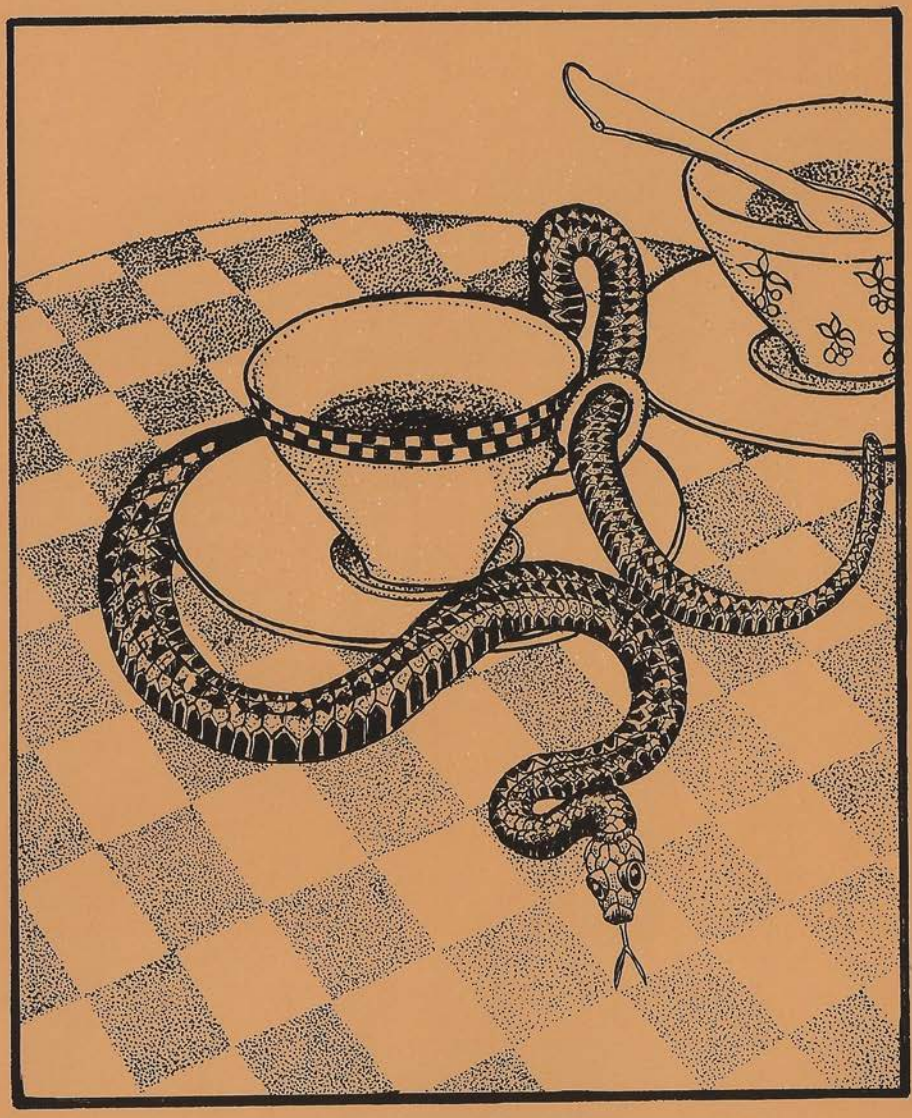
conditions: nine



conditions: nine

a feminist magazine of writing by women

with an emphasis on writing by lesbians

 Subscription rates (three issues): $15 for individuals ($9 "hardship" rate) and $25 for institutions. Single copies: $6 for individuals; $9 for institutions. Bookstore orders of 5 or more receive a 40% discount. Overseas subscription: add $2 per subscription and $.50 for each additional individual copy. Orders should be directed to *Conditions*, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, New York 11215.

Conditions is free upon request to women in prisons and mental institutions.

Conditions accepts advertising at the following rates:
CLASSIFIED ADS: *Women's/gay presses and businesses, small presses:* 25 cents per word, 10 word minimum. *Commercial presses:* 50 cents per word, 20 word minimum, DISPLAY ADS: *Women's/gay presses and businesses, and small presses:* Full-page (4½" x 7") – $100; half-page (4½" x 3½") – $50; quarter page (2" x 3½") – $25. *Commercial presses:* Full-page – $150; half-page – $75. Display ads must be in the form of camera-ready copy. All ads must be accompanied by a check or money order. Copy is accepted at the discretion of the editors.

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Conditions **was founded in 1976 by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.**

Conditions: Nine **was typeset by Diane Lubarsky.**

Distribution Coordinator: Shelley Messing

Office Manager: Cherríe Moraga

Cover: "Snake between Teacups" by Gay Belknap (Gaia) from *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* **by Cheryl Clarke.**

TO OUR READERS:

CONDITIONS: NINE is the first issue to be edited entirely by the new CONDITIONS collective. Although the process of putting out the magazine has been changing dramatically, change in the magazine itself has been much more gradual. We needed time and energy simply to get to know each other, and to devise procedures for coordinating the work of an expanded group. New collective members are still learning the various aspects of how to put out the magazine; old collective members are still learning how not to put out the magazine alone.

We have finally defined areas of responsibility so that each of us works on several committees. We have begun to establish an advisory board; to increase outreach to writers who may not be familiar with CONDITIONS and to visual artists; and to find ways of reducing our dependency on grants through fundraising and increased subscriptions. In order to publish more regularly, we plan to publish somewhat shorter issues.

Although much of the work is now being done by committees, we continue to hold all-day collective meetings at least twice a month to make decisions about the content of the magazine, its politics, and its directions for the future. In our discussions of political issues—often raised by the material we consider—we have found areas where our views conflict. It has been an important step for us to get over our initial politeness and find out that we can yell at each other without threatening our personal and work relationships.

This issue does introduce a new feature: comments by individual editors. In part, this feature is meant to alleviate a persistent and time-consuming problem—dealing with reviews and, in some cases, essays or interviews. We have often found ourselves torn between our conviction that a magazine must bear editorial responsibility for the material it publishes, and our reluctance to influence excessively the views or emphases in work by contributors. By allowing for comment by individual editors—to present an additional perspective on an issue or book discussed in the magazine, or to offer remarks on a piece that we are publishing—we can fulfill what we see as our responsibility without compromising the independence of the women we publish. We expect that these expressions of support or dissent may reflect disagreement on issues within the collective, and among our readers as well. We hope that the author whose work is discussed, or readers who wish to further the dialogue, will

respond; our policy is to send a pre-publication copy of such comments to the author, in the hope of eliciting and publishing a response. We see these editorial comments as further expression of the statement by the founding CONDITIONS collective that, "We have found that we do not always agree or identify with viewpoints expressed by the women we publish, or with each other." As our numbers have increased, so have the opportunities for diversity.

One major change the collective has had to make is to increase our subscription rates. We feel fortunate to have been able to maintain reasonable rates for our readers over the past 7 years. Beginning with issue Nine, CONDITIONS will raise its price to $6 per issue; $15 for individual subscriptions; $9 for hardship subscription; $25 for institutions. Back issues (Five through Eight) remain available for $4.50. CONDITIONS is still free on request to prisoners or women in mental institutions.

Dorothy Allison
Elly Bulkin
Cheryl Clarke
Jewelle L. Gomez
Carroll Oliver
Mirtha N. Quintanales
Rima Shore

conditions: nine

Vol. III No. 3 Spring 1983

POETRY

FICTION

ESSAY/DIALOGUE

REVIEWS

COUTURIER CLOTHES

If it had not been
for St. Vincent de Paul's thift
shop
Gamma Washington could
never have made it through
law school
The green I. Magnin suit that only
needed a new zipper
carried her through the winter of
1970
with a red corduroy coat she bought
for three dollars
it had a stained lining
but no one ever saw that.
The alligator boots
weren't such a good buy
heels too hard and the leather split
behind her calf
but she winced along until spring
and found a pair of black cobbies
like a number nine answer
to a poor girl's prayer
for graduation.

BREAD PUDDING DAYS

Revilla Jackson had heard her mother talk about bread pudding. She knew it was something that very poor people ate back in the South. Her mother was so busy working in a defense plant after she came to California, that she seldom cooked the old hardtime dishes. Still Revilla could remember her describing the pudding. She had tried to teach Revilla, saying, "I don't have no recipe. Poor folks carry their recipes in their head. They just measure out as much as they have. If they don't have enough of one thing, they use something else."

First you need bread. This is one time when stale bread is better than fresh. Break it up in little pieces and poor a few cups of milk over it to soak. Then beat up a couple eggs real good and add some sugar. Mix this and pour over the soaked bread. You can go hog wild with the flavoring. Use vanilla, or cinnamon, or lemon rind, almost any flavor goes good. Don't be skeered to throw in anything you like, little dabs of left-overs, a spoon of apple sauce, a few raisins, a half peach.

The words rang in Revilla's mind like a greeting from the Great Beyond. "Don't be skeered." She realized how frightened she had become since the tire plant closed, and other work in her town had become almost non-existent. She had to face a lot of bread pudding days ahead. Her mother and grandmother had faced them and survived. She would also be able to do so.

THE PEARL CHOKER

The day Jovetta Blaine turned forty she stopped wanting a lot of things. Big shiny cars did not tempt her to envy, as they always had before. She could stand on the corner and wait for a bus quite contentedly. Anger no longer boiled within her spirit. It was the same with clothing. She quit skimping on food to save money for exotic outfits from I. Magnin. She did not know when she made this drastic change in her priorities. Maybe it had been coming on so gradually that she had not noticed. Perhaps she had really begun to change when her baby brother Perryman was killed in Vietnam. Surely no one could be the same after a loss like that, and the world had not been made safer by his death. Jovetta did not attempt to philosophize too much. She simply knew that she had changed for the better. She found herself actually seeing fellow workers as women like herself, and not just names on time-cards to be punched at intervals. She began sharing lunch with an older woman called Bitsy. It became a pleasant game to bring an extra treat for her. Sometimes, it was nothing more than a bran muffin from breakfast or a single brownie. Jovetta soon discovered that no gift of food was too small to be appreciated. Bitsy was crippled in one leg, and did her work sitting down in the laundry. It was reported that she supported her low-life brother, Renfro. He was all she had in the way of family, and she was deeply loyal to him.

Late in October she confided to Jovetta, "Renfro has got a birthday coming up November tenth." Jovetta blurted out, "How about that? My birthday is November twelfth." Afterward, she was sorry that she had spoken, and hoped that Bitsy would forget their conversation. She certainly did not want to obligate her with buying a birthday gift. It would be enough of a drain for her to buy Renfro a present. Winter work accelerated at the laundry, and Jovetta almost forgot about the conversation. She came to work on the twelfth with two pieces of apple pie in a plastic dessert carrier. The boss always made tea and coffee for everyone at lunchtime. Jovetta and Bitsy took their accustomed place at a table beneath the window facing the alley. Bitsy smiled a secret knowing smile and said, "I have got something for you." She took a small white

package from her enormous raffia purse and handed it to Jovetta, insisting, "Open it." Jovetta was shocked. She hadn't thought that Bitsy would remember. Now, she was saying, "Jovetta, I taken down your birthdate. It was easy to remember coming so soon after my brother's birthday." She urged, "Open your package, now." Jovetta carefully removed the silver cellophane bow from the box and tore off the wrapping. She slit the tape on the end of the box and opened it. There on a piece of cotton, lay a pearl choker. Bitsy watched Jovetta's face for a sign of pleasure. She said, "Try it on! I always wanted one of these when I was a young girl." Jovetta felt a flood of joy sweep over her. She snapped the choker around her neck. It was beautiful to be forty, even better to be forty-one today. She picked up the teapot she kept at work, and asked grandly, "Bitsy, shall I pour?"

JACKSON GENES

The last time that Arfata Jackson's cousin came to visit her from Columbus, Ohio, Arfata made up her mind to reduce. The cousin was pencil-slim and wore exotic belts to emphasize her tiny waist. The day Arfata and the family put her on the plane for Columbus, she wore a gold chain-link belt that tinkled musically. Arfata had a sharp picture of her mentally, the slim body in the white boucle dress. No woman who wasn't a reed could get by in an outfit like that. She thought of her own two hundred twenty-five pounds of lard in a tight knitted dress. It made her wince to even imagine such a spectacle. She was silent as she drove her mother and father home. Her father said, "Baby, you kinda quiet, probly because Delisle gone home. I feel kinda lonesome like, myself. You know, almost like somebody died. I always do when I say goodbye to kinfolks." Mrs. Jackson spoke from the back seat. She said, "I wonder if Delisle is in good health. She is as thin as a toothpick, but she eats good." Mr. Jackson expounded, "Delisle's daddy is a tall thin man. She takes after his side and not ours. You cain't do nothing about them genes. Look at you, Arfata. You are a Jackson through and through, cain't ever dispute that."

PAULA ROSS

TELLING

EXCERPT FROM A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS

NOTE: The action in this piece takes place a year after Ida, the main character meets Ollie. Ida's mother, Louise, who shared a duplex in Tyler, the small town where Ollie lives, has just died. Viola is a friend of Ida's from their childhood in Tyler.

"Ida, just what is it you're trying to say to me?"

"I decided not to sell Mama's house. I'm moving back to Tyler."

Viola accelerated as the light changed and the large car lumbered forward. Traffic was thick and sluggish in the rain. Ida stared straight ahead, wondering how Viola could see around the metronomic half-circles made by the windshield wipers. That had always been a mystery to her since she'd never learned to drive. How could you see when the wipers wouldn't stay still? As soon as you had an unobstructed view of the window, the thin rubber-edged blade crossed your field of vision—mechanical predestination, relentless return.

"Well," Viola said, weighing the likelihood that the taxi to her right would suddenly decide to plow across their path to make a left turn. It did. She shrugged, slamming on the brakes absent-mindedly. Again, "Well, I don't know, Ida. Moving back. I guess I just never expected that." Her forehead wrinkled. Ida leaned her head back against the seat.

"Now you can tell me it's none of my business, Ida Martha, which it isn't, except I've known you for more years than I care to count, but did you meet somebody down there?" She looked straight at her.

They had stood, she and Ollie, 12 hours ago, on the edge of that last touch, their bodies prepared to pull away, to begin feeling less sharply. Ollie. A voice leaving footprints of sound just beneath Ida's ear, soft, dissolving. The grumbled warning of the bus motor. Hands lifted only to fall into a wave, good-bye. The bus window reflecting images, each on her own side of it.

Windshield wipers. Wiped clean. Those years swept away, cleanly, with sharp edge of the blade. Her tongue, like that blade. Viola, cleanly wiped from her life by the answer her tongue would give to a simple question. Did you meet somebody down there? The answer, a clean sweep, like the windshield wiper flicking water from the glass in front of them. Can't see the windshield for the blade. All those years for a few words, answer to a simple question.

Viola, my lover is a woman.

"Well, I did meet, but that was before . . ."

"That's kind of what I thought. And you're feelin' like it's not right so soon after your Mama passed. Well, Ida, you're a grown woman. Miss Louise wouldn't want you to hold back for her. Not now. Not after you've been alone for so long."

Not now. When? Not ever? My lover is a woman. Now. A lover. At 41. Holding her. Hold back nothing. Except? Except her name, which you know, Viola. Which you knew before I did. Before I touched her, you knew her. If I say I love her who saves part of herself in grief for the love that came to her first, touched her but couldn't stay? If I say I love her, what then? Her lover was a man and now it's me. Hold it all back.

"She wanted you to be happy, Ida Martha," Viola was saying. "And if you're happy with this man, if he's good to you, she's resting in peace."

A man. Never a man, Viola. Not one. Not once! Not now! What if I tell you my lover is a woman? Can I still be happy? Will my mother still rest peacefully? Will your eyes still hold all those years between us, Viola: If I told you?

"So. What's his name? When do we get to meet him? You gonna bring him up here to New York before you move? You know Sugar and Vincie won't quit 'til you tell us all about him." She negotiated the corner, head turning from side to side, looking for a parking space.

Suddenly she whooped, "This *is* our lucky day, girl!" as a delivery truck pulled away from in front of Tiny's. Viola eased the car into the spot, scraping the tires against the curb. She switched off the ignition. And turned, her face beaming, to look at Ida. It was still raining.

"I'm just so tickled for you, I can't see straight!" And she threw her

arms around her, hugging her close.

A fake. Counterfeit. She tried to pull away. "Viola?" Barely audible. Louder: "Viola! You *can't* meet him! He doesn't *have* a name!"

"I mean, who would have ever thought that Ida Martha Felton would . . . What *are* you talkin' girl?" Viola cocked her head, her eyes narrowing. Puzzled. "Everybody has a name," she said, as if talking to a child. Smiled broadly. "Nothin' worse than a grown woman in love! Don't you know you don't have to be shy with me, Ida Martha? We've known each other too long for that." And she gave Ida's shoulder a little shake.

The tears slid down Ida's face, tracing a warm, wet trail that burned her cheeks, scalded the skin of her chin and neck.

"Oh, Ida, honey, what's wrong? I'm sorry! I shouldn't tease you like that. I'm sorry!" She looked ready to cry herself. Picking Ida's hand up in her own, holding it tightly, she asked, over and over again, "Ida? Ida, what is it? You can tell me. It can't be that bad. Ida?"

Their hands caught the splash of Ida's tears. She could feel them slip between the spaces where Viola's fingers grasped hers, slipping, almost tickling. She had a sudden urge to laugh, to explode with loud shouts and jeers. So absurd. What a joke. Two women sitting in a car in the pouring rain, holding hands like lovers, quarreling. So very, very funny. One crying. Her face, washed like the windshield with the rain spilling freely down the glass, uninterrupted now by the sweeping of the wipers. Funny. She tried to pull her hand away. Viola shook her head.

"No. Now you need to tell me what's got you so upset. Keeping it all inside won't help. You can tell me, whatever it is. Come on now."

Bring it out. Set it down in this small space between them. Let it loose in this big old car, windows steamy from their breathing and the rain outside. Whatever it is, she said. Whatever it is, is so simple. Is a smile. Is a touch. Is her name. To speak and destroy whatever it is, is so simple. If I call it out, is to call down the voices mocking her name, pulling smiles into sneers and that certain look of knowing poisoned by its own certainty, its own self-righteousness, it's own lies. How can you know? What ought to be, calling her name or keeping safe, keeping silent?

You have the right to remain silent.

Why borrow trouble?

Not just the right. It's your duty, your obligation.

No truth is worth that kind of shame.

You have the right, you who are naturally silent.

You, the naturally silent daughter of a naturally silent mother.

Silence is your native speech, your first language. To speak it now costs you nothing. No new lessons to learn, no repetitions of strange words and phrases confusing your tongue. You already speak silence fluently.

Cover your shame with it and remain safe.

Remain silent and you will not be cast out of the circle.

Speak, and you will learn the high cost of claiming your own truth.

If thy left eye offend thee, pluck it out.

With a blade.

Knife.

Dagger.

Bulldagger.

Tell the truth and shame the devil.

Don't *call* me out my name, woman!

Excuse *me,* honey, but I call what I see what it *is.*

Bulldagger

Nothing but a bulldyke

I call out her name.

If thy left eye . . .

. . . *which sees what?*

The face of her friend, worried, eyes searching hers for a promise, both an answer and a question: Everything will be all right. Won't it?

"Viola," her voice breaks. "It's not, it's . . ."

"Not *what*, girl?"

"It's Ollie."

"*What's* Ollie? Ollie who?" Viola sounded impatient now. "What kind of foolishness are you talking about anyway?"

Would she scream? Would she become the shame that sat ready to surround her as soon as she spoke it? Would her hands, lying like lies in Viola's own, become fists, furious with pain? Her tongue, like a blade, sharp with the sound of her whose name unspoken is soft as breathing. Give voice to it and the dagger gouges out the eye of the beholder. What's in a name? She is. Don't call her out of it.

"Ollie Green. She's why I'm moving back to Tyler. Most of the reason. I love her." The last words sounded dry and empty, falling between them like bored curses. "We love each other." Like breathing. "We're lovers." Nothing.

Rain continued to spatter the roof of the car, running in rambling streams down the windows. Viola's hand felt cold and heavy. Gently Ida returned them to her. Closing her eyes, she could still see the numb stillness that froze Viola's face in between the shock, the anger, the But why? the Who *are* you? the How *could* you? that finally yielded to the need to feel nothing.

Ida reached behind and unlocked the back door. Taking her purse, she stepped out of the car, closed the door and lifted her suitcase from the back seat, locking and slamming that door behind her too. Gripping the suitcase handle firmly, she walked slowly through the rain to her apartment.

LETTER TO JUDITH

This morning, old poems
seem no better than junk mail,
where I advertized for love
or a way out. For the last month,
I kept looking up
from books, coffee, conversations
as if this snap of the door
meant a turn in season.

Black wool, winter coat,
Demeter, pale as the first crocus,
rimmed with the shiver
of a morning cool,
Your grey eyes
search us.
Have you come for me?

SOLSTICE BLANC

Mother brisks back hair,
weaving between vines.
Her head disappears
into the mesh, the tangle,
she reaches for the largest grapes
hanging on inner branches.
Her hand cups them,
six, seven,
they brim in her palm,
and then the canvas pouch.
Her motion gentle,
her mother and two daughters
bend in this ritual,
their bags slung over shoulders.
Each year they glean the added rows.
Each year they hum the same songs,
birds in different
corners of a meadow.

ANOTHER YEAR'S TURNING

I am drawn
to what is delicate in moonlight,
drawn to this Japanese red leaf maple.

Fine burnt-red leaves nudged
down by sliding, gathering, beads of water.
All hedged together,
tip to tip, a mesh

of palmate leaves,
arc the supple twigs,
as if each branch
were dowsing for ground water.

A balance, leaves, stem,
branch, root and water–
water skims leaf to leaf
down the runnels

of the mid-rib,
holds lastly to the serrate edge,
then to the ground,
to the thick grass.

LAYING A FIRE

She cranks open the damper,
to a sput of thin cedar
and spruce in the uptake.
A glaze of smoke
backs out of the flue
into the room. The orange light
of this seed fire draws
her face from the dark morning.
She blows at the base
of kindling. Her legs fold
under her, bent
as if drinking from a stream
the hollow
of her deep breath in,
the thrull of the air in the flame.

The cast-iron stove taps
a four-four beat
as the heat rises;
she stacks in a log.
The top pieces, spruce
heavy with rain, hiss.
She clamps the door closed, stands.
The morning chill sifts off
to the outer rooms.
She comes back to bed.

MORNING ETUDE

for Judy

A blue heron lifts
from the hill-enclosed bay.
A fog laps back
on the rock
the heron left.

Near the window,
she turns to the coming morning
The line of her body
follows that rising ease,
the blue arc of wing
darker than water.

She flattens a palm
to the lead-glass pane,
as if a touch
would hold the heron.

ON DISPLAY

1.

I prowl the displays
in the half-light:
Haida, Tlingit,
Makah, Nootka,
Kwakiutl, Skagit,
and I am home.
I squat in front
of these cases.
My eyes pour memories
in the smooth lines
of cedar, the black and red
of a dancer's mask.
Deer hooves sewn on leggings.
The paws of bear
gripping the ribs
round a dancer's coat.

My leg bounces,
I wrap the hoof legging
around it. I rise ready.
I stamp my foot
to the "chock, chock"
of bone. Black wool
and the crimson bear
crawl onto my back,
a ride to the spirits.
After a hundred years,
inside this mask
I can still smell cedar.

2.

One day, you stop
in front of my case;

and I notice I work,
with my hands.
Rough out a canoe
with an axe.
Tooth and eye
shape with knife
and adze. Wood
whorls around me
to the floor.
Shavings spatter
my legs and curl
from a plane
set to alder.

If you stay
long enough,
there will be masks,
and canoes with gunnels
as sleek as killer whales.
Chest plates inlaid in abalone,
the swirl of Mother Raven's eyes.
Such work knots backs and fingers
with years, brings a deep
grain to the face,
turns a heart to yew.
Such things last.

VACATION

The Pennsylvania hills are a grainy blue-gray of four o'clock fog over forests of pine and spruce. After driving all night I feel worn paper-thin, transparent, easily penetrated by the color. Headlights float toward me in pairs through the fog, sheeting the windshield just for an instant with a yellow dust. Fatigue has finally crystallized into a fragile exhilaration.

To keep myself awake I've been singing harmony to country music. A little embarrassed, even though I'm by myself, at how satisfying it is to belt out the lyrics of homesick ramblings, unheroic homecomings, apologetic goodbyes. The country airwaves dissolved into static somewhere in Ohio, but from inside the melancholy calm of that music I listen now to drab reports of football, the Presidential campaign, an earthquake on the other side of the world.

I've been on edge ever since I left Seattle. Afraid to see my father again after seven years, afraid to travel ten thousand miles by myself, afraid to handle a half-ton truck in the narrow streets of eastern cities. On that fear I rattled and shook across the midwest, steered through the dusty detours around St. Louis at rush hour, my head aching from sunlight and exhaust. But in crossing three borders in one night I've burned through most of my fear.

In five or six hours I'll be in Boston. Where, after breakfast and a nap in back, I'll have to keep my promise to Ruthie to try to unearth some information about her mother. Exactly the kind of task I dislike most: contacting a list of strangers and agencies by telephone. But I couldn't refuse. There I'd be in the same city where, back in the fifties, Ruth's family sank out of sight—her mother dead, her father indifferent—pitching her into a weary round of foster homes, maiden aunts, sympathetic priests, girls' homes, proprietary boyfriends, until she finally came to rest in the feminist community. It's Ruthie's philosophy that the whole universe is motivated by a longing for connection. The least I can do to help the universe along is to trace the loose ends of my closest friend's existence.

But after that I'm off to tangle my own loose ends among the strangers in a women's bar. I'll have a beer, observe the habits of the local lesbians, read the bulletin board, play space invaders like I did in other bars in other states. After all, this isn't just a sight-seeing adventure, or a visit to my father to relieve my guilt, but a chance to shake my usual persona. Looking back at my life in Seattle from here is like looking at a slapstick routine in a pool of light from a dark seat in the back row. I can watch myself back there acting out those exaggerated parts–battle-weary radical, competent printer, devoted lover. I've escaped them. But I'm already worried that I'll slide back into adolescent identities when I get to my father's house–playing self-righteous zealot to his scoffing realist, for instance. Ruthie doesn't know how lucky she is to be an orphan.

Several hours later I'm standing dutifully in a Boston phone booth.

"Yes, is this the Robert Parker residence? I'm calling for a friend who asked me to try and track down her relatives while I was in the Boston area. The Robert Parker I'm looking for had an aunt named Annette. . . . Oh, okay. Sorry to bother you."

I stare at the bleary pane, the blotches of old chewing gum on the sidewalk, the invitations ("for a good time call . . .") scratched into the blue paint, and back to the barely intact phone book propped open to the R. Parkers. There must be fifteen of them. So far I've called three. I don't have to feel embarrassed at calling wrong parties; it's not my own past I'm pursuing, after all. I just read through the speech scribbled on my notepad, shifting jerkily through a series of inflections (cheerful, urgent, obsequious) meant to personalize my businesslike phrasing. As happens when one is straining to be casual, I occasionally choose an inflection that doesn't match or oddly accentuates my meaning. I have the uneasy sense of carrying out the letter rather than the spirit of Ruthie's request.

I've never been any good at talking to people I don't know. One of my first jobs was selling encyclopedias door to door. In the twilight of my first and last afternoon I wandered in a field at the edge of a prefabricated neighborhood, crying and chewing on a blade of grass. And now I'm learning the loneliness of the telephone solicitor. Faking intimacy, sniffing for insecurities to exploit in newlywed wives. Only what I'm selling is not a magazine subscription or a miracle spot-remover, but an opportunity to be the cousin of a thirty-six-year-old lesbian with

a bad case of despair. So what's the alternative? An ad in the paper? "Jaded dyke. Has exhausted Christianity, art, academia, revolutionary theory. Seeks family situation, nuclear okay." I dial the next number.

" . . . an aunt named Annette who was married to a man named John Clarke. . . . Pardon? Well, no, not exactly . . . no, no inheritance, you see . . . well no, but . . . hey look, why don't we just forget it, okay? Fine, goodbye."

Don't get so uptight, mister, no one wants to climb up your family tree. Damn. Maybe I should invent some credentials. Mr. Parker? This is the missing persons investigator with the Ace Detective Service. I'm tracing one Robert Parker, nephew of Annette Parker McLeod, late mother of my client, Ruth McLeod. I was hoping you might be able to assist me, etcetera. No, I'd never be able to pull it off. Persistence I've got, flair no.

Dialing another Parker I'm reminded of winding up a talking doll I asked for and received one Christmas. I had to hide my disappointment that it repeated the same ten inane lines over and over. I was embarrassed to come up against such a limited world. But then and since I've done my best to pretend that the world is panning out exactly as I expect. Just the opposite of Ruthie who reacts with an outrage fine and flagrant to each of the world's tacky and sadistic little surprises. Difference in temperament, I guess, or class and ethnic background. I descend from soft-spoken Mennonites, she from fiery Irish Catholics. Anyway, she's right. It's the world that ought to be embarrassed.

Ten Parkers later I'm getting this curious sensation that I'm inquiring about someone who's never existed. Maybe Ruthie simply appeared in the world without parents. That might explain her quality of being beyond social conventions, her way of talking in rhyme to comfort herself, or threatening to beat up maitre d's, or lacing her hiking boots with ribbons. But if Annette McLeod never existed, then who was it who talked the corner grocer out of the life-sized cardboard Howdy Doody, who took Ruthie to tap dancing lessons when she rebelled against ballet, who listened patiently from a rest home bed to one elephant joke after another, and who one night wouldn't wake up but only thrashed about no matter how hard Ruthie shook her, until finally the five year old had to make her way through the monster-thick darkness to the bathroom by herself.

By now Annette McLeod isn't the only one whose reality is in question. After being sealed away in this glass box for nearly an hour I am

feeling less and less real myself.

Well, bureaucracies are usually reassuring on the question of existence. I look up the number of the cathedral that was named in the death notice. I dial, then hold while a secretary checks the files. Yes, the funeral services of Annette McLeod were held there in 1954. No, survivors are never listed. Yes, there was a burial at St. Joseph's cemetery. No, that's all the information they have.

A little flag of victory waves in a blank landscape. Annette McLeod may never have lived–you can't take deductive reasoning too far these days–but she definitely died. I feel my forehead lift itself philosophically out of its concerned frown. There's some relief in failure after all. From here on in I can pursue Ruthie's past as a private ritual instead of as a civic service. I maneuver myself out of the phone booth, grateful that the door doesn't stick. I've never trusted those folding doors.

The clerk at the cemetery is very helpful. Together we bend our heads over the register. At first there seems to be no listing.

"There has to be," I insist.

"What was the married name again?"

"McLeod."

"Oh *here* it is," the clerk says cheerfully. "It's unmarked, John McLeod."

"But why is it under her husband's name?"

"Oh because he's the owner of the plot," she explains reassuringly. "Now go straight through that gate, then left down lane 145, and the grave will be at the back of the row that begins with Sheldon, in between Mary Anne Wheeler and the Courtney monument."

I'm beginning to notice the effects of too little sleep. The alertness, the sensitivity I'd felt earlier to sound, color, has dulled into a dazed indifference. Time passes in slow-motion with a soft buzz. The bustle of people out on the sidewalk flickers like an old newsreel in the gray light. Overhead the wind moves enormous banks of low clouds laboriously from east to west. The blue spaces have all been swept into a heap in one corner of the sky. Cold and sweaty in my synthetic raincoat, I eye the sky anxiously, trying to gauge when the light will strengthen and for how long. The sun is sunken and pale.

Left of 145, there's Sheldon, Mary Anne Wheeler, the Courtney monument, it should be right here somewhere. I step back, study the close-cut grass. "It's unmarked," the clerk had said. Only I hadn't understood. Didn't realize that a person would be put in the ground without any marker at all, without even a clerical scrawl in that office ledger that recorded the owner but not the owned.

I'm too overwrought, too exhausted, too frustrated with my own naivité to control the urge to cry. Battlement, fury, and an overwhelming sense of unfairness crash through me like a series of natural disasters, leaving me leveled and disoriented. The landscape has heaved itself up and lowered itself again—altered. The sky and grass look somehow different—tinted, washed-out, foreshortened. And I feel a new variety of volcanic rock hardening inside me. I give Mary Anne Wheeler a wordly nod and walk back to the lane. But I still feel restless and seething. The new rock hasn't cooled.

On an impulse I hunt around under the hedges until I find a jagged hunk of concrete. Then rummage in my backpack for the paper bag from the Hallmark store. Inside is a jar of gold leaf, a jar of glue, a packet of sequins, a paintbrush, and a page of angel stickers. I bought these to make a card for Ruthie who wrote jokingly that she was thinking of rejoining the church, since she needed to belong to something. It used to be enough to belong to the lesbian-feminist community. But more and more the lesbian-feminist community is like any other institution within the mainstream culture. Like a lodge, say, or the art world, with its injokes, its prejudices, its style of dress. And in these days of political disenchantment it's losing members right and left to social clubs with more immediate appeal. Half of the people she knows, Ruthie wrote, are proselytes for the latest fad in human potentialism and the other half are trying to get rich through chain-letters. I had no argument to make. I just intended to send a little congratulatory card—"so glad you've seen the light" or something along those lines—with a sequin cross and maybe some pop-up angels.

I paint "Annette Parker McLeod" in gold on the flat side of the rock and wreathe it with pictures of cherubs. Then I carry the rock back down the row and place it carefully between Mary Anne Wheeler and the Courtney monument so that it's facing the sky at a 45 degree angle. From some of the newer graves I take a few irises and a rose and set them in front of the rock. I take six photographs of this makeshift gravestone from six different angles. With any luck the gardener is a whimsical ex-hippie and will leave it for a week or two anyhow. Inside me the new

understanding is now easily as hard as the Courtney monument.

That night in the truck, shadows pulse forward and back from the objects casting them in the dim candlelight. To reclaim your past after over twenty years of battling its claim on you . . . Ruthie's father wrote her last support check when she was sixteen; he hasn't contacted her since. At twenty-six, intending to die, she burned boxes of letters, photos, school papers. And now she's scrounging for bits and pieces of her past in the obituary sections of old newspapers.

Surrounding me in this truck are objects that I saved out of the shipwreck of my childhood, or collected since as a sort of hope chest for the future–a one-eyed raggedy anne, a patchwork bag . . . and every sand dollar, every last valentine is essential. They are ballast. Without them I would drift off–like Ruth. I used to wonder how the prim Christian woman with the sprayed bouffant and stiff wrists in an early sixties photograph had become that wild one, her hair scraggly, her eyes green wounds, her face beautifully wrinkled. She had simply drifted off, maybe at first wondering if anyone would notice, but finally whirling away in defiance.

Three days later I'm in western Massachusetts. A low-hanging fake-colonial lamp lights up the dining room. With my forearms resting on the table, my chin on my forearms, I can see the dirt worked into the grain of the yellow vinyl tablecloth. To my right is the tiny galley-like kitchen, its yellow formica layered with black grease; behind me is the twelve-paned picture window looking out on the autumn colors of the Pelham hills; next to the window is a painting of Jesus, long wavy brown hair, smooth brown cheekbones, glistening brown eyes; above that a wooden cross. Opposite me is a fiberglas curtain filtering the evening sunlight, next to that the china closet stuffed with dusty crystal and old letters, beyond that the living room with its vinyl-upholstered sofa, caned chairs, portable tv atop the baby grand, the round coffee table, its water rings hidden by stacks of magazines, everything from radical weeklies to the Jehovah's Witness newsletters that no one read, delivered by an old man who used to linger for long discussions with my mother about the state of the world. And over the fireplace the mantelpiece displaying photos of the children at all ages, seagulls on pins stuck into driftwood, the plastic creche.

This is my father's house. Once my mother's also. Once mine. But

first and always my father's house. He built it himself on a professor's income in the late forties. And it is economical to say the least. With its tiny low-ceilinged rooms made still smaller by the amazing amount and variety of clutter, it houses one person far more reasonably than it housed seven, especially since there is now no one to tell my father to keep the debris of his ever-multiplying hobbies off the tables and chairs. Much as he must be lonely, he seems comfortable here.

I, on the other hand, am not. Not in these cramped dingy rooms. And neither was my mother. For as long as I can remember she nagged at my father to fix this, finish that. In better times with most of the kids gone and two incomes she tried to persuade him to sell this house and buy a big old roomy farmhouse where she imagined living out her old age with lots of nonviolent activists and miscellaneous eccentrics trailing in and out. And he pretended to go along with the idea. I can remember excursions with real estate agents to remote broken-down farms with duck ponds and staring children. One of my father's old-fashioned ideas about women is that they require humoring. Others: they like to be bearhugged from behind, their personalities correspond in some way to their hair colors, and a man should defer to their criticisms as he would to bad weather, taking shelter while it lasts, and going about his business afterwards.

