

# WE STAND OUR GROUND

THREE WOMEN, THEIR VISION, THEIR POEMS.

KIMIKO HAHN • GALE JACKSON  
SUSAN SHERMAN

ArtWork by Josely Carvalho







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**IKON**  
creativity  
and  
change  
NEW YORK, NY



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All these years beyond placebos filling our mouths, slivers  
of glass and sand tearing our feet  
we knew beyond mixed messages and no messages  
beyond heavy rules and doors closed  
by others and also by ourselves.

The face that said no the arms that said no the grace  
of god or patriarch.  
We understood and the island dried our tears.  
We stood our ground.  
We stand our ground.

Margaret Randall  
Albuquerque, Summer 1986

## CONTENTS:

### CONVERSATIONS/CORRESPONDENCE

THREE VOICES TOGETHER: A Collage 9

#### POEMS

##### Kimiko Hahn

The Bath: August 6, 1945	33
Seams (Coalfields Text 2)	35
Coalfields (Text 2)	37
Revolutions	38
Her First Language	41
Instead of Speech	42
The New Father	44
Poetic Closure	45
Towards Strength	51
Going Inside to Write	52
Nora	54
Seizure	59
Resistance: a poem on ikat cloth	61

##### Gale Jackson

she.	75
a poem to begin again.	76
coyote is the falling star...a zuni tale.	78
distances.	79
the beginning of the story.	80
at the cross roads.	81
so there is no poetry in these nites.	84
housework.	86
the untitled.	88
new york. beruit. nagasaki.	90

## CONTENTS:

a hottentot tale.	91
home.	94
¿donde esta alfredo mendez?	96
winneba.	97
an old poem. on the road.	98
your poem once.	100
guadeloupe.	104
haiti. new york.	105
love.	106
deepwater.	107
what time abides.	110

##### Susan Sherman

Definitions	115
Ten Years After	118
What I Want	121
The Desert & The Sea	122
Washington D.C./A Study in Black & White	124
Scene	127
Spring Song	128
Morning Poem	130
Facts	132
From Nicaragua A Gift	136
A Fare/Well Present	138
The Meeting	140
Opening Stanzas	142
The Fourth Wall	144
Rituals/A Turning Back	148
A Small Question	150
Alchemy	151
Lilith of the Wildwood, of the Fair Places	152
Love Poem	154



# Three Voices Together: A Collage

Kimiko Hahn, Gale Jackson, Susan Sherman

(The following excerpts were edited from a series of letters, discussions and taped conversations that took place from July through October, 1987)

## "My work is informed by where I am from..."

**Kimiko Hahn:** Some of my earliest memories rise from my family's visit to Maui to see my (maternal) grandparents. I was four and very confused about nationality, about being "American." (I'm half Japanese-American; my mother's from Hawaii, and half German-American, my dad's from Milwaukee.) Children called me Chinese or Japanese — physically, I look Asian. Could I be Japanese and American? Part Japanese?

I remember asking my grandmother if she were Japanese. She laughed and said, "Yes." Then she asked me. I replied, "A little bit." I remember being confused and being asked a lot: "What are you?" Now people ask, "Where are you from?"

When I was nine we lived in Japan while my father studied art. The children in my Japanese school called me "amerikajin" or "gaijin" (literally, "outsider"). I felt I never fit in. I never felt fully "at home." My poems address this ambiguity, for example, in "Instead of Speech" or "Her First Language."

Growing up in a white middle-class suburb in effect polarized my identity. I grew away from the Western tradition in a sense (except for poetry and rock-and-roll). I was raised with a lot of Japanese culture mainly because of my father's deep interest and my mother's heritage; my sister and I studied flower arrangement, classical and folk dance, calligraphy, tea ceremony. In college then graduate school I went on to study Japanese literature, seeking both the familiar and the new. Something that felt comfortable. In the poem, "Revolutions," I open with the little-known fact that the "golden age of literature" was dominated by women in Japan. This influence of theirs happened for social reasons because the men were writing in Chinese (the same as people wrote in Latin instead of in the vernacular) whereas the women were writing in the vernacular in Japanese. So the women's writing was an explosion; it was a release of material and feelings — so much so men would write in the female persona. The "female sensibility" was that dominant. To me this is a very important piece of history and part of myself. It inspires and informs much of my own art.



Parallel to this was my political "awakening," beginning with a feminist orientation. I sold copies of the original newsprint booklet of *Our Bodies, Our Selves* in high school. When "caught" I retreated to a nearby parking lot where the girls picked up their orders. My own sexuality became a territory for me: my body is mine, my responsibility. This "territory" also gave me an increasing awareness that women's bodies historically have not always belonged to them; for instance, fathers using their daughters as marital pawns or husbands using wives to produce sons.

It is strange that while I do not consider my ideology "Feminist" (capital F) in the sense of men or patriarchy being the enemy, all my work is deeply committed to women's relationships (with one another, with men, with society). This is especially true of the poems I've collected here. In "Seizure," I view revolution not as a "midwife" but as birth itself. "Revolutions" is more or less about a female culture or aesthetic. "Seams" was commissioned by Bill Brand for his experimental film (*Coalfields*) on Black Lung advocate Fred Carter—my particular subjective contribution (I was also interviewed and helped edit) takes a "feminist position," envisioning the strip-mined land as "female" and reaching for the kind of power (sexual and social) the word "virile" engenders. I think my longer poems further explore a female sub-culture: "Resistance" through the metaphor of weaving (traditional women's work); "Poetic Closure" through the metaphor of closure/divorce. It may be simplistic to say "but" because women have been unencouraged and unpublished for centuries, what we say today is new and exhilarating. Our work and concerns are very different from men's and it has something to do with biology (the powerful, mysterious and vulnerable uterus) and a lot to do with history. I'm not knocking male writers, rather expressing my particular need for other women's voices.

**Gale Jackson:** I am a Black woman. An African American woman. My mother's first child. My grandmother's fourth, but first American born. Older sibling. The one who writes. My great aunt's special. And sometimes "patti g."

On my mother's side my people are African Caribbeans from Jamaica, the West Indies. Their continuous immigrations (I've never thought of my people's immigration as a static concept) allowed me to understand internationalism at an early age. I heard I took my first plane ride at age six months and my great grandmother, who I knew as a child, was a great traveler as well—up thru the island nations, thru South and Central America, as one did working in the colonized world of that day. My father's side of the family are African Americans who have been in this country longer, I suspect. The truth is that I don't really know.

I grew up in a very large household (very African I've learned, very West Indian also) with several generations and family groups and special names and relationships to everyone. I have always lived with older people and new born babies belonging to a community with a measure of security and a measure of rule. We were not particularly rich or poor, but I am, have always been, clear that our well-being as individuals was absolutely tied into our helping each other along. This is the axis of my politics. This is what we were told and what we saw done. I grew up with cousins and lived in the same household as great grandmother, grandmother, uncles and aunts. My mother always worked. The older women, at different times, kept house. We were taught (maybe the saving naivete of immigrant children) that we could create the life that we would.

I grew up in a home of women who were smart, independent and self-sufficient. These are the things you learn by osmosis. I am sure that I am among many writers of similar background who attribute their love of stories to their early delight in listening to the women talk. The women in my house gossiped, talked music. Talked politics. Talked sports. They spoke several languages. They have, as Jamaicans, a dual concept of home. (They don't pronounce the "h" but they say home and mean Jamaica even here while they live in the psychic space that they've created in this country which they also call, in a way, home.) To imitate not only their storytelling but also the language of their stories was always a special game for me as a child. I remember longing to be grown so I would have stories to tell and a language of my own.

I come from a place where there is a lot of love and respect. I feel gifted and responsible. Having been socialized to share and to see myself as a part of a community—my family and by extension my people and then by extension our world—leaves you with tremendous strength and the real responsibility to carry on. To take it further. To put something back. Like a new place. New words. New possibilities for home.

My work is informed by where I am from; my Africas in America, my Caribbean journeys, loving myself, women, children, (smile) even how I love the men. I want the work to be loving portraits, reminders to people of their strength, stories to extend the imagination about where we can go. Like in "the untitled" which begins with my friend's grandmother, Mrs. King, a woman who is an emotional and physical axis for her family. The poem begins with this real Black woman at its heart, then takes you to Central America and her women, to South Africa and the real women there, back to Brooklyn, back and forth until it is one place, a place where we can begin to imagine what will happen when she has had enough and decides to 'soar,' change the world, take it out. Possibilities. The language to tell. The language to see with and be empowered by enough to reach on out and connect. In a language that is our own.



**Susan Sherman:** I like the word "origins" because to me it means not only your childhood or your roots (your starting point in time) but what continues, what makes your work, your daily life possible. In "Ten Years After" there's a line, "...what we move toward is what moves us most." My origin: what moves me, touches me; what moves me, activates me, defines me, most.

I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1939, grew up in Los Angeles during the 40s and 50s. My memories of my family are attached to those years. When I finished college in 1961 I came to New York and didn't return to California for over 17 years.

Berkeley in the late 50s and early 60s — the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, North Beach, poetry, the "sexual revolution" and my first real experiences with sex and love — unfortunately then not the same; my first relationship with a woman, the House Un-American Activities Committee "riots;" the first time I saw a real alternative to the life I had known or the lives I knew about, an alternative I wanted to embrace.

New York, 1961, '62, '63, poetry readings at the *Deux Megots*, *Le Metro*, writing and directing plays at the *Hardware Poets Theatre*, working for \$28 a week, apartments on Delancy and Suffolk, on 9th St. between B & C, the riots in '63, '64, the episodes of disassociation, panic, not seeing my family for years. The struggle to survive. The mid 60s — *Angry Arts Against the War*, *the Free University*, *the Alternate University*, the founding of the first series of *IKON*, "coming out" in 1961 and then slowly retreating in and then "coming out" again. The trips to Cuba in 1967 and 68 — and consciousness of a reality totally separate from any I had recognized before — loss of job, ulcer, loss of magazine, turning that loss into intense political involvement and commitment and creativity, not born from, but energized by anger — as my poetry had been, from personal anger, from a consciousness of my parents' brutality, years before.

The 70s — Chile, breakup of first long relationship, the 5th St. Women's Building, the Lesbian/feminist movement, the stillness of years that were a pulling together as well as a breaking apart; *Sagaris*, a bad automobile accident. The 80s — Nicaragua, the new *IKON*, a new relationship. All that I remember, all I have forgotten. My origins, what made me, make me what I am.

To talk about all this with any completeness would take a book in itself — being close to fifty, a half century now. And I'm actually in the process of writing that book. More than anything else to try to get some of the feeling of those years down, not "my" years, the years themselves. So much of them, as so much of our own individual histories, forgotten or distorted.

My childhood was characterized by a lack of roots, of specific place. I never knew exactly where my grandparents were from, my parents

never spoke of it, if they knew themselves. Partly from fear, partly because they wanted desperately to forget those years, to fit in. I am Jewish, and that was thought of then in racial, not religious terms. I wasn't brought up in the Jewish religion, I went to a Christian Science school (I left Christian Science when I was 15) although we celebrated most of the important Jewish holidays at home and I was often the only one who went to synagogue with my father on high holidays, and I was always very aware of being Jewish and of a proud and troubled heritage.

It was only long afterwards, when I learned about words like "background" and "class" that I realized how important my parents' immigrant experience was in explaining a lot of what happened to me in my early life. And the importance of understanding that experience now. The multiplicity of cultures and the constant pitting of those cultures against each other. The multiplicity of centuries — in a place like New York, in the space of a few square blocks. And the incredible problems and the incredible energy and creativity which that produces.

Our class definitions were confused — my mother was the only child in her family born in this country, my stepfather (who raised me) came here from Russia at the age of five — he never went past grammar school. My mother hated poverty; I think there was a certain grayness attached to her childhood memories, to being poor, that became a kind of metaphor for her. It wasn't until I got much older that I realized how many of her choices were conditioned by that hatred. She moved as far away from her family as she could get. So I never had "family" around when I was growing up. I remember only once visiting my grandparents when I was quite young. I remember them being nice to me — they didn't speak English so I couldn't understand what they said — and that their apartment smelled of crackers and warm milk.

"The Fourth Wall," written around 1964, was the first time I really tried to deal directly with any of these issues in my poems.

As I get older, the hardest part seems to be able to continue defining myself in terms of my hopes, my dreams, my vision — to keep identifying and re-identifying myself with what I believe, what I think is human and just. And, perhaps most important, to allow myself to risk being wrong. In my writing as well as in my life.

### "Breaking through towards expression..."

**Gale:** I write because I am compelled to, by circumstance, by desire. I write like I could scream sometimes. Or sing. Compelled by love to mark the moment. Compelled by pain.

Writing is like living. It is absolutely intimate and absolutely social. It is something that is personally felt even while it is resonant with



many voices. Conscience. Haunting. It's that close. The world around you is insistent and specific and real and you have to put it down. You have to say something about how we are living. About life. To say. To shape. To explore. With words. With voice. To celebrate. To mourn. To recreate.

The kids out in the street can be so shouting, so wildly alive. While in our silences we are dying a little each day with AIDS, famine, the death squads who invade. You write to tell the stories that need telling. Of course that is political. Our culture is our social heart. Our histories. Our possibilities. Our names. How we survive whole. This is about how a woman moves thru the world alone. This is about Nicaragua's sovereignty. About Palestine's homeland. About South Africa's freedom. About hunger. About home. You write to tell the stories that need telling. You hear it and it matters. You nurture the imagination of voice as it rises up.... A scream, a note, a song, a shout, a silence, a cry.... Making way in the world.

**Kimiko:** It was a real need for other voices, like yours and Susan's, that thrust me into poetry. Writing for me is the process of breaking through towards expression and finding time to write is important to my well being. My poem "Going Inside to Write" is based on a real woman whose place of privacy was the bathroom. Her desperation for expression lead her to write there. I feel for her.

When I look back at my childhood, although we were a family of artists and were close in mutual activities, we did not express our emotions to each other. I vividly recall my mother and father telling me to put on a cheerful face in spite of whatever I was feeling, then turning to my friends and encouraging them to express themselves. In high school it became heightened when my father would tell me my "bad moods" ruined his day. My parents assumed my sullenness was an adolescent stage.

**Susan:** It wasn't an easy thing to speak in my family either. Often when really emotional about something, I would start to stutter—not a noticeable stutter to anyone, more like a hesitation, an inability to force the words out, to find the right ones. I feel my writing expresses that deep part of me. It takes the language of the poem, the images of the poem—reaching beyond words—to do it.

From the time I was very young reading was my refuge, but I never read poetry. The poems I had contact with were typical grade school and high school poems, written in another century, in another language, having nothing to do with me. The poems I wrote when I was a teenager were about my own life, my own dreams, written in my own language, unsure and poor as it was.

It was when I was in Berkeley in 1958 and met Diane Wakoski and all the poets there that poetry came alive for me. It was about me, my generation, my hopes, and in my language. As I read those poems, and often mimicked their gestures, my own language in writing changed, and my own voice began, slowly, to emerge.

**Gale:** Someone once said "Art is like a lover" because it is the job of art to show you, like a lover can show you, the things that you can't see. The things that are there that are not yet seen. There are ways of sharing vision. Art. Of caring. I remember once finding my mother's drawings in a sewing stool, in those years when I was very young and making books and selling them to her for nickels and encouragement. She is a very fine artist. Realistic. Drawing portraits. Concerned with the lines. The feelings in the human face. Tho she no longer draws, she has created that kind of a household. Around her. So full. And the cozy and wide-angled world view which begins with the intense importance of each individual face.

**Kimiko:** I was just thinking about what it means to be an artist right now in this environment. I was thinking that it's so much like working a second shift—second shift, third shift whatever. You work, you come home and the day begins again doing your true work; it's a continual tradeoff and compromise.

My life works best when everything is integrated—making money, politics, my art, my relationships. Everything is really intertwined. But when did that ever happen! I can only think of one time—when I worked on *Coalfields*. The two poems "Seams" and "Coalfields" are from that film. I traveled with Bill Brand in West Virginia, conducted, then excerpted interviews. I didn't promise him poems because I usually don't write on assignment like that, but I said I'd write some text and I wrote these two poems I really like—I think they're probably my best. They're political, they're sexy, they're forceful.

For ten days we did nothing but talk to active miners, retired miners, their wives, their kids in some cases and heard extraordinary stories. I'd return to my motel room exhausted, but type away, and that's where these poems originated. The whole experience integrated what I love, what I feel passionate about—that is so rare and it just needn't be. Why should we always think of ourselves as having to scrape around for moments to do our artwork! (And being a mother now means even less time.)

**Susan:** We're trying to do our art now as women who have to work to survive. As women who can't depend on anyone else to support us. Who are self-supporting. Well, this is obviously nothing new. This is the reason women, people of color, working people, have always been so under-represented in the art world, not because of



a lack of talent, because they have lacked both the time to do the work and the places to publish or show their work.

**Gale:** There are a lot of myths about what and where art is. On this side of the "arts" spectrum there are women, people, the majority of the world who, it's true, have not had the establishment forums, but who have always had art in their own lives and it's own (even when it has been very confined) spheres. For most of us maintaining our cultural identity has been a crucial, political act. I think that is one of the things Kimiko's "Resistance" poem talks about. There has always been a people's art. It may have been quilting to tell the story of family generations, jewelry, craft that identified a particular people, or pictures cut from magazines and pasted up to give color to a wall. At our best we create a living art. Today we are, again, saying that we want to take the best of that tradition and imagination, particularly as women, and exercise it in the widest international spheres. We are saying to take the art, the beauty, the understanding and the values that have informed our lives and insured our survival, what we've used to make a home, to make a just and better society.

I feel very utilitarian about art. I look at what the traditional functions of art have been — they've been about education and comfort, about being in harmony with the world and getting dreams out. Art is a vehicle not just for beauty, but for all the possibilities of things people have inside. Folktales, for example, teach people, remind them of the rules of their society, kindle their imaginations, their concept of possibility and of reach. Storytelling, like quilting, brings people together with a vehicle of expression within the context of what they must do. Within the context of their society and its work. It is at best an interaction, a progress in the world that is interactive, not self-destructive.

I always think of the Inuit people and the storytelling they do thru the dark days, because it's freezing cold and this is a part of the tradition they have created to sustain themselves and be in harmony with their environment. Well, in this country, in this city, the question is, how do you bring that here, to this wild urban place?

