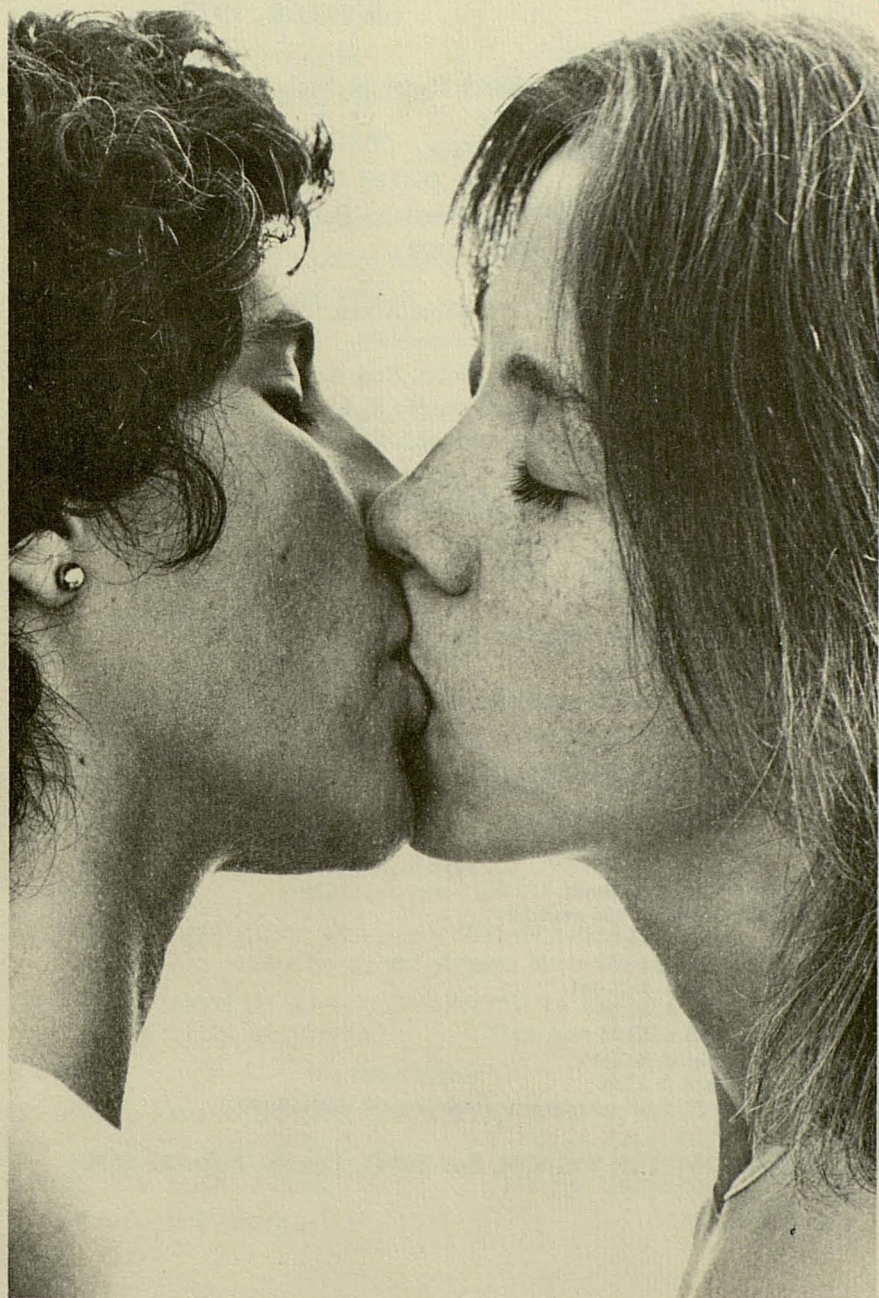


# SINISTER WISDOM





# SINISTER WISDOM 8

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

WINTER, 1979

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Cover photograph by Deborah Snow

Printed by Iowa City Women's Press

Special Thanks to the Lincoln Collating Crew!

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Published quarterly

Individual subscriptions: one year (4 issues) \$7.50

two years (8 issues) \$13.00

Institutions: 4 issues, \$12.00

Back issues, while available:

Issue 1, \$2.00

Issue 2, \$2.50

Issue 3, sold out

Issue 4, \$2.25

Issue 5, \$2.25

Issue 6, \$2.50

Issue 7, \$2.50

(Add 50 cents postage when ordering 1-2 single copies.)

Address: SINISTER WISDOM, Box 30541, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503



## CONTENTS

PHOTOGRAPHS	Deborah Snow	cover, 23, 53
PHOTOGRAPH	Irene Young	4
PHOTOGRAPHS	Tee Corinne	32, 52, 72
POEMS	Judy Grahn	2, 15
SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME	Sherry Thomas	5
POEM	Barbara Deming	16
THE HATE/PAIN/POISON POEM	Judith Crewe	17
SHE IS STILL PLAYING HER PIANO	Nancy Adair	18
POEM	Kimi Reith	20
LOVE POEM FOR TWO LARGE DYKES	Arlene Stone	21
POEM	Robin Linden	22
CONNECTION	Melanie Kaye	24
SCRAMBLED EGGS 2: POLITICS AS AN ACT OF LOVE	Melanie Kaye	26
SEXTET FOR DREAM VOICES	Melissa Cannon	30
AMBIVALENCE	Susan Krieger	33
WASHING CLOTHES	Lee Schwartz	38
STORY	Cathy D. Miller	39
( )	Martha Yates	40
POEMS	Theresa Barry	50
MY MOTHER'S MORTAR	Audre Lorde	54
ACOUSTICS AT THE WOMEN'S COFFEEHOUSE	Claudia Scott	62
NOTES ON DEAFNESS	Catherine Nicholson	63
RESPONSE ON DEAFNESS	Terri Poppe Cris South	67 69
SISTER	Felice Newman	71
INTERVIEW WITH RUTH AND JEAN MOUNTAINGROVE	Mint Danab and Athame Mountainclimber	73
THE IMPORTANCE OF <i>BEGINNING WITH O</i> : A REFLECTION ON OLGA BROUMAS	Toni Ann Hurley McNaron	77
A CHANT	Martha Courtot	86
TO DWELL AMONG OURSELVES: A REVIEW OF MARY DALY'S <i>GYN/ECOLOGY</i>	Susan Leigh Star	87
NOTES FOR A MAGAZINE	Harriet Desmoines	99
CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES		103

My name is Judith, meaning  
She Who Is Praised  
I do not want to be called praised  
I want to be called The Power of Love.

if Love means protect then whenever I do not  
defend you

I cannot call my name Love.

if Love means rebirth then when I see us  
dead on our feet

I cannot call my name Love.

if Love means provide & I cannot  
provide for you

why would you call my name Love?

do not mistake my breasts

for mounds of potatoes

or my belly for a great roast duck.

do not take my lips for a streak of luck

nor my neck for an appletree,

do not believe my eyes are a warm swarm of bees;

do not get Love mixed up with me.

Don't misunderstand my hands

for a church with a steeple,

open the fingers & out come the people;

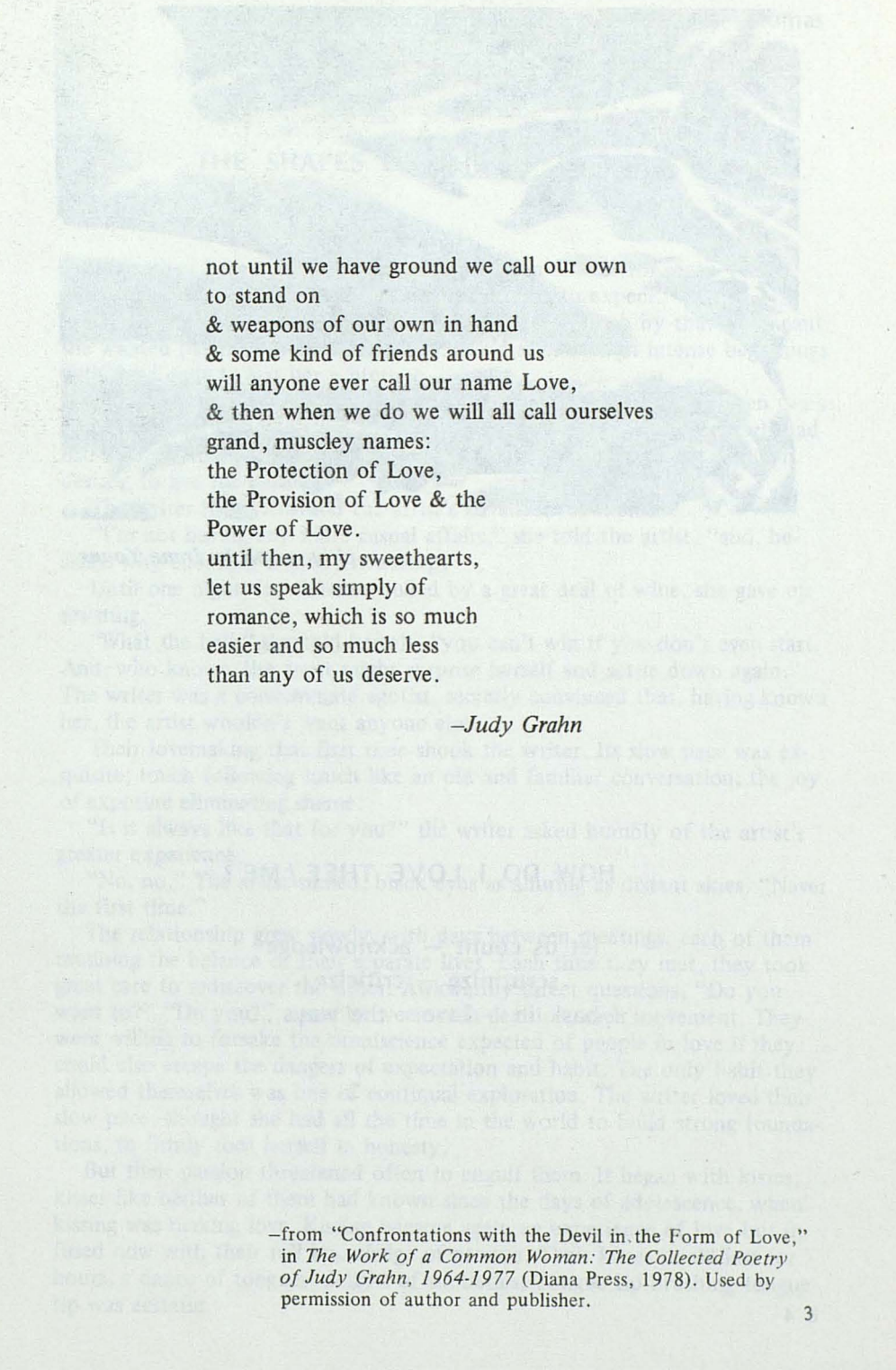
nor take my feet to be acres of solid brown earth,

or anything else of infinite worth

to you, my brawny turtledove;

do not get me mixed up with Love.

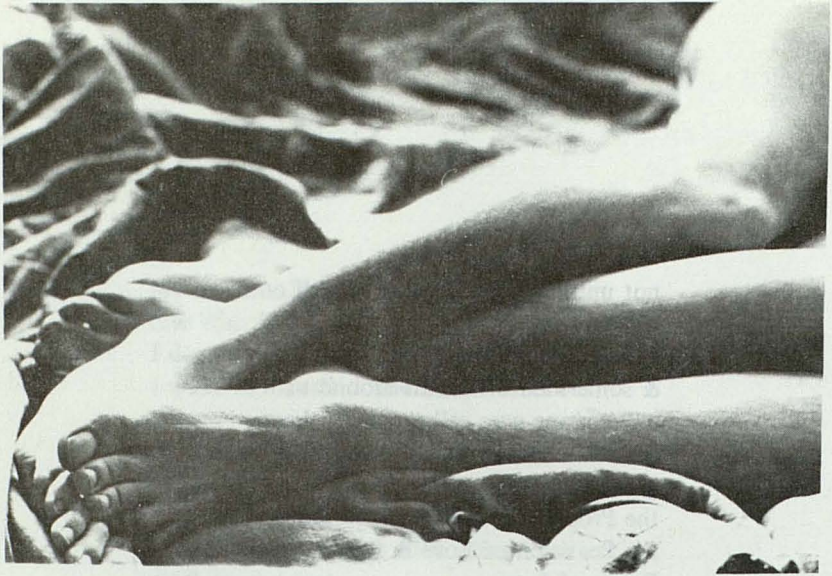




not until we have ground we call our own  
to stand on  
& weapons of our own in hand  
& some kind of friends around us  
will anyone ever call our name Love,  
& then when we do we will all call ourselves  
grand, muscley names:  
the Protection of Love,  
the Provision of Love & the  
Power of Love.  
until then, my sweethearts,  
let us speak simply of  
romance, which is so much  
easier and so much less  
than any of us deserve.

—Judy Grahn

—from “Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love,”  
in *The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry  
of Judy Grahn, 1964-1977* (Diana Press, 1978). Used by  
permission of author and publisher.



*photograph by Irene Young*

## HOW DO I LOVE THEE / ME ?

let us count — acknowledge  
scrutinize — criticize  
bask in — love the ways . . .



## THE SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME

When they began making love, they had been friends for seven years. The change was experimental, neither knew what to expect.

The writer thought she wanted to get married, though by that she meant she wanted partnership not ownership. She'd seen enough intense beginnings with dead ends to last her a lifetime

The artist wasn't interested in getting married. She'd lived for seven years with a woman who had then left her for a new lover. The artist herself had had several subsequent lovers. She wanted to be limited only by her own desires, to live for herself.

The writer had withstood the artist's advances for months.

"I'm not having any more casual affairs," she told the artist, "and, besides, why endanger a good friendship?"

Until one night, her defenses lulled by a great deal of wine, she gave up resisting.

"What the hell," she told herself, "you can't win if you don't even start. And, who knows, the artist might surprise herself and settle down again." The writer was a consummate egotist, secretly convinced that, having known her, the artist wouldn't want anyone else.

Their lovemaking that first time shook the writer. Its slow pace was exquisite, touch following touch like an old and familiar conversation; the joy of exposure eliminating shame.

"Is it always like that for you?" the writer asked humbly of the artist's greater experience.

"No, no." The artist smiled, black eyes as alluring as distant skies. "Never the first time."

The relationship grew slowly, with days between meetings, each of them retaining the balance of their separate lives. Each time they met, they took great care to rediscover the other. Awkwardly direct questions, "Do you want to?" "Do **you**?", came between each decision, each movement. They were willing to forsake the omniscience expected of people in love if they could also escape the dangers of expectation and habit. The only habit they allowed themselves was one of continual exploration. The writer loved their slow pace, thought she had all the time in the world to build strong foundations, to firmly root herself in honesty.

But their passion threatened often to engulf them. It began with kisses, kisses like neither of them had known since the days of adolescence, when kissing **was** making love. Kissing became again an experience of love but infused now with their full knowledge of passion. Their kisses could last for hours, a dance of tongues, delight of subtleties. Tongue tip brushing tongue tip was ecstatic.



All their lovemaking contained an element of entering, merging each with the other: eyes through eyes, mouth to mouth, tongues to inner ears, hands to vulvas. Woman to woman, they became both child and mother in ever reversing circles: hand in the vagina, child seeking wombward; the vagina stirring toward the birth of orgasm. They drew nourishment from each other's breasts. The child lover became mother of the other's ecstasy; her greatest gift was tenderness.

It began with kisses, hours of gentle, sensuous touch, and melted finally into fierce desire. Mouths to each other's vulvas were kisses transformed. The passion did not end at orgasm; the energy passed between them, transformed itself, but did not diminish. They lay together crying sometimes, laughing others; tender, joyful; exposed, bare to the heart and sinews; bone-shaken.

One night they lay on the writer's bed watching the evening sky transform itself to darkness.

"I'd like just for once to be full," the artist said, "to have enough. Why didn't I meet you when I was twenty and unattached?"

"Because it wouldn't have been the same. I sometimes think we even waited those seven years just so it would be like this." The writer lay curled against the artist.

"Do you supposed our friendship can survive this?" she asked.

"Aren't we just becoming deeper friends?" the artist teased.

The writer felt pierced by sadness, realizing that there was no going back from where they were, that they would always be touched by the knowledge of each other's bodies. She wondered if they would ever again be simply, unconsciously, oblivious of the other's presence.

"Such passion is rare, even in a lifetime of lovers," she said.

The artist turned until they touched breast to breast, belly to belly.

"You are everything I'm moving toward," the artist said.

And the writer believed her.

\*\*\*

"I don't like being in love," the writer said, sitting up by the pond.

"You don't?" the artist teased, running her fingertip softly across the writer's cheek.

"It's too dangerous to be pleasurable. The minute, the **minute**, I start trying to hold on to what I feel now, I lose everything." The writer spoke with great intensity, unaware of her own melodrama. "Being in love should be the most changeable of emotions, and yet it is the one that is most often grasped, smothered." Her face softened as she looked the artist fully in the eyes. "Do you know, there are moments I think I will die of so much feeling as I know with you. I don't know how to let go, so all I can think of is that I will just die."

"You couldn't hold me even if you wanted to, you know." The artist took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Nothing can ever hold me except my own desires. Everything, everything changes; always. The thing to discover is how not to lose but to grow with the changes."

The writer stared out across the water. For, though she knew about change, she wanted now to feel herself part of a continuous spiraling web.



She wanted now to know that freedom could include steadiness, a constancy.

She looked back at the artist, "No, there's no point to what we're doing if there isn't always room for each of us to be whatever we are. Perhaps the faithfulness I want to bind myself to should be for my work—the need to write is the most absolute thing in my life."

"Do you know, E. was asking me last week which was the primary relationship in my life, you or her."

As the artist paused, the writer felt a sharp stab of pain, not knowing what the answer would be.

". . . and I realized that the only 'primary relationship' in my life now is myself, myself and my work. At thirty-three, this is the first time I've ever been able to say that."

The writer nodded, the moment of jealousy already past. She knew that however much she would like to attach the artist, she would not love the artist so were she not already so committed to herself, to ideas, to the process of creation. And she felt most sharply the paradox that she would bind the artist most completely only by loving her freedom, by letting her be whatever she would.

Then she laughed. "How ridiculous it is to think of 'letting you be as you are.' As though I had anything to do with it! Lovers are such egomaniacs!" She stood up. "I'm going in."

In the icy water of the pond, she came clean. Shook off the artist's spell and the spell of herself as she was with the artist. The water tightened her skin, the ancient movements of swimming took over her body. She had spent her whole childhood in the water, came back to it now like a salmon finding its native stream.

\*\*\*\*

One day the writer sat in the artist's cabin and was struck suddenly, painfully by the artist's beauty. The artist's beauty was not conventional or daily; it shown out rarely, at moments when her dark eyes seemed to dance and her thin skin seemed suddenly translucent, when all of her was lit up from within. She was talking about a series of drawings that had begun two days before and still kept coming. Every time she closed her eyes, the image transformed itself yet again into its next metamorphosis—so that each drawing grew out of the one before and yet was unique.

As the writer listened to the artist speak, she thought suddenly, "It is as though I'm watching her through a window. Her beauty has nothing to do with me, was not meant for me."

But as soon as she said it to herself, the writer knew that the image was all wrong. For she was not seeing her "through glass"; there were no barriers between them in those few feet of air. And suddenly the writer realized that she was utterly deficient in an image system, a vocabulary for love that **included** the separateness of the other.

"I have no words left to love you with," she interrupted the artist. "Even 'love' covers such an enormous range of feeling that it is nearly useless. And everything else is worse. 'My dear' sounds as though you were mine. 'I love



you' places far too much emphasis on the 'I' for what I'm feeling. 'You are lovely, lovable,' that comes closer."

She reached out and took the artist's hand. "Sometimes I think the only endearment I have left is the word 'you.' You." She looked at the artist, her own face alight now. "Somehow that says everything to me, speaks of the all of you I know or will know, and the all of you that belongs only to yourself."

The artist laughed. "Does everything have to have a name?"

"Does everything have an image?"

They smiled at each other.

"There is so much in me that must find some way out," the writer said passionately. "Finding its name releases it, sets the image, the idea, the feeling loose in the world. Sometimes I think I will choke if I can't invent a language for loving you in. I am too full, but nearly all the words are lies. And those words, those lies, keep us from knowing what we really are together.

\*\*\*\*

"I came to see if you wanted to go to the ocean, maybe out to dinner," the writer said.

The artist was at that moment a farmer, struggling to trim the hooves of a recalcitrant goat. She shook her head. "I have a date with E. as soon as I get done here."

The writer held herself in tightly, allowing herself no feeling. She had told herself all the seven-mile drive that she would have no expectations. And E., after all, had been the artist's lover long before the writer. Jealousy, she told herself, was ridiculous and irrational. How could she be jealous of what she had known and accepted when she opened herself to the artist? She felt close to tears but could give no name to any feeling. Having no expectations nearly canceled out desire itself. And jealousy was impossible. She wasn't even sure she could feel disappointment when she hadn't allowed herself to desire that which she was now deprived of.

The goat kicked again and the artist looked tired and harassed. "This is the last one. If you'll wait till I'm done, we can talk about it."

The writer sat on a log in the sun, trying to still the insistent voice in her head. The feeling had become suddenly, clearly, anger.

"It's been a week. I can't stand such extremes of intimacy and isolation. It batters me, I adjust to nothing." Her voice was harsh, a weapon wanting to pierce the artist's self-containment.

The artist sat down beside her. "You may have noticed that I'm not good at saying that I care." She put her hand on the writer's shoulder, willing her to turn and face her. "You will have to trust my gestures, to trust all you know of the moments we share."

Suddenly the writer's anger was deflated, and she saw her arguments about time and distance were insincere. For she herself had been too busy until that morning to even feel the artist's absence. Her head had been so peopled with the conversations of her characters that she had not noticed the external silence, and would not have welcomed interruptions.



She knew then that the knot inside was fear. Fear so strong she was willing to deny the connections she knew were real.

"How can I trust gestures, trust how we are with each other, when we are always apart?"

"It's time for us to be together again. I'm only busy tonight."

The writer felt the knot giving way within her, its strands unraveling. She began to cry, something she did awkwardly and rarely. The artist rocked her in her arms.

\*\*\*\*

They came home one night from a poetry reading, each of them enlarged by the stories of women, a chorus ringing in their ears. Snug in the warm pickup truck, they composed a poem of their own as they drove, trading lines back and forth, playing off each other's images.

The writer loved how anything could sound profound when she was a bit in love with herself, and with all the other women in the world.

In her kitchen, they sat warming their hands around cups of cocoa.

"Oh, you could leave me over and over," the writer said, "if each time we met again it was as lovely as tonight!"

The artist's face grew still, and she looked for a moment at the blankness of the dark window.

"I will be leaving," she said gently, meeting the writer's eyes. "I was waiting to tell you. I've decided to go to France next summer; I don't know for how long, maybe six months, maybe forever."

She watched the writer tensely, wanting to touch her, afraid to reach out.

"Why?"

"I'm not sure how to explain. . . I want to see things, really see with the intensity of foreignness. And . . . does it make sense that I need to be alone with my painting? I've never in my life been alone."

The writer nodded slowly and brushed tears from her face, trying to stay calm. The work, the work was something she was not jealous of.

"Summer is too far away," she answered, "for me to think now of missing you. Here we are." She held out her hand, then added fiercely, "But I cannot sit here waiting for you to come back."

\*\*\*\*

"Fondness seems to be the middle age of this affair," the writer thought.

"What do you mean by 'fondness'?" the artist asked when she said it to her.

The writer thought for a moment. "Something not less than being in love, but more dear. A familiarity that has never grown ordinary."

They were lying together in the early morning light, skin alive to skin's touch all along their bodies. Drifting at ease, affectionate, the feather edge of desire brushing at the edges of their awareness.

The writer sniffed the artist's skin. "Put me blindfolded in a room of five hundred women and I could find you by your smell."

The artist smiled, delighted. "You exaggerate so."

A smile, a dear familiar smile. The writer felt her skin could not contain such joy as that simple, fleeting smile produced.



They lay together encircled, circling. Held within a perfect moment of passionate delight and of simple comfort. Riding a meteor whose core was still good solid rock.

The writer had decided the week before to eliminate the word "we," always using "you and I" instead. "We," she said pontifically, "is a fiction, a denial of how the artist and I remain always unique."

But lying in those arms, she found she would have to resurrect the "we." There was something present that encompassed but was not limited to herself. She felt that cell nuclei might merge at any moment, atoms might be exchanged in the molecular distance between their bodies.

"I would have to say there is also an 'us,'" the writer thought and then laughed out loud, mocking herself but also secretly delighted. Her propensity for naming was a passion equal to that she shared in spirit and body with the artist.

The artist, looking up to inquire at the laughter, was caught by the sight of a ray of gold green light on the far wall. For her, images were always just as present as the writer's words.

Driving home, the writer thought of the artist's latest painting sitting on her easel, the last thing the writer had seen as she left the studio. The painting was of a bowl of apples: the center one polished and perfect; toward the edges of the bowl, the apples grew more and more sketchy until the outside ones existed only in bare outline.

"Our relationship is like that," the writer thought, "something absolutely perfect at the center; the future barely sketched, empty of everything but limitless possibility. We can do anything, anything we want! Even her going away can bring us closer."

\*\*\*\*

The writer was in the orchard, looking out across the wide sweep of her hilltop land. She suddenly imagined the artist living there with her. The main house was big enough, surely, for two. And the cabins could become studios, one for each of them, inviolable private space. As she walked, she looked at the nearest cabin, imagining the artist was already at work there. She felt a rush of protectiveness, thinking how she would guard the artist's separateness, her time for work. Acknowledging ruefully that such generosity was founded in self-interest, for how else could she claim the time and space for her own work, the right to spend days and days undisturbed at will?

