IKON

creativity and change

JOURNEYS

IKON creativity and change

SECOND SERIES, #8

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JOURNEYS

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KAREN BRODINE
Three Poems

Sickness slept in us

> Seattle Times: "The West German Health Ministry said it was considering legislation calling for prison terms for AIDS victims who know they have the disease and continue having sex."

It was a time when sickness slept in us waiting
It was a time when birds dove through slick oil
and came up without feathers
a time when no one was immune

Are you now
or have you ever been
a member of those
who face the days with no natural defense?
who face a slow and certain death?
diagnosed, the new lepers
under wrath of god.

Can they lock us all up?

Bones

There is a procession
There is a march
up from the sodden grassy banks
of the Green River
There is a march, a procession
up from the flooding waters
of the river where forty women
were murdered and dumped one by one.
One by one, after another, the women
return. The ones who are known
by name, the anonymous too.
The women who are missing, feared
dead. They drag themselves up
from the currents of the river.
The sisters who left in the morning
and never returned. The daughters
who vanished with never a phone call.
The women who by force of circumstance
or force of a gun, climbed into a stranger's car
at midnight or at noon, on the street
or in a shopping center and drowned
in the cold grasp of the terrorist.
These are the women filed in the detective's desk:
Bones 1, Bones 2, Bones 3.
Their teeth clack in the cold waters
of the river. Their shoulder blades
scrape and gleam. Bones 4, Bones 5, Bones 6.
They drag themselves out of the waters and
march, these disappeared, these lost women
down the avenue of the homeless in Pioneer Square,
through the suburban yards of the outlying districts.
Bones 7, Bones 8, Bones 9, like pale long trees rattling,
calling out his name. To find him. And we will.

A scapegoat is one bearing blame, falsely

Driving through soft rain, flaming autumn
edging into winter, north toward mountains
past Woodinville, Clearview, to Snohomish

Highways widen, pushing up to doors like rivers
green our valley, now engulfed in tires,
spare parts, farms replanted in metal, woods gone.

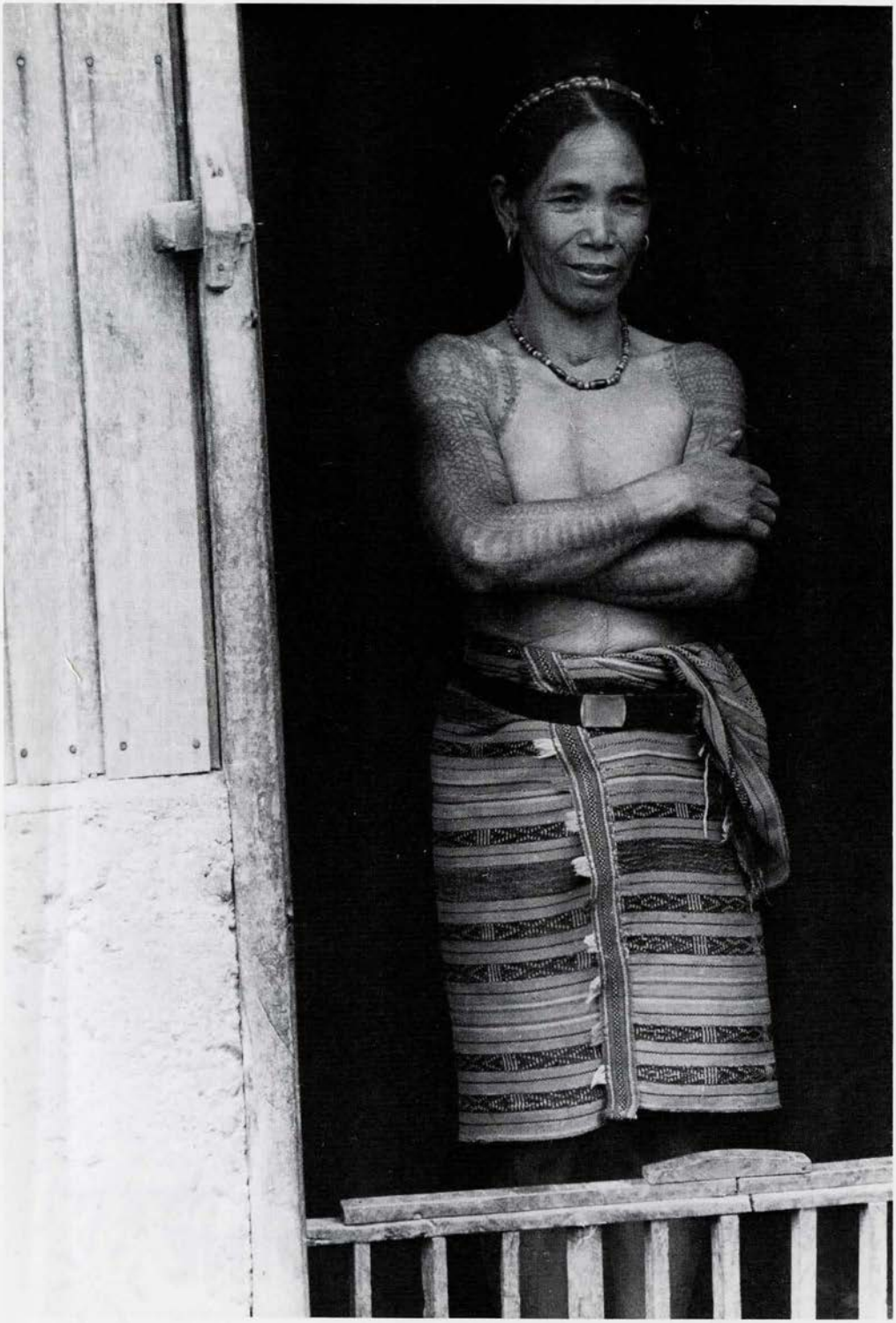
Up through the sleepy towns, loosening their
hold on the land, tossing up utilitarian bridges,
fast food stands.

Wandering into a second hand store
all sleek old homey wood
face to face with a placard
bold as everyday:
a placard of ceramic pins, pasty peasants,
the matter-of-fact words: "Nazi Party Pins"

I confront the shopowner, she mutters
pre-war Germany, Harvest Bounty, picking up the towns
from hard times, these pins rewards
for jobs well done. I point out Jews, gays,
socialists, millions killed, her mouth drops,
a slammed door.

Nazis in Snohomish.

KAREN BRODINE



TRIX ROSEN

IGORATA: THE WOMEN OF THE CORDILLERA

IGORATA: THE WOMEN OF THE CORDILLERA

The Igorota
is a girl who smiles as she spits into her palms, grabs the wooden pole and rhythmically pounds the rice;
is a small child carrying her baby brother in a sling on her back;
is a forty-year-old woman whose outstretched muscular arms are covered with tattoos that fly by as she dances;
is a guerrilla soldier giving acupuncture to the tribal women to relieve stomach problems and arthritis;
is a woman weaving intricate designs on a backstrap loom for 50 cents a day;
is a female whose body has taken the form of the mountains from bending morning till night.

From June 1986 to March 1987, I travelled through areas of the Cordillera, sometimes walking for more than a week from village to village. During the rainy season, the roads were impassable and the mountains became rivers of mud. I lived in villages nestled high among the terraces, at times in the home of the tribal chief or with the unmarried women. Squatting by the fire at night, the women asked me where I pounded rice in New York City. I listened to the elder women chant "salidummay," traditional songs that poignantly spoke the oral history of their family. I bathed among the women in the hot springs, where they rubbed my back clean with stones worn smooth and laughed as we mixed shampoo and stories, enjoying the intimacy of the healing waters. I lived with girls who had left their homes to study at college and returned because their goal was to improve life in their village. (Traditional belief is to get married in your own place, I was told, because someone else might not understand the customs.) I was taken by the teenage girls to the "olag," where the youth sleep away from their families so they can get to know each other. I listened all night to the songs by the fire, smiling shyly at the boys and girls by my side. I spent weeks with the rebels and heard from the first tribal women warriors about the sacrifices and dangers of guerrilla life. One of the hardest things young mothers in the rebel forces have to deal with is separation from their children. But always I heard, "I am doing this for my children's future."

The Cordillera in northern Luzon is a vast mountainous landscape, home to one million people known as Igorots. These tribal people represent seven major ethnolinguistic groups: Bontocs, Ibaloys, Ifugaos, Isnegs, Kalingas, Kankaneys and Tinggians. The region is still considered all but inaccessible by the majority of Filipinos who inhabit the lowlands. Through four hundred years of foreign occupation of the Phillipines, the Igorots have resisted colonization and continued to maintain their ancient traditions and culture.

For centuries a harmony has existed between the indigenous people of the Cordillera and their ancestral land, a relationship as old as the rice terraces they hand-carved from the mountains. For the people of the Cordillera, their land is their life, and they say that if they lose their land, they would die.

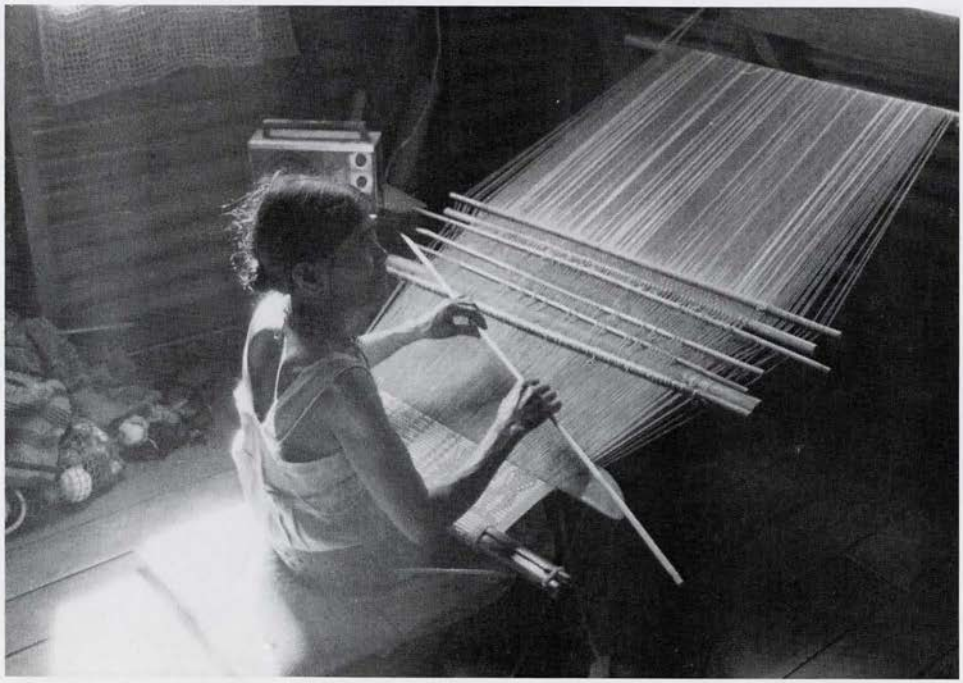
Traditionally, the Igorots are a warrior society, and the role of the men was to protect and defend their villages. This way of life still dominates tribal thinking, and many men and women joined the insurgency when their homes and families were threatened by military occupation during the Marcos regime.

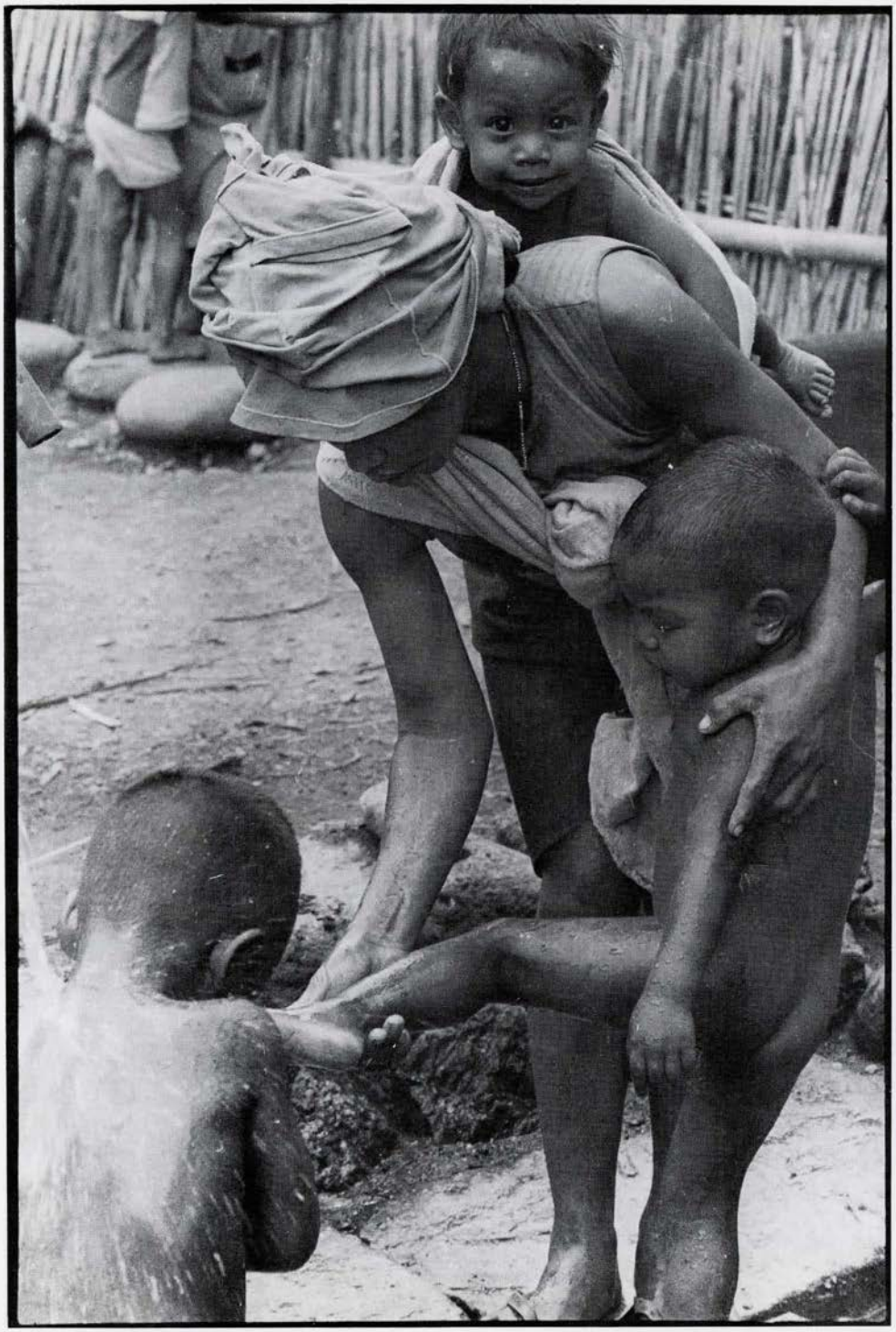
For the women and younger girls, village life is bursting with continuous activity. The Igorota are busy from daybreak to night. They take care of the babies, pound rice, clean the house, wash the clothes and dishes, and carry the water. They plant and harvest the rice and vegetables and clean the weeds from the rice terraces. At night the community of women gather and drink strong, home-grown coffee and tell stories. All wear agate beads encircling their hair and necks. These heirlooms have been passed from mother to daughter for generations, the most valued possession besides rice fields. The elders squat, smoking handrolled tobacco in their pipes, wrapped in traditional woven shirts (tapis), their upper torso decorated

with tattoos drawn when their men were still headhunters. The younger girls are dressed in jeans and t-shirts, the universal image of their generation. The transformation of the tribal world—by the guerrilla movement, education, martial law, and the accessibility of the younger generation to the conveniences of the 'modern' world—has become more apparent.

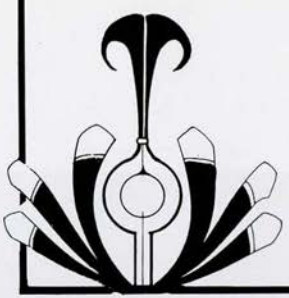
Mary Foy-os, a teacher in a mountain village, related stories about the Igorota priestesses who heal the sick and the women peacepact holders who have had the courage to stop tribal wars. She said that women are given a mission and a role to play in life. "United, we have the strength to fight and unchain ourselves, to liberate women from the oppressive situation in our society." Virginia Puyoc, a CPA who works in a government office in her village, is putting her skills into creating small businesses to help the village youth have the money to further their education and the women to have additional income. With determination built from years as a rebel/outlaw in the mountains, 'Ka' Sandra, pregnant with her third child, said, "I want to see my children grow, I would even like my children to serve their people, I want to see the outcome of our dreams for the Cordillera."

There is a mountain called 'Sleeping Beauty' in Tinglayan, Kalinga-Apayo, whose shape echoes the profile of a woman at rest. I think of the beauty and the strength of my Igorota friends, and the mountains that have the form of a woman, and the women that have the form of the mountains. They, like the mountains and the land, are the backbone of the tribe.





Grandmother's Letters



MEENA ALEXANDER

My grandmother Elizabeth Kanda Kuruvilla (nee Zachariah) was born in 1884 into a Syrian Christian family in Central Travancore, in what is now Kerala State in South India. She was educated at home and subsequently attended Presidency College, Madras where she took an M.A. in English Literature and taught briefly. She was active in the Nationalist Movement and was an ardent follower of Gandhi. Her husband, my grandfather K. K. Kuruvilla worked with her in the Quit India Movement. Grandmother became the first woman MLC from Travancore.

These letters, I must make clear, are fictive. Though drawn from the source of the actual, they are made and remade in imagination. I found a cache of her letters tied up in pink ribbon, preserved in a rusty biscuit tin in my parents' Kozhencheri house. They were written when grandfather was imprisoned. The next year that I returned home to look for them, the tin and the letters in them had vanished. The attic was filled with dust and bits and pieces of ancient grain.

1.

My grandmother was imprisoned in the mountains. I think she understood the loneliness of a woman's body as she sat there, looking out at the elichi tree, brown now in the bitter season. She was just twenty-seven when the British imprisoned her. She sat on the floor by the window and a wild light fell upon her.

She touched her thin belly, dark, utterly unscarred. She wondered if she would ever be let out of prison. If she would ever bear children. She saw the grey rocks of the Deccani mountains. She smelt the bitter grasses burnt by the goatherds on the slopes outside her barred window.

She stoops in the light. She picks up her pen and her paper. Her hair is tied back with a red ribbon. It is the very same ribbon that grandfather used to tie up the letters she wrote him when he was imprisoned. Many years after his death I discovered the letters in an old biscuit box, in the attic of the Tiruvana house.

The black syllables flash in my mind's eye. I hold them for an instant. Her pen is dry. She shakes it. The ink spurts. I repeat her letters as I write. I sound them out. I will not slip into the black flood of time. I will save myself.

How carefully grandmother uses her pen. And paper is scarce. She writes.

"Let the rice grow . . ."

"Let the children play in the sunlight . . ."

"There is mud on your cheek, beloved . . ."

This last is addressed to grandfather who is underground. She does not know if he will ever receive her letters. Barely knowing what she writes, she adds:

"The koil sings in its own light. Those who listen will never forget."

Did she really hear the dun-colored bird cry? Or is she, like myself, inventing a great deal? How I wish I had known grandmother. She was dead fourteen years by the time I was born. By the time I was born, in 1951, India was already independent, a republic already for three and a half years.

I see grandmother stand on a small wooden crate at the Pakeezah steps. It is early in the morning, the day before Gandhi's Salt March. Her sari tucked into her waist, she addresses the fisherfolk. The crate wobbles a little as she speaks but she does not falter.

"Collect salt water in your palms," I hear her say:

"Let the great heat of the sun make salt for you."

"Let the Britishers see how against nature it is to prevent us."

The crowd claps. She steps off the crate holding her pallu in her hand. She is nervous. She tugs at the red and white threads with her thumb and forefinger. Her hair blows in the sunlight.

A tall, thin figure in white rushes out of the crowd. He embraces her, then overcome by shyness stands utterly still at her side, head bent. I cannot see his face.

It's grandfather! What is she saying to him? I wish I could hear. A child runs up with a garland. Grandmother stoops and the golden ring falls over her neck. Her mouth is in the shadow. Grandfather still stands there. Behind them, in the distance, I can see the dark waters of the Arabian sea.

Grandfather stands there and stares at her. It's the very first time he has set eyes on her. For years he had heard of her, her marches, her speeches, her nonviolent demonstrations. He has even published some of her little texts in the journal he runs. Now he stands by her side, in the blazing light, drinking in her presence. Side by side they stand, each looking forward, too nervous, too shy to look into the other's eyes.

Someone tugs at grandfather's arm. He has a meeting to attend in the next town. Grandmother stands there, for an instant, in utter solitude, bereft of this stranger she already loves. A pigeon casts its shadow on her head. She touches her own cheek, her eyes shut, as if feeling her flesh for the first time. Then the crowd engulfs her.

Three months after this first meeting with grandfather, grandmother was in prison, charged by the British with disturbing the peace. When they let her out after two and a half years in a mountain cell, she was 29 years old, thinner than ever, thankful at last for the ordinary light. There were blue rings under her eyes, dark smudges under her pupils. Though no one knew it, it was the start of her blindness.

The day of her release, she returned to the Pakeezah steps. Overcome by emotion, she wept a little as she stood there. Her hands trembled in the air. Her crimson pallu flashed in the slight wind. There was salt in her eyes. Grandfather stood right in front of her, next to the leaders of the movement, listening intently. A few

weeks later they were married. It took him three years to nurse her back to health. In prison she had refused most of the food set before her and had lived off wild rice and water.

I remember the first letter I read. It was addressed directly to grandfather. Now it was he who was imprisoned.

Kuruchiethu
Tiruvana
Jan 16, 1929

. . . You have a small window, Kuruvilla, that looks out on the hills. Unlock the bars with your gaze, deceive the distances till they come swarming off the purple hills hung now with jacaranda bloom. Let the distances uphold you. A stream, a bright blade of grass. Even if the stream is dried and puffs dust rather than water, even if the blade is rusty with death. I am sure from your descriptions that the room they keep you in is close, very close to where I was. Perhaps the bars are identical. Perhaps we look out and see the very same bird, dust coloured, a speckle of blood on its beak, turning in the sunlight at the rim of the hill.

As time passed things became harder for her. She kept going to political meetings. Her friend Balamaniamma the writer was her mainstay in those years.

April 21, 1930
Kuruchiethu
Tiruvana

K. I am not sure anymore what I say. There is some desolation in me I cannot touch with my own fingers. I need you.

At the meeting Dinesh said: "Gandhi wants him to come to Wardah, as soon as he's out."

Your press is running. Each night the pamphlets, still wet with ink, pass from hand to hand. A long line of text, piercing the alien world. The police haven't found out the source, though they've been nosing around.

Balamani and I worked on the last one together: "Liberated India and Free Women" we called it. She had a dream: as day breaks, all the women in the new world clasp hands, rise from sullen earth like sun-birds. "Our flesh is light." She told me, that night as she worked, inky, covered in sweat. "You are the morning star," she wrote. "All stars since the birth of this universe! Your chains lie useless. They drop through the waters."

There is nothing more to the dream: in the distance, through the wine dark waters, speed English ships, mere tin vessels, their flags limp, speeding to that damp cold little island.

I teased Balamani later: "So many stars! You'll empty out the night sky!" But she takes her dreams quite seriously and sat gazing out of the window, at the stubble, the barbed wire Bhaskar had strung to keep the milk cows away from the strawberry patch. I could not tell what she was looking at. You know that faraway gaze of hers . . . one barely knows if she's listening.

I do love her very much, but she has been a little strange of late. She seems obsessed by the Kutubshahi emperor, the last one. "I'm convinced," she said to me the other night, "that his madness (crawling up the stairs and all that) was a response to British invasion. Remember his quest took a form. A vanished bird. A dot of blood on its beak."

I left it at that. In any case she did not really want a reply. It was dark and the mango trees made huge black umbrellas that kept the moon out. I thought the foundations of our house shook a little. The water rats were playing in the strawberry patch. I could tell by the silver glint in their tails. So we just sat there, in silence . . .

3.