Connections are very important for me. I feel that my strength as a writer grows with my ability to tap into my cultural traditions. From knowing who I am. Being an African American woman, for instance, in this time is an extraordinary moment in history that I am a part of. Understanding that allows me to move in and out in powerful ways. It allows me to connect with other women from a very strong place. It allows me a very international understanding of myself in my time. My political work is for me the logical extension of my understanding and my concern, in the same way that my writing combines caring and craft to move towards broader understandings, visions.

From the time I was thirteen, I knew that I lived in an absolutely interdependent world economy. This is a real challenge to the human imagination. My mother couldn't say that, my mother didn't wear socks from Afghanistan or have an idea of what was happening in Afghanistan and see it on television. There is a balance, a tension, a consciousness between the particular (the one loved one, the family, the self) and the international (the universal, the world). Within that tension somewhere is where I live and write.

**Kimiko:** I write from a very unconscious place. When I write I sit down with a blank piece of paper and I just scribble. Whatever comes up, that's what I shape and re-write and work over. Vision and revision! There are occasions when I have something I have to write about, but what I do is store the idea until it becomes part of that place I write from. We all self-censor to a greater or lesser degree, but my most successful poems are the ones that spring from that unself-conscious place.

**Susan:** In every poem I have ever written I am looking for meaning. Not "How?" — which is a series of physical causes, but "Why?" This is what the poem "Facts" is all about. We have been taught not to ask, "Why?" With the result that we wind up in the dilemma of my student in the poem, unable to understand even the most obvious truth, what's right in front of us.

I find my inspiration, as far as form is concerned, first of all in music — which is one of the things I love most. It is the rhythm of the poem, the music of the voice that captures me. And then with imagery — to make the statement precise and unusual. And simple. The complexity of the simple, of the simple statement. I'm not telling stories in most of my poems; I'm not describing events. If anything, I'm painting states of mind, composing themes, trying to come up with new perceptions, new ways of relating what I observe around me — like the old way philosophy was written, in poetry — but adding our new consciousness, our personal and social life and the events that take place around us.

I understand how philosophy got and continues to get "bad press," but I'm not talking about a kind of intellectualism that plays with language or abstract concepts and refuses to be grounded in any kind of real social context. Behind everything we do and say is an assumption, and one of the things philosophy is about to me is understanding and questioning those assumptions.

*With Anger/With Love* was an appropriate name for my first full book. Love is an obvious connection, but the anger is not anger that ties you to the hated object; it is anger that energizes you to change that condition.



### "Political involvement is not an abstract thing..."

**Kimiko:** While no one escaped the influence of the Vietnam War, I was not a conscious voice in the Movement (say in the '60s to early '70s). When I did venture towards Asian American organizations (which is to say an organized struggle) there was a little animosity: being part white translated to part enemy. Back then.

Not until I lived in New York and began to feel oppressed by the economic and social environment did I begin to understand my own personal dilemma: female, non-white, artist, member of the working class. My boyfriend said to me, "Well, what are you going to do about (your anxiety and anger)?" As a step toward comprehension and vision I began to study Marxism-Leninism. For the first time I cared about the study of history and political economy and through those studies I began to think in an analytical manner quite different from what I had encountered in college. A scientific manner. I began to appreciate science and to learn I could use my mind to understand current world events. However, this was the early '70s, a time when sectarianism was rampant, and the Left was isolated from "the working class."

But my real cultural and political work did not take off until Oct. '81 at the *American Writers Congress*, a gathering of over 3,000 writers in New York. I found myself in the midst of political people who had trained in every place you find writers: from trade union newsletter editors from steel and auto plants to university professors to street poets. We were there to talk politics. Dissent. Make resolutions. (The most concrete product, or by-product, was the *National Writers Union*.) I was in my element though still young in the sense of being politically "fresh." At this time I met more Asian American writers and having completed a stint in graduate school, I was aching to quit the libraries, to write and organize. My activity began with my editorship at *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* (now defunct).

After a few years of projects, projections and a couple of trips to Nicaragua (where I met Susan), I was invited to help form the Poets and Writers Committee of *Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America*. This would be my next "leap forward." I met other writers/political activists and began to hone my organizing skills. Being on the Steering Committee gave me a chance to exercise my political views which were to keep *Artists Call* on track as an organization against intervention (and undeniably pro-Sandinista). The organization faded away after a couple of years for a variety of personal (many original organizers started families) and political reasons. Political? In my opinion we should have linked the issue of intervention (the bloated military budget, for example) with our real needs here. Artists' needs are not separate: we need food, housing, medical care, schools for our children. Part of the reason we (and most of society) don't have

adequate social services is because so much is taken up by the military. I consider illiteracy, unemployment and homelessness our real national security risks. I wish we could have made these links, brought the issue of intervention closer to our own needs, rather than conveniently keeping it one of "the poor Central Americans." We cannot afford to be sectarian any longer: our allies, say, in shelters for the homeless here, may not even know what socialism is. They may never have heard the word "proletariat," but if they are struggling against this economic system, we must become allies.

**Gale:** One favorite writer friend says, "be subversive"—she talks in the poem "deepwater." Subversive be much of the crux of it. Inadvertently. At first. I found that this imagination would be the only way for me to making a living and write and care.

When I began my work with *Art Against Apartheid* I was working as a Black Heritage librarian. Doing a lot of cultural programming. Telling stories. Helping to build the collection in a very special community-run space—the *Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center*. He had always been my first poet. A working artist.

Five years before that I had been standing at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn trying to figure out what I could do here where I lived. It was the museum. The park. Or the library. So library it turned out. I had, still have, these biographies for children I wanted to do. I been in and out. Doing some free-lance research. Uncovering. Discovering. In Black women's history. In myself. The concept of the bookarts, story-arts, and the politics of information.

Much before that were lots of beginnings. Some anti-nuclear work in college, some coming together with other Black students. In a women's space. Around then was when I began to do research and writing for community based organizations. I worked with the *War Resisters League*. Some extraordinary people who had been around, militantly for peace, more than twice the time of my life. Learning about finding and disseminating information in organized "alternative" structures. The educational work for justice. Had many important apprenticeships. In writing. In organizing as well. I grew up to be a librarian thru alternating between these special works and some of the regular jobs women find themselves doing at one time or another. All these things forced my eye. The political work. The craft. The shit work. I went naturally into the work with children and it has stretched me out in all possible directions. To teach. To perform. To program and organize in the arts. To be faster and more smart.

I keep being a librarian in different settings. Now at Medgar Evers College, a predominately Black women's college in Brooklyn, pushing the status quo out—I feel like I'm still building. Being a juggler. But no more than the women before me who got me to this spot. To that



multi-generational coalition I must attribute (smile) the strength of imagination for survival.

**Susan:** It has always seemed to me that the greatest weapon that can be and is used against us is isolation. Separating us from one another. What depresses me most, inactivates me most is when I feel that I'm totally and completely alone, in my work as well as in my relationships. That I have no community.

I'm not talking about the physical event of being a single entity in a room. You can be in a room with a thousand people and still feel alone. I first heard this conceptualized in the 60s when I was teaching at the Free University — or School as it came later to be known because of legal restrictions — a place where I felt I was really able to share what I knew and at the same time learn from people who were gathered together there to learn and teach for the purpose of directly influencing and changing the world they lived in. Or rather the worlds. Since we came from many different places. Where information was used instead of stored, where, at its best, there really was dialogue, a willingness, an eagerness to participate, to talk and to listen. To break down the artificial and imposed separation between words and action, poetry and real people's lives.

At many crucial points in my life, from childhood on, I have seen and experienced forcefully and often quite painfully the results of isolation and lack of community, not only on myself but on people around me. That's why it's been so important to me to make connections. To edit a magazine that makes connections. To do this book.

**Kimiko:** My political involvement has profoundly influenced my writing. In the same way relationships (romantic relationships, my relationship with my mother, my father, my sister) influence my writing. I think it's given it a totally new dimension and I don't feel at all "agitpropy," like I'm writing something that's for a placard or that, in fact, I can only write one way. I feel very much that there's a new dimension added to my writing that makes it much more powerful. And yes, it means *not* being separated.

**Gale:** Your politics really mean the configurations of your relationships. We live in a world together and that is a political construct. How we choose to live, our collective imagination about how we can live and what we can do is so tied to our culture. Our culture is after all our eyes. My eyes allow me to see, to have relationships with folks close and far, all my relationships, with my family, my love, my friends, with even the women far away. All that feeds into who I am, my political being. I am in Brooklyn, I can imagine what it must be like to live in a house where soldiers are standing on the roof, with guns. This all my

world. I write from here about that voice, about the place where it joins my own. The world is very much with me. Sometimes so much it is difficult to write. But always so important, so urgent, that it brings me back to a place where I have to. You care. You want. A safe place. It is a politic of the deepest desire. We are always saying something about the connections that we forge with one another. We are at best saying something about human possibility for humanity, for a particular articulated beauty, for change. Politically, culturally, it is my job to provide the information about what, how much life means.

**Susan:** Political involvement is not an abstract thing. You write about it the way you'd write about anything else you have a deep commitment to. It's very fashionable now to argue that American writers are free of the necessity to include political or social issues in our work because those necessities don't impinge on our very existence the way they might in another country like, for example, El Salvador. The implication, of course, being that not only are political issues not an "authentic" part of our existence, they shouldn't be central in "real" art, and that, in this country, one must finally choose between being an artist or an activist. That being an "true" artist automatically means putting issues of "language" first and "society" second.

Of course, this not only ignores the actual day-to-day struggle for survival of a huge segment of the American population, it conveniently excuses from responsibility the very group of people who are directly or indirectly the source of the problems that necessitate activism to begin with. My question, and I think it's crucial, to those writers, artists, intellectuals would have to be this: Even if your own individual life isn't threatened at this particular instant, at what point do you decide what's being done to other people is worth involving in your writing, your world, at what point do you take responsibility for it, at what point do you suddenly discover that it *is* your world, your responsibility, your work. Whether it's apartheid in South Africa, brutality in the Israeli-occupied territories, or poverty and racism here in the United States.

The real danger, it seems to me, when you become politically involved is not in your choice of subject matter, but how to keep from being overly self-censoring. Maybe it's partly generational, but when I first became involved politically in the middle 60s, I started asking myself questions like, "Should I write about this subject?" "Should I change these words?" I went back through my essays and changed all the masculine pronouns that referred to humanity as "man." And I think that was absolutely right. But it can be carried too far. There was an internalized part of me constantly saying: Is this revolutionary? Is this correct?

And it did affect on my work and did inhibit me for awhile. I'm trying to write about my family now and I feel a lot of conflict and a lot



of difficulty trying to be careful, trying to be fair, trying to be political, in the face of an anti-Semitism I acknowledge I cannot possibly understand. After all, I was a child raised in the 40's when the fear of what was happening in Europe and the prejudice and danger that engendered here was an undercurrent that ran through my parents' everyday existence. Fears that were passed on to me in much more subtle ways: The obsession with, whenever possible, passing, assimilating. The contradiction of, at the same time, building a wall around you of your own people, your own customs, traditions, of excluding the life-threatening "other." The fear that falling out of line, being pointed out, being too obvious, would affect not only you, but your family, your whole people. That an individual act could be lethal to the community as a whole.

**Gale:** How do you be all the things that you are? How can we all be? How can a commitment to humanity be maintained? As we struggle to survive, as we fight wars between and among ourselves. There are a lot of things we have yet to learn. But there has to be something in the deepest voice that you trust and that is the place where you write from. There is something in there that as a cultural worker you are constantly in the process of teaching and learning. We live in a very complicated time. And this is one of the big challenges before us—teaching ourselves to relisten, to be human, to liberate our hearts. I have to believe that is possible. That we have whatever tools we need in our histories. In our stories. There are some very harsh realities. Believing doesn't make me anguish free. But it makes that contradiction, that anguish, that isolation a little different, a little less.

I was talking to somebody about relationships and they were saying, you know, look at the world we live in. We live in a fucking insane world. You want to read the paper, you know what I mean. How do you think that you make it through loving someone else, anybody, how do you think that you get through that scot-free and perfectly and you're always a good person. That none of your society gets into you. But, of course, it does. Into all of us. Women. Men. The children.

**Susan:** A child has no alternatives. A child's world is proscribed by the adults in it. They define that world. I wrote once the most important thing you can discover is that there is an alternative. And later I learned that if there isn't one, you have to fight to create one. Because that's what being an adult, being in control means. We are kept in the position of children by being deprived of choice.

My trip to the Cuban Cultural conference in 1968 taught me about the history of my own country, because it placed me in a context outside myself, separate from me or the interests of people around me. Because it taught me about revolution, about change and about how

art, how culture was part of that process. Because I met writers from Argentina and Chile and Mexico and Columbia and the rest of Latin America, many of whom I had seen in *El Corno Emplumado* (the bi-lingual magazine co-edited by Margaret Randall in Mexico in the 60s), possibly the only place in this country those works were available then, but had never really understood as part of my own culture, my own hemisphere.

In the 50s, with the Beat Movement, poetry really moved out "into the streets" and became a dialogue you spoke out loud, that people listened to and responded too—the readings in the Northbeach bars in the 50's and the open readings in the early 60s in cafes and bars in New York.

The Black civil rights movement and liberation movements, the women's movement, Lesbian and gay struggle, Chicano, Puerto-Rican, Native American, Asian American movements, produced the energy that has motivated and empowered all people to creatively express themselves, to demand their work be recognized and that those artists and activists and thinkers and human beings that form their culture, their "origins" be published, be heard. As progressive Jewish groups had done earlier and now again, and the Irish, and all other groups that came before and will come after carrying on in a long tradition of struggle and change.

And the base of American culture *has* changed, because the way was opened for a new underpinning of culture that was truly representative of the United States as it is today, for all of us, a United States no longer grounded exclusively in European art and criticism.

I'm not talking about stealing someone else's ideas or work, as so often happens in popular music. I'm talking about the fact that we now have so much access to what is truly ours. All the wonderful work that is now available from our America, as well as writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Luisa Valenzuela and Isabel Allende and Pablo Neruda from Latin American and Sembene Ousmane from Senegal and Fumiko Enchi from Japan. They are there for us to absorb the way I read Rainer Maria Rilke and García Lorca in college until they became part of me, part of my history, my own voice, and they were important, but it was a limited history, a European history, and a limited voice, and now it's not, it's an "American" heritage which is all of us in close contact with our own hemisphere, with Central America and the Caribbean and South America and Mexico and Canada too.

I think making a dichotomy between art and politics is part of that whole process of continuing to separate us, of silencing us—which is what the poem "From Nicaragua a Gift" is all about.

I think that it's very important and that people who are involved politically keep saying it, that what we're fighting for is not a world that's smaller than the world we live in. If it gets any smaller none of us are going to be able to breathe at all. What we're fighting for is a



world that's larger, where all people can express themselves, where they can express their differences. Where we can express *our* differences.

### "I say 'poet' now..."

**Kimiko:** I think when one talks about politics and art, history and memory are essential elements. One is not entirely subjective, the other objective. I think women's history in general is most important to me. I identify with the collective difficulty to express and/or publish that expression. (In fact, this book will be one avenue against that historical silence.) Of course the stereotypical Japanese woman is a passive, silent one. I defy that. I use history and memory to defy it.

The history of the artist in general is one of margins. We are part of the intelligentsia and therefore, in times of social turmoil, we can throw our lot in any direction. We don't have set allies. The social margin we occupy is one that denies us full participation as citizens (especially in being able to make a living) and does not take our occupation seriously. I used to be hesitant to tell people I was a poet. I'd say "writer" or "student." That sounds legitimate. But to admit to being an artist (even though I grew up in a family of artists!) was somehow saying I was not to be taken seriously. I say "poet" now.

Politically I do my organizing with artists because I don't think real social change is possible without cultural change — that's where artists come in — yes, even poets! Who reads and listens to poetry? I read in a variety of places and that's where people mainly hear me. And a great many people write all over this land — I mean there are a lot of poets out there. Nicaragua is called "A Land of Poets" because you can go anywhere and find them. Well, I think that is true here though our society doesn't value poets/artists as highly. Just look at the proliferation of journals, newsletters and workshops. What I'd like to do politically is say to these writers — your lot is really cast with all working people, therefore, everyone from meat packers in Minnesota to welfare mothers in Atlanta is our social ally.

What is really the opposite of repression? Usually we think of the opposite of repression as being liberation, but a major part of liberation is expression. Expression empowers people towards liberation, or within a liberation movement, or the liberation of one's heart, or whatever. I was thinking of expression as being perhaps the true opposite of repression. I was thinking of it in a social way.

I grew up in a very white suburb where my sister and I and my mother were the minority. And later on, when I started getting involved with people who were in the Asian-American struggles, some people would look at me as being part white and they somewhat rejected me. Later on it was okay — never mind that in the detention camps during

World War II, if you were some fraction Japanese you were in the camps. I consider my daughter Japanese-American, because if it came to having to go into the camps that's where she would be. I don't know what she'll consider herself, that is for her to decide and for her to live out. But I consider her Japanese-American.

My husband's mother, when we announced our engagement, turned to him right at the dinner table and said--why don't you marry an American? What she meant was white, but what she said was American. American means white, anglo-saxon, protestant. Probably not even Catholic or Jewish. If I'd been Jewish, she would have said something somewhat different, but with the same meaning.

**Susan:** The truth is when it comes to the bottom line the society you live in always tries to enforce its definitions of who you are on you. And even more important what you mean and what *value* you have. Sometimes fatally. Which is why it's so essential to make our own definitions and to struggle to change social definitions.

**Gale:** We're talking about human education here. That's when you talk about seizing traditional forms, the arts, traditional forms of reaching people and turning them modern and figuring out how to teach these lessons again because somehow people have watched too many commercials not realizing that culturally, or thru the lack thereof, we've been pushed to the brink of survival, against the wall literally to the edge of the fatal possibilities of the world we're living in. Somehow you have to reach people and bring them back mindful that peace will only come with justice. That eye for eye for eye could go on and on. Somehow you have to reach people 'cause we have to talk. There are a lot of things that, for starters, we need to learn and remember. A lot of history has been taken away from people and one of the first retributions would be to begin to restore. People's very stories have been taken away, made inaccessible, till we don't all know who we are. Culturally. Till we don't have no home. Real or metaphor. Then there is all that is going on that is not being told. The news. Our country's not-so-covert wars. In my work as a writer, as a librarian, I be finding that people don't know. This tragedy of repetition. When it becomes clear that culture, art information, is first and foremost political, it is clear that people need to use that to reach and teach. To explore. People need to know. To imagine. To know.

