the sound of one fork

minnie bruce pratt

Electronic Edition
with new introduction by Minnie Bruce Pratt
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THE STRUGGLE TO WRITE

Minnie Bruce Pratt

The Sound of One Fork was my first book of poetry, published in 1981. These poems and I emerged together from the women's liberation and lesbian/gay liberation movements of the 1970s.

I had written poetry in college, but had stopped writing when, barely turned twenty, I had married a poet in 1966. Like so many other women of my generation, I married the person I wanted to be—and then had my world turned upside down when I had two children in quick succession, eighteen months apart.

At the same time, while in graduate school at the University of North Carolina, I got to know feminists and lesbians involved in early women's liberation in Durham and Chapel Hill—a movement then developing from both the anti-Vietnam war movement and the Black civil rights movement.

The range of women's organizing was wide—from forming Marxist study groups to publishing non-sexist children's literature, from fighting for pay equity in university teaching positions to doing support work for prisoner liberation and for Joann Little—a Black woman who had defended herself, killing a prison guard who attempted to rape her.[i]

In this productive ferment, I began reading feminist theory and writing short book reviews for a local movement publication, the *Female Liberation Newsletter*—begun in 1969 and sold at a women's liberation lit table for 2 cents in mimeo.

And then, I began to write poetry again in 1975, when I fell in love with another woman. I returned to poetry, not because I had "become a lesbian"—but because I had returned to my own body after years of alienation. The sensual details of life are the raw materials of a poet—and with that falling-in-love I was able to return to living fully in my own fleshly self.

By 1979 the Female Liberation Newsletter had evolved into *Feminary*, first a quarterly feminist community magazine and then a literary publication self-described as a "feminist journal for the South emphasizing lesbian visions," which had both a regional and national readership. That year, while living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, I became part of the Feminary editorial collective based in Durham, North Carolina. Others in the editorial collective during the time I was a member were Susan Ballinger,

Eleanor Holland, Helen Langa, Deborah Giddens, Raymina Y. Mays, Mab Segrest, Cris South, and Aida Wakil.[ii]

We were a group of anti-racist, anti-imperialist Southern lesbians—Black, white, Jewish, Arab. All of us had to work for our living—some held blue-collar and some white-collar jobs—and we struggled as explicitly with issues of class inequality as we did with racism, especially in the matrix of the U. S. South, and with anti-Semitism, toward both Arabs and Jews.

Inspired by the U.S. Women in Print Movement, different members of our collective learned all aspects of book production—from editing, page design and layout to burning text into the metal plates required by our old printing press; from the actual printing to hand-collating, stapling, and trimming the magazines. We worked with huge clumsy equipment borrowed from Lollipop Power, a feminist press that published non-sexist children's books. And when we finally held the copies of the printed journal in our hands, then we had to tackle distribution.

The Women in Print Movement had emerged in the 1960s as a U.S.-wide effort to make the ideas and art of women's liberation, including lesbian lives, available to the widest possible audience. In a brief online history of the movement, Mev Miller says: "Women in Print was a strategy to build solidarity and to create actions for change." The movement included writing retreats and groups, newsletters, magazines, newspapers, political and literary journals, book publishing, bookstores, distribution networks, and national conferences taking up practical and theoretical issues.[iii]

This larger movement developed both consciousness and skills. I, along with others, began to make our own books in that collective context. When I published *The Sound of One Fork* in 1981, the illustrations were drawn by local artist Sue Sneddon, the printing was done by Feminary collective member Cris South, and the poems were written, typed, and then burned onto the printing plates by me.

By that time my children were ten and twelve years old. When I came out as a lesbian, I had lost custody of them to their father. (I later wrote about this struggle in the poems of *Crime Against Nature*.)

The lightning bolt of that loss etched into me an indelible understanding of the economic and political system I lived inside. I was living in Fayetteville, North Carolina, at the time—where *de facto* segregation was enforced by the white majority, where the country club set still excluded people who were Jewish, and where the state sodomy laws declared any lover of her (or his) own sex to be not only "unnatural" but also a potential felon.

I struggled to stay connected to my children, even as their father moved them hundreds of miles away. My favorite memory from making *The Sound of One Fork* is how I stood next to my two sons, facing a long counter workspace in the cavernous Lollipop Power warehouse. We worked together collating and stapling pages the pages of the book; then we took turns putting stacks of books into the trimmer, and swinging its giant guillotine-like arms.

Over the next two years, I got in my little red Volkswagen "bug" and drove myself all over the South—to see my children in Kentucky, and to do readings from this first book of poetry. In 1983 I visited ten cities in fourteen days**.** I read from my work in the homes of lesbians in Knoxville, Nashville, and Memphis, Tennessee; at a conference on violence against women in Little Rock, and at a women's cultural center in Fayetteville, Arkansas; at an MCC church in Jackson, Mississippi; at an abortion clinic in New Orleans; for college students in English and Women's Studies at universities in Huntsville and Tuscaloosa, and at Lodestar, the first women's bookstore in Birmingham, Alabama.

My travels were not unusual. All over the U.S., women in general, and lesbians in particular, were in a creative whirlwind of political and cultural work.

And the Women in Print movement was not unique—all political liberation movements must bring forward suppressed ideas and often develop cultural, literary and journalistic organizations. The Women in Print movement was necessary because, not surprisingly, national mainstream publishing corporations were not interested in encouraging independent women's liberation or lesbian grass-roots organizing through germination and distribution of our work.

Locally, when we produced art and writing that directly addressed certain crucial issues—sexuality, women's bodies and our health—the companies that we paid to print our journals or newsletters frequently refused to do so once they saw our content and politics—sometimes claiming it was "pornographic," sometimes because company owners held to patriarchal domination, and so deemed us "unnatural women."

These were not isolated, individual acts of bigotry, but the continuation of limits on public communication that had been accelerated by the passage of U.S. federal and state laws linked to the 1873 Comstock Act. That federal legislation made it illegal to send "obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious" material through the U.S. mail. The prohibition included contraceptive devices, any information on abortion or prevention of

pregnancy, and, of course, any materials or devices related to same-sex/gender love.

The provisions of the 1873 "Comstock laws" were still in effect in 1954 when an issue of the gay magazine *One* was seized from the U.S. mail in Los Angeles. The U.S. Post Office and the F.B.I. used the authority of the Comstock Act to try to shut down the magazine, a publication that had spun off from an early gay rights group, the Mattachine Society. One official reason given for the censorship? A short story, "Sappho Remembered," condemned as "cheap pornography," that described a lesbian woman's affection for another woman.

The subsequent court battle for *One* magazine, won by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) organizing, culminated in the 1958 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that granted free press rights to discussions about "homosexuality" for the first time.[iv]

It was this ruling that won the right for the Feminary collective to send our laboriously assembled literary journal out through the U.S. mail—that enabled us to do more than hand-carry copies to our readers.

But the bigotry that had generated the Comstock laws was still firmly in place in other legal and social structures in the 1970s. For instance, "crime against nature" statutes continued on the books in two-thirds of the U.S. states, criminalizing LGBT+ people, our lives, and our loves. My husband used the anti-sodomy laws in North Carolina in 1975 to take my children away, arguing that as a lesbian, I was engaging in illegal, felonious behavior. My "unorthodox" belief in the equality of women within heterosexual marriage—seen as an attack on the "role of the father in the family"—was the final proof I was an "unfit mother."

So, when Women in Print activists Nancy Blood, Leslie Kahn, and others in Durham, North Carolina, decided to expand the Female Liberation Newsletter into Feminary, a magazine, in the mid-1970s, they were not simply launching a literary or journalistic project. They were organizing against an entrenched anti-woman, anti-lesbian, anti-sexual current that raged, deeply embedded, in all economic and social structures in the U.S.

They chose a name for the magazine from a passage in Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*. The women in that novel had small books called *feminaries*, made of pages of text and of blank pages where the women wrote as they pleased.

In Wittig's novel, several women say to a "great gathering of women": "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that....You say

you have lost all recollection of it....You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent."[v]

What kind of woman, what kind of person is she who has not been imagined yet? We knew only—from memory and scraps of story and flimsy pages—that we were the daughters of the great mass liberation movements of the U.S. in the 20th century. We knew that living on within us were the people who had fought the labor union battles of the 30's, the people who shaped the Black civil rights and other national liberation movements of the 50s and 60s, the anti-Vietnam war and women's liberation movements of the 60s and 70s.

We were creating in a space that had been cleared by these people, those struggles, a space into which we were writing our lives and histories.