Grandmother kept going, by herself, to all the family gatherings. One of her letters tells of an elaborate christening her cousin had arranged for her three-month-old daughter. It is hardly surprising that grandmother found the displays of wealth unsuitable. She wrote grandfather about it, in some detail.

Kuruchiethu
Tiruvana, Sept 29, 1930

Accamma's daughter's naming ceremony was done with such splendour you might have thought us in Babylon or some such pagan city. Silver, a huge city, mound on mound, from candlesticks to pepper pots. Porcelain, glittering in the sunlight. Lace tablecloths! And on the floor, for the guests to eat off, piles of banana leaves. A whole feast wasted, to name a child!

They are terribly rich and hold onto their estates with an iron hand. I hear the father of the child wields a gun. They carry out floggings on the land. Five elephants in the procession from the church, all from the personal herd, the grandmother took great care to point out to me.

The father's brother was in Western dress. Can you imagine, the ignominy of wearing that dress, in times like ours! I couldn't bear to look at his polished shoes. He came straight to me.

"There you are, Kanda!" I've no idea how he found me out. "So you don't believe in British rule? hah?" I should have slapped him then and there in front of all the guests. But he moved away smartly, to the other side of the great copper urn they were serving tea from. I think it's all imported from Belgium or some such place. Then, as I was helping myself to some papaya, he leaned over the sugar bowl, grinning from ear to ear: "Your husband's in jail, isn't he?"

I almost dropped my plate. I sat myself in a corner after that and did not move. It was a kind of rage that would not let me breathe. Through the window, I could see the servants' children, mouths covered with flies, shoving and pushing to get at the heap of banana leaves that were tossed out. Kuru, I felt sick at heart. Thank god, Mara didn't come with me.

When I got home, the house was all peaceful, the curtains drawn. Mara was asleep under her little white sheet; I sat down at your desk and signed over the rice fields we had decided on. The Bhoodhan movement will make good use of them.

There's such a terrible hunger for land now. Sometimes, I feel that this house we live in, and all the ancestral property are like a great millstone, a granite ring about my neck. I know one day I shall perish because of it: the rooms I inhabit will be mist. My womb full of blackberries, fit for the birds of paradise.

"You and I will live in a field," I was going to say, then realized in that world, we will not need our bodies either. Our flesh and blood is a mere contingency, bound to this earth.

I hear Mara cry. Where will she be, I wonder, in that world? And suddenly I am full of fear. Is the sheet over her mouth? Is she on a cliff, hanging by her nails, in a nightmare? A puff of black wind?

I found her wandering through the fig patch one morning drawn by the wet sticky smell of the frangipani. She was there, almost before I could get to her, poking her fist into a snake hole. I slapped her hard. I was so scared. She burst into tears. "The big rats make the hole. Then the cobra goes in. It'll bite Mara!" I picked her up and ran away with her, feeling the wind on my heels. Then slowed down, out of breath by the jacaranda tree. I set her in the swing and pushed her high in the air. Through her eyes I saw the great blue sky. There were bees in the honeysuckle that twines about the tree trunks and golden dragonflies in the lilies. Even the dry brown leaves were buzzing with life. "More, more!" she cried out, and I pushed her higher and higher, till I too seemed to be flying through the brilliant blue air, into paradise.

It's all there, Kuru, I want to say to you. It's all already there. Paradise, I mean. And this terrible oppression of mind and body that we struggle against is a passage, a birth. I must stop now, my love. I shall write again, very soon. Much, much, love,

Kanda.

P.S. Yacub says that Gandhi is planning a visit to Tiruthankur. I must make sure he has somewhere to stay. Perhaps even here? He asked about you, Yacub says. They are busy now, with the work in Gujarat.

K

4.

Six months later, the day before her birthday, grandmother felt herself slip into her own eyes, fall through her face in loneliness. Or so I thought, reading her lines. But her humor held her up and fat Chinamma who haunted her, dropping in and out of grandmother's days. I could hear grandmother's voice so clearly, perhaps with the slight distortion my own voice has as I listen to it.

Kuruchiethu
Tiruvana
February 17, 1931

Yesterday I stood in front of the oval mirror and looked at my eyes. They were so huge, so formless. So black. I picked up the stick of kajal Chinna had given me.

Frivolity in hard times my love! Rimming around the sad flesh. Making boundaries. But I stood there and did nothing but bite my lips. "No, I won't do up my eyes I said. Let them be. When I'm dead, let the photographers do it!" What a stupid thing to say, my darling.

But I'm funny these days. I wash my face only in well water. And hardly use soap. And wear white for days on end 'till Chinamma says I look like a widow! Tomorrow, I turn thirty. All, all my love, my darling.

Kuruchiethu
Tiruvana
March 19, 1931

Chinamma was wearing those wooden clogs she always wears and made a terrible clatter on the marble floor. I embraced her. She smelt of fresh soap. She is like an older sister to me, Kuru. She scolded me, for my hair hung in shreds and had not been oiled, because my lips were bitten. She insisted I come with her the next evening to address the college women in Kozhencheri. She forced me to accept. Even mother was glad I was getting out of the house. Chinamma stayed, ate some fried bitter gourd. She is curing her blood she says, though only the lord knows what might be up with her blood and what the bitter gourd will do for it. But she has a vaidyan she sees in Kottayam. She follows all his instructions most faithfully.

The college is up on a hill. You've been there, a small white-washed building overhung with jasmine. I was very eager to meet the women again. Many of them were satyagrahis. I still remember fifty of us, lying on that very road, in the dust, our red and white saris tied end to end, the knots bursting through the dust. Our bodies, warm and alive, laid in the dust. "The British truck will not pass! Oppression will not last!" we chanted. It seems funny now, in a strange way. Not the passion, but the utter dispossession of self needed to lie in the road. Our passive resistance. I remember how hot my mouth felt. And how pale the white butterfly above me seemed to be, melting into the sunlight. The British were shouting something in the distance. The road trembled with their boots.

After a while Chinamma said she had to get herself a drink of toddy before the meeting, and that I should walk up alone. They would be waiting for me. It was a long stretch of road. Soon the houses were all left behind. Even the small red brick schools. There was just the dusty field, purple now, in the darkness. I could hear my own footsteps. It was unnerving. Like hearing one's own heartbeat. On and on I walked. My tongue felt so dry. Then I started to run. I saw thorn bushes that I did not remember seeing before. They had tiny red berries, like drops of blood. I felt like plucking one, to cool my tongue as I ran, but it was dark, and I could not tell if there was poison in that fruit or not. When I finally got to the college, I felt as if I had run an eternity. My ankles were scratched and swollen. I could not stop panting.

5.

There was nothing exaggerated about the next letter. Nothing dream-like. It was as precise as grandmother could make it. It was hardly her fault that she was

struggling to spell out feelings that lay outside the ordinary territory of her days. A nothingness within . . . perhaps it had something to do with her father's imminent death.

Tiruvana
May 7, 1931

I watch the grass turn yellow in the rock crevices. People move about me, Kuruvilla, but I have no body of my own. Nothing to grasp. A hollowness at the heart of me. Like the passion fruit we saw together in the hills the year before we married. The vine clawing the air, perfectly tooled—the skin golden, the freckles so smooth on its green globe one wanted to lick it. But through a hole near the stalk all the stuff had dribbled out: seeds, flesh, juice. And it hung on the vine, by the blue mountains, a bell, utterly hollow, not fruit, just skin of fruit, deceiving all the world.

It's a weariness, my darling. But where does it come from? I can hardly tell any more. I am ashamed of speaking like this of myself, and you in your straitened condition, bound in a small dusty room. But you have asked me to speak, and so I do.

Tiruvana,
no date

Yacub must have told you. Father is growing steadily worse. He breathes with great difficulty. His lips turn dry and he chokes; cries out as if iron were crushing his ribs. Mara doesn't go near him anymore. She's afraid. Or perhaps even wants him to die. Last night, I could tell he was listening to the bats in the jamun tree. But when mother came with her Bible, he refused to hear. I think he needs to see you. I tell him, as he lies there, his eyes clamped tight, all about your doings. How you are eating a little now; what you read and write, who else is in prison with you, how Gandhi speaks of you.

Sometimes, when the black seeds drop in the air or the jamun splatters its fruit, father seems to breathe more easily. His nails are growing dry and yellow. Mother, with her nose in the Bible, like a huge warthog, hardly moving yet shouting constantly to one servant or another: bring the fried cucumbers, hot compress, prayer book, bell, bowl. And poor father, laid out rigid in that bed, groaning. There's very little the doctors can do for him. It's as if mother must constantly shout out these petty commands to stop her soul up. She cannot conceive of life without father. I fear for her.

It would be like lacking a foot or an arm. Or loosing her silken garb and suddenly finding her body in rags. She cannot face herself, nor herself in the world without his presence. So she shouts and fills up the time, or oils poor Mara's hair without stopping. "It'll all fall off, mother. For pity. For Christ's sake!" I cried at her the other day.

The lamps are lit in the dining room. The curtains have blown open. Mother has roused herself and is setting out the silver dishes. I can smell the starched white cloth from where I sit. I think it's because the bishop has promised to come. He wants to see father. I can see mother open her mouth. She is wiping her mouth

with her handkerchief. I am so scared she will call out for me. Mara's asleep, my darling. Sometimes at night she cries out. Then I put my cheek by hers and she tucks her arm around my neck. It hardly goes all the way around so she squeezes herself against me. She smells of straw, and honey, as she sleeps, her mouth wet with milk.

I didn't tell you that as I ran, panting up that dusty road to the college, a song came into my mind. Nothing whatsoever to do with my talk, as far as I can tell. I think mother used to sing it, ages ago. Or it might have been Aunt Sara; poor mad Sara found drowned in a well.

Glistening silk
the colour of milk
decking the bride!
Who'll bind up the shroud?
Mama, mama, I'll
come for a ride!

The song has a lovely lilt to it. But it's terrifying. You know that mother keeps her wedding sari in the teak chest. That she will be wrapped in it, when she's borne out of the house? "There are many rooms in my father's house." Kuru, forgive me. Forgive me, darling. She's calling out for me. And I hear the bishop's walking stick on the granite steps.

September 2, 1931

Already his death is here, living with us. It knows us. And because it's father's death, we welcome it, a kinsman, a twin, known only at the rare moment of passage. I realize now, Kuruvilla, that I have absolutely no religious faith, but I acknowledge my father's death. It troubles the air. It teases the light. The leaves blacken around it. Last night father sipped a little wine and seemed almost happy . . .

Father is more peaceful now and sleeps at night.

His death has settled into the house. The huge iron pots of boiling water we keep at his bedside to help him breathe, seem immovable yet part of the ordinary world. Kutan stands by him all afternoon, fanning him.

Now and then, father opens his eyes. In some strange way, he seems to be filled with love. As if his dark blood had fled the wound and light from another shore were pouring in. Bathed in that light, everything is unfamiliar. His bed, the books, spitting bowl, even mother's hand.

Yesterday he raised his fingers and touched her wedding ring. That tiny gold millstone at her knuckle. Tried to say something. But mother fled. I heard her weep from afar. Now she has taken to walking through the pepper vines, ivory cane in hand. Mara follows her, tugging at her hems. It's as if mother does not want to re-enter the house. Yesterday she pointed out a swallow to me. It clung to a pepper vine. "It's come from the other side of death, Kanda," she said to me, pointing with her stick. I barely know what she thinks. Yet she's more lucid than before, and all my anger has vanished.

His death leaps with him. They swing from bough to bough. Little boys who would steal gooseberries. Crying out as the air rushes to their skins.

My father dancing with his death. Kuru.

Now, nothing but the stench of the old body.

I hid in the bathroom. I heard the hearse clatter down the gravel path. I walked, gravely, as befitting a fatherless child. I buried my head in a hole the gardener had dug. I bit the dust, beneath the gooseberry roots.

Tonight, I enter another hole. No sounds come out of my mouth. It's all a great wind, whirling, unfixing the elements. Father's clothes, juba, dhoti, even his skin, unwrapped and whirling as if all the air in the hole were sucked out with a giant breath. His skin rolls off. It stops at his toe bones: five delicate flowers, blue-petalled, perfect. Out of which a great scent rises.

Leaves fall on my head. In that darkness, his flesh vanishes wholly. I bend, to protect my mouth from the wind. I touch a blue flower, and find a tiny foot. I tug and tug, feeling my own skin soldered there, breathing so hard I think I will die. My mouth is horribly open, yet I hear nothing but the gasping wind.

Suddenly, the whirlwind ceases. I find I can pull my flesh away. It does not burn as if cut by a red hot iron. I lie on my back, breathing ever so gently. In my arms, a little child, Mara. Holding her by the waist, I clamber out of the silent hole, lie down on the damp grass, utterly spent.

There are wild bees about us, in her wet tangled hair; in my armpits. Red ants crawl over us. Grasshoppers, their wings drenched with light, all over our eyelids.

She sucks and sucks at my breast. Milk flows out, over the tiny grassblades, the pebbles, and will not stop. Enough for the whole world. Her tiny heart beats hard.

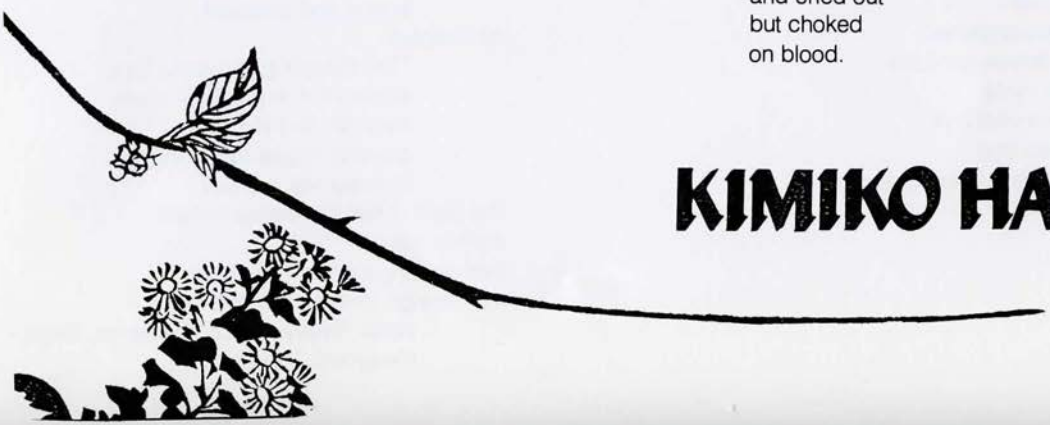
The British are planning large scale repressions, flogging, death in the Northern Provinces. They cannot hear our birth struggle.

So I'm fatherless now, my darling, and he, out of whose seed I am come (though all these are mere words now, no substance left to touch) is gone. Neither wind nor water touch him. It is our love that is left, utterly bereft, whirling. A dry wind of anguish. Knowing the last threads are loosed and father, he who was father, has no need of us any more.

Mother is confined to her bed and will see no one. I do not even know where Mara is. Tomorrow, the feast of the dead. I hear the pots clatter. Axes bite into the flesh of the banana tree.

Resistance: a poem on ikat cloth

By the time the forsythia blossomed
in waves along the parkway
the more delicate cherry and apple
had blown away, if you remember
correctly. Those were days
when you'd forget socks and books
after peeing in the privacy
of its branches and soft earth.
What a house you had
fit for turtles or sparrows.
One sparrow
wrapped in a silk kimono
wept for her tongue
clipped off by the old woman.
You'll never forget that
or its vengeance as striking
as the yellow around your small shoulders.
shitakirisuzume mother called her.
You never need to understand
exactly.
a technique of resist-dying
in Soemba, Sumatra, Java, Bali,
Timor,
Soon came mounds of flesh
and hair here and there.
Centuries earlier
you'd have been courted
or sold.
"Inu has let out my sparrow—the little one
that I kept in the clothes-basket she said,
looking very unhappy."
For a eurasian, sold.
murasaki
mother
She soaked the cloth
in incense
then spread it on the floor
standing there in bleached cotton,
red silk and bare feet.
And you fell in love with her
deeply as only a little girl could.
Pulling at your nipples
you dreamt of her body
that would become yours.
"Since that day we first boarded the ship
I have been unable to wear
my dark red robe.
That must not be done
out of danger of attracting
the god of the sea."
red as a Judy Chicago plate
feast your eyes on this
jack
"when I was bathing along the shore
scarcely screened by reeds
I lifted my robe revealing my leg
and more."
roll up that skirt
and show those calves
cause if that bitch thinks
she can steal your guy
she's crazy
The cut burned
so she flapped her wings
and cried out
but choked
on blood.



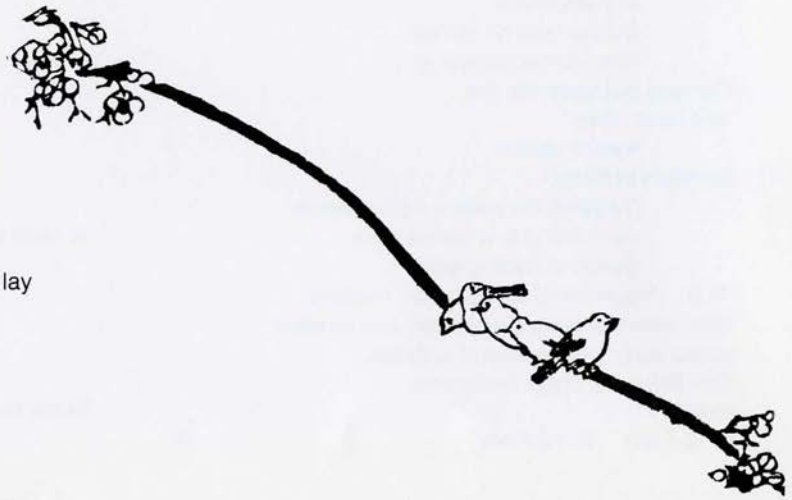
KIMIKO HAHN

The thread wound round your hand
so tight your fingers
turn indigo
murasaki
The Shining Prince realized
he could form her
into the one forbidden him. For that
he would persist
into old age.
rice starch
envelope, bone, bride
you can't resist
The box of the sparrow's vengeance
contained evils comparable to agent orange
or the minamata disease. The old man
lived happily
without her. But why her?
except that she was archetypal.
She depended on her child
to the point that when her daughter died
and she left Tosa
she could only lie down
on the boat's floor
and sob loudly
while the waves
crashed against her side
almost pleasantly.
This depth lent him
the soft black silt
on the ocean floor
where, all life, some men say, began.
warp
"Mr. Ramsey, stumbling along a passage
one dark morning, stretched his arms out,
but Mrs. Ramsey, having died rather suddenly
the night before, his arms though out,
remained empty."
when the men wove and women dyed
mother—
mutha
Orchids you explained
represent female genitalia
in Chinese verse.
Hence the orchid boat.
Patricia liked that
and would use it in her collection
Sex and Weather.
the supremes soothed like an older sister
rubbing your back
kissing your neck and pulling you into
motor city, usa
whether you liked it
or not that
was the summer
of watts and though you
were in a coma
as far as that
the ramifications
the ramifications
bled through transistors
a *class* act
blues from indigo, reds
from mendoekoe root, yellows, boiling
tegaran wood
and sometimes by mudbath
when you saw her bathing in the dark
you wanted to dip your hand in
mamagoto suruno?
The bride transforms
into an element
such as water
while the groom moves
like the carp
there just under the bridge—
like the boy with you
under the forsythia
scratching and rolling around.
No, actually you just lay there
still and moist.
Wondering what next.
pine
You're not even certain
which you see—
the carp or the reflection of your hand.
the forsythia curled
like cupped hands covering
bound and unbound
As if blood
"The thought of the white linen
spread out on the deep snow
the cloth and the snow
glowing scarlet was enough
to make him feel that"
The sight of him squeezing melons
sniffing one
then splitting it open in the park
was enough to make you feel that
Naha, Ryukyu Island, Taketome, Shiga,
Karayoshi, Tottori, Izo,

resistance does not mean
not drawn it means
sasou mizu araba
inamu to zo omou
bind the thread
with hemp or banana leaves
before soaking it in the indigo
black as squid as seaweed as his hair
as his hair
as I lick his genitals
first taking one side
deep in my mouth then the other
til he cries softly
please
for days
Though practical
you hate annotations
to the *kokinshu;*
each note pulls apart
a *waka*
like so many petals
off a stem
until your lap
is full of blossoms.
How many you destroyed!
You can't imagine
Komachi's world
as real. Hair
so heavy it adds
another layer of brocade
(black on wisteria,
plum—)
forsythia too violent
and the smell
of fresh *tatami.*
But can you do without
kono yumei no naka ni
Can you pull apart the line
"my heart chars"
kokoro yakeori
corridors of thread
"creating the pattern from memory
conforming to a certain style
typical of each island"
"K.8. Fragment of ramie kasuri, medium
blue, with repeating double ikat, and mantled
turtles and maple leaves of weft ikat.
Omi Province, Shiga Prefecture,
Honshu.
L. 16.5 cm. W. 19.5 cm."
"the turtle with strands of seaweed
growing from its back forming a mantle,
reputed to live for centuries,"
Komachi also moved
like those shadows in the shallows
you cannot reach
though they touch you.
Wading and feeling
something light as a curtain
around your calves you turn
to see very small scallops
rise to the surface
for a moment of oxygen
then close up and descend.
Caught, you look
at what he calls their eyes
(ridges of blue)
and are afraid to touch
that part.
from memory or history
sasou mizu
Grandmother's *ofuro*
contained giant squid
killer whales
hot
omou
You were afraid of him
turning to the sea
saying something
that would separate you
forever
so kept talking.
Of course he grew irritable
and didn't really want
a basket of shells
for the bathroom.
"his arms though open"
The line shocked you
like so much of Kawabata
who you blame
for years of humiliation,
katakana, hiragana, kanji,
at each stroke
You hear the squall first
coming across the lake in your direction
like a sheet of glass.
You start to cry and daddy
rows toward the shore and mother.
in the Malayan Archipelago
Georgia O'Keeffe's orchid shocked you
so even now you can picture the fragrance

"Should a stranger witness the performance
he is compelled to dip his finger
into the dye and taste it. Those employed
must never mention the names of dead people
or animals. Pregnant or sick women
are not allowed to look on;
should this happen they are punished
as strangers."
in the Malayan Archipelago
where boys give their sweethearts
shuttles they will carve, burn,
name,
"language does not differ
from instruments of production,
from machines, let us say,"
knocked down
knocked *up girl*
"the superstructure"
he wouldn't stop talking
about *deep structure*
and mention in prayer
but you need more than the female persona.
A swatch of cloth.
A pressed flower. The taste of powder
brushed against your lips.
pine
matsu
The wedding day chosen
he brought you animal crackers
cloths
Pushing aside the branches
you crawl in
on your hands and knees
lie back,
and light up.
tabako chodai
because the forsythia
symbolizes so much
of sneakers,
cloth ABC books, charms,
sankyu
the "charred heart"
would be reconstructed thus:
"Before the golden, gentle Buddha, I will lay
Poems as my flowers,
Entering in the Way,
Entering in the Way."
fuck that shit
Link the sections
with fragrance: *matsu*
shards of ice

The bride spread out her dress
for the dry cleaners
then picked kernels of rice
off the quilt and from her hair.
bits of china
the lining unfolds
out of the body
through hormonal revolutions
gravity and chance
lick that plate clean
can I get a cigarette
got a match
click clack, click
clack
chodai
in this dream
She wrapped the ikat
around her waist and set out
for Hausa, Yoruba, Ewe of Ghana,
Baule, Madagascar, and Northern Edo
I relax, pull off my dress
and run along myself
until dry and out of breath.
click clack click
clack
and in the rhythmic chore
I imagine a daughter in my lap
who I will never give away
but see off
with a bundle of cloths
dyed with resistance



notes

Ikat: ". . . the technique of resist dying yarn before it is woven." (*African Textiles,* John Picton and John Mack, London, 1979).

Sparrow references from the Japanese folk tale, "Shitakirisuzme" (literally, "the tongue-cut-sparrow"). The sparrow received the punishment after eating the old woman's rice starch. The sparrow got even.

Place names refer to locations in Indonesia known for ikat.

Quote from *Genjimonogatari (The Tales of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, translated by Arthur Waley). This is the first time Genji hears the child Murasaki who he later adopts, then marries. *Murasaki* also means "purple."