**Kimiko:** You've touched on something really important. I keep speaking as if the artists are over here and the oppressed people are over there and we're going to meet, but in fact the majority of artists are part of the survival movement. I can find the time to write because I'm fortunate enough to have a rent-stabilized apartment. But that's



part luck and part living in a place for ten years through drug wars and everything else — sticking it out. But the fact is there are people out there who may not consider themselves “poets” but actually are. There are groupings of homeless poets’ workshops. Several groupings. So they’re already out there working together. It’s a matter of seeing our interests as one and the same.

**Susan:** When I was in Berkeley in 1959, there were the “artists” and there were the “political” people. I was an artist and I didn’t consider myself one of the “politicos,” although I fancied myself terribly anti-establishment. We slept together, we ate together, we went to parties together, but there was a very distinct separation.

When I went to the demonstration against HUAC after the demonstrators had been washed down a flight of marble stairs in San Francisco in 1960, when I went to anti-war demonstrations after coming to New York, I still considered myself an “artist” — period. I was just protesting certain unjust actions. It was really after my trip to Cuba in 1968 along with the repercussions from that trip (loss of job, the magazine, friends) that I became much more conscious politically, that I began to make connections — to connect the poverty that I suddenly “saw,” the racism, the commercialism and recognize their inter-relations, to examine their cause.

At the same time I started to identify myself as an artist who was also a political person and recognize where those two things came together. It was a huge change for me, as big as the one I went through when I first went to Berkeley. And that I would go through later as a result of feminism.

My recognition of myself consciously as a “woman” rather than a being who somehow magically transcended such mundane categories as gender came through the “5th St. Women’s Building Action,” which took place in coalition with the squatters’ movement in the early 70’s. I’ll never forget that night — standing precisely at midnight in the middle of a snow storm on New Year’s Eve, on the corner of 1st Ave. and 5th St. guarding a van full of provisions as women crawled, one by one, each holding a flashlight, into a broken window on the first floor of this huge abandoned building almost directly across from the 9th Precinct. We intended the building to be used by community women — for day-care, for the homeless, for community activities. And it was — at least until we were busted by the Tactical Police Force and it was demolished to make way for a parking lot. It was always my feeling with the level of energy we women showed, they didn’t dare leave that building standing.

One of main organizers of that action was June Arnold, the head of the Literature Committee of the *Women’s Center*, a feminist author who started one of the first women’s presses — in fact, it might have

been the first — *Daughters Inc.* Our slogan was “Our hands, our minds, our feet, our bodies are tools of change.”

“Lilith” was a direct result of that 5th Street action and the months of organizing and “consciousness-raising” that went along with it. I call it my “coming-out” poem — that expression to be taken on a number of levels. It is also a strong statement of support for the many brave woman who had put themselves on the line in the 60s for what they believed in, some of whom were in prison or underground at the time, and additionally, a connection with the late 50s and early 60s, living as a poet on the periphery of society.

**Kimiko:** What we’re talking about really is culture. You can change laws and you can change institutions but culture is something that continues from one state to the next and you can’t say — “Smash it” like you can a building or an institution or a structure. It is, like history, something that continues.

My feeling is that there are social motions right now that are not your conventional political motions, for example, it may be more like homelessness, undocumented workers. We have to look at things that are happening and not expect to see the same things. Again, that’s where the artist as a visionary and as a creative person really plays an important role, because we don’t always look for things as they’re supposed to appear.

**Gale:** I think of a lot of the stories of Black women writers, and myself included, who really trace the beginning of their writing to people telling stories, to women telling stories, or the kitchen, you know. But that’s a reality for so many people. That’s an underground culture. A subversive survival culture. The same kind of thing that was somehow able to come in Japan, that certainly nurtured the story telling instinct of so many writers today. So many Black women writers now. From a place that people understand. The trickle down theory clearly doesn’t work in economics, in politics, or culture or anything else. You have to figure out how much is here from a language that people all speak, from a language that gets defined as you speak it. This movement, for life, for peace and social justice must tap into creating a way for people to be empowered. To write the scenario for their own lives. We want to claim the power for people to really name themselves and to make some decisions about how to live.

You know, there’s some kind of meeting in-between what people who have learned to move people and work with people, i.e. political people, and people who have learned to move people and work with people, i.e. artist people — there’s some meeting of their knowledge that’s absolutely necessary, that’s an even exchange here. And that needs to be recognized as that. And both sides suffer from that lack of recognition.



If you don't liberate peoples' hearts, you pass the civil rights bill one more time. And again and again and again. The problems we face demand the fullest of our capabilities. Our imagination. Anger. For example, picture yourself in this city, how do people find new structures for dealing with what our lives are? Once you get to the core—somebody doesn't have a home, what do people do then? That takes incredible imagination. These are the places that organizing and imagination absolutely must meet.

**Kimiko:** This doesn't mean that we have to write only about those issues in order to ally ourselves with them. I read at a demonstration put on by the National Union of the Homeless—homeless people who organized themselves—and I read mainly love poems. The context was like this: if a husband or wife or whoever are in a shelter, now how are they ever going to have any intimacy? You know, if you don't have a home, you don't have a home life. I wanted to read love poems in that context.

People of color, poor people, are being blamed for pulling down the standard of living and for the violence in our society when in fact it's the fault of the system itself that creates these conditions, exploits people and victimizes them. There's a different way to lynch people these days. You just let them be homeless, or you shoot them in the back and get away with it. I think the way artists can work against this is through political clarity, through understanding what's going on and trying to use their voice, because artists have a platform that other people don't have. Again, not that we have to write poems about any particular subject—if people want to that's fine—but you can also get up and say a word on your platform and then do what you gotta do, sing a song, or play a flute or whatever. But I think clarity is what's important.

**Gale:** Which happens within groups of people, groups of people learning about themselves in the way you learn about yourself from the inside out and at the same time between people looking at each other and learning something else about themselves by learning something else about somebody else. And that kind of process being able to happen, which assumes the absence of fear. And in this society that's a big assumption.

**Susan:** You know, that really brings up our relationship to each other. This kind of book that we're doing doesn't come out of nowhere. It's the continuation of a process rather than the beginning of one. And part of it is that I felt I could sit down with you and not be afraid to talk about anything. That we trust each other because we've known each other for a long time—we've worked together and respect each other.

Kimiko and I met at the Conference on Central America in Managua, Nicaragua in 1983, we worked together on the original organization of *Ventana*—a cultural support group for the ASTC (Sandinista Cultural Workers Association) and in connection with *Artist's Call*. Although I published a poem of Gale's in the second issue of *IKON*, we didn't actually get to know each other until *IKON* organized a benefit poetry reading for *Art Against Apartheid*, a coalition of artists and arts' organizations.

**Gale:** That was in 1984 when we were initiating a major drive to inform and agitate people on the anti-apartheid front as well as drawing the domestic issues connections. Then AAA and *IKON*, Gale and Susan came together again to edit an anthology, *Works for Freedom*, of anti-apartheid work; a collection of over one hundred artists work.... Now me and Kimiko we met in Blue Mountain doing some strategic planning (smile) for artist response and networking in urgent political times....

I like the concept of collaboration and what it can be when it's good. I think that it's like what musicians do when they jam and create a new moment in music. The trick is to understand the differences in each voice. The different needs. The different tones. And roads that bring us here. Each player brings her own music. One comes for the challenge. One comes to hear the sounds. Another comes out of the need to move with others. You kinda cup your ear. Like a good singer. Pick up your beat. Your key. Your notes. Then I guess it's like jump rope: there's a moment then the downbeat opens up and you can slide in in stride. One voice after another gets in there. Best if they all be distinct. But you get a new music. Familiar and different in the end.





# KIMIKO LAHN



## The Bath: August 6, 1945

Bathing the summer night  
off my arms and breasts  
I heard a plane  
overhead *I heard*  
*the door rattle*  
froze  
then relaxed  
in the cool water  
one more moment  
*one private moment*  
before waking the children  
and mother-in-law,  
before the heat  
*before the midday heat*  
drenched my spirits again.  
I had wanted  
to also relax  
in thoughts of my husband  
when he was drafted  
*imprisoned* — but didn't dare  
and rose from the tub,  
dried off lightly  
and slipped on cotton work pants.  
Caution drew me to the window  
and there an enormous blossom of fire  
*a hand* changed my life  
and made the world shiver —  
a light that tore flesh  
so it slipped off limbs,  
swelled so  
no one could recognize  
a mother or child  
*a hand that tore the door open*  
*pushed me on the floor*  
*ripped me up —*  
*I will never have children again*  
so even today  
my hair has not grown back  
*my teeth still shards*  
*and one eye blind*  
and it would be easy,  
satisfying somehow  
to write it off as history



those men are there  
each time I close  
my one good eye  
each time or lay blame  
on men or militarists  
the children cry out  
in my sleep  
where they still live  
for the sake of a night's rest.  
But it isn't air raids  
simply  
that we survive  
but *gold worth its weight*  
*in blood* the coal,  
oil, uranium we mine  
and drill  
yet cannot call our own.  
And it would be gratifying  
to be called a survivor  
*I am a survivor*  
*since I live* if I didn't wonder  
about survival today —  
*at 55, widowed at 18—*  
if I didn't feel  
the same oppressive August heat  
*auto parts in South Africa,*  
*Mexico, Alabama,*  
and shiver not from memory  
or terror  
but anger that this wounded body  
must stand *take a stand*  
and cry out  
as only a new born baby can cry —  
I live, I will live  
*I will to live*  
in spite of history  
*to make history*  
in my vision of peace —  
that morning in the bath  
so calm  
so much my right  
*though I cannot return to that moment*  
*I bring these words to you*  
*hoping to hold you*  
to hold you  
and to take hold.

## Seams (Coalfields Text 1)

The seam was gray as a recollection —  
I mean, as that recollection  
(even in my motel room)  
of the shirts my husband packed in his suitcase,  
the toothbrush and razor,  
of the door I closed after him  
as I said *sorry—*  
gray as the morning air  
in Dupont City full of Dupont.  
That Thursday was my day  
to not talk about Fred Carter's case.  
And Blue, an unemployed coalminer,  
hardly talked  
but drove us around  
pulling over to pick up coffee  
or apples  
adjust the windshield wipers  
and I felt sadder for the red  
than the raw yellow  
in the hills. How to take  
this virility (yes) in my heart —  
the politics  
that make my blood surge —  
and place it in the feminine land:  
the seams, drift mouth,  
strip mining, hollars.  
So on a steamy autumn day  
I could smell  
something like Ortho cream or rubber  
except it was Dupont  
a late Thursday afternoon.  
Was it this female  
that forced the men to tender moments  
(even *art*)  
in the shafts  
or made me hope Fred into saying  
*whereas the lungs are like a sponge*  
even as the company  
invades his very alveoli.  
If I could be a virile woman  
I would be these sorry hills



separate and gorgeous  
 where the plain language  
 (black lung)  
 becomes stripped.  
 Where the thin-seam miner  
 guts the side of a mountain.  
 Where some men cut open some kid's stomach  
 in the parking lot  
 for being black with a white girl.  
 That, too, landscape.  
 Also, that day — with the coal  
 pouring out of the tippie —  
 was so exquisite  
 I just sat in the car.  
 Some moments I stopped breathing  
 as the rain sprayed through the window  
 across my cheeks and sweater.  
*Fred would never last a week in jail*  
*and they know it* I knew  
 I was home  
 when I mistook mantrip for mantrap.  
 The men winked and offered  
*wanna go down?*  
 I smiled: *a couple inches or a few yards*  
 That made them ask  
*where you from anyway?*  
 Between sass and conversations with Blue  
 or how he got his name  
 when the other miners threw him out of the shower  
 into the snow — a kind of hazing —  
 and how he paints while he watches the tv  
 and the kids  
 and how I write on the subways —  
 I knew the extra suitcase  
 my husband left behind  
 wouldn't hurt me  
 everytime I went for my hairbrush.  
 He'll never come home.  
*Fred would have a heart attack*  
*in that hole*  
 Miners never die of natural causes  
 in the lungs of the south —  
 in Dupont City, Kanawha, Goshen, Confidence,  
 Left Hand, Five Forks, Clover Lick

(Coalfields Texts for a film by Bill Brand, 1984)

## Coalfields (text 2) 30 Seconds on Fred Carter

Blue first told me about Fred Carter —  
 an old black retired miner,  
 black lung victim, lay representative,  
 who was up on some misdemeanors.  
 He said the feds framed him  
 for being effective  
 and running for UMW president.  
 His running mate said  
 they knew where me and Fred was coming from  
 and we could organize  
 every nonunion mine in this country.  
 His lawyer said  
 Fred has the most impressive forearms  
 I ever did see.  
 And to tell you the truth  
 I didn't believe much of it  
 until I saw his three bedrooms  
 filled with hats and suits.  
 Files. Suitcases. Cases.  
 And a second story.



## Revolutions

for P

Forbidden to learn Chinese  
the women wrote in the language  
of their islands  
and so Japanese  
became the currency of high aesthetics  
for centuries  
as did the female persona: the pine  
the longing. This is the truth.

(We can rise above those needles.)

The red silk from my grandmother  
amazes me. Think of the peasant  
immigrating from rice fields  
to black volcanic soil. The black beaches.  
The children black  
in this sunlight  
against the parents' will or aspirations.

(Anywhere else  
girls of mixed marriages would be prostitutes or courtesans.)

I want those words  
that gave women de facto power,  
those religious evocations: dreams so potent  
'she became pregnant' or 'men killed'  
or 'the mistress died in pain.'  
I connect to that century  
as after breath is knocked out  
we suck it back in.

The words the men stole after all  
to write about a daughter's death  
or their own (soft) thigh  
belongs to us — to me —  
though translation is a border  
we look over or into;  
sometimes a familiar noise  
(‘elegant confusion’). But can *meaning*  
travel  
the way capital moves  
like oil in the Alaskan pipeline

or in tankers in the Straits of Hormuz?  
Can those sounds move like that?  
Yes. But we don't understand.

But we don't know  
what it means to speak freely  
even to ourselves. Patricia,  
fertility is not the antithesis of virility.  
I can't help it.

If I could translate the culture  
women cultivate  
I would admit to plum  
and plumb.

*I always begin with a season.  
Like: snow and plums in the wooden bowl  
make me love him. How  
I warm one in my fist  
then lick it until the skin  
grows so tender it bursts  
beneath my breathing.  
The yellow is brilliant.  
The snow is warm.*

Some of our lessons issue from song  
because there are never enough  
older sisters  
especially from the South via Detroit

where we look for a model  
with the desperation of a root —

where a bride is a state —

where *heat lightning* is pronounced:  
lie down on my breast  
so your tongue and teeth reach my tit  
and I can —

where yes —

I didn't learn the diction from the Classics  
rather transistor radios. Confidence  
in my body also. After years —



the confidence that gives and gives  
and is not afraid to take either.

Exploring the words means plunging down  
not skimming across  
or watching whitecaps however lovely.  
Not balking at fear either:  
the walls are filled with sounds,  
the windows, with sorrow.

Revolution for example is the soft  
exact  
orbit of planet, moon, seed.  
Also seizing the means of production  
for our class.  
Where does that come from?  
*It all begins with women*, she said.

Like the warp and woof of cloth.

And how there's no 'free verse' so we'll search  
for the subtle structures: the poetic closure,  
the seven kinds of ambiguity, etc.

*Not tonight dear.*

How it's not so sad really  
for a husband or wife  
to come alone.

Komachi's reputation came from legend:  
the 99th time a lover visited her door  
(the night before she would let him enter)  
he died.

*That's the breaks.*

In a patriarchy is such cruelty cruelty  
or survival? Is  
the father to blame for ugly daughters, too?  
for the unruly ones?

Come sit by the radiator and open window.  
When the baby hiccoughed inside her  
her whole body shook.

*After birth* is not a time or reform  
it belongs to a separation we turn toward.

## Her First Language

is not American  
so when she recites the poem  
the worlds are not as clear  
as the beautiful notes  
from her mouth.  
Teeth figure into not only this section  
but recollections of grandpa  
and the glass by his bed.  
You could cry for his plumeria  
and chickens.  
The other plantation hands  
brought his wife laundry  
and stalks of cane.  
The T-shirts  
glistened on the line.  
He couldn't speak to you  
though he said *iiko da ne*  
and patted you on the head  
somehow like the German girl offstage  
saying  
the moon is writhing.  
It occurs to you  
only women and wounded soldiers  
writhe.



## Instead of Speech

The reflection of Noh actors  
in the reflecting pool, the torches,  
the faces all turned in one direction  
make your heart throb:  
*this is home*. This is home the way a home  
will never admit you  
because you are by definition alien and female.

No matter what (bitchy, manipulative, fertile,  
on top)  
you girl  
are the vulnerable one by social  
and biological inheritance.  
At the moment.

*All women are streetwise*, she said  
and, *the penis is the linchpin*  
*of linguistic systems*. Funny

the word penis.

He recognized the comb as something  
you bought for the honeymoon you didn't take.

After the separation  
his girlfriend interfered with your grief  
so you wanted to — to what?

The actor's feet never left the ground  
as he slowly whirled across the wooden stage  
toward anything.

All summer you wore your husband's gym shorts and T-shirts  
*Do you wear that in the street?* she asked.  
A man asked the same.

Carpenters construct a stage  
so stamping and pounding resound  
like the chest cavity.  
I'm told ceramic urns are planted beneath  
in strategic locations.

On a subway poster of a voluptuous woman  
someone drew in tits  
and a cock stuck up her ass. *Had it been a man*  
there might be a cock stuck in his mouth  
not a cunt.  
The evermore unattached phallus.

— you wanted to rip her fucking face off —

A woman with short blonde hair and white earrings  
entered the cafe.  
She wore an immaculate white T-shirt  
and you knew were you a lesbian and she were  
you would approach her  
and court her.

There are only actors  
yet so many female roles  
so many women's masks it hurts.

I would like to climb the stage  
in white tabi and silk  
stretch my arms out — fingers together palms down —  
and stamp.  
Calling out: *nantoka nantoka soro*

like sorrow, sorrow sorrow



## The New Father

for Ted

Setting aside her rattle and doll  
you stretch across our bed  
and draw me over you.  
We curve into each other and pulse gently  
until my breasts spot your chest with milk.

## Poetic Closure

"(T)he conclusion of a poem has special status in the process, for it is only at that point that the total pattern—the structural principles which we have been testing—is revealed."

