SINISTER WISDOM

special issue:
on being old & age

SINISTER WISDOM 10

A Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women

Summer, 1979

This issue edited by Susan Leigh Star

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Back cover photographs by Lynda Koolish (top) and JEB (bottom)

Facing page photographs by Deborah Snow: Alice Sullivan is left, Bertha Stratton is right. Alice is 99, Bertha is soon to be 98. They have been friends since 1904. Their friends call them Sullie and Buddie.

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photographs by Deborah Snow

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this issue is dedicated, with all my love and respect,
to Catherine and Harriet.

-Leigh

photograph by Tee Corinne

Susan Leigh Star

INTRODUCTION: Notes for a Magazine

"'It's the special quality of age that it alone has available to it, to its brain, its recall, the majority of the person's life. Only in age can one brain be all ages. Because a woman in the middle can look forward and backward, she will naturally see that youth is to anticipate, to expect, and age is to possess, to claim, to have available.'

'A decade in the memory is worth two in the hope,' Su said.

'Because the life of the mind is more intense, more complete than the life of the body everyday and because the novelist creates by rounding out, filling in, and rearranging everyday, the old mind is the complete novelist, or the completed rounded-out filled-in novelist is the old mind, with every past age and day at its mindtip. The truly free is she who can be old at any age. Now you know, Su, that it's not necessary to be old to think old. It has been said that geniuses are forever old. And it is true, you're only as old as you feel. Or as you look.'"

–June Arnold, in Sister Gin

". . . experience is as to intensity, and not as to duration."
–Thomas Hardy, in Tess of the D'Urbervilles

"To those of you who would seek to be young once again–no. you do not know that which you would have. you choose only to remember the smiles, the young body, the energy perhaps . . . remember also the pain. the real, real, real anguish of not knowing the unsureness the limbo the limbo . . . very, very rarely are young people accepted as whole people.

I am dead dead. oh my god, all there is, is loneliness."
–from my journal, age 14

The first crack in the carapace of "the world"–the rural New England town where I spent my first seventeen years–was the disjuncture between what I was told about my age and my inner experience. I wanted to read serious books, explore my spirituality, and most of all find other people like me to talk to and experience with: all of these invoked the ridicule and censure of the adults around me, or a kind of bemusement and tolerance at my "precosity." As D.B. Turner and Robin Linden write in this issue, I was not alone in my experience. Between 10 and 17, I was in an agony of waiting, of feeling tortured, invisible, held in place by something which had no relationship to me. It became very important to me during this time that I *remember* later what it was like–the nostalgic, sweetly-colored descriptions I read of youth seemed like sadistic burlesque. As the quote above from my journal shows, I often had to fight even to feel alive.

But once I began to know that I was not too young to feel and think, other questions came easier. As the experience of loving women is a springboard into understanding patriarchal lies and deception, seeing the lies about age helped me understand other coercive social fictions.

The first person I found to talk to, who saw me as a peer and shared her life and friendship with me openly, was a woman ten years older than I–I was fifteen. She was a teacher, someone with freedom and a job, thus power

in the world that I could hardly imagine. In our loving, my relationship to age was indelibly altered–I became a being in my own right, with the power to attract, speak, move, act and make choices–because she had chosen to see me as myself, she helped open the possibility of a world in which I could question ageist assumptions.

If someone had said the word "Lesbian" to me then I would have just looked at them blankly–I literally didn't know the meaning of the word. As I think is true of many girls growing up in isolation, I was incredibly ignorant of even the biological facts of what it meant to be a sexual female being. Though I would get physically aroused with Mary, I named the warmth and wetness I felt love. It was only later, when I learned to distinguish sexual feelings from love, that I realized how deeply disenfranchised from sexual knowledge I had been.

I was born with six grandmothers (four great and two regular), and knew all of them. In our extended family, all of these women were a daily part of my life as a child and teenager, and my two grandmothers are still. At a time when I felt stranded and betrayed by the world's perceptions of my age, I was enveloped in a positive web of old women–Crones–who passed along their wisdom and love to me, and never tried to restrict me. I learned the old skills from them: sewing, planting, telling the weather. One was a poet who composed poems for family gatherings. There was always a sense of rightness for me about sitting with the old women and listening to stories of the past. Their lives were real to me: their travels, girlhoods, loves. I took the stories in as parts of myself; heritage. I believe that I learned from them the tricks of suspending time, to experience the past simultaneously with the future.

One of my grandmothers has spent the past thirty-five years as the close friend and companion of another "widow" (read: free woman). Several years ago, visiting the two of them down on Cape Cod with a lover, my grandmother's friend Meredith pulled me over and whispered to me, "I see that you've found a special friend. That's good, very good. Rachel and I have been together for thirty years, and we've never even had a fight." Lunch was a treat that day–crabmeat salad on paper plates–and they took us to "their" places, beaches they always went to when alone and free of the rest of the family. Watching the two of them, rotund, short, seventy-five years old, in polyester pantsuits, I felt ashamed of my sometimes thoughtless politics that would insist on *my/our* language for woman-identified relationships. In wondering silently about their "Lesbianism," I had often been unable to *hear* forth my grandmother's fires of female friendship, had held myself back from all that richness. Later, when I read Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's article on female friendships in the nineteenth century, I came to understand and appreciate the Victorian, same-sex world of meanings that Rachel and Meredith shared. When I imposed my own 1960's and 70's sensibilities upon them, it was a mistranslation that might have cost me my respect for and understanding of them.[1]

The sparks for this issue began with a series of remarkable conversations about age and ageism over a period of two years with two friends, Baba and Risa. Risa came out ten years ago at the age of twelve. The Lesbian world of New York City was hostile and degrading to young Lesbians. At twenty-two,

she is still with her lover of seven years, and we have shared deep understandings about the dehumanizing of young people, both within and without the Lesbian world. That Risa could not go to a bar, the main place to meet other Lesbians at that time, for the first nine years of her activism in the Lesbian feminist movement, fills me with rage and shame. We have not chosen, for the most part, as a movement, to meet whenever possible in places accessible to young women.

Baba is almost sixty now, and we have together explored many meanings of time and age. Her house was the meeting place for a "consciousness raising' group of sorts, a weekly discussion group about consciousness, language, time, and Lesbian feminism. From that group, which included Myra Love and Alice Molloy, we developed a language for our mutual distance from the normal concepts of "age." We fought, reached, loved and were both brave and tentative in creating an agenerational friendship. I moved with her from denying her age (*you're not old, look at how young you think)*, to being awed or distanced by her age (*how much experience you have, how little we have to talk about)*, to envying her age (*everyone listens to you, you have the force of age-authority, you've been through this already)*, to sharing her anger about ageism towards elder women, and accepting her age and mine as wonderfully changing, central parts of us, involving me because it is *of* us, because wherever two women touch, all of our complexities are relevant.

This issue encompasses many of our conversations. We talked many times of the need for images of strong Lesbian/feminist women in their nineties and eighties, strong seers who can scry for us a future, a council of heretics who can stand on the edge of multiple experience, looking forward and backward, to help us crack open our frozen present-centered sight. If we have no idea of boundary-dwelling at ninety, then we really have no idea about it now, because our lives will have an end-point, a *telos,* a linear stopping-place. Whenever we measure our time linearly, we place a screen between ourselves and our real experience. As Audre Lorde explores in her essay on cancer, even the experience of disease that can come with aging need not become that screen, either: as long as we *experience* our lives, we are whole. Audre's article has helped free me from the fear of my body's age and my fear of disease, restoring me to vision.

The word for "age" is the word for "always" in Old English; "old" derives from the Latin for "to nourish, to grow high and deep." This etymology has become a patriarchal mockery for many elders, particularly in the United States, and particularly for old women. It is no accident that mostly women are in nursing homes, and that nursing homes are what they are.

The semantic derogation of elders is deeply connected with the semantic derogation of women. "The elderly" (or: senior citizens, the aged, old folks, the aging) is a humanistic term (both men and women) which renders invisible old women somewhat like the phrase "Blacks and women" renders Black women invisible.[2] When we talk about "the problems of the elderly," we are talking about a form of oppression of women. As Mary Daly says in *Gyn/Ecology:* the paradigm for genocide is trite, everyday gynocide. I echo her insight for what amounts to the psychic/physical genocide of elders in this society. As Marcia Black and Gayle Pearson elucidate in their writings here, it is the murder

and dismemberment of the Crone aspect of the Goddess that forms the mythic basis for the genocide of old people.

The process of editing this issue has been an extraordinary one for me: I feel oldened, enriched by it. The women whose work appears here have taught me to prefer the chaotic reality of my life to the image–to experience, as Myra Love names it, *lived intensities,* real age. I feel restored to my own age by the example and courage of the women of all ages whose lives and perceptions, freed from static images, appear here. I have become all of my ages more fully.

The articles, poems, photographs and graphics in this issue explore many strands of aging, age, and time. Visions of new kinds of oldness, love of the old, love of the process of becoming old, claiming the pride and wisdom of age. The bitters of age, and of youth; the way that patriarchy has fragmented our experience into a monotonously broken nonflow; the concentration camps that are nursing homes; the way we have been separated from each other, stranded in our respective ages. The process of "intergenerational" sparking between Lesbians: respecting the special experience with which each era imbues us, and wanting that to be a basis for sharing and for individuation–moving from intergenerational to transgenerational to freely agenerational anarchy, where *we* designate what is relevant, where we leap times together, explode the continuity of history by refusing to see ourselves in terms of a "life cycle," and moving instead into a life layering, a "succession of brief, amazing movements/each one making possible the next."[3]

It was impossible to print all the words of all the women who sent in work for this issue. I feel that the work that does appear is a distillate of a collective effort of consciousness. This issue would have been impossible without Robin Ruth Linden and Lynda Koolish, who have helped with every phase of it, intelligently, patiently, and with vision. Baba Copper, Myra Love, Deborah Wolf, Carol Jean Wisnieski, Judith Musick, Barbara DuBois and Sarah Hoagland have all shared their insights about age with me. June Arnold's *Sister Gin* (Daughters, 1975) and Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* (Pocket Books, 1977) were vital sources. And this editing experience has given me an even deeper respect for the work of Catherine and Harriet. I marvel at how they manage to maintain their loving vision in the midst of all these bizillions of details! They have been, as always, wonderfully trusting and encouraging.

My dreams often inform me about how I am changing and growing. The following two dreams helped me further the process of erasing ageist images, replacing them with real experience, and gave me mind-poems for the process of becoming restored to mySelf while editing this issue:

Some people in a fancy part of Boston are renting an apartment. This is a very desirable apartment–rent incredibly low, beautiful location, charming. It also has some other mysterious appeal that's not clear to me. In order to judge the worth of competitors for the apartment–and there are many–the owners/renters decide to have a race. You have to run from their "office" to the apartment, open the door, have a short interview with the current tenant,

and return. The one to return soonest gets the apartment. The realtors tell me, "Well, the young lady that lives there now has really made it beautiful. Her name is Dolly. She's sort of the owner." I go to where the race is, and then look down at my feet and realize that I can't possibly start running in the ridiculous shoes I'm wearing; they're what my friend Sandra, a professor, calls 'tenure shoes,' open, with low heels. I'll just have to take them off and run barefoot. I see all the men around me with their running shoes and big muscles, also wanting to compete for this apartment. I can't see the women as clearly. We discuss routes there. Someone tries to find a shortcut, then gets lost. The next thing I know I'm in the apartment. It is hung with lovely, handmade, unfinished quilts. It is like a gallery of women's art. Indeed, I think, Dolly must have loved this place. Suddenly, though, it becomes clear to me both that I'm going to lose the race and *I don't want the apartment, can't have it, isn't right. An old woman is sitting there near the quilts–I assume she's interviewing instead of Dolly–and I walk past her, not really even caring to be interviewed. I get out the door and something hits me (did she reach out her mind and tap me?)–*she *is Dolly. Not a "young lady," but old. I walk back in and face her: "Dolly." She turns her blind face to me and smiles. I know suddenly that I have passed the test. "They are making me get out of here. I'm 93. I want to keep making my quilts." I touch her, run my hands over her smooth, soft, strong shoulders and arms. "Yes, I will take you from here," I promise, not really knowing how, "we will go together. It's time to go. We'll live together. You'll finish your quilts." As we walk out. we become the same person. I do not know exactly where we will go, but we will not be separated ever again.*

I am to give a poetry reading with a friend of mine, a poet who is exactly twice as old as I. I somehow have forgotten that it is already the night of the reading, and I am frantically trying to find my way to the hall, late, as I remember that it's tonight. There is a terrible rainstorm outside, and I stumble in, wet, bedraggled. My friend is sitting in the hall, and I go and sit beside her. She helps me try and find some old copies of SW *to read from, and comforts me. As we are sitting, she changes and becomes very old–her hair whitens and becomes very wild, her fingernails grow long and white. I am not even sure it's really still her until someone else in the room calls her name and she answers. Then we start to have a conversation about photography, softly, hurriedly, before the reading begins. She says to me, "I love photographs because each print is so individual, it's so chaotic, you never know really how it's going to turn out. So much goes into each print." I look at her with love, laughing, half teasing, "Only you would* prefer *the chaos to the image." She looks back at me, we have a moment of perfect understanding.*

Susan Leigh Star
San Francisco, August 1979

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1. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs*, Autumn, 1975.
2. See Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions*, 2, October, 1977.
3. Adrienne Rich, "From a Survivor," *Diving into the Wreck* (Norton, 1973).

Barbara Macdonald

DO YOU REMEMBER ME?

I am less than five feet high and except that I may have shrunk a quarter of an inch or so in the past few years, I have viewed the world from this height for sixty-five years. I have taken up some space in the world; I weigh about a hundred and forty pounds and my body is what my mother used to call dumpy. My mother didn't like her body and so of course didn't like mine. My mother was not always rational and her judgment was further impaired because she was a recluse but the "dumpy" was her word and just as I have had to keep the body, somehow I have had to keep the word—thirty-eight inch bust, no neck, no waistline, fat hips—that's dumpy.

My hair is grey, white at the temples, with only a little of the red cast of earlier years showing through. My face is wrinkled and deeply lined. Straight lines have formed on the upper lip as though I had spent many years with my mouth pursed. This has always puzzled me and I wonder what years those were and why I can't remember them. My face has deep lines that extend from each side of the nose down the face past the corners of my mouth. My forehead is wide and the lines across my forehead and between my eyes are there to testify that I was often puzzled and bewildered for long periods of time about what was taking place in my life. My cheekbones are high and become more noticeably so as my face is drawn further and further down. My chin is small for such a large head and below the chin the skin hangs in a loose vertical fold from my chin all the way down to my neck where it meets a horizontal scar. The surgeon who made the scar said that the joints of my neck were worn out from looking up so many years. For all kinds of reasons, I seldom look up to anyone or anything anymore.

My eyes are blue and my gaze is usually steady and direct. But I look away when I am struggling with some nameless shame, trying to disclaim parts of myself. My voice is low and my speech sometimes clipped and rapid if I am uncomfortable, otherwise I have a pleasant voice. I like the sound of it from in here where I am. When I was younger, some people, lovers mostly, enjoyed my singing, but I no longer have the same control of my voice and sing only occasionally now when I am alone.

My hands are large and the backs of my hands begin to show the brown spots of aging. Sometimes lately, holding my arms up reading in bed or lying with my arms clasped around my lover's neck, I see my own arms with the skin hanging loosely from my own forearm and cannot believe that the arm I see is really my own. It seems disconnected from me; it is someone else's, it is the arm of an old woman. It is the arm of such old women as I myself have seen, sitting on benches in the sun with their hands folded in their laps; old women I have turned away from. I wonder now, how and when these arms I see came to be my own—arms I cannot turn away from.

I live in Cambridge now in an apartment in an old Victorian kind of

house with a woman I love. Above us are two men, one studying law and the other political science and above them a single woman lives whose lover comes and stays for a few days and then he leaves to return again in a few weeks. The men who live above us are uncomfortable when they meet me in the hall, greet me without looking at me and are always in flight when we meet. The woman on the top floor does not engage with me in any way but visits with the students just below her. I wonder sometimes whether it is my lesbianism they cannot deal with or whether it is my age they cannot deal with. Usually, I conclude they do not deal with people who cannot give them something—and there is nothing I would give them in any way to aid their survival. The law student will soon be endorsing laws that will limit even further my power in the world and the political science instructor can do me nothing but harm. The woman who lives above the men has dinner with them occasionally, and waits to see what power she can align herself with in any tenant dispute.

In the world beyond the house where we live are students riding bicycles and walking along the brick streets or lying on the grass on the Common in summer. As we walk along the avenue, we hear the conversations of the young women telling each other about Him. The pubs along the avenue are filled with the young men the girls are talking about and are building their plans for their future around. But the young men in the pubs are together, without the women, laughing loudly, taking up a great deal of space, and being served by young women anxious to please.

In contrast to the young walking through the streets, there are a few old people, moving slowly, bent over. They are mostly women, alone, carrying home a few groceries in a sack. There are a few old men. The old women do not enter the pubs, they do not drink beer, nor do they spend their evenings talking and laughing, and no young girls are waiting on them anxious to please.

But if you leave Harvard Square and walk down Cambridge Street to Inman Square—there you will find the beginnings of a small women's community. There is New Words, a bookstore of women's literature on feminism, lesbianism, the history of women. Almost any book at random confirms some of who I am and who I once was. But it is seldom that a woman past fifty ever enters the place; whenever I go I am the oldest woman there.

And if you walk on beyond New Words you come to Bread and Roses, a woman's restaurant, where the women who cook and serve you confirm your right to be in the world as a woman, as much as do the posters on the wall, posters of Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Gertrude Stein, Emma Goldman. The food is good and although groups of women sit together explaining, talking, laughing, there is not the struggle for space and the struggle to be heard that there is in the pubs along our avenue. And if you stay after supper on a Sunday, there may be a reading by some woman writer, or a film on Gertrude Stein or Georgia O'Keefe, or perhaps a film of Lillian Hellman's will be shown. But though all this is there to confirm the lives of women—there is no woman there my age. I enter the restaurant and the film room always aware that I am the oldest woman there. I am glad the women's community has a beginning and is there to support women but I am aware that it is not there to confirm who *I* am. The younger women there have

no place in their heads to fit me into, have no idea what I come for as no other woman my age comes, and yet I am nearer the age of most of the women on their posters from whom they draw their support.

Sometimes I feel the young women are supported by other young women on the basis of a promise or a hope of who they may become, but that they demand that I somehow already have proved my right to be taken in. Sometimes I feel like the only way I'll really get into Bread and Roses– alive in the eyes of the young women–is dead, on a poster.

Wherever we go, Cynthia and I, to the pubs, to the theatre to see "The Word is Out," to hear Adrienne Rich or Olga Broumas, Mary Daly, Kate Millett, or to some meeting of the lesbian caucus of NOW, I am always the oldest woman.

I keep wondering where everybody else is. Where are the friends I drank beer with in the fifties? Where are the young women I slept with in the thirties and forties? Did they never grow old? Did they never reach sixty-five along with me? Sometimes, alone on the streets, I look about me and feel there has been some kind of catastrophe from which only I have been spared. Sometimes in desperation I search out some woman my own age on the street, or at some bus stop, or in some laundromat, to ask her, "Do you remember me? Did we drink beer together in the pubs in Seattle? Did we sleep together, you and I, in the thirties when there were no jobs and never enough to eat and love carried the whole burden to see us through?" But there is no look of recognition in her eyes. I see instead fear, I see that she is paralyzed with fear, that she does not know where my friends and lovers have gone, that she cannot remember who it was she used to be. She wants to show me pictures of her grandchildren as though all of her answers could be found there–among the living. And I go on down the street and I know there has been a catastrophe, a holocaust of my generation of women, and I have somehow been spared.

My feeling of having been spared is confirmed in the way that no one seems to be expecting me anywhere. Even if I go into a local shop to buy clothes, I am always greeted with the question, "Is this for yourself?" as though I somehow must be buying for someone else or as though I didn't buy clothes for myself; as though I must have some supply somewhere in an old trunk, left me by my mother, there waiting for me to wear when I reached the right age.

But I have grown to like living in Cambridge. I like the sharp lines of the reality of my life here. The truth is I like growing old. Oh, it isn't that I don't feel at moments the sharp irrevocable knowledge that I have finally grown old. That is evident every time I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and brush my teeth. I may begin as I often do, wondering if those teeth that are so much a part of myself, teeth I've clenched in anger all my life, felt with my own tongue with a feeling of possession, as a cat licks her paw lovingly just because it is hers–wondering, will these teeth always be mine? Will they stay with me loyally and die with me, or will they desert me before the Time comes? But I grow dreamy brushing my teeth and find myself, unaware, planning as I always have when I brush my teeth–that single-handed crossing I plan to make. From East to West, a last stop in the Canaries and then the trade winds. What will be the best time of year? What boat? How much sail? I go over again the list of supplies, uninterrupted until some

morning twinge in my left shoulder reminds me with uncompromising regret that I will never make that single-handed crossing—probably. That I have waited too long. That there is no turning back.

But I always say probably. Probably I'll never make that single-handed crossing. Probably, I've waited too long. Probably, I can't turn back now. But I leave room now, at sixty-five, for the unexpected. That was not always true of me. I used to feel I was in a kind of linear race with life and time. There were no probablys, it was a now or never time of my life. There were landmarks placed by other generations and I had to arrive on time or fail in the whole race. If I didn't pass—if the sixth grade went on to the seventh without me, I would be one year behind for the rest of my life. If I graduated from high school in 1928, I had to graduate from college in 1932. When I didn't graduate from college until 1951, it took me twenty years to realize the preceding twenty years weren't lost. But now I begin to see that I may get to have the whole thing and that no experience longed for is really going to be missed.

"I like growing old." I say it to myself with surprise. I had not thought that it could be like this. There are days of excitement when I feel almost a kind of high with the changes I feel taking place in my body, even though I know the inevitable course my body is taking will lead to debilitation and death. I say to myself frequently in wonder, "This is my body doing this thing." I cannot stop it, I don't even know what it is doing, I wouldn't know how to direct it; my own body is going through a process that only my body knows about. I never grew old before; never died before. I don't really know how it's done, I wouldn't know where to begin, and God knows, I certainly wouldn't know when to begin—for no time would be right. And then I realize, lesbian or straight, I belong to all the women who carried my cells for generations and my body remembers how for each generation this matter of ending is done.

Cynthia tells me now about being a young girl, watching and enjoying what her body was doing in preparation for her life. Seeing her breasts develop, watching the cleft disappear behind a cushion of dark pubic hair, discovering her own body making a bright red stain, feeling herself and seeing herself in the process of becoming.

When I was young, I watched this process with dread, seeing my breasts grow larger and larger and my hips widen. I was never able to say, "This is my body doing this wonderful unknown thing." I felt fear with every visible change, I felt more exposed, more vulnerable to attack. My swelling breasts, my widening hips, my growing pubic hair and finally the visible bleeding wound, all were acts of violence against my person, and could only bring me further acts of violence. I never knew in all the years of living in my woman's body that other women had found any pleasure in that early body experience, until Cynthia told me. But now, after a lifetime of living, my body has taken over again. I have this second chance to feel my body living out its own plan, to watch it daily change in the direction of its destiny.

When autumn comes to Cambridge, we walk along the brick streets between Massachusetts Avenue and Concord Avenue, and I think a lot about endings, as we are walking along arm in arm, because all about us endings are so visible. Dry leaves cover the brick streets, and the bare branches above

us reveal now the peeling paint on the old Victorian houses and the chalky crumbling of old chimneys and brick walls. I feel how the houses are ending a period and the trees are ending a season. And in contrast to Cynthia's lighter step, her narrow waist, I become sharply aware that I, too, am living my ending.

As we walk along, other things are revealed–signs. In Cambridge, the signs are everywhere,–on tree trunks, telephone poles, fences–paper signs, sometimes printed, sometimes mimeographed, hanging by the last tack or torn piece of tape. By the end of winter they will be hanging in shreds.

Someone has a need and puts their sign up. Exclamation marks remain to attest to how great the need was at the time: Garage Sale! Lost Dog! Apartment Needed! or Apartment Mate Needed! Everybody puts them up but the person with the need never comes to take the sign down. I think, as we walk along, of the experience missed–half lived–left in tatters in the wind.

Somebody decided to have a garage sale, to "get rid of things." At the end of the sale, no one came to take the sign down, to feel, "The sale is over. These things I got rid of, these things I did not."

Or in fear and pain another person pleads to every passerby to help her find her dog, but the ending is not felt, removing the sign to say, "My search is over. I have found her," or "The search is over, but my dog may never return. I must become a person whose dog cannot be found."

Once someone needed an apartment, a roof, a home. She must have found one, somewhere, yet she continues to call out that she is homeless. I feel that she probably is homeless, not ever having finished with the homeless feeling–never having come back to the feeling or the place to take the sign down, to say, "It isn't the apartment I dreamed of; I wanted a garden space on a first floor–but it is my apartment now. I am the woman who now has an apartment."

