

CROSSING THE DMZ



© Martha Shelley, 1974

Some of these poems and essays have appeared previously in *The Ladder*, *RAT* newspaper, *Come Out!*, *Focus* (Boston) and *Ms*.



For Heather, who offered to publish my work;

Marge Piercy, who helped me cut the literary crap;

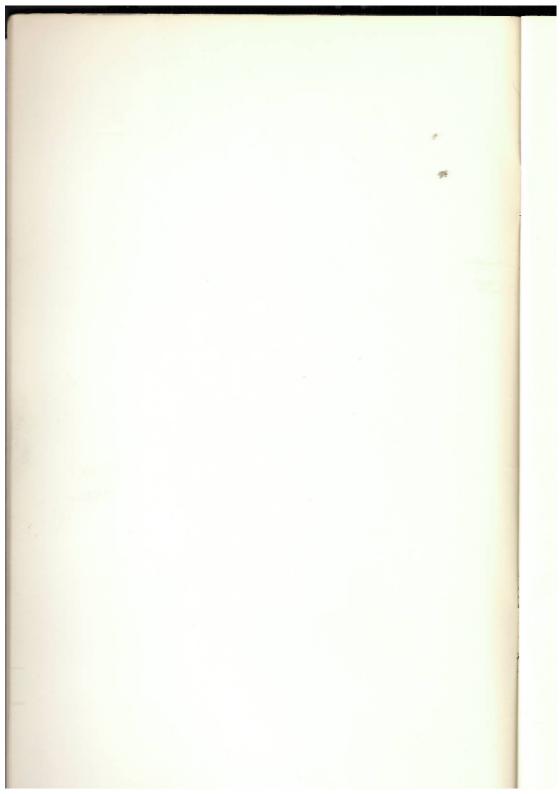
Tina Mandel, who showed me a new way to do *kata*;

and Myrna Lamb, who did animal imitations the night I planned to jump off the Verrazzano Bridge, and made me laugh instead.

TABLE OF CONTENTS	page
ON BEING ASKED, "WHAT DO YOU DO?"	1
A DAY IN THE CLOSET	3 🦏
GAY IS GOOD	4
DEUS IRAE ON BLEECKER STREET	8
WE MET ONLY ONCE	9
WELFARE WORKER	10
ON SCORPIO RISING	11
WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN QUEENS	12
IN TRANSIT	13
A GIRL ON A SWING	14
MY FRIEND MIRIAM	15
THE DARK TOOTH EDGE	16
COMPRESSION CHAMBER	17
IN A COIN BOOTH	18
MAKING CONNECTIONS	19
WORKING ON RAT: MAY 1970	21
AFTER I QUIT: NOVEMBER 1970	22
THE POETRY OF MAN	23
TO A SISTER OF DIFFERENT PERSUASION	26
A LETTER FROM HANOI	27
IN MEMORIAM: J. EDGAR HOOVER	30
MORGAN IN MY BED	32
AFTER READING THE FIRST CIRCLE	33
WHAT COMES OUT IN THE WASH	35
LADY AND THE DYKE	36

OUTSIDE YOUR DOOR	37
THE TRANSPARENT CLOSET	38
OF MATRIARCHS AND AMAZONS	39
EVEN AFTER YEARS, HER PERFUME	40
HITCHHIKING	42
THE TREE OF BEGATS	51
WALKING TO RED HOOK	53

do



ON BEING ASKED, "WHAT DO YOU DO?"

Not much this week.
I read the Times this morning
and was quite depressed
at the success
of the rich and mighty
in keeping the poor from day-care centers.

This week I have a cold, but notwithstanding, managed to screw a reading lamp into the wall above my bed.

When I was seventeen, on seeing the word *lesbian* in some cheap paperback, I got excited, thought of mysterious and wicked practices which I would practice on mysterious and wicked women.

Ten years later, being gay is everyday, and I tried reading books on witchcraft by my reading lamp; but physics texts seem more exciting, perhaps because I have a different faith than Cotton Mather did.

Frankly, when I have a cold I'd rather have a bowl of soup and re-read all my comic books than play the evil dyke corrupting someone's inexperienced brat. Today especially
I feel depleted,
like I haven't got
even one little perversion
left in the world.

A DAY IN THE CLOSET

Darkness closed over me.
Her hands closed over me.
And my flesh leaped up to meet her finger's tracings.
(In the dark I do not fear the weight of her mouth.)

Next day I felt her scent upon me, But my friends beside me, working with me, Could not see it; I could not say it, Could not share with them Baroque pearls Dark harvest.

GAY IS GOOD

Look out, straights. Here comes the Gay Liberation Front, springing up like warts all over the bland face of Amerika, causing shudders of indigestion in the delicately balanced bowels of the Movement. Here come the Gays, marching with six-foot banners to Washington and embarrassing the liberals, taking over Mayor Alioto's office, staining the good names of War Resister's League and Women's Liberation by refusing to pass for straight any more.

We've got chapters in New York/San Francisco/San Jose/Los Angeles/Minneapolis/Philadelphia/Wisconsin/Detroit and I hear maybe even in Dallas. We're gonna make our own revolution because we're sick of revolutionary posters which depict straight he-man types and earth mothers, with guns and babies. We're sick of the Panthers lumping us together with the capitalists in their term of universal contempt—"faggot."

And I am personally sick of liberals who say they don't care who sleeps with whom, it's what you do outside of bed that counts. This is what homosexuals have been trying to get straights to understand for years. Well, it's too late for liberalism. Because what I do outside of bed may have nothing to do with what I do inside—but my consciousness is branded, is permeated with homosexuality. For years I have been branded with *your* label for me. The result is that when I am among gays or in bed with another woman, I am a person, not a lesbian. When I am observable to the straight world, I become gay. You are my litmus paper.

We want something more now, something more than the tolerance you never gave us. But to understand that, you must understand who we are.

We are extrusions of your unconscious mind—your worst fears made flesh. From the beautiful boys at Cherry Grove to the aging queens in the uptown bars, the taxi-driving dykes to the lesbian fashion models, the hookers (male and female) on 42nd Street, the leather lovers . . . and the very ordinary un-lurid gays . . . we are the sort of people everyone was taught to despise—and now we are shaking off the chains of self-hatred and marching on your citadels of repression.