My mother didn't live out her old age. My father is living out his like a second childhood. Raised on a farm in New Hampshire, he paid his dues to society by chalking engineering equations on blackboards for crewcutted collegians headed for jobs in the defense industry. Now he keeps purebred horses, taps his sugar maples, grows organic vegetables, and sells honey to a steady and well satisfied clientele.

I feel no bitterness toward him anymore. I'm too much like him: reclusive, hard-working, apt to be too absorbed in my projects to pay close enough attention to my relationships. I used to resent his self-containment. Now I feel fortunate to have a parent whose sense of himself in no way rests on what I do or don't do. Moreover, his daily routine is very grounding; it seems to be able to absorb any excessive voltage in family interactions. Up at six, work outside till noon, eat lunch, fall asleep behind the newspaper, feed the horses at dusk, make dinner, watch television or read, go to bed. Visiting children don't alter the routine much until after dinner. Then the television and books are interspersed with sporadic conversation often shouted from room to room.

Despite the progressive politics that move him to subscribe to leftist

magazines and make tax-deductible donations to liberal candidates, my father has the social and moral conservatism often attributed to rural New Englanders. In the company of my mother's rather wide variety of friends, and his own wide variety of children and children-in-law, he would stand, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, hands in his waistband, visor cap tipped back on his head, smiling and nodding, politely but skeptically, making noncommital comments ("oh really?" "I don't know about *that*") and secret moral judgments.

But this time he seems different. His moral stubbornness, which I've finally come to appreciate, is giving way to openness and curiosity. Perhaps because I am a sort of "prodigal daughter" marked out by my long absences, my lesbianism, and my failure to develop a career. Or perhaps because we are both remembering the last time I was home, when my mother died—a time charged with uninvited revelations: my father's affection for his children, my lesbianism, one brother's problems with women, another's bitterness toward society, everybody's vulnerability. These revelations managed somehow between hospital visits which, if I leave aside the individually tissue-wrapped memories of each word and look from my mother, consisted of smoking menthols while leafing through *Reader's Digests* and medical journals in the lounge, and chewing and chewing away on insipid cafeteria food, delaying each swallow because I wasn't hungry and my throat was tight with fear.

For whatever reason, my father is less reserved this visit than he's ever been. He explains to me his opinion that homosexuality is biological, deciding that since I don't find men physically repulsive I must be bisexual. He asks to see a picture of Ruth, then expresses surprise that she's not a brunette: "I thought opposites attracted." He wonders if I'm worried that Ruth will be "unfaithful" while I'm away. Cringing inwardly at this wording, I try to explain that Ruthie and I expect each other to have other lovers. This information seems to intrigue him even more. Before he can think of another question I ask to see the picture albums. He obligingly pulls them out of bookcases and closets. He comes back with a pile of four or five scrapbooks, most of which I've never seen before. Standing over me he explains the snapshots as I turn the pages.

"Those were my buddies in the fraternity house. And that was during initiation. They made us wear ladies' lingerie to soccer practice." When I express surprise, he tells me more initiation incidents, grinning widely in fondness for the old days. Actually what shocks me is not the initiation but the fact that he is telling me any of this.

"That was a girl I went out with my sophomore year. A red-head.

"And I went out with *her* a few times. Not really my type. Later she married the captain of the football team."

On the next page is a picture of my mother. As beautiful as ever, but subdued. Her dark eyes, without their rhapsodic sparkle, look religious and resigned.

"She was still pretty broke up over Joe then," my father says. "He wanted her to run away with him but she—" he yawned in embarrassment—"She didn't believe in sex before marriage, you see." He glanced meaningfully down at me. "So, Joe got another girlfriend."

"Oh yeah? She told me they quarreled because he said he'd kill his father for communism."

"Oh is that what she said? Well maybe so, maybe so. But he was a real two-timer, what they call a ladies' man, you know.

"And that's a picture of your mother and her friend Anne. They were real close. They used to do everything together. In fact they even used to sleep in the same bed." He squeaks a little on the word bed, having gone up an octave to hit it. "I couldn't understand that," he mutters as if to himself. He looks honestly bewildered.

So that's Anne. She substantiates his theory of opposites by being blonde. My mother told me about Anne when I announced my lesbianism. They met at a summer resort where they both waitressed. "For years there was no one else," my mother said. They understood, consoled, fascinated, and were jealous over each other. "Now I can see that the sexual element could have . . ." my mother said cautiously. But the desperate ups and down of another lesbian couple had persuaded her that sex wasn't good for friendship. She referred to this other lesbian couple once when I was a child. Funny. She neglected to tell me how intercourse worked. I had to get that from paperbacks. But she did tell me what a lesbian was. At the time I pretended not to be interested. Yet I've never forgotten that conversation. It took place in the playroom with the cowboy wallpaper where the underside of the bunkbed was crayoned with graffiti protesting brotherly abuse. ("Tom is a dick," I printed when I was seven or so, misspelling duck.) I remember because I busied myself by picking up my toys.

The photograph of my mother and Annie is striking. They're standing dressed in thirties' bathing suits at the edge of a pool. Anne slouches

casually, yet challengingly, her hands on her hips, one foot crossed behind the other, a slight tilt to her head. She contemplates the camera with a calmly amused, asymmetrical smile. She has the sly look of someone who has just said something very witty. My mother has one arm securely through Anne's and is leaning sideways at a precarious angle. Her head is thrown back in unselfconscious laughter. She is looking a little adoringly over at Anne. I'm not sure I've ever see her so spontaneously happy and abandoned.

"Oh she left something in her dresser for you," my father says. While he's out of the room, I hide the photograph under a stack of pictures he's already given me. It would be hard to explain why I want that one.

He comes back with a small white envelope. On it is written, "For Lyn, because of the poetry."

I open it later in the bedroom I had to myself in my teens. Inside are several poems by my mother's communist boyfriend. They are very romantic; one is a love poem to my mother, others grieve over the ills of the world. They seem like the kind of poems the CP might have tolerated in a new recruit, figuring he'd outgrow the bleeding heart period. They are earnest, sad, urgently written in a large scrawl. All in all I rather like them. I can't help contrasting them to a letter I saw once written by my father to my mother shortly after they were engaged. Most of it was an inventory, down to exact quantities, of household goods he had acquired from his father's farm. The rest of it was a list of what they still needed. He signed off with love.

In the bottom drawer of my old bureau are my own adolescent poetry and diaries. Skimming through them I'm embarrassed by the self-obessesion, the chatterbox rhetoric. "And so dear diary I've decided that life is meaningless," etcetera. Still, they hold keys to myself, and to my early passion for my mother. I'll read them later. For now I pack them in a shopping bag along with the poetry, a packet of letters, a turn-of-the-century edition of *Little Women* which I read ten or twelve times as a child, the snapshots, five 1920's silver dollars (birthday gifts from my grandfather), a jug of my father's maple syrup, a few paperbacks, and a palm-size music box that plays "The Blue Danube," give or take a few notes. Tomorrow I'm going to New York for a few days. Then I'll be taking a southwesterly route back to Seattle.

The next morning I take a picture of my father on the front steps, him grumbling that his face will break the camera. Then I climb into the

truck and embrace him awkwardly through the rolled-down window. As I back out of the driveway he says, "Not a very long visit after seven years."

"Oh I'll probably be back in a year or two," I say.

"Oh you will." It isn't a question. It's said in the matter-of-fact tones of a placid disbelief. He stands, whistling nervously, hands in the pockets of his baggy workpants. As I drive off he pulls out one hand to wave abruptly before turning away.

On my last day in New York I walk into the Pink Kitchen for breakfast. Banging screen door, dirty pink stucco walls, a framed photograph of Martin Luther King, another of J.F. Kennedy, the smell of pork fat.

"What would you like, honey?"

Hotcakes with syrup, eggs and potatoes, side of greens, biscuits, coffee. While I wait I hold the Times in front of my face, unnecessarily since I won't be noticed anyhow. But I'm not used to the wonderful indifference of New York City. It's not that New Yorkers keep distance out of politeness or a sense of propriety the way Seattleites might. It's just that they're too used to eccentricity to react with curiosity, rudeness, or even interest. You can look like a bulldagger and order a five-course breakfast, or you can wear a cap with a stuffed lizard leaning out over the visor like the man at the next table, and who cares? Living in crowds, New Yorkers learn how not to collide. The woman who brings my order has no quick assessments clicking in her eyes. She smiles and moves back to the counter to laugh and talk with a circle of regulars.

Another thing I like about New York is the mix of so many ethnic and racial groups. In places, at times it's possible to have a visionary flash of a relaxed cordiality among cultures. Of course this is the Village. From the pink walls echo the ideals of the sixties, the integrated crusade for civil rights with its shining knight.

So many parts of this city stubbornly keep up the past. In Seattle everything seems to be updated at a steady pace. Just now Seattle is overrun with new-age restaurants serving costly holistic meals amid potted fig plants to young white skiers and hydroplane pilots. Art galleries are taking over skid row. New York is so old; with any luck corporate renovation will never catch up.

It's midafternoon when I walk back to my parking place on a tree-shaded corner. Right away the air in the truck has an impersonal smell—like the air on the street. And then I notice: the guitar is gone. I look around. The camera, a box of tapes—missing. I panic: what about the shopping bag, the photos, the poems, the journals. Gone. Stunned I stare just past the leafy reflections on the windowshield. I feel as if I'm struggling to surface after a faint. Frantically I go back along the chain of events looking for a break anywhere. The fact of physical absence is so plain, so unarguable, yet so hard to grasp—like a mathematical concept.

I search through the garbage cans within a five-block radius. What would a junkie or scavenger want with a schoolgirl's diaries? They sure wouldn't bring much on Canal Street. After a couple of hours I give up and go back to the truck with nothing to show but an old pair of cowboy boots that fit perfectly.

Mine is not the first past to disappear in this city. What about the homeless women whose memories are dulled with fatigue from the daily trek from the train station to the Catholic charity. I've only lost my paperwork after all. But I only want to get on the road, to build up enough speed to lose this hollow feeling, or be one with it. One rainy day years after my mother died I remember thinking, "She won't reappear in her body any more; she'll only dash herself in drops of water on my windowpane." Now I long for that kind of existence myself.

It's the weekend of the runner's marathon, of the Reagan rally in Chinatown. Going to buy Chinese pastries for the trip, I have to squeeze through the crowds. It's the weekend of fifty-mile-an-hour winds. And one of those gusts blew away the frail evidence of my mother's life and my own childhood that I so carefully collected. Gathering those mementoes, I realize now, was about as pathetic as piling my mother's bones in a Boston graveyard when the medical students were done with them. It's as if I was assembling pieces for a little mosaic shrine where I could kneel and ask for blessings. And now my inner life has been violated, my sacred trinkets stolen.

I think of the snapshots and poems rifled through, snickered at by street-tough young men. I hope they pocketed the silver dollars and dumped the rest of the bag in some underground stairwell. Then maybe some bag lady will spy it and carry it over her elbow back to wherever she sleeps. She'll read parts of the diaries, eat the maple syrup, put the letters and poetry aside, thinking, poor girl. She'll know how it is, that you can't take your past with you, but in this tossing plunging world

you may end up with someone else's in your lap.

Within three days I'm in Arizona. I feel as if my grip on life has quietly vibrated loose. So that I have a vague urge to detach myself from the world, not violently, but gently the way a child's curled hand might let go of a piece of furniture if she were enchanted by the sweet blue of the sky. But this feeling is not advisable when you're driving seventy-five miles an hour at three in the morning having slept six hours out of the last thirty-six.

All day I've been on this highway, brown-pink with the brown-pink of the southwestern earth. All day I've passed the bodies and tracked blood of coyotes, the deer carcasses tied onto the tops of pickups, the curly-haired steer staring wonderingly from their cattle-cars with red-rimmed eyes. Just like that coyote, I think, I've been hit and scattered from east to west.

Now out of the darkness the truckers blink their lights at me, like cowboys tipping their hats, in one of the most compassionate gestures I've ever seen. The brights indicator on the dash is a little blue beacon to guide me into the accepting black space.

I camp near Botatakin and Tsegi canyons in the Navajo National Homeland. Here in the desert night I have no needs, no history. Coyotes wail to each other across the prairie. The Pleides are clear—a cluster of tiny blue-white flowers.

I wake up early the next morning and walk to Tsegi to watch the sun rise. The birds are silent, waiting. The only noise is the clattering of an animal nosing a tin can around down in the canyon. The loose red dirt holds the roots of pinyon pines, juniper, fendlerbush, buffaloberry, prickly pear. When the sun is all the way above the opposite wall of the canyon the birds start to whistle and chatter. I walk along the rim picking a dry bouquet: furry yellow flowers that smell of honey, small brittle flowers with dark centers, drooping purple flowers ringed with tiny peapods rattling with tiny peas.

I take the trail over to Botatakin. At the end of it is a ledge and a railing looking across to a two-thousand-year-old cliff house, still in shadow. I sit down and start writing a postcard. "Dear Ruthie, I'm sick to death of the twentieth century. . . ."

Behind me is an energetic bounding. I look over my shoulder. Sure enough: tennis shoes, athletic socks, bermudas, polo shirt, binoculars, topped off with a sporty smile.

"Hi there. Pretty amazing isn't it?"

"Yeah." Reluctantly I sacrificed my communion with the mesa for the requirements of small-talk with my fellow tourist.

"Like a look through the binoculars?"

"Sure."

My fellow tourist starts to read the plaque, audibly, under his breath, pretending to be careful not to bother me. "These cliff dwellings were built in the 1st century A.D. by the. . . ."

I put the binoculars up to my eyes. Sunlight has only just entered the town in bright squares here and there. It is a city all of a piece, each apartment opening into another, then another, over several levels, with closed-off alcoves, narrow hallways, skylit cellars. And the whole of it tucked into one long crevice in the cliff wall, like an eye squinting against the sun.

What sense of past did those people have, watching the planets through the open rooftops, piling the bones of the dead in the back rooms? Around them the ancient plants and stones, the ancient lizards, the extravagantly ancient stars for holy objects. They must have possessed the past by telling stories. Yet who knows those stories now? Or can trace their maternal ancestry back to this city? Lost histories replaced by parks' department plaques. I hand the binoculars back with a polite thank you.

The next night I camp in Lake Havasu, a tacky resort with fake Mexican architecture and palm trees lit up with pink blue and yellow spotlights. Its main claim to fame is the London bridge transported here at god knows what expense. I would know if I read the plaque.

At the state park I pay four dollars for a "primitive" site which turns out to be a parking place in a gravel pit downwind of the portable toilets. More than anything else this place seems like a moon colony, barren and partly abandoned, an old boomtown with a slight flavor of cowboys and Hollywood left over from a once active tourist trade, a lot of empty motels in the middle of the desert. And I'm like some low-rank employee working off my rocket ticket in an old rock quarry walled in

by great hills of bulldozed dirt and a barbed-wire fence. By midnight I can't take this 3-D fifties sci-fi movie anymore. I leave with relief, my wheels crunching loudly on the gravel.

I'm making one more stop before Seattle. The mother of Joanne, a Seattle friend, invited me to visit her home in the San Francisco suburbs for a day or two. Joanne's brother welcomes me in with dramatic arm-sweeps. He is clownish and innocent, but after a few beers and a joint he carries on about affirmative action.

"If you're Chicano, man, if you're Chicano, you can just walk right into a job around here, I'm not kidding." His blustery adult air does not quite hide his uneasiness with his own hard line. He listens to my arguments with a half-smile both tolerant and uncertain. When his mother arrives home from her job as a clerk at a lazy susan of card files and ringing telephones she helps with dinner, implores us not to argue out of consideration for her arteries, if nothing else, shuffles the papers of her late husband's estate, laughs about the neighbor's lawsuit against her because her back rockery is an eyesore—that is, the stone pools stand empty, and there's bare dirt where there ought to be tailored shrubbery. She even finds time to listen sympathetically to me babbling on in spite of myself about my mother and Ruthie's childhood, over several glasses of cheap loganberry wine. And in the background the television annoucnes and reannounces Reagan's election as president of the United States. Enthusiastically.

For most of the evening I wander, or station myself neutrally in doorways, the way outsiders do who are trying to pass off their tension as nonchalance. I'm on my third turn around the house when Joanne's grandmother motions to me, patting the seat of a straight-back chair next to her rocker. She is part-Irish, part-Polish, named Mariana after the midwife who delivered her. More children come home. While the family storms around us, Mariana and I sit talking quietly about all manner of things.

Her face moves so flexibly from one expression to another. She screws it up and confides, "I'm tired of living." After a minute of staring soberly into space she puts a hand on my knee and asks, "Do you like beer?" then sits back with a triumphant air, "I like beer." We watch the tv awhile in silence. Then she says, frowning intensely, "Oh I hate that Reagan," then wide-eyed and appalled, "He'd better not take away my

social security. When he was governor here? Whoo! You should've seen the old people sitting on their wheelchairs on the sidewalk." Her face concentrates into a shrewd, knowing look. "He's going to be assassinated." Here Joanne's mother inserts, "I've got two contracts out on him." She said this already but she wants to make it clear which side she's on as well as show off her street-talk.

I say, "I don't know if assassinating him would be of any use. If the country was willing to elect him . . ."

"You know what I think?" Mariana says, as if reading my thoughts. "I think we're going to have socialism. My father was a socialist you know. Oh yes. He picketed and wrote leaflets and went to meetings, and stood on streetcorners. . . ." She swings her open palm up and down from her wrist for emphasis, as if directing the symphony of her father's life.

"Was your mother a socialist too?" I ask.

"Oh my yes. Of course she had us children to take care of." And Mariana looks at me intently as if to make sure that I'm not one of those youngsters who glosses over the basic conditions of life in this world.

Later on she says, "Oh I'd like to go dancing. . . . Wouldn't you like to go dancing?"

"I'd love to," I say. The loganberry wine has made me almost ebullient.

"This girl and me are going out dancing," she says to her daughter, nodding vehemently.

Doubting there's any club in San Francisco where she and I could dance comfortably, I say, "Why don't we dance right here?" I stand gallantly, if unsteadily, and offer her my hand. We move in a stumbling foxtrot around the kitchen.

When we've settled again Mariana says, "I don't think I want to live much longer. I've had a good life.

"One morning my husband said to me," and here her voice and face become stern, "Mariana, today's the day. We're going to buy a bottle of wine and go shopping for our gravesites." Her cheeks soften into a chuckle. "So we bought our gravestones with three thousand dollars cash. And then we sat in the cemetery for the rest of the afternoon

drinking wine and laughing. Oh we had a *fine* time. And by sundown we were pretty tipsy!" she says as if astonished at the wildness of her middle age. "And then we went to eat in a dear little restaurant down on the pier." As she is absorbed with remembering, her words seem to me to lapse into a waltzing one-two-three. She interrupts this tempo to say firmly, "And I'm going to be buried there, right on top of my husband." She pumps her lips in and out a few times, then relaxes them. "In the same grave," she says.

The next day driving alongside the swirling blue and white Pacific I have a slight hangover and vague memories of the night before. That Mariana sang, "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" in a sweet quavery voice. That we laughed uproariously over her husband's axiom, "Keep your mouth shut and your bowels open." That I sat for hours mesmerized by the clear stream of glimmering moments that were her life, beside which the present seemed as flat and trivial as afternoon tv.

And now I'm returning to my "real" life. Soon I'll be stepping back into my script with its laborious subplots of making money, going to meetings, adding my two cents to the latest controversies. Soon I'll take on the old roles–the butch jocularity, the samurai sense of honor demanded of lesbian-feminist by lesbian-feminist.

Yet for now I am clear as water or quartz. Curiously integrated, clarified by what has been taken from me, and by what I realize can't be. Though I have no news of Ruthie's past, no souvenirs of my own, I hold within me–glowing like holographs–a handful of scenes out of Mariana's. I take the curves of the coastal highway gracefully, hand over hand.

MUÑECA*

Her legs were tossed among the dying weeds
and lost, along with old, familiar toys:
a laceless shoe, a flat ball, plastic keys.
Her black skirt, soiled and torn, hung flapping on
a barb, and piercing through a single thread
a pin bent open, caught on her cornsilk head.

*The doll used in Penitente rituals of northern New Mexico to represent either the Virgin Mary or Death. The nature of the ritual determines which woman she will be chosen to represent.

ORDEN*

January 1932
found forty thousand dead
and not one sound escaped
the barbed borders
to tell of who or where or why.

The news was stacked in pieces
for tumbling to cities
towards the sea.
Caught in wires
closer to the hub,
he sat weaving words from sounds
coffee sugar cotton
labor twenty cents per day
and tame.
El Salvador, the savior
of many a finely jeweled hand.

---

*Order

INSIDE THE IRON TRIANGLE

A thin girl steals a piece of broken chalk
and writes on walls *the people will be free,*
through streets where campesinos have been stopped.

Her fingers rub along the metal trough
upsetting mounds of dust, so long at ease.
A thin girl steals a piece of broken chalk

and hides it in a cardborard, pencil box
while praying that the teacher does not see.
Through streets where campesinos have been stopped,

she takes her small, red fan made out of straw,
and spreads it wide, into a spiraled tree.
A thin girl steals a piece of broken chalk

and then skips on to see if soldiers walk
with guns and whistles, chains weighed down with keys.
Through streets where campesinos have been stopped

She steps upon a brick outside a shop,
writes on the wall *the people will be free.*
A thin girl steals a piece of broken chalk
through streets where campesinos have been stopped.

BLESS ME, SISTER . . .

If by chance (or even by choice) you were a Catholic in the sixties, you probably remember Pope John the Twenty-Third. If you are like me, you do not remember the string of Pontiffs that succeeded him, but you remember him. He is the one who talked about opening the windows of the Church and letting in some fresh air. I was a young nun in the sixties and enthusiastic about fresh air. I converted easily to reciting the Mass in English, taking rules with a grain of salt, and loving; this, despite the fact that I liked Latin and found keeping rules a painless way to feel like a good person. It was the loving that got me: loving and being holy at the same time sounded like an unbeatable combination. The idea gave me a warm, full feeling at random times: while eating stewed prunes for breakfast, which was a silent time and therefore supportive of warm full feelings; while unpinning the coif (white cotton encasement for head and neck) in the evening, which unpinning was pure relief and therefore also conducive to pleasant feelings; while playing basketball against high school nuns and bumping surreptitiously into my friend, which bumping was especially pleasant and a major reason for playing basketball (a sport I had never played and had no particular interest in before my sixth year in the convent) and which experience was especially good for producing those warm, full feelings about how being holy meant being loving.

You see, I took Pope John seriously. The more love, the more holiness; and I was after holiness with a vengeance. It seemed the loftiest of goals. Only being an artist could come close to it; and to a young woman from a small town in Minnesota where it was a tradition that girls become nuns, mothers or secretaries, but certainly not artists, holiness seemed more practical. So holiness it was. And then it was love.

Her name was Sister Giles and I remember her best in a long white cotton nightgown, whispering in the dark of her bedroom or mine, the two of us creating a leak in the Sacred Silence that reigned after 8:30. We would wait until very late to begin these night visits. The waiting served a dual purpose. Since not everyone shared the modern notion that daring to break a rule could at times be an act of higher rank than mere

servile adherence to the same rule, we had to sneak. The route from Sister Giles' room to mine led down a long hall; the floor creaked; and the Superior's room was placed strategically along the way. By two or three o'clock we had at least some hope that our Sisters would be asleep (though I always doubted Sister Dominic slept at all, since I was unable to imagine those piercing eyes at rest). The second purpose for waiting was more complex and, I think, peculiar to me. I had standards, you see. I could not break Sacred Silence and unlawfully commune in another nun's room without just cause; something powerful was required to thrust me beyond the boundaries of the law. Serious concern for another's emotional well-being was usually considered a decent reason for breaking a rule or two and happened to be compatible with my character. I used it regularly, but not without work. On a typical visiting night I had to worry for hours at some chance remark I had dropped while Sister Giles and I were doing the supper dishes before I could convince myself that I must have upset her and she must surely be lying awake and miserable, in need of my reassuring presence. Once I was certain of the situation it seemed only human to go and offer comfort. I would negotiate the hall and stand in her doorway breathing with a constraint that invariably reminded me of hiding in dark closets at the age of seven, terrified I would be found and made *It* in a game of hide-and-go-seek. I could almost smell the stale cigarette smoke that lived in my father's suit-coats and seemed to offer a modicum of protection. Thus feebly armored, I would stand in the doorway until my eyes could at least imagine they saw her body, a small round bulk under the covers, and until my ears could venture to guess at the rhythms of her breathing and whether they indicated sleep or wakefulness. Many times I stood there long, decided she was asleep, and turned to renegotiate the hall. But often she would wake up, no doubt from the intensity of my silence. Once in a while it would even happen that she was wakeful and needed company.

She was bolder in coming to me. It was not in her nature to stand holding her breath in doorways; nor could she wrap herself in rationalization the way I could. She would have made her way down the hall on the strength of feelings no less intense than mine and considerably more honest. She came, she would admit, because she wanted to so badly. She came directly to me, touching me lightly on the shoulder to wake me.

These nights were full. We whispered and cried and hugged inside the Silence and took a kind of rest against each other's bodies that could not be gotten any other way. Pressing into the length of one another, our twin nightgowns decently between us, we were comforted. We never

romped or let ourselves be wild. How we used our hands was strictly governed: we only touched what absolutely needed being touched that night. We used words for all the places words can fill and then we took a measured bit of what our bodies craved; this was no bacchanal.

I never thought it was sex we were doing. I knew we were living dangerously, playing at the boundaries of legitimacy, stretching them even, but stretching them with the care of an artisan, never tearing the fabric. We were taking risks, not just of being caught, but of being sinful. We had excellent backing, though. There was a batch of theologians spawned by existentialism who were coming into their own just then, swimming right beside Pope John against the current of the Past. These folks made light of rules and ranked "risk" among the ten most prestigious words in the language. I read their writings avidly and risked myself regularly, trying always to season the risk with just the right amount of prudence, a virtue they hastened to mention without fail somewhere in the thirty-fourth paragraph (having, I suppose, their own Superiors to answer to).

But it *was* sex, I found out quite by accident and much to my dismay. I happened upon the distressing information while reading a book by some worthy priest who was decidedly not an existentialist in either philosophy or style, which meant that he did not speak in grand abstractions like "risking" and "becoming" but in worrisome particulars –like a wet vagina. If your vagina gets moist, he wrote, you are engaged in sexual activity and therefore in violation of the Vow of Chastity as well as, of course, the Commandment against adultery. I took the information to Sister Giles, who kindly did not tell me it was no surprise to her, but quietly agreed it must be true. Sex it was, and to Confession we must go.

I do not remember suffering terribly from this particular turn of the screw. If we had by accident passed from pure loving into the less than pure realm of sex, then we would confess and retreat to safer forms of hugging and a more extensive use of words. I was twenty-three at the time and groomed from childhood for idealism by a mother whose life creed was that reading, the loftier the better, was the way to escape from the nasty animal smells of the farm, the humiliation of inferior grammar, and all types of painful insecurity. As long as I could convince myself that I was doing the right thing I could get quite a good measure of comfort; and I had acquired a talent for convincing myself of just that by the age of twenty-three. Sister Giles, on the other hand, was thirty-nine years old and from a different school. Her delight was not in the perfect con-

struction of a phrase or idea but in the real world, real people, a cold bottle of beer and a lively game of basketball. She had lived the first decade of her adulthood as a secretary who hated her job. When she was about thirty something compelled her to join the convent where she was promptly put through college and made into a first-grade teacher. She loved teaching. Even at the height of occasional teacherly crankiness her voice would take on a characteristic warmth and depth when she spoke of the children themselves. In addition to good work, the convent offered her the mixed blessings of companionship. She was lonely during many of those years of living as a secretary. And when she was not in the simple state of loneliness she was in the more complicated state of being in love with someone of the wrong sex. She never talked directly about this, but confessed once that I was not the first woman she had loved—confessed in a voice so lowered and so distorted with shame that I understood her only after several moments of silently deciphering what I knew I could not ask her to repeat. I think the convent was in part her attempt to escape her lesbianism. But, of course, the convent was populated with women; and with me, in particular.

I can guess now, because I have listened to so many stories of so many lesbians who endured the same thing, what must have happened when she found herself loving me. She must have been dismayed: the thing she tried to cage was running loose. She must have been delighted: the part of her that loved, compelling and precious for all the condemnation it received, still lived. Through the months of our relationship the paradox was there, an unrelenting pressure. The love that sprang up with liveliness and seemed wholly good also tightened a net of guilt and self-hatred so tough there was no cutting through it. She lived those months stretched between her knowledge and her Faith. She believed in sin but knew clearly how her spirit was relieved when she could speak, be known, and know another woman with her body. Through all of this she let me have my innocence. If I could work my mind around to peaceful coexistence with what we were doing, so much the better. Perhaps I and the whole crop of radicals who had sprouted in recent years were even right; perhaps one ought not to worry so much about sin and hell.

Then I presented her with the "moist vagina" passage and to Confession we did go. I remember the day; it was summer and heat rose in waves from the asphalt of the playground that surrounded church and school. We stood for a long time behind the school out of sight of, we hoped, everyone. We held hands and kissed "one last time" and talked about the things we would refrain from in the future. I suspect we omitted much I would now list as sexual: wrestling matches in the living

room, our Sisters titillated by the slightly scandalous spectacle of the two of us, all our holy clothing flying, our faces an unseemly red; how I laid my head against her shoulder, feigning sleep but secretly delighting in the warm brown smell of her habit, as we rode home at night with other nuns; all the accidental brushing one against the other that we managed as we cooked breakfast in what was really a fairly large kitchen; those basketball games. Despite these omissions I felt quite virtuous, measuring my virtue by my fear of this Confession. The fear was reduced from utter terror by a choice we made: we would confess only if Father O'Hara, a big man with a bear-like body and sufficiently liberal attitudes, were the priest on duty this particular Sunday afternoon. I think Sister Giles could have done it, but it would have been beyond me to speak of sins of impurity with the formidable, graying conservative who was our pastor. As it was, Father O'Hara appeared and we confessed one after the other to sins of touch with another nun. Our Confessor reacted with calm, good humor and sent us away to perform the standard penance for nuns who cannot come up with much in the way of sin—the recitation of three Hail Mary's.

I do not remember that life changed substantially after The Confession. We could have proceeded to ride a roller-coaster: descending into the depths of sinful pleasure on Monday and Wednesday, climbing swiftly to the heights of pure intention by Friday in preparation for the glorious state of grace we would achieve in Saturday's Confession, holding firm at high virtue all Sunday only to descend with breath-taking rapidity into dark sin by Monday night, and so on. Or we could have stopped making love. We did neither. Perhaps due to Father O'Hara's casual response, perhaps to some resiliency within our relationship, the effect of those potentially crucial ten minutes in a dark box in church was minor. After that Sunday we used, as I recall, a bit more restraint in our lovemaking. It had always been finely tuned and I doubt a passing observer would have noticed any difference. Luckily, there were no passing observers. We managed to maintain a successful underground relationship without detection and without further Confessions for the better part of that year. Then I left the convent.

I left for reasons having nothing to do with the Vow of Chastity or late night encounters and I left without considering how my action might affect Sister Giles or our relationship. I departed from the convent on the grounds that life within the walls did not quite come up to my standard of holiness. The hallmark of that life was the taking of three vows: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. The Vow of Chastity had always seemed unimportant to me. I had never quite understood what purity

meant but I had the strongest suspicion that if I ever did grasp the concept I would come to the conclusion that my own could not possibly be of much use to the world in general or anyone in particular.

The Vow of Poverty, on the other hand, meant a great deal to me. A life with few and simple possessions appealed to my sense of fairness in an unfair world; I did not want more than my share of the world's goods. It made an even stronger appeal to the romantic in me: how could one have a properly ethereal life if surrounded by a surfeit of material things? Paradoxically, the idea of poverty also satisfied my sense of the practical: life became more efficient if one had few possessions. So I was disturbed when I entered the convent and found my standard of living raised. In my zeal for the perfect life I could hardly tolerate the luxury of desserts with every dinner. More seriously, I could see that we nuns lived in greater material comfort than many of the children we taught—and these were by no means the poorest children in the city. As religious women, we made great pretense of living in poverty and we were not poor. I was young and shockable and in six years of religious life I had never ceased being shocked. It did not mollify me to hear from the highest authorities that it was poverty of *spirit* that really mattered.

In fact, the existence of highest authorities was another worry for me. They had been quite convenient in the early days of my religious life when I, having read *The Imitation of Christ* and the major works of St. John of the Cross, became enamored of the idea of absolute surrender as the ultimate in sanctity. At that point I needed someone to surrender to. I was a prime candidate for an organization based on hierarchy, authority, and the taking of the Vow of Obedience. But as I moved along in my reading (and thinking) I began to question the wisdom of such utter detachment from one's own actions. After six years of pondering the problem I decided I could not in good conscience continue to hand over responsibility for my actions to my religious Superiors; I could no longer promise to be obedient. On the contrary, I must courageously and in good existential form take up responsibility for my existence and all that followed from it. Such were the concerns that occupied me as I prepared to leave religious life.

My relationship with Sister Giles paled beside the brightness of my ideals. It did not occur to me that I might hurt her; it did not occur to me that I was taking a step that might lead to the end of our relationship; it did not really occur to me that we had a "relationship." As I write this I impose a vocabulary on an experience that was for me essentially sans vocabulary. I use words like lovemaking and relationship and thereby

give meaning to something that was at the time without name and without clear significance–for me. I am sure that Sister Giles knew she was in love with me, knew that pain would come with separation, knew that when I left the convent I started on a path that led away from her. Had our roles been reversed, she would have been unable to leave the convent without considerable soul-searching over the prospect of leaving me. Roles were not reversed and I left the convent oblivious of the effect my departure had on my lover. I cannot remember how or where we said good-bye.

The time after I left the convent comes back to me now in bits that seem broken off some lost and possibly meaningful whole: my sexuality concretized in a religious medal; the medal immortalized in a photograph; short skirts and hair rollers; a narrow cot beside an unused bed.

Sister Giles gave me the medal. It was small, silver, light-weight, an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary on one side; in the world of Catholics an ordinary medal, the sort any grade school child might wear on a chain around the neck; not, however, commonly worn by women in their early twenties. I wore the medal. I did not especially like the medal and I was frequently embarrassed by its presence just below my throat, but it was what I had from her. I needed it; it was something to touch. Also, I felt loyal wearing it. Since I was wearing a rather odd piece of jewelry and displaying it somewhat prominently, I was often asked its significance. I always answered that the medal was a gift from a friend. I suspect that, despite the practice I got, I never quite achieved the grace of giving that reply without blushing.

My loyal wearing of the medal was tested and proven strong the day of the photograph. My mother had never liked my high school graduation picture and when I returned home from the convent one of the first excursions she arranged was to the studio of a local photographer. After six years in the convent it takes a while before a body is camera-ready. Mine was not. I was still awkward in lay clothing and was suffering from a clear lack of expertise in caring for my newly liberated hair. I had sufficient skill with bobby pins, having used them year after year before entering the convent, but while I was away bobby pins had become passé. Rollers were in and my fingers knew nothing at all about manipulation of rollers. Nevertheless, I went to the photographer and the medal went with me. Since I am not in the habit of having my picture taken frequently, that photograph lives on, nicely displayed on my mother's dresser, the most recent portrait of her eldest daughter. From time to time it still evokes a question as to the significance of that small, silver medal.

I lived at home and went to school that first year out of the convent. I never achieved success with rollers but did discover that most of the world did not view short hair as a mark of having recently emerged from behind convent walls. I cut the hair I had grown to camouflage my vulnerable status (thus eliminating the need for rollers), wore simple clothing, and eventually lost the sense that I resembled a just-born horse, wet and awkward, testing new legs. I studied hard and, for the most part, let the rest of life pass by me in an undifferentiated blur. Until Thanksgiving.

Sister Giles came to visit during Thanksgiving break; she spent the night. Into that single eight-hour period of darkness we crammed (very quietly) months of tension, hurt, anger, confusion, hugging, sex, and comfort. We used one narrow cot and, as I recall, did not sleep much. The presence of a second bed, untouched, looms large in this memory because by morning I had developed an almost obsessive fear that my mother would examine the beds and find scandalous evidence of her daughter's perfidy. It did not comfort me that such an examination (and the suspicion that would motivate it) would have been grossly out of character. I have no idea how Mother did account for my lack of ease at breakfast that morning.

The next time I saw Sister Giles was in the daytime, in the summer, in a car in a strange park in a city I had not yet gotten used to. I see the scene as a series of stills: her face friendly with opening small talk; a white wooden barrier at the end of the road; her arm relaxed across the back of the seat, reaching towards me; a lightly littered dirt path; her face again, this time broken open with pain as my words come at her; my hand touching her shoulder; her body twisting away from me; trees and trees and more trees, blurring beyond the windshield.

