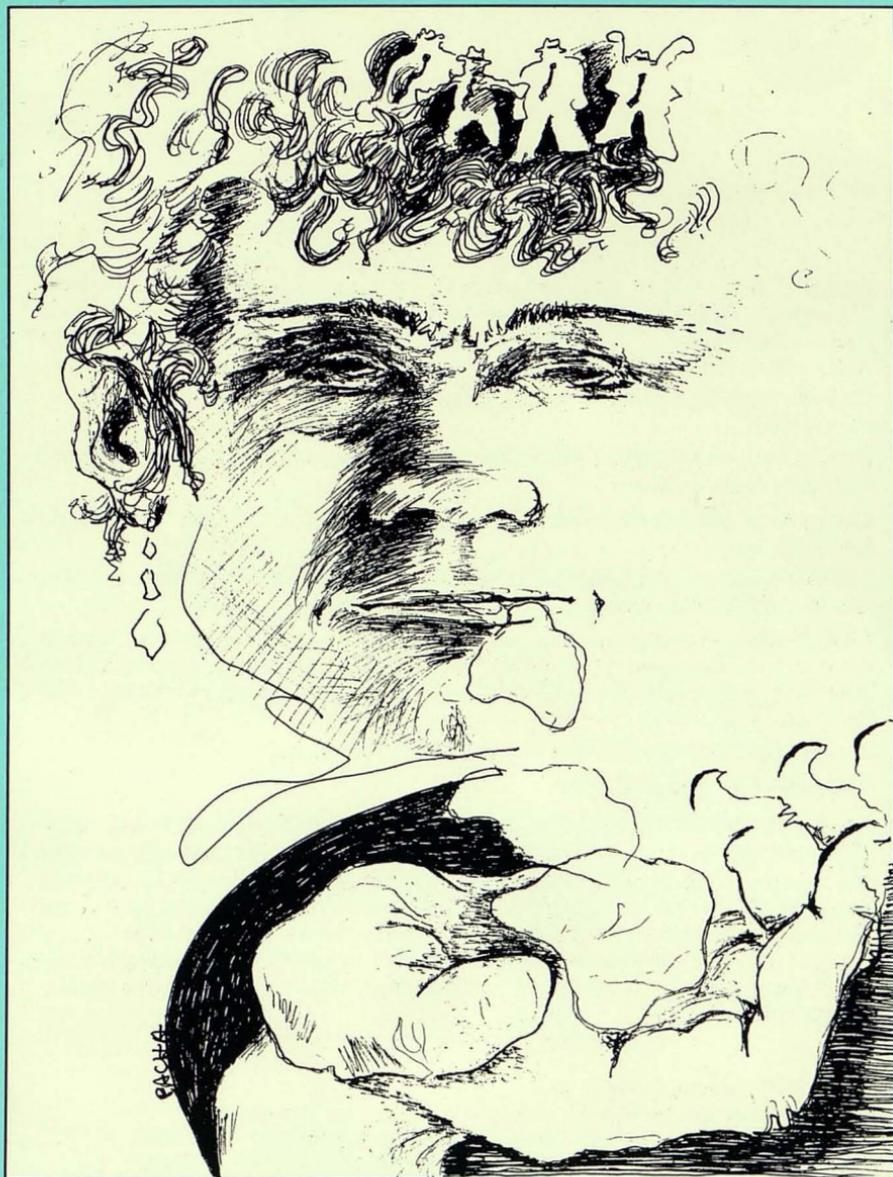


# sinister wisdom 35



passing



## Sinister Wisdom 35 Summer/Fall 1988

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Thanks to Bobby Rothschild and Rebecca Kutlin of Tamed Technology; and Ellen Gavin of BRAVA! Women in the Arts.

**Distribution, moving and mailing:** Anita Schriver, Betty Dudley, Caryatis Cardea, Cath Thompson, Debbie Fier, Dolphin Zelda Waletzky, Elizabeth Fides, Jasmine Marah, Leslie Baker, Lisa Carlin, Sonja Erickson, Susan Jill Kahn, Tavia Tipton, Valerie Stoehr

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SINISTER WISDOM, founded 1976

Former Editors and publishers: Harriet Ellenberger (aka Desmoines)  
and Catherine Nicholson (1976-81)  
Michelle Cliff and Adrienne Rich (1981-83)  
Michele Uccella (1983-84)  
Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1983-87)

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ISSN: 0196-1853

Sinister Wisdom • P.O. Box 3252 • Berkeley CA 94703

A Journal for the Lesbian Imagination  
in the Arts and Politics

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## On Passing\*

Passing is an enormous word that seemed simple to me until I started writing about it. By simple I mean, it's clear we all pass in some way or another; the world we live in requires it. You can get killed for being the "wrong person" in the wrong place; you can be refused the basic necessities of life. Passing is about appearing to be who you're not; about being acceptable or invisible to those who exercise power over you. But it's not simple. It works on a hundred levels at once, and it shifts, from moment to moment.

Either by experience, instinct or analysis every woman knows we live in a brutally unjust world. That brutality is aimed at us: for our color, sex, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, size, ability, age. Most of you reading this have worked to undo these injustices actively, for large portions of your adult life.

And still, you must have the experience, as I do, frequently, of finding yourself passing. Passing on your job as straight; passing (as whatever you can) when you apartment hunt; trying to pass as younger or older; passing by tone of voice, choice of words, assumptions you don't challenge, beliefs you don't actively defend. Passing, sometimes, without choosing it — because it's been granted, someone in power has deemed you "ok."

The ways we pass (or don't) aren't necessarily equal. Among lesbians, to pass is either to present yourself as a man or as a straight woman. Among people of color, passing is often about reflecting "whiteness,"<sup>1</sup> of second-guessing those in power. For working class and poor women, adopting the language and symbols of the middle class are forms of passing. But to pass or not have the option of passing based on skin color is not the same

---

\*These notes come from many conversations with many different women. I wish I had transcripts of the conversations to print, but in their absence I want to acknowledge the input of Rhea, Michal Brody, Gloria Anzaldúa, Susan Jill Kahn, Laura Rifkin, Monifa Ajanaku, Vivienne Louise, Caryatis Cardea, Leslie Levy, Dolphin Waletzky, Barbara Ruth and the SW editorial readers and advisors, among many others. What I've written, however, should not be taken as a representation of any of their individual opinions on these issues.

<sup>1</sup> A billboard near my house reads "The Bay Area's Faded Beauties" above a picture of two thin, young, light-skinned Black women, with "Porcelana Fade Cream" underneath.

experience as being able to pass or not as heterosexual. For a woman to try and pass as a man is nothing like what it was for jews to try and pass as gentiles in nazi Germany. If you can pass as heterosexual, it may not matter, in a given situation, that you are clearly working class.

It may not matter. You might get by. No one may notice. Get a nose job, go on a diet, straighten your hair, use a strong deodorant, bind your breasts, go to a good college, mind your manners, learn to speak with or without an accent, shave your legs, wear blue contact lenses, get a face lift.

We pass to survive. We get used to the privileges we get by passing and we forget to question ourselves on the cost of those privileges. We forget we get privilege, because passing is so built in. The dominant culture wants to assimilate as many marginal people as it can into its middle-management positions, in order to have shields for its actions. If light-skinned, non-white women can be convinced to identify as white\* it cuts them off from identifying with the struggles of women of color as well as their cultures of origin. The more we pass within the boundaries of patriarchal society, the more we are identifying with that society, shoring it up. Whether we mean to or not.

Often, if we experience oppression in one area of our lives, we can't focus clearly on the benefits we get by being allowed to pass in another area. Sometimes we feel as if those benefits "make up" for the other ways we can't pass. A young, white diesel dyke may be promoted over an old, black straight woman, and never get why her dykly-ness got passed over. Sometimes our major struggle to survive makes other privileges seem trivial (a thin, working class dyke may feel the ability to get clothes in her size anywhere is meaningless if she can't buy them; she may dismiss the barrage of hatred that fat women get as small potatoes next to class divisions, not experiencing that hatred as effecting her).

We may get angry at each other around passing issues. A latina may have no patience for a bearded woman saying she can't pass because of her beard — you can always shave off a beard. Some of us believe any lesbian could look straight if she "had to." Others believe there are many lesbians who'd get burned at the stake before anyone thought they were straight.

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\*Historically, jews are often placed in this position; in North America, it often happens to other semitic groups, light-skinned native americans and latinas.

There are obviously profound differences between what's visible, what we can alter and what we can hide, within groups as well as between them.

Of course, in any given situation or historical moment, some oppressions will be much more threatening to a woman's survival than others. We have to be able to make the fine distinctions between what is crucial to our individual survival at a given moment and what is not — and no one can decide that for us. It seems to me that one of the by-products (or purposes) of passing is to keep us focused on ranking oppressions. But we have the ability to judge situations. It wastes our time to make an absolute list of what's most important — there will always be exceptions, and a new list. Many of us are not able to forget the privileges we get from passing, and when our passing is "successful" we may feel anger or grief, a sense that we are betraying our communities and ourselves.

Passing is handed down, generation to generation: how to be acceptable to men; how to pass for white if that's an option for us, how to pass as acceptable to whites if it's not; how to hide a disability; how to avoid looking old; how to be good girls. But I don't want to start in blaming mothers. Many work hard to have their daughters value their own cultures, often while trying to get them to pass in some other way. Mothers, after all, must want their children to pass through the world with as little danger, as much power and security as they believe their children can get.

The essence of what our mothers, schools, tvs, government teach us is that in an out-of-control world, the way we, as women, can (and should) exercise power is by how we control and present ourselves. Someone else holds power over us — and the constant message is that we must appease him. We must know how to hide whatever trait is dangerous in a given situation; and if we can't hide it, we must know how to hide our anger, our understanding of what's going on. We must try to defer, to appear as inconsequential as possible, so marginal we wouldn't even make a good victim. Do we have a choice? Choices?

Sometimes. We have to understand how much pressure there is on all of us to pass all the time, and understand that pressure — which makes each of us "the other," "the outsider" — as a crime against our natures. We have the choice to present ourselves as who we are, sometimes. But in order to make that choice, we have

to know who we are, and where. It sounds almost silly to say that. But I spent years saying "my parents were jewish, but I'm not." If I know, for instance, that this culture sees old womyn as asexual, then I have to make sure I keep presenting myself as clearly lesbian as I age — unless I choose to pass. We may make com-promises. But we have to keep understanding why.

The trouble is passing tends to wear away our centers. It makes us doubt our own realities, our sense of our culture, it feeds on our self-hate. It's too easy to believe we are making thoughtful or necessary concessions and end up compromised instead.

We need not to blame ourselves or each other, nor to rank — but to understand what goes on, how complex and deep it is, how it cuts us, how it fragments and depresses us. One of Sinister Wisdom's primary purposes is to encourage every kind of lesbian to work towards conscious personal resolution as well as community identification and resolve: a motion towards hope: towards the ability to feel individual purposefulness supported by community progress. In order to do that work, we have to be visible to ourselves and to each other as who we are.

This issue explores some of the facets of passing, in many different forms. There's room for a lot more work, questions and discussion. We encourage your response.

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## Notes on the Themes

**#36. Surviving Psychiatric Assault/Creating Emotional Well-Being.** How these issues affect lesbian lives individually and in community. Due out in December.

**#37. Open.** We get a lot of good material that doesn't fit into the theme issues, and we get writing that's been sparked by one of the themes. Here's a space for that work. (Deadline: October 15).

**#38. Italian-American Lesbians.** Guest edited by Rose Romano: "What does it mean to be an Italian-American Lesbian?"

There's an Italian-American culture, distinct from the Italian as well as the American, yet many non-Italians don't seem to have noticed—including some Lesbians, who make a special effort to recognize and respect other forgotten cultures. Why?

Italian-American Lesbians remember the witchcraft of their grandmothers and mothers and still wear evil-eye horns, yet are thought by non-Italian Lesbians to be followers of a woman-hating church. Why?

Non-Italians consider Italian culture to be patriarchal, yet most Italian-American Lesbians grow up in families run, without question, by women. Why?

Non-Italians believe a Lesbian is never tolerated in an Italian family, yet the Italian-American Lesbian most often finds herself accepted as Blood according to Italian tradition, only ostracized by families trying to Americanize themselves. Why?

What is the difference between north and south? What does it mean to be Sicilian? What is Omertà? Omertà American-style? How does it combine with Lesbian silence? What is l'Ordine della Famiglia? La bella figura? La miseria? Il Mezzogiorno? La via vecchia? Il mal occhio? La commare? Why don't you know how to speak Italian?

Given the strength and self-sufficiency of the Italian-American woman; her place of importance in the family; her memory of the Black Madonna; the tradition of Sappho in Sicily; and her determined urging of guests to eat, don't you think she's a natural as a Lesbian?

Basta! Write!" (Deadline: February 15, 1989)

**#39. An issue on Disability.** (Deadline: June 15, 1989)

See the inside back cover for submission guidelines.

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## Contest results

One year's subscription goes to Marjory Nelson of San Francisco for being the first to identify the quote we were looking for on p. 5 of #34.

"In education, in marriage, in everything, disappointment is the lot of woman. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

—Lucy Stone, 1855

Other lesbians who identified the quote: Tina Gomoll, Madison, WI; Karen Scholz, Dorchester, MA; Sara Karon, Malden, MA; Elliott, Madison, WI; Joyce Treblicot, St. Louis, MO; Susan Goldberg, Oakland, CA; Ryn Edwards, Gambier, OH. The poster was published by Times Change Press in 1970; both A Room of One's Own Bookstore in Madison and New Words in Boston appear to still carry it.

Thanks, all, for sending not only the quote but such positive notes.

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## Correction

The painting "Diptyk, Tari Pennu: Mandala/We are all part of the Whole" by Sudie Rakusin on p. 8 of SW #34 came from a photograph by Beth Karbe (© photography by Beth Karbe 1984), which we neglected to credit. We apologize for this omission.

D.A. Clarke

## and everywhere unicorns

### 1.

In the passenger seat of my father's car, passing through the deliberate ugliness of south los angeles I see suddenly that I have been mistaken: there are no lesbians.

There is less sign of our existence here than there is of unicorns: the unicorn appears ubiquitous on plastic boxes, expensive posters, t shirts; nowhere do lesbians appear.

I move irritably in the crowded store, out of my depth, far from my own lairs and trails; fear is corked securely in my stomach, I do not shove people aside and run. My face congeals beneath their stares, only my peripheral vision catches heads turning. I imagine whispers, ponder giggles.

I look at every short-haired woman eagerly, as sailors they say used to strain their eyes to the thin blue promise of shore; but disappointed I count up the necessary feminine articles, my eyes are evaded.

I see no woman unaltered, undisguised, in all this human variety no variety; no naked face looks back to mine, no unvarnished nails scoop up my dollars, no broad behind strides past me in uncompromising denim. I see shoes not made to walk in, clothes not made to work in, women not meant to last.

My hair is buzz-cut to fur; with heavy boots and hips and face uncamouflaged, with my missing smile I trail behind my parents, a dancing bear blinking and confused on its length of familial chain, shuffling awkwardly through this curious

unfriendly crossfire of eyes.

Trying for defiance I feel my face  
assume a familiar grim nonentity. I pretend  
to myself that I am a foreigner, a tourist,  
entertained by quaint customs, safe in the glass globe of my  
culture,  
just visiting. But  
I have no country.

My language is this language, my parents  
fade respectably into the human haze, my belief  
is bent as iron filings court the magnet. Though I look hopefully  
at any two teenage girls together, I remember not to look.

Is it alarm I read in their acceptable faces, is it disgust?  
Ugly, I read in their faces, and the years of my youth  
repeat it bitterly to me, ugly.

I cling to the dialect  
of my own, my nonexistent country:  
*handsome*, says my lover. *My people*, I tell myself,  
say *butch*. Not ugly. *My people*,  
I tell myself, reaching for an untaught history,  
for the simple dignity of a foreigner in this place.

Somewhere in LA tonight are women together without men  
(but you'd never know it);

I pass the bright magical images of rock heroes,  
little dragons glitter under glass at the jewellery counter,  
Santa Claus beams at me from all sides and the god of the  
Christians

proclaims his pain from pendants, from lacquered  
laminated clock faces; and everywhere unicorns.  
So many pictures and none of lesbians.

## 2.

My country is invisible as the hidden landscapes  
under leaves, wide plains of moss across a stump,  
towering cliffs of a crumbled log, massive cumulus of blown  
foam,  
neon cities of wet web slung between twigs, the vast sky

reflected in common puddles, the artistry of each individual pebble.

My country is concealed  
in its minute details, lesbian beauty hidden  
somewhere in this jumble of stucco and cement,  
revealed only to a special lens.

In individual houses, in obscure restaurants,  
at unlisted numbers, behind mailboxes bearing only initials,  
in the back rooms where customers won't have to look at us,  
my people are lurking unnoticed as the perfection  
of the plain flowers that grow along the freeway.  
Under disguises so clever even we can't see through them  
my people are running scared  
laying low.

My country shimmers into existence at the magic  
level meeting of eyes across a room, at a bold or shy  
grin, a nod, the flash of a pinkie ring, the sight  
of some arcane talisman.

My country rises around me when something about two women  
shopping together, sitting together, the quiet undistracted  
connection

between them, conjures ancient realms, unproven warriors, the  
lost lands:

we have been homesick all our lives.

Two Barbies in suggestive poses, the mythic lesbians of  
centerfolds

inhabit men's eyes. I mourn my country  
defoliated monthly on their newsstands,  
vanishing in the dust under their loud tires,  
evaporating in the killing radiation  
of ten million TV sets tuned to their truths.

### 3.

My country  
fades around me. In this my childhood room  
I find books of dragons, books of monsters,  
pictures of angels and devils and gods  
and none of lesbians.

In the eyes of my younger self as they look  
coolly from the projection screen, at my mother's lens, out of time,  
I see exile.

Somewhere in LA tonight are women together  
in love or struggle, but first in each other's lives  
(but you'd never know it); like Peter Pan and Wendy

I mutter to myself tonight,

'I *do* believe in lesbians

'I *do* believe in lesbians...' while headlights search my ceiling.

This whole cluttered, desolate shore of my past I have walked  
again

looking for a bit of wood bearing the name of some ship,  
some obscure script curled tight in the dim heart of a bottle,  
for the footprints of something once half-seen, for *evidence*.

And in the face of failure and of long knowledge  
well-taught, that there are no lesbians;

that what I am is different, yes, but nameless;

that I have no country; in the teeth of the evidence

I do, I do, I *do* believe in lesbians.

Even in los angeles, in my old room,

in my father's car,

in the bathroom mirror.

While headlights hunt my ceiling I lie still  
working magic; I conjure Whileaway  
and Lesbos and Valencia Street, I build my country  
brick by brick out of thin air, create myself  
and all my untaught history, I conjure my lover  
and our friends. With no passport,  
no license, no documents and no evidence, in desperate alchemy  
I stir stale lies and dusty griefs,  
transmute them to defiance.

My country endures or falls by such unnatural acts  
of faith.

---

Reprinted from *To Live With The Weeds* by D.A. Clarke, 1985  
(Herbooks, P.O. Box 7467, Santa Cruz, CA 95061).

Terri L. Jewell

## A Call To Black Lesbian Sisters

Despite the many Feminist treatises and perspectives written during the past decade by Black Lesbians concerning issues that keep Sisters separated, a conscious "skin condition" still pervades among us. Though this topic has been discussed fervently in many arenas, treatment has been cursory in that we Black Lesbians are reluctant to face the nitty-gritty of our personal vulnerability when dealing with this particular issue.

This piece is in response to "casual conversations" addressed to a light-skinned Black Lesbian friend of mine by darker-skinned Black Lesbians at a "Woman of Color Dance". The lighter-skinned dyke was asked by one darker-skinned newcomer to the community whether she was Cape Verdean Portuguese or not. When the light Sister said no, the darker Sister insisted that she MUST be Portuguese "or something" to be so fair-skinned and still have the "grade" of hair (coarser than expected by this woman) that she had.

During a later "casual" conversation, this same light-skinned Lesbian was addressed by an intoxicated and darker-skinned friend as a "half-breed" and a "redbone".

The darker Sisters seemed to have no idea of the pain they had inflicted. And as a result, the light-skinned Sister silently withdrew from them. I was alarmed by the ease with which the darker-skinned dykes essentially excluded my friend from being Black by emphasizing her light skin color. All 4 of us were in our 30's. When I attempted to explain to the dark-skinned dykes that they had hurt the light-skinned Sister with their labels, they each denied any malicious intention.

Unfortunate occurrences such as this are commonplace. Admittedly, oppressive forces surrounding standards of beauty and acceptability are at work and continue to wear Black women out. Nevertheless, we must stop using this as a convenient excuse to avoid the extraordinarily difficult work of setting ourselves free. Unlike white people, who refer to distinctions among

themselves by hair and eye color, we do indeed use our many skin colors as an initial reference point. This is of no consequence until we begin to attach malignant judgements and prejudiced perceptions to our own diversity.

We Black Lesbians are all too aware of one another's miseries:

"Who does that high-yellow bitch think she is? Too pretty to talk to me?"

"I am the darkest one in my family and I was always made to feel ugly and apart from my lighter sisters."

"I see my fair skin as the mark of the slave master and I am very ashamed of that."

"She was a beautiful woman but too dark for my tastes."

"I feel more comfortable with white Lesbians. With my light skin, I do not stand out as much as I do with other Black Lesbians."

"When I go to the women's bars, only the other dark-skinned dykes ask me to dance. We are usually relieved we can accept one another long enough to enjoy dancing together."

These comments and a wide variety of others on the same theme indicate that we Black Lesbians carry some level of self-loathing that may never leave us unless we undertake some serious self-examination and honest sharing. We bring these negative perceptions into our relationships with one another, living them out in acts of emotional and sexual game-playing, and "cannibalism" in which we consume the ones we claim to love most in instances of treachery, gossip and deceit.

It is important we begin to really listen to how we speak of and refer to other Black Sisters, how we critically judge by color before we give ourselves the precious chance to learn what miracles we all are. We must cease addressing our skins first as others outside our culture do and strive toward self-understanding and self-love. This can be quickly gained if we only take a step toward that goal on our own.

we must make totems  
how else can the spirits feel us  
how else can they know we must reach  
for them in ourselves/our spirits  
roam the skies the soil & the seas  
not unlike other deities/we require

homage sacrifice & offerings  
those things we must give ourselves. . . .

— from "Box and Pole" by Ntozake Shange

As Black Lesbians, we must begin a hard journey toward ourselves. The excuses of the past grow weaker for us as the present time advances. We cannot afford to continue the dance into the fires of misconception and psychic self-mutilation. White Lesbians cannot carry us. All that is required of white Lesbians is their recognition that we are also dykes but of a culture and spirit different from their own.

All that is required of us as Black Lesbians is the recognition that a Black dyke with very, very light skin is STILL BLACK and belongs among us, and a Black dyke with very, very dark skin is STILL BLACK and also belongs among us. We must stop waging war against ourselves. There are too few warriors among us and much too few lovers. We do not have the numbers to be so careless with our own.



© 1987 JEB (Joan E. Biren)

Colevia Carter  
(from *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front*)

*La Bruja del Sueno\**

She has one eye, slightly on the left  
of her face, which is an egg.  
She looks at you balefully with this eye  
when you turn the corner  
by the blue-white wall, where sunlight  
bleaches her patch of dust.  
You know you should be afraid  
of her one-eyed stare  
but you can't remember why. Does she know  
about the cold spring  
that erupts in your belly and the outer limits  
like precipitous horizons,  
which you cannot yet approach  
and sail across, proving  
once and for all you are the explorer  
you claim to be?  
So what if she sees all this? Still,  
you wonder, why be afraid?  
It must be, you think, because one eye  
is considered insufficient  
to see both past and future. But  
she looks at you carefully  
as you round the angle of the wall  
and you know it is not so.  
She sees, with her one good eye,  
who the explorers are.  
You fear the horizons — she will tell you so,  
and chuckle too, sometimes maliciously.  
"But you will sail towards the edge," she says,  
"when the tides are right."

\*The Witch in the Dream

## Annie Wauneka's Story

Há 'aat' íish naniná, we asked  
what are you coming here for  
what are they coming here for  
we asked. White man's education  
like snow coming down  
white sheets of paper  
over our heads our hands  
and never at our feet  
paling the sky over the reservation  
pens impaling the whiteness  
in a winter of reading.

A need to reverse, they said  
learning to wear white man's shoes  
that strange thing, learning to turn  
that strange thing that is called a book  
letters on pages pressed like dead plants.  
But white man is not the other  
if only it were that simple  
two minds two tongues  
and one that is forked  
but no matter, is that what we, too  
become in school  
do the bright ones get out estranged?

And then still nothing about  
the dead Navajos at Fort Sumner  
eight thousand began  
the long walk to submission  
unlike in China where I have lived  
and decimated we returned  
to go on with the matter of living  
after five years of nothing.

And then a livestock reduction  
the verdict was overgrazing  
from Washington, the great white  
arbiter over nature, and I  
reluctant but meek, translated  
the papers which at first  
they mistook for my voice.

Then a killing illness, TB  
how did it get into the people?  
Through breathing in. The bug  
the white man brought was living now  
in our dirt, was going into our lungs  
was killing us. No healing way of ours  
could kill their disease. It took  
the pencil-like filaments of penicillin  
to wipe out the bug. And I told the story  
of the bug in every hogan until all those  
bugs were dead.

---

Dr. Annie Wauneka is the only Navajo woman to ever sit on the Navajo Tribal Council (she is no longer on it). She traveled to China to study health practices and was instrumental in ridding the Navajos of tuberculosis.

## The Earth

I want to step over  
the "No Trespassing" sign  
to hide in the wheat field  
where the sun shines high at noon  
I want to roast  
my naked body  
feel the earth  
I'm a landless Indian  
drunk with one glass  
of cheap vodka and ice  
confined  
in a pair of new tennis shoes

## Think Twice Before You Call Me Courageous Again

**G**lass walls. For the first six weeks of my life, I lived in an incubator. I would scoot myself into a corner, jamming my head against the glass wall, and scream until a nurse moved me. My parents watched from the door of the preemie ward; they didn't hold me until I was four weeks old. Early on, a nurse told them, "You can always tell which ones will live. Your baby, she's a fighter. She'll live."

I didn't walk until I was two or talk until I was three. So when I was two-and-a-half, my parents took me to Fairview State Hospital to find out what was "wrong" with me. In flashes I remember long corridors and doctors' white coats and being on a physical therapist's table, so afraid of falling off and of what he'd do to me. As a result, they told my parents that I was "dull normal to retarded." A couple years later when it was clear that I wasn't "retarded," Grandma would tell me, "God made you smart to compensate for your handicap."

Age 12, I went to Cripple Children's Division for more testing and finally learned that I had cerebral palsy. Until then, we didn't know what caused my shaking or lack of coordination. We always simply said that I had a handicap, which for a long time I thought was a word my family made up particularly to describe me. I can still hear the silence in that room after the physical therapist said the words *cerebral palsy*.

But I don't want this to be a memory piece where I put my life into chronological order. I didn't have the words *cerebral palsy* until I was 12 or the word *ableism* until a few years ago. What do those words mean? Where does honesty lie now that the silence is riding its way out?

For years the words *brave*, *courageous*, and *inspirational* filled that silence. I sit here at my typewriter and stare at my face in the night-black window, trying to explain those three words. All my life as I have written or run or done door-to-door fundraising or

walked across the country with the Great Peace March, people have called me brave or courageous or inspirational because I have CP. In response, I usually tell them that I simply live in the body I was born into and do the things I want/need to do just as they do, that I don't believe much in courage, and that their patronizing isn't welcome. But I wonder if anyone really listens to me. Most people end up trying to hide their discomfort behind very set and determined definitions of *courage*, *bravery*, and *inspiration*. In doing so, they never see me as a peer but as someone who has "overcome her handicap."

