# conditions:

# one

# CONDITIONS: ONE

*a magazine of writing by women*

*with an emphasis on writing by lesbians*

*Conditions* appears three times a year. Subscription rates: $6.50 for individuals ($5.00 for students and unemployed) and $10.00 for institutions. Bookstore orders of 5 or more receive a 40% discount. Orders should be directed to: *Conditions*, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, New York, 11215.

Submissions will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Cover graphic by Irene Peslikis

Conditions *is edited by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore. We work collectively to select and edit material which will reflect women's perceptions of themselves, each other, the conditions of their lives, and of the world around them.*

*This collective process is a difficult one. We have found that the four of us do not always agree or identify with viewpoints expressed by the women we publish, or with each other.*

*Because we do not proceed from a single conception of what* Conditions *should be, we feel it is especially important to receive critical and personal reactions to the writing we publish. We hope to begin printing readers' responses in the second issue.*

# CONDITIONS: ONE

Vol. I No. 1 April 1977

## POETRY

## FICTION



## JOURNAL



## FEATURES



## REVIEWS

## REMEMBER, THIS

is only my side
of the story. We haven't said
a word to each other these thirteen
months, nor seen
one another, two blocks away
on the same street, in this small
neighborhood by the Amazon slough.

I never kissed her.

We had been talking for years
across the soup, or tea, or some
hot liquid, and always Bi-
sexuality, as we called it, entered
the room mid-meal. We had been talking for years.
It was last spring. My breath
deep in my lungs, my first
solo free-fall, no
parachute, I said: *I love you*, frightened, more

terrified than she, who dandled
her infant daughter bare
on her bare knee, who laughed
a nervy, drawn in laugh, saying: At least
you're not pregnant.
Laughter.
A huge
air pocket sucked me back
to the metal
belly of the plane, my own
gut reeling. That was the next

to the last
time I saw her. I didn't kiss her
then. I never

kissed her.

## THE WORLD WAS BARREN FOR NO PARTICULAR REASON

she wandered
through the cafe
balancing her cup
on the flowered shelf

the red poppies
stretched taut
she was due
any day

the load had
dropped
she was carrying it
low

I wanted
I wanted

to move my hands
over her
mountain

hold her belly

get in touch
with beginnings

right up through
my arms

the earth pond

pumping

## JEN'S NOTES

Sunglasses even in the fog  because the fog glares at me

I slouched in my joke hat all year, keeping notes
under the brim

I have peeled and peeled
back the cautionary nightmare.
What can *I* make of *facts*?

At dinner Jane explains an old law about scaring a horse with a car
The horse is rearing and ghostly  You need to dismantle
the car part by part  until the horse is calm

Is it good to be in control? I could order this whole summer
onto one short list – sleep wake sleep wake sleep.
Got enormous one week – huge breasts, stomach puffed up –

As the first step, I have dismantled my hat.

At a party, Jane is painting our fingernails red.
She carefully fills in the middle nail of my left hand.
Meanwhile, Janice reads aloud from The Scarlet Letter.
High school smell of polish. All week I brandish
the red nail  on Friday, I scrape the color off.

We are taking the house apart, furniture stacked in the yard,
floor bare and powdery. We search in the dark space
behind walls for our small parents. They stand,
their cheeks against plaster, breathing shallowly.

I turn my ankle, it hurts all night and I am scared.
What is the extent of the injury?

Trying to get home  Trying to figure out
what is broken

Someone told about a law where in the dark she has to run
ahead of the car with a lantern in her hand

as warning and as illumination.

The two laws here are *actual* laws still on the books in Pennsylvania!  K.B.

Dear Frances,

thinking yesterday about how I used to perceive things . . .
separate quick takes, or intense focus, myself at sad center.
a consistent depression. tomatoes, oranges, green peppers,
so brilliant – they seemed to explode.

not seeing the connective links. dazed, gliding through.
everything separate. in myself a jumble of parts.
forgiving that one who told me he liked my breasts and
not my hips, forgiving that.

now it is a calmness about taking things in. an amazement
that my eyes see a whole field. yet they are two separate
light blue spaces on my face.

though we move always through weathers, we have to
feel our own skin, the bones of our hands, delicate or not.

there are days when nothing I see is true. there are days
when I can't lie –

delving a shovel into the ground, the weight of lifting
and turning the earth

the coffee at the bottom of the cup, tipped
and lukewarm

the sense of struggle, of a slight lift or break in a pattern,
the knowledge it will come back to get you in the night
but that you face
it stronger.

## STROKE

1.

my mother is conscious during the birth
I find the baby curled on her belly,
all wet and red. I want it to be a girl,
but she says, 'I'm so glad it's a boy'
I fix cammomile tea for her, good, warm.
balancing the child on the palm of my hand,
I sing a lullaby, 'baby, baby, you're so happy'
how the kid has changed: his hair is red
but it was blond, her eyes are brown but
they were grey. now it turns, falls
and rolls like a soft penny. the baby is still
in perfect order, but when she opens her mouth
part of her tongue is gone. just not there.
'oh does it hurt?' I ask and slide my tongue
along the roof of my mouth. 'no' I think
'it doesn't hurt at least it doesn't hurt.'

2.

it dragged at her
face this smile
stiff, automatic this

she had fallen into

the space between the wall and
the telephone dangled and

buzzed, I could reach for

her hand gripped mine hard
the blood knotted to sting
her nerve

travelled up and lodged

at the base of the could break off any

the car seemed to lurch

rough water break water
that slanting cold wind

could she make it across

this unprotected stretch
the wind
comes up so

and she was regaining speech but

midway between floors
I waited
for the appointment

more bread? more jello? more fruit?

I want to go home she said.

3.

the season the creek rode up the steps
she was asking for water
for me to cup my hands

I watched the simple grey
gather in her hair all that year
there was snow one day
that would not stick
when the pipes froze
we warmed them with blankets
left the water running all night

she had her piano in the center of the room
could have used it for firewood
it kept her that warm
as she played
leaning and tilting there
her face changing with the currents

in a big wind
the trees double over
her foot stepped out
into air
her ribs bent in two

the minute swelled
the light drained
out through the trees
in the dark pool of the house
she drifted  calling for water

MAUREEN BRADY

## GRINNING UNDERNEATH

School wasn't even out yet and already it was so damn hot and muggy the new flypaper over the kitchen table had curled up. Folly sat in front of the fan in the old wicker rocker. She could feel the small, broken pieces of wood pushing into her legs below her bermuda shorts. She stared at a page of her new mystery story that Martha had just finished and loaned her but she couldn't read. She thought maybe after the summer she'd start on a new budget and try again to get them out of the rotten trailer and into a house. They were all tripping over each other, all the time, tripping over each other. Especially with that Mary Lou getting hotsy-totsy. It was no good. Mary Lou in there bungling around. She'd leave the bedroom a shambles. How could you read a mystery with such a disrespectful kid in the next room and that wall between you so thin if you put a tack in the one side, it'd come out the other.

Skeeter was out mowing lawns. Now there was a good kid for you. He wanted some money of his own and he wasn't scared of working a little. Mary Lou'd drop her allowance on the first thing that came along and then hitch from town when she didn't have change for the bus. Worries about that girl were as regular as clothes gettin' dirty. With Tiny, it was too early to tell. He still minded. He was only ten. She remembered nursing them all in the wicker rocker. Seemed like Mary Lou'd been born with a mean bite. The other two'd taken more easily to it.

Mary Lou came out in her cut offs that she'd sat fringing for two hours the night before. She wore a skimpy T-shirt and an Aunt Jemima scarf tied around the crown of her head like she was going out to sweat in the fields. "Did you sleep some today, momma?" she asked.

"Not much. Too hot." Folly worked the night shift at the factory putting zippers in polyester pants. She looked back down at her page.

"Yuck. Do we have to have that stupid flypaper right over the table?"

"Mind your business, sister. I don't see y'all working out with the fly swatter, ever. That's the reason we need it."

Mary Lou stood sneering at the yellow strip and didn't answer. She had to admire the way her daughter's body had grown so nice and tall and lean. Graceful too. Mary Lou did a sort of reverse curtsy, going

up on her toes and putting her hands behind her back. Then said, "See ya later."

"Where you goin'?"

"Out."

"Out where?"

"To town."

"You stay away from that A&P, you hear, child?"

Mary Lou didn't answer.

"I don't want you hangin' around with that Lenore. She's too old for you."

"Mom, she's only nineteen," Mary Lou said, exasperation puckering the corners of her mouth.

"That's too old. You're sixteen."

"You don't have to tell me how old I am."

"Who told you she was nineteen, anyhow?" Folly asked. "She's been around that store at least four years now."

"I know. That's cause she dropped out of school in tenth grade."

"That's what I mean. I don't want you runnin' with that sort. She'll be givin' you ideas about droppin' outa school."

"But mom, she's smart. She's so smart she can study on her own. That's why she dropped out of school. She had to work anyway so she figured if she worked all day she could get her some books and study what she wants to at night. She does, too. You should see all the books she's got."

"I don't care how many books she's got, she ain't smart," Folly said, her voice rising. "People don't drop outa school from being too smart . . . and I don't want you around her. I want you goin' to school and lookin' for a job for the summer." Folly placed her book face down to keep the place, leaned forward so the chair was still and tried to penetrate Mary Lou with her eyes as if to stamp the statement into her. It was too hot to fight if you could help it.

Mary Lou held on to the back of the dinette chair and matched her stare. She was thinking of what to say. Finally she said, "School's stupid. There's no way I can explain to you how stupid school is."

Folly rolled her eyes up in her head to dismiss the point. "You're goin' to school, that's all. You get you a job for summer and then you'll know how easy you got it. I oughta send you to the factory a couple nights. Let you sit in front of that damn sewing machine for eight hours." She wiped the sweat from her forehead. Jesus, she didn't want to fight. She was just scared for Mary Lou that she'd end up like her or worse. She tried to lower her voice and it came out scratchy. "Look," she said, "I'm working my ass off to try to get us out of this

damn trailer. I run off with Barney when I was sixteen cause I thought he was hot shit with his tight pants and his greased back hair and his always having change to buy me a coke at the drug store. They kicked me outa school cause I was pregnant but I figured sweet shit on them, I already knew everything. Then I had to work cause Barney kept on goin' out with the boys and gettin' drunk and losin' his job, then I was pregnant again . . . . Then, you know the rest."

Folly looked at the flies stuck on the flypaper instead of at her daughter. She felt embarrassed. That wasn't what she had meant to say.

"Ma. It ain't my fault you married a motherfucker," Mary Lou said.

"You watch your mouth. You watch how you talk about your father."

"Well, he was." Mary Lou kept her mouth in a straight line though both mother and daughter were aware that she was probably grinning underneath. She'd always had a grin to go with her defiance. Folly had pretty much slapped it off her face by the time she was twelve and now she was sorry. She'd rather Mary Lou would just grin and then she'd know for sure it was there. Instead she picked up her shoulder bag and made a sort of waving gesture out of the way she hiked it up on her shoulder.

"Anyway, Lenore's trying to get me on at the A&P for the summer," she said at the door. Then she was gone.

Mary Lou was gone and Folly was left with a picture of Lenore standing behind her meat counter, quartering the chickens, her strokes swift and clean. She had always kind of liked the girl. She got up from her rocker and moved the fly paper to an old nail stuck in the wall by the kitchen window.

She took the wash off the line out back and called across to Martha to come on over. The two women sat at the table on the concrete slab they called a porch and Folly folded the laundry into two piles. She folded neatly, trying to keep the ironing pile low. On the other hand, she didn't want the kids going to school looking sloppy poor.

"How's your ma?" Folly asked.

"Oh, she's getting back to her old crabby self. She woke me up at noon to make sure I wasn't hungry . . . you know, in my sleep I'm gonna be hungry and not feeding myself. Then all afternoon it's, 'Go lie down, you didn't get near enough sleep.' I couldn't go back, though, with her bungling around with the cane. She's not near as

steady on her feet as she was before the pneumonia. I can't help myself from peeping out at her, waiting for her to fall down. Lotta good it's gonna be if she does, me lying there peeping."

Martha had brought her mother there to her little two-room trailer after she'd had her second stroke. Folly had a lot of respect for what she'd put up with but whenever she said anything like that Martha would say, "Look at your own load, Fol, and the way you take care of it." Once she'd even said, "I swear you were born a solid rock."

Folly thought about how Martha always seemed like the rock to her. She kept her awake at work making jokes about the boss. She'd touch her shoulder when Folly was really nodding out and say, "I wish I could just give you a pillow but you know old fartblossom'll be making his rounds soon." Coming home in the early mornings they always came back to life for the fifteen-minute drive and concocted tricks they would do on fartblossom once they were ready to quit the factory. That was Folly's favorite time of day. Once you'd come out into the sun and sneezed the lint out of your nose, the air always seemed so sweet and fresh. She often wished they lived a little further from the factory so the drive wouldn't be over so fast.

"Did you finish that mystery yet?" Martha asked.

"No . . . . Hardly got started on it. I been tryin' to figure that Mary Lou again."

"Yea. What's she been up to?"

"I don't know if it's anything or not. You know that girl behind the meat counter at the A&P? Short, dirty-blond hair brushed back, kind of small and tough?"

"Lenore? Is that who you mean?"

"Yea, you know her?"

"Not much. Only from going in the store."

"She's queer. Least that's what the guidance counselor down at the school says. She called me in to tell me that Mary Lou's been hanging out with her."

"I didn't think Lenore went to school."

"She don't. The guidance counselor says she comes by in her car when school lets out and picks my Mary Lou up every now and then. What do you think?"

"I don't know, Fol. Did you talk to Mary Lou?"

"I told her I didn't want her hangin' out with no one that much older. She's a smart ass kid, got an answer for everything. She ended up callin' Barney a motherfucker."

"What's he got to do with it?" Martha asked.

"Good question." Folly shook out a pair of jeans, then placed

one leg over the other and smoothed them with her hand. She could hardly remember how Barney got into it. "He sure was a motherfucking bastard," she said. "Serve him right if his daughter turned out queer. Him runnin' back, just stayin' long enough to knock me up with Tiny." Her face felt hot. The anger always rushed to her head when she thought of him.

"I sure have to agree with you," Martha said. "It never sounds like he done you any favors."

"I was pretty stupid," Folly said. She tried to get back to thinking about Mary Lou. She didn't want her mind wasting time on that bastard. The thought struck her that at least if Mary Lou was messin' around with that girl she wouldn't be gettin' herself knocked up. She didn't say that to Martha, though. It was a weird way for a mother to think.

Martha sat quiet and patient, waiting for Folly to get back on the track. She ran her fingers through her hair. It was then that Folly realized Martha's hair was cut just about the same as Lenore's. It was the same color too except for the temple parts where she had most of her grey. Folly looked away and tried to pretend she was immersed in her laundry. Ever so strange, the feeling that had crept up on her. How could it be that you live next door to this woman, you know exactly how she looks, you know she came up to North Carolina from Florida seven years ago when her ma first took sick. She works all night in the same room with you, she sleeps mornings in the next trailer, she knows every bit of trouble you ever had with the kids. They mind her like they never minded you. She loves them. She's like family. Folly was realizing that Martha never had talked about sex. Never. She'd never talked about any man. She'd never talked about not having children. She'd talked about her girlfriend in Florida when she'd first come up, about working citrus groves with her; then Folly'd become her best friend.

This all slipped furtively through her mind in a few seconds and she could only glance sideways at Martha. She was husky. She flicked her cigarette ashes with a manly gesture. "For Christ's sake," Folly said to herself, "so do I." Then it hit her that she never talked about sex to Martha either. Except to bitch about Barney. But that was because she didn't have any. She didn't want no man within a clothesline length of her. No thanks. She did just fine living without.

Folly stooped forward and fished around in the laundry basket for more clothes but she was down to the sheets. She sat back again and scrutinized the ironing pile just to make sure she hadn't put anything in it that could go right on over to the other pile and be done

with but she didn't find any mistakes. Then she searched out two corners of a sheet and Martha came around and took the other corners just as she would always do if she were around when the wash was taken in. They stretched it between them.

"Listen here. I just don't want no trouble for Mary Lou," Folly said. "You know, she seems cut out for gettin' herself into things."

"Yea, but she's pretty smart about getting herself out of trouble too. Least she don't come crying to you most times. I bet she didn't go to that guidance counselor on account of wanting guidance."

"Uhn't uh. Matter of fact if you ask me I think that counselor is a snoopy bitch. She'd probably like to have somethin' on Mary Lou. Said Mary Lou is a rebellious girl, that's what she told me."

"What of it?" Martha said. "Ain't nothing wrong with that. I bet this counselor don't like any kid that don't run around with a runny nose and a whiny voice asking for guidance." Martha shook her end of the sheet vigorously as she spoke. "That's a fine girl you got there. Reminds me of someone I know real well."

"What you mean?" Folly said.

"You know what I mean. I mean you. Remember when you ran around getting us all ready for presenting that thing with our working conditions to fartblossom's boss. They tried to give you some guidance. Remember that? You saying, 'Piss on them, they'll never get me outa here till I'm ready to go.' "

Folly tried to keep her mouth down to a flat line but the grin was there anyway. You could see it if you knew her as well as Martha did.

## UN PARTO

Quiero decirte que
no hablo así
que nunca lloro
en lugar público
que no grito jámas
aunque eres hombre

Quiero decirte que
soy enojo que lo
vivo lo camino
que me destruye si
no lo dejo libre

soy dolor doloroso
que lo bebo hasta
la hondez de mi alma
y que me salga sin el
querer ni el saber

Cómo te puedo decir
que soy el grito
el grito de dolores
el de la llorona
el de todas nuestras
hermanas el de la yo
propia y las lágrimas
no me vienen inundan
me ahogan y digo
por carmesí y rosas entre
dientes que te odio

que no oyes nunca oyes
y te digo y te grito y te
sonrío y te pego y te
pateo y te quiero y te ha
go el amor y no me o
yes nunca todavía

Spanish original and English translation by Ana Kowalkowsky.

## A BIRTH

I want to tell you that
I do not speak like this
that I never cry
in public places
that I never yell
unless you are man

I want to tell you that
I am anger that I
live it walk it
that it destroys me if
I do not set it free

I am pain full pain
that I drink it down to
the depth of my soul
that it leaves me without
the wanting or the knowing

How can I tell you
that I am the outrage
the curse the pain
of she who wails mourning
of all of our
sisters of me
my own and the tears
will not come to me they flood me
drown me and I say through
redness and roses from between
my teeth that I hate you

that you do not listen never listen
and I tell you and I scream to you and I
smile at you and I strike you and I
kick you and I love you and I make
love to you and you do not hear me
never yet

y siempre así

Quiero decirte que te
odio que tu éxito
es sin no vale aunque
te quiero decir adios

a dios a

tí trabajo pesado
tí amor tan cansado
tí casa llena de tí
tí tristeza tan harta
tí vida ya gastada
tí mitá ya tan vieja
tí poder tan pendejo
tí enojo guardado
ya de siglos y más cómo
puedo decirte a dios
a ya quiero dejarte
distancia sin distancia

Oyes tú te voy a
matarte a tí te
voy a decirte a
dios a tí parte en
medio de mí parte
cuchillo que me se
para oyesme a
hora tú tú te voy

a querer Tú que ya
salgas de mí yo te
quiero ya que somos
vos yo

and always so

I want to tell you that I
hate you that your success
is without does not count even
when I want to tell you good by

good by to

you work so heavy
you love so tired
you house full of you
you sadness filled
you life now spent
you half now so old
you power ass hole
you anger stored
now for centuries and more how
can I tell you good by
to now I want to leave you
a distance without distance

Listen you you I am going to
kill you you I
am going to tell you
good by to you part in
the middle of me part
knife that separates
me you listen to me
now you I am going

to love you you that
now leaves me
I love you now that
we are I

## THE MOON IS NO MUSE

The moon
is no muse.
She's got enough to do
hauling
oceans back
and forth
across the world.

Once,
young and intense,
I called her sister, lover;
prayed her
fertilize
my poems.

Now
I don't waste her time.
I have no muse.
Only two parents and
a sense of history
I drag around with me
under New York,
on bridges, over highways
to Baltimore, to Jersey.

No muse,
only a bus, a subway
to joggle poems
inside my mind.

JACQUELINE LAPIDUS

## ASSUMPTION IN THE ALGARVE: 1974

i.

off to a late start
we had a flat tire in Setubal

ugly industrial suburb
five women struggling to
change the tire while
groups of grubby tourists
straggle sweating back from the beach
and an old man watches
from the garden of an abandoned villa
suspicious
silent

and reached the Alentejo
hungry the car panted,
climbing the purple hills

black-shawled women hover in the twilight
branches claw at the windshield
like beggars' hands
and an old man sits on a wall
puffing his pipe mysterious
guardian of the mounds
suspicious
silent

abruptly we stopped singing
revolutionary songs
and rolled up the windows
shivering hugging our sleeping bags

ii.

midnight in Albufeira  nobody
home at Teresa's  the beach
has disappeared into the sea

exhausted, we stumble into an olive grove
and pitch our tent in the dark  next
morning we wake up black and blue
on a building site: another luxury hotel

not a drop of fresh milk
in Albufeira
    and we haven't seen any old men

heat shimmers off parked cars like ovens
as we limp past miles of burning flesh
looking for Teresa

iii.

hiding behind dark glasses
thick hair spread like honey
over her face  Teresa

her words come hesitantly through her fingers

frail as seaweed at the water's edge
she speaks to me of passion
and of poetry

her husband drying on her skin like salt

iv.

today is the fifteenth of August, sacred
to Artemis and Diana the huntress
and Hecate of the Night Sky
and Bridget the triple goddess
and Astarte, many-breasted Mother of All

the Blessed Virgin
escapes to heaven

we five remain on the beach
breasts bared to the sun, and swim
naked at night  forgetting the revolution

a scorpion crawls across the sand

v.

*Grandola, vila morena*
*terra da fraternidade*

the sky woke up startled
and blushed when we strolled
yawning into the café
asking for breakfast  incredulous men
lowered their newspapers
the radio jammed

*former secret police agents*
*stage prison strike  leftist*
*demonstrators arrested*

we bundled into the car and drove
back to Lisbon like Erinyes

by the time we arrived, rumors
were spreading all over Portugal
that a high-level international feminist conference
had been held, secretly, in the Algarve

WILMETTE BROWN

## BUSHPATHS

the road is strewn with fallen wings
and the stench of mangled dogs
follows frightened barefoot travelers on the sidetracks
cattle scatter on burning hoofs
to escape the blast of horns
and faded women sell subsistence cobs
and watermelons along the highway

africa
who scratched these roads
in pitch
across your face
new scars
to mark the new maturity
the knowledge of imperial evil
for surely
these are the paths of plunder
that violate the sacred forests
to race for hidden treasures
leaving us
a continent of opened secrets

they are not our roads
that trample through the maize field
and cramp the lion in her kingdom
that steal across whole villages
and parcel out the continent
into national thoroughfares
to deliver the goods
to europe

LILLIAN FADERMAN/ANN WILLIAMS

# RADCLYFFE HALL AND THE LESBIAN IMAGE

The liberation of women generally and lesbians specifically was accelerated by women's opportunities to prove their usefulness to their countries during World War I. After the War, middle-class women were permitted on a large scale—for the first time in history—to earn some kind of living, which made it possible for those women who chose to love other women to live together instead of disappearing separately into the sea of matrimony for want of a means to subsist. Once lesbianism became a viable lifestyle, a literature dealing with the subject began to emerge in relative abundance. Jeanette Foster (*Sex Variant Women in Literature*) has identified thirteen titles with a major lesbian focus which were published in English in all the years before World War I and sixteen in the one decade following World War I.

