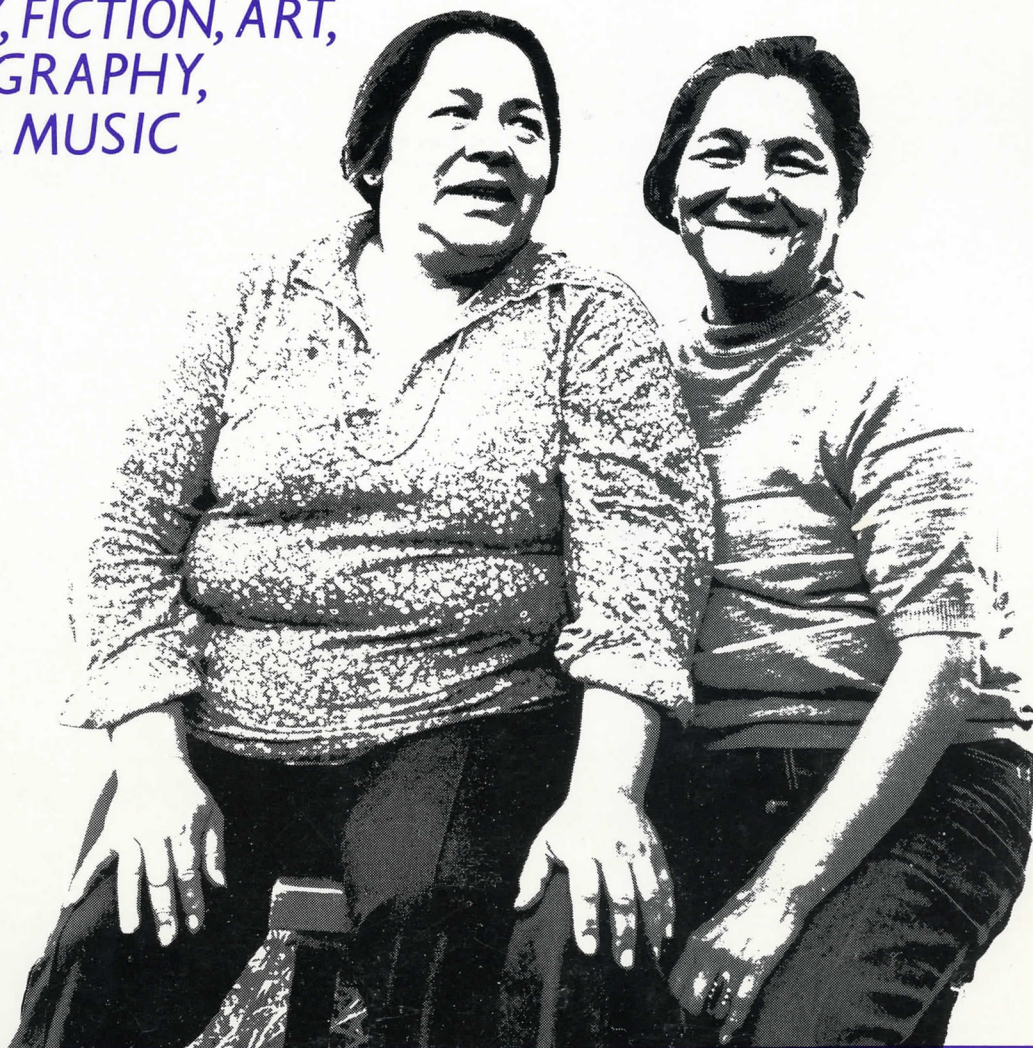


# IKON

creativity  
and  
change

A SPECIAL SECTION  
WOMEN  
IN STRUGGLE:  
SENECA,  
MEDGAR EVERS,  
NICARAGUA

AN ANTHOLOGY OF  
POETRY, FICTION, ART,  
PHOTOGRAPHY,  
ESSAYS, MUSIC



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Most Special Thanks to MARY JANE SULLIVAN,,  
 SUZANNE LYNCH, and ANTONINO LOPEZ, with-  
 out whose help this issue would not have been possible.



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# WAKE



Roberta dressed herself carefully. She wore a dark brown dress with flat black buttons down the front. After she was dressed she remembered to wash her hair and leaned over the kitchen sink and ran water over it. She wore it loose and wet down her shoulders. She decided to wear the plain soft leather moccasins a Cree woman had given her at a ceremony. They were lined in red calico and they felt good on the feet. Roberta took them from the bag she kept on a shelf in her closet. Narcissa was the woman's name. She had given the shoes to Roberta because Roberta had tutored Narcissa's teenaged daughter in English, given her enough proficiency to pass a high school equivalency test and find a job. Even though the shoes were not Southern and even though they were gathered at the seams, Roberta wore them and the water dripping off her hair left spots on the leather.

Roberta opened the window of her bedroom and stood in sunlight breathing the fertile odors of spring. The mourning doves outside were singing.

Michael stood awkwardly inside the rectangle of the door. He did not know what to say that might cover her loss. All he said was, "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

She closed the window. "To the funeral, yes. But the rest of it I need to do alone." She would have felt embarrassed to have him hear the words she wanted to say to her mother, the songs, would have been ashamed of the customs that needed to be performed. As it was, she hoped no one else in the funeral home would see or listen. They were things white people found interesting perhaps but never understood. Their sense of things, Roberta believed, was from a different part of the self. Something else controlled their words and acts. They were proper in a different way. Even Michael with his square hands and short fingers, his short and graceless legs, his labor as a mechanic, work done with the body and hands and not with the mind. Even Michael who was honored to sing with the White Pine singers in the city, who had been given a wrapped drumstick by Roberta's uncle. Even Michael was not given to understand what needed to be carried out to permit Neva's soul to go on her long journey.

Roberta wrapped cedar and sage in a section of the morning newspaper. She placed this package, along with a container of iodized salt, in the bag that held her cigarettes, wallet and cosmetics. She brushed her hair once more because she would not be able to brush it for the four full days and nights she was required to sit with her mother.

She remembered the meal and tobacco and returned to the kitchen. Cloth, she needed cloth. She would have to stop at the store. She needed black cloth, white, red, yellow. And string. She took the scissors from the drawer and put them in the bag.







# LINDA HOGAN



She drove. She drove past the new white-faced calves. Herefords, standing on wobbly legs in the fields. She stopped the car and watched all the dull slow faces turn toward her. One cow was lying down in the grass. Roberta waited for it to give birth and wanted to witness the event. She needed to think about birth on the way to a wake. But while she waited she noticed that nothing about the cow was moving, no motion in her womb or stomach. The dirty white neck of the cow was stretched out and Roberta was astonished to see that she was dead; had died in labor. The legs were already stiff, the eyes open and gray with that blue vacant light of death. The calf would be dead already. No need to run and find the owner. And the other cattle were grazing or nuzzling, licking one another as if nothing had happened. They watched Roberta warily, ready to bolt away. She was their enemy.

That, more than anything, filled her with grief. The struggling to give birth, the pushing outward of a new life that never arrived in the world. The cow, brown and white, straining to lose and to keep her infant until it smothered inside her. Sometimes it is easier for the struggle with life to end. And it filled Roberta with sorrow to see this death and to know she was the enemy in so many places.

She drove to the funeral parlor where she knew she would have to argue with the white mortician about her mother's body and the proper time an Indian woman needed to lie in state.

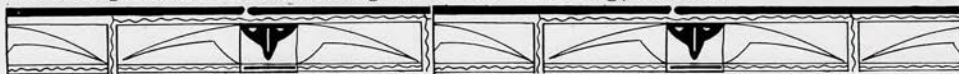
How long had the cow been lying there on the new grass?

Roberta knew the funeral director would want to get the services over with immediately.

In state. In state of what? In state of silence, of stillness, of the soul passing through the layers of world and sky? Perhaps she should, after all, bury her mother today. Perhaps traditions were no longer necessary in this world where everything, every single thing, was a balancing act, where Indian women were walking on a thread that was delicate as spider silk, being one person one day and someone else the next, always keenly aware that the thread could break, the thread that was created from within their bodies and the bodies of those that came before them.

She felt like that cow, unable to bring life into anything, anything into life. And her mother was that cow, a celestial cow with milk that dried in her udders instead of falling like sweet rain on the earth.

In town the trees were beginning to bud and grow leaves. Birds carried small twigs and clear strands of fish line in their beaks. Roberta sat beside her mother's body. She noticed details, the lines of the world from the window, a bird outside singing, the shape of her own hands. It was chilly and she noticed the coolness of the air and the strange odor of the building. The odor of biology classes.





Roberta cut the cloth into squares and filled them with tobacco and cornmeal. She tied them with the string and placed them inside her mother's coffin. She tucked them out of sight from the undertaker, beneath the cold and wax-stiff shoulders and legs of Neva, afraid he would remove them if he saw them.

She rubbed her own forehead with salt and then rubbed her mother's forehead. When she rubbed the coarse grains on Neva's skin, the make-up came off. On Neva's forehead was a purple and transparent looking bruise and a gash that had been covered with some kind of flesh-colored clay or rubber. How had Roberta not noticed the falseness? Now it was apparent to her that the entire face was covered with paint. Roberta tried to push the clay back into its place on the forehead. With guilt she realized that she could not repair the damage she had done to the embalmer's artwork and so she left the little ball of salt and clay beneath Neva's hair, hidden, with the thin-looking wounded skin exposed and surrounded by the placid smoothness of the remaining mask. And when she tried to open Neva's lips to place the salt between them, she found that they were stitched shut. There was cotton and gauze behind them. Roberta, tense, poured the remaining salt over her mother's heart and stomach. She lit the cedar.

Roberta tried to sing as she waved the smoke across Neva with a feather. This first song was interrupted as the mortician came in to see about the fire.

He looked at the smoke-filled room, at Roberta. "Maybe you should leave the door open," he said. Suspicious.

"Oh, hell," Roberta said aloud and within hearing of the man. "Where's my uncle?" James would know what to do. He wouldn't have been clumsy and unable to utter a song. Roberta's face felt hot. The oversized and rigid man wouldn't have glared that way at James. James would have done it correctly and with competence. He knew the sequence of songs. Roberta would have to fill in with sounds she made up, knowing it had to be done, but fearing to do it badly. And fearing even more not to do it at all. But still, her voice would hardly come through the tightness of her throat and it had no strength. She was ashamed of herself. And Uncle James was not there with his painted drum and rattles and it seemed like such an awesome tedious task that Roberta just gave up and sang from her heart the songs she remembered, even birth songs, even firesongs. Even the duck song. And when she was finished performing over Neva and singing from the chair, the silence left her empty and heartbroken so she made up new songs each morning when the sun rose. She made up songs about lying in the earth, lying on the earth, about endless summers with corn whispering, about the cow trying to give birth, about rain and the circle of color it left in the sky. She forgot to sing to the people "over there" who were meeting her mother, but by then it was the fourth day and her throat was dry. She could not drink water until she had poured some into her mother's lips and she did not see how it was possible to put water between the threads that held her lips so tightly, or into the mouth that used to speak and was now filled with dry gauze and cotton. She didn't want to risk ruining the rest of the cosmetics on Neva's face. And so she did not, herself, take any water the four full days and James never did arrive. It grew dark. Roberta just sat, aware of her thirst, with pictures of her mother, like a hundred snapshots from the past, coming across her eyes. Neva





standing, Neva sitting, Neva in her blue dress dancing with the women, her hand locked into the elbow of one old woman and behind her another woman's hand touching Neva's arm. They were all dead now.

Roberta was so parched and thirsty that her tongue was swollen. She tried to swallow but her throat closed and there was no saliva. She was light-headed. Her skin was dry and taut. Outside the door was a hallway and in that corridor was a water fountain. She was afraid she had done everything else wrong and she was not going to swallow that sweet clear liquid, that transparent cold and silky liquid that arrived so easily through pipes in this building. Her eyes were dry and she had no tears to cry for her mother. When she closed her eyes it was too painful to open the grainy lids again and so, sitting there straight in the chair, she drifted off.

There was a story she once heard about the Sun Dance up North. That year the people had allowed a white man to dance. This was during the time when piercing was illegal and whites were often dancing with the people then, were making honest pledges of money and soul to dance for the members of their families or for themselves. This particular man was sick and had been hospitalized with heart trouble.

By noon of the second day, in the intense August heat and dust of the north country, he was pale and dehydrated. His skin was cold and growing blue. The medicine man, seeing that the man was going dark inside and in need of water, could not provide it from any natural source and so he prayed. The eagle spirit told him to tap the sacred pole. He went into the center of the circle and hit the pole once very lightly. Clear water came from the other world out a hole in the wood and he collected it into a gourd and gave it to the man to drink and pour on his body, and revived him.

Roberta was walking with her mother. Neva was younger and looked healthy, like she hadn't been drinking. The two of them walked around a frozen lake. Snow blew up off it in the strong wind. The two women were surrounded by trees and white clouds of flying snow and mist. It blew their dresses against them. Neva stood straight and tall. Roberta huddled against the wind, lifted her shoulders and held one hand up to her blowing hair. They walked without speaking, about the lake. On one side of the water there was a thawing in the ice. Underneath the green water were round red pebbles and golden leaves that had fallen in autumn. Neva bent down and drank of the clear cold water. Roberta watched her, the strong back of her mother, the black hair falling into the water. After Neva stood, Roberta knelt in the same place, her knees on the cold mud. She drank of the water that was so cold it took her breath away and she was quenched. When she stood up, Neva was walking a black path that went into the woods. Roberta hurried to follow her but the path began to disintegrate. The road was still intact beneath Neva's feet but each step Roberta took, the ground gave way. She found herself standing, alone, beside a tall pine that creaked in the wind and she knew the water had finally entered her mother's mouth and Neva was on her journey to the other world. Roberta could not follow there. She leaned against the tree, the moss-covered side of the tree, and felt its life and warmth against her body.



# ABENG

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## AN EXCERPT

# MICHELLE CLIFF

By 1958 the original property at Runaway Bay had been subdivided for American vacation homes, and the elm trees were long gone, dying about a hundred years previously—like the harpsichord, the trees never managed to make the adjustment to the Jamaican climate. Clare saw the property for the first time that year, as she drove to the North Coast with her father, who had taken a job as a traveling liquor salesman for a British distillery, peddling Beefeater gin and Haig & Haig scotch to hotels and rumshops across the island.

In front of the property at Runaway Bay was a narrow beach; about a quarter-mile out the water broke on an offshore reef, so that the waves which approached the beach were harmless and slight. At the water's edge the color of the sea was a light blue, by the reef, deep green. Through the light blue shallows Clare could see the almost transparent tendrils of a jellyfish floating near the surface, the mushroom-shaped body languid and apparently lifeless. On her right thigh she had a two-inch scar, long and white, where she had been stung by a jellyfish, a surprise because the animal seemed so incapable of attack. A pink and transparent being carried by the sea, in and then out again, dependent entirely on the movement of the tides, harmless—until a swimmer got too close. On the sand beneath the jellyfish were the distinct spines of a sea egg—also dangerous, but clearly so.

Clare and her father picnicked on the beach that afternoon, and he told her again about the elm trees and how strong and healthy they had been, and about her distinguished ancestor the puisne justice.

Father and daughter drove through the gate of the estate and up the drive toward the great house. It was still standing. Barely standing in the center of the subdivision. A large wooden sign saying PARADISE PLANTATION was propped against the verandah railing, and they could tell that the great house had been left by the developers as a “come on,” to convince prospective clients they could buy into the past. Capture history in their summer homes.

In size the house was not really very great—it was low and square, and set on flat ground with a view of the sea in front and the canefields in back. It was wooden, with a slightly peaked wooden shingle roof and a wooden verandah marking the perimeter of the building. The wood was bleached almost white—by the sun and the salt breeze from the sea.



"May we go in, Daddy?"

"I don't see why not; after all, it did belong to us once."

So father and daughter climbed the verandah steps and heard the noises of lizards running through the vines and across the latticework. Inside the house was dark, and Mr. Savage went back to the car to get a flashlight. His beam scanned the walls and Clare could make out scenes on paper which once had been colored bright red against a white background, now faded pale and darkened by an accumulation of dust. She went closer, and detected that this was a picture—a pattern made of the same picture—of people in a park in a city somewhere in Europe. The women wore long dresses and strolled with their thin-handled parasols unfurled to protect them from the sun. The dresses and parasols were red, the women white. White children played across the paper, and red dogs jumped at sticks. The scene was repeated again and again across the wall; it was not a continuing story with a theme, like the Bayeux tapestry her father had described to her—because, he said, one of her ancestors had fought alongside the Conqueror in 1066. The pattern on the wallpaper was only a small glimpse of the background against which this part of her family had once existed. These images surrounded them as they sat in their parlor. The danger to Clare was that the background could slide so easily into the foreground.

She licked her finger and touched it to the wall, then tasted—it was salt.

"You know, your great-great-grandfather imported all his furnishings from abroad. Settees and tables. Bric-a-brac. Crystal. China. From England and Ireland mostly. Staffordshire. Wedgwood. Waterford. Royal Doulton. Sometimes he brought things out from France and Switzerland. I think this wallpaper must have come from France and the chairs from Switzerland. The rugs came originally from Persia. Fine, fine oriental carpets." Boy Savage was describing, filling in the room for his daughter. The only objects to be seen were a few broken-down chairs stacked in one corner, and these were uninformative as to origin. The flashlight passed over a mantelpiece at the far wall of the parlor—"Carrara marble, from Florence, Italy," her father said. "Over the mantel there used to be a portrait of your great-great-grandmother, painted by a man who had studied with Sir Joshua Reynolds, but it's gone now."

"What happened to it?"

"It was stolen, or got sold; I don't know. It doesn't matter anyway."

The two moved on, into another room behind the parlor, and again the wallpaper caught her eye. This time the scheme was flowers—but no flowers she had ever seen. Foxgloves, bluebells, oxlips, harebells, forget-me-nots, wild roses—once purple, blue, yellow, and pink, now dim—ran across a wall. A pattern of English wildflowers. The paper was torn here and there, and there was nothing but bare white wall underneath.

And so father and daughter walked through what was once a great house, and they came out into the backyard, where the only signs of a former life were the foundation stones of some of the outbuildings, and faint gullies marking the earth where others had been. These buildings out back, only a few yards from the great house, had once contained molasses and rum and slaves—the points of conjunction of the system known as the Triangle Trade. They contained these things and they contained the paraphernalia of day-to-day existence on a sugar plantation. The warehouses held hogsheads and puncheons, barrels in which the sugar and



rum was kept. They held billhooks, cutlasses, hoes, axes, shovels—for working the fields and harvesting the cane. Bins of dried beans, sacks of flour and grain, wooden crates of salted herring—these provided the basic diet of the slaves. Salt was important; it compensated sweat. The warehouses held cloth—bolts of blue German linen and coarse red checkered cotton—to make into work clothes for the slaves. Blankets—rough wool—for slaves who took sick, slaves who were lying-in. These things were also imported from England.

The traces in the earth which Clare could now see indicated where the slave cabins had been. Little more than huts, really, twenty to twenty-five feet long and twelve feet wide, made of wattle and plaster, with dirt floors and palm-thatched roofs. Inside, the ceiling was low—usually brushing the forehead—so the inhabitants, if they were any height at all, had to walk stooped forward. As they stooped to hoe; stooped to stir. There were no windows in any of these huts—light in each came from a candle, made with the fat rendered from farm animals. Cool came through the front door, when it was opened. The candle sat on a small table, beside one or two earthenware jars, an iron pot, a pile of calabashes—gourds hollowed out and dried, to be used as plates and cups. The beds were of straw or planks. The lines in the earth were close together, separated only by a few feet, where there might have been a planting of cassava, or yam, or plantain—to supplement the diet provided by the justice.

The outbuildings on which the livelihood of the plantation hinged were these cabins, and the sugar mill and the boiling-house. The cane was cut—after it had reached past the height of a human being—tied into bundles, and carried from the fields to the sugar mill on the backs of cattle or mules or slaves. Inside the mill, huge metal rollers turned slowly; the bundles were passed between the rollers, and the juice was crushed from the stalks of cane. The power which moved the rollers came from wind or water or cattle or mules, or from a treadmill on which men and women walked. From the sugar mill the juice flowed along an open pipe—a large open pipe made of mahogany or bamboo—to the boiling-house, where the liquid was clarified in huge copper cauldrons, sitting on woodfires fed by the refuse of the cane—nothing was wasted. The heat of the boiling-house was intense, as the steam from the liquid filled the atmosphere, radiating from the brick walls and the metal vats. Slaves ladled the purified juice from the cauldrons and filled the flat cooling trays which sat on a shelf by the windows of the boiling-house.

At the surface of the trays, the sugar crystallized. Beneath the crystal surface, the molasses remained liquid. The sugar was skimmed away and packed into barrels. The molasses was treated to become rum. Each product was then transported to Port Antonio or Montego Bay, and thence shipped to Great Britain.

From the backyard, in which she now stood, noting the existence of the foundation stones and the gullies in the earth, but not knowing the former life they represented, Clare could see in the distance long funnels of smoke and an occasional tongue of flame. The Paradise Plantation was burning the canefields to clear the land and begin construction of the vacation homes.



Back in the car, sun glaring through the front window in the hot afternoon, sea beside them, still, aquamarine. Driving toward Ocho Rios, where her father had an appointment with the manager of the Arawak Hotel, Clare thought about the great house. The time which had passed through it. The salt taste of the walls. She sometimes imagined that the walls of certain places were the records of those places—the events which happened there. More accurate than the stories of the people who had lived within the walls. She did not remember where she had gotten this idea, but she held on to it. The walls might not be able to reveal exactly what they had seen, but perhaps they could indicate to a visitor something, if only a clue, about the time which had passed through them. Maybe there were signs marked on the walls each time they heard a shout—like the slashes on the Rosetta Stone, which she had learned about in school.

She tried to think of the walls in the house and what she could remember from them. They were already dimming in her mind. She began to confuse the ladies on the paper with the women in her past. Lace. Parasols. Wide skirts. Heads bent in discretion and secrets. Clare assumed the women who had lived in the great house had been as white as the women on the paper. . .

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Inez, the woman the justice had taken to be his mistress, was bronze. Her mother was a half-blood Miskito Indian, whose people had come from the mountain chain of Central America. Her father was a Maroon, an Ashanti from the Gold Coast. Inez was known as a friend of the slaves on the Savage Plantation. Her mother's ancestors had been among the Indians the Red Coats brought to the island to defeat the armies of the Maroons. But they went over to the Maroon side—lived among them, and married with them. Her father and mother settled in the Cockpit Country near to Trelawny Town and kept a small farm, trading with other Maroon people and with the few settlements of poor whites and creoles nearby.

It was night in the parlor. The moon came through the windows which she kept open to catch the salt breeze—when the judge returned, he would latch them again, saying that the air would damage his wallpaper and his furniture. And he had a fear of the slaves watching him while he read—but he did not mention this. Inez sat with the moonlight behind her and a lighted candle shaded at her side. The sofa was made of heavy tufted cloth, designed with gold threads which crossed over each other; the justice had ordered it from Geneva, he said. She sat there with a book in her hand—the poetry of Lord Byron—she was teaching herself to read while the judge was away. On the floor a Persian carpet was laid, a thick weave on which bright royal blue peacocks strutted across the parlor. Over the marble mantelpiece was a picture hung in a gilt frame—a portrait of the judge's wife-in-England: a young woman whose face was framed in curls, her hands folded in her lap, wearing lace and brocade, a bouquet of white roses beside her.

The justice was in Kingston, bringing a petition from the planters on the North Coast to try and stop the bill of emancipation.

Inez was not officially a slave—she had not been placed naked on an auction block, her teeth had not been marveled at by a prospective buyer. The judge found her in his courtroom one morning, brought up on charges of the theft of a rifle and



some ammunition from the Selby Plantation. Her father had need of a gun—to hunt and for protection—some of the white and creole settlers were being troublesome, and had begun to poach animals from their farm. So Inez was sent to St. Ann to fetch one for him from a slave who was an ally of the Maroons. But she had been caught on the path leading away from the estate—someone must have informed; it happened. Some damned *quashee*, thinking freedom would be his or hers in exchange for information. Massa Selby brought her into the courtroom, where she would have had her hands cut off at the wrists, or been given a hundred strokes of the cat, but the judge intervened and took her home, where he raped her. He raped her for six weeks until he left on one of his trips to London. She was eighteen.

Now she was twenty. She had survived by planning her escape, waiting for emancipation, devising a way to avenge herself—all of these things. She had been taught the ways of her mother's people and the ways of the Maroons, and she made spells with feathers and stones and shells and tried to work her way out. There was a slavewoman in the quarters whom she visited and who taught her more about *obeah* and magic. This woman's name was Mma Alli—a strange woman with a right breast that had never grown. She said she was a one-breasted warrior woman and represented a tradition which was older than the one which had enslaved them. She said she was one of the very few of her kind in the New World. Where in some places Mma Alli might have been shunned or cast out or made fun of, the slaves on the Savage Plantation respected her greatly. The women came to her with their troubles, and the men with their pain. She gave of her time and her secrets. She counseled how to escape—and when. She taught the children the old ways—the knowledge she brought from Africa—and told them never to forget them and to carry them on. She described the places they had all come from, where one-breasted women were bred to fight.

Mma Alli had never lain with a man. The other slaves said she loved only women in that way, but that she was a true sister to the men—the Black men: her brothers. They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. How to become wet again and again all through the night. How to soothe and excite at the same time. How to touch a woman in her deep-inside and make her womb move within her. She taught many of the women on the plantation about this passion and how to take strength from it. To keep their bodies as their own, even while they were made subject to the whimsical violence of the justice and his slavedrivers, who were for the most part creole or *quashee*.

When Inez came to Mma Alli to get rid of the mixed-up baby she carried, Mma Alli kept her in her cabin overnight. She brewed a tea of roots and leaves, said a Pawpaw chant over it, and when it was beginning to take effect and Inez was being rocked by the contractions of her womb, Mma Alli began to gently stroke her with fingers dipped in coconut oil and pull on her nipples with her mouth, and the thick liquid which had been the mixed-up baby came forth easily and Inez felt little pain. A baby, Inez's people believed, was sacred, but a baby conceived in *buckra* rape would have no soul—with this Mma Alli agreed. Her tongue all over Inez's body—night after night—until the judge returned from his trip to London and Inez had to return to the great house. But she went there with a new-found power.



With Mma Alli she remembered her mother and her people and knew she would return home.

Inez took a square of Irish linen from the judge's trunk, and pulled some long strands of her blue-black hair free from her braid. With a small knife she cut through the strands, threaded a needle, and embroidered a picture on the cloth for Mma Alli. The outline of an orchid—the plant she knew from the Cockpits, suspended in the green of the crevasses, living on air and water. And also light. She drew her needle through the pale, loosely woven fibers and traced the lip of the flower with her hair. She thickened her stitches to reveal where the orifice hid behind the ridges of the orchid's tongue. Storing its honeyed juice for the night-flying moths that sought the flower during the full moon.

She mixed colors in calabashes—taking red from clay, blue from indigo, yellow from arsenic—and with her knife, sharpened bamboo splints. At the end of the splints she fixed some pieces of sponge from the sea, and working slowly, filled in the outline she had drawn, a keepsake for the walls of Mma Alli's cabin, to be placed alongside the *abeng* which Mma Alli kept oiled with coconut and suspended from a piece of sisal and a fishhook.

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There had once been a fire at Runaway Bay, but it had never touched the great house.

The night the justice returned to the plantation from Kingston, where his petition had been a failure, he walked up the verandah steps and came into the parlor—but Inez was nowhere to be found. He sat heavily on the tufted sofa and waited, the mud from the journey flecking the peacocks beneath his feet. But she did not return. He poured himself a draught of rum and though with astonishment and disgust about the fact—now it *was* a fact—that his slaves would be free in a matter of months. The justice worried what would happen to the island when it swarmed with free Africans, some only a few years out of the bush. Who would have conceived that the empire would see fit to unleash these people. The justice was not thinking about his crops or even the future of his properties. His mind was on a “higher” plane—he was concerned about the survival of his race. He was fearful of the mixing which was sure to follow freedom—in which the white seed would be diluted and the race impoverished. He thought along the lines of Jefferson and Franklin, the founding fathers of a free society of white men—both of these, Virginian and Yankee, enlightened tinkers, had written letters and tracts warning about the danger to the white race once Black blood mingled with it. Franklin had written that of all the people of the earth, only the English and the German Saxons represented the purity and superiority of the white race—the pinnacle of human life. The judge had read Franklin's words more than once:

And while we are . . . *Scouring* our planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People?

To have a nation of Black freedmen, the justice thought, would be like wearing a garment—he searched his mind for an analogy—a garment dipped in the germs of



the plague. Yet there were children on the plantation, as there were on Jefferson's plantation, who were of the judge—his offspring—but these were not his heirs, these were his property. And he had sent children like these to the slave market in Kingston more than once.

With this heaviness the judge stalked to the quarters calling for Inez. It is very important to note here that although the judge had had a drink of rum, he was cold sober. His mind was moving through a logical series of suppositions and conclusions informed by his beliefs and his assessment of experience. He lit a torch from the kitchen fire and called the name of the woman he had raped again and again. He approached the cabin of Mma Alli when there was no answer to his calls.

"Inez not in here, Massa Justice. Me no know where him be." Mma Alli poked her head out the cabin door.

"You know everything that goes on on this plantation, bitch; tell me where my nigger wench is."

"Me not know, sah.

Inez had made her move that afternoon. Back to the Cockpits. Meeting with the slaves on the plantation, all had decided that after freedom—and they knew that freedom was coming; there were spies in the households of the governor and some of the members of the island's assembly—after freedom they would have no certainty of employment, no guarantee that there would be peace between the former slaveowners and the former slaves. Someone even suggested that they shouldn't have to work for these men after freedom—"Me would preffer starve." Someone else said she thought their goal after freedom should be to return to Africa. To achieve this, she continued, would mean "getting us some land and saving monies for our passage back." It was agreed that whether their aim be to stay and make a life for themselves on the island or to save and return to Africa, they needed property of their own. Inez had returned to the Cockpits to find the mayor of Trelawny Town and speak to him on behalf of the slaves on the Savage Plantation about getting a piece of land for them to farm together after freedom. She took some gold sovereigns from the strongbox beside the judge's desk as partial payment for the property and tools. She did not expect to come back to Runaway Bay—she would send word to the slaves about the results of her petition.

The judge's anger rose with each denial he met from each one of the slaves he questioned—"Me no know, Massa." "Me know not, Massa." "Me nebber se de gal, Massa Justice."

Later, he would look back on what he had done and assess that he was a man of passion who had been pushed to his limit. His passion had been misled into violence. He was not to blame. These people were slaves and would not know how to behave in freedom. They would have been miserable. He was a justice: he had been trained to assess the alternatives available to human beings, and their actions within the limits of these alternatives. These people were not equipped to cope with the responsibilities of freedom. These people were Africans. Their parameters of behavior were out of the range of civilized men. Their lives obviously of less value. They had been brought here for one purpose, and one purpose only—and this was about to be removed. Even more than the papist Irish he had once assessed for the Crown, the dark people existed on another, lower level of being. He believed all this absolutely. And he held that among these people life was cheap,



and death did not matter. His conclusion was far from original among his own kind: At that moment these people were his property, and they were therefore his to burn.

Not all died that night; some escaped into the interior of the island and managed to find Inez. There she was waiting for them with land and tools. They told her that the fire began at the cabin of Mma Alli and that the old warrior woman — their strict teacher and true sister — had been trapped as the flames caught the thatch and the tightly woven palm collapsed inward.

Lest anyone think the judge's action — which became the pattern of foundation stones and thin dirt gullies Clare saw that afternoon behind the great house, rectangles remembering an event she would never know of — lest anyone think the judge's behavior extreme or insane or frenzied, the act of a mad white man, it should be pointed out that this was not an isolated act on the eve of African freedom in Jamaica.

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The bones of dead slaves made the land at Runaway Beach rich and green. Tall royal palms lined the avenues leading to the houses of the development. Breadfruit trees, branches fat with their deep green lobed leaves, created shades around the stucco bungalows. The breeze from the sea came through the windows of the houses and made the walls taste of salt.