Quote from *Tosanikki (The Tosa Diary* by Ki no Tsurayuki translated by Earl Miner), written in the female persona.

"The Shining Prince" refers to Genji.

Quote from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse.*

Colors refer to dyes used in Indonesia. (*Ikat Technique,* Charles Ikle, New York, 1934).

Mamagoto suruno, Japanese, "playing house?"

Quote from *Yukiquni* (*Snow Country,* Kawabata Yasunari, translated by Edward Seidensticker).

Place names refer to locations in Japan known for ikat.

Sasou etc. is a quote from a waka (classical Japanese poem) by Ono no Komachik. Donald Keene translated these lines, "were there water to entice me/ I would follow it, I think." (*Anthology of Japanese Literature,* p. 79).

The *Kokinshu* is the Imperial Anthology of poetry completed in 905.

Tatami, straw matting for the floor used in Japanese homes.

Kono etc. is Japanese for "in this dream."

Quote and Japanese original from another Ono no Komachi poem translated by Earl Miner (*Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry,* p. 82).

Quote from Ikle, p. 50.

Quote from *Japanese Country Textiles,* Toronto, 1965, p. 16; p. 15.

Ofuro, Japanese bathtub.

Katakana etc. are the Japanese syllabaries and the Chinese characters respectively.

Quote from Ikle, p. 51.

Quote from Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics.*

Matsu, Japanese, "pine tree" and "wait."

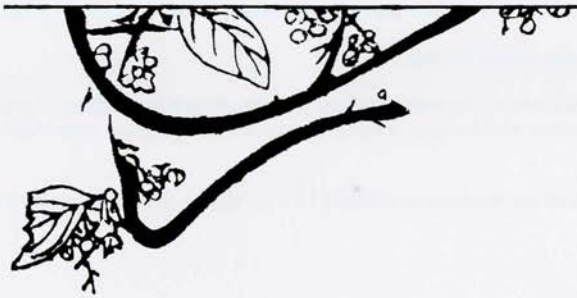
Tabako chodai, Japanese, "can I get a cigarette."

Sankyu, Japanese pronunciation of "thank you."

Quote from Noh play by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu, "Sotaba Komachi" supposedly about Ono no Komachi's repentence. (Keene, p. 270.)

Chodai, Japanese, "please give me."

Place names refer to locations in Africa known for ikat.



notes

Question to Anonymous Passerby from 'The Girl in the Chair'

CHERYL MARIE WADE

Do you walk
feeling the muscle
in the back of your left calf
tightening loosening tightening loosening
as you step lightly on grass cement
run upstairs downstairs jump over curbs
Do you walk
to school in the morning
moist air sneaking up your skirt
damp cool air on a schoolgirl's knees
Do you walk
Do you shinny up trees
Do you walk
slipping off rocks
to reach the rushing
rushing of a hidden brook
Do you pause
one foot in the air
reluctant to startle a little brown bird
Do you walk
till your thighs are hard
Do you walk
Do you walk
till the balls of your feet blister
Do you walk
Do you dance
Do you dance on table tops
Do you dance on table tops in spike-heeled boots
till dawn
Do you dance till dawn
when you limp home
your heel cords on blissful fire
Do you walk
Do you run
Do you skip
Do you jump
Do you walk

Do you walk

Do you drag bare feet
through worn shag carpet

Do you walk
Do you stand on tiptoe
outside your daughter's room
listening for her breath

Do you walk

Do you walk
feeling the muscle
in the back of your right calf
tightening tightening tightening
loosening
as you walk.

PAMELA PORTWOOD
Children of the Corporation

I

My childhood grows voiceless,
as my second language disappears, year by year.
Still when I speak Spanish,
I think in Spanish, a halting affair,
translating from the void
where words once lived.

Seventeen years ago, we moved to *Los Estados Unidos,*
the foreign land where grandmothers,
doctors and Yogi Bear lived.
At first, I began failing classes:
who cared which were the thirteen colonies
and when the Constitution was signed?
My hand knew the lines of other states,
traced and colored in pencils:
Cojedes, Trujillo, Sucre, Anzoátegui.
And my friends still say: *You remember*
the Hoolahoop craze, you must, you're my age.
But I was not here,
another history filtered into my dreams.

For years, everyone asked:
Did you like Venezuela?
I was bemused: Who asks
do you like your home
or do you love your mother and father?
No matter how you feel,
the questions make no sense,
for the answer is, must be,
there is only this,
there can be no other.
I cannot remember ever
not speaking Spanish or English.

II

As a child, I gave my father neckties
for his birthday which was Simón Bolívar's birthday.
I didn't know the tie stains
indelibly into the skin, the suit
presses belief into the corporate man
while the corporation splits the man in two.

With family, friends, one to one,
my father is a moral man.

Yet he believes the world has been,
will always be, this way. Big sticks win.
Companies, governments are not people
and do business their way.
Imperialism is not in his vocabulary.
My mother agrees with him in this
for my father is a moral man,
and they wonder where I came from.
My brother sleeps with a loaded gun by his bed
and will not live in cities
where Spanish is spoken,
and my parents wonder where he came from.
We each saw one half of them,
took that half for whole and traveled
towards opposite lives.

III

As a child, I knew nothing of politics:
why, two minutes after my school bus passed,
the general who lived across the street
was machine gunned down before buying his newspaper,
or why, thirty minutes after I bought
a small, handmade chair for Mother's Day,
the North American shopping center was bombed.
I never believed this threatened me,
or that someone somewhere was shouting,
Yankee Go Home. Where would I go?

Years later, I heard the Caraquenos,
had pelted Vice-President Nixon
with tomatoes the year we arrived.
Years later, I understood why
the oil family just back from Chile
had only four suitcases,
that the CIA assassinated Allende
who was not, as I'd heard, *a bad man.*
I learned to laugh when people asked
Why were you there, what does your father do?
My answer was, *Guess,*
three chances for the only choices:
government, military, oil.

IV

What does it mean to grow up
a child of the corporation?
To be a colonialist, a foreigner at home?
I learned self-irony, put off going back

indefinitely, afraid to find out
I was not wanted there.

Still Venezuela returns in what does not appear.
Ferns that look like they would close
when touched, but don't. Purple
and pink horizons without the orange spigots
of oil fire. Rollerskating
but not in the streets or en route
to midnight mass Christmas Eve.
Children whose bellies do not balloon
with the emptiness of lives spent
in corrugated cardboard and tin shacks.
We cannot walk away from the past
for children never forget.

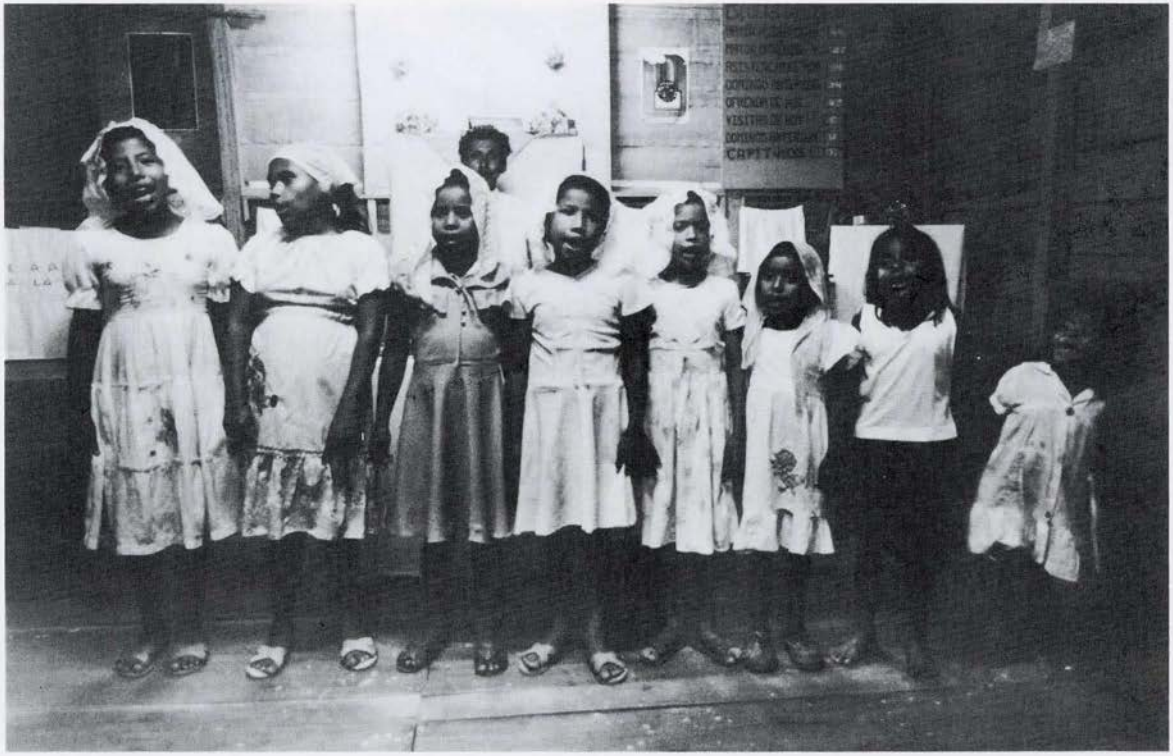
And what is concentrated in me
is dilute in many:
we are all children of corporations,
strangers in a home which sends bullets,
kills strangers, invoking our names.
Knowing this, I know one child
cannot carry the white man's burden
and guilt drives adults to nothing.
Today I can call out to my past,
I can speak the echo
that murmured in the void Spanish left:
Patria, patria mía.

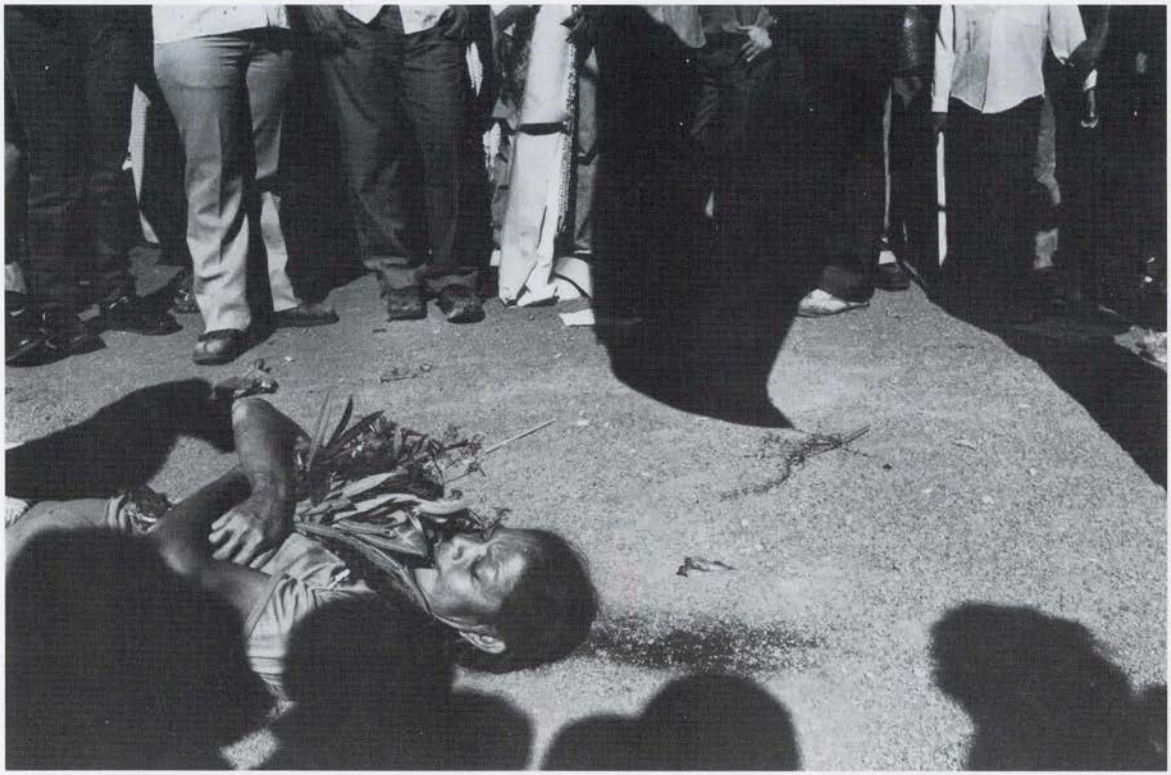
We must go back, remind ourselves, others,
of what we all want:
a home where everyone is valued,
clothed, fed, safe, allowed to be
what they most need and want to be.
Then we must jump across this Grand Canyon,
which, glancing back, will seem a sidewalk crack:
this home is what a country should be.
In their daily lives, few are far from this,
the words my parents taught me:
Mi casa es su casa.

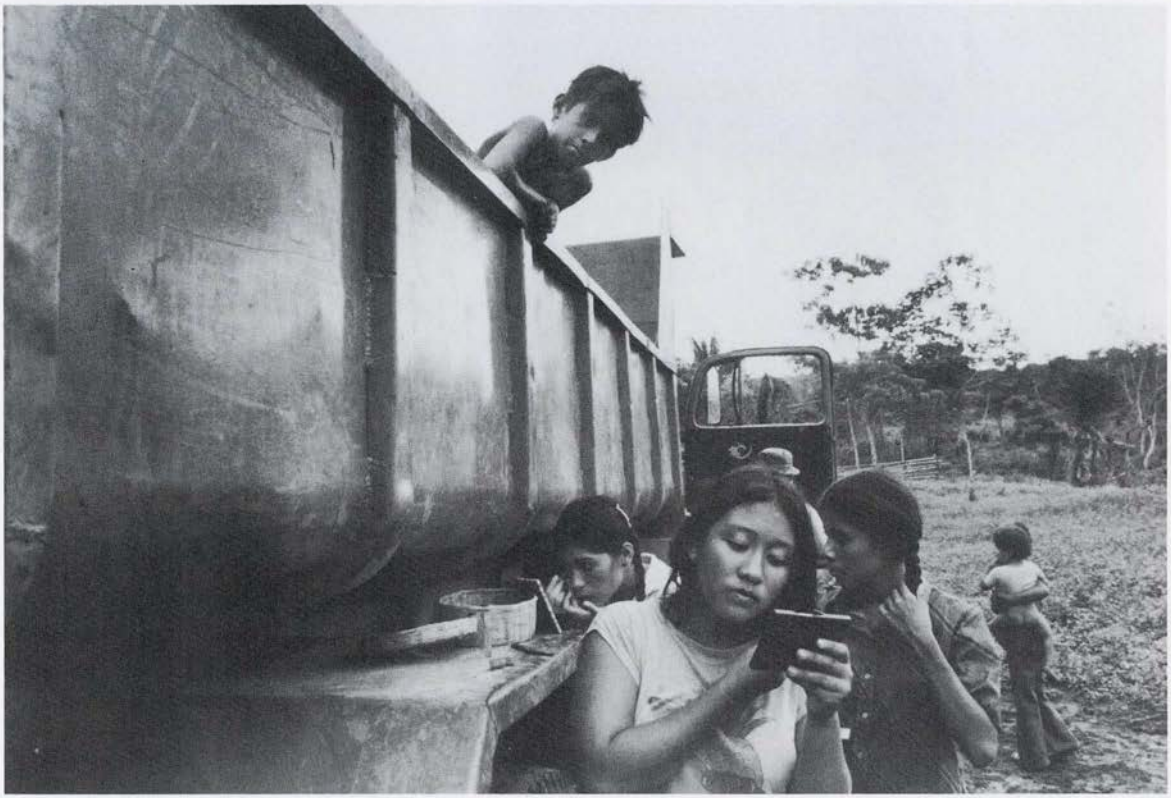
Until we can stop the blood money being passed
from white-gloved hand to white-gloved hand,
our country to yours—El Salvador, Honduras,
Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Peru—
creating sanctuary is what we must do:
take you in, our sisters and brothers,
as our homeland drives you from your homes.

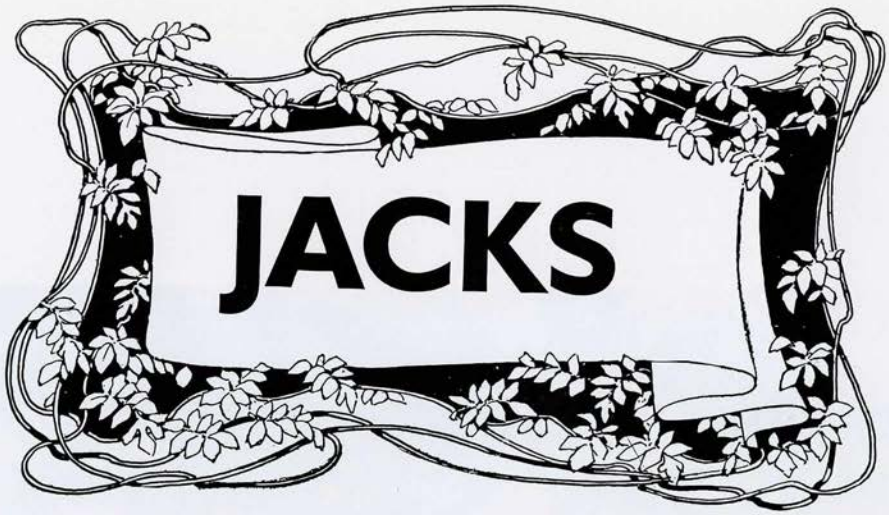
patria, patria mia: country, my country
mi casa es su casa: my home is your home

CLAUDIA GORDILLO
Photography









We played jacks in the hallway at the top of the steps at recess. Was it early spring? On balmy days the doors were propped open and a warm breeze wafted the smells of flowering up to us. The hallway floor was a checkerboard of green and white tile, smooth and polished. You sat cross legged or one leg crossed under you and the other straight out, a prop. The formula of play was one at a time first (the ones), then pairs and on up. When you finished you started over with ones again, eggs in the basket. You played until you missed. If you moved a jack other than the ones you picked up, it was the next girl's turn.

"That one moved!"

"What! Where?"

"*That* one, dope."

"Whaa-aaat! I didn't even touch it!"

"We all saw you, Chrissie."

"No I didn't! I didn't come *near* that one!"

"Chrissie, everybody *saw*."

Chrissie slams both hands down across the field of play and sweeps up her jacks defiantly. "This is *not fair*."

"You don't have to get so mad."

The little kids crowded around, watching. They could not quite believe we were that good. Sometimes two or three boys sauntering down the hall would stop to watch. Once in a while a wicked boy, needing disaster, would charge through us, through the field of flung jacks, on purpose, then run like hell away, powered by our screams. Usually though the boys just watched. Jacks was a girl's game and this was girls' territory. They were curious about girls' territory. This was a good time to look us over good without appearing to be interested.

Marilyn Krysl

When boys watched, the ambience of the game changed. You couldn't play your best with boys watching. You got the jitters and the juicy flow of your play dried up. In fact you prayed to miss soon so as to get out from under the hard scrutiny of boys' eyes. The easy camaraderie around the circle of players tightened up. We became unusually quiet, and when we argued, unusually shrill.

Only if it was a boy you liked did you like being watched. Then you suddenly became very good. You became, in fact, spectacular. You rose above everything dim and known and went flying off on a winning streak. Your temperature rose, your face flushed, and you went right on climbing the sky, playing perfectly. The other girls fell back in awe. They were pleased for you and they were jealous too. Above all they hoped some of your glory would rub off on them.

But this too was unnatural. It wasn't the way the game, at its best, went. At its best it was a girls' game, requiring the presence and participation of girls and only girls. Your skill was what it was. And it was a game not of competition but of demonstrations of skill. You did not play against the other girls. Instead you were each other's witnesses.

Your skill was what it was and you were as good as you practiced. You practiced at home alone on the kitchen linoleum or the floor of your bedroom. When the weather was warm, you practiced on the sidewalk. And you sewed a little cloth bag with a drawstring to keep your jacks and ball in and carried the bag with you everywhere. You kept it with you while you washed the dishes, in your pocket or hanging from your belt. You took it with you when your mother sent you to the store. At night you put the bag on the floor beside your bed next to your shoes. And while you practiced alone you thought about the other girls: how their faces looked in concentration, how graceful and quick and clever their hands were, how their hair shone. And you thought about them practicing at home too, thinking about you.

It was a world. Because it seemed to the rest of the world, the world outside our circle—parents, teachers, boys—that we weren't really doing anything important. We were doing something harmless, like embroidery, they thought, and generally they left us alone. Jacks was the one place we would not be interrupted, interfered with, instructed, judged, criticized, set straight. You got to school early so you could play before school. You played at recess. And if your mother would let you, you stayed after school and played some more. When you had to leave immediately after school for your piano lesson or your tap dancing lesson or lessons in voice, you were morose.

In late spring and summer we played on the sidewalk in front of the school or on the cement of the basketball court. The sun shone. The cement we sat on was warm. The sun shone, the sun warmed our shoulders and backs as we bent, leaning into the play. We played until the sides of our hands were scraped dry, until the paint was completely worn off the ball, until the rubber began to break down, until the pink and blue jacks polished back down to pure metal. We played while the weather turned cooler, while the days moved through Indian summer. We put on sweaters and played while the leaves fell, falling around us, falling into our circle.

We kept on playing while the leaves burned.

This excerpt is edited from a speech delivered at the University of Illinois, Champaign, Urbana for Women's History month, March, 1987.

Pocahontas and Nancy Ward hold a special fascination for me because of the legends that have risen around their names and lives. At the same time, words like "traitor" are attached to them. Deified and villified. What were the lives of Pocahontas and Nancy Ward really like?

Somewhere outside their legends the real truth lies. And as a poet, rather than a historian, I feel I have a freedom of sorts to explore and imagine what those truths are.

According to "history," Pocahontas was a favored daughter of Powhatan, chief of the Powhatan Confederacy in what is now called Virginia. In 1607 or 1608 she saw her first white man, John Smith, as a ship from England sailed into the harbor. She immediately became enamoured of his color and promptly fell in love with him. Powhatan, being the savage he was, hated John Smith and for no apparent reason gave the order to have him executed. Right before he was to be tomahawked, Pocahontas threw herself on Smith, telling her father that he'd have to kill her too. Since Pocahontas was willing to die for this particular white man, then there must be something wonderful about all white men, so Powhatan spared not only John Smith's life but the lives of the rest of his crew.

Smith eventually returned to England, leaving Pocahontas to pine away until she met John Rolfe. Pocahontas must have thought that all white men looked alike because she enthusiastically fell in love with him and became a good christian. She also became a good capitalist because she helped her husband grow rich in the tobacco trade, took up wearing white women's clothing, had a son, went to England where she was a celebrity, and finally died happily in England—her soul eternally saved.

Quite a story. Even Hollywood couldn't improve on this tale.

But I can.

Powhatan had twenty children, ten of them daughters. Pocahontas was a favored daughter, but more than that, was a child of her father's confidence. She understood only too well what the invasion of Europeans meant for her people. I also must tell you that at the time Pocahontas met John Smith, she was twelve or thirteen—a woman by Indian standards of the day. Pocahontas was not just a good listener, she had ideas that were listened to. When she spoke, the Powhatan people heard her and respected her voice. While not a true matriarchy like the Mohawks or the Cherokee of Nancy Ward, Powhatan women held sway in the disposition of enemy warriors and matters pertaining to war. John Smith's so-called rescue was, in fact, a mock execution—a traditional ritual often held after capture of enemies. This ritual, in the eyes of John Smith, held all the dramatic trappings of a play. Smith saw himself cast in a starring role and played it to the hilt. Pocahontas also played her part. She chose to adopt Smith as her brother since this was her right as an Indian woman. Smith began writing letters back home of how his life was saved by a genuine Indian princess, and now he held the Powhatan Confederacy in the palm of his hand. Of course this was and is nonsense.