That day was built from weeks and months of other days, of course. I imagine the whole process, time-lapsed and photographed twice, once from her point of view, once from mine. She sees me move away but underestimates the distance and by some trick of faithfulness keeps me large and steady in the camera's eye. Roll two: when I move away the camera moves with me, shakes her image, fills with the miscellanea of new experience, sometimes loses her; by the end of the film she looks small, distant, and somewhat incongruous; she is overshadowed by images more current and chaotic.

I had emerged from my year of study into my first adult hetero-sexual community, and it was an overwhelming, involving, intriguing, and

fatiguing experience—working sixteen to eighteen hours a day at a Catholic Worker House. I was having fun, feeling useful, righteous, and filled up with my present life. Sister Giles did not blend well with my new existence. She was not a young radical; she was, as fate would have it, a nun, slightly conservative, and over forty; she was in love with me, a fact more threatening in the context of a high-energy heterosexual community than in the (supposedly) asexual atmosphere of the convent —perhaps because it might more likely be recognized for what it was.

I spoke that day in the car of our differing lifestyles, the divergence of our political points of view, the impossibility of regular contact. I was rational: our relationship had dwindled; we had seen each other twice over the period of a year; it was time to acknowledge reality. All of this was, I think, quite true. More to the point, but elusive of expression, was the fact that in a peculiar way and rather belatedly I was leaving home. Home now meant convent as well as family, and so it meant Sister Giles. For me, the break was necessary. When, at odd moments, I imagine what my life would have been like had our relationship continued for years, I see pale, constricted pictures of myself holding a limp and badly worn lifeline. None of this, of course, reduces the pain I caused Sister Giles.

I did not speak, that day in the car, of the vague embarrassment I had experienced in anticipation of Sister Giles' visit, of my reluctance to tell my new friends and co-workers who was coming, of my impulse to maneuver her quickly and inconspicuously out of the Catholic Worker House into the car and off toward a park unfrequented by acquaintances of mine. I could hardly have said what so unsettled me. I knew the sight of her long, brown habit, so strange when juxtaposed with summer pastels and bare legs, gave me a little shock. I exposed my identity as an ex-nun only in selected situations and at the price of considerable vulnerbility. Perhaps I feared the very presence of the habit would reveal my past. But the basic ingredient of my discomfort must have been that we were lovers. I must have been afraid our lesbianism would show, mysteriously, startlingly, when we were seen together. Perhaps it did.

It took twelve years before I acquired the words, courage and good sense to apologize to Sister Giles for being ashamed of her that day at the Catholic Worker House. I wrote to her, with whom I had had almost no contact in the intervening years, conscious of the fact that I was writing to a fifty-two year old Catholic nun. I told her I was a lesbian and felt good about my sexuality. She responded with a warm letter that used none of my words, but forgave me. Again our contact became minimal.

Then a letter came, abruptly and from the wrong address. It started in the middle of things, as if there had been a context woven around it earlier, some design out of which it could have come, expected and understandable. The letter said:

> I just found out what is going to happen to me—
> I thought you might like to know. Monday I start
> two kinds of treatments—
>
> > radiation—2 weeks
> > chemotherapy—1 week
> > then 3 weeks rest and repeat treatments then
> > evaluation and surgery.
>
> My sisters & brother were here this weekend.
> It was good to see them.
>
> My love.

I read the letter twice, put it away, and spent the afternoon not thinking about it—an unproductive and irritable stretch of hours during which I was supposedly working on a piece of fiction. At five o'clock I yielded to the pressure building within me. I read the letter again and wrote one of my own. I wrote with a split sense of what I was doing. Part of me felt I was writing to a stranger—a Catholic nun in her middle fifties, a woman I had once known, who for some reason was speaking to me about her pain. Another part of me felt I was writing to a basketball playing, beer drinking, very attractive woman in her late thirties, a woman whose body I knew well, a woman whose body was somehow now, incongruously, seriously ill. Thus split, I attempted a meaningful letter. I wrote of death and confusion and I very deliberately used the word cancer. Faced once again with the reality of Sister Giles' body, I used words; I gave name to something that either needed naming or could not bear it, or both. I have no way of knowing if the letter was a service, an offering, a violation, or the simple fulfillment of my role in our relationship as the one who turns experience into language.

There has been no further communication between us. She must be resting now, somewhere in her three weeks between treatments. I am left with many thoughts and more questions about human connection and separation. It is as if I have been challenged to wrestle again—this time without a ring of watching nuns.

FLAMINGOES AND BEARS

a parable

Flamingoes and bears
meet secretly
on odd street corners.

Horses and chickens,
elephants and geese
looked shocked and appalled.

Ostriches don't look at all.

Bear and flamingo
ignore greedy gazes
from disgruntled parents
and frightened sly weasels
who hiss
as the couple
strolls by.

Chance brought them here
from forest and sea,
but science won't agree
where
bears and flamingoes
learned how simple
building a nest
in a den can be.

Now flamingo and bear
sleep forever entwined
in all sorts of climes
be it rainy or snowy or sunny,
happy to know
there's room in this world
for a bear who likes palm trees

and a bird who loves honey.

June, 1982

POMEGRANATE

I curled up
around you
like a pomegranate
around her seeds
reaching deep into
who you are
even as you sleep.

I sucked at your sweet
breath
like a kitten
after baby's milk
leaving no trace
on your lips.

The morning eye
caught me
contemplating
where next
to touch your
damp, brown skin.

November, 1982

MY CAREER AS A THIEF

I have been so hungry my hands would not stay still. In the bad times when I was a kid, my mama made flour and water biscuits with flour, water and fat gravy to pour over them. Sometimes with it she'd serve a bowl of tomato soup or maybe pork and beans. We joked about liking such stuff cold out of the can, but I remember that it was cold because the power company had turned the house off—no money in the mail, no electricity. That was hunger wrapped around a starch belly. The worst time, there was nothing, not even flour to make up the pretense of a meal. We sat around, my sisters and I grumbling over our rumbling bellies. My mama laughed at us, making so much noise over such a little thing. She told us about real hunger, hunger of days with no expectation that there would ever be biscuits again, days when she'd cried with it, only one of eleven hungry kids. She got us to go off to play, made us laugh with her imitations of her brothers and sisters fighting. But I stayed back to watch her, to see her fingers ridge up into fists and her chin stand out in anger. When my stepfather came back, she was just like a big angry mama hen, feathers up and eyes yellow.

"Not my kids," she told him, "I never wanted my kids to know what it was like. I won't have them hungry."

She outlined her mouth in bold red lipstick, combed back her dark blond hair and hung her big old purse on one arm. She went out the door, her waitress shoes slapping on the steps, not even looking back to see what he would do. She came back with money, with flour, with the makings of an evening breakfast. My stepfather sat in the living room and didn't say a word, but I saw the hunger in his eyes as clear as the rage in mama's. His hands on his thighs kept moving, the fingers working. I curled mine, I rubbed my leg muscles. The biscuits didn't fill me. I stayed hungry.

We always lived at a distance from the rest of the family. My stepfather chose houses in the suburbs that we couldn't keep. The landlords

would come to the front door calling my mama's name and I would stand there to call back to them.

"She's not to home. I can't let you in, my mama's not to home."

They'd yell, threaten, beat on the door. In the back of the house, my mama would sit with a cigarette between her fingers, pushing her hair straight back from her face, saying nothing until they left. Then she'd hug me, praise me. "My smart little girl." Soon then, we'd move to another house, another suburb, eventually the outer edges of the town, almost country. My stepfather's family lived in big houses they owned, with fenced-in yards and garden bushes. My mama's people moved as often as we did, but to rambling old frame houses where the dogs could hide under the floorboards. Uncle Nevin and Aunt Carr got a place built on such a steep hill that we could play in the dirt under the front porch and not even reach the porch boards at a jump. The back was set so deep into the hill that the dogs couldn't even dig out from under it. I loved that house, the cool dimness under the porch, but my stepfather hated it.

"Don't they care how they're living?" He wouldn't put us in such a house, he insisted. So he found us cinder block houses where the tile floors were always peeling up from the damp and where, never mind, we didn't stay long. But a decent neighborhood, he told mama. Mama said nothing, just unpacked the dishes one more time.

When I was eight my aunt Dot moved her brood of kids into an apartment building, a second floor frame walkup with a wide porch hanging off one side. Nobody else we knew had ever lived in an apartment. An apartment then was special and mama took us over to visit. With Dot's kids we made an even dozen to play up and down those shaky stairs, getting splinters in our hands and thighs. Down in the dirt yard there were other kids, colored kids, who watched us. It was a week before we started playing with them, they with us.

"Niggers," my uncles cursed. "Living in this trashy place with niggers!"

My aunt laughed at them. "Yeah, and paying my own rent thank you. Hell, here I can even pay it a few days late and not find my ass back out on the street." The uncles still complained but my aunt seemed to ignore it. "Find me better," was all she said. "Find me better."

We thought it was a great place, better than many of the others she'd

been. It had, at least, in-door toilets. And those kids knew games we hadn't played yet, curse words no uncles had yet used and, more importantly, none of them were as rough as the boy cousins with their broken bottles and sharp rocks. None of us were pleased when Aunt Dot finally moved. "Nobody's business," she said. But it made too much trouble, people always coming around to complain.

She got a house downtown, a house so old and weathered the second floor had to be locked off as unsafe. Some people wondered how she was paying the rent, but there was no question where the food on the table was coming from. The boys brought it in, the twins then just thirteen, Bill's other "wife's" boy just eleven and little Butch just eight. They fanned out into the streets in the early morning and started coming home by afternoon, loaded down with stolen produce from local gardens, canned goods palmed in the little corner groceries—one or two from each store. "Have the sense to spread it out," they told me. Sugar they got from the diner on the truck highway and mustard or ketchup from the one near the high school.

"White Horse Road's best," my favorite cousin, Grey, told me. "Seems like every diner on White Horse Road's got those easy to steal plastic ketchup bottles, and all their sugar in little paper packets. It's hard you know to get out with one of those glass sugar dishes. They're just too big to hide."

"Horseshit," his twin, Blue, insisted. While Grey's name really was Grey, Blue was actually Garvey though no one had called him anything but Blue since he was four. "I tell you you can steal anything if you set your mind to it. I tell you the day's gonna come when I bring mama home a 22 inch TV set, that I an't gonna spend a penny on. You just got to think out how to do it, and then stealing's the easiest thing in the world."

I nodded and tried to watch how they did it. The hunger in me craved more than sugar or ketchup, or canned goods out of some dirty little grocery. When mama took us into town to Penny's or Montgomery Ward's my fingers would start to ache and my mouth water. Stacks of things around me made me think about the empty coal grate in our bedroom, the broken couch propped up with a brick, milk spoiling in the warm refrigerator. With mama there, it seemed the only thing I could do was run my hands over things, finger the sheets and glassware and use my nails to tear little holes in clothes I knew we couldn't buy. It was

wanting what I couldn't have, I knew, that made me want to be so mean.

"Don't you ever let me catch any of you stealing," mama insisted. "You want something, you tell me and if it's worth the trouble, we'll find a way. But I an't gonna have no child of mine caught stealing." I took her at her word and went out with my cousins, planning not to get caught and not to tell her. But one afternoon when I produced Tootsie Rolls for my sisters, mama took my hands in hers like she was going to cry.

"Where'd you get them?"

"Bo?" I said.

"No," she cried.

"Aunt Dot," I said.

"Don't lie too." The lines in her face looked as deep as the rivers that flowed toward Charleston. "Tell me the truth."

I started to cry and told her, "Downtown, the Woolworth's counter."

She wiped my face. She wiped her own. "Is this all of it? How much did you eat?"

"Two others, mama. I ate one and I gave Bobbie one."

She wrapped it all in a bag and put some pennies in my hand, washed my face again and walked me downtown. All the way down she was quiet, but when we got there she turned to me, said, "I don't like this." She shook her head. "But there an't no other way to do it. You're my pride, you and your sisters, and I can't have you shaming us."

She walked me straight back to the candy counter, waited for the counter girl to come over and stood me right in front of her. "My daughter has something to tell you," she said and gave me a little push.

But I couldn't speak. I held out the bag and the pennies and started to cry again. The girl looked confused but mama wouldn't speak, and I thought I'd strangle on my own tongue when the manager walked over toward us.

"What's this?" he said real loud. "What's this? You got something

for us, little girl?" He was a big man with a wide face and a wide belly poking out from under one of those button-up vests. He stooped down so that his face was right in front of me, so close I could smell the sharp alcohol scent of aftershave. "You do, doncha honey?" He looked like he was swallowing an urge to laugh at us. I was suddenly so angry at him, my stomach seemed to curl up inside me. I shoved the bag at him, the money.

"I'm sorry. I stole it."

Mama's hand squeezed on my shoulder and I heard the breath come out of her in a sigh. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying hard not to let myself get mad at her.

"Uh huh," the man said, "I see." I looked at him again. He was rummaging in the bag, counting the Tootsie Rolls and nodding. "It's a good thing, mam," he said, still talking loud, "that you've caught this when you did." He nodded at me. "You're a fortunate little girl, truly fortunate. Your mama loves you. She doesn't want you to grow up to be a thief."

He stood up and passed the pennies to the salesgirl. He moved like he was going to put his hand on my head but I stepped back. "Son-of-a-Bitch," Grey would have called him. "Slimy son-of-a-bitch probably eats Tootsie Rolls all day long." If he reached for me again, I'd bite him, but he didn't. He just looked at me long and carefully.

"I'm gonna do your mama a favor, help her to teach you the seriousness of what you've done." Mama's hand tightened again on my shoulder but still she didn't speak. "What we're gonna do," he announced, "is say you can't come back here for a while. We'll say that when your mama thinks you've learned your lesson, she can come back and talk to me. But til then, we're gonna remember your name, what you look like. You understand me, honey?"

I understood. I understood that at nine I was barred from the Woolworth's counters. I could feel the heat from my mama's hand through my blouse and I knew she was never gonna come near this place again, was never gonna let herself stand in the same room with this honey-greased bastard. I looked around at the bright hairbrushes, ribbons, trays of panties and hose, notebooks, dolls and balloons. It was hunger I felt then and everytime I passed their window, a hunger edged with hatred and a raw lust to hurt them back. Mama said nothing about whipping me or telling my stepfather what I'd done. The trip to Woolworth's had

punished both of us more than we could stand.

Getting older, I began to feel that hunger was in the back of the throat, not the belly. It was an ache that throbbed extra sharp when we went to visit my stepfather's people: the uncle the lawyer, the uncle the accountant, the aunts that were all mothers and nothing else, the grandfather that owned the bakery. We went in my parents' proud white Pontiac with the top down and the wind blowing whatever paper scraps had accumulated on the floor. We went for somebody's birthday—a double, one of the uncles and one of his kids.

"One of the *children,*" my stepfather's sister, Marvella, said, "kids are billygoats."

Goddamned right, I thought, staring over at my puffy cousin in creased pants, a *kid* of eight, a copy of his fat ugly father. They served us tea in the backyard, just us—"Ruth's girls," they called us. Their kids went in and out of the house, loud, raucous, scratching their nails on the polished furniture, kicking their feet on the hardwood floors, running mud in on the rugs.

"Those little brats need their asses slapped," my mama said, but not where any of them could hear her. She came out to check on us now and again, where we sat in our starched dresses, as stiff as the sleeves.

"Mama, when we going?"

"Soon," and she'd light a cigarette with shaking hands. She couldn't smoke in their house, though they never came out and told her she couldn't. They just didn't leave ashtrays out. But I saw them go in the kitchen to smoke over the sink and drop their ashes down the drain. Why was it they were pretending they didn't smoke?

"Can't we go home now?"

"No, James wants to show Daddy his new lawnmower."

"I thought he got a new one last year."

"This one's the kind you can ride on while you cut the grass."

"Don't seem like the yard's big enough to need to do that."

"Well," mama gave a short laugh, "I don't really think they buy

anything cause they need it." She brushed herself down carefully before going back in, though there wasn't a speck of ash on her.

We sat still, wonderfully behaved. "Yes mam, no mam," we kept our backs straight and never spoke out of turn, trying to be worthy of the roses, the sunlight in their garden. They watched us out of the windows. Behind them, shelves of books and framed pictures mocked me. I stared in at the spines of those books, wanting them all, wanting the polished furniture, the garden, the big open kitchen with its dishes for everyday and dishes for special, the freezer in the utility room and the plushy seats on all the chairs. I couldn't speak around the hunger in my throat. From behind the rosebushes I heard one uncle talking to another.

"Look at that car, just like any niggertrash, choosing something like that."

"What'd you expect? Look at what he married."

"Her and her kids sure go with that car . . ."

I pushed my hair out of my eyes, looked in at one of my wide-mouthed cousins in a white dress with eyelet sleeves looking back at me, scratching her nose. What do they tell her about us, I wondered. That we're not really family, just her crazy uncle's wife's nasty kids. You're no relative of mine, I told her and myself. All those new words I'd learned rolled around in my head. To the shock of my sisters, I got up and went for a walk among the roses. I pulled the petals off one at a time and dropped them down inside my dress, pulled up my skirt and tucked them in my panties. I walked slowly around, feeling the plushy soft petals moving against my skin.

Trash steals, I thought but I only took the roses. No amount of hunger would make me take anything else of theirs but looking at everything I could feel a kind of heat behind my eyes. It was dangerous that heat. It wanted to pour out and burn it all up, everything they had that we couldn't have, everything that made them think they were better than us.

"Trash rises," my Aunt Jerrine would say. She lived down by the river, where on summer nights she kept an old tire smoldering in the yard to keep the mosquitos away. She used huge old truck tires from which the smoke rose in a thick black fog. It stank but it kept the mosquitos

down. My aunt would wave the fog down toward the river where an amazing collection of things kept accumulating. "It's a good place to live," she'd tell us. "This is where the trash rises," and she'd give out a high hoarse laugh to tell us she was thinking of something more than garbage.

People from Greenville tossed their garbage off the highway a few miles up the river. The garbage would sink out of sight in the mud and eventually work its way down to my aunt's yard to rise and get caught in the roots of the rotting trees that screened her yard. The uncles went to Aunt J's to fish, to stand by the river in the tire smoke, drink whiskey and tell dirty stories. I went to pull in the trash from the tree roots and pick vegetables out of Aunt J's side garden. I'd come home with fresh tomatoes, okra, and the head off a Betsy Wetsy doll, the one with the silly rubber curl on her forehead. I brought back mostly pieces of things –baby carriage covers, tricycle wheels, shoes, plastic dishes, jumprope handles, ragged clothes and once the headlight off a Harley.

"This is good stuff," Aunt J usually told me. "You got an eye for things, girl. I can clean up and patch those clothes. We'll just soak the dishes in bleach and give the rest of it a scrubbing. Saturday morning, we'll put out blankets and sell it all off the side of the highway. You get your mama to send you over to help me."

It got so my sister, Pam, wanted to help me but she didn't like to get mud on herself so she rarely pulled out anything worth the trouble. Still it was she that saw the hooks–two of them, big four-pronged things still dragging little shreds of rope, with a rusty link chain holding them together.

"Lookit!" she yelled and scared herself, almost sliding down in the mud. "Look there. It's something metal maybe." I climbed out on some of the exposed roots that hung off the bank until I could reach down to the curved metal edge that was showing. It was hard then to untangle the hooks from the muddy trash that lined the weeds and bank. By the time I'd worked it free, I'd slid over and had one leg thigh-deep in the mud.

"You get your ass down here and help me," I yelled at Pam but she had no intention of risking the river. Instead she ran back to find Grey and Blue.

"My sweet Jesus, look at the size of them!" Grey shouted, before we could even get them back up the bank. "That sucker's longer than my arm."

"What is it?"

"It's a hook, a set of hooks."

"Any fool can see that. But what are they for?"

"Mountain climbing." I didn't believe that for a minute but Grey seemed convinced. "Look at the edge on them points. They'd sink into rock with no trouble at all."

"You don't need nothing like that to climb the mountains around here."

"I'll bet some Yankee brought it in not knowing what our mountains are like."

"You an't got the sense you were born with, and even Yankees an't that dumb."

"You calling me stupid?"

"Aw for god's sake."

I got the hooks back in my hands then, before somebody stabbed himself with one. They were kind of heavy but not so much so that I couldn't imagine swinging one around and throwing it. Grey was right about one thing. The barbs were razor sharp, and not only at the points but also along the edges that curved back on themselves. There was a grey-green gunk all over them that hid most of the metal shine, but that came off easy with a little scraping. In the center of each hook where the four points came together, there was a packed mass of river mud, weeds and fish pieces. I set to scraping it clean and got the boys interested.

"Once we get them cleaned up, I'll show you how mountain climbers use them." Grey was determined to convince everybody that he knew what the hooks were all about, but Blue was having none of it.

"You try throwing that son-of-a-bitch up a tree and you gonna put somebody's eye out when the chain catches on a branch."

"I an't gonna throw it up in no tree," Grey looked disgusted. "I'm gonna use it to pull myself right up the side of Aunt J's house. I'm gonna wave at you from the roof, and then you tell me I'm crazy."

He did it too. The barb dug right into the wood below the roof and gouged deep enough to support his weight. Though once he got up there,

Grey couldn't swing around to get a leg over the roof after all. Blue tried it next and had the same problem. He managed to hang onto a roof beam while he worked it loose and tossed it down.

"We'll aim it at the roof this time," he told us, "and then we can climb over the edge using the rope."

"You'll do no such thing." It was Aunt J who'd come up behind us while we were all looking at Blue. "You trying to kill one of these children?" Then she looked up and saw the hole, the hook had gouged in her wall.

"Oh my God in heaven!" She grabbed for the hook Blue was holding. "You digging holes in my house! You planning to just walk off and leave it like that. I expect. Goddamn, you kids got no sense at all." She jerked the other hook with its loose flapping chain out of Grey's hands. "I'm surprised you an't killed each other already." No, what's surprising is that *I* an't killed you already."

"It an't that deep a hole." Grey said. "It an't gonna let the rain in."

The color rushed up into Aunt J's face, and I thought for a moment, she was going to swing one of those hooks into his belly. The other kids took off at a run and Grey stumbled back out of her reach.

"You crazy little bastard," she hissed at him. She turned around and grabbed my arm. "All of you. Don't you know what this is?" She waved the tines near my face. "You think it's a big old fish hook? Well it an't. It's for trawling, for dragging. You go down in the river and they'll use something like this to pull you out. They'll drag you up in pieces out of the mud."

The damn thing was, she didn't scare us. It just made the hooks more fascinating. Maybe it hadn't been fish we'd cleaned out of those gaps. But my aunt locked them up in the cellar and it was plain she wasn't going to let us get at them again. I started to dream of the razor points, the steel edges and woke so hungry my teeth ached.

I took to going over to Aunt J's more regularly, hanging out, being helpful. I even spent July pulling weeds and August picking tomatoes, corn and peppers. When canning started, it was just expected that I would be there to boil the mason jars and melt the wax. I brought up the jars from the cellar. I brought up the wax, and when my aunt went out

to put her neck under the cool water from the pump, I brought up one of the hooks. I even got it out under the porch before anyone could see, laughing because it was so easy. But mama showed up in the meantime, and was standing waiting in the kitchen over the bubbling vats.

"You want these tomatoes to boil over?" she asked me. "You got to watch this stuff close. You can't be running off in the yard with a fire like this going." She planted me on a stool by the stove, "You sit here and keep your eyes open, little girl."

I got stuck at that stove three days running while my mama and my aunt retold every story I'd ever heard.

"Remember the time Mattie Lee wouldn't let the sheriff take the furniture, screaming for the neighbors how they were trying to rob her?"

"Oh God yes, and that sheriff like to pee in his pants when he saw her throwing clothes out of the window, yelling 'take it all, take the kids why don't you? take it all!'"

"Well the point was she threw her housedress at him, and then just stood there in her underwear, and he wasn't gonna come near her after that."

"Oh no, girl, that's just what people tell. She didn't really do it. She just threatened to do it."

"It'd be a better story if she'd done it."

"It would, wouldn't it? And it would be just like her. Mattie Lee an't scared of hell or high water."

Mama looked over at me, watching them. "Give that rack a jiggle," she told me, "I don't think those jars are setting deep enough in the pot."

"Oh, Ruth leave the girl alone. Those jars are setting fine and she's doing a good job. When she grows up, she gonna know all she needs about canning and cooking and gossiping in the kitchen."

Mama laughed. "Jerrine, you're spoiling her. You should have some of your own and then you'd watch them all a little more sharply."

"Well, for not birthing any, it sure feels like I've raised a crowd. Seems like all my life I've had somebody's kids under my feet. An't nobody in this family ever been selfish with their children. Why I've

woke up many a morning to find a porch full of young'uns somebody's dropped off in the night.

"Most often, Mattie Lee's."

"Oh don't go on about Mattie Lee. She's had a hard time, especially with those oldest girls. They weren't so bad when they were young but since they turned thirteen, they'd both gone as sour as bad whiskey."

"Sour and tightassed. Everybody tells me that Bobbie takes after me, but I can't see it. I'd swear that girl just an't easy in her body. She don't give a hoot about nobody or anything, except her pride."

"You know she was standing in the yard when the sheriff came that time, and all the yelling started. And she just stood there trying to pretend wasn't nothing going on, wasn't no sheriffs beating on the door, nor nobody throwing clothes out the windows."

"What'd she do—offer them a glass of water?"

"Hell no, she tried to get Mattie Lee out of the house so she could give them the furniture quietly. It was like she didn't care what happened, just so the neighbors wouldn't know they couldn't keep up the payments."

"As if everybody didn't know it already. You can't keep secrets like that."

"Well you and I don't even try, and certainly Mattie don't. She knows who she is. But it's different for the kids, seems like they're all the time wanting just what they can't have, and they've all got such a funny dose of pride. Look at your girl there, I've seen it in her too. Not like Bobbie I'll admit, but something, something hard and angry that only shows now and again."

They looked over at me, and I tried to pretend I hadn't been listening, concentrating on waving the steam away so I could see down into the pot. Through the steam, they both looked older – two worn tired women repeating old stories to each other and trying not to worry about things they couldn't change anyway. It struck me then how young they both were to be looking so old, neither of them as old as my stepfather's sisters; mama not yet thirty and Aunt J less than ten years older than her. Still they seemed so different from me, almost as if they came out of another century. I wished then that I could be more like them, easier in

my body and not so hungry all the time.

After the vegetables, the peaches had to be done which meant it was almost two weeks before I got the hook off to myself. It had gotten rusty but that came off pretty easily with steel wool and a little grease. I worked at the metal steadily until it shown like silver.

"You're really serious, aren't you?" Grey grinned at me like I'd grown an extra set of teeth. He ran his hands over the points on the hooks. "And you surely did a good job of sneaking this off Aunt J." He laughed and scratched at his hands. When he'd turned fourteen, Grey had begun to grow hair on his chest and arms just like his brother, but Grey had shaved it all off with a straight razor. That, of course, made it grow back thicker which tickled Grey to death. It not only made him different from his brother–a life-long ambition–he also talked it up as being a sign of how manly he was. The only problem was that it hadn't just grown back thick but long and it itched him. It almost ruined his tough image, the fact that he was always standing around scratching at the wavy reddish-brown hair on his thumbs.

"I'm serious," I told him, pointedly not looking toward his hands. I wanted him on my side.

"Wellllll," he drawled, running his fingertips over the points again. "You've put a little too much shine on these for safety. You plan on not being seen, we better spread a little black paint where it will do the most good, tone down the light-catching side of this thing.

"You'll ruin it," I couldn't help myself. I really loved the shine of that hook.

"Hell no, won't touch the tips. I'll just make it harder to spot."

I didn't really believe him. I figured he was just trying to make himself seem more important, since it was obvious I was going to have to take the hard part of this thing. There wasn't any way my tall hairy cousin was going to fit through the roof vent of the Woolworth's store.

When it came down to it, there was a moment when I thought I wasn't going to make it. Grey had only a little trouble swinging the hook high enough to get it to bite into the water tower on the back roof, and I'd only had a little trouble getting up the rope with my feet braced against the brick wall. It was a little trickier at the top where they'd

stuck broken glass on the edge–probably to discourage people with ideas like mine. But the rope hadn't frayed and I jumped the glass easily with the rope to brace me. At some time they'd covered the exhaust fan with chicken wire and a couple of wood slats. The chicken wire was rusty and pulled free pretty fast, and I kicked at the slat that was in my way until it finally boke. It was looking through the fan blades that worried me. I could slip around them probably but the engine block was big and oily. That would be a tight piece.

"You o.k.?" Grey whisper-yelled.

"Fine, now shut up," I tried to keep it quiet but he seemed to hear me. The blades of the fan weren't sharp at all, just gummy and covered with dust. I thought about it for a moment and then went over and pulled the hook free; then coiled the rope up and tied it around one prong. I would push it ahead of me into the darkness. I didn't think about how it might get stuck or how the wood slat would have been safer. All I knew climbing over the fan blades and wiggling around the engine block was I wanted those razor points near me. I was scared and sweaty, and half-convinced I was going to get caught but those points were sharp and certain and tangibly dangerous the way I knew inside I wanted to be.

The exhaust pipe widened on the other side of the fan and there was a kind of filter there made of sharp prickly stuff that bit my fingers. I unhooked it on one side and slid through, then hooked it again. It was so dark, I couldn't see that the pipe bent at an angle and the hook banged the sides as I felt my way. There was no warning at all when the pipe suddenly turned down and the hook slid out of my hand. I fell after it, my shoulder hitting the edge of another grate, knocking it sideways so that the hook fell ahead of me into a loud shattering noise. I caught the edge of the hole, held myself only an instant and fell after it. I bit my tongue as I fell and it was a miracle I didn't scream. I hit the side of the cabinet-rack that displayed the pattern books and registered immediately the hook points just inches from my butt.

"Oh my god," I whispered. My hip ached where I'd hit but nothing seemed broken. In the dim light from the streetlights, I could see that the hook had shattered the glass case that covered the sewing notions. It was lying with two of the points straight up just where I could so easily have fallen. "Oh my god."

I was suddenly soaking wet and weak all over. I half-fell the rest of the way off the cabinet onto the glass case, my sneakers cracking the

rest of the glass across. I was shaking so that it was hard to climb down and when I was finally standing in the aisle, I saw that my hands were covered with fine counter glass dust that glinted like diamonds in the light from the front. I took a deep slow breath and gave a careful look around. Up near the front I thought I saw a shadow move that was probably Grey waiting for me to come let him in. But inside the store was perfectly still and musty, smelling of sweet toilet water and starched new clothes.

I pulled the hook free and started up front. Broken glass from the notions case crunched under my feet. I stopped and looked around. The candy counter had been moved further up front. I could see the double stacked case of nuts right next to the popcorn machine. I swung the hook in my hand back and forth as I walked toward it, feeling the grin on my face widen and a looseness move down my back. How long had it been since I'd been in here? How long since I'd stood in front of the candy counter and smelled the particular Woolworth's smell of dust, salt and caramel corn. I swung the hook back and forth, back and forth, letting the loose part of the rope slip in my fingers, back and forth – and right into the case. The glass shattered sideways and nuts poured out. I couldn't help myself. I just started laughing out loud. When the sound stopped I saw that the case was a sham. There hadn't been more than two inches of nuts pressed up against the glass and propped with cardboard.

"Cheap sons of bitches," I said out loud.

I heard Grey pounding on the front door. He was so impatient to get in I was afraid he was going to break the door. Carefully I dragged the jack that was on special sale out of the window. "Stop it," I yelled at Grey when he kept beating on the glass. It wasn't easy but I got the brace fixed against one door and the lever wedged in the crack. Two turns of the crank and the door popped open with a snap. Immediately Grey streaked past me like a dog with his tail on fire. I shoved the jack back out of sight and ran back to the pattern stand to climb up and push the grate back into place. Let them wonder in the morning how we did it.

"Goddamn," Grey crowed and I heard more glass break. He'd cracked the front of the knife case and was happily stuffing his pockets with jackknives of all sizes. I looked past him over the store at all the *things* on display. Cheap junk everywhere: shoes that went to paper in the rain, clothes that separated at the seams, stale candy, make-up that

made your skin break out – what was there here that I could use? I remembered the rows of canned vegetables at Aunt J's – rows of tomatoes and okra and green beans that stretched for shelf on shelf in her cellar. That stuff was worth something. I bit my lip and went and got my hook. What had I wanted except to be inside this place, to stand here and look at it and let some of the anger out?

Grey was running up and down the aisles, grabbing stuff and then dropping it. "Goddamn, we're a team," he told me and took a pillow case up front to fill it with cigarettes.

"Yeah," I whispered and kicked at the case in front of me. It was full of picture frames–wood, plastic and metal gilt. The big ones were the same style that my stepfather's sister, Marvella, had for her family pictures. For a moment I thought about smashing them, but those weren't Marvella's, even if they were the same cheap brand she wouldn't admit she'd bought. I swung my hook back and forth, thinking about what it was that I really wanted, who I really wanted to get to.

I ran back up to the front, calling for Grey as I went, but even so it was twenty minutes before I could get him out of there. "We an't gonna lock the door you know," I told him, "and your hands are full anyway." He had his shirt tied tight around his middle to hold stuff he couldn't carry in his hands.

"Goddamn," he kept saying like a happy child, "goddamn!"

I pulled the door to so that it looked closed from a distance and grabbed Grey's elbow. As we ran up State Street, neither of us could keep from whispering to the grey-faced men standing around.

"The goddamned Woolworth's is standing open, man. It's open, it's wide open." They looked at us, blinked and looked back up the street. I knew that by morning there wouldn't be a case left that hadn't been opened, a counter that hadn't been cleared. I knew too that it wouldn't take me that long to take the paint off the tines of my hook.

When the metal was once again clean and pure and shiny, I was going to take it over to Aunt Marvella's some night. I was going to pull my mama up a rose bush or two.

RAW AUTUMN

Is there a world which speaks through us
or do we only imagine that possibility
that expanse of water
the solemn procession to a funeral
we do know whose
in Prague, in Atlanta, in Santiago,
on windless afternoons
when all the stores have closed?

And how do we speak in the meantime,
when somehow in Berlin
you and I ate Chinese food
in a restaurant where the cook knows you
and I can remember
your fingers on the moist side of a glass,
your hand resting next to my plate?

That we each wake in the morning
and drink coffee as a cultural
fact, even knowing what we know
that we hunger for its smell
and for the thick milk on our tongues,
knowing that you do not have a country

As we try to live in a daily way
on different continents
in a thinkable world
of imprisonment, torture
where you count yourself lucky
for escaping to exile
and those with power have theories
to define the impractical emotions,
we are forced to distances
that cannot be traversed.

And when our silence keeps its beat
among the discontinuity,
the suffering that cannot
be reconciled,
where exile cannot be my metaphor
because it is too real,
I walk on this familiar street
and I hear your voice calling me,
and I do turn
for I am lonely and the year is getting on,
and I feel a wind sharp and wet at my neck.

LAGRASSE

False steps, falling back on my right foot
in a kind of dance, the broken pace
of following along goat trails, as pebbles
slipped beneath my boots. You held
your pace, your breathing
was steady, no closer than a sound.

You lay down on your back, flush
with the meadow, and watched the sails
of evening light. Rapid birds
rising in flocks out of dry grass,
coursed toward stone fences
to settle hidden in the vineyards.

The bright heat broke
across your face, on the opposite hillside
a woman stood, a grave beneath her feet,
her black scarf
lifted up behind her head.
She surveyed the vineyards
in the glare of stone, squinting,
and I wondered if she watched us
winding toward the valley.

You pointed at the birds,
a shadow flying through the arch
of the abbey. The insistence of the bells,
that time had passed,
will pass. I wished each whitening,
every blue, had stopped
in the heat, in the fading
of evening.

We are lovers, I can only think
of us this way. I wanted to ask you
if you thought she saw us,

or if you would see us
with my vision
of that time, our bones turning
to earth, to sand, to salt.

RIMA SHORE

SISTERHOOD–AND MY BROTHERS*

1.

> *I have had some things from you to which I perceive no meaning. They either were very vast, or they didn't mean anything, I don't certainly know which.*
>
> Emily Dickinson to her brother Austin, 1854

In the Fair Lawn house where we grew up were two attics, and we had names for them. The more dreary was the Grandma Shore attic, a crooked hollow toward the front of the house, with no natural light that I can remember, with a smell of spoiled oranges and ashes. Its far side sloped at a menacing angle, not a wall or ceiling, just a bleak surface that pressed down on anyone who entered. Somewhere on that surface, a hinged door could be pushed open into a cavern which was actually a crawl space under the eaves, but which, in its resonant emptiness, became forever my idea of eternity. I was not often in the Grandma Shore attic, but its mysteries never seemed to discourage my older brothers. Ricky and Bradd arranged drop-leaves and shelves from the attic's stored furniture to hold thick bottles filled with liquids of colors for which I knew no names. They labeled them with words or symbols that were indecipherable to me or Kenny. There were four of us in those years before Barbara was born, and we were forever founding laboratories–Ricky and Bradd in their corners, Kenny and I in ours.

