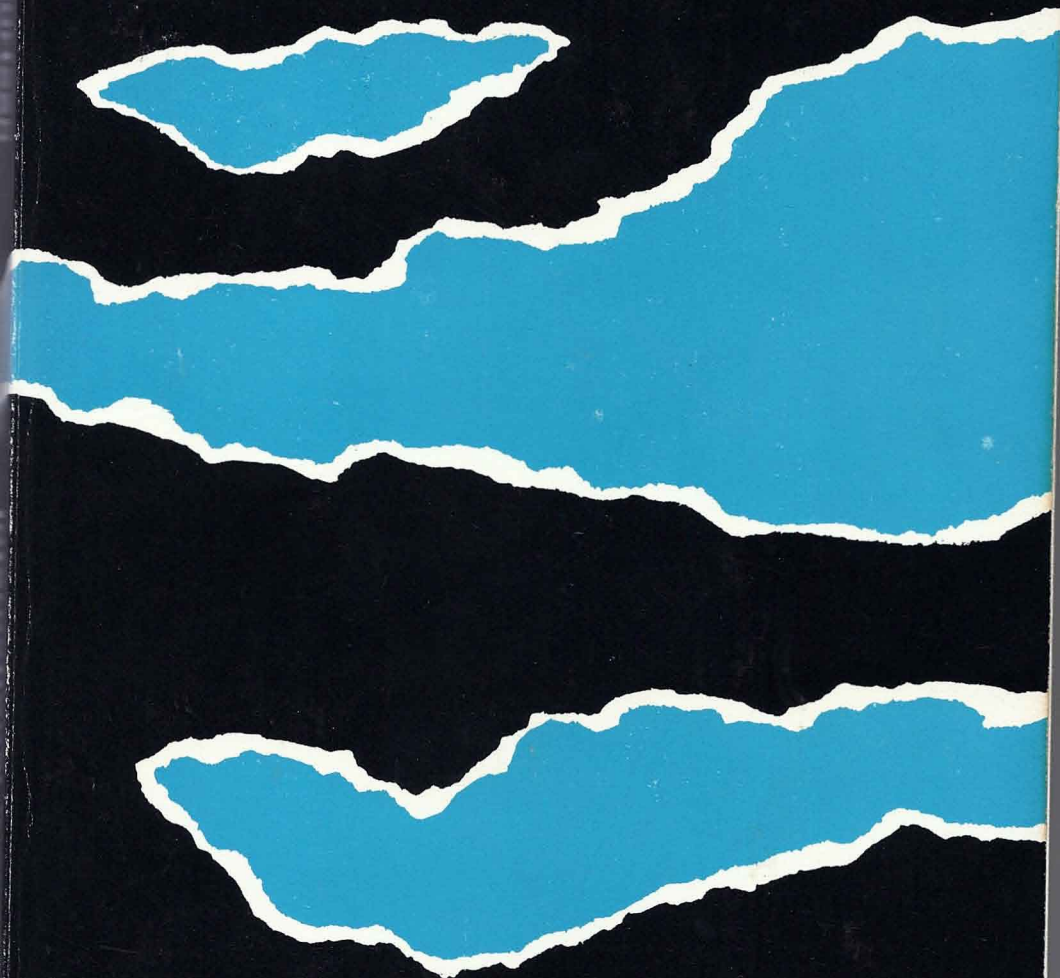


# conditions: fourteen



international focus II

**conditions: fourteen**  
**international focus II**

**a feminist magazine of writing by women  
with an emphasis on writing by lesbians**

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**conditions** was founded in 1976 by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.

# Introduction

This second volume of writings by and about women throughout the world continues our commitment to expand the scope of **conditions** magazine. That commitment does not end with this issue. We consider it a beginning. We welcome and encourage submissions from the women's international community, and hope that volumes of writings will continue to flow through doors we've opened.

Contained on these pages are words by and about women who are Brazilian, Filipino, Native American, Honduran, German, Puerto Rican, English, Cuban, Costa Rican and American. We are proud to be able to share their lives and experiences with you in this our tenth year of publication.

For ten years the collective and its many members have worked to establish and maintain a standard of excellence and acceptance for the writings of women to whom a commitment to women is an integral part of their lives. We have worked to provide a platform for writings by lesbians, older and working class women, and for those confined to prisons and mental institutions. In order for us to continue to function, we need your help. We were barely able to publish this issue. We would hate to be unable to publish the next one. Collective members receive no salaries, but **conditions** does have expenses for part-time office help, rent, utilities, postage, printing, typesetting, graphics, xeroxing, office supplies, rent, etc. Your financial support is crucial to the existence of this publication. Subscriptions, donations of money and supplies, and contact with funding sources are some of the ways you can help. Our need is immediate.

The **conditions** Collective

# Collective Update

In September of 1986, the Collective set about the job of seeking new collective members, and reorganizing our procedures. Putting out **conditions: 13** had been an awesome and overwhelming task that took its toll on all of us. Fortunately, the lessons we learned enabled us to create a series of systems that made the production of **conditions: 14** much smoother.

Randye Lordon resigned in September, and in the same month Pam Parker joined the Collective. Chirlane McCray came on as office manager after Adrienne Waddy resigned. Financial difficulties forced us to restructure the position of office manager. Our new manager will begin in August. In the meantime, collective members are pitching in and attending to all of the office duties.

On March 15th we gave a very successful fundraiser reading entitled, EVE OF THE IDES: erotic readings in celebration of women's sexuality. The readers were Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke, Gwendolen Hardwick, Dorothy Randall Gray, Enid Dame, Sapphire, Joan Nestle, Shirley Steele, Pat Califia, Dianne Houston, and Pam Parker. The standing-room-only crowd delighted in a very enjoyable and stimulating evening. At this writing we have scheduled our next erotic reading for June 14th.

Over the summer we'll be making plans for our tenth anniversary celebration in the fall, preparing ourselves for the next issue, and seeking ways to increase funding for our publication. We would appreciate any ideas, comments and contributions.

The **conditions** Collective:  
Cheryl Clarke, Dorothy Randall Gray, Pam Parker, Annette Peláez and Sabrina

# Collective Bios

**Cheryl Clarke:** Congratulations **conditions** on your tenth year of publication. What a wonderful dyke rag you are! Thanks to all you **conditions** readers for your intense loyalty—it's your anniversary too. I'm happy to celebrate my sixth year of involvement with the magazine. And happy to celebrate both with such a fine group of dedicated editors. And what I want most to learn is humility.

**Pam A. Parker** (Midwest, 1950).

Just to be here

is a delight!

You knew that too

you girls who seemed

deprived of it.

—*Duino Elegies*

**Annette Peláez**, b. 1953, N.Y. Taurus. Mixed blood. Tries always to consider more than three dimensions and questions everything, sometimes too late. Anti-imperialist. First love, music. Loves art but doesn't care to own it. Needs solitude, needs to move. Grateful to have met Turtle-Bear.

**Dorothy Randall Gray** brings to the collective finely tuned graphic skills and the zaniest sense of humor this side of the Brooklyn Bridge. She has an infectious spirit that manages to uplift the collective as effectively as an 18 hour bra. In addition to being a performer, designer and a published writer, she is also a native Polarian who has applied for citizenship on this planet.

**Sabrina**, “a nappy-headed West Indian” just finishing her first Saturn return, brings a diversity of skills to the collective. She has assumed the responsibility of managing the finances of the collective.

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Masai woman—Kenya

Annette Peláez

# PROMISE OF THE DIASPORA: Afro-German Women

**EXCERPTS FROM A BURST OF LIGHT,  
A Forthcoming Book**  
*Audre Lorde*

*May 23, 1984, Berlin, Germany*

Who are they, the German women of the Diaspora? Where do our paths intersect as Women of Color—beyond the details of our oppression, although certainly not outside the reference of those details? And where do our paths diverge? Most important, what can we learn from our connected differences that will be useful to us both, Afro-German and African-american?

Afro-German. The women say they've never heard the term used before. I asked one of my Black students how she'd thought about herself growing up.

"The nicest thing they ever called us was 'warbaby,'" she said. But the existence of most Black Germans has nothing to do with the Second World War, and predates it by many decades. I have Black German women in my class who trace their Afro-German heritage back to the 1890's.

For me, Afro-German means the shining faces of Katerina and Mai in animated conversation about their fathers' homelands, the comparisons, joys, disappointments. It means my joy at seeing another Black woman walk into my classroom, and her reticence giving way as she explores a new self-awareness, gains a new way of thinking about herself in relation to other Black women.

"I've never thought of Afro-German as a positive concept before," she said, speaking out of the pain of having to live a difference that has no name; speaking out of the growing power scrutiny makes from that difference.

I am excited by these women, by their blossoming sense of identity as they're beginning to say in one way or another, "Let us be ourselves now as we define us. We are not a figment of your imagination or an exotic answer to your desires. We are not some button on the pocket of

your longing.” I can see these women as a growing force for international change, in concert with other Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, Afro-americans.

We are the hyphenated people of the Diaspora whose self-defined identities are no longer shameful secrets in the countries of our origins, but rather declarations of strength and solidarity. We are an increasingly united front from which the world has not yet heard.

*October 10, 1984, New York*

I’ve been thinking about my time in Germany again, unencumbered by artificial shades of terror and self-concern. I don’t want my involvement with health matters to obscure the revelation of differences I encountered. The Afro-German women. What I learned about the differences when one teaches about feeling and poetry in a language that is not the original language of the people learning, even when they speak that language fluently. (Of course, all poets learn about feeling as children in our native tongue, and the psycho-social strictures and emotional biases of that language pass over into how we think about feeling for the rest of our lives.) I will never forget the emotional impact of Raja’s poetry, and how what she is doing with the German language is so close to what Black poets here are doing with English. It was another example of how our Africaness impacts upon the world’s consciousness in intersecting ways.

As an African-american woman, I feel the tragedy of being an oppressed hyphenated person in America, of having no land to be our primary teacher. And this distorts us in so many ways. Yet there is a vital part we play as Black people in the liberation consciousness of every freedom-seeking people upon this globe, no matter what they say they think about us as Black Americans. And whatever our differences are that make for difficulty in communication between us and other oppressed peoples, as African-Americans we must recognize the promise we represent for some new social synthesis that the world has not yet experienced. I think of the Afro-Dutch, Afro-German, Afro-French women I met this spring in Europe, and how they are beginning to recognize each other and come together openly in terms of their identity, and I see that they are also beginning to cut a distinct shape across the cultural face of every country where they are at home.

# AFRO-GERMAN\*

May Opitz

Translated by Ilze Mueller

You're Afro-German?

. . . oh, I see: African and German.

An interesting mixture, huh?

You know: there are people that still think

mulattos won't get

as far in life

as whites.

I don't believe that.

I mean: given the same type of education . . .

You're pretty lucky you grew up *here*.

With German parents even. Think of that!

D'you want to go back some day, hm?

What? you've never been in your Dad's home country?

That's so sad . . . Listen, if you ask me:

A person's origin, see, really leaves quite a mark.

Take me, I'm from Westphalia,

and I feel

that's where I belong . . .

Oh boy! All the misery there is in the world!

Be glad

you didn't stay in the bush.

You wouldn't be where you are today!

I mean, you're really an intelligent girl, you know.

If you work hard at your studies,

you can help your people in Africa, see: That's

what you're predestined to do,

I'm sure they'll listen to you,

while people like us—

there's such a difference in cultural levels . . .

What do you mean, do something here? What on earth would you want to do here?

Okay, okay, so it's not all sunshine and roses.

but I think everybody should put her own house in order first!

\*First appeared in German in the anthology, *Farbe Bekennen (Standing by What One Is)*. Edited by K. Oguntoye, M. Opitz, D. Schultz. Orlanda Frauenverlag, Berlin, 1986. *Farbe Bekennen* is an anthology of writing by Afro-German women.

# **OUR FATHER WAS A CAMEROONIAN, OUR MOTHER WAS AN EAST PRUSSIAN, AND WE'RE MULATTOS: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE SISTERS FRIEDA, 65, AND ANNA, 70\***

*Translated by Ilze Mueller*

*Frieda:* We had a sheltered childhood and never had the feeling that we were different. When kids would yell “nigger” (*Neger*) or “Nigger baby” (*Negerbabbi*) after us, it didn’t bother me. I simply called them names back. I still remember how my blond girlfriend and I—we were about five years old—compared our little hands and were surprised that mine were so brown and hers so light-colored. At school we were allowed special privileges, if anything.

*Anna:* Our mother realized that boys and men were quick to run after colored girls, just to see what it was like. I stayed unkissed for a long time, I was so scared.

*Anna:* Father was very popular and well-known in Danzig, and so were we.

*Frieda:* There weren’t any other Africans there. Now and again a freighter would arrive with a colored man on it, or a circus. My father would bring them all home with him. We loved it, especially that din of voices when they talked in African.

*Anna:* Father was twenty when he and two other Cameroonians came to Hamburg on the *Wohrmann Line* [a German trading and shipping company] in 1891. The three of them came from the first families of Cameroon, and were to be educated in Germany at the request of Emperor William II. [Cameroon was a German colony from 1884 to 1918, under partly French and partly British mandate.]

*Frieda:* Father was supposed to study medicine, but he fainted away the first time they dissected a dead body. In 1896 Father bought German citizenship for fifty gold marks; then, in 1918, when Danzig became a free state, he automatically became a citizen of the free state. Father was loyal to the Emperor, and more German than many native Germans.

Our mother met Father at the house of mutual friends of theirs in Danzig. He was divorced, and the two of them got married in 1914. Mother’s family had very varied reactions to the marriage. Her sister at

\*This dialogue first appeared in German in *Farbe Bekennen*. Though we are not able to publish the dialogue in its entirety, we hope our readers can still be enriched by the experiences recounted.

first accepted it, but during the Nazi period she said, "You can come and visit, but I don't want to see your husband and children at my house." Of course Mother never went there again.

Our grandmother lived in a tiny village in East Prussia, and she was totally horrified. She wouldn't come to the wedding, either. She had never seen a black man, not even from a distance.

Dad was a good father, he played and did gymnastics with us. His idea was that we should first go to boarding-school and then get married.