Liberalism isn't good enough for us. And we are just beginning to discover it. Your friendly smile of acceptance—from the safe position of heterosexuality—isn't enough. As long as you cherish that secret belief that you are a little bit better, because you sleep with the opposite sex, you are still asleep in your cradle and we will be the nightmare that awakens you.

We are women and men who, from the time of our earliest memories, have been in revolt against the sex-role structure and the nuclear family structure. The roles we have played amongst ourselves, the self-deceit, the compromises and the subterfuges—these have never totally obscured the

fact that we exist outside the traditional structure—and our existence threatens it.

Understand this—that the worst part of being homosexual is having to keep it a *secret*. Not the occasional murders by police or teenage queerbeaters, not the loss of jobs or expulsion from schools or dishonorable discharges—but the daily knowledge that what you are is so awful that it cannot be revealed. The violence against us is sporadic. Most of us are not affected. But the internal violence of being made to carry—or choosing to carry—the load of your straight society's unconscious guilt—this is what tears up apart, what makes us want to stand up in the offices, in the factories and schools and shout out our true identities.

We were rebels from our earliest days—somewhere, maybe just about the time we started to go to school, we rejected straight society. Unconsciously. Then, later, society rejected us, as we came into full bloom. The homosexuals who hide, who play it straight or pretend that the issue of homosexuality is unimportant—are only hiding the truth from themselves. They are trying to become part of a society that they rejected instinctively when they were five years old, to pretend that it is the result of heredity, or a bad mother, or anything but a gut reaction of nausea against the roles forced on us.

If you are homosexual, and you get tired of waiting around for the liberals to repeal the sodomy laws, and begin to dig yourself—and get angry—you are on your way to being a radical. Get in touch with the reasons that made you reject straight society as a kid (remembering my own revulsion against the vacant women drifting in and out of supermarkets, vowing never to live like them) and realize that you were *right*. Straight roles stink.

And you straights—look down the street, at the person whose sex is not readily apparent. Are you uneasy? Or are you made more uneasy by the stereotype gay, the flaming faggot or diesel dyke? Or most uneasy by the friend you thought was straight—and isn't? We want you to be uneasy, be a little less comfortable in your straight roles. And to make you uneasy, we behave outrageously—even though we pay a heavy price for it—and our outrageous behavior comes out of your rage.

But what is strange to you is natural to us. Let me illustrate. GLF "liberates" a gay bar for the evening. We come in. The people already there are seated quietly at the bar. Two or three couples are dancing. It's a down place. And the GLF takes over. Men dance with men, women with women, men with women, everyone in circles. No roles. You ever see that at a straight party? Not men with men—this is particularly verboten. No, and you're not likely to, while the Gays in the Movement are still passing for straight in order to keep up the good names of their organizations or to keep up the pretense that they are acceptable—and to have to get out of the organizations they worked so hard for.

True, some Gays play the same role-games among themselves that straights do. Isn't every minority group fucked over by the values of the majority culture? But the really important thing about being gay is that you are forced to notice how much sex-role differentiation is pure artifice, is nothing but a game.

Once I dressed up for an ACLU benefit, I wore a black lace dress, heels, elaborate hairdo and makeup. And I felt like—a drag queen. Not like a woman—I am a woman every day of my life—but like the ultimate in artifice, a woman posing as a drag queen.

The roles are beginning to wear thin. The makeup is cracking. The roles—breadwinner, little wife, screaming fag, bulldyke, James Bond—are the cardboard characters we are always trying to fit into, as if being human and spontaneous were so horrible that we each have to pick on a character out of a third-rate novel and try to cut ourselves down to its size. And you cut off your homosexuality—and we cut off our heterosexuality.

Back to the main difference between us. We Gays are separate from you—we are alien. You have managed to drive your own homosexuality down under the skin of your mind—and to drive us down and out into the gutter of self-contempt. We, ever since we became aware of being gay, have each day been forced to internalize the labels: "I am a pervert, a dyke, a fag, etc." And the days pass, until we look at you out of our homosexual bodies, bodies that have become synonymous and consubstanial with homosexuality, bodies that are no longer bodies but labels; and sometimes we wish we were like you, sometimes we wonder how you can stand yourselves.

It's difficult for me to understand how you can dig each other as human beings—in a man-woman relationship—how you can relate to each other in spite of your sex roles. It must be awfully difficult to talk to each other, when the woman is trained to repress what the man is trained to express, and vice-versa. Do straight men and women talk to each other? Or does the man talk and the woman nod approvingly? Is love possible between heterosexuals; or is it all a case of women posing as nymphs, earth-mothers, sex-objects, what-have-you; and men writing the poetry of romantic illusions to these walking stereotypes?

I tell you, the function of a homosexual is to make you uneasy.

And now I will tell you what we want, we radical homosexuals: not for you to tolerate us, or to accept us, but to understand us. And this you can do only by becoming one of us. We want to reach the homosexuals entombed in you, to liberate our brothers and sisters, locked in the prisons of your skulls.

We want you to understand what it is to be our kind of outcast—but also to understand our kind of love, to hunger for your own sex. Because unless you understand this, you will continue to look at us with uncomprehending eyes, fake liberal smiles; you will be incapable of loving us.

We will never go straight until you go gay. As long as you divide yourselves, we will be divided from you—separated by a mirror trick of your mind. We will no longer allow you to drop us—or the homosexuals in yourselves—into the reject bin; labeled sick, childish or perverted. And because we will not wait, your awakening may be a rude and bloody one. It's your choice. You will never be rid of us, because we reproduce ourselves out of your bodies—and out of your minds. We are one with you.

DEUS IRAE ON BLEECKER STREET

In my green all-weather coat I catch the rain, and throw it off; I wrestle with the wind.

Wind twists the clouds like rope; my head is bare and wind twists in my hair.

I take long strides and puddles roll abjectly round my boots; I make dark gestures at the skies.

Standing alone in Bleecker Street, I glare at God. He answers me with thunderbolts.

WE MET ONLY ONCE

For Mary, whom I first met but last week, hidden under counterpane and quilts, her shawl draped over wisps of hair: was it chill or vanity or piety that covered her balding head? "It hurts, all through my system." The nuns said her birthday was coming. I told them I had just turned twenty-one. She said, "I listen to the radio, but sometimes I get bored." Cataracts had closed her off. Her teeth were gone, but she spoke clearly. "The priest says Mass in the morning."