Kenny and I were more at ease in the Grandma Kirsch attic, a musty, cozy room full of corners. In it was a wooden trunk, and in the trunk felt hats from our parents' days in the millinery trade, letters they had written during the war, swatches of fabric of all kinds. Ricky re-

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Due to an editorial error, the sequence of Rima Shore's essay, "Sisterhood–And My Brothers," was scrambled in *Conditions: Eight*. We are therefore reissuing the essay. *The Editors

minded me of that trunk not long ago. He told me that when he was a kid, that was where he thought you went when you died: you went into the old wooden trunk in the Grandma Kirsch attic. That room had different associations for me and Kenny. Enclosed there we would convene hushed meetings of the clubs we would form and dissolve every few months. Once the four of us began a bench-building club: we built benches, then sat on them at meetings where Ricky would collect dues. After a while Ricky and then Bradd withdrew. Kenny and I thought up new clubs, warily admitting kids from the block. Ricky and Bradd began working as junior volunteers at a hospital in Paterson. In the Grandma Shore attic, the bottles gave way to dissecting equipment.

My ideas about being alive in those years–before the new house, a new town, junior high school–had everything to do with that foursome. What I saw, what I believed, what I wanted, were shaped by the pacts we made, the rules we laid down, the loyalties we exacted from each other. We would break other people's rules to help each other. When Kenny and I were nine and ten, we went to neighboring boys' and girls' sleepaway camps. Kenny was homesick and altogether unhappy there (or perhaps it was I), and though it was forbidden, we would cross camp limits to meet secretly every day.

My brothers and I have not always gotten along, but we have always been able to rely on each other. When we moved to a new town, I was in the seventh grade and Bradd in the tenth. The transition was especially hard for me, and though it was simply not done, Bradd walked to school with me every day. Twenty years later, when my apartment was burglarized, Kenny made a two-hour trip the next morning to bring me his typewriter. When Ricky was dying of cancer these last months, he knew we would be with him and Elaine day and night.

I have gotten many things from my brothers. Since the illness and death of my oldest brother, I have been thinking about their meaning.

I am a woman who is committed to other women: my lover; my former lovers; my friends; my mother and sister and sisters-in-law; women I work with; women I play volleyball with; women whose work I read and who read mine; women I have never met whose lives in some way concern me. I agonize over political divisions, grieve when lovers or friends separate. I think of myself as having a place in a women's com-

munity, yet I know that many of my most intense feelings, most fierce loyalties, are directed toward the men who are my brothers. And much of what I know about being a sister, about sisterhood, I have learned with them.

My situation is not extraordinary. I have heard lesbians who are close to sons, fathers, male friends, ex-husbands or former male lovers, speak about the seeming paradox; I have read what some have written. I suspect that lesbian/feminist poets who have written about these relationships have been included less frequently on the programs of the movement's poetry events. Or when invited, they have read poems about relationships with mothers and grandmothers, sisters and lovers. Perhaps this is as it should be. . . do we need more words in praise of men? But I worry about the strictures that have sometimes kept me from writing or even talking about my brothers, and I wonder how many other women have deformed their own experience.

Some women I know talk often about their mothers or stepmothers or sisters. I am sometimes surprised to learn in passing that they have brothers. I think of a woman I have known for nearly a decade: it seems to me that she has a brother, but I don't know his name or anything about him. Of course I know other women whose brothers have been important to them and who will say so, and I seem to search them out. While others scour Emily Dickinson's letters to Sue, I find myself reading what she wrote to her brother Austin.

2.

> *I* do *well remember how chilly the west wind blew and how everything shook and rattled before I went to sleep, and I often thought of you in the midnight car, and hoped you were not lonely.*
>
> Emily Dickinson to Austin, 1851

To the day-room of the hospital I bring books about dying, break their backs holding them flat against the newspaper on my lap, afraid to let patients or other visitors see their titles. I sit here for hours at a time, and the bold news of world events rubs off on my sweater and my jeans. This is the afternoon, before most visitors arrive. One woman is here; her husband has been in intensive care, next to my brother, and now she waits

for him to return from surgery. Around us are men: patients who have come to smoke and pass an hour, the elevator supervisor and an orderly who have stepped in to catch an inning of the Yankee-Dodger series. It is October.

I am reading Gerda Lerner's *A Death of One's Own,* about her husband's death from brain cancer. She describes the day-room of an unnamed hospital–its view of New York's East River, its cheerful walls, its plastic chairs. I match its symptoms with those around me. This too is a neurology floor, the day-room walls painted brightly like a cellar turned day-care center. Ricky has been diagnosed: malignant melanoma of the spinal cord and lining of the brain. I read Gerda Lerner's account as primer and prophesy. Already in these first days, words like *steroid, pain med, shunt,* are becoming second nature.

The game drones on, and as I read the sounds comfort me. I find myself, astonished, caring about the outcome, and listen more attentively, memorizing details I will pass on to Ricky if he is not too sick from the radiation to listen.

In the assortment of lines and images that fill my mind, that create this new picture, he is the vanishing point. My thoughts reach in his direction.

I abandon Gerda Lerner as her husband loses power of speech, and slipping the book into my bag, concentrate on Ron Guidry's pitching. I am pleased to be watching on a color TV. When I was growing up with my brothers, I spent summers watching baseball, knew the batting averages of half the American league. I talked baseball with Kenny and occasionally with my second cousin, Marsha.

I imagine that my brothers have wondered: what does it mean, this choice of mine, this turning away from life with a man, with men. Only a few hours after Rick heard the positive diagnosis, I was alone with him sitting on his hospital bed. He told me hurriedly that whatever troubles we had had, whatever unhappiness I might have had, were because of him. "Remember that heart I once gave you for Valentine's day, what a bastard I was–we had a fight and I took it back, and gave it to Susie Zarchin?" I remembered. I had thrown it back at him. *Take your stupid*

locket. Moved, horrified, furious, I responded as he talked to me. No, I wasn't unhappy, and no, it wasn't his "fault" that I was a lesbian, and yes, of course I had made a choice. This was not a conversation we had ever had, directly. He was the one member of my family who had never seemed at ease with me, my life, my lovers. He was loyal, protective, loving, but always from a cautious distance. He was proud of me in the abstract–had brought his friends into a bookstore to point out my name in *Conditions*–but for reasons I am only beginning to fathom, he was afraid of me.

No, it wasn't his fault, and yes, I had made a choice. I told him that he was leaving me out of his calculations. His apology was presumptuous, and I could have said more, but we were suddenly and unaccountably measuring his life in days or weeks. In his formal, wild statements I heard questions: he needed to know how I was connected to him and I needed to tell him. If I could love him, why not another man? And if I chose not to love another man, could I care for him? In fact, he asked nothing. Looking away, he told me he loved me. I did not know then that we would have, over the next five months, long visits, slow car rides, time to try to sort it all out. It was still October.

At home one of those first nights, after hours in the hospital, I wait for Judy to finish work. We sit together in the dining room, eat leftovers that don't seem to be the right color. We move closer together to look through the newly developed prints of photographs we took in August, "before the world changed," as we have begun to say. We have cried together for three nights. Now she asks about the hospital: how does Ricky seem? what have the doctors said? how much more radiation? how are Elaine and my mother? I give her only headlines for now, too worn for the fine print, afraid to go through it again. I tell her they want to reduce the pressure by operating, putting in a tube to drain exess fluid from his brain to the lining of his stomach. "But there are cancer cells in the fluid, aren't there?" she asks. "Won't that just spread it?" I'm stunned at her logic, distantly curious at the absence of my own. As I add this to my file of questions for the neurologist, it strikes me that if spreading the disease is the lesser of evils, there won't be much time.

Judy runs a bath for me and I make two phone calls, the first to my sister in California. I give her a report: the steroids are reducing the

pressure, they are deciding about putting in the shunt; Ricky is less confused (the word we've adopted for the "neurological deficits" we have been told to expect). It is a brief conversation. I listen closely to the sound of her voice, hearing a new timbre, listening for clues about how she is, and how I am.

I call a friend, a relatively new friend, long-distance. I tell her the news a bit abruptly. The spinal tap has come back positive. It might be weeks or months but no more. Ricky knows everything. He's been talking about suicide, doesn't want to die of cancer.

She is quiet at the other end. I hope she doesn't feel obliged to find right words, hope I won't lose her to correctness, won't feel sorry to have called so new a friend. I wonder, when she starts to speak, whether she thinks I have called for advice, for counsel. What did I want? We have recently had some differences on issues personal and political: am I using Rick's illness to dissolve the distance?

"That's so unreal," she says when I tell her that Rick has been talking about funeral plans. "Trying to hold onto control even after. . . men aren't very good role models for dying."

"Don't lose this year," she urges a moment later. "You've worked hard to make time for writing. Don't lose it. He's not your lover."

3.

> *I watched you until you were out of sight Saturday evening, and then went to my room and looked over my treasures; and surely no miser ever counted his heaps of gold with more satisfaction than I gazed upon the presents from home. . . .*
>
> Emily Dickinson to Austin, 1847

My brothers were my first lovers. We did not have sex, though we did our share of seductive slow-dancing to "practice" for school events, snuggling under covers while quizzing each other for social studies tests, peeking at each other naked, or giving each other the chance to peek. My shame at these experiences has always been disproportionate to whatever

we did. I have never believed that other brothers and sisters did the same, have rarely heard women speak about this.

These relationships were intense, unspoken to this day. And of course we split up, at different times, with different degrees of resolution. These partings were some of the most painful I can remember, and much of what I have since felt in leaving women I have loved, lovers or friends, whether I have acted admirably or viciously, has pulled me back to those losses.

In a larger sense, much of what I know now about relationships, about trust, loyalty, and conflict, about merging and separating, I first experienced with my brothers. And much of what I first knew about erotic expression, about sexual signals, desires, limits, jealousies, I learned with them.

I fall asleep this October night in Judy's arms, comforted in a way I have not thought possible. I dream of Ricky and Bradd, upstairs in one of the attics of the old house, with bottles and scalpels and frogs.

The next afternoon at the hospital I peek into Rick's room. Elaine, his wife, is sitting with a book, settled by his bedside as if she has been there for hours. She steps into the corridor to talk to me: they haven't taken him down for radiation therapy yet; the pain pill has finally started to work; it looks like he might be asleep. I take another look. My brother—his eyes the color of mine, his body, always solid and broad, now shrunken. Gravity suddenly grips at the weight I have gained in the last year. He opens his eyes, says hello. "It's grown a lot," I tell him, thinking his face doesn't look so drawn with the beard he began to grow when he expected that treatments would make his hair fall out. "Just my luck," he says. "Just when my beard grows in I have to die."

Elaine asks if I will go with him to RT today, to give her an hour alone. The escort arrives, offering Ricky a stretcher, but he falls instead into a wheelchair, scowls, looks at me for encouragement, says, "You're here again to sit shiva? This is no place for healthy people." He seems glad that I'm going with him. I chase the wheelchair as it is pushed quickly and expertly through a maze of hallways and elevators into a somber makeshift waiting area. Hammering and drilling shake the room from behind a feeble partition. "A new treatment room," the escort explains as

he leaves. I look around me at six or seven people lying or sitting, waiting, with little or no hair, emaciated, magic marker lines drawn on their skin to target the radiation. By now Rick is holding his head; he carries a basin with him in case he needs to vomit. He begins to move rhythmically, a sign I have already learned to know for pain. The drilling and dust show no signs of letting up. "Headache?" I ask him as a dull throbbing sets in somewhere behind my eyes. I approach a nurse, ask if there is somewhere Ricky can lie down. "Certainly, Mrs. Shore." They move us to the hydrotherapy room, and after a few minutes Ricky asks whether I know what hydrotherapy is. "They boil it out of you, limb by limb or all at once." He is trying to scare me. This is a more familiar Rick, and I decide he must be feeling some relief. He is quiet for a few minutes, then turns on his side, asks me about prospects for a teaching job. I stroke his arms and his back.

Soon they are ready for us. "You can wait over there, Mrs. Shore," a nurse tells me. Rick looks at me uneasily, and then away. "Not Mrs. Shore," I correct the nurse. "Professor Shore." Ricky laughs, and I return to the waiting area where I stand near the desk so I can see what they are doing on the closed-circuit monitor. Ricky's body appears: he is on his side, enveloped by an eerie light. After a few minutes a technician goes in and turns him over.

By the time we again admit Rick to the hospital a few months later, I have learned something odd. Just as people there will insist that Judy—my lover of four years—is my sister (particularly when we stay overnight with Ricky, sharing a narrow cot to get a few hours' sleep), they often will not believe that Ricky is my brother. I go to the admitting office to fill out papers while Elaine stays with Rick. "Do you have your husband's Blue Cross card," the woman asks me. "Not my husband, my brother," I correct her. "Don't confuse me," she answers. When it comes time, a moment later, to sign certain forms, she recalls that I am "only the sister" and asks to see Elaine. I feel alarmed at the thought of what would happen if it were Judy or I—not even sisters—and resolve to call all my friends to urge them to sign notarized statements about who is to be considered kin in a medical crisis. My long-distance friend has shown me statements she and her lover carry.

I have finished Gerda Lerner's book and have started another—Alice Bloch's *Lifetime Guarantee.* I read aggressively, looking for clues, for help. She too has had worries about playing the maiden aunt, without a legitimate family of her own, free to nurse her sister, to hold vigil at her bedside. I don't hide this book as I read in the day-room. The title seems less threatening, and anyway I've lost my former delicacy. I've become a regular there, and it is harder to read now. People wander in and out, wanting to know how I am, what I'm reading. I see the woman whose husband had been in surgery during the World Series. He is walking with her today. He looks swollen, bloated in his pajamas, childlike in his gauze shower cap. I conclude that he will not die soon: if it were terminal she would not be so anxious. She introduces me. I say hello and look down at my book; too tired to read I go through Persephone's back-cover blurb over and over: . . . *the personal chronicle of a woman faced with the impending death of her sister from cancer. . . explores the complex and intense bond between sisters. . . a strong woman-identified sensibility.* I decide that I will not write about this death. . . there are already books about women experiencing cancer. . . would women really want to hear about my complex and intense bond with a brother, a 38-year-old man with dubious politics, a strained history with me. . . .

And there are women who have not wanted to know. The friend who urged me not to lose this year has never called, has not acknowledged that I even have a brother. Others whom I see often ask nothing. Are they afraid? I ask myself, a few friends, and Judy. When her brother died several years ago, there were women who suddenly vanished. Would they call if it were a sister, or a mother?

Ricky died two weeks ago, in early March, the day we brought him home from the hospital. By then he could not stand up alone, or see as far as the end of his bed, or swallow food or water. His speech was increasingly slurred until he could barely make himself understood. One of the last nights in the hospital, at 4 o'clock in the morning, Ricky seemed desperately to want to say something. My mother and Kenny were with him, but neither could make out his words. Kenny gave him a piece of paper and a pen, and he labored for some time before producing the word *thanks.*

4.

As lesbians we invent our own laws, create and define the bonds among us. Is it not difficult, even dangerous, to grant importance to our families of origin, particularly when these families have often rejected or patronized or infantilized us? If we are going to struggle in relationships, should it not be with each other? Do we not, by the very act of valuing the nuclear family, demean the ties we have chosen?

As the politics of identity play an increasing role in our community, I find myself baffled at conflicting claims on my loyalty. We are being urged, and urging each other, to acknowledge and to reclaim the cultures from which we have emerged. This process has been important for me; in a sense, I have made it my profession. Studying Russian for half my life, I have been able to return to the place from which my family emigrated, and where many relatives remain. The closeness I have felt to my family is connected, in some way, to ideas about family I learned in my Jewish home. Am I to value the culture from which my family came, while dismissing the family itself? Do I seek to identify with Jews in the abstract, but not with the brothers I have loved all my life?

I feel sometimes like a political exile. I would not want to return to the place I have left. I have made other choices, other commitments. But I cannot forget that much of who I am, much that I value in myself, even the fortitude to make those choices, came with me from the old country, whose air I have breathed, whose language I have spoken.

CHERYL CLARKE
JEWELLE GOMEZ
EVELYNN HAMMONDS
BONNIE JOHNSON
LINDA POWELL

BLACK WOMEN ON BLACK WOMEN WRITERS: CONVERSATIONS AND QUESTIONS

Developing and expressing a black feminist criticism in publications controlled and consumed primarily by white feminists is the issue which brought the five of us together for this pentalog *(discussion by five). As reviewers, critics, and black feminists we had each experienced ambivalence over the extent to which we imposed a black feminist analysis on the work of black women writers, partly because of the fear of exposure in white feminist space and partly because the criteria of a black feminist criticism is still developing. Thus the dilemma: how many, if any, "family secrets" do we reveal? We did not resolve the question of "to what extent" in this pentalog. The questions served as a catalyst for our discussion in other relevant areas: the literary tradition of black women; the role of black feminist critics; the seriousness or lack of seriousness with which white feminists view the work of black women; and lesbianism as aesthetics and politics.*

*During the taping we tried to create an atmosphere of anything can be said. We felt this to be crucial. Many times in writing about black women we had gotten stuck on how much to say and how far to go. We had censored ourselves. Indeed, during the process we constantly asked one another, "Can we say this?" or "Should we erase that?" The urge to edit ourselves before the words hit air was ever-present, especially in our discussion of lesbianism. We laughed a lot, especially during our discussion of lesbianism. There was pregnant silence, particularly in our discussion of lesbianism. We were apprehensive, open, resistant, rebellious, "nappy girls."**

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*From "Harriet" (Audre Lorde, *Black Unicorn*, Norton, 1978).

We decided our essential task in this process was to raise questions. Though the urgency of definition and self-definition is always impending, we were not so interested in answers. Hopefully, our exploration will be another catalyst for further exploration by black women of the dimensions of black feminism.

The inspiration for "Black Women on Black Women Writers: Conversations and Questions" came from my good friends Linda Powell and Bonnie Johnson, with whom I have had numerous conversations about the cultural tradition of black women in America–at retreats, conferences, parties, across the kitchen table. I invited Linda, Bonnie, Evelynn Hammonds, and Jewelle Gomez to participate with me in the pentalog. All the magic is theirs and, as editor of the transcription, I accept full responsibility for the flaws.

"Black Women on Black Women Writers: Conversations and Questions" has been edited to reflect our discussion in the following areas:

- *The fear of exposure: the dilemma of the black feminist critic.*
- *Still "towards" a black feminist criticism: black women on black women writers.*
- *Naming: the lesbian aesthetic/the lesbian politic.*

My warm thanks to the participants in the pentalog and to the Conditions *editorial collective for their support of this piece. We invite and welcome your response, feedback, criticism, and support.*

Cheryl Clarke

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

We wrote the following responses to three questions:

What is the first novel you read by a black woman writer?

Linda: I think it was *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker. It was assigned by a high school teacher [in the late sixties] . . . I remember being impressed by my first book by a black woman. I also remember being *under*whelmed by the writing itself and by her storytelling ability.

Bonnie: I think the first writing I read by a black woman was *Jubilee*

in 1967. In that same year I read a book called *Black Protest* by Joanne Grant.

Evelynn: Growing up in a black middle class community in Atlanta during the sixties, I had gone to many "Negro History Week" programs at school. It wasn't until high school [in the late sixties] that black women writers began to play an important role in my life. And the phase that began with *Jubilee* motivated me to constantly search for anything that mentioned something about black people and black women specifically.

Jewelle: The first thing I recall reading by a black woman was Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues.* . . . I've never forgotten that as my first consciousness of myself as a black woman.

Cheryl: The first novel I read by a black woman was that tired *Jubilee.* I was a junior at Howard [in 1968], taking Arthur P. Davis' course "Negro Literature in the United States." *Jubilee* was such a come down from Walker's poetry. The story of how Walker wrote the book is infinitely more interesting than the novel which came out of her search for her roots. I had the opportunity to hear her lecture at Howard on her discovery of her family history, her grandmother, etc.

Name the first novel you read by a black writer.

Linda: At the same time I read *Jubilee,* I discovered *Another Country* by Baldwin. It was considered a "dirty book." My father had it. And I sneaked reading it.

Evelynn: Margaret Walker's book was the first novel I read by anybody black.

Bonnie: The first novel I remember reading was *Another Country* in 1966. I remember that I was moved by it but didn't understand it all.

Jewelle: The first novel I read by a black writer was Baldwin's *Another Country* in the early sixties. I was stunned by Baldwin's facility with words and images. They made me sweat. And, of course, there was the fact that he dealt with . . . interracial love and homosexuality . . . Yum! Yum!

Cheryl: I read Frank Yerby for years as an adolescent. But I don't count him. The first authentic black writer I read was Baldwin—*Another Country*—in 1964. My mother had the hard cover, and I asked her could

I read it. She encouraged me. I'll never forget *Another Country*. It changed my life, at least my intellectual life at that time. It taught me to take novels seriously. Everytime I teach a black lit course I use it.

Name your five favorite novels.

Linda: *Song of Solomon* (Morrison), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Marquez), *Chosen People, Timeless Place* (Marshall), *Just Above My Head* (Baldwin), *Them* (Oates).

Jewelle: *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy), *The Color Purple* (Walker), *The Awakening* (Chopin), *Native Son* (Wright)—I couldn't decide on a fifth.

Bonnie: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston), *Sula* (Morrison), *Song of Solomon* (Morrison), *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou), *A Woman Named Solitude* (Schwartz-Bart).

Evelynn: *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison), *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara), *The Color Purple, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Another Country* (Baldwin).

Cheryl: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (Walker), *The Bluest Eye, Absalom! Absalom!* (Faulkner), *Another Country, Quicksand* (Nella Larsen).

BEGINNINGS:

Linda: It would be helpful for me if we could talk a little about what each of us has done.

Jewelle: Most of my writing up to now has been poetry and I'm just starting to do critical writing. I've always thought of criticism as a way to advance the art of literature. Criticism is valuable to building audiences. And so, I look forward to being able to write about other people's writing. And that's what I plan to do all year.

Cheryl (*to Jewelle*): What's the piece you've written for *Home Girls*?

Jewelle: Black lesbians in fiction by women. It is a discussion of the kinds of images presented about black lesbians. The piece is basically a synopsis of everything I feel about writing on black women.

Linda: I don't consider myself a writer, while I do feel I'm a critic or maybe I'm just a consumer who has interesting reactions to things that are written. Essentially, my writing career hinges on three book reviews. I reviewed Michele Wallace's book (*Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*) for *Conditions:Five–The Black Woman's Issue* (1979), and it was later reprinted with some editing in *Radical America.* With Lynne Reynolds I reviewed J.R. Roberts' *Black Lesbians* for *Off Our Backs*. For *Sinister Wisdom* I reviewed June Jordan's *Civil Wars* (1981).

Cheryl: I've done four reviews that I consider criticism. I reviewed Ntozake's book *Nappy Edges* for *Conditions:Five.* Then for *Conditions: Six* (1980), I reviewed Pat Parker's book of poetry, *Movement in Black* and that was the first time I came upon the dilemma we're going to be discussing today. How far do you go about black women's work in a journal read primarily by white women?

The next piece I did for *Conditions* which was problematic for me was Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*. Also again, how critical can you become of a black woman's work? And then I wrote a fourth piece–*Some of Us Are Brave* for *Sinister Wisdom* No. 20. That presented fewer problems in the sense that by the time I reviewed it, I had resolved a lot of the dilemma because I had decided wherever I wrote I would tell the truth. And whoever is involved in the scenario will get the truth told about them, that is, as far as I can see it.

Evelynn: I started writing for *Sojourner* in 1979. *Sojourner* is one of the Boston women's newspapers. I first got involved with them when I wrote that piece for their special issue on women of color, which was a sort of biographical piece. So naturally, when a book by a black woman came through to be reviewed, and I was the only black woman on staff, I was asked to review it and said yes. I was initially so excited about being able to do it. I've reviewed some of everybody: Ellease Sutherland, Barbara Chase-Ribaud, Alice Childress, Toni Morrison, and I wrote a couple of essays for the *Heresies* issue on Third World women. Over time I started dealing with the problem of reviewing for *Sojourner.* I subsequently got off the staff and sort of write when I feel like it, review things I want to review, and write essays when I want to, because it's a white women's publication and because of the audience and all the issues I have to face every time I sit down to review something by a black woman. And I also don't think of myself as a writer. I have a hard time with that identity.

Jewelle: Come out. Come out.

Bonnie: I'm a historian by training and have written only two reviews–

both of them solicited. I didn't ask to do them. Both of them under pressure of a deadline. I was asked to review *Some of Us Are Brave* for *Womanews.*

And I was asked to review jointly Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down* and June Jordan's *Civil Wars* for another publication. Those are the two I've done. Both of them are what I would call "book reports." Not to put them down in any way, but for both publications my way of dealing is to not analyze critically but to talk about the books' worth.

Cheryl: Does one cancel out the other?

> *. . . Black women . . . began to look for works that would speak to our experiences. We found Joyce Ladner, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker to name just a few.*
>
> (Bonnie Johnson, *Womanews,* March 1982, p. 11)

THE FEAR OF EXPOSURE: THE DILEMMA OF THE BLACK FEMINIST CRITIC

Cheryl: We've talked a lot informally about the dilemmas of writing about black women writers in our work as reviewers and writers in various feminist publications. I want us to talk as freely as possible about those dilemmas and the pieces we've written which have been problematic for us. Who are the problematic writers and thinkers? What are the boundaries in white women's publications? What limitations do we impose on ourselves–personal and political–in writing about black women writers?

Bonnie: I'd just like to touch on something that I feel is crucial, and that is: how much of the world, how much of politics, how much of white male society–how much do they dictate to us what we say and how we say it? How much do we as black women, in our work, put burdens on authors, saying, "You have to be better because there are so few"? And then that's the bind we're forced into all the time that we have to be extra special, double better; everything has to be doubly researched, perfect. Because there is supposedly so little material out there about us, everything we do has got to be right.

Linda: I think that is clearly the burden I put on *Some of Us Are Brave.*

If *Brave* was one of a whole new genre and next Christmas I could go to the bookstore and there would be eight or nine new black women's studies books, *Brave* would be fine! I'd have no beef with *Brave*. But knowing that I don't have that assurance, I do, like, look for the book to be perfect. There's a search for perfection that really does affect my criticism of the book.

Bonnie: I have a beef with the way bibliographies were compiled in *Some of Us Are Brave*. The one bibliography by Pat Bell Scott, particularly.

Cheryl: That's the one I had problems with too.

Bonnie: She calls it "black feminist" and she lists every black woman in history as a "black feminist." Well, whether I think they're feminists is irrelevant. *They* would not call themselves feminists. So, I really had to say something about that. Also there was another bibliography by Jean Yellen, in which she included everything she found about black women and wasn't discriminating. I had just done some research on household workers for my Master's essay, and one of the sources that Yellen cites is this article written in 1906 by this man in the *Sewanee Review*. She cites it as a source on household workers that "describes the difficulties of keeping servants." Actually, it's a racist tome. The man is talking about "stupid darkies" and how they've run the town and what "we" (white people) must do to get them to realize what their place is. I used it in my work because what he does show is how black women were organizing in Auburn, Mississippi in 1906. If one of them was fired, the rest wouldn't go to work for six weeks and drive the white people crazy. And that's not about how tough it is to keep servants. (*to Cheryl*) Did you criticize these bibliographies in your review?

Cheryl: I criticized Scott. Some of the women she cited as "black feminists" were clearly not feminist at the time they wrote their books and still are not to this day. Like Inez Smith Reid, Joyce Ladner, or Angela Davis.

Linda: The search for perfection is something which also affected my view of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. With all the "hooplah" that attended its publication, one would have expected it to be the definitive work on the issues of women of color in the United States. I suppose I also resented being defined as a woman of color, because I feel my blackness is subsumed. I guess I took that resentment out on the book.

Jewelle: Many times over, throughout the book, the editors admit or

pay tribute to black women as being the force which awakened other women of color to their oppression. So I don't feel that blackness is subsumed in the "women of color" designation.

Evelynn: Even Toni Cade wrote the introduction.

Cheryl: Yeah, but I see what Linda means in terms of being "subsumed." The political terminology of "women of color" sometimes seems to negate difference.

Jewelle: But then there's the vision of the work in the subtitle, "Writings by Radical Women of Color," that posits the ideal for us of coalition politics among self-determined women of color.

Cheryl: I so agree. And the idea and actuality of a book of writing by women of color in the United States is a valuable and precious artifact. I appreciate the politics which guided the book: that colored women, lesbians, feminists, writers, poets, workers can talk to us, as I hope someday all women of color can talk to each other.

Evelynn: I was disappointed by the lack of discussion of economics, except for your article, Cheryl ["Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance"].

Cheryl: And mine didn't discuss it too tough.

Bonnie: My name is Bennet and I ain't in it. I haven't really looked at it enough to evaluate it.

Evelynn: I feel *This Bridge* would have been much stronger had class and economics been addressed. But I still think it's an important contribution to feminist theory.

Cheryl: See, it gets back to that issue of the search for perfection or the book that is all things to all women. I mean, you want more class and economics, I want more fiction and poetry.

Jewelle: And I would have liked more space devoted to women as artists and political beings, naturally, since I think that's the thorniest issue of all. So, is it fair to put all our burdens on the book?

Evelynn: I go on record about *This Bridge.* It is a valuable beginning.

Bonnie: Then I'll go on record about *Brave:* since it was the first composite of black women's studies, I wanted my review to be exciting and I wanted people to look at it themselves. I wanted my review to say: "You have to look at it. Don't think it's wonderful in the world, but you

need to look at it." Erlene Stetson's piece on teaching on the enslavement of black women (in the United States) was really a good piece. The questions her class raised were fabulous.

Cheryl: I thought that Stetson's article was one of the best essays in the book. I had some problems with her interpretation of white women and black women and their (white women's) use of the analogy that women are slaves to their husbands as blacks are slaves to their masters. . . .

Sometimes I can't see my own value judgments getting in the way. Audre Lorde confronted me on my review of *Cancer Journals* in *Conditions: Eight.* She said, "How come you criticize what isn't there? It's like you put the burden of the whole world on me." And so my response to Audre was, "Well, now, Audre, you know we expect you to be perfect." (*Laughter*)

Linda: At some point we have to stop making the individual black woman writer take the weight for the lack of works by and about black women in our reviews and criticism.

Bonnie: Well, Alice Walker's book has gotten the stamp of approval from the straight literary world. Mel Watkins [in *The New York Times*] says it's basically okay.

Linda: In a rather classic review, though. He does not mention lesbianism at all. He talks about the relationships between black men and black women. (*Laughter*)

Bonnie: And the stuff that I find so appealing about Walker, which is her historical sense, Watkins puts down.

Jewelle: Publishers say, "Okay, well, we've published Alice Walker's book with a lesbian theme. We have one and we don't need anymore." And each publishing house will do the same. One lesbian theme a year will do. I think that does affect what we say and how harshly we say it.

Evelynn: I think we also have to deal in part with the issue of the editors of these books. For example, the editor of *Ain't I A Woman* is a white woman, who was simply ill-equipped to determine whether the factual or the cultural parts of the book were accurate. She simply had no idea. I feel had a black woman been involved with the editing of that book its flaws would have been dealt with.

Linda: A black woman or a woman who's qualified?

(*A general "Yeah" goes up.*)

Jewelle: What were some of the book's flaws?

Cheryl: It's oversimplification of history with regard to current feminist activism, inaccuracies about black feminism, her homophobia by omission. The way Hooks cited references was a problem for me. I didn't know where half the quoted material was coming from. I became curious about the book since I was reviewing it for *Off Our Backs* and contacted Hooks' editor, Ellen Herman, who is not "ill-equipped." I asked her why the references weren't cited in correspondence with their appearance in the text. Herman said that Hooks did not want to alienate readers who are not used to footnotes and citations. (*A general outcry. Expletives. Statements like, "Oh, give me a break."*)

Evelynn: I bet that white woman didn't even know how offensive that idea is.

Cheryl: Oh yes she did! She said she told Hooks how patronizing her rationale for not precisely citing her references was. She also told me she told Hooks the book would be perceived as homophobic because of her avoidance of the lesbianism issue.

Bonnie: Why didn't she deal with lesbianism?

Cheryl: The editor told me Hooks had no really sound reason.

Linda: I still believe whether you're a black woman publishing with a feminist press or a black woman publishing with a lefty press, the quality of your work gets sidestepped. It's the "dancing dog" in operation. Bell Hooks writes a book. And we all know the wonder is a black woman can write at all. I wonder if the press, her editor . . .

Cheryl: Who is a lesbian, by the way.

Linda: . . . impose the same standards of excellence, accuracy, and balance on her, as a black woman, that they impose on white writers?

Cheryl: Herman told me that South End Press, for example, has a strong editorial policy which grants the author editorial veto power. Which means that Herman could suggest until she was blue that Hooks cite her references traditionally or that she address the politics of lesbianism, but if Hooks, as author, don't wanna, she don't hafta.

Linda: While on the subject of editors, I just want to talk a little about having my Michele Wallace review [*Conditions: Five*] reprinted in *Radical*

America. There are several things that are important about this. If I were to review that book today, I would review it differently. Part of that is growth and part of it's just common sense. Several things happened. I had a fabulous woman editor who was white at *Radical America.* And it gets back to that issue of "qualified" vs. the color agenda. It all boils down to the woman knowing her shit and having good personal skills. She knew how to be an editor. She knew how to say to me that I was wrong like, "Linda, you need to rethink this."

Cheryl: I think that the problem that was raised in connection with Hooks is the problem black women writers have with publishers and editors across the board. Black women writers, however good they may be, however successful they may be in their writing, rarely get the benefits of an editor who will work with them and help them take their work where it ought to go. Like Toni Morrison's book, the one she wrote about that boy, not the latest one. . . .

ALL: *Song of Solomon.*

Cheryl: Yeah, I would love to know who edited that book. There's so much garbage in it.

Jewelle: Floating debris.

Bonnie: (*to Cheryl*) Could we be a little nice?

Linda: No more nice girl.

> . . . *Black women . . . have for too long been described by others, and their misrepresentations have cut deeply into our concept of ourselves as women and our place in the past and present struggles of black people to survive in this country.*
>
> (Evelynn Hammonds)

Cheryl: Should we key in on the limitations we impose on ourselves personally and politically when we write about black women writers?

Linda: I think Bonnie should say what she's going to say first.

Bonnie: I want to raise two points that I've been thinking a lot on. One is the issue of assuming a consciousness on behalf of our readers and putting it out there and bringing out the subtleties in a book and thinking that the white readers are going to get it. Like, a friend of mine who's white said to me, "Bonnie, I've heard that this Bell Hooks book is

the answer. . . ." And I'm wondering if, in your review, white women reading it, my friend, for example, would get what you get. Is their consciousness ready to hear it?

And the second part of that is that the issue for us, as black women, is self-definition, which is one of the problems in reviewing. Everyone is so quick to say who we are. And we're so quick to say all of us are different, that there's no universality of black womanhood. Therefore people are still not quite sure. They don't know our history, our essence. So, when they read the book, they take from it what their perspective is, which could many times be racist and they may know it or not know it. And then we're way beyond that, talking about the subtleties in the work.

Linda: That sounds like the white woman who said to me that *Say Jesus And Come To Me* is wonderful. White women seem to love *Say Jesus,* because it's about real black people, unquote. And because of Ann Allen Shockley white women say that they now know who black women, black lesbians are.

Cheryl: Some white women—not all.

Linda: That's true.

Cheryl: Some white women still see black women as one monolithic whole.

Jewelle: Sexually aggressive wet nurses.

Cheryl: Then there are some white women who manage to transcend the stereotypes.

Jewelle: It was a white woman who first told me about *Say Jesus.* She said, "Jewelle, read this book and keep a barf bag beside your chair." So, it is true. Not all would do that.

Bonnie: What about the issues I put out there.

Linda: There's no answer.

Cheryl: Well, *my* answer to the consciousness of white women, Beej, re black women writers is the same as my response to Linda: some white women will understand the subtleties in the work itself and in my review and some won't. Some black women will and some won't. I will deal with the subtleties where I can whether the white reader or the black reader can deal with them or not.

Bonnie: Could we talk a little bit more about criticism? I've always wanted to know what it is. Is criticism *trashing*?

Cheryl: The very word criticism negates the act of "trashing." If *I'm* going to write about a work critically, my perspective should in some way be historical. My writing should also be instructive and balanced. I deal with the perceived and actual shortcomings of the book as well as the things that grip me. In *Ain't I A Woman,* for example, I was gripped by the chapter, "The Devaluation of Black Womanhood," which I thought was excellent. But then there's the other side of it—the obfuscation of current feminism, white and black, and just the total omission of anything about lesbians. It's like what I said in my review, "Feminists must read this book" with the awareness that it has many shortcomings. I also like to write reviews. I guess I like to write critically. I like to be humorous. I like to be sarcastic. I try to balance my style with an understanding of where a work by a black woman fits in the tradition of black intellectual contributions.