And the one who wanted an apartment mate? Did she find one? Did she not find one? Does she really know whether she found one or not? She missed the ending of the experience of her need, missed the chance to say, "I will take the sign down. I will live alone. I will be the person who lives alone for awhile." Or "I will take the sign down. I have found someone who chose to live with me. I am known as the person who lives with someone."

As we walk along I see my own signs, left hanging in my life. One by one I take them down. I wanted a different body when I was young. I have lived in this body for sixty-five years. "It is a good body, it is mine."

I wanted another mother and another beginning when I was young. I wanted a mother who liked herself, who liked her body and so would like mine. "My mother did not like herself and she did not like me; that is part of the definition of who she was and of who I am. She was my mother."

When I was fifty-two, my lover left me after fourteen years of living our lives together. I wanted her to return. I waited for many years and she did not come back. "I am the woman whose lover did not return."

I was lonely for years of my life and I wandered in search of a lover. "I am a person who loves again. I am a woman come home."

So often we think we know how an experience is going to end so we don't risk the pain of seeing it through to the end. We think we know the outcome so we think there is no need to experience it, as though to antici-

pate an ending were the same as living the ending out. We drop the old and take up the new—drop an idea and take up a new one—drop the middleaged and old and start concentrating on the young, always thinking somehow it's going to turn out better with a new start. I have never had a child, but sometimes I see a young woman beginning to feel the urge to have a child at about the same time she feels some disappointment at how her own life is turning out. And soon the young mother feels further disappointment when her own mother withdraws her loving investment in her daughter to pour it into her grandchild. I see how all are devalued, the grandmother devalued by society, devalued by her own self, the daughter devalued by her mother, and the granddaughter, valued not for who she is but for who she may become, racing for the landmarks, as I once did.

We never really know the beginning or the middle, until we have lived out an ending and lived on beyond it.

Of course, this time, for me, I am not going to live beyond this ending. The strangeness of that idea comes to me at the most unexpected moments and always with surprise and shock, sometimes I am immobilized by it. Standing before the mirror in the morning, I feel that my scalp is tight. I see that the skin hangs beneath my jaw, beneath my arm; my breasts are pulled low against my body; loose skin hangs from my hips, and below my stomach a new horizontal crease is forming over which the skin will hang like the hem of a skirt turned under. A hem not to be "let down," as once my skirts were, because I was "shooting up," but a widening hem to "take up" on an old garment that has been stretched. Then I see that my body is being drawn into the earth—muscle, tendon, tissue and skin is being drawn down by the earth's pull back to the loam. She is pulling me back to herself; she is taking back what is hers.

Cynthia loves bulbs. She digs around in the earth every fall, looking for the rich loamy mold of decayed leaves and vegetation, and sometimes as she takes a sack of bone meal and works it into the damp earth, I think, "Why not mine? Why not?"

I think a lot about being drawn into the earth. I have the knowledge that one day I will fall and the earth will take back what is hers. I have no choice, yet I choose it. Maybe I won't buy that boat and that list of supplies; maybe I will. Maybe I will be able to write about my life; maybe I won't. But uncertainty will not always be there, for this is like no other experience I have ever had—I can count on it. I've never had anything before that I could really count on. My life has been filled with uncertainties, some were not of my making and many were: promises I made myself I did not keep, promises I made others I did not keep, hopes I could not fulfill, shame carried like a weight heavier by the years, at my failure, at my lack of clear purpose. But this time I can rely on myself, for life will keep her promise to me. I can trust her. She isn't going to confuse me with a multitude of other choices and beckon me down other roads with vague promises. She will give me finally only one choice, one road, one sense of possibility. And in exchange for the multitude of choices she no longer offers, she gives me, at last, certainty. Nor do I have to worry this time that I will fail myself, fail to pull it off. This time, for sure I am going to make that single-handed crossing.

ΤΟ ΠΑΡΑΜΥΘΙ ΤΗΣ ΣΟΦΗΣ ΓΙΑΓΙΑΣ

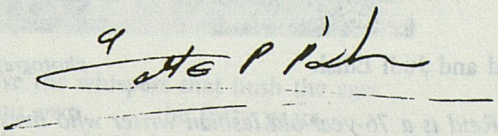
Άκου πώς ταξιδεύουνε τά πράγματα
μέσα στις φλέβες μας
μέ τόν ἀργό καί σίγουρο ρυθμό σημάτων
- ὁ δρόμος πού δεν εἶναι μόνο σρόμος
τό χόρτο πού δέν εἶναι μόνο χόρτο
κι ἡ καλημέρα πού τό χαμόγελό της κρυσταλώθηκε
σχέδιο τῆς μνήμης καί δέ λέει νά διαγύσει-

Καί μιά βαθειά ἐλπιδα ἀνεξήγητη
φρέοκια σάν τῆς αὐγῆς τό ἀστρο
μά ὡστόσο πιό παληά
κι ἀπό τήν πρώτη σου ἀνάσα.
Κι ἐνα κλαδί ἀγάπη γιά τήν παλάμη σου
ἀντίδωρο τῆς μοίρας στή φθορά σου

THE WISE GRANDMOTHER'S TALE

Listen to how things travel
inside our veins
with the slow sure rhythm of signals
– the road that is not just a road
the grass that is not just grass
and the goodmorning whose smile has crystallized
memory's map refusing to dissolve

And a profound hope unexplained
fresh as a star at dawn
but ever so much older
and from your very first breath.
And a sprig of love in your palm
fate's gift in return for loss



–Elli Perraki
translated by Jacqueline Lapidus

Ruth Reid and Judi Ellish *photographs by Lynda Koolish*

Ruth Reid is a 76-year-old lesbian writer who lives in Berkeley. Being with Ruth, listening to her stories, sharing my own, growing with her insights, have all been for me a way of loving. "It is our want of passion, our inertia, that creates emptiness in old age"– so says Simone de Beauvoir. I wrote this poem in celebration of Ruth Reid (who is writing her own autobiographical novel, **DARK BIRTH***) and in honor of our relationship.*

photograph by Lynda Koolish

NO WANT OF PASSION

for Ruth Reid 1979

I think of you in my recent Berkeley mind
Four years new we are at first polite
and admiring I spoke softly and sat at your feet
My mouth wide open as my eyes

Your words pour into me a long continuous stream
addictive as Turkish coffee biting soothing
stirring in me the sleepy silences of my own
unspoken questions unshared answers

You remove the whispers that hush the ages
between our own the forty years
that separate my birth from yours
(time greater still than I have lived)

You give to the flat map of words
the oceans of your emotion
and let me see
the rivers that fill them

You take my hand into caves
and show me where a touch is warm
where mother moon hides by day except for
those who dare to follow her at dawn

I look at your beautiful face
and find it carefully watermarked darker
edges blending into eye interiors like an ancient
manuscript unearthed from a noble urn

I discern the separate signatures
of goddesses imprimatur
of tears
of laughter

You reel into your seventies the knowledge
of all that came before a lifeline
hooked into fleshy memory vivid
as pain bright as blood warm as woman

Real as touch
(mothers sensitively finger our navels)
at the watery depth
of my womaning

You weave yourself into my life
Words echoing ocean sounds as if
your mouth were a moon shell on my ear
Fingers fishtailing wavey tales in the air

You say your heart is weak Yet I watch
you wrap its strength around the youngest child
remembering still the digitalis a ritual
as rigid as rent

I make your coffee cold as you like it
and talk of the book you are writing: a window
into the Magritte sky of your life in this life
separate yet so much a part of us all

You light another cigaret read your manuscript
and forget your glasses (we both don't notice until the third page)
You say you'd better have them
and you continue . . .

I ask you about all the love so much for so many
How do you do it? "I've always been loved. So much."
Our eyes nestle into each others' and there are
no more words.

–Judi Ellish

photograph by JEB

surviving and more:

INTERVIEW WITH MABEL HAMPTON

by Joan Nestle
Lesbian Herstory Archives
New York, New York

I met Mabel Hampton in 1950 when I was 10 years old. She was a friend and buddy of my mother's; they both were devoted to betting on the horses to get over hard times and there were many hard times. Mabel and my mother remained confidantes until my mother's death in 1977. Mabel was the first Lesbian woman I knew; she used to read Lesbian paperbacks, carrying them in her raincoat pocket with the covers turned in so she could read them on the subway in peace. She and her lover of forty years, Lillian Foster,

Mabel Hampton and friend *photograph by JEB*

lived in the South Bronx. I would bring my lovers to meet them, hoping to get their approval. Now our relationship is much deeper. Mabel had her own library all these years–a self-educated woman, she always looked for Lesbian images. She donated her Lesbian paperbacks and her collection of Wonder Women comics to the Archives. Since Lillian's death last summer, Mabel is sharing more and more of her life with us. She spends Wednesdays at the Archives, sleeps over and leaves Thursday morning. She never misses her Archives days, and it is a long subway trip to get here. Mabel Hampton is a wise strong loving woman who never lost her integrity either as a Black woman or as a Lesbian.

–Joan Nestle

Mabel, how old are you?

Seventy-seven, May the second, last.

How long have you been a Lesbian?

I've been a Lesbian since I was a very young girl, well, let's say about eight or nine. Now that I know what it is, why, I can see that I've been this, I've been in the life since I was very young. And I liked it because I could understand, even at that age, I understood women and I liked them. I didn't understand *exactly* what it was until I got up into my teens, but then I was glad that I liked them.

How do you feel being in your seventies?

I feel all right . . . maybe I have a little arthritis, and I'm trying to get rid of that, and I'm glad I'm at this age because then I understand what the rest of the young people are going through, and if there's anything I can tell them to do, I'd be more than glad to do it.

As long as they're a Lesbian, and they like it, I'd say–keep it up–because, in my experience, it's nothing to be ashamed of, you're not hurting anybody–it's just that you like women, and you're supposed to like them, because your mother held you so close to her all the time. And you should feel that you're part of every woman, and try to do the best you can for them . . .

How do you feel about women yourself at this point? Do you still find women attractive?

Oh, yes. [emphatically] Yes, I do, I find them very attractive, and a little desirable, um hm. I still smile at them, and they smile at me, and that makes it better.

I had a birthday party given to me by a dear friend, and I met quite a few friends, people I knew, and people I didn't know, and I also met a lady in the Congress, in the House of Representatives, a hundred and five years old, so I think I should take a back seat on that. And she kissed me, and we talked, and she was very nice. And in comin' on down, I met another woman, oh! I was given a party at the Senior Citizens', and there was a woman there eighty years old, and her and I was the oldest ones there. So we talked . . . it just made me feel good to know that I've arrived at this age, and am still going strong [laughs].

You sure are! Tell about your philosophy about doctors. About how you feel–you don't go to doctors. You use herbs and things.

I think the reason that I have the health I have is that I don't believe in doctors. They're all right, but so much happens, where the doctor is implicated in it. All I like is my tea, different teas, nettle tea, parsley tea, and they have brought me around, because I had arthritis. Labor Day I had a muscle spasm and a stroke along with it, and now I'm feeling fine, I got rid of all of it, and I can walk, and then, I couldn't walk, and I was in bed two and a half weeks. [*What about garlic?*] Oh, yes, garlic goes along with parsley. . . . After I had the muscle spasm I got to go for a book that was sent me, and that book has done me a world of good. [*Is that the Chinese herb book?*] That's right, they recommend ginseng, ginseng tea, and so, you know, I'm feeling better? I can get my hands back of my head, and all that, see, and I think, and I may hope, that I may live to the ripe old age of eighty-five.

I advise everyone: you have to live right, and you're living right if you're a Lesbian! . . . Live right. You've got to live right, that's right, live a clean life. Don't be messing around with other people's property. Then if you do, then whatever you do, whatever you want to get out of life, you've got to put something in it to get out, and that something is living decent and taking care of your body, and everybody else's body–help everyone else, help as best you can.

How do you feel different now from, say, when you were thirty?

Oh, when I was thirty I was runnin' like gangbusters! Oh, boy, I was runnin' after girls, I was carryin' on, I had myself thirty, I had myself a lily white time! All the girls, in the show–I was in the show–was dancin' in the nightclubs, I just had a ball!

How do you feel now?

Well, I can't dance now. How do I feel about it? Well, I do the best I can now. I used to sing, when I was thirty, I was singing in the chorus, at town hall, and Carnegie Hall, I was taking lessons from Robert Malone, and we went into a couple of places and had concerts . . .

Do you feel wiser now? Wiser about life?

Well, about *my* life, yes, I went through enough to know that things are entirely different, and I'm glad I went through it, because now I can look back and see the things that happened, but if I had it to do over again, I would be a Lesbian, but there's a lot of things I wouldn't do. I'd still be a Lesbian, and be smiling at the ladies [laughs], and settin' lookin' at them, admiring them.

Do you feel that your feeling about women has given you strength? You're a pretty independent person.

Well, naturally, women give you, when you're going with women you get a lot of strength because they sympathize with you and you sympathize with them, and that's the way it is, and they stick with you, you see, they stick right with you, and those that don't just let 'em go, don't bother with them. Now, what else?

Mabel Hampton *photograph by JEB*

What do you have to tell younger Lesbian women? What would you want to tell them about what they have to look forward to, about feelings about aging? All these women are frightened of getting older.

Oh, that's *stupid!*

Why do you think it's stupid?

Well, I'll tell you why . . . After all, you're not on this planet to stay any length of time–you stay your time out, see, like I just said, I want to live to eighty-five, I don't know, though, if my time allotted will be up tomorrow.

Were you ever afraid of getting old?

No, I never thought about getting old. I just lived from this day to the next day, to the next day, see, because it ain't necessarily gettin' old because you're going to stay here until your time is up, whether you're two years old or a hundred and two! You're going to stay until your time is up. If we *knew* that, then we'd be different.

Mabel, do you ever get angry at how you get treated in this society as an older Black woman?

There's nobody, practically, that makes me angry now, I don't pay anybody any attention, all my friends that I've had for years and years they treat me nice; everybody likes me–seems that way, they smile at me–but me, I have a sharp answer for everybody, and therefore they tell me I shouldn't do it, but with me, being my age, I believe I can do anything I want to do. And if I don't like you, I don't bother with you. Therefore, you cannot hurt me, because I don't give you a chance. I read you before you read me, and that's your worry.

Mabel, just lately we've been going to some conferences together–could you talk about them? What do you think about what's going on in the Lesbian community? How does it make you feel? Like the conference out in Brooklyn?

[This was the Lesbian survival conference in Brooklyn, NY, and we attended the workshop on growing older as Lesbians.]

I enjoyed that, I'd like to go back there and meet those people, because even if they haven't been long in the life, I believe that they'll stay in it, because a younger person will get in and get out, but an older person won't–they'll stay. And me, I've always stayed there because I liked it, from a child, see.

Mabel, what plans do you have for your future? What kind of things would you like to do more of?

Well, I'd like to visit lots of the senior citizen projects and see how they're getting along, and go in and look around . . .

What about in the Lesbian community?

Oh, I'd love to be in with them, but right now it seems like there's so many straight women, *I* call them straight women, that's all mixed up so that you've got to focus your mind on a couple of people to see who they are . . . If you're not true, you don't know who's a Lesbian, who isn't, because all of them act the same. You've got to sit down, and talk to them, pick 'em, just like you would a Chinese puzzle, so you can find out who they are, what they are, what they do, and how they did it.

Mabel, remember when we heard that there were two women in a nursing home in Boston, and you wanted to do a tape? Why did you want to do that?

I want to do a tape, because I want to get their version of when they met and how long they've been together, and what happened, when they first met. When they were young, they must've been passionate in love with each other. And they just stayed together, stayed together, and those are people I like, but you've got to look and look to find those people . . .

Do you think it's important to find these women and put them on tape?

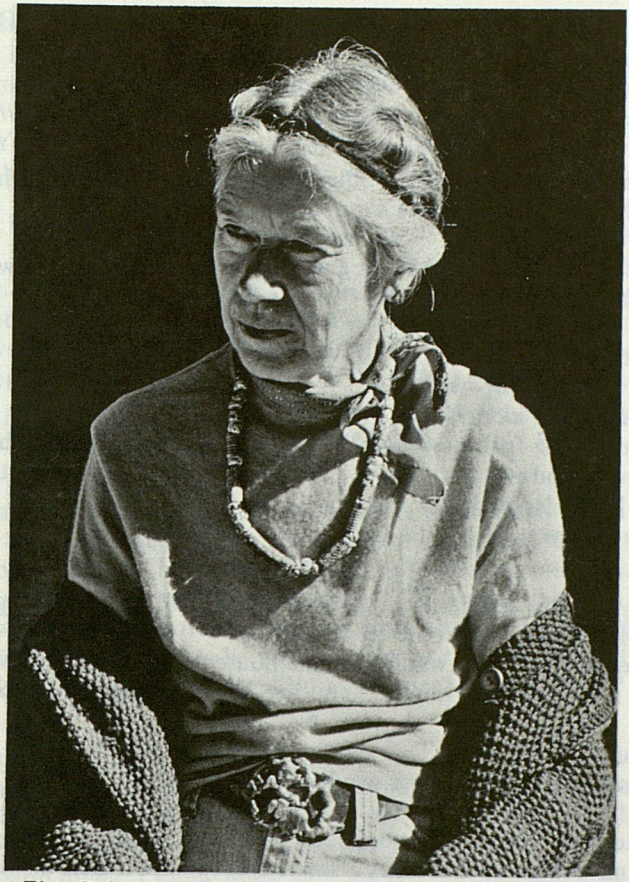
Well, yeah, if they agree with it, yes. But there's so many people, I've talked to quite a few people–people are nervous about it–and why, I don't know, but they are, they don't want to be implicated in it. I don't know what they're afraid of, but . . .

But you're not afraid. You make tapes all the time for the Archives.

I'll tell you, Joan, how I feel about the Archives. We are going ahead and going ahead means that Lesbians are branching out. In years to come I might be gone, but thank God at least I'll go down in history. I want to be a part of going on. The archives is a marvelous thing. It should be widened. Each country should have one. We need to work together and stick together. My life has had three parts, the first is God, the next part is passion, the third is love. I may be wrong but that is how I lived my life. Now I have a staunch true friend. I will find the passion somewheres else.

I don't have nobody to be afraid of. You remember that. I've always been Mabel Hampton, and I always continue to be Mabel Hampton.

 (transcribed and edited by Leigh Star)



Elsa Gidlow *photograph by Lynda Koolish*

From woman-created refuges and enclaves where we renew our strength, become familiar with our authority as se-ers, poets and learn to use it, we must envision the world we want, make it so real in our hearts that it already exists like the child growing towards birth, while we shape our songs of encouragement.

That is what I moved towards from my fiftieth year personally to salvage life and sanity. It took a long time, still working as a journalist, but beginning to write more of the poetry that was closest to my deepest self. It was necessary to express the angry or socially critical vision; but I needed to go beyond that phase and explore wider, more versatile and positive reflections of my experience. . . .

Now, nearing eighty, in the quiet, bird-singing garden refuge arduously won from the years of economic pressure–as well as the wild natural terrain–and named Druid Heights, there still may be time to listen to the inner voice, the voice of the sacred, disturbed by fewer dissonances. I should like now to find heart to add to the songs of love, laughter and rejoicing, without which no victory has value.

–from "Footprints in the Sands of the Sacred" by Elsa Gidlow

D. B. Turner

"WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE . . . "

"She's awfully cute, Ruth." Mother beams. "And so smart for her age. But isn't she a little *skinny* and *short* for eight years old?"

Mother blushes. "Well . . . " she begins.

"Oh," continues Aunt Hazel, "I guess she takes after you. Oh what a cute thing! Does she ever smile?"

* * *

"Quit it Dad!!"

"Oh, is Susie getting mad?"

"*I said leave me alone!!!*"

"Are we getting frustrated now?" He continues to laugh. My cheeks are hot with anger and wet with tears. I can't lose control. But I can't keep control. *No!! Won't* let them have this one.

"What's that you say, Little Girl?"

* * *

It's only slightly different now. The walls are still there, although with a few carefully chiseled and time-eroded gaps.

Mom peers out the car window at the houses neighboring mine like they're something from a Warhol movie. "You live in a *black* neighborhood again, dear?"

"Well . . . "

"Do you have locks on your windows?"

"Mom . . . "

Dad interrupts this with his opinion. "Well now, Oakland has one of the highest crime rates in the country. Now I don't know if that includes Berkeley, but it *is* so close . . . "

Later at dinner, my father is talking again. "I hear you saying all this stuff, all these radical ideas, and I just can't figure out where you got them from. At *your* age, the only possible influences could be heredity and environment," he explains. I stare into my salad, exasperated at him once again totally negating my personal experience. He continues, " . . . and then I just have to ask myself 'where did I go wrong?'"

Mom is looking at me beseechingly when I glance up from the lettuce. "Why don't you ask yourself where did you go *right?!*" I suggest. "Did I really turn out that awful?" My knuckles are turning white gripping my fork. I'm not even pursuing the negation issue, my life is already invisible to him. I have to reach him some way he can understand. "You raised me to be a free-thinker and that's what I am." He smiles. Oh, I hate to stroke his ego like this. *I* raised me. Not him.

* * *

September 1977. I'm new to the area, examining the Housing Available board at the women's bookstore. "Roommate wanted: nonsmoker, vegetarian, pets negotiable, over 25." "We are two lesbians, work full time, seeking mature woman over 30." "Woman roommate wanted in collective household, 25 or

over . . . "

My friend suggested I lie about my age. But shit, I don't want to live with anybody I have to lie to. I go ahead and call one "over 25" number. I explain to the woman that I like vegetarian food, and yes, I can cover rent until I get a job. We have a rather amiable conversation and agree on a personal interview. "Yeah, it sounds like you'd get along pretty well here."

"Yeah, but there's one thing: I don't meet your age requirement. I'm twenty."

Silence. "Oh," she says pensively.

I try to address the issue. "But I really don't understand what difference it makes to you. I mean, to make your decision based solely on age . . . "

"Oh but there's a huge difference. Like, you younger women grew up with the women's movement, while I had to go through this really long, heavy heterosexual period. No, I'm sorry, I don't think it would work out."

"Hey, I grew up in a small town where they never even *heard* of feminism . . . "

She won't hear it. "Sorry, I just don't think it'd work. Bye."

* * *

The cigarette smoke hangs thick yet invisible in the employment office, downtown Oakland. I'm probably the only one in here who is sincerely looking for a job. I scan the boards posted with little "help wanted" forms. "Institutional cook. min. 5 yrs. exp. food prep." "Driver for disabled. $4.75/hr., must be over 25." Shit. Gotta be over 21, gotta have years of experience.

"Nice girl like you oughtta be able to get a waitress job somewhere," they say when I ask for work at shops. "No experience?!! *Train* you?!? Ha ha ha!!!"

* * *

I get more of the same when I finally do land a job. Usually there is subtle doubt (if not outright disbelief) of my credibility on any topic. Occasionally it is more blatant, particularly with one of my co-workers, Gail. She begins most of her conversations with "When *I* was your age . . . " which I finally ask her to stop doing. I know quite well she is older, but she does not have to use it to explain all our differences. Then she says to me, controlled and impatient, as with a child, "Look, some people, by virtue of having been on the planet longer, know a few more things than you . . . "

* * *

Sisters. Listen to the sound of the word. Sisters. It implies equality, cohesiveness; and support, a willingness to understand. Usually, other feminists/lesbians have been my only contacts who are willing to come to term with ageism. "I feel our ages are like different colors we bring when we come together," explains one woman. "We come from the Sixties, some of us lived through World War II, some from rural areas, others from big cities. We just need to understand our diversity."

Unfortunately, it's not always this simple. Perhaps it is because of our very idealism, our sisterhood, that I come to expect nearly total consideration from my friends in the women's movement.

We've just finished a meeting. "Let's go to the bar," someone suggests. Everyone's face lights up. Except mine.

"Hey wait a minute. They won't let me in, I'm not twenty-one. Can we go somewhere else?"

Embarrassed silence. "Well, maybe they won't be checking ID," someone else suggests. Everyone is putting on their jackets and heading toward their cars. Nothing more is said, and I am faced with the choice of not going, or risking being kicked out and having to sit in a car or catch a bus home. Blecch, I hate it when it's like this.

I also wonder sometimes when I will stop hearing my age repeated to me preceded by "just" or "only." Or things like "She's so together for her age!" It's tempting to take it on as a compliment, but it makes me wonder: what about young people who don't seem so "together?" Besides, I don't want to be seen as a "credit to my race" or a child prodigy; it's a long fall from that pedestal when I pass whatever age takes me out of the youth category.

You seem to think I'm special now because I don't fit your assumptions of what a young person is like. Maybe I appear more experienced, or smarter, or talk and act like a woman older than myself. Yet, appearances are not reliable. Maybe I've just learned to get by in our 25- to 40-year-old dominated community; maybe I can pass for being all "grown up."

