SINISTER WISDOM

19

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The following note, by Gloria T. Hull and Geraldine McIntosh, was intended to appear with their review of Audre Lorde's THE CANCER JOURNALS in SW 18. The editors deeply regret that it was omitted.

"This review is both experiment and fulfillment for us. For years now, we have discussed/argued about/tried to lessen the divide between us as academic versus non-academic women. This project represents an important phase of that process. We chose this collaborative 'alternating-voices' form because it allowed us to speak simultaneously together and separately."

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CONTENTS

A WOMAN LIES BURIED UNDER ME

A woman lies buried under me,
interred for centuries, presumed dead.

A woman lies buried under me.
I hear her soft whisper,
the rasp of her parchment skin
fighting the folds of her shroud.
Her eyes are pierced by needles,
her eyelids, two fluttering moths.

A woman lies buried under me,
afraid to wake, afraid to greet
the eyeless ovals of intimate faces.
And choosing.

A woman lies buried under me
dreaming that she walks
across the horns of the moon
and wakes at the foot of its bridge.

A woman lies buried under me.
Clothed in black
the moon sheds its light–
a fragile snake skin
brushing my face.

A woman lies buried under me.
I hear her soft whisper,
the rasp of her parchment wings
fighting the folds of my shroud.

A woman lies buried under me.
I emerge covered with mud.
Twigs fall from my eyes.
I rise, smell every flower
touch the four corners
and the burning trees.

In my own hands
my life.

From A BOOK OF TRAVEL (Chapter 13)

In 1950-51, Deming, young then, but already in full possession of her writer's craft and consciousness, went for the first time to Europe and lived and traveled there for more than a year. Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Spain–traveling usually 3rd class, with a knapsack and her father's quilt, she took her writer's notes and kept letters, etc. Soon after, conceiving the whole experience as central in her life, and as passionately unified by her falling in love during this period, she set out to write of it–and finished a first chapter. But she couldn't continue. Friends discouraged her–because she was writing about a lesbian and this was not only taboo then, it was not considered an authentic hold upon reality.

Times change. Having a good memory, having kept the notes, letters, etc., she is able to give us now this experience, to resee it through her powers of a writer who is also a poet. Since the writing was postponed twenty years, we get the benefit of Deming's later perspective on this material–showing us a young woman in the process of her radicalizing, before she is aware of theory. The portion here is a good example of this. And of the religious or epic quality of this work, a woman's epic for our age of awareness.

–Jane Gapen

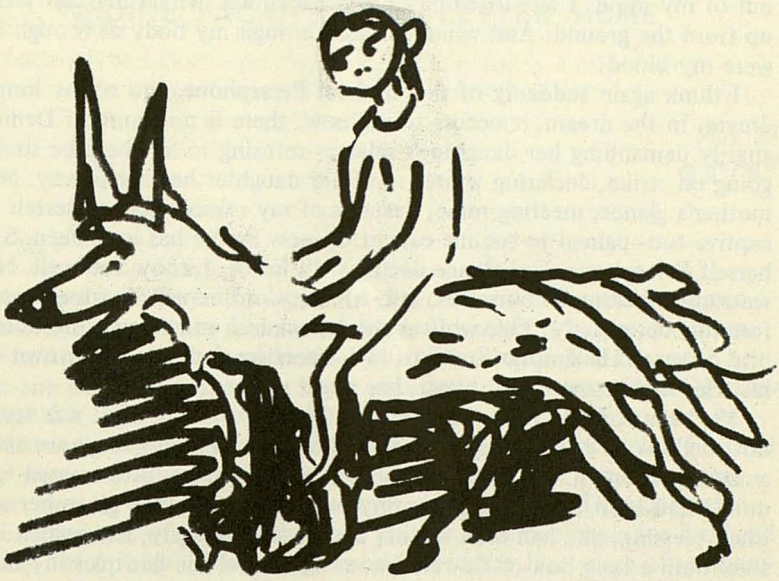
On another day I took a bus to Elevsis. And on that day I fell into a dreaming state deeper still. My first feeling was a shock of disappointment. I found little more than three columns upright there. A peasant woman who saw me staring about made a rolling motion with her hands–"Bomba." Mussolini's planes had bombed the place. Here was a jumble of fractured stones and pillars and bits of ornament. The site was on a small hill above a town that was now a factory town. Townswomen were gathering some edible weeds among the ruins. And a few chickens hopped from ancient stone to stone. I wandered along the hilltop, among the marble wreckage. No shape of what once had been was still discernible. Here was just the rubble of it. But I can remember still my disappointment changing to a deep surprise, as I stood among those scattered stones. Smoke rose from the chimneys of the town just down the hill. Its factory whistle shrilled. There were bursts of popular music, and a continual seething of voices.

But these sounds which were the nearby sounds of the present day seemed to me curiously remote—even illusory. Whereas the jumble of tumbled stones at my feet seemed electric with life—subtle, undeniable. I stood for a long time in a state of surprise. The factory whistle shrilled again. It was as though the sound struck against my body but fell away. My inner ear brimmed with a gentle humming. In fact my whole body seemed to hum. It was as though the soles of my feet picked up vibrations from the ground. I wrote in my state of wonder: "These ruins are more live than the present life."

At the time I found it strange that I should feel it to be so at that particular site. I no longer find it strange. For I have come—as other women have—to muse at length about the rites that once were celebrated just there—the Eleusian Mysteries. Rites in which Persephone, who has been carried off by the Lord of the Underworld, is reunited with her mother, Demeter, and with her own stolen-away self. Rites acted out in a time when women had begun to lose their strength to the patriarchs, but here affirmed the truth that it could not be taken from us once and for all—will be found again.

As I write of Persephone's abduction there floods into my memory a dream I dreamed as a young girl. Which has remained for me down through all the years of my life sharp as though I had dreamed it yesterday—its imagery distinct, and the feelings, too, distinct that cast their net over me. I dreamed it at a time when my father used at bedtime to play with my brothers and me a game he called Daddy Wolf. He would hide in the parlor with all the lights out. We would creep together down the long hall that led to the room, and then—venture into that dark. He would jump out of the shadows, catch in his arms first one of us and then another; tickle us until we screamed with joy and terror. It was play my mother pleaded with him to give up. For she would have liked to put us to bed in a calm and drowsy state. But my father loved the game. In the dream: I am on the back of a large silvery wolf. Seated there, captive. Not able to slip off. Not bound in any physical way, but passive, accepting—that I *am* the captive. It is this resignation that is the dread feeling that fills the dream. The wolf moves with awesome dignity slowly down the hall and toward the front door—passing in this motion the open door to the dining room, where all the family sits. Or rather, my mother, my brothers, the woman who cooks for us. They see us pass and with helpless looks they raise their hands in sorrow and then bow their heads. Yes, I belong to the Daddy Wolf. He will bear me wherever he wants. And it is for me simply to be his quiet passenger. At the front door, I wake from the dream. Though I don't wake entirely. For its feelings hold me still.

A net of feelings in which I struggled all through my youth. As an adolescent I began to feel that net give. Began to feel I had the new weight and new impulsive motion to break it. This was a delicious feeling. Which persisted during my four years at an all-women's college. There we young women stared into one another's eyes and saw each other as strong and



pen and ink drawing by Jane Gapen, 1981

beautiful. But as soon as I graduated and was attempting to make my living and my way in a man's world—I could taste in my mouth again that familiar earlier taste, of captivity.

Nell's kisses could dispel it sometimes. And her assuring glances. But too often I could catch in her own eye the look of one being borne in a direction not her own. She did have about her a lovely air of capability. Of gayety, too. That could seem to assert: oh our lives belong to us. And yet—I could see that she too sometimes doubted it. Or doubted at least that two women hand in hand could find their way. And finally of course it was a man to whom she had turned. Would the woman I loved always finally turn from me to a man? Probably. And what was I then to do with all my feelings for her? Or rather, if I stamped out those feelings, stamped them underground, what was to become of me—whom those same feelings had first brought alive? As I stood there among those tumbled shining stones, all my feelings for you circled through my body as though they were my blood. And the humming in my ears asserted: This

is more real than that "real world" nearby in which you must make your way. The world which will ask you to deny what you are feeling. How was I then to make my way? But this question only flicked in and then out of my mind. I was listening to that humming. Which my feet picked up from the ground. And which circled through my body as though it were my blood.

I think again suddenly of the myth of Persephone, and of my long ago dream. In the dream, it occurs to me now, there is no figure of Demeter, angrily demanding her daughter's release—refusing to let there be summer, going on strike, declaring winter until her daughter has her liberty. My mother's glance, meeting mine, despairs of my release: names herself a captive too—pained to see me caught up now as she has long been. She is herself Persephone. Her glance declares: "I know, I know too well. No, we cannot belong to ourselves. It is his kingdom here." She does not show fear for me, exactly. This wolf as she knows him in her own life does not bite or snarl. He simply carries us in a direction that is not our own—is his. Her look is awed and bitter, her anger masked.

My beautiful and bitter mother. At this point in my life I was trying not to think of her very often. I feared to have her captive glance take away my strength. And yet—any bold or near-bold gestures toward freedom I had been able to make on my own she had always given her astonished blessing. She had seen me off on my ship to Italy, and left in my stateroom a long box of flowers (mountain laurel she had picked) and a note that had made me cry. We were shy with one another, she had written, but she wished she had the words to tell me her pride in me—and in the book I had just finished, and the poems she had seen. "I can never talk to you about your poems," she wrote; "To me they are so very personal it would seem a sort of intrusion. But my admiration is very deep." Some of the poems of course were about Nell—as I knew she knew. Her note ended with the sudden cry: "Feel free!"

I stood among the fallen stones of Elevsis, and listened to the humming in my ear. It seemed to be telling me that I was in fact free. However, the hubbub of voices from just down the hill seemed to be warning me that I was not.

Judith Katz

NADINE PAGAN'S LAST LETTER HOME

May 29
☉♊/☪♐

Dear Ma–

A long time ago you told me about a girl child a womon child thirteen years old this one Anne Frank who lived with seven other people in an attic in Amsterdam Holland in the 1940s. She lived in this tiny attic because she was hiding from the Nazis who came all the way from Germany to hunt for Jews and Gypsies and queers and crazy people in order to kill them. Anne Frank's attic was a tiny tiny space. The people who lived there were very cramped and did not always get along: sometimes they argued over food to eat, sometimes over air to breathe. They depended on the good will of people who were neither Jews nor Nazis for food and news of the outside. These people who helped the Jews were often themselves in great danger: the Nazis considered it a crime against their fast-growing empire to save the lives of those who they wanted to exterminate.

Anne Frank and her family and friends hid in their attic because it was not possible for them to escape Holland as others who had sensed that times were going bad had done. They were like many Jews who had thought that times would get better for them again in Holland. They had believed that even though German soldiers had invaded their little country it still belonged to them and they to it. Many had thought, "If only we are good citizens, if only we adjust our last names, leave our prayer books in the synagogue, eat sauerbraten instead of gefilte fish, if only if only if only, then we will be safe." By the time Anne Frank's family realized such camouflage was useless it was too late. The men in the occupying German government wanted to keep all the Jews in Holland so they could ship them off to concentration camps and kill them.

The Nazis succeeded in killing a great many Jews, a great many Gypsies, a great many homosexual men, and a great many crazy people. It is unclear how many lesbians were killed at this time because you know how invisible we lesbians become in the schema of things. Perhaps some of the Jewish and Gypsy womyn were lesbians; probably many of the crazy womyn were lesbians. Some far-sighted lesbians could easily have been among the first to escape when German soldiers threatened to enter the country brandishing flags and singing stout songs.

If Anne Frank had grown older she might have discovered that she herself was a lesbian. What if she harbored such feelings as she tacked pictures of American movie stars over her mirror? What if she told her mother and father? Would they have said, "So it didn't work out with Peter Van Daan—is that any reason to announce your lesbianism?" Would it have mattered if she had kept it a secret? I mean, even though she and the others hid their Jewishness in an attic, didn't all but her father Otto Frank become so many piles of gold fillings and bars of soap? Didn't they all have numbers and nightmares burned into them so indelibly that even Jews who never slept in those foul concentration camp barracks remember the dreams? Even Jews like you, Ma, who read about the death camps in American newspapers. Even Jews like me, Ma, who learned the stories from you.

While Anne Frank lived in her attic she kept a diary. When Otto Frank returned to Holland from his devastating vacation, he was given this diary by friends. He edited it and showed it to the world. American publishers liked the diary so well they made it into a book that anyone could buy at the store and read at home. Theatre producers in New York City liked the book so much they made it into a play that you could buy tickets to and watch. People in Hollywood liked the play so much they made it into a movie. The people who run television liked the movie so well they played it on tv. I first learned the story of Anne Frank from your lips, Ma, but then I saw it on television and Anne Frank had a face, a Hollywood actress's face to be sure but a human face and she and her outlaw family became real people in Amsterdam, waiting to escape, waiting to be found. It was a lesson common as the chumash books I studied from in Hebrew school: this is how we Jews survive in the face of terrible danger; how we make do with what we have, bide and spend our time in times when being identified as a Jew means certain death.

Jane told me she believed as a child that in another life she had been Anne Frank. Womyn I know who have traveled to the attic where Anne Frank hid before secret service soldiers captured her and shipped her off in a box car to be killed say to me, "Nadine, it was so eerie . . . I sat at her dressing table, I touched her hair brush, it felt so familiar, Nadine—what if *I* was Anne Frank?"

Today I write to you from an attic in Massachusetts. I have freedom to come and go as I please but for how long, this is uncertain. In other life times I was persecuted as a Jew. My so-called crime this life time is not my Judaism alone (although when the time comes they'll throw that into the soup of my offenses like so many carrots and onions), but a kind of witch craft that has slept deep inside us womyn for generations. Like a complicated dream we don't always remember, it comes back to us from time to time, in pieces or all at once. Throughout history, when men spot

us dreaming as we do, they wake us up, tell us we never had such dreams, warn us that to dream in such a way is punishable by burning. Some of us forget then, lose our purpose and go back to sleep in another way. But some refuse to forget and work hard to remind the others. Now, at a time when men with bombs and the missiles to deliver them come perilously close to destroying life on this planet, this witch craft comes into many of us again, a steady, waking dream. We call the witch craft lesbia. The men who plan to annihilate us call it terrorism. Their way of naming us is ironic to me. I'll tell you why.

These generals and congressmen and ministers claim that we lesbians with our Take Back the Night Marches, karate classes, tarot cards and custody cases are so dangerous to human life they have to pass laws against us. They claim this at the same time that they themselves prepare to carve up the Nevada desert to plant MX missiles in its holy sandy soil. They say this as they dump poisonous chemicals into our oceans and make red tides; as they take millions of dollars away from government programs that feed and house people so they can use the money to make bombs and guns to kill people.

I hear you tell me, "Look, Nadine, times are tough for everyone. Give in a little. A law is a law." You wonder why I still wear overalls at my age. You ask me not to wear my labrys in front of my grandmother because it looks, you say, "too much like a cross." But, Ma: a lesbian is a peculiar creature: when people don't want to see us we're invisible; when they hunt for us they see us everywhere. I could have nothing on my neck and high heels on my feet and they'd still spot me a mile away.

I read in a magazine about a torture device that the US government makes and sells to foreign countries, many of which are right here, on this side of the globe, south of us. These countries are run by military dictatorships which our government helps by selling to them torture equipment like this helmet I saw. Men put this helmet on your head and then they torture another part of your body and you scream from the torture and the scream repeats itself loudly into your ears over and over again. The United States government makes this helmet. They make it here, you wear it there. You are tortured there, you scream there, you hear the scream but we over here in the US we just see the photographs. Of the helmets, not the torture.

Once I saw a picture of a bed in a room where men torture people in Chile. There were no people in the photograph but you knew from looking at the bed, from the blood-soaked concrete floor that held it up that people had been tortured there. Womyn and men, lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, light-skinned and dark, sane and crazy, in Chile, in Iran, in Brazil. They make it here, you get it there. If it's there for South American dissidents it's here for North American lesbians. I'm a witch, they're

the terrorists but that's not how they see it.

I do not plan to stay in this attic I write to you from like Anne Frank and the people in her family. I have the wherewithal to travel and so I will go. I go as an outlaw, out the bathroom window and with only the clothes on my back.

I will write notes to you, Ma, in my travels, post cards and long letters. I will send none of them by mail. When they pick me up and throw me in a box car and send me to the state penitentiary for womyn in the state they find me, these communications to you will be among my possessions. If they don't burn them, you will probably get to read them some day. If they do burn them, they may shortly thereafter burn me too. If this happens, you will feel me so clearly in the air no words will be necessary.

Until that time,
my love,
Nadine

Thanks to Ynestra King and Adrienne Rich for helping me deepen and widen this piece.

the dream

back in the old neighborhood
cautiously picking my way among
abandoned houses and broken sidewalks
I am trying to follow my grandmother, but
clumsy, I fear I will fall
she shouts encouragement to me in Italian
she climbs a rope ladder to the attic

words float from her mouth like water

old women, young women
march in procession
in their black aprons they carry
gleaming eggs and melons

I have not been invited, yet I am here
tumbling through air
past banners of brightly colored canvas
trying to follow my grandmother
as she climbs the stairs
past the room where the baby died

women dressed in black climb up
and down the stairs
holding eggs between their teeth
they finger their bones a rosary

the air is sharp with the tang of new ginger

a constant murmuring like
water over pebbles
the women work, deliberate, efficient
the mirrors are covered, red peppers
are hung in the windows
deft hands hang sheets, cut string
the inhale and exhale of breath is
slow and reassuring

from hand to hand the black stone is passed
ovoid it glimmers and shines

gasping for breath,
I watch as my grandmother
brings the knife down on a melon,
slicing it cleanly
it falls open reveals
two rows of perfectly formed teeth
locked in a grimace

Pesha Gertler

WHY I CAN'T WRITE ESTABLISHMENT POETRY

You speak too directly, they said,
for poems.
Are lies, then, the suitable idiom
for poems? tra la and gossamer
My life is filled with shit
and rape and poverty tra la
Gossamer wings o brush gently across
my daughter bloodied by a bully.
Direct. Life is like that. Poems
are not tra
la

Sarah Lucia Hoagland

VULNERABILITY AND POWER

This is exploratory, incomplete, and part of a longer work on Lesbian ethics.[1] It is obvious to me that if we are to move from being bound to each other and working together only because we have identified a threat from an outside force, to a bonding, a free choosing of intimacy based on shared perceptions and politics,[2] we must examine some of the ways we interact with each other and some of the ethical ideals which serve as the foundation of that interaction. In particular we must examine interactions which amount to attempts to control, which may involve some form of closeness resulting from dependency but which proscribe intimacy as well as autonomy.

Mary Daly has noted that the feminine virtues are the virtues of subservience.[3] These include vulnerability, altruism, and self-sacrifice. While vulnerability is not usually called a virtue, still a virtuous womon must make herself vulnerable. That is the nature of her virtue. Emerging from under the rule of the fathers, these qualities function to drain our "natural resources," our healing, creating, enabling power. They have served to channel our gynergy to men and thus keep us from realizing our power. It is my contention, however, that while men designed the feminine virtues, thus gaining access to female energy and securing male domination (particularly in the patriarchal institutions of the nuclear family and enforced heterosexuality), wimmin have refined these virtues in defense and resistance, developing them as a means of obtaining some (individual and limited) control over those who have our gynergy. It is my contention that we have developed them as survival and resistance strategies.

Part of my reasoning is this. If the feminine virtues function to channel our gynergy away from our Selves, then we must have developed them as a means of obtaining some power over those who have our gynergy. For example, when we sacrifice we can display our resulting wounds and use them to gain some control in a context which *presumes* female sacrifice and in which all hints of female autonomy have been eradicated. So if as a matter of survival we have developed our expected opening and giving into strategies for gaining some control, strategies which promote distance and erect barriers, we face a problem. Since we have not fully named and

perceived these strategies as part of our resistance to male domination under the rule of the fathers,[4] they can operate among ourselves as habits and reactions whenever we feel threatened.

In the introduction to *The Coming Out Stories,* Adrienne Rich asks: "And why is our common, 'moral and ordinary' . . . love of women not enough to create of us a mǣdenhēap—a band of female warriors, a movement? . . . Why are we still so rent among ourselves?"[5] And in *Women and Honor* she notes: "There is a danger run by all powerless people: that we forget we are lying, or that lying becomes a weapon we carry over into relationships with people who do not have power over us."[6] I believe that part of the unraveling of these concerns lies in an exploration of the feminine virtues. And the concept I wish to explore in this paper is vulnerability.

There is a belief among Lesbians that the way to establish trust among ourselves is to make ourselves vulnerable to each other. Most Lesbian feminists I know plan for a world in which we can be safely vulnerable to each other. I myself once had this vision and argued that so long as a society exercises power as control, vulnerability will be confused with impotency. Thus one who is vulnerable is a target of attack, a victim. However, I went on, in a womon-identified space, a space in which power can develop as ability not control, emanates from the dark core, and is a power of processes and changes, vulnerability may come from strength, not weakness: when we choose to make ourselves vulnerable, I thought, it will be because we are strong and flexible enough to absorb what may come. That was my argument, and while superficially the idea sounded plausible, I soon began to wonder about it. I envision a time when we can be open to each other with less caution and greater flexibility because we allow greater honesty to inform our exchanges. But I no longer believe this vision connects in any way with the concept of vulnerability.

When playing with the dictionary one day, I discovered to my horror that "vulnerable" comes from the Latin, *vulnerābilis,* meaning "to wound." One of its entries is "having the power to wound." The editors call this definition obsolete. Current usage connects "vulnerable" with either being wounded or being open to wounding or attack. I do not believe a concept tied so completely to attack and wounding can involve any form of power but the power of control and its resulting presumption of access—the process of domination and subordination.

The context of making ourselves vulnerable in order to establish trust emerges from heterosexual behavior and male fantasy. Wimmin have been forced to make ourselves vulnerable to men, to open ourselves to wounding by extending ourselves appeasingly and by displaying our "weaknesses" or our "helplessness" during initial contact and ever after at regular intervals in order to prove we're not like Eve, Cleopatra, or Delilah, and to reassure men that we would never be able to threaten them, that we see the necessity of remaining loyal to them, and that they are beings who deserve such reassurances. Making ourselves vulnerable and granting undue

access to a given male–so matter of course that men often do not even need to solicit it–has evolved under the rule of the fathers and forces us to establish that we are exceptional wimmin, i.e., not like other, dangerous, wimmin, and hence worthy of this man's attention and trust. Thus the idea of making ourselves vulnerable in order to establish trust emerges from a context in which wimmin have been forced to deny our common womon bonds and connections in order to survive, that is, in order to attain male approval under the rule of the fathers.

Aside from constant appeasing postures, the primary way to prove we are "exceptional" to a given male is to belittle the wimmin around us. Waiting in New York's La Guardia Airport one Winter Solstice, I watched a young womon arrive and greet her boyfriend who was there to meet her. She had been to a family gathering, and for the next twenty minutes of conversation she belittled each female member of her family, beginning with her grandmother. In the process she was making herself vulnerable in two ways. In the first place she was disassociating herself from her female bloodline and from wimmin in general in order to prove, indirectly, that she, at least, could be trusted by him. This is the result of male-identification; she exposed herself to wounding by cutting herself off, and she will be wounded by the isolation–has been wounded already. Nevertheless she was doing so in an attempt to survive in the only way apparent to her–alignment with a male.

More interestingly, she was using vulnerability as a tool. She was exposing herself by exposing the "weaknesses" of the wimmin of her bloodline to show that she could recognize their qualities as weaknesses and that she abhorred them as much as any man would. The case is interesting because she was using vulnerability in an attempt to gain security and avoid risk. She was exposing herself by exposing the "weaknesses" of her bloodline in order to actually ward off an attack on herself along those lines and in order to gain male approval–"trust." If her boyfriend later hurls a charge at her that she, too, has these "weaknesses," he will have betrayed her.[7] By giving him information that could be used to hurt her in order to establish exceptionality and gain his trust, she is using vulnerability to gain some security and even a bit of control from a position of subordination.

There is a related pattern among wimmin who deny connections with feminists, or heterosexual wimmin who deny connections with Lesbians, or liberal and socialist feminists who take pains to make men feel comfortable by denying connections with radical and separatist ideology respectively.

After a heterosexual liaison has been established, vulnerability can be used in another way; it can become a means whereby a womon can control a man's access to her life in certain respects and force him to keep his distance emotionally, if not physically. This way he can't consume her. One womon described a relationship she observed this way: The wife is submissive, vulnerable, and needs protection. As the husband is the domi-

nant member of the pair and she has no separate means of self-realization, he is supposed to guess what she needs, and on occasion, wants. (Since he's supposed to be superior, let's see just how much he really knows and how competent he really is.) She makes herself vulnerable by depending on him to guess and provide for her needs; if he fails, he wounds her. As inevitably he does fail at second-guessing her needs–something she is a whiz at in his case, since she has had to learn to observe him–she feels hurt and eventually angry due to his fatuousness. In the process she makes him feel guilty. He is thus distanced and must attend to her even more closely, trying to guess her innermost needs while she goes competently about her business. Thus at crucial moments she can call in her due; she can call certain shots in their relationship while keeping him at a distance.