Because she could not see,
I held her bone-thin hand;
and that's all I remember,
blue eyes in a sallow face,
and a cold blue hand.
On Monday next we were notified
she'd died,
and we stopped sending the welfare checks.

WELFARE WORKER

Dusk also falls on the Bronx, Even on the sooty "Elevated," On me that night as I climbed to the train, On Mrs. Sanchez, my client, As I thought of her, as it grew dark; Dark-eyed and deep bosomed, Three kids and the man's gone.

I passed the tattered posters, (Like spotted cabbage leaves Fallen beneath the vegetable stalls) Screaming foods and Fords and flicks — I stopped Before a movie ad, a tailored woman, Fashionable smile beneath a bowler hat.

And I turned away sharp, Wincing at my own sad lust. (Dust cannot hurt me, nor soot, nor slum, Nor broken glass; Only flowers burn my eyes and throat.)

Looking up at the sun-splattered sky, Hills of white cloud, edged in gold, Where once I dreamed to run; I saw the pigeons, circling free, Black, white, tan, and nearly screamed.

ON SCORPIO RISING

Those men knew how to do homage Knew that the ram of sacrifice Must be belted and bejeweled, Marked with memento mori, Carefully tended and dressed In the ritual, feasted. In the prime of lust and luxury, He must go knowingly, eagerly, As a man prepared.

Sheath him in leather, black and burnished, Studded in chrome.
Hang chains from his waist, ring his hands, Strap on his boots.
At the feast of masks let him strip, Give stripes, receive adoration, ram.
He who goes down before the Lord Must be without blemish.

And let him rise in the morning,
Mount, ride through the misty streets,
Ascend at the cross road with sirens
Wailing kyrie, beautiful symbol
Of his body sailing high and then ruined forever,
Cut by the chromium jewels,
Blood spurting out of the leather like love,
like spilt seed.

WE MIGHT HAVE BEEN QUEENS

You would have been a fine fashionable man — Sunday Times magazine — but for your fiery hair. I watched your slender hands

It was pink and orange hair around your groin, that seemed to be brushed little peppers 'cross your butt, soft baked apples in my hands.

If I had been a man
I would have sunk myself
into those spicy fruits;
but as it was you sunk yourself in me
(and I could almost fall in love with you.)

IN TRANSIT

We were three, riding home, sleepy with drink and smoke-drowsy; Christmas was winking out in the city.

The driver, the man up front, talked on. I tried to lift my eyes, respond. Meanwhile, she, next to me, dropped her hand to my knees.

I pressed her hand. — Tonight
I am with the man. Another night
I will call you.

But at her touch, my smoke-soaked blood jumped in my veins, rattled the excuses of my heart.

A GIRL ON A SWING

The sun breaks over her head Breaks out the banquet of an afternoon

Swing, little girl

Alone in the park Her shoes kick out a valley of dust beneath the swing.

The sun in a slow roll Stirs up the dust Traces a fine sweat on her face Swing, all your afternoon.

Time enough to learn the ways of men Splayed out hands Eyes like steel-tipped quarrels in the bow Cocked and aimed Time to learn the walk of a deer through the gantlet Of hunters on the street

If I could stay in the park with you And listen to the slow creak of the swing And the sparrow's song of victory And the silent orchestra of summer fire . . .

The click of a bolt in breech is our sunset
Brings down the day
Brings me to my feet

Go home.

The dust is down. A night breeze rides in the empty swing.

MY FRIEND MIRIAM

She was never athletic; Yet by sitting still, Tensed for a shower of blows, Her shoulders had secreted muscle.

Never the schoolgirl of unconscious grace,
Not the fair-haired leader
Most certainly not the sweetheart of Sigma Chi —
She had acquired a tough butch rep of late;
Cross between a casanova and a hood —
And half believed in it herself.

So I was surprised,
But most of all she was surprised
To know that she had been beside a fire,
Beside a woman, drinking wine,
Talking, unable to reach for a waiting hand;
Talking until it became absurdly late,
And they retired in polite dismay
To separate rooms.

THE DARK TOOTHEDGE

Her robe fell open at the knee; I heard crossed knees Shifting on the sofa springs, Beneath white words she breathed at me.

Like curtains at the Met
Drawn for pale Aida,
Are the folds and stripes of her robe,
Blood-color fells of velvet.

Something with blood-caked fur Stiffly paces the chambers Of bone caves beneath my face, Gazing at her.

She puffs words, "Do you love me?"
Love! — is toast and tea,
An ordered house
In a distant valley.

And here in me the dark monsoon In solid rainsheets falls, Wordless, keening in the dark; I hear her blood across the room.

COMPRESSION CHAMBER

Rainwater hands
Your cat-dilated, almost amber eyes
(as space between beats grows smaller
on drums that light broken streets)
Your touch draws
power down; current
back of my eyes.
We are too crowded in one room.

I wish I were
the rapids of the Colorado
wild within cliffs
And you a storm
come down tundra
onto Montana.

Poor bones,
too narrow a path
For the lightning your fingers suggest;
Your lips demarc
our cruel-edged limitations.
I almost ask you
Go; let me be
some small cool thing
greybird
Crossing the Plains
starless
In late November.

THE DARK TOOTHEDGE

Her robe fell open at the knee;
I heard crossed knees
Shifting on the sofa springs,
Beneath white words she
breathed at me.
Like curtains at the Mot

Drawn for pale Aida,
Are the folds and stripes of her robe,
Blood-color fells of velvet.

Something with blood-caked fur Stiffly paces the chambers Of bone caves beneath my face, Gazing at her.

She puffs words, "Do you love me?"
Love! — is toast and tea,
An ordered house
In a distant valley.

And here in me the dark monsoon In solid rainsheets falls, Wordless, keening in the dark; I hear her blood across the room.

COMPRESSION CHAMBER

Rainwater hands
Your cat-dilated, almost amber eyes
(as space between beats grows smaller
on drums that light broken streets)
Your touch draws
power down; current
back of my eyes.
We are too crowded in one room.

I wish I were
the rapids of the Colorado
wild within cliffs
And you a storm
come down tundra
onto Montana.

Poor bones,
too narrow a path
For the lightning your fingers suggest;
Your lips demarc
our cruel-edged limitations.
I almost ask you
Go; let me be
some small cool thing
greybird
Crossing the Plains
starless
In late November.

IN A COIN BOOTH

When her voice crosses the Mojave, passes through huge black cables buried under the Father of Waters, leaps across the Alleghenies to me in Manhattan, in the sad-ass end of February: It's like she wasn't gone.