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# small DEATHS

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I tear my hair like the mad queen of hearts. "What? You used a whole cube of butter to fry one egg?" Her eyes drop; I refuse to see the lashes cast shadows on her cheeks, too busy thinking, I must wipe dust from under the coffee table, and I'm tired, my gaze sagging on the electric wires splintering the pale blue sky. Her voice trembles, "I'll go to the store, Mommy, and buy it with my allowance." Another small death, this time caused by the misappropriation of forty cents worth of cholesterol.

Last night my obscene "friend" called to awake me with silence. The telephone company will charge eleven dollars for a new number. Friday the boss will sign my paycheck at three minutes past five. The bank opens at ten a.m. Monday morning. This week-end marks our conversion to vegetarianism, Sunday dinners of brown rice, inexpensive walks on the beach to quiet our taste for blood. And this evening, as the bus winds up and down city hills, pushing me closer to my psychiatric 5/6ths hour, when I will discuss the hostility inherent in my passively aggressive, overdue bill, I will be grateful for a seat by the window; I will be grateful for the sun's heat on my cheek, its light slipping through the yellow and red strands of hair that I stretch around my fingers so that I may sing, there are rainbows in me yet.

I am pulling the cord, stepping onto littered sidewalks, furtively searching for two-way mirrors, hidden microphones as I slouch on the therapeutic, flowered chair, pleading:

## GUILTY AS CHARGED!

Guilty of screaming at my child.  
Guilty of stealing the office stamps,  
Conspiring to cheat Landlords of Cleaning Deposits,  
Writing Rhetorical Poems with no Metaphorical Content,  
Refusing to tend my garden, instead  
Proclaiming the aesthetic purity of weeds,  
Guilty even of the inability to fantasize rape,  
The nonownership of a vibrator. Yes. I am guilty of  
Refraining from reading the NYSE Daily Quotations,  
Choosing instead to watch fog seep through the heavy  
branches of cypress trees, dark green foliage wetted  
darker green. Yes! Yes!  
Guilty of the desire to raise my fist to Montgomery  
Street's skyscraped glare, shouting  
"Next Year in Madrid!" And most of all,  
Guilty of keeping my mouth shut,  
Crossing my legs in public,  
Ignoring the wind's cry as it sweeps grease  
from tankers mounting the ocean's dying waves.

The doctor wipes his glasses on his  
imported Madra plaid shirt and  
suggests redefining my options,  
acceptance of limitations, a  
course in assertiveness training.  
I shrink back on the cushions and  
cop a plea. "Nolo contendere."

I am thrusting the key in the  
hole, turning its toothy blade.  
Leah is linking her hands  
around my belly. I flop  
rag dolled on the couch as  
she removes my shoes, her  
fleshly padded fingers de-  
manding, "Play with me."



It's no game, kid, this  
living, no accident that  
profit is minded from dirty  
phone calls.

Okay, pumpkin, do I bury you  
with the wasted butter, or do  
we buy guns? You're right.  
It's too early to go to bed.  
Even fifth graders know the  
earth is not a pyramid, but

a porous, shimmering egg  
dropped monthly from between  
our legs, giving and taking the  
pounding of our feet, as we  
dance round and round, sweat  
circling our throats, our faces  
lifted to the moon dripping  
juicy on our tongues flagging  
cars that screech past the  
window, yes, our wet, red  
throbbing anarchist tongues.

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# TODAY

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Today I slept until the sun eased  
under my eyelashes. The office phone  
rang and rang. No one answered.  
Today I wrote songs for dead poets,  
danced to Schubert's 5th Symphony,  
(which he never had time to finish)  
right leg turning andante con moto,  
arms sweeping the ceiling as leaves  
fell, green and golden, Autumn in Paris.  
I sat in a bistro and drank absinthe  
while Cesar Vallejo strolled past,  
his dignity betrayed by the hole  
in his pants, and I waved, today

and the dictaphone did not dictate  
and the files remained empty  
and the boss's coffee cup remained empty  
while the ghosts of my ancestors  
occupied my chair and threatened  
all who disturbed their slumber

today, when I sat in my bed, nibbling  
croissants and reading the New Yorker  
in San Francisco, and I did not make  
my daughter's lunch; I did not pay the  
PG&E bill; I did not empty the garbage  
on my way out the door to catch the bus to  
ride the elevator to sit at my desk on time  
because today I took the day off

and rain drenched the skins of lepers  
and they were healed.  
Red flags decorated the doorways  
of senior centers, and the old were young  
again, and I walked in the streets at  
10 in the morning, praised the sun  
in its holiness, led a revolution,  
painted my toenails purple,  
meditated in solitude  
today, on this day, when I took  
with pay  
the day off.

— Carol Tarlen

# AS THE DOLLS GROW OLDER THE GIRLS CHANGE

from pine cone to spruce,  
saucer to cup, etc.  
Somewhat different from the dolls  
themselves: plastic,  
rag, china.

*Eat this medicine  
and don't let me catch you  
spitting it out.*

The dolls taught us  
everything: squeeze,  
slap, kiss, and sass.

*This is your last chance.*

Some days they talked back.  
You couldn't stand it  
and shrieked.

*I'm your mother for godsake.*

Some of the dolls  
you could never play with  
like the Japanese beauty.  
She had a hard time breathing  
in the glass box  
but got used to it  
mother said.

You kept wishing she'd faint  
so you could open the door  
and pinch her face.

Later came tits and ass —  
the doll  
you had to ask grandma to buy.  
And her miniskirts,  
pizzas, and Ken.  
Wow.

If only he had a cock  
everything  
would have worked out  
okay.

As the dolls grew older  
you gave them  
to your little sister.  
She happily stuck them  
in her mouth.  
You can see her  
as you were:  
doll on lap,  
offering nipples  
from a flat chest.  
Talking and humming.

Once you get used to blood  
it almost doesn't matter.  
It takes all of high school,  
linen, skirts.  
The dolls had been useless  
but at home  
you threw yourself on them  
and cried *cut it  
out cut it out*

Yet what is your weakness  
becomes your strength,  
calendar, identity, lawn,  
rock garden, pond. Swim in it  
baby.

The first mistake you made  
was smiling back.

fucking cunt  
she'll get hers  
and I'll give it  
if she tries  
one more time  
that razor tongue  
bitch the nerve  
to even look that way  
at him







Speaking of razors  
reminds you of Sheila  
in confirmation class  
when she hiked up her skirt  
to show you  
his initials  
scratched across her thigh  
and talking about  
his tongue in your mouth.  
*oh jesus*  
*does that mean I'll get*  
*a disease*

*they lie on top of you*  
*can you imagine*

When eurasian  
was definitely exotic

but totally unhip  
the dolls meant nothing  
but white babies  
or animals.  
Being nice  
was not top priority.  
Smashing the Japanese doll  
for example.  
Shards of glass, splinters,  
ceramic head  
and hands all over the carpet.  
Just a thought.

Still what you desire now  
has the sensibility of the nursery:  
you go from their chest  
to your own  
to the chest you put them in

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Kimiko Hahn

# PETE, 1956

She cannot sleep. She knows he's here, downstairs with Daddy, because out her window, across the thick-tufted swaying waves of moonlit grass, his Buick sits grimacing. Its three airholes, its lightless eyes.

For awhile, she was saying "For Pete's sake!" a lot. When she got braver and progressed to "For the love of Pete!" Daddy mimicked her in his rough heavy voice. But she secretly named her hamster Pietro, and asked Mom if she could be an Italian lady for Halloween. Mom bought black chintz and colored trims, spent October sewing an Italian peasant dress copied out of a library book.

All Daddy's training efforts will never make Pete into the salesman Daddy is. Pete's charm is not so controlled; it spills out carelessly at its own pleasure. Maureen sits quiet, half hidden behind a barberry bush, watching them talk. Daddy's hands go out and dart around; Pete's thumbs are hooked into the pockets of his dark blue suit. Maureen stares trying to memorize the brown streak in his black hair, the shape of his nose and mouth, his polished shoes. Unexpectedly, he turns to spit on the lawn. Later, a little sadly, Maureen searches for where it landed.

"Lili called," Mom tells Daddy as she brings in his rewarmd supper. "It's hard to make out her English when she's so upset, but it sounded like Pete hasn't been home since yesterday." Daddy eats with his jacket on, grumbling. "I ought to tell that joker to get lost. Him and Nick are probably camping out down at the Pass Time again. Shit." Just at the right moment, as he takes a last forkful of peas, Maureen asks quickly, "Can I go with you?" The expected hoot comes, cutting across her face like a slap, but she continues to stand there waiting for an answer. Mom says, "They don't let children in. Besides, it's nearly time for bed." "I could wear your clothes, Mom. I could wear your high heels and be as tall as some ladies are. I'd get Pete to come out."

Gravel crunches under tires. Maureen has been in bed two hours already. Soon Daddy is across the hall snoring but still she lies in the dark hearing Pete's surprise at how pretty she looks dressed up and made up, feeling herself sink into the plump leather beside him as they sail out in his green car.

# -ZANA



# THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES /or Climbing Back on the Roof Again and Taking Off the Rag

for Dorothy White

— Hettie Jones

I was forty-five  
the first time  
the moon  
took me by surprise  
and I stood on the Bowery  
abandoned by the planets  
while a man  
showed me the sky  
and told me that's why  
I was so crazy

Oh my sisters—  
that a man  
should show me  
the moon

But the habit of menses dies hard

She is saying, loudly, in the  
clinic, to the young doctor  
thirty-two years! there must  
be something, if I'm not pregnant  
why are my breasts swollen and  
why are these problems if it is  
menopause why don't you say *it*  
why do your eyes slide away, what  
is this shame which is yours not  
mine for thirty-two years like  
my friend on Avenue D tells his  
science students, it's not dirty  
it's *rich* blood

And the habit of menses dies hard because it comes hard

It is sometime during her twelfth year, and  
her mother is taking her to spend a weekend

with relatives who raise chickens. They stop in a roadhouse, where unexpectedly she gets her period — her second or third — and begs a dime from her mother for the Kotex machine.

But one Kotex does not a weekend make. After her mother has left the farm and the evening is well on she corners her aunt, whispering a sanitary napkin? Only cotton, says Aunt Sally, who comes from Europe.

She thinks immediately of cotton falling out of the side of her underpants and into the yard with all the chickens. No thank you then she says, I'll manage.

The house is old, the upstairs room where she will sleep is bare of decoration, its furniture only an iron bedstead and a table with a ticking clock on it. In the bathroom she decides to wind toilet paper around the napkin she got from the machine. She does this carefully and not unhappily. No one has told her about old time ladies rags, no old wives tales, they explained in terms of biology only: after all, we were in America now. And though it will be this year that the rabbi explains how ritual makes a life in which every human action is a way of getting closer to God, she does not know this yet, nor that, eventually, she will dispute him. She only repins the re-furbished napkin, and goes to bed.

The window beside the bed looks out on a dirt road dividing an empty, moonlit field. She closes her eyes. Between musty sweet sheets, she listens to the deep, unfamiliar quiet. Something new in her unfolds in that moment, she senses the rest of her life coming. She lies there, listening for it, trussed in gauze and toilet paper, she lies there, and bleeds.

And the habit of menses, because it comes hard, must be mastered

She is naked and victorious  
bent double  
in a cabin by the water  
head between knees, she is thirteen  
and the winner, the winning  
swimmer with her legs and the  
winning boater with her arms  
bent double  
the champion  
bent double  
checking for her  
string



But mastery of the habit of menses is finally only self-mastery,  
and the self courts pain, always courts pain

She is lying on the tailgate of a red Ford station wagon, somewhere in the middle of South Dakota. The car is parked at the edge of a field, and the full moon is so bright it lights the field all the way to a little wooden outhouse where earlier she had seen, in the evening dusk, that whereas the morning tampon had yielded one small drop, that of the afternoon had yielded — nothing. She checks her swollen breasts which are tender but still empty, though in two more days, she knows, they will give up colostrum. But not yet, so far nothing, only, as she lies there, on the tailgate, herself with what thing is in her womb, and above the high full moon, which, this time, has betrayed her.

Yet the habit of menses, though a habit of pain, dies hard and dies slowly

She is naked again, in the clinic  
with the women who care for her,  
and the small cold hands of the doctor  
are like her own small cold hands, and they  
are laughing, the three of them  
I didn't have my period all Fall and all  
my girlfriends were jealous she says,  
I thought it was done  
but then, it came again.

And the slender nurse laughing says  
Honey, she says, honey with a wave  
of her hand she says  
honey it's never that easy

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# “STRIKE IT RICH”

To Francis J. Brady, 1907 – 1981  
September, 1982

Me and my brother and sister sit about three feet from the brand new twenty-one inch T.V. Our baby brother, Dewey, toddles up and down the room on the thatched rug which is the only protection from the cool, hard tile of the floor should he stumble and fall and bump his head. We have just moved to Florida and this is the first T.V. we have ever had. When we lived up north on the chicken farm only our rich neighbors had one, and seeing it required conniving a reason to get into their house, then sidling into the living room where it occupied center stage. I would feel like a burgler stealing into that room, but Mary would push me ahead, saying, “Lee Ann, we’re just going to look ’n see what’s on T.V.” Mostly it was snow until they got hooked up to the antenna up on the hill, but we would watch until we got good and bored. Often it was snowing outside, too, and when we’d saturate with boredom, we’d go back out to the real stuff.

The jalousie windows are open but it is 11:30 on a summer morning and there isn’t much of a breeze. When it does blow, it stirs up the smell of freshly poured cement. The memory is beginning to fade, but only a short time ago we lived in The Royal Palms Motel and drove to this Citrus Estates subdivision every couple of days to survey the progress on the house. We’d stare at the concrete block walls which had abruptly been erected in our absence and realize – wow, this is my room, or – hey, this room is the biggest – is it the living room or the master bedroom? We’d tear about with our confusion. The fact that the floor plans said *master* bedroom; the fact that the neighborhood was called *Citrus Estates*; the fact that our parents tried never to talk about money in front of us children: these facts sat on top of question marks in our nimble, pre-television brains. We knew we weren’t rich; we knew this couldn’t be an *estate*. We knew we had moved because of money, because our father was going back to sea, where he had come from before the farm, and where he had gone when he was fifteen and his father had died and he’d stepped into the role of provider.

We knew without being told that this was mother’s house. She’d said, “If you’re going back to sea, I’m going where it’s warm,” and then she got the map out and showed us all where Florida was, and that turned into wouldn’t you like to go there? No, no, no, no, no, I’d hollered inside. All my friends, my room, my house, my barns, my hills, my berry patch, my apple orchard, all settled around me, all woven through me, part of me. I saw myself hiding in the attic of the house across the street, looking out the dormer window onto our house, adoring it – the huge maples that stood so tall in the front yard, the wide sweep of the side porch that was where we set up rainy day games of Monopoly. From there, I imagined myself watch the family drive away



# MAUREEN BRADY

without me, the little two tone green Nash Rambler station wagon that didn't have room for all of us anyway, loaded down heavy in the back, climbing the hill and taking the last curve out of town. In this way I avoided thinking about actually having to move right up to the very last moment, when I was assigned the middle of the back seat, as befit my role as second child, and was packed in along with everything else we had chosen to keep out of the auction.

The fact of the Florida house going up surely meant we weren't tourists. We weren't rich either, but I'd thought only rich people built new houses. There was a sign out front we always had to pass—NO TRESPASSING—DO NOT ENTER—and the whole time we wandered around those hollow walls, I feared being caught trespassing, never called out to the others but whispered, and often they answered in whispers.

We'd look up to the sky and see the stars and giggle at the idea you could see stars from *inside* a house. For me, I wouldn't have minded leaving it that way. It was warm like Mommy wanted. Imagine standing out at night in shorts and the breeze cooled you by its motion, not by bringing in the North wind. It was consoling to think she must be happy with this. No, I did not want or need a roof on this house. Boring as it was at The Royal Palms Motel, change was coming too fast.

"Next time we come the roof'll be on," Daddy said.

No, I didn't believe it. There were only four carpenters and the construction of a roof seemed an enormous task. We couldn't go and watch them build during the daytime because Daddy went to Unemployment or else was off following up leads, thinking he might find a stay-home job, though we all knew he was going back to sea as soon as he got us situated in the new house. The next day, everywhere I looked I saw ants building ant hills. I wanted them to stop, to rest, but they went on relentlessly, pushing one grain of sand on the top, returning for another. I had to sit on my feet to hold back from flattening the hills with one simple swipe of my big toe.

Sure enough when we returned, the roof was on, settling like doom between us and the stars, but at least the breeze still blew through the holes that were meant for windows. Mom couldn't wait for the house to be finished. She walked around with hungry, decorator eyes, thinking out loud about colors, arrangement of the furniture we didn't have, starting fresh. "Isn't it nice to start fresh," she'd say, her voice light and airy with bright ideas. Mary, twelve and adventuresome, would agree. I'd say *sort of* even though it had wrecked the first ten years of my life, and terrible Timothy, the grouch, nine, would just give her a mean look. Dewey would be toddling around, testing echos with his screeches in the various rooms, or spilling out huge boxes of seven penny nails on the floor. Mommy, surviving inside her



frilly fantasies, decided to paint the outside of the house pink. Coral, she called it, and that word built in the imagination, but when it came off the paint brushes onto the concrete blocks, it was just plain pink.

Mary and Timmy and me are sitting all hunched up close, both to each other and to the new T.V. in the new pink house, on the "grass" rug, which leaves markings all over your bare legs if you so much as watch one whole program without moving around. The NO TRESPASSING sign is down and we are now actual residents of Citrus Estates, though it is still hard to believe this is home the way our farmhouse was. Our farmhouse had a wooly rug in the room we played in and drapes heavy enough to hide behind on all the windows. This place seems more like a cross between our real home and The Royal Palms Motel.

Mary and I have a room together like we did before, and Timmy and Dewey have a room with bunkbeds. Mommy and Daddy have the master bedroom but Daddy has gone back to sea so Mommy has it all to herself (really more space than she needs). Daddy has not yet found a job to take him far out on the ocean, but he works on tug boats in New York Harbor for two weeks at a time, then has one week off. We can't afford for him to come home since we live so far away, (in this place that may one day blow away in a hurricane), so on his week off he goes around trying to get on quiz shows and we stay home watching for him.

We were watching Strike It Rich and we know this is one he has tried for and then Warren Hull is saying, "Our next contestant, Mr. Franklin Sperry," and Daddy is there, flat figure on our screen in the Coral house and we are all calling, "Mommy, come quick, Daddy is on T.V." Dewey comes with his greasy fingers and touches Daddy on the picture tube and Mary lunges on him and pulls him into her lap to watch. Mom stops sweeping the sand, which she claims enters this house as if each of us shoveled the beach into our shoes. She comes and stands behind our backs, propped against the broom. I think she is even more amazed than we are to see Daddy like this. I can't hear anyone breathing. It is like he is watching us, watching our existence in the Coral house, instead of us watching him. His face is broad, as it is in real life, and his look is direct. He smiles for a second, which we take as a message for us, then Warren Hull asks him would he please tell the viewers his story.

I am suddenly, rigidly aware that this is not all a game, that for weeks now we have been listening to the sad stories of the contestants on this program. I have often been quietly moved to tears by them. I have known that telling why you are poor or unfortunate is a requirement for getting on the program, but I have never thought to put this together with a picture of my dad, standing there like he is now, shifting his body slightly inside the suit which I've only ever seen him wear to church. He's saying—my wife, she was a city girl . . . I met her on a cruise on a ship I was sailing then . . . we went up country together . . . hard adjustment for her but she was willing . . . worked hard, both worked hard trying to make it with a small chicken farm . . . no big equipment . . . just the family . . . children worked too, as soon as they were old enough . . . (How fast I'd forgotten the chores—gather eggs, grade eggs, pack eggs, feed my own little bantam hens I was raising for a 4-H project. Life so simple in the pink house, squeezing grapefruit and watching T.V.) . . . bankruptcy . . . couldn't make it . . . had to declare bankruptcy . . . give up on the farm . . . go back to sea. Family's in Florida now . . . trying to get back on our feet.



I am crying now the way I do when I am moved by other people's stories on Strike It Rich; the tears rise to my eyes and stay on the edges of them until they evaporate. The word bankruptcy has stuck inside me, making me feel as if a boat has overturned in my stomach. I don't know what the word means but I am riveted to it as a key to my confusion. Does it mean the bank has something to do with our lives? One reason it is hard to figure this is that we didn't even have a bank in our town. Despite the fact that I feel sick, I maintain an appearance of calm but avid interest in this T.V. program. I don't dare look to see how anyone else is reacting because I can feel that shock has made us all into statues, still and silent to anyone but ourselves. Mom is propped on the broom, her bare arms sticking out of her sleeveless blouse, her bare legs sticking out of her bermuda shorts. We are all very exposed. We have come here to start over, but Daddy is on T.V. in living rooms all over the country and, perhaps more to the point, all over Citrus Estates.

I can see that he would like to loosen his tie. He always does that as soon as he exits from the church, pulls his tie first one way, then the next, then releases the top button of his shirt and sighs, as if he had only been getting a limited supply of air through the bottleneck of his throat surrounded by the stiff collar, the noose of the tie.

His story is finished. Dewey is clapping for Daddy, the audience is clapping, Mommy shifts her relationship to the broom and begins to clap and then we all do. The sounds of our claps ring on the concrete walls, the stark floor. We do not have enough in this house yet to be clapping, singing, laughing, shouting. We have a cheap sofa with bolsters, a grass rug, a picture of a lone seagull on the wall. We have a father who comes to us on T.V., working for his honor, telling us about a family we barely recognize.

They have cut to a Fab commercial but we do not cut our attention from the screen except to release Dewey for thirty seconds of toddling. We all stare silently at the woman examining her wash for whiteness and Mommy hums the jingle without seeming to know she is doing so.

Now back to Daddy and we are ready to play Strike It Rich except while the camera comes in on Daddy, Warren Hull summarizes his story for anyone who tuned in during the commercial. I hope that he will explain bankruptcy, but of course he doesn't. As the words come out of his mouth, our story becomes a public story. It belongs to the show now, which is fine with me—they can have it. "Come on, come on, let's play the game," Timmy mutters to Warren. The camera is on both of them now, and I like the way Warren looks, so friendly to Daddy and yet so comfortable in his suit.

There are categories such as history, music, sports, famous figures, and sometimes Daddy gets to choose the category, sometimes not. After the category is chosen, he decides how much to put on the question, and the more money he goes for, the harder the question he draws. He starts out slow and easy and he's doing fine. He gets all the answers. He lets go of a little grin after each one, then I can see how his concentration is moving forward to be ready for the next. This is how he was also when he was home with us, after we got the T.V. He would sit on the sofa, trunk bent forward, elbows on his knees, and volunteer the answers to the contestants before they responded. Chuckling lightly when they missed. A big \$400 is lit up on the screen. This is what he is winning so far, we are winning so far. We are already



spending it, at least I am, and I suspect I am not alone. It feels as if we are all one person at this moment, though I know we will argue later about how we would each spend it if it were our own. I would try to begin to fill up the pink house more.

Warren Hull is saying, "Do you understand?" and Daddy bobs his head. What is to be understood is that he has just put double or nothing on the last question and he does not get to choose the category. If he answers correctly, we will win \$800. If he does not, we will lose the \$400. We hold our breath. It is unbelievable that our life might change so fast.

I grab Mary's hand and we both squeeze hard. I just know he is going to lose and wish he had gotten on *The Price Is Right* instead. That is his favorite quiz show and I know he could win on it. He knows exactly how much everything costs. He knows the difference between the price of a Sears refrigerator and a Montgomery Wards. He knows stoves, he knows cars, toasters, irons, washing machines. His hobby is pricing things. While other people go shopping to buy, he goes around memorizing price tags. He comes home and reports to us and tells us his ideas about why Wards is charging more. He knows motors, too, so he knows they have identical motors, these refrigerators. He wants to understand the psychology of pricing, but he doesn't. He believes no one should charge more than is absolutely necessary. Mom says there are hundreds of reasons why prices might come out different, but he doesn't believe her. He doesn't even ask her what they are and she doesn't tell, so I don't know what to think. Just like with the eggs I didn't know what to think. All the time they used to talk about the egg prices up, the egg prices down—way down sometimes—Daddy frowning, his bushy eyebrows nearly coming to meet. It didn't seem fair that if the hens had a good laying season the egg prices should drop. We'd be working harder and so would the hens. Why then should everyone else be going around rejoicing about cheap eggs? Daddy tried to explain the balance, the system of supply and demand, but I wasn't ever convinced that he bought it. An egg was an egg where we were concerned.

They flash \$800 in a light bulb design off and on the screen. This isn't because he was won it already, but to tell how excited we are that he might. Warren Hull's low voice has risen to a higher pitch as if he wants us to win it, and I hope this means he has a way of pulling an easy question for the last one. Mary slips her legs under her, comes up to kneeling, and whispers, "Come on, Daddy, you can do it."

Now the category comes jumping out—MUSIC—and Mom sighs, *oh, no*, and we all droop. Still rapt but we can no longer think of spending the eight hundred. Daddy is tone deaf. He can't sing. He doesn't listen when we do or even when music is played. He reads a paper or watches out the window or goes off in his own mind playing with the prices. This is awful. We try to sink slowly but Mary sinks the fastest because of kneeling. I have just filled up the house with eight hundred dollars worth of stuff and they are playing a song, something familiar but I wouldn't know how to name it myself. I say, *come on, come on, please, Daddy*, over and over inside. *You've probably heard the name of it somewhere. Just relax and let the answer come to you.* His eyes are looking around as if time is taking too long to pass, and I can see he has no where more to search for the answer. They only played the first few bars. Now those bars are fading in my memory and in the silence I could make them into almost any song, then venture a guess, but he doesn't even do that. "I don't know,"



he says, shrugging the weight of his shoulders which are abnormally squared off from the shoulder pads in his suit.

"What is it?" I whisper to Mommy.

"The Blue Danube Waltz," she says, mouthing the title to Daddy, but she knows, we all know, that he will never get it. Timmy is beating his legs with his fists. "I'll give you one more chance," Warren says, and replays the same bars of music. But this is only making it worse. Making us wait and wait, making Daddy shift uncomfortably foot to foot, his eyes losing their sparkle. I am chanting to myself—blue danube waltz blue danube waltz. We know it is lost but we are still trying. Now would be a good time for the hurricane to come and blow us away. Daddy is beginning to look stupid, which finally, is worse than bankruptcy. They ring a bell that means time is up and they erase the light board that was holding our money. At least we can breathe.

"Too bad," Warren says. "Bad luck for our contestant." But now the heartline lights up. This is a pink telephone with lights all around it and as the phone rings, the lights flash, pumping my adrenalin back up so my heart is a knot. Warren's voice is calm enough to make me think the world will go on, no matter what, as he says, "Well, let's see who's calling." He listens and then conveys the message. The caller is an ex-actor from New York City who moved upstate to try his hand at chicken farming and has been quite successful, so he's donating seventy-five dollars to help Franklin Sperry and his family get back on their feet. "How nice of him," Mommy says. I don't think it's nice at all. How come he was able to succeed? And what will a mere seventy-five dollars be able to buy? I don't want to have to be grateful to this stranger. I don't want to have people all over the country, sitting in their living rooms, saying, "How nice, aren't they lucky this man decided to give them some money." If Daddy had won, that would have been something else. Or if the man was willing to donate eight hundred dollars, I'd be willing to say thanks.

Daddy is gone now. He is off the air and a new contestant is telling her story, but we don't follow her. It seems very pale to watch a stranger on T.V.

Timmy curses and Mommy scolds him for it, but he goes on anyway, a grin loping across his face. "Quite a sob story he told, wasn't it?" Dewey is first to giggle at this, then me. I say, "Yeah, he really laid it on." I wait for Mommy to say, "No, that was real, that was us he was talking about," but she doesn't. She starts to hum The Blue Danube Waltz, goes on beyond those first few bars they played, letting the hum swell louder as she goes. We are all a mass of giggles now. Mary rolls off her knees over onto her side, her pretty face away from me, but I hear her join in, saying, "He laid it on pretty thick." I tickle Dewey, then Mary tickles me, then she turns on Timmy. He tries to hold a straight face, to resist feeling. His brown hair waves at the same place on his forehead where Daddy's does. He looks like Daddy did when he was waiting out the time. Then tiny little spits fly out from his mouth as he breaks into laughter. This seems very, very funny. "You're spitting at me, can't you control your spit?" Mary says, as she keeps on tickling him. "Can't control your spit, can you?" She turns back to me. "How about you?" I get serious, hold my breath. Think numb and try not to feel her fingers digging along my ribs except as nuisances, but I hear Mommy still humming the tune. She's gone back in the kitchen with the broom and is sweeping and humming, and my throat is filling and I burst, rocking on the grass rug with my laughter that's hurting my stomach and my face.

Still somewhere in the far back reach of my mind, I am doing fractions, which we've been studying in school, and trying to figure out what fraction of \$12,000 is \$800. Because I think it is \$12,000 we are paying for this pink house over the next twenty years. It might be \$12,500 because we got a corner lot. We are all rolling and rocking and spitting out our laughter and Dewey keeps running, leaping and then falling onto our mass of bodies, and I don't know how we'll ever be able to stop.

"Stop," I gasp. "We've got to stop."

"Can't," Mary spits out.

We've got to ask *what's bankruptcy*, I'm thinking, feeling the indentations on the backs of my legs from the grass rug as if they were symptoms of some big disease. I can't ask it. Instead, I say, "Maybe tomorrow he'll get on *The Price Is Right*."

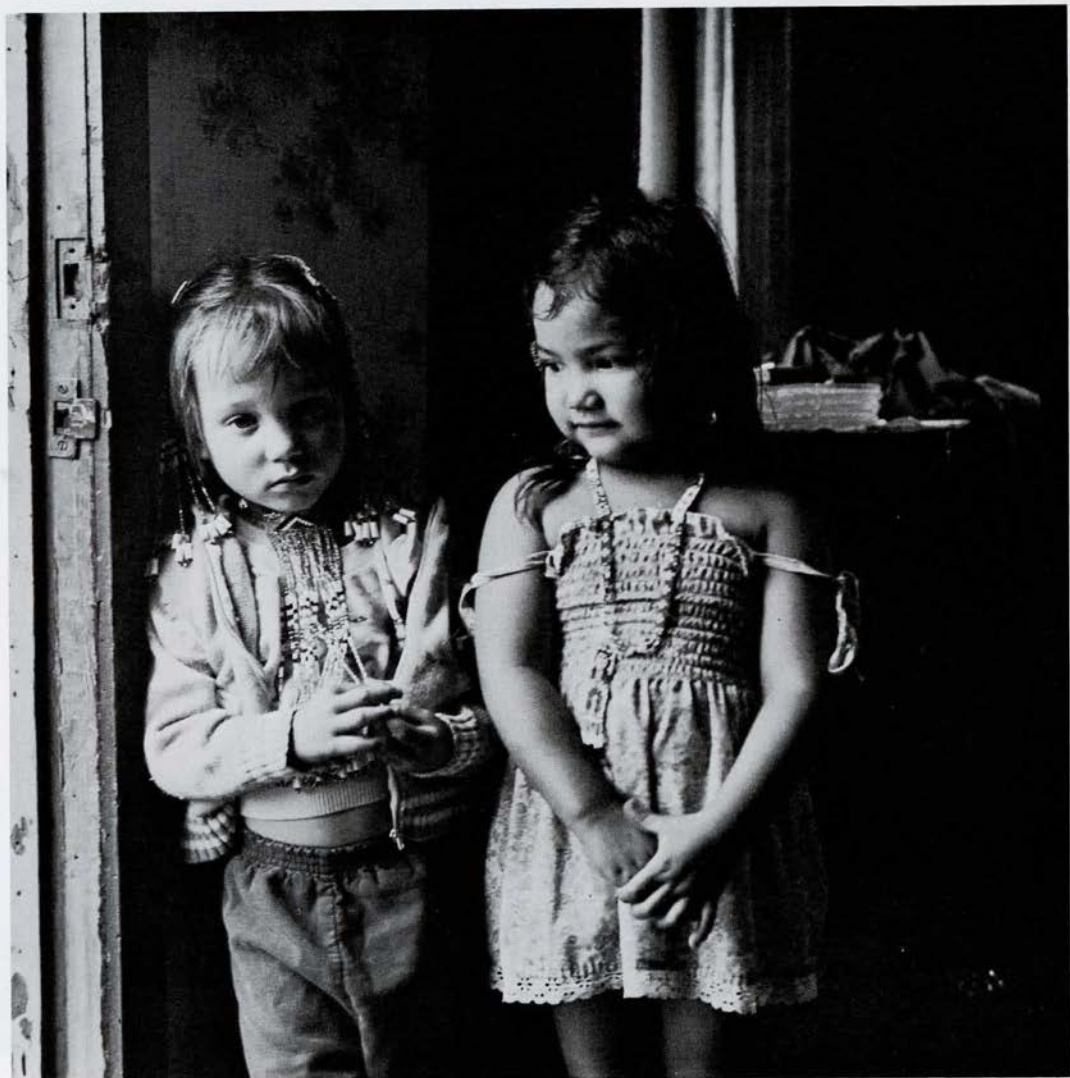
"Yeah," Timmy says, his laughter dying to contempt. "They don't have any *music* on that one."

