

Sinister Wisdom



fourteen



SINISTER WISDOM 14

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

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MESSAGE FROM THE SW STAFF:

This is a SPECIAL ISSUE!

*We are naming SW14 a special issue
because those of us who have put it
together have found it especially
exciting, provocative, and delightful.*

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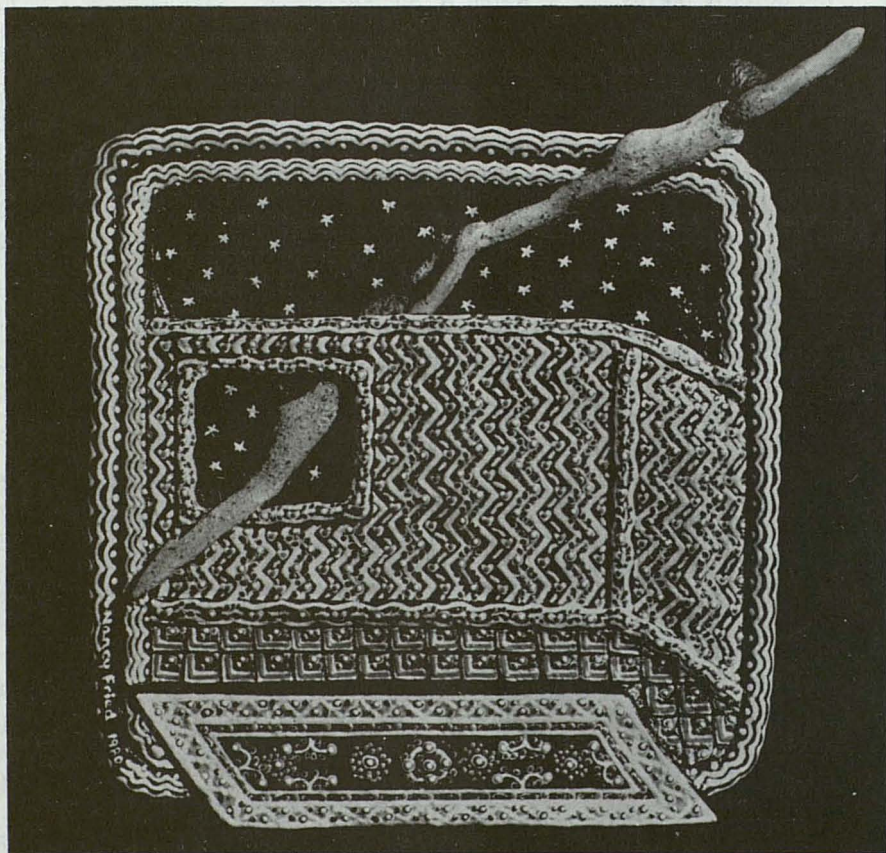
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CONTENTS

Assignment: NWSA—Bloomington—1980, Speak on “Lesbian Perspectives on Women’s Studies”	Marilyn Frye	3
Female Bonding and Sexual Politics	Jacquelyn N. Zita	8
the dorothy poems	Karen A. Snider	17
Home Movie	Jane Rule	28
Frankie: a short story	Joan Gibbs	36
something you should know	Anita Skeen	39
Vicissitudes: a short story	Harriet Malinowitz	40
Transformer: love poem for a vibrator	Lorie Dechar	43
The Nut House	Joyce M. Latham	44
Heart Dance	Oriethya mountain crone	49
Re-membling Lesbian Lives	Sarah Lucia Hoagland	52
“leude behaiour each with other vpon a bed.”: The Case of Sarah Norman and Mary Hammond	JR Roberts	57
It’s Important to Believe	Joanna Russ	63
Proud, Disputed Names	Barbara Grier	64
A Taste	Joan Larkin	70
The Day My Father Kicked Me Out	Sandy Boucher	72
Daughters and Mothers: An Autobiographical Sketch	Evelyn Torton Beck	76
Dear Mama	Eileen Pagan	81
Hannah at The Elms at 79	Mary Sojourner	85
The Death of My Mother	Joan Nestle	86
The Class and the Closet	Carol Seajay	88
Review of <i>The Coming Out Stories</i>	Marilyn Frye	97
Responses:		
Marion Zimmer Bradley		99
Susanna J. Sturgis		101
Ruth Douglas		103
Adrienne Rich		104
Graphics:		
Nancy Fried		2, 7, 27
Jan Hansen		51, 96
Lynda Koolish		71
Emily Levine		68, 69
Helen Moore		8

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photograph by Mary McNally

Nancy Fried
"Flying"

clay, acrylic 1980
4" x 4"

**ASSIGNMENT: NWSA — BLOOMINGTON — 1980:
Speak on “Lesbian Perspectives on Women’s Studies”**

Looking at women’s studies from my Lesbian perspective and with my Lesbian feminist sensibility, what I see is that women’s studies is heterosexual. The predominance of heterosexual perspectives, values, commitments, thought and vision is usually so complete and ubiquitous that it cannot be perceived, for lack of contrast. (Like the air on a calm and moderate day; the way sexism still is for many people.) Sometimes, usually because of the interruption and contrast imported by my own presence, the basically and pervasively heterosexual character of women’s studies is very clear and perceptible—overwhelming and deeply disappointing. It is also, usually, unspoken and unspeakable.

Some of my colleagues in women’s studies say they cannot really tell the truth or “be radical” in their teaching because it would alienate the students. I tell them not to worry about alienating people; I say that the truth is challenging, interesting, compelling and very effective in the classroom. I also say that when one attempts just to tell the truth, the responses, whether constructive or hostile, honest or dishonest, will be the best clues to one’s errors. But in my dealings with my heterosexual women’s studies colleagues, I do not take my own advice: I have routinely and habitually muffled or stifled myself on the subject of Lesbianism and heterosexualism, feminism and women’s studies, out of some sort of concern about alienating them. Some of these women are tangibly peculiar about Lesbianism and are already offended by my being uncloseted and blatant; I do not think they have noticed that I avoid discussing Lesbianism and heterosexuality with them for fear their already-nervous association with women’s studies would become simply untenable for them. Much more important to me is a smaller number who are my dependable political co-workers in the university, the ones in the academic world with clearest and strongest feminist and anti-racist politics, the ones

I am grateful to Sarah Lucia Hoagland for organizing the panel “Lesbian Perspectives on Women’s Studies” for the 1980 National Women’s Studies Association conference; what is printed here is a revision of the speech I made. My thoughts reflect discussions with my lover Carolyn Shafer, and she gave help and suggestions in the revision process.

with some commitment to not being homophobic and to trying to be comprehending and supportive of Lesbians and Lesbianism. If I estrange these women, I will lose the only footing I have, politically and personally, in my long-term work-a-day survival in academia. They are important, valuable and respected allies. I am very careful, over-careful, when I talk about heterosexuality with them.

But the situation is asymmetrical, as it always is with minority or marginal people and majority or dominant people. What is *a topic* for them, which some can and some cannot attend to fruitfully, is a condition of life for me. I avoid "alienating" them, but they constantly and (usually) unconsciously alienate me by their mostly uncritical and apparently unalterable, to me unfathomable, commitment to heterosexuality—by which I mean deeply bound emotional and intellectual commitments to men, to reform, to integration and to the centrality and natural necessity of heterosexual genital sex. The unwelcome weight of this heterosexuality is a salient fact of my life, and its manifestations in the politics of women's studies are coming very clear to me and should be stated.

In my experience with women's studies it seems common and characteristic for the women instructors to assume that widespread heterosexuality and the dominance of heterosexual conceptions have always been and will always be The Way It Is for humans on this planet, in particular, for women on this planet. Lesbianism is seen by most of them (but not all) as an acceptable, plausible alternative for some women and is understood (not by all) at least at a verbal level to be clearly coherent with feminism. But they all believe that it is only realistic to understand that most women are and most women will be heterosexual, at least for the duration of any era that our practical politics can concern itself with. Women's studies programming is grounded on the assumption that the vast majority of the students are and always will be heterosexual. Hence we give them almost entirely heterosexual women's literature, the history of heterosexual women* and analysis of the roles of heterosexual women in work, business, the arts and heterosexual domestic life. It is also assumed that we should support (not just tolerate) speakers, films, workshops, classes, whole courses, which encourage women to prepare themselves to cope with life in the "dual career marriage," teach how to be married and a feminist, and train them in the tricks of legislative reform so they can try to ensure that abortions will be available to them when they need them, since they obviously will not practice the only safe and sure method of contraception.† We presume the students are hopelessly heterosexual and cater to the interests and needs we assume heterosexual women to have, instead of assuming they are educable to other ways of living, different needs and interests, and some non- or anti-heterosexist sensibility and politics.

*...or the literature and history of women *presumed* to be heterosexual. The evidence that many of the women we study were Lesbians is generally overlooked—an erasure that builds in added security for the assumption of natural near-universal heterosexuality.

†By "the only safe and sure method," I do not mean only exclusive Lesbianism, but whatever would add up to total female control of reproductive sexual intercourse.

Women's studies, as an institution, as I know it, actively and aggressively supports women in becoming and remaining heterosexual; it actively seeks to encourage women to believe that the personal, political, economic and health problems associated with heterosexuality for women should be struggled with rather than avoided—that these problems are inevitable but more-or-less solvable (with great endurance and much work), rather than that they are unsolvable but definitely avoidable.

I am notorious in my town for my recruitment of women to Lesbianism and Lesbian perspectives. But what I do is miniscule. Imagine a real reversal of the heterosexualist teaching our program provides. Imagine thirty faculty members at a large university engaged routinely and seriously in the vigorous and aggressive encouragement of women to be Lesbians, helping them learn skills and ideas for living as Lesbians, teaching the connections between Lesbianism and feminism and between heterosexism and sexism, building understanding of the agency of individual men in keeping individual women in line for the patriarchy. Imagine us openly and actively advising women not to marry, not to fuck, not to become bonded with any man. Imagine us teaching *lots* of Lesbian literature, poetry, history and art in women's studies courses, and teaching out of a politics determined by Lesbian perception and sensibility. Imagine all this going on as actively and openly and enthusiastically as the program now promotes the searching out of careers and "feminist men," the development of "egalitarian marriages" and the management of heterosexual sex and the family.*

But the politics which women's studies purveys, even when some material by or about Lesbians is included in some courses, is heterosexual politics. And according to heterosexual politics, Lesbianism could never be the norm, and promoting Lesbianism for women generally is somewhere between unrealistic and abusive.

The people who are the primary agents in determining and promoting this politics in women's studies are the heterosexual feminists in academia. These women are (not without exception) quite good in their relations with the few Lesbians they work with—supportive, tolerant, useful. But this friendly, open-minded, even appreciative attitude camouflages their continuing and firm commitment to our marginality. Their being friendly and supportive and respectful to a few Lesbians (who inevitably serve as tokens) has obscured from me and from them the enduring fact that they never take seriously any idea that Lesbians and Lesbianism *should not be marginal*.

I want to ask heterosexual academic feminists to do some hard analytical and reflective work. To begin, I want to say to them:

I wish you would notice that you are heterosexual.

I wish you would grow to the understanding that you choose heterosexuality.

I would like you to rise each morning and know that you are heterosexual and that you choose to be heterosexual—that you are and choose to be a member of a privileged and dominant class, one of your privileges being not to notice.

*For a sense of the magnitude of this, consider: at Michigan State the women's studies classes account for well over 12,000 student-credit-hours each year.

I wish you would stop and seriously consider, as a broad and long-term feminist political strategy, the conversion of women to a woman-identified and woman-directed sexuality and eroticism, as a way of breaking the grip of men on women's minds and women's bodies, of removing women from the chronic attachment to the primary situations of sexual and physical violence that is rained upon women by men, and as a way of promoting women's firm and reliable bonding against oppression.

Some heterosexual women have said in response to these sorts of sayings, "I see the connection between Lesbianism and feminism, but I cannot just decide to be a Lesbian . . . I'm not sexually attracted to women: women just don't turn me on." And I want to ask, "Why not? Why don't women turn you on? Why aren't you attracted to women?" I do not mean these questions rhetorically. I am completely serious.

The suppression of Lesbian feeling, sensibility and response has been so thorough and so brutal for such a long time, that if there were not a strong and widespread inclination to Lesbianism, it would have been erased from human life. There is so much pressure on women to be heterosexual, and this pressure is both so pervasive and so completely denied, that I think heterosexuality cannot come naturally to many women; I think that widespread heterosexuality among women is a highly artificial product of the patriarchy. I suspect that it is not true at all that we must assume that most women are and most women will forever be heterosexual. I think that most women have to be coerced into heterosexuality. I would like heterosexual women to consider this proposition, *seriously*. I want heterosexual women to do intense and serious consciousness-raising and exploration of their own personal histories and to find out how and when in their own development the separation of women from the erotic came about for them.* I would like heterosexual women to be as actively curious about how and why and when they became heterosexual as I have been about how and why and when I became Lesbian.

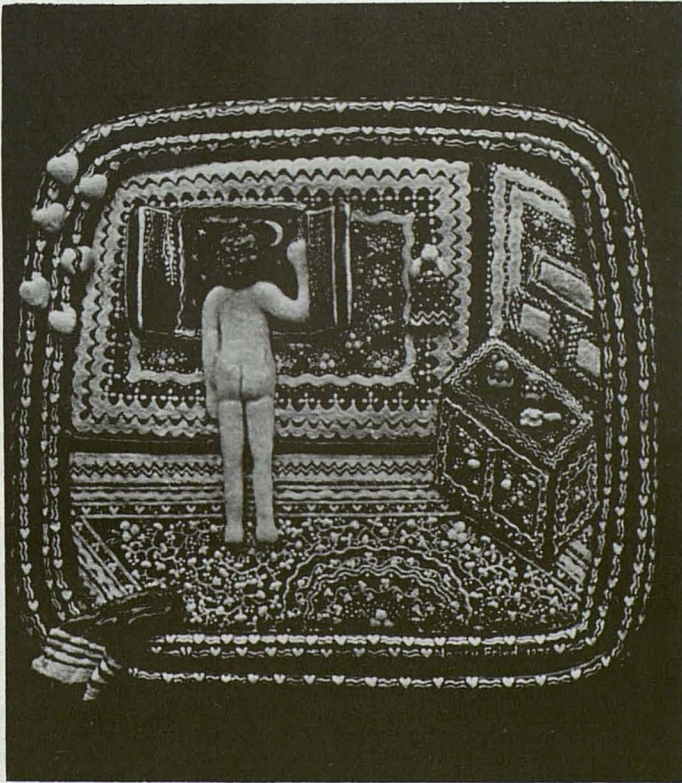
At this point it might seem that I am demanding of heterosexual women their respect for my choice but that I am unwilling to respect theirs. I think, though, that it is respectful of autonomy to genuinely inquire into the history and grounds of choices, and disrespectful or negligent of autonomy to let unfreedom masquerade as choice or let the declaration "It's my choice" close off rather than open up inquiry.

Millions of heterosexual women give no thought to what heterosexuality is or why they are heterosexual. Heterosexuality is understood by them to *be* sexuality, and they assume uncritically and unthinkingly that it is simply the way humans are; they do not perceive heterosexuality as *an* option. Where there are no perceived options, there can be no such thing as choice, and hence one cannot respect the choice. But well-educated, worldly, politically astute, thoughtful, analytical, feminist women do know perfectly well that there are options, and that Lesbian life is an option that coheres very well with feminist politics. They do choose to be heterosexual. Respect for that choice (on my part, and on their part) demands that they make that choice intelligible.

*This phrase is due to Adrienne Rich. My thoughts on these things have benefitted from my correspondence with her.

Many feminist Lesbians have thought and reflected and written and worked very hard to demonstrate that our choice makes sense. We have gone forth and participated on panels and in workshops, and appeared on television explaining ourselves. We have, over and over, at great personal risk and considerable cost, worked as hard as we knew how to make our choice intelligible to audiences ranging from the idle curious to the skeptical to the openly hostile. Respect for heterosexuals' choice demands equally that they show, within the gentle standards of rationality recommended by womanly sensibility, that their choice can be understood as a *reasonable choice*. Until this has been shown I will not grant the assumption that heterosexuality can make sense for feminists, and I am not willing to continue uncritical acceptance of women's studies programs promoting heterosexuality for women.

Unless many heterosexual feminists start working as hard at making their choice intelligible as Lesbians have worked at making ours intelligible, they should refrain from teaching and publishing and other work which openly or implicitly encourages other women in becoming or remaining committed to heterosexuality, and Lesbians should refrain from supporting women's studies.



photograph by Mary McNally

Nancy Fried
"If You Go Away"

dough, acrylic 1980

4" x 4"

—photograph by Helen Moore



FEMALE BONDING AND SEXUAL POLITICS

by Jacquelyn N. Zita

We have always had a women's liberation movement. Throughout the history of patriarchal civilization, our struggle has taken on various forms of communication and bonding between women. These alliances and networks have been strung by a furious intelligence, born in a female body and borne between female bodies, thrown together by our mutual discovery of a common theft and our mutual refusal to continue the ruse of womanhood as defined by males in power. We have been revolutionaries and reformists, social critics, and volunteer workers, angry mothers and defiant daughters. We have also been lovers of women—all in the name of struggle, since our love and passion for one another did not find easy entrance in a world where mothers belonged to men and daughters to the next generation of mothers.

We have already in the making a long narrative of woman-to woman bonding. There has been the theme of rupture, of betrayal, rivalry, pain, and violence. There has been the theme of continuity, of love, friendship, and solidarity. These female bonds constitute our strength and identity. I prefer to believe in the power of these bonds and the possibility of our continuity, but I also know that this possibility is yet to be truly born in

This paper was originally presented at the National Women's Studies Association conference, Bloomington, Indiana, May 18, 1980, in session 109, "Feminist Philosophy and Consciousness." Since then many women readers have helped me reconstruct my ideas. I am especially thankful to my colleagues Sue, Madonna, Nancy, Kris, and my partner Hilary for their insightful criticism. Even more thanks should be given to my students in Phil. 332, Washington University, where the idea for this dialogue originated, and to my friend Kathy, who helped me live through the pains of what I am trying to say.

our words and carried into the world by our actions. Tolerance is respect for persons; truth, agreement in language. Until we learn to speak the same language and until our creativity and anger spring from a commonly understood experience and appreciation of women's lives, we will continue to narrate ruptures and continue to tolerate long silences between us.

The following is an imaginary dialogue on the nature of these woman-to-woman bonds. It takes place in America during the early 1980's between two women—a lesbian feminist and a heterosexual feminist. They are white middle-class women without children or husband or secured career. How much of the dialogue is particular to these two women and how much useful to all of us, I have left to the reader's rumination. It is a dialogue not uncommon for the time or place. I will not put more specific labels on these women, since such devices too often engender an inability to listen and understand. Suffice it to say that both women think of themselves as feminists, by which I mean women interested in understanding the causes of women's oppression, women interested in confronting and eliminating patriarchal power in their lives, and women committed to caring for the victims of patriarchal violence and allying with other women to put an end to such violence. They are also women who perceive capitalism as a system inimical to their interests as feminists, but who refuse to believe that working for socialism in the traditional ways will automatically result in the liberation of women. They are women of many battles which share a common enemy. This common enemy stands for the interests of capitalism, racism, and sexism, and—more often than not—appears in the form of a male. Given this general area of agreement, the differences between the two women derive from the lives they are living, as one woman is heterosexual, and the other a lesbian. These sexualities are at once personal and political in meaning, an event that belongs to this dialogue of words shared between them.

Emma Goldman once said, "Ever since I had come into the anarchist movement, I had longed for a friend of my own sex, a kindred spirit with whom I could share the inmost thoughts and feelings I could not express to men. . . . Instead of friendship from women, I had met with much antagonism, petty envy and jealousy, because men liked me . . . there was no close personal, intimate point of contact."* For me, Emma's words resound with memories of my own, almost forgotten, lamentations. I am a lesbian woman. I am a woman who lives with, for, and in the presence of women-loving women. I am woman-bonded and unbound. Emma's lamentations are of a time past when women turned against women because of servitude to men. Emma's loss was her own. I have not accepted such a loss in my own life. Coming to life as a lesbian feminist, my energies are centered on women—I draw strength and courage from our bonding and insight from a politically directed anger toward all that historically opposes our discovery of what we can be and what we can do. This freedom, both contagious and dangerous, has pushed us to the edges of life, where we stand amazed by forbidden visions and insights. As creatures from the outside, we also face our other sisters, only to feel the frustration of bonds never made, trust never felt, and sincerity never fully shared.

**Living My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), p. 157.

There is something missing. We long to tell you about this, but we stand out of bounds and too far away to be believed, or perhaps even heard. This situation puzzles me and brings me to dialogue with *the other* as woman, a kindred spirit still in bondage to men. Why has sisterhood become such a difference between us?

I am a feminist woman. I am also heterosexual and hopeful, hopeful of merging the best of two worlds. I enjoy the intimacy and companionship of women, just as I enjoy the company of sensitive and loving men. I relish the physical, cultural, and emotional differences that men bring into my life. Their presence constitutes a sense of completion that I cannot find in my bonding with women. On the other hand, what I respect most in other people has nothing to do with sexuality; it has to do with the honesty of commitment to political struggle, especially feminist struggle, that I see carried into a life. I respect this regardless of the sexual identity or preference of the person, since my experience has shown me that not all lesbians are feminists and that some men are more feminist than some women, even some lesbians. For me ideals, convictions, and commitments take precedence over other aspects of the person. For this reason, I have a great admiration for my lesbian sisters, those who are taking a courageous stand on their rights to love and live in the open. I will do what I can to stop the violence designed to liquidate them. We, as heterosexual feminists, want to reach out to our lesbian sisters, but attempts to do so are aborted by lesbian militants, who automatically label us heterosexist and homophobic. As I see it, sexual politics involves two struggles: one against compulsory heterosexuality and the other against patriarchal heterosexuality, two struggles that can be carried on simultaneously as one movement. The division between us seems unnecessary. I want us to get back to the real issues. I am who I am. If only you could understand this, sisterhood would not become such a difference between us. I really want to understand you, my lesbian feminist friend. Believe at least that much.

Your desire to understand me is dishonest. The woman you don't understand is yourself, the woman who for some mysterious reason has not become a lesbian. I am no different from you except that I have chosen to love women with the same intensity, attention, and intelligence you bring to your love for men. To understand me you would have to come to a new understanding of yourself. It is dishonest to turn what should be an introspective project onto someone outside yourself—the lesbian other. In doing so, you have already dispossessed part of yourself in the name of “objective” patriarchal truth, a “truth” that women have perpetuated by lying to themselves and to each other with their bodies. I see you in your body pretending to want the truth, pretending to understand me, pretending not to lie to me, but I refuse to share with you what you seem able to study only at a distance, only in some other woman's body. I will not engage your contemplative self-deception. This is why understanding has become so difficult between us.

You are accusing me of turning you into an object of study, but if anything, your ridicule and condemnation of heterosexuality has rendered my life strange and bizarre. I feel just as much objectified by you as

you feel by me. Wouldn't it be easier to let go of these differences and create an arena of tolerance and respect? As for my understanding of you as a lesbian feminist, I really don't understand why you insist on my genital allegiance to lesbians as a prerequisite for understanding you. I don't feel that my relationships with women are necessarily dishonest. I feel that my bonding with all women is more enduring and meaningful because it is non-sexual. It is a special kind of bonding that does not call for genital completion and a special kind of understanding that comes from words and touchings, there for themselves, devoid of other destinations. I cannot endorse the fetish you place on sexual preference, as if my identity is completely fashioned by my genital urges. Sexuality is incidental to other parts of my personal identity and commitments. Why do you insist on creating difference where there should be indifference?

The differences between us are the social differences of power and privilege, awarded to you because you are heterosexual, acceptable, "normal," protectable, and willing to service men's needs. By participating in the institution of heterosexuality, you become part of the daily quota of violence against lesbians that I experience in my life. The violence is difficult for heterosexuals to see because it belongs to the way things are. Only by stepping outside the institution of heterosexuality could you begin to see how heterosexual women perpetuate this incontinent violence against lesbians—only then would you understand what it means to be a "wo-man," to be kept in bounds by the patriarchy. Becoming a lesbian is self-clarifying because the enormous violence that must be used to keep "wo-men" in line suddenly becomes visible. Such violence cannot be treated with indifference.

But surely I have done nothing to harm you. You seem to have no other test for my sincerity except my conversion to lesbian feminism. If I can't do this, then I am one of the enemy. But there are lesbians who oppress women, which means to me that the issue is not one of genital preference, but one of political values and commitments. If I can share these values and commitments with you, isn't that enough? Why must I bond with you sexually to prove my sincerity? Isn't this how men have always tested us?

To be lesbian and feminist involves more than sleeping with other women. There is no contradiction between celibacy and lesbian-identified feminism. To me, lesbian feminism is an ever-present willfulness to accept the intensity of emotional and sexual feelings we have for women, and an ever-present resistance toward the self-diminishing categories of "otherness" that have always defined women under patriarchy. It is choosing to take on a lesbian identity by refusing to remain invisible and silenced by heterosexual sensibility, refusing to limit lesbianism to a bedroom issue, and refusing to contribute to the erasure of our experience. Lesbian living is a constant testing of our lesbian convictions, a life of sexual disobedience against the patriarchy. It is to know that we are real and that the division that historically exists between you and me is not in our best interests. To know that we can love one another, both sexually and emotionally, if we so desire, is to know of our lesbianism. It is to know ourselves. Lesbian feminists carry this knowledge into political action. I'm not sure

that you can share the same values and commitments with me in the same way, and that makes all the difference.

You romanticize your sexuality. You romanticize your sexual refusal next to mine. Your *no* to patriarchy is abstract. It breaks their taboos, and in reacting to their power, you get a thrill—you indulge in a thrill-seeking that assumes the charm of politics. This kind of esoteric romanticism becomes a substitute for politics. Why do you take their taboos so seriously, so seriously that breaking them becomes an end in itself? My resistance, my *no* to patriarchy, is less romantic, more tedious, much more concrete and daily. They are going to have to deal with me. I will not cut myself away. I will not make myself invisible and incredible to them by labeling myself “lesbian”—that is the easiest way for me to undermine my legitimacy. My reasons are practical. If the entire movement becomes identified with lesbian feminism, then I think all women will have lost more than we could have gained.

My *no* to patriarchy is hardly abstract! Nor does my avowal of lesbianism make me invisible to them. It makes us dangerously visible to the patriarchy and dangerously visible to ourselves. Of course, men use our lesbianism to split the movement, but if they succeed, it will only be because we have failed ourselves, because we have failed to recognize the divisions between us as their creation. Why should we consent to such destruction?

You say that you want to get beyond the categories that now separate us, but I see you as captive to those categories. The antagonism between us does not belong to us—it is part of a patriarchal lie. Why do we persist in believing the myth that personal truth has anything to do with our body's sexuality, as if the victory of seduction reveals the real truth about women? The categories “lesbian” and “straight” are a patriarchal way of sorting our differences. Why should we adopt their way of seeing us? I wonder if we don't diminish ourselves and our pursuit of self-knowledge by taking so seriously the stigma of their categories? You talk of truth-telling between women. Perhaps the categories themselves create an unnecessary untruth.

The truth I am trying to find begins with the lies between us. Have you never felt that pull toward a woman? Have you never wanted to touch another woman and receive the same from her? What stopped you? By what authority have you turned away from women? What tugging have you smothered deep inside? Honesty between women demands that we talk about this.

I will admit that I have at times been sexually attracted to other women, that I have been curious about sleeping with my women friends, that I have flirted with the possibility of my bisexuality. But my reasons for not acting on these desires had little to do with my honoring of heterosexual norms. The choices I make in life are largely determined by responsibilities, commitments, and desires already set in motion by the life I am living. It is clear to me that I am not terrorized by the possibility of sleeping with a woman. It's just that my personal life has moved in a different direction. Because I am involved with men sexually, my feminist politics must take them into account.

You can continue to call yourself the educator of men, the mother of

men, the lover of men, the daughter of men, the liberator of men, but your personal idiom turns into an immense dwelling of self-deception. All of these choices are predicated on a commitment *not to do the same for women*. What you fail to see is the betrayal of women carried out in your life. Do you know what it feels like when our attraction toward you is turned to pain because of your withdrawal, your fear, your unwillingness to give women a chance in your life? It is a mother's betrayal of her daughter, replayed in the daughter's betrayal of other daughters, replayed in our womanly betrayal of our selves. What you so generously give to men, you can't even begin to give to women—*because we are women*. It is this kind of impersonal violence that a lesbian woman so often experiences from straight women like you.

You say that I exercise an impersonal violence toward you because I cannot love, in some immense sense, a woman in my life. But I feel that you exercise a similar impersonal violence against me because I cannot love one of you or because I can have that love with a man. Don't assume that I am homophobic just because I don't want to sleep with you. You flatter yourself by turning me into a stereotype dishonest to both of us. You don't respect the choices I have made, simply because they are directed toward men. You harbor an impersonal violence toward all men, *because they are men*, which I in turn experience as an impersonal violence toward me. I will not choose to turn my back on a weeping son, husband, brother, or father. I choose to nurture my sons so that they will grow to love women as courageous as myself. I choose to be with male lovers, sensitized to my desires and needs. I choose to share my mothering with a male of good will and compassion. If I became a lesbian, I would have to give up the choices I would rather make. I cannot choose categorically to disregard the suffering and joys of half the human race.