It's speed and acid in a way no solo trip could be; dormant privet hedges swell and stretch their twigs in lightning angles, traffic signals flash a secret pattern, hinting of rhythms I scarcely imagine: Brainpaths of a manic city.

And I run down the morning streets, no money to fly but I run West as far as Second Avenue.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Lesbianism is revolution, it says on the button on my jacket. My roommate Judy says no, women have been making it with each other for centuries and we still have no power in the world. But I have sworn to leave no stone unturned in the quest for liberation, so on Christmas day Mikki and I got stoned. Sunshine. Best acid I ever turned on to.

We made love, our bodies formed a circle. It was like making love to myself, like a cat catching its tail, a worm coming across its other end in the burrow. I remembered a line from a song, "Let the circle be unbroken." The circle dances that we introduced in Gay Liberation Front. Monique Wittig's "vulval ring." I made up a haiku about it:

I woke up eating My tail one morning and found It was my sister

Myself, my mother. I am the flesh of my mother who will go to the grave despising her own flesh from the waist down. Unclean, it says in the Torah. She told me she couldn't bear to have another woman touch her sexually. B.T.'s mother told her, "Don't mix the bathroom with the kitchen." Cut your self in half, it's easy; the magician will now saw a lady in half in the kitchen, the other in the bathroom. Morning prayer: I thank thee Lord that I was not born a woman. My grandfather said it every morning but I didn't know enough Hebrew to understand what the words meant.

I am the flesh of my father who fears the flesh of women, who betrayed me with his contempt for women. I am the flesh of my father, the butch who has betrayed a thousand women simply by seeing them as beautiful, myself as the frog courting the princess. But her kiss didn't turn me into a prince. No, I'm a princess. A grown woman, a six year old who got her tail for Christmas.

Mikki: "Did you ever think you might be my other end?"

A man can't make a woman feel beautiful, and Athene knows I've tried them more than once, and had the best of them, too. I must be beautiful in my own eyes, in my own terms, must accept the beauty of other women before I can begin to think of the male as a human being. We will deal with them when we have re-integrated ourselves.

With Mikki I lived through many fantasies, buried in her flesh like a black woman and her children in a wagon full of cotton. We slept in the soft cotton, in the wagon on a dark and starry night. We took the cotton from Massa and left him, and we were free. I have heard blacks in Harlem calling each other evil names, putting each other down, reinforcing the ugliness that has been forced on them by the oppressor. And heard many times, from many people of my parents' generation, that they find most blacks unattractive, can't imagine sleeping with a black.

Men must really despise our bodies, for we learn their values and despise ourselves. Mikki gets angry when I touch her behind in public. "It's a gesture of possession," she says. But it's more. A woman's behind is always behind her; she can't see it. The gesture is an attack from behind. Kids get spanked on the behind. Women get pinched and grabbed and goosed. I remember the curses where I went to school: "I'm gonna kicket yo' ass in." "Getcher white ass outta here."

I was on the edge of life and death with Mikki, knowing somehow if I came then, it would be through a process of wiping out my consciousness, that high degree of awareness which is the acid state. Or that it would be through making a new kind of connection with Mikki, a telepathic one, a new level of consciousness beyond the normal. Being aware that sexual fantasies were always, no matter how distorted, fantasies of union. We are strange beings, our little consciousness the difference between life and

death, between animal and human, union and separation.

Fantasies . . . for years I've been prey to masochistic fantasies, masturbation fantasies which replicated power relationships in our society. Mikki said, "This wiping-out of consciousness, these masochistic fantasies are reflections of the fact that sexual union, for most women, means self-obliteration, self-denial." Then what is sex between equals? I've been gay for ten years now—my god it's my birthday on which I'm writing this; happy birthday to me!—and I'm just beginning to find out. What now? I don't feel like having fantasies anymore. I feel reborn—not in the blood of some miserable little lamb, but in my own menstrual fluid.

We attempt to assimilate the names they call us. I remember one hot spring day, during the time I was working on RAT, and living in one of the worst tenements in the East Village. I was walking down the street with Wendy, wearing jeans and a torn tie-dyed shirt. We passed the fruit stand, where the proprietor was abusing a customer. Wendy swiped a tangerine and we shared it. I thought of Jean Genet, and compared myself to him. "Homosexual, thief, ragamuffin." I was glad, perversely proud of my outcast status.

Her labia were like flowers, like sea anemones . . . I wondered if mine were like that to her. She said later that she was on a hilltop, making

love to me in the grass, sunshine pouring down.

Lesbianism, I have read somewhere, contains narcissism. A healthy narcissism, I think, for the oppressed people are not allowed to love themselves. You can always rule a people who have no self-esteem, no self-love. For me, lesbianism has been a ten-year search for myself in another woman; an effort always amputated by my inability to see myself in her. Always falling short until Christmas day, when acid completed the connection. Plato said, "An army of lovers cannot lose;" but first we must learn to love. A profound change.

Chapter One in the Field Manual of the Women's Liberation Army

will discuss self-love.

WORKING ON RAT: MAY 1970

my sister was married last night and grandpa, who is eighty-four danced all evening, telling again of his draft-dodging days, of how he refused to serve the Czar.

in june my brother must go, perhaps to montreal, perhaps vancouver.

the aunts i hadn't seen in seven years asked me what i did to live; i knew they meant for career, for money; but i said "to live — i am a revolutionary."

my cousins were afraid, but one, on strike at Hunter, said, "you must be very brave." i shook my head.

and during the rites i watched the generations, those who had survived the former wars, sweat shops, strikes, meaningless work . . . counting only on weddings and numbers of children, grandchildren . . . these are the brave.

my sister had said,
"please come to my wedding.
i have only one sister,
and i want you to be maid of honor."

but i have millions of sisters, here and in Cambodia. it's easy to seem brave in the revolution when you have such a large family to care for you.

AFTER I QUIT: NOVEMBER 1970

Someday there will be revolution Someday we'll live in communes Tear down Rockefeller Center Breathe air instead of lead Monoxide Silicon We will make a revolution They say we must fight to love

And my sisters in the Movement Say, if you don't make it now Don't feel bad Someday we can together And there are no Personal solutions

And there is no space for communes In New York And there is no air But we can together Make a revolution Someday

But today she left me
Sisterhood is distant as the stars
Beyond the wet November sky
And today, only today
I have a pulse and breathe
Someday is the revolution
Now the pain comes down
And the pain comes down

THE POETRY OF MAN

These are the words that condemn him,
Out of his own mouth they condemn him,
The semen dribbling mouth of the reviewer
Echoes the mouth of the poets.
Dated the 31st of December
in New York's Village Voice
[while we established the new order for the coming year in the city's abandoned buildings].