When I think of the word *overcome*, I think of the years I spent avoiding mirrors and my reflection in night-black windows. I didn't want to be reminded of my hands that don't bend smoothly or move with any grace. I wished to be — or at least to appear — "normal," meaning people wouldn't stare in restaurants, banks, grocery stores, meaning I wouldn't have to ask for more time on timed tests because I write very slowly, meaning I wouldn't have to explain why my hands tremble, why I talk slowly, don't enunciate clearly. One day I wished I could cut off my right arm so it wouldn't shake. Overcoming is amputation.\*

I think of a story Mom tells: when I was a year old, Grandma came from Michigan to take care of the family while Mom recovered from a kidney operation. Every afternoon Grandma tried to rock me to sleep. I would cry and wrestle to get off her lap, but she insisted on holding me. After weeks of this, I finally let her rock me. I clearly see myself as that little girl's inheritor, not letting anyone hold me until I can't resist needing the comfort anymore. To be held means letting another person feel my shaking, the way tension rises with the shaking, and how it locks into my back and shoulders and right arm. Sometimes the tension is worse when people touch me. Somewhere I learned that I had to hide the shaking, to pass in the world and to myself. Now I want to learn how not to pass, how to crack the glass walls. Overcoming is living behind those glass walls.

---

\* After I wrote this line, I started to think about people who have had limbs amputated and how for them amputation must mean something entirely different, possibly akin to what CP means to me.

I think of a camping trip we took when I was nine. I stood in a field surrounded by playmates from the night before. They taunted me, "Monkey, retard, weirdo." I couldn't do anything, couldn't convince them that I wasn't, and couldn't run fast enough to get away from them. Finally Dad came along, and the kids scattered, leaving me sobbing and feeling like a monkey. I didn't let anyone comfort that out of me. Overcoming is telling that story so matter-of-factly that I forget how my nine-year-old self felt.

More recently something else has happened with the word *courageous* that is totally unconnected to the word *overcome*. Women whom I love and respect have called me courageous, and I have listened, maybe because they're listening to me, not just to my disability or their own discomfort. From my journal:

1/20—Still at Woman Share. A thing from yesterday: that man who came looking for the Johnsons while M and I were alone in the main house, he was obviously lost and needed directions. He couldn't/wouldn't understand me; each time I spoke to him, he'd turn to M and ask her to repeat what I had just said, basically asking her to translate for him. M refused, telling him to ask me. Later M came up to my cabin, and we talked for a long while in the loft. There is part of me that is overwhelmed by her listening and noticing. When I talk to her about ableism, I begin to see my own growing honesty and understanding. To explore my self-doubt, to call it self-doubt, to hear M say, "I think he was discounting you," to hear her talk about moving away from the word *handicap*, all amazes me.

I have accepted the word *courage* from M.

I wonder why her listening feels so new and unfamiliar, and then I remember high school. I ran long-distance on the cross country and track teams. I was a slow runner with a great deal of endurance and came in last in many races. Afterwards strangers would frequently come up to me and put an uninvited arm around me and tell me how brave or inspirational I was. Some of those invasions left me close to tears, not knowing what to do or how to react. When I came home, still upset with these incidents, my parents would tell me that I had to accept people's "compli-

ments." Their answer always left me unsettled, angry, and feeling like they weren't listening, that no one really listened. But I could never explain. I grew to believe that I half-deserved the patronizing and had to accept people's inevitable reactions, no matter how invasive they felt. In the end my discomfort became my personal problem rather than a reaction to someone else's ableism.

In contrast to those years, there are whole days now of listening where I stop believing the lies. Last week I ate dinner with a friend who probably knows pieces of this story as well as I do, and as usual our conversation turned to the personal politics of being a Black lesbian and a disabled lesbian in this world. She had a couple of stories about racism, and I had a few about ableism. They weren't new or unusual stories but ones that we don't tell often. I was telling her about a woman who had called me "dear" but so clearly meant "cripple," and she said, "You could easily insert the word *nigger* there." Somehow we started laughing hysterically at the thought of "dear nigger, dear cripple." Neither word is funny, but we both knew exactly what the other meant.

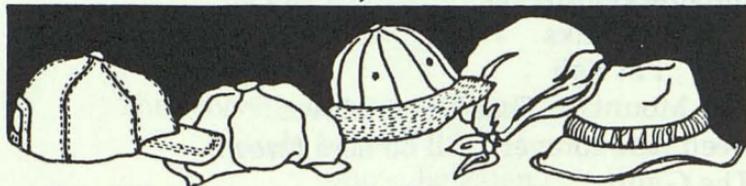
As I tell the stories and see women listening to the ableism and laugh and cry with them, the cracks in the glass wall grow; I begin to look steadily at ableism and learn not to pass. My father said once in a restaurant as people stared at me, "It is their problem, not yours." He was right and still is, but my answer then was to pretend that the staring didn't exist, which meant that I could pretend that I didn't have CP, that I was "normal." Now I am learning to stare right back at those people, not hiding my hands, until they stop calling me a courageous cripple with their eyes or until they ask me an honest question. I still can't do it every time, but it is a long way from the girl who pretended to be "normal" while quietly and unconsciously absorbing all the stares. I want to see the glass walls shatter into splinters.

But passing is also about my own discomfort, not just other people's. Lying with a new lover after making love, my right arm begins to tremble, and I pull away, trying to stop the shaking, so she won't feel it. Tension rises through my arm and shoulder. I don't know what she thinks of my body, of the trembling, of my hands that don't travel smoothly over her body. I want to hide, to pass yet again. Then she turns to me and asks, "What does the

trembling feel like?" She asks this as she has asked many questions in the past three days. Her words push at the glass wall and tell me, "I can see through this glass wall, but I want more. I want to be on the other side with you." To answer her will take a long time, but I want to begin. Later she says, "I like when your hands tremble over me. It feels good, like extra touching." The glass wall has shattered; the splinters will demand my attention later, but for the moment let me remember that passing isn't even functional here. If I pass, or even try, I do it because of my discomfort, not hers.

In the end, not passing means telling the truth, wearing myself, a lesbian woman with disabilities, as strongly as I can. If there is any courage in me, it isn't in what I do but in living with the words *courageous cripple* and laughing and being angry. It is a daily, ordinary kind of courage.

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Cheryl Marie Wade

## I Am Not One of The

I am not one of the physically challenged

I'm a sock in the eye with gnarled fist

I'm a French kiss with cleft tongue

I'm orthopedic shoes sewn on a last of your fears

I am not one of the differently abled

I'm an epitaph for a million imperfect babies left untreated

I'm an ikon carved from bones in a mass grave at Tiergarten,  
Germany

I'm withered legs hidden with a blanket

I am not one of the able-disabled

I'm a black panther with green eyes and scars like a picket fence

I'm pink lace panties teasing a stub of milk-white thigh

I'm the Evil Eye

I'm the first cell divided

I'm mud that talks

I'm Eve I'm Kali

I'm The Mountain That Never Moves

I've been here forever I'll be here forever

I'm The Gimp

I'm The Cripple

I'm The Crazy Lady

I'm The Woman With Juice

## Job Description: Disabled (3)

"Must be able to effectively imitate enjoyment  
of enforced isolation."

In the long days  
when the wolves of pain  
are the only ones  
to share your home,  
Lie still.  
Twisting leaves you tired.

Make your face blank.  
Hide bitterness though  
the cost is laughter.

The third time you call wolf  
no one comes but the wolves.  
Others say they really can't  
and if  
The wolves were so terrible  
surely by now  
you'd be eaten.



Jean at the Gala

© Barbara Johnson

class

(to white feminists of class privilege)

i  
i move among you as though i belong  
i have matched my vocabulary  
to our mutual skin color

you lay out your assumptions  
like cushions for me  
but for me to recline on the comfort of your memories  
is a lie betraying all the broken springs  
of my past

for all my years in your movement i have held  
closely guarded in my breast pocket  
what is too heavy for my heart to carry

a treasure of strength and pain  
an embarrassment  
a perverse pride

the memory of poverty

dinner for nine from a box of corn flakes  
sleep sought on a mattress atop an old bureau  
my mother's smile  
a straining of muscle  
threatens to crack tissue and bone pulled  
ever downward  
by the anvil-weight  
of weariness

you brew your collective goals  
and pass the cup to me

how can i share your dreams  
tepid though they are they would steep away  
my rough edges  
leaving a shell polished to reflect your own

but we do not mirror reciprocally

as a child you slept on linens  
laundered by my mother  
your discards even  
were too fine for me to wear

while you cultivated a shuddered response  
to the words  
shit  
and vomit  
i cleaned up their realities

at what point do our lives  
touch

how will we survive the crossing

my coarseness will scar you  
as your smoothness has wounded me

courage will be required of you  
not as of a cloak  
but as of a nakedness  
if you will know my life

but hear this

less courage than i've needed to live it

i will move among you and belong  
to myself.

## Fanny Finds Out

*a true story*

Fanny stood in front of the mirror, hiking up the starched-but-not-ironed skirt of her white cotton nurse's uniform. She'd always wanted to be a nurse. A pin here to hold up the hem ought to do. It was getting late — almost six o'clock. Ridgeview Manor Nursing Home was out in the country, and the bus that went there only passed her corner once an hour. She ran out into the pale Kalamazoo dawn. The July day would steam up later, and her curly, wild hair would really frizz. But for now it was cool and sweet out.

Kalamazoo! What a name! Fanny hadn't believed it, sitting in hip L.A. in 1964. When her boyfriend suggested that she should come with him so that he could go to school, she hadn't believed it. Thought he was joking. Thought Kalamazoo went with Timbuctoo — rhyme words in a children's story. Three weeks later, she was back in the 50's in Kalamazoo. That was three months ago.

The bus came. Fanny remembered her mama's advice when she heard where her daughter was going to go. *Be careful. In the Midwest they think Jews have horns.* But Fanny hadn't a clue about how to be careful.

She still winced when she remembered Miss Peadon's voice from the sixth grade. Miss Peadon had called her "Jew" as though Jew was her first name. "Jew, it's your turn to read — don't slouch. Jew, can you do that problem? Write neatly."

Later, in high school, her gym coach snarled, "You, Fanny, get out of the shower. You Jews always take more than your share." She couldn't believe it could be worse anywhere else.

Fanny had been relieved to get the nurse's aide job at Ridgeview. It was a real step up from the factory jobs she'd held previously. She worked nine hours a day, for a dollar an hour. Her schedule was fourteen days in a row, two days off and then another fourteen-day shift. There were no male employees, so all the care of the male patients was done by the "girls." A nurse's

aide had the care of the bodies and rooms of seven patients who were too disabled to care for themselves. There were no Jewish patients and no other Jewish workers.

She thought that the other aides working there, mostly black women, were her friends. She got along with them. The white supervisor, Miss Louella Jones, had been a perfect bitch and nag the whole time. Her voice was shrill sometimes, gruff other times. If Fanny fed a patient carefully, for sure Miss Jones would pipe, "Hurry up, Fanny. You've got behind on your work as usual."

When Fanny mopped the floors, Miss Jones might snap, "Less water, Fanny. It's not a swimming pool." So Fanny used a barely damp mop and Miss Jones snarled, "This is a hospital." (It wasn't.) "You've got to get the floors wet to get them clean."

Or take Monday's fiasco. Miss Jones approached Fanny all smiles, and Fanny wondered what was coming. "What's the matter, Fanny? Don'tcha like me? All the other girls call me Louella." So at lunch that day, Fanny said, "Uh. . . Louella, could you please pass the salt?" Suddenly Louella growled in a rage at Fanny, "Who do you think you are?! I'm your supervisor. You're to talk to me with respect. It's Miss Jones to you."

Outside of that, Fanny liked the work, and learned quickly from Mary, an older black woman who expressed genuine pleasure at the younger woman's deferential, respectful attitude towards her. Mary was soft and warm and efficient. Often she would come to Fanny and say, "Come on and team up with me, girl."

Fanny was happiest on these days for she and Mary worked side by side all day, first doing Mary's patients and then Fanny's. The patients loved Mary. She never seemed to keep anyone waiting, yet gave each one her special pat or word. Fanny had to trot to keep up with the stately woman, yet Mary seemed to gently glide everywhere. Mary's voice was low and clear, never harried. She didn't say much, just moved with sureness through the day.

At eighteen, Fanny was the youngest woman working in this "convalescent" home for the upper middle class. Fanny couldn't figure out the convalescent part. As far as she could see, no one there ever got well. They either died at the "Home" or went to the hospital and died there.

Fanny got off of the bus with about 15 minutes to spare before her shift. She went into the dining room and sat at a table with the other nurse's aides from her shift. They were all smoking and talking and drinking their pre-shift coffee.

Miss Jones offered Fanny a Winston.

"Come on, Fanny, have one of these — it's filtered."

She was immediately suspicious, knowing that Miss Jones disliked her. Miss Jones would never share anything with her.

"Yeah, Fanny. What you smoke those Camels for? They a *man's* cigarette," added Teresa Lynn, an aide Fanny had never worked with.

Fanny blushed. The truth was she smoked the Camels because Miss VanClaire, a rich old woman in a private room, gave them to her. Miss VanClaire was a retired professor and quite independent. She always held a cane in one hand which she used to poke the girls with when they didn't do what she wanted. One day Fanny was fixing Miss VanClaire's hair and attempting to avoid the cane when she felt a hand reach up under her uniform to pat her on the bottom and feel her garters. She looked down in shocked surprise into the wickedest grin she'd ever see on the face of an adult. Fanny would never have told, but Miss VanClaire believed the Camels were a bribe for her silence.

Everyone at the noisy table became unnaturally quiet. Usually four conversations went on at once, but now everyone was listening to Louella and Teresa Lynn. Fanny had been the last to sit down and she was suddenly aware that she had been gossiped about; she was frightened. She thought of her wrinkled uniform and frizzy hair and knew they could rag her about her messy appearance.

All of a sudden, Teresa Lynn said, "Fanny, *you* not white. You a *colored* girl! You just trying to *pass* for white. You trying to pretend *you* not one of *us*. You don't fool *me*."

She felt like she was outside, watching the scene. Fanny's surprise was palpable. All her life she had disliked and mistrusted white people. She had never wanted to be white and had never considered herself white, but had been called white along with other European Jews.

"No ma'am!" Fanny spluttered, deferential as always to the older wimin.

She floundered. "I'm not trying to pass. I'd never do that. I'd be proud if I were black."

"Oh yeah. Sure, sure," they all chuckled, as they rose and drifted off to their work.

Left alone, she realized that, to the the wimin she'd thought were her allies, Jews didn't exist. They couldn't understand that anyone would be their ally who wasn't "one of them." Fanny got up and went to work. The next morning she quit.

---

\*With thanks to Cath Thompson for computer games and the Jewish Lesbian Writing Group for critique.



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## Stalin's Big Brush Mustache

Jeannie,

I write you to make sense of those 2 1/2 years.

Dogmatism ate us raw

Chewed the gristle off our bones.

What made us give up our sexuality

And me, my art and Jewishness?

Remember Alix from Seattle?

We met here at Big Sur this weekend,

Six years ago, we argued at Point Reyes

She wouldn't read *Origins of the Family*

"It was written by a man"

I tried to cram it down her throat

She wouldn't swallow: of course she was wrong

I ended it there.

Now we meet again at Big Sur

Last night we camped in a field of allergies

I woke up soggy and sneezing remembering our old fight

You know, THEY told us

"the heterosexual family is the correct form in this period"

How did Alix resist

While we took it in?

Having no lover, it was easier for me.

Yet you, Jeannie, jilted your lover for a line.

But all the correct politics in China

Could not ease the pain of going straight

No political re-education in the countryside like the Chinese

You and Margaret gave in to attraction

Stealing kisses at the beach

Guilty, you turned yourselves in

To lengthy meetings and long reports

The sea lions are barking here on Point Lobos

Welcome dogs

Ochre and burnt sienna playing with the fog

Then, we heard shrill barking dogs  
They gave us few choices  
Remember when I questioned my leader  
"What about Stalin?  
Look what he did to the Jews."  
She angrily scolded me for doubting the line  
After all

"Stalin was 70% correct"  
So he grabbed the other 30%  
Rolled it tightly into a broomstick  
And swept the Jews and Kulaks away.  
Guilty too, I buried my Jewish past  
Overlooking any radical tradition  
Ignoring antisemitism  
Seeing only Jewish shopkeepers in minority neighborhoods  
As if passing for Anglo  
Would make me guiltless  
And somehow international

The cypress are sturdy here on Pt. Lobos  
like rough green fingers knuckling the ocean  
My green painting — is it still on your wall?  
I remember you let it hang "politically incorrect" all those years  
You know, it's been five years since I pushed all my abstract  
paintings into a dumpster  
Forced to give up my "class privilege"  
I threw out art with the bourgeoisie  
As if no art would better "serve the people"  
Why, Jeannie, did we think that way?  
What made us give up everything  
our sexuality  
and me my art and Jewishness?

## #67 To Be Posted on 21st Street, Between Eye and Pennsylvania

Take this poem down. You can take it and read it. I wrote it for you passing by, you standing at the grey plywood construction wall where it happened. If you'd been here, what would you have done? Believe me, it was not fun.

And I had been happy, supper at the Trieste around the corner, that nice Italian place, cheap cheese ravioli. Was pleasantly hand in hand with my lover, walking to Eye and 21st, back to the car. Happy despite hard glances, angled eyes of two women, next table, unused to seeing two people together like us. But we went on, happy. It was a triumph of love. Holding hands in the street's raw pink glow, a little like the movies, slow motion angle on us stepping into the flimsy sidewalk tunnel, tunnel of love, wedding arch, *arc de triomphe* after the war, secret passage, honeysuckle arbor, except it was us in the blunt echo off the boards, laughing, at walk in the city, Saturday night.

When some young white men passed and began to talk at us, derisive. University, not hard hat, if that's what you are thinking. Or maybe you're one of them, reading this now. Why did you try shame? The mock: *I can't believe it. Can't believe it. They're holding hands.* Six to us two. A tongue's scratch scratch, trying to get at our hearts. Like a movie, sudden threat. Predictable. I get so tired of this disbelief.

My tongue, faithful in my mouth, said: *Yes, we are.*  
The shout: *Lesbians. Lesbians.* Trying to curse  
us with our name. Me louder: *That's what we are.*

Around the corner, empty street. Nobody came  
with rocks, or dogs. Alone and glad of it,  
still holding hands. Around the corner screamed  
a car, the men, shouts: *Dykes, dykes.* Have you  
ever tried to frighten someone out of their life?  
Just having a good time, like shooting at ducks  
down by the Bay, or at the office telling jokes.  
Nothing personal except to the ones getting hit,  
other side of the threat.

But this is a poem  
about love, so I should say: In the torn silence  
we stood, in the night street, and kissed, solemn,  
sweet as any engagement party or anniversary,  
stern as the beginning or end of a country's war,  
in the risk of who knows who might come and see  
us in the open, isolate, tender, exchanging a kiss,  
a triumph like no other.

I hope you, here,  
have read through, didn't crumple or tear this  
up the middle at *lesbian*. I hope you carefully  
took this poem down and read it. Now it's a poem  
about you, about how there can be a triumph of love.

*for Joan*

## #65 Parked Down by the Potomac

We don't say we're too old for this.  
Instead I pick you up at your house, slide  
over to passenger, and you're driving  
me around at midnight, straight scotch,  
bourbon and water in glasses engraved  
B, from no wedding of ours.

Parked  
down by the Potomac, we drink and talk  
about football and politics by the grey-  
green cold molten luminescent water.  
Your tongue probes my mouth, hot, hotter.  
Making out down by the river, like back home,  
no truck, but you in your baseball cap, tough  
and dykey like no one else who ever drove  
me anywhere. Your wide small hands cover  
my side, hot.

Covering me: was the beginning  
then? We disagree on how to count the years,  
but here we are by one of our calendars,  
end of the summer, September, starting up again.  
The crickets complain, somewhat pitiful,  
and we don't care.

We drive off, windows  
down, you with bare forearms, sleeves rolled up,  
seductive with hidden soft inner elbows.  
Your hands turn and glimmer on the wheel.  
We talk and I watch, wanting your hands on me,  
wanting you to turn me over, over, turn me.

*for Joan*

## closure

Perhaps it is because I've never been athletic, preferring to sit on the sidelines watching women's legs; preferring to be among the perceivers rather than among the perceived;  
Perhaps it is because at thirteen, I could look between nine and nineteen with the right eyeliner and modeled for *Seventeen* magazine;  
Perhaps it is because my hair is so blonde, so curly, so childish and it still grows so quickly;  
Perhaps it is "just because": the rationale of the cornered when all is disconnected;  
Or perhaps it just *is*;  
Or perhaps it isn't.

*What makes me think it is:*

Skipping down the boardwalk, holding hands. I am always the bolder one. I stroke her hip, kiss her mouth. I think she is more beautiful than the ocean.

But it is always me the summer boys grab. They push her away, telling her I am too pretty to be one of her kind. They do not claim me as one of their own, rather as something owned.

*What makes me think it isn't:*

The Women's Hospitality Lounge is crowded with professionals sipping coffee, networking, looking each other over as if we are not competitors. She swaggers toward my table, cruising while balancing the thick cup and saucer.

After bed, I ask her what made her walk over. She says: "My kind of dyke is one who knows how to apply eye make-up. I learned cosmetology in prison."

*What makes me think:*

It's a gay "mixed" bar in Miami and I'm dancing dirty with my girlfriend Felipa and feeling safe and slightly drunk and sweaty with passion. I'm trying to focus my eyes deep into her irises in

the dank light, so I don't see whoever they are until they are already dragging me outside. They tell me my kind doesn't belong in a place like this and slap my face with the back of large ringed hands and tear my tropical-weight jeans, laughing at my absence of underwear.

Ice on my cheek, I ponder my transgression: was I too Anglo? too tight with my Cuban lover? too queer? not queer enough?

Vision is often equated with perception: as if the only sense were sight.

Only my lovers smell me, touch me, taste me.

Only the waitresses at my usual breakfast place listen to me.

Everyone else looks.

And when lovers and waitresses look at me, I cringe.

Inside.

Outside, I am impassive.

*What lovers ask:*

when I wear eyeliner: are you trying to pass, girl?

when I dance: are you like that in bed, woman?

when I leave: what are you so afraid of, child?

*What waitresses say:*

when I wear eyeliner: you look nice today.

when I sit down: you'll have the usual.

when I leave: see you tomorrow.

Inside and outside of the restaurant;

inside and outside of the bedroom;

the sense of closure wraps itself around me as if it believes it is protective.

But I do not want to be protected.

Usually.

That seventh sense, closure, allows people to impose their expectations upon their perception of me.

People see what they expect to see.

I become enclosed;

encircled.

My lover and I are at the skating rink on a rainy Saturday

afternoon with our children.

Yes, we have children.

We hold the children's hands, supporting them.

We hold each other's hands, steadying ourselves.

We skate the oval, first one way and then, as instructed, the other: around & around & around.

I like to pretend that people are so involved with the turning of their own wheels that they do not see us: my own seventh sense involves much unrealistic expectation.

It's my sixth sense that is relentlessly realistic: as the people

order and reorder their worlds as they look at us;

as they reject one hypothesis because of the children and then resurrect it as I pat my lover on the ass.

The skaters look and then pretend they are not looking.

Someone looks, but doesn't pretend he is not looking.

I look to check that the exits are still where they were a half-minute ago.

My lover looks at me and I look back; knowing that we need to protect the children from more than falling;

knowing that in certain spaces the children protect us;

knowing that stereotypes travel under their own power.

There are stereotypes that travel through time.

And if I could travel through time?

I know I don't look like a Fifties femme: I don't shave my legs and my bones are too large and I can't pluck my eyebrows and pumps make my feet swell in summer.

I know I don't look like a Fifties butch: I can't drink beer and I don't shoot pool and my nose bleeds during fist fights even when I win.

In the last lights of the Eighties, I become preoccupied with the stereotype I'd choose — or which one would choose me — if I'd been loving in 1954:

a year I wasn't born.

I don't want to look back.

I don't want to look.

I don't want to be looked at.

I am afraid to be invisible.

I am afraid of photographs,  
of every photographer I have ever known,  
of the techniques of posing and being posed,  
of the formulas for chemicals which birth images.  
I want to dismember photographs into such tiny flecks it will be  
as if the shutter never clicked,  
but I know there is no need to destroy that which never was.

*a photograph from her exhibit:*

Ocean in background.

A full term pregnant nude open mouthed kissing another naked woman.

Caption: *they must be old friends.*

In the feminist gallery, I don't know whether I am relieved or annoyed that no one seems to recognize me, not even the photographer with her glass of drambuie.

A man I've never seen before walks up to me and tells me I'm the most stunning woman he's ever seen. I tell him I'm a transvestite.

*a dark place, not alone*

I've often thought that if I closed my eyes, I couldn't be seen.

He hired my lover and me for "studio work," but then brought out video equipment. I objected.

He told me to keep my fucking eyes open.

She kissed me. She spread my thighs.

He locked her in a closet. He fucked me.

There was not enough light for any lens yet invented.

Still, I always expect to see a still-shot of myself in every porn-shop window;

on the dresser of a woman not-yet-met;

in a Christmas card from a relative.

*undocumented memory*

We set the timer on the Nikon in hopes that we'd get a photograph of the three of us. We have been friends and former lovers for a long time. One of us is dying. We each live in different parts of the country. We met at Garvey's house almost by accident. We want to document this event, which might be our last time together.

We pose. We clown. We imagine that we look like lesbian angels. Only after we have all driven at least a day away, one of us will discover there was no film in the camera. The other women will not be told; not yet.

When our second baby was born, the fontanels of her skull refused to close. The soft spot on her head stayed soft; open. There were forms from hospitals, doctors, insurance companies — forms that had lines in the wrong places.

There was some confusion: but not on our part. There was something that resisted closure: long after the spot on her head became solid enough to risk roller skating.

We never take her photograph;  
never send it to long lost relatives on holidays.  
We never wonder what people see when they look at her;  
what people think of her.  
We never tell her what she looks like;  
or think about her before she was born;  
or dress her in clothes the color of heavily creamed coffee.  
We never tell her to wear eye make-up; we never tell her not to.  
We take her to our usual restaurant.  
She is talking so loudly about her jump-shot with a half-second remaining during last night's basketball game that we cannot pretend people do not notice us.  
But this morning, we are too hungry to be concerned about perceptions.  
The food finally comes.  
"Close your mouth when you chew," we tell her.  
Defiantly, she opens her mouth round and wide as a pancake.

## TEXAS '52

Texas was a fat, blonde whore that summer, who smoked cheap cigarettes and wore brassy make-up; who stood under a street light and beckoned to strangers — and you and I — well, she'd gotten in our blood.

We drove around in a candy-apple red Lincoln, brand new convertible with the top turned down — me, Jimmy Dean, all duck-tail and denim; you — Marilyn-alcoholic innocence. I'd steer with one hand while you sat with your back to me — my arm around you, hand cupping your breast, while you crossed your legs and stuck sandaled feet out the window.

We'd drive across the desert tankin' up on Bud and Schlitz, every twenty minutes pullin' over to the side.

"Nature call!" you'd giggle and squat behind the open car door.

"Now, don't look!" you'd warn me — and I'd jump over and leer at you and shout at nobody in particular: "Hey! Gotta lady over here takin' a leak!" Then you'd hurry and stand (as if someone was comin'!) and I'd watch you tryin' to pull up your drawers ...

And if you could see yourself, little girl in woman package, heels all muddy from pee and sand — tryin' to wriggle up into these size too small drawers — then, you'd know why I loved you.

I remember makin' love under a big black cauldron that somebody had poked with pin-pricks of silver. Wasn't nothin' bigger than a Texas sky, nothin' sweeter than my breasts against yours; my ass against sky, your ass against leather.

And when the hiway patrolman caught us by surprise, you whispered in my ear, "Don't say a word ..." and you held me so tight that I couldn't breathe, "... and for God's sake, don't let him see your tits!"

"Well, what we got here?" I could hear his soft drawl.

You gave him your sweetest smile (I'd have killed for that smile), and hugged my face to your breast.

