

Sinister Wisdom



Sixteen



SINISTER WISDOM 16

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

Founding editors: Harriet Desmoines & Catherine Nicholson

SW16 was produced in Lincoln, Nebraska,
by the following staff:

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Cover photographs by Deborah Alicen
Model: Sister Pooh

Printed by New Victoria Printers, Inc.,
Lebanon, New Hampshire

Publishers: Michelle Cliff & Adrienne Rich

SW16 is being distributed from
Amherst, Massachusetts, by the
new editors, Michelle Cliff and
Adrienne Rich.

*This issue was funded in part by a grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary
Magazines, with funds CCLM has received from the National Endowment for the
Arts.*

ISSN: 0196-1853

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Published quarterly

Individual subscriptions: 1 year (4 issues) \$10.00
2 years (8 issues) \$18.00

(For out-of-the-U.S. subs: \$12.00 for 1 year; \$21 for 2 years; U. S. dollars only)

Institutional subscriptions: 4 issues \$15.00

Supporting subscriptions: \$25.00 and up

Sample copy: \$3.10 (including postage)

NEW ADDRESS: SINISTER WISDOM, P.O.Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004

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Sex Is Always the Headliner

Introduction by Robin Ruth Linden

Karlene Faith's Journal: Summer 1972

Juanita has been morose all week since getting her write-up. It happened Tuesday night after our talk about race and sex and where it all connects. "I was really caught up in what we were talkin' about, and when I got to the cottage, I was following my girlfriend around, telling her about it. She's like family to me. When she went in to take a bath, I went in and sat on the side of the tub, just talkin' to her and washin' her back, like I do with my husband and kids at home. No big thing. The police came along and gave us a write-up for homosexuality—can you believe that? Most of these staff are really sick. Giving me a felony write-up just for talkin' to my friend and washin' her back."

*I first met Lorene months ago in the staff snack bar, where she was a waitress. She's a beauty. Tall, strong body, big bright black eyes, delicate braids circling her head, a smile to melt the heart. She wanted to know about the book I was reading, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, so I left it for her. She read it, loved it, we talked about it, and I started bringing her other things she wanted to read. After we'd talked only about books for a month, she started talking about her life—her addiction and arrests, her misery as a prostitute. And she talked about her dreams—getting out, finding work as a model, buying some decent furniture and a car, making a home with her girlfriend.*

Lorene's leaving tomorrow, and today she got a message to me asking me to meet her. She told me she had something important to say, and after a lot of hesitation she blurted out, "I've told you the truth about everything else, but you know my friend I talk about? How would you feel if you knew that we were . . . you know . . . I don't know how to tell you . . . I really love her. You know?"

I started to say that I'd assumed all along that she and her girlfriend were lovers, that she was a lesbian . . . But she protested, "No! I'm not a lesbian. I'm not homosexual. I'm just in love with this woman, don't you see?" It was the stigma, yet one more label, that she recoiled from. We talked for a long time about how to deal with fear and guilt in a world where other people make up the rules, even in matters of the heart. She said it was the first time she'd admitted that she loves a woman. I hope it isn't the last.

Introduction

In the late 1960s, when "women's liberation" was nascent and the anti-war movement was the focal point of American radical politics, a strong, anti-

My special thanks to Robin Linden for the incredible patience and inspiring and skilled editorial assistance which I received from her in preparing this piece for *Sinister Wisdom*.

racist prison resistance movement had begun to take root. Although "free" women were active in the movement's leadership, before the early 1970s there was little support or opportunity for women who had been incarcerated to speak publicly about their prison experience.

The stereotypes of women prisoners are forbidding. Social scientists have colluded with the media to create images of sadistic bull dykes who terrorize the entire prison community. Rarely have these stereotypes been recognized for the homophobia they embody and encourage.

The actual daily lives of people who are warehoused in "total institutions" like prisons and mental hospitals have traditionally been hidden from outsiders. During the 1970s, women in California made tremendous progress in gaining access to and accountability from the California Institution for Women (CIW), the state prison in Frontera, sixty miles east of Los Angeles. In 1980 access problems are no less serious. Nonetheless, over the past decade, we have succeeded in exposing the conditions of women's lives behind prison walls.

Karlene Faith is a lifetime community activist. In 1968 she began working with men and women caught up in the California criminal justice system. In 1972 Karlene broke new ground when she began to concentrate intensively on interviews and cultural support work with the women at CIW. Later that year she organized the Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, which, until 1976, brought hundreds of outsiders into the prison as volunteer participants in educational, political and cultural programs. The Prison Project developed a state-wide prisoner support network which still functions informally and through numerous offshoot organizations. In the early days of "women's music," Karlene worked with the *Women on Wheels* production of a concert tour of California. This tour brought the issue of prison access to the awareness of nearly 10,000 people, primarily women.

Karlene and I spent an afternoon talking about her work inside CIW as an interviewer-advocate-teacher-friend. . . . I told Karlene that when I first read her work on sexuality in prison I was amazed at the women's openness about their most intimate selves. Karlene explained that when she began interviewing at CIW, she hadn't expected that sexuality would be an ongoing matter of discussion:

Actually, I was reticent to bring up the subject of sexuality and relationships between women. For years male (and male-identified) social scientists have made a fetish out of homosexuality in prisons. The images they have produced, couched in academic language, have been seriously offensive to prisoners and have reinforced the worst homophobic stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. I didn't want to feed into that American obsession with sex. And yet in every conversation and interview, matters of intimacy between women came up in one context or another.

So there it was. Like everyone else; women in prison were interested in talking about sexuality. What they wanted, simply, was for their own truths to be told. Prisoners are the only true experts about life in prison—what it means to live behind cell bars, coiled razor and barbed wire fences, laser beams, electronic doors and guarded walls. What the rest of us can do is document their reality in so far as they choose to share it with us.

The following article is adapted from a chapter by the same title in *Curtains Over the Bars*, Karlene's book in progress.

Rules and Regulations of the Director of Corrections. Title 15 (Crime Prevention and Corrections), Article 1. Section 3007 (Sexual Behavior).

"Inmates may not participate in illegal sexual acts. Inmates are specifically excluded

in laws which remove legal restraints from acts between consenting adults. Inmates must avoid deliberately placing themselves in situations and behaving in a manner which is designed to encourage illegal sexual acts."

Norma: The institutional policy on homosexuality is "Don't Get Caught." Otherwise you get a write-up and disciplinary action. They can't officially condone it, even though it's no longer against the law on the outside. There's no such thing as rape in here, the way they play it up in books and movies. "Homosexuality in Prison!" They make it sound like prison invented it. If a woman cuts her hair, they figure she's turned gay. Sex is always the headliner.

Susan: I never felt threatened by it, nor did anyone ever express to me that they did. There were none of the horror stories you hear, or see in the movies. Stories of women being raped, having brooms stuck up them, held down, forced to do it. I never, never saw any intimidation to be involved sexually. I never saw or experienced it ever happening except between two consenting adult women who both wanted to become sexually close . . .

Juanita: Homosexuality in here isn't like the things you see on TV—S & M trips, shower stall rapes, the horrible things. My feelings about it have really changed since I've been locked up. We can talk about it with each other. We can respect each other. I have fears about it for myself, but hey, if that's what you want to do, I'm not going to look down on it. I wish people wouldn't look at it as dirty or nasty. If society didn't look on things that way, it could be accepted and not be a big thing.

Prisons frustrate every natural human need. The need for good food must be suppressed. The need for restful sleep must be allayed. The need for joyous work must be buried. The need for uncensored time with friends must be ignored. And the need for sexual comfort must be denied. But it doesn't work. To be deprived of life's sensory experiences is not to lose interest in them. To the contrary.

Upon admission to the state prison, each woman who is a "known" or suspected "homosexual" is labeled. During the time she is locked up, she will carry an "H on her jacket"—her official administrative file where the label is recorded. It is commonly estimated by "corrections" officials that between 15 and 20 percent of women prisoners are "true homosexuals." This figure is probably irrelevant, since many women are falsely labeled "homosexual" and other women who are lesbians go undetected.

Often, a new prisoner is labeled "homosexual" if her clothing or mannerisms appear "masculine." A woman can be coerced into confessing to be a "homosexual" if she is sufficiently harassed by the suspecting staff and/or psychiatrist. Or rumors of a prisoner's "homosexuality," either verbal or written, may be passed along the chain of law enforcement agencies that process her before she reaches the dead end of prison. There is often no formal verification of such rumors, and a woman—lesbian or not—may even be unaware that she has an "H on her jacket." Nonetheless, while in prison, many women will learn to love other women.

Susan: Probably more than 90 percent of the women here get involved in homosexual relationships—actually making love with another woman—whether just to try it once or twice, or to be involved in an ongoing way. Some women never encountered homosexuality before they came to CIW. Others, whether or not they were involved before CIW, learned about it in juvenile hall or county jails. And some have been lesbians for lifetimes.

Joann: I understand homosexuality now. I even respect it. Women become much closer in here than they would on the streets. Women like me who have been involved with men their entire life are thrown off into this institution with all these beautiful women—well, of course, prison breeds homosexuality. If you need something, there's no man to call, so you get closer to women than you would on the streets. In here a friendship can turn to love, even though outside it would just be a good, strong friendship. And after you get love, sex is just another step. You don't have to say, "C'mon, let's try it . . ." It just happens. I learned that I don't need men. A lot of women are with men because it's all they know. If I do find a man to be with when I get out, it will be strictly by my own choice.

One of the functions of prison is to cultivate submissiveness and dependency. Yet, for many women, being severed from any possibility of dependence on men is the first step toward independence of mind. Often, the emergence of self accompanies newly discovered intimacy with other women. As women learn to love other women, they may also learn to love themselves. And a woman's growing regard for her own body is often the key to this transition.

Sandra: My self-image was very low until four years ago when I came to prison. I've always felt self-conscious about my body, inadequate, and it distracted from my experience as a female. When I started menstruating, I thought it was because I'd been masturbating, and that I'd done something wrong. And there was so much stress placed on having large breasts and a tiny waist. I had neither and I felt flawed and guilty, somehow to blame. If my self-image had been better, I don't believe I would have kept on picking inferior men for partners. Since I've been here with women, I've been able to accept myself, and I've found freedom. I don't feel guilt anymore. I've been with the same woman all four years, and she has helped me overcome a lot of my guilt about myself.

Prison. Home to the birth of a freedom. Freedom from guilt.

Roberta: I never really liked women until I came here, I guess because I didn't like myself. We have so much time together, to really know each other. It's really something to have friends who know everything about you, and still like you. Until I came here, I was very ashamed of my body, but now I'm pretty damned proud of it. And I know now that there's nothing wrong with homosexuality. I'm a woman and now I'm proud of it. And I like to be with a woman who is also proud of it. It's time we all started listening to our own souls, instead of to all the perverted rules other people make up for us.

For women like Sandra and Roberta, learning to accept and love themselves is the great paradox of prison confinement.

Susan: A lot of women in here grew up always in subservient relationships—in relationship to the families they were raised in, to their jobs, to the men in their life. Then all of a sudden they're ripped from all their connections, ripped off from their husbands, ripped off from their children, and placed in prison on their own. Alone. They don't have these people, these men, to lean on or hide behind anymore. They're in interactions with people who are strangers. They don't know these other women. And they're forced to find out who they are. There's a whole lot of women who come to incredible realizations about who they are as people, and where their strengths really are, untapped sources of strength within themselves . . .

Even if women go back to their men, the relationships will have to change in a good way. A lot of times you get married when you're really young, and you have a couple of kids, and pretty soon you're not sleeping together except maybe once a month, and the woman's not being satisfied. Well, here she is in this situation where she gets into a relationship with another woman, and she finds out about her own sexual needs, her likes, her dislikes, because she's experiencing it with another woman. Sure a lot of women go back to men when they get out, but they have a stronger basis to struggle with them.

Female prisoners are often stereotyped as "stud broads"—women who from physical appearance might be easily mistaken for men. Yet probably less than 3 percent of the women I observed in the prison fit the "stud broad" stereotype—never more than twenty women in a population exceeding six hundred. Contrary to the images in homophobic research and the media, "stud broads" are no more likely than other women to be aggressive or hostile, and in fact they are often unusually quiet and gentle. As a group, these women command respect from other prisoners, as though they were men, and they are often the target of both positive and negative attention. Some "stud broads" recoil from playing the "butch" in relationships, while others act out the role with confidence and flair, making the most of their desirability to "femmes."

Susan: When you go around here, you see maybe four, five women in the whole prison who are righteous stud broads. Not very many. But those women really use sex to control other women. They perpetuate a lot of things that I don't think are good, like "you do the laundry, you get me a cup of coffee." They get these services by satisfying a woman sexually, which really trips me out.

I struggle against that kind of role playing because I don't think it's positive. But it's not the dominant thing that's happening. You find that the women who get involved with stud broads are usually ones that have a husband and think it's to their benefit to be dominated. What's the role of women in society? The women who are vulnerable to these kinds of relationships are those whose whole life experience made them think they were inferior. They need somebody to give them guidance for what they do in their life, somebody to tell them what to do. They need to be emotionally and sexually dependent.

What's real interesting to me is the difference in the sexual relationship of a stud broad and a woman, and just two women. Two women satisfy each other sexually. There's equal sharing of whatever's going on, whatever it is. The stud broad sometimes won't allow herself to be touched. She is then not vulnerable, the way men are not supposed to be . . . But not a lot of women are into role playing.

"Jailhouse Turn-Out" (JTO) is prison vernacular for a woman who has her first sexual experience with another woman while she is incarcerated. Her unguarded enthusiasm and openness about her new sexual discoveries are often offensive and painful to older lesbians who must live with the "H" stigma.

Kathryn: If you're unfortunate enough to have homosexual on your record, your life is really miserable. I'm one of those with an "H on my jacket," so I'm really considered a detriment to the prison society, even though I live very quietly in here. And yet they'll let these jailhouse turn-outs come in here

and move in with their latest trick and carry on, conducting themselves in a disgraceful manner all over the campus. Yet someone who has been homosexual for years comes in here, and they're immediately set upon to change to a "better way of life."

They told me if I was ever caught in my room with a woman, I'd go to rack (solitary deprivation). It would go with me to the board and hold up my (release) date. I'm not in here for being a lesbian, but you'd think I was because of the way they carried on about it when I went to the board for my time. They didn't talk to me at all about my crime, which involved a great deal of money. They talked to me about my homosexuality. I really don't think they understand about love. They don't understand two people just loving each other. It has to be something nasty, and it has to be physical. All love isn't physical.

Norma: Before coming here I had talked with myself and admitted the entire truth about being a woman who loves women, and in doing so I no longer felt guilty or wrong. But this place is full of phonies trying to imitate homosexuals. If I was younger, they would make me feel ashamed of being what I am. I've seen so many one-sided affairs, getting someone involved with them, really in love, then dropping that person to move on to another.

Just a small percentage of women enter this place as real sure-enough lesbians. The rest are playing a game, and I can't prostitute myself or them. I don't need sex to the point where I just gotta have a woman. A relationship has to be on a high plane before I can enjoy the sex side of it. It's hard to find someone to hit it off with so you can have a happy relationship. It's like it is anywhere when you're new and alone. You don't just walk into a new situation and find someone you can love and live with. I've found out that there are lots of things to do with energy, and sex is just one of them.

Being "butch" in here requires that I think twice on every word and action that could possibly have any significance regarding another woman. Inmates and staff pick up real quick on it if I talk to the same woman too often. Lest it be overheard, I can't say out loud that I "love" someone. They try to make you feel base and degraded, and I know I'm neither.

These women who come in here and pretend to be butches are damned repulsive to me. If you know who and what you are, you don't need to signify. I know that as a woman I can offer a fuller life to another woman than a man can, for the simple reason I can understand her. If you really care for somebody, you might want to just touch them. And men don't seem to know how to do that. With a woman neither of us needs to pretend or hold back our desires. We can be exactly what we are—two women experiencing deep, heartfelt and soul-shaking emotions. There's so much more to homosexual love than sex.

When I remember my love, I think of intimate conversations; two heads bent together studying a small seashell; lying in bed late on Sundays with the coffee pot, TV and Sunday paper; dressing up together and stepping out now and then, knowing we made a striking pair and laughing at befuddled males; walking in the house after a long work day with contentment flooding over the tension and the tiredness; not being able to afford a whole dozen red roses, so I bought just one, and she cried.

Lobotomies, electroshock therapy, aversion therapy and chemotherapy have

often been employed as “cures” for “homosexuals” in state and federal prisons. Such extreme physical torture in the name of “treatment” for homosexuality is currently going out of fashion, especially in women’s institutions. Concerned activists and their (few) allies among mental health professionals have had some success in getting the courts to prohibit such forms of “cruel and unusual punishment.” It is only slightly reassuring to know that psychosurgery, for example, cannot legally be performed without the “informed consent” of the “patient”/prisoner. However, psychological coercion is still a primary method of controlling “undesirable” behavior. And just as the tradition in this country’s prisons was to segregate African-Americans, so have “homosexuals” often been separated from the other prisoners. It is a tradition, in most societies, to isolate those who are feared.

Annie: When I was at the Los Angeles County Jail they had a “Daddy Tank” where they put all the women they think are lesbians in the same cell block. They crowd two or three women into cells built for one. Women in the Daddy Tank can’t have contact with any of the other women in the jail, can’t go anywhere without an escort, have to sit in the back row if there’s a movie. All the Daddy Tank women are assigned to the laundry night shift. You’re totally ostracized, night and day. And you always have to be careful to not have any physical contact with each other, not even holding hands.

I figured that if these nazis are so opposed to us, we must be okay. How can you respect the opinions of people who are so uptight and cruel, always hassling, accusing, talking obscene, looking for new ways to punish you, taking your good time, putting you in solitary—the whole bit. It was pretty obvious to me that the guards in that jail were the ones who were really sick. They said I was sick because I wanted to be close to my friend, and since she was the one person who I knew really cared about me in there, it just didn’t make any sense. I admit I had my own funny ideas about homosexuals before I went to jail that first time. I had to learn the hard way that it’s not homosexuals who are sick and hung up around sex; it’s the ignorant people who are out to get them.

Nonetheless, “staff” is responsible for deciding whether and when to punish a woman for engaging in “Physical Contact,” the official sign that “homosexuality” might be lurking just around the corner.

Rosanna: Homosexuality is technically against all the rules, and oral sex will get you three years tacked onto your time. But any PC—physical contact—can be considered homosexual by the staff. I’d been close to the same partner for over a year before they busted us one day for being in a “compromising” position. We were sitting on the steps talking, with our arms on each other’s shoulders. If they’d been on the ball, they could have caught us long ago in a real compromising situation. They’re lazy about it, at least some of them some of the time. It’s like they wait ‘til they’re in a bad mood, and then they start busting everybody. We touch each other all the time, all of us. It’s nice. But it’s an easy thing for them to catch somebody in a PC, and it’s a handy threat for them to always be holding over our heads.

Each time a prison rule is broken by one or more prisoners, the staff is supposed to write up a report. A “write-up” is equivalent to police arrest, and depending on the seriousness of the “crime,” it is considered either a misdemeanor or a prison felony. Physical Contact in prison is a felony action. If a woman is written up, her punishment will be determined at a disciplinary

hearing.

There are many rules within a prison and there are many prisoners. It is not possible for the harried staff to observe and write up every rule infraction. Write-ups are made arbitrarily and erratically.

A woman who is written up for Physical Contact may simply be scolded and warned that the next time she will be severely punished. She may be ordered to avoid all contact with her close friend. She may be sent to solitary confinement, i.e., rack. She may be required to be "counseled" by a chaplain or psychologist, who may attempt to "help" her understand her "sinfulness" or her "sickness," whether or not she wishes to be "saved" or "cured." To help women overcome their "wickedness" or "deviance," some of these male "counselors" may offer "sex therapy." The most serious threat or punishment is loss of good time or time added to the original sentence.

Susan: Either you throw abandon to the wind and hope you don't get caught—you never know when the pig's gonna walk down the hall and make a surprise check—or you have a pinner. A pinner is somebody who sits out in the hall, and when the cop starts walking down the hall, she whistles or gives some other high sign that tells you you have about 20 seconds to get up and be presentable. Which means you're never completely naked, you're never able to just relax in each other's arms, to get completely involved in making love. There is always the tension involved. But people manage in spite of it. Women are able to comfort each other emotionally and physically. To hold each other, to touch and be gentle and listen and care. To love each other. In a prison situation that is a very beautiful thing.

Everybody knows what a relationship is, and sex is not the primary part of any relationship, and it isn't in prison either. Sex is a very important part of a relationship—when all the barriers are gone, and you're really exposed to another person. But what is more primary is the friendship, how you share dealing with the world. Somebody to face this madness with.

Trust and loyalty between close friends can be severely tested by the constant threat and danger which accompany intimacy inside prison. However, the challenges a woman faces in forming bonds with other women, both in and out of prison, can also be strengthening. Nowadays, when a woman is released from prison, there is a women's community that awaits her.

Gino: Ten years ago I was thrown in jail three times for wearing "men's" clothes. Now I wear what I want and no one's busting me for it, and I attribute the change to women on the streets who have been fighting for women's rights, for lesbian rights. It was real hard when I first came out of prison, it's always real hard. But getting in touch with the women's movement has made a big difference to me, and I'm so happy it's come about. Job resources, health care, women's coffeehouses—there was never anyplace like that before. Now there's a whole community. I used to have to sneak around to be a lesbian, and it was just like being in prison. Now I can be a lesbian and still deal with men at work, and it's great to be able to do that. Equal rights means that now I can get a job working with machinery, working with and beside men, and it's okay. I know we've got a long way to go, and whether you're a convict or a free sister, we've all got our work cut out for us. But the war's on, so fasten your seat belts.

Yesterday, I was called to an urgent meeting with the warden and three of her highest ranking subordinates. Staff had reported to them that I've been observed kissing women (prisoners) who greet my arrivals at the institution, and the nervous administrators wondered if I realize the seriousness of such behavior. I tried to explain that where I come from kisses and embraces are healthy and natural exchanges of affection, but they reminded me of the institution's rules and warned me to use better judgment in the future.

People die from not being loved, and from not loving, and unloved and unloving people become dead social weight long before they meet the grave. When such people are in positions of power, they endanger our lives and our freedoms. Moral responsibility demands that we protect ourselves against them and their ideas. As I listened to the prison authorities reprimand me, I felt sad for them. I could feel no love from them, only fear. And I rejoiced in my heart for the hundreds of women I had known in their prison who would never be so firmly imprisoned as the keepers of the keys.

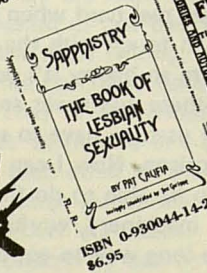
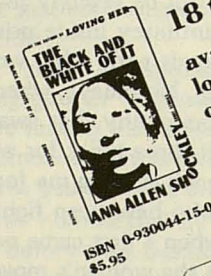
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Look Me in the Eye

Cynthia and I decided to go on the March to Take Back the Night. It wasn't a decision we came to easily. The notice hung on the refrigerator door for weeks. Cynthia mentioned it from time to time and I had a vague feeling of dragging my feet, of never really saying I wanted to go but never saying I didn't. So when the evening came and we were having dinner, I knew that I had better decide how I did feel about marching or I was going to have to get up from the table, put on my coat, and go with her.

Finally, I said I didn't think the march was the right method to use for what women wanted to accomplish. "I agree with Melanie Kaye,"* I said. "Men don't take us seriously because they don't have to. Men don't take us seriously because they aren't physically afraid of us. Men rape women because they can."

"But, Barbara, the only way to draw attention to what is happening is for women, by the thousands, to get out there in the streets and shout to the world, 'We won't put up with this violence any longer.'"

"How will shouting that you won't put up with it any longer change anything? I agree with Kaye. Men rape because they can. To go out into the streets to say that we are being raped and murdered—what does that accomplish?" For the first time it occurred to me to ask myself and to put the question to Cynthia: "What is the purpose of the march? What do we hope the march will do?"

Cynthia reached for *Equal Times* and read me her answer. "Because the night is our time of greatest fear, a time when many women are confined to their homes for fear of attack on the street, we march at night to say together, we will fight our fear, we will take back the night."

"But Cynthia, aren't the women just bluffing? What do we mean fight our fear? A woman has to be out of her mind or plain stupid not to be scared to death on the street at night. And what do we mean take back the night? We're in no position to take back anything. You can't demand without power. I suspect the march is based on some hope that society doesn't really know the facts about violence against women and that when society has the facts it will correct the wrong. You know they won't. The facts are evident all around us. Everybody knows that women are not safe because of men's violence, and telling them again won't change anything. More than that, I think that to march through the streets saying that you are being murdered and raped and that you aren't safe except on one night in the year with several thousand women to protect you is to invite more violence. Since we have no power—all the marchers are really doing is pleading for mercy."

I always try to win an argument by throwing in a lot of words and flailing my arms around, but Cynthia didn't raise her fork or her voice. "Barbara, everything women do invites violence. We can't let others go out and not stand with them, and we need numbers, especially because it's going to rain tonight.

*"Women and Violence," *Sinister Wisdom* 9 (Spring 1979)

Besides, you need the exercise.” Cynthia’s last thrust was to remind me that neither of us had really walked since we got back from the summer. I agreed I needed the exercise, so we put on our rain gear and headed for the subway.

By the time we arrived at Kenmore Square I was into the spirit of the thing, and as we lined up, six in a row, I recalled some of Cynthia’s earlier arguments for coming. “Maybe just because it’s good for the women who are there is reason enough for going, even if it doesn’t accomplish anything else,” and I found myself silently agreeing that it was reason enough.

Women were dressed in somber colors—parkas, capes, and slickers because of the rain. Kenmore Square was dark except for a few lights from the closed shops reflected on Commonwealth Avenue’s dark wet pavement. We were lined up along the edge of the center green so as not to block traffic while we waited for the march to begin.

Monitors carrying flashlights, dressed in bright yellow slickers and hoods, moved like monks down dark corridors, back and forth along the lines, giving instructions, advising us about how long the wait would be, reminding us to watch out for the curb when we stepped into the street as we would be marching in close ranks and unable to see the curb ahead. One of the marshals who had been assigned to our ranks and who was to march with us throughout the march blew her whistle to give us our instructions: to keep our ranks closed; if men tried to enter our ranks, to say nothing, but to join arms and partition him out to the side so that he could not enter. She cautioned us, “Try not to touch the men because that incites them.”

So we are six abreast, Cynthia on the outside, and we are waiting to start when it occurs to me that there just might be a rough encounter. I don’t know why I did it, maybe some of the old dyke left over in me from the ‘30s, but anyway, I thought, having lived twenty years longer, I had probably seen a lot more fracas than Cynthia had, so as we milled around in the dark impatiently waiting, I moved over to the outside. Cynthia was unaware for a few moments, then realized the switch, laughed and took her place back.

Then a man walked by with leaflets telling us that the real oppressor was not men but capitalism, and I was about to ask him what the hell he thought the difference was when I remembered our instructions and feeling like a race horse waiting at the gate, I snorted, stamped my feet and waited.

I felt the exhilaration, the oneness with the women around me, the sense of at last doing something instead of passively grinding my teeth with anger, as I do every morning when I pick up the *Globe* to see what woman was murdered the night before. I felt the energy of the Wanderground, the conviction that the war was real and the Day would come.

I don’t know exactly when I sensed that something was wrong and noticed that Cynthia was no longer beside me but a few feet away where the monitor was talking to her. I joined them. At first the conversation was not clear to me, and I glanced at Cynthia’s face for some clue. There was none. The monitor was at first evasive and then chose her words with care, “If you think you can’t keep up, you should go to the head of the march.” Gradually, I took in, like a series of blows, what the situation was, that the monitor had thought that because my hair is grey, because I am sixty-five and because I look sixty-five, I might be unable to keep up; that her concern was that I might, if slower, leave a gap between the ranks in which men might try to enter; and that she could not say this to me. I stepped directly in front of the monitor for eye-

to-eye contact to force her to talk to me instead of about me, saying only to Cynthia, "She means me, Cynthia." I faced the monitor with rage. "You have got to be kidding; I don't believe this." My fists were clenched at the injustice as I felt the all too familiar wave of helplessness and fury engulf me. Then, in the glow of the flashlight, I saw the monitor's face and heard her words of discomfort and confusion. She said that she was sorry, that she had not known what to do, whether to say anything to me or not, and finally she had asked others if she should. She wanted to apologize. I said it was all right but it wasn't all right. Sometimes I wonder if it will ever be all right.

She went back to her monitoring and I tried to go back to where I had been in my head before the encounter. Back to the exhilaration, back when I was feeling and remembering Cynthia's words, "If the march doesn't accomplish anything else, it is good for the women doing it." But there was no way back. I took my place beside Cynthia but I knew that this march could not be good for me. The monitor came back to me a second time, she wanted to apologize again, she explained that she had not known what to do. I assured her I understood that she had not known what to do. For at that moment, I did not know, myself, what I thought she should have done.

We continued to wait in the darkness but nothing was the same. I felt the old caution I used to feel entering a bar, not knowing whether or not it was a men's-only bar—the dread of being told I did not belong there. With the same furtiveness, I now glanced at the women around me, at the six women in the rank ahead of me. We had been laughing together earlier at the man who wanted to convince us that capitalism was our oppressor; at least, I had thought we were laughing together—now I wondered. I looked at the women in the row behind me. I wondered how I looked to them. My short stature, my grey hair, my wrinkled face—I wondered how sixty-five years looked to them. And finally I looked at the four other women who were to walk beside me. I wondered how they felt about being with me. I wondered if I should take the arm of the woman next to me and tried to remember the instructions, but all I could recall was my shock and shame, hearing the monitor's words, "If you can't keep up, go to the head of the march," hearing once more that I was a problem and did not fit. All my life in a man's world, I was a problem because I was a woman; now I'm a problem in a woman's world because I'm a sixty-five-year-old woman. Hearing once more that I was not in the right place and thinking, "If not here, where?"

Finally, we heard the signal to start and with hesitancy I took the arm of the woman next to me. I wondered if she had some idea that I needed her support. God knows I needed hers and everybody else's, but not for walking; my rage alone would have carried me twenty miles and a foot off the pavement.

The march was a strange scene from where I was. We passed through blocks of dark apartment houses where only scattered lights indicated anyone was home. It felt more like marching through an empty city in which only a few people were left. In front of many of the apartment buildings, four or five men stood outside together and the women could be seen at the windows above, some waving, some not.

I chanted with the rest:

We have the power
We have the right
The streets are ours
And we'll prove it tonight

But I heard the lie in my own voice.

We are angry, proud and strong
Freedom is our righteous song.

I studied the wet pavement under my feet and tried to get some hold on what had happened. I wondered how to feel proud and strong when women around me were telling me I was weak. I wondered how I looked to other people, and I kept feeling my own muscles and reassuring myself, "Barbara, you don't feel very weak to me." I wondered what Cynthia was feeling, and I wondered if I would ever have the confidence to make love to her again.

At one point, hating myself and the women around me, I found myself wishing some of the grinning men on the curb would start something so I could put my fist in somebody's face. I shouted:

Puerto Rican, Black and White
Same struggle, same fight

and I wondered where I came in. I was tired of young women who could not look me in the eye, of the monitor who could talk about me but not to me. I was tired and distrustful of a woman's movement that seemed to feel everyone's oppression but mine, and I wondered why in hell I was there.

Sometimes as we were marching, I would look at some woman leaning out of her apartment window and I would think, "Why don't you get some guts and come on out and join us?" But then I would think, "Don't come out if you're over sixty; the greeting you get will send you right back in again."

We finished the march and hung around Blackstone Park for awhile. Some woman with a tape recorder for New England Today, a radio program, stopped and asked if Cynthia and I would comment on the march. I said that I wished more women had come out of their houses, but in the back of my mind I was wondering, "Why did this woman ask me? Does she want the Older Woman's Viewpoint?" Finally, we took the subway home.

But I was left with the experience—with the rage that had no place to go. I could see no way to put the anger on the monitor, and I fought not to put it on my aging body. I recalled the monitor's face above her flashlight, sincere in her discomfort and apology—that she "had not known what to do." I tried to look at it from where she was. What could she do? The ranks were expected to stay close together in order that men could not enter. There might be a lot of women who could not keep up. And how could she know whether they could or not without asking? And why should I find her assumption that I might not be able to keep up so painful?

Repeatedly, I told myself that there would be nothing wrong with being physically weak. Lots of people are. If it does not happen to be true of me now, it will be true of me soon. If I have pride in my strength now, it is false pride and if I feel shame in my lack of strength later, I will have let someone else in my head for the rest of my life.

I would go over it all again in my mind. The monitors were looking for women who would march slower, I told myself, and I looked sixty-five and they picked me. But why me? Out of five thousand women there must have been thirty about to come down with the flu, fifty suffering from a hangover, and at least a hundred who were going to get a blister on their heel before the march was over. So why me? If you are a woman about to come down with the flu or your head is bursting with a hangover, you will either decide not to march to have sense enough to quit. Why can't it also be assumed that

if a sixty-five-year-old woman doesn't feel up to a march, she won't choose to march? I still come to only one conclusion: the monitor didn't pick me out because I looked weak; she picked me out because she believes that a sixty-five-year-old woman lacks judgment about what she can do. She thought I did not perceive the situation and that I did not know what I was doing.

We had chanted:

Our bodies, our lives
Our right to decide.

Did she think I had no right to decide?

Sixty-five is older—that's true. Sixty-five may be slower—that's also true. But who should know more about what sixty-five can do than the woman who is living it? All our lives we look over a situation and decide whether or not to participate according to our ability. From six to ninety-six, we measure our strength and our agility for the situation at hand. Why did the monitor assume that I had suddenly lost that ability at sixty-five?

One may reply to this that it is well known that very old people lack judgment. I'm not willing to accept even that general statement. Lots of people lack judgment—drunk people, psychotic people, plain happy excited people—but old and lacking judgment don't go together—old and cautious sometimes do. When I was young, it seemed like everybody over thirty thought, "The young lack judgment." Now I'm sixty-five, and the women in their thirties think I lack judgment, and I am not about to go through that round for a second time without examining very carefully this movement that is rejecting me.