### ***We hire Aryans only***

*Anna:* In the fall of 1932 Father was told to appear at our school and was instructed to take us out of school. Father was so intimidated that he immediately did as he was told. It was shortly before my graduation. Afterwards, when I looked for a position as an apprentice, all I heard was, "What, you want to work for us? We hire Aryans only." A good friend of mine, a girl, dropped me like a hot potato. Later, in Berlin, people spat on us and molested us in the streets, called us names like "bastard" and "half-breed." It was bad.

Finally I found a job in a Danzig art dealer's shop, and I liked it a lot. But a month later my boss had to let me go because his business partners had threatened to pull out of the business if he kept me on. Actually this had all started as early as 1927-28.

*Frieda:* But not for us, for the Jews. Two guys from our neighborhood were running around in SA uniforms, chasing the Jews off the streets and pulling their beards. There were a lot of Jews living in our neighborhood, they were from Galicia and other places. Many wore *payes* [sidelocks worn by observant Jewish men].

But things got worse and worse. 1932 is when our troubles really began. Suddenly a lot of people—especially the ones who had moved to Danzig from the so-called *Reich*—realized we were different. The upshot of it was that it interfered with Father's business; they told the retailers not to place orders with him any more.

Shortly after this, we were given notice by the landlord to vacate our five-room apartment. Father's business had gone bankrupt.

*Anna:* After that Father worked for a Jewish company that had been expropriated. An SS-man ran the business in trust, and he was decent. Apart from that, our mother hauled a lot of nice stuff off to the pawnbroker's. That's how we lived.

*Frieda:* This was the beginning of a difficult period. Mother had to look for a new apartment, because Father, being black, wouldn't have got-

ten one. We moved into a wretched three-room apartment on the edge of town, we even sublet one of the rooms.

I had to take a subject called “race studies” and listen to slogans such as “All whites and blacks were made by God, half-breeds come from the devil,” or “Half-breeds can inherit only the bad characteristics of both races.”

The teacher forced me to go and see the exhibition “Race and Nation” with the rest of the class. At that exhibition they showed things like retouched photographs of colored people living in Munich that I knew, with their teeth filed down and crazed expressions on their faces. It wasn’t until 1974 that I stopped having nightmares about that school.

In 1936 I finished high school, and from 1936 to 1939 I tried to find work. It was simply impossible. At long last I was enrolled at the Polish business college, but I couldn’t stay there because of course I couldn’t speak any Polish.

The Adolf period was the worst you can imagine. After the war started, everybody was obligated to work by law; I was told to report to work in the warehouse of a paper and office supply store as of December 1939. My job was to move around heavy rolls of paper in the unheated warehouse. Then, to my great good fortune, the secretary got sick, and thanks to my knowledge of shorthand and typing I was able to take her job.

I went to work with a civil engineering company two years later. The personnel manager did look at me in a funny sort of way, but he hired me all the same. The boss had a half-Jewish wife whom he had brought to safety in Luxemburg. I’m still grateful to the boss and the manager for taking my part, for seeing to it that I got everything I wanted—overtime pay, ration cards and other privileges.

*Anna:* In 1938, in Danzig, I married a compatriot of my father’s and moved to Berlin with him. At that time my husband was just on tour as a wrestler, and I met him when he was appearing in Danzig.

In Berlin I worked in a book bindery. That junior boss never left me alone! But my colleagues took my side and reprimanded him.

### ***They took away our passports***

*Frieda:* In 1939, right at the beginning of the war, when Danzig became German according to the slogan “Home to the *Reich*,” we had to turn in our Danzig Free State passports.

*Anna:* My husband was also deprived of his German citizenship at that time. We had to report to the police every week.



In Berlin we had to endure a lot. When I was pregnant, I would have to listen to remarks like, “Our *Fuhrer* sets no store by children like yours.”

During the war, my husband had an acting contract for Munich. Our daughter was four at the time. We had reserved seats on the train next to each other. Suddenly the compartment door opened, an SA-man appeared in the doorway: “Come on, you fat-assed nigger, make room for the old lady!” My husband went for that SA-man like a tiger. The man disappeared at once.

*Frieda:* Father did everything he could for other persons of mixed blood when they had problems. Initially he still had a lot of support from Hindenburg, whom he probably knew from pre-war times when he was still supplying the Court with coffee and cigars.

Father was sixty-seven when they took away our passports. He was absolutely determined to leave Germany and return to Cameroon. Everything seemed to be settled, he had been examined and found to be “fit for the tropics.” He just had to make one more trip to the colonial office; there he was told, “You may go back if you make propaganda for us.” His response, as we were told later, was “But gentlemen, how do you think I can do that? Don’t you see I can’t do publicity for a country that holds the color of my skin in contempt?”

I don’t know what happened after that. At any rate, after he had left the office, he had a stroke on the street. This was in May of 1943. He never recovered from it, either; but people were very helpful, you know.

When Father died in June of 1943, the gravediggers doffed their caps in shock stammering, “The old gentleman.” The funeral procession was endless, in spite of the Nazis.

*Anna:* Many women of color were sterilized—Gerda, Hanna. Christel had been hidden in a convent near Cologne by her mother. They took her away and sterilized her. Our nephew, too. After the sterilization he was sent home at once, he wasn’t even allowed to rest.

*Frieda:* That’s when I was supposed to be sterilized. To do this, they drove me to the gynecologic clinic; I cried terribly on the way. One of the men wanted to comfort me, and kept talking at me non-stop. I’ve no idea why. He took me up to the clinic and let me go. Just because I had been supposed to be sterilized, I was later so grateful for my two children. My daughter—can you believe it?—was blond and blue-eyed. I would have loved to show her to Hitler and tell him, “Here’s a German girl, but not for you!”

We knew that Jews were sent to camps. There was one boat completely packed with Jews that they blew up in the Baltic, you could

hear the screams and the despair all the way to where we lived. Often we also heard of persons of mixed blood being taken to concentration camps.

### ***Forced labor and “watchdogs”***

*Frieda:* In early 1945, the so-called watchdogs picked me up because of my appearance and brought me to a shipyard. Here I had to carry heavy pipes.

Passers-by who had watched the incident had told my mother that the watchdogs had taken me with them. After several days of forced labor, we were outside the shipyard gates when a major air raid took place. When the low-flying aircraft approached, everybody scattered, and a lot of people beat it, including me. I spent the day in the Armory arcade. I went home that night. In our apartment there was a little extra room whose door could be easily hidden by moving a cupboard in front of it. That’s where I stayed for the time being.

The watchdogs, a special unit of the German army, were armed police who marched through the streets picking up all those who looked suspect, looking for deserters, foreign workers, etc. They were quick to hang people, including deserters from their own ranks.

### ***The end of the war and the post-war period***

*Frieda:* Since Danzig had been totally bombed out, Mother and I moved to Bromberg—partly on foot, partly by train. We were worried about Anna in Berlin, and she was worried about us. One day I heard the sound of shooting, and I ran out into the yard. A Russian came over the fence and called, “The war is over!”

Mother and I were very fearful after the flight from Danzig. The people kept us hidden in a room in front of whose door a cupboard would be pushed. Though each of us had her own bed, we slept in a single bed huddled together in terror.

Since Mother spoke only German and all her papers had been burned, the Poles would not believe her when she said she was my mother. In my passport I found a family photograph as evidence, and it saved my mother’s life.

*Anna:* It was hard being a foreigner then, there was still an element of race hatred deep inside people. To begin with, I wasn’t Aryan, then I was a foreigner and consequently there was no work for me. In 1947 I applied for German citizenship again. And I finally received it in 1963.

*Frieda:* After the war we wanted to get out of Poland to go to Ger-

many. Then the Russians offered us a free ticket to Africa.

*Anna: From Bromberg to Africa! (they roar with laughter)*

*Frieda: After the Nazi period was over, acts of hostility toward us quickly subsided. There's a lot that happened that I can't forget, but I'm not terribly unhappy any more either. It's over, and I'd rather not think about it any more.*

I've always liked being a mulatto, even during the bad period, and I've always been perfectly able to cope with having black and white in me. I remember that in the forties a colleague once asked me was I very unhappy to live as a mulatto. I said, "No—you know, the things I've experienced so far because of my origin you will never experience as long as you live."

# Fiction



Church Rock, New Mexico

Annette Peláez

## **EVER SINCE MIRANDA LEFT**

*Merritt Hoyt*

In lieu of motherhood, twenty-five years ago Olga Olivia Harmakowski chose public assistance work. Now, at age fifty, she was a veteran bureaucrat and a conscientious caseworker in the Welfare Department, so dedicated to her work that she secretly pretended the clients were her children: a harmless deception, she believed, one that no psychiatrist would be interested in analyzing and, quite possibly, an occupational hazard in a person like herself.

Olga's territory encompassed a significant portion of the nation's largest Indian reservation. It was often half a day's drive to interview clients and heads of households who sometimes were long gone from their homes by the time she arrived. Then, it was an endless trip back to the dilapidated frame building occupied by the Welfare Department. But, Olga didn't really mind; that was how she earned her living and she quite willingly accepted the terms and conditions of her employment. Her job was her life.

Olga's co-workers thought that she put too much of herself into her job, that she should loosen up, go out for a drink after work, join civic organizations, meet new people, have fun, take her mind off her clients, and so on. Olga hated her colleagues and wanted nothing to do with them.

She spent as much time as she could on the Indian reservation, away from her office which was not actually a room but a suffocating, partitioned space that provided only a small exit into a common area. All day long employees pranced and marched and crept past Olga's cubicle but no co-worker had ever been interesting enough to entice her to look up.

Management liked Olga and they entrusted her with the only extra set of keys that unlocked a fenced area behind which the official vehicles were parked. On one cool fall morning Olga left the parking lot well before anyone else arrived for work. She was driving an old truck, the only vehicle behind the gate that had keys in its ignition, and she enjoyed the pleasant bouncing along. She felt somewhat sensual with the sun warming the air in the truck's cab and an unpredictable heating system spewing hot air every now and then. Pleased by the sensation, Olga hummed a popular tune for a few minutes, but stopped. Her atonality was embarrassing, even when she was alone. She turned on the radio instead.

*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour*

*of our death, amen.* The voice on the religious station, call letters KGOD, repeated itself monotonously, reviving Olga's memories of childhood in Chicago. She was the second daughter in a large Roman Catholic family of Polish ancestry, one in which tensions ran high and expectations ran low. Fed up with everyone and everything, one Sunday afternoon Olga took her clenched fist out of her pea jacket pocket, stuck her thumb up in the air, and reached the Southwest a week later beside a dark, older woman named Miranda who drove a saucy red Chevrolet with Vancouver, B.C. license plates. Although Olga was convinced that drama and excitement were waiting, she learned differently one night after her shift in a twenty-four-hour restaurant. Weeping and holding her right hand between her legs to ease the hurt of rape, Olga crawled into bed with Miranda. She was now the possessor of knowledge about what a woman alone meant to several local men.

And then it happened: the major event in Olga's life. Miranda held her, and cooed, and caressed, and whispered, and sshh-ed, and showered her with a nonsexual gentleness that is rare among women. Olga was ministered to for the first time in her life—mercifully, compassionately, empathetically and guiltlessly—in a beautiful, beneficent way. For months afterward, whenever she tried to describe her experience to acquaintances of either gender, she was looked at quizzically by most; some men jealously called her "queer." So, she stopped discussing it but daydreamed often, especially after Miranda left. By that time Olga had taken several courses at a nearby college and, when the legislation creating the food stamp program was enacted, she falsified her transcript to reflect the minimum qualifications required for the job, and Olga Olivia Harmakowski became one of the state's first caseworkers.

*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, amen.* Olga changed the station and listened for a few minutes to yesterday's livestock report, broadcast in the Navajo language. Next on the dial was a cowgirl singing her broken heart out about a dude that left her flat, broke and pregnant at a Texas rodeo. Olga clucked her tongue at the woman's sorrowful plight as she turned the truck off the road into a field of scrub brush and weeds. She jumped out, pulled her pants down, and let loose about a pint of urine. She felt better instantly; the peculiar physical uneasiness that had been hanging around her that morning seemed to vanish. As she drove on, Olga even managed to conjure up a bit of sympathy for the cowgirl because she knew what it was to be abandoned by a man, knew what it was to feel the slap of a powerful hand across her face,

knew the power plays and the punishment in most of the male-female situations. But especially, Olga reminded herself, she knew the opposite: she knew what it was to be comforted by another woman and her one-time-only experience many years back was what consoled her when everything else was wrong. It was the only loving in her life that ever really mattered. And it only happened once.

Olga came quickly out of her reverie when she felt her heart flopping inside her chest. She tried holding her breath, an action which sometimes restored a regular beat, but the trick didn't work this time; the irregular rhythm continued, uncomfortable and scary, but not painful. She took several deep breaths of air filled with pollutants from a nearby coal-fired Public Service Company plant, and quickly coughed the toxins back out. At the pleural spasm, her heart corrected its rhythm and, sighing with relief, Olga threw a finger out the window at the chemical haze.

Although she still considered herself young enough to live alone, Olga had previously decided that in about ten years her health would require her to look for a roommate. But, Olga admitted as she shut the radio off, lately she had been having more and more attacks of irregular heart rhythm and if these problems persisted, she might have to find someone sooner.

It would be a small miracle for Olga to come in contact with a person with whom she was compatible, someone she could tolerate under the same roof. Ever since Miranda left she hadn't found anyone she cared enough about to bid the time of day, much less share the same living spaces. The same zip code was all she had in common with the small circle of humanity around her. Now, because of the increasing frequency of cardiac episodes, ". . . the time for a roommate may be coming quicker than I think," she confessed aloud as the truck jiggled along. After mentally reviewing a short list of acquaintances, it became clear that she would have to begin a more comprehensive search for a partner. Olga dreaded the effort—joining a church, attending boring civic functions, patronizing the local bars, etc., etc., when she'd rather be alone reading a book. However, Olga readily acknowledged that novels can't call the ambulance when their reader's heart is running amok, and so there was, quite realistically, no avoiding what had to be done.

"Damn Miranda for leaving!" Olga said aloud. "Damn the stupid message about a new husband that she scrawled on the back of a postcard from Las Vegas! How dumb. And damn her for sending a Christmas card with no return address!"