Jewelle: That's a real important issue for me, too.

Bonnie: I'm not sarcastic. That makes me too tense. I'm good at summarizing. I'm good at making the historical connections, finding something in a book that makes a connection. Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*—a lot of these stories didn't work for me, but the sentence "Harriet Tubman wasn't my great grandmother for nothing" stuck with me. So, I can make an historical connection and say that some of the women in their stories are recognizable to me. But that's what I tend to do in reivews—try to find some connection and make it educational.

Linda: But what is it that makes you so undecided about reviewing?

Bonnie: What you said—"Who the hell am I?"

Evelynn: I want my values to come through. I want it to be my personal voice. But I want it to be my personal voice as a black lesbian feminist who has these values which do fit in with the larger black lesbian community, black feminist community, women's community, world.

Bonnie: We know the reality. When people see us in print they figure we must know something. But I know that the reasons I was asked to do reviews had nothing to do with who I am. The white women who have asked me don't know who I am. I happened to be in a place where somebody said, "Oh, you're black. . . ."

Linda: You speak the language and you're bright. . . .

Jewelle: And you have a typewriter. . . .

Evelynn: And you've got four days. . . .

Bonnie: And when I'm reading other reviews by other black women I know the same thing probably happened. So, I'm not putting myself down in any way by asking, "Who am I to say?"

Linda: One of the truths about the "dancing dogs" is the dogs do function on a certain average basis. And they do occasionally hit on someone who can do the job. It's not because white women look for somebody. It's a law of averages.

Cheryl: Another side to this is while some white feminists may approach us to write because of the superficial reasons you all catalogued, others might approach us on very solid ground–because we're *qualified*. They may know we've done some thinking on the issues. It isn't always happenstance. Linda, you've alluded to this concept of the "dancing dogs." I wish you would elaborate on it a little.

Linda: Once there was a man who made his living because he had a dog. And he would call people into the street and would say, "Come, see my dog." And he would then play a music box, and his dog would dance. Now this dog hopped around.

(*Laughter building*)

Linda (*continuing*): Now, the truth is this dog didn't do anything that remotely resembled dancing.

(*Fits of laughter*)

However, it wasn't bad for a dog.*

(*Uproarious laughter*)

So it's been my experience that what's been operating in the women's community is that whole thing that if a black woman speaks the language and is nice around white folk, "the dancing dog" is in operation. She can speak at conferences. She can write reviews. And even if she's mediocre, it's not bad for a negro. Occasionally, they hit pay dirt. And they ask a

*See Mary Ellmann. *Thinking About Women* (N.Y.: A Harvest Book, 1968, p. 31) for a similar discussion of women writers and male critics.

Bonnie Johnson to write a review. They'll get something that's higher quality than much of the material they print. But it's not because they met her, or they spoke to her, or they knew her work or her involvement in women's issues. No, but because they saw her at a party, she was dressed nice, she's black, and she went to Sarah Lawrence.

Cheryl: Not all the time.

Linda: Well, that's my theory of the "dancing dogs."

Evelynn: And how can you not let yourself be a dancing dog.

Linda: Everybody in this room has probably been one. It's a stance we're critical of and have lived. I have been approached by white feminist editors—to review work by black women writers—in ways that are out of proportion to my literary accomplishments. You would have thought, by the way they approached me, that I had published essays, written novels, and was known throughout the world. So many times their perceptions are off, their intensity is off. And that's because I'm black.

Jewelle: (*to Evelynn*) Your question of how do you not become one, it seems to me, might be answered if we, in developing a black feminist standard, identify why we want to write critically and what it is we have to say. And having looked at what I think I want to do with criticism, which is to learn what writers are trying to do and to teach what I feel is important in terms of historical and political contexts, I can define that role for myself. Once I've done that it comes much easier for me to look at someone's writing. Then I don't feel that I am throwing out cheap shots or trashing anyone's work, because I've considered why I've put pen to paper.

> *Black feminist criticism can, we hope, provide the revolutionary perspective that can support the development of an autonomous Black feminist movement.*
>
> (Evelynn Hammonds, *Sojourner,* October, 1980)

Cheryl: I see our task differently in this piece than say in "Towards A Black Feminist Criticism" and from "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Smith and Walker at that time were trying to create positive space for black women writers to exist in after decades of critical abuse and neglect from white critics—men and women—and black male critics, all of whom had dismissed black women writers, had not taken us seriously, and had not recognized our tradition. We are at a different place, I think,

today. We can agree that black women have a tradition, a veritable tradition of writing, and we can begin to look at the work of black women writers evaluatively.

Linda: We're supposed to be talking about how we see what we're doing here. My reasons are related to yours but are far more personal.

Cheryl: The personal *is* political—a good ole feminist tradition.

Linda (*mocking*): Thank you, thank you. The point is that over the past five years of being who I am and what I am, I've developed two conversations about literature and politics. One kind is the kind I have in public—in journals, in newspapers, as a public speaker. There's another kind of conversation I have had with most of the people in this room which never leaves *us.* These conversations are often furtive, often filled with cynicism about people's work, my own work, and about what I intend to do. It is usually clear that these conversations have changed my life, have shaped the way I feel about writing, singing, doing theater, have mattered to me! In the last year or two the gap between the public conversation and the private conversation has gotten bigger and bigger. And the major issues relate to what we were talking about before, which is what Cheryl's talking about, which is quality, which is who do you believe gives a damn about what she's saying. And who has the capability to say it in some real way. You're right, it's real linked to personal issues. My ability to be a good actor is in many ways directly related to my ability and my willingness to tell the truth. I sense that and I'm living and working with that. Part of what I wanted to do was for us to look at that gap between those public and private conversations. And what we're saying may bring some of those other conversations out of the closet. I can start saying more of those things publicly than I say privately. Maybe it'll advance the work, as Jewelle said. That's what I want to do.

Evelynn: I think what you said, Cheryl, is good. I agree that Barbara's piece on black feminist criticism and Alice's piece start from different places than we are now. When Barbara wrote that piece there was no such term as "black feminist criticism." As far as I know she coined it. And Alice's writing about being a black woman artist and a tradition of black women's writing was certainly unique in 1974. We're at a new place, because there *is* a black feminist criticism now. We don't have to start by justifying our existence.

(Several "Uum-huums" go up.)

That leads to new complications because this new position allows us to

examine things as opposed to illuminating the lost history, refuting the past transgressions against us. Now we have to be in a new place and say: what is this piece about? what is it doing? We have a body of literature and we have access to publications. We have space to really develop black feminist criticism and take away that sort of starting from, "This is so wonderful because there's never been anything like it before." We can move beyond that, while still being caught up in the dilemma.

The other thing for me personally: I'm here because of the conflicts that have arisen for me in reviewing black women in white women's publications. And this has become more problematic for me over the year. And I need to talk to other black women about it. It's like a reality check. It's like: am I making any sense? What I need to do is challenge my thinking, to grow. On white publications sometimes I feel like I'm holding up the banner of black womanhood. And that doesn't allow me to be as critical as I would like to be. And this space is like a place to be freer.

Cheryl: Here's one of my concerns and dilemmas and it sort of alludes to what you said, Linda. The world, the community is so small. We're friends with many of the women we write about. We have done political work with some, been in various groups with others. How does that personal relationship affect us as critics, reviewers? That was my dilemma with *Cancer Journals*—I know Audre. I've known her since she did several poetry readings for the Assata Shakur Defense Committee back in the seventies. Some have said that perhaps, when faced with such a dilemma, you shouldn't write the review. But I wanted to write about Audre's work, because her work is valuable. I also faced this dilemma with *Brave*. I have known Gloria Hull for a few years. And I've known Barbara Smith since 1975, when we met at the Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs, Ohio. But I also wanted to write about *Brave*. So, the question becomes for me in many cases not, "What am I to say?" but rather, "Can I say what I need to say and still keep my friendships?"

Linda: My feeling on this is that you gotta cop to your personal dilemma in your review.

Jewelle: I'm in a constant struggle to define myself as a writer—a writer of fiction, of criticism—and one of the ways I do that is by exchanging ideas with other women who I respect and whose ideas I find stimulating.

Cheryl: Any of them here today?

(*A pregnant pause, then bursts of laughter.*)

Jewelle (*laughing*): . . . so for me it's a question of definition for myself. Defining what I think is "good" and "bad" writing, important writing, something which I think advances important political positions. In building my own definitions for myself in my writing, I hope to do the same for literature as a whole. And not trying to answer all the questions, but learning how important the questions themselves are. Constructiveness—that's the key word at this point.

Linda: Two things I'd like to respond to. I think to raise the questions will be the major value of this piece and not to hesitate to raise the questions just because you think you don't have the answers. If we can raise the questions, that will be valuable work in and of itself. Secondly, Jewelle's final comment about the need to build and the need to be constructive are the most difficult problems in this whole thing about doing criticism. If we go with Cheryl's point about now trying to show the whole picture instead of the brighter points in the picture, that's what I'm most fearful of: that I'm not being constructive; that I'm not contributing to the vision.

Bonnie: I agree. I'm in a good spot here because I can bounce off of everybody and make some type of positive statement. I think we're coming from any equally positive place as Barbara in "Toward. . . ." I think the need to say, "Yea, black women" is clear. We're doing that also in this piece. That's why I'm here. My feeling is that this piece, our piece and Alice's and Barbara's and any others make up the whole. I agree with Ev. Part of why I'm here is writing for *Womanews* and *New Directions* and because of my responsibility as a black feminist.

I heard a contradiction in what you said, Ev. First, you said we had gone beyond Barbara's piece and then you said in your own work you still feel like you're holding up the banner of black womanhood. So, we really haven't gone beyond. We are still defining and we're still making inroads into how we want to define what we're doing. Barbara Jordan's piece on Channel 13 on Boston, "Crisis to Crisis: A City Divided," brought home to me the realities of racism in this country. So I think we're starting from square one every time we open our mouths. We have covered some distance. But I think Barbara Smith's piece will be read and re-read. And this piece will be read and re-read.

Cheryl: So, one of the goals of this piece is to bring the personal, private drawingroom and kitchen conversations into the public domain? Do we again want to elaborate on this dilemma of letting it all hang out in white feminist publications?

Linda: As Ev was talking, this came to my mind: do white feminist editors and publishers know we feel ambivalent about writing for their publications? And do they care? First, do they know that when they call me up to review something that I really do feeling I'm holding the banner high. I really do feel that responsibility.

Bonnie: Why?

Linda (*strident*): You must. You must be a credit to the race. White folks ain't spozed to know your shit.

Cheryl: The idea that you're not spozed to air your dirty linen in public.

Linda: Right. Right. This whole secrecy thing is another issue we can talk about. There are family issues here. I mean I'm in a position now where I'm refusing to review a play because I can't find anything good to say about it. I'm not going to say in public the things truth would necessitate I say about this particular black woman's work.

Cheryl: That's like the bind I felt I was in when I reviewed Pat Parker's *Movement in Black* for *Conditions:Six* (1980). Much of the poetry in the book I found to be mediocre. And here I had said I'd review it and the editors needed the review. They couldn't turn around and find someone else. I had already committed myself. But I couldn't say anything glowing about the book.

Linda: And so what'd you do?

Cheryl: I wrote a lukewarm review. The editors sent it back and told me I had to be more critical. They told me Parker had been an "out" lesbian poet for seventeen years and I had to say more abut her work. I took the review back to try to be more critical, but I was dealing with this dilemma of should I put her poetry down in a white woman's publication. Audre Lorde and Judy Grahn had said her poetry was great. Like, who am I to say that most of the poetry in that book was poor, needed work. I held myself back in terms of how critical I could have been.

Linda: But my question is: did the *Conditions* editors understand the pressure you were under.

Cheryl: Probably not. I didn't even understand it, at least not enough to articulate it to Rima and Elly. They just felt I shouldn't be so wishy-washy.

Linda: We all have to be credits to our race.

Evelynn: There's an assumption being made I think in what Cheryl was saying that being critical is being negative. And that's not the case.

Bonnie: I agree.

Evelynn: Not wanting to say anything bad in the streets is again dealing with racism. We live in a racist culture. And if we have some access to the media and we're going to say something about a black woman, we don't want to say anything that can be used against her.

Cheryl: The other issue for me, especially with Pat Parker, was am I right? Am I stopping people from reading it who might benefit from it?

Bonnie: I don't think I enjoy the process of reviewing. But I think that when I review again I want to strengthen the work, and if that means saying what I don't like about it I think I need to say it. The other piece of it is that people reading the book see flaws I haven't mentioned. Then what gets perpetuated is that blacks don't even know how to review work by their own people.

Cheryl: Not necessarily. There are always going to be those who see issues or flaws that you don't see. You can't be responsible for seeing everything. Reviews, criticism express points of view, opinions, values.

Linda: I realize that I always assume–for better or for worse–that people will read my review and the work. I'd never think that I am the deciding factor on whether or not a reader will buy or read a work. In the reviews I have done, I've always said, "Read this book." There's a lot of value in most of the material I've been asked to review.

Cheryl: Is criticism merely the demand for a "rigorous examination of the text," as Deborah McDowell said. Or is it about looking at what's not there, what's lacking. And what about the search for perfection? I think there's a line we must tread. Okay, Parker didn't take this poem where *I* think it ought to have gone. So?!!! Can we really get down on a writer because our expectations as critics or consumers are disappointed?

Jewelle: That's what I saw happening with McDowell as she tore into Barbara Smith. I would say to her that the key to Barbara's article is "Towards." Barbara was trying to set up certain criteria in terms of our position as blacks and as women. So, who was Deborah McDowell to tell me what Barbara didn't do? What would have been better for her and me was if she had gone on and built on what Barbara Smith had said.

Linda: Now, for the record, who is McDowell and what did she write?

Jewelle: She wrote an essay entitled "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" and used Barbara's piece as a point of reference. She attacked Barbara for being imprecise.

Cheryl: By a rigorous examination of the text, I don't mean what McDowell actually did. I don't mean her style. As much as she was trying to put down the style and approach of traditional white male criticism in her piece in relationship to black women writers, she fell into the same trap. However, that's not the way McDowell proceeds. She is exceedingly vituperative in espousing her views. She is hard, biting, condescending, competitive, impatient, patronizing, and homophobic!

Jewelle: There's no question about that.

Linda: When I read it, one sentence sort of leapt off the page which seemed to say, "You lesbians don't say nothing to me till you make it easy for me, till you can make it a little easier for me to digest." And the name for that I do believe is homophobia.

Jewelle: For McDowell any relationships drawn between criticism and lesbianism are invalid.

Cheryl: Or "reductionist."

Linda: She said in her article that definitions of lesbianism were imprecise. She was asking for more precision of definition.

Jewelle: She also took issue with Barbara's interpretation of *Sula* as a lesbian novel.

Linda: Because if we say *Sula* is a "lesbian" novel, we'll have to say others are. I think it's wonderful.

Cheryl: And that's exactly what she says. She also ridicules the criteria Barbara uses for assessing a novel to be a lesbian novel. She says they are "vacuous." I have had reservations about the criteria Barbara Smith sets forth in her piece and also her use of *Sula* as a lesbian novel, because I think Morrison undermines the relationship between Sula and Nel. I think she develops the relationship between Sula and Nel's husband to avoid the lesbian issue. Even so I don't think Barbara's criteria are "vacuous."

Linda: Well, the point is that by definition lesbian is fringe. What frightened McDowell was that she sees "lesbian" can be broader than she is

prepared to admit. It could be a way to talk about *Sula.* It could be a way to talk about Zora Hurston. It could be a way to talk about James Baldwin. And that's what she reacted to. She had quite an issue with the concept and term "lesbian."

> *In the midst of the politically repressive atmosphere of the eighties, the black woman writer seems to be unveiling herself from the masquerade of heterosexual assumption.*
>
> (Jewelle Gomez, "A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women")

Cheryl: I was thinking on that question of who I write for. And I don't know who I write for. I don't know if I think about who I write for very consciously when I write. I know I write the way I like to write. The way the writing feels good to me. I know I make efforts to be "politically correct" much of the time. I think I write for the reader, but I don't know if I think about which or what readers. I mean, do I write for the black woman intellectual or the white woman intellectual or do I say things in the review for both of them? Do I say things that the writer can pick up on?

Linda: Or do you write for people with political consciousness?

Jewelle: Write for the writer.

Evelynn: I think you can get into a false persona writing for the writer—black women or white women. For me, it's got to come out of myself—(to Cheryl) sort of like what you said about writing the way you like to write. I get lost by writing for all those others. So I try to write it for myself. I try to say something about what was in it that was important to me. And I always say to the reader to read it for yourself and discover what is important for you. But I would like to write more things that would address the writer. The black woman writers I have interviewed say that criticism offers nothing for them. I think if I were a black woman creative writer I would want to feel that I had some people that were gonna say something to me about my work.

Linda: Let me digress a little. The thing is that when I review, I like to engage in a two-part process. One, I like to look at what a writer sets out to do. Look for the goal, the framework. Comment on what it is she sets out to do, and have some sense of does she do it. Not whether I like the way she does it. But does she do what she sets out to do? The second

part of that process is to throw that in some sort of relief with the real world. How important? So what? Does it fit? Does it matter?

Jewelle: I think that ultimately if you're looking at a piece of fiction you're gonna look at what the author/writer set out to do. And how artistically she accomplishes it. That will almost always cover what you gonna have to say about a book. If I'm reading *Tar Baby* and at the end of it I don't know what Morrison set out to say, I have to assume that her writing is confused or her goals are confused.

Cheryl: Jewelle, isn't politics persuasive in art? Can you really divorce politics from any assessment you make of a piece of literature? And an element of me is part of that review. Not just what the author sets out to do. And by what standards or what politics am I judging the writing's success or failure? Me—what the book did to me in the process of my relationship with it. Did it change my life? Did it teach me something about art, about life? All of which are political. The writer may set out to accomplish something totally different from what I got out of the book. Like in 1972 Toni Morrison said that when *The Bluest Eye* came out, so many black women wrote her letters of praise for the veracity of the book. She also said that they offered interpretations of the book that she never intended—now, these were ordinary black women, not critics. She seemed puzzled by this and then she said, "I guess once you write something and put it out there, in the world, it ceases to belong to you. You give up your ownership." Art is so political. It is always political. And so is our view of art as critics.

Jewelle: One of the things I think has come to my mind is: as you are writing criticism, who are you writing it for or to? I think it makes a big difference once you've decided who it's going to be. When I'm reviewing I review with the writer in mind. I say to myself what am I going to say that clarifies for the writer what she's trying to do. I don't think the majority of mainstream critics are thinking about that when they're reviewing. I think that's one of the things that'll make a difference in the development of a black feminist critical standard. We have to look at the process in a totally different way. Not thinking about a deadline at *The New York Times.*

Linda: Or about the competition that's in your interest to rip the writer to shreds for. That's what often happens in mainstream publications—mine is bigger than yours.

Cheryl: In terms of male criticism or at least male style of criticism that we see in establishment rags, men do not cop to what their perspec-

tive is. They make their perspective seem universal.

Linda: Like theirs is the generic brand.

Cheryl: They proceed to write about a work as if their criticism is the last word on it. They're either going to make it or break it. We cop to something different. We say we're coming from a lesbian-feminist perspective or a left perspective. Whatever. We admit our politics, values, standards.

Linda: Or we should.

Jewelle: Or we might.

> *Language–however, we adapt it or adapt to it–is eternally political, because language reveals to what degree the writer accepts or rejects the prevailing culture.*
>
> (Cheryl Clarke, review of *Nappy Edges. Conditions:Five*)

STILL "TOWARDS" A BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM: BLACK WOMEN ON BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

Bonnie: As we've been taught to write, who have been our models? Who have been our teachers? From where do we get what good writing is? When we hear about classics, whose classics are they and why? Who relates to them and why? And do we want black women writers to in some way emulate these so-called culture bearers or are we about coining our own ideas about what the black female aesthetic is? That's key for me.

Jewelle: One of the things you mentioned, Cheryl, in your letter to us about participating in this taping, is "the tradition of black women writers." That is the necessary underpinning of black feminist criticism. Sometimes that tradition is painful to look at, when you look at Phillis Wheatley who was lionized because she was able to emulate eighteenth-century white male poetic conventions. . . . .

Bonnie: But then we have, as another part of our tradition, the writer activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who was a turning point in terms of black women writers. Harper is also a part of our black feminist tradition. She wrote poetry on the double standard between men and women, on slavery, on social injustice. . . .

Linda: She was the first black woman to publish a novel. I think it was the first black novel to describe the Reconstruction South.

Cheryl: Yeah, *Iola Leroy* was the first novel by a black writer to deal with Reconstruction, but not the first novel published by a black woman. I read in the *Times* a few weeks back [Nov. 8, 1982, p. C13] about the discovery by this cat who's a professor at Yale of a novel published in 1859 called *Our Nig–(laughter)*–written by a Harriet Wilson. This adds thirty-three years to our literary tradition. Harper's novel wasn't published till 1892. And this book, *Our Nig*, dealt with racism in the North before the Civil War. The book was ignored by abolitionists and the black press because the subject matter was unpopular, cuz everybody wanted everybody else to think the North was the land of milk and honey. Usually William Wells Brown's novel, *Clotel,* is credited with being the first novel by a black person, and it was published in England. But this *Our Nig* book is now the first novel by a black person, period, to have been published in the United States.

Bonnie: The emphasis on Wheatley is something we have to live with, but in terms of interpreting what black women wrote about, there were women who turned away from that emulation, who dealt with taboo subject matter, who addressed racism. . . .

Cheryl: But sometimes, I get a little sick of the tragic mulatto theme in a lot of this early fiction. So, I'm glad when Hurston comes along.

(*Laughter.*)

Jewelle: It's been very hard for me–doing fiction for the first time–to find quality and styles that strike me, that I would emulate. It's very hard.

Cheryl: As far as I am concerned, that's what the sixties was all about–to search for new models.

(*Laughter.*)

Okay, okay, given the fact that those who got the play were black men, with the exception of Nikki and Sonia.

That was the whole deal–that we had to look outside European models. That's a whole American thing anyway–to look outside European models for new forms. As black women, we have a literary tradition whether we want it or not, and whether people draw on European models or not. I mean there are those who draw on European models,

there are those who look outside them, there are those who are ambivalent, but there's a tradition–Lucy Terry on down to you and me. I would not want to exclude Wheatley or even a fake like Nikki Giovanni from our tradition. They just don't happen to be my models. But I've found models for myself as a poet. I don't think I ever could have written *Narratives* had it not been for *In Love and Trouble* by Alice Walker and *Cane* by that strange boy, Jean Toomer.

Linda: I think the point you're raising is that we don't take any of that tradition uncritically.

Cheryl: I suppose that's one of the things I'm saying.

Jewelle: Well, I don't feel that there are many viable black lesbian characters in anybody's fiction. In my piece for *Home Girls* I examined several novels: two pulp novels by white women. One is about twenty years old and called *Twilight Girls* (*laughter*) and a new book, *To The Cleveland Station* just out of Naiad Press. Black lesbians get the short end of the stick. The characters are one-dimensional plug-ins. You know, "Let's plug-in a black person."

(*Laughter.*)

In *Say Jesus and Come To Me,* Ann Allen Shockley's latest novel, her main character, this unscrupulous woman who's a minister, is characterized as unconscious politically while using political stances purely for her self-aggrandizement. She sets up this whole political movement in Nashville to clean up crime because these two black prostitutes get shot on the street. She starts the whole movement basically because she wants to get her own church. I mean, she doesn't care about these prostitutes. She goes to visit them in the hospital and all the while she's thinking about how she can get out into the street and call a press conference.

(*Laughter.*)

Then suddenly, the minister falls in love with this born-again rock 'n roll singer.

(*More intense laughter.*)

Then the whole political issue is dropped as part of the plot. The reader is not allowed to deal with the fact that here's a character who's totally self-centered, who's using politics and black people as a way to get her own church. Suddenly she's an acceptable character, because

she's fallen in love.

Cheryl: Such a narrow view of lesbians.

Linda: Sometimes, I can't tell the difference between what is just bad writing or just bad politics–like so many of the characters in *The Black and White of It.* They come off so despairing. And some of that's because her writing is not developed. All the characters are dull, but then there are those you'd like to know more about. And again I am wondering why so many white women like her work.

Bonnie: Shockley's a dancing dog.

Evelynn: Back to the literary tradition of black women. I take all those women for wherever they were. And if I wanted to say Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters,* for example, is in the tradition of black women writers, I would say that's true because of the theme of it, the language, where she set the characters, the characters, and the sheer feel of the book. . . .

Cheryl: And her humor.

Evelynn: And whether or not stereotypes of black women are perpetuated. Like: is this another story of another black woman who's suffered everything on earth and triumphs in the end. . . .

(*Laughter.*)

Cheryl: I'd like to talk about that humor issue. I've always felt black women's humor more deeply than anything else in life, and I experience it in many black women writers–Bambara, Morrison, Walker, Hurston. Could each of you talk about what you perceive as black women's humor?

Evelynn: I think most of the time you have to be there to experience it. When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world. Our humor can often be self-deprecating, cutting. But even when it is I don't feel hurt as much as I feel challenged by it.

Bonnie: Yeah, that's what I feel. It's that moment of recognition, when I connect with another sister and we know we are laughing at the exact same thing. Again, like you said, Ev, it's an acknowledgment of our shared experiences as black women.

Linda: And it can be in the form of a gesture, a look, or a voice inflection.

Jewelle: I think our humor is one asset we have that white feminists don't. I've noticed that a good play on words is always appreciated by black women.

Linda: We revel in the sardonic and the ironic.

Cheryl: It was my mother and her sister who gave me my first lessons in black women's humor. The first being: learn how to laugh at yourself and then learn how to laugh at others. Both my mother and my aunt laughed at themselves a lot. My mother would laugh at human beings more than anyone I have ever known. Like you said, Ev, the humor is self-deprecating. . . .

Jewelle: It's also raunchy, understated, silky, sarcastic. It's an unpredictable combination of all the things we can be.

Cheryl: I can't stop thinking about my mother. It's cracking me up right now to think about her humor. She could make a joke out of anything, especially adversity . . . (*laughing nearly uncontrollably*).

Jewelle (*laughing*): I remember my best friend in high school and I got weeks of chuckles out of the repetition of geometric principles in varying suggestive or dry tones, i.e., "The whole is equal to the sum of its parts." I can still crack her up with it over the telephone.

(*Cheryl is in hysterical tears of laughter.*)

Bonnie (*to Evelynn*): I guess, like you said earlier, you hadda be there.

Cheryl (*trying to control herself*): No, seriously, there was a tone my mother would have and I would begin to feel butterflies in my stomach, getting ready for the laugh of the day. I've felt that same proclivity in many another black woman: in the advice-giving, the storytelling, the signifying, the advice-asking. The way we say "Girl" when we're getting ready to tell some gossip, kinda rolls off the tongue like a Mercedes Benz starting and then you know the humor is gonna be a monster.

(*Laughter and lots of it.*)

Evelynn: Let's get back to the issue of lack of balance raised by Shockley's work. Like, you know, we may not read anything else that's going to give us a different view of black lesbians by a black lesbian writer. And if a different view is out there, how widely will that view be disseminated? And by whom is that view or any view of lesbians disseminated. *Black Macho* raises the same problems for me. How much was out at the time

Wallace's book was published on the issue of sexual politics in the black community except for say, Calvin Hernton's book, *Sex and Racism in America*. . . .

Cheryl: And that was over ten years earlier and just as inadequate.

Evelynn: I wouldn't necessarily say *Black Macho* shouldn't have been published, even though on some level I would say that—in terms of how dangerous it was regarding black women's understanding of black feminism. But again, some white feminists I know just took that book as gospel, and never questioned a word of it. . . .

Bonnie: The dancing dog.

Evelynn: . . . And besides *Ms.* magazine annointed Wallace as the definitive spokeswoman for black women. And whenever white people need a black feminist statement, they'll go and get hers, even though most of the black women who wrote on *Black Macho* have serious issues with it. But those disagreements never get in print. I never see pieces of June Jordan's review when somebody quotes Wallace.

Being a feminist, I would not want to take a black feminist to task in a white publication for the shortcomings of her work, because that's home business, except we don't have a home to deal it out in, and I get crazy. I wouldn't review Wallace's book. It had gotten too big. I didn't agree with what was being written about it. I didn't want to be in the position of being one more voice trashing her either, because I think there were some ways in which she was criticized that were wrong.

Cheryl: June Jordan's review being one them.

Evelynn: Why do you say that?

Cheryl: I thought her review was vituperative and in the tradition of white male criticism with some "Sapphire" touches. And it never addresses the main issue Wallace so ineptly raises, that is the sexist oppression of black women. I'd like to have heard somebody deal with Wallace's statement that the real reason black men resent black women is that we have never been their slaves.

Linda: It goes back to what we were saying that there are so many ideas we would critique from one perspective that have been soundly trashed from another. When *Radical America* reprinted my review of *Black Macho* with the changes, I had an opportunity to see how the world had taken this book on. I had reviewed her in *Conditions: Five*, Ron Karenga

had vilified her in several left publications and used it as an opportunity to write a whole anti-feminist tract. So, I had a chance to respond to that. And the combination worked out well. I had a good editor and a time lag. But how often do you have that? All the indicators were right.

My internal limitation has always been and still is: what are the bases for criticism? You know, if it doesn't move me emotionally then I'm tempted to say it's not well written. Or if it doesn't agree with my vision of reality, I'm tempted to say it's not real. I wonder how much of that comes from being a black woman. Not to be trite, but white boys don't seem to have that problem. Whereas I sort of feel not only do I have to not trash this sister's work, I have to deal with questions of validity.

Cheryl: I feel, as a critic, I must have those ambiguities. We have to get away from that pervasive tradition of white male criticism with its arrogance and absolutism, which negates the existence of other traditions.

Linda: If we talk about a black women's tradition of writing or even the larger Afro-American tradition of writing, I think there are different qualities that are valued. For those things that I value in Morrison's writing, for example, prior to *Tar Baby*, she took shit. For example: the ability to be personal, the ability to translate the female body into language, the ability to talk tellingly about sensuality and erotica in everyday black life, the ability to talk about intrapsychic pressures with regard to being creative. Her telling ability to talk about life like that was not valued.

Bonnie: Also because she was writing about black women, she wasn't valued.

Linda: Yeah, dig it. In *Tar Baby*, as she allegedly moved more and more out into the realm of interpersonal relationships between disparate people that is what's valued in that world. So, now she's doing well. She's writing and talking about people who are valued in that milieu. That's what the *Times* says a good writer writes about. That's why the mainstream papers give her glowing reviews for *Tar Baby*. So, we are definitely talking about different critical values.

Cheryl: Let's definitely hope like hell we are.

Evelynn: I thought *Tar Baby* was terrible.

Linda: I couldn't read it.

Evelynn: *Tar Baby* was a real departure from her other works—none of the strengths that compelled you to read *The Bluest Eye.* It wasn't *Sula.* There was no Pilate in it.

Linda: What were the first words of James Baldwin's reivew of *Song of Solomon*? "Toni Morrison has come into her own as a writer. She has written a book about a man."

Cheryl: That's why she got a National Book Award.

Linda: *Song of Solomon* is my favorite novel. All I'm saying is that if Morrison writes about boys she gets well reviewed in *The New York Times.* And even though *Sula* changed my life, that is her minor work. And if someone asks me to review Morrison's work, I have to do it with that political reality in mind.

Evelynn: That's what I think a black feminist aesthetic is about—a different set of values. For me one of the important things about Morrison's work is that she was able to draw this incredible picture of a black world, a world where black people lived and operated and loved and had conflicts with each other outside of this realm of the interaction with white people all the time. Her novels seemed contained. I could look at these people and deal with their humanity. I saw these people who could take on mythic proportions, like Sula. For me the most powerful one is Pecola in *The Bluest Eye.* I have never read anything that spoke so eloquently to a little black girl's experiences with being black and nappy-headed in this world. The scenes of her losing her mind were the most riveting for me.

Cheryl: The scene where the boy kills his mother's cat and blames it on Pecola made me catch my breath so hard I almost fell out of my chair.

Evelynn: Now as far as I'm concerned *Tar Baby* was problematic for me because there were more white people in it. And for me that took away from the powerful way she has of creating this black world, where I could see some things clearly without the backdrop of white people. Am I being clear?

Linda: Yes, you are. I just disagree.

Evelynn: Well, that's me. But I will find that, if I read a review in the *Times* and in various and sundry other places, those reviewers do not value the same things I value in a writer.

Cheryl: No, of course. It is their role to discredit what you value. So,

they will say that until somebody like Morrison gets out of writing in a way that defines her as a black writer or a black woman writer she is not going to take her place among the "literary greats."

Evelynn: And then we have as part of our tradition that when Lorraine Hansberry did that (*The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*) she was vilified by the white press because she dared to write about white people.

Linda: And that is the crucial thing about Toni Morrison. It is not so much a problem for me that *Tar Baby* has white people in it, but rather that Morrison has stopped writing.

Evelynn: Well, there are no other people in it I like either.

Linda: But the thing is, I have since read too many novels about little black girls with nappy hair. I have come to the conclusion it is not just that situation which rivets me. It's the way Morrison wrote that. I was prepared to like *Tar Baby*. But it was clear to me in the first several pages that she was through writing. I'm using "writing" to mean something that comes from someplace other than the cerebrum. That she wrote from a place deeper inside her and she wasn't going to do that in *Tar Baby*. And that cooption will get you space in *The Times* book review section. So, it wasn't just the content in *Tar Baby*.

Evelynn: Neither the content nor the form. There were not the scenes that gripped me like in her earlier work, that had me sitting on the edge of the page swooning.

Bonnie: If we read *The New York Times* section and see Mel Watkins' review of *The Color Purple,* and he says Alice Walker's a good writer, she does fine things, but the African history passages are boring and you, Linda, review it and say different things, according to your values, are you more right than Watkins? Is he wrong?

Cheryl: It's not a question of right or wrong. That's not true. Watkins could be wrong, i.e. incorrect. But he's coming from his perspective in the *Times* and we're coming from our perspective in *Womanews, Off Our Backs,* or *Conditions*–which is decidedly different. I may see, for example, the woman-identification in *The Color Purple* or the form as more important to subject to critical analysis and Watkins may see the historical piece or the issue of male-female relationships as important. That doesn't make him wrong or me right. Given our readership, we come from where we come from.

Bonnie: Are you saying both reviews should be read?

Linda: Oh, yes. That's how capitalism and intellectualism cannot coexist. The purpose of Alice Walker writing a book is for hundreds of thousands of people to read it and talk about it. That's why she writes. Not for Watkins to review her in *The New York Times.* The idea is to get out the free flow of ideas. But because of the way things are organized that doesn't happen. I think Cheryl's right. I don't think reviews are right or wrong. I think they serve certain values and certain politics. We're simply clearer about which values our reviews serve. Watkins' review of *The Color Purple* clearly serves the middle-of-the-road liberal position: that heterosexuality among black people ought to be looked at. Those are his values. And those people with those values are whom he serves. My review, you can count on it, will be very different. And both of them ought to be read. And both have a place.

Jewelle: I think because of a lack of definition of the black women's cultural context, writers have trouble creating that cultural context and critics have trouble recognizing it, especially the cultural context of the black lesbian. But Audre Lorde's new prose work *Zami* is an example of the cultural context of a black woman who's a lesbian. This work has no labels on it, saying "This is the story of a lesbian," though you know this woman's a lesbian. Being a lesbian is as intrinsic a part of her life as the stories of her mother and father coming to this country from Grenada. That is the theme I keep missing lately in novels by and about black women—that sense of home quality. And that's what I'm going to be writing about.

> *Our job is not to deny the connections between feminism and lesbianism, but to build and clarify them. . . .*"
>
> (Linda Powell, "The Intimate Face of Universal Struggle: Review of *Civil Wars* by June Jordan," p. 73)

NAMING: THE LESBIAN AESTHETIC, THE LESBIAN POLITIC

Cheryl: Is there such a thing as a lesbian aesthetic?

Linda: I guess so, if you want there to be.

Jewelle: I bring being a lesbian to everything. On the other hand, as an editor and reviewer, I'm not running around looking for work with signs

on it. I want to review work by different types of people, not just black lesbians. I think one of the limitations that lesbians, especially black lesbians, place on ourselves is that we define our work down to a certain ethic, so that it has to say something about being black, about being a lesbian, or it's totally invalid.

Cheryl: I think that's an over-generalization. I don't see why defining one's vision as a black lesbian is anymore limiting than any other vision or politic. And since the women's writing community isn't teeming with "out" black lesbian writers, how defined could our work be? Those of us who are "out" want our work to speak to our experiences as black lesbians. I know that's my thing. Basically, the world don't want to hear from black lesbians, and I'm bound and determined that it will hear from us. So, I try to bring being a lesbian to everything too.