As I thought about it, I could see that the women's movement, the second wave, has just come of age; she is barely twenty-one. She is made up largely of young women in their twenties and thirties who are concerned with their physical strength as well as their political strength. And well they should be. For the generations of women who came before them were considered by men to be weak (despite considerable evidence to the contrary), and women, as a result, viewed themselves as weak, thus limiting the development of their bodies even more. Physical weakness, all too soon, was equated with being mentally inferior and women were segregated out of the mainstream of power, put on a pedestal or at the head of the line, where the "weaker sex" was in even a greater position of vulnerability.

But the young women who make up the movement today are physically stronger and want to feel their physical strength. They are jogging, running in marathons, working out in gyms to build up muscle, practicing karate and judo, and, it seems, the young women are beginning to worry about what to do with other women they consider "weak." And again the equation is quickly made that physically weaker is mentally weaker, and the next thought is to separate them out. (Put them at the front of the line.)

I could see that, in another setting, I might not have felt the humiliation and, later, the fear so acutely. But this march was a march to say, "We are strong and we will not be victimized by men." So the message of the younger woman, "You are older and weak," I could only hear as, "You make us vulnerable by your weakness. You are the weak link in our strong chain, so go to the front of the line."

Later, as I began to internalize the message and to hear it from within instead of from without, my fear grew. I saw that I lived in an unsafe world as

all women do. Male violence is everywhere. But at a time when young women are building up physical strength to combat the violence, I am growing older and will be growing weaker. On a dark street, hearing footsteps behind me, I will be less able to run, less able to ward off a weapon or a fist, and less able to call out and be heard. My fear of such a scene paralyzed me.

Alone, I examined my predicament. As I took in the inevitability of my becoming less and less able to protect myself, all I could feel was a kind of hopelessness and panic. But then I did what I have always done in my life when I had to face some given, some painful reality that cannot be changed, that will not go away, that must be lived with in some way. And I thought, "Then I will yield to this fear. If it is something that must be, then it must be and I will not fight what I know I cannot win with." But as the panic began to subside, it dawned on me that men have always been stronger than I was. This was no new experience that was going to come with aging. Men were stronger than I was when I was in my twenties and in my thirties and in my forties, and it would never have occurred to me in those years to give up without a fight. I realized that my feelings of shame grew out of the fear that I would not fight—that I would betray myself. In place of the fear came old primitive knowledge, animal knowledge. The knowledge of the animal who lives her life out; who, blind with age, will smell and feel her way to the end of life. Who, old and blind, with her back to the wall, will face the enemy, bare her teeth and inflict whatever wound she can on animal or man, twice her size, who thinks he has come upon some easy prey. As long as she has strength left, she will not feed the enemy; not one more meal from her flesh will she give to strengthen him.

Thus I healed myself and could feel whole again, connected to my aging body, wanting to live my life out in partnership with it, without feelings of humiliation because of its difference, and without the fear that I would so want to disclaim it that I would fail to protect it.

Although much of what happened to me in the march is resolved for me, I am still angry at the ageism in the women's movement. I am angry at what it does to me and at what it must be doing to many other women of my age. It also makes me distrustful of the movement itself, as it seems to me that such ageism, entrenched in the minds of the women of this second wave, must be some indication of the degree to which we have all internalized male values.

And then I began to wonder: Where are the Susan B. Anthonys, the Carrie Nations, the Pankhursts today? These post-menopausal women were marching all over the place a hundred years ago, and no one was asking them if they could keep up. It was then I realized that this is probably the first time in history that the mass of rebelling angry women are so young. In the first wave in this country and in England, angry women in mid-life and older were marching and visible. In the photographs in Emmeline Pankhurst's *My Own Story*, I see older women marching with younger women, and older women were smashing windows and setting fires all over London, and women in mid-life and older were going to prison and going on hunger strikes and being forced.

Emmeline Pankhurst was fifty-nine when she marched to King's Gate and was arrested. Six years earlier she describes the evening the deputation marched with their petition to the prime minister:

Then our deputation set forth. Accompanying me as leader were two

highly respectable women of advanced years, Mrs. Saul Solomon, whose husband had been the Prime Minister of the Cape, and Miss Neligan, one of the foremost of the pioneer educators of England. We three and five other women were preceded by Miss Elaine Howey, who, riding fast went on horseback to announce our coming.

Thus I suspect it would have been unheard of in the first wave to stop an older woman in a march and question her about whether she could keep up.

It is probably evidence of our growth and increasing strength that for the first time younger women make up the mass of the second wave. Made possible for the first time because young women are more knowledgeable than they were a hundred years ago, better read and with more literature to read than ever before, and freer because the younger woman of today is not caught in enforced heterosexual coupling until much later in her life and may, in fact, not choose heterosexuality. A hundred years ago, much of the radical feminist political action was probably not visible to most young women, who were in domestic servitude or were already burdened with unwanted pregnancies and small children, and unable to read and with no way out. This increased visibility of young women is certainly due in part to the efforts of the older women of the first wave.

But the primary reason that the second wave is made up of young women is that the second wave rose out of a different time in patriarchal history—it rose out of a time of a patriarchally supported white middle-class youth culture. This important difference in the two waves is not one that I can dismiss lightly with the popular observation that emphasis on youth neglects an older population. That is to trivialize what has been taking place since the first wave and the development of the youth culture. It does not make clear to me what happened to me in the Boston march; it does not explain to me why I do not have eye-to-eye contact with younger women as I enter my mid-sixties, and it does not explain to me what happened to the older feminist activists who were such an important part of our earlier history.

In the first wave, when the angry older women were marching, most women were slaves to their husbands, as were his children whom he could put to work in factories and mines and into domestic servitude as soon as they were strong enough. The mother had no real power over her life and no real power over the lives of her children. But it was profitable for the father to give the mother authority over the children. In his absence, she represented his authority and kept the children in subjection. Frequently she was beaten by her husband for her children's insubordination, and she in turn beat the children to keep them in line.

But with the advent of child labor laws and children's rights, the father lost power over his children. Out from under the father's tyranny, the children were a burden and an expense instead of a source of income, and they became the woman's problem. The mother still had the care of the children, but now she had to try to control them without the father's power. Once the father had said to the mother, "I want them fed; feed them. I want them clothed for the workplace; clothe them. I want them God-fearing and industrious; teach them. I want them obedient; beat them." But now it was not in the father's interest to control the children, and he did not transfer his power to the mother; instead, she was left powerless to protect herself from their battering demands. The children out from under the tyranny of the father's rule

were free in their own way to tyrannize the powerless mother. Now it was the children, who borrowed power from the father, who were saying to her, "Feed me, clothe me. Buy me everything. The fathers say you must." And indeed the fathers are saying clearly, "The children must have everything. If you are a good mother, your children's laundry will be Downy soft and perfumed. You will tempt your children's appetites and feel pride to hear them demand, 'More sausages, Mom.' You will send them out in white clothes to play in the mud to prove that you know how to wash their clothes cleaner than the woman next door. You will make sure the environment your children live in is scrubbed, polished, sanitized and odorless. You will wipe their noses and bottoms with the softest tissue in the world, all the time rubbing your hands in lotion so your callouses and red cracks won't feel rough on your children's soft skin."

It seems to me that never in such a few years has the patriarchy been able to develop a new elite leisure class of consumers and a slave class to serve them—an elite class that stays out of the job market and does not threaten the father's job, but consumes endlessly to ensure his job.

A hundred years ago, the mother's value to the Fathers was that she raised God-fearing industrious children who could bring income into the family until they left the home. Now the mother's value to the Fathers is that she raises children to expect the best, to be good consumers, to remain as children as long as possible and out of the job market, and she hopes that society will value her for how well she serves them. The elitism of the children is still exploitation of the children. Now, instead of the exploitation by the single father, it is the exploitation by the collective Fathers. But the woman is still slave, and now she has two masters to serve.

The evidence is all around us that youth is bonded with the patriarchy in the enslavement of the older woman. There would, in fact, be no youth culture without the powerless older woman. There can be no leisure elite consuming class unless it is off the back of someone. The older woman is who the younger women are better than—who they are more powerful than and who is compelled to serve them. This is not true of men; older men still have power, power to be president, power to be Walter Cronkite, and power to marry younger women. Men are not the servants of youth; older women are.

The lines between the powerful and the powerless have always had to be very clearly drawn, and nowhere is this more evident than in the clothes of men, the young, and women. The clothes of the young woman are designed to, at least, give the illusion of power and freedom, and the clothes of the older woman are designed to make her look sexless, dowdy, and separated from the rest of society. Little boys and young men for high occasions dress fashionably like older men, in suit and vest, but no young woman dresses fashionably by imitating the dress of older women.

It becomes more clear that the present attitude of women in their twenties and thirties has been shaped since childhood by patriarchy to view the older woman as powerless, less important than the fathers and the children, and there to serve them both; and like all who serve, the older woman soon becomes invisible.

From the back of the house to the front of the march is not that different—both result in invisibility. In a march of five thousand women, all you have to do is separate out the women in their sixties; and unless the observer happens

to see the first few lines of the march, she watches five thousand women go by and is left with the impression that there is not a sixty-year-old woman among them.

I watched the 80 Women to Watch in the 80's go by in *Ms.* magazine last month, and I learned that there are only six women in their fifties worth watching and only one woman in her sixties worth watching. That's invisibility.

I find the whole line-up of women to watch in the 80's very patriarchal, and I would prefer not to see it at all. But worse, *Ms.* magazine asked older women to make the selection, a selection that excluded them. That's one way to get permission to oppress—ask the older woman, not to be co-equal, but to step aside for the younger woman. Sheila Tobias stepped aside by saying, "Established women have the responsibility to boost others. One reason the first wave of feminism died out is that it failed to create new leaders."

To me something in her statement smacks of maternal self-sacrifice and invisibility: the young women asked Tobias to make herself invisible and she made herself invisible. Nor do I think that the first wave of feminism died because the women failed to create new leadership. I think it died because the women decided to put their own needs aside to help the good old boys win a war; and when they got ready to take up the struggle again, they discovered they were slave to two masters.

Given the nature of the question put to Tobias, it is not surprising that she responded in patriarchal language: the word *boost* suggests help on "the way up," someone on the bottom boosting another to a higher level. Such an image conjures up the possibility that the one being boosted may well have her foot on the booster. Such a word seems a long way from the beginnings of this second wave that consciously avoided hierarchical structure.

I hurt that the committee who selected the eighty women to watch tells me that I am invisible, that no sixty-five-year-old woman is still in process and worth watching; but they give no better message to the women pictured there in their forties, as it must be plain to them that they will be invisible in ten years, in their fifties and sixties.

Several months have gone by since Cynthia and I went to the Boston march, and I only begin to see how I came to be there at sixty-five in this particular time in our history and how the monitor came to be there. I only begin to see who we both are and how men are still defining our feelings about ourselves and each other.

I WANT MY ACCENT BACK

Halloween, October 31, 1979

for Cindy, my sister, and for Cher'rie Moraga Lawrence, also my sister

i

it is cold in Rhode Island today. Here San Francisco blooms blue
and gold/sunlight burns

it is the last day of the old year. tonight
we share the Feast of the Dead begin the silence the move into dark
toward winter light.

I have been dressed in black for days
I am finally getting ready to mourn
my difference from you.

ii

it turned out so dry here, cindy. beached
on a clay that slips with my own wetness i deluded
in the movement i moved
away and away and away. queer
how the beach kept receding queer
how there was never a way to hold
on to the changes
all around me
and never
a name that would make sense queer

iii

my first class
way of being
had no accidents. it never fit me before, so now that I know how to say
working
class it don't fit no better. and the word "token," like a light bulb
peeling apart from its center strips lonely white glare from lonely white
glare until
only a thin
tung
sten wire remains.

I can't lie to you.
we laughed together too many times; plotted
escape too trustingly took too many baths in the same
used water. Seventeen years
we shared a room
though I never saw you naked.

there is no escape. I am wired to you like sound
putting on airs
is impossible

iv

Radcliffe College, Class of 1976, *magna cum laude*.
Stanford University, *graduate studies*.
currently pursuing PhD at California. Publications.

I never knew we had an accent.
My first week of college, sitting on the floor
with Andover and Exeter and Taft,
stoned, I said,
“nawh wida than a bon doah.”
Andover turns to me, be
mused: “What
is a ‘bon doah’? A musical instrument . . .?” I laugh nervously. . . casually—
“you know, the doah of a bon.” Andover laughs: *a barn door*. A good natured
hearty chuckle the others join in pahk the cah in havad yahd the conversation
turns

by 9:00 the next morning my accent disappeared. except
when I talk too fast, or to you
my soft r’s my dull t’s my idears
are invisible I clip
my speech

and when I have tried to imitate a New England accent
my tongue stumbles: it comes out Southern or British. I have sat
in my room
nights trying to get it back
face burning girl
help me goddam it help me get it right
talk to me. talk to me.
talk to me.

v

get your nose out of that book. get some fresh air.
what happens in those books is not the reality. Just because you read
about it doesn’t mean it’s so. Your father and I have been around
longer than you have, don’t be so smart.
my nose is stuck in this book. It seems to be some kind of
epoxy I tug and tug there’s blood on the pages I can’t read the writing anymore
my whole face is flattened into white paper
print on me.

vi

dyke my cousin Sally’s a dyke they locked her up in McClean’s
where those Harvard doctors practice to learn to be mental doctors
day after day she slashed at her hands with knives
she lived with a woman before that
auntie Beulah says, she’s lazy, wants a free ride gram went to see her anyway
my mother said, ‘don’t you go
all the way to becoming a man with this women’s lib stuff’ and i
never went
to see her because i had heard that she was jealous
i went to college

before they locked her up, I made several of my own
slashes with a kitchen knife four
neat slices, and later, a long jagged one.

I told the Harvard doctors

I got caught
in a machine. They never
pressed it.

Later, I would dream that they had and locked us up next door to each other
Sally and me

when I'm tense or angry now, my left hand still stings, turns red at the scar.

would we have held each other stopped bleeding

would we wash our hands

of love would we talk to each other

vii

there's no back to go to.
backed up backed in backed down backed around

I never belonged.

This amnesia of place is like a death-
thirst once you move away it turns out
so different so queer

the blending in had seemed easy, bleaching
my teeth my freckles the big black holes in my
nightmares that didn't keep up with the rest of me
but you look

just like them talk

like them soften soften a working

girl femme white in whiteface will it cover the bad skin?

well ma I'll never be a gentleman and a scholar
when i saw that woman that stone butch i wanted to run to her and hide in her
no i said to my lover

she doesn't offend me she don't.

my father cried at graduation.

i haven't gone all the way

sink or swim, they said the Harvard board of overseers is giving you this
opportunity your college board scores indicate equality

last year they offered me a job making more than both my parents put together
she used to lock me out of the house so

I'd

get my

nose out of that book

fresh air

when I have a kid I'll never treat her like this, and we were never more
fierce, cindy, than vowing this, small fists curled blue eyes matched, locked
just let me go just let me go just let me go just let me go

once you move away

where.

once you move away

passing.

at least I can type.

or wait tables.

think you're too good for us here, now, huh sue?
when are you coming back this way? cindy.
i will be your maid of honor. don't do it oh don't don't please be different
you'll get caught there

vii

there is rach in this place we will talk we will talk
there is danger in this place.
dear cher'rie you write of your own life, a brown girl gone white gone
brown, brown:

**"The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger
lies in failing to acknowledge
the specificity of the oppression."***

for years I have lived with the inexactness of oppression
among labels simple analyses
but I never knew I had an accent.

I want to say this so clearly:

it was annihilation I feared. There is nothing in the words
working class that tastes of this confusion this clear Rhode Island winter
light this sister *now hold me touch me I'm done with talking hold me*

nothing in the words to break this clear

—Susan Leigh Star

*from "La Guera" by Cher'rie Moraga Lawrence

On the Edge of the Fringe

I wrote this journal four years ago. The physical act of writing helped me survive a major crisis of existence and direction. I've chosen to share it because I think it may have value for other lesbians (particularly those who are survivors of the "great lesbian wars"). I've edited the journal twice. Both times I've tried to resist the temptation to alter the contents and change meanings. I've tried to edit only for clarification, continuity, and to whittle down its considerable length. I'm writing this introduction to provide some background information and fill in some of the gaps that occur when you are writing for yourself and not for an audience.

I became involved in the Women's Liberation Movement early in 1969. The anti-lesbianism with the Women's Movement of that time has been well documented, so I won't go into my specific experiences, which were similar to those of lesbian feminists all over the country. My main problem was finding other lesbians who were interested in feminism. I tried hard to start a lesbian group. Eventually, enough of us found each other to form our own group. For the most part, this was a very exciting time.

By 1971-72 many changes were occurring within the Baltimore feminist community. Longtime straight feminists were coming out as lesbians, the Women's Center was becoming more and more a lesbian center, women's dances were becoming lesbian dances, and so on. Some of the new "women's liberation lesbians" were going to lesbian bars and making contacts with, and frequently enemies of, the long-established "old gay" lesbian community. It was a time of discovery, experimentation, and change. One of the important realizations of this period was that there was a growing community of lesbian feminists locally, nationally, and internationally.

Barbara and I became friends and eventually lovers during the spring and summer of 1972. In the fall we moved into an apartment within the boundaries of the newly emerging lesbian feminist ghetto. At about this same time two fads developed within the community. Suddenly it was "in" to be doing non-traditional blue collar work and to be a lower class dyke. Since I was a known lower class dyke and at the time working as a mechanic's helper, I found myself in the position of having new status. This was occasionally exciting and I cashed in on it some, but mostly it was confusing and irritating. I hated the glorification of poverty and the lifestyle of downward mobility which was also in fashion.

Meanwhile, some women from the community decided it would be fun and productive to put together a local lesbian poetry book. It was around the issue of this poetry book that the "Class Split" happened, occurred, or was engineered—depending on one's point of view. What happened basically was that all the known lower class dykes in the community (except me), including (or led by—again, depending on one's point of view) women who'd recently moved up from Washington, D.C., announced at a poetry book meeting that they would no longer work on the book or with middle class lesbians in general.

I had been told about this action beforehand, but I didn't fully support it.

The whole series of events beginning with and revolving around this class split is the key to understanding the journal. Barbara and I were quite literally caught in the middle of the split. We were lovers and friends. She was a middle class dyke—I was a lower class dyke. Our relationship violated the new morality. We made everyone either uncomfortable or angry. We suffered tremendous abuse because we wouldn't go along with the new program. Some subtle, some pretty damn overt. It was not pleasant.

Speaking for myself, I was manipulated, man-euvered, guilt-tripped, and pushed to the edge. The message was clear and often repeated. I was a traitor to the lower class. I was selling out to the middle class and betraying my real sisters. I was in a more or less constant state of pain, confusion, and bewilderment. I started losing balance within myself. It took me years to recenter.

My problem was that everything seemed half right. My sense of logic said yes, this is probably necessary. My instincts said no, something feels funny about all of this shit. On one hand I had much class anger, but somewhere I didn't trust the motives of some of the lower class dykes. On the other hand I loved and cared for Barbara and didn't want to end the relationship, but somewhere I did feel unsure and guilty. This confusion made me very vulnerable. I was also sick and tired of women pushing conformity to standards that depended on style and fad more than anything else. I didn't like being pushed to the wall.

Thinking and writing about all of this now, even though it happened years ago, is still hard for me. I've been fortunate in that over the past couple of years several of us who were involved in the various camps have gotten together and trusted each other enough to share our experiences of the split. I have a fairly good understanding now of what happened and why it happened. Mini-wars like this scar everyone involved in one way or another.

Barbara and I stayed together and gradually began to isolate ourselves from the community. When the lower class dykes had a falling out, we worked with two of them on a local newsletter called "Desperate Living." After the first two issues and more of the same pressures around the issues of the class split and our interclass relationship, we quit.

Within a year or two we'd evolved into almost total isolation. This included not answering the telephone or doorbell or responding to notes left by friends. We had some contact with the lesbian community, but it was minimal. For a time we even worked with straight women at a rape crisis center. We were ridiculously dependent on each other.

The journal begins at the point where Barbara had found a new lover. Our relationship was in the process of painfully and bitterly ending. I was very sick from a flu, an infection, and eventually malnutrition. I was attempting to break out of isolation and reestablish contact with old friends. Mostly I was just trying to recenter and find reason and balance within myself to survive in this alien world.

I would like to thank my friends, especially Lee Hopwood and Mary Kay Lyman, for their support, encouragement, and constructive criticism.

February 23, 1976. If most of your needs are being met by two people—yourself and another woman—and the other woman stops meeting any of your needs, you have to make conscious decisions about what to do with yourself.

What I want are close supportive relationships with a few women that have mutuality and balance and caring as a basic part of their existence. Also that there exists a knowledge that those relationships are necessary for the survival of each woman and of the community itself, so that each woman understands from the gut why no one should be trashed unless they're trashing everybody else. What I am looking for are women who have a strong sense of themselves and know why feminism is absolutely essential for their survival. I want to be a survivor and I want to meet and be with other women who also want to be survivors.

I am sick of feeling guilty, frustrated, bitter, resigned, and always angry. I am sick of being inert. I want to be a builder. A dream-into-reality carpenter, and I want to be with other women who feel the same.

February 25, 1976. I have decided to make this a journal for as long as I need/want to use it. I still have a terrible pain in my chest, but I feel better than yesterday.

I have been leaving this lying around and that probably isn't the best thing to do. I'm beginning to feel a need for secrecy with it.

Strange thought—this is the first time since I was fifteen that I haven't been involved in an intense loving relationship with another woman . . .

I'm beginning to think again about leaving the city. Not now but maybe during the summer or fall. In August I'd have a whole year of paste-up and printing experience. If things aren't better for me by then, I'll leave. Sell all the shit I can't store somewhere and maybe go to the southwest and then to San Francisco.

I have this sense of things closing in on me. Almost as though people were afraid of me or something, and I think it is a true feeling. I have been a real fool to put up with Barbara's possessive, jealous shit all this time. Why did I think it was funny with her, and yet when M. pulled less of it but basically the same shit I was always furious? I think that somewhere within myself I really thought Barbara and I would keep our relationship on a constant loving level for years—even if we didn't live together, even if we stopped being lovers, even if we came out of isolation. You would think that all the times I have lived this, from each and every side, that I would have a working knowledge of how to handle it. Where is my survival sense? Why am I becoming so resigned to this death thing. Every question leads to ten questions.

Why does everyone keep asking me if I've met any new people? Are they trying to set me up with someone new? By being "unattached" have I suddenly become a potential threat? I am morbidly depressed and I don't think it's because I'm sick. What has happened is that I have hit this point where reality and hope have clashed and hope is losing the battle. The great community I wanted doesn't seem to have much possibility for existence. All the women I've run into lately seem to be walking on thin ice, keeping their own heads and their own relationships together.

I have decided to give a lot of thought to suicide. Not impulsive or impetuous suicide, but well-thought-out, well-planned, deliberately constructed suicide.

There are three reasons that keep leading me to think of it. The first is the total absolute re-realization that I am not afraid of death. To me dying seems like a natural part of the life cycle. The second reason is that I am so very very tired and weak. I feel like I have to be strong to survive, and I feel too

weak to handle it. All I feel physically and emotionally is pain. The third reason is that I don't know if I'm into this life business anymore. I am seriously questioning my will to live. If I have one, why isn't it pulling me now when I need all my strength and have so little? I also have grave doubts about feminism. Not the basic concepts—I know that they are real on a gut level. I guess it's the current practice that is getting me down. At least in this city, I don't think there is ever going to be a serious effort to deal with class and privilege. As long as that holds true, I feel that feminism will be a dying movement—or at least stagnant.

I can understand B.'s frustration at wanting to die so bad and not being able to kill herself. I feel something close to the opposite—if I can't *live* the way I want, why should I keep trying and trying when I'm not afraid to kill myself? Maybe I want to live in a utopia; only it seems to me possible to have some of that now. Not only possible but absolutely essential. Maybe it's only essential to me—which of course is probably right, otherwise it would exist or at least show signs of beginning to exist—which is another good reason to consider whether or not I should check out of this whole set up.

March 1, 1976, late a.m. I still have a lot of pain, but it's not as constant as before. I've just about given up hope of ever feeling physically good again. I have lost an incredible amount of weight in the past two weeks. I'm trying to eat as much as I can, but most of the time it's a real struggle. I have completely lost the ability to eat and sleep regularly. It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't feel so fucking weak. It freaks the hell out of me that I can't carry that damn trash bag down two flights and around the block to the alley. I mean shit, if I can't do that, what the hell can I do? Not much. I'm not doing such a hot job of taking care of myself.

All I seem able to do with any degree of consistency is to smoke and smoke.

I remember vividly when I hit total bottom before, and I remember that I started fighting like hell to get my shit together and I did. I think that I knew I was getting too close to the edge of insanity, and when authority people started getting involved in it all, I freaked and was scared as hell and I managed to get myself together in a real hurry.

Things are different now. I feel clear-headed and clear-sighted and calm and resigned. I know that I want to die. April 1st. April Fool's Day, very appropriate! That seems to be the day when all my decisions and loose-endings have to be finished. I have a hell of a lot to do between now and then.

I'm trying to figure out if I should write a will. It's also ironic and humorous to think the only thing stopping me from doing that is that it's too fucking expensive. It costs too much to be born, too much to exist, and too much to die—at least patriarchy is consistent! I don't know why I want a will anyway. I don't own anything of value. The only thing I have that's worth any money are my tools, and they're only worth five or six hundred dollars. The only other thing I have that's valuable is all the feminist literature I've been saving all these years.

It amuses me to know that I can be so out of it and yet continue to function in a halfway decent level so that no one knows how loose I really am. (Ego, Sandy, ego . . .) I am no longer a survivor, and yet no one knows it except me. I'll continue to do all the things I have to do—I'll go to work and do my paste-up and printing and get the magazine out on time, I'll keep trying

to find a place to live, I'll see Lee on Wednesday, I'll help Susan print "Desperate Living," I'll go to the International Women's Day thing and talk to women I haven't seen much of in the past two or three years. I'll go to the next women's dance and see those same women again, I'll go and talk to Dorothy and I'll go and talk to Jenny and tell her that I'm sorry for being such a shit to her, I'll try and explain how my feelings about straight women have changed because my feelings about survival have changed. I'll probably go see Ann one more time and call Shirley again too. Detailing details, Sandy, detailing details . . .

March 2, 1976. I'm no longer amused about being out of control and nobody knowing it. I'm starting to feel afraid because I'm not doing such a hot job of pretending healthiness. My boss and everyone at work acted weird around me all day. I'm having trouble keeping my face together on the bus.

The thing that scares me is that my craziness seems to be growing beyond my control, and that scares me because I'm afraid of authority people getting control of me and locking me up. I just couldn't stand being locked up, and I know how easily it could happen if I don't take extreme care in public situations, especially at work and on the bus.

I just decided I can't keep my appointment at the out-patient clinic at the hospital tomorrow. Suppose I freak out in there and they lock me in the hospital?

I had a dream last night that freaked me out. I wanted to write it down this morning, but I was late for work and I had to rush to catch my bus. So now it's all foggy except for one part: My mother was there in her uniform and her pastel raincoat and her plastic shopping bag to carry her work shoes in. All these women were there in their uniforms and their good clothes to ride the bus in, with their pastel raincoats and carrying their plastic shopping bags with their work clothes in them. My mother was handing me clothes, and I was putting them on and looking and acting like a zombie. Finally there I was with nylons and shoes and uniform and pastel raincoat and plastic shopping bag. The next thing I remember my mother and I and all those women went to the bus stop, and I got on a bus and looked out the window. They were all smiling and waving at me and giggling with each other. Everyone was happy but me, and I was feeling and acting like a robot.

March 3, 1976. . . . I really want a vacation from my life; if I were rich, I'd do just that. Not being rich, I guess I'll have to settle for just being dead.

Undated. Boss said, "Your nerves are shot." I giggled a lot and he said drink coffee, drink coffee. Soothsayer can't play today. Nobody home at the shop, stop the presses, that's all she wrote. Bus day. Nice lady. Poor and lonely. Seen her before and before and before. She's real poor. Can't decide, is she a day worker or an aide? Hard to tell. Sometimes she gets on near the home. Not always. Old and lonely she is and talked to me all the way home. I tried and tried and tried. Couldn't reach, but she seemed happy for anything. Such a waste. Old and lonely and poor and complaining about the rate hike. How they're robbing poor people who can't choose not to ride the bus. She talked about Dundalk. Shit, does she ride all the way from there to Towson every day? Racist too. Always, almost, hand in hand, the combination. The stage whisper, "colored," loud enough for all the black women within ten feet to hear and they did and reacted and I didn't have the heart to cut her

off. And life goes on— isn't this the way always? In the middle—or rather outside all the spirals—backwards too? Descent (decent) not ascent (assent). You wanted to write but you went crazy instead. Ho hum, ho hum. Typed that on the composer at work a zillion times. Witches Brew [a cat], I love you too!

Undated. Strength, courage, and energy for the facade. You must keep it intact. The surface is mattersome.

March 7, 1976. I called Sarina in the height of my loss of self and she reached and I responded. She has helped me to get a bit of my core trust and faith back.

March 8, 1976. I feel very reflective tonight. Yesterday I went to the International Women's Day (one day early) thing sponsored by the Women's Union. My reactions to it were mixed. Also my reactions to seeing and being a part of a group with all of those different women. Many of whom I haven't seen in literally years, thanks to good old isolation.

I hated the slide show on working women. To me it seemed that the lower class women were tokened in to make the show "well rounded." I was really disappointed in the Feminist Chorus. Maybe it's just me, but somehow I don't think that labor songs which are based in very real pain should be laughed and giggled through, and sung as light little ditties.

Then a woman sang a song about God and Jesus that really blew my mind. I think I was wrong about the Metropolitan Community Church and Ann was right. Instead of acting as a survival/transition thing it exists for lesbians as an end/institution in and of itself. Sometimes I forget that Christianity has been really drummed into some women.

March 13, 1976. I listened to Sophie's Parlor [old Washington, D.C. feminist radio show] today. It was neat, great 30's and 40's blues. Thoughts: Class differences cannot be blocked, ignored, overlooked, or *glorified*. Privilege exists and cannot be hidden, or disregarded as a constant factor of every and any relationship. It will not go away. Anger and guilt usually act as negatives. Anger is a real positive reality reaction if kept in a political class-conscious reality, as opposed to self-destructive anger. Guilt is destructive to *everyone* and changes nothing. I must try to get to the ocean soon; I need the continuity of the sea.

Undated. I feel like a bump on a log, as my mother would say. I am going through so many changes so fast that I can hardly keep track of it all. I'm getting back these heavy feelings of determination and resolve to not take any shit off anybody. I'm glad I let my anger out to Barb, even if I did spend hours stomping around at work, muttering and slamming doors and pounding on everything in sight. It was worth it to get the anger out. It was real positive anger. I hope that someday I'll be able to get angry without having the adrenalin carry me off for hours and hours; it's so hard for me to calm down when I let myself get really angry.

Undated. Capitalism is a pile of shit; I've known that in my gut for years and years. State capitalism is a pile of shit too. It took me longer to get clear on that 'cause on the surface it comes across looking as though it meets basic survival needs. The more I think about them the closer they seem to be. I remember years ago I ran into this member of the John Birch Society who kept yelling that U.S. corporations were secretly plotting with Russia to estab-

lish joint global control. I don't know why I thought she was so off the wall; anything seems possible to me now.

March 15, 1976, a.m. I have been furiously angry for four solid days. I can hardly believe it—I haven't allowed myself to be this angry in years.

March 17, 1976. 18th, actually, a.m. April Fool's is getting real close; it seems like doomsday, re-birthday, whatever, all rolled up in my head. I thought this suicide shit was over, but it isn't. It's coming back now stronger than ever.

I really cannot stand feeling like this. I am in a state of total panic. I can't stand the thought of not being able to afford to live alone. Is that why I'm back at this point again? It always seems to come down to money, or rather lack of money and privilege. Am I just using that as an excuse? Lee and I were talking the other day about once poor white trash, always poor white trash, shit isn't it the truth?

Undated. What is needed for survival? Food, water, place to live, clothes for the weather, work—paid or not, dreams/hope/visions of change, trust in self/others? caring, love of self/others? self-sufficiency/mutuality?

March 25, 1976. Class seems to be a dead, or rather paralyzed, issue. The boundary lines are fainter but still definitely exist. Maybe it's water under the bridge, but the bridge still exists and the water's still flowing and I don't see any fundamental change. Except maybe that while I've been in isolation, a whole new crop of downwardly mobile women has moved into town. And as far as I've been able to find out, no one is talking (let alone doing anything concrete) about class and privilege at all, except for my old favorite, "organizing the working class." Well, Sandy me girl, things haven't changed all that much.

Undated. Me, today. I have choices and alternatives. I can make choices rather than must make choices. Self-hatred knows no bounds and can grow even when it seems it couldn't possibly be more intense. Understanding and getting support to understand my own and other women's class realities is the only way for me to overcome it. I thought I had my class shit pretty together, and I was real wrong about that. I had hardly begun to get it together. It is a continuing process. Fighting for my own class reality is a continuing process also.

Working is very important to me. Seeing my labor produce something I feel good about is very important. Using my creativity and tiring myself out in the process is important. Using my hands to do/to make is necessary and positive. Bridging the mind/body male-created split is important, and I do it at work. Working at the magazine, despite the drawbacks of rotten pay and no benefits, plus my boss's tantrums, is an important and positive aspect of my life. I should not give it up unless the negatives increase dramatically. Although it is important for me to live alone, I will not give up my job solely because of economic reasons. If I must, I'll settle my stuff at Lee and Claire's and live at Susan's for awhile rather than give up my job. Meanwhile I'll push that fucker for more money.

Some bills I have I won't be able to pay for ages, the medical center and the clinic, also the fucking student defense loan that's been hanging over my head all these years will have to hang there a few more.