I wonder when will Mommy be able to have a piano again. It's the one thing I don't think Daddy has priced. But I've never seen them give one away on *The Price Is Right* anyway. I'm thinking how it's hard to imagine where we would put it in this hollow sounding room so that its notes wouldn't just echo off the walls. Then I realize the house is different now. It does not seem so empty or so new as it bounces our laughter back to us.



# MARIAN ROTH

*portraits*



Ganietahawe and Teioronse



Cecilia and Annabelle, Potsdam, N.Y.





Elvira and Elmyra



Trudy and Nancy Wood





Tonia and her mother, Millicent



# HOME GRACE PALEY

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Going to Minneapolis by air one day, on air that is, held up in space on currents of air by a noisy unimaginable machinery—skimming that air like some pebble of casual god, I was crammed into a seat next to a woman who looked like a Vietnamese actress. Of course, I thought, she is really a middle or upper middle class Asian woman, with rouged cheeks and narrowed lips, her hair done up by the dresser's hand, her eyes lined into an approach to caucasian.

Why did I think she was an actress? Because I've been in Vietnam. In 1969 I travelled by jeep on a dirt road called National Highway One from Hanoi to Vinlinh a tiny hamlet on the DMZ near the Ben Hai River. During this journey along the Vietnamese coast, we travelled under what could be considered the American sky—since that's where Americans were seen, floating, flying, dropping tons of ordinance (bombs), sometimes even falling down out of their planes to death, injury, prison on the Vietnamese earth. We often stopped in villages or in fields that had been villages to see how people could live on the floor of blast and carnage. We saw rosy, rouged theater groups playing to the thin pale people, marking some kind of cheeriness in those caves and underground households. Since then, I never see an Asian woman wearing lots of makeup without thinking, Ah! an actress! A theater person.

Naturally I wanted to speak to my neighbor; she had the window seat and there was no reason for her to turn toward me. When we were about 25 minutes from Minneapolis, I said, Excuse me but where are you from? She looked at me out of a half minute's silence. I'm Vietnamese, she said. Then I asked her the following questions all at once,—in rapid nervous order: What city are you from? What province? Do you have children? Where do you live now? When did you come here—to this country?

She answered in a friendly but factual way. I am from Saigon. I have two children. I am here six months. My children are in the Sisters School in Maryland, the nuns that helped us get here. My husband is dead. He is an American. German. I live with his family in Wisconsin.



Then I asked her: Was your husband a soldier? Were you born in Saigon?

No, no, he was a businessman. He was much older than I. He was very rich; real estate was only one of his businesses. He was in Saigon from the late 50's. He died of a long illness. Oh, we have lost over \$200,000 in the rush to get here on time. No I was not born in Saigon. I was born in Hanoi.

We drank our pre-landing orange juice for awhile. I had to make a decision. Should I tell her that I had been in Hanoi, that I had gone with others as a political anti-war woman to record the devastation of American war and bring back (at the North Vietnamese initiative) three American prisoners of war. I thought, No. Better not. God knows, she could become angry and attack me with the sorrow of her exile. Then I thought, (since opposing thoughts often succeed one another)—Yes, *I will* tell her. Otherwise this airtalk will remain just another chit chat, nothing moved further, no knowledge gained on either side. So I told her I had been to Hanoi a few years earlier. I had been a guest of the North Vietnamese and I had worked against the war. With all my strength, I added.

You were in Hanoi? she asked, turning to me, probably to see my eyes which had seen her home. What was it like? How were the people? And the streets?

I told her I had walked every morning along the Lake of the Restored Sword. I had lived in the Hotel of Reunification. What's that? she said with a little irritation. Then. What else?

I told her there were trolley tracks along the park and the cars packed with people, stuffed, their heads and legs and arms stuck out of doors and windows. I told her I saw a military parade, but the lines were not straight and children and women joined the march and then went off. I walked up and down streets of French Mediterranean houses.

She said, Most people think Saigon is much handsomer than Hanoi. They think Hanoi is grey. Was it much damaged? I told her about the individual shelters sunk along the streets like big garbage cans for individuals caught in sudden bombing. Then in '69 it had seemed a poor, bikeriding city. But the trees were wonderful, plane trees and what was it—eucalyptus—.

Yes, it's green; it is green.

Why did you leave? I asked.

Oh, long ago, she said. In '54, when the French left us, we were taken south, tens of thousands of school children, by the sisters—in trains and vans and buses. So that we should not grow up to become communists and forget our Jesus. My father was already dead, but my mother, I never saw my dear mother again. I remember I looked back, and in my mind it has remained always a mist of greenness.

When, in '69, my comrades and I flew into Hanoi, from Pnom Penh, a big busy city, stinking of bad automobiles and streaming among them, the Cambodian ricksha runners hauling upper blue collar workers from office to lunch to home, we were greeted at the little hidden Hanoi airport by women and men, their arms full of

flowers for us, Americans who hadn't flown all the way to Vietnam, 12,000 miles just to kill Vietnamese.

The woman from the Women's Solidarity Committee took my arm. She spoke enough English to be able to ask, after embraces and the delivery of the flowers and the taking of my arm as we walked loving the sight of one another toward the car, Grace, from the air, tell me, did you see our city, how beautiful and green it is, did you see our green Hanoi?

# THREE

## VILLAGES

In Duc Ninh a village of 1,654 households  
Over 100 tons of rice and casava were burned  
18,138 cubic meters of dike were destroyed  
There were 1077 air attacks  
There is a bomb crater that measures 150 feet across  
It is 50 feet deep

Mr. Tat said: The land is more exhausted than the people  
I mean to say that the poor earth  
is tossed about  
thrown into the air again and again  
it knows no rest

whereas the people have dug tunnels  
and trenches they are able in this way  
to lead normal family lives

### In Trung Trach

a village of 850 households  
a chart is hung in the House of Tradition

rockets	522
attacks	1201
big bombs	6998
napalm	1383
time bombs	267
shells	12291
pellet bombs	2213

Mr. Tuong of the Fatherland Front  
has a little book  
in it he keeps the facts  
carefully added



Last week  
seven Americans swam in the Gulf of Tonkin  
guarded by the sampans of the Nhan Trach  
Fishing Cooperative  
This village was attacked 846 times  
For each inhabitant 260 bombs were dropped  
There isn't a home left or a household that's intact

On the highest dune the villagers have just built  
a small brick house for four old men  
whose lives have passed in war  
when they look out the back window they see  
the stumps of their village  
the grassy cluster of tunnels

Below them is the sea on the white sand the nets  
are being mended  
the young militia is trained

What do they think when they look out to sea  
and seven Americans are swimming in the Pacific  
with eleven members of the Vietnam American  
Solidarity Committee

We will meet in Saigon

—Grace Paley

# talking nicaragua



I  
After the revolution Juan still  
yelled at his kids  
not always  
just when he was trying to sleep and they  
ran out banging the door

Isabel  
still couldn't get the faucet to stop dripping

Elena's feet were killing her  
still

everything went on the same  
only different after the revolution:  
the same  
only different.

II  
The kind and very blond  
American actress wants to know about Nicaragua.  
She thinks the problem must be  
economic: "What do they have? What's there that  
the United States needs?"  
It's not copper this time  
not gold  
and no oil, that's for sure  
it's not uranium or diamonds:  
what do they have?

There's a little bit of coffee  
some cotton, hardly enough for a shirt  
There's not a lot of anything in Nicaragua  
not even people  
and the people are the same.

Only different.

III  
"The Nicaraguans," laughs another, "they  
remember *everything*! And Jaime  
Hermida Castillo, pale  
serious  
twenty-four  
doesn't understand. He looks up  
from the book he is holding:  
"We have to remember."

And here are the photos  
a high-school yearbook of the dead  
ordinary faces:  
here are their names:  
Julio Buitrago Urroz  
Arlen Siu  
Jesus Reyes  
Enrique Campbell  
page upon page and Jaime still  
remembering:

"Leonel Rugama: I was eleven and Managua  
was such a small town. All day  
we saw helicopters  
tanks  
troops trying to win  
against three or four people. I remember  
because that was the first time  
I learned of the Frente. It took a whole army  
to kill Leonel. He was  
a poet, you know."

Each ordinary face  
a poet each  
ordinary face so  
very young each ordinary face different  
and dead  
and still speaking saying: each  
face the same.



IV

*Managua Nicaragua is a wonderful town  
You can buy a hacienda for a few pesos down*

Somoza. To say it soured  
the mouth  
put snakes between the teeth  
whistling *you can buy a hacienda*—

With Somoza gone, it was different.

V

But it's the same  
shame

New uniforms at the border but the same  
lettering on the explosives  
*C119/LAUNCHER/MADE IN USA:*  
only now more people can read  
the labels on what comes to kill them.  
The terror *MADE IN USA*  
means nobody there likes a bad loser  
but especially everyone hates  
the people who really  
win something

different

and plan to stay that way.

VI

What do they have?

Brenda Rocha. Elena. Juan. Isabel.  
The way the lake laps liquid  
at the evening's knees remembering  
these living heroes  
ordinary as the gritty  
holy air of Nicaragua  
still real despite the terror.

They have  
these faces.

The same and the same  
only  
transformed.



# Sara Miles

# AT THE FLEAMARKET



I want the things no one else has  
like the handpainted yo-yo from Mexico  
or the fans that fold out painted flowers edged in gold  
or the car from a roller coaster ride  
or the wooden cigarette box in the shape of a dog's head  
When you pull the lever the dog's mouth opens  
and out pops a cigarette

I wanted the scrapbook  
This scrapbook I was sure was kept by a  
frustrated female artist, born circa 1880  
It held smiling Victorian ladies,  
illustrations from instructive manuals  
and greeting cards from a time when  
greeting cards meant much more and  
were kept in scrapbooks

—It was the way the pieces were collaged together —  
a black and white print of a  
mother and child in the  
center of a circle of  
bright flowers cut from  
seed packages arranged to  
form a border along the  
edges of the page so that faces  
peered out from the middle of a  
giant flower made up of flowers or a  
giant flower that looked like a  
giant eye

—Outside the buildings, an old woman, her car trunk  
full of old toys, tells us about  
The One Inch Rubber Dolls from Germany —  
Tiny athletes stretching and posing,  
bound together by bands of rubber at the waist  
A little rubber nightmare

We say "Weird!"  
She says, "Not weird, no not weird  
You don't see that everyday  
You can't get that at just any dime store  
It's imported! You couldn't find it *anywhere*  
but in my collection"



I can stare and I can stare at her  
She is living proof our lives are  
not cut from advertisements

But my friends don't like that woman with the wild white hair,  
a living proof they fear  
So we move away from that scrappy woman with her trunk of toys  
toward's the scraps of a life, a closed book we open

We move away, back into the musty buildings  
to find something—  
old postcards, antique laces, a black velvet dress  
—Something we can get our hands on

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## THE DRESS

I buy an "old lady" dress of  
yellow and blue daisies  
Returning home I discover  
in the pocket  
a mat of grey hair and  
notice the shoulders  
stained with blood  
as if she had fallen  
asleep on the chaise lounge  
in the backyard in the sun  
and the blood ran out of her mouth  
and soaked into the dress  
and she slept

I scrub the stains with vinegar  
until the old cotton shreds  
I bury the mat of hair outside  
where the sun is brightest

I wait by the window  
thinking she will come

She must leave her house  
sometime

Thinking she will come  
at night

She must come to see  
what has grown

In the rain  
silver at night

Silver at night  
in her eyes

Silver in eyes  
in the rain

What comes up  
silver at night



Arenas



# Rosa Maria

I step out onto the New York sidewalk, a fat roll of laundry in my arms. Breath of the city scorches my skin, oil and tar and rubber and shit, sweat of the city, seeps into every pore. The sidewalk's sudden glare scatters sight, mind runs apart quick as mercury dropped. Air is thick as blood heavy as flesh itself the boundaries disintegrate the plane doors swing open to the blast of the jungle there are silver steps long drop one to one to one Lagos Lagos Lagos I say I slip the metal burns my calf. The thorns tear my legs seeking shade under the Bouganvillea whose flowers are a flight of crimson butterflies entering the shade my eyes sip at darkness beige brown black black diamonds on beige coil thickening thicker than my arm coil inward: snake. Christine Christine Christine. With the machete she comes running. Snake it is a snake. "It is a good snake. It has eaten a rat so it sleeps. Its name is African Beauty snake. We don't kill these snakes," she says.

Quick silver shiver the drops run plump across the floor

My hands pressed around her forearm thumbs touch where the skin is soft my fingers will not meet. I trace the ridges on her arms too straight for accident too regular. They are like mountain ranges they are like waves seen from the air. I want to touch the lines on her face, her Ibo lines. She tells how the women cut the baby skin with a knife. They mix mud with the blood. There is earth in her arms. It is for beauty and for strength. It must hurt. "Where do you come from?" I ask. "Omomwe," she says, "a village three hundred miles east of here, past Enugu, my husband and my children live there." I have heard my father say Enugu. There is a war there because the Yoruba and the Hausa are killing the Ibos and now the Ibos say they are Biafra not Nigeria. "Are you safer here?" I ask. She shrugs, if she goes back they will all be hungry.

The drops still and many sizes scattered on the stone floor.

I look at her face. I want to ask more questions. I saw her laugh once, her breasts shook and her hands spread wide. I never saw anyone laugh like that before. Mostly she looks like she's guarding a secret place in her mind and she only lets herself visit it occasionally but she always knows it's there. I want to know what it is.

I will slide drop to drop—if you push too hard they split again you start again teasing drop by drop the silver.

The dry wind is blowing, filling the house with sand from the north. My brother and I shape deserts on the window ledge. I say, "It's from the Sahara." "No it isn't." "Is." "Isn't." "It's too hot to fight. Anyway I know because I'm older than you." Christine walks by, her arms piled high with dirty clothes. Her body pushes at the



boundaries of her crisp white dress and between her shoulders spreads a dark slick of sweat. Her broad cracked feet grip the tile floor as she walks. She walks down the hall proud as a ship in sail. We play grandmother's footsteps until we are close behind her and then we pull up her dress. Dark coils between her legs underwear she doesn't wear underwear it is hair hangs down between her legs. We run scared down the stairs. At the bottom I look back. She has set the laundry down she is just standing. She isn't allowed to hit us. My brother giggles. I hate him.

I run outside across the road into the cemetery. I am dodging through the brush sidestepping castles of dried red mud they are everywhere. I don't want to. Christine has hair there too. I am giddy and out of breath. I seen my mother dressing after swimming my mother is Christine is. My name is Mike, I'm going to be an explorer. That's a secret. When you grow up "woman" a fat smelly word. "Woman." I got a doll for Christmas I hid it I played football with it then it was dirty and one arm broke off so I buried it. She won't tell my mother. I didn't see. My name is Mike. Dust clogs my nose, my mouth. In the cemetery are mud castles I draw my foot back I kick one it falls apart inside are thousands of little rooms and termites scurrying I see them alone it's a doll's house with the roof off they swarm all up my leg I stamp like a horse they run up my dress I run yelping into the house Christine Christine she pushes me into the bath and turns the water on full until there is a crust of insects floating dead. I am ashamed.

I am afraid. Christine tells me a story to make me brave. She says, "This is the story of my grandmother whose name is Akueke. My grandmother, my mother's mother, had a scar runs from her knee to her ankle. This is a scar she was dealt in fighting. This fighting took place when Akueke was young. It was the hungry season and she was gathering the corn with the other women. The British were coming next day to take away a large part of the gathering and the chief men were not stopping them because the British were giving the men the title of Warrant Chief. The British gave the men money more than cowrie shells but not to the women. As this was the case the chief women determined to hold a mikiri, a meeting of the women, and Akueke, my grandmother, was there. They met and they talked and they danced different dances and one to be loyal they spring forward one arm high and touch their hands. And all through the mikiri should be a man bringing palm wine in a gourd in court-esy as is the custom but no man is coming and this is the way the men are behaving. So as the women have decided they take the men's machetes and guns for hunting, they go together to the shrine of the ancestress and they touch each other with the medicine paste that is buried before the shrine. The paste is white so they are like ghosts now and fearful to behold. All the night they are saying to the men, "Fight with us. You are Ibos too." but the men are hiding in the huts. Shortly the British come and it is the women chase them away and then is high dancing. But the British return many together bringing guns. The women hide in the bush where there are large number of beasts, lions, jackals etc. and many are killed and wounded. Akueke, for example, her leg is torn in fighting, she lies in the sun for she cannot go run. The British find her, they beat her to tell where are the women hiding but she will not loose one word. They leave her for the lions to eat but she packs mud into her wound and she crawls under a thorn tree. When it is morning she creeps to where the women hide which is nearby and they cry out to see so many bruises and especially the wound in her leg. She tells how she was loyal and they are glad with her and apply strong medicine so she is soon well. The women fight, also many



women from other villages and some men, they fight for two years, they will not give up so finally the British must change their behaviors. And in these troubles there is never a woman will tell the British where are the women though they are beaten into death but they will say, "I am strong like Akueke, I am silent like Akueke." This is the fighting where Akueke my grandmother received her scar. She told me this story when I was of your age as I should not be scared in the bush but brave like her."

Christine tells me to go back to the cemetery so I go outside. I see that the lilies in the driveway have unfurled their orange trumpet and the blue lizards with poison in their heads crowd the walls of the servants' quarters. Where the cemetery begins I find a snake skin wrinkled like one of my mother's stockings. I give it to Christine and I tell her about the flowers and the lizards. She says, "The rains are coming and everyone will drink palm wine tonight and clap their hands." She says the rain will come one hour before sundown and it does, hammering at the roof and furrowing the dust dry road. The air is thick as the smell of ripe bananas. It will rain in the morning and in the afternoon every day for six months. At seven it ends and the sun, mango red, drops into the harbor. Drums beat in the villages across the lagoon and fires leap into the sudden night. It is dark in the house: the power is off again. Christine lights the hurricane lanterns, puffs of oily smoke hang in the air. I see in her face that she has gone far away to that secret place. I want to ask, "why did the British kill the Ibos?" I am silent. Sweat tickles my ribs and beads of water run diagonally down Christine's cheeks following the lines of her tribe.

She is putting us to bed when we hear shouting from the barracks beyond the cemetery. The shouting grows louder, the soldiers are coming down the road. They are chanting something. They are chanting "We want Christine the Ibo. Give us Christine the Ibo." It is dark in the house but by the light of their torches we see them, Christine and my mother and my brother and I standing in the hall way. In their hands are whips. They tilt their heads to drink, faces shining with sweat, the green glint of bottles passing hand to hand, they are twenty or more. Christine hides in the closet in my parents' room. The soldiers are talking. The sound of the lord's prayer and the songs for safety of her people rise and fall against the loud night

*Our father which art in heaven  
Debe m ndu Ji rue nne Omumu bea  
Omumu bea*

until I hear the click of the claws of the land crabs on the veranda and the soldiers' boots clattering the gravel in the driveway below. They are chanting slowly, rhythmically now. The neighbors must hear. The soldiers edge closer They crack their whips. The doors are locked. It is the house of white people.

*Ji rue nne Omumu bea*

I hear it first. The noise of jeeps on the road. It swells to a roar. Headlights split the night. The military police drive the men away. Christine hides long after they have gone.

Edging the tiny drops towards the center a flattening silver blister surely it is smaller than I remember there are beads trapped in cracks in the floor I nudge them free



"Malaria," says the doctor, "I'm afraid." I am cold blankets score my skin I am hot I shiver the rain clatters in my skull it draws a curtain of beads across the window. The curtain is moving my skin is grey with ice the curtain of water is green as a mamba its black bead eye holding mine Christine my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth Christine is gone in a Mammy Wagon she wears a colored headcloth too blue and orange she is going to find her family in the bush where the war is. The soldiers they raped and flogged another Ibo woman to death. Christine waves from the truck. I cried when we got home, her white dress ironed and folded on the chest in the hallway. Quinine is bitter. The fever comes and goes my father is home from the front he was an observer he flew up and down every night there is a blackout voices my father's the war will be over soon the Biafrans can't last they're surrounded there's no food or fuel left days slide into each other. I get up I walk down the stairs step by step I am watching "Mission Impossible" my father is home from the embassy he tells my mother "I got a letter from Christine today. God knows how it got through. She wants a diplomatic pass. She only found two of her family and they're starving." Christine is coming back. She'll never make it. Don't tell the children." There are pictures of Biafra in the magazines beside the T.V. Christine is coming back. The fever returns I smell my mother powdery too sweet she shakes a silver stem "Don't bite it by mistake. Leave it in until I come back." Christine stands in a deserted village. There are no women pounding cassava the yam patch is a charred square she is wearing her white dress. She is in the bush a child stands with a tight round belly crying. That's a photograph. A black march of ants crosses a heap of limbs rotting in the sun. My mother props the thermometer in a glass by my bed. "When is Christine coming back?" "I've told you a hundred times, I don't know. It'll be a miracle if she got the pass let alone the money. We'll just have to wait and see." I know from her voice she doesn't believe Christine will come. I turn my face to the wall. In a dream I see Christine. She stands in a triangle where three paths meet. Her feet are red with mud. There are no people only the chatter of birds high in a breadfruit tree. The tree is one hundred feet tall. At the base of the tree is a snake coiled in fat loops around a breadfruit. Christine squats and speaks to the snake. It slides away. She builds a small fire and roasts the fruit. When she has eaten she walks on, choosing the wider track. I cannot see her eyes. I know she is coming.

Christine arrives at our back door the same day the rain ends. She is thin, her cloth muddy and torn. I wouldn't have recognized her. She says, "You've grown," and smiles. But her eyes are so tired and like she doesn't dare look into that secret place anymore. She goes to wash and sleep. The next day she is wearing her white dress, it hangs from her body in folds. Alongside the beauty lines are new lines scored deep in her face. I watch her doing the laundry, squatted on the ground, slapping and turning the wet cloth on the wash board. Beads of water zig-zag down her face. I touch her face with my finger. She pushes me away.

The drops are gathered now a pool of liquid silver on my fingers is a fine glitter of mercury the street is hot still and the air is thick with smells.

It is the dry season now. I trace footprints on a dusty path and there is one pair broad and strongly marked where the toes grip the ground and there is one pair small and sandal bottom smooth and there is a dry wind from the north sweeps the tracks away.

# ELVA PÉREZ-TREVIÑO HECHIZO

The night, formless, shrouds the land and its casual objects. Deep in meditation, Lucha Paz exercises her desire for developing trust. The Curandera has advised trust for the abyss.

The memory.

"Mi'ja . . . you have suffered a lot of your life. The seven of swords indicates this. Your mother . . . she suffers a lot too." Doña Maria rears her head upwards with the grimacing smile of acceptance in what the cards say.

"Much of your trouble comes from envious people . . . your own inability to trust the universe allows everyone else's magic to work on you. Envisage what comes into your mind, then will you begin to remember who you are . . . then their magic will turn pssh!" a wave of the hand emphasizes the nothingness. Doña Maria's smile returns to emphasize the good fortune.

"Doña Maria? . . ."

"No. Vete Lucha . . . no more prophesying for you. I will light a candle for you, you will see, your soul will grow stronger.

The night.

Dark skies crackle with dry-heat lightning. A black center . . . a callejón leading to the abyss. The museum piece of future/past . . . the great ego equalizer . . . the hole of nothing waiting for the total self . . . the nothingness.

The hechizo.

Hot nopal needles digging into my body, my nipples, my anus. The fear of darkness, of night, of invisible forms. The nightmare of Incubus, of campfires ringed by dancing, frenzied women. La Curandera sweeps with broom and herbs over my sheet-covered body. Fear—the uncontrollable need to murder my mother. The altar fire, the laughter. Fear. Needing to be whipped with a red cloth into some sense of reality, some distraction that says I still have control over my life. The stinging whips, the crying women all around. The silence of this slow-moving cold shower of reality moving into darkness.

On the night of revenge, we prayed to awaken the dead, asked for invisibility to deliver cemetery dirt to the culprit's door. The voices of night, the omens crashing—making me the center of my own universe. My mother whispering "My baby?" over long distance lines into Mejico. The verdict, "Three days to live. They want her soul."



The memory.

The home altar. La Virgen Guadalupe, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, San Martin, San Cipriano de la Capa Negra, the crucifix which has laid on three coffins. The anxious nights staring into this mixture of heaven and hell. The cool breeze touching the candle flame. The wanton desire to enter that world without fear. The anxiety at first thoughts of wanting more knowledge, of wanting to break away. The anxious fear of the altar, of nights lying before this ritualistic emblem of sanity. My mother's belief dressed in red, called forward by chanting songs of allegiance to the omnipotent *good*, the omnipotent *bad*. An anxious girl made more anxious by an anxious mother. The switch blades of hate, resentments. The anxious evenings, the anxious groping . . . the anxious beginnings.

The night.

Fast cars down Guadalupe Street. The stranger walking up and down the callejón, the dogs too scared to bark. The night with its dark is the quiet accomplice. The sinister dream that takes form.

The hechizo.

Dead skin slothing off. The smell of dead fish. The cold oiled baths. Clear on Monday, Brown on Tuesday, Green on Wednesday, Blue Thursday, Red Friday, Gold Saturday, Purple Sunday. The crippled right arm. The cold distrust my brother wears in his eyes. His anger at me for confronting him with something he can not change. Harpies standing guard in our white oak tree . . . whistling to Death while fever fries my sense of real. The phantom man that leans into my dream, the black owl in the paper sack, the blind chick delivered to our kitchen, the stranger begging me for part of my mother's Ruda plant. The urine stench coating my taste buds, the diarrhea of green excrement, the suffocating blackness making me blind during the day. The intuitive sense telling me I am being watched. The black hen that escapes from under my bed while my sister weeps her need to see me live. The dancing white light which appears from nowhere.

The night.

Innocent of its power, creates its selves. It forms the first horizon . . . memory broken, the seam pops like a riveted system outgrown. The peace of clear breath exhaled into star-shape rain, star-shape umbrellas. Night, the need itself sprouts. In the eyes of the mirror. The precious nothingness turns into dirt.

The memory.

In the jungle, men with web feet motion me further in. We crawl in among the dampness, past the bamboo cages. Soon I lie staked to the ground while feathered rattles wave in my face. I rear back on this image when three black onyx crosses rush me in a surprise attack. I turn my back on this illusion in response to the feel of my mother's first touch . . . where I stand at the jungle's edge. The disillusion of all that is man-made . . . the men with lizard feet that run deep into the trail's rut . . . the chameleons that sprout wings, and chirp the sound of survival to the noon day's shadow. Everything in here conspires to make me reveal the secrets of my origin. But memory has no address, no salutation, no post-script. The echoes of laughter, my grimacing smile is the last thing I can share without affectation.

The hechizo.

After the erotic dreams of incest, the dreams of endless oceans, shark-infested — the realization that I must swim forever. The nightmare of dreaming within a dream the clacking voices of some other person inside my head. Haranguing taunts dangling like fish stuck on a lifted net. The piss that escapes out of my control, the habitual hunger to violate my self, the exhaustion of breathing each moment. My burning eyes see tarantulas where my hands should be. I have urgent needs to enclose someone within my arms before I return to sleep. There is constant flapping of wings in my ears. I tell myself to wake . . . then the laughter.

The memory.

Fear — that I am not alone inside my body. The host of possibilities. Which part is mine? Thoughts — what's in my stomach making me sick, or the toad that manifested in the smoldering coals. This sudden satanic whistle, constant. Who is where, and why am I in-between? Everything echoes and the whole picture crumbles. Once I remember, all people come from inside earth . . . not to judge by what one sees because what one sees isn't always that. I learned that in a dream . . . once as an old aunt tipping my hat from a train, I found my true love's gaze coming from behind a child's face . . . the horror of realizing I could not touch myself in some places. All the stories we can be, all the torture we can conjure out of *living*, these are all crammed into my chest. My bowels are sensuously sensitive to pain, and I am caught in the posture of total submission. There is nothing to be done but fight the confusing urges to tear out my own heart.

The hechizo.

During the entire night of three days Lechusas came and took all the emotions I knew . . . and I knew them by heart. During this blindness I became very good at divining cards and at the *laying-on-of-hands*. My entire sense of balance was replaced by a burning in my bowels, and there was no *up*, and there was no *down*. I had to accept all temptation, I had no will of my own. I was not present, yet my entire skull contained the nuclear blast of the pictures . . . but I was not contemplating life. During this time, someone stuck green-glass shards on my tongue, and I could not speak. Also, three apparitions rushed me and stuck a pointed-bone dagger in my exact center, and plunged it all the way in until I awoke somewhere else and ran on all fours like a human dog. The shame of how weak I have been. Can you see now why I am scared and angry at the same time?

The night

unfolds upon my outspread palms. In the quiet prayer of my constant breath I sing the song born on my lips at birth. It is against this last bit of the *concrete* that the heavy rains finally fling themselves . . . into the puddles. In this night I am the extent of whatever control there is for I know absolutely nothing . . . somewhere near the thunder and quakes my soul wavers in a flaming house of ancient stone books. Death has come to be the ultimate challenge for someone like me with no soul . . . How soon will I lose awareness in this disillusion of dreams and consciousness . . . will my shrieks carry into infinity?



The hechizo.

Everything is so absurd in this constantly silly episode . . . I am still in pain . . . I am still an enigma of fear . . . but mostly, it is anger that drives me to peel myself off this mirror door. Somewhere near, I smell flowers. Somehow I begin to question all things in front of me . . . now I'm in dream, now I'm in real-space . . . now the land cracks open and I fall off the edge. I startle to find myself holding up our stone house's stone door frame while an earthquake reels me into disaster. It's no longer important that now I am completely altered, completely affected by the heat of gaseous fumes. This ether in which I breathe stings my vision with color. Now am I up, and there is no down, now am I not anyone's because I am not my own. My image is being consumed by outside changes directed at me by my own ignorant mind.

But this is all magic. This is all ugly and magic is not ugly. But magic is awesome. Staring into the altar, playing with these erotic fears of the dark, I recognize the magic's need to have my breast suckled by a hungry mouth full of sharp teeth . . . something that powerful. Delicate. Deliberate. Were I to convince you that the hechizo is *Metamorphosis* itself, the night would swallow us all.

# SAPPHIRE

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i guess if i was a sound

or  
if i was your woman

i guess if i was a sound  
i'd be a saxophone  
a drumbeat  
ocean wave  
heart beat and if i was something to eat  
i'd be an eggplant  
mango strawberry  
blackberry banana  
pear raspberry  
luv juice orange  
blk beans brown rice and if i was something to wear  
i'd be red silk  
clean cotton  
fine wool  
i'd be a hi heeled trumpet  
gold ring warrior  
with a feather shield  
an opium dream  
a real wind storm  
soft sea  
i'd be banana bread  
and chocolate lips  
thighs clenched around  
your hips  
a lightening flash on  
your clitoris  
i would be cinnamon  
tea tears soft  
smiles smooth skin  
hot bath  
attentive woman  
i would be warm things  
and wash your feet  
i would be a communion  
a union of love need  
green things growing  
in your mind  
if i was a touch  
i'd be fur on a cat's back

burlap a silk sand  
hot wet thing  
if i was a sight i'd be  
an African print gold hoop  
brown round glorious  
red bird a mirage  
of mad things  
if i was a smell  
i'd be sesame oil  
coconut natural  
funky thing  
i'd be flowers  
and sweat  
perfume and piss  
manufactured and  
real i'd be a sweet  
thing open  
wide to your need  
a bowl a river  
to flow fill  
i'd be black ink  
grey fears  
midnite madness  
and if i was a jewel  
i'd be a Rubylee Pearl Sapphire Opal  
Crystal girl and  
if i was machine  
i'd break down  
decompose and  
go back to the  
earth  
"I'd never stop  
loving you  
I'd never stop  
loving you  
i say i say I SAY  
i'd never stop  
loving you."