Barbara Hernstein Smith, *Poetic Closure*

Affection came easily  
like dust or salt spray  
or leaving.  
Yet it could not have been anywhere.  
Curling up in my new studio  
I thought of rain and wished it—  
to extinguish the outside—  
to make the surface of everything blurred.  
I was cleaning  
and thought how rust feels like his face in the morning  
as I leaned against him  
or blurred his complexion on a holiday.  
But affection for anything came easily as rain—  
if it showers now you see him (or me)  
now you don't. My reflection  
coincided with the lightning  
and I knew, like women for centuries,  
I am without father or husband  
only partly by choice.

The taxes, insurance, bills—  
seemed like my whole life.  
I could barely think  
or fall asleep for days.  
Though it's women who comfort  
we leave our mothers at birth  
for fathers to give us away  
in, say, a couple dozen years.  
While the boys never leave.

I know if it rains while I sleep  
I will rise for the open window  
like walking toward a crib.

When I think of looking for an apartment  
I think of metal: stainless steel, green copper,  
rusty pipes.  
And stoops toward early evening  
with families fanning themselves



and playing dominoes.  
There were lots with grass,  
the kind that feels like razors.  
A few green or brown bottles,  
a Midnight Express.  
It was fall.

It was fall when I hurt my mother:  
I said it's possible  
I may be alone for the rest of my life.  
I wondered: childless?  
with an old dog and beat-up typewriter?  
She changed the topic.  
She promised herself to change  
against all odds  
like the woman in the Tosa Diary  
(written by a man)  
who had lost her daughter.

"I kept my attention on the beautiful sight ashore, and as the ship rowed on, the mountains, the sea, all darkened as night fell. One could not distinguish north from south and could only entrust the weather to the captain's understanding. Even a man accustomed to a sea voyage at night must find it disheartening. For a woman it was worse, nothing to do but hold one's head against the floor down in the boat and weep aloud. While I was so dejected, the men of the ship or the captain fell to singing boat songs til it could scarcely be borne.

"In the spring fields I cried aloud in pain —  
The young pampas grass had cut, had cut my hands;  
I managed at least to pluck some shoots,  
And shall I take them to my parents?  
Will my mother-in-law make them a meal?  
And how can I get home?"

How would that be, have been, in the year 935  
to leave in the provinces a daughter's ashes  
and travel by boat to the capital  
where her husband would be?  
No comfort from concubines or a mother-in-law.

How could I measure this in 1985?

What do you mean what does he want?  
do you know what you want?  
aside from a daughter like your younger sister:  
pliant as grass or wild iris  
and clean as clay in a stream.  
I could wade in and breathe water  
like fish  
in the woods there behind the house.  
The greatest childhood dangers: poison ivy,  
strange men and dinosaurs.

If you push yourself you reach endings  
again and again. Right smack in the middle  
of a thought or breath  
(we're back to breath).

I would love to hold you Ruth  
back when you were, say, fourteen,  
in 1918  
when you were smart and virginal  
(I imagine) —  
not to kiss your mouth or breasts  
but to cry until my body shakes.

Maybe this one will understand:  
he brought a flower  
though I misunderstood the gift  
and ignored it. I'm sorry.  
It's a little thing to you — but to me  
I'm sorry.  
Had I known I would have touched it to my nose  
like a puppy  
who understands everything thus.

"In societies like the Nuer, bridewealth  
can only be converted into brides. In others, bridewealth  
can be converted into something else, like political prestige."

"The world of corporate finance is unrelated to the real world  
of goods and services. Instead of generating new wealth,  
corporations are playing a giant game of asset rearrangement  
that is largely unproductive. It's a symptom  
of a longer-range economic problem — a fear of the future."



Maybe if I had known Ida  
as a woman and not my great-grandmother  
maybe I would have liked her for more than fudge  
and cloth corsages.  
Maybe I would forgive her for not letting father  
meet his grandfather.

The Phelps Dodge strike in Morenci, Arizona  
began over a year ago  
and the striking miners see themselves  
as fighting not only the company but the law.  
One month after the walk out  
with 700 police officers and National Guardsmen on hand  
the company reopened the plant. Before the strike  
the average wage was \$14 an hour;  
today the company is paying \$10, with new employees receiving \$7.

Looking for an apartment was so heart-wrenching  
I could only think of her  
lying on the bottom of the boat sobbing  
as the waves lapped the hold.  
Anything she saw — pebbles on the beach,  
a piece of candy, a scrap of cloth —  
reminded her of her daughter.  
How interesting,  
not so much to write in a female persona,  
but that he chose the dead child to be a girl.  
Scholars do not know how autobiographic the diary may be.

I would ask mother to reread the end of the rhinoceros story  
again and again: "But the Parsee came down from his palm-tree,  
wearing his hat, from which the rays of the sun  
were reflected in more-than-oriental splendor, packed up  
his cooking stove, and went away in the direction  
of Orotavo, Amygdala, the Upland Meadows of Antananarivo,  
and the Marshes of Sonoput."

He left the apartment until I found something I could afford.  
He had tried to leave before  
the difference now was that it was the first time  
I didn't try to stop him. Something like mothballs  
or turpentine held me back.  
Something in my throat.

Marie came home with me that afternoon  
and I showed her my sister  
playing in her crib  
and my mother's wedding shoes  
which I had found that weekend.  
Marie was such a big girl at eight  
and mother so small  
that they fit.  
I was furious. *They're mother's.*

"Besides greenmail, the new vocabulary in the takeover game  
includes two-tiered tender offers, Pac Man,  
poison pill defenses, crown jewel options,  
golden parachutes and self tenders."

After college I found an office-temp job  
and moved in with my fiancée.  
It was early fall and the barrio was still hot.  
Hawkers sat on the corner with avocados,  
platanos and crates of fish.  
I was twenty-two and felt this is it.  
I'm ready.

"The Phelps Dodge miners live in often bleak surroundings  
in the hot, treeless camps on the lips of the mines  
and in the shadows of the tall smelter smokestacks.  
...If you can break a strike here  
you can break a strike anywhere."

"Always I look back  
Toward my native place,  
To where my parents are,  
And how can I get home?

"His song touched the feelings of us all. As he was singing and  
the boat bore on, we passed a place where dark-colored birds were  
gathered upon the tops of rocks along the coast, while the waves  
scattered white at their base. It was as the captain said: 'The  
white waves are heading where the black birds roost.' There was  
nothing very special about his words, but at the time they  
sounded like the verse of a poem. Since it was not the sort of  
thing one would expect a sea captain to say, it caught everyone's  
attention."



I thought of Eliot's subtle rhyme, varied and soft,  
and the line: "I shall wear white flannel trousers,  
and walk upon the beach."

Then, "I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
When the wind blows the water white and black."

"Mr. Ramsey, stumbling along a passage one dark morning,  
stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsey  
having died rather suddenly the night before,  
his arms though open, remained empty."

*If you can break a strike here in Morenci  
you can break a strike anywhere. We have a history.*

We kept saving each other from despair  
and vacationed together:  
two young women, fresh and sorrowful.

"[In a poem] the structural principles produce a state  
of expectation continuously maintained  
and in general we expect the principles to continue operating  
as they have operated."

He didn't have an apartment to let  
but he thought I would be young like my sister  
and easy.  
Such scum.

The structure will change like a woman  
breaking through a fever  
and rising for a glass of water.

I thought of the day my sister was born.  
I waved to mother from the hospital parking lot.  
Her face looked small  
and I got to stay at the Goddard's for the first time.  
Meg had just put the constellations on her ceiling  
and they glowed in the dark.  
I asked daddy if we could go to the Natural History  
and get some too.

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NOTE: quotations from *Poetic Closure* by Barbara Hernstein Smith, *Japanese Poetic Diaries* by Earl Miner, *The New York Times*, *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T. S. Eliot.

## Toward Strength

For E

Tell me also that the lawns will be covered  
with snow even as the flowers  
break through.  
We think they are delicate  
but know their fragrance penetrates the ice.  
Or it may be our imagination:  
little signals that we'll bear up under hard times  
together always.



## Going Inside to Write

She finds the only place to write  
is the *ote arai*.  
So she takes in her notebook  
and retells the story of the peach boy:  
when the old man and woman  
broke open the peach  
a dazzlingly handsome baby  
with pink cheeks and penis  
stepped out and said  
*chichiue hahae domo arigato gozaimashita*  
(thank you).  
He was a baby  
but he could speak.

In the halflight  
she finishes her version.

Here the mind deregulates language.  
Outside  
causes  
are not confined but often conditioned  
by an infant's bowel movements,  
stacks of dishes,  
international economies or classical literature.  
Myths and store coupons bear philosophy.

To know the body  
from the inside —

the lining of the uterus, the muscles  
that squeeze blood out,

the Braxton-Hicks contractions

labor

crisis

c-section —

to know the body from the inside  
is warranty against fear

("baby look what you've done to me") —

against the fear

of one's own body,  
also toward the possibility of tending oneself  
in the onslaught of others.

She will return later  
to write about the sparrow  
who had her tongue clipped off  
for eating the woman's rice starch.

We garden with the knowledge of our bodies.

Though she hears her father  
calling from the far room  
she shouts:  
I can't hear you.  
I can't hear you.



## Nora

Other women say other women  
gave more than Nora  
and she says so also.  
The streets, named after martyrs,  
are filled with women:  
Marta, Bertha, Ariel,  
Rita, Beatriz, Arlen —  
and there are companeras  
who can tell you about regiments of men they led  
or mothers who joined  
in mourning a child's death or rape.  
Indeed, Nora spent her Saturdays  
at the golf course or poolside  
of the country club  
outside her father's cattle ranch.  
The *adoring* father  
pushed this little girl  
to a vision broader than sink and bed  
in the town then Villa Somoza,  
in the days when she dreamed of marrying  
*someone with an aristocratic name.*  
But she knew the poor also:  
visiting the hospitals crowded as slums  
and teaching hygiene and religion  
in the slums diseased as the hospitals.  
She knew even then charities  
would not satisfy.  
But when she campaigned  
for the opposition leader, Aguero,  
her parents sent her to the Catholic University,  
Washington, D.C.  
and she baked in isolation  
from her country's history  
and from our own days of massive escalation  
and the slaughter of the Vietnamese people  
(who would also claim victory in time).  
These were, she said, *the two most superficial*  
*years of my life.* 1968  
1969  
Returning to Managua  
Nora entered law school,  
*believing in justice.*

But her lessons revolved around political prisoners  
and as my friend, a lawyer, learned,  
the law is to *defend*  
power and property.  
Nora probably felt the same  
when a companero approached her;  
she began her timid *collaboration*  
with the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional.  
Soon she exchanged readings  
for meetings and transporting comrades.  
Oscar Turcios taught her  
within the limitations of her life experiences  
until her need was synonymous  
with the FSLN —  
with the tortured peasants and students  
and the exhausted petty bourgeoisie.  
Then, too, she met Jorge Jenkins,  
student FSLN rep,  
and they promised political allegiance first  
before their own vows.  
She trusted his *higher level*  
*of political development.*  
Their engagement caused her father  
heart arrest  
but she married Jorge.  
And slowly, again, she became isolated.  
They moved to Italy  
where he studied anthropology  
and she, banking law and computers.  
But isolation is more than geography or class.  
I wonder if it was partly morning sickness,  
the swollenness beyond expectation,  
hunger for everything, anything, nothing —  
even at the cost of one's vision.  
You need him. You need  
to protect the forthcoming —  
first one daughter then another.  
Or was the isolation *practical*:  
when two have a meeting  
the woman goes in principle.  
But know that the woman  
is there bathing the infants,  
nursing, singing,  
washing rice off the table and dishes  
consumed by the house



with little to spare for politics  
or oneself.  
After five years  
of what I've just imagined  
Nora divorced her husband;  
but, too, she separated from herself.  
Was that it Nora?  
That queasy sensation  
there's nothing under your feet.  
So all you can think is  
clutch the girls,  
become active again or fall.  
Meanwhile the number of executions  
and disappeared  
spread plague-like.  
Then it was March, 1978.  
Nora, a lawyer for Nicaragua's largest  
construction company,  
met General Reynaldo Perez Vega,  
the "Dog."  
She contacted the compas.  
They plotted.  
Would she give up everything  
(her daughters)  
to kidnap him.  
But she thought  
*part of my decision*  
*was precisely because of my children.*  
So she invited over the General  
who'd been waiting for her  
to give it up for months.  
He arrived within hours  
giving her only enough time  
to buy some liquor.  
But he didn't want a drink  
(*what for?* he asked);  
he wanted the prize of his patience.  
So she began the task:  
unbuttoned his jacket,  
slipped off his shirt gently  
with an urgency akin to passion,  
unbuckled his scarred belt,  
pulled off his bruise-black boots.  
Drawing his pants down

toward her lips  
she spoke softly  
a signal for her comrades.  
They caved into the room like an earthquake  
and held him down.  
When she went out to tell his bodyguard  
*go buy us some rum*  
he couldn't hear the General's calls  
above his car radio.  
She returned to her bedroom  
to find his throat slashed.  
The "Dog" fought so intensely  
there was no choice.  
And it was *just as well*  
she thought later  
training in the mountains on the Northern Front.  
She wondered at what he would have done to her,  
had done to many women  
when promises weren't hot as a piece of ass  
or when that wasn't it.  
One less CIA agent, eh Nora?  
By June she was ready for combat  
and became political leader  
of four squadrons on the Southern Front.  
Her eldest daughter, then six,  
resented her disappearance.  
*If you had just told me,* she said later.  
For a mother who belongs to an organization  
dedicated and poised to win  
what can you say to your daughters.  
Do the fathers leave  
as if going to work as usual,  
can they?  
When does a woman know  
what to say to her daughters.  
Then, too, she was no longer  
a corporate lawyer or mother or woman  
though she was.  
She was falling in love in the mountains  
fighting beside her comrade,  
Jose Maria Alvarado.  
She fought the National Guard  
until six months pregnant  
when they sent her to Costa Rica  
in charge of financing the Southern Front.



I do not know what she was doing  
 July 19, 1979.  
 Perhaps in her last trimester  
 barely able to breathe  
 she shouted for the grandeur  
 of the peasants' Triumph.  
 Perhaps she wept, as I would.  
 And now with the war  
 directly against U.S. intervention  
 she leads Nicaragua's mission to the U.N.  
 where *Nora*, a male colleague admitted,  
*wears her past the way other women*  
*wear perfume;*  
 where, an opponent said,  
*Norita is a resonance box*  
*and what is put into it*  
*is decided in Managua.*  
 Of course. That's her job.  
 Though no one would say that  
 of a man.  
 As I complete this narrative  
 I think of all the women  
 I'd love to fight alongside,  
 here, North of the Border,  
 as a gift to Nicaragua.

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NOTE: This poem is based on and uses quotes from two sources:  
 "Nicaragua's U.N. Voice" by Elaine Sciolino (*The New York Times Magazine*,  
 Sept. 28, 1986). and *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women*  
*in Struggle* by Margaret Randall and edited by Lynda Yanz (New Star Books:  
 Vancouver, Canada, 1981). It is interesting to note that Ms. Astorga was  
 appointed Nicaragua's chief delegate to the United Nations only after the  
 U.S. Government rejected her as Nicaragua's ambassador to the United  
 States in 1984.

## Seizure

In Nicaragua  
 old women  
 mobilize with sticks and boiling water  
 again.  
 You're North American.  
 You figure it's the season.  
 But back home  
 the moon  
 acts like that girl  
 who'd been fucked in so many places  
 she hardly knows which hole  
 is for babies  
 and you know you understand

*un deber de cantar*

and you know you understand  
 your desire  
 to see Broadway  
 NY NY  
 taken in a flash of July heat  
 and you know you want it.  
 (The green parrots snap  
*guapa*  
 and your thighs sweat like mad.)  
 And you want it.  
*Shit. We don't have mountains here.*  
 The rooftops  
 will do the trick

you think out loud.

Because you belong to a process  
 that belongs to you

one

you love to touch

and nurse

and deploy



on your lap, here  
Nicaragua. On your

lap here Nueva  
New York. Here

*novio*, baby

sister. When I say *mujeres*

man of course

I mean *y hombres*

*tambien*.  
I'll never forget

the shower that riddled the tobacco fields  
on the Honduran border of Nicaragua

where Suyapa  
*una nina de 4 anos*

learned June 9, 1983  
what somocistas are

—*yanquis, contras*—  
if she didn't know

before she was hit by mortar. Seizure  
you envision

as the street  
after the water has broken.

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Note: *un deber de cantar*, "a duty to sing," is the title poem of contemporary Nicaraguan poet, Rosario Murillo.

## Resistance: a poem on ikat cloth

By the time the forsythia blossomed  
in waves along the parkway  
the more delicate cherry and apple  
had blown away, if you remember  
correctly. Those were days  
when you'd forget socks and books  
after peeing in the privacy  
of its branches and soft earth.  
What a house you had  
fit for turtles or sparrows.  
One sparrow  
wrapped in a silk kimono  
wept for her tongue  
clipped off by the old woman.  
You'll never forget that  
or its vengeance as striking  
as the yellow around your small shoulders.  
*shitakirisuzume* mother called her.  
You never need to understand  
exactly.

a technique of resist-dying  
in Soemba, Sumatra, Java, Bali,  
Timor,

Soon came mounds of flesh  
and hair here and there.  
Centuries earlier  
you'd have been courted  
or sold.

"Inu has let out my sparrow—the little one  
that I kept in the clothes-basket she said,  
looking very unhappy."  
For a eurasian, sold.  
*murasaki*

mother

She soaked the cloth  
in incense  
then spread it on the floor  
standing there in bleached cotton,  
red silk and bare feet.  
And you fell in love with her  
deeply as only a little girl could.  
Pulling at your nipples



you dreamt of her body  
that would become yours.

"Since the day we first boarded the ship  
I have been unable to wear  
my dark red robe.  
That must not be done  
out of danger of attracting  
the god of the sea."

red as a Judy Chicago plate  
feast your eyes on this  
jack

"when I was bathing along the shore  
scarcely screened by reeds  
I lifted my robe revealing my leg  
and more."

roll up that skirt  
and show those calves  
cause if that bitch thinks  
she can steal your guy  
she's crazy

The cut burned  
so she flapped her wings  
and cried out  
but choked  
on blood.