This is but one heterosexual scenario. Given the power imbalance of the social mechanisms accompanying the rule of the fathers, vulnerability can be a way of gaining token, minor, individual control. And while the control may be minor relative to autonomy, the *conceptual* difference between seeing the vulnerable womon as submissive on the one hand, and seeing her as *resisting* total dissolution within the dominance/submission scenario of the rule of the fathers on the other hand, is significant for us.

One revealing television perfume commercial aired the last few years in December for the holidays exhibits a seductively dressed white womon with a French accent who states, "I crave vulnerability, I think too much intimacy is dangerous." This is a significant contrast. The message is that she craves control and thinks too much openness dangerous. She makes herself vulnerable but does not allow full knowledge of herself such as one who is intimate would have. Yes, openness is dangerous for one trying to gain some control over her circumstances in a context denying all remnants of female autonomy. And it is out of this context that the idea of wrapping a man around the little finger (left or right as the case may be) emerges. She keeps him at a distance, maintaining the "mystery" and thereby maintaining some separation. If the mystery is dispelled through intimacy (knowledge a male often begins to gain when a womon lets down her defenses after first engaging in sexual intercourse with him), she becomes ordinary and hence no longer exceptional. Yes, in this context intimacy is dangerous, and vulnerability is a strategy for gaining control.

Under the rule of the fathers, wimmin have fashioned our presumed vulnerability into various strategies for survival. And we must herald these strategies for what they are. However because we have so refined and perfected them, they may have become for many of us a matter of reaction and defense rather than a carefully planned course of action. Or at least, very often we can resort to them without fully considering other options. Thus making ourselves vulnerable to gain control may be a matter of habit, and as a result we are in danger of using vulnerability unthinkingly against those who have no real power (control) over us. For example, mothers can use vulnerability to gain (unacknowledged) control over their children.

So it is important that we examine the belief among Lesbian feminists that the way to establish trust among ourselves is to make ourselves vulnerable to each other, that this is a Lesbian-feminist ideal. We should also examine the converse belief that in order to retain power we can never really open to another womon, never share our full selves. These two beliefs combine to yield the prevalent idea that we cannot have a living-in relationship with another womon and still maintain autonomy because sharing in a relationship is seen as putting another womon's needs over our own. More importantly, I have heard it argued that autonomy and intimacy are incompatible. My suggestion is that using vulnerability as a tool leads not to intimacy but rather to a false closeness, a dependency, and that while the use of vulnerability is incompatible with autonomy, development of intimacy is not.

Among Lesbians, if I make myself vulnerable in order to establish trust, if I open to a womon in ways that invite her to wound me, if I open up before we have found a common ground of trust, my opening is most likely an attempt to gain control in the relationship without accepting responsibility either for the attempt or for any control I might succeed in gaining. For example, if I share doubts about myself with a womon before we have grounds for trust, I am revealing to her what I am defensive about. If she then criticizes me for the very thing I am defensive about, she has declared open war because I "trusted" her with this information; she has betrayed *my* trust. This then acts as a constraint on her: So long as we remain "friends" she cannot criticize me in these areas; she must "support" me, i.e., give the appearance of agreeing with everything I do. Our bonding has become a binding, and our "friendship," then, has become not an open, honest exchange of ideas, critiques, and support but rather a means whereby I have enlisted someone to insulate me from my fears and pain (as opposed to someone who may hold me through them).

In a related vein, vulnerability can become a way of gaining undue access to another womon's life. In exchange for becoming vulnerable to you I may expect automatic time priorities and knowledge of what you are doing. Or I may make presumptions about your willingness to do certain things which I would not make about other close friends. This is the taking for granted, the presumption, of lovers. And it is difficult to unravel because supposing autonomy and bonding are compatible, then if autonomy means you do what you want and being lovers means we have similar wants, surely I can simply expect you to want, freely, what I want. If you don't, it seems a sign you no longer love me. I think this type of trap is most likely to occur when we regard ourselves as becoming vulnerable to each other (so that unfamiliar difference can seem a threat) and less likely if we regard ourselves as becoming more intimate with–gaining greater knowledge of–each other. The problem, as I see it, lies in the expectation. When I take your giving for granted as a result of having become vulnerable to you because of the "rules" of the relationship, I am

binding you to me, not bonding with you, and our relationship becomes a vulnerable dependency rather than an intimate bond.

Of course we must not use another womon's vulnerability as an excuse to avoid hearing her needs. There must be spaces where we can explore our wounds. And we must be able to ask for help. However, the other must also be able to refuse. What I am talking about is the use of vulnerability as a means of engineering closeness or as a means of gaining access or as a shield. And what should be resisted is the power play, the coercion. Perhaps the most revealing use of vulnerability I've witnessed came from a Lesbian-feminist who, upon publishing a piece and finding it criticized, avoided the content of the criticism as well as responsibility for her own work by arguing that no one should criticize a womon who is suicidal. In general when one opens herself to wounding for a purpose, she is in a sense holding herself up for ransom (the redemption of a prisoner or a slave). And the price the other must pay to redeem her is to refrain from criticizing her in those areas. She *trusts* the other will not hurt her; and if the other does, even by just withdrawing because of her own wounds, then the other can become a scapegoat for all that goes wrong in the relationship, thus enabling the one to avoid examining herself.

All of this does not always happen in our relationships. My point is that using vulnerability (to establish trust, to gain access, to obtain control) sets up mechanisms whereby constraints work against growth and change, and especially against bonding and intimacy.

Recently an appeal to vulnerability surfaced from a context which its proponents call Lesbian-feminist, an appeal which openly embraces the full force of the word's etymology as an end in itself and not even as a transforming power. Some Lesbians claim that to be a Lesbian-feminist in the fullest sense one must engage in sadomasochism, in particular in masochism, because physically and emotionally submitting to another womon to be wounded (though not to a man) is the ultimate act of trust. By opening herself to wounding, by inviting another womon to wound her, so the argument goes, a Lesbian is allegedly expressing the ultimate trust, the ultimate commitment to sisterhood. In the first place, by asking the sadist to dominate her the masochist is forcing the sadist to be supremely attentive, the masochist is becoming the center of at/tension, and she is thus gaining some control. However to do so she must be willing to accept the dominance/submission context established by the rule of the fathers;[8] she must be willing to embrace subordination. This is hardly a commitment to sisterhood.

More significantly, in terms of the philosophical justification of masochism it is phenomenal how closely the reasoning is tied to religious ecstasy. One might as well argue that turning over the entire direction of one's life to another womon is an even greater act of "trust." The concept of trust requires analysis as much as the concept of vulnerability. (For example, in a certain sense one can trust one's enemies since one can be certain of or depend upon their actions.) However the significant point here

is the rhetorical equation of trust with submission. My ultimate feminist act, this line of reasoning proclaims, is total submission to another womon. Submission is no more a matter of the trust of bonding than it is a matter of cooperation or commitment. The logic in defense of Lesbian masochism does not challenge or exorcize the ideology of the fathers, it embraces it.

Hailing vulnerability—the specific opening of oneself to wounding—as a desirable virtue effectively obscures the fact that we live under the rule of the fathers, a rule of dominance and subordination, and thus that our survival is profoundly political because it means survival as autonomous wimmin and on our own terms. And as Audre Lorde reminds us, we were never meant to survive.[9] The idea behind the feminine virtues buries even the fact that turning the other cheek is an act of violence.[10] In turning the other cheek we are inviting the other person to do us violence. (We are also egging our attacker on, encouraging him.) The belief that this does not merit the name of violence stems from the same mode of thought exhibited by a Wisconsin police officer who refused to alert the community to a rash of rapes, refused to warn wimmin that a rapist was striking often and obviously, because he didn't want anyone to get hurt. It stems from the belief that violence done to wimmin doesn't hurt anyone, or that breaches of our integrity or our health are not violations. At every turn we as wimmin have been encouraged to not take ourselves seriously,[11] and while one side of vulnerability in a situation of dominance is a power play, the other side perpetuates a devaluation of our existence.

Even in a space free of patriarchal rule, a feminist fantasy space, I find myself leery of using vulnerability to establish trust. A good example occurs in Sally Gearhart's *The Wanderground.* A womon who had escaped from the city after having been raped and dressed in armor as a joke, meets Seja, a hill womon. Failing to reach the womon in armor either through language or with a mind stretch, Seja makes herself vulnerable, saying, "'If you do not understand my words or my mind, then understand my body. I do not wish to harm you. You may kill me if you like. I trust you will not.' With that Seja exposed her neck to the womon in armor, showing her she could kill Seja with her sword, that Seja was willing to take this risk with her, go that far with her, that Seja therefore was not the enemy."[12]

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

Secondly, I think the womon in armor may well have struck Seja. Men had just brutally raped and dressed her in armor as a mockery. She was wounded and violated, and wounded animals strike out regardless of the intentions of those approaching them.

In a wonderfully biophilic conversation late one evening in Minneapolis,[13]

Sally Gearhart pointed out that the hill wimmin have a concept of death different from our own, so that taking such a risk would not have the political significance it does surrounding our survival in patriarchy. While the feminine virtues function to feed our gynergy and strength to men, it is not true that in the Wanderground those we live with fear and hate us. In this respect, then, vulnerability becomes a strategy to be used in a certain type of rescue mission in order to transform fear of an external force into trust of one's own kind. Nevertheless, I question the strategy.

While vulnerability may transform a womon's fear, it will not transform her personality. Suppose once recovered, Margaret turns out to be the sort of person Seja just does not get on with. Suppose in five years Margaret makes political choices Seja strongly disagrees with. It is possible that Seja might eventually come to resent Margaret—not because Seja helped her and now doesn't get on with her, but because Seja risked her own life in the process of helping her. In evaluating the transforming power of trust we must ask whether vulnerability ever comes with *no* strings attached.

There is a more important aspect that merits consideration in the use of vulnerability as a rescue strategy. By using vulnerability to transform Margaret's fear, Seja is forcing Margaret to choose between killing a womon or letting loose her own armor, her defenses. And in choosing to let loose her armor, Margaret must still her anger, contain it. Yet it may be too soon for Margaret to do this; it may be time instead for her to vent her rage and thus begin to assuage her wounds. The anger inside us must come out, and we need to find ways to attend to it.

One might argue that this is precisely Seja's purpose. She is providing a safe situation in which Margaret can vent her rage if necessary. But is the situation safe? If I expose myself to someone who has been seriously wounded in order that she may vent her rage on me (and thus to gain her trust), I provide her with an inappropriate target for her anger because I am not the cause of her anger and because unfortunate consequences can result. If she hurts or kills me, she must later live with that. So Seja is not really providing a safe situation in which Margaret can vent her rage. Even though the risk of Seja's life does not have the political significance it would under the rule of the fathers, still her life is not without meaning or value. Had Margaret killed Seja, she would have had to live with this loss, a loss that was not a purpose or goal of the expression of her anger. It is crucial we relieve tension and frustration resulting from anger, but not by directing our aggression toward someone who is not the cause.

Further, turning our rage on each other when the other is not the cause, whether consensual or not, may relieve tension and frustration and hence momentarily feel good. But we are not thereby dealing with the cause of the anger. And if in one way or another we cannot address the cause to our satisfaction, our tension and frustration will build again and again and must be relieved again and again in a recurrent pattern that proscribes growth and healing because one does not break out of it. The prob-

lem is compounded when this process is defended in the sadomasochistic arena and the temporary relief of tension is associated with sexual orgasm. The recurrence of building tension and then seeking relief is seen here not as a failure to break out of the cycle and deal with the source of tension. Sadomasochists attribute it rather to the natural recurrence of sexual appetite. The process is thereby embraced in the name of feeling good, and those who push for growth and change are judged anti-sex.

To return to the Wanderground and Seja's strategy in aiding Margaret in her anger and pain, wounds take time to heal. The hill wimmin could leave Margaret alone, watching from a distance as they did with the gentles, leaving food nearby and protecting her from extraneous forces while she focuses on her Self, giving her time and space to discover and name her own needs for herself. There are other ways to provide a space for dealing with anger and pain than by risking one's own life. And trust does not have to be established immediately. In forcing Margaret to respond to her by choosing to trust or kill, Seja may be placing an additional burden on Margaret and cutting short a needed process instead of aiding her in unburdening her anger. Even in the best of contexts, to use vulnerability as a tool is to take a "short-cut through another's personality."[14]

I do not mean that within a radical and Lesbian-feminist space we should take no risks; I do not mean to encourage shallow relationships. I mean to encourage a deep evaluation of our risks. To state the case in the extreme, if the risk I take is that in acting I may not get her to do what I want, then I am setting myself up to be hurt and betrayed by her if she refuses to do what I want. There is nothing wrong with asking another to do something. But in setting myself up to being wounded by a refusal, I am not really allowing the possibility of refusal; or rather I am setting our relationship or possible relationship up against a refusal. The actual request can become irrelevant while compliance with my will becomes proof of her commitment to me. Thus I am risking the relationship in order to get her to do what I want, and I am thereby taking a short-cut through her personality, cutting off her processes and putting constraints on her growth. Eventually, to maintain autonomy she must end the relationship.

For there to be the risk of bonding, instead, I must be prepared for all responses, not only the ones I want. For example, if I come out to a friend or I speak my anger to her, she may reject me or she may listen, or she may speak anger back, or she may come out, and so on. If she turns from me, it was time for the relationship to end. If she hears me, then our relationship grows and develops in one of several possible directions. Either way, the relationship changes. The real risk of bonding lies in a willingness to take the next step, to change the relationship, to lose the security of predictableness. The risk lies in embracing the unknown.

I also do not mean to suggest we should forever guard against being vulnerable to each other. As you come to know me more intimately you

will come to know what is most capable of wounding me. However once intimacy and trust are developed, *if* they are developed instead of a forced closeness, we are less likely to use that knowledge to hurt each other. Hence our vulnerability is less likely to be a weapon. Vulnerability is an *effect* of bonding, but it is not a *tool* for bonding (or for anything else but control). Used as a tool, vulnerability establishes the "trust" of dependency but not the trust of intimacy.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, intimacy involves extremely strong bonds resulting from affection or understanding, and a sharing of interests, problems, and experiences. This takes time, as does the development of trust, and it is not something one can guarantee. If I attempt to establish closeness by using my vulnerability, then later on if I find her interests or needs changing and taking her on other roads when mine do not, or if I find my own interests changing while hers do not, I will be more likely to see such a change as a betrayal of my trust and of our relationship. The closeness I established, thus, will have grown into a binding dependency. If instead I pursue the closeness of intimacy, of greater knowledge, and embrace the risk of change–if I let go of control,[15] I will be less likely to restrict my growth or try to restrict hers for fear of losing something valuable in my life. Thus even if we grow apart, the real value–the bond–can remain solid because it is based on affection, understanding, and shared past experiences. In this way, I believe, autonomy is compatible with intimacy.

I do not have any quick and easy strategies. In fact one of my points is that there are none. I only have a hazy vision. Still, I do believe that if we hold a sister's freedom as a goal, as Mary Daly suggests, if we love her freedom and we love our own, then as we work through our pains and anger with each other, and especially the way we hurt each other, we will maintain honesty and humor, encourage autonomy and integrity, develop intimacy and establish trust. (Whew!)

AFTERWORD

This material, obviously, comes out of my own experience and observation. And I am aware that the descriptions do not apply to all wimmin. Nevertheless the material does seem to have general application. And I think the mechanisms set up under the rule of the fathers affect many of us in one way or another, though we live in quite different circumstances, even if just by providing traps we can fall into.

One very sensitive and very complex area I would like to develop or see developed is the effects of using vulnerability as a strategy when confronting questions of classism or racism and when articulating political differences within the Lesbian community. I would also like to explore the immediate implications of using alternatives to vulnerability for hearing anger between Lesbians of different races and of different classes.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this discussion appears in *The Lesbian Inciter,* 2. I am grateful to the many Lesbians who have heard and responded to various versions of this paper, especially Lesbians in Minneapolis, Lincoln, Iowa City, Chicago, and New York. Particular thanks go to Deidre McCalla, Llena de la Madrugada, Judy Seale, Karen Dodson, Lucy Burke, Kate Burke, Ann Jones, Phyllis Bere, and Sally Gearhart. None of them, of course, is responsible for the content of this paper.

2. See Julia Stanley (Penelope), "Lesbian Relationships and the Vision of Community," *Feminary,* IX, 1 (Spring, 1978).

3. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), and *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

4. See "Femininity, Resistance, and Sabotage," Sarah Lucia Hoagland, forthcoming, in an anthology on masculinity and femininity edited by Mary Vetterling-Braggin (Littlefield, Adams).

5. *The Coming Out Stories,* edited by Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1980).

6. Adrienne Rich, *Women and Honor* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Motheroot Publications, 1977).

7. She will affirm his male supremacy as long as he affirms her exceptionality.

8. This argument and the one below on the question of sadomasochism appear in my paper "Sadism, Masochism, and Lesbian Feminism."

9. Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sinister Wisdom,* 6 (Summer, 1978), reprinted in *The Cancer Journals* (Argyle, N.Y.: Spinsters Ink, 1980).

10. Deborah Snow suggested this point to me in conversation, Spring, 1980.

11. The one exception to this seems to be when we are acting in someone else's name.

12. Sally Gearhart, *The Wanderground* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1978), pp. 4-6.

13. Spring, 1980.

14. The phrase "short-cut through another's personality" comes from Adrienne Rich, *Women and Honor,* op. cit.

15. I explore various ways we assume control over each other, for example in confusing support with approval, in another section of the Lesbian ethics manuscript. However I wish to point out here that I include in this even taking over for another womon in order to help or protect her, or letting her take over to help or protect me.

Rebecca Gordon

BY HER HANDS

What, you didn't ask this morning,
will happen to us
if my hands grow too
stiff, too weak to love you?

I shook but did not speak, afraid
to break the seal
your courage left intact
though words paced
restless in my chest:

We shall have still
a multitude of lips between us
and the will.

In quiet I remembered
with whatever skill she loves
a carpenter lives
by her hands.

Later we shop. I watch you
choose a cup
a sister's birthday gift,

swift stung
grab your hands, kiss
at your knuckles
bent around the belly
of the cup they hold,
red and cold

a kiss for luck
a kiss for suppleness as if
to suck this stiffness out
through the fingertips.

Now outside the toilet stall
I lean easy, musing
on the dear small sounds of you

a moment later, hear the crack,
a sharp report through paper.
The cup. My breath fails
Under the door your red hands
reach for the sack. It
swings sad between your feet.
clinking like a bag of nails.

You emerge, your face
suffused with effort of
resisting private tears
in this public place.

I recall the grace of your hands,
seabirds flirting in caves
my morning estuaries, ruddy
with the taste of salt and sand

remember too
however she may love
a carpenter lives
by her hands,

and find my gift of language silenced
rudely by your pain.

What speech, what spells
what revolution
can make this moment whole again?

Michelle Cliff

MAKING SOUL, CREATING ALCHEMY

A review of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. Published by Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. 261 pp. $8.95.

This Bridge Called My Back stretches across the lives and histories of women of color—Afro-American, Asian American, Latina, and Native American; spans objectification and oppression, stereotype and otherness, racism and assimilation; crosses through reality, dream, myth, memory into vision, politics, revolution. So much is here in this book, for myself, for other readers, that it is difficult to begin—or at least, to know where. Much of the work in *This Bridge* departs from the past, in the lives of ancestors, mothers, grandmothers, foresisters—

> *I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother*
> *speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth*
> *the wide-arched muzzle of brown women*
> (Cherríe Moraga, "For the Color of My Mother")

> What a shame not to speak Blackfoot. It was my mother's first language—she'd talk it over the phone long distance—she'd speak it when she went home (the Blood reserve in Southern Alberta) she even spoke it in my dreams but I never learned. All that talking denied me.
> (Anita Valerio, "It's in My Blood, My Face—My Mother's Voice, the Way I Sweat")

> Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. . . . She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puertoricanless neighborhoods.
> (Aurora Levins Morales, "'And Even Fidel Can't Change That!'")

"Speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth"—I think of my own mother; "my mother's first language": again I think of my mother—her patois, her speaking to family only in this tongue; people asking her when we went shopping in New York—"What is your accent? It's so musical!" And her anger at being asked, and her shame also. Much later in my life, she told me she had a constant ringing in her ears from

an early age, which makes it hard to hear herself speak. And she can also "pass" and has done so. But she has never lost her accent.

The silence of my colored mother has haunted me. At first I took it upon myself to learn the oppressor's language thoroughly. Then I (or perhaps this was simultaneous) took her silence into myself and did not speak or write in any real way. Now I realize my language is my own—whichever I choose to use, however I choose to use it—but that it comes from a past connected to my mother's past.

For me, Merle Woo's "Letter to Ma" made other connections.

> When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a ten-year-old Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as a maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self-contempt. . . . For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into self-contempt, passivity, and despair.

The realities of self-contempt are known to all of us who grew up "different" in this society. We have seen it as a force in the lives of those around us, have felt its power within ourselves. The task is to recognize this force, to outwit it, but always to be aware of its presence and the purpose it serves the dominators, the colonizers, the oppressors. The degree to which a woman has internalized the culture's contempt for her difference can vary according to the degree she is the other. But just as it is dangerous to hierarchize oppressions, so is it dangerous to assume that women of color, lesbians of color are in some way more in thrall to self-contempt than are white women, white lesbians. I have known white lesbians in my life so mired in self-hatred that it is almost impossible for them to move. Merle Woo makes the important point that

> Racism is an essential part of the status quo, power*ful*, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear that there are no exceptions [i.e., among white women]?

Because racism *is* connected to power, it may allow the white woman who is different (that is, possessed of a difference more than the difference of being female in a white-male dominated world) a connection to

power that the woman of color will never have. And although the white woman may appear to be filled (awash, even) with professed guilt about her own racism, by her inaction she is accepting the power and privilege which come with racism. The woman of color is free of this connection to the dominant culture, unless of course she chooses to pass (and I mean passing not only in the sense of skin-color, but in accepting the dominant culture's condemnation of all difference, including her own). With each level of difference in identity, a woman is removed from the possibility of buying into the dominant culture; the task is to transform this removal into power.

This Bridge Called My Back connects women of color across racial, sexual, class, ethnic identifications. It connects women to each other and it connects ideas to each other. But the writings in this book are always aware of the divisions forged between women of color from varying backgrounds and heritages, and the writers respect the history of these divisions while at the same time they move to mend them.

> Mirtha Quintanales, "I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance" (letter to Barbara Smith):
>
> The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing. . . . How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies": race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of *class* and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.
>
> . . . I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the "white woman"—especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges—regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American "White Trash" and destitute.

These words of Mirtha Quintanales spoke in a particular way to me. I too am a white-looking Caribbean woman, immigrant to the United States. Her essay brought back many memories, many observations. One of the consequences of being colonized is that you are told, in both overt and subtle ways, that you must speak in the language of your oppressor, or else your speech is not *real*—it is dialect, patois, pidgin English. Just as you are trained in the language, so are you trained in his ideas: a package deal. In the school I attended in Jamaica, where I was taught by assimi-

lated Jamaicans and white Englishwomen, one of the primary focuses of the teachers was to erase our accents, to correct our speech. Another was to teach us only the history, literature, religion of our "mother" country. I remember when I was twelve or eleven and chose for my foreign language Spanish rather than French; I explained to the headmistress that I thought it would be more useful in that part of the world to know Spanish–and she laughed. I have other memories of that school: one being that those of us with the lightest skin were singled out for the most intensive acculturation, and made to believe that this was some sort of honor, while the darker girls were encouraged in the high jump, broad jump, hundred-yard dash. This all now seems so simple, so incredibly *blatant*, but the effects were not so–they were (and are) complex and subtle and far-reaching.

The writers of *This Bridge Called My Back* are committed to a lifework which is radical. They have a patience informed with anger, a passion informed with consciousness–both necessary to see the revolution through. The writers also realize the complexity of any movement of liberation; that past, present, and future must all be respected, integrated, and known:

> Barbara Cameron, "Gee, You Don't Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation":
>
> I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy balance to maintain. Sometimes some of us are not so successful with it. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate.
>
> *When I was about 20, I dreamt of myself at the age of 25-26, standing at a place on my reservation, looking to the North, watching a glorious, many-colored horse galloping toward me from the sky. My eyes were riveted and attracted to the beauty and overwhelming strength of the horse. The horse's eyes were staring directly into mine, hypnotizing me and holding my attention. Slowly from the East, an eagle was gliding toward the horse. My attention began to be drawn toward the calm of the eagle but I still did not want to lose sight of the horse. Finally the two met with the eagle sailing into the horse causing it to disintegrate. The eagle flew gently on.*
>
> I take this prophetic dream as an analogy of my balance between the white (horse) and Indian (eagle) world. Now that I am 26, I find that I've gone as far into my exploration of the white world as I want. It doesn't mean that I'm going to run off to live in a tipi. It simply means that I'm not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those who are not bastards of the Pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.

