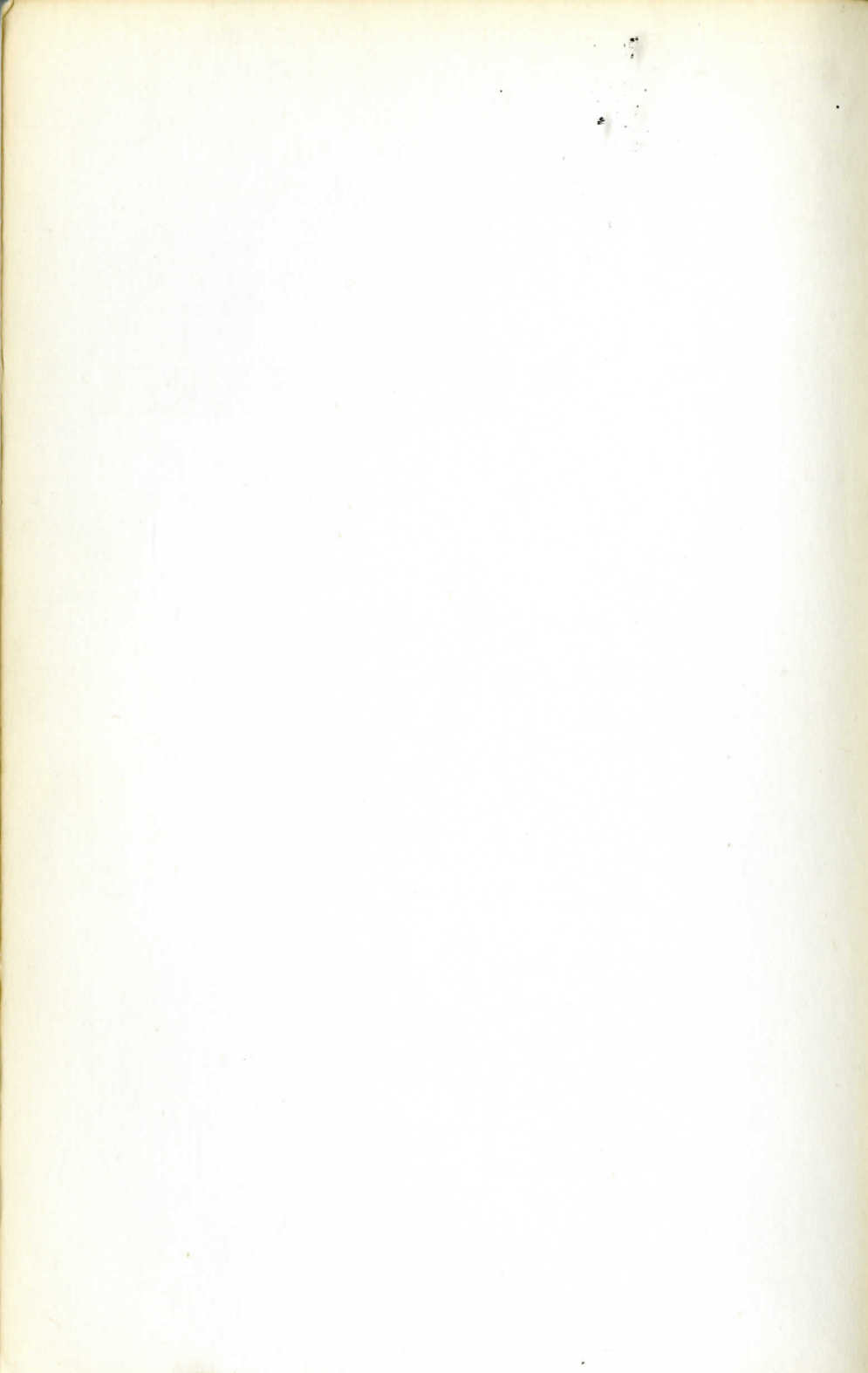


# conditions: three







# CONDITIONS: THREE

*a magazine of writing by women*

*with an emphasis on writing by lesbians*

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

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

*Because we do not proceed from a single conception of what Conditions should be, we feel it is especially important to receive critical and personal reactions to the writing we publish.*



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# CONDITIONS:THREE

Vol. I No. 3

Spring 1978

## POETRY

### ENID DAME

Vildeh Chaya	20
Giving Blood	22

### MARILYN KRYSL

Proscription	27
Memory	29
The Muse and Her Instrument	32
Tableau for Two Women	33

### BARBARA NODA

Strawberries	39
--------------	----

### AKUA LEZLI HOPE

"collect images like flowers"	42
Djamila	43

### NELLIE WONG

On the Crevices of Anger	52
--------------------------	----

### SHARON OLDS

The Return	86
Elizabeth, Before Adolescence	87

### MARILYN HACKER

Boulder: August 1977	88
Up From D.C.	89
Ordinary Women I	91

SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES	
"Music is my lover"	93
Bedford Hills is a Women's Prison	95
SUZANNE JUHASZ	
A Woman Like a Rock	96

## PROSE POEMS

MICHELLE CLIFF	
Obsolete Geography	44
KAREN BRODINE	
Making the Difference	50

## FICTION

FRANCINE KRASNO	
Celia	9
SALLY GEORGE	
Church Music	25
ALICE WALKER	
Petunias	41

## ESSAY

JANE RULE	
Homophobia and Romantic Love	34

## DRAMA

RIMA SHORE	
Life in America	62

## REVIEWS

BARBARA SMITH	
<i>Child of Myself</i> by Pat Parker; <i>Pit Stop</i> by	
Pat Parker; <i>The Poetry of Pat Parker and</i>	
<i>Judy Grabn: Where Would I Be Without You</i>	99



IRENA KLEPFISZ	
<i>The True Story of Ida Johnson</i>	
by Sharon Riis	104
ELLY BULKIN	
<i>She Who: A Graphic Book of Poems</i>	
by Judy Grahm	111
BERNICE MENNIS	
<i>Between Revolutions</i> by Enid Dame	117
LORRAINE BETHEL	
<i>Dogmoon</i> by Rikki Lights	121
SUSAN GOLDBERG	
<i>Making The Park</i> by Karen Brodine,	
Patricia Dienstfrey, Marina La Palma,	
Laura Moriarty, and Rena Rosenwasser	130
JAN CLAUSEN	
<i>Women on the Breadlines, Harvest, Song</i>	
<i>for My Time, Rites of Ancient Ripening</i>	
by Meridel LeSueur	136
Publications Received	148
Contributors' Notes	151



## FRANCINE KRASNO

### CELIA

*The woman/I needed to call my mother/  
was silenced before I was born.*

Adrienne Rich, "Re-forming the Crystal"

*Stories are told to you as a young child, some you remember, some stand out in your mind, and if I had heard them recently, there most likely was much more that had been told to me. But don't forget, as I said, grandpa's dead twenty-one years. You forget. It's frightening because these things when they're told to you, you feel—you want—it should go on and on, it should be remembered, and you don't. You have no one to talk to, family is gone, and you become involved in your own family, and you forget.*

My mother and I are sitting in her living room, an uneasy distance between us; she sits at one end of the couch, I am at the other end, and between us is a tape recorder on a pillow of its own. "Just talk about grandma, how she came over here, where she lived; whatever you want. You'll forget about the tape recorder in five minutes." She begins eagerly. She does not have many friends to talk to. I am nervous because we do not talk easily to each other. It is a kind of miracle that we talk at all. There is the memory of her screaming at me two years ago, "You are not part of this family, you are *not* . . ." The tears, the old hatred flaring up, stunning me with its ferocity. But this time I told her I would not come home again. And she listened and apologized, saying over a long distance phone call that I "made everyone in the family tense." "But what about how you make me feel?" I asked. She didn't answer. Two months later she had a cancerous breast removed; I have been home twice to see her, but we have not talked about that phone call since.

I feel guilty extracting this family history from her. How can I explain—she has failed herself—and so I want to hear stories of my grandmother and greatgrandmother. I want to know what they have done so I will know what is possible for myself.

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My greatest fear has been that I would grow to be like my mother: passive, discontented, confined. I want to know if there has been a time in her life when she was not all of these things. I want to find something to like in her. Which will be something to like in myself. Perhaps in my maternal history there is one story that is my own.

*Let's first start with the story she used to tell about being in Europe. She tells of her father.*

He came from a petit bourgeois family in Galicia, a province bordering Poland and Hungary. He was a musician by trade, but after immigrating to America in 1900, became a furrier on New York's East Side. He came himself; it was understood that he would send for his wife and children within the year.

*Her mother. . . ? Her mother was a very strong and. . . a real matriarch, definitely. But what she did, I really don't know.*

After a few months, his letters stopped coming. Nothing. It seemed that he had been swallowed up whole in America. My greatgrandmother wrote, waited, perhaps sent an ad to the "Gallery of Missing Husbands" in the *Jewish Daily Forward*:

"Selma Steltzer is searching for her husband,  
28 years old, slight build, medium height, blue  
eyes, black hair. Left me one year ago. I offer  
25\$ to anyone who will notify me of his where-  
abouts."

Nothing. When Selma fears that he has deserted them, she resolves to come and find him. Buys tickets for herself and her two youngest, the infants. She leaves my grandmother, who is eleven, and the next oldest boy, who is deaf, with an aunt and uncle until she can send for them.

He has abandoned them; he has taken up with another woman; he wants nothing of his old life. Selma's brother gives her some money, finds her a place to live. She may have applied to the United Hebrew Charities for relief. *What she did, I really don't know.* In some way, she survives. The story of her anguish is lost. But it is possible to imagine her shame, with what numbness she began a new life. Living with the babies in airless rooms; taking in boarders; learning "finishing" work from her brother who gives her an old sewing machine so she can work at home. She cooks and cleans. Ventures into the street to shop, learning to breathe the sunless air, learning to find the cheapest, fattest piece of

meat. Numbness dissolving into a fierce determination to feed and clothe herself and the babies. The rhythmic clack of the treadle on the linoleum floor. Selma sews, nurses a baby to quiet her, dishes out soup for a boarder, forgetting to eat herself, there is no time. She pedals away her anguish, her sexual longing for the one who has abandoned her, her youth. She will never remarry.

*The story grandma tells is that three times she came to Ellis Island. Twice they were turned back. Part of it was that he was deaf. They wouldn't let him in, and there were also problems with their eyes.*

Three times my grandmother, Fanny, came to Ellis Island. Selma sent them tickets and instructions. Two children, traveling alone, across the German border to the major port, Hamburg, for embarkation. Inspection at the dock. Their baggage is taken from them. Fanny's brother, Ben, is separated from her. She is terrified she will lose him. People in white coats yelling, "Halt!" "Line up!" "Quick." He cannot hear. Where is he? They are undressed. Rubbed with disinfectant. Showered.

Two weeks' imprisonment in Hamburg in quarantine. Two children among hundreds of immigrants behind a brick wall. On the other side of the wall, the Atlantic. The sound of the vast water filling their dreams with blue pockets of terror.

Two children. There are one or two days after quarantine before embarking and she must find them a room in a hostel, keep her eye on their baggage, steer them past this man, who is a thief, past that one, who is a white slaver. To America. To Mama. Papa. Who has abandoned her.

On board. Packed into steerage. She has never known anything like this. The closeness, the stench, the sickness. The food is *treyf*,\* it makes her nauseous anyway, it is so bad. The sight of other children with their mothers makes her homesick. Galicia. America is nothing. Just Mama's face and body moving about in strange rooms. Ben is crying, he is thirsty; he cannot speak. She hugs him next to her, wrapping him in her coat; they sleep.

After eight days, there is a cry in the morning, "Ellis Island!" Magic words. Bodies move, sloughing off weariness. Get ready. Get our things together. She pushes him a little too roughly. Alert now,

---

\**treyf*- unkosher, defiled



tense. Someone from the crew chalks letters and numbers on their coats. Come come quick!

Herded off the boat, almost running onto the Customs Wharf. She grips his hand, careful not to lose him, as they move slowly in a long line. There, up ahead of them, a doctor. What? She must let him go. All children over two years must walk alone. A doctor pulls a girl out of line, runs his hand down her spine, puts her behind a wire cage, writes something on her coat. She does not understand. Her stomach sinks. She cannot see him. There, someone in a white coat is talking to him. What is he asking? He cannot hear. He cannot hear. The inspector steers him into a cage. She has not counted on this. She pushes her way through the line to him, trying to talk to the inspector in her schoolgirl English. An interpreter from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society explains that they have picked her brother out because he is deaf. The Society can negotiate with the officials for some immigrants, but with deaf and dumb, it is hopeless.

She cries. It is not the cry of an eleven year old but sounds strangely like that of an old woman. Ageless grief. Her mother and uncle are found by Immigrant Aid and brought to her. There are hurried, tearful instructions from Selma: she will go back to Galicia with him; there is nothing else to do. When she gets the money, she will send tickets, and they will try a second time.

The second ordeal in steerage. Back with the aunt and uncle, they wait. The third voyage. Again, the lines, quarantine, seasickness. She cannot bear the anguish of another rejection; she instructs her brother how to avoid the inspector's questions. She is terrified that they will remember his face. At Ellis Island, she pulls his cap low, keeps close to him. He is pulled aside. Impossible.

Back to Galicia. She does not know what will happen to them. Desperate letters to her mother. It is two years now since they have lived together. In that time, she has mothered herself and her brother. Now she wants her mother back. She waits. Then, instructions from America: leave him. Leave him? This is the greatest agony. She has no choice. At age thirteen, she makes her final voyage.

*She had to leave him there with the aunt and uncle. He died young. She was notified of his death when our Uncle Joe was Bar Mitzvahed.\**

---

\*Bar Mitzvah- the ceremony celebrating a boy beginning his thirteenth year, the age of religious duty and responsibility.



America. Nothing had prepared her for this ugliness. Sunless air; grey tenement brick; the din of busses, trollies, peddlers, drays, and refuse carts. The windowless bedroom. Mama sewing in the kitchen. The boarders in the parlor. She is ashamed of their poverty, but this is how everyone lives here. She at once determines to work her way out of this nightmare. She will not waste her years bent over a sewing machine like Mama. She will go to school, perfect her English, work in the summers, and save.

She does everything Selma does: sews, cooks, feeds the babies, shops, learns her way among the pushcarts in the streets. And another thing Mama cannot do: translates English words into Yiddish for her uncle's family. She reads her schoolbooks aloud after supper, entertaining her sister and brother with stories about Canadian Indians and cowboys. She lapses into Yiddish to explain the complexities of public school; to marvel at an old peddler who collapsed on the street; to tell how it felt to ride a trolley for the first time. America. In the summer, she applies for working papers and gets a job as a feller in a glove factory. There are long hours in an unventilated room. The grimy walls and floors, the high temperature and bad light, make her sick. She gets another job the next summer as a finisher in a factory. At least this one is not filled with the stench from the water closet. The wage is a little better, 8\$ a week. At the end of the day, she is exhausted. Once, walking home in the dark, a figure comes up behind her, grabs at her purse, whispers something obscene in her ear; from then on, she works the day shift.

She wants her privacy now. Her body is growing, developing, and she is ashamed around the male boarders. She escapes from the house with her friends to a lecture or a coffee parlor. But Mama warns her not to waste too much time playing. Mama doesn't know what fun is. Someday, she tells her, she'll have her own shop with her husband's name on the door. Uptown.

She works and dreams. On hot evenings, when the air is insufferably close, she goes up to the roof, standing in the great shadows thrown from the sheets on the lines; hundreds of sheets, clothes, hundreds of lines stretching from tenement to tenement. It is cool up here, the stench from the street is not so strong. She looks silently at this America, grey stone world. She has no dreams that are not of escape.

*She always felt superior to grandpa.*

He emigrated from Russia in 1906 to escape the pogroms. He was

a tailor, like his father, and went to work in a garment factory in New York, boarding in different tenements, until he found the Galitz family. They were good people, a mother and her children, the place was clean, and there was Fanny. He married my grandmother when she was eighteen and he was twenty. They moved from the East Side to Brooklyn where their first child, my Aunt Sadie, was born.

*We had difficulty in his becoming a citizen because you had to be able to write your name in English, and grandma always felt how superior she was to him because she could read and write. He made the attempt. He was a very bright man, but found it difficult to—at that age—of course, he was much older because I was born already when he went to school to try to learn English. And he was able to write some and read some, but he did not have that education as a young boy. He had strong feelings of the union. He talked of the fights that would occur when they were trying to be unionized and all. . . Grandma was one who believed that one should have their own business and this was a sign of status. They didn't have the money for him to start. He was somewhat of a fearful person. To take a chance, he didn't want to, and—he worked for others. He would work in small shops. His work was very seasonal. You would work like three months, and three months you didn't. Three months you did, and three months you didn't. . . He would go from one to the other. Towards the end, he had worked himself up into a factory that had a name—it was Carmel—and to work for them, that was quite an honor. . . He was called a cloak operator. He was really quite a craftsman. I mean, you would see that when he would do work for us. . . He was a quiet person. When he got angry, he had a terrible temper, it was as though everything was in and then when he let it out it was ab. . . it all came out. But the relationship between grandma and grandpa. . . well, she felt that she was superior to him. And it was not so. As years went on, my feeling was one of resentment, because this was a man who was never really—she didn't give him credit for what he was.*

But what happened to my grandmother's dream of owning a shop? To her determination when she could not go out and work for herself? In America, some wives simply did not work, and there were babies and the cooking and house to take care of. She pestered and badgered him to invest in a business. And when he failed her, turned to her son. He would be a teacher, equal in status to a shopowner. Terrible fights followed. He wanted to be a doctor. Grandpa was not set on an education; he wanted his son to go to work and learn a trade.



My mother and her sister were spared grandma's meddling—it was assumed that they would marry and take on the roles of wife and mother. But there were other problems, disappointments, failures. *My feeling was of resentment. . . she didn't give him credit for what he was.* For what *she* was: intelligent, sensitive, painfully shy. *A fearful person.* A frightened child. Forgotten by grandma in her ambition for her son, "the teacher." And my mother learns this lesson: how painful it is not to be seen. To be invisible, because of what one is, or is not.

*In her mind, the most important thing was to be your own boss. She blamed grandpa the most because she didn't feel he was a strong enough character. Owning your own business. This was very important to her. And this she did not achieve in life.*

My mother married the man my grandmother should have chosen, an ambitious student in graduate school whose dream was to be looked up to as a professional. They moved from New York to a small Catholic, working-class city in Pennsylvania, where he began his career as a clinical psychologist. She began her work as mother and housekeeper. She was shy and imprisoned with two babies. During the first year in the new house, she had fantasies of drowning her two children "like kittens." She grew lonely and bored.

My earliest memories are of her watching helplessly as my father spanked me for dancing around the kitchen table. She yelled at us during the day when he was gone, losing her temper easily, reducing us to tears. But there are other, happier memories. She liked to get us together on Friday nights to light the *shabes*\* candles. My father would rush in from work and take his *yarmulke*\*\* from the drawer; she gave us kleenex to cover our heads and put one on her own. She would light the two white candles and say the *brokhe*\*\*\* moving her hands in fluid oval shapes over the flames.

Her hands were slender, with long fingers the color of the ivory keys on the piano she sometimes played.

I liked to say her name slowly. Celia. Rolling out the first syllable, letting my tongue effortlessly somersault around the 'l,' tickling the roof of my mouth, coming down neatly on the 'a.'

---

\**shabes*- the Sabbath

\*\**yarmulke*- skullcap

\*\*\**brokhe*- blessing

Celia.

In a photograph I have of her then, she is tall and thin, dressed in a stylish black dress. She is standing behind and a little to one side of grandma, smiling at the camera. Her arm is bent so that her hand is hidden behind grandma's hip, as if she were holding on to her in a tentative, childish way.

Two years after this photograph was taken, my grandfather died. Grandma came to live with us because my mother thought she would die of depression if she were left alone.

*Her next five years were a gift. As the years went on she became younger rather than older. . .*

She did what she had always planned to do with grandpa: traveled to Florida; mixed with people; joined Leisure Lounge, an organization for old women, and within two years she was elected president. The Council of Jewish Women chose her as the Outstanding Senior Citizen for that year. She flowered, and became younger.

*The cancer was all over her body. It had spread to her brain.*

There were times when she was quarrelsome and short-tempered, when she thought my mother might be stealing her clothes. Then she had her first seizure: rolling eyes, projectile vomiting, blackout.

*Grandma doesn't feel well.*

The doctor diagnoses stomach flu. Her food tastes bitter. Another doctor pronounces my grandmother is "depressed." My mother is a "meddling fool" because she is the only one who has seen the seizure and no one believes anything is seriously wrong. My mother begins to doubt her perception: it might not have been a real seizure; the doctors must know. Yet she is sure grandma's hearing is going. And it's clear, if you spend any time with her at all, that her thinking isn't right. She is paranoid, she is. . . no one sees it but my mother. Does she wish she were dying? But that is—impossible.

*I had been pestering him constantly about—for the past year things had been getting from bad to worse and they were ignoring me. . . they didn't want to understand. This woman was not in her full mind. She didn't know what she was doing. . . She'd go into comas and you'd feel any day—and, of course, I felt a responsibility to Uncle Joe and Aunt*



*Sadie. You'd call them and—well, should they, shouldn't they come. . . I couldn't predict. . . They would come during those six months and visit me and say, "Oh, she's looking better," "she looks fine." And here she had just come out of a coma. The situation was so bad—I was made to feel guilty. . . I was looking upon her as she's dying and they were looking upon her as living . . . how dare I have such thoughts. . .*

Grandma fell in the hospital and developed an aneurysm on her brain. When they operated, they found cancer all over her body. My parents took her home to die.

*For the six months she was completely in a world—of her childhood, I guess. She looked upon me. . . it was as though you were—you know, things that you imagine in childhood, frightening things in childhood, these seem to have been the things that came out. The fact that her food was being poisoned. And this I will never forget: Aunt Sadie coming to visit and listening, Grandma would tell her all these stories, and then she'd come out and say, "You know, it's very hard not to believe her." It was a horrible six months. It left me sick for ten years, really. It took me that long to get it all out of my system and, at times, it all comes back.*

Thus began my mother's own long journey out of guilt and depression. I have a photograph of her taken a few years after grandma died. She is standing alone on the back porch, in a shirtwaist she has outgrown; her skin looks puffy and she is frowning at the camera. Lines of discontent and anger are set into her face.

My beautiful, slender, smiling mother had vanished.

I blamed myself for her unhappiness. I pretended to ignore her compulsive eating, the distant look she got in her eyes as she stuffed pieces of cake into her mouth, as if she were trying to ignore herself. She refused to clean the house, cooked for us grudgingly. Exploded in anger when my sister or I touched some hidden grievance. I remember meals when I choked on resentment, eating her misery. And it was always the same anger; there was no cleansing torrent of words. My monster mother. I longed for a perfect TV Donna Reed mother who handed her children bagged lunches as she kissed them good-bye and waved them out the door. My mother stormed out of the kitchen after supper and left my father to clean up and wash the dishes in silence.

It was impossible for me to love her then.

I was terrified that I had inherited her misery. She became very



overweight, a near recluse. I was ashamed of her and rarely brought friends home from school.

As my body developed, I listened to her silences as if they were clearly spoken warnings. What do you suppose mothers tell their daughters? It is the words that are not spoken that we listen most closely to. My mother never told me, "When you have children, you'll see. . ." or "When you're married you'll understand." I learned through her silence what was possible for myself.

When I left home to go to college, the list of activities forbidden by her grew longer: I was not to date gentile boys, I was not to go to political demonstrations, I was not to move off-campus, I was not. . . and yet, in some passive ways, she was *for* me. I was not happy in school. She tried to convince my father, who forbade me to drop out, that it might be good for me to work for awhile; but she gave in to his fear that "I would never go back." And another time, commiserating with me when I explained how shy and awkward I felt around other people, saying in intimate letters that yes, she too had felt shy and awkward at my age. She did not have any advice to give. I was old enough now to experience the pain for myself.

She was for me but could not help me. I turned away from her as I would hide an ugly photograph of myself.

I went to the political demonstrations; moved off-campus; made a new life, slowly, as an oyster would construct a pearl around a pin point of pain.

As I grew older and learned to love myself, I could let myself love her. A little.

She is talking to me now, my mother, as if we were old friends, bringing her story up to date, complaining about my father who has heart trouble and will not cut down on his work load. *She* has to do *his* worrying for him. He is like a sponge, taking, taking, taking. She is afraid he will drop dead and then who will she have to live out her years with? She should *do* something. What? Leave him? Who will support her? Trapped. And it is too late. I see that now.

It is depressing sitting with her in this room. This is the living room she has always wanted. We are surrounded by expensive furniture, an oriental rug, cut glass figures on polished wood. I look at her on the couch: she does not seem so much like a monster now. Her face is pale because she is on chemotherapy and cannot expose her skin to the sun.

Her hair has fallen out but is growing back a beautiful snow white. She sits wigless in a cotton bathrobe, rubbing the sweat from her palms onto her robe.

"Well, do you have enough?" she asks, looking at the tape recorder.

"Yes, yes, thank you." But there is not one story that I can carry away with me like a favorite stone. There are long journeys and suffering, qualities of endurance and determination. An unbroken thread. Then there are the snags, the life stopped behind a sewing machine, smothered ambitions, hopeless complaints in a sterile ghost room. A mixed birthright.

"Francine," my mother says, "I just want to say one more thing." She pauses and looks away from me. "I don't want you to feel that you're going to get cancer. You know you have it on both sides of the family. I think—and some people might think this is crazy—I think you can make yourself sick. After grandma died, I was waiting for the day when I would get it. I was believing in it. This doesn't have to happen to you."

And I tell her that I understand.

## ENID DAME

### VILDEH CHAYA

*"The day before her hairdresser appointment, my mother says: 'By now I must look like a Vildeh Chaya.' Neither of us knows that this Yiddish phrase means 'Wild animal' (or beast). I imagine it is the name of a woman. I imagine her in various incarnations."*

1.

Vildeh Chaya  
in the woods on the edge  
of the shtetl she hides  
mud-splattered dress torn  
barefoot she won't  
peel potatoes get married  
cut her hair off have children  
keep the milk dishes  
separate  
from the meat dishes.

Instead, she  
climbs trees talks to animals  
naked sings half-crazy  
songs to the moon.

2.

Vildeh Chaya  
in New York  
in the sexual sixties  
lives in a tenement  
toilet in hall  
wall posters cats dirty sheets

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learns to say "Fuck"  
sleeps with men she meets  
at peace demonstrations.

Later, she  
cuts off her hair  
sleeps with women  
writes poetry.

3.

Vildeh Chaya  
in the suburbs lives alone  
on Social Security  
afraid of  
her floor-length drapes  
her glass-topped tables  
the color television

her daughter's married  
an Orthodox Jew  
her son's hitch-hiked  
off the edge of the world

she hides when the mailman knocks  
keeps missing hairdresser appointments

at night, she creeps  
around the development  
avoiding swimming pools the glare  
of headlights

she's starting to worry  
she's starting to  
like her smells.

## GIVING BLOOD

1.

The radios call it a crisis:  
blood banks  
less than half full,  
inaccessible city  
walloped by ice storms.

So  
in spite of  
my fear of needles and cold,  
I rise, displaced radical,  
to the bait.

The other donors  
are pink-cheeked, healthy  
lawyers and skiers:  
three-piece suits, tailored jeans.  
I've seen them before  
in glossy magazines  
sipping drinks in  
snowy villages  
with unpronounceable names.