"Well, offisuh," you drawled in an Ann-Margaret voice, "he's just a baby boy. Can't blame this boy for a little lovin'; not under a moon as big as this one — not under a sky as huge as this — can ya? I mean . . . perfect settin' for your first time."

He rubbed his chin and looked at the moon.

"Yeah," he said, sorta soft and low, like maybe he knew firsthand 'bout a night like this, "First time oughta be like this for everybody, with the moon lookin' down and the sky for a ceilin'."

Then, he grabbed your breast and tweaked, and you held me down and smothered my protest.

"Don't get greedy, sonny!" he called as he left us, then climbed into his car and drove away.

I held my head up, mad as hell, and sputterin'.

"Why, that goddam bastard! I'll break his fuckin' neck ..."

And I could feel your body shakin' under mine, laughin' (or tryin' hard not to).

"Aw, c'mon — SONNY!" and you pulled me to you, and then I started gigglin'...

...and making love that night was a place just short of Heaven — wasn't nothin' ever as good as you that night. The moon got big and bright and filled up the whole sky; that moon was as big as Texas itself. That moon was a Goddess lookin' down at us laughin'— pleased with our gift of sweat and come. And when we screamed...

I ain't never felt a scream like that.

That scream started at the base of my spine, crackled up to my shoulders and spread down my arms; and I thought I was hurtin' you, I was squeezin' so hard — and you was cryin', I was cryin', bodies shakin' like we had the D.T.s ... that scream cut through that prairie night and swallowed it.

When it was over, the sun was inchin' up. You'd gone to sleep under me, and I'd woke with a start, 'cause I'd always pictured you this tiny, fragile thing. But as I lay playin' with this wisp of your hair, kissin' your eyelids and smilin' (at this gaudy-assed lipstick you insisted on wearin'-rememberin', jeez, it musta' been all over my face, between my thighs, on my tits), I got to thinkin'.

An' I thought about how I was s'posed to be so damn butchy — with my denim, and leather, and studs, and my ducktail; and you, with your heels, your make-up, and skirts; your soft-talkin',

the way you pouted your lips when you wanted your way; the way you touched your hair when you talked . . . you, so very much, this hot smoldering woman . . .

I got to thinkin'.

Thinkin' bout the time when we didn't have no money an' needed gas, and you tore out the station with the nozzle in the tank.

Thinkin' how you *made* me git out on the floor an' dance with you at the sweetheart dance — didn't care *who* saw we was two women — you threw your arms around me and ground your body against mine. And when somebody murmured, "fuckin' bulldaggin' dykes", your body went rigid, your eyes flashed lightnin', and you grew what seemed to be ten feet tall — and you read that cowboy like he was the Morning Times, til he couldn't do nothin' but turn red and fidget; and everybody called you "m'am" after that (didn't know quite what to call me, but that was okay) and took their hats off when we walked by.

Well, I got to thinkin' bout all that, and got to thinkin', maybe, this butch/femme stuff wasn't quite rule of thumb—maybe leather didn't make you a tough broad, or silk a sissy; got to realizin' that *maybe* I was always on top 'cause you let me be, and how soft and warm you made me feel, like sometimes *I* wanted to wear long, flowin' skirts, and look pretty just for you.

I kissed you softly. Your eyelids fluttered open, and you stretched and held me to you. Gettin' dressed was a dance of coy looks and blushes. The sun was gettin' brighter in a hot, red sky.

I looked at you applyin' that last touch of mascara, puttin' your lipstick back in your make-up kit, and I remembered the night.

Then I reached for the keys in my cowboy jacket pocket; raised your hand to my mouth, placed a kiss on your palm — dropped them in your outstretched palm, and said, "this time — you drive."

## Lesbian "Sex"<sup>1</sup>

The reasons the word "sex" is in quotation marks in my title are two: one is that the term "sex" is an inappropriate term for what lesbians do, and the other is that whatever it is that lesbians do that (for lack of a better word) might be called "sex" we apparently do damned little of it. For a great many lesbians, the gap between the high hopes we had some time ago for lesbian sex and the way things have worked out has turned the phrase "lesbian sex" into something of a bitter joke. I don't want to exaggerate this: things aren't so bad for all lesbians, or all of the time. But in our communities as a whole, there is much grumbling on the subject. It seems worthwhile to explore some of the meanings of the relative dearth of what (for lack of a better word) we call lesbian "sex."

Recent discussions of lesbian "sex" frequently cite the finding of a study on couples by Blumstein and Schwartz<sup>2</sup>, which is perceived by most of those who discuss it as having been done well, with a good sample of couples — lesbian, male homosexual, heterosexual non-married and heterosexual married couples. These people apparently found that lesbian couples "have sex" far less frequently than any other type of couple, that lesbian couples are less "sexual" as couples and as individuals than anyone else. In their sample, only about one-third of lesbians in relationships of two years or longer "had sex" once a week or more; 47% of lesbians in long-term relationships "had sex" once a month or less, while among heterosexual married couples only 15% had sex once a month or less. And they report that lesbians seem to be more limited in the range of their "sexual" techniques than are other couples.

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\* When I speak of "we" and "our communities," I actually don't know exactly who that is. I know only that I and my lover are not the only ones whose concerns I address, and that similar issues are being discussed in friendship circles and communities other than ours (as witness, e.g., discussion in the pages of the *Lesbian Connection*). If what I say here resonates for you, so be it. If not, at least you can know it resonates for some range of lesbians and some of them probably are your friends or acquaintances.

When this sort of information first came into my circle of lesbian friends, we tended to see it as conforming to what we know from our own experience. But on reflection, looking again at what has been going on with us in our long-term relationships, the nice fit between this report and our experience seemed not so perfect after all.

It was brought to our attention during our ruminations on this that what 85% of long-term heterosexual married couples do more than once a month takes on the average 8 minutes to do.<sup>3</sup>

Although in my experience lesbians discuss their "sex" lives with each other relatively little (a point to which I will return), I know from my own experience and from the reports of a few other lesbians in long-term relationships, that what we do that, on average, we do considerably less frequently, takes, on average, considerably more than 8 minutes to do. It takes about 30 minutes, at the least. Sometimes maybe an hour. And it is not uncommon that among these relatively uncommon occurrences, an entire afternoon or evening is given over to activities organized around doing it. The suspicion arises that what 85% of heterosexual married couples are doing more than once a month and what 47% of lesbian couples are doing less than once a month is not the same thing.

I remember that one of my first delicious tastes of old gay lesbian culture occurred in a bar where I was getting acquainted with some new friends. One was talking about being busted out of the Marines for being gay. She had been put under suspicion somehow, and was sent off to the base psychiatrist to be questioned, her perverted tendencies to be assessed. He wanted to convince her she had only been engaged in a little youthful experimentation and wasn't really gay. To this end, he questioned her about the extent of her experience. What he asked was, "How many times have you had sex with a woman?" At this, we all laughed and giggled: what an ignorant fool. What does he think he means, "times?" What will we count? What's to *count*?

Another of my friends, years later, discussing the same conundrum, said that she thought maybe every time you got up to go to the bathroom, that marked a "time." The joke about "how many times" is still good for a chuckle from time to time in my life with my lover. I have no memory of any such topic providing any such merriment in my years of sexual encounters and relation-

ships with men. It would have been very rare indeed that we would not have known how to answer the question "How many times did you do it?"

If what heterosexual married couples do that the individuals report under the rubric "sex" or "have sex" or "have sexual relations" is something that in most instances can easily be individuated into countable instances, this is more evidence that it is not what long-term lesbian couples do . . . or, for that matter, what short-term lesbian couples do.

What violence did the lesbians do their experience by answering the same question the heterosexuals answered, as though it had the same meaning for them? How did the lesbians figure out how to answer the questions "How frequently?" or "How many times?" My guess is that different individuals figured it out differently. Some might have counted a two- or three-cycle evening as one "time" they "had sex;" some might have counted it as two or three "times." Some may have counted as "times" only the times both partners had orgasms; some may have counted as "times" occasions on which at least one had an orgasm; those who do not have orgasms or have them far more rarely than they "have sex" may not have figured orgasms into the calculations; perhaps some counted as a "time" every episode in which both touched the other's vulva more than fleetingly and not for something like a health examination. For some, to count every reciprocal touch of the vulva would have made them count as "having sex" more than most people with a job or a work would dream of having time for; how do we suppose those individuals counted "times?" Is there any good reason why they should *not* count all those as "times?" Does it depend on how fulfilling it was? Was anybody else counting by occasions of fulfillment?

We have no idea how the individual lesbians surveyed were counting their "sexual acts." But this also raises the questions of how heterosexuals counted *their* sexual acts. By orgasms? By *whose* orgasms? If the havings of sex by heterosexual married couples did take on the average 8 minutes, my guess is that in a very large number of those cases the women did not experience orgasms. My guess is that neither the women's pleasure nor the women's orgasms were pertinent in most of the individuals' counting and reporting the frequency with which they "had sex."

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This is the term used in the Blumstein and Schwartz questionnaire. In the text of their book, they use "have sex."

So, do lesbian couples really "have sex" any less frequently than heterosexual couples? I'd say that lesbian couples "have sex" a great deal less frequently than heterosexual couples: by the criteria that I'm betting most of the heterosexual people used to count "times," lesbians don't have sex at all. No male orgasms, no "times." (I'm willing to draw the conclusion that heterosexual women don't have sex either; that what they report is the frequency with which their partners had sex.)

It has been said before by feminists that the concept of "having sex" is a phallic concept; that it pertains to heterosexual intercourse, in fact, primarily to heterosexual intercourse, i.e., male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation. I have thought this was true since the first time the idea was put to me, some 12 years ago.<sup>4</sup> But I have been finding lately that I have to go back over some of the ground I covered a decade ago because some of what I knew then I knew too superficially. For some of us, myself included, the move from heterosexual relating to lesbian relating was occasioned or speeded up or brought to closure by our knowledge that what we had done under the heading "having sex" was indeed male-dominant-female-subordination-copulation-whose-completion ... etc. and it was not worthy of doing. Yet now, years later, we are willing to answer questionnaires that ask us how frequently we "have sex," and are dissatisfied with ourselves and with our relationships because we don't "have sex" enough. We are so dissatisfied that we keep a small army of therapists in business trying to help us "have sex" more.

We quit having sex years ago, and for excellent and compelling reasons. What exactly is our complaint now?

In all these years I've been doing and writing feminist theory, I have not until very recently written, much less published, a word about sex. I did not write, though it was suggested to me that I do so, anything in the SM debates; I left entirely unanswered an invitation to be the keynote speaker at a feminist conference about women's sexuality (which by all reports turned out to be an excellent conference). I was quite unable to think of anything but vague truisms to say, and very few of those. Feminist theory is grounded in experience; I have always written feminist political and philosophical analysis from the bottom up, starting with my

own encounters and adventures, frustrations, pain, anger, delight, etc. Sometimes this has no doubt made it a little provincial; but it has at least had the virtue of firm connection with *someone's* real, live experience (which is more than you can say for a lot of theory). When I put to myself the task of theorizing about sex and sexuality, it was as though I *had* no experience, as though there was no ground on which and from which to generate theory. But (if I understand the terminology rightly), I have in fact been what they call "sexually active" for close to a quarter of a century, about half my life, almost all of what they call one's "adult life," heterosexually, lesbianly and autoerotically. Surely I have experience. But I seem not to have *experiential knowledge* of the sort I need.

Reflecting on all that history, I realize that in many of its passages this experience has been a muddle. Acting, being acted on, choosing, desiring, pleasure and displeasure all akimbo: not coherently determining and connecting with each other. Even in its greatest intensity it has for the most part been somehow rather opaque to me, not fully in my grasp. My "experience" has in general the character more of a buzzing blooming confusion than of *experience*. And it has occurred in the midst of almost total silence on the part of others about their experience. The experience of others has for the most part also been opaque to me; they do not discuss or describe it *in detail* at all.

I recall an hours-long and heated argument among some eight or ten lesbians at a party a couple of years ago about SM, whether it is okay, or not. When Carolyn and I left, we realized that in the whole time not one woman had said one concrete, explicit, physiologically specific thing about what she actually *did*. The one arguing in favor of bondage: did she have her hands tied gently with ribbons or scarves, or harshly with handcuffs or chains? What other parts of her body were or weren't restrained, and by what means? And what parts of her body were touched, and how, while she was bound? And what liberty did she still have to touch in return? And if she had no such liberty, was it part of her experience to want that liberty and tension or frustration, or was it her experience that she felt pleased or satisfied not to have that liberty ... ? Who knows? She never said a single word at this level of specificity. Nor did anyone else, pro or con.

I once perused a large and extensively illustrated book on

sexual activity by and for homosexual men. It was astounding to me for one thing in particular, namely, that its pages constituted a huge lexicon of *words*: words for acts and activities, their subjects, preludes and denouements, their stylistic variation, their sequences. Gay male sex, I realized then, is *articulate*. It is articulate to a degree that, in my world, lesbian "sex" does not remotely approach. Lesbian "sex" as I have known it, most of the time I have known it, is utterly *inarticulate*. Most of my lifetime, most of my experience in the realms commonly designated as "sexual" has been pre-linguistic, non-cognitive. I have, in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore in one important sense, no knowledge.

In situations of male dominance, women are for the most part excluded from the formulation and validation of meaning and thereby denied the means to express themselves. Men's meanings, and no women's meanings, are encoded in what is presumed to be the whole population's language. (In many cases, both the men and the women assume it is everyone's language.) The meanings one's life and experience might generate cannot come fully into operation if they are not woven into language: they are fleeting, or they hover, vague, not fully coalesced, not connected, and hence not *useful* for explaining or grounding interpretations, desires, complaints, theories. In response to our understanding that there is something going on in patriarchy that is more or less well described by saying women's meanings are not encoded in the dominant languages and that this keeps our experience from being fully formed and articulate, we have undertaken quite deliberately to discover, complete and encode our meanings. Such simple things as naming chivalrous gestures "insulting," naming Virginia Woolf a great writer, naming ourselves women instead of girls or ladies. Coining terms like "sexism," "sexual harassment" and "incestor." Mary Daly's new book is a whole project of "encoding" meanings, and we can all find examples of our own more local encodings.\*

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\*I picked up the word "encoding" as it is used here from the novel *Native Tongue*, by Suzette Haden Elgin (NY: Daw Books, Inc., 1984). She envisages women identifying concepts, feelings, types of situations, etc., for which there are no words in English, and giving them intuitively appropriate names in a woman-made language called Laadan.

Meanings should arise from our bodily self-knowledge, bodily play, tactile communication, the ebb and flow of intense excitement, arousal, tension, release, comfort, discomfort, pain and pleasure (and I make no distinctions here among bodily, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic). But such potential meanings are more amorphous, less coalesced into discrete elements of a coherent pattern of meanings, of an *experience*, than any other dimensions of our lives. In fact, there are for many of us *virtually no meanings* in this realm because nothing of it is crystallized in a linguistic matrix.\*

What we have for generic words to cover this terrain are the words "sex," "sexual" and "sexuality." In our efforts to liberate ourselves from the stifling woman-hating Victorian denial that women even *have* bodily awareness, arousal, excitement, orgasms and so on, many of us actively took these words for ourselves, and claimed that we *do* "do sex" and we *are* sexual and we *have* sexuality. This has been particularly important to lesbians because the very fact of "sex" being a phallogentric term has made it especially difficult to get across the idea that lesbians are not, for lack of a penis between us, making do with feeble and partial and pathetic half-satisfactions." But it seems to me that the attempt to encode our lustiness and lustfulness, our passion and our vigorous carnality in the words "sex," "sexual" and "sexuality" has backfired. Instead of losing their phallogentricity, these words have imported the phallogentric meanings into and onto experience which is not in any way phallogentric. A web of meanings which maps emotional intensity, excitement, arousal, bodily play, orgasm, passion and relational adventure back onto a semantic center in male-dominant-female-subordinate-copulation-whose-completion-and-purpose-is-the-male's-ejaculation has been so utterly inadequate as to leave us speechless, meaningless, and ironically, according to the Blumstein and Schwartz report, "not as sexual" as couples or as individuals of any other group.

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\*Carolyn Shafer has theorized that one significant reason why lesbian SM occasioned so much excitement, both positive and negative, is that lesbians have been starved for language - for specific, detailed, literal, particular, bodily talk with clear non-metaphorical references to parts of our bodies and the ways they can be stimulated, to acts, postures, types of touch. Books like *Coming to Power* feed that need, and call forth more words in response.

"Asserting the robustness and unladylikeness of our passions and actions, some of us have called some of what we do "fucking."

Our lives, the character of our embodiment, *cannot be* mapped back onto that semantic center. When we try to synthesize and articulate it by the rules of that mapping, we end up trying to mold our loving and our passionate carnal intercourse into explosive 8-minute events. That is not the timing and ontology of the lesbian body. When the only things that count as "doing it" are those passages of our interactions which most closely approximate a paradigm that arose from the meanings of the rising and falling penis, no wonder we discover ourselves to "do it" rather less often than do pairs with one or more penises present.

There are many cultural and social-psychological reasons why women (in white Euro-American groups, but also in many other configurations of patriarchy) would generally be somewhat less clear and less assertive about their desires and about getting their satisfactions than men would generally be. And when we pair up two women in a couple, it stands to reason that those reasons would double up and tend to make relationships in which there is a lowish frequency of clearly delineated desires and direct initiations of satisfactions. But for all the help it might be to lesbian bodies to work past the psychological and behavioral habits of femininity that inhibit our passions and pleasures, my suggestion is that what we have never taken seriously enough is the *language* which forecloses our meanings.

My positive recommendation is this: Instead of starting with a point (a point in the life of a body unlike our own) and trying to make meanings along vectors from that point, we would do better to start with a wide field of our passions and bodily pleasures and make meanings that weave a web across it. To begin creating a vocabulary that elaborates and expands our meanings, we should adopt a very wide and general concept of "doing it." Let it be an open, generous, commodious concept encompassing all the acts and activities by which we generate with each other pleasures and thrills, tenderness and ecstasy, passages of passionate carnality of whatever duration or profundity. Everything from vanilla to licorice, from puce to chartreuse, from velvet to ice, from cuddles to cunts, from chortles to tears. Starting from there, we can let our experiences generate a finertuned descriptive vocabulary that maps and expresses the differences and distinctions among the things we do, the kinds of pleasures we get, the stages and styles of our acts and activities,

the parts of our bodies centrally engaged in the different kinds of "doing it," and so on. I would not, at the outset, assume that all of "doing it" is good or wholesome, nor that everyone would like or even tolerate everything this concept includes; I would not assume that "doing it" either has or should have a particular connection with love, or that it hasn't or shouldn't have such a connection. As we explain and explore and define our pleasures and our preferences across this expansive and heterogeneous field, teaching each other what the possibilities are and how to navigate them, a vocabulary will arise among us and by our collective creativity.

The vocabulary will arise among us, of course, only if we talk with each other about what we're doing and why, and what it feels like. Language is social. So is "doing it."

I'm hoping it will be a lot easier to talk about what we do, and how and when and why, and in carnal sensual detail, once we've learned to laugh at foolish studies that show that lesbians don't have sex as often as, aren't as sexual as, and use fewer sexual techniques than other folks.

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1. In its first version, this essay was written for the meeting of the Society for Women in Philosophy, Midwestern Division, November, 1987, at Bloomington, Indiana. It was occasioned by Claudia Card's paper, "Intimacy and Responsibility: What Lesbians Do," (published in the Institute for Legal Studies Working Papers, Series, 2, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Law School, Madison, WI 53706). Carolyn Shafer has contributed a lot to my thinking here, and I am indebted also to conversations with Sue Emmert and Terry Grant.

2. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples*, (NY: William and Morrow Company, 1983).

3. Dotty Calabrese gave this information in her workshop on long-term lesbian relationships at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, 1987. (Thanks to Terry for this reference).

4. By Carolyn Shafer. See pp. 156-7 of my book *The Politics of Reality* (The Crossing Press, 1983).

## The Bullfight Sonnets

" . . . but you might remember  
Whether I cheated my father for you  
and tamed the fire-breathing  
Brazen-hoofed bulls . . ."

— Euripides' *Medea*

1.

In razzle dazzle gold brocade he flicks  
his hips and flaunts his cape before  
His Majesty, the Bull. The matador  
is teasing anger from his beast with tricks  
of red muleta, dancing hands, and love.  
The judges, cool, care most for grace,  
for elegance of form. From death's embrace  
they cut an ear or two, a tail, and give  
them to the hero. Novelists extol  
the crowd, the sun, the blood, the kill, the role  
of manhood challenged and found worthy. I  
am less enthralled. Instead, I wonder why  
cerebral critics desperately admire  
heroes who hold their shit when under fire.

2.

The horned god, cloven-hoofed god, god who dies  
to fertilize the land: These bulls are raised  
for war, for fierce and noble spirit praised,  
admitted to the plaza, given right  
to charge a man in front of other men.  
In razzle dazzle gold he flicks his cape  
before you. Do you know you can't escape,

that if you kill, they still won't let you win?  
This turf they chose for you; it isn't yours.  
It's just a stage. Enthusiasts devour  
each act and howl for more, more tails, more ears,  
more bulls, and if the matador is gored,  
there's more suspense. Safe behind the fence,  
they thrive on blood and killing elegance.

### 3.

A poem should stand on footnotes, not on hooves.  
Unyielding as an uncracked code, a poem  
should float above the crowd, opaque, alone,  
till critics can elucidate its truths.  
Professors tease *entendres* from the words,  
insist no line can mean just what it says.  
To earn attention, poets acquiesce  
and write obscurely; sonnets fall unheard  
beyond the tiers of educated men.  
Admitted to the ring, a chance conferred  
to wield the cape, a woman undeterred  
by challenge yet is disconcerted when  
her new position calls for killing bulls.  
She hones her sword. She knows who makes the rules.



## Finding Out

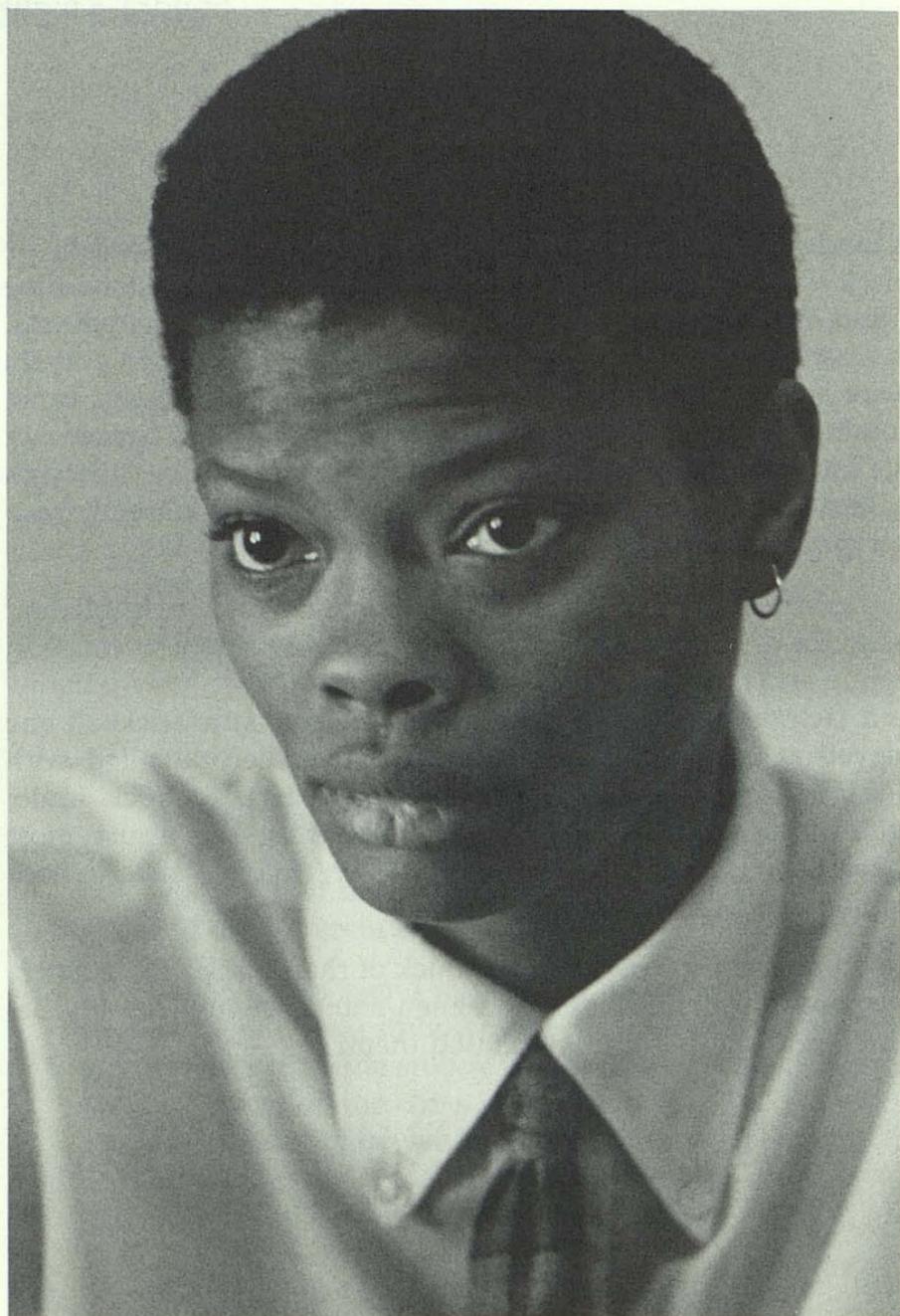
They found me out in Brooklyn,  
where I was born  
and grew up;  
where I learned to speak English  
with a genuine Brooklyn accent;  
where I watched Looney Tunes  
and wore genuine Mickey Mouse ears;  
where I read comic books  
and ate Twinkies;  
where I watched American Bandstand  
and wore genuine dungarees;  
where I listened to the Beach Boys  
and hung out on street corners;  
where I watched I Love Lucy reruns  
and wore genuine dress-for-success suits;  
where I read the Daily News  
and ate Velveeta on white bread.  
Italian genes found my chin in Brooklyn  
and made little stubby black hairs grow on it  
just like the little stubby black hairs  
that grow on the chins  
of genuine Italian women born and raised  
in Italy.

## sisters

h  
handmaids of mary. an order of nuns who happened to be black. faculty members of st. aloysius. sisters. black sisters. blue prints on black. as was one so was her other. like common thread. the lasting cause. the dangling beads; markers by which prayers were said. in whispers. soft hummings. these sisters came coming. came walking, brave and defiant. through harlem. in the bone-chill of winter. in the heatwave of summer. through political storms, hotter than hot. why harlem, this harem? why harlem? why not?

like spirits of silence. shades of commitment. intent to fulfill their missions of service. one michael: the mother (superior, indeed); young and ambitious. a creamy delicious no taste to ever know. and jacinta marie: kind grace, her demeanor/the stickball she played at noon-time recess. one stern intellectual filled with discipline and deep-chocolate resolve: sister dominick savio; wire-rimmed glasses over piercing brown eyes. and beauty, most lovely; one fair, black rose . . . this sister/precious sister whose name rained music/rang rosario.

down mean city streets. in the thick of their black. their quick, purposeful gaits. black-cloud-linen-habits waving loosely behind them . . . perhaps, to remind them?