Powhatan and his daughter/confidant were not fools. They had a sophisticated view of the English and the other European nations who were clamoring to capture the new continent and claim it for their own. The English seemed mighty, so why not choose them to make alliances with? The continuation of the Indian people was uppermost in the daughter's and father's minds. Then, as now, survival is the most important thought on North American Indians' agendas. Also, the art and practise of diplomacy was not a new concept to Indian people. If Indians were as savage and war-like as the history books would like us to believe, there would not have been any of us left when the first white man set his feet on this continent. So Pocahontas was probably the first ambassador to the English, just as La Malinche was to the Spanish in Mexico. Not an easy task for anyone, let alone a twelve-year-old woman who could not read, write, or speak the language of the intruders, and who most likely figured out early on that the English held little esteem for women—especially if they weren't white. Pocahontas saw the alternative to genocide as adopting John Smith as her brother.

The history books speculate on whether Smith and Pocahontas were lovers. It may seem an insignificant thing to wonder about, but I wonder too, because the failure of John Smith to sire a child by Pocahontas must have been a tear in the delicate fabric of the tie that had sprung up between the British and the Powhatan Confederacy. A child born of an Indian ambassador and a British father stood a chance of truly being the child of a new world; a child that would contain the elements necessary for the continued existence of the Indian people. But it is probably just as well that Pocahontas did not bear a child by John Smith. Boastful and self-involved, he eventually left the Jamestown Colony and went home to England. He hadn't made his fortune, but he was to make a mark on history through his lies and distortions of the Indian people. There are reports that Pocahontas and her father were greatly angered at Smith's leavetaking. Why? Did they see it as a withdrawal of protection by the British? Through Smith's adoption, they had woven a tenuous connection between the two nations that had so far been mutually rewarding. The Powhatan Confederacy had lost few people to these

British invaders. Their confederacy was still strong in the eyes of other Indian tribes they traded with, and they were not weakened by the relationship with the British, due to the diplomatic skills of Powhatan and his daughter.

The British had done fairly well in the new colony too. Indians had taught them what to eat, how to eat it, how to plant what they ate. It often amazes me how Thanksgiving is portrayed as whites and Indians sharing their food with each other in a loving gesture of friendship. The pilgrims had nothing to share. What they ate on that mythical day was entirely due to the generosity and loving spirit of the Indian people. And it was this kind of generosity that frequently became the beginning of the end for all Indian tribes. Indian people have many languages, but there is not a single word, except in English that describes the word "stingy," or "selfish." But that winter when John Smith left for England, Powhatan and Pocahontas left the Jamestown settlement and went home. They enjoined other Indians to do the same. And Jamestown suffered heavy losses of life. They literally starved. Was this a punishment on the part of Powhatan? Did he see his daughter as a woman scorned? Most likely not. Did he see his daughter as a humiliated woman? There we can come closer to the truth. Sexual behavior was an Indian woman's territory. They chose who they wished to love or not love, who they wished to have children by, whose families they wished to unite. By adopting Smith as lover/brother, Pocahontas was, in effect, opening her home and family to him. Smith violated this most basic precept of Indian values by leaving Jamestown without even a goodbye or thank you. To be impolite to an Indian is humiliation to the whole family, clan and tribe. Smith and the other settlers might not have been aware of this humiliation, simply because they chose not to be aware of the system of values that governed Indian thinking. Literally turning their backs on the Jamestown settlers (another subtlety that the British chose to ignore), Pocahontas was sent on varying missions to other tribes by her father. Serving as a spokeswoman for the Powhatan Confederacy, she arranged new trade agreements, cemented old friendships, built new ones. Of this there can be no doubt—Pocahontas was a skilled orator and a politician. It fills me with rage that the only stories we have of her are the sickly sweet, romantic variety, so racist and untrue.

During this time, Pocahontas took an Indian husband. Of him, we can find no trace. I wonder if she had children by him. What happened to them and him? Was Pocahontas happy? When Powhatan and Pocahontas were ready to visit Jamestown again, they were taken prisoner. I suppose the settlers wanted to vent their anger on them for being deserted. It would never have occurred to the pilgrims that their own stupidity and racism had led to the death of so many British. Pocahontas and Powhatan were not free to leave the settlement, but could wander among the people and houses. They found a man who must have intrigued them no end. He was a missionary, and he was teaching people to read. Reading was something the white men did, and because of it, they held a certain power over the Powhatan people. Bargaining with the British, Pocahontas arranged for her father to be sent home and she would stay to learn more about the christian way. The accounts given at the time show Pocahontas to be an eager convert. I submit that her conversion to christianity was only half-hearted, but her conversion to literacy was carried out with a powerful zeal. And besides, the Church of England was not without some appeal. The rituals of prayer and communion must have

been appealing to a Powhatan woman who had grown up in prayer and communion with the spirits. The message was different, yet the idea of life after death was one that Pocahontas could identify with. In Indian life, everything has its own spirit, not just human beings. When things die, they go to the spirit world and become influences on the living. And while some aspects of christianity must have seemed harsh to someone of Pocahontas' sensibilities, it served a nobler purpose in her mind. Please don't think of this as hypocritical or calculating. Pocahontas was using the tools that the spirits and the Creator were giving to her.

And that brings me to something that I feel in my heart is true—Pocahontas was guided by divine power. Not a god in christian terms, but a communion with the Creator. Indians of pre-christian times spent their lives in this kind of communion. "Living with the spirits" my father would say. Pocahontas lived with and listened to these spirits. There is a term that has been used for centuries—"Manifest Destiny." It is a white man's term and logic, meant to imply that whites are superior to Native peoples and, therefore, it is nature's law that the white race hold dominion over all natural things. In other words, the white man is king and emperor over all—people, animals, plants, the very air. But I propose that Pocahontas had her own manifest destiny to fulfill. That of keeping her people alive. Would Powhatan and his people have listened and learned from Pocahontas so readily if she had not already proven to be the kind of person who did "live with the spirits?" Was Pocahontas a shaman? Don't forget her name means "playing with the spirits" or better "getting joy from the spirits." Name-giving in Indian culture is serious business. Many signs and omens are consulted before giving a person a name. In many tribes, it was the role for the berdache or man-woman to bestow this honor. History will not tell us that Pocahontas was a shaman, but there is a feeling inside me that tells me this is so. A very unscholarly and unacademic feeling on my part. But I am not a scholar or an academic. I am an Indian woman poet and storyteller who believes there were and are prophets of the future among my people. Pocahontas was such a prophet.

Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet, has written to me in letters about the "new people." These are people like her and myself—the half-breeds, the mixed-bloods. Did Pocahontas envision nations of new people? Did she envision a new world? A world where people would say "I am a human being of many races." Is this the real manifest destiny? I may be stepping on many toes, for there is always debate on who constitutes a real Indian, depending on the blood quantum. But I remember what Vine Deloria once said. He said "Blood quantums are not important; what really matters is who your grandparents were." These women I am talking about were our grandparents. They were our grandmothers in spirit, if not actual blood ties. This does not mean that I think every person is a spiritual Indian. That would be dishonorable to my ancestors. And I emphatically do not believe that our culture and rituals are up for grabs. A person does not become an Indian by participating in a sweat, or observing a Sun Dance, or even working on political issues that affect Indians, such as Big Mountain. One does not become an Indian like one chooses new clothes, or chooses religion. And one is not *like* an Indian simply by believing in our value system.

While learning to read and write, Pocahontas had as one of her teachers, John Rolfe. The accounts come down to us through history that he admired Pocahon-

tas. He may indeed have admired her. She was a powerful voice in Jamestown, her father held great wealth of land, she knew the many secrets of growing tobacco which Rolfe had come to realize could make him a rich and respected man. Rolfe came from gentry stock, but was a fairly poor man compared to others of his station. Why else go to the New World, except in search of untold wealth, ready for the taking? But the history books tell us that Rolfe was taken with Pocahontas because of her "regal bearing, her christian demeanor, her wisdom." All this may be true and perhaps love even entered into it. But I tread carefully when I speak of love, because it means so many different things. Did Pocahontas love John Rolfe? Perhaps. Did her spirits tell her that Rolfe was the right choice? More than likely. There were other white men waiting in the wings to have the favor of Pocahontas and her father. For one was not possible without the other. But Rolfe was a man easily handled by those who held more power and charisma than he. And he was not ugly or diseased. The courtship began, but not without obstacles. The court of King James was very adamant in discouraging contact between the races. The issue of class was an equal barrier to the marriage. This is why we end up with the ridiculous legends of Pocahontas being a true, imperial Princess. John Smith had started the flame of this particular bonfire when he wrote home about having his life saved by a princess of the realm. And John Rolfe added more fuel to the story in his desire to be married. Thus Powhatan is made a king and Pocahontas his favorite princess.

Of a dowry, there is no mention, but it would be fair to say that Rolfe acquired quite a parcel of land to experiment with tobacco. The smoking of tobacco was a great hit in England among the royal court. King James was said to disapprove of it, but it doesn't look like too many paid attention to what he had to say. His own wife, Queen Anne, was addicted to the stuff and her court of ladies spent hours smoking and gossiping in the palace. The legend of Pocahontas makes us believe that after marrying Rolfe, she quickly became a lady of leisure, even acquiring the title of Lady Rebecca. I find this choice of names especially intriguing. Did she choose it for herself? In her quest for literacy, the Bible was the only tool she had at that time. Did she read the story of another ancient legend, Rebecca, when she was told "Be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them."

When Pocahontas found herself pregnant, what must she have felt? The joy any new mother feels? A special joy because she was going to have a child of her new world? A child of differing races, who would learn to read and write as a matter of course and would take a place in this new world with Pocahontas' wisdom and cunning and political skills.

To insure this child of her new world would come into the best of possible worlds, Pocahontas surrounded herself with female relatives and her father. John Rolfe may have been alarmed that Lady Rebecca was choosing to have her child in this most primitive and heathen of manners, but maybe he wasn't. We only know that in 1615 Pocahontas gave birth to a son, Thomas, amidst the chanting and singing of her people. So much for Pocahontas' christian submissiveness. After the birth, the relatives stayed on.

One has to wonder at John Rolfe's attitude toward this. But unlike John Smith, Rolfe recognized the honor of being part of an Indian family. When a non-Indian

becomes part of an Indian household, whether through marriage or friendship, the Indian family takes over. This is assimilation of a kind that is never written about or discussed. The non-Indian is swallowed up and loved and may have to put up small battles to hang onto a distinct personality as opposed to the personality of the Indian group. I have seen this happen to my non-Indian uncles, my non-Indian mother, my non-Indian lover. Soon they are talking like Indians, joking like Indians, using the term "we," instead of "you" and "I." The prevailing Indian culture and world-view becomes the non-Indian's view as well. But, again, this is not *becoming* an Indian. It is a process of assimilation that is whole. Many parts make up the integration of a community. This is a difficult concept to explain to people who are not part of an Indian community. Each part is distinct, yet each part acts in accordance with the whole. One way I might explain this integrity is through the example of the Sun Dance of the Plains Indians. Each person entering the circle to dance has a definite objective in mind. Whether he or she is dancing for one purpose, for example strength, or the curing of a sickness of the body or mind, that purpose must reflect on the community and be for the good of the community. In Oklahoma a few years ago, a Vietnam veteran asked to participate in the Sun Dance in his wheelchair. This had never been done, but a way was worked out that a guide would maneuver him through the rigorous ceremony. This was not an easy task the veteran and his guide had taken upon themselves. The dance can last for hours; it has been known to last for days until the communion with god has taken place. Later, when the dance was over, the vet told a friend of mine that he was dancing to be absolved of the "sins" (his word) he had committed in Vietnam. But all the while he was dancing, he was reliving his experience in Vietnam, and he began dancing for his buddies, he began dancing for the Vietnamese people, he began dancing for peace and the end to racism in the world. What has this story to do with Pocahontas? Everything I think. While not belonging to the Indian world-view that produces the Sun Dance, Pocahontas was doing her own dance for the good of the community. And her community, because of the child she bore, was an enlarged one. And so I believe was John Rolfe's idea of community. At least I am hoping so, for the sake of Pocahontas and that little boy child Thomas.

Pocahontas and John Rolfe were invited to England to be presented to King James and Queen Anne. The tobacco industry was a profitable one to the British monarch. He wished to thank the Rolfes in person, but more than that, he wished to meet Pocahontas, the princess of the Indians. North American Indians were becoming the rage in England at that time. The novelties of Black Africans were wearing thin and British royalty wanted a new toy to play with. Indians were the "in thing," and I daresay, Europeans haven't changed all that much. To this day, North American Indians are an object of fascination to European peoples. I honestly think they believe we still live as we did 400 years ago. And they think we are all alike. But Americans are not much better. I'm afraid they tend to think that Indians are pretty much extinct, except for the Southwest, and that we all hold the same world view and tell the same stories.

The England of the 1600s was a primitive, filthy place and must have been a terrifying sight to Pocahontas and her relatives. For she did not travel to London with just her husband and son. She took many female relatives and her uncle who

was a medicine man. I often wonder, since Pocahontas knew how to write, if she kept any kind of account of her journey. It has been recorded that while in London, Pocahontas and her Indian family swam daily in the waters. This was seen as a primitive abberation by the British who took baths maybe once a year. But some of the Indians became ill from the polluted waters and had to stop their cleansing routine. Pocahontas met the king and queen. It was reported that they were impressed. Was Pocahontas? We have no account that she was. Illness began making inroads on the Indian family. John Rolfe got permission to take them to the country where the air and water was cleaner. Thomas could play, and Pocahontas could relax from the stares and pointing fingers and rude comments. It has also been recorded that Pocahontas visited schools. The sight of pale, little boys being disciplined by the cane and given no physical endearments of any kind, must have made her fear for her own child, and more determined that although a child of both cultures, her son would receive the proper kind of childhood—an Indian one. Pocahontas also met up with her old friend, John Smith. Smith wrote that she seemed angered with him. He was probably quite angered himself. This grand reception that was accorded Pocahontas and Rolfe could have been his if he had been more far-thinking. It must have rankled him that the princess of his making was truly being treated as royalty.

Pocahontas fell ill. She had already lost some of her people to England's diseased air and had spent her time in the country in mourning. The Rolfes prepared to take their leave to go back home to Virginia. Thomas was ill also, which must have sent his mother into a frenzy of trying to get him away from a country that did nothing but kill her people. They set sail, but in Gravesend, in the county of Kent, the ship had to stop and Pocahontas was removed to receive medical care. The general consensus is that she had tuberculosis. Her uncle, Uttamatamakin, performed healing rituals over her. This may have been enough to ease her mind and spirit, but British doctors came and purged her and applied leeches. This treatment weakened her further. Pocahontas died and her last reported words were "it is enough that the child liveth." John Rolfe failed Pocahontas in death since he had her buried christian style. Uttamatamakin was infuriated and the anti-white feelings that had always been present, but were held at bay during Powhatan's rule, began stirring and set the scene for hard times to come in Virginia.

Why did John Rolfe fail Pocahontas? It may be the fact that his son was still very sick and he wanted to leave for Virginia as soon as possible. Rolfe was not a strong personality and may have chosen the most politically expedient way to placate his English hosts, and Pocahontas was no longer there to strengthen him. This final act on Rolfe's part was that of a fool. Pocahontas' relatives were token christians as she was, and they would have gone along with the christian burial, *if* they also knew that Pocahontas could be sent on her proper way to the Spirit World through their Powhatan ministrations. But it did not happen this way, and Pocahontas was interred at Gravesend in full English dress and tradition.

Powhatan died within a short time after receiving the news of his daughter's death. He longed to stay alive to take his grandson to live with him, but that was not to be. And the precious child Thomas, so important to Pocahontas' vision of a new world? He stayed in England and was reared by his father's uncle. John Rolfe went back to Virginia and died shortly after the Indian uprising that took place.

With Pocahontas and Powhatan dead, the so-called Peace of Pocahontas was at an end. As a teen, Thomas Rolfe did return to Virginia and experienced the great urge to see his mother's people and the place where he first drew breath. He journeyed to the Pamunkey, which was considered enemy territory by the British. What happened to Thomas as he visited the land and language of his birth? For a few years later he was commissioned a lieutenant in the colonial militia and took up duty as a colonist against the Indians. Had his mother lived, would the outcome have been different? It is hard to say. La Malinche lived to see her son by Cortez take up arms against her people, and his. The Powhatan people and those of other southeastern tribes were on the path to extinction. Some by war, but most through the greatest weapon the Europeans had—disease. It is estimated that two-thirds of Indian people in North American were wiped out because of measles, chicken pox, tuberculosis, smallpox, and the common cold. Did Pocahontas see this also in her vision? It's ironic that Pocahontas became grandmother to an estimated two million people who lay claim to being her descendents. It is ironic to me because a Virginian who would recoil in horror at having a Black ancestor, points with pride at the Indian blood in their bodies. The British did their job well, annointing Pocahontas a princess while excising her Indianness. We are left with the story of a woman who was made into an "incidental" Indian. And this is the biggest and most hideous of lies surrounding Pocahontas. There was nothing incidental about her. She fought for her people and for the future of her people. She spoke in Indian even at the last. She brought her son into the world through Indian womb and hands. And even her final words "it is enough the child liveth" speaks volumes of her plans, much more eloquently than I ever could.

Nancy Ward was also a woman committed to vision. When Nancy was born in 1738, she was given the name Nanye'hi, which means "Spirit People" or "Spirit Path." This name, like Pocahontas' "getting joy from spirits" describes Nancy's communion with a dream that gave direction to her life.

Nancy became the wife of Kingfisher in 1750 and the legends about her began at that time. While a mother of two young children, she went into battle with her husband to fight the Creeks, traditional enemies of the Cherokee. The Cherokee nation was a true matriarchy, meaning that blood lines flowed through the mother. Clans of the female became the clans of her children. All property came from the female side and was only given to her children. Women influenced all political and family matters. Accompanying her husband into battle was not a new phenomenon to the Cherokee people. For a reason known only to Nancy and her spirits, she went to Georgia with Kingfisher and when her husband was killed, she took up his arms and continued the fight. This inspiration led her people into ultimate victory over the Creeks. Stories began to circulate among the Cherokee about Nancy's heroism. She soon was chosen to become a Beloved Woman of the Cherokee. Beloved Woman means exactly what it implies, she was beloved by the people, but even more, she had a direct link with the Creator who spoke through the Beloved Woman's voice.

It seems to me that only Indians could come up with this particular model of behavior. Most of us know stories about christian saints who supposedly were in communication with god or christ, but the Indian people so cherished and personalized the Creator and all the spirits that made up the mysteries of the uni-

verse, that this mystery chose to speak through women's voices. This is not unique to just the Cherokee. In many tribes across North America, you will hear the Creator's voices coming from the women. In fact, the Creator is usually a female/male deity or one that has no sex, who just *is*. Again I think of christian women saints who had to die before achieving that state of grace so desired by them. How much more human, and yes Indian, to be in a state of grace constantly. And I must quote my father again when he says there are "people who live with the spirits."

This particular state of grace called being human was and is a source of amusement and wonder to Indian people. We have thousands of stories that tell the tale of being human. It is not an exalted position. In many instances, humanity is a result of the creator or our tricksters playing a joke. How's that for making us humble? And if the state of being human is a joke, how much more important it is for us to have our spirits to guide us?

I once wrote a short story about a young man who had conversations with his dog. The young man despaired about the human species, wondering if they could ever be smart. His dog told him that was an impossibility. Dogs buried bones and occasionally dug them up and chewed them, but pretty much left them alone. Humans left bones lying all around their lives and tripped over them and piled them up so high that eventually people couldn't move and had to stay in one place forever. And that is because human beings are stupid and young and don't know any better. The young man had to agree—for after all—it is the truth. And the young man came to the conclusion that if humans were as smart as dogs, the human would be the pet and get to sleep all day and eat food already prepared for him and be welcomed into bed on a cold night.

I give you this story because I want you to know what it is to grow up an Indian and know your place in the scheme of things. Women like Nancy Ward and Pocahontas knew what their places were. Perhaps we can imagine a little of how they felt when we put it into modern terminology. Non-indian and Indian women of today live with fear as a constant. Yet, at the same time, some of us try to set things right. So it was with Pocahontas and Nanye'hi.

When Nancy Ward became the Beloved Woman the Cherokee were literally caught in the middle between France and England. Each European nation was panting for the Cherokee lands and it became Nancy's job to placate each nation while retaining and preserving the strength and power of her own Cherokee nation. Again, like Pocahontas, she had to be a diplomat of skillful integrity. Nancy's uncle Attakullkulla worked hand-in-hand with Nancy at maintaining this precarious balance of power. Imagine it, if you can. These two people, young woman/mother and aging man, holding war at bay for years, while gathering strength to withstand the onslaught they knew would eventually come. And because of maintaining this balance, Nanye'hi was seen by many of her descendants as being a traitor and lackey to the British. The same has been said of Pocahontas, La Malinche, Molly Brant (my own ancestor who I am not going to write about here because there simply isn't room.)

These women called traitors, what was their treachery? Neither handed over their people or lands to the white man. For one thing, it would not have been in their consciousness as Indian people to do so. Land was given by the Creator.

They were simply human, who were they to give land to someone else? These women called traitors, did they fraternize with the enemy? What does fraternization mean? Sleeping with the enemy while giving away secrets? Neither woman did so. They married white men, but again I must remind you, these women lived with the spirits. They knew what was in their vision. Some may say things did not work out the way they were supposed to. Or did they? Gloria Anzaldua, Chicana poet and editor of "This Bridge Called My Back," has told me that she sees La Malinche as a hero of heroes—because of her there is a new race of people, the Chicano. There are ways and then there are ways of looking at history.

In 1757, Nanye'hi married a white trader by the name of Bryant Ward. She had a daughter Elizabeth. The unusual thing about Bryant Ward is that he did not live with Nancy and the Cherokee. Why is this? My own guess is that Nancy didn't want him to. She sent him away after her child was born. The words of Pocahontas come back to me, "It is enough the child liveth." Was this Nancy's thought also? To carry on the vision of a new people?

In 1775, the Watauga Purchase took place. Twenty million acres of Cherokee land was sold to the British for 2,000 pounds. There is no record of Nanye'hi's voice at this time. But a woman who always counseled "never sell the land" must have been appalled at what she saw as a break with Indian tradition and spirit. But already, whether because of her marriage to Bryant Ward or her repeated negotiations with the British, Nanye'hi, Beloved Woman, was losing her influence. In 1776, a Cherokee faction, led by Dragging Canoe and Old Abram, set seige to the Watauga fort. They captured a white woman, Lydia Bean, and were going to burn her alive. It is reported that Nancy stepped to the fire and shouted "No woman shall be burned at the stake while I am Beloved Woman." This whole episode has a familiar ring to it. But it probably happened as it was recorded. The Cherokee, tired of years of staving off the white man, was nonetheless learning from him. The very notion of murdering a woman, regardless of her being non-Indian, is a telling story of how the Indian system of values was deteriorating. In all the horror stories of actions between whites and Indians, I find this one the most horrific—how Indian attitudes toward women had changed. Not everywhere, and not everyone, but enough of it to freeze my blood and anger me almost beyond reason. Nancy Ward must have been feeling the same kind of rage and fear. For if attitudes about women could go against the Creator's wishes, what other horrors must follow? And this is not to say that Indian people brought destruction upon ourselves. Such a statement would even be beyond the stupidity allowed for merely being a human. We are all familiar with the "blaming the victim" syndrome. Yet at the same time, I do not see my people or myself as victims, since that word implies a giving-up, a loss of self. And certainly it's evident we are still here, as bothersome as we have always been.

After saving Lydia's life, Nancy took her to live at Chote, Nanye'hi's ancestral home. History does not say how long they resided together, or what they talked about. How I wish I could hear them! Did they talk of politics and raising children? Did they learn about each other's peoples and ways? Did they become lovers? One thing is known: Nancy learned to make butter and cheese from the milk of the "white man's buffalo," the cow. She later used this knowledge to introduce dairying into the Cherokee nation. But what of Lydia Bean? Did she learn of

the spirits? Did she learn of the woman's voice being the conduit of the Creator? Did she learn a lesson in being a woman? Did she become assimilated into the Indian way of thinking like so many do who live with Indians?