And we knew also that there was a time, almost within living memory, when some women's grandmothers' mothers were enslaved, and some were *not*. We asked ourselves, what does it mean to recover memory and history under these circumstances? We knew that anti-racist work and writing, political struggle and art, were inextricably intertwined.[vi]

In 1980, in response to an interviewer asking about my "lesbian aesthetics," I answered:

> I started writing poetry again because I became a lesbian and a feminist and because I came to see, to understand, the need for a radical, transformative change in the human world I live in. I became a poet because I became a revolutionary, and I have always felt that my writing was only one part of my work, no more or less important than starting a C-R [consciousness-raising] group on racism and feminism, or marching by the Washington Monument for lesbian rights, or any one of the actions that I do….
>
> In so far as theory about revolutionary poetics, the only person that I've read that has said anything that helps or confirms my ideas [is] Frantz Fanon—a Black revolutionary [who was part of the anti-colonial Algerian struggle against France]….He says that as a people becomes less colonized, their writers produce a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature. The writer becomes an "awakener of the people." He says, "During this phase a great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances—in prison, with the Maquis, or on the eve of their execution—feel the need to speak…to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the

> people…." In speaking of poetic form Fanon says, "The present is no longer turned on itself but spread out for all to see."[vii]

My heart resonated to the hope and resistance in Fanon's words as I struggled to survive the loss of my children, the criminalization of my sexuality, and the rejection by my family. I wrote in 1980 that Fanon's words were "very true of my feeling of urgency and immediacy in beginning to write again." As a white Southern-born woman working to become an anti-racist, I grasped in my deepest self the necessity to act in conscious solidarity with liberation struggles other than my own.

I was coming to consciousness in a century when world-wide liberation movements of colonized peoples, from Algeria to South Africa, from India to the Philippines, were fighting to free their countries. These movements infused other liberation struggles with hope and new ideas, and intertwined the issues of national oppression and racism, oppression because of gender and sexuality, and class inequality. Graphics collectives in U.S. women's liberation made "Women hold up half the sky" posters in solidarity with the women of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), formed in New York City immediately after the Stonewall uprising in 1969, named itself in solidarity with that same anti-colonial struggle.

These and other struggles have shaped my path and my poetry. I have expanded the understanding of the link between my life, my poetry and my body—my woman's body, my lesbian body—and the bodies and lives of other people, other peoples.

I have expanded my understanding of what it will take to have "a radical, transformative change" in this world, of how there is a deeply material basis for a socialist revolution that can overthrow capitalism and the oppressions kept in place by that economic system—and what the struggle for that change means for me as a poet.

As I was writing the poems that became *The Sound of One Fork i*n 1979, I said of my process: "I try to use the most constant natural law of form—that everything changes itself, transforms itself, again and again."

Without knowing it, I was following a path as a poet into the revolutionary work developed through the analysis of theorists like Marx and Engels, who said in *The Dialectics of Nature*: "All nature, from the smallest thing to the biggest, from a grain of sand to the sun...is in a constant state of coming into being and going out of being, in a constant flux, in a ceaseless state of movement and change."

In 2010, after the horrific and preventable British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, I wrote another statement on the relation between my art and my politics:

> I grew up in central Alabama, where our weather and thunderhead clouds come up from the Gulf, and our river, the Cahaba, flows down to meet the Gulf waters. My first memory is of being carried by my Pa through our glittering river; later I began to understand the complicated twining of my life, my river, the life of the human species, with the Gulf and its beings when I read Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us.* Later I began to understand the economic and political intertwinings in my Gulf region as I studied Marx, Engels and other theorists. Eighty per cent of the land in my home county is now owned by corporations—coal, timber—and big financial interests in Alabama exploit workers in countries around the Gulf rim—Russell sports clothing in Mexico, Drummond coal in Colombia, the lumber companies that import Mexican workers displaced by NAFTA to dig vast pine tree plantations in Alabama.
>
> In "Estranged Labor," Marx said, "The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*," and said that nature is our body, "with which [w]e must remain in continuous interchange if [we are] not to die."[viii] As capitalism seizes our labor and estranges us from our work, we are simultaneously alienated from nature, and from experiencing ourselves as simply one species intertwined with the world and other species.
>
> My work is to make poems that re-establish the link between the "sensuous external world" and our daily life, battered as we are under capitalism by such corporate-engineered crimes as the BP Deepwater Horizon catastrophe. I try to make poems that hold the seeds of another kind of "productive life" than what big business analysts speak of—a life spent not for corporate profit, not in coerced labor, not in relation to nature as an inimical force, but with us the human species in "free, conscious activity" in relation to other beings in the larger process of differentiation and development that is our world.

In 1981 *The Sound of One Fork* was my first attempt as a poet to say who I was and where I was, precisely, in the great liberation struggles of my time.

In 2011 the link between there and here is traceable in me, in my poetry—and, more importantly, in the continuing world-wide movements against oppression and class exploitation. The intimate, close-up struggle for freedom continues: Same-sex love is still on the books as a Class One

felony in the anti-sodomy laws of North Carolina. Earlier this year I received a Facebook message from a young lesbian in Alabama who had just lost custody of her child—despite the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court decision (*Lawrence v. Texas*) that struck down the anti-sodomy laws used to prosecute same-sex love. And the global struggle against colonization and imperialism continues: The U.S. at the moment of this writing is bombing Libya as part of its strategy to re-colonize the peoples of Africa.

I hope you will find connections to this present moment as you read these early poems of mine, made available to you through the hard work of poet and historian Julie Enszer. Please note that the link to this essay and to the book can be shared freely under the Creative Commons copyright stipulations: attribution with no commercial use and no derivative use.

As capitalist monopolization of book-publishing and selling increases, and as electronic books are made available through those corporate structures, there are more and more profit-making restrictions placed on how we can access and share books in this new digital era.

But sharing the history and result of our "struggle to write" is crucial to our collective work in the larger world-wide struggle.

So, it is heartening to me that thirty years after its creation, you are reading this small book that emerged from an era in which we fought to find and use the ideas and skills of liberation, and pass those on through art and politics. I hope you will find something in these pages to use in the continuing struggle.

Minnie Bruce Pratt
Syracuse, New York

September 12, 2011

[i] For the Women's Press Collective 1976 chapbook *Save Joann Little*, go to http://www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/node/291. For my retrospective article on her case, see
http://www.workers.org/2006/us/joann-little-0316/).

[ii] For more on *Feminary* and the Women in Print Movement in North Carolina, see Wynn Cherry, "Hearing Me into Speech: Lesbian Feminist Publishing in North Carolina" and Tamara M. Powell, "Look What Happened Here: North Carolina's *Feminary* Collective," both in *North Carolina Literary Review* 9 (2000).

[iii] Mev Miller, "A Brief History of Women in Print." Women in Print - Central Source Networking, 2003. Accessed 5 September 2011.
http://www.litwomen.org/WIP/forms/geninfo.pdf

[iv] "*One, Inc. v. Olesen*." Wikipedia, 10 August 2011. Accessed 5 September 2011.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One,_Inc._v._Olesen

[v] Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*. New York: Avon: 1973.

[vi] Elly Bulkin, "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics," *Sinister Wisdom* 13 (Spring 1980).

[vii] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, Grove Press, 1963. 223.

[viii] Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: International Publishers, 1964. 109.

Editor's Note to the Electronic Edition of *The Sound of One Fork*

The Sound of One Fork was published by Night Heron Press of Durham, NC in 1981. It was Minnie Bruce Pratt's first chapbook of poetry. In total, four editions of the chapbook were printed, each edition with five hundred copies. This electronic edition was scanned from a first printing of the chapbook owned by the editor.

In 2003, Pratt selected seven poems from the original sixteen in *The Sound of One Fork* for her book *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press). Of these seven poems, two poems, "My Cousin Anne" and "My Mother Loves Women," are printed in *The Dirt She Ate* exactly as they appeared in *The Sound of One Fork*. Pratt edited the other five poems included in *The Dirt She Ate*. In this electronic edition edition, a small red oval (•) in the upper right of the first page of the poem indicates that the poem was modified for *The Dirt She Ate*. A small blue oval (•) indicates the poem was included in *The Dirt She Ate* without changes. In the appendix at the end of this electronic edition, I enumerate the changes in the poems for *The Dirt She Ate*.