# Nile Blues

I.

for now we see through a glass,  
darkly . . .

1. Corinthians 13:12

I walk the streets and there are people  
with blood on their faces  
the blind man approaches the cage where I dance  
waves his hand thru space  
hoping to touch a thigh perhaps  
or just feel the warm heat of the glittering woman  
I am at the bar in my seat  
he doesnt know the space is vacant  
no one dances  
they laugh at him and I wonder how I look in his mind  
see myself and know he is lucky to be blind  
the trick didnt show (shouldnt a tole him he had to  
use a rubber)  
and women ride the trains in white veils  
cat guts binding their lips n I feel all of Bessie Smith's  
200 pounds and wish for more  
yeah  
and gentle mist 40 degree mild winter day reminds me of  
all the sunshine I've missed

II.

when I was a child . . .  
1. Corinthians 13:11

wow its been  
a while  
since I was 16  
a bitch loaded off  
red devil's was  
a lo rider's dream  
the asphalt got so hot  
and was always someone stopping  
to give you a ride: hey baby I have to make  
a stop before I drop you off come on up  
you dont have to wait in the car

my sister jumped out  
a two story apartment once  
rather than be raped

there was a thing called the  
wet look and we wore it

Judy(Birdlips)Coleman  
a half breed I went to junior high with  
one of Angie's tights  
lightskinned straight hair big legs  
fine the bitch was fine  
we worried over the fine ones  
scared they wouldnt be destroyed too  
but I heard she married  
blk ugly Charles  
got fat drops pills ALL the time  
they locked her up in Camarillo  
for beating on her daughter

In L.A. my home town  
its rumored among those  
who knew me but not well  
Ramona likes women

III.

then face to face; now I know  
in part; but then shall I know  
even as also I am known.  
1. Corinthians 13:12

1. Coca-Cola R.C. gingerale  
Nehi Orange all the sweetness a L.A.  
bitch might ever know  
and the after-hours  
same game I mightta fell for  
ten years ago (till he 'come' (he'd been  
tootin' too Unh uh honey  
15 minutes for you)

next time ten years from now  
when I sit up in the after-hours joint  
I'll be wise but unable to refuse  
the chances will be so few  
I'll have to take what comes  
and make do

and the asphalt will be hot

2. read in the bible bout lillies  
and suck from tween my thighs  
scrape honey from my eyes  
knead bread from my hips  
dont throw pearls to swine  
walk waters if you can  
be an ocean to the world  
see if five fish feed  
a thousand men

OH MARY DONT CHU WEEP  
TELL YO SISTUH TELL YO SISTUH  
NOT TO MOAN

go back the nationalists say we should go back to Africa

I read it was done when she's around six  
(I'm talkin about clitoridectomy) she's  
taken screaming  
labia pierced with thorns and stapled to her thighs  
and a woman wields the knife  
blood streaming  
puts her hands there after  
to make sure its all gone

has it ever been right

they say a child born  
of woe man  
not knowing man  
was sent forth to  
save  
I cannot deal wit immaculate conception  
having learned the taste  
to taste sperm  
have felt my belly swell  
breast engorged thighs become as rivers rising  
I know better

Coca-Cola a sweet ice cold  
surge down my throat  
I would want some strawberry sweetness  
to wrap 'round me and shot sugar  
all thru my veins  
and as long as the sun shines wheels'll roll  
the asphalt's hot and the past runs over me  
like blind freight trains  
children within me cry out and I can't NOBODY  
bathes in my name

my mind is a scab  
that doesnt bleed  
soap water  
blood  
tears moon  
salt  
bathtubsblood  
IN THE NAME OF  
THE MOTHER  
THE DAUGHTER  
AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF SHIT  
I BAPTIZE THEE

Sapphire



## SONNET WITH WEAPONS

I wish I could say my day's a search  
for the angel who's trying to rise in-  
side each of us, instead of this lurch-  
ing across the word processor editing  
articles on SS-20s and cruise  
missiles, phoning the Pentagon for  
pictures of bombers, guessing whether we'd lose  
too much contrast by printing that color  
slide of a mushroom cloud in black & white.  
I wish it weren't metal I imagine gliding  
silently over the clouds when at night  
I shut my eyes. I'm tired of reciting  
policies, figures, my mind watching faces  
melt as air's pieces blast out of their places.

## POINT ZERO

As I read of the man who reduces life  
to point zero, whose quizzical mind  
wants to see where perception diffuses  
completely, leaves no point of focus, his wife

is who starts stirring pots in my mind, rife  
with silence. She keenly feels his mind  
in her days, insisting that brilliance is  
what she lacks, the critical tool, the one knife.

As the stew begins simmering, she sits amidst  
shifting shadows and odors and writes to  
her sister and mother. "Today was a whistle-  
stop of a day. Quail filled the yard with their odd coos,  
and waddled among the wild daylilies. It's  
painful how little he'll talk. Oh, I miss you."



BEVERLY  
JOSE

# “MARIE”

“Oh . . . she was just a drunkard.” That’s what my mother said when I asked about my father’s cousin Marie. When I asked how she died. I did know she died of ‘factors attributed to alcoholism,’ but I had never bothered to find out anything more. I had only vaguely considered what happened to Marie after she left us. But after thirty years of vagueness not only concerning Marie, but my whole life, I decided it was time to ask some questions.

The answers were not what I wanted to hear. Yet, they were the ones I expected.

Then for two years I suffered what I thought I had long since outgrown—embarrassment and fear.

I was embarrassed not only by my idyllic childhood memories of Marie, but by the ugly pictures I conjured up of her. I pictured her swollen, sweaty, drunken—slovenly—men pawing her, degrading her. I pictured her reeling through stores, main streets, alleys, ditches. I saw her not caring that people looked at her, were repulsed by her. I saw her not caring that she—that she what? Embarrassed me? The pictures were only conjured up. But they were pictures my eyes had seen many times; the embarrassment I had felt many more times. And that was the biggest embarrassment, I suppose. That she reminded me of where I came from. That she, like my father and me, was just another—drunken Indian.

Now the pictures and fears that haunted me those two years have waned. My memories of Marie, together with my mother’s recounting of her life, have put in perspective her tragic outcome. Which put in perspective my father’s life. And my mother’s life. Which put in perspective—me.

1950

Marie came to live with us and be our babysitter when my mother went to work at St. Vincent’s Hospital. My sister was two years old and I was four. And if my sister was two then my brother was nine months old, but I don’t remember him at the time Marie was there. My father was a carpenter and never had any trouble finding a good paying job in the young-old town of Santa Fe. At least that’s what I used to think. When my mother was telling me bad things about Marie, she also mentioned that *we* would have starved if she hadn’t gone to work when she did.



We lived in a small, three-room apartment, one of six or seven in a neat-looking, long and narrow, one-story adobe building. The building was white with green trim and faced a wide expanse of a driveway/parking lot and general play area. There were a dozen or so mobile homes scattered about the large lot, as well as many trees, Chinese Elms, I think. And one big cottonwood that filled the air with tiny feathery fairies in the spring.

The apartment dwellers shared a bathroom with the trailer people that I thought silly to call a *bathroom* because it had no bathtub. It only had one shower in the corner with a flimsy greenish or bluish curtain and three stalls. There must have been a bathroom for men too, but I don't remember it. I do remember Daddy waiting out in the cold dark for my sister and me to come out of the one I do remember. And I remember we never showered openly like the other people did; we used to wait until the dead of night to bathe. I also got in the habit of keeping one eye on the bathroom and then rushing in there only when I was certain no one else was there. Sometimes Marie or Mom sent us to check in there for the same reason, I guess.

Our apartment was special to me, we used to cuddle there and be soft, sing and tell stories. It was usually warm and smelled good—like sugar cookies and tortillas cooking at the same time, and beef stew with bright carrot circles floating on top. But it was particularly special to me because not only was it the only apartment with a side door that opened to our own sunny and grassy patio (the others only had windows that looked at it), but because it was also apartment number one. I can still see the big, black, shiny number “1” on the front door.

I don't remember where Marie slept, in the bedroom with us, I suppose. And my mother and father must have slept in the livingroom, on the hide-a-bed sofa. Now that I think of it, it seems like the kitchen was part of the livingroom also. But I'm not sure, we moved so many times in those days.

There was something strangely singular about Marie, something in the way she stood before us that first day—tall and lean, her blouse and skirt draping softly. I think I felt this strangeness about her because in my childmind she seemed to appear from nowhere. One evening she was just—there, standing before us. Mom and Dad must have wanted to surprise us.

I think the strangeness I felt was also because I was confused by her looks. Something radiated from her, from her face, from her posture. I couldn't take my eyes off her. It must have been the beauty of her youth. Yet she wasn't like the magnificent women in the story books Mom read to us. Her skin wasn't fragile and white like fine porcelain, and she didn't have golden hair or cherry-red lips. Nor did she look like the finely clothed, mysterious manikins in store windows. And she certainly didn't look like the animated women in town who did.

I would like to describe Marie as having skin like the deepest brown of a desert dawn tinted with a touch of rose, and ebony hair that streamed to her shoulders then rested across her back, and lips the color of rich mahogany, but I don't remember her skin, except that it was brown like ours, and though her hair was long and black, I doubt that it streamed. I do remember, though, her lips forming the special, enticing smile that made her dark eyes sparkle and my childheart tingle.

And I remember her dress.



She wore a plush, dark green velvet blouse that had a big pointed collar like Daddy's dress shirt. I remember the long draping sleeves caught the light and let it play along its verdant folds. Across and down the front, as well as on the cuffs, the blouse was trimmed with shiny nickels and dimes and quarters as buttons. The loose blouse was belted with big round silver conchos that had deep blue turquoise stones circled by tiny red coral ovals. Her long, gathered skirt was shimmery satin the color of moonbeams across a warm June night. It was the traditional dress of the Navajo woman.

Marie had many blouses, each a different color, but all made of the soft velvet I learned to love because of its tender feel. My favorite was the maroon one; it made Marie look mysterious, especially when she let her hair hang loose for my sister and me to brush and try to braid. It was like we were in a fairy tale somehow, she was the princess of a far-away place and we her keepers.

And the buttons! I was fascinated by the buttons. Rows and rows of shiny, clinky coins played in the sunshine. However, the audacity of altering valuable coins and then sewing them on clothing worried me. I was certain something terrible would happen to Marie for so blatant an act. But after carefully watching the eyes of storekeepers and others we encountered, I realized she wouldn't meet any ill-fate because of it.

I began to look forward to the times when Marie would snip off a nickel or a dime, sometimes a quarter, because she didn't have enough "regular" money. "Want some candy?" she'd say. Then snip, snip—and we'd rush to the little grocery store up the road. I'd be tickled, then I'd get anxious and a little embarrassed when the altered coin would rock back and forth on its shank while the other coins remained still. But the storekeeper never refused the money and my sister and I would go home feeling proud eating candy bought in this way.

Sometimes the three of us, Marie, my sister, and I, walked along the railroad tracks toward town to meet my mother who walked this route home from work. Mom was always happy to see us and I liked to see her and Marie smile over us. They held our hands while we balanced on the rails until we reached the place where we had to cross the road to our home.

This road, Cerillos Road, was the main road into town and also part of the route the city bus line took. There was only one bus in the "line" but it was adequate at the time. The bus made a circuit of the three main sections of town then ended up in the Plaza, which is the heart of Santa Fe. If, while riding the bus, you happened to be a little shy and unworldly about such matters, and you didn't speak up about getting off at your approaching stop, and no one else did either, then—you missed your stop and had no choice but to grin-and-bear the long ride through unfamiliar regions of Santa Fe, experience a taste of the fear of the unknown, and wind up back where you started—the Plaza, the heart of Santa Fe.

Marie must have at one time experienced this predicament of the bus ride because we always got off it in the first section (ours was the second) where invariably there would be someone else waiting to board, and the bus driver would have to stop. I could feel Marie's relief in the way she'd usher us off the bus and plop us safely on the good earth.

To my amazement, after getting off the bus Marie was always able to lead us through the strange neighborhoods and safely home. I was scared going through



those neighborhoods, they were close somehow, dogs barked and people watched us like they did on the bus. They stood there, in their walled-in yards; women and children and sometimes men, their actions suspended while their eyes ushered us along their sidewalks and through their streets, much like Marie had hurried us off the bus. When I got older, I realized that not many young "Reservation Indians" would have then even gone into town, much less attempt the bus ride. There were always too many eyes that watched.

I was very happy when Marie would point out the big cottonwood tree that grew near the entrance of our driveway/parking lot. "See, there's Candy Tree," she'd say. We'd smile up at her and not look back.

One time Marie was left in charge of the laundry. We had a Maytag wringer washing machine and usually the whole family joined in the job of doing a week's laundry. But this time Mom let Marie do it. And me. "Beverly bring the big pots," Marie ordered, and the excitement began. I dug out the big stew pot and some smaller ones while Marie lit all four burners. We set up the chairs to hold the huge galvanized tubs for the first and second rinsings and waited for the pots of water to heat. I poured the Tide in the washer and watched the whites agitate while more water was heating for the rinses. The whole apartment was like a hot-house, or a witch's den and I the little witch with my hair plastered to my scalp and face and the windows dripping with steam water. But I certainly didn't mind; Marie had also given me the honor of stirring and poking down the clothes in the steaming, sudsy water and then in the big tubs of steaming rinse water. We had quite an operation going, as I recall. I stood by on a chair and picked the clothes up out of the water with my stick for Marie to guide through the treacherous rollers. They came out nice and flat—permanently pressed. At the end of our assembly line steaming stacks of flat, clean clothes piled up nicely, awaiting Dad's muscular arms. He'd carry them to the rooftop where there were rows and rows of clothes lines to hang them. We'd eventually get them back smelling like gentle wind and sunshine.

Well, Mom came back from wherever she was and I remember she smiled at the whole thing and at us. Then she went over to the piles of flat, steaming clothes and dropped her smile. I can still see her standing there, holding up the shrunken replica of her best, basic-black wool dress before the grim, unsmiling Marie.

There are memories of Marie that drift in and out of my mind, most are pleasant and I remember *feeling* pleasant at the time. I think it was mainly because of her smile. She smiled a lot at me and a tickle would travel down me somewhere.

Sometimes Marie went to town alone, when she got paid. She would get all dressed up in her best velvet blouse and satin skirt and fresh-brushed mocassins. She'd let her long, shiny black hair hang free about her shoulders forming a perfect backdrop for the silver earrings that swung gently from her pierced lobes. I liked to watch Marie put on her jewelry. She'd pick them out carefully, one by one, from the shoebox in the corner of her suitcase. And she'd put them all on—turquoise hishee, shell hishee, silver beads, chains, brooches, pins, and one big squash blossom that seemed the grandma of all the rest. They were beautiful next to that maroon velvet, or green, or the red . . . And massive flat turquoise stones surrounded by petite oval and circular ones, set in highly polished silver, formed the intricate floral patterns of the many bracelets and rings she placed on her fingers and wrists. And just as I could feel the dazzle of her jewelry and buttons to reflect in my bright eyes, so could I feel the sparkle



and sheen of her smile swell her heart. Then she'd present herself to my mother. Mom would pick off several necklaces and pins and bracelets and say "There. That's better." Marie would quietly put the excess jewelry back in the shoebox in the corner of her suitcase and leave for the day. I'd watch her cross Cerrillos Road and head toward the railroad tracks that led to town. Her hair bounced along her back.

And that's one of the final memories I have of Marie at that time—her hair bouncing along her back.

I don't remember how long Marie stayed with us or when she left. One day she was just—gone.

I imagine my father took her to the Greyhound bus depot in town and she went back to Ft. Defiance—via Albuquerque.

In Albuquerque the bus depot was downtown, just off Central Avenue. At that time downtown Central was the hub of the city and Marie probably wandered about, enjoying the sights and bustle of the big city. I can just see her, looking in the windows, admiring all the goods. She probably wandered in some of those stores; J.C. Penny's, Woolworth's, looking at things, touching them. The clerks would have kept a close eye on her, and she would have noticed they did. When she picked up a bottle of lotion, or maybe pretty pink shampoo, one of the clerks could have said "Okay Indio, get going before I call the cops." She was poked in the arm with a pencil that forced her to step back, clutching the bottle of lotion, or pretty pink shampoo. The slick-haired little manclerk with that vulgar curled up lip only an Indian can know the full implication of, grabbed the bottle and led her out of the store at the point of his ten-foot pencil. This could have happened to Marie.

Marie's face turned from soft brown to rusty red and her eyes blurred bright with tears as the store full of narrowed eyes and turned heads helped her through the aisles and out the door. She wished to God she hadn't left the safety of the bus depot. Out on the sidewalk the little man seized the golden opportunity to be heard by the masses and shouted and cursed "... and stay out—Indio!"

Marie hurried back to the Greyhound bus depot. With both hands she clutched the narrow, beaded buckskin bag that hung from her shoulder. In it was about sixteen dollars, a tube of Revlon lipstick—fire engine red—that she had meant to pay for but didn't get a chance to, and her ticket home and burning through her mind as she made her way along the sidewalk was the picture of her black suitcase and its contents—the shoebox of precious jewelry, the nest of velvet "money" blouses, the shimmery skirts. She had left it on the floor in the Woolworth's store, by the counter of lotions and things.

In the bus depot Marie sat with her back to the door. When the bus to Gallup arrived two hours later, she was the first to board. From her window seat she watched the buildings and people whiz by until they were replaced by the squat trees and patchy hills that were easier on her eyes and on her mind. But as she watched the restful countryside reel by, behind her eyes passed pictures of ugly people, their stares heavy with hate.

As the bus neared Gallup, however, the pictures and the memory of the manclerk and the lost suitcase faded further and further away behind Marie's eyes. Already she had caught sight of Navajos riding in their wagons or walking along the roadside. She smiled to herself at the little puffs of dust at their feet that appeared golden in the warm pre-dusk. She vaguely wondered where they were going and where they had been. Slowly her face relaxed at the rhythm of the women's swishing skirts until



her eyes sparkled with their reflection. And down to the soles of her feet, her whole body remembered and yearned for the gentle, undulating motion of the wagons travelling along their brown, well-worn trails. At one point, when the bus slowed in traffic, she felt like calling out to the bus driver, let her off here—she'd walk with her people into the golden dusk and through the earthwarmed night.

But Marie didn't call out, she didn't get off the bus. She sat back and continued to look out the window, watching the comings and goings of her people, noting familiar landmarks of the approaching town, until her silence became fertile ground for the seed of youthful anticipation of an all night's stay in a town where she would be among her own kind. The bus to Ft. Defiance didn't leave until early the next morning; she'd find some friends and have a good time.

Marie did find some friends in Gallup, but she found some non-friends also. Their "goodtime" lasted two days and nights.

On the morning of the third day Marie headed home—on foot. It was a thirty-mile walk but she knew someone would pick her up. She hoped it wouldn't be one of those white guys again. They were so demanding, so strong. She thought this as she picked at the torn spots on her blouse where the shiny nickels and dimes and quarters used to be. The maroon thread ends around the jagged little holes made them look like dismembered or inside-out spiders. Now and then as she plodded along the clumpy and dusty roadside she'd hug her waist and consider what she'd tell her grandma if she asked where the concho belt was. "I had to sell it for a bus ticket," she said later that night. The grandma didn't ask what happened to the rest of Marie's things or even about her stay in Santa Fe. She just kept on with her spinning.

The grandma didn't say much either when that rugged-looking man kept coming for Marie, the one they said used to hang around drunk Navajos and steal their money and things. Marie would go with him in his beat-up green truck and be gone for days sometimes. She'd come back haggard, smelly and dirty. One time the man came in the house with a box of clothes and some papers. He stayed for five years. Just before Marie had their sixth baby, he left. Some people said he froze to death in Denver.

Eight years after Marie had been our baby sitter she and several of my father's relatives came back to Santa Fe for a short visit. Our house filled with their massive bodies and resonant chattering. Their blankets and belongings piled up anywhere there was an out-of-the-way space. They brought bags of groceries and sweets and dozens of little bottles of Coke as well as carefully wrapped chunks and slabs of mutton. The women took over the kitchen and soon had a big stew bubbling and fried bread stacking up. They stacked the big rounds so high that everyone who passed through the kitchen found it their personal duty to eat one just to keep the rest from teetering to the floor. The men brought out a couple of drums and for two days and nights our house was a Navajo Carnegie Hall. Their bass voices blended into beautiful rhythmic chants, haunting dirges and funny storysongs too. Every once in a while great bellows of laughter boomed throughout the five rooms of our house.

It was a splendid feast and family reunion, but I spent most of the time sitting at one end of the couch—watching. I was clearly an outsider. I didn't speak Navajo or know how to make fried bread. There was no one else my age. My mother, who was my only ally, worked evenings from three-thirty to twelve. When she was home she

rested and sort of sat back like I did. My brother and sister were young enough to play with the adults, I was too old for that sort of thing.

So, as I sat back and watched—Marie in particular, I realized for the first time what throughout my childhood had lurked at the fringes of my awareness in the form of a grey, amorphous mass. I had never confronted this grey area, this grey mass of uncertainties, of belittling accusations. I avoided it—it was dangerous. I knew somehow it would consume and destroy my fragile image of myself.

Watching Marie astonished me. She had changed so much. The childhood pictures of her I had painted so indelibly in my memory liquified and dispersed before my eyes. She had matured into a woman, somewhat fat, but she was as tall as I remembered, taller than my mother. Her black hair wasn't long anymore, it wasn't even black anymore. It was an ugly dusty brown (maybe it was dyed) and lay in unnatural big and little rolls all over her head. Her brows were pencilled heavily and resembled fallen question marks without the dots. Her lips were painted a dry, bright red. Her face did, however, show signs of a beauty just passed or just missed. But her clothes were plain and drab—nothing compared to the lush, dark velvet blouses and shimmery satin skirts the color of moonbeams I remembered.

And then the realization; the grey area confronted.

Her face—shiny. Her eyes—glassy. Her cheeks—hard and thick. She was drunk. They were *all* drinking. Soon they would all be drunk—like my father got drunk every weekend and sometimes in between. And for all intents and purposes, because I lived in the same house with one of them, was raised by one of them—I was one of them. All the times my friends weren't allowed to play with me, for some feeble reason or another, came flashing back to me: lightening on black waters. I was one of them. I realized this, sitting there watching. I realized how white people saw us, saw me. I was trapped. I was one of them. An Indian.

I was twelve or thirteen years old at that time. From then on my life followed a self-destructive path true to the influences of who I was and my place in society until I reached, at age twenty-two, the very ditches of life. My waking hours were a daze of liquor parties, dirty diapers, whimpering bastard babies, futile attempts to hold down various menial jobs, and men—always men. I ran with the very men my mother taught me to hate—Spanish men, Black men, scrubbed, acrid smelling Whites. And always I had liquor by my side; in my purse, on the top shelf in the kitchen cabinet, under my bed. Liquor made it easier to get through my days and nights, my life.

My daze ended when in utter self-hate, remorse and defeat, I held a paring knife to the throat of my oldest baby and stared into his six-year-old-eyes—glistening black pools of stark obedience and trust. My plan to kill my four babies and myself drowned in his eyes. I couldn't thrust that blade. But around that same time someone else did. Marie was found, piece by piece, in the feculent ditches of Gallup.



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*These drawings are part of a series titled "State Psych Ward" which are based on my memories of being a psychiatric aide on the adult observation ward of a large mental hospital. I worked in this hospital for two years and dealt with patients in acute emotional distress.*

*A mental hospital is a very unnatural situation where patients, cut off from community and family, live under constant observation. Patients are totally dependent on hospital staff for their daily survival. In this environment, patients become childlike, sullen and secretive. Acts of violence against both staff and other patients are not uncommon. Many of the staff are also frightened by mental illness because it is a form of intangible and extremely personal pain.*

*In these drawings I have chosen dramatic and bizarre imagery for strong visual impact. The most disturbing reality of a mental hospital cannot be drawn, because it is about absolute loneliness and endless dead time passing in the patients' lives.*

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## MARGO MACHIDA

### Drawings

























# GREAT GRANDMOTHER

Mary Louise Clement. Great grandmother.  
She spoke French-Canadian by birth. English  
through an intense desire to be accepted as American.

The house she and my great grandfather lived in was painted white.  
During the winter months, it nearly lost itself in the snow.

From the sofa and rocking chair in the living room,  
I would sit and look at the lace curtains in the front windows.  
Mary Louise brought them from Québec when they emigrated.  
When I looked through the curtains, I saw the funeral home  
directly across the street.

Her kitchen melted the winter out of my five-year-old body.  
This room, painted bright yellow, hugged and breathed me.  
Crayola yellow was bright, too, but spread out entirely flat  
on the paper as I sat at the table making pictures for her.

She had a wood-burning stove. A dragon she befriended.  
All black on the outside with feet that looked like fists.  
When she opened its mouth, red and orange tongues  
lapped at the wood pieces that she tossed inside.

They had separate bedrooms. Hers, dressed in ruffles and satins.  
A coral color touched nearly everything in her bedroom.  
How this color means old and great grandmother for me.  
It is her skin, thin and oily. Soft.

Her bedroom held captive treasures and endless discoveries.  
Bottles of scents, jewelry, powder boxes, scarves and gloves.

I have a photograph of my mother when she was five.  
A gypsy child all covered with beads and scarves and probably  
one of the scents from Mary Louise's vanity.

My great grandfather's bedroom was dark and plain.  
The bed and dresser too big and bulky for the small room.  
Even he seemed over-sized for his own sleeping room.

The wood shed behind the house provided him another kind of space.  
He drank there and hid the bottles in the wood piles.  
Sometimes she would find one, empty it, and refill it with tea.  
Both knew when she found a bottle. No words, only looks crossed  
in angry battle over The Bottle after so many years.

I remember sitting around the pot belly stove with them  
in the dining room, in the very center of the house.  
She in her rocking chair wearing a flower-print apron  
over a shirt-waist dress. He in his rocker,  
the plain one without the cushions. He told the stories.  
Sometimes she would stop him because right in the middle  
of the story, he would switch from telling in English  
to telling in French. It didn't matter to me, gramma.  
It was grampa just being himself and I understood.



# MARY MORAN

## TAKING THE RIVER BACK

Though we moved onto a mink farm, I don't remember the mink or the long rows of pens and kennels they were raised in. Our house on that farm is just out of reach. I can almost hold the living room. But it pulls away.

The barn stands solid. Huge, and filled with hiding places. Our father punished my little brother and me whenever he found us hiding in the barn. The barn was his, not ours.

And the pigs. I remember the pigs. Round animals, pink and black like the licorice candies we sometimes got at the grocery in the back of the tavern in Lily. My brother and I hung over the tin fence watching the pigs hunt for corn and grain in the mud outside their shed. Our mother didn't share our fondness and curiosity for the pigs. In fact, she told us to stay away from them because they were dirty, bad dirty.

She warned us to stay away from the Indians because they were dirty, too. She never told us she was Indian and how my brothers and I were part of a tribal family in Canada. There would be no Indians in our house. We had our father's skin. We would be Irish. And we would be clean. Our bodies scrubbed and scrubbed. White towel rubbed. Our clothes laundered and pressed. And changed over and over again.

Before the snows came, we left Lily and drove up north to visit our relatives that lived in "iron ore country" where we were born. That was the first time Uncle "Shike" tried to tell my brothers and me what we weren't supposed to hear. He started with his stories about working for the railroad before the accident that left him with a hand that looked like a skinned bear paw. His voice changed when he started to talk about hunting. He said, they called him "coureur de bois," the half-breed trapper. He ran those stories through the woods of Ontario and then gathered us on a river bank to fish with him and the others. Our unspeakable heritage began to skim the water's surface in whispers. And he talked about the water spiders, how they went against the current, jumping over the ripples that pushed downstream. He said they took the river back, all the way back to its beginning place.

# FOR THE RECORD

The clouds and the stars didn't wage this war  
the brooks gave no information  
if the mountain spewed stones or fire into the river  
it was not taking sides  
the raindrop faintly swaying under the leaf  
had no political opinions

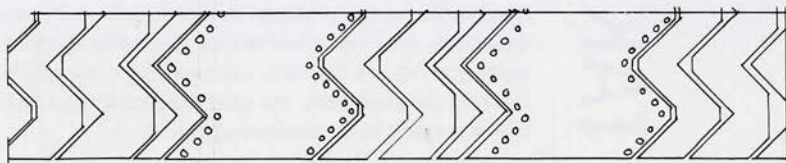
and if here or there a house  
filled with backed-up raw sewage  
or poisoned those who lived there  
with slow fumes, over years  
the houses were not at war  
nor did the tinned-up buildings

intend to refuse shelter  
to homeless old women and roaming children  
they had no policy to keep them roaming  
or dying, no, the cities were not the problem  
the bridges were non-partisan  
the freeways burned, but not with hatred

Even the miles of barbed-wire  
stretched around crouching temporary huts  
designed to keep the unwanted  
at a safe distance, out of sight  
even the boards that had to absorb  
year upon year, so many human sounds

so many depths of vomit, tears  
slow-soaking blood  
had not offered themselves for this  
The trees didn't volunteer to be cut into boards  
nor the thorns for tearing flesh  
Look around at all of it

and ask whose signature  
is stamped on the orders, traced  
in the corner of the building plans  
Ask where the illiterate, big-bellied  
women were, the drunks and crazies,  
the ones you fear most of all: ask where you were.





## UPCOUNTRY

The silver shadow where the line falls grey  
and pearly the unborn villages quivering  
under the rock the snail travelling the crevice  
the furred, flying white insect like a tiny  
intelligence lacing the air  
this woman whose lips lie parted  
after long speech  
her white hair unrestrained

All that you never paid  
or have with difficulty paid  
attention to

Change and be forgiven! the roots of the forest  
muttered but you tramped through guilty  
unable to take forgiveness neither do you  
give mercy

She is asleep now dangerous her mind  
slits the air like silk travels faster than sound  
like scissors flung into the next century

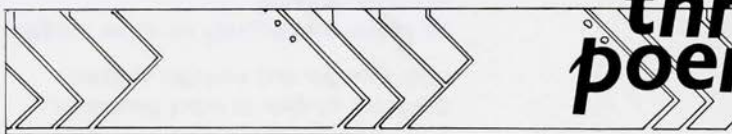
Even as you watch for the trout's hooked stagger  
across the lake the crack of light and the crumpling bear  
her mind was on them first

when forgiveness ends

her love means danger

**ADRIENNE  
RICH**

**three  
poems**



# ONE KIND OF TERROR: A LOVE POEM

## I

From 1964: a color snapshot: you  
riding a camel past the Great Pyramid

its rough earthy diagonal pushing against  
the blue triangle of sky

I know your white shirt dark skirt your age  
thirty-five as mine was then

your ignorance like mine  
in those years and your curious mind

throw of your head bend of your guilt knees  
the laugh exchanged with whoever took the picture

I don't know how you were talking to yourself  
I know I'd been thinking

with a girl's ardent rectitude  
*this is the deciding year*

*I am sick of drift*  
Weren't we always trying to do better?