Saturday night, March 27, 1976. Today, again, bitterness; only this time

it's from understanding too much, knowing too much. Seeing other women war together and knowing both sides. Feeling like I have been fighting both sides within myself for a long time, but especially lately. Feeling like I finally know which side I want to struggle for and seeing that side championed by one woman against another.

What I *know* is that there has to be a joining of the personal and the political. Not in a run-away purist sense; but in the sense that you are struggling and fighting *from the gut for yourself*, and not for some *unknown Mass* ("other") or learned concept. Each of us is alone, and we have to struggle alone to survive. Self-strength can be helped by outside people and events, but can only really come to existence from the inside. There must be some type of individual strength before collectivity can even happen. Differences don't go away by calling all attempts to deal with them "divisiveness." All this fucking middle class shit about having to produce something all the fucking time, production, production, production. If you don't have proof—credentials—that you are a fucking producer (even though those credentials are usually just so much male bullshit, they still count), you are worth shit and your thoughts and opinions are worth shit because you aren't doing your part ("your fair share") toward production. Production of what? Why, production of "The Revolution" of course. No Comment.

... By myself or with other women I am still alone with myself. Keeping that self intact and as strong as possible is survival. Fighting for that self's existence and its right to exist halfway decently with as much self-determination as possible is the point where that self has to join other selves *for its own good*, and that is politics at the root.

Laying aside that self for the larger good is male Christian crap. Fighting a textbook war, fantasizing about saving the third world, leaving aside "women's issues" until after the revolution (the what?), being an organizer (missionary) of the "working class" ("others," read inferiors) is just so much destructive useless garbage.

There have to be new and better ways for selves to work and be together minus these insane structures and dumb pipedreams of an instant revolution that is suddenly going to make everything different.

It seems to me revolution is only a long-drawn-out process of gradual change. I want to know how and where to put my two cents into the process.

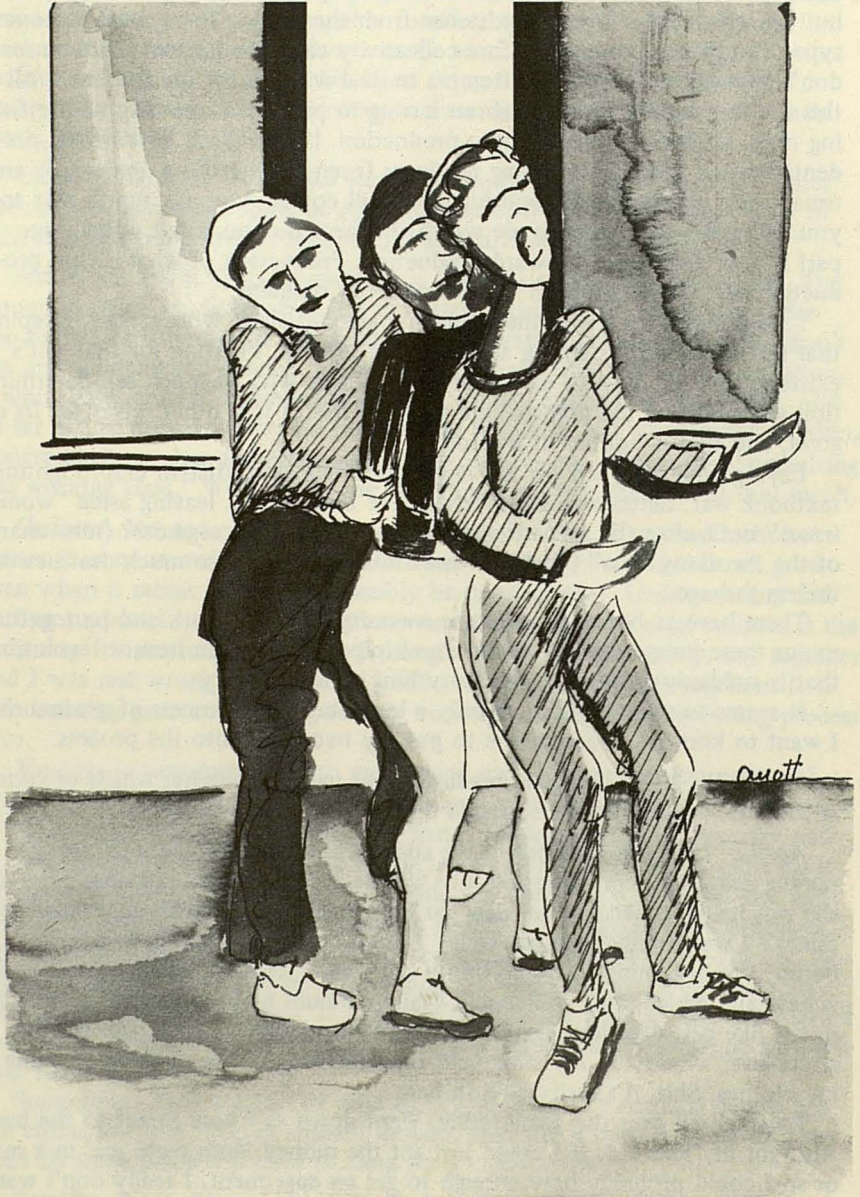
March 28, 1976. I've been reading about natural anarchy, which of course is where I've been for years, only I didn't know it had a name . . .

April 2, 1976. I moved out of the apartment on Wednesday night. It was raining and I was very depressed. Lee was decent, especially considering that she was irritated because her new car kept fucking up. Wednesday night at Susan's I was totally freaked. Today I am a bit more oriented and feeling better. I'm beginning to figure things out: buses, clothes, which of my stuff is here and which stuff at Lee and Claire's should be here. I need to do a few things like get something heavy and more permanent to hang over the big street-level window in my room and rig something to use to hang up some of my clothes. Shit, it's really cold in here.

I walked all over the place today. Went down to Chase Street to the bank. Also got my hair cut. If I could just get the money Mom owes me, in a month or so I could probably have enough to get an apartment. I really don't want

to be at Susan's at all, and the sooner I get out of here the better for all concerned. After the political/personal fight Susan and I had, it took real desperation to get me to move in here.

Hey, self, you survived April Fool's Day. Happy re-birthday!



POEM FOR BETTY LORENZ

i want this house i say
what do i have to do
to get it
fill out an application she says
but don't you dare
if it's the 2 of you
we don't rent to 2 men
or to 2 girls
women i think to myself
you dumb broad it's women

betty calls gail
& gail calls & says hey look lady
don't you know this is illegal
against the law
immoral plain stupid
lemme talk to yr boss
he's not here now she says
would you like to call later

meanwhile all on a ½ hour parking meter
we talk to the man say we've done this before
lived together for over a year
bought a car together etc
& he says what's all this women's liberation
bullshit

still on the meter we get to fill out
our very own application to rent
& the dumb broad with whom we're familiar by now
takes names no addresses
addresses no phone numbers all our credit
shot to hell but we're given equal opportunity

our time's running out & she's explaining
that we all get a fair shake
& we're trying hard to listen trying not
to be rude but don't feel bad if we are
i'm not sure how much we can check out
she says since it's all out-of-state
but we'll let you know

yr application has been approved she says
i'm afraid to give her my name in case
she thinks she's talking to somebody else
but she can't see me over the phone so it's just as well
that i pretend i'm calm & knew it all along
that it's my house
it was nothing
i expected it

sure you did god says

—Dinah Wernick

not in cars

*dark danger in the shadows of the city city city driving
by the danger darkness urban buildings and the men men
that serve as girders beams the backbone of the danger
men in windows stories high indiscriminately lurching from
the speeding cars the freeway thieves that drop their
compliments their vile demands commands from rusting
cars on cracking crosstown roads twisting twisted shadows
grotesque mouths that vomit words like green white bullets
to the womyn on the sidewalks in the buildings not in cars*

—Achy Obejas

THE EYE OF THE BE★HOLD★HER

The Lesbian Vision of Romaine Brooks

Romaine Brooks is called Thief of Souls because when she painted her portraits, she "captured" the essence of the sitter. (This you will read everywhere you can read.)¹ The truth is that she restored souls. Lesbian souls.

Romaine Brooks' portrait of herself in a riding habit, top hat shading her eyes looking directly at us. The eye of the creator meets the eye of the beholder eye to eye. The Lesbian eye, how is she different? And what is woman's art apart from man's perceptions?

Romaine Brooks was virtually unknown in this country until 1971, when Adelyn Breeskin introduced her work in a major exhibition and catalogue at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. I had never heard of Romaine Brooks, even though, in 1971, I had completed coursework for a Ph.D. in art history. But once I *had* heard of her; once I had seen her paintings and drawings; I searched for her—her influences, affinities, and contemporaries—in books about twentieth-century visual art.

But I found her nowhere. She had been yet another woman lost in the pool of silence which still is women's contribution to art. An American (in Paris), she gave her entire estate to our National Collection of Fine Arts just before she died (alone) in 1970 at the age of ninety-six. Not only alone, but obscure. She had not shown her work in thirty years. Re/dis/covers the same year of her death by Adelyn Breeskin and by her own gift of the whole of her art, but still alone. The epitaph she wrote for herself was "Here Remains Romaine, Who Romaine Remains." And the (unpublished) memoirs of her life she titled "No Pleasant Memories."

Of artists alone, Judy Chicago says: "When men are alone, they aren't really alone—they are alone in their studios supported by systems. But women are *really* alone, without any system, and that is not just alone—that is isolated and powerless."² Romaine Brooks was outside of the main stream of modern art, which was located on the left bank (only) of the Seine River in Paris, France, during the first quarter of this century. (Brooks worked in England and France, where she meandered along the left and right [wrong] bank of that stream.) A portrait painter, she was considered to be neither experimental nor innovative. Not very modern. Meaning, in the language of the avant-garde, not very good. Romaine Brooks was certainly not a great one like Picasso, Braque, or Matisse.³

Silence and isolation are blood sisters, mothered by denial. Silence denies existence, and isolation denies the environment of existence—content, commonality, context, community, and, finally, vision.

Romaine Brooks was isolated as an oddity. (That she was odd we can read in each of the few texts written about her.) Cast out side of the major legitimizing categories of twentieth-century art, to which her work may have been



above: LA BARONNE
D'ERLANGER

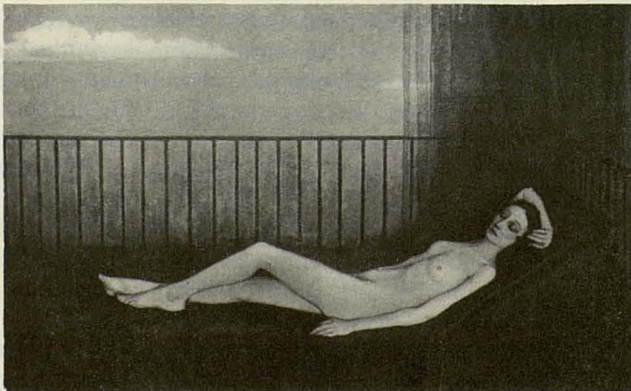


above: MISS NATALIE
BARNEY
"L'AMAZONE"



below: WEEPING
VENUS

left: SELF-PORTRAIT
DE ROMAINE
BROOKS



appropriately and interestingly connected, her art has rather been analyzed almost exclusively in relationship to her (unfortunate) personal life, to explain (away) its deviation from *normal* art and conventional art interpretation. For example: "The work of Romaine Brooks cannot be separated from her life. It had its roots in experiences that marked and marred her and provided the obsessive themes for her portraits and drawings."⁴

How, then, can we evoke her heritage? Locate her support network? See her work in a cultural context, within the tradition of her time?

Consider a tradition of modern art: that art is self-referential and self-explanatory. A work of art must stand on its own. Everyone has heard this, but what does it mean? That a work of art can stand on its own, be understood, without information about the environment in which it was created, means only that there is complete agreement about what the context of a visual statement is. The context of art is culture. But the only major recognized art we know is male-created art within male culture underlaid by a male perception of the universe. Not culture itself, but male culture. Not perception itself, but male perception. Within that context, a work of art can stand on its own.

What of the work of art which is not created by men for men? Through what perception may we begin to see?

Romaine Brooks' *Weeping Venus*. A slight, frail figure. Not a voluptuous earth goddess but a christ-like figure, an aspect of the Trinity or the Triple Goddess. About this Venus Natalie Barney wrote,

Yet as the God-man crucified
Her body expiates the sin
That love and life with her begin!⁵

A primary mythic and spiritual concept in female form. Not simply the appearance, but the underlying perception of the world, is the point of departure of a Lesbian vision.

Our mutual sidewise glances (fixed, frozen; under the wrath of the fathers we could not bat an eye). Who we are and have been to one another. What we have expressed. Seeing ourselves with our own eyes. Sharing a common vision.

There may be a Lesbian form. But the form of a hidden culture is the in-between, the inter-face. So that even—perhaps especially—in visual art, appearances aren't everything.

Whistler is the artist Romaine Brooks is said to have followed in her own way. We can read in her memoirs that she (uniquely) admired his work. Leaving Capri at the turn of the century for England, Brooks took a studio on Tite Street where Whistler lived. And, forsaking her earlier bright palette, she modulated her tones (after Whistler, it is said) to black, white, and grey.

Whistler's *Rose and Silver*, "*La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine*" (1864) and Romaine Brooks' *Miss Natalie Barney, L'Amazone* (1920). *Rose and Silver* could be an illustration of Whistler's well-known exoticism—the exoticism of an influx of oriental art, artifacts, and attitudes about decoration to England in the latter nineteenth century. You can see in the picture an oriental rug; a fan held by a woman in an embroidered kimono, standing in front of an oriental screen. This is a picture of a woman, but nothing in the picture belongs to this woman. She does not even seem to be oriental. We are not to look at Whistler's *Rose and Silver* as a picture of her. We are rather to look

at it as a certain number of things, including this woman, which belong to an oriental influence on contemporary art in nineteenth-century England. This influence, in turn, finds an illustration in the home of a wealthy Englishman—his rug, screen, fan, kimono, and woman.

The portrait of Natalie Barney by Romaine Brooks can also be called bourgeois—pertaining to private property interests. And here, too, is a version of the idea of the exotic. The exotic is not only a cross-cultural influence on art, but the exotic is the vehicle through which Lesbianism is expressed. Everything in this picture belongs to Natalie Barney. Her necklace—alternately blue/green/sphere/pyramid/triangle—is an Amazon necklace. Her fur, a sign of the wealthy bourgeoisie, is also an animal skin which Brooks often used in her paintings to refer to the Amazons. The horse, a table decoration, reminds us that Natalie Barney was *L'Amazone*, horsewoman, who unrestrainedly rode in the woods near her home for most of her lifetime. Not only Amazon, but Amazon of letters. Remy de Gourmont wrote to her his *Lettres à l'Amazone*. But more important, she wrote as an Amazon such aphorisms as,

Let no woman renounce her natural crown
Lest man take her for his equal [from her notebooks]

Everything in Romaine Brooks' portrait refers us to Natalie Barney's attributes and to their exoticism. *Exotic* meaning excitingly strange, unusual in color and design, introduced from a foreign country. The land of the Amazons. And from the past, the race of Amazon women. The past recreated in contemporary life, reclaiming the power of the Amazon woman in the person of the contemporary Lesbian creator.

Brooks' palette of black, white, and grey varied to red. The red hair of Amazons. Notice Romaine Brooks' portrait of the *Baronne Emile D'Erlanger* (1924). A large, powerful woman, red hair. John Usher reviewed this picture in 1926 in *International Studio*: "Luminosity without radiance, which suggests that one has just missed glimpsing the last rays of the sun as they dropped onto russet hair a leopard robe and faded in the amber eyes of the cat." Red hair of the Amazon, leopard robes draped over one shoulder, back from her other shoulder, almost baring her breast. The cat, of the same animal skin, said to be the Baronne's husband, is in her powerful domain. Women and animals create a lost sense of our nature.

Romaine Brooks' portrait of the Baronne D'Erlanger cannot be taken as including her husband in any significant way, despite the documented similarity of the cat to the lady's spouse. Romaine Brooks never portrayed the relations between men and women. In fact, her portrait of Jean Cocteau had originally included two women beside him on the railing looking toward the Eiffel Tower. But Romaine Brooks cut this picture in two.

In the cage is the lion. She paces with her memories. Her body is a record of her past. As she moves back and forth, one may see it all: the lean frame, the muscular legs, the paw enclosing long sharp claws, the astonishing speed of her response. She was born in this garden. She has never in her life stretched those legs.⁶

It is significant that in Romaine Brooks' portrait of the Baronne D'Erlanger, the caged animal is not a symbol for woman.

Chasseresse (1920) is another Amazon. The skins drape her body, leaving one breast bare. She touches her mountain goat with friendly comradeship.



above: "UNA" LADY
TROUBRIDGE

above: CHASSERESSE



left: ELISABETH DE
GRAMONT

below: RENATI BOR-
GATTI AU
PIANO



The background of this painting is abstracted, with a section or ray of light revealing a mountain in the distance. Her glance also looks to the distance, inward as well as outward. To another time, outside of contemporary life, when women were strong and powerful in a world which reflected our strength and power. The Chasseresse is a Lesbian fantasy. The model for her image, Eyre de Lanux, a Lesbian lover of Romaine Brooks.

Natalie Barney was a lover of Romaine Brooks for over half of this century. Natalie Barney is of this race, and of this heritage. In her life and work, Natalie Barney re-created Lesbian Nation: In 1904 she and Renée Vivien traveled to Lesbos to found a Sapphic school of poetry and love; her Temple of Friendship, a small Greek-like structure in her garden at 20 Rue Jacob, was a temple of honor and celebration of women's relationships and achievements. Natalie Barney's life was a fine art of Lesbian love. Romaine Brooks' portrait of Natalie Barney—of a woman, by a woman, for women. A portrait in which Lesbian creators share a common vision.

Romaine Brooks painted a number of stunning portraits of Lesbian contemporaries during the 1920s—among them Natalie Barney; Elisabeth de Gramont, Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre; Renata Borgatti; and Una Troubridge. These images are unique in the history of art. Because they are proud images. Images of women who were talented, successful, independent; who chose to be Lesbians as they chose to be creators. With conviction, style, and joy. Without reference to pornographic sex or perversion. As a self-identification linked to solitude and the creative life.

Renata Borgatti sits at the piano. She wears dark robes—of the composer, the scholar, the Lesbian? And short hair, no hairdo. Another title for this painting is *Musical Inspiration*. Borgatti is completely absorbed in her work. *She* is the inspired creator of music, not—as is more usual in visual art—the subject or impetus for male creativity.

How does this image of a Lesbian by a Lesbian compare with other images painted by Lesbian artists? Alas, although some of our most gifted and recognized artists have been and are Lesbians, they do not wish to make themselves known to us. There are very few visible artists known to be Lesbians. Of these, fewer still have dealt with the subject of Lesbianism in their work. Certainly no other Lesbian artist contemporary with Brooks made Lesbianism a persistent theme in her work nor brought it to her own personal sphere by referring to herself and her colleagues and friends.

It is no accident that more explicit Lesbian sexual relationships were painted by male artists. Obviously, their interest in the subject could not be attributed to Lesbianism. Courbet's *Sleep*, in which two goddesses, unconscious, are displayed by the male artist for the voyeuristic pleasure of male spectator and patron. Lautrec's pathetic, aging prostitutes turning to one another for comfort. Renan's saccharine symbolist idealization of Sappho: Sappho, whose art and life made her a symbol for Lesbian strength and love, is not a poet and political leader here but a sexual delight, lying breasts up in the grass.

There are also derisive caricatures of Lesbians. During the period in which Romaine Brooks was portraying Lesbians in her circle in her way, male cartoonists viciously ridiculed some of the same women. Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge, for example, in reaction to Hall's pioneering novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, in which she dared to defend rather than condemn Lesbianism. Leo Dowd, in *The Bookseller*, and Beresford Egan, in an illustration for *The*

Sink of Solitude, an anonymously written poem mocking *The Well of Loneliness*, both made devastating stereotypical dyke/castrators of Hall and Troubridge.

Romaine Brooks' portrait of Una Troubridge (1924) may also appropriately be called a Lesbian stereotype. The tuxedo, the severe (red) hair, the monocle, the squat hounds given Una by John (Radclyffe Hall). Brooks might have conveyed some personal sarcasm here. She did not always have the charm of her lover, Natalie Barney. At times she was sour, sometimes defensive. Often she kept to herself, and sometimes lashed out at others. She considered distasteful the staunch Catholicism and sentimental dedication of Hall and Troubridge to bringing the understanding of the Lesbian way of life to the general public. But consider this way of dressing. The same way that Radclyffe Hall dressed. Cross-dressing. A sign of freedom, independence, and unmistakable Lesbianism.

The most profound influences on Brooks' work were the congenial atmosphere of her time and the literature which emerged from and expressed it. The 1920s was a period in which damnatory attitudes toward homosexuality subsided for a time. Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* promoted "sexual inversion" from a sinful disease to a (sick) variation on the sexual norm. The Ellis-Freud controversy on the origin of homosexuality brought the subject to public attention. The nineteenth-century feminist movement had created more freedom for women to live as they wished. And literature about homosexuality boomed after 1915, from mocking satires like Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* to Hall's impassioned *The Well of Loneliness*. Admiration of the Lesbian as a model of post-war independence and the unfettered life made her an attractive rather than a depraved figure.

All of the uniquely explicit Lesbian images which were created during this period, with the exception of Romaine Brooks' portraits, were in literature.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). A man becomes a woman becomes a man over a period of centuries. A person who is not a member of an opposite sex. A creature who lived in-between history, in a continuous present. Gertrude Stein comments: "After all every century has to be made by somebody being something and it is difficult to do it again and anyway when it is done it is done and having been done it does not make any time to begin again. When I began writing I was making a continuous present a continuous beginning again and again . . ."7 Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf's lover, poses for the illustration photos; *is* the image of Orlando, to whom Virginia Woolf dedicates this work.

Rose O'Neill's *Master-Mistress* (1922). Rose O'Neill, who invented the Kewpie Doll, also invented the master-mistress (after the master-mistress of Shakespeare's passion). A book of her poems and illustrations, a monster-creature suggesting sexual ambiguity, unification, and human completeness.

The Master-Mistress

All in the drowse of life I saw a shape,
A lovely monster reared up from the restless rock,
More secret and more loud than other beasts.
It, seeming two in one,
With dreadful beauty doomed,
Folded itself, in chanting like a flood.
I said, "Your name, O Master-mistress?"
But it, answering not,

Folded itself, in chanting like a flood.

The Lesbian. The turning, the monstrosity, the sublime beauty.

Androgyny, usually interpreted as a synthesis of male and female to form a hermaphroditic hybrid or referring to one who is under-sexual, is for O'Neill, Brooks, and Woolf, *specifically Lesbian*. And creation of the monster, the synthesis, the human, is synonymous with the creation of (Lesbian) art.

Romaine Brooks' support network—which is Lesbian, literary, and artistic—has been made invisible, erased by silence. Because it is Lesbian, literary, and artistic. In the face of evidence to the contrary: Natalie Barney's salon / Renée Vivien's sapphic poetry / Colette's *Claudine* / Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* / Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Saphique* / Virginia Woolf's letters to Ethel Smyth / Georgia O'Keeffe's letters to Edna St. Vincent Millay / Natalie Barney's letters to Gertrude Stein / Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts" / Florine Stettheimer's stage sets for Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts" / Alice B. Toklas' cookbook / Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* / Margaret Anderson's autobiography / Una Troubridge's biography of Radclyffe Hall / Virginia Woolf's assistance in publishing Hall / Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* / Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings / H.D.'s poems / Bernice Abbott's photographs / Janet Flanner's journal / Elisabeth de Gramont's memoirs / Sylvia Beach's *Shakespeare and Co.* / Lucie Delarue-Madrus' *Sappho Désespérée* / Frida Kahlo's paintings / Colette's *The Pure and the Impure* / Natalie Barney's *Souvenirs Indiscrets* / Bryher's *The Heart of Artemis* / Marie Laurencin's paintings . . .

I could continue to weave this network, or with Sappho / Rosa Bonheur / Adrienne Rich / Jeannette Foster / Harmony Hammond / Mary Daly / Fran Winant / Willa Cather . . . we could inter-weave the continuous present of the presence of the proper environment in which to see clearly the art of Romaine Brooks.

Romaine Brooks' portrait of herself looking directly at us. We begin to see her Lesbian vision.

NOTES

1. Adelyn Breeskin's *Romaine Brooks, "Thief of Souls"* (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971) and Meryle Secrest's *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks* (New York, Doubleday, 1974) remain the only substantial sources of information on Brooks' life and work aside from the artist's unpublished memoirs, "No Pleasant Memories," housed in the archives on Brooks at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. A number of theses and dissertations on Brooks' work are in progress, and in addition a few articles in feminist publications supply an appreciation of Brooks' Lesbianism, which Breeskin tactfully omitted and which Secrest treats homophobically.

2. Susan Rennie and Arlene Raven, "The Dinner Party Project: An Interview with Judy Chicago," *Chrysalis*, 1:4 (Spring 1978), p. 100.

3. Gertrude Stein's portrait of Matisse, originally published in the August 1912 issue of *Camera Work*, talks about Matisse's, and men's greatness. "This one was certainly a great man, this one was certainly clearly expressing something." My remark paraphrases this essay.

4. Secrest, *Between Me and Life*, p. xvii.

5. Natalie Barney, "The Weeping Venus," from *Poems and Poèmes, au très alliances* (Paris: Emile-Paul, 1920).

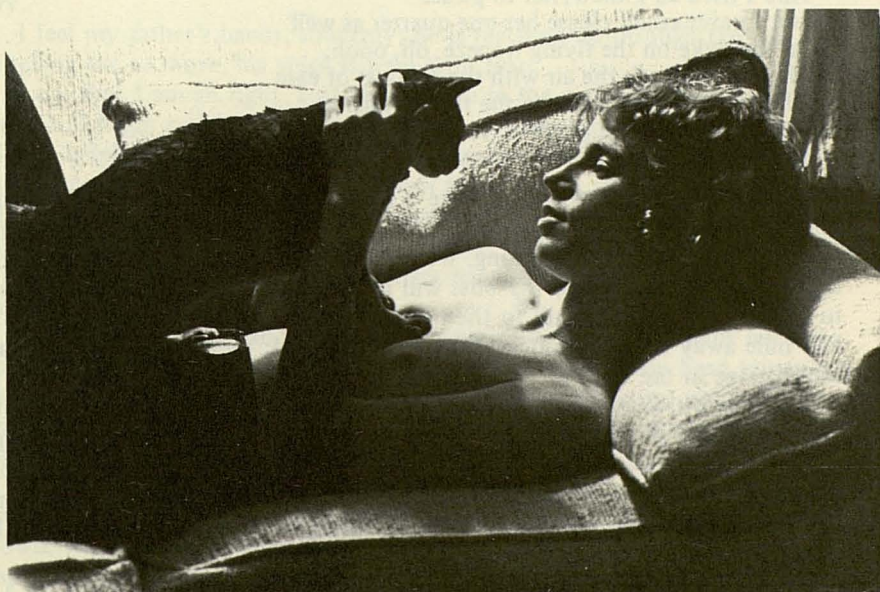
6. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (Harper & Row, 1978), p. 105.

7. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937), from the Vintage Books edition, p. 251.

Perilous Passages

Paradoxical Positions

& Prickly Pears



photograph by Lynda Koolish

Trapeze

We are snowed into the Wimmin's House; even with the chains on we cannot move from the driveway. We wait all morning for the snow plow. I am so bored that I go into a frenzy of cleaning house. The others are glad and make sly suggestions as to what I might do next. I sing the same song endlessly, an old song with new words, whilst visions of Amazons soar in my head:

O once I was happy but now I'm forlorn
Like an old coat that is tattered and torn
Left in this cruel world to fret and to mourn
Betrayed by a girl in her teens.
Now this girl that I loved, she was handsome
And I tried all I knew, her to please
But I never could please her one quarter as well
As the dyke on the flying trapeze, oh, oooh,
She flies through the air with the greatest of ease
The daring young dyke on the flying trapeze
Her movements are graceful, and how she does please
But my love she has stolen away.

The plow does not come by three o'clock. At four o'clock, dark is nearly upon us, the snow is falling harder, and our electricity goes out. No heat, no water. The phone is not working. We are a little worried. I must go to work the next morning; I know my boss will not accept my excuse. Jobs are hard to find. I volunteer to walk to the nearest house, our neighbors' who are a half mile away and that much closer to a real road; they have a vehicle that can manage in the snow.

I bundle up, stuff chocolate and a flashlight in my pocket, and leave with my dog. She is so small that she keeps getting trapped in the drifts, and I pull her out impatiently. All the way I sing and think of how much you like the snow. I think grimly, I bet you wouldn't like all this. But as I think it, I am not sure. I remember that when we were falling in love, you would rather kiss me in icy fields than by a warm fire.

The neighbors are not at home, looks like they haven't been there for a couple of days. In desperation, I dig a path to the door and try the knob; it is open and, feeling like a burglar, I enter. I leave the dog outside and she howls a protest. I find the phone, and, blessedly, it works. I call for help and am reassured. I call my boss and he says he will come pick me up. I thank him sourly. Then I trudge home.

When I sing my song again, moving my arms in the appropriate motions at the appropriate times, someone in the kitchen snickers. Ah, the supportiveness of collective life.

That night I dream I am a youngster, being taken up on the ropes for the first time. I stand on the small, slightly swaying platform; twenty feet below the net has been jerried; beside me is my mother, lean and firm and silent. We are both wearing old brown leotards. I am only ten.

I have been doing exercises for six months, to develop the muscles I will need. But today, after all, I do not use them.

My father and my older cousin stand on either side of the net; their faces are turned up to me, unsmiling. My mother is urgently repeating the instructions: control your fall, fall flat on your back, relax but keep your body parallel, let yourself bounce to a halt, only then try to move from the net. I am only half-listening; I do not sweat yet, but under my arms is unpleasant heat.

I am looking down, wondering how I can jump off into that emptiness. My mother lets me look; knowing always what is below is part of what I must learn in the act. Then she hugs me, says, "Once you fly, you will never want to stop," and I almost smile. She says, "Now!" and raises her hand to signal the catchers. I do not go for a second, but before she can speak again, I crouch, spring, and am falling, twisting. I want to scream in terror, but there is no time before I hit the net sideways.

Great squares of hemp jerk at my body, my muscles down my spine are jangled and burn, I am airborne again for too little time to count, then I am shuttling back and forth from flight to net, a ball between two paddles, until finally the motion has subsided and I am cradled in the net. I am ready to cry.

I feel my father's hands, suddenly; he is reaching up through the net, he is telling me to move, his voice is tight with fear.

I say that I am all right. I sit up and bob in the net some more from the motion; I begin crawling to the side. When my arms or legs miss the rope and plunge helplessly through the holes in the net, my father eases me back through. He follows me to the edge; my cousin is there, trying to steady the net; I slide off into their arms and stand. I am bruised and giddy, but I have done it. Suddenly I grin and shout. I wave to my mother, who waves back joyously. I am standing on the earth but I am no longer her slave. I am ready to climb up and jump again.

My father runs his hands over me, checking for breaks. He pulls my arms and legs, feeling the tendons, asking me if I hurt. I shake my head impatiently and pull away, swarming back up the rope ladder. At the top my mother holds me soundlessly, gripping me close for a minute; I welcome her embrace; I feel older. Her eyes are glistening as I face the edge again.

It is still not easy, to dive off into space. But as the day goes on, I become smooth and eager, able to move in the air, once crying "wheee!" all the way down. When at last we stop, hours later, I hear my mother tell my father, "I see why they are taught while they are young; she will do fine." I am laughing as I wake.

I am startled at the vividness of my dream. That day I receive a letter from you, the first in months. It is written on the back of a flyer for a rally, a march followed by speakers. Your name jumps out at me: you are making a speech on "Classism in the Wimmin's Movement." I try to imagine you making a speech; I recall your resistance when I first explained classism to you. I turn over the flyer and read the three paragraphs.

You tell me about the rally, about your excitement, how it went well and you received thunderous applause. You say, "Thank you for believing in me for so long, and helping me to learn to believe in myself." I feel a surge of pride; I am glad that you have written. Yet, as I reread over and over the paper you have sent, the pride gives way to an uneasy feeling. I am bitter that you grew only after I left, only after one too many fights over the gap between us. The bitterness turns into anger.

I rip up the letter. Jude sees me from the hall; she stops and quietly asks

me what is wrong. I reply hotly, "She says thanks for getting out of her life so she can live it for herself." Jude raises an eyebrow and leaves. I think about what I have just said. The ache returns; I decide to wait to write you until I am sure I will not fill the letter with passion and recrimination. I do not write for two months.

I dream again. I am chalking my hands and wrists. Again, my mother is beside me; the rest are below. But today, I will take the bar from its hook beside me and swing out on it, hopefully to return. I listen intently to my mother: if you feel yourself slipping, she says, jerk yourself upward, pop your wrist, and get another grip. She hands me the bar, shows me where to hold. I take a breath, then pull myself up and point my legs as I start the swing.

Immediately, pain sears into my shoulders and arms. I hold on for a couple of feet, then let go, feeling the agony subside as I do so, relaxing into the familiarity of the fall. When I leave the net, I am embarrassed, but no one else appears to be. My father tells me something about centrifugal force. I listen politely and ascend again. My mother rubs my shoulders; they are already sore.

I take the bar and swing again; again, I must let go. No one laughs; no one criticizes. My mother says only, "It is hard to learn." I am encouraged. As I take the bar, I think about the unbearable pull when my feet leave their support and my arms stretch out; I think about where it hurts, and try to flex those muscles. I can feel them; I realize the months of exercises have given me control where I need it. The third time, I think to myself.

I push out. Instead of abandoning my body to dangle from the bar, I keep the muscles in my shoulders just a little tight; I am holding myself up, not hanging. It hurts, but it can be borne. I am carried along to the end of the swing, like a clock's pendulum; momentarily, I am motionless; then the return trip begins. It is too abrupt; I do not know how to make the change. I slip and fall.