People  
who've never doubted  
they have something  
to give away.

My sweater sleeve's  
unravelling.  
One button's missing.  
I bite my nails. This  
is a mistake.

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2.

Two hours later,  
the nurse  
rattles a stack of papers,  
reads me a litany  
of disasters:  
jaundice malaria abortion.  
Have I met up with one  
in the last six months?  
No? Good.

she says, and jabs  
a needle in my finger.

3.

Smug and complacent  
as a woman baking bread  
or giving birth,  
I lie on the padded table.  
My blood  
rocks gently beside me  
filling its plastic bag  
neatly as frozen spinach.  
It does not clot. Or leak.  
I'm proud of it.

Three women technicians  
snip us apart  
bend over my packaged blood,  
tending it like a child  
spilling the excess  
into the proper tubes,  
and finally wheel it away  
to another life.

I sip  
a slow cup of tea  
and float back to Brooklyn  
ecstatically  
one pound lighter.

## SALLY GEORGE

### CHURCH MUSIC

I have begun an affair with a woman who wants to be a priest. She is interested in the liturgy, and the music. When I am at her house I am soothed and comforted, because it is not like any house I have lived in; and she is attentive and flatters me in believable ways. When she touches me with her friendly hands it is very quiet and we make love surrounded by fabric; on the bed, on the window, there are drapes, and it reminds me of church, though I have scarcely ever been to one.

The woman, Natalie, tells me how her vocation grew. She was originally interested in swing, and then Dizzy Gillespie. Her family was religious. She studied music and went to church, and the two came together for her. She likes the history of the different liturgies, and is majoring in this at the seminary. But what she really loves is the music, and the church she goes to has the best music in the city.

I tell Natalie about my last lover. Mainly the bad parts, of course. How we do not speak any more, and I am sure it is better. How we held each other so tight, and could not breathe, and could not move, as if something had broken and we were waiting for it to heal. But I do not tell about the house.

My last lover's apartment was cold. We huddled under an ice-blue bedspread, a feeble current in the pillowed blanket guarding us from the draft, and we dreamed ourselves a house on a quiet street where it was warm. Onions grew on a tree in the back yard. Birds squawked from the balcony and pets curled in the misty corners where we never looked. We never spoke of the house but when we made love we met there and each time things were different; and we had music but it was discordant. Often it mingled with smells and voices: garlic and lilies and drums.

We made love in that place until last spring it grew rank and unsightly; screaming and holding out wounds we left it, blaming each other for the ruin. When I make love with Natalie we have no house, only the quiet ceremony covering our lust. Later she plays her thick music which never melts into dreams. Sometimes I look at her and I wonder where she goes; we don't meet. We counterpoint; we harmonize; we keep time. We arrive at different destinations bearing gifts for

different people.

We bring each other no suffering; nothing is healing. Our fingers flow courteously on the flesh, never close with bone. We are glad: this music will never spill over, tainted with memory, speaking in tongues.

# MARILYN KRYSL

## PROSCRIPTION

beasts    Bring me beasts  
mutilated, from which a member  
    has been cut off                      Bring beasts  
Lay them in heaps  
    across the white  
stone                      My back is

winged    Bring me wolves  
gray wolves at evening                      At  
evening they shall sleep  
at my feet                      And at my  
winged back they shall  
lie still at dawn

at dawn Bring lion cubs  
and bear Bring furred beasts  
richly crowned Bring these  
to me Bird's feet  
are mine, my back  
is winged Bring these

to stone            and bring brown hares  
and white hares        where owls  
         close their eyes        Bring these  
         to me, to stone  
         Lay them  
         across my white

breast                      And bring  
bull's thigh, and thigh        Bring  
of hippopotamus  
elephant                      and tender gazelle  
to my mouth        For I am



winged            I am winged woman  
of beasts        from which, from  
                  which fleet leopards  
                  spring        from which  
                  grain, and the son  
                  rise again        For I am

winged            Therefore bring  
dog and pig, and lay these  
                  beasts, prone, bled,  
                  on white stone where I may  
                  see them, from which  
                  stone I stand

and mount the standing lion's back

## MEMORY

Climbing this long grass, I remember  
your hair. As though you're  
here. Of course you're

not, and years  
have passed, of course, and I'm  
archaic, and some would say  
sick. *Forget,*

they say, the past's  
inefficient, out of date, frowned on, modern forbidden  
fruit. NOW BE PRESENT

and empty, enjoy  
the tedious traffic, admire the evening news,  
put ketchup on it, dress  
chic for it, swear to be  
faithful to it. The past is

worse than lust  
once was. Me, I'm a  
junkie, hooked on this heady  
going back. I want to get  
happy, climbing into the drug, memory, the past  
a bright future around me, warm inside  
my deliberate sin. It looks like  
Dali, here nothing has utility, and memory

stings. And I choose to be  
stung, stung as the queen by the drone, who then dies,  
leaving her

remembering. Dazed, she carries her honeyed  
belly home, as I climb, dazzled  
by this quivering stinger, stoned  
on this high zinging in the good blood,  
remembering, years later, you here,

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hair

spread on this hill.

I did not try then

to resist the animal snout

of my own desire. Demeter

sister, laid back

on the earth, as I chose

to climb you in my shimmering toga

of heat, I choose now

not to forget it, I now choose

to refuse to agree to keep my fingers

out of this sticky sweet, to make myself

over, to become their perfect

society. No. I will indulge

the rhinoceros horn

of memory,

as I mount now, golden

and slippery, in the lamé and sequins

of my own sweat and delight. They'll have to get

used to it, get used to my salt

wet, my oils and my vinegars, the fragrant

stink of my sweat, my lost keys, my blank

look, this gluttony for the gorgeous body

of thought—

all these flaws, fatal

and obsolete, the mantle

I am not ashamed to wear.

And wear it

I will, like the horned goddess

her skirt of snakes, her cape of

hides, at her throat strung teeth

of bear, owl

on her shoulder, her feet

bird's feet, and in her arms

not basilisk, but

lemur, the legacy

you left me, small body bright with intense  
heat, as I ascend

old hills, remembering

not what we are now

but how we were.



## THE MUSE AND HER INSTRUMENT

She holds the blue three-crescent standard, unfurling  
I bear the wounds for her

She lifts the blue torch  
I carry the bowl of blood in the pelvis

She is the lightning streak  
I am the dazzled ground

She is the cool shell of the robin's egg  
I am heat woven in the nest

She is a ribbon in the hair  
I am the rose at the waist

With her right hand she holds the sky  
Below I rock the lava

She is the wind's insignia stitched to the stranger's shoulder  
I am the firebrick of the oven floor

She looks out from the eyes of my children  
She floats in the bowl of violets  
She lays her hands like dusk on my burning hair

She is the thin, blue thread of the flute  
I am the thud of the blood drum

She is the vein, I am the artery  
circling, circling, circling

Even the red horses, the blue horses  
can't tear us apart

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## TABLEAU FOR TWO WOMEN

Two women, in a park. Bushes, iron bench  
beside a fountain. The fountain dry. Two women

kissing. A waste, a universal boredom. One  
is a dancer, she kisses the white marble  
fish's mouth, in a park inside the walled,  
aluminum city, elevators rising to prescribed  
levels, each man obedient in his cubicle,  
picking lint from his socks, perhaps phoning.

The other woman is lying down in brown grass.  
Plans breaking into a shop. The glittering,  
exquisitely splintered glass.

## HOMOPHOBIA AND ROMANTIC LOVE

"Do you mean there are lesbians *here*, in this room?" a young woman asked, horrified. For her the experience of women meeting together once a week, sometimes as many as fifty of them, to break up into small groups and discuss the problems shared by women, had been literally liberating from the sexual pressure she always felt when men were around. That she might have to be on her sexual guard again, this time with women, depressed her badly. A man, reviewing Kate Millett's *Sita* in *The New York Times*, confessed to a depression (I doubt his sincerity) because *even* in a lesbian relationship one woman dominated the other emotionally and more blatantly sexually.

If lesbian sexuality poses all the same problems, while being 'a problem' in itself, it is automatically worse. The onus is on the lesbian to prove to heterosexual women and men that her experience is essentially better if it is to be accepted at all. There is a lot of attractive arrogance particularly among younger lesbians setting out to do just that, and they have my candid applause for every point they win in the debate. Having grown up in the lesbian silence of the 30's and 40's, having had no sense of community through the 50's, having broken the silence for myself in the early 60's with a gentle and romantic novel, I have developed no skills for that debate; but Adrienne Rich's invitation in *Conditions: One* to enter into a conversation about homophobia in all women, not necessarily in political/feminist terms but to discover "What's really going on here," calls to my own endless wondering at experience.

If I had been the same age as the young woman who was threatened by the idea of lesbians in the same room, I would perhaps have been angry with her, though, when I was her age and a friend of mine expressed the same kind of horror—"What would you do if you ever met a lesbian? I think I'd throw up or faint or die"—I said not a word, and later in my brooding neither anger nor any doubt about my silence ever crossed my mind. I felt simply horribly and inevitably alone. Twenty-five years later I wanted to be instructive, and I think I was gentle and reassuring enough to encourage that young woman to be courteous if not open-minded about experience. I suspect my own sexuality,

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because of my age and my position as a university teacher, was unreal to her, as I am sure the sexuality of her male teachers even older than I was not. I could not, in good faith, have told her that no lesbian would ever find her attractive and make sexual advances. Most in my generation are timid and circumspect enough to be generally harmless, but lesbians her own age might certainly not only desire her but feel some political zeal in converting her, challenge and bully with as much ego investment as any young male for conquest. Nor, of course, could I have assured any young lesbian that one of her adventuresome heterosexual sisters might not take advantage of her feelings for the experience of it. The young call it 'doing numbers' on each other.

I *am* sincerely depressed by how often lesbian relationships are accurate caricatures of heterosexual relationships, though it doesn't surprise me. It's important for Kate Millett to chart accurately what has happened to her, whether anyone is depressed by it or not. It is clear that Kate's obsession with Sita depends on Sita's indifference at this stage in the relationship. The moment Sita relents, offers Kate the sexual security and attention she craves, Kate feels claustrophobic and longs to be free. Over and over again I was reminded of Willa Cather's statement: "Human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them."

True. For my much younger self. I was sexually hungry, humanly isolated, psychically traumatized by social judgement. I required of myself a purity of motive so self-sacrificing, a vision of love so redeeming that to be a lover was an annihilation of all the healthy instincts of self-preservation I had. I am still not free of all the phobic reactions that sweet, strong, young self had to resort to in order to stay singularly alive. And, though we say over and over again that the young now are not traumatized as we were, I do not really believe that the sexual revolution of the women's movement has reached most nervous systems yet. I was interrupted in the middle of this paragraph by a phone call from a younger friend who says, "My lover, ever since a political fight about tenure at her university eighteen months ago, has vomited every time we have made love, which has been no more than once every two months, and now she's moved into the guest room and says I should make love to anyone else I want." There's the homophobia in ourselves, Adrienne, whether we've known from age eight or only discovered after years of marriage and childbearing that we love each other. No wonder the homophobia in heterosexual men and women is so outrageous to us. Before we confront



it in them, never mind that's where we got it, we must understand it in ourselves.

As honestly as I can recall, before I knew any psychological or moral definitions, I turned to women for love because I knew how I wanted to be loved, and I knew only women knew that. From my mother certainly. I had a cherishing father when he was around, but he was rarely around, and so he loved the ideas he had made of his children. My mother loved us through our vomitings, broken bones, sulks, listened to our jokes, theories about the world, egomanias and sorrows. (My father, this day, loves as I think a woman can, but it has taken him seventy odd years to come to it, and he's rarely gifted.)

I was not good at being loving, "half the time greedily seeking. . . half the time pulling away. . . ." I could not get clear of the separation of roles: beloved or lover. Like Kate and Sita, I seesawed between senses of power and dependence. Power required too much responsibility. Dependence was too humiliating. In each is the failure to be peer, a failure that is so appalling in the heterosexual model, never mind that some men and women together figure out how to be free of it.

Do we begin by disliking ourselves as women because women are unequally loved? Do we carry that dislike into our love of other women and therefore struggle under a burden: knowing we are worse, we must, therefore, be better? Are we the unclean bitches who must transform ourselves into goddesses? To try to be too good to be true is spiritually so expensive that our failures not only nauseate but destroy numbers of us. I wrote some years ago, "I'd like to try being simply good enough."

It was my lovers who suffered nauseous guilt, not I. They returned to husbands, the church, celibate scholarship. I, instead, found I could not walk down a city street, stand before an audience, eat in front of anyone. I slept, drank, masturbated through days to avoid writing, and believed my will to defy those escapes and get back to work would finally kill me. It is not simply a story of the terrible 50's. I hear it all around me now in the 'liberated' 70's.

I understand why Bertha Harris wants to insist that lesbians, the only true lesbians, are monsters. She is trying to take our homophobia into her arms and transform herself/us into lovers 'bad enough to be true', incestuous, self-centered, addicted, mad. Begin to love there.

I lack the romantic flare, live in too small a community (by choice), have been too long in a central relationship (twenty-three years, by

choice). I need more ordinary solutions. Or hopes.

One of my heterosexual friends told me that her lover had said she wasn't a good 'wife' to him. She asked him for his definition of a wife. When he had finished telling her, she said, "You're not talking about a wife; you're talking about the mother of a child under six." I am always nervous about the suggestion that, as lesbians, we should mother each other, though I understand that the image comes from our first source of love. Our mothers are also the first source of rejecting power against whom we screamed our dependent rage. As adults, if we cry out for that mother love, the dependent rage inevitably follows, and what is even more disconcerting is that, given total attention and sympathy, we are soon restless to be free, for we aren't any longer children. A young man asked me, in a seminar on Willa Cather, "Don't you think only people of the same sex can have a *real* marriage, not only of the flesh but of the imagination?" "I don't know," I answered, "but what a dreadful thought!" "One flesh" has always struck me as spurious since each is importantly defined by a sack of skin, and children are not metaphors of union but individuals often made up of gene banks hard to recognize as in any way similar to either parent. "One imagination" is an even more terrifying invasion of the autonomous mind and spirit.

The Greeks treated romantic passion like any other illness, expressed sympathy and a hope for early recovery. Yet we put the state of being in love as the highest good. When I encounter people 'entirely in love', I wonder why we couldn't just as well celebrate any delirious fever, say pneumonia, as a state infinitely to be desired. Surely we would be kinder to ourselves and our friends to hope for a cure than to encourage a life-long ailment, fortunately very rare.

I am not being cynical. The love which Kate Millett describes in *Sita* is finally degrading to both people, patterned as it is on the relationship between a mother and a dependent child. Kate's instinct to get out, to get back to her own work, is her cure. Both the pain of her own dependence and Sita's return to men as lovers strengthen the homophobia in each of them. There can be no lasting delight and nourishment between people when one is always afraid the other will return to "Daddy" with his superior sexual power, the other sure to be suffocated by a possessive child who refuses to grow up and leave home.

I don't think there is any way to root out our homophobia until we also deal with the infantile in romantic love as the weed that it is, choking out the young and real sisterhood that begins to flower among us. We have got to be peers, respecting each other's strengths without

dependent envy, sympathetic with each other's weaknesses without cherishing or encouraging them, interdependent by choice, not by terrified necessity.

I love the eroticism among women who like their own bodies, the hard discussion between those who require their own minds, the joy among strong spirits. The young woman who was terrified to be in a room with lesbians learned her fear from men who tried to dominate her. The man depressed at the old pattern of sexual politics, even between two women, was first disillusioned about relationships in heterosexual terms. Each is projecting onto lesbians the basic failure of romantic love between the sexes. If we try to be better at that, we will over and over again feel worse.

Sex is not so much an identity as a language which we have for so long been forbidden to speak that most of us learn only the crudest of its vocabulary and grammar. If we are to get past the pattern of dominance and submission, of possessive greed, we must outgrow love as fever, as 'the tragic necessity of human life', and speak in tongues that set us free to be loving equals.



## BARBARA NODA

### STRAWBERRIES

Father, your strawberry-stained  
skin a field brown  
as dark as your curses  
of Mexicans  
your hair now a  
dusty legend  
of the wavy-haired crow  
who rode your forehead  
for a lifetime,  
you do not escape.

Sweet as lips puckered  
to kiss  
rows and rows of berries  
there is nothing to say  
when a man of  
bad ancestry  
inhales the fertile soil  
plows his whole family  
under and bitter and sodden  
until one crop grows  
and springs to life  
an obsession.

Blood that is richer  
than your blood  
an inedible fruit  
weaned on the sweat  
of the son of a bitch  
you and your 12-hour day  
you do not escape



the strawberries  
a dusk encrusted  
shimmering  
for a moment  
plowed and plowed  
a carcass/ a lifetime.

## **ALICE WALKER**

### **PETUNIAS (A Story)**

*This is what they read on the next to the last page of the diary they found after her death in the explosion:*

As soon as my son got off the bus from Vietnam I could tell he was different. He said Mama, I'm going to show you how to make bombs. He went with me to the house, me thinking it was all a big joke. But he had all of the stuff in a footlocker and in his duffel bag. So it wouldn't jar, he said.

Son, I said, I don't think I want that stuff in my house.

But he just laughed. Let's make a big noise in Tranquil, Mississippi, he said.

We have always lived in Tranquil. My daddy's grandmama was a slave on the Tearslee Plantation. They dug up her grave when I started agitating in the Movement. One morning I found her dust dumped over my verbena bed, a splintery leg bone had fell among my petunias.

## AKUA LEZLI HOPE

collect images like flowers  
like leaves in fallpyre  
like garbage in newyorkcolored streets:  
harlem was not unclean  
it was chalice without saviour  
he had another kind of jones and split  
leaving masses without bread nevermind fish  
hunger is a colorless certainty  
the "whatfor" of it a bourgeois dilemma  
its existence a result of divisor and dividend  
world without end intone creatures without spine  
eyeless and inflexible this is not contradiction  
but indication, that they call chancre pimple  
apply pencil and say freckle  
world without end. war called game like dominoes  
black and white in color see how they run  
racism called pride  
oppression called aggression  
imperialism called divine right with nothing left  
to purify discovery they wrote history grotesque  
bladderless and blind, tongueless and deaf  
on newspaper frozen cry anguish face of  
yellowbrown black babies burnt and running  
Soweto like 'Nam like Little Rock like Chicago  
NewYork DetroitWatts London world without end  
collect images like flowers like garbage —Burn  
brandish as torch  
Remind.

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## DJAMILA

Miss your couscous warmth,  
the berber of yr smile,  
our coffeeklatch of halvah  
'n sweet fried plantains  
you - sugared crepe  
me - plump pancake  
we - laugh, semilingual,  
counting men and misfortunes  
like growing pearls in baby's mouth,  
thanking Allah for wisdom or  
at least wit to keep on.  
miss you - friend who weighs  
yet never measures.  
yr sahara sighs and kohletched eyes  
speak - vraitment une presence africaine  
moments turn, you conjure clear seas:  
fragrance of yr unfelt springs drift  
like sand i see fall from eyecorners  
speak - "Motherland" room widens  
with this vision bursting  
houseplants dance eager with dreams  
you grow remembrances of dune and field  
i've yet to see  
high with hope, we toast  
our journeys becoming.  
Djamiladjamila  
miss you.



## MICHELLE CLIFF

### OBSOLETE GEOGRAPHY

#### I

Airplane shadows moved across the mountains; leaving me to clear rivers, dancing birds, sweet fruits. Sitting on a river rock, my legs dangle in the water. I am twelve—and solitary.

#### II

On a hillside I search for mangoes. As I shake the tree the fruit drops: its sweetness splits at my feet. I suck the remaining flesh from the hairy seed. The sap from the stem stains my lips; to fester later. I am warned I may be scarred.

#### III

My other life of notebooks, lessons, homework continues. I try not to pay it mind.

#### IV

Things that live here: star apple, pineapple, custard apple, south sea apple; tamarind, ginep, avocado, guava, cashew, cane; yellow, white, St. Vincent yam; red, black, pepper ants; bats, scorpions, nightingales, spiders; cassava, sweetsop, soursop, cho-cho, okra, guango, mahoe, mahogany, ackee, plantain, chinese banana; poly lizard, green lizard, croaking lizard, ground lizard.

#### V

The pig is big, and hangs suspended by her hind legs from a tree in the yard. She is screaming—her agony not self-conscious. I have been told not to watch her slaughter, but my twelve-year-old self longs for the flow of blood. A small knife is inserted in her throat, pulled back and forth; until the throat slits, the wound widens, and blood runs over, covering the yard.

As her cries cease, mine begin. I have seen other slaughters but this one will stay with me.

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## VI

My grandmother's verandah before they renovated the house sloped downhill. The direction the marbles took as they rolled toward the set-up dominoes was always the same. There was a particular lizard at one end, who crawled up to take the sun in the afternoon. I provoked him—knowing he had a temper, since half his tail was missing. As he got angry he turned black with rage and blew a balloon of flesh from his throat—and sat there.

## VII

Sitting in the maid's room asking her about her daughter; who is somewhere else. I examine the contents of her dressing table: perfume, comb, hand mirror, romantic comics, missal.

The maid is sunning rectangles of white cloth on the bushes behind the house. I ask her what they are. She mutters something and moves off. They are bright with whiteness and soft to the touch. I suspect they are a private matter and ask no more about them.

## VIII

The river—as I know it—runs from a dam at my cousins' sugar mill down to a pool at the bottom.

On Monday the women make their way to the river; balancing zinc wash-tubs on a braided cloth on their heads—this cloth has an African name. They take their places at specific rocks and rub, beat, wet, wring, and spread their laundry in the sun. And then leave. The rocks are streaked white after their chore is finished.

This is *our* land; *our* river, I have been told. So when women wash their clothes above the place where I swim; when the butcher's wife cleans tripe on Saturday morning; when a group of boys I do not know are using *my* pool—I hate *them* for taking up *my* space.

I hate them for taking up space; I hate them for not including me.

## IX

The butcher's wife—after she has cleaned the tripe—comes to wax the parlor floor. She has a daughter my age who today is embarrassed and angry: I think it is because she is wearing one of my old dresses.

(Twenty years later I find she is part of us; "from" my great-uncle.)

There are many mysterious births here: Three people come up to the steps and ask for my grandfather (who by this time is almost dead)—I am suspicious and question them closely. My grandmother explains: “They are your grandfather’s *outside* children.”

## X

Three women—sisters, my second cousins; unmarried; middle-aged—live across the river. They have a plant called “midnight mystery” on their verandah. They come late one night to fetch me and we walk down the path, our way lit by a small boy with a bottle lamp; we balance ourselves across the river and reach the house—in time to see the large white flower unfold.

## XI

One reason the parlor floor is waxed on Saturday is that my grandmother holds church on Sunday. People arrive at nine and sit for two hours: giving testimony, singing hymns, reading scripture. They sip South African wine and eat squares of white bread.

Religion looms: Zinc roofs rock on Sunday morning.

## XII

The river “comes down”: the dam breaks; rocks shift; animals are carried along.

The clouds build across the mountains and move into our valley. Then it rains. Over the rain I can hear the noise of the river. It *is* a roar; even the gully, which pays the river tribute, roars—and becomes dangerous.

This is clear power.

## XIII

We cook on a wood stove in a kitchen behind the house. Our water is taken from the river in brimming kerosene tins. We read by lamp and moon light.

## XIV

On one hillside next to the house is the coffee piece: the bushes are low, with dark-green leaves and dark-red fruit. Darkness informs the place. Darkness and damp. Tall trees preserve the dark. Things hide here.



I pick coffee for my grandmother. To be gentle is important: the bushes are sensitive. I carefully fill my basket with the fruit.

## XV

After the birth of each of my grandmother's five children the cord was buried and orange trees planted near the house. These trees now have the names of her children.

## XVI

One child died—a son, at eighteen. His grave is in the flower garden, shaded by the orange trees. She tends the grave often, singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

The walls of my grandmother's parlor are decorated with two photographs: of her two remaining sons.

## XVII

My mother is my grandmother's daughter. My acquaintance with my mother in this house is from the schoolbooks stored in boxes underneath. Worms have tunneled the pages, the covers are crossed with mold—making the books appear ancient. She has left me to find her here, under this house: I seek identity in a childish hand and obsolete geography.

## XVIII

A mad woman steals my grandfather's horse and tries to ride away. I know several mad women here. She is the boldest; riding bareback, naked. The others walk up and down, talking to themselves and others. One talks to a lizard in the cashew tree at the bottom of the yard. Another sits in the river, refusing to cross.

This woman—one of my cousins—tells me twenty years later about her terror of leaving her place; about the shock treatments the family arranges in town; about how she kept the accounts; about her sister's slow death and how she cared for her.

It must have meant something that all those mad were women. The men were called idiots (an accident of birth); or drunks.

The women's madness was ascribed to several causes: childlessness, celibacy, "change": such was the nature of their naive science.



## XIX

An old woman who sometimes works for us has built a house by the roadside. It is built of clay—from the roadbed—with wood for structure. It has a thatch roof and rests on cement blocks. It is one-room.

She promises to make me a cake if I help her paper the walls. I arrive early, my arms filled with newspapers. We mix flour paste and seek suitable stories for decoration. Pleased with our results, we gather flowers and put them in gourds around the room. True to her word, she bakes me a cake in an empty condensed milk tin.

## XX

Walking down to the shop at the railway crossing, saying good morning, people stop me and ask for my mother—often mistaking me for her.

## XXI

I want to visit my mother's school where she broke her ankle playing cricket and used the books which now lie under the house. I can't get to the school but I play cricket; using a carved bamboo root as she did and the dried stalk of a coconut tree for a bat. I play on the same pitch she used—a flat protected place across the road.

## XXII

Walking through the water and over the rocks, I am exploring the river—eating bitter susumba and sweet valencia oranges. Up past pools named for people who drowned there; to the dam; to the sugar mill where I get wet sugar.

## XXIII

What is here for me: where do these things lead: warmth/light/wet sugar/rain and river water/earth/the wood fire/distance/slaughter/mysterious births/fertility/the women at the river/my grandmother's authority with land and scripture/a tree named with my mother's name.

Twenty years later these things rush back at me; the memories of a child inside and outside.

## XXIV

Behind the warmth and light are dark and damp/behind the wet sugar, cane fields/behind the rain and river water, periods of drought/under-

neath the earth are the dead/underneath the wood fire are ashes to be  
emptied/underneath the distance is separation/underneath the slaughter  
is hunger/behind the mysterious births is my own/behind the fertility  
are the verdicts of insanity/behind the women at the river are earlier wo-  
men/underlying my grandmother's authority with land and scripture is  
obedience to a drunken husband/under the tree named with my mother's  
name is a rotted cord.

## MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

1.

ever since I found out I was hired to teach a class,  
my words have been reversing. seascape becomes scapesea  
cashing a check, checking a cash. I walk backwards  
into the blackboard, waving. my words come out like  
reading someone's newspaper on the bus, sneaky, at an angle.

we were talking about death but we were really talking about  
feeling powerless. though my mother said once she dreamt dying  
was like flying off a cliff, perfectly sure.

my grandma wants hershey bars. her feet don't touch the floor  
in the nursing home chair. her car, newly equipped with power  
steering, sits in the driveway covered with leaves. I am afraid  
to see her. I am afraid she will look up at me and ask  
for a hershey bar.