The majority of the alterations to the poems are small edits to tighten language; changes that are inevitable for a poet like Pratt's whose art and craft have matured since the publication of this first chapbook. Two alterations to the original poems are especially significant because they reflect Pratt's continued political engagements as well as her desire for her poetry to reflect her political commitments. These two changes are in "Cahaba" and "The Segregated Heart." In "Cahaba," Pratt removed a comparison between Choctaw people moving in an imagined past in the town and the movement of women. In "The Segregated Heart," Pratt removed a reference to "a persian harem." When revising these poems for *The Dirt She Ate*, Pratt had a heightened political consciousness about racism. The revisions of these poems in *The Dirt She Ate* reflect Pratt's increasingly complex understanding about the relationships between white people and people of color in the United States. Her thinking about the issues of race and class is well documented in later work, particularly her essays in *Rebellion* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991) and in her 2010 collection, *Inside the Money Machine* (Durham, NC: Carolina Wren Press, 2010). By reproducing these poems in their original form, my intention is to document and highlight how Pratt's thinking and writing evolved.

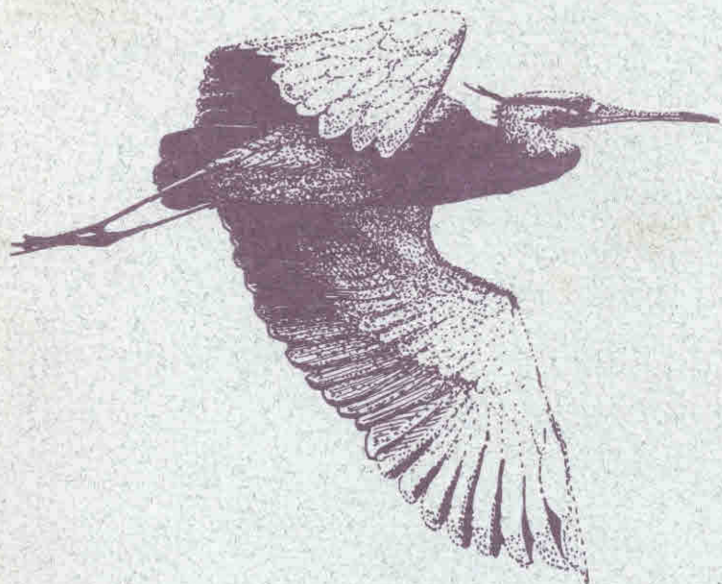
While this close attention to Pratt's editorial changes to the poems of *The Sound of One Fork* may seem elaborate, understanding Pratt's editorial interventions illuminates Pratt's dynamic engagements in her poems textually and politically. These comparisons between the publishing of the poems in 1981 and then in 2003 enhance our understanding of both the

evolution of her work throughout her career and the continued attention to political and cultural formations in her work.

It has been a great pleasure for me to spend time with the original chapbook *The Sound of One Fork* and the revised poems in *The Dirt She Ate*. I hope contemporary readers find pleasure and meaning in this electronic edition of Pratt's work.

Julie R. Enszer
September 2012

the sound of one fork



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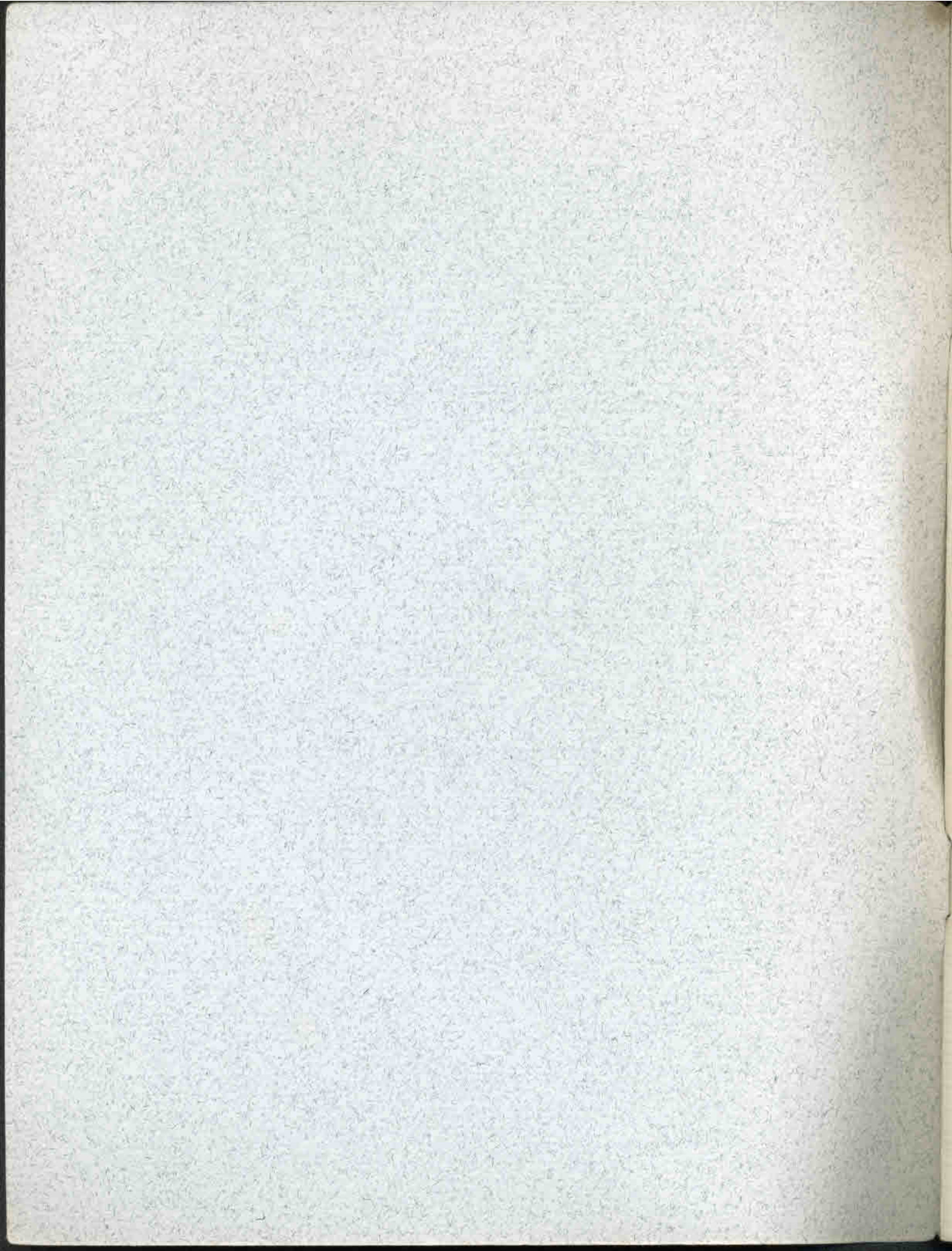
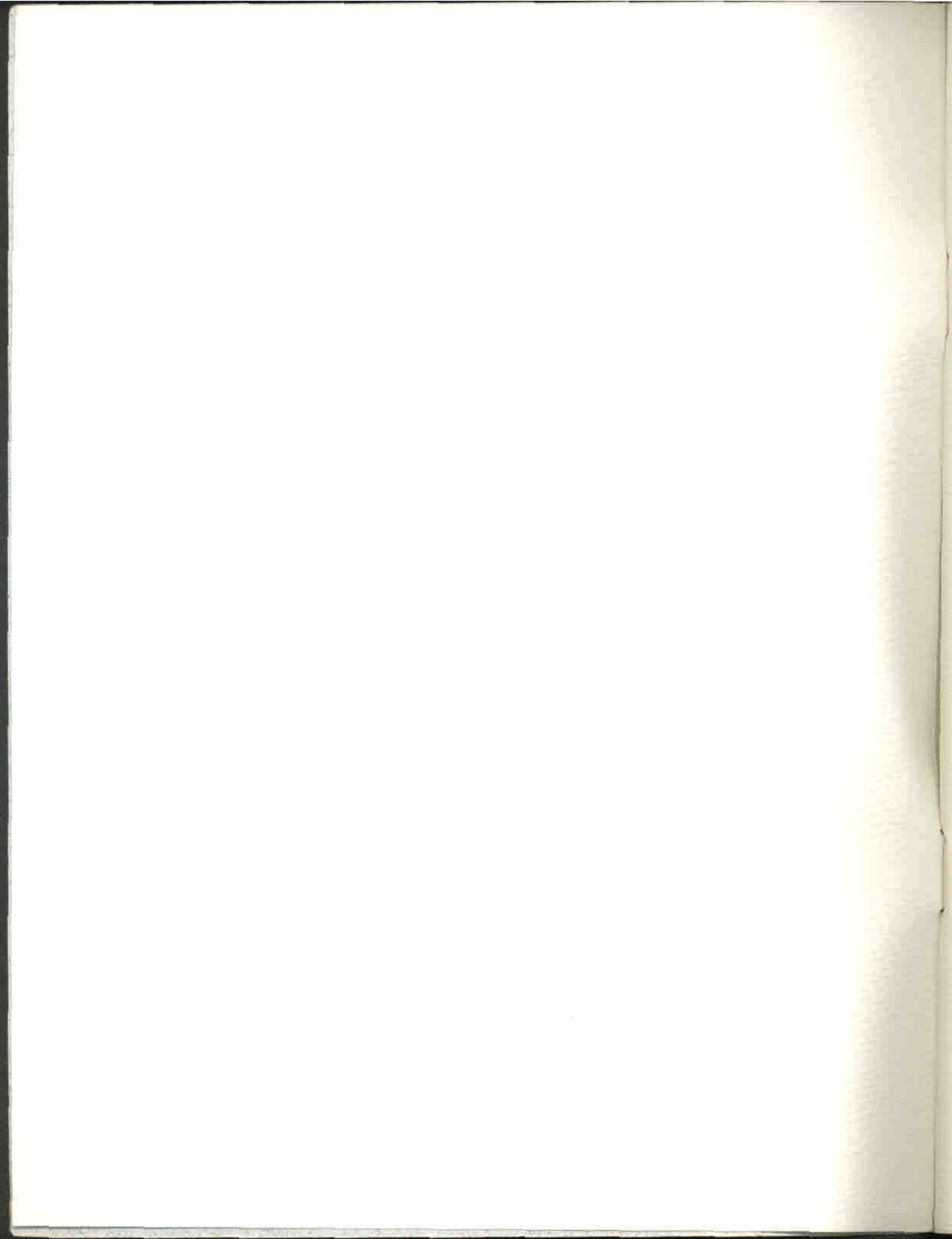
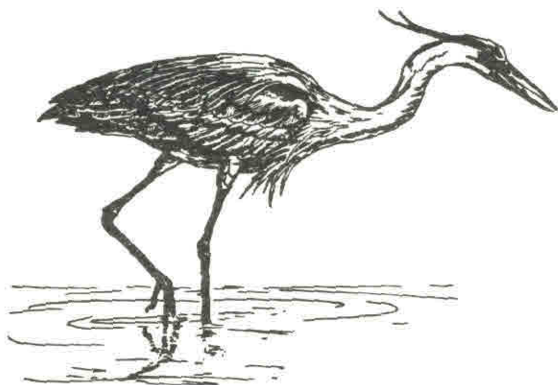