No one speaks of the fall. They are glowing, praising me for being able to hold on at only the third try. The adrenalin flows through me. My mother whispers, "This time," and I feel she is right.

As I fly out again, I am aware of the air brushing into the scoop of my body. In the split second at the end of the flight, I relax my legs and let my body go convex, readjusting the muscles. It is enough. I am returning, blindly, my back to the platform. I want to see the look on my mother's face, but before I can twist my head to the side, her arm is coming around me strong and sure, and I am pulled onto the stand, tumbling into my mother's arms. I tremble, with happiness, I think. Amid the cries from below, I hear my mother murmur, "Fledgling rides the wind, hmm?" and I think of how much I love her. She takes a turn on the ropes, swift, fluid, and rippling, laughing as she lands back beside me. Again, I wake to my own laughter.

You write to me, asking if you may come for a visit at Thanksgiving. I call to tell you yes. I explain that we in the House will go to a cabin up by Lemon Lake on Thanksgiving Day, a crowd of dykes having a vegetarian feast. I mention that we all plan to fast the day afterward. You find this amusing. You will spend The Day with your current lover and fly up that night. I arrange to pick you up at the airport.

When you arrive, a snowstorm is blanketing the night. The effort of driving through it plus the prospect of the fast the next day has left me ravenous. When we get back to the House, I set out all the leftovers on the breakfast

bar. You and the rest sit around on stools or the floor, and we talk of the holiday while I nibble at this and that.

When we go to bed, I am exhausted. I cuddle into you and drop off. The next morning is delicious. We touch and giggle and are very cozy, until we wake fully. Then we slip back into our roles, self-consciously; you even go into the bathroom to dress. I grin at that.

I am ravenous again; I take my vitamins and watch you enviously as you make pancakes and scrambled eggs. I suggest that we spend the day up in Kenebec Pass, by Maiden Falls and the old ghost towns. You agree and pack an enormous lunch, even after I remind you that I will not be eating. I fill a canteen and dress in several layers.

The day is still and clear and much colder than during the snowstorm the night before. The snow is cleared away down in the valley; but as we drive higher, into the mountains, it is a thick cover everywhere. By the time we get to Kenebec, the chains are barely pulling the car along. Maiden Falls is half frozen, with an edge of ice like new lace. An occasional sheet of ice is frozen into the swirl and tangle of the rapids, while the water can be heard rushing on underneath.

Even with all I have on, I am still cold. You look blue and enchanted; you have not seen a winter like this since you were a child. You sit on a large flat rock, gingerly, and watch the waterfall. I am hesitant to sit next to you. Because I am not watching the waterfall as intently as you, I catch a movement in the sky above us. I look, and see an eagle making passes in the windy reach over our heads. You follow my gaze; later you tell me that you have never seen an eagle before. You lie back on the rock, eyes to the sky, and stretch out an arm for me. I curl beside you, and we are an audience for the eagle.

When she leaves, a wall that was between us has fallen. We kiss shyly and then storm the mountain, following the falls ever upward but going slowly enough that we may talk. We talk of everything, open, intimate; it is scary, but you are reassuring and blunt. We talk of our other lovers; we talk of how we can raise our daughter away from each other; we talk of our parents, their progress in understanding our lives; we talk of our past, with a growing gratitude that the memories can be as good as they are, that we remember the same things; and we share what glimpses we have of our days that will rise ahead of us.

We find the remains of Paret City; I take a picture of you leaning out the three-cornered window of a crumbled gambling hall. We are friends again. That night I cannot help shaking when I slip into bed with you. You hold me, trying to soothe the tremors; then you make love to me. I am delighted to find that your body is not at all familiar, I can learn you once again, and you cry when you come and go to sleep with tears still drying on my arm. As our chests rise and fall together, I sleep, and dream.

I stand in the ring below the trapeze. All of us stand there together, my family and I. We will not chalk until we reach the top, because tonight we are performing. People must not understand how we do what we do; they want to be dazzled, mystified.

My mother goes up the rope first. For performance nights, we use a rope instead of a ladder. There is more drama in slithering up a thick, curling rope, hand over hand, without a pause. I follow her. My father holds the rope for me; my cousin is climbing the rope at the other end, to the catcher's bar. My cousin is catcher because he is the most powerfully built and least excitable.

When my father joins us, there is room only for our feet on the small platform. We lean our bodies out, hanging on the guys, trying to hide our nervousness with carefully rehearsed grace.

My cousin has begun swinging on his bar; he is sitting on the bar, his back to us. At a certain point, when the swing is going straight enough, he flips over backward; his knees catch on the bar, his legs wind round the ropes. Now he faces us, upside down.

He has practiced for hours at a time to keep the muscles in his legs from cramping, to keep from being dizzy as the blood flows to his head and stays there. If either of these happen, it could be fatal, though tonight we are using a net. We use a net because I am only twelve. In another year, we will again perform without a net.

I am not afraid of this coming, being without a net. I have learned how little a net really means; the fall is to be avoided always, whether the net is there or not. After the lessons are learned, there is no excuse for a fall. And the net is not so big. If one falls while in motion, one can twist, but not move bodily through the air to one side or the other. It is easy to miss the net altogether. Or break a bone in the net. Or slip at the platform. A catcher below is more effective than a net. But we are a small family. All of us are on the ropes.

Someday, my younger siblings will join us; then my father and my cousin will go below. They will be older, too slow to do their tricks well anymore, but still strong enough and fast enough to break our fall with their bodies. Only someone in your family will volunteer to be a catcher below, because it usually means death to stop an object of a hundred or more pounds from a thirty-foot fall. Until we are more, we hope for no accidents.

I realize that all this review and speculation has passed through my head in the less than a minute we have stood on the platform. With this realization, like the breaking of a spell, I awaken. The dream does not feel finished. Perhaps it is a result of the ongoing upheaval in my life.

I come to visit you and other friends, to explain that I am moving to San Francisco, that the mountains have given me back my sense of self and now I must "do things." You are upset with my decision. You say I always move away from you. You are right. Still, we manage to spend time with each other that is not crowded with walls and judgments.

The night before I take my leave, crossing the continent to the land of dykes and honey, we spend hours saying good-bye. We sit in your yard, underneath a gentle crescent in the early spring. It is warm enough to enjoy the sitting out and damp enough to enjoy sitting close together. I keep saying, "Well, it's really late and I must make an early start tomorrow," and we smile and touch hands, and then suddenly we are off again talking feverishly without realizing how it has happened. Finally, I stand, looking resolute, and you hold me tightly and then you say "wait" and run into the house.

When you return, you have a big Texas orange in your hands. You place it in my two hands, and I look at you with a wondering grin. "A present," you laugh, "to remind you of home when you miss it the most." I cannot help but cry; you cannot help but kiss my tears into your wet and wetter lips; we cannot help but kiss passionately, sadly, until I break away and jump into my car and run from your waves and cries of "Be careful!"

I leave the orange on the dash of my car. All across Texas and New Mexico

I look at it, wondering if now is the time, is this when the pain is the worst, how can I tell when the bleeding will shortly begin to flow less and the wound commence healing over? The orange bothers me until in Albuquerque, when I make up my mind how I will use it. When I go through the enchanted mesas and buttes just leading into Arizona, a place that had been ours once and that I had not reclaimed for my own. There, in the Painted Desert, we had gone through during a sunset, and we were so moved that we couldn't even talk; we only listened to the ghosts and ancient chants that came to us on the wind. One of our best times, and I had not yet come back to let the regret wash through me until I was clean and could make memories in my own name once again. When I came to that place, I would open the orange and eat it slowly, letting the smell and the acidity of the juice seep into my own flesh like salt, cauterizing swiftly, so that I might continue on without leaving a piece of me behind.

I stopped for the night, glad at least that I would not see the region in sunset again, but by the calmer light of morning, the unseen light of morning.

The next day, before I reach the place where I will eat the orange, I approach the inspection point that prevents citrus fruits (among other things) from entering Arizona and California. I throw the orange under my seat in a panic and try to drain the guilt from my eyes; silly, to feel so paranoid over such a little crime; I've done things a thousand times worse. When I am asked, I deny that I am carrying any fruit. My voice sounds funny to me, but I guess not to them. I am waved on.

Without the orange visible, I forget about it. I reach Kingman before I remember it. Somehow I have driven through the place where I was going to eat it without noticing where I was. At this realization I am both agonized and exhilarated. I pull out the orange and eat it with relish. The trip begins to take on new symbolism for me. Not only am I cutting ties, I am filling in the spaces with new visions.

I try to remember what I had been thinking of that distracted me so when I drove through the familiar mesas. I cannot recall, but it stops mattering immediately. As I drive into California, I have a momentary sensation that I am flying. I throw the orange peels into the Mojave, hoping they will provide nourishment for the delicate life there.

That night, journey over, the dream returns, picking itself up where it had left off. I am standing in the charged silence of a people-packed tent, reaching for the bar so that I may begin the show. I begin, not because I am the youngest and least experienced; it is because I am the lightest, and better on my cousin to ease him into the tremendous impact of a moving body suddenly hanging onto the ends of his arms.

I do a simple move: out to my cousin, my feet to his hands, one swing upside down, my face sweeping the crowds but I see nothing, back to the bar, then up to home. Now, in the act, there are no words of praise, no time for reassurance, only a glance that is, really, enough. My mother launches herself as soon as I hand her the bar. She catches hand-to-hand with my cousin, flips to return, and is not even sweating yet when she lands. My father does a half-twist to my cousin, meaning he is caught by the backs of his hands. He does a full twist to return. My mother's hand is tensely resting on my neck. The first is over for each of us. From here, it is easier.

We build gradually until the climax of the show. I do a somersault to my

cousin, still feeling a small kernel of panic rise in my throat as I hurtle end over end, trying not to flatten out in my forward flight. The panic is swallowed each time I am abruptly halted by calloused flesh seizing my wrists. Then I return to the hands of my father, who has swung out on the bar just in time to catch me.

He returns me, then keeps swinging, reversing himself, as my cousin leaves the catcher's bar and sends it out alone, timing its sweep to the finest fraction of a second. Now that the pressure is off me, I practice by watching my father. My mother has taught me that in order to do a series of moves as complicated as those in a single trick, practice is not enough. I must know every part of every move, like the building blocks that they are. Then I must put them together in order, imagining every detail, while an internal clock measures off the seconds. I must imagine this sequence so often that it is thoroughly familiar to me before I ever try it. One reason for this method is that I will know when I make an error as I make it. But what I appreciate most about it is that it has transformed the air for me. In the beginning, the vast amount of air around the platform was just a space that thousands of my small body could fit into; I was never sure my body would do what I wanted it to in so much open space. But when I had learned a sequence in my mind, it became a track in the air, from bar to bar, a tunnel that just fit my body and seemed to hold me up. Now I stood and watched my father, remembering what he would do next, envisioning his track before he is on it. It is very comforting.

My father does a double somersault to the second bar that my cousin has sent to him, completes the swing, then returns with a one-and-a-half twist. I am impressed with the mechanical perfection of my father's actions, and I am tracking him, but I am not out there with him. I dimly hear the roar of the watchers; already I am losing concentration, now that my role is almost over; my father and I bow.

My mother takes the bar and jumps off; my cousin has caught his bar and times it again. Now I can see the moisture on my mother's face. I hope she chalked herself before she began; we keep the chalk up here; we are supposed to use it every time under the lights, to counteract the sweat that runs down our arms. I feel a thin web of connection to my mother. As I watch her, I am learning, the empathy is so strong. I wish her part were over, yet I also thrill to the confidence and birdness of her.

My mother does not do anything on the first swinging, though she could just as easily; she is playing to the crowd, prolonging their suspense. But on the second swing, she goes into a one-and-a-half somersault; the calf and ankle of each foot find the rope and cling; she has caught herself upside down, alone. Before the crowd can end its gasp, she is coming up high above the second bar and falling down to it in a two-and-a-half twist.

I want to hug her madly when she is safely back; instead, we wave at the crowd. My cousin projects himself out and lets go, a churning spiral to the net below. My mother is next, with a series of convoluted somersaults; then my father; then me with as much as I can manage, a single flip, the colors around me blurring as I move within motion to the resistance of the net.

We flip over the side of the net in turn; I join them, the last, and we link arms and bow. I am thinking about how much the crowd loves the solo stunts, how deceptive these are. The foot-and-leg catch is easier on the body, especially for my mother, with her mighty legs. It is in a way harder to be a catcher,

being responsible for those coming toward you, having to gear your timing to someone else's, keeping a sense of balance while always upside down, being jerked repeatedly, all the hard work with none of the glamour. That is why my dull cousin, who can perform over and over without making a mistake or being bored, is our catcher. I am glad to be on the other side. As we scamper out of the ring, I awaken, tired and satisfied.

The next time I see you, it is on your own territory. I come to your city, not mine anymore; I drive through the heavy traffic one afternoon and knock at the door of the house you share with your lover. She is in the living room, watching television. I am slightly ill at ease; I do not know what to say to her. She ignores me altogether, her eyes on the screen. I am relieved; I stand there, watching the news with her, as you get ready.

We are going out to eat. As you come into the room on our way out, the newscast takes on an urgent tone. Mechanically we watch. The camera is showing Karl Wallenda crossing the wire seventy feet above a South American street. He teeters as I hear the words "... fell to his death today ..." I want to look away but I do not. The wind catches him; we see him fall, try to hang onto the wire, then fingers give. He plummets to the pavement below. The camera is on him all the way.

I feel sick; I turn and bury my face in your shoulder. You say, "Why are they showing that on tv?" Your lover shrugs and says, "If they didn't, someone else would." She is angry at us both for embracing in front of her. I pull you out of the door.

I am unable to drive; I am shaking. We skip dinner. I buy a bottle of wine, get drunk gratefully, and we go to a quiet place in a thicketed park to talk. For some reason we are avoiding any mention of Karl Wallenda's fall. You touch me much, but are more silent than I am.

Finally I begin letting my feelings out. In some way the fall is a threat to me. I tell you about my dreams. It rushes out in a jumble and I feel better, but I need a response from you. I wait, oddly alert. You say that you think I am overreacting to the newscast, upsetting as it was.

I do not try to explain anymore. I say, "I want our relationship to stay exactly as it is right now." You are very affected; you feel that you have finally pleased me, after all the years of my discontent. But I know that I have insulted you, I have laid a death knell on our association, because of course we will change, we will move from here and now, and I am not ready for this. I withdraw from you before we even say good-bye. You do not notice. You kiss me cheerfully and step away. I do not watch you go.

When I am at last home again, I gather up the dictionary and open it speculatively. I look for the root word of *trapeze*: *trapezium*, the Latin, meaning "a quadrilateral having no parallel sides." In front of me, suddenly, I see the bar, suspended from two ropes which are hooked to supports in the top of the tent. I see the curve of the tent, the widening ropes, the bar: a closed figure. I hear my mother's voice telling me the muscles in my shoulders that make me able to raise my head are called the trapezius. I consider my life, how the boundaries of it no longer conform to any thing but the impulse that moves me. I think, I move from one part of my life to another, and the distance between the parts is never the same twice.

I put away the dictionary and go to bed. I stretch out in the width of my bed, enjoying the luxury of so much space for myself. I do not dream, at all.

Meditation on Movement

I

In the beginning was the beginning and that has never changed. After that everything changed / and never stopped changing.

In the beginning (we all had high hopes. Here was a place where we could be more ourselves than we ever had been. Here was a place where the struggle to survive, to create space for ourselves, was so immediate a reality that the possibilities for creating alternatives multiplied spectacularly. In taking just precisely what we needed, and not waiting to be given, or attempting to earn, or buying with any of the current dishonest and contradictory currencies, the delineation of our selves in opposition to the enemy crystalized; the war was on and we loved it.) In the end /

everybody left and I stayed. For six weeks I lived in a bare white room, painting the black birds of death on the walls and other symbols of power and mystery. In another photograph all of our belongings are in the street; in the background the house is boarded up. We later broke into the house and set fires in all the rooms, huddling in the shadows outside with a fine rain dusting our faces, watching, watching the fire, our eyes, our hearts filling with flame, until we heard sirens and escaped into the dark broken streets / this was no revenge. We said it was a ritual act of love.

I later returned to a place I had left before. I wrote:

when I came to this house after so many months, I thought I saw myself as I was then slipping out the back door to feed the chickens. I ran after you, Cellan, you looked like me, you were wearing my clothes; I called after you, you were humming a song I wrote the last time, I knew it was you though you were more of a witch then than I have become; you were waiting for your lover who has come and gone twice since then, you were living in the attic (I have lived at the top of many houses in two cities since then, I am older and harder, I have broken since then, I am broken now) but I knew it was you. I called your name repeatedly, I called your other names but you wouldn't answer me, you wouldn't answer me. I ran after you and you dissolved into the side of the woodshed. I collapsed and rolled in the mud, cursing the chickens, cursing my bad luck, cursing the rain, it has been raining steadily for two weeks. In the end I left without seeing you again. What has become of you?

[she'll turn up. Maybe not here but somewhere. Certainly not in the way I expected / anything is not attracted by the desperation in any other thing, there is no need to say what.] Or for example:

My friend left me / I left my friend in a hilly dry region in the south. The hills were surprisingly and spectacularly green. The city rose out of the earth in orange hues. The sky, needless to say, was very, very blue. The currency of the land was so inflated that the least expensive item rang up in the hun-

dreds. I couldn't understand anything—the language, the blue wire of a sky that dissected me in the mornings before I could get out of bed, the dreams that sickened me even in my waking hours, the planets in different dimensions my friend and I had occupied, huddled into the aloneness behind our eyes. When we left each other, and she went south and I went north and neither of us knew where we were going, I struggled not to believe the lie that we would never get there / though we never did

as far as I know / but that is more because my conception of where anywhere is and how any woman gets there has /

Moved on.

II

SHE CAME INTO A ROOM

I lay drunk full of myself on the hillside in the snow, looking up through the branches of trees into the stars, snow falling on me, stars and the cold night air filling me up. I lay there twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. I staggered up the hill and came hushed into a room, the sky falling off me in ribbons. I came /

hushed into a room. Women were naked by the fire. They complained of the cold she brought in. They were tearing the pages from a book and laying them on the hot coals, their blank eyes staring at the curling blue-black pages. The woman ran screaming from the room back out into the night and flung herself into a snow bank. She lay there with the tears freezing on her face. She lay there twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. [She entered the room and the women

took from her her damp clothes, they took her into the soft warm flesh of their bodies. We later burned the pages of a book which was full of lies.]

She came into the room.

I cursed / I screamed / I ran from the room.

MARIANNE STAYED. We are like that. We have never yet gone the same way at the same time. She thought she would come but I knew she would stay for I wanted so badly not to travel alone, I wanted so badly to stay but I couldn't and therefore I knew I would hate her for staying and she did but by the time she knew she would stay I had stopped hating her for I knew she would stay and I would go and we would kiss on the platform and I would wave as the train pulled out and be sad for some time until I stopped that we never did go the same way because that is how we are and so we did. It is unlikely I will ever again be in that room so if they ever smashed things up that night, as I hoped, they have certainly by now repaired the damage and, I hope, moved on. I will never know for sure. [*when I explained the situation to Noelle I said though she thinks now that she will, Marianne will not be on the train tonight and she said neither will you. But she had missed the point entirely.*]

III

Other endings made naked by a combination of circumstances persist in my imagination:

How we sang that night, in the empty warehouse on the canal! How we sang—breaking into our power right in front of their noses, on the very day they thought they had us down once and for all, how we sang—like the arrogant outsiders, the awful outlaws we were; jumping, hooting, banging on the drums, and the one clear voice of the flute changing and binding, ranging in the high notes of our beings, our furious beings. The flutist played all night.

Long after we slept, her tune vested my dreams with the significance of an ending. I felt finished / in the morning

I was too weary to ask myself, what now?

She said she was weary, she said she was resting, she said this moment is a riddle to me and I am baffled by the unfolding of events; why don't things go on? She was weary she said, and she was resting she said but later she was forced to admit errors had been made. She realized she had been waiting to be claimed by movement, she had forgotten how to claim her Self and had therefore dis-membered her Moving Self; she was not resting, she was waiting and in waiting, she came to be waiting on the master who, ever-quick to perceive a lady-in-waiting, a victim, had proceeded to colonize her waiting-room with demons and delusions she had thought long left behind. *To be passive is to be a victim. To be a victim is to be afraid. A victim is colonized by fear, a spiraling fear that creates for the victim a fearful reality. All her fears are realized. She colludes in her own oppression, by oppressing herself. She has*

STOPPED MOVING:

RED ALERT.

IV

CONCLUSION

It is so hot and dry here. She needn't have feared coming back. What is familiar, is so in a kind way. She walks a lot. Dust blows up out of her footsteps. She has stopped asking, how does movement occur, having realized how the question was wrong, having realized how the answer does not exist within the confines of language. If she answered herself at all, she said, by occurring, simply. Once she said, movement occurs in direct proportion to the fearlessness of the spirit. Yesterday she wrote in the book she carries everywhere—*the goddess is not a moralist*. And underneath this, in heavy strokes: **THE PAST IS PAST AND THE FUTURE IS MADE.**

Having recaptured belief, she believes this is true.

Llorona

*cry sorrow sorrow
coming with your dried snakes charm
charming the crazed and
the innocent with your lyrical
lunacy
mystical
tales of the moon
you claim immortality
you
you think you'll find me there
docile
bewildered
the lost child torn from
you by demons that swirl and
burn amidst the golden
brown hair of your devil devil
child
oh cry sorrow with
your spells and the magic no
one doubts you own
the power that swallows everyone's
fantasies
you claim life forever
using scars for tears and a
noise noise that shakes
reverberates
beating all the passion
with a passion
the black sweet bruises and dark systems
wanting to wring them out of
me out of you
you claim life forever
again and again thinking
I'll be there steady ready
to take up the fight
of mother and daughter divided
unsatisfied forever
antagonistic cry sorrow
let your ovary
throb from the pain of my absence
I am the daughter the children
shredded castrated decapitated
in the arid desert
the blood red flames in your eyes
which serve as blinders
to keep you from seeing what
you wish not to see*

*take a white woman to lie
with you
clean smooth as
enamel
the veins plainly visible
through vinyl skin
rest your head on what
you claim so close to perfection
and take repose
rest rest
but then when all seems finally
quiet
there's a beat beat
a beat in your head
a pain in your abdomen*

*y
siempre
siempre por las
noches
there's that fearful wailing*

—Achy Obejas

Emily's Arrows

1. 1969

His parents kept asking, "When are you going to get married?"

My parents were "disappointed." However, they gave us a used vacuum cleaner to help us set up housekeeping.

I used it faithfully.

I was very married.

2. *Henry Miller and the Taxi Dancer*

At first we were very happy in our rebellion; then we began to quarrel.

Robbo was suddenly after me to get a job, though he didn't have one either. He was going to school on a scholarship which turned out not to be sufficient for the two of us. A nineteen year old college drop-out, I sat at home, cleaned and read. I especially read about Henry Miller's enigmatic wife, June, in Anais Nin's diaries.

"... the phosphorescent color of her skin, her huntress profile, the evenness of her teeth. She is bizarre, fantastic, nervous, like someone in a high fever. Her beauty drowned me. As I sat before her, I felt I would do anything she asked of me."

Robbo read Henry Miller and it made him horny, but he didn't like it when I faltered on about Anais Nin's attraction to Henry's wife.

One day I ringed my eyes with black eyeliner, like June in the photograph.

"You look like an idiot. Wash that off," Robbo said when he came home in a bad mood. "Why don't you get a job and *do* something?"

June Miller had been a taxi dancer when Henry met her. She took drugs and lived at the fever point of existence. She carried on with women and everybody.

I said I would get a job when he got one.

It was our first fight and I hated him.

3. *Fast Foods*

A week later we both got part-time jobs at the Taco Bell on Pacific Coast Highway, right across from Shephard's Ambulance. Two or three times an hour the electric doors rose up to spit out a flashing, wailing rescue car. It was harrowing at first, but you could get used to it.

Our Taco Bell manager assured us that "fast foods are the wave of the future . . ." A skinny, sly man with yellow, erupting skin, Handy had trained in Texas at the Taco Bell School for Managers. He had also been with Kentucky Fried for a while. He was pleased we caught on so quickly to burrito making. He lectured Robbo: "Stick around. You can rise to the top in this biz. Look at me, not much older than yourself. I'm bringing it in all right."

Handy thought Robbo should quit college and go to manager school. He was impressed that Robbo could chop twenty pounds of onions without crying.

4. *Emily*

Emily was the person I most often worked with in the afternoons. She was sixteen or seventeen and was still in high school. She was tall, dark-haired and almost beautiful, except for one thing:

Emily looked as if she had fallen asleep and someone had drawn lines in fine pencil across one cheek; they radiated out from a dimple or scar near her left ear.

"I'm glad you didn't try and brush it off first thing," she told me a few days after we began to work together. "Most people do."

Her parents were bringing a suit against the doctor who had put her face back together after a motorcycle accident. He had left the dirt in.

Emily was metaphysically inclined. The sirens didn't bother her. She believed in karma, reincarnation, afterlife, everything. She was working her way through *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. During slow times at the counter she read me bits.

She wanted to move to San Francisco when she graduated in June. She took acid every weekend.

"Get back to work, girls," Handy admonished us. "Wipe up that bean goop when there's no customers."

He did not suggest we go to manager school.

5. *(Un)married Life*

was easier with both of us working at Taco Bell, as we ate burritos, tostados, tacos and soft drinks two meals a day.

Nevertheless, as spring began to turn into summer I grew more and more depressed. I cried and read, read and cried. I read every single novel of Henry Miller's to find out more about June, returning always for reference to the first volume of Anais Nin's diaries.

Anais said Henry lied about June, made her into a character, did not touch her true essence. Anais told June, "You're the only woman who ever answered the fantasies I had about what a woman should be."

Anais told Henry, "If there is an explanation of the mystery, it is this: the love between women is a refuge and an escape into harmony and narcissism in place of conflict. In the love between man and woman there is resistance and conflict. Two women do not judge each other. They form an alliance. It is, in a way, self-love. I love June because she is the woman I would like to be."

"It's not my fault you're unhappy," Robbo told me. "Do something with your life."

Do something, always do something. He made it sound so easy. But all my energy had gone into my rebellion, first to initiate it, then to sustain it. I had dropped out and I had moved in with Robbo. I felt too weak to do anything else. I dreamed of dramatic gestures, a life at fever pitch, knowing a woman like June Miller, *being* her—while day after day I served out beans with a smear of red or green chile sauce and listened to the ambulances scream.

6. *Emily's Acid Trip*

Emily asked me if I would like to take acid with her one weekend. First I said yes, then I changed my mind. I had taken acid with Robbo once and I had cried the whole time. But I said I would spend the evening with Emily while she tripped.

She had borrowed someone's apartment as she still lived at home with her parents. It was one of the barest apartments I have ever been in; there was toilet paper in the bathroom and that was about all.

No, it wasn't quite empty. On the bare wooden floor of the living room were two corduroy bean bag pillows and a big spool table with a clay pipe and a dish of strawberries, the first of the season.

We smoked some weed and lay bumpily back onto the pillows.

"You sure you don't want to try it?" Emily asked, taking two tabs out of her front shirt pocket.

I shook my head. I felt high enough and just fine. I looked longingly at the curves of the strawberries. "I'm starving," I said.

"Me too," Emily joked and popped one of the tabs.

I think I was waiting for something to happen immediately.

Nothing did.

We smoked more weed, and I began to eat the strawberries, holding my greed in check, taking only one at a time, letting my tongue first brush the faint prickles up and down, then rubbing the berry over my lips so that some of the juice escaped and stained them, finally breaking into the fruit in slow bites, exposing the feathery white center.

"Whoop! Are you getting into those strawberries," Emily giggled; then she bent over and kissed me quickly, almost experimentally, on the mouth while I still had one of the berries in my teeth.

I was more amazed than anything to see her face close-up, with the graphite tattoo spraying across her cheek like a comet.

"Don't worry," Emily said, worldly or embarrassed, leaning back once again, out of sight behind the spool table.

I wasn't worried; no, not that. And if she had asked me, I would have said unhesitatingly that I had liked it. She didn't ask though, or say anything at all for a while.

7. *The Reincarnation of June Miller*

Later, while staring at the ceiling, I launched into an animated description of June Miller: "She had tuberculosis, but she didn't mind it. It helped her live a fiery life, that's what she wanted—to burn up, not to be ordinary. She lied about everything, she couldn't help it. She needed life to be interesting. She had affairs with men and women. Anais Nin was in love with her, lots of women were. She believed in Dostoevsky like the Bible. She lived in New York and Paris, she might have been a drug addict, she was very beautiful, and she wore kohl around her eyes."

My voice drifted off. I looked expectantly at Emily, beautiful and drugged, as dreamy as a harem girl in her Indian shirt, with a veil of scars over her expression. Would she be as moved by June's life as I was?

Emily said nothing for a moment; then she ventured in a far-away voice, "Maybe you're her reincarnation. Or is she dead yet?"

I didn't know, to tell the truth. I was taken aback by the question. I found I hardly believed in June as a real person; she was so much a symbol in my mind, though of what, I would have found it difficult to say.

"You know what I'd like to do?" I surprised myself by saying. "Is get some black eyeliner and dance naked around the room."

But right after that I fell asleep.

8. *My Dream (I think)*

I opened my eyes and saw Emily across the room, in front of a full-length mirror I hadn't noticed before. She was naked and could have been dancing, though it was very slow, more like a plant weaving in the wind. She was shadowy and white and lovely, and the thin scars on her face formed a kind of mantilla or a spider's web over her cheek.

I wanted to touch her very much.

I said, in a voice that sounded like my voice, but still odd, "Give me another strawberry, June."

9. *More Sirens*

Then I was awake. I didn't have any idea what time it was.

"Emily," I whispered. "Where are you?"

She was lying, asleep and fully clothed, behind the spool table, half on a pillow and half on the floor. I knew I should leave, Robbo would kill me.

I didn't wake her then, but leaned over and brushed her scarred cheek with my lips. It was soft; the dirt lay lightly under the skin.

A siren began its long shriek the minute I stepped out the door. It was only about five blocks to our house, but on the way I had to go past the Taco Bell. Robbo and Handy were just closing up when I got there. They let me in. Handy was friendly and wanted to put me right to work.

"Could you just wipe off that counter?" he asked, giving me a rag.

But Robbo was furious. "What the fuck are you doing out at 2 A.M.?"

I didn't know if I'd done anything to be ashamed of, but I suddenly felt as guilty as if I had. In some vital way I had been unfaithful to him, and everything was different. I didn't even want to look in his direction.

But the doors of Shephard's Ambulance tore open then and spewed out another screaming car, cutting off all conversation long enough for me to think up an excuse.

"I got Dad to drop me off here so I could walk you home," I said, lying as skillfully as June Miller ever had, embracing my deception.

10. *Emily's Arrows*

Emily graduated that June, a few weeks after our evening together, and moved to San Francisco. She gave me a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and I gave her the first volume of Nin's diary. We hugged each other good-bye beneath Handy's somewhat disgusted eye, in the back of the Taco Bell where I had been stirring refried beans. I wanted to ask her why she had kissed me or if she had really danced naked before the mirrors. Instead I begged her impulsively, "Don't get your face fixed."

She just laughed. "Forget *you*," she said.

Not long after that Robbo and I split up. "I'm tired of masculine/feminine conflict," I told him rather grandly. "Yeah, well I hope you get it together sometime," he returned.

I gave the vacuum cleaner back to my parents and returned to college. Soon I was studying the usual subjects and demonstrating against the war, and had forgotten all about June Miller.

Not quite: years later I fell in love with a woman who had once worked as a topless dancer in New York. She had the same dark-rimmed, world-weary eyes and pouting cheeks as Henry Miller's photograph of June in the *Diary*.

I remember once telling this woman about Emily. I ended my description with something I had never thought of before, "Some of the lines on her face were like arrows."

"Which direction were they pointing?" she wanted to know.

I laughed and shook my head. "They weren't *pointing* anywhere," I said. "Were they?"

And Be My Love

Ann discovered she was in love on the day the world almost came to an end. It was glorious that October day in 1962. In Iowa it was softly hued, russet, copper, yellow and gold. Not so in the Caribbean, where life balanced delicately on the tightly drawn will of two men. There, in her mind's eye, Ann saw colors bold as a Parker Bros. game board: a cobalt sea and an emerald island surrounded by steely grey markers with tiny stars and stripes on the prow. Advancing move by move were the battleships of the other side, each with its bright red hammer and sickle. Bristling the circumference of the board were the doomsday missiles. They were black and they all looked alike.

At six-thirty that morning Ann opened her cellar door. The wicker basket in her hands overflowed with diapers. She paused before stepping out on the grass, white and delicate as a bridal veil. The tide of golden air spilling over the brim of the plain had blandished night away except under the ferns and behind the willow where the clothesline was strung. The world seemed suspended in a golden gel, delicate as floating milkweed.

Then the air assailed her nose and her lungs. It was frosted and acrid with the odor of nighttime fires; the smell whipping her like pennants flying. She stepped out briskly. Wind rustled a pile of leaves. A squirrel ran out on a limb to abuse a jay. In the distance, on the other side of town, the whistle of the express bustled along ahead of the sun.

She smelled coffee. That meant David was up. And so must Sara be, she thought. At this very minute perhaps Sara is making coffee, because surely she'll want an early start. And she tried to conjure a picture of Sara in a kitchen performing the prosaic routine of coffee making. But she could not. All she could see, and that quite clearly (the diapers had disappeared; she hung them by touch), was Sara that night walking down the dormitory corridor with her glass full of vodka saying defiantly, "It's not water, you know. It really is vodka." Half of her, she confided later, wanted to be thrown out. But of course no one believed her. "If I'd said it was water," she remarked bitterly, "they'd've had old Mrs. Grundy with her beltful of keys up to smell and I'd've been out on my ear."

