last issue "To Go To Berbir" I felt anger, and disgust for several reasons which will be discussed within this letter.

Initially allow me to tell you that I am an Israeli woman, who served in the Israeli Air Force for a compulsory service of two years. I am also a radical feminist who was, and still is, active in all aspects of feminism: socially, politically etc. I was encouraged to read this particular issue of *Sinister Wisdom* by both Jewish and non-Jewish women who had been shocked to read the lies and misinformation found within. As an Israeli who was present in Israel during the invasion in 1982 and can write honestly from experience, I will refer to specific statements and descriptions given by Ms. Drew, and then give an overall background to the situation which *did not begin* in June 1982.

In your introduction to *SW* you write: "Sinister Wisdom has published continuously for eight years, collections of writings, art by women-identified-women about women's experience". It is hard for me to understand why in a feminist magazine, which I hoped to be mine as a woman, I must read about men fighting, men's politics, and men's issues. You call this diary an "honest book". If this is an objective story, one does not have to read your magazine, but merely pick up any local newspaper and read the same distorted view.

Ms. Drew is a nurse, has she forgotten to mention that the P.L.O. planted cannons in hospitals, mainly in children's wards, and bombed the Israeli forces with the knowledge that they would not retaliate against a hospital. Has she forgotten that hundreds of Christians were treated in Israeli hospitals via "the good fence" (Israeli-Lebanese border) in the last 12 years, due to the slaughter by the Moslems in the civil war.

"There will be anguish for Palestinians, Lebanese, Arab people. . ." what about the Christian people?* Women in Zor, Zidon, Damour etc. who for 12 years have been living under violent terror of P.L.O. men, raped and murdered, their sons taken away at 10 years of age, being trained to become terrorists.

Thank you for mentioning that the majority of Israelis want Israel out of Lebanon, perhaps at least the people are not a "curse". Maybe you forgot that the Israeli army is a citizens' army, these citizens are those who fight the P.L.O. opposition. I also am against Israel staying in Lebanon, not because of the "injustice" of trying to destroy a terrorist movement that has killed and continues to kill our women and children, but because I believe that Israel should not fight another country's civil war. Since I believe most women who read your magazine are probably not well informed on the middle east, I would like to present a brief history of the cause and development of this current situation.

Prior to 1947 Palestine was occupied by the British, and in that year they divided it into two halves, one half for the Arabs, and the other half for the Jews. The Arabs disagreed with this division, and refused to recognize Israel as a state, a situation which has not changed to this day. Their disagreement resulted in constant attacks on Jews. Due to these acts of terrorism the War of Independence broke out in 1948. Undoubtedly one can not disagree that six million Jews burned to death in Germany was enough to justify a Jewish state. I myself do not know of any Arab tragedies in history, with the exception of those caused by their own disputes (Iraq-Iran, Libya-Egypt, Jordan-Syria).

The fact that 3.2 million Israelis are surrounded by more than 100 million who wish to see Israel destroyed, necessitates a well trained army. I do not

* Editor's Note: Palestinian, Lebanese, and Arab people can be Christian.

remember Israeli terrorists planting bombs (except a recent incident in which those responsible were arrested and sentenced) in civil buses, garbage cans, or mining highways and parks. Nor do I recall groups of terrorists attacking buses, this type of terrorism was common against Israel prior to 1967. As a result Israel attacked and occupied the West Bank, and the Sinai Desert. I wonder how many of your readers would like to live 7 miles from a hostile border, as I did until 1967? It is unfortunate that Ms. Drew wasn't in the Arab villages during 1967 to see how primitive and patriarchal Arab women (and non-women) lived, without running water, electricity etc. in order to appreciate that today in every Arab village (in Israel) there are women's health centers (Tipat Chalav, drop of milk); also there are technological advantages available. Throughout history has any other country given back captured land, two and a half times its own size, complete with oil refineries, cities, and a flourishing tourism in exchange for peace? What happened to the Palestinians? To my best knowledge the idea was to form Jordan as a place for Palestinians. Unfortunately, King Hussein did not want them, perhaps that is why his army slaughtered thousands of them, destroyed their camps, were you aware of that? If the concern for Palestinians was so great, why can not the Arab countries find land to put them on? That Arabs can't accommodate their own is why the Palestinians are living in camps not fit for human beings. Ms. Drew, did you see where Israeli Arabs live? Israel does not have camps. I saw them living in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Nazareth. They attend Israeli universities, utilize Israeli hospitals, and they carry Israeli citizenships (which no Arab country will give them)! They vote and have members in the Israeli parliament, mayors of cities, etc. True, Syria allows 5000 Jews to survive in 5 blocks in Damascus.