And this is the evidence for the prosecution:

"Sexual passion," says the reviewer,
M. G. Stephens is his byline,
"Sexual passion [in these poems] is manifest
In healthy, vigorous
Uncontained terms."

And the poem by the reviewed Codrescu, a poem called "gang bang" I quote "two cocks crush dry under the flag of her hips. there will be nothing left."
And this Codrescu is an exile From Rumania, who came and learned our tongue Only to use it as an instrument of mutilation.

Again the reviewer testifies:
"The best poems in each book
Are usually love poems
Written
With a tenderness and delicacy
Which betray those cults
That make objects of women."

And the poet, Weatherly: "marry me in my pre fascist period. why because i dig yo fat thighs rumped ass bald domed tits cunt that's a live home to huge beasts."

And this Weatherly is a black man Who served in the Marines [And how many sisters over there Died under his instruments in Da Nang?] And he was once a minister, Paid to lie about our mother Eve.

These the reviewer presents as poems of the revolution. These the reviewer presents as poets
Who chisel at the foundation
Of literature, who chisel subtly away.

Oh, the subtleties of the gang bang! Oh delicate feelings and tenderness!

Let us return once more to Codrescu,
Who as I understand it,
Learned his English on St. Mark's Place
Where he picked up teenage runaways
And out of the compassion that befits a refugee
Gave them warm beds for the night:
His very own bed with himself in it.
Here is a poem, perhaps to one of these, "for sarah":

"someone raped you and carved your fine bones with fertility masks. it's what i should have done."

Oh the subtleties of rape! Oh delicate feelings and tenderness!

Now this is the case for the prosecution Of Stephens, the reviewer, Tom Weatherly, and Andrei Codrescu, And male Amerikan poets in general: The evidence is in.

We will accept the motion of the poets That poetry reflects man's noblest thoughts: And if these are their noblest thoughts, They stand condemned.

I call upon you, sisters of the jury,
To judge them guilty
To sentence them as they themselves suggest,
And carve their bones with masks
And the words of the law
Which we shall hang on walls
To educate our daughters.

TO A SISTER OF DIFFERENT PERSUASION

At night, the guns are greased. Even the babies know: their crying ceased, They lie awake and watch While the guns are greased.

We meet at lunch. Your hands Are oily, still. I dare not inquire — But our eyes meet, and I know You are my enemy. Whom I desire.

Who cannot love me. I may not ask nor know . . . Divided first by ideology,
We are divided more by ancient laws
Of honor, and love's rivalry.

And you shall go to the front And shall return to slaughter me. Your eyes betrayed it that first night: A certain cruelty . . .

Fascinating — Kali, death-dancer, I would do battle with you once before Your next return. In this last age, perhaps, Even the act of love is war.

A LETTER FROM HANOI

This morning I received one letter tucked inside another, a few weeks late; delayed by the necessity of seeming to originate in London rather than Hanoi.

The tale was fairly brief.
A friend is ill and asks me several times to come to her.
She's written to her friends in every town:
Hoboken...Vladivostok...Manchester...and Yenan.
Some have pledged a Christmas visit.
"That's a long wait," she says.
"The walls are leaking.
Rain, as if directed by malicious hands, is battering our town and tearing down the crops, the chicken coops, the fruit unripened from the vine."

In Maine, the leaves all red and gold leap from their stems, swing wide descend to earth; and old New Englanders, each year a little stiffer than the last, prepare themselves for some such dignified descent, hearing an echoed rustle in their bones.

Check it out, sisters and brothers, dig it, right here in New York, right now the leaves turn red! You can go to Central Park and see it for yourself.

You'd better pray to be a leaf the next time round.

On Houston Street
I almost stepped on what was once a dog
— I think —
some matted hair,
the outline of a paw. A tail.
A very definite tail.
The rest, a semi-liquid greyish lump
alive with maggots
racing round, an endless scrimmage
at the 10-yard line.

Now where's the dignity in that? No wonder they bury the dead. Nobody wants to see her lover like that, eaten by a thousand nameless johns with never a penny to pay as they strip her bones.

My uncle gathers the leaves on his lawn. At harvest time he builds a little hut to pray in, and the women of his household bring him fruit. (In Bangladesh they lined up for women dropping their loads like coins in a turnstile.)

Swear what you will, swear never again, swear never again, swear protests at Stockholm this year where the Nobel Prize for Peace will go to the governments of Pakistan, Burundi and Nigeria, and our very own, for contributions to the cause of Zero Population Growth.

My flesh grows slack with age before its final liquidation. I filed the letter from Hanoi with articles and charts on population trends. This talk of genocide is like some dull rheumatic ache; and that, I've grown accustomed to. Nonetheless, the thought that I might die really disturbs me.

IN MEMORIAM: J. EDGAR HOOVER

I have pinned a photo on my bulletin board, a photo which appeared in the *New York Times* last week. It depicts two men of proud bearing, dressed in the style of the 1940's, ascending a wide staircase. The caption reads, "Clyde A. Tolson, Associate Director of the F.B.I. and crose personal friend of J. Edgar Hoover, walking his usual respectful step behind the chief during an investigation in 1942. Mr. Tolson, like Mr. Hoover a bachelor, was part of Mr. Hoover's strict schedule, and had lunch and dinner with him six times a week beginning in 1920's."

When I pointed this photo out to a friend, she declined to claim Mr. Hoover as one of our kind. "We don't need him to give us a bad reputation," she said. "Perhaps their relationship was a platonic one . . . perhaps Hoover's reactionary ways were the result of sexual repression." I reminded her that the late Mr. Hoover had performed at least one noble deed: when Walter Jenkins was hospitalized after his disgraceful entrapment in a YMCA men's room, J. Edgar Hoover sent flowers. She reluctantly admitted that the Director might indeed have been a brother.

When we tally the generations of famous men, let us not forget Ernst Roehm. If we may claim Socrates, Richard Coeur de Leon, Joan of Arc and Emily Dickinson, we must be prepared to accept those erring sheep whose politics are not our own. And let us be just to both the living and the dead, praising their virtues and honestly criticizing their failings.