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Elvira Williams  
(from *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front*)

## We Come From Iowa

Nigger lover  
no  
lover of a man  
the color of maple  
lover of babies  
babies to be the color of  
wet sand  
peach trees  
in the summer  
ripened firm — born bruised  
marked  
for the dual

mama is german english  
my coarse locks twisted  
like so much corn silk  
african

mama breathes  
her breasts filling the air  
over and over  
she does not throw  
the tomatoes  
rotting on the sill  
at this boy who came across the fence  
marched about the yard  
shook our hearts  
with  
nigger lover  
nigger lover  
breeder of mongrels  
traitor  
traitor  
she does not caress

or hold me  
cringing child at the window  
places her hand  
on my crown — a cloud  
maybe sifting  
first direct rays  
her touch is a shaky shelter  
the light funnelling love  
her back  
bends but does not snap  
her raw country hand  
coarse like my hair

Mama. Mama was soft boobs, tummy and thighs. Green eyes flecked with amber. I've been held with those eyes, in the cushion of her lap. When I was an infant, she played peek-a-boo and Dinah Washington for me, rocking me in that old, creaking chair. Swam at my side at two, her strength holding up my ribs against the pull of the water. Sung the alphabet song for me at three. And at the park with the caves and the muddy water for canoes, we ran hand-in-hand through fields of milkweed and dandelions. When I was five, she sent me off to school. Once in the car, the second time walking, the third time with a black and white map of streets that looked like rivers and stick houses I would recognize. "Here's the pretty purple house — remember it? And look, I drew the house where that nasty dog lives. The one that barks every time we go by. Are you scared to go by yourself? No? Good. Good girl."

It was there in the surrounding of white children and teachers that she allowed me to roll off her palms and onto the earth. With fear etched in her forehead, she prayed I would survive the briar patch into which Daddy had taken us, considering a white education a rose garden. Mama saw the stares of the children as she left me in the hands of yet one more white teacher. She imagined the long quills I pulled out of my sides daily, but feeling powerless to alter my predicament, she let me become strong in the flappings of the wind. Mama was resigned to save herself the full agony of a woman who regrets bringing babies into a cruel, divided world.

That relationship between me and Mama? Anger. Anger at her for being powerless. Leaving me. The children flipping my dresses to see if the color of brandy they saw in bottles at their homes stretched all the way up my legs and covered my stomach. Anger at her for being helpless. Leaving me no space for breathing inside a smile or outright giggle. Not knowing how to stop two grown folks from bouncing my Cheerios onto the waxed tiles of the kitchen floor. Acting like they didn't see me sitting in the middle of the long veneer slick table backed into the wall. So I imagined myself absent from the room and ceased to cringe from the solid whacks of maple strong hands against wilting birch. Stomach constipated with screams, teeth and balled fists to come between them. And tears. Tears for myself. The self that felt powerless in her own presence, unable to make room, stop the anger of hands that wrecked Scooby Doo mornings. I blamed Mama for handing me a stacked tray of nothingness. It was her fault. She wore the guilty face. And I punished her with an invisible game of tug-of-war, controlling the tension of love and hate. Pulling on the rope from her stomach.

It's been awhile. Mama and Daddy have been going their separate ways for over fifteen years now. And me? Growing older, mostly. Now Mama kneads my naked muscles rubbed with oil. All-body-health-practitioner is what they call masseuses in California. Then again, we come from Iowa. She came west seeking freedom from that boy who grew into the men and women who continued to call her nigger lover — because of her brown children. They wouldn't take her back since she'd been under the water and walked around on the other side. And I came to California looking for her. My mama. I'd grown into the shape of that rope. Pulled along by its strangle hold strength. Stretched tautly between the choices: Black/White. Good/Evil. Truth/Lies. Mother/Father. When I was twelve, my Grandma J. told me: "You a well-developed, wavy-haired, black & white mixed colored girl from the other side of town. That ain't ugly or cute; it's just who you is." I'm *still* a well-developed-wavy-haired-black-&-white-mixed-colored-girl. That's just who I am. There is no choice. I finally found the power waiting for me in all of those words. It came to me about the time I realized my limbs would not unfold without a rip or crack, and I took myself back into the

kitchen, slithered beneath the veneer slick table still vivid in my mind, groped my way to the corner leg. There I rocked into my knees, softening my fragile frame into a fetus. The tears that were sand lodged in my throat seeped into my eyes. I heard the stifled snuffles of my mother in the other room and quietly I whimpered: "Mama. Mama. Mama. Mama . . ."

"Mama. I love women."

You know, the way you love a community of women which ain't just gay/lesbian/dyke/bulldagger or some other *one-more-definition-word*. I love a world of women. I especially love the one who looks for my smile coming around the corner, up out of my heart. But this isn't a love poem for my woman. Not the woman whose breast I hold when we sleep, always on the same side of the bed, always tucked in. She fits me. It's a love poem for Mama. Who knew that my loving women is about loving myself enough to fill my tray. The one she handed me with trembling fingers and silence. A platter of women made of hugs to hold me. Made of gold, really. Women. A woman. Whose back bends with my swaying, but does not break. Whose hands are coarse like my hair.

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## White-Trash Cooking

I am one fat, white, working-class bitch  
Upwardly mobile enough to be in a room with you.  
I watch you — white, middle-class, literate women — cringe.  
How uncomfortable my words make you feel.  
Like a vegetarian served raw meat.

And if I were black,  
Or of another culture,  
My words would be oh, so important to you.  
If you could not quite swallow them whole  
You'd take them and throw them in  
A nice, hot pot of liberal stew,  
Delicious, nourishing,  
As if they were meant to satisfy your hunger.

But I am white,  
If not like,  
Not enough unlike you.  
So you want my words to be  
Palatable,  
Cleaned-up,  
A grade above stew.

And I want to say  
My momma did not raise me to cook for you.  
She choked on middle-class.  
And if this is something I have learned not to do  
Well, sister, I still will not choke  
Down my own words,  
To salivate and regurgitate  
Making baby food  
To be digested by you.

If you want to hear me,  
I suggest you sharpen your teeth and learn to chew.

## Ledger: After

I used to keep a ledger  
of everything I ate,  
every bit, bite, piece  
of blood I devoured,  
I kept a ledger  
for my hunger  
was greater than could be spoken  
so it had to be written, recorded,  
studiously noted  
my one meal of the day  
was in shorthand  
all the life I could have been living  
and I was burning nothing but  
calories

## Fragments

**M**y aunt's hair was black and curly and cut short, short. I loved the way it combed back in little layers on the sides. When I kissed her she smelled like Jergen's hand lotion and Pond's cold cream.

Her pocketbooks were huge and leather and she had everything in them. Leather billfolds with cash and pictures. Cigarette case and Zippo lighter. Kleenex and pens and notepads. Gum and glasses case. Keys, change with bits of tobacco clinging to it.

I remember the mowed grass and flower smells in the backyard of my aunt's friend. Her friend was solid built and tall, wore jeans and a soft, soft flannel shirt. Once when I was maybe five, she and my aunt installed speakers outside her brick house so she could listen to the hi-fi in the yard. Her garage had tools hanging all over the walls, neat and tidy. She and my aunt laughed a lot. The woman held me firm by the wrists and swung me around and around until both of us were dizzy. We lay on the ground and looked up at the spinning sky. My aunt stood over us. "Sillies, sillies," she said. With the speakers sounding out Bach, we sat in lounge chairs and I crawled in and out of their laps while they talked softly to each other.

I was grown and visiting her. My aunt was wearing panties and one of my uncle's shirts. The Boston terrier was running around the rooms of the house barking. My aunt sat on the floor next to the bookshelf in the study thumbing through a biography of Carson McCullers. She couldn't find what she wanted to show me. She seemed sober.

When I was ten my parents had a tree-trimming party. My aunt and I took tinsel and threw great clumps of it on the tree. The silver strands hit the evergreen needles and separated, draping themselves elegantly on the limbs.

Several years before she died she was tiny. All her life she'd been heavy, stocky, strong. The family says I'm built like her.

One night I picked her up off the floor and put her back in bed. "You're strong," she said, "and I love you." There was nothing but white wine in the refrigerator.

Before she was married we drove around in her Pontiac with the windows rolled down and the hot summer air hitting our faces. I knew when I grew up I wanted to be just like her.

She and my uncle came to my parents' house to exchange Christmas gifts. I was home from college. Her skirt and shirt didn't fit, didn't look like they belonged to her. Like a child she sat quietly in a chair while the adults talked. She was across from me and I saw when she threw up a little in her mouth and held it there. My mother stood up and took her hand, murmuring something about decorations in the hall. There was a tenderness in my mother's movements. When the two of them came back to the room they were still holding hands. My aunt was laughing.

While she was still living I wondered if she'd ever been with a woman. I imagined visiting her and the woman with the soft, soft flannel shirt and outdoor speakers. They would have a huge vegetable and flower garden and lots of dogs. They would sleep together in a queen-size bed.

As a bed-time snack when I was eight she let me eat Cheez-its and drink buttermilk. My stuffed rabbit was allowed to share. I wore her pajamas safety-pinned at the waist when I spent the night.

By the time of her funeral I had been a lesbian for several years. It was a communion service and I watched all of the congregation one by one go up three steps and past the choir stall to receive their wafer and wine. Women I hadn't seen since childhood filed by one after the other. Women who now I nodded to and thought, lesbian, lesbian, lesbian every time I looked and nodded. They were her friends, I thought, and cried.

You look just like your aunt the family says, even though she was dark and I am a blonde.

## A Moment From the Years Past Present Future

I've never known what to write on forms that ask about number of children. For medical forms, it feels important to answer number of full term pregnancies. Then, of course, they know I've had a child. Then, I have to explain that she was relinquished for adoption, and no, I'm not raising her. At least not on the physical, visible level.

Step inside my home, and it's evident I'm disabled, I'm a Lesbian. Search every corner of my home, and there's still no evidence that I'm the mother of a teenage daughter. No fourteen year old girl's clothes in the closet, no school books strewn about, no bedroom filled with teenage treasures/junk, no pictures of her on the bookcase.

Though not a part of my external world, my daughter is a major part of my private reality. No one sees the constant energy I put into raising her. I spend hours that turn into weeks that become years, wondering — is she ok, is she happy, is she even alive? Are her adoptive parents loving and supportive — I was told they'd do better than I could, that they'd be perfect. Please, please, no abuse, no incest. What does she look like, has she inherited my illness, *Where Is She? Parents, do you know where your children are tonight?* No, not tonight or any other night. No punk clothes or Michael Jackson posters acknowledge her existence, only the holes ground into my guts after fourteen years of worry. Fourteen years' worth of crying late at night, searching the universe for a clue to where she is. The years I barely talked about her, once or twice in eight years (only to trusted lovers), always referring to her as "the baby." Not feeling/knowing I had a right to call her "my daughter," thinking I had no claims to her at all.

As she neared ten, the shock had begun to wear off, I was slowly thawing out, and then! — grief in torrents rather than the years of trickles. I went to birth mother support groups, I confided in friends, I finally told my parents, I started to say, "my

daughter." Those torrents never stopped swelling. This is not as clean as a death. Death is a closure, a pain that heals with time.

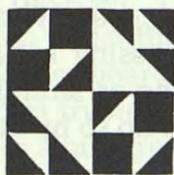
Like other birth mothers, I was told to forget about her, pretend it never happened, go on with my life, it was all over with once she was adopted. The truth is, losing my daughter was not an ending, but a beginning — a beginning of a life time of grief and trauma. A child stolen through adoption is a ripping at the heart that has no end.

My daughter's nearing fourteen now, growing up, hopefully becoming more independent, more self-reliant. I can only guess she's like most teens, spending more time hanging out on the corner with friends than she spends at home. Most likely, she's less visible, less present to her adoptive parents. There's not a moment she's not with me, that I'm not worried and concerned about her. What other parents worry full time, with no hope for relief in the future? She may not always be home, but they know where she is, they know she's ok, they know she's alive. And if they didn't know where she was, if she disappeared suddenly, family and friends would rally around, empathize with their grief, their terror at the not knowing. No one would be so cruel to tell them to forget about her, pretend she never existed, and go merrily on with their lives leaving the past behind. Every social agency available would co-operate in searching for their daughter. I don't have the support so readily offered them. No one can see my daughter. Her presence is invisible; as my daughter, she doesn't exist to others. They can't know I'm a mother distraught over her child's disappearance.

If I was a Lesbian mother, a disabled mother, or a disabled Lesbian mother with custody of my daughter, there'd be those who'd believe I'm unfit to raise a child. I'd have stereotypes about Lesbians and/or disabled womyn to fight in order to keep my child. There are many firmly entrenched myths and stereotypes about birth mother for me to struggle against, yet not matter how successfully I overcome the stereotypes, I wouldn't be any closer to knowing the whereabouts and welfare of my daughter, let alone gaining custody of her. As well, there are no courts available to me as a birth mother, as there are for Lesbian and disabled mothers, in order to wage my battle. There is no court in this

entire nation willing to let me know if my daughter is alive and where she is, not even mentioning the question of custody.

My daughter, to me alone, you are my daughter. Within my own community of Lesbians and disabled women, I struggle continuously to affirm my life-long bond to you as a viable part of my life. These are my people, where I feel safest, yet even here, I remain mostly invisible. I don't always know how to continue this ongoing, exhausting work. My daughter, you are family, my communities are family — how do I reach for both of you?



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## On Lawerying, Passing and Pornography

As a lesbian separatist attorney, I was once asked to speak on the issue of pornography. I was supposed to be the “nut” who spoke against it; rather like a modern day Carrie Nation, the voice of censorship and prudery. Instead, I began to think of the silence of wimmin attorneys on pornography. And that brought to mind the matter of passing, which I think is inextricably related.

My focal point in considering this issue was the words of an anonymous black lesbian separatist, who wrote: “Males have irrevocable power, while wimmin have only revocable privilege.” This statement caused me to consider how wimmin try to keep their privilege by pleasing men. And one customary way of doing so has been to copy them — to pass. When we think of passing, we may think of one race passing for another, or in lesbian community, of wimmin passing as straight or wimmin passing for men. But wimmin lawyers do so by fitting in, acting male and not causing waves.

One womon lawyer I encountered recently showed me vividly how this could be done. Seated behind the counselor’s table, she looked passably male. She is tall, and had on a blue and white skirted searsucker suit, with the little fake tie. And she was doing quite passable work. She was representing a man who, in the words of the law, “allegedly killed a womon.”

In truth, this killing was a butchering. She showed me the pictures of “the victim,” a black womon who had been reduced to raw meat. I could not help but wonder if the slicing and carving of her took place before or after her death. Her face was a lavender and blue mottle of bruises, and her wounds would have screamed, had they had tongues. This unknown womon’s pain shocked my fingertips and brought tears to my eyes as I looked into hers.

But my friend’s attitude was passable. She only laughed shortly, in response to my long silence, and said, “That’s pretty bad, but you get used to it.” Her job was to think solely of her male

client's needs and the urge to be top cock by winning her case.

Passing, as a woman lawyer, involves much of this last attitudinal shift. One must have a demeanor that fits in inoffensively, even when confronted with gravely offensive situations. This woman was not standing in the courtroom, screaming to the heavens about this victim's brutal dismemberment. One might wonder why.

Because to do so would give the woman lawyer a two-fold vulnerability: identifying with the victim and "standing out" as a hysterical woman. As woman lawyers, we are told, subtly and loudly, that we should not align ourselves too closely with wimmin. And we definitely should not do messy, womanly things like wailing in agony at the crimes against our sisters that the male legal system condones each day.

Still, in 1988, a woman has as little chance to get sanctions against her batterer or rapist as a black in Mississippi has to get justice against the Klan. The guys just wink at these little foibles and sweep them under the rug. They do so by running wimmin through an endless board game of legal procedures that nearly inevitably end in frustration. Batterers are not arrested. In my area, two out of a hundred will receive jail time for their crimes. But wimmin lawyers should not be too pushy about this, should conduct themselves as gentlemen, though we are not. Thus we are coerced, each passing day, into becoming more like those whom we should struggle against.

This theme extends over into the proper female civil libertarian response to pornography. Pornography also treats wimmin as pieces of meat — both saleable and butchered. Wimmin are depicted as trussed bundles of flesh. They stare back at me with whip marks on their breasts, or nipples torn off with pliers, their screams smothered by latex gags. Like the *Hustler* image of a woman's legs being stuffed into a grinder that turns out womonburger, these images define unmistakably the status of wimmin.

Wimmin lawyers, though, are taught in endlessly rarefied, abstract discussions, that to protest this cruelty is the doom of the constitution and all democratic freedom. As a survivor of pornographic depiction, I say no to this theory. Nowhere does the first amendment prohibit or discourage protest against oppression,

economic boycotts, lawsuits against the harm done to subjects by their pornographic panderers or expressions of disgust and revulsion.

But again, wimmin lawyers are warned to be reasonable and inoffensive. We must fit in. Besides, to speak loudly about wimmin's defilement might cause someone to notice that we have the same breasts and bellies, the same gagable mouths. The same vulnerability to harm that elicits screams. Better to discuss pornography as a detached, abstract "first amendment issue" in endless debates that remind one of medieval arguments on how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Maybe then the womon lawyer can remain safe, even "succeed" in her chosen profession.

To return to my separatist sister's point, though, the problem with this approach to "success" is the revocability of privilege. A womon is never really far enough from meat status to be safe. Only denial causes her to believe such a lie. Her walk, her body and bones are still those of the object. If she doesn't have her business suit on, how will a rapist know she is an influential lawyer? Or will he care?

The ladder of success can never take us far enough away from atrocity. Isn't it better, then, to see the pain in a butchered womon's eyes, in the way that my friend refused, to know that it could be ours? Then we can make our allegiance to wimmin clear — and practice law to make a difference, not a sameness with the master.

It is inevitable, when we pick up his sword of reason and vengeance, that we will have to process compromises. But only when we know the pain of our people can we struggle against co-optation, align ourselves with others who are outraged and fight for our own. Therein lies our real power as wimmin lawyers, not in passing.

---

This piece is dedicated to Garnett Harrison, a Mississippi lawyer "alleged to be a lesbian" who has risked criminal charges, grand jury investigation, surveillance and enormous personal and financial losses in order to expose sexual assaults on her client's infant children; and to earnestly represent these mothers in their efforts to resist further rapes of their babies. It is also dedicated to those in the southern underground who allegedly hid these children to protect them from harm.

## My Jewish Face

It was the exact blend of rage and fun that got me hooked on politics in the first place: deciding something had to be done and forming a group and doing it — immediately. Like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin — Jews and Yippies — used to say, *Do it!*, and if Jerry Rubin ended up on Wall Street (a source of some humiliation to those of us who measure Jewish safety by constantly counting which side which Jews are on), Abbie Hoffman, as it turned out, had been plugging along underground all those years with his new name and plastic surgery new Jewish face: still doing it.

We did it too — in this case, interrupted a performance we found insulting and made the audience to some extent ours; a modest but nonetheless thrilling feat. What I remember most vividly, though, is not what we did or even how I felt. It's Rae I remember and it's her face I can see right this minute up on stage in front of the cafe as the theater company was singing their stupid finale. Because she was part of the company, one of "them," and when it came to her part, she betrayed them and announced herself.

The story doesn't start that night in the cafe. For me, for the rest of the group it starts in the afternoon around the lunch table. For Fran and Bonnie it started the night before, when they had gone to the cafe to see political theater. But for Rae it started when she was an infant: orphaned, adopted, raised in a churchgoing family. At 17 she discovered that her grandmother was alive and a Jew, a survivor from Hungary. Rae had hitchhiked across the country to spend what turned out to be the last six months of the old woman's life with her. Then she hitchhiked back, came out as a lesbian, and hovered uneasily around her Jewishness like it was a gorgeous book in a foreign language. She didn't know it but she craved it. She was 19, tall and large-boned with high Slavic cheeks, grey eyes, dark nearly straight hair. She joined the theater company.

It was her second show with them, early rehearsal. In one skit was a joke about the Holocaust, scraping the bottom of the bad taste barrel, and you're probably wondering about the joke; maybe afraid you'd find it funny. I wouldn't repeat it even if I remembered it, but it wasn't funny. In the same skit was a crack about animals looking Jewish. Each unfunny joke reinforced the other and Rae felt queasy. She said so.

The director of the theater company, a nubile man-loving sort of woman named Janet, ridiculed her. No one in the company stood up for Rae, predictably not even the one other Jew, who instead spoke the line that should be engraved next to (the by now somewhat hackneyed) *when they came for the x's I said nothing because I wasn't an x until finally they came for me*. The line I'm talking about is, *I'm Jewish and I don't think it's anti-Semitic*. So much for solidarity. Rae was 19 and had been a conscious Jew for two years. She'd had no Jewish education, no exposure to Jewish culture or tradition, until the six months with her grandmother. In this she was not so different from a lot of American Jews, except for the six months part. She backed down and shut up.

And stayed shut up until that night on the stage.

But first comes afternoon, and at the lunch table Fran was upset. *It was disgusting*, she gestured with her coffee cup, luckily almost empty. *There was a joke about the Holocaust and there was a woman wiggling around barking and meowing. The last line of the scene is, "She looks Jewish, doesn't she?" About the dog-cat character, whichever it was*. Fran waved her cup again, this time in dismissal.

Bonnie had taken off her glasses and was rubbing between her eyebrows. *The whole time I was saying to myself, "Is this happening, am I being crazy?"*

*Where was this? Shelly was asking, a play, what kind of play? And Zelda, Who are these people?*

We were sitting in the cafeteria of a large Midwestern college campus. Thousands of women had gathered for a feminist conference, a small group of us had coalesced just two days before in the Jewish caucus. Women had come from the South, from the West Coast, from the East, some it's true because they were teachers and their schools were paying, but some because they were dying for contact with other Jewish feminists and lesbians.

We came to feed our Jewish selves: those already wrapped in scraps of knowledge, history, culture, religion, who came to piece together something more whole, and the rest of us, like me, who had only our Jewish names, faces, scattered memories, and hunger for more. We were delighted with each other, gathering every day for lunch — we figured people would say we were clannish no matter what so we might as well enjoy ourselves. One day Zelda and Penny did Midrash about Ruth and Naomi, for Shavuot, and I had never even known their story was connected to Shavuot, nor that Ruth was a convert to Judaism and the mother of King David. As a lesbian with a gentile lover, I was moved by Ruth's devotion, a woman to another woman, and by the idea that someone could join a people through love. Zelda, on the other hand, hated the story, found the women weak and shadowy, cherished only for the sons they bore; she had been married for 20 years and kept an orthodox home, this Zelda, and she preferred the story of Judith, who chopped off Holofernes' head. *Never pigeonhole anyone*, I reminded myself not for the last time.

Another day we learned songs, Yiddish from Shelly, Hebrew from Fran, and we sang more and more vigorously until we were grabbing each other's hands for a jumping kicking line dance around the cafeteria, several minutes worth before the polite but appalled manager asked us to stop. Still another day we talked about the Middle East, the Israeli peace movement, icy tension clamping down on everyone's temples and shoulders as our feared differences emerged. And there were differences. But still we were talking.

Today it had turned into a meeting. The night before Fran and Bonnie had gone into town to the local hip cafe where a political theater group was performing the series of skits. After two days of delicious Jewish pride, one skit's throwaway insensitivity and contempt had so stunned them that they had sat there quietly incredulous. They hadn't even thought of telling anyone. But over lunch, when Zelda asked Bonnie in all innocence what she'd done last night, Bonnie started talking, and then everyone was tossing questions on the table.

*This is supposed to be radical theater, like the Mime Troupe or something?*

*Did anyone else seem upset?*

*What do you think they were doing?*

*What did they think they were doing?*

*Did you talk to the actors?*

*We went this morning, Fran said, to talk to someone, a couple of them were there —*

*Yeah, they spared us 3.67 minutes — Bonnie interjected.*

*We spoke with the woman who directed it, Janet — she wrote the script, she played the cat/dog creature —*

*Bonnie: — watching her fawn and wriggle was bad enough, she's just a bundle of talent —*

*What is this, Animal Farm?, Sonia stuck in.*

*Fran went on: Janet didn't know Nazi propaganda described Jews as dogs. She thanked us for telling her, but of course she didn't mean anything by it. The joke about the Holocaust wasn't supposed to make fun of the Holocaust. That isn't what she meant. Bonnie made a tight prissy face and we all laughed.*

*What she meant was — sort of va-ague — Bonnie's voice went up and down — but something like we were all Nazis —*

*I can't stand that liberal bullshit — Shelly shook her head in disgust — "If I'm Not OK, You're Not OK Either?"*

*No, Sonia interrupted, it's an old game people play — "We're All Nazis," you never heard of it?*

*Also known as — I broke into song, the tune "Clementine" — "If Everyone's Guilty, No One's Responsible," linking my arm through Sonia's, but Fran began again —*

*She kept insisting she hadn't meant anything —*

*— so we shouldn't feel anything, Bonnie snorted. Then she had to go. She certainly wasn't about to change anything just because we were upset. She kept talking about artistic freedom — and we understood, she was SO busy —*

*She thought we were crazy. Fran looked depressed and I wondered if she'd been called crazy a lot.*

*Oversensitive, Bonnie corrected, making her funny little prissy face again, and we all laughed on cue.*

*The cafeteria was nearly empty, the time allotted for lunch was over and I could feel a restless energy perched in the middle*

of the table. I have been an organizer on and off for more than half my adult life — civil rights, women's liberation; since I got hooked, like I said. I recognized that energy. It was people wanting to fight back but uncertain what to do. I know when people want to fight and do nothing, what gets reinforced is feeling helpless, like you can't fight city hall, can't stick up for your friends or your people or your self, can't do anything. Everyone's sense of possibility shrinks up a little. To me, that restless energy is the sheerest temptation, whereas blocking that energy — out of fear, laziness or just plain lack of imagination — is my idea of sin.

*What do you want to do?* I asked. The word *do* hung in the air, an odd moment of quiet.

Carla broke it. *We could go to the play and start a discussion when it's over.*

*Tame, distinctly tame.* Zelda wrinkled her nose.

*We could just interrupt the performance — we could give out leaflets.* Shelly was getting excited.

*We can't get a leaflet together by tonight,* I responded automatically and immediately felt ashamed: Why was I offhandedly dismissing the idea? Who knew what we could do?

*Let's picket —* Zelda was piling her tray high with everyone's dishes — *I have to go do my workshop now. Someone let me know what's happening, I'm up for whatever, ok?*

*Me too. I have to drop off Lila.* Lila was Sonia's year-old baby, on a breastfeeding break from childcare. *What about guerilla theater, right at the entrance, we could do our own play.* I resisted the impulse to say we couldn't get a play together so quickly.

*Can you get childcare for tonight?* Penny was asking.

*Yeah, we'll all chip in,* Zelda tossed off over her shoulder.

But Bonnie and Fran were beginning to feel contortions of self-doubt.

*What if we just took it wrong?*

*I can't remember exactly what gets said, what if we're being —*  
*— paranoid?* I asked, and we all laughed, rather bitterly.

*When are we sure,* Shelly asked acidly, *when they're marching us to the showers? Or do we say, "Well, maybe we need to wash."*

But they were adamant. The responsibility was too heavy. They wanted the rest of us to see the play so we could act on our

knowledge, not their feelings. We would attend the performance, paying for tickets — which annoyed the shit out of Shelly and me but that's what people wanted to do — and, when (or if?) offensive things got said, we would simply say what we thought, force them to deal with our reactions.

So there we were, \$6 a head. I have to say the show was unbelievably unfocused and just plain vapid. There was a skit about unemployment, a couple about TV and advertising — really bold subjects; one about American racism — unintentionally but distinctly racist; one about the Statue of Liberty, in which poor Rae was the Statue, except we didn't know Rae yet, she was just a large young woman, one of the actors: them. Half the jokes revolved around parts of her body. The overall message thrummed home with the subtlety of a buffalo herd was, *it's your own fault if you don't do anything* (definitely a variation on the *we're all Nazis* theme).

So we sat in the audience waiting to be or not to be offended enough to do something: It. There was Janet scooting around barking and meowing and wiggling her small prized ass. There was the not funny joke about the Holocaust, and I said to myself in an affectionate but bossy tone, *ok, honey, you encouraged everyone else, you go first* and I was on my feet asking in a very loud voice: *You think that's funny?*

Shelly said later when she saw me start to get up and heard the words come out of my mouth her heart began to pound so fast she thought she'd have a heart attack. *It's really happening*, she thought, *now we have to go through with it.*

One after the other, we did. Shelly spoke next, with a slow measured anger that was itself an irresistible force — *I have to say this very clearly, and I want everyone to understand it. The Holocaust is not funny. There is nothing funny about it.* Dead silence while people combed the Holocaust for something funny. You could see them not coming up with anything.