Olga's heart skipped two beats in a row before a different, quieter

thought popped into her head: support. "Women are supposed to want to support each other," she muttered, "like some giant woven spider web creeping over and down the sides of a globe. Wonder how you talk some strange woman into living with you and I hate to think what it will cost me in terms of privacy and freedom. Damn that woman for leaving!"

There was no doubt that her roommate would be a woman. Olga could never live permanently with a man; her early experiences, sexual and non-sexual, with her father and brothers had been too damaging and the scars had never healed. She sometimes thought that she smelled from the rot and the fester their wounds had caused. But Miranda convinced her that the odor was all in her head, that she smelled as fresh as the desert after a cloudburst. Olga loved to hear Miranda talk. Miranda's words erased all her hurts and made Olga feel that she was somebody after all, not just an ordinary female who was inferior to every male who walked the earth. But, ever since Miranda left, no one had taken an interest in Olga. No one.

She drove the truck off the state road into a field that still looked parched, even this late in October. Nearby a stream gurgled along toward the bottom of a hill, its steady course interrupted only by Olga's face, plunging in and out of a shallow pool naturally framed by river rocks. Olga thought the cool water would soothe her suddenly feverish skin. As she rested under a cluster of old cottonwood trees, Olga inhaled deeply, trying to pull more oxygen down to the bottom of her lungs where they felt blocked, as if the air channels were plugged with cement.

"Miranda would let me live with her," Olga said aloud as she rubbed the twinge in her chest, "and I'd be as true as the tide. If only I could find her. Even if she gave me a spare room over her garage, it would be enough. I'd settle for that happily." She swallowed air and forced a burp and then a cough, hoping that the spasms would correct an increasingly rapid heart rate. "*Goodness, I'd better get back in the truck,*" she thought, and tried to get up. She couldn't. Quite dizzy, Olga sank back down onto the earth.

Clouds floated overhead, full of moisture saved for Kansas. Lying on her back, Olga stared upward until she felt one of the clouds descend, as if in response to an urgent call from her. Loving, inviting arms appeared from either side of the fluff, with shadows on them that looked like faces. One of them was Miranda. "*She's finally come for me,*" thought Olga. Encouraged, Olga struggled to raise herself up on one elbow. Moving her upper limbs was still easy and so she stretched out her left hand and arm and strenuously beckoned to the cloud,



waving high and calling in a raspy voice, "Here, here! I'm over here, Miranda." Her heart was so full it felt like it would leap from her chest with joy. Miranda had come at last. "One moment and I'll be ready," Olga said to the illusion. "I need some water and then we can go on. How did you ever find me?" She crawled to the stream and gulped the sweet water, grinning broadly between tastes, sure that the Miranda cloud would take care of her forever.

Three months later, at a mid-winter funeral of one of the most important people in town, a small group of caseworkers gathered together in the mortuary's anteroom. "Too bad we couldn't have paid our last respects to Olga," said one of the women, "but they never did find her. The Navajo police thought her body got carried off by small animals," she added.

"Well, anything can happen in that rough reservation country," said one of the men. "Take the truck, for example. Had to have it towed in after sitting out there a week, and it never has worked right since. Y'know, I can't understand why Olga didn't leave the keys somewhere in the truck. But, she never did have a lick of sense. . . ."

"How in the world would you know?" the same woman asked.

# THE RETURN OF SALLEY MAE

*Alycee Lane*

Salley Mae walked heavily through the door, her bags flung over her shoulders and hanging from her hands. Her flight seemed endless; the Jim Crow train rocked and swerved fearfully as though it would fly off the tracks and roam through the cornfields, and the violent rocking left her back sore and her head splitting. She was hungry too, and recalled with bitterness the old black woman who ate heartily the two buttered biscuits sandwiching sweet, smoked ham. Her stomach growled at the thought. But, hell, she finally arrived and as always, the door was open and the scent of black-eyed peas filled the air. Shit she thought, I should have never left.

"Who's there?" a voice called from another room.

Setting down her bags, Salley Mae slipped her shoes off and headed towards the voice.

"Just me," she said plainly, as though the voice should have been expecting her.

The voice was in the kitchen. It came from a young-looking woman, brown-skinned, with a rag tied on her head. She was sitting at the kitchen table with a book opened in front of her, looking up with a wide grin as Salley Mae walked in.

"Thought you was married," she said, her eyes sparkling in amusement.

"That's a damn lie started by a damn liar," Salley Mae said, pretending anger at the woman's grin.

The woman chuckled.

"No, no, I do recall you hootin' about some fine-looking man you married and ran off with. What's so bad about it is that you never did introduce him to me and Vivian. Just left us all by ourselves."

Salley Mae walked over to the pot of peas cooking on the stove. Opening the top, she pinched a piece of hamhock that was simmering in the peas. She blew on the piece and shoved the meat in her mouth, closing her eyes in delight. She picked another piece before she grabbed a bowl from the cupboard.

"There's rice in the other pot," the woman said, still smiling at Salley Mae.

Opening the other pot carefully, Salley Mae shoved a healthy spoonful of rice in her bowl. She then reached for the peas and hamhock, slopping them generously over the rice.

The woman cleared a place at the table for Salley Mae. Sitting

down, Salley Mae dug into her food as though eating her last meal. Her eyes looked down into the bowl, her jaws worked continuously without rest, for with each swallow of food she shoveled another spoonful to keep the rhythm flowing. Naturally, she did not speak a single word.

The woman watched her, amused by Salley Mae's technique.

"A little hungry, dear? Seems to me you need to give yourself a chance to breathe."

"I'm doing just fine thank you," Salley Mae responded, her mouth half-full.

"Whose bags are these?" another voice questioned from the front room. "Jesus? Who's here? Or are you going somewhere?"

A woman appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, her eyebrows crinkling in perplexity. Upon seeing Salley Mae, her expression softened and a grin widened on her face.

"Well look who's here! Stuffin' her face like a hog and not even sayin' hello to nobody."

"Didn't even bring her husband with her."

"She didn't?" the woman in the doorway asked, walking towards the table. "He's probably ugly as hell. All that high talk about him bein' a fine-lookin' man probably just a pack of lies."

"Oh, Vivian, hush!" said Salley Mae. "Just sit your big ass down and hush!"

"Jesus, I think you better get this girl some more food before she starts eatin' the bowl."

Jesus laughed. "Actually, I think she's already started on it."

Salley Mae ate her last spoonful of peas and rice and leaned back in her chair, sighed heavily and rubbed her stomach slowly.

"I dreamed about that hoppin' John during my whole trip. I was so hungry, I liked to rob this old lady of her biscuits and ham. She was eatin' them all slow, like she had all the time in the world. I watched her eat every last bit of that food, you know, trying to imagine what it would be like to be in her place," Salley Mae said, staring dreamily ahead of her. She then looked at Jesus and Vivian whose eyes were fixed on her, and shrugged her shoulders. "But I'm satisfied now."

"I guess so," said Vivian accusingly.

They sat around the table for hours, it seemed, talking about everything and everybody as they had always done when Salley Mae was living in the house. Vivian couldn't resist recounting the story of Fat Anna Lee, a sister of the church which Vivian attended. Apparently Fat Anna Lee was seen in the downtown district with Jimmy, known among the ladies mostly as "That sweet man with the gold

tooth,” hollering and crying about his being with another woman. When one of the church members saw her (and no one really knew *which* church member saw her), Fat Anna Lee pulled out her large black Bible and recited some obscure verse at the top of her lungs. Jimmy laughed loudly, pinched Fat Anna Lee on the ass, and drove off in his shiny new car. Flustered, Fat Anna Lee straightened up her flowered dress that contained her plump, well-oiled body, and said to the church member self-righteously, “Just doing my duty to the Lord.”

Salley Mae, who knew Fat Anna and was once chastized by her for being, in Fat Anna Lee’s words, “too wild,” laughed loudly, moving uncontrollably in her chair. As always when she told the story, Vivian was in tears, and Jesus smiled, shaking her head dramatically.

“I still haven’t heard about *who exactly* saw Fat Anna Lee,” said Jesus to the laughing women.

They talked all over the place, acting as if Salley Mae had never moved out. But Vivian, who always wanted to know something, couldn’t resist the topic that Salley Mae was obviously avoiding.

“Girl,” Vivian said, looking in Salley Mae’s sparkling eyes, “why in the world are you *here*?” She said “here” as though “here” was the most unlikely place to ever find Salley Mae.

Jesus began to tease her.

“You know, you’re probably right about that man of hers, Viv. He probably is *real* oogly, and she just came home ‘cause she finally came to her senses.”

“Please,” Salley Mae said dryly, looking at Vivian. “Jack is one fine man, let me tell you.”

“Hmph!” Vivian retorted, picking up on Jesus’ teasing.

Salley Mae folded her arms across her breasts, looking as though she didn’t care one bit what these two women thought. Getting up from her chair, Salley Mae walked to the sink for a glass of water. Jesus and Vivian’s eyes followed her closely, watching how she coquettishly switched her behind, both hands resting on her hips and moving with a rhythmic sway. She eased a full glass of water to her lips, drinking steadily until the water disappeared, and then eased the glass into the sink by the other dirty dishes. Turning around, Salley Mae observed the look of total anticipation on her friends’ faces. She let loose a sly smile.

“I am *here*,” Salley Mae said, mocking Vivian’s emphasis on the word, “‘cause I couldn’t dance.”

Jesus and Vivian both frowned slightly, not understanding.

“You mean that man didn’t like the way you danced so he sent you

home?" Vivian asked incredulously.

"Naw, girl," Salley Mae said, sitting back in her chair. "You *know* better than that. Shit, I can dance better than anybody on this side of hell. It's just that. . . well. . . ."

They had just been married, Salley Mae and Jack, and she took him home, down to Virginia, to meet her folks. She called her sister, Nora, the day before she and Jack arrived, and said quite plainly, "We're coming home, me and my husband. Have something for us to eat when we get there." Her sister, used to Salley Mae's sudden appearances and surprises, sighed heavily, and before she could ask what time the couple was arriving, Salley Mae had already hung up.

"Randolph!" Nora called, sounding slightly irritated. "Randolph!"

A tall, muscular man appeared, sweat dripping from his forehead and onto his naked chest. His hands were dirty from garden work, and one of his arms had been scratched by a thorn bush. He was Salley Mae and Nora's younger brother.

"What is it Nora?" he asked, his deep voice gentle and concerned.

"It's that crazy-assed sister of yours, that's what it is. Seems she's comin' home," she said. Then she looked at him carefully from head to foot, noting his dirty shoes and hands.

"Now you're a grown man, so you should know better than coming in this house all filthy! Get on out of here!"

Randolph, never one to argue, turned slowly to go wash himself up. He didn't mind Nora's short temper; just knowing that Salley Mae was coming home made him dismiss Nora completely.

"And when you've cleaned yourself up, get right back in here. I'm going to need your help," Nora hollered back at him.

Randolph went to a bucket of water sitting beside the back porch stairs. He plunged his hands in the cool liquid, rinsing the dried mud from underneath his fingernails. He thought of Salley Mae and smiled, remembering her wildness, the way she warmed the coldness of the house whenever she came, and the way she could always make him laugh. She was so different from Nora, who was serious and hard working, and who, when she smiled, seemed only to be hiding some trace of cruelty.

"Hmph!" he said loudly, thinking of the differences between his two sisters. Why were they so different? he wondered, trying to think back, to see if he could remember whether they had always been this way. But memory was evasive, and all he could do was shake his head.

"Randolph! What's takin' you so long?" Nora asked, loudly, from the back porch door.

"Just washin' my hands," Randolph answered, not looking up. He continued to wash his hands slowly and carefully.

"Well," she said, softening her tone, "when you finish, I need you to help me clean the house a little."

"Why? It's just Salley Mae comin' home."

"Correction," said Nora, "Salley Mae and her *husband*" (and she said "husband" with disgust) "are coming home."

Randolph's head darted up.

"Husband?" he asked, looking incredulous.

"You heard me. She done gone and got married, the silly heifer," Nora said, walking away from the door. "Hurry up."

Nora knew that this news would upset her brother. He always, at least as Nora saw it, treasured that sister of theirs and acted as if Salley Mae could do no wrong. Randolph would swear that "no man is good enough for my sister" and promised that he would *personally* check out anyone who had the nerve to ask for her hand.

"He's gonna have to pass my test," Randolph would say cockily.

Walking back into her kitchen, Nora sat at her table and waited for Randolph to come and help her. She fanned herself with a tattered First Baptist Church fan, scrutinizing the blonde-haired, blue-eyed man staring menacingly at her. Again sighing heavily, she braced herself for her sister's unwelcome visit.

Salley Mae glanced out of the train window, watching the cows and horses lazily nibble on the green grass. She laughed, startling Jack who had begun to doze. She was laughing at herself, at the impulsiveness of her personality that made her, unquestioningly, marry Jack even though they had met only a few days earlier. He had passed by the house she shared with Vivian and Jesus on his way from the steel mills, having just secured himself a job. He felt good, especially since his trek to Pennsylvania from North Carolina was nothing but a gamble. He had heard enough good things about the north to want to try his luck at success, and so he packed his bags, kissed his family goodbye, and promised to send for them when he made it rich. Grinning from ear to ear, his handsome brown face beamed with pride.

Salley Mae was sitting on the front porch when Jack walked by. She chuckled, amused by his slow saunter and easy grin, and when he turned to look, she tried unsuccessfully to hide her smile.

"What you laughin' at?" he asked, attempting to look upset.

Salley Mae began to chuckle again, walking slowly towards him. Jack started laughing himself, at the pretty young woman coming his way.

"I'm sorry," Salley Mae said, trying to control herself. "You just looked so damn silly walkin' all by yourself with that grin on your face." (She started laughing again, and not being able to help himself, Jack laughed with her.

"What can I say? I'm on top of the world today, and I intend on stayin' here!"

"Amen! And who might you be?" Salley Mae asked boldly.

"Jack Redding, from North Carolina," he answered, bowing and acting as though he was tipping a hat.

Salley Mae walked with him to his rented room, where they relaxed and talked about any- and everything as though they had known each other for years. Jack liked her audacity and her energy, and found himself watching her more than listening to her. She is a fine woman, he thought, and smart, too. He gazed admiringly at her broad shoulders and shapely figure, and in the high spirits that his day produced, he blurted out, without thinking and without regret, "Will you marry me?"