Much has been said to condemn the man who kept dossiers on us all, and those who laud him now are often men whose personal integrity is subject to question. Whatever your political coloration, if you had to depend for your life on one man's keeping his word, would you rather that man be Richard M. Nixon or J. Edgar Hoover?

Let us also honor constancy. While the younger generation may set little store by the duration of a relationship, placing a higher value on intensity of passion, our forebears had great respect for a marriage that lasted fifty years in spite of adverse social conditions. Two men who defied convention publicly for half a century, who preferred each other's company to the exclusion of all others, who rose together to wield a power unmatched and, until recently, unchallenged, should not pass from view without a well-deserved salute.

These men influenced our lives in many ways. We know them as passionate collectors of relics: photos, fingerprints, biographies, endless transcripts of taped conversations — these men could have written the political history of our time. And where will future historians go to find the lovingly preserved lives of our comrade revolutionaries? The fictional heroes of our youth were modeled on Hoover and Tolson rather than Achilles and Patrocles — which of you is unfamiliar with Batman and Robin? Have you never read G-Man Comics? Have you not been visited by dreams of

these indefatigable gentlemen, hovering around like a couple of bats at the other end of your telephone? Endlessly listening, taking pictures — perhaps they were the greatest voyeurs of our time. What right have we to oppress voyeurs?

Endlessly listening, writing down your good deeds and bad in their Great Book, their Data Bank — perhaps they were trying to assist God in His labors? (I'm sure no female deity would bother with such trivia.) If so, theirs was indeed a magnificent obsession, however much it may have inconvenienced us.

And who shall replace them? Alas, those powerful men who erect great structures are always supplanted by lesser men who can barely keep it up. Great leaders give way to tedious bureaucrats. Here we must sigh, for bureaucrats are generally more efficient, if less colorful: theirs is not a mighty iniquity but a banal evil. The Hoovers of the world take responsibility for their acts, the Eichmanns are always following someone else's orders.

I sometimes wonder which evil is greater: that of the men who go forth and destroy, who build empires on heaps of human bones; or that of the men and women who continue in their convenient routine, who swallow the lies on their plate and keep their noses down. There are so many more little banal folk than there are saints and villians. How could those other little men kill Eichmann?

A man like Hoover was another sort entirely. Perhaps today he awaits his friend in the Elysian Fields, clad again in the splendid flesh of his youth, complete with shoulder holster and broad-brimmed hat, prepared once again to go forth in defense of Truth, Justice and the American Corporation. Ave atque vale.

MORGAN IN MY BED

Sappho said "beauty is that which one loves". Though all the women I love are beautiful. today you seem the loveliest because last night I lay with you after a sleepless week and ragged days. You gave me rest. All night your arms drained nicotine and phone deposits window gates no closets Con Ed landlord sediment out of my veins. Your arms were warm and blonde and in the morning shone translucent angel arms that drained my blood of the world, gave me back to the world, in the morning.

We rose later than we planned resetting the alarm three times, each time prolonging the sweetness of morning delicious lounging like an overdose of hot fudge sundaes. Anglo in the flag-patch jeans: When I sleep beside you I remember all the colors of my dreams. If I were your mother I'd have called you Cream of Mescaline, but you chose to dress yourself in the name of the morning.

AFTER READING THE FIRST CIRCLE

Curiously, I still remember her front teeth, one behind the other like a shy child iammed against her mother. I had just closed a book on prison camps when, unaccountably, an image of her hands returned to me. Freckled and square, larger than mine, those hands knew me well as I knew her. All things intimate and dear were opened; why I could tell you the shape of her womb, the shade of her eyes, her hair.

I read a book
about a land where everyone was in the hands
of fear, from ministers to prisoners
in Sovyetskaya Gavan.
And I wondered,
how much am I prisoner here?
Whom do I hold in jail?
For women know
that you can live behind a thousand bars
and never see
just what they are
till someone brings a key.

I thought we were each other's keys to freedom.
Yes, we were, until the day she saw me as another barrier, a new means of imprisonment.

With that, there was no argument; she had her will.

Yet I can close my eyes and touch her cheek and love her still.

WHAT COMES OUT IN THE WASH

The laundromat on Jersey Street!
Ah yes, the daytime hangout
with the only working phone
for a line of whoever
couldn't pay the bill this month.
Round, brown patient faces,
a few white ones like mine,
shining in the steam,
fingers sweating up a dime.
It's the cheapest sauna in town!
Every day the woman who mops up the Tide
stares at the whirlpools behind the glass
her head filled with roar like the sea.

Meanwhile a bumblebee flew in the door, checked out a candy wrapper and is butting her head on the window ever since.

She's angry and it's dangerous to try to help her.

She knows there's something wrong, some unseen bar to freedom just beyond her insect understanding. We all sense something wrong: the woman who makes change for the machines, the bumblebee and me.

LADY AND THE DYKE

On New Year's Eve, an oddly warm and humid night, I passed a lady in an open doorway; a lady in a long black dress, framed in the party light.

She smiled at those inside, then stared at me. Her hair tricked up in masses of black curls, her elegantly-painted eyes bespoke a different destiny than mine.

Her hands caressed a glass of wine. Her smile became a troubled frown the moment that she saw me swagger down her brownstone block.

Dark woman in the darker dress, do you fancy me?
A dyke in blue jeans, leather boots and vest — do you see me as your Garbo playing Queen Christina?
Well, maybe a little less of a star.

I am the road not taken and you are my untravelled way. Before the New Year's Day appears to wipe away this warm delicious mist, let me imagine — as you return to party — myself desired, heroic, magical, the object of your fantasy.

OUTSIDE YOUR DOOR

Outside your door, someone orders me to justify my name. Is it you? Or am I hearing voices once again?

Tonight I have no name, don't know who I am, jobless, unmarried, lacking property. Are they mothers or cops? who cry, justify. Justify.

I am another pair of eyes, looking out. I seem to be a woman. Do you like me? Are you like me? At night, my teeth grind together like stones in the sea.

I am at your door, and must I say I came for intellectual conversation? A dinner? Or to be in avante gay society? Shall I pay my way in poetry?

Or shall I say, I came to your home to lay my hands on your breasts, to lay my cheek on your thigh, to hear your blood, to feast, and then to rest.