You say you want to hold on to your heterosexual choices, that becoming a lesbian would take away your sense of freedom. To me, the lesbian option opens the way to new freedoms, to new definitions of self and autonomy. As lesbians, the only choices we refuse to make are those that enslave us sexually and materially to men. We can still become mothers if we so desire. Isn't choosing when, how, or if we shall mother a right that belongs to every woman? Only when every woman can make these choices freely, without fear of social punishment, will the hold of patriarchy on our bodies be broken. I know that it is difficult to separate ourselves from existing heterosexual knots, but the knots can be unwoven with the loving care of many women together. Sometimes the break away can be as immediate as a glance, once we see the great emptiness of an existence emptied into the lives of others and the desperation with which the lies are passed on to the next generation of daughters.

You make it sound as though I am doing something wrong in loving men. But I don't feel guilty. I don't feel that I have done anything wrong. Both lesbians and heterosexual women are victimized by patriarchy. We as heterosexuals, more often than not, are beaten, raped, psychologically and physically abused, but our conviction is to stay on, and that has not been all that easy for many of us. Some of us are stuck. There is

no way out. For others it has become easier to leave, to join the charmed elitist circle of lesbian separatists. But I still see that choice as a privilege and one often abusive to women still left inside. We cannot forget the bleeding and wounded women who still need our help. Strong heterosexual women can become models of resistance for other women still on the inside—most of them mothers, most of them poor, helpless, and hungry. We have to nurture a vision that speaks to their needs, as well as to ours. I hope I don't have to remind you that most of the world's women are still on the inside and that hunger, poverty, and early death are sometimes issues of more gravity than lesbian feminism.

There are lesbians also among the most oppressed peoples. It is you who wants to see us as a privileged, elitist group so as to make us peripheral to your life, but we stand at every escape point on the boundaries. We *are* asking you to leave—especially women like you who can engage in the privilege of this sort of dialogue. You are correct in saying that many women do not have the choice, but women like you, who have surfaced on the back side of middle-class privilege and heterosexual hegemony, do have the choice.

But what about the many other women left burning in the burning house?

The issues of hunger, poverty, and unnecessary suffering are not peripheral to the politics of lesbian feminism. If anything, a lesbian's care and concern for those burning women is strengthened by our lesbian legacy. Our caring is radical and patient. We see all of us as incapacitated by capitalist patriarchy. We bring patience to the pains of burnt skin and radical interrogation to the consent that women give to their continued mutilation. We are firmly committed to the belief that it is much more empowering for women to disown an oppressive world that claims them, than to continue nurturing the oppressor in the name of love.

All of what you say seems to assume that I can choose to love women in my life, and that in some sense, I am living a life that has already made that decision for me. But what about desire? It seems so rational, so masculine almost, to think that I could somehow choose to have an overwhelming sexual desire for another woman, that I could have that much control over my body and its sensual playfulness. I don't think that my heterosexual preference is just a bad habit, a capitulation to patriarchy. Nor do I think that I could choose to be a fully lesbian-identified woman. If I were to force myself to sleep with another woman, in the name of lesbian sisterhood, I would be prejudicing and slighting my real sexual desires. It would be an ideological dishonesty much more self-destructive than what you have accused me of. You seem to want to liberate desire by making it a tool for political struggle, by using it for an end outside itself. I feel it's more important to accede to the genuine desires of the body.

I refuse to believe in the mysticism of 'pure desire.' Your desires are already part of a political agenda that belongs to patriarchy, and that is how they should be named. I was once like you, but my experience has shown me that my desires for men were far from pure—they had

everything to do with the institution of heterosexuality and the power that belongs to men. My inability to feel sexual love for women had more to do with my perception of their powerlessness and dependency, than with the mystery of desire. Why mystify powerlessness with mystery? In changing my perception and understanding of women and of myself as a woman, I have grown toward a bonding deeper than anything possible with a man. My old heterosexual self hangs like a mask in my past, my heterosexual *history* like a false narrative that didn't belong to me, and my old sexual needs like an empty carcass unfit for desire. My heterosexual needs were dependencies born from my oppression as a woman.

Your radical rejection of the past disturbs me. It seems to rob you of an authenticity that you lived at that time. In cutting yourself off from that past, you have cut yourself off from women, who represent to you a form of self-deception. This seems a rather grand projection. I prefer to believe in the continuity of my self. I prefer to believe in the possibility of different narratives for different women. I don't want to disown large parts of my life. Is wanting to hold on to one's past the origin of self-deception? How do you know that you haven't spun another narrative of lies between us? In ceasing to lie with our bodies, must we necessarily turn to other women?

It is not that our desires are true or false. Our desires are simply there. The interesting question is how they got there. We must attempt to understand the genesis of our desires and resist the temptation to see them as hit-and-run mishaps passing through our bodies. Impulsiveness can enslave us. Our impulse to buy a particular brand or to have a particular sexual experience has been planted and cultivated in our bodies. We experience a life that has already been planned for us, and we call that life a life of freedom. This is the most insidious form of self-deception. It seems to me that the first step toward real liberation comes from an attitude of studied caution toward the unmediated impulses and desires of the body. This does not denigrate the body—it celebrates a new possibility.

You are lying to me. Your words are part of a seduction which is personal rather than political. You want me to be one of you, like you, in bed with you. You are always forcing me to say no. How can I not resent your judgment of me? For totally impersonal reasons you are asking me to turn away from everything that has personal meaning in my life. Unlike you, I don't perceive anger and open warfare between the sexes as a given at all times. Unlike you, I have been lucky enough to find a few men, sensitive and generous enough to share a feminist way of life with me. I cherish my life with such men and will not be seduced away from it by a group of disappointed man-despising women. You are in competition with men for women. Your self-righteous moralism is part of a seduction. Woman, sister, listen carefully. Why is my loving so painful to you?

My pain is both personal and political. It is you who perceives us as sexual predators, you who feels questioned and threatened by our pre-

sence, you who wants to see us in competition with men, you who feels uncomfortable by our touching. For me this is painful. It feels like a failure in imagination, part of a cycle of reproductive terror that will not let us imagine anything more to life.

And my pains? My pains belong to the distance that words have put between us. My pains have hardened to a life that will not let go of me. At the root of it all, we find a dialogue between us that continues to question the meaning of our sexual politics. How much of our personal life is political? How many of our political choices are really part of a personal drama, of many personal dramas and many personal seductions?

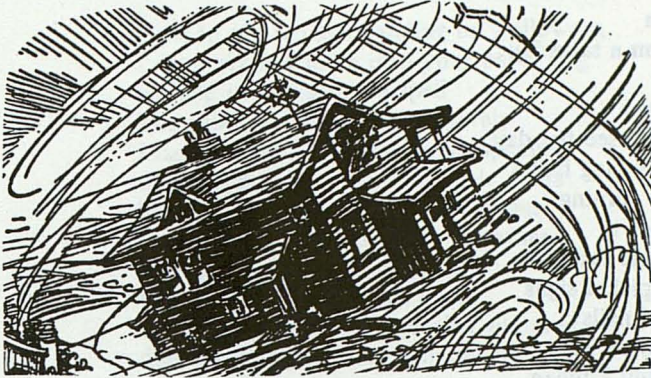
When does a persuasion become a seduction? When does a seduction begin to replace a persuasion? "Love me." "Believe me." "I love you." "I believe you." These are not rational ends to rational arguments, but radically new beginnings of a different form of life. Women say these things so easily to men, but do women stand persuaded by patriarchy or seduced by its power? Does change come from persuasion or seduction? What is it we want to know about ourselves, our bodies, our sexuality, and our deepest political commitments, those that come from the most intimate resources within us? Of course, we must begin with desire and end with a different kind of body—a dialogue of political seduction. Truth is agreement in language; seduction, agreement in sentiment and desire. Both have to do with who has the power to speak and who has the power to be believed. As women have seldom spoken of themselves, to themselves, about themselves, in the total absence of men, we don't really know who we are or how to believe what we are saying. We have to begin with desire—with *the desire to know*. Perhaps we have to begin with seduction to get at the truth about ourselves.

I want to stop their violence against you, but I cannot share your way of seeing the world. I do not consider this another form of violence against you. You obviously cannot see what I am able to see. We are women of two communities, two forms of life, two different kinds of struggle, two different ways of overcoming a commonly shared pattern of socialization. I see my role as an insider, as one trying to re-educate the oppressor and rescue the victims of his violence. I am also on a longer voyage to rescue myself, but I will not eliminate his right to exist. I cannot categorically dismiss half the human race.

Neither will you eliminate these differences between us. Our differences in body and politics will be obscured by easy forms of tolerance and banners of coalition strung between us. Somehow, we have to stay connected, but the ambiguity remains. You are not my oppressor; you are my sister. You are not my sister; you are my oppressor. I trust that our painful silences will be heard. We as women belong to different 'worlds.' We speak different languages. We live a different body of a common struggle. It would be dishonest for me to erase my experience for the sake of sisterhood.

Why must we turn against ourselves when we have as yet so little? I will not eliminate your right to exist.

But will you eliminate the might of your existence . . .



The following poems are from a collection, *the dorothy poems*, that I have been working on for four years. These poems, written mostly in persona, are my attempt at a lesbian and feminist transformation of the original Oz characters. I am not attempting to re-write the whole, but rather allowing my imagination to spin a new thread amid the old, ever present, echoes. It was my obsession with mid-western imagery and intuitive search for a land where witches rule that led me to recognize dorothy's spirit rising up again through me. Since then, many discoveries have enriched and inspired my work upon the material. For instance, L. Frank Baum, author of the Oz collection, was the son-in-law of Matilda Joslyn Gage, who was not only a well-know suffragist, but also a woman whose research into the gynocide of witches led her to write *Woman, Church and State*—a book which documents the vast numbers of women murdered as witches [reprint by Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, Mass. 02172, 1980; includes introduction by Sally Roesch Wagner and foreword by Mary Daly; 294 pp., \$7.95]. Baum, himself, was interested in the occult sciences, published pro-suffragist editorials (including the work of Gage and Susan B. Anthony) in his dakotan paper, *Saturday Pioneer*, and spoke of his desire to create a 'non-sexist' children's story in his writing of the Oz.

As with all such attempts, however, one who is thinking as a crone/hag/spinster, will slowly become aware of the false polarization created among the women in his story. As Mary Daly has so aptly described in *Gyn/Ecology*, false polarization is the result of male-defined feminism set up against male-defined sexism. Thus, on careful examination, we experience the need to re-tell, re-write, transform, myths and fairy tales where 'good' witches triumph over 'bad' witches and the virgin (dorothy, in this case) must destroy the raging crone (wicked witch of the west) in order to re-unite with her mother (aunty em). In the poems within this particular selection, Mable the Able is the good witch of the north, a solitary crone in the city on Hallowmas and a pagan witch of Demeter. Aunty em is the estranged mother of dorothy; and Dyke Diana, the wicked witch of the west, is a lesbian separatist.

aunty em
stewing on a saturday

well i never
thought i'd see the day
so many young ladies
would be turning
their heads in
such a male fashion
painting picket signs
instead of nails
struttin' blue jeans
through my kitchen
prayer whistling
in the house like
a gaggle of cackling
geese on a saturday
night without a date
among you to get
dolled up for—
dorothy tell me
when was the last time
you sang amends
in your father's house
or asked the good lord
to forgive your fresh
mouth without a doubt
dorothy we women
don't want to be
nothing like men
so why begin fighting
when you're older dear
you'll understand
women's rights are something
a lady carries on the inside
knowing what's wrong is wrong:
a man has his boyish ways
and his foolish pride
his mind is like a brick
once it's set you can't
unstick it until the years
wear it thin or crack
the foundations—
it's up to the weather

is no joke dorothy
you suffer alone
to build a good home—
are you listening???

i said i never
put much store in politicians dorothy
and every one of you
girls could be pretty
if only you tried.

**Mabel the Able
good witch of the North**

I am an old woman bending on Halloween
I drop my last plum into your paper bag
wishing it would rain a spell
The supplies have dwindled sorely
I have looked upon my hands opening
their cupboards to rummage sale china
lifting that which in turn goes down
on a new list—Is there time to gather
up treats for the children, I ask
Will they hold the shops open
for my late selection or shall I summon
dorothy to weigh the economy for me?

I am an attic head among winter spaces
windy . . . some rooms quite vacant:
a metaphor vandalized by my time
in the city when I could have drifted
into rifts on a strong breath in the country
when I could have curled about your house
a sort of cold insulation my isolation
never coming then to this twilight tracking
down what clutter can be found
beneath the rafters . . . the house grows thin
the sun sucks the sparkle out of everyone
today as if the sun had returned to blister

my war paint, dorothy, in kansas reaped
the plowed land cracks the edge of the sky
in all directions grey like a clean slate
waiting for a ritual harvest . . . perhaps
there will be no rain for the wishing
on again . . . the floorboards creak out
their steady inquisition . . . perhaps, I am slowly
evaporating on the north wind, yet
I can still blow my confessions onto this
side of the window—a smoky mist
covering the landlord's glass eye with what is
left of my breath—some condensation:

Yes I would say to the bus riders now though
there be at any given moment those
thousands of thunderstorms resounding
descent across the earth's surface: yes
I have known my own evaporation

I have taken to the air—was it
by self discovery or circumstance
my element changed—I dissolved to speak . . .
Yes now, though there be at every corner
those church bells ringing, I am
old, woman, face parched, cracked; I have seen
my share of martyr temples and turned back.

II.

Smelling of smoke tonight like a lesbian book
burnt in a basement flame I have heard an absence
of many words hushed or forgotten in my time
the neighbors have lost the urge to read
any further connection to what may not be
anymore the struggle of one heart pressed to page
the season's rituals . . . reduced to love songs
and I on Hallow's Eve without a purple plum
to cheer the masquerade of children on . . .
aged, processed, my 'nap' insured—have I
turned into the city, the grease of it
slipping each mind in and out of control?

Will my hand shake a burnt wick onto my candle?
Will my hair catch on fire before my altar?
I have felt the old igniting . . . It would not be
the first time my fingers combed through
the singes— I stood before my mirror then
humbled like a soup hen, counting my pin
feathers, plucked clean and thinking
it was the genius in me that kept my head
out of the oven . . . It is true I have been my own
voyeur at times in determined rhythms
I must admit, I have tied my apron about my heart's
exhibition as if to strangle those hungers in me.

If my living is an art and at that political
I have declared my heart my home I have woven
thick wool ruffage into my hangings like secrets
ready to unravel . . . I have dropped my share of
stitches, challenging my mind's expansion
I have refused to hem my sky-blue dress . . .
I confess the collected details have been forced
to address themselves into a natural order, a dove's
ink landscape my needle has slipped its stitch
to save something other than time—years now
I have stood ambiguous in food stamp lines
noting scars on winos—Was I misunderstood?

Would it matter if I told you that witches are good?

I have heard a subtle division of lines
drawn to erect new altars it comes
as no surprise . . . the numbness of doorways
after foundation ceremonies
after spades rework the dirt after shovels
break the earth—Are we going fishing? Is it Sunday?
Would you bait an old woman on your hook?
It is true I have shaken cold in choir lofts
I have hot-flashed in balconies vomiting
my comfrey tea amid alleluias over oak railings
flooding naves of congregations singing
“may the kingdom come”—I am not one of their society.

Am I not an able angel, a fairy godmother?

III.

There was a time I too was afraid of witches
an unkept fierceness leapt out their eyes
angry like the ancient creaking in their curses
as if the fires had never burned down
as if their blood boiled, bolted before
the old wailing rang in their ears, a silent collusion.
Curious now that once I thought them masochists
to claim the death branding: were they waiting
for rain to stun the crowd, to leave them simmering?
Did they dream they would vanish in the steam?
What is at stake today?

my own reflection flushed—its beauty
seasoned, effaced, before barren city streets
a spinster woman birthing her early winter bitterness
Will I haunt the land with Indians?
Will my spirit stampede buffaloes? Obliterate
executives in gynocide factories? I do not know
if I will return to do the dishes, to blow
against these dusty windows . . . My breath disperses
my orgasms lengthen . . . my head wobbles to and fro
as if my neck were a wand of willow—
Shall I leave a ghost behind me? You ask.

the floorboards creak.

Will dorothy suddenly appear, crashing
through the air my remote doorways?
All day she lands on herself, provoking a storm.
Will she come in time to gather me in her country
arms—pitting her youthful miracles
against my sagging breasts will she press me to test
my magic again; will she bring home a new list

the rapists, make it rain . . . drizzle . . . spellbound
thigh to thigh? Will I find new strength
inside this darkness . . . will the rage unfold me?
I am an old woman, a spinster, a crone,
my candle burns low, my skin flakes

a sacred hag among winter spaces
dreaming of cows with wings.

Economy of Affection

Oh the Father who tries to come
between a Mother and a Daughter
is given his own parish

Is made Wizard of the land!

Oh the little people will praise his name
And the munchkins sing along his path
a trap of shiny coins . . .

Yes once upon a time which is still true
a woman is raised with love
as commodity
And dorothy, sadly, was no different

The sun was sandpaper on dorothy's troubled face
Nothing but economizing her heart
could erase the precarious conditions
that defined her passage home

home, then, to aunty em!

LIONS and TIGERS and BEARS O MY

You know the refrain: It's the patriarchy's game
when dorothy is told she must lose her soul
that union with the Mother
that ticket home to aunty em
or liquidate the assets of a wicked witch
with one eye, like a third eye
powerful as a telescope
that separatist loving women in a no man's land
of hope, planting catnip in her garden
groping with the weather

Oh once upon a time which is still true
a woman is raised to fear
violent women

And dorothy, ideally, was no different

“how am I, orphaned child of kansas, to change
the mind of this stormy one
with her cackling laughter and her silver
tongue of charming curses?”

Oh the Author who tries to come
between the revolting hag and the virgin
is given his own fan club

is made pop prophet of the land.

dorothy herself was confused:
“how in Hades did I inherit these spinster shoes?
Was it my fault the anxious house
landed on the sister of a witch and a lesbian?
aunty em always said I have no mind
for practical consequences:
good witches, bad witches . . .
how does one choose?
Whatever else happens my innocence
is bound to lose . . .”

EPPE PEPPE KAKKE, HILL-LOW HELLO HOLY
(Mother must I fly solo?)
ZIZZY ZUZZY ZIK?
(Where are the other separatists?)
asked the wicked witch
in her house below the hillside
dreaming up spells to end the womyn gynocide

LIONS and TIGERS and BEARS O MY
All day dorothy sought out womyn’s land
with her shadow band of androgynous accomplices
And a breast full of self doubt:
“peaches are fuzzy and plums have pits,”
said dorothy, “but that isn’t half of it—
we have come through the forest
the poppies sigh beside us
And still I don’t know
what great love can guide us . . .”

The tin man would keep the wolves from dorothy
40 times a wolf he killed the beasts in himself
Still the bees swarmed like angry workers
and crashed their stingers, their pointed
protests against his heartless tin flesh
He questioned such abrasiveness

and left for New York City, bi-sexuality
and a job at a 'refined' publishing house

The strawman would keep the Moon's beak
out of dorothy's wandering eyes
40 times a natural threat he twisted
the raven's feathered neck—
Reading Sexton, despising Plath
he mapped out the one ecstatic death
and left for California's cut and curls
Beautician in a Beverly Hills hotel

As for the cowardly lion, all he wanted
was a good night's sleep—he made a science
of dissecting sheep and studied the language
on the 'old dump heap,' hoping to merge
masculine with feminine pronouns. AH BUT
nothing could ease the stress he felt
over the spinster woman who picketed
with her broom and terrified the kingdom
laughing predictions of doom
he offered dorothy a Veteran's Day poppy
and a little cocaine to quiet the pain
Still she left him there in the gay nursery
pontificating courageous acts
to his fellows on the university staff

Oh the loving friend and brother
who tries to come
between the separatist and the feminist other
is given over to his own pre-occupation
and procession

"What's a warring crone to do?"
screamed the wicked witch as she stitched
up the holes in her poverty, mending
her worn out overalls . . .
And the resounding echo brought dorothy
around to her senses, down the steep path
to the door of her fated antagonist's
wind-blown, jewel-box home
just as the moon bowed
over a country shitter . . .

"Well, here you are, in time for dinner!"
said dyke Diana (the wizard's sinner)
"come here my beauty, my ruffled sword
princess. Shall I anoint your temple
with rosemary, pour you angelica tea and show
you where the Amazon altar grows?"

AH-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
as far as you can see, my dear, this land
is in collusion with Amazons, witches
uppity womyn and me—

a man who tries to come
between the daughters of the earth
is bound to lose his way on our path

The wizard (now he is a deceptive critter)
has sent you here as a spy and a sacrifice
but you will return with hidden knowledge
a sybil sparkle in your eye to mock his deadly rule
Nature teaches us all we need of the 'truth'
the plants and animals move in psychic
communion (as will you), the land at our feet
opens up and heals us, we speak without words
we move through all space and time, we hear,
my nervous dear, beyond the wizard's interference—

And personally, dorothy, I'm sick of human interaction—
those dishonest atrocities, those social hierarchies
the patriarchy has imposed upon our brains!
Even dear sweet Glinda has turned her back on me
one too many times—she condemns my 'violent' tongue
she says, "Cut it out or we'll cut it off!"
will never win us our women's rights!" O fiddlesticks
and snakewort, dorothy! She may be right, but not
'for naught have I worshipped the grey-eyed goddess
that walks in the dark . . . ' Medea is my sister, too
and she says her story was twisted, twisted TWISTED

Long ago I gave up trying to control
the furies . . . I'll unleash them on anyone
who stands in our way (after all my anger
wasn't forged in a day, a mere day, of firings!)
Doesn't Good Glinda understand that creation
and destruction are sister consorts of change?

why am I always to blame?
In truth I have no social grace . . . AH-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
But I am not your enemy, dorothy,
just another scapegoat
clawing at the patriarch's throat:
patience and kindness get me nowhere
I share my love with witches!
We spin out our revenge!

Now is your chance to join us dorothy.
If you deny me you are denying yourself

the primary love of a womyn for a womyn
without which you can only survive
separated from yourself . . .

If you raise your hands against my rage
call it 'unhealthy' or 'in poor taste'
you are writing another page
in the wizard's journal of 'salvation'
his story of division among womyn
Believe me, 'my little pretty,' he understands
and would gleefully destroy our eternal union
exhausting the earth for his 'kingdom come'

There are no good witches, no bad witches
without his control of the definition . . .
(Glinda martyrs me! And they call her good!)
Listen, dorothy, mark my words
aunty em is a prisoner in Kansas!
surely the mother you seek lives inside you—

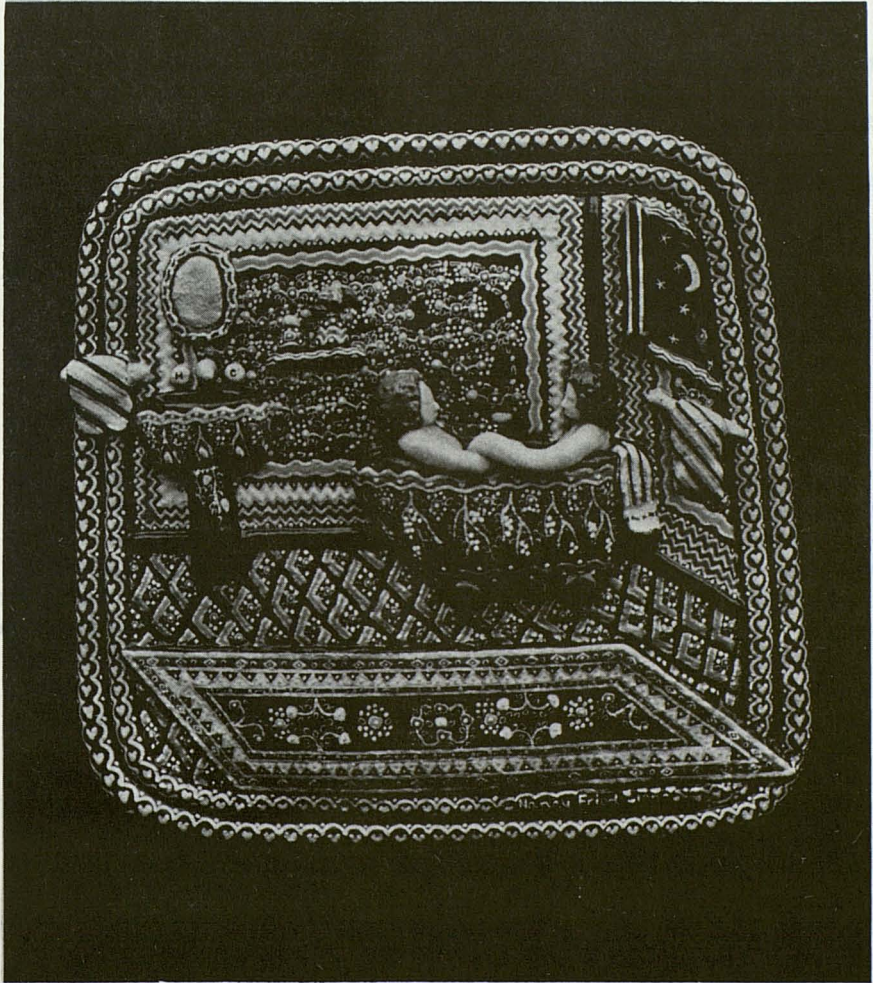
My sister is dead.

Whether it was the house of prostitution
the house of representatives
the house of the lord
the collective house
or simply domesticity
that landed on her, it doesn't matter
she was as wicked as me
and she is dead.
silent as a doorknob.
you, sweet dorothy, have inherited her shoes
claim the universe as your home
and do something besides whining for innocent Kansas
or you, my virgin
will inherit her death as well

AH-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha

you know the refrain: it's the patriarchy's game
the dying god that tries to come
between the virgin, the mother, and the crone
is given his own perish

FICTION & POETRY



Nancy Fried
"Our Midnight Comfrey Bath"
dough, acrylic 1980
5" x 5"

photograph by Mary McNally

HOME MOVIE

Alysoun Carr sat at a table in a street cafe in Athens drinking ouzo. Directly across from her, through an open window and onto a far wall a home movie was being projected. A young couple grew larger on the wall. Suddenly the enormous head of a baby filled the whole window as if it were going to be born into the street. Alysoun, careful in a foreign country never to make so melodramatic a gesture as to cover her eyes if she could help it, looked away. She added water to the ouzo and watched what had been clear, thick liquid thin and turn milky. She did not like the licorice aftertaste, but she liked the effect, which was a gentling of her senses so that she could receive things otherwise too bright or loud or pungent at a level of tolerance, even pleasure. In another ten minutes, if the movie lasted so long, she could watch it without dismay.

At her own home, such a show could go on as long as an hour if absolutely everything her father had ever taken was resurrected for the occasion and supplemented by an ancient cartoon or two he'd bought for a forgotten birthday of one of the children. At least two of the films were always also shown backwards, causing an hysteria of giggles in which at least for Alysoun there was an element of alarm. It was daunting to see how without effort the projector could do what all the king's horses and all the king's men could not, the diver's feet breaking the water and restoring him by impossible magnetism to the board, the child toppling up onto the chair "to keep the past upon its throne," where did that come from? Another wall. The camera, particularly the movie camera, is reactionary. It doesn't have to run backwards to prove its point. Alysoun always dreaded most the moment when her own baby face would fill the frame and her father would say, "Well, you're all good-looking kids, but Alysoun was the prettiest baby I ever saw." Alysoun could never see why, a head with that little hair, offering up not a smile but a silent snort as if blowing a nose without a handkerchief directly into the camera. The remark could have made the others jealous if the past tense weren't emphasized as a rebuke. Her father seemed to see the process of her growing up like some horribly disfiguring disease or mortal accident. Only the camera could give him back that pretty baby, who snorting out at her adult self made Alysoun feel as disoriented as if she had been physically dragged by the camera back up out of the water and onto the springing board. Others of her siblings had reproduced; Alysoun had not. Perhaps her father was only complaining that she hadn't given him the plea-

sure a second time in life, a granddaughter about whom he could say, "She's almost as pretty as her mother." Only by having children were you allowed by such a parent to go on living in the present.

Alysoun looked back through the window at remarkably bad views of what what might have been a flower garden. A film maker has no business trembling with awe before anything, but what ten minutes ago would have made Alysoun mildly nauseated now amused her. People talked about the universality of great art, but far more universal is the mark of an amateur, trapping all he loves in the cage of his own unpracticed seeing and letting it run backwards out of time. If she had watched long enough, surely a Greek diver's feet would break the water, a Greek baby snort, but Alysoun could not wait. She was due at a rehearsal, and she had to stop at the hotel to pick up her instrument.

The walk back down the steep street, loud with Greek and aggressive automobiles, would dissipate the mild sedative her drink had been and leave her ready to do what she always did very well, whether alone or before an audience.

"Don't you ever have stage fright?" her father demanded before her first important appearance with the San Francisco symphony. For Alysoun to be able to go into the high calm she could always achieve when she was about to confront any music was, if not inhuman, shockingly insensitive for a woman.

She did not tell him that she was frightened of nearly everything else: what most people were afraid of like getting on an airplane or meeting vicious dogs; what some people were afraid of like sex or fortune tellers; what no one should be afraid of like eating or her father. She did not tell him because at the moment before a performance she did not have to be afraid of anything.