"Just that easy, huh?" Salley Mae asked, caught off guard. "I bet you ask every woman to marry you."

Jack smiled. "I've never asked anyone to marry me, not even my sweetheart back home."

"I'm sure she'd just love to hear that."

"Maybe, maybe not," Jack said, leaning back in his chair. "Doesn't matter, though. And I can't really think of anything better to do. What do you say?"

"Spare me," she said. "But I tell you what I will do: I'll take you to see Louis Armstrong tonight. He'll be at the Lazy Day in Pittsburgh, and I've been dyin' to see him."

"You'll take *me*?" Jack asked, sitting up. "Whoever heard of a woman takin' a grown, *workin'* man out for a good time?"

"I take it you don't want to go, then," Salley Mae said nonchalantly, standing up to leave.

"Oh, no!" Jack said, scrambling up from his chair. "Just that no woman to my knowledge has ever done such a thing. But, yeah, I'll go."

"Well can you Charleston?" Salley Mae asked sassily, setting her hands on her hips.

"Better than *any* southern man," Jack said, imitating her sassiness.

"Well, good. I'll pick you up tonight. How about seven?"

Jack's mouth hung open, and he was, for a moment, speechless.

"Uh, well, uh . . . yeah! Seven will be fine."

"Then it's settled," Salley Mae said decisively, shaking his hand. "See you around."

As she headed out the door, Jack just stood back and watched her, perplexed by her strange ways. His shock was so profound that he said "goodbye" long after she walked out the door.

Salley Mae would not return home after her night out with Jack, except once, briefly, when she packed a few bags of clothes. They had spend nearly an entire week together during the hours Jack and Salley Mae were not working, and by the end of the week, they were married and heading to North Carolina to meet Jack's family. Since they were to go through Virginia, Salley Mae suggested that they stop by her old house so she could show Jack off to her own family.

Two phone calls were made from the train station: one brief one made to Salley Mae's sister, and the other to the girls back home.

Jesus had been reading, as always, when she received the call. Vivian was out, working in the Hayes family kitchen, the kitchen of a white family that owned a great deal of Pittsburgh real estate. She hated the job tremendously, but it paid more than any other job she had ever had. Which, of course, was not much, but it was enough to help pay the mortgage and to help with the groceries.

Answering the phone gruffly (for Jesus hated to be disturbed when she was reading), she was surprised to hear Salley Mae's voice on the other end.

"Girl, where have you been?" asked Jesus, sounding both worried and angry.

"Oh, Jesus, I just got myself all married to some fine-looking man. Look, I need you to—"

"Married?" Jesus interrupted.

"Yeah. Look, I need you—"

"Married? What do you mean, *married*?" Jesus asked, thoroughly shocked.

"I said 'married,' as in 'wedding,' as in 'tying the knot,' as in 'got hitched.' Shit, I mean 'married.' Now I need you to do me a favor. I need you to pack some of my things for me," Salley Mae continued, ignoring Jesus' shock.

"Well, where are you?"

"I'm at the train station."

"And you won't let me or Viv meet your . . . your *husband*?" Jesus asked, unbelieving.

"Oh you will, soon. But will you pack my things?"

"Ah, yeah . . . ah . . . I can do that."

"Well, good! I'll see you, sugah."

Salley Mae had hung up quickly before Jesus could ask any more questions. She turned to Jack, squeezing his hand, and led him to the



train. Jesus, still bewildered, hung up the phone slowly and began chuckling to herself, repeating with amusement "Wait 'til I tell Viv!"

What turned out to be a weekend trip lasted for an entire month. Jack would run back and forth from Virginia to Pennsylvania in order to keep his job, and in order to accommodate his new wife's desire to spend time in her hometown. He was anxious to take Salley Mae to his folks, but did not push the matter because he wanted to be accepted by her family. Randolph was finally warming up to him after his initial ice-cold reception of Jack, and Nora was slowly treating him like a human being. During his first weekend in Virginia he was bombarded with questions from both Randolph and Nora, who made him feel as though he was being tried for murder. Salley Mae was hardly around to protect him from their assaults, for every moment she could find she was visiting her friends or going to some dance at the local jukejoint. Jack was, of course, bothered by her excursions, but he bid his time, waiting to see some sign that Salley Mae was finally going to settle down into married life. But each weekend that he returned, he saw no changes in her. She was just as wild and free as ever.

When he returned for the fourth time, Salley Mae was not at home to greet him. Nora explained to him that Salley Mae went fishing with her old sweetheart Tom, who was now married and had four children. Jack was furious.

"What do you mean, 'old sweetheart?'" he asked, raising his voice.

"Oh, that's nothing," Nora said, waving him off and walking in the sitting room. Jack followed closely behind. "That man loves his wife and kids, and he and Salley Mae have become pretty good friends over the years. They didn't get along for nothin' when they was together—fightin' like cats 'n dogs. But every time Salley Mae comes home, they spend a little time together, mostly fishin' or playin' checkers."

Jack had heard nothing. He sat back in a chair, staring in front of himself. Nora watched him, sizing him up.

"Now you're not going to get all upset, are you?" she asked, sitting down.

Jack continued to stare in front of himself, obviously thinking hard on something. A heavy pause filled the air before he spoke.

"A woman oughta be home with her husband, not out running the streets like she ain't got no sense."

"That's the truth," said Randolph, who just walked through the door. "Where is Salley Mae, anyway?"

Nora looked up. "She's fishin' with Tom."

Randolph went in the kitchen and grabbed a few pears. He came

slowly back into the sitting room, and plopped heavily in a chair.

"This has got to stop. Am I right?" Jack asked. He looked at the faces before him for confirmation and support. Randolph nodded.

"Course you're right," responded Nora, who leaned back and closed her eyes.

They sat in silence, Randolph eating his pears and Nora leaning back peacefully. Jack's bewilderment did not change and, feeling restless, he got up from his chair and left the house. He wanted to walk, to take a long walk, in order to clear his thoughts before he would see Salley Mae.

Salley Mae was in the kitchen cooking dinner with Nora when Jack returned from his walk. He heard her talking excitedly about a dance that was to take place later in the evening, a dance that she had been looking forward to since her visit to Virginia.

"Girl, don't you know? They going to be giving twenty-five dollars to the best dancer there, and I intend on showing 'em *all* I got. Can't nobody Charleston like I do!"

"Oh, you think so?" asked Nora dryly.

"Think so? Hell, I *know* so. You should come. It would do you some good to get out of this house for once."

"I get out," Nora snapped, flashing her eyes angrily at Salley Mae. "I just don't get all tangled up with nonsense, that's all."

Nora turned to stir the stew.

"Hmph! I get out as much as I please—and enjoy myself, too. Hmph!" continued Nora, mumbling under her breath.

"Alright, alright. No need to get all flustered," Salley Mae replied. "I was just—well, hello there, sugah!"

Jack walked in the kitchen, frowning slightly. He was glad to see his wife, but he wanted her to know that it was time for her to start acting like his wife.

"Where you been? I must have been gone at least an hour or so, walkin', waitin' for you to get here. I expected you to meet me when I got back."

Salley Mae chuckled and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm so glad you missed me, baby. I would have been here, but I went fishin' with ol' Tom. Look at these trout I caught!" she said, pointing at the fish frying in the pan. Jack hadn't eaten since he left, so the frying fish threatened to soften his attitude. He, however, prevailed.

"Ol' Tom? Old Tom, my ass. He's one of your sweethearts, ain't he?" Jack asked accusingly.

"Yeah," Salley Mae replied, stepping back from him. "He's an *old* sweetheart, which is why I call him ol' Tom."

“And you’d rather spend time with him than greet me like you’re supposed to.”

“Like I’m *supposed* to?” Salley Mae asked incredulously. “Since when am I *supposed* to do anything?”

“Since you became my wife, that’s when!” Jack retorted.

Salley Mae looked at Jack and just shook her head. She did not intend on carrying the argument any further, especially when it was apparent to her that he was being unreasonable.

“Dinner will be ready in a few,” she said, turning to the frying fish.

Jack stood and watched Salley Mae and Nora work, and was not quite sure what to do with himself. Nora filled a glass of cold water and handed it to him, directing him back to the sitting room.

“Just relax yourself. It’s been a long day for everyone.”

Jack seated himself comfortably in a chair and slipped his shoes off. He felt exhaustion creep up on him slowly, like a deadly poison, and only a few minutes after he drank his water, he was fast asleep.

They had all finished dinner and were relaxing in the sitting room. All of them except Salley Mae. Upstairs, in her old bedroom, she was primping in front of the mirror in her new dress, fantasizing about the evening’s dance. She had already made plans for the twenty-five dollars she would win—how she would use some of it to buy a new pair of shoes for when she finally left to meet Jack’s folks. The rest would go to household items she wanted for her and Jack’s place. That is, whenever they returned to Pennsylvania.

She began humming to herself as she adjusted and readjusted the bobby pin her hair. “*It’s too bad that Jack is so tired,*” she thought. “*It would be great to show off for him.*” Salley Mae dismissed her regret, however, for she felt that she could still show off for her husband by simply waving in his face the twenty-five dollars she would win. He would grin, just like he did when she first met him, and would stop thinking his silly thoughts about what she was *supposed* to do.

Finally ready, Salley Mae slipped on her shoes and walked slowly downstairs. She wanted her kinfolk to see that, just by the way in which she fixed herself up, she already won half the battle of getting that twenty-five dollars. All eyes focused on her when she made her entrance. Jack swallowed hard, simultaneously admiring her beauty and growing jealous with the thought of the number of men who would approach her at the dance. She is going to be my wife, he thought, and stay home with me like she’s supposed to.

“How do I look?” Salley Mae asked, strutting in front of everyone. Her eyes sparkled with pride and her smile teased, inviting approval.

“You sho’ look good!” Randolph said, smiling at his sister. “Don’t she look good, Nora?”

Nora, her face stern and rigid, looked at Randolph harshly, then reluctantly nodded her head. She had had enough of her sister's easygoing style, and did not like to be put in a position of commenting positively on it. When Salley Mae chuckled at her reluctant nod, she felt anger rise in her, threatening to explode.

Jack got up abruptly and walked over to Salley Mae.

"Where you going?" he asked, grabbing her arm. The jealousy he felt had taken over any admiration he was feeling for her, and he felt it was time to assert himself as her husband. "You can't go *nowhere*, you understand? You are *married* and its time you started acting like it. I *means* for you to start acting like it, as a matter of fact. And we begin tonight by your takin' all this junk off and packin' your bags, so we can leave tomorrow morning. *You hear me?*"

Salley Mae's sparkling eyes faded to cold, black marbles. She yanked her arm forcefully from his grip.

"Just 'cause I married you don't mean my life changes, mister. Do you hear *me*? Now I'm going to this dance tonight, and I'm gonna win twenty-five dollars, *understand?*"

"Sit your ass down, Salley Mae," Nora commanded, also getting up from her chair. "You're married now, plain and simple. And what your husband says, goes."

Salley Mae looked bewildered. She swung her body toward Randolph, who remained in his chair. He met her pleading eyes with a nod, showing his approval of her settling down to married life. Tears fell furiously from her eyes, and she turned and marched upstairs. Nora sat back down and closed her eyes, and Jack remained standing, feeling the bitter-sweet power of control.

Salley Mae had slammed the door behind her and flung her body on the bed. The tears continued to fall, and she felt angry enough to ransack the bedroom. So this is marriage, she thought, and suddenly she began to question all of her homegirls' rush to be married off. She had felt inadequate being single while they got married, as though she was missing out on something fabulous. Spectacular.

"Now I understand why Viv doesn't even *look* at a man," she mumbled to herself. "And Jesus—I just thought she was *strange*, when all this time, she just be knowin' things. Damn, I'm stupid!"

She tried to lie down and let her anger subside so that she could think rationally, and do whatever she could to fix the mess she was in. But it was no use. All she could think about was getting her gun from the dresser drawer and shooting up the place, running Jack, Randolph and Nora out forever. She got up and looked for the gun, and found it under a pair of old bloomers. It was still loaded. She

wondered if she could shoot it, and she reminisced briefly about her father who taught her how to shoot.

"Now hold it steady, Salley Mae. Don't be afraid if it kicks back at you, just keep shooting it."

"I want to shoot a possum, daddy. I don't want to aim at no stupid tin can."

"Aw, shoot the damn thing, girl. How you gonna shoot a possum if you can't shoot a tin can?"

Salley Mae thought about how she aimed steadily at the tin can, sending it flying in the air on her first shot. She became such a good shot that her father took her hunting with him all the time.

The gun felt familiar to her again. She held it tightly and began wandering around the room, thinking of things to shoot. There wasn't anything in particular that she wanted to destroy in the room, so she glanced outside for a target. Sitting on the fence outside were three jars with small plants in them. Targets, she thought, and she steadied her hand for the kill. Three loud bangs echoed through the house and outside as Salley Mae easily found each of the jars. She smiled to herself, and thought again of her father.

"Good, gawd, baby girl! I haven't seen anyone shoot as good as you in all my days. At least not on a first try."

"I did good, didn't I, daddy? Let me try again! Let me try again!" she chanted.

Her father rushed to the fallen tin can and placed it back on the fence. He moved closer to Salley Mae to watch her aim.

"Steady it now, girl. Steady it!"

Salley Mae aimed again. BAM! The can went flying in the air. Her father, shocked, began laughing loudly, calling everyone to come outside and watch Salley Mae shoot.

Salley Mae lowered the gun. Downstairs she heard everyone scrambling, and, realizing what she had done, she rushed to the bed and laid down, the gun still in her hand. She closed her eyes as she heard someone come in.

"Oh, Salley Mae, Salley Mae," she heard Randolph repeat, his voice full of dejection.

He walked over to where she was lying, and she heard the footsteps of the others behind him. Randolph got on the bed and began to search Salley Mae's body for gunshot wounds.

"Salley Mae," he said, as if in tears, "Salley Mae. You could have gone to that dance, baby. You could have gone."

He continued to poke at her body, to search for her wounds. In the process, however, he was tickling her, and Salley Mae, trying

desperately to control herself, burst into laughter.

"Randolph, will you get off me?" she said, chuckling.