Two of the most historically significant lesbian novels appeared at the end of that decade (1928): Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Woolf, the far more sophisticated writer of the two, masked her lesbian subject matter in a wild and charming fantasy about a creature who lived for hundreds of years, alternately as a man loving women and as a woman loving men. The model for her beautiful Teiresias (and the person to whom the book was dedicated), Vita Sackville-West, was a sometime lover of Virginia Woolf. She (or rather Orlando, her fictional counterpart) is depicted as being neither malformed nor maladjusted; nor is she a lesbian, except to all the world of perceptive lesbian readers and those who knew something about Vita Sackville-West. *Orlando* thus slipped easily past the English censors. It was for years considered only a slight and negligible work by most Woolf scholars, and a tantalizing little joke by lesbian readers.[1] Had Virginia Woolf dealt more explicitly with her lesbian subject matter, *Orlando* might have become the sensation of 1928, and the popular image of the lesbian for many subsequent years might have been entirely different from the one that prevailed.

Instead, it was Radclyffe Hall's very unambiguous *The Well of Loneliness* which, for the next forty years, defined for the public, and even for young lesbians themselves, what a lesbian was or was supposed to be. Just before she began *The Well*, Hall, a popular writer, had won two coveted literary prizes—the Prix Femina and the James Tait Black

Prize–for *Adam's Breed*, a novel that does not deal with homosexuality. She approached the subject of lesbianism with an admirable temerity but also with a simplism that would have been impossible for a better writer. Her purpose was expressly political. She saw herself as having taken up her pen "in defense of those who are utterly defenseless"[2] in the hope of effecting "impartial justice and understanding towards a very unfortunate section of the community."[3] She believed that the best way to accomplish her political purpose was to argue that women do not become lesbians by choice or circumstance, but are rather born with an affliction that Hall called not lesbianism, which would perhaps have evoked too dangerously the image of happy Greek isles where women wrote love poetry and wove daisy chains for one another, but "congenital inversion." She was familiar with society's reasoning: if one can *become* a homosexual through environmental circumstances, then one can be cured and unbecome a homosexual; if one has *chosen* to be a lesbian she is perverse, flying in the face of society, and deserves to be punished; if, on the other hand, one is born a lesbian, she is surely part of God's plan, and although we mortals cannot yet see the purpose of such an anomaly, she must have a place in nature.

It was perhaps primarily due to the English and American obscenity trials which followed the publication of *The Well* that the book became a *cause celebre* and an immediate best seller; it was translated into eleven languages and was even adapted for the stage. It is the one novel about lesbians that heterosexuals are likely to have read (often, in past decades, in college Abnormal Psychology classes). And it is the one novel that every literate lesbian in the four decades between 1928 and the late 1960's would certainly have read. In *Lesbian/Woman* Del Martin remembers that only after she read *The Well of Loneliness* as a young woman was she able to "put a name to what she had been feeling" towards another woman. *The Well* also gave her a heroine to emulate. It became for her, as for many lesbians over that forty-year period, before the beginning of the lesbian-feminist movement in the late 1960's, a "Lesbian Bible."[4] In those forty years, a young woman growing up gay in a small community where lesbian role models were scarce all too often found her role model in the fictional Stephen Gordon, the prototype of the "butch." She learned that inverted women, the real lesbians, were generally tall, or had boyish qualities in their voices, or had ankles that were too strong to be womanly. Furthermore, like Stephen she had no taste for feminine clothes, feminine occupations (which consisted of playing at dolls

and tea parties as a child and doing nothing as an adult). She inevitably was attracted to her polar opposite, the "femme" who was not a congenital invert. In short, the real lesbian was masculine, preferred male attire and male pursuits, suffered terribly, and could not hope to find a modicum of joy in this world.[5]

Radclyffe Hall did not invent the idea of the butch, but she was the most influential popularizer of that stereotype. It is puzzling that Hall, who had social access to a diversity of lesbians not only in England, but also in America, France, and Italy, should have chosen such an extreme—and at that time relatively rare—character type to represent the women she wanted to defend. Hall began writing *The Well of Loneliness* on a visit to Paris, where her closest social intimates were Natalie Barney (who became Valérie Seymour in *The Well*) and the group of lesbian writers and painters, mostly English-speaking expatriates, who gathered around Barney. Hall would have observed at Barney's famous soirees that while some butch/femme distinctions occasionally existed between two partners, what marked most of those lesbians was only their ambition and their air of independence. These were not women who were "trapped in the Well of Loneliness," as Hall suggests. They formed a supportive social circle and they encouraged each other to live creative, productive lives.[6] Nor were they, like Stephen, perpetually plagued by multitudinous sorrows: Natalie Barney spoke for many of them when she said with regard to her lesbian lifestyle, "If I blush for what I do, it is out of pleasure."[7]

Hall's depiction of Stephen Gordon as a much persecuted and suffering butch is especially enigmatic in the light of her only other (and, unfortunately, far less famous) lesbian novel, *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), in which there is not a word of congenital maimings or the "haunted, tormented eyes of the invert" (447).[8] While in this earlier novel, too, the lesbian characters are not permitted to live together happily ever after, their misfortunes have little to do with their gender preference: briefly, Elizabeth and Joan, who are tutor and pupil, fall in love, but Joan cannot leave her neurotically seductive mother who keeps her at home by playing invalid. Hall's view that Joan and Elizabeth should have been strong enough to run off together is implicit in her title, which she borrowed from Robert Browning's "The Statue and the Bust":

> And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
> Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin.

Clearly she believed that the two lovers had a right to each other, and

that it was stupidity and timidity that kept them apart, not (as she suggests of Stephen, who relinquishes her lover) nobility, not a saintly willingness to sacrifice oneself for another's good. In this sense, *The Unlit Lamp* is far more revolutionary than *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's political statement in *The Well*–Pity us and let us live–is made to heterosexuals. In *The Unlit Lamp* she speaks, although in muted tones, to other lesbians–Don't deceive yourself by false nobility and kindness; take the happiness which is your mortal right!

Both Joan and Elizabeth of *The Unlit Lamp* are independent, potentially strong, androgynous women. There is no butch and no femme in their relationship, no "congenital invert" and "mate of the invert." In the later novel, *The Well*, Stephen discourages the younger Mary from realizing herself through constructive work and reduces her to the position of a dependent child, but the older lover of *The Unlit Lamp* tells the younger, "I not only want your devotion but I need it, and I want more than that. I want your work, your independence, your success."(130-131)

The fact that the two lovers of *The Unlit Lamp* are both women is significant only in that Joan feels it would have been easier to escape from her mother had custom sanctioned two women going off together–but one sees that Joan uses this point as an excuse for her inertia, and that if her lover had been a man she would only have found another excuse for succumbing to her mother's emotional blackmail. Perhaps because Hall felt constrained to be subtle in this first novel she was able to write a book more complex and truer to life than the simplistic and egregious *Well of Loneliness*. Her focus in *The Unlit Lamp* is not explicitly on the problems of inversion (and conceivably the uninitiated might even miss the fact that Joan and Elizabeth are more than very good friends). Hall shows us in this work that a lesbian who suffers generally does so not because she cannot accept her lesbianism, not because she is born with traits that are considered more appropriate to the opposite sex, not because she is constantly aware of society's disapproval, but rather because she is indecisive or timorous or cannot love strongly enough–i.e., she is made miserable by the same things that make a heterosexual miserable.

While Stephen of *The Well* would have regarded feminism as irrelevant to her concerns since she believed herself less a woman than a member of the third sex, *The Unlit Lamp*, although it was written almost fifty years before the rise of the lesbian-feminist movement, is actually a lesbian-feminist novel. Hall does pay some lip service to

Freudian theories regarding the "causes" of lesbianism, but the importance of those causes diminishes when juxtaposed to the characters' feminist statements, which suggest that their lesbianism is at least partly a manifestation of their rejection of the position of women in a sexist society. When Joan at the age of fifteen announces to her father that she intends to be a doctor, he responds, "An unsexing, indecent profession for any woman, and any woman who takes it up is indecent and unsexed . . . I'll have none of these new-fangled women's rights in my house; you will stay home like any other girl until such time as you get married. You will marry; do you hear me? That's a woman's profession!" (116) Joan learns her feminism from Elizabeth, who complains, "But surely . . . a woman's brain is as good as a man's? I cannot see why women should be debarred from a degree, or why they should get lower salaries when they work for the same hours, and I don't see why they should be expected to do nothing more intellectual than darn socks and have babies." (210)

In fact, the primary cause of Joan's unhappiness is that she lacks the courage of her feminist convictions. Towards the end of the novel, Joan, now a middle-aged woman, sees all around her young lesbians, women who, perhaps aided by the circumstances of World War I, made better choices than hers:

> Active, aggressively intelligent women, not at all self-conscious in their tailor-made clothes, not ashamed of their cropped hair; women who did things well, important things; women who counted and would go on counting . . . . But she, Joan Ogden, was the forerunner who had failed, the pioneer who got left behind, the prophet who feared his [sic] own prophecies. These others had gone forward, some of them released by the war, others who had always been free-lances . . . and if the world was not quite ready for them yet, if they had to meet criticism and ridicule and opposition, if they were not all as happy as they might be, still, they were at least brave, whereas she had been a coward, conquered by circumstances. (301)

Hall seems to recognize in this novel that lesbianism and feminism are related, that women who choose to be productive often determine not to marry, that their affections go to other women—not because they are men trapped in women's bodies, but rather because they reject

prescribed roles, and they require a relationship in which the partner will say, "I not only want your devotion . . . . I want your work, your independence, your success."

Why did an author with such an apparent lesbian-feminist awareness write a novel about congenital inversion, butches and femmes, and hopelessness and loneliness? Primarily because Hall saw her role as the author of *The Well of Loneliness* to be that of apologist of homosexuality to the heterosexual world. She was far less concerned in this novel with presenting human truths than with writing a polemic which would convince heterosexuals that homosexuals need and deserve their "merciful toleration" and their "better understanding,"[9] and that heterosexist aversion and prejudice are unchristian. She suggests in *The Well* that such toleration would produce a society in which Stephen could bring Mary to her ancestral home with Mrs. Gordon's blessings and in which Lady Massey would not be chagrined and rejecting when she discovered the nature of Stephen and Mary's relationship. But Hall believed her polemical purpose was best served not by arguing that lesbians could be healthy, happy, and good company—that their life style often permitted them to be more productive than heterosexual women, that many women freely chose to be lesbians because they preferred relationships that were not pre-defined, that it was even possible to reach the heights of monogamous Victorian bliss in a long-term lesbian relationship—but rather by eliciting smug, heterosexist generosity.

She was, in fact, quite right in believing that her novel would be more likely to get a sympathetic reception if she presented her heroine as a woman who was trapped, not by the Freudian facts of her environment (as she implies through the character of Joan in *The Unlit Lamp*) from which one could be cured with enough psychoanalysis, but by a terrible accident of birth. A typical positive review in 1928 praised Hall's presentation of "the dreadful poignancy of ineradicable emotions, in comparison with which the emotions of normal men and women seem so clear and uncomplicated, [which] convinces us that women of the type of Stephen Gordon, in so far as their abnormality is inherent and not merely the unnecessary cult of exotic erotics, deserve the fullest consideration and compassion from all who are fortunate enough to have escaped from one of nature's cruellest dispensations."[10] Such critical support from heterosexists with a liberal bent was apparently what Hall had hoped to get.

Because Hall understood, too, that just by dealing explicitly

with the subject of homosexuality she could be found culpable in the eyes of the English censors, who might even accuse her of salaciousness, she sought to disarm her critics by borrowing the sanctity of science for her novel—but she chose her science carefully, rejecting the prevalent nurture theories of the day (which supported the possibility of "cure") in favor of the nature theories (which recognized the ineradicability of what had been pre-ordained and generally scoffed at the possibility of "cure"). To this end she made a systematic study of all theories which argued that inversion was congenital and then appealed repeatedly and finally successfully to Havelock Ellis, one of the chief exponents of the naturists, to write a few scientific, prefatory words to the novel.[11]

Adapting the theories of the naturists, Hall seems to have reasoned, often to the point of ludicrousness, that since inversion is congenital, an inherited defect, signs must appear as early as infancy and childhood. Therefore, Stephen is first presented as "a narrow-hipped" baby—as though "normal" female infants had womanly pelvic development; as a child she has suspicious muscles, unlike ordinary little girls—as though her unvictorian indulgence in fencing and weight-lifting have nothing to do with her somatic development; as a young woman, her interests, her dress, her ambitions are all "unfeminine."

Born a Victorian, Hall was very familiar with nineteenth-century rigidity regarding sex roles. When Stephen compares her lot with that of Roger Antrim, Violet's older brother, the narrator concludes: "above all, she envied his splendid conviction that being a boy constituted a privilege in life; she could well understand that conviction, but this only increased her envy." (46) This envy is submitted as evidence of her oddity: because her temperament and her interests are as vigorous as Roger's, she is not a "proper" girl, but rather one of those "who stand midway between the sexes" in Hall's own phrase.

Obviously, lesbians looking for a role model in the years before the lesbian-feminist movement would not have been drawn to Stephen Gordon were she not a seductive character. Despite all her morbidity, Stephen is romantically heroic. She takes to heart the instruction from Puddle, her governess: "Have courage; do the best you can with your burden. But above all be honorable. Cling to your honor for the sake of those others who share the same burden. For their sakes show the world that people like you and they can be quite as selfless and fine as the rest of mankind. Let your life go to prove this."

But Stephen's heroism and nobility are, certainly to the cooler reader of the 1970's, overshadowed by self-pity and even self-loathing. When she discovers that she has been deceived by Angela, she cries out to the woman: "I'm just a poor, heartbroken freak of a creature who loves and needs you much more than its [sic] life." (223) Her suffering reaches a bathetic height when she realizes that even her dog perceives that she is not a genuine article and favors a real man, her rival Martin. Hall observes that the dog "loved Martin, not being exactly disloyal to Stephen, but discerning in the man a more perfect thing, a more entirely fulfilling companion. And this little betrayal, though slight in itself, had the power to wound." (483) Throughout all this Hall creates the impression that such suffering is merely a matter of course for the lesbian, that her morbidity is part of her make-up along with "the terrible nerves of the invert, nerves that are always lying in wait" (174), and especially, that inversion is a congenital *defect*. After reading Krafft-Ebing, Stephen laments, "and there are so many of us—thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they are maimed, hideously maimed and ugly—God's cruel; He let us get flawed in the making." (232)

Furthermore, acts of courage or generosity are invariably seen in masculine terms: for example, when Stephen finds herself strong enough to leave her ancestral home to her mother, the narrator observes, "Stephen found her manhood." (229) "Real" women, who may be either straight or "the mate of the invert," are deceitful, absurdly dogmatic, or simply weak. Even Mary Llewellyn, the woman who seems genuinely to love Stephen, is a poor, passive creature, whose greatest need in life is, according to Stephen, "protection," which seems to mean nothing less than respectability attainable only through a marriage sanctified by Church and State. She is handed over to Martin by Stephen, her last guardian, as is patriarchally appropriate. Where the lovely, independent Valérie Seymour rests in this schema of strong men/weak women is never made clear.

This kind of attitude naturally has social ramifications, and it is perhaps this point more than any other that taxes the credulity and the patience of the contemporary reader. Mary, and Stephen, too, are shown to bask in the friendship of Lady Massey, a proper, and undeniably tedious, heterosexual, who rejects the two when she discovers they are lovers. It is because Mary is so upset by this rejection that Stephen feels for the first time that they have an insurmountable problem: Stephen cannot "protect" her woman. This scene is followed by Stephen and Mary's jaunt to the gay bars of Paris, where they are

accompanied not only by Valérie Seymour but also a painter, a composer, a playwright, and an American aviatrix. In the midst of all this Stephen sees about her only "those haunted, tormented eyes of the invert" (447), and she and Mary pine for the respectability of Lady Massey and her ilk, rejecting a dynamic society that could have sustained them.

The impulse which motivated this novel must have been one of anger, and surely lesbians (as well as most other women) in the 1920's had a good deal to be angry about. But the anger in *The Well of Loneliness* is generally turned inward, which creates, of course, the terrible self-loathing and self-pity that we observe in the novel. However, through the few passages in which Stephen is permitted not to internalize her fury but rather to direct it where it belongs, we can understand something of the social conditions against which Hall protested. Mixed as it is with self-pity, the most moving of those passages is the one in which Stephen tells Mary the "cruel truth" about love with an invert:

> I am one of those whom God marked on the forehead like Cain, I am marked and blemished. If you come to me, Mary, the world will abhor you, will persecute you, will call you unclean. Our love may be faithful even unto death and beyond—yet the world will call it unclean. We may harm no living creature by our love; we may grow more perfect in understanding and in charity because of our loving; but all this will not save you from the scourge of the world that will turn away its eyes from your noblest actions, finding only corruption and vileness in you. You will see men and women defiling each other, laying the burden of their sins upon their children. You will see unfaithfulness, lies and deceit among those whom the world views with approbation. You will find that many have grown hard of heart, have grown greedy, selfish, cruel, and lustful; and then you will turn to me and will say: "You and I are more worthy of respect than these people. Why does the world persecute us, Stephen?" And I shall answer: "because in this world there is only toleration for the so-called normal." (344)

Such passages, which suggest that "haunted, tormented eyes" or

"terrible nerves" are not inherent in a lesbian's make-up but may be brought on by social prejudices, are all too rare. Hall apparently felt the need to tread lightly in her criticism of society because she thought she would be more likely to get a sympathetic ear by begging the heterosexist world for pity.

It would be ungenerous and complacent to ignore, in an era of lesbian-feminism, Radclyffe Hall's courage in writing *The Well of Loneliness*. As the recipient of two literary prizes, Hall had had every reason to believe that her fame and fortune would be guaranteed as long as she practiced the least bit of restraint. A lesser person would not have been willing to risk what she risked. She was much braver than Gertrude Stein who, after writing a most interesting novel about women who loved other women and did not belong to "a third sex," put it away in a drawer and forgot about it for decades. When Stein discovered *QED* again she refused to have it included in the Yale edition of her work, and it was not published during her lifetime. Hall was much braver than countless other lesbian writers who contributed, and perhaps still contribute, to a conspiracy of silence. But the saddest piece of irony in Hall's noble gesture was that she—perhaps more than Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, Freud—helped to wreak confusion in young women who, knowing themselves to love other women and having no other role models but Stephen Gordon, learned through Hall's novel that if they were really lesbians they were not women but members of a third sex, and that they need not expect joy or fulfillment in this world.

It is doubtful that any significant reform (for which Hall may have vaguely hoped) resulted from *The Well of Loneliness*. Maybe a few hearts were changed so that there was more "tolerance" for the "suffering," but in those days before the lesbian-feminist movement the book also convinced countless lesbians (who may not have known it before) that they were "suffering" and would be helped by "tolerance."

NOTES

1. Vita Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicholson, in his recent biography of his mother, *Portrait of a Marriage*, confirms that Woolf was, in fact, fancifully depicting his mother's lesbian adventures in those portions of *Orlando* in which the main character appears as a male.

2. Montgomery Hyde, *Norman Birkett: The Life of Lord Birkett of Ulverton* (Hamish Hamilton, 1964), p.255.

3. Unpublished letter to James Louis Gavin, editor of *The Observer*, July 15,

1928, in the Radclyffe Hall collection, Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas.

4. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, *Lesbian/Woman* (Bantam Books, New York: 1972), p.17.

5. Hall apparently intended that her book be explicitly non-proselytising. She wrote to Havelock Ellis that *The Well* points out "the pitiful plight of inverts who form a sexual union . . . I think it would really act as a warning to any young and thoughtless girl–a warning to think seriously before she threw in her lot with an invert." Unpublished letter to Havelock Ellis, December 2, 1928, in the Radclyffe Hall collection, Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas.

6. For a more detailed discussion of this group, see Bertha Harris, "The More Profound Nationality of their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920s," *Amazon Expedition* (Times Change Press, New York: 1973) pp.77-88; *Adam International Review* XXIX no.299: 1962, entire issue devoted to Barney and her group; also George Wickes "A Natalie Barney Garland," *Paris Review* 61: 84-134 (1975).

7. W.G. Rogers, *Ladies Bountiful* (Harcourt, Brace & World, New York: 1968), p.46.

8. Page numbers refer to the following editions: *The Well of Loneliness*. Garden City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1928; *The Unlit Lamp*. (St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, Inc., reprint 1972) London: Jonathan Cape, 1936.

9. Letter to Havelock Ellis, December 2, 1928, *op. cit.*

10. Vera Brittain, "Facing Facts," *Time and Tide*, August 1928. Quoted in Vera Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (A.S. Barnes and Company, New York: 1969), p.49.

11. Hall's papers at the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas include a set of notes prefaced by the statement, "the following are extracts from the latest and revised editions of the works of the highest authorities on sexual inversion, exclusive of the psychoanalysts." These notes seem to have been gathered in preparation for writing *The Well*. They include excerpts from Iwan Bloch's *The Sexual Life of Our Times*, Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* and Magnus Hirschfield's "A Manual of Sexual Science." Hall was also familiar with the work of Krafft-Ebing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and she suggests in *The Well* that Stephen's father understood her problem by reading those authors. All of these writers reject more or less the Freudian approach which tends to treat homosexuality as an acquired phenomenon, and argue that true inversion is congenital and thus neither curable nor communicable.

A hook pulls me out of the darkness my sleep
ribbed like the inside of a whale

I imagine I get it

once twice three times the knowledge
almost clicks into place like a disk

rolls out of me back into that
place where it has been waiting

## JUST ONE OR TWO THINGS

This person, she

knows too many things
such as
*multiple functions*
or
how to remember
lists of potential tensions

drives North
to the Hot Springs
pepper trees along the road,
and these willows,
that oak . . .
just one or two things selected
and focused

this person
she opens herself like a door
closes, with dragons–
opens herself like a meadow

knows too many things

she knows
"Swiss chocolate"
"the fellas down on Deneuve Street"
loose quotes  from abroad
loose ends
"Mardi Gras"

In the mineral pool
all this extra information
floats, and
talk of pigeons
chatter of jays

a memory extending itself
into the present
makes scar tissue
against my better judgment

## SAILING WITH ANN

*"Perhaps they would be skimming*
*over miles of blue ocean*
*in a queer little ship*
*with a leg-of-mutton sail."*
*The Well of Loneliness*

Ann with her yellow hair in a captain's hat
and a slicker for the spray
I dress up like a fisherman. I'm the mate

The wind's up and we're going! Mainsail, topsail
We're skimming blue water like a skate
We're swept
We're sailing away

Ann's a Finnish sailor
at the helm, and I'm the mate
Ho! down the sea coast
with a mutton-sail
on a breezy day

## AMY LOWELL AND THE FLAMINGOS

A color like peaches
or American Beauty pink
a flamingo color

On the grass at Sevenels
in the woods of Broomley Lacey

under an umbrella
bright as the flame of bird feathers

in the bath tub
with a hookah and her papers

Even the birds are dazzled by her colors
the blue waves of her talk

the moon floating silver over the fish-ponds
the silvery heart of the mystery woman

Miss Lowell!

a basket of peonies on her arm
in her pocket a good cigar

Smoke and sunlight around her head
flamingos among the pine

## ELLEN BASS

"If you talk enough
you've got to say some
stupid and some smart
things," my Grandmother
said. I tell this
to a group of women.
One copies it into a
notebook, asks me
her name, to write
underneath.
Sara Wolpert, I say.
I say her name.
And she becomes
a woman in herstory,
like Emma Goldman,
like Mother Jones,
a woman quoted in a
young woman's notebook.
Not grandmom, wife,
sister, mother.
She is Sara Wolpert.

## HOMECOMING

How your three daughters
thought you were dying this time for sure,
came home one summer night
meeting in the airport at 4 a.m.
to catch another flight up the coast.

The airport was nearly deserted and
devoid of women except for the janitors
and ticket agents. How the men
gawked at us and turned around to watch
the big women striding abreast
down the empty corridors,
talking and laughing
holding ourselves together
with no use for them.

At dawn we boarded a small plane
and sat in the rear, joking
that the door would fall off
at any moment. There was
no need to hide ourselves, or sit
humble and diminished
three unguarded women trying to pass
through the world unnoticed.