Bonnie: So what does that mean?

Cheryl: For me it's a way of seeing black women's writing and a way of seeing the world. I look for how women's relationship to other women is played out in literature vis-à-vis how it's played out in the world. Lesbianism is not the only way I see the world, but it's basically how I survive and, in many cases, how I triumph mentally and emotionally. And so do many other black women. It's just that some of us call it lesbianism. You know, like there's feminism or women's music or Pan Africanism or reggae. There's black lesbianism. For me, lesbianism *is* the politics of woman-bonding.

Jewelle: If you look at *The Color Purple,* which is really a superb book, Walker doesn't mention the word *lesbian.* And I don't look at that as a negative point. It has to do with the context about which she's writing. And her presentation of characters. She doesn't have to. Those characters don't have to wear signs. We know who they are. And they're all related to us.

Cheryl: Walker also doesn't care for the term *lesbian.* She doesn't identify with its history. She's been clear about that.

Jewelle: I can deal with that. I think those are very real concerns. But I think ultimately what we have to look at are the characters that she creates. Do you feel they represent you and where you are? And do they represent that in an artful way?

Linda: Those are serious questions. Is she a writer and does she do it in an artful way? Something in me resonates to it. Whether I've lived it or

not. Right? It's like Marquez' book where the mother had this attachment to her son and when the son got killed his blood ran through the streets to the mother's house. I heard that. It worked for me. In *A Hundred Years of Solitude.* It's not as though I've lived this.

But I want to say something about the lesbianism issue. Black lesbians have in the real world not been considered women. There's no political understanding of lesbianism and sexuality in the world, especially in the black community. I went to Florida to speak, where students had specifically invited me because of my Michele Wallace review in *Conditions: Five*. They assumed I was a lesbian. I had no idea why. I wore my dress. But they told me it was because in my review I treat lesbians like people. I assumed, in my review that lesbians are in the world. And that's what I came up against in reviewing *Civil Wars,* i.e., sexuality is an issue that writers can sort of fudge about. Where does June Jordan get off saying identifying yourself as a lesbian is a smokescreen for "lecherous, exploitative" behavior ("A Declaration of Independence I'd Just as Soon Not Have," p. 120). And she can do that and know that there is not a group of black women in the black community, not even lesbians, there's not a feminist in the black community to say this isn't true of most lesbians.

Cheryl: Well, Linda, you did in your review. And that's the role of the black feminist critic—to take a stand on lesbianism.

Evelynn: The reason that *The Color Purple* raises serious issues for me about lesbians is Alice's use of "womanist" as opposed to feminist. It's about *naming*. It applies to using the word feminist in black women's writing, and it applies to lesbians. In the context of *The Color Purple,* it flowed very easily for me that these two women characters are having a relationship and it seems to be about love, and I was all wrapped up in it, *except* where were these characters? I didn't feel a statement about anybody around them thinking this was different or weird. It was not the norm. That's what I mean, where were they? I think using the word "womanist" is a way of pulling away from naming.

Linda: Has anyone read her review in *The Black Scholar*?

Cheryl: I read it. Alice reviewed *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson*, edited by Jean Humez. Jackson was a black woman mystic, spiritualist who left the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia to eventually live with the Shakers and establish a black Shaker community in the 19th century. The writings were edited by a white woman. Alice really liked the book. However, the editor states that,

because Jackson lived for many years with another woman also named Rebecca, in a later time those two would have been called "lesbians." Now, Alice, in her humorous way, says that there's no evidence these women were lesbians, and, in fact, Jackson was most probably celibate, which Jackson herself had alluded to many times in her writings. Walker went on to say that, finally, lesbian is not a suitable term for black women who are into woman-bonding. She, herself, Alice Walker, has her own term for "such women" and that term would be "womanist." "Lesbian" is derived from the Isle of Lesbos. And what black woman can relate to Sappho? Okay, fine. That's Alice Walker. I see that as coming from a woman with a straight persona in the world.

Bonnie: I read it differently. I see her as always trying to get out of the mold, to redefine, to define things for herself and us. I saw it as a way to say *no* to whatever images come to mind in those words, from that history.

Cheryl: I agree. But I have reservations about her naming for "us." Us who? If Audre Lorde said, "I don't want to call myself a lesbian anymore, I want to rename myself 'womanist'," I might feel differently. Audre has been out for years. She's lived as a lesbian. She knows that history. But Alice—I love her, I think she's fabulous—but I don't think she should be telling me, as a black lesbian, to call myself a "womanist."

Bonnie: She's not telling you to call yourself a "womanist." She's saying she has her own word for woman-bonding.

Linda: She's a mixed bag. She seemed to be saying in *The Black Scholar*, "Please don't embroil me in a controversy over the term 'lesbian'." While I really liked her review of *Conditions: Five* in *Ms.* It was fabulous. I thought it was wonderful when she said life isn't over yet—who knows which of us will be a dyke.

Cheryl: For me she embodies all of that ambiguity and all the contradictions. She does it purposefully and consciously, working toward that clarity. She's never afraid to be experimental. Somehow, I still don't want her telling me to call myself a "womanist." Because until the world can deal with the word "lesbian" and what that means, we cannot go to the next step. I don't think so. Just like I can't call myself "bisexual" until the world stops oppressing homosexuals. That's the way I feel. That may be reactionary, though.

(*Laughter.*)

Bonnie: Cheryl, you're giving somebody a lot of power that I don't trust. I don't think Alice skips the next step. I think she's saying, "No one can define my reality. I'm gonna be the base from where I grow."

Linda: But that's not the real world, Bonnie. Alice made that ideal. And that's fabulous. But when June Jordan can say in *Civil Wars* that "lesbian" equals "nigga" (p. 120), we are a long way from what Alice Walker, an avowed straight woman, says lesbians ought to be called.

Cheryl: June Jordan said that in 1976, Linda. She could feel differently now.

Linda: That attitude was even reactionary in 1976. Don't you think she would have made some comment in her introduction to the essay if her position were different now? I mean, it's in her book of essays published in '81.

Bonnie: Back to Alice. I think we need her view of the ideal. I think we got enough real world.

Linda: I strenuously disagree.

Evelynn: Alice can say "womanist" all she wanna, but it doesn't matter. In some quarters this book is gonna make Alice a lesbian.

(*Laughter.*)

> *Lesbianism is not solely an aesthetic nor solely a sexual issue, nor an issue to be treated solely by lesbians.*
>
> (Cheryl Clarke, "Black, Brave, and Woman Too," *Sinister Wisdom No. 20,* 1982)

Jewelle: I went to a poetry workshop, which covered a wide spectrum of women poets. Two of the poets mentioned were Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar Nelson among several others. The workshop dealt with imagery and cultural place. At neither time was the sexuality of either or their involvement with women mentioned. I found that disturbing.

Linda: Why? And how important to the appreciation of their work is knowing that either had liaisons with women?

Jewelle: Because heterosexuality is assumed. I mean, most people who've heard of Nelson at all, for example, think her greatest claim to fame is that she was married to Paul Laurence Dunbar. And, anyway, sexuality is

an important part of who we are and what we have to say politically and culturally, particularly if one is talking about black women in the early twentieth century, involved in romantic relationships with women.

Cheryl: And pretty important to our black lesbian herstory.

Jewelle: And I'm not *even* going to get into whether those liaisons were sexual or not. That's beside the point.

Cheryl: It's never beside the point in homophobic America.

Jewelle: Anyway, for somebody like Grimké to sustain that kind of consciousness at that period must have been very important to her writing. Obviously, the woman who was running the workshop didn't know that.

Cheryl: Well, Grimké was pretty closeted.

Jewelle: Not if you're reading her writing. And I believe that is one of the main reasons a black lesbian criticism is needed—to raise the question of women-identification, of woman-bonding, of lesbianism. I'm sick of the sin of omission. A black lesbian-feminist critic can shed more light on the things that black lesbians and other black women writers have to say.

Cheryl: The workshop leader was a straight woman. Unless she's read Gloria Hull's piece on Grimké in *Conditions* and her piece on Dunbar Nelson in *Some of Us Are Brave,* she just might not get the lesbianism. It was cloaked in all that late Victorian vernacular.

Jewelle: Well, why hasn't she read *Conditions*?

Cheryl: A straight black woman in her own narrow world of sexuality is hardly gonna pick up a lesbian rag like *Conditions,* even *The Black Women's Issue.*

Jewelle: Well, we can't have that.

Cheryl: Well, that's part of the reality. But, I agree with what you are implying. Why is it important to know a writer is a lesbian? What difference does it make in terms of her work?

Jewelle: I don't think it's crucial in an analysis of her work artistically. But I think in terms of historical perspective and politics it is.

Cheryl: One's life, one's sexuality forever impinges on the form and content of what one writes. I mean, Grimké's lesbianism and this homo-

phobic culture might have kept her from getting more of her work out for fear her lesbianism would be discovered.

Bonnie: Or she might have written more.

Cheryl: Well, all I'm saying is that knowing about a writer's lesbianism may not always be crucial to an analysis of her work, but where it is crucial to that analysis, like with Audre Lorde or Pat Parker or even Ann Allen Shockley, it does get into a question of art or the lesbian aesthetic.

Bonnie: That gets back to the question of the lesbian aesthetic. What are we talking about: sexuality, political stance, point of view? We have to define some of the stuff we're talking about. It's just too broad.

Linda: I don't think so. I think it's broad, but it's broad like sexuality is broad. I think it doesn't have to do with precision. I think it has to do with the fact that being a lesbian is not neutral. The whole thing is about power. For a *New York Times* critic to say that he doesn't want to diminish Marilyn Hacker by saying she's a lesbian is what I think labeling is about. I think this whole question of did she actually sleep with a woman is not the deal.

Jewelle: If there is a lesbian aesthetic, as McDowell says there isn't, what is it? Do we use it as a criterion on every point or only when the artist is dealing with the actual lesbian theme?

Linda: Or is it the critic's perspective? Not that the writer necessarily comes from there.

Cheryl: You mean like Barbara Smith's interpretation of *Sula* as a "lesbian" novel. Not that Morrison wrote *Sula* as a lesbian novel. In fact, the spring before the book was published, Morrison, in a public lecture, made a point of saying, and I quote: "It's a story of love between women —straight love." But that the lesbianism is Smith's perspective.

Linda: Or if I reviewed Baldwin's last book, there's some stuff that I would say about women's relationships with women related to sexuality that could be interpreted from a lesbian perspective.

Cheryl: Or if I was looking at *Emma* by Jane Austen.

Bonnie: Or *Little Women.*

(*Lots of laughter . . .*)

Linda: If it wasn't such a big fucking deal who you sleep with, if "lesbian" wasn't such a charged word, I wonder if there would be such a big deal about definition from people like McDowell?

Evelynn: It may have nothing to do with who we sleep with. There are some people who think that any time a black woman writer writes about black women in a context where black men are not central to those women's lives the writer is branded "anti-male" or a lesbian. And, of course, the two brands are considered interchangeable. And then the term "lesbian" is used by those people to denigrate and devalue that woman's work.

Linda: Yeah, right.

Evelynn: I think it's about power. The first time I was in a position of challenging a number of men, one of whose advances I had rejected, I was immediately called a lesbian.

Linda: By definition.

Cheryl: The "All-Men-in-One" Theory. You know, if you don't want me, you don't want no man, sister. So, you must be a lesbian.

(Laughter)

Linda (*laughing*): I like that.

Cheryl: I have to give credit where credit is due. The "All-Men-in-One" Theory is the brainchild of a black woman by the name of Cheryl Cavitt, from Los Angeles, California.

Jewelle: If one were trying to pin me down on what I think a lesbian perspective is, I would opt for a political stance. As a black woman, I'm speaking to you from two immutable situations. If I'm speaking from a lesbian point of view, I'm taking a political stance–much like feminist is a political stance. Because I think who you sleep with is a seat of power and power is politics. Some woman said to me, "I'm bisexual." I said, "Well, everyone is bisexual. What are your chioces?" Well, my choices are lesbian and have been for a long time. I think it's a political analysis we're trying to get to for the writing. And I don't think that people like Deborah McDowell can say that one rules out the political perspective of lesbianism anymore than one can rule out the political perspective of feminism or the political perspective that being a black person in America engenders. I think defining what lesbianism means is politically crucial.

Linda: This is very tricky. Because I have problems with the political definition, too. That's not all there is to the definition of lesbian. Even if you take two women who both work at Wall Street, who wear suits every day, who live on the Upper East Side, both Republican, and both in the closet, those two women have a commitment to one another that never expresses itself politically. But they undermine the system. Whether they mean to or not. Their basic union is an act of resistance.

Cheryl: I believe that to an extent. Though the other parts of themselves they have sewn into the system retard any kind of revolution.

Linda: Yeah, yeah, I know. I didn't believe what I just said two years ago. But now that I'm beginning to meet more of these women, I see what they do to the basic social fabric–they matter too.

Jewelle: That's still a political definition of a lesbian, even though they may not be activists or "out." It doesn't negate the fact that lesbian is a political identity.

> *In order to interpret accurately and critically the historical past of Black women, we must accept their definitions of themselves.*
>
> (Bonnie Johnson, "Some of Us Are Feminist . . . and Are Building Black Women's Studies," *Womanews*, March, 1982)

Bonnie: I feel like our role, especially coming from a historical perspective is not to try to change the way Angelina Grimké lived, for example, but to interpret her work with our own reality and values. Not to try and change what her life was and what she did, but to say based on her work, how I can see the way she lived from my perspective. It's the old argument of not calling Mrs. Booker T. Washington Mrs. Booker T. Washington when she wanted to be called Mrs. Booker T. Washington, because for a long time she couldn't use "Mrs." She wanted that. That was her definition for herself. That definition needs to be brought to light, acknowledged in a very truthful manner. And then we go on to interpret it.

Evelynn: But there's another issue that comes up for me in this and it's about naming. I've always run into black women not wanting to identify themselves as feminists. They may be doing feminist things, but they reject the term "feminist." I feel this is so with the term "lesbian" as well. Like in Alice's book she doesn't say the women are lesbians, but

they're having a sexual-emotional relationship with one another . . . that . . . is . . . lesbian.

(*Laughter.*)

Jewelle: That's a legitimate position for any writer coming out of the black community to write a piece of fiction that has a lesbian relationship in it and never use that word. I think that the very common practice in the black community is to do just that.

Evelynn: And here we come right back up against the politics.

Jewelle: I think that Alice's ability to recreate that relationship in the same way it has existed in the black community, which is without a name, is in and of itself politically important. If she had had those characters running around trying to organize feminists or lesbians at that time, it would have been totally anachronistic.

Cheryl: Of course. But the black community does have names for lesbians.

Jewelle: They do, but in more cases than not, they don't have names. People would just as soon leave them alone. There are the quote, maiden aunts who live together for years and years. As I was growing up I saw those relationships unnamed. And to me that said they were okay. And when I got to be an adult and when people asked me if I was "out," I said I didn't know I had been "in."

Linda: My experience was different.

Jewelle: That's because you're bourgeois.

Cheryl: Well, Jewelle, what are you?

Jewelle: My experience was not bourgeois. I grew up on welfare. I grew up in a bar community. My father was a bartender. His wife used to cook in a bar. There was that patina of respectability that comes from middle-class aspirations.

Linda: I grew up with that same patina. The thing that I think we're trying to talk about is: So, Alice chooses to write about black women who are lovers. I got no beef about it. I respect that artistic choice. But the point is that does not negate my responsibility or opportunity to comment on that. My experience was that those maiden aunts who lived across the alley could do anything as long as they didn't say their relationship mattered. And this is the point I tried to bring up in the *Civil*

Wars review. As long as you didn't cop to loving a woman or imply that you preferred the situation, as long as you weren't public in any way and went along with the program, you were tolerated. I saw black gay men crucified because at some point they said, "I'm a faggot and I like it." I have heard people say, "Our community's always been this way. If you don't talk about it, everything will be fine." I don't think it was fine. My aunt died of cancer—and I see a relationship between stress and cancer. This was a woman who was furious, I think, for most of her life because she could not be who she was. I'm not going to lightly toss that off and say, "Well, she was in the closet." The facts that she had cancer and was in the closet are related. They could be related. And the goal of my work on those kinds of issues is to see the possibility of relationships.

Cheryl: I did want to get back to the issue of a lesbian aesthetic in black women's literature. Along the line of naming ourselves, as black women, black feminists, and black lesbians or black women-identified women, why is it that some black women writers reject the term "lesbian"? Is it that we want to give our own selves a name that describes woman-bonding in black women's culture? Or are there other things? Black women's feelings on the issue are at least mixed. You take somebody at one extreme like Mary Helen Washington, who omitted any fiction by black women who call themselves lesbians from both her two anthologies of short stories by black women. And then you have a June Jordan, who equates the term "lesbian" with the term "nigga." Or Alexis De Veaux, who is certainly very woman-centered but she don't call herself a lesbian. Women like Ntozake, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker are dealing with lesbian themes, but are not calling the themes "lesbian." Is it simply the word?

Jewelle: The word is not a simple issue. And it isn't simply the word. Words carry a certain kind of power—legitimate or not. And we need to acknowledge that about lesbianism. The word "lesbian" has taken on a negative power. So, it's very difficult to cleave to that negativeness. And for black women, "lesbian" has been a very white word. It connotes a kind of dabbling, aesthetic, frivolous something that I connect with a type of white cultural context that I never felt a part of in my growing up and reading and looking desperately for something about women loving women. And so I know that those are two reasons I have trouble taking on "lesbian" as an identifying term. But I also think there is the need not to box yourself in. I don't want people saying I'm the best black woman poet or best black poet or best black lesbian poet. As soon as you put a name to something, it does not become the jumping off point it should be. It becomes the track you're on. I think a lot of writers

are afraid of boxing themselves in, because of the need to develop culturally and artistically.

Cheryl: Well, I wouldn't want folk calling me the "best" this or that either. I don't go for that ole classist, competitive, stratifying bullshit. But I fail to see how naming or calling oneself a lesbian and defining one's vision, one's aesthetic retards one's cultural and artistic growth—except in the eyes of those outside one's experience.

Jewelle: I don't really care for the term "lesbian." It has no musical quality.

Cheryl: That's what Evelynn and I were talking about last night—the non-beauty of the word. When I first came out I called myself "gay" for a long time because I did not care for the term "lesbian." But then I turned to feminism and embraced the term "lesbian." But I do want to be known as a lesbian, as woman-affirming, black-woman affirming. I want the unequivocal definition. Now, you may ask, "Why is it important, Cheryl, for people to know you're a lesbian?"

Jewelle (*laughing*): Because it's a political statement.

Cheryl: I've gotten used to the term.

Jewelle: I've never gotten used to the term.

Cheryl: You're right, though, people box writers in. I mean, if I identify myself as a black lesbian poet, people will think I cannot or will not write about any other experiences. But that is their problem. I'm not the one who's boxed in. But in terms of naming myself and my creative source—it's lesbian. I can't stand it when women say to me, "Why do you label yourself?" I hate the term label. It's clinical and usually refers to a pathology.

Jewelle: We talked earlier about naming people who hadn't named themselves. People have to name themselves.

Cheryl: Oh sure. I named myself.

Jewelle: If one chooses not to, you may comment on it. But I'm leary of saying such and such a writer doesn't say she's a dyke but we all know she's a dyke.

Linda: I'm leary of that also. But speculation about a writer's lesbianism usually comes up as a result of what is put out in her work. No, she doesn't have to name herself. And it is not my responsibility or my in-

terest to name her. However, if she makes art about something that has to do with lesbianism, then other women who are "out" as lesbians must respond—in one way or another.

I went to see *No** when it first played on St. Mark's. I had a lot of trouble with the production. On the basis of *No*, people can come to me and say: All black women are interested in in terms of lesbianism is sex. The weightier stuff goes on between black men and black women, like the scene between the man and the woman revolutionaries.

On the other hand, I think a lot of this business around being "out" as a lesbian is really dancing around the issue. In my life, if you come out as a lesbian, you get crucified. If it goes to Wall Street tomorrow that I'm a lesbian, I'm in big trouble. We're not talking about boxes. I think for writers we're not just talking about not being reviewed in the *Times*. We're talking about you won't get jobs. We're talking about you won't get published by certain presses. And we're talking about whether or not you will eat—no pun intended. What's crucial is that the reviewer should comment that that's still the reality about what it means to call yourself a lesbian. You may hang out at Djuna Books (NYC) or near 23rd Street and that may be as far as your world goes. For other people the power of this word will not just affect how they're seen, it'll affect their lives. But I think the role of the reviewer is to keep saying that. To address love between women as dangerous. That to me is larger than is she or is she not.

Jewelle: I don't know how crucial an issue knowing a writer's a lesbian is in terms of evaluating her work.

Cheryl: For those for whom lesbianism is important it will be crucial to evaluating their work.

Jewelle: Well, the issue of sexuality in the black community is nearly taboo, especially if it's not heterosexuality. The response to *No* is an example of this avoidance of sexuality. Alexis De Veaux writes *No*—without labels or signs on it—and the *Amsterdam News* runs this ignorant review of the production, which states that Alexis should not be writing about "lesbianism," because it is not in the tradition of African peoples.

Cheryl: Yes, I remember it. Glenda Dickerson referred to it as an "illiterate harangue." And it was.

**No* was written by Alexis DeVeaux and directed by Glenda Dickerson in 1981. *No* was produced by Women's One World Festival and later by the Henry Street Settlement House.

Evelynn: See, it raises another issue, though, for me. If we don't name our visions, others will. And our enemies will label our work and use that label to denigrate us and our work.

Linda: But if the *Amsterdam News* can cut Alexis down for so-called "lesbianism," then, as a black feminist critic, I ought to be able to support her for being woman-identified.

Evelynn: It seems to me that unless we deal with the lesbianism in a writer's work or the anti-lesbianism, we, as black feminist critics, are accomodating the homophobia.

Linda: What have you got to say, Beej?

Bonnie: Since my original statement, we've moved from "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" to "black lesbian feminist criticism" and that has been the bulk of this discussion and I hadn't worked that through.

Cheryl: Well, we hadn't either.

(*Laughter.*)

Bonnie: I think the question that I was raising earlier is still pertinent. The question of definitions. We've been using examples and it's hard for me to get or make a general statement, because reading the *Amsterdam News* reaction to *No* I was angry, but I expected that from the *Amsterdam News.*

Cheryl: Yeah, one would. But the *Amsterdam News* is so symbolic of the world.

I guess what I'd like to ask is about the whole issue of self-definition and naming. We name ourselves but dare we name other black women? Do black women accept the name lesbian?

Bonnie: Well, we have to ask them. I don't know if our speculation is even valid unless it's really based on something they've written or they have said.

Linda: But a vision of women who love women is put out there–like in *No*, for example. And it's a vivid, evocative vision since it's theatre . . .

Cheryl: And Glenda Dickerson directing it . . .

Linda: And then it goes into the world. But the writer doesn't answer to the images or visions out there in the world. Now, the play is reviewed

in the *Amsterdam News*, and the reviewer calls it "lesbian," right? This is what I think is the issue of naming. The work does not name itself, but it clearly speaks to love between women in a telling way.

Bonnie: Why are you saying it doesn't name itself? Doesn't name itself what we want to hear or what we think it should be named?

Linda: My experience of *No* was that the lesbian themes were handled in a "pinch and tickle" manner. There were moments of it that were powerful, that were good, but again it never copped to the fact that *this*–the relationships between the women–mattered, that there was love between women, that *this* is not just sexuality or that *this* is very serious sexuality.

Cheryl: Right on.

Jewelle: But I also think it addressed more than just lesbian sexuality.

Linda: That's true, but in this climate what's going to get noticed?

Jewelle: Of course that's what is going to be noticed. But I don't think you can fault the artist for that and say it's "pinch and tickle," if an artist is trying to create a vision that encompasses the many things that she is. It is the critic's fault if he or she can only pick up that one element. I would have appreciated some discussion from the *Amsterdam News* about the play dealing with the mother-daughter relationship, or the male-female relationship during a revolutionary period, or the deaths of black children in Atlanta, but no, the reviewer focused on the lesbianism and his homophobia.

Linda: The one thing that Alexis dealt with in *No* in a different way from the deaths of the children in Atlanta and the mother-daughter relationship, etc. was lesbian sexuality. Egypt Brownstone lives in my mind forever. She worked for me. She was not "pinch and tickle." Maybe that's why the other pieces jumped out at me. Much of what I am criticizing has to do with how the piece was directed. The St. Mark's production was theatrically uneven for me. But there were parts of *No* that were alive and real and very much in the moment, and there were other parts that seemed to me voyeuristic, cute–in a way I don't think Alexis is cute. I didn't like that scene about the twins, but I'd read it and loved the poem. The poem was not about twins. So, I thought the use of them in the production at St. Mark's was gratuitous. What are we talking about here? We're talking about the necessity of naming. The effect of not naming. I'm not saying that the artist should or should not have done anything differently, but I'm saying that a writer should take the weight

for the way her vision is put out.

Jewelle: Alexis got the weight by putting the piece out there.

Linda: That's very true.

Bonnie: Are we writing about writers or are we reviewing writers' work? I really believe there's a difference. And I think that we've gotten on to a lot of questions I certainly would like to continue, but I think it's off what I understood as the point of this piece. How do we review? What are the issues?

Cheryl: Well, I think that gets to one of my issues. I don't think we can be just stuck at how do we review these writers. The fact that we're dealing with these issues and dilemmas make it a larger question than how do we review these people. There is a lot of writing about lesbians in the public domain: some by lesbians, some by non-lesbians, some by women who don't name themselves. We have as part of our responsibility as lesbians to comment on issues that have to do with our lives.

Linda: That's not solely a lesbian responsibility. That's a feminist responsibility. I would hold a "straight" woman to that if she were to say she is a feminist.

Bonnie: I just want to know what we want people to come away with after reading this "pentalog." An idea of what we feel black feminist criticism is is what I would want.

Linda: I think what we're doing in some ways is looking at your question about what do we want to say about black feminist criticism. I think part of what I hear going on is that the issues involved are very broad. I don't think we've been off the topic. We've rambled, as is our wont. But all of these issues, down to what we know about somebody's private life, are issues that come up in the act of reviewing. And I think we obfuscate if we don't cop to that. These things affect our critical perspective. This is not the ivory tower. What we're doing is a new bird.

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reviews

JOYCE E. KAUFFMAN

NICE JEWISH GIRLS: A LESBIAN ANTHOLOGY edited by Evelyn Torton Beck. Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. 1982. 286 pp., $8.95.

In a time when anti-Semitism and homophobia continue to be widely tolerated and, in some quarters, actively encouraged, the contributors to *Nice Jewish Girls* courageously attempt to delve into "'all of who . . . [they] are'" as Jews and lesbians (xxx), in a collection of "pictures, poems, fiction and essays" (xxxi). Edited by Evelyn Torton Beck, this anthology is valuable as a consciousness-raising tool for both Jews and non-Jews. The contributors share with us moving accounts of their histories and of their visions, mostly in work which is highly readable, personal, and candid.

Nice Jewish Girls is organized into six sections, each devoted to a different aspect of Jewish lesbian experience. The opening section, "If I Am Not for Myself, Who Will Be?", explores the process of bringing to consciousness a sense of Jewishness, lesbianism, and anti-Semitism. "Jewish Identity: A Coat of Many Colors" features a range of voices showing diversity in personal history and experience. Connecting—to other Jews, to other oppressed groups, to other lesbians and gay men—is the theme of "If I Am Only for Myself, What Am I?" "That's Funny. You Don't Look Like a Jewish Lesbian," a pictorial essay, and "Family Secrets," a section on the Jewish lesbian in relationship to her family, follow. "Next Year in Jerusalem," the final section, deals with Israel, its problems and its promise. The appendix, "Cast a Critical Eye," includes a critique of I.B. Singer, a Nobel Prize winning Jewish male writer; two articles on anti-Semitism in the Christian feminist and feminist spirituality movements; and biographies of the contributors. The editor's glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew expressions increases the book's accessibility, and the suggestions for further reading encourage self-education.

In her introduction, Beck states: "this book has become the explora-

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance of Alice T. Friedman. *J.E.K.*

tion of complexities, as well as a celebration of our survival" (xxix). When she asserts. *"If I say that Judaism is more than a religion, as lesbianism is more than a sexual preference, I begin to tap the complexity"* (xv), Beck does indeed challenge the reader to explore the myriad myths, both self- and societally-imposed, of just who we, Jewish lesbians, are.

In reading this book, I was struck by writings that asked the question: what does it mean to be a Jewish lesbian? I recalled that the first time I attended a meeting of Jewish women, I experienced a feeling of embarrassment and shame–I did not entirely understand "the point." Only when a woman in my small discussion group who had been raised in a Protestant family told us that she was in the process of converting to Judaism, did I begin to understand. I wondered about the meaning of Jewish identity: what does it mean for someone to "convert" to something I *am*, but have often shied away from?

Choosing to identify as a Jew can be a complicated internal and external struggle. Growing up in a virtually non-Jewish community, I learned what it meant to be different, and I adopted the embarrassment and shame that went with that difference. Over time, the childish shouts of "Christ-Killer!" and "Dirty Jew!" hurled at me began to re-emerge in different form from my own mouth as contempt and scorn for "rich Jews" (not being one myself) and desperate attempts to be "like everyone else" (i.e., non-Jewish). For me to reject this internalized anti-Semitism and identify openly as a Jew was frightening, and challenged my time-worn defenses. There was another emotion pushing through those defenses–pride–I had survived.

Many of the contributors to *Nice Jewish Girls* describe their own process of affirming a Jewish identity. Melanie Kaye's article, "Some Notes on Jewish Lesbian Identity," is a thoughtful journey, piecing together a sense of her Jewishness. By the end, we share her joy, her pride, and the seriousness of her assertion that "I want a button that says *Pushy Jew. Loud Pushy Jew. Loud Pushy Jew Dyke"* (42). Although she "realized that . . . [she] too had to accept or reject . . . [her] Arabic-Jewish identity," Savina Teuba tells us, "The Jewish part was not so difficult. Both my mother and father identified very strongly with Jewish traditions . . ." ("A Coat of Many Colors," 86). The complexity of her own Jewish identity is explored further by Josylyn C. Segal, "daughter of an American Negro/Native-American mother . . . and a Russian Roumanian Jewish father" ("Interracial Plus," 55). Segal was "ejected" from B'nai B'rith Youth because, as the daughter of a non-Jewish woman, Segal was "not Jewish" according to the rabbi. She made the decision to

convert and found that her "conversion acted as a catalyst for an even deeper sense of . . . [her] Jewish heritage and identification" (55). In "Split at the Root," Adrienne Rich looks back at her experience as the daughter of a gentile woman and a Jewish man who were very much invested in assimilation and denial of Jewishness:

> And sometimes I feel inadequate to make any statement as a Jew; I feel the history of denial within me like an injury, a scar–for assimilation has affected *my* perceptions, those early lapses in meaning, those blanks, are with me still. My ignorance can be dangerous to me, and to others. (84)

Rich's writing shows the interplay of internalized denial and external pressure to assimilate.

The dangers of Jewish visibility are described, in part, by Holocaust survivors and the daughters of Holocaust survivors. Evi Beck tells us, "*In order to feel fully safe I need to feel known.* How so?. . . . in Vienna in 1938, when I was five years old and Hitler came to power, visibility was not safe. . . . Once I was sent to buy butter because I was blonde and did not look Jewish" (xiv). Irena Klepfisz writes, "As a child, my first conscious feeling about being Jewish was that it was dangerous, something to be hidden" ("Resisting and Surviving America," 100). The poetry by Klepfisz in *Nice Jewish Girls,* excerpts from "Bashert"* and from "Perspectives on the Second World War," is beautifully written and illustrates what she values in the poetry of others: "a subdued, earnest poetry that expresses their feelings, their struggles, the conditions of their lives" (101). In her own poem, Dovida Ishatova tells movingly of her mother's survival of the Holocaust and both reminds us of the horror, and teaches us of the strength of those who survived and of the emotional scars they bear. While not the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, Rachel Wahba, an Arabic Jew, shares a similar feeling when she describes being raised with her "mother's vivid memories of hiding in neighbors' homes, running from one rooftop to another as she fled from Baghdad's anti-Jewish mobs . . ." ("Some of Us Are Arabic," 64).

Throughout the book, but especially in "Family Secrets," the contributors describe the difficulties of affirming their lesbian identities within their families and the Jewish community. Dovida Ishatova in "What May Be Tsores* to You is Naches* to Me," asks of her parents, "So what's a nice Jewish girl like me doing in a book like this?" (174).

**Bashert*: "inevitable; (pre)destined" (279).
**Tsores*: "woe; troubles; misery" (285). *Naches:* "joy; contentment; gratification" (283).

She answers them, and us:

> . . . I'm a very important link in the liberation of women and the liberation of Jews. I should be welcomed into the Jewish community with open arms. I am not a contradiction or an impossibility. What could make more sense than my casting off, in my lifetime, the remaining vestiges of woman and Jew as victim, and asserting my love of self by being woman-identified? (174)

"I have not come out to my family," relates Bernice Mennis. "I think (and I am perhaps wrong in my perception) that their guilt, shame, fear, and need to assimilate as Jews in an alien land would make my lesbianism extremely painful to them ("Repeating History," 95.) To be a Jew is to be different. To be different is to be dangerous. And so, some Jews attempt assimilation. If their daughter is a lesbian, she is different still, and therefore more dangerous.

Harriet Malinowitz' "Coffee and Cake" is a poignantly related "coming out" story about the frustrations and fantasies that accompany a meeting between sister and brother. When she does not get the hoped-for response, the sister writes:

> Sometimes I have the impulse to gather my family and say: "Today I am a lesbian," and see who starts to dance. I would like to see someone rent a catering hall, give me a salad bowl, say, "Mazel tov, mazel tov, health and happiness always!" with tears of joy in their eyes. . . . And I know the crazy thing I hoped to get from telling him. I hoped to see him dance. (189)

And, even as we must confront this homophobia within our own families, we must also confront anti-Semitism when we choose to identify openly as Jews. Articles in *Nice Jewish Girls* reflect on the existence of anti-Semitism both globally and within the women's and lesbian-feminist movements. It is especially painful that anti-Semitism exists within our own movements. In "Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement," Irena Klepfisz says:

> . . . the anti-Semitism with which I am immediately concerned, and which I find most threatening, does not take the form of the overt, undeniably inexcusable painted swastika on a Jewish gravestone or on a synagogue wall. Instead, it is elusive and difficult to pinpoint, for it is the anti-Semitism either of omission or one which trivializes the Jewish experience and Jewish oppression. (46)

Two articles in the appendix, Judith Plaskow's "Blaming the Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy" and Annette Daum's "Blaming Jews for the Death of the Goddess," analyze an underlying, sometimes "elusive" anti-Semitism in feminist writing. An example of overt anti-Semitism

and racism in the women's movement is given by Gloria Greenfield in "Shedding." We are told of Greenfield's and Michelle Cliff's promotional tour of Cliff's book, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise:*

> While addressing Houston's white-lesbian audience about the militant escalation of the Ku Klux Klan, Michelle was criticized about her inclusion of Jews as Klan victims. According to the critic, "Jews don't have to worry about the Klan, since Jewish cartels run the world." In Austin, we were verbally attacked by another white lesbian who contended that our willingness to fight against the Klan made us "as violent as them." We were told in San Antonio that to identify ourselves respectively as Black and Jewish was divisive to the movement. (8)

A discussion of the overt anti-Semitism in *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries, Part II* by Z. Budapest appears in the introduction. "The fact that several of Budapest's coven sisters and supporters are themselves Jewish," says Beck, "in no way mitigates the anti-Semitism of this passage; in fact, it serves to highlight the ways in which some Jewish women have internalized anti-Semitism" (xx).

While this anti-Semitism certainly exists, I am hopeful that a growing consciousness of it also exists. The process of unravelling the elusive and overt sources of our own anti-Semitism is a serious undertaking, and presents the lesbian-feminist and women's movements with an opportunity for important growth. My own experience has been that within these communities I have discovered, come to know, and work with Jewish women for the first time in my life. Precisely in this context, I have begun to confront anti-Semitism, with the support of my sisters, both Jewish and non-Jewish. My own strength as a Jewish woman has been validated, affirmed, even appreciated within this community, as it has not been anywhere else in my life.