Randolph, seeing that Salley Mae was not injured, grabbed her by the neck and slapped her.

"What the hell is wrong with you, girl? I thought you was dead," he shouted angrily, continuing to slap her. Nora and Jack grabbed Randolph and pulled him off of Salley Mae. She put her hands over her face and laid still.

"Get out," she said through her hands. "Get the hell out."

They all left the room, closing the door behind them. Salley Mae began to cry again, until she dozed off into a restless sleep.

When Salley Mae finally woke up, the house was silent. It was late and everyone had gone to bed. She sat up, tired, and began to think about the evening. It oppressed her to think of the missed dance, the tyranny of her husband, the slaps in the face, and she felt the need to escape. Getting up from the bed she rummaged through her drawers quietly, grabbing a few clothes and throwing them on the bed. She untied a sock in which she kept her money and emptied its contents, grabbed her change purse and two bags, then gathered her money and clothes together. Her shoes in her hand and her bags flung over her shoulders, she crept silently out of the house and headed for the train station. She was going home where she belonged, back to Pennsylvania with Vivian and Jesus.

Salley Mae got up from the kitchen table and went into the sitting room. Vivian shook her head, thinking about the story that Salley Mae told. Jesus, too, sat for a moment, reflecting on the story. Salley Mae had gotten visibly upset as she continued on with the tale, her laughing eyes showing hurt and frustration. Jesus got up and walked to the sitting room, where Salley Mae was sitting with her eyes closed. Jesus kneeled by her side.

"What are you doing to do, Mae?"

Salley Mae did not move. After a moment of silence, a heavy sigh escaped from her.

"I'm not going back home, or back to Jack, for that matter, 'specially since I can't dance no more. Hell, who ever heard of someone tellin' a grown woman that she can't dance no more?"

Salley Mae opened her eyes and stared ahead with a blank expression on her face. She then closed her eyes again, releasing another sigh.

"Nobody, I tell you," she said, answering herself. "Nobody."

# A TALE OF TWO WITCHES\*

Mila D. Aguilar

*In the barrio of San Roque, a witch is reputed to have lived. Having hypnotized a native girl into the magic of her craft, she is said to have carted her away, to her lair on top of the highest hill in San Roque.*

Talia had arrived in the barrio distraught, but determined to overcome. The town had been too much for her, bearing down too heavily on her singleblessedness: her relatives, her co-teachers, those she did not especially consider her friends but declared themselves to be so. Even the principal—married with children—had gotten into the fray, attempting to seduce her on such a shallow challenge as that she must prove her womanhood.

She was not about to. Growing up under her father's tutelage, she had learned to be independent—rather too fiercely for the town's tastes. And at thirty-three, she was still curious about the world. No, she was not about to give up her independence and thirst for knowledge; but yes, though she felt quite above the mediocrity of that little town, she was not a little affected by the pressures it had brought to bear upon her.

So she ended up in San Roque, choosing to farm an almost forgotten two-hectare lot left by her dead father, trying to cut links completely with her immediate past. It was this complete cutting of links that led to her first—and last—fateful encounter with San Roque's *kapitan del barangay*.

Ka Tiago — as he was fondly called by his subjects — was not a man to suffer rejection. He had worked his way through to the barrio people's affections, in a manner of speaking, and now immensely enjoyed his absolute hold on them. If he had been more educated and operating in the city, he would have called himself an "organization man;" but since he was merely an elementary school graduate and *barrio jefe*, he prided himself in its local equivalent, that of being a *pulitiko*, like it ran in his blood and was his predestination. In truth, like any city organization man, he maintained his power over the people with a heavy dose of intrigue balanced by an ever so slight dash of charm.

When Talia showed up in his house to register her presence in the

\*A glossary of Tagalog (the language of the people of the Philippines from which the national language is being developed) terms follows the story. Tagalog terms are italicized the first time they appear in the text. Dialogue in Tagalog is italicized and translated into English in the text.

barangay, Ka Tiago's first reaction was to be tickled no end. A small, stocky man with a power drive stronger than his character, it flattered him to acquire a subject with a college education, and a *maestra* no less. Her face attracted him immediately. What joy to have such a one pay homage to him after all these years of being worshipped by a bunch of big-toed grade-three numbskulls!

When Talia had made known her purpose and was properly seated on the bench in front of his rough-hewn table, Ka Tiago immediately dispatched his wife and youngest son to fetch some paper or other not a few mountain hills away, enough time for him to finish two big cigars. Dutifully the fat woman, an inch taller than he but a third-grader nonetheless, left two glasses and a potful of native freshly brewed coffee, already milked and sweetened, on the table, in front of the *maestra*. Then off she lugged her runny-nosed son to fulfill her mission.

Ka Tiago lost no time in signing the *maestra*'s papers, presuming that he would make his catch. But Talia sensed danger in the wife and son's easy dispatch and made ready to leave with her signed papers, saying stiffly, "*Salamat, kapitan, makaalis na po.*" ("Thank you, kapitan. I have to go.")

The *kapitan*'s cigar almost fell off his broad, dark mouth at the unfriendly response. Nevertheless his charm quickly overtook his surprise.

He smiled. "*O, huwag ka munang umalis, magkape ka muna. Alam mo, dito sa a in matagal bago makuha ang papeles na iyan. Maraming kung anu-anong rekisitos. Pero dahil sa ikaw ay edukada, hindi man lang ako nagdalawang-isip. Sa katotohanan, marami pa akong kailangang itanong sa iyo. Marami tayong kailangang pagusapan. Kailangang mapatunayan ko na hindi ako nag-kamali sa pagrerehistro sa iyo. Alam mo naman. . .*" ("Come now, don't go yet. Take some coffee. You know, it takes a lot of time to get those papers here—plenty of requisites. But since you are educated, I did not even take a second thought. In truth, I still have quite a few questions to ask you. We have much to talk about. After all, I have to prove that I did not make a mistake in giving you your registration papers. You know how it is. . . .")

So she stayed rooted to the bench, her back stiffening at each round-about phrase, her eyes fixed on his ungainly nose and big mouth while he rambled on and on. How common this toad, she began thinking, how ugly like a frog. How like a frog he croaks. How like a high-pitched frog.



“How old are you?” he asked. “Thirty-three? And not yet married? With so many eligibles in town? I am forty and already blessed with a dozen children. It is good to be married; one is served. My wife—you just met her—serves me coffee whenever I want it. Ah, but she reached only grade three and you are *edukada*. What made you want to settle in this isolated barrio? Life in town is so much more exciting. Someday, I myself will settle in the town, maybe to become mayor, when I have bought enough land to stop farming. Now, I already have four tenants, but I still have to do some farming myself. But I will retire in the prime of life, move on to bigger things.”

What do I care about you, ugly man, she thought to herself, staring now at his teeth reddened from chewing betel nut. All I want is a quiet and peaceful life.

But she said nothing.

Not getting a response, he twaddled on—now sitting down on the stool across the table, now walking about the cement floor.

“I have worked in town myself. In fact, I was able to save enough to buy a piece of land—this very land my house is standing on. I will never forget the town. You know, when I lived there, I had a girlfriend studying to be a maestra, like you. She was also tall and thin. She had long hair, like you. *Edukada. Intelektwal*. Graceful. Long neck. Just like you. But I had to go back to my barrio, because I knew in my heart that this was where I should start serving my people,” he sighed, striking his breast with his rough palm, his head bent appropriately. And sighing again, he continued wistfully, “She wouldn’t go with me. She did not understand my cause in life. We were compatible in everything except my cause. And so I had to leave her.”

Talia could not have cared less about this man’s romantic past. However, his unravelling of comparisons made her hair stand on end; not so much out of fear as out of absolute contempt. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at every “*parang ikaw*,” her head had reared. By the end of the story her stiffening neck had stretched its full length. When, after a short pause, the kapitan added another “*Talagang parang ikaw*,” she was already angry, her lips thinned to a hard straight line; her nostrils flared and expelled hot air.

Sitting now, the kapitan reached for his coffee, drawing his stool closer to the table, his dark hairy arms sliding and his body leaning towards her.

“It is good you came. Now I can talk to somebody at my own level. My wife, you know, I didn’t love her at first, but she has served me well. But I cannot talk to her at my own level. I only learned to love her through the years. One gets used to it after a while. After all, she has

given me so many robust children, all alive. But my girlfriend was something else, really something else."

Talia leaned her tensed back on the windowsill, moving her hands away from the tabletop to the bench, ready to go. The kapitan went on. "*Ikaw naman, magkwento ka naman tungkol sa iyong sarili. Ako na lang ang nagkukwento. Paano ka naman napadpad sa lugar na ito e napakalayo sa sibilisasyon?*" ("Now how about you. Tell me about yourself. I'm the only one talking here! How'd you come to a place like this, so far away from civilization?")

That was it. A very private person to begin with, she loathed the idea of explaining to a total stranger—and what was more, a totally ugly stranger—her lifetime angst. Without a word she stood up, taking her papers from the table. At the table corner near the door she stopped, her head turned sideways to him, her body poised to get out, her fingers firmly on the papers. With full contempt she looked down at the man and said curtly, "*Sa akin na 'yon. Salamat sa rehistro. Aali na ako.*" ("That's my business. Thank you for the papers. I am leaving.")

The kapitan's left hand was holding his cigar, his right hand on his glass of coffee. He looked up at her and noticed for the first time her fiery eyes. He was so surprised that she had left before the insult dawned on him.

## II

The construction of her nipa hut on top of the highest hill in the barrio, on her father's land, took little time. She had hired a fast and efficient carpenter from her town to put it up. That was the way she wanted it: as little contact as possible with the barrio people, so she could have her peace and quiet.

When the war-vintage truck that bought her things came, the barrio people and their children milled around it, curious and happy about the only new inhabitant in their barangay. The women marveled, almost with fright, at the antique bed, table, chairs and *baul* with their baroque designs. They had never seen anything like them before. But aside from the basic furniture and implements necessary to conduct daily life, what occupied most of the truck were tattered boxes soggy with the rain.

Talia immediately regretted that she could bring only two haulers from her town, the driver included. The truck could not reach the top of the hill anymore, and it was quite a trek to the house.

When the *baul's* turn came, she had the two haulers bring it. But it was so heavy, and the way so steep, that two more barrio men had to

come to their aid. Talia watched them helplessly as they trudged up the hill.

She was watching thus, her back to the truck, when she saw the other men and boys already bringing a box each up the hill. She opened her mouth and poised to wave them down but failed to utter a word.

A woman who had been standing by silently noticed her predicament. She went up the hill and started directing the barrio men on the proper handling of the wet tattered boxes.

Talia saw the lithe, skirted form running up and down the hill, and started to breathe easily. She had counted the boxes winding their way up; now only one was left.

She turned toward the truck to find it. Nothing! She felt the blood surge into her head and looked around. The children were in a commotion. Several boys were fighting over the privilege of bringing the box.

"*Huwag! Huwag!*" ("Don't! Don't!") she cried frantically, her eyes all fired up. But before she could come near them, a heavy thud arrested her movement.

It had fallen, the box had fallen apart! Gloomily, she ran to the scattered papers, her beloved father's precious papers. There lay his unfinished calculations, his handwritten poems, his scientific articles. And there, in one corner farthest from her, lay his only novel.

The children stood at bay, frightened by their deed. They had never seen so much paper before. The scribblings looked strange and formidable. They had never been taught such in school. But finally their eyes all focused on the big book with its colorful cover.

It was the strangest book they had ever seen. Dominated by various shades of green and brown with streaks of red, it seemed to represent a formidable forest; the trees all gnarled and dark and massive; their leaves huge and knotted. Drops of blood flowed irregularly on the cavernous trunks. At the top, seeming to grow out of the forest, sprung, like the rays of the sun, three short words. None of the children had learned to read English, and the barrio men and women who were left near the truck could hardly read. So no one in the barrio ever knew that the three words were, simply, *The Great Faith*.

Before Talia could finish picking up the papers, one boy naughtily snatched the book and ran to his parents with it. Talia's eyes flashed with anger. "*Ibalik mo iyan! Ibalik my iyan!*" ("Give that back to me! Give that back!") she shouted. But he would not, and she could only manage to grit her teeth.

It was the lithe woman who came again to the rescue. Hearing

Talia's cries, she sped down the hill, in time to grab the boy by his mud-spattered shirt. She took the book from him and, with great care, dusted it.

Then she walked over to Talia; holding the book gingerly with her two hands, she gave it to her without a word.

Talia looked into her eyes thoughtfully. They were big, soulful eyes, eyes that looked and saw. The woman smiled. Her lips were small and soft looking, untainted by sorrow. Her smile was the smile of one who understands.

### III

Talia and Lisa became fast friends.

Lisa came up the hill, at first, to help put the house in order. She wanted to be hospitable to this strange woman who had immediately upon arrival pushed the barrio folk to a distance. At the same time the strangeness itself attracted her, mystified her, drew her daily to the house on top of the hill.

For she herself was not an ordinary barrio woman. Taller than the rest of them, her features more those of a town lass; she stood out in their midst like a sore thumb. Almost thirty, she had not yet married in a place where most girls have two children by the time they reach the age of sixteen. In a barrio where even the kapitan had finished only grade six, she had by some fortuitous circumstance been sent to the town high school. And unconscious as she was of it, she was the barrio's most intelligent person.

Lisa learned quite a few things about the proper arrangement of furniture from Talia. To make the most of space and give an illusion of spaciousness even in cramped quarters, Talia had explained you must keep most furniture by the wall. So she, Lisa, lined up the living room chairs by one wall, making the room look stiff and formidable. "No, no, not like that," Talia threw up her hands in exasperation. "And, besides, there are exceptions."

Lisa laughed heartily. She had a laugh that rang, a laugh full of innocence and joy, like the small tingling shells that gaily signal the opening of a door to the fresh winds of May.

Talia's sad eyes lit up. She could not help but laugh too. The shells had tingled their way to her skin, bringing with them fresh winds to permeate her being.

Next came the planting of the fruits and vegetables. Talia had learned the basics of planting from teaching high school, and had read the rest from books. But Lisa knew planting by heart, having grown up in the barrio. So, using the special seeds Talia had bought from the

agriculture bureau in her town, they planted fruits and vegetables all around the house. Lisa corrected Talia's book knowledge. Talia explained to Lisa the scientific bases of her own practice.