*Do you know who's in your audience?* Sonia was asking, *Maybe people who lost their families, or people who were tortured. You're supposed to be against torture.*

*We are against torture, oh, of course,* Janet the cat/dog nodded emphatically.

*But your jokes add to people's pain, people who've suffered what no*

one should ever suffer. Why? Why would you want to make jokes about this? Penny was asking with an inexplicable touching innocence. People were — killed, tortured. By Nazis, or even now it's happening in Salvador, right now — you make it trivial, what they go through. Laughable. I know that's not what you want, she concluded sweetly.

I'm not sure they don't want that, Shelly quipped under her breath, but I was crying. I was sure the audience felt it too, a gap outlined in neon between the cheap shallow politics of the skits and the depth of these women.

Zelda was talking now. Why are you saying a dog looks Jewish? Do you know Nazi propaganda said Jews were dogs? Do you know people, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, communists were treated like animals, worse than animals? and Bonnie, You're supposed to be against oppression. We're saying this skit is oppressive.

Janet, deprived of some dignity by her tail and whiskers, kept saying, You don't understand what we're trying to do, let us finish — and one of the men who'd played too convincingly a creep pawing the Statue of Liberty whined, We're on your side. Several of the actors looked stricken, as if they couldn't quite believe our ingratitude.

It doesn't matter what you're trying to do — I put a hard edge on the word "trying" — what matters is what you're doing. We're telling you it's not working.

The whole point of political theater is that people shouldn't be passive, Carla was waving her arms, why do you expect us to sit quiet and listen? You could feel at least half the audience mentally nodding, Really!

So the actors insisted on their intentions, we counter-insisted that intentions — in art as in life — were the least of it, and finally we agreed to let them finish the show in return for an open discussion with the audience as soon as the play ended. Which did not stop us — by now, imagine the adrenalin — from commenting loudly on anything that bugged us as the play proceeded.

Who remembers the rest of the skits? I was just waiting for the show to end so we could have the discussion. At last came the finale. The cast gathered on stage at the front of the cafe to sing, each actor in turn, a verse about her or his character from the last skit. Each verse ended with the line, *see how you like my face*, sung

3 times, more or less musically. It was the turn of the large young woman who'd played the Statue of Liberty, she sang her verse like everyone else, concluding with *see how you like my face, see how you like my face* — she tossed her head slightly, the words came through clenched teeth — *see how you like my Jewish-looking face*.

She was crying, that was why she had clenched her teeth. You could see a wave blip through the other actors like they hadn't expected it, and sure enough Bonnie was whispering into my right ear, *That didn't happen last night*. The next actor took his turn on the song, the whole cast onstage together, and the large young woman walked right off the stage behind the screen they all entered and exited from. After a few minutes she came back out and sat down with us in the audience, next to Zelda who immediately took her hand and held on tight.

The play was over. There was weak scattered clapping. Then everyone started to talk. The cast charged us with censorship and with being deficient in our sense(s) of humor. We made all our points again, several times, and some new ones too, including Carla asking the company's one Black member how could she stand the show's racism (as if assuming that none of the other actors ought to mind a little racism here and there).

I watched the audience, mostly students from the college town, quiet young women, blabbing young men; a few women from the conference. The men were citing Marx and Brecht but in sterile phrases betraying their thin experience and a fatal snobbery — college radicals whose underlying theme seemed to be not "We're All Nazis" but "Ordinary Working People Are Stupid." Their language, their faces conjured up late-60s Berkeley in such thick nauseating waves that I could only wish for my dead father's ghost to bellow disgusted judgment: *theory-schmeory*, he'd say, in a construction I only two years ago learned was Yiddish-derived. The same time Rae learned about her grandmother.

Maybe some people were thinking about the issues. The discussion was lively enough, going on and on until the cafe janitor showed up to clean and lock, and people moved out to the sidewalk, still talking, arguing, waving their hands around.

The next day over lunch we rehashed the details. We won-

dered about the young woman whose name we had learned was Rae. Shelly and Zelda were ecstatic, making lists of possible targets, and Sonia too wanted to do *it* again and again. Carla kept insisting she had done nothing wrong by making the one Black responsible for the whole company's racism — that's not how she put it, naturally — and we argued.

Fran brought up what everyone had noticed, that she had not said a single word during the performance; she also confessed that when we interrupted the play, she was mortified and hoped people wouldn't know she was with us. She said this with an edge of self-mockery, but the other edge was real discomfort — *we had gone too far* — and I remembered what sometimes happens: People pushed beyond themselves snap shut, a reflex of fear, resentment and guilt. After that they stop meeting your eyes and avoid you altogether.

Carla's defensiveness and Fran's alienation struck two sour notes, as if to remind us change comes hard. But everyone else was hooked on *doing it*: not a bad habit, as habits go.

Word got around the conference. All day women were asking questions and, better yet, spreading fascinating rumors of women barring the exits from the theater (the size of the cafe and numbers of people grew sharply in these accounts), or forcing the entire audience into instant consciousness-raising groups on Jewish issues. Someone had heard it was all about Zionism and the PLO. A young graduate student who'd been there told each of us at least twice she had never seen anything like it, members of an audience taking power from the stage. She was pink with inspiration.

That night was the final event of the conference, a dance, and sometime towards midnight — I was punchy with fatigue — I saw Rae heading our way across the huge ballroom. She'd come to see us, and we gathered around her in a corner of the ballroom, and then around a table in the coffee shop, while she talked. For hours. That's when we found out about her childhood, her grandmother, her shame about knowing nothing Jewish.

*You think you're the only one?* Shelly asked.

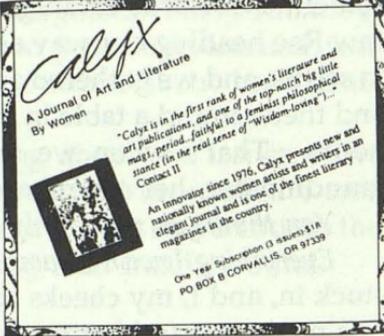
*Everything Jewish I know I learned in the last few years,* Bonnie stuck in, and I, my cheeks surprisingly hot, nodded. I could tell this made Rae feel better.

Finally someone thought to ask what had happened with the theater company. Janet the director had been in a rage, especially at Rae, but also at two women who tried to defend her. After nearly twelve hours convulsed with fights, Rae had screamed *YOU may be a Nazi, I'm a JEW and I QUIT*. (At this point we all cheered.) Then she had gotten a ride over to the dance and here she was. She wasn't sure what she'd do next, for work or anything, but she was glad, she kept telling us that, we shouldn't worry we had made it hard for her, she was glad.

By now we were all crying and hugging her and each other. Then her ride showed up and we had to say goodbye, and we dug through our bags for books, polaroid snapshots, our addresses, Jewish strength we wanted to wrap her with, though the truth is she had all she needed and more. *Don't worry, she said again, I'll be fine.*

I was worrying, that's the down side of doing it, you make trouble and people get swept up into it and then you leave and they're stuck with trouble. Rae was out of a job, she had no Jewish family or community.

But I looked at her face. She had herself. She had been brave, and courage is a *mitzvah*, for her and for us, then and now as I remember Rae standing on stage, 19 years old, those large bones, grey eyes, straight hair. I doubt she often got spotted as a Jew, and it seems she chose her Jewishness. When she was 17 and found her grandmother. When she was 19, on the cafe stage. Maybe she's still choosing, in different ways, her proud angry Jewish face. Maybe I am too and that's why I remember.



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First published in *Response* magazine, 1988.

## Family Ritual

My grandmother's red hair,  
braided down her back,  
clasped with tortoise oval,  
brushed in silence —  
while my grandfather  
swayed from side to side,  
prayed to God Adonai

For Passover  
she cooked all week  
and served on plates with gold rims  
Seder night we sat upright  
around a mahogany table  
Its carved legs like paws  
ready to stalk game

I waited  
to pour wine  
for the ancient plagues,  
for my sins,

I listened to Hebrew syllables  
and thought One, Two, Three O'Leary  
A my name is Alice  
and I come from Alabama

## This Great Drama

*"People live in direct relation to the sheroes and heroes they keep alive."*

— Maya Angelou

In the mid-nineteenth century this country was a panorama of criss-crossing migrations. In the northern cities, refugees from Europe funneled into kaleidoscopic streets and tenements. Forced relocation was driving entire nations — the Cherokee, the Seminole, the Choctaw, the Creek — westward to the undeveloped territory in the center of the continent. Like prairie wind shivering across amber fields, pioneer traffic rippled steadily towards the Far West and on to the motherlodes of California. Eastward from Asia came a procession of railroad workers to build the Pacific artery of the vast rail system metastasizing across the plains. From the cottonfields and canefields of the South streamed an underground current of slaves escaping to freedom in New England and Canada. And from the cities and towns of the North poured the blue battalions of the Union Army to clash and retreat in a slow, bloody dance with their southern counterparts.

In the midst of this enormous choreography were two women, spotlighted in their day, all but forgotten now, two who briefly starred in bold charades, who staked their lives for a vision and helped forge the chain of events that brought us all here today. Though they never met, these two, their lives are symmetrical, like matched bookends: the black woman who might have been white, the white woman who might have been a man. Who fled servitude to seek a saner existence up north. Who marched southward, craving danger.

\* \* \*

*[Bound for Charleston, S.C., December 1848] It was a mild, beautiful morning, and most of the passengers were on deck, enjoying the freshness of the air and stimulating their appetites for breakfast. Mr. Johnson soon made his appearance. He was a slightly built, apparently handsome young man, with black hair and eyes, and of a darkness of complexion that betokened Spanish extraction. Any notice from others*

*seemed painful to him so to satisfy my curiosity, I questioned his servant, who was standing near.*<sup>1</sup>

Introducing Mr. William Johnson, alias Ellen Craft, fugitive slave.

\* \* \*

Ellen Craft was born in Georgia in 1826. Her owner was also her father, and her disturbing resemblance to her half-siblings in the big house infuriated the mistress, who treated Ellen spitefully until, finally, she "gave" the girl to her daughter, Eliza, as a wedding present. This transfer of ownership traumatically separated the eleven-year-old Ellen and her mother, Maria.

Maria must have been light-skinned— probably, like Ellen, the child of slave-rape, because Ellen herself was light enough to pass as white. And so a decade later, when Ellen and her husband, William, harbored a dream of escaping, it occurred to them that perhaps Ellen could pose as a white slaveowner, William as her faithful slave. Of course, for a lady to travel alone — even accompanied by a slave — was unthinkable. So Ellen would attempt to pass as both white and male.

The couple began elaborate, sly preparations for their flight. Since public accommodations were segregated, Ellen would be travelling on her own for much of the 1,000-mile journey; the hoax would have to be faultless. They knew she would be expected to sign hotel registers en route, and she couldn't read or write, but she could put one arm in a sling to account for her inability to sign in. In an era when beards and sideburns were fashionable, her smooth face might attract notice, so she would tie another bandage around her head, as if she had a toothache. High-heeled boots and a tall hat would bring her up to a man's height. Pretending to limp would be easier than trying to imitate a man's stride, she decided. And she would wear green-tinted spectacles, to conceal from her fellow passengers any traces of alarm in her eyes. If luck were with them, she would appear to be an eccentric, sickly aristocrat. She dubbed this outrageous conjuration "William Johnson."

And if their plan failed? They must have been well aware that Ellen's fair skin would fetch her master a pretty price in the brothels of Natchez or New Orleans. At the very least, they risked never seeing each other again. But both had already lost blood-

kin to slavery; too recently, their baby had been sold away from them. They agreed: they had more to gain than could be lost now.

During the five-day journey from Macon to Philadelphia, Ellen's fortitude was repeatedly put to the test. As it happened, her first seatmate was a good friend of her master's, who had known her since childhood. She turned her head toward the window, feigning deafness, and somehow got by unrecognized. Worse, on the last day of their trip, the Crafts were told it was illegal to transport slaves across the border states without ownership documents. In desperation, they persuaded officials that the invalid's health depended upon his slave's assistance and at the last minute they were let through. In between, there were numerous nervewracking, tragicomic episodes; in an account published twelve years later in England, William described one interaction between "Mr. Johnson," an elderly man, and the gentleman's two daughters:

*The gentleman thought my master would feel better if he would lie down and rest himself; and as he was anxious to avoid conversation, he at once acted upon this suggestions. The ladies politely rose, took their extra shawls, and made a nice pillow for the invalid's head ... After he had been lying a little while the ladies, I suppose, thought he was asleep; so one of them gave a long sigh, and said, in a quiet, fascinating [sic] tone, "Papa, he seems to be a very nice young gentleman." But before papa could speak, the other lady quickly said, "Oh! Dear me, I never felt so much for a gentleman in my life!" To use an American expression, "they fell in love with the wrong chap."*<sup>2</sup>

From his fellow passengers in the Jim Crow car, William had obtained the address of a colored boardinghouse in Philadelphia. Disembarking, they hailed a cab and made a bee-line there.

The "City of Brotherly Love" was a hotbed of anti-slavery sentiment, and as news spread of this latest brazen escape, Ellen and William became overnight celebrities in the abolitionist community. Persuaded by their new allies, they began to tell their story to enthusiastic audiences across New England.<sup>3</sup>

But their flight had not yet ended. Two years later, the Fugitive Slave Law, upholding a slaveowner's legal right to his runaway "property," was passed. The Crafts, well known among their enemies as well as in abolitionist circles, stood out as a prime target for the teams of slavecatchers who began to comb

the free states. President Polk himself announced that he would employ military force for their capture.

England offered the safest refuge; there, the Crafts would be legally free, since that country had outlawed slavery in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> With borrowed resources and letters of introduction, the Crafts headed north, traveling at night, and caught a transatlantic steamer from Canada. Ellen was the first free Afroamerican woman England had seen since Phyllis Wheatley's visit in 1770; again the Crafts made a sensation, and they seem to have made friends — lifelong friends — wherever they stayed.

\* \* \*

[Yorktown, winter 1862] *It was a cold night, moonless and threatening rain. Among the colored infantry sent to distribute coffee and corncakes to the Rebel picket posts was one who carried a canteen of whiskey along with the night's rations. Preferring to drink with the Negro sentries for awhile, he let his comrades return to camp without him. Presently an officer came riding along the lines and spotted the newcomer. One of the pickets explained that the stranger had helped to carry out their supper and was waiting until the Yankees stopped firing before starting back. "You come along with me," said the Rebel officer. He led the colored soldier to the petty officer on duty, some fifty yards away. "Put this man on the post where that fellow was shot until I return." The new man was given a rifle, told to use it freely in case he caught sight of any Feds, and then seized by the collar and warned: "Now, you black rascal, if you sleep on your post, I'll shoot you like a dog!" The Negro saluted; then, as hoofbeats faded from earshot, he deliberately and noiselessly stepped into the darkness, headed toward the Yankee encampment.*

Introducing Frank Thompson, alias Sarah Edmonds, white spy for the Union Army.

\* \* \*

Sarah Emma Edmonds was born in New Brunswick, Canada, in 1841. When the Civil War broke out, she had already been passing as a man for two years. Her disguise may have been inspired by her exposure to the novel *Fanny Campbell, the Female Sailor*; a deeper motivation was her hatred of her father's tyranny. He had wanted only sons, and Sarah was the fourth daughter; he never let Sarah forget that she was unwanted, and while she was

still a teenager he arranged for her marriage to an older neighbor, a man she detested. Before the forced wedding could take place, Sarah climbed out of her bedroom window and fled.

In her new identity as Frank Thompson, she was hired as a book agent for a Connecticut publisher, and by 1860 was selling bibles in Flint, Michigan, where she was later remembered as a "good looking, likeable, successful young man, who made money, dressed well, drove his own horse and buggy, and had many lady friends."<sup>5</sup> The same gifts that later ensured her success as a spy also enhanced her ability to sell; one of her male friends recalled "Frank" as "glib of tongue, thoroughly businesslike, with an open, honest, persuasive manner that was particularly attractive."<sup>6</sup>

Early in the spring of 1861, as "Frank" sat waiting in a train station, she heard a voice in the street crying out the news: Fort Sumpter had fallen, and Lincoln had issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers. She later wrote:

*War, civil war, with all its horrors seemed inevitable. It was not my intention, or desire, to seek my own personal ease and comfort while so much sorrow and distress filled the land. But the great question to be decided was, what am I to do? What part am I to act in this great drama?*<sup>7</sup>

Eager to demonstrate her love for her adopted country, "Frank" signed up for basic training with the 2nd Michigan infantry; though they kidded her about her tiny boots, the men never suspected her disguise. On May 25, she was sworn in as a "male nurse" and was sent to Washington. As a medic she braved enemy fire to rescue bodies from the field and risked exposure to various infectious diseases — typhoid, diphtheria, pneumonia, smallpox — as well as the chance of contracting TB, malaria, gangrene, dysentery or lockjaw. There was no such thing as immunization then, and working conditions were far from sanitary.

Early in 1862, "Frank" applied for espionage work and was accepted into the secret service. Before the Battle of Fair Oaks she penetrated Rebel lines masquerading as an Irish peddler; later, before the second battle of Bull Run, she stole some classified documents from a Confederate officer.

Her disguise as a mulatto soldier was accomplished by darkening her face with pigment. Because southerners were used to ignoring slaves, talking of important matters in front of them as if they couldn't hear or understand, this ambitious disguise gave

"Frank" — and the Union — access to important bits and pieces of information about Rebel strategy.<sup>8</sup> "The colored soldier" returned with a detailed inventory of Confederate weaponry and a sketch of Rebel fortifications tucked inside her shoe; she also brought the name of a Confederate spy who'd been hanging around the Yankee camp disguised as a peddler; she'd spotted him in the Rebel camp without being recognized herself.

During her enlistment, "Frank" was wounded several times. Once, caught in an ambush, her horse was killed and she was thrown. She pretended to be dead as an enemy soldier went through her pockets, and lived to tell the tale. Another time, while serving as a mail carrier, she was thrown from her mule and, though bleeding internally, refused medical attention, "for the very first thing would have been an examination of my lungs — which to me simply meant dismissal from the service."<sup>9</sup> (This injury continued to plague her on and off for the rest of her life.) Finally, late in 1862, she contracted malarial fever in the Chickahominy swamps. Rather than go to the Infirmary, she went AWOL — deserted.

Once she shook off the malaria, Sarah began writing her memoirs. *Nurse and Spy or: Unsexed, the Female Soldier* was an immediate bestseller.<sup>10</sup> During this time, Sarah changed her identity; though she had risked death to avoid exposure of her womanhood a few months ago, she now rejoined the army as Sarah Edmonds. This about-face testifies to her patriotic fervor — deserters were customarily shot; there was no way she could have returned to military service as Frank Thompson. She worked as a nurse until the end of the war and donated all proceeds from the sales of her book to soldiers' aid societies.

After the war, Sarah married; she bore three children, all of whom died in childhood, and later adopted two boys. In 1880, still afflicted with recurring spells of malaria, she decided to apply for a government pension. Her old buddies, astonished to learn who "Frank Thompson" really was, nevertheless showed no hesitation in helping document her claim, and the 48th Congress passed an act granting her a pension and honorable discharge.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile in England, Ellen had acquired an education and was having babies — freeborn babies, four boys and a girl by 1867. In

that year she also succeeded in contacting her mother, who was reunited with her in England. Still active in the abolition movement, Ellen now formed a "ladies' auxiliary" to raise funds for charitable causes; when the colored orphanage in New York City was burned in draft riots, a package of handsewn clothing from Ellen Craft was among the contributions received.

In 1869, soon after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment (supposedly guaranteeing voting rights for black men), Ellen and her family returned to Georgia. Sherman's scars and the mood of the people must have presented a depressing, frightening contrast to the cordial years among the British upper class. Within a year the combination school and plantation they had founded was burned to the ground by nightriders; later, white enemies stirred up rumors that involved William in a long, draining libel suit. Still, within their community, the Craft family remained well known and respected.<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

Sometime around 1891, already overlooked by history, Ellen Craft died. She was buried near Savannah, at Woodville, the family estate, under a favorite pine tree.

Sarah died seven years later, after a last, long bout with malaria. She was given a military funeral and buried in the Washington Cemetery in Houston, Texas.

\* \* \*

You won't find Ellen Craft or Sarah Edmonds in schoolbooks (nor any mention of the fact that more than a few women in those days slipped into trousers in order to enlist in the Civil War or to elude slavecatchers).<sup>13</sup> As far as "American History" is concerned, the notorious runaway whose determination, fluency and dignity won sympathetic crowds to freedom's cause or the one-time soldier whose secret missions altered Union strategy, might never have lived and died. Deviants. Nobodies.

Nevertheless, their influence on their contemporaries is indisputable. Imagine the number of slaves inspired by Ellen's story to make a run for it, the numbers of "unsexed" women inspired by "the female soldier" to rid themselves of their corsets and behave like freeborn human beings.

There is a funny kind of reciprocity between past and future. We're aware of our responsibility for the kind of world our children inherit, but forget to look backward and remember what our ancestors have deeded us. Our survival depends on our ability to let their lives change ours, to retell the fragile, recurring dream that haunts us all, to water our spiritual family tree. To find our own way of saying "thank you" — lest it be said that our heroes risked their lives in vain.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers: Three Lives*. Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1979, p. 15. Written for children, this is nevertheless the most thoughtful and comprehensive account of Ellen's life that I've found.
2. "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery," in Arna Bontemps, ed., *Great Slave Narratives*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 303. The Crafts' autobiography.
3. At this time women who spoke in public were stigmatized — considered maladjusted and dangerous. Abolitionist women, in fact, were beginning to understand how helpless they would be within the movement until they first liberated themselves. However, Ellen's audiences were so moved by her presence that they consistently begged to hear from her until, finally, a brief address by Ellen was included in the program.
4. "The British antislavery movement, which had won liberty for the slaves of the West Indies and was now supporting the American freedom struggle, was made up of 'the best people': titled ladies and gentlemen, members of Parliament, ministers, doctors, literary folk. Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, was president of the Anti-Slavery Society, giving it the seal of respectability that the American movement lacked. Instead of putting up at New England farmhouses, [the Crafts] stayed in big city hotels or fine country homes. Their meetings were held in large halls where thousands came to see them." (Sterling, p. 38)
5. Sylvia G. L. Dannett, *Noble Women of the North*. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959, p. 49. A well-researched collection of first-person accounts by women — mostly white nurses — who served on the battlefields of the Civil War.
6. "Sarah Edmonds . . . Just One of the Boys," in *The Wooden Nutmeg*, March 2, 1981, pp. 4-5, 25. A useful article, in spite of its author's obvious

homophobia.

7. Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy or: Unsexed, the Female Soldier*. Hartford, 1864; later reprinted in Philadelphia. Sarah's autobiographical account of her wartime adventures.

8. Harriet Tubman, "the Black Moses," who spied for the Union as well as leading thousands of her people to freedom, also took advantage of this self-destructive habit on the part of the Confederacy.

9. "Sarah Edmonds . . .," p. 5.

10. The term, "unsexed," as it was understood at the time, referred to any woman who overstepped the boundaries of "a woman's place."

11. In 1883 a black newspaper commented: "No colored family in the state stands higher in the estimation of the people of Georgia than the Craft family. They are well fixed in the world's goods and both of the boys are holding first class positions under the Federal Administration." (Sterling, p. 59)

12. Thus "Frank Thompson" received the recognition denied her sisters who served the Union as women and later petitioned for compensation for war-related injuries. "In 1892, many of the women who had faithfully served their country were old and destitute. Many had been in poor health since the war ... A great number of the women died without reward or recognition and in extreme poverty, despite the fact that the Civil War soldiers were more indebted to these women than to any other class of people." (Dannett, p. 389)

13. No less than 400 women are known to have enlisted, or tried to enlist, in the army during the Civil War. ("Sarah Edmonds...", p. 25.) Though the underground railroad was understandably more concerned with the immediate safety of its passengers than with record-keeping, several cases of cross-dressing slave women are documented in William Still's book, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1968).



PORTRAIT—ELLEN CRAFT

# The Second Coming of Joan of Arc

## *A One-Woman Show*

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was inspired by Vita Sackville-West's incisive biography, *Saint Joan of Arc*. As a lesbian researcher, Sackville-West was able to recover facts about Joan's life that make her experiences relevant to women today, faced as we are with the same conspiracies of betrayal by army, church and state.

### PROLOGUE

Okay, here it is. Here's Compiegne over here. It's ours. And there's Margny, over there. It belongs to the Duke of Burgundy's men. Those are the French who are fighting for the English king... you know, the "enemy." And here's the river in the middle. And over the river is a bridge, right from Compiegne to Margny. And the bridge is not guarded. All we have to do is cross over, surprise them, and Margny's ours. Nothing to it, right?

So that's what we do, almost. We cross, we attack, they retreat. And then suddenly off over here we see more of the Duke of Burgundy's men coming from the next town across the way. Well, I mean that's not good news, but it's not the end of the world either. I say to myself, "Well, this is going to take a little longer than I thought." But my soldiers, they see these reinforcements, and what do they do? They lose it. Completely. They take off running back across the bridge to Compiegne, and I'm yelling at them and trying to get them to stand and fight, but there's no way to stop them. Every try to stop a scared man? So I do the next best thing. I stay behind and cover their retreat.

So here I am, on my horse, fighting backwards to get across that bridge, with all my soldiers streaming past me. And suddenly, I hear this terrible noise. The worst noise in the world. You know what that is? That's the sound the drawbridge at Compiegne makes when it's being raised. By my own men.

So here I am, cut off, surrounded by enemy soldiers. Of course, I'm "captured." Ditched is the word.

You know, when you are locked in a cell for eight months with nothing to do, you have a lot of time to ask yourself questions... questions like WHY THE HELL DIDN'T THEY WAIT TO RAISE THAT LOUSY DRAWBRIDGE? Don't tell me they didn't know where I was. The entire army had to run past me on the bridge to get to Compiègne. And don't try to tell me they thought I could take care of myself. Me against five hundred soldiers?

I mean, *what* were they thinking? You know what I decided? I decided they weren't thinking at all. Which in itself is a statement. They were scared; they were in a hurry. They saw me fighting on the bridge, but they didn't think about it. They didn't think about what would happen to me if they raised the drawbridge. It was irrelevant.

There is a term for the chapters about women in your high school history books: "nonessential information." In the brains of these men, the textbook of their personal history has two essential chapters: the one on fraternity and the one on chivalry. The fraternity chapter tells them how to act around other men, how to be a team player, a loyal comrade, an esteemed colleague. It tells them to close ranks against outsiders and never to desert a brother officer in the heat of battle. The chivalry chapter tells them that if they are on a sinking ship, to make sure that the women and children are saved first.

But the problem was, I was neither a brother, nor a helpless female. In the textbook of their brains, the section on me was just an insert, with a border of little cannons around it, and a heading in flowery letters: "The Maid of Orleans." It was nonessential information. They would not be held responsible for it during a test. So, with the enemy bearing down on them, they stuck to the essentials. The image of me still fighting on the bridge was entered into their programs for fraternity and chivalry, but nothing turned up ... so they raised the drawbridge.

Now, in case you're thinking that this kind of thing only happens to butch women — I say, look again. I submit that every one of you is an insert in the textbook of your country. I look out over this sea of nonessential faces, and I see the little borders around your lives, individually and collectively. You are inserts in the lives of men. You are inserts in the history of your nation. You are inserts in the roll book of your government. And when it comes down to the real issues, you will be missing from the

program.

What I am here for tonight is to take the border off "Saint Joan of Arc," and put my life into the main text. My story is not a sidelight of history, a piece of local color, or optional reading. My story is the story of all women, and my suffering is *identical* to yours. My trial is the trial of all women. My misguided crusade is all of our misguided crusades. My enemies are your enemies. My mistakes are your mistakes. The voices I hear are your voices. And the voices you hear are my voices.

## PART I

In the first place, my name is not Joan. It's Jeanne. So how did "Jeanne" get to be "Joan"? It got lost in the translation. In five hundred years, a lot of things about my life got lost in the translation.