That simple fantasy made her blush with a flood of desire, an intuition of all she was capable of and wanted passionately to achieve: a union of partnership and creative independence. She did not ordinarily allow herself fantasies about the artist. For so long she had believed so absolutely in their process together that she had nearly forgotten there was anything else she might want. Then, in her moment of wanting her vision, of believing in all they might be, she saw the artist sitting in that studio with a new lover, and the vision vanished from her mind's eye, died swiftly and unconsciously, with a rush of imagined pain.

As she came toward the house, she saw the artist's car in her drive, on a rare unplanned visit. The writer stopped at the garden to pick a few roses,



carefully willing herself to look closely at each bud, until their beauty stilled her heart's joy at the artist's arrival and she could walk to the house calmly, roses in hand, expecting nothing but whatever would happen.

The artist looked first at the roses and then at the writer's face, savoring both. She drew the writer to her, careful not to crush the roses.

"Hello."

The writer buried her face in the artist's neck for a moment, breathing in the scent of her skin.

"Hello." She smiled. They knew each other's faces so well; wordlessly, they acknowledged that the visit was unusual, and welcome.

They sat together on the front stoop.

"I need to talk about the future." The artist clasped her hands together, looking down into the dust at her feet. "I need to know that we will be friends whenever I do come back, that we'll look each other deeply in the eye, sit together with open hearts."

The writer was surprised by the question. "What else has it all been for?" I promise you nothing specific. I don't know if we'll make love, be lovers. But whatever form it takes, I want always to meet you with an open heart."

There seemed to her no room to speak of her dreams of might-be. She reminded herself that she would not choose to spend a year waiting, her life suspended, while the other traveled, grew, changed.

"It's not so easy to do, you know," the artist answered. "I was with J. for seven years and now she will not look me in the eye."

\*\*\*\*

"I would have made such a good nun."

The artist laughed at the writer. She had been raised Catholic. "I doubt it."

The writer lay with the artist's arm around her, stretched out comfortably on the bed. "No, I mean it. I thrive on harsh discipline. I have even been ecstatic this last week of not seeing you. Isn't there something perverse in getting such joy from renouncing what one wants very much?"

"You're crazy," the artist said, brushing the writer's nipple gently, teasingly, with her fingertip. "We've both been busy."

"No, I haven't," the writer answered firmly. "It's strange how egotistical love is. I like myself so much for being able to let you go."

The artist bent to kiss her. She got tired sometimes of all the words.

"I want her to seduce me," the writer realized, as the kiss ran like a flame through her breasts, down her belly, out her vagina. "I want her to make me feel."

Then she sank into the kiss, giving up conscious thought, moving instinctively to the pure sensuous impulse. And as the kiss ended, she experienced another far sharper desire, so complete, compelling, that it never reached articulation. She wanted the artist, wanted her not as lover but as beloved. Her mouth moved to the artist's breast, sucking, caressing, whispering about her nipple. Her mouth traveled up and down the artist's body, drawing feeling from every sensitive spot, until the artist's whole body was alive, awake to all sensation. The artist caressed her also, but for the most part, the writer kept just barely out of reach, avoiding distraction, doing exactly as she



wished. Then she turned her mouth, her whole self to the artist's vulva, found her vagina as open and caressing as her other lips had been. She stroked the artist without haste, building passion to the edge of orgasm and back, again and again, until finally the artist came, screaming. And the writer went along with her, her own body alive, ecstatic, satisfied. Then they lay together silently, the writer cradling the artist in her arms, both of them crying.

When the artist turned to stroke her, touching gently her inner ear, the writer said, "Only do what you want to do."

"Oh," the artist answered, "I want to do everything to you."

And the writer felt a moment of panic; willed herself to relax, to give in, to accept. When she finally came to orgasm, its ferocity surprised her. The artist's hand in her vagina seemed to reach clear to the core of her, to touch her heart. And for a moment she was graced by feeling too great to be contained within her, energy given, taken, exchanged with the artist, even with the air around them.

\*\*\*\*

"You pull on one little thread and the whole fabric comes unraveled," the writer marveled to herself. "So we aren't going to make it to the end after all."

Her inner voice was commenting on a scene the rest of her was engaged in. She had just said to the artist, "It's over. I'd have to start again and I don't want to. I don't want to do it anymore."

"Did you come here to say that?" the artist asked, her face harsh, still.

The writer shook her head, incurably honest. "No, it came to me when E. walked in just now to get you for dinner." Suddenly she felt blazingly angry. "I've been gone for three weeks, and my first day back you make a date with her. There is no message from you. I have to come here and find you with her. You can't even say you missed me, can you?"

"I would have come tomorrow or the next day," the artist said quietly, trying to calm her. "I thought you might want to get resettled."

"I've been gone long enough that I can just let go. What's the difference now or next month? Will you pin a medal on me as you leave?"

"I have to go meet E. I can't talk now. Can I come tomorrow?"

"No. I'll be busy," the writer said, shaking off the artist's arm. She felt deprived of a scene and wanted to be deliberately, spectacularly childish. She had never even had a fight, much less a scene, with the artist in all their time together. The artist wouldn't fight, kept her emotions safe and tidy.

The writer went home and drank three straight whiskeys, not allowing her mind to stray for a second from the pages of a Dorothy Sayers murder mystery she had already read twice before.

In the next two days, the writer found how very much less "done" she was than she had proclaimed. She held endless self-justifying harangues with the nonexistent artist. Incidents which even she could still recognize as small in themselves assumed prophetic and symbolic importance. Twenty times a day she screamed at herself to stop it, stop it, stop it. But the voice continued without cease.



"I am killing myself with her," she said, "bit by bit I've cut every desire, every need, every spontaneous gesture out of myself until there is almost nothing left. Wind me up, see how good I'll be. It doesn't matter to her how long we go between visits. If she can sandwich us in between meetings and dates with E., how lovely. It's been a year, a year, since we've spent two nights in a row together. I'm not even used enough to her to get a good night's sleep in my own bed!"

"And she's welcome to E. She can have her. How long would that relationship have lasted if she hadn't had me to be creative with? How long until the possessiveness and the tantrums would have suffocated her, if she hadn't always felt she was growing with me? And her art. I didn't paint her paintings, but what would she have done without all our talks, without me in the bleak dry periods? Or I without her? Or I without her?"

The artist came to find her at the end of the second day.

They eyed each other warily. The artist's face was questioning, the writer's stony.

"Have you decided what you want to do?" the artist asked.

"You can't have the decision without the speech. I've been rehearsing for two days." The writer found it all suddenly ridiculous. "I don't want to be enemies. That just makes me spend all my time thinking of you." She tried to smile. "But I don't want to care either. I don't want to let you hurt me. I've let you be however you were, I've let you go. What's left is for me. I want to give myself something for once."

"Come on," the artist said gently, "that can't be the whole speech."

So then all her anger, bitterness, recriminations came pouring out. How she felt unrecognized, unvalued, uncared for.

The artist reached out to touch the writer's rigid body. Her eyes gentle, hurting too. "That first week you were gone," the artist said, "I realized how much I depended on you. But you were gone, and so I began to depend on myself more. I need to. When I leave, I can't afford to be leaning on anyone."

The writer could understand that. She wished wearily that for once she wouldn't understand, wished she could maintain the purity of her anger.

"You should have explained to me sooner. I could have tolerated the distance if I'd known why I had to."

"You know I'm not good at saying things."

"You could learn."

The artist shook her head. "If I could, I would have."

"What can we do now?" the writer asked. "When we were first together, I thought perhaps we'd form a partnership that would last for years. Then when I saw you were going to stay with E., I thought we'd do something else wonderful, that we'd love each other absolutely, without attachment. I thought that we were perfect. Now it just seems to me to be a trivial little love affair winding to an ordinary end."

"Whatever this change is, it isn't an ending," the artist said sharply. Her eyes met the writer's. "Whatever we do, don't deny what we've been."



The writer felt worn out. She cursed her understanding, and was grateful for it. What she could understand, she could live with. And somehow she always felt better sharing hard truths with the artist than remaining separate and silent.

She reached out and clasped the artist's hand, smiling wryly. "Did you believe me when I said it was the end?"

The artist shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't leave like that."

"Damn it, I've been through two hellish days, you know."

The artist just drew her close enough to hug.

\*\*\*\*

When the artist left for Europe, she gave the writer the apple painting. The writer looked at it often as she went on with her own work.

As she looked at the painting day after day, meditating on the bare outlines of apples around its edges, she began to see that the possibilities were not, and never had been, infinite. Just as the apples' shapes were defined, so were she and the artist bound by the shapes of their own characters, of all their past experiences. The artist's years of attachment had left her fiercely protective of herself; the writer's years of changing had left her yearning for stability.

In the moment of parting, their eyes had met more deeply than their bodies ever had. They knew absolutely that they loved each other; and just as clearly they knew that this was an ending, that there were kinds of partnership and communion they could not find with each other. But all their work made it possible for a new friendship to begin to grow between them, spanning two continents, an ocean, the end of their love affair.

"You showed me the way to so much I'd never known and now must have," the artist wrote. "Not just the passion, my dear," (reading, the writer could imagine her wicked laugh), "but your belief in your work, strengthened my belief in mine. And something else—you will know the words for it—how we just were what we were."

"And your leaving," the writer answered, "is forcing me to finally learn to love myself."

All the attention and concern she had once directed at the artist, she now tried to turn toward herself. Just as she tried to rid her stories of the passive voice, she also rejected the lie that she had been left by the artist. She was herself, whole. A new novel was growing in her mind, its characters surprising her with actions she had never dared to take herself. Their insistent voices helped somewhat to fill the silence of the artist's absence.

And in the months that followed, the writer found the apple painting became at last her own private image. For it was her core that was shining and solid; her possibilities that were, not infinite, but limited only by her visions. Like thousands of women, most of whom she would never know, she struggled daily to affirm that all the power she would ever need was already in her hands. That she could become whatever she would.



*Love came along and saved me  
saved me      saved  
me.*

*However, my life remains the same as before.  
O What shall I do now that I have  
what I've always been looking for.*

*Love came along and saved  
no one  
Love came along, went broke  
got busted, was run out of  
town and desperately needs—  
something. Dont tell her it's Love.*

—Judy Grahn

—from "Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love,"  
in *The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry  
of Judy Grahn, 1964-1977* (Diana Press, 1978). Used by  
permission of author and publisher.

Our love, like the new moon,  
Lies at last within the old moon's arms  
And grows again.  
Lone night after night we had been  
Without its light — this grace withdrawn.  
Shaken with tears, we spoke our loss —  
Admitting what was bitter, bitter.  
With this burst water  
Love was born again.  
Again I swoon upon your mothering breast,  
Again the white crescent of your body  
And my body are joined, and blessed.

—*Barbara Deming*



## THE HATE/PAIN/POISON POEM

(for Connie)

pain hurts me  
when I hurt you

still, I gather the  
harsh black clods  
of words, and throw them

easy/careless/heed-  
less that I do.

and then my guilt  
clawlike creeps in

gnaws on my soul  
like a rat  
that must sit  
and devour

everything rich-  
danae, and  
good and true.

and yet I go on  
hurting/paining you

with poison words  
from the night-hag's  
store replete

blaming the  
night (our  
secrecy itself  
necessary)

and far worse  
blaming you

for a world's hard-hating  
stone folk wielding  
the word-hoarde

—Judith Crewe

## SHE IS STILL PLAYING HER PIANO

### Fantasy of Erotic Frustration and Some Satisfaction

i'm walking up the street... up the crumbling steps to her house... the trees are overgrown... the shrubs snag my legs... the house is spanish... the house is in barcelona behind a great white wall covered with geraniums hidden by fig trees... i am wearing black... i am wearing boots... i'm walking up the street... up the crumbling steps to her door... i'm knocking on the door... i keep knocking... i hear no voice... so i shrink and slip through the horizontal mail slot... the brass flap claps shut against its brass frame... i recognize her... she is on the other side of the tall room... she's startled... she's playing the piano... she's surprised but her fingers continue... and she has forgotten... her fingers skim the keys... her body is staked to the bench... her head doesn't move... she is navigating a complex tune... i reconstitute myself... rakishly toss my black cloak round my shoulder... i put a knife in my teeth and walk up and down the long tall room following the rhythm of the music... i slide along the floor as her fingers skim the keys... i do a flamingo dance up the wall... i do flamingo across the ceiling... i hang out above the piano and pull flowers from my sleeve and drop them on the keys... then i sing a gypsy song in the fine tradition of the cante hondo... i'm taking the dagger from my teeth... i cut off my head... my cordoban hat flies across the room... my head bounces out the window... she does not notice me...

i'm walking up the street to her house... i'm walking up the crumbling steps past the decrepit overgrown trees... and bushes that scratch my knees... i'm knocking on the door... there is no voice... i turn sideways and slip myself in between the grains of wood in the door... i remember her... she's playing the piano... she does not notice me... i casually meander over and stand behind her... i am picking up her hair... i whisper in her ear... "you can trust me"... i stand back a few paces... and i grow my arms... i stick my hands through her shoulder blades... i slide them down her arms... and i fit them into her fingers... her hands are my gloves... i play music with her... our hands skim across the keys... our hands negotiate the tune... we play well together... she does not notice me...

i'm walking up the steps to her house... i'm trying to direct my fantasy... to finish my daydream... to complete a story... i'm trying to get her to



notice me... so i'm walking up the steps to her house... the passage is dark... the tall old trees are all overgrown... the thick bushes snag my knees... i'm walking up the decaying steps... i might fall... but i am in full control of myself... i'm knocking at her door... she does not answer... i can't write that piano number again... i'll move her to another room... no then i'll have to go through some different song and dance... i'll do the piano routine one more time... this fantasy is not supposed to be frustrating... i'm meant to have a good time

in fifteenth century barcelona... i'm walking up the steep hill to her castle... it is surrounded by a four foot thick ten foot high white wall... i have a difficult time clearing a way through the jungle of trees and bushes that attack my knees... the worn steps have disappeared... i'm knocking at her door... i can hear her playing her piano... i can hear her stop playing the piano... my god she is stopping playing her piano... the door is opening... the door is opening very slowly... when i see her i recognize her... she is wearing a long black velvet dress... she is wearing my old cordoban hat... she is carrying a knife in her teeth... she cuts off her head... it bounces out the door and down the decayed steps... roses pour out of the neck... it stops at the foot of a bush... the mouth is smiling... the eyes are staring at me... but she does not notice me... i really am trying to finish this fantasy... i'll review the purpose... i'm having this fantasy so that i won't feel lonely... so i have something to do... i'm writing this fantasy because i don't feel like doing what i'm supposed to... i'm really writing this fantasy to get turned on... and i am only getting bored... i just need to create a simple seduction scene... i just need to seduce this woman...

one more time... i'm knocking at the door... she answers... she is surprised to see me... she waves her arm... motions me in... she offers me tea... i ask for tequila... and she sits down... to play the piano... her hands scan the keys... she discerns a complex tune... the music is beautiful... i ask her what it is... she does not answer... she is concentrating on her music... it must be her own conception... she is fixated... i tell her i love her... she does not answer... she does not seem to hear... she is playing her piano... i am asphyxiated... i succumb to the music's spell... i fall asleep on the couch... in my sleep i wake up... i hear her stop playing her piano... i feel her presence... she is kissing my eyes... she is stroking my fingers... she is drawing circles on my vest... on my breasts... her fingers trace my mouth... she beckons me to stand... who is seducing who... she has said nothing... she has a tear on her cheek... it is crystal... the tear is making a rainbow... i ask her why she is crying... she points to the sheet of music on the piano... she gives me the tear and makes another... i put it in my pocket... the rainbow hangs out... we hold hands... we float... up the stairs... we are many colors... we are a chagall painting... we are standing in her room on the top floor... it looks out over the moat... her dress has thirty eight buttons... i have a long zipper... she unzips me as slowly as i unbutton her... she has a body... i have bones... she is running her hands up my arms... and down my



arms... i am sifting her hair through my fingers... our knees are locked...  
our feet are tired... she is scanning her fingers on my head... she is not  
playing the piano... she is playing me... she speaks... "why are you shy"...  
i am too shy to answer... i trace soft lines on her face with my finger...  
down her long nose... across her eyelids... along her forehead... around  
her tear... she cocks her head and catches my hand between her ear and  
her shoulder... i touch the other side of her neck with my other hand...  
her muscle is taut... i can feel her pulse racing... i can feel my pulse  
racing... my eyes are looking at hers looking at mine... i lick her tear...  
the rainbow is all flavors... we shift our weight... our knees are locked...  
our feet hurt... she lights a candle... we are slipping into ironed white  
satin sheets... under a deep brown... goose down... velvet quilt... we  
are on a carved mahogany four poster bed... it is snowing outside... a  
fire is crackling in the grate... the rainbow surrounds the bed... her  
faithful great dane is on the floor... orlando and queen cristina are  
making love... we embrace... slowly lips touching... tongues... nipples...  
hair... bellies... fans... we are slipping into each other... we are not  
playing the piano... we are playing each other... "you are not so shy  
after all" she says... i say "as soon as i get off my feet i am fine" ...  
the candle flickers... the words fall out of our heads... we make beaut-  
iful music together... later we say we will never love another... we will  
never leave each other... strong words... but i can write any story i  
like... i am creating my own fantasy... when i wake up on the couch  
she is still playing her piano.

---

her ears are teeny  
as a cat's nose  
eyes are greedy bad and beady  
thief of wishes, burglar on my premises  
Her cunt the flashlight  
with a soft ruby bulb

—Kimi Reith



## LOVE POEM FOR TWO LARGE DYKES

This poem for my sisters  
Barbara and Kathy  
Evolving to the female form the circle  
That buries its end in beginnings

The circle  
The shape of revolution  
And energy  
That is eternal

These women wide in love  
Who needed fuller dimensions  
Who could not be stiffened pricks  
Or thin as broomsticks  
Or be banished as the harpies were

When women were still diapered  
These women crawled out of the crib  
And stood on their own two feet  
And shot themselves into space  
Like Quaker oats

From far below we saw them  
Round moons as radiant  
As helium balloons  
And rich as frosted donuts  
Their breasts tucked tenderly  
One upon the other  
Like deep soup bowls with radiant glazes  
Each finding comfort in one cosmos  
Each keeping her own sphere

These dykes who fertilized new trenches  
On menses-shaded Mars  
Then travelled far beyond like zeppelins  
Or whales  
Inventing sonar harmonies for those  
Like me  
Who walked the straight male arrow

My sisters climbing comets  
To torch out causeways

—Arlene Stone

Folds of skin weave a web of lines when you smile  
I love to laugh with you.

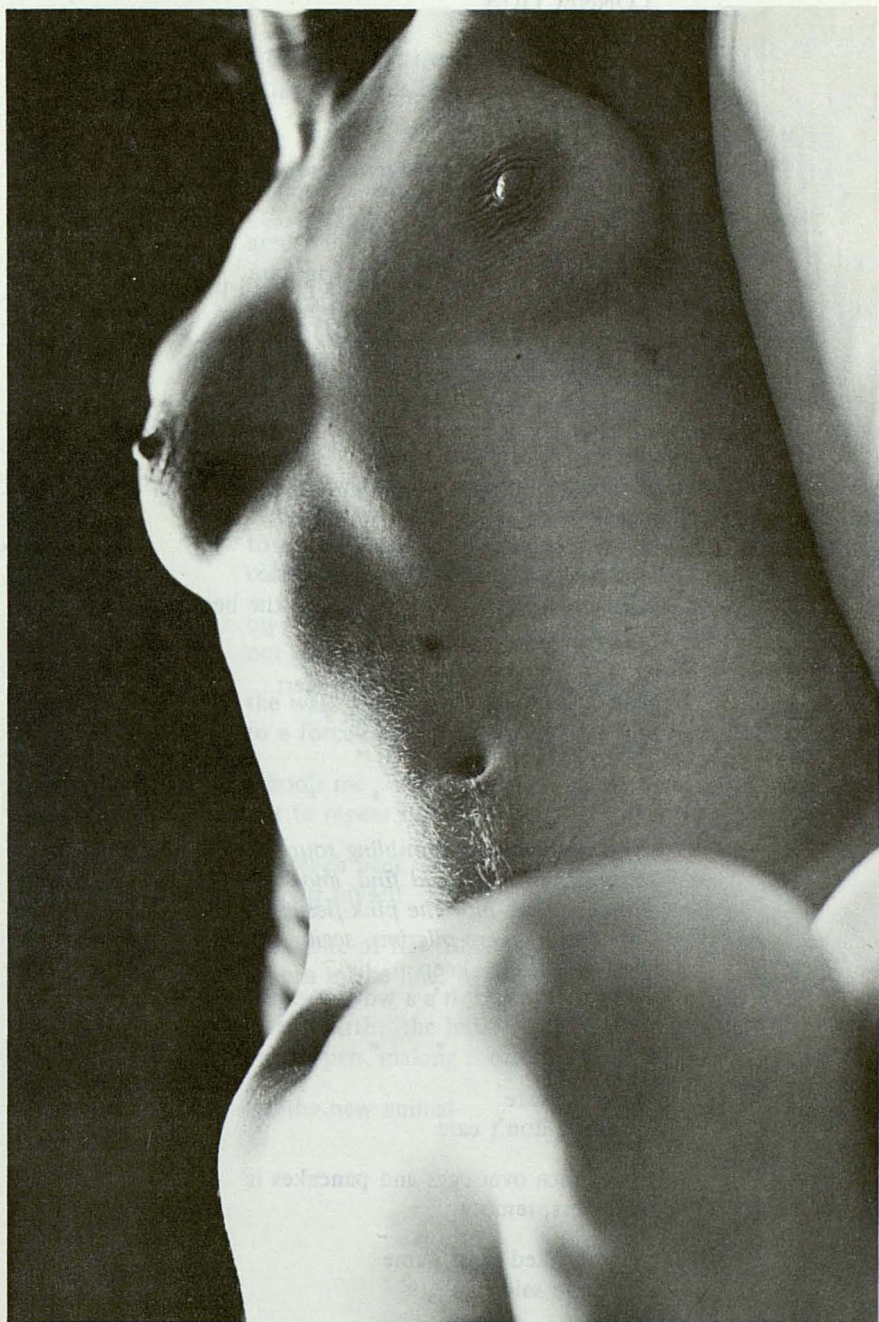
Something other than language  
renders my meanings transparent  
a deleted agent — unnamed subject  
a quickening moment — ephemeral

Your insisting I find words — choose  
delve deeper into the silence — darkness  
face the formlessness before the form  
that I am the formlessness, the form.  
Always the ambiguity.

No equation defines the curve we plot together  
without time, space — language  
We are the points along the matrix — phonemes  
We are the matrix, syntax.

*—Robin Ruth Linden*





*photograph by Deborah Snow*

## CONNECTION

if love were a current to turn off  
I could put out the light  
and sleep easy

not lie on my back screening reruns  
of you and me and her  
at the table in various frames  
of discomfort, you  
pulled back from your skin a good 3 inches,  
she crackling along the wire  
from your face to her face,  
my line to you clipped—  
some miracle!

finally I sleep  
to dream I'm at the ocean with my sister  
inside a hotel. a singer was there,  
a man, someone famous.  
my sister wanted to hear his music  
she would not walk with me on the beach  
I was afraid to walk alone

inside the dream an ancient heart  
was thrumming *danger, can I  
transform the danger*

\* \* \* \* \*

*we were laughing tumbling touching  
everywhere we could find, another curve  
to the climb into the pink-fleshed caves,  
my fingers were pilgrims, seeing signs—  
tell me, I said keep  
going, you said, it's a worthy cause*

\* \* \* \* \*

loss if I care  
loss if I don't care

your face over eggs and pancakes is  
pleasant, remote

if you liked your name  
I'd have said it

if you wanted me balanced on one ungrateful toe  
I'd have tried



I cut your hair partly in anger  
I have looked for everything in you

not to like

\* \* \* \* \*

across the room at a meeting to stop  
nuclear power, the patriarchs' final bargain,  
our faces  
watching some man miss the point  
conspire to blow up, laughing—  
how to stay mad?

\* \* \* \* \*

opening the day's eye

to refuse nostalgia—  
old clothes conjured back to size—

on grounds of boredom.  
not to imagine

the walk led anywhere but straight here  
to a force-field where each speck and particle

schools me  
not to repeat myself.

if I reach back, it's not for you  
but for myself

for a bite of the tribal egg  
reborn in the lines between us, bloody

as any birth. the heart  
beats open, making room

for the new animal

*Melanie Kaye*

## POLITICS AS AN ACT OF LOVE

Love is an abused word. Men exploited it. Feminists exposed it. Lesbian Feminists, remembering the mothers we had or wanted, reclaimed it, as possibility:

\*\*\*\*

*But I can't call it life until we start to move  
beyond this secret circle of fire. . . .\**

\*\*\*\*

By chance picked up Viktor Frankl's book—*Man's Search for Meaning*—"a title only a man could make up," I say contemptuously, and D— tells me it's about the concentration camps. I read it straight through. I have dreamed the contents of this book: the dwindling self who can focus on nothing but physical need and deprivation, hunger pain cold. What I had not grasped was the highly selective passionate loyalty:

All that mattered was that one's own name and that of one's friend were crossed off the list of victims, though everyone knew that for each man (*sic*) saved another victim had to be found.

(I wish I knew if this was the same for the women.)

to remember: deportation of jews in each country began with stateless jews, non-citizens. rich educated jewish citizens helped the nazis to gather and identify the aliens, thinking to protect their own by giving over the others.

*so the circle of protection shrinks from people to jews to citizen jews to the camps and the point where we becomes you & me and all that matters is that one's own name and that of one's friend get crossed off the list.*

also to remember: in denmark where people from citizen to king refused to cooperate with the nazis but instead defined the jews as **us** and would not turn **them** over, efforts at deportation simply failed.\*\*

---

\*from "Origins and History of Consciousness" by Adrienne Rich, in *The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974-1977*.