There is no "grown up." We are not static beings. Ever. We all continue to change, to go through phases. We all have childself, motherself, who peek out intermittently through our hopes and memories. We are many ages, the sum of our experiences and much more.

Robin Ruth Linden

NOTES ON AGE, RAGE AND LANGUAGE

Age: the mark of time, temporal context for discrete fragments of constancy and change. How do we learn to hear simultaneous and independent voices inside our Selves, as a fugue, sometimes as answers to questions we're afraid to ask, pointing directionality, possibility, purpose, meaning?
I am 22. I want to say this with pride. Rather, I feel pangs of shame, inclined to apologize for not being 40, with the experience, grace and wisdom I imagine that implies. How I am still locked into their chronology, their static measure of time.

** * **

"Act your age." To remind us we are deviant, violating lines of control. To return us to their control.

I've often wondered why I cannot remember so much of my childhood. Fifteen years of images and feelings are shrouded in darkness, like being depressed or sleeping without dreaming. Yet, as a child I felt unspeakably deep rage that was neither confirmed in nor translatable to their language.

Even now I can scarcely begin to speak of it.

** * **

Being out of control, though, involves a shift in center or locus of control, from Other to Self. It *is* being in control, although it may *feel* chaotic—or even torpid.

Rage: pre-verbal and unutterable, even to our Selves and also, mutual and articulate and therefore, political and directed, is caused by and the result of being outside their control: in a natural state of wildness.

** * **

Semantic equivalents to "act your age":
"Why are you being so stubborn?" Meaning: nothing you are—or could be—concerned with is as important as you think it is. You should be dispassionately occupied with dolls or boys—things Other than your Self.

"You're much too young to take life so seriously—you're just too sensitive." Meaning: feeling deeply is inappropriate to your age.

** * **

Thus, age is a bludgeon for restoring children to the control of adults.

** * **

Adults exercise physical as well as psychic and symbolic coercion. Violence against children is so pervasive and normative that most of us scarcely notice

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Lynda Koolish has deeply encouraged this writing, patiently hearing me forth from silence. Leigh Star's wisdom and understanding constantly urge me to make real what I can yet imagine. Her loving friendship is profoundly enspiriting. Adrienne Rich's *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying* has inspired much of my thinking and feeling in this piece.

when a mother slaps her child in the supermarket or when a father threatens his adolescent son with his fist. For years, I thought that all parents "spanked" their children and thus, that my father's occasional beatings weren't so bad.

And yet, how consistently fearful I was of his demonstrating upon my flesh the power—and simultaneously the powerlessness—he felt over me. From whom did I learn that I was responsible for and deserving of his violent humiliations, that I was the cause of his rage? What about those remarkable "exceptions"—my friends' parents for whom such acts were unthinkable? In their example I came to understand that my father's violence was chosen and deliberate, not precipitated by me.

As an adult, I retain vivid memory traces of my father's violence: his power and his rage. Still, I feel sometimes terrorized that my own rage will "cause" the violence for which, as a child, I was made to feel responsible.

** * **

Power: the first arena of struggle between children and adults. How early we are taught to deny our deepest intuitions, our intensity: not to trust our Selves. As children we become complaisant, feeling as our own adults' contempt and fear for our deepest feelings, our sense of justice.

Adults deny the consequences of the power they wield over children, concealing their choices and beliefs as inevitable, ineluctable facts. Adults deny the struggle for power between children and themselves. Yet each of us must see the world unmediated—through our own eyes.

** * **

Women have begun speaking of the conditions which shaped our earliest years: incest, battery, rape, infinite gradations of psychic and physical abuse. In the face of such violence we are speechless, disenfranchised from language, utterly without means to translate our nerves' truth. Without language there is no imagination, no possibility.

Our silence was not participation in adults' coercion, though: we knew our own truths. We resisted, we felt and we survived.

To insist on the truth in our feelings, the clarity in our perceptions against all odds—this is what it means to survive. This struggle we choose: to render into language yet unnamed knowledge, the sense dwelling deep in our cells as instinct.

** * **

Until the essential condition of childhood changes, we can expect that this violence will continue to escalate.

** * **

As women, we have the common experience of childhoods imbued with violence. As lesbians, violence remains for us an ordinary reality. Our lives can never be free of violence until male presence and control, as we presently know them, cease. It is a matter of survival that we encourage each other and our Selves to alchemize our ancient rage and the silence swelling inside it.

Baba Copper

Some Notes from the Fifty-ninth Year of This Life

I

"Listen," I whisper eagerly to my mirror, "I need to be a heroine, to fulfill my Aries nature. *You* know that!" My mirror hangs upon the wall, deer antlers from some pioneer's kill framing its silvered circle, linked by the pendant Eye of Isis to a Nubian Goddess statue standing/free upon the rose pine floor.

The mirror answers. "A heroine is a female hero. Heroes are seen as performing heroic acts in the face of great vicissitude."

"Like mothers?" I ask, in need of more warmth.

"No. Like train engineers. There is a heroic tradition which enfolds the engineer in mythic dimensions, with little reference to the reality of his acts. Like cowboys. Like policemen would like to claim. Like the self-deification of doctors. Like clowns."

"Just so. Just so. Songs of admiration are written about them. Their deeds are serialized for TV. Books analyze their relative importance." (I am thinking of cracking my mirror, to see if it will make her more helpful. I am, after all, an artist and can do what I want. Crazing, on the other hand, would be going too far.)

The mirror glistens coldly. "Heroes reflect values. Medias create heroes. Those who use the medias choose the person/ification of *their* values."

II

A dream on my birthday: I am a grain of sand, so infinitesimal that they cannot see me. But they have a detector. No matter how or where I hide, they always find me. I have spent my whole life hiding, until I lost myself in the struggle; until I loved my captors. When they found me the last time, I nursed at a breast and felt my sex pulse and gave up. They could not see me, but they always found me.

III

There are real differences between being a single woman, aged sixty, and being a lesbian feminist, aged sixty. When you step off the edge of genteel respectability at fifty, growing visibly radical, the punishment is often ostracism from the complex web of family connections, largely maintained by the women.

Issues of righteous indignation, humor, esthetics, priorities, prescribed loyalties are not easy to negotiate with family women phobic to change. Daughters and sons anticipate stability in their mother from which they can detach, comfortably untangling the threads of dependency at their own speed. A lesbian feminist mother explodes the expectations which surround family commitments into real encounters bereft of the comforts of precedents.

So many young women have said to me, "If only my mother would raise her consciousness enough to enable her to leave my father, and strike out on her own. She could do it. She has always worked. She is miserable with my father, but she clings to what she knows." A younger lesbian, in coming out to her mother, cuts free from her past–albeit often with pain–into new

associations through the channels of sexuality and life work; new family is moulded. The expectations of risk toward intimacy surround her age bracket; they disappear at sixty.

IV

Weaving webs of affection out over the edge of the uncharted, away from the great Man Machine. My mother and my grandmother taught me how to weave, but deceived me into thinking that marriage and blood ties were the stuff from which I should make the webs. Is it possible to weave webs of love without energy thieving—without any kind of vampirism or victimhood—which will hold the weight of my body/spirit, out into space/time?

V

I am at the peak of my powers—the same age as the average of US Presidents, Chairmen of the Board, owners of movie conglomerates, godfathers of the Mafia or professors with their own Institutes. These old men have already finished the exploration of their worlds. Their frame of reference has been well enough assimilated by their younger colleagues to stabilize their sphere of influence. Our responses to these patriarchs is an ambivalence of hatred and acknowledgement. It contains respect for their power.

Who are the matriarchs—the Demeters? They can't be the mothers who socialized us to accept Pluto. Are they the lonely giants who shimmer mirage-like on the garbage heaps of male knowledge and acceptance? Anais Nin, Margaret Mead, Eleanor Roosevelt, Greta Garbo, Eva Curie? Who is there to be like?

VI

Garage Sale
Twenty cents for orange exotic bait
genuflection to the memory board,
Monopoly and daughter rape.
Ninth-grade drawings sell like past mistakes;
my body aches from too much penting.
Stuffed snakes go as a monogamous couple;
only two bucks for my husband's tuxedo;
dollars peel from a nervous roll.
Who am I, that my life
sells for fifty cents a record?

VII

All men have both God and our father as part of their power over us. Any allegiance we feel to either, conscious or unconscious, accrues to men's benefit. As long as we Goddesses mother/kill, we are powerless; as long as we mothers Goddess/deny, we are powerless.

VIII

I am sitting crosslegged in the sun, eating giant strawberries and buttered popcorn. A Gregorian mass sounds dimly from the tape deck to the sun deck. I sort my confusion carefully, like polished stones, looking for matching colors of feeling:

Curiosity Could it be that there is another way of loving, another meaning not before/taught, another learning to teach by example?
Is the coming together of the mother and the daughter the Ultimate Threat?
Can peer recognition leap the gap of thirty-six years?

Gratitude to have found someone who will play with me outside the limits of age.
to have learned the meaning of belatedly.
to be able to trust your recognition of my excellence, because you know your own.
for your recognition of the reptile in my timing, my boa loving.
for giving me someone i dare to be me with, if only for a little while.

Fear of missing out/ of finding you boringly familiar/ of losing control of my life/ of getting overextended/ of making a fool of myself/ of doing harm/ of the crazy-lady syndrome/ of my incest taboo/ of being overlooked/ of my diminished sexual hunger/ of incest tabooed/ of getting hurt/ of incest.

It seems cowardly to be questioning the momentary materialization of my vision of old wimmin of Power–Demeter acknowledged as a sexual figure–the conscious creator. It has to begin somewhere. Why not between the Seer and the Star?

IX

It is important that more old wimmin like me start lying down on the Earth, listening to Her heartbeat, to name the messages we read from that act of listening. I do not speak poetically or symbolically, but literally. We must name the body's knowing of the connections between us and the primal life forces of the Earth.

The more that wimmin prove to themselves that we do not need men–economically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually, biologically, creatively–the more we act upon the evolutionary potential latent within our DNA patternings. There is a primal law of Nature to be learned from Earthlistening: Only those circumstances which affect the female and her female offspring are of evolutionary significance.

X

Patriarchal reversal teaches us to do things against our own best interests–rationalizing them, psychologizing them, minimizing them–while at the same time taking the blame for them upon ourselves and socializing our daughters to do the same. We are taught to expect certain things when we get older–all negative–all diminishing. The only way that women who are young now can evade that fate is by seeing to it that it doesn't happen to me.

XI

Everyone normalizes me. I may be seen as Bright, Brave or Interesting. I may enjoy the enlightened friendship of young women who have decided to Not be Guilty of Ageism. But there is no one to talk crazy to. No one to acknowledge my power back to me. Recognition is part of magic. My broom only sweeps.

vitality, n. animation, being existence (Life); liveliness, vivacity (Activity); endurance, guts, stamina (Continuation); virility, bloom (Strength).

The following photographs are an excerpt from the series, "Vital Spirits/Images on Aging."

Photographed by Jilly Lauren

These photographs are from a series titled, "Vital Spirits/Images on Aging." I photographed 15 women from one retirement home in Los Angeles while under the Professional Artists in Public Places Grant.

I use the camera to help set up a relationship that I later photograph. I find it a necessity to set up a relationship where there is trust and acceptance on both sides. If I'm not accepted, then the other person(s) will never lose awareness of the camera. I also bring back prints after the first shooting which helps to set up trust and rapport. It reminds me that I'm not only taking but giving in the relationship.

In this series on aging, I tried to capture the quality of these women's daily lives as well as the imprint of their former, more vigorous lives. The photographs are a testimony to the subject's vitality and engagement in life processes, and a rebuttal of the commonly held notions of the grave diminution of vital spirits as characteristic of aging.

I asked everyone I photographed the following question, "To what do you attribute your having grown old with grace, energy and vitality?" They all seemed to believe that being involved with civil rights and being aware of the world situation helps them to grow and stay alert. It also helps them to care and be aware of other people and not concentrate on their own problems associated with growing older. They all are committed to helping bring about a better world for everyone to live in, and having passion in one's life as a necessity. No matter if it's passion to paint, write letters, talk to other people, make doll's dresses or play music. Whatever it is, there's a desire to continue to grow and use one's time constructively. Ellen Van Volkenburg Browne decided to use her time differently when she turned 95. She decided that she was going to listen to women now because she had never given herself the freedom to do this in a masculine world.

I was petrified to start this series because I had to face my own fears of aging, dependency and death. Photography is a way to give life to my fears instead of denying them. Instead of finding a depressing atmosphere, I found women who were engaged rather than retired, and still had passion in their lives. At first, I ran up against a lot of barriers because the women felt embarrassed by their physical appearance, and couldn't understand why anyone would want to photograph them. Once I gave of myself and showed my own vulnerability, they became less hesitant and started to feel relaxed. They eventually took me into their lives and shared their feelings and thoughts through old family photo albums, family genealogies and present interests and activities. The most rewarding part of my involvement in this series was when I installed an exhibition of the photographs in the retirement home. Even though everyone had a copy of their portrait, the images took on another dimension when they were matted and framed and up on the wall. Everyone kept pointing out their friends and, most importantly, themselves. An added sense of self importance and worth beamed from the faces of my friends, and I had accomplished my goal. I feel privileged to have been able to meet these people and photograph them.

–Jilly Lauren, 1979

Judith Gregory, Age 90, Musician *photograph by Jilly Lauren*

Haydee Zeitlin, Age 95, Doctor
and Judity Gregory

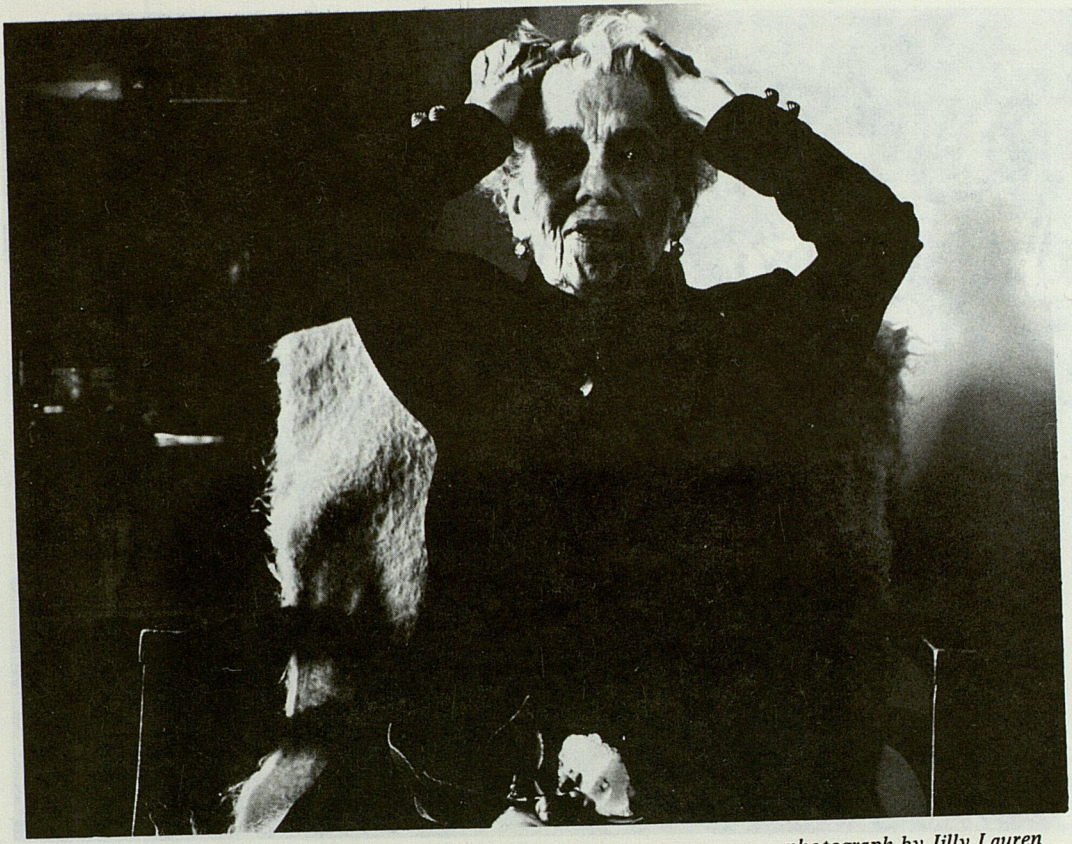
photograph by Jilly Lauren

Haydee Zeitlin

photograph by Jilly Lauren

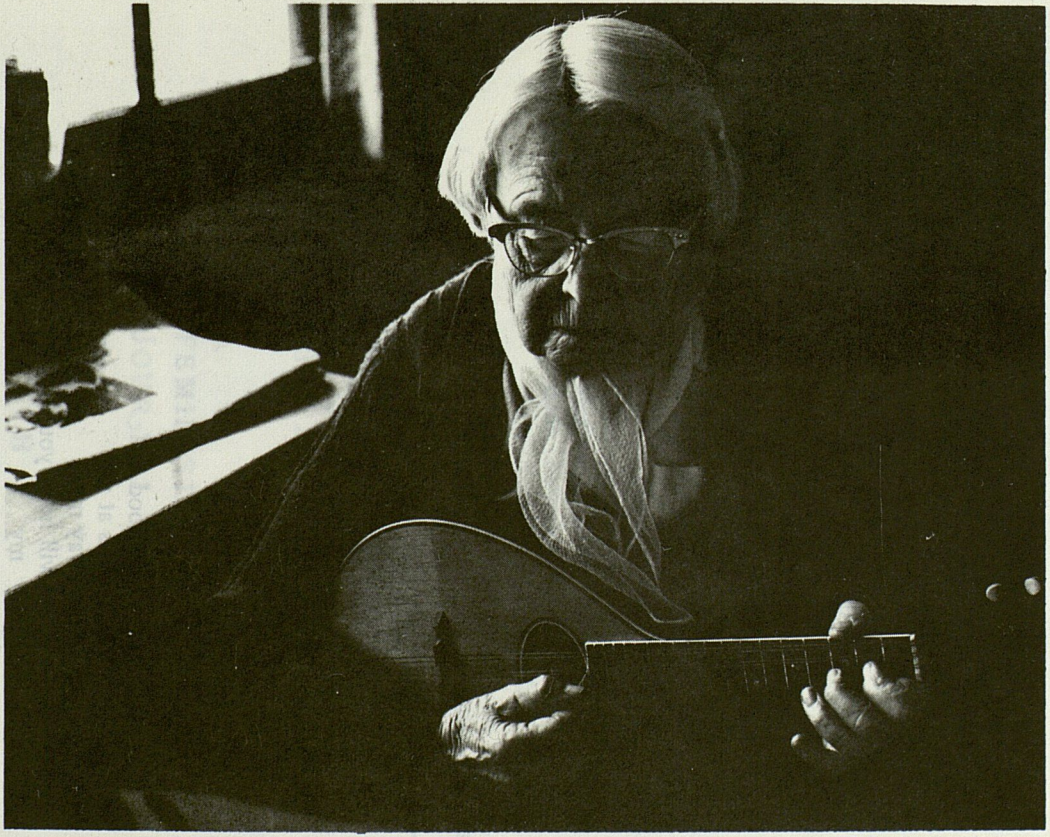
Ellen van Volkenburg Browne, Age 96,
Actress, Director, Teacher

photograph by Jilly Lauren



Ellen van Volkenburg Browne

photograph by Jilly Lauren



Marian Wolfson, Age 88, Active Socialist

photograph by Jilly Lauren

i

who refuses to be history
she wears her face she
will
not be
an ancestor
except for herself.

who refuses to be elderly
she is up to the last
living moment
by day
she appears in her soft
shoes

by night, she's a witch.
the woman who refuses

to touch her
is dying smug

in her young
painted boots

ii

I eat cat food
she snarls at me
stay away my
cane will hook you stay
away my
granny eyes will
rake you old will
tremble your

hands

iii

touch me.

oh grey oh white could I know your hair
could billow could sheen could steel
bunch brush blow
oh soft
of under your eyes
your wrists
pulling up gravity

iv

she wears the ages like a claw necklace
conches whales
nest in her skin the whorls of her face
speak ikons:

come
break me bare
upon the waters like a skin
upon the waters like the day
upon the waters

–Susan Leigh Star

Audre Lorde

BREAST CANCER:

A BLACK LESBIAN FEMINIST EXPERIENCE

photograph by Lynda Koolish

March 25, 1978

The idea of knowing, rather than believing, trusting, or even understanding, has always been considered heretical. But I would willingly pay whatever price in pain was needed, to savor the weight of completion; to be utterly filled, not with conviction nor with faith, but with experience—knowledge, direct and different from all other certainties.

December 29, 1978

What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying, as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?

This is work I must do alone. For months now I have been wanting to write a piece of meaning words on cancer as it affects my life and my consciousness as a woman, a black lesbian feminist mother lover poet all I am. But even more, or the same, I want to illuminate the implications of breast cancer for me, and the threats to self-revelation that are so quickly aligned against any woman who seeks to explore those questions, those answers. Even in the face of our own deaths and dignity, we are not to be allowed to define our needs nor our feelings nor our lives.

I could not even write about the outside threats to my vision and action because the inside pieces were too frightening.

This reluctance is a reluctance to deal with myself, with my own experiences and the feelings buried in them, and the conclusions to be drawn from them. It is also, of course, a reluctance to living or re-living, giving life or new life to—that pain. The pain of separation from my breast was at least as sharp as the pain of separating from my mother. But I made it once before, so I know I can make it again.

Trying to even set this all down step by step is a process of focussing in from the periphery towards the center.

A year ago I was told I had an 80% chance of having breast cancer. That time, the biopsy was negative. But in that interim of three weeks between being told that I might have cancer and finding out it was not so, I met for the first time the essential questions of my own mortality. I was going to die, and it might be a lot sooner than I had ever conceived of. That knowledge did not disappear with the diagnosis of a benign tumor. If not now, I told my lover, then someday. None of us have 300 years. The terror that I conquered in those three weeks left me with a determination and freedom to speak as I needed, and to enjoy and live my life as I needed to for my own meaning.

During the next summer, the summer of 1978, I wrote in my journal:

> Whatever the message is, may I survive the delivery of it. Is letting go a process or a price? What am I paying for, not seeing sooner? Learning at the edge? Letting go of something precious but no longer needed?

So this fall I met cancer, as it were, from a considered position, but it still knocked me for a hell of a loop, having to deal with the pain and the fear and the death I thought I had come to terms with once before. I did not recognize then how many faces those terms had, nor how many forces were aligned within our daily structures against them, nor how often I would have to redefine the terms because other experiences kept presenting themselves. The acceptance of death as a fact, rather than the desire to die, can empower my energies with a forcefulness and vigor not always possible when one eye is out unconsciously for eternity.

Last month, three months after surgery, I wrote in my journal:

> I seem to move so much more slowly now these days. It is as if I cannot do the simplest thing, as if nothing at all is done without a decision, and every decision is so crucial. Yet I feel strong and able in general, and only sometimes do I touch that battered place where I am totally inadequate to any thing I most wish to accomplish. To put it another way, I feel always tender in the wrong places.

In September 1978, I went into the hospital for a breast biopsy for the second time. It all happened much faster this time than the year before. There was none of the deep dread of the previous biopsy, but at the same time there was none of the excitement of a brand new experience. I said to my surgeon the night before—"I'm a lot more scared this time, but I'm handling it better." On the surface, at least, we all expected it to be a repeat. My earlier response upon feeling this lump had been—"I've been through this once before. What do we do for encore?"

Well, what we did for encore was the real thing.

I wake up in the recovery room after the biopsy colder than I can remember ever having been in my life. I was hurting and horrified. I knew it was malignant. How, I didn't know, but I suspect I had absorbed that fact from the operating room while I was still out. Being "out" really means only that you can't answer back or protect yourself from what you are absorbing through your ears and other senses. But when I raised my hand in the recovery room and touched both bandaged breasts, I knew there was a malignancy in one, and the other had been biopsied also. It was only for affirmation. I would have given anything to have been warmer right then. The gong in my brain of "malignant," "malignant," and the icy sensations of that frigid room, cut through the remnants of anesthesia like a fire hose trained on my brain. All I could focus upon was getting out of that room and getting warm. I yelled and screamed and complained about the cold and for some extra blankets, but none came. The nurses were very put out by my ruckus and sent me back to the floor early.

My doctor had said he would biopsy both breasts if one was malignant. I couldn't believe this hospital couldn't shut off the air-conditioning or give me more blankets. The Amazon girls were only 15, I thought, how did they handle it?

Frances was there by the door of my room like a great sunflower. I surfaced from anesthesia again as she took my hand in her deliciously warm ones, her dear face bent over mine. "It is malignant, isn't it, Frances, it is malignant," I said. She squeezed my hand and I saw tears in her eyes. "Yes, my love, it is," she said, and the anesthesia washed out of me again before the sharp edge of fact. "Baby, I'm so cold, so cold," I said. The night before I had said to her, crying, before she left, "The real victory will be my waking up out of the anesthetic."