The wings dipped and we headed
out over the ocean and I thought:
Mama, you would be proud.

## WAITING FOR RELEASE

It keeps being summer again.
I imagine your face
behind a wall of mountains
waiting for release.

Today clouds scrape
the arid mountain tops.
I swim on my back
watching the dry storm
pass overhead.

Here, you can have my body
I don't want it.
All week, looking in the mirror
I turn away from these
large bones planted
on sturdy feet.
The ruddy face is yours,
not mine.
You can have it back.

Doing dishes I
suddenly remember your eyes,
sunken and red-rimmed,
your skin refusing
to heal,
your ankles no larger
than my wrists.
And always the effort
at speech,
the way I must press
the flat of my hand
to your chest
trying to understand.

When I said your will
grew stronger,
it was my own strength
I wished for.

LORRAINE SUTTON

## DEAD HEAT

*for my brother Henry*
*1953-1976*

i thought the sun would never
find you.

i was wrong

it took strength
to reach out with love
awkward clumsy
still
you kept coming
toward me
toward us
never letting us forget
even for a moment
that
the pain grew with each pint
of blood
that
the burning went on
and on and on and on
this time for me for us
as well as for you

brother

i thought the sun would never
find you.

i was wrong

ELLY BULKIN

# AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIENNE RICH

*Adrienne Rich has written eight books of poems and a prose book,* Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution *(1976). She was born in 1929 and has three sons, all born in the 1950's.*

*The following is Part One of an edited transcript of interviews taped on October 19 and 27, 1976. Part Two will appear in the second issue of* Conditions.

**EB**: I'd like to start by looking at the change in your critical reception by establishment critics over the past few years, particularly since the publication of *Of Woman Born*.

**AR**: I think it's been changing for a while. I don't think it's just all of a sudden happened. It really goes very far back, because when I began writing in the Fifties on what I now see were women's themes I ran up against tremendous resistance. The first "feminist" poem I ever wrote was around 1958, 1959: "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." Friends, poet friends, women friends, said to me: "You mustn't call the book by that title; it'll sound as if it's only about women." But I did call the book by that title because I *knew* in my guts that that poem was the central poem of the book. I'd always gotten good reviews on the basis of being a dutiful daughter, doing my craft right, and—

**EB**: Randall Jarrell said you were "sweet."

**AR**: And when I began to write as a woman I suddenly became "bitter," and that *was* the word that was used. It's interesting that you cite that word "sweet" because then I was seen as "bitter" and "personal," and to be personal was to be disqualified, and that was very shaking to me because I had really gone out on a limb in that poem. I would never have called myself a feminist at that point; it was only reading *The Second Sex* that gave me the courage to write "Snapshots" or even to think about writing it. I realized I'd gotten slapped over the wrists and I didn't attempt that kind of thing for a long time again.

I wrote a lot of poems about death and that was my next book, but I think I sensed even then that if there's material you're not supposed to explore, it can be the most central material in the world to you but it's going to be trivialized as personal, it's going to be reduced

critically, you're going to be told that you're ranting or hysterical or emotional. The reception of *Snapshots* did make a deep impression and in some way deepened my sense that these were important themes, that I had to deal with them. But it certainly didn't encourage me to go on with them at that point; I had no sense that there was going to be an audience for them.

**EB**: What changed that let you go back to them?

**AR**: My life. I mean, I didn't have anything else to use. I had a sense very early on, you read the writers that you need and in the Fifties I was reading Mary Wollstonecraft, de Beauvoir, I was reading the Brontës, Mrs. Gaskell's life of Charlotte Brontë, and it was clear that women's lives were a problem, there was a real problem there, it wasn't just me and my neurosis, that was very clear to me. It wasn't clear in any sense that I could explore except inside myself, but I knew that there was something wrong. I was very tired, caught up in the daily routine and children and that kind of thing and I knew that. My poetry had always been a means of surviving, finding out what I thought and what was true for me, one place where I was really honest with myself. I was very much striving for male approval and people's approval in general in those years. I was trying to do it *all* right, be a good wife, good mother, good poet, good girl, but I couldn't *really* just seek approval in my poetry, I couldn't, and it was a fortunate thing for me that I had the poetry.

**EB**: As an expression of that.

**AR**: Yes. And then increasingly journals, where I put a lot—about my life as a mother—that I couldn't put into poetry at the time, largely because by the male standards which were all I knew, motherhood was not a "major theme" for poetry. In the mid-Sixties, a lot of poets became politicized, yet there was always a critical canon that said, political poetry cannot be good art. Of course, poets have always and everywhere been political. By the time of the women's movement I already had a body of work, more or less recognized by the establishment. But the women's movement connected for me with the conflicts and concerns I'd been feeling when I wrote *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, as well as with the intense rapid politicization of the 1960's New Left. It opened up possibilities, freed me from taboos and silences, as nothing had ever done; without a feminist movement I don't see how I could have gone on growing as a writer.

Yet reviewers, critics, tended to say: "Here she was, this skilled

craftsman, this fine poet, but then she went off the rails and became political and polemical, and we can only hold our breath and hope she'll get back on the rails again, write the kind of poems she was writing in the 1950's." There's no sense in pretending that critical opinion doesn't affect you, it does affect you. Even when you are determined to go on with what you have to do. In a sense it can make you more tenacious of what you are about, it makes you know what you will and will not do, in a clearer way. But I know that I could not have gone on writing without a feminist movement, a community to support what I felt were my own intuitions.

**EB**: How do you think the reviews do affect you, both immediately and perhaps in a long-range way?

**AR**: You mean the reviews of *Of Woman Born*?

**EB**: Specifically of this book, but even going back. I was looking at the *New York Times* review of *Poems: Selected and New* which was written by a man who said that at your "least convincing" you write "poetic journalism, free-form expostulations on Vietnam, Women's Lib and 'patriarchal politics,' " yet he ends up talking about what a "spell-spinner" you are, what a "story-teller." Then he quotes from "From an Old House in America," and the last lines he quotes are: "My power is brief and local/but I know my power . . . . " Yet the two lines that follow these in the poem are: "I have lived in isolation/ from other women, so much . . . . " But he doesn't quote them. He just ends his review with a selected fragment of a poem.

**AR**: That strikes me as a kind of dishonesty and the dishonesty begins within the person. It's like saying: "I recognize the charge in this poetry, I recognize that in some way it moves me, but I will not accept what the poet is saying, I will not deal with what she is asking me to deal with as a poet. I will read this poem selectively, I will take the lines out of it that please me and call the rest polemical or unconvincing and I will not read this work as a whole."

In one sense, the critic has to deal with me respectfully because I was certified by W.H. Auden when I was twenty-one years old. But more than that I see what has happened with *Of Woman Born* as symptomatic of how what is disturbing–what might cause you to think, what might cause you to feel, to an extent that you would have to re-examine something–gets rejected in this kind of critical establishment and the critic then has to say, "OK, she's one of our finest poets, but we will not trust what she has to say about experience." If you don't

trust what the poet has to say about experience, then what is the point of talking about her as a poet? Why not say, "She is a skillful manipulator of words," or, "She is one of our finest advertisers," or something like that? Why talk about poetry at all? It does seem to me that if you are going to respect the poet, you have to respect everything that she is saying. Not necessarily to praise everything, but to take it as a whole, deal with it as a whole, not deal with it selectively.

**EB**: I thought about that earlier review because it seems to me to represent the first of two stages, although obviously they're very closely connected: the earlier review of *Poems: Selected and New* seems to dismiss you as a feminist, a "women's lib nut"; and the more recent establishment reviews, which are really savage and totally distorting, come a lot out of dismissing you as a lesbian. So I sense that as a sort of movement.

**AR**: First of all to dismiss as polemical anything that can be described as feminist. That's point number one. Then I write a book in which I simply take it for granted that I am a lesbian, that a lesbian can be a mother and a mother a lesbian, which is heresy because it destroys the stereotypes of both mother and lesbian. I write a book in which I take for granted that heterosexuality is institutionalized, that it is not necessarily the one natural order, that institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood deserve a great deal of scrutiny in terms of whose interests they serve. I think it would have been much more acceptable if I had written a special chapter on lesbian mothering, which at one point I thought about doing. But I felt that it ought to be possible to write from the center, from where I exist, as if that was natural, which I think it to be.

**EB**: How did people at Norton feel about it?

**AR**: I had many struggles with my male editor over the text of this book, but I was left to do what I decided to do. I'm sure it was disturbing to some people at Norton and gratifying to others. I didn't get any kind of pressure to deal with it differently or to stay in the closet with this book.

**EB**: Do you see any future problems with them in terms of publishing?

**AR**: I see a problem on my side. I've never had that sort of problem with a book of poems, obviously. I feel that I wouldn't go through that process again with a male editor, even though I felt that our relationship was very decent and I knew I was not going to be pressured into

doing anything I did not want to do. But I feel that the book could have been stronger in some ways if I had had an editor who was not threatened as a male by the issues I was raising.

**EB**: In terms of things that were cut?

**AR**: I didn't cut out anything substantive. One thing I didn't do was compromise with that book. If I'd taken the kind of advice I received, I could have turned out a book that was much more acceptable to the *New York Times*. But I didn't compromise with it.

**EB**: Do you feel that they understood the impact the book was going to have?

**AR**: To the extent that anybody reading that manuscript was not themselves able to deal with the full implications of what I was saying they were probably not prepared for the violence of some of the reviews. *I* was prepared for it. Not in terms of what my own response would be—I mean, it was very, very painful and I thought I was ready for it. But I thought that a great deal of what I was saying was obvious, a synthesis of ideas that have been floating around in the women's movement for a long time. Much of that book is not original—it simply makes connections among ideas that women have been discussing and writing in all sorts of places.

But even something as elementary as the concept of patriarchy, the idea that women have essentially been the property of men for centuries, still goes down very hard. It still is an extremely painful idea to accept, especially painful for a woman who can recognize the patriarchal system but has no further to go at that point because it looks like a total negation of her. I think that for men it is extremely painful to acknowledge that they've built their identities, their egos, their culture, on the denial and diminishment of the identity and egos of women. One can prove it historically, politically, psychologically; we can erect all of the scholarship in the world and it is so unacceptable still. It meets with incredible resistance.

The homophobia evinced in some reviews of my book was something that I hadn't expected. I had seen the book as being controversial on a lot of levels, but maybe I had assumed a kind of sophistication on the part of the kind of people who would review that book for the *New York Times*, for the *New York Review of Books*, that a homophobic response would try to disguise itself. The fact that there was a very evident freezing at the notion of the discussion of lesbian motherhood, the general assumption that lesbians are mothers and mothers are lesbians,

gave me a great deal of thought. I thought I had thought this through when I was writing the book; I had made a very clear decision in my own mind not to have a chapter on "the lesbian mother" but to have that as a thread throughout the whole book, just as I chose not to have a chapter on "the black mother" but to have references to and to extrapolate from black experience wherever I could—although I feel in both cases that a lot more could have been said. But not to specialize, not to group mothers according to race or sexual preference, but really to talk in terms of chapter heading and topics about things that seem to be common to all women who have children.

But although it wasn't precisely said that I had disqualified myself from writing a book about motherhood because I came out in the book as a lesbian mother, the assumption was clear that as a lesbian I was a man-hater. As a feminist I was a man-hater first of all—that was the first and most primitive vituperation thrown at feminists. That particular charge is so clearly a way of dealing with the book by relegating it to a realm of fringe mentality, insanity, or polemics—I suppose in all innocence that had not occurred to me, I had some sort of naive notion that reviewers would attack the book but more or less on the terms that the book had set itself up for.

That's one thing that has struck me very much and I think that that has to do with homophobia in women—quite apart from the fear of the lesbian in the patriarchy. It also has to do with the patriarchal need to polarize women between mothering women and deviants. Anyone who's not a mothering woman is thereby a deviant, any woman who will not give over her energies to men, let alone children, is a bitch, a dyke, what have you. So to say that these two polarities can co-exist in the same person, that the loving, tender, nurturing mother can also be a lesbian, is terribly threatening. It is one of the fundamental fragmentations that has worked to keep women antagonistic to each other.

But homophobia can also take the form of total denial that the lesbian exists. Coming out in the classroom I've been realizing the extent to which my preference would be to include the fact that I am a lesbian among any other group of facts I include about myself when I present myself as a person. But it's less a question of that being seized upon than that the fact I am a lesbian will be resisted, denied, except by students who are lesbians and may relate to that. Where people do not wish to deal with information they will absolutely not deal with it. A friend of mine recently was raped in Central Park and she said: "You know, one of the most painful things I've had to go through about this

whole thing is that most of the people I talk to don't want to hear about it. They think it is shameful that I should want to talk about it myself and I am, in a sense, forcing this information on them." There are so many examples of the kind of phobia that produces blindness and deafness to facts that people don't want to deal with. The problem of dealing with something that people conceive of as deviant or unnatural–which is their problem; they, themselves, psychically cannot handle this and they have shrunk away from it, they have shrunk away from their own knowledge and even their own experience.

I went through a very large part of my earlier life in that kind of homophobic denial, and the phenomenon of denial seems very important to me–very important in the world at large. Some of the polarization between women has been a result of the fact that neither–lesbian or straight women as they define themselves–want to really explore that phenomenon. What happens in the classroom, for instance, women's studies classrooms, what happens in a book like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* where there is a special chapter devoted to lesbianism but the gist of the book is that women have sex only with men? And that is a best seller, it is describing to enormous numbers of women who have access to no other source what the "feminist" view of sexuality is.

I've seen really very little that attempted to bridge this gap, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to raise it here, because it seems to me that this is something that could begin to be talked about in *Conditions*; not simply in political terms such as the relation of lesbian-feminism to feminism or how lesbianism relates to class or race, but also in more subjective terms; what is really going on here? Those of us who thought we were straight and got married and had children, what changed us? What made it possible for certain other women from the age of eight to know they were lesbians? There's no simple pattern that I can see, certainly not the pattern of some specific family constellation, certainly not the pattern of flight from men, not necessarily the pattern of a movement toward women, because there are still many lesbians who don't have strong feelings for women in general, who identify in many ways much more with men.

The whole issue of homophobia in women, not just "out there" in the patriarchal world, has got to be confronted and talked about, dealt with as the real problem. The question is going to have to begin to be asked much more forcefully: what is this fear and panic about? What is it making people do and how is it making people react? Ranging from literally not being able to hear what is said because it is said by a

lesbian to literally not being able to hear a woman say that she is a lesbian. In my own case I know there are people who don't want to deal with me as a lesbian because they have an image of me that they would like to keep intact and they don't want to associate me with their image of a lesbian. As a teacher you encounter that to a certain extent. Have you run into this?

**EB**: Not so much when I was teaching. I haven't taught in a couple of years. Certainly one of the single most important things to me about my job now is that in terms of the large group of women I work with, I don't have to pretend to be straight.

**AR**: At the Women's Center?

**EB**: Yes. It's very hard for me to think about ever being again in a work situation where it's not possible to get support for being out. But at the same time we get a tremendous number of women coming in to work who aren't feminists, who are sometimes very hostile to feminism and lesbianism, and who bring with them all of the prejudices and myths and fears that run through the general population. I still find it a chore to come out, to do staff training with new people and to have to really deal with it, and part of me just feels very angry. Why do I have to explain this? Why does it have to take all this energy?

**AR**: Well, I felt that last spring when I lectured—I was using *Amazon Poetry* in a course, and I gave a lecture on lesbian poetry. I'd talked about a number of the poets we'd been reading as lesbians, and again, sort of taking it for granted; that Amy Lowell and Ada Russell lived together for years and Amy wrote love poems to her friend, a woman who absolutely supported her, gave her a kind of support that she never got from men. I talked about Gertrude Stein, I talked about H.D., and so forth, and then I gave a whole lecture on lesbian poetry, sort of why *Amazon Poetry*? why does such an anthology need to exist, why do we need to have this lecture, and so on.

And I have the same feelings—why do we have to spend all this energy explaining, what is the justification for this? But I thought it was exremely important. Throughout the course I was talking about encoded feelings in women's poetry, and feelings that are censored even before they get to the page, poems that are censored by editors, the Emily Dickinson phenomenon, and so on. If we have come to a point where it begins to be possible for women to write out of their feelings for other women in a freer way and be published, and for that work to be available to other women, this is a kind of milestone, a literary phe-

nomenon.

I come back to this phenomenon of silence, that we grew up in a certain kind of silence, literary silence, again; that literary silence is beginning to be broken for certain people and in certain places. Most young women growing up in this country do not have access to Daughters, Inc. and Out & Out Books and *Amazon Poetry* and Diana Press and so on. They have little enough access to any women's work in school, and if they read poems by lesbians they're never told that this is the work of a lesbian; the question is never asked, is this different in any way, is this a sensibility that is in any way affected by the fact of having to live as a "different" person in a heterosexist culture?

Even in women's studies programs, the whole question is very much muted; there is a fear of dealing with the subject, and there, particularly in academia, the fear gets very complicated. It's like the old lesbian-feminist split in the women's movement: If you're struggling to set up a women's studies program and make it respectable and appealing to a larger number of people, how horrible to have it labelled a dyke department. That fear I sense very strongly. The desire to appear respectable. I also think that a lot of straight women are just not sure how they can or should teach lesbian literature, and that is a very complex thing, because it would really mean asking themselves a lot of serious questions about their own feelings about it, and their own relationship to women.

**EB**: Most departments aren't set up to deal with those issues. There's very rarely any mechanism for having women in a women's studies program or women in an English department sit down and have some dialogue about how to teach lesbian literature. How can women who don't define themselves as lesbians teach it most effectively? What are their feelings about it, not just their ideas? Part of the problem is that most people are unable even to hear the questions when they're raised.

About four years ago, when I was teaching at Manhattan Community College, I rather naively suggested a new course for the syllabus called "The Outsider in Twentieth-Century American Literature," which dealt with the writing of homosexuals and of people who were or had been in prisons and mental hospitals. When it was brought up at the English Department meeting, I was totally taken aback because everybody discussed it—with much laughter and side comments—as if I had suggested a course about homosexuality and literature. Most of the faculty dismissed it by saying, "Well, that's not so important, I don't see why that has any more influence on a writer than a thousand other

things."

**AR**: People will not deal with the fact that the homosexual, like the prisoner or the mental patient, is treated as the scapegoat, the carrier of what others refuse to acknowledge in themselves. This is a societal problem, it becomes our problem because it is a problem of the society.

**EB**: Also the question, I think, for all three groups, of who can you tell and when and how can you tell them. People don't want to say that they've been in prison, or that they've been institutionalized for a while because they don't know what the response will be, and because certain rights—jobs, housing, child custody—can be placed in jeopardy if the listener chooses. What assumptions and stereotypes are immediately going to come up if you stand in front of a group of people who don't know anything about you and start with this information as a simple fact?

**AR**: That you will be invalidated, that it will somehow be taken as the word of a crazy person or deviant or criminal.

**EB**: On some level they all merge.

**AR**: In terms of validation, the grouping makes a great deal of sense. It was interesting; I got a book in the mail, an anthology of "voices from the outside" or "voices of the powerless" and it included blacks and other minorities; but women and homosexuals were not included. There was absolutely no essay dealing with power and powerlessness where gender is concerned, where sexual preference is concerned. It seems to me that if there's one thing that the feminist movement has been trying to say over and over and over again which has been successfully blotted out, it is that there is a power issue here, a very concrete power issue.

Feminism constantly gets translated into terms of equal pay for equal work, or some kind of pseudo-sexual liberation, you know, women should have the right to initiate acts of intercourse with men, trivialization down the line, an inability to see sexism as a root political problem. The most successful way of dealing with the issue of power is to pretend that it doesn't exist, and to divide it into other issues that then get trivialized, and the lesbian issue even more so, because either they decide that it doesn't exist, that lesbians are such a tiny fringe, a minority, of the population, it's unimportant, or that lesbians are so sick, so full of hatred for men, that their view of anything has got to be totally pathological and warped and that they are incapable of ordinary good human relationships with people.

I remember reading *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing, in 1962 when it first came out, and again I keep associating things that I've read with periods in my life. It was a period in my life when I was very much in love with a woman and not calling it by that name and *The Golden Notebook* at that time seemed like a very radical book. It doesn't anymore, but it was a radical book because it did focus on women, even if on women who, although they were writers or professionals in some way, seemed to have no real center to their lives apart from trying to relate to men and to male politics. But it talked about things that had not been talked about in literature before, you know, what happens when you're having your period and your lover's coming to sleep over, what happens if you're a single woman with a child and there's a conflict between your loyalty to the child and your loyalty to your lover.

So it seemed like a very radical, very feminist book, and I remember distinctly, at one point in that book, the woman is getting fed up with her relationships with men, none of them have come off well, and then she begins to worry and she thinks, women like me become "man-haters or bitter or lesbian." The implication of course was that it's only from being jaded with too many unsuccessful encounters with men that you would ever turn to women, and that stereotype too still holds. Lessing has been enormously important as a quasi-feminist writer, a writer centering on women's lives, and the failure of her novels, because in many ways she's a very brilliant political novelist, but the failure of *The Four-Gated City* and of what has come after is a real failure to envisage any kind of political bonding of women and any kind of really powerful central bonding of women, even though individual women get together in her novels and go through intense things together. In some ways I feel it goes back to that notion which she evidently has, that women become lesbians–bitter and full of hatred–not because there is a fulfillment in loving women, but because there is this terrible battle of the sexes going on and men just get to be too much to deal with.

The interesting thing is that even where there is a veneer of sophistication and liberalism about other kinds of controversial "differences," that veneer breaks down very quickly over this particular issue, and I don't mean just homosexuality, I mean lesbianism specifically. Lesbians are far more threatening to patriarchy, obviously, than male homosexuals.

**EB**: I just read a posthumously published article by Howard Brown

that makes that very clear. It starts off with a description of the day he's going to be sworn in as chief health officer in New York City and doesn't quite know what to do with his lover, whom he would like to have at the ceremony with him, sitting in the chairs reserved for family. Then Brown speaks of "men, whose careers would dramatically illustrate how socially useful homosexuals can be . . . ," how all we need is for "several mature, respected homosexuals" to come out publicly and people's attitudes would change drastically. The issue of societal values in relation to everything but homosexuality isn't mentioned. Working for the government or being a high-paid professional is fine, as long as a man can have sexual and affectional relationships with other men.

**AR**: What was more patriarchal than fifth-century Greece? The leaders of the patriarchy had male lovers, that's nothing new. But women directing their energies toward all women is threatening, partly for the reasons that I try to talk about in my book, in the chapter on mothers and sons, but partly because men know that their one real weapon, apart from infinite and incessant motherhood, enforced, indentured motherhood, has been this fragmentation of women from one another, this vampirization of women's energies, the use of female emotion by males, as if they had no sources of their own.

But it's also very complex how that gets internalized in women, I don't think it's merely that women are indoctrinated to pour their energies toward men, I think that whole mother-daughter thing is very intense and profound, that longing for and dread of total identification with the woman whose body one came out of, the woman who gave us our first nurture, sensuality, warmth, affection, security, and disappointment that we ever knew, is tremendous.

**EB**: And very different from the relationships between mothers and their sons which you write about, which seem inevitably shaped by the existing power relationship between women and men. You pick that theme up when you say in that chapter that the so-called liberated man wants the freedom to cry but wants to hang onto all the other benefits which accrue to being a man in this society.

**AR**: It's like the idea of androgyny which is so seductive somehow as a liberal solution. It's essentially the notion that the male will somehow incorporate into himself female attributes—tenderness, gentleness, ability to cry, to feel, to express, not to be rigid. But what does it mean for women? The "androgyny people" have not faced what it would mean in and for society for women to feel themselves and be seen as full human beings. I don't think of androgyny as progress any-

more, I think it's a useless term, but I think of it as associated with the idea of "liberating" men, giving males the desirable attributes that females have had without having to pay the dues. I think there are very, very few men who want to come to grips with this, because for them, it not only looks like loss of privilege, but, as for many women, it also involves a very negative view of their history.