This Bridge Called My Back is divided into six parts: Children Passing in the Streets: The Roots of Our Radicalism; Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh; And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You: Racism in the Women's Movement; Between the Lines: On Culture, Class,

and Homophobia; Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer; and El Mundo Zurdo: The Vision. Each of these sections is preceded by a vivid portrayal of women of color by the artist Johnetta Tinker, whose artwork is also on the cover of the book. Tinker's illustrations are for me the best kind of women's art: for example, her portrait of a black woman at a bus stop writing in a notebook, which precedes Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer, brings to mind the probable reality that this woman is coming from work/or going to work, that the bus may come along and interrupt the flow of her words, that the bus may be late and she may have to stop writing and worry if she will be late for work/ or late picking up her kids after school or daycare, etc. Each part is also prefaced by an introduction, the first four written by Cherríe Moraga, the last two by Gloria Anzaldúa. These essays, and the general introduction and preface, set out the purpose of *This Bridge,* design the context, combine the parts of the book into a whole:

> Cherríe Moraga, introduction to Part 2:
>
> A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience.
>
> We are the colored in a white feminist movement.
> We are the feminists among the people of our culture.
> We are often the lesbians among the straight.
> We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

There is also in *This Bridge* a foreword by Toni Cade Bambara. Bambara points out in her essay a theme, a *fact,* carried through the writings in this book:

> For though the initial motive of several siter/riters here may have been to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supercede their invitations to coalesce on their terms . . . the process of examining that would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks . . .
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | and a new connection: | US |
> | a new set of recognitions: | US |
> | a new site of accountability: | US |
> | a new source of power: | US |

In *Sinister Wisdom* #18, Joanna Russ talks about Harriet Tubman, and her portrayal by Cicely Tyson, as a woman motivated by herself, essentially for herself. A selfishness, a placing of the self first in her priorities, is something a woman of color is not supposed to have, or to do. I am talking here of a specific selfishness, one which demands a moral commitment to the self, not the superficial and comfortable self-involvement of the so-called me generation. I am talking about a selfishness hard-won

against those forces always denying that self importance. The self-worth which will proceed from this selfishness will allow the woman in possession of it the power to connect within herself, to others.

> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers":
>
> The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think of as "other"–the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered "normal," white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive.

This Bridge Called My Back is essential to my existence: as I try to make soul, create alchemy. As I try to connect parts of myself within myself and stretch to meet other women of color. In St. Croix last March I met another Jamaican woman–a woman darker than myself. We were both of the same class. We had attended similar girls' schools–were taught by similar women. We compared our lives across anger. She has not returned to the island for some years, neither have I. She told me about a specific incident when she was twelve. The school was having an essay contest and she submitted her essay to the (English) headmistress; it was returned to her and she was told that a lighter-skinned student had been chosen to represent their age group in the contest. Of course it was not said in those words. She took it upon herself to submit her essay surreptitiously. And she won. She said that this incident–this victory–was the only event in her school life in Jamaica which had aided her survival. And I could understand that. And I was also aware that my essay might have been the "official" entry. But I also remembered that when I returned to the United States I was left back a year because the school principal attested that Jamaican schools were substandard.

This Bridge Called My Back is written with power and beauty, courage and complexity. I can only hope that women make use of this book: as a tool; as a catalyst to create more work by women of color; as a source of knowledge and ideas; as a catalyst for white women committed to anti-racism; as a source of energy. I want this book in the world.

Beth Brant

LETTER

10/6/81

Dear Michelle,

It was so sad not to see you at the Women in Print conference. Your voice was missed by me and many others. Do get well soon. I'm sure the healing process is a long one, especially healing the spirit that has taken such a trouncing. But of course, you are a life-lover, and will come back, stronger than before. Denise and I are thinking of you and send healing energies and thoughts.

The conference was filled with emotional roller coasters for me. Coming by myself was a difficult thing to do. I am so shy and filled with imaginary terrors about so many things. First off, to know that there were other women of color, but how to introduce myself; how to let them know that the woman with the light skin and the eager look on her face, wanted to align herself with them, wanted them to know "it's in my blood, it's in the way I sweat." Would they accept me? Would I feel the community I hunger and dream about?

That night I stood and introduced myself as a Mohawk/white/half-breed. I am shaking inside. Denise is not there to hold my hand. My father, my Grandmother are not there to prove what I say—yes, I come from a dark-skinned people whose eyes are black and deep. I am a sport, a mutant within my family. Do these women believe who I am? Why do I care if white women believe me?

The next day Cherríe and Gloria and Mirtha and Juanita give a workshop on Third World Women writers. Gloria talks about La Malinche and the fear of every Chicana woman of betraying her people. I understand this betrayal. Every time I pick up my pen, that fear stops me, makes me water down my words, makes me hold back the power. I am so afraid of telling the secrets that are locked inside. The secrets of my family, the secrets of my people, and, yes, the secrets of myself; how I feel about being the light one, the pampered one, the "favorite" one. Must I face the fact that part of the reason I was favored by my Grandpa was because of my blonde hair, my blue eyes? That tiny, dark man who taught me Mohawk, who told me ancient stories, called me "our masterpiece," and it is time I knew that for him, for Grandma, there was a satisfaction in knowing I would never be hassled like they were, never be called "nigger." The betrayal *they* must have felt is more than I can imagine.

After the workshop I went to introduce myself to Cherríe. We cried in each other's arms. La Guëra standing face to face. Gloria came over and wept with us. I feel so alone, Michelle!! Always I carry this loneliness around me, like a shawl. It covers me and protects me also. For a few

moments, the shawl was thrown off and I was revealed as a woman of color to my sisters. There were no questions asked. I was not interrogated like white women do to me. I was me, Beth Brant, a woman who identifies with who I am. Forty years of tears were being shed in the circle of protective sisters. They invited me to a party that night. For the rest of the day I fought with myself inside. Do they really like me? Will they think I am cashing in emotionally on what seems sometimes to be a "trend" in our movement? Racism–anti-racism. It's on every woman's lips. Is it in every woman's heart? I wonder, I wonder. I had a talk with a Black woman who told me her daughter would be so happy to look like me. This I know. My skin that sets me apart from my own, has given me assumptive privilege. Of course, this privilege can always be taken away, be smashed. My father worked in a factory. During the organizing of the union, how many times was he beaten? How many times did the goons choose him for his *dark skin?* We know the answer, don't we? I guess this is how I feel. My skin has been the tool with which I have beaten myself. It has been the weapon that has separated me from my own and from other women. I dare not trust! For, who is liking me because they think I am white, like them? Who is mistrusting me, because they think I am white, unlike them? A lot of colored women were using the word schizophrenia. This is true. I know you feel it too, Michelle. It's not just a matter of living *in* two worlds. It's knowing we *can* and *have* adjusted to the world we hate. The white world, filled with white people who hate us, who want us to leave things alone. Pass for white, pass for hetero; don't be different, don't identify with our own kind, don't speak about racism *from the heart.* Leave it in the air, as a subject or topic to use when things get dull. Leave it to float from space to space, never filling the imagination with power or anger. I weep as I write this. I am frightened by what is not said or felt in this movement we align ourselves with. But, of course, I can't imagine it being otherwise. Feminism is my hope, our hope. There is no other way to see the truth, than through feminist eyes.

I went to the party. It was silly and fun and real. I wore my beaded turtle, as if it were an amulet. Also I know I wear it as a sign–see me. I am an Indian woman, I am one of you. (Or, I am *not* one of you, in the case of white women.) The feeling of being in the room with Latinas, Black women, as a belonger, not an outsider. It was good, Michelle. The loneliness subsided. I went back to my own room at 2:00 in the morning and cried again. I have shed so many tears this past weekend! Perhaps I feel the salt water will wash me clean and brave. My Tarot cards always come up with the Strength card. It is a bridging card. Bridging soul and body. I have never felt comfortable with it, but now I think about it, laying in bed, not sleeping.

The next day, a workshop that opens the conference up. Mab and Cris from *Feminary,* talking heartfully about being Southern white women, what that means in their quest for anti-racism in their lives. I was

very moved by Mab. She spoke about there being no Indians in the South because we were either killed or driven west. Hattie was on the panel and spoke of her sisterhood with working-class women, her expectations from working-class women. I'm sure Adrienne filled you in on the details of what was said. When the unfortunate woman from the bookstore began her rap, it was apparent to me it was going to be horrible. I prayed for her to shut up. The things she said! Oh God, how many times have we sat and listened to it? –"You should," "they," "women of color need to know they're not invisible," "racism is a *problem* that should be dealt with." How many times have *we* said the same things, in our light skin? My shame for her was mingled with my shame for myself. I was sitting with the colored contingent. We were rude, talking and whispering and giggling. At one point we thought of walking out en masse.

It was so difficult to speak up. At last some white women asked her for clarification and not to speak in such generalities. Michelle, it was obvious something was going to happen. A Latina woman stood up and said, "We don't want your separate bookshelves, we don't want your pictures of us hanging in your windows, and don't defend yourself because we don't want to hear it." My heart was beating, thumping. Tears were forming in my eyes again and again. D.J. asked the white woman how could she be sure that the "handful" of colored women who visited her bookstore were the only ones. "Look at the women in this row. We are all different, all colors, all shades. Don't be too sure that the woman you think is white, is not really colored." More tears, more burning in the throat. Woman after woman, standing up and speaking. White women *not* apologizing, for once. White women giving support to the woman on the panel, while addressing her racism. Something new. I want to speak but my tongue is tied. I want to tell the white women in the room about my father's graduation from college. The first one, you know? It was a big event. Relatives from Canada coming. Old Indian men in rusty suits with incredibly starched collars and cuffs on their white shirts. Old Indian women in print rayon dresses, wearing black oxfords and heavy cotton stockings. Hats on their heads. Small straw pillboxes with veils.

We arrive at the auditorium. I am thirteen years old, embarrassed by everything and everyone, as usual. We are a different looking lot. I imagine everyone's eyes are on us, this obviously Indian-looking family. But I am so proud of my father, too. I am at war with myself, as usual! My father goes to get his cap and gown–he comes back empty-handed. There has been a fuck-up. Guess who doesn't get his robe? I am panic-struck, I start to cry. I am afraid my father will "stick out" from the rest. I am afraid he is crying inside. But my family!! They nod and go on with sitting down. *They expected no more than what they got!!* and it was this I wanted to tell the white women in the room; we never expect more than the racist, offhand treatment we get. This is a given to us! They wanted my father to be the fool, the outsider. I told this story once to a white woman friend of mine–"an unfortunate incident," she said. We don't

believe it. Nothing is ever a mistake, or unfortunate to us. It is the way things are. As my father moved up the aisle in his suit, his dignity and strength was a present to me. As he walked on stage to accept his diploma, I thought my heart would encompass the whole room. I feel the same today. My aunts and uncles sat in their chairs nodding their heads, occasionally wiping an eye. Another place, another time, we would have beat the drum and danced an honor dance. The singers would have sung of his bravery in the face of the enemy.

This is what I wanted to tell the white women. In spite of you, we exist, we burn brightly. But the time has come when we have to make the flames together. There is no hope other than our movement, and it must be *our* movement, all of us, all kinds of us, all colors of us. Michelle, I felt that most of the women in that room understood. It was different. Gone was the indulgent, prostituting kind of guilt and defensiveness that usually comes from white women. Gone was the "listen to my story, I'll tell you how horrible my life is, how oppressed I am above all others" that has come from us colored women in response to white women's racism. That sticking in the knife, twisting it. I know I have enjoyed using my knife in the past. I can no longer enjoy such a useless endeavor. I thought of my Grandma and the many times I betrayed her in the name of normality, whiteness. My shame, my shame of my people. Our Indianness, our darkness, our ways. And my shame at my lightness, my eyes that shine out blue, my hair that is brown and thin. My shame at my quietness even now. I write the words, the secrets, but can't force them from my throat except in very small groups of women, and sometimes not even to them. I know this is part of my culture. We Indians do not speak easily to people we don't know. The fear—don't trust, don't trust. But we have to, don't we?

I feel so much a part of you and your life. When I think of women like you, Cherrie, Mirtha, I know I am not alone in the isolation that white skin has put me in. I do feel crazy sometimes. I almost feel I am proving to myself as well as others, as if others sit in judgment and are watching for mistakes. I am the greatest judge of myself. I torture myself with shoulds and shouldn'ts. The calm times are becoming fewer and fewer. So much to do. Is time running out? Do you feel this? These are bad times we live in. Fascist times, scary times. It becomes more and more important to give ourselves the names. To call ourselves what we are, and who we are.

We can grow from such encounters, such as the one last weekend. It means responsibility, faith, and true hearts. Last night, Denise read my Tarot again—and once again the Strength card looked out at me. And the Death card and the Magician. So many signs pointing to change, to ways of channeling power inward and outward simultaneously.

I feel that way as a lesbian/feminist who is a Third World woman. So many don'ts crowded into those descriptions. So much power concentrated in those descriptions. I long for changes and never knew I could

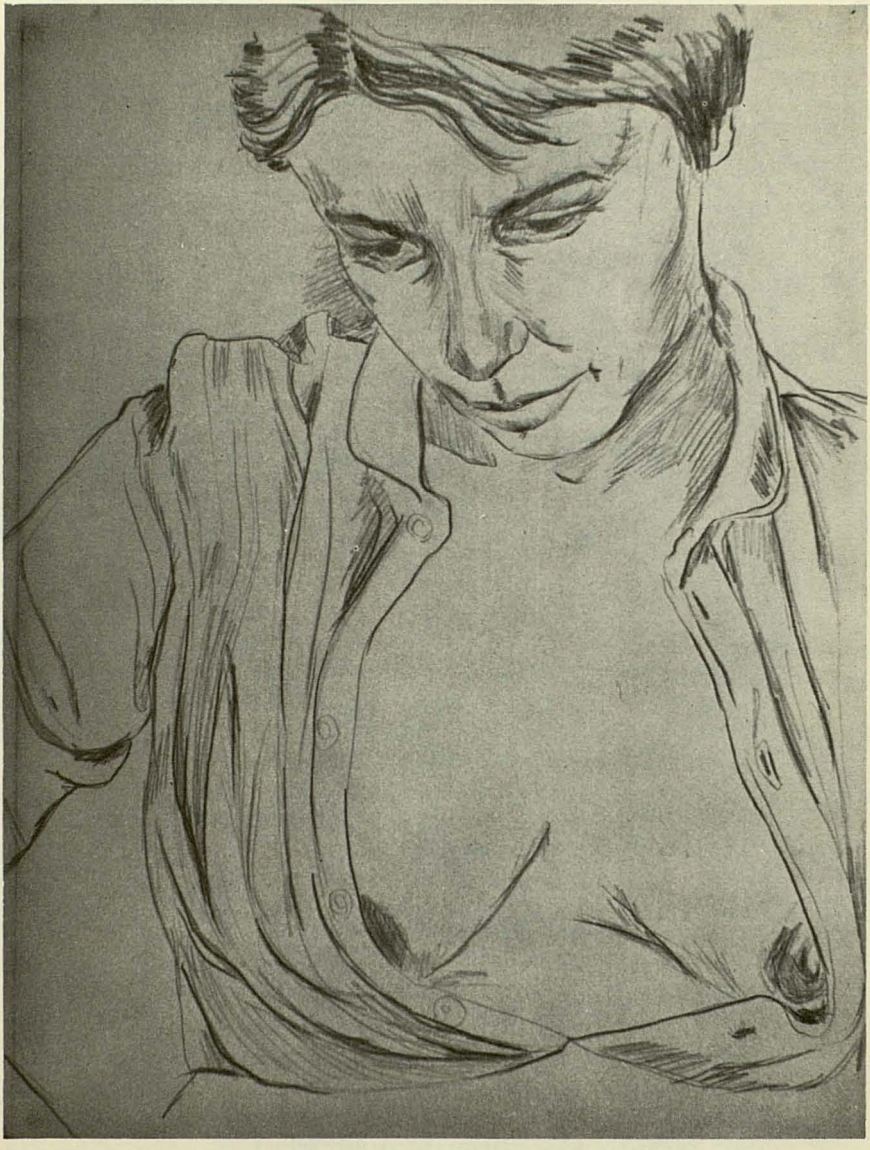
be a means to a way to that change. To know this is an awesome feeling. To dare to take this thing on–Racism.

Dearest friend, this letter has been long, you must be tired. I look forward to seeing you soon.

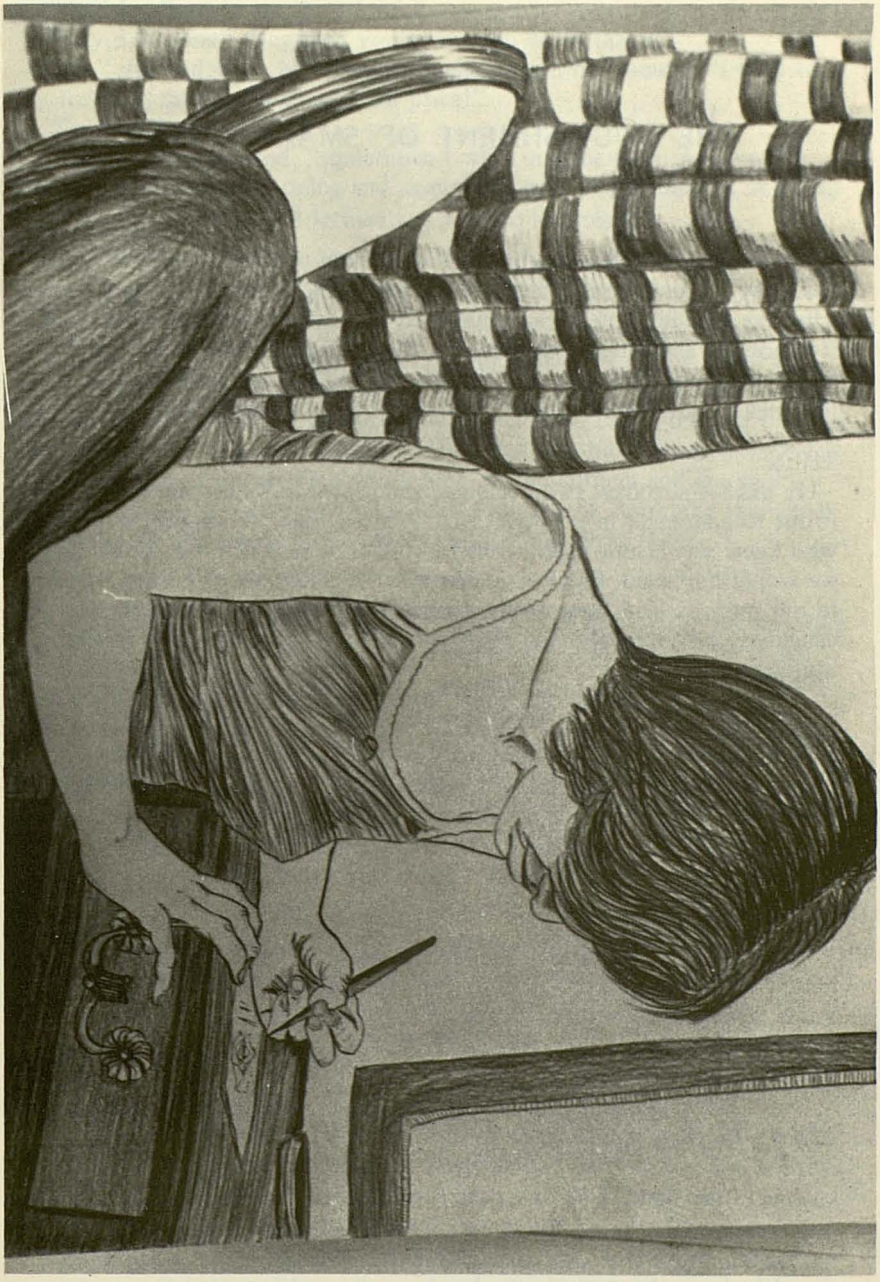
Sisterhood and Love

Beth

Diane Ayott, "Self-Portrait." Pencil, 1980.



Diane Ayott, "Nadine." Pencil, 1980.



Diane Ayott, "Self-Portrait, N.Y. Hotel." Pencil, 1980.

wendy stevens

THE NOURISHMENT OF SMALL THINGS

There are many things which we keep from one another—they are not lies, they are omissions. These are the gaps which haunt us at moments when we wonder why we are unable to share them with someone. Perhaps it is not the event that stalks us, but the confusing knowledge that this is not something you can tell. You should tell no one about this. It is like making love, like being adopted, like being working-class—

THEN:

It was a sharp day, two years ago this October. I have never blurted it out to a stranger in a bar. At first I feared that the only other person who knew would not regard it as forbidden or sacred. I was afraid that we would be found, like young arsons, with hundreds of burned matches in our pockets, and they would explain my carelessness as a desire to get caught. I carry this with the same joy that I carry bombs into government buildings in dreams.

You're expecting that it's going to be something dirty like "single girl picks up man in stairwell." That's all you can figure that a woman would want to keep to herself. You think I was raped and am ashamed. No, I would probably be accused of "manslaughter" before he got accused of rape and it would make the local section of the paper "rapist stabbed to death by 31-year-old woman" (read that: crazy white woman)

Anyway, that's not the story I am trying to tell you.

BEFORE THEN:

Frequently, I would take my dog to work. She would spend the day dozing near the stool in the bookstore and then sometimes on the way home from work I would run some blocks with her and we would arrive home breathy and hungry and hotcold sweaty, like animals in a damp jungle of our own.

After crossing the avenue, I would get close enough to my apartment so that the faces would begin to look familiar. Sometimes at the bus stop on the corner, the woman from the luncheonette would stand with change in her hand. I had bumped into her one day. She had been sitting on a bench which faced the street, chewing a wrapped-up sandwich with her mouth wide-open. Too naturally I turned away, but it was the first time I had seen her outside the luncheonette and I wanted to say more than hello.

"Even eating their food on your day off?" I kidded.

"No, I hardly ever eat their food."

"Why not? Don't they feed you when you work there?"

"No," she said, with bits of tuna hanging from her mouth. "I have to pay for everything I eat there. Full price!"

"Do you live near here?"

"Not far," she offered, "sometimes I walk on nice days. And you?" she quizzed, her jaw dropping and showing a mass of mayonnaise and tuna and egg and rye bread and lettuce and tomato and pickle.

"Not far."

REALIZING NOW:

I do these things. I stop on the street to talk with people to counterbalance the city. Sometimes, I forget, I walk brisk and bitchy down the streets and each time someone passes, especially a man, I grab the cement with my eyes, like Kindre, my dog–hiding her head under the bed thinking that she can't be seen, if she can't see me. But, the men still stop midsentence when I pass by them, convening on the corners and stoops like tollbooths. I pay my way and sometimes I stare back, watching them suck me up, wondering which one of their clan has me every night.

THEN:

I passed the woman from the luncheonette that night. Still not knowing her name, I nodded. She waved with a closed fist, her bus change in her hand. It was an October evening and just beginning to get dark. I stopped to buy some crackers to nibble on the way home. The older man who stocked the shelves was still into this thing of asking me to go out with him. It frightened me because I got the feeling that he was serious. I didn't understand. He was about thirty years older than me and that day while I reached to get the crackers off the shelf, he came along and kissed me on the neck.

BEFORE REALIZING:

It is not your grandfather kissing you on the neck–he is a man, a stranger. You have no allegiance to him. He is Susan's neighbor in the third grade who showed himself to you as you walked past his house each day. We wouldn't tell anyone because he was Susan's neighbor and what if your father did the same thing to little girls as they walked past your house when you weren't home. I mean, besides the fact that he pressed his penis to the window on lunch hours, he was a good man and, of course, Susan's neighbor and perhaps someone's father and someone's grandfather. No one knew but Susan and I and perhaps the hundreds of other small girls who passed by the house and told no one.

THEN:

I continued to walk home that night with Kindre. The night seemed lit by fluorescent bulbs, like the evening before a snowfall. It was a clear night, where buildings and trees take on new edges.

BEFORE THEN:

A few weeks before I had gone to the ocean alone. There was a light rain and the heavy clouds were getting dark with nightfall. It was an etching done only in greys and I was a lone pink figure stripping myself of my clothing and then slowly making my way into a wild, excited ocean. I bravely walked in, as if being taken by an old friend, not a new lover. I held my hands over my belly and loosened myself to the chill. Before I make love I am like this–always afraid that I will not be able to be taken by the moment, always afraid that a greater sense of something will come along and grab me before these few delicious minutes. But I fell into the ocean, cold as it was, without question. My body was suddenly charged with energy. I laughed and breathed and swam all at once, wondering how I could possibly grasp a breath between strokes; I continued to swim. At some point, I realized that I had no intention of turning back. Turning back meant lists and going to the bank and getting up each morning with only a few duplications of the intensity of this moment spread through the mundane–a teasing of sweet butter with the margarine. I wanted to keep swimming. I didn't want to end my life, I just wanted to keep this motion. But no one would understand if I gave myself to the ocean this time. I turned around and slowly swam in. I was a child coming home late, knowing I would be beaten.