The decisions seemed much easier. The whole rest of that day seemed a trip back and forth through the small pain in both breasts and my acute awareness of the fact of death in the right one. This was mixed with the melting and chewing over of the realities, between Frances and me. Our comforting each other—"We'll make it through this together"—and the cold, the terrible cold of that first hour. And between us both, our joint tears, our rich loving. I swam in and out of sleep, mostly out.

Our friends came and were there, loving and helpful and there, brought coats to pile upon my bed and then a comforter and blankets because the hospital had no spare blankets, they said, and I was so desperately chilled from the cold recovery room.

I remember their faces as we shared the knowledge and the promise of shared strength in the trial days to come. In some way it was as if each of the people I love most dearly came one by one to my bedside where we made a silent pledge of strength and sisterhood no less sacred than if it had been pledged in blood rather than love.

Off and on I kept thinking. I have cancer. I'm a black lesbian feminist poet, how am I going to do this now? Where are the models for what I'm supposed to be in this situation? But there were none. This is it, Audre. You're on your own.

In the next two days, I came to realize as I agonized over my choices and what to do, that I had made my decision to have surgery if it were needed even before the biopsy had been done. Yet I had wanted a two-stage operation anyway, separating the biopsy from the mastectomy. I wanted time to re-examine my decision, to search really for some other alternative that would give me good reasons to change my mind. But there were none to satisfy me.

I wanted to make the decision again, and I did, knowing the other possibilities, and reading avidly and exhaustively through the books I ordered through Frances and Helen and my friends. These books now piled up everywhere in that wretched little room, making it at least a little bit like home.

Even before the biopsy, from the time I was admitted into the hospital Monday afternoon, the network of woman support had been begun by our friends. Blanche and Clare arrived from Southampton just in time before visiting hours were over bearing a gorgeous French rum and mocha cake with a marzipan banner that said 'we love you, audre,' outrageously rich and sinfully delicious. When the findings were malignant on Tuesday, this network swung into high gear. To this day, I don't know what Frances and I and the children would have done without it.

From the time I woke up to the slow growing warmth of Adrienne's and Bernice's and Deanna's and Michelle's and Frances' coats on the bed, I felt Beth Israel Hospital wrapped in a web of woman love and strong wishes of faith and hope for the whole time I was there, and it made self-healing more possible, knowing I was not alone. Throughout the hospitalization and for some time after, it seemed that no problem was too small or too large to be shared and handled.

My daughter Beth cried in the waiting room after I told her I was going to have a mastectomy. She said she was sentimentally attached to my breasts. Adrienne comforted her, somehow making Beth understand that hard as this was, it was different for me from if I had been her age, and that our experiences were different.

Adrienne offered to rise early to park the car for Frances so she could be with me before the operation. Blanche and Clare took the children shopping for school clothes, and helped give them a chance to cut up and laugh in the midst of all this grimness. My sister Helen made chicken soup with homemade dumplings. Bernice gathered material and names and addresses and testimonials for alternative treatments for breast cancer. And through those three days between the biopsy and the mastectomy, good wishes came pouring in by mail and telephone and the door and the psychic ether.

To this day, sometimes I feel like a corporate effort, the love and care and concern of so many women having been invested in me with such open-heartedness. My fears were the fears of us all.

And always, there was Frances, glowing with a steady warm light closeby to the island within which I had to struggle alone.

I considered the alternatives of the straight medical profession, surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy. I considered the holistic health approaches of diet, vitamin therapy, experimental immunotherapeutics, west german pancreatic enzymes, and others. The decision whether or not to have a mastectomy ultimately was going to have to be my own. I had always been firm on that point and had chosen a surgeon with that in mind. With the various kinds of information I had gathered together before I went into the hospital, and the additional information acquired in the hectic three days after biopsy, now more than ever before I had to examine carefully the pros and cons of every possibility, while being constantly and acutely aware that so much was still not known.

And all the time as a background of pain and terror and disbelief, a thin high voice was screaming that none of this was true, it was all a bad dream that would go away if I became totally inert. Another part of me flew like a big bird to the ceiling of whatever place I was in, observing my actions and providing a running commentary, complete with suggestions of factors forgotten, new possibilities of movement, and ribald remarks. I felt as if I was always listening to a concert of voices from inside myself, all with something slightly different to say, all of which were quite insistent and none of which would let me rest.

They very effectively blotted out the thin high voice that counseled sleep, but I still knew it was there, and sometimes in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, I wondered if perhaps it was not the voice of wisdom rather than despair.

I now realize that I was in a merciful state akin to shock in those days. In a sense it was my voices—those myriad pieces of myself and my background and experience and definitions of myself I had fought so long and hard to nourish and maintain—which were guiding me on automatic, so to speak. But it did not feel so at the time. I felt sometimes utterly calm cool and collected, as if this whole affair was an intellectual problem to be considered and solved; should I have a mastectomy or not? What was the wisest approach to take having a diagnosis of breast cancer and a history of cystic mastitis? Other times, I felt almost overwhelmed by pain and fury, and the inadequacies of my tools to make any meaningful decision, and yet I had to.

I was helped by the fact that one strong voice kept insisting that I had in truth made this decision already, all I had to do was remember the pieces and put them together. That used to annoy me sometimes, the feeling that I had less to decide than to remember.

I knew the horror that I had lived with for a year since my last biopsy had now become a reality, and in a sense that reality, however difficult, was easier to deal with than fear. But it was still very hard for me not only to face the idea of my own fragile mortality, but to anticipate more physical pain and the loss of such a cherished part of me as my breast. And all these things were operating at the same time I was having to make a decision as to what I should do. Luckily, I had been in training for a long time.

I listened to my voices, considered the alternatives, chewed over the material

that concerned women brought to me. It seems like an eternity went by between my returning from the biopsy and my making a decision, but actually it was only a day and a half.

On Wednesday afternoon I told Frances that I had decided to have surgery, and tears came to her eyes. Later she told me that she had been terrified that I might refuse surgery, opting instead for an alternative treatment, and she felt that she was prepared to go along with whatever I would decide, but she also felt surgery was the wisest choice.

A large factor in this decision was the undeniable fact that any surgical intervention in a cystic area can possibly activate cancer cells that might otherwise remain dormant. I had dealt with that knowledge a year ago when deciding whether or not to have a biopsy, and with the probabilities of a malignancy being as high as they were then, I felt then I had no choice but to decide as I did. Now, I had to consider again whether surgery might start another disease process. I deluged my surgeon with endless questions which he answered in good faith, those that he could. I weighed my options. There were malignant cells in my right breast encased in a fatty cyst, and if I did not do something about that I would die of cancer in fairly short order. Whatever I did might or might not reverse that process, and I would not know with any certainty for a very long time.

When it came right down to deciding, as I told Frances later, I felt inside myself for what I really felt and wanted, and that was to live and to love and to do my work, as hard as I could and for as long as I could. So I simply chose the course that I felt most likely to achieve my desire, knowing that I would have paid more than even my beloved breast out of my body to preserve that self that was not merely physically defined, and count it well spent.

Having made that decision, I felt comfortable with it and able to move on. I could not choose the option of radiation and chemotherapy because I felt strongly that everything I had read about them suggested that they were in and of themselves carcinogenic. The experimental therapies without surgery were interesting possibilities, but still unproven. Surgery, a modified radical mastectomy, while traumatic and painful would arrest any process by removal. It was not in and of itself harmful at this point, since whatever process might have been started by surgery had already been begun by the biopsy. I knew that there might come a time when it was clear that surgery had been unnecessary because of the efficacy of alternate therapies. I might be losing my breast in vain. But nothing else was as sure, and it was a price I was willing to pay for life, and I felt I had chosen the wisest course for me. I think now what was most important was not what I chose to do so much as that I was conscious of being able to choose, and having chosen, was empowered from having made a decision, done a strike for myself, moved.

Throughout the three days between the mastectomy and the biopsy I felt positively possessed by a rage to live that became an absolute determination to do whatever was necessary to accomplish that living, and I remember wondering if I was strong enough to sustain that determination after I left the hospital. If I left the hospital. For all the deciding and great moral decisions going on, I was shit-scared about another bout with anesthesia. Familiarity with the procedures had not lessened my terror.

I was also afraid that I was not really in control, that it might already be too late to halt the spread of cancer, that there was simply too much to do that I might not get done, that the pain would be just too great. Too great for what, I did not know. I was afraid. That I would not survive another anesthesia, that the payment of my breast would not be enough; for what? Again, I did not know. I think perhaps I was afraid to continue being myself.

The year before, as I waited almost four weeks for my first biopsy, I had grown angry at my right breast because I felt as if it had in some unexpected way betrayed me, as if it had become already separate from me and had turned against me by creating this tumor which might be malignant. My beloved breast had suddenly departed from the rules we had agreed upon to function by all these years.

But on the day before my mastectomy I wrote in my journal:

September 21, 1978

The anger that I felt for my right breast last year has faded, and I'm glad because I have had this extra year. My breasts have always been so very precious to me since I accepted having them it would have been a shame not to have enjoyed the last year of one of them. And I think I am prepared to lose it now in a way I was not quite ready to last November, because now I really see it as a choice between my breast and my life, and in that view there cannot be any question.

Somehow I always knew this would be the final outcome, for it never did seem like a finished business for me. This year between was like a hiatus, an interregnum in a battle within which I could so easily be a casualty, since I certainly was a warrior. And in that brief time the sun shone and the birds sang and I wrote important words and have loved richly and been loved in return. And if a lifetime of furies is the cause of this death in my right breast, there is still nothing I've never been able to accept before that I would accept now in order to keep my breast. It was a 12 month reprieve in which I could come to accept the emotional fact/truths I came to see first in those horrendous weeks last year before the biopsy. If I do what I need to do because I want to do it, it will matter less when death comes, because it will have been an ally that spurred me on.

I was relieved when the first tumor was benign, but I said to Frances at the time that the true horror would be if they said it was benign and it wasn't. I think my body knew there was a malignancy there somewhere, and that it would have to be dealt with eventually. Well, I'm dealing with it as best I can. I wish I didn't have to, and I don't even know if I'm doing it right, but I sure am glad that I had this extra year to learn to love me in a different way.

I'm going to have the mastectomy, knowing there are alternatives, some of which sound very possible in the sense of right thinking, but none of which satisfy me enough. . . . Since it is my life that I am gambling with, and my life is worth even more than the sensual delights of my breast, I certainly can't take that chance.

7:30 p.m. And yet if I cried for a hundred years I couldn't possibly express the sorrow I feel right now, the sadness and the loss. How did the Amazons of Dahomey feel? They were only little girls. But they did this willingly, for something they believed in. I suppose I am too but I can't feel that now.

Eudora Garrett was not the first woman with whom I had shared body warmth and wildness, but she was the first woman who totally engaged me in our loving. I remember the hesitation and tenderness I felt as I touched the deeply scarred hollow under her right shoulder and across her chest, the night she finally shared the last pain of her mastectomy with me in the clear heavy heat of our Mexican spring. I was 19 and she was 47. Now I am 44 and she is dead.

Eudora came to me in my sleep that night before surgery in that tiny cold hospital room so different from her bright hot dishevelled bedroom in Cuernavaca, with her lanky snapdragon self and her gap-toothed lopsided smile, and we held hands for a while.

The next morning before Frances came I wrote in my journal:

> September 22, 1978
> Today is the day in the grim rainy morning and all I can do now is weep. Eudora, what did I give you in those Mexican days so long ago? Did you know how I loved you? You never talked of your dying, only of your work.

Then through the dope of tranquilizers and grass I remember Frances' hand on mine, and the last sight of her dear face like a great sunflower in the sky.

There is the horror of those flashing lights passing over my face, and the clanging of disemboweled noises that have no context nor relationship to me except they assault me. There is the dispatch with which I have ceased being a person who is myself and become a thing upon a Guerney cart to be delivered up to Moloch, a dark living sacrifice in the white place.

I remember screaming and cursing with pain in the recovery room, and I remember a disgusted nurse giving me a shot. I remember a voice telling me to be quiet because there were sick people here, and my saying, well, I have a right, because I'm sick too. Until 5:00 a.m. the next morning, waking was brief seas of localized and intense pain between shots and sleep. At 5:00 a nurse rubbed my back again, helped me get up and go to the bathroom because I couldn't use the bedpan, and then helped me into a chair. She made me a cup of tea and some fruit juice because I was parched. The pain had subsided a good deal.

I could not move my right arm nor my shoulder, both of which were numb, and wrapped around my chest was a wide Ace bandage under which on my left side the mound of my left breast arose, and from which on the right side protruded the ends of white surgical bandages. From under the Ace bandage on my right side, two plastic tubes emerged, running down into a small disc-shaped plastic bottle called a hemovac which drained the surgical area. I was alive, and it was a very beautiful morning. I drank my tea slowly, and then went back to bed.

I woke up again at about 7:30 to smell Frances outside my door. I couldn't see her because the sides of my bed were still up, but I sat up as best I could one-armed, and peeped around the corner and there she was, the person I needed and wanted most to see, and our smiles met each other's and bounced around the room and out into the corridor where they warmed up the whole third floor.

The next day the sun shone brilliantly, and for ten days steadily thereafter. The autumn equinox came—the middle—the sun now equidistant, then going

away. It was one of those rare and totally gorgeous blue New York City autumns.

That next day after the operation was an incredible high. I now think of it as the euphoria of the second day. The pain was minimal. I was alive. The sun was shining. I remember feeling a little simple but rather relieved it was all over, or so I thought. I stuck a flower in my hair and thought "This is not as bad as I was afraid of."

During the first two days after surgery, I shared thanksgiving with beautiful and beloved women and slept. I remember the children coming to visit me and Beth joking, but how both of their faces were light with relief to see me so well. I felt as if there was grey smoke in my head and something I wasn't dealing with, but I wasn't sure what. Once I put a flower in my hair and walked through the halls looking for Frances who had gone into the waiting room with Michelle and Adrienne to let me rest.

From time to time I would put my hand upon the flattish mound of bandages on the right side of my chest and say to myself—my right breast is gone, and I would shed a few tears if I was alone. But I had no real emotional contact yet with the reality of the loss; it was as if I had been emotionally anesthetized also, or as if the only feelings I could reach were physical ones, and the scar was not only hidden under bandages but as yet was feeling little pain. When I looked at myself in the mirror even, the difference was not at all striking, because of the bulkiness of the bandages.

And my friends, who flooded me with love and concern and appreciation and relief gave me so much energy that for those first 48 hours I really felt as if I was done with death and pain, and even loss, and that I had for some unknown reason been very very lucky. I was filled with a surety that everything was going to be all right, in just those indeterminate phrases. But it was downhill from there.

On the morning of the third day, the pain returned home bringing all of its kinfolk. Not that any single one of them was overwhelming, but just that all in concert, or even in small repertory groups, they were excruciating. There were constant ones and intermittent ones. There were short sharp and long dull and various combinations of the same ones. The muscles in my back and right shoulder began to screech as if they'd been pulled apart and now were coming back to life slowly and against their will. My chest wall was beginning to ache and burn and stab by turns. My breast which was no longer there would hurt as if it were being squeezed in a vise. That was perhaps the worst pain of all, because it would come with a full complement of horror that I was to be forever reminded of my loss by suffering in a part of me which was no longer there. I suddenly seemed to get weaker rather than stronger. The euphoria and numbing effects of the anesthesia were beginning to subside.

My brain felt like grey mush—I hadn't had to think much for the past two days. Just about the time that I started to feel the true quality of the uphill climb before me—of adjustment to a new body, a new time span, a possible early death—the pains hit. The pain grew steadily worse and I grew more and more furious because nobody had ever talked about the physical pain. I had thought the emotional and psychological pain would be the worst, but it was the physical pain that seemed to be doing me in, or so I wrote at that time.

Feeling was returning to the traumatized area at the same time as I was gradually coming out of physical and emotional shock. My voices, those assorted pieces of myself that guided me between the operations were settling back into their melded quieter places, and a more and more conscious part of me was struggling for ascendancy, and not at all liking what she was finding/feeling.

In a way, therefore, the physical pain was power, for it kept that conscious part of me away from the full flavour of my fear and loss, consuming me, or rather wearing me down for the next two weeks. That two week period of time seems like an age to me now, because so many different changes passed through me. Actually the course of my psychic and physical convalescence moved quite quickly.

I do not know why. I do know that there was a tremendous amount of love and support flowing into me from the women around me, and it felt like being bathed in a continuous tide of positive energies, even when sometimes I wanted a bit of negative silence to complement the pain inside of me.

But support will always have a special and vividly erotic set of image/meanings for me now, one of which is floating upon a sea within a ring of women like warm bubbles keeping me afloat upon the surface of that sea. I can feel the texture of inviting water just beneath their eyes, and do not fear it. It is the sweet smell of their breath and laughter and voices calling my name that gives me volition, helps me remember I want to turn away from looking down. These images flow quickly, the tangible floods of energy rolling off these women toward me that I converted into power to heal myself.

There is so much false spirituality around us these days, calling itself goddess-worship or "the way." It is false because too cheaply bought and little understood, but most of all because it does not lend, but rather saps, that energy we need to do our work. So when an example of the real power of healing love comes along such as this one, it is difficult to use the same words to talk about it because so many of our best and most erotic words have been so cheapened.

Perhaps I can say this all more simply; I say the love of women healed me.

It was not only women closest to me, although they were the backbone. There was Frances. Then there were those women whom I love passionately, and my other friends, and my acquaintances, and then even women whom I did not know.

In addition to the woman energy outside of me, I know that there must have been an answering energy within myself that allowed me to connect to the power flowing. One never really forgets the primary lessons of survival, if one continues to survive. If it hadn't been for a lot of women in my lifetime I'd have been long dead. And some of them were women I didn't even like! (A nun; the principal of my high school; a boss.)

I had felt so utterly stripped at other times within my life for very different reasons, and survived, so much more alone than I was now. I knew if I lived I could live well. I knew that if the life spark kept burning there would be fuel; if I could want to live I would always find a way, and a way that was best for me. The longer I survive the more examples of that I have, but it is essentially the same truth I knew the summer after my friend Genevieve died. We were sixteen.

To describe the complexities of interaction between the love within and the love without is a lifetime vocation.

Growing up fat black female and almost blind in america requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die. Gennie, rest in peace. I carry tattooed upon my heart a list of names of women who did not survive, and there is always a space left for one more, my own. That is to remind me that even survival is only part of the task. The other part is teaching.

After I came home on the fifth day after surgery, the rest of those two weeks were permeated with physical pain and dreams. I spent the days mostly reading and wandering from room to room, or staring at blank walls, or lying outdoors in the sun staring at the insides of my eyelids. And finally, when at last I could, again masturbating.

Later, as the physical pain receded, it left room for the other. But in my experience, it's not true that first you cry. First you hurt, and then you cry.

For me, there was an important interim period between the actual event and my beginning to come to terms emotionally with what having cancer, and having lost a breast, meant and would mean to my life. The psychic self created a little merciful space for physical cellular healing and the devastating effects of anesthesia on the brain. Throughout that period, I kept feeling that I couldn't think straight, that there was something wrong with my brain I couldn't remember. Part of this was shock, but part of it was anesthesia, as well as conversations I had probably absorbed in the operating room while I was drugged and vulnerable and only able to record, not react. But a friend of mine recently told me that for six months after her mother died, she felt she couldn't think or remember, and I was struck by the similarity of the sensations.

My body and mind had to be allowed to take their own course. In the hospital, I did not need to take the sleeping pills that were always offered. My main worry from day three onward for about ten more was about the developing physical pain. This is a very important fact, because it is within this period of quasi-numbness and almost childlike susceptibility to ideas (I could cry at any time at almost anything outside of myself) that many patterns and networks are started for women after breast surgery that encourage us to deny the realities of our bodies which have just been driven home to us so graphically, and these old and stereotyped patterns of response pressure us to reject the adventure and exploration of our own experiences, difficult and painful as those experiences may be.

On the second day in the hospital I had been crying when the head nurse came around, and she sent in another woman from down the hall who had had a mastectomy a week ago and was about to go home. The woman from down the hall was a smallbodied feisty redhead in a pink robe with a flower in her hair. (I have a permanent and inexplicable weakness for women with flowers in their hair.) She was about my own age, and had grown kids who, she said, wanted her to come home. I knew immediately they must be sons. She patted my hand and gestured at our bandages.

"Don't feel bad," she said, "they weren't that much good anyway." But then she threw open her robe and stuck out her almost bony chest dressed in a gay printed pajama top, saying, "Now which twin has the Toni?" And I had to laugh in spite of myself, because of her energy, and because she had come all the way down the hall just to help make me feel better.

The next day, when I was still not thinking too much, except about why was I hurting more and when could I reasonably expect to go home, a kindly woman from Reach for Recovery came in to see me, with a very upbeat message and a little prepared packet containing a soft sleep-bra and a wad of lambswool pressed into a pale pink breast-shaped pad. She was 56 years old, she told me proudly. She was also a woman of admirable energies who clearly would uphold and defend to the death those structures of a society that had allowed her a little niche to shine in. Her message was, you are just as good as you were before because you can look exactly the same. Lambswool now, then a good prosthesis as soon as possible, and nobody'll ever know the difference. But what she said was, "*You'll* never know the difference," and she lost me right there, because I knew sure as hell *I'd* know the difference.

"Look at me," she said, opening her trim powder-blue man-tailored jacket and standing before me in a tight blue sweater, a gold embossed locket of no mean dimension provocatively nestling between her two considerable breasts. "Now can you tell which is which?"

I admitted that I could not. In her tight foundation garment and stiff, uplifting bra, both breasts looked equally unreal to me. But then I've always been a connoisseur of women's breasts, and never overly fond of stiff uplifts. I looked away, thinking "I wonder if there are any black lesbian feminists in Reach for Recovery?"

I ached to talk to women about the experience I had just been through, and about what might be to come, and how were they doing it and how had they done it. But I needed to talk with women who shared at least some of my major concerns and beliefs and visions, who shared at least some of my language. And this lady, admirable though she might be, did not.

"And it doesn't really interfere with your love life, either, dear. Are you married?"

"Not anymore," I said. I didn't have the moxie or the desire or the courage maybe to say, "I love women."

"Well, don't you worry. In the 6 years since my operation I married my second husband and buried him, god bless him, and now I have a wonderful friend. There's nothing I did before that I don't still do now. I just make sure I carry an extra form just in case, and I'm just like anybody else. The silicone ones are best, and I can give you the names of the better salons."

I was thinking, "What is it like to be making love to a woman and have only one breast brushing against her?"

I thought, "How will we fit so perfectly together ever again?"

I thought, "I wonder if our love-making had anything to do with it?"

I thought, "What will it be like making love to me? Will she still find my body delicious?"

And for the first time deeply and fleetingly a groundswell of sadness rolled up over me that filled my mouth and eyes almost to drowning. My right breast represented such an area of feeling and pleasure for me, how could I bear never to feel that again?

The lady from Reach for Recovery gave me a book of exercises which were very very helpful to me, and she showed me how to do them. When she held my arm up to assist me, her grip was firm and friendly and her hair smelled

a little like sun. I thought what a shame such a gutsy woman wasn't a dyke, but they had gotten to her too early, and her grey hair was dyed blond and heavily teased.

After she left, assuring me that Reach for Recovery was always ready to help, I examined the packet she had left behind.

The bra was the kind I was wearing, a soft front-hooking sleep-bra. By this time, the Ace bandage was off, and I had a simple surgical bandage taped over the incision and the one remaining drain. My left breast was still a little sore from having been biopsied, which is why I was wearing a bra. The lambswool form was the strangest part of the collection. I examined it, in its blush pink nylon envelope with a slighter, darker apex and shaped like a giant slipper-shell. I shuddered at its grotesque dryness. (What size are you, she'd said. 38D I said. Well I'll leave you a 40C she said.)

I came around my bed and stood in front of the mirror in my room, and stuffed the thing into the wrinkled folds of the right side of my bra where my right breast should have been. It perched on my chest askew, awkwardly inert and lifeless, and having nothing to do with any me I could possibly conceive of. Besides, it was the wrong color, and looked grotesquely pale through the cloth of my bra. Somewhere, up to that moment, I had thought, well perhaps they know something that I don't and maybe they're right, if I put it on maybe I'll feel entirely different. I didn't. I pulled the thing out of my bra, and my thin pajama top settled back against the flattened surface on the right side of the front of me.

I looked at the large gentle curve my left breast made under the pajama top, a curve that seemed even larger now that it stood by itself. I looked strange and uneven and peculiar to myself, but somehow, ever so much more myself and therefore so much more acceptable, than I looked with that thing stuck inside my clothes. For not even the most skillful prosthesis in the world could undo that reality, or feel the way my breast had felt, and either I would love my body one-breasted now, or remain forever alien to myself.