Everyone with whom she must play had practiced, as she had, for years, read from the same score, followed the same conductor. Together they were in agreement, in control of what happened. Having discovered that co-operative security very young, Alysoun never wanted to leave it for the reality outside music at which she'd never known how to practice, for which there seemed to be neither agreed score nor conductor. Each time she played, she was inside that universal harmony toward which life and even the other arts struggled but only music achieved.

Only after the rehearsal, on her way to a midnight dinner, listening to a flamboyant concert master say, "Such control! Such feeling! You play to my soul!" Alysoun wondered if she would vomit or faint in the street or burst into hysterical tears. More often, like tonight, she managed to control herself enough to make it to the restaurant only to stare at a dinner no hunger could have forced her to eat while the concert master protested at American vanity that made their women thin as even the poor would be ashamed to be in Greece.

"You are no bigger around than your own clarinet!"

The criticism was modestly reassuring; it meant her dinner partner was more offended by her skeletal thinness than attracted by the novelty of her blond hair, and she could soon go to her bed without argument.

"But she is famous even in her own country as the lady who does not eat," said a young woman sitting across from Alysoun, who had been intro-

duced as the sister to the first viola.

"How do you know that?" Alysoun demanded.

"I read about you at the American Information Center. I work for the Americans as a translator."

There had been a hushed-up episode when, after one of her collapses, an ordinary doctor rather than a psychiatrist had been called. Instead of being diagnosed as an unfocused phobic for whom little could be done or being told she suffered the absolutely normal anxieties of a career woman who should marry, stay home, and have a baby, she was informed that she was suffering from malnutrition. She went into the hospital to be fed intravenously until she could tolerate the sight of food. In the protected environment of the hospital, Alysoun had done very well. She put on ten pounds and left with the knowledge that, though she had not found a cure, she had found a retreat. Then her doctor, pleased, no doubt, with the shadow of breasts that could now be discerned under her blouse, feeling in a creative way responsible for them, asked her to marry him.

Alysoun had learned not to say in response that she didn't like sex; it was too much of a challenge. None of her other real reasons was much help either, for men could easily delude themselves that, servile in pursuit, they could be servile masters. She had to invent her excuse.

"I not only read you do not eat but that you have a mysterious lover. Some say a great head of state, some say a reclusive millionaire," sister to the viola went on, and her eyes, though not unfriendly, were disbelieving.

"I must try to get some sleep," Alysoun said. "I haven't got over the time change."

Their immediate, effusive sympathy might have been a taunting protest the way her throat soured. She was trembling.

"I will take you," the young woman offered. "I have a car right there."

"Thank you. I didn't even catch your name."

"Constantina. It must be dreadful for you, having to do this after every rehearsal, all over the world. Oh, they play like angels, I am the first to admit, but they eat like beasts and talk like men. Tomorrow night I'm going to kidnap you and take you somewhere quiet where you can have fresh fish and salad, and I will not talk to you or even look at you if you prefer. I hope you have forgiven me for gossiping about you to you, but it did stop them, yes?"

Because Constantina was concentrating on moments of inexcusable traffic, Alysoun could watch her throughout her monologue, a high, very white forehead against her dark hair and straight dark brows, a rather sharp nose, a very wide mouth with handsome white teeth. No one would call her pretty; no one would easily forget her face. She was about thirty, Alysoun's own age.

"And lunch. May I take you to lunch? Before you decide, I warn you that it is because I want to make use of you, and I can tell by looking at you that you know what I need to know."

"I know about nearly nothing but music," Alysoun said.

"You know the names of flowers," Constantina said.

"Yes," Alysoun admitted.

"Then you must have lunch with me, as an official duty, a matter of good

will between nations.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.”

In a strange bed, where she could be afraid of sleep in certain states of exhaustion, Alysoun wondered why such overt flattery had pleased rather than offended her, why she had responded so confidently about her knowledge of flowers when it was her habit always to deny anything that she could, to avoid being known, to avoid obligation. Enduring the endless novelty of anxieties was, if not easier, at least less humiliating alone. She could always resort to practicing, even just the fingering if other people might be disturbed. Something in Constantina’s confidence was specifically protective of Alysoun without a trace of inevitable male condescension, and Constantina had had the good sense to ask a favor, one it would give Alysoun pleasure to grant, for she had learned the names of flowers very early in her vocabulary where they stayed certain and bright, a gift from her mother, who could forget the name of a child or neighbor but never the precise definition of a tulip or rhododendron or rose. In memory no film had ever picked from her, Alysoun, not much more than flower high, walked with her mother naming the last of the daffodils—Carlton, King Alfred—and the early tulips—White Trimphator, General Dewett. Naming was better than counting which could start tomorrow night’s concert in her head. She was walking, nearly hidden in rhododendrons, saying, “Unique, Pink Pearl, Sappho...” when she slept. It was noon when she woke.

Constantina was waiting for her in the lobby, rose and came to her quickly, embraced her formally and stood back. “You have slept.”

“Yes, thank you, very well,” Alysoun said, “thinking of my mother’s flower garden.”

“Very good. I have a plan. We can walk, shall we? It is all right for you? It is not far, to the old Placa. We will have lunch, very simple, nothing much. Then we will do our work. We will go to the flower vendors. I will tell you the name of the flower; you will pick it out, and then the vendor will tell me its name in Greek?”

“What is this for?” Alysoun asked.

“Oh, I am translating a collection of Eudora Welty’s short stories for the American Information Center. They are *full* of flowers.”

Alysoun was grateful to have heard of Eudora Welty, remembered that she had read a story or two of hers but could not remember what.

“I am embarrassed not to know the flowers in Greek. When Yaya taught us, I had my head in a book,” Constantina confessed without guilt. “And they are not listed so particularly as I need in Greek-English dictionaries.

Alysoun had to concentrate to hear what Constantina was saying because they were also negotiating the noon crowds along the narrow sidewalks, up onto which cars swerved without concern for pedestrians. Constantina had a cautious aggression Alysoun felt she could trust; so she followed, let her arm be taken, even allowed herself to be pushed ahead of Constantina until they escaped through a dark doorway and down a narrow hall. There had not been a sign Alysoun could see.

“How does anyone know this is a restaurant?”

“I don’t know. It’s just always been here, and we have always come to it,” Constantina said, directing her into a room of perhaps eighteen tables,

two or three already taken by groups of men. "I am sorry we may be the only women here, but we will be left alone, and the food is safe for Americans. Shall I order for you?"

As in the car the night before, Alysoun had an opportunity to study Constantina's face while she read the menu, behaving as if it were in a foreign language she must translate for herself. She had the kind of face that registered every small perplexity and pleasure but might be a busy mask for deeper moods and needs. When she had made a choice, she described it in detail to Alysoun, who agreed at once.

"You know, it's not that I don't like to eat. It's just sometimes I can't."

"I understand. I understand exactly," Constantina said. "One can feel such a victim to food."

"Do you often have to take visiting Americans around?" Alysoun asked, for she knew how notoriously small Greek salaries were against their social obligations; the only country that was worse was Japan.

"Unfortunately, no. I am no one of importance, after all. I met you because my brother is kind to me, and he understood my urgency. He even allowed me to use his car. I do not want to sound like a school girl. I have your record. I admire it very much, and you. That is enough of my confession. Are you who you are because you obeyed your parents' wishes?"

"No," Alysoun said. "Oh, they've come round by now, of course. And they might have come round sooner if I'd played the violin or the viola or the piano or even the flute."

"Or the harp?"

Alysoun laughed and said, "That might have seemed to them a little excessive. And the clarinet isn't as bad as the cello or French horn would have been."

"I can hardly bear to watch a woman playing the cello myself. But what could be the objection to the clarinet?"

"It probably didn't have to do with the instrument. I wanted to learn to play it because my best friend did. My father never liked influences on his children other than his own...or Mother's, of course."

"What was her name?"

"Bobby Anne. I haven't thought of Bobby Anne in years!"

"How faithless you are when she inspired your whole career!"

"But I discovered in the process that it was the clarinet rather than Bobby Anne I loved."

"The true obsession is always work," Constantina said.

"Do you know that?" Alysoun asked, surprised. "It isn't really like a discipline at all. It's much more like a habit, impossible to give up. Not that I want to give it up, but I don't think I could. My father said it was giving me buck teeth just as if I were sucking my thumb. My brother started calling me Bugs Bunny. Even Mother thought I should have braces."

"And you did?"

"No, as you can see. My music teacher said minor vanities had to be sacrificed, and I didn't really care as long as I could go on playing, and that was before I even learned to like music."

"You have beautiful teeth," Constantina insisted. "How different it is for my brother. He is doing what my parents want. He never learned to like

music. It is nothing but work, work, work, and he is bored, bored to his soul."

"How terrible!"

"Yet he is loved, oh so loved! And they go on helping him."

"Don't they help you?" Alysoun asked. "Don't they approve of what you're doing?"

"No. Oh, they don't mind so much now, but my father used to call English the devil's tongue, probably because my mother speaks it well. I simply outlasted him. My greatest strength is my attention span. He finally just lost interest in his own objections and let me come to Athens...to keep house for my brother, of course."

"Will you marry?"

"Never!" Constantina said. "My brother, he wants to marry, but I tell him incest is all he will ever be able to afford."

"Do you have to live with him?"

"I don't mind," Constantina said. "He is a kind man, but one day, when he does marry, I look forward to living alone...or with a friend."

"A friend?"

"You have no lover," Constantina stated, suddenly changing the subject.

"I like the way you make statements rather than ask questions. I let people think I do. It's the only refusal that seems to make sense to anyone."

"You have enjoyed your lunch."

"Yes, I have, and, Constantina, I'd like to pay for it and for dinner, too. I have a generous travel allowance for this tour, thanks to the State Department, and there's no reason for you...."

Constantina put a hand out to stop this attempt. "If I told you I had saved for months, looking forward, if I told you what a privilege...?"

"If I told you I have such a horror of obligation that I usually refuse all invitations...?"

"If I told you the waiter would judge me for failing in Greek hospitality...?"

"If I told you...." Alysoun tried to continue, but she was laughing and could think of nothing more to protest.

"Come," Constantina said, "and name me the flowers. Then I will be obliged to you."

The crowds had thinned now, and they had no difficulty strolling arm in arm. Alysoun did not even care that they turned heads and inspired comments. Sometimes Constantina answered back at some length.

"What are you saying?"

"Sometimes I say, 'Go home to your mother and kill a pig,' sometimes much worse."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"It is nothing. It is like, in a village, saying 'good afternoon.' It is a circumstance where it is rude not to be rude. They are only admiring your hair."

Alysoun, accompanied by a man, felt not so much protected as invisible, and she sometimes wondered if her need to vomit or scream was a fear not of the dangers of the street but of obliteration. With Constantina she had the odd, light-hearted sense of being conspicuous and safe.

When they arrived at the Placa, some of the flower vendors were closing

their stands for the afternoon, but there were still at least a dozen open for business, displaying a remarkable variety of flowers.

"Of course, it's May," Alysoun reminded herself. "Greece is like California: absolutely everything blooms in May."

"One story is set in San Francisco. She is describing the San Francisco flower stalls."

"Give me your list."

Looking down it, Alysoun had not seen quite that style of script before and realized Constantina must have learned to write English script once she was old enough to control it and form a conscious style of her own.

"What is the matter? Is it hard to read?"

"No, not at all. I was admiring it. It is very like you," Alysoun said, aware that she was falling into Constantina's habit of compliment.

There were twenty flowers on the list. At the first vendor, Alysoun found five of them, and, when Constantina explained to the man what they were doing, he gave Constantina not only the Greek name but the flower itself and refused payment. With the second vendor, where Alysoun found another four, it was the same. Soon all the vendors in the Placa knew what the women were doing and called out their specialties in hope of offering the rarer, the lovelier, but only when Alysoun actually saw what she wanted were the Greek names any use to them. The bouquet in Constantina's arms grew larger and more absurdly various, fragrances of rose, iris, phlox, a startlingly perfumed orange tulip more pungent. In a short while they had all twenty kinds of flowers, sometimes as many as half a dozen specimens. The vendors shouted in pleasure.

"Oh, it's getting late," Constantina said, in sudden distress, "and you must rest before the concert."

"I'd forgotten all about the concert," Alysoun confessed, but what would have been truer to say was that she had not needed to think about, consciously keep it in mind as a safe goal to get her through the anxieties of the day.

"A Eudora Welty bouquet," Constantina said, her face disappearing into the blooms. "I am a little in love with her, too."

"By now, so am I," Alysoun said. "I wish we could send it to her or at least let her know. It must be odd to be a writer, never in the presence of the pleasure you give."

At the hotel, they lingered a moment in the lobby.

"I've had such a lovely time," Alysoun said.

"You must have the flowers."

Alysoun began to protest; then instead she simply smiled and took them.

"I'll come for you tonight after the concert," Constantina said, and she was gone.

Alysoun went to her room and rang for room service for a vase. The maid looked critically at the flowers and returned with three vases, but the flowers could not be separated. Alysoun chose the largest and began to arrange the bouquet Eudora Welty had called to life. Perhaps when Alysoun was through, she would actually sit down and write Eudora Welty a letter. Constantina would know her publisher. A tulip, deep purple enough to be called black named Queen of Sheba, was the color of Constantina's eyes, an apricot rose the texture and color of her skin. Now walking along the street, she would

be carrying the fragrance that filled this room. Alysoun imagined herself saying to Constantina that night, "If I could have a perfume made of this, I would wear it the rest of my life." And some time after that Constantina would say, "You have loved a woman." And Alysoun would say, "Yes, but such a long time ago she is even less real to me than Bobby Anne." "How faithless you are!" And Alysoun would say....

Fear woke in her womb, feeling so like desire that if someone very loving, very skillful had been there at that moment to hold her, to touch her, she would not have resisted. Constantina.

"Dear Eudora Welty," Alysoun began a letter she knew she would neither finish nor mail, "Perhaps it is as well you don't know all the pleasure you give or the insight you bring. I have no idea whether you've ever written a story about this, but because of a bouquet of your flowers (I'll explain what I mean about that in a minute) I've discovered that fear is desire, not shame or guilt or inadequacy or any of those other things. The question to ask about fear is not what are you afraid of but what do you want. If you know what you want and you can have it, then fear doesn't seem like fear at all...."

If Alysoun could walk out at the end of the concert tonight not betrayed back into the threatening loneliness of people who only moments before belonged to the same great affirmation of order and harmony and now had nothing to share but petty, conflicting appetites, if instead she was to be with Constantina, who read a menu like a score, who turned an afternoon into a bouquet of flowers, Alysoun might practice to live as she had learned to work in the high calm of anticipation and presence.

She did not walk out for her solitary drink to watch a world behaving as if everyone were taking part in a home movie, jerky and self-conscious, to be projected over and over again so much larger than life on the flawed wall of childhood. She stayed alone and quiet in her room until it was time to go.

Alysoun Carr played that night as well as she had ever played in her life. Only when she was taking her bow was she aware of the cameras. The concert was being televised not only for the Greek audience but also for Americans who at that moment were watching her image by satellite on their television screens. Her father, her mother, her brothers and sisters would all be together, and for one dangerous second she was tempted to snort before instead she smiled her full, buck-toothed, professional smile through a rain of flowers her mother had taught her to name.

"Home Movie" is part of a collection of short stories and essays by Jane Rule, entitled *Outlander*, to be published by Naiad Press.

FRANKIE: a short story

When Frankie's Mama found out that she was pregnant all hell broke loose: dishes were broken, flowerpots came out of the windowsill and Isadora, their cat, picked that evening to jump from the Browns' bathroom window into Agnes' diner across the alleyway. Even in our apartment, three flights down and across the hall, you could hear them: Frankie crying and Mrs. Brown screaming so loud that old Mrs. Flora on the first floor who hadn't heard a non-megaphoned word in years could hear her.

It was a Wednesday night and instead of doing our homework, Roberta and me were playing cards, half-a-deck gin rummy. As usual, Mama was falling asleep to the seven o'clock news.

"I told you this would happen, hanging up out in the street at night 'till all hours of the morning. I told you this is what it would lead to. God don't like ugly and this proves it. Whose child is it?"

If Frankie said anything, we didn't hear it; but Mrs. Brown's next words were as clear as if she was standing right in front of us.

"If you would have listened to me, this never would have happened: gone to church like Mrs. Birtha's children and stayed out of trouble. No, you had to have it your way, do as you please like all the other children of no-good parents around here. Whose child is it?"

Then Frankie gave what apparently was a wrong answer.

Whack!

"You trying to sass me, huh. I asked you a question and I want an answer. Whose child is it?"

Whack!

Now Frankie was crying and talking too, just as loud as Mrs. Brown was screaming and just as loud as the sound of Mrs. Brown's hands touching her body.

"Don't hit me in my face, Mama. Don't hit me in my face. What you want me to tell you for—so you can try and put the police on him? I'm not going to tell you no matter what you do."

Mama had gotten up, turned off the tv and was now standing with wide-open eyes in the door of our room.

"What in the hell is going on? Who is that?"

"Frankie, just told Mrs. Brown that she was pregnant," I answered, not giving Roberta a chance to be first again. Roberta and Frankie had been sort-of friends for years and last week she had said that Frankie was pregnant.

"You made your own bed now you are going to have to lie in it, Jezebel. And you are gonna tell me whose child it is or else. I brought you into this world, took care of you when your father went to seek his fortune and fame and I got a right to know who the father of my grandchild is. But maybe you don't know whose it is, is that it? You been shacking up with so many

that now you don't even know who the father is. You crying now but just wait until Charles gets here, you gon be begging."

Charles was Mrs. Brown's husband and no truer words had ever been spoken. Mr. and Mrs. Brown were both Sunday to Sunday Christians. Mr. Brown had a church somewhere over in Brooklyn and both he and Mrs. Brown spent most of their time there. Roberta and I could never figure out how Frankie stood it: sitting up in church all day Sunday, Youth Choir practice on Tuesdays and Thursday night prayer sessions. And still that wasn't enough. Frankie had just gotten back from vacation Bible school somewhere down in Georgia and Mrs. Brown wanted her to go to Bible training classes on Saturday mornings.

"Barely sixteen and here you are pregnant. What you think you going to do now? I hope you're not planning on me and Charles supporting the two of you—Charles is building a new church and we're going to move out of this neighborhood. Whose child is it?"

Whack!

Mrs. Brown still hadn't let up. Outside windows were rising and nearly the whole neighborhood, for once secure that no garbage would fall on their heads, were listening.

"Lord, Edward, Mrs. Brown is going to kill that girl," Mrs. Baker on the second floor said. Mrs. Baker was a retired cook and spent most of her days making cookies for the children in the building. Everybody loved her.

"We should call the cops on her, serve her right if they put her self-righteous ass in jail for child abuse. Figures her Frankie would be one of those who got caught, anybody else's child would have known what to do." That was either Lou, Marge or Katie—none of them liked Mrs. Brown and they didn't waste no time in letting you know it. Just a few days before, while Mama and me were on our way upstairs from the supermarket, and with Mrs. Brown right out front waiting for the bus, Katie had stopped Mama and said, "Mrs Brown thinks she's better than the rest of us, walking up and down the same dirty streets we are acting like her shit don't stink. If it's anything like that fart she just passed it does," Katie continued, despite the fact that Mama had kept on going after the first sentence and was now halfway up the stairs and I was the only one listening. "You know what she said to me the other morning when I lowered myself to speak to her? I only said 'good morning' and the heffer turned around and said 'God makes all of my mornings good. You should go to church sometimes, Katie. He might do the same for you.' Now wasn't that nothing but some b-s? That was the last thing I needed to hear after I been standing on a street corner all night long. But you know what I told her? I said, 'if it pays you, honey, do it.' That woman got just enough sense to fit on a needle head and no more."

Frankie was still crying.

"I ain't going to tell you, Mama. I'm old enough to do what I please and I don't have to tell you anything. Charles ain't my father."

Before Charles came on the scene with what Mama called his "religious words and dirty eyes" Mrs. Brown had been just like everybody else. But after she met Charles everything had changed—she didn't talk to anyone in the building anymore.

"So what you gon do now? Drop out of school and get on welfare?"

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't. That's for me to decide not you."

"If I was you, I would start praying to God right now for him to help me."

"Well you aren't me and God don't have anything to do with this, whoever He is."

"Don't talk about God like that in my house." Whack! "You gonna start packing your clothes right now and in the morning you're going down to South Carolina to live with Charles' folks until all of this is past and until you finish high school. He said that we should have sent you down there and he was right."

Then Katie, Lou or Marge was banging on Mrs. Brown's door and in a voice just as loud as hers yelling, "Shut it up."

The next day, Frankie ran away; or so Mrs. Brown thought: she moved in with Katie. At night after everyone had gone to bed, she would come down the fire escape, knock at our window and sit and talk with Roberta.

"What you gonna do, Frankie? You gon have the baby?"

"I haven't figured out exactly what I'm going to do yet. I do know that I'm never going to set foot in Mama's and Charles' apartment again in my life. Maybe I'll have the baby and maybe I won't. Katie says she knows somebody that will help me get rid of it, if I want to."

"You gon have an abortion, Frankie?"

"What's an abortion?"

I had never heard the word before but from the way Roberta said it, fast as if it shouldn't have been said, I knew that I should find out what it meant. Neither of them were paying me any attention.

"Maybe."

Frankie had told Roberta how after Charles came in and Mrs. Brown told him that she was pregnant, he had beat her. Tied her mouth up so nobody would hear her and with a Bible in one hand while uttering the Lord's Prayer beat her black and blue. If she hadn't left, she said, he would have killed her and she had the marks to prove it: her body looked like somebody had ran a hot comb over it. If it wasn't for Katie she said that she would have died.

That same night, I looked up "abortion" in the dictionary. Webster's said that it was "1. the expulsion of a nonviable fetus: as a: spontaneous expulsion of a human fetus during the first 12 weeks of gestation—compare miscarriage. b: illegal abortion 2. monstrosity 3. a: arrest of development (as of a part or process) resulting in imperfection b: a result of such arrest." All of it sounded terrible and the definition of the next word "abortionist" was "producer of illegal abortions."

When I finally got up the nerve to ask Mama what she thought she said "it wasn't that bad. The monstrosity is that poor women have to go to quacks and rich women go to a hospital"

For several weeks, Frankie came every night to talk to Roberta. She was still going to school and living with Katie had worked wonders on her—now she smiled alot. Everybody thought that the sign that Mr. and Mrs. Brown put in the window was one big joke:

"Wanted—information leading to the finding of Francine Brown. Reward offered."

Then Frankie stopped coming and none of us ever saw her again. Roberta said that she had had an abortion.

Joan Gibbs would like to receive feedback on her writing. Her address is 360 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11238.

something you should know

I became a poet because I was in love
with a writer of short stories
who loved (she thought) a malcontent
scholar who loved (we discovered)
a beautician named Jackie in Toledo,
Ohio. It is at that point
my life begins. I abandoned my married
lovers for younger ones of the opposite sex,
swore never again to have midnight encounters
with irate wives in local bars, tried to give up
drinking, and promised myself a new start
in a new place. Moving brought me
to the midwest; a job and a lover
kept me here. The first is now boring,
the second is gone. Better that way
than the other, I suppose. I am ready
for a change. I have rediscovered
choice and I plan to use it:
I am the old hound sitting on the back stoop
barking all night because I want to,
the young girl climbing the tall wooden fence
because it is there, the woman who will take
your hand when it is offered (avoiding
pertinent questions), prune the rings
from our fingers one by one,
drink from the ripe openings of your eyes.

—Anita Skeen

VICISSITUDES: a short story

For three hours we have been sitting in the Ironhorse Cafe, talking. For much of this time I've been feeling, *yes*, we can be friends, we *are* friends: this is what we're excellent at being. I dictate to my body what my demeanor shall be, and obediently it poises in the figure not of a lover, but of a friend: the eyes slightly vacant, legs absently crossed, shoulders reclining against the chair—not hunched forward over the elbows planted on the table, eagerly fondling a coffee cup. My demeanor is changed, and my feelings scramble to accommodate it. Almost frantically they jump inside this new skin, assembling themselves; and then they hover expectantly, tautly strung, waiting for me to come like some stage director and declare that they are accepted, naturals, perfect for the part.

I am trying to do this but something in me is unwilling to commit itself to such a declaration. I can't yet altogether believe that the actors for whom the script was written will not make an appearance after all, that somehow their talents cannot be used and applauded. I think I am willing to settle, only not yet.

We have been talking as we haven't in months, in the old style which had atrophied during all these weeks of resistance and recrimination. For so long now we have been nothing but policy-shapers: this is what I want, this is what you want, therefore we will be this, we won't be that, although we could be that other thing twice a week. Words preceding meanings, demeanors preceding feelings: everything going in reverse. Now apparently a treaty has been signed, and once again we are simply understanding one another with the old clarity and immediacy of connection.

It is all very fine until the thought creeps up on me that this is what we went through last year; this is what made us fall in love with each other to begin with. Our honesty used to beget something; we spent many hours honestly talking about honesty, looking at each other in increasing amazement, like artists writing poems about art. It hurts me to realize there isn't that future now. Honesty isn't rocks to climb any more; we have woven it into something larger than us which in the end has birthed us. We have to live with it now, no longer of our own choosing; we can't escape it.

We go back to your apartment and move into separate rooms to work. I know that now there will be no interrupting each other with brilliant thoughts which require instant corroboration. My demeanor takes a deep breath and gathers itself into a position of deep abstraction and concentration. I read for an hour or two. Then you come into the living room, where I am, with a book, and sit in the chair by the kitchen. I'm not exactly sure of the rules of the game we are playing but without admitting my ignorance I am mutely learning them. We read for a little while longer and then abruptly you begin to talk. You tell me you are depressed. I put my book down and listen to

you as you tell me the reasons you are dissatisfied with your relationship with Gloria, your new lover. I offer advice or therapy or whatever you want to call it—as a friend. At first I believe in the role. Then, as it goes on and on, I start to feel disturbed; at the same time I feel I can't show it. My demeanor is impassively watching; it is lying through its teeth.

At one point you come over and you hug me. You lie down on me—I am sitting on the couch—and you put your head in my lap. I hold you almost mock-soothingly, saying “Poor Mia” and patting your head, but what I am doing seems to be coming from another person. It is in no way reflective of the real feeling that is inside me, which is an all-encompassing urge to hold you very passionately and for a long time. The way I am holding you is such a bastardized form of what I am really feeling that I begin to feel dissociated, like a third party watching. Then you let go and get up and walk back to your seat, before I am quite ready. I am still aching to hold you. I still haven't shown this. I think you believe that *you* are breaking the rules and that I might be angry or annoyed with you.

We read again and soon you sigh restlessly, turning your open book pages down so it straddles your knee. You randomly begin to tell me the things you need in someone with whom you are in a primary relationship. You say it frustrates you sometimes not to find these things in Gloria. Gloria, you say, is not intellectual enough, she has little ambition, she has no interest in literature, and she is often maddeningly not on your perceptual current. I look at you quietly as you say all this, my face once again a polite blank of listening attention. An impatience is beginning to boil in my blood. Every factor you mention is something you have specifically, emphatically, and repeatedly professed to have found in me. It does not seem appropriate to make that connection now. You, certainly, are not making it. Why are you telling me these things? I can only respond with a strangely contrived mental dullness, an obliviousness to the obvious. Is this what you want from me? Am I supposed to play dumb? We both used to be rather fond of saying that we were a Bloomsbury Group of two. A pompous pronouncement, true, but the act of saying it was an act of love, an assertion that amid all the divisions between the souls of people, amid the incongruous latitudes and longitudes that people lived on, we two, *we*, found ourselves perched on a common speck of dust. What was important was that we shared the view from this speck of dust, and that as its only two inhabitants we created the esthetics, the politics, the mythology of our speck. Our religion was what a professor of ours once called “passionate provisionalism”—a strange theology which accounted for the intensity behind every belief, while still remembering that knowledge is always incomplete, that the perspective of any given moment is always flawed. Together we were brave enough to admit the provisionalism of our ideas and of the passion which informed them; but we did not admit the provisionalism of our honesty. True things cannot be transmitted through a false medium. Now I look at you across a gulf of flawed integrity.

Our conversation moves away from such personal concerns. You are steering; I go with the flow. We have turned to the subject of racism, and I can see that our dynamic interests and arrests you. I see your eyes locking around the thoughts which hover and vibrate between us, and I have a sudden sense of possession: I possess my own thoughts and my own way of articulating

them, which I can give or withhold at will. I know that you value these things, that you attempt to draw them out of me, that you grow frustrated when I choose not to dispense them. I know, and I know you know, that separately our ideas come slowly, that often they remain half-formed or they spontaneously abort. Together, we go somewhere with them; we lead each other always onto new planes which in themselves become exciting. I think that perhaps when we manufacture these things together I bring in the raw materials, and you supply the technology to make them useful and alive and functioning. Yet we have come to work together on this so closely and the process always happens so quickly that we are not conscious of performing these particular tasks. We just know that things move and spring into existence, and we are learning. I don't know if you are able to run the plant on your own any better than I am. I know that each time in these last few months that we tried to separate, I became overstocked on raw materials and they just sat in my warehouse, rotting.