THEN:

Sitting on a low brick wall as I turned the next corner was Mya. She was tossing a ball into the air and letting it bounce, then trying to catch it. Kindre became fascinated by the game and ran over to the wall before I had fully turned onto the street. Mya knew Kindre and threw the ball across the lawn for her.

"Does Kindre always bring the ball back?" Mya asked me.

"Yes, almost always."

"How did you teach her to do that?"

"I'm not exactly sure, I guess she figured out that if she wanted me to throw it again she had to bring it back."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Work."

"Work at the bookstore?"

"Yeah, I still work there. Did I tell you I worked there?"

"Don't you 'member the day you were walking home with that book and you sat and showed me the pictures?"

"Oh."

"What are you eating?"

"Crackers, wheat thins, would you like one?"

"Sure, can Kindre have one too?"

"Okay, but not too many."

She held the small cracker out to Kindre and then let Kindre lick the salt off her fingers. Mya kissed Kindre's nose and turned to me for a

handful of crackers. I looked at her small feet dangling over the sides of the wall and the blue jeans that were swaying above her ankles, too short for her long, stretched legs. Her tee shirt read: sometimes it is difficult for a woman to make herself heard.

"Who bought you that tee shirt?"

"My Aunt Jean got it for me and another one too."

Then she held out her cupped hands for some more wheat thins.

"Are you really that hungry?"

She nodded.

"Well then why don't you just come home with Kindre and me and we'll fix some dinner?"

We sped down the street like hikers in the desert.

BEFORE REALIZING:

There is an apprehension which comes with the end of afternoon. As a child it was the time when I felt most alone. It was that time toward evening which most reminded me that I was captive. Each night I had no choice but to return to my parents' house. I was an obscene library book that everyone wished would fail to show up in the return slot one night.

I wished and dreamed that someone would come along and, realizing what my parents were doing to me, take me away with them. I knew this couldn't happen. I was my parents' child and theirs to do with as they wished. I was maintained because well-to-do families did not go around farming out their children.

As the street lights went on, I felt lost in my own house. I wandered from room to room bolstering my breath enough to begin a sentence, only to be told to tell it to someone else. Tell it to the ice that has formed on the driveway, tell it to the leaves that have collected on the lawn, tell it to your father and my father would listen like the ice on the driveway and my tears, which came with his silence, refused to show my pain until I returned to my room and dug my teeth into the pillow.

Late nights were filled with dreams of escape, dreams of being old enough to leave. I would go to houses filled with warm people and be asked to stay. No one would notice that I was missing. I would pack my bags and read by flashlight under the covers, journeying with Clara Barton, Helen Keller, and Madame Curie.

I am no one's child. No one can cover up this pain. You have made me need you. No one else is allowed to give me the ache and nothingness you bestow on me. Wrapped in my bedspread, perhaps in the warmth of my own urine, I imagine myself held. I imagine holding someone who does not begin to walk away while I am still hanging on, someone who does not quickly release me when they hear someone coming as if I were fucking their husband.

THEN:

We chattered the rest of the way home.

"What would you like to eat?"

"What can I have?"

"Let's see, we can have grilled cheese sandwiches and soup, or eggs or fruit and yogurt."

We agreed on grilled cheese. I asked her what she was doing in school. I asked her if she had many dinner invitations like this one.

"No," she said. "This is special. We are buddies, you and me and Kindre."

NOW REALIZING:

We were children and friends and lovers. Looking back, I do not understand. The invitation had jumped from my mouth before I even knew I was thinking it.

BEFORE REALIZING:

It was a picnic lunch with a stranger. It was an older woman hugging me because she had no one left to hug. It was secretly feeding all the stray animals near the house and bringing home injured birds in shoe boxes.

When I was eleven, I met a monk who lived in the monastery up the hill from my house. My parents wanted me to have nothing to do with him and so once a week we met secretly in a field near my house, by a stone wall. We would sit on the wall and he would teach me Spanish, slowly saying foreign words to me and then opening his small book to show me the way they looked on the page. It was as if it were an ancient religion. He was a pious man in every way. He was thin with white silver hair and his voice wove its way out of him. I hoped that someday he would not hump all my trust away on the soft dirt by the wall. One day he did not appear; I waited until it got dark, thinking that perhaps I had transmitted those fears to him and that I had insulted our silent reverence. I was deserted. I dreamed that night that he had died and so the next day, I skipped school and hiked up the hill to the brown carved building, only to find all the monks in silent mourning. I asked if I could join them for a moment to talk with my friend for one last time. They shook their heads; no women were allowed inside.

THEN:

With grilled cheese sandwiches fixed we sat down next to each other at the table. Kindre curled up under Mya's chair, knowing that she would be the more likely of us to slip bits of melted cheese and whole wheat bread under the table.

"Are all these books yours?"

"Yes, in a way it's silly for me to work in a bookstore. I wind up owing them more money than they pay me. But I love being around books all day. Sometimes they are better friends than people."

"Do you live here all alone?"

"Just Kindre and me."

"Where is your mother and your father?"

"They are both dead."

"How come?"

"Last year they were killed when a train hit their car. They were stuck on the tracks and suddenly a train appeared and before they could do anything it hit them."

"Do you miss them?"

BEFORE THEN:

and the whistle as it screamed down the tracks and turning your head to know that it is yelling at you–i am going to hit you–i am death –you must fear me and there is no time to say yes i am afraid yes you are more powerful when we meet on these terms I relent. give me a moment sir and I will move out of the way–there there sir now you may pass as you please i have always known your power but never this close and now i have felt your steel i will never be the same

hit by a train how short death must be at that instant you are aware that you are dying being dragged down the tracks like another railroad car or a busted roadblock unable to withstand the momentum. driving through ohio expecting to live and the railroad tracks will always be a cemetery the crossing the markers railroad tracks will always be tombstones and the whistles a cry of anger

the child you drove crazy mourns you she is sorry you took so much energy to scar her and when the bandages were taken off the wounds guilt oozed rampant from closed sores still–I didn't know you very well you were only the faces behind the hurt

at first you were the reason i decided to never have children of my own –put to an early grave as most children are i refused to pass on to another generation your ugly work–until I can clean up this splatter i refuse to carry on in your shadows.

THEN:

"Would you like to hear a story?" I asked after dinner. "I love reading stories, would you help me read one?"

"Sure, what stories do you have? Do you have a television too?"

And in the silent part of the evening, the part of the night when the whole world with families of their own come together again and eat dinner and bicker and wash dishes and don't think that there is anyone anywhere not doing that. No one in the world without daughter or son, mother or father–Myra and I sat on the floor and looked through my books until we found one that we wanted to share. Her fingers and eyes were flashing. I warmed some milk on the stove, made hot cocoa and we began to read.

By the time the story ended Mya was asleep with her head resting on my thigh. Her breathing was shallow and her small body was stretched out loosely along the rug. I lifted her from the floor and brought her over to my bed. I pushed a pillow under her head and untied her sneakers. I

laid down next to her and began to read until I, too, drifted.

NOW:

I did not want you to be mine Mya. I wanted to share you. I wanted to share a child in a world that does not go halvsy on children. In a time when having a child is still a weight that each woman must carry separately—I cannot take that burden.

THEN:

I woke up a few hours later, a book tucked under me and Mya on one side of me and Kindre on the other. The scene was deliciously close to sleep. I looked at the time and shook Mya.

"Mya, Mya wake up. You must go home."

"No, what?" she mumbled.

"Go home, but let's not tell anyone that you came here for dinner tonight. I don't think they'd understand, do you?"

"Oh, hi," she smiled as she became alert. "What shall I tell my mother?"

"Tell her that you took a walk and got very lost and was tired and fell asleep and then someone found you who showed you the way home. Tell her that you are fine and that you will never do it again. Okay?"

"I was lost. Then I fell asleep and some nice person took me home. Have I been gone long? What I'm saying really isn't not true. I mean, some nice person really did find me."

I zipped her jacket and walked her to the corner that we had met at that afternoon. I hugged her and she kissed Kindre and me.

"This will be our secret?" she asked. "Kindre and you are my special friends."

"Special like the ocean."

NOW REALIZING:

I told no one for two years. I kept it to myself like a murder. But it was no crime. I stopped and talked with Mya many times after that night but we rarely mentioned it. I asked her once and she swore she had told no one and that her mother had just put her to bed quickly that night.

I must tell someone. I refuse to remain silent. For one night I defied all the voices that harbor children in safe living rooms and pain-filled kitchens; I must defy all the voices which tell me to stay hushed and make my special moments criminals.

ALL ABOUT EVE

These sad, star-broken eyes
come down on
jagged fingers.
We are always
sticking our hands in dirt;
grasping, clawing,
the mustiness slithers up
into the joints.
A must of water-logged leaves:
the insistence of rusty wood bark.
Those clutched dreams
hang like milky tits
between our fingers.
I squeeze them,
as Adam squeezed knowledge out of Eve.
And the runny milk falls
with the caked mud
under my fingernails;
I scrape the sludge out,
scratching for a secret.

There is nothing pure.
All lives have
god's dust
blown across their patterns.
Crystal clear sight,
extreme cleanliness,
are a sand-stripped
skull, rotting,
bleaching, blanching,
reflecting voids.
Better to slide one's belly
along the
raw roots of earth;
like a serpent,
muddying a scaly oilskin,
her beaded eyes
as shiny rocks,
I insinuate
myself into
the breath of life.

Diana Bickston

WATCHING YOU LEAVE

staring at the ceiling, a smile threatens to crack my jaw
the old grey cat with light green eyes cries at my window,
his paw resting in the torn screen savoring my verses with
particles of sun and clouds; he smells the scent of death
rising from my pores, rotting in a concrete cage
I have nothing but a 1000 lines
of an unfinished poem that will soon cast and forge the words
of our death; as your simply going

ON ALL FOUR WALLS

The mind has shown itself
as the silence unrolling before me
and in the evening the crickets forget me.
I am old and all the worlds
have crumbled somehow in the fading dusk
of artificial light & bars nailed
on the image of my lust that falls at twilight
making the mourners blush.

I would be a child for those who mourn
brushing my wings against their painted cheeks
delighted by the human
if I weren't surrounded by pigs & chains
as someone unknown & nameless who nevertheless saw
one word from the beginning to the end
on all four walls,
guilty.

GRAVE BONE GARDENS

the longing in my being to fill the hole
where the dog dug up the daisies, the space

that should not be there, that wasn't there before

when we first loved and laughed, we planted gardens
in each other's anatomys; before the dog

before the daisies that mark death's resting
a hole housing my emptiness without you

barren except for the bones the dog forgot to bury

NO, I'VE NEVER HAD THE PLEASURE TO WORK AT THE JACK IN THE BOX

I groomed German Shepherd seeing eye dogs once
til' the owner caught me with them all in the yard.
16 of them playing in the hose water.
I tried a lot of factories but the monotony & marijuana
always implanted new ideas for longer lunch hours
and more "sick leaves".
Being a janitor was great—cleaning & browsing
I found all kinds of "goodies" in desk drawers
and closets . . . moving from area to area
I discovered the storage rooms in an escrow office
filled with blank checks the banks accepted easily
afterwards, sitting in the back of a police car
I realized I was beginning at the bottom of
a life long occupation . . . from forger I progressed
to an ex-con with a gun & no, I've never had the
pleasure to work at the Jack in the Box, but
I've robbed many of them.

Selma Miriam

ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY: A Collage of Mostly Bad News by One Jewish Dyke

I

First the good news. A couple of years ago Kathie Bailey wrote a letter to *Lesbian Connection* called "I Hate Christmas."[1] She described herself as a middle-class WASP. She writes, "The very existence of Jewish and other non-Christian cultures is totally denied by the media, stores, and people who *sellebrate.* People who don't celebrate are ignored at best, hated, mistrusted, and made to feel guilty for being a Scrooge. . . . People who don't do the straight family lifestyle have more self-hatred and loneliness causing the most suicides of the year; and Jewish and other non-Christians are made even more invisible and oppressed."

Like many other Jews, I had been brought up not to confront the dominant culture's assumption that my values and traditions were the same as if I were a Christian. Some Jews end up "doing" Christmas as a "folk holiday" (for the children) and often these same families send their children to Hebrew school even though they don't believe in religious teachings so that their children will remember they are, and remain, Jews. As a mother, I wouldn't "do"* Christmas, and except for a liberal period of trying to believe that Christians were really trying to be good in their churches, I have resented the smugness of Christians—their assumption that I believe what they do and that their belief system is the underpinning of all ethics whether or not we (they or I) believe in god. So Kathie Bailey's letter brought up a lot of pain for me. I was very grateful to have a non-Jew understand at last.

Maybe because of Kathie Bailey's letter, I began to think about my Jewishness in the context of feminism. Raised as an atheist, I'm not looking for my Jewish religious roots, just shocked when no one else notices Christian arrogance within my own community; that is, in the world of lesbian women, the newspapers, magazines, and books that help me think through what I believe and to evaluate all our varied stories.

II

Catholic Tales

Roman Catholic girlhoods are rich in lesbian lore, perhaps because many Catholic lesbians are surrounded by strong women—nuns—in their formative years . . . .

*"Doing" means no conviction; *celebrate* implies joy.

> Though less exotic than Catholic lesbian stories, Protestant stories have their own appeal, especially when the theme is triumph over puritanical and repressive religion. . . .
>
> Several stories by Jewish lesbians have already appeared in print, including Loretta Lottman's article, "I was the Dyke At My High School Reunion," in *Lavender Culture,* edited by Karla Jay and Allen Young.*

When I saw this page in *Lesbian Path,* I had trouble getting past it. I'm glad to read both Catholic and Protestant coming out stories, but must I be told that Jewish stories *as such* need not be included, since they can be found elsewhere? (There *are* articles by Jewish women in *Lesbian Path,* e.g., by Alix Dobkin and Joan Nestle.) So I wrote the editor a polite complaint and she wrote back an apology, all of which should settle the matter. What is bothering me is that no one else seems to have noticed this page, nor did Margaret Cruikshank think it necessary to make any sort of public mention that this editorial comment is uncalled for and offensive.

III

Writing in *New Women's Times Feminist Review* about the benefits of white women studying Black women's literature, Adrienne Rich says,

> Emecheta depicts both the sorority and the antagonisms of women living on the edge, raising children and taking comfort from each other in a different kind of "terrible place," in which they are labelled "problem families." As in welfare America, "Separated women were not allowed to have 'fancy men,' the phrase for men friends."
>
> Yet *In the Ditch* ends with a telling incident, one which sweeps away illusions of any sisterhood which depends solely on either shared female or economic oppression. Adah's white friend Whoopey has taken up with an African boy-friend; Adah, who has no illusions that African men are more dependable than Englishmen, fears the worst for her, but Whoopey is sublimely optimistic. As they walk together,
>
> *The doors of the pub opposite them were thrown open. A group of white and black regulars straggled out . . .*
>
> *"Hello, sister," said one of the black men to Adah. She laughingly hello-ed back. She had learned from experience never to rebuff men of her own race; they were more sensitive than others. Even the road sweepers would invariably greet her and she would answer back with a nice "hello, brother." She was not sure why she had this attitude in England; at home she would have ignored them but here she felt that a black man working by the side of the road or in the company of white friends needed to have his morale boosted. Whoopey asked if she knew the men before and she said no. Whoopey frowned and bit her lips, puzzled.*
>
> *"You must come and see me sometime," Adah invited.*
>
> *"Yes, I'd like to do that but you're always out aren't yer?"*
>
> End of the novel. Adah's sisterhood with the white woman does not prevent the white woman's total misreading of the exchange she has

*Margaret Cruikshank, ed., *The Lesbian Path,* Angel Press, 1980, p. 73.

seen. Adah's beleaguered connection with black men in a white world is read as promiscuity, as part of a sexual pattern. There is much for white feminists and lesbians to consider in this brief final scene.

When I read *In the Ditch,* I also found:

> Yes, she could start work the following day . . . something, something, something . . . she was too nervous to listen properly.
>
> "Now your pay," said the guv'nor. He seemed to have an almost triangular face, the upper part of which was wide, with cheeks slanting gradually away until they finished in a sharp and pointed chin. The chin stood out at what looked like a good ninety degrees. His mouth was small with surprisingly full lips. He had little hair, but what was left of it was black with lots of grey. He blinked frequently as if he had sand in his eyes. . . .
>
> Adah was angry. All this fuss just for a cleaner's job. She did not care any more. The man was as narrow as his narrow face. He's a Jew, probably, she thought, though she did not really know any Jews or anything about them. . . .
>
> Even if the man was not a Jew he behaved like one. He was mollified. He guessed that Adah was telling him the truth. "Well, if you want it you can have it, but to me it looks like exploitation. . . . "
>
> He gave Adah a twinkle with his bright eyes at the last statement. Poor old Jew; he thought Adah was a typical case of an easy conquest. "You know the trouble with you, you should marry a rich man." The Manager had a sense of humour, all right.

For a Jew, it is no surprise to find these lines, so finding them was less depressing than realizing they were invisible to the reviewer. Again I wrote a polite letter; again I received an apology; again I require that it be public to be adequate.

IV

Conditions V: the Black Women's Issue published Judy Simmons' poem "Minority," which included the lines:

> mine is not a People of the Book/taxed
> but acknowledged; their distinctiveness is
> not yet a dignity; their Holocaust is lower case[2]

and which some readers found to be anti-Semitic. This inspired a series of conversations between Jewish and Black lesbians in Boston which was reported in *Conditions VII.*[3] That same issue of *Conditions* contains a review of *Top Ranking*[4] by Cherríe Moraga, who has both criticism and praise for that pamphlet. But so far, no one in print seems to have noticed this passage in *Top Ranking:*

> . . . of that number only about seven million [Black slaves] ever reached the western hemisphere alive. What happened to the African continent as a result of the slave trade makes the horrible and horrendous crimes of the Nazi's fascism almost child's play. [pp. 8-9]

This, from a man, was quoted by the two editors in their opening article, otherwise an extremely valuable history of American racism. Is anyone else offended by it?

In many of these examples, I wonder whether I'm being unnecessarily sensitive. As one of the women in the dialogue between Jewish women and Black women in *Conditions VII* points out, women of color are facing life and death situations (witness Atlanta)–so why get uptight over the "almost child's play"? Maybe the writer of that phrase didn't mean only Jews. Maybe he meant everyone–gays, gypsies, and others, too. I don't know. But I was more upset at "almost child's play" than over Judy Simmons' apparent ranking of oppressions.

V

Have you seen the Winter Solstice issue of *Womanspirit* 1979, in which there is a Christmas nativity play where the "savior" is a Black girl? This is not an isolated instance of feminists romanticizing Black people as the truest Christ figures. It appears as the theme of Dorothy Bryant's *The Kin of Ata,* and in the expression by an MCC minister in her unpublished thesis[5] that Black women were closer to the real meaning of Christianity and that lesbian criticism of the established church might possibly bring to it "the good news," just as Jesus tried to bring the good news to the Jews, who of course wouldn't listen. "There are irreconciliable contradictions involved in being a lesbian/woman and a Christian . . . I see our relationship to Christianity as similar to Jesus' relationship to Judaism . . . His preaching was experienced as 'good news' by the common people of his day." And also, "There is a Third World Lesbian Writers Conference in the Women's Center in Manhattan and I stop by . . . a poetry reading is going on. . . . It is a worship service. . . . We sing the African chants together. . . . And then the gospel songs. . . . I am ecstatic. We hold hands, circling the room. The energy is collected and directed. And we sing raucously, powerfully, swinging our joined bodies, 'This little light of mine / I'm gonna let it shine / let it shine / all the time.'" While Ziegler sees Black women's African dances and songs as another valued form of Christianity,* I am left with the impression that my Jewish songs and dances are less appealing, since my people never embraced Jesus' good news.

VI

Then there's *Sisters United,* a magazine from Kansas which frequently declares lesbianism to be the best current application of fundamentalist Christianity . . .

> "Blessed is she that believeth, for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord." These words were

*See Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (Heinemann, 1977), to learn how destructive Christian values were to African people.

spoken to Mary as she was told she would give birth to the Christ-child. They are again being spoken this day, unto YOU who are the mothers to be who shall birth Christ in this age. All that God needs is some staunch BELIEVERS!

Can Christians imagine how it feels to a Jew to be told God loves you if you'd only believe in him? To me Christianity is the most arrogant of proselytizing religions. There are four of us in our collective, and the other three who were raised as Christians will not read *Sisters United.* I do. It's overwhelmingly Christian and I'm grateful to be nowhere near Kansas. It's not that this magazine is in any way specifically anti-Semitic. It's knowing that the closer you get to fundamentalism, the closer you approach Jew-hating.† The best I could hope for in that world is to be invisible, and usually I am. It's very hard to explain my uneasiness about *Sisters United.* Still I read it, trying to understand why the two women who write it get so much comfort from a belief system so dangerous to me. In a sense I admire these two women's survival, their struggle to be open lesbians in their context, and to write about it, but I am also suspicious, because by Christian definition I am both condemned and evil to them:

> We recently received a letter from a dear Sister who asked a very sincere, logical question. Her question is this:
> *". . . Barbara and I come from very different places spiritually– even as opposed to religiously (her being Jewish and me being Catholic) since she does not believe in God and I not only believe in God but the whole thing, your spirits (angels?) the saints, the hereafter, etc. How will we be together in the other world, which is sort of what I was counting on since we can't be together in this world, if we might both be going to different places because we both believe in such different things? . . . . "*

I know it's hard to take her problem seriously. The editors go on to write about death and future lives, and there's not an anti-Semitic word in it. However, the July-August 1981 issue recommends the merging of religions into Christianity:

> The United States has served as a "melting pot", a place where various races have integrated and intermarried, thus bringing to an end the PURE RACE BLOOD. Even the staunch Jews have intermarried in the United States and we are even now beginning to see the mixture of BLACK and WHITE coming into existance.

In the same issue there is a shocking article claiming to explain Black skin color:

> Black people are thus for a reason, just as all races are what they are

†As Judith Plaskow and Annette Daum have pointed out in *Lilith* magazine no. 7: "Blaming Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy" and "Feminists and Faith." Also more specifically at the anti-Semitism workshop at NWSC in Storrs, 1981, Plaskow spoke of the relationship between fundamentalism and anti-Semitism.

for a reason. . . . It is said that Cain of the Bible, was the first man to turn black when God put a mark on him because of his sin. We well know that the entire human race has sinned and is yet sinning, and we are not all black, so why this distinction? I am of the opinion that God did this as a SIGN unto all peoples that *SIN is indeed black.* He wanted them to know the results of Sin in a way that they would never forget it and therefore the Black race came into being. These people were as a monument to remind all other races that Sin has dire consequences.

VII

After *Sisters United,* it's a relief to recall reading Maureen Brady's review of Michelle Cliff's *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*[6]:

> We were meant to walk out of this classroom chanting: *assimilate, assimilate.* I remember the emphasis on the failures of those who did not properly pass into the bland blend, and the correlations with their place on the economic ladder. The melting pot has since been moving directly along toward meltdown.
>
> This emphasis on being stirred into sameness is one of the greatest forces that we as feminists must be consciously fighting, even though we often compromise our material means by doing so. Each of us must have solid footing to move from, and that requires the ability to search our origins, comprehend their meaning to us, and when we share them as Michelle Cliff has done, expect other women to recognize the wealth that lies in that sharing. I believe our movement will only *move* on the recognition of difference, and on understanding the composition of the differing soil on which we grow.

I have often thought that being a Jew, a dissident, has been my best preparation for being a lesbian and that passing is the same experience in both cases.

VIII

The Spring Equinox 1981 issue of *Womanspirit* contained a long letter from Barbara Mor. Two issues earlier she had written about patriarchal religions, generalizing a lot in a way I agreed with, though in two passages she had made Jews responsible for the very concepts used by Christians to persecute and murder Jews:

> Downhome, throughout Biblical history, the *Judeo*-Christian [emphasis mine] idea of a Devil has led to the phenomenon of devil-projection, in which people become pathological in their fear of invisible "evil forces", and in their anxiety to project responsibility away from themselves and onto scapegoats, self-righteously oppress and massacre whole groups of "other people", i.e. the heathens, the infidels, the Devil's Brood. Devil-projection, as a psychotic process, works to distort the perception of reality; in polls, over 60% of the American people declare they believe that "the Devil" is responsible for our current economic, social and energy problems.
>
> There is one more principle, the final Christian principle, that is truly

nihilistic and disgusting. It is the belief that only *one creature* born in the 5 billion years of our universe has actually been "born of God". All the rest of us are dust and shit. I would say that *no* person of goodwill could believe such garbage; and no woman who believes it—whether Christian or Jewish (for it was a Jewish postulation)—can possibly be a feminist.