the sound of one fork



night heron press

Some of these poems have previously appeared in *Cat's Eye, Conditions, Feminary, Lesbian Poetry*, and *Sinister Wisdom.*

Special thanks for their conversation and friendship to Elizabeth Knowlton, Mab Segrest, and Cris South.

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For the women
who have worked collectively on the
FEMINIST NEWSLETTER/FEMINARY
from 1969 through today.

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Cahaba

for Susan B.

On the banks of the Cahaba
black walnuts are scattered
with their smooth skins split
down through convolutions
to the kernel fat within.

On the sand of the Cahaba
mussel shells have opened
their dull oval wings
and spread their opal,
pearl, and purple, skies shining.

On the road by the Cahaba
worn stones have shattered
at veins of crystal
where arrowheads lie
hidden but angled for flight.

In my town by the water
mothers, sisters, daughters
flow like the river
in the dry beds of men,
within crumbling limestone walls.

We pass like Choctaws, silent
through the years: men know
that Indians walked
for flint in River Bend
but no man remembers where they went,

knows only that the sand at his curve
of the river has spread
wider since last year.
Unnoticed so in their beds
generations of women turn

and twist the currents of anger
under our blank faces.
We eddy in the past
while our wills rise
and fade like the morning mist.

But we could flood the fields with rage,
spread the red mud to move
over house and porch,
split the sycamores through
to the white core of pith.

Our waves could break
at the surface and down
to the concave shell
to the vein of light
to the kernel of heat
to the arrowed flight
when we release
beyond all bound
the love and hate
we have contained.

Then we could raise
our eyes from the ground
and step where we please
on the banks of the Cahaba.

My Cousin Anne

My cousin Anne taught me
how to eat honeysuckle,
shook the dust from the tangled vines,
guided my hand to the frilled petals.
She snapped each calyx
and pulled through the stamen
so I could tongue from it
the one drop of nectar
shining there.

We were girls when this happened,
when we leaned with our shoulders together
to quench our thirst with flowers
in the furnace of an Alabama summer.

We were still girls then.
Years had not burned between us.
We saw only each other
and the yellow honeysuckle.

Occoneechee Mountain

My mother always said,
Make the most of what you've got.

So the year I lived in the country
I had as friends only
those aloof and undemanding acquaintances
true and false solomon's seal
purple toadflax
the red-shouldered hawk.

I conjugated only with Ovid and my husband,
manipulated my breasts to toughen them for babies,
and, flank jammed against
that of the hill above the Eno,
masturbated as unselfconsciously as Eve,

watching the ferns uncurl above my face,
the sun govern in slow degrees
the unfolding of elm and trillium.

But Cato Said:
Attach No Importance to Dreams

I had bad dreams last fall.
The pond had died with cold weather.
My boys no longer bloomed yellow
and pink in the water, when alone

one night I went down
to the rotting dock, dangled
by one hand at the end
and a dead man rose

glowing yellow-green
bloated with invitation.
Saying *Come with me*
he nibbled at my fingers.

Several nights later
my husband blew me up
when he rolled a bomb,
homemade but effective,

so slowly that I couldn't
avoid it and imploded
into a rather peaceful
void.

All this was easier than
being handed over to the Mafia
by him in the halls
of my mother's WPA office,

where they shot me
several times with pleasure
while I felt continued
indignation and surprise.

It's spring now;
I'm still dreaming:
last night from Birmingham
to Jackson, Mississippi,

I ran away
with my children, on Greyhounds,
in strangers' cars, hurried
from him and the police.

I function well
in the daytime I'm OK
but I want to know
will the past catch me

will night or day come
when I'll not wake
or in the summer
will the dreams stop?

Windows

1. When I was a girl
we knew when it was spring.
The red maple buds opened their wings,
flirted with the ground, had their fling.

I opened my window to night,
to the one sound I heard
in the damp green air,
the mockingbird singing
cantata in a score of voices
from the angled boughs
of the crepe myrtle tree.

I opened my eyes
in the depth of the night
alone in the silence
alone in my bed
to see the moon with clouds
in full bloom overhead.

2. I'm a grown woman now.
I know at the end of winter
that spring still comes
though not the same for me.

In March I sit trapped
in my car with the heat,
open my windows to catch
spirals of air rising
from the grey asphalt street.

Blood pushes at my fingers,
my hands flower with joy
deliberate as crested iris,
until from another window

words come snaking out:

Hey pussy   cunt
wanna   fuck
canya   suck
lookit her tits
some kinda snatch
whats your price   bitch?

I feel my body bloat
as if the copperhead had bitten.
I remember I'm a grown woman.
I hear my mother telling me
when I was a girl at home in Alabama:

You're too old
to go walking alone
too old for bare feet
for walking outside alone.

3. So in the night I have stayed
inside and dreamed instead
that I walk out in the young grass
that snakes circle my feet
that Mama kills them with a hoe
that my ankles and toes bleed
that I cry because spring has come
and I am grown. I am inside
behind closed windows.

4\. But this year I have grown
to hate living as a prisoner
inside my own body
inside my house
I have taken to
taking off my clothes
to admire the shimmer
of my skin in the mirror,
as fine as any light in the sky.
Before I lie down to sleep
I raise my hands,
pull back the curtains,
open the window.

Rape

for S.

At four in the morning I hear
her scream again.
This time he holds the knife
to her throat in the park
behind my house where leaves
darken for the fall.
She offers thirty-two cents.
He wants all.
When the police come they don't
find no screaming
lady search the creepers
at next light
find no body left
but the corpse
of my fear clutching the phone
on the desk and wait

for her to scream again
at ten in the morning
down by the creek it's Sue
taken fishing by her grand-
father, raped and hooked
by him with pain

in the fall, in the early
afternoon
watching the bees bloom
in the sasanquas
I hear my lover scream

in Kansas City
where he holds the knife close
to her white throat
where she fights while blood drips
from her ears to the floor

behind a barracks door
slammed in Germany
Sue hesitates to scream,
to create a stir,
a racist scene over the black
GI beating
off his load of rage
in her

final report of the day
I hear Beth
typing women who've sat
in her office, their lives
bleeding from the mouth, their sides
swollen with incest,
they slide into the metal
file drawers
while Beth feels them murmur and cry
in the cabinet of her heart

Mesia measures the red
for Holofernes'
head and paints revenge
for her rape and death,
paints Judith alive with the knife
in the shadows of midnight

I wake to my lover's scream
this time in my arms
he holds the knife to her throat.
Her scars bleed.
I think of Holofernes'
bleeding head.