2.

difficult Monday. Rosemary fired. could have been any of us.  
I see the cracked window in the boss's office. a brick?  
John Ng says, no, a window-washer did it, months ago.  
we are all touchy about voice-tones, looks. who will join us?  
the postman who cleans here on his lunch-hour says, 'what's  
going on? how come it's so quiet around here?' the union  
notice is posted by the sink and everyone stares at the cups.  
John C. says *he* doesn't want to pay dues. Ike raises his eyebrows  
and grins at me. the big and little bosses try to keep track.  
little boss Ken watches over my shoulder while I do opaquing work.  
I keep my hand steady and ignore him. two of the machines  
break down. I lose a strip of type in the waxer. what next?  
I try to decide how to get home, which combination of buses.  
the bart train stops in the tunnel, crowded. the doors open,  
close, open, close. people lurch in one direction as it moves forward,  
then, as a body, right themselves.

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3.

my grandmother grips my hands as if they were truth and calls me 'Mary, Mary!' my mother's name.

at work we say we will vote yes, and then over the days, some faces seem fearful, not sure. I try to be strong, every minute, and sure, but I want to take a rest, go to sleep, just for an hour.

when I tell Kim of a friend who began to cry, I say, 'she is so vulnerable, her pain waits to spill over,' and right there in the cafeteria, a man stacking chairs on the tables around us, I want to cry too.

grandma was in too much pain to know me. I stood there and looked out the hospital window. I had dreamt of a ghost in a black coat, now I felt like an old coat thrown over the chair. I look out and the bay wasn't beautiful and it wasn't ugly. It was just there, flat and blue, with its edge of industry. and every bone in her face distinct as scaffolding.

'can't you take it away Mary?' grandma says, 'can't you just take it and put it outside the house?'

'no, I can't take the pain away, I'm sorry.'

'all we can hope' my mother says later, 'all we can hope is a quick end, not to linger.'

in two weeks we will have a union election. we will vote yes and no. we will win or lose. it will make a difference. in two weeks she may be even thinner. if she is alive, her hands will grip a nurse's hands. if she is alive, her hands will beat against my dreams, all pulse, all assertion.



ON THE CREVICES OF ANGER

1

Bugsplattered windshield, a gray sky,  
and the orange sun dips  
behind sloping roofs.  
The horizon expands the MacArthur Freeway.  
Cadillacs, Mercedes-Benzes, Volkswagens,  
Fox Audis, vans stud my vision.  
And who are the poets, the writers, the painters  
who landscape the hills with words and trees?  
Who digs with hoes, what dirt loosens  
from fingernails, what smells?

2

Are we the women who gather language  
into our arms, sifting, sifting  
and how we move, walk, talk  
in circles, into obstacles, fencing  
at arms' lengths, retreating, forging.  
The body talks, the eyes  
hide nothing, the hands fling out.  
The legs spread.  
Voices, a palette of green, red, yellow, blue.  
Language that impairs, repairs,  
changes.  
Not words but language that lives,  
purple blooms flanked by pink buds  
on trees lining the city's streets.

3

No voice goes unheard, no movement unobserved.

Longings swell,

fill the room.

No earthquake but the floor moves,

it moves

below my still feet,

my toes curling tightly as spring buds.

Form and content. Content and form.

Hand in hand we move, separate, move.

How to see with feeling,

how to act. how the choices beckon

if we move with love.

4

Writing. In and out of our lives, the circles shaping

our anger. Our anger possessed but not alone

and was it I who said: "Racism is big business?"

We who are Asian women speak from the fibre,

the shadings though we are few. What drives

the surfacings of unknown landscapes, the minute risings,

the suns in our breasts?

We who walk the streets are called chink, jap, gook,

dink, slope, slant

and still we are asked:

Are your vaginas slanted like your eyes?

We who writhe in bed in pornographic movies.

Will we satisfy the hunger of men

in our oriental splendor?

We who go from bed to bed, from soldier to soldier.

Will we hoard our rice, our digital watches,

resole our children's shoes?

The hatred, the violence to our own bodies,  
turning down the lights that may shine,  
turning inside out the wellworn thoughts  
suppressed because some women know the necessity  
to remain silent  
to bow before ancestral graves  
to walk three steps behind their men  
to kill themselves if their husbands precede them in death  
to be ostracized by husbands, fathers, brothers  
for being raped  
to cry out in silent agony  
the injustices they understand  
but cannot articulate, cannot theorize.  
Some women still wear veils.  
Some women still kowtow.  
Some women still weep inside.  
Some women still lament among themselves  
in the women's quarters  
and the songs, tribal, prenuptial,  
the baths to redden and sweeten the skin.  
Can suicide be resistance, the will asserting itself,  
the decision to face destiny  
in its tiny black cubicle?

Holocausts. How we compare them,  
 how we speak from the fire within our hearts.  
 Will our eyes betray us, will they see truth  
 even in temporary blindness,  
 even in living the circumstances of disbelief  
 even in our islands of isolation  
 from women who bear arms  
 to fight for their countries?  
 Even in existing in vacuums  
 of unchosen, uncontrolled anger?  
 To listen with our eyes  
 to hear the rumblings in our hearts  
 across the seven seas  
 to feel the piercing of knives  
 to lift the blades from our own bodies  
 with our own hands.

Ai yah. *yow meng ah!* How can we even begin  
 to know, to understand if we close our ears,  
 if we shut our eyes to the moon,  
 crater our own bodies, ignore  
 the human touch?  
 I hold my mother now in my arms  
 though she's not here.  
 She never held me  
 She never held me  
 but it's not too late,  
 not when I breathe and decipher her voice,  
 though harsh, shrill and calling  
 through my skin's flakings.

---

*yow meng ah-* have mercy



## 8

This is not a dream: I walk over the minefields,  
 my legs push on. Next to trenches, open foxholes,  
 the artillery shelling my body  
 and it is always night. I see no moon.

The bread in my sack has molded, my flask dried.  
 Arms and legs, heads, the blood on the fields,  
 the defoliated crops, the stench,  
 the silenced cries.

And I say that I've known despair  
 and I say that I have suffered  
 because my skin has cracked, itched, bled.

I ignore nothing because I live.

"She knows the thingness of things," a woman once said  
 of a woman poet. Was she, this woman poet,  
 the mother of us all?

## 9

She was not my mother. I still seek my mother  
 who knew no fame, no notoriety, who shelled shrimps  
 for pennies a day, who ornamented herself  
 with a pageboy haircut, opal earrings  
 while cutting up chicken, who relished  
 a letter written from home  
 inquiring about her children,  
 their health, their education.  
 She wrote some English, some Chinese  
 and she wept after the birth  
 of each daughter.

She is the poet who saw me and didn't see me.  
 Yet she roasted prime rib of beef  
 because I loved it.

Self-made men. Self-made women.  
Behind every man. Behind every woman.  
Individual will, the inadequacy.  
Mah-Mah, can you hear me now?  
Step on the accelerator, shift  
into view, the mountain ahead may be a mirage,  
the clouds distant in the twilight.  
The moments of strength at the touch of a pen,  
the typewriter keys clacking, yes,  
even as I type inter-office memos.  
Yes, even as I write poems between  
the phones ringing, disbursing cash  
and running off copies.  
I file the shorthand of poems in my mind.  
I scribble crumbs of poems on unlined notepads,  
savor them in my purse and in my lunch bag.  
Biting into a Red Delicious apple  
the mind bursts, crisp, cold.

The walls in my office are grassclothed.  
A menagerie of tiny glass elephants, cats, dogs,  
porcelain ducks, worms, storks, chickens  
guard my every move.

Hierarchical arrangements, protocol.  
Politics of behavior in a private office,  
my fear of talking in a controlled environment  
the inability to express love, to say what I feel  
where I spend forty hours a week  
and the freedom at five o'clock,  
the freedom to what?

To the tiredness, to a classroom  
for the renewal of talk, touch  
for the technology of my own thoughts  
the human sounds I hear sizzling  
between hot rolled sheets in a steel factory,  
swiggled in ice cold beer and the dream  
of fishing in unpolluted streams.

I need to hear of the humor, joy  
in the writings of the elderly.

I need to experience the activity of pain,  
of women's lives as in Frances' dream  
of me feeding kumquats, piece by piece,  
from icecubes long frozen.

The streets crackle, the pits, the holes.  
No, no, not flatbread I see but concrete pavements,  
manholes, cigarette butts, candy wrappers, pop top rings,  
inlaid bricks, designs reminiscent of ancient sun gods.  
And the furcoats in the windows at 20% off  
the platformed shoes, the Frye boots,  
mufflers, blazers, the big tops,  
velveteen, polyester, the fringed plumshadowed eyes,  
the mannequins posing, perhaps mocking me.  
Those mannequins, now Asian, now black,  
now mainstream, even propped in wicker chairs.  
And I've sat with them, my knees bent,  
haughty in coordinated separates.  
Why do I need my underpants, bras  
designed by Bill Blass, Princess Diane Von Furstenberg?  
Ah, the mirrors gleam as I blink my eyes,  
this theater where eyes and noses suck  
the good wools, the natural fibres,  
the silky richgirl looks.



Crossing the street. One block, two.

"Squaw / Chief" carved in the sidewalk, walking uphill on Clay Street to the Garden Restaurant.

Passing the shoeshine stand, empty.

Carrying a bag of women's names:

*Kollwitz Truth Sand Murasaki*

and the no-name prostitutes waiting on Clay near Kearny.

My belly growls after *gai kow choy sum fahn*

and the cars race outside, past

the International Hotel, past

Portsmouth Square where old *Tong Yun* gather,

across a pedestrian bridge linking

the Chinese Cultural Center

in the Holiday Inn — Financial District.

The cultural center.

Where but the old *Tong Yun* playing games in the twilight for the challenge of skill and yes, even luck.

Where but in a room cooking on a hot plate,

a bespectacled man sitting on an orange crate.

In his coolie hat he smiles

his own secrets.

Where but in Chinese women fighting for scraps, lettuce, bok choy in the garbage dump?

*Ab Bock, Ab Gung*, I cry out, they turn deaf ears.

*Ab Poo, Ab Ngin*, their ears buried somehow in China.

---

*gai kow choy sum fahn*- chicken greens rice

*Tong Yun*- Chinese men

*Ab Bock*- Uncle

*Ab Gung*- Grandfather

*Ab Poo*- Grandmother (maternal)

*Ab Ngin*- Grandmother (paternal)

And two small boys. "Bob John  
Hawaii

1976" on one yellow T-shirt.

"Bob Jim  
Hawaii

1976" on one red T-shirt

singing: "And I've been working on the railroad  
all the live long day,"

jaywalk as I follow their tiny forms, free,  
arms hugging huge paper sacks, past steel skyscrapers,  
their hair twisting  
in the five o'clock breeze.

Will they know the labor of their forefathers,  
mine, laying railroad tracks for the Central Pacific,  
ten miles in one day, ten miles, some buried  
in the snow, some whose ghosts talk now  
in the voices of two small boys singing  
among the honking cars, the lights blinking  
the rush traffic home.

Home. To summer nights where I slurp grass jelly  
after toiling in Goon Do Hang where Bah Bah lived  
as a small boy.

To hear Bah Bah say: See the *bow see* moon hovering  
over the bay bridge as I rub my sleepy eyes.

To return to dreams of sister-poets sailing  
in a red boat in the heart of an imperial lake.

And still I walk and go on, unable to resist  
the views of my changing eyesight, knowing  
the south winds sweep me back, here, now  
from a frozen tundra.

To seek the women warriors and emulate their strengths,  
gift them with arms, such wildflowers.

---

*bow see*- stuck up (conceited)

## LIFE IN AMERICA

*A Play in One Act*

[for D.M.S. 1911-1977]

*The kitchen of a modern apartment on the outskirts of Moscow. On the back wall is a broad window. Only the upper panes, very clean, are visible, and through them telephone wires running through the snow-covered branches of trees illuminated by a streetlamp. The window's lower panes are neatly covered with newspaper. Under the window is a small pastel-green table; the two matching seats have no backs. Against the right wall are the sink and counter, and a narrow refrigerator. A bulky black shortwave radio with prominent antennae is on top of the refrigerator. Against the left wall, toward the rear, is a door leading to another room; on the same side, toward the front, is an archway leading into an entrance foyer. A coat rack hangs on the wall of the foyer, and next to it a mirror. A small bench sits under the coat rack, with several pairs of shoes, boots, and slippers neatly arranged under it. A padded door at the end of the foyer is the main entrance into the apartment. A plastic runner extends through the foyer into the middle of the kitchen. Everything is in place: this is the home of a man who tells himself often that he is a better housekeeper than his ex-wife.*

*DIMA KOROBV carries the telephone with him through the door at the rear left. As he walks through the kitchen, he drags the long extension cord behind him. He holds the receiver to his ear with his shoulder, and finishes knotting his tie. As he speaks he begins slicing the large black bread which sits on the counter. He is in his mid-sixties, tall, with a clean-shaven angular face. He wears a striped shirt and narrow tie, but no jacket. He speaks with a voice that has a gravel-like quality, so that it is sometimes difficult to know whether he is whispering or whether this is his natural sound.*

*DIMA, impatiently: Don't worry about that Nadenka, just come. . . . I didn't know myself. . . . it was just this morning, as I was leaving the house, out of the blue. . . . What? I don't know about these things. . . what you'd wear if you bought it in New York. . . . Of course she does, how do you think I talk to her? Now listen, she's going to be here. Yes. . . No. I'll try to lie down. . . All right. All right. Bye. What? Call when you're there. OK. Wait, Nadya, use the signal. Begins to hang up the receiver, but the conversation is not over. What? I can't hear you. . . . Bye.*

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*He hangs up the phone, puts it on top of the refrigerator so that the wire runs through the middle of the room, and continues to cut the bread. When he has stacked all the black bread rather precariously on a small plate, he begins again with a large white bread. The telephone rings.*

DIMA, *his voice high-pitched*: Hello. Hello? *He slams down the receiver.*

*The doorbell rings. He hurries into the foyer, pauses to glance in the mirror, then quickly unlocks the door. In the doorway stands LUCY. She wears a black ski jacket, a man's fur hat with flaps down, and high boots. She is covered with snow, and carries a large net bag containing various parcels wrapped in newspaper. At first glance it is hard to know what she looks like. She is thirty years old.*

DIMA: I didn't expect you so late, come in, come in. No, wait. *He brushes the snow off of her jacket so that it falls into the hallway beyond the door. She takes off her hat and at the same time kisses his cheek.*

LUCY, *breathless*: Swan Lake. Couldn't get away.

DIMA: Again Swan Lake! How much Swan Lake can you stand?

LUCY: I don't have much choice.

DIMA: Let me get you out of those. *He unzips her jacket halfway, sits her down on the bench, and starts unlacing her boots.*

LUCY: I'll do that Dima. *She takes off her boots and puts on the slippers he offers.*

DIMA, *straightening up*: Don't your Americans ever want to see anything else? Every time you come it's the same thing. So when are you going to come without a whole delegation so you can see your old uncle? You ate?

LUCY: I'm starving.

DIMA: You'll have nightmares. It's not good for the digestion, eating so late.

LUCY, *laughing—this is clearly a familiar kind of conversation*: It's good to be here, Dima.

DIMA: Remember you used to come every year? I'd gotten used to



you. So what happened? Let me look at you.

LUCY, *taking off her jacket*: I got tired. But one of the interpreters got sick, and they needed someone at the last minute. They just called last week, got me a visa, I didn't have time to say no. . . . *Underneath her jacket is a Russian sports outfit: royal blue wool with a turtle-neck collar, white stripes up the arms and legs and around the collar, elastic straps under the feet. Dima's slippers are too big for her.*

DIMA, *teasing, but with an edge of disapproval*: This is what they're wearing in America?

LUCY, *pleased with herself*: I got it from Tanya, you know, on the Arbat. I stopped there on the way. *They walk into the kitchen.*

DIMA: No wonder you're so late. So sit down, everything's ready.

LUCY: It's my disguise.

DIMA, *not knowing whether to laugh*: You're serious?

LUCY: That guard out there, he didn't used to scare me so much. It used to seem like a movie, not really there at all. But now—

DIMA: He wouldn't stop you—so long as you look like you know where you're going.

LUCY: I still can't get used to it though. So I thought, the best way to do it would be just to run through the archway—not look. But that seemed suspicious, just to run by him, so I thought I'd wear the whole outfit.

DIMA: It's pretty convincing, now that you have your coat off.

LUCY: I guess it's silly. But I felt safer. And anyway, it worked. I just ran right by him. I almost killed myself, though, there's so much ice.

DIMA: They should clean the walk better.

LUCY: Why the bayonet? That's what I've never understood. For show?

DIMA: Don't let him scare you, he's just a kid. He's really not thinking about you, he's thinking about when he can get a smoke.

LUCY: All the same—*Dima is getting out the food. Lucy stands on her seat to get another look at the guard out the window.* Well, he's

not so grim in the winter, that big coat looks too soft. *She sits down again.*

DIMA: This friend of yours—

LUCY: Tanya?

DIMA: She's Jewish?

LUCY: No.

DIMA: You didn't tell her where you were going? *He is trying to sound casual. His head is practically in the refrigerator as he says this.*

LUCY: She knows I have family, that's all. *She is annoyed.* You don't have to ask.

DIMA: Now don't take offense, Lusenka. I forgot how sensitive you are, so thin-skinned all the time. Take some bread and butter. You didn't have trouble getting here? *He is frying an egg.* Don't wait for me.

LUCY: I got a taxi, Tanya's mother was coming home in one, so I took it—

DIMA: Straight here?

LUCY: Just to the metro at Prospekt Mira, so I'd only have to change once. I was glad to get underground anyway, the taxi was nearly out of control and the driver wouldn't slow down.

DIMA: I was worried you'd forget the stop. They've extended the line since you were here, there's a new station that's closer. It's supposed to be the deepest in the city. Not as deep as in Leningrad, though. They have to go down further there because of the water. I'll show you how to go when you leave.

*He slides the egg carefully onto her plate. By this time there are large quantities of food on the table, arranged in a semi-circle in front of Lucy. Aside from the two piles of bread, there is smoked fish, a jar of pickles, a great mound of butter, sausage, sliced tomatoes, mushrooms, black caviar.*

DIMA: Tea now, or when you're finished?

LUCY: Now. . .no, later. Listen, Dima, tell me something.

DIMA: Hmm?

LUCY: Is it all right for me to be here? Is it safe?

DIMA: You're in my house. Why shouldn't you be safe?

LUCY: You know what I'm asking. It won't make any difference, I think I'd come anyway. But I want to know.

DIMA: I don't understand—you've been coming here for years.

LUCY: I know. But it's different times. Or maybe I'm just older. I don't know. The novelty's worn off.

DIMA: Seeing me?

LUCY: Of course not. I mean the guard, this place. It used to seem like another world, not mine, I could just look at it. I used to think I'd make a story of it. . .

DIMA, *half-joking*: Do me a favor, wait 'til I'm dead.

LUCY: I'm serious, Dima. Now it's more just part of my life, and this is another Tuesday in my life, except I just walked by a bayonet.

DIMA: Ran by.

LUCY: That's what I mean. I don't like it. Is it safe?

DIMA, *standing up*: Who knows these things, Lusya? Nothing's ever happened—how long is it now since you came the first time? *He goes to the radio, switches it on, turns the knob until he finds some choral music.*

LUCY: But I'm *not* supposed to be here. . .technically.

DIMA: No, you're not. But it's better here than outside. If I had different work it would be another story. You could come here anytime, we'd go to restaurants, I'd take you to the opera, the ballet—

LUCY: Anything but Swan Lake.

DIMA: Maybe not the ballet. I'd show you Moscow like you don't see it on your tours. But with my work. . . . I'll tell you, it's not even all that secret, what we do. There's nothing I do your people don't know, it's all a question of classification. You get what I mean?

LUCY: I think so.



DIMA: But they don't bother me, they leave me alone. I've been there a long time now. And I'm careful—it's just habit. I don't say everything, not in here anyway.

LUCY: Do you have to live here?

DIMA: It's not a question of have to. They give me the apartment from the Lab. It's run by the Institute, the whole complex. A lot of military people living here, that's why the guard. It's not for me.

LUCY: The odd thing is, once I'm inside, once I'm here, I always feel safe, almost more than anywhere else. Maybe it's the food—look at it all!

DIMA: It happens that way sometimes, someplace far away. I felt like that during the war. They moved the Institute—all the researchers—to Central Asia, near Tashkent.

LUCY: But there you *were* safer.

DIMA: I don't mean it that way. I mean, more free, more myself. So have something, we'll talk later. Make yourself, well, at home. . . away from home.

LUCY: . . . away from home, away from home.

*The telephone rings: two short rings at once in the European manner. Then a long pause, and the ringing begins again.*

DIMA: It's our signal.

LUCY, *amused*: Half my friends in New York think it's *their* signal.

DIMA, *picking up the receiver, turns off the radio*: Hello. OK. . . Yes. . . Soon. . . Bye.

LUCY, *teasing*: Something new?

DIMA: Eat, we'll talk later. I'll tell you everything. Try some of this. *He gives her caviar.* Left over from the New Year.

LUCY: What about you? You're afraid of nightmares?

DIMA: Nothing so salty—the doctors warned me. Try some of the salmon. So do I look the same? You notice anything?

LUCY: You look younger—did you lose some weight? You're taking



care of yourself?

DIMA, *a little embarrassed, points to his upper teeth*: Silver. I didn't want you to see.

LUCY: You're vain, like my father. I would hardly have noticed.

DIMA: Was he vain? Sam was always better looking than me.

LUCY: I can't believe this conversation—how old was he when they left?

DIMA: He must have been good looking, he always was. He was always pretty, a big head with all ringlets all over. They used to think he was my sister. He didn't lose his hair like me?

LUCY, *laughs*: Here. *She hands him the net bag*. Open them up.

DIMA: You're always dragging so much with you. I'm surprised they let you on the plane. *He takes out the first parcel*.

LUCY, *taking a big bite of bread*: Open it.

DIMA: You wrapped it in Pravda?

LUCY: Had to look Russian. . .for the guard.

DIMA: You should forget about the guard. *He unwraps the parcel. It's a bottle of liquor in a box*.

LUCY: From mom.

DIMA: You tell her I drink? She shouldn't waste her money.

LUCY: It's good. You'll like it.

DIMA, *takes the bottle out*: Brandy? We'll have some later, when Nadya comes.

LUCY: So we're giving her a name.

DIMA: I'll tell you everything. . . you don't know her. Now tell me, how's mamma? She doesn't think I'm an alcoholic?

LUCY: I can see you're not going to give up on that. Dima, what else should she send to a man she doesn't know?

DIMA: But I have nothing ready for her. Maybe some perfume. What

do you think?

LUCY: You know what I think. No matter how much time we have together, we always spend half of it discussing what to send back to mamma. And in the end it's always perfume.

DIMA: All right. We'll settle on perfume. It's all right with me. What else is there? *He takes the newspaper wrapping off another parcel, obviously a tie. Underneath the newspaper is American "designer" wrapping and a ribbon.* It's such a funny thing you do, wrapping things so many times. I'm not used to it. Try the white bread, it's fresher. Is the paper expensive?

LUCY: I like the black. *She takes another slice.*

DIMA, *carefully unwrapping and folding the paper:* A tie. All right. I'll wear it. Thank you very much. *He quickly opens the last package; wrapped in newspaper are several American record albums.* Good, this is very good. It's hard to get your music.

LUCY: I thought your son would like them. They're not new, but I like them. I had duplicates—

DIMA: I'll put one on. Which one?

LUCY, *looking through them:* Try this one.

DIMA, *going into the other room through the left rear door, he speaks from offstage:* Which side?

LUCY: Either one.

DIMA: You have to write out the words for Vladik, he's studying English now at night. *The music begins as Dima returns. It is Janis Joplin singing "Lord Won't You Buy Me a Mercedes Benz."* His wife knows it too. *He has brought some candy from the other room and hands her a few pieces; they are wrapped in bright foil.* What's that, Mercedes Benz?

LUCY: You know, Mercedes Benz. She says she wants one.

DIMA: I've seen them here, parked by the embassies. Some of ours have them too, the big shots.

LUCY, *affectionately:* I thought you were a big shot.

DIMA: Don't make me laugh.

LUCY: Dima, I've never asked you this—

DIMA: Wait, I want to see if I can make out any of the words.

*Lord won't you buy me a color T.V.  
Dialing for Dollars is trying to find me. . .*

DIMA: What's that—"my darling dollars?"

LUCY: Dialing for Dollars. It's a T.V. show.

DIMA: What kind?

LUCY: They show movies, and then they pick a name and call you up.

DIMA: What do they call for? Is that what the song's about?

LUCY: Not really. It's on in the mornings, they give away money, it's. . . it doesn't really make any sense.

DIMA: It's like a lottery? We have them here, they sell tickets in the metro.

LUCY: No, it's just on television, and when they have commercials, after the ads. . . in between parts of the movie. . . there's a woman. . . not from the movie, it's the same woman every day but a different movie. . . you really want to know about this?

DIMA: Go on. So they call you up. Who?

LUCY: She's like an announcer. She's sitting by a phone, and she picks a name and calls.

DIMA, *seriously*: I see. What does she say to you?

LUCY: She asks if you're watching.

DIMA: And then if you are you get the dollars.

LUCY: That's how it works.

DIMA: How much?

LUCY: It changes. I don't know.

DIMA: Well say, for example, how much could it be?

LUCY: Maybe seventy-five dollars.



DIMA: Is that a lot?

LUCY: To me it's a lot.

DIMA: So how come you spend your money on paper that gets ripped up?

LUCY: You're impossible! *She gets up and walks into the offstage room.*

DIMA: Where are you going?

LUCY: Too much noise. *The music stops, but Lucy does not immediately return. Dima makes tea, then tries on the new tie. From offstage comes the sound of a toilet flushing. Lucy returns.*

DIMA, *embarrassed*: Lusya, I'm sorry, I should have asked you right away—

LUCY: What?

DIMA: If you had to go somewhere. You want to wash? *He gets up and hands her a towel.*

LUCY: Do I have to?

DIMA: All right, I'll leave you alone. *Pushes some tea toward her.* It's getting cold. *She sips the tea.* So now we can have a nice talk. *Lucy continues sipping the tea. They are uncomfortably silent.* It didn't get cold?

LUCY: It's fine.

DIMA: So how's mamma?

LUCY: She's fine, she's working hard.

DIMA: Same job?

LUCY: Mhmm.

DIMA: And my aunt—grandma—she's living? Take a candy.

LUCY, *surprised by the question*: She sits. . . she has a chair. *Brighter*: You know, I wanted to ask you, grandma won't tell anyone how old she is, when she was born, I thought you might know.

DIMA: Let's see, she'd be. . . ninety-one or -two by now. She stays



in the same place? In the dormitory?

LUCY: The same place, but they moved her to a different floor. She asks me what I'm doing, if I'm working, how's Jack and Gail, Tommy, Eva, Nick. I tell her and then she asks me again and I tell her again. The nurse says she terrorizes everyone on the floor, and she tells me the nurses are Nazis.

DIMA: Who do you believe?

LUCY: I believe them both.

DIMA: Nadya says to me, if Sam were alive it would be different, she wouldn't have to live like that.

LUCY: But—

DIMA: Let me finish. But I tell her, how do we know? It's different there, we don't know what would be. And anyway, they do things differently. Maybe it's not what I would do. But who am I to say? Nadya doesn't understand that.

LUCY: Everybody's working, Dima, she can't be alone. . . even if dad were—

DIMA: You don't have to explain, I wasn't asking. You see her sometimes?