As we sit here talking about racism, the look on your face tells me that you are compelled by what I say and by the electric charge of our thoughts spewing and hooking up in midair. Sensing my power, I get up to leave; yet there is your power, too, and afterwards I am passionately depressed. The more I am with you, the more I cannot extricate myself from your gravity, from the weight of our coalescence. I try to escape you, and it is a lie that I want to escape you, although it is also a lie that I don't want to escape you. I have lost all attempts to sever this tie. You have won; now we are "friends," and as such we may see each other often. Yet I don't know how to be with this person who is my best friend, who I want to hold and kiss and cry with and make love to and who only wants now to talk to me and write books with me and be my friend. I try to block these things out of my head when I am with you. Up to a point I can do it very effectively, but then they have a way of sneaking up on me and hitting me in the stomach when I'm not paying attention. I am so angry with you for forcing me to suffocate my deepest humanity and pervert my deepest truth; but I love you for having collaborated with me on the expedition to discover them.

The redeeming aspect of this pain is that by its very nature it contains the possibility of its opposite. It is a gentle pain; it protects me against easy ignorance, telling me relentlessly who I am, what I can feel, what depths of possibilities lie inside me, not unfathomed and untouched, but known. I think that in this, more than anything, lies the power and the paradox of lesbian relationships: that we are friends *and* lovers, that we are fused together through knowledge and mystery, that the boundaries which might have been comforting refuse to exist for us. As you said to me many times: "I talk to you about the vicissitudes of life. And yet you *are* the vicissitudes of life."

Transformer
love poem for a vibrator

Electric
power lines
love between the trees.

Branches scan
the sky like nerves.

Lying in this field
I have become
a circuit for the hum:
a path of less resistance.

The cables snake
around my thighs.
Magnetized
the juices pass
through brass

arc
into flesh.

I'm rising
on a thread of steel

wired
to a hundred tons
of water beating on a dam.

I rush against the flow.
Salmon roe slides down.
I ride the dragon's
fire licking tongue

I have become
a circuit for the hum.
I hold the spin
as long as I can stand

and then I gather all my trucks
and buffalo
and gush
Niagara
through the falls.

—Lorie Dechar

THE NUT HOUSE

To tell the truth of this story I have had to move deeper and wider than the actual events. There is the actual truth: that at a younger age I was shot up and locked up and beat up at some famous institution that labelled me an hysteric. There is the learned truth: that it was unnecessary, and a violation. And finally the truth I have struggled to touch and to know: that in and of ourselves we are strong, that with and through each other we are stronger.

They released her from seclusion early, wordlessly, before the other patients were even up. The rising sun threw a shadow of the heavy black grillwork across her face as she walked down the hall. In her room she loosed the single string of the hospital gown and it fell to her feet. She kicked it under the bed. Someone knocked — Jean, her nurse — and came in and sat casually on the edge of the bed. She spied the gown and pulled it out, bunching it in her lap.

“Well, you made it to the inner sanctum of the great temple. How does it feel?”

Danci placed a hand above her left breast.

“I am truly purified: anger burns as the great fire purging me of acquiescence and all guilt.”

Jean sighed.

“Danci, everybody knows you aren’t nuts.”

“Then let me go,” she shot back.

“You have to stop *acting* nuts.”

Danci buttoned up her shirt.

“To borrow some of your own jargon, my behavior is not inappropriate to my situation. This place sucks.”

“ ‘And motherfucks.’ I heard. You chanted that for hours last night.”

“Maybe somebody got the message,” she muttered, closing the bureau drawer.

“Pomeroy said you called him a rapist.”

Danci raised an eyebrow.

“Did he believe me?”

“Does it matter so much?”

“Hunh,” she grunted, slipping into her boots, “If men like him would recognize their rapacious appetites, women like me wouldn’t end up in institutions like this. Pomeroy should stop jerking off in my doorway at night.”

Jean jangled her keys and frowned.

“Does he?”

Danci walked over to the door.

“Does it really matter?” she asked lightly, and turned the knob. “I’m going in for breakfast.”

Danci sat at the table with eight men around her and Jean perched by the coffee pot. Over the weeks she had learned the routines and realized today must be chart day, the day patients could read what others were saying about them. Danci never did; somehow they always missed one basic truth.

She played with her rubbery eggs and drank her milk while the men around her talked.

“Noisy last night.”

“Yeah, real noisy.”

“How’s anybody supposed to sleep with some hysterical woman mouthing off . . .” The speaker slurped his oatmeal, sucking it through a crack between his front teeth.

Jean commented: “Gross, Harvey. Eat your food right.”

“Yes, Harvey,” someone mimicked, “and don’t forget to wash behind your ears.”

The men chuckled. Harvey snarled.

“Well at least I don’t go around pissing on floors, hunh, Miss Fancy Danci? Pissing on floors and making Pomeroy clean it up.”

“Should’a made her lick it up.”

“Wish I’d’a been there. I’d’a given her something good to lick.”

He didn’t see it coming but Jean did; she yelled, but too late. Without a wasted motion Danci landed her fist on the guy’s still-open jaw. Blood trickled down and he bawled, “Yah! Yah! Stop her! She’s after me.”

Which was not quite true. Everyone but the bawling victim was moving. Danci was up and crouching, her chair flipped back behind her. She saw Jean dash out of the room.

“Typical,” she thought, and then felt herself being lifted off the floor. Some guy flung her against the wall.

“You bitch! Filthy bitch!” a deep voice blasted at her. Oatmeal hit her face but she shook it off, jumping back up. She snapped a white plastic spoon and had something like a weapon. She tried to angle to get the wall behind her. A grabbing hand pulled open her shirt and she was bare-breasted. Her eyes flashed. She whooped, and brought the heel of her boot down hard on a shin behind her. Someone yelped, and let go. She spun away and was able to leave a long scratch down a hairy arm. It was fruitless, she knew. Soon they would be on top of her. Someone pinched her exposed breast and she jabbed the plastic edge at his eye, just missing, ripping open his cheek. He stared at the blood on his hand, disbelieving, but someone else jumped her from the other side, holding her wrists and pulling her arms back behind her. She kicked back with her feet and they both fell.

“Get her feet! Her feet!”

It was Jean’s voice. Danci screamed in outrage.

“Traitor! Traitor!” She tried to catch the woman’s eyes but her own were blurred, with blood, or tears. She kicked out aimlessly. The men responded with relish, holding her legs, yanking off her boots. Someone worked at the buckle of her belt; Danci screamed in fresh rage, unintelligibly. She almost broke free. Then someone climbed onto her stomach, gleefully, laughing, provoking her.

“Now you’re gonna get it, bitch! Now you little cock teasing butch!”

His eyes glinted. Danci tried to focus and spat. He spat back, over and over.

Jean yelled at him to stop, called him off. Danci tried to dislodge them with one last surge of strength and rage. But her pants were down. The needle shot into her hip and she howled one last time as the thorazine or mellaril or whatever shit it was leaked into her. Someone giggled. She heard a stern voice order everyone out just as she slipped into unconsciousness.

The sound of bolts scraping roused her. She tried to sit up, but could not. She was bound tight in a straitjacket. Jean entered with another woman. Danci hardly saw her, but the woman told Jean to remove the restrainer.

"How are you?" Jean asked, working at the clips. Danci felt her shoulders give with a twinge of pain but said nothing. The woman knelt beside her.

"Do you remember me? I'm Dr. Helen Fox. I'm going to meet with you later. Why don't you drink this and I'll be back in an hour."

She set a paper cup on the floor and stood up; it steamed. Jean slipped the sleeves off her arms and they left. She heard mutters outside the door. She sat up slowly. Her arms and shoulders were sore, wrenched. Her ass hurt, bruised from all the shots — how many? One eye was swollen, almost shut, and her knuckles were scraped raw. More bruises covered her arms and legs. She smiled grimly; she'd made it. Officially mad. She looked around the room. More mattresses lined the walls. It was true, then. She'd caved in, lost the delicate balance and slipped into their pit, their snake pit. Fitting image, snake . . . Nut house, nuts . . . Where they wanted her. She laughed shortly at herself, and rested her forehead on the heels of her hands.

What could she do now? She'd fought the best way she knew and lost.

The thorazine, and whatever else, was still working on her; she was slowed, dulled. Her body was weak. Righteousness remained but no strength for it. She realized she hadn't eaten for awhile, and still she had no appetite. The drugs, she remembered. Another beneficial side-effect. So why would they give her coffee? She could smell it; it cut through the odor of shit and urine. She picked up the cup, held it in both hands, and took a sip. It wasn't too hot; it was strong, though, too strong for hospital coffee. But she sat hunched over and sipped it.

She caught Jean looking in at her once, but she turned from her in distaste. There were things she remembered, not yet in the front of her mind. But with time, she promised herself, she would recover them, and with them her anger, and she would begin again.

When the cup was empty Jean came back in.

"Want more?"

Danci nodded, not looking at her. Jean took the cup and left with only a click of the lock. She returned soon, the cup full. She set it on the floor and left without a word, only the sound of the clicking door.

The doctor returned as she worked on her second cup. She came into the room and the door locked behind her. The bare light bulb went out. Danci watched her walk over to the window where the light barely glimmered and flick a finger against the fancy grillwork.

"Bars would be more honest," she observed, and pulled out a cigarette. "Do you remember how you got here?"

"A fight," Danci muttered.

The doctor snapped her lighter and blew the smoke at the window. She

spoke quietly.

"You were right, you know. They were after you, and, I'm sorry to say, they got you right where they wanted you."

Danci gritted her teeth.

"I know, I know, I blew it, I lost it . . ."

She balled her hand into a fist and brought it down hard on her leg. The doctor frowned.

"What are you beating on yourself for? Haven't you been beat up enough? Aren't you tired of it yet?"

Danci laughed, disbelieving.

"As though there's a choice, hunh?" She laughed again. "The only choice is how you go down, really, kicking or sucking. Either way, either way, you get beat."

Dr. Fox smiled.

"You know, you have a real fine anger, and I think it could be very useful to us."

Danci smirked.

"Really? So, who's 'us'?"

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

Danci shrugged and finished off her coffee. The doctor sat beside her on the mattress.

"Cigarette?" she offered.

Danci tried to eye her suspiciously but it hurt too much to squint. She winced.

"Do you want some ice for that?"

Danci just shook her head and took the offered cigarette. The doctor lit it up for her.

"Out there," the woman jerked her thumb towards the window, "and also in here, in the too-many places like this, are women like you, like me, whose anger burns pure and hot, and rightly so, but who have it robbed from them by some medical Prometheus who passes it on to serve men, and their needs, never mind ours."

Now she laughed.

"But, but . . . we're learning. We're learning to say 'No, we have our own use for this. You can't have it.' And our anger becomes an energy source for fighting back."

"How?" Danci asked drily.

"I'm not the only subversive in my profession. We've learned we can't do it all alone. There are others who are teachers, lawyers, social workers — librarians, even. We haven't been uncovered yet. On the surface we play by the rules. Now, Jean is an example . . ."

"Jean shot me up!"

The doctor nodded.

"I know, I know. And it's regrettable we don't have our own resources yet. But you were in danger; those men were playing for keeps. She knew that. She did what she could. And she is the one who called me; that's what she's here for."

Danci took a long drag on the cigarette.

"You can get me out?"

Dr. Fox nodded emphatically.

"I can get you out, put you in touch with a social worker I know who can line you up a job, an apartment . . . whatever you need."

"And what do I do?"

The doctor shrugged.

"That's up to you. Although," she paused, and looked at Danci from the corner of her eye, "there is this half-way house we'd like to infiltrate, and if you were my patient, we should be able to get you in there and find out what's really going on."

Danci sat thoughtfully, then asked, "How do I know this is for real?"

"Well, Pomeroy is under investigation for the charges you made against him. All the director needs is a statement from you, and another from me, and he's canned."

Danci's face twitched, and finally a slow smile slipped across her lips.

"Alright, alright," she said softly, and then, turning to the doctor, "You got a deal."

The woman met her eyes.

"I'm glad. Now I can see about getting you out of here."

She pushed herself smoothly up from the mattress.

"How soon?" Danci pressed.

"Come on," she said, offering her hand. "I'll walk you down to your room."

Danci dropped the cigarette in the cup and, after a pause, reached up. She rose stiffly; the doctor steadied her as she stood.

"You got it now?"

"Yeah, yeah," she answered, her breath short.

Dr. Fox rapped on the door and Jean opened it from outside. Some men sat in the rec room, visible from the angle of the doorway. Danci hesitated.

"Don't worry," Jean winked at her, and slipped one of her arms through Danci's. Dr. Fox took the other, and as they walked the length of the hall, the eyes of the men slid away.



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HEART DANCE

She thought as she lay there about the fact that she was dying. Not the way she had been dying since the moment of her birth; not even the way she had been dying since learning of the sickness that was raging like an august brushfire throughout her body. But dying. Really dying. Within minutes, half an hour at the most, this life, her only remembered life, would be ended.

She refused to spend these last few moments going over, again, the scene at the hospital: her refusing treatments, her father cursing, her mother trying to understand. It was her brothers who had walked her to the parking lot. They didn't agree with her, they said, but it was her life. She had laughed. They corrected themselves. Her death. They hugged.

Her lover waited in the car. She had said that she just couldn't be part of what would go on in that consultation room; knew as well as her cancer-filled friend how the family, the physician, would respond

She forced the memories from her mind, chided herself for wasting time on what was already. I must think about what is, only what is. What was doesn't matter any more, nor what will be. The future, now, is defined as whatever happens in the next twenty minutes.

The pressure on her chest brought her back to her immediate reality. Kira, Kira who had been with her since she had come, crying, to her back door, a seven-week-old kitten. Kira on her chest purring, kneading, nuzzling against her cheek. The familiarity was almost devastating. The simpleness. The warmth.

She opened her eyes, stroking Kira under the chin, starting at the base of the neck. She looked around the circle she lay in, looked one by one at the faces of her friends, and smiled. Several smiled back. They had red, wet eyes. And smiled. A warm, friend smile. Their smiles said

i will miss you i love you
i don't want this i respect this i love you
i miss you don't leave me i love you
their mouths did not move.

There was a drum beating. A long slow beat. Not sad. Not mournful. Constant. Like the beating of a heart set to music. She liked that.

She thought of what it was like to be dying. Truly dying. In her circle of friends. Some of these women had been lovers. Some had been co-workers. All were close. All people whom she had loved and cared about. All people who cared for her. Years ago they had taken to calling each other family. Month by month, crisis after crisis, sharing after sharing, the naming had created a reality. They *were* family. In ways that amused and touched and shook them. Family when one of them needed money; family when one needed a safe place to heal, a safe place to be ill; family when one needed to be held, go crazy, stop being crazy, give birth.

And now, she thought, to give death.

Not one of them had given an excuse. Not one of them had refused her invitation. She had called, written, to each woman in this circle. And they

had come. From all over the continent. She had told them each that she could not explain this thing, this need, to them one at a time. She did not have the energy. She said that she needed them to come together, all at once, and she would speak to them of her need, her fantasy, her desire. They came. They came because they loved her; they came responding as much to their trust in her, in each other, in their connection, as to the urgency, the intensity, of her request.

To die, not in a sterile, white, arrogant, soul-less cubicle in some hospital. but in a circle of trees. in a field. outside. under a sun-lit sky. in a circle of trees. a circle of friends. a circle within a circle.

They had asked questions: was her death certain. yes. how long. another month, maybe. a slow month. a painful month. no control. no power. They understood.

She asked questions: are you prepared to deal with the legal red-tape. yes. even if accused of negligent homicide. yes. will you give the burial instructions to my parents. yes. will you help me find the best way, something fast, painless, an easy, gentle death. yes. will you sit with me while i take it. yes. while i die. yes.

They met for the rest of that week. Sometimes with her, sometimes without her, talking, exploring their feelings about what they were agreeing to. How they felt about her dying, about not trying to stop her, not trying to convince her, force her to try something, anything else. They began to truly deal with her death, what it meant to each of them, the fact that she would no longer be accessible to them in this familiar, physical way. They spent their days, their nights, discussing all of this; discussing, too, that there would be need of more and continued discussion when she had, in fact, died.

They came together on the day she had chosen. She gave them information: the car goes to joann. the books go to the new women's library. the journals to whoever, here, wants to read them, then on to anyone who would use them in some way.

Her parents had been informed of her wishes in terms of the funeral. They had already agreed, verbally, to all her demands. They had agreed to help with any legal problems. They knew that she was sending a notarized statement via her friends. Her final bit of control. The written version of what they had agreed to: no christian ceremony. something tribal. leave it to the women. they will know.

The drum continued. There was another sound, a gourd with its seeds being shaken about. And a flute. A tambourine. The voices of the women she loved. They sang. She listened.

She looked at all of their wide open faces. She cried a little. They cried more than a little. They sang. She listened. The drum continued, a heart-beat set to music. The drum will beat after i have stopped. They had promised her this.

The sun shone. The grass tickled her arms. Kira purred. The drum beat on. She looked around the circle; wondered at the opening and closing of the mouths of living creatures making noise, singing songs. She watched the hands that beat on drums, fingered flutes, shook tambourines, rattled gourds. The drum continued, a heartbeat set to music, drawing her own heart into a dance, a dance that would be carried by each of the women here; a dance that would last as long as the circle, the family, continued.

LESBIAN HERSTORY



Jan Hansen

Untitled

acrylic painting

30" x 30"

REMEMBERING LESBIAN LIVES

discipline . . . n. 1. Training intended to produce a specified character or pattern of behavior. (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed

the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence

(Adrienne Rich, "Cartographies of Silence")

Feminist process must become sensible (in actions, speech, works of all kinds) in order to become. The journey requires the courage to create, that we may learn from lucid criticism, that we may re-member the dismembered body of our heritage, that we may stop repeating the same mistakes. Patriarchal erasure of our tradition forces us to relearn what our fore Sisters knew and to repeat their blunders. (Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*)

You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.

(Monique Wittig, *Les Guerilleres*)

I was never confused about whether I was male or female. I always knew I was female. But for most of my life I did not believe I was a woman.

I liked climbing trees; at age nine when the wind blew against my face and body, I would think of the title words and tune of the song "High and Mighty" and feel powerful. I would lie for hours in the grass and gaze up into trees, watching leaves and sparkles of sunlight dance. I watched clouds pass in constant transformation. I held conferences with the neighborhood dogs, and my cat sat opposite me in a lawnchair. Solitude and I were best friends.

I knew perfectly well who I was, so much so I mostly never thought about it. And I knew I wasn't a lady. I didn't like skirts—they meant you couldn't do back bends or cartwheels or climb on the monkey bars during recess, or you couldn't sit with your legs in all kinds of delicious positions because the principal didn't like your underpants showing. It wasn't ladylike. Neither were shorts.

I knew I wasn't a lady also because I hated sitting indoors and gossiping. Yuch. What a waste of a day. Mr. Gruff, my teddybear, didn't like gossip either. We thought ladies silly.

Sometimes I thought ladies worse than silly. Some of Mother's friends would play up to men in the most embarrassing ways—they acted like two-year-olds.

It was carefully explained that Mother's friends (white) were ladies while the cleaning women (black) were women. I liked the cleaning women.

By fifth grade I had a best friend and would become furious if she even spoke to another girl. Then we moved, and at twelve I found another best friend. We became blood sisters. Our friendship crossed borders, enduring distance and time, and lasted into our early twenties when her dissolution became complete in marriage and her societal role.

As a teenager, I thought most girls ridiculous; they stayed at home waiting for boys to ask them out. I went out golfing. I was one of the boys.

In college I made unsuccessful attempts at friendship both outside sororities and then, at twenty-one, inside one. Repeatedly they dissolved around boys, leaving me betrayed; female bonds always came second to boys. By graduate school I began to restrict my friendship to males, still thinking friendship the most important relationship, but knowing I could not trust women—I knew how fickle they really were. By twenty-five I hated women.

Having lost solitude and descending into loneliness, I came close once to seriously considering “giving up and getting married” though I had no one particular in mind. Instead, I sniffed at a book someone shoved under my nose, *The Feminine Mystique*, and voraciously devoured it. (I especially liked the way she exposed the Freudian traps.) By twenty-eight I was solid in feminism, having detected in my new-found concept, sisterhood, a source for loyalty among wimmin who choose to become friends and a recognition of my long-held belief that no man was worth the dissolution of a friendship. Soon I was discovered by lesbians and I came out at twenty-nine. Now I am thirty-five.

Have I been a lesbian all my life?

I don't know: I was a tomboy, very much my own person, but without means of protecting myself from becoming self-conscious (conscious of and affected by others' perceptions of me). I grew up, bowed somewhat under peer pressure. I was willing to think of marriage, just not to *this* one, and certainly not *now*. While having the requisite slew of boyfriends, I managed to keep them in other states or countries. Once I fell in romantic love and had an abortion. When I did try living with a male, I chose one I was not particularly attracted to. For a long time I was essentially celibate. Sometimes I am very slow.

Have I been a lesbian all along?

Certainly I never fought the battles prefeminist dykes have. Mine are a different set of scars. Until I was twenty-eight, I did not have the concept, lesbian, with which to evaluate myself. I only knew I wasn't a lady. And for most of my life that meant I wasn't a woman—not one of *them*. I was unique.

Have I always been a lesbian?

Actually, the answer doesn't much matter . . . at least, the answer didn't much matter until I began to think of historians. When I think of historians talking about me or about wimmin like me, or about all kinds of other lesbians, the situation begins to change. When I think of a historian's approach to the question of whether I've been a lesbian all my life, or whether tomboys are lesbians or whether prefeminist loners are lesbians, when I think of a historian's questions (as opposed to the ridiculous questions scientists have asked), I begin to care.

✓ The work of re-claiming lesbian lives is enormously biophilic; it is part of our survival. To re-claim our tradition is to begin to heal our Selves. Because of the deafening silence surrounding even the concept, lesbian; because of the distortions, burials, violence, committed by male historians; because of our own near death by starvation at the hands of phallocratic scholarship, discovering even one lesbian life is profoundly enspiriting.

Still, I want to know about the focus of a lesbian historian. Is she truly after Sinister Wisdom, the lesbian imagination in all wimmin? Is she a Crone-ologist, "unmasking deceptive patriarchal history, rendering it obsolete?"¹ Or is she merely attempting to prove that some wimmin in history were lesbians, attempting merely to include "lesbian" as a historical category? When I think of a historian talking about my life, or the lives of other lesbians, I wonder about the arena of her inquiry. When she is meticulous and exacting about detail, whom is she trying to convince? If a lesbian historian is an apologist, to whom is she apologizing?

We know that left in a patriarchal context without hard and fast evidence of lesbian bonding, the intricacies of a woman's life will be cast in heterosexual concrete. That is the nature of phallocratic heterosexism. But we must also remember that even with hard and fast evidence of lesbian bonding, male historians will neurotically manipulate, distort, and discard that evidence. That, too, is the nature of phallocratic heterosexism. Even though we have broken the silence surrounding some lesbians for ourselves, we still live in a world that will re-establish that silence as soon as possible.

It is vitally important we never forget that masculinist scholarship and the patriarchal naming of wimmin as "feminine" go hand in hand. The concept of femininity defines wimmin as passive, and in relation to men, so pervasively that scholars bury or otherwise render invisible women who do not relate to men, as well as wimmin who resist male domination. By the very act of naming us, these scholars determine the limits of female behavior. Female autonomy, female resistance, and female bonding do not exist within patriarchal ontology. If there is mention of these phenomena, they are named "madness."²

✓ When we attend to their disciplines, we must keep in mind that the male social constriction/construction of reality emerged in the name of objectivity and universality. The presumption that spinsters and old maids are heterosexual now strikes us as ludicrous. Once it did not. Men recast the concepts in a heterosexual light, suggesting wimmin who could not get men rather than wimmin who chose to live without them. To successfully reverse male reversals, Crone-ologists must take risks. Regardless of what a lesbian historian uncovers, the way she approaches her material and the academic criteria she accepts as appropriate to her work can contribute to phallocracy. Wimmin's Studies arose because of distortions and fabrications in the patriarchal canon, not just because of omissions. We must be wary that our re-search does not preserve a masculinist context.

✓ For example, lesbian historians have found themselves expected to facilitate male voyeurism by responding to demands for exacting proof of "genital contact" so men can consider whether that contact might possibly be evidence that some woman was more than likely, though not for certain, but quite possibly, not heterosexual. And so the strength and vitality of a woman's life again crumbles in the face of male questions and feeds male fantasy.

Lesbian historians are beginning to shift our focus from male questions to our own conceptual clarity, vision. In an enormously re-membering article on Katharine Lee Bates and Katharine Coman, Judith Schwarz discusses problems of lesbian re-search. Arguing that genital contact is not a necessary condition of lesbian identity, she offers Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's definition: "a woman whose primary erotic, psychological, emotional and social interest is in a member of her own sex."³ She also points out the importance of focusing less on evidence of sexual contact among wimmin involved in female partnerships at a time when married wimmin acted as if conception were an act of a god, and the importance of focusing more on discovering and analyzing how these wimmin survived without heterosexual privilege.

Nevertheless, the question of the burden of proof looms large. In the process of her discussion, Judith Schwarz makes a problematic claim. Noting Carol Smith-Rosenberg's silence surrounding the naming of lesbian relationships, she states, "In effect, the standard of assuming all women to be heterosexual until positively proven otherwise is at least as biased and historically incorrect as declaring all single women who ever enjoyed a close friendship with another woman to be lesbians."⁴ Why is it biased and historically incorrect to think all single wimmin lesbian who ever enjoyed a close friendship with another woman? And what does that have to do with heterosexism? What is the purpose of this statement?

We know lesbians have passed as heterosexual. A more reasonable statement reads: "In effect, the standard of assuming all wimmin heterosexual until positively proven otherwise is no more biased and historically incorrect than declaring all wimmin heterosexual who were ever married and had children." In fact, given patriarchal constriction of wimmin, it is not clear we can ever say positively that any woman in patriarchy was ever truly heterosexual.

Lesbian Feminist sociologist Susan Cavin offers an en-lightening perspective on prehistoric wimmin:

It is my position that patriscientists must prove their assumption that all prehistoric dead women are exclusively heterosexual before they can correctly conclude that no lesbian, asexual, or bisexual females exist in early society. These heterosexist generalizations cannot be proved regarding living women in present society, much less the dead of prehistory. Yet heterosexists still function under the impression that the burden of proof is on lesbians to prove lesbian existence, when they have yet to establish the veracity of their assumption that all historical and prehistorical women are straight Perhaps the most interesting point to be grasped in any theory of sex and society is that until the actual incidence of lesbianism, celibacy, bisexuality, and male homosexuality is known, the actual incidence of heterosexuality remains unknown.⁵

Our history is our memory, and Crone-ologists are charged with "re-membering the dismembered body of our heritage," a heritage which has to a large degree been snuffed out. This involves dis-covering facts and re-valuing them in light of the primacy of wimmin, getting beyond femininity to dis-cover femaleness. It involves a willingness to approach phallocratic scholarship with nothing more to go on but the question, How have they distorted/destroyed our lives? It involves seeing through masculinist conceptual coercion.

For example, patrihistorians claim wimmin have remained content with our lot and have accepted male domination throughout time with the exception of a few suffragists and now a few aberrant feminists. Attending to the work of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton rather than listening to the boys, Crone-ologists can dis-cover fact and show that suffrage and suffrage-related activity, for example, was widespread. But Crone-ologists can go still further.

My own current work involves an argument that even wimmin in isolation have resisted male domination; that not only is "femininity" not characteristic of real wimmin, but that even the stereotypic behaviors that fall under that umbrella term do not indicate female submission to male domination. Instead they indicate female resistance. Similarly, I argue that the stereotypes surrounding slaves—"shiftless," "lazy," "clumsy," "childlike"—are not indicative of passive acceptance of domination, but rather of resistance, of separating from the will of the master, of sabotage.⁶

So much deeply challenging work needs to be done. It is argued, for example, that lesbianism did not exist in Africa until the European invasions. The basis for this claim seems to be a lack of African female erotica. Yet how could we expect female erotica to emerge among wimmin who have had their clitorises gouged out and their labia scraped and scarred?

Was a British woman who showed signs of doing anything but what fell within prescribed stereotypic behavior *not* a lesbian? Was a woman who succumbed, heterosexual? Are there any grounds that could support the hypothesis that such a woman was heterosexual? How can we dis-cover lesbian identity among poor European and American wimmin of the 19th century? If a woman resisted but found herself isolated from female support networks, was she thus not a lesbian? And what about the loners?

Have I been a lesbian all my life? Within the confines of my life as I live it now, the answer doesn't much matter. But I want lesbian historians to attend seriously to the question and turn history inside out.

NOTES

1. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 16. For insight into the following words and others that appear in this paper, see the "Index of New Words," pp. 469-71: 'biophilic,' 'survival,' 'dis-cover,' 'enspiriting,' 'Crone-ologist,' 're-member,' 'reversal.' For the use of the words 'woman' and 'wimmin,' see "A Rose by Any Other Name Would Smell as Sweet," *Lesbian Connection*, IV, 5 (December, 1978), p. 5.

2. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, "Naming, Describing, Explaining: Deception and Science," paper delivered at the panel "Feminism and the Philosophy of Science" of the annual meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, January 6, 1979, Houston, Texas.

3. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (NY: Bantam, 1972), p. 1. A friend of mine tells me she picked up *Lesbian/Woman* in an airport and when she saw this definition, she knew for certain that she was a lesbian.