16

THE TRANSPARENT CLOSET

No longer can we sit in anonymity in some cafe chewing a fantasy as Indian women chew manioc root till it ferments. Someone is sure to walk by and inquire:

I read your book. I saw you on T.V.

She wears the cloak of fame as dubiously as I would wear a permanent — too late to take it off, unsure if this is truly an improvement. I blush, torn between a guilty pride and wishing the groupies would split.

None of us knows what to do with the hunger of crowds the cast of millions who are each day informed that they are extras in this film.

Strange to have one's name used as an icon poster on a bedroom wall spattered with one night's dreams yellow and tattered tomorrow.

OF MATRIARCHS AND AMAZONS

Dear Jane, speaking of the Mother-Right, seven years ago I dreamed I was with child. I was a man a poet of the Renaissance pregnant by my own father.

This year a woman I love wanted me to bear her child but she herself prefers to sleep with men, sees divinity in them; and there is no redress of that old wound.

Marge teased me, took me round her garden showed me a bush called Bleeding Heart said, "Martha, that's your plant." I said I'd rather be a marigold like those that guard the beans from hungry worms sentry with the orange afro golden shakoed warrior.

Now I think
that if I guard some crop
it is by chance
not service to a queen
not because I count less than a bean.
I am a tough and fiery flower
shedding psychedelic seeds
roman candle poems
I am the huntress, bloody and bold,
and ain't I a marigold.

EVEN AFTER YEARS, HER PERFUME

Even after years someone passing on a subway platform wearing her perfume brings me to a halt, a shudder and difficult breathing.

Leaping into love was easy welcoming the fire that burnt away sleep the cat-nerves that leaped at her touch. But I did not consent for every kiss to change my chemistry so that after years when the faded imprint of desire ceased to trouble me, love remained.

Neither of us consented to drop the cloak of romance that knotwork of mothholes open to the wind of lies. How we hungered for instant understanding permanent ecstasy sisterhood ignorant of fear or envy ready to back each other with blood.

How I hated her being an honest messenger of herself and now, how rare it is that after years, the grudge for tearing up my dreams has turned to gratitude.

Old friend, old lover, our ancient quarrels ache on rainy days like shrapnel in the flesh. I will never pick out the pieces of you never quite absorb them. You populate my heart; our dialogue goes on. I need you, even after years even against my will.

HITCHHIKING

1. Driving in Larger Circles

After a tornado-watching day we waited by the road that cuts the plains like pie. Leftover winds rippled the wheat leftover clouds crossed the sky clouds like those patches of blue that fly over New York City.

A good day to hitch.
Three soldiers pick us up:
Moses and Vic and Turner
on a three-day bender
driving an old Impala
over what was once the prarie;
up Kansas into Nebraska
through Iowa down to Missouri.

The army bought them out of the inner cities and set them in Fort Riley. They punch each other lovingly, easy, friendly, available to be lifted by the winds of war and set down anywhere.

They tell us how to set flares how not to set off a mine whatever we need to know to join the infantry. Riding to Kansas City I think of state troopers who might stop the car: three black soldiers, two white women hitchhikers.

Beside the road
three buzzards are locked
in a holding pattern
hovering lower and lower
over whatever crawls slower and slower
beneath black shadows to die.
The sky is as blue as a trooper's eyes
the wheat is gold as his hair
and sprinkled with storm-killed animals.
The buzzards are everywhere.

2. The Weight of Clear Sky

Barbara, at forty
newly turned Missouri farmer
was trying to save seedling
spruce, maple and Russian olive trees.
All but a branch of the yearlings
were dead and dry.
The winds held steady at forty
under a summer sky.

"Newcomers curse the settlers for cutting the trees," she said. "Before we planted here there were no trees.

All the way to the Rockies the grass was four feet high. That was the prarie."

Next day driving West I tried to imagine oxen, wagons and men chest deep in a trackless sea of grass, the red clay faces cracking in an August drought. Kiowa struck from the north — tornadoes from the south — Providence gave the pioneers a natural compass.

Childbed fever, prarie fire smallpox and locusts; none of the virtues of Scripture compares with endurance when God's hand tries to grind you back to dust.

Imagine marching three months under a millstone sky — and then the red clay gullies washed by tears of wonder as they trudged over yet another rise to lay eyes on the distant peaks surrounding Denver.

Here's the real miracle: the preacher's tongue, as dry as jerky found spit and words to praise the mountains purple as his language, phrases ransacked from the Bible spliced together in the only poetry he knew.

We cover the distance in a day passing semis doing sixty on the highways gazing at the jagged edge of the horizon through a smoky haze, imagining the undiluted younger sky, and the survivors' joy and the preacher shouting "Glory!"

3. Postmark: Grand Junction, Colorado

Dear friends in Manhattan,
Why are we in Grand Junction?
sitting in the bus depot,
decorating picture postcards
in a microscopic hand.
The river through this town
cut canyons in red sand
that looks like rouge,
sprinkled with a bit of green.
Landscape porno, borderline obscene
just like a Western movie here
if you ignore the powerlines and fences.

Someone left us last night on the highway.
We slept in smelling distance of a pigsty, where, this morning troopers came by with a warning: don't let your thumbs hang out don't hang up signs that indicate your destination.
Don't even stand by the road wearing a hopeful expression.
You get one to thirty days for hoping in Colorado.
We rearranged our faces and he let us go.

The clerk at Trailways, knowing we were going to Los Angeles shipped our backpacks east to Denver. Frantically, we called the clerk at Vail who may remember to head 'em off at the pass and get our gear to us in time to catch the Utah bus tonight. We're hoping, still, to leave this town by sunset.

4. Transcontinental Breakdown

The rhythm of the highway breaks the skin of thought as the driver cuts the lane. Hitching is a rhythm you don't need to dance to as it carries you across another time zone. Set your watch back one stop check the oil stick wipe the bugs off.

Running out of words the driver slaps another tape deck in, filling the car like a rolling studio with Santana and marijuana smoke. Later you push the eject switch to the Doors of Perception, roll the window down before the tollbooth, change the atmosphere to sage.

Five hundred miles to the south you can see saguaro older than Columbus taller than camels the color of razorblades passed through a flame.

Meanwhile the rhythm of hitching is drowning the squeal of rusted pistons in your obsolescent drive the hollow roar of an ambition tank the whining machines of the failure of dreams you tried to leave behind in New York City.