In 1973 Israel was attacked by all the Arab nations, which almost destroyed it. The attack occurred on the holiest day for the Jews, Yom Kippur, when all the men were at temple. Israel, after suffering thousands of casualties managed to recover, and subsequently surrounded the Egyptian Third Army which consisted of tens of thousands of soldiers. Arik Sharon, "the man responsible for Sabra and Shatila" gave them food and water, and

* Editor's Note: Exchange of the Sinai for a peace treaty with Egypt.

later released them. This is hardly the characteristic of an army Ms. Drew describes as "cruel". Does Ms. Drew remember in 1973 when 3 Palestinian terrorists captured a classroom of 13-14 year old children in Ma'alot, and murdered them all? Is she familiar with the incident when terrorists entered an apartment in Naharia, took a father and his three year old daughter and smashed her head on a rock in front of his eyes before shooting him to death? Did Ms. Drew forget the bus full of families on a tour in 1977 which was captured by Palestinian terrorists, after they murdered an American woman bird photographer who they happened to pass? Did Ms. Drew forget that the bus was sprayed by the guns and grenades? There is no end to this list. Perhaps she did not forget, only she is ignorant of the facts that have not been publicized through the conventional media. Many of the facts usually get no publicity or so little that you really have to look to find it.

The P.L.O. is an organization not recognized by all Palestinians. It is basically a terrorist movement led by Yassar Arafat. There are other Palestinian organizations as well, and usually there are major disagreements among them all. It is not uncommon for leaders to be murdered by one another. There is constant fighting among them.

After being expelled by King Hussein from Jordan, they established themselves in Lebanon which suffered from tension due to different power struggles among various Arab groups, and thus contributed in making Lebanon an unbearable place to live in. For 12 years, boys and men walked in the Christian cities with M-16 guns, feeling free to do anything they pleased. Need I explain the many liberties which were indulged in by these men at the expense of defenseless women? Commandeering homes, killing the man in the house, and taking young children to train as vicious terrorists against Israel was the common strategy followed. More than once the terrorists captured in Israel were children of 13-14 years old. The Christians formed forces of their own in an effort to recapture their cities, and regain their liberty with the support of Israel.

Meanwhile the Palestinians were building an army with the aid of Russian arms and knowledge, bombing Israel's northern border, kibbutzim, cities and villages. For 12 years people left their homes not knowing whether the home would still be standing upon their returning. When they slept at

night, they never knew whether they or their children would awake. Hundreds of Israelis were killed, and injured by the constant bombing by the P.L.O.

The invasion of Lebanon was planned in an effort to stop the bombing and the invasions of terrorists into Israel. The operation was planned to take a few days, but once the I.D.F. entered they found arms, ammunition, and military devices that took weeks to unload and move to Israel. The P.L.O. had built an army that in a short time could have been a very significant force to supplement another army geared to destroy Israel. We can all agree that war is disgusting, and no matter which side you are on terrible losses are suffered. Women and children were killed because the P.L.O. strategically positioned themselves among innocent citizens. Israel learned the hard way. Instead of using the air force, soldiers went from house to house to locate terrorists, and behind every child a gun suddenly appeared and shot them. After hundreds were killed, Israel realized that the only way to solve the problem was to bomb from the air, in the hope that the terrorists would leave the civilian area. They did move, but now the terrorists occupied hospitals, churches etc. World powers began giving advice, orders, suggestions, "withdraw, get out. . .". Sabra and Shatila was the first camp which the Israeli troops withdrew from. This was the first slaughter of revenge by the hands of the Arabs, not the Israelis. Today they are continuing a tradition of many years of slaughtering each other. Israel left most of Lebanon. Ms. Drew you can stay there, and continue to work in hospitals. I assure you that you will have employment, especially when Israel is totally out of Lebanon.