I want to know the answers to these questions because it is essential to understanding between Indian and non-Indian women of today. But once again, the answers and questions are meant for us to decipher and translate. Are we doing it? If there truly is a new world as I believe, and as Nancy Ward and Pocahontas believed, we must get down to this basic at once. I am reminded of a time when my non-Indian lover and myself went to my reservation for a visit. We stayed with one of my many great-aunts and cousins. One night we sat at the kitchen table and shelled beans. Beans, incidentally, that are only grown on my reserve—potato beans. We all sat for hours, about five of us, just doing women's work—preparing food for our family. There was a magic to that evening. Probably because it *was* the most simplest and primal acts of love—feeding those we love. And my lover Denise, always aware of the fact that she is a white woman among the Mohawks, felt loved and filled and thankful to be a part of this act. And we Mohawk women felt the same. I have thought of that evening many times, especially when I am asked to speak or read in unfamiliar places. Nancy and Lydia made food together—of the physical and spiritual kind. It must be possible for us to do it too.

War intensified between the Cherokee and the emerging American nation. The Cherokee found themselves defeated at every turn while Nancy stood her ground and shouted for peace. In 1781 trying to negotiate a peace treaty, Nancy Ward cried, "Peace. . . . let it continue. This peace must last forever. Let your women's sons be ours. Our sons will be yours. Let your women hear our words." This speech is the most stirring of all speeches to me. The idea that differing races could belong to each other in love and peace was and *is* the most radical of ideas. Did the women hear Nancy's words? It is doubtful. How could they have heard them unless their men chose to tell them?

1785 found Nanye'hi still living at Chote with her children and grandchildren. Her daughter by Bryant Ward had married an Indian agent. Her two children by Kingfisher had married and produced children. All lived with Nancy. She had also opened her home to orphans, of which there were many. Things had changed. Life was changing for the Cherokee people. They were becoming farmers and, as I mentioned earlier, Indian culture was giving way to some of the values of the white man. But in 1817 the last Cherokee Council meeting was held, and Nanye'hi was expected to speak and give counsel. Being old and ill, she sent her son Fivekiller to represent her and to read her written message. And here we have another conundrum. Nancy Ward was a literate woman. Where are her words? It frustrates me no end as an Indian woman, that history has not deemed it worthwhile to remark on the fact that Nanye'hi and Pocahontas could write and therefore must have put ideas and thoughts on paper. Nancy and Lydia Bean must have corresponded. Where are these documents I long to see? Does someone have them? Were they burned or thown out with the trash? Were they deliberately lost? After all, it must not be known that the savage, the barbaric, the primitive could read and write. It would completely change history and the attempts by white North Americans to make us invisible—a silent genocide. As an aside to all this, I

must tell you of Sequoyah, who devised a spoken and written alphabet of the Cherokee language and he never knew how to read or write. Imagine the genius and spirit of such a man. Fivekiller read his mother's message to the people and I'd like to quote some of it here.

"Your mothers, your sisters ask you not to part with any more of our lands. We say you are our descendents and must listen to our request. Keep the land for our growing children for it was the good will of our Creator to place us here. Keep your hands off of paper for it is our own country. If it was not, they (the white man) would not ask you to put your hands on paper. It would be impossible to remove us all for as soon as one child is raised, we have others in our arms. Therefore children, don't part with any more of our land but continue on it and enlarge your farms and cultivate and raise corn so we may never go hungry. Listen to the talks of your sisters. I have a great many grandchildren and I wish them to do well on our land."

Nancy's words were a prophecy, especially about the impossibility of removing all the people from the land. Even during the forced removal of southeastern tribes to Oklahoma, known popularly as the Trail of Tears, many Cherokee escaped and blended into other families and races.

Nancy Ward died in 1818. She had lived a long life compared to Pocahontas. When she died, there were no last words recorded, but her great-grandson reported that a light rose from her body and fluttered like a bird around her body and her family in attendance, then it flew in the direction of Chote, Nancy's ancestral homeland. If Nancy had spoken last words, I imagine they would have been words she had spoken all her life—Don't sell our land. Let the women hear my words. Our cry is for peace.

My friend Awiakta, a Cherokee writer and champion of Nancy Ward, has told me of a Cherokee Reunion that was held in Tennessee a few years ago. Nancy Ward is buried on a hill where the Sacred Fire was lit. Awiakta tells me that 20,000 people were there. Descendents of Nanye'hi's dream of a new world. Red and white, red and black, red, white and black. All these glorious mixtures come together as family. "Let your sons be ours; our sons be yours." How prophetic those words! If I leave you with any thoughts, let them be that Pocahontas and Nanye'hi were not what history has made them. They also were not goddesses or superhuman. They were human women who communed with the spirits. History has given us some truths and many untruths about these women. What is women's history? Is it the history of all women, not just those who were white and privileged? Does it mean the changes that women have wrought in history, not just the history of the European nations, but of all nations? I hope it means that. As an Indian, I am forever on my guard about what I read or hear about my people. So much is distorted through ignorance and misunderstanding. I recently became a grandmother. When I held my new born grandson in my arms for the first time, I was so awestruck that I think I stopped breathing. For I realized that this truly is a new child of a new world, or as Linda Hogan said to me "New atoms and their beginning in the human form." This child, Nathanael Brant is a child of many people—Mohawk, Polish, French, Cree, Irish. And he will grow up knowing all of them.

A Powhatan shaman and a Cherokee Beloved Woman—they did not fail their communities. Their dream should be ours, together. What can we do in their memory and honor is to continue the search for truth in all things.

Charlotte DeClue FIVE POEMS

Woolworths.

I won't go in that store anymore,
won't even look to see
who's having a coke at the counter.
Not since the day I got caught
dreaming DREAMING
about cheap lipstick and dimestore sunglasses.
The manager closed in on me
between the smokey tints and tortoise shell.
I could feel him in the soft hair
bristling down my back,
fingering his pockets for the money
he was losing on urban renewal.
He motioned towards the SHOPLIFTING sign.
Never mind the ten dollars
crumpled in my hand
or the fact
I never stole a damn thing in my life
'cept a roll of toilet paper and a light bulb
from the girl's room at Mike's Tavern.
I was one of THEM.
I had lied and cheated
and now was robbing him blind.
My tongue sharpened at the edges
wanting to cut his dry heart in half.
Instead I paid eight hard-earned dollars
on a pair of Polaroids
that broke in the middle.
The cashier screamed
it wasn't me after all
and pointed to another dark hair
bobbing down aisles of chantilly
and pallette rouge.

Young wife.

It's Friday night, the Panhandle
and poker at the Western.
Words out the company men are gonna play,
means high stakes.
The drillers can afford to lose,
but our men, well
I told my man if he goes down there
don't bother comin' home.
He's young but he's smart,
he'll be home.
Lying in bed
silence next to me.
Lump under my pillow is the pistol
for protection.
Outside the wind,
always the wind
moves like a restless man.
The woman next door is crying,
can hear her through paper thin walls.
Her name is Wanda.
Just got to know her last week,
caught her staring at me
kind of sad and knowing.
I got a baby on the way
(a baby with a baby, Wanda says)
come due the middle of winter.
But I'm not afraid anymore,
afraid of the baby,
afraid of the wind.
It's all a part of me now.

Transition.

This woman's body talks
big-boned and slow.
Talks only when spoken to,
having known one man
for these years.
A face turned towards the wall,
back arched,
has talked through distances.
Sad that way.
Makes it hard to talk to another.

This woman's heart talks
in moans.
Held in gentle, lean fingers
could sing
moon-drenched summer evenings
on the plains.
Instead
leans against a beer-soaked bar,
thumps to a two-step.
Makes it hard to talk at all.

Oklahoma you are the wind.

Oklahoma
you are the wind.

Relentless
you endure.
Ta-dse win,
    Wind Woman
    move through us.
Oklahoma
you are the rivers
swift and deep
and red.
Ni-shu-dse win,
    River Woman
    move through us
'cause
you are our blood
shed no more
    no more.
And eyes
emptying themselves
of dust
and heat
and promises
    no more
    no more
and our waiting
and our patience.
Oklahoma
you are the twilight
when sun and moon
share the same sky.
You are the child
born from the thighs
of this twilight.
Pe-dse win,
    Fire Woman
    move through us
'cause
you are our lover
whispering
in cool prairie grass
and stars.
Stars never lie.
Remember Oklahoma
you are woman
and remember
whose woman you are.

Separation.

The women at work tolerate
my ways.
Never remembering the days of the week,
setting my clock
by the first robin and
the first rays of morning sun
streaming across the half-empty bed.
Nothing in the mirror I recognize anymore.
No simmering pots of chili
in the kitchen,
no beans to soak and salt.
No cast iron skillet on the stove
waiting for floured hands
patting out dough with a pinch of cinnamon.

My boy worries about me,
the way I push away food,
my one syllable sentences,
the sorrow that comes and goes
behind my eyes.
I mark my calendar,
Raccoon Moon waning,
arrival of winter,
thinking it will never end
this going
this leaving.
Comes hard.

BRONWYN MILLS

TWO POEMS

Separatism

(after Grenada & other invasions,
fall, 1983)

There is a war going on as we
rest, soft as ferns. New. Naked.
I feel each drop of sweat dampen
your waist, the hollows below your
bones, in dark hair protecting your neck—
so easy to flow into each others' arms,
to float in the tidal pool of our bed.

In the tropics, there is a war going on.
Do we think it doesn't touch us
here, in this magic circle of salt-
smelling flesh, where I taste mangoes
inside your thighs, you taste them in mine?

Outside papers say: INVASION.
HUNDREDS DEAD. Men go down hard
on boundaries they do not understand, mix
violence with sex, don't know the brown
people they circle in their beds, people
who are bound by hunger, who do not own
their own sweat, women who do not rest
in each others' arms—

or anywhere.

Hoofed Animals in a Spanish Zoo

". . . the witches sayd they consorted openly
with the beast with cloven hooves."
—ms. from the Inquisition

-I-

(quagga*

the plaque does not say, head
struck with shadows womb
hollowed by oxygen and
sunlight died
in a white man's cage
it says
"quagga extinto")

-II-

la dama gazelle

"forma manadas pequenas
durante las migraciones estacionales
el numero en cada manada puede llegar
hasta seis ciento.

alimentacion: plantas del desierto."

yaweh named them beasts
of the field but, look
at this living in the dustcloud:
each stands still on icicles
each body is a temple
for the grass, always waiting
for the wind to start, for electricity
to ignite these small hooves.

one of them moves upright horns, polishing
the air about her. but there is no
wind yet, no lion
lumbering toward sun
and fresh meat. so she follows the liturgy
of accustomed movement,
appropriate numbers. she eats
bitter herbs. men come
to observe
and kill her.

---

*qwah-ha: half-horse, half-zebra in appearance.

-III-

Mira! mira! una gnu de barba blanca!

"viaja en manadas de cinco
a diez y cinco dirigidas por un
macho; en ocasion viaja en
manadas de ciento o mas, dirigidas
por varios machos. Vivenden
cerca del agua."

look! a child says, the tree
has eyes, little eyes!
before knotted trunks, cherubim stare
across a sea of glass. they align
themselves perfectly beside
bare rocks
worn sand, stonehenge of many females
masked by men who call them odd
and incongruous. they dream of wings
rising like mist from their backs:

then the oldest will stand up
gunwales swaying, tilt hard
little feet they will batter their
leader and drive him out.

they settle their haunches into familiar
dust, chew the food that is given them,
wish for the apocalypse which has not come.

-IV-

la tapir, sudamericana

"duerme en malezas y en el bosque
durante el dia, viaja sola
o en parejas
en la noche."

who sleeps all day? who sucks
green juice from plants? who
whispers behind feathery leaves?

(I sleep under a thirsty tree,
I am not a dancer of the plains.)

goddess of dirt and spit, held up
to the moon for luck,
listen!
listen to time
marking the trees with blood.

slow as a sumi wrestler, she
moves alone behind nightwinds:
she is not beautiful as we had hoped,
she is not made in our image. we
have not watched her close enough
to know
where the resemblance lies.

---

1. *quagga* has no translation. The phrase "quagga extinto" means "quagga—extinct."

2. The *dama gazelle* (or just plain gazelle) "forms small herds; during seasonal migrations their number can increase to as much as 600 in a herd. food: desert plants."

3. Look! Look! A white-bearded gnu! "travels in herds of 5–115 headed by a male leader; occasionally they travel in groups of 100 or more, led by several males. They live near water."

4. The South American tapir "sleeps in the underbrush or in the woods during the day, travels alone or in pairs during the night."

RENT, Coming Arms & Legs (Detail)

RENT, POWER I

CAROLE BYARD
RENT Drawings

RENT and POWER III

RENT, Space Mid-Air

RENT, Night Coming On Gently

RENT, Moving Up

RACHEL GUIDO DEVRIES
THREE POEMS

Sea Stones

"The kind you pick up and stick
in your pocket, not thinking once
why it was they were lying there at all."
P. E. McGrath, Provincetown

Nothing could measure the first circling
The gulls were so random never settling
for the small part of sea just beyond
our kitchen window We hovered at the table
singing melancholy tunes of love lost
but really it was passion's turning
to calm that alarmed us

Once in July we laughed all day on the beach
Your freckles began to appear and I
squirmed all over the blanket noticing a shift in air:
time and its motion and the way we knew something reckless
in us had changed forever

The moon came full four times magic
number half of your luck and I
was turning the color of a penny over
and over in my hands Prayer and sacrifice
in the sand and sea stones we collected
seeking one that would yield to light

August Psilocybin and the ocean's
shimmer at low tide so much life and
the hermit crabs skittering with their homes intact
You moved into melancholy twilight full of recognition
and light so tender my heart ached watching

That night the last full circle anchored in the sky
like a perfect stone: "Harvest Moon" you said
gazing upward

Homecoming/Homegoing

And so I return in fall
to this other view this other
blessing Where I saw the sea
on days my heart was breaking
and it was a miracle of vision
I now see the trees and the different
sky of autumn I witness
the wisdom pure and clear as
a whistle in air Understanding
is a phenomenon of nature and the
falling away of gesture holding
the heart is the beginning of a lifetime

Thinking of the sea in the country
I can hear the sparrows and
the gulls just as clearly
The wide wide sky is sensation
so large and this is the place
I've always lived but have
just begun to recognize
Here where I can taste the
lowest tide on my skin and
the air is scented with sea
And here where the rustle
of leaves and the foghorn
together are home and again
the breaking heart/sea takes
its time and it is in me

It is all only love, beginning
an endearment or the meaning of holy

Coastal Travelling

Silence, so long, the night stops.
Morning opens, a tiny tiny bird
flutters near the edge of sleep,
chirps soft against my ear:
Swim Swim as though your life

depended on it

as though sleep
were a raft for floating,
as though time
were a red and white beach-ball
bobbing to the sea's gentler
rhythm, as though you could
choose a direction, follow it,
swimming sleek as a seal
stopping only to sun

to bask on a rock along
a foreign coast, where the heat
is so familiar you lie defenseless
and brave Later, catch
fish or listen to the clams'
whisssh against water, later
lie by the fire's edge,
a lover's tongue caressing
your sleek and sunny body
salty, glowing like a pearl
in the sand at moonlight:

Settle for dreaming, ear
pressed to conch shell, heart
against sand at the edge, at
the very edge of the sea

SUSAN JORDAN

AMERICAN PICTURES

the sisters and brothers stand in the field
wild grasses shoot up to their knees
Mary Oakes, lined face under the sunbonnet
Sarah Oakes Jeter, her broad calm face
under a man's hat, her body stands
firm in the field among flowers
four of her brothers are there
Joel, Tom, Doc and Lorenzo, each body's shape
rumpled and unique, behind them
a mule in harness and trees

these stories we've heard all our lives
Sarah, one-eighth Choctaw
her granddaughters remember her
full of love and laughter, strong as earth
with her husband Joshaway ran a school
for Indian boys, one night yellow flames
lick wooden walls, the fire speaking in tongues
next morning old Choctaw woman
picks through smoking ash, coming with a sack
for her grandson's bones

Sarah sister of Mary, sister of Bess
who was crippled falling from a fence
she had a lover who disappeared
and one evening when they were sitting on the porch
taking the evening air, he came riding
out of nowhere, and poured a sackful
of gold dollars into Bess's lap
and rode off again, never to be seen
they heard later he'd been shot somewhere
robbing a train

snapshots from the Forties
in Hugo or Seminole, Mom and her sisters
in summer dresses or caps and gowns
arms around each other, Mama and Granny
this matriarchy, sisterhood that was my family
now lost to death and distance
Sarah mother of Hattie, Harriet Selena
Hattie mother of Geraldine Rebecca
mother of Susan Harriet and Clarke
father of Corinna and Sarah Rebecca

the year's 1882, Hattie and her sister Gertrude
aged two and four in white dresses
bare feet and legs dangling, pink hair ribbons
colored in by hand. The scene's a steamboat
on the Red River at Wright's Landing
Texas side, on the boat they're making crackers
and Hattie always remembered the first taste
and that day by it. Gertrude died in childhood
in her 20's, and Hattie, blind at 95
climbing out of her deathbed again and again
to go looking for Gertrude and Papa

the girl on the swing
hung on a tall tree, Miss Hattie at 16
the Red River Valley's the pink-brown-grey
of dust and dreams, Hattie's new dress
and her trusting face, split rail fence
scuffed dirt under the swing, thick ropes
held motionless for the camera
when the picture was taken was she
child enough still to swing high?

blind, shuttled from daughter to daughter
she took up a corner in our house
rocking, clicking her false teeth
humming offkey the fundamentalist hymns
of her youth, there is a happy land
far, far away, where saints in glory stand
bright, bright as day

Sarah was Granny to Mom and her sisters
Hattie was Grandma to us, less cosy
somehow less approachable, who thought
her father a better man than her husband
and loved more than her daughters
her only son, Army officer and alcoholic
something she chose not to see

Hattie daughter of Sarah
daughter of Harriet
daughter of Eve
daughter of the Choctaw woman
whose name is lost
whose name is disowned
Aunt Johnnie as a child ashamed
to raise her hand when the teacher said
those of Indian blood could get government aid

Harriet daughter of Eve
one quarter Choctaw, maps out
a direction for her family
forbids Sarah to play with Indian kids
or to speak the language
except for the Choctaw hymnbook
songs for sweet Jesus

Harriet married red-haired Tom Oakes
a Scot and a builder of Indian schools
and councilhouses on government contract
owner of slaves and tracts of land
in the Red River valley
Choctaw exiled from tribal lands in 1831
from the mother hill of Nanih Wayeh
after the treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek
90,000 Indians driven from Five Nations land
three million Africans brought on the ships

lost mother, the river of history
bears you away, where will I dig your bones
from the earth, to bear them piously
on my wanderings, how should I stand
on the leaning hill in Mississippi
trace Oklahoma cousins I've never seen
where will I find you, red weaver
red expert craftswoman, Lady Rainbow
Lady Iguana, what would you say to me
very quick, very holy her words

Hattie, Hatai Wugti
Sarah, Spider Grandmother
I throw your star quilt over my bed
the red patches from Sarah's dresses
your favorite color, star cloth for visions
you denied. Brother Tom married Margaret
half Choctaw and dark-skinned
unhappy invalid as long as her husband was alive
Margaret one of the Iron Stob Choctaw
faces tattooed with bridles, so Joshaway told
but Sarah hushed up that kind of talk

sing the moon up
dew falling on the fields
water moving underground
Lady of the Golden Bells
you talked to snakes and spiders
the men were afraid, the men
wanted power, at the foot of Snake Hill
you were dismembered

it's no good, can't follow you
to The Place Where They Cried
follow the Red River north and west
my history's white bread and whitemen's books
between the lines, women with no choices
a people with no choices except the choice
the body makes, to keep moving or fall
become part of the trail, leaving bones

as a sign in the dust. It's futile or worse
to reach back for roots in sentimental longing
to turn up on the hill of Nineh Wayeh
or in all the bars of the Red River valley
to say, Uncle Bud was the last of us
on the Old Rolls, I'm a stranger here myself

Harriet and Tom married in Mississippi
sailed up the Red River in style
on one of the steamboats Hattie remembered
when she was a little Christian girl
eating crackers with her sister
"okla" means "people", "houma" means "red"
"Red People," that unknown country

since we have landed at this place
about 20 have died, are continuing to die
about 200 miles from Red River
two large deep streams nearly impassable
this they had to perform or perish
there being no provision on the way
a heavy sleet bowing tree trunks
under pressure of hunger old women
and children without any covering
except a cotton underdress
I gave a party leave to enter a field
in which pumpkins were, they would not enter
without leave though starving
these they ate raw with the greatest avidity
the women and children had been
from four to six days without anything to eat

storms and floods, cholera filth
in the Arkansas River, the whites refuse
medical help, the road is lined with the sick
death is hourly among us
on the trail to the land of Red People
bounded by two rivers, the Red and the Arkansas
where they cleared land, planted corn, built houses
until the Arkansas overflowed its banks
and swept it all away

fewer pictures from Daddy's side
of the family tree, his father
a pale young bookkeeper in a high collar
marries Susie Harbison & leaves Philadelphia
going back to the land, green fields by the Delaware
but dies of TB in 1905, leaving her penniless
with six kids and one on the way

Dad was five when his father died
he ran to his mother
and threw his arms around her
crying "Get me a new daddy"
hard hands pulled him away
he was told how wicked he was
and put in a locked room, alone

Lord have mercy on the widow's son
living on Christian charity on the vestry farm
his older brothers had to leave school early
his older sisters were strange girls
who'd run upstairs when visitors came
and pull the children down on the floor to hide

Manasquan River runs out to sea
over the bar, strong currents pull
between jetties at the inlet
Manasquan meaning island of squaws
we were told, degenerate form of a word
in Algonquian language. The only Algonquin
left in town was the movie theatre
dark cavern flickering with light impressions
John Wayne kicks a fat squaw and laughs
the dark place connected to all the shops
on Main Street through an underground passage
that could emerge anywhere, your head
popping up into anyone's world

the car is aimed at me, accelerating
as aged four I step off the curb
into the air of possibility
I don't see it coming, but a godlike hand
probably father's, pulls me out of the way
just as his ex-wife Pauline
who'd spread rumors of his impotence
aims her '51 Chevy at my chubby legs

he believes he does it out of love, to make me
change: father ridiculing my body
thighs as big as a woman's at 14
tits that hang down, you'll never get
a husband or a job. I remember
the distaste in his voice. To be acceptable
is to be out of this body, into
some body else, not as a snake sheds its skin
revealing the new self underneath
but to mourn in hospital toilet
in dormitory labyrinth my being
in the body, "that first place
where right and wrong are recognized"

one more river, the other kids
used to tease me, one more river
and that wiiiiide river is Jordan
look over Jordan, I got a home across the water
red water as thick as blood, milky river of stars
flows still across heaven as I lie
wrapped in Granny's star quilt
on the knotted grass of earth

Unknown Woman, Cherokee earth goddess
an old woman whose body is food
whose spirit feeds hungry children
unknown women, we reclaim our mother
the earth, reclaim our bodies divided from us
by the pollution of greed and lies

Unknown Woman
the woman who is alone, the woman who is a stranger
the woman whose body was found in the orchard
the woman whose body was found in the cornfield
daughters of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo
lost mother your bones are earth
so when I touch the earth I touch you
water, air and fire, you are my body
so when I love my body I love you
your name is lost so when I find my name
I find you, and when I come into my power
I re-member you

notes

Lady Rainbow, Red-Aged-Lady-Craftswoman-Weaver: The Mayan goddess Ix Chel, Red Weaving Crone aspect of the Lady of Earth & Moon.

Nineh Wayeh: Sacred hill in Mississippi where the Choctaw emerged from the underworld, or where they planted the sacred pole on their emigration from the west.

Hatai Wugti, Spider Grandmother: Creator goddess of the Hopi & other tribes, who weaves Time & the cosmos.

Lady of the Golden Bells: The Aztec moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, daughter of Coatlicue, "Snake-skirted Lady." She was dismembered by her evil brother Huitzilopochtli the war god, whose priests usurped power, substituting the reign of the bloodthirsty god for that of Coyolxauhqui & her gentle brother Quetzalcoatl.

The Place Where They Cried: The Trail of Tears, referring to the genocidal removal of the Cherokee by Andrew Jackson from their ancestral lands in North Carolina. The Choctaw & other tribes were exiled from their lands between 1831 & 1838. Their emigration was encouraged by some members of the tribe who had become wealthy & assimilated into white culture.