In the second place, "of Arc" makes it sound like I come from a town called "Arc." I don't. I come from Domremy. There's no such place as "Arc." It's a poor translation of my father's name, and besides that, I never used his name. I went by my mother's name: Romee.

And in the third place, I never gave anybody permission to make me a saint. Think about it. The same boys that burned me at the stake turn around and try to make me a public relations officer for their church. Right . . . over my dead body.

So I'm not Saint Joan of Arc. I'm Jeanne Romee. Big deal, right? Who cares? I care. Joan of Arc is *not* my name, and "saint" is just another word for a woman who got burned, and it's time we woke up and stopped letting other people change our names and it's time we stopped thinking it's an honor to be tortured by men. Most of all, it's time we started telling the truth about our own lives. These myths are killing us.

So . . . soldier, martyr, hero, saint. All between the ages of seventeen and nineteen. That's when I died, nineteen. I had just those two years. Soldier, martyr, hero, saint . . . idiot. It was my death that really did it. The beautiful young girl clutching a makeshift cross, eyes lifted up to heaven, as she disappears in a cloud of fiery smoke. That was the death of Saint Joan of Arc. Tonight I want to tell you how Jeanne Romee died.

The beginning of the end was on Easter, 1430. I was all of eighteen. The city of Melun had just surrendered to me, which

was very exciting. It had belonged to the enemy for ten years. I was standing on the walls of the city, and the soldiers and the people were all cheering me, and the bells of the church were ringing for Easter. I couldn't have been happier. The king had been crowned; I was a national hero. Everything was possible. And then I heard my voices.

My voices. Everyone always wants to know about my voices. When do I hear them? What do they sound like? Do other people hear them too? And — here's my favorite — why do they speak French instead of English?

My voices weren't all that special. Everybody hears voices. Everybody's got somebody leaning over their shoulder and whispering in their ear what they should do and what they shouldn't do ... "Get the hair out of your face ..." "Put your knees together." That's what civilization's all about, isn't it? Listening to the voices of those who lived before you did. That's what keeps the machinery going. No, the real problem for civilization comes when a woman decides to invent her own voices and then believe in them. See, that's almost like thinking for yourself.

You're surprised to hear me say I invented my voices? Let's put it this way ... I heard what I believed just as much as I believed what I heard. Think about it ... Where is the reality in the voices *you* hear? Is it "out there," or do you make it real for yourself? Just where does the authority come from? Hey, we all invent our voices. Mine were just more blatantly fictional, that's all. That's because I didn't like the selection available to young women in Domremy.

There was my father's voice: "Jeanne, a rich young man will come and marry you and you will go and live with him and he will help your poor old father take care of his sheep." And then there was my mother: "Jeanne, a nice young man will come and marry you and you will have lots of children and then you will understand just how I feel." And don't forget the priest: "Jeanne, God has called you to give yourself to him, and you will enter a convent and say prayers all day long that things will get better." All the voices in Domremy were more or less variations on these themes.

But then one day, I'm walking in my father's garden and I hear, "Jeanne, you have been chosen by God to ride at the head of the French army, to take the king to be crowned, and to drive the

English out of France." Yeah! Now, that's what I call a voice. It was the voice of St. Michael, and I liked it so much a few days later I heard St. Catherine and St. Margaret.

So why saints? And why these particular saints? Well, you have to remember that Domremy was a pretty small place, and good role models were hard to come by. I mean, outside your family and your neighbors ...you were pretty much looking at the sheep. If I wanted another point of reference, I was going to have to use my imagination. And I did. There was a statue of St. Margaret in our church, and there was one of St. Catherine in the church across the river. And everybody knew who St. Michael was, because he was the patron saint of the district. So, not too surprisingly, these were my role models, my "voices."

Let me tell you about them. There was St. Michael. He led the army of angels out to battle against Satan, and kicked him out of heaven. He was our Catholic cowboy, our superhero saint. He always wore armor and carried a sword.

Then there was St. Catherine. She was arrested and put on trial for her religion. Fifty old men asked her a lot of trick questions, but she outsmarted them all, which wasn't so smart, because it only made her sexually irresistible to the Emperor who had arrested her in the first place. And of course when she turned him down ...well, he had to do something to save face, so he cut off her head.

And there was St. Margaret ... she ran away the night she was supposed to get married, and she cut her hair real short and passed herself off as a monk for many years. Then some woman accused her of getting her pregnant, and Margaret decided it was better to take the rap and spend the rest of her life in solitary confinement than to admit she was a woman.

Some role models, right? Michael, Catherine, Margaret ... And guess what? I grew up to lead an army, to dress like a man and to stand trial for my religious beliefs. No, my life wasn't original at all. I copied my role models just as faithfully as any one of you copies yours. Mine were just a little more flamboyant.

We have *got* to stop and take a look at our role models. Maybe just spend two minutes thinking about the people we're going to spend the next fifty years imitating. Take me for instance ... I had two female martyrs, both beheaded, and one male conquering hero. I should have noticed that the only happy ending was the

man's. I also should have noticed that a conquering male gets a whole different reception than a conquering female. The only thing a woman is expected to defeat is herself. Anything else is not victory, but castration. What I'm saying is that I should have noticed I had a third act that wouldn't work. The lead was written for a male.

What, and I mean *what*, is the happy ending for women? Marriage, where the whole company comes on stage and joins hands around the happy couple while they ring down the curtain? And they better ring it down at this point, because, as we all know, that's when the leading lady retires from the stage.

Or is the happy ending those scenes where the fatally-wounded or terminally-ill heroine sings her dying aria in the arms of a heartbroken lover? The bad news is she dies, but the good news is he really did love her after all. Too little and too late maybe, but who's keeping score?

Is there some happy ending for us that doesn't call for our total spiritual annihilation? What if we all dropped everything... whatever we've got going right now? What if we just stopped doing everything until we could figure out the happy ending for women? Not just figure it out, but actually see it, feel it, touch it, taste it. Because I'm here to tell you, you're going to paint what you're looking at. And if we don't come up with something better than all these martyred female saints — hey, we're all going to end up at the stake. Today you women are allowed to go out and work in the men's world. When I did it back in 1430, I was a real freak. But the men haven't changed, the rules haven't changed, and the institutions haven't changed. The fact that there are more of you women doing it now just means an excuse for a bigger fire.

But getting back to the voices ... The first time I heard them, I was thirteen. That's a good age for internalizing voices, isn't it? The age of puberty.

Puberty. I knew all about puberty even before I got there, because I had figured out it was the missing link in the story of my mother's life.

Isabelle Romee was my mother. I didn't see too much of her, even though I lived under the same roof with her for seventeen years, if you know what I mean. By the time I was born, she had already had three other kids, and been married half her life. When she opened her mouth, it was either mother-talk or wife-

talk. The only time I ever heard Isabelle speak with her own voice was when she would tell us kids about her trip to Rome.

When she was a girl, her family went on a pilgrimage to see the Pope. And they took her along. It was a big adventure, traveling all that way, going into a foreign country, staying in a different place every night, camping out, and meeting all kinds of people from all kinds of places. Whenever she told us these stories, she would get very animated, and her eyes would shine, and she would literally turn into somebody else . . . somebody I never knew. Somebody who never had children. Somebody who had lived another whole life in another whole world. This person who had all these adventures and wanted to go back again and was brave and independent and funny ... well, she was not my mother.

The only thing I could figure out was that something terrible — I mean *really* terrible, must have happened to turn this girl with all the big adventures into this woman who would be doing the exact same things tomorrow that she did yesterday. I didn't know what this terrible thing was, until I saw it happen to my big sister. In one year, she went from being full of crazy ideas and lots of fun, to being somebody serious and boring and busy. The terrible thing was puberty, and I made up my mind it was never going to happen to me.

Puberty. The beginning of periods, which means you can have babies. The beginning of breasts, which means you can nurse babies. The beginning of feeling self-conscious around boys, because you have this opening between your legs that they all want to stick themselves into.

Puberty is about loss of privacy. It's about living in a body that has become public property. It's about foreign invasion, about occupied territory. One by one, my girlfriends surrendered themselves. I watched them go off with men and turn themselves into foreigners ... Mengette, Charlotte, and even my best friend Hauviette ... or at least that's what I thought at the time, but that's a whole other story. Every day I could feel my family, my relatives, my neighbors laying siege to me. They surrounded me, and they would not let anything in or out that would allow me to have my own life. They were isolating me, trying to starve the spirit out of me, waiting for little Jeanne to raise the white flag and throw open the gates for all of them.

And then they would pour into my citadel, and they would take my children hostage, rape my women, kill my men, seize anything of value, destroy what they couldn't use . . . and then when they were thoroughly in control of what life I had left, *then* they would feed me.

I will tell you a secret. If you learn not to eat, they can't threaten you with starvation. That's right. And that's exactly what I did. I would eat as little as possible . . . a piece of bread a day. And it worked. My body stayed like the body of a girl. When I died at nineteen, I had still never menstruated. I had found a way to avoid puberty.

I love the body of a young girl. I love my body. My lean body, somewhere between men and women, somewhere where nobody can catch me. I'm a freak. There's a lot of pain in being a freak, but there's a lot of respect. People have to deal with you on your own terms. They can't project their fantasies onto you. There's dignity in being a freak. I was a freak. I still am. Let me tell you something. There's no such thing as "eating disorders" in a prison camp. There's only eating *strategies*. And mine was very successful. I did not fall into the same trap my mother and my sister did. I did not die by millimeters, as if it were my own fault. If I was going to die, at least the killers were going to have to come out and show themselves. And they did.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. When I was seventeen, my father engaged me to a nice young man. I said I had no intention of marrying him, so the nice young man threatened to take me to court for breach of promise. I said, "Go ahead. It's my father's promise, not mine." He thought he could call my bluff, but I called his. We went to court and I won. Of course, I made a fool of my father, and after this, life at home was pure hell. And then the enemy soldiers came through Domremy and burned everything they could get their hands on. So this was a red letter year for me. The year I was seventeen, my whole family turned against me and the town where I had lived all my life was burned to the ground. But these were just brush fires compared to the real catastrophe. That same year, Hauviette, my best friend, got engaged. France's hour of glory had struck. I ran away from home.

One of the hardest parts of running away was leaving my mother. It was like in battle, when the soldier next to you gets his legs blown off by a cannon. You don't want to leave him, but

there's nothing you can do for him, and if you stay behind with him, they'll get you too. So you leave. Like I left my mother. But it tore my heart out.

The year before I left, she was always telling me to get married, to stop making so much trouble for my father. But way in the back of her eyes, underneath all those layers of wife and mother, I could still see those embers of her trip to Rome smoldering in her memory, like the remains of some sacred fire at the altar of her lost girlhood. I wanted to take those embers of hers and fan them back into flame, and then I wanted to take that flame, and live out my life, not just one or two episodes, but my *whole* life, in the blaze of that hot, bright fire. I left without telling my mother I was going, but I felt, and I still feel, that I have her blessings. I rode out with the standard of my mother's lost girlhood. I am the champion of lost girlhood dreams.

After I left home, I went to stay with my cousin. His wife was expecting a baby and she needed some help. But I didn't stay long. I talked my cousin into taking me to see the governor of the fort at Vaucouleurs. I wanted him to give me a military escort to Chinon, where I could see the king.

There are a lot myths and theories about why this macho governor gave me, a young female nobody, that escort. Some people say I convinced him with a supernatural prophesy. Others say that he believed some legend that a woman would save France. Or some say that he was talked into it by other people. And — here's my favorite — that he was just desperate enough to try anything.

The truth is that there is no man on earth who can stand in the way of woman who is utterly convinced of the rightness of her actions.

So why, since women are usually right, are we still stuck in the Dark Ages? Because we don't *feel* like we're right. Well, if we are, *why* don't we feel like it? Because we're waiting for permission. You will notice that my career began to slide after the king was crowned and I began to need his permission. Before that, nothing could stop me and my voices. But as soon as I started waiting for permission, I lost my timing, I lost my momentum, and finally ... my confidence.

Anyway, I went to the governor and the governor gave me the escort, and I went to the king, and the king gave me the army, and

I went to Orleans and I lifted the siege, and I won my battles, and I took the king to Reims to be crowned ... and all of these things happened for the same reason: I was one hundred per cent sure I was right.

Which brings me back to that Easter Day at Melun, the beginning of the end. Like I told you, I was standing on the walls of the city. The crowds were cheering and the bells were ringing, and then I heard my voices. And my voices told me I would be captured soon.

My voices never lied to me. My father lied, the king lied, the generals lied, and the bishops lied. But my voices never lied. A month after Easter, I was captured.

"I was captured." Captured, hell ... like I told you, I was ditched! Let's be honest. I can't even say I was betrayed. That might actually have involved some forethought. No, I was ditched.

So, there I was ... a prisoner of war. This was May 23, 1430. I was eighteen.

For the first few days, I actually believed I would be rescued. I believed the king would send the army to get me. I would sit in my cell and imagine I could hear the trumpets in the distance. That was June. By July, I said to myself, "Well, Jeanne, the king is holding back the troops. He is raising your ransom money."

That was July. By August, I said to myself, "Well, Jeanne, they are negotiating. Charles is having trouble getting all the money together. After all, you're not cheap." It never occurred to me that he wouldn't save me. I was the hope and promise of France. I was a national hero. Of course, the king would save me. I was even more popular than he was. Right.

So that was August. By November, I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what. The king was clearly not doing anything, but why? Like a detective, I began looking for clues among the details of my brief but spectacular career. I thought back a year earlier to the scene at Reims.

Okay, here it is. It's the inside of the cathedral of Reims, Coronation Day. It's a beautiful July day, and the sun is streaming through the stained glass windows, and the bells are all chiming, and the air is sweet with the smell of incense. The pews are full of soldiers, and officers, counts and dukes and knights ... and their women, all dressed in satins and lace and velvet. There are priests

and abbots and bishops, and the Archbishop of Reims is here, wearing this beautiful robe made out of gold cloth. And here's Charles, standing in the front of the church, dressed like a king, waiting to be crowned according to the sacred traditions handed down by generation after generation of French kings. And there, standing next to him, in the place of highest honor, is a seventeen-year old peasant girl in full armor.

What's wrong with this picture?

What everyone else knew and I didn't was that I had broken all the rules. Here I was ... a peasant, strike one ... a child, strike two ... and a female, strike three. Actually any one of those is an automatic out, but I was all three at the same time. And if that wasn't bad enough, I was also illiterate, outspoken and I dressed like a man. I mean, we're talking about somebody so far out in left field they're beyond the bleachers. But ... all the same, there I was, right up there next to the king.

Alone in my cell, I began to consider for the first time the people sitting in the pews that day. These people had followed the rules very carefully. They passed their property and titles down to their oldest sons. And then they passed their daughters down to somebody else's oldest son. They arranged their whole lives around their real estate. And this was considered high class.

And for the first time, I considered the high-ranking officers ... the ones who were supposed to be driving the English out of France — or, at least that's how I understood it. To them, the army was a career ... which explains why we were still fighting the Hundred Years' War. The first rule of promotion is, "Cover your ass." This means make friends in high places, never question authority and above all, never ever do anything that involves personal risk.

For the first time, I considered the men of God, the clergy. They know the good Lord helps them that help themselves, so that's what they did. They helped themselves to other people's money, to other people's land and to other people's daughters. The name of the game here was, raise the most money in the name of the Lord, keep a low profile and be able to quote some authority for all your actions, preferably the Bible, but anything in Latin will do.

So here is this cathedral full of people who have devoted their whole lives to playing by the rules, inching their way along, one

square at a time, and here comes this peasant girl ... this girl who has taken a shortcut right around all their precious titles and bloodlines, and is right up there next to the king ... this girl who has never held any rank at all, but she rides at the head of the army ... this girl who belongs to a church where women are too sinful to be priests, and yet the angels are talking to her...?

Obviously there is something wrong here. I mean, here they are ... these people have spent their whole lives waiting in line to buy tickets to see God. And they've made up all these rules to make sure they get the good seats, while everyone else has to take standing room in the back. And now, here's this little peasant girl nobody, walking right past the whole line of them, right into the theatre, with no ticket at all!

There's two conclusions they can draw. One, they have wasted their whole lives. Their place in line is meaningless, the reservations made for them by their ancestors are meaningless, the fact they can afford box seats is meaningless: you don't need tickets to see God. And then there's the second conclusion. The girls is wrong. Dead wrong.

In December 1430, on the eve of my nineteenth birthday, alone in my little prison cell, I finally figured out why there hadn't *been* any rescue or ransom and why there was never *going* to be any rescue or ransom. I was the enemy.

So that was December. In January, the Duke of Burgundy turned me over to the church Inquisition. I was no longer a prisoner of war. I was a heretic. A woman who hears voices is a lot more dangerous than a woman with an army. Keep that in mind.

## PART II

So, how *do* you torture a woman? Well, you can tie her up on the rack and rip her bones apart from the sockets. That's one way. Or you can tear apart her mind and her body. There's two ways to do this: you can pry her body away from her mind, or you can pry her mind away from her body. Either way, it comes out the same: you paralyze the woman ... she can think but not act, or she can act but not think.

To pry her body away from her mind, you need to physically humiliate her. Of course rape is the most traditional method, but it's not the only one, by any means. You can ridicule her body, or

make fun of the things she does. You can make her self-conscious about her looks. You can make her strap her breasts in, you can make her embarrassed about her periods. You can make her frightened of puberty, frightened of sex, frightened of aging, frightened of eating. You can terrorize her with her own body, and then she'll torture herself.

Now, if you want to pry her mind apart from her body, you have to make her believe she's crazy. I mean, you can put her in a courtroom and have all the experts certify that she's mentally incompetent. But again, there's a lot of other ways to go about this. You can just annul her. We all know how that goes . . . interrupt her, change the subject, ignore her, patronize her, trivialize her, dismiss her. You can deprive her of her own history, of her art, of her spiritual traditions. You can limit her contact with other women. You can cause her to doubt her perceptions, and then if she is unable to change the way she thinks, she'll believe she's crazy. It's really not too hard to do, if you control all the resources.

And if you're a real expert at torture, you can do both at the same time. You can offer to love her body, if she'll just give up her mind. Then you can offer love to her mind, and at the same time reject her body. That's what I got. The Church had so much love for my soul, they had to burn my body. On the other hand, they promised to take care of my body, if I would give up everything I knew was true.

You think the days of the Inquisition are over? Every woman who's ashamed of her body is a victim of torture. Every woman who doubts her own judgment is a victim of torture. Just how many women do you know who aren't pulled apart?

Well. My torture. As I say, I got it both ways. In my prison cell, they were after my body. In the courtroom, they were going for my mind.

I was moved to a castle in Rouen for the trial. My cell was dark and cold and I was never allowed to leave it, except to go to the courtroom. My feet were chained to a wooden beam. It was uncomfortable, but it wasn't all that different from the other places where I had been a prisoner for the last eight months . . . except for one thing. I wasn't allowed to be attended by women.

In this prison, I had a special detail of guards. There were five of them. English soldiers. Three in the cell with me and two

outside the door, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for five months. They were animals. They insulted me, they threatened me, they molested me, they ridiculed me, they degraded me. They never got tired of cruelty. They never gave me a minute of privacy. They polluted every square inch of my cell.

They did everything but rape me, and that wasn't out of any respect for me. There were two reasons they didn't: first, I was difficult to get at, because I was wearing men's clothes. I had hose tied to the doublet at twenty points, and I had leggings which were tightly laced. And then, my virginity was an issue at the trial — you know, virginity being equated with credibility — so after the court had me examined to certify my hymen, well, the guards didn't dare to anything after that. Not because it would have been rape, oh no — not at all. Because it would have been tampering with the evidence.

But rape, of course, is not the issue. The fear of rape, as men have known for years, is just as effective as the real thing. The woman is scared to live alone, to go places by herself, scared of the dark, always looking over her shoulder, waking up at the least sound in the middle of the night. She is perpetually distracted, self-conscious, subverted ... terrorized. She might just as well have been raped, which, of course, is the whole point.

In my little cell in Rouen, surrounded by my five guards, the atmosphere of rape was suffocating. And it had nothing to do with sex. It had to do with degradation. They wanted me to despise myself. I chose to despise them instead.

Anger is a discipline. I practiced my anger like some people practice piano. It takes energy to be outraged. It's hard work. Especially when the abuse becomes routine. Some days I was tired and sore and feeling sorry for myself. Some days I just wanted to pretend I didn't hear them, or that I was exalted enough to forgive them. But I would always say to myself, "Jeanne, if you don't resist this abuse, then you accept it, and if you accept it, then you deserve it, and if you deserve it, you're a dead woman and that's exactly what they want." So, no matter how sick, how tired, how weak, I would always rise to the occasion, throw back the insult, protest the abuse and demand my rights as a human being. Of course, this had no effect on them, but it kept me alive.

I want to say something about my experience. I hear a lot of talk about women forgiving men. I don't believe it. I have

experienced almost every form of cruelty men can inflict on women, and I am here to tell you that no human being can forgive it or ignore it, and furthermore, no human being should ever try. With abuse, you either resist it, or you accept it, period. Anything else is just fooling yourself.

So I fought for my body in the cell. In the courtroom, I had to fight for my mind.

Let me tell you about my trial. I had two judges, two officers of the court, three notaries and an usher to escort me back and forth from my cell ... AND ... thirty-two doctors of theology, sixteen bachelors of theology, four doctors of civil rights, seven men with special licenses, five doctors of canon law, fifteen men with licenses in canon law, seven medical doctors, eleven masters of arts, sixteen assistants and expert witnesses, twenty-three priests, five bishops, three abbots ... and a cardinal in a pear tree. After all, you can't be too careful with these teenage girls.

The trial lasted five months. It focused on two issues: my voices and my clothing. Now, that seemed strange to me at first, because both of those things are so irrelevant. I mean, why would all these important men be so interested in something so personal? I kept trying to skip over their questions or change the subject, but time after time, day after day, they would always come back to those same two things: my voices and my clothes. Of course. My perceptions and my identity. They knew exactly what they were doing. They wanted me to renounce my voices — that is, invalidate my perceptions — and to wear women's clothing — that is, to change my identity to suit them. Of course. Haven't we all?

So on and on it went. Actually, in the beginning, I was holding my own pretty well. They'd ask, "Do St. Catherine and St. Margaret have hair?" And I'd say, "You better believe it!" Or, "Was St. Michael wearing any clothes?" And I'd say, "What do you think? God's too poor to give him any?" Lots of people in the courtroom would crack up. In fact, I think a lot of them were secretly rooting for me.

I think my judge, Cauchon, knew it too. I was supposed to have two judges, but one of them never showed up. Really it was Cauchon's baby. He told everybody he wanted to have a "beautiful trial." It was going to be a big boost for him. You see, he was on a career track. He had gone to the University of Paris, and then

they sent him to Rome, and then they made him the Bishop of Beauvais, and he was moving right up the old ladder. But then he ran into a snag with the war, and he had to choose which side to be on. Since all his rich friends in Beauvais were for the English, he decided he was too, which was fine until I came along and the French began to win. Two years before this trial, all his hot-shot friends got kicked out of Beauvais and he lost his territory. So now this refugee bishop was going to use this trial to stage his big come-back. That's why he invited all these prominent people to see it. And here I was making a monkey out of him.

I'll tell you something about men. They can't stand to lose face. It's hard for us women to understand how very, very important this is to men, because we have never been allowed to have enough face to lose. We tend to be more concerned with things like the justice of an issue, or finding a peaceful solution. It's hard for us to understand how the most important thing, even in the case of war, is to find a way for all the men involved to save face. It would almost be funny, how childish they are, except that these children are running the world.

These rules of face-saving are hard on women. When a woman challenges a man, it's not enough for him to prove she's wrong. To save face he has to annihilate her. And this is what Cauchon was out to do.

After my sixth day in court, he moved the trial to my little cell. No more audience. Just him, a few assistants, and the notaries. Things went downhill for me. Without the pressure of the spectators, I couldn't make them skip over the questions any more. I had to give them what they wanted.

And when it was all over . . . five months and hundreds of pages later, this is what they came up with. Here are my charges: one, disobeying my parents and causing them anxiety. Two, wearing men's clothes. Three, taking a vow not to have sex with men. Four, listening to voices on the basis that they brought me comfort. Five, believing in these voices without the church's permission. Six, refusing to recognize the church's right to judge my actions.

These were my crimes. And if you think they don't burn women for these anymore . . . ask any dyke. She'll tell you.

So they took me out of my cell. They took me to a cemetery. That's appropriate, isn't it? And there were two big platforms

they'd built just for the occasion. This one here's for me. And that one's for the judges. And over there is the little cart with the executioner, waiting to take me to the public square, where the stake is.

And I want you to imagine for a minute — all around you, all over this room, a sea of faces, ignorant, vicious faces. Faces of people who have come just to watch you die. Faces that expect it, that insist on it. Faces that should be familiar. Faces from your own neighborhood, faces of old women like your grandmother, faces of little girls like your sisters — human faces. And all of them are completely unrecognizable. There's not one glimmer of sympathy, not one spark of compassion. They are all looking at you, but they don't see you. They see their long-awaited revenge, they see their promised entertainment, they see their reward for living cowardly and conservative lives. The world owes them your death and they're going to get it.

I had been in battle before. I had expected to die many times. I had even tried to kill myself before. But nothing in my experience even came close to this — these hideous faces. Fear is one thing, but this was horror.

So while they were reading my sentence, I broke down and confessed. I signed a statement renouncing my voices and agreeing to wear dresses. What happens to women when we finally do break, which is usually after almost superhuman suffering? Do we get a reprieve? Are we released, forgiven? Does the torture stop, the pressure let up? I have seen all kinds of women give in in all kinds of ways ... to harassment, to guilt, to sex, to alcohol, to mental illness. And in every single instance — listen to me — the abuse increases. There is no mercy for women, because our crime is our gender. We have to fight.

Well, so I confessed. And, like most women, I expected some reward for surrendering myself, for betraying my voices, for denying my purpose, for completely selling out every scrap of integrity. I expected to be moved to a church prison with other women prisoners and women attendants. But that didn't happen. They took me back to my old cell, to my five guards. Only now I had to wear a dress.

Meanwhile, the crowd with the faces was starting to get ugly. They didn't care anything about heretics or laws or procedures or confessions. All they wanted was to see somebody suffering

more than they were. When they realized they had been cheated out of an execution, they were ready to riot. The political pressure was building to find some way to make me break the terms of my penance.

It was on Thursday when I signed the confession and they took me back to my cell. On Saturday, the guards opened the door and let an Englishman into my cell. He was well-dressed, and I thought he must be a lord or something. I stood up and faced him to see what he wanted. He said my name, "Jeanne ..." "Yes?" Wham! "The Maiden ..." Wham! And I'm on the floor, and he kicks me in the ribs, and in the stomach and I roll into a ball. He's kicking my back and my legs. And then he's on the floor over me and he's pulling up my dress. One hand. If I had been wearing men's clothes, he would have had to use both hands. He would have had to untie forty knots and two sets of lacings, with both hands. I would have made him pay for it. You better believe it. But with a dress — one hand, one movement. That's what dresses are about, isn't it ... accessibility? I don't see where that's changed much in five hundred years. And neither has rape.

So he's got my skirt up and I'm lying on the floor, and he's smacking my face back and forth. Wham! Wham! Wham! And he's taking his penis out with his other hand. And here's my precious girl body. My own sweet body. My body. Me. It's me, and he's jamming his big ugly thing into my sweet body. And the guards have all come in to watch. And he's slamming into my body. Wham! Wham! And I can't focus my eyes and my nose is bleeding. And he's talking between his teeth in a language I can't understand. And then suddenly he's standing up and kicking me again. In the uterus, in the back. And then he's gone. And the guards are standing there. And I think, "They're going to rape me, too." But they didn't.

It's like a cat who plays with a crippled bird, pouncing and shaking it while it struggles to get away. But then, as soon as it dies, the cat just drops it and walks away. The game is over. And there I was ... raped, battered, broken. The game was over. After five months, it was finally over. They stood there for a minute, maybe hoping I would show some sign of my old spirit, so they could pounce, but I didn't. So after a while, they walked away.