5. Pacific Coast Maneuvers

Put a rifle in my hand spin me and point me at whoever is the enemy.

Yesterday we stood attentively beside a freeway ramp in demin jackets and dungarees red neckerchiefs and backpacks: two women watching a convoy of olive drab trucks and troops pull out of Bakersfield base.

The sky was thick with fog and smoke. All up the coast the hills were California gold, platinum, ocher and tan four hundred miles' span of velvet breasts. The cleavages were green.

A trooper in blue pulled up.
We thought he'd check I.D.
to see if someone wanted us
but he was lonely
wanting conversation.
"Be careful, ladies
don't just hop in anybody's wagon.
Some real queer people ride these roads."

I asked him then
"What kind of golden grass is this?"
"The dry kind," he said.
"We don't get rain
but we get arsonists.
The hills are burning —
you can smell the smoke.
Be careful, ladies
we get real queer folk
round here." He drove away.

We are very careful ladies although somewhat queer. The night before a man gave us a ride, a bed and breakfast, too. We accepted carefully, hearing tales of his family, years in the war, work at a warehouse where local farmers make remarks about his hair. They think he's strange. He ran a youth group at the church and quietly arranged abortions for their daughters.

He studied Chinese philosophy. He gave us a room of our own and towels to shower. His manner was exemplary but we remembered scenes from *Psycho* and slept in our sweat; and since he was a man we were up before dawn washed and dressed and came to breakfast with our boots on.

6. Carry the Pack Home

Pain comes unexpected a rock between my shoulders out of the cloudless Angeleno sky. Building up secretly like stress along San Andreas it twists the tendons in my back and knees. Old karate injuries.

There are wounds a hot bath won't dissolve: watching a children's party in Pacific Palisades, remembering pajamas mother gave me for my birthday. The plastic saw that didn't cut—good enough for a girl. I wanted tools and fussed till Mom permitted Dad to buy a set that wasn't real; real tools are dangerous.

I visit a sick uncle in L.A.
He gives me cash and lays on
the real legacy
numbers of pain
hundreds of books
about four years of war.
My father's brother,
do you love me more
because your son is queer like me?
Do you read books
to recollect that agony
six million times?
or to divert your mind
from cobalt treatments?

Why does your caring twist strings in me that no karateka could touch?

Three days ago
I slept beneath the stars
between thistles and sagebrush
on pebbles and dust.
I was happy in my way
squatting on spare tires
in the back of someone's van,
hitching along the highway.
Peace, like pain, comes unexpectedly.

THE TREE OF BEGATS

When they offered me the glass I turned it down.

The baby sucked a rubber nipple dipped in wine, and fell asleep again. Ruddy little nephew, covered with the fuzz of monkey ancestors, thrust from a tropical womb into a blue flannel blanket. The rabbi tried to bring my godson closer to the angels, cutting off that other vestige of an ape, the little sheath of skin around his cock.

These clean-shaven rabbis merely pretend to reform, saying, in English, "Thank God for a healthy child" and in the ancient tongue
". . .for giving us a son as our first-born."

The women, in vernacular, clustered around a tray of cocktail franks, glancing sideways at my track shoes visible beneath a velvet pants suit. The glass came round. "All those who want sons, drink," the rabbi said. They sipped a bit. I turned it down.

"Hey, ma," I said, "I have a radio show."
"Cousin Lynne, I wrote these poems."
"Dad, hey listen, dad,
I got a yellow belt in my karate class."
"Hey, ma...?"

do

The women cornered me around the canapes. "It's your turn now."
"When are you going to make your mother twice a grandma?"

No way. My womb, like my fist, is clenched against the world.

Kid sister, I remember being three, climbing the bars of your crib teaching you to clap and sing some garbled Yiddish rhyme. You asked the wishing well for a red pinafore. I, for a microscope.

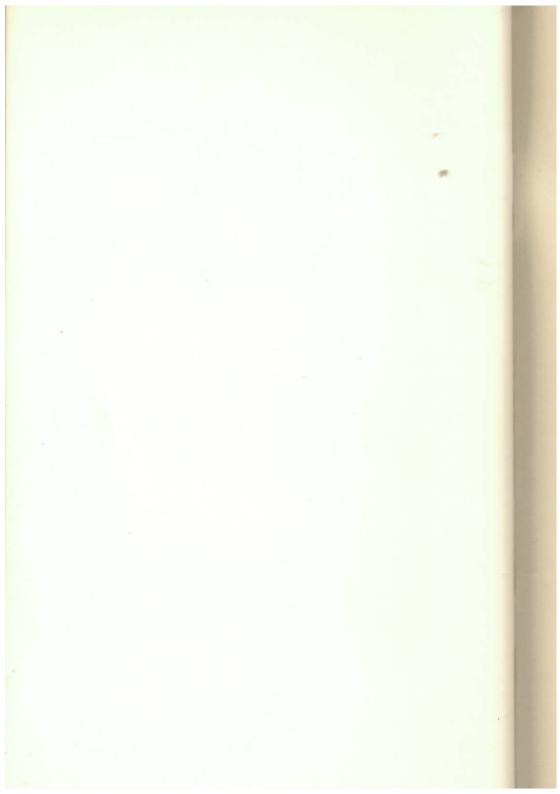
We rattle around in different cages now. You almost became your mother's daughter. I am each day less the wandering lesbian my father dares not own.

Our eyes meet over a barricade of sanctified penises and I ask myself why sisterhood sometimes feels like a wine glass crushed in my fist.

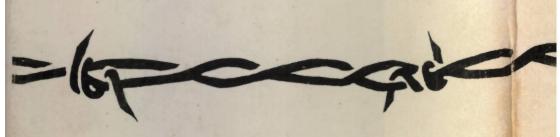
WALKING TO RED HOOK

A wet November night. Smeared on the street, I see Leaves from a maple tree, Like newspaper strips in paste Waiting to be a mask.

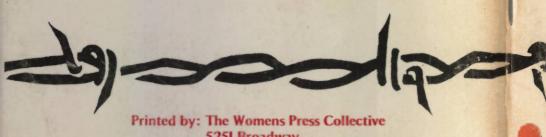
Halloween is past, November mist, And what face will I wear This year, what Christmas mask? Where will I sleep on Christmas night?







Martha Shelley is a certified public hitchhiker. She wrote these poems as an alternative service to the draft.



525l Broadway
Oakland, Ca. 946l8