**EB**: What's been happening to your poetry during this period when a prose book has been the focus of your attention?

**AR**: I wrote a lot of poetry during the four years I've been working on this book and the poetry is very intermingled and involved with the themes of the book. They're coming out of the same places. I haven't sorted out for myself what it is that leads me into prose and what it is that makes me turn to poetry. I'm very much interested in writing more long prose pieces because I am concerned with certain ideas that need to be spelled out, explicated, as you can't in poetry; poetry is a kind of condensation, it is very much the flash, the leap, the swift association—and there are some things that I want to say in a way that no one can resist as "she's a poet, etc." At the same time, I can't imagine not writing poetry. It is just in me and of me, it is a survival tool that I have to have.

I have been writing a great deal of poetry out of women's relationships, both consummated and unconsummated, and in a way the poems about the unconsummated relationships, the relationships which should have gone somewhere but couldn't because of times, customs, morals, all kinds of elements, interest me the most. I've written a couple of personal poems out of that and a couple of *persona* poems. I'm interested in the blockage of those relationships, and what was able to be felt in spite of the blockage.

I think there's a whole history there, in and of itself. What women have felt for each other who never heard the word "lesbian," who never thought of their connection as an erotic connection, who thought of themselves as wives, mothers, etc., but who knew in some way that there was this intense connection with another woman or women, in community and in individual relationships. We need a lot more documentation about what actually happened; I think we can also imagine it, because we know it happened—we know it out of our own lives.

**EB**: It sounds to me like transmuting history into poetry. I think of it as using Caroll Smith-Rosenberg's documentation from nineteenth-century American journals and letters that showed amazingly close

relationships between women who never would have thought about having a sexual relationship with another woman and felt stuck with their husbands. But many of these women communicated intimately with each other over distance and over periods of fifty years till one of them died.

**AR**: I was thinking of that. There's this new documentary history by Gerda Lerner, *The Female Experience in America*, nineteenth and twentieth-century documents from women's lives, many women who were utterly unknown and others who made a name for themselves but the names have been forgotten, like Jane Swisshelm. Reading these documents it's so clear that marriage was an economic necessity for women; it wasn't even a question of who you were attracted to or who you wanted to spend your life with, the fact was that you were not going to survive economically unless you were attached to a man. That economic fact is a pillar of the whole institution of heterosexuality.

**EB**: What makes you find relationships you describe as "unconsummated" more interesting in terms of writing poetry?

**AR**: I don't mean that they're necessarily, in and of themselves, more interesting than consummated relationships. But they're very interesting to me at this point, maybe because there were so many such relationships in my own life which I'm still trying to work through. But also because I think that lesbian history is going to have to be written about not just in terms of known lesbian couples or known women who were visible as lesbians, but in terms of all these other women—not just the ones Caroll Smith-Rosenberg has documented but a connection which had to describe itself in terms which were even less overt than the way those women wrote to each other, saying, "My darling, I can't wait till you're coming and I can press you against me," or, "We can sleep together," or whatever.

What are we going to be looking for when we look at lesbian history? We can't afford to look only at the lives of those women who were financially independent and so strong in certain ways, whether by good fortune or innate character, that they could afford to be self-proclaimed lesbians or live in homosexual enclaves, because we would be touching only the barest top of the iceberg. One of the reasons why I got involved with the figures of Paula Becker and Clara Westhoff was that here is truly a relationship that had the potentiality for being a full relationship in every sense, a working relationship, not just an erotic relationship; there was the most intense feeling there, also shared motivations and aims, creative ambitions—and both married male artists and

had marriages which ended quite soon. That's the kind of thing that's happened over and over.

**EB**: It seems to be reflected in "To Judith, Taking Leave," which I was fascinated to discover was a 1962 poem.

**AR**: When I wrote that, I didn't think of it as a lesbian poem. This is what I have to keep reminding myself—that at that time I did not recognize, I did not name the intensity of those feelings as I would name them today, *we* did not name them. When I first chose not to publish that poem I thought, this is just a very personal poem, an occasional poem, it doesn't carry the same weight or interest as other poems I would publish. But my dismissing of it was akin to my dismissing of the relationship, although in some ways I did not dismiss it—it was very much with me for a very long time. In 1962 there was precious little around to support the notion of the centrality of a relationship between two women. I was amazed when I went back to look for those poems and found them again—the kinds of truth they told.

I have a much, much earlier poem that deals with a relationship with a woman. It was written while I was in college and it's in my first book. It's called "Stepping Backward." It's about acknowledging one's true feelings to another person; it's a very guarded, carefully-wrought poem. It's in the form of a farewell, but a farewell which was taken in order to step backward and look at the person more clearly, which makes it safer to look at the relationship, because it's as if you were saying good-bye. That poem is addressed to a woman whom I was close to in my late 'teens, and whom I really fled from—I fled from my feelings about her. But that poem does remain and it was unquestionably addressed to her. It's very intellectualized, but it's really the first poem in which I was striving to come to terms with feelings for women.

**EB**: Did the fact that it was intellectualized make it easier to think about printing it?

**AR**: Yes, it could have been written to anybody. I showed it to her at some point and she said she thought it was written to a man. But *I* knew where that poem came from, *I* knew to whom it was addressed.

The major influence in my life in many ways was poetry, was literature. I was always looking to poetry and to literature to find out what was possible, what could be, how it was possible to feel, what kinds of things one could or could not do. And the silence about loving women was so incredible. I met someone the other day who

teaches in a very conservative, middle-class, protected sort of college environment. In the humanities freshman course there they have a unit called "Innocence and Experience" and they're reading Blake and *Rubyfruit Jungle*. I don't think anyone raised in this kind of an era—even with all of its prohibitions and homophobia—can realize what that earlier silence was like to many of us.

My history is a very different history from the woman who knew from the age of 12 that she was a dyke, that was her life, and she had to come to terms with what that meant in terms of who she could know and not know, where she could be and not be, what she could allow herself to show and what she couldn't. Women like me were totally in the closet to ourselves and I blame that silence very much. It's one reason why I feel so strongly, not just that more lesbian literature should be written and more lesbian experience expressed, but also that lesbian writing should be taught in colleges, that it should be available not just for women who know that this is what they're looking for but for women who don't know what they're looking for. There's got to be an increased consciousness on the part of women, whether they consider themselves straight or not, who are teaching literature, to deal with this.

Following is a list of some of the material referred to in this interview:


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——. *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems, 1954-1962*. New York: Norton, 1967.

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JAN CLAUSEN

# THAT QUESTION THAT IS OUR LIVES: THE POETRY OF SUSAN SHERMAN

Susan Sherman is a woman whose life has been profoundly affected by her participation in the struggle for revolutionary social change. She is a lesbian. These two facts are basic to her work, and because of them she is often spoken of as a "political poet" or a "lesbian poet." The labels are accurate, yet in a sense misleading. They do little to prepare the reader for political poems which employ so sparingly the traditional devices of rhetorical language and exemplary incident, for love poems in which the sex of the lover is implicit in the imagery but seldom clarified by the pronouns. (Before either of Sherman's books appeared, a friend of mine who had read her poetry in manuscript told me, "Susan's a lesbian, but she doesn't write about it.") Susan Sherman's work challenges our conceptions of lesbian poetry, of political poetry, of poetry itself.

It is always difficult to talk, to write, about poetry. With this poetry the difficulty is greater than usual because the poems tend not to depend on scenery or "plot"—they rarely offer one obvious message which can serve as a key to other levels of meaning. Instead, they are constellations of feelings, perceptions, ideas. Sherman's statement of the function of poetry in her essay on "The Language of Art" is a very good description of the way her own poems work:

> The poem itself is not the experience, it is a trigger gauged to set off an experience—either between the poem and the poet or the poem and the reader. And it is through this combination of relationships that the experience which is the poem is lived.
>
> (WA/WL)

A few simple nouns, recurring over and over, serve as the building blocks of much of her poetry: rain, grass, sun, wind, city, light, water, dream, sleep. Words have for her a physical, almost spatial existence;

Note: some of the poems quoted here are from Susan Sherman's two books of poetry, *With Anger/With Love* (WA/WL) and *Women Poems Love Poems* (WPLP), both distributed by Out & Out Books. Where the source is not listed, the poem is from an unpublished manuscript.

she relies upon the simplest of them to anchor her poetry in what is concrete, in the common experiences and perceptions people share.

In "It Is Raining" she establishes a connection between the rain and her absent lover:

> I think of rain as green
> I think of rain as brown blue
> as color without light as light
> without color
> as part of me
> barely like memory like dream
>
> I think of you as rain . . . .
> (WA/WL)

Characteristically, she does not give us even a glimpse of the absent person; absence itself is the theme of the poem. Similarly, her love poem "The Meeting" is not a description of a specific encounter; repetitions like

> To touch your face
> To touch your arms
> To touch your waist
> To touch your thighs
>
> To touch your sex (WPLP)

paradoxically universalize the experience, and Sherman focuses on "meeting" as the essential element in passionate (lesbian) love. "Reminiscences" (WA/WL) and "Letter from Havana" tell us little about Cuba; they tell us a lot about what the experience of Cuba meant to the poet, how it entered into and changed her life, and how to let our own experience change us.

At times, Sherman risks romanticism. Her diffuse, dreamy images sometimes become too vague, too shapeless; her determination to grapple with "The Real Questions," as the title of one poem puts it, occasionally leads her to the verge of self-parody. One example: "To Choose This" (WPLP), a poem about separation from a lover, ends in the lines, "She is who is Who chooses being Who chooses/to choose." I find the dramatic existentialist resonance of this appealing, but also a trifle embarrassing; I'm more comfortable with the concreteness of preceding lines like "I would hide myself in the hollows of your flesh/ In that precise place where two bones meet/Like two rivers . . . . " In offering this criticism I am aware that the risks Sherman has chosen

are large ones, commensurate with her themes; they have made possible the creation of a very original and moving poetic style.

Evident in both the subject matter and structure of Sherman's work is the influence of the European philosophical tradition which includes both Marxist thought and phenomenology. In "The Language of Art" she discusses how phenomenology sought to end the traditional separation between subject and object by emphasizing process and interaction, by focusing on human intentionality as the organizing principle behind perception. Her poems often employ a similar method. Sometimes a central incident or metaphor frames the poem, determines its form, but more often the poet's consciousness moves freely within the "field" of the poem, focusing in turn on the different ideas, feelings and images which occupy that space.

The danger of this approach is that if the poet doesn't organize her perceptions sufficiently the images become blurred; we see only meaningless shapes. I find this happening several times in *With Anger/ With Love*; "The Palace of the Lowest Moon" and "July Poem/1966," for example, leave me feeling confused and uneasy even after a number of re-readings. When the technique does work, however (e.g. in "First and Last Poems," "Ten Years After," "Reminiscences," and "The Fourth Wall"), the poem functions as an effective metaphor for the process of our lives.

Sherman is obsessed with process, with change.

> there is nothing on this earth
> that does not change
> that does not deepen or drift
> away
>
> ("A Poem," WPLP)

she says, revealing that she views the inevitability of change ambivalently as both promise and threat. This attitude is at the root of her affinity for Marxist thought, which holds that growth and change proceed from internal contradictions. Sherman constantly examines the ways in which the basic conditions of our lives trap and liberate us at the same time—or, perhaps more accurately, how they form a situation in which we can become entrapped or choose to begin the process of liberating ourselves.

Time is one such condition; for Sherman it is perhaps the most important dimension of experience. She is painfully aware of

The wasted days, the wasted hours, the piles of waste that make up much of our lives, that are part of our lives. The time lost. The time spent. The time destroyed.

("Ten Years After," WA/WL)

Yet time is what makes change possible. She never forgets

How time itself is our enemy
our friend How we trap ourselves
in vision
But how it also opens
out

("Morning Poem 3/28/75")

The contradictory process of communication through language is another obsession. Writing becomes a metaphor for all communication:

A POEM

for you alone
built word upon word
like years
like time people share
together
deepening
growing into meaning
word
upon word
meaning
upon meaning
for you alone a poem

(WPLP)

Often she speaks of the difficulty of beginning, of the poet's incessant struggle to surmount the inadequacy and futility of words:

A mockery to write of it To speak And yet it must be spoken As if with words we could rip open the levels of our flesh

("To Choose This," WPLP)

She calls attention to the workings of the poem, to her own almost physical effort to make of it something that can connect her to others:

If a poem were a hand, if it were alive, warm. If it
could reach out. If it could enter places I cannot.
If it could do things that make me afraid.
("Ten Years After," WA/WL)

Because in our time the world of the intellect has tended to become divorced from the "real world" of human suffering and struggle, it must be emphasized that for Sherman ideas are tools intended for use in a human setting. "What is relevant and what is real is people and what they create & nothing else," she asserts in her essay on "Creativity and Change," reminding us that according to Marx the primary purpose of philosophy is to change history. Central to her work is the realization that

. . . it is this earth we
live on, and apart from ourselves are others who also wait,
whose need is greater, because for them not even
the first step exists.
("Letter From Havana")

I have mentioned that Sherman is known primarily for her love poetry and her "political" poetry (the two categories sometimes overlap); I want to discuss each in turn. Partly in order to relieve my frustration at being unable to quote more extensively ("To speak of any element separately is to speak of only part of the poem, to understand a part at the expense of the whole," says Sherman), I'll begin by reprinting in its entirety one of her simplest and most beautiful love poems:

BECAUSE WORDS DO NOT SUFFICE

Your hands like that The grass The sun
Your lips like that The grass The rain

It was only that it was so green The smell of it
The rain that coiled around the grass The sun
that touched its roots

Only to lie there My nose furrowed deep in it
As if a moment can be left The smell of it deep
in the muscles In the veins

And underneath As the nostril quivers lost in the
touch of it Because we feel the loss of it Because

we feel the death of it

That too much rain will drown the grass  That too much sun will dry the rain  That only in moments is love possible
(WA/WL)

Here the grass, sun and rain become more than metaphors for hands and lips; body and earth are literally identified, as, in the passage from "It Is Raining" quoted above, the lover is thought of as rain. Such sensuous natural imagery is typical of Sherman's love poetry, as is the awareness of love's fragility. Yet many of these poems seem to issue from a kind of protected environment in which both temporality and ordinary spatial boundaries have been suspended:

It is everywhere  This night and the
outline of our form  As we are together
Without boundary  Without dimension

As I touch the depth of you
My love
("The Meeting," WPLP)

Sherman is particularly successful at conveying the feeling of identification—at times almost of fusion with the lover—which is perhaps peculiar to lesbian relationships. For her this is the central love experience. She describes it more directly in the last stanza of "Natural Light":

To find my own face  To see my own hands
Different  And yet incomprehensibly
the same
(WA/WL)

And again, in "Lilith of the Wildwood, of the Fair Places" (WA/WL), where identification with other women takes on political overtones:

To fear you  is to fear myself
To hate you  is to hate myself
To desire you  is to desire myself
To love you  is to love myself

But two people are never perfectly fused. The majority of the love poems are about loss, about the sharply re-awakened sense of time which comes with the severing of an important relationship, about the attempt to recover the meaning of a connection so deep that the rupture feels like a physical amputation:

It is hard to remember
what is was I touched
Your body  the faintness
of leaves
There was a person once
behind that longing
("Return," WPLP)

Occasionally, particularly in *Women Poems Love Poems*, this emphasis on the past gets dangerously close to nostalgia, but usually it is redeemed by the poet's will to understand her pain, to give her sorrow its due. Such scrupulous self-examination is the basis of the long prose poem "Areas of Silence" (WA/WL), in which Sherman explores the meaning of a relationship by recording the complex and ambivalent feelings which survive it. She admits to herself that

> I wonder sometimes what it was I loved—how many people went into the conception I loved as you. I suppose that more than anything else I wanted something to give meaning to my life. I wanted that one thing to be a single person. And unable to find what I wanted, I created it.

In the final lines, whose fatalism does not seem unwarranted in context, Sherman beautifully evokes the quality of risk inherent in relationship:

> There is no escape. There is no turning back.
>
> To move is to be touched. To be flung, lucid, against the inner layers of the rain.
>
> To know is to touch. To be killed by the sun.

In "Love Poem 12/16/71" (WPLP), however, Sherman tells us that she is willing to take this risk again and again; that it is, in fact, an essential part of her self-definition. At the same time she shows us the intimate connection between her love poetry and her political poetry, between the activity of writing and the other activities of her life:

if you were to ask me what defines me
how I place myself in the world
I would say this poem
is the center of it  is the core
that I reach toward the world
as I reach toward you
as one who wants to reach out

endlessly who wants to open out
endlessly who wants to feel
endlessly that question
that is our lives

In her essay on "Creativity and Change" (WA/WL), Sherman states

> To discover that the people who surrounded you, their values, their ethics, are not the only values and ethics, is probably the most important discovery in a person's life, because it is to discover the possibility of not one, but many alternatives, it is to discover the possibility of choice.

In other words, before you can begin to "reach out endlessly," you have to have at least some assurance that there is something to reach out to. And such assurance is difficult to come by—probably for anyone, certainly for those raised within the American middle class:

America you run through our veins
like oil a surface slick
dissolving everything that breathes
that gives
life
("America")

One of my favorite Sherman poems, a prose poem called "The Fourth Wall" (WA/WL), deals with this process of discovery, which is also one of resistance, of refusal. Sherman writes about growing up in America, beginning before her own birth with the experience of her immigrant father:

> "Jew," they yelled, and he ran. "Jew," they yelled, and he ran across a continent. "Jew," they yelled, and he ran across an ocean.

She describes the desert country of Los Angeles where she was raised, "decorated with pine cones and exotic spice," but also deformed by the empire-builders:

> . . . When the settlers first came it was a barren country—a desert surrounded by deserts. They brought the stucco and concrete. They brought the horses and the children. They rode over vast ranches of cattle and grain.

Other cities enter her life, San Francisco and New York. But always she carries with her the doom which one generation pronounces upon the next:

> When you are grown your brush will be red—the color of this city. You will live here, work here, be married here, raise your children here. You will die here.

At last the realizations that form the poem enable the poet to make the gesture of refusal which comes in the final lines:

> *I will not die in your city. I will not be buried under your streets. I will not dress myself in your houses of gold and lies and grotesque forms.*
>
> Always you will live here, close as the blood that flows through the veins of my hand. As I walk into the desert. Father, mother, country. The dream clutched tight to my body, like a lover.

In "Lilith," another poem which treats the theme of resistance, women's rejection of societal norms is seen as the precondition for the establishment of a true identity:

> to be an outcast an outlaw
> to stand apart from the law the words
> of the law
>
> outlaw
>
> outcast
>
> cast out cast out by her own will
> refusing anything but her own place
> a place apart from any other
> her own

But it is not sufficient simply to resist; there must be a positive alternative to oppression. "Letter from Havana," written in the late 60's, deals with the process of becoming connected to others which is for Sherman both means and end:

> . . . And it is now that we begin, together, knowing a certain end. For all of us, together, or for none of us at all.

As always, her sense of time, its possibilities and limitations, is central:

Has it happened before, in other ways, in another time,
and I, who am so impatient, waiting, forced now to wait.
Because there are things that cannot be pushed.
Can only be prepared for, fought for, lived for.

*To prepare, to fight, and to wait.*

Finally she is able to let go, symbolically accepting even the words which are so important to her as having an existence outside herself:

. . . I can no longer
use the words, must talk to them, must let them talk
to me, tell me what they mean.

As they come now from other mouths. As I find them
on other pages. As I find myself no longer alone.

In the more recent "America," Sherman expresses her resistance to "This lie that bore me/That I refuse to bear" with unwonted directness:

America it is by choice
you are undone
the courage to name things
To judge

By Terry Turgeon Ellen Grusse and Jill Raymond
The women in New Haven and Kentucky
who refuse to speak
By Assata Shakur
warrior
and Sam Melville executed
in a prison yard at Attica
By Lolita
Lebron Diana Oughton and Susan Saxe
By the acts/poems of the Underground
The victorious Vietnamese

Your enemies are endless America
Their very names a poem . . . .

My first reaction to this poem was unfavorable; much as I agreed with the statement it makes, I found that statement unsupported by imagery, by the necessary evidence. Re-reading it a year later, and especially in the context of the rest of Sherman's work, I find it both necessary and moving. There are times when the need for plain speech

transcends the requirements of form, when direct statement becomes the only possible form. This style is used cautiously in Sherman's work; clearly she's a poet with a well-developed sense of what Audre Lorde has called "the difference between poetry and rhetoric."

There is something extraordinary about Susan Sherman's clear vision: passionately desiring freedom, she knows the extent to which she is unfree. Yet she does not place herself above us. In one of her essays she writes that creativity is magic, "not the magic of the supernatural, separated from the human being, but the magic of human beings themselves." Similarly, hers is a thoroughly human courage. She writes of herself:

> This woman tried to grasp life
> balance her days
> the worlds
> that sprang
> from her hands
> broke from her lips
> She was burdened as we all are
> by ends and beginnings
> But she never turned
> away
> ("Spring/Song")

I wonder whether I've made it sufficiently clear that I think Susan Sherman writes beautiful poetry. She does that, and more. I feel that she helps me in my life and in my work, that she includes me in her search, her struggle, when she writes:

> What part in all this do you have
> What part in all this do I
> To understand that question
>
> to hold it
> open
> to hold it
> open
>
> until finding it
> we enter
> free
> ("Words," WPLP)

IRENA KLEPFISZ

## from THE MONKEY HOUSE AND OTHER CAGES

*(The voice is that of a female monkey born and raised in a zoo.)*

/1/

to state each horror
would be redundant. the objects
themselves suffice: a broken comb
an umbrella handle a piece of blue
plastic chipped pocket mirror.

the face is unfriendly.
i try to outstare it but
it persists moving

spastically the eyes
twitching open shut
nose quivering wrinkled fingers
picking at the ears. i do not know

this stranger.

/2/

i have heard of tortures
yet remain
strangely safe.

but at night
i am torn by my own
dreams see myself live
the grossest indignities probes

and unable to rip myself from my flesh
i remain silent not
uttering sound nor moan not
bothering to feel pain.

waking in early light
alone untouched
i cry over my safety.

/3/

when they first come
they screech with wildness
flinging themselves against the wall
and then against the bars.

some sit and cry for days
some never recover and
die.
they are familiar
yet crap uncontrollably plead
shiver and rock. i refuse

to have anything to do with them
till they learn to behave.

/4/

at her arrival she was
stunned and bruised. she
folded up refusing to eat

her mouth grim. i staked
out my territory recognizing
her fierceness her strength.

but she weakened grew sick
was removed without resistance
returned three days later
shaved patches on her arms.

later she told me: we create
the responses around us.

/5/

i remember the grasp of her claws
the vicious bite  the scar
still on my leg.  she was crazed

jabbering  then attacking
again.  and the sun seemed to fall away
into coldness  as i pressed myself
against the corner  the hardened sand
under my nails.  i began to gnaw
through concrete  my face raw.

they took her away
and when she came back
she did not look at me.

/6/

scatter yourself
i told her  moving
myself into the left
corner  where i sat
observing the movement
of her head.

she nodded
seemed to sleep
then stood up  pointing
outside.  the leaves were
red.  it was a falling time
noisy  dry twigs cracking
off nearby trees.  i felt

content  watching myself
while she pointed  the leaves
red.

/7/

and finally
she said this is enough
and began to bang her head
against the wall one thud

after another thud she batted
herself beginning to bleed
throwing herself and falling.

they came and tried to seize
her while the sun vanished
and the trees moved slowly

and everyone so still
afraid to breathe: the moon
all fresh and the birds
small balls of feathers.

i puked as they dragged her out:
tufts of fur on the stone floor.

/8/

when she died i mourned
a silent mourning.
and
the others asked
asked asked
and poked at me.

there had been much between us
in gesture. mostly i remember
her yellowed teeth her attempt
at tameness.

/9/

there had been no sound:
just the motion of our hands
our lips sucked in
toes pointed  outward.
it had been enough.

dizzy
with messages  i would lie
down  dream of different
enclosures.