\*\*Moreover, "it is the only case we know of in which the Nazis met with *open* native resistance, and the result seems to have been that those exposed to it changed their minds." (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 175) That is, Nazis stationed in Denmark became unreliable as Nazis.



*if every jew in europe had taken the survival of every other jew as seriously as she took her own and that of her family; if every jew in europe had joined in resistance, as they did in Warsaw, Byelostok, Tarnow, even in the death camp at Treblinka—would 6 million have died?*

Revolutionary love would mean feeling the same passionate loyalty for each one of us that jews in the camps felt for their one or two friends; would mean *love-for-one's-people*, as for one's children, lover, self. we would all be us to each other. we would know this love was anything but altruistic, that our survival required us to love this way.

\*\*\*\*

On the other hand, we do not make ourselves capable of either love or revolution by pretending we already are capable; but by extending our capability where it exists, and examining where it does not.

\*\*\*\*

it could be easy to think larger than one  
to think larger than two or three or four  
this is me  
this is my partner  
these are my children  
if i say, these are my people  
who do i mean?

(excerpt from journal, 1977)

I am a woman, 33 years old, a jewish child of working parents, a lesbian, an activist whose political education began in the civil rights movement, a writer, a teacher, and an unemployed part-time scrounger for wages. What i mean by **my people** is not always obvious.

for practical purposes, i use a rule of thumb discussed by Andrea Dworkin as **primary emergency—the [identity] which brings with it as part of its definition death.**\* my people are those with whom i share a state of primary emergence: women. anti-gay activity can modify this identity, as would empowered anti-semitism.

I have promised myself to protect any woman's life, including my own, as if it were the life of a woman i love. i have imagined thousands of women making a like promise, chanting it as vow and battle cry.

at the same time i find myself thinking *i hate her* about a woman who i know is basically on my side.

most often we don't function on **basics**. our emergency is so ancient, so ordinary. i know things are desperate but i don't feel it. (when i do feel it, i lose control.) when our lives are not structured in need of each other, our differences flash neon.

*sometimes we're so hungry for blood  
we forget whose it is\*\**

---

\**Woman Hating*, p. 23.

\*\*excerpt from conversation with Amy Kesselman



\*\*\*\*

*dream:*

*a mystery novel i'm in, part of a closed group like a ship or a village. i don't know who has been murdered but fear soon someone else will be. i suspect that 2 men are the killers, i'm tempted to trust a man standing nearby—but this is a mystery novel and the killer could be any of us. i'm afraid.*

*i find my car and i know someone's tampered with it, is trying to kill me. then i see a woman, part of the group, and though i don't know her i suddenly realize i can trust her. her name is lily. walking through rooms i see another woman i barely know. i realize i can trust her too, and some others, though not all. the women i trust come with me to lily's room to confront this problem of murder. i feel a kind of elation, like love: i am not in this alone, i can trust the women.*

*in lily's room there are others, including dykes from my community and some who travel from place to place. some of the travelers have agreed that they don't want to talk about anything upsetting. i am furious, and fearful that they will block discussion of the danger we're in.*

*i see i can't trust them because they don't share my sense of danger.*

*i tell them to leave, and that those of us who want to talk about the danger will stay.*

\*\*\*\*

*to extend the secret circle:  
begin at the fiery core*

the most exciting, pleasurable, and effective political work i've done has had the quality of a vital love relationship. we uncover imaginative risk-taking selves. when we meet, energy rises. our thoughts merge into some larger thinking process. we leave meetings high on ideas and our own power.

that is, the group falls in love with itself.

the bond is different from personal friendship/intimacy. it doesn't mean we all want to snuggle in bed on cold mornings. it means we can risk saying what we think is true, risk doing what we think needs to be done; that we have fun; that we gather for wholeness, as we are drawn to love, in need, desire, and possibility.

\*\*\*\*

*why bother?*

on my wall is a quote from Brecht: a political guru asks an aspiring revolutionary: *If you don't want to get the best out of life, why should you struggle?*

I put it there to remind me not to be a puritan.

But I also reject the question as beside the point.



I struggle because it is the best I know of life: a larger unit of love. obnoxious powers see struggle as hateful: to them it is. but i agree with Che Guevara, who knew something about political commitment: *let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by feelings of love.*

I think to women this will not seem ridiculous.\* we are making love over in the image of all we want. *Why stop?\** the name of the secret circle, when it includes enough of us, will be **revolution**, another abused word to make new.

---

*“Scrambled Eggs” will appear regularly in Sinister Wisdom. I welcome comments and suggestions from readers, and would be happiest to open this space to dialogue.*

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\*though it is certainly informative that he feared ridicule for saying it.

\*\*in wording and spirit i am indebted to Diane Nowicki:

*loving me even overthrowing the government each time  
is finite.  
why ever stop.*

—from “I Dream You Are Anonymous/The 13th Century American Poet/A Woman in the Underground” in *Naming: Poems by 8 Women* (Portland, 1976).

*I also want to acknowledge general indebtedness to Amy Kesselman, Diane Nowicki, Dino Lucas & Paula King. The development of political thinking is always a collective act.*

## SEXTET FOR DREAM VOICES

1

I enter your pain. I have  
to have it. Thin cry of the needle  
striking for thread, a raw vein. My system  
stretches, contracts, with this radical  
transfusion. This is the object.  
Swollen, speaking in pain, your tongue.

2

You feel me swell up under your tongue.  
Nerves blossom like suns. Their aching lights have  
burst into nova, space is a disappearing object,  
a black hole that swallows itself. And your tongue is the needle  
spinning our course to a radical  
country where we meld into radiant harmonies under one system.

3

I unfold, waking, in the black corridor. Each system  
of conduits remembers the sharp taste of my tongue.  
I go deeper to fill my need, drinking from the dark radical  
before it splits and thins. All night I forget where I have  
lain, dream-torn, seeing a bright needle  
staked through the heart of a small wax object.

4

I was a flame-blind fool not to see how you would object  
to this torch thrown in your eye, this heart with no stake in your system.  
Now you will needle  
the devil out of my splitting tongue,  
and I must burn and burn, must burn and cry, until you have  
melted from every burning bush its radical.

5

This room's long thumbs restrict any radical  
move. In it, I am safe from dust and stones, like its most precious object.  
I own a glass world on a platter. And when I have  
dreams of some strangled vital system,  
cramped gut, lobotomy, I wake with my tongue  
sewn to my lips. I am rocked by a sleeping needle.



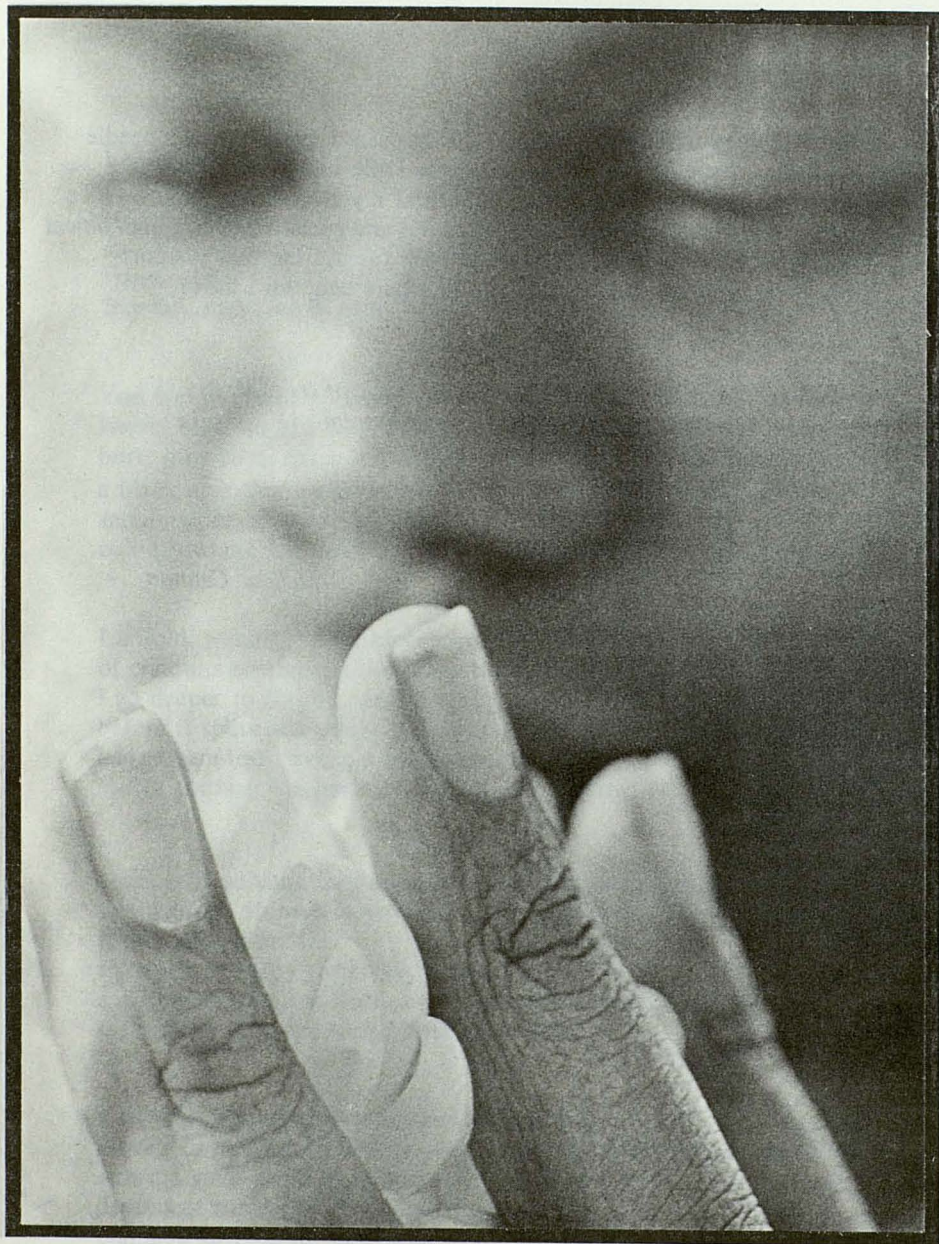
6

Whether I sleep with a bottle or cry to the glazed eye of speed's needle  
I hold your shape as I did, once, after the knife had been radical  
against you. No ease for your dry mouth at my breasts, no tongue  
of desire, but it was one touching, found out and excised like a foreign object  
by a white coat on a stick. Where's the trick for beating that system?  
Now, alone, you die in a white room in a bare bed. All I have.

Envoi

*Articulate: let the tongue joint touch the root of its object;  
and where the nerves have failed, into that system  
let the radical heart shoot its quick needle.*

*—Melissa Cannon*



seen to my lips. I am moved by a sleeping need.

*photograph by Tee Corinne*



## AMBIVALENCE

It is a small house and the curtains in the living room and in Jacqueline's bedroom are made of old lace, large pieces, hung as if the world outside did not exist. Jacqueline was painting part of the kitchen yellow when I left, hair piled on top of her head, in a yellow shirt, standing on a bench, raising a roller to the ceiling. She did get off the bench and come to say goodbye, a gesture I tried to push away as needless, she had said goodbye yesterday standing beside her car outside in the rain. I am only to be gone one night, possibly two. I have only been staying with her for a few weeks and we are not close. Yet we try. With frustration and hesitation, we try. When Jacqueline came, roller in hand to say goodbye, it was with a kiss and I offered her my cheek. I looked quickly at her lips and gave a cheek and thought as I turned away of what I had missed—a kiss on the lips, briefly, before she returned to rolling paint and I left for the airport. It might have been a moment of surprise, because our lips are each thin and tremble at first and would have a small dance as they sought each other out. But it is perhaps too wishful to think that in that kiss that did not occur we might have admitted and seen each other as we have not up to this time.

I will probably always be looking for the kiss we will not have and always be turning from it, and it may not make much difference to Jacqueline but it will make a difference to me and I am not clear about why. Jacqueline has asked that she be important to me and she is important, although at the time she asked I thought she was not and would never be. Yet as the plane took off and I looked into a rainy sky, I felt a fondness for her and thought to remember it, because it is not often I have distance enough to feel that. To know what comes between myself and the fondness it is necessary to go back, back just a few weeks to when I first came to Jacqueline's house and found her notes and washed her sheets and waited her return.

It seemed such a small house when I arrived, which probably says less about the house than about my feelings for Jacqueline. I feel that she is large, and she and I are about the same size. What is large is Jacqueline's voice and her enthusiasm and her granting the people she knows large qualities. The man she is with now is a fine, fine man, and I am beautiful and her friend Mardy brilliant and this is said so from the heart and in such a low convincing tone that at the moment there is no doubt. So it was one night in the beginning when Jacqueline and her man friend and I sat in the living room after dinner, she and I on the floor near each other, he apart, across the room in a chair until he got up to stretch, for he is a tall man and it is part of his charm, and she looked up at him and her eyes became moist and she said to me, "that is a fine, fine man, don't you agree," and I said yes, and then uncomfortable with having said yes, for no man could be so fine, got up and walked into the kitchen, leaving her to admire, to cloak him in awe.



I am now on a plane again, but this one takes me away for a longer time and I am far from the living room and that night. This flight marks the end of our visit, the end of our sharing the tiny house that was nonetheless large enough, the end of my sleeping in the garage out back, never having shared the bed I was at one point offered. I had the bed to myself at first, for nearly a week before Jacqueline arrived. She had gone for the holidays home to her parents with her small daughter who stands as she does, toes pointed out, and likes to dance and pouts and is as resolutely independent. Jacqueline calls her "daughter" and Sara speaks of herself as "daughter" and there is a sense of being on top of it when they do so, as if their relationship is large enough to comprehend the role without assuming it. But this I did not know when I first came and the house was empty and I slept those six nights on Jacqueline's blue sheets. All I knew were the feelings there for me in two notes, one on the cover page of a book left as a Christmas present: "For beautiful Susan, an incredible woman, briefly encountered in this strange world," the other at the end of a page bidding me welcome, telling about how the heater worked and that the goldfish on the kitchen table needed food and that Jacqueline and Sara would be back Thursday, but in the meantime I should make this my home and know that Jacqueline was in some excited way looking forward to seeing me.

So the house had from the start an air of expectation, which perhaps all houses of absent owners have, a sense that at any moment the drama that is usually played there will recur, it lurks as a shadow, almost grinning at one's presence. And sometimes this shadow is not merely there, but there as if ready to play, to take one on. So I thought that week of playing with Jacqueline, of our wrestling and exhausting and daring each other to the farthest in our emotions. It was Jacqueline and I in the bedroom laughing with the final exhaustion of sex, in the kitchen talking with our eyes, outside in a meadow exhilarated with the air and each other. Yet the days were rainy and the house quiet and dark and I was alone. I was at that time not enough with my friends, still in my habits from another life. I helped myself through the hardest of my days with expectations of Jacqueline's return, and this seemed to serve me at the time, but then on Thursday when she did not come the disappointment was grave.

I had, in preparing, bought some groceries and roses and cleaned a bit and washed the towels and sheets. The sheets when I first crawled into that bed were heavy with the smell of Jacqueline and there were white stains on them which made me think of sex and a man above a woman, I as I lay there somewhere in the midst of it. Yet it was finally only with Jacqueline that I slept, getting used to her smell, not the smell of sex so much as of sweat, adding to it my own, so that by the fifth day when I washed the sheets, the two were indistinguishable. What I am trying to say is that Jacqueline and I for a second time had an affair that perhaps she could imagine but I could not admit. For a guest ought not take liberties difficult to confess. I never told Jacqueline about those few days, although I hoped she might know. I hoped she might see through the roses, and also that she would not



say so. When she asked who gave them to me, three muted orange-yellow flowers sitting in a glass jar in front of the lace curtain in the living room window, I said it had been my birthday the day before she got back and I gave them to myself. That perhaps would have been a better idea, but as many of the sort, it was not true. Yet I wanted her in part to believe it, and to think I took care well. To have said the roses were for her would have been too bold, would have risked the danger of a premature gift. So all of a sudden I had them as mine and came in the next few days as they opened to half believe my story. Perhaps the roses had been for me after all, even at the start. The affair was not with Jacqueline but with myself. Yet like all doubtful stories, this one never ended, even a week later as I threw the roses out, one morning as Jacqueline lay sleeping, it was as if they and I shared a secret and as if even from the garbage they talked.

The other sign I tried to leave was the sheets and that had a harder outcome. When I washed the sheets on Thursday morning, I felt I was washing them for us, washing them clean of her old sex to make a bed we might lie in fresh, and I made that bed with gentle expectation and waited the day for a call from the airport, a car to drive up, a door to slam, the house to be occupied on one of my returns. There were many car doors that slammed that day and each of them I welcomed and then forgot, for Jacqueline did not come and then in the evening called from the home of her friend where she would be staying the night. He had picked her up from the airport and had taken her to dinner and all I could say was hello and I had been worried and been prepared to pick her up.

I am now back in the middle of the country and thinking of Jacqueline makes little sense. There is a blizzard outside and I have drunk mulled wine and had soup and tried to hang pictures that keep falling down because the walls are cold. I am lonely again as I was before I came to Jacqueline's house, and I am angry, as I was with her, at the frustration that bears no good name but is what we often accept. It must have been sometime on Friday that I came back to the house and found Jacqueline reading her mail, the blind on the front door up. We must have embraced but I do not remember that embrace, and it must have been long, for that is Jacqueline's habit. What I do remember is her opening her mail and saying she had just gotten back and how good it was to be home. I remember our sitting on the two chairs across from each other at opposite ends of the living room, yet because it was small, not far apart, and I remember her saying her friend would be gone much of the time of my stay and I might share her bed. She stood by the heater soon after she said it, getting warm. And I took pleasure and wondered what she felt that would mean. Would we easily lie beside each other, or had she not even considered as she offered? I would not find out that night because she was to be away again, or the next night which was New Year's Eve, although on that night we talked in the kitchen for several hours, having dinner, first burning then making a dessert.

She stood by the stove and I by the sink and I watched her eyes and listened as she spoke of discovering her own power and of needing space and as she said she saw power in me too. We drank and hugged and talked and



touched, all in the kitchen with Jacqueline claiming surprise when she would look at me and want to hold me. Something was going on which she seemed not to know. I cannot say I knew. I was not in love. It did have to do with power, and with home. But some kinds of assertion are not my style and I felt not as powerful as she seemed. Always through the visit I felt that way, so I dared not match her, instead took her word that she was too tired, or too involved with her friend, or too much wanting to run away, and felt that despite her enthusiasm, her ambivalence was profound, and I, too, had a difficulty as unresolved.

One night for a very long time we stood just inside the front door, holding each other, not daring to move. All that was between us was in that embrace. The morning we did not make it to the ocean is there. It is in the way she stood, very still, yet occasionally giving in to the strength of a kiss such as was not really allowed in that house. It is there in the fact that I would not move her with anything more sudden than an invitation to my bed in the garage, a mock invitation, knowing her bed was the place we should be, but that in her house I could not ask her there. It is in the orange juice we drank, and in the lying on her bed where the gentleness of being touched mattered to her and the passion of finally feeling wanted moved me. It is in our not having taken off our clothes, in my leaving and our sleeping even that night in separate beds. It is there too in the fact that she was asleep when I, restless, came in from the garage to go to the toilet and thought to come to sleep with her, but instead sat on the chair beside her bed for a while and looked at her and then decided a lonely fantasy was more my own. It was there the next morning which almost did not know the night before, and the next night when I would have stayed had she not wanted a sense that I did not care, that nothing she might have done would commit her further. So she went to a bar and I left for a friend's and when I came back and played my record and it was too loud, she heard its message as intended for her, "Sweet darling woman," it said, and I was horrified and made foolish because that was not my intent.

It was nearly a month in the end that I stayed with Jacqueline, using her house, sleeping in her garage with its rugs and new window and doors that would not shut. The first week I was by myself, but for the rest we were there together, seeing each other, as Jacqueline would have it, "in and around" whatever else we did. During those weeks, I saw Jacqueline nowhere else but in the house or immediately outside it, except for one night when we went to a grocery. We would talk to each other as we came and went, often only briefly, sharing an event or two from each of our days, and the talk was surprisingly lacking in comfort, which confused me. Yet I learned not to ask for comfort from Jacqueline, to go elsewhere when I wanted the phrases I often, without taking, simply like to know are there. Jacqueline said she wanted to be faithful to her new lover and she did not want to spoil what there was between us, words which never convinced me and tended to discourage me, but which did, I think, reflect a desire stronger than I knew. Jacqueline wanted a quiet passion, a kind of delicacy she associated with women, and with part of herself, and with me. We are all to some extent



fantasy creatures of each other's desires, but sometimes our fantasies are more total and sometimes their nature is not clear, until afterwards, looking back, one sees them in all the movings about, the checking out a new dress in the mirror and gently feeling its fabric, the kisses that are brief and looked at for a longer time than they take, as if the decision at best is a decision to linger.

So I stayed, longer than I sometimes thought I should, after one night of going elsewhere to sleep when Jacqueline's friend was expected, before I got used to the fact that we were not the only ones. I stayed in the mornings and wrote at the kitchen table, and in the late afternoons standing beside the sink, hearing about Jacqueline's playing soccer, and the job she hoped to get, and the bar she liked, and her new friends and discovering herself, and often late into the night after she had gone to bed, I stayed for the feeling of being alone in that protected space. I sat in front of the fire one night and talked too long about my disappointment and heard but did not hear how it was not hers. I stayed to pet the cat and crack two coconuts and watch Sara, who seemed very small, and Jacqueline, quite tall, sit in Jacqueline's white chair and argue with each other and then make up. I stayed for a few minutes that became a half hour to talk of the trip to the beach I had taken alone because earlier in the morning when I woke Jacqueline up she said she preferred to throw pots. But then as she was throwing pots, she thought she would like to be at the ocean, and I, on my way, had been too angry and too proud to come back and ask again.

The morning I finally left was a sunny morning and I was nervous about packing and Jacqueline spent a while in the bathroom, staying out of my way, but she talked to me more than usual and joked about my being nervous and the little front room was thick with the sense of us, so in the end when it was time for me to go, our embrace seemed almost beside the point. No bodily holding could be as full as the way that house had held us together, no touching more intimate than the sense that sometimes existed across that room, as on nights when Jacqueline, curled up in her chair, tried to read and I, sitting across, tried to think, and the phone rang and my voice was mistaken for hers, and one then the other of us went for a walk, and I played a few records, and we made our separate drinks. But it is to be remembered that this is only how I felt, and a guest can be so surrounded by another's presence that it is a kind of drug.

Perhaps the last embrace and the two very light kisses we gave and looked at and gave again felt differently to Jacqueline. It is often easier to leave than to be left. It was she who said she would miss me, and I believed she would, for I had wandered about in her life with a seriousness that is lasting, and I was leaving her a vacuum cleaner and, for a while, a car and when you use another person's things, you remember, and you think of what was and it seems right and like it had to be and the fit of that is easy to miss, as is the feel of the air on a cool, damp night and the sound of an imagined lute and the fact that some of it did not fit at all and all of it is important.

## WASHING CLOTHES

Through the half-

open door—

the pale-blue cloth

and the gray-blue coil

like snakes, mid air.

Your arms charm them

into a circle—

a blue/blue circle sends water

like sparks into the evening;

sun ignites

each drop.

Of different shades

we lay twisted—

water like sparks

shaken from our shadows.

You there,

I here,

tonight we stretch seeing

but not speaking;

our outlines clear as this crescent

in a clear sky.

Nothing is twisting us.

—Lee Schwartz



## STORY

*There were two women. They were disappointed in something. They were not disappointed in each other. There were two women. One was fat and the other, thin. Well, one was not too fat really and the other was not too thin. Actually, they were growing more like each other every day. One thought she would like to be thin like the other. The other thought she would like to be fatter like the one. One was growing more like the other one every day. The other one was growing more like one every day. They knew this. They were perceptive women. They knew that some day they were going to meet in the middle.*

*And because they were fat and thin and meeting in the middle, they were good friends and had many disappointments together. They did not have them with each other. They thought each other was the best one they had. The disappointments they had were always with others. They could tell each other about their disappointments in others. They could and they did. The disappointments for both of them were many. The disappointments were these:*

*One woman had a lover and then another lover and then another. One lover after another. Just like that. All the lovers disappointed her. She sensed that they disappointed her because she disappointed them in some way she did not understand. Because she was a perceptive woman, she did not like to think about this because it meant that she was not perceptive. This disappointed her and she did not like being disappointed.*

*The other woman had only one lover. Her lover was a long-term lover and disappointed her for a long time. And for that she was disappointed. Her lover was possessive. She did not like being possessed. This disappointed her. She was disappointed not because she did not like being possessed but because someone had tried to possess her and she tried to make it go away. It didn't. She did.*

*It was a nice blue room where they told each other how they were disappointed in the others. They explained the others to each other and were no longer disappointed. They had a nice room where they met there. It belonged to one of them but the other one had things there too. It was a blue room, a room just for them with lace curtains and satin trim. A very nice room. They liked it there. They liked their bodies there. (They began to forget about their disappointments.) They liked their hair there. (They forgot their disappointments.) They liked their bodies and hair there. Here. And there. (By this time, neither one of them could remember anything about disappointments.) They thought they could there. They thought they could. And, they did.*



In this essay, I am concerned with “that place where nothing is” . . . with the thought which has no object, rather than the idea or word; the objectless state, that consciousness in which no object is intended, rather than a consciousness of something.

I am interested in that which is, not to be imagined or thought. I admit this is strange. The world is filled with that which can be thought. And yet I am concerned with un-imaging the world—not with that which can be found in imagination or that which is accessible to reason or fantasy.

A question has faced me, very early, from the time when my senses and mind connected and began to focus together, when I began to feel thoughts and thoughts appeared . . . how shall I live in this world? How can I bear it, which means to me how do I understand it and understand myself in it. Understanding . . . to **under**-stand something? No. Understanding is a with-standing. A standing with. In this way of “understanding,” knowledge is not a grasping or possessing. It is not to find an answer and never to think of the question again. It is to come upon, discover openings, new sights and new senses.