Then I climbed back into bed and cried myself to sleep, even though it was 2:30 in the afternoon.

On the fourth day, the other drain was removed. I found out that my lymph nodes had shown no sign of the spread of cancer, and my doctor said that I could go home on the following day, since I was healing so rapidly.

I looked down at the surgical area as he changed the dressing, expecting it to look like the ravaged and pitted battlefield of some major catastrophic war. But all I saw was my same soft brown skin, a little tender-looking and puffy from the middle of my chest up into my armpit, where a thin line ran, the edges of which were held closed by black sutures and two metal clamps. The skin looked smooth and tender and untroubled, and there was no feeling on the surface of the area at all. It was otherwise quite unremarkable, except for the absence of that beloved swelling I had come so to love over 44 years, and in its place was the strange flat plain down across which I could now for the first time in my memory view the unaccustomed bulge of my rib-cage, much broader than I had imagined it to be when it had been hidden beneath my large breasts. Looking down now on the right side of me I could see the curve of the side of my stomach across this new and changed landscape.

I thought, "I wonder how long it was before the Dahomean girl Amazons could take their changed landscapes for granted?"

I cried a few times that day, mostly, I thought, about inconsequential things. Once I cried though simply because I hurt deep down inside my chest and couldn't sleep, once because it felt like someone was stepping on my breast that wasn't there with hobnailed boots.

I wanted to write in my journal but couldn't bring myself to. There are so many shades to what passed through me in those days. And I would shrink from committing myself to paper because the light would change before the word was out, the ink was dry.

In playing back the tapes of those last days in the hospital, I found only the voice of a very weakened woman saying with the greatest difficulty and almost unrecognizable:

> September 25th, the fourth day. Things come in and out of focus so quickly it's as if a flash goes by; the days are so beautiful now so golden brown and blue; I wanted to be out in it, I wanted to be glad I was alive, I wanted to be glad about all the things I've got to be glad about. But now it hurts. Now it hurts. Things chase themselves around inside my eyes and there are tears I cannot shed and words like cancer, pain, and dying.
>
> Later. I don't want this to be a record of grieving only. I don't want this to be a record only of tears. I want it to be something I can use now or later, something that I can remember, something that I can pass on, something that I can know came out of the kind of strength I have that nothing nothing else can shake for very long or equal.
>
> My work is to inhabit the silences with which I have lived and fill them with myself until they have the sounds of brightest day and the loudest thunder. And then there will be no room left inside of me for what has been except as memory of sweetness enhancing what can and is to be.

I was very anxious to go home. But I found also, and couldn't admit at the time, that the very bland whiteness of the hospital which I railed against and hated so, was also a kind of protection, a welcome insulation within which I could continue to non-feel. It was an erotically blank environment within whose undifferentiated and undemanding and infantilizing walls I could continue to be emotionally vacant—psychic mush—without being required by myself or anyone to be anything else.

Going home to the very people and places that I loved most, at the same time as it was welcome and so desirable, also felt intolerable, like there was an unbearable demand about to be made upon me that I would have to meet. And it was to be made by people whom I loved, and to whom I would have to respond. Now I was going to have to begin feeling, dealing, not only with the results of the amputation, the physical effects of the surgery, but also with examining and making my own, the demands and changes inside of me and my life. They would alter, if not my timetable of work, at least the relative pieces available within that timetable for whatever I was involved in or wished to accomplish.

For instance, there were different questions about time that I would have to start asking myself. Not, for how long do I stand at the window and watch the dawn coming up over Brooklyn, but rather, how many more new people

do I admit so openly into my life? I needed to examine and pursue the implications of that question. It meant plumbing the depths and possibilities of relating with the people already in my life, deepening and exploring them.

The need to look death in the face and not shrink from it, yet not ever to embrace it too easily, was a developmental and healing task for me that was constantly being sidelined by the more practical and immediate demands of hurting too much, and how do I live with myself one-breasted? What posture do I take, literally, with my physical self?

I particularly felt the need—craved the contact, really—of my family, that family which we had made of friends, which for all its problems and permutations was *my* family, Blanche and Clare and Michelle and Adrienne and Yolanda and Yvonne and Bernice and Deanna and Barbara and Beverly and Millie, and then there were the cousins and surely Demita and Sharon and them, even Linda, and Bonnie and Cessie and Cheryl and Toi with her pretty self and Diane and even my sister Helen. All through that time even the most complicated entanglements between other family members—and there were many not having to do directly with me—all those entanglements and fussings and misunderstandings and stubbornesses felt like basic life-pursuits, and as such were, no matter how annoying and tiresome, fundamentally supportive of a life force within me. The only answer to death is the heat and confusion of living; the only dependable warmth is the warmth of the blood. I can feel my own beating even now.

In that critical period the family women enhanced that answer. They were macro members in the life dance, seeking an answering rhythm within my sinews, my synapses, my very bones. In the ghost of my right breast, these were the micro members from within. There was an answering rhythm in the ghost of those dreams which would have to go in favor of those which I had some chance of effecting. The others had lain around unused and space-claiming for a long time anyway, and at best needed to be re-aired and re-examined.

For instance, I will never be a doctor. I will never be a deep-sea diver. I may possibly take a doctorate in etymology, but I will never bear any more children. I will never learn ballet, nor become a great actress, although I might learn to ride a bike and travel to the moon. But I will never be a millionaire nor increase my life insurance. I am who the world and I have never seen before.

Castaneda talks of living with death as your guide, that sharp awareness engendered of full possibility at any given chance and moment. For me, that means being—not ready for death—but able to get ready instantly, and always to balance the "I wants" with the "I haves." I am learning to speak my pieces, to inject into the living world my convictions of what is necessary and what I think is important without concern (of the enervating kind) for whether or not it is understood, tolerated, correct or heard before. Although of course being incorrect is always the hardest, but even that is becoming less important. The world will not stop if I make a mistake.

And for all that, I still wish sometimes that I had still the myth of having 100 years in this frame, and this hunger for my sister stilled.

Women who speak with my tongue are lovers; the woman who does not parry yet matches my thrust, who will hear; the woman I hold in my arms, the woman who arms me whole . . .

I have found that people who need but do not want are far more difficult to front than people who want without needing, because the latter will take but sometimes give back, whereas the former simply absorb constantly while always looking away or pushing against and taking at the same time. And that is a wasting of substance through lack of acknowledgement and both of our energies, and waste is the worst. I know this because I have done them both.

Coming home from the hospital, it was hard not to feel like a pariah. There were people who avoided me out of their own pain or fear, and others who seemed to expect me to suddenly become someone other than who I have always been, myself, rather than saint or buddha. Pain does not mellow you, nor does it ennoble, in my experience. It was hard not to feel pariah, or sometimes too vulnerable to exist. There were women who were like the aide in the hospital who had flirted so nicely with me until she heard my biopsy was positive. Then it was as if I had gone into purdah; she only came near me under the strictest of regulatory distance.

The status of untouchable is a very unreal and lonely one, although it does keep everyone at arm's length, and protects as it insulates. But you can die of that specialness, of the cold, the isolation. It does not serve living. I began quickly to yearn for the warmth of the fray, to be good as the old even while the slightest touch meanwhile threatened to be unbearable.

The emphasis upon wearing a prosthesis is a way of avoiding having women come to terms with their own pain and loss, and thereby, with their own strength. I was already dressed to go home when the head nurse came into my room to say goodbye. "Why doesn't she have a form on?" she asked Frances, who by this time was acknowledged by all to be my partner.

"She doesn't want to wear it," Frances explained.

"Oh you're just not persistent enough," the head nurse replied, and then turned to me with a lets-have-no-nonsense-now look, and I was simply too tired. It wasn't worth the effort to resist her. I knew I didn't look any better.

At home I wept and wept and wept, finally. And made love to myself, endlessly and repetitively, until it was no longer tentative.

Where were the dykes who had had mastectomies? I wanted to talk to a lesbian, to sit down and start from a common language, no matter how diverse. I wanted to share dyke-insight, so to speak. The call went out. Sonny and Karyn came to the house that evening and the four of us shared our fears and our stories across age and color and place and difference and I will be forever grateful to Sonny and Karyn.

"Take it easy," Sonny said. "Remember you're not really as strong now as you feel." I knew what she meant because I could tell how easily I fell apart whenever I started to believe my own propaganda and overdo anything.

But still she told me about her going to an educational conference three weeks after her surgery, and that she thought now that it probably had been a mistake. But I knew why she had done it and so did she, and we both speechlessly acknowledged that she would probably do it again. It was the urge, the need, to work again, to feel a surge of connection begin with that

piece of yourself. To be of use, even symbolically, is a necessity for any new perspective of self, and I thought of that three weeks later, when I knew I needed to go to Houston to give a reading, even though I felt weak and inadequate.

I found I couldn't sleep more than three or four hours at a time for awhile, propped up on pillows because my back and shoulder were paining me so. There were fixed pains, and moveable pains, deep pains and surface pains, strong pains and weak pains. There were stabs and throbs and burns, gripes and tickles and itches. I would peep under the bandage when I changed it; the scar still looked placid and inoffensive, like the trussed rump of a stuffed goose, and once the stitches were out, even the puffiness passed.

I would sleep for a few hours and then I would get up, go to the john, write down my dreams on little scraps of paper without my glasses, take two aspirin, do my hand exercises, spider-crawling up the wall of the bathroom, and then go back to bed for another few hours and some more dreams.

I pretty much functioned automatically, except to cry. Every once in a while I would think, "what do I eat? how do I act to announce or preserve my new status as temporary upon this earth?" and then I'd remember that we have always been temporary, and that I had just never really underlined it before, or acted out of it so completely before. And then I would feel a little foolish and needlessly melodramatic, but only a little.

On the day after the stitches came out and I got so furious with the nurse who told me I was bad for the morale of the office because I did not wear a prosthesis, I wrote in my journal:

> October 5, 1978
> I feel like I'm counting my days in milliseconds, never mind hours. And it's a good thing, that particular consciousness of the way in which each hour passes, even if it is a boring hour. I want it to become permanent. There is so much I have not said in the past few days, that can only be lived now—the act of writing seems impossible to me sometimes, the space of time for the words to form or be written is long enough for the situation to totally alter, leaving you liar or at search once again for the truth. What seems impossible is made real/tangible by the physical form of my brown arm moving across the page; not that my arm cannot do it, but that something holds it away.
>
> In some way I must aerate this grief, bring heat and light around the pain to lend it some proportion, and god knows the news is nothing to write home about—the new pope is dead, the yankees won the game . . .
>
> Later
> If I said this all didn't matter I would be lying. I see this as a serious break in my work/living, but also as a serious chance to learn something that I can share for use. And I mourn the women who limit their loss to the physical loss alone, who do not move into the whole terrible meaning of mortality as both weapon and power. After all, what could we possibly be afraid of after having admitted to ourselves that we had dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? For once we accept the actual existence of our dying, who can ever have power over us again?
>
> Now I am anxious for more living—to sample and partake of the sweetness

of each moment and each wonder who walks with me through my days.
And now I feel again the large sweetness of the women who stayed open
to me when I needed that openness like rain, who made themselves available.

I am writing this now in a new year, recalling, trying to piece together that piece of my recent past, so that I, or anyone else in need or desire, can dip into it at will if necessary to find the ingredients with which to build a wider construct. That is an important function of the telling of experience. I am also writing to sort out for myself who I was and was becoming throughout that time, setting down my artifacts, not only for later scrutiny, but also to be free of them. I do not wish to be free from their effect, which I will carry and use internalized in one way or another, but free from having to carry them around in a reserve part of my brain.

But I am writing across a gap so filled with death—real death, the fact of it—that it is hard to believe that I am still so very much alive and writing this. That fact of all these other deaths heightens and sharpens my living, makes the demand upon it more particular, and each decision even more crucial.

Breast cancer, with its mortal awareness and the amputation which it entails, can still be a gateway, however cruelly won, into the tapping and expansion of my own power and knowing. We must learn to count the living with that same particular attention with which we number the dead.

February 20, 1979

I am often afraid to this day, but even more so angry at having to be afraid, of having to spend so much of my energies, interrupting my work, simply upon fear and worry. Does my incomplete gall bladder series mean I have cancer of the gall bladder? Is my complexion growing yellow again like it did last year, a sure sign, I believe, of the malignant process that had begun within my system? I resent the time and weakening effect of these concerns—they feel as if they are available now for diversion in much the same way the FBI lies are available for diversion, the purpose being to sway us from our appointed and self-chosen paths of action.

I must be responsible for finding a way to handle those concerns so that they don't enervate me completely, or bleed off the strength I need to move and act and feel and write and love and lie out in the sun and listen to the new spring birdsong.

I think I find it in work, being its own answer. Not to turn away from the fear, but to use it as fuel to help me along the way I wish to go. If I can remember to make the jump from impotence to action, then working uses the fear as it drains it off, and I find myself furiously empowered.

Isn't there any other way, I said.

In another time, she said.

FOR JULIA IN NEBRASKA

In the Midwest of Willa Cather
the railroad looks like a braid of hair
a grandmother's strong hands plaited
straight down a grand-daughter's back.
Out there last autumn the streets
dreamed copper-lustre, the fields
of winter wheat whispered long snows yet to fall
we were talking of matrices

and now it's spring again already.
This stormy Sunday lashed with rain
I call you in Nebraska
hear you're planting your garden
sanding and oiling a burl of wood
hear in your voice the intention to
survive the long war between mind and body
and we make a promise to talk
this year, about growing older

and I think: we're making a pledge.
Though nothing in the books of ritual
is useful between women
we still can make vows together
long distance, in electrical code:
Today you were promising me
to live, and I took your word,
Julia, as if it were my own:
we'll live to grow old and talk about it too.

I've listened to your words,
seen you stand in the caldron's glare
rendering grammar by the white heat
of your womanly wrath.
Brave linguist, bearing your double axe and shield
painfully honed and polished,
no word lies cool on your tongue
bent on restoring meaning to
our lesbian names, in quiet fury
weaving the chronicle so violently torn.

On this beautiful, ever-changing land
–the historical marker says–
man fought to establish a home
(fought whom? the marker is mute).
They named this Catherland, for Willa Cather,
lesbian–the marker is mute,
the marker white men set on a soil
of broken treaties, Indian blood,
women wiped out in childbirth, massacres–
for Willa Cather, lesbian,
whose letters were burnt in shame.

And if I've written in passion,
Live, Julia! what was I writing
but my own pledge to myself
where the love of women is rooted?
and what was I saluting
but the matrices we weave
web upon web, delicate rafters
flung in audacity to the prairie skies
nets of telepathy contrived
to outlast the iron road
laid out in blood across the land they called virgin–
nets, strands, a braid of hair
a grandmother's strong hands plaited
straight down a grand-daughter's back.

–Adrienne Rich

Myra Love

the time trip

(for Helen)

NOTES ON THE TEMPORAL IDEOLOGY

> time (tīm), n. [ME.; AS. tima; IE. *dī–men < base dā(ī)–, to part, divide up, etc. . . .][1]

Introduction

When I started to think that time and not I was a problem, Mary Daly had not yet published *Gyn/Ecology:*

> Women are constantly tempted to measure reality in terms of the measurements of Father Time, which are linear, clocked. This is a trap. Our gynocentric time/space is not measurable, bargainable. It is qualitative, not quantitative . . . Furious women must begin by seeing through the Time Keepers' Lie and daring to defy the Time Keepers' schedules. The more we do this, the more we "find time" for our Selves. Hags' spirits soar out of the cells of the Clockwork Prison when we defy the Lie, leaving their "frame of reference," de-riding their boundaries. Otherworld Journeyers are precisely time/space travelers . . .

I had intuitions about the "senseless circles, the pointless processions of the hands on the Grand Fathers' clocks,"[2] and about that "monodirectional goose-stepping into oblivion."[3] I felt that there was something phony about the opposition of "historical" and "mythic" time which lies at the heart of all the male debates on temporality, and I had no desire to waste my lifetime taking sides in the ball-game of the "linears" against the "cyclicals" or in the battle of progress and "eternal recurrence." Both modes of time malfunction (male-function), that is, they literally work for ill, to make us sick.

After reading Mary Daly's a-mazing comments about time in *Gyn/Ecology,* I turned again to my musings on time, took up my first intuitions, made some changes, added a bit that I had learned in-between, and ended up with the patchwork that you are now reading.

Time in Patriarchy

Male avant-garde thinkers describe reality in patriarchy for us:

> An organ-machine is plugged into an energy-source machine: the one produces a flow that the other interrupts. The breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth a machine coupled to it. The mouth of the anorexic wavers between several functions: its possessor is uncertain as to whether it is an eating-machine, an anal machine, a talking machine, or a breathing machine (asthma attacks). Hence we are all handymen: each with his little machines. For every organ-machine, an energy-machine: all the time, flows and interruptions. . . . Something is produced: the effects of a machine, not mere metaphors.[4]

The body-mind split in the male as the relationship of machinery to its handyman: a fitting description of the technology which is patriarchal cul-

ture. The game of deadly dichotomies: anything is better than life! This is not a metaphor. For we who are not *man*, not handymen repairing bodies for exploitation by alienated minds, are nevertheless trapped within the machinery maintained for use and exploitation by men. Look at our physical environment. Sense our psychic surroundings when we are not with each other.

There is the threat of possible annihilation should we cease to participate, cease to serve as the energy sources for their technological identities. Contrary to what they claim, energy sources are not machines. Men turn the breast and the sun into machines, exploit and mystify them. Such mystification is the outcome of self-mystification, of the patriarchal fallacy of dualism. If one's own body is a machine, so then are others. Why not take over the other machinery? One handyman is as good as another: lives become interchangeable. The interruptions, the imposed connections and couplings (take this as a metaphor for institutionalized heterosexuality) and other patriarchally sanctioned drains on female energy sources, make machinery out of the uninterrupted flow of energy that constitutes life. In short, the activities in which energy is coded, dammed up, and andro-centered construct the world in which we are forced to live.

Thus, if we refuse suicide, refuse to be sources for the sourceless, we are threatened with annihilation. But we are their energy sources, and without us, our cooperation, they may not even have the energy to destroy us.

Carefully, we make our way, sometimes slowly and sometimes by leaps, out of the machinery, discovering all the nuts, and bolts, and screws, and wires that kept us locked in, functionalized in his-story, trapped outside our Selves or driven into isolation in the interior to be grist for the psychiatric wrecking-mill that specializes in what no longer serves the masters. And one of the central imprisoning devices that we discover is patriarchal time.

Father Time is well named. He parts us from ourselves, divides us up. And according to patriarchal myths of origins (of what they have misnamed "creation"), he began in the "primordial dividing up of the three-headed monster": in other (our other) words, in the murder and dismembering of the Goddess.

Accordingly, every celebration of the regeneration of time, every New Year for example, is originally a celebration of the murder of the Goddess, indeed a repetition of that "cosmogonic act," or, to be more accurate, a reiteration of the triumph of patriarchy.

Mircea Eliade, noted (patriarchal) scholar of comparative (patriarchal) religions, writes at great length in his *Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* of the supposedly profound antithesis of historical and mythic or cyclical time. In patriarchy, however, history is myth and myth, history.

The failure of the patriarchs to recognize and enunciate the hidden history of patriarchal mythic time is no more of an innocent oversight than their unwillingness to confront the mythic quality of their history. Both are attempts to present patriarchal reality as *reality*—as if there were no other possibility. By treating the origin of patriarchy as the beginning of the world, they create the illusion that the so-called passage from chaos to order, which they celebrate, is the beginning of life and the regeneration of time, with a periodic rebirth of innocence.

Particularly significant in this respect is the regeneration of time, for like

every male idea of renaissance it mystifies far more than it explains. Eliade claims that the origin of new year celebrations "is basically an attempt to restore—if only momentarily—mythical and primordial time, 'pure' time, the time of the 'instant' of the Creation. Every New Year is a resumption of time from the beginning, that is a repetition of the cosmogony."[5] We who are able to read the hidden history in patriarchal myth recognize what is only implicit in Eliade's description of the ancient Babylonian New Year ceremony, the *akitu,* in which the Great Goddess, Tiamat, is dismembered:

> During the course of the *akitu* ceremony, which lasted twelve days, the so-called epic of the Creation, *Enuma elis,* was solemnly recited several times in the temple of Marduk. Thus the combat between Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat (sic!) was reactualized—the combat that had taken place in *illo tempore* and had put an end to chaos by the final victory of the god. *Marduk creates from the fragments of Tiamat's torn body* (my emphasis). . . . That this commemoration of the Creation was in effect a reactualization of the cosmogonic act is proved both by the rituals and by the formulas recited during the course of the ceremony. The combat between Tiamat and Marduk was mimed by a struggle between two groups of actors. . . . The struggle between two groups of actors not only commemorated the primordial conflict between Marduk and Tiamat; it repeated, it actualized, the cosmogony, the passage from chaos to cosmos. The mythical event was present: 'May he continue to conquer Tiamat and shorten her days!' the celebrant exclaimed.[6]

The New Year celebration, also "the same period that the ceremonies of the initiation of young men are performed,"[7] is the celebration of the transformation of the female into raw material, into energy sources for men, the destruction of the Goddess in the service of the god. This is how we decode the text of patriarchal mythic time, the underpinnings of the technology of male supremacy.

But the patriarchs themselves (Eliade included) have their own interpretation of the "necessity" for this mythical time, for the endless cycles of repetition. Of course they do not acknowledge such temporal constructs as patriarchal. They simply posit all other temporal possibilities as "chaos," for to do otherwise would open up, however indirectly, the question of other, non-patriarchal realities. Instead, the patriarchs write of the *necessity* for mythical cyclical time as a means of tolerating, overcoming, or transcending what they call "the terror of history," as if that terror were something visited upon them by fate rather than the havoc and destruction produced by their mania for mastery:

> For our purpose, only one question concerns us: How can the "terror of history" be tolerated from the viewpoint of historicism? Justification of a historical event by the simple fact that it is a historical event, in other words, by the simple fact that it "happened that way," will not go far toward freeing humanity from the terror that the event inspires. . . . We should wish to know, for example, how it would be possible to tolerate, and to justify, the sufferings and annihilation of so many peoples who suffer and are annihilated for the simple reason that their geographical situation sets them in the pathway of history: . . . And in our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign,

no transhistorical meaning.[8]

The "hows" of the patriarchs reveal more than their speaking/writing intends. Patriarchal mythic time allows man to escape, at least symbolically, from the consciousness of his own destructiveness, to return to pseudo-innocence which enables him to avoid seeing the effects of his own malfunctioning. So nothing need ever change: the patriarchy continues its processes of annihilation, and man periodically reclaims his theoretical innocence, only to fall back into (or more accurately: to continue) his history.

The history which is at the heart of patriarchal myth is the thoroughly disguised account of the origin of male supremacy; the myth which is at the heart of patriarchal history is the *telos*: a part of the philosophical structure of patriarchal thought which goes back at least to the metaphors of Plato and probably a lot farther. This philosophic structure is "centrist," that is, it conceives of the

> presence-to-itself of a center (given the name of Origin, God, Truth, Being, or Reason) [which] centralizes the world through its authority of its self-presence and subordinates to itself in an agonistic, hierarchical manner, all other cognizable elements of the same epistemological (or ontological) system. Thus, the metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions which dominates philosophical thought . . . is, in fact, a subtle mechanism of hierarchization which assures the unique valorization of the 'positive' pole (that is, of a *single* term) and consequently, the repressive subordination of all 'negativity,' the mastery of difference as such. . . . Theoretically subordinated to the concept of masculinity, the woman is viewed by man as *his* opposite, that is to say, as *his* other, the negative of the positive, and not, in her own right, different, other, *Otherness* itself. Throughout the Platonic metaphors . . . the woman, and the Other as such, are philosophically subjugated to the logical principle of Identity—Identity being conceived as a solely masculine sameness, apprehended as *male* self-presence and consciousness-to-itself. The possibility of a thought which would neither spring from nor return to this masculine sameness is simply unthinkable. Plato's text thus establishes the repressive systematization of the logic of identity: the privilege of 'oneness,' of the reproduction of likeness, of the repetition of sameness, of literal meaning, analogy, symmetry, dichotomous oppositions, teleological projects.[9]

The *telos,* an aspect of the theoretical framework based in the repression of otherness and of women in particular, *produces linear time by alienating experience.* Because patriarchal time and history aim toward an end-point which is already predetermined, given at the origin of the process which exists only to reveal, to fulfill, to accomplish its end, it is necessary to have a rule which knows and allows of no exception: all occurs according to some principle which is itself beyond tangible experience. At best we are allowed to be the means by which the *telos* is achieved (or more accurately, the means by which progress toward its achievement is made).