SUSAN KRIEGER

## TRIP TO THE ANZA-BORREGO DESERT MARCH 19-28, 1976

*Saturday March 20, p.m.*

We are parked at the end of a sandy road at the south fork of the Indian Valley. We came through the Indian Gorge to get here. We looked at flowers on the ground, they were pretty and the plants are all strange. There is something called a smoke tree that I like and we came through a miniature forest of them. We saw jackrabbits and one roadrunner. The animals scramble around here. There are no people near us. We are a few miles off from a paved road and up on a hill so we see dow down and out over a large stretch of desert. Up to the sides of us are stony ridges with cactus and bushes between the rocks. One purpose of coming here was to be in another place with Nancy and have it be good for each of us.

This is a very physical place. Nancy likes that. She tells me to look at the rocks and plants, forget where I was, be here in the desert. We kissed for a while this afternoon, then I stopped. I looked into her eyes and got afraid, that I had seen youth while I was teaching and might leave her, leave the comfort of age for an energy I sometimes lack. I thought I would not tell her until I had to.

*Sunday March 21, a.m.*

I told Nancy last night about thinking of leaving her, and that it was anger because here I was in the desert depressed and she would not be a fantasy person and solve it all for me by making love passionately in the back of the bus. She said if I had asked her to take off her boots maybe something different would have happened. I said I was afraid to ask. She said she felt unlovable and the implication was I should do something about that. This morning it seems maybe I can do something, but that will depend on keeping myself out of trouble, filling my time here and letting her fill hers.

I have started reading an Anza-Borrego Desert guidebook to see if I can learn to appreciate this environment for what it is. According to the book, what I thought was a roadrunner yesterday was more likely a quail, what I thought was a giant spider may have been a desert bird cage, or a plant. The view from here out over the Pinyon Mountains and

Harpers and Hapaha Flats changes in different lights of day. Descriptions of scenery seem to me usually dull, but in this case they indicate I do not know what I am seeing. The Pinyon Mountains and the Harpers and Hapaha Flats are not there at all. Nancy just took out a compass and said the direction we are looking in is due east, so the mountains are the Coyote Mountains. In the distance is the Imperial Valley. I have yet to figure out what is inbetween.

*Sunday March 21, p.m.*

We changed gorges at noon, moved to the north fork of the Indian Valley, stopped on the way, saw jackrabbits, walked around, looked at tiny flowers on the desert floor, 1-2" above the ground, yellow, white, lavender, and red. I thought about writing this diary and how I keep expecting that being on vacation means I should not think about ordinary things, like what happened last week or will happen when I get back, or whether to eat or to shit. I should just be still and that will be peace and the patterns that get me into emotional trouble will go away. I forget that my improvisations may be my life and a vacation does not have to mean the end of it.

I get hard on myself for writing. I am not yet ready to say I enjoy it and that is enough. Diary writing is a problem in a way poetry is not. The justification for the poetry is art as well as personal feelings. The justification for letters or notes for a class is immediate relationship with other people. But a diary is simply: I thought this, I felt this, I wanted to write it down. And I want to be able to read it later without cringing. I want to be able to show it to Nancy and anyone who might be interested and say, yes, my life is like that, and worth it.

Nancy said about my class one part of the problem is what happens to me in groups: "She becomes defensive." I wrote it down Friday night and had her sign it. Nancy will not write. She will only give a comment now and then. This afternoon we walked up a wash and passed a group of rocks she later happened to mention was a dam. I had not seen it. I had seen the rocks and some cement but not a dam.

I have new arms to get used to on this trip. They have freckles on them, small brown spots, my mother taught me to call them beauty marks. Nancy's mother taught her to call them moles. For me I think they should be beauty marks. My arms used to be plain with one mark midway down each one and one on top of the left shoulder. Now there are about twenty dots sprinkled unevenly on the left arm and about twenty-five on the right. I think it may have to do with hormone

change, going off the pill and having my body re-establish itself. The thought of that is good. I am now supposedly more my own person. But the sight of it is frightening. I want my old arms back. I am afraid of these, afraid they mean growth into something cancerous and awful. But they are my arms. I have to love them.

*Monday March 22, mid-afternoon*

We moved again and are now in Bow Willow Canyon. In front of us are mountains and in back are small green gray willows bent in odd shapes. The air is still and the sky grayish white. It feels like it might rain. The Harpers and Hapaha Flats I thought I saw yesterday in the distance were not that but some nameless badlands, according to the map. I am writing now in the back of the bus. This is where I wrote yesterday afternoon. Nancy sits outside in the mornings and when we stop. I make a nest up here and lie down. For Nancy, the out of doors is a way she can feel self-reliant and be in country she likes. For me it is mostly, can I find a way to make it nice?

Last night I got sick. From now on I hope to feel better. It is very warm and still now. I keep thinking about problems from home. Cleo is here. So are the students from the class, especially the two who knew I was coming here. So is the Welfare office when I get back, and the problem of how to find work and whether it is a joke to think I can do it apart from a university. I have read most of the guidebook now and looked at the maps. This morning began grumpy but turned out well. When we left the cactus garden and all the flowers on the ground I felt delicate and quiet. I thought if this is what happens in the desert, it will be all right. But now it is mid-afternoon and I worry about the night.

*Monday March 22, late-afternoon*

poem:

I would like my days of craziness to be over
and on this vacation to learn to feel peace.
Then I would not hurt so much inside, or worry
so much about hurting.
But that has not happened.
The quiet of the desert is not my own.
I try. I make recoveries throughout the day.
But by evening I am tired.
I fear dinner. I fear sleep. I fear bursting my load.
It is not nice to say it.

*Tuesday March 23, late-afternoon*

I talked with Nancy after writing the poem yesterday, before I was about to cry, and then during dinner and I felt better. It is hard for me to know how much of the solving I can do myself and how much might as well come through talking with her. We talked about how I want everything to be better all at once and when that does not happen I give up. Nancy thinks I need not give up. I think sometimes I have to. But I need to suppose more of the time that I do not have to fight all the battles to win the war. Or maybe I need to forget about the war.

We had a calming dinner and I told Nancy about my last class, how the two male students did not want to think my being a woman and acting the way I did had anything to do with their anger and frustration, and how two of the women were sure it did, also how I answered the question of one of the men: what difference did it make for him to have taken this class rather than to have sat on a streetcorner? I told him one of the things I noted to myself was I did not have to answer all questions, I could say I did not know. So I said I did not know. That was defensive, at the same time to the point. And he could not score.

Last night I slept well until the morning when I woke with a dream about a broken contact lens I had to wear behind my glasses in order to see. It was orientation anxiety. I thought I might have gotten over that by talking with Nancy yesterday about what we might do in the next few days, so as to have things to look forward to, places on the map and in mind. But the prospect of new places did its bad work anyway. This morning I decided I would try to ignore it after 9 a.m. and pump water and drive and drink beer and talk about our mothers, how they ask questions and how we have learned to answer. Nancy said her mother asks but does not care about the answer, it is her way to make conversation. My mother asks to find out what she needs to know. In both cases the daughter gets denied. Nancy's answers did not matter. Mine mattered if they were what my mother wanted. So I learned not to answer other people's questions, for fear they would manipulate me for their ends, which I assumed would be bad for mine. Nancy has tried to get me to change that and I think it has worked a little. But the process is slow.

We saw violet flowers along the roadway and made it over to Tamarisk Grove Campground to take hot showers. Then we read and had lunch. It was cool. I have started to read *Up and Down California in 1860-1864: The Journal of William H. Brewer*. He was a member of the State Geological Survey, the botanist. The book is from letters he sent

back East about his travels. He kept climbing mountains and discovering things and writing them down, precisely. If there are four fruits in a fruit basket, he tells you what each one is. If he has traveled some number of miles in a year, he tells you what number were by foot, what by horse or muleback, and what by public conveyance. He tells you he has sewn on a button and also that his hands get rheumatic if it is too cold when he writes. He tells you the view from the mountains he has climbed early in the day was magnificent and that he went up while Ashburner fell to the wayside. But he says nothing of fear or anxiety, and I had assumed he would have some. Maybe it was not manly to talk about.

Nancy says no, just because I have fear and anxiety looking at mountains and new sights does not mean he has it. He may have liked to adventure and felt that routine ways of climbing and handling whatever he came upon would get him through, and maybe mostly they did. Nancy likes that I am interested in reading Brewer even though he does not talk about fear and anxiety. She brought the book to take along for herself, but she is willing if I am interested to read Virginia Woolf, which I brought.

After lunch we drove to Split Mountain, through much hot desert, and got discouraged by the sand. There is a story there, mostly Nancy's, of how she drove her bus like it was a bucking bronco and finally in mutual good judgment we decided to turn back. It was stressful on her and seasick on me. But I do not have a history like hers. She has felt she wanted to go new places and it has been the other person who was afraid and demanded a turning back. This trip seems to be a lot about differences between Nancy and me. Like the country and geology, I see they are there, where previously, or much of the time, I have assumed they were me. I do not know why otherness should be so frightening.

Now we are back in the Tamarisk Grove Campground. There are people close by but the trees are large and have willowy leaves, the wind is rushing, it is cool. I have my place in the back of the bus with a pillow, curtains can be drawn, and sleeping bags are near. There is fruit juice and graham crackers and we have wine. I have pen and paper and books. The desert is outside and I am in it, but not really. Geological time and plant time are not mine. I will outlive the ocotillo and go other places than the mountains. I am something aside from them. It sounds ridiculous but the temptation is great to think I am a mountain or a plant.

*Thursday March 25, late-morning*

We are now in the Joshua Tree National Monument parked in a campground full of "jumbo rocks" which Nancy likes because they are rounded by the wind and seem organic. We came here yesterday after giving up on the Anza-Borrego Desert. I think we did the best part first and then ran out of places Nancy knew and felt I would like, which we could get to with the bus. As soon as we got to this Joshua Tree park I wished to be back in the cactus gardens with the very small flowers we went to first in the Anza-Borrego. I am much less at home with large rocks, vast mountainous vistas, and coarse brown sand. The Anza-Borrego was more like a beach with lots of little finds. This is more like a western desert and the national monument designation is overwhelming. The Anza-Borrego was a state park and had an air of playground about it. This is more serious. Last night I had a dream about Hitler taking over San Francisco, I think brought on by coming here.

Before we left the Anza-Borrego, we saw fields of lavender and yellow flowers and looked at badlands. When we got here I was depressed lying in the back of the bus and felt suicidal and like a complete failure for adjusting so badly to this trip. The new is frightening to me more often than it is wonderful, and as soon as it gets monumental or religious, like these Joshua Trees with their arms up to God, I cower. although I keep telling myself there is no need. So I cried after we got here. Nancy was nice to me. I think she feels more comfortable now than she did at the start. She likes this park. She likes the rocks and the trees and the Indian legacy of the desert. This morning we took a walk and my tiredness in the face of it showed.

*Friday March 26, early-morning*

Yesterday midday we went for a ride down into a valley to look at rocks and washes, Joshua Trees and shrubs. The Joshua Trees are ornamental on the landscape and unusual. I think it was worth coming here to see them. But the rocks do not move me, nor do the shrubs– the dry low life without flowers that lives on this plain. The scale of the trees and the rocks so far apart is not friendly for me. But for Nancy it is not a problem, it is an environment she likes.

Last night I got sick and upset and depressed and went to bed early. This morning I have resolved to try, or at least be resigned to being here. Nancy, I think, will not be convinced that is good enough.

*Saturday March 27, a.m.*

Now we are at the ocean. Yesterday morning we decided to leave Joshua Tree, after I had become resigned and changed my clothes to bright colors as a step toward doing something about feeling better. Nancy said what did that mean, was I going to hitch into town, and where was my lipstick? I then felt terrible about the clothes. My way out was to stay in, the bus and myself, underneath colors. She said she wanted me to really be there, out among the cactus, with her. Then we decided to change environments, on the chance I would like the ocean better and because for her the desert was too cold and windy and beginning to be too full of weekend campers.

We drove down out of the desert and across to the ocean above Santa Barbara, to three state parks, two of which were full and the third of which was ugly. I was feeling guilty for taking us out of the desert in the mountains and feeling appreciative of how the desert was far away, with fewer people per square inch. Nancy said I should not feel guilty, coming to the ocean was also her choice. We took out a map at the third campground to figure out where to go next, either up in the hills behind for the night, or to a motel room around Pismo Beach and take showers and spend the next two days meandering up the coast. I thought we might yet have a happy ending.

This morning we woke and took showers. Last night I checked us into a motel. It is the first time I have done that for two people. In the past it has been a man who has done it. I think it makes a difference traveling as two women. With no male protector, you have to do it for yourself. In the long run you should feel better protected. But it is new to me. In the short run I feel mostly naive.

Immediately after we got into this motel room last night I got scared, of the room. I missed the bus, Glattisante, questing beast, Nancy named her. I missed the waves. I thought that shows it, changing environments makes no difference, I am equally afraid in all. It is the changes, the new and the different, and the descent of night that are the trouble. I do not know how to deal well with any of them. Nancy said the place should not make such a difference, I should have it inside. I had it inside the bus. I need a shell. But I know that is not good. Shells crack. I looked in the mirror when we got here and saw myself, outside, not bad. It pays to look in the mirror every once in a while. It reminds me that I am a person, then there is a little vanity, and then I give up. The glimpse is fleeting. Too long and I would begin to see.

This morning we are fresh. We have slept and washed and been warm. It is windy outside and the tide is high.

*Sunday March 28, a.m.*

Today we are home. We got here last night. It is cloudy out but the trees are delicate with new leaves and the house is as we left it. Yesterday we came up the coast on Route 1 in a windstorm. The surf was wild, the waves were whipped back on themselves, the ocean was the color of jade. The cliffs above had flowers, the mountains behind them were soft and green. Nancy had to drive the bus into the wind to keep on the road. I found the scenery spectacular but frightening. Nancy found it beautiful.

In the morning we walked on a beach at Pismo Beach. There was wind and surf but it felt calm. There were people: children playing with the waves and sand, an old man with a cane who walked briskly past us. We felt good in the morning and leisurely about driving up. We were going to stay in a campground in Cambria. But when we got there it was windy and full of trailers and boyscouts with orange tents. So we came on up and stopped in a few campgrounds in Big Sur. One at Plasket Creek was protected but full. A later one in the redwoods had some empty places but I really wanted to come home. Nancy said it was all right with her either way. We came home. The last two days had a lot of driving in them. Nancy drove but I felt we did it together. I kept my eyes open, held hands and gave kisses, and paid attention to the hillsides. I said I would like us to take other trips.

# reviews

LIZ HESS

## LOVER by Bertha Harris

Daughters, Inc., Plainfield, Vermont. 1976. 214 pp. $4.50.

If bookstores were laid out like toy departments, *Lover* would be found in the special section for Adult Games. It is a difficult book, a literary enigma which gives clues but no rules to guide the reader-player through the 214-page maze of its prose. The novel-as-puzzle is not only acceptable, but *de rigueur* in avant-garde literary circles the world over. *Lover* is an interesting if somewhat flawed addition to the genre. *Lover* is also, however, a Lesbian Novel, and this cross-indexing may create problems for the unwary. A hypothetical *lesbian* bookstore would have many empty shelves bearing silent witness to the fact that lesbian literature is in its infancy. The average shopper is avid for plot, action, characters which reflect the undocumented experiences of her life. She craves representation more than artistic obfuscation in a novel. She is not ready to pass directly into the Adult Games section. *Lover* is not for the impatient, not for those who want fiction to clarify and define their own world. It must be read on its own terms, or left on the shelf to be picked up again when lesbian literature catches up with it.

The novel is structured as a series of non-chronological episodes in the lives of a group of mothers and daughters. The brief, unnumbered chapters are prefaced by snatches of female mythology, such as:

> Reparata, a twelve-year old Palestinian, was first tortured, then executed with a sword. As she expired, a dove flew out of her open mouth. (p. 60)

These arbitrary quotes, unrelated to the text, are a recurrent chant—a liturgical framework announcing a new mythology in progress.

The contemporary heroines are, in line with current lesbian dogma, mothers. A second reading of the novel yielded the following genealogy: Veronica and Samaria were both married to Theophilus. He died, the women became lovers and moved their dependents under one roof: Veronica with daughter Nelly, Samaria with daughter Daisy and granddaughters Rose and Rose-lima and Flynn. Unfortunately, the exigencies of myth-creation seem to force the author to complicate what should be simple identification of characters and scene. Flynn, a non-mother, is said to have

> A daughter named Nelly, enough eggs for breakfast, and herself as lover. But none of these things are Flynn. They are a lie about Flynn, or they are pictures of herself her fantasies have contrived, or they are her overworked imagination forcing memories of things that have never really happened to her. (p. 9)

Much later, a character cries out (with the reader): "How do I know which is the mother and which is the daughter? How can I know that for sure? Two grown women—which is which?"

Archness obscures narrative, as the incomprehensible is compounded by the inaccurate (Daisy is the only reprehensible woman because she sleeps with men):

> For Veronica to meet Samaria, Theophilus could not die before Daisy lived: Theophilus' daughter, Daisy, living to be every daughter's dream of mother. (p. 9)

Another irritation to the reader is that "I" and "she" often remain stubbornly unidentified. Shifting points of view constitute an unnecessary strain on the reader. Who is "she" in a chapter beginning: "In the dream, she is sitting yoga-legged in a pale room: peaceful, dim, Oriental..."? The characters in the book all speak in the same tough-eccentric jargon, so dialogue rarely reveals the speaker's identity. The locales shift as wildly as the speakers, cutting all possible threads of continuity.

This arbitrary game-playing is a modernist crutch that Bertha Harris does not need. Her "magic lantern show" (p. 208) needs only its kaleidoscope of poetry to be properly avant-garde. And the novel is bursting with poetry, an element which should enrich, rather than engulf and obscure the narrative with obsessive fragmentation.

Opening the novel to any page gives lyric passages such as these:

> ...pretty women still let her kiss them in dark corners at the ragged edges of parties. (p. 6)

Flynn, delirious:

> I am tall off the floor in her tall bed, sick and hot in her bed. They think I am my mother in her bed, so they are coming to burn me to death or smother my head. I am her case of mistaken identity. The fire sheds like mica from the mirror. One reflects the other; both fire

and mirror collapse and lay hidden in the tufts of the red rug to catch bare feet if they should pass. (p. 11)

Flynn recuperates:

> In summer, that which is most dependable about Flynn –her harshness, her furies, her grimness–slacks out of her control. It is always a shock to her to find herself all of a sudden like some pulpy fruit, like peach or plum. She remembers herself as stone, but the stone gets fattened, by heat, into something edible and she hates that. She could be compared to a rich orange dropped out of the night into the lap of an unconscious woman. A toothsome delight. (p. 49)

When lyricism is focused on women together, no literary gimmicks are needed to imply a new order:

> Veronica is a woman concentrating and therefore she and all about her become inviolable: surrounded by mountain ranges thick with glaciers, moated fortresses; dynamite-charged tunnels beneath. Flynn, Rose, Roselima, Samaria–energy unwinds from all of them then reunites with the source. Their atmosphere is untouchable, deadly, bright: live wires loosened by ice from telephone poles. There seem to be more women than usual in the house. (p. 87)

Harris' lyrical prose can smoothly cross the threshhold into surrealism:

> The kerosene light sheds through her saffron veil through which our genteel audience can perceive the face of a virgin. Naked–but for the black beard so long it hangs between that deep place between her breasts. She also wears a crown of gold and ivy. She has grown to be nearly six feet tall. I approach her as Hamlet, in a white wedding dress. The audience, understanding, applauds. It is a lovely night for my very lucrative production of "Scenes from *Hamlet*." The sky is sharp with stars. (p. 74)

Erotic passages are rare, but memorable:

> She stood up and reached to take the bright, dangerous blades from Samaria's hand; and she began to un-

> wind the blue cloth, thumping the bolt against the
> floor; and, once it was all unwound, she rewound it,
> this time around and around Samaria until Samaria had
> become a tall blue wand Veronica could bend and lift:
> only the face was free of the blue. (p. 121)

Bertha Harris can be witty, as in this lover's plaint: "The beloved's personal city map is of a great wasteland greened in secret places with restaurants, all miles apart..." (p. 62). Narrative passages relate the hilarious antics of cartoon characters, Bogart and Boatwright, Rose and Rose-lima. A stereotype such as Lydia Somerleyton, a movie star, surprisingly relates an endless tale of her mother who thought she was Won-Wonder Woman and Billie Holliday. High Camp.

Poetry, wit, surrealism and eroticism are enough for the creation of myth. Talent is its own justification. Along with the obscuring of narrative, Harris can afford to dispense with the clumsy sign-posts to critics furnished by the device of having a character be in the process of writing a novel called, yes, *Lover.* With fewer bows to literature and a few more to the reader, Harris can win the wide audience she deserves. Or, to borrow a passage from page 208:

> All that really happened is that the lover won the
> beloved, and became the beloved...

GLORIA T. HULL

## BETWEEN OUR SELVES by Audre Lorde

Eidolon Editions, Box 629, Pt. Reyes, Calif. 1976. 22+ pp. $3.50.

Audre Lorde's *Between Our Selves* is a beautiful book–both physically and poetically. Published by Eidolon Editions of Point Reyes, Calif. and typeset by Diane di Prima, it is a slim volume of high-quality, heavy, tan paper, printed in dark brown ink and decorated with a simple burnt sienna design. The last poem is followed by the nicest photograph of the poet which I have yet seen–a closeup which captures her arch attractiveness and strength. Anyone who manages to lay hands on one of the limited 1,100 copies will certainly enjoy the look and feel of the work.

The seven longish poems which comprise *Between Our Selves* are equally pleasurable, but, like all of Lorde's poetry, demand close reading for their understanding and appreciation. Lorde's three-word title is no semantic cuteness. It, together with the cover design, indicates the theme and method of the book–rigorous dialogue with and between our various selves to achieve harmony. In contrast to the Ashanti Adinkra symbol of two crocodiles who "share one stomach yet fight over food," Lorde announces her unifying intention in "Outside":

> for most of all I am
> blessed within my selves
> who are come to make our shattered faces
> whole.

This theme of multiple selves and the need for their integrity is one which Lorde often speaks and writes from and about. In prefatory remarks to her reading at the NOW National Convention in Philadelphia last year, she fronted the identity issue in her characteristic fashion by declaring that she was woman, poet, black, lesbian, mother, fat, sassy (my ordering from memory, not hers). And at the Modern Language Association Convention in New York City in December, she gave an expanded treatment of this same theme. Saying first that poets write from their many self-images, she then stated her conviction that "the world will–if we do not–define us–usually to our detriment," and confessed that she wrote what she lived and spoke out of all the selves which she seeks to define. She added: "When they [the selves] war, I am immobilized; when in harmony, I am enriched." It is these selves–

at war and in harmony—which Lorde presents in her new book.

"Power," "School Note," and "Between Ourselves" seem to be more racially resonant. (These poems continue Lorde's use of plangent and allusive—and, if my students are to be believed, elusive—titles.) In the first, Lorde is concerned with right and wrong uses of power and with the self-agony required to know and practice the right. "Between Ourselves" rejects an "easy blackness as salvation" for the hellish truth of history and its varicolored consequences.

Two other poems, "Solstice" and "Scar," strike a more personal, more woman-related note. Starting from enervation and barrenness, "Solstice" fights to a triumphant rebirth—

> My skin is tightening
> soon I shall shed it
> . . . . . .
> and dare to enter the forest whistling

and concludes with a series of vows:

> May I never remember reasons
> for my spirit's safety
> may I never forget
> the warning of my woman's flesh
> weeping at the new moon
> may I never lose
> that terror
> which keeps me brave
> may I owe nothing
> that I cannot repay.

"Scar" is "a simple poem./ For the mothers sisters daughters/ girls I have never been." The final two poems are about the poet's relationship to her parents and her growing into her selves ("Outside"), and about a reluctant abortion ("A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children"). This latter ends:

> I am bent
> forever
> wiping up blood
> that should be
> you.