That was Saturday. On Sunday morning, I woke up to feel one of the guards taking off my dress. He threw my old clothes at

me and told me I could go naked or put them on. Of course, it was against the terms of my penance to wear men's clothes ever again. I begged him to give me back the dress, but he wouldn't. They just laughed at me ... and waited. I stayed in bed pleading with them until noon, but then I had to get up and pee. So finally I put on the men's clothes, my clothes again. And of course, the minute I did that, the guards went to report it to Cauchon. And he and the other court officials came scurrying like rats to see for themselves.

And then the miracle happened. I had been raped and battered and broken. I had denied my voices. For three days, I hadn't known who I was. But suddenly when I put on my old clothes again, my men's clothes — my *human* clothes — I came back to myself. I knew who I was again, and I was all through with compromise.

Nobody mentioned my swollen, bruised face, and I didn't mention it either. I told them I was wearing men's clothing of my own free will. I looked right at those guards and told them that no one had made me wear them. I said that as long as I had to live in a man's world, I would dress like a man. If they would move me to a decent prison where I could be with women, I would wear anything they liked.

They asked me if I had heard the voices of Catherine and Margaret since Thursday when I confessed. And I told them, yes, as a matter of fact, I had. And my voices had told me that by trying to save my life, I had condemned myself. They told me that every single thing I had ever done in my whole life, I had done well and it was a lie to say anything different. Of course the notaries were writing all of this down as fast as they could, and when I got to that last part, they wrote "fatal answer" in the margin.

So that was Sunday. That was when I rose again from the dead. Rape is the crucifixion of women, and I am proof that there is life after rape ... even more life. When a woman is raped, she buries that part of herself that is accessible to men. Now, in a rape culture, they'll try to make you think that's everything. But it's not. She rises again with what no man can penetrate, her self-esteem. She is reborn, in her own image.

Wednesday morning they came to get me. I didn't have to measure myself against the world anymore. I was my own person, and I cried uncontrollably. They gave me communion and then they took me out to the executioner's cart. This priest who

used to spy on me in my cell tried to climb into the cart and get me to forgive him. They pulled him out and told him he better leave town if he knew what was good for him. There were a hundred English soldiers escorting my cart to the market square. This time, they had put the platforms in the same place with the stake. They didn't want to risk another confession, I guess.

They put a hat on my head, with names on it ... "idolater, heretic." And there was a sign on the platform where I stood: "Jeanne ... liar, seducer ..."

Someone gave a long sermon. I wasn't listening. This time I didn't even notice the faces that had bothered me so much a week earlier. They hadn't changed, but I had. I had been raped.

They read my sentence. I remember they called me a dog returning to my vomit. And they excommunicated me. I prayed. People were laughing at me. Then I was turned over to the bailiff. Two men shoved me over to the platform with the stake, and they threw me up onto it. The stake was very high, so that everyone could see it. Usually the executioner kills the victim, so they don't actually have to burn to death, but the stake was so high in my case, he couldn't reach me to do his job. I had a little wooden cross inside my clothes, against my bosom. A priest sent to a church in the square for the ceremonial cross, and he held it up so that I could see it. And they tied me to the stake and lit the fire.

Between the time they lit the fire and the time I lost consciousness ... was a long time. It was a long time to wonder where God was. The God I had been taught to believe in wasn't any match for my suffering. My voices were still with me. They were always with me, because they were part of me ... but where was this loving Father with all the power to save people ... or at least make me die quickly?

Do you remember when Dorothy exposed the Wizard of Oz, and you heard the booming voice say, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" ...? Well, let me tell you, when women begin to expose the actions of men, we hear this sacred voice urging us to protect and forgive. This voice is so ancient, so powerful that we're overcome with guilt and shame ... even though we're the victims!

I'm here today to tell you something about that voice. That voice telling you to protect and forgive men, that voice urging you to be a little more patient, a little more tolerant, is not the voice

of God. It's the voice of the men behind the curtain. The only reason it sounds like God is because they amplify it and use a lot of special effects.

Tied to that stake, watching the fire come closer and closer, I realized that God the Father was a lie. He was an invention of the good old boys to cover their tracks and their asses. The closest I had ever come to a real sense of God was alone with my voices or in the company of women.

I realized what a fool I had been to waste my time crowning a man king, as if he had some divine right to rule ... what a fool I had been for trusting a church run by men who didn't hear their own voices, or even believe they had them ... what a fool I had been to lead one army of men against another, as if it could make any possible difference who won ... and what a fool I had been to believe I would be saved from the actions of men by a god they had created in their own image.

God the Father was a lie then and is a lie now, and all the hierarchies modeled after him ... the governments, the armies, the churches, the corporations ... are illegitimate. We will not convert them. They will martyr us. We must fight for our own causes, women's causes. We must clothe ourselves in self-respect, arm ourselves with our anger, and obey *only* the voices that we alone can hear.

## EPILOGUE

So. "Saint Joan of Arc." Twenty years later they had a second trial to "rehabilitate" me. You see, I was holding my own as a national hero, and if there's one thing the Church can't stand, it's competition. Besides, the myth of a feminine, simple-minded peasant girl had begun to replace the memory of the cross-dressing butch with the smart mouth.

Well, this second trial was pretty much a formality without the star witness. Everybody knew ahead of time what the outcome would be. Not much interesting ... except for one thing. Hauviette, my best friend. She testified. I didn't think she'd even remember me.

I remembered her. Hauviette and I had been very, very close, until the year I ran away. We had grown up together. We took our first communion together, which was a very special thing. See, it was a custom for the girls who shared their first commun-

ion to sleep with each other. She would come over to my house, or I would go over to hers. We would sleep in the same bed together. Sometimes we would pretend we were on a very small boat in the ocean and I had rescued her, and I would hold her in my arms and my heart would be so full of tenderness it made me feel light-headed. Or sometimes we would pretend that she had found me wounded in the forest and had taken me to her cottage, where she would bandage my wounds and cover me with kisses. Hauviette and I were more than best friends. We were one soul. We knew this and we had always planned to live together after we grew up.

But, like I said, there was this terrible thing, puberty. Hauviette got engaged. I wouldn't even speak to her. How could she do that to me, after I went to so much trouble to break off my engagement? So I left Domremy. I left, and I didn't even tell her I was going. I said good-bye to my other friends, but not to her.

Anyway, here she is twenty years later, testifying. And what does she say? She says she cried her eyes out when she heard I had left Domremy. She says she loved me because I was so good. And then she calls me her "jacuit amorse," which is an expression for one's lover. She's forty years old and married, and standing in front of a room full of Catholic priests and judges, and she says this about a young girl who's been dead for twenty years, a girl who left her without saying good-bye.

Hauviette. She had more courage than I did. It was easier for me to face the English army and the French Inquisition, and even the executioner, than to face her and say "I love you." There is one crime I committed. It's one they overlooked in my trial, but it's the one for which I suffered the most, and the one for which I suffer every day. I confess it. I denied my love for a woman, and I denied the woman who loved me.

So there was no Saint Joan of Arc with her legacy of glorious martyrdom. There was Jeanne Romee who tried to find a substitute in the world of men for the love she had experienced in the arms of a woman.

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*Compañeras: Latina Lesbians (An Anthology)*, compiled and edited by Juanita Ramos, 1987, \$8, Latina Women's Ed. Resources, P.O. Box 627, Stuyvesant Sta., NYC, NY 10009.

When I met Juanita Ramos, three years ago, she informed me that she was compiling a *latina lesbian* anthology. Being in a numb space regarding my own Puerto Rican heritage, I did not understand the implications of such a task. Today, having accepted my Puerto Rican identity, I now understand what a courageous feat this was.

*Compañeras* was a mirror I was eager to look into. Written in Spanish or English, by latina lesbians from various Latin American cultures, each story, poem, oral history, journal entry, and graphic filled me with memories of the smells of my Abuelita's cooking. I could hear salsa, danza, bomba, ranchero, and samba music playing in my head and I could see the lit candles in front of the santos. I felt like I was in my kitchen talking with family, sharing with *my* compañeras. Feeling heartfelt warmth, pain, laughter, love, confusion, self-acceptance and most of all *pride*.

Yes, *Compañeras* is a must read work of art. It is a loom where colorful threads are woven into soft blankets of truth validating that latina lesbians, whether in or out of "hiding," aware or unaware, are not insane for loving women in whatever ways we choose. Furthermore, we are not alone in our daily struggle to be who we are as individuals and as a culture. *Compañeras* makes clear that we, as latinas and as latina lesbians, are a part of, as opposed to apart from, humanity.

For me, *Compañeras* touched a secret place where I have longed for identification as a latina and as a latina lesbian. I was comforted to discover, in more ways than one, that I belong.

Oye Juanita!, now we await *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians (An Anthology)*, VOLUME II. Felicidades!

— Carolina Delgado

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*Past, Present and Future Passions* by Barbara Ruth, 1987, \$8.00, 213 pages, available from HerBooks, P.O. Box 7467, Santa Cruz, CA 95601. To be sold to and shared with women only.

The epigraph to this book could be a quote from one of the poems in it: "I have spent my life / Searching for the words, the names / To tell you who I am" ("The Eskimos"). It is as much autobiography as poetry, a story of survival close to the edge. Barbara Ruth is not an easy subject for biographical writing: a "lesbian Indian Jew" (as she calls herself in "The Eskimos"), a fat woman, a political radical, a survivor of progres-

sive disabilities and medical treatments. The material demands originality. Because so much needs to be written that hasn't been put into words before, it also demands clarity. Most of these poems have both.

The overriding passion of *Past, Present and Future Passions* is the writer's need to create herself as an artist and a person. One of the first poems, "I Live to Write," explains, "It's what I salvage from my life / The act that makes me who and what I am." The closing poem, "Written to Console Myself While Waiting in the Office of the County Board of Assistance," reiterates "I have . . . invented myself / Again and again."

Inventing oneself is something all Lesbians have to do, fighting a lifelong war against countless kinds of denial — denial of history, of community, of legitimacy. It's something womyn have to do, reinventing the wheel each generation. Family secrets turn out to be political, the story of patriarchy's stranglehold, of female survival strategies: the aunt whom no one ever called a Lesbian, the "illegitimate" older sibling, the abortion Grandma never mentioned except in a letter found posthumously. It's something children of assimilated parents have to do, forced to choose between living a whyte xtian lie and discovering, or inventing, their true inheritance. BR writes in "Familial Amnesia" that her parents did

Nothing to call attention to themselves  
They (did) not remember  
What holidays they used to celebrate  
What candles lit  
What dreams beat  
In their childhood homes.

The triple denial leads to a triple necessity: Make someone of yourself or die like a plant with no roots. Where Maxine Hong Kingston and Monique Wittig create themselves by recreating the past, Barbara Ruth does it in the present, repeatedly, in drastically changing circumstances. She has the gift and the skill of saying things simply, but the things she says aren't simple.

There are poems about how we as Lesbians have to create ourselves, competent examples of an established genre. More exciting, and more terrifying, are those about creating an identity as a disabled Lesbian:

Chart me by my words  
And by my silences. . . .  
Chart me by my scars  
And by my stretchmarks  
And by my hairline fractures  
Chart me by the murmurs of my heart. (Bringing Light to Bear)  
I can't tell what I like anymore,  
I don't know if my hands will work. . .  
We don't fuck,  
But yes, we make love. (Intimacy, Disabled Style)



For a few poems, however, the notes don't explain enough. The note to one of these, "Bringing Light to Bear" explains, "This poem is full of many secrets, some of which I can't tell." Those that can be told add up only to a frustrating series of half-connected hints, a poem not personal but private. In others, such as "At the Old Age Home," gaps in meaning between the verses suggest parts of the story still untold.

Even with some of the chapters unclear, this autobiography is worth reading, both for the beauty of language and illustration and for the hard-won truths it tells.

— Rebecca Ridgely

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*Making a Way: Lesbians Out Front.* Photographs by JEB (Joan E. Biren). Foreword by Minnie Bruce Pratt, 1987. \$13.95, Glad Hag Books, P.O. Box 2934, Washington, D.C., 20013. Dist. by Spinsters/Aunt Lute, S.F.

When I was ten, my small Illinois home town celebrated its centennial. I still have a special edition of the local newspaper, *The Argus*, from that commemoration. In that edition were photographs of every owner and employee of every business, church (for there were no non-christian religious institutions), professional office, and the managers of each manufacturing plant in the town.

My family was mentioned in several ways, the most important of which was that my great-uncle, W. C. (Chauncey) Hooker, had invented the rat trap, and, in fact was the man about whom it was said, "If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door." I felt an unquestioned sense of belonging, deeply akin to that I felt when the old folks cemented our family history by talking through the stories represented by photographs, and, sentence by sentence, agreeing on what was true of us as a clan, as a people.

Since my grandmother made most of the pictures used in that process, I thought she was a magician. I learned early on that, even before naming, before thought, before feeling, before action, there is perception. And I observed that the decisions about who gets to say how perception is interpreted and which images are valued fundamentally determine how power is distributed on this planet. (I say "observed" because I didn't really understand this, I just knew it.) In fact, the English language is shot through with references to this basic truth: "I don't see it that way," or "It depends on how you look at it," or "Why can't you see thus and so?" Or, for women, the deadly, "Why don't you try to see things *his* way?"

Perceptions do change, of course, which may be the only realistic basis for hope for the human race. When I looked through the *Argus* Centennial edition a couple of years ago, I discovered that not only the owners of the *Argus*, but the local florist, optometrist, the sole town councilwoman, the librarian, a couple of my teachers, and other leading

citizens were (well, I'll be damned!) thespians! I mean, Lebanese! And then, thinking back, I realized there was my great aunt Nancy and....

What had changed during the thirty years those newspapers yellowed were my perceptions — and the degree to which I am allowed them by the greater culture — because the only dyke I remember from my childhood was a woman who rode around in jeans and a leather jacket on a red Schwinn bicycle, and, while my mother talked to her through the screen door, no one ever invited her in. And that, in 1957, was the allowable public image of a lesbian.

As you might imagine, I came to Joan E. Biren's new collection of pictures, *Making a Way: Lesbians Out Front*, with great delight. It's such a terrific thing for young lesbian girls and women to have these 100 new images from JEB (and those of so many others, such as Cathy Cade, Happy Hyder, Irene Young, et al.). Goddess knows, I'm sure hungry for them.

We should note, of course, that the women portrayed (most of whom are in public service jobs, or who are self-employed) have permanently foregone the protection of the closet, even one with a glass door. But certainly allowing one's image and one's name to be used in such a public way is both a personal act of rare courage and a sign of what has changed during the past decade. As JEB says, "When more and more lesbians chose to step in front of my lens, I knew the atmosphere had changed and that we had changed it," (from "Photographer's Notes").

One of the things I've discovered about making portraits is that it is a very rare thing for two people to make the same picture of someone; people rarely see things the same. Nonetheless, a gifted portrait photographer captures the essential woman so that others recognize that person they know in the image. So, one reason I value this book is that I see the women I know very much as JEB presents them, which means that I trust the portraits of those I haven't met.

Technically, I would prefer that Biren use a larger format, although I can certainly understand why she might not want to chase lesbians around the country lugging an Omega View camera on a wooden tripod. Too, there is much to be said in favor of using the 35mm black-and-white newsfoto which is the journalistic format of choice in a project such as this: just as people seem to believe anything they see typeset in 10 pt. Century Schoolbook, they give credence to any photograph they see in the newspaper. My personal preference for JEB would be toward either a larger format or a crisper image (perhaps a sharper lens).

But that minor criticism aside, I would love to see women across the country donate copies of *Making a Way* to their local libraries so our next generation will have easy access to these positive images. Each time I look through this book, I feel a little more whole, more made real, more an accepted and acceptable part of the human procession. It is such a gift for me, who's been plagued with chronic dreams of invisibility since I was that small midwestern child.

Between the written statements each woman has written, Minnie Bruce Pratt's wonderful prologue, and Biren's photographs, I would love to simply sit — what my grandmother would have called "bide" — with each of these women for a while, much as I need and love to sit in silence with the women in Santa Fe — simply share the same spirit space for a time.

JEB has given us a wonderful rainy-day book we can look to — as my mother once searched through her college yearbooks — to recall who we really are at those times when we cannot fully be ourselves in this world in which we are so little honored.

— Grace L. Harwood (© 1988)

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*A Restricted Country*, by Joan Nestle, 1987, 189 pages. \$8.95, Firebrand Books, 141 The Common, Ithaca, NY 14850.

It is a pleasure to see Joan Nestle's essays, narratives, stories and poems collected. Her contributions as an archivist, historian and writer form an essential aspect of contemporary lesbian life.

*A Restricted Country*, it seems to me, is an attempt to pull together all the things which make Joan Nestle the kind of lesbian she is: Jewish, working class, fem, civil rights and free speech activist, passionate. These are the terms Joan sets. In the acknowledgments she thanks her "friends who have stayed with me through illness" and then later, specifically acknowledges the Lesbian Illness Support Group. And yet nowhere in the body of the book does she talk about her illness. This is a book about how ethnicity, political activism, appearance, and sexuality weave together in a life. In the preface Joan tells us "my body made my history — all my histories. Strong and tough, it allowed me to start work at thirteen; wanting, resilient, it carried me the fifty-four miles from Selma to Montgomery. Once desire had a fifties face: now it is more lined. But still when I walk the streets to protest..., my breasts and hips shout their own slogans. As a woman, as a Lesbian, as a Jew, I know that much of what I call history others will not." She has shown us beautifully how aging has varied her sexuality, particularly in "A Change of Life". As a disabled lesbian, I find it hard to believe that illness has not also shaped the way Joan works and loves. And I deeply miss her words on this facet of her life.

I also wish this book told more about her work with the Lesbian Herstory Archives (for instance, "Radical Archiving from a Lesbian Feminist Perspective" which was first published in *Gay Insurgent*, Spring, 1979 is not included here, nor any pieces from *The Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*). She tells us how her multiple identities led her to join in founding LHA, but she does not talk about the ongoing work, what it has meant to her to live with the Archives for so many years. Much of Joan's contribution, for the past twenty years or so, has

consisted of valuing what others do not, preserving the work of people, particularly lesbians, dismissed by the world as not being worth saving. I wonder if she sufficiently values her own work as a historian and archivist.

What I love about Joan's writing is the richness with which she approaches her subjects, the "yes/and" rather than "either/or." This is especially true in the pieces about her relationship with her mother, in particular "Two Women". She shows us Regina Nestle as a compulsive gambler, yet also strong and courageous; kicking Joan out of the house when she discovered her daughter in bed with a woman, then years later, speaking at a panel called "Mothers of Lesbians" sponsored by the Lesbian Liberation Committee where she described Joan as a beautiful person whose choices could only be good ones. Regina gave her daughter the gift of intimate communication few of us have with our mothers. "She taught me laughter and endurance and the right to passion." She was a woman physically and emotionally abused by her lovers yet insisting on her sexuality and her pleasure "who kept alive her right to sexuality when sex was killing her." Joan refuses to see her mother as deluded in her frank enjoyment of heterosex. Instead she portrays her mother as both victimized by men and powerful in her passion for them.

Joan gives many examples of people who wronged her in some way — her mother, her straight male friend in the civil rights movement, a straight woman who did to Joan what many would certainly call sexual abuse (although Joan does not call it that). She does not dismiss these people, does not dehumanize them. She says, yes, they did this bad thing, and look, too, at the good there was about them. She often ends with sadness about the ways we hurt each other, how intolerance contaminates our relationships, and how love redeems the. How joyful sexuality, in its myriad shapes, is a celebration of what is best in us.

Joan has often described herself as "a fem from the fifties." Throughout this book she evokes the sensibility of that period. Writing about a working class lesbian bar in 50s New York City, she says, "We needed the Lesbian air of the Sea Colony to breathe the life we could not anywhere else, those of us who wanted to see women dance, make love, wear shirts and pants." ("The Bathroom Line") She insists on never turning her back on what she learned there, or the women who populated her world. She squarely places her body and her words in opposition to the kind of lesbian feminist orthodoxy which both prescribes lesbian behavior and excludes those who do not conform to the prescriptions. "As we change our names to commemorate the earth, we must remember the women who changed their names to Frankie and Jo to commemorate their woman-loving selves. And if we are tempted to dismiss them for being male identified, we must reflect on how only the imprisoned know the kind of freedom they need the most." ("Voices from Lesbian History")

It seems to me that one of the most valuable things we can learn from the dynamics of butch and fem is an appreciation of difference; butch-fem works because of the erotic energy inherent in the fact that we are not all identical in our tastes and styles and self-presentation. Joan Nestle certainly embodies this appreciation of difference; her admiration of butches is never coupled with devaluation of herself or other femmes. Joan says "My roots lie in the history of a people who were called freaks." ("Voices from Lesbian History") She is highly conscious of the risks for our movement in excluding lesbians who cannot or will not be mainstreamed, who may prove an embarrassment as more "acceptable" lesbians come out of their closets. "By allowing ourselves to be portrayed as the good deviant ... we lose the complexity of our own lives." ("Some Understandings") "Our battle is to be accepted in the fullness of our difference and not because we promise to be like everybody else." ("Voices From Lesbian History")

Joan gives us wonderful models of feminist scholarship. She begins a subject (censorship, prostitution) by placing herself squarely vis a vis the topic. "My deep despair at the new antipornography movement and the censorial atmosphere that is fed by it is the legacy of my history.... I was a member of a group of students who protested against the House Un-American Activities Committee. I remember... the chair's words... 'You people' — gesturing at us 'are the scum of the earth.'" Later, when recounting being asked by feminists if accusations about her sexual practices were true, she says, "Only those of you who remember the cadence of those McCarthy words — 'Are you now or have you ever been. . .' can know the rage that grew in me at this moment."

I appreciate this emotional honesty and accept her point that because I do not have direct experience with McCarthyism, I cannot have that particular emotional resonance to the issue. However, I find Joan's analysis re: censorship occasionally simplistic. When discussing the magazines *Bad Attitude* and *On Our Backs* she says they have been excluded from some women's bookstores because they were found to be "prosodomasochistic, antifeminist, antiwoman, anti-Semitic and racist" ... As a Jewish woman, I find it ironic that Gentiles are in such a hurry to protect me from myself." ("My History With Censorship") Although Joan uses quotation marks she never attributes the quote to specific individuals, Gentile or Jewish. Joan says the list cited above consists of "words that call for exile from our community, for there is no argument possible when this code is used." Is this statement in itself an injunction to avoid criticism of sexually explicit publications on these grounds? She also criticizes "the little white cards that popped up for awhile in feminist bookstores, warning the potential reader what to expect from a book." But if we have a commitment to doing women's and Jewish liberation and anti-racist work in a way which Joan herself shows us by example — deeply intertwined with our claiming and celebrating of our sexuality — is our only alternative to ignore oppressive words in those

journals which serve as vehicles for publication of sexually adventurous writing? Should a feminist bookstore carry a book by a lesbian that has passages that are, say, fat oppressive, without warning me, the potential reader, before I spend my money on it? I reserve the right to criticize a publication for oppressive attitudes I find in its pages, while simultaneously supporting its right to exist. And I appreciate responsible criticism, clearly revealing the critic's biases (as Joan does in her own scholarship), telling me what the critic finds objectionable in the work in question, and challenging me to draw my own conclusions.

There is a vital distinction between criticism and censorship which is being lost here. We are clearly shown how painful it is to be attacked by one's own people for that which makes you one of them. But here Joan has fallen into the good lesbians vs. the bad lesbians trap, which is precisely what I find so irritating about many women who work against pornography. Yes, I understand why she places herself in the ranks of the bad girls, and I still say there is an oversimplification whenever we position ourselves in one camp or the other. It is possible to have deep concerns about the effects of both violent pornography and censorship. The safety of lesbians can be threatened by both. We are sometimes deeply hurt through sex, including lesbian sex. It's also a source of potency and healing for us. A specific sexual act can have enormously different meanings, depending on its context. I wish Joan had approached this subject with the "Yes/and" philosophy of inclusion which characterizes many of the other pieces. And again, I appreciate the delineation of her process in coming to the opinion she holds. "My lesbian history tells me that the vice squad is never our friend even when it is called in by women." ("Voices From Lesbian Herstory")

Joan Nestle is perhaps most famous for her reclamation of butch/fem. She insists those who claim butch/fem relationships are solely a historical relic or only engaged in by "heterosexually defined lesbians" ("My History With Censorship") do all lesbians a disservice. Interestingly, I found "A Look at Butch/Fem Relationships" timid, apologetic now in comparison to her later pieces. Yet I remember when it first appeared in *Heresies*, how shocking it was and how affirming reading it was to my own fem identity. It would generally be helpful to have each piece dated.

A careful comparison of the originally published versions of some of these pieces with their current embodiment in this book shows how Joan Nestle has grown as a writer, learned what to include, how to use her craft with increasing certainty. I hope her next book will be even more inclusive, more crafted. Perhaps my complaints concerning the omissions are in fact the subjects of a planned second anthology. To finish a book wanting more is not such a bad state of affairs.

— Barbara Ruth

*Loving Her*, \$7.95; *The Black and White of It*, \$7.95; *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, \$8.95, by Ann Allen Shockley. The Naiad Press, Inc.

Ann Allen Shockley has begun, at last, to receive the just attention that she is due. With the Naiad Press's republication of her three major fictions: *Loving Her*, *The Black and White of It*, and *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, one can finally read Shockley as a process of discovery.

Thirteen years ago (1974), *Loving Her* was first published by Bobbs-Merrill and Company. A "bold" "ground-breaking book," some critics called it, and it was. For it featured what was understood immediately in the Afro-American and developing lesbian-feminist literary communities to be the first portrait of a contemporary Black lesbian character in American literature, i.e. Renay Johnson, musician, mother, battered wife, baby dyke. However, some early reviews were harsh. From the Afro-American literature camp came the offended homophobic remark, "This bullshit is not to be encouraged." From the lesbian-feminist camp came the questionable pronouncement that the book was "racist" "a bad lesbian novel." These judgments were to be followed by more conciliatory and thoughtful appraisals by critics such as Karla Jay, Alice Walker, and Louie Crew, but a great deal of damage was done to the budding reputation of then first novelist, Ann Allen Shockley.

Yet beyond the effects of racism, sexism, and homophobia, were other factors that kept Ann Allen Shockley veritably invisible as a fiction writer, though she was greatly known as the longtime Fisk University librarian and archivist, and for her scholarly work as a library scientist, e. g. *The Handbook of Black Librarianship* (edited with E. J. Josey). The factors that left her understudied are: first, reviews that appeared on *Loving Her* continued to be published over a ten year period. Scattered like this they provided no round or sound image of the writer nor of her talents. Second, the reviews were published in slick publications like *Ms*, in scholarly publications, like *Black World*, in popular rags such as *The Gay Community News*, and in low-budget periodicals such as *So's Your Old Lady* (now defunct). Third, even though Shockley kept publishing and writing newer fictions, the reviews of *Loving Her* kept coming. She seemed to get locked in a time warp that allowed her no advancement beyond the still reverberating *Loving Her*. Fourth, the reviews were written by mainstream critics, by gays, by Black men and women, by straights. They were written expertly, with profound insights, and by fledgling reviewers with nothing guiding their pens but the hope for publication, the experience of it, and the willingness to try. Moreover, the reviews were slanted towards the audiences they served; so they alternately met with the consternation and approbation of the given readership based on the critic's politics, aesthetic, or editorial freedom. The new result was an uneven hodgepodge of critical assessment most of which failed to do more than react to Shockley's politics and writing style. Not many seemed to know that this writer had been on the scene since the 1940's, and that *Loving Her* was Shockley's third novel written

on lesbian themes (the other two with lesbian content remained unpublished due to the McCarthy fifties, and the American love affair with Freudian psychology).

