

BETWEEN
A ROCK
AND
A HARD PLACE

poem and a prose piece

by Joan Gibbs

For my mother, Juanita C. Gibbs;
Sara Bennett and in memory of my
sister, Ruth Johnice Gibbs.

Special thanks to them and Robin
Christian, Linda Brown and
Claudette Furlonge.

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V/I/Poe

MANTRA FOR THE WOMEN - 1977

the voices of the children are
diminishing in Puerto Rico
no new schools are being built in Harlem
no rooms added on to the old ones
Where are the Indians?

35.3 percent of all women of child
bearing age have been sterilized
in Puerto Rico, according to
the *officials*

las voces de los ninos estan
desteniendo en Puerto Rico
no new schools are being built in Harlem
no rooms added on to the old ones
Where are the Indians?

1 out of 4 Native American
children are forceably
removed from their
families.

It has finally come to this
the freeing of Joanne Little*
Assata Shakur
Dessie Woods
all the women
in Bedford Hills**
on Rikers Island**
All the women imprisoned
in maximum and minimum security
walking the streets of New York City
typing in typing pools
working in factories
All the women -
are you with us or not?

Think about it
slowly
carefully
All the Women

*Joanne Little was released from the North Carolina Correctional Institute for Women in June of 1979.

**Rikers Island and Bedford Hills are two women's prisons in New York.

A Different Song

you probably never noticed her
on subways
she sits
surrounded by dirty shopping bags
and her own bad odors
sleeping
slipping in and out of old dreams
like new age plastic
they won't burn or be disposed of

in winter
she wraps herself
in several bright colored scarves
her mother's old clothes
and stays inside
riding from the top of Manhattan
to the bottom of Brooklyn
5 times a day

the thing is
to recall
a different song.

Deja Vu - A Trip to A "New" Lesbian Bar

This place
has a strange familiarity to it
the woman over there
all in Black
clutches her drink
in ringed fingers
bangles falling loosely down her arms
her eyes staring at her reflection
in the mirror
a rum tonic
or maybe
a white wine
I would like to get to know her
but her face
says, "love me"
and I am lonely too.

There's no welcoming committee here
No one says "hello"
and the records on the juke box are all
scratched

in a week
they will be replaced by others
the bar-woman comes every five minutes
"You can't sit here if you don't drink,"
she says, -
"Check your coats."
A white man guards the door.

Still
the sisters on the dance floor
seem happy
all their troubles left behind
none of their clothes the same
the faces different
I have seen them before.

at rallies
on welfare lines
in high school gym classes
on street corners
in maternity wards
sitting on subways

We are everywhere
We are everywhere

The Woman on the Corner

the woman on the corner
has a chip on her shoulder:
her rent is due,
her welfare check is late,
her "old man" can't be found.

the man in the store says
she's been there for three hours
saying,
"Don't believe everything you hear -
the world has already ended!"
saying,
"David, bring back the stereo."
saying,
"Denise, I did the best I could."
saying

the sister is definitely mad,
going out of her mind:
enraged:
ready to do bodily harm
to the first person
who steps on her foot,
looks at her the wrong way,

forgets to say,
"Excuse me, please."
God help 'em if they're white.

Watch Out!

An Untitled Poem for Myself

overhead
the clouds burst open
wetting the streets
the glass in the windows
mingling with my tears
you are not here
but still
the clouds burst open

on days like this
I think of you
the way you made living life
without an umbrella
face hiding inside your pea jacket
an art
stomping into rooms
slamming doors
always a new idea in your head
drunk

I think of you
and
the clouds burst open

For Ruth

sometimes
I spend hours
thinking
about your smile
the way we danced
one summer Saturday
all day
caught up in sisterly love.

sometimes
I spend hours
deep in conversation with
your picture
: soft big brown eyes
behind heavy glasses :
face to face talks
are always hard.

sometimes
I spend hours
trying to remember
exactly the way you walked
into a room crowded with strange faces;
touched my body
the first time you changed my diapers
sticking in the pins -
wishing.

sometimes
I spend hours
watching Mama's back rise
slowly
sleeping
I was happy as a child.

sometimes
I spend hours
thinking about your smile
the way you walked into a room
soft big brown eyes
behind heavy glasses
one summer Saturday
watching Mama's back rise
crying
I was happy as a child.

Sunset

look at it
again
down.

INTERNAL GEOGRAPHY - part one

This then
be for real:
a blank sheet of white paper
the world,
filling up with black dots,
words,
that stay put,
come back to haunt
and never change.

How does one talk about change?
like going from day to night
you notice the difference
but not the second
the blueness replaced
by a growing darkness-
in summer the blue stays longer
and the darkness is cooler.

How does one feel change?
the sensation of swimming
on shore
watching turtles
as a child
I am afraid of water
but
the turtles backs
glistened in the sunshine.

sex bores me
like showers
you know the results
in advance
and I like
long hot baths
gentle hugs

and stolen kisses.