Feminism, lesbianism must be all of this: always searching, always questioning the vantage point and taking care that it opens onto newness, not onto an old understanding disguised. It is difficult, and I wonder if my eyes are ever more than partially open.

And yet ironically at their widest and most open, my eyes see nothing. So then, am I blind? The blind see nothing with their eyes; they see with their mind-sense and other senses. Often it is the wise man who is blind. Women don't need to lose their sight in order to be wise.

How is it, then, that nothing can be seen? Why should this concern me, except as possible madness? Each of us knows from her own special experience how this culture, brought to us by the patriarchs, only favors certain existences with the status of reality. That which must be voiced in the grammar of denial, opposition, contradiction, or negation, has no reality of its own separate from that of which it is a reflection (as a negation) or inverse image.



Darkness, for instance, is understood as being without light; in this culture there is no such thing as seeing in the dark without light. The word **no**, a deep and passionate demand, is heard in this culture as a negation of something (the culture itself). Grammatically, at least, we can say that the culture is still in possession of that which is its negative.

These and how many more forms of negation are applied to women and seen as having no real existence of their own, for their existence depends upon the positive of which they are the negative. No matter what is said about negative and positive supporting each other, the negative does not have the same high status of reality as does the positive. I suspect that those ways of life, of existence and possible existence, ways of thought and ways of with-standing, those ideas, fantasies, and imaginings which did not accord with the principal streams of this culture found their way into the language in the grammatically negative form.

I would like to explode the ideaword **WoMan**. In this culture we are thought of as **Womb-Men**. Just as there is being and nonbeing, there is man and not-man . . . womb-man. Womb refers to what this culture understands as empty space, and to be empty is to lack. Womb, it is believed, refers to that which is nothing, has nothing; its only fullness is when it is full with something other than itself—for instance, as a place for sons to dwell. This is one negation present in the word **WoMan**. There is another. We are not men and that is how they call us. Again we are known as a reflection in the negative form; negation, twice present in the word **wo-man**.

I would like to expose this. I would like to explode the glass I was given to wear over my eyes (which has felt like a cage). There is such a thing as seeing in the dark when there is no light. There is a **no** which is pure affirmation

seeing in the dark when there is no light. There is a **no** which is pure affirmation, and space which is a fullness, not a lack. There is a darkness of the moon, always there, even during those times when men understand it only as a reflector which lights the sky. The moon is its darkness, not the light that it reflects.

I would like to shatter even the value that is given to the negative; to show that which is seen in the mode of **not** as the affirmation in its own self that it is; to free these affirmations which are now imprisoned in the negative grammar of this language and culture. To shatter the word that surrounds me, **wo-man** itself, and open myself anew to that with which I can with-stand myself: my darkness, my left and sinister handedness, my speaking about nothing, so I can begin to speak about it as that it is.

I am concerned with . . . I am interested in consciousness in which no object is intended, yet which is not a passive consciousness. I am interested in that which is, not to be imagined. I am concerned by which brings everything into question and places the question and the questioner herself under suspicion . . . as if the question is in itself unsightly. Sometimes I look into a woman's face and connect with , which is . . . not to be touched.



It is not the unnameable; there are unknowns which are not yet named. It is not the unknowable which has no name. It is not that which cannot be found (we can play tricks with our minds and imagine or fantasize that which can't be found), nor is it, really, the unthinkable, nor the un-imageable. If all of this is so, how does it happen that I can ask about \_\_\_\_\_? It seems I am speaking in quick signals, but perhaps this is all I can do for \_\_\_\_\_ is, just as that.

I am not speaking of the gap between things—that space-between which can be defined by the objects which surround it—nor of nothingness, that strange reification present in twentieth-century psychology and philosophy. I am not speaking of the “instant” of which Kierkegaard speaks, nor of absence as Sartre speaks of it,<sup>1</sup> nor of nonbeing which finds its support in the idea that we are, nor of god given a negative form, nor of death or lack.

I am speaking of \_\_\_\_\_ which is separate from the process of constitution. God can be constituted (we know very well about him); god can be intended. I am unable to constitute or even intend \_\_\_\_\_, yet \_\_\_\_\_ is, present to me. If not imagination, does intuition play a part in this? Perhaps, but if so, \_\_\_\_\_ also empties intuition of intentionality.

Existence seems to deny \_\_\_\_\_. To ask any question about \_\_\_\_\_ is to contradict the very asking. Yet in some way \_\_\_\_\_ is present. If I can say that consciousness is basic to my be-ing, and all modes of knowing (imagining, seeing, sensing, naming, intuiting, fantasizing, and others) are a making present the world to myself, then how is it that \_\_\_\_\_ is, present to me? Heidegger asks in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, “Why are there essents rather than nothing?” My question is, rather, how does \_\_\_\_\_ arise for me at all?

What I wish to explore should not be confused with death—neither physical nor psychological death—death which presents to me the intimate possibility of my own nonexistence. Death is like nonbeing present to being. Like the gap between things. I can see it seasonally; I can see it daily. I can almost imagine it as an end to life. Death is, because I am; existence posits death. My point is that existence seems to refute \_\_\_\_\_ at every moment.

I am speaking of the sense or consciousness of myself existing at the same moment that \_\_\_\_\_ is present to me. The harrowing sense of you and me here but bound up with \_\_\_\_\_, which is posited in spite of itself and in spite of existence and in turn places everything that is, and the consciousness I have known itself, under suspicion. To be is to stand with \_\_\_\_\_, or to stand across from or to with—stand; be-ing is to be in the face of \_\_\_\_\_

I have not been brought to this by meaninglessness; meaninglessness follows at the heels of \_\_\_\_\_ because in this western philosophical and male tradition, there is no consciousness without the possessive, without something—an object, an other—to be conscious of, and without this consciousness, men say, there is no meaning. This assumption is what I wish to expose.



## The Desire to be God and Object-making

The desire to be god. What I call man's insatiable longing to view all that is (and even himself) from the position of an "original creator." To understand and know in the mode of grasping, dominating, controlling, knowing without question. The desire to possess the image, to encircle it by putting his mind around the object to be known in the same way that he sends his spacecraft around the moon. The wish to be his own creator, to be his own foundation. In Freud's words, the wish to be his own parent. The wish to be outside with a view on totality while staying in. To live with the paradox by gaining control over it. To wish completeness and perfection in the mode of knowing as "God would know."

The first necessity in this desire to be god—this desire to control be-ing, to possess and dominate—is to make (or imagine) that which he needs to possess into an object for possession. He then needs to produce those tools—select and develop the kind of consciousness—which can encircle and dominate (or fill) the object; and, finally, he must do away with that which cannot be possessed.

Even be-ing has been given objective status and measured. Although the "idea" "infinity" cannot be said to be within the possibility of measurement, it is believed forms of measurement can articulate it. It cannot be enclosed by the finite, but "infinity" can become accessible by being seen in terms of finite parts. Eternity is defined as an endless succession of moments or as time-without-end. Ontology is given an objective description which becomes its definition and measurement. Death is understood as being-without-life, and nothingness is known as an infinite number of negations. By understanding infinity, eternity, nothingness, be-ing, in terms of an endless succession of finite objects, he thinks he can have control over be-ing. He thinks by putting his mind (or arms) around one object in this infinite succession of objects, he can come to grasp his situation.

For Sartre, "Nothingness can appear nowhere except at the heart of be-ing." He declares that the fundamental passion of man, especially the philosophical man, is to "fill holes" and to fill them with himself. Nothingness, for Sartre, is that hole at the core of being which is to be filled, and it is this filling of the hole which produces the movement of freedom, itself founded upon man's power to negate. This movement of freedom which he calls the "infinite pursuit" feeds off the passion "to fill the hole at the core of being." "The hole," he says, "is originally presented as a nothingness 'to be filled' with my own flesh." He continues:

The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open.' It is an appeal to being as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution. Conversely woman senses her condition as an appeal precisely because she is 'in the form of a hole'.<sup>2</sup>

The hole which he fills with himself is WoMan. In this passage Sartre has exposed the third necessity in this desire to be god: he must do away with that which cannot be possessed. This project has to do with us. Man desires the hole in a woman, but he cannot possess space so he fills it with himself.



For Sartre woman is that hole at the core of being, that nothingness which is possessed (**must** be possessed if man is to transcend himself) by filling it, by negating it. The hole of which Sartre speaks is seen as something to be filled for only when it is negated (filled) does it have objective status and man can only connect with that which is object. For man there can be no relation without something to relate to.

We can encounter \_\_\_\_\_ in ourselves and each other without filling \_\_\_\_\_ with objects to fear, dogmas to believe in, rituals to perform, objects to love. This need to fill \_\_\_\_\_ which is at the basis of patriarchal desire is not the nature of a woman's desire. In some way we are in intimate relation to \_\_\_\_\_ which is, not to be imaged, and which we can encounter just as that.

This desire which I symbolize by saying the desire to be god is now at the basis of the technology which surrounds us: the infinite extension of finite tools with which man hopes to encircle be-ing (so it becomes for him Infinite Being) . . . the rod in physics which measures space, the spacecraft which will infinitely repeat traveling through finite distance, man who believes he has a handle on be-ing by thinking of time in terms of finite periods extended infinitely, man who thinks of himself as a tool to be extended infinitely.

But there must be someone to carry on this infinite count. And I imagine that "God himself" is sitting on a rock somewhere counting to infinity. If not, the succession of sons will carry on this count. Infinity is measured by the infinite number of human lives, and perhaps this is one function of war—to hasten the count.

In order for man to fulfill the desire to be god, that which cannot be measured or broken into finite parts must be lost. This is what I am concerned with, \_\_\_\_\_ which is not to be found but can be lost . . . that which is not accessible to measurement without being lost. The fact that man believes he can measure himself and measure everything against the background of his own making is only possible with the loss of \_\_\_\_\_. The more he "knows" himself in this way, the more he imprisons himself.

An image. Man draws not a circle but a square around himself, and in relation to that square he measures himself. He forgets that it was a square he drew, and he then begins to use these derived dimensions—a square is accessible to measurement—to know what it is to be. Man is in the image of god or god is in the image of man but it is a square god, a god also imprisoned and without freedom.

If man does not have the tools for such measurement, he will develop the tools or he himself will become the tool. Technology is the omnipotent and un-mortal extension of man's body: the car, his weapons (man arms himself), the penile nuclear warhead, never live and cannot die. He seeks to extend that which is not mortal—his tools, his arms, his art—in his effort to be immortal. They are immortal in the mode of being un-mortal. He is a body without \_\_\_\_\_, and this he desires; for the body which is un-mortal can be extended and refined while \_\_\_\_\_ which cannot be found (and therefore re-fined) must be lost. He replaces fleshy parts which die with indestructible metallic parts which never live. He will be immortal. That is correct. He will not be mortal. He will not live. This "immortality" extends



only to that which he is capable of creating . . . history, time, forms of measurement, mechanical extensions of his body . . .

So the desire to be god has led to the desire to replace life which dies with that which does not live.<sup>3</sup> His situation, his condition, existence, has been reassessed in the light of that which he is capable of: immortal lifelessness. This god that man becomes is filled with an immortality which is lifeless. God is, dead. And this man imitates for this he is capable of.

Tragedy and absurdity are both representative, in different ways, of patriarchal madresses coming from the desire to be god. Both are representative of a deep and integral anxiety countered by the need for omnipotence. Omnipotence is pursuable only when it is possible to be blind. Oedipus thought himself omnipotent as long as he could be blind to his "destiny" and when he finally saw this, he ripped out his eyes so that he would not be blind again. In the world of the absurd, there is too much light. There is not enough darkness in which to be blind. And yet, ironically, this light which fills everything makes the world impossible to see, leaving the absurd man sightless.

In tragedy, the desire to be god is renounced and then replaced by a subject-object "relationship" to god, to destiny, or to some eternal justice. The desire to be god has not really been given up; it has been camouflaged by an inversion. The man who desired to be god becomes god's object and purpose.

On the other hand, in the world of the absurd the desire to be god cannot be renounced: god is not, the object is lost, the world is no longer available for his consciousness. The image is gone and man is left without his sight. Male consciousness which had depended upon objects is empty. He hasn't even the subject-object "relation" of tragedy. Absurdity saves man from the madness of tragedy (in which the object which he wished to possess possesses him) but delivers him into another madness, another strange omnipotence, itself much more endangering of life, and that is relation-less-ness.

Absurdity is not merely the incomprehensibility, the self-contradiction, the paradox, the pure contingency of be-ing. Absurdity, for man, is to be in the state of relation-less-ness. The nothingness of the world of the absurdist reveals how the ability to relate has depended upon an object. How male consciousness has had to be consciousness of something. It is revealed how the "relation" is not a free relation at all. Perhaps this is why man is more interested in death than in life and why, as he goes on studying life, he part/iculates what is living until it is lifeless and thus available for his consciousness.

In the world of the absurd, man has come full circle to the problem of patriarchal consciousness, and yet he is unable to go further for his consciousness, his sense of being-here, cannot exist without an object. The absurdity man has found for himself is the state of relation-less-ness he has always been in.

My be-ing is involved in a relating to . . . . Even to voice that sentence should be an impossibility. In some way women are in an intimate relation to . . . . which is unimaginable and which we can encounter just as that.



In some way \_\_\_\_\_ is present to me. I believe when I say this I am trying to go beyond my means, those means which I have been given by patriarchal culture. The "consciousness" of the patriarchs eventually takes itself as its own object. Reason, for instance, is intentional. It takes for its object that which is susceptible to the power of reason. That god which can be proved by reason to exist can also be proved by reason not to exist. At some point then the power to reason, itself, becomes the object for study. Reason can function adequately within this closed circuit—foundation upon foundation—with itself as its own object. In a sense, as Freud would say, man does become his own ideal and, like the uroboros, ends by biting his own tail.<sup>4</sup> What I am saying is: to go beyond our means is what produces a genuine movement of consciousness.

In some way I am conscious, and essential to my being conscious is this connection with \_\_\_\_\_. How do I with—stand relation to \_\_\_\_\_? How is such a relating possible when there is \_\_\_\_\_ to understand? This is a very unreasonable and unsightly statement. Yet, always, within the nature of genuine consciousness is the relation to \_\_\_\_\_

### Relation and Relationlessness

Relation is a kind of connection but not a connection in the mode of possession or identification, of power, domination, or control, or a connection which is a subject-object making. If consciousness is always of something, if consciousness is to know by grasping an object, then consciousness is not a relation and I cannot be both conscious and in relation—to being, to another woman. Relation is a connection which leaves that which is connected free.

There are ways of dealing with \_\_\_\_\_ besides relation. Man may try to lose himself and thus rid himself of the disjunction caused by existing in the face of \_\_\_\_\_. Man can refuse this radical possibility of \_\_\_\_\_ and become god. He then becomes his own ideal, his own creator. Or man may fill \_\_\_\_\_ with an object of fear or belief or an object of desire (which this culture calls love). Later he will negate (transcend) the object in order to have control over it. This may be what lies behind the male nihilistic philosophies of this age.

Anxiety can be a relation to \_\_\_\_\_. It has no object and that is why we are anxious. Anxiety comes when we cannot make an object of that which is its source. \_\_\_\_\_ is at the source of anxiety. Contrary to a painful part of the body or psyche, the individual cannot even prepare to sacrifice the source of anxiety<sup>5</sup> for \_\_\_\_\_ is, not to be touched. Unlike anxiety, fear may have an object, and that object can be overcome, that is, **conquered**, a word of domination.

Paul Tillich in an article called "Anxiety-Reducing Agents in Our Culture" wrote:

All anxiety springs from lack of power. The word bans chaos, the threat of non-being, inside and outside of oneself. The powers of chaos . . . are expressions of the basic anxiety which is the destiny of man. . . . This source of anxiety cannot be removed because it is we ourselves, our very being. But the creative word can keep it in limits and make life possible. He who has the word has power over chaos and therefore over anxiety.<sup>6</sup>



With his "creative word," man fills the source of his anxiety, changing it, in essence, into an object. The necessity for an object for his consciousness is integral and original to his very being. I believe, as Solanas wrote in **The S.C.U.M. Manifesto**, man is derivative and, as Davis stated in **The First Sex** and Sherfey alluded to in **The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality**, maleness is a mutation. The divisiveness present in his consciousness—subject-object "relationships," the philosophical problem of the one and the other, and the other well-known dualisms—exists because, in some way, man is derivative. He was the original "other." His consciousness cannot do without that from which he was derived. He cannot do away with his source without destroying himself, but he can mirror it and make himself the source and make the source the "other." Nevertheless, at every moment, that "other" will threaten man with nonbeing.

"But the creative word can keep it in limits and make life possible." As Sartre wrote, man's passion is to fill holes. That which man cannot encircle because it has no boundaries, he fills, full-fills, and re-fills with himself. Try going back to the Tillich quotation and reading **semen** for **word**.<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible for man to relate to an objectless state without his own disintegration. He cannot be conscious without something to be conscious of; he cannot be transcendent without something to transcend; he cannot "love" without an object. He has developed an object-dependent consciousness which functions by domination/submission and fixation/transcendence or, as in some Eastern philosophical traditions, a transcendence without consciousness. Men are derivative and cannot be without this object state in which they are either possessed, possessive, or unconscious. This in turn infects all their action and thought. In male "consciousness" there is no relation present. In fact, because of this, it is not a consciousness at all.

Consciousness is a knowing which is a relating, and in every relation we are in contact with \_\_\_\_\_, just as that. The source of meaninglessness for men is not lack of purpose or boredom; it is not contingency or the nullity at the basis of being (as Heidegger would say) nor the vague sense of the incomprehensibility of existence. Meaninglessness is relationlessness. It is in the possibility of relation, as I speak of it, that meaning is found.

But how is relation to \_\_\_\_\_ possible? Can I even tolerate this question? Even the language makes the question unacceptable. How can \_\_\_\_\_ be encountered without falling into the desire to be god, the desire to possess or object-make, or without falling into madness and meaninglessness? If we can face \_\_\_\_\_, we may be able to sense ways of knowing which are a relating because they themselves are relations to \_\_\_\_\_ or relation to \_\_\_\_\_ is present in them.

Just as the negative grammar may be a clue to ways of be-ing from which we have been separated, we may be directed toward ways of seeing, understanding, acting, sensing, which are not object-making, controlling ways of knowing by that which is called irrational: anxiety, rage, sensuality, love . . .

Love, for instance. A woman does not need to possess (encircle, dominate, enslave, fill) anyone (anything) to know her own power of consciousness; nor do we need to try to make an object (an "other") of a woman in order to love.



In love, I am brought to that place where . . . is. Love between women is a desire to be with rather than a desire for (which would fix rather than free). In this love, that which is felt passionately is not to be possessed. We can encounter . . . , just as that. Woman's love can with—stand the pressure of . . .

To exist while encountering . . . . To exist without a mirror to reflect back an image. Narcissus felt his own presence only when he saw that he could have an image.

Women need no image. We can see through this mirror. We can love without the desire for an object-image to image ourselves back to us. We do not need to see ourselves reflected in a lover's eye. We can exist, we can know in the encounter with

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### Notes

1. Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Dread* speaks of the "instant" as "that strange being . . . which lies between movement and repose. . . . Pure being is the most abstract expression for eternity, and in turn, like 'nothing' . . ." *The Concept of Dread* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 75.

2. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1971), pp. 781-82. I do not know if this passage is familiar to lesbian feminists, but I offer it here for it should not be missed. Recently, Peggy Holland has written an excellent article which exposes and details Sartre's phallic philosophy in much greater depth than I do here. (Peggy Holland, "Jean-Paul Sartre as a NO to Women," in *Sinister Wisdom* 6, Summer, 1978.)

3. I wrote this paper (the present essay is a shortened form) in the fall of 1973 and spring of 1974. Several months later I saw an article called "Sorry, We're Here for Eternity" in the *New York Times* (September 24, 1974) written by F.M. Esfandiary, who teaches philosophy at the New School. He writes: "we will refine the existing ability to replace more and more of our vulnerable parts. We will continue to de-animalize our bodies, creating new durable attractive physiologies. . . . We who in this late 20th century send spacecraft to instellar space . . . can now also marshal our genius to achieve the most transcendent and liberating freedom of all: physical immortality."

4. Monique Wittig in *Les Guerilleres* wrote: "Women say that men put all their pride in their tail. They mock them, they say that the men would like a long tail but that they would run away whining as soon as they stepped on it." (New York: Avon Books, 1973), p. 106.)

5. There is an interesting book by David Bakan called *Disease, Pain and Sacrifice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). In it, Bakan says that the effort by a man (sic) to bring pain upon himself is an effort to make an object of himself or part of himself in preparation for sacrificing it. This can afford "the ego the sense of control over the source of annihilation."

6. Paul Tillich, "Anxiety-Reducing Agencies in Our Culture" in *Anxiety*, ed. Hoch and Zubin (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1950), p. 17. He is wrong that anxiety can only be reduced. Anxiety can be faced as itself a relation to



7. In the Tantric systems of Tibet and India this exchange is not so hidden. In the Buddhist Tantra the source of the seed, the **Bindu** or rupa-skanda, is located in the forehead. Alex Wayman, a scholar in Buddhist Tantra, speaks of:

. . . the secret delight by the seed, i.e. the delight engendered from the dripping of the bodhicitta [the seed] from the HAM syllable at the crown of the head.

(In Alex Wayman, **The Buddhist Tantras** [New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973], p. 40.)

In the Hevajra Tantra, one of the important texts of the Buddhist Tantras, Lord Hevajra (Lord Thunderbolt) says:

Taking this girl, who has wide-open eyes and is of age, and endowed with youth and beauty, he should consecrate her with his seed of enlightenment.

(**The Hevajra Tantra**, trans. D. L. Snellgrove, Part 1 [London: Oxford University Press, 1959], II, ii, pp. 17-18.)

Lord Hevajra says of himself:

I am the goal. I am the trainer. I am the world and worldly things. My nature is that of Innate Joy and I come at the end of the Joy that is Perfect and at the beginning of the Joy of Cessation. So be assured, my son, it is like a lamp in darkness. (II, ii, pp. 39-40.)

Recently in Boston women organized "Women take back the night." Along the way, there were small groups of men, each man with his hands around a thin candle, about seven inches high, lit, which he held slightly below his waist. It seems they think they must still bring us their light (so that we can see in the dark), and women are still letting them in so many different ways: semen, the seed of enlightenment, their word . . .

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—Martha Yates

If there were a point to begin  
I would tell it in the slow nodding of my head  
in the sun  
and I would sit like this, eager and straight  
with my hands now on my knees, now swinging through  
air to dance the shapes I wish you would make  
for me the ones I thought  
you were hoarding small and would not use for  
breaking a quiet dignity  
the same that carries you so proud in the  
white shape that I hold aloof  
from the first far dark seeing of you  
and still the dusky vision  
despite the great rush and tumbling of yes and  
echo knew that  
there is sharing so large as disbelief  
here this first talking  
and later in the slow weaving of days into days.

hidden from myself I  
found back to you each time from the path  
strewn from your door home  
reluctant. crumbs and the smaller dreams  
that crackle and grind under my feet  
as I turn and climb the stair  
the doors that guard me from you solid  
at my back.  
leap and dream the we that could be in the  
safest place hollowed  
from ageless circling and shifting  
like the longest nightmare  
and the tearing of blankets and damp hair  
like that shallow depression you left in my chair  
the nest of lost weight  
the place of a head seeking warmth  
where the lap is echoing still

*-Theresa Barry*



In touching you are river  
fanning wide fingers towards the sea  
gliding clear over  
polished sand and stone blue  
eyes leave  
faint tracings in the current and sliding night  
defy rhythm  
and dwell in the wellsprings  
that knife cool through your waters there  
close me deep in you.  
seen closer than vision  
the lightest finger swirls away  
flesh in the quiet melt  
and catch at the river's edge  
in a slow lapping pulse.

*—Theresa Barry*



Tee's grandmother and her friend Gerti (ca 1910)

*photograph by Tee Corinne*





## MY MOTHER'S MORTAR

When I was growing up in my mother's house, there were spices you grated and spices you pounded, and whenever you pounded spice and garlic or other herbs, you used a mortar. Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar. Now if you lost or broke your mortar, of course, you could buy another one in the market over on Park Avenue, under the bridge, but those were usually Puerto Rican mortars, and even though they were made out of wood and worked exactly the same way, somehow they were never really as good as West Indian mortars. Now where the best mortars came from I was never really sure, but I knew it must be in the vicinity of that amorphous and mystically perfect place called "home." "Home" was the West Indies, Grenada or Barbados to be exact, and whatever came from "home" was bound to be special.

My mother's mortar was a beautiful affair, quite at variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with her projected public view of herself. It had stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly.

The mortar was of a foreign fragrant wood, too dark for cherry and too red for walnut. To my child eyes, the outside was carved in an intricate and most enticing manner. There were rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear. In between these were smaller rounded shapes like cherries, lying in batches against and around each other.

I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval but suddenly business-like. The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object always made me feel secure and somehow full; as if it conjured up from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come.

The pestle was a slender tapering wand, fashioned from the same mysterious rose-deep wood, and fitted into the hand almost casually, familiarly. The actual shape reminded me of a summer crook-necked squash uncurled and slightly twisted. It could also have been an avocado, with the neck of the alligator pear elongated and the whole made businesslike and efficient for pounding, without ever losing the apparent soft firmness and the character of the fruit which the wood suggested. It was slightly bigger at the grinding end than most pestles, and the widened curved end fitted into the



bowl of the mortar easily. Long use and years of impact and grinding within the bowl's worn hollow had softened the very surface of the wooden pestle until a thin layer of split fibers coated the rounded end like a layer of velvet. A layer of the same velvety mashed wood lined the bottom inside the sloping bowl.

My mother did not particularly like to pound spice, and she looked upon the advent of powdered everything as a cook's boon. But there were some certain dishes that called for a particular savory blending of garlic, raw onion and pepper, and souse was one of them.