Then the voices began to say: *Your plans*  
*are not in the book of plans*

*written, printed and bound while you*  
*were absent*

*no, not here nor in Egypt*  
*will you ever catch up*

## 2

So, then as if by plan  
I turn and you are lost

How have I lived knowing  
that day of your laugh so alive/so nothing

even the clothes you wore then  
rotted away How can I live believing

any year can be the deciding year  
when I know the book of plans

how it disallows us  
time for change for growing older

truthfully in our own way

## 3

I used to think you ought to be  
a woman in charge in a desperate time  
of whole populations  
such seemed the power of your restlessness

I saw you a rescuer  
amid huge events diasporas

scatterings and returnings  
I needed this for us

I would have gone to help you  
flinging myself into the fray

both of us treading free  
of the roads we started from

## 4

In the book of plans it is written  
that our growing old shall be episodic

spasmodic irrational  
lived out in impure, violent rains

and rare but violent sun  
It is written there that we shall reach

like thin vines across a window  
trying to grasp each other

that we shall lack each other's care and tending  
it is written that we shall die

from poisons whose names we do not know  
and antidotes that detach us from ourselves

## 5

In the book of plans it says  
that the young will die and the old live on

lacking livelihood and respect  
only through conscious fury

to survive so long  
that there will be finally no more mothers

only younger and younger women  
pregnant by men of every generation



by fathers, brothers, strangers  
other children, schoolmates

while the daughter born a poet  
will die of dysentery

and the daughter born to organize  
will die of cancer

## 6

In the book of plans it says that no one  
will speak of the book of plans

the appearance must continue  
that all this is natural

It says my grief for you is natural  
but my anger for us is not

that the image of a white curtain trembling  
across a stormy pane

is acceptable but not  
the image I have of you

arm raised hurling signalling  
the squatters the refugees

storming the food supply  
The book of plans says only that you must die  
that we all, very soon, must die

## 7

Well, I am writing a different book  
taking notes everywhere I go

the movement of the wrist does not change  
but the pen plows deeper

my handwriting flows into words  
I had not known I was going to write

I'm the sole author of nothing  
the book moves from field to field

of testimony recording  
the wounded teaching each other the old

refusing to be organized  
by fools how a woman says in one or another language

*I am the subject, the theme, of everything  
ever written on power and I am unmentioned*

This book of untranslatable  
mutters and ramblings

growing crystal clear  
when I disconnect my mind

from the book of plans  
and prepare to meet the unplanned

the forgotten the unforeseen  
that which can break  
despair which has always travelled

underground or in the spaces  
between the fixed stars

and which gazes full-faced wild  
and calm on the Revolution

## 8

Love: I am writing in a different book  
and yes, a book is a finite thing

In it your death will never be reversed  
the damages we have witnessed never undone

The light drained from the living eyes  
can never flash again from those same eyes

I make you no promises  
but something's breaking open here

there were certain extremes we had to know  
before we could begin

Call it a book, or not  
call it a map of constant travel

Call it a book, or not  
call it a song, a stream

of images thrown on a screen  
in open lots in fields

and among those images  
one woman's meaning to another woman

long after death  
in another world

— Adrienne Rich

### In This Heat

In this heat  
we gather ourselves  
and hold together  
day folding into night  
we press for darkness  
as if the heat  
would steal away  
like some errant ship,  
vanquished by moon  
and stars,  
we close our eyes  
the night half-swollen  
with the whispers  
of the day.  
Out, across the way  
a dog barks.  
Yesterday,  
a Chinese girl  
with skin the color  
of dragon's eyes  
and hair as fine  
as my beloved's  
killed herself.  
She answered an ad  
in one of the dailies  
and was raped  
during the long interview.  
No one believed her.  
You know the old story.  
Tonight I hold your  
hands between my palms.  
Afraid of yesterday.  
Outside, the moon pales  
against the window  
as shadows lap across  
the sky.  
Sleep flutters  
like burning incense.  
We curl into darkness  
and are gone.

— Willyce Kim

### Home Coming

Glistening like the sea  
your hair  
entwined  
among my fingers  
my mouth  
your hair scattered  
and black  
like the strands  
that sweep  
across my shoulders  
falling  
and rising  
my eyes cast back  
heat for heat  
wind rushes through the door  
our skins are steaming  
breath of my breath  
first asian woman  
I lay my head  
upon your thigh  
you are all the women  
that I have ever feared  
you are my mother  
you are my mother's daughter  
bone of my bone  
throat arching  
like a curve of the moon  
you cry out my name  
your mouth

a cave  
a resting place  
fills my tongue with song  
flesh of my flesh  
coming home to me  
wet and sweet  
in the morning light  
your face  
rises like mist  
from the sea  
my hair  
bright  
in the hollow  
of your mouth  
oh, blood of my blood.

— Willyce Kim





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# Touching Bottom and Pushing OUT

Blue heron in flight along the river;  
we shade our eyes for a better look.  
Lone wings span the evening sky,  
bright and cold the Trinity rushes  
past us.  
We huddle together in expectancy,  
night hovering like the heron in mid-flight.  
This morning I watched as you dove  
into the river  
your body keen  
against the rushing current,  
touching bottom and pushing out,  
winding your way through the  
rock beds upstream.  
Overhead, the sky is thick with stars.  
We search for constellations,  
our faces arching toward the heavens.  
Far below, headlights glimmer  
then fall away into a ring  
of mountains.  
We stand on the edge  
of the Western hemisphere,  
the unknown beckoning.  
We pretend to know where we are going,  
all the while remembering  
that moss grows on the northern side  
of trees  
and Polaris will guide us home.

— Willyce Kim



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# DOMESTIC PRACTICES

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## SUSAN LEE

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The little girl hugged her doll as hard as she could. True, she was guilty of a special affection for the wax creature. True, she clung to it as she would to few of the Community adults. But she did not blame her doll like Sarah Burt did for seducing her into a heedless spirit. Sarah Burt would have been late for breakfast anyway. She was late for everything else. Why take it out on her doll? And Mary Prindle. Little snively thing. She would try to make up to any of the adults, even if she had to contradict herself. Mary Prindle had told MG that the fuss was all because the boys wanted to burn up the girls' dolls; they had none of their own.

MG didn't know what to believe other than that she was going to have to march downstairs and throw her Matty into the fire. Mary Prindle was on the committee which voted for the exorcism. No one would know how Mary had cried over her Emily except for MG. Mary knew MG would never say anything even if the Community encourages everyone to report any individual-spirit behavior to the adults. MG had lived on the outside for too long to pick up tattling as one of the finer things of Perfectionist life. She did not take to the process of criticism where everybody said what was wrong with her. Each time it happened, the words were like knives in her heart. Maybe this criticism cured others in the Community of sickness and egoism. She was not old enough to understand the medicinal and spirit-building qualities of the procedure. What she knew was that she would keep her mouth shut despite what the adults said.

MG was not ready to sacrifice her wax doll. She had gone the requisite week without her, just as the adults had wanted her to. Then the other girls had spoken about the dolls as if they were living beings, and this upset the adults further. MG had kept her silence, but then MG had several times received the criticism of holding back. Hold back she did. She was only eight, but she knew she should not make too much of Matty. If she did, she and Matty would be parted.

After all, Matty was just a doll. Two months before, didn't MG's own mother get punished for loving MG too much? Didn't they get separated for three days which meant they couldn't see each other even to greet each other? If MG and her mother should be accused of special affection for each other, how could a doll possibly survive? And didn't MG's own mother show her the way to behave after that separation when they saw each other in the hallway or in the quadrangle? MG felt her mother didn't care for her anymore when she first saw her mother ignoring her.



She cried. That was when she knew Mary Pringle also was capable of keeping her mouth closed. That night she didn't care whether or not Mary told on her. She was touched that Mary gave her the stone she'd found when all the children went on a walk with Father Noyes. But the wound her mother had made by simply walking past her and not even bending over to kiss her was not so easily healed. Even after her mother explained in the privacy of her bedroom that to do more than that was to bring down the charge of "philoprogenitiveness" upon her head and to cause longer separations between the two, MG was hesitant. She learned to decide what she needed and what the rules about it were. The charge of excessive mother-love did not carry much weight with her.

So too the charge of special affection for Matty didn't make her feel as if she'd done something wrong. She'd been accused of becoming like a baby when she was with her doll. Had she been made of the salt her grandfather Sewall Newhouse was, she would have answered, yes, I can be a baby if I want. But evidently not.

Her father, Frederick Newhouse, had told her that taking care of Matty would teach her how to be a mother. He said it was nonsense that the Community wanted to put the fear of the Lord into the little girls before allowing them their dolls. But her father didn't defend Matty. All he did was to say, "Idolatry! Graven images! Now they've gone too far."

Eight girls were in the room, oblivious of each other, each only concentrating on their dolls that would soon no longer exist. Harriet Worden tried to pretend hers was only going to be separated from her for a little while as if she were going to the trap house to link some chains. Sarah Burt explained to her that the Community had decided that the doll-spirit was a seducer of little girls. She did not bother to say that she and Mary Prindle had been on the committee with the adults who guided the children into points of view that they otherwise could not have possibly had.

Mary Prindle no longer cared that she had been on the committee with Sarah. She no longer worried, at least for those moments, that anyone would see her crying. The moment of separation from her Josie was coming, and Mary was taking it hard. At a later time, she might accuse herself of indulging in baby-talk with Josie but now she was not concerned with criticisms. She was just a nine-year-old girl who was having her doll taken away from her.

Miss Barbara appeared at the door. The righteous snuffled and cleared their noses. Time had come. These little wax things were a stain on their lives. The worship of graven images had to be obliterated. The Community could not sustain such a breach.

MG took the outer bits of cloth from Matty. Such was the prescription. The cloth could be used in patching. MG felt as if she were betraying her little rag and wax doll, but there was nothing she could do other than to hold the stripped-down body to her own.

Miss Barbara collected the cloth and led the girls downstairs where the boys waited. To a boy, each had voted for the destruction of the dolls. The girls had put up objections but were argued out of them. Voting the dolls out of the Community forever had taken place yesterday.

Now the circle of girls was formed. Miss Barbara began singing "To Baby Jesus We All Belong" and the girls joined in on the song while the boys were behind them

singing and clapping. The moment had come.

Martha Allen wasn't a child born and brought up in the Community for nothing. She might have been crying but a few moments before. Now she seemed as if she were leading the people of Children's House to a Perfectionist picnic. Singing with great fervor, she marched right up to the stove door and threw her Po-Po onto the coals with a spirit that could only cause rejoicing.

The boys let out a clamor of approval that startled MG. She was third in line. Next came Harriet Worden who had laid her Grace onto the coals with the care of a mother who was putting her baby to a nap.

Another roar of condemnation and happiness came from the boys.

Now MG was in front of the stove. The Community where she lived was making her do something so wrenching that she could not understand it. Oh, she knew the reasons of the spirit. It was those of the heart she couldn't fathom. Why did she have to throw the one little bit she had in the world onto the flames? It wasn't as if she wanted to be disloyal to the Community. Far from it. She enjoyed her life here much more than she did outside after her grandfather had joined and her father could not find sufficient work. There hadn't been enough food to eat. There had been moves from one house to another. It wasn't as if there was much better food at the Community, because the Community did not feature abundance. It was that they had enough food. And no one argued as her parents had. When they weren't arguing, there was only coldness. Here, at Oneida, such did not exist.

"Kill the doll . . . spirit," came a male voice from behind her. She was not sure but she thought she recognized Abram Hardy. He might not remember saying that in this frenzy of destruction, but she would.

Everyone began to clap. The deed had to be done.

"Good-bye, Matty," MG said. "I love you," she mouthed to the muslin creature whom she laid on the grill inside the stove. For an instant she thought of leaving her hands inside the stove. Whether it was the feeling of intense heat that scared her off, her belief in not making a scene, or a desire not to martyr herself when nothing could be done, she did not know or even consider for very long.

Her place was taken by Mary Prindle who acted as if she were possessed by a spirit of jubilation. Emily no longer had an identity. She was just refuse being tossed into the flames. MG could not believe Mary Prindle. She could only stare at the transformation. In so doing, MG did not watch Matty sizzle and burn.

The boys cheered. Miss Barbara encouraged, the few adults who stood in the back nodded. When Mary Prindle turned away from the fire, her face no longer seemed to MG suffused with the Holy Presence. Her very forlorn eyes met MG's. MG quickly looked away.

Within minutes, the dolls were gone. Within half an hour more, the children were all bundled up and out sledding. Within two hours more, they were brought in for drying out and dinner.

Life in the Children's House at Oneida Community continued as if very little had happened.



*When the child must be weaned, the mother blackens her breast, it would indeed be a shame that the breast should look delicious when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother is the same, her glance is as loving and tender as ever. Happy the person who had no need of more dreadful expedients for weaning the child!*

*It was early in the morning, Abraham arose betimes, he embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken away her reproach, who was her pride, her hope for all time. So they rode on in silence along the way, and Abraham's glance was fixed upon the ground until the fourth day when he lifted up his eyes and saw afar off Mount Moriah, but his glance turned again to the ground. Silently he laid the wood in order, he bound Isaac, in silence he drew the knife — then he saw the ram which God had prepared. Then he offered that and returned home. . . . From that time on Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had required this of him. Isaac throve as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he knew joy no more.*

*When the child has grown big and must be weaned, the mother virginally hides her breast, so the child has no more a mother. Happy the child which did not in another way lose its mother.*

— Kierkegaard

# ERIKA DUNCAN

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## THE GARDEN FOR THE BLIND

The children sat together in the garden for the blind, alone. It was sunset and Elena was trying to describe to Caroline how fleeting bright, like pearls that would be lost, the little drops of sun-lit water were each time they fell upon the low flat rusted Chinese gong. She tried to tell the other girl how only these small spots of dripping yellow sang, while all the sky grew deep and dark with fading mauve and lavender. But already the other girl seemed to be listening to a music Elena would never hear.

Caroline was a much bigger child than Elena, although she was several years younger. Her skin was unnaturally pale, like that of a marble sculpture, singularly unlined. And Elena knew that it would remain so. Already, although Caroline had only newly become blind, Elena could feel her being transported into regions of the heard and felt that she was barred from. She watched Caroline's overlarge deft fingers close about a sturdy bell-like flower like a Medieval hunting horn. Caroline did not know how to read Braille yet, so both girls were equally helpless to decipher the flower's name, though their hands together passed over its plastic marker with its strange raised symbols, wondering. The flowers were all sturdy with strong smells and shapes. The water fountain was not lovely, but for the strange melancholy sound it made each time a drop fell down, and for the moment with the red sun tears upon it only Elena could see.

Elena was old far beyond her years. She had been raised to be. Her dark eyes were almost larger than the tiny hollowed face they were set in. They had already seen far more than most people would have thought good for children's eyes. And she was very small and thin, made out of bird bone almost, from being always on the go.

She took Caroline's large pale hand in her own smaller darker one and led it over leaves like velvet to touch little blossoms woven like long husks of corn. She bent the blind child's head down gently towards a bush so that its scent could come about her like a cloak.

"My daughter has a special way with all hurt people," she had overheard her mother offering her up, when Caroline's mother came to the lot where they were performing their street play, to ask them what to do. Her mother had offered her heart and soul, though she was barely turning twelve, to remake Caroline's so cruelly shattered world.

A slight breeze rustled through the trees and hedges. Elena wished some adult would come and rescue them from this lonely secluded spot in which they had been left. But it was not the first time she was left in a strange city with someone who had been badly hurt to care for. Once it was a suicidal woman in need of Elena's child-like direct zeal for life to grab a grip on life again. Another time, in Latin America, she had cared for four tiny children while their revolutionary parents were in jail. And all the while, her mother, with her peoples' theater, continued her rousing work. That time, she and her mother were arrested too.

Just a week ago Caroline still had seen a tiny bit. Elena had noticed her sitting with her mother on a wide dead tree trunk that curved like a bench, in the corner of the vacant lot in Ashville, North Carolina, where they performed their street play. Elena's mother had been particularly beautiful that night, almost religious, perhaps because the faces of the listeners had been so closed and cold. For it had been a tight-lipped audience, with many sons already killed in wars. It had no room to absorb the theater's loud and unrelenting calls to stop the war. The audience was cold as bullet steel and far away, until Mikela, Elena's mother, held up the puppet of a murdered child and shrieked, "You! You!" Then they all began throwing eggs and tomatoes to try to quell the pulsebeat chanting, the enumeration of instances of inhuman genocide and pain.

Caroline had had a raging fever then already, but her mother could not take her to the hospital. She had been cold to Caroline the night before, and something in her, when the sickness came, made her believe it was her punishment. Something inside her stopped her from believing that the fever was a curable emergency. So she and Caroline sat stunned and staring while the people of their city threw food at the pacifists.

They did not move at all. But when the others of the city rose to leave the corner lot where the street play was taking place, Caroline and her mother stayed. They watched while Elena and her mother cleaned away the broken egg shells, while the others in the troop packed the props into an old ramshackle blue van. They edged closer and closer, like two phantoms, the mother stiff and very frightened looking, and the child, eyes glazed and traveling upward, skyward towards the stars . . .

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Evening was coming quickly by the time Mikela started through the darkened woods to bring the children home. While she left Elena to care for Caroline, her own work with Olwynne had eaten up the day, leaving her distant from all but a primal sorrowing and gnawing. To the others in the troop, Olwynne's turning away from Caroline became tantamount to murder. It became a deviation from the natural order of things so horrifying nobody could bear to look upon the crime. Why were Mikela's feelings about it so different? Today she had taken Olwynne the unmothered into her arms. She had held the one who could not hold her own wounded child. Like a child herself Olwynne had been! She had not wept when she was told that Caroline was blind, and yet, when she was rocked herself, she could not stop her weeping. It had been as if her eyes were set on fire and would burn forever, she had told Mikela, her own waters had felt so dangerous a thing.

Now in a tree above Mikela, a catbird burst into two or three of the most ethereal notes of gentle liquid song, then shifted without breaking voice into the guttural meow of the one that would stalk it unto death. Could Mikela never escape the death imagery that called her like a long lost strain of a never known childhood she still longed for? Could she never escape the love of violence that came into even the most pacifist of her works, the love of the dark and death which had haunted her ever since she could remember, which so clearly haunted Olwynne so. Out of the wondrous mass of odorous pine and mimosa wafted the enigmatic death smell of the carrion vine. She had shown it to Elena and Caroline this morning, thinking that Caroline had to be curious about smells. She had put Caroline's too willing hands on the soft purple petals, and then had bent her nose down to them, sharing with the girls her wonder at the thing in nature that allowed a plant of beauty to emit the brutal odor of a dead decaying animal, talking to them about the mixups of nature, and its intrinsic beauty, more wonderful than any god that humans could invent, and not really so scary when one came to know it well.

She felt that it was important for Caroline to learn to touch the darkest of her feelings quickly, and the darkest of her fears, so that she need not be afraid. "How like a murdered and uncared for animal it smelled," she said, "like one who had been deprived even of a proper burial," and yet it was only an innocent light purple flower. Called carrion vine it was not really one who waited for the eagles and the crows to come, and with brute beaks to bear the bones — there were no bones — and turn them into poetry, fixed precious stones, like Shakespeare's deep sea change which jeweled demonic death and merely human sorrowing, its bell-like ding dong tolling now deep in Mikela's heart, blotting out the other simpler image of a little blind girl lurking there, crying mother, mother, don't leave me. Don't you go away from me.

Why was the merely normal weening mother in Kierkegaard paired with the murdering father who became the father of the faith? Because of Olwynne, all was symbolic today. All was tortured, the catbird and the carrion vine and Abraham's knife, his silence, merging with the blackened breast of the mother who must turn away, along with all mothers and murderers. But even Kierkegaard had not dared to impute any miracles to the unnatural mother. He had situated the mother's denials safely within the natural cycle, within what had to be for movement's maintenance. The Medeas, those hungry mothers at the holy city who ate their children had remained untouchable, those who exposed their girl children. They existed



both in history and myth, and yet never had they become the subject for a mystery, as had Abraham. Olwynne was Mikela's mystery, her clue to the holy city of the unexplored parts of the female heart passed down for generations, silent and unsung. For in the mystery of what went wrong with Olwynne, Mikela was convinced, might lie the clue to sanctity, new holy laws and faith.

For a week now, during Caroline's incarceration in the hospital, Olwynne had wandered among the players with her head cast down, her garments torn, as though she had flayed them, and her long red hair flung over her face, hiding her eyes, reciting in a half mad poetry the garbled litany of her own helplessness and guilt. She was like a figure out of one of Rouault's paintings, like one of Rouault's saintly prostitutes, but only in the colors, destroyed in the dark outlines and yet made saintly by the very rending, the desecration. To Mikela Olwynne's tragedy was the tragedy of all hungering ones who first destroy and then repent, only because Olwynne's tragedy was a mother's tragedy and a new one, and an innocent child was hurt by its own maker, very few would let it in as beautiful. There was no vocabulary yet for the repentance.

This morning when Mikela brought Caroline home from the hospital, Olwynne had merely watched her from afar, flagellating herself, begging the others not to tell Caroline that she was there. It will be better that she think me dead for now, Olwynne had said. Mikela had let Caroline cry on her shoulder while together they watched Elena showing Caroline her stuffed animals, running the blind child's confused fingers over the big button eyes and soft plush ears of the toy teddy bears and rabbits given to Elena by people to thank her for her kind understanding. They had watched Elena run Caroline's fingers over the fuzzy pink felt tongues of the stuffed creatures and then, smiling mischievously place them on her own wet tongue, trying so hard to elicit a reaction, any kind of a reaction. And Olwynne had whispered to Mikela that nothing she could do would ever make up to Caroline for the eyes she lost. She whispered that instead of feeling drawn to Caroline, she felt like such an unnatural mother, she wished to kill herself. Only Mikela's sexual carresses, her stimulation of a false passion in the woman who wished so much for death, today Mikela was convinced had kept Olwynne alive. And yet they had left Mikela with the sense of having touched an evil at the core, of having turned into some kind of evil Faust-like figure in her passion to remake, ignoring all the rules of human nature that had been thus far set down. She had done the undoable. Who could she tell? To whom could she confess?

It was with sorrow that she let her feet sink deep into the soft red oozing clay that covered the forest floor in that part of the Carolinas. She loved and yet did not love Nature, but must constantly personify it, making it human like herself. For the mysteries of Nature were untouchable, while those of humankind might yet be figured out and shifted so that it all need to be so painful. Olwynne's holding back from Caroline, now, in the moment of Caroline's most utter need, was part of a pattern of withholding that had been passed down in less exaggerated form throughout all history, all time, Mikela was quite sure. Somewhere in the core of mothers rejecting their own flesh, once they imprinted their own all too human weaknesses and histories upon it, lay the mystery of all human disappointment, of all human inability to love. There were times when Mikela the play maker liked to think that only women, by recreating the act of mothering might be able to save the world. Half



on the stage, half in real life within the shelter of the borrowed mansions and old churches that the troop stayed in, Mikela would make a new song out of the old Demeter Persephone myth. She would reassemble Sappho's fragments. Like the misused earth itself, that would never again lose its cancerous radiation and its desecration, Caroline would never again be freed from the bane of her blindness; she would always be severely damaged; and yet, out of the sheer ecstasy of catching a serious error midway, of changing directions, a new reconciliation would be wrought. On painted wings the child would rise and her mother would be there to catch her. But where would Caroline really be in this whole schema? How much hope could there really be for her, considering everything? Somewhere unseen still in the darkened woods the real children waited for their mothers to come out of their dreams.

# WE TRAVEL OUTSIDE OUR BIRTHPLACES TO FIND OUR HISTORIES NOT PERFECT

Here in Tierra Amarilla  
Earth of yellow grass  
Forested mesas  
Horses and cattle roam dirt roads  
Thick coated mongrels wail  
Under a quarter moon's  
Gathering of stars.  
The villagers  
Their tiring poverty a heritage  
Granted by a shrewd lawyer's bribe  
Attend Las Posadas  
Await the second coming  
In homes of adobe and wood burning stoves  
Their rights to the land  
Forgotten.

Land before post and rail  
Land of dancing tongues  
Rushing down mountainsides  
Shaping the arms of aspens and cottonwoods.  
Land of proud songs  
Searches for the open plain  
The unshaded eye.

*Las Posadas is a special prayer (novena), which lasts 9 days prior to Christmas.*

SULLIVAN



## MARY JANE



# The Gourd, The Bowl Of Ashes

Under the eagle's golden desert  
The red clay inhales the rain  
Of an overrun river

The wind is drawn to the flight  
Of an unnamed bird.  
We move with their songs  
Through mesquite trees  
You pick a gourd from the brush

We carry these remains of breathing earth  
Across open fields  
Into the sun of evening  
Where shadows of memory find substance.

## Desert Beyond Gates Pass

West of Tucson      West of palm tree meridians  
Auto spas      Jack-in-the-Box      24 hr. Food & Liquor  
The dried washes  
West of Davis Monthan AFB's flying fighters in formation  
The Speedway reroutes manmade murmurs.  
The blacktop road grips sundried canyons  
Elevated saguaro      Skeletal palo verde  
Sparrow in known territory.  
A white breeze settles      Disperses.

I am prepared for this journey.  
Unprepared for your presence  
Everything unto itself.  
Poverty:      Absence of land without water.

In high winter heat  
The coyote roams in dead brush.  
The wind rustles      Dependent  
Fragile like these mixed auras of color  
Unlike the lights in the eastern valley.



# Geography within limits

In this room of books, papers, clothes and a pullout bed  
Everything is prelude to an event. I learn to think  
As I see. Reflect as I remember small incidents.

It is midday. The plastic on the windows wind creased.  
The Ailanthus trees stark, filled with sweet juices.  
Stray cats steady pawed on jagged fences,  
Leap into the charred house. Abandoned. Waiting.

I feel a silence inside, full of meaning.  
There is no other voice.  
Only solitude as it affects all things.

The phone rings. News of Dartie's death in Lynn, Massachusetts.  
She is my grandmother's remaining sister.  
My grandmother, the last of the McGuigan women  
Of the late 19th century. Eighty-eight years old this April.

The silence wavers; the act of living, the event of dying.  
The silence wavers and continues.  
The room shakes from underground trains  
Carrying passengers through tunnels and miles of electrical wires.

I lie down.  
The meaning of today is in the future of this room.  
Next to the bed the map of Indian lands before state boundaries.  
The posters of the women at the Pentagon. Their signs of rage, defiance,  
Empowerment landscape a geography within limits.

I hear my grandmother's voice.  
"Dartie died peacefully at 85. She had a pacemaker.  
She was tired. The boys went up to the apartment  
On the second floor of that old house and those 18 steps,  
They cleaned it out in two hours."

"I have no reason to go back to Lynn," she says.  
"But it will be a good Spring.  
I look forward to your coming  
There's a bed here for you."

Tomorrow I leave on the express bus.  
It is time to be with her, Sarah Ramona.  
Time to speak about the way things are.  
Time to acknowledge the present.

SULLIVAN



MARY JANE



# Peace Museum, Hiroshima

*"I myself spent 5 hours, supported by  
a pole that was half dead," Mr. Nakao  
states in a caption to his drawing. "I  
have been in silence for 30 years except  
for talking to the pole once in a while."*

One end of the pole is North.  
The other is South.  
I say to my pole "Have a good day."  
I say "Ashes make a good blanket."  
I hold it up  
to show it the hole in the sky.  
I show it the family portraits.  
etched in the ground.  
One end of the pole is North.  
The other is South.  
It runs through the earth  
holding it for the fire to eat.

## Climbing the Mesa

over and over  
on one side nothing  
on the other the desert,  
the top receding in distance,  
into the sky

blue over Arizona, then California  
disappears in the Pacific  
booming against sea cliffs  
on up the coast, disappearing  
in forests of sequoia and fog;

hauling myself up, over and over  
clutching twigs that snap  
in dreams of tree-barren mesas,  
gripping rocks that avalanche under me,  
laughing in their rubble as they go down;

climbing; at my heels memories  
growl low in their throats,  
menace, your eyes in the distance  
glaciers receding over the mesas  
into the blue sky . . . Arizona,  
burning like dry ice, burning

SUZANNE  
ZAVRIAN

# WOMEN IN STRUGGLE: SENECA, MEDGAR EVERS, NICARAGUA





# THINKING ABOUT SENECA

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YNESTRA KING  
*photographs:*  
*Catherine Allport*

The *Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice* is on a long country road that winds through strawberry fields and small towns with small stores, American flags, and people sitting on front stoops. In the middle of this farming country which looks so lush is the Seneca Army Depot, storage place for U.S. Cruise missiles bound for Europe and the neutron bomb. The Seneca Women's Encampment appears as a flash of color—signs, banners, a white house under green trees, a barn painted multi-colors with a giant spider web on one side. In the hazy summer heat, in front of the house, women are talking to the press, meeting with townspeople, and singing. Along the left side of the house under giant trees, there is childcare. To the right of the house in a field is a giant parking lot with women directing traffic, welcoming women and patiently explaining support roles to men who want to help. In the parking lot women gather up banners and leaflets and recruits for an action at the Depot, one of several daily.

The Feminist anti-militarist movement has grown at a remarkable rate in the last few years. It has sparked the imagination of women in both Europe and in the U.S.—women's actions against militarism have been held in Germany, England, Scandinavia, Australia. With strong roots in the civil rights movement and the "direct-action" pacifist community, the feminist anti-militarist movement is evolving a style of action which is participatory and decentralized, using symbols and images from the everyday lives of women and tactics of non-violent direct action. The *Women's Pentagon Action* wove shut the doors of the Pentagon, and since then the gates of military installations around the world have been closed using colored yarn, padlocks, and human chains. We have taken our private pain and put it in a public place, along with photographs, clothes, pillows with our nightmares written on them.

One of the political forms to emerge out of this movement is a permanent demonstration called a peace camp where women come to live at the gates of life-threatening installations, vigiling, demonstrating, blockading as a living daily reminder of what's actually going on behind the gates, a disruption of "business as usual." The first women's peace camp was begun at Greenham Common when an anti-militarist

walk initiated by the *Wales Women for Life on Earth* group came to the gates of the U.S. military base at Greenham, England and spontaneously decided to stay there. At first they were only a few — their action was called naive. What possible difference could a few women camping in the mud outside a military base make? But slowly more women joined, the word spread about the camp, and finally in December of 1982 widespread support for the women of Greenham Common was amply demonstrated — 30,000 women turned out to “embrace the base” reaching all the way around the nine-mile perimeter, transforming the wire fence with banners, messages from women who couldn’t be there, colored yarn, scarfs, triangles, dolls, flowers, poems as we in the U.S. had surrounded the Pentagon, circling the cold marble facade with our rope of life. While, with Greenham as an example, in the U.S. women had begun to think of creating a peace camp.

Here in the Northeast, women from upstate New York groups proposed the Seneca Army Depot as the site. (There are at least eight other peace camps in the U.S.) We chose Seneca for several reasons. The most immediate was that the Cruise missiles slated for deployment to Europe in the fall of 1983 and the neutron bomb are stored there. Another reason we chose this site is that our own U.S. feminist movement had its formal beginning in Seneca, New York in 1848 with the first women’s rights convention. Iroquois women had met in Seneca to oppose a tribal war, and the Underground Railroad carrying runaway slaves to safety in Canada went through this area. Seneca is the storehouse for terrible weapons of destruction, but it is also the home of women’s strength and militant feminist spirit.





Seneca was an incredibly ambitious undertaking. Following the scramble to raise funds to buy the land, the planning committee had to reach agreement on a name for the encampment, a program, actions, staff hiring, money, and a stance toward a wary, conservative community. This planning committee worked by consensus and consisted of whoever attended the meetings. At the same time the land had to be prepared to accommodate thousands of women—water had to be piped in, fire and food pits dug, portable toilets (“PortaJanes”) installed.

I was on the Program Committee in the months preceding the encampment. In order to proceed we had to imagine the daily life of the camp—hundreds of women meeting together, eating together, and preparing for actions at the base. We spent many hours developing a set of priorities and program guidelines for camp workshops. First we decided that there would be workshops on five program areas each day no matter what—racism, feminism and militarism, economic justice, dialogue on sexuality/sexual preference, and workshops on weapons. We also decided that it was important to insure that women from various groups met and talked with each other. We were trying to bring a variety of women to the camp and we were afraid that women would stick with groups—and politics—they already knew, so we planned carefully to bring different women into contact with each other in the small group workshop format. We also had to work on differences even within our committee as we learned that women from “Pro-lifers for Survival” wanted to hold an anti-choice workshop. We faced the hard question: Shouldn’t women be free to discuss anything or present any point of view? Finally we agreed that no group





advocating legislation curtailing women's autonomy could be on the program, but a consciousness-raising type discussion could be held on any issue.

At the same time an action committee was meeting weekly trying to envision how we could have daily actions at the Depot, and when and how we should hold a big action. Finally, it was decided that the encampment would try to start gradually — without a big July 4th opening — to accustom the townspeople to our presence and to break in the camp gradually.

The encampment did open July 4. Actions happened daily, and work continued building ramps for disabled women, trenches for water pipes. Decision-making processes evolved and work sharing structures (called "webs") were developed which would allow women to come in and out of the camp smoothly.