Unknown Woman: Ohoyo Osh Chishba, Cherokee earth goddess.

Damn My Excuses

JULIA STEIN

Carol, here are my reasons for giving up,
a few of us rowed against the wind with the poor,
we were smashed,
my friends the stars disappeared from the sky,
one by one giving up
only I was left half-glimmering in the blackness,

you never gave up in your hospital bed,
how you loved looking out the window,
said looking "can be an act of resistance,"
showed me the circles on your arm, TB, leukemia,
a circle for every disease they tested,
kept looking and looking out the window
you doctored my ills,
encouraged me to try again,

damn my excuses,
let me glue the broken parts of myself together,
let the deadened spaces within me begin to grow,
let me come alive again.

Jeanne Lance

Babies Parade

The summer is oppressive
I've stopped midway
to an old end, but
the telephone is ringing
the present doesn't yield perceptions
simple cafes and again tourists

I can't stand the fixtures
men push bikes along the street
wind blows my hair
soft wind fraying the plumed
fountain
not that seasons run down
& the breeze still blows

But a young man strides
hard before me, his boots
clomp on the brick walk

I don't care that people pass
talking or playing the radio
nor even that it's romantic
to wear open-necked shirts
I'm no monument
& a positive stance won't cheer me

Nothing could except your face
that promises
youth isn't a lost cause

A grey-haired woman sits down
opens a book about EST
Ah, wisdom

There are tears in my eyes
because you aren't here
& lives are unfinished
as skirts wrinkled over asses
clinging to muscled legs

POETRY AND RECOVERY: An Interview with Joan Larkin

Elly Bulkin

The following is an edited transcript of an interview I did with Joan Larkin on December 20, 1986, eleven years almost to the day that her first poetry book, *Housework*, and *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* (of lesbian poetry,) which we co-edited, appeared. In 1981, Joan and I co-edited *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*. In Spring, 1986, Granite Press published Joan's second poetry book, *A Long Sound*.

Though between 1975 and 1981 we spent many hours together reading manuscripts, proofing galleys, and doing promotion, during that time I managed—until we were no longer working together—never to consider the possibility that Joan was an alcoholic. Doing this interview gave us a chance to talk about writing, alcoholism, and recovery.

ELLY: There's been a 10-year gap between your first book, Housework, *and* A Long Sound, *so I was very excited to finally see this book. And I was also wondering what you see as the major things which contributed to the long period of time between the books.*
JOAN: I was struggling with alcoholism and drug dependency, though I thought all kinds of other things were going on. It's hindsight and being in recovery that help me understand that I was sick. For a few years, I was like something that had just crawled out of a chrysalis. I was vulnerable and raw. I didn't know yet what I had to write about. I didn't know that recovery is a gradual process. In time I had more energy, and things started to come into focus. I think that most of what happens in writing a poem begins outside awareness anyway.

And there's also another answer to your question. The publication of *Housework* in December, '75, as you know—you were involved—coincided with a lot of activity for *Out & Out Books*, the publication of *Amazon Poetry*, Jan Clausen's *After Touch*, Irena Klepfisz' *periods of stress*. There were readings, sharing of poetry, the excitement of connection with other women. I experienced what I think many other writers have: when I saw that there was an audience for this poetry, which was really amazing to me—it was part of the explosion of feminist writing that had begun—I got very self-conscious about writing and lost the sense of play about it. I was very aware of the potential audience—the criticism, the needs, the concerns, the standards of the very same people who were making it possible for us to be out there with our work. I had to let go of self-consciousness in order to get back to the place I have to go down into to write—to play the kinds of games with structures of language, as well as to tap the feelings that make me want to write a poem. That took a long time.

ELLY: You were talking also about a two-year gap between the time you started the process of recovery and the time you began seriously writing. Were you writing during that time?
JOAN: I was trying to. I went to Cummington for a summer. "In Western Massachusetts, 16 Months Sober" came out of that period. But I was pretty miserable. I had a tape recorder I was talking into—long autobiographical stories—but I didn't know where they were leading yet. I couldn't stand the not knowing; I thought I was wasting time.

I wrote a 4-page single-spaced poem that was the basis for "Broken Girl." I knew there was too much in it, it wasn't finished, it wasn't really a poem. It was a narrative full of details from the life of a street person. People said things like "It's powerful" or "It's a nice story," politely not saying, "This isn't poetry." It wasn't until four years later that I was able to sit down on the bed one night and meditate on those four pages and say, Let me get out of this the poem that's in it. And that material fused with other things I'd been thinking about, the healing power of sounds, and became that poem. Some other poems in the book came from that time, too, honed down and rewritten in 1985.

The next summer, I went back to Cummington and thought I was going to work on a novel. I wrote several chapters of two different possible novels, and at the end of the summer, a week before I had to go home, I suddenly saw what the subject was—I'm still working on that novel. What happened was feelings that had been sealed up in me for years finally broke out, and I started to mourn the loss of my father who had died 20 years earlier. I had never really touched any of my feelings about him. That was the beginning of an emotional unblocking.

Up to that point I'd been "acting as if"—I'd hunch over the desk and try to remember what I'd been taught about how to do it. I had a lot of self-centered fear. I couldn't tolerate my mistakes, and you have to do that, to write. After the book was published, one reviewer questioned whether these were "confessional" poems (that pejorative word!). I didn't know whether they were confessional poems either! I worried a lot. Was this poetry or my obsession? Would anybody see me as just dumping pieces of my life onto paper? I felt sick writing some of the most revealing stuff.

What I went through was just a drawn-out version of what I think always happens when you're writing poetry. You have to go through many layers of feeling, your awareness grows, and a more conscious kind of shaping takes place. I didn't know that what I was doing was part of my writing process and there would be a book. I was in the dark, and scared. For most of my life, writing has been the center of my idea of my identity. To have that idea of yourself and to think you're not writing is upsetting. Meanwhile, lots of people were asking me, "When is your next book going to come out?"

ELLY: How did you get from the point of feeling that maybe this is just your personal thing and nobody wants to hear it to putting together a batch of poems which felt finished enough to put in a book?
JOAN: I came to think of this book as not belonging just to me—that it was given to me. There are voices other than mine in my work. In my recovery, I became more willing to let go of my ego so I could be more open to hearing the voices of my community and to identifying with those voices. Even though there are some

specific autobiographical details in some of the poetry, a lot came from my feelings of identification with other people. That identification is what makes recovery possible, and what makes writing possible at this point.

To recover I had to first let go of my denial that I had a problem with substances. It took a lot of listening to other people with similar histories. I identified emotionally, but I was constantly saying things like, "I wasn't *that* bad." There was a gradual series of surrenders. I think of this now as coming awake and understanding that people are connected.

And that, of course, has to have an impact on the way that I write. My writing for at least three years now has been more of an opening up and listening, not feeling that I have to make the poem happen. I'd done that before, but I thought that was wrong. There's always the wonderful final point in writing a poem when you put in a semicolon, and you stare at it for two hours, and then you take it out again. I love that part of it, but I was trying to do that at the beginning.

ELLY: All this is part of what you started to talk about before: the history of the book and how you got support—not just as someone in recovery, but as a poet who wanted to write about that process and to get the poems done and *published.*

JOAN: I taught part-time at Sarah Lawrence in the writing program. The people on the writing faculty were the most supportive I'd ever met in academia. Allan Gurganis was one, and Jane Cooper kept saying, "Of course, you should have a book! Joan, it's *there.* I keep hearing you read these poems." At Sarah Lawrence, the faculty reads. My first week there, I read "Rape" and exposed myself in front of those complete strangers! I wanted to sob after the reading. But students and colleagues spoke to me; they'd *heard* the poem. Colleagues said "That was really wonderful!" I thought, have I died and gone to heaven? Here people read poetry, they *care* about it.

Then Bea Gates reached out to me. We had dinner and exchanged some poetry. I mentioned to her that I was thinking I was going to try to get out a chapbook somehow, but I didn't want to publish it myself. A few weeks later, Bea called me up on the phone and said, "Why are we talking about a chapbook? I want to publish a whole book of poetry." I said to her, "I'm really very happy that you think these poems are worth talking about doing a book with. But I don't think I have a book." And she said, "You will have." I was moved by her trust that the process I was in would yield up more poems.

ELLY: What do you see in the poems now that you've pulled them together into a book?

JOAN: I see themes of recovery, of letting go and of the persistence of the life force. Even the poems about very painful experiences I can see in that perspective now. "The Blackout Sonnets" have their comic side.

I knew I wanted to write poems in the voices of recovering alcoholics. That's what I feel is the center of the book, the basis of the rest of it, though there are poems in the book that are about childhood and adolescence and the family.

ELLY: There's probably something easier about seeing a book only in its final version. I remember when I was working on my essay for Yours in Struggle *I couldn't remember what the latest version was and what I had left out from earlier drafts. I think there's*

something about being very much caught up on the inside of the writing process, especially when the subject feels scary, that makes it take a while to get a sense of the final product.
JOAN: The image in my mind is of a snake shedding its skin. One thing the book is for me is the willingness to expose the most painful material in the interest of going beyond it and sharing it and identifying with other people who've experienced the same things.

ELLY: I wonder about what you're saying in relationship to Housework. *Reading* A Long Sound, *I was very struck by how much more concrete and personal those poems were. I felt almost as if some of the poems in* Housework *were unintentionally distanced, sometimes through metaphor or allegory. It was not something which had ever bothered me about* Housework. *But, when I went back to it after reading* A Long Sound, *the contrast between the books seemed very sharp.*
JOAN: People have said to me that they think this book is stronger. The earlier poems *were* more distanced. Writing *A Long Sound* has come partly out of being willing to expose more and more.

I started writing "The Blackout Sonnets" after spending an evening with two poets whom I know; we were reading each other's work and Emily Dickinson and Cheryl Clarke and a lot of favorites. Something about that evening excited me so much that I went home, and at 4 o'clock in the morning, I began writing in a notebook what was the beginning of "The Blackout Sonnets." I felt like throwing up as I was writing them. I really felt sick. How can I *tell* people about this? I'd think, Should I let my mother read this? I went to Maine for a week with three women writers and continued drafting the poems. I was scared to share the work with *them*. But when I did, they asked very penetrating questions.

As Bea and I were working together on the final draft of the manuscript, she gave me a very sensitive response to the poems. She suggested that the abortion was important and I needed to let that be more in the poem. One of the reasons that the poems in *A Long Sound* are more direct is that I had had the experience by the time I wrote the book of five years of being part of an anonymous community. People in recovery share very intimate details. *That*, as much as anything else, gave me permission.

ELLY: When I first read Housework, *I didn't make any association between you and the abortion you describe. Part of my separation of you from the experience had to do with trying to avoid the trap of reading every poem as if the poet were speaking for or about herself. Even in relation to the poems about abortion in* A Long Sound, *I wouldn't have made the connection quite so definitively unless you had said, as you did at your reading, "This is a true story," and you obviously meant it was* your *true story. There are several poems in the second section of* A Long Sound *which have various narrators who are clearly not speaking in your voice.*
JOAN: It works the other way too: just because I am writing in someone else's voice doesn't mean that I don't identify with every bit of the experience in some way.

ELLY: When you started thinking about writing was there any place to go to find writers, specifically poets, who dealt with alcoholism?
JOAN: There was almost nothing, except for Ray Carver. Sharon Olds has some poems about alcoholism in the family. But not really from the same perspective.

It's beginning to happen now. There's Judy Grahn's poem about being the adult child of alcoholics and Judith's book about recovery.* But there really wasn't anything then. There's still the myth of alcohol as inspiration and the specialness of the alcoholic poet. On the other hand, this is an extremely alcoholic culture, and alcoholism is a disease of denial. It's stigmatizing to say, "I'm an alcoholic."

Recently, I think there's been more acknowledgment that we're spiritual beings. Some kind of spirituality is part of recovery. That doesn't have to mean finding God in any of His or Her traditional forms. But I don't believe in recovery as an act of will power. It's a surrender. You have to ask for help.

ELLY: What changes have you experienced, especially in terms of community expectations—a poet should be writing about X and presenting Y image of the feminist and lesbian-feminist communities?
JOAN: I did not write many of the poems in *Housework* as a conscious feminist. Sharing the poems with others, publishing them, the involvement with *Out & Out Books*, co-editing our anthologies, all that was the conscious feminism. When I'm actually in the process of working on a poem, I need to clear out all of the people in my head. If politics, commitment, or anything else were higher on the agenda than telling the truth and going deeper into the truth, whatever that truth may be, I don't think it would be poetry. Writing poetry really means to me going out on some edge where it feels very, very dangerous and hanging out there for a while and seeing what it feels like. It means doing it while experiencing the fear about it. Before I write, I pray to be able to tell the truth and to be useful.

Teaching poetry, I encourage students to include as much as possible at first. Part IV of Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish" begins, "Oh, mother, what have I left out?" I tell my students, "Ask yourself, 'Oh, mother, what have I left out?' and get it all in there." Then you cut. There's a piece Sharon Olds wrote about being a student of Muriel Rukeyser's and her instructions to cut everything nonessential—and then cut some more. That's what I understand about the process.

I heard a feminist poet read last week at the Donnell, and I kept thinking, "These poems are so correct. They have all the right values." But something was missing. They were pamphlets with metaphors. Poets have to have an *ear*. That's basic!

There are poems in *A Long Sound* I thought might make feminists angry, and some that have been disturbing to the people who support my work; for example, the poem about an aborted child, "Open Question," and "Rape." People have responded by saying, "Well, I see why you were afraid to read that."

ELLY: What was it about the poems that made you feel that way?
JOAN: In "Rape," the speaker keeps asking the question, was it rape if, in effect, I participated, asking herself whether she is responsible as well as being the victim. I don't think that women are responsible when they get raped. But the poem acknowledges that low self-esteem enters into the narrator's participation in her own victimization. And I think knowing that helps one to stop raping one's self in

*Judy Grahn, *Descent to the Roses of the Family* (1986; $1 from Common Lives/Lesbian Lives, P.O. Box 1553, Iowa City, IA 52244); Judith McDaniel, *Metamorphosis and Other Poems of Recovery* (1986, Long Haul Press, $4 from Inland, P.O. Box 261, East Haven, CT 06512).

all the possible ways. But I was afraid that people would hear this poem as blaming.

Some people tell me that they are disturbed by "Open Question." For me, it's a case of not denying complexities. Abortion's being legal doesn't mean a woman might not have to go through emotional suffering and terrible guilt. It's a loss, there's no question about it. "My clinging womb," which is a line in the poem, really exists. Some people reading it were concerned by the fact that the speaker in the poem directly addresses the "fetus." I think of it rather as the image of the child that she wanted to have—people thought that it was a political statement to address a fetus, as if this poem were right-to-life propaganda. I hope not. I've had an illegal abortion, and I'm glad that it's legal now to have them. But I don't think that makes it easy as a process to go through.

I *wanted* that poem in the manuscript. I think that working on the craft of a poem and really honing it down and getting it where I want it as a structure of language is my best defense against the fears I have about exposing these ideas that I think will be disturbing to some people. That was one I worked on a lot. I published it in a much earlier version; it didn't change that much but I think that it changed enough for me so that I felt it was a poem finally.

ELLY: In "The Blackout Sonnets" the structure is terrifically tight. I was wondering about involvement in form as a means of distancing. Is that happening and if so, how consciously is it happening?

JOAN: This is hindsight: The poem in *Housework* that I thought was most dangerous for me was "Rhyme of My Inheritance" and that's also the most formed poem. I once saw a videotape of Anne Sexton reading and she said that form was the superego of the poem that allowed the nasty little id to say whatever it wanted. Whether you use Freudian terms or not, the tight structure makes me feel a little safer about saying what it feels dangerous to say. Even some of the poems that appear to be in open forms have another kind of structure going on. The narratives—I can think of at least four poems in the book like this—are based on the "qualification," a kind of extemporaneous talk about illness and recovery which I've heard over and over again, so I had that structure in mind.

The harder it is for me to say something the more comfortable I am saying it in a form. Certainly "The Blackout Sonnets" are the tightest forms in the book and the fact that it was a crown of sonnets both protected me and drew me on. I combined this very restrictive form with a very opening up or permissive kind of first line, which was a variation of something that Muriel Rukeyser used to assign, which was to begin a poem with "I could not say . . ." or "I couldn't tell you . . ." This all happened a little outside of awareness; it was afterwards that I understood the interplay of the opening line and the form.

But I also got a chance to play with the problem of using a traditional form and trying to keep the language speakable, which has always been a value of mine in poetry. I'd say things over and over again out loud and read them out loud to people. I want it to sound like effortless music—inevitable—not chained by the form.

ELLY: I felt that it worked wonderfully, partly because the form doesn't undercut the emotion in some self-conscious sort of way. That's one of the things I like about the sequence—despite the fact that one poetry editor wrote you, "It's the '80s now and we don't need poems with all this anguish in them." Your poems remain very pared down—almost entirely single-page poems. I felt some of the impact of "The Blackout Sonnets" came from its being seven pages long.

JOAN: A friend of mine who's an adult child of an alcoholic and also a poet, a very good poet, says that she learned to say things fast, to get them out very fast. I suspect something has made me feel safer controlling the anxiety of making a statement by getting it out in its pithiest form—I want to get to the end of it before getting cut off or wiped out. And it's like a rapier-thrust if it's said as efficiently as possible. I wanted in "The Blackout Sonnets" not to let the energy flag. It is a long poem, seven times fourteen lines. I guess it's the longest poem I've written. I'm excited about that. I've been working on a novel for a couple of years and I'm putting the pieces out in front of me now because I want to try to make a longer sound. So I have been more comfortable with that shorter form, but I'd like to be able to say more, there's always more to say about the same thing, always deeper to go.

Joan Larkin, Housework (Out & Out Books; $3.50 from Inland Book Co., P.O. Box 261, East Haven, CT 06512)

Joan Larkin, *A Long Sound: A Book of Poems* ($8.95 from Granite Press, Box 7, Penobscot, ME 04476; available to bookstores through Bookpeople, Bookslinger, Inland, and Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance)

Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, eds., *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology* (Persephone Press; $10.95 from The Gay Presses of New York, P.O. Box 294, Village Station, NY, NY 10014, and Inland).

BROKEN GIRL

seconal and wine I lived on the street
I slept wherever night found me
abandoned buildings boxes always
it wants more from you
it wants you
to drink
it doesn't mind if you die
I didn't mind

there came a night I had nothing
I went on a roof to kill myself
I prayed first You
make the decision let me die
or live
a long sound
Wa . . . the sound of life
entered my body like a breath

held me it was warm
a bell hung in my heart
a bell of feeling
glowed in me
then the silence peace
it was then I got sober
after a vision you have to do it
so the next one can come to you

I want you to know this
sometimes I think I won't make it
yesterday voices were singing
kill yourself this
goes on for years after the drugs
right now I'm alive grateful
if you find it hard to believe
look at me

Joan Larkin

MARJORIE AGOSIN

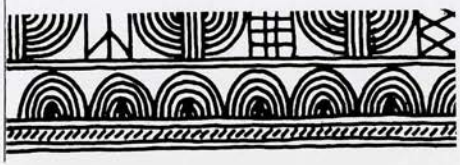
Ella iluminaba regresos

Ella iluminaba regresos:
olía colores:
una lavanda espesa como los cielos,
una magenta de sueños,
una cobriza melena de cordilleras andinas.
Se imaginaba esa ciudad ausente, cautiva,
el oleaje de ciertos pinos al atardecer,
los barrios con sus artesanos,
esos rostros de desierto
deseando hablar entre las
palabras que no se pueden
oír.

Recordaba los alfareros,
y añoraba ese olor putrefacto
a pobrezas y nuáseas del tercer mundo,
añoraba las míticas cebollas,
los peces palpitando en la espesura azulina de su país.
El sonido de un idioma familiar
a sabiendas que entre el tierno murmullo de abuelas extraviadas,
rondaban ratas y gendarmes.

Pero ella simplemente prefería volver
al patio morado de la imaginación,
donde pelaba papas con su nana Delfina
y aprendía los secretos prohibidos del espíritu santo.

Sí, sí volver
a la tierra prisionera
al fin de cuentas
su país.



She conjured up returnings

She conjured up returnings:
smelled colors:
a heavy lavender like that of the sky,
a magenta taken from dreams,
a coppery mane of Andean peaks.
She imagined the absent city, captive city,
the billows of certain pines in the evening light,
the neighborhoods and the artisans,
faces of the desert
trying to speak between
words that cannot be
heard.

She thought of the potters,
she longed for the third world's rotten smell
of poverty and nausea,
longed for the mythical onions,
for fish throbbing in the azured depths of her country.
The sound of familiar speech
knowing that rats and policemen prowl in and out of the
tender murmurs of eccentric grandmothers.

But she simply preferred to go back
to the patio settled in the imagination,
where she peeled potatoes with the nana Delfina
and learned the forbidden secrets of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, yes go back
to the imprisoned land
in spite of all
her country.

tr. Cola Franzen

Tarde del 22 de Mayo

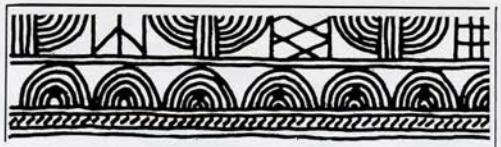
a Elena

Semi-abierta
como una luz entre los pinos,
o unas manos que desde la
cercanía
se sueñan,
rueda el olor a lilas
rueda una instancia y nada más
rueda el color del viento
de estaciones y comienzos.

Respiramos despiertos,
qué maravilla
soplar lilas en el aire
oler la vida
desde las lilas
como el nombre
de una buena y excéntrica
madrina.

Miremos las lilas,
que no son los presagios
de malos augurios
ni de famélicas raíces vecinas
ni de cuerpos descosidos bajo
los árboles desprendiendo fragancias
enconadas.

Ven, no me dejes, ven y
siéntate y forma
una palabra
entre los pasos seguros
de una
flor
lila
lilas.



Afternoon of the 22nd of May

to Elena

Half open
like a light between pines
or certain nearby hands
that are dreaming
wheels the scent of lilacs
wheels a moment and that's all
wheels the color of the wind
and the purple voice
of seasons and commencings.

We take a breath wide awake
what a wonder
to snatch lilacs from the air
smell life
from the
lilacs like
the name of
a benevolent and quirky
godmother.

Look at the lilacs
they are not signs
of bad luck
nor of famished roots nearby
nor of undone bodies beneath the
trees giving off guilt-ridden aromas.

Come don't leave me
come, sit beside me and make
a word
among the sure steps
of a flower
lilac
like.

tr. Cola Franzen

MARJORIE AGOSIN

DEA TRIER MORCH


DEA. 74

12/200 · 1974 · MED BYLT PÅ HOVEDET. DEA

5/200 · 1974 · MED BYLT PÅ RYGGEN. DEA

A.D.
KATE MILLETT

When I was a youngster, A.D. stood for Aunt Dorothy and, ironically, Ano Domina, as well—for I adored this aunt. A difficult and brilliant woman, very rich and very wonderful. She sent me to Oxford, but when I turned out to be a Lesbian and an artist, she disowned me. Her death twenty-five years later brought it all back again: infatuation, conflict, loss. "A.D." is an excerpt from the forthcoming book.

Isn't there some way to convert her shade into a friendly spirit? At the moment I heard of her death I had a wild second when I felt this might finally be my forgiveness. For don't people forgive when they die, let go, open their hands of all grudges and wrongs, bless or at least attain neutrality towards all the wrongs of life? I know she didn't die cursing me only because I know I was the last thing on her mind, an old woman bleeding to death internally whose doctor could not even find a remedy. It might have been years since she'd thought of me, and the me that she thought of might have been eight or eleven or twenty.