For our mother's souse, it didn't matter what kind of meat was used. You could have hearts, or beefs, or even chicken backs and gizzards when we were really poor. It was the pounded up saucy blend of herb and spice rubbed into the meat before it was left to stand so for a few hours before cooking that made that dish so special and unforgettable. But my mother had some very firm ideas about what she liked best to cook and about which were her favorite dishes, and souse was definitely not one of either.

On the very infrequent occasions that my mother would allow one of us three girls to choose a meal—as opposed to helping to prepare it, which was a daily routine,—on those occasions my sisters would usually choose one of those proscribed dishes so dear to our hearts remembered from our relatives' tables, contraband, and so very rare in our house. They might ask for hot-dogs, perhaps, smothered in ketchup sauce, or with crusty Boston-baked beans; or American chicken, breaded first and fried crispy the way the southern people did it; or creamed something-or-other that one of my sisters had tasted at school; or what-have-you croquettes or anything fritters; or once even a daring outrageous request for slices of fresh watermelon, harked from the back of a rickety wooden pickup truck with the southern road dust still on her slatted sides, from which a young bony black man with a turned-around ballcap on his head would hang and half-yell, half-yodel—“Wahr-deeeeeee-mayyyyyyyy-lawnnnnnnnn.”

There were many American dishes I longed for too, but on the one or two occasions a year that I got to choose a meal, I would always ask for souse. That way, I knew that I would get to use my mother's mortar, and this in itself was more treat for me than any of the forbidden foods. Besides, if I really wanted hot dogs or anything croquettes badly enough, I could steal some money from my father's pocket and buy them in the school lunch.

“Mother, let's have souse,” I'd say, and never even stop to think about it. The anticipated taste of the soft spicy meat had become inseparable in my mind from the tactile pleasures of using my mother's mortar.

“But what makes you think anybody can find time to mash up all that stuff?” my mother would cut her hawk-grey eyes at me from beneath their heavy black brows. “Among you children never stop to think, you know,” and she'd turn back to whatever it was she had been doing. If she had just come from the office with my father, she might be checking the day's receipts, or she might be washing the endless piles of dirty linen that always seemed to issue from the rooming houses they managed.



"Oh, I'll pound the garlic, Mommy!" would be my next line in the script written by some ancient and secret hand, and off I'd go to the cabinet to get down the heavy wooden mortar and pestle.

I would get a head of garlic out from the garlic bottle in the icebox, and breaking off ten or twelve cloves from the head, I would carefully peel away the tissue lavender skin, slicing each stripped peg in half lengthwise. Then I would drop them piece by piece into the capacious waiting bowl of the mortar. Taking a slice from a small onion, I would put the rest aside to be used later on over the meat, and cutting the slice into quarters, I would toss it into the mortar also. Next came the coarsely ground fresh black pepper, and then a lavish blanketing cover of salt over the whole. Last, if we had any, a few leaves from the top of a head of celery would be thrown in. My mother would sometimes add a slice of green pepper to be mashed in also, but I did not like the textures of the pepper skin under the pestle, and preferred to add it along with the sliced onion later on, leaving it all to sit over the seasoned and resting meat.

After all the ingredients were in the bowl of the mortar, I would fetch the pestle and placing it into the bowl, slowly rotate the shaft a few times, working it gently down through all the ingredients to mix them. Only then would I lift the pestle, and with one hand firmly pressed around the carved side of the mortar caressing the wooden fruit with my aromatic fingers, I would thrust sharply downward, feeling the shifting salt and the hard little pellets of garlic right up through the shaft of the wooden pestle. Up again, down, around, and up, so the rhythm would begin. The thud push rub rotate and up, repeated over and over; the muted thump of the pestle on the bed of grinding spice, as the salt and pepper absorbed the slowly yielded juices of the garlic and celery leaves and became moist; the mingling fragrances rising from the bowl of the mortar; the feeling of the pestle held between my fingers and the rounded fruit of the mortar's outside against my palm and curving fingers as I steadied it against my body; all these transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied.

Sometimes my mother would look over at me with that amused annoyance which passed for tenderness with her, and which was always such a welcome change for me from the furious annoyance which was so much more usual.

"What you think you making there, garlic soup? Enough, go get the meat now." And I would fetch the lamb hearts, for instance, from the icebox and begin to prepare them. Cutting away the hardened veins at the top of the smooth firm muscles, I would divide each oval heart into four wedge-shaped pieces, and taking a bit of the spicy mash from the mortar with my fingertips, I would rub each piece with the savory mix. The pungent smell of garlic and onion and celery would envelop the kitchen.

The last day I ever pounded seasoning for souse was in the summer of my fourteenth year. It had been a fairly unpleasant summer, for me. I had just finished my first year in high school. Instead of being able to visit my newly found friends, all of whom lived in other parts of the city, I had to accompany my mother on a round of doctors with whom she would have



long whispered conversations that I was not supposed to listen to. Only a matter of the utmost importance could have kept her away from the office for so many mornings in a row. But my mother was concerned because I was fourteen and a half years old and had not yet menstruated. I had breasts but no period, and she was afraid there was "something wrong" with me. Yet, since she had never discussed this mysterious business of menstruation with me, I was certainly not supposed to know what all this whispering was about, even though it concerned my own body.

Of course, I knew as much as I could have possibly found out in those days from the hard-to-get books on the Closed Shelf behind the librarian's desk at the public library, where I had brought a forged note from home in order to be allowed to read them, sitting under the watchful eye of the librarian at a special desk reserved for that purpose.

Although not terribly informative, they were fascinating books, and used words like menses and ovulation and vagina.

But four years before, I had had to find out if I was going to become pregnant, because a boy from school much bigger than me had invited me up to the roof on my way home from the library and then threatened to break my glasses if I didn't let him stick his thing between my legs. And at that time I knew only that being pregnant had something to do with sex, and sex had something to do with that thin pencil-like thing and was in general nasty and not to be talked about by nice people, and I was afraid my mother might find out and what would she do to me then? I was not supposed to be looking at the mailboxes in the hallway of that house anyway, even though Doris was a girl in my class at St. Marks who lived in that house and I was always so lonely in the summer, particularly that summer when I was ten.

So after I got home I washed myself up and lied about why I was late getting home from the library and got a whipping for being late. That must have been a hard summer for my parents at the office too, because that was the summer that I got a whipping for something or other almost every day between the fourth of July and Labor Day.

When I wasn't getting whippings, I hid out at the library on 135th Street and forged notes from my mother to get books from the Closed Shelf and read about sex and having babies and waited to become pregnant. None of the books were very clear to me about the relationship between having your period and having a baby, but they were all very clear about the relationship between penises and getting pregnant. Or maybe the confusion was all in my own mind, because I had always been a very fast but not a very careful reader.

So four years later, in my fourteenth year, I was a very scared little girl, still half-afraid that one of that endless stream of doctors would look up into my body and discover my four-year-old shame and say to my mother, "Aha! So that's what's wrong! Your daughter is about to become pregnant!"

On the other hand, if I let mother know that I knew what was happening and what these medical safaris were all about, I would have to answer her questions about how and wherefore I knew, since she hadn't told me, divulging in the process the whole horrible and self-incriminating story of forbidden books and forged library notes and rooftops and stairwell conversations.



A year after the rooftop incident, we moved farther uptown and I was transferred to a different school. The kids there seemed to know a lot more about sex than at St. Marks, and in the eighth grade, I had stolen money and bought Adeline a pack of cigarettes and she had confirmed my bookish suspicions about how babies were made. My response to her graphic descriptions had been to think to myself, —there obviously must be another way that Adeline doesn't know about, because my parents have children and I know they never did anything like that. But the basic principles were all there, and sure enough they were the same as I had gathered from *The Young People's Family Book*.

So in my fourteenth summer, on examining table after examining table, I kept my legs open and my mouth shut, and when I saw blood on my pants one hot July afternoon, I rinsed them out secretly in the bathroom and put them back on wet because I didn't know how to break the news to my mother that both her worries and mine were finally over. (All this time I had at least understood that having your period was a sign you were not pregnant.)

What then happened felt like a piece of an old and elaborate dance between my mother and me. She discovers finally, through a stain on the toilet seat left there on purpose by me as a mute announcement, what has taken place; she scolds, "Why didn't you tell me about all of this, now? It's nothing to get upset over, now you are a woman, not a child anymore. Now you go over to the drugstore and ask the man for. . ."

I was just relieved the whole damn thing was over with. It's difficult to talk about double messages without having a twin tongue. But meanwhile, all these nightmarish evocations and restrictions were being verbalized by my mother:

"Now this means from now on you better watch your step and not be so friendly with every Tom Dick and Harry. . ." (which must have meant my staying late after school to talk with my girl-friends, because I did not even know any boys); and,

"Now remember, too, don't leave your soiled napkins wrapped up in newspaper hanging around on the bathroom floor where your father has to see them, not that it's anything shameful but all the same remember. . ."

Along with all of these admonitions, there was something else coming from my mother that I almost could not define. It was the lurking of that amused/annoyed brow-furrowed half-smile that passed as an intimate moment between my mother and me, and I really felt,—all her nagging words to the contrary, or the more confusing,—that something very good and satisfactory and pleasing to her had just happened, and that we were both pretending otherwise for some very wise and secret reasons which I would come to understand later as a reward if I handled myself properly. And then at the end of it all, my mother thrust the box of Kotex in its plain wrapper which I had fetched back from the drugstore with a sanitary belt at me, and said:

"But look now what time it is already, I wonder what we're going to eat for supper tonight?" She waited. At first I didn't understand, but I quickly picked up the cue. I had seen the beefends in the icebox that morning.



“Mommy, please let’s have some souse—I’ll pound the garlic.” I dropped the box onto a kitchen chair and started to wash my hands in anticipation.

“Well, go put your business away first. What did I tell you about leaving that lying around?” She wiped her hands from the washtub where she had been working and handed the plain wrapped box of Kotex back to me.

“I have to go out; I forgot to pick up tea at the store. Now make sure you rub the meat good.”

When I came back into the kitchen, my mother had left. I moved toward the kitchen cabinet to fetch down the mortar and pestle. My body felt new and special and unfamiliar and suspect all at the same time.

I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my body back and forth like lunar winds across the moon’s face. I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the warm delicate bread-fruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, erotic, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious.

(Years afterward when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our making love to each other.)

I took the mortar down, and smashed the cloves of garlic with the edge of its underside, to loosen the thin papery skins in a hurry. I sliced them and flung them into the mortar’s bowl along with some black pepper and celery leaves. The white salt poured in, covering the garlic and black pepper and pale chartreuse celery fronds like a snowfall. I tossed in the onion and some bits of green pepper and reached for the pestle.

It slipped through my fingers and clattered to the floor, rolling around in a semicircle back and forth, until I bent to retrieve it. I grabbed the head of the wooden stick and straightened up, my ears ringing faintly. Without even wiping it, I plunged the pestle into the bowl, feeling the blanket of salt give way, and the broken cloves of garlic just beneath. The downward thrust of the avocado-shaped wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly, and then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat. Back and forth, up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down. . . There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous.

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my rounded brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer.

The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, now pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice. And within



that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information.

The jarring shocks of the velvet-lined pestle, striking the matted bed of spice, traveled up an invisible pathway along that thread into the center of me, and the harshness of the repeated impact became increasingly more unbearable. The tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of those strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition the downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler until its velvety surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar.

The whole rhythm of my movements softened and elongated until, dream-like, I stood one hand tightly curved around the carved mortar, steadying it against the middle of my body: while my other hand, around the pestle, rubbed and pressed the moistening spice into readiness with a sweeping circular movement.

I hummed tunelessly to myself as I worked in the warm kitchen, thinking with relief about how my life had become now that I was a woman. The catalogue of dire menstruation warnings from my mother passed out of my head. My body felt strong and full and open, yet captivated by the gentle motions of the pestle, and the rich smells filling the kitchen, and the fullness of the young summer heat.

I heard my mother's key in the lock.

She swept into the kitchen briskly, like a ship under full sail. There were tiny beads of sweat over her upper lip, and vertical creases between her brows.

"You mean to tell me no meat is ready?" My mother dropped her parcel of tea onto the table, and looking over my shoulder, sucked her teeth loudly in weary disgust. "What do you call yourself doing, now? You have all night to stand up there playing with the food? I go all the way to the store and back already and still you can't mash up a few pieces of garlic to season some meat? But you know how to do the thing better than this! Why you vex me so?"

She took the mortar and pestle out of my hands and started to grind vigorously. And there were still bits of garlic left at the bottom of the bowl.

"Now you do, so!" She brought the pestle down inside the bowl of the mortar with dispatch, crushing the last of the garlic. I heard the thump of wood brought down heavily upon wood, and I felt the impact throughout my body, as if something had broken inside of me. Thump, thump, went the pestle, purposefully, up and down in the old familiar way.

"It was getting mashed, Mother," I dared to protest, turning away to the icebox. "I'll fetch the meat." I was surprised at my own brazenness in answering back.

But something in my voice interrupted my mother's efficient motions. She ignored my implied contradiction, itself an act of rebellion strictly forbidden in our house. The thumping stopped.

"What's wrong with you, now? Are you sick? You want to go to your bed?"



“No, I’m all right, Mother.”

But I felt her strong fingers on my upper arm, turning me around, her other hand under my chin as she peered into my face. Her voice softened.

“Is it your period making you so slow-down today?” She gave my chin a little shake, as I looked up into her hooded grey eyes, now becoming almost gentle. The kitchen felt suddenly oppressively hot and still, and I felt myself beginning to shake all over.

Tears I did not understand started from my eyes, as I realized that my old enjoyment of the bone-jarring way I had been taught to pound spice would feel different to me from now on, and also that in my mother’s kitchen there was only one right way to do anything. Perhaps my life had not become so simple, after all.

My mother stepped away from the counter and put her heavy arm around my shoulders. I could smell the warm herness rising from between her arm and her body, mixed with the smell of glycerine and rosewater, and the scent of her thick bun of hair.

“I’ll finish up the food for dinner.” She smiled at me, and there was a tenderness in her voice and an absence of annoyance that was welcome, although unfamiliar.

“You come inside now and lie down on the couch and I’ll make you a hot cup of tea.”

Her arm across my shoulders was warm and slightly damp. I rested my head upon her shoulder, and realized with a shock of pleasure and surprise that I was almost as tall as my mother, as she led me into the cool darkened parlor.

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Note: “My Mother’s Mortar” is an excerpt from Prosepiece, a work in progress.



## ACOUSTICS AT THE WOMEN'S COFFEEHOUSE

in sequestered silence  
only by appreciating  
the affinity of separate silences  
stillnesses magnifying stillnesses  
for centuries has this space ever  
been achieved

how can these sounds of laughter  
of laughter, conversations  
notes from a guitar  
exclude only distractions

the essence has been  
realized and saved

a habit of regard, exactly  
a respectfully declining  
to disturb, intrude, impose  
upon another

not the silence  
but the keeping of  
our silences  
our sounds

—Claudia Scott



## NOTES ON DEAFNESS

### My Deafness: Deafness as Separatism

A few years ago I began to have trouble hearing: What? What was that? What did you say? Repeat that last phrase.

At first I blamed the speaker. Speak up! Stop mumbling. Project! I was a teacher then, and in my arrogance I knew it was the student's fault. I recalled the cynicism of older colleagues (usually male) who joked about deafness (like alcoholism) as an occupational hazard. Deafness was cultivated along with arrogance. They waxed together to mold an armor against the inanities mouthed by students.

I went to an ear doctor. He said it was wax build-up—a common malady of middle-aged ears. With washes and probes he unstopped them. It felt good—a bit sexy. But driving home, I began to have some regrets: the cacophony of traffic hurt a lot. At a faculty meeting next day the voices of the men violated me, and I realized that for weeks my deafness had protected me from academic battering. My own body had provided me with a baffle against the assault of male opinion. I had been under a partial anaesthetic (since I was in an "Arts Department," *anti-aesthetic* is a more apt term) which had created a temporary, quiet observation post from where I had begun to see more clearly the machinations of the minds that produced the battering sounds.

Oh, what a blessed state deafness had been! I resolved that henceforth I would practice deafness in order to cultivate deep listening, listening words back to their sources—and deep seeing, seeing the machinery that projected the farcical mime of the male academics.

When I told Harriet about all this, she said that my deafness had meant the beginning of my separatism.

### Deafness to Me: Deafness as Pain

But I was concerned with deafness for another reason. When I announced in *SW 5* that I wanted to write about it, I had just re-read all the sinister wisdom of that issue and I was wondering how many women would hear it:

Lesbians rightly develop deafness as self-defense: the exhortations of the patriarchy are deadly. To be deaf is to control ingress and hence access to one's self. But deafness can be killing, too. It can, like speechlessness, be cultivated to preclude growth. We impose deafness on one ear to protect us from the threats and blandishments of the father, but—out of fear—we can also stop up the other ear to muffle the new words of our sisters. If, as Julia Stanley says, every speech act involves personal risk on the part of the speaker, then every act of honest listening involves personal risk, too—the risk of a changed consciousness which can make the listener as naked and vulnerable as the speaker. She who hears, as well as she who speaks, is a witch—a knower of changes.



At that time I was and had been deeply pained by my inability to talk to two women (closet Lesbians) whom I had loved and treasured for many years. We lived long distances from each other—B. in Kentucky, E. in Florida, I in North Carolina—and we had long ago replaced the letter with the telephone call, believing (wrongly, I think now) in the importance of immediacy— instant stimulus and response—over the time-consuming, time-lagging exchange of correspondence. So we kept in touch through the ear—something not so hard to do, until one of us—me—becomes a radical Lesbian feminist and announces in print her Lesbian separatism. Suddenly, gulfs and chasms exist, and the telephone cables and acoustical instruments that serve them don't serve us.

Although E.'s and B.'s questions were identical—*WHY? HOW?*—the style of their response was different: E.'s a thick deep silence sighing on the line; B.'s a slashing, contemptuous attack crackling static on the line. But the effect of their deafness on me was the same: the sound of my voice was baffled back to my ears as hollow rhetoric. Their protective deafness bent my words into babbling. I ceased to speak. Their deafness had struck me dumb.

[*boomerang*—“an act of utterance that reacts to the damage of its originator.”]

I was damaged. It was this pain that prompted me to announce that I would write notes on deafness. But my intention was not to write about the experience with B. and E.—no, of course not. My intention was to carve profundities on the page so precisely shaped and brightly polished that all the women who saw them—all the women who didn't know me very well—would fall in love with my gray-haired wisdom and I would dwell in the hearts of my sisters forever.

It didn't happen like that. In fact, nothing much happened at all. I sat and I thought and I occasionally dribbled a note or two—

(Sample: *how are hearing and deafness related to power? I don't think I ever knew a man who ever listened to a woman. . . . listening is something done by slaves—the possessed and the powerless listen to the powerful for clues to survival. . . . Dogs do a lot of listening. Cats, more aware of their power, listen only on occasions they deem essential to survival. So do children in the houses of their fathers. Deafness is a shield and a weapon of the powerless: you can't carry out an order if you don't hear it. . . . To be deaf to your master can lead to passive resistance—to sabotage.\* Perfect listening makes puppets and good slaves. . . .*)

But when I read them over, the words seemed flat and unresonant. So after awhile I quit.

In December while back in North Carolina for a brief visit, my friend Joy talked about her failure with an article she was trying to write for *Sister Wisdom*. Her honesty, her truth-telling about herself, opened me up and I told her that I was unable to write the notes on deafness because I was ashamed of the experience with B. and E. that had prompted me to write them, and I told her why I was ashamed. After listening tenderly and intently, she told me that she had had a similar experience and that she too had been ashamed of herself. “But you must write about your feelings of

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\*I'm indebted to Sarah Hoagland for this insight.



shame," she said. "It's important to write about why you can't write notes on deafness."

So, dear reader, the truth is that I was not cast in the right role. I preferred the more attractive role of writer-thinker of profundities about deafness; I deplored the role I feared I had actually played in the telephone drama. In my worst moments (about ninety percent of my moments), my self-analysis was:

1) I had seen myself as a Lesbian feminist voice crying in the wilderness; a true prophet without honor, self-righteously demanding to be heeded.

2) I had been insecure in what I believed. If my words were not indeed hollow rhetoric, if they had sprung from my blood and bone marrow, I would have been heard. E. and B. were after all reliable tuning forks, and I was way off key.

3) If I were truly Amazonian, the deafness of E. and B. would not have damaged me. And I did not want to be judged weak and dependent—found wanting by tough and vital Lesbian feminist friends.

Result: speechlessness. Conclusion: dead-end.

### Hearing and Transformation

While I was trying to write about deafness, there were women who were thinking and writing profoundly about hearing. Shortly after I wrote the announcement in *SW 5* but before it had appeared in print, I received from Nelle Morton—a wise crone in southern California—a copy of her paper "Beloved Image!" in which she had written this illuminating passage on hearing:

*It was in a small group of women who had come together to tell our own stories that I first received a totally new understanding of hearing and speaking. I remember well how one woman started, hesitating and awkward, trying to put the pieces of her life together. Finally she said: "I hurt . . . I hurt all over." She touched herself in various places as if feeling for the hurt before she added, "but . . . I don't know where to begin to cry." She talked on . . . and on. Her story took on fantastic coherence. When she reached a point of most excruciating pain no one moved. No one interrupted. Finally, she finished. After a silence, she looked from one woman to another. "You heard me. You heard me all the way." Her eyes narrowed. She looked directly at each woman in turn and then said slowly: "I have a strange feeling you heard me before I started. You heard me to my own story." I filed this experience away as something unique. But it happened again and again in other such small groups of women. It happened to me. Then, I knew I had been experiencing something I had never experienced before. A complete reversal of the going logic in which someone speaks precisely so that more accurate hearing may take place. This woman was saying, and I had experienced, a depth hearing that takes place before the speaking—a hearing that is far more than acute listening. A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech—a new speech—a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech.<sup>1</sup>*

A few months later we received from Beacon Press the page proofs of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, and there



again in the fantastically coherent final chapter of her book were quoted Nelle Morton's insightful words on hearing. Using these words, these thoughts, Mary spins the major reversal of the Spinsters' Journey:

*In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning is the hearing. Spinsters spin deeper into the listening deep. We can spin only what we hear, because we hear, and as well as we hear. We can weave and unweave, knot and unknot, only because we hear, what we hear, and as well as we hear.*<sup>2</sup>

When I first read these amazing statements, I knew them to be true. But I didn't really understand them—hear them deep in the labyrinth of my consciousness. Instead, I responded with a sort of intellectual glee at the reversal that turned christian theology upside down. But I was deaf to the resonance of its truth—deaf to its relevance to my life and my broken connections with B. and E.

I had responded deeply, of course, to the truth of Nelle Morton's account of hearing a woman into speech. I had been present at such occasions and experienced the wonder—the miracle of a woman giving birth to herself midwived by the loving hearing of the women surrounding her. I had known too the exhilaration of a similar life-creating experience in a special rapport between myself and one other woman. Moreover, on some level of my being, I felt exonerated by Nelle's "reversal of the going logic": I realized that no matter how Amazonian my character or eloquent and lucid my speaking, B. and E. or indeed a whole alphabet of women would not have heard me. I was brought home to the truth of the old saw that "nobody hears what they don't want to hear."

But there was something else—some lost connection—that I kept groping in the dark to find—  
(Gropings: *I think there is something other than—above, under, surrounding—speaking-hearing when two or more women talk together . . . What do we mean by "rapport" anyway. . . . [Merriam-Webster: Fr. rapporter. "to bring back," relation marked by harmony, conformity, accord, affinity.... "affinity": relationship by marriage; distinguished from "consanguinity"..... "consanguinity": of the same blood or origin; descended from the same ancestor; a close relation or connection] . . . When we feel rapport with some women, is it that we sense that together we will un-cover, dis-cover clues to find our way back to the "original ancestor"—to our original oneness—or forward to a wholeness-----)*

At that point my "internal ear" opened up and the truth of "in the beginning was the hearing" began to spiral down into my consciousness. I was understanding what Nelle and Mary meant by the transformational power of hearing. I was also understanding what Mary Daly named "the earthquake phenomenon,"<sup>3</sup> that harrowing experience that happens suddenly: just when we think we are clearheaded and surefooted the ground opens up at our feet and we stop terrified that we will fall into the chasm. The deafness of E. and B. had produced such an earthquake in me. By writing about it I have discovered a new balance.

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1. Paper presented at a workshop on feminist imaging at the American Academy of Religion Conference, December 28, 1977. To be published by Queriniana Press in the third volume on Liberation Theology, *Perspectives on Feminist Theology*, edited by Mary E. Hunt and Rosino Gibellini.

2. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 424. See S. L. Star's review of *Gyn/Ecology* on pp. 87-98 of this issue.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 409-13.



## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CONCEPT OF FULL COMMUNICATION

To communicate is one of the basic principles of my life, and of other feminists in my life. Meaningful, full communication is honest exchange of thoughts and opinions, particularly when they directly affect the relationship of the persons communicating. This involves honest speech (as Michelle Cliff wrote about speechlessness in *Sinister Wisdom* 5). It also involves listening: paying attention to the speaker—hearing the words, the inflections, understanding the meanings of those words in context. And it means seeing—reading the nonverbals: how is she sitting? looking at you or not? seeming to be comfortable or not?

Through using all our senses, and checking on our own perceptions with the persons(s) we're perceiving, and being as honest as possible, we begin growth toward full communication. It's work, a lot of work; and commitment to the process is necessary for any two or more women to have any success at all.

Each of us has many levels of communication—from the more superficial when communicating with someone peripheral in our lives (postal workers, supermarket checkers, and so on) to the more intense (closest friends and lovers). The level is based on how well we know and trust the other person. It's also based on a need to protect ourselves from hurt; this is often why we have superficial communication with persons close to us.