But for us progress is an ambiguous term, a loaded word which resounds with overtones of nuclear pollution, social and genetic engineering, etc. It is a contradiction-laden notion, for what has been called progress in the social, political, and scientific realms exists in very real tension with its "opposite" on the level of individual life experience; what we have to look forward to

in patriarchal culture is increasing experiential impoverishment: aging made negative by the patriarchal definitions of what is valuable in women, and a death institutionalized and depersonalized by the frenetic attempt to deny or conceal it, both from the one experiencing it and from all those who might be confronted with it. The gap between the positive image of linear time as progress and our immediate experience of the deadly technology of patriarchy is one they condition us to ignore or to experience and comprehend as the superiority of the mechanical-technological to the mere "raw material" of our bodies and our lives, teaching us to see the "larger picture" which is really their projection.

Lived Intensities

We have no institutions
No mediators between ourselves and our
Experience our perceptions

. . .

We all benefit mutually
From the intensities of each
Our conflicts are not between people
They exist between each woman
And the walls she has chosen to transcend
They are positive
Creative
Like tensions of ions
But tension is strongest in the risk
We don't know what it is we gain or lose
Or whether it may be the risk itself we seek
The immensity of becoming

. . .

I know this:
Whatever we can imagine is possible
Whatever we will to be will be[10]

Perhaps we begin by refusing the patriarchal separation of ourselves from our experience, and maybe we start with the "unaskable" questions: *Why* is history terror? Why should we seek to escape, transcend, justify it? We begin to imagine the ways in which change is possible, how to cease serving as raw material, means to any patriarchal end, and we share with each other what we learn and vision.

Tired of dreams of escape, once my favorite fantasy, I start to value my own energy and look about me to see others who do so too. It takes too much energy to run, there is no safe, uncolonized place in their world to which escape is possible, and I refuse to dedicate my life to the reproduction of an inverted reflection of the patriarchal *telos*, a mirror image of some future perfection, utopia-to-be, which I will never live to see.

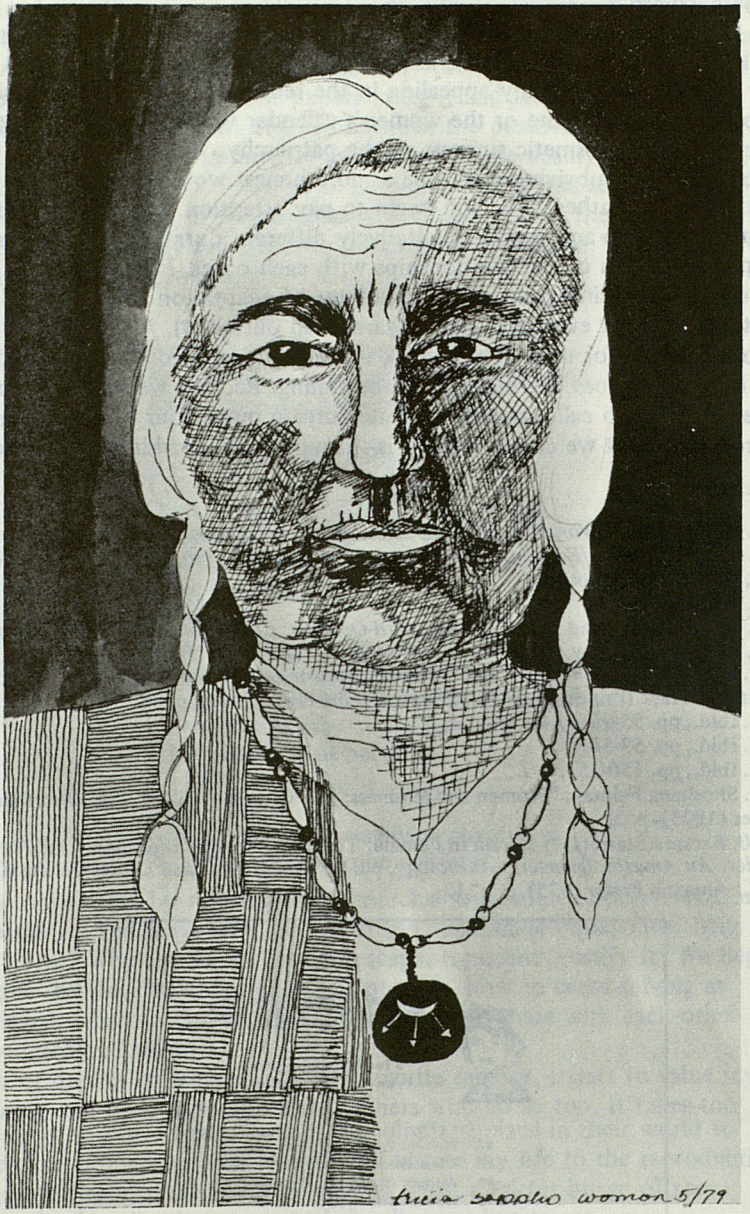
There must be an end to end-points, to goals cut off from our experience and perceptions. We must connect with ourselves and to each other, and these connections must be intense, immediate, and personal, not merely the formalized gestures of shared allegiances, ideologies, or group-identities. For only from such connections, which I always think of with the words "lived intensities," I don't know why, can we begin to create alternatives to the "Masters' March of Time" and to the "pointless processions of the hands on the Grand

Fathers' clocks."

I hesitate to suggest, for obvious reasons, institutionalized or institutionalizable alternatives to the clocks and calendars of the masters. Although there may be something initially appealing in the rebellion which the establishment of lesbian standard time or the women's calendar would be, such changes are little more than cosmetic surgery on the patriarchy. What is important is that we cease living (subviving would be a more honest word here) under the domination of Father Time and begin to pay attention to our own rhythms: to our body-time and to the qualitatively different durations, intensities, and temporal patterns of our relationships with each other. I believe that if we do so, we will disintegrate whole structures of adaptation to patriarchal reality (that we may not even have been aware of in ourselves). And although there is no safe place for us in their world, if we begin to decolonize our bodies and our experiences, we make a real beginning. Because we have no ground under our feet to call our own, we must create out of our own needs and desires, and what we create already is—in our shared workings of creation.

NOTES

1. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language,* 1962.
2. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 41, footnote.
3. Ibid., p. 390.
4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1977), pp. 1-2.
5. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History,* trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 54.
6. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
7. Ibid., pp. 53-54.
8. Ibid., pp. 150-151.
9. Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," in: *Diacritics,* Winter (1975), p. 3.
10. Barbara Starrett, "I Dream in Female: The Metaphors of Evolution," in: *The Lesbian Reader: An Amazon Quarterly Anthology,* ed. by Gina Covina and Laurel Galana (Oakland, Calif.: Amazon Press, 1975), p. 121.



graphic by tricia sappho womon

One of the experiences of growing older is of course that more and more of our friends begin to die—and we now begin to live in the strange state of feeling as close to those who are dead as to those who are alive. At this point of my life (I am 62), almost as many of the people to whom I feel close are dead as are living. To go on living, myself, in any kind of equilibrium, I have to muse deeply about their deaths—and to muse, too, about the closeness to them that I feel. Here is a death song I have written to Bessie Breuer, who was a wonderful writer. — *Barbara Deming*

DEATH SONG

To Bessie Breuer (1894–1975)

You are in the earth.
I lie in bed, knees to my chest
(as we were buried when death
was known to be the Mother),
not quite thinking of you–my thoughts stand
still–but dying a little myself.
With you.
I don't get up.
There's nothing
that I want to do.
My days stop.

"In the beginning was the listening," a woman has
now dared to say–though at your funeral
they quoted JOHN.
I try to listen–or, lying stiller still,
to listen to a listening.
I can't hear,
try to hope.

My body remembers your knobby skeletal
body in my arms.
The nurse had propped you in a chair and,
in a delirium, I think,
you tried and tried again and tried again and tried
again to stand.
To keep you from toppling forward,
I put myself in your way,
catching you under the arms each time, your
thin breast, like a lover's, pressed
against my breast. In this wrestling I think your greeting
to death passed into my bones.
I take it as a gift,
though I am now undone.

You are in earth, death, in the Mother,
and, knees to my chest, I too
wait in Her–Death Mother, Life Mother,
the Old One, the Listener–as you must be waiting–
to be heard,
to have Her bring us forth again,
and name us –
Who are we now?

–Barbara Deming

THE WORDS NOT SPOKEN

I carry your grief inside
as surely as the cancer you invited
to end it/

You never wanted me in your kitchen
your hands shook when you showed me
how to fold nuts into cookie dough

it may have been your dread
to teach what we have always done
lest that be all I learned of you
it may have been your rage
his diets took away
this last ageless act
making out of molecules
warm sweet scented things
it may have been his wide brown eyes
looking at you from my head

I saw the tremors
how you shook me off
my voice would quaver
is this enough is it ready now
tell me it is good enough.

Later I would cook a meal for you
shoo you out to stand
in the back hall doorway by the stairs
watching liqueur and poppy seed
my scatter of pots and conversation
messing and beaming and
waiting
for your taste

you eat gingerly
you admit
it is interesting although very rich.

I never cooked another meal for you
not in your house
nor in mine
not that I did not keep petitioning
for a visit year on year

see me where I live and see me once
as someone other

than the shadow
of that soft-lipped mouth
and barbed wire curls/

I never told you that I loved you
till your eyes
scared lost resigned their sight
and your glaze itself spoke go.

–Sara Heslep

QUESTIONS ABOUT VIOLENCE

–Melanie Kaye

In the last SW I published in this space a piece called Women & Violence, which has become the germ of a book I'm writing, partly on women's actual experience with violence–as victims, resisters, and aggressors (and all the shadings & new categories which such an investigation demands).

The information available–especially on women's non-victim experience with violence–is scanty, to say the least. So I'm asking you for your experience. I'm not trying to obtain a random sample, or derive meaningful statistics; I have neither the equipment nor the money, and besides, my interest is in qualitative experience. What I want is a series of violence profiles. Those of us who've done a profile of ourselves agree that it is a surprisingly interesting untapped area to probe.

You can send me information anonymously, if you want. Anything you send will be confidential. You can set conditions for use (e.g., delete all names), whatever would make you feel ok. **Send to Melanie Kaye, c/o Sinister Wisdom, Box 30541, Lincoln, Neb. 68503.**

The following questions are suggestions: use them as they are useful but feel free to focus on what is relevant to your experience. Most useful to me would be a free-form response, including specific examples, maybe describing particular incidents, your feelings about these incidents (then/now). In fact, whatever you're willing to share is bound to be useful (including criticism of these questions).

Background: how old are you? what's your race or ethnic group? what kind of work did/does your father do? mother? you? did you grow up in a city/small town/suburb/rural area? how many people in your growing up family? are you a lesbian/heterosexual/bisexual/celibate? do you have kids/have you raised kids? other pertinent information?

As a child, were you beaten? by whom? were the beatings out of control? measured punishment? did you resist? how did you feel? were your siblings beaten? was there a pattern (e.g., alcohol; bad day at work; every saturday morning . . .)

Did you father/stepfather beat your mother? did she fight back? was there a pattern? what would you do? how did you feel?

Did you fight–with siblings, kids in the neighborhood?

Did anyone (neighbors, family, police) ever intervene during family fights?

Have you beaten or been beaten by men? women? what did you do? how did you feel? have you been raped or assaulted?

Have you ever hit a child? measured punishment? out of control? how did you feel about it? have you ever felt like hitting a child? have you ever felt

like hitting anyone? who, why? what stopped you? what happened if nothing stopped you?

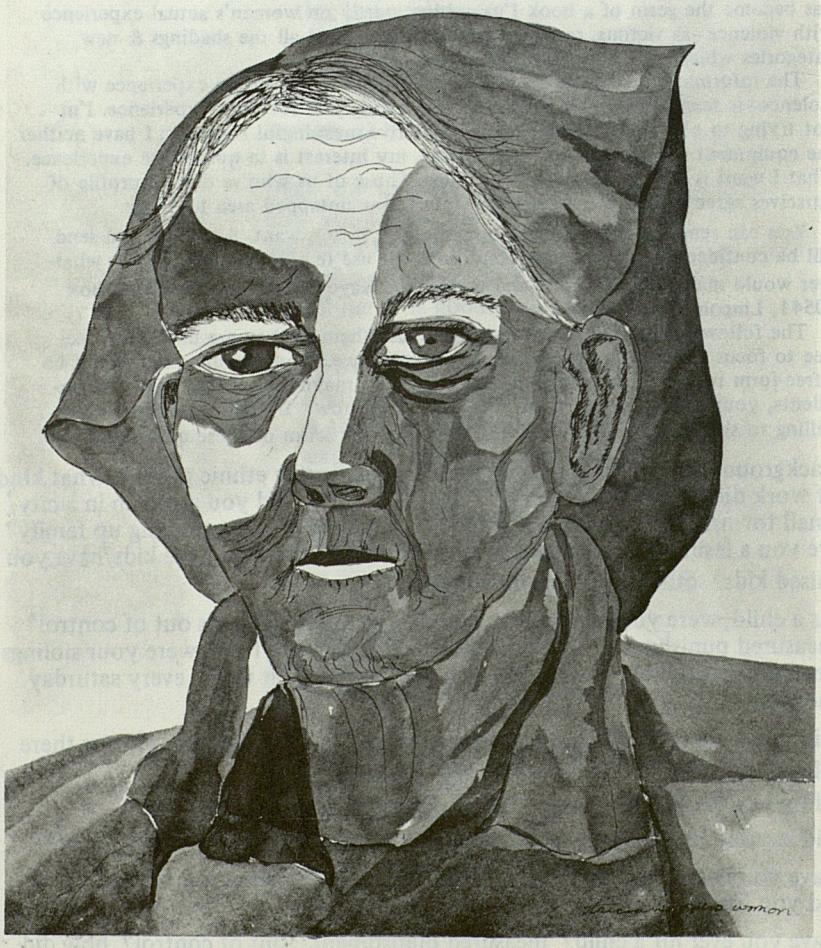
Have you ever hit or kicked an animal? as punishment? out of control? how did you feel?

Do you fight? have you started fights (with lovers? at the bar? with men?) are there any patterns? do you know how to fight? do you carry a weapon? what? do you know how to use it?

Has your relationship to violence changed over the years? how?

Do you recall any of your sexual fantasies over the years? share a couple. do any of them seem connected with violence or power? (e.g., as a child, for years i had fantasies of rescuing someone, usually a girl, from some situation of torture and abuse).

Thank you.



graphic by tricia sappho womon

Marcia Black

nursing home women:

THE BITTERS OF AGE

"Sometimes the curtains are open, the light comes in, and I remember. Other times the curtains are closed, and my mind is dark. I have been sitting here for eight years. Today I remember, tomorrow there may only be a thin crack of light."

This article is dedicated to Mary Lawton and Blanche Papandrea, whose spirits are ageless.

The women's cries weave through the air above the drone of TV advertisements and soap operas, the harsh gibberish of the intercom regulating this world of psychic and emotional dusk. Constant reminders of violation. Light issues weakly from the fake candelabra, from the nursing station, from the TV. I sit in the front lobby and watch all these others, so well practiced in waiting. The women's faces initiate me into their realities: the routines of awkward and impatient visitors, the cruelty of others' condescension, the plundering of their selves by drugs and physical restraints. My sense blur from the horror, screams of protest rigidify in my being.

The nursing home is a place few of us enter unless forced by necessity. My first day as a social service worker I watch the Old Ones lined up around the sides of the room. A few of them occasionally stand up and then sit back down; a confusion of hopelessness paralyzes their minds. The women gaze blankly, the bitterness of neglect sour on their tongues. The bond between us all, the shared experience of our womanhood is immediately visible to me, but such commonality is rarely recognized. The old women have become invisible to each other, separated by lifetimes of ignorance and isolation, dispossessed of their common-power and common-sense. For years they have refused to speak to each other and so I, still young, become the repository for their life's stories.

* * *

In patriarchy, to be old is to be deviant. Mental hospitals, prisons, and nursing homes are the dumping grounds for those who do not obey and conform, institutions that incarcerate and disempower those classified as human refuse. The elders in this society are treated with suspicion, and feared as potential dangers. Once physical infirmity begins to limit self-sufficiency, they become easy prey for patriarchy's judgement of mental/emotional deviance. The woman who attempts to find a home in a nursing institution, by either choice or necessity, finds her status quickly shifts from "resident" to "patient." Her complaints and symptoms are seen as signals of mental disturbance, rather than viewed in relation to the totality of her life.

The doctors and nurses substitute medical caricatures for the old woman's reality; she is described in medical charts and meetings between the "professionals" as schizophrenic, neurotic, paranoid, or sexually delusional. The "confused" patient, as she is called, loses all claims to her individuality, her past, and her own process of healing. She is deprived of her grief through anti-depressant drugs and is reduced to a criminal/invalid through the constant use of restraints. The medical description of her experience allows for no growth or creative transformation of experience into insight. The alternate modes of perception that are accessible to the aged woman are disguised as sickness, and her language is dismissed by those around her as delusional hysteria or senility.

* * *

". . . oh darling, darling, I am so glad you've come. I have been calling and calling, but no one ever pays any attention. I know they can hear me, I can hear them laughing. What have I done to make them ignore me so? I try and be so sweet, but I am in such pain. Always the pain makes me fret so, makes me need to urinate so bad, but they never come. And they always do me last now, too. They change my bed after they've done everyone else, they take me to the bath last after there aren't any towels left and use the bath mats to dry me, leaving my skin to chap from the dampness. Why do they hate me so? I call and I call and they never come."

I reach over the bed-railing and softly caress her forehead, her skin surprising me, as it always does, with its softness. Her panic inhabits her whole body, possesses her mind, whips all her energies into its service. Her head tosses as she gasps for breath, her distended stomach heaves, her tongue lolls between the phrasings of her terror. Each day I hear her as I pass her door, calling and calling. She is caught in a strangle-hold of fear, her words the carcass of her life.

She calms under the gentleness of my touch, reassured by my presence. I soothe her in low tones, and remind her that I, too, am a woman, and have much to learn. She hesitates, uncertain in the novelty of my concern, but begins the telling of her past.

". . . I gave birth to two children, both of them hard births, I almost didn't make it with my daughter, she was so big and I have never been strong. I was in bed for a month after she was born but still I nursed her until my milk ran dry. . . . After my husband died I went to live with her and her husband. They both worked full-time. I was mostly alone, and I wasn't well, but I was glad to be with her. I did what I could for them. Sometimes when I got to thinking about my husband I would cry. I hadn't wanted to be left alone when I was old. But my daughter's husband would yell at me then, telling me what a toll I was on my daughter. I never meant her any hardship. I did what I could for her. When I began with this stomach trouble they decided it would be best for me here . . . "

She begins to cry softly, the tears fill the crevices in her face. She talks on, haltingly, about her children, unable to disentangle her life from theirs. She speaks to me as though confessing, ashamed and grieving that her children do not visit, do not remember even her birthday. She has been in this "home" for eight years, bedded down in her memories, unable to explicate the journey that has been hers. A woman with long blonde-white hair tangled

behind her, the webbing of her life torn. Day after day she stares at the light-green walls, the bed-railings, the plastic flowers. The nurses aides avoid her, shielding their fear, so that only her own voice keeps her company now through the long hours of waiting.

* * *

Nursing "homes" are predominantly female communities, yet they are communities where few relationships develop, and where the celebration of female inheritance does not even glimmer in the women's dreams. These "homes" are bitter distortions of the heritage of wisewomen; they are a mockery of our healers who now must plead for an impossible healing. Our world has been supplanted by terror and emptiness, yet remnants of her herstory still speak to us: whispering, teaching, reminding. The Old Ones of the past live on in our spirit's recollections, our women's gossip, our fairy/witches tales.

These women are the hags, the crones, the old maidens, the old Virgins. Women who are post-menopausal are often free from forced heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood. The maid and the old maid speak to the wives and mothers, and remind them that woman cannot be completed through a man, that woman does not equal womb. The old hag challenges the mold of docility, as she resists sexual objectification.

The perpetuation of patriarchy is ensured through teaching women to shun our female-aged. The aides in nursing homes have learned this lesson well. They cluster together, laugh at the patients, mimic their despair. These women are also powerless, caught in an exploitative economic system that forces them into the servitude of minimum wage labor. Yet, divided against themselves, they reinforce their powerlessness through the fear-wrought refusal to cross age-boundaries. The aged women threaten the aides' images of female beauty and sexuality; the pretense of firm, smooth flesh and cosmetic heterosexual bodies gives way before the Old Ones' physical truths. Younger women learn to turn away from the "dried-up, barren old woman," to shudder and pity her for her humiliations, but to take no action. In the past, our crones were burned, reinforcing this indoctrination. Now the crone is cast out from her community and into nursing "homes."

As an outcast, the crone's power is stolen from her, leaving her to taste the bitters of woman's oppression. When we gaze into the panicked eyes of the nursing home woman, we no longer see the possibilities of her/our freedom. The world which she could represent is reflected back to us as alien territory. The terror of this landscape keeps us away; we avoid her, unable to face the psychic and physical torture which she is forced to endure. These contradictions which we have for so long overlooked between our inner knowledge and our external realities point to the gaps and absences in our suppressed herstory.

* * *

They have lined up all the women, and are shaving their chins. I ask the aide, who couldn't be older than twenty, why they are shaving the women. She turns to me, and in a voice that distills shock at my stupidity and contempt for the women's condition, but with eyes that flit in squeamish discomfort, she says, "Well, they have Beards, *you know." Her expression wavers*

as she puts a name to this indecency, lowering her voice as she shares this secret of tabooed change.

* * *

We have not always been afraid of women's transformations. In the old tales that whisper through our memories and find confirmation in the recent excavations of Goddess-wisdom, we discover an ancient matrifocal culture and religion where women were once healers and priestesses. In the Old Religion, women's activities gave meaning and structure to the entire community; the communal home was sacred space; the hearth was icon and altar of female power. Women here practiced the magical, transformative crafts of agriculture, food preparation, weaving and medicine. Through woman's actions and through her body, the power of the Goddess was alchemized, and the community tapped into the reverberations of female power. Women of all generations were integrated into this community, forming a network of nurture and support. The physical and spiritual aspects of existence were united in the day-to-day rituals of healing and creating, thus ensuring continuity of the female network.

This hearth religion, the Craft of the Wise, was brutally suppressed. Women were terrorized, burned, and dispossessed of our power. The development of the medical "profession" excluded the participation of women, denigrated the older woman-crafts of herbology and midwifery, and assaulted the apprenticeship network between older and younger women. Woman-kind was decimated during this time, and the demands of the market economy came to be seen as inevitable: a further excuse for the suppression of woman's power and skills.

The women who remained after the brutal dissolution of the Old Religion were isolated from each other, no longer supported by life-sustaining crafts and rituals. The spiritual aspect of woman's craft was severed from the material base of household skills, and women were restricted to the degraded work of house cleaning and maintenance. The totality of the hearth religion was fragmented, robbed of the powers to nurture and heal. Separate institutions were created to house those who had become social misfits, deviants, and outcasts.

* * *

The old women are screaming and cursing, their voices colliding in the air, crashing up against the walls. They are engaged in a war of rebellion, with only their voices as weapons. Restrained in wheelchairs, white sheets twisted around their bodies and then knotted, the women rock and moan, slowly try to work their bodies free. It is the day of the full moon, and the nursing staff has taken added precautions. More of the women have been herded into the TV room where they can be kept under surveillance. Fewer women shuffle down the halls. Every month, for one day, the women gain the revenge of the powerless. Their howls sear the air as the suppressed bitterness and rage of their lives well up and burst. The waters of their beings explode from years of pressurized restraint, and their language sprays outwards in a brazen flood of filth, dirt, and excrement. During the time of the full moon, the women cleanse themselves. They reverse the tides and release their soured, fetid anger.

Yet coupled with their cursing, harmonized in dissonance, the women also pray. Their voices clear in meaning and passion, they call upon their Mothers,

summoning the comfort of the Goddess.

"... oh mother, mother, don't leave me here now. Don't leave me here alone. Why are you going away? Oh please stay with me here, hold me, I don't want to be left alone." The old woman rocks back and forth, cradling herself. "Oh mother, where are you? I haven't seen you for so long, please come back to me, I am so scared. Please come back and hold me. Oh mother...

And another woman calls out, her voice piercing through the chaos of noise, "... Oh Mother of God, come to me now. I can't take this pain any more, I can't keep on here. Mother of God, deliver me of this life."

Cursing and praying, the Old Ones greet the full moon. Their voices reach outwards, and join with the spirits of their mothers and their sisters.

* * *

Daughters, mothers, and crones–we are divided against each other, unwilling to acknowledge the extent of the pain and the power that constitute our female heritage. The root fibers of this resistance reach deep into the cracks of our divisions, subsisting on the body-hatred that poisons our integrity. The patriarchy has robbed us of our power, fragmenting the triple aspects of our woman's bodies/spirits, tearing apart the unified embrace of our woman-selves. The transformative actions of our bodies once revealed the power of the Goddess, providing us with a physical metaphor for a sense of process and the magical necessities of change. Lunar and menstrual cycles resonated and harmonized, invoking the multiplicities of female expression. The crone, as reminder of death, as symbol of the corporeal ground of all existence, and as the last crescent in woman's life, is crucial for our female spiritual sensibility.