When called anti-Semitic for this by Jane Litwoman, Barbara Mor responded:

> The epithet "anti-Semitic" is inaccurate. Jewish and Semitic are not synonyms. The *Semites* are a blood-group of Caucasoid people located in the eastern Mediterranean region; they include the Syrians, Arabs, Jordanians, Egyptians and Libyans, as well as most Israelis. *Jewish* refers not to a "race" of people, but to a religious and cultural body of traditions and history.
>
> There are many Jews who are not Semitic, while the vast majority of Semitic people are not Jewish. Not to make this distinction is to be, I think, very chauvinistic and insensitive to the realities of MidEast geopolitics.

She goes on to quote chapter and verse of the Old Testament to show what Jewish religion is really about. She does admit:

> As for "saviors", we all realize the Jews did/do not accept Jesus as their long-prophesied Messiah. But the idea of a virgin-born, spirit-generated Redeemer is textually prefigured in the O.T.

One of my partners found the whole article upsetting, especially the semantic game with the word *anti-Semitic.* Presumably we know what racism is—the oppression of people of color by whites. Presumably we know what sexism is—the oppression of women by men. Whatever anger is felt or expressed toward whites by people of color is not called racism. Whatever anger is expressed toward men is not called sexism, though sometimes these are called reverse racism, or reverse sexism, probably because of the power differences implicit in racism and sexism. Or at least this is the distinction listed at the back of *Top Ranking.* Yet anti-Semitism can't be an accurate term since Arabs are Semites and, the assumption must be, the Jews are powerful! Barbara Mor responded to my partner's letter with seven typewritten pages, which she urged us to share with others. Here is some of it, starting with a discussion of the word *anti-Semitism.*

> The racist use of the term (as you point out in your letter) has its history & origin among Europeans; i.e. it signals the prejudice of European people against Jews. At the time, Europeans had little or no contact with non-Jewish Semitic peoples—there were no Libyans, Egypts, Syrians living in groups in Europe, to my knowledge—& so the word *Semitic* was used as a synonym for *Jewish;* I presume, without anyone caring that these words are not really equivalents.
>
> And that was the historic situation thru WW2. It is now 1981, and

everything that's happened in the MiddleEast in the past 40 years really requires us to redefine the term anti-Semitic—or, as I'd suggest, throw it out altogether. Because the term is now used quite carelessly to define a post-WW2 situation involving political & religious conflicts, not racial conflicts; & as a definition of *this* situation, the term is wholly inaccurate.

I've heard so many politicians & journalists use the term "anti-Semitic" erroneously—& grotesquely—that I've built up some kind of pet peeve about it. For example, do you remember back when Billy Carter was first revealed to be dealing with the Libyans; Bill Brock, then National Chairman of the GOP, came out and made a widely quoted statement that Billy Carter was "anti-Semitic."

Then it turns out that American "manifest destiny" derives directly from

. . . the old Hebraic idea of themselves as a Chosen People. I think that idea is a bad one, a spiritually arrogant one; it caused much suffering when the Jews were in power, & persecuting all those who would not bow to their male god. And in its evolutions thru the western-Christian world, via the Bible, it has helped breed religious fanaticism, spiritual megalomania, & imperialistic political doctrines in which countries like America, for example, go around ripping off the world's people & resources in the Bible-inspired belief that we are "God's Country" & have a "Manifest Destiny" to lead the world to righteousness. I do not *blame* the Jews exclusively for introducing this notion of a Chosen People to the Western world; but I don't *exempt them entirely* from responsibility either. Many individual Jews take it upon themselves to denounce this old idea of a "Chosen People of God"—but I'm not aware that the Jewish people as a whole have renounced this idea, officially, I mean, via their leaders in Israel, let's say.

Finally, to return to World War II, even though it is forty years ago:

I know that 5-6 million Jews died in WW2. I also know that *40-45 million people altogether* died in that war. So what's the point? There's nothing I can do to prevent WW2, or the crimes committed against humanity in it. (And I think of the bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima & Nagasaki as being equivalent, as crimes against humanity, with Dachau & the other camps; i.e. they *all* result from the patriarchal lust for power over life, i.e. Death.

And if Jewish women were genuinely clear & honest in their grief over the hideous torment of women & children in the concentration camps, I believe they would be pointing their fingers at the Hebrew patriarchs, just as angrily as they point at the Gobineaus & Nietsches. For the hatred of what is *dark, fleshly, other, & impure* did not begin with the German Nazis. All males must acknowledge responsibility for their life-hatred, including Jewish males.

Adrienne Rich pointed out the need for white women not to misconstrue Black women's relationships with Black men (see her comments about *In the Ditch.*) Barbara Mor evidently believes a similar understanding of Jewish women's connections to Jewish men is not legitimate.

Jewish women should be blaming Jewish men as they go off to the concentration camps.

As for the rest of Barbara Mor's thinking about Jews, some women will undoubtedly agree with her, and there is nothing I can say to them. In fact, I find it impossible to explain at all how awful and how dangerous her perspective is to me. Those who care will have to figure it out for themselves.

IX

My parents' atheism was a set of ethical beliefs and concerns that I could call religious if I did not prefer the term *political.* Whether it was interest in and support for unionism and socialism in the thirties, reading Richard Wright and Lillian Smith in the forties, they formed my political consciousness. While I don't assume all Jews grew up the same, I suspect my parents' Jewish attitudes were common enough. In an article called "Liberal Ladies Beach," Sue Davidson explains one woman's activism:

> That political history had its roots in the Seattle home in which she spent her childhood. Her parents, Eastern European Jews, were interested in trade unionism and socialism; they subscribed to a variety of liberal and left wing periodicals; and they contributed money to a string of left wing political causes. Above all, Ruth was influenced in her home by "the depth of *feeling* surrounding notions of justice, equality, and liberty.
>
> "It wasn't so much that political matters were discussed. It was the emotion, the passion that I caught, like some communicable disease. I was young, but I was very aware of how my parents were responding to the rise of fascism in Europe, the rise of Nazism in Germany, because—the radio would come on, and they would burst into tears, or they would scream. I don't know at what point I began to feel it. It's as though it was always there, from as early as I can remember. The feelings came first. And then, as I began to move out, as a more independent person, as an adolescent, and to look a little bit at the society—to see how badly people were treated, to be aware of poverty—I don't view myself even, somehow, as ever having had any choice. The world we lived in was so unjust, and so many people suffered as a result, that one simply had to *do* something."[7]

A few months ago I would have paid little attention to the familiarity of this description. Reading it now seems important. My story is not unique; at least there are some other Jewish women who can describe their political consciousness in Jewish terms, coming out of a Jewish past with pride.

X

And there's more good news, too. I noted *Conditions VII,* with the article "The Possibility of Life Between Us." Especially interesting to me was a talk on "Lesbian Ethics" by Sarah Lucia Hoagland, reported in the *Lesbian Inciter.* She speaks of the need for us to listen to each other

about our varying oppressions:

> . . . how *are* we to begin a bonding process? In the first place, I think we have to recognize that we have tremendous amounts of violence and anger inside of us. . . . Everything in our world encourages us *not* to consider ourselves, encourages the self-doubt and self-hatred of victimization. Expression of anger is taboo among us.
>
> . . . Secondly, we must learn to be witnesses to each other's pain while not trying to make it go away. . . .
>
> What I *want* is a witness to my pain. . . . That's *very* hard, especially for us as nurturers, because we want to come in and make it all better. My mother always wanted to come in and make it all better. And what she did to survive when she couldn't make something all better was to not see it. . . .
>
> Thirdly, we must find a time and space to witness the pain we've caused each other. Simply having our pain witnessed is a first major step in the healing process. This was apparent last weekend at the National Women's Studies Association. I went to a workshop on Jewish Lesbians. There were several non-Jewish wimmin there, myself included. There was tremendous pain and anger coming out in that workshop. I gave a workshop on the Lesbian perspective in academia, and there were heterosexual women there—and they got an earful, let me tell you. The fact that they were *there listening* to our anger was healing for us. They didn't get all defensive, they didn't run out screaming and crying—they listened and they heard us. There is tremendous anger, I think, between Black and Jewish wimmin, particularly among Lesbian feminists. . . . Some Jewish wimmin . . . [have] said, "When we were young, our parents told us that if we were in trouble and there was no one Jewish around, to find someone who was Black. They are safe since they know what discrimination is." And some Black wimmin have told me that when they were young they were told if they were in trouble and there were no other Blacks around that they should find someone who was Jewish. Since then there have been betrayals on both sides. . . . All of this anger has got to be heard and gotten out. And we must be prepared to go through this with each other.[8]

I need to hear non-Jewish lesbian women listening for and objecting to anti-Semitism when it happens. Peg Cruikshank's collection of stories is valuable despite her carelessness—but why has no one noticed? Emecheta's work (especially, I think, her discussion of *pre-Christian* Nigerian values and customs in *The Slave Girl, The Bride Price,* and *The Joys of Motherhood*) is important for women of all races and ethnic backgrounds to read, as is Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures.* In fact I find both writers reassuring in that all Blacks aren't natural Christians. But why was this instance of ugliness in *In the Ditch* not noticed by Adrienne Rich? *Top Ranking* has so much that is valuable in it, why make the Holocaust "child's play"? How do lesbian-feminists raised as Christians react to *Sisters United?* What do they really think of a lesbian version of fundamentalism? As for Barbara Mor, my initial admiration is quite gone. Is anyone a witness? Jews have been so typically unwilling to call attention to our own pain—but won't any non-Jews take notice?

NOTES

1. *Lesbian Connection,* Vol. IV, Issue 7, November 1979.
2. *Conditions: Five,* Autumn 1979, p. 93.
3. Beverly Smith, ed., with Judith Stein and Priscilla Golding, "The Possibility of Life Between Us: A Dialogue Between Black and Jewish Women" in *Conditions: Seven,* Spring 1981.
4. Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett, eds., *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community.* February 3d Press, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11238.
5. Karen Ziegler, "A Radical Feminist Theology of Ministry," Union Theological Seminary, 1979.
6. Maureen Brady, "I Am a Woman of Color": review of *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* in *New Women's Times Feminist Review,* April/May 1981.
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THE CONVERT

"The aesthetic ramifications in a work of this magnitude have not, even after three hundred years, been fully explored. The creation of Milton's epic can be considered on every level one of the pivotal cultural moments in the history of our civilization."

Louise closed her notebook and without blinking stared past Mr. Stevens who stood at the front of the room. His words droned on but she was missing them. Her concentration had slipped upon that last phrase, become fixed upon that word "our."

"Our civilization."

Whose? Yours and mine? Not likely. Not if Louise herself were any part of it. If Louise were included in the "our" then Mr. Stevens' statement made little sense. Louise was eighteen years old and she was discovering every day that when people up here said "our," Black people like herself were no part of it.

"Our history, our literature, our language, our culture, our houses, our cars, our maids, our money," were not, she was positive, anything that belonged to her. These kinds of thoughts were always breaking into her concentration, in lectures, in the dining room, while talking, and of course when she was alone. Just one more thing that was not right about this place. She hadn't wasted time thinking about the hidden meanings of simple words when she was at home, before she came to college last September. Who and what "our" was, was one of the more apparent facts she had been forced to grasp growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "Our people," a phrase she often heard at home and school and church, were quite simply Black people. *Their* people were of course white and everything in Baton Rouge was decided according to this simple axiom.

Only when Louise came to this tiny town in Connecticut and to the third oldest women's college in America did she begin to wonder about matters that had seemed clearer, if not necessarily easier before.

"Our people, our people!" She heard her grandmother's urgent voice. Depending on who said it the whole meaning changed.

A bell rang and suddenly Louise was awake again, felt Mr. Stevens looking at her curiously, tried to rummage casually for her books and coat.

"Is the assignment more of *Paradise Lost?*" she asked the girl next to her.

"Ahunh, books seven and eight."

"Thanks."

Lord, I'm not even finished with three and four yet, Louise grimaced to herself as she rushed out the door to get to the dorm in time to eat in a hurry and then waitress for lunch.

It was beginning to snow again, yet the sky was glaringly bright and there were birds twittering above her and pecking along the path. How she hated this weather, this grinding cold.

I'd better slow down or I'm going to break my neck, she thought as she slid along the walk. Waitressing was such a pain, but it was the best job on campus and of course there weren't any other jobs to be had in the tiny, block-long town. Usually freshmen didn't get assigned waitressing jobs because it was thought to be too time consuming for a new student adjusting to the absolute mountains of work. But a junior in Louise's dorm had gone home with mono and she had been chosen to replace her. Of the one hundred girls in the dorm, hers was the greatest financial need. They had to wear awful blue smocks to do it, Louise assumed so that they would look more like the servants they were. The poorest girls on campus were the waitresses, but in her dorm most of the other waitresses had fathers who were things like college teachers and ministers instead of doctors and company vice-presidents. To Louise they were all rich. Only the fifteen other Black girls on campus seemed to know what poverty actually meant, despite the fact that the others searched day in and day out for a definition in her Social Problems class.

Louise's dorm was one of the most remote on campus, on the far side of a small lake, which she did not appreciate especially on a day like today, sludging through the wet snow. This place was so country. More trees than people. True, it had been beautiful in the fall, the bright leaves shimmering, but Louise had been too lonely and too scared to notice much. She still felt that lost way a lot of the time.

The only relief were the letters she got from home, from her mother, and her aunt, and especially from her older sister. Maybe there would be a letter today. How she wished she was at home this minute, in their small warm kitchen. Momma telling her to get her books and paraphernalia off the table so they could sit down and eat. Home, where there were people to talk to easily, people to take care of her. Here she had the feeling that people could not even see her, let alone be concerned with her existence.

The other source of comfort that had grown throughout the fall was being with the group of Black girls themselves, particularly her friend Alice. She knew all fifteen by name and they stuck together a lot, especially the freshmen. Louise smiled wryly at the words "stuck together." Alice had told her how some white girls had said it upset them that the Black girls always seemed to "stick together." Now whenever she and Alice went some place they would turn to each other and ask sarcastically, "Why do you girls always stick together!" Then they would giggle,

and shake their heads in despair at the dumbness all around them.

Of course they all didn't stick together. Some of their small number Louise seldom saw. She supposed they were studying or had boyfriends at other schools. She never saw the girl named Janice from South Carolina who hardly spoke when Louise happened to run into her outside. Janice didn't seem snobbish, just very preoccupied as she huddled inside her gray, battered-looking coat. Once, when Louise had seen her in the library, she tapped her on the shoulder and Janice jerked around with a look of absolute terror in her huge dark eyes. Janice seemed lonely and unhappy, but none of the sisters questioned why. They knew why only too well, because they felt it too.

Louise did question, though, what was to become of Janice, of her friends, and of herself. If there had ever been any Black seniors on campus, they had all disappeared, implying that this place could devour Black girls alive. Whenever any two of them got together they talked incessantly about leaving, but this was of course impossible because after lives of "exceptional" achievement, they had been transformed into average students almost as soon as they entered Collins' gates. Their grades just weren't good enough, their scholarships weren't transferable either, so they would have to stay or maybe drop out of school completely. Talking about leaving was a great comfort, though, even if it wasn't remotely possible.

Louise finally reached the path that led to her dorm's front door, when she thought she saw something move high upon the hill which faced the lake.

What was it. An animal? As she got closer she could make out a light blue strip of color. Maybe it was a person, but what would they be doing way up there where there was nothing but ice and bushes? Maybe it was one of the crazy white girls whose actions and words Louise found mostly inexplicable. Just before she entered the dorm she looked up again to see the figure moving toward her rapidly down the hill. Suddenly, she felt she knew who it was. Janice—in her long gray coat, a blue muffler wrapped many times around her head. But something else was strange. Janice did not have on any boots or stockings. She was running barefoot in the snow.

Louise stood absolutely still. What was happening, what was this, why was Janice there? Should she run up the hill herself and try to catch up with her or instead run inside and pretend she hadn't seen? She stood hypnotized by Janice's careening movements. Just as Louise made a step toward the loping girl, she changed directions and ran back up the hill. Louise stopped. This was horrible. What was happening? She walked a little way up the hill almost falling down from the ice but couldn't see anything. Maybe Janice had doubled back and gone around the other side. Her chest filled with fear, Louise turned back to the dorm. Had Janice seen her watching and run away? She needed to tell someone, to find Alice, and figure out what to do.

When she got inside, the dorm clock said 11:55. Too late to eat now and too late to track down Alice. Louise checked her empty mailbox, ran back to the kitchen, dropped her books, tore off her coat, washed her hands, and began setting up her tray of dishes. She wished she could get someone to waitress for her so she could find Alice, then together they might be able to find Janice. But it was too late for that too. She set the table for eight and then for the next half hour went back and forth, back and forth, between the kitchen and the dining room like someone on an oiled track. Where was Alice? She must have decided not to eat, or to eat in town. Why wasn't she here, of all the days?

"Could you get some more butter?" one of the seniors interrupted her thoughts. "Salad dressing too," added Melanie, a girl whose blonde hair looked almost white, whose eyelashes were invisible, and who was dressed as usual in a riding habit. Louise headed for the kitchen. She hadn't even had a chance to really think about what Janice was doing up there, what it meant for her to be walking barefoot in freezing weather in the snow. Janice was so silent, kept so much to herself, Louise found it impossible to think of any kind of motives, rational or irrational. She just did not know her enough. Louise put the butter and salad dressing on the table, lost in her own thoughts until words from the table broke in again.

"What did you do then, Luce?"

"Well I just told Rich that if he didn't go to the Bahamas with us for spring vacation, I'd call the whole thing off. After all, Daddy is going to pay for everything."

"Maybe he just doesn't want to have to hang around with your folks, Luce, even if it is a free vacation."

"Why wouldn't he? I've visited his parents lots of times and believe me, they're nothing to brag about. Anyway I took off my ring and held it out to Rich, but he wouldn't take it. He said he'd tell me for sure this weekend."

"Is he coming down here?"

"I think so. I've got a lot of work to do though."

"That would be a television first. When did you ever put work before romance?" Luce made a sour face, they all giggled and began pushing back their chairs.

Louise picked up their dishes and hurried back into the kitchen for the last time. Lilly, the cook, gave her a wink. "You must be in a hurry."

"Definitely!" she answered.

Lilly was one of the friendliest people she'd met on campus, although she and her assistant were always arguing with each other. Louise grabbed some cookies and took the elevator up to her room. She stopped on Alice's floor first, but no one was there.

When she got to her own room she collapsed on the bed. She felt really tired as usual after waitressing, but she had to get to soc. class. At

least Alice should be there since they were in the same section. Maybe she should go back up the hill again just to look around. She looked at her watch. No time. Then she thought that maybe she should call up Janice's dorm to see if she had come back. No that wouldn't help. She might be anywhere in that big old building and not get the message for hours. It would be better to stop by there instead. She got another set of books, combed her hair, put on another sweater, and hurried back outdoors.

Whatever the reason Janice was on the hill Louise felt bad for her. As she slogged through the snow she felt almost like crying herself. Why did things have to be like this. Why did getting a "good" education have to be this hard? It wasn't just the work, though all of the Black girls agreed that it was a killer. It was the whiteness, the pervasive whiteness that infected everything. Even something as absurd as gym. One of the phys. ed. instructors had told a girl from Chicago that the reason the Black girls didn't do well in swimming, which was required, was because their bone structure was different from white people's. According to her they were physically incapable of floating. When this comment was passed among them they all got furious. Just because this particular group of eight freshmen had five people in it who hated the water didn't mean that Black people couldn't swim. The fact that there was no place in town to get their hair done when it got ruined twice a week by the water was much more to the point. But you couldn't dwell on such foolishness, because if you did in a place like this you would spend a life dealing with incidental trivia and have no time at all to deal with the deeper racist stuff. Louise often considered how she had made a real mistake to think that she wanted or deserved the kind of education that would have been completely closed to her even four years before. Why hadn't she gone to one of the Black schools down South and saved herself the trouble? But she also suspected that she might be considered a back number there, if she didn't keep up with the partying and styling. She would have been just as poor down there as she was up here, but at least she and everyone else would have been Black.

Louise finally reached Janice's dormitory on the other side of campus and found her room number at the desk. Then she remembered that she hadn't thought of an excuse for being there in case Janice had returned. Maybe I'll ask her to help me study for botany or if she has any notes, since she's a bio major. Louise climbed up three flights of stairs that looked medieval. The whole place was so dark and forbidding. She thought she'd heard that Janice was the only Black girl in this particular dorm.

When she got to Janice's door she stopped, afraid to knock. She wished she'd gotten someone to come with her. She rapped softly and waited. No one was coming. Maybe she hadn't heard. Just as she knocked again the door moved away from her hand. It was Janice.

"Hi, Janice. I didn't mean to disturb you. I was wondering if you

could help me with my botany. I can't keep up and I thought you'd have some notes," Louise spoke in a rush.

Janice stared at her for a long time as if she didn't know exactly who she was and then mumbled, "Please wait."

Louise was frightened. Janice's eyes were so wide and blank. Please. What was wrong. She looked through the door that was only half open and saw a morass of clothes and scattered junk. Papers, trays of dirty dishes, everything looked upside down. The shades were pulled and a tiny desk lamp gave the only light. The desk itself, however, was absolutely clean. She watched Janice kneel beside the closet and pull out a huge notebook from a cardboard box. She looked at it as if she didn't quite know what to do with it and then when her eyes caught Louise's she seemed to jump as though she didn't know there was anyone else there. She got up slowly and walked toward Louise. She was wearing furry woolen socks. Louise sighed inside herself. Maybe she was all right. Maybe she was just doing an experiment or something. Or maybe she'd hurt her foot and had to take off her boots. That didn't make sense. She wasn't walking unevenly, only very slowly like she was moving through water and why would she take off both boots if only one foot was hurt?

Janice handed her the notebook and still said nothing. Louise wanted to ask her something, something important, something kind, but she didn't know what.

"Thank you. I can really use this . . . all the help I can get."

Janice blinked so slowly Louise thought she saw the muscles of her eyelids working.

"Do you have a cold or something?" Louise asked.

Janice shook her head and said in an almost whisper, "No."

Louise wished she had kept her mouth shut, hadn't asked something so stupid.

"Well I have to run to class in the soc. building now. Thanks for the notes. I'll bring them back after the midterm."

She turned and walked not too fast, not too slow down the hall. When she got to the stairs, she glanced back but Janice's door was shut.

When Louise got outside she knew she wasn't going to class. She had to find someone to talk to. Alice should be in class. Just don't let it start before I get there. Then she'd have to wait for Alice outside or just go in and sit through the endless lecture. Louise reached the building and rushed downstairs to the basement lecture hall. Alice was sitting near the door. Thank goodness the professor hadn't arrived yet.

"Alice, Alice, out here."

Alice was talking to the girl next to her and didn't look up.

"Alice!" Louise repeated.

Alice looked up and grinned.

"Hey, Louise. I saved you a seat."

Louise pleaded, "Come out here. I've got to talk to you."

Alice looked mystified, but quickly followed her outside.

"What's going on, Louise, aren't you coming to class?"

"No, I can't. I've got to talk to you. Let's get out of here before Mr. Davis comes."

"O.K. This is about the only course I'm not worried about failing."

Alice went back for her books and coat and they hurried out into the brittle air.

"Girl, you look terrible," Alice observed as soon as they got into the sunlight. "What's happening?"

"I wish I knew. Where were you at lunch time? I tried to find you."

"I needed to stop by the library so I bought a hamburger in town. Sorry I missed you."

"That's all right. You're here now." Louise took a deep breath and spoke even faster. "Listen, you know Janice, the junior who's a bio major?"

"I think so. I've only seen her about twice since we've been here."

"I know. I hardly ever see her either. But I saw her today. It was when I was going to lunch. She was way up on that hill that's behind our dorm."

"Wow. What was she doing up there? Collecting specimens?" Alice laughed.

"Alice, this is serious. I don't know why she was up there, but there's something else. Janice didn't have on any shoes or socks."

"What?"

"I mean she was barefoot, walking in the snow."

Alice was completely attentive now, the frown creasing her forehead mirrored Louise's.

"What . . . why?"

"I don't know. When I tried to go after her she ran farther up the hill. Then I had to go inside to waitress. After lunch I thought I'd better look for her so I went to her dorm. That's where I just came from."

"Was she there?"

"Ahunh."

"What did she say?"

"Hardly anything. I pretended that I wanted to borrow some botany notes and she got them for me and then I left."

"How did she seem?"

"Sort of out of it, like she was daydreaming or something. She had on socks."

Louise stopped talking abruptly and turned to Alice. A knowing look passed between them. Besides fear, their faces shared a look of unsurprise, of resignation.