We also need to protect ourselves from overextending—to be always completely honest and open is to set ourselves up to be taken advantage of, hurt, and used. The risks are huge even when the other person is someone sharing that commitment, that risk. Most of us cannot, physically or emotionally, work on full communication with more than four or five others at a time (at the most, and then probably not *fulltime*).

But this doesn't mean full communication isn't a valid goal. Maybe, as more of us work on it, we'll develop ways of doing it that will help the process be less difficult. Or at least we'll get a sense of many of us working at communicating and some satisfaction and minor successes.

To get to the concept of deafness. As Catherine Nicholson implied (*Sinister Wisdom* 5), we impose deafness on ourselves for protection. It is a weapon or a tool for self-preservation.

Being deaf to catcalls and whistles of men in the street is self-preservation.

Being deaf to our children whining and crying because our attention leaves them for five minutes is self-preservation.

Closing ourselves off from nonsupportive words from co-workers, friends, and others allows us to continue what we're doing. (But we may also be tuning out constructive criticism and help.)



Being deaf to lovers and friends may seem like self-protection, but it can also be closing doors to growth in these relationships.

Others are deaf to our lesbianism, preferring not to recognize us and therefore keeping us in places we may be trying to get out of. Or—they hear that we love women (in the sexual sense) but are deaf to the politics of lesbianism, to what else we try to say about lesbianism.

Deafness can also be hearing too much: taking in so many messages, often conflicting, that the passageway to the brain (to convert hearing to speech/action) is blocked. We can become paralyzed and not even be able to communicate that paralysis.

If others of us cannot/do not listen, we are unaware of the paralysis and unable to act on it. And so mis-communication continues.

Those who are trying to listen, to practice full communication, often feel their efforts are one-sided and not working. The sense of defeat may stunt their growth and create their own deafness to someone who is trying to be honest with them.

Sometimes it doesn't seem worth the trouble, pain, and work.

Occasionally we are rewarded, even if only briefly, with a glimpse of what we can be if we try.

How to be deaf to nonconstructive criticism and harrassment and how to, at the same time, be open and ready to hear another are two of the most difficult things we can attempt in human relationships.

I believe in the concept of full communication. I want to practice it in my whole life. I attempt it with my women friends and in my writing. I often fail.

Is a failed attempt worse than no attempt?

Some of my friends believe in silence and in internalizing feelings and thoughts rather than expressing them. Sometimes I want to do that. They appear to be less hurt, more functional, in the world, in their own lives than I am.

When I try to be quiet, to be deaf, I usually fail.

Funneled hearing (that is, to be tuned in to only certain sounds and persons and tuned out to others—the catcalls, for example) is one form of deafness.

Over-hearing (listening to so many often contradictory things that we become paralyzed) is another form of deafness.

Perhaps the small approach is best for our time and place: working toward full communication in small groups, with only a few others (friends, lovers); developing the skills involved (hearing and speaking honestly and taking the risks involved, accepting constructive criticism), achieving some sense of success in the process within that structure; and recognizing that full communication is not happening with everyone, or even with everyone we'd like it to be. And we can move on from there, increasing the circle slowly, strengthening ourselves, knowing the process can work if individuals are committed to the ideal of full communication.



## THE DEAFNESS SYNDROME

It's not always easy to hear what someone else is saying when conversation happens. Pleas for help and understanding often come in vague, clouded disguises. And sometimes one may simply not like what she is hearing. But if **listening** is an art, as "they" say, the **hearing** is its final and most completed form because usually the two are not even faintly synonymous. In many ways, most listen but few actually hear.

To hear the words of another woman takes a certain amount of courage on the part of the listener. It means opening oneself up to another's experience, pain, joy, or anger. It means understanding, analyzing, evaluating, accepting. It takes time, effort, and involvement. But most of all, it seems there has to be willingness.

"Deaf ears" is a commonplace syndrome that befalls most of us at one time or another, whether we are doing it or having it done to us. If it were an anatomical or a physiological reaction, perhaps most of us could come to accept its existence. But it isn't and it intensifies the frustration we feel when we first started talking or even felt the need to talk. Usually women don't just pour themselves out for the sake of dumping on one another. They do it for the support that just the act of being heard alone can and does provide. Perhaps I am fortunate to be in the midst of a lesbian community whose women do listen and hear and respond to my words. They question and support and remember what is said to them. They often check back into previous conversations to see how things are going. This gives a tremendous sense of relief and sharing in addition to helping ease the aloneness that often begets us in times of crisis.

I encounter a tyrannical form of deafness, however, when trying to communicate with many heterosexual women or with my family. It often takes the shape of arbitrary, oppressive disapproval, sometimes loudly expressed and demonstrated. They may, at first, give the appearance of truly listening but will almost immediately negate or refute everything I have said or have tried to say. The mildest form of negation I have experienced is having someone simply turn away when I was expressing a feeling or an opinion. I much prefer to have their verbal anger leveled at me. At least then I know they have heard me.

Hearing is a powerful thing. It is a conscious motion, an act of will. The woman who hears and who understands what is being said to her is then faced with having to deal with new knowledge or information. Usually it can't be lightly tossed away without serious consideration and evaluation on the part of the recipient. Herein lies the element of courage, I think. All of us have been faced with new knowledge, at one time or another, that unsettled or frightened us because of its overwhelming honesty and truthfulness.



Unlike many of my friends, I did not “come out” as a lesbian. This was a process for me. I was a feminist but still I emerged from eight years of marriage as a **gay** woman. I knew little about dyke politics and awareness and I still attached bad connotations to the word “lesbian,” seeing it as impossibly extremist and hopelessly irrational. Besides, the word greatly upset everyone around me. I wasn’t completely sure why but I knew I wanted to live in this world as easily as possible and being gay insured that to a great degree.

Still, I was unsettled and getting more angry. The peace I expected from the dissolution of my marriage didn’t materialize although I was happier in my freedom **from** him than I had ever been during the years of being bound **to** him. But I refused, for a period of time, to acknowledge that being gay was only a statement of preferred sexuality while lesbianism embraced that along with a whole woman-centered, politically aware, self-caring lifestyle. And a great deal of that first knowledge came from finally summoning the courage to **hear** what lesbians were saying to me. Then, regardless of my fear and uncertainty, the words settled into me and had to be dealt with in one fashion or another. Emerging a lesbian is to me my greatest triumph.

Change is threatening, frightening. And to hear a lesbian woman talk and share her life is to face the ultimate in change. The fact that most lesbians are angry and are unashamed of that feeling is perhaps the hardest of all to accept and to hear. An angry woman is one to be reckoned with, one who won’t sit still for the ax to fall on her. And this threatens every existing part of society from role-playing marriage to traditional family to conventional femininity to cultural motherhood to woman herself.

I saw and heard the anger in women; I saw their fear of the this powerful emotion as well. I was able to place accurate fingers on many of the sources of my own anger, but I, too, was fearful of the sometimes violent surge of feeling—the face drawn, the fists clenched, the wanting to lash out and destroy. There were tamer levels of anger also, but I had to acknowledge that the current of this particular feeling glowed through **every** level of my being, whether I liked it or not.

It has taken much time and effort on my part to start really hearing the words of other women, to recognize their legitimacy and relevancy. It has taken a lot of evaluation to remove my own judgmental attitudes and to simply listen and hear what is being said to me. I am not always successful certainly, particularly when I don’t like what is being said.

Change comes from anger and awareness. Many of us have heard our own anger and the anger of other women, and we accept the presence and validity of this anger. But change, major change, the kind that we as women need so desperately in this society, will come only when enough women begin to hear one another. Conquer deafness and we may very well have won our own much proposed revolution.



SISTER

after Gabriela Mistral

There is a woman walks as I walk, carrying packages over her hip as we would carry children. Her boots cut deep holes in the snow, and I want to take her home.

In all of this town there is no water. Behind a curtain, there is a candle filling a bowl with wax. A field of women, each bent over her stoop, scraping deep furrows in the ice. My hands dig into her coat. We walk, and our legs are strong for work. If my breasts are hard and cold, then the winter has come inside me. I touch her scarf. Because we kneel at my door, in spring the yards will sink with so much wetness.

—*Felice Newman*



## PUBLISHING



photograph by Tee Corinne



## AN INTERVIEW WITH RUTH AND JEAN MOUNTAINGROVE

**Q: What urged you to create WOMANSPiRIT?**

**JEAN:** Well, I think it was one of those intuitions that you get when you feel like your back is against the wall or something like that. The doors had closed behind us and we knew that out of our own experiences something spiritual was happening to us and we thought it might be happening to other womyn, too. But when we tried to talk to womyn about it, it was very difficult. But womyn seemed to be able to share it out of their journals and letters and poems, and so we thought we would do that. But it wasn't a thinking, it wasn't a logical decision. It was a leap of imagination, and like all leaps, it was a little wobbly at first and a little scary.

**Q: Could you talk about what kind of material you print?**

**RUTH:** You don't have to be a crafts woman to write for the journal. You don't have to write perfect sentences, or you don't even have to be able to spell. Because what we're looking for are new clues to our culture, and many of the diamonds may not be very well cut yet.

**JEAN:** The beauty of the magazine has always been very important to me because I want the magazine to be an experience of the culture that we're moving toward. So we want material that will affirm womyn, encourage them to keep on struggling, encourage them to believe in themselves, encourage us to look always to our own experience. We're not interested in whether your material can be documented or footnoted. If you have documentation and it's useful to other women who are doing research, then include it. If it's just a hunch or a feeling that you have, that's just fine, because your experience is yours and its valuable. If we think that other womyn can respond to it, then that's what is valuable for us.

**Q: What kind of response have you gotten from subscribers and readers, and how widely are you distributed?**



**JEAN:** We get a lot of love letters which mean a great deal to us because we do live in a small community. We don't have all of the immediate feedback we would have if we were living in a big city. As far as our distribution, from the beginning we wanted to be an international magazine because I had felt that whatever is stirring womyn spiritually is an awakening for womyn all over the world. But initially, we didn't have much access to womyn in other countries, and only gradually have we begun to reach womyn in Australia, New Zealand, South America, Canada, some in England and France, and some in Germany and Holland. We have not been very good at promotion, so we've relied on subscribers telling their friends or taking the magazine with them when traveling. And I think that's how we've begun to spread across the world —through a womyn's network of sharing with friends. **WOMANSPiRiT** as a project has been an invention on the wing —as we go along, we just have to make up what to do next and to me it's been confusing but very exciting. It's an example of how we can be creators. We don't have a formula that we follow that will lead us to a guaranteed place. We have to continually exercise our imaginations and our intelligence to make something new to meet a particular circumstance. And so we don't know what the next year will be like for **WOMANSPiRiT**; we just have to make it up as we go along.

**Q:** From what I understand, you have a collective of womyn that produces each issue. Could you talk about how you choose the collective and the process that produces the magazine?

**RUTH:** Well, the collective chooses herself. Whoever wants to work on an issue —here or in another city — shows up and starts reading manuscripts and hangs in and goes through the whole process with us — she's part of the collective. One of the things we like is to have womyn join us and discover that they have some creativity, too, and to have that creativity expressed in each issue of the magazine....Doing each issue is like climbing a mountain and you have to keep yourself in very good physical condition. You shouldn't stay up late, you shouldn't party when all this is going on. You should eat properly and show up early; that's important. ... What we mean by "collective" is a group of womyn gathered together to work and to talk about their feelings and to enjoy each other if possible. We eat meals together, we have "feeling" meetings in which we pass the rattle, we make decisions all along about what is going into a particular issue.

**Q:** What about the big issue of money—learning to validate yourselves and getting some kind of support for the energy you put out caretaking the magazine?

**JEAN:** Support comes in many forms. It comes in those loveletters I mentioned and it comes from the visitors who come and say it's really



beautiful and we love what you're doing. But it also has to come in terms of not having to worry about how you're going to eat tomorrow or how you're going to keep your physical trip together. I think that the whole of the capitalist patriarchal system is arrayed against our survival. I mean this for all womyn's projects because we are inadequately funded and we don't have many womyn to support us. We worked the first year and a half totally volunteer. At the end of that time, there was enough money coming in that we could afford to pay ourselves for our groceries. And again, we've had to do what is necessary to survive—we've had to invent our processes. We've had a lot of help from other womyn's newspapers and magazines and when they print how they survive we read it very eagerly because we need to know how other womyn are making it. We're still volunteer and we're still not in any way supporting ourselves because I'm very aware that this magazine does not exist on our energy alone. It exists on the energy of many womyn. The reason we are paid and they are not is because there's hardly enough money to pay us, and if we quit it wouldn't matter about the drawings and the poems because the in-between nitty-gritty-office-kind of maintenance work that is utterly essential would stop.

**Q: What about politics and spirituality?**

**JEAN:** I have a lot of ideas about it because it is something we think about a great deal. We don't in any way wish to drain energy from the changes we wish to see happening in the world. What we envision as change is so profound and so total that all of us are needed to work at anything we can get our hands on. And I would like to see us be more aware of respecting all the different places we can work for change. I think that perhaps it comes out of the hierarchical thinking that men have trapped us with that we have to think "this project is more important than that project...this work is more revolutionary than that work," when indeed, all the work needs to be done, and those womyn who are inspired to do any sort of work are a great benefit to me. We hope that what we are doing is adding an ingredient to the womyn's movement. We don't see ourselves as the vanguard. I think if we think of things in spirals and circles that there is not so much of a vanguard. We've each got a piece of it and we're all working as hard as we can, and we're all going to transform it—perhaps more like a loaf of bread than a battalion or something. . . I do want the magazine to be. . . there's no word "enhopement". . . there's encouragement. . . enjoyment. . . but I think this magazine might be an enhopement.

**RUTH:** Another insight that has come is that womyn are going to find new ways of bonding with each other. The one-to-one relationship is fundamental, but it's not exclusive. We can bond in larger groups than couples, and these groups can be very strong and supportive. Some womyn call this tribal consciousness. Tribal awareness is where womyn find compatible groups and work with them and travel with them and



feel responsible in caretaking for each other for a time and these groups overlap so that as a woman moves from one part of the country or one city to another there are connections that are made. She's never a total stranger anywhere for very long because there's so much movement in the womyn's movement that we are all connected to that network of womyn who have been there before. Womyn who are coming along soon connect with the people we know in other projects. And this is a support network that I think we're going to develop to replace the restraining nuclear families so draining of our energies. . . new forms of support.

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WOMANSPiRiT is published quarterly at Equinoxes and Solstices. Subscriptions: \$7.00; Institutions: \$12.00; Sample back issue: \$2.00. Order from WOMANSPiRiT, Box 263, Wolf Creek, Oregon 97497.



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## The Importance of BEGINNING WITH O:

### A Reflection on Olga Broumas

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A review of **Beginning With O** by Olga Broumas (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) \$2.95, 74 pages, paperbound.

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In her first volume of poetry, Olga Broumas seeks to make language and philosophy out of her experience of finding and celebrating her lesbianism. This act is radical because it confronts the patriarchy at its core. Not only does Olga assert that she no longer chooses to "hold my tongue" in order to remain heterosexually acceptable; she makes art of her lesbian lovemaking. Her tongue becomes an agent of ecstatic sensuality and of new speech. With her lesbian tools, she is both unveiling the patriarchy and exploring an earlier and projected world in which the powers of women are central. To have won the Yale Younger Poets Prize for spinning poetry from her outlawry carries an irony which Olga acknowledges in "Cinderella." Clarifying her position vis a vis such rewards and their bestowers, she says:

. . . I am the one allowed in  
to the royal chambers, whose small foot conveniently  
fills the slipper of glass. The woman writer, the lady  
umpire, the madam chairman, anyone's wife.  
I know what I know.  
And I once was glad  
of the chance to use it, even alone  
in a strange castle, doing overtime on my own, cracking  
the royal code. The princes spoke  
in their fathers' language, were eager to praise me  
my nimble tongue. . . .

Olga defines the perils of being a token woman, not the least of which is a spoiling of all created work: "what good soup I boil turns/in my mouth to mud." She ends the poem by laying out alternatives: she can wear "wet/canvas shoes in my sisters', my sisters' hut" or "die young/like those favored before me, hand-picked each one/for her joyful heart." By its very title, this poem recalls Anne Sexton and other women artists who, while gaining recognition from the patriarchy, have chosen to kill themselves.

Olga Broumas, slightly under thirty, living in Oregon, writes lesbian love poems in alabaster. Greek by birth, Olga takes Sappho not as historical model but as mother, sister, lover. Greek mythology is not a metaphor system to her; it's bread and roses. She is not using tired material and she codes



nothing; she's speaking plainly and powerfully for us and to us. Her voice is strong and lyrical. Trained in the techniques of her craft, Olga uses those techniques to shape a parallel culture, consciously outside the patriarchal tradition while simultaneously calling up its very roots. She incorporates the finest elements of that tradition even as she brushes the centuries-old dust from an older world, the matriarchy. I find this volume a glorious statement about a woman's ability to transform the Greek (male) tradition by writing close to her own Greek (female) bones.

The structure of the book fascinates me, beginning with a cosmic collage of the god of a new territory inhabited by women. The center—a bitter core—contains poems about Olga's intimacy with Stephen. The final section combines shades of bitterness and unfulfillment with sensual power and energy. The overall effect is indeed of beginning: this lesbian poet is finding her voice by refusing to mute her past or present shadows. Like Robin Morgan and Adrienne Rich, Broumas wants to bring all of her selves into her new world, to enrich her present with realities filtered through former voices, however painful that process becomes.

In "Twelve Aspects of God," the first three faces depict multiplication of the many from the one, while the fourth and fifth poems present transformations. Midway in the section stands the poem "Dactyls," in which a woman questions her fate, takes that fate in her own hands, literally, and becomes her own person. The next trio ("Circe," "Maenad," "Aphrodite") describes the damage done to women by our long service to the patriarchy, and is followed by the face of "Calypso," offering an alternative. The women in this poem discover that they can be free from heterosexual modes of interacting: "no need of a wound, a puncture, to seal our bond." From this point, Olga begins the final movement: in the last two poems, her god becomes feminist and lesbian. In "Demeter" we see the pain of being a mother within the patriarchy; that patriarchy's required hatred of the mother by the daughter; the trauma of leaving that initial female space, the womb, to enter a hostile "spotlight" with its "gleaming, mechanical eye." At the center of this poem the poet names her spirit-mothers—"Anne. Sylvia. Virginia./ Adrienne the last, magnificent last." The ordering is significant—I see these four writers in an ascending pattern from most self-destructive to most affirming of self and other women. That Olga calls Adrienne Rich "magnificent" and "last" sounds a hopeful note, paralleling the terrors/myths surrounding biological mothers with the relative strengthening to be had from claiming psychological mothers, mothers of our work.

Finally, Olga turns to "Artemis," traditionally the goddess of wildlife, and the virgin hunter, reserving herself for herself and women—a lesbian goddess. For Olga to end her aspects of god with this poem reflects a direction out of the patriarchy, filled with maligned and damaged female faces: "I am a woman committed to/a politics/of transliteration." Because this poem is crucial to a lesbian-feminist reading of this volume, I quote it here.

Let's not have tea. White wine  
eases the mind along  
the slopes  
of the faithful body, helps



any memory once engraved  
on the twin  
chromosome ribbons, emerge, tentative  
from the archaeology of an excised past.  
I am a woman  
who understands  
the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin  
still lie beyond me. I keep the goat  
for more  
than the pastoral reasons. I work  
in silver the tongue-like forms  
that curve round a throat  
an arm-pit, the upper  
thigh, whose significance stirs in me  
like a curviform alphabet  
that defies  
decoding, appears  
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-  
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound.  
What tiny fragments  
survive, mangled into our language.  
I am a woman committed to  
a politics  
of transliteration, the methodology  
of a mind  
stunned at the suddenly  
possible shifts of meaning—for which  
like amnesiacs  
in a ward on fire, we must  
find words  
or burn.

Artemis-Hecate is the lesbian mythic voice, instrumental in the Persephone-Demeter myth.<sup>1</sup> It seems that Demeter, as earth goddess, could hear only sounds that traveled horizontally. Persephone, forced below ground, could hear only sounds that moved vertically. Thus we have a painful moment born neither from desire nor personal motivation. This impasse resulted from physics, from the reality of sound wave theory. The person in this myth of whom we rarely hear is Artemis-Hecate, known as a crossroads character. This woman hears intersections of vertical and horizontal sounds. Artemis hears a voice across dead fields calling mournfully, "Persephone," and another from Hades calling "Demeter." Intuiting the problem, she arranges a reunion. In ancient drawings of the Eleusinian mysteries, this reunion depicts three women: Demeter, Persephone, and Artemis-Hecate in the middle with an arm around each.



In Olga's poem about Artemis, we find a piece which superficially could be dismissed as a matter of aesthetic choice proceeding from sexual preference. Someone could include this poem in a survey of women's poetry to illustrate the beautiful, erotic celebration of female sexuality and of women loving women. To do so is to miss the point of this poem: this poem is about epistemology, a way of seeing reality; it becomes suddenly philosophical amidst its opulent images. Olga makes an alphabet out of those images, tying lesbian sexuality to a symbol system, a naming system with all the power that resides in language: "a curviform alphabet/that defies/decoding," "the methodology/of a mind/stunned at the suddenly/possible shifts of meaning—for which/like amnesiacs/in a ward on fire, we must/find words/or burn." This is not a love poem in the usual (masculine/heterosexual) sense, yet it is an example of consummate love poetry. Olga presumes that her sexuality as a lesbian affords her an angle on the universe. She'd have much to say to Emily Dickinson's recommendation to tell all the truth but tell it slant. She not only acknowledges the need for such a slant; she creates art from its edges. The poem "Artemis" proceeds with its metaphors of curve and diagonal not because these are poetically fitting but because they are her reality.

In the second section of this book, Olga charts married life, beginning with a poem called "betrothal/the bride's lament" and ending with "the knife and the bread," whose last lines are "how long/can i keep the knife/ in its place." The absence of a question mark after so potent a question evidences the poet's certainty of breaking out of the kitchen in which she stands, poised at the loaf of bread. By juxtaposing a weapon of destruction with the essence of domesticity, Olga rips away a curtain to show us the underside of "anyone's wife," at home on a routine day, seething with anger and hatred. Again she is reminiscent of Dickinson, whose women carry a volcano within, never telling anyone, waiting for the inevitable eruption.

Structurally, Olga carries the feelings from this central group of poems into her final section. Since she says this is "for my mother," I ask how the poems speak to that primal person. Olga describes unrequited loves, in which she has been attracted to women unable to allow themselves to return her feelings, and more important, unable to allow themselves to have their own feelings.

The last seven poems are Olga's versions of familiar fairy tales. The parallel with Anne Sexton's **Transformations** is obvious. However, these two poets seem essentially different as they confront basic stories about what it means to be a girl in the patriarchy. I locate their differences in their tones. Sexton is almost uniformly bitter, sardonic, paralyzed/hopeless, and then angry under all that. Her poems seem reactive, while her images remain heterosexual, ugly, or slick. Sexton changes the angle of vision while keeping the stories intact. Olga actually transforms. In her versions, the stories and their morals become something pro-woman, something outside the patriarchy in language and message.

The two poets' work with "Little Red Riding Hood" will make my point clear. Sexton's poem is almost hip in its imagery—talk of Duz and Chuck



Wagon dog food, the Congregational Church parking lot; the cute questions about why the basket contains wine and cake if grandmother is ill; scenes of Mr. Wolf himself. Olga's images, contrarily, vibrate with life and physicality, even when describing painful scenes—"mantle of blood," "pelvic scaffold," "cramp/me between the temples, hobble/my baby feet." Sexton's women must be saved by a male—the kindly huntsman who performs a caesarean section on the wolf to free the two females. At the end of the poem, the three sit down to eat wine and cake. Where is the transformation?

Olga's poem ends with the poet wondering how to connect with her mother, "alone/in your house and waiting, across this improbably forest/peopled with wolves and our lost, flower-gathering/sisters they feed on." The poet focuses on women all the way through: the wolves are present as a menacing force, yet none of the emotional emphasis is on them. The transformation turns on Olga's placing her own mother within the poem, on her trying to unite with her. She uses the fairy story to tell her mother how she helped her daughter remain unto herself unless with other women: "I kept/to the road, kept/the hood secret, kept what it sheathed more/secret still." This poem is a subtle coming-out, an affirmation of what more and more of us lesbians are coming to know—our mothers gave us powerful double messages and by telling us to keep to the road, they cautioned us against being led down primrose paths to our confusion and loss.

This fairy tale is utterly transformed in Olga's system, ending with her lesbian voice considering how best to save heterosexual sisters from being devoured by wolves. I am concerned that Olga seems so taken up by Sexton and wonder if she sees herself as kin on some level more specific than that both poets were let into their fathers' mansions and praised for their "nimble tongue[s]." I trust that Olga Broumas will name the real ways in which her being a lesbian in that mansion has caused her to write different poems, utilizing female sexual imagery. I trust she will see that her lesbianism allows her to escape that place in one piece—something Anne Sexton was never able to do, try as she did. Such a realization is part and parcel of Olga's argument for a new language, based in the erotic, leading us always closer to it, informed at its core by an understanding of the lesbian body.

Olga's language is her native tongue and her tongue is her native language. This elegant play on words is a cornerstone for lesbian epistemology. I want now to work with the poems which deal directly with language and artifacts, where the poet is namer and archaeologist. These poems are "Triple Muse," "plunging into the improbable," "Four Beginnings/for Kyra," "Sleeping Beauty," "Rumplestiltskin," and "Artemis" (already discussed).

"Triple Muse" speaks of three persons—literal women, suggesting the Fates, Furies, Graces—who are cultural workers ("the cabin/full of our tools: guitar, tapedeck, video"), whose idea of inspiration is radically different from the traditional one in which the artist waits "for inspiration/served up like dinner, or sex." These women are each other's muses while each is her own special muse. By being the "mineral-bright pith" which is also the "salt veins" from which wisdom is "cast" and read, they become their content. Like the spider in nature, they work out of themselves and their own sub-



stance. These women differ from a male “audience” because they use each other actively and lovingly—they tend their muse(s). By describing men “invoking/us absently,” Olga offers one explanation for male artists’ anxiety about whether they will be inspired at a given moment. Their absent-minded invocations make them aware that they take poor care of the persons on whom they depend—their female muses/mistresses/models. The final scene in this poem is visionary and feminist: “We are/of one mind, tuning/our instruments to ourselves, by our triple light.” The three women assert commonality as their source of inspiration, in opposition to patriarchal artists who strive for uniqueness; they affirm self as the basis for harmony of song.