"Power" speaks of "trying to make power out of hatred and destruction." In *Between Our Selves*, Lorde is striving to make poetry/

beauty out of the same unmalleable, unlovely material. As "Solstice" does, most of the poems move from images of holocaust and desolation to affirmation/celebration/determination. Many are disjunct and lack the transitions which would help make the parts cohere, sometimes even seeming to be two or three poems wrenched into one by the force of Lorde's language and sensibility and the subtle inner pattern which is the poem's own coherence and logic. This book also reveals Lorde's tendency to write what I call allegorical poetry, a tendency which is more pronounced in her later work. There is the real experience which the poem is about (visualize a bold, solid line) and then, above it, the words of the poem into which that experience has been translated (a faint, broken line). Reading the poems, one knows immediately and instinctively that they are about something *real*, but finds it difficult or impossible to directly and specifically connect the two. One steps uncertainly on the fine upper level with feet never quite touching the concrete literal.

There are also numerous African motifs and images, ranging from the cover design to allusions in individual poems (notably "Between Ourselves"). Lorde can write with the sinewy laciness of ornamental Japanese rice paper but here she seldom indulges this side of her talent. When she does, it is generally in relation to women, and these images, I think, are some of her very best, as in this wonderful passage from "Scar":

> I have no sister no mother no children
> left
> only a tideless ocean of moonlit women
> in all shades of loving
> learning a dance of open and closing
> learning a dance of electrical tenderness
> no father no mother would teach them.

How, finally, does this latest volume relate to the rest of Lorde's poetry? For obvious reasons, it is not the one which I would use to introduce or fully represent her—even though she herself has called it "*the* book." Instead, I would send the interested novice first to *Coal* (1976, with poems earlier published in 1968 and 1970) and then to *The New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974). After this initiation, *Between Our Selves* can be appreciated as a further manifestation of Lorde's rich and expanding talent.

Ultimately, though, Audre Lorde has grown larger than any one

book of verse. Reading her work, we share her awe and gratitude at having "the experiences which bind us all spoken," knowing with sister poet Adrienne Rich that "whatever goes unspoken becomes finally unspeakable." We are also validated and inspired by her refusal to simplify her own or our complex selves. Increasingly, Lorde assumes the role of prophetess, crying out for what she calls the most important human movement—"the right to love and to define each of us ourselves"—and warning us that

> if we do not stop killing
> the other
> in ourselves
> the self that we hate
> in others
> soon we shall all lie
> in the same direction
> and Eshidale's priests will be very busy
> they who alone can bury
> all those who seek their own death
> by jumping up from the ground
> and landing upon their heads.

Audre Lorde's *Coal* is published by W.W. Norton. *The New York Head Shop and Museum* ($3.50) is available from Broadside Press, Dept. M.O., 12651 Old Mill Place, Detroit, MI 48238 (add $.25 postage).

## ANNE GIBB/NAN BAUER MAGLIN

**WOMENFRIENDS: A SOAP OPERA by Esther Newton and Shirley Walton.** Friends Press, 520 West 110th Street, New York, N.Y. 1976. 210 pp. $4.50.

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*Because Esther Newton and Shirley Walton developed the unusual form of parallel journals in* Womenfriends, *and because they have written so honestly about the friendship between a gay and a straight woman, we decided to invite two reviewers to respond to their book. The outcome was not exactly what we expected:*

**" . . . I think many readers will find themselves responding less in terms of gay/straight identification than of sympathy for personality. Certainly I was drawn far more to Rebecca, though my experiences have been closer to Pauline's." A.G.**

**"What particularly struck me as I read the journals was that it is not only sexual orientation that divides or unites us. For although I am like Rebecca in being married and being heterosexual, I often more closely identified with Pauline . . . " N.B.M.**

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*ANNE GIBB*

This book chronicles the relationship between two women—one gay, one straight. In fact, it chronicles the partial disintegration of that relationship. In 1970 Pauline (Esther) and Rebecca (Shirley), friends from their college days in the early Sixties, decided to keep a joint journal that they would eventually publish. As published, the journal covers a period of slightly over a year—from May 1971 to July 1972. During that period Pauline becomes involved and something of a "star" in the gay women's movement (learning with anguish of its personal and ideological divisiveness) and grapples with the problem of coming out in her job (college teaching); her relationship with her lover seems to crumble; and she is in a perpetual state of self-questioning and self-analysis. Rebecca too is a feminist and involved in movement activities; and she works—as a sportswriter and broadcaster. However, she is also married (although emotionally rather removed from her husband), and in the course of the period covered by the journal, she carries and gives birth to a child—a boy. By nature she is more self-accepting than Pauline, and her circumstances reinforce this

trait.

There, in soap-opera-digest form, you have enough contrast in situation and personality to account for any amount of conflict. But there is also a friendship, warm and supportive, which enables the two women to carry on a vigorous dialogue, to confront their differences and try to understand them. This is the excitement of the book.

Rebecca's child forms a central theme. Rebecca, naturally enough, is preoccupied by the pregnancy, then the baby himself—by the fact of motherhood, herself as mother. Already conscious of the anomalies of her position as wife and feminist, she tries to confront the even greater ensnarement by convention that pregnancy and motherhood bring. Pauline's response to the baby is extremely ambivalent. The baby appears to confirm Rebecca's conventionality, which is a constant irritation to Pauline; but Pauline also recognizes that she is jealous both of the comforts of Rebecca's conventional life-style and of the straight woman's ability to produce a child with someone she loves: "She and Sid are creating a new life which is organically joining them together or *is* the two of them, something which Laura and I can never do."

Pauline also fears that the baby will take Rebecca away from her, as in a sense he does; she fears that Rebecca will "cop out" on the book, and though this does not happen, Rebecca nonetheless feels that Pauline begins to take over their book. At one point she rationalizes: "You feel out of control of things around my having the baby but look at it this way: I feel you have taken control of our work, and I have to trust you." The trust is not always there, however, for Rebecca too has her jealousies—of Pauline's intellectualism, professionalism, and her "stardom" in the movement. This forms another major theme of the book, neatly balancing the motherhood dialogue.

Trying to summarize such themes is a dangerous exercise, because these journals touch on many issues and present a complex tapestry of thoughts and feelings. And the emotional intensity is such that I think many readers will find themselves responding less in terms of gay/straight identification than of sympathy for personality. Certainly I was drawn far more to Rebecca, though my experiences have been closer to Pauline's.

Pauline is in a rage. She is gathering her courage to confront straight society head on, and in the meantime she confronts and analyzes every aspect of herself and her relationships, trying to fit them into

the pattern of her new-found gay identity. This is an agonizing process, one that all gay women can relate to—the more so since Pauline forces us to examine aspects of ourselves that are easier to let lie. However, not all of us are in the same rage, nor are we all confronters. Pauline reminded me of an earlier period of my life, a very unhappy period, when I believed in her philosophy and felt horrendously guilty because I couldn't live by it. She revived my sense of guilt, even though I have come to see my inability as largely a matter of temperament and personal priorities. It seems to me that Rebecca is in a similar position. At one point she says:

> I am tired of serious Pauline, delving oh, so somberly into the deepest profoundest realities and unniceties . . . . I say to you all, angry and tired and small and convoluted, that I feed on little things, on small joys and momentary fantasies and I grow and I live. These moments are what I bring to them.

I sympathize heartily.

It seems to me that Pauline demands all, and Rebecca makes a valiant attempt to meet her more than halfway. Ultimately, however, the dialogue fails, and there is more to that failure than the fact that the women's priorities become increasingly separate. One element is the journal itself.

In one sense the journal holds them together. While their lives go in separate directions, they nonetheless hold to their commitment to keep writing, collaborating in this work. However, it seems that after a while, the journal becomes their chief form of communication; and it's a dangerous form. Through their journal Pauline and Rebecca communicate with each other with all the honesty about their feelings (perhaps more) than most of us reserve for the more conventional journals that we keep for our own eyes only. And the dangers of such openness emerge all too clearly. Sometimes things are said to which there is no response—the other woman simply does not know how to respond (Pauline, for example, cannot discuss Rebecca's dreams about her). Or sometimes the response is bitterness that lasts much longer than the thought or feeling that provoked it. At one point Pauline makes an apology:

> I'm sorry to have hit you with all that down writing without warning you, or softening the blow with the truth that by the time I gave it to you I was feeling

> better. That's one of the problems of our written interchanges, that by the time we read what the other has written, it is past.

Another problem, which they do not define, is that feelings are inevitably altered by the writing process itself, by its solitariness. The reality of the other person fades because there is no give and take—no possibility of immediate response. Introspection can, and in this case largely does, take over. Monologue replaces dialogue.

I think we need to take note of this. For if these problems take on exaggerated form in written exchanges, they exist also in face-to-face dealings. Many women are striving in their relationships for the kind of honesty that Pauline and Rebecca bring to their journal. But all too often this leads to a greater facility in dealing out the truth (as it exists for perhaps only a moment) than receiving it—or, for that matter, coping with the hurt of the person who receives it. Perhaps it is time that more emphasis be placed on the need to discriminate between what really needs to be said (for one's own sake as well the other's) and what not. Or is it even harder to acquire this kind of judgment than the ability to absorb the body knocks that come with "total honesty"? I hope not, because we all need to learn some degree of compromise—that is, if we want to build bridges among ourselves and maintain dialogues, between gay and straight, woman and woman.

I have to conclude this review on a note of confusion. In an epilogue to the book, the writers say that "Pauline and Rebecca 'let go' and went their parallel ways," although remaining in touch. This comes as no surprise, given their increasing separation in the journals. What is surprising is the statement that follows: "We, their creators, however, are more than ever bound together by a dense shared herstory, a continuing love . . . . " The introduction gives a clue as to what happened. Despite the original intention to publish their journals unedited, the authors found that "keeping the 'everything' Pauline and Rebecca wanted to share would have meant letting details obscure main themes. The journals *by* two women gradually evolved into a story *about* two women." It seems to me that a more detailed explanation is needed, given the rather dramatic difference in outcome. Because what was edited out was apparently what made Esther and Shirley's relationship continue to tick. It sounds like a rare case of reality being happier than fiction.

The world of female interaction, female ties, and female love in nineteenth-century America has recently been revealed to us by the publication of letters, diaries and writings of women to women. Female friendships which ranged "from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women"[1] were apparently quite socially acceptable then; in fact, according to Caroll Smith-Rosenberg in "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," "women's heterosocial and . . . homosocial worlds were complementary."[2] As the twentieth century approached, however, such bonding between women became more and more taboo.

In *Womenfriends: A Soap Opera* by Esther Newton and Shirley Walton we have the public acknowledgment of such female interaction. *Womenfriends* is about the struggle of two women, one lesbian and one heterosexual, to explore the implications of their difference, often hurting each other in angry prose while at other times trying to reach each other with words of love and concern.

As I read this journal by Rebecca and Pauline I learned about and thought about my own development since 1969. Because I am heterosexual, I surveyed Rebecca's words more closely. She suffers from the same terrors I do—those of being a middle-class married woman, of being "a good, normal woman" (p. 15), of being swallowed and lulled by her domestic and marital life, of hiding in conventional institutions. As a result, she tries to break down these roles and institutions, or at least to reach out beyond them to other women. And when Pauline says to Rebecca: "You'll never know what it means to be gay, the eternal, overwhelming sense of being *wrong*, cast out, cast off, and the constant ache of rage" (p. 115), I acknowledge that I am Rebecca. I feel the truth and impact of what Pauline is saying, and I relive the years of the movement which brought feelings of guilt and inadequacy to many heterosexual women.

These feelings come into play in the book as Rebecca's pregnancy becomes the focus of the journal. It most concretely and sharply objectifies for the two women the distinction between a married heterosexual woman who can assert her total "normality" by becoming a mother and a single lesbian woman who is "abnormal" because she is not a mother (and, in a sense, would be triply "abnormal" to become a single lesbian mother). To Pauline, Rebecca's choice seems easy, and a

put-down of her own being. To Rebecca, Pauline's hostility is a put-down of her being, stereotyping her as Mrs. Straight America. She says:

> Do you truly think I am pregnant because nature and society have now ratified my existence as married, straight woman? Or am I pregnant because I want to be, and have wanted to for more than a decade?
>
> I am pregnant because I like it, I feel good, I want to hold a baby, I want you to love me doing it, I want Sid to love me doing it. (p. 18)

Rebecca's desire to parallel the partnership in writing with a partnership in the raising of her child, however, does not overcome the polarity the conception of the baby has caused. The failure of female bonds is played out as Rebecca retreats into anxiety, isolation, loss of self, and exhaustion, and as Pauline withdraws into hostility, envy, self-doubt, and feelings of rejection. As the journal ends, Pauline and Rebecca attempt a way back to each other which includes the now-born male baby. Perhaps this is successful, but from my perspective, the institution of motherhood seems to overwhelm Rebecca, separating her from Pauline or from any other person not in the "family," whereas Pauline seems to grow stronger, more sure of her identity and more committed to her work.

While not denying the real differences between Pauline and Rebecca, I see both of them suffering from self-hatred, envy, jealousy and feelings of competition that are very painful and paralyzing. They are feelings which maim us, not allowing us to freely swim and sail (as Pauline desires) or fly (as Rebecca desires), not allowing us to confirm each other in our differences.

What particularly struck me as I read the journals was that it is not only sexual orientation that divides or unites us. For although I am like Rebecca in being married and being heterosexual, I often more closely identified with Pauline: we both have a strong will to perform, to succeed, which took the form of getting a Ph.D. and joining academia—while at the same time being ambivalent about that direction and its rigid demands. I am like Rebecca and Pauline in setting up a dichotomy between mother versus great woman, between baby and creativity, between baby and fame. I am like Pauline in wanting to be a star; I am like Rebecca in being critical of "heavies" both from self-effacement and anti-elitism. I am like Pauline when she describes her shyness and inhibition in bed. We are all alike in the power struggles that go on

in "coupledom." All three of us are divided from most women by our class position; therefore, Pauline's statement meant to apply to those lesbians who will be neither mothers nor grandmothers applies to Rebecca and myself: "I am cut off from ordinary women" (p. 65). And all three of us are alike in our needs to feel whole, to take ourselves seriously, to be productive and creative, and to discover in the women's movement an important support in working towards these ends.

Of course there were phrases, attitudes, and feelings which made me uncomfortable or with which I had disagreements; some issues which I wanted to see explored seemed to have been avoided (or lost in editing), as for example the whole question of monogamy, especially for Rebecca, and the uses and abuses of therapy for lesbian and straight women. I was a bit disappointed that Vietnam seemed so peripheral to this account of our lives in the early seventies, because this book is about women's consciousness and the women's movement which grew in part from women's participation in the movement against the war.

I am not comfortable with the sub-title "A Soap Opera." Is this meant to deny the seriousness of the journal and/or to mock its writers as well as other women? Or is it an unclear yet positive admission of commonality in the lives and stories of all women? I am not sure. In addition, the use of some real and some fictional names seemed inconsistent, if not name-dropping.

Despite these questions, I found *Womenfriends* to be a moving, provocative, and "revolutionary" (p. 171) project, for as Pauline says, "What could be more important than women making things together?" (p. 172) This double journal is an innovative form of interaction and communication among women. What Adrienne Rich says in *Of Woman Born* applies to the journals of Pauline/Esther and Rebecca/Shirley: "I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours."[3]

NOTES

1. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 1-2.

2. Smith-Rosenberg, p. 8.

3. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 10.

LYNNE REYNOLDS

**SASSAFRASS, a novel by Ntozake Shange**
Shameless Hussy Press, Box 424, San Lorenzo, Calif. 94580. 1976. 38 pp. $1.85.

**FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF, poems by Ntozake Shange.** Shameless Hussy Press. 1975. 24 pp. $1.95.

Ntozake Shange has recently come into public notice as the author/playwright of the Broadway sensation *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The play is a brilliant hybrid of dance and poetry focusing upon the peculiar sorrows and celebrations of colored girls.

That the play and the collection of poems share the same title can be misleading, since they have in common only three poems and contain a distinctly different set of perspectives. The degree of their dissimilarity is what makes it impossible for me to review the earlier books by Ntozake Shange without making reference to the play.

What is moving, even transporting in the staged choreopoem *For Colored Girls* is a feeling of community among women, a oneness within which all women are able to discover their godliness: "I found God in myself and I loved HER fiercely." These words are sung by a circle of women at the end of the play, and they mark an awareness that is universal in its implication. There is a strong woman identification which, although not altogether missing in the poetry collection *For Colored Girls* and the novella *Sassafrass*, is certainly submerged. An evolution has clearly taken place in the author's perceptions of her material within the seemingly short time between the release of her books and the appearance on stage of the Joseph Papp production of *For Colored Girls*.

Witness the deferential attitude of the protagonist Sassafrass toward her lover Mitch:

> mitch thot of himself like he waz a god n he waz always tellin sassafrass not to succumb to her mortality/ to live like she waz one of gods stars/

and here again:

in her study sassafrass had sequestered a sequin n
feather hangin shaped like a vagina/for josephine
baker n mitch made her hide it cuz it waznt proper
for a new afrikan woman to make things of a sexual
nature.

In Shange's poetry collection, a seventeen-part poem called "three" details the intrigues and betrayals perpetrated by women upon one another; it is almost a catalogue of the suspicions, jealousies, and insecurities that are supposedly characteristic of women's behavior in a male-oriented society:

cant figure out which of these women in the room he's been wid/
which ones he wants/ which ones want him guess/i just wont talk
wid anybody/i dont want no woman stickin some more knives in
my back/i just wanna meet some more men . . . yeah men.

The distance this poem travels to its woman-supportive position in the play is reflected in the drastic reduction of its length and in the greater emphasis placed on the original poem's final stanza:

she held her head on her lap
the lap of her sister soakin up tears
each understandin how much love stood between them
how much love between them
love between them
love like sisters

*Sassafrass* is the story of a young black woman who leaves the man she loves because he has broken his one vow to her: no drugs. She journeys to safe harbor with her sister, Cypress, where in an attempt to heal herself of her pain, she involves herself with craft work, her sister's life, and a relationship with another man. However at her lover's summons she returns home to the putatively healthy and solicitous Mitch and to the possibility of a better future.

Though she submits to repeated inequities at the hands of her lover, Sassafrass has an innate pride and latent sensibility which remain undeveloped in the novella. Here she rails at the offense of being read a poem by one of Mitch's friends, called "ebony cunt":

dont you ever sit in my house n ask me to celebrate
my inherited right to be raped . . . dont you know
nothin abt anythin besides takin women off/or is that
all you really good for/

A feminist sensibility strays throughout the short work, reappearing at moments when the character needs most to reaffirm herself; at these times she reverts to her mother's craft of weaving, or speaks with the spirits of blues women Mamie Smith and Billie Holiday, or seeks solace in her sister's world of dance. These are traditional areas of women's strength and they are her shelters.

She's a woman at odds with herself, doubting her own esteem and natural inclinations. Sassafrass leaves when Mitch beats her, as she had long vowed to herself, but soon chooses to go back to him. When she gets caught in a traffic jam in returning to him she negates the action of leaving, calling it "just another debt she has to pay for being a brazen hussy." She loves the blues because in them she finds "the pain in the truth of her existence."

The sister, Cypress, is a foil for the character of Sassafrass, the voice of another consciousness. She is a woman independent of the influence of men, yet seeks their company when she chooses, a woman who controls her environment; she is allegorically the second link in a chain of consciousness. We must remember that this novella is one part of a projected trilogy concerning the lives of three sisters. The faintly suspended atmosphere of the ending of the novella might have a different effect when the final two components of the trilogy are added. Hopefully they will complete the progression begun in *Sassafrass* and found at its most mature in the stage version of *For Colored Girls*.

Ntozake Shange's skillful descriptions highlight her prose and are the foundation of her poetry. The poem "sechita" is well served by her luxuriant prose:

> she moved as if she'd known them/the silver n high
> toned laughin/the violins n marble floors/sechita/
> pushed the clingin delta dust with painted toes/the
> patch-work tent was polka dotted n stale lights
> snatched at the shadows/creole carnival was playin
> natchez in ten minutes . . .

But sometimes this method has difficulty, as in this example when the descriptions fail to evoke and degenerate into filler for the shell of a good theme:

> one time at this ridiculous fete/jumbled with glitter
> boys butch whacks/wd-be dancers writers painters &
> butch whacks real dancers painters jewelers & writers
> in multiple tongues/ smoke and graciela encountered

a mimist recently returned from europe/where he'd
endured boundless adulation & poverty/pyssed in
women's mouths upon request/worked once in oslo/
the mimist haunted women/cuz he had chosen celiba-
cy/& cuz he loved them more than himself/& cldnt
offer the imperfect/when more waz needed . . .

Evident in both the novella and the poetry collection is Shange's love of music and dance, musicians and dancers, and their language. In two or three instances Shange employs a jazz structure that is lyrical enough to sing. She includes a snatch of a jazz scat rhythm at the end of the poem called "chicago in san francisco & you/me/waait/love is musik/touch me like sounds/chicago on my shoulder/yr hand is now a kiss":

. . . but we're already musik
& i feel you/ i cd make it up again/ but we're already musik
joseph roscoe lester don & malachi/ i hear em in our sweat
& nobody is speakin/ but the rhythms are chicago/ melody
[on the loose
when you make love to me/ i shout like the colors on joseph's
[face
am bound to air like roscoe's horn/ like the 'cards' are stacked
in our favor/ one slight brown thing-bip-bloo-dah-shi-doop-
[bleeeehahaha uh
refusin false romance/

And again, the rhythm is apparent and full of motion in the amusing self-portrait, "my name means my own":

. . . wontchu put me back & let
me play this duet wid the silver ring in my nose
honest to god somebody almost run off wid alla my stuff
& i didnt bring nothin but the kick & sway of it
the perfect ass for my man & none of it is theirs
this is mine. ntozake 'her own things'. that's my name.
give me my stuff. i see ya hidin in my laugh & how i
sit wif my legs open sometimes to give my crotch
some sunlight & there goes my love & my toes & my
chewed up finger nails/ niggah wif the curlers in yr hair
mr. louisiana hot link/ i want my stuff back . . .

The five poems that feature this style are cleaner and more elastic than the overdrawn prose poems, allowing the emergence of the greater

humor, tension, and subtlety of expression. In these instances Shange trusts her material and gives it room to work within its own space. Here her writing breathes, it sings, it dances. This musicality and an awareness of the nuances of physical realities are the best that Ntozake Shange has to offer.

RIMA SHORE

**TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS by Adrienne Rich.**
Effie's Press, 1420 45th St., Studio 45, Emeryville, Ca. 94608.
1976. $4.00.

## *"TO MOVE OPENLY TOGETHER/IN THE PULL OF GRAVITY"*

To begin speaking of *Twenty-One Love Poems* by discussing its title might seem hopelessly academic. Like the poems themselves, the title is wonderfully simple—but deceptively so. This would be a different book were its poems unnumbered, were it called simply *Love Poems*; for this poetry spills over its form, breaking the limit set by its title. There are twenty-*two* poems (the lines which seem most like a conventional love poem are called "the floating poem, unnumbered"). In this way the title reflects what, in an important sense, this love poetry is about—and perhaps suggests something of what love is about and what poetry is about: recognizing limits (conventions, laws, boundaries) and breaking through them.

Here the idea of overstepping boundaries—the old American theme of the road less travelled—takes on special weight, for this is love poetry written by a woman to a woman, "a woman's voice singing old songs/with new words . . . ":

XIII
The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out-of-date
by years . . . we're driving through the desert
wondering if the water will hold out
the hallucinations turn to simple villages
the music on the radio comes clear—
neither *Rosenkavalier* nor *Gotterdammerung*
but a woman's voice singing old songs
with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
plucked and fingered by women outside the law.