4. Judith Schwarz, "Yellow Clover: Katharine Lee Bates, and Katharine Coman," *Frontiers*, IV, 1 (Spring, 1979), p. 60.

5. Susan Cavin, "Lesbian Origins Sex Ratio Theory," *Sinister Wisdom*, 9 (Spring, 1979) p. 15.

6. Sarah Lucia Hoagland, op. cit., also, "Lesbian Ethics," work in progress.

“leude behavior each with other vpon a bed”:

THE CASE OF SARAH NORMAN AND MARY HAMMOND

In recent writings, Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough cite a rare court case involving sexual activity between two white immigrant women in seventeenth-century America. In 1648 in Plymouth Colony, Sarah White Norman and Mary Vincent Hammond were charged with “leude behavior each with other vpon a bed.” The Bulloughs maintain that this “seems to be the only prosecution in American history for lesbian activities.”¹

This statement, however, is debatable on two counts. First, there have been other court prosecutions in the United States for lesbianism.² Secondly, the two women were not prosecuted for “lesbian activities” *per se* but for “leude behavior.” Still, a closer examination of the historical record does confirm that the two women were charged with committing some kind of sexual act or acts with each other, although it is not clear what those acts were.

The earliest mention of Sarah Norman is in the marriage records of Plymouth Colony. Sarah White married Hugh Norman October 18, 1639.³ In 1642 a daughter, Elizabeth, was born. Ship passenger lists indicate that Hugh came from Orchard Putman Parish, Somersetshire, England, but there is no record of Sarah’s origins, circumstance, or date of arrival.⁴ She may have come to the New World with her family since later records concerning Sarah mention a “Goodman White,” possibly her father.

Other records show that the second woman named in the case, Mary Vincent Hammond, was born in England in 1633, and came to the New World with her family, the John Vincents, who originally settled in Lynn, Massachusetts. Her husband-to-be, Benjamin Hammond, arrived in 1634 from London with his mother and other brothers.⁵ These four families were part of the Great Migration during which thousands of Europeans poured into the North American continent.

In May 1648, while living in Yarmouth, tragedy came to Sarah and Hugh Norman. Their daughter Elizabeth, then age six, drowned in a well.⁶ This may not have been an unusual accident as the court on varying occasions cited farmers for leaving wells uncovered. Later that same year on November 8th, Mary Vincent, who was 14 or 15 years old, married Benjamin Hammond of Sandwich, a nearby town.⁷ It was not uncommon for young colonial women still in their teens to marry and set up a household since there was a shortage of women, especially in the Northern colonies, and wives were much in demand. It appears that few women escaped or resisted this fate.

At one point, we find the Norman and Hammond families both living in the town of Yarmouth. Here, Sarah and Mary might have met, perhaps while gathering with the other women to perform community chors. Their lives up until then had been like those of many other white European colonial

women—they came to the New World with their families, married, set up a household, and gave birth to children. Existing records do not indicate that either woman was of a wealthy or prominent family. Like other colonial men, their husbands served in the militia and sometimes held minor government posts. They appear to have been quite ordinary, everyday people.

Yet the Plymouth court records indicate that in 1648 the two women, Sarah and Mary, did share an experience quite uncommon in the lives of other white colonial women: they were charged in court with committing lewd behavior with each other. The record for the court session of March 6, 1648⁸ reads: “Wee psent the wife of Hugh Norman, and Mary Hammon[d], both of Yarmouth for leude behaiour each with other vpon a bed. Of this more is entered in the conclusions of the court held 2^{cond} of October 1650 p226.” In the margin was written: “Mary Hammon[d] cleared with admonision.”⁹

We do not know who discovered or reported the two women, nor under what circumstances. We do know that most colonial homes of this period consisted of one large hall which served as kitchen, working, living, and sleeping space. Neighbors were also known to enter each other’s homes at will and to look through windows. Privacy was a concept virtually unknown to Plymouth inhabitants.¹⁰ Twentieth-century concepts of “privacy of the bedroom” had no meaning since “bedrooms” per se did not exist. Thus, either of the women’s husbands or a neighbor could have discovered and reported Sarah and Mary.

Neither do we know what was considered “leude behaiour” between two women. The prompt dismissal of Mary Hammond is also puzzling. Why didn’t she stand trial, when it is obvious that the court, in giving her a warning, did consider something amiss in her behavior? A possible explanation may be Mary’s age. If we accept Mary’s unverified birth date as 1633, she would have been about 15 years old when the incident occurred. Sarah was obviously somewhat older as she had married nearly a decade earlier. In Puritan society, an individual was not legally responsible until age 16, the “age of discretion.” It was the responsibility of the family, rather than the courts, to punish underage offenders.¹¹ On the other hand, the records say Mary was “presented” to the court and “cleared.” Did she perhaps accuse Sarah of leading her astray? Whatever occurred, Mary was dismissed and Sarah stood trial. The content of the court’s warning to Mary, which might have shed more light on this question, was never recorded.

The Norman-Hammond case was heard as a “Presentment to the Grand Enquest,” before Governor William Bradford and his seven male assistants, among whom were Miles Standish and John Alden. According to the Plymouth legal code there were certain grave crimes punishable by death. These included arson, witchcraft, murder, rape, adultery, and sodomy. Other “lesser crimes” or misdemeanors were to be investigated by the Grand Enquest, and the court was to use its own discretion in meting out punishments. Concerning “misdemeanors presentable,” the law read: “That all such misdemeanors of any person as tend to the hurt and detriment of society civility peace and neighbourhood be enquired into by Grant Enquest and the persons presented to the court that so disturbers there of may be punished and the peace and welfare of the subject comfortably preserved.”¹² The code

also noted that fornication and other "uncleane carriages" were also to be punished at the discretion of the magistrates.¹³ However, there was no *specific* law calling for the punishment of *sexual acts between two women*. Technically, Mary and Sarah were charged with "lewd behavior" not "lesbianism."

Certain contemporary members of the Puritan clergy, both in Plymouth and in neighboring Massachusetts Bay Colony, had their own ideas about sexual acts between two women. Cotton and Chauncey considered sexual acts between two women to be an "unnatural lust," or "unnatural filthiness," to be punished by death. One clergyman considered such acts to be "sodomy."¹⁴ Although members of the clergy were often instrumental in formulating colonial legal codes, their proposals were not always adopted by the civil governments. As was noted, the Plymouth legal code did not make lesbianism *per se* a crime. In contrast to the harsh views of the clergy, sexual activity between Mary and Sarah was considered by the court to be a "lesser crime," a disturbance of the peace and order of the community, a misdemeanor to be investigated by the Grand Enquest.

The period between her first court appearance in 1648 and her sentencing in 1650 brought more trouble for Sarah Norman. The following year, 1649, Richard Berry of Yarmouth accused Teague Jones, also of that town, of sodomy. Berry also accused Jones of "uncleane practices" with Sarah Norman. Later, Berry confessed to having lied on both counts. The court ordered Berry to be punished by whipping for the defamation of Jones. Nothing is said concerning the defamation of Sarah. Perhaps her earlier court appearance for "leude behavior" had already irreparably damaged her character? Maybe that is why Berry implicated her in the first place, so as to add credence to his lies.¹⁵

Finally, in October 1650, Sarah Norman was sentenced by the court. Court records indicate that various difficulties in Sarah's life had prevented her return to court prior to that date. The entry for October 2 further elaborates on the charges against her:

Whereas the wife of Hugh Norman of Yarmouth, hath stood pnted diuers courts for misdemeanor and leude behaiour with Mary Hammon[d] vpon a bed, with diuers lasiuious speeches by her allso spoken, but shée could not apere by reason of som hinderances vntell this court, the said court haue therefore sentenced her, the said wife of Hugh Norman, for her vild behaiour in the aforesaid pticulars, to make publick acknowledgment, so fare as conveniently may be, or her vnchaste behaiour, and haue also warned her to take heed of such cariages for the future, lest her former cariage come in remembrance against her to make her punishment the greater.¹⁶

There is little doubt that Sarah's behavior with Mary was of a sexual nature. The words used by the court to describe that behavior—"leude," "lasiuious," "vild," "vnchaste"—all had one common motif in seventeenth-century usage—uncontrolled, impure, and unlawful sexuality.¹⁷ Clearly, the language of the court conveys a negative value judgment; yet the leniency of the court is also evident in the understanding of Sarah's long absence from court and in allowing her public confession to be done as was convenient. Yet the court's warnings and treats of greater punishment make it very clear that such activity between two women was not to be tolerated.

For the Puritans, social control was achieved by inducing shame and by taking preventative measures. The warnings, threats, and public punishment were being used to deter the two women from continuing their sinful, disruptive activities, which were apparently considered harmful to both the individual and the community. We will never know when or where Sarah made her public confession, nor what she said, and certainly not how the community or family reacted to her. There is no evidence to indicate whether Sarah ever engaged in "leude behavior" with another woman, or not.

Sarah's story, however, does not end with her sentencing and punishment. During the period of her trial and sentencing, her husband, Hugh Norman, abandoned her and their children and returned to Old England. Purital society placed high value on the cohesive family unit; both wife and husband had an obligation to cohabit regularly and exclusively with one another. If one left the other, the courts could force them to reunite. If the deserting mate left the country, the courts usually took no action. Willful desertion by a wife or husband over a period of years was grounds for divorce.¹⁸ How Sarah and her children got along after the desertion is not known. Women without husbands, such as spinsters, often lived with fathers or other male relatives, unless they were of the upper class and had the option of remaining independent. There is evidence too that single working women went from town to town in search of work, but this type of mobility was discouraged for both sexes.¹⁹ Sarah and her children may have tried to support themselves, or possibly they resided with her father. Apparently Sarah received no economic support from Hugh, and Goodman White, probably Sarah's father, was concerned about the situation as the following documents indicate.

Around 1649, while in Old England on business, Thomas Allyn of Barnstable, a town near Yarmouth, had been requested by others to inquire concerning Hugh Norman's situation. Later in 1654, Goodman White asked Allyn to testify in writing concerning the situation of Hugh Norman. What prompted this request is not known, but for some reason legal testimony was needed. Perhaps so Sarah could prove desertion and thereby obtain a divorce. Thomas Allyn and Hugh Norman's English cousin, Thomas Richards, both testified as follows in 1654:

1654 a writing appointed to bee recorded

These are to certify all whom it may concerne, being requested by Goodman White to re late in what condition I found hugh Norman to bee in att my last being in ould England; which was about 5 yeares sence, I being ymployed by Diuers ffrinds to enquire him out and to goe unto him about busines of my owne as well as of other mens; I had intelligence wher hee lived; and being in the countrey, att Orchard a little Parisse about 2 or 3 miles from Tauton wher hee lived in a great house that had been plundered; and as I was credably Informed hee kept there with 2 or 3 whores and none else in the house and had spent all hee had that hee had not clothes to were fitting to companie with men soe that I could not come to speake with him; where uppon haveing understood that M^r Richards lived ther abouts I went unto him hee being his cozen and brought him over to New England soe hee tould mee of his wickedness and his bad life hee then lived in as I had been tould by many; and the yeare before his mother died and left him sixty pounds of money and a tenement hee sould for an undred pounds all which

hee spent in less than a yeares time; M^r Richards was Diuers times with him hee tould mee; and pswaded him what he could to reclame and send something to his wife and children but could not gitt soe much as six pence from him and tould him that hee had noe wife and would not owne her nor would goe more unto her; Truly for my Pte I would not relate anymore than I heard and found to bee true for I know I must one Day give account for yt; to the truth heer of I can take my oath; this witnessse my hand

Barnstable the 26th of
the first month 1654

Thomas Allyn

Another to the same effect ordered alsoe to be recorded

This is what I can testify conserning hugh Norman if I should be called ther to; first that hee could not come to his wife and children anymore neither could I gitt him to send them anything but spent all his estate as I was enformed by one which was an honest man (whome I ymployed to inquire about him) upon a naughty womanwhom hee would have married as they pretended, for they kept company together very unseasonably while under hedges and other base places; But hee having spent all hee had shee leaves him (and as they say) is gone to barbadoes and I heard him say and others also that hee would go to Barbadoes; Thus for prsent I remember

me Thomas Richards²⁰

Because the date of Hugh's desertion coincides with the dates of Sarah's trial and sentencing, we might surmise that the two are related. At this point, we lose contact with Sarah White Norman.

Little is known about Mary Hammond. She later gave birth to a number of sons and daughters, with all the daughters dying young. Mary's earlier involvement in the court case with Sarah did not seem to adversely affect her husband's status in the community. Benjamin Hammond owned land and served in several minor posts such as constable, juror, and member of the Grand Enquest. In 1684, the Hammonds moved to Rochester, another early colonial town. Benjamin died there in 1703. Mary lived on as a widow until her death in 1705 at the age of 72.²¹

Although fragmentary, the documents relating to the Norman-Hammond case may be the only existing records of lesbian activity among white women in seventeenth-century America. We can conclude from the information available that sexual activity between two women was not only disapproved of by the clergy as a sexual sin but was also discouraged and punished by the civil authorities as a threat to the social order, "a hurt and detriment to society civility peace and neighbourhood."

NOTES

1. Vern Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1976), pp. 521-22; Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfound Study," *Signs* 2:4 (Summer 1977): 895-904.
2. Johathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Crowell, 1976), pp. 127-28, 405-6.
3. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, 8 vols. (Boston: William White, 1855-61), 1:134.
4. Charles Edwards Banks, *Topographical Dictionary of 2885 English Emigrants to New England 1620-1650* (Philadelphia: Elijah Brownell, 1937), p. 144.
5. Simon Deyo, ed., *History of Barnstable County, Mass.* (New York: Blake and Co., 1980), p. 266; Philip Battell, "Descendants of Benjamin Hammond" *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 30 (January 1876): 28-32.

6. Robert Sherman and Ruth Wilder Sherman, *Yarmouth, Mass. Vital Records to 1850*, 2 vols. (Warwick, R.I.: Society of Mayflower Descendants in the State of Rhode Island, 1975), 2:841.

7. Clarence A. Torrey, *New England Marriages Prior to 1700*, 12 vols. (photocopied manuscript, New England Historic Genealogical Society), vol. 6, unpaginated.

8. When working with early colonial dates we must be aware that the British colonies before 1752 operated on the old-style Julian calendar, rather than the Gregorian Calendar, which had already been adopted by the Catholic world in the late 1500s. Thus in colonial times the first month was March rather than January, the last month was February rather than December, and the new year began on March 25th. This must be kept in mind when considering the proper chronology of events. In this case, both May 28, 1648 (when Sarah's daughter drowned) and November 8, 1648 (when Mary Hammond married) occurred *before* the court appearance of Mary and Sarah on March 6, 1648, which was near the end of the year. Around 1700 the discrepancies between the two calendar systems resulted in the practice of "double-dating" in which both Julian and Gregorian dates were supplied, and separated by a "slash." Then in September 1752, when the Gregorian was adopted by the British world, eleven days were lost and September 2 was immediately followed by September 14.

9. Shurtleff, 1:137.

10. John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 43, 46-47.

11. Demos, pp. 101, 148.

12. David Pulsifer, ed., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, vols. 9-12 (Boston: William White, 1855-61), 11:18.

13. Pulsifer, 11:12.

14. Katz, pp. 20-22.

15. Shurtleff, 2:146, 148.

16. Shurtleff, 2:163.

17. James A. H. Murray, *Oxford English Dictionary*, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

18. Demos, pp. 92-95.

19. John J. Waters, "The Traditional World of the New England Peasants: A View from Seventeenth Century Barnstable," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 130 (January 1976), pp. 3-21.

20. "Plymouth Colony Deeds," *Mayflower Descendant* 6 (January 1904): 102-3.

21. Battell, pp. 28-32.

OPENS SEPT 6



A PLACE OF OUR OWN

A Womyn-Identified Enterprise

701 P Street P.O. Box 82041
Lincoln, Nebraska 68508
[402] 423-0821

IT'S IMPORTANT TO BELIEVE

That they plucked her from the muddy pond where she lay, breathing life back into her. That they emptied the stones from her jacket pockets. That they took off her clothing and dried her, wrapping her in something invisible and warm. That the one with the fur and tail and six fingers opened the walls and showed her the shining dance floor of the Heavens. That they fed her and she didn't refuse, no longer believing the body to be horrible. That there were vines and little creatures like chickens. That there was soft laughter. That King George did not talk in the shrubbery. That she was not shut up. That she wanted her books and they got them. That she asked for her manuscripts and they had them. That she loved one who loved her.

That they went there.

That it was a good place.

(For Allie Sheldon, who wrote "Beam Us Home," and for Jessica Amanda Salmonson, who had the idea that it would be marvelous if time travelers or aliens went back to England in 1941 and rescued from suicide by drowning You Know Who . . .)

PROUD, DISPUTED NAMES

I want to talk about the joy of lesbian literature and the fact that we have come full circle. We have gone in our movement from a time when a few women were collecting and writing about lesbian literature with that welling up of joy, that feeling of discovering something new and never known before, that terrible excitement that comes each time you find a lost lesbian jewel in writing, and that equal joy when one finds a lesbian writer whom no one seems to have known is a lesbian—we have managed somehow in a very few short years to take the joy out and turn this pursuit into an academic one wherein we examine and dissect and perhaps appreciate but certainly don't express well the excitement and wonder of it all. *This* woman was a lesbian, and *that* woman. We are somehow forgetting all the fun of this and making it dry and dusty and dull, instead of joyous and exciting and new. We need to recapture some of this excitement.

I want to talk about Gladys Taber, who died on March 11, 1980. She was eighty years old and had spent her life being one of America's most popular women's writers—a long-time syndicated columnist, and a veritable wellspring of endless homey, loving, good books about life, love, death, children, flowers, dogs, cats, gardening, cooking—everything. And millions of women all over the U.S.—many of your mothers, your aunts, your grandmothers—bought her books, went to libraries and checked them out, adored her, looked forward to each new book, apparently never recognizing that she spent the vast majority of her life in a loving relationship with another woman, Jill. Now how all these women managed not to realize this, since it was the central topic in almost all of her work, I will never know. When I spoke very recently here in Kansas City, I was asked about the fact that none of the popular women's writers seem to be lesbian. I hadn't thought for some years about Gladys Taber. So I talked to this audience briefly about her.

About a week later, one of the women in the audience called me at work to say, "I was in an airport and picked up the *New York Times*, and read the obituary of Gladys Taber. And there's absolutely nothing in her obituary to indicate anything about her life as you told it." And that's true—the obituary says she made her home at Stillmeadow for many years where she raised her family and lived with her sister's family (note that it says sister's family, not lover's family). It says she is survived by her children and her husband—her husband whom we know to have been dead since the middle or late 30s. The *New York Times*, because of its stature and the fact that it is found in every library in the world, will go on perpetuating this myth about Gladys Taber, and there is very little that can be done or will be done to combat it, but we need to make every effort we can.

Gladys Taber was born April 12, 1899, in Colorado Springs. Her parents were New Englanders, and she early developed a love for Massachusetts. In one of her books, *Harvest of Yesterdays*, we learn a little about her early intimate life with Jill—that she and Jill first met at summer camp when they

were fourteen years old, and what bound them immediately was that they were both set to go to Wellesley College and both hated the idea. Gladys preceded Jill at Wellesley by a year, since Jill was held back owing to scarlet fever; but the minute Jill arrived at Wellesley, Gladys changed her room so they could be roommates. After graduating, Jill went to Europe to study, and married Max. Gladys graduated in 1920, obtained a master's degree in 1921 from Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, and between 1921 and 1926 she taught English at Randolph Macon Woman's College. In 1922, she married Frank A. Taber, Jr., a music professor.

In 1934, her first novel, *Late Climbs the Sun*, was greeted by the reviewers as a feminist tract. *Late Climbs the Sun* brought her to the attention of novelist Helen Hull, herself a lesbian, who greatly encouraged her work. During the next four years, a series of Gladys Taber novels appeared—all light, popular women's fiction. After a hiatus of several years (which might coincide with her final move to the country with Jill), another novel appeared in 1943, two in 1944, and another in 1946. She also joined the staff of the *Ladies' Home Journal* that year, although her monthly column, "The Diary of Domesticity," had been running in the *Journal* since 1937. But none of this writing brought Gladys Taber the fame that her later works did, and for us the real story of Gladys Taber begins with the books she wrote about her life with Jill at Stillmeadow Farm.

The first really important book in this series is *Stillmeadow Daybook* (1946). The dedication is simply "for Jill, the mainstay of Stillmeadow." In the book's foreword, she tells how she came to own the small, white farmhouse called Stillmeadow, built in 1690. She also talks about two families. She talks about Jill, who had a doctor husband, a son, and a daughter; and she talks about her own husband, although she does not refer to her husband or Jill's husband by name. She names her child (Connie) and names Jill's children (Don and Dorothy), and she names all the animals, the neighbors, and so on. The only people without names are the husbands. They are referred to only as husbands or by their professions. In *Harvest of Yesterdays* we learn that both husbands died after long illnesses. No details are given; this is said in a single sentence because, as is always true in Gladys Taber's work, the men—with the exception of her father, whom she talks about at some length—are more or less ignored. The husbands were lost, but the life that Gladys and Jill created at Stillmeadow apparently wouldn't have had room for husbands in any case. The story that Gladys tells about their life together at Stillmeadow is about herself and her love for Jill.

In the introduction to *Stillmeadow Daybook*, she says, "Through the kitchen window I could see Jill striding down the road, training Tiki . . . , the small compact black and white cocker trotting along so earnestly, so eagerly, the tall straight woman with her hair blowing in the wind, looking absolutely content." She goes on to talk about picnics and children and foraging for butternuts and black walnuts and says, "No I could never add up the riches we acquired by striking our roots down firmly into the kind earth in our little valley." The remainder of the book is a day-by-day, month-by-month, season-by-season, event-by-event chronicle of a year at Stillmeadow. Two hundred seventy-four pages later, we are told: "As I close the garden gate and follow the crooked flagstone walk to the house on an amethyst evening,

the dogs run before me, Jill is bending over in the garden, planting young lettuce, pressing the earth gently around the pale roots. And the ancient splendour of the evening star shines above Stillmeadow. And this is the first of the Stillmeadow books.”

Stillmeadow Daybook was followed by a seemingly endless series of titles, each one on a different aspect of the endlessly delightful life they led at Stillmeadow. Gladys Taber also published a number of collections of poetry, many of them containing what Jeannette Foster and I refer to as “variant poetry,” poetry clearly directed at women and probably lesbian, but subtle enough to be open to interpretation.

My few letters from Gladys Taber are from 1966, after Jill died, and while I was reading everything I could lay my hands on for the “Lesbiana” column of the *Ladder*. They say very little except for details of future books, some praise, and some thanks; in one of the letters she thanks me for mentioning Jill to her. So I do not know how Gladys Taber defined her relationship with Jill beyond saying in print that it was extraordinarily loving. And that in itself is very important. I think every woman in our movement would be enriched by going back and reading Gladys Taber’s books about her life with Jill. What I find astonishing is that a whole marching army of women did not rise up—because they obviously were reading her work—and follow in her footsteps to that blind and real joy of Stillmeadow. All those days, all those years, all that happiness.

Another Path, which came out in 1963, from Lippincott in Philadelphia, was Gladys Taber’s first book after *Stillmeadow Road* (1959). (She was an extremely prolific writer, and a four-year hiatus in such a rich career means simply that it took her a hell of a long time to begin writing again after Jill died.) It is a confused—at least in terms of what happened when—account of the death of her “beloved companion of thirty years” and of how she survived the grief of which she says, “For me, the world had ended”:

After years of listening to her special voice I found I could not say a single sentence that sounded like Jill. Some of my friends who have been bereaved say they have trouble recalling exactly the face of their dear one. This was not my problem, probably because I have acute visual imagery. I could not only see Jill, but I could see her as she looked when she was 14, and at 20, and at 40. So I began with that first step of feeling nothing mattered, and almost at once I was thinking, I must not lose the sound of Jill’s voice. Even during the funeral I was trying to catch her voice saying firmly, ‘Don’t make a fuss about this.’

Everything that Gladys Taber wrote in that book, and from that time on, is a celebration of how she learned to live without Jill—just as everything she wrote before that book was a celebration of living with Jill.

As far as I know, no one in our movement has paid much attention to the work of Gladys Taber. I’m not certain if her work is ignored because it is, after all, popular and light in many senses. She talks a great deal about the kind of living that results in happiness for people. And she talks about how wonderful it is to be alive, what a pleasure life is, and these *are* things that seem to be ignored a great deal. But mostly she talks about the extraordinary strength and happiness that come from households that consist of two women because—from some indefinite date in the mid 1930s until the

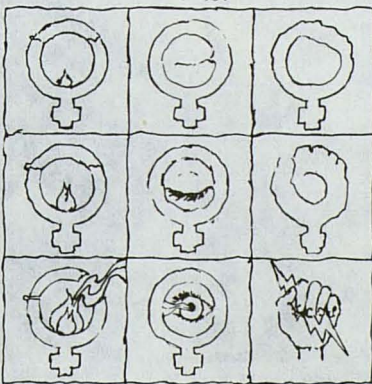
death of Jill—hers was a household of two women, several children, and the animals they enjoyed raising together.

What still remains for me is the amazement that all these women in all these communities all over the U.S., all these librarians and all these reviewers, read all of these words and talked about these books, and not once, ever, did any one of them notice that this was a lifetime of two women not just living together and loving one another dearly but also yattering about it at length. At least Gladys Taber yattered about it at length. She talked and talked and talked, in print, constantly, about the loving, beloved, wonderful relationship with Jill.

I think what we need to do at this point is to celebrate Jill, and to celebrate Gladys Taber. Everything about Gladys Taber was wonderful. She's a perfect example of living propaganda—blind, living propaganda. And it's time that everyone knew. It's time that everyone knows that Gladys Taber loved a woman named Jill, and lived much of her life with her, and made an entire career of writing lovely, delightful, popular books about her life with another woman.

Author's note: The only biographical information about Gladys Taber—apart from her own work, which does not give explicit detail, particularly dates—is in a book called *American Novelists of Today*, edited by Harry Warfel and published in 1951 by the American Book Company. Virtually every library in the United States, including the small ones, has this particular book, and if you're looking up obscure people, this is a good place to search.

Public libraries would be the best places to find Gladys Taber's books.



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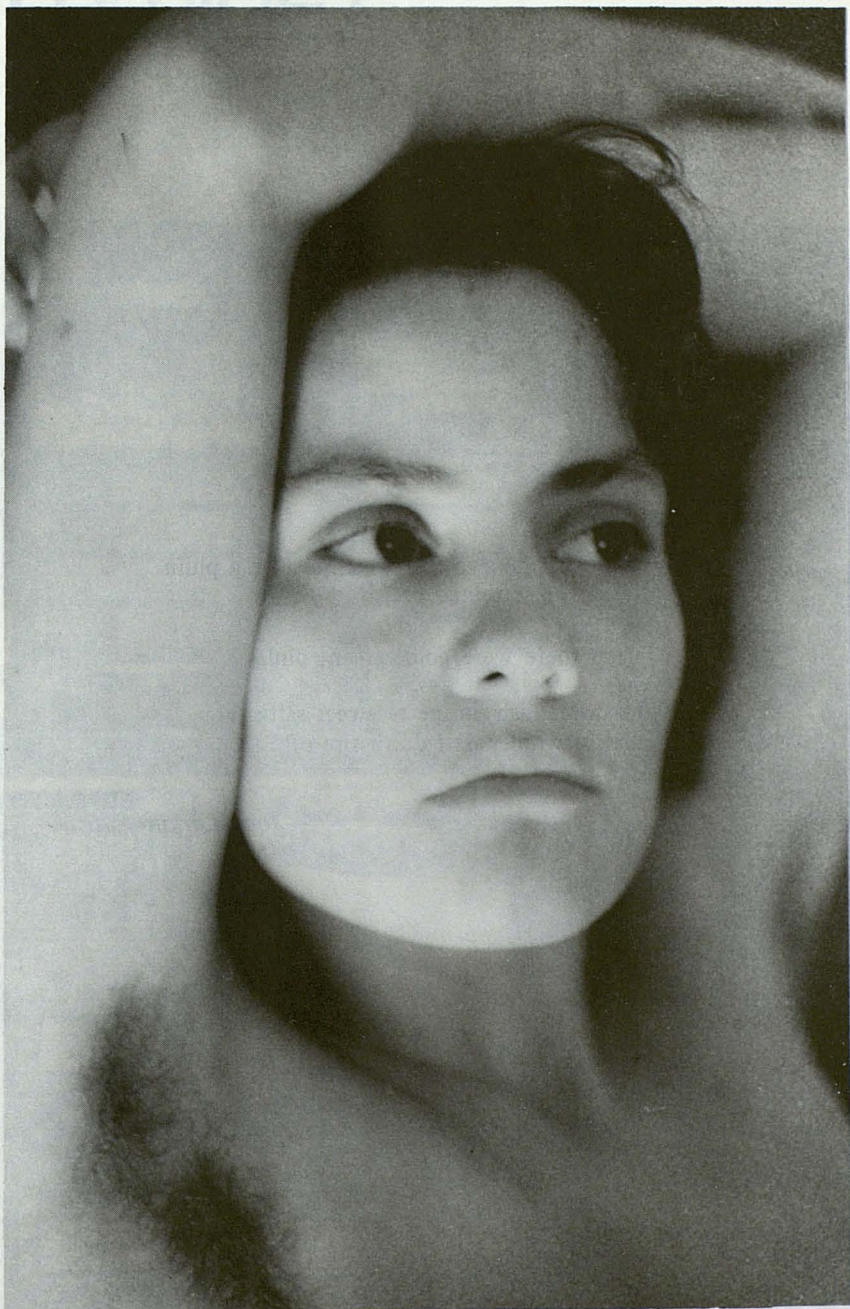
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"gilda capello/Catherine Deneuve N.Y.C."