Or the forlorn fool who visited her the last visit of all, the one I can't bear to remember, the one when I was "crazy"—or said to be so, and, furious at the accusation, shaken by a plot two days before in New York whereby I had nearly been actually committed, I rambled on about how my younger sister Mallory was trying to have me locked up at Paine Whitney mental hospital. As my elder sister Sally had rather more successfully put me away six years before. Mad or not I had the fleeting impression of a tear on A.D.'s cheek once during this recitation; was she eternally patient or impatient with my vibrant paranoia? Was the tear out of pity for my troubles that summer—or out of sorrow that I was so disarranged in my mind? Did she side with me or Mallory? Surely I knew it was wrong to bear tales. Such inappropriate ones for a reconciliation—but I'd been struck again and needed comfort. Still more inappropriate evidently were the pile of books and manuscripts I would foist upon her as proof of my worthiness. And that was the last she would remember of me—that awful occasion. The summer of my discontent, having steered clear of capture and gotten off on my journeys first to St. Paul and then to an exhibition in Europe, I was still shaken, shakey, outraged. How foolish I must have appeared before those always censorious eyes, how lost a creature. I cringe to remember, remembering as soon as I heard of her death, that this was the last time we met. This was who I was the last time she saw me.

Problematic offspring: first she is queer, then turns artist and throws away her education, writes those dreadful books, and now it appears she is mad as well. Or suspected of it. At my previous incarceration, under Mother's aegis and on the advice of a heroic doctor she had located at the University of Minnesota, I had the gall to telephone my aunt at a point when my sanity trial was going well and I

could look forward to a life on the outside, dialing her up from the public phone-box in the ward with a dime that had escaped supervision. With Bemelman's *Fifi*, a book that my Aunt had given me in childhood clutched under my arm as a crutch while I dialed the number. Calling from a looney bin. I had found this old relic at Mother's while staying at her house the first night I arrived in town and rejoiced it still existed, the great scrawl of "To my adored niece Katie from her Aunt Dorothy" on the flyleaf. The next morning the white coats came at Mother's behest: the wonderful doctor thought it was wise to take the full step of commiting me since I had proved so devious and uncooperative at our interview the night before when I told him to be on his way: if I needed a shrink I'd find one myself in New York. By seven a.m. he had persuaded Mother to sign the papers and consign me to the state for good.

By the afternoon of that same day the civil liberties lawyers arrived to save me and I signed the papers demanding a sanity hearing. Then came days of the mad trial, a strenuous and humiliating procedure whose greatest ordeal was keeping silence while one is discussed for six hours at a time. One evening, after a day of this, when things were looking well for us, I was not out yet, but I would be—I gathered my courage and called my aunt. Her voice spun firmly and calmly at the other end. "Perhaps tomorrow when you are 'up' you should call again. And when you are 'better,' that is when you are out, you should come to see me."

It was equivocal of course. Holding on to Bemelman or letting go of him and depositing him on the floor while I organized the cigarette and the match and the dime and the phonebook—remember not to call the cottage but the house—it all seemed simple. Mother's side had put me away. Starting with Sally who did it last month in California. I got out of that by falsely swearing I was a voluntary patient. A ratty little game I played with the bully in charge who was afraid I would make trouble for having been involuntary to start with, ambulance drivers having nearly broken my arms while I looked on in astonishment. Sal had told me we were going to visit a psychiatrist: I presumed in an office. It turned out to be a locked ward. And then Mother takes the ball when, coming home from California to New York, I stop off at her insistence in St. Paul—and she has slammed the gates of hell closed again, maybe permanently. Until the good guys, the lawyers come. Then the folly and chicanery of court, the fustian and comedy of proving one's sanity: I go off each morning like Joan on her way to the Inquisition. Even prepared to be quizzed on the multiplication tables since the trial is in St. Paul, Ramsey County, and sanity in Ramsey is established by statute as having the multiplication tables in thorough good order.

The evening I called my aunt it was part of a strategy to keep or restore or retain my sanity against all this confusion. First I took a wonderful bath, the baths at the university hospital are both marble and glorious, the veins of the stone as old as time as pure as sculpture, as hard as history or the ancient world, the very memory or the planet's passing through the ages engraved, inlaid in deposits of fossil or metal petrified material running through them, the rubble of another world. And then a vision appeared, an old woman who was Sita and not Sita, who was an Egyptian and a gypsy, all the poor of the world but nobility in disguise—probably simply another patient or more likely an attendant, dark, mysterious. But sud-

denly fraught with enormous meaning to me: a profound compassion suffused me, the day in court vanished, the place itself. Or rather it converted itself from a hellhole crazyhouse to something as innocuous as my sorority house at college, here at this same university, only a few blocks away. Pass all this present unpleasantness off and congratulate the place on having decent bathtubs anyway; real marble, that's class. Basic materials, you can't beat it. If the whole place disintegrated or were demolished, including the bars on the windows, they ought to leave this intact, this is worthy of a real hospital.

And I emerged feeling young enough to tease the nurse about hopscotch and the Charleston, and the similarity between the two, and the checkerboard floor tiles before her desk, demonstrating a step. And no doubt persuading her of the congruity of being her prisoner at the same time. My good humor has persuaded me that she is not my jailor, merely a convenient presence like a hotel clerk, someone who knows the time and what day it is and the weather, someone to say hello and goodnight to. So I go off to my room for the dime. I have been waiting for the moment to spend this dime. It is time to call in the Milletts, I think, the other side of the family; we are winning in court and it is now time to check out the other team. If one team locks you up, the other team is likely to be on your side. After a lifetime of their rivalry and the division of loyalty, this is a logical conclusion.

It is possible that the lawyers have even appraised the Milletts, through my Aunt Dorothy, of my plight. They are in fact rather fancy St. Paul civil rights lawyers, do lots of pro bono work for the Indians in the state—my own case is to set a precedent in cases of lifelong commitment imposed upon Indians all the time here. The rationale being that if the state can put me away—education, publications, reputation, etc.—how very easy for an Indian in the north country: poverty, alcoholism, record of delinquency, lots of psychiatric drugs, no opportunity to demand a legal hearing. The attorneys are in fact very good men, but they are also an upper class-outfit from an old family, my aunt's own world; the head of the firm is one of her very best friends. Though they came to my aid for my own sake and for those who may benefit from the precedent, there may also be some other support or obligation deriving from her. The head of the firm is her crony; I knew him in my childhood. He met my plane once in Chicago as I was being sent by my parents from St. Paul to my Aunt Harriet in Philadelphia. It had been very rough and I had been very sick, so the good man was presented with a shaken little tyke who had not dirtied herself but, still worse, had vomited all over an army sergeant and been held back in punishment as the plane emptied, the hostess having decided she was dangerous. Not sure what to do he filled me with malted milks and hamburgers and put me on a plane for San Francisco. An error discovered on the runway. My life might have been very different indeed. Stuart White himself is in Sweden just now but his son had sent another member of the firm, Donald Heffernon, to save me from the state. Mother's attorneys, our opponents, Pierce Butler the third, St. Paul's fanciest lawyer of all, is another one of aunt's closest friends and a squire in her divorcee days. When Mother went to Pierce to divorce my father Dorothy turned up her eyes in pique: to use her lawyer to divorce her brother—so she is more likely to be on the Stuart White team this time. And anyway, doesn't it stand to reason that if your mother's people put you

away, the Milletts with their usual contrariness would say you weren't crazy and be for getting you out. It is politics of the two families: it is the sociology of St. Paul.

So I will knock now on that door, dare to call her up and present myself, make it sound funny, another one of those family things: "It's going just fine, have the nicest lawyers, a wonderful guy from Stuart White's. This way we can test the law don't you see, get a precedent. They are hoping in fact to introduce legislation this fall so that no one can be committed without trial. The hospital's not so bad if you overlook the iron grating, that sort of thing." And then her reply. Then my stunned, dazed disappointment. Which is not entire: after all, you are to get in touch if you make it. Did she know, did she expect this call, is it a fetch? Her mask of not helping is preserved: afterall you are under a cloud a bit just now, responsible citizens don't open their arms to maniacs. Or is she merely perplexed, bothered at home in the evening. I was careful to call before nine-thirty, the prescribed moment beyond which you do not trouble a lady; rules learned here in childhood. Does she even remember who I am after all these years? A scapegoat. A figure in the phonebooth of a looney house, carefully repossessing a children's book and trailing off to bed. To practice Mahatma Gandhi's patience or Buddhist prayer or tomorrow's arguments in court.

And when it was all over, the champagne in the room behind the courtroom, long distance phone calls of rejoicing, they took me to Stuart's beautiful house where the paintings made me cry for the sheer joy of a red Mondrian or of a Chinese line on a scroll after the emptiness of the bin. Which the sight of a real house made me realize might have been gone on and on, years, a lifetime shot to hell in wards behind bars: then I rested. And in a few days I went over to Tommy Pryor's house a few blocks away and spent some easy days on the porch looking over the Minnesota River Valley. It was from the porch that I called A.D. again. And was given an invitation to dinner some five days hence, clear into next week. I thought I'd be going back east very soon, probably the weekend, returning to the farm. But she steadfastly maintained that was the first day she was free. Moreover there was the attraction of a certain witty priest also invited for dinner that Tuesday, I'd be sure to enjoy him. The last thing I need in the world is an amusing cleric. I feel the pull of any invitation from her—and then withdraw, pull away. Just out of a looney bin, my life in ruins around me, I want to see my aunt.

And the last obstacle I want to struggle against for her comfort is some ordained pedant, the charm of his erudition, that sort of thing. Yet I feel its pull talking to her. Perhaps these are the delights of civilization; where else in the world would you find them but out here. The soft lull of Tommy's porch, the comfort of it, home in St. Paul, a place you might try to describe to someone but give up after a moment. So foreign it is to New York, the blistery desert of Poughkeepsie—what do you have to go back for anyway? Everything has fallen apart with Fumio, every soul you ever knew in New York has decided upon hearing of your "nervous breakdown" that you are mad now and permanently disabled. A casualty if you keep silence but if you call them and enter upon your troubles you are merely a nut. You have lost your name and reputation. A natural circumstance of losing your mind. Here Tommy and Judy treat you as a normal human being, your aunt even seems to want to see you. On her terms of course, five days from now. But the invitation is real and warmer than years.

Why then plead you must go home? Because you have a farm and must take care of it. Because you might still patch things up with Fumio. Because you can't hang around five days for a meal. Because you don't like being put off. And maybe you are not too sure you want to impose for five more days—mother's is out. Having lost her suit against my liberty and for my "treatment" on an indefinite basis, Mother is vexed indeed. I had a friend bring me to Mother's to collect my clothes, a professor from Macalester who specializes in St. Paul writers, a penchant that stiffened her sufficiently to accompany me to Mother's, for she is a friend of Mother's as well. Still Pat Kane stood by my side against Mother's wrath and even Sally's furious curtain line about how I had "better get myself together pretty damn quick" and so forth. I think I managed to keep my mouth shut and limit rebuttal to a fairly gentle remark that if Sal intended to finish law school and enter the bar it might be a good idea if she looked into civil liberties a bit. Oddly enough she seems to have taken my advice and we became friends again over the years. With my aunt too, I figured there'd be time, the next speaking engagement or reading that brought me to the middle west. There was ever so much time then. Especially for the people out there; they would always be there, always had. What was necessary was to rush back east again, plunge into my own life, re-establish what I could.

And when I came out of the wreck, depression followed in the fall growing into suicide in the winter, the urge to die was overpowering, the hatred of life. Depression if not the partner of mania, certainly the partner of incarceration, the shame of it, the loneliness. Fumio gone, the old Bowery studio condemned to demolition for structural reasons by the City of New York, the eviction, the limbo of being without a studio in the city, a home, a place to work, being exiled to the farm in winter or taking shelter in Ruth's little room, for Ruth was the only friend left—it had been as I had predicted about friends. Except for Washburn who buoyed me up and suspected the suicide plans and suggested calling it plan A. Why not try plan B first? Lithium and so forth. Then the long struggle out of depression, back to productivity, to having a few friends, something of a name again, a little reputation for honor or sanity or intelligence.

. . . Impossible for my Aunt to believe that I think of her often, almost daily, that she forms the subtext of my mind, that my wrongful erroneous love for her and her anger over all these years are the subjects of my dreams, the fabric of my unconscious, those still painful moments upon waking which color the morning and darken the first hour of consciousness day after day over long stretches of time. That this sense of being judged and still unforgiven was—is so pressing it brings me here to plead again for absolution. And finding none, I know my life is in some large portion doomed and condemned. Like fate, like Mother's voice over the phone telling me she is dead, Dorothy is dead. And in that instant I know I will have to live without forgiveness now forever. That there had always been a chance and now there is none, will never be any hope.

And in sleep the mind goes to her over and over. All these years. Sometimes for months on end, great dreams of the mind without a halter or rein will over and over put me in her arms. Beds, there are beds, we lie upon a bed. Her house, it is never mine—always the unconscious protects me in giving me the role, not of the seducer but of the persuaded. For the essential point is that she be willing. Since I am the lover. No—the beloved. She must announce her desire, secretly, after a lifetime's discretion, reveal her passion. Give in, the one nod or look or touch or outreach of the hand, that final admission. That she too loves a woman. And then the rest is a pact. In which we are equals at last. Past age or authority or money or even old age, we are then peers and companions. Her hand reaching toward mine but not touching it as we lie together across some enormous bed. That is the proof, that assurance, that final and absolute trust. Between two persons who in life had none or so little or it was all demolished; first by me in dishonesty, then by her in obduracy. Now these two hands at rest, in perfect harmony and friendship, touching but not touching, at ease, they become us, the final agreement. Platonic and elevated and then somehow beyond the flesh as is this dream. But there are a thousand others of the rarest eroticism, the perfume of her flesh remembered with a child's tenderness and adoration still mine, but adult. Utopian, transcending every taboo.

We are one then in being women, in being wise and intelligent women, in being humorous, in knowing places and times and years of propinquity and kinship. In knowing the world as well, Paris or Rome or the best streets in Dublin: restaurants, fountains, books and pictures. And we bring all this to our rapture, to the scent of her flesh as I kiss the soft skin under and behind her ear as she embraces me. The same embrace as childhood but adult and sexual and without ignorance or innocence, our selves looking frankly into each other's eyes. Two women, neither aunt nor niece but that as well and the green eyes do not turn from me nor do they grow cool and treacherous as in life: those little glints of yellow in the green—utterly terrifying in life. Suddenly angry or contemptuous, the fury of disdain. But in dreams she does not turn against me, she is without guile, frank and trusting. And I am trust itself for at last all that I had cherished is given me. There could be no greater happiness, nothing the psyche has longed for more could come to it. This is the mind's paradise when in hidden hours it invents, completes its hopes, draws its full circle of wish and pattern. This.

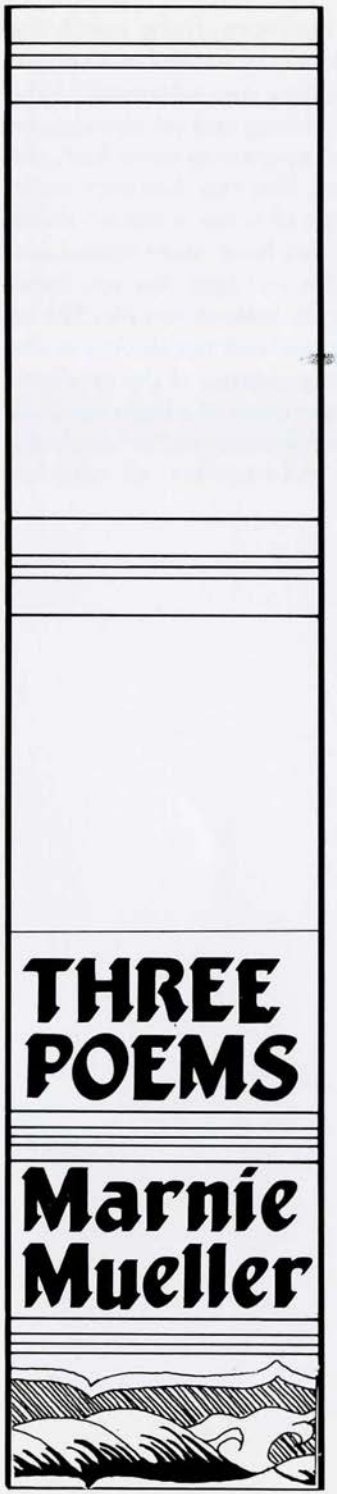
The influence here is not the late Aunt of the stock report booklet and the empty grey rooms of a winter evening—but the young aunt, the beauty, the bonny one, the friend of all the lights and talkers, the wit with the magnificent green eyes and the mind of a rapier, as spring, as sharp, as eager; the Jamesian lady for whom civilization was invented and before whom the centuries had labored to lay it at her feet as she stepped forward in freedom, the A.D. who sent her long ago Isabel Archer niece to Oxford. And she came home and did these things. Remembering always an idea. Not what she was told, but what she saw. Not what was lectured to her to keep down her puppy-like enthusiasm (Aunt Dorothy, I think I'd like to be a poet. Like Wordsworth.), A.D. sitting through this sort of confession in her car, just as she is about to deliver me to Mother's door, and I blurt it out like someone trying to steal a kiss or saying I love you. Which is really all I meant.

Loving her, I wanted to be a poet, a painter, a sculptor, a writer. Mother wanted me to be a writer, and only a writer. Though a writer of rather more correct books than I have encompassed yet. But Aunt Dorothy made you want to be everything. Theatre, the world as theatre, as a golden Fitzgerald novel in which she starred as heroine and actress, savant and lady, collector and cut up, wit, the vital energy itself.

And of those late years alone, the grey of evening, age and loneliness, the bitterness of solitude—perhaps they wait me too. Fifty-one and you may know that sorrow to some measure and in the forseeable future—give me the guts you had. And may I be spared your sorrow, hug enough souls near to me against the cold of age, infirmity and death. Forgive me for not being there, for not trying harder to get through the line, for not being the young man with the tulips, your treasured gardener. And bless him that he was there. I see him again as he told me of it, his yellow hair, the back of his head which for some inexcusable reason I want terribly to kiss. Imagining him that New Year's morning ascending the stairs with the unearthly yellow flowers, seeing him from the back, then seeing him as he approaches that terrible little iron bed, ornate and all, antique and all, but what a model of discomfort and sorrow. And then you smile at him, the flowers. I see only the back of his head. And your face. Still so beautiful, God so beautiful, the smile, the crinkly hair, the eyes, those cheek bones. There is an urge to intervene, to interfere as the pot of tulips advances toward your frail hand. Contraptions for walking, wheelchair, the little elevator all around, that ghastly light in the room, western, very strong but filtered through orange fabric and bamboo to an unearthly color, luminous as death, zen in its radiant finality—the tulips are nearly there. Your hand reaches toward them in rapture, Hepburn's smile. I strain wanting to cheat, to kiss that hand, to replace or fool or supplant a tulip. And then I know I can't. Mustn't. It is his glory, not mine. It was he who brought her what she wanted. I had loved her a whole lifetime. But never well enough to give the pleasure this man has troubled to take even as a professional gardener; the very ingenuity of forced—no, in January you don't really force tulips, you create them. Out of whole cloth like God the father. A miracle.

And that miracle is his, but I have seen it. It took a good many hours of concentration, some words and much pain, tears even, that are like a hymen breaking or the birth of something resembling peace. In order to know your death. The hours alone in that house I have known for years in several depressions. But until I could resolve the end I could not go back to the beginning. To fashion you into my companion from here on in, my fellow spirit, guardian angel as we used to say. Ageless, you can be all ages now, my age or even younger. Imagine, I can be older now than your younger self. As easily as we both can be twenty-four year old know-it-alls. My joyous Aunt. And then my constant one. With a bit of each era. The irreverent young beauty who still whispers outrageous things to me in public places amid pomp and stuffiness. The wisdom of the woman of the world, the traveler, scholar, private student of how many obscure books and historical ruminations, the judge of real and fictional characters, the expert on phonies even when she was being phony, the enemy of snobs even in her snobbery. The creator of moods and milieu, rooms and costumes and parties and arrangements of this with that, a flower or a scarf, a chair or a table, a piece of music or a dish of food.

Someone who made you feel that life was a very big thing, really worth the trouble to live well and thoughtfully, whether it was lovely or hateful at a certain moment, season or year. It was serious in the most beguiling way, whimsical in the most terrifying way, dull in the most fascinating way, exciting and yet also slow or lilting, able to open up with a single bar of music whole experiences never had, like going to Baghdad, whole memories crushed and buried, lifetimes that were someone else's life, not yours, but yours through a paragraph of prose, a certain shade of grey caught in a mirror, a photo of a street in a city you have never visited and now feel in the marrow of your bones. Like you feel color and light, like you know poetry, like you will hear Yeats all your life, including the instant you die, like an echo, like race consciousness. Like the sins of the fathers and the slavery of the mothers, the warmth or spite of the sisters, the callow arrogance of the brothers, the rudeness of shopkeepers, the kiss of a good lover, the curse of a bad one. Full, full, full to overflowing. As miraculous as yellow tulips in January in the hands of a yellow-haired man who was never part of the story. All surprises, all miracles. Let go.



FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND: My father remembers Tule Lake Internment Camp

My father lies in a hammock
in Puerto Rico where he's gone
to retire. Beyond him
is the Caribbean Sea.
He clasps his hands behind his head
and swings.

"I remember a Fourth of July.
I'd been working there for a year.
You were one and beginning to walk
and we went out to the parade grounds
your mother and I and you.
There were hundreds of Nikkei kids
in boy scout uniforms,
their parents standing by
proudly, solemn, at attention
hands over their hearts
squinting into the sun.
I looked up and saw Old Glory
flapping in the breeze
and beyond, glinting in the sun,
the barbed wire on top of the fence.
Jeezus!"
He closes his eyes.

I wait.
"Dad?"
He shakes his head.
Light catches the tears
sliding down his cheeks.

Behind him a Sunfish sails by,
framed for a moment between two palms.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR ASSIGNED TO TULE LAKE

I wait at the gate.
It's May but cold.
There's a wind blowing
across from the coast.
"The trains are coming,"
someone shouts. The first batch
is about to arrive.

Windows frame the faces—
an old man in his hat
a woman in black
the hard jaw of a youth
I can see jutting forward.

I help children down,
mothers with babies
old men who tremble in my arms.
I can see eyes scan the watchtowers
the barbed wire
the barren land.

No one speaks
except to murmur to children
or ask me where they should go.

A group of fifty follow behind me
across the black sand of the dried lake bed
across the firebreak
toward the tarpapered barracks
black in the distance
black against black.

We enter the Block
its long barracks on four sides
latrines and showers in the center.
I climb warped raw wood steps
and open the door.
Four cots with mattresses rolled
a pot bellied stove, sheet rock
walls that don't reach the ceiling,
nothing more.

The Issei woman I bring to this room
wears a hat, a veil covers her eyes.
I catch the sharp pulse in her cheek.
Her husband reaches for her hand.
She pulls it away.
"I'm sorry," I whisper,
but they don't hear.

GUARDIANS: Tule Lake Internment Camp 1943/86

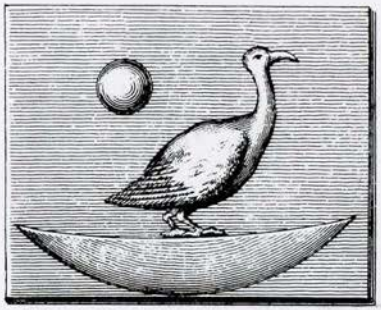
Mr. and Mrs. Takaetsue-san,
there is a story,
I wonder if it's true
that my parents went away for a week
leaving me with you.
Our neighbors in Block Three
checked one day to see if you were doing fine by me.
They saw Mr. Takaetsue-san carry out the playpen
and put it on the ground.

> You remember how the earth at Tule Lake
> was fine and black and kept blowing in the air?

Well, Mrs. Takaetsue-san, you swept around my playpen
while your husband got a bowl of water
which he sprinkled on the sand.
Then you both went inside our barracks
and emerged with me high in your arms,
a Caucasian princess in bonnet and diapers,
and placed me in the pen.

Mr. and Mrs. Takaetsue-san,
this story must be true
because even now I have a dream,
when I'm especially troubled,
that I seek and seek
until I find a prison
to enter for retreat.