The desert is a metaphor, not a setting, for this love. Rich locates herself not in an unbounded expanse, but in the city, on the island of Manhattan. The opening poem is a kind of prologue, insisting on this setting—not a postcard view, not a picturesque skyline, but a real city

of tenements and garbage. There is passion here, but it is "passion rooted in the city." The insistence on ordinary life prepares us for the poems that follow. Their long lines, their sometimes prosaic feel, their range of experience, give a sense that Rich is breaking out of the confines of narrowly "poetic" poetry. This kind of poetry—we might call it establishment poetry—seems to be personified in Poem IV by the man who lets a door almost close on the poet, then berates her when she makes it through:

> . . . I'm lugging my sack
> of groceries, I dash for the elevator
> where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
> lets the door almost close on me. –*For god's sake hold it!*
> I croak at him. –*Hysterical*, –he breathes my way.

In her poems Rich communicates the great difficulty of her defiance, but also her conviction that to a woman's hands may be entrusted the most difficult of tasks:

> . . . in these hands
> I could trust the world, or in many hands like these,
> handling power-tools or steering-wheel
> or touching a human face . . . (VI)

Poetry has its place in the setting of daily life as the poet's work. In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Rich handles words like the power-tools they are, using them to build another world, to touch another human being. These lines struck me as another expression of her determination to break out of the confines of taut, elderly, carefully composed poetry.

The second poem introduces the poet, her lover, their smaller setting. It introduces poetry itself, almost as a character in the narrative, and it introduces the notion of gravity which becomes so central.

> I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.
> Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,
> you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed:
> our friend the poet comes into my room
> where I've been writing for days,
> drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
> and I want to show her one poem
> which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate
> and wake. You've kissed my hair
> to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem*,
> I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone . . .*
> and I laugh and fall dreaming again
> of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
> to move openly together
> in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
> which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.

*Twenty-One Love Poems* seems to grow out of this "desire to show you to everyone I love," and yet the lover remains for the most part unseen and unheard. Our glimpse of this love affair is mostly of the moments in between—not the waking, not the parting, but the moment after waking, the moment after parting. We see not the lover, but her reflection in the poet's ordinary life, as in Poem IV we see

> . . . the early light of spring
> flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado,
> the Discount Wares, the shoe-store . . .

We see not her lover, but the impact she makes, as in Poem VIII, looking at the dark ocean we don't see the wave itself; we are rather . . .

> looking down the red rocks to where a soundless curl
> of white told me a wave had struck, imagining the pull
> of that water from that height . . .

This image returns us to the notion of gravity's pull. If these poems are down-to-earth, it is in a very literal sense. The physical world is always visibly present, even if our view is filtered through the poet's sensibility (a filtering process which becomes an image in Poem XVI, when the poet is "watching red sunset through the screendoor of the cabin"). There is always:

> that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves,
> was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us.
> (XI)

But while the poems and their passion are "rooted in the city," the poet uses dream and metaphor to break out of the limits she has set. In the center of the book, she crosses over into another unbounded expanse; in sleep, the poet and her lover become planets, separate worlds, turning in the same universe.

> XII
> Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
> rotating in their midnight meadow:
> a touch is enough to let us know
> we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep:
> the dream ghosts of two worlds
> walking their ghost towns, almost address each other.
> I've wakened to your muttered words
> spoken light- or dark-years away
> as if my own voice had spoken.
> But we have different voices, even in sleep,
> and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
> and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
> is freighted with different language, different meanings—
> though in any chronicle of the world we share
> it could be written with new meaning

we were two lovers of one gender,
we were two women of one generation.

Reading this poem, I remembered a grade school trip to the Hayden Planetarium, where a series of scales told what your weight would be on each heavenly body. Each world, we learned, has its own unique gravitational force. We imagined how we would float effortlessly on the moon, how our heaviness on Jupiter would take some getting used to.

The gravitational pull of this poetry, of the world it creates, takes some getting used to. Familiar ideas and sensations take on new weight; familiar words take on new meanings. Light seems denser, water heavier; time moves in a different way. I think one reason why this is so striking in the context of love poems is that it comes so close to the feeling of being in love—the difficulty of re-orienting oneself, the sensation of "my body still both light and heavy with you" (IV), the fresh awareness of possibilities and limitations:

At twenty, yes: we thought we'd live forever.
At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.
I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
and somehow, each of us will help the other live,
and somewhere, each of us must help the other die. (III)

One can think of gravity in another sense as well, for the poetic process has its own downward pull, from idea to image, from passion to paper:

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
What atonement is this all about?
—and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living.
Is all this close to the wolverines' howled signals,
that modulated cantata of the wild? (VII)

Rich recognizes the power of poetry, "imagining the pull . . . ," the modulating force. And yet, the poetry seems to take on a life of its own which breaks through the surface of the words, just as when the lover tells the story of her life in Poem XVIII, "a tremor breaks the surface of your words . . . ." When this happens, the poet becomes again a woman outside the law; she defies the law of gravity, and the twenty-second love poem becomes a *floating* poem:

(the floating poem, unnumbered)

Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine—tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun. Your travelled, generous thighs

between which my whole face has come and come–
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there–
the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth–
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
reaching where I had been waiting years for you
in my rose-wet cave–whatever happens, this is.

This breathtaking poem insists on the physicality of passion, but it leaves you with a sense of floating, and gives new meaning to the lines

to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the upbreathing air.
(II)

The floating poem comes near the book's center, in the midst of a journey (we have left the island of Manhattan for a time, we are on the sea, we travel to another island). It comes between two poems/episodes which place the lovers in postcard settings gone awry. In the first, they cruise between islands, but there is a storm. The poet recalls that they vomited into plastic bags, their insides literally spilling out, and that "I never felt closer to you" (XIV). In the second, they are on a beautiful beach too windswept to lie on. They retreat to another place, where the beds are too narrow for two. Rich places the floating poem between these two moments full of the closeness which comes from resisting the elements together.

If I cling to circumstances I could feel
not responsible. Only she who says
she did not choose, is the loser in the end. (XV)

The theme of choice is crucial in *Twenty-One Love Poems*, the first book of poetry explicitly about a lesbian relationship that Adrienne Rich has published. It is full of a sense of determination. It reads sometimes like a dedication to that poem "which is the poem of my life" (II).

If I could let you know–
two women together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple,
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness . . . (XIX)

Reading this book, you get a sense that it is special, that Rich has thought of it as special, that she wants it to be thought of as special. The very beautiful edition hand-set by Bonnie Carpenter of Effie's Press, a small women's press, reflects great care.

Rich ends *Twenty-One Love Poems* with the conviction that she has chosen: "I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle." Closing her circle of poems, she returns to the image of the poet alone; for in this love poetry, she does not address only her silent lover:

> and I discern a woman
> I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat . . .
> and soon I shall know I am talking to my own soul. (XX)

Sometimes when she addresses her lover, it seems she could as well be addressing her poetry—her poetry come to life. This comes as no surprise, for from the very beginning ("*I dreamed you were a poem . . .*" II), the poet has spoken of her lover and her poetry in a single breath.

> I can hear your breath tonight, I know how your face
> lies upturned, the halflight tracing
> your generous, delicate mouth
> where grief and laughter sleep together. (XVI)

And finally, she speaks to another silent woman—to her reader. For moving through these poems, "where grief and laughter sleep together," the poet and her reader move openly together, in the pull of the poetry's gravity. To re-orient oneself to the force of Adrienne Rich's world is, as we have been warned, not simple. But it is an effort which is rewarded. For whatever happens with us, her world will haunt ours.

BERNICE MENNIS

## IN HER DAY by Rita Mae Brown

Daughters, Inc., Plainfield, Vermont. 1976. 196 pp. $4.50.

Rita Mae Brown begins *In Her Day* with a note "to the feminist reader": "In art as in politics we must deal with people as they are not as we wish them to be. Only by working with the real can you get closer to the ideal." In her novel Brown attempts to capture "people as they are" and, by doing that, to show the major movements and struggles and conflicts of "her day" and our day.

The novel's structure (and plot) is the beginning, middle, and end of a relationship between two women, Carole and Ilse. The two women are opposites, polarities, two parts of a dialectic. Carole is "old" (44); Ilse is young (22). Carole is a professor of art history at N.Y.U. (a professional and an aesthete); Ilse is a waitress at Mother Courage and dedicates herself to political work (a non-professional and a political materialist). Carole is from a poor Southern family (a Southerner who has moved up class lines); Ilse is from a wealthy Boston family (a Yankee who is downwardly mobile). Carole is an extreme individualist; Ilse is for group discipline. Carole teaches medieval art history and looks to the past for meaning, models, values, roots; Ilse rejects her parents, her class, her past, and all past history, and looks to the future for a new language, a new world, and new meaning. The apartments in which they live, the language they use, the friends they have are all in opposition. They seem an unlikely pair. Yet they are strongly attracted sexually and their very differences draw them to each other—the seeming need of each part of a whole to complete itself by incorporating its opposite.

The two main characters serve as pivotal points around which Brown can revolve many questions. The questions are asked, consciously, by the characters: Why does the new political breed of women insist on looking ugly and dirty? What good is art and literature? What is the role of love, physical power, humor, seriousness in the movment and in life? How should meetings be run? What should one do with members who consciously and/or unconsciously sabotage political efforts? Should one "come out" professionally? What is the media's function in radical politics? How do differences in class and race manifest themselves? And, more broadly, how should one lead one's life? What gives life meaning? What are one's values? How can art and politics, beauty and materiality be united? How should one live?

Throughout the novel Ilse and Carole debate each other's framework and perspective. By the end of the novel and of their relationship, each incorporates a small part of the other's vision. Carole wants to do research on women in the middle ages and becomes more of a feminist; Ilse loses some of "her distrust of the beautiful" and reads Mao's positive views on art. But the gap between them is too great. The dialectic has no synthesis. The relationship, now, at this time, is not possible.

Brown raises many important issues and makes an attempt to deal with some of the major struggles of our day, but *In Her Day* does not really succeed as a novel.

Brown self-consciously refuses to make the relationship between Carole and Ilse a powerful, romantic love story. Adele and LaVerne, two two of Carole's friends, have the deep "lover" relationship of the novel, and Adele and Carole have the deep and very meaningful "friend" relationship. Carole and Ilse are passionate lovers who *like* each other. The novel suffers from an *emotional* center—the relationship between Carole and Adele—which is in a tangential, non-central place. But even more of the problem is that the two main characters and their relationship do not really come alive.

Both Carole and Ilse are by their own definition "cerebral" people and, according to Brown, Ilse is "linear," but so are some "real" people and some fully developed fictional characters. The problem is not that they are cerebral but that they are too abstract, too much points to be made rather than characters to be portrayed.

The characters might be people Brown really knows, and events and places and dialogues might have actually happened or may be *literally* true, but a novel's truth is different from a literal truth. In *In Her Day* Brown is more an essayist than a novelist. She has not really used the art form, has not expressed in a concise, concentrated microcosm a broader subjective reality, has not let her characters express, through and in their being, a reality. One can tape a meeting or a dialogue and then transcribe it word for word, or one can listen to a tape of a meeting and then, through art, express the reality of that dialogue or meeting in a few sentences. The latter is the artistic concentration that enables one to evoke a totality while presenting a small fraction. Brown has the literalness and the pointedness of the former, but somehow misses the artistic truth of the latter.

In her first novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle,* Brown is closer to achieving that truth, that fuller vision. As with *In Her Day* all the characters are connected to their historical time and place. But in *Rubyfruit Jungle* the

connections are more subtle and less self-conscious. The class, education, background socialization are woven in a complex pattern so that we see and feel them within the characters. The tragedies and victories of the characters are class and societal as well as personal. What is intellectual and abstract in *In Her Day* is organic and flowing in *Rubyfruit.* We feel the pain, pathos, and humor in dialogues and in action in *Rubyfruit,* whether it's the hysterical humor of the school Christmas pageant in which Molly, as the Blessed Virgin, competes with Cheryl, as Joseph, for the attention of the audience, or the pain of Molly's loneliness when she is thrown out of her home and arrives in a cold and strange New York City, or the pathos of Carrie's life with her insecurities, denials, deprivations, and anger. The complex relationship between Carrie and Molly, with which the novel begins and ends, is an emotional fulcrum which supports a great weight of feeling and meaning.

*In Her Day* has humor, but if often seems forced and tangential to the main movement of the novel. The pain, the conflict of Carole and Ilse, move us, but only slightly. The dialogue, except for some conversations between Adele and LaVerne and between Adele and Carole, demonstrates issues but seems stilted.

A strength of *Rubyfruit Jungle*—and a weakness of *In Her Day*—is the point of view or author's voice. In *Rubyfruit* the narrator and main character are the same Molly Bolt, talking about and viewing her childhood and her life through her own voice and her own eyes. Because there is no split between narrator and main character, there is a unity of focus, tone, and feeling, especially in the first and more successful half of the book.

*In Her Day* has no such unity. Brown's own voice is mainly expressed through Carole, the character whose life and views are closest to the author's. But Brown also speaks through Ilse, Adele, and the omniscient narrator. While it is true that an author, like a dreamer, is always all of her characters, each character embodying part of herself and speaking part of her voice, a narrator and a novel must have a consistency of focus, tone, and style. The omniscient narrator of *In Her Day* keeps changing voice. She is sometimes journalistic, sometimes psychological, sometimes caricaturing, sometimes serious and philosophical. The shift in tone makes it difficult to accept either the serious part or the comic part as real. Characters like Fred Fowler, Carole's chairperson, Olive Holloway, an uncentered, destructive political being, and Martin Twanger, a scared, cringing writer for the *Village Rag,* seem like extreme caricatures, while LaVerne and Adele seem realistic. The result is, I think, a lack of emotional power or depth of feeling.

With all the critical comment, there must still be a "hurrah" for portraits of strong women and non-stereotyped lesbians. In a society that is sexist and anti-homosexual, an artistic expression of women's feelings and lesbians' lives and loves is a political act. Film and T.V. are almost totally lacking in such expression. When Channel 13 presented *War Widow,* a play in which two intelligent, sensitive women fall in love and decide to live together, I was moved greatly beyond the artistic merits of the drama. The extent of my reaction indicated the extent of my deprivation. I had seen on T.V. almost no artistic mirrors, reflections, models, or portraits of women loving women. I realized how much I wanted and needed an artistic representation of my internal reality.

Five years ago literature was in the same position as film and T.V. Then, any expression of lesbian reality was welcomed, because we had been so deprived. Now, because there are more novels and poems by and about lesbians, we can be more discriminating, demanding not only non-stereotyped portraits but also good, meaningful art, art which adds dimension to our life and helps us look at our reality with a greater understanding.

I thank Daughters, Inc. for printing novels which those in power had tried to keep out of print, although I think the price, $4.50, will, in another form, continue the inaccessibility of such art to broad sections of the population. And I thank Rita Mae Brown for *In Her Day,* for strong women involved in important struggles, although I wish that her novel had really captured "people as they are" and had actualized the synthesis which Carole and Ilse could not—the synthesis between politics and art.

VIRGINIA SCOTT

## LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN by Alison Colbert

Women Writing Press, Box 1035, Cathedral Station, New York, N.Y., 10025. 1976. 64 pp. $2.75. (+ .30 postage; checks should be made payable to the author).

Grounded in self, the 22 poems in Alison Colbert's first collection, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, present a young woman seeing others who are, like herself, involved in personal struggle to survive on a daily level. The circle of the title, the dominant image in the book, is the family circle, which for her has been broken by her brother's death; the circle of self; and, perhaps most importantly, the circle of women who are in the process of building toward a stronger private and public community.

Ordered in five sections, the collection is prefaced by a quotation from the Surinamese poet Trefossa: "A real poem is a strife with death." "Strife" seemed initially to me to be a mistranslation. Yet it's a good word to suggest the emotional *cut* of each poem. Not a striving but "strife"—insistent, hard, combative. Whether in poems or prose/poems, the style is short to curtness, clear, direct, accurate. The resistance to making the poems pleasant enables Colbert to speak truth. Literal honesty about the poet's life makes the book startling.

In the first section, nine poems, under the heading "The Conglomerate," she announces her own death as an opener: "My death: Looking for a place to lie down until the earth stops turning." She finds others, not her own. "The Veteran" evokes the struggle to remember the Vietnam veteran "who had picked up the habit/of killing people/of calling people" until he "hanged himself." "Kill," "call," "cut" are the verbs for "strife" in this poem.

I like a number of pieces in this section which record the atmosphere of Colbert's neighborhood on the streets of Manhattan's Upper Westside. "He Said He Was Leaving For Phoenix" captures the violence of the encounter on Broadway, and moves in part like this: "He fucked a woman he picked up at 96th Street, a man called her 'gypsy cunt' and knocked out two of her front teeth, he came to help her . . . . " "Nixon's Bombs Kill People" describes a torn political poster on a Broadway wall: "the posters with the drawing of the white gaunt lined face of a

Vietnamese woman . . . and all over Broadway, merchants have tried to tear them off . . . great gouges in the woman's face, a scar from her neck to her ears . . . . "

The focus in the second section, called "On the Edge" after its central poem, is women writing, women as artists—in strife to remain alive and productive. Diane Arbus, her photographs, her perception, her strife, her death in " 'Women Can't Paint, Women Can't Write.' " The poet's intention is to convey the atmosphere of discouragement that leads women artists to suicide: "she could not write she could not take pictures; . . . you aren't a woman if you write, you're a man, you're a dyke."

"Joan" in "On The Edge" is a woman on the edge either of becoming a suicide or becoming a writer. This poem is a record of a woman who came down from her mountain and tried to tell her story at a conference of women writers. Colbert as the "I" in "On the Edge" is responsive to "Joan." Helpful, while capturing the wildness that suggests they are both "on the edge." Who listens to real voices? "Joan's" wild cry is a new voice. And "On The Edge" is probably the most important poem in the collection.

As part two moved through women in strife with death, and ending that strife, or barely hanging onto the land, part three, "In Steerage," opens out a little, through a model of survival in Colbert's family. The poet's roots are split. Part Irish, part Russian Jewish. She finds no individual models in the Irish roots. "The Beach On The Cape" names the experience she thinks forced her Irish forbearers to emigrate:

> they ate potatoes and lard. In the potato
> famine my ancestors Black Irish died in the lanes hills
> like animals rotted in their houses

"In Steerage" is a long poem retelling the life of Sarah Gold from 1870 to 1920. Colbert probably uses her great-grandmother's life as a model for her own. Sarah Gold came from Russia in steerage alone with her children to this new country. Through immigration, naturalization, through Yiddish into American, and right on into assimilation:

> Sarah Gold. Socialist. Agnostic. Wanted women's suffrage.
> Sound sleeper Saturdays when the kids
> couldn't get her up.

"How Are The Girls Doing" is a four-page poem about a passage through training as a "poet-in-the-schools" in which the school principal asks the supervisor of the trainees (one 42; one 26), "How are the

girls doing?" The poet, seeing the thirteen-year-old girls in the class, reflects on their loneliness, their being stunted, the circle of growth, the continuing repression of women. The sad, fluent poem leads to this image:

> And the snow falls down
> into the greenhouse
> the little girl
> clutches my arm
> and says I am alone
> and the plants freeze.

The poet's life is thrown out of joint by her brother's death in an automobile accident. Parts four and five of *Let The Circle Be Unbroken* move toward and away from this event. "The Way Home" is a thirteen part poem examining, or revealing, the relationships of mother, father, sister, brother from the point of view of the fictionalized "Marian." Strife charges the family circuit. In New York, away from family, the poet as Marian begins to experience autonomy, the making of her own circle:

> Then she sat with other women in a circle reading each others' poetry talking of their families lovers lives. They were plants crocuses coming out of the frozen ground leaves touching each other.
>
> In the park she ran over the brown ground the dandelions knotweed grew she was twenty-three.

She had been making an autonomous circle, away from men, when this making was knocked out of its trajectory by her brother's death.

Colbert's evocation of her mother's grief is powerful:

> She cooked loaded the dishwasher
> turned on the water she had not screamed. But in her dream she was lying on the ground howling a wounded animal caught in a trap dragging cut head and legs across wet rocks trying to find someone she knew. She found her son dead in the rain she dragged him into a cave made him a bier from dried leaves and wept on his chest.

Long lines, resembling prose, except for the empty spaces, denying continuity, gasping for air, not breaths, emphasizing broken lines.

The final section of the collection, "Let The Circle Be Unbroken," articulates Colbert's grieving, and strife with herself. A real life is a strife with death. She says she does not believe in resurrection. Strife with her brother's death takes her to "The Top of the Hill in Maine":

> To climb the hill I thought was a mountain, alone, to climb . . . .
> to leave the rutted trail up the hill scattered with rocks the deep
> green pines above, and walk into the meadow with lichen and knotweed
> with the blackpines behind, to go on, to survive dying, even though
> I have no name to the tiny white houses and green trees below me.

The mourning passage at which the poems stop is a growing passage, the poet alone above the green trees: the circle of self continuing.

SARAH PRATT

## CAMP NOTES AND OTHER POEMS by Mitsuye Yamada

Shameless Hussy Press, Box 424, San Lorenzo, California, 94580.
1975.

Here is a small red book. The line drawing on the cover starts with the figure of a girl child. With a few well-planted lines emanating to the right, the girl child is transformed into an adolescent. Still farther across the page, the figure becomes a grown woman, and then the lines drift off the right side of the cover on the way to yet another stage of existence. Plain black letters above the picture spell out the title–*Camp Notes and Other Poems*. Under the picture, in smaller letters, is written–Mitsuye Yamada.

This cover has a lot to do with what's in the book. The poems inside are clean and simple like the line drawings, and they reflect the various stages of a woman's development. But just as the lines connecting the stages of the metamorphosis portrayed on the cover suggest that the figures are part of a crowd, part of the evolution of generations, the poems within show a life indissolubly linked with the lives of a whole mass of people.

Yamada's strength as a poet stems from the fact that she has managed to integrate both individual and collective aspects of her background, giving her poems a double impact. This quality marks the book itself, as well as the poems inside. The book was written by Mitsuye Yamada and no one else. But two of her children contributed their drawings, her husband contributed his calligraphy, and her parents and grandparents contributed a Japanese upbringing–all of which help constitute the richness of the author's endeavor. And because Yamada is a Japanese-born woman, because her father was taken into custody by the FBI and the rest of her family evacuated from Seattle to a relocation camp in Idaho during the war, her strong portrayal of individual and collective life experience stands out as a distinct thread in the fabric of contemporary literature by women.

In one of the first poems, "Marriage Was a Foreign Country," we hear the voice of a frightened Japanese bride, speaking English with Japanese syntax. The bride leans over the railing of the steamer, searching the crowd of men below for a glimpse of her waiting husband. But she is not alone. The boat is full of "picture brides" who

know their husbands-to-be only by the wrinkled photographs they clutch in their hands. The last two lines express the woman's pride and fear, and they also make us understand how much greater the fear of the "picture brides" must be: "I was not a picture bride/ I only was afraid."

The same kind of movement from individual to collective experience occurs in a poem towards the end of the book called "A Life Story." An older woman tells matter-of-factly of her life, and in the process casually remarks, "My creative energies included growing/ a uterine tumor even." After this, her focus gradually shifts from "I" to "we":

> After seven years of being out of practice
> living with the notion of not dying
> took some getting used to
> but then most of the time now
> we can live with it.

The poems which make up the middle section, the Camp Notes collection, show Yamada at her best. The vision projected in Camp Notes must ultimately be a tragic one. The circumstances were tragic. Yet the tragedy here is thoroughly laced with humor, subtle irony and above all, compassion. A poem called "Block 4 Barrack 4 'Apt' C" offers a good example:

> The barbed fence
> protected us
> from wildly twisted
> sagebrush.
> Some were taken
> by old men with gnarled
> hands.
> These sinewed branches
> were rubbed and polished
> shiny with sweat and body oil.
> They creeped on
> under and around our coffee table
> with apple crate stands.
>
> Lives spilled over us
> through plaster walls
> came mixed voices.
> Bared too

a pregnant wife
while her man played *go*
all day
she sobbed alone
and a barracksful
of ears shed tears.