The crone experiences that which was prefigured in her body each month during her menses. This blood signaled the close of a cycle, and was once celebrated as the sacred material of woman's corporeal, alchemical capabilities. The meanings of this cyclic ending expand during this last phase, and woman-as-crone realizes once again that she is Virgin, one-unto-herself, Lesbian. She has journeyed through the maiden and mother aspects of her woman-selves, and has learned that amidst all these changes, woman remains intact, greater than each individual transformation of her woman's power.

Patriarchal reversals have buried the crone's wisdom through the curse on death and carnality. Both the menstruating woman and the old woman are treated as objects of taboo. Menstrual blood is feared as a tainted, polluting substance, and the physical changes of the hag are viewed with horror. Her body transforms in shape, she grows facial hair, her skin wrinkles, her odors change. Thus she finds herself inhabiting the realm reserved for woman-as-untouchable.

Women in nursing homes are treated as objects of taboo, as deviants, as criminally suspect and mentally ill. This attitude is rooted in the recognition, fear and perpetuation of the leprosy imposed on our female being, the process of erasure. The crone-as-wisewoman is absent from our present realities; the transferral of her wisdom and skills has become an underground tradition. Until we awaken and unite the multiplicity of selves that lie muted and dormant in the cyclicity of our beings, we are untouchable to each other, and to ourselves.

As midwives of the spirit, we must relearn our blood's alchemy, and the language of our crone's visions.

Gayle Pearson

THE OLD WOMAN WHO LIVED IN THE BLUE

On the day I move into the apartment, the twenty-first of July, I introduce my parents to her. Later, in an aside, Mother says how glad she is that I have such a nice old woman to turn to if I need her. That evening, from the single small window in my living room, I watch as my mother, father, and three brothers drive away, pulling an empty u-haul trailer behind them. I wave and they wave back until they turn a corner and disappear. When I no longer hear the hiss of the tires on the hot summer street, the rattling of the u-haul chain, then I hear beneath my window on the front porch below the drumming of a rocking chair, wood on wood, in a hurried frenzied rhythm.

The apartment is the upstairs half of a large green and white frame house on a street lined with old elms, maples and oaks shading other large wooden houses. It has a separate side entrance with a long narrow wooden staircase. The living room is also long and narrow, with a single small window at one end. I have never lived alone.

From that single small window I look across the street below and over the freeway to the hospital, dozens of red brick buildings scattered over spacious green lawns, college campus style. Facing me is the back door of Hill Cottage, where I enter each morning, not so promptly, at eight. It is a peculiar world, so shut off, so a world of its own, that my days seem divided in two, split down the middle as the freeway seems to do to the town—the hospital on one side and the rest of us on the other. Then there are those of us who cross over.

"Good morning, Mary, how are you?"

"Go away, you crazy bitch, you know what you did you crazy bitch. I told him I never wanted to see you again now let me alone."

"Janet, why aren't you dressed? It's time for breakfast."

"Oh, help me, help me, I can't move he's done it again wired my brain and took my babies away my babies and he's shooting it through my brain if I eat I'll die hold my hand I'm cold and I'm freezing to death."

The women sit in their circles and they, too, rock, like the rubber Popeye I'd hit as a child, stiff and erect. At night I sit on my windowsill and watch them, sitting outside on little green benches, puffing on cigarettes that the husbands, fathers, and children bring on Sundays, with flowers and candy and plastic containers of coffee. There's Doris, emptying the trash, and Millie is helping, and they're spilling, can't even empty the garbage. And Helen is lighting another cigar with matches she shouldn't have, and Esther, with that horrible man from the cottage next door, crawling out of the bushes again.

I sit on the windowsill one evening, during my second week in the apartment, when I hear the stairs whining and groaning, someone gasping for air at the landing outside my door, and then a soft apologetic rapping. Opening the door I find Mrs. Braun, massive bosom heaving upward and down, peer-

ing up at me with the hopeful look of a dog wanting in from the rain.

"Am I disturbing you?" Her voice is creaky, nasal. "Is everything here satisfactory? Can I help you in any way?"

"No, everything's fine."

"Oh. I see you're all moved in, and how do you like it so far?"

"I'm very comfortable."

"Don't have much furniture, do you? Place looks rather bare, don't you think?"

She is inside the apartment, walking room to room with her hands on her hips and squinting, an inspector surveying. I protest her offer to lend me things from her attic, but she does not hear me, is scurrying out of the apartment mumbling—"they'll have to be carried down and dusted"—and I follow. The attic is wall to wall old furniture, clothing on racks, dusty books stacked on tables, boxes of china and silver packed in obvious unconcern for their protection, piles of children's games and toys. She rummages, scrounges through it all, picks something up, examines it, drops it and moves on, nearly sniffing like a pack rat. She does not ask me what it is I might want or need but has me carry down things as she chooses them: a three-tier bookcase, two end tables, a small chest of drawers, and two Roy Rogers table lamps. On one end of the living room I place the end tables with the lamps on top.

"They should be on opposite ends of the room, for better lighting," she suggests.

I hesitate. She picks up one table and lamp and carries them to the other side of the room.

"Oh, yes, this is better, see? Bruce used to have these lamps on his desk in this very corner. Course, he took the desk with him, so I can't give you that. Too bad, corner looks rather bare without it. Now help me move the bookcase against this wall."

She steps back to observe and is pleased; her face is flushed and her eyes are gleaming. "A few more things and we should be back to normal—maybe a chair over there and some pictures on the wall over here. I tell you, it's good you've moved in—to hear footsteps again over my head. You should've seen this place when the kids were here, never a busier place, I tell you, and never a moments rest, between them and their friends. Yes, that's why we called it the Grand Hotel, it never slowed down a minute, you know, like the Grand Central Station. Worked my hands to the bone. And hardly a day's rest now, still cleaning and cooking and washing and shopping—starts with the first one and never lets up. But it's worth every minute I've spent.

"Now what about you? I don't want to see you sitting up here alone, no matter how much you like it. I seen a sign of that in you already and you can't be happy like that. Those crazy women all day and sitting up here all alone at night. Unhealthy. Go where the young people are, like yourself, and get you a boyfriend. You hear?"

My acceptance of her furniture must be, to Mrs. Braun, an acceptance of her, too, for after that her visits are frequent and long. Each day, passing the front porch where she sits rocking, I nod and smile and she smiles vacantly back, not a word, just the smile, as if rocking commands her total

attention. Up in the apartment I first hear a slight creaking at the foot of the stairs, then the lumbering, dragging of feet upon them, and last the feeble rapping. What can I say to her, with her urgent eyes staring up at me? She does not have to look at me as if I am her only friend, as if I have something to give her. I know it. But I cannot tell her no.

"And how was it on Hill today?"

"Oh, it was a so-so day."

"So-so bad or so-so good?"

"The morning was quiet. The afternoon was a rough one."

"How was it rough?"

"Had to put three in restraints. And someone else cut her hand breaking a window, and then it quieted down again, like the morning. It happens like that, builds up until the tension and noise and the feeling something awful will happen are almost unbearable and we start tying them down left and right, hoping to stop it, and someone really lets go, and it's like watching the fuse on a stick of dynamite while holding your breath, like an explosion or a balloon popping and it's suddenly over except for what you have to clean up. And it's as if they all take part in the act, then all go back to sleeping or rocking or watching tv."

I never intend to tell her that much but often I do, perhaps because her eyes urge me on.

"Must be a dangerous place to live, Hill Cottage. I've heard all kinds of stories, living so close. Always told the kids to keep away, but sometimes you'd see one walking down the street–you could tell by their clothes or the way they walked. And sometimes a neighbor'd come home and find one in his living room or sitting on the front porch. Say, do you like those women on Hill? They're all pretty crazy, huh? Like you see in the movies when they come and haul you away?"

"There's different ways of being crazy. Some aren't loud about it. They just sit in a corner and quietly hallucinate."

"Hall–oo–cin–ate? What's that?"

"It's when they hear or see things that aren't there, and talk to people that aren't around. It gets pretty noisy, with everyone talking at once."

"Hmmm, that must really be something, to see things and people that aren't really there. No wonder they went crazy, sounds like hall–oo–cin–atin would drive anyone batty. Are they mostly old, the women on Hill, like me?"

"All ages, but after 60 they go to geriatrics."

"Ever been to gerry–atrics?"

"Just to walk through."

"Same as Hill?"

"Quieter."

"Not as crazy, huh?"

"I don't know. Quietly crazy, I guess."

"Oh."

Walking home from Hill, from the end of the block, I see her white head bobbing, forward and back, forward and back. It is the tenth of November, a very bad day. I want to leave it behind but I know she'll not let me. She rocks with her lips pressed tightly together, thin white lines in a circle of

fat. White hair frizzy, uncombed. Torn brown hairnet. Hands clenched tight in her lap like iron clamps. I smile as I pass and she eyes me strangely, then looks away.

I am in the kitchen when I hear her, and I think, it cannot be this way, day after day, and today I will tell her. She knocks, I let her in, and she follows me to the kitchen where I sit and stare at the paper. There is silence. She stands and I sit. I cannot do it. "Sit down," I offer.

"Ok, but I cannot stay long." She pulls a chair from the table and seats herself. "Any action on Hill today?"

"No," I lie, "a very dull day."

"So you had a quiet day. Well, I did not. You'd think after all these years that things'd slow down, wouldn't you? That somewhere there'd be time for myself but there isn't. It started with the first one and hasn't let up. I remember the day she came and the day I brought her home and placed her in the crib beside our bed, and the next one, too, and the one after that. Seems like no time has passed at all. Your living room was Bruce's bedroom. Did I tell you that before?"

"Yes, you told me."

"And your bedroom was Sheila's, I told you that. My, how that girl had me going, from the day she could crawl, lord knows how she had me going. And here I am busy as ever, you should've seen what I did today. The cooking and cleaning and shopping. My, my."

Her house has never been clean. The stove and counters are covered with grease and the tables are white with dust. I stay away, for I am afraid I carry the smell on my clothes.

"But it's ok, I wouldn't trade it for anything. Had the highest calling a woman can have and there's nothing to make a woman any happier than that. That's why you got to start looking. For months now you've been sitting up here alone. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"Aren't you going to get married?"

"I don't know. Twenty-three isn't old, is it?"

"Oh, no, not any more, I guess. And you're working, that's something. You really like those women on Hill? How can you like them? What do they do all day?"

"Not much. Sit, sleep, watch television."

"Too bad, too bad. This room was a guest room, did I tell you that?"

"Yes, you did."

"Flooded with guests. Baking and cooking and table always set for an extra or two. There's nothing like children, you know. The little dickens are a handful but boy, no one loves you back like a child. Don't have to do much, either, be there and feed them and they look at you with wide loving eyes and smiles, arms around your neck they hold you, nothing as warm and soft as a child, you'll see. And they grow up and they love you still, just not so out in the open and they're growing and growing till one day, one day they're gone, and, well, then you, you just keep on working, and you remember."

I watch her remembering. She sways forward and back, forward and back, looks down at her hands folded tight in her lap. She looks at them and smiles, stops swaying and places them on the table, palms down, fingers

spread widely apart.

"Now, you see these hands. These hands'll show you. See the top of my hands–the veins standing out like they're going to burst? And the little ones, too, running down to my knuckles? And the cracks, look at the hundreds of tiny cracks going this way and that and look when I turn my hands over, how dry and red and calloused. Not very pretty, are they? Not very pretty at all but they show what I've done they're my life a big blue vein for every year I've worked and a tiny little crack for every dish I've dried and every face I've wiped and if there aren't enough why I'll show you the soles of my feet. my sagging breasts, and the scar on my side and between my legs see honey see what I mean but I got more then these scars I got the love of my kids in my heart right here here where it counts and it keeps me going alright so you ought to be looking and going out dancing and you'll find you a fella and that'll be it and the kids'll start coming and that'll be it you won't have to worry you won't go crazy and end up on Hill what do they do those women on Hill?"

On the sixteenth of November I leave the apartment, move in with a friend, into another apartment with no view of Hill–I must drive to get there–and downstairs live two old women, whose hands, I've noticed in passing closely, are riddled with dark blue veins like little rivers running through them, but through the vents I hear them sometimes laughing, a lilting, spirited laughter like children in a schoolyard.

TRAIN TRIP TO EPERNAY

springtime the sudden warmth
lulls the waiting
may-be mon amie won't come
whom I have not seen for a long time
who is an admired
writer

then she calls my name from afar
her voice
through the station hall
she laughing
white-haired
in a lilac summer blouse

I long to tell her 'Now
  it is all changed
  I write again . . . me too'
with palpitations
I await her question about me
but I remember she likes to speak
about herself
I am waiting she speaks
quickly
as if there was no time

and she has much to say
I remember a whole life
weighing–
we wanted equality
at any price
we denied our ages
out of pride to spare each other
héroiquement
but while she spoke I weighed myself
and considered
I was too light
  weightless
I came and went
she held me back each time

as if Spring
was going from her

so I am listening still
with admiration
wonder / wound
and perhaps for this reason
she speaks a lot quickly
as if there was no time

when we get out
of the train the sun
blinds us
for a moment quiet
I hear wind in a chestnut tree
and on the gravel
beside me her small
shuffling
steps

–Renate Stendhal

Dear Sisters, Dear Friends:

For the very first time, *The Naiad Press* must ask for some basic help.

We are beginning work on the new edition of *The Lesbian in Literature.* A new edition has not come out since the Second Edition which was published in 1975 with entries complete through copyright year, 1974. This new edition, the Third Edition, will be at least 7,000 entries or about twice the size of the prior work.

It is a tremendous task, but one that must, simply *must* be done.

Our immediate need is for at least two women who will function as research assistants. It requires no basic skills beyond its being useful to type and to be familiar with libraries in general. I will provide the directional instruction. You will be working directly with us (by mail) and it will require no more than a few hours a week for a few months. You will receive full credit for your work in the book itself. A real love for Lesbian literature is an understood asset but I suspect no one without that love will volunteer.

If we are successful in obtaining adequate help, we will be able to produce a bibliography far beyond any past effort, since we will incorporate many new features including guides for helping women to obtain the books listed and much much more.

Please write to me at the address below, or call me (evenings please) if that is preferable.

We would also appreciate financial help. If you have spare dollars that you can direct towards this goal (with any kind of luck, we can bring this out in the late fall of 1980), it would be most helpful.

Time, money, love: we can use them all. We welcome suggestions too, but give us some working hands and minds please–they are all in short supply.

Blessings,
Barbara Grier for *The Naiad Press*
7800 Westside Drive
Weatherby Lake, MO 64152
(816) 741-2283

I asked her to smile
a smile to show
she had no teeth
she sat with her legs open
but this one time beneath the tree
she sat knees turned in not to expose
her raggedy panties

hand me down
hand me down
reach me down lady

10 times I shook the town to its timbers
skipping and dipping naked together
in the tub shallows
compounding the 10 by 40,
we sipped wine of pruned vines,
next to clotheslines of torn dresses and tattered drawers

reach me down
reach me down
hand me down lady

stone cellars hid me and the fruits of summer,
bursting with juice and fermenting bottles,
she stemmed merrily;
laughing bosoms heaving the slopes and flats
of safety pinned dresses leaned up against
her patterned knee, the wealth of continents
hidden in our flesh

hand me down
reach me down
reach me down lady

–Stephanie Byrd

Hadley Irwin

afraid

"Afraid" is a chapter from The Lilith Summer, *a novel about the relationship between a 12-year-old girl, Ellen, and Lilith, a 77-year-old woman. Ellen and Lilith are forced by their respective families and financial situations to spend a summer as "companions" to each other. The voice in the story is Ellen's. Lord Jim is Lilith's cat.*

The storm had hung in the southwest all morning, building up into black banks that kept pushing the blue skyline eastward. Gusts of wind swept in across the town sending dust twisting down the streets, followed by a sudden calm.

The two of us had rescued a reluctant Lord Jim from his clothesline post and hustled him into the kitchen. Lilith rushed to her bedroom to save the newly-laundered curtains now whipping out into the room like parade banners.

I was afraid of storms.

"Now, then," sighed Lilith. "I guess we're all battened down. We'd better go out on the porch and keep an eye out. This may turn into a twister. We should be ready to run for the cellar."

Next to storms, I was afraid of cellars, especially Lilith's cellar, even on the hottest day. It was dark and damp and smelled of unlighted places with the furnace and water heater lurking like monsters in the far corner.

My fear would begin when Lilith, peering into cupboards, searching shelves, closing doors with exasperated slams, would exclaim, "Isn't that funny. I thought I had an extra jar. Run down to the cellar and fetch me some more corn relish. It's in the far cupboard on the top shelf."

I had to force myself to go down, leaving the door open and switching on the light before I took a single step.

Finally I managed to find a safe way into Lilith's cellar by repeating my own magic formula.

The words were meaningless. I think they came from some poem Lilith read once in the four-to-five hour: "I gain the cove with pushing prow."

I would repeat the words on every step down: "I gain the cove with pushing prow." Step. "I gain the cove with pushing prow." Step. "I gain the cove with pushing prow." Step.

Going back up, I could get clear to the top on just the one line: "I . . . gain . . . the . . . cove . . . with . . . pushing . . . prow."

I needed a magic formula to go down into a cellar. For storms, I had no formula.

"Always watch clouds in the southwest. If they are dark and stormy with a yellowish tinge and are boiling, it's a tornado. Fascinating to watch, though. A storm is a battle, you know. Between the earth and the sky. We'll sit here in the porch swing and watch."

It wasn't much of a choice: the porch or the cellar. I decided I'd stay with Lilith.

Lilith gave the porch swing a push with her foot.

"We could play a game while we wait for the storm. Let me see now. We could . . . I know. Why don't we tell each other what we're most afraid of? That could be fun, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

I wondered if Lilith knew I was afraid.

"I'll go first. Shall I?"

"Okay."

"Well, let's see now. I'll have to think. Seventy-seven years of living takes a bit of thinking over. Well . . . when I was little, I was afraid of the dark. Even if the stars were out and the moon too, I was still "afraid" of the dark being alone in the dark. It was silly, of course, wasn't it?"

"I suppose."

"But once, once my brother and I were sent to close the gate down in the far pasture. It was dark. In June, I remember. After we'd closed the gate and climbed back up Lyons Hill, we both lay down in the grass, on our backs, to rest. And Barney—he was my brother—Barney started pointing out the stars. The Big Dipper, the Seven Sisters, the Milky Way, the North Star. And he said he liked the dark even better than day. He said it was like velvet.

"Then I told him I was afraid of the dark. I think he knew that. 'What's to be scared of?' he asked me, and I said the dark was so much of nothing and that's what made it scary."

"I don't like the dark either."

"But do you know, Ellen, from that time on I learned to look for the stars instead of thinking of the dark. I know the stars well now."

"Where's your brother?"

"Barney?"

"Yeah."

"He was older than I. He's gone."

Rain, driven by sharp surges of the wind, beat against the porch windows.

"It's your turn. What are you afraid of?"

At first I didn't want to tell Lilith what I was afraid of. I felt as if I were opening forbidden doors.

"Sometimes . . . I'm afraid of big buildings. Like a different school or a big office building."

"Is it the bigness?" Lilith asked seriously.

"I don't know. It makes me feel small. That's when I get scared."

"I suppose it's sort of like the dark—the nothingness. Makes us all feel small. But a big building is just a bunch of little buildings stuck together."

"I never thought of it that way."

"We all feel small sometime or other. But we do have a balloon inside. And when you feel small, try taking a deep breath and blowing up that balloon. Try that the next time you're in a big building . . . or around anything that makes you feel small. Usually takes several breaths, though, to blow it up, but you'll be surprised how much breath you can find for blowing when you have to."

I gulped in a sharp breath as lightning forked out over the roof of Mr. Cummings's house.

"It's my turn again. Let me see. What else frightens me? Would you believe . . . "

Lilith was a pauser. She always paused before she said something that you knew was going to be especially important or exciting.

"Would you believe I used to be afraid of storms?"

"Storms?"

"Oh, my, yes. When I was little—five or six maybe—I used to throw a tantrum like you've never seen. I'd stand by the window and scream and shake and shiver and carry on. But one night, when we were having a terrible storm, my father swooped me up, perched me on his shoulder, covered me with his old windbreaker, and toted me right out into the middle of that storm."

"That's awful!"

"No. No. Indeed not. He showed me the storm. Told me all about it. How the lightning was a big electric spark. That if you counted between the flash and the thunder—one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi—you knew how far away it was. How lightning purified the air. And how thunder sounded like trucks rolling over a wooden bridge."

"It does sound like that."

"And I've loved storms ever since. Just loved them."

"You have?"

"Indeed I have. Now it's your turn again."

I squirmed farther back into the porch swing.

"This is going to sound awful dumb. But sometimes I'm afraid of faces."

"People-faces?"

"Uh huh. Not all faces. Grown-up faces mostly. Not the people. Just the faces."

"My face too?"

I giggled.

"Not yours."

"What about faces scares you? The mouths? The noses?"

I shook my head.

"I guess it's just that I never know where to look when people look at me."

Lilith sucked in a big breath. It sounded as if she were filling her own balloon.

"You should try looking into eyes. Eyes are the nicest part of a face. Mouths you can't depend on. Noses are so fixed, and chins, nobody can help chins. But eyes. Eyes are the real person looking out."

Through the rain-washed windows, Mr. Cummings's pine looked like a finger painting, smudged and distorted into a blob of dripping green.

We sat in silence except for the rhythmic creak of the porch swing, but we were both used to the silences now. "Talking without words," Lilith called it.

The wind dropped and the rain settled down to a soft patter.

"I don't suppose anything frightens you any more," I said.

Lilith stopped the swing with her foot. She didn't answer right away. Then in a voice I hardly recognized, she said, "I'm no braver than you, Ellen. Maybe not as brave. You go out under the willow—all alone—and I watch from the kitchen window and envy you. I'm afraid of being alone. Not *being* alone as much as being *left* alone. Of being of no use to anyone. Of not being needed. Only needing. Needing to take, and not being able to give. For what I have to give, no one wants . . . anymore."

"I've never been afraid of that."

"I'm afraid of the way I feel, some days, unless I talk myself out of it. Of being outdated. Of not being old enough to be a genuine antique. Just old enough to be junk. Pure junk. And when someone asks me how old I am, I feel as if I've done something wrong by living so long. As if I had some terrible disease."

I wanted to say many things, but I didn't know how.

"I think," I began, "I think when I grow old . . . I mean grow up . . . I want to be just like you, Lilith. I think you're very brave and I don't think you're so old . . . or useless . . . or junky."

"I said *junk.* Not *junky.*" It was the old Lilith back again. "This rain reminds me, I haven't watered the plants in the living room."

I really wasn't in a big hurry that day to go home. I sat cross-legged on the kitchen stool trying to sort out many things.

"Ellen. Come in here. Just see."

I hopped down from the stool.

"See what my geranium has done. Given me two new blossoms, and I haven't paid a bit of attention to her all week."

Lilith talked to her plants. She even had names for some of them.

"They hear. They understand."

"Oh, Lilith."

"You don't believe me?"

"Not really."

"Can you prove they don't hear?"

"No."

"So there. If they can't hear us, all we've wasted is a little consideration. If they can hear us, think how much joy we've given them." It was Lilith Logic. I couldn't disprove it, so I had to accept it.

"Geraniums are such nice plants. They take so little tending. Some plants you have to baby along and they still grow up puny. Geraniums are like good friends. They don't demand. They understand."

"Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who understands?"

"Geraniums, Ellen. Geraniums."

"Oh, I thought you were talking about friends."

"I was. Oh, never mind."

The rain was over, and the sun was breaking through the late afternoon sky.

"It helps, doesn't it?" I turned back as I started out the door. "It helps to talk about things, doesn't it?"

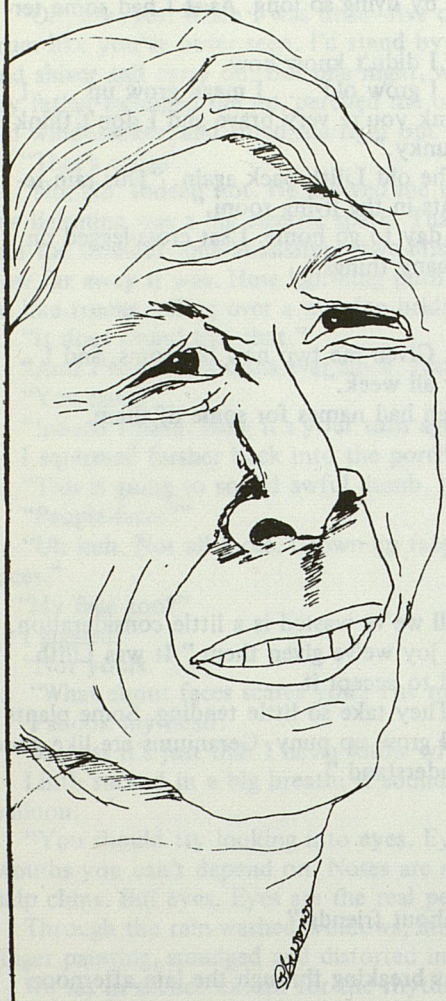
Lilith nodded.