Talia felt immeasurably satisfied in teaching and relearning at the same time. Things she had seemed to know so well before gained an entirely new perspective, were sometimes even overturned by the supremacy of this barrio woman's indisputable experience. Not having been brought up with much pride, much less false pride, Talia bowed effortlessly to Lisa, who had come to help her.

But the explanations bedazzled Lisa no end. She had never before thought that learning could go beyond high school, and though she had had before Talia's arrival an indefinable thirst for knowledge, and had racked her brains trying to cull something from the sun, and the rain and the trees, without getting anywhere, she had never before so much as abated her thirst. The barrio people had the most befuddling reasons for doing or not doing certain things, such as not sweeping at night so as not to lose God's grace, or not leaving the table before the single women had finished eating, lest they never get married or planting this or that fruit or vegetable in such a way, so that *nuno sa punso*, who lived in an anthill nearby (which must never be stepped on, so as not to anger its occupant), would not come to eat them. Talia had a scientific or ethical explanation for all these.

So now here was a spring that thoroughly quenched her dry throat, a spring with which she could choose to wet her tongue or palate, or gargle or gulp down its splendor and freshness.

Talia did not miss out on this awakening. It showed all over. Lisa's big soulful eyes would grow even bigger, engulfing Talia's words and bringing them deep, deep down into her own consciousness. Her small, soft mouth would open ever so slightly in gentle amazement, her comely upturned nose wrinkling in awe. She would rub her stubby hands, strong and sensitive at the same time, against her skirt asking for more knowledge, more explanations, more answers about life and the world.

So it was that Lisa came to spend more and more time in the house up the highest hill. They began to scour Talia's built-in bookshelves, the latter guiding her through until she was able to jump from the easiest reading matter to the more difficult. They read about anything and everything under the sun, in bed, on the sala set, by the dining table in front of their meals. Often they would keep the Coleman lamps burning late into the night, reading until their eyelids fell with sleep, or suddenly rocking the silence with laughter about some funny passage which one had read and shared with the other.

It was Talia's idea to spend the night out under the sky one evening when the moon was full and so many stars dotted the hemisphere that they almost crowded each other. She wanted to know more about this woman, how she could exist in this barrio, how she managed to spring up seemingly out of nowhere. She herself felt a welling in her breast, a welling up that had started in her abdomen and wanted to be disgorged thoroughly, cleansing, purifying, whatever it had to leave behind.

"Have you ever slept out under the night sky?" Talia asked, rather timidly, afraid to be rejected. "It is best to sleep on the beach, but there's no beach here. There you could hear the waves smashing on the sand. But here maybe it's better, because with the silence I think you can even hear the stars. I've never tried it myself, yet, in a place like this."

And she looked into Lisa's eyes, expectantly and with trepidation.

Though Lisa was born in the barrio, she had never slept under the night sky. On hot summer nights she had gone on the nipa-covered bamboo porch with her *banig*, as was the custom in the barrio, to cool off but not to listen to the stars. The idea of listening to the stars, and with her new-found friend, excited her.

"*Sige, dalhin natin ang banig at unan at kumot pero magkatol tayo, dahil malamok,*" ("Okay, let's bring the mat and the pillow and blanket, but we'd better light a *katol*, too, for the mosquitos,") Lisa responded immediately, her eyes shining with enthusiasm.

As in their first encounter, Talia's bated breath resumed its regular rhythm upon this demonstration of utter spontaneity.

And so it was that Talia and Lisa began to know each other.

Lying under the night sky, between pointing out the big dipper, the small dipper — or *ang supot ni Hudas* to Lisa — and looking for Sirius and the north star, each asked the other questions about her past.

Talia learned that Lisa was an adopted child, taken in by a childless couple under, and despite mysterious circumstances.

Almost thirty years before, Lisa's future adoptive father was walking by the highway several hills off from the barrio, on his way to rent out his labor to another farm, when a bus stopped some meters away from him. A young woman, tall and comely, got off holding a box. When the bus had roared off, she put down her box and walked to the other side of the road. The man passed by the box and seemed to hear the cry of a baby. But not thinking that anything extraordinary was happening, he went his way.

He had walked quite a few puffs of his cigarette when a bus going the other way sped by, and seemed to stop. Casually he turned

ground, expecting the young woman to go up to the bus with her box. She did, but on the other side of the road he spied it, still lying on the dewy grass. He ran after the bus, trying to flag it down, waving wildly, shouting with all his might. But the bus's engine must have been too noisy, because it sped right off.

The man, then, ran to the box in an effort to find an address which was not there; instead he discovered a baby cradled in a comfortable swathe of baby clothes.

Since the man and his wife were childless after twenty years of marriage, they decided to adopt that baby.

"And how did you know you were adopted?" Talia asked.

"Everyone in the barrio knows."

"I wonder how it feels to be adopted."

"Nothing. They are my parents as far as I know."

"Do you love them?"

"Very much. They could feel for me. My mother has always said if I feel that it is time to go, I should go. They won't stop me, because they know I am not meant for the barrio. No one knows that I go to town secretly; only they know. They sacrificed much just to send me to the town high school. They wanted to send me to college, but they couldn't afford it. My father himself had worked in town trying to finish high school, but he got married early to his barrio sweetheart, my mother."

"But why do you go to town secretly?"

"Because I am always looking for something. I don't know what. I have to do it secretly because here a *dalaga* is bad if she goes alone. And I can't always come with other people; not too many travel here because of the difficulty. There is a forest path, much shorter, right at the back of this house, but the others won't take it. They say there are creatures there — *aswang* and *tikbalang*."

And then Lisa whispered furtively, "*Wala naman e. Doon ako dumadaan.*" ("There aren't any such things. I've been through that forest path many times.")

Talia laughed. How light she felt with Lisa! "*May plano ka bang umalis dito?*" ("Do you have any plans for leaving this place?") she asked.

"*Oo! Gusto kong tumira sa malaking syudad,*" ("Yes, I'd like to live in the big city,") Lisa answered without a second thought, her eyes lighting up. "*Sasamahan mo ako?*" ("Will you come with me?")

And their eyes, afloat on their new understanding, met.

"What about you," Lisa asked. "Did you not come here to stay?"

Talia came back to herself, her agonies. “No,” she answered. “Just for some peace and quiet, just for a while. I would like to write. Then there are some experiments my father was working on when he was alive.”

She thought about her father. He was not a great scientist, she told Lisa. He was more of a writer, but he was interested in everything. So he experimented and read much about science. But most of all he wrote. “He was a good man, unlike any I have ever known. He was a teacher by profession, but he and my mother were thrifty to a fault so he was able to acquire enough to assure his children some financial stability. I was the last child, born ten years after my elder sister. I practically grew up alone. Perhaps that is why I learned to write.”

“Your father must have been like you,” Lisa said.

“I was molded in his image,” she answered. “Even my mother molded me in his image. They brought me up not to think of my gender. I was always a *person*. It was easier when I was young, nobody demanded the subservience of a woman from me. Besides, in my college years I was in Manila, where no one minds anyone. But as I grew older everyone started to ask, why aren’t you married yet? Your intelligence is going to waste. Why do you argue so much? You’re a woman. Be feminine. Don’t think. Don’t hanker after so much knowledge. Just be a woman and take care of your man. Let *him* do the hankering. I couldn’t take it.”

As she spoke, Talia’s eyes wandered farther and farther into the distance, into the space between the stars.

“I have always dreamed of a nether world where all is true and just and beautiful. I think that is why I became a writer, why I would rather be holed up on top of a hill, observing people, not talking to them. I am looking for something myself — a heaven, or maybe just a haven. Maybe I will end up writing satire,” she laughed to herself.

Talia paused, her eyes still reaching for the space between the stars, her voice becoming even more distant.

“I don’t think many people understand me. I must be too complicated. In fact, I have never found anyone who could understand me.”

She turned to Lisa, who was looking at her sympathetically but, somehow, vacantly. It is too much for her, Talia thought. It is not yet time. Someday she will see, but not now, it is too soon. Besides I am still too mixed up myself.

Feeling satisfied enough with having unburdened herself so, she changed the subject, and told her friend about the principal, and the other men, all of a kind.



“Akala ko iba na rito. Mas masahol pa yata. Yung kapitan na ’yan. . . .” (“I thought it would be different here. Maybe it’s even worse. That kapitan. . . .”)

Lisa laughed. “Kahit as akin nagtangka na rin ’yan. Pero hindi siya makaabante. Pinakamatanda na kasi ang Itay at tinitingala rito. Habang buhay any Itay, wala siyang magagawa. Kaya kinukuha na lang sa tingin. At saka, ang ginagawa ko na lang, umiiwas.” (“He’s tried that with me too, but he couldn’t make base one. That’s because my father is the oldest man here and respected by all. While my father lives, his hands are bound. He could only stand and stare. Besides, all I do is avoid him.”)

Then pausing to think, she continued, “Pero tama ka. Ganyan nga rito. Kailangang magpailalim ka. Hindi lang nila ako magalaw, dahil para bang naiiba ako sa kanila.” (“But you are right. That’s the way it is here: a woman has to be submissive. They just can’t touch me, because I don’t seem to be one of them.”)

Their eyes met again: Talia’s looking exasperated; Lisa’s all wonder at the new discovery. But they were both smiling now.

“Ang supot ni Huday, tingnan mo, kumikinang o!” (“Look, Judas’s money bag is twinkling!”) Lisa laughed, pointing up at the sky. She looked back at Talia and laughed again. “Pero alam mo, kung naiiba ako, mas naiiba ka yata. Nagtataka ang lahat sa ’yo, kahit babae at bata.” (“But, you know, if I am different, you are even more so.”)

“Bakit?” (“Why?”)

“Iba ka kasi. Hindi ka nakikisalamuha. Hindi ka nagbabahay-bahay. Hindi ka matsismis, tulad ng ibang babae.” (“Because you are different. You don’t mix. You don’t socialize. You don’t engage in gossip like other women.”) She looked at Talia carefully, afraid to hurt her.

But Talia’s reply was philosophical. “Wala akong magagawa. Iba ang pakay ko sa buhay.” (“I can’t do anything about that. I have a different purpose in life.”)

“Oo nga,” (“Of course,”) she replied approvingly, stroking Talia’s arm. “Maiba ako, ano yung nasa baul.” (“By the way, what is in your trunk?”)

“Chemicals and vials for experiments, a laboratory set, a slide projector and slides from my college days, sensitive equipment in general,” Talia answered. It took some time to explain to Lisa what these were for, but Lisa showed she understood, even if she may not have imagined their full use.

“But why do you ask?” Talia wondered aloud.

Lisa was hard put to explain.

"You see, the people in the barrio, they have no secrets from each other. They've never seen such things. Even your furniture looks strange to them. Your father's book, they think it's something about. . . . They think you're different. They have their suspicions. They think you're — you know — another kind of creature."

"What!" Talia pressed. "What do they think I am?" She looked searchingly into Lisa's big eyes.

Lisa's eyes softened. She could hardly look at Talia, so afraid was she to see the hurt. She lay on her back and looked at the full moon, now high up in the sky.

"They think you're a witch," Lisa said, her voice trailing off.

The silence seemed an insuperable barrier. Then Talia broke into a loud laugh, and Lisa could look at her again.

"They burn witches at the stake, don't they?" Talia said softly, thoughtful again. Looking into the big soulful eyes for succor. "What do you think?" she finally managed to ask timidly, after a long pause.

Lisa looked back into the dark sad eyes of her friend. She put her hand on the other's cheek, let it lay there softly, and whispered with the greatest tenderness, "As long as you're with me you need never worry." And then she kissed Talia, beside the hand she had lain on her cheek, the kiss glancing the side of Talia's lips.

And so that night they lay, the two women, in peaceful sleep, holding on to each other's hands, the light of the full moon shining high above them.

#### IV

When Ka Tiago had heard all the salacious details of the arrival of the maestra, he immediately felt the beginning of his triumph. Having digested the insult hurled at him, he had vowed revenge; but a revenge without confrontation like the man without character that he was.

The barrio residents came to him one by one, confused at what they had seen. "What is she?" they asked. "How did she get there?"

And he answered in a righteous tone, "Well, you know, we live in a democracy, and everyone is innocent until proven guilty. Everyone has the right of domicile. The title to her land was genuine, and all her papers were in order. Of course, I had no choice but to approve her registration. But nothing is permanent. Everything changes. After all, the registration is only for a year. And if there is cause, we can expel her or even jail her."

He conveniently failed to mention, of course, that she was a maestra, for that fact alone would have been enough to reverse the

people's observations. Instead he made haste to add, "*Pero ano nga ba ang nakita ninyo?*" ("So, what was it you saw?")

And each told his story.

One noticed that she flailed her arms in a way he had never seen before, because, it seems, she did not want anyone to see the contents of her boxes.

"Flailed her arms—like a bat?" the kapitan asked with perfect timing, in the proper conspiratorial tone.

"Yes, yes, like a bat! Even her eyes were all afire like a bat's," the resident answered, the image now indelibly printed in his mind.

Another told of the giant book with the horrid creatures on the cover, which his nephew had seen and related to his mother, the storyteller's sister-in-law. And then the strange scribblings nearly jumped off the yellowed pages, he added.

"You don't think—witchcraft. You mean books and papers on witchcraft?" the kapitan asked, seemingly with hesitation.

"Witchcraft—oh no! Yes! It couldn't be anything but witchcraft!" exclaimed the interlocutor.

A third described the awesome furniture with the mysterious designs, a description he had picked up from the wife of his cousin, who had heard it from her neighbor.

"The same designs as the books and papers on witchcraft?" the kapitan suggested, moving his cigar as if he were drawing the carvings in the air, in front of the man's eyes.

"Yes, they must have been! Of course they were!" the man gasped, dizzy from following the cigar's circled route.

One of the men who had carried the baul related its awesome weight. "As heavy as lead," he said.

"What? There was a dead person inside?" the kapitan asked, sending a wave of recognition into the man's eyes. "Are you sure it was only one dead person? Not many chopped to size?"

And the reporter shuddered at what, in his mind, already was.