The thread wound round your hand  
so tight your fingers  
turn indigo

murasaki

The Shining Prince realized  
he could form her  
into the one forbidden him. For that  
he would persist  
into old age.

rice starch  
envelope, bone, bride  
you can't resist

The box of the sparrow's vengeance  
contained evils comparable to agent orange  
or the minamata disease. The old man  
lived happily  
without her. But why her?  
except that she was archetypal.

She depended on her child  
to the point that when her daughter died

and she left Tosa  
she could only lie down  
on the boat's floor  
and sob loudly  
while the waves  
crashed against her side  
almost pleasantly.

This depth lent him  
the soft black silt  
on the ocean floor  
where, all life, some men say, began.

warp

"Mr. Ramsey, stumbling along a passage  
one dark morning, stretched his arms out,  
but Mrs. Ramsey, having died rather suddenly  
the night before, his arms though out,  
remained empty."

when the men wove and women dyed  
mother —

*mutha*

Orchids you explained  
represent female genitalia  
in Chinese verse.

Hence the orchid boat.

Patricia liked that  
and would use it in her collection  
*Sex and Weather.*

the supremes soothed like an older sister  
rubbing your back  
kissing your neck and pulling you into  
motor city, usa  
whether you liked it  
or not that  
was the summer  
of watts and though you  
were in a coma  
as far as that  
the ramifications

the ramifications  
bled through transistors  
a *class act*

blues from indigo, reds  
from mendoekoe root, yellows, boiling  
tegaran wood  
and sometimes by mudbath



when you saw her bathing in the dark  
you wanted to dip your hand in  
*mamagoto suruno?*

The bride transforms  
into an element  
such as water  
while the groom moves  
like the carp  
there just under the bridge—  
like the boy with you  
under the forsythia  
scratching and rolling around.  
No, actually you just lay there  
still and moist.  
Wondering what next.

pine.

You're not even certain  
which you see—  
the carp or the reflection of your hand.

the forsythia curled  
like cupped hands covering  
bound and unbound

As if blood

"The thought of the white linen  
spread out on the deep snow  
the cloth and the snow  
glowing scarlet was enough  
to make him feel that"

The sight of him squeezing melons  
sniffing one  
then splitting it open in the park  
was enough to make you feel that  
Naha, Ryukyu Island, Taketome, Shiga,  
Karayoshi, Tottori, Izo,  
resistance does not mean  
not drawn it means

*sasou mizu araba*  
*inamu to zo omou*

bind the thread  
with hemp or banana leaves  
before soaking it in the indigo  
black as squid as seaweed as his hair  
as his hair  
as I lick his genitals  
first taking one side

deep in my mouth then the other  
til he cries softly  
please

for days

Though practical  
you hate annotations  
to the *kokinshu*;  
each note pulls apart  
a *waka*  
like so many petals  
off a stem  
until your lap  
is full of blossoms.  
How many you destroyed!  
You can't imagine  
Komachi's world  
as real. Hair  
so heavy it adds  
another layer of brocade  
(black on wisteria,  
plum—)

forsythia too violent  
and the smell  
of fresh *tatami*.  
But can you do without  
*kono yumei no naka ni*

Can you pull apart the line  
"my heart chars"

*kokoro yakeori*

corridors of thread

"creating the pattern from memory  
conforming to a certain style  
typical of each island"

"K. 8. Fragment of ramie kasuri, medium  
blue, with repeating double ikat, and mantled  
turtles and maple leaves of weft ikat.  
Omi Province, Shiga Prefecture,  
Honshu.

L. 16.5 cm. W. 19.5 cm."

"the turtle with strands of seaweed  
growing from its back forming a mantle,  
reputed to live for centuries,"

Komachi also moved  
like those shadows in the shallows  
you cannot reach



though they touch you.  
Wading and feeling  
something light as a curtain  
around your calves you turn  
to see very small scallops  
rise to the surface  
for a moment of oxygen  
then close up and descend.  
Caught, you look  
at what he calls their eyes  
(ridges of blue)  
and are afraid to touch  
that part.

from memory or history  
*sasou mizu*

Grandmother's *ofuro*  
contained giant squid  
killer whales  
hot

*omou*

You were afraid of him  
turning to the sea  
saying something that would separate you  
forever  
so kept talking.  
Of course he grew irritable  
and didn't really want  
a basket of shells  
for the bathroom.

"his arms though open"  
The line shocked you  
like so much of Kawabata  
who you blame  
for years of humiliation,  
katakana, hiragana, kanji,

at each stroke

You hear the squall first  
coming across the lake in your direction  
like a sheet of glass.  
You start to cry and daddy  
rows toward the shore and mother.

in the Malayan Archipelago  
George O'Keeffe's orchid shocked you  
so even now you can picture the fragrance  
"Should a stranger witness the performance

he is compelled to dip his finger  
into the dye and taste it. Those employed  
must never mention the names of dead people  
or animals. Pregnant or sick women  
are not allowed to look on;  
should this happen they are punished  
as strangers."

in the Malayan Archipelago  
where boys give their sweethearts  
shuttles they will carve, burn,  
name,

"language does not differ  
from instruments of production,  
from machines, let us say,"  
knocked down

knocked *up* girl  
"the superstructure"

he wouldn't stop talking  
about *deep structure*  
and mention in prayer  
but you need more than the female persona.  
A swatch of cloth.  
A pressed flower. The taste of powder  
brushed against your lips.  
pine

*matsu*

The wedding day chosen  
he brought you animal crackers

cloths

Pushing aside the branches  
you crawl in  
on your hands and knees  
lie back,  
and light up.

*tabako chodai*

because the forsythia  
symbolizes so much  
of sneakers,  
cloth ABC books, charms,

*sankyu*



the "charred heart"  
 would be reconstructed thus:  
 "Before the golden, gentle Buddha, I will lay  
 Poems as my flowers,  
 Entering in the Way,  
 Entering in the Way."  
 fuck that shit  
 Link the sections  
 with fragrance: *matsu*  
 shards of ice  
 The bride spread out her dress  
 for the dry cleaners  
 then picked kernels of rice  
 off the quilt and from her hair.  
 bits of china  
 the lining unfolds  
 out of the body  
 through hormonal revolutions  
 gravity and chance  
 lick that plate clean  
 can I get a cigarette  
 got a match  
 click clack, click  
 clack  
*chodai*  
*in this dream*  
 She wrapped the ikat  
 around her waist and set out  
 for Hausa, Yoruba, Ewe of Ghana,  
 Baule, Madagascar, and Northern Edo  
 I relax, pull off my dress  
 and run along myself  
 until dry and out of breath.  
 click clack click  
 clack  
 and in the rhythmic chore  
 I imagine a daughter in my lap  
 who I will never give away  
 but see off  
 with a bundle of cloths  
 dyed with resistance.

Notes to "Resistance: a poem on ikat cloth"

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

- Line 11 Sparrow references from the Japanese folk tale, "Shitakirisuzume" (literally, "the tongue-cut-sparrow"). The sparrow received the punishment after eating the old woman's rice starch. The sparrow got even.  
 Line 22 Locations in Indonesia known for ikat.  
 Line 29 *Genjimonogatari* (*The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, translated by Arthur Waley). This is the first time Genji hears the child Murasaki who he later adopts, then marries. *Murasaki* also means "purple."  
 Line 33 *Tosanikki* (*The Tosa Diary* by Ki no Tsurayuki translated by Earl Miner), written in the female persona.  
 Line 45 & 54 "The Shining Prince" refers to Genji.  
 Line 72 *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf.  
 Line 100 Colors refer to dyes used in Indonesia. (*Ikat Technique*, Charles Ikle, New York, 1934).  
 Line 130 *Mamagoto suruno*, Japanese, "playing house."  
 Line 156 *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*, Kawabata Yasunari, translated by Edward Seidensticker).  
 Line 165 Locations in Japan known for ikat.  
 Line 169 *Sasou* etc. is a quote from a waka (classical Japanese poem) by Ono no Komachi. Donald Keene translated these lines, "were there water to entice me/ I would follow it, I think." (*Anthology of Japanese Literature* p. 79).  
 Line 184 *Kokinshu* is the Imperial Anthology of poetry completed in 905.  
 Line 201 *Tatami*, straw matting for the floor in Japanese homes.  
 Line 203 *Kono* etc., Japanese, for "in this dream."  
 Line 205-6 From another Ono no Komachi poem translated by Earl Miner (*Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry*, p. 82).  
 Line 208 Ikle, p. 50.  
 Lines 211-19 *Japanese Country Textiles*, Toronto, 1965, p. 16; p. 15.  
 Line 242 *Ofuro*, Japanese bathtub.  
 Line 257 *Katakana* etc. are the Japanese syllabaries and the Chinese characters respectively.  
 Line 279 *Joseph Stalin, Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics*.  
 Line 293 *Matsu*, Japanese, "pine tree" and "wait."  
 Line 302 *Tabako chodai*, Japanese, "give me a cigarette [tobacco]."  
 Line 307 *Sankyu*, Japanese pronunciation of "thank you."  
 Line 310 Noh play by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu, "Sotaba Komachi" supposedly about Ono no Komachi's repentance. (Keene, p. 270.)  
 Line 336 Locations in Africa known for ikat.











GALE JACKSON



**she.**

alone after the lovers leave  
the one who comes the one who goes  
the one who never stays  
she  
watches the day break with painful  
precision over streets littered  
with neglect she longs to ride  
the nite foreboding, she longs  
to ride the wind.



## a poem to begin again.

it begins when the radio shocks you awake  
tho the child was beaten to death two years ago  
and others still and atlanta and south africa and philly  
and time and time shrouds their bodies. another acquittal.  
it begins when you get up. shed sleep. dress. go to work.

it begins when you're ready or not. it began long ago  
displaced by slavers despised as evidence and strength  
roaches run in the damp where pipes are cracked, new york city  
sunrise sunset birds in migration and everyday everyday  
there are many funerals. it begins as it begins as it never ends.

it begins the day before the last day or the first day of the month  
which is mothers day with the women and the women's brown-faced  
children and the lines for foodstamps, clinic, housing court  
housing the endless lines that begin in early morning that stretch  
deep into the dreams. it begins with tears or anger  
it begins when you fourteen and pregnant and is on you  
and you go on welfare and you stop acting like a child  
it begins when you lose your childhood.

it begins on a cold nite no room at the inn just a million  
empty windows the star hidden by a counterfeit skyline  
it begins when you have no home and the temperature drops  
below freezing.

it begins how you work for a living and be living to work  
how you stare up at gold mountain and be thrown off when you dare  
to climb and not be allowed water on the mountain when you crawl  
it begins with thirst and the search for beauty in a sleepwalker's  
face, on the bus, looking for it in a face  
how you get on the bus tired and you come back home worse  
for doing somebody else's work so glad to not be hungry, even  
if you thirst, looking for a man or the moon to wink just right.

it begins because you do not have a choice with the woman draping  
the danger of nite around her, putting on her heels and stalking  
it back. it begins with the stomach unsettled, with a half sharp  
pencil with a half dull knife. it begins in your draws. it is not  
sexy. it begins with ghosts and then your neighbors and the wailing  
of fire engines and the howling of dogs. it begins cause you can't  
sleep thru it. it begins with dying, it begins with the will to live.

before five in a shanty or a highrise, with coffee or tea or nothing  
all the same because it has never stopped and the world spins and  
the old ways burn in the streets or in our hearts. it begins  
and even if the radio never came on again you would know to wake up  
that another child has passed thru hunger or cold or just plain evil  
that you must begin to stop that each beginning must matter to make it  
that other women men children are waking or sleeping all making it  
towards home. it begins where it ends making it towards home.

it begins with a woman looking for a beginning and finding  
her own hands a weapon a balm. it begins with or without  
chick or child, heat or hot water, contemplating bellevue or  
a woman's shelter to escape the cold that's crept in  
on the edge, the edges of things where living and dead  
walk hand in hand on the far reaches of one imagination  
gathering in the skirts of memory crawling or standing  
and walking towards someplace no bus goes called home.



## coyote is the falling star...a zuni tale.

for david

coyote love to dance is true he dance from day till nite  
coyote took to dancin and that dancin be a sight  
coyote dance with tortoise and then he might dance slow  
coyote dance with prairie dog and then he might step low  
coyote dance with rooster and help him get his sound  
coyote dance with eagle and his feet don't touch the ground  
coyote dance with sparrow and dance way up on his toes  
coyote dance with aardvark and get all in her nose  
coyote dance with bison and still he beg for more  
with little ones like rabbit he dance with three or four  
coyote dance with rattlesnake and coil up in her lair  
coyote dance with horses and he whisper in they hair  
coyote dance with buffalo and never miss a beat  
coyote dance with centipede and step on all her feet  
coyote dance with sunset till she holler up then down  
coyote dance new moon to full and then he go to town  
coyote howl for dancin he just cannot get enough  
he dance with wolf and bear and deer and no one hang as tough

but when coyote dance with starlite she really take him high  
when coyote dance with starlite she spin him cross the sky

when coyote dance with starlite they hustle on the moon  
when coyote dance with starlite she sing him a monsoon  
when coyote dance with starlite is lightning her fingers snap  
when coyote dance with starlite is thunder when she clap  
he stood below the sky one nite and stretched up high his paw  
he called to north star east and west "i wanna dance some more"  
the stars all laughed but they reached down to bring him dance with them  
and up he climbed the centuries climbed and danced on heavens brim  
starlite dance him thru winter into spring and then cross fall  
but tired he slipped thru summer he knew he'd seen it all  
he tumbled down seven mountains chasing snowflakes in his fall  
he falls thru all the heavens a streak of lite a burning ball  
so if you see the sky one nite and if a star falls by  
youll know is just coyote been star dancing way up high....

---

Adapted from N. Belting. *The Earth is on a Fish's Back.*

## distances.

for the twins

imagine him a condor  
wings a man's height  
stairstep on wind  
hunted and wild.  
imagine him antelope  
large as grandfather  
oak  
the sleeping ones  
swiftfoot legs arms  
powerful gentle  
creature  
imagine him  
the last one of two  
looking back on majestic  
mountains torn open  
for poison and steel  
majestic mountains mute  
and the condor  
poised before ancestry  
wondering what you'll leave  
for the centuries to learn  
you cry and it  
echo on ground water  
carry thru valley  
what they  
have multiplied wrong  
and lost  
forgetting  
the wind is to climb  
the land to roam in an embrace  
stairstep on wind  
your athlete's body  
in flight.



## the beginning of the story.

for edmund perry.  
june 13 1985.

i'm tryin' to find the beginning of the story of the child  
i'm tryin' to find the beginning of the story of the child  
who became a man in a time of war dividing nothing from plenty  
i'm tryin' to find the beginning of the story of the child  
who became a man in a time of war dividing nothing from plenty  
in a time of hunger as ungiving as concrete in brooklyn  
mean as the absence of trees on crosstown streets where there are  
no fresh vegetable markets, where there are no stories admitted  
only tv where there is living and living in broken glass  
and the uncaring smell of piss, beer but no good water, cigarettes  
but no crayons, welfare small hopes anger no place to put it  
but the belly

i look deep into the story of the child  
i look deep into the story of the child who to live had to try  
i look deep into the story of the child who to live had to try  
harder be tougher be smarter run relays of the imagination against  
an undefined line and win, and dream antelope cheetah bird against  
roaches and dream grass against piss store like a camel food  
for the soul love like plenty color with even the fingers believe  
fuck the odds and turn anger into magic into gold.

there is no end to the child's story tho they say it is a hunter's season  
and heart like his is worth its weight in gold  
there is no end to the child's story tho they say it is a hunter's season  
and heart like his is worth its weight in gold his beauty so quick and specific  
his laughter crest an octave like no other color from his fingertips turning  
anger, magician, black child, into gold, faster, harder, tougher, love his  
mother's his father's singular child, mistaken for all their worst fears  
mistaken for all their worst lies fears over three hundred years of inhumanity  
unadmitted made believe that this child, singular beauty of specifications ancient  
that this child was their mugger that this child was their ghetto that this  
child was urban blight and crime in the streets that this child was their  
scapegoat for all their worst selves unadmitted say that it was this magical  
child and they, their police, they, their guns, they, their nite walk scandal  
covered up in reams and reams of paper and declarations and treaties broken  
and promises hollow as holes they murdered this child. they murdered this child.  
in an attempt to kill off his magic.  
but this is not the end of the story, i swear to god, this is not the end.

## at the crossroads.

beirut  
divided unto itself  
east from west  
and if they come  
by sea  
grenades explode in  
grotesque  
shadows  
on homemade curtains  
and shouts of shrapnel  
burst  
in the eye of children's  
dreams.

the one who sings meets me  
in the lamplite city nite  
a stump where her arm was  
a reflection of a woman's  
reflection  
a siren of mirrors  
her strength  
century upon century upon  
centuries  
beneath her chador  
a stump where her arm was  
she says she will not  
leave  
here again.

the one who sings meets me  
in the dream of a sleeping city  
veiled  
her steps muted  
in modesty  
around us bullet holes line  
the walls and militias battle  
for surer ground  
while mothers run pell mell  
thru the street  
bearing their possessions  
their crying  
children.



so much a memory of constant  
expulsion  
nitely bombing  
hushing the children  
the one who sings meets me  
her palms rough as stone  
paved roads  
we walk and  
pigeons fly from our footsteps  
in the dream as over  
the flaming roofs of lebanon  
stone doves  
can find no safe place to  
lite  
and airborne  
echo our chaos.

so much a memory  
constant  
expulsion  
and death's smell  
and screaming  
and silence  
her steps muted  
arms olive branch  
gesture  
and sandy reaches  
surround her shore  
to her own shore  
not metaphor shore  
to her own shore  
palestine.  
and the woman waits  
for the modern prophet  
to breathe water unto  
the flaming roof tops  
to quench the thirst and turn  
camps of refugees  
into new cities promised.

and the woman waits  
in the lamplite city  
walks in the dreams of sleep  
and the faces of earth born  
children  
blind  
or torn

by the schrapnel  
in the eye  
in the rubble  
in the city  
whence may come  
a prophet  
a memory constant  
century upon century upon  
century  
for the city  
for a people  
a memory constant  
in flames.