Over the last few years, as anti-Semitism within the women's movement has begun to be explored, I have feared the possibility of further polarization within an already fragile movement—polarization between Jews and non-Jews, between white Jewish women and women of color, between supporters and non-supporters of Israeli positions. In her introduction, Beck describes a workshop where such tensions became painfully obvious:

> At one point in the day, the Jewish lesbians asked that the group be divided, because the gentile lesbians' stories about their anti-Semitic backgrounds were creating great anxiety and pain for the Jewish women. While everyone understood the need to separate at that time, the non-Jewish lesbians were loathe to discuss their anti-Semitism with each other and found it difficult to do so; some expressed jealousy of the developing close ties they sensed among the Jewish lesbians who were, for the first

> time coming together around their common heritage, as lesbians *and* as Jews. Yet we have come to understand that white women must work on their racism with each other, that such education is not the burden of women of color. (xxi)

Klepfisz contributes to this education process for Jewish and non-Jewish women by offering a list of fifteen questions which "are designed to reveal the degree to which they have internalized the anti-Semitism around them" (50). These questions provide concrete assistance to all of us who agree with her that, whatever the difficulties,

> . . . anti-Semitism, *like any other ideology of oppression,* must *never* be tolerated, must *never* be hushed up, must *never* be ignored, and that, instead, it must *always* be exposed and resisted. (50)

One attempt at such exposure of anti-Semitism is "Shedding" by Gloria Greenfield, the first and longest esasay in *Nice Jewish Girls.* Unfortunately, "Shedding" falls short in this attempt. In December and January of 1981-82, Greenfield travelled in Western Europe "as a lesbian Jew with the purpose of researching the escalation of anti-Semitism . . ." (5). Her journal entries combine her personal experience and impressions with historical fact; she footnotes these references from a handful of sources. Greenfield's selective use of history serves to reaffirm her own feelings, rather than to incorporate a larger political context. In light of the fact that "Shedding" is the only article in this anthology which focuses on anti-Semitism from an international perspective, it is especially disappointing that Greenfield's combination of subjective impression and historical reference fails to deepen an analysis of anti-Semitism.

In additon, there are two major problems with this anthology. One concerns racism and anti-Semitism, and relationships between non-Jewish women of color and Jewish women; and the other, an analysis of the Middle East.

Several white contributors express concern for their relationships with non-Jewish women of color and point to parallels between anti-Semitism and racism. The inclusion of Melanie Kaye's poem, "Notes of an Immigrant Daughter: Atlanta," is important since it is the one contribution to the anthology which deals specifically with racism and attempts to integrate ideas about racism and anti-Semitism. Acknowledgment of the parallels between anti-Semitism and racism opens the door to confronting this issue. Beck asks: "Need one oppression cancel out another? Would the recognition that it is not *either/or* but *both/and* be

too overwhelming? What would happen if we admitted that oppressed groups can themselves be oppressive?" (xxii). And, Irena Klepfisz writes:

> If someone were to ask me did I think a Jewish Holocaust was possible in this country, I would answer immediately: "Of course." Has not America had other Holocausts? Has not America proven what it is capable of? Has not America exterminated others, those it deemed undesirable or those in its way? Are there not Holocausts going on right now in this country? (49)

Reference is made to the New England Women's Studies Conference in 1981, at which a confrontation between Jewish women and women of color occurred. Upon reading Beck's discussion of this in the introduction, the reader is referred, on the one hand, "for details" (xxii) to Greenfield's "Shedding," and, on the other hand, to a letter which appeared in *Gay Community News,* a Boston-based newspaper. From this letter, Beck quotes Cherríe Moraga (et al.): "We don't have to be the same to have a movement, but we *do* have to be accountable for our ignorance. In the end, finally, we must refuse to give up on each other" (xxi). In "Shedding," the "details" focus entirely on anti-Semitic remarks made by women of color during the confrontation. Greenfield does not mention the *GCN* letter, written by women of color in direct response to the confrontation. This omission gives a distorted picture of the complexity of these relationships and may thereby contribute to our battling against one another and sapping energy from what should be a unified stance against oppression of all kinds. Although it is frequently important for specific groupings of us to meet separately in order to better develop and articulate our politics and to get support, I do not believe in separatism as a political strategy. The need for us all to work together is essential. While many contributors point out that we must work together *and* that this is not easy, there is little offered to push us forward in reaching that goal.

Unfortunately, the one article by an interracial Jewish lesbian, Josylyn Segal, reinforces a tendency in our movement to rate or "prioritize" all the "isms." She is in a unique position to address not only those overlapping oppressions, but also the relationship between women of color and Jewish women. While she acknowledges that "Black and Jewish Americans need to confront and demythicize their stereotypes of each other" (58), she says little about racism among white Jews and quite a lot about anti-Semitism among Black Americans. This leaves the rather unsettling impression that she sees one as less of a problem, the other as more prevalent. Segal tells us:

> Nobody assumes that I am Jewish; I do not "look" Jewish. This makes me privy to quite a range of freely spoken anti-Jewish attitudes. Black Americans, as part of the gentile majority, tend to share universal misconceptions about Jews.
>
> In my experience, the oppressive stereotypes associated with Jewish Americans outnumber those associated with Black Americans. That is *not* to say that Jewish oppression is more severe than Black oppression; rather, the history of Jewish oppression is far older than the history of Black oppression. The longer a people have been oppressed, the longer the list of oppressive stereotypes associated with them. (56)

One can assume that, as an interracial Jew among white Jews, Segal would *not* necessarily be privy to quite a range of "freely spoken" racist attitudes and that this informs her experience as well. In addition, how long a people have been oppressed or how many oppressive stereotypes are attached to them is less important than how these people join together in struggle against a common oppressor.

At no point in *Nice Jewish Girls* is there an attempt to formulate an analysis of the relationship between Jewish women and non-Jewish women of color, its historical sources, or possible solutions. The burden of this responsibility, however, lies on the white Jewish editor, and not on Josylyn Segal or the two other Third World Jewish contributors. Several possibilities exist for addressing these issues substantively: an essay specifically dealing with the relationship between anti-Semitism and racism; a dialogue discussing relationships between Jewish women and non-Jewish women of color; or in the appendix, such historical material as the *GCN* letter in its entirety, with a more in-depth discussion of these issues. Although the need for further discussion, analysis, and strategy concerning the relationship between women of color and white Jewish women is obvious, this discussion is not begun in *Nice Jewish Girls.*

"Next Year in Jerusalem" consists of four selections. In a short introductory statement, Evi Beck asserts: "For many Jews, the question of Israel is the most complex and confusing aspect of identifying as a Jew today" (193). In this and other sections, articles speak of Israel from the differing perspectives of women who have lived or are living there, and of women who have visited.

"Excerpts from an Israeli Journal" by Andrea Loewenstein is a haunting, often beautiful, often disturbing collection of her impressions while visiting Israel in 1979. In it we see evidence of homophobia, racism, misogyny, and sexism in Israeli society—disturbing evidence indeed of the distortion of the original socialist/utopian vision of Israel.

She tells us of her visit to a Jerusalem cafe:

> Right away, an Israeli soldier with a huge, long gun hanging from his shoulder down between his legs came over. When I wouldn't talk to him, he got ugly.
>
> "What you sit here for, then, whore? American girls!" Then he spat. "But you're supposed to be my people!" I wanted to yell. (202)

In contrast to this ugliness, Loewenstein describes the view from a bus on the way to the Dead Sea:

> The colors are white, pink and ochre. We reach sea level, then plunge down to the sea of deadness, the flat desert. The very emptiness–the flat desolation has its own beauty, and I think I must learn to look at loss in my own life in this way. (207)

Other contributors write about a growing women's movement and lesbian and gay movement in Israel. In "Letters from My Aunt," Helen Weinstock tells of her difficult but eventually successful search for other lesbians in Israel. Writing about the Israeli women's movement, Shelley Horwitz says: "In the past several years, we have created a network of women's centers, battered women's shelters, and rape crisis centers" (196). And in Aliza Maggid's "Lesbians in the International Movement of Gay/Lesbian Jews," we learn of the activism of Israeli lesbians in protesting attempts by the Israeli Orthodox rabbinate to force the cancellation of the 1978 International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews.

While these pieces are important and often moving, they are primarily experiential. Of the four selections in this section, two are letters and one, a journal excerpt. Although the authors sometimes state their political convictions, they do so without providing any detailed analysis. For instance, Shelley Horwitz simply states her opinion:

> I believe that it is important for Jewish women to support Israel–in addition to working towards important political, economic, and social change. As Jews, our fate is tied to that of other Jews. The fate of the Jewish people is tied to Israel. Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. (198)

Like Horowitz' letter, the rest of the nearly fifty pages of this section contains almost no discussion of the complexity of the Middle East crisis: the debate over the very existence of Israel; the homelessness, treatment by Israel, or fate of the Palestinian people; the role of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East; the use of anti-Semitism, on the one hand, to force public opinion against Israel, and, on the other hand, as a defense against criticism of the Israeli government. We Americans surely do not get a complete picture of what is happening

in the Middle East from the mass media, which manipulates public opinion. The media's failure to differentiate between Israel as a political entity and Jews as a people inflames existing anti-Semitism, as is painfully seen in the upsurge of anti-Semitic violence, both in Europe and in the United States. The 1982 actions of the Israeli government in routing the PLO from Beirut have certainly blurred further the possibility of disctictions between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism–and I do believe there can be distinctions. *All* these issues must be addressed.

The Middle East is obviously an emotionally-charged issue which demands much, much more discussion and examination. Regrettably, *Nice Jewish Girls* has not begun such a discussion. The book neither adequately raises these issues, nor takes responsibility for suggesting how, as women, as Jews, as lesbians, we might begin to develop a feminist analysis of them, and consider solutions. I do not expect here a fully elaborated solution; I do regret that no new perspectives have been offered. A dialogue among Jewish lesbians of differing perspectives might have challenged readers and opened the way for further discussion in our communities.

Nice Jewish Girls is an important contribution to the women's movement as a whole. It is a steppingstone in what promises to be a difficult and complex process, a process from which we must not shy away. Every complexity must be examined. All our differences demand exposure, confrontation, education and understanding.

Rachel Wahba helps us to understand her experience as a Sephardic/Arabic Jew in "Some of Us Are Arabic." She uncovers how this experience is unlike that of Ashkenazi Jews, and yet places these differences in timely perspective:

> As a Jew, I identify with all Jews as a People. We not only share similar cultural values, but also a common history of oppression–whether Eastern or Western, Sephardic or Ashkenazi. And we share a common destiny. (65)

RIMA SHORE

GLORIA Z. GREENFIELD'S "SHEDDING": A FURTHER COMMENT

In reviewing *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* for this magazine, Joyce Kauffman mentioned the "selective use of history" in Gloria Z. Greenfield's article, "Shedding." After we looked back to Greenfield's sources, members of the *Conditions* collective came to share Kauffman's opinion based upon the facts discussed below. Moreover, in the course of considering the bases for Kauffman's statement, we noted similarities in language between Greenfield's text and those she relied upon which are, in our opinion, too close for comfort.[1] Most importantly, we felt that Greenfield's presentation of aspects of Jewish history raised extremely important issues which merited fuller discussion. Since asking Kauffman to elaborate on her statement would have meant introducing a lengthy critique into a largely positive review of the anthology, altering the tone and the balance of her assessment, we decided on another approach: a further comment on the use of historical sources in "Shedding" by a member of our editorial collective.

I looked at four books cited by Greenfield which were on the shelves of Brooklyn's public library: Nora Levin's *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-1945;* Paul E. Grosser and Edwin G. Halperin's *The Causes and Effects of Anti-Semitism;* Lucien Steinberg's *Not as a Lamb: Jews against Hitler;* and Helen Fein's *Accounting for Genocide: Victims–and Survivors–of the Holocaust.* (Page references in the following discussion and in the notes refer to these books.)

I found Greenfield's tendency to repeat isolated statements from her sources–rather than digesting historians' discussions of fact, context, implications, qualifications–particularly troublesome in her account of resistance and collaboration in Nazi-occupied Western Europe. The question of who resisted the Nazis and who collaborated with them is emotionally charged, and problematic for Jewish and non-Jewish historians. Nora Levin warns of:

> . . . the danger of making generalizations about certain aspects of the Holocaust, such as the role of Jewish resistance, the extent of general popular resistance, and the presence of unassimilated refugees in the

> midst of integrated communities. In each of the countries of western Europe–Holland, Belgium and France–these factors can be isolated and observed, but no conclusion as to their interplay can be drawn. (403)

Greenfield uses her sources to hazard precisely these kinds of generalizations, contrasting the organized resistance in Belgium with the belated, ineffective resistance in Holland. She writes that while the "Belgian response differed from that of other occupied Western countries" (10), in Holland, "Typhus was the bullet that killed Anne [Frank]. The gun was held by the Dutch population, who offered no mass resistance to the massacre of seventy-five percent of Holland's Jewish population" (22). Her discussion of Belgium cites both Helen Fein and Nora Levin. Although Levin's discussion of Belgium is contained in a chapter entitled "Holland and Belgium," Greenfield's statements about Holland rely solely on Fein. Yet Nora Levin states in that chapter:

> In Holland, for example, the Jewish community was well settled and integrated and enjoyed the wholehearted support of the population in facing the Nazi crisis. Dutch resistance developed early and persisted through the Nazi occupation. Jews participated in the resistance as Dutch nationals, in the same way they had participated in Dutch life generally. And yet, Jewish losses in Holland were shattering. In Belgium, on the other hand, the losses were much lighter, despite a less active Belgium resistance and the presence of many Jewish refugees, estranged and cut off from Belgium Jewry as well as the general community. (403)

Another historian cited by Greenfield, Lucien Steinberg, writes that in Holland,

> . . . more than 105,000 [Jews] were deported and put to death; and this despite the fact that the Dutch Resistance movement was of a considerable size, and that almost the whole of the Dutch population rejected Nazism, particularly in its anti-Semitic aspects. (131)

Elsewhere he remarks that, "Holland was the only German-occupied European country to organise a general strike as a protest against German anti-Jewish measures" (156).

These views directly oppose that presented by Greenfield. In some respects, this conflict reflects disagreement among historians. Levin and Steinberg analyze the reasons for devastating losses in Holland *despite* Dutch resistance; Greenfield follows Fein in stressing the collapse of that resistance from late 1941 until 1943, when Dutch Christians were faced with the prospect of forced labor in Germany. It remains unclear to me why Greenfield relies so unreservedly on Levin and Steinberg at some moments, only to ignore or dismiss their basic tenets at the next. What in

Fein's interpretation proved more convincing? I am not an historian, and in any case know more about Jewish experience in Eastern than in Western Europe. I am not in a position to draw definitive conclusions about the political and historical issues which divide the scholars whom Greenfield cites. But I believe that Greenfield was obliged at least to acknowledge that her view is not shared by all scholars, that two historians whom she cites as authorities present a very different picture, and that Fein too offers both a context for the Dutch response and qualifying statements. For example, Fein describes strikes by Dutch workers in February, 1941, spontaneous student protests in response to a purge of Jewish teachers, and Gentile support of Jewish resistance:

> However, in Amsterdam the object of such actions [by the German Nazis to incite the public against Jews] was foiled by the development of mass resistance within the Jewish quarter by Jews and some of their Dutch neighbors, most likely to be of the working class. (269)

Greenfield states that by June, 1943, "Of the 20,000 Jews left in hiding [in Holland], half were betrayed or discovered" (23). She takes this statement from Fein (286); "Shedding" contains no reference to the figures or the contextual statements provided by Levin:

> The number of Jews reported in hiding at various periods shows not only Jewish efforts to avoid deportation calls after the summer of 1942, but also the valiant Dutch efforts to save them:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | September 11, 1942 | 25,000 |
> | March 20, 1943 | 10,000-15,000 |
> | June 25, 1943 | 20,000 |
> | February 11, 1944 | 11,000 |
> | At liberation | 7,000 |
>
> The figures also attest to the last relentless drives of the S.S. to bag their quarry. Often those who had given Jews shelter were also murdered. These figures become heroic when it is recalled that in the last winter of the war, the Dutch also suffered a *Hungertod.* Four hundred people starved to death each day. (418)

Greenfield mentions the fact that Belgians wore Jewish stars to show solidarity with the Jews, but passes over Levin's mention of the yellow flowers worn by Dutch citizens in their lapels as an act of resistance. She does not mention the 20,000 Dutch Christians whose rejection of Nazi racial policies resulted in their deportation to concentration camps (Levin, 409).

She presents selectively the role of the Dutch clergy. Greenfield follows Fein in stressing the important fact that the Dutch Reformed Church until 1943 exchanged "pulpit silence on the plight of Jews in

exchange for the exemption of Christians of Jewish origin" (Greenfield, 22). She does not cite Fein's statement on the facing page that Holland's Roman Catholic Church "proved to be the most outspoken Roman Catholic Church in Europe by refusing the offer: its head denounced the deportations from the pulpit and in February, 1943 forbade Catholic policemen from participating in hunts for Jews, even if it caused the loss of their jobs" (285). Fein also notes that Protestant churches other than the Dutch Reformed also knew of the offer, but nevertheless spoke out against the deportations.

Certainly the history of the Holocaust includes belated resistance and collaboration, disastrous failures by Europeans and Americans, and specifically by the Christian clergy, to respond to the overwhelming Nazi threat to Jews. And collaborators could be found in every occupied country, including Holland and Belgium. We must not avert our gaze from this history. But an arrangement of isolated statements selected to confirm what appear to be pre-existing convictions of one country's heroism and another's ignominy, serves no one.

Greenfield implies that the absence or presence of resistance largely explains the number of Jewish lives lost under Nazi occupation. All of her sources agree that Holland's Jewish community was virtually decimated; more than 105,000 of its population of 140,000 died at the hands of the Nazis. But her sources also indicate that a meaningful comparison of devastation in the two countries would consider numerous factors, including the following:[2]

Military reality: The stunning speed of the German assault cut off escape routes from Holland; thousands of Belgian Jews were able to flee to France, although many did not make it and others were later deported.

Early suppression of Jewish resistance: Workers' strikes in 1941 (which closed shipyards and armament plants and stopped public transportation) and attacks against individual Nazis led to crushing reprisals from which Holland's Jewish resistance never recovered.

Nazi strategy: Unlike Belgium or France, Holland was considered a Germanic region, marked for permanent protectorate status and incorporation into a Greater Reich. The Nazis imposed a more rigorous registration, mounted a more intense ideological campaign (provoking anti-Semitic acts by Dutch Christians with particular zeal), and in general exerted more complete control than in the other occupied Western European countries.

Nazi leadership: Choreographing the deportation of Dutch Jews was Hanns Albin Rauter, a fanatic Austrian for whom anti-Semitism was the reason for being a Nazi (Steinberg, 157); as Greenfield mentions, the influence in Belgium of General Alexander von Falkenhausen, a less extreme commander of occupying forces (who in 1944 was implicated in a plot against Hitler) to some degree checked the Gestapo in Belgium, except in Antwerp.

Geography: Holland's topography provided few forests, few natural means of concealment; its geographic situation allowed few escape routes. Amsterdam's layout—a cluster of small islands separated by canals, connected by bridges—facilitated the Nazi effort to isolate the Jewish quarter. Also, the traditional style of Dutch houses did not lend itself readily to tunneling or concealment.

Deportation quotas: On June 23, 1942, Eichmann stipulated deportation of 40,000 Dutch and 40,000 French Jews, and 10,000 Belgian Jews.

Role of the Jewish Council: All of Greenfield's sources point to the debilitating role of Holland's Jewish Council (*Joodse Raad*), which centralized many functions relating to Jews, stratified and thus divided the Jewish community, encouraged compliance with the Nazi authorities, and in the opinion of many, played into their hands. (Lucien Steinberg cites the existence of the *Joodse Raad* as the key factor which worked against the formation of a social defense movement and ultimately led to Dutch Jewry's shattering losses.) By the time the Nazis attempted to establish this kind of Council in Belgium, most of the members of the Jewish community with the prestige necessary to form such a body had fled.

Domination of civil administration: The day-to-day administration of Holland was more completely dominated by Nazis than in Belgium, where many Belgians retained their posts in the bureaucracy, and in this way were in a position to aid Jews or impede Nazi efforts.

Identity cards: The complex design of the tri-colored identity cards carried by Dutch Jews made them significantly more difficult to alter or forge than Belgium's more simple identity cards.

Bureaucratic style: The traditionally meticulous records of the Dutch bureaucracy allowed the Nazis to keep track of Jews with particular efficiency.

These factors do not *explain* the systematic murder of Holland's Jewry–*this* no list of facts or circumstances can do. They do not discount the role of collaboration. Rather, they demonstrate the danger of lifting facts out of context.

Greenfield's discussion of the registration of Belgian Jews further dramatizes this danger. Levin states that on the eve of the German invasion, Jews in Belgium numbered about 90,000. "As Germans began to cross the border, there was a mass flight to France and almost half the total Jewish population in Belgium fled. *On October 28, 1940, when all Jews were ordered to register with the police, 42,000 reported.* The Germans added 10,000 to this figure to account for the estimated number of Jewish children who were being sheltered but had not registered" (419, italics added). Greenfield apparently took note of this paragraph, for in the context of describing opposition to the Nazis in Belgium, she writes, "*In October 1940, when all Jews were ordered to register with the police,* only 42,562 *reported.*" (10; italics added). She cites Steinberg, not Levin as a source here, and uses his figure.[3] Comparing Greenfield's statement to Levin's we find added the misleading word, *only*. Had all 90,000 Jews remained in Belgium, the *only* might have been warranted. But Greenfield does not include here Levin's preceding sentence about mass flight to France; in fact, 42,000 constituted most of the Jewish population at the time of registration. She also leaves out Levin's next sentence: "There were also several thousand adults who did not register, most of them from the well-assimilated native-born Jewish population" (420). While there were indeed Jews who defiantly refused to register,[4] this option was generally open to those who, for linguistic and cultural reasons, had a better chance of passing in Belgian society. The majority of Belgium's Jews were refugees who could not pass and who did register because they had no alternative. Holocaust history offers countless instances of Jews' resistance and heroism; we do not have to invent them.

I am objecting not only to Greenfield's misrepresentation of the facts, but also to the principle of using registration figures to suggest the degree of resistance among Jews in occupied countries. Certainly information about the numbers of Jews who registered with the Gestapo has a place in histories of the Holocaust. But to supply this kind of information without context, without discussion of the situation of Jews in occupied countries, without a consideration of the alternative, implies an equation between registration and capitulation. This borders on the kind of reasoning that created the stereotype of the European Jew pas-

sively led to the slaughter. As Greenfield notes, 90 percent of Belgium's Jews were immigrants; historian Nora Levin stresses that most spoke neither Flemmish nor French. They were particularly visible, and therefore particularly endangered. For most, to register was a bid for survival: another day, another month.

Inaccuracies in "Shedding" are not limited to Greenfield's discussion of the Holocaust. For example, she states that, "In part due to Napoleon's commitment to Jewish civil liberties, Germanic anti-Semitic practices declined during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (15). Even if Napoleon had been alive in the seventeenth century, or politically influential in the eighteenth (he overthrew the Directoire in 1799 and became Emperor in 1804), he hardly championed Jewish rights. Grosser and Halperin, whose book is cited by Greenfield, note that in France in 1808, Napoleon "issued an imperial decree limiting Jewish economic activities and freedom of movement and abrogated previous privileges some Jewish communities had been granted before his conquest" (210-11). The civil liberties he granted outside France, in the countries he conquered, stemmed from his desire to consolidate his empire, rather than from a "commitment" to Jewish rights.

Greenfield ends her article with the refusal to remain silent. And we should not be silent. We should speak. But not before we have considered with great care the complexity, the possible implications, the accuracy of our statements–particularly if our words will reach a wide audience. For as Elana Dykewoman wrote in *Nice Jewish Girls*, "I perceive that this will be the 'source book' on judaism within the lesbian community for some time . . ." (148). Because the anthology is so visible, so powerful in stirring dialogue, it is imperative to challenge the presentation as historical fact of questionable or inaccurate statements. Jewish history is too important for distortions to pass unnoticed.

1. As I read through Greenfield's sources, it seemed to me that many of the historical statements in "Shedding" echo the language of these books to an extent which, in my opinion, goes beyond the bounds of appropriate use of sources. Compare, for example, the following passages. The second appears in "Shedding" without footnote or quotation marks.

> Otto Boechel (see 1886) was elected to the Reichstag on the slogan, *"Peasants! Free yourselves from the Jewish middlemen!"* . . .
>
> Hermann Ahlwardt published his pamphlet *Der Verzweiflungkampf der Arischen Völker mit dem Judentum (The Aryan People's Battle of Despair Against Jewry)*. In it he depicted the "Jewish monster octopus" controlling every phase of German life, army, government, business, education, agriculture.
>
> Grosser and Halperin, pp. 225, 226

> Otto Boechel was elected to the Reichstag in 1887 on the slogan, "Peasants! Free yourselves from the Jewish middlemen!" Three years later, Hermann Ahlwardt published his pamphlet *Der Verzweiflungkampf der arischen Völker mit dem Judentum,* which depicted the "Jewish monster octopus" controlling every phase of German life, army, government, business, education, and agriculture.
>
> Greenfield, p. 16

At other times, Greenfield provides a source but does not indicate that she is quoting directly, as in the following example:

> Some Belgian officials, however, used their knowledge and power to circumvent German edicts. . . .
>
> The Belgian police were deftly noncooperative, losing and misplacing files on Jews and forging and manufacturing documents for them. Several Belgian officials in the Ministry of Justice saved some Jews by intervening directly. They also made substantial sums of money available for the Jewish Defense Committee which supplied thousands of Jews with false documents and supported Jews in hiding. Major E. Calberg, an official in the Food and Supply Ministry, persuaded the Red Cross to surrender to him a thousand food parcels which he distributed to Jews in hiding. The Department of Registry helped Jews evade deportation by facilitating mixed marriages.
>
> Levin, pp. 419, 421

> Some Belgian officials used their knowledge and power to circumvent German edicts. Belgian police "lost" and misplaced" files on Jews, forging and manufacturing documents for them. Several Belgian officials in the Ministry of Justice saved some Jews by intervening directly, as well as making substantial sums of money available for CDJ, which supplied thousands of Jews with false documents and supported Jews in hiding. An official in the Food and Supply Ministry persuaded the Red Cross to surrender a thousand food parcels, which he distributed to Jews in hiding. The Department of Registry helped Jews evade deportation by facilitating mixed marriages.
>
> Greenfield, p. 11 (cites Levin, p. 421 only)

2. Helen Fein, whose discussion of belated Dutch resistance and the sell-out of the clergy is closely followed by Greenfield, mentions a number of factors not included in this summary, such as: lack of leadership from the government-in-exile; denial of reports of extermination by both Jews and Christians; Nazi exploitation of hostility between German and Dutch Jews; and the Nazi effort to create opportunities for collaboration in every sphere of Dutch life. Fein stresses that, "The decimation of Communist cadres [122 top leaders and 90 lower functionaries] helps explain the lapse of organized resistance from 1941 to the first quarter of 1943" (270).

3. Steinberg states that:

> . . . in Belgium alone, the Gestapo registered 42,562 Jews over fifteen years of age, that is to say, counting the children, abot 52,000 in other words about 60 per cent of those who had been domiciled there before the war. *This meant that around 40,000 Jews had found refuge outside Belgium, principally in France.* (131-132; italics added)

4. Steinberg cites the exceptional case of Ghert Jospa, a Jew and a Communist who was Bassarabian by birth and had lived in Belgium for ten years when the registration was enacted.

> . . . Jospa did not register as a Jew, which to him seemed an extremely dangerous thing to do: as an experienced militant Communist, he knew that any measures imposed by the Germans only served to further their own interests; nor did he wish to give the German police the slightest clue of his whereabouts. (144)

ELIZABETH WATERS

ALL THE WOMEN ARE WHITE, ALL THE BLACKS ARE MEN, BUT SOME OF US ARE BRAVE: BLACK WOMEN'S STUDIES, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. The Feminist Press, Old Westbury, N.Y., 1982. 398 pp. $8.95.

> . . . I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life . . . just one book to reflect the reality that I and the other black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream. (173)

Barbara Smith must have known when she wrote those words in 1977 that she would be a part of compiling and editing the very book that would begin the process for black feminists and lesbians to "live" and "dream."

All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, the first work specifically designed to be used as a text for programs in black women's studies provides a series of essays and historical bibliographic information about black women from slavery to the present. *But Some of Us Are Brave* includes information on black women writers and singers; confronts various issues affecting black women, such as health care and organizing; has an extensive research section; and overall provides much of the groundwork material necessary for a basic, introductory course in black women's studies.

The most significant contribution this book makes is in its exploration of the lives of black women from a primarily feminist perspective, exploring also the pain and isolation often involved in that perspective, the particular courage needed to maintain the feminist stance, and the resultant rewards. To read the various pieces in *But Some of Us Are Brave* is to experience again the loneliness of our situation, but it is also to reflect positively on certain other aspects of our lives and to realize that each of us, caught up in our struggling, is also united with others like ourselves whose numbers, happily, are growing.

In Section One, "Searching for Sisterhood: Black Feminism," Michele Wallace in her popular "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," poignantly articulates the difficult transition she made from black nationalism to black feminism, the alienation she felt both from black men who accused her of betraying the black race by embracing feminism and from watching non-feminist black women continually subjecting themselves to sexist treatment in the name of preserving the black nation. Wallace said of black feminists then, and this isolation is still felt by many black women who are feminists:

> . . . We exist as women who are Black, who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle–because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (12)

Our reality as black feminists makes our fight a necessary fight. In that same section the Combahee River Collective's powerful "A Black Feminist Statement" is also reprinted, and still remains one of the most eloquent discussions of the convergence of race, class, and sex in the lives of black women: "We also find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because most often in our lives they are experienced simultaneously" (16). To attempt to separate or exclude one part of our lives from another is to invite spiritual and political suicide. But there sometimes seems to be no safe direction in which to turn, for if we face conflicts within the black world, when we encounter white feminists, we face there the racism of their world.

In Section Two, "Roadblocks and Bridges: Confronting Racism," in her article, "A Child of One's Own," Alice Walker illustrates a form of racism under which many white feminists operate, i.e. they forget or fail to recognize that black women are not only black but, amazingly, women too. Using the critically acclaimed Judy Chicago Dinner Party exhibit, Walker humorously describes the racism of Chicago's plates:

> . . . All the plates are creatively imagined vaginas. . . . The Sojourner Truth plate is the only one in the collection that shows–instead of a vagina a face, in fact, three faces. One weeping (a truly cliche tear) . . . and another, screaming (a no less cliche scream) . . . and a third gimcracky 'African design,' smiling. . . . It occurred to me that perhaps white feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine Black women have vaginas. . . . (43)

Patricia Bell Scott's article, "Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science," in Section Three, "Dispelling the Myths: Black Women and the Social Sciences," discusses the sexist atti-

tudes of both black and white male sociologists and psychologists in the ways in which they either support or refute the theory of the black matriarch. Black men, in arguing against the racism inherent in the theory of the black matriarch, usually at the same time promote sexist attitudes toward black women by asserting that "the black matriarchy theorists are merely trying to victimize and ostracize the black man by saying that he can't take care of his family" (87)—as if this were the exclusive role of the male.

Sexism confronts black women from many directions. In Section Four, "Creative Survival: Preserving Body, Mind, and Spirit," Constance M. Carroll's selection, "Three's a Crowd: The Dilemma of Black Women in Higher Education," challenges some of the myths long held about the educational advantages of black women over black men. Carroll cites the results of a survey conducted in 1968 of doctoral and professional degrees conferred by black institutions that found, "Ninety-one per cent were awarded to black men, only nine per cent to black women" (116).

In Section Five, "'Necessary Bread': Black Women's Literature." Barbara Smith in her groundbreaking article, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," discusses sexist, racist and cursory treatment afforded black women writers by the white male and female and black male critical establishment and she puts forth a radical discussion of lesbianism as an issue in black women's writing. Smith examines how a black lesbian feminist approach to literary works may reveal aspects of the work often ignored by the aforementioned establishment. For example, Smith makes her controversial claim that Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* is a lesbian novel "in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed" (170). She also mentions the role black feminist criticism has in "creating a climate in which black lesbian writers can survive." Though Smith does a commendable job of discussing lesbianism and black feminist criticism, her article and Gloria T. Hull's article on Alice Dunbar Nelson, wherein Hull discusses Nelson's lesbianism, and Lorraine Bethel's article on Zora Neale Hurston, in which Bethel discusses black woman-identification as the basis of black feminist criticism, are the only ones which relate specifically to black lesbianism. And clearly that is not enough. Though some of the other articles refer to black lesbianism, a separate piece on the issue of lesbianism is warranted—whether it be on the cultural isolation of black lesbians or on black lesbian mothers.

One of the book's greatest values is in its in-depth bibliographical section which takes up just slightly less than one-third of the book and comprises Section Six, "Bibliographies and Bibliographic Essays." In-

cluded here are names of handbooks and directories, studies, listings of reference tools divided into sections on employment, the arts, education, women's organizations, composers, aids for finding periodicals and anthologies. It is an invaluable sourcebook and a catalyst for further research.

However, the lack of more definitive information on black lesbians is not the only shortcoming of *But Some of Us Are Brave.* There are no articles on black women in prision, motherhood, aging. There are no essays devoted to the visual and performing arts. I also found missing essays on social problems, such as rape, domestic violence, child care. Much of the work in *But Some of Us Are Brave* seems to deal with the theoretical aspects of our lives and less with the day to day.

In the past black women have been put into situations where we have been expected to choose between our feminism and our blackness, to make a choice between either the black movement or the women's movement. *But Some of Us Are Brave* signals a new beginning in that for the first time an attempt has been made to present a unified and analytical portrait of the various elements of the lives of black women from a feminist point of view and a recognition made that we cannot exist as "either/or" but as "all." For that reason alone this book is well worth the reading and the reflection. It is a vital step in the development of black women's studies and indicates the direction in which we rightfully ought to be heading.

FOLLY by Maureen Brady. The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886, 1982. 196 pp. $7.95 softcover.

When I finished reading *Give Me Your Good Ear* by Maureen Brady, I knew I was a fan. I liked her style of writing, her careful pacing, her obvious thoughtfulness. But I have to admit that when I saw her at the Women In Print conference in D.C. in October of '81 and she asked me if I would be interested in reading a draft of her newest novel, *Folly,* which was about women working in the garment factories of the South, I had a lot of reservations and nervousness about it.

As a Southern-born, working-class woman, I have spent my life with the stereotype of who and what I am in the eyes of other people, people who do not live in the South, who know very little about the South, who continue to believe in the Scarlett O'Hara image of Southern women, or who continue to believe in the sub-human racist Southern woman who still holds images of slaves in her mind. If I didn't fit into any of those categories, there was always the uneducated red-necked, slovenly drawler, an assumption I guess was based solely on my accent. These stereotypes didn't come only from ignorant men and heterosexual women who lived outside the South; they came from Lesbians and Lesbian-feminists, women from whom I expected more thought and analysis. So even though I liked and respected Maureen as a person, and even though I admired her work as a writer, I was worried and scared to read her book. She was a woman from New York. How could she write a novel about rural, Southern, working-class women that would be accurate and positive? I was scared she would not; I was afraid I would be hurt and offended by *Folly,* by Maureen, by even one slip of the pen.

It took me two weeks to get up enough nerve to open the manuscript after it arrived. Once I started reading, I knew I held a positive, important novel in my hands.

Folly is thoughtful, powerful, and proud. The characters Maureen has created are solid, strong women who are proud of their lives, who find no shame in themselves, their work, or their class. They are friends, co-workers, neighbors, caring for one another and their families, taking

care of business in the best way they know. They are working-class women, the kind of women I grew up with and have known all my life.

The main character, Folly, and her best friend/next-door-neighbor, Martha, work the night shift at a garment factory, sewing zippers into men's polyester pants. It is a sewing machine assembly line, with production quotas to meet, a supervisor who watches the women like the proverbial hawk, noise, dust, no benefits, and many unyielding rules. There is no freedom, only unending, exhausting work, with no sick leave, no time off, no excused absences.

The firing of a woman co-worker sets off the main plot of the book—a strike and an attempt to organize a union in the factory. For the first time, the white women and the Black women must really work together on a personal basis if they are to succeed. And to work together, the white women must confront their racism and begin to change themselves and their attitudes.

A great deal of the focus of the book is on the strike as well as Folly and her growing relationship with Martha. But there are also intriguing sub-plots revolving around Folly's teenaged daughter, Mary Lou, and her attraction to a young woman named Lenore who is the butcher at the A&P who is known to be "queer." There is an ongoing correspondence between Lenore and her lover, Betsy, who works the Alaskan pipeline. And there is Lenore's attempt to become friends with a young Black woman named Sabrina, who works at the local diner. At first glance, the plot of *Folly* seems simple. That simplicity is deceptive; this is a very ambitious book, dealing with change and struggle and survival. Maureen attempts to cover a lot within these pages.

I was relieved and excited to read *Folly*, having found a great deal of the available current Lesbian fiction to be superficial and very predictable. As an avid reader of fiction, I was hungry for work which showed women's lives in a fuller dimension of reality-life, work, relationships, sexuality, the politics of change and survival, not just coming-out stories and guilt. I wanted fiction which showed women really living their *whole* lives. By the time I read *Folly*, I was immersed in trying to complete my own book, in which I wanted real women, so I knew how difficult it is to accomplish that reality without rhetoric and "preaching."