After each visit, the kapitan sat back on his rough wooden wall in self-satisfaction, one leg at a level with his ass on the bedroom bamboo floor, one hand on his knee holding a lighted cigar stub, the other leg hanging down freely over the cement of the combined sala-dining-room-kitchen. He was right in pretending to be busy at the farm upon the maestra's arrival. Not having been an eyewitness to the event, he now merely served to crystallize the people's opinions. Moreover, the people came to him; and he took great care to talk to each one separately, simply suggesting conclusions to what each reported. He would continue to stay away, and let his men and the other barrio folk

do the spying and the work of avenging his ego for him.

So they came every day, sometimes twice a day, for weeks.

The very first reports after the incident were of the increasing frequency of Lisa's visits to the "witch." It had become an established fact, after each talk with the kapitan, that Talia was a witch. Those who were present at her arrival recalled, in hindsight, how Talia and Lisa's eyes had locked while Lisa was handing the book to the witch and how that look must have been the beginning of a hypnotic trance that kept Lisa coming back daily to the house on the highest hill for longer and longer hours, until she even slept there nights. Others reported unholy laughter in the dead of night, laughter that rocked the trees near their homes. Still others saw light as bright as the sun issuing from the hill, so bright it could be seen mountains away till the wee hours of the morning. All this occurred on the nights that Lisa stayed with the witch.

Then finally, the *tanod* sent by Ka Tiago to spy on the two came to say that he had seen them sleeping on the grass under the full moon, that the witch had planted a death kiss on the lips of the poor girl, and that he had left them in an even deadlier embrace and scurried off, lest they turn without warning into *tikbalangs*.

These reports, especially the last, stung the kapitan to the quick and fueled his ire. It had been bad enough that Talia had deflated his ego, the witch. Now she would even best him in the purely male game of winning a woman he had sought to woo. She was a witch, indeed, he managed to convince himself. Otherwise, how could any woman be the better of a man?

If the kapitan had been braver, he would immediately have laid siege to the house on top of the hill upon hearing of this insult of insults to his manhood. But he happened to be a coward, intrigue his only special capacity. So, he chose to wait out his revenge.

The only step the kapitan took now was to warn the barrio folk not to tell Lisa's adoptive parents about their suspicions until the evidence of witchcraft was beyond doubt—on the pretext that they might, without meaning to, send the old folks to their graves against God's will. But in truth, the kapitan wanted to prevent the old folks from hearing of the intrigue and therefore foiling it. Instead he advised them to win back Lisa in any way they could by diverting her to more godly pursuits. Why not invite her to the fiesta in town, he suggested to one. Or involve her in the cleanliness drive, he told another. Talk with her, make friends with her, he urged a third. Warn her about what she's getting into.

And so it was that Lisa came to know what the people thought

about her friend. Divert her, however, they could not. The months passed by, and the fruits and vegetables grew bigger than any the barrio had seen. And *there* lay added evidence of witchcraft—for who had ever seen squash as large as huts and papayas big enough to fill one table? And Lisa started to stay on the hill for days and nights on end, barely going home to her parents.

The kapitan's fated stroke of luck, however, did come one stormy night.

Talia and Lisa had been to see the latter's parents and had just finished eating supper. The old man commended his adopted daughter for having chosen such a fine friend. Suddenly, Lisa seemed to hear, through the storm, the muffled cries of their neighbor from another hill a short distance away. She knew it was one month before Daling's time. She'd been left alone by her husband, who'd gone to town to buy their sari-sari store supplies. Daling had two children with her, and one of the cries seemed to be that of the elder child.

Lisa told the party of her suspicions and immediately pulled Talia to the rescue. The old man advised that they go straight to the place, for the *komadrone* was in the other barrio, waiting on another patient. But the walk was slippery and the mud knee-deep. So, when they reached the house, Daling was already unconscious on the floor, the baby out and motionless, its umbilical cord unremoved.

"*Kalalabas lang ba?*" ("Has it just come out?") Talia immediately asked the elder child. But he was one of the children who'd been present at her arrival and had heard all the horror stories. He paled upon seeing Talia and remained mute and plastered to the wall throughout.

They could do nothing but revive the poor woman. Talia cut the umbilical cord and cleaned up the baby and the mess.

When Daling came to and saw Lisa, she was relieved. Lisa told her gently that her baby had died, having been born in the most dangerous month, as Talia had explained while cleaning up. But Daling espied Talia from the corner of her eyes and became hysterical. Soon her two children joined the hysteria.

Afraid to cause more harm to the family, Talia and Lisa left hurriedly.

The very next day, talk of the witch's latest deed was rife in the barrio. She had sucked the blood of the baby, it was said, and that was why it died. She would have sucked the blood of the pregnant woman too, if the woman had not by some good fortune regained her consciousness and shouted her lungs out. And Lisa was there; she must have sucked some blood. So, now, she too is a witch.

When Daling's husband got off the bus from town, he was immediately met by the rumormongers—about a dozen in all. Inflamed,

he proceeded without much ado to the kapitan's house, trailed by the rumormongers. "It is time we did something," he demanded, backed up by a chorus. "They have already taken a life. It is time we took theirs."

The kapitan raised his hands to silence them. "Okay, okay, if you are with me, I am with you. Let us plan this thing very, very carefully. Let us be sure we get them," at that he stuck out his fist and made a back-handed jab.

The small crowd cheered. The kapitan was their hero.

## V

The old man finally heard about the rumors from the hysterical Daling. He tried to explain that he had talked to Talia over dinner, rather lengthily, and that he thought she was a fine womam, chaste and pure of mind.

But it was too late. She remained unconvinced and merely stammered that the witches deserved to be killed by the barrio people. Yes, even now, the latter were with the kapitan planning the witches' demise. The couple should never have adopted that baby. Maybe she was, in truth, a witch's daughter just waiting for another witch to take her.

The old man lost no time running to the house on top of the highest hill. "*Umalis na kayo,*" ("You have to get out of here,") he advised. "*Kilala ko ang mga taong-baryo. Hindi na sila mapakikiusapan. Kung sana sinabi ninyo sa akin ito nang mas maaga, hindi na ito mangyari. Kung sana may nagsabi sa akin . . .*" ("I know these people. They cannot be prevailed upon. If you had only told me earlier, this would not have happened. If someone had only told me . . .")

But it was too late, and all he could do was entrust his dear adopted daughter to the hand of God.

"*Harinawa'y pagpalain kayo ng Diyos, saan man kayo magpunta,*" ("May God bless you, wherever you go,") he said as he blessed the two women on his way out.

The news of having been blamed for the death of Daling's baby hurt Talia to the core. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks as Lisa held her head to her breast. But there was no time to be hurt, the danger was too present.

"It has come," Lisa told her gently, stroking her hair. "Now we have to leave."

"But my father's legacy! I cannot leave it behind!" she cried. "It is precious to me!"

Lisa stopped to think. Talia was right. But how could they leave

delly with all that baggage. Maybe Talia could let go of most of the belongings, except for the novel and her father's papers. The kitchen things and even the clothes were surely dispensable. But what about the big bulky furniture? And the baul?

"Are the contents of the baul precious to you?" Lisa asked.

"I could buy them again in the city, after some saving up," Talia answered.

Then all we need is a few days to hold them off. If only we had something to hold them off," Lisa thought aloud, her eyes fixed on an indeterminate distance. "If we had a *carabao* and a cart, we could easily drag those things through the forest. The way there is not so steep. It's not so hard to pass through the forest, you know. Even easier than climbing this hill. They don't know that. And right after the forest is an abandoned logging road where the truck could wait."

"Hold them off?" Talia asked, drying her cheeks now, her reason assuming control. "The only way to hold them off is to scare them off."

Almost simultaneously they turned to each other, a glint of recognition flashing between them as their eyes met.

"Of course!" Talia laughed. "What better way to scare them off! Now is the best time to put my knowledge of chemistry to a test. Open the baul. Where's the key?"

And so it was, that while Talia and Lisa ran through the forest and sped to town to arrange for the *carabao* and the truck and the haulers, the barrio folk thought that the two witches were still in the house on top of the highest hill.

Attempting to attack the hut that night, the barrio men and some brave women, armed with sticks and stones, were suddenly assaulted by sparks that flew and fire that blew, in all directions, such that they could not so much as get near the top of the hill. If they had been just a little more observant, they would have noticed that one of their own had tripped on a thin wire strung through the front perimeter, at mid-base.

Talia and Lisa came back the next day with the haulers and other equipment to find that their contraption had worked. Smiling and giggling like little girls, they packed up, mixing, stringing together still another contraption. At nightfall they started to set out on their long journey. It was already morning when they finished hauling the last of the furniture to the truck on the abandoned logging road. Finally seated in the truck, they ordered the driver to speed off in the direction of the highway.

The kapitan and the barrio folk had not attacked that night. They

were feverishly preparing their weapons. This time they aimed not to fail.

They launched their last attack the night after. Not far from the base of the hill, they were already met by the same crackle and whoosh of sparks and fire.

But they were prepared. Undaunted, the hardiest men continued their advance, and at the appropriate distance, just above mid-base, lit torches and strung them to sturdy bows, and aimed. Fire flew to the nipa roof, setting it aflame.

Quickly the whole party ran up the hill. But hardly had they reached the top, flames almost on the walls of the hut now, when another horrid thing happened. On the tree a short distance from the hut shone a terrible image, the very same the children had described to be on the giant book, without the inscriptions. It seemed to float in the air, rippling with the wind. Shortly sparks and fire flew again, issuing from the mysterious vegetable patch. Heavy mist flowed from the ground, thickest where there were mud puddles.

The barrio folk stood in awe, spears and *bolos* in hand, not daring to go any nearer. The kapitan slithered away to a distance, inconspicuously. Meanwhile, the fire they had thrown started to engulf the house, lending the floating image an even more frightening orange hue, as of flames eating up a whole forest.

And the hut suddenly blew apart. Everyone scampered for cover.

When the kapitan let go of his head and emerged from the bush where he had run for cover, it was all over. Nothing had been left of the hut. He strode up the hill like a conqueror, his mouth still biting a cigar, his thick lips stretched to their broadest width. From the top of the hill he surveyed what he thought was his triumph.

Nothing was left of the evil witches, he reported later at the *munisipyo*. "The only things that remained were broken shards of burnt glass, still hot with the fire we had thrown, and wire and tattered pieces of white cloth, all used by the witches for their blood-curdling activities. We have burned them to a crisp."

*So it was bruited about in the barrio of San Roque that two witches has sipped the blood of a newborn infant. And this was more than the kapitan and the people of San Roque could stand. So, the kapitan, who had been good enough to leave them be, and the people of San Roque burned the two witches to an unrecognizable crisp.*

#### GLOSSARY OF TAGALOG TERMS

*ang supot ni Hudas*: Judas's money bag  
*aswang*: witch or witches



*banig*: a cool mat made of nipa leaves  
*baul*: a native trunk made of wood; the bauls of poor people are made of plain wood, only the rich folk being able to afford ones with carved designs  
*bolos*: large, single-edged knives  
*carabao*: water buffalo  
*dalaga*: an unmarried woman  
*edukada*: an educated woman  
*intelektwal*: intellectual  
*jeje*: chief; adopted from the Spanish  
*Ka*: an address of respect; also considered a short term for “kasama” or tenant  
*kapitan del barangay*: chief of the *barangay*, a government unit equivalent to a barrio, instituted during the martial law years  
*katol*: a mosquito killer with a spiral shape  
*komadrone*: a midwife, usually unlicensed  
*maestra*: teacher; also adopted from the Spanish  
*munisipyo*: municipal hall  
*nuno sa punso*: according to Filipino superstition, a tiny strange creature who lives in an anthill  
“*parang ikaw*”: “like you” (“*Talagang parang ikaw*”: “Just like you”)  
*pulitiko*: politician  
*tanod*: guard  
*tikbalang*: a gigantic horse which smokes a cigar and has the body of a man; it lives atop trees

# ONE SHABBOS EVENING\*

Leslea Newman

(for A., with much love)

Lydia had just finished setting the table with her only two matching plates and bowls, when the doorbell rang. She glanced at the clock and smiled to herself as she hurried to open the door. Exactly 5:55. Emily was the only other dyke she knew who was compulsively early, just like herself. That's why they were best friends.

"Hi *Mamela*," Lydia said as she pulled open the door.

"Hi *Bubela*," Emily answered, handing Lydia a white paper bag that was sitting on her lap. "Here, take these," she said as Lydia stepped aside, and Emily wheeled past her into the apartment.

Lydia followed Emily down the hallway back to the kitchen, opening the top of the paper bag and sticking her nose inside. "*Quelles shayna* bagels," she said, pulling out a fat whole wheat and raisin bagel and placing it in the basket on the table. She pulled out two more, and frowned at Emily who was wiggling out of her coat.

"Emily, did you buy all whole wheat and raisin?"

Emily twisted around in her wheelchair to get a small brown bag out of the blue pouch that was hanging behind her from two small straps looped over the handles of her chair. "I didn't want you to have a fit, so I went to Waldbaums and got you an onion bagel and some cream cheese." She opened the bag and put its contents on the table, along with a stick of soy margarine. "I don't know why you insist on having white flour and dairy every Friday night when you know how bad it is for you."

"*Oy* Emily, such a *goyishe kop* you have." Lydia bent down and kissed the top of Emily's head. "A whole wheat and raisin bagel is like whole wheat and raisin spaghetti. *Feh*." She took Emily's coat from her and went to hang it in the hall closet. "Once a week I live a little," she said. "It didn't do my grandmother any harm and she lived to be eighty-seven."

"I can't hear you," Emily called, as she wheeled over to the stove and lifted the lid off a big soup pot. A cloud of steam immediately enveloped her. "Ummm, the soup smells great," Emily said as Lydia came back into the room. "Let's light the candles and eat."

Lydia put two white candles into a pair of brass candlesticks and

\*A glossary of Yiddish terms appears after the story. Yiddish words are italicized the first time they appear in the text and then no more.

placed them on the table. Then she lit one, Emily lit the other, and both women made three wide circles in the air with their hands, bathing themselves in the *Shabbos* light. They sang the blessing and kissed each other on both cheeks, saying "*Shabbot Shalom*." Then Emily wheeled to her place at the table and Lydia filled their bowls with chicken soup and sat down.