No, Ann decided, Sara would have her first cup of coffee somewhere on the road, on the way. Somewhere memorable, a peg to hang the whole adventure on. Ann could hear her telling it, see her: "Moody's Diner on route 30, a sad little cafe. That's where I had coffee the day I stopped in Iowa to visit Ann that time. The short order cook was Lymon Willis. Really he was."

Before the laundry basket was empty, Ann's fingers were blue and the diapers frozen, their folds and wrinkles hard as metal, projecting rigidly at odd angles from the line. In the kitchen she warmed her hands under the cold water tap and listened. She could hear David in his study opening and shutting drawers. That meant he was 'having difficulty,' probably with his introduction for that afternoon of Adele Gray. Still, he wasn't slamming them, so it could be worse. She didn't understand why he was being so fretful. It wasn't that he admired Gray's

poetry. Perhaps that was the trouble. Ann would have loved to introduce her. She had hinted as much to David, but either he hadn't heard or he chose to ignore the hints as she dropped them. In the early morning kitchen, drying her hands, Ann imagined herself on the stage, Adele Gray behind her, and before her, spreading into the shadows under the balcony, receding up under the eaves, all the students of Trenton College, all the faculty, all the trustees, and all the most important people of Cambridge, Iowa. Her heart caught in her throat and her mouth turned dry. Still, as chairman of the English department David spoke from that stage all the time, she reasoned, paring it down to size. He really shouldn't mind.

Upstairs she heard babies' voices. Aaron and Adam. They were both up. Where was Paul? She put water on for cereal and eggs in a pan to boil, then went to see. Paul was still asleep in his crib, his face red and wet with perspiration. Not a fever. Not today. Not with seven, maybe eight, people coming to dinner. Not when it was the whole English department and Adele Gray. Maybe it would pass. She tiptoed out and left him. In the hall, Adam caromed off her thigh. She caught and steadied him. He smelled awful. The guilt on his face needed no corroboration.

"I'm sorry, Mommy. It was an accident."

Into the toilet she hurried him, the one at the head of the stairs because it was closest, and cleaned him there. As soon as she had him on his back, he began to charm, blew spit bubbles at her and baby raspberries.

"Not today, friend," she said, but her severity fluttered lightly over other passions, and Adam, mocking her, drew his brows down too in a knot between his eyes and shook his head at her disapprovingly.

"What are you supposed to do first thing in the morning, Adam?" she said, keeping the upper hand.

"Go potty."

"That's right. Now get dressed. And tell Aaron to get dressed. His bus will be here in half an hour." Aaron, five, was in kindergarten.

The phone in the kitchen began to ring. Ann dropped the loaded diaper in the toilet bowl and ran downstairs.

It was Jennifer in Iowa City. She and Ann had decided the night before to send telegrams protesting the Cuban blockade and to get, each of them, twenty other people to protest too.

"Have you heard the news this morning?" Jennifer said.

The water for the cereal had almost all boiled away, Ann saw. She thought, "The eggs will be hard; David won't eat his." "No," she said, "I haven't had a chance."

"Don't bother. It's not encouraging. Did you get your telegrams off?"

"Six of them. Well, eight with mine and David's."

"Six! Is that all? Listen, you tell those people in Cambridge from me if they don't send telegrams soon, their vote to keep the world's not going to get counted."

"I'll tell them. I've got to go now, Jennifer." She hung up. A grey vortex of panic opened in her belly, and for a moment the hundreds of things to be done that day went bobbing crazily out of reach. She steadied herself against vertigo, thrust the anxiety back into an obscure recess of her gut where it could churn unattended.

"One thing at a time, Owl," Sara would say. Ann clung to the thought.

Breakfast first. But here it was seven o'clock, and she was already running ten minutes behind. That was ten minutes an hour. She flipped the checkered cloth across the table; by this evening when her dinner guests arrived, how much would it be? Two hours. If things kept on like this, she would be two hours behind schedule. The glasses down from the cupboard, cereal bowls on the stove, sugar, spoons . . . the cups! And she smiled as a vision came sailing across her mind: the English department and their wives and Adele Gray all milling about with frosty breath in the cold night air on the verandah until she was ready. David flustered and apologetic, fiddling with his watch, cocking it to his ear to hear the tick and say every few minutes, "I can't understand it. She always runs right on schedule."

The phone rang again. She should have left it off the hook. Where would she find twelve more people in Cambridge to cable the President? Suddenly the primary colors of that Caribbean game board dominated the whole plane of her mind. If something wasn't done, there wouldn't be a dinner party tonight. She wished Sara was here with her, now. She wished Paul would get up. It was so odd fixing breakfast without him underfoot, and she felt an ache of grief flow through her arms at the absence of his perpetual irritation.

"Hello?"

It was Karl, one of those who had refused to cable the President.

"Good morning. It is very early and I am sorry to call at this hour. Is David available?"

"Good morning, Karl. I'll call him."

"Ann, were you successful in your search for telegrams?"

"So, so. Six others besides David and me. If it's done by popular vote, I think the world loses."

"Such things, they cannot be decided in this way," Karl said. He was an historian. His opinions issued *ex cathedra*.

"Well, maybe not. I'll get David."

But before she could call him, there was a terrified scream from the bathroom at the head of the stairs and David's feet pounding down the hall.

"Who left the diaper in the toilet this time?" David's voice licked downstairs into the kitchen. "Aaron, why don't you ever look before you flush! Ann! Would you come look at this mess?"

"It's Karl for you, honey. And breakfast is ready," she called up into the tumult, willing it to calm. "He'll be here in a minute, Karl."

Ten after seven. And the orange juice wasn't made. If they didn't blow up the world, she was going to be in a pack of trouble, she could see that right now; and she laughed aloud. What Sara would say to that! "You're the only person I know whose life's a distraction to her," she said once. It seemed funny and they both laughed. What was it Sara had wanted her to do? She couldn't remember any more, or why she hadn't. David was the same. He complained when she didn't read a chapter he wrote or an article right then when he gave it to her. Her life, Sara and David both seemed to feel, had no shape to it, at least that they could tell. And yet the thought of Sara's coming comforted her. Sara's presence seemed to hover brightly over the breakfast table, fluttering the air.

"Sara's coming!" She blurted it out. She hadn't meant to. Hadn't meant to mention it at all. It would just make David cross; she knew that. "But we're having a dinner party tonight," she could almost hear him say. And Sara had been vague. She might not stay. What was she driving to Des Moines for any-

way? It was all very strange.

David's head came up from the notes he had propped against the sugar bowl. Aaron paused, his milk glass halfway to his lips, alert for trouble, his hair wet and slicked back. He'd been into David's hair tonic again. She could smell it.

But David's attention never quite broke loose from the notes he was reading, never quite caught the new fact she had tossed out to him unexpectedly. "Oh, good," he murmured. Aaron finished his milk, and next thing they were all tumbling from the table and out the door.

She decided when they were gone to have another cup of coffee. Somehow she was back on schedule again. It was just past seven-thirty. She would call Dr. Thomas at home about Paul, but not until eight. It couldn't be the chicken pox. It just couldn't, not today.

Sara had never seen Paul, the thought struck her just then, tangled up with the certainty that it was chicken pox. Had to be. Rachel called yesterday to report Julie had them. But yesterday Ann brushed it aside as too incongruous. How could anyone get chicken pox when the world might end. That's what she must have been thinking. "You remind me of a turtle," Sara said. What was it she had done? Ann couldn't remember. "When you feel the world touching you, you just settle back inside that shell where nothing else fits and wait til it goes away again." Probably it was when she started to sleep with David. How strange that it was she, serious Ann, who was caught and not Sara. How intense she had been then; she could hardly remember the feel of it anymore, just the fact: intent on 'doing something with her life.'

Then, that last time Sara was here, lighting for a moment, on her way to London, or to New York, to read a paper, or to attend a conference, going somewhere, to do something; they had sat up late into the night talking. Once Paul had stirred and Sara had laid her hand on Ann's undulating belly. "If it's a girl, what will you call her?" Sara asked. "Sara," Ann said as if it had all been decided, not something that just sprang to her lips from nowhere, from love.

"Mommy!"

"Mommy!"

Adam's cries had been falling for some time like summer showers, unheeded.

"Mommy! It's raining from the ceiling! I told you a hundred times!"

"Oh my god! The diaper!" Ann knocked over her cup as she jumped up. And that was the bathroom for guests. Eight o'clock. How had that happened! There she was half an hour late again and the doctor to call. Not the plumber. Please not the plumber. Please don't let that goddam diaper be flushed all the way down, she prayed, flying up the stairs two at a time.

The air that day was gorged with words. People everywhere kept tuned in to hear the latest bulletin:

"... as the Russian ships approach Rendezvous Point ..."

"... no further word on the results of that meeting ..."

"... from Washington on the thousands of telegrams pouring into the White House: the American people are 100 percent behind the President and his firm stand ..."

Karl said, "Neither of them can back down now, it has gone too far. They would lose too much face."

"But it's unthinkable."

"I am afraid it is inevitable."

"... as the Russian ships approach Rendezvous Point ..."

Sara left Oberlin at quarter to six that morning with a thermos of coffee for rest areas along the way. It was dark when she left, and she had still not decided whether to stop at Ann's. Ann was so apt not to approve. And David! If David found out, he would probably show her the door. No, she couldn't bear it, not now. Afterwards perhaps. After she had been to Des Moines. Des Moines, magic place. She would call Ann from Cedar Rapids and stop on the way back with Nancy safe beside her.

Nancy! Sara looked at her watch. It was just six. Nancy would be getting up, just now opening her eyes and reaching to turn off the alarm, her hand so slender, so soft to touch.

"Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove," Sara sang to a tune she invented as she drove into the becoming day.

It was a day of convergings. The Adele Gray lecture was at three in Lorrimer Chapel. David insisted Ann attend. She wanted to of course. But . . . Paul did have chicken pox. The pustules had emerged and he was miserable. Karl had phoned again and suggested to Ann a group telegram. The wording was milder than she liked, but it was a vote against holding the Apocalypse on October 22, 1962. By nine-thirty, with her blessing, it was on its way to Washington over thirteen signatures. She managed to extract the diaper from the toilet without a plumber and to remove five gallons of water from the bathroom floor before it shorted the ancient electrical wiring. At two-thirty, when the babysitter arrived, the house was ready for company and what could be prepared for dinner beforehand had been. Ann was running right on schedule.

Adele Gray, after a gracious introduction by David, spoke for a little over an hour. She quickly moved from the lectern, stiffly centered in a glare of lights, to a less well-lighted area to the side and front of the stage. She was standing most of the time only a few yards from Ann. The timbre of her voice without the thinning distortion of electronic boosting was rich, and if her features were obscure to those sitting in the balcony, her communion with her audience there in the shadow where she could see them was profound. She was vibrantly alive. Ann felt herself caught in the net of her words; she hung from the beam of her black eyes which roved the audience but returned again and again to Ann's waiting eyes. Ann came to feel as if she and Adele Gray were alone in a vast space. She felt herself, her thoughts, all her sensations, gathered in a concentrated stream and drawn toward the woman on stage as iron filings are energized and pointed and pulled through space by the attractive power of a magnet. The intermittent touch of their eyes seemed to her as natural and insistent as the peristaltic contractions of hunger. For an hour Ann was completely absorbed by Adele Gray.

Ann was one of the last people to leave Lorrimer Chapel. The chapel sat on a ridge which ran like a spine through the village of Cambridge, cutting it in two. She paused for a moment on the top step. The town spreading out below her with its white frame houses visible through the autumn trees, showing clearly now the cloistered silhouettes of winter, seemed like the New England of Gray's poems to her. The sun as it descended into the oblivion of the vast western plain was beginning to draw to itself on broad bands of gold the light lingering in small pools where it was cupped, in the petal of a late rose, among the amber stubble of gardens, and from reluctant window panes where pieces of it caught fire and burned in a blaze of red and yellow. The air was liquid,

as it had been in the early morning, and the smell of burning leaves and wood fires promised to the people hurrying homeward the comforts of hearth, contented children and good things for supper. Ann should have hurried home too, to be sure that all those comforts were prepared; or perhaps she should have gone first to the faculty lounge to meet Adele Gray. She did neither; she wandered in an aimless way, as she had not wandered in years, down past the library to the pond which in the twilight was a hazy confection of greys, and there she walked with her head bent forward and her hands plunged deep in the pockets of her coat. She did not want to meet Adele Gray. It was that conviction which drove her out of the chapel when she finally left and turned her north toward the pond and away from 109 Elm Street, where in an hour and a half they would all be converging and she must be ready with drinks and hors d'oeuvres and a well-timed glimpse of shiny babies ready for bed. But she did not want to meet Adele Gray.

Every time her mind reached that point it would leap to Sara, to the image of Sara, Sara driving, Sara on her way to Cambridge, and there with Sara it seemed to get stuck until some memory from the afternoon, a phrase Adele Gray had uttered while her eyes held Ann's, nudged her back into an awareness of the present. In an hour, less than an hour, the whole English department would converge on her house and Adele Gray with them. But she did not want to meet Adele Gray. Her body stiffened at the thought of touching her hand. Then like an acrobat her mind flew to the waiting image of Sara, of Sara rushing to meet her.

Understanding when it came was complete. It arrived whole and perfect. It was as if in the somersault her mind made in its fall from Adele Gray to Sara the world had turned too, swung upside down, so that when her thoughts came to rest again on Sara, the world had changed. She was in love with Sara. It was suddenly so clear. The evening star winked red. It knew. It knew what she longed to do was to hold Sara in her arms, that she had always wanted this. The fine leafless threads of a willow brushed her cheek as Sara's hair had brushed it so many times and she had not known, but the willow knew. Water rippled the shore and the wind in the willows called Sara's name. They had always known and so had she. And Adele Gray. And Adele Gray. She turned. She flew home. Her feet never touched the ground. Sara was coming. Sara! Sara! her heart sang.

"Come live with me and be my love," passers-by heard Ann sing, and it made them smile to see a girl in love running through the falling dark in a world which had just been saved.

Ann had left an 'emergency list' with Peggy, the baby sitter, in case she was late, so though she arrived home only half an hour before her guests, things were well in hand when they appeared, even to a fire in the library.

Ann drank her cocktail on the run: Paul was sleeping but she brought Aaron and Adam, freshly bathed and dressed for bed, to meet the 'company'; she prepared a second tray of hors d'oeuvres; Adele Gray was cold and Ann brought her a hand-crocheted sweater she kept for special occasions; and, finally, she finished setting the table and announced that dinner was served.

Ann avoided touching Adele Gray until after dinner. Her hands were full of coats when they were introduced, but the meeting of their eyes again at such close quarters caused an odd contraction of Ann's bowels and she laughed, she

thought afterwards inanely, and said, "I feel we've met already." But Gray's attention was drawn away just then by David to an engraving he wanted to show her. And of course at dinner she sat at the other end of the table. Ann was just as glad because she couldn't keep her mind on anything anyone was saying, what with wondering what had happened to Sara and the way phrases and comments Gray had made that afternoon turned through her head like messages on a revolving sign board. Relief that the world was still intact bubbled through the conversation, and everyone drank more wine than Ann had anticipated. But the Gantners and the Ewells had each brought a bottle, and these were opened and amid toasts to 'the Ks,' were drunk. The academic talk with which dinner began turned, as it so often did, Ann thought, simply silly. By the time dinner ended she found herself laughing a good deal. And after dinner she sat next to Adele Gray on the sofa David called a love seat. She took Adele's hand and began to talk earnestly with her about poetry and life and love. Ann asked whether Adele thought it strange that she, Ann, had just discovered that very day, not three hours before, that she was in love with Sara. Adele said it did not seem strange so much perhaps as difficult. That puzzled Ann at first.

"You mean because of David," she said at last.

"Well, yes, certainly. David." Adele paused and sighed. "But I was thinking of Sara."

"Sara?"

"You said she was engaged."

"Oh. She was very young then. Just twenty."

"But she may not love women, dear."

"Oh." Ann thought about it for a moment. She sniffed her brandy. She sipped it. She peered into the bowl of her glass. It was all gold. "She does," she said, and she smiled. "I'm sure that Sara loves women too." Ann could not have explained why this was so clear to her, this and many other things, things she could not remember or even think of, all of them clear, astonishingly clear.

David called to her then from the fireplace where he was standing, smiling, handsome and assured, surrounded by his guests, his department, his books, bibelots and plaster busts of Shakespeare and Caesar, dispensing his hospitality with the geniality of a Norse chief among his thralls.

"Ann, I think it's time for coffee and the pie. Ann's pie is marvelous," he said to Adele Gray as Ann left the room. "It's my mother's recipe," he added with a lingering slur of the South on his tongue.

Everyone left at ten . . . eleven Boston time, Adele Gray reminded them. David went to bed as soon as they had gone. Ann stayed up. Sara should have called hours before. Ann washed the dishes, endlessly it seemed, but still Sara did not call. It was midnight and the kitchen floor still wet from the mop when the phone finally rang.

"Where have you been? Where are you?" Ann cried.

"Didn't David tell you?" Sara said. "I called from Cedar Rapids about five, and you weren't there." Sara's voice was full with love.

"No, no. He never told me." Ann felt the healing balm. "Oh, Owl, I love you," she cried.

"I know, Owl. I know, and I love you too. Owl, I have something very important to tell you."

"Owl . . . Sara . . ."

"I'm in love, Ann. With a woman."

"I know . . ."

"Her name is Nancy."

"Nancy."

"That's why I'm in Des Moines. I'm bringing her back with me. We are going to live together, Owl. At Oberlin. She's a painter. Ann . . . Ann, say something to me."

They decided together it would be best to postpone a visit until later. Because of David. They both agreed about that. Ann said of course she didn't disapprove, but, she said, she would rather not talk to Nancy on the phone, not just then, not until later, until after they had met. During the Christmas break they agreed would be a good time to get together. David might even babysit the older boys. Ann could come to Oberlin with Paul.

"Who was almost Sara." Sara's voice brimmed with her joy.

"Yes, almost, Sara," said Ann.

The next morning at breakfast David said to her, "Oh, your lesbian pal called yesterday. I forgot to tell you."

"Who?" Ann asked.

"Sara. Are there more?" And then David talked a while about how much she had drunk the night before and how she surely must have known when she was making a spectacle of herself, sitting on the love seat and holding her hand, that Adele Gray was a known lesbian. She admitted as much, publicly.

According to the *New York Times* the next day, of the hundreds of thousands of people who sent telegrams to the White House, only forty-one did not support President Kennedy's blockade of Cuba. For weeks Ann was alternately frightened, dumbfounded and awed by the fact that she, Ann Markham, of Cambridge, Iowa, was personally responsible for over half of the protests received by the President of the United States on The Day the World Almost Came to an End. But after two months passed, right before Christmas, the mystery was solved. She received a letter with the Presidential Seal. It thanked her for her support of the President during the country's crisis.

Everything depended, she finally decided, on how you looked at it, or as David said right away, on the perspective you brought to bear on the matter.

SPECIAL RECOMMENDATION:

We would like to recommend to *Sinister Wisdom* readers the superb Iowa City Women's Press. They are experienced, expert, and excellent printers. For 2½ years they have treated *SW* and its editors with patience and tender, loving care. We want them to know that we love them.

—Harriet and Catherine

Iowa City Women's Press
529 S. Gilbert Street
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

Julie

Julie is the booty in your childhood dream. She appears walking along the shore of Mud Lake one afternoon when you are both thirteen. You are sitting in the hollow of your favorite bush, plotting a raid on the abandoned resort down the street. You tried it once at the age of seven and were caught. The old lady who lived in the alley across the way saw you crawling through the window with a cardboard box. She called your brother, instead of the police. All the candy bars, cards, and poker chips had to be replaced. And then the horrible punishment—to go to your brother's house and study, every day after school. How long did it last, this interminable sentence? Months? And then the afternoon in spring when all your friends were going to town for a coke and you had to go, too . . . He found you; he drug you home.

How long was it before the guilt wore off—the bruises healed on your wrist—and your mother agreed to buy you the boat—two-seater, styrofoam that she couldn't afford, on her salary from the phone company? You were a natural on the water; a Tom Sawyer behind the rudder, you followed the coast for adventure. Along the east side of the lake you would slow the motor and watch the rich ladies sunbathing on their private docks. How your eyes lingered over their long limbs, turned with the sun over their flanks. You would imagine yourself lying beside them on a blanket, drinking a coke . . .

Or perhaps you would have to escape. Perhaps they would catch your lush brown eyes peering over the boat and would call to you to keep them company; to mow their lawns; to see if the mail had come. Some would stand on the shore waving their arms and shouting in frustration. Others would grasp the rope that kept their own boat tied to the shore and try to lasso your rudder. But you were no longer Tom Sawyer, in the face of their desire. You became Moses in the bulrushes, your innocent brown eyes floating down the coast. You would drift into the middle of the lake and lose consciousness. The clouds were trains of elephants and monkeys; or the blocks of letters on a baby necklace. But you would not think; you would not choose metaphors; you would drift into nothingness as the sun set its colors on the west side of the lake.

Then you would start the motor, Tom Sawyer once more, the approach of night making you raucous. There would still be time to take a swing around the island, the point called Lover's Bluff, or watch the lights of the amusement park blink on in the distance.

Could it have been on a night like this that you first met Julie, walking on the shore of Mud Lake? Surely it must have been close to dusk, you plotting in the bush under an invisible eye-patch, whispering to shipmates the plan for attack; she appearing from the west, the dust particles of dusk playing like gnats around her head. She must have been wearing pedal pushers, a sweater, and some keds. You didn't suspect that anyone was approaching your spot until you heard the hum that was too high-pitched for water. Perhaps you thought it was your own boat whistling against the pull of the rope. Then you heard the splash as she threw in a rock.

You peeked and it was a revelation—you had seen her at church. She went

with her mother and brother. She was quiet. You watched as she dug her toe in the sand for rocks, her long brown hair masking the thin prettiness of her face. The bush shook as you slid gently from your hiding place. She was bending over a large rock that her toe had uncovered when you said hello. Your voice did not frighten her because she had been humming. She looked up and smiled, recognizing you from school. You had everything in common.

You discovered your houses were only a street apart. It was nothing to take the short-cut through Mrs. Pritchard's yard now that you went over to help Julie babysit her brother. Her parents went out every night.

How did it happen?—her mother must have wondered, her father wrinkling his forehead. For surely he liked you; had adopted you, in fact, as his second daughter, knowing your own father was never present. And there was something in the way you rolled your shorts, in your bowlegged walk, that made him susceptible, that made him want to hold you on his lap.

And perhaps he was right; perhaps you were looking for a new set of parents. On the day of the accident, on the school field trip, you cried for Julie's mother, even when your own had arrived. It wasn't very serious—just stubbed your little toe on the dock and it had pulled right off; four toes on the left foot your trademark for life, your early distinction . . . let all future lovers remark—this woman is related to Captain Hook . . .

So you left your mother alone in the house every night and went to visit Julie. Small, sweet Julie. I have no idea how it began. Did you play with dolls? Did you take lessons from the flames in the fireplace? Did you whisper secrets in the dark or chew gum under the sheets?

You began touching each other because you said it felt good. She was shy at first; then not as shy as you, under the blankets every night (yes I am jealous). You would put her brother to bed and then explore each other; every inch of your bodies, in innocence, was open to every kind of caress. It was like being out in the boat together and drifting with the waves; it felt natural; it felt good.

How long did it last?—months?—the feeling stronger than fears; the pleasures stronger than doubts. You brought her presents by the day, by the week—a candy gum machine; a blue felt coin purse; and most important and cherished, a gilt crucifix she kept on her dresser. No one seemed to notice the abundance of gifts; or was it a secret you kept to yourselves? Were you the diplomat—did you advise her not to tell? For surely she was impulsive; wanted to share her happiness. Maybe your instinct for caution was precocious; was part of the knowledge of your own mother's violence; the baton crashing down on the chair—not your back—and breaking it.

But Julie's parents were religious—went out every night, kept themselves contented; they let you ramble over Mud Lake like bandits; gave you free tugging on each other's scarves (Is that why you still wear them?) Who was Tom Sawyer and who was Beckie Thatcher; or did you take turns?? Did you sit in the hollow together smoking invisible cigars and conjuring ghosts and goblins for a crew? Did you kiss watching the colored lights of the amusement park?

Your mother was only two houses up the street, mumbling as she boiled her vegetables for dinner. Where were you anyway?? As if she didn't know; spending all your time with that Julie girl; running in and out of the house to get things—a softball mitt, your binoculars, a coat. In and out as if she were running a hotel, not a house. As if she weren't your mother but a housekeeper; washing your dirty butter knives, picking up stray underpants, never knowing if you were

coming home for dinner. And surely you were somewhere within the block; within calling distance, perhaps.

Then it happened—the second revelation; the fall from bliss. You came home from school one day and all your presents to Julie, even the crucifix, were piled on the front porch. Your mother conveyed her mother's message—you were no longer welcome in their house. You couldn't listen; you ran through the streets; you hid til dark. Then you snuck to Julie's house. She opened the door; she shrank. Yes it was true; you could never see her again; she had wanted to make sure it was all right that you touched; she had confessed.

Her father had not wanted to impose the sentence; you had sensed this, told me this as we strolled along the shores of Mud Lake. Her parents still live in the house; her brother rode by on his bike as we walked along the street. You showed me Julie's photograph. She's teaching somewhere in the Midwest; never married; an intense face; wide-eyed; almost frightened.

Announcing a New Quarterly for the Common Dyke

COMMON LIVES/LESBIAN LIVES

fiction * autobiography * herstory * photography * journal
theory & analysis * oral herstory * correspondence
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Common Lives/Lesbian Lives was created from a personal/political need to record lesbian experience and thought. *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* seeks to discover our past, claim our present and envision our future, as part of the process of defining our lesbian community.

To claim community with all dykes, we need to share the diversity of experiences that have separated us, such as differences of color, size, class, background, age and physical ability. Therefore we actively solicit contributions from all lesbians.

Tell your stories, collaborate with others, excerpt your diaries and journals and correspondence. Send in your work now. Xerox is OK.

Common Lives/Lesbian Lives 1 will appear in August, 1981. For a flier describing the publication in more detail and the collective producing it, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to our address.

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Those "Other" Kind of Women

Emily had long straight blond hair and a big tomboy smile. Louisiana talk. Liked to wear overalls which always seemed too big for her smallness, her pear-shaped girliness. She was the only person I ever met who actually said, "Aw, shucks."

Well, this particular night, we drove up and down Federal Boulevard, back and forth from east side to west side, shooting up and down all those Denver alleys which jigsaw through the city, mated to the streets they stand behind. It was Columbian we were smoking, being long before the days of sinsemilla. And Budweiser we were drinking, before I got sophisticated enough to know that San Miguel Darks were better.

Emily was driving wild as usual. In fact, I think I could say that next to me, Emily was just about the craziest driver I've ever met. I'd seen her pull wheelies and outchase cops—just grinning and settled back on her hips, drivin'. I held on tight to my seat and jes' screamed with the brakes.

Now when I first met Emily, back in San Antonio, she was living with Chuck, but I knew, deep down, (cause I'd heard the rumors) that she was one of those "other" kind of women. But I liked her anyway. I figured what she did in bed was her own business.

But this night, this particular June night, bein' my last night in town, my good-bye night to Emily, I decided to finally broach the subject.

"Err . . . umm, well, Emily, I, uh . . ."

"You trying to say something, Laura?" (She always did seem to nail me right up against the wall.)

"Yes, Emily. I, well, I just was wondering . . . I, just, uh . . . wanted to know . . ."

"Know what, Laura?" she smiled, mischievous, knowing goddamn well what I wanted to bring up.

"Well, Emily, uh . . . what's it like?" I finally blurted out.

"What's what like, honey?" she asked.

"You know."

"Know what?"

My voice raised in intensity. A teeth-bared whisper, urgent. "You know!"

Emily looked me right in the eye and smiled. Then deliberate: "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talkin' about." An appropriate pause: "Want another beer?"

Silence between us. End of Round One. I took the beer and drank, recouping. I knew she was enjoying it. I just knew it. I put on my best casual voice, "Well, you know, it wasn't important to me anyway." I sighed my best nonchalant sigh and turned to stare meaningfully out the window.

Emily screeched to a halt at a red light. Her own peculiar form of punctuation. "What wasn't important, hon?"

Well, as you can imagine, by now I was feelin' just as sweaty palmed as when I got caught stealing that scarf at J.C. Penney's. That woman had sat me down in her office and made me take everything out of my purse and lay it on her desk—my morocco red hand-stitched wallet, my diaphragm, my peace-

sign hash pipe, my oozing tube of spermicidal jelly, my copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—everything, that is, except the scarf she knew was on the bottom.

"Emily," I began.

"Why, honey," she remarked, swerving around a corner, "you look redder than a coyote's balls in hell."

I took a few deep and lingering breaths. "I'll count to three," I thought, "and then I'll say it." One, two . . . My mind drifted to a cartoon I had seen with a mother feeding her two year old. "Just three more spoonfuls—one, two, twenty-six, eighty-four, thirty, twelve, three, all gone!" I stopped counting. No words. Nothing but a knot in my throat bigger than any half hitch I'd ever seen.

"Having trouble getting it out?" she asked, sweetly. And then she did it. Reached right over to my lap and grabbed my hand. "You can tell Emily."

Oh my God. A woman has taken hold of my hand. One of those women. I'd never felt such a hand—light, quiet, yet firm like it belonged there. No sweaty palm, claiming possession. A small and delicate hand holding mine. The little tic I get that lifts my eyelid up and slams it down again like a snapping turtle started just about then. But I felt warm right from the touch of that hand all the way down to my toes.

"Emily," I babbled. "What's going on?"

"On?" she asked, squeezing my hand, her fingernails playing with the top skin of my hand, her nails teasing my flesh. "We're just enjoyin' our last night together. Anything special you want to do?"

"Do?" I bumbled. "Uh, well, uh, yes, I mean, no, nothing special."

"Well, how about this?" she asked, pulling up short at the sidewalk. "I'd like to kiss you."

Something akin to a short circuit ground me down to a halt, an eye-popping, mouth-open halt. "Kiss me?" I thought. "She wants to kiss *me*?" Oh boy, did I want those thin and delicate Louisiana lips on mine. Again, the problem of no voice. I managed to squeak out, "Okay."

I think I must have had my face all screwed up like a prune in heat, because she laughed. She bent over me slow and quiet, like a wild cat caressing her young, and touched her lips to mine. She kept them there, her tongue teasing my mouth, gently, oh so gently, a soft pussywillow kiss.

It was the kiss I had dreamed of all those years Scott Weiner had thrust his smelly sausage tongue into my mouth. Through all the hours of spin the bottle and seven minutes in heaven and post office. Through all the third grade make-out sessions with Keith Rand on the mattress in Celia Sara's basement. Through all the red and swollen gums I nursed after gashes from *His* braces, finally now, after notch upon notch etched impermeably on my diaphragm, this woman, this girl child, placed her mouth on mine and simply kissed me, turning me inside out and upside down until the me I knew began to melt, dissolving right into the pile of the red shag carpeting of her Datsun B210, never to recover.

My being screamed, "TILT! TILT!" My heart beating like a whole army of hearts, throbbing right up through the top of my head. She stroked my hair, smiled. I know there were tears in my eyes. "Well, how'd you like your first kiss by a woman?" she asked.

I didn't say anything. I just turned around and kissed her back, full throttle on the lips, kissed her back.

And I've never been the same since.

Seduction Scene

... talked to Kate this morning. Told her I broke up with Judith. Thing to remember: be proud of my strength—giving up when it was time to, leaving when it was clear we'd never make each other happy. Misery all over again. And it was. And as for Kate herself, the two-sided wonder, the very best and the very worst, her sides already filled three and a half years of my journal with magic and misery, at last become moaning and mourning and nothing magical at all, so she can just put herself together with Judith now and the two of them move on to occupy my past full of wraiths: Jeanne and Jackie, Joyce and Justine and Janice, on and on. Back, through Danny and Mark and my ex-husband, whose name I don't care to write here. And further back, to the biggest ghost of all, my mother Mildred.

As I write this, I'm on the beach with Nicholas, my grown son, Leah, his love, Jennifer, my daughter. When I look in the mirror, a hundred times a day, a woman I choose to see as ageless looks back: in fact she's 38, her children nearly grown, while she looks around 30 and feels 19 or 2, depending. And Goddess willing she'll stay young forever, because how can a 19 year old-2 year old woman, overnight, become middle aged? Though that isn't the whole truth, because she can feel every bit of her 38, too . . .

Jennifer, my daughter, looking in the mirror a hundred times a day, wants to know why her ass and ears stick out, her feet are big and turned in. Nick wants to know why he can't just be in love and happy all the time. I want to know all those things too. Who's going to tell me? Who's going to make life come true for me the way it's supposed to? You are, Ruth, I hear myself answering from deep inside, only you. But why does it have to be that way? Can't I have some help? Can't someone else do it for me instead?

... I mean, I woke up with Judith in my bed for four months, several times a week, once for two weeks straight, 14 mornings her tiny beautiful body there beside me. Months of slowly opening up and trusting. Trusting she'd be there, that she'd want to hear, learning she was who to tell, listen to, share with, open up to, little by little and more and more. For months increasingly it was she I spent all my time with and told all my dreams to. Learning to let her love me. Until, one day, sitting in the kitchen, she opened her mouth and it said, like the quick change in a nightmare when good suddenly becomes bad, the nice man a monster, it said she was having a little trouble . . . being close. Beginning of the end. A month later it was over. My Judy. But first we hoped, tried, pretended, one particularly beautiful moment I remember saying, "Hold onto me, Judith, because I would do anything for you . . ." She remembers it too . . . it seems that's what really started her running! It was too much, hearing that. Which is, essentially, the thing I can't understand, the problem that's killing me: why doesn't closeness feel good to so many people? Why didn't it keep feeling good to Judith?

But so what. Now I'm not on the beach any more. I seem to be writing this in pieces, like a patchwork quilt, like the one I made, hanging on the

white wall in my bedroom: three by four feet, a woman-sign banner made from a sample book I found of men's suit fabrics, grey and brown plaids, solids and pinstripes, enjoying the irony of the large, squarish woman-sign in the center outlined with lavender cross-stitches, the whole thing edged with pale pink-lavender satin . . . and Kate came to hate it and wanted me to take it down. Hurt and angry, I refused. This isn't your house anyway, it's mine—a reference to her not wanting to live with me . . .