Folly evolves very naturally. The idea of the strike comes easily in the book, the very real feeling of women who perhaps couldn't get it together to fight for themselves as individuals but who could get it together to act on the behalf of another woman who has been hurt in such

a way they cannot possibly ignore it, even at the risk of losing their own jobs. But the strike is not forced on the reader. It is there and is a large part of the book. *Folly* contains many other realities: how to raise children, how to pay the bills, how to cope with prejudices and racism, how to continue a growing, changing relationship. We get to see a fairly complete woman, as complete as a character can be within the confines of a relatively short book. If the novel were a hundred pages longer, I would only expect Folly to grow even more than she does.

In writing political, reality-based fiction, I think it is very difficult to achieve a balance between making a point and belaboring it. Just as I rapidly become bored with superficiality, I become equally bored with having an idea or point shoved down my throat. When I read fiction, I want a well-plotted story that is realistic and pertinent. I want characters who live and breathe. Maureen gives that in *Folly,* and I have a great deal of admiration for her craft.

Folly is not *the* perfect piece of Lesbian fiction by any means: there were parts of the book that gave me trouble.

I wanted more of the Black women, who were such strong, powerful characters. I didn't see nearly enough of them and I needed a bit more of Folly's beginning to come to terms with her own racist attitudes. It all happened a bit too easily for me to be completely comfortable, even though I *know* Folly is a "good woman." I found Mabel's reaction to the white women (willing to give them a chance because she almost *had* to but being very cautious) much more realistic than some of the white characters' reactions to the women of color. I wanted more of Folly's thoughts, how she reasoned it all out.

One of the most memorable and realistic scenes for me was the celebratory softball game during which the women divided up into teams that fell right down the color line. The women were nervous and the tension of the scene, amid the fun and laughter, is real. The other solid scene concerning racism and tension was, for me, the initial meeting of several of the women strikers, held in the beauty parlor that was supposed to be familiar and non-threatening to *all* of the women, Black and white. The Black women were not comfortable; the beauty parlor was a white experience. The dialogue in this scene sets up a very intense tension and a very real situation–Black women having to correct the assumptions of white women, and white women having finally to begin to question themselves as well as their own misconceptions. Some of the women present at the meeting were unable and unwilling to understand what was

being said to them by the Black women. It felt just like many scenes I have sat through in real life. I wanted more of this kind of reality, more of the interactions among the older women, more about the reality of race, age, education, opportunity. I know it can't all be in one book, but sometimes, how I wish.

I find the cover to be a very unfortunate first impression of the content of the book, and I think it very much misleads a probable reader by misrepresenting the book. Only a very small part of the novel deals with the relationship between Lenore, a white woman, and Sabrina, a Black woman, and Sabrina works behind the counter in the diner; she never sits in it and socializes. And yet this is the situation which the cover apparently depicts. I know there was a great deal of difficulty surrounding getting together a cover for *Folly*, but if it is reprinted, as I suspect it will be, I hope a cover will be chosen that more accurately reflects the content of the book.

My joy in *Folly* lies mainly in the almost complete lack of any negative stereotype of any woman, but especially Southern, working-class women. For years I tried to change everything about myself that was Southern and/or working-class. It took a long time before I got angry enough to realize that I was not the one who needed to change. Since then, I have become more sensitive to class and privilege, and more proud of my Southern identity. I am a working-class woman, from a working-class family, and I am not ashamed anymore. Maureen has taken a setting and characters which have been a large part of my life and she has created a fiction within that context. She has not written a word of shame or apology on the pages of her book. For that I am glad and grateful. Only with thought about class and regional differences/stereotyping, and only with positive images to replace the old, inaccurate, negative ones, will women be able to start to change their concepts and stop trying to fit Southern women into a mold of prejudice that is not only unfitting, it is absolutely intolerable. We are not caricatures of women. Working-class women, whether they are mill workers or secretaries, Southern or not, are not low-life forms to be pitied or taken less seriously. We are survivors of the hierarchy from the lowest point society plans.

I think *Folly* may well serve as a starting point for many women. It should be read seriously, because these are real lives. It may be classified as fiction, but there is very little fiction within this book. Maureen has written a lot of truth.

ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME by Audre Lorde.
Persephone Press, Inc., PO Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172. 256 pp. $7.95. 1982.

Each new book of poetry by Audre Lorde has expanded the boundary of where words can take us. Her latest book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,* which she describes as a biomythography, continues in that tradition. It is a blending of autobiography, the simple history of her life, with an inner monologue, the timely perceptions of a fertile thinker. In presenting her life as not immutable fact but dramatic reflection she avoids the affectations of most autobiographies and captures the excitement of a mythological adventure.

Audre's earliest memories, as the myopic, silent child of immigrant parents in the twenties, picture her as the listener. She did not speak until she was four but the child Audre hears all. She is the observer within her strong West Indian family. Her parents came to the United States in 1924 while still in their twenties. They brought with them the secrets of Granada, the mystical island home they'd left behind: the herbal remedies; the neighborhood songs; and legends of Zami, a name for women who work together as friends and lovers.

None of this could protect them from the Depression or racism but they did instill a sense of power in Audre's mother, Linda, who stood as a bulwark between the destructiveness of prejudice and her three daughters. Once enrolled in a white Catholic school in Harlem, Audre is the outsider because of her vision problems and the overt racism her mother can no longer keep hidden.

When Audre's sister is barred from a high school graduation trip to Washington, D.C. because the hotel the class will stay in does not admit blacks, their father takes the entire family to the nation's capital. Once there they are turned away from a Breyer's soda fountain because they are black:

> The waitress was white, the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole

rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all. (71)

A large part of the book is a child's eye view of her world presented in snapshot groupings that relate personal and American history. Although the story encompasses some of our most dramatic political episodes–the Rosenberg trial and execution, the rise of McCarthyism and the advent of court-ordered desegregation of the south–Lorde does not indulge in cute revelations about rubbing shoulders with "the stars." Many autobiographers fill their pages with predictions of greatness and proximity thereto, yet never ignite the sparks that must have flown between the luminaries that are mentioned. Lorde's focus is on just such electricity–between herself and the women with whom she shares her life:

> I loved DeLois because she was big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all over. I was scared of DeLois for those very same reasons . . . She moved like how I thought god's mother must have moved, and my mother once upon a time, and someday maybe me. (4)

Maya Angelou notwithstanding, black women do not regularly choose to present themselves in full autobiographies. It is a form particularly suited to Lorde whose personal presence has always been strongly felt in her poetry. She is there, mourning Genevieve, her dead high school friend in "Memorial II" written in 1954 and still there in 1972 when she writes with a touch of irony in "My Fifth Trip to Washington Ended in Northeastern Delaware." Her biography is, in fact and form, a continuation of the storytelling tradition evident in her poetry.

Lorde's journal-entry style lets us listen to the listener; to go inside of the outsider. What we find is a woman keenly aware of the value of intensity to the quality of life.

In her essay, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power;** Lorde begins to reclaim the erotic nature of women for the strength and sustenance it provides. She exalts in the inclination to follow intuition and do the most productive/pleasurable, not necessarily most profitable thing. She says:

> As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves.

**Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.* Out and Out Books, 1978. Pamphlet distributed by Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY 14886.

Audre's mother, Linda, looms over the life of her three daughters as a woman of just such power. She hovers close to the edge of tyranny, in her attempt to make a world of justice, order, and prosperity out of racism, chaos, and deprivation. But more than a fair-skinned West Indian woman fighting for work and to instill pride in her darker daughters, she is a woman infused with a great sensuality which has seeped in from her African/Carribean roots through the soles of her feet and has passed it on to her daughter, Audre, with each laying on of hands:

> Sitting between my mother's spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shouders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. I feel my mother's strong, rough hands all up in my unruly hair . . . I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace. (32).

The sensual quality of Lorde's imagery is as pervasive here as it is in her poetry. She pictures the colors and textures of her life with an intensity that is warm to the touch. She describes her chance meeting with a new child in the neighborhood who appears to the four-year-old Audre like a baby doll come to life. The little girl is a vision in a velvet frock coat and white fur muff that Audre hungers to touch and make real. The silky invitation of the fur and the warmth of her body next to Audre's snowsuit envelops her in a haze of sensual pleasure common enough to children but rarely remembered or acknowledged when they become adults. There is a directness in Lorde's acceptance of sexuality that does not let you avoid its powerful role in our lives.

Unlike many women writers of our time, Lorde does not back away from herself as a sexual being and is able to make the most private and vulnerable moments a comfortable part of our memory. She recounts the beginning of an affair in Mexico with an older woman who hestitates to make love because of the scars she bears from a mastectomy. In her description she makes tangible the reality of the singular breast on her lover's chest burned from radiation; as well as the tenderness and desire she feels for this woman who is not separate from her wounds. Audre does not shrink from disfigurement but embraces her; not hidden in the romance of darkness, but in full lamplight.

Lorde exalts in women's sexual nature, which persists despite society's attempts to smother it; and applauds the important role that nature has in flavoring our lives.

As Audre moves along what she calls the "journey to this house of

myself" (43), her vision of the world becomes sharp and sometimes painful. There is much sentiment: for her family, for her first friend/love, Genevieve, who commits suicide at 15, for the orphaned children of the Rosenbergs and for her need to define herself apart from her family, friends and causes. But it is not a sentimental journey. Each lesson she learns along the way reveals more of the woman her mother was and the woman Audre is to become.

Audre leaves home soon after graduation from Hunter High School, withdrawing from the mother who was so crucial in the shaping of her life but who cannot understand that life as she lived it. Her focus shifts then to the friends and lovers in Greenwich Village during the fifties. She easily engages us in the mythological romanticism of the never-ending circuit of women's bars: Laurel's, the Pony Stable, Sea Colony, Page Three, Swing and the Bagatelle; as well as the smoky basement rooms where black women (often made to feel out of place in the white bars) gave the best house parties on earth. The secret world of recreation rooms in Queens was a microcosm of class and style. Black women revelled in buckskin shoes and D.A. haircuts or lowneck, tight dresses and high heels. There was an elegance of dress and food that made the underground quality of the parties irresistible. Blending with the smoky dimness of colored light, abundant drinks and creative food displays was the sweet smell of hairdos fresh from the beauty parlor and the sense of social masks dropped at the door. Everywhere we find the familiar that makes us nod our heads in recognition.

Lorde's approach to unravelling this life before us is adventurous and, for the most part, satisfying. Occasionally, though, reading *Zami* is like watching a lush tropical island through a telescope. What we see is exciting, intense, and colorful but it leaves us hungering to open the other eye and see a larger horizon up close. The episodic nature of her form does not allow for an accumulated involvement with the people in her life. Often when shifting from one situation to another characters are dropped abruptly and not taken up again. This is most noticeable with her mother. After leaving home, Lorde has little to say about their relationship although she indicates that some contact was maintained with her family. The passages that deal with her and her mother are sometimes the most powerfully written so their loss in the second half of the book is a big disappointment.

Having learned about her home life in Harlem and her home lore of Granada I wanted her to use the same precision in describing the gay world she entered at a young age and how she was affected by the butch-

femme relationship role models that were so prevalent in the fifties and which she consciously avoided emulating.

I wanted to know about the frictions between West Indian and American blacks. There has long been a mistrust fostered and fueled by American white racism that surely played a part in her attempts to form friendships outside her family circle.

Her recollections in a few sections of her life remain curiously skewed, leaving blanks that could have been vividly filled. Her journey to Mexico is centered on a group of expatriot, white women with whom she becomes involved, leaving us to imagine her perceptions of the rest of her Mexican experience. If the intensity of her relationships with these women did blur her memories of the land and its people I want to know that too, for that is as valid an emotional reaction as any other.

Lorde's command of images and language remains a powerful asset, yet occasionally she slips out of the voice she has established breaking the spell she has woven by using stock phrases ("the first rude awakening . . ." p. 65; "I wanted to wring her neck . . ." p. 232).

Still, this odyssey accomplishes almost more than we could hope for. Lorde has succeeded where most women and many writers have not: she has exposed her roots while continuing to nurture their life. In doing so she has named herself before the rest of the world dares to do so. Her tale reveals the enduring traditions of women, their place in history and how they can see us through our journey: "It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home" (3).

THE SOUND OF ONE FORK by Minnie Bruce Pratt. Night Heron Press, PO Box 3103, West Durham Sta., Durham, NC 27705. 1981. 41 pp. $2.

One reason for my lasting attention to a good writer is her subjective, unstinting use of facts and fantasies of her life in her work and the ability to create a kinship between them and my own. Minnie Bruce Pratt is such a poet. In her short collection, *The Sound of One Fork*, she writes from within a distinctive experience of oneness with her world, the American South, and at the same time conveys her sense of estrangement from its pervasive tradition of separate and unequal.

Most of the work in this collection has a narrative quality which Pratt uses to weave the story of life among the women she knows. She vividly characterizes the familiar current of electricity that crackles between mothers and daughters ("My Mother Loves Women"); the ephemeral but lasting legacy of a grandmother ("Ora: At the Carter Wedding") and youthful affection ("My Cousin Anne"). It is her appreciation of this love between women as well as her attention to racism (for she is a white Southerner) that set her apart from this background.

Her title poem is a sensitive evocation of an older woman who regularly eats alone at home. Rather than an exploration of the sad isolation of old age the poet postulates her undeniable sisterhood with not just her neighbor but also with "the honeybee in the mouth of the purple lobelia" and the blue heron who comes at first light to feed on the minnows." (34)

> In the morning and the evening we are by ourselves,
> the woman next door and I. Sometimes we are afraid
> of the death in solitude and want someone
> else to live our lives. Still we persist.
> I open the drawer to get out the silverware. (34)

While other neighbors find no hope or beauty in such a life, Pratt sees in their active solitude a ritual of confirmation. She is a woman alone but does not accept the label "lonely woman."

In another poem, "Elbows," this same disavowal of convention is

expressed in a completely different style. Here Pratt shows a facility with broad humor in her terse response to the traditional admonition to rural women: "*Cover your arms. Don't let your elbows show.*"

if I thought
my skinny, sharp-boned
elbows
could secure you

I'd flap my arms
like a chicken
like a pea-fowl
like a guinea hen

when next I saw you
honey
I'd roll
up my sleeves and
sin
sin
sin. (30)

Pratt's rule flaunting is more than caprice: she is a lesbian in a small Southern town. Her existence is a political act that she does not deny. She is the "bearded lady . . . living like wisteria . . . while the neighbors murmur, how peculiar, how queer." ("Southern Gothic," 36) Still, Pratt does not angrily cast off the vast store of imagery that is indigenous to her Southern background. She adapts the rich oral and literary traditions to make them speak for her as in her description of the women who live by the banks of the Cahaba River:

In my town by the water
mothers, sisters, daughters
flow like the river
in the dry beds of men,
within crumbling limestome walls. (9)

"The Segregated Heart," the final poem in this collection is a glimpse into the root conflicts of sexism and racism that incite Pratt's poetry. In three sections she depicts the world as she knows it through the home she has shared. Her view of the wall that has been erected between the races has many facets. It is a structure whose history she knows and whose insidious nature she acknowledges:

I took my napkin from the silver ring that bore my name, my mother helped us to food while Laura who had cooked it went to sit in a chair in another room. My father always thanked her as we left the table. (37)

From behind the walls/fences/bars that were meant to protect, insulate or separate, Pratt is able to hear "the sounds made by those who

believed they had to stay while their hearts broke in every room in the house." (38) She moves away from the voices and attempts to break down the walls and put together the pieces of her life that will constitute a whole. But while she may "refuse the divisions" (41) of sex and race imposed on her, the rest of society does not. Everyday gratuitous violence is still done to women and to blacks; her mother and the black woman, Laura, who raised her "still live in the same and in different houses." (41)

Pratt refuses to ignore these voices of her past or be contained by the walls of custom or history. Her words, sometimes as bleak as a newscast, at other times dense with imagery, convey the suffocating nature of oppression. Her boldness is in speaking so dispassionately of these facts, thus saving them from being dismissed as liberal sentiment. Her wisdom is the knowledge that no break is easily mended.

She does not throw herself mindlessly into the breach, but moves thoughtfully and tentatively. Her work shows her to be willing to reach out and attempt to pull those many pieces together again.

CARROLL OLIVER

RADICAL FEMINISTS OF HETERODOXY: GREENWICH VILLAGE 1912-1940 by Judith Schwarz. New Victoria Publishers, Inc., distributed by The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, New York. 1982. 110 pp. $6.95.

The critical function of history is to make connections, to provide a framework for understanding continuity and change. The lesbian-feminist historian's work is particularly difficult in this regard because it involves rediscovering issues, events, and individuals that have not been previously regarded as important, and exploring and explaining their significance. Such work is necessarily subjective, based on what questions and perspectives the historian brings to her work.

In her short, lively study, *Heterodoxy*, author Judith Schwarz has uncovered vast amounts of information about the prominent women who joined the every-other-Saturday luncheon club. She has used her sources imaginatively to present an account of the organization's success and its members' achievements, rather than the controversy around and the contradictions within the group.

Founded in 1912 by ardent suffragist and feminist organizer Marie Jenney Howe, Heterodoxy became a meeting place for "unorthodox" women with widely divergent political views and personal perspectives ranging from:

> staunch members of the Democratic and Republican parties to Stella Corman Ballantine, anarchist sympathizer and Emma Goldman's niece; from admirers of Senator Robert La Follette's Progressive Party such as his daughter Folla La Follette, Marie Jenney Howe, Netha Roe and Zona Gale, to the socialists Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Rose Pastor Stokes (both of whom eventually became active Communists) and Katherine Anthony; and from the pacifist founder of the American Union Against Militarism, Crystal Eastman, to strong military advocates like Mary Logan Tucker of the Navy League and the pro-Wilson Daughters of the American Revolution . . .

and

> conventionally married heterosexual women (several of whom kept their maiden names after marriage), through scandalously divorced members and free-love advocates, to a rather large number of never married women,

> several of whom were lesbians involved in long-term relationships with each other or non-Heterodoxy women. (1)

Relying heavily on the "Heterodoxy to Marie" autograph/photo album given to Howe in 1920 and an array of other primary and secondary sources, Schwarz has created an intriguing collage of handsome pictures, cartoons, quotes and narrative that describes members' love and respect for the Club and for Howe, their charismatic chairwoman. Most Heterodoxy women were highly educated and financially secure. While the Club was almost all white (Grace Nail Johnson was its only Black member), it was not all "WASPish" (*i*). Heterodites prided themselves on their non-cohesive nature. They were "women who did things" (41) and their professional achievements are indeed impressive. *Heterodoxy* offers a great deal of information about members' professional and personal lives. Members apparently cherished the friendships that developed through the Club, which provided political stimulation and emotional support. Heterodoxy members were evidently highly mobile, travelling throughout the world; Schwarz' use of their correspondence effectively documents the women's concern for each other.

Schwarz depicts their meetings as freewheeling political discussions infused with humor and sensitivity. Members often gave "background talks" on their early lives and shared their values and beliefs. Meetings also

> served as an informal but valuable news source about battles for women's rights and political issues wherever they were being fought. Helen Keller, Margaret Sanger, Amy Lowell, Emma Goldman, Finnish peace advocate Mrs. Malmberg and other non-members spoke to the group. Members and non-members alike addressed Heterodoxy on national and international issues such as pacifism, birth control, the Russian Revolution as seen first hand by Heterodoxy women, health issues, infant mortality, anarchism as a political tool, education of women, Black civil rights, disabled women, the Irish internal conflict over an independent Ireland, free love and changing sexual mores. (14-15)

The controversial content of Heterodoxy meetings was kept strictly off the record, enabling members to express their views without fear of scandal.

Schwarz has been able to uncover only three descriptions of actual meetings and admits that some readers may wonder "what all the fuss is about." However between 1917 and 1920,

> the American Government certainly thought these women were worth making a fuss . . . the entire Club . . . [was] followed to meetings by government agents, some of the women . . . [were] accused of spying and

> being traitors, Marie Jenney Howe . . . [was] arrested . . . and several other Heterodoxy members . . . [were] beaten in front of the White House and forced to endure prison terms for daring to question President Woodrow Wilson's anti-suffrage policies. (18)

Although she does not comment here, Schwarz later states, "It would be reasonable to believe that someone in the government found these women troublesome enough to follow around and persecute" (37). By not placing Heterodoxy within a larger political and historical framework, that statement seems to distort both the women's actual experience as targets of government harrassment and the reality of the U.S. government's attempts to disrupt dissident organizing activity. During the Wilson administration, the nearly hysterical fear of radicals that swept the country resulted in the passage of such dangerously vague legislation as the 1917 Espionage Act (under which Heterodoxy member Rose Pastor Stokes was sentenced to ten years).

Although such action on the part of the government would seem to have raised a number of conflicts and tensions among Heterodoxy women, Schwarz maintains that the only conflict that occurred within the Club was a "split over the question of pacifism versus involvement in war preparation" which became "*the* decisive issue in Heterodoxy" (32) and caused former Socialist sympathizers Rheta Childe Dorr and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to resign from the Club when their demand that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Rose Pastor Stokes be expelled for their "unamerican" politics was refused. Flynn later "recalled 'a few superpatriots were shocked at the anti-war sentiments expressed at our meetings. They demanded the expulsion of Rose Pastor Stokes and myself after we had been arrested. When the Club refused, they resigned'" (33-34).

Did this "unpleasant" incident force Heterodites to shy away from internal confrontation? Schwarz evidently accepts Flynn's recollection at face value. Since memory is so selective, especially around issues that are painful or unpleasant, it would have been helpful for Schwarz to explore the possibility of further conflict between women with such diverse politics and personalities. In addition to not analyzing the effect of the attempted purge of radicals in the organization, Schwarz does not explore important dynamics regarding class, race, and ethnicity.

Schwarz writes: "Feminism was the one belief that united every member." This feminism is defined in the words of Heterodite Rose Young as meaning, "that woman wants to develop her own womanhood. It means that she wants to push on to the finest, fullest, freest expression of herself. She wants to be an individual . . ." (21). This definition re-

flects a class perspective that *Heterodoxy* does not address. While the Club may have allowed its members to express their individuality and experience a sense of freedom in a woman-centered environment that could be considered in some ways radical, the fact remains that Heterodoxy was an every-other-Saturday luncheon club primarily for mobile, affluent women who had the leisure time to ponder their individualism and self-expression.

Schwarz does not raise questions about the women's class alliances, that might have clarified some of their later political positions. She writes:

> The decade of the 1920s was a relatively quiet one for Heterodoxy members in the political sense. After winning the vote, they left the battlefield to the younger, more eager women in the social reform ranks, being content to mainly offer their writing talents, their names and their money to various causes that continued to spring up. Some of the women worked quietly on as volunteers for the League of Women Voters or for peace but the only Heterodoxy members who continued to fight conspicuously for political change were the remaining Socialists who were now moving into the Communist Party, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Rose Pastor Stokes and Ruth Hale constantly appear in newspaper accounts of the 1920s and 1930s. (38)

It would have been helpful for Schwarz to discuss this point further or to raise questions about Heterodoxy's shift. Why did the majority retreat from the arena of social reform after their primary goal had been attained? Had they lost interest in political activism? Were they fearful of continued government surveillance? Were they swept up in the artistic movements of the 1920s and their careers? Was this shift simply a reflection of the limitations of reform-oriented politics?

It is clear that at least one other Heterodoxy member remained politically active in the 1920s, 1930s and beyond. Grace Nail Johnson was also a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The extremely light-skinned daughter of a very wealthy Harlem family, Grace Nail married James Weldon Johnson in 1910. Johnson was killed in a car accident in 1938 and Grace was seriously injured. After her recovery, her "political activism did not slow down, and her protest of racism in its various guises continued to be reported in the *New York Times;* for example when she resigned in protest from working with the American Women's Volunteer Services during World War II, charging 'unfair racial treatment' against AWVS in its organizational work in Harlem" (63).

Heterodoxy offers surprisingly little information about Grace Nail

Johnson's life. Who was she? What did she do? What was she like? What were her concerns? Again, Schwarz offers few clues. Has Grace Nail Johnson been lost? It seems hard to believe there is no other information about her, if only in her capacity as Mrs. James Weldon Johnson. I was surprised that Schwarz chose to document his participation in Marie Jenney Howe's memorial service following her death in 1934 as "one of the few male speakers" (63). Were there other Blacks? Why didn't Grace speak, since they were, according to Schwarz, close friends?

Moreover I was confused by Schwarz' failure to discuss what it meant for Grace to be Heterodoxy's only Black member. Why was she the only Black woman ever to join the Club? Certainly there were other affluent Black women in New York City who were highly educated during the period before the Depression. To what extent was Grace's very light skin an issue in all this? Did the Club ever seek out other Black women? What were its membership policies? Such questions become glaring in their absence.

Schwarz' avoidance of such political issues divorces Heterodoxy from the country as a whole. While she states, for example, "although there were many Jewish women in Heterodoxy, none of them attained the widespread fame and financial wealth that several of the WASP members did" (54), Schwarz does not explore the implications of this fact. Without discussing increasing anti-Semitism and racism—Ku Klux Klan membership, for instance, went from 100,00 to 4.5 million between 1920 and 1924—Schwarz does not adequately place the women of Heterodoxy within their historical era.

Schwarz' treatment of lesbians in Heterodoxy is romantic and affectionate. While she describes some of the difficulties involved in researching lesbian history, her discussion of several of the Club's couples begins to speak to the complications and contradictions involved in living a lesbian life in the 1920s and '30s. She goes to great lengths to describe how the lesbians in the Club were accepted by the heterosexual majority and how Heterodoxy never went through a lesbian/straight split. However, as with Grace Nail Johnson and the Club's Jewish members, I felt that I knew very little about why they were so acceptable to the other members.

Despite my reservations about *Heterodoxy* it is a provocative book that forces readers to question actively the material it presents. Reading *Heterodoxy* is challenging and often frustrating. But it provides much needed information about women whose lives are relevant to our current and future struggles.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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SHIRLEY GLUBKA, *b. 1942. Washington, D.C.* Spent most of her childhood years in Winona, Minnesota. Made her living by teaching nursing and counseling–with short stints as a factory and office worker. Currently working as a housecleaner and writing poetry, fiction, and journal material in Oregon City, Oregon.

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EVELYNN HAMMONDS, *b. 1953, Atlanta, Georgia.* Black, lesbian, feminist critic, theorist, and scientist living and writing in Boston. Just trying to keep all her selves together.

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JOYCE E. KAUFFMAN, *b. 1950, Boston, Massachusetts.* A working-class Jewish lesbian active in the women's and gay/lesbian movements for the past ten years. Has lived in Boston most of her life. Is a feminist therapist.

JEAN LANGFORD, *b. 1952, Northampton, Massachusetts.* Unemployed printer working as a gardener. Member of Tsunami Press, a lesbian-feminist publishing project at work on a political pamphlet series. Also "underfoot" (as Eudora Welty would say) in Seattle politics, though not as much as she was once. "Vacation" is her first piece of fiction.

CARROLL OLIVER, *b. 1957, Elizabeth, New Jersey.* Is trying to keep her life together.

STACY PIES, *b. 1956, Los Angeles.* Works and studies comparative literature in New York City.

LINDA POWELL, *b. 1952, Chicago, Illinois.* Black feminist critic, musician, and actor. *Rise and Fly,* her autobiographical exploration of the black mother-daughter connection, is one of her many works-in-progress.

PAULA ROSS, *b. 1947, Detroit, Michigan.* Co-director of Women's Voices Creative Writing Workshop. Lives in Berkeley, California. Former dance critic, television and newspaper reporter. Currently editing an anthology, *Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Lives.* "Telling" is her first published piece of fiction.

RIMA SHORE, *b. 1948, Paterson, New Jersey.* Will shortly be leaving the *Conditions* collective after seven years. She is at work on *The Informant,* a novel set in Brooklyn and Moscow.

CRIS SOUTH, *b. 1950, Charlotte, North Carolina.* Working-class, country dyke, a member of the *Feminary* collective. Seriously working on being a wild woman with no apologies.

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Small-press books by contributors to CONDITIONS: NINE *include:*

Dorothy Allison, *The Women Who Hate Me,* (Long Haul Press, P.O. Box 592, Van Brunt Station), 1983, 50 pp., $4.50 plus $1 p/h.

Cheryl Clarke, *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women,* (Distributed by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, P.O. Box 592, Van Brunt Station), 1982, 52 pp., $4.50 plus p/h.

Jean Langford, Katherine Hess, Kathy Ross, *Feminist First, Feminismo Primero:* an essay on lesbian separatism, (Tsunami Press, P.O. Box 22913, Seattle, Washington 98122), 1981, 107 pp., $3.00 plus $.65 p/h.

Work by contributors to CONDITIONS: NINE *is included in the following small-press anthologies and collections:*

Conditions: Five, the Black Women's Issue, Barbara Smith and Lorraine Bethel, eds. (Conditions, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 1979, 187 pp., $4.50. *Cheryl Clarke, Linda Powell.*

Dictionary of Native American Literature, Vol. 2, Jeffrey Huntsmen, ed. (New York, Greenwood Press), 1983. *Jo Carrillo.*

Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, Barbara Smith, ed. (Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, MA 02172), 1983, 409 pp., $10.95 plus $1 p/h. *Cheryl Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Linda Powell.*

Lesbian Fiction: An Anthology, Elly Bulkin, ed. (Persephone Press), 1981, 336 pp. $8.95 plus $1 p/h. *Dorothy Allison, Jo Carrillo, Jewelle Gomez.*

Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds. (Persephone Press), 1981, 336 pp., $10.95 plus $1 p/h. *Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke.*

This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. (Persephone Press), 1981, 261 pp., 8.95 plus $1 p/h. *Jo Carrillo, Cheryl Clarke.*

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

Paula Gunn Allen, *Shadow Country,* poetry (University of California Press, Los Angeles), 1982, 149 pp. $7.00.

Alliance Against Sexual Coercion, *Fighting Sexual Harassment,* (Alyson Publications, Boston), 1981, 92 pp., $3.95.

Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst MA 01004), 1982, 192 pp., $7.95.

Ann Bannon, *Women in the Shadows, Odd Girl Out, Journey to a Woman, Beebo Brinker* and *I Am a Woman* (Naiad Press, Inc., P.O. Box 10543, 1983 Tallahassee, FL. 32302), $3.95 each.

Sandy Boucher, *The Notebooks of Leni Clare and Other Short Stories* (The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, N.Y. 14886), 1982, 150 pp., $6.95.

Karen Brandow, et al., *No Bosses Here!* (Alyson Publications, Boston, MA), 1981, 120 pp., $4.95.

Doris Davenport, *eat thunder & drink rain,* poetry (D. Davenport, P.O. Box 20452, Los Angeles, CA 90006), 1982, 86 pp., $7.00.

Page duBois, *Centaurs & Amazons–Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being,* (University of Michigan Press), 1982, 161 pp., $8.95.

Elsa Gidlow, *Sapphic Songs* (Druid Heights Books, distributed by Naiad Press), 1982, 95 pp., $5.95.

Judy Grahn, *The Queen of Wands* (Crossing Press), 1982, 111 pp., $5.95.

Ruth Hall, et. al, *The Rapist Who Pays the Rent* (Falling Wall Press, Available from Rape Action Project, Box 94, Brighton, MA 02135), 1981, 64 pp.

Jo Harjo, *She Had Some Horses,* poetry (Thunder's Mouth Press, 242 West. 104 Street, N.Y., N.Y. 10025), 1983, 74 pp., $6.95.

Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia), 1982, 203 pp. (hardcover).

Eda Howink, *Wives of Famous Men,* prose poems, (The Golden Quill Press, Francestown, New Hampshire), 1982, 166 pp., $8.00.

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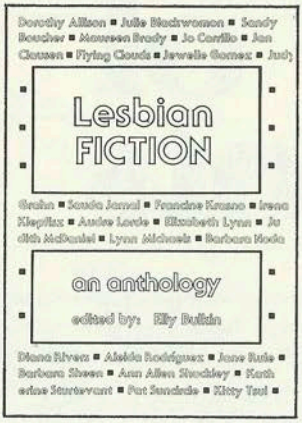

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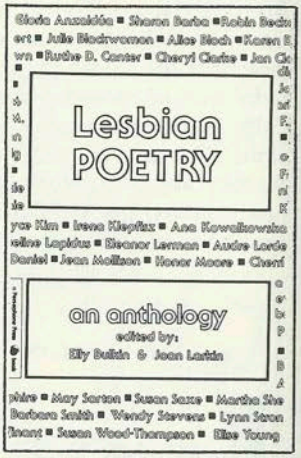

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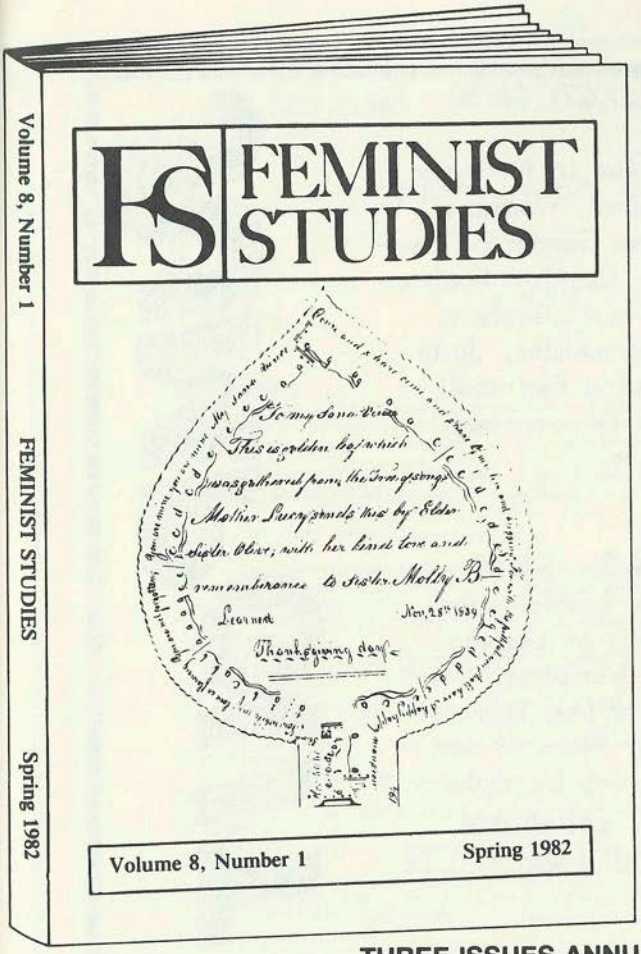

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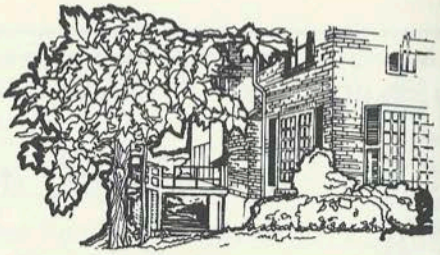

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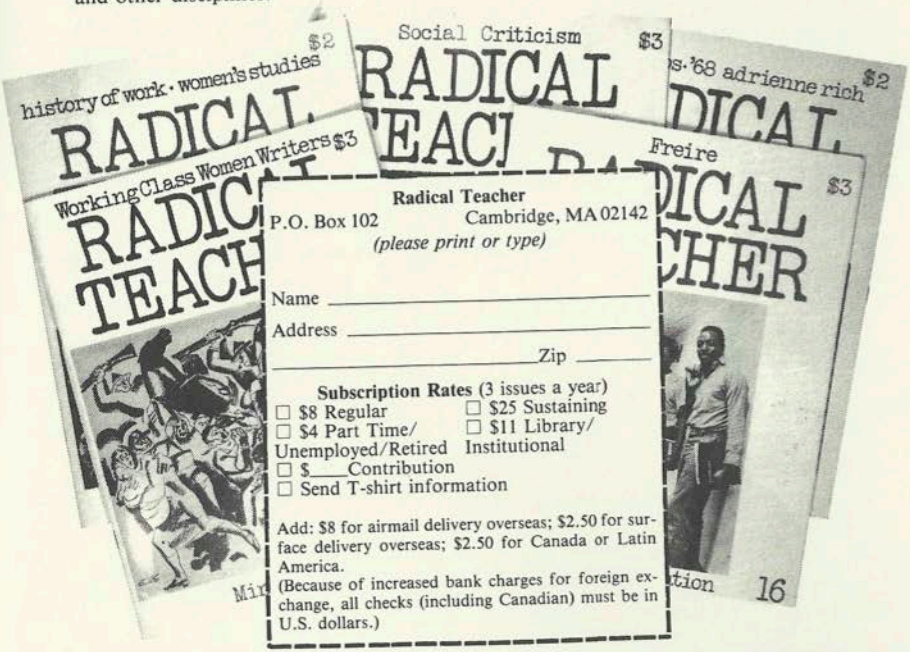

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