Alice whispered, "Let's go back to the dorm."

Louise nodded.

They walked in silence for minutes, the words about Janice a weight between them.

"Alice, what do you think I should do?"

Alice shook her head. This was a terror they had subconsciously anticipated, but still were not prepared for. The two of them together did not have the experience or knowledge of a grown person. At least she didn't think they did.

"I don't know, Louise. I never had to decide about anything like this before," Alice said hesitantly. "Maybe it's not what you think it is. I mean, maybe it's not so bad." Her words trailed off, stifled by her own lack of conviction.

"Alice, you know it's bad. It doesn't make sense. It was wild for Janice to be up on that hill in the freezing cold. It was something a crazy person would do." The word "crazy" made Louise choke. She had felt more or less crazy every day since she'd come to this silent place in the woods, where nothing was familiar and everything was white. She felt crazy every time she had to make some kind of truce between the person whose life she had lived before and the new person of the moment, who strugged every day to remember who that other person was.

"All right. Maybe it's crazy," Alice said, "but does that mean she'll do something like that again? We could make a big fuss over it and it could just be something that happened on this one day and she'll go back to being all right and we'll have caused a lot of trouble for nothing. Anyway, who would we tell?"

That was definitely a problem. They barely knew their professors, the housemothers were ancient old women who seemed distinctly upset that "colored girls" were being allowed to lower the standards of their alma mater, they didn't know any of the doctors in the health center, they didn't even know any older, wiser seniors who sometimes acted just as disturbed by their presence as the housemothers. Who could they tell indeed?

"I don't know, but we probably should tell somebody. What if she does it again, or something worse?"

"But there isn't anybody." They had often talked about their isolation, how there were no other Black people around, on the campus, in the town, nowhere. Now that fact became more than a personal source of pain, it was terrifying because it insured their own and Janice's helplessness.

"Damn it! What are we supposed to do? Of course Janice is *only* a Black girl. She should be happy to be at the third oldest *white* women's college in America. She shouldn't let the fact that there are sixteen of us and sixteen-hundred of them drive her crazy. Right?"

Alice looked into Louise's twisted face, could only grab her hand for a moment and answer almost to herself, "I know. They have us just where they want us."

When they got back to the dorm, Alice offered to make coffee, but Louise went straight to her room, unable to talk more about the things she'd seen that day.

She dropped her books and coat on the floor and fell onto her bed. For once she was glad that the college hadn't seen fit to give her a roommate, that they were still experimenting with rooming arrangements for Black students. Her head had begun to ache hours ago and now it was pounding. When she tried to sleep, however, the events with Janice kept going through her head and her chest began to tighten. Finally she drifted off. She began to dream.

She dreamed her family was at the college, standing in some important looking office and a voice was telling them something bad about Louise. When her mother tried to defend her, the voice just laughed at her, at all of them–her aunt, her grandmother, herself. Then they were in a large lecture hall and there were dozens of white faces laughing too. Their protestations made the laughing all the louder. And then the white people turned their backs on them as if they were not even there. She saw her grandmother dressed in an old dress, her hair in the rough braids she wore around the house. She was sitting in the lecture hall where they had their social problems class. Her grandmother was at the center of the room. Mr. Davis was saying something like, "Today we will study the problem of the Negro. Here, class, is our exhibit." Then the whole class looked at her grandmother and the laughter began again. Their laughter was a thick roar which covered everything. Louise got up from her seat and tried to take her grandmother away from that place, but her feet would not move. She began to scream, her face wet with tears. Her grandmother only smiled.

Suddenly Louise jerked awake to the sound of laughing voices outside her door. She was hot and sweaty from going to sleep in her clothes. Her heart was racing. She tried to get her eyes to focus on her watch. Five forty-five. She'd been asleep for hours and now she had to go down to the dining room and get ready for dinner. She pulled herself out of bed, feeling strange in the now dark room, not quite remembering why. As she reached for the light it came to her. "Janice," she said out loud. In the bathroom, splashing her face at the sink, the nightmare also returned. They had been laughing at her grandmother. They had been laughing at her. She did not want to go downstairs to wait on them, to be surrounded by their blank and staring faces. She went back to her room and sat on the edge of her bed, slowly rocking back and forth covering her eyes with her hands. I have no choice, she thought, I have no choice. When she finally got up to leave, the words had become a chant, so regular they comforted her. I have no choice, she repeated again and again to try to make herself understand a fact that was incomprehensible. I have no choice. Just like Janice, I have no choice.

For some days Louise was in a frightening place, but gradually the day that Janice walked in the snow faded, was nearly erased by the routine of classes, exams, and her own aloneness. Occasionally there was a respite, a movie or concert on campus, a "soul" weekend at one of the men's schools that was perfectly awful, but at least provided an excuse

to get out. When Louise returned Janice's botany notes a few weeks after borrowing them, she seemed distant, but otherwise O.K. Still Louise glimpsed something in her eyes that made her wonder. But, as Alice kept reminding her, what could they do? One night, when she was in the library, a group of them including Janice took a study break and went over to town for sodas. Janice seemed almost happy that evening, although she said virtually nothing. She was very shy and undoubtedly, Louise thought, as by herself as the rest of them.

At least the winter was breaking. Every day the weather became softer bringing spring vacation nearer. Many of her classmates talked animatedly about the trips they planned to the Islands or to Florida. Louise and Alice were just glad they could manage to go home.

The Sunday before vacation Louise found herself heading for chapel. There was going to be a special service, a guest minister had been invited, and Alice was singing some new music with the choir. Louise had found that one of the greatest advantages of being away from home was not having to go to church, but she promised Alice she'd come.

As she walked across campus some girls from her dorm caught up with her and she found it easy for once to join in their chatter. A week from now I'll be home, she thought, and I won't mind going to church a bit. She wondered what surprises Momma would have prepared for her arrival. There was always something, a length of material for her to sew, maybe one of Aunt Renie's yellow cakes, a bag of socks and underwear Momma had got on sale. Since she had come here, home seemed more and more like a haven, a place where she could in all senses rest.

Inside the chapel Louise sat down at the end of a pew near the front so that Alice would see her, then thought wryly there was no need for this. Her color, so rare in this place, would be a magnet to Alice's eyes. The choir marched in and the service began. Except when they sang, Louise's attention focused inward on pleasant visions of being home and of the summer break soon to follow. She wondered if she'd changed, if this place that was so strange was making her into a stranger too. She wondered if her constant efforts to protect the past that made her who she was, had damaged her. Often older Black people at home talked about the way going away changed their children. Louise felt that she was different, but she could not say exactly how. Only being at home again for a long time might show her.

The choir was standing up again. This must be the special music Alice had described. Louise became completely attentive, yet as the singing began, she thought how different it was from what she had grown up with. So formal, the challenge was to sing it just as it had been written, while at home the effort was to invent a sound that no one had ever heard. Louise admired Alice, who needed music so much, she would sing with people who would never hear her own Black song. Louise imagined that she could hear Alice's voice separate from the rest sending a secret message directly to her.

In the midst of the singing there was suddenly a noise–a long cry arching above her containing both ecstasy and fright. Louise looked around and saw a figure in the very back of the church. Even though she didn't know who it was, she could tell it was someone Black. It was one of them. The girl moved forward down the center aisle shouting and doing a jerky, awkward step, clapped and waved her hands high above her head. Janice. It was Janice. Janice moved steadily on, rhythmically shouting over and over, "He's got a hold on me, he's got a hold on me. Hmmm. Jesus got a hold on me, a hold on me." The singing had stopped. There was absolute stillness. No one moved, but hundreds of eyes stared, not believing or comprehending what they saw. Janice sobbed now, her words all mixed up, but still she moved toward the altar. When it seemed that she was going to climb into the pulpit, the minister finally moved toward her, his hands extended. Louise could not tell if he meant to embrace her or push her backward. When Janice saw the minister, she immediately darted away, ran quickly up the aisle screaming angrily, "Don't touch me. Don't touch me!" Just before she reached the doors a group of men rose in front of her and blocked her way. There was a wall of white faces. She ran in the opposite direction, but was blocked on that side by another wall of bodies. Janice ran back and forth, but the men had formed two wedges and closed around her. Finally, she collapsed to the floor in the tiny space between their feet, sobbing and whimpering. As the men tried to pick her up she resisted them, twisted and kicked, but after several more minutes of struggling her cries stopped and they carried her from the chapel in a silent heap.

Louise stood absolutely still, astonished by what she was seeing, and yet she felt that she knew exactly what it meant. Janice had simply got happy, like the countless people Louise had seen do the very same thing in her own church all through her childhood. The singing had given her the spirit, but no one understood that except Louise. The faces around her were bathed in shock. They had no comprehension of what had occurred and they talked and whispered to each other in hysterical voices. They did not know that someone had gotten happy or what was needed. When Louise was a little girl she had not understood either, had been afraid of the high pitched screams and movement that suddenly filled a Sunday morning. But her mother and grandmother had explained it to her, that the Lord was getting very close to the person and that the feeling was so great it had to go somewhere, so it arose in a shout and came through their mouths, went down to their feet and made them do a happy dance. Momma told her she did not need to be afraid, but that what the person wanted most was to hear the voices of everyone in the church giving witness that they knew the spirit too.

Louise wanted to find Janice. She had to find her. She stood up just as the minister had obtained silence. As she turned into the aisle the choir began to sing. She looked back and found Alice's face. It was wet with

tears. As Louise walked toward the back the hundreds of eyes stared at her with almost the same expression they had turned upon Janice moments before. She wondered why their eyes were fixed upon her so intently and then she remembered that to them she and Janice must look a good deal alike. Louise did not care about their eyes. She had to find her friend.

Outside on the steps, she looked for some sign of Janice or of the men who had taken her away. There was not a person in sight. The campus was as silent and empty as a deserted stage. Louise strained her ears to catch a sound, looked everywhere for some sign of movement. There was nothing. Where in the world had they taken her? She searched the entire campus and then walked aimlessly, not wanting to return to the dorm.

Later in the afternoon Louise found out that they had taken Janice to the nearby state hospital. A few days after that someone in her family came to take her home. Louise never saw her again.

Because Janice had kept so much to herself, her going hardly seemed to make a difference in anybody's life, except for the initial sorrow and shame all the Black girls felt. For Louise, however, Janice turned into a ghost whose presence hung over everything the rest of that year—a figure who walked with her to classes, who was at her elbow when she waitressed, who silently stared at her when she tried to talk to the others, and who watched her when she finally went to her room, closed the door, and wept.

Mary Ann Daly

BRIGID

It was one of those summer days when the sun's playing with little wisps of cloud, and the air is thick and yellow, multiplying crickets; and then suddenly, for a moment only, it's full moonlight, silver: you hear the mockingbird, grey and white; and then the wisp trails away, or the sun rolls on, and it's yellow again. You can feel the blackberries ripening, the stems get heavy, juice crowds the round skins. The tohee says, "Drink your tea." I sat in back of the house, dangling my feet in the weeds; felt like a ripening blackberry myself.

Lila was bending in the garden several yards in front of me. Every year we two women plant vegetables and every year we get herbs; they come up of their own accord now, though at some point we must have planted them: on her left, as she tends the radish, purplish mountains of comfrey, like the Virginia hills that fold away from us on every side here; on her right, towards the house, yellow plumes of the dill; and behind her, looking into her seat, the surprised blue stars of the borage. "I, borage, bring courage," they sibilate, wearing their white fur like frost.

Unlike us, the house is old. The timbers smell of compost, musty at times, but most often sweet as dark, aging apple flesh: fermenting. Down the hill an abandoned cabin dried out and collapsed under the willows; but our house was built to last: far from collapsing, it stews in its own cider. Our landlord, Mr. Mellis, remembers when this house was built: he was a boy, his father a widower with a new young bride; a white picket fence divided their lawn from the fields. That fence has disappeared; and in its place, long tongues of grass lick the tops of the posts that hold the barbed wire, as if to tease Mellis's cattle who wander at liberty among their patties on the shaven hills beyond. They come up to the fence and stare at us sometimes, at us and our overgrowth and our drunken house where yellowjackets swarm out of the furniture and into the summer afternoons. The cows moo at Lila and me, and then move on. Sometimes we moo back.

Some people around here still cultivate their pickets. A horse farm down the road has miles of them, zigging over the property like mazes; the lawns they border are lush, perfect, horseless. Hesperus, the next property over from ours, is a working farm for the retarded: the pickets, pristine cottages, pristine barns, salt licks for the cattle, beehives, pond whereon migrating geese glide in harmony with domestic ducks: an idyll, everyone and everything in it forever young.

I sat out back watching Lila work and it was not as if she was working. She was just *out there,* like everything was just *out there,* and I was just

here, and Pooch just next to me on the walk, a concrete sidewalk that runs from the gate to our back door; that seems funny now that I write about it, as if a sidewalk here should seem out of place, but it doesn't, it's just here. I breathed in my heart and out the top of my head, in my heart and out the top of my head, and it was as if the whole world—Lila, garden, hills, sun—was a stream of light going through me. I closed my eyes and saw Sai Baba, his curly head, his burnished face, standing, alive, and I saw that he had a heart like Jesus's, into which the world flowed and which poured out the world; I opened my eyes and Lila was standing in a purple flame, wiping her brow with her forearm.

Pooch began his little bark. He stood on the walk, waving his plumed behind; his caved-in, half-blind face making sounds of indigestion at the gate, where a woman stood: Brigid, a girl from Hesperus. "Hi, Brigid," I said. "Hi," she said. She stood behind the gate without moving, barely touching it; a cloud came over the sun. "Come in," I said. She slid the latch, the gate fell open. "Please close it behind you," I said. "The cows." She turned back to shut the gate; her pleated skirt swung with her, the heavy plaid skirt she wore in all seasons; and then its hem lay still against her calves, against her knee socks, while she latched the gate. She came down the walk and stood over me, tall, plump, her yellow curls tangling out of their ponytails: looking like an overgrown Heidi but for the fact that the right half of her face was gone, burned off, melted toward the mouth in pitted swirls. The left side was fine, pretty, even. Lila looked up at us, then walked into the comfrey. The sun came out.

"Hi," Brigid said again. "Sit down," I said, patting the pavement next to me. She remained standing. Pooch waddled over and nudged my elbow with his face. "Afraid of getting your clothes dirty?" I said. She nodded. I looked back out at the garden. Lila's head showed just behind a hill of leaves, hatless, a wisp of hair lifting. When I didn't look at her, Brigid seemed just another part of the scenery.

I felt her tap my head and my hair spring back at her; I turned; pink buds appeared in the folds between the radiant ridges of her face. She exaggerated each word the way children exaggerate lines in a play. "I'm a queer," she said, pointing to her heart.

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"They said it. They said you're one too."

"Who's they?"

"Bobbob and Angelo." She smiled her half-smile.

"Well, what do you think they mean by that? Sit down. Your skirt won't get too dirty."

"My skirt won't get too dirty," she said. She sat down, hugging her legs to her to keep them from entering the weeds. "I don't like that," she said.

"You don't like what, them calling you that?"

"No. That," she said, rocking toward the weeds.

I felt glad the subject was changing. "It's a beautiful day," I said. I

wanted her to like the weeds.

"Susan went away," she said.

"Who's Susan?"

Brigid stopped looking at me. She looked out at the mountains, turned the pretty side of her face toward me; it was as if someone had just tightened a loose bulb, making the light constant. "She fucked me," Brigid said. "I fucked her, too. I liked that." She turned toward me again; the light became jagged again; she said with reverence, over her bared knee, "She was prettier than I am. She let me see her with her panties down."

I tried to picture them together in Brigid's little cottage. I pictured the Susan who was one of the other twins in elementary school. They were what you'd call "cute," Susan and Sheryl, with little squat faces and naturally curly red hair. Joan and I had curly brown hair, but we weren't identical. They were. Then Susan had Lila's body, and her breasts were full, tipping slightly toward the mattress on either side. And then I wondered whether Brigid was scarred anywhere besides her face. I had always thought of it as just her face.

"Do you like to fuck too?" she asked. "They said you're queer too."

"Brigid, stop saying fuck and queer. There are better words for what you're talking about."

"There are?" she said, her face beaming with wonder. Then she let go of her leg and touched my shoulder gently, as though it were a fragile bloom. She grew solemn. "Don't you want to fuck me?" she said.

"Oh, Brigid, I wish I did."

Lila came up to us, stood in the weeds a few feet away. "Something's eaten the cabbage," she said. "And the peas, I can't even find the peas. Hi, Brigid. But look." She held out five or six little bell peppers.

"Lila, Brigid's a lesbian," I said.

"Congratulations, Brigid," said Lila, going past us into the house.

"She's pretty," Brigid said.

"Yes, she is," I said. "I love her." I wondered if Brigid saw, looking at Lila, anything like what I saw in her round face, her cornstraw hair, her full knees: my world growing young, growing old; putting forth sunrise, swarms of butterflies, sunset, the night sky full of saucers and stars; holding me, covering the bone; getting up to pull an engine from a car. Or was "pretty" just a word for women who could not inspire panic at first sight?

"Me too," she said.

"No, Brigid. No, you don't. You don't love her. You think she's pretty. Maybe you like her."

"Maybe you like her," Brigid said. She had pulled her front shirttail out of her skirt and was twisting it; the white cloth was already turning grey under her thumb.

"Brigid," I said. "We have some things to do around the house. I'm real glad you came over, but you better go back now. It's starting to look like rain."

"No," she said.

"They're going to miss you. They'll start looking for you. You better go back."

"No. I don't like that. I'm not going to go there anymore."

"But you have to go there. You live there."

"No!"

"You can come back," I said. "This is my house. You don't live here. You can come to visit. That's your house up there on the hill."

"I don't want that house."

"But it's nice. You have your room there." Brigid weaves mats with the wool from the Hesperus sheep. She's good; her mistakes are the fruits of an unconscious genius. A purplish knot in the corner is surrounded by bare threads leading into a field of dirty lumps like the back of a sheep. Maybe they're not mistakes.

"No," she said. She threw her big arms around me and held me tight against her. Her shirt moved gently on my cheek; but I pushed up her elbow and tore out from under it. I stood over her on the pavement.

"Get out of here," I said.

She sat there twisting her shirt again. Her breast heaved in big sobs, but she did not cry. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Go home." I turned toward the back door. Our house looked peaceful, damp.

"O.K.," I heard her say faintly as I went inside.

Lila sat on the edge of the bed, sagging the mattress, unlacing her boots. Dirt fell from them to the floor.

"I saw your aura today," I said. She pried off her boot. "I don't see it now." She pried off the other one and lay back on the pillow; the shirt, half-open, lay flimsy against her chest.

"Whad it look like," she said. She reached behind her for the bedpost; the mattress was about to roll her onto the floor.

"Purple."

"What's that mean?"

"Passion," I said, pulling my shirt over my head; we giggled like a flock of girls, like twins, like the rain, which I heard falling everywhere but on us, as I climbed over her into the bed. There was a lowing out in the rain, as if the shower itself were longing for the barn.

NOVENA

It all came back to Susan like the rosaries, one decade after another. First her mother Mary's story and then Susan's own story. Sometimes Susan confused the two stories, in the sense that we are all each other's memories and premonitions.

Mary

Pubic hair, dark curls against blue-white skin, is all she remembered of her own mother. Mary was seven-and-a-half when the "doctor" left her mother dead on the kitchen table. They said her mother was a blonde, but Mary didn't remember. They said her mother was French. Mary appreciated that when she was older. (Stuart romance in Edinburgh's dour back streets.) The pubic hair, she did remember, was flecked with grey.

Susan

The blood on the sheets of the double bed came from her toes, Susan's mother said. From clipping her toenails too close. But it smelled of sex and she couldn't fool Susan with this fairytale. Susan was already eight, so she knew she was too old to be an orphan and she remembered more than pubic hair. Susan remembered that when her father was at sea and her mother slept alone, there was blood on the ironed muslin sheets. She would crawl in next to Mom, snuggling away from the nightmares. Her mother never revealed her own dark dreams. But Susan knew, even then, that the blood was too high up for toes.

Mary

Mary's mother's photograph stood on the bookcase for four years after her death. Later Mary could never remember her mother's face, but she did remember all the books, each by place. Fifty years later. The Everyman volumes of Scott, the red leather Burns. And the Milton. Mary's father would bring down *Paradise Lost* and read her the order of the world. He would leave her oatmeal bubbling on the stove each morning. Mary always came straight home from school and prepared his supper. They took care of each other this way after her mother's death. But there was never enough warmth for his cough.

Susan

Susan's grandma, her father's mother, lived in the upstairs bedroom and never cried. Sometimes the "Jesus, Mary and Joseph" under her breath was more expletive than prayer, but Susan never saw the tears. Urine bottle on the lace doily. "Would you empty it dear?" Susan pretended it was orange juice and never smelled the difference. She took care of her father's mother the way she would have taken care of her father if he had ever been home. The pus oozed from Grandma's leg ulcer as Susan changed the muslin dressings. She washed yesterday's blood from these remnants. They dried outside on the line, slightly yellower than the double bed sheets, the stains gone from both. Susan never heard her mother *or* her grandma cry. Not even over onions.

Mary

Mary bawled with anger. On a sunny Saturday morning riding the Princes Street trolley down toward Leith and Portabello Beach. She was going home, alone, from the Royal Infirmary. When they had registered the night before, him alternately choking and spitting blood, he told her not to worry. God would take care of them both. He reminded Mary that HE would always be with her. And these people on the trolley, what right did they have to live, to laugh. She would never forget him, never. He would always be with her.

Susan

He came back periodically. Susan didn't remember much about her father, but she did remember the Japanese stamps, the Easter cablegram and a telephone call from Argentina just-to-say-hello. Her mother polished the Swiss music box, dusted the ivory elephant carvings from India and the fat ceramic god Ho Tai. Susan remembered her mother being happy for days before he returned. Once he brought back three bronze busts, of women in the traditional coiffures of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, cut off just before the nipples. He would stay home for two or three months at a time.

Mary

Broken chocolate and the *News of the World*. Mary would run down Leith Walk for their treats and race back home for the two evening hours before the coal fire. Her little brother Peter was there, too. Beautiful, blonde Peter. (It must have been true about her mother being a French blonde.) But *she* was his daughter. "Remember you're a Gibson and I love you," her father would say. She knew that, even the day he chased her out of St. Mary's Cathedral with a switch. All right to play with Maria Ciotti, to eat her mother's spaghetti, but never let him catch her again in that Papist sanctuary. She remembered for a long time afterward, because the switching was so unlike him.

Susan

Susan's mother taught her the Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Glory Be. Susan brought home the classroom rosary beads in the belly of the statue of the Infant of Prague which opened at the bottom like a piggy bank. Sister Matthew told them that the family that prays together stays together. But one afternoon when Susan was sitting with her father watching the Dodgers smash the Giants, he told her that her mother wasn't Catholic. She screamed and demanded he tell her she wasn't Jewish. (Sister Matthew had warned about the Jews.) "Go ask your mother," he teased, "go tell her you thought she was a Jew." "Protestant," Mary said heavily. She put her arms around Susan and told her God loved everyone. But Susan knew, then, that her mother Mary would not be saved.

Mary

After his death, Mary's half-sisters were always around—like faded aunts, somewhere in the background. They were kind to her, but restrained. Their mother, who was her mother, had run away to live with her father, who was not their father. Jennie, Kate, Patsy were older sisters who treated her kindly, especially after everyone's mother died. Mary. She was sweet, wee Mary. But neither Mary nor her sisters could forget she was a Gibson.

Susan

When Susan told Ann Crisillo that her family was moving all the way to Seattle for her father's shore job, Ann let Susan into the clique. Susan was invited to play in the family room which Dr. Crisillo had paneled and hung with the heads of dead animals. There was an all-color gumball machine. In June, Ann Crisillo came around to the house and pressed her nose on the warm backdoor screen. "Mrs. Campbell, will you see Eskimos in Seattle?" Susan was mortified by the question. She dreaded her mother's honest, boring answer. "There are snowy mountains," said her mother. Susan interrupted, "And moose." Her mother continued, "and the Pacific Ocean." The Pacific Ocean! Ann and Susan regarded each other seriously. They were passionate friends those last three weeks in New Jersey on the Atlantic Ocean.

Mary

Now, Mary always thought of her favorite teacher, Miss Mackie, when she started her shift at Fairley's Cafe. It was a kind of magic insurance policy against Miss Mackie coming in and discovering that she wasn't going to be a bookkeeper after all. That day, two years before, when Miss Mackie treated her to lunch at Fairley's had been the high point of Mary's entire life. Better than being Top Student. Better than getting married which Mary would never do anyway, because she was going to be a career woman like Miss Mackie, as she had promised her father.