I'm in the house at Deep Eddy now. It's almost evening. Susan and Linda, lovers, are asleep on the couch. Spaghetti's in the pot. Brownies on the stove, cooling. And I'm waiting for my friends to wake, trying to write a story. Story of my life as usual.

Taking in everything around her, Ruth couldn't keep from smiling. The scene from the porch was nothing short of idyllic. Even the porch itself: so big, wrapping around from the side to the front of the house, with its broad deck of grey painted boards, sturdy white railing, wide enough to sit on comfortably, while leaning back against the strong posts going up, up to support the roof overhead; or comfortable seats to choose from, a rocker, a butterfly chair covered in faded green, a beige hammock . . . and a table against the house wall holding iced tea, brownies, ashtray, two joints, matches. And from the porch, a tiny upstate New York town, wide unpaved road, large, well-built houses surrounded by lawns. Across the way, an old couple in rocking chairs on their porch, pillars of the town. Deep Eddy, New York State. Not a tourist town, but a river and beach five minutes from where they sat.

"What about you, Ruth? Do you want to get married again?"

Legs crossed and swinging, Stephanie stole a look into Ruth's eyes, a frank look for a long moment, and then away. Lightly tanned, a beautiful woman of 37. Unexpectedly there when they arrived for the weekend, one of the others who shared the house they were staying at. A teacher; a talkative, energetic, funny, warm, lovely woman. Straight. But acting like she was attracted. Meaning? Meaning what? Ruth had no idea. She did know she'd like to kiss Stephanie though. They'd had fun all weekend together, going to the yard sale and poking through 1940's *Woman's Day* magazines marked 2¢, old lace shawls and pillows and lamps and dishes and silverware, each buying wonderful bargains and talking about their New York apartments and how they made them pretty . . . the way Stephanie'd made the house at Deep Eddy so pretty, with her wonderful finds full of character and history and humor. Then going to the river and floating on inner tubes for hours, surrounded by children, and coming back to the house to cook dinner and bake mint brownies from scratch, according to Stephanie's secret-from-her-mother recipe. They'd been close and warm for two days, and the feelings had been growing—at least for Ruth they had.

Closing her eyes, she sighed as she imagined lightly rubbing her hand over Stephanie's high, beautiful breasts, ran the tip of her tongue tentatively and lovingly all along the outline of the other woman's lips, then slowly entered her mouth. With her other hand she gently stroked Stephanie's back . . . what was the question? Oh—get married?

"—or just live with someone, or what?" Stephanie looked right at her again, frank but furtive too, looking away and then back. Ruth tried to hold her eyes. "Married? No. Or yes, I do. But not the way you mean it."

Risky! Why did she say that? Annoyed with herself, Ruth was the one to

look away now. Something caught her eye. In the last light of the day, a small yellow bird flew by the porch, landed on a lowish branch of a high tree, and fussed with its young. Out back, the 89 year old man who lived next door picked a few tender young green beans and put them in a basket he had beside him on the damp ground.

Why had she said that! "Not the way *you* mean it!" Stephanie didn't want to hear that—did she? Did she know what Ruth was hinting at? Know it inside herself anyway, somewhere maybe was she looking for it, scared but searching, running away and hiding, but coming back for more? Or not—of course not. Why should she. It was so easy, and so clear, the whole world was Deep Eddy—or New York City, same difference—the old man and the yellow bird, the couple across the street and in every other house, old and young, all the same, straight.

Straight women! Ruth knew them . . . she'd been one for so long. And so had Jeanne, first love, and gone back to being one. Jeanne—seen on the street last week, still just as beautiful, deeply sensual even in the way she walked, held her hands, her head, and somewhere inside herself was Ruth still in love with her? Or did you never stop loving the ones you really loved, was that it? Seven years a lesbian—no, forget that, 38 years old, and who had she *really* loved? Aside from her mother, her children. Her first boyfriend, Danny? And her *real*, her long-time lovers, Jeanne, Jackie, Kate. None of them ever really given up? And this Judith, this beautiful, 25 year old, 13-years-younger one—what did she matter; what were three months. Ruth had never really let her in anyway. Certainly not all the way. Knock, knock, who's there. No one. Not so fast, young woman. Let me see your I.D. Who cared anyway. Get them to start writing resumes soon. List your affectional, sexual, closeness levels. Past relationships? Number, duration?

"What do you mean—uh—not like I mean it how?"

Stephanie had brown eyes, brown hair, in a nice Jewish face, and energy like her own. And straight. Why'd she have to be straight. She wants to get married—I want to get married. 4-ever. Judy and Ruth forever. Ruth and Kate forever. Niagara Falls, that time it almost was forever—and he didn't even make the really-loved list. Thirteen years. Let me out, out, out. Well, now, yes, I want to get married again, Stephanie. You're very attractive, have you ever tried women? Lesbians make the best lovers. We are not just good friends. I know you know. DYKE, printed on her T-shirt, sun visor, and ring. *The Well of Loneliness*? You know? Stonewall, DOB, LFL. And finally the radio at the beach the other day, blaring WKTU disco, then suddenly, ". . . have a question about the gay lifestyle? Or just want to rap? Call the Gay Switchboard, 929-9889 . . ." followed by an ad for Sunkist oranges.

A seduction scene? But what if she rejected. But so attractive. But to sleep with so many women? Sixteen, at last count . . . sixteen! And count them she did, every time there was a new one she'd write about it, in her journal and maybe in a poem, but eventually she'd actually list them, wanting to keep track as well as to sort them—*them!*—out and categorize them, different ways at different times, how many all together, how many—a coincidence?—had names beginning with the same letter, "J"—at present nine, over half of her sixteen women! How many Jewish and how many Irish Catholic, how many one night stands, short, or long term relationships, how many butch, femme, or in between, short or tall, big or small, how many much younger than she was. And

then dwelling on and analyzing and discussing all these counts and scores and differences. What did they all mean? What were the specifications of her perfect lover, and what was "bottom line"? Her journal was the most remarkable mixture of dear diary outpourings of both grief and joy, letters never meant to be mailed, much introspection, the beginnings of poems along with occasional completed ones, and these lists and other recapitulations of all the women she'd been involved with. But so many, it would be easy to get the impression that she liked or wanted it that way, needed to play around. It wasn't true, she didn't, wasn't the type. Hated non-monogamy . . . and serial monogamy. She'd been married 13 years. faithfully! All she really wanted was one, one forever, one happily ever after like they had said, had promised her since she was a little girl. But it never worked out that way, so eventually there'd be another one. But to just keep adding them on? Shouldn't there be some limit?

Oh, why not do it. Get more stoned—they'd already started. Put on music, disco, Donna Summers! Dance! Laugh, touch, flirt just a little, nothing you could pinpoint exactly. Switch to slow music. Dance along—together but apart, no touching. But move alluringly. Then, careful—but sure—touch.

Possible reactions:

. . . "What are you doing, are you crazy?" Or,

. . . "Oh, Ruth, I thought you'd never touch me . . ." Seduction scene.

But no, don't, caution, stop, red light, she's straight, and straight women—

Stephanie was looking at her. Don't seem too weird now, she told herself, and don't space out—you'll scare her away—but yes. Take the plunge. Look back, warm and frank. Excitement beginning to take hold of her, she gathered herself together, back to the conversation she kept dreaming away from.

"I mean yes, I want to get married again too, Stephanie." She said the name caressingly, which was how she felt. "I want to very much. But not to a man. To a woman."

Pause.

Silence. And more silence.

Unable to keep from spacing out now, Ruth felt the lightness of her head. Oh, don't get scared, Stephanie, she felt herself wanting to say, I don't want to make a lesbian out of you, I just want to sleep with you. Giggles starting to work their way up and out like the hiccups. 2, 4, 6, 8, how do you know your wife is straight. Stephanie. You're 37 years old. Come to bed with me. You'll like the way it feels, I am good, I am very, very good.

Screen door. Opening and closing. Out of her spaciness, pulling herself back. What was happening. Stephanie gone in the house? No, or else come back, because she was on the other side of the porch now, smoking. . . . What am I *doing*, Ruth thought, I hate kissing mouths that taste of cigarette smoke! —no, wait, that's not the point . . .

Looking around her, it was really dark now, moths, crickets so noisy you wanted to cover your ears at times, while at others they just became a part of the night and you didn't even hear them, and lightning bugs, bats farther out, or up, watch out, beautiful moon, stars like you never saw in the city, big trees, black sky. Going over toward where Stephanie stood, all the way thinking oh, no, how can I possibly try again. I can't, why, just to get hurt one more time, just to have to face up to my "unrealistic expectations," that's what Judith said. Just to have one more woman come in close and send her soaring with the intimacy, the pure sensuality of it, the joy, the sex, the

touches, the looks, the loving, the sweeping uplifting sensual soar of it, that thickened her voice, her throat filled with so much tender passion that she really, truly believed that at last it had happened and she was going to be happy . . . and then to have the woman go away again, or have to go away herself. She couldn't do it again, ever. She choked it back, all the expectations, the joy and the grief. No more.

But the porch. The empty iced tea glasses, the brownies from before, still sitting on the table. Rock music and raucous laughter from the bar on the highway a block away, full of rednecks and drunken laughter. Then fading somewhat, someone closing a door.

Stephanie stood leaning against the porch railing, smoking and shaking, the shaking visible as her glowing cigarette end made weird staccato jabs at the night air, twitching like a drunken firefly. The smoke quivered in the air in front of her, as if to hide her face, her pretty, forthright, but right now shy face. Scared, uptight and tense, but waves of her sensuality still coming across dense, strong, and wonderful, the way they had been all weekend. Beautiful straight woman. Turning away as Ruth approached.

"Stephanie? What's wrong?"

No answer.

Not knowing what to do, Ruth went to the hammock, thought about it, then passed it and settled angrily in a chair. Stop it! she demanded, stop it this instant, I won't have it. I won't open up again. Get back, feelings! Back! I don't like you, I don't want you. Get away from me, breath-catching desire, tingling cunt! Go away, agony of wanting, wishing, lusting!

They were ignoring her completely. She felt it. Her chest filling and her throat swelling with the huskiness, her body simply taking over, the corners of her mouth turning up in smiling anticipation. She couldn't believe it was happening. And her mind—flitting around, unable to concentrate. Focusing, jumping. Stephanie. Judith. Kate. The porch. Dreaming. The bathroom. Oh, right, the bathroom, on the toilet yesterday just after Stephanie arrived, going into the bathroom and sitting on the toilet and seeing it on the cabinet, Stephanie's makeup bag! When had she last seen one like that. Little bulging plastic bag, unzipped. Slyly, smiling to herself at what she was about to do, thinking naughty but picking up the bag . . . full to the brim with bottles, tubes, brushes, razor. Lipstick, mascara, eye shadow, blusher, of course, of course. Stephanie's present and her own past, heaped heavy in the plastic bag that pressed cool against her naked thighs.

. . . Estoderme Flowing Emulsion. . . This wonderful emulsion helps your skin remain soft, smooth, youthful-looking. Daily, its moisture-retaining ingredients help prevent dryness, giving your complexion the radiance and freshness of youth.

Straight women! Oh, it took her back, to herself, to Jeanne, remembering, flashing momentarily on the lipstick that had been on Jeanne's mouth, the first time they kissed . . . not that all lesbians wore no makeup. But for Ruth that had been a part of the transition, of coming out, of learning to love herself, her body, the way she looked, in natural color, nothing added or removed, and it was still a part of her life.

Estee Lauder fresh air makeup base—a rich but sheer foundation that not only covers tiny imperfections and smooths out texture, but also imparts

a clear, dewy, "country air" finish of sheen without shine.

And the release of slowly letting it all go. The eye shadow went last, she remembered. No, then the leg shaving.

Go-Bronze Bronzing Jel. New Go-Bronze will give you the golden glow that used to come only from the sun itself! Can be applied under, over, or without makeup.

Then she found the small bottle of toilet water—L'Air du Temps by Nina Ricci, Paris and New York. The smell, beautiful—and familiar. Where? A lover? The women she knew now wore body oils if anything—musk, patchouli. She herself liked a special East India patchouli, a while ago it was almost a trademark, the lover she was with then calling her Patchouli Mama . . . no, wait, now she remembered, it was her aunt! Her great aunt Florence used to wear it. Coming to visit once a year, so dressed up, her rich great aunt Florence, Ruth wove fantasies about her that lasted the whole year, till her next visit . . . how she'd take Ruth away and love her with a sweetness that matched the delicious smell of her perfume. It was L'Air du Temps, she remembered . . . and now the familiar smell, and Stephanie was in the chair beside hers.

Silence. Her heart flew.

"I'm sorry," Stephanie began. "I didn't know I, I mean, I shouldn't have reacted like that."

"Like what?" Her own voice, Ruth noticed, was calm and quiet, Stephanie's high-pitched and hurrying.

"Running out like that!"

"It's all right. I figured you needed to move around or something."

"Move around! I needed to run! Why did you say that—oh, never mind, wait, I didn't mean that, I . . ." She drew a long breath. Two. Opened her mouth to go on. Ruth stopped her.

"What's that you have on?" She felt herself smiling, smiling all over—her lips, her toes, her fingers, they were all curling with the delight of it, the wonderful, special space she got in when she was turned on, when things seemed promising, most of all when she made love, the space she'd discovered only since coming out, but that every woman she was with commented on, how she became quite transported . . . it was happening now. She embraced the sensations. She could do nothing but. "It smells so good," she heard herself say softly, intimately. "Really."

Inside the house, a new record dropped down onto the turntable, and suddenly Janis Joplin was singing in a way that expressed exactly the lust Ruth had to admit she was feeling. And she wanted, all she wanted now was to be able to simply reach out and touch the woman beside her. How didn't matter, it could be any one of the many ways she wanted, needed to touch her . . . soft and gentle and caressingly, or powerfully, or sensually; with her whole hand or just her fingertips or both her arms around her tight—any way, but just to touch her. Must. Please. Wouldn't she? She had to.

She was scared too, though, and something in the way Stephanie was looking at her caught her up short, and her mind raced off again. Kate. Write her? Meaning to tell her so many things for so long—but then she was always meaning to, never able to, not just since the relationship ended, during it too, there were just things that contradicted each other, always so many contradictions, is that what life was about? So the very saying of them canceled out the other half of what she needed to say. Oh, two-sided woman, I loved your one side

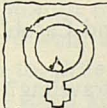
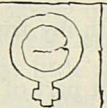
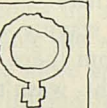


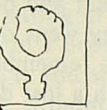
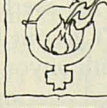
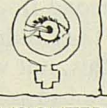

so much, I hated your other, wanted you to get rid of it, couldn't live with it, couldn't in the end. And always afraid I'd lose you and giving you all the power, that's how it felt to me, and then you, afterwards, after it was finally all over, telling me you were always scared shitless I'd leave you. Oh, fairy godmother, why can't the world come out the way it's supposed to? Why couldn't we have stayed together happily-ever-after, Kate?

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Now she strained against that dream to pull herself back. She had to. This was it—certainly not hers alone, but this was her personal struggle. How could she live with that forever-after constantly haunting her . . . and failing her? But how could she live without it? She didn't know any answers . . . never had. Maybe never would. And so, having no way of knowing whether she was finally fighting it off or just succumbing to it one more time, she forcibly stopped thinking and pulled herself back to the present.

Forced back by pure willpower, the past faded, submerging for the moment all the hurts and pain, the loss and disappointment, Kate and Judith and Jeanne and so on all the way back to her mother. Lips and toes curled up and smiling, she allowed the present to rematerialize, deliciously, in the sounds of Deep Eddy—where she was right then, that moment—the crickets loud, the music and laughter from the bar far away, the wings of a moth brushing against and escaping the yellow bug light on the porch ceiling—and below it, best of all, the soft and unexpected—or wasn't it really expected all along?—touch of Stephanie's hand moving wordlessly into her own.

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The Shell

Over, over, time to go back. Time to go back and end it. Rage smoldering in the car that could ignite in a moment and at the same time coldness, ice filling all the space, pressing on her chest, on her breath. Just the two of them in that car locked together, each other's reality, each other's world, the two of them seeming alone forever in that car. Other people going by are inaccessible strangers, sealed in their own vehicles, flat and distant as a movie—no help there.

I hate this, Sara keeps thinking, I hate this. I want to get out. I'd rather hitchhike. I'd rather walk. I can't stand being in this car another minute, but she doesn't speak or move. She sits staring straight ahead with her teeth clenched. The landscape pitches too fast at them around sudden curves. Slow down, slow down, let me out. I want to get out. When the wheels slide on the gravel shoulder, she glances quickly at Tasha. Tasha's profile is like stone, terrible stone flesh that radiates hate. I'll pack and leave, Sara thinks, I'll go to Carol's. Tomorrow I'll be on my way to Washington. I never should have stayed in Eugene. She feels the shell pressing against her leg and takes it out of her pocket, not daring to look at it. How quickly this all happened, her life changing course and now changing back, and how little control she seems to have.

Her first night in town she'd met Tasha at a dance. Sara was traveling, needing to move on, to be alone. Then this woman was dancing with her, sinuous, undulating, almost hypnotic, flowing around her, blazing with fire. She moves like a golden snake, Sara thought. Cords of energy flashed between them, winding around Sara, binding her.

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Seduction Scene

... talked to Kate this morning. Told her I broke up with Judith. Thing to remember: be proud of my strength—giving up when it was time to, leaving when it was clear we'd never make each other happy. Misery all over again. And it was. And as for Kate herself, the two-sided wonder, the very best and the very worst, her sides already filled three and a half years of my journal with magic and misery, at last become moaning and mourning and nothing magical at all, so she can just put herself together with Judith now and the two of them move on to occupy my past full of wraiths: Jeanne and Jackie, Joyce and Justine and Janice, on and on. Back, through Danny and Mark and my ex-husband, whose name I don't care to write here. And further back, to the biggest ghost of all, my mother Mildred.

As I write this, I'm on the beach with Nicholas, my grown son, Leah, his love, Jennifer, my daughter. When I look in the mirror, a hundred times a day, a woman I choose to see as ageless looks back: in fact she's 38, her children nearly grown, while she looks around 30 and feels 19 or 2, depending. And Goddess willing she'll stay young forever, because how can a 19 year old-2 year old woman, overnight, become middle aged? Though that isn't the whole truth, because she can feel every bit of her 38, too . . .

Jennifer, my daughter, looking in the mirror a hundred times a day, wants to know why her ass and ears stick out, her feet are big and turned in. Nick wants to know why he can't just be in love and happy all the time. I want to know all those things too. Who's going to tell me? Who's going to make life come true for me the way it's supposed to? You are, Ruth, I hear myself answering from deep inside, only you. But why does it have to be that way? Can't I have some help? Can't someone else do it for me instead?

... I mean, I woke up with Judith in my bed for four months, several times a week, once for two weeks straight, 14 mornings her tiny beautiful body there beside me. Months of slowly opening up and trusting. Trusting she'd be there, that she'd want to hear, learning she was who to tell, listen to, share with, open up to, little by little and more and more. For months increasingly it was she I spent all my time with and told all my dreams to. Learning to let her love me. Until, one day, sitting in the kitchen, she opened her mouth and it said, like the quick change in a nightmare when good suddenly becomes bad, the nice man a monster, it said she was having a little trouble . . . being close. Beginning of the end. A month later it was over. My Judy. But first we hoped, tried, pretended, one particularly beautiful moment I remember saying, "Hold onto me, Judith, because I would do anything for you . . ." She remembers it too . . . it seems that's what really started her running! It was too much, hearing that. Which is, essentially, the thing I can't understand, the problem that's killing me: why doesn't closeness feel good to so many people? Why didn't it keep feeling good to Judith?

But so what. Now I'm not on the beach any more. I seem to be writing this in pieces, like a patchwork quilt, like the one I made, hanging on the

white wall in my bedroom: three by four feet, a woman-sign banner made from a sample book I found of men's suit fabrics, grey and brown plaids, solids and pinstripes, enjoying the irony of the large, squarish woman-sign in the center outlined with lavender cross-stitches, the whole thing edged with pale pink-lavender satin . . . and Kate came to hate it and wanted me to take it down. Hurt and angry, I refused. This isn't your house anyway, it's mine—a reference to her not wanting to live with me . . .

I'm in the house at Deep Eddy now. It's almost evening. Susan and Linda, lovers, are asleep on the couch. Spaghetti's in the pot. Brownies on the stove, cooling. And I'm waiting for my friends to wake, trying to write a story. Story of my life as usual.

Taking in everything around her, Ruth couldn't keep from smiling. The scene from the porch was nothing short of idyllic. Even the porch itself: so big, wrapping around from the side to the front of the house, with its broad deck of grey painted boards, sturdy white railing, wide enough to sit on comfortably, while leaning back against the strong posts going up, up to support the roof overhead; or comfortable seats to choose from, a rocker, a butterfly chair covered in faded green, a beige hammock . . . and a table against the house wall holding iced tea, brownies, ashtray, two joints, matches. And from the porch, a tiny upstate New York town, wide unpaved road, large, well-built houses surrounded by lawns. Across the way, an old couple in rocking chairs on their porch, pillars of the town. Deep Eddy, New York State. Not a tourist town, but a river and beach five minutes from where they sat.

"What about you, Ruth? Do you want to get married again?"

Legs crossed and swinging, Stephanie stole a look into Ruth's eyes, a frank look for a long moment, and then away. Lightly tanned, a beautiful woman of 37. Unexpectedly there when they arrived for the weekend, one of the others who shared the house they were staying at. A teacher; a talkative, energetic, funny, warm, lovely woman. Straight. But acting like she was attracted. Meaning? Meaning what? Ruth had no idea. She did know she'd like to kiss Stephanie though. They'd had fun all weekend together, going to the yard sale and poking through 1940's *Woman's Day* magazines marked 2¢, old lace shawls and pillows and lamps and dishes and silverware, each buying wonderful bargains and talking about their New York apartments and how they made them pretty . . . the way Stephanie'd made the house at Deep Eddy so pretty, with her wonderful finds full of character and history and humor. Then going to the river and floating on inner tubes for hours, surrounded by children, and coming back to the house to cook dinner and bake mint brownies from scratch, according to Stephanie's secret-from-her-mother recipe. They'd been close and warm for two days, and the feelings had been growing—at least for Ruth they had.

Closing her eyes, she sighed as she imagined lightly rubbing her hand over Stephanie's high, beautiful breasts, ran the tip of her tongue tentatively and lovingly all along the outline of the other woman's lips, then slowly entered her mouth. With her other hand she gently stroked Stephanie's back . . . what was the question? Oh—get married?

"—or just live with someone, or what?" Stephanie looked right at her again, frank but furtive too, looking away and then back. Ruth tried to hold her eyes.

"Married? No. Or yes, I do. But not the way you mean it."

Risky! Why did she say that? Annoyed with herself, Ruth was the one to

look away now. Something caught her eye. In the last light of the day, a small yellow bird flew by the porch, landed on a lowish branch of a high tree, and fussed with its young. Out back, the 89 year old man who lived next door picked a few tender young green beans and put them in a basket he had beside him on the damp ground.

Why had she said that! "Not the way *you* mean it!" Stephanie didn't want to hear that—did she? Did she know what Ruth was hinting at? Know it inside herself anyway, somewhere maybe was she looking for it, scared but searching, running away and hiding, but coming back for more? Or not—of course not. Why should she. It was so easy, and so clear, the whole world was Deep Eddy—or New York City, same difference—the old man and the yellow bird, the couple across the street and in every other house, old and young, all the same, straight.

Straight women! Ruth knew them . . . she'd been one for so long. And so had Jeanne, first love, and gone back to being one. Jeanne—seen on the street last week, still just as beautiful, deeply sensual even in the way she walked, held her hands, her head, and somewhere inside herself was Ruth still in love with her? Or did you never stop loving the ones you really loved, was that it? Seven years a lesbian—no, forget that, 38 years old, and who had she *really* loved? Aside from her mother, her children. Her first boyfriend, Danny? And her *real*, her long-time lovers, Jeanne, Jackie, Kate. None of them ever really given up? And this Judith, this beautiful, 25 year old, 13-years-younger one—what did she matter; what were three months. Ruth had never really let her in anyway. Certainly not all the way. Knock, knock, who's there. No one. Not so fast, young woman. Let me see your I.D. Who cared anyway. Get them to start writing resumes soon. List your affectional, sexual, closeness levels. Past relationships? Number, duration?

"What do you mean—uh—not like I mean it how?"

Stephanie had brown eyes, brown hair, in a nice Jewish face, and energy like her own. And straight. Why'd she have to be straight. She wants to get married—I want to get married. 4-ever. Judy and Ruth forever. Ruth and Kate forever. Niagara Falls, that time it almost was forever—and he didn't even make the really-loved list. Thirteen years. Let me out, out, out. Well, now, yes, I want to get married again, Stephanie. You're very attractive, have you ever tried women? Lesbians make the best lovers. We are not just good friends. I know you know. DYKE, printed on her T-shirt, sun visor, and ring. *The Well of Loneliness*? You know? Stonewall, DOB, LFL. And finally the radio at the beach the other day, blaring WKTU disco, then suddenly, ". . . have a question about the gay lifestyle? Or just want to rap? Call the Gay Switchboard, 929-9889 . . ." followed by an ad for Sunkist oranges.

A seduction scene? But what if she rejected. But so attractive. But to sleep with so many women? Sixteen, at last count . . . sixteen! And count them she did, every time there was a new one she'd write about it, in her journal and maybe in a poem, but eventually she'd actually list them, wanting to keep track as well as to sort them—*them!*—out and categorize them, different ways at different times, how many all together, how many—a coincidence?—had names beginning with the same letter, "J"—at present nine, over half of her sixteen women! How many Jewish and how many Irish Catholic, how many one night stands, short, or long term relationships, how many butch, femme, or in between, short or tall, big or small, how many much younger than she was. And

then dwelling on and analyzing and discussing all these counts and scores and differences. What did they all mean? What were the specifications of her perfect lover, and what was "bottom line"? Her journal was the most remarkable mixture of dear diary outpourings of both grief and joy, letters never meant to be mailed, much introspection, the beginnings of poems along with occasional completed ones, and these lists and other recapitulations of all the women she'd been involved with. But so many, it would be easy to get the impression that she liked or wanted it that way, needed to play around. It wasn't true, she didn't, wasn't the type. Hated non-monogamy . . . and serial monogamy. She'd been married 13 years, faithfully! All she really wanted was one, one forever, one happily ever after like they had said, had promised her since she was a little girl. But it never worked out that way, so eventually there'd be another one. But to just keep adding them on? Shouldn't there be some limit?

Oh, why not do it. Get more stoned—they'd already started. Put on music, disco, Donna Summers! Dance! Laugh, touch, flirt just a little, nothing you could pinpoint exactly. Switch to slow music. Dance along—together but apart, no touching. But move alluringly. Then, careful—but sure—touch.

Possible reactions:

. . . "What are you doing, are you crazy?" Or,

. . . "Oh, Ruth, I thought you'd never touch me . . ." Seduction scene.

But no, don't, caution, stop, red light, she's straight, and straight women—

Stephanie was looking at her. Don't seem too weird now, she told herself, and don't space out—you'll scare her away—but yes. Take the plunge. Look back, warm and frank. Excitement beginning to take hold of her, she gathered herself together, back to the conversation she kept dreaming away from.

"I mean yes, I want to get married again too, Stephanie." She said the name caressingly, which was how she felt. "I want to very much. But not to a man. To a woman."

Pause.

Silence. And more silence.

Unable to keep from spacing out now, Ruth felt the lightness of her head. Oh, don't get scared, Stephanie, she felt herself wanting to say, I don't want to make a lesbian out of you, I just want to sleep with you. Giggles starting to work their way up and out like the hiccups. 2, 4, 6, 8, how do you know your wife is straight. Stephanie. You're 37 years old. Come to bed with me. You'll like the way it feels, I am good, I am very, very good.

Screen door. Opening and closing. Out of her spaciness, pulling herself back. What was happening. Stephanie gone in the house? No, or else come back, because she was on the other side of the porch now, smoking. . . . What am I *doing*, Ruth thought, I hate kissing mouths that taste of cigarette smoke! — no, wait, that's not the point . . .

Looking around her, it was really dark now, moths, crickets so noisy you wanted to cover your ears at times, while at others they just became a part of the night and you didn't even hear them, and lightning bugs, bats farther out, or up, watch out, beautiful moon, stars like you never saw in the city, big trees, black sky. Going over toward where Stephanie stood, all the way thinking oh, no, how can I possibly try again. I can't, why, just to get hurt one more time, just to have to face up to my "unrealistic expectations," that's what Judith said. Just to have one more woman come in close and send her soaring with the intimacy, the pure sensuality of it, the joy, the sex, the

touches, the looks, the loving, the sweeping uplifting sensual soar of it, that thickened her voice, her throat filled with so much tender passion that she really, truly believed that at last it had happened and she was going to be happy . . . and then to have the woman go away again, or have to go away herself. She couldn't do it again, ever. She choked it back, all the expectations, the joy and the grief. No more.

But the porch. The empty iced tea glasses, the brownies from before, still sitting on the table. Rock music and raucous laughter from the bar on the highway a block away, full of rednecks and drunken laughter. Then fading somewhat, someone closing a door.

Stephanie stood leaning against the porch railing, smoking and shaking, the shaking visible as her glowing cigarette end made weird staccato jabs at the night air, twitching like a drunken firefly. The smoke quivered in the air in front of her, as if to hide her face, her pretty, forthright, but right now shy face. Scared, uptight and tense, but waves of her sensuality still coming across dense, strong, and wonderful, the way they had been all weekend. Beautiful straight woman. Turning away as Ruth approached.

"Stephanie? What's wrong?"

No answer.

Not knowing what to do, Ruth went to the hammock, thought about it, then passed it and settled angrily in a chair. Stop it! she demanded, stop it this instant, I won't have it. I won't open up again. Get back, feelings! Back! I don't like you, I don't want you. Get away from me, breath-catching desire, tingling cunt! Go away, agony of wanting, wishing, lusting!

They were ignoring her completely. She felt it. Her chest filling and her throat swelling with the huskiness, her body simply taking over, the corners of her mouth turning up in smiling anticipation. She couldn't believe it was happening. And her mind—flitting around, unable to concentrate. Focusing, jumping. Stephanie. Judith. Kate. The porch. Dreaming. The bathroom. Oh, right, the bathroom, on the toilet yesterday just after Stephanie arrived, going into the bathroom and sitting on the toilet and seeing it on the cabinet, Stephanie's makeup bag! When had she last seen one like that. Little bulging plastic bag, unzipped. Slyly, smiling to herself at what she was about to do, thinking naughty but picking up the bag . . . full to the brim with bottles, tubes, brushes, razor. Lipstick, mascara, eye shadow, blusher, of course, of course. Stephanie's present and her own past, heaped heavy in the plastic bag that pressed cool against her naked thighs.

. . . Estoderme Flowing Emulsion. . . This wonderful emulsion helps your skin remain soft, smooth, youthful-looking. Daily, its moisture-retaining ingredients help prevent dryness, giving your complexion the radiance and freshness of youth.

Straight women! Oh, it took her back, to herself, to Jeanne, remembering, flashing momentarily on the lipstick that had been on Jeanne's mouth, the first time they kissed . . . not that all lesbians wore no makeup. But for Ruth that had been a part of the transition, of coming out, of learning to love herself, her body, the way she looked, in natural color, nothing added or removed, and it was still a part of her life.

Estee Lauder fresh air makeup base—a rich but sheer foundation that not only covers tiny imperfections and smooths out texture, but also imparts

a clear, dewy, "country air" finish of sheen without shine.

And the release of slowly letting it all go. The eye shadow went last, she remembered. No, then the leg shaving.

Go-Bronze Bronzing Jel. New Go-Bronze will give you the golden glow that used to come only from the sun itself! Can be applied under, over, or without makeup.

Then she found the small bottle of toilet water—L'Air du Temps by Nina Ricci, Paris and New York. The smell, beautiful—and familiar. Where? A lover? The women she knew now wore body oils if anything—musk, patchouli. She herself liked a special East India patchouli, a while ago it was almost a trademark, the lover she was with then calling her Patchouli Mama . . . no, wait, now she remembered, it was her aunt! Her great aunt Florence used to wear it. Coming to visit once a year, so dressed up, her rich great aunt Florence, Ruth wove fantasies about her that lasted the whole year, till her next visit . . . how she'd take Ruth away and love her with a sweetness that matched the delicious smell of her perfume. It was L'Air du Temps, she remembered . . . and now the familiar smell, and Stephanie was in the chair beside hers.

Silence. Her heart flew.

"I'm sorry," Stephanie began. "I didn't know I, I mean, I shouldn't have reacted like that."

"Like what?" Her own voice, Ruth noticed, was calm and quiet, Stephanie's high-pitched and hurrying.

"Running out like that!"

"It's all right. I figured you needed to move around or something."

"Move around! I needed to run! Why did you say that—oh, never mind, wait, I didn't mean that, I . . ." She drew a long breath. Two. Opened her mouth to go on. Ruth stopped her.

"What's that you have on?" She felt herself smiling, smiling all over—her lips, her toes, her fingers, they were all curling with the delight of it, the wonderful, special space she got in when she was turned on, when things seemed promising, most of all when she made love, the space she'd discovered only since coming out, but that every woman she was with commented on, how she became quite transported . . . it was happening now. She embraced the sensations. She could do nothing but. "It smells so good," she heard herself say softly, intimately. "Really."

Inside the house, a new record dropped down onto the turntable, and suddenly Janis Joplin was singing in a way that expressed exactly the lust Ruth had to admit she was feeling. And she wanted, all she wanted now was to be able to simply reach out and touch the woman beside her. How didn't matter, it could be any one of the many ways she wanted, needed to touch her . . . soft and gentle and caressingly, or powerfully, or sensually; with her whole hand or just her fingertips or both her arms around her tight—any way, but just to touch her. Must. Please. Wouldn't she? She had to.