How does one know about change?
like feeling pain
it needs to be identified
the cure is in recognition.

yesterday my sister died
in a dream 4 years later
the memory frightens me still-
in cars
I sometimes travel to the graveyard
tears on the way to a friend's house.
In my mind
the day going further away
returns.

How does one talk about change?

This morning
I did my laundry
the clothes smell sweeter
and the dirt
disappeared
in the water.

To the True Witches Among Us

There is a little Cassandra in all of us
mad
raging
angry as all hell and
still not being heard
posed to strike
chained

If you are who you say you are
and can do what you say you can
then
free us
do something besides
gather in dark cafes
read tarot cards
watch stars

Organize
revenge yourselves

There is a little Sojourner Truth in some of us
convinced in a cause
with all the cards stacked against us
fighting
trying

If you are who you say you are
and can do what you say you can
then
help us
do something besides
talk about us behind our backs
at private parties
in free spaces

Organize
revenge yourselves

There is a little Sappho in each of us
strong
proud
intelligent
creative

Please!
If you are who you say you are
and can do what you say you can
fight for us

do something besides
talk
gather in dark cafes
scare your own kind
follow stars

Organize
Revenge yourselves,
Please?

Sunday Thoughts

for my mother

this morning
I woke up thinking
of pecan trees
the smell of honeysuckles
corn growing

lite a cigarette
eat breakfast with my mother
and observed, out our window,
another Black family on their way to church
:dressed beautifully:
some things never seem to change

the thoughts on my mind
are old,
unoriginal,
learned, heard,
inherited.
My ancestors had to come over on slave ships
pick cotton and die for their "freedom."

what truths I know
were gathered mostly from books
filled with contradictions;
people : relationships : people
who didn't fulfill their promises
or live up to their potential

Malcolm, your words are on the sides of
burning buildings
in the minds of junkies
I have seen them
wandering down 125th Street
cold dead in southern towns
in search of you.

Black is
a question we answered
to ask again
and again

This is not just "another poem" -
there are no men in my life
and I am still wondering
if the old ways weren't easier
(better? NO)

I would have at least had company
2, 3, 4 children to share
my life with
husband gone:
the welfare department might have sent us
a handout

but this way
there are no children
and no one seems to care
that I and alot of my sisters are
continually unemployed.

And
what is a poem?

yes...yes
everyone says they understand
"It's a small matter."
the lives of Blacks,
women,
Blacklesbianwomen
have always been hard -

"Don't you know...
Joanne Little put to death
the white man
that dared assume control of her body."

My thoughts are old,
unoriginal,
this morning
I woke up thinking of
pecan trees,
the smell of honey suckles,
corn growing.

another poem for the victory of women

the shape
long un-identifiable
has come into focus
clearly

hell is frozen over
the cows are in
this is the year for victory

love the flower that withered
when you touched it
is being left in the garden
unadorned
the weeds are dying around it
freeing it to live
without having to be picked

this is the year for victory
for coming into our own
writing our own poems
knowing our herstory

women having left their husbands
now return
to gather the children
and rest
learning from the ways of bees.

Thinking South

traveling this way again
I am continually amazed
at what little difference
a year seems to make

all the signs are the same
the houses -
mostly white
some bricked over
but still
at six
smoke eases from the chimneys

women's liberation never reached here
the women cook, clean up and care
for the children
their husbands
and anyone else that passes by
while the men
work all day
or sit
in the center of town gossiping

somedays
the school bus comes on time
some it doesn't
but mostly
waiting children
hoping the bus driver's had "bad luck"
toss rocks to the wind

across the street
Ms Selby's alone now:
her parents
brothers and sisters
all dead:

has young girls,
women teachers
staying with her

from time to time
you can still hear
old and young folks say
"What a shame--a life wasted."

A "Politically Incorrect" Poem for Sara

At night
without you
I feel left behind
even the sound of the wind
touching the window
frightens me
I smoke a cigarette
have a drink
and go to bed early

What is this?
Shall I call it "love?"
maybe the moon is changing
Tomorrow I'll buy a new book.

I wish that I could be like
some other lesbians
with two or three lovers

I write poems
compose short stories
but still
at night
without you
I feel left behind.

One of the Pains

It hurts me to see them
their voices
like Mama's
the night she opened the door to
two white men
asking for Ruth
a month after her death
Her voice
full of "yes and no sirs"
without anger or smiles
just answers
automatically

one hand touching the face
in the other

A long time ago
the face was strong
and the hair was black
not streaked with grey
or
fading red
trying to hide it.

It hurts me to see them,
my sisters,
walking the street
pushing young white babies
while their mothers
struggle with Bloomingdale shopping bags
in Gucci shoes

My sisters
drunk in hallways
surrounded by dirty shopping bags
and sleeping in piss.

My sisters
standing on the corner
of Delancey and the Bowery
waiting for some white boy
in a large cadillac
the kind
some whiteys
and almost gone
sure 'nuff
kneegrows
called "nigger" or "pimp" mobiles
when they thought
we were
the only ones driving them

My sisters,
it hurts
sometimes.