Susan

Susan's chubby thighs stuck to the green naugahyde chair. She cried and cried. The kitchen chair had been baking on the sidewalk with the rest of the furniture, ready to be confiscated by the Mayflower man. It took a while for them to find her bawling in the street. "Some sight you make, Clownface," her mother said. "I won't go." "He'll always be with us from here on out," her mother said. "I won't go." Her mother hugged her tightly. Susan didn't want to be childish, so she went into her empty bedroom and played with the doll Ann Crisillo gave her to make them blood sisters. The doll's arms fell off just before supper.

Mary

Mary saw them come in the side door. Miss Mackie and a pudgy little girl smiling and chattering under her freckles and straw hat and red hair. Luckily, Mary's morning shift was almost over. She had a date with that sailor Andy Campbell who always wanted her to marry him and go off to America.

Susan

It was late. Susan's father never came home before midnight now. Because of this Alaska oil line, tricky business. So Susan would sit up with her mother and talk about times as long ago as Ann Crisillo and the moose. Susan always fell asleep in algebra the next morning, but someone had to stay up with her mother, to say he would be all right. Even though the roads were slippery and he was a terrible driver, especially through whisky fumes. Susan longed for the Easter cablegrams and the calls from Argentina. She knew it would never be all right and here they were on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Susan wished he would die, but instead, he and the bleach-blonde woman took off together for San Diego.

*****

Grey hair across the booth of the downtown diner. Mary's hazel eyes reflecting back to Susan what once was, what might have been. She cuts the deck, deals them each a canasta hand and keeps an eye out for customers. An old lady, cashiering at an all-night coffee shop. A middle-aged daughter, keeping her company. Hail Mary. Our Father. Glory Be. The words slip out with the cards. Who said them? Neither woman acknowledges. But perhaps someday yet they will talk about the blood too high up for toes.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai

FOUR POEMS IN SEARCH OF A SOBER READER

I. We have a history, yes
and it is full of women
who died
because some man
decided we
should be stoned or
burned or shut up.
I carry with me visions
of women screaming as
the flames rise as
the doors close as
the rocks fall
and they are visions
of us.

We have a history,
she and I
and we both know the feel
of locked doors
our fists against the wall
the words no one wanted.
We have a history
and we know either of us
could have had electrodes
strapped on lit up
could have had stony streets
turn harder.

But we survived, yes
and I was proud
of that and of our love
proud of her I drank
her like the coolest water
and every act of love
was also praise.
But it was not enough:
our lover's knot couldn't bind
her into peace.

She's gone to live with a man
and on the walls
are cartoons of women.
She spends nights smoking
in the bars;
she tells me she will sell
what is at hand. She wants to prove
she's normal
and I am left to mourn
her still living.

This is a social disease
the desire to be
normally dead.

II. A woman in the mills
who sweated out her life
and each week watched her husband
pay her wages to the tavern
had cause to be mad.
Hunger and beatings breed
frustration and another
nine months later. Rage
was easy too, for a woman
standing without a vote
watching a man stagger
from the saloon where he cast
her future, his wishes.
And the woman
helpless to save her daughter
from the man in her life
was foolish like a bird
beating against the bars.

We have forgotten why
women went with hatchets
to destroy the demon
drink. Our books show cartoons
of ugly faces beneath absurd
hats; we say those women were
foolish and neurotic.
We are embarrassed by this
evidence of women who moved
against the flow of reason.

Those were simple stories
too hard to tell in school.
But when men laugh, listen
closely. We of all movements
should know the power of bad press.
Ridicule is a powerful brew
and served to us for reason.

III. When everything is connected
the smart man makes a profit
on the links. Consider shipping rum,
New England to Africa. White
men bought dark bodies and piled them
tight as caskets in the hold.
The cost was low: a woman
for ninety-five gallons, a man
for thirty more. It was best
to mix the captives, never taking
many of a common language
lest they remember each other
into freedom and revolt.

The middle passage was the hardest.
The cargo died inconveniently
or mutinied against the chains.
Some starved themselves; others found release
through the nets spread above the sharks.
At least ten of every hundred died.
A month before the end, the women
were bathed in salt water
and given to the crew.

In the sugar colonies
sale was quick. Demand was always high;
a third of the arrivals died
within three years. Survivors
worked the cane: planted, cut, milled
and boiled. Yankee traders
carried home the sugar
and molasses for making rum
and so it began again.

This is historical fact.
The slick magazine, feminist

to the core, has pictures of the beautiful
people who drink
Puerto Rican rum. The best
of course is white,
very expensive. So are the people.
I imagine they speak
perfect English.

IV. when I ask for free space
the woman over there
says we must keep our meetings
accessible and Fay, black,
has more pain
and needs her drugs
to continue
and Angie, poor,
remembering rape, can
not go on
without her bottle

pounding on the wall
til my hands are blue
I want to drink
to forget

my mother, stumbling down the hall
did not drink because she was
Catholic divorced
on welfare with two children
or because my father
abused her and left

my mother, vomiting on the bed
drank because she did
not stop

watching a woman kill herself
by inches of a bottle
is not
a revolutionary act

Elva Pérez-Treviño

MILAGRA:
Character Sketch of a Woman Looking

All those that wish to die today are anxious for tomorrow when the possibilities of meeting death grow greater. Tomorrow is like today and yesterday, each a more violent day of hungry souls grappling at faint images of themselves. For them, the repetition heard in clanking chains that bind is a security: a deaf world is anxious for any sign. New visions and new insights claim responsibility, momentarily expand to occupy space on short notice, and then die for lack of attention. Sometimes though, when connections of thought and attention are made, new images form. They are blessed with a flair for movement, and their trails mark space with bands of fermented matter: large landscapes open where none existed before. One thought lets go into a thousand and more pictures. A new persona births and dies within split seconds, or it grows horns and tacks on colors and meaning to everyday existence by waiting . . . observing . . . studying the hues of sunsets leaves an impression of heat.

Today Milagra decided that she could not believe in any one thought long enough to see it give form . . . take shape. At thirty she has lost all use of her mind . . . she is busy being self-conscious. Too preoccupied with impressions, she laughs and cries with herself. Either she functions or she creates . . . the fine edge of her creativity carves space with a thin blade . . . here life slices into profane and sacred . . . all is minor divisions.

Today she became sweaty when she caught sight of herself looking at herself in the mirror: as a reflection she did not recognize herself. She has been thinking about passion and tries to envision herself as lover . . . she seduces herself into a tangent of thought. She avoids looking at her reflection, but she needs to see.

Her mind, in order to restore its equilibrium, creates fantasy in another dimension. She paints new visions because she knows, that no matter where, she is just a manifestation of static . . . she represents the ultimate in a process designed to complete divine desire into action. As her connections to pain and knowledge slowly dissolve into a still-picture, a new vision spins off.

"A woman who disowns herself can sit on any beach," mumbles Milagra's mind to itself. Milagra's usual state of waiting leads her into a

diffused awareness where her senses do not yet shatter against rigid barriers. She withdraws to another part of her thinking. Totally immersed in contemplation, she stands before the mirror desperate to feel anything, even pain . . . to understand even the negative can be positive. In the mirror, her face shys. Short bits of anxiety spring from old sores . . . her eyes waver before themselves.

"In all honesty, I don't recognize myself . . . how strange . . . I never look at my face, unless it's to pick at some flaw." Milagra initiates a self-contemplation that leads to alienated feeling . . . the absence of firm ground that nurtures seeds of knowledge not yet understood: ignorance confronts its lack of self-respect. She reaches into the source that makes her look, all the fertile memories of childhood, the want and the desperateness.

"These beasts of malcontent are suppose to die some time . . . a lot of people accept that time will erase the most bitter of life . . . yet, I see the necessity for full circles . . . something continuous in my life that makes sense. I'm not comfortable not knowing what to choose for myself. After all, what do I do because I want to . . . how much of my life? And why do I sound so melodramatic about it? What is necessary . . . which divisions . . . which circle?"

This seventh morning in July, a woman stands on the beach. The day barely lightens over the water. No gulls screech and the wind whips palm leaves with steady intensity. The woman is alone. She scans the blended horizon of sky and ocean. Her footprints wash free with each wave that surrenders onto the harder sand made of cracked shells. On the wet sand tiny crabs scatter, preparing for the new day, they scurry for their food and shelter. The woman stands silent, eyeing the vastness of unfirmed terrain, the lack of solid ground halting her deliberate, wandering step of curiosity and self-exploration.

Milagra never feels integrated during these moments of self-realization. In a frenzy, anxious to feel relief in this microcosm, she reclaims random moments from her life, no matter how painful or unnecessary. The work involved in testing her instincts for safety, recalling dead and live fears, are the measure of her personhood. To venture closer to shedding old patterns, to tentatively stroke new strengths, creases her forehead with concentration. Accepting what she sees of herself reflected is a deliberate and necessary process.

The woman sitting isolated underneath the sun shifts her eyes and her head travels full circle. Her gaze focuses on two native women squatting in a palm tree's shade. Her face intrigues them; with vacant eyes she pierces their souls. She moves them from the abstraction of waiting to the concrete wondering. They accept that this woman appears temporarily;

intentionally brief, she lights on a petal of thought. Her eyes look inward and the women know they must remain a silent refuge for this wandering soul. Her face wears the curious pout and downcast mask of the Uninvited; her presentation remains constant. She is numbed against the world: she is both microscope and specimen, another full circle which can respond in full form to its self-containment. She has come to this point and this beach before, but always ignorant of her whereabouts. Convinced in some mirror reflection, she visits with her only exclusive possessions, her self-worth, though at times it be nothing more than a bitter pit.

In the mirror Milagra can see herself, naked body gold-gilded by candle light. Her own hands run from her smooth throat to her shoulders around to her breasts. She cups her left breast and recalls her girlhood, the discovery of being able to lick her own nipple while she masturbates. She grows hot with shame with the recognition of her intense sexual demands, and she disputes with the feeling of shame. Old pain momentarily rears its angry tail. She sometimes is still ashamed of her early introduction to sex. Sexual abuse memories surface daily and make her a deliberately cautious woman. Then, from deep within her conflict, she loses sight of herself as her head lowers towards her breast, towards forgiving that girl. She regresses in honor of that moment and in the mirror Milagra releases her mind. She can be spied suckling her breast. Sounds shift the small candle flames with puffs of movement.

The two native women talk among themselves. Their facial expressions direct a limited conversation of precise exchange and connection. In appearance their similar dress blends them into a double image of the same person. To the observing eye they are a vision of brown skin, dark features, and strong builds. They rest on their haunches, their toes flick sand at insects that pester.

"That one will learn not to wait," Acatl, the older of the two natives, says, motioning with a jut of her chin towards the isolated woman.

"We have watched and remained silent for too long. The mornings that she has greeted the same dawn now accumulate the space and time of many years." Santos is still young, and does not express herself well, but plain enough.

Acatl, intentionally greeting new information with a philosopher's fever, replies. "She will learn because in waiting she learns how time and its phases are relative. When she learns that she can forgive and still not accept what she forgives she will move on to another moment that will no longer concern our silence, nor this dawn." The two native women are aspects of Milagra's inner dialogue with herself: two women whose existence lives in the hiatus between what Milagra knows and what she would like to know.

Milagra's head slowly returns to an even level where her eyes meet their reflection in the mirror. She licks her lips and spreads herself open at the crotch. Her fingers trace every fold of skin, as her own smell assails her nostrils, she is gone again into her subconscious. She can be observed twisting thought behind leveled eyes: small flames flicker . . . it is a new light. The look of self-containment can not be negated.

Milagra relaxes her hold on herself and begins to focus once again on her body. Her hands extract themselves from within her female hole. She turns towards the wash basin, runs cold water, and splashes her face, neck, and chest. She blows out the candles and moves into the sunny living room. Her thinking process is fully engaged in sorting through information about who she is.

"Are my sisters as scared of daily routine as I am?" Milagra pushes the question as dialogue with herself.

On the beach Acatl and Santos have stripped their wrapped skirts creating a multi-color canopy of shade. They flank the woman like mental apparitions. They become the boundaries of an increased awareness whose momentary presence creates a womb out of the entire of loose space. Meaning attaches to life, reasons throw off definitions. Milagra breaks one connection and makes countless others. In another setting through an open window, the sun can be seen aging. Shadows grow on walls, like even fungus when enough moisture remains to preserve microscopic life.

"How does that feel Milagra?" She addresses herself. "When I look at myself it feels like I must diminish myself . . . as I resolve who I am I find I can't forget my audience. All those who have seen who I am . . . in my ignorance, my response has always been sincere." But, she finds little comfort in this last thought.

The setting sun throws amber shadows of swaying mesquites at her feet.

"It feels tough to speak . . . this is what my nightmares say! In them I yank my gums and jaws in necessity to rid my mouth of what sticks: old gum in the way of my talking. It's true." Here Milagra becomes aware of a definite character to her existence, the firm belief in dreams sets a straight line she can follow.

She is drawn by the amber shadows of tree limbs grappling with the room, an outward picture of what happens inside her head. She sits on the floor, she sits within the casting rays of the dying sun.

"How much longer do I have to keep thinking about changing . . . transforming my visions into realities, before I change? I've self-arrested . . . I'm stuck . . . on myself . . . my mind can't breathe . . . split second leaping from faith to trust is still hard for me. Thinking it over, I don't know how to be open . . . be vulnerable? . . . and still not be expectant of those who open me up. How to change preoccupation to action . . . to

act before thinking . . . maybe I need to learn to let go . . . not to hold on.

Steel grey clouds pierce the open, blue sky. Seagulls travel the single whisper of wind and water. They hunt surface waters for fishes. They form shadows over a private strip of land where all thought converges into newness. Here anticipation and hunger wait in vain for a woman who takes her time in arriving at new conclusions. Here reasons are not formed out of the systematic leaping of logic, but are found in the satisfied look a woman gives herself in the mirror. Recognizing the foreign element narrows down the choices of deciding: to acceptance, or change, or death. This clarity has not been familiar, but the words are simple and easily understood like hallucinations and dreams. The symbols and messages are there, but what's important is the ambiance of their space . . . can it nurture.

Acatl and Santos hold firm to the fabric now a billowing wrap in a new, more gentle wind. A cool shadow forms a larger canopy above the trio. The two native women continue to be a staunch guard. The woman for whom barriers are difficult to erect, keeps the guard, the key of her journey, in check with her peripheral vision. She welcomes their beauty as she notices how blowing sand turns their hair white, and she unfolds into their significant presence. Milagra notices their warm smell and accepts her curiosity. Without thinking, she stands up, turns her back against the water and the waiting. Two women of firm step follow her into the thicker terrain, away from the water. Their procession is commanded by a single instinct: to follow the path that travelling day leaves.

"A woman who disowns herself can sit on any beach," Milagra's mind mumbles to itself as it turns outward. Three women walking flow in a single line against the horizon, blot out against the setting sun.

BLOODLINES

i.

i am not afraid of blood
red blood
not that of blood tests
or red cross donations
or cuts
not that which passes from me each month
in rich strong colors
i respect my red blood

it's not my blood
  it's my bloodline that i fear

the blood i fear has no color
except the flesh tones
which shape it

  the blood of my grandmothers
who live chained to food and toil

  the blood of my father
who let go of truth
in exchange for money

  the blood of my mother
who has stayed
thirty years in her marriage
because she is afraid to live alone
without a husband

ii.

i was carved out from you
my scalp still holds the scar
where the knife slipped into my forehead
just inches above my eyes

had the cut been lower
would i still see your eyes in the mirror
would strangers still stop me

in grocery stores to say:
–you don't know me do you but i know that you're lyndal's daughter
you must be you have her eyes i knew your mother
when she was thin and young as you

when you die there won't be the usual inheritance
you sold your silver that fall
when he left you
with little money
and you were hungry and sick
we have no family jewels
except for your wedding ring
but diamonds never shone for me
there are no quilts to hand me down
no knitting needles
only the felt ornaments you sew each christmas
so when you die
it will be your eyes that you leave

long after your eyes shut
unless i die first
i will have your eyes

iii.

you gave me these scars in my eyes
your words cut me
cut through me
for years
you made me afraid
of my face in the mirror
or in someone else's face
you made me afraid of you
i was 22 before i could look you
in the eyes

–afraid to not be perfect
afraid to appear as blemished
as my adolescent skin

your fatherly warnings cut through me
–you've been picking your face haven't you
–you need a dermatologist
–you're going to be pock-marked
your warnings scarred me afraid

never good enough for you–why
didn't you make all A's, how come, huh?
i was afraid
to make mistakes
never good enough
for anyone
else
as a teacher afraid to make mistakes
as a friend afraid to make too many
with a lover
afraid to not be perfect
afraid to not be perfect

i have other scars from my childhood
scars on my knees from
bike wrecks skates and skateboards
a chicken pox mark on my thigh
they've mostly faded
but the scars on my eyes remain
afraid that if i'm seen too closely
i won't be good enough

the scars in my eyes remain
but i've learned to ignore them
as one learns to ignore large birthmarks
and facial moles
i live in ignorance of them
until i come too close
and my eye contact begins to vanish
afraid to not be perfect
never good enough for you
afraid to not be perfect

iv.

in your eyes
i can do little wrong
the first grandchild on either side
i was a perfect baby the perfect child
i can do little wrong
i become your saviour at christmas
your breath of fresh air in perk's room
of ceaseless cigarettes and television
i am the future you never had
the youth you gave up at 13

to marry
and at 14 to have my father
i am the lives you never led
the schooling the travels the freedom
you turned over to your men

you know my skin
but not my blood
not my rivers
or what makes me boil
you love what your minds have molded of me
but you don't know me
not my soil or sands or soul
you love the child you've made up
and in your eyes
i can do little wrong

v.

i am not afraid of red blood
the blood i fear
has no color
except the flesh tones which shape it
it's my blood line that i fear

the tendencies and traits you passed down to me
the connections that i have had no choice of

i fear
that your blood in me might some day
run stronger than my own
that i'll drown in your blood
that it will cause me to chase comfort
instead of unanswered questions
cause me to lose control
and to grow obese and weary young
i fear
that i'll be afraid to live alone
and that i'll drown
in your blood first

THE LEGEND

(Chaco Cañon, Mesa Verde)

We never understood the significance
of the abandonment, whether
it was a cause of personality
or not. Certainly,
there were persons involved,
possibly goddesses, spirits and gods,
but whether they were simply
bullets shot from an unaimed gun,
or whether one stood and
deliberately chose a target
was not said.
The oldest manuscript maintained
that she had done it all,
that had she moved
in certain ways uncongenial to her nature,
the collision of body and projectile
would never have occurred.
Later manuscripts analysed it differently,
and held the invisible hand responsible,
though there were those who would insist
that such collisions (collusions) were
in the nature of things, and
not to be understood. Abundance
figured in it, they all agreed, but how
its lack transpired (luck) could not be
understood.
The elder tales were genially ignored.

(San Ysidro, Cabezon)

We went up the pass, she and I,
to see the mountain turning,
watched it discover
its golden light
rejoicing
we followed a rutted road
center blooming and filled with rocks,
yellow, magenta and pale brown,
that kept us twisting, unable to see
what was ahead, climbing

until the valley opened wide below
fading into simple blue as the sky,
revealing distance to our astounded eyes.
We were reminded of an old wanderer's dream,
a stream fizzing and bubbling among the hills,
the blooming, smokable trees–
the kind and perfect ease anyone would wish for,
going so unbelieved.

I want to tell you this:
the notion of how it ought to be,
name of an Eskimo god who sits,
content, grinning. He understands.
And so do you, and I,
if only we could remember
the banks are steep,
the peaks so far away,
but in between
a careful space of perfect springs
and all we'd ever need,
and swift winds on the peaks
where the light is clear.

(Jemez)

Walking along the dry arroyo bed
we pick up bits of chipped,
shaped flint, obsidian, find manos
scattered almost randomly
among the stones.
The air is warm.
Cicadas sing in the twisted junipers,
low wind builds behind, murmuring
old forgotten songs.
The women used to come here to work
before the land went slack
vacant
and white.
It is important
to know how they thought,
the white ancestors of the woman
I walk beside: they
needed something to fear,
something frightening to name,
to speak about their inner sense
of things.

And so it was.
Someone else reaped
their despair.
Over the next hill at the mesa's foot
the village curls around itself.
There is a picture on a stone near my hand,
the line of eternal return, circling.

FALL RETURN

There is this:
skimming light among the trees,
leaves sparking,
old women facing destiny
blazing as gloriously:
on their mark.
The set of their limbs is not grievous,
ready to make the last long arabesque
they go singing, thin wrinkled voices wavering
on the turquoise air. Falling
toward the earth once and for all. They
counted all the years.

THE FLOOD

Looking at old FSA photographs
on a winter afternoon in Brooklyn, New York.
Looking at: a sharecropper's hands,
small children on a rotting porch,
plowed fields that have dried to dust.
Remembering you
and your garden of withered tomatoes,
bell peppers, mustard greens,
on a farm near Valera, Texas.
Those rutted rows of grey soil.
The drought that hung on through winter.

Now I remember your husband's hands,
his grand piano
in the living room of that cropper house.
(You told me about the filth you found,
how you shoveled a six-inch layer
of rat shit and dirt off the floors . . .)
His fingers were red from the cold
as he played a cold, pounding Bach.

He refinished your furniture,
applied for professorships at small mountain schools
like the one that had let him go,
while the winter fields rolled around you.

• • •

I came to visit on Sunday afternoons,
sat on the cedar bench to hear Carl play.
I drank tea
brewed with the water you hauled from town.
I watched your children
tumble with the collie in the cold:
the tumbling colors of brown, beige, blonde,
red-gold against the grey ground.
I imagined mud, grain, harvests,

the colors of hay and wheat.
Your long hair loose in the fields.
Sometimes we all drove the thirty miles
across Coleman County to your parents' farm,
where the weedy hills, pecan bottoms
and feed-lot cows were decoration,
and the Colorado with its spongy water table
kept the wells from going dry.

We went there to swim.
(You told me
how the government took the river bottom;
how your father finally endorsed the check
and used it to build an indoor pool
at the top of the hill.)
We went to stand inside the plate glass walls,
to look through fog
at the fat green river down the hill.
We went to dive into lukewarm water
and come up again, eyes stinging.

• • •

We went there the last Sunday I saw you.
You left the kids at the house with Rosita.
You swam laps with your father,
went on swimming
while he sat dripping in a lawn chair,
drinking a Schlitz, talking to Carl.
You swam close to the edge, and slowly;
after each lap you slid another clothespin
down the string your father had stretched
across the corner of the pool.

I floated on my back,
watched your steamy reflection in the glass,
remembered walking in your back door,
finding you in the bedroom, folding and refolding
towels. You said, "Carl knows."

Carl, at the piano, crying,
red fingers pushing at his glasses.
He said, "Just don't shut me out."
He said, "I'll try to understand it,"
and "This is what she's always wanted."
Finally he said,
"I can't think about it anymore.
I want to have an ordinary Sunday afternoon."

• • •

I got out of the pool when I bumped hard into Carl,
who was swimming laps now, too.
I went into one of the dressing rooms,
turned on the shower.
I wondered what I was going to do.

Then the shower curtain moved.
You were laughing.
You stripped off your suit and swimming cap
and slung them over the curtain.
You stood just under the nozzle;
I watched the water flood over you,
soak into your hair, stream off your nose,
your shoulders, breasts.
Laughing, you turned your head up,
let the water run into your mouth,
and with a mouth full of water kissed me.

Judith McDaniel

THE PRIVILEGE OF CHOICE

A review of *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* by Lillian Faderman, William Morrow & Co., 1981. $10.95. 496 pp.

Lillian Faderman has written an important book, one which I hope we will be exclaiming over and arguing about for years to come. *Surpassing the Love of Men* whets the appetite by satisfying a need we perhaps did not even know we had: as a result the reviewer is tempted only to ask for more without noting profoundly enough the riches Faderman has provided. I will try in this review to deal with the book Faderman has written, not the four or five more books I hope she will write. But one of the riches of her subject is that it continually suggests areas, theories, problems which will need the further attention of all of us—readers, historians, literary critics, fiction writers, poets, and feminist theorists.

To describe *Surpassing the Love of Men* is to recognize that Faderman has given us three books in one. The first is a history of romantic friendship and love between women from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. The second shows the transition from society's acceptance and approval of this love to an attitude of disgust and horror at such love as a perversion of "normal" heterosexual love. Finally, Faderman provides a brief account of the rise of lesbian feminism: our attempts in the last fifteen years to counter the definition of love between women as "perverted," to build a strong and healthy base for woman-identification.

Using letters, diaries, poems, and other written accounts, the first section of this book copiously documents the phenomenon of primary love and support between white women in the middle and upper classes of western Europe, Great Britain, and the United States. Faderman disproves the frequent and self-serving assertion of heterosexual literary critics that the expression of passionate, physical love between these women was a "mere" literary convention without real meaning or substance in their lives. Given the choice, most of the women Faderman writes about would have chosen to live with, be with, sleep with their women friends rather than the husbands to whom they were—most frequently—economically and legally bound.