I paused again outside the screen door.

"And we never run out of things to say, do we?"

Lilith smiled a funny smile that made her face look old and sad—almost as old as Mr. Cummings and nearly as sad as Grace.

Afterword: The Lilith Summer *will be published by the Feminist Press, September, 1979.*



graphic by tricia sappho womon

Slowly: a plainsong from an older
woman to a younger woman

am I not olden olden olden
it is unwanted.

wanting, wanting
am I not broken
stolen common

am I not crinkled cranky poison
am I not glinty-eyed and frozen

am I not aged
shaky glazing
am I not hazy
guarded craven

am I not only
stingy little
am I not simple
brittle spitting

was I not over
over ridden?

it is a long story
will you be proud to be my version?

it is unwritten.

writing, writing
am I not ancient
raging patient

am I not able
charming stable
was I not building
forming braving

was I not ruling
guiding naming
was I not brazen
crazy chosen

even the stones would do my bidding?

it is a long story
am I not proud to be your version?

it is unspoken.

speaking, speaking
am I not elder
berry
brandy

are you not wine before you find me
in your own beaker?

do you not turn away your shoulder?
have I not shut my mouth against you?

are you not shamed to treat me meanly
when you discover you become me?
are you not proud that you become me?

I will not shut my mouth against you.
do you not turn away your shoulder.
we who brew in the same bitters
that boil us away
we both need stronger water.

we're touched by a similar nerve.

I am new like your daughter.
I am the will, and the riverbed
made bolder
by you—my oldest river—
you are the way.

are we not olden, olden, olden.

—Judy Grahn

—from *The Work of a Common Woman*, Diana Press, 1978.

Lynda Koolish

"Choosing Ourselves Each Other and This Life": Feminist Poetry and Transgenerational Affiliations

Patriarchal culture degrades and tries to domesticate both old and young women, attempts to deprive them of any control over their own lives, and disenfranchises them from moral and visionary authority. When an old or a young woman lashes out against her domestication/domination, her behavior is dismissed as tyrannical, difficult, irrational, emotionally draining, or even mad. Defying age-imposed docility, she defies explanation:

> *And we know we are not logical.* The mule balks for no apparent reason. For no rhyme or reason. *We remember weeping suddenly for no good reason.* Spiteful and kicking, angry out of nowhere, like a hurricane, with almost no warning, and incomprehensible, brutish.[1]

Ageism—the process which categorizes and dismisses on the basis of age—contaminates, distorts and prevents relationships that span generations, especially within the nuclear family. Within the family, parents and children are likely to see each other in limited, static and mutually destructive ways. One woman's remark, that she "grew up in a close knit family—we strangle one another between the strands"—is an accurate metaphor for most families. And we often carry into our non-"familial" relationships the same mistrust, fear and disempowerment which we learn in our biological families. One of the most serious consequences of this is that relationships between women of different generations have sometimes been similarly maimed.

But as feminists and lesbians, our relationships *do* cross generations. We who are boundary dwellers are learning to refuse reified, ageist definitions of relationship, learning to give new meaning to the concepts of age, kinship and generation. Lesbians have increasingly come to define ourselves as family to each other, choosing out of affection, respect and kinship, rather than birth, a complex network of love, nurturing and responsibility. Because our kinship bonds are *chosen* rather than imposed we can challenge our assumptions about age dynamics, the *meaning* of belonging to a generation, of being an age. Within the context of a lesbian/feminist sensibility, new relationships between different generations are possible. We are much less likely to stereotype women with whom we freely choose relationships.

Through poetry, we imagine and reflect possibilities for our new relationships. Poetry is a foundation of our bonds, a matrix of our emerging female culture.

> Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought . . . , carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.[2]

Like our relationships, our poetry depends on our willingness to "examine

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The title, "choosing ourselves each other and this life," is a line from Adrienne Rich's "Phantasia for Elvira Shateyev" in *The Dream of a Common Language.*

the assumptions in which we are drenched," to see each other "with fresh eyes."[3] Contemporary women's poetry reflects our deepest impulse toward self-exploration. It is an accurate measure of this new way of seeing—a clear revelation of women's culture. Our survival depends upon finding "the courage to name, describe and locate ourselves in a context of self-authored meanings and perceptions."[4] Women poets today are, for perhaps the first time, "living in the earth deposits of our history," have access to knowledge long hidden from us.[5] Thus our poems about generations, kinship and mothering deserve our deepest scrutiny. These poems are both cultural and poetic resources, for "the words are purposes./The words are maps."[6] Woman-identified poetry is creating a new sense of generations. By naming the destructive dynamics in the nuclear family, we change them, and become free to envision new ones.

Our blood relationships have undergone radical transformations. Thus women's poems about both our mothers and our children now contain previously "unacceptable" deep ambivalence and rage which had been censored out either by the poets themselves, or by the misinterpretations of male-identified critics, who silenced the meanings of women's poems by attributing to them their own patriarchal values.[7] Other bonds of kinship in women's poetry suggest an almost tribal belonging to a community of women. Nowhere is this idea more passionately stated than in the final line of Adrienne Rich's "From an Old House in America": "any woman's death diminishes me."[8]

Within the context of the relationship of women's poetry to women's culture, I would like to explore several poems that reveal the possibilities that feminism engenders in relationships that span generations. Metaphorical and biological motherbond and thus the range and limits of kinship is a central motif in most of these poems. Louise Glück's "Flowering Plum," Audre Lorde's "To My Daughter the Junkie on a Train," and Judy Grahn's "Plainsong" are all visionary poems in their feminist treatment of the relationships between women of different generations. I have also included a detailed reading of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song."[9] "Morning Song," while it fails to imagine a *chosen* relationship between mother and daughter, is nevertheless important as one of the earliest feminist poems that depicts the crippling of a transgenerational relationship within the confines of institutionalized motherhood.[10]

* * *

The "lesbian imagination in all women" encourages new definitions of the mother-daughter relationship. In Louise Glück's "Flowering Plum," the compassion, caring, and identification possible between blood mothers and daughters is extended to a non-biological motherbond. The poet observes a young girl, and identifies her not only by her age and sex, but also as "the neighbors' *daughter*" (italics mine). Because the poet responds to the girl with a particular sense of protectiveness and bonding, the reference to the child as a daughter is meant to provide the reader with a clue that the relationship between them is, at least in part, one of motherbond. The poet describes the young girl, sitting all afternoon

> in the partial shade of the plum tree, as the mild wind
> floods her immaculate lap with blossoms, greenish white
> and white, leaving no mark, unlike
> the fruit that will inscribe
> unraveling dark stains in heavier winds, in summer.

Glück's poem is about tribal affinity between women. The poet has undertaken the responsibility to transmit knowledge, awareness, survival lore, both to the young girl, and to herself as well. Despite its gentle, haiku-like tone, the poem is a warning to the immaculate young girl about the unnamed stains that will inevitably unravel around her.

Much as a dancer carries her center of gravity with her as she moves, lesbian poets are moving out into the world, taking with them their perspective as mothers, even in situations seemingly remote from that perspective. In seeing a teenage addict on the subway as her own daughter, Audre Lorde confronts us with the tragedy of women's lives destroyed by racism, poverty, and heroin:

> Little girl on the nod
> if we are measured by the dreams we avoid
> then you are the nightmare
> of all speeding mothers
> rocking back and forth
> the dead weight of your arms
> locked about our necks . . .

"To My Daughter the Junkie on a Train" implies that motherhood is a capacity and not a destiny. It is chosen, willed, by acts of compassion and love. Lorde's poem suggests that mothering is a process in no way limited to biology.

The woman poet's concept of the community as an extended family claims mothers as well as children, and thus involves roots as well as branches. The reclaiming in poetry of female ancestors displaced from history, and witches, legends, and goddesses, creates new transtemporal bonds among women. Consider the attempts to seek out "foremothers"–personal and poetic sources–such as Alta's Anne Hutchinson, Susan Griffin's Harriet Tubman, Adrienne Rich's Marie Curie, or the generations of women in Marge Piercy's "Looking at Quilts." Contemporaries, or near contemporaries, have also been claimed in poems as foremothers, including Erica Jong's "Dear Colette" (" . . . Dear Colette/you hold me/to this life") and "Dear Anne Sexton" ("Dearest wordmother . . . ") as well as Kay Boyle's "For Marianne Moore's Birthday" (" . . . And now,/As then, I cannot write this book or that/Without you . . . "). And lesbian poets, including Honor Moore, Lynn Strongin, and June Jordan are claiming their own mothers as muses, foremothers.

* * *

The reclaiming of our flesh mothers occurs not without struggle, as Mary Daly and others have pointed out; our mothers have been "token torturers" in our lives.[11] Forced to act in behalf of male controlling agents, our mothers pass on to us their own affliction, mutilation and self-hatred.

Our mothers must heal themselves before they can reclaim us, for they have been triply victimized–first, directly by men who have power over them (fathers, husbands, bosses), then indirectly by their own mothers as token torturers, and finally by us, their children. For as our mothers' daughters, we also become token torturers; we mirror patriarchal expectations of "appropriate" maternal behavior.

Mothers' ambivalence toward their children is deeply rooted in the social condition of women, as Alta's prose poem *Momma* bears witness:

> & all those years nobody loved me
> except her & i screamed at her & spanked her

& threw her on the bed & slammed the door when
i was angry & desperate for her fathers love,
& i cant undo all those times i frightened her
& she loved me, she still loves me, i cant undo needing &
being tortured with loneliness until i cried out at her,
who loved me even in my needy loneliness, & how
do mothers, unloved, love their children?[12]

Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song," an anguished, furious mother's fugue to her infant daughter, depicts a similar transgenerational relationship.[13] The poem opens abruptly: the morning song is reciprocal; the child's cry is a voice heard simulatenously with the song, the litany of pain, which this mother sings to and about her child. The child's vulnerability constitutes a threat to both parents' psychic security: "your nakedness/Shadows our safety." The terrified parents who find themselves responsible for their daughter's life become helpless children, immobile, defensive, "stand[ing] round blankly as walls."

The third stanza is a complete renunciation of the traditional mother's role:

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

Not only does "I'm no more your mother/Than the cloud" deny the speaker's biological and nurturant motherhood, but it suggests that "motherhood" is a mystified construct, as ephemeral as a cloud. The parallel between motherhood and a cloud is peculiarly apt for another reason: clouds "watch" their own destruction. Wind forces clouds to release precipitation, which falls to the earth and becomes mirror-like puddles or lakes in which the clouds can "see" themselves diminish and finally disappear. Plath takes ironic pleasure in creating a mirror in which she can watch her own destruction by motherhood.

In the fourth stanza, the tone shifts from disdainful reserve to uneasiness. She continues the metaphor of dissolution/destruction.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

Now it is the child who is endangered—vulnerable, like the moth drawn into flickering flame. The child's fragility and right of kinship with the mother are emphasized by the design of the baby blankets: "pink roses," watered-down versions of the mother's blood-red totem, the tulips. Duty-bound, the mother awakens to listen for the regular breathing of her child, but her mind immediately drifts off in another direction: the sea. (In Plath's other *Ariel* poems, the sea or an associated object has negative connotations. The sea is a metaphor for despair in "Tulips"; for a self-chosen watery grave in "Full Fathom Five"; and in "Lady Lazarus," a seashell suggests withdrawal.) The mother is lulled by the song of the "far sea" of Death, who is the fourth speaker—or singer—here. The poem is a mourning song for the part of her that patriarchal motherhood will kill.

The fifth stanza begins with an ironic inversion of the roar of a compelling, if distant, sea. The child's whimper awakens the mother from a reverie of death.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.

Unwilling and confused, she staggers clumsily out of bed. Her movement is almost totally instinctual; her body and mind are in a dissociative split. As if they have a life and will of their own, her breasts swell full with milk at the first sound of the child's cry.

With a tinge of mockery, Plath repeats the floral motif of the baby blanket in the preceding stanza by describing the mother's nightgown as "floral." The parallel serves as one link in the chain that binds them. One indication that this mother is unwilling to be bound is the description of the nightgown as "Victorian," suggesting a facade, a pretense of propriety, of the "appropriate" maternal instincts.

In the final line of the stanza, attention shifts to the child, whose "mouth opens clean as a cat's." The line seems innocuous enough on first reading. But it is the predatory, rather than the kittenish, aspect of cats that she emphasizes. The child is never nursed in the poem; the poem dissolves at the moment this evidently greedy little predator pounces on her breasts.

"Morning Song" accurately and painfully depicts the difficulty of communication, nurturance, and growth between mother and daughter within the confines of patriarchal motherhood.[14]

* * *

While a component of the motherbond can reside in all relationships between women, women are also beginning to describe and name—and therefore to know—other ways in which we who are of different generations claim one another.

Judy Grahn's "Plainsong" moves beyond the motherbond motif to explore some of these other locations. A powerful lyric poem of shared solidarity and strength, "Plainsong" sings in the voice of an older woman to a younger woman, as if each had the qualities of the other:

I will not shut my mouth against you.
do you not turn away your shoulder.
we who brew in the same bitters
that boil us away
we both need stronger water.

we're touched by a similar nerve.

I am new like your daughter.
I am the will, and the riverbed
made bolder
by you—my oldest river—
you are the way.

Here, the old woman acknowledges that the younger woman is the "oldest river"—the source of strength and direction—that enables the elder to move from seeing herself as "crinkled cranky poison/ . . . glinty-eyed and frozen" to the "ancient raging patient" one who recognizes her own inner power; she becomes a priestess:

was I not ruling
guiding naming
was I not brazen
crazy chosen

even the stones would do my bidding?

The deepest meanings in this poem reveal themselves to me most fully through the poem's form; thus, I want to pay particular attention to the poetics of "Plainsong." There is an urgency, a determination to create new forms which originates in the compelling life-experiment which is feminism. Creating new literary forms most powerfully expresses our radical transformation in consciousness, our coming to female power, to self-conscious femaleness. "Plainsong" reveals Grahn's commitment to an essential component of women's creative work: the incendiary transformation of our cognitive and imaginative powers into new forms.

In her Preface to the *She Who* section of *The Work of a Common Woman*, Grahn explains the reclaiming for women of "feminine" rhyme:

> The form for "Plainsong" Number One happened after a dictionary informed me that there are two kinds of rhymes, masculine and feminine. Masculine rhymes, the explanation said, are one syllable, important, serious, like "man" "can" "ran." There was a long list of them. Feminine rhymes were characterized as two-syllable, unimportant, used only for humor, not worth listing. I began making my own listings of feminine rhymes, such as "forming" "swarming" etc. I became even more fascinated remembering that Chaucerian Old English contained many feminine rhymes in words such as "také" and "maké," presently pronounced as masculine rhymes.[15]

While rejecting the sexist implications of the distinction between masculine and feminine rhyme, Grahn constructs a poetic form that is a variant on feminine rhyme, transforming an implicitly denigrating term into a powerful new feminist poetic. In this rhyme scheme, unusual word combinations offer a rich source of unmined meanings, as well as sounds. Feminine rhyme introduces the element of chance, forcing the poet to uncover material she didn't know she knew. Form can—and should—be used to provoke the poet into writing not only what she intended—but something true she discovers. Or as Adrienne Rich describes the poetic process:

> To record
> in order to see
> If you know how the story ends
> Why tell it.[16]

"Plainsong" builds to cumulative musical intensity with Grahn's gift for feminine rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. The poem intermittently employs a strict meter; many of the lines or breath units work off an accentual-syllabic mode of four stresses and nine syllables. Typography counterpoints rhyme; in the lines

> am I not elder
> berry
> brandy

> are you not wine before you find me
> in your own beaker?

Grahn breaks the rhythmic unit of the first four stresses into three lines instead of one. These line breaks exploit the tension between enjambed and end-stopped

lines.* When the reader's eye pauses at the end of the first line ("am I not elder"), the mental pause evokes the earlier lines

> am I not olden olden olden
> it is unwanted.

Thus the meaning of the line as enjambed ("am I not elder/berry/brandy") is a surprising twist: to be elder is not to be unwanted, but to be transformed—from wine into brandy. Here the lines implicitly compare aging with the process in which a raw young wine mellows into a fine old brandy, becoming rarer, more delicate, more intense, more precious. As the young woman embraces the elder within herself, she becomes increasingly brandy-like. The magical/religious allusions in these lines are strengthened by the line which follows ("are you not wine before you find me"), whose imagery more explicitly suggests transubstantiation. In a feminist reversal of the Christian-patriarchal version of transubstantiation, both younger and older woman partake of a feast that weds them to their/Selves, a feast that begins and completes with Self before being shared. The older woman reminds the younger of their separateness: the younger woman is substance—is wine—before she "finds" or rediscovers the older woman, in her own "beaker," a pun on both mouth and chalice, as well as a chemist's vessel for distilling brandy. The affirming of self makes possible the bonding between these two women, a bonding acknowledged in the poem's movement from "am *I* not olden olden olden" to "are *we* not olden, olden, olden" and in the change from

> it is a long story
> will *you* be proud to be my version?
> it is unwritten,

to

> it is a long story
> am *I* not proud to be your version?
> it is unspoken.
> (italics mine)

As women begin the deep recognition that we *are* each other's "versions," the "long story"—the history of women's lives—will no longer be unwritten nor unspoken. "Plainsong" and other cartographies of individual women's lives will become paradigms for all our lives, "for all the world we didn't know we held in common all along."[17]

In "Splittings," Adrienne Rich equates accepting the myths which separate us from one another with those that divide us from our Selves:

> I will not be divided from her or from myself
> by myths of separations.[18]

In transcending generational barriers to reclaim one another, we reclaim ourselves; we make the leaps which make new vision possible; we are "choosing ourselves each other and this life."

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*Every line to some degree appears *endstopped;* one's eye pauses, if only for the briefest moment, at the end of a line, even if punctuation and breath units carry the meaning of the line on to the next line(s), thus *enjambing* the line.

FOOTNOTES

I would like to acknowledge here and thank Robin Linden and Leigh Star for their attentive and loving editing of this article, and for the a-mazing dialogue which we shared in the writing of our respective articles for this issue of *Sinister Wisdom.*

1. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her.* New York: Harper and Row, 1978, p. 75. Although Griffin's analogy is between women and mules, it seems to me remarkably appropriate for both elders and the young.

2. Audre Lorde, "Poems Are Not Luxuries" in *Chrysalis* I (3), 1977, p. 8.

3. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" in *College English* 34 (1), October 1972, p. 18.

4. Robin Ruth Linden, personal communication, San Francisco, May 1979.

5. Adrienne Rich, "Power" in *The Dream of a Common Language.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978, p. 3.

6. Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck" in *Diving into the Wreck.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1972, pp. 22-24.

7. The "standard" reading of Plath's poem "Morning Song" is one example of this. Annette Lavers maintains that the child in this poem is "the fountainhead of all life and hope . . . imbued with infinite possibilities before which the parents are humbled." And A. Alvarez's comment that "the birth of [Plath's] children seemed, as she described it, to vindicate her as a woman" has been cited by other critics to validate their reading of "Morning Song" as reflecting Plath's unconflicted delight in her role as mother. Even Diane Middlebrook, (an increasingly feminist scholar whose work is certainly *not* male-identified) offers what I consider to be a serious misreading of the poem. She recognizes in "Morning Song" "the woman's fear that she may disappear under the influence of the child's wearing demands," yet she concludes, "the feelings in this poem are, I think, those of the deepest human love." She further describes the poem's last images as "tentatively affectionate and festive," and Plath's description of the child's crying as "tender."

Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon–On Sylvia Plath's Themes," in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971) pp. 123-124, 126.

Diane Middlebrook, "Three Mirrors Reflecting Women: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich," in *Worlds into Words* (Palo Alto: Stanford Alumni Association, 1978), pp. 70-73.

A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 23.

8. Adrienne Rich, "From an Old House in America," in *Poems Selected and New* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 1975), pp. 235-245. The last line of the poem is also the closing line and thus in some sense the concluding idea of this volume of poems.

9. Louise Gluck, "Flowering Plum" in *The House on the Marshland.* New York: Ecco Press, 1975, p. 12. Audre Lorde, "To My Daughter the Junkie on a Train" in *The New York Head Shop and Museum.* Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974, pp. 3-4. Judy Grahn, "Plainsong" in *She Who.* Oakland: Diana Press, 1977, pp. 56-58. Sylvia Plath, "Morning Song" in *Ariel.* New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p. 1.

10. I am not necessarily suggesting that Plath was a feminist but I do feel that many of her poems, "Morning Song" among them, reflect a feminist stance toward the oppression of women.

11. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, pp. 132, 139-41, 163-65.

12. Alta, *Momma.* New York: Times Change Press, 1974, p. 71.

13. Critic A. Alvarez, a friend of Plath's, insists that the poem was written for Plath's daughter, not her son. The pink floral baby blankets in the poem seem to confirm his theory. A. Alvarez, *The Savage God.* New York: Random House, 1972, p. 12.

14. When the final lines of the poem shift the action back to the child

> . . . And now you try
> Your handful of notes;
> The clear vowels rise like balloons,

it is tempting to see in these lines a reversal of tone, a loving, if momentary affirmation. The surface situation of the poem, a mother listening to her young daughter singing, would apparently lend credence to such an interpretation. The preceding five stanzas, however, render such an optimistic reading dishonest. This last stanza demands a reading consistent

with the rest of the poem. The child can only "try," can only attempt to communicate. The "handful" of notes suggests a tiny greedy fist; and "handful" in the sense of "only a few" suggests that the child is unable to create a melody: the "clear vowels" are not music, only separate sounds.

15. Judy Grahn, *The Work of a Common Woman.* Oakland: Diana Press, 1978, p. 76.

16. Adrienne Rich, "Pierrot Le Fou" in *The Will to Change.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971, pp. 25-28.

17. Judy Grahn, "VII. Vera, from my childhood, The Common Woman Poems" in *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems.* Oakland: Women's Press Collective, 1970, n.p.

18. Adrienne Rich, "Splittings" in *The Dream of a Common Language.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978, pp. 10-11.

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tricia sappho womon. fairy dragon, is working on her first political poster. she lives in There's No There, There.

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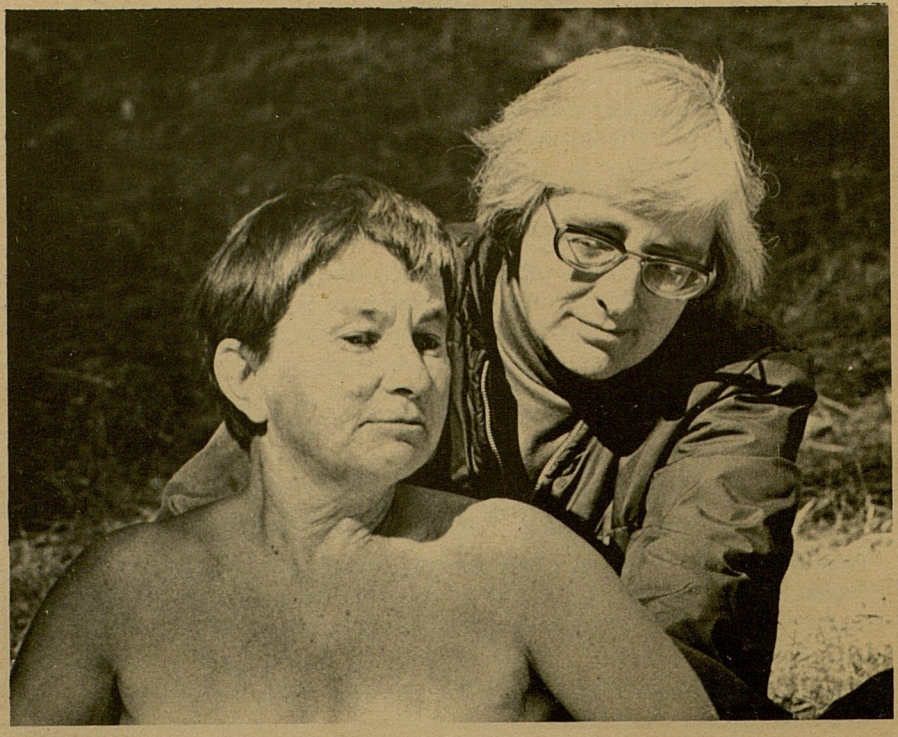

edited by susan leigh star