Witchcraft in the Nuclear Age: thirteen accounts



RUTHANN ROBSON

1.
a cross-legged someone watches a red moon grow smaller
as it rises in Texas
all lights and eyes reflect the heat
the dogs, the cats, the pigs are silent
as they queue, flat and distant
a white bird glides to the left
like a heart, a bent feather, a witch's breast
the legs are uncrossed
the eyes are cleared
the *wilde jadge* will end at the fences
spirits cannot be arrested
gather together again and again
some circles must be broken

2.
they stole our holy places, our holy days
once there was a sacred tree in this desert
the tree is long dead
the desert is in danger
they named the second Sunday in May for mothers
even as they said we would eat our own children
rather than tolerate their vapid warnings
we decided to worship their day
we gathered ourselves in Nevada
at a place they called a test site
we chanted in the searing daylight
the journalists wrote that all the protesters were women
the photographers discovered all the negatives were white

3.
the trials often start with charges of trespass
there is paper and handcuffs
and sons who replaced suckling
with the crease of a uniform
the ground is held as the most private of properties

by neatly guarded but public utilities
in the courtrooms, there are more guards
some of them are women
none of them smile in the fluorescent noon
there are books thick with rules
and numbers and penalties
the accused all state they have no names

4.
listen to the silos hum so close to the ocean
there is not enough salt in the world
to make heavy water float
children fall in love with this green
so iridescent it pales a cat's eyes
the toddlers want to touch this water
to swim, to drink, to splash
we are the women who restrain them
as we point to the turtles
with the red and swollen underbellies
rocking in the tides
we are the women learning invisible fire
we tell the children that water can burn

5.
all the roads spiral
around those long and low buildings
which squat on the shores of the Potomac River
a feather falls from nowhere
it is bent and as sturdy as an eyelash
you clutch it and massage it
into a lover's sweaty bed tonight
you draw pentacles on the Pentagon
you refuse to fondle the phallic Monument
every small protest is a necessary charm
against the promise
that you will be among the first to die

6.
for thirteen years, i curled around her feet;
her familiar, her dog, her protection:
a cop stalked her in Miami
my bicuspid tore at his tenderest flesh
a burglar busted our window in New York
my bark cut his hand on the jagged glass
we traded stories on winter nights
we swapped souls when it thundered
we travelled to Haiti together
she wove me a rope of herbs and hemp
we watched as the underbellies of clouds
turned green as turtles
we breast-stroked into the boiling Caribbean

7.
when i was a boy, i wandered the cities
San Francisco, Paris, Buenos Aires and Shang-Hai
i took older lovers from every country
i gave cures with potions of petroleum
i told their fortunes with round cards
men admired their hands on the curve of my back
so they paid for me to fly
everything was stopped by the blizzard of bombs
some men died immediately
some men died of disease
i like to think of each of them
i light red candles in their honor
using my fingers for flames

8.
there is ample anecdotal evidence for the belief
that witchcraft
co-existed with nuclear technology
and its aftermath
most of the official documents were destroyed, of course
but some stories survive even fire
this account is typical: a proud hag, somewhat
insulated by education, was working as a scribe
in a power plant when a man put his mouth
to her left breast and his hand over her mouth
she screamed and bit him and left a scar
he was something called a boss
she prosecuted him and she was found guilty

9.
we scratch beyond all borders
she & i
i wear 17 earrings in my African ear
all are melted silver
she has a braid from the left side of her head
it is singed blonde
feminus cum femina
i have the mark of the crescent moon
on my toe
she has a scar like a wild hare
on her back
we are each other after survival
she & i

10.
even at noon, the forest is dark
a green brown net
spun thin as glass
if i could find a window
i would hurry to the other side of it
i would look out it

i would pass through it
i would find the moon
i know she is still there
i know the wind is somewhere
if i could smell the tides
they would pull my heart
back to the left side of my chest

11.
if it's true that the devil's cock is cold
and always hard
like some steel building from memory
then let that bastard come to me
and fuck me and fuck me
i've been a lesbian since before i was born
but life is now too damned hot for us
i'm tired of women so soft
that when i stroke
their precious breasts
their raucous asses
their flesh rolls off
in layers too flayed to scab

12.
our ancestors met in caves
we must live underground
every place else it is summer
without a sun
our ancestors chanted at crossroads
we must sit silent
all other places are winter
without provisions
we are hibernation
we are meditation
i have shrouded my embryo
until she can grow
until i remember how to bleed

13.
in that last circle where all colors cavort together
and we have only enough strength to want
what is forbidden,
we dance
we dance not with each other, and
not for each other, and
not with movements we will name
this is not the *danse macabre*
but even if it were, there is no one
left to persecute us
this is the dance of what we have always known
this is the color of what we tried to tell you:
the limits of all power are limitless

RESPONSE

JULIE PARSON

Women are not raped in poems
women are raped.

Women are raped
hands tied above our heads
women are kicked, gouged, battered and knifed

if you don't know
how it hurts
don't pretend
it doesn't

don't pretend
it's a literary device
to express
your alienation

when women are raped

it's not the woman
who wants
more

don't believe
a poem
is just words
on paper

what is written
becomes real:

playing football
with a woman's breasts
is not a metaphor

shoving a pineapple
up her cunt
is not sexy

what you call sexy
is your own humiliation

what you write.

What is real:

a woman is gang-raped on a pool table
in a crowded bar
while the customers cheer
or wait their turn.

What is real
must be written:

Leola Bea, 3, strangled;
her 5 year old sister Aretha
thrown from the third floor.
"Police said the girls had been raped."
Will it make good literature?

What is real
must be written:

a woman's vagina split open with a hammer
a woman axed in the head while reading in the library
it's your sister, lover, waitress, child,
your neighbor, mother, teacher, boss,
it's your cousin, salesgirl, stranger, friend,
it's anyone

but you.

What is written
becomes real:

your 12 year old daughter is awkward
but beautiful, and the writer
raping her
is you.
Is she sexy?
Do you want more?

I saw her that day in the rain,
lovely and shy,
you want her whole,
you want her alive, you don't want
the world to end, your daughter,
the rain.

When you stomp a man to death
inside your poem
and you are not
dying
as well as stomping
then the only world ending
is your own
and there are no
bombs.

Note: This poem was a response to a viciously misogynist story published in a widely respected literary magazine. known for being somewhat political, which I had read and respected. All of the images in the first part of my poem are taken from that story; the second part is based on incidents I read about in the newspaper or which happened to women I knew.

ACHY OBEJAS

Coming to Bed

I never shut the door
quietly
neither do the cats
lie still
we're in concert
pretending improvisation
but we know
where we're going
you protest—
the door
playing on its hinges
the floorboards
spreading each footprint
beyond my own
like a pebble in a pond—
you burrow, pink cheeks
snap your leg to complain
a grunt, thick air
I can never
undress in the dark
the cats need the warmth
they rustle
they muse, they stretch
and yawn
their miniature sickles
caught on the linen
mennonite pure
you turn
one eye open
the other a pillow
I unfasten each hook
toss them
like hard tomatoes to the floor
close the door
get in
beside, beneath, wrap around
you, counting sheep, a grin
(you giggle too)

you know who loves you

Public Displays

we had left the women-only festival
for a temporary ride
to phone her parents—
our part of a conspiracy
of complicity
"happy anniversary, mom and dad"
I wished them well
my in-laws technically unaware
even as I winced in the hot grey michigan sun

near the phone booth
where my lover talked
in neutral pronouns to her parents
brown flat bodies jumped
from pick-up trucks to country store—
migrants, mexicans, men

we hadn't seen any in three days
managing, even on the highways
to find only women
at the tollbooths
I hadn't spoken spanish in three days
and here they were, raw-skinned
men gnarling spanish
with bad teeth

"hay cinco mil mujeres malas allá"
one of them, leather-faced, chuckled
to another, while nodding
at a density of trees
fingers working on a pack of cigarettes

bad women, he called us
(we might have been snakes)
his eyes, like argonauts, darted
at the phone booth—
curious and daring, titillated—
followed by the others in spurts

they scanned our car, then me
with the ghost skin line
where my watch had been
three days before

"americana, tortillera" he never said
but I heard it
even as my lover laughed
into the receiver
an anecdote, another kind of joke

there were no clues in the car mirror
my mouth milky and sour

* * *

there are men under cars on our street
body parts leaning on hoods, fenders
on tires without hubcaps
tools scattered like bones
a gorgeous day fills our window
our own car keys point out

taking a step past the gate
to the sidewalk, I love it
my arm on its own going to my lover
a stole stealing itself on her shoulder

"honey, honey" she says
taking inventory of the
extremities sprouting around us
"did you forget?"

Older Brothers

MADELINE TIGER

walk
like storks
stalk territory
crane toward
corners
of sky not to
ask why they're
here, not elsewhere,
wary of the question-
answer trap, the snap
verdict; but they are
addicted to
grouping; ergo, their
cliques and slick talk
between the long legs of
their secrets and loves. still
brothers who may be
taller walk near
the others, hear
awes, gripes, fears, peer-
group peckings, pick
what they don't know
they need to hold
themselves somehow
dear, all the more-
so dear. it is said
the older ones are their own
arbiters, unduly
arrogant, derogatory;
they are marked and re-
marked unique in this
they bask: it is the next best
state to being blessed
as the darlings
once they might have been
before they got so grown
out of the now too easy
brother/sister/hood
of jangling younger siblings and until
they get grown gracefully
up.
Older brothers skulk in corners
waiting for the past
to catch up with their long legs.

Would you be shocked if
they broke out
with lovesongs?

Nina Newington

THE ONLY SHOE

For her fifth birthday Anna's aunt gave her a pair of wooden clogs. Rapping the solid soles Mrs. Braun said to her sister, "She'll get good wear out of these. The way children grow they'll be too small before they split."

Mrs. Weld smiled at the breezy windmills painted on the toes of the clogs. She imagined her wan daughter romping with the other children in the playground, Anna's face shattering into laughter as she hurtled down the red slide. "Yes," she said, "she should enjoy being young, it doesn't last long."

Anna waited. When her aunt put the shoes down she slid her hand sideways into the left clog. Its hard satin curves welcomed her. She chuckled and her fingers danced this song:

Here is a house
carved for my comfort
smooth for my safety
never shall I leave
my home again.

Mrs. Weld sniffed, "Why should I be cursed with such a peculiar daughter? Try them on Anna. Show your aunt they fit." She took the shoes and stuffed Anna's feet into them.

Anna squirmed but already she had learnt cunning so she smiled up at her aunt and said, "Thank you Auntie for such a useful present. I feel at home in them already."

Mrs. Braun patted Anna's head. "She's a good girl at heart," she said to Mrs. Weld, who looked hopeful. "She'll grow out of it."

Mrs. Weld sent Anna out to play and for once she went. She settled in a corner of the playground with her shoes. Again her hand chose the left one, she could not say why. Inside it was dry and curved as a snail's shell. Her fingers danced. She knew it would be a safe home for her words. She wanted to speak the words in her head but words in the air got twisted and torn and discarded. She decided to test the shoe just in case. So she bent her head until the shoe echoed her breath and she told it a story.

She told how once there was a girl called Jim who lived all alone on a secret island. She lived in a willow tree and she ate trout tickled from the stream and she sang all day. She lived happily ever after until, one cold morning, a great raven with creaking wings came and carried her away. She told how the raven carried her through many dark nights to a strange town where a woman who called her Anna claimed her for her own. She paused. The shoe was silent in sympathy so she sang it her song and promised to look after it always.

There was a whirring of wings in the air. Scared, Anna looked up. A tattered figure stood, arms outstretched, in a sea of grey and green and purple feathers. It was only the old man who lived in a cardboard box come to feed the pigeons. Anna was forbidden to go near him but now she was brave. She went and stood among the birds until he turned to look at her. Then she kissed the right clog goodbye and she laid it gently on the ground, for she knew one home would suffice. The old man picked up the shoe, he bowed to her in acceptance of the gift. She returned to her mother's house, happy.

The next day Mrs. Weld wanted to take Anna shopping. She told her to wear her new clogs. But she could only find one shoe though she searched high and low. Mrs. Weld was puzzled because, although she thought her daughter odd, she did not believe she would be so malicious as to render a brand new pair of clogs useless. She blamed the cussedness of things instead and, since she was late already, hurried off alone to the market.

Anna, left at home with her shoe, felt triumphant. She would not have put it quite this way but she understood that for Mrs. Braun and Mrs. Weld a shoe is an object to be used and life a war on two fronts, with time and with objects. You battle with the object to exact from it its use before it is too late. And if it is worn and cracked before time takes it from you anyway, why then you have won and can forget it.

For herself, Anna wanted her shoe to grow into itself with age, like a seashell gathering layer upon layer of mother-of-pearl.

So she annointed the shoe with words and as time passed it glowed with a blond familiar light. At night when monsters came to take her away so she would never see herself again, she slid her hand into the shoe and felt safe.

At first Mrs. Weld tried to be amused when she went to wake Anna and found her fingers curled in the clog tight as a hermit crab in its shell. But in her heart she knew something was wrong. Her head filled with angry chatter. She'd done her best hadn't she? No one can ask more than that can they? Some days she caught herself glaring at the shoe like an enemy and it returned her gaze with hatred. She wondered if it was her that was going peculiar. She made a joke of her worries to her sister, and Mrs. Braun told her, "she'll grow out of it." But as the days lengthened and shortened and the shoe grew smaller, she became impatient.

Anna felt her mother's anger in her hands but the more scared she was the less she could find to say. One day a sentence formed in her mind, "I don't want to grow up to be like my mother," and she was astonished by its truth. At night she dreamed that her mother came to steal her shoe away. After a while her mouth dried up with fear whenever her mother asked her a question so she told the shoe and the shoe told her mother.

Mrs. Weld was frantic but she could think of nothing to do so she too fell silent. Words clattered in her head and she, who was so tidy and careful, found the plates and the cups jumped from her hands to lie in pieces on the wooden floor. One day, which was simply worse than other days, it was no different, she broke the teapot her mother had given her. She turned to fetch the dustpan and brush. In the corner sat Anna and her shoe, pale and sullen as ever. The shoe stared at her. Words pummelled her skull. Mrs. Weld pinched her lips tighter. What's wrong with you? Answer me. Where did I go wrong? Don't look at me like that. A perfect child until you came along. You've eaten all her words. You've made her grow backwards. She's my baby.

Anna's fingers danced faster and faster inside her shoe and she curled into the corner. Her mother's mouth, a slash of silence, terrified her. Her mother walked to the closet where the brooms and tools were kept.

Mrs. Weld knew what she must do before it was too late. She fetched the hammer and a long nail. She tore the shoe from Anna's hand, placed it on the ground and drove the nail through it into the floor. The wood squealed as it split. She smiled and looked at her daughter. Anna sat silent. Mrs. Weld picked up the hammer, burst into tears and left the room.

Anna walked to the shoe and slid her foot into it. She performed a motionless dance to the silent song, "You are my home, I will never leave you." There was no sign of the song ending.

contributors

MARJORIE AGOSIN is a Chilean poet and professor of Latin American literature at Wellesley College. She is the author of a bilingual book called *Witches and Other Things*, (Latin American Literary Review Press 1984 and 1986) and *Scraps of Life—The Chilean Arpillera*, (William-Wallace, Toronto, Canada and Red Sea Press, Clinton, New Jersey.

MEENA ALEXANDER is a poet from India who lives in New York City. She spent this summer at Kerala University lecturing on women's writings. She teaches in the English Department at Hunter College, CUNY.

BETH BRANT: "I am 45 years old, a Bay of Quinte Mohawk, a lesbian mother, a high school drop-out, a writer, editor of *A gathering of Spirit*, (Sinister Wisdom Books, 1983), devoted to the writing and art of North American Indian women and the author of *Mohawk Trail* (Firebrand Books, 1985)." Beth Brant is a contributing editor to IKON.

KAREN BRODINE lived in San Francisco, where she worked as a typesetter, writing teacher, editor, etc. She was a feminist socialist active in many of the movements for social change. Her work has been widely published in the left, gay/lesbian & feminist press & her fifth book of poetry will be published by Freedom Socialist Publications in 1987.

ELLY BULKIN edited *Lesbian Fiction: An Anthology* (Gay Presses of New York.) With Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith, she co-authored *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-semitism and Racism* (Firebrand Books).

CAROLE BYARD, visual artist, instructor, lecturer, widely exhibited, recipient of a 1985-86 NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) fellowship says of her series, "RENT" drawings, "Just being, I find we are faced with a perpetual struggle for existence/ We the borrowers/ Be we captive, great, run-away, bag, or boat/ Caught in the ritual dance of marking time/ To stay a little longer/ Pushing and pulling, stretching the very fibers of life." She will be lecturing this Spring at Parsons School of Design.

CHARLOTTE DeCLUE: I am 39 years old, Osage and white. I have been writing for 10 years. My work has appeared in *A Gathering of Spirit, Clouds Threw This Light, Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back, That's What She Said, Bearing Witness: Sobreviviendo, Akwekon, Contact II, Sing Heavenly Muse, Sojourner.* Winner, Cherokee Nation Award for poetry, "The Native American Today" issue of *The Phoenix*, Chapbook, *Without Warning*, Strawberry Press.

RACHEL GUIDO deVRIES, a poet and novelist, lives in Cazenovia, N.Y. A co-founder and co-director of The Community Writers' Project, Inc., in Syracuse; a past director of The Women's Writers' Center, she teaches in the writing program at Syracuse University, in elementary and high schools—through The Alternate Literary Programs in the Schools and in poetry workshops for convicted felons at Central New York Psychiatric Center in Marcy, N.Y. She has published a book of poems, *An Arc of Light*, (1978) a novel, *Tender Warriors*, (1986, Firebrand Books) and was awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in fiction in 1987.

CLAUDIA GORDILLO was born in Managua, Nicaragua in 1954. She studied drawing at the "Institute of Fine Arts" in Managua and the "Scuola Libera di Belle Arti" and the "Scuola di Design" in Rome. In 1979, she began taking photographs and in 1982, her first exhibit, for the ASTC (Sandinista Cultural Works Association), was a series on the Cathedral of Managua. At the same she began a period of intensive work for the newspaper, *Barricada*. Her photographs were shown in an exhibit of war correspondents in Boston and, in 1987, she was part of an exhibition of Latin American Photographers at the Aperture Gallery in New York. She is now working as a free lance photographer in Managua.

KIMIKO HAHN lives with her husband and daughter in N.Y. and coordinates a reading series, WORD OF MOUTH, in the Chinatown Public Library. Her first book is forthcoming from Hanging Loose Press and she is one of three women (with Susan Sherman and Gale Jackson) in the forthcoming collection, *Standing Our Ground* (IKON Books).

SUSAN JORDAN is the author of *Benzene* (Aquila Rose #2, Truck Press, 1977) & *Crystal Spirit* (Snakesisters Press, 1987). She has been active in feminist groups and was an editor of the *New Women's Times Feminist Review (1979-1984).*

MARILYN KRYSL's newest book is *Mozart, Westmoreland and Me* (stories). She served as Artist-in-Residence at the Center for Human Caring at the School of Nursing, University of Colorado, Denver, in 1986-87. She teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

JEANNE LANCE is author of four chapbooks of poetry and prose, including *Mass Psychosis* (Jungle Garden Press) and *Water Burial* (e.g. Booksellers & Publishers). She co-edits the literary magazine *Gallery Works* and coordinates the Ear Inn Readings in New York City.

JOAN LARKIN has written two books of poetry, *Housework* (Out & Out Books, 1975) and *A Long Sound* (Granite Press, 1986) and is co-editor, with Carl Morse, of *Open Lines: An Anthology of Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* (forthcoming from St. Martin's Press). She lives in Brooklyn and teaches writing at Brooklyn College.

KATE MILLETT was born and grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, and was educated at Oxford and Columbia. She is a sculptor and visual artist as well as a writer.

BRONWYN MILLS is a writer and a social worker now living in Newark, Delaware. She has published *Moving Out, Plumbline,* and *New Women's Times.* She has also published material on assisting lesbians with chemical dependencies for N.I.D.A. (National Institute on Drug Abuse) in Washington, D.C. and is presently writing a book about her personal experiences working with terminally ill cancer patients in an inner city hospital.

DEA TRIER MORCH, graphic artist and author, was born in Denmark in 1941. Her graphics have been exhibited internationally in Denmark, England, Norway, Columbia, GDR, Iceland, Sweden, and in New York at the A.I.R. Gallery. She was elected Danish Author of the Year in 1977 for the novel *Winter's Child.* She was awarded a government stipend for life in 1985.

MARNIE MUELLER was born in Tule Lake Japanese Internment Camp in California. She was the program director of Pacific Radio in New York (WBAI) as well as producer of a video project for Public Television. Her short stories and poems have appeared in such magazines as *Jewish Currents, Croton Review, Earth's Daughters, Five Fingers Review, The Minnesota Review, Painted Bride Quarterly,* and *Beyond C & D.* She is a member of *City Fiction, Inc.* and the *Julio Cortazar Hospital Committee.*

NINA NEWINGTON: I wrote this story some time ago, it was one that just arrived on the page, must have been waiting a while in the wings. My work has been published in *Conditions*, and *Visions* magazines, in the anthology *Ordinary WomenExtraordinary Lives*, (ed. Paula Ross), and will appear in Virago's lesbian poetry anthology, *Naming the Waves*, (ed. Christian McEwen), and in *Healing Ourselves: A Guide for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, (eds. Bass and Davis). I live in Cummington, Massachussetts, earn money as a carpenter, teach writing workshops, live sober.

ACHY OBEJAS is a Cuban-American writer currently living and working in Chicago. She has published in *Abraxas, Antigonish Review, Beliot Poetry Journal, Conditions, Helicon Nine, Revista Chicano-Riquena, Sinister Wisdom* and many others. She is also the recipient of numerous writing awards, including a 1986 Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

JULIE PARSON is active in the Feminist Writers' Guild and has been published in *Black Maria, Another Chicago Magazine, B-City, IMAGINE—An International Chicano Literary Magazine, Sing Heavenly Muse* and other journals, and has given readings and workshops in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and at the National Women's Music Festival Writer's Conference. She is assistant manager at Guild Books, a Chicago bookstore and literary center.

PAMELA PORTWOOD is a feminist, freelance writer living in Tucson, Arizona. She reviews visual-arts exhibits for columns published in the *Tucson Weekly* and in *Artspace: Southwestern Contemporary Arts Quarterly* of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her book *Clark St. Lullabye* was published by Mad Poets Press. She is presently at work on a second book.

RUTHANN ROBSON's poetry most recently appeared in *Early Ripenings: American Women's Poetry Now* edited by Marge Piercy. A collection of her short fiction is forthcoming from Firebrand. She lives in Florida.

TRIX ROSEN, a New York based photojournalist, recently returned from a year of travel throughout the Philippines. During her year in Southeast Asia, she wrote and photographed news and feature stories for international magazines, including a twelve page "eye-witness" in *Asia Week*. She worked for WNBC-TV News for six years and is the author/photographer of a book about female athletes, *Strong and Sexy: The New Body Beautiful*. Currently, she is exploring light as a sculptural medium and is preparing a show of her photographs.

JULIA STEIN is a writer whose first book of poetry, *Under The Ladder To Heaven*, was about working class women of North America. She has written two more books of poetry, *An American Song* and *Exorcism*. Currently she is writing a novel about Berkeley in the 1960's. Stein has performed extensively throughout California in bookstores, community centers, music clubs, colleges, video and radio. She has translated Sara Martinez, a Salvadorean refugee poet, for an anthology of Central American Women's poetry, *Ixok Amar Go*. Stein also was an organizer for Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, organizing the first series of poetry readings in Los Angeles against U.S. intervention in Central America.

MADELINE TIGER's two books of poetry are *Keeping House in This Forest* (1977, Fairleigh Dickinson U.) and *Toward Spring Bank*, (1981, Damascus Road Press.) She recently received a fellowship in poetry from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and has an MFA from Columbia University. She has been published in many journals including *Shenandoah, The New Republic, How(ever), Slant,* and *Visions.*

CHERYL MARIE WADE: I live, love, and write in Berkeley, Ca. My work has appeared in *With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women's Anthology, My Story's On: Ordinary WomenExtraordinary Lives, Matrix, Sinister Wisdom,* three volumes of *Across The Generations*, an anthology of Northern California writers; and it will appear in a book about healing from childhood incest by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis for Harper and Row. I write for, perform with, and have directed WRY CRIPS, a disabled women's theater group. I am editing interviews for a book on independent living adults with disabilities—working title, *COMES A TIME.*

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