Lillian Faderman did not invent the definition of lesbian that insists we are only what we *do* sexually, specifically that a woman is only a lesbian if she engages in genital sexual SOMETHING with another woman. (More

specific still, I was once told by a heterosexual woman, "After all, at most you're only a lesbian for a few minutes a day," that is, we are only lesbians when we are engaged in a sexual act with another woman.) Nonetheless, Faderman is saddled with the inevitable question—did they or did they not make love, have sexual contact as we understand it—since it has been asked (or the answer assumed) about women in centuries past. From the Ladies of Llangollen to Eleanor Roosevelt, IT seems to be the burning question, and part of the tact of Faderman's book is to not assume one answer for all centuries. But almost invariably, for those of us who knew ourselves lesbian before we knew sexual intimacy with a woman, the discussion seems irrelevant and misleading. And for those of us who are nervous about straight women taking on the name lesbian as a political identity without giving up the perquisites of heterosexuality, the discussion seems foreboding and potentially divisive. Faderman argues intelligently that the answer is ultimately unimportant: what we must see through to is the need of those asking the question—a need which is rigid and seeks to limit the "perversion" of lesbian sexuality to a few oversexed, misdirected freaks. But I disagree with certain aspects of Faderman's analysis. She argues that, usually, romantic friends were not lovers as we understand that word. Perhaps not. But the issue that interests me, which Faderman does not explore, is whether two women could have chosen what was "unknown," since lesbian sexuality was obviously undiscussed. If they chose to act against the definition of themselves as women (that definition which said women had no sexual feelings of any description), how might that have affected the other choices which such women made in their lives? I wonder if such women would have been more able to resist the patriarchy in other areas—economic, social, cultural?

The question of choice is an important one in this first section of the book in another way. Women who could choose how they would live their lives were very few and very privileged. "I am well aware that there are many fine men," writes seventeenth-century novelist Madeleine de Scudery, "but when I consider them as husbands, I think of them in the role of masters, and because masters tend to become tyrants, from that instant I hate them. Then I thank God for the strong inclination against marriage he has given me." Faderman comments that "when their families and fortunes permitted them to avoid these entanglements, they did; but such freedom was rare" (p. 89). As a reader, it would have helped me in this realization if Faderman had included some continuous reminder of the actual conditions of these women's lives, how thorough was their bondage to men, perhaps some sense of what a luxury these friendships represented when they were realized in full. It seems to me that the pervasive absence of accounts of working-class women (urban and rural) from this book is more than just the absence of written records, although this is a real and difficult problem in any historical analysis. But we are surely allowed, indeed, required to speculate on the conditions of life that produced romantic friendships and forbade them, and working-class women need not be

left out of that speculation. If, for example, as Faderman proposes, romantic friendships were in part a response to the enforced separation between the sexes—that men and women lived and worked in an almost exclusively same-sex environment—then I want to know whether that condition was present or not in other classes of the time. If so, would other factors have prohibited loving friendships between women? If not, can we discover whether women formed these friendships in spite of the presence of men rather than just in their absence?*

The second part of *Surpassing the Love of Men* is a profoundly disturbing account of the way in which female friendship became seen as a threat by men and was therefore—almost as a matter of course—declared abnormal and immoral by men. Faderman's thesis is not very complicated; it doesn't have to be. When women had no real potential for economic and social independence through which they could realize their lives together apart from men, romantic friendships were harmless. Indeed, they served the purpose of "controlling" women, allowing them an emotional release which in fact reinforced their bondage to men, both by providing women with some satisfaction in their lives and at the same time keeping them in the world of women, away from the lives and achievements of men. As soon as that economic condition changed, as soon as capitalism required more workers in the workforce and women became the available bodies, another means had to be found to force them into marriage with men. Faderman asks:

> If they gained all the freedom that feminists agitated for, what would attract them to marriage? Not sex drive, since women still were not acknowledged to have one; possibly the longing for children. . . . Perhaps love for a man might draw a woman to marriage, but with the battle of the sexes raging even more virulently than ever, how could that magnet be relied on? . . . If women on a large scale now had no hindrance in their freedoms they might find kindred spirits, other women, and provide homes and solve the problem of loneliness for each other.
>
> For the first time, love between women became threatening to the social structure. (pp. 237-38)

Hence, female friendship had to become a vile social transgression. Faderman documents this abrupt and striking phenomenon, emphasizing as she does so not that love between women is a fashion which comes and goes, but that love between women is an enduring constant which has been seen as supportive or threatening to men in different times and places and, therefore, encouraged or suppressed accordingly.

Faderman's account of the theories of the early "sexologists" is lucid and frightening. Westphal, Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, Freud. Through their work "love between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness." She de-

*Not available to Faderman when she was writing, but of equal relevance here, is Paula Gunn Allen's essay, "Beloved Women: Lesbians in Native American Cultures," in *Conditions 7*, 1981.

monstrates the inevitable linking of lesbianism and feminism, explaining to me for the first time that word I found so many years ago in *The Well of Loneliness:* invert.

> A lesbian, by the sexologists' definition, was one who rejected what had long been woman's role. She found that role distasteful because she was not really a woman–she was a member of the third sex. Therefore she did not really represent women. All her emotions were inverted, turned upside down: instead of being passive, she was active, instead of loving domesticity, she sought success in the world outside. . . . She loved womankind more than mankind. (p. 240)

I am not sure I can agree with Faderman's follow-up thesis, that as part of a self-fulfilling prophecy many lesbians became transvestites and "butches because such behavior demonstrated *ipso facto* that they were the genuine article, that they must be taken seriously and not forced into heterosexual patterns" (p. 245). This assertion is a throw-away, never mentioned again, let alone developed, an example of several provocative speculations I wish Faderman *had* either developed or left out.

Most of these problematic assertions occur in the final section of the book, the account of the rise and growth of our current lesbian feminist movement. Brief and necessarily unfinished–lesbian feminists are still working to undo the damage of Freud, et al.–the account of the growth and healing found by lesbians who are actively feminist is where I would send writers in search of a book–or send Lillian Faderman herself for her next four or five. For example, she asserts that there are benefits for lesbians in the conjunction of the rise of feminism and the occurrence of the so-called sexual revolution (p. 377). I have myself doubted this, argued the opposite, and feel it needs to be examined, not asserted. Writing as a literary critic, Faderman outlines a history of lesbian feminist literature so briefly that it almost seems limited and exclusionary, rather than an opening out of possibilities of subject, style and form. And she states that the acceptance of lesbian literature by commercial presses is responsible for the "slowing down of production among the lesbian-feminist presses," which is statistically incorrect, whether one measures the number of lesbian feminist and feminist publishing companies or the number of books being published by them in 1981.

Nonetheless, *Surpassing the Love of Men* is a necessary book, one that will make other historical work possible. The thesis of this book is dramatic proof of the bonding between women (whether sexual, emotion, or both) and profound disproof of the twentieth-century myth that two women cannot bond, cannot remain loyal to one another, cannot and will not choose the friendship of women over patronization by men. It is a book which *ought* to change the face of literary criticism and social history, although I am afraid that unless women writers and critics take it seriously, this "new" knowledge will almost certainly be ignored, re-buried, along with so much that we, as women, used to know. Finally, *Surpassing the Love of Men* can be read by every lesbian for her own mental and emo-

tional clarity. To know what Lillian Faderman has unearthed for us is to change the grounds on which so many of our battles today are being fought. Love between women is the norm. Let those who disagree shoulder the burden of proof.

Bonnie Zimmerman

TESTIMONIES

A review of *The Lesbian Path,* edited by Margaret Cruikshank. Published by Double-Axe Books, distributed by Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302. 248 pp. $6.95. *We're Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women,* by Angela Stewart-Park and Jules Cassidy. Published by Quartet Books, 1977, distributed by Horizon Press, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010. $3.95. 152 pp.

Despite erosion from within and attacks from without, it is as yet a fortunate time to be a lesbian in the western world. A generation ago, women could go only to the doom and gloom paperback novels for images and stories of lesbian life. With the gay and feminist movements, all that began to change and today we have novels, poetry, autobiography, and non-fiction that present a rich and diversified picture of women-loving women. A popular literary form used in many books–such as *Lesbian/ Woman, The New Lesbians, Our Right To Love,* and *The Coming Out Stories*–is the short personal testimony or interview. These testimonies give many women who are not professional writers the space to tell their tales, breaking down the silence that reinforces lesbian oppression. We find in these stories the similarities and differences that remind us no lesbian is alone or unique, that we all belong to a growing community.

Two new collections of lesbian voices have recently appeared: *The Lesbian Path,* edited by Margaret Cruikshank, and *We're Here: Conversations with Lesbian Women,* by Angela Stewart-Park and Jules Cassidy (originally published in England in 1977 but newly distributed here.) *The Lesbian Path,* subtitled "37 Lesbian Writers Share Their Personal Experiences, Viewpoints, Traumas and Joys," is described by its editor as "one work which marks the beginning of our literary expression. Illustrating our quest for new self images, it is a collective work–the autobiography not of one woman but many. This book celebrates the survival of an

oppressed group by showing our strength and resilience . . . we have an exhilarating sense of our power to say—sometimes tentatively—who we are." These diverse narratives (some actually poems and a few more like essays) document lesbian history and culture through accounts of coming out, struggles, literature, mothers, public lives and adventures.

Although *The Lesbian Path* is a "collective autobiography," some parts inevitably work better than others. I found myself excited by a few entries, interested in many, bored by a handful, and even disturbed by a very few. I particularly enjoyed the coming out section, "Finding Ourselves." "A Flower for Judith" describes Sarah Spencer's gift of love to her best childhood friend which became a symbol of perversion to their parents, and haunts her years later: "When I think of my coming out, I think of the never-ending opening of the never-ending petals of a flower, that special painful flower from so long ago." I was also moved by Margaret Sloan's poem to the women of her family, in particular her independent unmarried aunt Johnnie Mae who died of cancer at age thirty-three, leaving words unspoken and stories untold. Jane Gurko, in "Coming Out in Berkeley, 1967," tells her story of a three-way relationship with a classically self-centered male and his wife; Jane falls in love with the woman, who is too frightened to leave her husband—that old painful story. My favorite narrative in the book is another "Old Story": Joan Nestle's account of being a fem in the fifties. Having myself come out toward the end of the role-playing era when, despite my strenuous efforts, I resigned myself to being a fem, I have been waiting for Joan's story for a long time. Since everyone I know claims to have been a butch in the old days, I have often wondered who they were making love to: straight women? each other (goddess forbid)? Nestle, finally, explains what it meant to be a fem lesbian: "'Fem' didn't mean passivity; it meant a driving need and it meant performance. I wanted to be the best woman in bed for the woman who chose me. I wanted to be the reward for other women's strength. I created homes for strong women who lived in small uncared for apartments and all the time I knew the power of my own hands but I kept them still."

Other stories in *The Lesbian Path* that I particularly liked include Minnie Bruce Pratt's unsentimental account of lesbian motherhood, a necessary counterpart to the ideal relationships celebrated in lesbian mythology (such as the film *In the Best Interests of the Children.*) Isabelle McTeigue shares "An Incident in the Fifties"—queer-baiting by the Civil Service Commission that, in the wake of *Norton Sound* and Billie Jean King, doesn't read like ancient history. Finally, Audre Lorde's "Of Sisters and Secrets," like the other short pieces she has been publishing recently, is only a taste of a major autobiography to come.

But some sections of *The Lesbian Path* bothered me. Although I agree with the moral imperative of "respecting every woman's process," I don't believe we have to accept them all uncritically. The unexamined assump-

tions of some stories might set certain readers on edge. For example, the book is imbued, far too much for my taste, with Christianity, both in the coming out stories of several women and in the continuing religious choices of others. At least two of the authors are currently Christian ministers, and while they acknowledge the homophobia and rigidity of established churches, they do not question the inherent sexism of Christianity that Mary Daly has shown us. "A Wedding in Carmel," an extremely idealistic piece, does not evaluate the implications of lesbians participating in—either legally or extra-legally—the sexist and heterosexist institution of marriage. Furthermore, the romantic, overly emotional tone found in some stories lessens their impact: "But here—at college, away from the town that my parents called my home—I find peace at last, a beautiful, supportive women's community, and friends. I feel warm energy radiating from them and I lovingly return it with a strong and gladdened soul" (p. 24). I often wished that the editor had encouraged more rewriting, or had provided a guiding, critical consciousness. As a result, I feel that *The Lesbian Path* is a mixed collection, although certainly a valuable addition to the record of lesbian lives.

We're Here struck me as being almost uniformly excellent and exciting. My curiosity was aroused by the differences between lesbian life in the U.S. and in England. Perhaps, since I spent several months in England in 1977 when this book was written, I was intrigued to learn more about a lifestyle I only peripherally experienced. But *We're Here* also excited me because it is a collection of excellent interviews by astute and probing interviewers. While personal narratives can be self-indulgent, uncritical or superficial (as can poor interviews), sharp interviewers such as these women can coax and pull strong statements and observations out of their subjects. This is particularly true in *We're Here* since these authors are not neutral; although they vary their questions and their tone from interview to interview, they never mute the fundamental political purpose of their project.

The introduction immediately establishes the political agenda of this book: "Society doesn't like to give us any space to be ourselves openly because we are an alternative. We're an alternative to heterosexuality, which is projected as the norm. We question, just by being here, many values which are a part of heterosexuality. We question monogamy. We question marriage. We question women's dependence on men. We question male/female role-playing. We question the sexuality of every human being who thinks they're normal."

The women chosen to be interviewed in *We're Here* thus tend to be politically involved, although not all are primarily activists. Several are involved in England's gay civil rights organizations or in the women's liberation movement. One woman became a celebrity after being kicked out of midwifery school for her lesbianism. Another is the founder of *Sappho* magazine, a *Lesbian Tide*-like publication. One is a well-known lesbian feminist artist, another an English counterpart of pacifist Barbara Deming,

and still another a member of a women's liberation rock band. Others are not actively political, but through the editors' probing, all draw connections between their individual lives and the politics of lesbianism.

These women are also diverse in age, profession, class and lifestyle, although all are white. At least one woman belongs to England's Irish minority, and one is an American Jewish woman residing in England. The absence of any interviews with lesbians of color is a serious flaw in this book. This is especially true as it becomes clearer that England, like the United States, is a multi-racial and racist nation. On the other hand, several of the interviewed women are outspokenly working class, and it is startling to note the clarity of their class consciousness in comparison to the wide-spread American belief in our universal middle class. One woman is an ex-prisoner and current welfare mother; another the illegitimate daughter of a battered wife. Other women live middle-class lives; some are in monogamous relationships, others in no relationships at all. Many have children. They talk about being closeted, coming out, relationships, sex, causes of lesbianism, prison experiences, classism, politics and the movement, men, role-playing, and even astrology and vegetarianism. The unifying thread in this collective story is provided by the authors, who keep asking pushy questions until they uncover the real souls of these women.

Perhaps that is what makes *We're Here* such a good book. I felt that I got to know these women–interviewers and interviewees. Were I to meet them on the street I could pick up the conversation where it had left off. I got a sense of the English movement's consciousness and tone of voice: intellectual, political, class-conscious. I understand better the differences and similarities between being a dyke in America and a dyke in England. And I was very pleased to know that, indeed, we're here, on a lesbian path that extends around the entire world.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

"Amazones d'Hier, Lesbiennes d'Aujourd'hui": Video for Lesbians only, made by French Canadian Lesbians about themselves. English version is a voice-over of the original French. Available in ¾-inch or ½-inch tape. For further information or rental requests: Video-Amazones, c/o Ariane Brunet, Boite 429, Succ. Station Victoria, Montreal H3Z-2V8, Quebec, Canada.

Anthology: What are white feminists doing to combat racism in the U.S.? Content will include: political analysis and theory; personal stories and anecdotes; guidelines for action; possibly a directory/bibliography. The goal is to produce both a historical document and a useful and inspiring guide/resource in which diverse women speak for their (or their group's) experiences dealing with racism. Issues of classism and anti-Semitism will be addressed as they relate/are part of racism. For further information please contact: Tia Cross, 230B Pearl St., Cambridge, MA 02139. (617) 492-6434.

Azalea: A magazine by 3rd World lesbians. Quarterly. Fiction, poetry, essays, reviews, visuals. Subscriptions: $2 single / $6 yearly / $10 institutions, organizations / free to womyn in prison. Accepting submissions from lesbians of color only. Azalea, P.O. Box 200, Cooper Sta., N.Y., N.Y. 10276.

Bloodroot: A Feminist restaurant-bookstore with a seasonal vegetarian menu. Lunches, dinners daily (Sunday brunch). 85 Ferris St., Bridgeport, CT 06605. Tel. (203) 576-9168.

C & H Publishing Services (now typesetting and pasting-up camera-ready copy for Naiad Press and *Sinister Wisdom*) offers careful and accurate editing, copyediting, proofing, typesetting, paste-up, and layout at reasonable rates. Founders and former editors of *Sinister Wisdom.* Harriet Desmoines and Catherine Nicholson, C & H Publishing Services, 10 Birch Rd., Shelburne Falls, MA 01370. (413) 625-2888.

Cleis Press/P.O. Box 8281/Minneapolis, MN 55408. A feminist publishing company committed to serious woman-identified works, especially those by lesbians and women of color. Our first publications include *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence,* edited by Frederique Delacoste and Felice Newman ($13.95) and *On Women Artists: Poems 1975-1980,* by Alexandra Grilikhes ($4.95): $1 for first item, .50 for each additional item (postage and handling). We welcome manuscripts from *all* women. SASE please.

Feminist Books is a new venture based in Melbourne, Australia. We aim to carry a wide range of feminist/lesbian UK and USA publications at low prices for women in Australia. Please send us any samples of journals, periodicals, books, cards, etc. for consideration. 254 Rae St., N. Fitzroy, Victoria 3068, Australia.

Free to Women in Prison: Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds., *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology.* Please request from: Persephone Press, Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172.

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press is committed to producing and distributing the work of Third World women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes that will further the cause of Third World women's personal and political freedom. Resources needed: financial contributions (make checks out to Kitchen Table Press); materials, ideas, and contacts; manuscripts (send outlines for book projects after January 1, 1982); women of color in the New York area who want to be involved in day-to-day, unromantic, undramatic labor of love. Box 592, Van Brunt Sta., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215.

Spinsters, Ink will be reading manuscripts from Feb. 1 to April 30th, 1982, for selection of two books to be published by fall of 1982. We will consider poetry and prose, fiction or non-fiction, material which could be published either in pamphlet or book form. We encourage women of all races, ages, and backgrounds to submit their work. Please include SASE.

Third World Women's Archives. Purpose: to collect, preserve, and circulate multilingual materials about, by, and for Third World Women; to further the development of a network of information and support for Third World women in the U.S. and abroad. Materials will include: personal papers, letters, and diaries, photographs, tapes, films, unpublished manuscripts, articles, books, journals, flyers and posters, artwork, sheet music and records, etc., etc. You can assist us by donating or lending materials for our collection and/or contributing your time, money, equipment, etc. For more information, write Third World Women's Archives, P.O. Box 1235, Yale Sta., New Haven, CT 06520.

Womyn's Braille Press has made a major change in policy. As a result, periodicals are being asked to produce their own taped version of each issue, which WBP will then duplicate and distribute. To help *Sinister Wisdom* meet this responsibility, we are looking for women in the local area (including Boston) to volunteer a few hours every three months to read *Sinister Wisdom* onto tape. If you own or have access to a stereo deck, cassette recorder, or reel-to-reel recorder of good quality, and can volunteer some time, please send information, including phone numbers, to SW, Box 660, Amherst, MA 01004.

Billie Diffenbacher is a prisoner who would like pen-friends. Please write to her at: Box 520, Walla Walla, WA 99362.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Paula Gunn Allen's *A Cannon Between My Knees* has recently been published by Strawberry Press, and her *Star Child* by Blue Cloud. Her collection of poems, *Shadow Country*, was published by the University of California Press in 1981.

Gloria Anzaldúa is the author of *La Chingada: A Poem-Play with Music, Dance and Song*, and co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone Press, 1981). She is presently writing *Poetry and Magick: A Practicum for Developing Literary and Psychic Skills.*

Diane Ayott, artist and educator, is currently in transition from one place to another.

Michele A. Belluomini, a Virgo, was born in 1949. She is part of a lesbian/feminist writers group in Philadelphia. She has researched and facilitated workshops and classes on the subject of the matriarchy.

Martha Boethal: "I'm a Texan; for as long as I can remember, I've been writing in order to survive–and to understand–my environment. I'm just finishing my first manuscript of poems."

Diana Bickston is a 27-year-old lesbian. She began writing in a prison workshop in Arizona. She has a chapbook published by COSMEP, and is working on a manuscript of poems and short stories.

Beth Brant is a Mohawk/white lesbian/feminist/writer in Detroit, co-founder with Denise Dorsz of Turtle Grandmother Books.

Mary Ann Daly saw her first Dogtooth Violets in 1981.

Barbara Deming's two most recently published books are *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives* (distributed by Frog in the Well Press) and *Remembering Who We Are* (distributed by Naiad Press). Born in 1917 in New York City, she lives now in Sugarloaf Key, Florida. An interview with her appeared in the "Disobedience" issue of *Feminary* (1981).

Jane Gapen has recently published her first book, *Something Not Yet Ended*, which has in it narrative, poetry, and drawings. She has two grown-up children, works with battered women, and lives in the Florida Keys with Barbara Deming.

Pesha Gertler lives in Seattle, writes poetry, short stories, essays; recently published her first chapbook, *Tales of an Immigrant Woman* (Amy David Press); travels giving poetry workshops and lectures on the New Woman's Genre.

Rebecca Gordon is an office worker recently relocated in San Francisco. She and Sandra de Helen collaborated writing the play "When I Was a Fat Woman and Other True Stories," based on Rebecca's poetry and produced by a women's theatre company in Portland. She's also published a first collection of poems, *By Her Hands.*

Sarah Lucia Hoagland is a lesbian feminist philosopher and separatist who lives and teaches in Chicago.

Judith Katz is a playwright and story-teller based in Northampton, Massachusetts. Her work appears in *The Coming Out Stories* (Persephone Press) and *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence* (Cleis Press). "Nadine Pagan's Last Letter Home" is part of a larger work in progress called "The Monster in My Mother's House."

Judith McDaniel is co-founder and publisher of Spinsters, Ink.

Valerie Miner's second novel, *Mirror Images*, is being published by the Women's Press, London. "Novena" will appear in her forthcoming collection, *Movement*, to be published by Crossing Press in Spring 1982.

Catherine Risingflame Moirai lives on a farm in Tennessee. Her work has appeared in *Southern Exposure* and in *Sinister Wisdom* 17.

Martha Nichols lives in Pittsburgh, where she has been active in the Feminist Writers Guild and in organizing a women's erotic art show.

Elva Pérez-Treviño is a Mestiza born in San Antonio, Texas. "I have been writing creatively since the age of 7. The main influence on my work continues to be the landscape and the sun: two principles that survive all the devastation that has been inflicted on my race."

Selma Miriam writes: "I'm 47 years old. My mother named me Miriam (middle name) to remember her aunt who in turn commemorated my mother's grandmother. The dictionary says Miriam means bitter, and that pleases me. The women I work and live with–Betsey, Noel, Pat–nurture my hopes and encourage my anger."

Barbara Smith is co-editor, with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott, of *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, published in 1981 by The Feminist Press. She is one of the founders of Kitchen Table–Women of Color Press, and lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Wendy Stevens: "i am the echo in hallways / the stones in the wall of a gate / a woman who marks time / by the wear on her floor."

Celeste Tibbets lives in Athens, Georgia, supports herself financially by working with emotionally disturbed adolescents, writes at night, and wants to one day be a farmer as well.

Bonnie Zimmerman lives and works in San Diego. Her article "Lesbianism 101" appeared in *Radical Teacher* no. 17.

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Issue numbers 20 and 21 will be a double issue, forthcoming in May. Some of the contents: narratives by Donna Allegra, Ruth Herstein, Joan Nestle, Annmarie Wagstaff; poetry by Chrystos, Lynn Crawford, Virginia de Araujo, Mab Segrest, Patricia Jones; theory by Martha Courtot, Judy Freespirit; reviews by Cherríe Moraga, Melanie Kaye; much more to come. Deadline for writing and artwork to be included in this issue: January 31, 1982.

Back issues (while they last): *SW* #4: "What Is a Lesbian?"; poetry by Claudia Scott, Audre Lorde; Joy Justice on separatism. *SW* #7: Melanie Kaye on the medical establishment; poetry by Susan Wood-Thompson, Teresa Anderson; Judith Schwarz, "On Being Physically Different." *SW* #18: artwork by Wendy Cadden and Liza Deep Moss; narratives by Maureen Brady, Clare Coss, Lee Lynch; poetry by Gabrielle Daniels, hattie gossett, Judy Grahn; theory by Joanna Russ, Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, Lisa Leghorn and Katherine Parker; "What Does Separatism Mean?"; book reviews.

SW 19

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