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"J.P."

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A TASTE

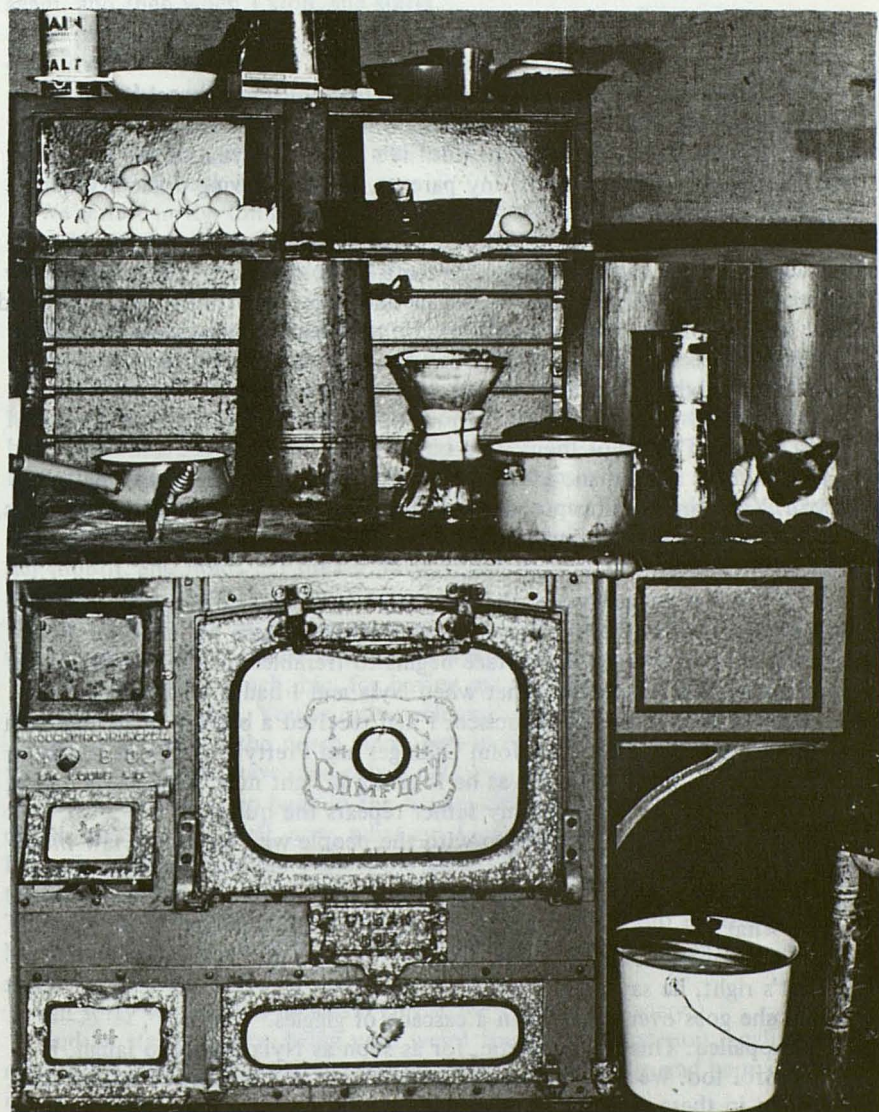
I thought the sweetest fruit must be a plum
with its dark-veined polish

inside there were gold, green, pink

the taste: lush unripe teasweet salt-sour
suck of wholeness I don't tire of

—*Joan Larkin*

FAMILIES



—photograph by Lynda Koolish

THE DAY MY FATHER KICKED ME OUT

It's Sunday evening. We're sitting at the table in my parents' house in Columbus, Ohio, and I've brought a friend with me. I've invited my friend Nyla to dinner, honestly, as protection. It's been eight years since I've come out from San Francisco to visit my parents, and I'm having difficulty being here.

So anyway, we're sitting at Sunday evening dinner, which is tuna salad, as always, and my father begins his lecture on John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd. This discourse is really about law and order, with these two renowned bank robbers of the thirties as villains. He rambles on about their exploits, and then he asks Nyla, Do you know what they did to Dillinger and Floyd when they caught up with them?

Nyla: What?

My father: They shot them.

My father is a big man, and he leans in on you physically when he talks to you. You can feel him pushing on you. Now he leans in on Nyla and says, And do you know what I would do *these days* with people who break the law?

Nyla has just gotten out of the hospital, where she had surgery: she's a bit weak and not quite in control. I notice when he asks her that question she starts to twitch a little, her face begins to tremble and the corners of her mouth jerk. And I remember that when Nyla and I had lived in a women's liberation collective in San Francisco, I had received a barrage of letters from my father, and the lecture on John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd had been in those letters, word for word as he is giving it right now. So Nyla is having a bit of a hard time here, and my father repeats the question.

Do you know what I would do with the people who break the law *these days*?

She: I think I do.

He: What?

She: You'd shoot them.

That's right, he says.

And she goes over the edge in a cascade of giggles.

I'm appalled. This is surrealistic, for as soon as Nyla begins to laugh, I lose control too. We giggle and snort like ninnies, and neither of us can stop.

Caught in these convulsions, I realize how trying these three days with my father have been. When he wasn't criticizing me for the way I live, he has been lecturing me about Richard Nixon's innocence and how the press always persecuted that unfortunate man. He's obsessed with Nixon, and set

on convincing me of his views, and he has pushed me out to teeter on the edge of hysteria.

Nyla tilts me right over.

My mother's action at this historic juncture is to get up from the table and go out on the front porch to sit on the porch swing.

My father tries to go on with his talk, but pretty soon it's obvious that we're laughing at him, even though we pretend we're choking and we hold our napkins over our mouths. As soon as Nyla gets herself in control, I start again, and then when I stop, she starts.

So my father gets mad. He stands up, bangs against the table, knocks his chair over on its back, and calls us some names. (It's a funny thing, I can't remember the words he used. He may have said weirdos, and I wonder if he said queers: at that point in time he wasn't sure about me . . .) Finally, he goes stomping out to the porch, and he sits down next to my mother and starts to swing back and forth.

We're left in the dining room, Nyla and me, and we cannot yet stop laughing. We're helpless, the tears are running down our faces. It feels so good, it feels wonderful, yet we *know* what we've done.

We can hear the swing out on the front porch. *Scree, scree*. They're not talking, but the swing is squeaking.

At last we are calm, only an occasional giggle buzzing like a crazy hummingbird through our now-earnest talk. How are we to get Nyla out of the house?! I mean, they're on the front porch: she has to get past them somehow. Sneaking out the back door would be too gross. We sit here. We don't know what to do. And Nyla has developed hiccups.

Finally I agree to go with her to the front porch. We stand up and check out our faces for telltale signs of mirth; Nyla hiccups, claps her hand over her mouth, and holds her breath, bugging her eyes at me. With a long look at each other, we start for the door.

On the front porch, my parents swing back and forth—*scree, scree*—and my father stares into space as if we do not exist.

Thank you very much, hic, for having me to dinner, Nyla says.

My mother replies, You're quite welcome. We enjoyed having you.

Nyla walks down the porch steps, gets in her car, says goodbye to me with a sneaky little wave, and drives off.

Here I am, left. I go back in the house, clear the table, start washing the dishes, and I think, Well, now, what am *I* going to do about this? The longer I stay in here washing the dishes, the harder it's going to be to go out on the porch. Finally, I decide that I must go out right now to say *something*. Through the dining room and living room I go, and step out on the porch. My father swings back and forth, back and forth, staring straight ahead. *Scree, scree*.

I'm sorry we laughed at you. (This is the truth, I *am* sorry.)

And he starts in, You bring your weird friends here and you laugh at a man in his own house, and etcetera on and on, very loudly, and he makes me mad.

Ever since I *arrived* you been laughing at *me*! I yell. Everything I do you put me down you don't like what I do, you laugh at me, it's about time somebody laughed at *you*!

And my mother says, Please, we *do* have neighbors.

Well, the argument goes back and forth between me and my father, because I feel outraged, and *he* feels outraged. And finally he says to me, If somebody laughs at me in my own house, I'm gonna kick their ass out the door, and yours too!

I see my chance. Does that mean you'd like me to leave? I ask.

Now that really puts him up against the wall. What can he say?!

Yes, it does!

I get up from my chair and I spit out, Well, it's a relief!

I go in and slam the screen door and stamp upstairs to pack my bag.

Now I'm up here putting things in my suitcase and I begin to feel ridiculous. This reminds me of a scene in a C-movie.

But Mom will be down there on the porch talking to him, saying, Now Jack, you know how Sandy is, and the two of you don't get along, but, etc., etc. She'll be busily smoothing the whole thing over. So I listen, but I don't hear a word from downstairs. What's going on? That's her role, to smooth things over: *she's not smoothing things over*, what's going on? So I keep on packing. Pretty soon the suitcase is all packed and I still don't hear any voices downstairs.

Now I have to go down there with my suitcase. My father's still out on the porch, but he's alone; my mother is sitting in the living room. As I come down the stairs, she says to me, Can I drive you to the bus?

Is it true? Have I heard the words properly? Yes, no way to get around them. With those seven words she defines her loyalty, her limits, her self-interest, her temperamental proclivities. That phrase is a masterpiece. The inevitability of it! The many layers of significance. At once simple and pithy, it does the job.

When I recover sufficiently to speak, I manage a belligerent Absolutely not! I'll take a taxi!

Then I lean down to the screened window that separates the living room from the porch where my father's swinging back and forth, and I come close and say, loudly, Do we really have to play this scene? He acts as if he doesn't hear me.

So I let my mother drive me to the bus.

On the way, I'm ranting in the car, saying, How can he really believe that nonsense he's talking about Nixon's innocence! I can't understand why he's saying those outrageous things! And she says, Of course he believes what he's saying. *I* certainly do.

There isn't anything to do but leave. I decide right now to go to New York City on the greyhound, and I announce (not to be dismissed so summarily), When I get back I'll come to see you before I go on to California.

So I go to New York City where I have business with some magazine editors and several old friendships to renew. My time there is tolerably pleasant, and when I come back to Columbus, just an hour before I'm due at the airport to fly back to California, I get Nyla to drive me to my parents' house, where she insists on waiting in the car. I've called beforehand, and the excuse is that I am going to pick up some old pictures. We have to have an excuse: it isn't possible to say we are going to try to make up. So we sit and look at the snapshots, my mother and me, at this very dining room table where the blasphemy occurred, while my father paces like a disgruntled bear

behind us.

Here is little Sandy sitting on the back step in her sunsuit, age two. Here are my sister, brother and I lined up stiffly against the living room wall looking like the czar's children staring down the barrels of a firing squad. My mother and I ponder two family dog pictures: this is Ham and this is Freddy, beings immured forever in our hearts. Is that blur in the background my cousin Carolyn? Honeysuckle perfume wafts seductively in through the screened windows, as it has and ever shall in Columbus in the spring.

When it is time to go, I decide to make a gesture of reconciliation. What have I got to lose?

I hug my father. He embraces me with arms of heavy wood, saying, Be a good girl.

Then I go to hug my mother, and I murmur to her, Be a good girl.

I always am, she replies.

And I leave, and have not returned.



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DAUGHTERS AND MOTHERS: An Autobiographical Sketch

I have a piece of lesbian history I haven't quite known what to do with.

Sometimes you know something is important and ought to be shared, and yet the uncertainty of where you might find the right place to publish it and the fear that it might not be accepted anywhere keeps you from putting it down on paper. This has been true for me and the story I've been carrying around in my head for a long time now.

The story is the story of my life. My life and my daughter's. I am EviB. (the lesbian name my lover gave to me). It is a name I especially like, with its warm and playful evocation of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. In that name I am both Gertrude and Alice. I am a community woman and a university professor. I am Jewish and a mother. I am a Jewish lesbian who is the mother of a Jewish lesbian. And if the world were a different place, and my mother not so hooked into the patriarchy, I'd be the daughter of a lesbian too.

It was my mother who taught me to love women. Not by loving me or by encouraging me to love women, but by her own unwitting example—the intense, life-long ties she shared with her women friends. I saw the closeness and the caring, even as she faithfully spouted what she believed to be her truths: Love men, they are our only salvation. Fear men, they are the dangerous enemy. She dreamed of male heroes, yet lived in a safe world of women. In real life, my father provided protection and sustenance; my memory is, other men were there only as essential backdrop and for occasional flirtation.

My daughter was an active lesbian in her teens. I envy her the freedom she took—I did not give it to her. If I had not been so fearful; if I had lived in other times; if my own mother had not been so watchful or so judgmental, especially when I was in my early teens, I'd have been freer to be the lesbian I was. I would not have had to spend long hours in the library agonizing, proving that I wasn't what I feared I was, knew I was, and talked myself out of being; loving women intensely, passionately, often obsessively, yet denying what this meant.

The best friend of my childhood years turned out to be a lesbian. I didn't know it in the years we shared a great passion for our seventh grade English teacher, saving our money to buy her a costly gold bracelet, planning and writing about it all summer long, she at camp and I at home. (My friend spent twenty years in therapy, she later told me.) When she "came out" at age fourteen it was a neighborhood scandal, talked about at length and in detail, at least in my home, primarily by my mother, who seemed to know everything about it. I can no longer clearly differentiate what I knew for myself from what my mother told me; how much my mother really knew from what

she made up or guessed. I do remember some fragments. My friend was involved with an older woman who lived on the next block with another woman. (How old was older? 25? 35?) Did my mother really suggest they seduced her? Probably. Were they really gym teachers or am I making that up? My friend herself told me that the police frequently bothered them when they were together in the car. Sometimes they were able to use someone's apartment. Did I know what they did? Did I guess or imagine? I distinctly remember one detail. She told me they always needed a lot of tissues. I didn't *exactly* know what for, but I've never forgotten that detail either. I must have known something. Sometime later my friend told me her friend had deflowered her and that she bled. I sensed she was proud of this detail, but I'm not sure I believed she was telling me the truth. Did I think she invented these details just for my sake? How much did I really grasp? I myself was still totally sexually inactive at the time (except for masturbation which I had learned young and liked a great deal and was terribly ashamed of). I intensely disliked what seemed to be the necessary making out at parties and always tried to get out of participating. Usually, I succeeded. At home, over and over again, my mother repeated that my friend was disgusting. What she did was disgusting. When I was disobedient, it was my friend's fault. She was a bad influence. Her mother was a communist, a divorcee who worked outside the home, what else could you expect?

In spite of my mother, we remained friends. A few years later she told me the details of her love affairs with women at college. How her lovers would touch her in the dark in bed, how they would touch her in bed but refuse to kiss her. How they would, in the daylight, withhold their love and pretend they didn't know her. These stories have stayed with me (till now I had no idea how indelibly) for nearly thirty years. I found it hard to understand why these lovers acted so strangely. If either of us had any inkling, we did not say. I doubt that the word *lesbian* ever crossed our lips, even while she was telling me these stories. I only remember clearly that she was badly hurt and terribly confused. We had no analysis, no names, no vocabulary (not in the early fifties on the streets of Brooklyn) with which to talk about women's love for women. The best I could offer her (and this I did willingly, eagerly) was to listen. In thinking myself back to those years it dawns upon me that her stories with their muted eroticism must have aroused me then, mildly, as they do now in the retelling. And I feel ashamed at feeling pleasure from what caused her pain. And at my own cowardice.

We've more or less lost touch now, but she was resigned and a little bitter when I last saw her, a few years ago, after a lapse of fifteen years. The long therapy had not erased the hurt. "I am neither," she said when I asked her if she was still involved with women. "I cannot dissociate women from how bad and crazy I felt all those years." I remembered then how desperately she had tried to make life with a man work for her. More than once she had seriously contemplated marriage, but it never happened. I knew it was all wrong, but never once in the many years we exchanged letters did I dare express my doubt, did I dare say what I knew in my guts to be true. "Why are you trying to be what you are not?" No, I remained dumb, foolishly polite, frequently encouraged her in her pursuit of marriage, and was disappointed with her every disappointment. Now she claims to have found peace in withdrawing from sexual intimacy altogether, and I feel angry for her, for my-

self, for all of us. Of course she is still a lesbian. Has never been anything else. It doesn't seem fair for her to have to believe she is "neither."

In a way, I was luckier. I masked myself in ways that protected. I think if I had come out then, as my friend did, in the late forties, I would be worse than "neither." I feel sure I would have cracked. My mother would have seen to that. She was so relentless and I so tied to her approval. I fully believed she would lock me up or throw me out (the latter now doesn't seem very likely—she was too fiercely possessive to let me go). Being poor and new immigrants, we did not believe in or have access to psychiatrists. Instead, thinking to save me, she would not have hesitated to destroy me herself. My need for protection was very real, and for a time my mask worked. True, I continued to fall in love with women all my life (I never did outgrow that passion), but I was able to marry a man. And live with him for twenty years. And bear two children, one of whom is now a lesbian and has been since she was thirteen.

It feels hard to have to say I didn't help her become one. No, if truth be told, I'd have stopped her at the time if I could have. I did try. And so did her father. This is the hardest thing to admit, to set down on paper: I tried to keep her from becoming a dyke. I thought it would ruin her life. I really did. We threatened to call the police if she continued to see her lover. (I had no idea then of the power of the law or the enormity of our threats.) I didn't even really believe that they were lovers—my thirteen year old child and the twenty-one year old woman who was her mentor. I only knew that they loved each other and had made plans to sleep together. We kept them apart (or thought we did). We joke about it now, she and I. Her friends all told her I must be a closet case to know so much and care so passionately. They were right, of course, but I was exceptionally obtuse. It took me years to really take in the fact that my daughter made love with another woman (not merely love, *sex*), even after she and her second lover had been living together for two years. And sleeping in one bed. And appearing with a group of Jewish lesbians in a protest at Hillel. I was utterly naive and heavily defended. Ridiculously, after I came out, I kept it from my daughter for a whole year (or thought I did). In fact, she knew and the whole community knew. (Was I ashamed to admit how very wrong I had been when she was thirteen?) One of the mothers I had run to in a panic about my daughter was herself the lesbian mother of a lesbian, only I didn't know it at the time, in spite of the fact that she was sharing her life with a woman. I can hardly bring myself to imagine how she experienced our assault; she met it with silence. We wanted her to *do* something, anything, to warn the other parents, to stop the affair. We did manage to call the youth-group parents together; I don't remember how they calmed us down. From the relatively safe distance of a decade I can almost see the humor of the situation. That the lesbian mother (who is now also a colleague) speaks to me at all often amazes me. We almost never mention those times. I think they embarrass us both.

Today my daughter is twenty-three. That she is a lesbian comforts me. Whatever her struggles, I don't worry that she will give her power away to the patriarchy. I trust and respect her and her lover and the many women who are her friends; I count myself among them. We share much these days. I also know that her example paved the way for me. In trying to understand her, I found myself facing myself and my marriage. I clearly remember the day when our family shrink (a patriarchal but sensible man who knew she

was a lesbian) said of my young teen-age daughter, with particular emphasis on the first and last words, "*She's OK, but what about the two of you?*" That day marked the beginning of my liberation and my slow return to the lesbian self I had abandoned years ago.

Of course it didn't happen all at once. The process was slow, sometimes painful, and helped enormously, crucially, by my growing economic independence. First, I had to free myself from the mask of heterosexuality I had so earnestly assumed. Only then could I begin to explore my love for women. But I was not going to burn all my bridges at once. Comical as it now seems, I prepared the way by systematically announcing my intentions to my heterosexual friends. It worked. Making love with a woman felt like the most natural thing I had ever done. (That makes me angry, since all my life I had been led to believe the very opposite.)

In one sense, the transition was easy; my emotional life had never ceased to be with women. That fact had caused me some discomfort while I was married, since it did not fit my picture of marriage. (Now and then my husband complained about it, but I didn't admit it to him. It must have made him feel just slightly crazy.) On the whole, it was a problem I could dismiss with relative ease. Some kindly, well-meaning shrink had once told me, in the early years of my marriage, that if I was successful in having orgasms with men, I could not possibly be a lesbian. I'm not so sure how deeply I believed him. It continued to seem strange to me that I always wanted to express my feelings for women by touching them, but I dutifully held back. (I don't think I ever mentioned these details to my shrink, which may have helped him in his diagnosis.) It also seemed odd to me that the only words that seemed accurately to describe certain of my feelings for women were the "inappropriate" words, "I am in love with . . ." Instinctively I knew better than to mention these feelings to anyone but my oldest, dearest, most trustworthy, unquestionably heterosexual friend. I don't think she really knew what to make of my confession either, but I know it helped me enormously that she listened and did not say it was a terrible thing. (Very like the role I played in listening to my childhood lesbian friend.) The word *lesbian*, of course, was never mentioned.

Fortunately, I had never fallen "in love" with my confidante, though I loved her deeply (and still do). No doubt that saved our friendship. I remember how relieved I was (even at age 18 when we first met) that I did not have "those" feelings for her. I so much wanted to be her friend, and knew from experience how burdensome those feelings could be and how peculiarly they sometimes made me behave. (My passions for women always felt like some dread disease I had contracted and could neither control nor get rid of.) I was terribly ashamed of these feelings and at the same time, treasured them as my most valued possession, my secret source of joy, comfort, and nourishment, right through the years of my marriage.

As I read and re-read these pages, I realize how long and cumbersome the process of coming-to-myself has been. I am now 46. I came out five years ago. It frightens me to think that without the lesbian/feminist movement, without the example of my own daughter (and other brave women I admire and respect), I might still be in the closet *to myself*, might still believe in the absolute normality of heterosexuality, despite the strong evidence of my own feelings. I ask myself as I read this: Is it possible that without the support

of a movement I might never have come out? Merely continued inexplicably and inappropriately to fall in love with women? A part of me believes this could have happened, unless I had ever fallen in love with a woman who knew herself to be a lesbian (and knew me for one too). Or would I have run away from even such an opportunity?

Recently, one of the women I was in love with years ago told me that I had once asked her to go to bed when I was still married and that she had refused. I have absolutely no recollection of such a conversation, but the longing and the desire were certainly there, perhaps for us both; I suspect more was communicated between us than either of us ever acknowledged in words. But as I said before, even as an adult, I was exceedingly naive. She was a painter. I modelled for her, both in the nude and while nursing my son. Over the years she produced hundreds of portraits and sketches of me. In oils, in pencil, in pastel. For hours, each day, for days on end, I sat while she painted and we talked. I understood well what this time meant to me—I never thought to ask what it meant to her. (Perhaps we made love after all, without touching.)

I have no way of knowing what shape my life might have taken without the influence and support of a lesbian/feminist movement. I only know with certainty that the last five years of my life have been for me the most fully lived. The years of greatest growth and deepest opening; of real congruence with myself. And for this richness, this happiness (unexpected, but actively sought for), I am grateful.

I came out to my mother about three years ago. She knew before I told her. (Her antennae are ever up.) In fact, I did not tell her. She asked. The very first thing she wanted to know was which of us was the man, I or my lover? When I told her we were not at all into roles, she was incredulous, particularly about sex. How was it possible, she wanted to know. "Who decides what to do?" She constantly brings up the subject of homosexuality (sometimes playfully) and as constantly puts it down. Just the same, letting her know was the most freeing thing I have ever done for myself. I no longer wait for her approval. She accepts me, as best she can, with some severe reservations—what she refers to as the "big big BUT." Her sense of humor saves her for me. I have come to understand that she is not simply judging me, that she is also jealous—of the obvious closeness with my lover, of the nurturing we give each other. In her ironic vision, she faults our love as a "mutual admiration society." She is slightly peeved. If we can be so gentle and loving to each other, why can't everyone else (in the heterosexual world she knows) be equally so? She says this in tones that could be called accusing. It was not the model for her marriage nor one she ever envisioned. We do not talk well. She has not learned to love me, nor has she ever loved herself. About these things, I am sad.

As for me, in coming out, I finally gave birth to the woman I had been carrying for decades. She has learned to love herself as she has allowed herself to love and be loved by another woman. I am glad to share her life. I like her and am glad she finally told her story. My story.

DEAR MAMA

The following are excerpts from an unpublished volume entitled "Dear Mama," a collection of letters and journal entries. The introduction begins:

In the spring of 1949 my 57-year-old mother-in-law Anna wrote on several pages of a small address book what she titled "A Diary of My Life." This secret volume was found among her things after her death in 1969.

"After being married for 30 years, thoughts come to me of what I want to be, and what I should have been," it began. She briefly chronicled her life: childhood, immigration from Poland to America, her feelings about her mother, young womanhood, marriage, her own motherhood—and then we learn what had impelled her to take up her pen that day.

"It is the most vital question in my life now, at this age, to break up a home and leave a family. But until now I didn't realize that it could go on that long . . . The reason I want to run away is because I get no friendship, no kindness of the man that was gentle and I looked up to him . . . we have nothing in common . . . It is hard to kill everything that I once possessed. The result is that I am alone, utterly alone . . . I have a great yearning for a peaceful life, not have a person in the form of a man degrade me to such an extent . . . I cannot laugh or sing, or even converse in his presence . . . I am ashamed of myself, how low I have stooped. All these years have made nothing of myself. However, with all my might I intend to fight and struggle and see what I can accomplish for my existence . . . I have ambition to study and to meet people above me that can teach me, but now to my regret, it is late because my health is poor . . . Often I feel it isn't even worth to think about it . . . wherever I turn and look for a friendly hand, I get slapped at . . ."

I met Anna soon after she had written these words. I married her only living child, her son. She remained with her husband for the following 20 years of her life. For several of those years she worked as a part-time sales-girl in a women's and children's apparel shop. She used the money she earned to buy presents for her three grandchildren—my children.

On an odd page at the back of this small, terrifying booklet was the following textbook statement, copied in Anna's handwriting:

The brain does not create thought. It is
an instrument which thought finds useful.

The following is excerpted from the middle of the volume. Eileen is making preparations to leave her husband, Irv. Lois is Eileen's lover.

11 September 1976

Dear Lois,

It's Saturday morning now and I am up in my room of my own. Holly is in her room next door. Irv's downstairs. He's been acting foul and angry and banging things around since he got up shortly after I did, and found no coffee made in the family coffee machine. When he yelled, "Christ, isn't there any coffee in this goddamned house!" I heard an echo of that old existence in which I no longer feel trapped—all that yelling and banging like a big, dark cloud funneling toward me. It no longer blots me out. Soon I will be free of even the sound of it.

When Alice was 15 and broke into tears and had a piece of rope in her room, I dragged him to the local neighborhood shrink. It took this beautiful child's intense pain to make me demand going out for help—to break out of his dictated realm of privacy in which I was always the one at fault . . .

Irv yells up the stairs, "Are they going to *keep* the cleaner!" Alice and John borrowed our vacuum cleaner earlier this week. I look up from my desk. Holly's beaming, smiling face silently appears at my open door, looking in at me. I smile back while the hysterilogue continues between lower and upper levels.

"I don't think so," I call down.

"Well, for Christ's sake, they've had it long enough! When are they going to return it?"

"I don't know," I answer, wondering at his concern.

His voice escalating, "Well, don't *you* think we should have it back?"

"If you're worried about it, why don't you call Alice and John and find out their plans?"

"I have no time to call them. *I'm* going out shopping now." He is in the kitchen near the refrigerator. "Are we out of milk? Should I get some?" Holly's hand moves to her mouth, stifling a gasp. Her eyes brim with merriment.

"Yes," I answer. The door slams behind him, loud.

15 September 1976

Dear Lois,

. . . And then, Richard comes downstairs. With Irv's tone of voice, "Hey, are you going to do some wash today?"

"No," I answer. "I'm not planning to wash again until tomorrow." He stands, glaring at me. "Why," I offer, "is there some emergency?"

"Yes," he answers in that loud voice. "*Yes, there's an emergency. I haven't had clean underwear for three days. Why can't you do it today!*"

"Because I have other things planned for today."

He stalks upstairs, slamming doors. I wonder why he doesn't run a load through the washer-dryer himself. I get knots in my belly and want to pick up the clothes he deposited on top of the washer and throw them at him. I do not speak any more. I am afraid of his violence. Holly does her own wash when the need arises between all the loads I do every week. But Richard learned his right to demand women's services. He assumes the same arrogant mode of voice and body dominance as his father.

I am getting out of this.

I hear a chorus of humanistic therapists singing: but Eileen, you must learn to be assertive. It's a simple matter of establishing clear communication. It is your responsibility.

Fuck off, all of you!

Questions not asked: Why is all responsibility for human services laid at my doorstep? Why is it permissible for a 21-year-old male to yell at his 50-year-old mother laundress? . . .

I am without a car to get to the store. Alice borrowed it this afternoon. I ask Richard if he will go to the store and get some milk before dinner time.

"I'll go out and get milk as soon as I have some clean underwear to wear."

We are deadlocked. Why aren't they both bending over backwards to find ways to help me find my life, after sucking all from me for so long? Hey you, all you wise prick doctors with all your good advice for women—I listened to all your advice all these years. I tried to do everything you said. But you never mentioned the boredom, the belittlement of my sexuality, the lies, the woman-hating. You didn't tell me that what you really wanted was for me to remain a cheap-priced, docile, fuckable doll.

I better move very soon.

It is a matter of life and death.

The following excerpt is taken from the last piece in the volume, a letter from Eileen to her mother. Eileen has left husband and former life behind, and is living in a cabin with Kady.