Meanwhile, *The Black and White of It* arrived (Naiad Press, 1980) six years later, and *Say Jesus* (Avon books, 1982) nearly ten years after *Loving Her*. The distance between the publications retarded the author's visibility as much as did the early critical reception of her first novel because many new lesbian-feminist critics came to Shockley with no knowledge of her past work, and those critics who did come with knowing, such as Lynne Reynolds, Beverly Smith, Barbara Smith, Merrill Mushroom, and Caroline Streeter, rarely made any comprehensive assessment of Ann Allen Shockley's work. As a result, the three major fictions were handled in a vacuum, one by one, though occasionally, some would allude to the past works of fiction. No one, it seemed, recalled that Shockley's work had been appearing in such publications as *The Negro Digest*, (and later *Black World*, when the name changed) *Umbra*, *Feminary*, *Freedomways*, and *The Fisk Herald*. They were primarily written about Black people and their struggles for civil rights, or about the relations between husbands and wives, Blacks and Whites. It may not be an overestimation to say that Shockley's turning to lesbian themes after years of writing mainstream fiction, doomed her to conflicting and contradictory criticism. Below, I cite paired critical remarks made on each of her major fictions as they address her thematic intention and stylistic competence. Some critics applauded her "bold" stance against oppression while others saw her writing as proselytizing for gay rights — an intolerant reaction.

#### On Thematic Intention

##### *Loving Her*

I find the story to be so far removed from reality that even if its sole purpose was to entertain ... some parts of it seemed totally absurd ... I lament the lack of politics in the book.

Sheryl Kaplan, 1981  
(unpub. women's studies paper)

The mere subject matter has a powerful political and emotional impact that cannot be ignored.

Evelyn C. White,  
*Backbone 3*, 1979  
(feminist publication)

##### *The Black and White of It*

We were all very closeted in the 50s, afraid that anyone should know or even suspect; and Ann Allen writes about us and the things we did to hide our lesbianism — the denial, the hiding and sneaking, the sex with men, the games, the signals, the devious-

The ten stories...are written as if according to formulas...it creates the impression that the stories have not been clearly differentiated each from the other... Part of my problem with these stories is that they seem terribly out of balance. There is, in most of them, a

ness and deceit, all of which were necessary because we *were* so intimidated by the threat of exposure.

Merril Mushroom,  
*Feminary*, 1982  
(lesbian/feminist pub.)

dearth of positive feeling which might have offset the absolute profusion of anguish, distress, and painful awareness that comprise the predominant emotional themes throughout this book. The narrowness of this scope makes it hard for me to place Shockley's characters in the world.

Lynne Reynolds, *Conditions Seven*, 1981 (les./fem. pub.)

### *Say Jesus and Come to Me*

This critic cannot understand why Ms. Shockley wishes to make the Black church an object of ridicule solely to support her belief that all women are gay ... The writer tries to convince the world that if you're not gay, you haven't been to Heaven.

J.S.T., *West Coast Reviewing Books*, 1982 (heterosexual pub.)

Its significance is the reason it attacks the black church. The church is presented as a mask for a certain type of black male preacher who represented an inflexible patriarchalism which thrives on the baiting, capturing and sexual undermining of women for his success... pushing the system as far as it will go in the direction of shunning homosexuals while capitalizing on and keeping women in their places.

Rita B. Dandridge, *Callaloo*, 1984  
(scholarly publication)

### On Shockley's Stylistic Competence

#### *Loving Her*

Jerome Lee is a familiar brute ... But in Shockley's rendition of him, he is without a single unbrutish quality. This causes him to seem less realistic as a certain *particular* Black man, though his type is perfectly *credible*... Terry is guilty of "congenital innocence" because she lacks any hint of racial prejudice. By being so "suspiciously perfect," Terry is rendered unreal.

Alice Walker,  
*MS Magazine*, 1975  
(popular feminist mag.)

Renay, the heroine, is good. Her husband, Jerome Lee, is so insensitive, so purely physical and stupid that I can only surmise he is a caricature of someone the author dislikes... one wonders why [she] didn't just dress him in black ... twirling his mustache wickedly. Terry, the white lesbian... is everything one might want a lover to be — kind, generous, sensitive ... Every woman in the book is a figure for admiration. Jerome Lee, on the other hand, has one whole dimension. O, he is nasty.

Frank Lamont Phillip,  
*Black World*, 1974  
(schol. Afro-American journal)

*The Black and White of It*

Her prose style is well-defined and highly readable. Her sense of pacing and rhythm produce prose that never falters or arrests the reader from understanding the subject.

Cynthia Patton,  
*Sojourner*, 1980 (les./fem. pub.)

The short story is one of the most difficult forms to write. The writer has to do more than present situations and sketch characters in order to be successful in this medium. Shockley's stories are rarely more than cliches.

Debra Morris, *Off Our Backs*,  
1981 (les./fem. pub.)

*Say Jesus and Come to Me*

This peculiar dreadfully written, yet somehow fascinating trashy novel is about a lusty, vaguely evil lesbian minister ... Those who ask for consistency, meaning even eroticism, would do well to look elsewhere.

Helen Eisenbach, *New York Native*, 1982 (gay male pub.)

A charismatic, articulate and beautiful Black lady minister named Mrytle Black is the well-delineated central character ... as the novel unfolds, the subordinate themes of homosexuality, prostitution, drug addiction, racism and male chauvinism are explored through intriguing, if sometimes desperate, characters. Shockley has woven a fascinating story about Music City in well-measured prose.

Donald J. Joyce,  
*The Tennessean*, 1982

Judging by these former critical remarks on the fiction of Shockley, one can see that she offers an excellent study as a Black woman writer who has taken on lesbian themes only to have that body of work alternately welcomed or dismissed based on the critic's point of view. What this all means is that Shockley is a writer who has been greatly misapprehended, understudied, and sketchily examined.

For the lack of a neat pigeon hole within which to place her, Shockley has suffered because her fictions do not meet with the politically correct framework for the still-developing lesbian-feminist aesthetic — one point of which is Caroline Street's belief that the only authentic portrait of a Black lesbian character will be drawn by a Black lesbian writer. A premise with which I soundly disagree, as I see such a notion disqualifying the classic fictions written by other than one's own racial, ethnic,

or social group, to say nothing of those written by those people of a different gender than one's own. What are we to do with insights gained from great literature which captures moments in human being that speak to the heart of our mortal existence? Are we to limit our artists with the arguments of political ideology? Are we to dismiss creative freedom, and the authority of authorial imagination. I should hope not. I realize that sometimes others presume on our rights to represent ourselves or misrepresent how we, in fact, are. But that is the nature of the beast, and must naturally occur in the scheme of creative things.

But beyond these points, what has been restrictive to the appreciation and development of Ann Allen Shockley is the belief that she is a lesbian. Without fail, even the most assiduous critics from Louie Crew to Alice Walker and Karla Jay have surmised that Shockley is a lesbian, and hence, her interest in lesbian themes, but this is not the case. In 1974 after Karla Jay's review of *Loving Her* appeared, in which she intimated that Shockley was a lesbian, Ms. Shockley wrote her publisher at Bobbs-Merrill complaining bitterly against his releasing such information (as Shockley thought they had given to Jay, but they hadn't). But the assumption was already in place, and to this day, Ann Allen Shockley is called a lesbian when it is a life-style that she denies. In an interview with this writer in December of 1984 she reiterated the fact.

It is hardly worth arguing as there is no reason for Shockley to deny being gay if writing about the same has brought the same result as coming out would. Personally, I believe she is entitled to her privacy, and if she were woman-loving, that would be her business. Still, given this state of affairs, it would have been unlikely that Shockley would have gained her current level of recognition were it not for the effect that Black American writers are having on American literature. The work of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Gayle Jones, and Paule Marshall has revitalized a tradition of American writing once given to the unemotional and imaginative darkness. Understood to be "women speaking for themselves," defining and particularizing their own experience in ways that empower rather than divide, it was only a matter of time until Shockley would be recognized for her contribution and her particular genius. Articles that discuss the revolution in Afro-American writings by women, unlike major anthologies before, now include Shockley. Calvin Hernton, Evelyn C. White, Margaret McDowell, Bonnie Zimmerman, and Dr. Rita Dandridge have in recent months discussed Shockley. Aside from the republication of Shockley's fictions by the Naiad Press, an annotated bibliography of all of Shockley's writings is now available from Greenwood Press. Further, a doctoral dissertation, "Portraiture and Vision in the Fictions of Ann Allen Shockley," has been completed by myself. These occurrences will certainly reopen the dialogue on the work of Ann Allen Shockley. Now is the time to purchase the entire Shockley canon and begin to think about her particular markings and subjects as



## Books Received

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*A Burst of Light*, not-to-be-missed essays by Audre Lorde, \$7.95, Firebrand Books, 141 The Common, Ithaca, NY 14850.

*A Letter to Harvey Milk*, nine short stories about being lesbian and Jewish by Lesléa Newman, \$8.95, Firebrand Books.

*More Dykes To Watch Out For*, cartoons from "the life" of the 80s by Alison Bechdel, \$7.95, Firebrand Books.

*The Fires of Bride*, lesbian legend and mystery on a Scottish island by Ellen Galford (*Moll Cutpurse*), \$8.95, Firebrand Books.

*Bulldozer Rising*, lesbian oldwomen fight the tyranny of the young and straight in a wonderfully comic SciFi adventure by Anna Livia, £3.95, Onlywomen Press, 38 Mt. Pleasant, London, WC1X 0AP, England.

*Lesbian Couples*, a psychological study by D. Merilee Clunis and G. Dorsey Green, \$10.95, The Seal Press, 3131 Western Ave., Suite 410, Seattle, WA 98121.

*Miss Venezuela*, new and reprinted short stories by Barbara Wilson, \$9.95, The Seal Press.

*Cows and Horses*, ending a 10-year lesbian relationship by Barbara Wilson, \$7.95, 8th Mountain Press, 624 SE 29th Ave., Portland, OR 97214.

*Ice Mirrors*, lesbian love & sex poetry by Fire, \$4, Shu Publishing, Worcester, MA.

*Sensual Rhythms and Purple Bats*, lesbian poetry by Esther Heggie and Virginia Rubino, \$6, Shu Publishing.

*Messages: Music for Lesbians*, a tape of very dyke-identified music with lyrics & notes by D.A. Clarke, HerBooks, P.O. Box 7467, Santa Cruz, CA 95061.

*The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom*, writings by five lesbian teachers, \$6.50, HerBooks.

*Artificial Insemination and the Unmarried Woman: Legal Rights and Responsibilities*, by Julie A. Waltz, J.D., \$29.95, Opportunity Press, P.O. Box 1821, Dept. 21, Aiken, SC 29802.

*The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyles*, a classroom text edited by Edith Blicksilver, \$12.95, Kendall/Hunt Publishers, Dubuque, IA 52001.

*Walking to New Zealand*, a Black woman's travels, poems, stories and recipes by Viki Radden, \$3, 815 Oak, SF, CA 94117.

*The Other Side of Venus*, a romantic lesbian love story by Shirley Verel, \$8.95, The Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302.

*To The Lightning*, a lesbian "Robinson Crusoe" adventure by Catherine Ennis, \$8.95, Naiad.

*Cherished Love*, lesbian love story by Evelyn Kennedy, \$8.95, Naiad.

*Yellowthroat*, Margarita, bandit, kidnaps Julia, by Penny Hayes, \$8.95, Naiad.

*Searching for Spring*, recovering love by Patricia A. Murphy, \$8.95, Naiad.

*The Sky Blew Blue*, exercises in writing and poem making by Cora Vail Brooks, \$4.95, New Victoria Publishers, Box 27, Norwich, VT 05055.

*Rural Women in Latin America, Experiences from Ecuador, Peru and Chile*, \$8, Isis International/Isis Internacional, Casilla 2067, Correo Central, Santiago, Chile (available in English and Spanish).

*Naming the Waves, Contemporary Lesbian Poetry* edited by Christian McEwen, £5.95, Virago Press, 41 William IV St., London, WC2N 4DB England.

*The Courage to Heal*, a source, exercise and healing book for women survivors of child sexual abuse by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, \$14.95, Harper & Row.

*We Are Everywhere*, writings by and about lesbian parents edited by Harriet Alpert, \$8.95, The Crossing Press, P.O. Box 1048, Freedom, CA 95019.

*Love, Struggle and Change*, an anthology of twelve short stories (straight & lesbian, multi-racial), edited by Irene Zahava, \$8.95, Crossing Press.

*Dreams and Dream Groups: Messages From the Interior*, a new approach to dream interpretation by Eva Renee Neu, \$7.95, The Crossing Press.

*Letters to Marina*, a lesbian seduction in letters by Dacia Maraini, award-winning Italian author, trans. by Dick Kitto & Elspeth Spottiswood, \$8.95, The Crossing Press.

*Over the Hill, Reflections on Ageism Between Women*, by Baba Copper, \$7.95, The Crossing Press.

*Colors and Crystals, A Journey Through the Chakras*, by Joy Gardner, \$10.95, The Crossing Press.

*The Womansleuth Anthology, Contemporary Mystery Stories by Women*, edited by Irene Zahava, \$6.95, The Crossing Press.

*Sappho*, poems & fragments, trans. by Josephine Balmer, \$6.95, Meadowland Books, 120 Enterprise Ave., Secaucus, NJ 07094.

*Rediscovering History: Bringing a Name to Life — Nellie Langford Rowell 1874-1968; Equality in Sports: Perspective; Pay Equity: Perspectives*, are 3 new pamphlets available from the Nellie Langford Rowell Library, \$2 ea., \$5 series, + \$1 postage. 202C Founders College, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ont. M3J 1P3, Canada.

## Contributor's Notes

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**Koré Archer:** my journal has been my best friend for years, but it wasn't until August '86 that I took my writing seriously enough to send it to a publisher. My essay, "Lavender & Silver," was published in the HerBooks anthology, *The World Between Women*, and ever since then, I've been claiming my craft. I am 42 years old, an actress, hystorian, recluse and fairy godmother. I am currently tutoring writing at the Univ. of Calif, Santa Cruz.

**Judith Barrington** is the author of *Trying to be an Honest Woman* and currently working on her next poetry book, *History and Geography*, which will be published in Spring, 1989. She is also translating the poetry of the Uruguayan poet, Christina Peri Rossi, who is now exiled and writing in Spain.

**Joan E. Biren (JEB):** having finished *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front*, I'm working on a new multi-image presentation, *For Love and For Life: The 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights* (which will be available starting in June, 1988) while traveling around the country with my current slide show, *Out of Bounds: A Lesbian Journey*.

**Dr. SDiane Bogus** is a poet and fiction writer who lives in Modesto, CA and is a professor of American Literature at University of California, Stanislaus. She is also editor and owner of WIM Publications, SF.

**Caryatis Cardea** is a 37-year-old working class separatist dyke living in Berkeley. Her major writing block arises when faced with the necessity of a contributor's note.

**Elizabeth Clare:** I am a poet and activist currently living at the Seneca Women's Peace Camp in upstate New York. I grew up on the south coast of Oregon and dream of living there again in a community of dykes.

**D.A. Clarke:** I was born in England in '58, emigrated involuntarily to the States in '62. In 7th grade I was sure I was a stranded Martian; on leaving college I was able to name myself more accurately as a lesbian. I make a living tinkering with large computer systems; I am a separatist, variously compromised; I like machines; I have written one book of verse and recorded one album of music. At the age of thirty I am now beginning to wonder if I may not be, after all, a stranded lesbian from Mars.

**Laura Rose DancingFire:** I'm a country dyke working in the city as a lawyer and social worker for battered women. I've done this work for ten years, and I'm still amazed at the indifference of the legal system to physically and sexually assaulted women and girls.

**DeeAnne Davis** graduated from the University of Iowa with a BA in English and then hung out in the theatre department for a few years doing graduate work in acting. Now a resident of Oakland, CA, she's done some copyediting for women's presses in the Bay area as well as in the work she does in her current j-o-b at Public Media Center. Writing is the prose that is her poetry; acting is the passion that is her heart; running keeps her open; and D. keeps her strong.

**Carolina Delgado:** Gloria Anzaldúa's writing class for women of color has awakened a place in me that's always been there. Now I see life like a pool and I'm ready to dive in. First I must learn how to swim and writing is one of the ways I'm learning.

**Betty Dudley** is a fat woman born and raised in small town Missouri. She now lives and works in San Francisco because the Bay Area offers her support for fat politics and the opportunity to swim with other fat women on Saturday morning.

**Linda Frances:** I'm a special needs teacher. I delight in drinking coffee and reading in coffee shops, hiking in the White Mountains, taking long walks in Cambridge, recalling the colors of the southwest, living with my lover, Dorothy, and writing poetry. I have recently had poetry accepted for publication in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Backbone* and *Proof Rock*.

**Marilyn Frye** is a philosopher. She is in the 15th year of lesbian relating to Carolyn Shafer (who is an artist now, a painter). She thinks she will write more, now that she has a computer.

**Amanda Gable** is a native Georgian and among other things is working on her Ph.D. in women's studies and American literature at Emory University. She has published in *Feminary* and has a story appearing soon in *The North American Review*. She is a feminist lesbian.

**Carolyn Gage** is a lesbian playwright in Portland, OR. She recently concluded a successful run of *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc* at the Portland Women's Theater and is currently touring with the show. Her play, *Coming About*, dealing with women's loss of identity in marriage, was a finalist for the Maude Adams Playwriting Award, a national award given for plays about women's issues. Gage is currently revising a musical based on the life of the athlete Babe Didriksen. She is also the initiator of the Women's Rape Museum Project, a project to establish the first museum/memorial with exhibits to honor our victims and survivors.

**Grace Harwood** is a recovering lover who lives in Oakland, CA. Her photographic images are available through WomanCrafts West on Valencia St. in S.F. Her short fiction and poems have appeared in

publications as diverse as *Bridges*, *Chrysalis*, *Christopher Street*, *Feldspar*, *Prize Stores*, *Paragraph* and *Zyzzyyva*; her interviews and opinions regarding contemporary feminist fiction are often found in *Mama Bears News & Notes* and in *The Bay Area Women's News*.

**Stephaine (CS) Henderson** is a Black Lesbian, single mother of two and a recovering alcoholic. She is a Bay Area poet and author/producer of a book of poetry/prose, *PACKING...and other moves*. She is a regular contributor to *Yoni Lesbian Erotica* magazine, where "TEXAS' 52" first appeared.

**Marti Hohmann** lives and writes in Richmond, VA, where she is an activist, educator, and buddy for the Richmond AIDS Information Network. Other writings have appeared in *Colby Library Quarterly*, *Singles Unlimited Magazine*, and *Iris: a Journal by and about Women*.

**Jano** is a writer, a union organizer, an artist and a very funny person (so she sez). She lives in Oakland with her son Jonah.

**Terri Jewell** is a Black Lesbian Feminist poet and writer living in Lansing, Michigan. She is 33.

**Barbara Johnson:** born in Chicago in 1949, I am a painter/printmaker, residing in Northampton, MA. I enjoy doing portraits, still lifes and large-scale murals and installations expressing a sense of mystery about reality.

**Sondra Knight** is a transplanted New Yorker residing in Seattle, aspiring to meet the many challenges of motherhood, Blackness and coming out.

**Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz** is co-editor of *The Tribe of Dina — A Jewish Women's Anthology* (Sinister Wisdom Books) and the author of *Some Pieces of Jewish Left and Other Stories*. "My Jewish Face" appears in that collection.

**Adrienne Lauby:** born second in a family of ten children, I graduated from Nebraska to travel as a hippie and organize for women's and gay rights. I presently live as a disabled writer in rural California.

**Jasmine Marah** — enigmatic, eclectic, elastic, eccentric, enthusiastic.

**Minnie Bruce Pratt** is the author of two books of poetry, *The Sound of One Fork* and *We Say We Love Each Other*. She is currently finishing a book of poems about being the lesbian mother of her two sons.

**Rebecca Ridgely** gets turned on by the sight of 747s taking off and has a great sense of social responsibility.

**Barbara Ruth:** I am 41, fat, disabled, Jewish and Native American, raised in an alcoholic family which passes as white gentiles. Not surprisingly, passing is one of the primary issues of my life. The poem, "I go to work in drag," is in my book, *Past, Present & Future Passions*.

**Ruthann Robson** lives in North Florida. A collection of her short fiction is forthcoming from Firebrand Books.

**Rose Romano** is the editor of *La Bella Figura*. Her work has appeared in *Room of One's Own*, *Home Planet News*, *Earth's Daughters* and has been/will be in *Common Lives*, *Rebirth of Artemis* and *Footwork*. She has a short prose piece about being an Italian-American lesbian mother in *We Are Everywhere*, an anthology just out from Crossing Press. She is very excited about being the guest editor of SW's Italian-American lesbian issue and is looking forward to finding more commari.

**Victoria Alegria Rosales:** I am a struggling Mexican-Indian poet and novelist, lost in the American system. Now, at almost 49-years of age, I'm finishing my M.A. in special studies at SFSU. Just recently I have finished the biography of my mother and father, dealing with the conflicts they had because of their difference in class: my mother, a white upper-middle class woman; my father, an Indian peon.

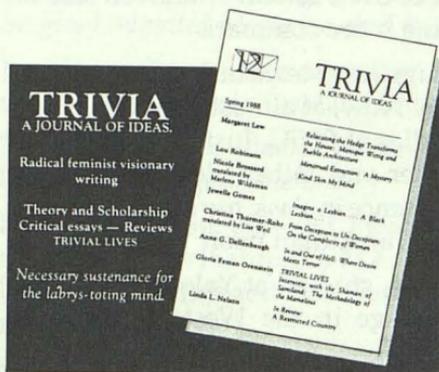
**Ute Margarete Saine**, born in Germany, studied at Yale and has been teaching French literature and language in the West, currently in Arizona.

**Naja Sorella:** I'm a lesbian separatist, born 1952, 1/2 Portuguese, 1/4 German, 1/4 English-Scotch, working class, severely disabled by chronic illness, birth-mother. During my able-bodied years I was a dancer, potter, actress, poet, avid bicyclist, mountain hiker. Now I'm a sometimes-writer, sometimes-artist when I'm lucky enough to get out of bed. I have a beautiful lover of 4 years, wonderful friends, and lots of rocks and stones. I currently live in Berkeley, CA, but I won't be here forever.

**Susanna J. Sturgis** has published essays, reviews, and poems in a variety of publications from *Hurricane Alice* to the *Vineyard Gazette*. "The Bullfight Sonnets" began at the 1987 Feminist Women's Writing Workshops with someone's half-facetious remark that "the only suitable subjects for academic poetry were bullfighting and war"—whereupon several participants undertook to write poems about bullfighting. She lives on Martha's Vineyard, MA, where she is working on a multi-genre collection inspired by Euripides' "Medea" and editing an anthology of women's science fiction stories for Crossing Press.

**Cheryl Marie Wade:** I am a forty-year-old straight woman. My hands have been gnarled like fine old oak since I was sixteen, my feet are soft, fat puppies, my spine resembles more than one letter of the alphabet. I am an incest survivor, a suicide survivor, a survivor of medical experimentation. Pain is an intimate companion. *I am not a euphemism.*

**Pacha Wasiolek** is an artist and illustrator currently living and working in the Bay Area. Her most recent efforts include the cover art for *Outlook* magazine's first edition and the cover art for Cleis Press' *Unholy Alliances*, edited by Louise Rafkin.



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## Announcements and Classified Ads \_\_\_\_\_

### CALLS FOR SUBMISSION

*LA BELLA FIGURA* — a literary journal for Italian-American women, with a special welcome for lesbians. Send SASE for writer's guidelines and subscription information to: Rose Romano, P.O. Box 411223, SF, CA 94141-1123.

*DYKES, DISABILITY AND STUFF*, a start-up networking newsletter is seeking submissions in all forms from women with an interest in health, ability, visibility and disability, as well as financial support. Send contributions to: UPE, Box 6194, Boston, MA 02114-6194.

*SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* is soliciting manuscripts for a special issue on Black Women's Studies (deadline: January 15, 1989). For more information: P.O. Box 42721, Atlanta, GA 30311-0741.

*CAMERA OBSCURA*, the leading American journal on feminism and film theory, is now being edited at the Univ. of Rochester. For themes and guidelines contact: Jana Carlisle, Camera Obscura, U. of Rochester, Rochester, NY 14627.

*NEMESIS* is an anthology seeking written work and photographs from Separatists, Lesbians and Radical Feminists which tell our tales of heteropatriarchal disruption and womyn-positive reality building. For more information send SASE to: Nemesis, c/o Amber L. Katherine, P.O. Box 417042, Chicago, IL 60641-7041. Deadline: December 1, 1988.

*LESBIANS OVER SIXTY*: other lesbians want to know accounts of love between women over sixty, by women over sixty, for an anthology from our perspectives. Send your poems, short prose pieces, letters, diary entries, songs, photos and drawings. Photocopies, please. Include SASE. Send material to: Old Lovers, c/o Womanspirit, 2000 King Mountain Trail, Sunny Valley, OR 97497. Deadline: Cronos Day/Halloween, 1988.

*FINDING THE LESBIANS* — an anthology on the subject of how Lesbians find each other in a society that wants us to believe we don't exist, that each of us is "the only one." Send mss to: Julia Penelope and Sarah Valentine, POB 606, Westford, MA 01886, with SASE. Deadline: December 1, 1988.

Interested in writing for, subscribing to, a FAT LESBIAN NEWSLETTER? We are looking for articles, announcements and a name. To give input, advertise or for more information, write Jasmine Marah, 1442A Walnut St., Box 357, Berkeley, CA 94709.

WIM PUBLICATIONS, woman- and Black-owned small press, WIM welcomes poetry manuscripts April-Aug. from women, African-Americans, lesbian and gay writers, Send SASE (45¢ stamp) for info and catalog to: SDiane Bogus, WIM, 2215-R Market Dept. PCP, SF, CA 94114.

DISABLED WOMEN'S NEWSLETTER in cooperation with Wry Crips Disabled Women's Theater of Berkeley is seeking submissions. Send work to: 2 Sun Lane, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601.

## GENERAL

THE LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES announces its "Friends" Campaign to benefit its many projects and build a funding base for the purchase of a permanent collection site. Donations to the "Friends" Campaign (from \$25 to \$1000 or more) should be made payable to the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc. (or LHEF, Inc.) and are tax-deductible. P.O. Box 1258, NYC, NY 10116.

THE FEMINIST WOMEN'S WRITING WORKSHOP of Ithaca, NY, is seeking contributions to its Scholarship Fund. Contributions are now tax-deductible. Send your contributions or get more information, from: Katharyn Machan Aal, Director, FWWW, P.O. Box 456, Ithaca, NY 14851.

M.A.R.C. (Mothers Against Raping Children) is currently fighting the courts in three cases where the courts have sent sexually abused children to their abuser's (father's) custody. The women of M.A.R.C. and their lawyer are under FBI surveillance and extreme harassment. They need organizers, money, attorneys, publicity, reporting and support. For more information or to send donations: M.A.R.C., Southern Wildsisters Unlimited Bookstore, 250 Cowan Rd., Gulfport, MS 39507 or Sanctuary, P.O. Box 50476, New Orleans, LA 70150.

*AUNT EDNA'S READING LIST*, a monthly review of alternative books for women, \$10, Aunt Edna, 2002 H Hunnewell St., Honolulu, HI 96822.

JEWISH LESBIAN DAUGHTERS OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS meet for support and net-working semi-annually. Write or call P.O. Box 6194, Boston, MA 02114, (617) 321-4252 for information.

Voting? Check out LENORA B. FULANI'S campaign — the first Black woman to get on the ballot as an independent presidential candidate in all 50 states, and the first Black woman to receive federal primary matching funds. Consider casting your vote where the act of voting itself might make a difference.



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We are particularly interested in work that reflects the diversity of our experiences: as women of color, ethnic women, Third World, Jewish, old, young, working class, poor, disabled, fat. We will not print anything that is oppressive or demeaning to lesbians or women, or which perpetuates negative stereotypes. We do intend to keep an open and critical dialogue on all the issues that effect our work, joy and survival. See pp. 6-7 for details on upcoming issues. The themes are intended as guidelines, not as rigid categories. If you have work that doesn't fit an upcoming theme, but belongs in *Sinister Wisdom*, don't hesitate to submit it.

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---

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