Untitled Poem for My Sisters

Black women are exotic
yes!
creatures of the night
with a hell of a herstory
erotic
but we do have our faults
and sometimes
we get mad
strike the one closest to us
cry for no reason
and find ourselves
without money
down and out in New York
and yeh,
we are beautiful
creative in the kitchen
with a lot of funny
can-make-you-love-us
stories to tell
about when we were young
the folks on the block
and
Daddy left home
but most of all
like everyone else
we are human
and we appreciate the truth
moments of silence
walks in the park
and love
yes, really love
respect.

sometimes
I think of dropping out
pitching a tent
beside some lonely stream
that nobody passes
fishing

I wouldn't have to worry
about being "politically correct"
trying to work
with Black men
and
white women
for the sake of unity
or sisterhood

But something happens:
the rent is due
the phone's about to be cut off
a brother on the street
calls me a "bulldagger"
or
a white lesbian says,
"I'm just as oppressed as you are."

Then I'm reminded
of what Mama always says,
"You can run but
you sure can't hide."

Not A Side-Show

See
she laughs
this woman
out in the street
no place to call her own
her family has deserted her
but still

See
she laughs
this woman
Black
growing old
flirting or seeming to flirt
with every man she meets
some of the women she knows
say,
"She wears too much make-up."
others say,
"Her clothes are too tight."
she's getting fat
but still

See
she gets angry
these two women
out in the street/white
growing old/Black
their families deserting them
young and old men
whistle at them on street corners
reach out to touch their passing bodies
their hands razor sharp
but still

See
she cries
these women
alone
their families deserting them.

See
she looks
out in the street
no place to call her own
her family has deserted her
but still

See
she laughs
this woman
black
growing old
illness or sorrow
with every step
some of the women
say
"she wears too much make-up."
others say
"the streets are too dangerous."
she's getting old
but still

See
she gets angry
these two women
out in the street
growing old/black
their families deserting them
young and old men
whistle at them on street corners
reach out to touch their passing bodies
their hands razor sharp
but still

Denise

Denise never did learn how to read: in the first grade she slept through all of the reading classes, waking up just in time for lunch and the recesses that followed it. The afternoon was spent coloring trees, flowers and wild strawberries.

In the second grade Denise fell in love with her teacher, a "high yeller" woman from up North that came to the small southern town to work for a year. The old folks said she was "nothin' but trouble" cause "those northern knee-grows don't come down here less-in' they got something to come to or something to hide from."

Denise didn't care though and despite the warning signals: the teacher was caught up a dirt road in a car with the male science teacher a week after she arrived: she pursued the crush with all the ferociousness of a lost child in search of her mother, bringing her apples and pecans in the fall, home-made cider in the winter and tulips from in front of her aunt's house in the spring. That summer she spent most of her time dreaming of growing up and going North too, like Cassie and her sister had done.

In the fifth grade, Denise along with all the other girls discovered the boys, temporarily put her attraction to women aside and started her career as an "easy lay." At least that was what half the boys in her class said.

Even then, Monday mornings were spent comparing notes on the weekend and there was no way anyone could go to the bathroom without hearing Willie Lee say, "I slept with..." Willie Lee fancied himself the town's answer to James Brown and Jackie Wilson, both rolled into one little country boy in high pants, torn shirts and run down shoes. Before long Denise was the one he mentioned the most.

Things continued that way for years with Denise getting more and more gossip spread about her until finally, in the 12th grade, she got pregnant and didn't know who the father was. Willie Lee said it definitely wasn't his.

The teachers didn't care though and no one bothered to tell her that she could come back to school afterwards.

A year later, Denise went North alone.

Hetrosexuality

women with men
have privileges:
at lam
hurrying on the lower east side
across Houston to Avenue A
in New York City
She smiles
arm and arm with her man friend
protected by conformity
her man's arm
"She belongs to me," it says
big strong and male

women with men
have privileges

not like myself
a lesbian
my lover
mother/divorced and alone
friends alone
we stalk streets like thoroughbreds
rounding the last mile
our eyes darting from side to side
necks hurting
trying to get home safely

women with men
have privileges
they can kiss on street corners
in subway stations
take him home to "Mama and Daddy"
get married
file joint income taxes
put each other down on health plans
protected by conformity
male rule

not like me
us
lesbians
women alone.

Joan Gibbs is a 26-year-old Black lesbian. She was born in Harlem and spent most of her growing up years in a small town on the coast of North Carolina called Swan Quarter. Currently, she lives in New York City and is a member of the Azalea Collective that publishes "Azalea - a magazine by Third World Lesbians." For the past two years, Joan has worked at Liberation News Service; before that she worked as a house-cleaner and a factory worker. This is Joan's first book.

"I like to think that I am a Black lesbian-feminist poet. Most of my poems bare witness to the oppression(s) that I feel and see around me. I'd like to know what you think of this book. Please write to me at: 306 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, New York 11238. Thanks."

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