In “plunging into the improbable,” Olga shows two people in a spelling bee, agreeing that “words/are supposed to claw you with/beauty, tear at you/spirant by sonorant/tongue by tongue.” Given the placement of this poem, I take the two people as a heterosexual couple trying to find the language of love. In addition to the competitive setting where they “trade off words, partners/suddenly & at random,” the two work with darkrooms, using developing fluid to catch images on film. Around this making of artifacts and constructing of words, the two make love: “we had signed with the brush of thighs.” With this line, Olga gathers up her strands of meaning. The pun on “signed” reflects her deep sense that formed art with the artist’s signature is intimately related to gestures of the body, especially in states of passion (signing as silent language communicating without the boundaries of letters/words which are often harsh, even hostile). This poem ends on an unresolved note—the picture has been developed and what is on the contact sheet is “improbable in high contrast.” That improbability consists of “a curve/on a piece of paper, a line of ink”—the classic mixture of curve and line, of feminine and masculine. Olga seems only too aware that art making and lovemaking have been projects. Her ending implies dissatisfaction, even regret at that process—“the stars/are silent, the sky/exposed.”

In sharp relief to this poem is “Four Beginnings/for Kyra.” Though the content is similar to “plunging . . .,” the images and overall mood have become powerful and positive. This time the two people are women who also make images, deal with words/tongues, struggle to find a way to communicate. The “you” has come through a scarring marriage to be trying for the first time to love another woman. The “I” ends up “spellbound/against your flesh.” The pun seems intentional in a poem so centrally about finding a new language. This language arises from a wish to express feelings that emerge from their lying together. They feel “speechless,” actors in a “common dream.” What they’ve done by making love is “cross into each other’s language,” suggesting that that language will also turn out to be a common one. Olga then states her essential point: the new tongue will involve full use of individual tongues and fingers. Language will be based on touch this time:

. . . I take your hand  
hesitant still with regret  
into that milky landscape, where braille  
is a tongue for lovers, where tongue,  
fingers, lips  
share a lidless eye.



So Olga introduces her metaphor of woman as territory unmapped, unknown, to be explored finally by other women rather than strip-mined or exploited by patriarchs. Suddenly a poem like "Triple Muse" takes on even richer connotations, since in it women are the mineral-bright pith. If we are the valuable salt veins, then when we look for such veins in other women, we will go carefully, like loving archaeologists, aware of the worth of the find from our own sense of self rather than from any scale of marketability or profit. When Olga says that the other woman reminds her "of each desire that ran, dead-end, into a mind/programmed to misconstrue it," we trust her to explore this woman precisely because she too has traveled the emotional spaces, share the "neurosis, anxiety, phobia" of a woman's mind "expertly camouflaged/from the thought of love/for a woman, its native/love."

In "Sleeping Beauty" Olga addresses those segments of society currently saying to lesbians, "all right, we see you and tolerate you, and your primary evidence is your love bites—we define you by your sexuality." What is radical about this poem is that it is a poem at all. To make love and wind up with varicolored marks on our neck is something any of us can do. To make a poem about that experience is to preserve evidence of our existence. To preserve us as lovers has strong political ramifications. Olga is making culture out of taboo. Love bites in a poem don't wear off and cannot be hidden by turtlenecks or bright scarves. So the poet frames us, leaving a record for later cultural archaeologists, making it impossible to say, "oh well, the fact that they lived together for forty or fifty years does not really attest to lesbianism." To frame us in the very act of lovemaking is not merely to celebrate the personal aspect of lesbianism. It is to proclaim us with no mistaking vagueness in our most threatening role of not needing men to prove our sexuality or to tell us we are passionate. We are passionate and erotic as the subject matter of this poem; we are passionate and erotic as the creator of this poem; we are passionate and erotic to make and print a critical review of this poem.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in "Rumplestiltskin," Olga confronts with a charged directness the central problem of "how to describe/what we didn't know/exists." On the most immediate level, her "what" refers to the clitoris,

. . . a mutant organ, its function to feel  
intensely, to heal by immersion, a fluid  
element, crucial  
as amnion, sweet milk  
in the suckling months.

By this point, however, a careful reader will also take "mutant organ" to be the voice of woman poet and of woman. An image which sears me is of "proud Columbia/stubbing/her bound up feet on her dammed/up bed." I translate from Olga's linguistic cues until I see proud Columbia with a tied tongue as well as bound feet. With her tongue tied, this noble female can make neither love nor poetry in her native manner. The urgency which begins this poem ("I have to write of these things") carries through to the ending where the poet's lover tries to describe their lovemaking, tries to use her tongue "to salvage some part/of the loamy dig." Significantly, the lover



employs a simile in her attempt to comment on their experience: "It's like/ forgiving each other." Throughout the poem, the poet has avoided similes, choosing a direct mode, understanding that what she does is not **like** anything in the patriarchal world. Therefore, to try to fit her sexuality into conventional phrases/tropes will not merely reduce it but will deny and kill it.<sup>3</sup> All such comparisons will be as this one by her lover, a "borrowing from your childhood priest," where "priest" is any of the institutional fathers; such comparisons "wipe clean/with a musty cloth/what is clean already." For women, for lesbians, and for our cultural workers, the patriarchy functions as a "musty cloth" which can only smear the clarity of our lives, our work, our passions.

This poem is important because Olga gathers into it both her vision of a new language based on literal tongues and her metaphor of the lesbian as archaeologist. She pictures herself and her lover as "archaeologists of the right/the speechless zones/of the brain." She refers to the division of the human brain into a right side which has to do with the irrational, the unconscious, the creative, the nonverbal, and a left side which controls the rational, linear, verbal, cognitive aspects of our lives. In our culture, the left side is valued while the right is feared, ignored, devalued. Naturally enough, the patriarchy has labeled activities of the left brain "masculine" and those of the right brain "feminine." Olga declares that for women to make love to each other is to journey into unknown regions where old words are useless. We go looking, exploring "the speechless zones" with our special tools/tongues.

"Rumplestiltskin" excites me because it is a poem which speaks about areas of female experience where words are not the currency. It does what it says is so difficult—it gives voice to what has been shrouded in silence. This poem fuses sexual and creative energies in a way that moves me. Talking of their lovemaking, the poet says,

... Daily  
by accident, against  
what has become our will through years  
of deprivation, we spawn the fluid  
that cradles us, grown  
as we are, and at a loss  
for words. . . .

Again Olga evokes images of the spider, making her web from her own juices. So women have the capacity to renew ourselves in our own fluids and then to make art out of that substance. The process takes place heroically, as, salmon-like, "against all currents, upstream/we spawn/in each other's blood." As suggested by the crucial preposition "in," these two women are mutually nurturant. They do not spawn each other, as heterosexual couples have long been figured as doing; they are not two halves merging to make one whole. Olga states early on, "We were grown/women, well/traveled in our time."

The poems in this collection witness their own truths—by their existence, they are known. Their composite message is clear and potent—lesbian tongues explore the unconscious, the formerly forbidden and unknowable, the dan-



gerous wild places of female reality and expression. From working on this book by an extraordinarily gifted poet, I offer this axiom: to make lesbian love poetry is to find our language, to speak with and in tongues of fierce clarity, signaling the emerging of matriarchal poetry.

#### NOTES

1. This information about Artemis-Hecate comes from a chapter in the unpublished book on Demeter/Persephone by Nor Hall, feminist-jungian therapist in St. Paul, Minn.
2. My expanded sense of the erotic comes largely from my hearing Audre Lorde deliver a paper on "The Uses of the Erotic" at the 1978 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. In that paper, Audre talks about the erotic as the essential foundation of anything we do with all of ourselves, be it lying beside a lover or writing a poem.
3. Cf. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* as she advises her audience of young women aspiring to write. In a key passage, she says: "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison" (p. 110).



## A Chant

axe ritual axe ritual acts ritual axe ritual acts ritual axe ritual

lip of the womb      labyris  
the ritual axe:

shell-headed woman      moon-bringer  
whom the vines climb      the tides follow

woman who sits      woman who sits with babies  
woman who sits with babies      inside her

inside her      ritual axe      lip to lip  
inside her      ritual acts      hip to hip

moon-bringer      shell-headed woman  
weaver      whose fingers speak  
like needles      through ancient threads  
a new language      a new language      a new language

i am looking for my name in your tapestries:

spider-woman      many-legged wonder who brings them inside  
inside her      spider      whose strong toes wrap us  
in delicate webs

iris      labyris      iris      labyris  
what can you see  
in the soft pink dark?  
in the soft pink dark?

flower who opens to seas      who grows in the deep dark  
who enfolds in the clumsy dreams of young girls  
a tender hope      who holds them in your soft pink arms  
all the night through

i am looking for my name      in the way you sigh:

incline: incline now      your shell-ears      my way  
wrap the nightwebs round my helpless words  
swimming upstream toward something      with no name

incline now: bring me the moon      in a ritual axe  
and i will cleave the will of the world  
to bring to you this      new

woman      a sacred woman      a woman who sits      lip to lip  
in the pink soft dark      a woman shell-headed      moon-bringer  
who sits with babies inside her  
lip to lip      lip to lip

and she will wear      your name      and mine  
and she will perform the ritual act:      to begin

to open      the lip of the womb      labyris  
the ritual axe:

—Martha Courtot



## TO DWELL AMONG OURSELVES

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A review of *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* by Mary Daly  
(Boston: Beacon Press, 1978; \$14.95, 485 pages, hardcover).

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There's a web like a spider's web,  
made of silk or light and shadow,  
spun by the moon in my room at night.  
It's a web made to catch a dream;  
hold it tight to lie awake with,  
and it will tell you,  
that dream ends allright.

—Old Folk Song

You can fly  
High as a kite  
If you want to  
Faster than light  
If you want to.  
Speeding through the universe . . .  
Thinking is the best way to travel.

—“The Best Way to Travel,” The  
Moody Blues, from *In Search  
of the Lost Chord*

Quantify suffering, you could rule the world.

They can rule the world while they can persuade us  
our pain belongs in some order.

—Adrienne Rich, “Hunger,” from  
*The Dream of a Common Language*

Context. Since reading *Gyn/Ecology*, my nerves have been humming with new meanings for this word, seeing it as a verb for the first time. I am profoundly **contexted** by this work. Placed. Seen. With its reading, I experience newer and newer navigations of my own consciousness. Without freezing, without staticness of any sort, this book is the total confluence of method and content, of the personal and the historical, of the reach for change and the unflinching examination of suffering, that I have come to know as feminism. Where this book is, there is feminism.

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**dwell**: from Old English  **dwellan** and Indo-European  **dhwel**: to lead astray, hinder, delay; also reflexive—to go astray, to be delayed, to tarry, to stay; corresponds to Old High German  **twellan**: to stun, make giddy, or perplex; also the causal of  **strong**; also, to cease, leave off, give up.



If this book/Voyage could be placed neatly in a "field" it would not be this book. I have considered naming its "field" Un-theology or Un-philosophy. Certainly, in the house of mirrors which is the universe/university of reversals, it can be called Un-ethical. [P. xiii]

In a deeply Un-ethical and passionately Unmoral, compassionate way, **Gyn/Ecology** Wends its way through and Webs itself across vast expanses of thought, the spatial and temporal dimensions of which are familiar to us as cohabitants of the dimension. **Gyn/Ecology** is an experience of recognition.

Like a spider's web, **Gyn/Ecology** has qualities that are both aerial and earthy, deadly for enemies and vital for inhabitants. Like a spider's web, its qualities encompass both location, as home, as connectedness, as creation; and locomotion, as change, movement, spanning, both vertical and horizontal. And like a spider's web, it has an integrity, a geometry that cannot be unraveled without destroying its meaning. Approaching **Gyn/Ecology**, then, in writing, I trace threads in fact so deeply intertwined that they have annealed to each other like the sticky silk of a real web.

### Methodicide and Context

In **Beyond God the Father**,<sup>1</sup> Mary\* spoke of the need for **methodicide**—killing the gods of method in academia which have determined the shape and focus of knowledge. **Gyn/Ecology** commits methodicide at many levels; as Mary says in the introduction: "This book is a declaration that it is time to stop putting answers before the Questions" (p. xv).

Fundamentally, her method for committing methodicide is the specification of context, of social and psychological realms out of which "knowledge" arises, knowledge which comes legitimated and delivered with the stamp of approval of patriarchal scholarship.

The clarity and intensity with which she specifies the context of patriarchal knowledge expands and transcends the term "sociology of knowledge." Loosely defined, the sociology of knowledge is the description of social conditions which give rise to theory and to everyday knowledge. But the methods or foci of these writers have never extended beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal paradigm, and thus never really broken out of the "sacred canopy" of assumptions they thought they were challenging.<sup>2</sup> **Gyn/Ecology**, by specifying more broadly and deeply than any scholarship to date, the background, origins, and assumptions of patriarchal scholarship, creates for the first time a feminist sociology of knowledge.

Mary's focus is on patriarchal scholarly legitimation of atrocities, particularly against women and including the Nazi-authored Holocaust of the Jews. Looking at the facts, historically past and present, of footbinding, **suttee** (the Hindu practice of killing widows after the husband's death), infibulation/female circumcision, the Witch-burnings, and American gynecology (both body-gynecology and therapy, which she calls "mind-gynecology"), and of the Nazi death camps, she illuminates seven common steps in "sado-ritual," which have all ended in ritual legitimation by "objective" male scholarship:

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\*In using "Mary" here instead of "Daly," I am honoring a fine old tradition of reclamation begun by Julia Stanley in her article on Adrienne Rich's work, "The Rhetoric of Denial," *Sinister Wisdom* 3, Spring, 1977. The first name designation refers to a shared location, and is a reversal of patriarchal reviewers' diminutive intent in using first names for women writers.



- 1) obsession with purity
- 2) erasure of responsibility for the atrocities
- 3) tendency to catch on and spread, since they “appeal to imaginations conditioned by the omnipresent ideology of male domination”
- 4) the use of women as token torturers
- 5) compulsive orderliness, obsessive repetitiveness, fixation upon minute details which divert attention from the horror
- 6) normalization/normatizing as a consequence of conditioning through the ritual atrocities, and
- 7) the scholarly legitimization.

As Mary herself states, doing the kind of scholarship we need requires that we become boundary-dwellers: we must both understand the “masters,” seeing commonalities in their self-proclaimed “objectivity,” and go beyond them.<sup>3</sup> In *Beyond God the Father*, Mary turned this method on anti-feminist criticisms; there, she talked about common dimensions of reactions to feminism (“resistances to consciousness”), and went beyond to envision new methods of be-ing with each other as feminists.

The naming of our own methods as feminist scholars is vital because it involves understanding our very ways of thinking, strengthening and communicating the ways we have developed for unraveling the deceptive models presented as “reality” by patriarchy. Much of the time this unraveling is almost instinctive, sublingual, psychic; Mary talks at one point about “books almost jumping off the shelf” in her process of preparing to write. The more we understand and can communicate about the processes by which we do our own scholarship, the more we will avoid having to unravel our own new creations . . . we will be creating, writing, researching on a totally different methodological basis.<sup>4</sup> Also, the better we understand our methods, the more centered and strong we will be in the face of attempts to delegitimize\* our scholarship (what feminist scholar has not frequently questioned her own sanity and intelligence—especially those of us physically located within academia). As Mary says:

Since it seeks out the threads of connectedness within artificially separated/segmented reality, striving “to put the severed parts together,” specious specialists will decry its “negativity” and “failure to present the whole picture.” [Pp. xiii-xiv]

Seeking out “the threads of connectedness” involves what Mary calls “journeying into the Background,” that is, looking in a new way at our everyday reality:

I have coined the term *metapatriarchal* to describe the journey, because the prefix *meta* has multiple meanings. It incorporates the idea of “postpatriarchal,” for it means occurring later. It puts patriarchy in the past without denying that its walls/ruins and demons are still around. Since *meta* also means “situated behind,” it suggests that the direction of the journey is into the Background. [P. 7]

Describing the “positive paranoia” of feminism, she names part of our method of survival/scholarship “pattern discovery”:

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\*Delegitimizing is different from honest criticizing.



Spinster-Spooking is both cognitive and tactical. Cognitively, it means pattern-detecting. It means understanding the time-warps through which women are divided from each other—since each woman comes to consciousness through the unique events of her own history. [P. 318]

## Violence and Context

Gyn/Ecology, as an example of this pattern-detecting, shows that radical feminist method is a matter of looking again, of de-anesthetizing our numbed and battered senses, of dishabituating<sup>5</sup> ourselves from patriarchal monotony in order to see their underlying strategies for gynocide:

We are finding ways of “breaking set”—of focusing upon different patterns of meaning than those explicitly expressed and accepted by the cognitive majority. . . . physically confined in oppressive set-ups, we can concentrate on implicit patterns in styles of communication, such as clothing, postures, gestures, eye-contact, speech intonation, choice of vocabulary, use of “humor,” facial expressions, and—perhaps most importantly—silences. [P. 341]

After I read Andrea Dworkin’s *Woman Hating* in 1974, I walked around in a stunned state (or what I would now call an unStunned state!), muttering to everyone I knew that we live in Dachau, in Auschwitz—how can people not see the **emergency** of this time, how can we be blind to the gynocide?<sup>6</sup> As I began to meet others who understood the emergency and its nature, my horror did not lessen, but my panic about my sanity did. It is one thing to be interned in a death camp, and to deal with that daily reality—rape, death, batterings, mutilations, ridicule, the denial of one’s being—and another to live among interned others who believe that nothing is wrong. After seeing thousands of killings, woundings, mutilations on TV, it is hard not to become inured to the violence, difficult not to normalize it. My definition of violence has come to include this normalizing, the anesthetization to violence.

Deepening the work of feminist scholars such as Andrea Dworkin and Adrienne Rich (and her own earlier work), Mary pierces through the last remnants of normalizing of violence against women.

This is an extremist book, written in a situation of extremity, written on the edge of a culture that is killing itself and all of sentient life. [P. 17]

In writing about atrocities, one runs a double-edged risk: that the information will either anesthetize, through the sheer numbing horror of the facts, by repetition; or that the information will be aestheticized, that is, be presented so “artistically” that one actually forgets that one is reading about/looking at human misery.<sup>7</sup> What skill does it take to present page after page of this material without either anesthetizing or aestheticizing? The language, and the method, from which the book comes must pierce through **itself**, continuously, to resonate with some Other place in us than the worn perceptual structures that echo only hopelessness and despair. It must be written with a double-edged ax—**presenting hope without erasing horror. We must dwell in another frame of reference without ceasing to live here.** This is precisely what Mary does, clearly presenting and performing the choice **against** any level of consent to violence (what she calls “**subviving**”) and **for** a profound healing/creation—the spinning forth of our own truths (**surviving**):



Spinsters are also Survivors. We must survive, not merely in the sense of "living on," but in the sense of living beyond. Surviving (from the Latin *super plus vivere*) I take to mean living above, through, around the obstacles thrown in our paths. This is hardly the dead "living on" of possessed tokens. The process of Survivors is meta-living, be-ing. [Pp. 8-9]

Survival, then, grows out of a simultaneous awareness of the **details** of normalized violence, and the **pattern/context** which makes the perpetuation of the details **possible, thinkable**.

... when the whole is hypocrisy, the parts may not initially appear untrue. To put it another way, when everything is bizarre, nothing seems bizarre. [P. 17]

The effect, in reading *Gyn/Ecology*, is to again and again see new sets of "Emperor's new clothes"—there's nothing there but the invisible beliefs and deception that create the social fabric of patriarchy.

What links the Emperor's-new-clothes phenomenon with violence? That is, under what conditions do the consequences of these beliefs in "nothing" lead to violence systematically directed against women? I believe that the answer has to do with the **manipulation** of context, with belief systems which are covert and which allow bits and pieces of "rationale" to be taken out of context and then covertly placed in another context by those in power. Pointing out, for instance, that many psychoanalytic studies were done on the prisoners in the Nazi death camps, Mary notes that most of the psychoanalysts maintained that the prisoners "regressed" to "infantile behavior." This analysis ignores the physical and material coercion that created the "regression."

The restoration of context to violence is a major task for all feminists: naming names, seeing social patterns, piercing through the pseudo-rationales of patriarchal reversals (for example, the claims about "reverse discrimination," which ignore historical and social patterns).

An important part of the way that this de-contexting is perpetrated is the reversal of saying that we as feminists see "men as the enemy":

This is a subtly deceptive reversal, implying that women are the initiators of enmity, blaming the victims for The War. Its deceptive power is derived from the fact that the Fury in every woman does fight back against males and male institutions that target her as The Enemy. The point is that she did not create The War, but rather finds herself in a set-up in which fighting is necessary for Surviving. [Pp. 364-65]

or that we are "intolerant" and those giving silent consent to gynocide are liberal-minded:

This attitude of "different strokes for different folks," while appearing to support originality, is in fact often repressive. The tyranny of tolerance is often the source of silencing/erasure of strong-minded Hags—who are labeled "intolerant," "extreme," and "narrow." However, if we look at Merriam-Webster's first definition of **tolerance**, we find an interesting clue for an analysis of genuinely gyno-centric respect for difference. **Tolerance** . . . is defined as "capacity to endure pain or hardship. . . ." The variety which Cronos respect in each other has as its basic precondition and common thread the endurance/fortitude/stamina needed for persevering on the Journey. [P. 381]



Of all the reversals perpetrated by patriarchy, the one that is most bitter for me is the naming of our Journeying as lack of compassion, as coldness, "hard-lining." The constant urgings to be tolerant and to "open up our hearts" are such perversions of the idea of love that sometimes it seems like any language for compassion, for loving has been rendered obscene. I know that what we are about as feminist Journeyers is deeply loving precisely **because** there is so much (violence/obscenity) that we refuse to tolerate. I think of these lines from Adrienne Rich's "Natural Resources": "But gentleness is active/gentleness swabs the crusted stump/invents more merciful instruments/to touch the wound beyond the wound/does not faint with disgust."<sup>8</sup> There is no way to be gentle without comprehending the dimensions of the atrocities, and there is no way to survive without this comprehension. As an assertion of active, courageous gentleness, **Gyn/Ecology** points the way toward a new kind of survival. Surviving, in this sense, also means naming the context, the source of all forms of oppression. For example, of the Nazi holocaust, and of crimes against humanity in general, Mary says:

The Holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany was a reality of indescribable horror. Precisely for this reason we should not settle for an analysis which fails to go to the roots of the evil of genocide. The deepest meanings of the banality of evil are lost in the kind of re-search which shrinks/localizes perspectives on oppression so that they can be contained strictly within ethnic and "religious group" dimensions. . . . The paradigm and context for genocide is trite, everyday, banalized gynocide. [P. 311-12]

The discussion of "ethnic and religious" "customs" above refers to the fact that many "scholars" have overlooked the pain and torture in practices indigenous to culture other than their own in the name of "cross-cultural" relativism. In their desire not to impose the standards of one culture on another (or perhaps their inability to see women as human), they have often named practices like African genital mutilation of women as religious "beliefs and customs." Mary re-names this refusal to **see** as sexism, racism, and as an active participation in the atrocity itself. She also brings this analysis to bear on American "customs": "American women, like their African sisters, are also lulled into pain-full captivity by the prevailing beliefs and 'customs'" (p. 261). **Gyn/Ecology** cuts cleanly through liberal mushiness to make the strongest possible statement about crimes against women: **moral relativism has no place in the face of torture**. No one nowadays would call the Nazi persecutions a "custom" based on "religious beliefs," yet, when similar things happen to women, they are often ignored, by social scientists and other scholars. Silence about gynocide is violent—and Mary places the responsibility for this silence, this collaboration, fully with the "scientists" who have failed to name names in the course of their studies.

## Therapy

The courage to be and to speak, in the age of the holy ghosts of gynecology, is, in the final analysis, the Courage to Blaspheme. [P. 264]

Some of the most delightful blaspheming in **Gyn/Ecology** occurred for me in the section on therapy, or "mind-gynecology." Mary's critique of psychotherapy expands some of the earlier feminist critiques of therapy,



and some of the criticisms of orthodox therapy made by the anti-psychiatry movement (those of the Radical Therapy group, for example). But Mary goes one step farther by bringing her criticisms to bear upon **all** forms of therapy which come to replace originality and Amazonian creativity with categories and formulae:

Like religion, it [therapy] tends to replace transcendence, assuming/consuming all process, draining creative energy, eliminating Originality, mislabeling leaps of imagination, shielding the Self against Self-strengthening Aloneness. The Self becomes a spectator of her own frozen, caricatured history. She is filed away, misfiled, in file-cabinets filled with inaccurate categories. Thus filed, she joins the Processions of those who choose downward mobility of mind and imagination. [P. 283]

She questions the structure of therapy:

I suggest that the god of therapy is therapy itself. Moreover, as in the case of all religions, there is a fixation upon the act of worship itself, which tends to function as a shelter against anomie, against meaninglessness. For this reason, any criticism of therapy threatens/terrorizes the therapeutized. [P. 281]

and she calls into question its tautological nature, the way it has names and labels for all experience:

One who strives for Gyn/Ecological vision may be accused of "not dealing with" therapeutic problems (just as Lesbians/Feminists generally are accused of "not dealing with" men). Yet to satisfy the accusers' often insatiable need to "deal with" this issue would require falling into the very therapeutic trappings/trap which Gyn/Ecology transcends. [P. 282]

Mary states that Gyn/Ecological Journeying is not feminist therapy, but "rather is itself an entirely Other Way" (p. 282). Her critique does not exclude counseling in extreme situations, although I get the feeling that she would definitely prefer that even crises be handled by a circle of sister-Voyagers rather than by "professionals":

I am not saying that genuinely woman-identified counseling cannot and does not take place. . . . My criticism concerns therapy as a way of life, as an institutionalized system of creating and perpetuating false needs, of masking and maintaining depression, of focusing/draining women's energy through fixation upon periodic psychological "fixes." . . . It concerns the woman-crippling triumph of the therapeutic over transcendence. [Pp. 280-81]

I find Mary's description of the cognitive processes associated with "therapy-as-lifestyle" fascinating. I'm currently a graduate student in a program affiliated with Langley Proter Institute at the University of California, one of the major training centers for psychotherapists in California. I'm not studying to be a therapist, but I have had more than enough opportunity to study my fellow and sister students who are. The descriptions in *Gyn/Ecology* of the patient's process of "indoctrination" into therapy are also good descriptions, mirror-imaged, of the socialization process for student therapists and psychology students:

Perpetually pushed into this revised past, the patient patiently re-learns her history. . . . The patient learns to fixate upon herself as an object, to objectify and label happenings in her process until process is re-processed into processions of thoroughly impersonal, explainable events. She becomes the therapeutic watcher



of her reinterpreted Self. . . . Her sense of transcendence/wildness/adventure is tamed. . . . To the extent that therapy mutes the call of the wild Self to transcendence, she fixates more and more upon the observation of details. If totally "cured" she is "terminated." Otherwise, she is maintained in her state of depression." [P. 285]

In light of this critique, I find it striking that most therapists in training are themselves required to undergo psychoanalysis, or some sort of psychotherapy. Many of the classes which I had to take as a psychology major were "encounter group" models—looking back, I wonder if the hidden agenda was to enclose us in the therapeutic language/lifestyle as Mary describes it.