She was scared too, though, and something in the way Stephanie was looking at her caught her up short, and her mind raced off again. Kate. Write her? Meaning to tell her so many things for so long—but then she was always meaning to, never able to, not just since the relationship ended, during it too, there were just things that contradicted each other, always so many contradictions, is that what life was about? So the very saying of them canceled out the other half of what she needed to say. Oh, two-sided woman, I loved your one side










so much, I hated your other, wanted you to get rid of it, couldn't live with it, couldn't in the end. And always afraid I'd lose you and giving you all the power, that's how it felt to me, and then you, afterwards, after it was finally all over, telling me you were always scared shitless I'd leave you. Oh, fairy godmother, why can't the world come out the way it's supposed to? Why couldn't we have stayed together happily-ever-after, Kate?

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"I'm not. I'm on my way to Washington."

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Dear *Sinister Wisdom*:

In *SW 13*, Barbara Grier defended herself against criticism which she perceived as characterizing Naiad Press as "opportunistic," and in the process she insulted me along with every other person who is less than physically perfect: "Do I need to add that even a deaf, blind, and dumb opportunist would snatch at the chance to publish her work if publishing for aggrandizement were one's goal." Using the words "deaf, blind, and dumb" as synonymous with "imperceptive" or "incompetent" lends her statement no extra positive impact, while it demonstrates an outrageous insensitivity for the feelings of physically impaired persons. I urge her and all other apparently "whole" persons to examine their feelings toward persons with impairments. Such an examination often reveals some fear, some anxiety, and more than a trace of condescension. These emotions can be worked through, which will allow one to learn that deaf, blind, and dumb persons can work as competently as non-impaired persons. Impaired persons vary just like members of any group vary on most characteristics. Some are ethical, others are opportunistic; some are tall and some short. On some level, I expect Grier knows these things.

Referring to a race, class, or type of people to connote a single characteristic relies on stereotypes, and stereotypes can almost always be relied upon to be inaccurate and hurtful. Patriarchal, white society has traditionally characterized women, people of other races, and impaired persons as incompetent, substandard creatures. Our linguistic clichés reflect this attitude. We must all stretch our minds and emotions to understand the damaging impact of such commonplace phrases, and we must flex our language into new shapes that will more accurately and sensitively represent what we are trying to communicate.

—Betty Bird
Washington, D.C.

Dear Barbara Grier,

Enclosed is a copy of my response to your comments which appeared in *Sinister Wisdom 13*.

I expect you made your comments about blind, deaf, and dumb persons without thinking of their impact on persons in these groups. I am blind, and I felt I had to respond merely because so many people say such things without thinking.

Harriet and Catherine said you might like the opportunity to submit a comment on my remarks and have yours appear in the same issue as mine.

Sincerely,
Betty Bird

Dear Betty Bird:

You are right, of course, I said it without thinking, and I am very sorry.

Barbara Grier

Dear Harriet and Catherine,

. . . I want to thank and applaud you for publishing Elly Bulkin's courageous article "On Racism and Writing" in *Sinister Wisdom 13*. (Shared of course by Beth Hodges and Elly.) This article has had direct and important effects in my life—it has brought information into focus in a new way, so that I see differently (as has happened to me only with the best of lesbian feminist writing—"Woman-Identified Woman" or "Women and Honor" or, most recently, *Gyn/Ecology*), and has also inspired direct action.

As Elly Bulkin suggests, I have begun an anti-racism consciousness raising group in Los Angeles at the Woman's Building. It is the second such group in Los Angeles for white women. . . . With each woman in the group, I feel moved and challenged and educated by the commitment and insight she brings.

I believe this article should not be read as an attack on Mary Daly—Bulkin is not saying her book should not have meaning for us—but precisely because of its powerful impact, Daly's ignoring of racism is dangerous, as is white feminists' inability to perceive it.

Once again, thank you.

In Sisterhood,
Terry Wolverton

Dear *Sinister Wisdom*,

Please thank Elly Bulkin for her lead article on racism (in *Sinister Wisdom* 13). It's one of the most practical articles I've read on the subject; it gives me and other white women specific suggestions about how to open up our thinking patterns, how, in our writing and speaking, to push outward the boundaries of our frequently token ass-covering remarks about race and class. It's also informative, packed with specifics, an excellent reading list and materials for future reference; the articulation of the distinction between "non-racist" and "anti-racist" is a real gift. And it's provocative; it makes me want to act and think in different and more profound personal ways about racism.

Best of all, the article is good criticism. By that I mean that Bulkin does not "dump" or "trash." Instead, she treats the writers she's critical of (at least those still living) with respect and with the recognition that each of them (and even she herself, particularly she herself) is still growing, still changing, still capable of making mistakes, still open to hearing criticism that will encourage dialogue and help both parties to growth and change.

What's most important to me in our building of a movement is the ways we treat each other along the way. If good criticism is also self-criticism and if it is, as the best of the Chinese revolutionaries tell us, an act of love and concern between friends (people fighting for the same ultimate goals), then Elly Bulkin has given us here a good example of how we can participate in and appreciate that process. Our (lesbian-feminist) literary criticism as well as our personal interactions can only benefit from good work like this.

Even beyond Bulkin's article, thanks are due to Beth Hodges and the staff that worked with her for another fine issue of *Sinister Wisdom*.

Sincerely,
Sally M. Gearhart
San Francisco

Letter to the Editor:

While reading Elly Bulkin's article "Racism and Writing," uneasy feelings were aroused in me. Forbidding undertones seemed to be prevalent. Was I wrong?? After re-reading the article, the same feelings prevailed. Are feminist writers now to be purged for their "Sins of Omissions" set forth by the "Litany of Inclusions" in the conclusion of Bulkin's critical/crippled analysis? Is Big Brother/Sister lurking in the shadows—peering/sneering? Has Patriarchy permeated women's lives and minds for so long that even feminist groups adopt/adapt their ideology/methodology in an attempt to tame their most courageous sisters?

I was enraged at the author's shallow analysis used in an effort to discredit such a profound thinker and scholar as Mary Daly. Its main purpose seemed to be to harness her genius. She whose words have en-spirited/in-spired the belief that woman is loved and loving and her reality is be-ing. Would Elly Bulkin have me believe that Mary Daly would reduce/exclude the meaning of the unique sufferings, contributions, creativity of any woman whatever race, creed, color or class. Never! Whose purpose would be served if one(s) could bind this creative genius? Are individual fears, egos, jealousies involved? We are keenly aware of the devastation done to women in patriarchal history. If this is the direction the Feminist Movement is taking, then every woman's journey would be interrupted and her-story again erased. We need to support and encourage each other's creativity—not limit it.

Before concluding, I would like to comment on Elly Bulkin's obvious objection to Mary Daly's statement "Big Words—for it is written for big strong women out of respect for strength" and her reference to another woman's infuriated and insulted reaction to these words. Although I am a woman with only a high school education—hopefully, one of the "Strong" ones—they did not deter/intimidate me. *Gyn/Ecology* spoke to me personally of things past, present and future with such intensity/integrity, which encompassed all women, that I am grateful I was "Strong" enough to be sparked by it.

Struggling Feminist
Louise Mullaley
Dorchester, Massachusetts

Dear Women of *Sinister Wisdom*—

I am writing to you because Elly Bulkin's "Racism and Writing" article [*SW* 13] moved me to regard in more depth the chain of atrocities that link racism with sexism.

Bulkin stated that "racism is in each of us," and "it creeps in even when [she] is most conscious of avoiding it (perhaps in [her] article)." *Something* has crept into her consciousness and prevented her from discovering the origins of oppression. She did not pervade the disguises which patriarchy uses to mask its crimes against women.

Bound by the patriarchal mind-bendings, Bulkin forgot an important feminist principle and blamed women for their victimization by men. She says that her "immigrant grandmother" is responsible for racist attitudes creeping in. She then blames her mother and father. This is a too-simple perception of the development of racism. I thought that such schemata had been thrown out with Freud's theories that the mother is responsible for man's woes.

Having done what Bulkin suggested and used the "formats developed by women looking at patriarchal oppression . . . [to] look at how we have been taught racist attitudes," I had to perceive her article as taking the blame for racism from the men who generate it and placing it on women.

A principle that Bulkin seems to have once adopted and given up is intellectual separatism. She says that women who decided to stop "reading work by and/or about men . . . will ultimately find it impossible to learn about the lives of women of color while holding to strictly separatist principles." In conflict with this idea of retaining male texts, she seems to think that Mary Daly's pervasion of white male texts is invalid and racist. Bulkin defames Daly's character for her use of male scholarship to make connections between cross-cultural patterns of misogyny, while recommending that we read works by Third World men (because the lives of women of color are linked with the lives of their men). To me, Daly's use of men's half-truths to elicit an underlying truth is much more powerful than an examination of male texts because women's lives are linked with men's.

Another contradiction Bulkin makes is to say that women should give each other "supportive criticism" just before she proceeds to discredit Mary Daly. I can find no criticisms Bulkin makes of Daly that hold true after a seriously reflective struggle with the ideas she presents. Due to the lengthy discussion one would have to engage in to dispute the multiple discrepancies I found in Bulkin's article, I have chosen to take issue with a point she made that may not be immediately transparent. Bulkin damns Daly for her praise of Katherine Mayo. Bulkin says that Daly saw racism in Mayo's *Mother India*, an exposé of Indian men's murder/rape/mutilation of women. Bulkin avers that Daly thought Mayo's racism was "beyond notice [and] beneath mention." How could Daly have seen racism and still have it beyond her notice?

It is true that Daly did not condemn Mayo for her sexism or her British nationalism. However, Bulkin did Daly an injustice by saying that her motivations were racist in origin. I'm sure no one will champion the idea that Daly is pro-sexism or pro-nationalism: she does strongly believe that all oppression is connected with man's will to subjugate women. The unveiling of men's possession/rape/murder of women is what Daly praises Mayo for. A second motive for not discrediting Mayo is apparent in Daly's recognition of detraction by male misogynists (and women who have had misogyny creep into their minds) that distracts us from the actual sufferings of the women whose situation Mayo was trying to change. Daly spent several pages (*Gyn/Ecology*, pp. 127-30) listing numerous attempts to discredit Mayo's condemnation of suttee and child marriage. Rather than discussing Mayo's belief that British men wanted to better the lives of Indian women, she chose to give credit to a woman whose book is the primary source of documentation of the actual victimization of Indian women. Witness to the plausibility of this motive is one of the passages from *Mother India* that Daly chose to cite:

Mayo presented evidence of a horror show that defies description, citing medical evidence from the Indian Legislative Assembly Debates of 1922. I will cite just four of the cases of child-wives brought to Indian hospitals, as described in Mayo's appendix:

- A. Aged 9. Day after marriage. Left femur dislocated, pelvis crushed out of shape, flesh hanging in shreds . . .
- I. Aged about 7. Living with husband. Died in great agony after three days . . .
- L. Aged 11. From great violence done to her person, will be a cripple for life. No use of her lower extremities.
- M. Aged about 10. Crawled to hospital on her hands and knees. Has never been able to stand erect since her marriage. [*Gyn/Ecology*, p. 127; *Mother India*, p. 412]

It is men's freedom to perpetrate these atrocities on women that Mayo worked to stop. It is the Indian women's victimization that Mary Daly wills to stop, and a feminist recognition of cross-cultural planetary oppression of women that she is concerned with. Daly recognizes the allied forces of men who keep all women in slavery. There is a pattern

that enslavement follows. One pattern is the feminization of males, such as the myth that pictures the black male being castrated by a matriarchal black woman. Daly sensed the emasculation of Jewish men victimized in the Nazi's concentration on extermination of their race. In other words, Daly believes that men turn other men into women in order to keep them in an inferior position. Daly also connects the gynecidal practices of American gynecologists with those of Nazis:

Like the body- and mind-gynecologists of America, the physicians and psychiatrists who justified and participated in the Nazi extermination and medical experimentation programs operated in the tradition of the Torture Cross society. Although their victims—mental patients and Jews—were of both sexes, all were cast into the victim role modeled on that of the victims of patriarchal gynocide, which is the root and paradigm for genocide. [*Gyn/Ecology*, p. 298]

Daly is not willing to trust to the compassion of any men to stem the flow of women's blood. Katherine Mayo did, and so (it seems) does Elly Bulkin. Mayo believed that British men did not want Indian men to kill women—she did not realize that gynocide knows no cultural bounds. Mayo saw British men instituting laws against suttee and child marriage and believed they were better than the men who were *openly* raping and killing women. Bulkin sees the lives of Third World women as “linked, often inextricably” with Third World men, men who want the freedom of their women as well as their own. Men pretend to fight for the freedom of women as long as it enables them to convince women to use their energy to bring them more power. This was true in the case of the British in India, and I believe proves true for black men in white America.

There is an excellent article written by Sandra Williams on “Sexism and the Black Male” [*Smith College Journal of Afro-American Studies* (1975-76), pp. 1-5] which provided me with some necessary insights to make connections between the emasculation of “oppressed males” and the subjugation of women by those males. The quote is long but extremely relevant; therein the issue of blaming the mother also arises again:

This author's opinion of the matriarchy myth is that it is a hoax designed to exempt white America from responsibility for the oppression of blacks and instead to shift the responsibility to black women. The acceptance of this myth is also evidence that American society views as pathological any model of femininity that is not consistent with the accepted model. It is true that black women have not been passive objects as the majority of white women in America have been characterized. . . . However, to refer to black women as matriarchs is to contradict the reality of their existence . . .

An integral part of the matriarchy theory is the theory of the castrated black male. Moynihan discusses this idea in his study when he says, “Both as a husband and as a father the Negro male is made to feel inadequate . . .” He is made to feel inadequate not only by white society but by the black woman. Moynihan quotes Thomas Pettigrew: “The Negro wife in this situation can easily become disgusted with her financially dependent husband, and her rejection of him further alienates the male from family life. Embittered by their experiences with men, many Negro mothers act to perpetuate the mother-centered pattern by taking a greater interest in their daughters than their sons.” Thus, Moynihan says, black mothers are instrumental in the castration of black men.

Surprisingly, some black men agree in part with Moynihan's theory of the castrated black male. For instance, Eldridge Cleaver, in a letter addressed to all black women, from all black men, says, “Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls, we face each other today, my queen . . . I want you to know that I feared to look into your eyes because I knew I would find reflected there a merciless indictment of my impotence and a compelling challenge to redeem my conquered manhood.”

In contrast to the castrated black male, there is the defeminized black female, Sapphire, or the Amazon as Cleaver calls her. Cleaver charges white society with projecting the Amazon image on black women, an image which coincides with their class-function in society.* [*Some connections should be made here to the Amazon image as it applies to black women and lesbians, but time and space do not here permit what would be a complicated analysis.]

. . . Thus, many black men while branding Moynihan's theory a myth, have at the same time sought to overcome this theory. This phenomenon has been evident in the attitudes and statements made by many black men and some black women about women's roles in the movement for black liberation. Some black revolutionaries have advocated a secondary role for women in the movement in the belief that it is of primary importance that black men “regain their manhood.”

It should be noted that Sandra Williams and I came to different conclusions in our final analysis; but given the information presented here, I feel free to conclude that masculinism produces multiple versions of oppression that take on the disguise of racism,

classism, etc. The stage for their theatrical productions is the world where men strut and fret across the bodies of women.

The hardest enemy to fight is the one you can't see. This is why a planetary perspective of patriarchy is one which we must attain to freely love our Selves, our Sisters and our Earth. This is what Gyn/Ecology means.

I hope that Elly Bulkin will find her Self free to revise her opinions on Mary Daly's racism and to read *Gyn/Ecology* again.

In Sisterhood and Struggle,
Marguerite Fentin
Amherst, Massachusetts

To the Editor:

It seems that someone, whose name I keep forgetting, has stirred bitter words and poisonous feelings among feminists as bold as Mary Daly, as courageous as Adrienne Rich, as bold and courageous as all feminists who try to live by the truth of our convictions. She wrote an article attacking Mary Daly as a racist. Adrienne Rich has lent tacit support to this attack by allowing her name to be printed among the readers of the manuscript article. The charge is so absurd I laughed when first told about it, but I was puzzled by the presence of Adrienne Rich in what had impressed me as the feeble ravings of a short-sighted mind. At each telling and recounting there were new ripples, new echos. This thing has grown into a monster which divides women into antagonistic factions, involves black and white women, and ultimately undermines the power of Mary Daly here, Adrienne Rich there, Audre Lorde elsewhere, and every feminist everywhere. And it made me angry.

It sounds to me as if the issue is not racism but the hurts and unresolved feelings caused by sexism, which includes racism. Just as yesterday's "classism" was a way of working a sense of guilt out of one's system—especially if you were born into the moneyed class who was paying your way through expensive schools—so racism today obscures the uneasiness of the oppressed and oppressors alike as well as the failure to confront differences with compassion and intelligence. *In this sense*, both classism and racism are one and the same crock of shit. They exist in real life as manifestations of evil, a fact which Mary Daly has understood better than anyone involved in this quarrel. Her writings are a blatant denunciation of them, a lucid and powerful analysis of the mechanisms by which they are allowed to function. This, to me, is far more important than her silences on the racism in some of her sources.

It has always been easier to latch on to an idea than to examine your own life in order to purify it of the emotions and attitudes we have all learned and know we must un-learn so as to free and enrich our lives. To make racism into an issue separate from the general pollution the patriarchy carefully and systematically unloads into all aspects of life creates the stultifying situation whereby women of the feminist movement take divisive positions that frustrate women on the move who form the women's movement. And since no one has yet invented an instant cure for the difficulties we experience in handling differences and disagreements in a culture that has done its best to keep women from bonding it would be nice if those who have a personal axe to grind would grind it privately. Without the acrimony of envy, the futility of nit-picking, the corrosiveness of guilt and the expediency of opportunism.

If the woman who wrote her nasty piece about Mary Daly understands as worship the profound gratitude so many women feel for those who have given us the words with which to fight destructiveness it is her problem. I wish she had had the decency to work it out for herself but if she *had* to use print, I wish she had been honest. In a white male supremacist society, all women have oppressed each other in varying degrees that have nothing to do with virtue and everything to do with the hazards of birth. The point is to recognize our share and push it out of our lives as we live it. The point is *not* to induce yet other supremacist inventions: guilt, which leaves one wide open to gross manipulation; envy, which goads some to steal a bit of limelight at her sisters' expense; self-deceit, which conceals a lack of courage, integrity, and self-esteem.

Andrée Collard
Norwell, Massachusetts

Dear *Sinister Wisdom*,

While not surprised by the negative published responses to "Racism and Writing" [*SW* 13] received thus far from Andrée Collard, Marguerite Fentin, H. Patricia Hynes, and Louise Mullaley, I was taken aback by the extent to which my arguments were distorted, my character maligned, and no possibility granted that I might actually be seriously concerned with racism. In *SW* 15, for example, Hynes reduces my article to a ridiculous formula (Homophobia + Racism = Oppression) entirely of her own conception and then spends several paragraphs detailing *my* inadequacies for believing in it; she distortingly interprets my belief in equal access to health care for *all* women as my "assumption" that "more health care from this same system is unequivocally desirable," rather than recognizing that the choice is nearly always between inadequate health care from this system or *no health care at all*.

The most basic assumption of these responses is that I am out to "get" Mary Daly and that I've acted out of "individual fears, egos, jealousies" (Mullaley) and out of "a lack of courage, integrity, and self-esteem" (Collard).^{*} My discussion of *Gyn/Ecology* (5 of the article's 20 pages) were actually very much of an afterthought, an example chosen once I'd outlined the article. I had intended a brief discussion of the book, but soon found Daly's omissions at least as important to my overall thesis as what she did include. In the absence of a tradition of white lesbians offering criticism to other white lesbians regarding racism, I perhaps did not sufficiently stress (1) the extent to which work by other white lesbians could have been cited as well; and (2) the reality that, while we are each ultimately responsible for our work, we do it too often within a framework in which other women encourage, support, do not sufficiently challenge our biases. In the absence of that tradition, of a norm in which those of us who are white are regularly held accountable for our racism, the very fact of my criticizing a specific white lesbian made her seem singled out.

Readers can go back to my article to form their own opinions. Infinitely more important than the article itself is the issue of what can happen when white women go beyond theoretical formulations to criticize specific instances of racism. I have been able to receive these responses with considerable equanimity in large part because of the fairly visible role I have played within the lesbian writing community: I can feel some confidence that my work as a whole will help undercut the attacks on my character, including the charges that the article demonstrates my "woman-hatred" and that I am not "woman-centered" in my thinking (Hynes). Had this been my first published essay, I might have found the responses personally shattering and felt at least tempted to question whether I would ever raise such criticism again, no matter how well I could substantiate it.

The overriding issue involves the potentially chilling effect of such personal responses on other white lesbians who have already been confronting racism—their own and others'—or who are considering doing so. We need to find ways to validate racism as the legitimate concern of *white* women and to support attempts to confront these issues. We need to understand racism as something white women have *all* learned and white privilege as something we benefit from each day. As we accept the responsibility to be accountable for our own racist actions, statements and omissions; as we recognize that our commitment to anti-racism in no way lessens our commitment to anti-sexism; as we understand "racism" as a characterization intended to open dialogue rather than to seal it in defensiveness; as we seek out criticism from women who, in their differences from us, are more likely to question and hone our assumptions, those of us who are white can begin to take a crucial step toward healing divisions between women of color and white women, recognizing, as Cherrie Moraga Lawrence writes, that "the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but *through*."

In sisterhood,
Elly Bulkin
Brooklyn, New York

^{*}Audre Lorde has received *no* negative written feedback for "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," a criticism of the racism in *Gyn/Ecology*. I wonder if these four women will respond to her as they've done to me or will attempt to nullify the words of a Black lesbian-feminist through the crashing silence of their rejoinder.

Sinister Wisdom

the first five years



Harriet & Catherine

photograph by Lynda Koolish

AN ALBUM

Special Thanks from Harriet and Catherine

to Leigh Star

—without whom we couldn't have made it!

to the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians

—for their help, support, and courage.



photograph by Deborah Alicen

and to the scores of women who have contributed

*—their talents, their labor, their money, their support,
and their love.*

I. In the Beginning— (by Catherine)

1976—Charlotte, North Carolina

January: We are alone. We talk about *Amazon Quarterly*, now defunct, how it should not just die with no progeny, how something like it should continue; then talk ourselves into believing we could do it.

February: The "something like" *AQ* is named "Sinister Wisdom," a witchy phrase from Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* that we've fallen in love with. (One of our friends tells us that the title is gimmicky and probably won't wear well. We ignore her.) The logo comes from Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (p. 275), a Boeotian plate painting of the Corn-goddess (Demeter and Persephone in one figure) which Catherine feels graphically represents the title. We make a flyer and send it to women and institutions whose addresses are in the *New Woman's Survival Sourcebook*. Also to Beth Hodges, who had done the *Margins* special issue on "Lesbian Feminist Writing and Publishing" (1974). Also to anyone we can think of that might be interested in contributing or subscribing.

SINISTER
WISDOM

How does a woman survive when she steps out from the death procession of patriarchy? How does she think without thinking 'their' thoughts, dreaming 'their' dreams, repeating 'their' patterns? We're trying to answer the questions in our own lives and finding only hints and clues so we decided to make a space to attract other clues, other attempts at living and thinking past the patriarchy.

We call our space Sinister Wisdom because the root meaning of sinister is 'from the left side'. The Law of the Fathers equates right-over-left and white-over-black and heterosexual-over-homosexual and male-over-female with good-over-evil. We want to turn these patriarchal values upside down as a necessary prelude to creating our own.

We want to print what Mary Daly calls "ludic cerebration, the free play of intuition in our own space, giving rise to thinking that is vigorous, informed, multi-dimensional, independent, creative, tough." We need thinking that comes out of the deepest parts of woman-identified experience; thinking that is outrageous, undiluted, monstrous; thinking that exorcises the Godfathers, allowing the most devalued fragments of self to emerge undistorted by guilt and unthwarted by shame.

The consciousness Sinister Wisdom will express is—briefly—that of the lesbian or lunatic who embraces her boundary/criminal status, with the aim of creating a new species in a new time/space.

The three issues of Volume I will come out July 1, 1976; November 1, 1976; March 1, 1977. (Submission deadlines: April 15, August 15, and December 15.) Subscription rates are \$4.50/one year; overseas surface \$5.50; institutions \$8.00; sustaining subscriptions \$25.00. Checks payable to Sinister Wisdom.

March: We open a bank account in *SW*'s name: we are a partnership, we legally exist. Beth stops to see us on her way north. We talk non-stop. She is encouraging; she gives us many more names and addresses. More flyers sent out. We receive a manuscript which we had solicited from Julia Stanley in South Dakota; we receive unsolicited mss. from LA, NYC, Oregon, and some exciting poems from a Susan Leigh Star in Boston.

April: Harriet is typing copy on a rented IBM Selectric; Catherine is learning to paste-up from Laurel Galana's "How To Make a Magazine" in the *AQ*

anthology *The Lesbian Reader*, and looking for a printer. Charlotte printers are too expensive. Find one in Clover, South Carolina—old family firm—prints a lot of Baptist Church literature—we are nervous. But Mr. G. will print a thousand copies of *SW* for \$450 if we do collating and stapling. We say yes.

Harriet writes her “Notes for a Magazine,” which announces the radical stance of *SW*. I am thrilled by her integrity of vision, which I share. But I’m scared to death by the bald admission that we are lesbians—that *SW* is devoted to the creation of a lesbian imagination, “and in all known societies lesbians are a criminal class, those who are cast out.” To declare these things in print! On the other hand, announcing around, above, under, and through the truth of who we are and what we aim to do seems to me unthinkable. [As to fear and courage, I think H and I complemented each other: she was bold about stating her politics, but afraid, lacking in confidence, about our ability to actually *do* a magazine. Coming from a career of doing the impossible in theatre, I was more confident about the doing, but coming from a life of disguises, encoding, I was mortally afraid of telling the truth about myself and my vision.]

May: Beth stops on her way south. We ask her if we can print the second lesbian writing and publishing issue she’s now planning. She agrees; it will be our second issue, scheduled for November. . . . Kent—close friend of a friend—offers a press—an ancient Multilith 1250, not in working order—rent-free for a year. C & H move out of their bedroom to make way for the press and an expanding *SW* office. Three Charlotte dykes form press collective and pledge to get the press in working order. (They never did.) C is still learning to paste-up, with Jan Millsapps and Marianne Lieberman advising her on design. . . . We select a drawing of Marianne’s for the cover: one of a Mexican woman who looks like a real Amazon, pointing to the left-hand side of the page. But because she is actually pointing right with her right hand, should we reverse the image? Do we identify with the model, or does the left-to-right reading convention dominate us? Big dilemma. Decide finally that the sinister connotations are stronger as she stands. Besides, her position corresponds to that of the goddess figure in our logo. . . . Marianne and I drive down to Clover to show her large cover drawing to the printer. Mr. G. turns pale, asks if there will be photographs of nude women in the magazine. I assure him no—we can’t afford to print photographs. Then he says he will make the cover plate himself, after working hours—“so the men and the girls in the shop won’t be embarrassed.” I begin to worry: what will happen when he sees the text of *SW*? What will happen when the term *lesbian* leaps from the page at the “men and the girls”? Nightmare fantasies of Mr. G and his men burning the paste-up in self-righteous revulsion. Or sabotaging the job by blurring all the print or what? I’m too naive to know what atrocities can be perpetrated by press men. . . . Our mailbox is beginning to fill up. Example: “Sisters, Have seen an ad about you in several places lately & the latest was L. Connection. Am very interested in carrying your publication in my *small* feminist bookstore—please send ordering information, including bulk rates. (Is it possible just to order 2 or 3 copies?) Thanks. (signed) Mooneyan, Womanspace, Tempe, Ariz.” Yes, Mooneyan, it is possible, and what are bulk rates? And our phone rings a lot. Long distance from Chicago: “Hello, is this Harriet or Catherine? I’m Nancy Adair and I got your name and number from Julia Stanley . . .” Dykes traveling south sleep overnight on our sun porch.

June: We deliver the copy. We are very nervous. We insist on paying \$100 in advance—I'm hoping this will somehow insure its safety: a propitiatory offering to the mercenary printers' gods or devils. The men and the girls are too busy to pay us much mind—no one looks at our precious paste-up. Whew—! . . . Three weeks later we return for the boxes of printed sheets. Mr. G has put together and stapled one copy for us. It is beautiful, it is dazzling, it is *real!* We stop at a Catawba river restaurant on the South Carolina side—so we can order a cocktail (illegal in N.C.) to toast the Lady *SW*. Back home with 4500 sheets of print to be collated. We throw our first collating party (*SW* 1 through 8 would be collated and bound by the hands of our friends.) Round and round the room—ten women walking round and round to the tunes of Alix Dobkin, Meg Christian, Nina Simone. (Later one of the women wrote "The Collating Song" to memorialize the occasion.)

July: The little manual saddle-stitch stapler which the printer has loaned us doesn't work. So back we must go to Clover and Mr. G, who by this time would be as relieved to be "shed" of us as we of him. But before we finish packing the boxes in the car, a woman we've never seen shows up at our door. She nervously introduces herself as Debbie P., a friend of a friend, and chatters away about nothing much; but she knows why she has come and what she wants: she wants a copy of *SW* 1. We tell her that the copies aren't bound yet, to come back in a few days. This won't do. She wants a copy right now, and she'll take it as it is. I go in the office and grab the copy Mr. G had stapled for us. It's a bit soiled by now, but she doesn't mind at all. She pays us in cash for a subscription, but when we ask her address, she says no—that she prefers to stop by and pick up a copy of each issue. About a week later she returns with a small blue file case which contains her journal and asks if we mind keeping it for her. We don't mind; we store it in our bedroom closet. She returns the following week just to talk. We have made our first friend through *SW*. During the next six months she becomes a regular helper with *SW*, moves out of an intolerable marriage—and the blue file case comes out of the closet. She changes her name from Debbie P. to Debbie Alicen, a name that reclaims her dead mother. When *SW* moves to Nebraska in '78, she and her woman lover follow the Lady across half a continent.

July 4: As the US of Amerika is celebrating its 200th birthday, *Sinister Wisdom*, Volume I, Number 1, is officially published.

August: Along with Mandy and Paula, two members of the Charlotte Lesbian Press Collective, we drive in Lavender Jane (H's purple Valiant) to Nebraska to attend the first Women in Print Conference. The conference is being held at a Campfire Girls' camp near Omaha. We are as excited as seven-year-old Bluebirds arriving for their first week away from home. Here on the banks of the Platte River, close to the geographic center of the USA, women are gathering from the north, south, east, and west—publishers, editors of women's books, magazines, newsletters, newspapers, and comic books; women printers, bookstore managers, librarians, and distributors of women's books—all of them (except perhaps Liza and Penny from the new *Dyke* magazine) more experienced, more seasoned than us. There in the heat, the drought, the constant whistling of the prairie winds, the dried grass jumping with grasshoppers, 130-odd women gather to tell their stories of the vicissitudes of women in print. "What problems have you had? How did you solve them? What mistakes have you made?" We have no problems yet, we haven't made any mis-

takes yet—we have little to say. We listen to *Quest, Country Women, Women: A Journal of Liberation, Lesbian Connection, Dyke, Second Wave, Black Maria, Chomo Uri, Womanspirit, Moonstorm*; to *Off Our Backs, Plexus, Big Mama Rag, Feminary*; to Diana Press, Naiad Press, Daughters, Inc., Lollipop Power, Metis Press, Northwest Matrix, Whole Women Press, Women's Press Collective, Iowa City Women's Press, Tower Press. We learn a lot—about collectives and their struggles, about taxes, about record keeping, about fund raising, about failures, about burn-out, about who is lesbian and who isn't (almost everyone there is), about agents and harassment, about the rising cost of paper, the prohibitive cost of paper, about what-can-we-do-about the exorbitant cost of paper. (One inventive woman begins to experiment—mixing grasshopper juice and prairie grass in the camp kitchen blender to make paper.) We argue over vision and strategy. We form networks. A beaming Barbara Grier keeps reminding us that "History is being made. We are *making history!*" A distraught June Arnold keeps reminding us to wear our official badge (an elegant gold satin ribbon with *Women in Print* lettered in bright blue) because there are agents in our workshops, our dining room, our beds! and we must rout them out! . . . *SW* makes friends: WIND (Women in Distribution) wants to distribute the *Lady*. We learn that despite *Majority Report's* recent review which had deemed our first issue "murky and pretentious," *SW* is considered by most women there to be a worthy successor to *AQ* and *The Ladder*. . . . It is a heady experience—our heads are reeling—Catherine's head reeled so much that stone-cold sober she slipped in the shower room and broke her ankle. Being the oldest woman there—a fact she's been painfully aware of since she arrived—she is mortified by her sudden glaring helplessness. She wants to hide out the rest of the week in her cot in Merryhill Cabin 2. But this is not allowed: in true Campfire Girl tradition, Women's Press Collective and Country Women make a saddle of their arms and hands and carry her down to the meadow (now dubbed the Mountaingroves' Meadow because Ruth and Jean discovered it and claimed it as Womanspirit space). And as the week draws to a close, we begin to sense our power—begin to believe what we keep telling each other: that we are not an alternative press, but the *real* press! that through sharing our skills and resources, that together, we will not only survive, we will prevail! (1981—looking back, we recall that there were no black women present; and we do not remember much serious discussion about their absence.)

The Fall: Back in Charlotte. With the help of the network, we locate printers Leslie Kahn and Nancy Blood of Whole Women Press in Durham, N.C. They agree to print *SW 2* on their old and temperamental Multilith 1250, and Diana Press (still in Baltimore) agrees to bind it. What a comfort to know that from now on the *Lady* would be in the gentle, caring hands of lesbian printers. . . . But editing problems are escalating. Our guest editor, who had felt herself torn apart by the conflicting demands of her writing friends and her publishing friends,* is becoming emotionally paralyzed—unable to make decisions. With Beth now way out in Kansas, misunderstandings are inevitable, and we all make mistakes. But since the three of us had agreed that it was essential to have the special issue on lesbian writing and publishing out in time for the December convention of the MLA in New York City, we reach a point when production has to begin. So dissatisfactions and hurt feelings notwithstanding,

*See Beth's account of her feelings in *SW 2*, pp. 122-26.