LUCY, *pausing*: Nick sees her more. It seems like every time I talk to him he's just been there.

DIMA: He's a good boy, hmm?

LUCY: He passes by there on his way to the clinic, and he doesn't seem to mind it so much. *She goes to the refrigerator*. Some lemon.

DIMA: On the bottom.

LUCY, *still looking into the refrigerator*: He interviews her.

DIMA: What do you mean?

LUCY: On tape. He asks her questions and puts it all on tape. *She sits down again*. At first he left her a pad and pencil and told her to start her memoirs, just write out anything that came into her head.

DIMA: She remembers Russian?

LUCY: Sometimes. It's hard to tell. She says a few phrases, the same ones all the time. Anyway, Nick left her the pad, he really thought she'd do it, too. He's always saying how lucid she really is, if only you expect her to be, if you insist on it.

DIMA: Maybe he's right—

LUCY: Maybe he is. I mean, he says she wouldn't ask the same questions over and over if she ever got a real answer. So I tried it. One day I was up there and when she asked me how I was I told her—I tried to tell her exactly how I was, what I did that day, how I'd lost my job the day before. You know, what I had for lunch, a letter I'd gotten. I'd gone up by subway so I told her about the new cars that aren't so noisy. I said everything I could think of, whatever came into my head. When I finished she said, so how's Jack and Gail, Tommy, Eva? I said they were fine and busy and they'd be to see her soon. And then she said, so tell me, you working?

DIMA: But your brother doesn't give up?

LUCY: No, Nick doesn't get discouraged. He gave up on the idea of memoirs, of course. I mean, it wasn't very realistic. . . I'm not sure she even remembered he was there after he left. But he started bringing a tape recorder. There's lots about you on the tape. At least that's what Nick told me.

DIMA: It's a cassette?

LUCY: Probably. He always has gadgets.

DIMA: They're good instruments, very good. I've used one a couple of times. They're very convenient. The one I used was West German—they make good machines. *He pauses.* She remembers me?

LUCY: Sure—but sometimes she gets you mixed up with dad.

DIMA, *laughs*: She did even then. We were the same age, the only boys. We all lived together—they were upstairs. Your father was a real troublemaker—did he make trouble for me! I always got the blame, Sammy was the good boy. Maybe I'll take a piece of bread—the white. *She puts some butter on a piece of bread.* They've started making cassette players here now, but they're hard to get hold of.

LUCY: Maybe I could bring you one. *She hands him the bread.* But it's tricky. If you bring something like that through customs, they

sometimes look for it on the way out.

DIMA: Don't waste your money. I know you don't have too much. You manage all right?

LUCY: I manage.

DIMA: You're working?

LUCY: I don't have a regular job—I do free-lance. I get paid by the page.

DIMA: Still translations?

LUCY: Yeah. I make a contract with a publisher. Sometimes it's technical—that's dull but it pays better. I just finished something more interesting, though—

DIMA: But it's not a real profession, translating. You need a specialty.

LUCY: What do you mean?

DIMA: It's all right for now, but where can you go with it—that's what I mean.

LUCY: It's gotten me here.

DIMA: Sure it has, and in a million years I'll never get to travel, to see what you've seen. If I had different work, maybe. . . but that's over. But how long will you want to keep coming back. It was three years this time, almost, and pretty soon you won't be coming back, you'll want to stay put, to be settled. And then you'll need a profession. Something where you could use what you know. Maybe journalism?

LUCY: Are you serious?

DIMA: Why not, you said you thought of writing—

LUCY: Talk to people all day? I couldn't do it, asking questions all the time. I like being home.

DIMA: It's not a bad life, though. You meet people. Here it's not a healthy line of work. *Lowers his voice.* I saw where here journalists die younger than anyone else. It came from one of your papers, but I believe it. . . it makes sense. *Louder:* You could still travel sometimes. And it wouldn't be somebody else's words all the time, you could speak for yourself. That's what I would do.



LUCY: Why didn't you?

DIMA: I never gave it a thought—and it's probably a good thing. I could always do numbers in my head—a Jewish boy who could do numbers. So I studied science, and I knew if I got to be good enough they'd need me. . . Lusya, tell me something. If I lived in America, what kind of living would I make? How does somebody live, like me. Say an engineer, with higher. . . with advanced qualifications? What would I make?

LUCY: Your position? I guess you'd work for the government, or maybe a foundation. I don't know, Dima, maybe fifty thousand, maybe more. That's a guess.

DIMA: That's in a year? Say, five thousand a month?

LUCY: Probably. Less after taxes, but maybe you'd be making more.

DIMA: How could I live?

LUCY: How do you mean?

DIMA: Well, what would I have?

LUCY: A lot of ulcers. A heart condition.

DIMA: That I've got without the five thousand. I'd have a house?

LUCY: And two cars and a lot of debts. You'd play golf.

DIMA: What kind of house?

LUCY: What kind would you want?

DIMA: Don't get me wrong. I don't need any more than I've got here.

LUCY: You'd spend all your time cleaning. Do you ever think, well—

DIMA: To leave? Impossible. For me, anyway. Even if I could, it's too late now. But sometimes I wonder, what if it was me instead of Sammy—what would be? If I'd been the one to go.

LUCY: Dima, *you're* still alive.

DIMA: I don't get your logic, you're too literal. But it doesn't matter now. I've got everything I need here, in two rooms. It's convenient, especially now with the new station, and there's the new furniture in the front room. Why would I want more? I've got books and the radio,



when I've got time, and I can go to the country on the weekend. I've got friends. So I don't need anything. I'll go on a pension soon and I'll have enough, and there's some put away besides. It doesn't cost so much to live here, there's always enough money. *Whispers:* It buys you shit, but there's always enough money. *Louder:* I don't know what to do with it, I just gave some to my ex-wife.

LUCY: You see her?

DIMA: We're friends now, she calls me every day. You know, after so long, you don't just stop. We stayed in the same apartment for a time after we separated, until I got this place. . . her television broke. She watches television all the time—it's poison. *You* don't watch it.

LUCY: Sure I do.

DIMA: But your television's a different story, I know. We've had some of your shows, a few years ago we had the Forsytes. A wonderful thing, we had the whole series.

LUCY: Did they dub it?

DIMA: No, that was the problem, they had an announcer who read all the parts, the Russian, over the sound track.

LUCY: *One* voice?

DIMA: For all the parts. That's how they do it. But still, it was a pleasure. *You* know how to do these things.

LUCY: It wasn't *me*. . . it wasn't even *us*—

DIMA: I mean you, not us. It was British, right? But except for that, I don't watch. I got a color set for my wife. . . I'd rather listen to the radio. Sometimes late I can get BBC; they've stopped jamming so much. Every now and then I get Israel. Listen, there's something I want to ask you.

LUCY: What's that?

DIMA: Wait. *He goes into the other room, brings back a small chalkboard, and chalk. He puts it on the table and writes out a name.* Do you know anything about—

LUCY, *looking at the board:* Not too much.

DIMA: She's alive? She's getting on now, I heard rumors—

LUCY: As far as I know. She's still in Moscow. She put out a second book—not here—some people were angry about it—

DIMA: But she writes things down. Someone has to. What about—  
*He writes another name.*

LUCY: He's out. I heard him interviewed on T.V.

DIMA: I see. *The telephone rings. He answers it. Hello? hello? He hangs up, clearly aggravated.*

LUCY: Wrong number?

DIMA: I've been having trouble with the phone. *He settles onto his seat again.* You live in the same room?

LUCY: Different place.

DIMA: Again? You Americans move around so much.

LUCY: It's a nice place—you'd like it. Not too near the center, but there's lots of room, and the park is nearby. I brought some slides. *She goes into the foyer to get them from her coat pocket, pauses to look in the mirror, runs her hand through her hair.*

DIMA: Color?

LUCY, *returning*: Take a look. *She puts a slide in the viewer, holds it up to the light to see which slide it is, hands it to him.* The dining room.

DIMA: You have a *dining* room? How many in all?

LUCY: They're small. It's hard to think of it as six rooms, each one is so small.

DIMA: *Six* rooms? You're alone?

LUCY: Not alone.

DIMA: I see. *Puts another slide in the viewer.* What's this to the left of the doorway? A piano?

LUCY: To the left? Let me see. *She takes the viewer.* You've got it in backwards. It's a piano. It's not mine.

DIMA, *putting in the next slide*: There's light in the kitchen. That's good. Who's this by the window?

LUCY: Shirley. My friend. And that's our dog, Sadie.

DIMA: You named a dog for your grandmother?

LUCY: Don't tell her.

DIMA: So this is where you live.

LUCY: What do you think?

DIMA: Six rooms. . . *he shakes his head*. You got someone? You got married?

LUCY: I'm not married.

DIMA: Good, you've got too much work to do, you don't need to get married. You know what I'm saying. You should go back to school, get a specialty. But it's good to have someone, not to be alone.

LUCY: I know what you mean.

DIMA: Someone healthy and young. If I were thirty years younger, Lusya, I'd be your young man. . . . So tell me everything.

LUCY: There's not much to tell. Why don't you tell me about Nadya. When is she coming?

DIMA: What's there to say? She's not Jewish. The family doesn't know anything. . . She's also divorced. In her late forties. Not a bad exterior. Civilized—she plays the piano.

LUCY: Do you see her often?

DIMA: It depends. I work most of the time—this is the first night I'm home since last week. *He picks up the slide viewer again, puts in a slide*. Where does the window look from the kitchen?

LUCY: The street. More buildings. Nothing special.

DIMA: It's a nice curtain. I haven't put up new ones yet—no time. You must think it's very primitive. It's hard Lusya. When I come home I'm tired. I'm glad for some quiet. Nadya's younger. Most of the time she comes here.

LUCY: Will she be here soon?

DIMA: She was stopping at her sister's first, to borrow a skirt or



something. So you're not going to tell your old uncle anything. Just like your father—you don't let on.

LUCY: Last time you saw him he probably could hardly talk.

DIMA: I can imagine—I have an idea what he was like. So?

LUCY: Really, Dima, I don't want to.

DIMA: Don't do what you don't want. Just tell me whatever you *want* to. You know, things aren't so different here. You think I couldn't understand, you think we don't know about these things. Well, we're human beings like everywhere. Let's open the brandy.

LUCY: What about Nadya?

DIMA: She'll have some when she comes. What I'm trying to say is, whatever it is, you could tell me, you don't have to be afraid. Everything happens in life. . . and I've lived. *He pours some brandy.* I haven't been where you've been, but I've lived.

LUCY, *holding her glass*: Not too much.

DIMA: I'm not saying this very well. *He leans closer to her.*

LUCY: I understand.

DIMA: It's the same everywhere, we all have, well, requirements. To be alive. I'm talking about physiology.

LUCY, *lifting her glass*: Here's to physiology.

DIMA: Now you're making fun.

LUCY: Dima, believe me, things aren't quite the same in America. Maybe they are the same but we don't talk about them the same way. I know about physiology. But I don't think you'd understand. And what if I told you everything and you—

DIMA: What if. . . what if. Lusia, if I worried about what if, we wouldn't know each other at all.

LUCY: That's blackmail.

DIMA, *laughing*: You're getting angry now.

LUCY: You knew, when I first came, you knew what it could mean to see me.



DIMA: Don't make such a drama out of it. It's not such a big deal anymore. Ten years ago, maybe. Now if anything happened, if there were anything unpleasant, I'd just go on a pension. I could do it any time as it is—I've done all the work I'm good for. Winter on the Black Sea. Not a bad life. I could travel—not like you, of course, but it would be cheap. I could go to the south, visit my sisters. So you don't have to worry. Besides, they haven't bothered with us for—what is it—ten years?

LUCY: Do you realize in ten years I've never seen you outside—

DIMA: You know why—

LUCY: No, listen. I mean, you make me suppers. I show you slides of home. I mean, I think of it as. . . well, it's our time, it's separate. You don't have to know everything. My life at home, well, it's far away, that's all. It feels pretty far away right now. *She picks up the slide viewer, looks into it.* I guess I like it that way. And anyway, it's not really so interesting. All this talk is making it seem much more interesting than it really is. It's pretty ordinary.

DIMA, *taking a drink of brandy*: You know, Lusya, you come here. You call me up. Always out of nowhere. Like snow on my head.

LUCY: Snow on your head?

DIMA: It's an expression. So you tell me about Aunt Sadie and I send perfume to mamma, and you go home. And everything's the same except there's caviar left over, and everything looks different to me. Maybe you don't know that—what seeing you means—a world I'll never see. I don't know how else to say it. . . so that's why I ask.

LUCY, *gets up and starts putting food back in the refrigerator*: I don't remember this.

DIMA: It's Finnish, a good model, I was on a list for it. Take a look it has a separate freezer—it stays cold. The food keeps—it was spoiling all the time.

LUCY, *puts food away, shuts the door, turns to Dima*: All right.

DIMA: Hmm?

LUCY, *walks to the table, wipes off the chalkboard with her cuff, writes something with loud, broad strokes.*

DIMA, *looking at it*: What do you mean?

LUCY: By the window, on the slide.

DIMA: You mean—

LUCY: You wanted to know.

DIMA: I don't understand.

LUCY: You do understand.

DIMA: But that's unnatural!

LUCY, *pauses a moment, then throws a plate of bread from the table onto the floor*.

DIMA, *startled, frightened, starts picking up the bread*: Don't be offended. I just meant, I thought you had a nice young man, a healthy young—

LUCY: Let me pick that up. You shouldn't—

DIMA: I didn't know. It doesn't matter Lusya, it doesn't change anything. Life is different in America, that's all. I just meant, those things don't happen here.

LUCY, *stands up, covers her eyes with her hand for a moment*: Oh God.

DIMA: Let me make you some tea, sit down. *He picks up the plate*.

LUCY: I told you, I shouldn't have. We'll leave it there.

DIMA: Lusenska, stop. Sit down. I'll put the water on. Now sit down.

LUCY: I'm all right.

DIMA: Maybe you're right, I don't know about these things, I don't understand. Does mamma know?

LUCY: No.

DIMA: You haven't told her?

LUCY: If she wants to know she'll know. Maybe she does. I don't know. I only told you.

DIMA: Let me see the picture again. *He picks up the viewer*. So let

me understand. This is for now, right? But what about later?

LUCY: Same thing.

DIMA: You're happy? *She nods.* Have you thought about children?

LUCY, *schrugging her shoulders*: Do you have a broom? *He gets out a broom, she begins sweeping up the bread.*

DIMA: You don't have to do that.

LUCY, *stops for a minute*: It's funny. I could have told you anything, it wouldn't have made any difference. There's only your kitchen, I could say *anything* about my life.

DIMA: It doesn't matter, Lusya. Sit down, have—

LUCY: I know all kinds of things to say, too. That's what you know after years of Russian, all kinds of dialogues. If you're good you learn both parts. Lucy eats lunch in Leningrad. I can be Lucy. I can be the waitress.

DIMA: Be whoever you like. In your country that's how you're taught. You were brought up like that. You can be whoever you please.

LUCY: All right then. I keep house. Wayne is very successful, I don't have to work. But when the kids are in school, I'll go back, maybe be a journalist, get a job on the local paper—see, we live in the suburbs, we have a laundry room in the basement. And I grow orchids in the laundry room, with special lights, where no one can see them—

DIMA: You don't have to make up stories for me. Here, well, we just don't say everything. It's not the same as lying.

LUCY, *more vulnerable now, she sits down, but keeps holding the broom*: I don't know, Dima. I used to lie all the time, I made things up, when I was a kid I mean. Now I'm a compulsive truth teller. I don't know which is worse.

DIMA: All kids tell lies.

LUCY: But I always believed mine. When I was ten or twelve—I believed them. We'd be at dinner and dad wouldn't talk to anyone, and then there'd be the question: who left the ice cream on the counter last night? The freezer was in the basement, in the laundry room, and I didn't like to go down there. It was usually me, but I'd convince



myself I had nothing to do with it. So when everyone looked at me I'd be indignant, really indignant, that they'd think I'd do such a thing—let it melt all over the place. And there would be ants, and mom could hurt her back cleaning it up. . . . It seemed so horrible, it was such an awful thing, I knew I couldn't have done it.

DIMA: Was it as bad as all that?

LUCY: It was pretty bad. I mean, all those nice straight lines, the chocolate and vanilla and strawberry, they'd all melt together. It would turn gray.

DIMA: You mean they have three flavors together in one package? We don't have that.

LUCY, *stunned*: What?

DIMA: I know it's not so important, but it aggravates me. We can't seem to manage. . . and why shouldn't life be more convenient, more comfortable. It's the little things—

*Lucy finishes sweeping, puts the broom away. Her movements are mechanical.*

DIMA: You're angry?

LUCY: I don't know what I am. *Pauses*: You know, Dima, my relatives at home—my uncles and aunts—I don't talk to them really. I've spent much more time with you. But maybe—all this time—I never knew it. You just want—I should just bring picture postcards, or. . . or, I don't know. Newsweek. Popular Mechanics.

DIMA: Don't talk nonsense, Lusya. You're Sam's daughter, the same blood. I love you like you were my own, if you were my own daughter I couldn't love you more.

LUCY: It doesn't matter, though. I think you do, you probably do, but it doesn't have anything to do with wanting to know me.

DIMA: Of course I want to know. . . didn't I ask? So maybe I'm too old to understand these things. I don't know how it is in America, I know what I hear on the shortwave, but they don't tell you everything. So now you're angry. But you don't understand. Here they don't allow such things. Maybe they do—we don't talk about everything the way, in America. . . you want me to understand—



LUCY: I don't think you have to understand, that's not it. But what you said before—I mean, up to now we've trusted each other. I couldn't walk past that guard if we didn't, and you couldn't let me.

DIMA: You're twisting everything around, don't you see that? What I said, I just meant physiology. How people are constructed—

LUCY: I know all about that—

DIMA: And if everyone lived that way—

LUCY, *raising her voice*: Who's talking about everyone?

DIMA: Shhh.

LUCY: The point is, you asked and you didn't want to know.

DIMA: You should understand, Lusya, you've been here now. You know how it is here. The war was a terrible thing, for everyone. You can't imagine what went on. So for us to have children, after the war, well, it meant being alive again. And we lost so many. And not only the war. You know what it means—to be a Jew. It's not just physiology I'm talking about. *Lucy doesn't respond*. So?

LUCY: What do you want me to say?

DIMA: You don't have to say anything.

LUCY: So there was the war and death and devastation, and now here I am from America with my little eccentricity, with my little American life that won't produce a single worker—

DIMA: I don't deserve that.

LUCY: I'm sorry.

DIMA: Don't misjudge your old uncle. I'm not so naive as you think—I've read about these things, I don't think it's so black and white. During the war, when we were evacuated, I worked, and I read, people brought a few books with them and we passed them around. I had a friend, he was like a brother to me. He'd come east out of Poland, he had some books and I read them all. There was one I remember, it was Musset I think, or Balzac. It was more than thirty years ago but I remember the story. It was about a woman who loved a girl, she was very beautiful. She loved this girl—the way you mean—then she meets the brother, the younger one has a brother. But she doesn't know

they're brother and sister. She likes him too. The brother sees them in bed together, he watches them when they don't know he's there. The woman is jealous and in the end she kills her lover, the girl. She has to, to keep the brother and sister apart. If you see what I mean. I remember it even now because the descriptions were so strong, the nuances, the language. . . . *The telephone rings twice. It stops and rings again. He keeps talking as he walks over to pick up the receiver.* So you see, I know about these things. *His voice suddenly becomes high-pitched as he picks up the phone.* Hello? Oy, you must be freezing. No. Listen, Nadya, wait there. It's easier for me to get a taxi here. . . No. . . It's all right, I'm not so tired. Wait and I'll come for you. . . Yes. . . Yes. Bye.

LUCY: What happened?

DIMA: She got to her sister's, but the bus isn't running and she couldn't find a taxi.

LUCY, *standing on her seat to look out the window*: It looks pretty bad out there. Maybe I should go.

DIMA: No, listen, wait a bit. I'll be back in twenty minutes. I want you to meet her. Make yourself some more tea. I'll put something on the radio so you won't be bored. *Looks at his watch.* Maybe I can get Voice of America. You can tell me if it's true, what they tell us. *He plays with the knob of the shortwave, adjusts the antennae, finds the station.* We'll get all this cleared up later, all right? We'll talk everything over quietly. *He is hurrying now. He kisses her, goes into the corridor, quickly puts on overshoes, a coat, a fur hat like the one Lucy wore when she entered. He takes gloves from his pockets and unlocks the door.* Make yourself a cup of tea.

*Lucy starts doing the dishes. Drying her hands, she makes the Voice of America broadcast louder. The announcer's voice is only intermittently intelligible; the broadcast is mostly static:*

. . . reported in the New York Ti. . . . President, speaking. . . . conference remarked. . . . following meetings between Secretary. . . . in the . . . . officials refused to comment. . .

*The broadcast is increasingly obscured by static. Irritated by the noise, Lucy switches off the radio and walks through the door at rear left. From offstage, the song "Mercedes Benz." The lights fade.*

THE RETURN

Your hair white as ashes flying up  
when someone has blown on them. Spectacles thick  
as shot glasses, witch mouth  
turned down at the corners, divining rods.

We kissed the cheek bristled as a man's,  
and presented the children. Next to your chintz  
overstuffed chair, the portable toilet  
alert on thin legs, stinking like a  
zoo animal in its cage.

Over in the corner a pink stuffed dog,  
four feet tall, sat on its haunches.  
The children thought we had come to visit  
that wonderful creature. They eyed it. They eyed  
the old blind crone in the chair.  
They eyed the toilet. They eyed the door.

We walked out past blue-black men  
on benches, down cement steps  
painted a dark blood rose.  
You died a month later, and I have not  
seen you since until tonight  
when you came up to me at the party  
as I danced — your hair of shattered milk,  
your hooked chin like mine, your nose  
mine, your sweet cackle, the bird  
you gave me for my thirteenth birthday  
perched like a falcon upon your hand — and you  
danced with me like a twin.



## ELIZABETH, BEFORE ADOLESCENCE

The long curves of her chest and back and  
hips and legs are flat as tools,  
elegant and hard as wood  
handles. As she lengthens out  
she does not soften. Only her skin becomes  
milkier and more translucent,  
her eyes darker and darker in it,  
the red in them burning, her sight growing  
sharp as her body.

I can sometimes see the growth-points of her brain  
shining like gold antlers in the air  
around her head, as everything about her grows  
fierce and bright,

and yet I know  
they are already hidden deep in her abdomen,  
tiny, creamy as her skin is getting,  
the eggs stitched into her side for safety like  
pearls in a hem. It's only a matter of  
time. I use this time to praise the  
girl, the infertile, the one who sleeps  
alone, the daughter, the one who has never  
shed a drop of her own blood,  
the warrior.



## MARILYN HACKER

### BOULDER: AUGUST 1977

Curves converge and blossom in your face;  
leaf-shapes ripple a patterned snake  
safe through pied grass. A tacky diamondback  
linoleum, earth, russet, green and black,  
covers my rented table. Typescript heaps  
await parenthesis between our sleeps.  
You're asleep now, murmuring, in the other room.  
The mountain range has a domestic name;  
I am domesticated at its foot,  
flabby, diasporid, illiterate  
in lichens, grasses, insects, conifers.  
Here is a white man lettering AFRICA  
on a scrap-book of Tarzan movie stills.  
Reading it is my work. A woman whirls  
her night-gowned daughter on her hip. Night gowns  
them, whirls them, us, through different windows, down.

## UP FROM D.C.

We were six women. My lover  
was the youngest. Her cabled shoulders  
glistened like her short dark hair.  
Tucked, unnoticed, in a sprawling slum  
our house was under siege.

We were six women, one  
my lover, in a wooden  
house, waiting  
for the danger  
to be over.

*In a round tin tub  
a woman scrubs  
the shape from a baby's  
face. The plump brown  
child's red hair-ribbon tells: a girl.  
Immerses her again, head  
under. I cry out, seize her.  
You, baby-shaped, face  
shapeless, sprawl in a  
deck-chair. I run, gasping, grab  
you too. Is it too late?  
Your chins lump like putty.*

We looked out a cracked window  
on the second floor, from a bare  
room: scorched floor-planks, cobwebs.  
Dust. Dusty outside,  
porched row-houses of a Southern slum,  
one, cater-corner across, enamelled red.  
Coffee-cans sprout grapefruit shrubs from pits.  
An old Black woman in a faded print  
dress sits behind them, rocking,  
waiting for the danger to be over.

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Her sweaty runner's limbs  
sprawl across mine, arm on  
my shoulder, calf  
knotted against my knee. We hunch  
below the windowsill, cramped. Still  
heat. Roaches run errands.  
Her angular  
cheekbones glint like blades.  
After this, we will not  
scavenge. We hope  
to survive. The others move  
lightly in the hallway. One bald bulb  
dangles. One of them  
may have given us away.

*I try to run with the two  
limp puckered babies  
grasping my neck, still  
chilly and damp, my arms  
under their buttocks, their plump  
legs slack. Is it too late?*

Light squeezes through bamboo slats.  
I squeeze my eyes shut. Corduroy  
wales pleat my skin through sheets.  
You're awake, humming, in the other room,  
golden and rosy, blue Grow Pajamas  
over scabby knees. In a minute  
we will lock on the day's love, the day's rage.  
In a minute I will hold you in my arms.

## ORDINARY WOMEN I

*for June, Sara, Lois, Pat . . .*

Mrs. Velez of the Tenants' Association  
zig-zags her top-heavy shopping cart through  
the usual palette of dogshit, brick-red  
to black on grimy leftover snow.  
Tenement roofs' stone scrollwork  
soot-chiaroscuro on the almost-equinoctial  
sky. Old Mrs. Cohen, who still wears a marriage-wig,  
stiff-legs the stoop with Food City-bagged garbage.  
Slashed bags everywhere spill chicken-bones,  
orange peels, crushed milk cartons, piss-soaked  
Pampers, broken toys.  
Sweat-cracked loafers, runover orange work-shoes, silver-painted  
platform shoes, running-stripe sneakers, a cast on one foot  
and newspaper-stuffed single shoe, electric-blue-patent-leather-  
style-fake-yellow-snakeskin-trim-shoes, stand,  
pace,  
shuffle,  
Bop a little,  
in front of the liquor store; the hands man brown-bagged Ripple.  
She has a daughter named Tequila,  
little and Black and wiry and so is she,  
her name's Joanne.  
Yellow-trousered Tequila, rising three,  
dashes from the separator to the laundry scales,  
past two broken dryers.  
Sometimes she plays with Iva on the slide.  
"I'm OK, I'm goin' to night school, studying  
bookkeeping,  
but I gotta leave Tequila with my brother—  
that's him."