I hold a knife to his throat.
    I hold her.
We watch the dark night pass.
    The door is locked.
We hear the step. He holds
    the knife to her throat.
I hold her scarred. I hold
    her in my arms.

Cleaning Day

for S.

1. There's beer and caviar
   in your refrigerator
   sour with rotten oranges.
   I lift out the half-empty
   bottle of wine and walk out.
   To drive north up eighty-seven
   away from the ocean is better
   than to circle and break,
   return again to the hate,
   return to the anger,
   return to the return,
   to love you, to you
   who just stepped to the stove
   as I leaned and kissed the air.

2. I wish
   I could rest
   my head on your arm
   and believe
   no power on earth
   could harm us,
   but they already have:
   the princes
   and the principalities,
   not to mention
   my ex-husband,
   the custody case,
   my mother's disgust.

My friends knew we'd
never last. My lawyer said
uncoupled from society,
no woman can supply
the rest, though I loved you.

We drank our tea from the same cup.

3. Now I'm travelling
to my empty house
where the towels smell
lavendar from your bath,
where in the kitchen
your cigarettes are preserved
in a glass dish by the stove.

4. Tonight I'll clean up the kitchen,
slide my dishrag over heavy plates.
I can not yet sweep up the pieces
left when your hand flashed, and
the cup broke, when I loved you and left.

Romance

I used to drive down to the coast to sleep with her,
past the faded grey fields of sand and houses
closed up for the night. Sometimes there was a glow in the east
like the fires of the paper mill at Riegelwood, but then
I would curve suddenly where the land flattened to swamp
and the moon would flash orange, rise and turn
yellow as her hair, white and cool as her turned back.

All the way down the moon shone through me.
I was transparent with desire and longing,
clear as glass and ready to break under her look.
The moon shone down on my hands curled
tight around the steering wheel, shone down
into the ditch beside the road,
into the oiled water drifting there,
reflected black light back into the stars,
poured down again into the throats of the pitcher plants,
onto the white arms of the bracted sedge, shone
down on the teeth and hinged open jaws
of the Venus' fly trap, its oval leaves like eyelids
fringed with green lashes, its leaves curved
together like clasped palms with fingers intertwined.

I wanted her hands to catch me and make me strange.
I liked the way her green look changed me into
someone else, a woman who could move before her shadow did,
who always knew at first touch her next desire,
who was never the same from one minute to the next.

She kissed me with the mouth of every woman
who had kissed her. She gripped me with hands
and thighs as large as my mother's. When she lay
curved and pressed against me, her breasts
became mine until in that passion
I did not know who I was

until I began to wake
in the night turning between the sandy sheets
to watch street light filter through the venetian blinds
onto my hands stretched far from me in the phosphoral shadows,
onto her closed mouth and sleeping eyes,
the face of a woman I did not know, a stranger.

Ora: at the Carter Wedding

My grandmother is dying.
She writhes and yells
as they bathe her.
She said that she never felt
like anyone until she married.
She was such a lady.
She would be embarrassed
to see herself now.

I saw her wedding yesterday
from behind a fence of cardboard placards.
I wore blue jeans, the crowd wore fur,
and she was swathed
in veils of ivory illusion.
They aimed a machinegun at us
from the steeple and cheered
as she edged past into the church
on the arm of the President.
We were chanting for justice
for U.S. prisoners when the words
rolled into her name:

Ora, heart of gold,
you let down your silver hair
for us to comb and grasp.
You wound it into braids
for your crown.

Your arthritic fingers crackled
as you combed the wool
and pieced our comforts.

Your head is shorn now
but I never thought
you would die.

The seam you have sewn
stretches even and fine.

Love Poem to an Ex-Husband

You were always the one
I asked to kill things:
rabbits disembowelled by the cat,
quail with wings snapped and useless.
I called it mercy
until one day you refused.

I had found a tortoise
smashed like an egg by a tractor,
its shell cracked
and the yolk of its entrails
spread across the dusty road.
Still alive with pain and fear
it moved without moving
toward the refuge of some green shade.

It had to be ended
but you said *No.*
This time someone else
could do the killing.
So I shovelled it
into a bucket of water
and watched it
breathe in its death.

You had not acted like a man
and I never loved you better
than when I stood before the fragments,
in the fear and the necessity of action,
the breath of death and life.

I am separate now and far away,
yet sometimes I still stand with you
in the evening by the road
and watch the fireflies light the alders
in the dim green down beside the pond.

My Mother Loves Women

My mother loves women.

She sent me gold and silver earrings for Valentine's.
She sent a dozen red roses to Ruby Lemley
when she was sick and took her eight quarts
of purplehull peas, shelled and ready to cook.
She walks every evening down our hill and around
with Margaret Hallman. They pick up loose hub caps and talk
about hysterectomies and cataracts.
At the slippery spots they go arm in arm.

She has three sisters, Lethean, Evie, and Ora Gilder.
When they aggravate her she wants to pinch
their habits off like potatobugs off the leaf.
But she meets them each weekend for cards and jokes
while months go by without her speaking to her brother
who plays dominoes at the bus shop with the men.
I don't think she's known a man except this brother
and my father who for the last twenty years has been waiting
for death in his rocking chair in front of the TV set.

During that time my mother was seeing women
every day at work in her office. She knit them
intricate afghans and told me proudly
that Anne Fenton could not go to sleep without hers.

My mother loves women but she's afraid
to ask me about my life. She thinks
that I might love women too.

Elbows

Cover your arms.
Don't let your elbows
show.

That's what these folk
in Mississippi tell
their daughters
so no elbow
plump or thin
tan or pink
will entice others
to passion.

But if I thought
my scrawny, two-toned
elbows
would lure you

if I thought
my skinny, sharp-boned
elbows
could secure you

I'd flap my arms
like a chicken
like a pea-fowl
like a guinea hen

when next I saw you
honey
I'd roll
up my sleeves and
sin
sin
sin.

Teeth

Men fear the teeth
in the vagina,
the *dentata* of greed
that we hide in the abyss,
the insatiable maw
which waits
eager (they think)
to eat up forever
their one thin fruit,
seeds and all.

I thought men foolish.
Then I saw Cris smile,
her teeth set sharp
in her hungry mouth,
and I wanted to turn
into quince or apricot,
I wanted her to eat me up,
bite me, entice me,
let me nibble
her tender hand.

When women make love
we know how to play
the game both ways:
with our hands
outstretched we set
stone to stone,
paper against paper,
blade to blade.
We know that we
can play any way
we choose.

We dare each other
to jump, to turn.
We watch the other's face
change through every mask
that we possess,
each face our own
and hers and hers.

We are pleased
to eat and be eaten,
to die and live
by falling into another's
mouth, eyes, and hand.

We indulge ourselves
in all our transformations.

So when Cris smiles,
I see the fury of a candle flame,
a momentary blaze of fireworks,
the starry, constant Pleiades,
the white flowers
of wild clematis,
virgin's bower,
and the fangs of the hounds
that tore Actaeon
for violating Diana's peace.

I see Cris smile
and know why
men fear
and women love.

The Sound of One Fork

Through the window screen I can see an angle of grey roof
and the silence that spreads in the branches of the pecan tree
as the sun goes down. I am waiting for a lover. I am alone
in a solitude that vibrates like the cicada in hot midmorning,
that waits like the lobed sassafras leaf just before
its dark green turns into red, that waits
like the honey bee in the mouth of the purple lobelia.

While I wait, I can hear the random clink of one fork
against a plate. The woman next door is eating supper
alone. She is sixty, perhaps, and for many years
has eaten by herself the tomatoes, the corn
and okra that she grows in her backyard garden.
Her small metallic sound persists, as quiet almost
as the windless silence, persists like the steady
random click of a redbird cracking a few
more seeds before the sun gets too low.
She does not hurry, she does not linger.

Her younger neighbors think that she is lonely,
that only death keeps her company at meals.
But I know what sufficiency she may possess.
I know what can be gathered from year to year,
gathered from what is near to hand, as I do
elderberries that bend in damp thickets by the road,
gathered and preserved, jars and jars shining
in rows of claret red, made at times with help,
a friend or a lover, but consumed long after,
long after they are gone and I sit
alone at the kitchen table.