. . . Not so long ago I gave you a book called *Of Woman Born*. I doubt that you've read it. Somewhere in there, Adrienne Rich wrote about how she had given up the fantasy of having that one, final, healing conversation with her mother. She's a fine poet who has won awards and has good credentials in that "old culture." That's what Kady and I call that strange man's world back there. The world where we try to live most of the time—in which women can speak freely and with dignity—we call the "new culture." These terms can be deceptive. Some days we use "death" and "life" cultures. Some days we say "closed" and "open," some days "prison" and "free." The words are imprecise. We do the best we can to keep aware of the sources of our energy.

Anyway, Adrienne is a woman about my age. Like me, she has three children born during the 50's. She, too, realized that she is a lesbian. She's writing some wonderful stuff.

Well, last year when I read her book again, and I reread the part where she said she had given up on the possibility of having that all-inclusive conversation with her mother, I said right outloud, "Well, I haven't!"

So here I am, mama, trying to have it with you. For some reason, I am seeing a red and brown coat. You made a coat for me. Do you remember it? It was when we lived on Sixteenth Avenue and were very poor. I was probably 14 years old. Was it that Donald got some material free from the place where he worked? And you used an old blanket for a warm lining. I needed a winter coat. It was red on one side and brown on the other. Reversible. And each side was just perfect. Flapped pockets and all. Goddess, what a beautiful job you did on that coat! I loved wearing it. Felt proud. It was beautiful. And warm. And I remember how perfectly the collar was made. I

mean to say that the points were executed with such precision. When I wore it on the brown side, there was no red showing. It was a brown coat. And when it was red, it was red.

Well, why is that coat looming up in my mind now? Because you have such excellent talents. Because you are beautiful. Because you have a strength and a daring in you that I have always admired. What a perfectionist you were. How clever you were.

And I hate it that when I tell you this, you will shrug your shoulders and say, oh well, I just did the best I could. No need to make any fuss. I hate it when people make a fuss about me.

I hate it because you're not angry.

I hate it because your life was used up serving and sewing, and you never could speak about the rage which you cast blue, to get through.

I hate it because you have just turned 87 and I may never hear from you.

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HANNAH AT THE ELMS AT 79

*"We are not very different, my dear,
when I was Director of Nursing,
I had to listen to people complain
as much as you do. Do you ever tire
of it?"*

Her fingers, slender,
bent by age into something less rare
than roots at shore line,
lie, for a moment,
still in her lap.

*"I suppose the only thing I have
left to dread
is being moved into the Infirmary.
One has so little control over one's
life
there."*

Her room, hung with silk and parchment,
rich as the inside of an old Chinese trunk,
smells of wintergreen
and dust.

*"Store up something for your old age, my dear.
I watch these old women,
bickering,
fault-finding,
and I am grateful that I have my books
and writing."*

Her letters,
written in script fragile and clear
as gull tracks,
so often, are returned,
marked,
"Moved, no forwarding address."

—Mary Sojourner

THE DEATH OF MY MOTHER

Mother, I brought you Colette and *My Antonia* to read, strong caring women voices you wanted to read, but I knew you would not be able to. You are lying on your death bed, plugged into small television screens that record in orange lines when your heart bleeds or screams or stops. Since Tuesday you have been a captured woman; your mind chained to a blood-drenched body. When I was very small, lying in a hospital bed, scared and wanting you there, you stood above me, dressed for business, a working woman who could not miss a day. You looked down at me and said, "don't worry, I'll stay," while at the same time you held the phone to tell the boss you would be in as soon as I fell asleep. We both knew you could not stay. I grew up knowing that your work at the office kept us in apartments, gave us food and clothes. I knew it because every time you lost a job or got in trouble, we lost the apartment. Now I can't see you. You lie in the most critical bed—a place of honor. I see down the long blue corridor; yellow lights shine at the end and white coats swing as they go in and out of your room. You waited for me to get home from work before you would accept the heart attack. You waited for your working daughter. I found you dying, and now I go to work every day before I come here. I don't want anything to take away the details of these moments: the click of heels in the halls, the singing doctor who told me you were dying. I sit across from the door that swings open to show me the blue hall that is your own tunnel. In every hour I will have ten minutes to give you my love. Your eyes beg me for help. You are tired and in pain. The machines are pumping at you, liquids are flowing in. The doctor turns down your stained sheet to show me where the heart burns from electric shock, but all I see is your pink nipple. We are joined now in your waiting. I am still outside your tunnel of blue lights; you as always sit with horror and do battle.

December 22nd Thursday Night 1977

Tonight, dear mother, you died. I reach out to you with words, words the source of your redemption. Your spirit pouring forth into words that no school taught you. Where are you now, my dear woman. We all spoke to you today. Mabel who will play your room number to sing you on your way. Rose your beloved friend who saw to the heart of you and stayed. I who was thinking uneasily of your return. You laughed with each of us, and then at 6:30 you rose from your chair and died. Where have you gone, my beloved woman? I saw you yesterday sitting on your bed, head bent down reading your last poem to Deb and me, about your encounter with death and your gratitude to the nurses whose hands covered you with caring. You had been dead twice and had returned to look with bright eyes upon the living world, to look with wonder at the way you had come. We had time to touch and hold; I combed your hair and held water to your lips. And every day you grew stronger—so strong that tonight you once again encountered the place of mystery and this time you did not return to write a poem about it. But dear Mother all your poems are within me—the bookkeeper poem, the dreamer poem, the outrage poem, the woman loving poem, the stealing poem, the child poem. Ride well, Mother. You will explore every corner of the world you have entered. You will find the quiet tired people sitting at long counters, having cups of coffee, and you will hear their story and tell your own. You will follow no rules, and in the end they will run you out of town. Dear, dear Mother, what mystery have you found?

Joan Nestle, daughter of Regina Nestle

THE CLASS AND THE CLOSET

She didn't know why these thoughts preoccupied her but they did. She kept coming back to them, kept thinking about Class and living in The Closet.

Maybe she was thinking about Class and Closet as a way to distract her attention from her lack of a lover. She had, after all, known herself to pull some pretty outrageous numbers to distract herself from that reality in the past. But no, she would decide each time this thought occurred to her, she went to outrageous numbers, not to political meditations. But what *did* Class and Closet have to do with each other?

She didn't suppose she had much more class than she had lovers when she looked at it that way. She had left her family early on, while still in high school, and had supported herself through college, so she didn't feel that she had much of her family's class in her. And just as she had begun working "professionally" and establishing her own class standing, she had dropped out and become a movement worker (albeit feminist) and done shit-jobs to support her real work or worked movement jobs for shit pay. So what kind of class standing do they give to revolutionaries and movement workers? Not much. And she hadn't lived in The Closet for years. Budding feminism and gay liberation had opened those doors eight years ago. Then she left the whole contraption behind her when she moved west to The Dyke Capital Of The World.

So why was she thinking about Class and Closet all the time? Like lovers, were they something to be mused over when she didn't have them?

Sometimes she laughed when she found herself thinking about class. "Now class, honey, is something you just ain't got," she would jive herself; "you just weren't there when they passed it out." And it was true. She'd look down at her pass-me-on jeans and her second-hand-store shirts. She knew what Suave and Sophisticated were and knew that she was neither. She couldn't even pull off Dyke-Dressed much less Well-Dressed Lesbian, politically incorrect as that was. And it wasn't even a matter of money. Other dykes pulled it off on the same income that she had. Not that she hadn't managed to "pass" in her closet days. Without pizazz, of course, but what lesbian wanted the attention that being a good-looking straight woman brought down on you? She certainly didn't, but she had to admit that she just didn't have the class to do it, even if she'd wanted to.

Or maybe she did. Actually, she did when she got right down to it. She remembered her last years in high school. The color-coordinated skirts and sweaters she had loved so much. New feminist friends in San Francisco had given her a hard time about them when she first moved out there. They said

that she looked too middle class in her still color-coordinated clothes (pants now, instead of skirts, of course); they refused to sit next to her in political meetings. And she remembered the ranch style house, two-car garage and big yard that she'd left. Then she had to admit that she really was middle class. Even in her present life she was acting like a good middle-class girl working off her guilt doing movement work. "Ah, well," she comforted herself, "guilt or no, I'm doing good work."

Now The Closet was something else. She *knew* she'd lived in The Closet. How and when it began and every painful minute of it. It began at fifteen, just thinking about women. And at sixteen, falling in love with her best friend and keeping it a secret right under their parents' noses. The Closet began in the school lunchroom the day Cindy B. came screaming down the hall, saying that she had just called Jem a *queer*, and he'd gotten real mad. So Steve told Cindy what "queer" really meant and she hadn't meant anything like *that!* Sitting there (queerly) silent, praying no one would notice her red face, her nothing-to-say. *That* was the beginning of The Closet in earnest.

Closeting grew in complexity at seventeen when she moved into a lesbian household as a boarder and into her first gay community, right there in her hometown. Before she had found that gay community she had thought that she could just be herself, by herself. But when her equally young lover left her saying she wasn't strong enough to be a lesbian all her life, she knew she needed the gay community for support. She tried to talk about all this with her friends, now, but she always ended up telling stories — stories of how it *was* Before Feminism, which was a lot different than talking about it. Her friends had all come out with the women's movement. Hadn't played roles, butch/femme, seduced/seducer. They were all righteously "out" to their parents. Things were different now, they told her. And she, too, was clearly Different. But she could still have a good time and was a good friend and tried to live as a good feminist, too.

But sometimes it wasn't so simple as all that and she was just lonely. Alone. Unlike any of her friends. Thinking about Class and Closet in those times didn't help, either. Though sometimes she knew that she was lonely for someone to speak Closet-ese with. And she knew that the best affair she'd had in years was with a woman who had lived in the closet, too. She had thought that they spoke a common language when, in fact, they were just seducing each other in the Old Tradition. But they'd had a wonderful time of it and she'd felt more alive than she had in years.

Class would pop into her head at odd moments. Like when this psychic was telling her about this fight her parents had when she was seven or eight. Her mother was saying to her father, "I don't know how you expect me to feed these kids, even. Much less clothe them. I slept with you, I married you, I bore your children, I've done my part. Now you get out there and do yours. Earn us some *decent* money!" The psychic said that's where her stomach problems came from, her fears about food. But her own mind had flashed: "This is a class fight. My mother is telling my father that he has to get a better job. A middle-class job. One with more money and a Future." Then all week long little memories popped into her head to hassle her: Her father *had* gotten a new job soon after. Then all of a sudden she'd had eight appointments worth of dental work done, when she'd never even been to a dentist before. Worse, the memories of

her mother's sickness, her achey tiredness came crashing in. It had gone on for years, then suddenly (at almost exactly the same time as the new job), her mother was well. She remembered her mother's trip to the doctor that very hot summer day, the scariness of it. Her diagnosis of "anemia." What a difference that white powder in her mother's orange juice at breakfast and liver for lunch made! Then, like a thunderclap, like a noise she couldn't bear to hear, came the realization that the next child born after her own self must have been conceived within months of that white powder appearing at breakfast, that her mother had been too *sick*, too debilitated to conceive, for lack of an office call, a few blood tests and a little liver. For nine years. She refused to believe it, then finally remembered her mother saying that she had never used any kind of birth control until the sixties. Then she remembered that her older brother's tonsils had been removed in that same year and he had stopped missing so much school and started doing better. Shivers rattled her spine the day she heard herself giving her own standard rap decrying the injustices of the patriarchal/capitalist system that denies health care to the poor and realized she was talking about her her own family and herself as a child. And yes, the second car, the lot in the country where her parents had built their house had all come later, in the following years when her father had settled down and "flown right," as her grandmother used to say. Those years, the ones *after*, had been middle-class years. The ones before were not.

Then she felt nauseated for a while. For weeks. She didn't like remembering these things. Even equipped with a class analysis as she was, finding her own pain, her family's poverty, their many lies, pushed her into silence, into guilt and shame that would not be articulated. But it was true. It was all true. If middle-class had come to her family when she was in high school, just a couple of years before she left them, what kind of class *did* that make her?

Memories continued to flash on her, though she might have stopped them if she could. She remembered the school she attended until fourth grade. How fine and tough they all were. For three years the basic playground game was "war." That and kickball. Your side against my side. Boys against girls. Westside against eastside. The teams didn't matter, just the fighting. Then the school board had redrawn the school boundaries to separate the black kids and the white kids, and she had to go to the rich-kids school. It was farther away from home and the other kids made fun of the kids from her old school. They were called "tough kids" and "dirty kid" and "trash." After the first few girls' mothers wouldn't let them go home with her to play after school, she had quit-asking. Reading was harder at the new school. So was everything. They had a class called "phonics" at the new school and she didn't know how to do it at all. The new teacher called her a liar when she said they didn't have phonics at the old school. There it was enough that she had learned to read. Here she was just dumb.

But she had recouped herself. Learned phonics enough to get B's where before she had always gotten A's easily. She figured out that you had to have a boyfriend in this school, so she chose and won the cutest, most popular boy in the class, even though she had to share him with the cutest, most popular girl. She didn't know until later that what she had done ensured her a certain status. She remembered pushing away the boy from the old school who had genuinely liked her, who was at least interesting to talk to, just because he was from the old school. That year her mother had started buying her store-bought clothes and that made

a difference, too.

Innocent afternoons turned into profound realizations. Feeling loose and free riding home from a day in the country with an ex-lover turned friend, she heard herself jive, "You just drive on and turn when you get a mind to and we'll get there all the same." She wouldn't have noticed how she said it, but she felt her friend stiffen beside her and look over at her out of the corner of her eye. One of the rules of their relationship was that there be no such clowning: no slipping into dialects or roles or characters. Her rules. Those kinds of things had always left her uptight. She didn't know why, but they did, and here she was, breaking her own rules. "It's OK," she told her friend. "This is my dialect," she added lightly.

Then her heart sank. She flashed on Uncle Dale riding her on his lap on the big tractor. All the aunts. Nameless faces. Sunday afternoons on the farm where her grandpa grew up. Other relations. Aunts and cousins. All her mother's relatives. What had happened to them?

"Don't you talk like that, Carol Jean." Her mother's voice broke in. When had her mother used her middle name? When had she stopped?

Thoughts, ideas. People tumbled in her head so quickly she could hardly touch them. Memories. She was a little girl. Four. Five. Six years old.

Seven. Why didn't they go see Uncle Ken and Aunt Vivian any more? Why couldn't she play with her cousin Sherry anymore? Eight. "You know better than that, Carol. Your mother raised you better than that," her mother's best friend had said, angrily. What had she done wrong? Her mind exploding, her stomach sinking — she knew after all these years. It was language. It was her words. She had *talked* wrong. "Don't you talk like that, Carol Jean" meant "Don't you talk like the relatives." It meant "Don't you talk like we used to talk." They had stopped seeing the relatives at the same time her mother started pushing her dad for a better job. Her mother had just up and left her whole family behind.

The pieces started to settle. That was why she was so afraid of languages, of dialects, even theater and films — because the language, the language she had first learned to speak, was "wrong." She had learned to talk, and then without anyone even saying what was going on, they made her unlearn her first language and learn a different one and speak that second language only. By the time she was ten, they had cut her off from everyone she had ever known who spoke her first language.

She mulled over this question of language for a long time after. She tried to remember what her first language had been like and couldn't. She tried to make it up, but she kept coming up with black dialect. Sometimes it was from books and movies, and sometimes it was from the black kids in her class when she was seven and eight, from when she was learning how not to talk. She tried to find books where the characters spoke Michigan Dirtfarm and couldn't find them.* She found that not having the language and words of those years of her life made her real life harder to recall.

She saw that by the time she was nine, she had to learned to "pass" for the next higher class. Had learned to lie, in some way, and to choose her friends accordingly and that she never even knew that she was doing it. And she felt very scared. Frightened, as if she didn't know who she was, or who she had

*until November 1979 when she found out that the dialect used in *Patience and Sarah* (Isabel Miller/Alma Routsong, Fawcett) really *is* Michigan Dirtfarm!

been, or who she might have been if she hadn't learned to be something else. If she hadn't started lying. Why had she started this lying? This passing? she asked herself. And her self answered: To survive. She felt queasy on and off for months this time.

She thought about all this and reflected that in many ways passing for middle class was a lot like passing for straight. Saw that the ease with which she had moved into the gay life came from already knowing how to "pass" in another situation. That in both cases she had learned to "pass" to survive. That lying was essential to passing, though when she was passing for Class she had lied to herself to survive. To pass for straight, to Closet, she "only" had to lie to straight people. She could speak true with her own gay community once she had found them and herself. She realized that by the time she had to, or *could* (which? she wondered) pass for middle class again, she was already so busy passing for straight that passing for middle class was just pulling an old trick out of the hat and she hadn't even much noticed that she was doing it.

"At least with The Closet," she thought to herself, "you get to keep your own self intact even if you have to cover it up with lies sometimes." That made Closet easier to remember than Class. She remembered that they had been witty and outrageous and sometimes daring in their Closet keeping. She remembered the deal she had with one of the gay fellows, an elementary school teacher: He went with her to her office parties, and she passed as his all-but-live-in girlfriend for his fellow teachers. One night they were entertaining one of his co-teachers and his wife for dinner, and she had excused herself and walked into the coat closet instead of the bathroom (the doors being right next to each other and she not being very familiar with the house) and had had to stand in the closet for the presumed period of time, then extricate herself and return to the table, bladder bursting. Jim sitting there choking back his laughter for the rest of the meal. She hardly dared look at him for fear she'd crack up and pee her pants. She hooted just to think about it now! What a story that had been to tell in the gay crowd! Everyone had such stories, one topping the other until they had a whole folklore and humor, too, to sustain themselves.

"The trouble with the closet," she thought, not being able to remember when these thoughts began coming to her, having no conversations to tie them to, having read no books that sparked her thinking on this question (except a novel* by a black woman about passing for white,) "is that you never knew where the edges were. Never knew how much *not* to say." It was pretty clear that she had had to lie to everyone at her data-processing job. But had she really had to Closet to everyone at the university? Might it not have been OK with some of her more liberal professors if she had been "out" to them, then, there in the midwest at the end of the sixties? What would they have done if they had known that she and her "housemate" were lovers? Had they figured it out for themselves? If they had known, *would* it have cost her lover her graduate assistantship? Both of them their careers? She never would know. The only way you ever knew was if you didn't closet well enough. Then it all blew up in your face.

At nineteen she had witnessed the painful results of not closeting well enough. A friend, a high school counselor, had not been careful enough. Had been reported to the school authorities as a suspected lesbian, setting off a lesbian witch-hunt in that tiny rural school district that had cost three lesbians their jobs and their teaching credentials. The gym teacher she didn't know and never knew what

**Passing*, Nellie Larsen. Macmillan

happened to her. The librarian, a Quaker and once her girl scout leader, fought the charges and got her record changed to read “misappropriation of school funds” (meaning theft) and “not recommended for rehire in public schools.” After two years of searching she found another job in a big-city public library and moved away. The counselor committed suicide a few years later. One never knew how just one slip-up would turn out. Never knew until it was too late if you were going too far. So she had learned to lie all the time. To keep her fronts up, her lies intact and consistent and to always juggle her real life and her covers.

And then there was the danger. The overt physical danger. She and her lover hadn’t closeted well enough one summer afternoon. Had forgotten to pull a shade when they were rough-housing, tickling, kissing on their bed. One of them had happened to look up and saw the man across the street looking into their window with binoculars. That wouldn’t have been too bad – they had thought themselves liberated by then and didn’t much care what anyone thought – but the next day his little boy came over while she was watering her window boxes. He said, “How’s your flowers growing, lesbian?” and “My daddy’s cleaning his shotgun on you.” Not such an idle threat. There’d been one stabbing come out of that house already that summer. A gay boy had just been beaten to death in a neighboring town, for holding hands on the street with another boy. She wasn’t saying, but maybe the whole episode had something to do with her moving to California a few months later.

So it was that she had learned her lessons well – had learned to lie with apparent spontaneity, to duck and dodge, to be evasive. She had learned to be exquisite in her closet keeping – an art form and survival skill no less important than milking cows, spinning wool or putting food by were to other women in other times. She had learned to live with the closet’s constant tension in her body and her soul and only now wondered if it would follow her – haunt her – for the rest of her life.

Would she *always* find herself with a lie/an evasion/a dodge about her lesbianism, her lovers, her *real* life, ready on the tip of her tongue? Perhaps not always. But it still happened under stress. The stories and the evasions just popped out, as if through no control of her own. Sometimes it took months to clean up the damages. And when her mother called, those times when she summoned up all of her courage and said, “Well, Carol, how’s your life?” the habit of silence was too long and even these years later she always found nothing to say.

She had been thinking about the last time her mother had asked how she was and she hadn’t been able to answer. She *wanted* to answer (she thought) so she started practicing things to say – honest things like “I’m very happy,” or “I’m in a hard place,” or “Sherry (Mary, Katherine, Patty) and I are just coming to an understanding,” or “Our relationship is this . . . and it contents me.” Underneath it all she was thinking, “I’ve been out to her for five years – why is it still so hard!?” She fell to musing over the time when she had come out to her folks. It was in her first year in San Francisco. Those times had been such bright times, full of richness and promise. She had felt so free to be lesbian here in this big city twenty-one thousand miles away from everyone she had ever had to closet to. It seemed the adventure of her life to explore this big lesbian community. It was such a year – ! It seemed as if all of San Francisco was exploring the connections between lesbianism and socialism and feminism. The study groups kept her high for months – interweaving lesbian tenderness with a philosophy that would end everyone’s oppression, poor people

and black people *and* women and even gay people's oppressions, if they were careful enough with it. And the oppression of these Asian people she was just beginning to meet. And the Chicanas . . . All this interwoven with the tenets of feminism as well . . .

In the midst of all that she had come out to her parents, *quick*, before she became a flaming revolutionary and they'd have to deal with that, too! She got to laughing, fondly remembering that year. She saw that she'd left her closet and her middle-classness behind in that same year. Or left them behind as much as one could. Hindsight is pretty funny—that year she had so stridently left her middle-class ideals and identity behind was pretty funny because all through that year she had truly believed that she was totally middle class.

Once she had seen that she had left her "class" (middle) and her closet behind at the same time, she began to see how intermeshed Class and Closet had been for her all those years.

One of the first things her first gay community had taught her was that she was going to have to fend for herself all her life. The boys were especially adamant. "Girl, there ain't gonna be no sugar-mammas for you in your life. Daddy ain't gonna be there to pick up the pieces, neither. You might just as well get used to taking care of yourself right now! You better start making plans right away!" The way to take care of herself was to get a good middle-class job—sick leave, retirement, vacations and all. She opted for university teaching, trusting that she could closet well enough to get tenure and trusting that the "liberal nature" of the university community would make her life a little easier.

Her new gay community was as middle class as her mother. Not totally middle class by a long shot, but everyone knew, just as her mother did, that the people with the middle-class jobs were the "lucky" ones. They had more security, seemed to closet easier. Had easier lives. It was something you envied if you didn't have, so she studied hard, learned to closet and worked toward getting it for herself.

It meant working nights in the data-processing factory and going to school days. Always being too tired and not getting good enough grades and trying to carry on with her lover(s) in between.

There was always some temptation—to just haul off on Friday night and sneak into the bar. To spend carefully hoarded tuition money on a cocktail dress because someone was having a *dress* Christmas party and she needed desperately to go—to touch and dance and be with the women and the men who were all week as silent and well behaved as she had been and to cut loose and be outrageous. To dance cheek to cheek with her lover if she had one and to dance sexy and "nasty" with the women if she didn't.

Dress parties or dinners. Drinks or pizza or recreation-room parties. Always the need to be "with" her own people, even when she didn't go out for months at a time because of the work and the need to study. Because of the money it took, the time and the conflicts. Partying late with people she didn't necessarily even like. "One thing about the gay life," her friend M. would say, "is that it cuts across all the race and class lines, for better or worse." And A., M's lover, would hiss "For worse."

Sometimes she couldn't decide who she liked less or disliked more — the careful almost prissy "professional" women or the tough macho energy she kept

running into in the bar. The ones who always said they had their jobs to think of were basically boring. They had no sense of adventure in their carefully planned lives, carefully bought houses (blinds carefully drawn against their straight neighbors), carefully *discreet* love affairs. She didn't think she could always be so careful. Besides, they were always drinking (or drunk) because they couldn't stand it either. And she just couldn't drink very well.

She had the same problem (not drinking so well) in the bar. There she had to deal with a ready emotion, almost like an intense drama to fill the boredom, that erupted into fist fights and passionate love affairs. She ran from her first fist fight and didn't talk about it for seven years. How to go to work with a black eye? To school? The other problem, and more serious one, was outside the bar: always having to park far enough away from the bar so that the local boys in blue didn't take down her license-plate number with the rest of the regulars, then having to negotiate the distance between the bar door and her car without being followed or beat up or raped or whatever were the horrors outside the bar doors. There weren't many incidents outside her bar, but still she was worried. She couldn't ask someone to walk her to her car mostly because she was too ashamed to let anyone know she was afraid to park in the bar parking lot. And *that* got in the way when she wanted to proposition someone. ("My car or yours?" "Well, mine's two blocks away." "What for?" End of proposition.) It wasn't a matter of who she liked, but a matter of safety. Where would she *not* get busted, beat up, found out? She knew that class was integrally connected with survival (her mother had taught her that) and that as a lesbian she already had two strikes against her. To be "caught out" being queer was, if nothing else, a lot less violent in the middle class than it was elsewhere.

So the decision to be middle class was no decision at all. It was a survival tactic. Being carefully middle class was a part of closeting for survival. Being "nice" to "pass" because the roles were a little looser (it appeared) in middle-class America and a woman attracted less notice working in a "nice" profession than being independent in a working-class world. Class and Closet had come to her hand in hand, literally, one feeding the other as she left her parents' home to find the gay sub-culture and to create a life for herself there. Then she tried to put them down together that first year in San Francisco — oh that politically correct and liberating year — only to find that she wasn't as middle class as she had thought and that the closet was within her (instead of her in the closet) and finally to see that almost everyone she knew was still closeted in some way (to their grandmother or Aunt Mary, if not to their boss or the postman or the teenaged boys on the bus).

No wonder she kept thinking about class and closet as if they were connected. As if they were passions that would fill her when she had no lover. No wonder she was thinking about them both now, in the time when she was trying to find out more clearly (again) who she was. As if these ideas had something to do with the basis and foundation of her life — for they did.

Then she thought about how neither feminism nor class analysis had ever talked to her about this connection between Class and Closet. She thought about survival, the very high costs of survival in patriarchy, about the silence that had always surrounded consciousness of class in the closet; and she knew that silence would never be quite so pervasive in her life again — because she had a *lot* to say.



Jan Hansen
"Philosopher, Marilyn Frye"

oil painting
18" x 18"

REVIEW

A review of *The Coming Out Stories*, edited by Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope Stanley, with foreword by Adrienne Rich. Published by Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, Mass. 02172. 1980, 251 pp., \$6.95.

When I found out this book was going to be published, finally, and by Persephone Press, I was delighted. The book arrived; it is physically pleasing; Carolyn pointed out the subtle delight of the cover (flat ink/glossy ink). I eagerly commenced reading. I fully expected to consume it, cover-to-cover, in a single banquet of insights and "aha's." But it is not that sort of feast. I bogged down in the middle, sated, even bored. It is interesting and gratifying to discover how much we have in common, but the data of such a discovery finally have too much of a sameness to sustain excitement.

I should have known. The individual contributions are deliberately not edited, the pieces are on a common theme, and one of the themes of the book is how much we have in common. Of course the writers, unaided and unedited, will not always say their similar things in artistically dissimilar ways. But perhaps the editorial restraint is partly responsible also for one of the great virtues of the book—the authenticity. Even our inauthenticity is authentically, tangibly available in this book. The experiences are real; our particular ways of seeing ourselves and presenting ourselves are accurately presented; the conception—a book of coming out stories—is real home-grown 1970s American Lesbian Feminist; the book is invaluable.

Our coming out stories are our tribal lore; they are our heroic odysseys, our tall tales, our adventure stories, our "origin" stories. They fill us with images, both fabulous and believable, of fantastic feats of courage, endurance, creativity, bravado, intelligence, madness and stubbornness, and of beautiful wicked schemes and magic eyes. Where another culture has stories of knights and tycoons becoming men by inventing things to overcome and then overcoming them, our culture has stories of amazons and witches creating themselves out of nothing. And we have the inestimable advantage of knowing that each of us has done it and can do it over and over; each of us is a Mother.

Different women have different uses for these stories. I have a long list of women I want to give the book to, all for different reasons. Closeted lesbians, not-yet-out lesbians, the first woman I knew I loved, young women, old women. What I myself find fascinating here is the *metaphysics* of being a lesbian. This anthology provides a picture of what it is to be something which there is no such thing as. And of what it is to make it the case that there is such a thing simply by being it, definitively, *perversely*, and *with no extraordinary power*.^{*} The artlessness of some of the writings and the artfulness of others combine to display and convey what it *feels* like to live on the boundary of the conceivable, on the loose and frayed edge of what is.