He must be nine,  
 little and Black and wiry, leafs  
 SPIDERMAN, THE INCREDIBLE HULK beside him  
 on the bracketed row of plastic chairs.  
 Tequila's run outside.  
 "Joseph, go *get* her!" He does.  
 Joanne has a textbook, *American History*,  
 all-sized thumb-smudges on the library  
 binding. She has me write my name and number  
 on a creased notebook-leaf shoved inside.  
 "WHat you doin' Tequila? Stay by me, you hear!"  
 I feel my old brown sheepskin's London label,  
 my red wool ERA cap. . . Joseph herds  
 Tequila towards the thrumming washing-  
 machines. She  
 scooters a canvas basket to the porthole.  
 Her left blue Flintstones sneaker is untied.  
 Tile walls sweat steam and soap. Compact Anne Desirée,  
 the propriétaire, has my laundry folded  
 into the Macy's shopping-bag. "Comment ça va?"  
 "Très bien, merci." "Et ta fille?" "Grandissante,  
 à l'école au moment. Merci bien, au revoir. Bye,  
 Joanne, Joseph, Tequila!"  
 Threadbare brown corduroy coat, Army Surplus safari jacket,  
 orphaned suit-coat, raddled blue anorak, black leather bomber  
 jacket, pastel polyester plaid with calf-length back-split skirts  
 elbow outside the liquor store;  
 the hands man brown-bagged Ripple.  
 The woman who stands on street-corners stands  
 on the street-corner, her coffee-bean  
 skin ashy, her plump face Thorazine  
 swollen. Thin grey coat gaps open  
 on short white housedress gapped open  
 on bolstered brown knock knees.  
 Fragile flesh puffs sink her huge wet eyes,  
 not looking across the street, or down the street,  
 not looking at the sidewalk or the sky.

## SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES

Music is my lover/ is my smooth dancing partner  
thursday night disco spring rhythm colors vermillion hue  
music is my soul on a dollar forty-five spin  
is my truth of living and my style of conversation/  
is silver jewels and jade rings/ is silk on my legs  
and smoke in my head/ music's even in my dreams  
where I float on blue clouds/ Gato Barbieri sax  
in erotic mesh with Willie Figueroa's jitterbuggin legs/  
feet moving Willie Colon style/ Eddie Palmieri style/  
hijo del santo style/  
y canta sabor libre singing rappin rhapsodies in rainbows  
tropic colored afro cuban rican chicano y chino rhythm

/music holds my hands  
and caresses my face in tender syncopated breaths/  
music kisses my feet/ don't have to wait for salvation  
or the liberation of my mind  
music's all the time/ doesn't beat me when I'm blue  
or kick me when I'm down/  
doesn't make me wish to be somebody else

/music is my beat  
is my salsa con dulce/ my guaguanco y bolero suave/  
is my mambo/ bomba/ plena y danza/ is merenge mashed  
potatoe well seasoned/ twisted into magic movement/  
is my soul train thru ghetto land and motown rock come  
knockin dewdrops on my door/ is the ocean flowing thru  
my body/ thru my spine shaking my bones loose/ pulling  
my muscles/ cracking my joints/ music is my barometer  
of hot and cold/ my newspaper of current events/  
is violin strung pianos returning to forever blow my  
eardrums out into the galaxy where lotus blooms/ is weed  
growing wild in gold gutters of my black and brown hills  
/is my eyes in the dark /the earth under my feet  
is my ice cream and buttered corn. . .

... on late nights we have conversations  
we drink smoke blow and shoot/ we drown jam groan and clown/  
we beat smack slap BANG play jump hit/  
music is all the pain  
I'll ever need/.

## BEDFORD HILLS IS A WOMEN'S PRISON

bars/ cold hard steel holding mind and soul  
bars to fight against/ to hit head cold upon  
floors damp damned with hate/ hard hearts  
lies traps prison is no home/ bars and gates  
locks slamming shut/ closing off the world  
pride dies in hate/ air grey dust filling corners  
feeling old alone away/ bars around my soul  
guard sticks rip against torn skin hands  
tied hoping reaching beaten weathered  
hands holding on holding on  
bars/ cold facts torn families  
cold time /and bars

holding down my wings

break

holding down my wings

free

bars/ cold bars/

break



## SUZANNE JUHASZ

### A WOMAN LIKE A ROCK

She is not permitted to say that the pain is too great to bear.  
She can bear it. She always has before.  
She is not permitted to say that the need is too great to endure.  
She can endure it. She always has before.

She does not throw her apron across her face, releasing a cry  
from the place where her throat, stomach, groin, heart  
are one place. Too dangerous, for all those under her care.

She opens to envy, of patients in hospitals,  
those who have managed from ill-fortune or sad fate  
to stop. Someone has to nurse them and decide for them  
and occasionally place a hand across their foreheads.

To be the wounded and not the hand holding bandages. To stop.

But she turns her back on this fantasy; she buttons her coat  
and goes on, resisting as well

the temptation of heights, to fly as a shriek  
out of her body and beyond the bars of her mind,  
to be white air spinning, so pure that she becomes her pain,  
a cold flame that rises and vanishes into the galaxies.

# reviews

# A WOMAN'S LIFE & WORK

## Reviews

The book is a masterpiece of biography and history. It is a work of art, a work of genius, a work of love. It is a work of a woman, a woman who has lived a life of service, a life of sacrifice, a life of devotion. It is a work of a woman who has seen the world, who has known the pain of loss, who has felt the joy of love. It is a work of a woman who has been a mother, a teacher, a friend, a leader. It is a work of a woman who has been a woman, a woman who has been a woman.

She was a woman of great courage, a woman of great faith, a woman of great love. She was a woman who had seen the world, who had known the pain of loss, who had felt the joy of love. She was a woman who had been a mother, a teacher, a friend, a leader. She was a woman who had been a woman, a woman who had been a woman.

It is a book that is a masterpiece of biography and history. It is a work of art, a work of genius, a work of love. It is a work of a woman, a woman who has lived a life of service, a life of sacrifice, a life of devotion. It is a work of a woman who has seen the world, who has known the pain of loss, who has felt the joy of love. It is a work of a woman who has been a mother, a teacher, a friend, a leader. It is a work of a woman who has been a woman, a woman who has been a woman.

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## BARBARA SMITH

**CHILD OF MYSELF by Pat Parker.** Drawings by Brenda Crider, Wendy Cadden, Jerri Robertson, Karen Garrison, Helle.

Published by The Women's Press Collective. Order from Diana Press, 4400 Market St., Oakland, Ca. 94608. 1972, 1974.

\$2.00 + 15% postage/handling.

**PIT STOP by Pat Parker.** Photographs by Jackie Howell, Ardena Sharks, Paula Wallace, Robin Wadsworth. Drawings by Wendy Cadden, Jules, Cottie. The Women's Press Collective. Order from Diana Press, 1973. \$2.00 + 15% postage/handling.

**THE POETRY OF PAT PARKER AND JUDY GRAHN:**

**WHERE WOULD I BE WITHOUT YOU.** Olivia Records,

P.O. Box 70237, Los Angeles, Ca. 90070. \$5.50.

### *NAMING THE UNNAMEABLE: THE POETRY OF PAT PARKER*

What does a Black lesbian poet write about when it would seem that our very preservation depends upon our ability to keep silent, to not bring up the many layers of our oppression? What kinds of things are finally said when we name the unnameable?

Pat Parker's writing provides some initial answers. One of a handful of Black women writers who acknowledge their lesbian identity, Parker gives us poetry which is woman-identified, feminist, and stunningly brave. "My lover is a woman," she declares at the opening of *Pit Stop*, and we know from that point on there will be no half-stepping.

I must admit that when I first read Parker's books I was much more excited by the content than by the execution of her verse. *Child of Myself* contained some poems which were vague in their intentions and strained in language. The work in *Pit Stop* was generally stronger, but I was not fully aware of what Parker was accomplishing until I heard her read in person. Immediately I realized that her poems were designed, consciously or not, to be spoken. I understood that Parker was writing very much in the Black oral tradition which relies on inflection, metaphor, irony, and humor to deepen our communication and make it specifically ours. Sound and rhythm combined with the uniqueness of



her subject matter to make fascinating art. I regretted that hearing her read would be for me a one-time experience. But fortunately, a new recording of both Parker's and Judy Grahn's work, "Where Would I Be Without You," has come from Olivia Records and every woman can now hear the intensity of Parker's words.

One of the most compelling aspects of Parker's work as a whole is the growth she shares with us as a woman and artist. At the beginning of her first book she debunks the Biblical creation myth of woman derived from man and asserts:

i, woman, i  
can no longer claim  
a mother of flesh  
a father of marrow  
I, Woman must be  
the child of myself.

Her process of self-creation has many episodes, but culminates in her identity as a Black feminist dyke.

At the beginning of *Child of Myself*, for example, she is still going through changes with men, but offers an early warning:

i will serve you no more  
in the name of wifely love  
i'll not masturbate your pride  
in the name of wifely loyalty

Trust me no more  
Our bed is unsafe  
Hidden within folds of cloth  
a desperate slave . . .

By the end of this book she is tentatively dealing with coming out ("Move in darkness/know the touch of a woman. . .") and concludes with several love poems to women.

Parker, it seems, has always been a nonconformist, uncomfortable with roles whether sexually or racially imposed. She calls herself a "goat child" in her long autobiographical poem and recalls:

so i settled down &  
fought my way thru first grade  
defending my right to  
wear cowboy boots even if  
i was a girl which no one  
had bothered to tell me  
about at home. . .

Not surprisingly, she also chafes at the requirements exacted of her as a supposedly adult female. A male lover presumptuously promises to show her "the ways of woman" and Parker bitterly admits:

& i learned  
i learned hate  
i learned jealousy  
i learned my skills -  
to cook - to fuck  
to wash - to fuck  
to iron - to fuck  
to clean - to fuck  
to care - to fuck  
to wait - to fuck. . .

Parker is saying that sexism does indeed affect Black women, rhetoric to the contrary, and that our childhood dreams are not always conventional and correct.

By the time that *Pit Stop* appears, Parker is clearly and happily woman-identified. She is fully aware, however, of the personal and political paradoxes inherent in being a Black lesbian. In "My lover is a woman" she describes the external and internal battles she must fight because she is in a relationship with a white woman. She writes that her love for this particular person makes her able to forget the brutalities visited upon her by racist whites and to transcend the distrust of white people taught by her family as a means of survival. There is also her sisters' homophobia to contend with and, if this is not enough, the disapproval of other gay people, both Black and white. Finally Parker cannot shut out these external judgments. She writes:

I remember—  
Every word taught me  
Every word said to me  
Every deed done to me  
& then i hate—  
i look at my lover  
& for an instant — doubt — . . .

This is one of Parker's most effective works. What she claims never to think about are in fact the things you never *stop* thinking about when you're Black. Stylistically the poem works well too. Stanzas that positively describe her lover open three of the poem's four sections and function in direct opposition to the litany of abuse which follows. Her mother's question—"Lord, what kind of child is this?"—ends each of the four sections and is an amazingly resonant refrain, containing all the anxiety and

love a Black woman might feel about her inexplicable daughter. Parker's reading of this poem on her record makes even more vivid the searing feelings which inspired it.

To me Parker's best poems are ones like this one in which the different elements of her identity mesh into a recognizable whole. The result is poetry with unique political impact. Parker writes the poems that only a Black feminist dyke can write. She can legitimately criticize supposedly revolutionary Black men who batter women.

Brother  
I don't want to hear  
about  
how *my* real enemy  
is the system.  
i'm no genius,  
but i do know  
that system  
you hit me with  
is called  
a fist.

She can also point to racism in the women's movement, a boulder which has yet to be turned over and looked at. She shouts:

SISTER!     your foot's smaller  
but it's still on my neck.

Parker's poetry makes sense because she has personally experienced how the major systems of oppression are linked and knows that they all must be destroyed if she or anybody else is ever going to be free. Parker's "Womanslaughter" illustrates how her identity, politics, and vision coalesce to make superb writing. In it Parker confronts the intolerable circumstances of her sister's death at the hands of her "quiet" ex-husband. The last stanza contains a declaration of the kind of commitment that will bring about the life-saving revolution:

Hear me now  
it is almost three years  
and i am again strong  
i have gained many sisters  
and if one is beaten or raped or killed  
i will not come in mourning black  
i will not pick the right flowers  
i will not celebrate her death  
and it will matter not if she is Black or white  
if she loves women or men  
i will come with my many sisters



and decorate the streets  
with the innards of those brothers in womanslaughter  
no more can i dull my rage  
in alcohol and deference to men's courts  
i will come to my sisters not dutiful  
i will come strong.\*

The poetry of Pat Parker shows that by naming the unnameable, there is everything to be gained.

---

\*Transcribed from the recording.



**THE TRUE STORY OF IDA JOHNSON by Sharon Riis.**

The Women's Press, 280 Bloor St. W., Suite 313, Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 1W1. 1976. 111 pp. \$3.25.

There is a special kind of excitement and pleasure in stumbling upon an unexpected discovery. I felt this excitement and pleasure even more keenly after I completed Sharon Riis' novel *The True Story of Ida Johnson* published by The Women's Press in Toronto. (I had not previously heard of the author or the Canadian press.) *The True Story of Ida Johnson* is, I believe, a unique and unusual work and I hope it will reach a wide audience of women. But in recommending that women buy and read it, I take particular satisfaction in knowing that not only is it a work of rare quality, but also that its appearance is a result both of the good judgment of a feminist press and of Riis' personal decision to publish within a feminist framework. At a time when outlets for feminist writers remain frustratingly limited, support of such a successful collaboration reassures feminist presses and writers that there is indeed an audience for their books, encourages the presses to expand, and this in turn increases the possibilities for writers to find publishers for their works.

One of the most striking characteristics of Riis' *The True Story of Ida Johnson* is its style. Written in short, untitled and unnumbered sections, the novel discloses the details and events in the life of a working-class Canadian woman, Ida Johnson. Many of these are almost self-contained and read like prose poems or dramatic monologues; often they end in terse, sometimes humorous, sometimes epigrammatic fashion, and it is these clipped and sharp endings which contribute to the novel's quick pace and extreme readability. Though Riis gave the very real story of Ida a supernatural and gothic-type context and also focused on Ida's ethereal and fantastic friend Lucy, it is Ida with her acute powers of observation and her wit who totally dominates the novel, overshadowing her superficially more exotic friend. Those sections dealing with her own life and those monologues delivered in her own voice are so carefully executed and so individual in tone and attitude that Ida

Johnson emerges as a moving and powerful figure, one whom we cannot easily dismiss or forget.

The narrative begins one night when a trucker, at the end of his fruit run to Calgary, Alberta, suddenly sees what he thinks is a body. But the body turns out to be a rather young hitch-hiker Luke, who insinuates he knew the trucker was coming to pick him up. Somewhat unnerved, the trucker nevertheless gives him a ride and eventually brings him to a cafe where Ida Johnson is a waitress. Luke and Ida eye each other cautiously. According to Luke's view of her, the waitress is neither unique nor special:

She's gone to fat, thought Luke. Her uniform was white and stiffly starched. It came halfway down her calf though the buttons strained against her midriff. An attempt had been made to order her dull heavy hair into a bun. Her eyes were smudged with mauve shadow. (12)

Ida, on the other hand, is intrigued by the young man. She finds him mysterious and glamorous, fantasizes he might be a film star, and hopes (and expects) that he will proposition her. At the same time, his stare makes her feel self-conscious, uncomfortable; he seems strangely familiar. But Luke does not proposition her. Instead, he demands that she tell him her life story, tell it completely truthfully. Only after being assured that he will pay her twenty dollars and buy her breakfast, does Ida consent and begin the monologue.

The bargain between Luke and Ida reverses, of course, the reader's expectations; instead of being asked to focus on the intriguing, ghost-like Luke, the reader is forced to concentrate on the ordinary waitress. Both this reversal and the contrast between the two characters enable Riis to make a clear statement about lives such as Ida's: what appears "ordinary" or "common" is in fact rich material for fiction, often as rich as that which has the more obvious trappings of mystery. As Riis states about Ida's parents: "... [they] appeared to be simple unassuming people; but none are that" (26). And as Ida begins to reveal her past, the reader does indeed learn to what degree the seemingly undistinguished and familiar is taken for granted, to what degree it can be astonishing, can be extraordinary, can be the object of admiration.

Ida's life, we quickly realize, is ordinary and common only in the sense that it is shared by many women. From the outset it is obvious to us that it is controlled and inhibited by her class and her sex. Ida herself is not particularly aware of this, for she is neither introspective nor



reflective. She does not interpret her life, nor analyze the course it takes. She simply moves from event to event, telling her story chronologically, beginning with her earliest memories. Throughout, she is honest, finds no need to edit out what might seem unpleasant or unflattering. Thus, she has little trouble keeping her promise to Luke. She does not judge herself and remains totally indifferent to the judgments of others; as a result, each episode is described naturally, just as she remembers it.

Typical of her style and manner is Ida's description of her religious upbringing:

When I was two I started Sunday School and so and so forth for many years. I went because that's what kids did on Sunday mornings and because I won everything for attendance and knowing my verses and being fairly polite. I won plaques. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" is one I still have somewhere. I really got to know Jesus, you know? When I was eight some kids who I won't name and me headed out for the Bar W ranch where we knew they had a few sheep but the full grown ones were truly enormous so we got hold of this lamb and held it good so we could hit it with rocks. In general we made a mess of it and it took a long time before it was dead and some of the kids got sick but I had enough smarts to bring matches and got everyone organized into getting wood and what-not and we had some largish rocks so as to build an altar but the burning wool stunk so bad we couldn't finish with it so we left. It was time to get home anyway. I ripped my arm along some barbed wire as in explanation of the blood for my mother. (27)

Here Ida neither sentimentalizes nor romanticizes herself. Her meekness and goodness is ironically contrasted with her brutality, her capacity for violence; the emptiness of the religious training is as obvious as the uninhibited cruelty of the children. Yet Ida is not ashamed of the episode. She describes it casually, matter-of-factly, with just a touch of pride: "... I had enough smarts to bring matches and got everyone organized. ..."

In all of her monologues, Ida displays the same non-judgmental quality, the same lack of self-consciousness. She describes all the events in her life till the age of 14, when she became pregnant and was forced to marry, with no sense of regret or bitterness. Certainly there is nothing unusual about those first 14 years, nothing unusual about her childhood ending so prematurely and so abruptly. As one of the local men states succinctly about the girls/women of the district: "Fuck man, most of them are bleeding like stuck pigs before they're ten around here" (50).

Ida's own brutality, first exhibited by the episode with the lamb and later by the murder of her husband and two children, is in complete harmony with her environment and with the general attitude toward women. Forced to be a wife and mother at the age of 14, Ida tries to live up to her obligations and duties, attempts to accept the natural course outlined for her, accept it as she has seen others accept it. However, the effect of this kind of life on her, the effect of her husband's alternating possessiveness and indifference is insidious. As Ida expresses it in one of those unassuming, understated, but extremely powerful statements: "... I got used to it. I got used to being a quiet sort of person till I couldn't remember not being so" (54). But her husband's oppressiveness is quite real, as is Ida's unarticulated disappointment in the life she is leading. The promises are never fulfilled, and she cannot delude herself forever:

If there really aren't such things as you're led to believe such as love or even real hate or just happiness then you should see it clear and not be made to lie about it so you fool even yourself maybe. (55)

It is Ida's succinct statements such as the one above, as well as her monologues which are the real achievement of *The True Story of Ida Johnson*. It is through them that Riis reveals her sensitivity to the rhythms and flow of everyday speech, to the richness of plain language. At the same time, Riis shows an acute awareness of the pain and poverty of working-class life, an awareness which is never expressed with condescension or melodrama.

Perhaps the most disturbing and dramatic event in Ida's life is her murder of her husband and two small children. In one of the most restrained and powerful passages of the novel, the narrator describes Ida's activities on the day before she murders her family.

On the morning of October 15, 1965 Ida took Debbie and the baby over to her Mom's house where she did a wash and drank four cups of coffee. She brought the kids home for lunch: she and Deb had Kraft dinner and Cokes; Danny had Gerber carrots and a bottle. After putting them to bed she watched *As The World Turns* on TV and asked Carole over for coffee. Carole gave her an oven mitt as a birthday gift and stayed with the kids while Ida collected her dried laundry. It was a cold clear bright day with a high of 36°F. Derek came home for supper at five and they had sirloin steaks for supper. Ida and Debbie ate butter-scotch pudding for dessert. Derek declined the pudding, drank a quart of milk straight from the carton, told Ida she was getting



fat again then left to play hockey (defense) in High River.  
Ida ironed until nine and let the kids stay up with her for  
company. . . . (57)

This is Riis, it seems to me, at her very best: her vision is precise and un-blurred, so that the objects and actions are clearly defined and the suffocating nature of the life of the *18-year old* woman perfectly understood. At the same time, the murders are not justified or excused. They are simply given an accurate context. And having provided the context, the narrator can then allow Ida to describe the murders herself. That night, thinking that she hears Lucy calling her, Ida steps out of her trail-er into the darkness:

The black scared me and the wind and the sounds I couldn't see. Then suddenly everything still and clear, fear lifting like a fog. I went inside for the bread knife and put it back for the meat cleaver. I killed him first. Quick. Not a sound. A clean clean perfect clean slice down through the throat past the throat through the neck not quite through. Clean. And his blood so red and thick I didn't know. I kissed him. Blood thick in my mouth and my nose, in my hair. Thick and red and good. The babies. Clean quick slice slice like a butcher. I'm a butcher. Everything red and clear as a bell. I turned the gas on. I had a shower and set my hair. I did a manicure under the dryer. Clean nightgown white and crisp and cool. Derek's coat, matches and a pack of Players in the pocket. Outside. I lit a smoke and threw it in through the door. The sky was red and clear as a bell. (60)

The explosion erases all trace of the murders and, with the exception of her admission to her father, Ida emphatically denies any knowledge of the cause of the explosion. This is, of course, not surprising. What is surprising is the way she absorbs the event. She never reflects on it, never exhibits either guilt or shame; as a result the entire episode takes on an aura of normalcy, of ordinariness, so that further comment seems superfluous. The effect on the reader, however, is just the opposite: for the detailed context provided by the narrator and the lack of judgments and moral conclusions create an atmosphere in which the reader is forced to grapple with basic and difficult issues relating to women's own violence and responsibility for it.

The placement of the murders exactly midway in the novel is also significant, for it enables us to compare Ida's life before and after she takes control of it. Only initially does it seem to be in any way different. Having set herself free, Ida begins trying to live for herself, to identify and meet her needs. But after the first wave of excitement, she begins

to drift, never travelling further than Vancouver. She has numerous adventures and misadventures, many of them comic in nature. But the comedy does not hide the fact that her options are frighteningly limited. In the end, she is back where she started; she remains trapped.

Ida is ultimately liberated, if one can call it that, through her reunion with her childhood friend Lucy. I felt disappointed that Riis did not have enough confidence in Ida's narrative or in her own powers as a realistic writer to allow Ida and her world total dominance in the novel. Instead, she introduced another woman to act as a complement to Ida's pragmatic, unreflective approach to life. Lucy, Ida's best friend, enters her life as a child and continues to haunt it till the two women become spiritually united. Like Ida, Lucy is born with severe handicaps: "She was female, poor, and Indian in a male, material white world. Her life seemed a predetermined one that left little room for manoeuvre" (43). But Lucy remains immune to her obvious limitations, runs away from the Reserve at an early age, and proceeds to travel around the world alternating between glamorous and mundane jobs. Throughout she philosophizes, discusses the existence of God, the efficacy of will, while simultaneously exerting her supernatural powers and changing her gender as easily as her places of residence. In short, she seems to have the capacity to leap over all the restrictions and boundaries which shape Ida's life.

We are, of course, in the realm of fantasy, where everything is possible and nothing needs to be explained. Nevertheless, both Lucy and her world should be emotionally accessible to us. I do not feel that they are. To me Lucy is an intellectual exercise; she remains all words, all abstractions. She and the exotic world in which she seems to move pale next to the real world which Ida presents to us; her philosophical statements appear empty next to Ida's plain speech. Furthermore, the mysteriousappings, the hidden clues to her whereabouts and identity, the unsettling coincidences, the ominous dates, all seem petty when compared with the genuinely gothic nature of Ida's life. In the end, the reunion between the two women (with Luke as intermediary) has no emotional credibility and verges on being silly.

The difference between the two women and the way they are characterized is perhaps best illustrated by their divergent views of lying. As always, Lucy is the purist:

"If you believe in lies, you're dead." "Jeez," Ida would counter, "you got to lie to stay out of trouble sometimes." (44)

Ida understands full well the impossibilities and contradictions of the world in which she lives; she understands how easily lies are given and how easily they are swallowed. And it is her lies, as well as her truths, that expand the reader's perception, that allow for a new perspective on what seems totally familiar and mundane. It is her clear and sharp voice that continues to haunt us; her uncompromising refusal to sentimentalize and trivialize herself or her feelings that grounds the novel in a world that we recognize as real, that we can claim as our own.



## ELLY BULKIN

### **SHE WHO: A GRAPHIC BOOK OF POEMS by Judy Grahn.**

Designed by Wendy Cadden and Karen Sjöholm. Diana Press, 4400 Market Street, Oakland, Ca. 94608. 1977. 89 pp. \$6.00, plus 15% for postage and handling.

I do not come to Judy Grahn's *She Who* without anticipation and expectations. I do not know if anyone who has been reading her poetry for many years can escape them when faced with the publication—long planned—of this book of poems, all but one written in a nine-month period in 1972.\*

Rarely seen away from the West Coast, little given to interviews or public statements, Grahn is unique among lesbian-feminist poets. She has built an enviable—and thoroughly deserved—reputation primarily on the strength of three short books published by the Women's Press Collective (which she co-founded): *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* (1971); *The Common Woman* (1971); and *A Woman is Talking to Death* (1974). Her reputation has been spread to a wider audience on the basis of selections from these books printed in women's periodicals and in women's press and mass market anthologies; some of the individual poems from *She Who* have also been previously printed, as well as read by Grahn on *Where Would I Be Without You* (Olivia Records, 1976).

First publishing in what now seems another era, one offering comparatively little lesbian poetry, Grahn began to fill the need for such poetry. Working-class, female, and lesbian, she has no stake in the established literary tradition and its social/political/aesthetic values. She seems, at times, to mock them intentionally: she calls one book *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*, even though the title work is clearly written in prose, and the word "dyke" can hardly help the book slip unobtrusively onto a college reading list.

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\*"A Funeral: Plainsong from a Younger Woman to an Older Woman" was written after 1972.



Her poems have helped to establish a tradition of women's/lesbian poetry that is personal, accessible, non-hierarchical. Grahn writes in this tradition in *The Common Woman*, which appeared both in *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* and as a separate book. This seven-poem sequence celebrates the waitress, the mother, the lesbian, the prostitute, the childhood friend:

For all the world we didnt know we held in common  
all along,  
the common woman is as common as the best of bread  
and will rise  
and will become strong. . . .

(“Vera, from my childhood”)

Grahn's direct, everyday language with its rhetorical drive draws on oral traditions of literature—biblical, Black, beat—and seems meant to be read aloud at women's meetings. Most often, she seems to hide the “craft” of her poems, giving the impression that she wrote them quickly—without careful attention to structure and language and rhythm.

*A Woman Is Talking to Death's* deceptively “non-poetic” opening, the narrative of a motorcyclist killed instantaneously on a bridge, leads into a tightly woven series of events, prose interrogations, lyric passages, and recurrent phrases that create a painfully wonderful poem. Much of the power stems from Grahn's honesty. Even as she describes the brutal impersonality of the police, she recognizes that, sometimes, like them, she too “has no child” in her, no compassion. Most “bitterly,” she regrets her “acts of omission,” her failures to comfort and love women who've needed her:

. . . I confess to kissing the top of a 55 year old  
woman's head in the snow in boston, who was hurt more  
deeply than I have ever been hurt, and I wanted her as  
very few people have wanted me—I wanted her and me to own and  
control the city we lived in, to staff the hospital I  
knew would mistreat her, to drive the transportation  
system that had betrayed her, to patrol the streets  
controlling the men who would murder or disfigure or  
disrupt us, not accidentally with machines, but on pur-  
pose, because we are not allowed out on the street alone—

The matter-of-factness of her narrative undercuts the potential for moralizing or self-pity. “That's a fact,” she keeps observing as she builds image after image of women ignored, derided, abused. Standing before death, she holds fast to the promise of victory for those women whose

"meat hangs on [their] bones/for [their] own use."