And when I sit in the last heat of Sunday
afternoons on the porch steps in the acid breath of the boxwoods,
I also know desolation and consider death as an end.
The week is over, the night that comes will not lift.
I am exhausted from making each day.
My family and children are in other states,
the women I love in other towns. I would rather be here
than with them in the old ways, but when all that's left
of the sunset is the red reflection underneath the clouds,
when I get up and come in to fix supper
in the darkened kitchen I am often lonely for them.

In the morning and the evening we are by ourselves,
the woman next door and I. Sometimes we are afraid
of the death in solitude and want someone
else to live our lives. Still we persist.
I open the drawer to get out the silverware.
She goes to her garden to pull weeds and pick
the crookneck squash that turns yellow with late summer.
I walk down to the pond in the morning to watch
and wait for the blue heron who comes at first light
to feed on minnows that swim through her shadow in the water.
She stays until the day grows so bright
that she cannot endure it and leaves with her hunger unsatisfied.
She bows her wings and slowly lifts into flight,
grey and slate blue against a paler sky.
I know she will come back. I see the light create
a russet curve of land on the farther bank
where the wild rice bends heavy and ripe
under the first blackbirds. I know
she will come back. I see the light curve
in the fall and rise of her wing.

Southern Gothic

for Carson McCullers and Bertha Harris
of Fayetteville, N.C.

In my room are six windows
and a mirror big enough to walk through.
There I see myself sit on a yellow bed and beyond
one window open into the green cavern of a tree.
In this mirror I have watched my face twist
with sorrow dangerous as a nest of coral snakes,
my body writhe with a lover, our arms,
our thighs silver in the moonlight, like eels
hurrying over a dewy meadow to the sea.

All the while the tree in the mirror trembled
with veins of ice or knotted itself into
fists of white flowers. Now berries are scattered
like red nipples over the yellowing skin of its leaves.

It is time for me to stand and look with a practiced eye
through the old glass that wavers behind me.
In this window I see the customary street, the lines
and fences that have caught the young woman next door.
She lives like a rose-of-sharon tree set in an iron pot.

I fear like her to be contained, but I know
at least two women before me in this town
have made an art of being strange, wandered
like wolves in its streets hunting for the wildness
hung between the starched clothes stiff on the line.

Like them I look with my eyes' mirror to see
the dwarfed housewife of forty years in the dawn
calling her cats to her like a gypsy queen,

the ponderous woman with elegant hands in the sun
who roots up the last rose from her lawn
to make a jungle with fern and banana tree,
at the night end of the street the ghost of two girls
whose mouths kiss and separate and join again.

I see myself stand on the steps, the bearded lady,
my hairy legs ready to run wild over the road,
living like wisteria, gnarled and twisted,
trailing with a lover down the steps
like purple meteors of wisteria bloom
while to themselves the neighbors murmur
how peculiar, how queer.

The Segregated Heart

First Home

Nowadays I call no one place home.

For awhile it was a house on the highest land around,
a hill that lightning always struck during the summer
storms when I watched the sky go green and black
and suddenly begin to move. Then the trees belonged
less to the ground than to the upper air.
The oaks and hickories bent almost to break,
their leaves turned inside out by gusts of rain,
their branches whirling, vanished, reappeared
quick as the fire that leapt up in the distance
to shatter itself in branching veins of light,
then instantly be whole again. From within, I heard
the thunder, the clouds travel to the edge of the hills.
I wanted to take their motion for my own and yet
I wanted to stay to see the new leaves reflecting
in the sun millions of green mirrors hanging from the trees.

Within the house down the narrow hallway
in the small rooms we lived each day the same:
politely and in silence we ate in the kitchen,
I took my napkin from the silver ring that bore my name,
my mother helped us to food while Laura who had cooked it
went to sit in a chair in another room. My father
always thanked her as we left the table.

Laura and I sat long afternoons without talking.
I could not understand her words, like harsh foreign language.
But the afternoon I found her in the front room,
sprawled and drunk on the flowered rug, I heard her breath
rattle through the house to join the others,
the sudden noises made by those partitioned into sorrow,

the weeping of my mother late at night behind a door,
the rush of water she used to drown her bitter sound,
the weeping of my father, drunk at dawn by the window
when he saw the green edge of light on the top of the oak,
the click of his chair as he rocked and cursed himself,
the sounds made by those who believed they had to stay
while their hearts broke in every room of the house.

Each noon we returned to our places in the kitchen.
For us change came from the outside and brought no good
like the thunderstorms that swept down north from Birmingham
or the elm blight that cleared town square of trees and left
the stone soldier standing guard alone over my father's fathers,
names written in marble honor on his weathered base.

There we used habit to contain, to outlast despair.
Even in the cemetery where my father's mother,
where my namesake lay, barbed wire ran between the graves,
dividing white folk from the black, it ran between
the women setting lilies on one side, the women hoeing on the other,
a fence to separate one heap of bare red clay from another.

Second Home

I have lived in rented houses, where I learned
to stare at walls at 4 a.m. with a sick child
sprawled across my lap, a husband asleep in another room,
where I considered the interior decoration of walls:
which pictures I would hang in the blank spaces
if I could choose. I began to understand the manners
of walls: to pretend I didn't see that they were there.
I began to refuse, would not sew or hang the curtains,
left the windows bare, unveiled and watched the light
spread over the sills out to its limit on the floor.

I studied the history of walls: the white and yellow sandstone,
the blue glaze around women held in a persian harem,
the windowless brick of a factory where I once sewed

with a hundred other women, black and white
(but men only were allowed to cut the cloth).
I studied the sociology of walls: the rotten boards
crumbling like bark on a fallen log, dropping
from the outside of Laura's house in the quarter,
the chainlink fence seen by women from where they stood
ironing their uniforms in the prison laundry,
on the 500 block the cracked plaster ceiling stared at
by a woman in a bed in a cubicle rented by a pimp.

I learned the anger of walls: they had kept me from myself.
Before I left, the live oak in the front yard fell on the porch.
I saw with satisfaction the crushed bricks and mortar:
his house was not mine. I kissed another woman,
not for manners but for love, and felt all shift around me,
as if I stood outside on a clay bank after a heavy rain,
as if the ground slid under my feet to settle in another place.

But I was surprised when my mother called to tell me
a tornado had come like a hundred freight trains,
rolled over her hill, lifted the roof from the house.
She said the trees were gone: the water oaks, the blackjack oaks,
the sweetgum and poplar, the magnolia grandiflora.
I had wanted motion and all was changed. With anger and love
I had changed and now I had no home. I was left
in a place I had never been, where the slope lay open and dry,
spiked with purple nettle and wild lettuce, the few trees left
standing dead, bark scaling from their sides,
like woods I'd seen stripcut for the saw mill.
My family were strangers from another country. They spoke
from a long way away and in a different language.

I learned the grief of walls: to leave where I could not stay,
to bend myself to change, was to leave where I also loved.

Later my mother wrote that the kudzu was taking the hill
(after rain, the vine spread, green veins held together the red dirt).
She wrote that the storm had set out canna lilies
(they flourished, broke open into red fragile lobes of bloom).

Third Home

The radio says flooding in Mississippi and parts of Alabama.
Outside my door the rain washes pollen in a yellow stream
off the porch and down the steps. The pines have been in bloom
for the last week, the wind moves through them in gusts
and becomes visible in sudden yellow clouds that lift from the trees.
Inside my house, my floors, my clothes, are thick with yellow dust.