Israel wanted the terrorists out of Lebanon, not to take away their right to live and survive. Israel's first priority was to assure its own survival. When the P.L.O. was leaving Lebanon, Israel did not sink their ships, nor did they kill them. Let me assure you that this generosity would not be found with the Arabs.

I felt it necessary to give this other side of the story because Ms. Drew's diary is very biased, and subjective. I am sure that working in a hospital under attack must be an awful experience as described, but one can not ignore the picture as a whole, and take something out of context, and make it objective. After reading the diary with such an introduction of Israel being a "curse", your readers

could be left with very strong feelings of anti-Zionism, anti-Israeli and consequently anti-Semitic feelings. . . . This male political issue can only promote unnecessary hatred toward Jewish women!

Dana Roth

Willimantic, Connecticut



Author's Statement about

To Go To Berbir, Sinister Wisdom 26

To Go To Berbir was written during a war. As a daily account — my daily account — I wrote about what I saw firsthand both in my work and in my life in Beirut. I also wrote down what my friends and comrades told me, and I wrote of the sharing of our lives and sometimes of our dying. I would not today, under any circumstances, modify my own observations from that time or those of the people I knew.

The people I knew in Lebanon were indeed for the most part kind and generous. The people in Lebanon are Arab people regardless of their religion. I was not — for obvious reasons — in a position to meet Israelis. And when I went to Israel itself, I did not go to meet Israelis: I went to convey a message to the editors of a Palestinian publication. I did not — during the time I was in Beirut — have cause to meet with members of the Kataeb, except on two occasions at military checkpoints. (My father once advised me during our mutual work at a national political convention, "Never drink with your enemies." I have tried to follow that advice all my life, and I was careful to follow along those lines — metaphorically and literally — during the summer and fall of 1982.) For anyone working in the medical field in West Beirut during that time, to say that the Israeli Defence Forces or the Kataeb militias were NOT the enemy would have been sheer lunacy.

To set the record straight: I am a Christian by choice. I was raised in my father's house and on both sides of his family were long lines of Congregational and Episcopalian ministers. I would never deny that, nor would I deny the influence that background has had on my thinking, on my choice of action, or on the images I use in what I create. The Christianity I was surrounded by has in no way anything in common with the Christianity of the Kataeb.

I am also a Jew. My mother is Jewish. I believe in the Jewish faith — to the extent that I raised, with varying degrees of success, my son in a Jewish school during his younger years. My mother's relatives died under the Nazi regime in Poland and others fought in the Jewish resistance in Italy. My Jewish faith has nothing in common with the tenets of Zionism and, unlike Melanie, I am not committed to the existence of the state of Israel. (I am not committed necessarily to the existence of *any state*.)

Given those two conditions of my background, it seems necessary to state that I am committed to the existence of people — Jews, Palestinians, and anyone else who is threatened by what appears to be genocide. There is little in the statements of Israeli, Phalange, or even United States leaders during much of the 1982 summer that gave me any reason to believe that genocide was not the issue. Genocide may yet be the issue in the Middle East, just as it may have been the issue in Vietnam and just as it may be the issue in the thinking behind the U.S. intervention in Central America.

A final word: Many readers of SW have brought up the topic of lesbian writing. . . that this journal 'could find publication in other places as lesbian writing could not,' and furthermore, as one reader wrote, we 'must read about men fighting, men's politics, and men's issues' in a feminist/lesbian publication. Perhaps it would clarify things to remind SW readers that I am a lesbian. Far more pertinent, however, is that war and human suffering and oppression are *not* men's issues: they are women's issues and they have always been women's issues. The fact that we as women — lesbian or otherwise — have avoided confronting them has, I believe, contributed to the continuation of war and oppression and has added to the untold number of victims — victims, I might add, who are mostly women and children. NOT to read about, actively participate in, and be witness to 'men's politics' may well signify the genocide of us all.