Besides the process of fixating on details, and learning to classify every activity according to the theoretical model chosen by the instructor or therapist, another, more subtle process operates to create therapy as reality: the conversion of everything into a homogeneous symbol system.<sup>9</sup> I howled at many things in *Gyn/Ecology*, but have been chuckling for weeks over the following passage which describes this conversion so succinctly:

Symptomatic of such pseudo-feminist downward mobility is the Soap Opera Syndrome, whose one basic Program can be entitled, "How to Deal with Relationships." Like the heroines of the 1940s radio soap operas and 1970s television soap operas, the therapeutized actress deals with her programmed problems before an audience of dealers. Like the radio and television heroines, she rehearses but does not create the script. She may try out for different roles, since everything can be coopted by therapy. Thus writing is therapeutic, swimming is therapeutic, painting is therapeutic, demonstrating is therapeutic. The script-follower forgets that writing is writing, swimming is swimming, painting is painting, demonstrating is demonstrating. [P. 283]

Reading this passage, I was reminded of my hilarity on hearing two students of Freudian psychology earnestly debating about dream symbols: one held that a pencil in a dream was **always** a penis symbol, and the other (a reformist, I took it) said that no, a pencil in a dream can really just be a pencil.<sup>10</sup> This incident from within the therapy paradigm is illustrative of Mary's point about the stifling of growth and transcendence. When there is no such thing as common sense, when every action is "interpreted," life ceases to have freshness, serendipity:

Instead of creating, she deals and deals, struggles and struggles, relates and relates. She finds that her problems are endless, having the infinity of a closed circle. Everything becomes a problem. The situation of being Feminist and/or Lesbian adds to the problems but does not break the circle. Only Journeying breaks the circle. In Journeying/process, therapy is not the priority. [P. 283]

## Myth

Mary exposes patriarchal myth as the act of heuristic naming. The repetition of **models** (both what patriarchal scholars have seen as myths, archetypes, legends, and everyday "myths," repetitions, and stereotypes) is what we as feminists refuse. In *Beyond God the Father*, Mary envisioned "a world without models."<sup>11</sup> This was not, as she went on to point out in her introduction to *The Church and the Second Sex*,<sup>12</sup> an **ahistorical** world; she affirmed there the necessity for continuously re-understanding our own lives and the lives of foresters in light of history, affirming their/our contribu-



tions and elaborating/revising mistakes. In *Gyn/Ecology*, she contrasts the **codes** of the fathers, or the sterile models of patriarchy, with "more ancient, more **translucent** myth from gynocentric civilization" (p. 44). The translucent myth here is conjoined with transcendence, with Wildness:

For what women who have the courage to name our Selves can do is precisely to act on our own initiative, and this is **profoundly** mythic. . . . When I speak of gynocentric myth and feminist myth-making I do not refer to tales of reified gods and/or goddesses but to stories arising from the experiences of Crones—stories which convey primary and archetypal messages about our own Prehistory and about Female-identified power. [P. 47 and 47n]

The crucial difference between patriarchal and feminist myth is thus the difference between organic and imposed; between that which arises from and is continuously subject to the experience of the subject; and the pre-formed, other-authored directives that resonate only with gendered, nonfeminist imaginations. Of patriarchal myth, Mary says:

On a level that passes as "sophisticated," scholars from various fields generally agree on certain components of what they perceive to be myth. Myths are said to be stories that express intuitive insights and relate the activities of gods. The mythical figures are symbols. These, it is said, open up depths of reality otherwise closed to "us." It is not usually suggested that they close off depths of reality which would otherwise be open to us. [P. 44]

In contrast, feminist myth opens, unfolds.

### **Spinning, Spooking, Sparking: Zen and the Science of Radical Feminism**

The last part of *Gyn/Ecology* focuses on the breaking-through/celebrating of Hags, Harpies, Crones, Spinsters, and Searchers (delightful new names for the overburdened "Lesbian feminist" designation). The celebration/breaking-through incorporates a threefold process Mary calls spooking, sparking, and spinning—the exorcism of old and destructive ways of being and thinking; the interpersonal and transpersonal sparking and joining of minds and bodies of Hags, Harpies, and Crones; and the spinning-out of tapestries of creativity, in connection with each other and all of life.

In creating her web of language around the ideas of spinning, sparking, and spooking, Mary uses words that have had profound meaning for me in my life, but which I have often felt embarrassed to talk about in a "political" environment: hope, innocence, courage, gentleness, compassion, **sacredness**. *Gyn/Ecology* frees up some of the coopted language and silences associated with these ideals, gives them new strength.

Spinning is creating an environment of increasing innocence. Innocence does not consist in simply "not harming." This is the fallacy of ideologies of nonviolence. Powerful innocence is seeking and naming the deep mysteries of interconnectedness. It is not mere helping, defending, healing, or "preventive medicine." It must be nothing less than successive acts of transcendence and Gyn/Ecological creation. In this creation, the beginning is not "the Word." The beginning is hearing. Hags hear forth new words and new patterns of relating. Such hearing forth is behind, before, and after the phallogocentric "creation." [Pp. 413-14]

The term **profane** is derived from the Latin **pro** (before) and **fanum** (temple). Feminist profanity is the wild realm of the sacred as it was/is before being caged into the temple of Father Time. It is free time/space. [P. 48]



**Gyn/Ecology** refuses all dichotomies of anger and gentleness, innocence and knowledge. It will be a useful tool for asking some of the basic questions about life's meanings and values that we need desperately to ask of each other and ourSelves. It has helped me to ask some of these questions in non-clichéd, fresh ways.

Because patriarchal language is dichotomized, and because we still must use it for some forms of communication, it is necessary to almost turn it on itself in order to burst its confines. Mary does this repeatedly, employing paradox, oxymoron, and reversing the reversals to explode and spin:

Journeying to the Center is undoing the knot, not cutting the knot. To try to cut the knot is merely to take a misleading short-cut. It is to remain fixated in the foreground, the place of the patriarchal War State. [P. 406]

In the beginning was not the word. In the beginning is the hearing. Spinsters spin deeper into the listening deep. We can spin only what we hear, because we hear, and as well as we hear. We can weave and unweave, knot and unknot, only because we hear, what we hear, and as well as we hear. Spinning is celebration/cerebration. Spinsters Spin all ways, always. Gyn/Ecology is Un-Creation; Gyn/Ecology is Creation. [P. 424]

This passage, which ends the book, brings one face to face with the very **context** of one's own s/Self. I felt my mind whirl on her own heels as I read this, spinning from me even as I closed the book. Our knotting/unknotting as Lesbian feminists, Hags, Harpies, and Crones, is realming, worlding—the placing of self in conjunction with time and space:

As each friend moves more deeply into her own Background she becomes both her earlier and her present Self. At times this re-membered integrity makes her appear Strange to her friends, and since the latter are also re-membering, the encounters of these older/younger Selves can be multiply Strange. [P. 382]

For the next many years, as we encounter the Strange, beautiful, spun unfolding of ourselves and each other, **Gyn/Ecology** will be a vital part of the poetry from which we learn, and to which we give, our methods. Without formulae, without rhetoric, Mary gives exquisite, joyful voice to many of the realms through which we as Voyagers have passed, and creates new others in the voicing. And in the Hearing of this book are the Questions which weave and compel us:

... our rough Voyage, which has proved—for those who have persisted—strange, difficult, unpredictable, terrifying, enraging, energizing, transforming, encouraging. For those who have persisted there is at least one certainty and perhaps only one: Once we have understood this much, there is no turning back. [P. 368]



## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

*How do you read a spider's web? It took me several weeks. I picked it up, and put it down after a few pages. Sometimes I couldn't continue reading because my hands were shaking with rage. One afternoon, sitting in Golden Gate Park, I read the part in Chapter Nine about how patriarchs have reversed the meaning of tolerance, and called feminists intolerant. I burst into tears, and wept out my outrage, pain, and horror at remembering how our most idealistic actions are twisted into mismeanings.*

*Another sense in which Gyn/Ecology was difficult to read is that the language Mary uses is thick, convoluted at times, filled with word games and puns, coining new words and phrases. When I began the book, I had a great deal of resistance to these. I would throw the book down and declare it to be so much rhetoric—until several hours or days later, then I found the "word games" coming back to me in some other context, illuminating some aspect of my daily life; working, almost like yeast, on other levels than those at which I am used to reading.*

*I have begun to recognize this resistance on my part as a resistance to change, as a reflection of my habits of mind and reading that are linear, which make me almost prefer to plod through familiar and unchallenging territory than to think/read in new ways (whatever it is that makes us like to read mystery stories or watch TV or eat junk food, I think it's the same). I had the same resistance/reaction to Bertha Harris' *Lover*, to Monique Wittig's *Lesbian Body*. It almost hurt to read them, like using a cramped leg muscle for the first time—ultimately, it's wonderful, freeing, moving . . . but hard to get used to at first, at least for me.*

## NOTES

1. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

2. See for example Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

3. The concept of boundary-dwelling is from *Beyond God the Father*; for the etymology of *dwelling*, see the beginning of this article.

4. See "The Lesbian Perspective: Pedagogy and the Structure of Human Knowledge," by Julia P. Stanley, paper delivered to the National Conference of Teachers of English, Chicago, 1976; B. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967); and B. Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (1978: Sociology Press, Box 143, Mill Valley, Calif. 94941, \$10.00).

5. The concept of dishabituating is developed in "The Politics of Wholeness II: Lesbian Feminism as an Altered State of Consciousness," Susan Leigh Star, *Sinsister Wisdom* 5, Winter, 1978.

6. At about this time I wrote a paper on psychology and the witch-burnings for a male instructor in a sophomore seminar on psychological methods. The instructor returned the paper with the remark that I had misspelled *gynocide*, and corrected it to *genocide*. *Woman Hating* is published by Dutton, New York, 1974.

7. This idea is developed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel, 1972).

8. in *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978).

9. See also Jerome D. Frank, *Persuasion and Healing* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).



10. On a parallel track, I have been thinking about the whole idea of the "medium as the message." I think that this slogan is used by patriarchs (and of course it contains important truths) to ignore the fact that the message is also the message much of the time (for example, in violent pornography).

11. Chapter 6.

12. Harper and Row, 1975, with a New Feminist Postchristian Introduction by the Author.

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## DID YOU SAY LU-UV? I THOUGHT YOU DID . . .

An issue on love? How tacky. I can't remember when Catherine and I thought of it. Maybe when the first draft of Sherry Thomas's story came in the mail and stirred in us tenderness, terror, and old questions we had agreed to forget. Doing a Lesbian magazine we had finally recognized with some shock would continue to be grueling: never enough time, never enough money, and our mistakes compounding themselves. It had become for us an easy relief to stop talking with each other about content and direction, to stop writing "Notes for a Magazine," and to concentrate instead on worrying about filing systems, the tax return the IRS was hounding us about, the guilt-inducing pile of unanswered correspondence. And we did make some headway in solving the practical problems of magazine survival. The move to Nebraska was expensive and time-consuming, a labor requiring several months, but at its end, there really were women who wanted to work on *Sinister Wisdom*, who decided it was worth their time. By October, Friday night open work sessions had evolved, and Catherine and I began the unfamiliar process of learning how to organize the chaos while relaxing enough to enjoy the companionship.

We had silently agreed to stop wondering on why's and focus on how's because dreams and desires and their halting articulation in new/old words don't get a magazine out. And yet they do too, in ways we began to sense. We had both seen enough of what cynicism does to Lesbian projects, to Lesbian lives—cynicism, and the hysteria which is its other face. Going through the motions of activism, dropping out, pulling back, lapsing into the undertow of passivity and despair that sucks constantly at our feet; and the other face—the lashings out at other women, the destructive winds that blow through Lesbian groups, Lesbian "communities." We knew enough about what happens when you forget to remember why you're doing what you're doing; and we knew enough about how much easier it is to forget than to remember. If "two women together is a work/nothing in civilization has made simple,"\* how difficult is three women together, four, five, a network? And how can a woman continue to participate without knowing why, without remembering that she does it for love?

We decided that it was time for us to remember, and a love issue would be the way we'd remember.

In 1974 I was struggling in my journal with questions about guilt and shame: when I think I have overcome my guilt at not-loving men, why am I still paralyzed by shame at trying to love myself, trying to love other women? "It's not bad conscience I suffer from; it's awkward nakedness. It's shame—shame when I sing, dance, write, talk, eat, make love spontaneously, shame when I display my own devalued self."







transport us and theory to bind us up. In the mornings, I want to sit alone at the typewriter until something real comes out. I want to be able to cry and able to come and able to be all the glimpses of a warrior I see.

*What will we do with the woman on our hands?*

### **Practical Stuff:**

At this point, *Sinister Wisdom* is paying for its own supplies, printing, and mailing costs, despite the escalating prices of paper, stamps, and everything else. The magazine has been able to keep financially afloat so far because: a) the women first at Whole Women Press and now at Iowa City Women's Press do not pay themselves the going rate for their labor; b) the typesetting, paste-up, collating, and binding of each issue are done in Lincoln with unpaid labor; c) the Tee Corinne fundraising poster is still selling; d) many women are sending in contributions, either on a regular basis, or when they renew; e) many women are buying gift subscriptions; f) Deidre McCalla, Llena de la Madrugada, and Leigh Star have given two benefit concert-readings—one in Lincoln and one, with Mary Daly, in Boston; g) the subscription list, despite the new higher rates, is still—slowly—growing; h) more bookstores are carrying *SW*, and most of these have increased their standing orders.

However, Catherine and I are in a bind. We are still paying for *SW*'s office space (a full basement with a small room for storing back-issues and another room large enough for collating tables, typewriter, typesetter, paste-up board, stapling machine, files, desks, chairs, bookshelves, etc.) Also, we have still not been able to cut the hours we spend on *Sinister Wisdom* below 30-35 hours a week apiece\*\*—none of which *SW* can pay for and the extent of which makes it difficult to get enough freelance jobs to pay the rent and groceries. And we are running out of money. Therefore, *SW* has to very shortly, at the very least, pay for its own office space. We've applied for a grant (which we're not particularly optimistic about getting), but the only sure remedy is to rapidly increase the number of subscribers.

So: if you are buying each issue in a bookstore, please consider subscribing. If you have friends who don't know about *Sinister Wisdom*, please tell them. If you are going to a women's event, please write us for *SW* fliers to distribute. If you'd like to represent *SW*, selling magazines and posters, please write Debbie at *SW*. If you can get a free announcement in a local feminist newsletter or newspaper, please do. If you can put up a flier on an appropriate bulletin board, please do. And so on.

### **Announcement:**

Beginning with issue 9, *SW* will run a "letters" column, as criticism and dialogue about what has been published or needs to be published in *SW*. Please mark your letters (or portions of your letters) so that we will know to consider them for publication.



### Unpaid Advertisement:

Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines now own an old IBM Selectric Composer (which *SW* uses in return for buying its own fonts and ribbons). We wish to feed ourselves by copy-editing, typesetting, pasting-up, and proof-reading books. We are literate, careful, and reliable. Phone (402) 435-1141, or write Box 30541, Lincoln, Neb. 68503.

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Notes: The title "Did You Say Lu-uv?" was lifted from the song by Willie Tyson on her album "Debutante."

\*from Adrienne Rich, "Twenty-one Love Poems: XIX" in *The Dream of a Common Language*.

\*\*Estimates for additional unpaid hours of editing, promotion, distribution, and production: staff—20-25 hours/week; Leigh Star—5-8 hours/week; Debbie Alicen—5-8 hours/week. This does not account for the hours put in by the contributing editors—Beth Hodges, Sarah Hoagland, Mab Segrest—nor by women who distribute magazines and posters in their own communities; nor by women who do special jobs for *SW*, like taping the issues; nor the time spent by friends who edit an article, collate an issue, etc. See next issue for a hopefully complete naming of women who have been contributing labor and/or money.

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### NOTICE

#### **BLACK LESBIAN BIBLIOGRAPHY NEEDS FINANCIAL SPONSORS.**

A comprehensive, annotated bibliography of materials by and about Black lesbians in the United States is nearing completion. The bibliography which has approximately 140 entries is being compiled by JR Roberts and will feature a foreword by Barbara Smith. Graphics and photos will illustrate the text. So far this bibliography has been done without any financial backing. Now that publishing time draws near (hopefully Spring, 1979) there is a great need to locate financial sponsors. Particularly women with good jobs and surplus money are invited to contribute. Groups and organizations might help by doing fund-raisers in their part of the country. This important publication will not be published without financial support from other lesbians and feminists. 1000 copies will be printed in the first edition. This will cost roughly about \$1,000-\$1,200. If you would like to contribute or do fund-raising, please write to JR Roberts, 167 Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02139. If you know of women who have a great deal of wealth, please let them know about this important project, urge them to contribute.

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## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Nancy Adair** is a wild Irish dyke best known for her work on the film and the book, *Word is Out*.

**Theresa Barry**. "I'm a partner in Labrys Books, a women's bookstore in Richmond, Virginia. I am a dancer, a photographer and a lover of women. Other labels include lesbian, feminist, eternal student and, of course, the writing goes on like a thread through these."

**Melissa Cannon** has been writing for about 20 of her 32 years, grew up in Tennessee; currently, she teaches for a living.

**Tee Corinne** lives in San Francisco and is researching images of Lesbian sexuality in the fine arts.

**Martha Courtot** has published two books of poetry, *Tribe* and *Journey*, and writes for *Runes*, the Sonoma county women's journal.

**Judith Crewe** writes a literary criticism column for the *Body Politic* in Toronto. She wrote *The Ancient, and Other Poems* (Catalyst, 1976) and has published widely in Canada and the United States.

**Mint Danab** lives in Eugene, Oregon, and does a weekly women's radio show with Thyme Seagull.

**Barbara Deming** has published several books with Grossman Publications: *Prison Notes* (1966); *Running Away From Myself; A Dream Portrait of America Drawn from the Films of the 40's* (1969); *Revolution and Equilibrium* (1971); and *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives* (1974).

**Judy Grahn** is a poet, publisher, and editor. She is currently working on a novel of matriarchal history.

**Melanie Kaye** lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Susan Krieger** lives and teaches in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Robin Linden** lives in San Francisco.

**Audre Lorde** is working on her first book of prose. Her latest collection of poetry is *The Black Unicorn* (Norton, 1978).

**Toni McNaron** is an activist and teacher who works on *So's Your Old Lady*, the Lesbian feminist journal from Minneapolis.

**Cathy Miller** has been published in *Woman Becoming* and *Backspace* magazines, both Pittsburgh-based publications, and was to be anthologized in a United Sisters publication before its demise.

**Felice Newman** edited *Cameos: New Small Press Women Poets* (Crossing Press, 1978) and is a member of the editorial collaborative of Motherroot Publications. "Sister" will be included in a chapbook of Felice's work from Motherroot.

**Terri Poppe** is a feminist, lesbian, collective member of *Off Our Backs*, member of the Feminist Writers' Guild, and has been involved in the women's movement since 1969 (Albuquerque, N.M., Fairbanks, Al., Fitchburg, Ma., Washington, D.C.)

**Kimi Reith** is from San Diego and lives now in San Francisco. A chapbook, *Poems for my Mother and the Women I have Loved*, has recently been published by Second Coming Press, San Francisco.

**Lee Schwartz** lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and co-facilitates a women's prose/fiction workshop called "Oracle," which is working on an anthology to be published this winter.

**Claudia Scott** lives in Philadelphia. *Portrait*, a book of her earlier poetry, was published by Lavender Press.

**Deborah Snow** is a co-publisher of Persephone Press. More of her photographs can be seen in *The Fourteenth Witch*, available from Persephone, Box 7222, Watertown, Ma. She recently had a photographic exhibition at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles.



Arlene Stone's books of poetry include *The Image Maker* (Emmanuel Press, 1976), *The Shule of Jehovah* (Plowshare Press, 1976), and *Through a Coal Cellar, Darkly* (Juniper Press, 1977).

Chris South works on the *Feminary*, a feminist lesbian journal for the South.

Sherry Thomas is one of the founders of *Country Women* magazine, co-author of the book *Country Women*, and is now doing a book of interviews with old women who have spent their lives farming.

Martha Yates is a carpenter from Vermont. She is presently living in Brookline, Mass.

Irene Young is a portrait photographer in New York City.

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## SINISTER WISDOM POSTER STILL AVAILABLE

In the spring of 1977, a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two women making love appeared on the cover of *Sinister Wisdom* 3, followed by a deluge of requests for a poster. The poster was printed in the summer of 1977: a duplicate of that cover, black on gray, 17" x 22". You can have your own for a contribution of \$3.00 toward the survival of *Sinister Wisdom* plus 50 cents to cover mailing costs. (They make nice gifts for friends, too; bulk rates available.)

Send \$3.50 per poster to: *Sinister Wisdom*, Box 30541, Lincoln, Ne. 68503.

Also available in feminist bookstores.

## SINISTER WISDOM ON TAPE

The sixth and seventh issues of *Sinister Wisdom* are now available on cassette tape. If you are interested in borrowing or purchasing the cassettes for either or both issues, please write *Sinister Wisdom*, Box 30541, Lincoln, Ne. 68503.

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### Sinister Wisdom

Box 30541

Lincoln, Ne. 68503

I would like to subscribe to **Sinister Wisdom**.

\_\_\_\_\_ Enclosed is \$7.50 for one year (4 issues), beginning with issue 9.

\_\_\_\_\_ Enclosed is \$13.00 for 8 issues, beginning with issue 9.

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Enclosed is \_\_\_\_\_. Please send SW to my friend.

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## SUBMISSIONS

*Sinister Wisdom* welcomes unsolicited manuscripts and art work. Please type (double-spaced) all written work. Reviews should be no longer than 3500 words; articles no longer than 5000 words. Enclose self-addressed, stamped envelope and a 2-3 line description of yourself. At this time, we can pay only with a subscription or copies of the issue in which your work appears. Please indicate which "payment" you prefer. Allow six weeks for reply.

**Important:** Please mail **poetry** directly to Susan Leigh Star, 52 Mars Street, San Francisco, California 94114. All other manuscripts, correspondence, and art work should be sent to *Sinister Wisdom*, Box 30541, Lincoln, Ne. 68503.

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## BACK ISSUES, WHILE THEY LAST

**Issue 1** (Summer 1976): "... solid politically, beautiful to look at, breaks the male language barrier. . . ." 72 pp., \$2.00.

**Book Issue 2** (Fall 1976) **Lesbian Writing and Publishing**, guest editor Beth Hodges: Susan Griffin on breaking the conspiracy of silence; June Arnold and Bertha Harris reinventing the world in Lesbian fiction; panel on reading, writing, and teaching Lesbian literature; essays on a woman-identified aesthetic; reviews; interviews; listing of Lesbian titles (with ordering information), and twenty-one Lesbian writers on why, when and how we publish with women. 136 pp. \$2.50.

**Issue 3** (Spring 1977): Sold out.

**Issue 4** (Fall 1977): stories of mothers and daughters and witches and lovers; Joanna Russ's tale for the girlchild in all of us; Lesbian separatism from the inside; photo-essay; interview; reviews, letters and poetry. 96 pp., \$2.25.

**Issue 5** (Winter 1978): Susan Leigh Star, "Lesbian Feminism as an Altered State of Consciousness"; Judith Schwarz, "Researching Lesbian History"; Michelle Cliff on speechlessness; Lesbian Day speech by Barbara Grier; fiction; poetry; photo-essay; reviews; interview. 104 pp., \$2.25.

**Issue 6** (Summer 1978): Julia Stanley, Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel, Adrienne Rich on language and silence; Marilyn Frye on separatism and power; fiction by Sandy Boucher, Thyme Seagull; poetry; interviews; essays by Sarah Hoagland and Peggy Holland; drawings and photos. 104 pp., \$2.50.

**Issue 7** (Fall 1978): myths, monsters, teeth, etc. Jane Caputi on patriarchal fish stories; Judith Schwarz on being physically different; self-portraits in prose and poetry by Alice Bloch and Susan Wood-Thompson; feminist musings by Melanie Kaye; plus a wealth of fiction, poetry, reviews, drawings, and photographs. 104 pp., \$2.50

(Add 50 cents postage for every 1-2 copies ordered.)