Like *A Woman Is Talking to Death, She Who* deserves to be read aloud. The title poem is sheer sound, two words accented by capital letters and punctuation to create a mood that is alternately serious, questioning, humorous. The play with language is typical of Grahn's strongest works. Much of her poetry rests on the cumulative effect of parallel structure, on strong rhythm, on repeated words—sometimes slightly altered—that weave in and out of lines, on sounds that slide from one line to the next.

Not the poetry of the single striking image, Grahn's poetry in *She Who*, as in her other works, must be quoted at length—and said aloud—to communicate its feel:

She Who marks her own way, gathering.  
She Who marks her own difference.  
She Who differs, gathering her own events.  
She Who gathers, gaining  
She Who carries her own ways,  
gathering She Who waits,  
bearing She Who cares for her  
own name, carrying She Who  
bears, gathering She Who cares  
for She Who gathers her own ways,  
carrying  
the names of She Who gather and gain,  
singing: I am the woman, the woman  
the woman—I am the first person.

("She Who Continues")

Another poem begins:

The enemies of She Who call her various names  
a whore, a whore  
a fishwife a cunt a harlot a harlot a pussy  
a doxie a tail a fishwife a whore a hole a pussy  
a cunt a bitch a slut a slit a hole a whore a hole  
a vixen/ a piece of ass/ a dame-filly-mare  
dove-cow-pig-chick-cat-kitten-bird  
dog-dish/ a dumb blonde

and ends:

She Who bears it  
bear down, breathe

bear down, bear down, breathe  
 bear down, bear down, bear down, breathe  
 She Who lies down in the darkness and bears it  
 She Who lies down in the lightness and bears it  
 the labor of She Who carries and bears is the first labor  
 all over the world  
 the waters are breaking everywhere  
 everywhere the waters are breaking  
 the labor of She Who carries and bears  
 and raises and rears is the first labor,  
 there is no other first labor.

("The Enemies of She Who Call Her Various Names")

Unfortunately, the placement of many of the 54 images of women in this 89-page book interrupts the almost cascading movement within many of the poems that is so essential. The long closing poem, for example, "The Woman Whose Head Is On Fire," covers eleven pages—with nine graphics interspersed. I found it impossible to turn the page without my eye moving away from the text and to the often striking graphics and photographs. Three pairs of facing pages are laid out so that the text begins on the top of the left-hand page and ends on the bottom of the right one (or vice versa) with a large picture covering the rest of each page; certainly the diagonal visual sweep necessary to follow Grahn's words is not possible as one unbroken gesture, given the interruption of pictures that measure at least 4" x 6".

I finally settled for reading the poems through carefully and then going back to look at the graphics and photographs. I liked nearly all of the pictures—of factory workers, athletes, older women, prisoners, mothers; of white women, Black women, Native American, Asian-American, and other Third-World women. Ironically, most of the women represented visually are among those least likely to be able to afford the book's \$6 price. If I had not received a free review copy, I too would have balked at this price, preferring a \$3 book of perhaps thirty pages of poetry to a high-priced "graphic book of poems with 54 images of women."

Yet the pictures do serve the function of visually depicting Grahn's "She Who." Lacking the tight structure of "The Common Woman" and "A Woman Is Talking to Death," *She Who* is loosely held together by the nine She Who poems; they frame the book and appear singly and in pairs throughout. They include some of the strongest poems in the book: "She Who Continues," "Bowl of Blood," "The Enemies of She Who Call Her Various Names," "The Woman Whose Head Is on Fire."



They also include relatively weak poems. A four-line poem, "She Whose Skin Is Luminous," creates an amusing picture of a woman whose dog mistakes her face outside its window for the moon, but the poem lacks (and is clearly intended not to have) the power of Grahn's "She Who" chants. In "She Who Sits Making a First Fire," Grahn ingeniously transforms the watching goat into a roasted meal, but the poem seems forced, self-conscious; I found myself admiring Grahn's verbal dexterity rather than losing myself in the poem.

This unevenness exists, I think, elsewhere in the book. "Sheep," about the power of the shepherd over his sheep and his wife, might better have been left out of the collection; lines like those spoken by the sheep at the poem's end succeed neither as serious statement nor as satire:

"I'd will my wool to the shepherd's wife  
If she could change the shepherd's life,  
But I myself would bring him low  
If only, *only* I knew how."

The parables of "The Wolf Spider" and "The Many Minnows" describe clearly united victories against male animal aggressors, but are certainly not among *She Who*'s most effective poems.

Perhaps I am overly critical of these poems. They do not so much fail in themselves, but rather fail to meet my expectations for Grahn's poetry. *She Who* suffers from the five-year gap between Grahn's writing them and their publication in book form. In those five years, they have been doled out at Grahn's readings, in women's publications (unfortunately not listed here), and, most recently, on the record *Where Would I Be Without You*. In those five years, *A Woman Is Talking to Death* has been published; *The Common Woman* has lent its title to bookstores, restaurants, and periodicals, and its poetry to posters, flyers, and brochures. Both have settled quickly into a kind of informal canon of lesbian-feminist poetry, inevitably included in anthologies, touchstones of lesbian-feminist writing.

Hardly any book could withstand the resultant burden of expectation on *She Who*. If the book fails as a whole to fulfill that expectation, a number of the twenty-three poems in it do not. The poetry I have already quoted at length is splendid in its sense of language and sound, in its rhythmic affirmation of women. The ironic humor of Grahn's previously published work recurs in *She Who*. In *The Common Woman*, she had written:



She has taken a woman lover  
whatever shall we do  
she has taken a woman lover  
how lucky it wasnt you

("Carol, in the park, chewing on straws")

In *She Who*, Grahn writes:

I am the wall at the lip of the water  
I am the rock that refused to be battered  
I am the dyke in the matter, the other  
I am the wall with the womanly swagger  
I am the dragon, the dangerous dagger  
I am the bulldyke, the bulldagger  
  
and I have been many a wicked grandmother  
and I shall be many a wicked daughter.

Grahn's control of the prose in *A Woman Is Talking to Death* is present too in the *She Who* parable, "The Woman in Three Pieces—One":

She said she was unhappy and they said they would take care of her. She said she needed love and so they raped her and then she wanted to be alone. They locked her into a tiny cell with one tiny window and took away her clothes, turning off all the lights as they left. After a long while they came back and she said, "It's so dark." So they shined a very bright light into her face and she said "I don't like that." . . . "The trouble with people like her" they said later "is that no matter how hard you try to please them, they are never satisfied."

And the strength at the ending of *A Woman Is Talking to Death* is echoed in the powerful last lines of *She Who*'s final poem, "The Woman Whose Head Is on Fire":

the woman who puts things together  
the woman who squats on her haunches  
the woman whose children are all different colors  
  
singing    I am the will of the woman  
             the woman  
             my will is unbending  
  
when She-Who-moves-the-earth will turn over  
when She Who moves, the earth will turn over.

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*Edward the Dyke and Other Poems* is available for \$2.50 from Diana Press.  
*The Common Woman* and *A Woman Is Talking to Death* were issued by the Women Press Collective, 5251 Broadway, Oakland, Ca 94618.  
*Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn* can be ordered for \$5.50 from Olivia Records, P.O. Box 70237, Los Angeles, Ca. 90070.

## BERNICE MENNIS

### **BETWEEN REVOLUTIONS by Enid Dame.**

Downtown Poets Co-op (X-Press Press), Box 1720, G.P.O.  
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11212. 1977. 32 pp. \$1.50.

*Between Revolutions* by Enid Dame is a collection of poems about the time in between, past the political revolutions with their visions and dreams, past the personal rebellions with their clarity and innocence, past them but nowhere yet, a time of no vision, a state defined by what it's not. It's a painful, passive, blank time through which one must "steer . . . without going mad."

The images occurring throughout the collection convey the emotional state of the narrator—dishes piled up, sinks clogged, roaches, garbage, unfinished thesis, cold coffee, vomit, catshit. Things are cracking, rotting, splitting, drowning, hanging suspended, going sour, "coming a little/undone." There is no vision, no myth, "no miracles here/no miracles left" ("Trouble with Endings").

In "Before," the first poem of the collection, the poet personifies the room around her, the surroundings becoming cause, effect, mirror, and symbol of her psychological state:

The catshit reproaches me in the bathroom.  
The icebox has regressed:  
incontinent, it leaks  
and puddles on the floor.  
The drain's in pain again.  
It vomits when I do the dishes.  
The dishes crack.

We're all of us  
a bit unwell.

The concrete images, the short sentences, the direct literal statements, the summing up are characteristic of the poet as she attempts to capture an unconcrete, unfocused mood and feeling.

Dame's most successful poems have a sense of history—personal, political, and ethnic—which gives a depth to her vision, a humor and, at

times, a love which tempers and humanizes that vision. In "Scrapbook" she views her relatives:

Here are my parents  
young and sincere  
in the terrible 30's,  
passing out leaflets  
to bored bus drivers

.....

My grandmother next!  
I knew her old,  
a dry strong wisp  
of a woman:  
scrap-saver, fish-gutter  
scared of our cats.  
Once she was 13  
on Henry Street. Made hats  
for \$.50 a week. Made all  
the cousins laugh.  
The vaudeville uncle said,  
"We oughta be a team."

I knew her old  
in quiet Beaver Falls.  
The cows ate the lawn.  
New York was her Europe,  
her Gemany swallowed  
by Poland, by history.  
She strained elderberries  
through her son's undershirt  
and entertained  
the poultry-farmer neighbors  
with off-color stories.

The poet's Jewish background gives her a past history which continually influences, expresses, and creates her present reality:

a second shadow  
underscores  
my politics, my life

Jews  
can't choose.

("Diaspora 9: Between Revolutions")

In "Diaspora 1," the anti-Semitism, the talk of "the Jewish plot/to buy the government," the "swastika/peep[ing] out among the peacesigns," and the "crosses everywhere" give concrete form to her subjective feeling of alienation and betrayal, to her position as a powerless outsider in



a world of hostility and lies.

"Flatbush Incarnation," the last poem in the collection, effectively interweaves scenes and voices from Dame's personal past:

a fourteen-year old girl  
behind a rainy window  
.....  
A self-declared agnostic  
who bites her nails to blood

her Jewish past:

The women  
shawl their hair  
and carry babies.  
And Yiddish  
is a spoken language  
on Coney Island Avenue.

and her political past. The past clearly influences and limits her present. But for a wistful timeless moment Dame sees herself out of history:

Walking home  
through the graying rain  
anachronistic in  
my hair-knots, my serape  
perhaps I've been  
sneaked into  
another incarnation  
before Auschwitz, before Warsaw  
before the Rosenberg case  
before the cold war  
iced over our roots  
before the nervous breakdowns  
before Vietnam  
  
time-captured  
in another, safer world  
with all my possibilities  
intact.

This is not, however, "another, safer world." "Sanctuary" ends with the feeling aroused by this world and this history:

We crack walnuts  
and curse our limitations  
    our enemies,  
    our friends.  
  
All we've salvaged  
is anger.



We treat it lovingly,  
breathe it to life,  
watch it grow.

We're addicts. It's become  
our element, our air.  
It keeps us afloat.

It fills the three rooms

We don't let it out.

In some way the above lines capture both the strength and weakness in Dame's poetry. There's power, strength, directness, honesty, and humor in many of her poems, and they succeed as poems. But the effect of the whole volume is less successful. At certain points the poems begin closing in on themselves as if they, as well as their subject matter, have nowhere to go. Images are repeated without a real development or crystallization of her vision. It gets stuffy, at times, in the closed sanctuary of internalized anger.

The state "between revolutions" may be a state of no air, no visions, of blankness, repetition, internalized anger, and Dame captures some of that painful reality. But the poetry about that state must, in some way, get beyond that reality even while expressing it.

## LORRAINE BETHEL

**DOGMOON** by Rikki Lights. Sunbury Press, P.O. Box 274, Jerome Ave. Station, Bronx, N.Y. 10468. 1977. 50 pp. \$2.50.

Rikki Lights is a conjurer. In *Dogmoon*, her first volume of poetry, she conjures up a world of Black female rituals and rites with a collection of spells and chants that derive their power and strength from the "inner beauty and despair ridden lives" ("Music Is") she knows intimately as a contemporary Black woman. At its best Lights' poetry works like magic, transporting us effortlessly and invisibly from one point to the next, one feeling to another, calling up emotions and evoking experiences with a mystical Black female language and sensibility.

*Dogmoon* is composed of four sections. The book begins with a series of short poems on various themes, most concerning the question of romantic love—its joy, its absence, its pain and denial. The section starts with "Gut Riddle," a poem that raises the question of male fear of female sexuality with this powerful image:

... papa say red woman mouf  
like running snake pit  
deep down hole in earth  
i call it root.  
deep down hole in me,  
papa say  
snake pit?

The image of the vagina as a snake pit calls up classic male attitudes towards the female body as dangerous, evil and unclean. Woman as temptress. The first three lines of the poem, "who got ya/ who had ya/ papa say/," also invoke the patriarchal vision of women as commodities, and their bodies as objects to be acquired, gotten and had by men. Throughout the love poems in the first section of *Dogmoon*, and in much of the rest of the book, we observe Lights fighting against these sexist attitudes in the most intimate settings. Her struggle to maintain her integrity and independence as a Black heterosexual woman, and to reclaim and assert her sexuality in the face of male attitudes like those in "Gut Riddle," is the central theme of the opening section of *Dogmoon*.

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The struggle is difficult and often self-defeating, and this is illustrated vividly in a series of poems in which the poet leaves or rejects relationships and men who threaten to limit and restrict her. "Absence" is by far the best of this group:

we rose early up that morning.  
i always the sleepier,  
followed just a little ways behind.

we moved quickly all  
my crowded belongings.  
we suitcased my heavy motions,  
city jeans, and dirty underwear.  
we baptized the blood stains from  
your mattress. . . .

now your room is larger  
clean.  
there is more room for you.  
you can pace around where  
once just my body lay  
with its foaming temptation  
and tease for your weakness.

where once my bed stood  
yawns an empty space  
of oriental rug for you to walk on.

"Absence" illustrates what is at once most pleasing and disappointing about much of *Dogmoon*. The images Lights uses in fleshing out the details of the separation in the poem are made almost superfluous by the incredible strength of the concluding lines. In these three lines Lights captures the essence of the male power demands that make this and many other heterosexual relationships intolerable for women. It is a beautifully concise and precise image—rug replacing bed, passive inanimate object replacing a symbol of an active, sexually demanding woman.

Such moments are not infrequent in *Dogmoon*—they are the magical instances when Lights finds the perfect image to convey what she wishes to say, and makes us feel that no other image would work as well. Unfortunately, as in "Absence," Lights often lets us see too much of the preliminary work required to produce such images. We are presented with drafts of poems, very close to final versions, but still needing good solid editing. I found myself doing such editing mentally throughout the book, but particularly with the poems of this first section, stripping them of extraneous elaborations so as to arrive more quickly at the fine and concise images Lights frequently achieves at the close of a piece.



Sometimes Lights is content to make a poem that is exquisite in its simplicity, its economy of images. In such poems she is a writer sure of her craft, secure in her artistry, fully and firmly in touch with her Black female creative powers and sensibility:

we lock eyes  
laugh the bottom out of hell,  
gnash teeth in kisses,  
trade skins.

("Lovers")

wrinkled passion,  
woman's song sits,  
warming wine bottles  
with empty breasts.

("Corner")

In these poems Lights seems to be creating something that suggests a type of Black female *haiku*. Because this appears to be a form uniquely suited to her poetic voice I hope it is one that Lights will pursue more in future works than she does in this volume.

Lights occasionally pushes this form beyond its limits. The result is a poem like "Double Jeopardy" that is not only concise but cryptic as well—inaccessible to us due to a lack of details, images, and facts to fill out the sketchy outline we are given. The arrangement of poems in the first section of *Dogmoon* often undermines individual poems and their ability to function as a thematic unit, contributing to this inaccessibility. As a result, we are left without a sense of the first part of the book as a whole, and instead find ourselves experiencing it as a series of discreet poetic moments frequently valuable in and of themselves but unrewarding as a cohesive unit.

The last three sections of *Dogmoon* consist of three longer poems, "Conjurations With My Mother," "Dissection," and the title poem. "Conjurations With My Mother" captures the particular nature of the relationship between Black mothers and daughters. Lights has isolated the difficult conversations we contemporary Black women often find ourselves engaged in with our mothers. The poem reminded me of several woman-to-woman talks I've had with my mother, particularly around issues of Black feminism and lesbianism:

Slow earth turning.  
Mind now.  
Go.  
Go slow. . . .

Oh, now.  
Oh, chile  
Baby. . .  
Go slow.

The Black mother voice in the poem is one that Black women of the poet's generation will find hauntingly familiar. The essence of the generational tension and conflict between the two voices will also be well known territory for many Black and other Third-World women.

The mother's advice to the poet regarding "slow earth turning" is complex and contradictory. "Earth turning" suggests complete and radical change, turning things upside down, and is an important concept for Black and other Third-World women who are at the bottom of the present system and must struggle against racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism to "put this world right again."<sup>1</sup> It is an image that would seem totally incompatible with the term "slow," and this incompatibility is the center of tension throughout the poem and in the lives of many radical Black women whose mothers certainly understand and support our struggle to defeat a system that is perjorative, oppressive and often fatal for themselves and their daughters. Yet, like the mother in "Conjurations," Black mothers have first-hand knowledge of the oppressive system they and their daughters must struggle against. This gives them not just an understanding of the necessity of that struggle, but a familiarity with the immense dangers the system holds for those who oppose it and a healthy respect for the power it uses against such opponents as well.

Therefore, though as Black and Third-World women many of us can locate our present strength and the beginnings of our radicalism, feminism, lesbianism, and Black woman-identification in strong, loving, capable mothers who raised us to perform earth-turning feats, we also find them qualifying that "earth turning" with warnings like "slow" and "careful." We are in the perplexing situation of being given a green light and a yellow light in the same instant: full speed ahead daughter, but proceed with caution.<sup>2</sup>

Lights responds to her mother's cautionary advice with an earth-turning spirit we sense she has inherited from the very woman she struggles against:

Moma, I heat.  
 I moon whisper  
 Sweat. . . .  
 Moontide don't crack my water flow,. . .  
 Moma you Watch  
 Moma you Watch  
 Moon don't crack me!  
 Sky high blossom, Moma  
 A.B. Degree.  
 M.D.  
 Jazz tough, Moma  
 Watch me.

She uses the tactic many of us have employed with our own mothers,  
 marshalling our degrees and world knowledge in favor of our ability for  
 fast earth turning. We can anticipate from our own unsuccessful efforts  
 that no amount of white male credentialing will prove sufficient to still  
 the concerned Black mother voice:

World winding big circles, Chile.  
 Baby home now.  
 God.  
 Believe?

Or, as my mother puts it in her periodic calls to me, "When was the last  
 time you went to church?"

Lights, frustrated by this point as only our mothers can make us,  
 resorts to criticizing the inadequacies in her mother's lifestyle, and the  
 conversation intensifies:

Oh Moma slave  
 You hump Papa.  
 Spit!  
 Moma space fly.  
 You slow.  
 Oh Moma, I!  
 us! . . .  
 . . . Oh walk Baby.  
 Go slow.  
 Strut Like Me.  
 oh? moma.  
 OH MOMA!  
 US!

I find the poem's ending affirmative and Black-woman identified. In  
 saying "us" Lights acknowledges the connection between her mother



and herself, and by extension that between all Black and Third-World women, as a primary and crucial one. It is the essence of Black feminism reduced to a word. Here is the realization that our struggles as contemporary Black feminists have their genesis in an overwhelming love for our foremothers, and a desire to reclaim their lives as valuable and valid in a society that has attempted to negate them.

The mother in Lights' poem voices this understanding in telling her "You walk/ You strut/ Just like me." It is at once an observation and a directive that stands against all the conflict in the poem as a primal feminist realization. The lines are beautifully simple, and they give me hope and energy for the struggle we share with the poet: the search to find the sister we all need in the mother we've always had, and to understand the complexity of this primary relationship described by Lights as "the cutting genesis of my spirit/ from the blood of my mother's bed. . ." ("Music Is").

"Dissection," the third section of *Dogmoon*, is a long prose poem. In the poem Lights trains her poetic vision on her experiences as a Black woman in the world of white male Western medicine. The cover note tells us that Lights is a third-year medical student, and this allows her to take the poet's voice into places where it is seldom present to challenge the supposed dichotomy between science and art. "Dissection" concerns the examination of a

Naked dead female  
with sutured right thigh  
Cat gutted veins  
Pubis shaved  
Labia bare.

Throughout the poem Lights works to achieve a fiercely honest language of the body, never shrinking from stripping away the medical jargon so that we can understand in horrible detail exactly what indignities our sister's body receives in the name of medical education. She places herself continually in the other woman's body, emphasizing the connection between the dead female body and the bodies that examine it

Searching for nerves and hiding our own  
beneath nervous laughter;  
Losing sensation like blood,  
We looked past the shock—  
Sipped coffee from plastic cups  
as we discussed. . . .

Lights constantly confronts us with the absurd and predatory nature of medical instruction based on dissecting bodies. The students

Corrected the wonder in our faces  
With an Atlas  
or a Yes,  
this is this  
this is that.  
... She lies silent.  
A thing just like the table;  
her guts spilling past our minds—  
Chunks of flesh charred black  
and falling on the floor.  
Her blood is the ink in our pens.  
A passing exam.  
The vultures would have done a cleaner job.

The poem concludes with Lights comparing this spectacle to the respectful treatment given to the dead in Indian society. We move from "the sound of steel biting through bone" to the peaceful image of Indian "Bones burnt white and shining,/ for the soul returning home." In "Dissection" Lights is concerned with the fact that the human body is something more than simply the sum of its parts. There is an unquantifiable factor that science cannot explain or convey in technical terms. This is the "magic" she refers to in the poem.

In the concluding section of *Dogmoon* we move from the image of the soul returning home to a magical spiritual place in the title poem that could be its destination. The first lines of "Dogmoon" immediately locate us in the special mystical Black female world of myth and ritual that Lights excels at creating: "In the hollow stomach of the night/ caressed by the silver fingers of moss laughing from the branches of the stout oak tree/ came the trickle of the years like blood." In the poem we have the affirming experience of seeing one Black female conjurer use her creative powers and sensibility to present us with another Black female conjurer. Lights uses her word sorcery to give us Nawalah:

... she was like the stout oaks around her—strong  
old wild/ her feet grew beneath the surface of the earth  
where they drew upon the wisdom of the water/ her white  
hair shone like the rough beauty of the silver moss which  
she wore as a shawl about her neck./ the veins in her arms  
stood out firm where the blood flowed like the river  
beneath her wrinkled black skin.

The term "dogmoon" refers to the type of moon that frames Nawalah—



one with a "round yellow face"—and also to the fact that she assumes the form of a dog later in the piece. Nawalah's Black female connection with the lunar powers is established as we learn that "her back and shoulders rolled in rhythm with a distant heart beat and the four faces of the moon."

The conclusion of "Dogmoon" finds Nawalah delivering the child of two runaway slaves—Bolompó and Rulahai. This part of the work fails to sustain the mystical language, sensibility and intense imagery Lights uses to introduce Nawalah. With Nawalah, Lights makes a fine contribution to the literary struggle to reclaim our Black female foremothers—healers, witches, and midwives—for their daughters. In this struggle she joins other contemporary Black feminist writers, most notably Jodi Braxton, who are making a conscious and concerted effort to capture in their poetry the fantasy and magic contained in the lives and spirits of our Black female ancestors.<sup>3</sup> We can only hope for more and sustained portrayals from Lights of women like those she presents us with in "Conjurations With My Mother" and "Dogmoon."

Finally, I must agree with what Audre Lorde states in her introduction to *Dogmoon*. Rikki Lights "has my sister's eyes" and a "Gullah tongue." She sees the world with a uniquely mystical Black female sensibility, and speaks what she sees. She is a visionary poet who, in the words of her "Drum Song," presents us with "a universe of rhythmical magical music locked in words." Her music does for us what Lights says Black music has historically done for Black people—sprinkling into their hands "the gift of the universe,/ a knowledge of all the places that are deepest and hardest to know" ("Music Is"). As Nawalah sprinkles dust over the heads of Bolompó and Rulahai in "Dogmoon," Lights sprinkles the gift of a Black female universe on us, allowing us to begin knowing the places and women in the Black female experience that are the deepest and hardest to know. They are places that I, as a Black-woman-identified Black woman, can see only with someone like Lights who has my sister's eyes, and my mother's and grandmother's as well. I see myself and my sisters in much of her universe in *Dogmoon*, and I like what I see.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This quote is from a speech by Sojourner Truth.

<sup>2</sup>Audre Lorde speaks and writes of these complex realities in Black mother-daughter relationships with great insight and understanding. She has stated that the concept that there is no generation gap between Black women is "both an



oversimplification and a reality."

<sup>3</sup>Braxton's first volume of poetry, *Sometimes I Think Of Maryland* (Sunbury Press, New York: 1978), provides a noteworthy beginning to portraying these women from a Black female mystical sensibility similar to that Lights exercises in "Dog-moon." The poem "Conversion" is an outstanding example of Braxton's innovative use of this sensibility.

## SUSAN GOLDBERG

**MAKING THE PARK** by Karen Brodine,  
Patricia Dienstfrey, Marina La Palma, Laura Moriarty,  
and Rena Rosenwasser. Kelsey Street Press, 425 Hudson Street,  
Oakland, Ca. 94601. 1976. 48 pp. \$3.75.

The distinct voices of five poets together create a complex vision in *Making The Park*. In her introduction to the collection, Susan Griffin points out that the "generic" masculine pronoun which stands for human experience is no longer taken for granted here, that it has, in fact, been replaced by "she." These poets write of women's experience—ranging from the extreme alienation of the mother solely occupied with her children, to another extreme, until now so unfamiliar, somehow, in relation to women, the extreme alienation which comes with a kind of self-granted spiritual freedom. Some of the experiences of women presented here might startle, were they not our own.

What sounds in Patricia Dienstfrey's poems almost like what we have been taught to think of as psychosis is, in fact, the experience familiar to so many women who have felt, in the circumstances of everyday life, absolute terror and isolation, the desire to hide, the loss of connection with one's body, with anything outside oneself. Dienstfrey's poetry expresses, perhaps more strongly than any in the book, a sense of drowning: almost going under, trying to hold on, desperate swimming to the top, then again going under, holding on, swimming to the top. "Self Portrait" describes a woman locked into herself, terrified. It is a strong poem, moving and immediate in its impact. "Phone," a prose piece about the painful almost-impossibility of communicating, is less successful; it is too long and loses its focus. Dienstfrey's most interesting and moving selection is the collection's title poem, "Making The Park," which takes the reader directly into the blurred and anguished mind of a mother who is almost literally trying to stay alive. Nothing is totally real to her; she *invents* reality to keep her children functioning:

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And she's sure there's a park

she remembers

there's a park dark

park she was there green

park the children ran there was a park and

maybe people

.....

She was in the park

on the park her children ran

through the park?

across the park?

on top of the park?

all of the above?

none correct?

how could she find out?

.....