One thing the stories reveal is that, among other things, coming out feels good; we are obviously, and righteously, quite pleased with ourselves. We ex-

^{*}From "Natural Resources," in *The Dream of a Common Language*. Adrienne Rich (Norton, 1978).

perience our insistence on our lesbianism as integrity. We also tend to interpret the inability at a certain point to name oneself a lesbian as dishonesty. I think there is a mistake here; a conflation of a conception of metaphysical integrity with a conception of moral integrity, a confusion of a metaphysical split with (cowardly) self-deception or self-denial. We need some concepts which will enable us to see that the struggle for integrity of being is in some sense and in part a moral struggle, and yet to see that lack of metaphysical integrity is not to be understood simply (and written off) as a personal moral flaw. Many things besides moral weakness contribute to our not having come out yet when we hadn't come out yet. To see coming out in a simple way as a matter of personal moral courage nourishes contempt not only for certain other women but for our own earlier selves.*

The temptation to disown our former selves can encourage us to falsify our histories. For instance, a clear majority of the coming out storytellers tell us they never had any interest in men, or that men repulsed, overwhelmed, or bored them, and I am not sure whether this presents a true picture of lesbians in general. I, for one, was very interested in men for quite a number of years, particularly in powerful, eccentric, intelligent men from whom I learned a lot about philosophy, music, wine, food, and drugs. Either I am a quite unusual lesbian, or the anthology represents a skewed selection of lesbians, or we are inventing a myth about ourselves, which, in the end, really could do us no good.**

If we do misrepresent our pasts, perhaps after all it would be just because we don't remember very well. The coming out stories are, among other things, stories of forgetting. We come out, and then forget we did. We come out; and then forget when we did. We forget how we came out. We forget the intense, dramatic, ecstatic passions we suffered before we learned not to. We have to look back at our diaries and journals and letters to recall. The excerpts from journals are beautiful and immediate, and they contrast quite strongly with the stories, which in many cases are strangely stylized. It is as though telling the stories, for all that we usually enjoy it, is nonetheless something of a discipline—something we have to do, and something that may be required of us whether we are really in a storytelling mood or not.

Our stories may be required of us when we are establishing new friendships and bonds. They establish that we have common names for common feelings, and this linguistic agreement is a necessary ground of meaning. Naming is a communal activity; a shared naming of what we knew all along, and of the passage to recognition, is the essential foundation of lesbian community. Our coming out stories establish the matrix of meaning for the word 'lesbian.'

The Coming Out Stories is limited in the scope and variety of storytellers, and it therefore does not display the meaning of 'lesbian' in all its richness. Most of the writers seem all too obviously to have been reading too many of the same books, and they say "for too long" all too often. But it is an important book, even so. If we want more stories from more different women, we will just have to write them ourselves and/or go find the women we want to hear from and do what Julia and Susan did—offer them a book to put their stories in.

*Recall "It's All Dixie Cups to Me," Rita Mae Brown, *QUEST: A Feminist Quarterly*, Vol. I, No. 3, Winter 1975.

**Of course, the selection is not fully representative of lesbians of all races, classes, ages, etc. But this sort of narrowness should not select for born manhaters and against converts.

RESPONSE

A FEW COMMENTS ON THE GENTLE ART OF REVIEWING IN THE FEMINIST PRESS

(These comments were touched off by reading the review by Joanna Russ of Donna Young's *Retreat* in *SW 12*. —Marion Zimmer Bradley)

I once knew a woman who had earned her living as a lady wrestler in one of the nudie night-clubs in San Francisco. Since this woman was not a feminist, but rather the reverse, I was surprised when she gave up the job; she had also worked as stripper, go-go girl and belly-dancer, as well as other things to make even the most rudimentary feminist cringe. But, with a flicker of enlightenment, she said that she didn't mind being ogled by men herself, but found it distasteful to think of standing, stripped, in a ring of leering males who took pleasure in seeing two nude women tear one another limb.

Well, this is just about the way I felt when I read Joanna's clever and artful dismemberment of a first book by a young and not terribly competent writer. I too, from my earliest days as a writer, have had the experience of standing stripped and bare before the harsh winds of criticism, and in general I advocate that if a young writer can't stand the heat, she had better keep well out of the kitchen, or develop a well-insulated ego. Maybe I am just squeamish. Or maybe I have read too heavily of the writers, woman writers in a tough commercial world, who get very angry because a woman writer is expected to be at least twice as good as a man before she can get published. Here we have a young writer whose book is probably, let's face it, not a terribly good book. Most first novels are not. But all of us (present company excepted, of course,) have written bad books before we learned how to write good ones, and some of us would never have managed to write good ones if we had not been encouraged by finding someone to read our early efforts. So we have a small press, the Naiad Press, which makes it a point to publish young feminist writers who have something to say, and generally help them along until they develop the skill to say it well.

I have often been accused of being insufficiently feminist, and in general I plead guilty; I'm too old to get worked up about rhetoric, which is, after all, the art of making the worse cause appear the better; nor, in general, do I enjoy seeing political expediency supersede objective fact. But I have been present so often when the commercial presses are criticized because they judge feminist writers by hard, objective, commercial and masculist standards, paying more attention to "Will it sell" than "Does it have something to say?" Here we have a small feminist press which accepted a first novel because it had something to say instead of rejecting it out of hand as ninety-nine out of a hundred ordinary publishers would have rejected *RETREAT*. Naiad Press brought us a feminist fantasy. I freely confess it is not to my taste; but I consider personal taste the worst possible measure of criticism. Joanna Russ has been very severely criticized because her books are not to the taste of many readers. That's irrelevant.

But, like my ex-lady-wrestler friend, I have a distinct distaste for the spectacle of a circle of women, sneering rather than leering as two of their sisters

tear one another to bleeding shreds in public. . . . One of the most unpleasant memories of my entire career, and one of the reasons why, in general, I have fled from the entire feminist press, is a memory of a time when Joanna Russ and I were (figuratively) pushed into the center of a yelling crowd while the entire lesbian-feminist science-fiction establishment stood around shrieking on their typewriters to the effect of "Let's you and her fight." . . . Now, Joanna Russ and I are philosophically at opposite ends of the science fiction spectrum. I admire but in general do not much enjoy her work, and while I don't know whether she likes mine or not, it's absolutely certain that from a philosophical or political point of view she finds it worse than deplorable. Which, of course, is her privilege; . . . I would feel distinctly distressed if Joanna praised my work, because I find that if she praises a book, in general I will find it unreadable, and on the other hand, if she wholly damns a book . . . I am likely to find it jolly good reading.

Well, anyhow, there are novels by women which I love, and those which I don't much like, and others which I find absolutely offensive, and others which I find, in general, of a silliness unutterable. For instance: hearing Sally Gearhart read an extended excerpt from *The Wanderground*, I was seduced by her personal charisma and the interest which her fine reading gave to the story, to buying a copy to read at leisure; and later discovering that I couldn't read three pages in succession without breaking into the kind of giggling fit I usually reserve for the more fatuous novels of Lost Atlantis and priestesses of dawn and beauty, or for the sillier effusions of Theosophy. However, I am able to recognize this as a matter of taste, and refuse to set up my personal likes and dislikes as the parameters of a critical aesthetic. I know that Sally's book has become something of a classic, and I'm delighted for her, and for the pleasure she has given to readers.

And so, when I read *Retreat*, and found it much the same sort of sweet romantic stuff, I shrugged and decided that anyone who could read *The Wanderground*—and there are a lot of them—would really enjoy this book, but that it wasn't for me, and so what? There is no arguing about matters of taste, and I don't expect anyone to be bound by my dislikes. . . .

In general it seems to me that Russ has simply been guilty of using her own enormous prestige in the feminist AND in the commercial press to tear a less skillful writer limb from limb. If a male writer of great prestige had done this hatchet job on a woman writer published by a small press, I think she would be the first to cry out in outrage and accuse the male writer of prejudice against the small or feminine-oriented. To do this is an abuse of one's personal charisma and a petty show of private malice. Even if *Retreat* were as bad a book as she seems to think, she has no right to imply a self-serving on the part of Naiad Press: I once offered Barbara, at Naiad Press, my then-unpublished *The Ruins of Isis*, and she turned it down because she felt it did not meet the self-chosen standards of Naiad, of being absolutely lesbian-oriented. If Naiad were as opportunistic as all that, they could now be deriving enormous prestige from publishing a book which, to be modest, has aroused really huge interest and controversy. She could have made some money, too. Integrity, rather than commercial expediency, marks Naiad's publishing history, and I think we should all be grateful to her for giving—as I said back at the beginning of this review—an opportunity to writers who have something to say, even if they cannot command enormous fees in the commercial press. . . .

Well, on the occasion I spoke of before, when Joanna and I were pushed to the center of the circle, with everybody cheering us on, Joanna reproved the whole lot of us for making an unedifying spectacle, in something like these words: "We find we can't take on Dad or big brother, so we start kicking Sis in the pants." I venture to remind Joanna of these words; her review of *Retreat* is kicking a very young and vulnerable Sister. . . .

Granted, we can't all like one another's books. . . . I am not qualified to say whether or not *Retreat* is a good book, a bad book, or a book best left to time to judge. But I know there are better books which I could NOT read, so I don't venture to judge it.

But one thing I am qualified to judge is common courtesy. I really think Joanna should be a little ashamed of herself. She has a right to her opinions, as we all have. She could have said, flatly, "I found this book so unreadable that I stopped trying after the first chapter," and some people would have refused to read it on her advice, and others would have rushed right out and bought it. . . . In my younger days I was also guilty of writing brilliant essays scoring off young writers because I had elevated my personal aesthetic into a whole Art of Higher Criticism and felt myself called to the vocation of Stamp-
ing Out Books Of Which I Did Not Approve.

And so, having been guilty myself, I say it flat-out; this is not nice behavior. I think that may be why no one except feminists seems to take feminism seriously. Almost all men, and an unconscionable number of women, say "Oh, women—let'em alone long enough and they'll tear each other to pieces." And then stand around, hot for fresh blood, like those men watching the lady wrestlers, while we do it.

Let's be glad we have a feminist press to publish books, good or bad, and remember what it was like when we didn't, instead of destroying it because its standards aren't those of commercial publishing! Joanna Russ is not as old as I am. But she's old enough to know what I am talking about, and to remember the days when women were not altogether welcome in the fantasy/science fiction press. And so she, too, should know better.

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

Joanna Russ's review of Donna Young's *Retreat: As It Was! (Sinister Wisdom 12)* has been giving me no end of trouble. Yes, the writing in *Retreat* is abominable. Yes, Young's imagination is so limited that her book is pretty close to antifeminist. Yes, the characters, relationships, story, science, economics, and traditions of *Retreat* are unforgivably mushy. Yes, a thousand times yes, Naiad Press should not have published this book. But.

Enough is enough. Joanna Russ's review of Donna Young's book is overkill on a grand scale. It's no news to me that the author of *The Female Man* and *We Who Are About To . . .* can blow the author of *Retreat* out of the water—and without taxing her abilities in the least. The first half of "Listen, There's a Story for You . . ." is less a piece of criticism than an exercise in escalating ridicule, and ridicule is no more constructive or justified in a lesbian-feminist publication than it is on a school playground.

I recently reviewed *Retreat for off our backs*, and I think I can understand Joanna Russ's apparent anger with Young's book. Reviewing *Retreat* was an infuriating, frustrating, incredibly long and drawn-out process that resulted in a terrible cop-out of an article that now embarrasses the hell out of me. It also prompted some hard, overdue thinking about feminist criticism and my weaknesses as a feminist critic. What became especially obvious was that, somewhere along the way, I had lost the ability to write, "This is a bad book."

When I came out in the mid-1970's, the incidence of trashing in the earlier Women's Liberation Movement had generated a reaction, an ethic that named "judgmental" a negative (patriarchal, male, heterosexist, academic, WASP, elitist, left-brain, etc., etc.) attribute. Being WASP and having a long history of demonstrated academic, elitist, and left-brain inclinations, I nervously tried to curb, at least in public, my penchant for sarcasm and caricature.

Our collective striving to be "nonjudgmental" may have eased the impulse to trash, but it also seems to have encouraged a tendency to uncritical (public) acceptance of every female endeavor, especially those that declare themselves feminist. Writers and artists should be the first to recognize the uselessness and the potential liabilities of such an attitude (in theory at least; a lot of us struggle with the fear that the first discouraging word is going to reduce someone to tears), but the publication of *Retreat* suggests that it's still around—and influential.

Maybe the "if it's lesbian, it's got to be good" credo has started its own backlash. Maybe some critics believe that they have to use scathing sarcasm and/or ridicule to prove that their work isn't mush and puffery. Maybe it's just that writing unbridled polemics can be more fun than laboring to say hard things in a gentle way. A part of my initial response to Russ's review was jealousy, that she had done the razzle-dazzle I hadn't dared to do, that she had probably gotten that book out of her system while I was still brooding about it.

Susan Wood-Thompson's article "To Know Each Other and Be Known . . ." also in *SW 12*, quotes Beverly Tanenhaus on her contribution to her women's writing workshops: "to figure out what I know about [a woman's] work that she can use." I think that feminist critics ought to be keeping this in mind and addressing their reviews to the creator of the work under discussion as well as to their own following (if any) and to potential readers or viewers of the work. Joanna Russ offers plenty that Donna Young and Naiad Press can and should use, and I hope that the tone of her article doesn't drown it all out. But I still remember with bitterness my fourth-grade teacher, who used to announce it to the entire class whenever I got less than an A on a paper and then speculate about what had gone wrong. She didn't teach me anything all year. I hope Russ is more effective.

Thanks, incidentally, for the mention of *Motherlines*. I discovered the paperback last fall by hit-or-miss browsing through the science fiction shelves at local bookstores. Feminists who are already reading fantasy/sf are finding Char-nas's book; may it now find a well-deserved wider audience.

—Susanna J. Sturgis

RESPONSE

In reference to the current issue (*SW 12*) I enjoyed the book review by Joanna Russ, and although she seems to have something to do with the writing and publishing of Sally Gearhart's *Wanderground*, I wonder if it is quite fair to draw a comparison with [Suzy McKee Charnas's] *Motherlines*. I have read *Motherlines* and reread it—and also the first volume of what I assume will be a trilogy—*Walk to the End of the World*. And I would without any hesitation at all give my vote to these two books as by far the best science fiction futurist novels ever written by a woman (and far superior to almost anything written by a man in this line). Every woman with a brain should read both these books and keep them nearby. . . . However, *Wanderground* is not a novel nor is Gearhart a novelist. She states this herself in that very interesting conversation she has with Baba Copper in the (sad to say) last issue of *Country Women*. . . . *Wanderground* is a series of Sufi type tales and Gearhart considers herself a teacher—not a novelist. I think that comparing the Charnas books and *Wanderground* is like comparing apples and oranges. Of course, one may prefer to eat apples rather than oranges—or vice versa; but you can't say that a good apple is better than a good orange. They are simply not the same thing. I love the *Wanderground* and am one of its readers who limited herself to one story per day to make it last as long as possible. . . . It is a master work in its own genre and if it had the power and the terror . . . of the Charnas Books, it simply would not BE.

—Ruth Douglas

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RESPONSE

Dear Sinister Wisdom,

I feel that Elly Bulkin's article in no. 13 is a contribution of utmost importance, deserving respect both for its ethical and political courage and for its scholarly thoroughness and care of execution. I hope it will be *used*, seriously discussed, and incorporated into lesbian/feminist processes of thinking and reading. To this end, I would like to add several points.

I do not believe it was in any sense Elly's intention to isolate Mary Daly as a sole target or scapegoat of racism among white feminist writers; it would be a great pity for her essay to be read as a form of "trashing." It is true that the magnitude undertaken by a book like *Gyn/Ecology* opens it to more than ordinary critical expectations. I feel, though, that readers of Elly's article may need to be reminded of the fact that *Gyn/Ecology* was not written in hermetic intellectual isolation but with acknowledged feedback and responses from other white feminists—including myself—who read or heard parts or the whole in draft. The stature and the flaws of any book are finally the author's own; however, lesbian/feminist theory has typically been created in a climate of collective support and critique, a climate which may have its own specific limitations as well as its own flashing gynergy. Critics of a manuscript in draft may or may not offer the rigorous kind of challenge that any thinker needs to test and refine her own original insights. I want to point out also that I was one of the lesbian/feminist reviewers who (in *The New York Times Book Review*) praised the feminist daring of *Gyn/Ecology* without questioning its racist blinders.

But, perhaps more to the point: after my own book, *Of Woman Born*, was published in 1976, I received a number of letters and comments from Black women, criticizing my extremely brief and cursory references to Black motherhood. These communications led me to reassess my own process in writing that book. I had indeed been aware that the dimension of Black maternal existence—in so many ways profoundly different from white maternity—and so relentlessly affected by white racism—was to a large extent missing from my analysis of both "experience" and "institution." I had let myself off the hook by telling myself that this was a subject that could only rightly be written about by Black women; that someday a Black woman would write "that" book. In fact, I *could* have delved into the wealth of fiction by Black women who have eloquently described the experience of mothering—Margaret Walker, Lorraine Hansberry, Sarah E. Wright, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, to name some writers then in print—just as I quoted from Virginia Woolf, Tillie Olsen, Margaret Atwood, or other white novelists for illustration or amplification. White ignorance, and the unconsciously held racist belief that white experience is *the* quintessentially real experience and can therefore be infinitely generalized with a few liberal qualifications here and there, undeniably weakened my book; and *Of Woman Born*, which lesbian/feminists generously defended against attacks in the anti-feminist press, could well be cited as another example of white feminist theory impaired by racist attitudes, however "unintentional." In the literature of white lesbian/feminism, not to mention the writings of nineteenth-century white feminists,

there are plenty of other examples, of course; this is the legacy which, like it or not, is ours as members of white culture.

My hope is that Elly's challenging, honest, and thoughtful article will help activate a climate in which every white feminist writer will seek and find the challenge and support she needs to combat her own conscious and unconscious racism. Our researches, if we are scholars, will frequently bring us face to face with white male *and female* racist sources, to which we need to develop highly sensitized antennae equal to our sensitivity to the language-deceptions of misogynist texts which Mary Daly has identified.

It would hardly serve the interests of an anti-racist lesbian/feminism to deny *Gyn/Ecology* its authentic insights and connections; but neither will our deepest purposes be served by refusing to consider the critiques brought by Elly, who has obviously read Mary's text with uncommon attention and concern. *Gyn/Ecology*, as Elly implicitly shows, is a book which offers important critical tools, not just for the dissection of patriarchal deception but for our movement as well: such concepts as "pattern-detecting" or "false inclusion" have a value wherever we turn our eyes, trying to break through the seeming paradoxes of life on the boundary. I believe we need a clear sense of how ideas impinge upon and feed each other in our movement, and a trust that, as regards racism, no seriously committed white feminist need be locked in a self-entrenched position. Nor can any of us, white feminists, however excellent our anti-racist intention, shed our mental chains of racism overnight: they are among the oldest inventions of patriarchy.

I hope we can now begin to use, test, practice, and refine the critical guidelines Elly offers at the end of her article (and the criteria she quotes from Minnie Bruce Pratt's letter to *Chrysalis*), whether as readers seeking a tougher, more enduring vision of female integrity, or as writers attempting to enlarge the meaning of global feminism to its outermost limits. Both reading and writing can be forms of action which can change lives, but both, if they are to become so, require unremitting caring, attention, and critical responsibility.

In sisterhood,
Adrienne Rich

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OUT & OUT BOOKS

Editors of Out & Out books, Jane Creighton, Joan Larkin, and Ellen Shapiro, talk about the press's origins, growing pains, survival, and future plans.

Joan: Origins. In January 1975 I went to California carrying with me manuscripts of two books. One was an early version of *Housework*, the other a huge anthology of poems by members of my lesbian writers' support group. I visited Judy Grahn, then of the Women's Press Collective, and Alta of Shameless Hussy Press, naively assuming that one of them would *have to* want to publish the books. (*laughter*) But then I saw the courage and stamina of these women who had produced thousands of copies of beautiful books on the shakiest of material bases. Alta said, "Publish it yourself. I'll help you distribute it." What a gift that was! Her encouragement and support sent me home ready to research costs and techniques. I couldn't think of acquiring and running a press, so I had to find a printer.

Meanwhile, Elly Bulkin suggested we collaborate on *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology of Lesbian Poetry*. Jan Clausen and Irena Klepfisz, like me, had manuscripts, and within six months we had four books ready to print.

Jane: I remember the home-made light table you used to paste-up *Housework* on—a piece of plastic on top of bricks and a high-intensity lamp underneath that was making bubbles in the plastic.

Joan: Two of the books were typed; all of them had press-type covers (*Amazon Poetry* still has a wobbly title page). We printed 1000 copies of each book. The four author/editors each took turns filling orders—which we obtained through reviews and some fliers (again home-made) sent to addresses culled from *The New Women's Survival Catalogue*. The name "Out & Out Books" got invented because the Print Center told us we had to have a publisher's imprint.

Jane: When did you start seeing it as a publishing company and make the decision to publish other people's work?

Joan: I got a \$600 grant from CCLM [Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines] because I wanted to publish a book by Jacqueline Lapidus. We had gone to the same college but had been out of touch for fifteen years, and when I saw her poems in *Amazon Quarterly*, I wanted to know the story of her evolution into a lesbian/feminist poet.

At that point the other authors weren't interested in further publishing, though later of course they did found *Conditions*, along with Rima Shore. Perhaps their sense of the problems of running a business were more vivid than mine.

Ellen: Why did you want to go on?

Joan: My whole life had changed, was changing. I had come out publicly, which released all the energy I had wasted trying to pass as straight. And I had given up the idea that women's self-publishing had anything to do with

vanity presses. This was a big change for me, since I was then—as now—teaching in a college English department. And then the process itself of making a book has always interested me. And there was support from women all over the country. We sold the first thousand *Amazon Poetrays* in four months.

Ellen: Joan asked me to be her coeditor in 1977. There were periods when we worked with other women—

Joan: Ellen stuck around for more of the nitty-gritty than anyone else.

Ellen: True. Out & Out had unmet commitments and backed-up orders. But what was attractive to me was getting women's writing into print and working on the physical production of books. And there seemed to be a lot of room to try out new ideas. We heard Adrienne Rich's speech at the Lesbian Pride Rally [NYC, 1977], and it was literally floating off in the air, so it seemed a very good idea to document it. Then we thought about how many speeches and articles—very important things that women were writing and saying—were getting lost in the shuffle, until a whole series of pamphlets seemed to blossom in front of our eyes.

The pamphlets were a great idea from a production standpoint because they're short and quickly put together and you can get a real feeling of "hot off the presses." They're also inexpensive and focused. My vision is to have the pamphlet series cover a range of disciplines and viewpoints about where lesbian/feminism is going and where it's been. And by putting a lot of perspectives out there, I think we can help to break down the traditional ways that knowledge has been organized. I want the pamphlets to be purposely eclectic.

Joan: Jane, what made you want to join the press?

Jane: I had a good offer that I couldn't refuse. It would have been 1979 when you two approached me with a glass of wine and said, "We've discussed it and we were wondering if you'd consider stepping into the pack?" I considered, then leapt into it, though it was unclear just then where the press was going. But the time was ripe, as it were, in my history. I came out of the woods having done a lovely little poetry magazine for five years (*Sailing the Road Clear*) with very little sense of who might be reading it, other than a handful of cowboy poets and poets' poets scattered across the country. So going into feminist publishing meant, in a very personal way, moving from a world of post-Beat, post-Black Mountain poets—as I saw them, competent people separated from their inspirational source—into a context where writing once again exists to clarify and illuminate the activity of the world. I feel like I've left a ghetto.

Joan: Could we say something about our collaboration? We've agreed to empower one another to make decisions in each of our own spheres, which eliminates hours of hideous meetings and gives each of us the opportunity to get creative pleasure from what we do for the press. We do operate by consensus on financial and editorial decisions, but primarily, I've been working on distribution while you both have been working on production and design.

Ellen: The next phase is to make a contract with each other. Maybe we should list our responsibilities.

Jane: Right. That'll be our next publication: "Martyr List" by Out & Out Books.

Joan: But really, decision making has naturally fallen into an order which seems surprisingly strong. And a turning point came for the press when we decided to hire Laura about forty hours a month. [Laura Kramer, a published writer of short fiction and buyer for the now defunct Eighth Street Bookshop, is the office manager for Out & Out.] Laura's extensive experience with buying and selling books meant that we got enormous help in getting systems set up, and we actually established an office. This occurred just after we had gotten our first grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. And seventeen women writers gave a benefit reading for Out & Out in 1978. These things made all the difference. We had support from other women publishers, too: Judy Grahn, Coletta Reid, and June Arnold especially. Judy once told me, "Publishing is like pushing a train uphill!"

Ellen: Morale and economic support helped us to reorganize practically. We hired Laura and published a new catalogue. We did inventories, mailings, and accounts. We started cautiously to buy advertising.

Jane: It's important to say that we're paying our authors now, that the books are generating a little money beyond what's needed just to keep them in print. That's progress. When we started out, the authors had to raise the money themselves.

Ellen: We still donate our time, but we're looking forward to a day when less of what we do will be unpaid.

Joan: We really couldn't have survived without the support of those who have written and published reviews, and the women's bookstores who stuck with us in our chaotic period. It meant more to me than almost any other letter the press ever got when SisterWrite Bookstore in London wrote something like, "We assume you've been going through the usual growing pains of a women's business; we look forward to getting our order when you can ship it."

Ellen: We should say that we're not in a position where we can respond to unsolicited manuscripts. We just don't have the time. That's a real fact of life, and it isn't meant to be anything other than that.

Joan: I think that women see us as publishers of poetry, and while we are continuing our commitment towards poetry, our main emphasis in the future is going to be pamphlets.

Ellen: Is there anything else we want to say about poetry versus prose?

Joan: It's a false distinction now. I've just read Marilyn Hacker's sonnet sequence, *Taking Notice*. What could sound more archaic and literary than that? But actually it's a radical statement examining problems of relationships between women, so it's as political as a prose speech on history or philosophy.

Ellen: I would like the press to continue to publish a lot of different things and to demonstrate that those distinctions are not so solid.

Jane: Poetry and prose are different ways of thinking out the same problems, and what I love is to have the distinctions between those two forms stand up and coexist in a vivid way.

Ellen: What about definitions of lesbian writing?

Joan: When the press first started in 1975, Out & Out defined itself as an independent women's press with an emphasis on lesbian writing.

Ellen: I think that since 1975 there's been a real growth and diversity in the kind of issues covered by lesbian writers.

Joan: Do you mean there's a diversity in the way we define ourselves or

are you referring simply to a diversity in the concerns expressed in writing?

Ellen: Those are not unconnected, so it's hard to be specific unless we're dealing with specific pieces of writing. Maybe we could talk about how we tried to define lesbian/feminist writing a few years ago and how it looks to us now. It's a big question.

Joan: I think one small contribution is that since the publication of the first edition of *Amazon Poetry*, a large number of women whose work we couldn't include have now come to us with work for the next edition. This says something about larger numbers of writers feeling that the identification of themselves as lesbian has an important connection with the meaning of their work. The sense of its importance has made them willing to take the risks involved in that identification.

Ellen: It's wonderful that there seems to be a new kind of play with definitions of sexual identity. In 1975, the women's movement was still immersed in that first onrush. And along with that onrush was an essential attempt to define lesbians in a community of lesbians for purposes of strength, for purposes of survival, for purposes of presenting ourselves to an often hostile world. There's a letting go of some of the need to justify ourselves to the world. There's less defensiveness, and I think that's giving writers a real freedom because we don't have to care so much about acceptability. We can explore the subtle ways that lesbianism works and the whole range of thought and feeling that's within that definition. I want the press to mirror this with the kinds of writing we publish. I would like to encourage controversy.

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CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Evelyn Torton Beck teaches (among other things) courses in Lesbian Culture, the Jewish Woman, and Women in the Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She recently co-edited an anthology of feminist essays, *The Prism of Sex* (U. Wisc. Press, 1979), and is currently putting together an anthology on Jewish Lesbians, for use in Women's Studies classes, to be published soon by Persephone Press.

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Nancy Fried. "My work is about the celebration and documentation of lesbian love and life . . . It is the journal of my life."

Marilyn Frye is an older dyke, trained in the academy as a philosopher. She has the usual sordid past and uncertain future, an old car, a perfect cat, and an ambition not to become a Crone prematurely.

Joan Gibbs is a 27-year-old Black lesbian feminist and a member of the collective publishing *Azalea—a magazine by Third World Lesbians*. She is the author of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* and compiled with Sara Bennett *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community*. Her poetry has appeared in several lesbian publications. "Frankie" is from an unfinished collection of short stories, *A Gathering at the River*.

Barbara Grier is editor of Naiad Press, the largest feminist press in the United States. Their fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth books, published in 1980, are *The Black and White of It* by Ann Allen Shockley, *Lesbian Feminism in Turn-of-the-Century Germany* by Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson, and *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* by Pat Califia.

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Oriethya mountain crone is a writer living in Albany, N.Y. (and sometimes on the road). Her first book of poetry is *Love Song to the Warriors*.

Pagan is a bearded hag who never tires of seeing photos of The Great Haircut at the '79 Michigan Women's Music Festival. "Let's remember—like the snakes—to continue emerging into our new skins," she says.

Adrienne Rich's most recent book is *Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*.

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Susanna Sturgis is an occasional contributor to *off our backs*, the *Blade*, and *In Our Own Write*, the newsletter of the Washington Area Women's Center. Lesbian Heritage/D.C., a daughter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, is her primary nonwriting commitment.

Jacquelyn Zita now teaches in the women's studies program at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Joan Larkin is the author of a collection of poetry, *Housework*, a co-editor of *Amazon Poetry*, and a founder of Out & Out Books.

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—*Catherine and Harriet*

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