H and I make the decisions, and by the skin of everyone's teeth we arrive in NYC with two shopping bags full of the book issue 2. Despite its imperfections and omissions, it was timely and bold and provocative, and we were proud of it. And when Harriet asked Barbara Smith and the black feminist Combahee River Collective to do a special issue of *SW*** in the spring, the first year ended hopefully.

**This issue didn't materialize because the collective decided it wasn't yet ready to do one.

II. The Middle (by Harriet)

In issue 1 we'd promised to publish for a year, and then "if contributions of money and labor materialize, we'll continue for a second year, a second volume of three issues." By the spring of '77, we're jubilant, adding to the notes for issue 3, after a section flippantly titled "How To Go International on Grits and Turnip Greens": "Did we forget to tell you that OF COURSE *Sinister Wisdom* will be carrying on for another year . . . or three." The cover of *SW* 3 is a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two acrobatically inclined women making love, which Harriet is convinced will land us in jail. Instead, at the request of several subscribers, it becomes a fund-raising poster, one that will pull *SW* out of the red time and time again.

But the summer of '77 is a long hot one, and the notes for issue 4 allude several times to the rise of the white-collar Klan and end with "Voices (Cryptic, in Riddles, at Night)," an attempt to speak indirectly about something we couldn't speak about directly, our first serious—and what then seemed to us devastating—clashes with lesbian publishers and writers we admired. Here are two of the voices:

(infuriated): But what is a Lesbian magazine supposed to BE?

(whisper): . . . *a guerrilla field manual—updated by the full moon.*

(disgusted): You talk as though Lesbians were an army. Army, hah! An army at each other's throats.

(whisper): *Divisions give strength; only keep moving.*

Sinister Wisdom did keep moving—at such a pace its history begins to blur.

September 1977. Issue 4 goes to press in Durham, and Gloria Gyn and Debbie Alicen take care of the mail while Catherine and I head for the Midwest, selling magazines, seeing old friends and making new ones, hunting ideas and a likely new home for *SW* in Ann Arbor, Lansing, Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, Minneapolis, Iowa City, Omaha, Lincoln, Kansas City, Columbia, and St. Louis. Then back to Charlotte and learning to set type on a composer for issue 5. Leigh Star visits in February, and we all get a new form of motion sickness from the giddiness of non-stop talking. She agrees to take over the job of selecting poetry for *SW*.

But with *SW* growing, Catherine and I are still yearning after a collective to share the responsibilities of decision making, production, and office work. Soon after number 5 comes out, Julia Penelope calls and says that a group of women in Lincoln will work with *SW* if we'll move there. We decide to do it, and spend the next several months in a chaos of packing boxes, reminding ourselves that *something* is bound to come of all this. Mab Segrest arrives from Durham that spring to help us put together *SW* 6, the final issue of *Sinister Wisdom*'s second year, and the last to be edited in North Carolina.

July 1978. Kitty-Pooh and Sister-Pooh (sister tortoiseshells born on Halloween; our muses and familiars) howl incessantly from Charlotte to an Asheville truckstop, where Kitty-Pooh escapes and we spend three hours coaxing

her out of a parked diesel. Eleven hundred miles later, we limp into Lincoln. It is 10:30 at night, the temperature is 100 degrees, the cats have screamed all through western Iowa, but there is a welcoming party at Julia's. Leigh and Sarah Hoagland have exorcised the house my parents rented for us of its born-again-Christian past; and a few weeks later, Deidre McCalla and Llena de la Madrugada play for *SW*'s first benefit, which ends with Deidre singing "The Road I Took to You" and Catherine and I bursting into grateful, if embarrassed, tears.

August-December 1978. The pace accelerates as *Sinister Wisdom* goes to four issues a year and 3136 "R" Street transforms itself into an unofficial Lesbian Center. The phone rings constantly; friends arrive from both coasts; the basement (*SW*'s first full-size office) fills up with inventory, jerry-rigged desks and work tables, cardboard files. We drive back through Iowa to pick up issue 6, the first of many trips in what will prove to be a long and fruitful (ten-issue) relationship with Joan, Barb, Michelle, and Farrell of Iowa City Women's Press. A woman in Omaha gives me access to her typesetter for issue 7; Friday work nights are in full swing; *SW* acquires three contributing editors (Beth Hodges, Mab Segrest, Sarah Hoagland); and Debbie Alicen takes charge of advertising. I begin free-lance copyediting jobs for the university press, and in December—after a favorable Tarot reading by house-mate Bobby Lacey—Catherine and I decide to buy an old IBM composer that will enable us to start a typesetting business as well as provide a much needed resource for *Sinister Wisdom*.

Ice covers Nebraska—local dykes insist that not every winter is like this one, but we don't believe them—and we're beginning to be subject to a lurking dissatisfaction. The discouraging truth, we say to each other in private, is that help alone will not get us through the next—how many?—years with *Sinister Wisdom*. Ending the magazine is unthinkable, but we seem already, after three years, to be running out of steam.

III. An Ending and a Bridge

Something very intriguing happens in New York City at the end of 1978 (see interview following). It may be an illusory hope, or it may be a way to end our responsibility for *Sinister Wisdom* without ending the magazine herself. We try to shove it to the back of our mind (where it refuses to stay), and get on with the job of making *SW* better despite the creeping emotional paralysis of its publishers. The notes for issue 8 (written in January 1979, the last time we would attempt to be an active written presence in the magazine) try to comprehend and overcome that paralysis:

Doing a lesbian magazine, we had finally recognized with some shock, would continue to be grueling: never enough time, never enough money, and our mistakes compounding themselves. It had become for us an easy relief to stop talking with each other about content and direction, to stop writing "Notes for a Magazine," and to concentrate instead on worrying about filing systems, the tax return the IRS was hounding us about, the guilt-inducing pile of unanswered correspondence. And we did make some headway in solving the practical problems of magazine survival. . . .

We had silently agreed to stop wondering on why's and focus on how's because dreams and desires and their halting articulation in new/old words don't get a magazine out. And yet they do too, in ways we began to sense. We had both seen enough of what cynicism does to Lesbian projects, to Lesbian lives—cynicism, and the hysteria which is its other face. Going through the motions of activism, dropping out, pulling back, lapsing into the undertow of passivity and despair that sucks constantly at our feet; and the other face—the lashings out at other women, the destructive winds that blow through

Lesbian groups, Lesbian "communities." We knew what happens when you forget to remember why you're doing what you're doing; and we knew how much easier it is to forget than to remember.

The following two years would be filled with the excitement of traveling to the East Coast and to California, the solidifying of old friendships and the making of new ones, the steady growth of the magazine, escalating free-lance work, personal loss and illness, and the ongoing labor of producing eight more issues of *Sinister Wisdom*; but as 1979 began, our passion for the magazine had already shifted focus and become essentially a passion for assuring its continuation.



photograph by Deborah Alicen

An Interview by C. Colette

NOTE: The following excerpts are taken from a series of interviews taped in late December 1980, and early January 1981.

C. Colette: What changes has the magazine gone through in five years?

Catherine: Well, I'll begin to answer you by talking about concrete changes—the technical changes. When we began in the winter of '76, we planned to publish *SW* three times a year. Two years later, it became a quarterly. The number of pages grew from 72 in the first issue to the present 112 pages. It changed, too, in style of print—from IBM-Selectric typewriter to regular typesetting—and, last year, from saddle-stitched to perfect, or square-back, binding. The edition has grown from 1000 to 3000 copies per issue.

CC: These are cosmetic changes. What about changes in vision? in politics? in content?

Harriet: I don't think the politics have changed any; I don't think the vision has changed any. There's a wider variety of voices in it now, but our notion of what we were trying to do hasn't changed that much.

C: I don't think the vision has changed. As far as content is concerned, the magazine has depended a great deal on what we've received in the mail. We've solicited very little. It's interesting that in the beginning we got a lot of poetry but hardly any fiction. As far as theory is concerned, there have been periods when we received a lot of it, and long dry periods when nothing came in.

CC: Having recently gone back and read *SW* 1, I find that there is a great difference between what was going on in the beginning and what is going on now, not in terms of vision necessarily, or radicalness, but there was a lot of talk of wildness, of living on the boundary. That wildness is really apparent

in the first issue, and I don't know whether it was because of the newness and formlessness of the idea or the excitement or what, but there's something a little more polished now, a little more self-assured, that I'm seeing as both a plus and a minus. The theory seems just as wild in some respects—for instance, in issue 14 the analysis of heterosexism is just as startling, as mind-reversing, as things in the first issue—but there is a smoothness now. It may be that there exists a body of theory and literature that women writing now for *SW* are writing in response to, or becoming a part of, while the first issue seems so speculative, so questioning. But actually I don't know how to characterize the change.

C: It seems to me that you've done a good job of characterizing the beginnings of *SW*: the roughness, the wildness, the speculation, the questions raised and partly answered. Susan Griffin made a wonderfully apt comment in issue 2: She said, "I want to send you something rough—not unworked, unthought, but rough, showing 'the mark of the hand.'" There is a slickness now that ties in with the look of the typeset copy. The cosmetic changes I mentioned earlier reflect changes in style. More women who write for *SW* now have refined their viewpoint before they write.

CC: And looking at issue 1, I get the image of raving women sitting at typewriters—

H: But when we started, we didn't think that anyone agreed with us—

C: Or very few—

H: *Very* few. We were real isolated, and from everything we could tell by reading *off our backs* and so on, separatism was just dead, and everyone else had gone through it, and here we were sitting down in Charlotte not having gone all the way through it—

CC: Sounds like it's a stage or a phase or something—

H: Everybody else seemed to be saying that lesbianism was dead—or, rather, there was no need to make such a big deal about it any longer—and here we were waiting for someone in Boston or San Francisco to start a successor to *Amazon Quarterly*, which had died in the spring of 1975, and we waited and waited and waited—

CC: In *SW* 1 you said that not all *SW* readers or contributors were lesbian or lesbian-identified, but that you didn't think this affected the magazine's lesbian perspective because most women seem to write ahead of themselves, and you thought that *SW* left the ninth door ajar—which I just loved. Do you still see *SW* as leaving that door open?

H: Yeah.

C: No. That is, I think *we* do, but I'm not sure that the magazine does any more. What I mean is that *SW* has come to be viewed as a lesbian magazine, and that non-lesbians regard it primarily as lesbian propaganda. The phrases "for the lesbian imagination" (which Harriet coined in her "Notes for a Magazine" in issue 1) and "for the lesbian imagination in all women" (which we later began to use as part of our logo) are no longer seen or heard by our readers or by most straight women who know about the magazine but choose not to read it.

H: I still think that phrase "the lesbian imagination in all women" is very important because it changes the definition of *lesbian* and makes it clear that what we're talking about is consciousness. It also makes clear that we're not talking about lesbians as being innately different from other women.

CC: Yes, because then you're caught in that thing of being considered marginal.

C: I agree completely with you, Harriet. But from representing *SW* at conferences like the NWSA [National Women's Studies Association], I've found that straight feminists regard the journal as marginal, as speaking to a minority of women whom they may respect or at least tolerate, but whose literature has nothing to do with them. Remember when Adrienne Rich, way back at the 1976 MLA [Modern Language Association] convention, used the phrase "It is the lesbian in us . . ."—remember the furor that greeted her, the misunderstanding of what to us were clear and truthful statements: "It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack."* Well, I don't think things have changed much since 1976.

CC: What does the phrase "the lesbian imagination" mean to you?

H: The other day Catherine started reading Nor Hall's *The Moon and the Virgin*.† Nor Hall is a Jungian—which is too bad—but she has this fascinating chapter on Artemis-Hekate women, which is what she calls lesbians, or "women on the Amazon pole," wherever that is. Anyway, the first thing Hall says about the Amazon is that she is "unconventional in any culture: she is wild mountain woman, woman alone, fighter, hunter, dancer, lover of animals, protectress of all newborn sucking and roving creatures . . . Her heart, in the Eskimo folk story, was the first drum." The drum I just loved—it reminded me of how the old Drastik Dyke collective in Charlotte defined *lesbian*: multiple orgasms, multiple angers, multiple laughters, and rhythm.

C: One way to get to a sense of "lesbian imagination" is to look at the attributes of Artemis-Hekate. Nor Hall describes Artemis as "virgin queen of the universe, source of the drawing-down and rising-up energy of plants, planets, and people." Her energy is the free-flowing movement of the universe, and it's that energy—the rhythm of Artemis—which is expressed in the ritual dances that Jane Harrison says are the beginnings of theatre and art.

H: Artemis-Hekate is the Lady of the Wild Things, but she's also the goddess of perilous passage—she appears at moments of great change. She's Changing Woman, actually—she's transformation and shape-shifting—which also has to do with her having, or being, instinctual rhythm, since it's rhythm that gets us from one realm to the next. So Artemis leads dances, and she is a midwife, and she is also present at the dance into death—

C: That's where the Hekate aspect of Artemis-Hekate comes into the Demeter-Persephone story. Hekate is the only one who hears Persephone's cries when she is being abducted by Hades, and it's Hekate who protects Persephone in the underworld.

H: Hekate lives in a cave at the entrance to the underworld, and she knows her way in the dark—

C: Toni McNaron, when she reviews *Beginning with O* in *SW* 8, cites Nor Hall as the source of her idea that Artemis-Hekate hears both horizontally and vertically and because of that it is Artemis-Hekate who brings women together. Demeter wanders horizontally, crying out for her daughter; Persephone's journey is vertical; and Hekate hears both the mother and the daughter—she stands at the crossroads where the two come together.

*Later included with an after-note in *Sinister Wisdom* 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 6-9; and in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), pp. 199-202.

†(New York: Harper & Row, 1980). See pp. 109-32.

H: And Nor Hall connects that story with Artemis-Hekate women being the ones who are able to welcome women out of marriages—out of Hades—where their “lust and lustre have dimmed.” She calls this lesbian ability the “good magic of giving women back to themselves.”

One very interesting point she mentions but doesn't emphasize is that Demeter, Persephone, and Artemis are part of a group of women. At the time of the seduction, they're all together in a meadow, carrying on, dancing and playing. Nor Hall connects lesbians with midwifing but never with actually giving birth themselves, and yet it sounds to me like Demeter is really a lesbian mother—why else would she and her daughter be fooling around in a meadow with a bunch of wild women?

C: Artemis isn't anti-motherhood, she's anti-marriage. The attribute *parthenos*—also an attribute of Athena—is translated as “virgin” by the boys, but it really means “one apart,” one having space apart. Or one set apart as a shaman is set apart—on the outside and yet paradoxically at the center, or matrix, of a culture. All this connects with separatism.

H: It also connects with the warrior aspect of Artemis because she wreaks vengeance on men who break the laws of *parthenos*, who violate the freedom of women or children or animals.

C: Cindy, how do you interpret the phrase “lesbian imagination in all women”?

CC: At first I thought it might serve as a cop-out for straight women. As long as they could assert that they were writing out of a lesbian imagination, it forestalled or replaced the need to really be a lesbian. But it clearly doesn't do that for women. I'm thinking particularly of a woman who submitted some work to us and said, “I'm straight, but you say it's for the lesbian imagination in all women, and I feel totally woman-identified in my life, except for my husband.” And the pieces she submitted had everything to do with the conflicts between men and women and nothing to do with relationships between women. They weren't suitable in other ways, but the most striking thing was that the content was so different from what we normally publish.

C: Feminism has come to represent strongly the rights of women *with* men, and *SW* does not address itself to these issues, so it is marginal to straight feminists if their eyes are glued on making it more habitable to live with men—

H: (laughing) Making marriage habitable!

CC: Making men palatable—

H: I think “the lesbian imagination in all women” is a kind of challenge. If you're going to appeal to the wild part of women as being the lesbian part, the part that wants to run free, then I guess it's natural that that comes out as being a challenge. It isn't the call of a real cozy sisterhood—a circle of trust among huntresses, warrior women, is not going to be like a c-r group. It's not where you support each other in your traumas so much as it's where you support each other's independence, which is not necessarily as attractive. It's also a challenge to the whole set-up that says heterosexuality is a choice to begin with—or a choice that women can make freely. How can you believe you've chosen freely what people have been trying your whole life to coerce you into?

CC: How do you relate “sinister wisdom” to “lesbian imagination”?

H: They're both paradoxical because *sinister* is not supposed to go with *wisdom*, and *lesbian* and *imagination* don't go together very well—

CC: Why? Because lesbians are seen as carnal under patriarchy?

H: Right. And it's paradoxical to think of a lesbian imagination in all women since lesbians are supposed to be marginal. It just seems like both phrases are internally contradictory, but they're only contradictory if you're accepting patriarchal definitions of the words.

CC: You're usually only considered to have wisdom in this culture if you know the right things, and we're advocating knowing the left things.

H: Both phrases keep taking on new layers of meaning the more you work with them—they're sort of open-ended. If we really knew exactly what we were talking about, we wouldn't have any trouble selecting things for the magazine. We'd know if this was or wasn't sinister wisdom.

C: But we'd probably never have anything in it then, because the writer is living with contradictions. I remember once we were trying to decide why we selected some things and not others, and we decided that very often there would be a failure of nerve on the part of the writer that would show itself somehow. The writer would start out perhaps with a shocking premise and then would dilute it. It seemed she was so scared of what she was saying that she *had* to dilute it. I found that to be true almost any time I tried to write anything down. What we felt was more successful was when the writer had the courage, the boldness, to make those statements and then not back away. To stand on the things that she said. And I think we've published a lot of unsuccessful or failed stuff in *SW* because it's really hard to find material that does not betray itself out of fear.

H: You can see it happen all the time. It also happens when women never start writing, or never finish writing what we begin—

C: I think *SW* has just groped with these things. We do have Michelle Cliff's "Notes on Speechlessness," which is about struggling to overcome that fear.

CC: Audre Lorde says that your silence will not save you. And patriarchy tells you that silence is golden! (long pause) Well, all this helps clarify sinister wisdom as a criterion. What we're really asking of a piece is, does this break taboos? is this reversing patriarchal logic? is this wise?

H: It's like sinister wisdom is a much broader standard to use in judging stuff that comes in than lesbian imagination.

CC: No, I think lesbian imagination is broader. If you're going to say that the lesbian imagination is wildness, and that it comes out of self-definition and freedom, that allows for more leeway than sinister wisdom, which is very clear that it is an attack on the patriarchy. Even though the lesbian imagination is almost inherently that, it doesn't really say anything about the patriarchy in the way that sinister wisdom does.

C: Sinister wisdom is more defiant. It's saucy—

CC: Impertinent—

H: Sly—

C: It's a bad attitude.

CC: Lesbian imagination seems more wholesome to me. It's like the good place you get into when you're looking inward, and sinister wisdom is looking outward and squinting.

H: Wrinkling up your nose.

CC: It's almost like I expect a goddess to have lesbian imagination, but a witch to have sinister wisdom.

CC: I'm always amused by readers who think that being involved with *SW* means you spend most of your time at the office thinking about Ideas with a capital *I*. It's real funny to me because I think of the time we actually spend down there stamping things—

C: Or figuring out what to say to the subscriber who messed up her—

CC: And writing threatening letters to gay bookstores that don't pay up! None of that glamor of a real intellectual approach to feminism.

H: I think it's funny because one reason I wanted to get out of *Sinister Wisdom* was to have more time to think.

(Gales of laughter)

C: That's why we got into it—we wanted some more stuff to think on—and now we feel like we don't have time to think. Get it out, get it out—

CC: There's no time to think, we have to go to the post office!

H: There's no time to think, the books have to be balanced—

CC: But seriously, has editing *SW* affected you in ways you'll take with you when you leave?

H: We learned all these skills, we met all these women, we had all this fun, we had all this agony—

C: We feel like we belong to a network that we helped make, and we plan to continue to be a part of that network in some capacity.

CC: I know what readers have felt *SW* has left them with, but I was trying to figure out what you felt it had left you with because I suspect they're very different things.

C: I think I really won't know until six months from now or a year from now, how much it has meant, how much it's given. I just know it is a great deal. It has been a life force for me—perhaps the most enriching experience of my long life.

H: I'm ambivalent, as usual. For one thing I want to be rid of the responsibilities, and for another thing I feel like I'll probably roll over and die. Or that wouldn't it be terrible if everything is downhill from now on—

CC: Well, it's certainly going to remove some structure from your lives. So many of your waking hours are spent doing things for *SW*, and that's been at the center. (long silence) I know that when I first saw a copy of *SW*—it was issue 5—it was lunatic to me. All I could do was look at it and be totally baffled; it took me a long time to sort out what it meant to me. But as a former reader—I read it now, but as a former only-a-reader—I felt that the magazine was terribly important because it led me somewhere. It was more than a door, it was a fucking superhighway. The things I've gotten from it as a worker on the magazine are very different; they were in part skills and in part a stronger commitment to feminism—it wasn't so far outside me, lesbian feminism was something I did every day, it was my work. And of course the relationship that developed with you all and the importance of finding those other women. A sense that there really is a network, that it's not just wishful thinking.

CC: Do you have any regrets?

C: Oh, yes—many. The major one for me is that as the circulation and the demands on our time increased, we became passive editors. Our energy was focused on maintenance—we were not thinking, not raising important questions or projecting special issues.

H: Yes. And this kind of passivity shows up in the whiteness of the magazine more than in any other way. Most of what comes in the mail comes from white women writers, and if you depend on the mail, if you depend on the initiative of women who already consider themselves writers, if you don't go out and solicit material, most of what you end up publishing is by white women. Which is what I feel worst about, mostly because it has meant that *SW* has so far conveyed a distorted—or at least very limited—sense of what being a lesbian means, of what a “lesbian imagination” can do.

C: I agree. Back in '77, before we became such passive editors, while we were still in North Carolina and living close to our black friends Adrienne M. and Clara G., it seemed that *SW* was moving naturally toward a balanced content—because Adrienne and Clara were constantly opening our eyes. In issue 3, for instance, there's a review by the four of us, talking about *The Ladder* anthologies. In discussing “Getting Ripped Off,” written by a white woman about her experiences as a social worker in the Puerto Rican ghetto of New York City, Clara called the author “Big Daddy's daughter”:

Clara: I began to call her Big Daddy's daughter after I read the essays which I assume described her background—I thought of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” and I began looking around for Big Daddy. After that I could understand where she was coming from and why her head was so twisted in this area . . . I appreciated her talent, but she really made me mad. I wanted to say to her, don't call yourself a feminist, or talk about feminism, which is supposed to encompass us all, and then I see that you're looking at other women as though they don't exist—especially Third World women. So how can you expect me to identify with things you write when you write insulting stuff like that?

Adrienne: I got the impression from these books that a lot of writers don't expect Third World women to identify and they don't care. And that's ok but we need to be honest about that. I remember that in the introduction to *The Lavender Herring* Barbara Grier laments the fact that only one Black woman had contributed essays—Anita Cornwall—why weren't there more of them. Whenever Black women are mentioned, it's why aren't there more of them, why don't you do something. But I get the impression that most white women don't really want us to do anything because if we did, it would probably be in conflict with what they are doing— . . . The dilemma for Black women in this society is, of course, that racism is so deadly—the patriarchy is too—but which comes first for us and can we deal with them both at the same time? And if so, with whom can we work?

CC: Are there other regrets that you want to talk about?

C: Yes—failing to answer all the letters. We always had this sense of urgency, of responsibility to keep *SW* coming out regularly. This was a priority. The wonderful, nurturing, sustaining letters we received from women all over—particularly isolated lesbians—well, we were poor correspondents, we didn't always answer them. But we felt partly justified because we were giving tremendously of ourselves to keep *SW* going—its presence was our letter to our world and, most importantly, our reply to women who had taken the time to write us about how life-giving it was to them. Those who wrote kept us going, and I wanted immediately to fly to them with the latest issue in my beak and drop it on their bedroom windowsill.

H: I'm sorry we didn't continue what we started in issue 3, a listing of all the women who contributed to *SW*—money, labor, love, their writing, room-and-boarding us on trips—

C: Susan and Katie doctoring our bodies, Marilyn and Carolyn doctoring our souls—

H: The list is so long by now, we're bound to leave somebody off. But I do want to mention specifically that Donna Saunders donated her time to

pack almost all the *SW* orders for 2½ years, which is probably some kind of record in feminist publishing.

CC: How were the new editors chosen?

C: Well, that was a remarkable coincidence. . . . In the fall of 1978, we were really depressed, and very tired. We began to think that perhaps the only way we could get relief from *SW* was to turn it over to someone else. But we had not sat around and said, "Now, if we're gonna turn over this magazine, who will we turn it over to?" We had not yet got to that point. And then Harriet went to the MLA convention in New York City in December of 1978 and—

H: And there was this party at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Michelle Cliff came up, introduced herself, and said that she and Adrienne were thinking about starting a magazine in a couple of years and would Catherine and I give them some practical advice. And I said, "Why don't you take over *SW*?" and she said, "Are you serious?" and I said, "Sure," and she said, "Let me go get Adrienne." So she got Adrienne and the three of us said this is something to talk about. When I got back to Lincoln, Catherine and I talked about it and thought oh this would be perfect. So then we had a correspondence about it which went on for a long time, all very tentative, and then in May Adrienne came to Lincoln to do a reading and the three of us decided we couldn't decide anything because Michelle wasn't there. Then Catherine and I went to New England in the fall of '79 and spent some time with them, and we all agreed to a transfer date of January 1981.

C: So the next year was spent in working through the details of the transfer.

CC: How do you feel about their adopting *SW*?

C: When Harriet told me that Adrienne and Michelle were interested in continuing *SW*, I couldn't believe our good fortune. We both felt that considering all the circumstances, if we had tried to think of who would be ideally suited to hand the Lady over to, our first choice would have been these women. Even though I had not met Michelle at that time, we had corresponded, talked on the phone, and *SW* had published her work, which I admired very much—particularly the "Notes on Speechlessness," which seemed to speak for me. Adrienne had long been a supporter of *SW*—she was one of the first subscribers and one of the first women to impress on us the particular significance of the magazine and the importance of keeping it going.

H: What it came down to was that we trusted their judgment. And at every new crisis in what's turned out to be a two-year turnover process, they've given us more reason to trust them. So we know the Lady is in good hands. And we're getting excited about what's going to come out of all this—what our sibylline selves predict, in case anyone's interested, is that they'll carry on, while simultaneously deepening and broadening, the original vision of *SW*.

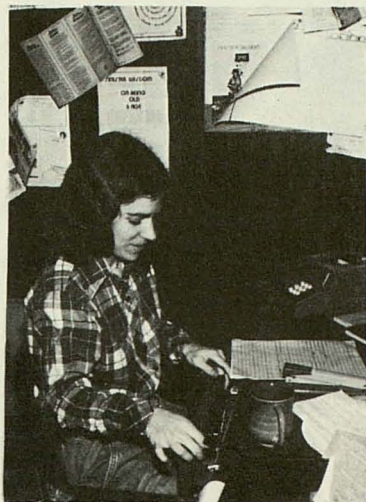
CC: Do you have any last words?

C: Only that without you, Cindy, we couldn't have made it through the last two years. . . . Do you want the last word, Harriet?

H: No! I mean, yes.

A FEW OF OUR FRIENDS WHO HELPED:

IN NEBRASKA



Vicki Nogle



Edy Ambroz



Donna Saunders

*photographs
by Deborah Alicen*



Tee Corinne: "Self-Portrait Collage for my 37th birthday"

"In it I am (top left to bottom right) 23, 31, 34, and 36 in the background picture."



Lynda Koolish

IN SAN FRANCISCO

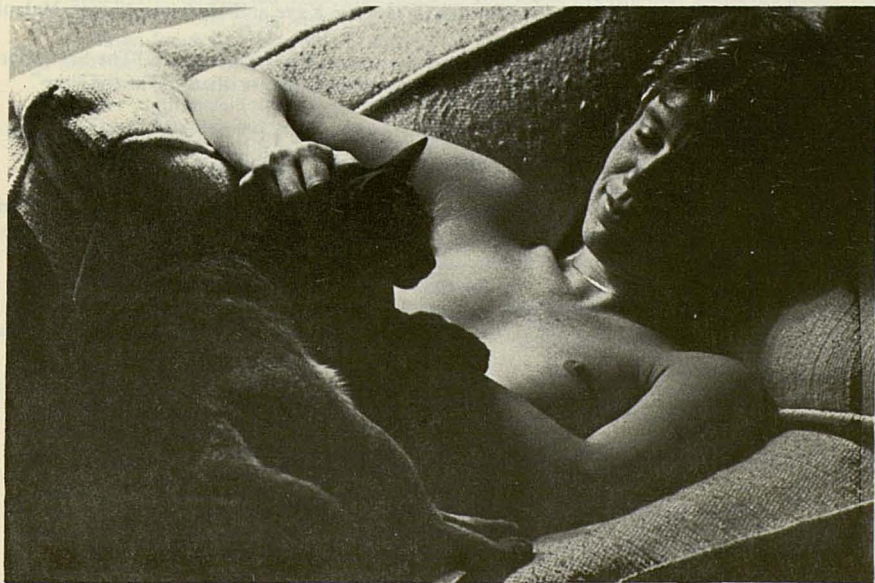
photograph by Barbara Klutinis



Robin Ruth Linden

photograph by Susana Blaustein

Susan Leigh Star & Maude Elizabeth



photograph by Lynda Koolish



Drastik Dykes and friends

APOLOGIES

—We apologize for listing Melanie Kaye as the sole author of “Sexual Power” in *Sinister Wisdom* 15. The credit should have read “Ideas, Melanie Kaye and Michael; Words, Melanie Kaye.”

—Our apologies to Jane Gapen for the faulty proofreading on her poem “The Slaughter House” in *SW* 15. The line “I saw this and other things which horrified me at the time” (p. 21) should have been omitted.

—We apologize for omitting the last line on p. 21 of issue 14. The final stanza of Karen Snider’s poem “Mabel the Able: good witch of the North” should read: “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/on Hollow’s Eve, twenty more names, will we curse/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.”

PLEASE RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTION

Contributors' Notes

Debbie Alicen is a transplanted Southerner now thriving in Nebraska. She writes stories and takes photographs as recreation.

Diane Ayott is an artist and art educator living quietly in the North Shore area of Massachusetts.

Sandy Covahey is a printer and country woman in exile, among other things, who lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Laura Davis. "I live in the Santa Cruz mountains, work as a problem-solving counselor with women, write and edit for *Matrix* newsmagazine in my spare time. My greatest asset (in my own estimation) is my ability to laugh at myself. My worst flaw (also in my own estimation) is I forget to stop."

Karlene Faith is a mother, writer, teacher and community organizer with special interests in music, cross-cultural alliances and women in prison.

Cellan Jay is currently living in Silly Servant City in Kanada where it is imperative for the sake of sanity that she take long flights of the imagination. She has been previously published in several anthologies.

Meg Jochild is a Texan living in San Francisco. "'Trapeze' found its beginning in a dream. I seem to do a lot of writing at night during my sleep, which I find makes for fun nights and a good use of every minute. (These two things might be the idealized goals of every active dyke.)"

Lynda Koolish is a poet and photographer living in San Francisco. She is writing a book on feminist poets.

Robin Ruth Linden is an editor and video producer living in San Francisco.

Barbara Macdonald lives with Cynthia in Cambridge. She is 67 now, for the first time in her life.

Achy Obejas is a Cuban-born poet, 24 years old, currently working for Terrapin Records in Chicago as promotions and distribution coordinator, although her usual line of work is journalism. She manages Sirani Avedis.

Jan Phillips is a wandering free-lance photographer currently staked out in Hawaii. Her work has been published in *off our backs*, *Plexus*, and various women's publications.

Arlene Raven is an art historian and former executive editor of *Chrysalis*. "The Eye of the Be*Hold*Her" is part of a book-length manuscript.

Diana Rivers. "I am living in rural Arkansas, on woman's land, in a small cabin I built myself. Have been writing stories about nine years, taking them seriously for about four, and am now working on a full-length Lesbian fantasy, wanting to give voice and form to our visions."

Karen Saum. "Ex-academic, current bureaucrat, writer, and video producer (*Working Women of Waldo County* and *She Knew a Phoenix: Interviews with May Sarton*). The Sarton tape, completed 9/80, concludes an episode in my life that began in circumstances similar to the one in the story."

Susan Leigh Star has joined Lesbians-25-and-Over, having survived universities, movement politics, and being hit by a car.

Lynn Watson is a skip-breakfast artist from the Sonoma Mtns. "Julie" is a chapter from her yet unpublished novel *Alimony or Death of the Clock*. Rhyming gives her energy.

Dinah Wernick has given away cemetery lots over the phone, washed cars, worked in a ceramics studio, and washed dishes before deciding on sales and marketing management.

Barbara Wilson has most recently published in *13th Moon*, *Chomo Uri*, and *Sing, Heavenly Muse*. Her first book of short stories, *Talk & Contact*, was published by Seal Press, which will release her second book, *Thin Ice*, in the spring of 1981.

Irene Yarrow's work has appeared in *Amazon Quarterly*, *The Lesbian Reader*, and the *Nation*. A novel, *Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down*, was published in 1972 by Simon & Schuster (under the name Irene Schramm).

Tee Corinne, creator of the SW poster, has a new book, *Labia Flowers*, forthcoming from Naiad Press.

Dear Lee Kinard,

Thank you for your faithful and generous support of SW during the last four years.

Affectionately,
Harriet and Catherine

NEW ADDRESS FOR POSTER

In the spring of 1977, a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two women making love appeared on the cover of *Sinister Wisdom 3*, followed by a deluge of requests for a poster. The poster was printed in the summer of 1977: a duplicate of that cover, black on gray, 17" x 22." Beginning in January 1981, the Lincoln Legion of Lesbians has taken over the sale and distribution of the Tee Corinne poster.

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