She remembers

she must remember to remember

she must continue

to make

the park

Karen Brodine is represented in this collection by five poems from her first book, *Slow Juggling*. "Slow Juggling" concerns the poet's wish to become "clear" and suggests the conflict between caution and risk involved in this process. But that poem, though its image of juggling suggests stasis or marking time, is definitely part of the forward-moving impulse which runs through all the work in this collection. In "I am the home person," Brodine describes a woman in a state of waiting, dozing, but watching. She is not so much marking time here as biding it. She is "the homed pigeon who ruffles her feathers, expectant/of a message to land on her shoulder/who wraps the bright foil of a sentence around her wrist/then wonders where to deliver it."

In "The House Is Alive, The Snow Is Burning," Brodine describes a very different state. Here calm has been replaced by intensity: "each day my body eats the light/and gives back fever." She desires to "fly apart in crystals"; she wills all her possessions to "fly off that rope and roll into the dark." The pain of changelessness has become unbearable. She expresses her anger at the women who have taught her their way of being, indeed, who have inflicted it upon themselves, in "To The Woman Who Swallows Her Identity."

Brodine's selections have the feeling of having been excerpted



from a larger body of work. The five that appear in this collection represent quite strong choices and provide a good introduction to her work.

The poems of Marina La Palma suggest a shifting back and forth between fear and enthusiasm, the slowness and difficulty of moving forward: "the meanings are rarely clear or dramatic," she says in her first poem; and in her second, "Animals," the conditions she describes seem to allow for little hope or meaning:

we live with the animals here  
in perfect confusion and peace,  
a measured frustration

and death is our lullaby

.....

and all of our lives  
we stay within boundaries  
stone walls and flesh—  
our silent words like pebbles  
fall out of our mouths

and fear is our alibi

But, despite the fear there is movement—slow, clumsy, and encumbered to be sure, and certainly undramatic:

I step heavily.  
wrong way to walk  
on unsure ground  
the boxes slip  
down my hips like baggy clothes  
filled with my life they weigh too much,  
can't be extended into crutches

my weakness grinds things down.

I need to lean on what has gone before  
or be a statue made of glass  
to represent  
capacity to shatter, melt reflect

("Summer Pieces")

La Palma's final (untitled) poem makes a surprising leap. It is a lovely poem, written in a spirit of joy which is in total contrast to what has gone before. I quote it in its entirety:

The poet is a fool  
she is happy without solutions  
she eats apples in bed  
and nods to ragas

outside her house  
the trees are shouting  
like an orchestra

Laura Moriarty's poems are sharp, biting, and satirical. Her three "Event Poems" capture the empty, self-congratulatory atmosphere of a sterile family and social life, imparting at the same time a sense of a rote mechanical quality and an almost nightmarish feeling:

The children would rise early and  
find us huddled against a white hillock.

They would always look the same and  
we would call them names like "Tommy" and  
"Dierdre".

We would do this several times  
before returning for the winter

("Summer People")

In an extremely funny poem, "Thirst," Moriarty has reduced the romantic image of the male lover to an absurdity. "The lover" has become a ludicrous little figure cast in the role of a waiter, "diminished," in the words of Susan Griffin, "and reshaped in the surreal and subjective vision of the author." Moriarty has wiped away forever that self-important, posturing character who has dangled himself foolishly in front of women throughout history.

The lover takes a step, turns  
all the way around  
becomes a waiter in white  
balancing a black tray  
like a button  
He seems very small

.....

The lover carries waterglasses  
full, beaded Tiptoes  
over the bed just missing me

.....

Turns over and over  
eroding a fissure  
Like geography  
he is everywhere  
an abstraction

In yet a different vein, the poems of Rena Rosenwasser are immediate and personal. They have a straightforward feel, a sadness, a

strong emotional underlay. They feel anchored in life, related to a larger frame; they seem to respect and incorporate a sense of a past, of a personal history. I like best the first three, concerned with a relationship between two women, with fear, with communication. In "Inside and Out," the poet describes the pain of waiting alone:

Because your skin is so thin,  
Because you're cold inside  
& also shaking back and forth  
cradling some old wound.  
It's so difficult  
speaking to people.  
Conversation sits inside  
and barely emerges,  
seems to cough when it hits the air.

Because you want to say  
something special  
and don't know how.  
Because you want something  
special and it doesn't come.

The relationship between two women, with its particular quality of identification, is the subject of "Exchange," where the poet "knows your extremes/knows how to slide/right over/false surfaces/wants to sit/in your hand/play with its/temperature." And in "Nostalgia," we feel the intensity of a remembered relationship which was once all-loving and now no longer exists. The inevitability of change, even its desirability, is understood here, but the loss is neither mitigated nor rationalized:

#### NOSTALGIA

the memory of the bed  
Slept in all those years  
the Thoughts you thought  
we brushed  
Arms sometimes Tongues  
large and dark the Vacuum  
that the Dreams slipped into  
what is remembered when the day  
leans over as if we  
Stood together waiting  
in the Shadow  
our Brains already crooked  
with our thoughts each other  
Changing the Dreams  
we were Waking  
waking in the dark  
Wanting to hold onto  
something more



Judging from these selections, we can expect a great deal from the five poets who made this book. *Making The Park* offers a stimulating introduction to their work.

JAN CLAUSEN

**WOMEN ON THE BREADLINES** by Meridel LeSueur.

West End Press, Box 697, Cambridge, Ma. 02139. 1977. Unpagged.  
\$1.00.

**HARVEST** by Meridel LeSueur.

West End Press. 1977. 93 pp. \$2.50.

**SONG FOR MY TIME** by Meridel LeSueur.

West End Press. 1977. 71 pp. \$2.50.

**rites of Ancient Ripening** by Meridel LeSueur.

Vanilla Press. 1975. 57 pp. \$3.60.

"What Happens in a Strike," the first essay in *Harvest*, is an account of the Minneapolis truckers' strike of 1934. LeSueur, who herself participated, describes the weariness, excitement, and impressive organization which prevailed at strike headquarters; the strike-breaking attempts which culminated in a police massacre of unarmed pickets (48 received buckshot wounds; one died); and the increased determination with which the truckers and their families responded.

In 1934 my father was a ten-year-old living in Minneapolis. He had never mentioned boyhood memories of labor agitation, so after I read *Harvest* I asked him what he knew about the truckers' strike of 1934. He did recall, he said, that it had been a "bad strike," marked by violence; and in fact it turned out that my grandfather, who drove a milk truck at the time, was required to join the Teamsters' Union in the aftermath of the strike.

It was strange to realize that I would have had no way of finding out about this important piece of labor history which directly affected my own family if I had not happened to read about it—and in a book which was not available before 1977, given that most of LeSueur's work has been out of print since the "blacklists" of the 1950's. The experience heightened my awareness of the political reasons behind the suppression of this and so many other revealing chapters in American history. And it made me doubly grateful that, throughout the 30's,

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40's, and 50's, Meridel LeSueur was busy recording the experience of white Midwestern working people, an experience which has been excluded not only from conventional written histories, but from the oral histories of many upwardly mobile families who were eager to forget their struggles once they had escaped into the middle class.

Born at the turn of the century, Le Sueur herself comes of a middle-class, if somewhat unconventional, background. Her step-father, a lawyer, was the first socialist mayor of Minot, North Dakota. She was raised in the Midwest and has spent most of her life there; she now lives in St. Paul. During the 1930's she became a Communist; she also achieved a national reputation as a writer, particularly as a writer of short fiction. But she never attempted to confine her impressive energies to a single literary form. She has written novels, a biography, a history of the upper Midwest, poems.\*

LeSueur's early literary success ended with the McCarthy era. Her publishing options became limited almost entirely to Communist periodicals, but she continued to write. A West End Press publicity sheet accompanying *Song for My Time* quotes her remark on this period: "I raised two children by myself, and had to have jobs. . . every night I stuck my head under the water and wrote for two hours, because I thought the working class needed new expressions of American experience!"

It is only during the past several years that LeSueur has once again begun to receive recognition from a limited but enthusiastic circle of leftists and feminists. As her recent publication history shows, this renaissance has been made possible by "small" presses dedicated to publishing work of literary and political merit without regard to its commercial possibilities. The Communist press International Publishers last year reissued the story collection *Salute to Spring*, first published in 1940. The Feminist Press is planning a collection of fiction and essays. Of the books reviewed here, three—*Women on the Breadlines* (journalism from the 1930's), *Harvest* (journalism and fiction, 1929-1946), and *Song for My Time* (journalism and fiction, 1947-1958)—were published in 1977 by the small, leftist West End Press, which plans to reissue several more of LeSueur's early works in the near future. And *Rites of Ancient Ripening* (recent poems) was put out by Vanilla Press, a Midwest-based collective of poets, artists and printers.

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\*See "Meridel LeSueur, Voice of the Prairie," by Patricia Hampl, *Ms.*, August, 1975, p. 62.



## WOMEN ON THE BREADLINES (Journalism from the 1930's)

One of LeSueur's most exciting contributions to a reconstruction of our forgotten—or rather repressed—history is *Women on the Breadlines*, which will be of special interest to feminists. The pamphlet contains four non-fiction pieces, including three remarkable first-person narratives which are essentially oral histories of women trapped in the Depression; "I did not write these stories. I recorded them," LeSueur states in her introduction. Here I was particularly fascinated by the documentation of sterilization abuse and the use of mental institutions as prisons, issues I had naively supposed were "discovered" by contemporary Third World and women's liberation movements. "Sequel to Love," for example, begins:

I am in the place where they keep the feeble-minded at Faribault. This place is full of girls moanin' and moanin' all night. . . .

They won't let me out of here if I don't get sterilized. I been cryin' for about three weeks. I'd rather stay here in this hole with the cracked ones than have that done to me that's a sin and a crime. . . .

In "Women on the Breadlines," the longer title essay (also reprinted in *Harvest*), LeSueur records in direct, spare language her impressions of destitute working-class women encountered in the city employment bureau. The piece is politically effective because it reflects LeSueur's passionate interest in the living world and in individuals; she never sacrifices people and events to the necessity of proving a point. The lives she observes are hard ones, and she conveys their hard realities with a remarkable combination of carefully observed detail and vivid imagery:

A scrub woman whose hips are bent forward from stooping with hands gnarled like watersoaked branches clicks her tongue in disgust.

Her legs are thin but the runs in her old stockings are neatly mended clear down her flat shank.

She is thin as a worn dime with her tumor sticking out of her side.

Yet LeSueur's own optimism—evident throughout her work, but particularly striking in the context of the Depression—makes her sensitive to the pleasure many of these women still take in their lives. Here is Bernice, a young Polish woman who has been "working in people's kitchens for fifteen years or more":

When you speak to her, her face lifts and brightens as if you had spoken through a great darkness, and she talks magically of little things as if the weather were magic, or tells some crazy tale of her adventures on the city streets, embellishing them in bright colors until they hang heavy and thick like embroidery. She loves the city anyhow. It's exciting to her, like a bazaar. . . .

LeSueur's acute examination of the psychology of destitution is always a sympathetic one. Her speculation on women's peculiar response to economic catastrophe has special resonance for a feminist audience:

If you've ever been without money, or food, something happens when you get a bit of money, a kind of madness. You don't care. You can't remember that you had no money before, that the money will be gone. . . . A lust takes hold of you. You see food in the windows. . . . You know it is suicide but you can't help it. You must have food, dainty, splendid food and a bright hat so once again you feel blithe, rid of that ratty gnawing shame.

.....  
It's one of the great mysteries of the city where women go when they are out of work and hungry. There are not many women in the bread line. There are no flop houses for women as there are for men. . . .

. . . A woman will shut herself up in a room until it is taken from her, and eat a cracker a day and be as quiet as a mouse so there are no social statistics concerning her.

Throughout the essay, LeSueur's intense but respectful curiosity about other people's situations contributes to her impressive ability to write about lives very different from her own. Although as an educated, relatively privileged woman, her attempt to place her writing in the service of working people is necessarily fraught with contradictions, it seems to me that here she succeeds remarkably well.

## **HARVEST (Journalism and fiction, 1929-1946)**

In addition to "What Happens in a Strike" and "Women on the Breadlines," the two essays already mentioned, *Harvest* contains six fiction pieces written over a period of more than fifteen years. Though all are set in the Midwest, they treat an interesting range of life experiences and social circumstances, often expressing LeSueur's love of the prairie and its people, and her sense of the deep but fragile connection between the two.

"Harvest" is a portrait of life on a traditional Midwestern farm

about to be transformed by mechanization. "Fudge" is a middle-American horror story; the horror lies in a young girl's discovery that her stultifying small town is incapable of producing even one authentic sexual scandal. In "Autumnal Village" a young mother realizes the barrenness of her existence as the property of a wealthy husband, while in "To Hell with You, Mr. Blue" a very different sort of woman undertakes her own insurrection against male tyranny.

The remaining two stories, "God Made Little Apples" and "We'll Make Your Bed," are told from the point of view of men, one a farmer and one an unemployed lumberjack. Here, despite my dismay at LeSueur's rather sympathetic depiction of some obnoxious male supremacist behavior, I often found myself both convinced and moved, particularly by the portrayal of the aging farmer who must come to terms with the limitations of his existence. Here is LeSueur's description of his encounter with an old sweetheart, unseen in decades:

When he stood by the door looking into the cool, dark summer kitchen, flavorsome, smelling of piccalilli, and—did he imagine it?—the lavender perfume Effie used to use, he grinned sheepishly to feel his heart hammering as he waited for an answer to his knock. But he wasn't prepared for the woman who strode from the darkness, peering at him through the sunlight as if from the grave. She was wearing an old hat and the face of Effie as he remembered her hung like a dream in the layers of old flesh.

(*Harvest*, p. 63)

These stories are engaging, rich in striking descriptive passages, and—with the exception of the heavyhanded but very early "Harvest"—expertly written; but they lack the tragic depth of some of LeSueur's nonfiction. Their strengths derive from her imaginative use of language, her ear for spoken English, and her ability to empathize with many varieties of experience.

Perhaps it sounds presumptuous to say that as I read and enjoyed this book I found myself wishing for some stories based more closely on LeSueur's personal life. I imagine I catch glimpses of her here—in the mother of girl children in "Autumnal Village," in the small-town adolescent of "Fudge," perhaps. But for the most part she is elusive. I think of such left-feminist writers as Doris Lessing and Tillie Olsen, and wonder whether, had LeSueur chosen to write more directly from her own experience, she might have achieved a deeper synthesis of her politics, her observations, and her inner reality. Certainly this would have meant examining her middle-class background—about which, as a Communist



identified with the working class, she was understandably ambivalent. And it might have involved an evaluation of her experience as a woman which could have led her to a more conscious and consistent feminism, a stance perhaps in conflict with her evident desire to present images of working-class solidarity.\*

A word on sexual politics is necessary here. LeSueur is now being billed as an early feminist, and she was that; but she was and is also, to my mind, a curiously inconsistent one. Clearly she has always been strong in her own female identity and deeply interested in the situations of other women. Yet time and again her fiction comes across as an endorsement of—almost as an advertisement for—traditional sexual arrangements.

It is not her heterosexuality I question here; rather, it is her tendency to represent the virility of man and the fertility of woman as the natural correlates of the earth's glorious abundance. The duality of the sexes is seen as symptom and symbol of the life force.

So pervasive is this sexual imagery that it prevents any recognition of heterosexuality as a social institution, a power relationship. "Harvest," with a sexual scenario embarrassingly reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence, is the most blatant offender:

But he came close to her and she was bewitched still of his body  
so she let herself be led straight to the giant and saw all its  
shining steel close to her. . .

(*Harvest*, p. 35)

In the more subtle "Autumnal Village" the ruling-class husband is presented as sexually distasteful, his kiss a "thin peck," while the wife is haunted by the "strong male brogue" of the farmer who gave her a ride. The farmer's "maleness" thus becomes identified with the vitality and authenticity of working-class life, and the embryonic feminist critique clearly present in the story goes undeveloped.

I want to make it clear that I offer these criticisms because I take LeSueur seriously, and not in any attempt to discourage potential readers. Perhaps a passage from "To Hell with You, Mr. Blue," my favorite

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\*LeSueur is a prolific writer. It is entirely possible that among work of hers which I have not seen are pieces which would belie these generalizations. However, though my remarks here are based primarily on *Harvest*, I feel they also apply to the material in *Salute to Spring* (International Publishers)—a more comprehensive collection and probably the best introduction to LeSueur's fiction.

of the stories in this volume, will be convincing on this point. It is an amusing but essentially serious tale of a woman's rebellion against her misogynist gambler-husband and the equally misogynist Mr. Blue, another gambling man she encounters on a bus trip she takes to get an abortion she doesn't want. The dialogue, some of LeSueur's best, is exactly what you would expect to hear on a long bus trip:

"... So you knew Dempsey."

"Did I know him! We were just like that. Oh, a king, a prince, a man among men. I was with him, I came right out of the ring with him after that pretty knockout. . . ."

He wasn't describing love. "Did you know his wife?" she said.

"Sure, of course, natural. I knew his wife."

"What's the matter? You look like you tasted something bad."

"It's bad for a great champ like that to get himself hooked up. A bird like that should never get himself married, that's what I say."

"That's what you say."

"Sure, I say it and I mean it. A bird like that shouldn't do it. It's a crime."

"Sure," she said, "a crime."

"Sure, a crime. What business is it of a fellow like that hooking up? Oh, that night I'll never forget it. Why should he get spliced after a thing like that?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," she said. She felt pretty bitter against him. "She's a nice person," she said feebly.

(*Harvest*, pp. 78-79)

## SONG FOR MY TIME (Journalism and fiction, 1947-1958)

The writing collected in *Song for My Time*—one short story and six pieces of journalism—reflects the experience of a very different era from that which produced the exultant political certainties of *Harvest*. In the title story, set in the immediate postwar period, a grieving woman grasps the political significance of her brother's life and his death in World War II, and is thereby enabled to look beyond the present "dark time" to a future of renewed struggle. But the volume is subtitled "Stories from the Period of Repression," and in fact the country was entering upon the era not only of McCarthyism but also of the Korean War, and of a cancerous economic expansion which was to transform ever more rapidly the social organization and landscape of LeSueur's beloved Midwest. This was also a time of great tension within the Communist Party, culminating in a mass exodus in the wake of Khrushchev's



public admission, at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, of the atrocities of Stalinism.

Given the context, it is unsurprising that those essays in *Song for My Time* which exhibit a clear organization and political assurance reminiscent of LeSueur's earlier nonfiction look back on the experiences of older people whose lives were dedicated to struggle. In "The Return of Lazarus," for me the most successful piece in the book, LeSueur accompanies an old socialist on his return, after many years' absence, to his boyhood farming community. He finds the town decayed, the farmhouse gone, his elderly cousins still slaving to keep ahead of the mortgage. Here LeSueur manages a remarkable portrait of a landscape and a life which remain beautiful even in their desolation. The old man lives in a furnished room in the city; he has spent a lifetime toiling for nothing, or rather for a simple understanding which has been acquired at almost infinite cost. Yet that understanding of social realities is everything to him, and despite his pain and regret he is triumphant: "I found out and stood with the people" (*Song for My Time*, p. 71).

"Of This Time, Upon This Earth," a tribute to the Black Communist leader Bill Herron, is moving also. Yet I was disturbed by its assumption, which was that of the Communist Party at the time, that the solution to racism in American society could and should come through united struggle on the part of all elements of the working class, led by a primarily white Communist Party. Today, passages like the following come across as both naive and patronizing:

I realized how much Bill taught all of us about the Negro. He gently and firmly led us from chauvinism; he was a living example of the strength of the weave of "black and white together."

(*Song for My Time*, p. 44)

The chaos and confusion of postwar America are reflected in the subject matter and rambling structure of three essays which record LeSueur's observations on bus and train trips through the Midwest. "Summer Idyl, 1949," for example, is the story of LeSueur's bizarre adventures during a flood. She observes "that genius of communal warmth which, sadly, in American life is invoked only by disaster, when some kind of reality and love rises like a submerged and magic ship" (*Song for My Time*, p. 26). The people she encounters are often cynical, the scenes decadent, but she draws what comfort she can from this "communal" experience so different from the unity of the Minnesota truckers' strike where, fifteen years earlier, she had described the "organization that comes naturally from the event, of thousands of men [*sic*] con-



ducting themselves as one man, disciplining themselves out of innate and peculiar responsibility" (*Harvest*, p. 16).

Despite this depressing contrast, LeSueur does not lose faith in the American people. In "The Dark of the Time," she remarks:

In the city you hear the words of contempt for our people. You even hear that our people have so many "things"—so many televisions, bathrooms, etc. Returning to the hinterland, I told this to a man who travels the Dakotas and he laughed bitterly. "The thing about capitalist 'things,' commodities, is that they are not permanent. They are an illusion, you never have them. . . now in one whole section of Dakota the outhouse has returned. . . . The killing of the REA has thrown a whole community back to oil lamps, hand milking, outhouses! Everybody knows you never own anything under capitalism—it passes through your hands and one month's backpayment on the installment and whisk—it is gone. . . gone with the mortgage!"

(*Song for My Time*, p. 49)

The white working class, LeSueur is saying, still suffers, still has revolutionary potential. This reminder is relevant today; younger leftists, frustrated by the failure of "the workers" to revolt on cue, do sometimes exhibit the "contempt for our people" which LeSueur noticed in the 1950's. But that is not the whole story. One would expect LeSueur, as a Marxist, to be particularly attuned to the contradictory nature of the political reality she observes. Instead, she often seems to cling to an idealized view of the white working class. The paragraph preceding the one just quoted reads, in part:

The people suffer under capitalism in a different way than a colonial people, for the masks are cunning and the naked wars of aggression are hidden under the words of democracy, and you are delivered into the death of wars against people you do not hate, and made guilty by Nagasakis and Hiroshimas you did not plan.

(*Song for My Time*, p. 49)

There is a truth in this, but it is a half-truth. American imperialism materially benefits even the working class, and the Korean War dead, the coffined "builders, planters, begetters" whose "torn loins" LeSueur laments later in the piece, were also the destroyers, murderers, rapists of a war which foreshadowed Vietnam. On the whole, these essays are best read not for their political analysis but for their vivid depiction of an era, their vignettes of gambling rooms tunnelled beneath corn fields, passengers irritated at the delay when their "express" train keeps stopping

to drop off soldiers' coffins, and funeral mourners harrassed by "the perpetual two, blond, arrow collar, large, well-fed on the people's tax money McCarthy twins familiar to us all" (*Song for My Time*, p. 43).

**rites of ancient ripening** (Recent poems)

In this poetry collection, copyrighted in 1975, LeSueur makes extensive use of Native American symbolism. She also adopts the persona of a Native American woman throughout three sections of the four-part book. At first glance, this approach would seem to be consistent with her early tendency to identify herself with the most oppressed, often to the exclusion of examining her own situation. In some of the poems she does imagine Native American experience in a way I find moving despite my conviction that the best thing white people can do for Third World people is to shut up and let them speak for themselves:

I am an Indian woman  
Witness to my earth  
Witness for my people.  
I am the nocturnal door,  
The hidden cave of your sorrow,  
Like you hidden deep in furrow  
                        and dung  
            of the charnel mound,  
I heard the craven passing of the  
            white soldiers  
And saw them shoot at Wounded Knee  
            upon the sleeping village,  
And ran with the guns at my back  
Until we froze in our blood on the snow

("Dead in Bloody Snow," *Rites*, p. 6)

But in many of these poems LeSueur seems concerned not so much to understand and communicate the experience of Native Americans as to create for herself a pleasing fantasy of a life in tune with natural rhythms. This effort is as destructive to her poetry as it is to her political vision, for the resultant work seems to have little to do with either the world of the Native Americans or that of Meridel LeSueur. Because the writing is ungrounded in the close observation that forms the backbone of LeSueur's best work, poems which repeatedly invoke natural objects (corn, stone, sun, water, seed) succeed in conveying only a vague nostalgia:

Rising in pollen  
we await each other.

Earth roused will bring us home  
     in seed and pollen.  
 Dance the ceremonial together  
     in the entire solar light.  
 Sun shining on all friends.  
 O meet me in the unbombed villages  
     of the earth.

(“Raise the Fruit,” *Rites*, p. 39)

Many of the poems emphasize male-female “polarities.” These are, according to LeSueur, intrinsic to the Native American world-view; but here the choice of symbolism seems, more than anything, a reflection of LeSueur’s own sexual-political outlook:

I lie prone    father husband,  
 Open me kernel, green unfurl me  
 Reach green to my hungry heart, husband.  
 Potent grain and crop await your breast  
 Reach green to my hungry breast  
     into my dust of fire and thorn  
 And face me to your knife of love.

(“Green Unfurl Me,” *Rites*, p. 12)

In “*Corridos of Love*,” a poem in the book’s fourth and final section, LeSueur abandons her persona and seems prepared to address herself directly to the question implicit in the rest of the book: what does it mean for her, a relatively privileged white woman, to say she identifies with the struggles of Third World peoples?

Tell me—the brown woman below the border asked me—  
 Can you reverse the verdict of darkness?

(*Rites*, p. 47)

But rather than replying directly to the “brown woman’s” question—where were you and your people when American imperialism was destroying me and mine—LeSueur answers with a list of wrongs done to white Americans. She piles incident on incident as though sheer volume of words (and exclamation marks) could obliterate the power and significance of that question:

We have wakened screaming at the same savage face of  
     the predator, above us!  
 My village has disappeared in ruin and deadly wind!  
 I have tasted the calcium radiation of the dust,  
 and hear the announcement—keep your children in, today’s snow is  
 radioactive!

(*Rites*, p. 49)



"Doan Ket" ("Solidarity" in Vietnamese; the poem was sent to the North Vietnamese Women's Union) concludes with a fantasy of solidarity which is unconvincing because it simply ignores the real forces which keep women apart:

I saw the women of the earth coming toward each other  
with praise and heat  
without reservations of space.

All shining and alight in solidarity.  
Transforming the wound into bread and children.  
In a new abundance, a global summer.

(*Rites*, p. 54)

In fact, in writing the book LeSueur seems to have directed all her energies towards obliterating reality, rather than coming to terms with it. Quite simply, I wish she had not published these poems.

I am, of course, sorry to be concluding this review on such a note; yet by now it should be clear that one negative judgment can do little to dampen my enthusiasm for a writer I find so interesting, so likeable, so intrinsically relevant to my own life and work. Perhaps a quote from "The Dark of the Time" is appropriate here:

[The artist] must return really to the people, partisan and alive, with warmth, abundance, excess, confidence, without reservations, or cold and merely reasonable bread, or craftiness, writing one thing, believing another, the superior person, even superior in theoretic knowledge, an ideological giant, but bereft of heart and humility.

(*Song for My Time*, p. 58)

"Partisan and alive, with warmth, abundance, excess, confidence. . . ." With delightful accuracy LeSueur's prescription characterizes her own achievement. I will read her past work eagerly as it is reissued, and hope to find her exploring new directions in the work she is said to be pursuing now, with unabated dedication, as she approaches age eighty.

## PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

- Katy Akin, *Impassioned Cows by Moonlight*, poems (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217), 69 pp., \$3.00.
- Carolyn Ashbaugh, *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 431 S. Dearborn, Suite 829, Chicago, Illinois 60605), 288 pp., \$3.95.
- Ellen Bass, *Of Separateness and Merging*, poems (Autumn Press, 7 Littell Road, Brookline, Ma. 02146), 105 pp., \$4.50.
- Eleanor Batchelder, editor, *Plays by Women: A Bibliography* (Womanbooks, 201 West 92 St., N.Y., N.Y. 10025), 40 pp., \$1.25.
- M.F. Beal, *Angel Dance* (Daughters, Inc., 22 Charles St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014), 259 pp., \$5.00.
- Lucia H. Bequaert, *Single Women: Alone and Together* (Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, Ma. 02108), \$3.95.
- Donna Brook, *Notes on Space/Time*, poems (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217), 27 pp., \$2.00.
- Tee Corinne, *Cunt Coloring Book* (Pearlchild Productions, 1800 Market St., Box 151, San Francisco, Ca. 94102), \$2.50 plus \$1.00 postage for first copy, .25 postage for each additional copy.
- Martha Courtot, *Journey*, poems (Pearlchild, "Tribe," 1828 E. 7 St., Tucson, Az. 85719), 22 pp., \$2.00.
- Martha Courtot, *Tribe*, poems (Pearlchild), 28 pp., \$2.50.
- Anna Demeter, *Legal Kidnapping: What Happens to a Family When the Father Kidnaps Two Children*, introduction by Adrienne Rich (Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, Ma. 02108), 148 pp., \$8.95.
- Miriam Dyak, *Fire Under Water*, poems (New Victoria Publishers, Inc., 7 Bank St., Lebanon, NH. 03766), 80 pp., \$3.00.
- Barbara Emrys, *Wild Women Don't Get the Blues* (Metis Press, 815 Wrightwood, Chicago, Illinois 60614), 52 pp., \$3.00.
- Laurel Galana and Gina Covina, *The New Lesbians: Interviews with Women across the U.S. and Canada* (Moon Books, Box 9223, Berkeley, Ca. 94709), 223 pp., \$4.95.
- Gifford Guy Gibson with the collaboration of Mary Jo Risher, *By Her Own Admission: A Lesbian Mother's Fight to Keep Her Son* (Doubleday & Co., Garden City, N.Y.), 276 pp., \$8.95.
- Bernice Goodman, *The Lesbian: A Celebration of Difference* (Out & Out Books, 476 Second Street, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 69 pp., \$3.75.
- Judy Grahn, *Edward the dyke and other poems* (The Women's Press Collective, 5251 Broadway, Oakland Ca. 94618), \$2.50.

- Judy Grahn, *She Who*, a graphic book of poems (Diana Press Publications, Inc., 4400 Market Street, Oakland, Ca. 94608), 92 pp., \$6.00.
- Heresies 3: Lesbian Art and Artists* (Heresies, P.O. Box 766, Canal Street Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10013), 120 pp., \$3.00.
- Polly Joan & Andrea Chesman, *Guide to Women's Publishing* (Dustbooks, Box 100, Paradise, Ca. 95969), 296 pp., \$4.95.
- June Jordan, *Things that I Do in the Dark; Selected Poems* (Random House), 203 pp., \$4.95.
- Jacqueline Lapidus, *Ready to Survive*, poems (Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217), 30 pp., \$1.50.
- Lyn Lifshin, ed., *Tangled Vines: A Collection of Mother & Daughter Poems* (Beacon Press), 95 pp., \$3.95.
- Karen Lindsey, *A Company of Queens* (Bloody Mary Press, 115 Museum St., Somerville, Ma. 02143), 64 pp., \$4.00.
- The Maimie Papers* with an Introduction by Ruth Rosen. Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, eds. (The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568), 1977, 439 pp., \$6.95.
- Linda Marie, *I Must Not Rock* (Daughters, Inc., 22 Charles St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014), 207 pp., \$5.00.
- Sara Miles, Patricia Jones, Sandra Maria Esteves, Fay Chiang, eds., poems, *Ordinary Women* with an introduction by Adrienne Rich (Ordinary Women, P.O. Box 664 Old Chelsea Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10011), 136 pp., \$3.95.
- Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Beacon Press, 25 Beacon St., Boston, Ma. 02108), 143 pp., \$3.95.
- Karen Miller, *Playing The Opposition* (G.P.O. Box 1203, N.Y., N.Y. 10001), 66 pp., \$3.00.
- Oriethyia, *Love Song to the Warriors* (Oriethyia, Box 255, East Durham, N.Y. 12423), 42 pp., \$2.50.
- Marge Piercy, *The High Cost of Living* (Harper & Row), 1978, 268 pp., \$10.00.
- Shirley Powell, *Parachutes*, poems (Mouth of the Dragon Press, Box 107, Cooper Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10003), 59 pp., \$2.50.
- Victoria Ramstetter, *Root Chakra*, poems (Moonshadow Press, P.O. Box 20152, Cincinnati, Oh. 45220), 50 pp., \$2.50.
- Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (W.W. Norton & Company, 500 Fifth Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10036), 77 pp., \$2.95.
- Sharon Riis, *The True Story of Ida Johnson* (Women's Press, 280 Bloor St. W, Suite 313, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V8), 112 pp., \$3.25.
- Maria Roy, ed., *Battered Women: A Psychosociological Study of Domestic Violence* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 450 West 33 St., N.Y., N.Y. 10001), \$10.95.



- Diana E.H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven, eds., *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal* (Les Femmes, 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, Ca. 94030), 298 pp., \$5.95.
- Alix Kates Shulman, *Burning Questions* (Alfred A. Knopf), 1978, 361 pp., \$8.95.
- Erica Silver, *love death and other myths*, poems (c/o Silverman, 102-20 67th Drive, Forest Hills, N.Y. 11375), 65 pp.
- Emily L. Sisley and Bertha Harris, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex: A Tender and Liberated Guide to the Pleasures and Problems of a Lesbian Lifestyle*, illustrated by Yvonne Gilbert, Charles Raymond and Patricia Faulkner (Crown Publishers, One Park Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10016), 220 pp., \$12.95.
- Sue, Nelly, Dian, Carol, Billie, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the Womanshare Collective* (WomanShare Books, P.O. Box 1735, Grants Pass, Or. 97526), 196 pp., \$5.50.
- Valerie Taylor, *Love Image*, novel (The Naiad Press Inc., 20 Rue Jacob Acres, Bates City, Mo. 64011), 168 pp., \$4.50.
- Renée Vivien, *The Muse of the Violets*, translated by Margaret Porter and Catharine Kroger (Naiad Press, Inc., 20 Rue Jacob Acres, Bates City, Mo. 64011), 79 pp., \$4.00 plus 10% postage.
- Chocolate Waters, *Take Me Like a Photograph*, poems (Eggplant Press, P.O. Box 18641, Denver, Co. 80218), 48 pp., \$4.00 plus .50 postage.
- Terry Wetherby, ed., *Conversations: Working Women Talk About Doing a 'Man's Job'* (Les Femmes, 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, Ca. 94030), 269 pp., \$4.95.
- Francie Wyland, *Motherhood, Lesbianism and Child Custody* (Wages Due Lesbians, P.O. Box 326, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 36 pp., \$1.20.
- Rachel Devries, *An Arc of Light*, poems (The Wild Goose Press, P.O. Box 10, Cazenovia, New York 13035), 64 pp., \$2.95.
- Rita Speicher, *Night Lives/Other Lives*, poems (The Wild Goose Press), 72 pp., \$2.95.
- Ginny Vida, ed., *Our Right To Love: A Lesbian Resource Book* produced in cooperation with women of the National Gay Task Force (Prentice-Hall, New Jersey), 320 pp., \$12.95.
- Sojourner: A Third World Women's Research Newsletter* (Harriet G. McCombs, Psychology Dept., University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Ne. 68588).

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**LORRAINE BETHEL** lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is an unpublished black feminist literary critic. She is a spiritual daughter of Zora Neale Hurston, a black woman writer, and shares her desire for "a busy life, a just mind, and a timely death."

**KAREN BRODINE** works as a typesetter and teaches part-time. Two books of her poems are out—*Slow Juggling* and *Workweek*. She belongs to the Women Writers Union, Radical Women (a socialist-feminist organization), and is active in the gay rights movement.

**ELLY BULKIN** is currently working on an article about teaching lesbian poetry. Co-editor of *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* of lesbian poetry (Out & Out Books), she has often reviewed women's poetry in feminist periodicals. She works at the Women's Center of Brooklyn College.

**JAN CLAUSEN**, a lesbian co-mother, is active in the Committee for Abortion Rights and against Sterilization Abuse. Her book of poems, *After Touch*, was published in 1975.

**MICHELLE CLIFF** lives and works in New York City. She has published "Notes on Speechlessness" in the latest issue of *Sinister Wisdom*.

**ENID DAME** lives in Brooklyn, loves cats, writes poetry. She has published one book, *Between Revolutions* (X-Press Press), and will soon bring out another, *Interesting Times*. She belongs to Women's Collage, a poetry-writing support group, which is working on an anthology called *Making Contact*.

**SANDRA MARIA ESTEVES** is Poet/Playwright/& Multi-media artist. Studied at Pratt Institute, Taller Boricua, Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, & New Rican Village, as well as at various political and cultural centers which have survived to provide artistic experiences of quality, sincerity, and direction.

**SALLY GEORGE** lives in Brooklyn and writes fiction. Her short stories have appeared in *Heresies*, *Redbook*, and elsewhere. She has a daughter and is working on a novel. Her hobby is marketing.

**SUSAN GOLDBERG** continues to live in New York City, where she studies classical singing, does free-lance editing, and supports a large family of cats. Her review of Karen Brodine's poetry appeared in *Conditions: Two*. She is currently involved in making a record of Yiddish folk music.

MARILYN HACKER is the author of *Separations* (Knopf) and *Presentation Piece* (Viking); the latter received the National Book Award for poetry in 1975. She is an editor of *The Little Magazine*, and is currently co-editing an anthology of women's poetry for *Chrysalis*; she will also be *Chrysalis*' guest fiction editor in the Fall. She lives in New York City with Iva, aged four.

HARMONY HAMMOND, a painter and sculptor, was one of the original members of A.I.R., a women's co-operative art gallery, and is a member of the collective publishing *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*. She teaches at universities and feminist art programs, gives workshops and lectures on lesbian and feminist artists and their work.

AKUA LEZLI HOPE—Black woman student poet trying to mediate/mitigate training with education [M.S.J. M.B.A.]. She yearns desperately for clarity of vision, to be wonderwielder of craft, toward healing, toward reclamation.

SUZANNE JUHASZ teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her criticism includes *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition*. Her poetry appears in journals and anthologies; a chapbook, *Benita to Reginald: A Romance*, is forthcoming from Out of Sight Press.

IRENA KLEPFISZ still lives in Brooklyn and, despite indications to the contrary, still considers herself a poet.

FRANCINE KRASNO lives in western Massachusetts. She writes short fiction and is currently making taped recordings of women's stories as mothers and daughters. Her stories, book reviews, and articles have appeared in the *Chicago Daily News*, *Black Maria*, *Chomo-Uri*, and the *Women's Studies Newsletter*.

MARILYN KRYSL has published a book of poetry, *Saying Things* (under the name Marilyn Thompson) and has published poems in *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and elsewhere, and short stories in *Foxy Lady*, *Northwest Review*, *Frontiers*, *Seneca Review*, *Best Little Magazine Fiction 1971* (anthology), and other journals. She teaches creative writing at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and is a reader for *Frontiers*.

BERNICE MENNIS taught literature, now lives by the water and reads natural history.



**BARBARA NODA** is a sansei (second generation of American-born Japanese) who grew up in the Salinas Valley. She has been writing for several years and will soon be published by Alta on Shameless Hussy Press. She is active in a group of Asian Feminists.

**SHARON OLDS** has had poems recently in *Chouteau Review* and *Poets On*. She has just completed the manuscript of a first book of poems.

**JANE RULE**—Born 1931. Novels, *The Desert of the Heart*, 1964, *This is Not for You*, 1970, *Against the Season*, 1971, *The Young in One Another's Arms*, 1977; story collection, *Theme for Diverse Instruments*, 1976; nonfiction, *Lesbian Images*, 1975. Novel in progress, *Contract with the World*, 1979? Resident of British Columbia.

**RIMA SHORE** studies Russian literature in New York City. Working as an interpreter, she has made frequent trips to the Soviet Union. *Life in America* is her second play.

**BARBARA SMITH** lives and writes in Roxbury, Massachusetts. For the past several years she has been involved in a Black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective. Through Black feminist politics, she is beginning to find a synthesis between literature and life.

**ALICE WALKER's** most recent novel is *Meridian*. She has completed two new books, *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (poems) and *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (essays). She is now editing the *Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (Feminist Press).

**NELLIE WONG** writes poetry from an Asian-American feminist perspective. A collection of her poems, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park*, was published by Kelsey St. Press last fall. Her work in progress includes writing a play on marriage.

Small-press books by the contributors to CONDITIONS: THREE include:

- Karen Brodine, *Slow Juggling* (Berkeley Poets' Workshop and Press, P.O. Box 459, Berkeley, Ca. 94701), 1975, 48 pp., \$2.50 plus .50 tax and mailing.
- Karen Brodine, *Workweek* (Kelsey St. Press, P.O. Box 9015, Berkeley, Ca. 94709), 1977, 48 pp., \$2.50 plus .50 tax and mailing.
- Elly Bulkin, *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* (ed. with Joan Larkin, Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 1975, 120 pp., \$2.00 plus .35 post. & handl.
- Jan Clausen, *After Touch* (Out & Out Books. Distributed by J. Clausen, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 1975, 76 pp., \$2.00 plus .35 post & handl. Checks payable to author.
- Enid Dame, *Between Revolutions* (Downtown Poets Co-op, X-Press Press, Box 1720, G.P.O., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11202), 1977, 32 pp., \$1.50.
- Enid Dame, *Interesting Times* (X-Press Press), 1978, 36 pp., \$1.50.
- Sandra Maria Esteves, *Womenrise* (Shamal Books, G.P.O. Box 2218, N.Y., N.Y. 10001), 1978.
- Akua Lezli Hope, *Lovecycles* (Center for New Images, 326 W. 42nd St., N.Y., N.Y. 10036), 1976, \$.75.
- Suzanne Juhasz, *Benita to Reginald: A Romance* (Out of Sight Press, Box 32, Wichita, Kansas 67201), 1978.
- Irena Klepfisz, *periods of stress* (Out & Out Books. Distributed by I. Klepfisz, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215) 64 pp., \$2.00 plus .35 post. & handl. Checks payable to author.
- Nellie Wong, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* (Kelsey St. Press, P.O. Box 9015, Berkeley, Ca. 94709), 48 pp., \$3.00.

Work by contributors to CONDITIONS: THREE is included in the following small-press anthologies:

- Amazon Poetry: An Anthology*, Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds. (Out & Out Books), Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz.
- I, That Am Ever Stranger: Poems on Women's Experience*, Nancy E. James and Mary Balazs, eds. (Dawn Valley Press, Box 58, New Wilmington, Pa. 16142), 1974. 68 pp., \$3.00. Suzanne Juhasz.
- Making The Park* (Kelsey St. Press, P.O. Box 9015, Berkeley, Ca. 94709), 1976. \$3.75. Karen Brodine.
- Ordinary Women* (Ordinary Women, P.O. Box 664, Old Chelsea Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10011), Spring 1978, \$3.95. Sandra Maria Esteves, Akua Lezli Hope.
- Touching This Earth: Poems by Women*, Mary Webber Balazs and Nancy E. James, eds. (Dawn Valley Press), 1977, 106 pp. \$4.00. Suzanne Ju





# Submissions

We are interested in manuscripts of POETRY, SHORT FICTION, NOVEL excerpts, DRAMA, and other creative forms (JOURNAL entries, excerpts from CORRESPONDENCE, TRANSLATIONS) as well as CRITICAL ARTICLES on the women's/lesbian movements and institutions, issues involving race, class, age and aspects of lesbian relationships. We welcome REVIEWS and review copies. We are especially committed to publicizing and reviewing women's press publications.

We are concerned that women's/lesbian publications have often failed to reflect the experiences and viewpoints of Third World, working-class, and older women. We want *Conditions* to include work in a variety of styles by both published and unpublished writers of many different backgrounds. We welcome submissions from all women who feel that a commitment to other women is an integral part of their lives.

We are also interested in receiving submissions for covers for *Conditions*. We have no specific preconceptions as to subject matter or theme, and will consider any form appropriate for an 8½" x 5" black and white cover bearing the title of the magazine and issue number. This might be a line drawing or other graphic, a photograph, or a half-tone of a painting, a collage, or sculpture. Please send a *photocopy* and not the original work.

Send manuscripts and art work to:

CONDITIONS  
P.O. Box 56  
Van Brunt Station  
Brooklyn, New York 11215

Only manuscripts and photocopies accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope will be returned.

# ANNOUNCING CONDITIONS: FIVE THE BLACK WOMEN'S ISSUE

GUEST EDITED

By

LORRAINE BETHEL and BARBARA SMITH

"De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see."

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937

"You ask about 'preoccupations.' I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. . . . For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world."

—Alice Walker, in *Interviews With Black Writers*, 1973

"If I could just tell you what it's really like  
To live this life of triple jeopardy. . . ."

—Linda Tillery & Mary Watkins, "Freedom Time," 1977.\*

*Conditions: Five* will be entirely devoted to writing by Black women. It will be co-edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith. We want submissions of any writing that would be of interest to other Black women-feminists-Lesbians. The issue will have a particular emphasis on writing from a Black feminist perspective.

We need: Literary Criticism; Black Feminist Scholarship; Political Theory; Fiction; Poetry; Drama; Song Lyrics; Interviews; Reviews; Journal Entries; Excerpts from Correspondence; Recipes; Incantations; Rituals and Dreams.

We will also be able to use black and white graphics. Please send *photocopies*, not originals, when submitting graphics.

Please send your submissions and self-addressed stamped envelope as soon as possible, but no later than September 1 to:

Lorraine Bethel  
90 Magazine Street  
Cambridge, Ma. 02139

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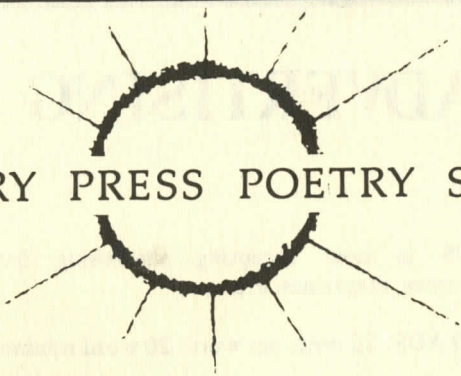
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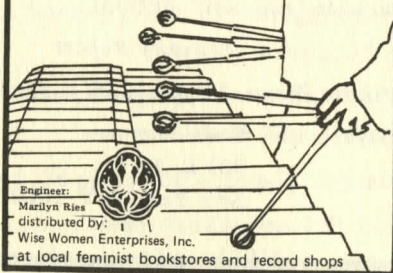
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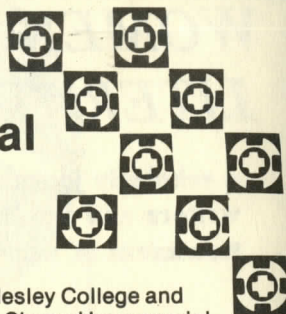
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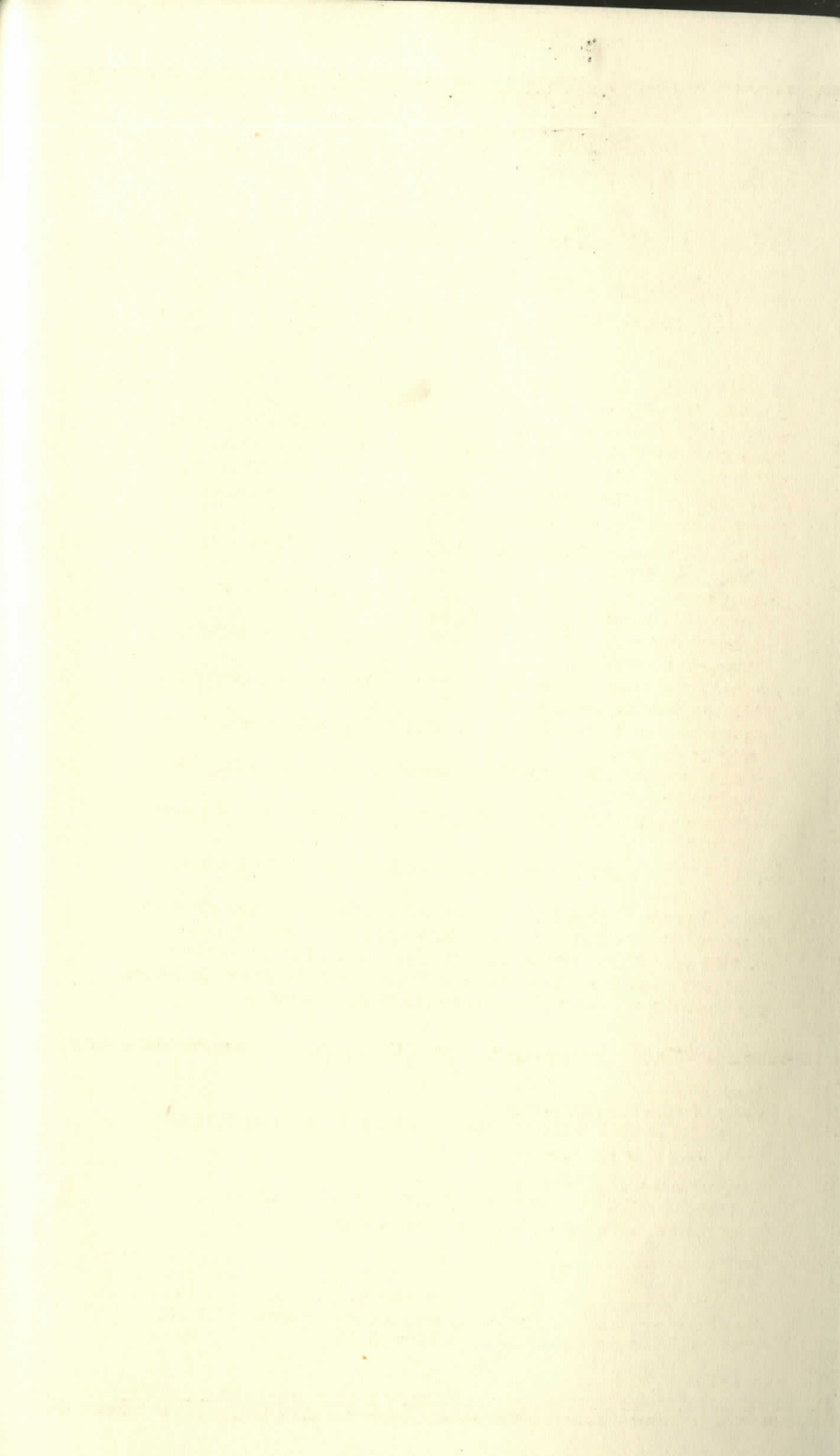
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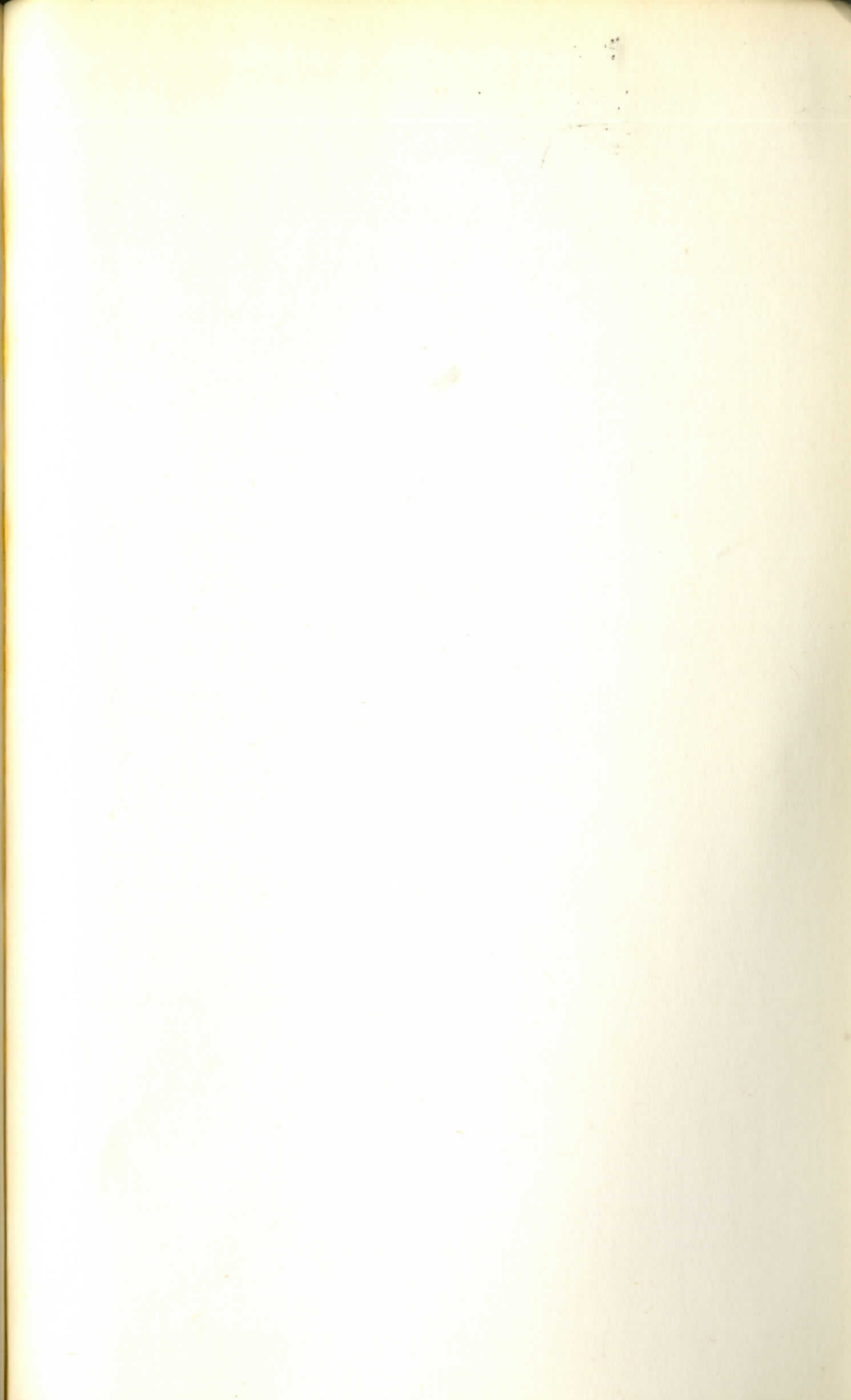
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Barbara Noda, Sharon Olds, Nellie Wong

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"Making The Difference" by Karen Brodine  
"Obsolete Geography" by Michelle Cliff

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"Church Music" by Sally George  
"Celia" by Francine Krasno  
"Petunias" by Alice Walker

### ESSAY

"Homophobia and Romantic Love" by Jane Rule

### DRAMA

"Life in America" by Rima Shore

### REVIEWS

*Between Revolutions* by Enid Dame  
reviewed by Bernice Mennis

*Child of Myself* and *Pit Stop*, by Pat Parker; *The Poetry of Pat Parker*  
and *Judy Grahn: Where Would I Be Without You*  
reviewed by Barbara Smith

*Dogmoon* by Rikki Lights  
reviewed by Lorraine Bethel

*Making The Park* by Karen Brodine, Patricia Dienstfrey, Marina  
La Palma, Laura Moriarty, and Rena Rosenwasser  
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