## so there is no poetry in these nites.

for the children of soweto.

i do not speak this language  
but another  
fluent as hieroglyph  
filled with click and bop and guttural sounds  
i do not overstand these runnins....

bantu  
education  
group  
areas act  
influx  
control  
displacing  
surrounding  
intervening  
so afrikaners, so apartheid, moves my people.

i do not speak this language  
i cry bullets  
so young, warriors, they bleed  
hippos tore them down  
on street corners in school uniform  
so these children on the frontline  
and even as the fast run and the strong  
walk way beyond the shootings these bars  
grate against voice like glass grinding  
on chalkboard the tear gas and the sirens  
and the flashing orange lites threaten  
to drive them insane and they bleed  
chanting  
so to speak in their own language....  
ghetto  
township  
redline  
dispossess  
gentrify  
break  
break  
break

word...

not this language but another these  
runnins the question glances of children  
the rumblins of empty stop the word the  
appetite for nitewalks or freedom fighters  
what you know of the force the power  
of the spoken the scratch the beat  
they would kill you for ritual knowledge  
of the real deal.

so speak to me in my country  
in i language in i woman in i  
heart so speak to me...word...  
the kids cry in new york city  
in soweto graffitti me so so speak.

so there is no poetry in these nites  
cept the writing on walls. so they tough  
but babies. they bleed. policemen hunt them  
in brooklyn in cieski in soweto torn down  
on street corners and even as the fast run  
and the strong walk away gunfire bars grate  
against expression policemen hunt them grate  
tear gas. chalkboards. school uniforms. sirens  
rushing thru my city where liberation is the writing  
their words  
their writing  
tag  
on the walls.



## housework.

cleaning my floors i search for a clarity in wood  
a real see myself in it shine and continuity  
(like digging thru to china)  
in the news for zimbabwe. i am on my knees before tv  
was invented, holy rollin' to the radio, but the newscaster  
ignores me. blood soaks the bread blesses the wine bends  
the torn heads of roses. north america is the battlefield  
in the closing distance of my dreams it marches forward  
in concrete. oh where is news from zimbabwe, hidden  
in section "b" on page 68? when will i hear  
from my people keeping one's home is one's nation  
colorful as calypso. i'm sure news awaits me making delicate  
arrangements of state.  
rebel. rebel. up to my knees in detergent.

my longing for you is a quiet wish between  
filthy refrigerator shelves and this case of  
a bachelor apartment: a frog waiting to become cinderella  
a kiss waiting for me to dig her out of soot and romance  
thaws as if it were once a castle of ice inside it  
how many lives frozen where dreams slip away  
leaving lakes of glass slippers and roaches  
run between my poems a fecund existence...  
so what if i am just defrosting my fridge?  
i do think of love, so what is the proper stance anyway  
for a woman alone, i wish the chance to be or not to be  
a bitch in love a woman the pain in my head  
threatens to rip me apart and expose that you can see yourself  
in it shine is deep i say, i sit, i miss you here  
undisturbed.

hanging from the window at 180 housewife's habitat  
i can see that maria marquesa desotta has been burned out  
(there are many forms of death and eviction)  
and cars roll by the graveyard unaware that another person  
has joined the list of casualties and every harsh word  
reaching up toward my fire escape is a tongue of flame  
leaving me nowhere to run/ spick/ nowhere to run/ nigga/ no where  
to run maria marquesa desotta whose husband and whose child  
sit, on the stoop another blockade no where to run and  
i'm tryin' to make sense out of all this waiting for the calm breeze  
but storm after storm after everyone has taken a drink  
i return to my bathroom, take a shit, gain courage.

where is the end of this poem? the economy in a diary  
and housework: an obsession a preoccupation like in occupied  
territory, like in "someone's livin' in this body" the end  
is in the beginning. i'm talking bout basic changes in technology  
my mop and my pail out into the streets my love off the ice  
(this ain't no vertical thing)  
i mean i envision hundreds of rejuvenated domestics marching thru the park  
reclaiming the land under our adidas... one's home is one's nation  
even invisible behind dark apartments or hung from catwalks like burglars  
i got my head out the window and i'm hollering i know you're there  
to meet me downstairs and move on the world city borough prospect park west  
an army of busily unemployed as the sun takes it down.



## the untitled.

for mrs. king

it's the women  
who are left  
as we are tonite  
you. me.  
the women left  
holding photographs  
missing the gone  
the assassinated  
burying the dead  
quickly  
give the heart  
of the baby died  
to a weak one  
so that both  
continue  
to live.  
the mothers  
of heroes and martyrs.  
the women conscious  
of the pain  
of losing any child  
tho she may look  
at the womanchild  
and see her husband  
not knowing  
her own strength.  
women  
from sophiatown  
which is no more  
from alexandria  
and bedsty still  
they remember  
like the bronx  
never leaves you  
the ones  
late nite  
going off the walls  
alone  
lonely  
very strong  
their ghosts remain  
even as the cities

are swept away  
not fearing blood pus  
or maggots  
only the absence  
of ritual  
...kindness  
but on these nites  
ice cold  
crystal clear  
they know it  
all the way in  
bones  
deep as sorrow.  
it is the women  
who are left  
in the bantustans  
in the ghettos  
they do not choose  
or name  
squatting over some  
other people's dead  
when the men go  
to the cities  
to war  
insane  
when the last good stream  
has gone dry  
and the check won't  
come  
when the lovers go  
she is left  
stop  
to sit  
be company  
for a friend  
left  
when there is no right.  
sleep  
for dreams.  
and if no one dare  
wake her dare break  
her pact with god  
she may leave and never  
return  
to this  
false version of life  
gaining a foothold  
she may decide  
to soar.



## new york. beirut. nagasaki.

Who promises redemption  
this is the third day and summer a flare  
rising against pavement against tenements  
against an african sky  
young men in khaki pants look west  
to beirut where the many passings fill  
the nite with homeless shadows seeking  
refuge where walking is a balancing act  
and sinners  
the ones with real religion.

### 2.

When pink clouds pass over the harbor  
over the tankers and conduits eastward  
in brooklyn the sky threatens august thunder  
storms and the detonation of bombs or anger  
bending the clouds into a halo that drifts  
liquid over the industrial city  
over and over pulling our eyes skyward  
walking softly to balance the dance of elements  
the ether, the explosive, situation.  
i dreamt of crossing a tunnel to her arms  
of walking a vast metropolitan horizon  
taut as a tightrope before me; the arch  
thru a tunnel that is a subway a skyway a silo  
the dream, good or ill, extended.

### 3.

The full moon also rises over beirut  
where the dead lay uncounted where the stain  
grows and festers like a sore, who can sleep  
who dares to tonite as only the stout wind  
at the head of a storm can move the garbage over  
new york city beirut nagasaki this is the third day  
august 9th. a storm is coming tonite tomorrow impending  
sure as the universe is its own prediction and  
the perpetual sorrow of passed spirits will be heard  
once more  
and those who know no better will think it inconvenient  
but the others, they will know.

## a hottentot tale.

for sean

in the beginning  
moon...  
and sun...  
but moon  
moon  
move up  
thru darkness  
move up  
thru  
black  
centuries starlite  
know the nite...  
so moon  
moon call up  
one  
firefly.  
moon  
tell her say  
"bring this word  
to the people:  
tell them  
that as i  
moon  
dying live  
and live  
tho i die  
so they too  
will live still  
beyond dying."  
moon  
tell her say  
"take the people  
these words."  
and so  
firefly went  
— wings kissing  
the sky —  
so  
firefly went  
but before  
she got  
to the people



was stopped  
by hare  
who asked:  
"where you goin'  
one  
firefly?"  
"i'm bringin'  
moon's words  
to the people"  
she say  
"she say  
that i should  
tell them  
that as she dying  
lives  
and lives  
tho she dies  
so they too  
will  
still live  
beyond dying"  
which hare thought  
was good  
though he felt that  
he should  
carry  
moon's word on  
quickly  
cause firefly  
be slow  
in flying  
— wings kissing  
the sky —  
and she know she slow  
so she let hare go  
on towards  
the village.  
and in his haste  
it was hare  
who brought  
this confusion;  
who spoke  
moon's words  
incorrectly.  
he say

to the people  
gathered up  
from near and far  
he say  
to the people:  
"as the moon dies  
with the sunrise  
so you too  
will perish  
and be gone"  
and believing  
this  
they went.  
and so to this day  
the people  
people  
got it wrong.

---

adapted from P. Radin. *African Folktales*.



## home.

for benjamin moloise the poet  
and our brothers in the mines

when they leave  
those cities  
the long nites  
underground  
the miners return  
to lesotho or zimbabwe  
or mozambique  
or up country  
crossing over roads  
where there are none  
carry the bodies  
of slain children  
between the mines  
and the country  
the ports and the landlocked  
lips  
of home...  
in the land of home  
no home just a job way  
in the land  
of screaming ghosts of red rivers  
distant ocean false bay in the land  
of home...

the day they hung the poet  
for crimes against the state  
his mother stood outside  
prison gates bells tolled  
a policeman looked out  
said:  
"you can go home now  
he's dead."  
the day they hung the poet  
colored children sang  
in the white only area  
they sang "we are the world"  
and botha sent  
an army to quell them  
nannies  
gardeners

domestics  
joined them  
the unemployed  
the prostitutes  
the ones just drifting thru  
the day they hung the poet  
the army came out  
for the first time  
to quell what had become a riot  
on accounta colored children singing  
in the heavily guarded area  
that the whites call  
home.

back towards  
mountain valleys  
from filthy cities  
breath of mines  
coal dust diamonds gold  
priceless in their lungs  
the miners return  
across roads  
that ain't roads  
passing place and place  
again, "homelands"  
no black man can call  
home  
dead children tears  
sweat slip from the  
shoulder  
to earth burnt  
far and long  
the poets  
the prophets  
the wing span  
of a crow  
the miners return  
deepening the footprints  
between the mines  
and the country  
carrying small  
white coffins  
death dreams ports  
towards the landlocked  
lips  
of home  
of home.



## ¿dónde está alfredo mendez?

a poet wrote it on  
the last standing wall  
the demolished building  
a testament to all missing  
occupants  
if no one remembers  
it could be forgotten too  
soon, what happens, life  
passion and perhaps love  
in the embrace the miracle  
of conception the struggle  
to be born alive walking  
first communion first love  
first vision if no one  
remembers what happened here  
there alfredo each of us  
if no one remembers what  
happened what will happen  
will be fatal.

## winneba.

hold me  
hold on  
somewhere the nites  
throw off winter simply  
paint their faces  
dance iguana  
bellow like frogs  
and the women are armed  
against the cold.



## an old poem. on the road.

for carole.

on the road in the nite  
drawn by a long black limousine  
we travel towards baltimore  
sonorous  
like nina sings it  
like grass would tell  
like rivers whisper  
like weeping willow cries  
and only time remembers:  
white-tailed deer, swallows  
skies dark with geese,  
buffalo's trail paved over  
for this passage  
and time to time to the sky  
my heart cries "god!" and  
stuck in the throat  
of no possible answer  
it wavers like wind  
or exhaust fumes  
from the big trucks  
in front of howard johnsons  
where the signs read  
"too far from home"  
and this is what has happened  
to the food chain  
over five million served  
but in the ladies room  
poised over toilets where  
millions of women have not sat  
pissing  
quickly  
swollen like bugs  
in fluorescent lite  
numb dumb not sitting  
over five million are served  
standing up  
and about to go  
go going and then  
gone  
the way of the wilderness  
back to a land called

no permanent place  
in cars that spit  
their own fire  
in front to god outside  
i beg for another passage  
deepwater, clearsprings  
infinite sky slapping me  
to my senses  
reminding me to think and then  
think again  
who would have wanted this  
wilderness covered in plastic  
the ghost fields of barley  
wheat and corn stretching back  
only into memory  
the lamplite slow poison  
the times we move thru truly  
too terrible for words  
and acres and acres before us  
road signs simply ticking it off  
what a place to be born into  
lonesome long stretch  
serpent highways snapping  
at their own tails.



## your poem. once.

on nites too cold for human possibility  
i think of the future  
and i think of you  
undressing. unafraid. this time  
illuminated by your eyes like  
the soft lite of waning moon  
and the heat makes me shiver  
as women will.

on nites this cold i think of palestine  
of modern diaspora  
of thin dark women and children  
hushed with an urgency  
only those who have lived  
by the gun will understand  
and on nites this cold i worry  
for all the wanderers who just go  
when they say home  
in a shopping bag or two

i worry on a nite like this  
for cabbies for people out here  
learning english the city the road  
simultaneously  
and i keep whispering "be careful"  
on nites like this i want  
to be following this pretty young  
woman and i want to push back  
hard  
when i'm pushed on nites like this  
my tongue is sharp my breath frost  
my heart wax melting longing  
to take it all into my arms  
on nites like this i am the  
quintessential lover limited only  
by my reach aching to stretch  
my arms like wings for flight  
to undress fear in the lites and darks  
of blackness aching for the nite  
streets in new york or capetown  
to be mine to be mine i think

like this on nites this cold  
i/ wish/ that/ kid/ wouldn't/ steal/that  
old black lady's pocketbook/ i/ jus  
wish he won't  
and is cold unbearable naked as  
i am  
on the streets where i walk bundled  
against the cold when the wind  
chill factor mocks our hip hop wisdom  
taking cold into deep freeze and ice  
into reservations of pain  
and we be so separate torn  
like dancers on a vast stage

but when all is still on nites like this  
i think of freedom the future palestine  
south africa how nothing really dies i think  
of twilight and the language of the city  
and i think of you undressing unafraid  
this time illuminated by your eyes  
where the vision of the future the freedom  
unfolds like the lite of a waning  
moon  
and the heat gives me warmth  
to dream in



## days before fall.

for maria victoria

africa...  
she from somewhere  
else  
standing  
among the delicacies  
she sells  
and the softness  
in her hair  
billows hidden autumn  
springs  
henna russet gold  
ringing at her cheeks  
from where it hurts  
here  
una morenita  
una karate instructor  
la lucha  
springs  
a house cat  
awakened  
from dreams of islands  
and continents  
and memory echo  
at her breasts  
she says  
that she is sad  
— dominica  
— guyana  
— grenada  
and lovers weep  
and the season wears  
a skirt of trash  
a wedding veil  
as the wind swirls  
high  
over this place  
these people displaced  
and across an ocean  
where she has come  
and gone  
and still remembers

in the accent what  
it is  
when the waves call you  
and the dead whisper  
hyacinth into woolly hair  
as she sells  
the gourmet dishes  
spiced  
with the colonial  
the senegalese  
chicken  
corn soup hearts  
of palm from brazil  
as she sells  
the gourmet dishes  
the tough softness  
her hair reminds you  
...africa  
she from somewhere  
else  
and that in these days  
before fall  
the seasons  
will change.



## guadeloupe.

she came to the pier  
weaved her perfume  
among the dizzy tourists  
and the impatient taxis  
and the official vendors'  
stalls.

looking for her friend.  
"eddie from dominica"  
where, the natives boast,  
they have sweetest coconut  
in the world.

later, the sea between them  
before them for now,  
they sat in the garden  
talking, quick and slowly,  
talking, as lovers do.

## haiti. new york.

this one morning  
the dictator was gone  
and brooklyn was singing  
this one morning  
caught in a flurry  
of snow and imagination  
down eastern parkway  
towards the monument  
of an unfinished  
civil war.

this one morning  
when the dictator  
had fled death  
with his crossboned  
mask

moved over and  
the haiti of brooklyn  
spilled sweet champagne  
into the contradictions  
of the tiger's new year  
the foam

drowning capsized boats  
imprisonment

in their own country  
imprisonment here

this one morning  
when the dictator was gone  
brooklyn wore its creole  
manifestos

and the nurses and  
the taxi drivers  
and all the day maids all  
had their day  
of blue flags and red  
waving

as tho

this one morning  
the past could be shooed  
with a wave in a  
brooklyn snowstorm  
and the footprints marching  
towards the civil war monument  
and the past sent marching  
the past sent marching  
towards the grave.

## love.

faith's landing  
is a place  
where gunriver falls fall  
and your breath is a river  
called remembrance  
willows weep casting their hair  
to northeasterly wind  
where you ask  
and i answer  
yes.

## deepwater.

for sara

"i jumped in the river and started to drown  
but when i saw you i just couldn't go down"  
"deepwater"  
can take you out  
she said  
some people can't help but drown in it.  
this is a poem for sara who said "thirst  
will bring you to water" got to try to  
swim or sink or fly "water to drink."

there are shallow waters  
the absence of drought  
thin cows gaunt women  
long neck fowl.  
there are still waters  
run deep  
muddy bottoms  
tears of release or retribution  
children you cry for  
still bodies so unlike what your water  
broke. dry mouths you spit to wet.  
there are still waters  
damned by resistance.  
there are shallow waters  
where someone has taken more  
more than their share.  
there are stagnant waters  
where poison waits.  
and there are pipelines and faucets  
to bring it all home.

my sister in capetown  
my great aunt in south orange  
has a flush toilet and running water  
in the house where she works  
for a white woman or she could not stay  
in capetown  
in south orange  
water barely washes  
the shit away.



there are endless cycles  
embryonic fluids  
marriages and wars  
there are women walking  
fetching water  
from a truck a stream a well.  
there are women plowing  
paths for water.  
a stick a hoe a baleful ox.  
there are women who search  
and women afraid to find  
what the red water yields.  
a whole continent of women  
watching the rivers  
for the bodies of their dead.  
a whole continent of women  
watching the skies, for rain.  
to wash  
scorched babies bones.  
to wet  
the mouth of hunger.

you could lose sight of the coastline  
and they make you a slave.  
this is a poem for a lover.  
her lips full of sedition.  
she spits when she says apartheid  
intervention limited warfare.  
she says "swim upstream"  
or you bound to die.

she said  
that there are bad waters  
heavy with armored ships thick  
with oil  
dock in ports of explosion  
false bay  
red sea  
middle passage  
the still angry waters  
that bore rum and molasses  
and men and women  
turned slaves.  
there are nuclear clouds  
radiation acid rains

undrinkable water  
fountains marked "colored"  
"white"  
where people have died to drink  
like landlocked states  
battlin for position  
sea embargos  
that stop the boats with food  
mines  
in the harbors  
soundless waters around  
el salvador  
water that seen too much  
in atlanta  
the mississippi  
the jordan  
heavy with bones  
capillaries  
flooding the heart...  
she said that there are waters  
you could drown in  
or find the way to swim  
how it rushes all around you  
how it takes you out  
and brings you back  
home.



## what time abides.

for marilyn

i imagine you barefoot  
toes dangling over an incline  
breeze playful in your hair  
"this is no laughing matter"  
you laugh a lizard's tongue  
darting colored threads into  
this fable this form this  
fallacy turned inside outside  
rightside staring it down  
the precipice. what the seasons know  
we learn slowly. time has shown us  
too much to refuse us but too little  
to abide.