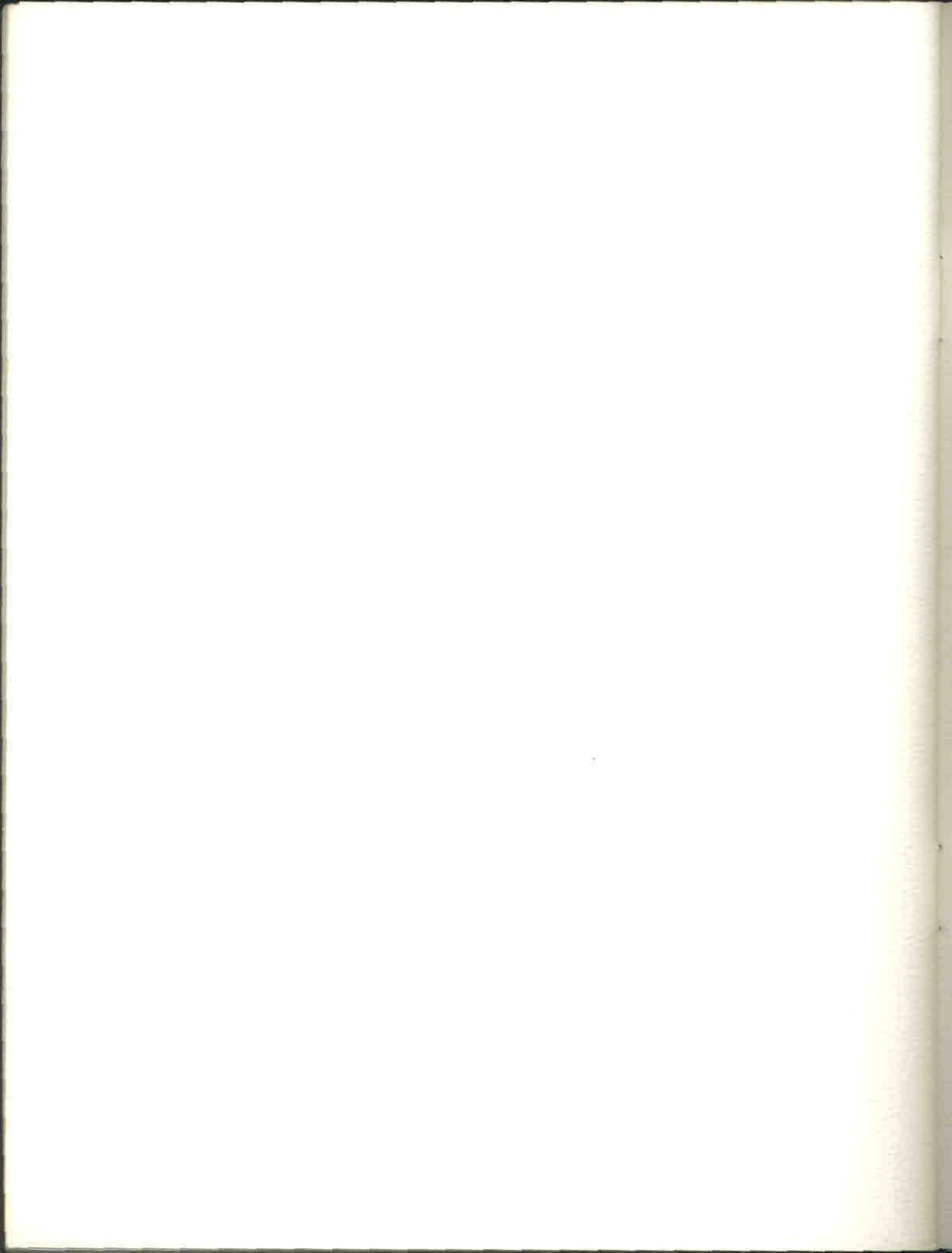
Before the storm broke, I watched the bees investigate
the corners of my porch, the oval bell of my wind chimes,
looking for a home before their swarm. I know inside the hive
the virgin workers lie, with bent head and folded arm,
each sealed within her quiet cell until waked from larval sleep
by the dance and beating wings of her sisters. At first flight
each fears to leave behind the fixed prismatic form,
each soars and returns twenty times, hesitates at the void of space,
the indistinct brilliant mass of colors, the yellow and blue,
the wind that twists her to and from her course.
She shrinks at first from the infinite loneliness of light
but knows she can return to the translucent walls of honeycomb
where her sisters work and others wait to be born.

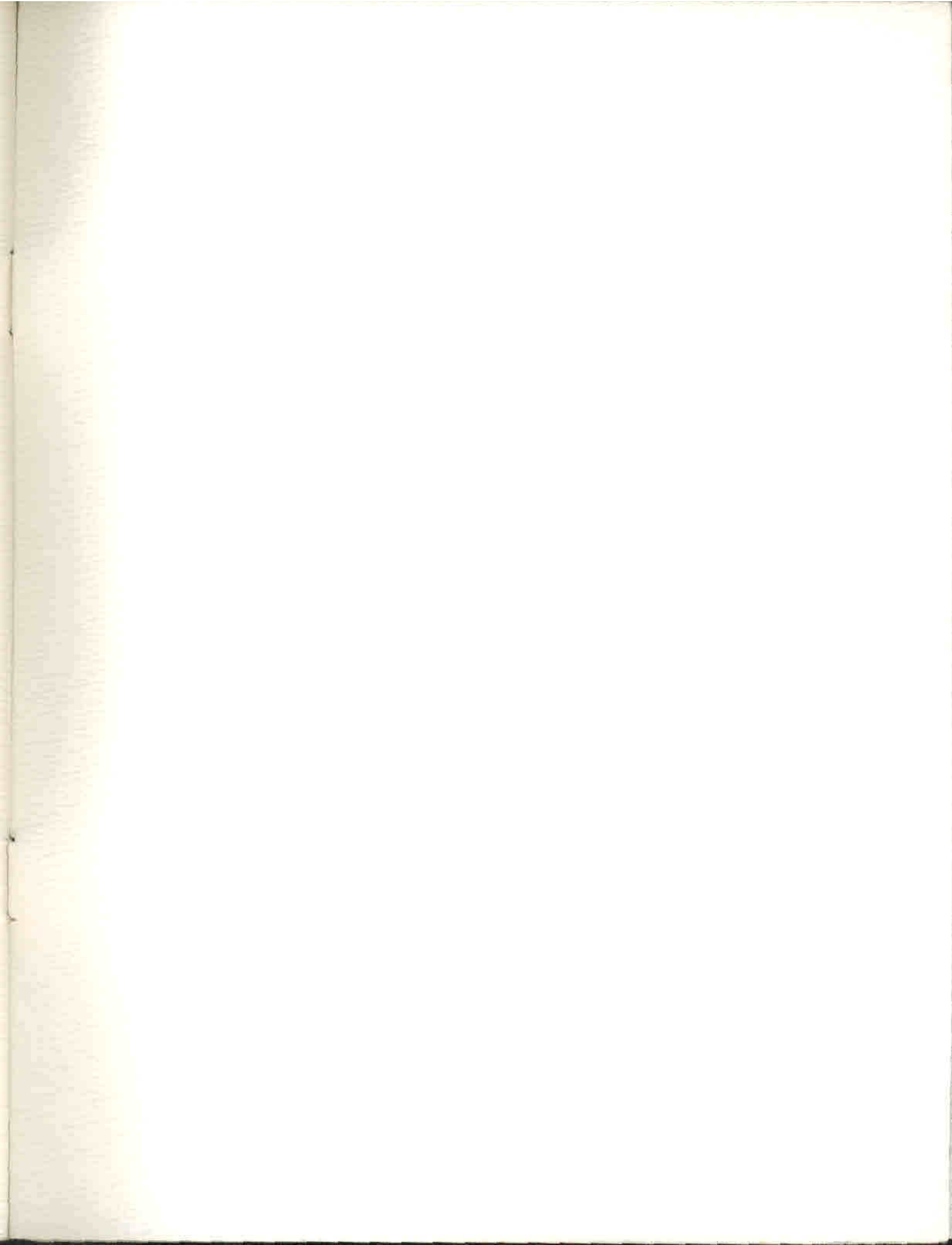
I live with no sister and have no daughter to name or raise.
I have no home except what I make for myself. Today it is
three rooms surrounded by rain where thunder cracks,
rolls through open windows, continues through the distances.
What I left I will not return to; yet I live in it every day.
The radio says mill workers in Wilson have brown lung,
their cells of pink flesh filled up with cotton dust.
The radio reports four women in Memphis, on foot from a dance,
shotgunned: they bled through small pellet wounds,
bright red holes in their dark skin and evening clothes.
The police see no connection between this and two crosses
burned in town that night, white flames fixed at right angles.

If I stand in the doorway, the storm drowns out the radio.
I put my hands in the rain, louder than rushing blood,
colder than the tears of my anger or despair. My home is not safe

but dangerous with pain that aches like a cracked bone healing.
I refuse the divisions; yet always they break again.
I miss my mother and Laura who raised me; they still live
in the same and in different houses. I live here knowing
that the separation ends only when it is felt,
that the whole mends only when the fragments are held.
I long for a garden, a place to plant in orange daylilies,
and see them bloom next year, but I do not work for this.

Instead I take plants in red clay pots out to catch the rain,
then set them inside where each leaf will focus the sun
like a burning green lens. I sit cross-legged on the porch
and turn my life outside in and out again, while in the pines
rain pierces the dark green needles with silver thread.
I mend the separation in my heart. I hold the heart's sorrow
and it blooms red, the courage to speak across distances,
the courage to act, like spider lilies rising unexpected
every fall, in a deserted garden, along old foundations.