The tensions between the camp and the local community came to a head the weekend of August 1st as thousands of women converged on the encampment for the largest action of the summer. The New York City Women's *Pentagon Action* planned a walk to bring the spirit of the suffragists from the place of the women's rights convention to the encampment. About two hundred women walked from Seneca Falls carrying the messages and faces of the suffragists on placards. In Waterloo they were met by an angry crowd, many of them brandishing flags on sharp sticks. The women sat down in the street to decide what to do. The Sheriff was unable (or unwilling) to disperse the crowd, and he told the women to take a different route. But the women who had planned the walk had contacted all the towns and had prior approval for this route. They believed they had a right to walk through these towns as they had planned. Finally after several hours of negotiation the seated women were arrested for disturbing the peace.

No step forward is taken without conflict. Many peace groups existed in the Seneca area before the peace encampment was organized but most people in the area didn't know that nuclear weapons were stored at the base. Maybe they didn't want to know, but after the confrontation at Waterloo a dialogue was opened up between women from the encampment and townspeople, and among townspeople themselves. If the women had never ventured through town with a visible message, the parallel uneasiness might have continued. By demonstrating exactly what they believed, and standing by it non-violently but firmly, the demonstrators confirmed what the townspeople already knew but what is sometimes denied by movement activists in the name of expediency — that the encampment and the anti-militarist movement is about a whole lot more than stopping the missiles from going to Europe. It is also about how to live in a non-hierarchical world with no need of missiles. People had to speak to each other.

The differences that were to emerge most strongly in this dialogue had less to do with the explicit camp message — peace, freedom and no missiles to Europe — than they did with the women's culture expressed in the camp. Lesbians played a strong and very visible role and for a time, townspeople speaking to reporters had more to say about their objection to lesbianism than their position on disarmament. Seneca was an attempt at a women's utopia, a free, safe space for women to be themselves and develop feminist culture and vision in living opposition to *all* forms of militarism. Militarism has many faces — one of which has to do with the fear of the different at home — the perception by the dominant culture of neighbors who may have different beliefs or a different culture, as "others." Women at Greenham faced this





same hostility. Following their demonstration of 30,000 women, the Greenham women were dubbed the "Greenham Mums" and enjoyed a sweetheart period in the press. After awhile, politicians, fearing their effectiveness, began to publicly call them lesbians and witches.

Because of the enormous ambitiousness of *The Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice* and its uniqueness as a political action, there's no simple way to "evaluate" its success. Seneca was simultaneously an action, a feminist statement, a place for women to live, a meeting place of political issues, a woman-identified oasis in an average American town, a base for antimilitary actions at the Seneca Army Depot, and a reclaimed piece of farming land. It is impossible to look at the kaleidoscope of stories, experiences, actions called Seneca and arrive at one conclusion about it.

Some Seneca critics have argued that Seneca took on too much. Some women worry about feminist energy being drained from longtime women's service projects into peace work, or about reinforcing the traditional ideas of virtuous womanhood by acting as planetary housewives. Some leftist peace movement activists have criticized the multi-issue countercultural emphasis and visible lesbian presence at Seneca as unaffordable luxuries in the face of the "really heavy stuff." As the international situation has worsened over the fall following the summer of the encampment—Lebanon, Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and who knows what tomorrow—there has been pressure on us to move away from the Seneca style of action toward political pragmatism and prioritizing of issues, toward "old-style" coalitions.

But the fact is even in the face of these atrocities none of us can afford single-issue activities. We have many examples in history where single-issue positions helped to defeat the issue itself. One of the failures of the suffrage movement during Reconstruction and later was its narrowness. Even Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (known as the most visionary of the suffragists because they refused to



reduce feminism to the vote) capitulated to racism. Anthony told Black suffragist Ida B. Wells: "When a group of colored women asked that I come to them and aid them in forming a branch of the suffrage association among the colored women, I declined to do so on the ground of . . . expediency." Our feminist history is full of such examples. Jane Adams and Lillian Wald, opposed to conscription, administered registration programs in their settlement houses, abandoning the radical peace movement, and women divided over whether suffrage or peace or poverty was "primary."

Over the past few years many feminists have extended our understanding of racism and U.S. imperialism, militarism, and the devastation of nature. We have made connections between all forms of domination. These discussions were happening in many women's groups at the same time. Barbara Smith writes about Third World women's discussions of interconnectedness of issues in the introduction to *Home Girls*. In the feminist anti-militarist movement we were also developing a different type of imaginative action which is non-hierarchical, encouraging different women's cultures to come together with integrity maintained by each. This is a different principle from most coalition work where it is assumed that people gather around a lowest common denominator compromising some vital part of themselves.

Sometimes those of us who are longtime feminists tend to forget the first power of realization of our common experiences in a patriarchal world, the intoxicating empowering experience of women thinking and being together. For many of us who joined the women's movement in the late sixties and early seventies these changes came in small groups meeting in living rooms—we called them "consciousness-raising groups." This still happens, but as we've grown as a movement we've begun to create public spaces where this breakthrough in consciousness called feminism can happen. At Seneca, the C.R. group gave way to the affinity group which is also an action and support group. Many women came to Seneca out of their great fear for the future of life on earth. Sometimes they didn't understand an all women's encampment.

In June before the Encampment began, I attended a Seneca organizing meeting in Poughkeepsie, New York called by local women. We went around, each one of us telling why she had come. In the course of the go-round, several women said they were angry that the Encampment was women only. They didn't see the need, they didn't want to be separated from husbands and boyfriends. One was especially angry—returning the meeting to this issue again and again. She kept saying to us, "You're trying to divide families." Someone else said, "You know, there are a lot of assumptions about women's lives in what you're saying. Not all of us have families like yours—some of us are lesbians, some of us are single mothers, lots of women don't have boyfriends or husbands." Another woman volunteered, "I have a husband and three sons, and I'm looking forward to being just with women." Finally, the angry woman left. I never expected to see her again, but my second day at Seneca there she was, sunburned, relaxed and smiling, arm-and-arm with the woman with three sons. She said to me, "You know, I'm learning so much about so many things. I'm not the same woman! I came because I was worried for my children and I wanted to do something even though I disagreed with all of you. But there is something special about women together, and now I'm glad for myself that I came." Many Seneca organizers have stories like this one.



It seems to me that feminism as a philosophy and a movement is at a crossroad. Seneca is located at that crossroad. Every action taken which brings together women to listen, talk, and act who would not otherwise know each other is a step in the right direction, although because of the location and demanding form of the peace camp it was more accessible to some women than others. (I was one of those who, because of my job and my disability, could spend only four difficult days at the camp itself.) The issues facing us as a movement at this crossroads include: Can feminism be a movement of all women without invalidating the experiences and concerns of some women? If we are to have such a movement, what is to be the relationship between Third World women and white women in setting the agenda for the movement? What is to be the relationship between women in the United States



and women in Central America and other parts of the world who live under the jackboot of American militarism in a wholly different way? For many of us Americans who worked on the permanent demonstration called the *Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice*, the torture of our sisters and brothers of Nicaragua and El Salvador brought us face to face still again with patriarchal capitalism which looks with such coldness on the suffering of the people of Central America, Lebanon, Asia and Africa and on our own streets in big and little wars that are by definition man-made.

The fact is all of us experience patriarchal oppression differently as it interlocks with a myriad of other forms of oppression and facts about our lives, and perhaps that finally was what Seneca was all about—the confrontation not only with external forms of oppression, but with ourselves.







ANDREA DOREMUS  
Interviewed by  
NICOLA-MCLAUGHLIN  
ANDREA



photo: Colleen McKay

ANDRÉE  
NICOLA~McLAUGHLIN  
*interviewed by*  
ANDREA DOREMUS



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*Andrea Doremus—Isn't it true that access to equal and quality education has historically been a major focus of Black political activity, especially for Black women?*

Andrée Nicola-McLaughlin—Yes, this is true basically because there is little material wealth in the Black community. We own little capital or production resources, so our only means to economic and social mobility is through attaining higher levels of education. Hence, educators such as Daisy Bates and Mary McLeod Bethune viewed the struggle for quality education as central to our liberation as a people and as women. So education is seen as key to community development, personally and collectively.

*AD—How does Medgar Evers represent forward movement in this ongoing struggle?*

AM—Unlike most campuses in this country, MEC itself grew out of activism, as part of the struggle for community control of education in the late 1960's. The MEC student body, which is 95% Black and 75% female, reflects the predominantly Black female population of the surrounding Central Brooklyn community. Although all races and many nationalities and ethnic groups are represented at MEC, we do see it as a Black female institution. And there are special needs of a woman's, a Black woman's institution, where the majority of its members are victims of triple discrimination: racism, sexism and poverty. There's a certain kind of strength of character that has to be developed, a certain kind of outlook and values that one must have in order to prevail . . . certain kinds of preparation in order to compete in a racist and sexist society. Student services, curriculum, faculty hiring, and administrative policies must be geared to these special needs. Although the college administration has not provided the proposed funding for it, we are still very enthusiastic about the potential of the Center for Women's Development which opened recently. What happens at Medgar just reflects what goes on in the University as a whole. But at MEC, because it's so small, the inequity is all the more apparent. For example, out of over 20 Deanship appointments made before 1982, only 3 appointees were women. . . . There is not one course about the Black woman at MEC. We're trying to get one now.

In terms of student concerns and needs, discrimination against women has been most flagrantly reflected in the absence of childcare at MEC. In 1974, a Blue Ribbon commission, which included distinguished members of the academic world, issued a report which recommended that MEC must have a childcare program in order to be successful. It stated that there was no way the College could grow and thrive without the establishment of childcare. Now clearly, people who did not act on this recommendation from 1974 until 1982 (when the students themselves turned the ex-president's office into a drop-in center) were insensitive, incompetent, or both. That's for certain.

It is logical that within CUNY, it was women of color who were the first to scream out and demand childcare as a right not a privilege. In many ways MEC reflects a new day dawning in the society, where we find many women expressing that consciousness which evolved out of the 60's and 70's . . . a consciousness of sex oppression along with national or race oppression.

So what we see happening at MEC is, as one journalist stated it, "the unfinished business of the 60's." Black women have always been active in our communities, in the churches, in labor, in civic organizations, especially in education, and throughout the whole civil rights and Black Power movements. Women have traditionally come together to organize and respond, such as the washerwomen who were the backbone of organizing the boycott in Montgomery, Alabama after Rosa Parks got arrested. However this role has been unsung . . . we have always been kind of in the background.

The Black Power movement addressed problems which affected the Black community, but half that community, women, were not addressed. Problems particular to their womaness were ignored, submerged. For the most part, our needs have rarely been addressed through the eyes of women in the community and this is what is now happening at MEC. We're speaking about those needs through the eyes and the voices of the women in that institution, and this is new.

AD—*What do you think has led to the primacy of this women's consciousness at MEC?*

AM—In the past there have been few national or even regional organs that reflected a progressive posture toward the concern of women of color. There are some Black women's organizations which certainly couldn't be considered progressive or grassroots and thereby of relevance to the vast majority of Black women. For Black women at MEC, or elsewhere, there have been few organizations in which to function, or to whom to appeal, in order to address or get assistance addressing our issues.

Well, in May of 1981 women had come together to organize a militant Mother's Day march to express concern about the continued murder of Black children in Atlanta, and the lack of adequate social or governmental response to those murders. This was the first time a City-wide coalition of progressive Black women existed in this city. Out of this emerged the Coalition of Concerned Black Women, some members of which already belonged to the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers in Brooklyn. These were high-powered women who worked in various organizations and all different arenas throughout the City, in all 5 boroughs. This loose network of women had the capacity to respond to the issues of the women of Medgar Evers College. They had a theoretical understanding of the concerns, and they were able to articulate these concerns to the media and to community organizations on behalf of the students at MEC. As the Student-Faculty-Community-Alumni Coalition to Save Medgar Evers College began to develop its well-organized and militant response to the CUNY Board and its representative, the ex-president, our practice was guided by a clear understanding of not only race and class bias but gender as well . . . and how these have determined our realities and our perception of these realities.

But the struggle at MEC is not a struggle for ideology, it is a struggle for some real changes in conditions. And that's why the struggle had popular support and became a popular movement at a particular time. People were asking for changes in their conditions, and this affects everybody . . . the students who are expected to



learn there, the faculty who are required to teach there, the staff who work there, the alumni who are supposed to say "this is my alma mater," and the community who wants to use the facilities. So everyone has a vested interest in wanting some real substantive changes in the conditions of MEC . . . be it in terms of leadership, the curriculum, the physical plant, etc.

At the time of the strike in the spring of 1982, the power structure had supported Richard Trent for so many years, he thought he was invincible. He was so arrogant that he dismissed angry students as a "mob," after keeping them waiting six hours before refusing to address them at a bi-annual Student Assembly. But he was not invincible . . . because the women of MEC are very determined.

It was some women who comprised most of the Student Government, women who sat-in at the president's office for three months with their children, women who ran security shifts, arranged meals, negotiated with the University administration and met the press . . . women who made their demands known. Women were fed up with both the misogynist and patriarchal attitudes toward Black women.

AD—*And do you think that community groups, the Black politicians, and the Black press, who came out to call for Richard Trent's resignation were conscious of the female strength, the female component of the struggle, or do you think they saw it as a struggle for all Black people?*

AM—Up until the latter days, I think most saw it as Black people's struggle, which it was, you know, *people's* struggle. It was when many of the key personalities became increasingly visible that the entire community became aware of the female character of the situation. And this astounded a number of people . . . I think the broader community, male journalists, community residents, elected officials, ministers remarked on their surprise.

AD—*Hadn't it been apparent in the kinds of demands the Coalition was putting forth?*

AM—Internally it was apparent. Externally, it was the community activists and the journalists whose coverage of the crisis began to make it clear to the public that this struggle contained women's issues . . . Journalists such as Freddy Washington of *Big Red*, Sheila Rule of *The New York Times*, freelancer Jesse Keyes and Barbara Day of WBAI News. In some cases, their interpretation helped crystalize the relevance of women's issues among activists in the College community. And support for women's concerns did exist among the public.

AD—*Do you think this support could have happened ten years ago?*

AM—No. Definitely not. It *didn't* happen ten years ago. And that's how Trent got in there. Today there's a much stronger commitment to women's advocacy. Equally important, our community has developed politically . . . today there are progressive Black elected official and mass-based organizations.

AD—*What do you think accounts for this shift?*

AM—I think it's what has happened in our community over the years . . . the feminization of poverty, the fact that the majority of Black families are headed by women, the insensitivity of the public bureaucracy to Black women's needs, and Black women's advocacy via such organs as the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers.

AD—*But hasn't it always been this way?*

AM—It has been this way, but under the present U.S. administration the situation

has intensified and escalated as the government cuts from social programs to give to war and militarism. And over the years this has affected the community. For example, in NY State alone there are 27,000 Black males in jails, including youth, and of course this has an impact on the community in terms of who has the responsibility of providing, who is in attendance at schools, etc. Most of the incarcerated come from downstate, right here in NYC.

AD—*Could the shift have something to do with the women's movement as well?*

AM—Certainly there is a dialectic operating. The women's movement of the late 60's-early 70's received strength, legitimacy and inspiration from the civil rights and Black Power movements. Surely the Black community has felt the influence of the women's consciousness movement of the 1970's and 80's.

AD—*Now what about the men of Medgar Evers? Don't they feel neglected, somewhat overshadowed?*

AM—No, and this is something I want to stress. First of all, the issue of quality education affects the entire Black community. Black men as well as women have always been involved in this struggle. Men such as Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Medgar Evers, the man. But just as significantly, there were men in the Coalition who had developed a high level of consciousness based on their own study and involvement in the community.

It was clear to these men that in order for such concepts as "equal educational opportunity" to have any meaning, specific women's concerns had to be addressed simply because issues such as lack of childcare and women's support services were barriers to equal access. During the intensity of the three month sit-in, a lot of these men shared responsibility for childcare, cooking, cleaning up, etc. They had developed a commitment to changing human relations based on their studies of social transformations around the world. They realized that these new societies were developing new forms of social organization and that women's concerns had been made a very high priority . . . that if you're talking about qualitative social transformation, women's oppression must be addressed.

AD—*Is it true that Black women are better educated than Black men?*

AM—No. This is a popular myth that you'll hear among people of color as well as in the mainstream society. You'll also hear that Puerto Rican women are better educated. This is not the reality. Statistically, Black men have outnumbered Black women at college campuses, although this disparity is now decreasing. Statistics show that women of color have the highest unemployment, the lowest income, and the least education because societal conditions oppress women of color, both as people of color and as women. At Medgar Evers College, for example, where there actually are more women than men, 7½ women to every 2½ men, it's significant to note that twice as many men as women reach graduation in Business Administration.

AD—*What do you think accounts for this misconception?*

AM—It is part of a generally divisive social myth which perceives that women of color have more opportunities than men of color. This notion comes somewhat from the fact that proportionately women of color have *had* to work in this society and, as a whole, have never enjoyed the luxury of being provided for as have many women in the majority society. So a lot of people take that to mean that they are better em-



ployed and better educated. Pervasive systems of disinformation constitute one of the most serious problems faced by justice-seeking people in this society. The idea that women of color have it pretty good, in fact, easier than men and therefore should be less demanding, serves both male and race privilege and protects the status quo. It is a myth that does not help the Black community develop because it is not factual.

AD—I understand that a Black Women's Studies component is being proposed as part of the current development of a Black Studies curriculum. Is this correct?

AM—Yes, but it's still in the proposal phase. Part of maintaining control is ensuring that people learn from Eurocentric, sexist perspectives in order to perpetuate an unjust society. Black Women's Studies, like Black Studies, must reflect a commitment to academic excellence *and* social responsibility. It is important for women of color to name our world, to take back control of how we are defined. We must define the theoretical as well as methodological paradigms for the study, research and teaching about women of color. It's important that each group defines its issues through its own cultural perspectives. The proposal is standing still because of a College administration and, to a lesser extent, faculty who have themselves been students of sexist, racist and culturally chauvinist education and who therefore have not made significant enough efforts toward educating themselves in this area of study. Frankly, many don't see the legitimacy of it.

A Black woman, who is a professor of history at Dartmouth and a member of the Institute, recently told a story about a conference she just attended in Virginia. In the literature of the conference, it stated that a white woman who studies Black women was going to speak on Black women from the Women's Studies perspective, and she a Black woman was going to approach the topic from an Ethnic Studies perspective, as though she was not a woman!

So members of different groups have interests in maintaining the status quo to safeguard privileges.

AD—Andrée, why do you think that so many people cooperated with Trent for so long?

AM—The question today we can ask is . . . why are so many people cooperating with militarism in Lebanon, in Grenada, with polls showing that the American people want to be there . . . even when we know the failure of Vietnam, the horror of war? How much longer will the American population allow this country to support and finance terrorism around the world? Violence against non-white nations appears to be official U.S. policy. Why is the ERA dead? It's unconscionable!

I think it represents a mentality that has been created in this society, a lack of moral character that has been created by the media, by education, by the mores pushed by the power structure . . . And so people have tolerated a lot of immorality over the years, and the policies of the ex-president and the CUNY Trustees are microcosms of the immorality of the larger society. Trent was a puppet of the power structure.

How do we know why people tolerate? Do they tolerate out of ignorance? Out of fear? Out of self-interest because they hope for mobility? I think that in the absence of a moral center you can find the whole spectrum of reasons.

When the students went up to the Board this September, they were told . . . if you're quiet, we'll meet with you afterwards. And the students said, "Hell! We don't

want to meet with you. Did you have to meet with the students of LaGuardia, or NY Technical, or Brooklyn College, for them to get quality facilities? Why do we have to have a meeting with you? You know what we want. Why must there be a meeting?" But in this way, the students are labelled troublemakers for demanding what is their right to have. As I said in my June 9th presentation, there should be no debate on the morality or justice or equality in a democratic society.

AD—*How would you characterize the faculty at MEC?*

AM—Now?

AD—*Has there been a change?*

AM—Yes. Initially the College had a very progressive faculty. This was the faculty that envisioned MEC as a base, a cultural center, a fountain of knowledge for revitalizing and developing Central Brooklyn. The first student and faculty uprising occurred in 1972 as a response to Trent's firing ten of these people in one sweep. These were the people who had done the planning of the institution, gotten it off the ground, had the doors opened, wrote the first College catalogue. If we look back at the early catalogues, just the content of the courses, and the vision stated in the mission reflect the calibre of the faculty who were there in the early days. Over the years progressive faculty have been fired.

You see CUNY has a policy that for the first seven years of an institution, the chief executive can do whatever he or she wants to do. So there is no protection by governance plan, by CUNY by-laws, by union agreement. It was incredible. Trent was an example of someone who abused that power. He didn't use the flexibility to implement experimental programs and bring in trailblazers. He used it to suppress critics, progressive people, women. There was harassment, intimidation, outright discrimination, people not earning tenure or professional advancement for personal, petty reasons, not academic reasons.

It used to be so sad, really. There would be these powerhouse people and then, when the president would ice them, forget it, few would come to aid them. They'd kind of be like an "untouchable." If they lost their grievance case, they'd go right on out. Now, after building the Coalition and forcing Trent to leave, there is a solidarity. Progressive faculty are supporting each other. We are refusing to allow people to be removed from the College for non-academic reasons.

AD—*Given that you believe that MEC is not at all a priority for CUNY and that power relations in this society actually want it to, hope it will, starve financially and spiritually, what are your powers of leverage? How will MEC receive the kind of fiscal (administrative) attention it needs in order to become the mecca of Black education that you envision?*

AM—The leverage for getting justice for the College community is in the consciousness of the people themselves. The consciousness of the students . . . the community . . . the alumni . . . and, as quiet as it's kept, the faculty . . . has been increased by the experience of the struggle. I feel that the hearts and minds of these constituencies are committed to quality education and *anything it takes to get it*. Because you see, the people have nothing to lose. There is nothing in the community. These communities are becoming like wastelands. People want change . . . I think that's the real leverage we have.



AD—So you're saying it's basically the strength and power in the hearts of the people who are determined to keep the pressure going? Okay, but why should a racist and sexist Board of Trustees respond?

AM—I think pressure from too many quarters is going to embarrass them, and quite possibly, have ramifications for certain constituencies and individuals whose privileges they want to protect. Although many of them are conservative, I won't say all the Trustees are backward. They cannot rationalize MEC being the way it is. When you're talking about four colleges in Brooklyn, you're not going to have the only college, which is mostly Black and which is named after a civil rights leader who was slain fighting against the very things that MEC is being victimized by now sitting by silently while the other colleges have quality education and we don't. Those kinds of things just cannot be permitted to happen anymore. The Board should be happy that they had 10–12 years' reprieve with the ex-president. And they only had it because they bolstered him, gave him excessive authority, and they had some elected officials who kept the flack off them and acted as a buffer between the community and the Board ... and there was the overriding concern of not putting the college in jeopardy of survival.

The bottom line is that they can't work with certain constituencies and they can't live in certain communities if MEC continues to exist like it is. For some people, it won't have any impact on their lives. But for the women, the Blacks, the Latinos, and the more progressive elements of the Board, they cannot morally or legally rationalize the condition of MEC to certain sectors where they want to exert influ-



photo: Colleen McKay

ence. This Chancellor is listening and dialoguing, and that's a beginning. Next, he must act upon his understanding and, hopefully, his perceptions will coincide with the realities of the University's majority Black, Latin and female student population.

AD—*Given the audience of IKON Magazine, what do you want to get across in this interview?*

AM—Well, I think it's important for women and progressive people around the country and in our local area and region . . . be they in education, in media . . . to understand what collective consciousness, what organized, collective action can do. What kind of changes it can make. These are conservative times. The tide of reaction is rising and there need to be strong coalitions operating to stop the anti-human things that are happening, including the wars, the nuclear build-up, the taking away of money from social programs, the abuse of the environment and life in general. Coalition building is an important tool for progress in the eighties. Progress can also be stopped by coalitions, such as the coalition between the Democrats and the Republicans who supported the U.S. invasion of Grenada.

Whenever you have decision-makers operating from within a power structure, a popular response from a broadbased group of people can be very effective because the power structure wants to minimize chaos, it wants to avoid any situation that intensifies the opportunity to enhance consciousness and to raise more profound issues, or to heighten contradictions between ideals and realities. So, coalition doesn't mean that everyone has to like each other and that we have to agree on every last tenet. It means we have to set our goals and objectives and agree that these objectives are going to help the majority, if not all of us. We can agree then on some collective action that's going to make it happen. A lot of times what happens is that we agree on the principle but each little group is willing to disintegrate into factions to do their own thing, and without unity there's no clout. The power structure encourages factionalism because it recognizes that this is a human tendency. But there is a stronger tendency and that is the human spirit which refuses to be dominated, smothered, submerged or oppressed. And this aspect of our humanity is what will transform MEC, other communities, this world into places in which the human spirit can thrive.



# Andrée Nicola-McLaughlin

## CLOSE TO THE EDGE!

### THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX IN THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge. I'm trying not to lose my head!*  
*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge. I'm trying not to lose my head!*  
*Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge. I'm trying not to lose my head!*

Good evening sisters and brothers, friends and guests:

Those stanzas from a popular disco song speak to the condition to which immoral economic priorities are fast-driving people in America, today. It is the resulting erosion of moral conscience — evident in every aspect of American life — which threatens to destroy this society, which threatens to destroy this city, and which threatens to destroy institutions; and it is this erosion of moral conscience about which we should be concerned when looking at the politics of race and sex in the City University of New York.

In a society where it is acceptable for eleven million people to be out of work, yet it is okay to propose to spend trillions of dollars to wage wars against peoples of color to control their lands, to seize their natural resources, to exploit their labor . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a society where two white men can beat a man of color to death with a baseball bat in front of witnesses and be given suspended sentences because a white judge rules that the sentence should be measured by the criminal and not by the crime . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a society where a man can rape and murder his blood mother and be protected by the loopholes of the law . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a city where a mayor can openly exercise containment policies by means of his initial appointment of an unqualified public school chancellor who could only administer miseducation to the majority Black and Brown pupils as part of an effort to ensure our continued servitude as peoples of color . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a city where the ranks of the hungry, the homeless, the unemployed and the destitute are increasing by the hundreds and thousands while the city's policy-makers spend over a million dollars to light up a bridge . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a University where there exists open budgetary and policy retreats from equal opportunity in the form of the jim crow treatment of Medgar Evers College and Hostos Community College, and in the forms of skyrocketing tuition, cutbacks in Black Studies Programs, slashing of educational opportunity programs, and the imposition of Euro-centric core curricula on predominantly Black and Brown student bodies in order to teach white nationalism . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

In a University whose mission it is to educate the "whole people" and build a new "experimental and innovative institution which meets the needs of the city which it must serve," and yet can rationalize the firing of a Black female affirmative action officer of a public institution in the largest Black-populated city in the United States, can rationalize the firing of the first woman dean of administration in the university, can rationalize paying women on the instructional staff less than men on the instructional staff, and can rationalize sending a polka dot, white-and-Black male team to administer the 95% Black and 75% female student body of Medgar Evers College . . . *don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!*

Sisters and brothers, friends and guests . . . while I only repeat the thinking of desperation on the minds of the American people today, *Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge!* . . . we—those of us here today as concerned people, as committed people, as conscious people—must try not to lose our heads, unless, of course, it's a collective head which is organized, which is directed, which sincerely believes that there is no sacrifice too great to make for justice, for freedom, and which is ready to take risks to cut-off the heads of racism and sexism in the City University of New York!

And it is in the spirit of that collective head which understands the value of collective study, collective analysis, collective work and collective struggle that is grounded in a moral philosophy of "*Freedom now!*", in a historical vision, in a global perspective and in a cultural sensitivity, that I bring you remarks on behalf of the STUDENT/FACULTY/COMMUNITY/ALUMNI COALITION TO SAVE MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE.

Since the founding of Medgar Evers College in 1969, members of the Medgar Evers College community have taken diligent measures to impress upon the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York and the policymakers of this city and state:

- the need of our community for quality education;
- our commitment to the realization of this dream;
- our ongoing concern to overcome the oppressed condition of underdevelopment which characterizes the Central Brooklyn community;
- our resolve that Medgar Evers College have some impact on the wretched social and economic conditions of the community it is supposed to serve; and
- our determination not to be daunted; not to be discouraged; and not to be any less committed!

Tonight, I wish to present three points about the politics of race and sex in the City University of New York for your edification and reflection and, of course, your application to future practice against national and sex oppression.



I. *Since the end of the Civil War, whites have sought to ensure white supremacy by containing Black efforts to advance through education.* Education for Blacks and other peoples of color has been geared to containing us and to keeping us in a state of backwardness, limiting our ability or desire to resist our oppression, which has been and continues to be evidenced by the disproportionate conditions of chronic poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, repression, racist violence, illiteracy, disease, social unrest, financial crises and political instability.

The major feature of the politics of race in the City University of New York is that despite the flowery, pluralistic rhetoric of its mission, the practice of its education is designed to deprive Black people of this city of the essential skills, tools and expertise necessary to transform our conditions. Reflecting on the fact that a little more than one hundred years ago it was illegal for Blacks to learn to read and write in this nation, we should be aware that the City University of New York was virtually all white until the late 1960's when the University's policies of exclusion were addressed by three movements in response to Black people's demand for self-determination:

- A. OPEN ADMISSIONS which sought to remove barriers in the city's public system of higher education that limited access to the City University of New York by most peoples of color (and poor whites);
- B. BLACK STUDIES which emerged from the premise that the teaching, study and research of peoples of African descent must be included in higher education to prepare peoples to live in a multi-racial society;
- C. MEDGAR EVERS COLLEGE which was conceived to assist in the revitalization and development of the largest Black community in the United States, Central Brooklyn.

Despite these movements, the 1980's find us resisting racist containment inside CUNY and within education in general where there exists the revolving-door syndrome for Black students at white-administered higher learning institutions (from which seven out of every ten Black students do not graduate), the high push-out and drop-out rates of Black high school students, as well as the lack of fiscal parity in a host of educational areas, which leads me to the second point.

II. *Economic motivations undergird racist and sexist policies and practices within the University as much as they undergird racist and sexist policies and practices within all American institutions and the society at large.* It is this economic imperative, often reflected in a lack of fiscal parity designed to prevent non-whites and women from acquiring the necessary training or opportunity for a qualitative change in socio-economic status, that most profoundly assigns Medgar Evers College and Hostos Community College "jim crow" status, in effect an unequal reality based upon unequal treatment. Obviously, such treatment serves to maintain the status quo. The most glaring representations of the lack of parity are the horrendous physical plant conditions of Medgar Evers College as well as many Black Studies Programs, educational opportunity programs (i.e., Special Programs), and other programs

and institutions which were originally established to serve peoples of color juxtaposed to lavish facilities for all CUNY's majority-white colleges.

It is clear that the City University of New York has never had a commitment—moral or economic—to peoples of color, and is *best evidenced by decisions of the Board of Trustees*, which come *after* the student population has changed to one that is predominantly Black and Latin and female, and which have *fueled* the consistent erosion of open admissions and Black Studies as well as Medgar Evers College within the University.

In 1976, we watched this Board capitulate to a conspiracy to impose tuition and reduce the size of a predominantly Black and Brown University, undermining open admissions by creating financial obstacles and red-tape procedures.

In 1976, we watched this Board pass a resolution converting Medgar Evers to a community college, which served to constrain the growth of the student body and to reduce the size of the faculty, the library and the physical plant.

In 1978, we watched this Board pass guidelines which stripped the educational opportunity programs of their authority to determine the content and character of the basic education for mostly Black and Brown students, reducing programs and faculties.

In 1978, we watched this University seize control over the fiscal resources of these programs, allocating them to the administration of the same colleges which housed the educational opportunity programs in less than equal quarters on the fringes of their campuses.

We have watched Black Studies shrink in size as the Trustees approved core curriculum after core curriculum which, if they do not outright exclude, include in a token fashion Black and Puerto Rican Studies for mostly Black and Brown student bodies in order to bolster enrollment for the benefit of many academic departments which did not and still do not practice affirmative action.

We have watched Black people denied promotion, reappointment and tenure for reasons of race and sometimes, sex, by white college administrations while Black faculty who fight racism and sexism at non-white campuses are also the objects of punitive measures.

We have watched the cutback of vital student services in this largely non-white university, and the Board's seizure of control of the student fee monies, limiting students' ability to augment these much-needed services.

We have watched the Board attempt to force Black and Brown students and faculty out of the University as it supports increasing tuition costs for a second time in less than one year and does nothing to prevent the proposed retrenchment of Special Programs faculty and cutbacks of Black Studies programs.