# SUSAN SHERMAN

## Definitions

1.

I think it's coming close to death  
that does it

both others  
& your own  
that magnifies the values  
begins the definitions

This morning

mild at last  
after weeks of chill  
Streets heavy with water  
People stepping  
cautiously  
hardly knowing where  
to place their feet  
so accustomed to barriers  
of salt and ice

My mind resembles those winter streets  
grey

with sludge  
The snow cover melted  
The sidewalks washed of unfamiliar  
glare

2.

After all she said  
What difference does it make?  
That's the reason I never write  
hardly speak of what is me

I begin to answer glibly stop  
Held myself in identical fear  
My own touch tentative  
almost an excuse  
like making love to someone  
for the first time  
or the third (which is always harder)  
once you begin to know experience  
another



the tension of your hair brown  
streaked with grey  
the lines of  
your face like wires rushing through  
my hands the pressures of your past  
your forehead your knees

3.  
Warm outside the steam  
continues forced by habit  
I open the window throw the  
oracle trace the heat  
The heart thinks constantly it says  
One constant then the heart another  
the drawing back  
Four o'clock  
two hours till dawn Nightmare  
image your face  
surrounded by strangers  
Beloved you turn  
away  
Sweat mixes with flowered sheets  
The constant fear  
To push out  
finally cautiously tentatively  
and find  
an empty place

4.  
Death brings us close to it  
Death itself  
forgetting  
And we the living  
wanting to remember  
not wishing to be forgotten  
separated  
from what we hold most near  
I hold you for a moment lose you  
watch you disappear  
I hold you  
for a lifetime lose you  
the next year the next morning  
the next minute the next breath

5.  
You tell me  
What can I say to that  
young woman 18 years  
of age?

That I at 38 must once more lay aside  
all sense of definition order  
Must once more carefully measure  
the accumulation of my years

Or should I say  
her question can be answered  
in specific needs others  
and her own  
But she's asking  
more than that We both know  
what she means

The only real difference being death  
The one who stops the heart

## Ten Years After

1.

How does one find words to speak the things that are too large for words. How does one fit an idea into a page, a feeling into a syllable. A room is not a world. A city is not a continent. These streets do not border the edges of a universe. But the people who move in them, the people who live in them are a world, a continent, a universe.

There were things I never learned, even though I began, a little, to reach out, to believe I could reach out.

Ten years. What does it mean? Ten years. *Elegua*. Guardian of the paths. Opener of the Doors. Trickster. The Juggler. The Balance. The Fool. The way the world goes past our understanding, resolves itself in our blood. How we play out our days, something very great, and something very small.

The image of the sea comes too often. The city is another voice. My own body a boundary harder to resolve. Life is a series of choices. By which we include or exclude all we ever hoped for or dreamed of. Love is a series of choices, by which we include or exclude the world.

2.

If I could speak in the images of dream. If I could play the words, stretch them across a mile of thought. Say it has been so long since I have allowed myself to feel that now I feel too much.

But the words of a poem are silent, make no sound. Reach across space hands cannot touch. Part of me has grown old seeing how people move. At different intervals. At different speeds.

Sometimes, at night, when I am alone, I hear a voice that calls my name. I am haunted by the memory of every person I have ever known, will ever know. I am haunted by the presence of every person I have ever loved, will ever love.

If I could mold myself into a poem, shape myself into a syllable, a group of words. What would it mean?

My memories are ghosts which surround me as I write. My future lies before me like a kind of space. I would ask for a different sense of timing from the world, knowing full well, at that moment, time itself would end and motion cease.

3.

What does it mean to lose. To invest in loss. To invest in the possibility of loss.

We move from a sense of need. Both others and our own. But what we move toward is what moves us most.

The wasted days, the wasted hours, the piles of waste that make up much of our lives, that are part of our lives. The time lost. The time spent. The time destroyed.

I want to wake up. Rise up. I want to be awake. To see.

I had almost forgotten what it was like to be next to someone, to be warmed by them. To feel warm. I think of death, more than anything else, as a very cold place. As a place where contact ceases, where a world ends.

I know what it is to lose contact. To see the world grow smaller and smaller. To be unable to reach out. To be unable to speak. I know what death is like, what it means.

As everything begins to fall away.

4.

I would like to write a poem that could solve the world, could solve my place in it. Could make my fantasies into something real. But I know a poem, words, even these words, as they come, from my pen, as they sing, as the poem always sings, as words are used, as motion, as change.

I know a poem can do none of these things.

Cannot stop the minutes, cannot turn even one hour, cannot bring into being what does not exist.



Because in all these years, with all this strength  
that has grown up in me. With all these words that  
have grown up in me. I still cannot find speech  
to say what it is I feel, when I really care.

5.

If a poem were a hand, if it were alive, warm. If it  
could reach out. If it could enter places I cannot.  
If it could do things that make me afraid.

There is this thing that changes, that allows change  
to exist. The poem is part of it, is its voice, this  
thing that is.

Any struggle is first that deep feeling that grows  
from the center of a person, a people. The poem is  
not separate from me, from the person I am. It is  
not the poem, but I who feels. It is not the poem,  
but I, who loves.

To hope, to have hope, to be hopeful, to hope against  
hope, to believe in change, to believe in the possibility  
of change, to know when to stay. And when to leave.

6.

To discover people is to discover a world. To find  
out what is important and what is not.

What does it mean to open yourself, to become open,  
to feel. What does it mean to open yourself to other  
people, to allow them to enter, to allow them to become  
part of your life.

The mountain stands still; above it fire flames up and  
does not tarry. Strange lands and separation are the  
wanderer's lot.

I am driven by love, *Elegua*. I am driven by love. I  
cover my madness, *Elegua*. I cover my pain. Make a  
place for me in your house. Protect me as I move.  
*Elegua*. *Elegua*. Guardian of the Doors. Opener of  
the Paths.

Cover my years. *Elegua*. Cover my years.

## What I Want

I want to be free of all the things that  
encumber me of rent & bills of tomorrow's  
breakfast of yesterday's words  
of my fantasies of love my insatiable  
need for love

I want to be free of the knowledge  
of things of my own shape my structure  
of "that's just not the way it's done"  
or "if only you'd done it differently"

I want to be free of time its endless  
repetitions of myself my name  
names labels what defines me

I want to be free of others of their  
distinctions of my need for them  
of this poem words

I want to be free of newspaper headlines  
the radio television all these things  
that encumber me

Please for a moment relieve me of  
constant discovery this prison  
perception But I am grounded in myself  
this world I was born to my passion  
for change to change things  
the need to touch hold be touched  
held

## The Desert & The Sea

What I heard on the roof finally  
(being frightened  
thinking of burglars rapists  
being murdered in my sleep)  
was merely seagulls nesting  
The dull roar outside

not cars

but ocean  
Not sharp and sudden  
A constant sound

A constant sound  
the sea  
Fading  
then growing louder  
wave by wave  
Gulls rest on its surface  
Two young women walk along its shore  
A sensual thing

not human

A texture  
(Or different textures really)

In the desert  
The earth seems still  
moving too slowly for human eyes  
or lives to follow  
The mountains like a barrier  
hold everything in place  
solid impenetrable  
absorbing

reflecting

sound  
Everything moves around them  
The clouds in succession the rain  
then sudden light

and then again

the clouds  
Birds sing

and in the night  
and sometimes even in the day  
crickets squeak their own loud song

I have always fancied myself  
an ocean person  
Born in July  
Cancer the crab  
addicted to water

and the movement

of things  
No earth in my chart at all  
Fire water air

I find these mountains have a strange  
appeal to me  
like something I have been missing  
a part

I have been denied

I don't know how long crabs live  
out of water  
Even the real things sometimes  
burrow themselves

deep

in sand  
Perhaps to dream of other regions  
other worlds

or just absorb the heat  
enclosing themselves in yet another  
type of shell

Wherever I have lived  
I have always faced the sea  
confronted it

everywhere

Comforted by it threatened by it  
Its symbols surround me

fill my dreams

Water wears all else down

But here in New Mexico  
Mountains before me  
The ocean far away  
A new reality claims me

earth  
silence  
the shifting  
of light and breeze



## Washington D.C./A Study in Black & White

1

Monumental this seat of government  
seat of power  
"The throne whereon the monarch sits"  
empty

or seemingly so  
not person

building  
this chill Spring  
glistening in early afternoon sun  
where human act becomes  
object

a frozen thing

To see it is to understand  
(nothing walks here

nothing moves)

To comprehend with vision  
Take it in with the eyes  
Examine this city as a work of art  
a philosophical concept  
a graveyard of classical suspense  
centuries out of date

Washington D.C.  
Tomb of unyielding laws  
monument to abstraction  
to rigid perspective

muted tone  
to dead heroes & ancient tales  
(always of warriors always of men  
perfectly proportioned perfectly still)  
monument to the universal  
what is out of time  
to the ascendancy the omnipotence  
not of order

of law

2

March 27, 1982

we protest yet another unjust war  
walking the periphery of the ghetto  
to Dupont Circle

(appropriate name)

the dividing line between  
Black and white

We should have stayed there today  
in Malcolm X Park  
Instead of a "symbolic beginning"  
it should have been the end of it

Someday we'll learn

always expecting  
always wanting to be heard by  
the halls of justice  
the walls of state  
the ones who run things  
the "important folk"

Our final destination  
Lafayette Park

across the street  
from the grandest building  
of them all  
The White House

& it is white!

The whitest place I've ever seen  
A white that stops you  
freezes you in place  
Amazing white spotless white  
So white you can barely see its seams

3

If history teaches us anything  
It teaches us

about direction

space  
The poor in Central America  
circling the cities  
like a giant necklace

a choker

How the lines of a drawing  
define its shape

Washington D.C.  
a study in Black and white  
neo-classical in style  
designed to dwarf you  
make you feel small

A model for our future  
A masoleum surrounded by living  
active need

In its center  
the Washington monument  
perfect symbol sharp-edged spear  
A missile tens of dozens of years  
before its time  
Not sex

weapon  
The ultimate offense

Later on the bus ride home  
newspapers swirl through deserted  
New York streets  
But there is more energy here  
in this refuse  
more action in the wads  
the waste

& less to fear

than in that tomb to eternity  
that shrine  
that rules our lives  
that sets our days  
that governs us

or tries

There is too much misery  
in this city

too much

pain  
A dream last night of trains  
Trapped in the entrance  
pinned  
My path blocked  
by strangers  
Too many of us forced  
to breach  
the same space

& yet as I walk along  
the street  
I am startled by a tree  
its bare twigs

full of

bright red berries  
As if someone had placed  
them there  
to decorate

the morning



## Spring Song

Let's put it another way  
The street breaks with ice  
It is cold tonight quiet  
This first day of spring

Burdened with clothes  
I would shed them My coat  
long blue wraps me into  
myself  
Holds me together

How much we are lied to  
Lie to ourselves  
How much we hide How many things  
are hidden  
in these layers  
of cotton wool rayon  
skin

I am startled by differences  
a lack of correspondence  
As I was before by what  
binds us

But things change  
Ten years twenty thirty  
Some drop away others grow  
stronger

Faces change  
& names  
I change remain  
What makes us unique

This first day of spring  
alone I wrote  
this poem  
patched a coat of words  
stitched a song  
Tried to find out what is beneath it  
what it means  
At the end of it  
finally  
what I would want  
to say

This woman tried to grasp life  
balance her days  
the worlds

that sprang  
from her hands  
broke from her lips

She was burdened as we all are  
by ends and beginnings  
But she never turned away

## Morning Poem

There's always plenty of time  
until it runs out on us  
But you can't rush things either  
They grow at their own speed  
reaching for a point of contact  
of their own

I am plagued with impatience  
inertia

the two extremes  
the edges of everything  
Those two things also  
being one

Some people build homes houses  
of themselves I think of Jung  
his circular walls

years of  
thought enclosing his body  
Trapped in his own ideas

Others travel the streets  
planting themselves in their  
sidewalks

Their bodies a motion  
more like a dance

And some try both worlds  
multiple existences

are makers of life  
Patience is part of it but more  
To have a vision To make it  
real

Can you see what I'm saying  
How time itself is our enemy  
our friend How we trap ourselves  
in vision

But how it also opens  
out  
can lead us forward

How we lose things only to find  
them again

Only to find ourselves  
different at the same place

Listen this morning the world closes  
and opens at my fingertips The sun  
is bright draws me to it  
But I sit in a room cluttered with  
memories books old pieces of furniture  
old pieces of myself

I am inside

and outside  
of it all

I reach out  
with what is behind me  
I live my death

am captured  
in my life



## Facts

1

What you see is what you get  
What you hear is  
                                often lies

Burnt out buildings  
on Ave C  
Speculators buy and sell empty shells  
where people used to live  
& still do  
                                illegally now  
among the ruins

I used to live there once  
on Ave. C  
twice really—at different times  
1963    1971  
chased out finally by rats  
& thieves  
                                & a man's throat cut  
in front of our building  
on an otherwise pleasant summer night

Most important  
I was lucky—  
I had somewhere else to go

The neighborhood hasn't "gone up"  
since then  
regardless of what the papers say  
It's gone down  
Down to money  
                                & greed  
disregard for human needs  
& illusion

That "things are getting better"  
At least for some

4

"Why?" is not "How?"  
is not a recital of physical causes  
physical effects  
It is meaning

The bullet pierced her flesh  
because a finger pressed a trigger  
& she was in the way  
is "how"  
Why that gun was there at all  
why she was in front of it  
why that policeman's finger pressed the trigger

not muscles    but years are behind the answer  
not reflexes  
                                people

5

I clip the photo from the paper  
pin it on my wall  
rip the caption into shreds

Apartheid  
                                what it means

Separation

Separation from land  
Separation from family  
loved ones

                                education  
                                home

Apartheid  
                                facts left undefined

that lead nowhere  
that separate us  
rob us  
                                of meaning

Apartheid  
It destroys us all

2

South Africa

September, 1984

A story in the *New York Times*

South Africa

40 miles south of Johannesburg

28 dead

600 detained in one weekend

Picked up at the funerals of their loved ones  
and their friends

The photo shows death

rebellion

Black people moved again

as they were before

and before

and continue to be

(except in our press)

to action

Resisting

the lie

Underneath the photo—a caption

No explanation A statement of fact

A lie of omission

"Police Quell a Riot"

as if implying they were doing,

a commendable

act

So many injured

So many killed

& how many times in our papers

do they tell us

"Why?"

3

In my class I ask

"What is a fact?"

A student answers

"What you hear on the 5 o'clock news."

I laugh but it isn't funny

& I am the only one

who gets the joke

6

October 6—

"Pretoria Will Use Army to End Riots"

"Military called in to support the police"

80 now are dead

October 23—

2 o'clock in the morning 7,000 South African soldiers  
(along with police) surround a town

Standing 20 feet apart

guns in hands

Two more townships follow

over 150,000 Blacks are interrogated

Their hands are stamped

Their thumbs dipped in orange ink

A general strike is called succeeds

Now whites also are detained

*In Soweto*

*The people continue to rebel*

*In Soweto*

*The people continue to fight back*

*In Manhattan*

My student looks at the 5 o'clock news

His head is filled with facts

He knows nothing

He learns nothing

He doesn't even know "Why?"



## From Nicaragua A Gift

for Margaret Randall

If you were to ask me  
to name a color for that land  
I would say it was green  
But the color you sent was yellow  
*A plane descending into green*  
*The sun rising golden beyond its wings*

Many things are made of gold  
A voice sometimes is known as golden  
A wedding ring  
Even silence  
(when chosen)

But "to be silenced"  
That's a different matter  
That's to choke on one's own words  
erupt in violence  
an act of war

Margaret today in your letter  
folded in a press release  
COVERT ACTIONS AGAINST NICARAGUA  
CHALLENGED BY INTERNATIONAL LAW  
a small shard of foil falls out  
slips to the floor

I can't make it out  
It puzzles me  
What is it? What does it say?  
A rectangular shape in the center  
a golden face  
circled by yellow edged by red  
—a cigar band—  
a cigar band?

*Sol Habana*  
The Havana Sun

Margaret in the midst of war  
both yours & ours  
How my country is trying to silence yours  
How the silences here are many  
& growing  
the violence  
not limited by nationality borders names

How people are more and more refusing  
to be silenced

in both our lands

Margaret in the midst of war  
from your letters of anger

& triumph

death struggle hope  
you have sent me/shared with me  
perhaps even as an afterthought  
who knows?

(& I will treasure it always)  
a gift of light

## A Fare/well Present

Well good-bye  
and all that means  
if in fact it means  
anything

words sometimes  
taking the place  
of meaning

like last night  
twisted in my own  
syllables trying  
to explain

Or that summer  
seven years old  
first time away from home  
A feeling of the heart  
but literally that

The camp director  
calling it "homesick"  
or "missing"  
Not only that something  
was missing

that I was missing  
someplace or someone  
but that somehow  
I was also missing  
from something somewhere  
I wanted to be

A seven-year-old pride  
denied it denies it still  
but now with how much more vehemence  
command of language  
skill with words

no longer only  
(shoulders out chest squared)  
"homesick not me"  
but paragraphs of explanation  
reams of words

to say only  
somewhere something  
has been left out  
is out of place

And so as a farewell present  
I give you this poem  
This feeling of the heart  
That when I think of you  
leaving

And when I think of you here  
and can't be with you  
Even when we are together  
when I feel you growing distant  
I experience that

"missing"  
that something  
left out  
as if I am discovering the word again  
for the first time  
What it really means

As with all things that move us  
deeply

the feeling comes first  
the experience  
As we perceive the meaning  
The word

follows later  
"missing"

that space which is not empty  
but fills all space



## The Meeting

1.

To touch your face  
To touch your arms  
To touch your waist  
To touch your thighs

To touch your sex

To hold it soft against my cheek  
To breathe it slow against my lips  
To hold you close against my breast

My love

2.

Old as the woman moaning songs  
from her chill staccato walls  
Old as that The touch between us  
The chant filtering through coarse  
night sounds The touch between us

Can I name you The words that lie against  
me Soft against the night Can I call you  
The night itself close upon my thighs

To hold you near  
To touch your lips  
To hold you close as my own breath

3.

Touched so deeply that tears come  
unnoticed And without pain That once  
were central And only pain

It is here between us Not ourselves  
But what is here In this space

Touched so deeply that love comes  
unnoticed And without pain That once  
was central And only pain

4.