The first four lines establish the setting—backwards—and bare the ludicrous basis of the whole situation: the Japanese inmates need to be protected from the sagebrush about as much as the sagebrush needs to be protected from them. (In a poem entitled "Harmony: At the Fair Grounds" Yamada uses this kind of reversal again: "Why is the soldier boy in a cage/ like that?/ In the freedom of the child's universe/ the uniformed guard/ stood trapped in his outside cage.") The poem builds on the backwards beginning with ambiguities, so that the reader is never sure who or what is acted upon, but the basic sense of some kind of involuntary and threatening confinement remains the same. Old men, with hands "gnarled" like the "wildly twisted" sagebrush, take "some." Some what? "Sagebrush," of course, but the image of the Japanese families taken from their homes lurks just below the surface. And the "sinewed branches . . . shiny with sweat and body oil" that "creep" around the apartment—they too are sagebrush but not sagebrush.

Once the poem moves inside the barracks, it becomes evident that the inhabitants of the relocation camp share not only common external realities, but also the realities of the soul. Lives spill over each other. A pregnant woman sobs "alone," yet her fellow inmates hear her despair through the thin walls and weep with her.

Other poems in the Camp Notes collection offer glimpses of specific aspects of camp life: a trip to the outhouse; children playing search and rescue in the sagebrush; mess hall discipline; a visit by U.S. Army recruiters to the camp; the author as a girl who "ordered a pair of white/ majorette boots/ with tassels from/ Montgomery Ward/ and swaggered in/ ankle deep dust"; and then the bittersweet experience of freedom—a new life in a big city where one of the blessedly anonymous faces suddenly turns sour, hisses out "dirty Jap" and spits on the narrator's right cheek.

In the poems that follow the Camp Notes collection, the poet speaks with new self-assurance. She knows who she is and she knows she deserves her own place in this society and in the world at large. Probably because of this change in outlook, Yamada occasionally

pushes specific political or social messages, rather than letting life speak its own piece. Poems like "Here," "There" and "Looking Out" (about being a member of a minority), or "Another Model" and "Punch Bag" (about women's liberation) express with wit and insight a striving towards goals that make sense to a lot of us. But still they lack the richness of the Camp Notes poems, which speak so eloquently and yet unforcedly about the same issues.

Other poems in the concluding section of the book create poetic statements more complex than those in the earlier works. "Lifeline" tells of a confrontation, or a non-confrontation, between a woman trapped in a tent and a man with a bicycle pump. It is impossible to say precisely what the poem *means*, but almost any woman could tell you what it's *about*–the feeling of being caught and terrified by some person or thing who logically should have no power at all over you.

One of the best poems, "Silver Anniversary," also occurs near the end. It is about seaweed–seaweed as womankind

> filling castaway bottles
> greening rocks and
> covering your undersides
> with chains of nippled beads
> and warm moss . . .

Seaweed which turns to the reader and says, in conclusion:

> At night we work
> to loosen our tangled limbs
> leave trails of phosphorescent sparks.

Mitsuye Yamada's *Camp Notes and Other Poems* leaves a trail of phosphorescent sparks in our literature for all to see.

LOUISE SCHNEIDER

**SCREAM QUIETLY OR THE NEIGHBOURS WILL HEAR** by **Erin Pizzey**. Edited by Alison Forbes. Penguin Books. 1974. 143 pp.

**BATTERED WOMEN NEED REFUGES, a report from the National Women's Aid Federation.** Rye Express (TU) London. 46 pp.

**BATTERED WIVES by Del Martin.**
Glide Publications. 330 Ellis Street, San Francisco, Ca. 94102. 1976. 269 pp. $6.95 (+.50 postage).

A recurring fairy tale theme is that of the princess or the great beauty who abides the ugliness of the frog, the coarseness of the beast, only to be rewarded for her steadfastness when the curse is broken and the prince is revealed. If fairy tales tell us anything about our psychological heritage, the women described by Erin Pizzey and Del Martin in their books about battered women seem to have been fed on this fantasy.

It is certainly difficult for any woman who has not and thinks she *would* not allow herself to be physically harmed by the man she lives with not to wonder, "why do they put up with it?" I had asked myself this question, and hoped that the books I was to review would help me answer it. And both Pizzey and Martin do attempt answers. But their books are *not* primarily psychological studies of the woman who is beaten. Their answers enter the social and political realms of analysis; they criticize the common psychological analysis which describes women as inherently masochistic, as asking for or provoking the beating (much as the raped woman has been portrayed as asking to be sexually assaulted by appearing seductive).

Recently, while working on this review, I admitted to the psychiatric ward of a general hospital a woman who had taken 14 barbiturates "to get a night's sleep." She described how each night she had barricaded herself in her room with a bureau to protect herself from a man who had begun physically abusing her after they were married. His domination extended to denying her money, buying all the groceries himself (only foods *he* wanted to eat), and forbidding her to play the electric piano—a great source of pleasure for her—because it used up electricity. A friend had convinced her to stay; what would she do at

age 48 if she left? And now she seemed to have reached the point where pills and the psychiatric ward were her only escape. In my hospital work I had never felt so much like leaping out of my professional role as with this woman; I wanted to urge her to leave him—to realize how crazy she now seemed to me—but at the same time, I was struck by the fact that she had been married for twenty years to another man who had never beaten her, and had reached her late forties before any man had abused her. It was difficult to believe that this woman was acting out of an unconscious need for physical brutality.

And yet, according to Pizzey and Martin, this "unconscious need" is accepted by mental health professionals and laypeople alike. This view—and the popular patriarchal mythology which treats with humor the right of the "man of the house" to beat "his" woman to keep her in line—has lent support to non-action from the societal agencies accorded in our culture the responsibility of protecting victims from brutality.

On another day I was working in the Emergency Room carrying *Scream Quietly* in my pocket, when the ER doctor asked me if I wanted to see a woman who was complaining of a sore throat. She was found to have finger marks on her neck—and admitted that they were her husband's. More enlightened than many, the ER physician asked a policeman to talk with her; the patient decided to ask him to arrest her husband. When she left, the cop seemed reluctant to follow through. He explained to me that so many of "these women" drop charges after the arrest is made. I could sympathize with his problem, but became enraged when several other doctors standing around began to joke. "She must have asked for it." "She must like it." "A little beating keeps a woman in her place." I didn't think that these particular men beat their wives, but this woman had tapped a deep prejudice about women *provoking* violence which underlies the quasi-acceptability of violence behind the family door.

It is the underlying premise of both Pizzey's and Martin's books, and of the pamphlet written by the National Women's Aid Federation of England, that no solution short of providing refuges for battered women and their children can even begin to effectively meet the problem of violence in the home. Attempting to deal with the maze of social services, hospitals, and the law is too frustrating and ultimately defeating for women who need immediate safety and care, women who often are fearful of the next attack, or of losing (if they leave home) the only identities they feel they have—as wives, as women attached to men. The books also stress the importance of the company of other

battered women, whose support can lend the courage to imagine a life apart from a husband or "lover".

Because in some respects these three publications approach the problem differently, I will talk about them separately.

Erin Pizzey founded Chiswick Women's Aid in England in 1971. Intended as a meeting place for isolated women, it began to attract women with incredible stories of brutality at home—as Pizzey stresses, women of *all* social classes and races. To Pizzey, theories of willing victimhood didn't account for the facts: she began to receive more than 100 telephone calls a day once word spread that battered women could find immediate help—shelter, food, companionship, a group offering some promise of safety in numbers against a vengeful man who had been left.

*Scream Quietly* is an intensely personal account which, by relating episodes as well as actual letters written to Pizzey, tells stories of women who have nowhere to go if they leave home, who have taken out injunctions against their husbands only to be beaten all the more severely as punishment. One woman describes sitting in a new apartment after fleeing her husband, until the fear of being found became such an obsession that listening for her husband's footsteps seemed worse than the beating. She returned home.

*Scream Quietly* is also a strongly political book (the book of a social activist who herself has been brought before the courts for housing women in inadequate facilities!). It denounces the psychological, social, and legal establishments for refusing to admit their failure in helping these women, and for yet accepting the public funds allocated for the relief of victims of brutality. Pizzey argues that none of these agencies have been able to understand what would make it possible for the battered woman to leave; they blame the woman if she stays, blame her if she leaves, and blame her if she goes back. "Very few people understand this kind of fear. It is the fear of knowing that someone is searching for you and will beat you when he finds you. In the mind of someone who has been badly beaten, this fear blots out all reason."

As for the batterer, Pizzey acknowledges that psychiatry does not yet have methods to help change the psychopathic personality. She feels that the abuser "must be detained and given treatment for however long it takes for him to become safe . . . if psychiatry can't cope, then prison for one man is better than suffering for his whole family." She portrays the batterer as immature, with a low frustration tolerance.

Although many are alcoholics, she feels that alcohol is but an excuse for those who *need* an excuse to be violent. According to many of the women who came to Chiswick House for refuge, most of these violent men need no real provocation; the women are beaten in their sleep, or because the baby cries, because dinner is too early or too late.

Pizzey insists that most battered women are not natural victims. She criticizes psychoanalytic theories of female masochism, which she equates with the popular notion, "she asked for it." Psychoanalytic theory does often suggest that people find themselves in situations because of a need to be there, and has tended to generalize about battered women as well as about women who have suffered rape. Pizzey's abhorrence for the *exclusively* psychological viewpoint is understandable, for the much more salient point is that society has given the battered woman so little means of escape. But in making her point, Pizzey seems to invalidate any attempt to understand the battered woman who never tries to leave. (I found Del Martin's book more satisfying in this respect.)

Pizzey's implication is that psychoanalytic thought has nothing whatsoever to offer the feminist. I believe, however, that it does identify some issues which women need to examine. For example, while theories of female masochism may lead to misconceived generalizations about battered women, they do characterize an aspect of many women's fantasy lives. Women I know have told me of masochistic sexual fantasies, but most would not abide actual physical harm to them in their relationships. Such fantasies do not imply that masochism is inherently female; they could just as well be explained as a mental device for allowing oneself pleasure in a society which stereotypes the male as the sexual aggressor and the female as the passive recipient. This whole issue needs to be explored further.

Pizzey is most compelling when she recounts the kinds of responses battered women receive from society's agencies entrusted with caring for those who are criminally trespassed against. She portrays the English social service as overly invested in preserving the family, and as overly bureaucratized. It is not uncommon for a woman to be even more severely beaten after a home worker visits to "investigate" her complaints. The police are constantly angry at battered women for dropping charges after the arrests are made, and are themselves products of a system which values male aggression. Pizzey criticizes the newer programs—which teach reconciliation methods to police—as inadequate protection in the context of criminal goings-on in

the home. Hospitals have a "bury their head in the sand" approach, sending women home after setting their broken bones. Pizzey reports that women are frequently admitted into mental hospitals, where they are treated for depression or anxiety with tranquillizers or electro-convulsive therapy. She characterizes most doctors, marriage guidance counselors, family service workers, and probation officers as unable to perceive accurately women's needs, or to respond to them quickly and selflessly. Pizzey notes that these officials and agencies now refer their clients to voluntary refuges, and yet do not see to it that these refuges receive an equitable distribution of the funds society allocates for such problems–a situation which affects many women's groups in this country as well.

The pamphlet "Battered Women Need Refuges" is a report from the British National Women's Aid Federation on the setting up and running of refuges. The NWAF was established in 1975, and differs from Chiswick Women's Aid in strongly advocating refuges run without an official supervisor in charge; the women in the refuge, who themselves have experienced battering, are less likely to close the doors on a woman in need, and less prone to establish "conditions" for help. This pamphlet attempts to describe life in the refuges: the limited comforts, the problems of living so close to other women and their children, the strength the women give each other. There is a chapter on starting a refuge, including details of fund-raising and relating to local agencies, the housing department and the social service. The NWAF argues that given the limited financial resources available to them, the refuges must enlist the services of other existing organizations for their survival. A strong statement stresses self-help for battered women, who are often used to dependence and lacking in self-confidence.

As chairperson of NOW's National Task Force on Battered Women/Household Violence, Del Martin has undertaken the task of familiarizing Americans with the extent of wife battery in this country. She uses the word "battery" rather than "beating" to imply the criminal nature of the attack, to counteract the tendency to see violence which occurs behind closed doors as more personal, less criminal. In *Battered Wives*, she documents the stories of refuges already in existence in this country, and offers very specific suggestions to women who wish to ascertain the extent of the problem in their communities, and/or to create refuges.*

*Another useful source is "Working on Wife Abuse," by Betsy Warrior, available from the author at 46 Pleasant St., Cambridge, Mass., 02139, 1976, $1.00.

Like Pizzey, she documents the failure of the social and psychological services and legal systems. The most interesting aspect of her book, though, is her analysis of the social conditions leading to battering. She sees male violence as the natural consequence of women's powerless position, and compares wife battery to rape in that it represents a power struggle. As with rape, the prevailing tendency has been to blame the woman and vindicate the man. Martin argues that sex-role stereotyping leads many women to define themselves only as wife and mother, to believe that living with a violent man is better than living alone. While Pizzey focuses on the social factors which make it difficult for a woman to leave home, Martin acknowledges that many women don't even consider leaving. She envisions a revolution in sex roles as a necessary adjunct to the shorter term solution of refuges. Martin traces the history of marriage, of "woman as possession," and believes that there is cause and effect between patriarchy, the institution of marriage, and wife battery. Citing the observation that so many battered pregnant women are punched and kicked in the belly (implying an unconscious resentment by the often immature husband of his envisioned paternal responsibilities), she suggests that violence erupts from inherent conflicts between personal preference and social expectation in marriage. She suggests feminist therapy, consciousness-raising groups, and physical fitness to help women escape the cage of helplessness once they have left their batterers.

Martin believes that legal measures are potentially liberating: she urges revision of laws concerning the arrest of batterers, as well as reclassification (as a felony rather than a misdemeanor) of violation of the restraining orders often taken out against battering husbands. She suggests legislation providing redress for victims to whom civil servants such as police, abusing their discretionary powers, do not respond. She proposes changes in legal procedures which take effect once criminal charges are brought—changes which would force an attorney to evaluate a battered woman's case on the basis of law, and not on the basis of "the conciliatory precepts of social work." Martin also comments on the importance of several legislative bills, such as the ERA, and points out that some of their major opponents derive direct financial benefit from the maintenance of the status quo.

Despite the promise of the fairy tale, the frog, alas! remains a frog. And the land of happily ever after is but a fantasy. These stories may provide consolation for children who need to feel there is some reward for the renunciation of the immediate fulfillment of their desires. But for the adult to continue to believe in this fantasy can be

disastrous, and not only for the individual, but for society. Martin feels that society *at large* would benefit from breaking down the door of the violent home. "I believe that our society is now plagued with violence because it is allowed to run rampant in the family home. Behind that sacrosanct door, men are allowed to rape and beat their wives. Children learn these lessons from their parents first-hand." These are the children who will be society's future batterers and victims.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

M.F. Beal, *Safe House: A Casebook Study in Revolutionary Feminism in the 1970's* (Northwest Matrix, 1628 East 19th St., Eugene, OR 97403), 154 pp., $4.00.

Robin Becker, Helena Minton, Marilyn Zuckerman, *Personal Effects* (Alice James Books, 138 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138), 86 pp., $3.50.

Patricia Cumming, *Letter from an Outlying Province* (Alice James Books), 79 pp., $3.50.

Barbara Grier [Gene Damon], *Lesbiana: Book Reviews from The Ladder, 1966-1972* (Naiad Press, P.O. Box 5025, Washington Station, Reno, Nevada 89513), 309 pp., $5.00.

Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid, eds., *The Lavender Herring: Lesbian Essays from The Ladder* (Diana Press, 12 West 25th St., Baltimore, MD 21218), 357 pp., $5.75.

Grier and Reid, eds., *Lesbians Home Journal: Stories from The Ladder* (Diana Press), 326 pp., $5.75.

Grier and Reid, eds., *Lesbian Lives: Biographies of Women from The Ladder* (Diana Press), 433 pp., $5.75.

Susan Griffin, *Like the Iris of an Eye* (Harper & Row), 134 pp., $4.95.

Griffin, *Voices* (Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568), $3.00.

Martha Kearns, *Kathe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist* (Feminist Press), 237 pp., $5.50.

Rikki Lights, *Dog Moon* (Sunbury Press, Box 274, Jerome Ave. Station, Bronx, N.Y. 10468), 50 pp., $2.50.

Judith McCombs, *Sisters and Other Selves* (Glass Bell Press, 242 Ashland, Detroit, MI 48215), 48 pp., $2.00.

Jennie Orvino, *Awake* (Milwaukee Feminist Printing Collective), unpaged, $1.50.

Agnes Smedley, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution* (Feminist Press), 203 pp., $3.95.

Renee Vivien, *A Woman Appeared to Me*, trans. Jeannette H. Foster (Naiad Press), 91 pp., $3.50.

Millie Mae Wicklund, *The Marisol Poems* (New Rivers Press, P.O. Box 578, Cathedral Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10025), 39 pp., $1.25.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**SHARON BARBA** is co-editor of *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets* (Pocket Books). Her poems appeared in *Amazon Poetry* (Out & Out Books), and will appear in the spring issue of *13th Moon.*

**ELLEN BASS** lives in Ben Lomond, California, where she teaches writing and facilitates growth workshops. She is co-editor of *No More Masks!* (Doubleday), and author of *I'm Not Your Laughing Daughter* (University of Massachusetts Press) and *Haiti: August 13-28* (self-distributed). Her forthcoming books are *Of Separateness and Merging* and *Japanese Notebooks* (both from Autumn Press).

**MAUREEN BRADY** is a feminist, writer, physical therapist, and teacher. Excerpts from her novel *Edges*, which is still in search of a publisher, have appeared in *So's Your Old Lady, Sibyl-Child,* and *Letters.*

**KAREN BRODINE** typesets in San Francisco for a living. Her work has been published in several magazines, including *Second Wave, Shameless Hussy Review, Room,* and *Ironwood*. A book of poems, *Slow Juggling*, was published by the Berkeley Poets' Coop. Her new book is *Workweek.*

**OLGA BROUMAS** was born in Greece, and now lives in Oregon where she teaches women's studies. Her books are *Beginning with O* (Yale University Press) and *Caritas* (Jackrabbit Press). She was the 1976 Yale Younger Poet.

**WILMETTE BROWN** is an Afro-American housewife and teacher who lived and worked in Africa for several years. During the Sixties she was active in the Black movement on campus and in the community. Today she is continuing in that movement by organizing independently with other women through the Brooklyn-based Black Women for Wages for Housework group, which is part of the International Wages for Housework campaign. She has written a pamphlet on forced sterilization of Third World women.

**ELLY BULKIN** is co-editor of *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* of lesbian poetry (Out & Out Books). She has written about women's poetry for *Majority Report, Big Mama Rag,* and other women's periodicals. She works at the Women's Center of Brooklyn College.

**JAN CLAUSEN**—despite her chronic involvement in various feminist publishing endeavors—is still a writer. Her work (poetry, fiction, and critical prose) has been widely published in the feminist press and elsewhere.

**ENID DAME** has published poems in such little magazines as *13th Moon, Light, WomanSpirit,* and *Response*. She lives in Brooklyn, and belongs to a women's poetry workshop. A chapbook of her poems, *Between Revolutions*, will soon be published.

**SUKEY DURHAM** recently graduated from the M.A. Writing Program at San Francisco State University. She has published in *Amazon Poetry, Hair Raising, Poetry from Violence,* and *Off Our Backs*. Her anthology of women's poems about work will be published by Freedom Socialist Publications sometime in 1977. She works as a groundsperson for the Bay Area Rapid Transit District. At three she reportedly declared to her mother: "McCarthy is a brat!"

**LILLIAN FADERMAN** teaches at California State University at Fresno. Her primary research interest is examining or re-examining lesbian works and authors in the hope of recreating a coherent lesbian literary history.

**ANNE GIBB** is an editor by profession and lives in New York City. She is gay.

**LIZ HESS** teaches college in the provinces.

**GLORIA T. HULL** teaches at the University of Delaware. She speaks, researches, writes, publishes about black women writers, especially poets. She is on the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession.

**POLLY JOAN** is an editor of *Women Writing Newsletter*, analyzing and supporting the growing network of feminist publishing outlets in this country. Her first book, *No Apologies* (Women Writing Press), goes into a second printing soon.

**IRENA KLEPFISZ** has published in numerous magazines. Her collection of poetry, *periods of stress*, is available from Out & Out Books.

**ANA KOWALKOWSKY** lives in California's Napa Valley, and has been writing bilingual poetry since 1970. Her work appeared in *Amazon Poetry* (Out & Out Books).

**SUSAN KRIEGER** is 31 years old, lives in Los Altos Hills, California, works in a bookstore, has a Ph.D. in Communications, did an 800-page dissertation on the cooptation of a rock music station, and has academic and personal interests in how people make sense of themselves and create livable worlds in writing.

**MARINA LA PALMA** was born in Italy and came to the U.S. as a child. She is a member of Kelsey Street Press, a five-woman collective, which has published a book of her translations, *Neurosuite*. She works in the Bay Area doing typesetting and paste-up. Her poetry has appeared in *Invisible City, San Francisco, Choice,* and elsewhere.

**JACQUELINE LAPIDUS** comes from New York. She taught English in Greece for several years, and since 1967 has been living in Paris where she survives by literary prostitution. She has published poems in various little magazines. A radical lesbian feminist, she is active in the movement. Her two books of poems are *Ready to Survive* (Hanging Loose, 1975) and *Starting Over* (Out & Out Books, 1977).

**NAN BAUER MAGLIN** is 35, lives in Brooklyn, and is about to adopt a baby girl. She teaches English and Women's Studies at Manhattan Community College and has published widely in feminist and literary journals. She is currently doing research on Florence Converse and Vida Scudder, two women writers who had a close friendship for over 25 years.

**BERNICE MENNIS**, a former community organizer and college teacher, now is in transition.

**IRENE PESLIKIS** is an artist and a member of Noho Gallery in New York City. She was a founding member of Redstockings and an editor of *Women & Art.* She teaches at S.U.N.Y. College at Old Westbury.

**SARAH PRATT** is finishing a dissertation on nineteenth-century Russian poetry, and was happy to make it into twentieth-century America with her review in this issue.

**LYNNE REYNOLDS** is a twenty-three year old poet and artist. She has been writing for four years and intends to continue in that enterprise for an indeterminate period of time or until the real thing comes along.

**LOUISE SCHNEIDER** is a physician and lives in New England.

**VIRGINIA SCOTT** edits and publishes books at Sunbury, a feminist press. Her first book is *Poems for a Friend in Late Winter* (Sunbury Press, 1975).

**RIMA SHORE** studies Russian literature. Her reviews have appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Drama Review.*

**LORRAINE SUTTON** was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. She now lives in Ohio. She has published in *Ms.*, *Best Friends*, *Latin N.Y.*, and elsewhere. Her first book of poems is *SAYcred LAYdy* (Sunbury Press). Her new poems will appear in a Third-World anthology, *The Next World* (Crossing Press).

**ANN WILLIAMS** is a transplanted Southerner living in California. She is a free-lance writer, and is currently working on a book about the women of the Paris Circle.

## LIST OF PRESSES

*Small-press books by the contributors to this issue of* Conditions *are available from:*

Autumn Press, 7 Littell Road, Brookline, MA

Ellen Bass, 275 Fairview Avenue, Ben Lomond, CA 95005

Berkeley Poets' Coop, P.O. Box 459, Berkeley, CA 94701

Black Women for Wages for Housework, c/o Brown, 100 Boerum Place, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201

Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886

Hanging Loose, 231 Wyckoff Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11214

Jackrabbit Press, 454 Willamette, Eugene, OR

Kelsey Street Press, 425 Hudson Street, Oakland, CA 94601

Out & Out Books, 476 2nd Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215

Sunbury Press, P.O. Box 274, Jerome Avenue Station, Bronx, N.Y. 10468

Women Writing Press, RD 3, Newfield, N.Y. 14867

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