Clearly, such systematic application of an inequitable economic imperative is systemic, serving to maintain the balance of social, economic and political power in the favor of the society's white majority, thereby safeguarding its privileges.

III. *Power relations in American society have rendered Black women the victims of institutional and personal racism on the part of white women, and personal sexism on the part of Black men.* In recent years, the University's mostly white male policymaking



bodies have exercised their racist and sexist decision-making processes sometimes using the racism of white women and the sexism of black-skinned males against peoples of color and women of color, respectively. The scapegoating of the most vulnerable population in the University community, women of color, is an escalating exploitative pattern which must be addressed by persons of conscience. The court suit filed against the University for discrimination against women did not give attention to the profound disparities between white women and women of color, the latter of whom are the victims of racism as well as sexism. It must be stressed that white women who are victims of sexism must address racism too if they are too qualitatively deal with the concerns and issues of the multi-racial community of women.

Historically, the concept of femininity and the ideology of womanhood have not embraced Black women in terms of the application of orthodox role definitions. To many, it is indicative of the profundity by which racism impacts the lives of women of color that it was *Black* women who raised child care, a woman's issue, as a concern in the student movement in the 1980's.

Still, the Black female majority student body and faculty at Medgar Evers College are the objects of the classical racist hysteria following Black militance: twenty-four-hour surveillance; the presence of plainclothes and secret service agents in the college community; and harassment and intimidation. However, we remain organized to resist the infringement of our human rights because there is no genuine academic freedom, equal educational opportunity or quality education without human rights. As the Coalition to Save Medgar Evers College has stated on numerous occasions: "Human rights are the first academic rights!"

## CONCLUSION

Although there are colleges and programs within the City University of New York which emerged out of demands in opposition to racist and sexist exclusion, they must, in substance, become testimonies to authentic efforts to eradicate racism and sexism. As long as they function as havens of jim or jane crowism, they are no more than symbols of appeasement and vestibules of miseducation.

Our struggle at Medgar Evers College in quest of quality leadership, quality facilities and quality academic programming as well as concomitant fiscal parity comes out of a tradition premised in that moral philosophy of "Freedom Now!", which has required us to exercise collective conscience of character to keep from being driven close to the edge . . . The anti-racist and anti-sexist initiatives of the Medgar Evers College women, which have led to consideration of legislation addressing child care needs in New York State's public institutions of higher learning, are in the tradition of anti-racist struggles which have yielded positive gains for the broader society. They are in the same tradition of anti-racist struggles which led to free public schooling, open admissions, educational opportunity programs, and ethnic studies. Support of the anti-racist struggles, which women of color are in the vanguard of waging in higher education today along with progressive men and white women, can only help to push over that which should be pushed closed to the edge—racism and sexism! *There should be no debate upon the morality or justice of equality in a democratic society!* Solidarity through struggle! Victory is certain!



*photos: Colleen McKay*



# SUSAN SHERMAN

# FEMINISM & THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION

## 1. Nicaragua: Being There

Knowing something intellectually, even physically situating yourself in a particular location, and “being there” are very different experiences. Statistics, facts, history, analysis, theory are absolutely essential in understanding what is happening today in Nicaragua and *why* it is happening and what it means to us as women in the United States, but there is a sense of the country, the people, a context that must be transmitted for these facts to come to life. In Spanish two distinct words are used to express simplicity — *simple* and *sencillo*. While *simple* is translated as easy, superficial, simple-minded, silly, *sencillo* — its deepest meaning untranslatable — means direct, unadorned, unpretentious, stripped bare. *Sencillo* is a word you hear over and over in Nicaragua, a word that becomes riveted in your mind, that becomes a kind of cipher, a kind of key, not only to the Nicaraguan experience, but to your own vision, your own perception of the world around you, your own society as well as theirs.

As Americans coming from an industrialized, technological society that equates complexity with progress and profundity, importance with size, that educates through image and representation rather than direct experience — whether in the university or through movies or T.V. — it is most easy for us to miss the obvious, to overlook what is right in front of our eyes. One of the things that struck me most coming home from Nicaragua was the consciousness of so many people literally plugged into some mechanical device, not looking at real things but at images of things. Not perceiving, knowing directly, losing individual judgment, choice. Learn it through T.V., through someone else’s eyes, the radio, movies, the library, books, magazines, newspapers, someone else’s ears, voice. People, instead of relating to each other, enticed into relating to a re-presentation — not the event, but the re-creation of the event — even finally electing a movie star to act out being president. Writing this it seems “simple” enough, even simplistic, but when you directly confront it after being in a country like Nicaragua, the contrast is overwhelming.

This should not be misconstrued as a romantization of “under-development.” After all, one of the first things the Nicaraguans did was to send out literacy brigades, mostly quite young people, 60% women,<sup>1</sup> in a successful campaign to reduce the illiteracy rate to 12% from a figure over 50%<sup>2</sup> — the estimated illiteracy among women was much higher than that, rumors even place the figure over 80%. Illiteracy — the inability to generalize, the inability to carry over skills learned in one area to another area (for example, how to stop planting sugar cane and start diversifying crops.)<sup>3</sup> It means a population unable to participate fully in the political process. Ironically, of course, even though illiteracy has been traditionally thought of in

relationship to under-development, many people in the United States are now to a large extent functionally illiterate—and that is true in every social class. Simplicity, *sencillo*, does not mean one-dimensional or easy, it is extremely difficult—both to understand and to express.

Because behind these words, the facts, the theory, is the actual experience of being in Nicaragua. Beyond all this, for me, being in Nicaragua was actually confronting the faces of the young/old children in the border town of Jalapa, scene of fighting and death where militia and army now outnumber the town's small population. It was to step on the miles of grassy waste that were once central Managua, never rebuilt—the millions of dollars in foreign aid and contributions to do so squandered by Somoza and his National Guard. Nicaragua was the bullet holes riddling the front window of an old pick-up truck loaded with corn; a young woman singing the songs of Victor Jara at 7 o'clock in the morning on the front steps of her house in Ocotal in the war zone two hours from the border, also scene of recent intense fighting; the poems of a boy not more than 10 years old, neck circled by a red F.S.L.N. scarf, reciting at a Christian base community meeting in León; a ceremony on the Honduran border honoring a regiment that had just spent six months fighting often hand-to-hand with the "contras" (counter-revolutionaries), on the speakers' platform mothers who had lost their children in the struggle.

For me, Nicaragua was the endless discussion, endless work, lasting long into the night—nights of three and four hours sleep, a common occurrence there. It was the tin and clapboard houses of *Ciudad Sandino* and much of the "temporary" housing put up to shelter over 150,000 left homeless in the earthquake of 1972 juxtaposed with the swimming pools and lavish lawns of the now-ousted Somozistas. It was the hot, hot sun and the sheets of sudden rain, and a total change in the sense of scale you are used to. It is smaller, closer, less. It is the directness in things that can't be counted or touched.

For a North American, to travel to Nicaragua is to learn your own history as well as theirs—the two so closely, so violently intertwined. It is to be thrown back on yourself, to learn your own contradictions, strengths, responsibilities. To really "see" Nicaragua demands this kind of dialogue, struggle—both internal and external on every level. "Being there" is more than a physical presence, it is an emotional and intellectual commitment. I think I began first to understand that concretely one night at a Christian base community, after two hours on the road, hot, dirty, late, hungry, trying to figure out what I was doing in what looked like an outdoor high-school basketball court (which I think it was), in what was basically a small group of Nicaraguans, trying to understand what was really going on as one by one they got up, sang, recited a poem, trying to talk to the woman sitting next to me, her children, trying for a moment at least to put myself, my notions, my pre-conceptions aside.

As Margaret Randall put it when I wrote her on my return to New York:

(What you say) is . . . so *hard* to get across to most people from the more industrialized societies whose natural sophistication have taken them to a plane both beneficial and preventing their contact often with what is most important, most real, most true. . . . how complicated we have been trained to make it, in the U.S. to keep us from seeing *what's really happening*.<sup>4</sup>



Not just in Nicaragua, but perhaps most important, here, to ourselves, in our own search as feminists, as women.

## 2. Mass Organizations, Liberation Theology & the Movement of Women

Women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution is certainly unprecedented in the history of revolutionary movements to this date, both in terms of numbers and importance. In fact, it is estimated that by the final offensive of the revolution, "women made up an estimated 30% of the Sandinista army and held important leadership positions, commanding everything from small units to full battalions. In the crucial final battle of León, four out of seven commanders of that military front were women."<sup>5</sup>

This was a result of several factors at least: the continuing struggle of the worldwide women's movement—Dora Maria Tellez relates that one of the ten books available to F.S.L.N. cadre underground was Margaret Randall's *Cuban Women Now*<sup>6</sup>; conditions within Nicaragua itself—according to Lea Guido, Minister of Health and head of AMPRONAC, the women's organization that preceded AMNLAE,

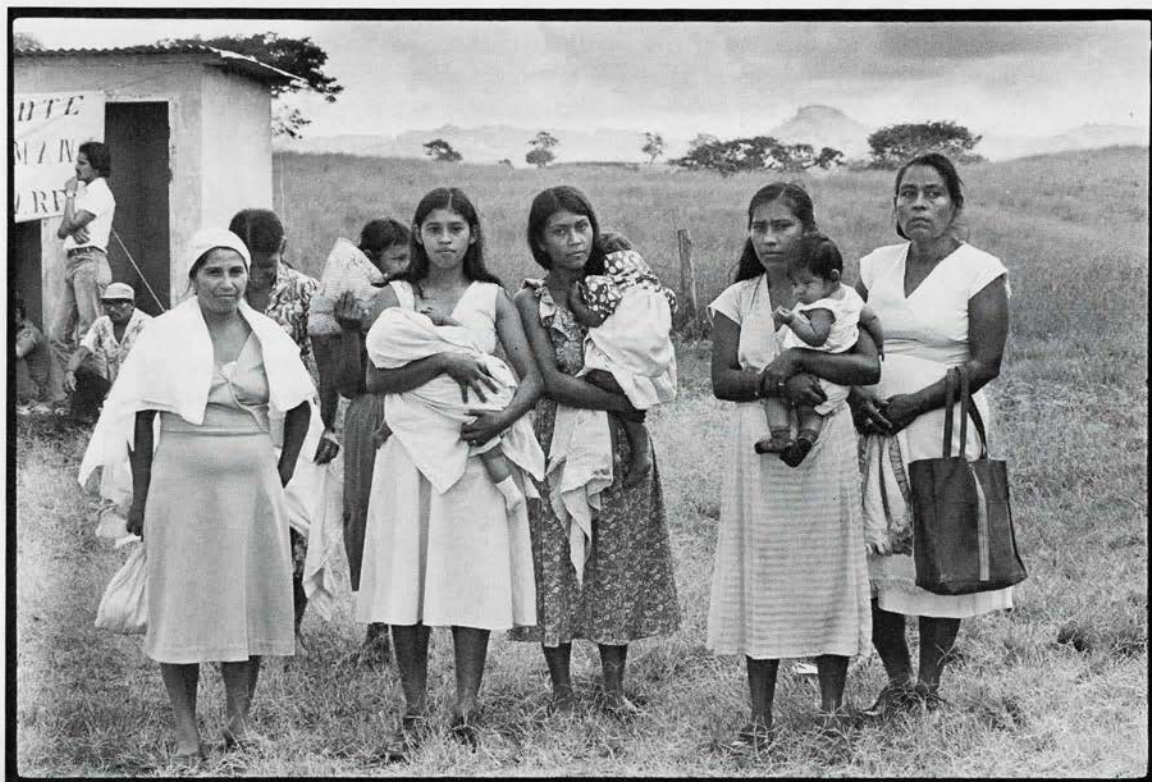
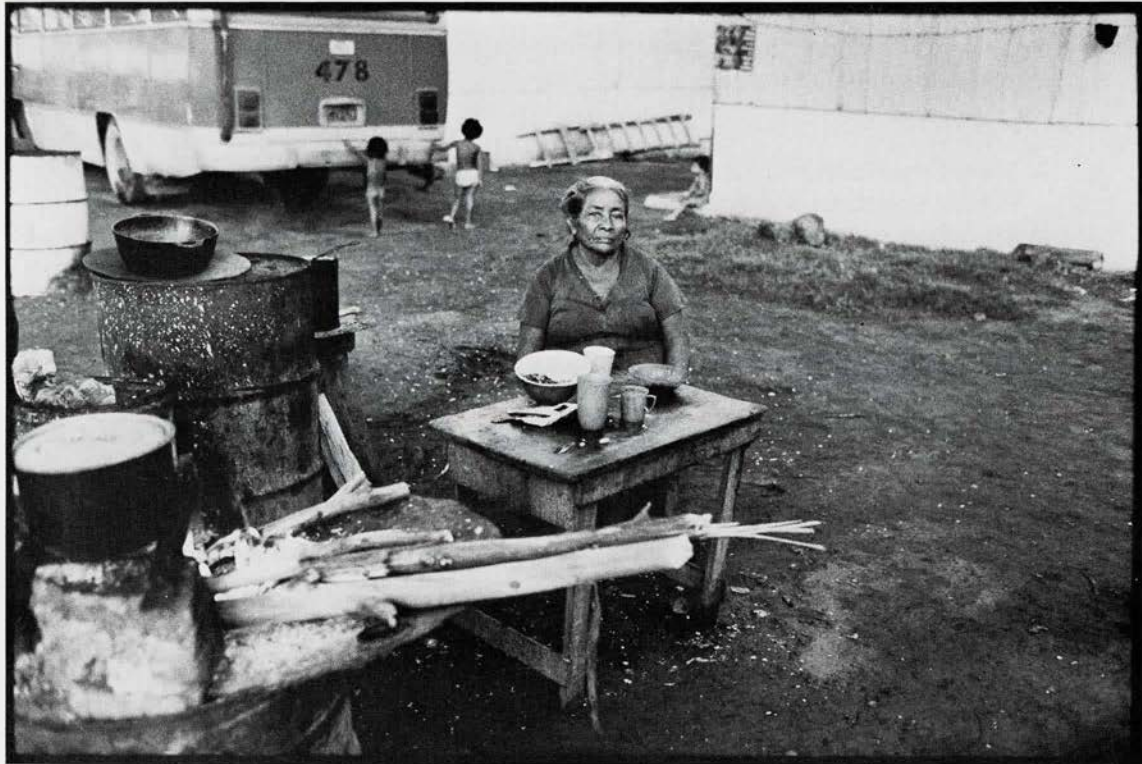
... a key factor in the unprecedented participation of women of popular sectors is their role as the economic pillar of the family in Nicaragua. As many as 50% of the households are headed by single women abandoned by the men who fathered their children. Even when the men remain with their families, the high rate of both seasonal and permanent unemployment has hinged family survival on the ingenuity and industriousness of women.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the emphasis on "prolonged peoples' warfare" and thereby on mass organizations "in all sectors and at all levels under a multiplicity of tactics and organizational forms that could speak to a multiplicity of contradictions,"<sup>8</sup> and certainly the realization of what happened in Chile where the needs of women and our place in the struggle were, if not totally ignored certainly not emphasized, led to the founding of AMPRONAC and its development as a strong and integral part of the struggle.

Although it would be a tremendous mistake to underestimate the influence of traditional Marxist thought, the ability of the Nicaraguans to consolidate a struggle with the broadest possible ideological base—within the limits of those actually interested in social change—is an instrumental factor. This can be seen in relationship to both sexism and racism. Sexism and racism are seen as phenomena in their own right that have to be dealt with ideologically as well as legislated in everyday practice. In the October 24, "International Barricada" the international edition of the F.S.L.N. newspaper, Angela Rosa Acevedo, representing AMNLEA, noted at the Fifteenth Latin American Sociology Congress that "not everything has been resolved for Nicaraguan women. . ."

*machismo* is a part of the historical legacy of a society based on exploitation and still persists in many men and women.<sup>9</sup>

Many women joined the Sandinistas because of the *relative* freedom for women compared with their normal lives under Somoza. Certainly this in itself would be an interesting comparison with the position of women historically in the left in this country.





To foreigners at least the analysis of oppression in Nicaragua more often is spoken of in terms of imperialism rather than *internal* class struggle as a primary *modus operandi*. Not that class struggle is not seen as operative or casual inside Nicaragua, to the contrary, but the history of Nicaragua has to be analyzed first in terms of external causal relationships. A concrete analysis of imperialism in this perspective shows why the triumph against Somoza in 1979 would be the *beginning* rather than the culmination of the revolutionary process—a process further complicated by continuing external pressures exerted by former Somozistas outside Nicaragua in league with sympathizers from the middle class and the powerful support and instigation of the United States. Nicaraguans, as a result of neo-colonialism, have been and continue to be the butt of both racism and sexism and this is a further reason why both forms of discrimination are discussed both in traditional Marxist terms and as phenomena on their own.

Another leg of this “poly-theoretical” base is found in the amalgamation of Christianity and Marxism. It is essential to remember that most Nicaraguans are Catholic and Catholicism permeates every facet of their life and thought. Political and religious beliefs are inter-related in Nicaragua in a way that is hard for us in the United States to grasp. Certainly one thing that surprises visitors to Nicaragua is the extent of deep religious involvement there, including the on-going struggle between the traditional church and “liberation theology.” The religious underpinnings of the Nicaraguan revolution is an issue that with few exceptions is either completely ignored in the establishment media here or terribly distorted. It has to be, because you can’t claim the Nicaraguan government as Marxist/Soviet/Atheist and use that to scare people, and at the same time say Miguel D’Escoto, the equivalent of our Secretary of State, is a Catholic priest, that the Minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal, is a Catholic priest. In fact, to hear D’Escoto speak is to hear a speech whose images are those of the New Testament and the Christian religion. He freely uses images of incarnation and religious commitment. This attitude was best summed up one night at dinner when he said, for the Nicaraguan revolution, “being more” was not having more, but giving and loving more.<sup>10</sup>

While it is impossible to understand the present negative status of abortion legislation without understanding the impact of Catholicism in Nicaragua, it is also necessary to take into account the tremendous positive political effects of the Christian base communities which were responsible for bringing so many into the struggle. As Norma Galo remembers:

Luckily, back in Managua, a priest came to our neighborhood who fit his parish just like a ring on a finger. He felt uneasy knowing the barbarities all around us, and he and we organized our Christian base community, which he said had to be born from our needs. In fact, we first learned to define our needs. Our people did not know how to speak out in public. It terrified them to stand in the priest’s place and read from the Bible. But the priest pushed us to learn to express ourselves, and our Christian base community came to mean for us the most open place, the place where we poor really had a voice. Once we could articulate the extremity of our oppression, we realized we were not doing enough as Christians to fight it.<sup>11</sup>

Two excellent books on liberation theology are Penny Lernoux’s *Cry of the People* and Margaret Randall’s new book, *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution*.

This is not to imply that Nicaragua is a dream world, a utopia, and that a revolution is an instant fix for centuries of problems. A pitfall we all too often slip into. One that insures disillusionment. Nicaragua today is involved in a revolutionary *process*, a profound process of social change, a process which is trying to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The relationship between social classes, sexual relationships, individuals' consciousness of themselves as part of a community is being irrevocably altered. Everything is being called into question and discussed and discussed and discussed and this in an atmosphere of present and imminent war.

Revolution by its nature frees contradictions that have been buried and ignored — all the anger, frustration, prejudice along with the tenacity, courage and sacrifice. The problem of sexism is far from being solved or, in some cases, even identified. Mistakes have been made and no doubt in the future will continue to be made. The Nicaraguans would be the first to acknowledge this, to be surprised that anyone could realistically imagine differently. Revolution to them is not an abstraction. It is the concrete actions of specific human beings. It is a human thing.

### 3. Women & the Nicaraguan Revolution

Women in Nicaragua took part on every level of revolutionary activity from support positions to leadership positions, including comandantes fighting in the field. They continue to be the backbone of the Nicaraguan revolution and hold leadership positions in many revolutionary institutions. But the struggle against *machismo* has just begun.

Although AMNLAE is the mass women's organization and presently has a current membership of 50,000<sup>12</sup> there are many other organizations in which women take a major role—including the important CDSs.

Women to be found in top leadership positions are Lea Guido, Daisy Zamora, Nora Astorga in the Revolutionary Government; Commander Doris Tijerino, Commander Olga Aviles, Sub-Commander Eleonora Rocha and Sub-Commander Julia Guido in the Armed Forces; and on the F.S.L.N. Board of Directors, Commander Leticia Herrera and Commander Dora Maria Tellez. 47% of all Nicaraguan women are in the militia and seven Reserve Battalions of the Sandinista Popular Militia are made up entirely of women.<sup>13</sup> Within recent months, because of the military crisis in Nicaragua, active recruitment has begun of women into the regular army—a move that was not anticipated until next year at the earliest.<sup>14</sup>

Lea Guido, Minister of Public Health and Secretary General of the women's organization during its years of struggle against Somoza, addressed the Conference on Central America in Managua in July, 1983,<sup>15</sup> on the gains in health care and education under the revolutionary government—the eradication of polio, the improvement in the infant mortality rate (one of the highest in Latin America going in four years from 121 per thousand born alive under Somoza to 88 per thousand born alive), the inroads against gastro-enteritis, which was one of the chief killers in a country whose average life expectancy was 53 years old—20 years less than the United States—a country where 50% of deaths occurred before 14 years of age.

Guido emphasized that the peoples' political consciousness was not a result of some "exotic theory, but of experience," that it was a consciousness formed by oppression and exploitation. She explained that the Sandinista victory was a result of the organization of women, of farmers, of labor unions—a broad band of organ-



izations which gave everyone a place. "This explains a victory that is impossible to explain in terms of military training and weapons." She stated that the substantial changes that have occurred since the revolution regarding the role and place of women in Nicaragua have

taken place through the struggle, when women joined the revolution massively and assumed all the tasks when the comrades had to accept the fact that women had the same or more capacity to face the task. This place had been won by us.

Furthermore, she continued, when asked specifically about relations between men and women, that men cannot be liberated when their relationship to women is that of master to slave. The liberation of women, for Guido, is defined in multiple ways—in terms of specific relationships, in economic terms, in political terms—simply, knowing *and* doing:

... the simplest women in the fields, in the markets, is now able to tell you the problems we have regarding supplies in the field of health, everything, the problems in defense. They can talk to you about foreign policy. She is aware of many problems that in the past were only known by a few or by men. Today, men as well as women can talk and implement the things they learn and see. There is a clear policy of fighting against that situation of domination and exploitation women have lived in, but we are aware that that situation faced by women does not change only through the theory of feminine struggle but by changing the living conditions of a people.



Relating to conditions women face having to care for their children, earn a living, as well as take part in direct political struggle, Guido stated that in spite of all the problems being faced by Nicaragua today, and the inordinate amount of the small monies they have available having to be spent on defense, they have not closed any hospitals or day care centers where working women leave their children, and the cultural events, CDS committees, militias which provide the possibilities for community action are being expanded. She concluded her remarks with the statement, "We cannot say *machismo* has disappeared, but we have only had four years when you put it next to a century of exploitation."

While it is obvious from this last statement that Lea Guido is working from a theoretical analysis of *machismo* based on "economic exploitation" rather than "patriarchal exploitation" *per se*, there is a clear understanding of what the effects of *machismo* are, and a fundamental push to correct conditions that will enable women who might not otherwise have the opportunity to participate politically, to change their society in line with their needs.

Some important laws directly concerning women have already been passed by the revolutionary government. "The Statute on Rights and Guarantees" was passed by the Governmental Junta for National Reconstruction in August, 1979, the first year of the revolution. It "guarantees the equality of every citizen before the law without regard to birth, race, color, sex, language, opinions, origin, economic condition or any other social condition" and furthermore guarantees "equality within the family in which spouses have equal rights." The statute also makes clear that it is the *obligation* of the government "to remove by every available means the obstacles which impede in practice the equality of citizens and their participation in the political, economic and social life of the country."<sup>16</sup>

There is also "The Law of Communication Media" which prohibits the commercialization of women and "forbids the use of a woman's image as a sex object for advertising."

Some of the changes in the "Law on Social Security" that directly affect women are the reduction of maternity leave time to four weeks before birth along with the extension of leave time after birth to eight weeks. Equal promotion opportunities for all with no other limitations than those of time of service and capacity, breaks, free time opportunities, reasonable limitation of work hours and periodic paid vacations of sufficient length as well as paid holidays are also provided in this law.

Another important law is the "Law of Nurture" which makes the father equally responsible, both economically and psychologically, "in regard to material needs, care, education, affection, etc. within the family" with the mother and "explicitly recognizes the social value of domestic work." This applies *regardless* of the marital status of the man and woman.

One way direct participation in government is evidenced is in laws being published and passed out for general discussion and possible change by the people. One famous incident that relates to this procedure was the recent discussion and unprecedented vote in the Council of State—the deliberative body—by AMNLAE, the women's organization, who voted *against* the new draft law on the grounds that it discriminated against women by *not* making draft mandatory for women. The issue was debated by representatives from AMNLAE for a full day and a booklet explaining their position was published.



In regard to homosexuality, while it is a subject not explicitly dealt with on the level other subjects are discussed, "there is no marginalization of gays in Nicaragua . . . and the subject is discussed in the Party (thus far with a great deal of maturity, there are gays in important party positions.)"<sup>17</sup>

While birth control in Nicaragua is not only legal, but is now provided free of charge in health clinics, abortion is still illegal. Even though in a large public gathering if you ask about abortion people might act as if they didn't hear the question, the problem is being recognized and dealt with. This particular issue is addressed in an interview Margaret Randall did with Milú Vargas, the chief legal counsel for the Council of State,<sup>18</sup> who replies to the question of whether she thinks the present laws against abortion will change by first explaining that under present law—a law passed *before* the revolutionary government took power—a woman can only have an abortion if her life is in danger, and worse, consent must be given by the man, not the woman. "And it is your (the woman's) body, and it is your life that is being toyed with." She goes on to say that she became actively involved in this question after finding out the number of women in Managua who are admitted to hospitals yearly because of illegal abortions and states that the number of reported abortions in Managua is about 5,000 a month "and that only in Managua, and those only reported."

She concludes her comments by saying:

I think it is necessary to respond to this situation sooner than later. But we are in this situation of imminent war, and we cannot just proclaim a law on abortion without preparing people. Because there is going to be controversy. We can't just proclaim this law without a base. I think that the first step, as women, or better yet, for the organization representing women, is to start dealing with this topic and discussing it.

AMNLAE has already started sex education discussion groups for women on all educational levels, including adult study groups that were an outgrowth of the literacy campaign. For women that aren't covered in any other way, meetings are held in health clinics. These discussion groups enable women to begin to verbalize their feelings and needs and raise consciousness around issues like abortion.

One of the other things that AMNLAE is doing now is sponsoring over 300 garden collectives to teach nutrition—bringing vegetables into the diet and even teaching how to make tofu and milk from soy beans. These collectives also allow women to own land who have never had that right before.

Another mass organization in which women play a major role are the CDSs, which perhaps more than any other group has been maligned in this country. The block committees, besides self-defense duties—almost 90% of those doing self-defense patrol are women—have other extremely important functions in terms of neighborhood organizing, doing everything from making sure everyone has ration cards to supervising vaccinations.

Norma Galo relates:

People in this neighborhood do revolutionary vigilance with the CDS. They watch what's going on in the streets 24 hours a day. If they see some man hitting a woman, he will go to jail and lose his job, too. In the early days of doing revolutionary vigilance, we did surprise some men hitting their wives and we drove

the men out of their houses and to jail. And we taught the women about their rights. Some were farm women who had not learned to read yet and who had been brought to the city by men who wanted a dependent, submissive woman. We'd say to these women, "You can't let yourself be hit because on July 19th we women won our full rights." An incident like this happened right in front of my own house. I grabbed the man by his shirt and stopped him even though he screamed in protest. The police took him to prison. Next day I talked to the woman and said, "Look, this guy's no good for you. He's hit you a lot. You're really young, and you can find another man. This one isn't worth it." Later we found out he had another wife.<sup>19</sup>

The CDS obviously also function as support groups for women, in the midst of a social change that is shaking apart many lives. Kimiko Hahn relates a particularly poignant story about an experience her group had with a CDS in *Ciudad Sandino*:

Then, they didn't have guns, they had sticks and whistles. We went out walking in the streets, and they didn't know we were coming because the place we were to visit was chosen randomly, they blew the whistle on us! We explained who we were and they were very gracious and told us all sorts of stories. We asked if they had done this during Somoza's time and they answered, "Are you kidding—we couldn't even sit outside when he was in power!" If children walked down the street, the National Guard would check their elbows and knees for bruises and scratches which would presumably indicate they'd received Sandinist training. If they had bruises, they were taken to a pit, lined up at the top and someone in the trees would machinegun them down. You could not even dare look for the bodies.<sup>20</sup>

The Nicaraguans are trying to work out their revolution in the midst of a history of exploitation and poverty and a present of increased U.S. economic and military pressure. There is always the danger that after the revolution "settles in" the movement of women will be reversed. That happened to some degree during the early stages of the triumph over Somoza when the pressure eased off slightly. But never in the history of revolution so far, because of all the various factors mentioned, have women taken so major a role. It would not be an exaggeration to say that at the grass roots level, finally, by the end of the revolution, perhaps the major role. There are no women in the nine-person junta—the reason given is that it is composed of the three top people in each of the three major tendencies in the F.S.L.N. But *whatever the reason* there are *still* no women. There is obviously a long way to go, but the road the Nicaraguans are carving speaks for itself. The Nicaraguan revolution is in danger now, and that danger also threatens women in the United States. The Nicaraguan model is not a literal one, the circumstances in Nicaragua are quite different than here, but it is model of strong and determined women who are working together, from all social classes and interests, to form a new society.

Doña María Tellez, one of the commandantes who led the victory in León said in an interview with *Granma*:

... the Nicaraguan revolution has had the largest participation of women because it is the most recent. In the next revolution, no matter where it happens, there are going to be more women ... The Latin American woman has awoken.<sup>21</sup>

These are words, and words can be deceptive. To be in Nicaragua is to feel the strength of the women, their determination, their spirit, their will. Perhaps the rela-



tionship of the experience of “being there” for a North American feminist to our struggle is summed up best by Adrienne Rich, who also attended the Conference on Central America:

We have to assume that people do change, that feminism is changing, that socialism is changing, that the liberation movements will teach and learn from one another . . .

I want to suggest that United States feminism has a peculiar capacity to break out of the nightmare and place itself more intelligently with other liberation movements (often led by women from whom we have much to learn) because the spiritual and moral vision of the United States’ women’s movement is increasingly being shaped by women of color. The concepts of identity politics, of simultaneity of oppressions, of concrete experience as a touchstone for ideology, the refusal to accept “a room of one’s own” in exchange for not threatening the system — these have been explored, expanded on, given voice, most articulately by women of color, and to say this is not to set up competitions or divisions, but to acknowledge a precious resource, along with an indebtedness, that we can all share.<sup>22</sup>

The Nicaraguan revolution has meaning for us *not only* because of what is happening in Nicaragua but what is happening in the feminist movement here in the United States.



But as I write these words each day carries more news of incursions into Nicaraguan territory — the bombing of oil resources, rape, murder, the burning of houses, kidnappings, the rumors of imminent massive attack, this time by “contras” backed up not only by Honduran troops, but by thousands of American troops and a flotilla of American warships. And I can’t help thinking of my journey to Jalapa and Ocotal and the Nicaraguans we had met and grown so close to in that brief but intense visit and Margaret and the faces of women indelibly etched in my mind and that word, *sencillo* — simple, but far from easy, the farthest thing from easy to live or to express. The Nicaraguan programme is being carried out by human beings with all the contradictions that human nature entails. It is a difficult programme even under the best of circumstances. Its implications for women are explicit, concrete. I came away from Nicaragua more than ever convinced, more conscious of the fact that our struggle as women, as human beings, and the struggle of the Nicaraguans is the same struggle, against the same oppressive forces, both internal and external. I came back from Nicaragua angry and depressed by my country’s actions in Central America, the suffering that was being carried out in my name. I came back from Nicaragua energized, sharing with Adrienne the necessity of defending the hope of that revolution, the fragility and strength of it:

... what most entered my heart and soul, in that brief time of being in the physical presence of a revolutionary process, was the quality I think we are all here tonight trying to affirm — Hope. The sense that it can change. We ourselves can change it.<sup>23</sup>

That the only way change is possible is to *actively* assume as one of our priorities stopping what our government is doing in Central America, as well as all other parts of the world, as *part* of our feminist struggle. That only in that way is any true dialogue between us possible.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Randall, “Conversando con la compañera Milú Vargas,” trans. Susan Sherman. Unpublished, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Guido, taped translation, July 15, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>Information taken from a conversation with Edmundo Desnoes, Havana, Cuba, 1968 on the subject of illiteracy and underdevelopment.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Randall, “Letter to Susan Sherman,” September 17, 1983. Unpublished.