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Minnie Bruce Pratt lives in Durham, N.C. and is a member of the *Feminary* collective, a lesbian-feminist journal for the South. She is working on a book of narrative poems, *Walking Back Up Depot Street.*

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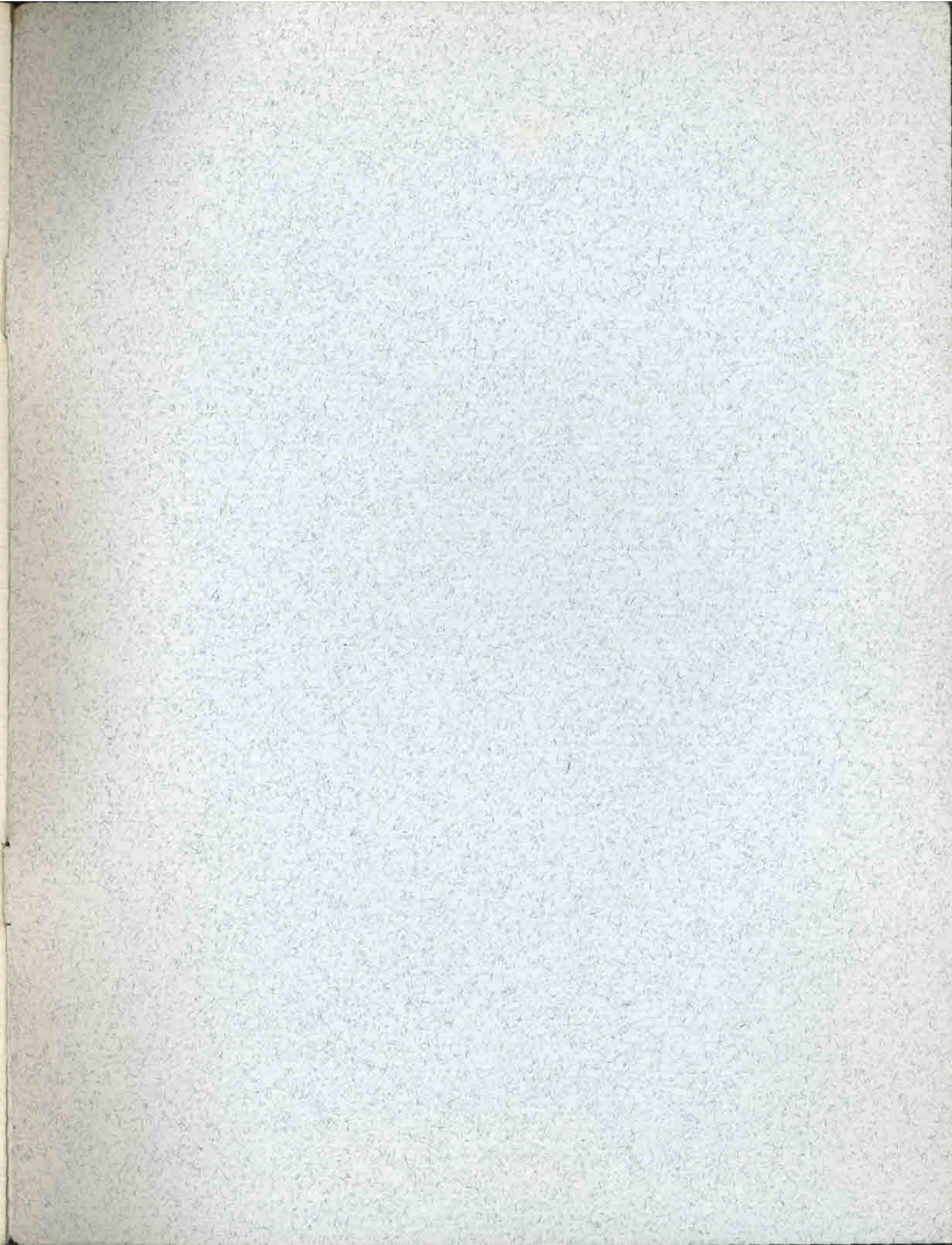

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Appendix

This appendix enumerates the changes to the poems from publication in *The Sound of One Fork* (1981) to *The Dirt She Ate* (2003). A small red oval (•) in the upper right of the first page of the poem in the electronic edition indicates that the poem has been edited.

<u>Poem: Cahaba</u>

There are two edits substantial edits in "Cahaba." In *The Sound of One Fork*, the fifth stanza begins with these lines:

> We pass like Choctaws, silent
> through the years: men know
> that Indians walked
> for flint in River Bend
> but no man remembers where they went,
>
> knows only that the sand at his curve
> of the river has spread
> wider since last year.
> Unnoticed so in their beds
> generations of women turn
>
> and twist the currents of anger
> under our blank faces.
> We eddy in the past
> while our wills rise
> and fade like the morning mist.
>
> But we could flood the fields with rage,

In *The Dirt She Ate*, these three stanzas are eliminated; in the revision, Pratt begins the fifth stanza "We could flood the fields" and deletes the prepositional phrase "with rage."

Later in the poem, Pratt eliminates four lines from the version in *The Sound of One Fork*. In *The Dirt She Ate* the penultimate stanza ends with the line "to the arrowed flight." In *The Sound of One Fork* the stanza continues with these lines:

> when we release
> beyond all bound
> the love and hate
> we have contained.

Poem: Romance

Three small phrases are eliminated in the later version of "Romance." In *The Sound of One Fork*, the second and third lines of the second stanza are "I was transparent with desire and longing,/clear as glass and ready to break under her look." In *The Dirt She Ate*, these lines are combined into the single line "I was clear as glass, ready to break under her look."

In the fourth stanza of the poem, Pratt deletes the word "curved" and the phrase "in that passion" to tighten this segment. It appears in *The Sound of One Fork*

> When she lay
> curved and pressed against me, her breasts
> became mine until in that passion
> I did not know who I was

and in *The Dirt She Ate*

> When she lay
> pressed against me, her breasts became mine until
> I did not know who I was

Poem: Elbows

In the first edition of "Elbows," the second stanza begins,

> That's what these folk
> in Mississippi tell
> their daughters

In the second and subsequent printing of *The Sound of One Fork* and in *The Dirt She Ate*, the second stanza begins,

> That's what my neighbors
> down in Alabama tell
> their daughters

In "Elbows," Pratt changed the lineation in the fourth stanza from

> my skinny, sharp-boned
> elbows
> could secure you

in *The Sound of One Fork* to

> my skinny, sharp-boned

elbows could secure you

in *The Dirt She Ate*. This change makes the middle two stanzas tercets.

Poem: The Sound of One Fork

There are three cuts in the version of this poem presented in *The Dirt She Ate*.

In the third stanza, Pratt cut the second line of the stanza. In *The Sound of One Fork*, the stanza opened:

> Her younger neighbors think that she is lonely,
> that only death keeps her company at meals.

In *The Dirt She Ate*, the stanza begins

> Her younger neighbors think that she is lonely.
> But I know what sufficiency she may possess.

In the fourth stanza, Pratt strikes a clause. In *The Sound of One Fork*, third line of the fourth stanza of the poem reads, "I also know desolation and consider death as an end." In *The Dirt She Ate*, Pratt tightens the stanza to read, "I also know desolation. The week is over, the coming night/will not lift. I am exhausted from making each day."

Finally in the fifth stanza, Pratt strikes a complete sentence. In *The Sound of One Fork*, the stanza begins,

> In the morning and the evening we are by ourselves,
> the woman next door and I. Sometimes we are afraid
> of the death in solitude and want someone
> else to live our lives. Still we persist.
> I open the drawer to get out the silverware.

In *The Dirt She Ate*, the stanza begins,

> In the morning and the evening we are by ourselves,
> the woman next door and I. Still we persist.
> I open the drawer to get out the silverware.

Poem: The Segregated Heart

"The Segregated Heart" is the final poem in *The Sound of One Fork* and the longest poem. It is shortened substantially for publication in *The Dirt She Ate*. Pratt eliminates the headers, "First Home," "Second Home," and

“Third Home” for publication in *The Dirt She Ate*. She also eliminates the entire section titled “Second Home” for publication in *The Dirt She Ate*.

In the third stanza of the poem, Pratt eliminates these lines “like harsh foreign language./But the afternoon I found her in the front room,/sprawled and drunk on the flowered rug[.]”

In the second stanza of the “Third Home” section, which becomes the ninth stanza of “The Segregated Heart” in *The Dirt She Ate*, Pratt inserts a stanza break, creating the ninth and tenth stanzas.

***