Jill J. Drew
Albuquerque, New Mexico
November 1984

Editor's Statement about responses:

It is ironic that the section of the introduction which I had written to reach out to my people—other Jews—to say I know this is hard and we need to go through it—was perceived by some Jews as a particular insult: why was I (or *we*—since the attempt came in the middle of a jointly written, jointly signed statement) singling out Jews? And why was I cursing Israelis?

Let me clarify. I did not/do not mean to curse Israel the nation and certainly not the people. The government that invaded Lebanon, I do curse. But that's not what I meant either.

One piece of information that affected me powerfully about Jill's journal was that people in West Beirut used the word "Israeli" as a curse. And for a reason. Fair, not fair, historically contextualized or out of the blue, connected or not to generations of religious hatred in a part of the world where religious wars have been waged for centuries (though rarely by Jews who until the present century have not had access to state power)—*rage and anguish are also facts*. The word "Israeli"—which I had always heard with pride—I now heard with another edge, one which cut me deeply when I allowed myself to hear.

Not that Israel is worse than any other nation—we could cite an endless list of atrocities from the last year alone. But atrocities are not to be measured and do not cancel each other out.

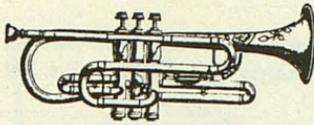
Because I love the Jewish people, care for our survival *and* our integrity, care when we suffer *and* when we make others suffer, I face choices no simpler, no more complicated than such choices have ever been for anyone. How to throw my weight on the side of justice? First I have to know—even when the knowledge is painful. And Jill Drew's journal gave me critical—if partial—knowledge about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz
Rockland, Maine
December 1984

ADDITIONS TO BIBLIOGRAPHY IN TO GO TO BERBIR

Bendt, Ingela and Jim Downing. *We Shall Return: Women of Palestine*. Lawrence Hill, 1982.

Tawil, Raymonda. *My Home, My Prison*. Zed Press (England), 1983.



Announcements

WANTED FOR ANTHOLOGY OF WRITINGS ABOUT SAPPHO, writing & art, esp. stories/images, non-scholarly pieces. Sharon Yntema, 611 North Cayuga St., Ithaca, NY 14850.

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A CELEBRATION OF WOMYN in NJ, May 24-27/85. For info send SASE legal size to Campfest '85, POB 30381, Phila., PA 19103.

WOMEN IN PRINT CONFERENCE 1985 Box 3184, Oakland, CA 94609 (415) 826-8720, May 29-31, June 1.

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462 Women's Presses and Publishers, 18 Other Media Categories in 1985 **INDEX/DIRECTORY OF WOMEN'S MEDIA**—172 pp. \$8 to WIFP, 3306 Ross NW, Wash., DC 20008.

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Midwest Research, independent research institute, collects **INFORMATION ON RIGHT-WING POLITICAL GROUPS AND TRENDS**, e.g. *Nostalgia on the Right: Historical Roots of the Idealized Family* by Nancy Theriot. MR, 343 S. Dearborn St., Suite 1505, Chicago, IL 60604.

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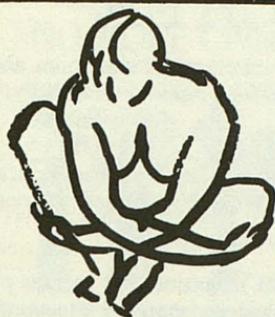
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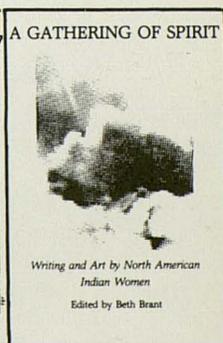
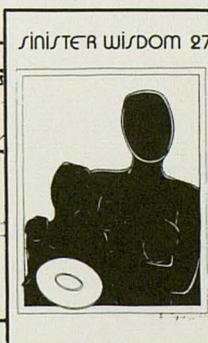
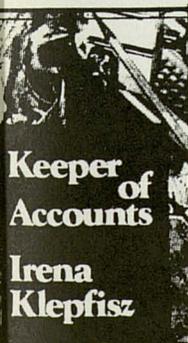
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