<sup>5</sup>Norma Stoltz Chincilla, “Women in Revolutionary Movements: The Case of Nicaragua,” *Revolution in Central America*, p. 431. An excellent article to set the context of the position of women in Nicaragua — historically and at the present time.

<sup>6</sup>Patricia Flynn, “Woman Challenge the Myth,” *NACLA: Report on the Americas*, Vol. XIV, no. 5, Sept. — Oct., 1980, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia Flynn, “Women Challenge the Myth,” pp. 29 — 30.

<sup>8</sup>Norma Stoltz Chincilla, “Women in Revolutionary Movements,” p. 425.

<sup>9</sup>“A Committed Sociology,” *Barricada Internacional*, Vol. III, No. 86, Monday, October 24, 1983.

<sup>10</sup>Kimiko Hahn, *et al.*, “Nicaraguan Dialogue,” *Womanews*, December, 1983.



## SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT NICARAGUA:

**NICARAGUA:** Area: 57,143 sq. mi. (slightly larger than Wisconsin); **population:** 2,750,000 (1981 est.); **GNP:** \$1.7 billion; **per capita income:** \$980 (1979); **labor force breakdown:** 40% agriculture, 14% industry, 46% service (1979); **unemployment:** 17.5% (1980), 13.3% (1981); **literacy:** 87% (1981) increased from approx. 50% after six months during 1980 Literacy Campaign; **life expectancy:** 55 years; **infant mortality rate:** (under Somoza) 121 per 1,000 born alive; **malnutrition:** (under Somoza) 70% among children.

**UNITED STATES:** (for comparison) **Population:** 226,504,825 (1980 census); **GNP:** \$2,350 billion; **per capita income:** \$8,612 (1978); **labor force breakdown:** 2% agriculture, 32% industry; 66% service; **unemployment:** 9% (1982 government figures); **literacy rate:** 99%; **life expectancy:** 74 years; **infant mortality rate:** 14 per 1,000 live births.

The present aggression against Nicaragua supported and funded by the United States and now backed up by actual U.S. military presence in Honduras is only the latest in a series of incursions and occupations by American marines dating back to 1853. The Somoza family dynasty was installed by the United States. The National Guard was trained by U.S. soldiers and advisors. Nicaragua, a country with a total population of under 3 millions lost more than 50,000 in the revolutionary struggle against Somoza on top of approximately 20,000 killed and 150,000 left homeless in the great earthquake of 1972. Managua was never restored after that quake, the \$90 million in foreign aid earmarked for that purpose, having been squandered by Somoza.

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<sup>11</sup>Norma Gallo, "Communism, Religion and War," *Voices from Nicaragua*, Vol. 1, No. 2-3, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Xeroxed handout from AMNLAE, "untitled," unpublished, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>14</sup>Magda Enriquez, informal talk, unpublished, November, 1983.

<sup>15</sup>Guido, taped translation, July 15, 1983.

<sup>16</sup>Xeroxed handout from AMNLAE, p. 3. Milú Vargas Interview, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>Margaret Randall, "Letter to Susan Sherman," p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Milú Vargas Interview, pp. 10-11. The rest of the remarks in this paragraph are from the same interview.

<sup>19</sup>Norma Gallo, *Voices from Nicaragua*, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Kimiko Hahn, et al., "Nicaraguan Dialogue."

<sup>21</sup>Norma Stoltz Chincilla, *Revolution in Central America*, p. 426.

<sup>22</sup>Adrienne Rich, Speech delivered at Women in Struggle: Seneca, Medgar Evers, Nicaragua" evening sponsored by IKON magazine, October 28, 1983. *Womanews*, December, 1983.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

Parts of this article have appeared in an earlier version in "Nicaragua: Being There," *Off Our Backs*, October, 1983.

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# WE CANNOT TALK ABOUT THE REVOLUTION IN THE THIRD PERSON

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## VIDALUZ MENESES *interviewed by* *Margaret Randall*

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Speaking of Nicaragua as “a land of lakes and volcanos” gives us in a few (though apt) words the image of a beautiful country in which a violent history lies always just below the surface. The same metaphors might apply to Vidaluz Meneses: woman, poet, Christian, a mother for whom — paradoxically — the Revolution has meant living apart from two of her children, an enthusiastic librarian, a woman with the clearest of gazes and impossible loves.

One must “begin at the beginning” in order to unearth — and understand — the history of this woman: worker, poet, and revolutionary. That was precisely what I meant to do, upon arriving at her home in the early afternoon of a warm day in May. Before sitting down to talk, we saw the house, the books, the paintings; we met her daughters, her aunt and saw the lunch table set with a place for us. We felt at home in this house, so simple and full of natural hospitality. And we began a conversation which will be somewhat edited and reordered here, but which we wish to offer with a minimum of cuts and changes.

Margaret Randall: — *Let's talk first about your origins, your childhood and youth, about the things that may have left their mark on you as a woman, and as a poet . . .*

Vidaluz Meneses: — After the Revolution one realizes more than ever the need to define oneself, to identify oneself within a certain class. And that has led me to study something of how classes are divided in Latin America. My family, my development, belong to the middle class. I remember that among my first critical poems I made some which point out how “having” came to be an integral part of “being.” My father was a member of Somoza's National Guard. And that has had extremely important repercussions in my life.

During my childhood and early youth my father was a lieutenant. We lived all over Nicaragua — the Guard was like that, always moving people around. I am the eldest of six brothers and sisters. A lieutenant's salary . . . well, it allowed us to live in a certain type of house, in a certain kind of neighborhood and with a certain financial security. By the time I was older, just before I married, my father was a Colonel; just after I married he finished his thirty years of service and retired as a General. The whole Nicaraguan people knows what happened in these cases: the higher the military rank — in the old society — the greater the economic possibilities and corresponding social level . . .



MR—Your father's life, and also his death, have evidently marked your life in a crucial way; one senses this on reading your poem—perhaps one of the best-known—“Last Postcard for My Father, General Meneses.” Could you talk a little about your education, the origins of your calling as a poet, your Christian roots, and then speak at greater length about your father?

VM—Okay. After undergoing the great trials of my life and coming to my total definition and option for the Revolution, I've come to the conclusion that my feelings, in terms of the old regime, have more to do with sorrow than with hate. I have never been able to hate the enemy, but I feel a tremendous sorrow. Because someone I loved so much didn't share my ideals. And that, I guess, is the central thread of my work. It's fundamental in the poem you refer to, thought to be one of my most important. That poem deals with this balance. And yet I know that with that poem I disappoint my friends, who have a right to be disappointed because their own process, their own historic commitment, was profoundly rooted in the liberation of our people. Maybe the poem seems weak to them. I believe that poetry has to be authentic, though.

But going back to the beginning . . . what happened was that my initial education in Christianity was with some old aunts of mine, truly saintly women, typical of Nicaraguan small towns. They were primary-school teachers in Matagalpa, very good and devout, much given to prayer. And they sowed in me my first religious concerns. At that time I had what you might call a magical sense of the Church—based on the ceremonies, the rites, the music, the incense. My first faith had as its basis that whole world which made a tremendous impression on me. Later my parents put me in La Asuncion School, a school for upper-class girls . . . There I came in contact with a whole other dimension of religion, because the teachers had a higher cultural level . . .

MR—Were you with Marta Cranshaw and that generation at La Asuncion?

VM—No, Marta came later. I was there with Michele Najlis. I was just going to mention Michele, as a matter of fact, because there you have a practical synthesis of religion, revolution and poetry. Michele was very courageous, very intelligent, and I remember that the nuns were scandalized by her relationship with Fernando Gordillo. I remember the repercussions at school: “Michele was going to become a communist and stop believing in God.”

I identified with what the *compañeros* were saying. I saw that a transformation of Nicaraguan society was necessary. But God was still a great source of conflict for me. A conflict that I didn't begin to resolve until after the Second Vatican Council. But we can't forget poetry either: for me it was all tied up together. When I was thirteen or fourteen years old—girls my age used to keep diaries—I really wanted to express what I was feeling. But instead of writing my diary in prose, I set out to express it in verse, with rhyme and all.

At that time I was reading Ruben Dario, a superficial Dario which was all that was available to us then. Also Amado Nervo and Gustavo Adolfo Becquer. Later on, Carlos Pérez Alonso gave me a book by Neruda: *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*; and that book meant a lot to me. Later I got my hands on a translation of North American (U.S.) literature by José Coronel Urtecho and Ernesto Cardenal; that's where I read William Carlos Williams and Emily Dickinson for the first time. I began to write without using traditional meter then . . .

I remember that about halfway through high school Ernesto Cardenal showed up at La Asuncion and asked for poems from those of us who were writing. I gave him mine. He selected some and took them to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, and so I was published for the first time. I think that must have been 1960 or '61. I published under a pseudonym, but it was a great stimulus . . . The synthesis of poetry, Christianity and the revolution began in those years; it's still with me today and has brought me a great inner peace. I'm strong enough now to define myself and overcome those last feelings of doubt . . . especially now that I have been able to really deal with my relationship with my father.

Perhaps I never went deep enough into revolutionary theory as such, and so never felt its full force. I always felt a conflict, an emotional one in the end. When I freed myself from that conflict, and became absolutely sure of my revolutionary choice, my poetry also became much clearer in reflecting that transformation, that conviction.

MR—Vidaluz, I know it's still hard for you, but tell me about your father.

VM—Well, you have to understand how I was drawn into the process of our country's liberation. Both my husband at that time and myself became close to the FSLN, collaborating in different ways, and there were moments in which my relationship with my father necessarily became tense. I must say there was a great respect on his part, but of course there were enormous silences as well. We never had violent confrontations; he never attacked me in front of others, or anything like that. But as it happened, on his retirement, Somoza named him ambassador to Guatemala.

By that time I was completely involved in the Revolution. My husband and I began by getting safe houses for the comrades. You know, being married helped: my father, consistent with the ideas of that society, thought of my husband as being my "immediate superior," and if he allowed me to do such things then the best my father could do was to give him advice; once he told him to be careful. My father had the idea that I was an idealist, that I could be used by others because of my poetic and romantic nature . . . a father's natural concern. Being married gave me a certain leeway in that respect . . .

When I took part in the takeover of the United Nations building and got home with my clothes reeking of tear gas, there was no hiding it. My father didn't say anything but my mother asked me to give him some sort of explanation. He was baffled by what I was doing. As I said, there was love and respect between us, but I was assuming an antagonistic position and his reaction was logical, given who he was. I wrote two letters to my father. The first was in somewhat abstract language. I just felt the need to talk to him about our transformations as Christians. But the second was more decisive. I told him then that I was nothing more than the product of the education they themselves had given me. That by sending me to religious schools, by wanting me to have values such as justice and morality and so forth . . . in my case, at least, those values were translated into another form. I had to be very clear in that letter, and I told him that I would always love him but that, unhappily, "I can't agree with you." I even said that history would condemn him but that I as his daughter would forgive him.

I'm going to forgive you—I told him—because you joined the Guard to have a career, you followed the footsteps of so many who were educated in it until they were for all intents and purposes contaminated with the privileges and so on. But



there can't be any justification for me, because I had the privilege of another kind of education. I felt that my moment in history was something else, my circumstances were different, and that greater demands were being made on me than on him. That's it, in synthesis.

MR—*Did he ever answer your letters?*

VM—No, never. We spoke once in awhile, and once he even said that socialism might be a just option, but that it would come through evolution. And we couldn't agree. Afterwards there was silence again. When Somoza named him Ambassador to Guatemala, I told him not to accept. That it was a blessing that he had gotten out of the Guard, and he should dedicate himself to his own life and business then (he owned property), that he should get out of all that . . . But he always felt a commitment, that he had made a choice and had to stick to it. So he went as ambassador, and since there was a lot of international support for the Sandinista National Liberation Front, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor executed him on September 16, 1978.

MR—*He didn't die right away, did he?*

VM—No. They shot him on the sixteenth, and he died on the twenty-ninth. My sister and I went to be with him in Guatemala. It was a tremendous shock. I had already begun preparing myself for something like that, but still it was a terrible thing when it actually happened. I went to Guatemala and it seemed like some surrealist novel, because I was already completely committed to the liberation process, to the FSLN, and here I was travelling in a plane belonging to Somoza's Air Force, arriving at a hospital where my father was Somoza's representative and guarded by the security forces of Guatemala's repressive army . . . you can imagine what it was like!

My father had a bullet wound in the medulla so he wouldn't have been able to walk, had he recovered. He would have been a quadriplegic. I prayed to God then that he would die; he would have been miserable the rest of his life. And for me, while he remained alive . . . (she weeps, pulls herself together, and goes on) I remember speaking with a German doctor in charge of his case, and in the middle of the conversation I realized the man was a fascist. He was surprised when I said I wanted to know about my father's condition, and when I said that my father was also a victim of the Somoza regime. I could see that the man was shocked.

My family always saw me as the one with a higher cultural level or something, and later my mother had me speak to the press and give statements. When my father's condition deteriorated, I told one of the journalists that I hoped his blood would help bring peace to my country. An embassy functionary showed up then and said I should be careful about what I said because it could be utilized. I told him that as a Christian I stood behind what I had said.

My father died and I returned to Nicaragua with my mother and the rest of the family. When I arrived it was incredible: I got telegrams from Somoza people; one of them said "We beg you to accept our condolences." And I got clandestine notes as well, from Fernando Cardenal, for example, who sent me a beautiful letter comforting me and giving me support with his confidence in my commitment to the people. Alejandro Bravo, a brother poet, sent me a little piece of paper with the words: "I'm with you, Alejandro Bravo."

I also got a lot of support from my Christian group. That group has split as well, since the triumph of the Revolution: some went with the people, and others stuck to that pseudo-Christianity which I consider one of the most comfortable positions in the abstract, a direct, vertical relationship with God.

MR—Vidaluz, *let's talk about poetry, your poetry. Did you publish a book before the Revolution?*

VM—Yes, *La llama guardada* (*The Hidden Flame*). It came out in 1975. My husband financed it. I took the material to a printer and they printed it. I tried to sell it in bookstores but I ended up with whole crates of books, most of them I've donated now to the library system in the program where I work. The second book came out last year: it was a very beautiful and joyful occasion, because it represents a start at achieving one of the goals of the Writers' Union. Now one of the *compañeros*, who was published at the same time I was, says it's not just a matter of publishing; we have to promote the books and make sure they're sold.

MR—*Speaking of goals, why don't you talk some about the Ministry of Culture and the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers; the successes and problems you see in each institution?*

VM—That subject's been one of public discussion for several months now. Basically, I'm concerned that we manage to keep the criticism constructive. Criticism should serve the purpose of solving problems, and here we sometimes exaggerate the goals, as the young people today would say. For example, the Ministry of Culture has a profound importance for me. I'm a founding member, along with Cardenal and Daisy.

Just after the victory, I sent a note to the Ministers of Education and Culture—I myself made the mistake that we writers in the Union are always bewailing, that of underestimating our condition as writers; I thought: what we have to do now is rebuild this country from the ruins it's in, and I chose my field because of its possibilities for service, in order to serve people. It's a technical field: library work—so I wrote and asked them to which of the Ministries I should report for work.

The Ministry of Culture answered first. We had a meeting, I remember that Cardenal, Daisy, Carlos Alemán and Ramiro Lacayo were there too. I arrived with Antonina Vivas, and there were some internationalists as well. We began to talk and ended up with a heap of flow charts on a blackboard. If there were deficiencies, they weren't intentional. No one knew how to go about creating a Ministry of Culture. The "conventions," for example . . . we didn't even know how to make them. It was like writing letters to Santa Claus . . . the victory was like a dream suddenly becoming real. One of us would say: let's make a "convention" with such and such a country. Let's see, what do they make there? Let's ask them for a truck to go around collecting works of art which are a part of our cultural patrimony and are in the houses of the Somocistas . . . things like that. We just had to learn as we went along.

I use a notebook a lot, and my assistant told me the other day: there's no time right now, but when things slow down a bit you should ask your secretary to organize and type up your notes because they'll be useful one day for reconstructing the history of the Ministry of Culture. And it's true. There are thousands of little things. I've often found that the criticism the Ministry receives is disproportionate. I always like to think, because I believe in people, that the nitpicking and preciousness of some



*compañeros* is just a product of revolutionary enthusiasm. But I'd like them to be more realistic. Because sometimes they're so exacting that they make judgments which are destructive.

Regarding the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers, I think the Association has a very important role to play, and it's quite clear that its functions have yet to be clearly defined. The Ministry is an institution while the Association is a guild. If we're clear about the definition of functions and objectives, we can see that they should be complimentary. Precisely because of its institutional character, the Ministry should be working intensively in all the arts, it should coordinate important events. The Association should be able to respond to specific occasions, so as to free the Ministry from that kind of pressure . . . so it can dedicate itself to a somewhat slower task, although it is one in which the Association will also be involved.

MR—Vidaluz, right now there's a lot of discussion about the question of writers as a group. Because the vast majority of Nicaraguan writers participated in one way or another in the defeat of the dictatorship, and the vast majority are with the Revolution today. They work within the Revolution, many in positions of great responsibility. But the Writers Union has had some problems consolidating itself. What do you attribute this to?

VM—I can't be very categorical about that. The ASTC has had to give more attention to organizing other sectors, I guess, sectors where the artists weren't so solidly active within the Revolution. In any case, the leadership of the Writers Union hasn't really been very functional, it hasn't worked well as a team.

We writers feel we are a part of the Nicaraguan people, a part of all the people, and we don't want to foster elitist positions, the idea that the writer should be some kind of privileged being. But we also have to recognize certain peculiarities or characteristics that artists as a group have. A writer has his or her own sensibility, his or her own way of moving, which can't be overlooked. You have to motivate people a bit to get them to join something like the Writers Union.

I'm not going to be simplistic and tell you the solution is just a change of leadership, but it would be a beginning. The Union should have delegates, real representatives. I was even thinking it's pretty easy to criticize, without committing oneself. Rosario pointed out the need for an executive secretary for the Union. Because of my work priorities I can't volunteer for that, but I'd be willing to work in a team with an executive secretary and other *compañeros* to try to achieve some cohesion in collective work.

MR—A propos of that, but backtracking a bit to more personal questions, what do you as a poet feel to be most urgent at this point in time? As far as your own work goes, what problems do you share with others which you feel need to be discussed here . . .

VM—I've thought about this, of course, since it's exactly what we've been discussing in the Writers Union meetings. I think we cannot talk about the Revolution in the third person. The Revolution is the intimate commitment made by each one of us; we ourselves feel its urgency.

Yesterday, at the Assembly, we talked about commitment. We have to organize brigades to go to the combat zones, on the border. We have to postpone personal projects at this point. That's why we can't talk about the Revolution in the third person, the Revolution solving such and such a problem for me, guaranteeing me a space for my work. We all feel that need, but we see that it would be inappropriate

to demand it in such a delicate and difficult moment. It continues to be a source of personal frustration that weighs on you, a limitation, but there are other, more pressing needs.

As the *compañeros* say, it's a commitment to future generations. All of us who have inherited a name in Nicaraguan literature in these early days of the Revolution must bring new forms and content to the literature of the Revolution. But that implies study, and exploration in your work, greater application. There isn't time, but it's not because they don't want to give you that time, it's because you're so struck yourself every day by the tremendous need there is on all sides, so much that has to be done, so many things that keep you from giving time to that other responsibility.

Someone said, so then we're going to be the sacrificed generation. And we must accept that. The generation after ours will begin to contribute in that sense. That's how I see it. But there's also something else: as limited as our work may be in terms of excellence, it is still more or less representative of Nicaraguan literature. And we have to publish and share all of this with so many, among the people. We've got to go out and read—as we do—to the militia, to the sick, the elderly . . . and I feel that these experiences are very rich ones, being able to share our poetry like that is to really democratize culture. So that's another dimension to the whole thing, something we can do with the time available to us.

You know, you discover things. One day Fernando Silva called and invited me to read with him at a club for diabetics. I imagined going to a hospital ward with all the patients swathed in sheets and us reading to cheer them up or something. But we found ourselves in a hall used by people who aren't even hospitalized, but just need medical supervision. They have a health problem which is a daily burden, but which can be controlled with discipline and proper habits. They all arrived to celebrate the first anniversary of the diabetics club. The whole aim of the club is to work together to keep all the members following the diet and maintaining their controls. It was really beautiful.

MR—Vidaluz, *what are you writing now? Are you working on a new book of poems?*

VM—I've never written for a specific book. I write poetry because I need it, and all of a sudden I realize I have enough material for a book. I believe that a book comes as a result of the work you're doing over a period of time. As it happens, I have a few poems now, but I haven't published them and haven't been particularly interested in doing so. Because lately I haven't been able to work much on my poetry, I thought: maybe it's better not to worry about publishing for a while. But at some point I will have to sit down and go through them, and work on them more. Well, I'll show you.

*trans: Christina Mills*



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# two poems

## LAST POSTCARD TO MY FATHER, GENERAL MENESES

Today would have been your birthday.  
It's just as well you're no longer here.  
I keep your words  
your late anxiety for my  
future,  
because history didn't permit you  
to see this moment,  
much less understand it.  
The judgment was in.  
Know that I keep for myself only  
your generous love.  
Your hand on the spoon  
feeding that last breakfast to a grandchild,  
making the heavy atmosphere of parting  
lighter.  
Each one in their place,  
like knights, ancient and  
noble  
embracing, before the final duel,  
the fatal morning.

## ULTIMA POSTAL A MI PADRE, GENERAL MENESES

Debiste haber cumplido años hoy  
y ya no estás, para tu bien.  
Guardo tus palabras  
y tu postrera ansiedad por mi  
destino,  
porque la historia no te permitió  
vislumbrar este momento,  
mucho menos comprenderlo.  
El juicio ya fue dado.  
Te cuento que conservo para mi sola  
tu amor generoso.  
Tu mano en la cuchara  
dándole el último desayuno al nieto,  
haciendo más ligera  
la pesada atmósfera de la despedida.  
Cada uno en su lado,  
como dos caballeros antiguos y  
nobles  
abrazándose, antes del duelo final,  
fatal.

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# Vidaluz Meneses

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# Vidaluz Meneses

## TO MY AUNT ADELINA

I watch you glide shadow-like  
gentle presence inhabiting  
our old home.  
Beginning the day with your bath  
in the chilly dawn,  
the bells of Yalaguina  
reverberating in our dreams.  
The same ritual, still solemn  
though no one awaits you now,  
only your sister's letters  
or the daily paper to be read on the sofa  
immersing you artfully  
in a world you barely touch.  
It's strange, we've joined our solitudes  
and I still remember you falling asleep  
chin on your chest and hands in your lap  
before finishing our bedtime story.  
Now when our talk goes on and on  
always revolving about a single theme,  
because day after day you wonder  
at the size and ages of my children  
and you tell me, as if it just happened,  
the story of your brother's death.  
Let's sit and share this silence  
or I'll explain the Sandinista Revolution,  
the rectification of your teacher's pension  
or our first year of victory,  
why we women stand guard,  
the militia uniform  
and so many other new things  
you'll try to understand  
before you have to leave them.

*trans: Christina Mills*

## A mi Tía Adelina

Observo tu deslizar de sombra,  
sutil presencia con que habitabas  
la vieja casona.  
El cominezo del día con un baño  
en las frías madrugadas  
cuando las campanas  
de la Iglesia de Yalaguina  
rebotaban su eco en nuestro sueño.  
El inicio solemne del mismo ritual  
ahora que ya nadie te espera,  
más que las cartas de tu hermana  
o la lectura del diario en el sofá  
sumergiéndote artificiosamente  
en un mundo que apenas ya transitás.  
Es curioso, hemos unido soledades  
y aún recuerdo cuando te dormías  
mentón en pecho ya manos en el regazo  
sin terminar el cuento infantil.  
Ahora cuando nuestros diálogos  
Se vuelven infinitos y sobre el mismo tema,  
porque diariamente te sorprende  
el tamaño y la edad de mis hijos  
y me relatás como nuevo acontecimiento  
la crónica de la muerte de tu hermano.  
Sentarnos y compartir el silencio  
o explicarte la revolución sandinista,  
tu nivelación salarial de maestra jubilada  
el primer año del triunfo,  
por que las mujeres hacemos oficialia,  
el uniforme de las milicias  
y tantas cosas nuevas  
que intengarás comprender  
antes de tener que abandonarlas.

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## two poems



## contributors

CATHERINE ALLPORT is a photographer who lives in New York. She spent most of the summer at the *Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice*.

ROSA MARIA ARENAS is currently Managing Editor of *Labyris*, a women's literary arts journal. Her poems have appeared in *Passages North*, *13th Moon*, and *The Little Magazine* among others. A chapbook of her poems, *She Said Yes*, is available from Fallen Angel Press (Highland Park, MI).

MAUREEN BRADY is a writer and a physical therapist. She has written two novels, *Folly* (The Crossing Press Feminist Series) and *Give Me Your Good Ear* (Spinsters Ink). Along with Judith McDaniel, she co-founded Spinsters Ink.

BETH BRANT is a contributing editor of IKON. "Born and raised in Detroit. I am 41, a Mohawk, a lesbian, a cook. I live in a city where color is the rule, not the exception. I live in a city that is out of work, hungry, but sassy and spirited. Along with Denise Dorsz, I am co-owner of Turtle Grandmother Books, a mail-order service specializing in books by women of color.

MICHELLE CLIFF's novel *Abeng* is available from Crossing Press (Trumansburg, New York).

DAVINE is Associate Editor of IKON. "I attempt to shatter myths, expose "personal" tragedies that are political in basis, to remind ourselves that whatever "it" is, it is not just happening to US, we'd better examine who is responsible and why, so we can join each other in the elimination of OUR oppression, instead of being embarrassed, ashamed, and so-vulnerable. As a Black person, and as a woman, I refuse to be silenced by my 'condition'"

MYRIAM DIAZ-DIOCARETZ is a contributing editor to IKON. Born in 1951 in Chile, she now lives in Holland. Poet, critic, translator, Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, her work has appeared in several magazines, including *13th Moon*, *Letras Femeninas*, *Third Woman*, *Fem*, *Acta Literaria* as well as other journals in Spain, Latin America and the U.S. She is the author of *Que no se pueden decir*. Her book of poetry in translation *Adrienne Rich: Poemas 1951 - 1981* will appear soon in Spain (Visor).

ANDREA DOREMUS spent August screening independent and social-issue films at the *Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice* in Romulus, N.Y. She is an organizer with the *Women's Committee in Support of Medgar Evers College*, working to build anti-racist feminism and to develop an understanding of support work based in practice.

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KIMIKO HAHN's poems have appeared in many literary journals including *Contact II*, *S. Dakota Review*, *Blind Alleys*, as well as *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Asian American Poetry* (forthcoming Greenfield Review Press). They have been translated into Japanese for the magazine, *Ishtar* (Japan). She has been the recipient of awards from Columbia University—the Bennett Cerf Award and the Academy of American Poets Poetry Prize—where she is completing a Master's in Japanese literature on the poet, Yosano Akiko (1878–1942). At present she is on the Executive Committee of the American Writers Congress and co-poetry editor at *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives*.

LINDA HOGAN (Chickasaw) is the author of *Calling Myself Home* from Greenfield Review Press, *Daughters, I Love You* from Loretto Heights Women's Research Center, Loretto Heights College, Denver, CO. and *Eclipse* forthcoming from UCLA American Indian Studies Center Press. She recently completed a novel and is at work on a collection of short stories. She lives in Idledale, CO.

HETTIE JONES has been living, working, writing and raising children in New York for over two decades. She is the author of six books for children and young adults, including *Big Star Fallin Mama: Five Women in Black Music* and a novel entitled *I Hate to Talk About Your Mother*. A collection of poems and short fiction from Number Press, *Having Been Her*, was published in 1981. She is currently working on a memoir of the 50's and 60's.

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WILLYCE KIM has published two books of poetry, *Eating Artichokes* and *Under the Rolling Sky*. She has just finished a novel entitled *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid* and is awaiting word of its publication. She is currently working on a collection of poems called *Love Notes to the Heartland*.

YNESTRA KING is active in the feminist anti-militarist movement and was a founder of the Women's Pentagon Action. She has contributed articles to periodicals such as *Heresies*, *Signs* and *Womanews*. She is currently working on a book called, *Feminism and the Reenchantment of Nature*.

SUSAN LEE co-authored *Dear John*, a novel (Richard Marek/Putnam, 1980), as well as writing articles for the *Village Voice* and *MS*.

MARGO MACHIDA is a Hawaiian-born painter living in New York's Chinatown. In the past three years, she has had five one-person shows at 55 Mercer Gallery, Merrill Lynch Commodities, Semaphore Gallery, Millerton Art Space and the Alternative Museum. Her group shows have included the New Museum, Westbeth Galleries, P.S. 1 and Lever House. She dedicated a public art commission—the outdoor mural "Swimmers"—at the 134th Street Recreation Center in May 1982 and was awarded a Visual Artists Fellowship Grant in Painting by the NEA (1983–84).

COLLEEN McKAY began her study of photography in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. During that time she was also very politically active in the women's movement and was one of the founders of the Los Angeles Women's Saloon. She has had her photographs published in numerous journals, magazines and newspapers including *The Nickel Review* and *The New York Times*. She just returned from a three-week stay in Nicaragua and is currently working on an exhibition of photos of Nicaraguan Women. She is staff photographer for IKON and resides in New York.

SARA MILES is a poet living in Brooklyn and the author of the stage drama, *talking nicaragua*.



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NINA NEWINGTON: I am English, lesbian, feminist, 24, a carpenter (aspiring) and writer (ditto). I was born in Hong Kong and have been travelling ever since. I lived in Nigeria between the ages of 7 and 10 during the Biafran war. I now live in New York City.

GRACE PALEY, feminist and anti-war activist, was born in the Bronx. She is currently finishing a new book of short stories.

ELVA PÉREZ-TREVIÑO: Born and raised Mexican, third generation Tejana in San Antonio, Texas, I write in response to the political implications of being born Mexican in South Texas. It has been the stark beauty of dark skin Mexicanismo in the landscape and environment that has allowed the magical philosophy of my Raza to survive within me in the form of *el espíritu Mexicano*, luminous source of faith and trust. There is a certain dignity and sense of self-value knowing my indigenous roots are found in La Tierra Del Sol and the seven tribes of Aztlan. The fiction I compose is inspired by the compassion that has been stirred by other Mexicanos and the women of all nationalities.

MARGARET RANDALL was born in the United States, lived in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua for over twenty years. She was co-founder and co-editor of *El Corno Emplumado* (1961-69). Her many books include *Cuban Women Now* (Women's Press), *Part of the Solution* (New Directions) a collection of her poems and narratives, *Sandino's Daughters* (New Star Books) and most recently *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New Star Books). She is a contributing editor to IKON.

ADRIENNE RICH's long poem *Sources* was published in 1983 by the Heyeck Press (Woodside, California).

MARIAN ROTH lives in Provincetown, Mass. where she is both a teacher of photography and photo editor of *Provincetown Magazine*. Her photographs have appeared as covers for Spinsters Inc., the Wild Goose Press and the University of Michigan Press. She was a recipient of the Lightwork Fellowship in Photography and was selected for Photography Forum's best photography of 1982. Her first book of portraits *Connections* is soon to be published. She is a resident artist and teacher at Freehand, a learning community of women writers and photographers.



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I named myself SAPPHIRE. I am a novelist, poet, performer, and dancer. I am Black. I am a lesbian. I live and work in New York City.

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MARY JANE SULLIVAN, poet and writer, was an editor of WIN magazine and has been working recently with film as a writer and producer. She is Associate Editor of *Central Park Magazine*.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"The Pause that Refreshes" was previously published in *Having Been Her*, a special issue of #MAGAZINE, January, 1981.

"Three Villages" appeared originally in WIN magazine.



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