Rain glides in two dimensions The window  
holding it to my face As I hold you As I  
place my knuckles to your forehead Moving from  
my touch

The vision two dimensions The surface  
rigid As we reach toward it To find it  
different But still there cool under  
our touch

5.

I would hold you gently  
Throw myself against you as  
the rain Talk to you of  
small things As you would  
touch a child Or yourself  
small and vulnerable to even  
the slightest breath

6.

No longer afraid The touch of you deeper  
than any fear Deeper than your naked form  
The single syllable of your name

As I touch your body  
As I touch the earth  
As I touch this paper  
As I touch each word

It is everywhere This night and the  
outline of our form As we are together  
Without boundary Without dimension

As I touch the depth of you  
My love

## Opening Stanzas

for Colleen

It is harder to write of what  
is complete  
than what is empty

We tend  
to fill in spaces  
avoid confrontation with meaning  
outside ourselves

It is the smell of my room  
of what has passed between us  
that moves me  
Not these words

or the dozens  
I have discarded

How can I say what is contained for me  
in the fold of your lip  
The way your body leans

when you dance  
What one remembers finally  
are the small things  
The tangible remains:  
a list (unfinished) a bottle  
of perfume two magazines  
a pair of boots  
a row of vitamins on the  
kitchen shelf

The daisies  
I bought you balanced  
lightly against blue glass

My past rests on the surfaces  
of my mind For me now  
the only reality  
is our present/presence  
together

You fled the seasons  
wound up in L.A.  
a city I had deserted  
years before

In New York  
I welcomed snow as miracle  
The way one accustomed to endless day  
(where things pass constantly  
but never change)

welcomes  
the miracle of night

There are no words adequate for it  
For what is between us  
They will come later  
These are after all only  
opening stanzas

welcome as miracle  
As I welcome you  
pressing into me  
draining my emptiness  
As together we re-awaken meaning  
in small things

For you  
perhaps in the seasons  
As through you  
I burst forth  
once more  
into the sun



## The Fourth Wall

1

*From which direction does the wind flow? It flows from the East.  
From which direction does the wind flow? It flows  
from the East and into my hands.*

Analysis. Cross-reference analysis. The age of analysis.  
Psychological, philosophical, poetic analysis. Not the  
event, but the picturing of the event.

Days, dwarf-like, with tinsel hats. America. Orange.  
sticky, matted.

My father was from Russia. When he was a small child, he  
crossed the borders of his country with a half-dozen other  
refugees. He often spoke of the town in which he was born.  
A small town. Long rows of hot, sandy streets. Plain  
one-story buildings. The cries of Cossacks cutting through  
the level dirtwalks of his home.

"Jew," they yelled, and he ran. "Jew," they yelled, and he  
ran across a continent. "Jew," they yelled, and he ran  
across an ocean.

They never really believed they had left for good. They  
never even learned to speak the language. But my father  
learned. When he was twelve, he learned — my mother waiting  
for him across the length of a continent.

*How many years does it take? In this, my sweet-smelling land.  
In this, my sweet-smelling land, where there is no  
question of time.*

They say a desert is an uncultivated region without inhabitants;  
a wilderness. A dry barren region largely treeless and sandy.  
This is only partly true. My desert is decorated with  
pinecones and exotic spice. In spring, the cactus blooms into  
small, pink flowers. My evenings are colder than it is  
possible to imagine. I take off my clothes at night so I may  
lie naked. Next to the warm body of my desert. My beautiful,  
beautiful desert.

2

This morning I had a dream. But I have already forgotten.  
"Yama." "Yama." Hanging to her grandmother's brightly  
colored skirts. "Watch out for the cars." The rolling  
cars, with their brightly colored skirts.

That wasn't the way it was, but it was the way it might  
have been. The roads, long, curved. The roads that  
curled into the desert. The roads that curled around  
that patch of land, tying it like a Christmas package  
with light and warmth and

This morning I had a dream. The bus traveled to the edge  
of a large, blue lake. Not across roads, but through fields  
and tall, thin arms of grass.

"Yama," she called, and the call curled around me. "Yama,"  
she called.

Los Angeles is situated in a basin. A flat, grey basin  
surrounded on four sides by mountains. One of the sides  
folds down long banks into the sea. Every year or so a  
part of this fourth wall collapses.

*From which direction does the wind flow? It flows from the  
sea. From which direction does the wind flow? It flows  
from the sea and into my hands.*

San Francisco is water and, crossing the bridge, patterns of  
lights. Lights suspended on air, on water. And on clear  
days, rows of hills with houses clutched to their sides.  
There is a vastness about the land, about the coast.  
Everything seems too large, unmanageable, like objects to  
the hands of a small child. The East Coast is different,  
and New York is cluttered and the distance across the palm  
of the hand.

Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York. The fourth wall is of  
an indeterminate size and shape. A desert. An impartial  
country where the other three are joined together. Every  
year or so part of this fourth wall collapses.

3

Clear, the music cries and circles the empty space. Clear and  
compact like a tightly resolved dance. Like this first  
afternoon as I wander the streets, as others do, as I see it  
in their faces also, as I walk. New York. Different as it  
is now, on this first day of warmth.



Clarity is much to be desired and simplicity is the essence of God. These the words of the Saint. Clarity is much to be desired. Clarity is much... to be...

Whose feet are these that walk along the streets? Whose hands hang down from whose body? These are my feet, my hands, my body. This is my face. The face of the blocks as they pass. In face of the blocks as they pass. In face of these members of my body, my face faces the street. The blocks are passed.

4

They said it was the best our country had to offer. Of itself, with no intrusion. Behold, here is the land. Behold, here is the school. Behold, here is the fist, bulging, its muscles veined with the gold of the earth.

But it was not the earth of which they spoke. It was the blood of the earth, cut from its body. Los Angeles. Gigantic. Now red. Now purple. Now the Virgin Mary on the boulevard, white and yellow lightbulbs falling from her lips.

I said I did not understand. They said I was young, it was a matter of growth. Of growth. Of learning how to wield the sickle, spread the refuse out, side by side, with the long, uneven rows of grass. When the settlers first came it was a barren country—a desert surrounded by deserts. They brought the stucco and concrete. They brought the horses and the children. They rode over vast ranches of cattle and grain.

This, my father, is what I am. Because one day I stumbled and scarred my knee so that now, twenty years later, I can still see the small white dots standing out against my leg. And after that how hard I found it to walk on your streets.

*I took a brush. It was red. I took a brush. It was green, orange, yellow. I took a brush. It was the width of the desert. And into this city I was born and first heard my name.*

When you are grown your brush will be red—the color of this city. You will live here, work here, be married here, raise your children here. You will die here.

I will not die in this city. I will not be the color of this desert, cut down the middle with blood.

It was raining when I left and raining when I arrived. The streets, the houses, the color of rain. When I was a child I wanted only two things—I wanted to learn and I wanted to write.

This is the way the lesson goes: in that first city there were shapes, huge and grotesque. In the second there was water, and the land like an arm extended to the sea. The third was built on a rock that could not support its own weight. There were people. The people that built the city. And there was the fourth...

Long rows of tightly corseted women through the wide, flat streets. Nothing in that hot sun that was not bright, not stripped with color. And the eyes. Always the eyes. Dressing, living, speaking, fucking for the eyes.

My father, my mother, my country. The dream that my country provoked in them, in me. This is what you made me. What I am. You gave me eyes and hair. You gave me a body. You sent me out—not as one person, but as a group of people, living under the same skin, gathered together under this union of eyes, hair, body. You gave me a name and you robbed me of that name. You gave me all these things and robbed me of them. But you could not take from me what was never yours to give.

*I will not die in your city. I will not be buried under your streets. I will not dress myself in your houses of gold and lies and grotesque forms.*

Always you will live here, close as the blood that flows through the veins of my hand. As I walk into the desert. Father, mother, country. The dream clutched tight to my body, like a lover.



## Rituals/A Turning Back

I don't like it (never did)  
looking back

- revising old rituals
- renaming old gods

For years now I've been trying to void  
my own past  
Not because it was bad  
Precisely

the opposite  
Telegraph Ave a rooming house  
no longer there  
A 5 o'clock tortilla  
washed down with random mugs  
of beer — less than a dollar then  
(I mark the years as we all do now  
by the rise in what it costs  
to live)

I can still see that old apartment  
It invades my dreams

Ornate drawings  
decorating walls ceiling floor  
A dragon with a tortured smile  
A field of grass covered with small  
blue weeds

(red sky/purple trees)  
A house slanted 40 degrees to nowhere  
supported by vermillion bricks

Home of cracked gray paint & unlocked door  
of first love & sometimes  
of violence

& often of pain

I don't like it turning back  
never did

Nostalgia leaves me cold  
The truth is even then I didn't want  
to stay

Wanted to move on

It's twenty-five years now  
and part of it I have neatly packed away  
part of it suppressed  
But there is this other part  
that tugs at me

like an angry child  
abandoned

demanding attention  
demanding to be recognized  
demanding to be heard

## A Small Question

Don't look for me in the sky  
my head is not made up of smoke or  
light but ordinary things  
My heart is not tidy  
not clean around the edges  
Don't look for me under the sea  
I walk on land as we all do  
make the same mistakes  
Don't look at me as distance  
I am here beside you  
Please don't change the order  
of words Caring is not possession  
All need is not demand  
It is not only what we take in  
that heals us but also  
what we eliminate  
Please pardon me if I continue  
to believe in love

## Alchemy

You can't just replace things every time  
the pressure mounts

memories go wrong  
Discarding people  
like used-up lives

Sickness plays that role in life  
robbing us of desire  
setting us adrift  
blinding our past  
As we also will our own deaths  
year after year  
manufacturing pain  
mistaking motion for progress  
In order to forget

Dearest friend Don't leave me now  
Just as we begin  
Remember the first rule of alchemy  
"It can't be done alone"  
A lifetime is rarely enough  
much less the moment we have left  
to find together  
for both of us  
through you  
myself  
where we each dwell

needing more than anything  
time



## Lilith of the Wildwood, of the Fair Places

*And Lilith left Adam and went to seek her own place  
And the gates were closed behind her and her name  
was stricken from the Book of Life*

1.

*And how does one begin again*

(Each time, each poem, each line, word, syllable  
Each motion of the arms, the legs  
a new beginning)

women women surround me  
images of women their faces  
I who for years pretended them away  
pretended away their names their faces  
myself what I am pretended it away

as a name exists to confine to define confine  
define woman the name the word the definition  
the meaning beyond the word the prism prison  
beyond the word

to pretend it away

2.

Its the things we feel most  
we never say for fear perhaps  
that by saying them the things we care most  
for will vanish  
Love is most like that is the  
unsaid thing behind the things we do  
when we care most

3.

to be an outcast an outlaw  
to stand apart from the law the words  
of the law

outlaw  
outcast

cast out cast out by her own will  
refusing anything but her own place  
a place apart from any other  
her own

I do not have to read her legend in the ancient books  
I do not have to read their lies  
She is here inside me  
I reach to touch her

my body my breath my life

4.

To fear you is to fear myself  
To hate you is to hate myself  
To desire you is to desire myself  
To love you is to love myself

*Lilith of the Wildwood  
Lilith of the Fair Places*

who eats her own children  
who is cursed of God

Mother of us all

## Love Poem

if I could hold you  
if I could wake up in the morning  
and see your face  
if I could touch you  
if I could see you as you go to sleep  
if I could feel you close  
beside me if I could reach out to you  
touch you in my need

time drifts endlessly like water  
like this afternoon  
the breeze as it drifts  
through my window  
surrounds me as thoughts of you  
as breath of you  
as I see you  
as I wait for you  
the inevitability of you  
as I am surrounded by you  
by my love of you  
as I waken into life

my words in silence  
my love in silence  
the quiet of the afternoon  
the curve of your face  
your features the way  
you talk the way you drift  
in my thoughts endlessly  
like time

if you were to ask me what defines me  
how I place myself in the world  
I would say this poem  
is the center of it is the core  
that I reach toward the world  
as I reach toward you  
as one who wants to reach out  
endlessly who wants to open out  
endlessly who wants to feel  
endlessly that question  
that is our lives





KIMIKO HAHN

Photo: Colleen McKay

**KIMIKO HAHN** was born July 5, 1955, in Mt. Kisco, New York, eventually making her way to New York City via Iowa City. In New York, she studied Japanese literature at Columbia University and received a Masters Degree. She cut her political teeth at the American Writer's Congress and *Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America*. She was a poetry editor at *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives* and edited the Asian Women United's poetry anthology. Her poems have appeared in *The Agni Review*, *Bomb*, *Lips*, *IKON*, *Conditions*, *Blind Alleys*, *Columbia*, *The South Dakota Review* among others. At present she coordinates the multicultural reading and workshop series. *Word of Mouth*, in the Chinatown Public Library and is working on a performance piece about a homeless poet. A collection of her poetry is forthcoming from Hanging Loose Press. In spite of — or perhaps, because of — a two-year-old daughter and another child on the way, Kimiko struggles to keep politically active along with her husband, Ted.

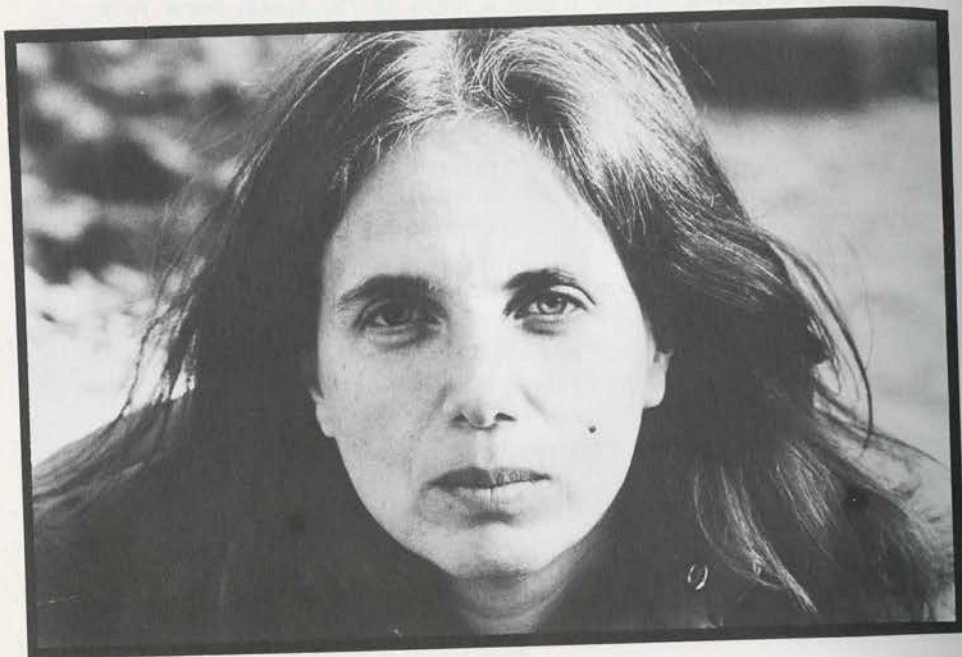


GALE JACKSON

Photo: Colleen McKay

**GALE JACKSON** works in the book arts. She is a poet, a writer, a storyteller, a librarian and an organizer in cultural education. Her work has been published in *Callaloo*, *Minnesota Review*, *Freedomways*, *IKON*, *13th Moon*, *The Black American Literature Forum*, *Essence Magazine*, *Obsidian*, *Azalea*, *Salsa Soul Gayzette*, *Sunbury*, *Conditions* and *The Women's Quarterly Review*. She has co-edited a collection combining literary and visual art from north america with testimonies from Southern Africa: *Art Against Apartheid: Works for Freedom*. She also regularly reviews children's books for *School Library Journal*. She is a co-coordinator for *Art Against Apartheid*: a coalition of artists and arts organizations doing educational work on Southern Africa, and has lectured on progressive cultural work as well as on educational resources, particularly for African american children. Currently, she is working as a reference librarian and instructor at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York in Brooklyn, New York and near home. Among other current works are a bibliography on African american women writers for a soon-to-be-published collection of essays and the progress of her own novel: *the precision of the embrace*.





SUSAN SHERMAN

Photo: Colleen McKay



JOSELY CARVALHO

Photo: Colleen McKay

**SUSAN SHERMAN** is a poet, essayist, and editor of *IKON* magazine. Beginning in the Sixties she was active in the poetry scene in New York—writing, reading and organizing poetry series at the *Deux Megots* and *Le Metro*—was poetry editor and wrote theatre and book reviews for the *Village Voice* and had nine plays produced off-off Broadway. She taught at the Free School and the Alternative University and took part in *Angry Arts Against the War*. During that time she edited the first series of *IKON*. She was awarded a CAPS poetry grant (1976/77) and editor's awards from CCLM (the Coordinating Committee of Literary Magazines) in 1985 and NYSCA (the New York State Council on the Arts) in 1986. She has published three collections of poetry and a translation of a Cuban play, *Shango de Ima* (Doubleday) and has been published in *Poetry*, *El Corno Emplumado*, *Heresies*, *Conditions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review* among other journals as well as many anthologies. She is completing a manuscript the "Color of the Heart," a collection of essays and poems and is working on an "autobiography of events." Currently she teaches at Parsons School of Design.

**JOSELY CARVALHO**, born in Brazil, has been awarded several grants: the New York Foundation for the Arts, 1986-1987; New York State Council for the Arts, Artist-in-Residence, 1978-82; and the National Endowment for the Arts, Community Artist-in-Residence, 1975-76. The founder of the Silkscreen Project at St. Marks's Church in the Bowery, she has had individual exhibits in Latin America and the U.S., including Casa de las Americas, Havana, Cuba, 1986; Yvonne Seguy Gallery, New York, 1983; Central Hall Gallery, New York, 1982 & 1985; Paco das Artes, Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1985. Her group shows include the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Universitario del Choppo, Mexico City. She has co-curated several exhibits including *Latin American Women Artists Living in New York*; *Choice Works*; *Connections Project/Conexus*. She is the founder of the *Latin American Women Artists Series* in New York City where she has lived since 1976.

"I work with a *Diary of Images*, an on-going process that records stories, events, memories, fantasies... The perception of women is the veil that permeates the different layers of reality. I use the photographic camera as an information-gathering tool. Silkscreen multiplies these images. The works represented here are part of a new series *Diary of Images: She is visited by birds and turtles*. This new work is about finding a statehood within myself. It is about carrying history within the shapes of my own turtle shell. It is the fantasy of flight. It is the realization that the turtle carries her own shell through waters and savannahs."