"So what's new?" Emily asked, dividing a *matzo* ball in half with the edge of her spoon.

"Well Em, I've got a completely fabulous idea." Lydia reached across Emily's bowl for a bottle of seltzer. "You know that Klezmer band we saw a few weeks ago, the one with that great singer, the blonde. what's-her-name?"

"Judy, I think it is."

"Yeah, Judy." Lydia filled her glass with seltzer. "Well, I've been thinking that we should have a lesbian Klezmer band. Wouldn't that be great? And I've got a perfect name for it too." Lydia's eyes twinkled in the light of the *Shabbos* candles as she looked up at Emily. "Are you ready?"

"No, let me guess." Emily reached for a whole wheat bagel, put it on her plate and started slicing it in half. "*The Yentes?*"

"No." Lydia shook her head vigorously. "You'll never guess."

Emily put down her knife and fingered the maroon scarf she was wearing around her neck. "*The Dyke Kikes?*" she asked.

"Emily, that's gross." Lydia shook her head again, more slowly this time. "It's a good thing you're Jewish, otherwise I'd give you such a *zetz*."

Emily laughed. "You sound just like my mother."

"*Essen in gezunt, mein klayne kind*." Lydia put another bagel on Emily's plate which she promptly removed. "So, do you give up?" she asked hopefully.

"I guess so."

Lydia put down the chicken wing she was gnawing on and executed a drum roll on the table with the tips of her fingers. "Ladies and jellybeans, may I present . . . the . . . fabulous . . . Klezbians!"

"The Klezbians?" Emily repeated.

"Yeah, Emily, don't you get it? Klezmer plus lesbians."

"Yeah, I get it, I get it. But who's going to be in it?"

"Well, let's see." Lydia stared for a moment at her curved reflection on the back of her silver soup spoon. Her face flattened out behind a huge nose, and she flared her nostrils at herself a few times before turning her spoon around and dipping it back into her soup. "We'll need a horn player, a few fiddles, a drummer maybe, a flute. . . ."

"How about a triangle? I used to play the triangle in second grade."

"Sure Emily. I was counting on you to be in it." Lydia put her spoon down, picked up her bowl with both hands and raised it to her lips, noisily slurping down the rest of her soup.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Emily asked, as Lydia's face reappeared from behind her bowl.

"What?"

"Who's going to sing? Not that Judy girl, unless you know something I don't."

"I wish." Lydia sighed and unbuttoned the two top buttons of her purple velour pullover. The chicken soup was making her hot. "Did you ever see such a pair of gorgeous arms in your whole life? Oy, when she walked out on stage in that sleeveless blue sequin top, I almost *plotzed*." A faraway look came into Lydia's eyes for a moment. Then she sighed again, bringing herself back to the present. "Oh well. I never did like blondes much anyway." Lydia took her onion bagel from the basket, tore it in half and spread some cream cheese on it. "Maybe she'll teach me how to sing though."

"You're going to sing?" Emily rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. What are you making such a *punim* for?" Lydia gestured at Emily with the knife in her hand.

"Lydia, in the first place, much as I love you, you can't carry a tune. And in the second place, you don't know Yiddish."

"So." Lydia's lower lip began to pout. "I can learn, you know. Besides, I do so know a *bissele* Yiddish." She jumped up from her seat and pointed at the table. "*Dos iz mein tish, und dos iz mein tush.*" She put her hands on her hips, turned around and wiggled her behind. Emily laughed. Then Lydia crossed the room and took something out of the freezer. "*Dos iz mein fish,*" she said, holding up a package of frozen haddock, "and *dos iz mein fus.*" She lifted her left foot and pointed. Then she put the haddock back in the freezer and sat down again, smiling smugly at Emily. "See?"

"I'm impressed. You're practically fluent," Emily said, tilting her bowl towards her and pouring the last drop of soup into her spoon.

"I've even written a song already," Lydia informed her proudly.

"In Yiddish?" Emily's eyebrows rose.

"Partly."

"Oy, this I've got to hear. Are you going to sing it to me?"

"Maybe. If you're a good girl and you finish the rest of your bagel."

"Oy Lydia, you're sounding more and more like a Jewish mother every day, you should pardon the expression."

"Well I have to practice. I will be one someday, if I ever find the

co mother of my dreams.” Lydia stood up and reached for Emily’s bowl. “Want more soup?”

“No thanks. Well, yeah, give me another *knaydlech*.”

“*Knaydl*, Emily. *Knaydlech* is plural.” Lydia went over to the stove and ladled some soup into Emily’s bowl. Emily stared at her back. “You have been studying Yiddish,” she said, with a note of surprise.

“*Yo. Ich hob a boch*.” Lydia set Emily’s bowl down in front of her and picked up a small paperback book from the windowsill. “*Dos iz mein boch*,” she said, handing it to Emily.

“The Yiddish Teacher,” Emily read aloud, as Lydia returned to the stove to fill her own bowl. Emily flipped through the book a minute, staring at the Hebrew letters which were meaningless to her. She handed the book back to Lydia who had just sat back down.

“So what gives with the Yiddish?” Emily asked.

Lydia held the book up to her chest and stroked the cover lovingly. “I don’t know, Em. After that concert, I really wanted to learn Yiddish. So I bought a Klezmer tape and I’ve been listening to it in my car every day on the way to work. It’s like a twenty minute private total immersion class. And then I got this book for only five bucks.” Lydia held the book up to her face for a minute, and then tossed it on the table. “I’m pretty good at languages, you know. That summer I spent in Mexico, I picked up Spanish really fast. The trouble is,” Lydia picked up a black and white salt shaker shaped like a penguin and shook it over her soup, “there’s nowhere left to go to be totally immersed in Yiddish.”

Emily took a bite of her bagel and chewed thoughtfully. “How about Miami Beach?” she asked.

“Oh Emily, I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Well I’m not going to Miami Beach. There’s a summer Yiddish program at Columbia I’m thinking about going to.”

Emily wrinkled up her nose. “New York City in the summer? Lydia, are you out of your mind? You wouldn’t last a week.”

“Emily, why are you being so unsupportive?” Lydia looked directly into Emily’s eyes, which were a dark liquid brown that reminded her of milk chocolate.

“I don’t know. I just don’t understand why you want to learn Yiddish. It’s a dead language.” She stared back into Lydia’s eyes, which were also brown, though lighter than her own, and flecked with bits of gold.

“Emily, that’s a rotten thing to say.” Lydia reached across the table for the penguin salt shaker and rolled it back and forth between her hands.

"I'm sorry," Emily took the penguin pepper shaker off the table and stared at it. It was wearing a red bowtie. "I'm just worried where all this Jewish stuff is going to take you, Lydia. I'm scared I'll show up here one Friday night and you'll answer the door with a shaved head and a *sheytl* and seventeen kids and a husband off in *shul* and then you'll move to Israel and . . ."

"Emily, are you serious?" Lydia set the salt shaker down on the table with a thump. "Em, going straight is about the farthest thing from my mind, believe me. That's not what this is all about." She shook her head in disbelief. "Can you imagine me with a guy, Emily? Me? The woman who'd be happy if she never saw a man naked from the neck down again?" Lydia leaned forward in her chair. "Emily, I've been listening to that tape in my car every morning now for three weeks, and every single day it makes me cry. Really. I've had to tell them at work that I've suddenly developed these strange allergies, so they don't think I'm losing my mind, I come in and my eyes are always full of tears." Lydia put her hand on Emily's arm. "It pulls at my heart-strings, Emily, and I just have to go with it."

"Well, don't go too far," Emily said, covering Lydia's hand with her own. "Judaism is just so entrenched with heterosexism. I can't even get near it for two seconds before I start feeling guilty for not perpetuating the race."

"I know what you mean." Lydia nodded her head. "But there are some gay synagogues. And I'm going to have a Jewish baby, even if it is with a turkey baster. You just have to find your own balance." Lydia paused for a minute as she stood up and started clearing the table. "Like having Shabbos dinner together every Friday night, Emily. That's perpetuating the culture at least." She carried the dishes over to the sink. "Anyway, you shaved your head at Michigan last summer."

"But that was different." Emily ran her fingers through her thick black hair, which was still quite short.

"Don't worry, Emily. I'm not going to desert you for the wonderful world of heterosexuality." Lydia returned to the table and began wiping it with a sponge.

"I certainly hope not," Emily said, leaning down and pulling back the two levers that released her rear wheels. She backed up her chair and then moved forward, to put the cream cheese and soy margarine into the refrigerator.

"I'll sing you my song, then you'll feel better," Lydia said, letting the water run in the sink. "Want some coffee or tea?" she asked.

"No, let's go sit in the living room." Emily wheeled herself through the kitchen doorway and Lydia followed.

"I'll be right in," she called, as she ducked into her bedroom for a minute. Then, carrying a blue spiral notebook, she entered the living room, to find Emily picking dead leaves off her philodendron plant.

"Lydia, you have to stop watering this plant so much. You're drowning the poor thing." Emily turned her chair and crossed the room, her lap full of withered yellow leaves. "Look at this."

"Oh, I thought I wasn't watering it enough and that's why it was dying." Lydia dropped her notebook onto the couch, bent over in front of the stereo and started thumbing through some records, while Emily returned to the kitchen to get rid of the dead leaves. "I'm just going to play you a song or two, to get you in the mood," she said, as Emily came back.

Emily clasped her hands in front of her heart, and began to sing in her best Perry Como imitation: "I'm in the mood for Jews. Simply because you're near me. Honey, but when you're near me, I'm in the mood for Jews."

"Well at least one of us can carry a tune," Lydia said as she turned the stereo on.

"Well you can tune a fork, but can't tuna fish, har, har, har," Emily said, popping a wheely in the middle of the floor.

"Emily, don't do that. You know it gives me a heart attack." Lydia covered her eyes as Emily thrust herself forward and then leaned back, balancing herself up on her two rear wheels for a minute before coming back down.

"Alright, alright, I'll behave." She brought herself to a stop, right in front of Lydia. "What have you got there?"

"It's the Klezmer band's second album. I got it at the library." Lydia handed her the cover and lowered the needle in the groove between the third and fourth songs. "This is called '*Mazel Tov Dances*,'" she said, stepping back. Immediately wild horn and fiddle music filled the room.

"Oh let's dance." Emily put the album cover down and wheeled herself into the middle of the room. She pulled the small levers on either side of the chair forward, locking her rear wheels in place. Then she started clapping her hands, snapping her fingers and moving her body in time to the music. Lydia joined her, doing a four-step grapevine back and forth in front of Emily.

"Hey, want to do a turn?" Emily asked.

"Sure. Wait a minute." Lydia ran to push all the chairs back against the wall. She threw two big camel-colored pillows that had been lying on the floor out into the hallway. "Do you think there's enough room?"

Emily looked around, released her brakes, and moved her chair across the floor. "I think so," she said, grabbing Lydia's hand. Emily used her free hand to manipulate her wheelchair, and soon was dipping under Lydia's arm and gliding around to her other side, while Lydia bent her knees and gracefully moved her body.

The song ended and "*Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*" came on. Lydia went over to turn the record off, but Emily said, "No, leave it," so she flopped down on the couch instead and Emily wheeled over to sit next to her while they listened to the song. Lydia's eyes grew moist and she wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "Nu, what did I tell you?" she whispered loudly, pointing to her face. Emily took one of Lydia's hands and listened intently to the music until the song was over.

"Did Judy sing that song at the concert?" she asked as Lydia got up to turn off the stereo.

"Raisins and Almonds?" I don't think so."

"It's really familiar. Maybe my grandmother used to sing it to me," she said, as she watched Lydia slip the album back into its cover.

"You know what's so great about Yiddish?" Lydia asked, sitting down on the couch again. "Everything rhymes. Like in the song—*cheder* and *seder*."

"Yeah, and what else?"

Lydia thought for a minute. "*Latke* and vodka. *Kichel* and pickle." She pronounced pickle with the guttural "ch" sound, making Emily laugh.

"I don't know, Lydia. Pickle's not Yiddish. And vodka?" She shook her head.

"Well, it's a very poetic language, anyway," Lydia said with a huff. "Lots of the words rhyme easily with English."

"Such as?"

"Well, *goy* and *boy*, for instance. Or *kvetch* and *sketch*."

Is that like an Etch-a-Sketch?" Emily asked.

"Very funny."

"Boy, are you touchy tonight." Emily scratched her chin. "I know. How about *l'chiam* and *mishkafiyim*? Pretty good, huh, huh?" Emily poked Lydia in the arm, feeling quite pleased with herself.

"Mishkafiyim? What does that mean?" Lydia asked.

"Glasses."

"Glasses?"

"Yeah, you know, glasses. The better to see you with, my dear."

Lydia looked at Emily with her head slightly turned to one side. "Where'd you learn that?"



“Hebrew school. It’s the only thing I remember from five years of studying. My teacher, Mr. Feldman, was always running around the classroom screaming, ‘Ayfo *hamishkafiyim?* Ayfo *hamishkafiyim?*’ Usually they were right there in front of his nose, unless Louie Abrahms swiped them from his desk.”

“Well that’s not Yiddish then, it’s Hebrew.” Lydia said.

“Okay, let me think.” Emily held her chin in her hand and concentrated for a minute. “How about matzo meal and orange peel?”

“Not bad.”

“Or *himmel* and *shimmel*.”

“Qu’est-ce que c’est *shimmel*?” Lydia asked. She knew *himmel* meant sky.

“I don’t know. It just sounds like it should mean something. I don’t know about *shimmel*, Em. I’ll have to ask my mother. But how about *himmel* and *farshimmeled*?”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh you know, all those *F* words—*farshimmeled*, *farshtinkener*, *farblondjet*, *farchadat*,” Lydia counted them off on the fingers of one hand. “They all mean the same thing—dizzy, confused, crazy.”

“In other words,” Emily interrupted her, “fucked up.”

“Well, sort of.” Lydia picked up her notebook and flipped through it. “Are you ready for the Klezbian’s first Top-40 hit?”

“I’m all ears.” Emily leaned back on her chair and folded her arms.

Lydia sat forward on the couch, resting her forearms on her knees and holding her notebook in both hands. “First I have to explain a few things,” she said. “Number one, it’s not really a song because I haven’t written the music yet. I’m hoping that Alix Dobkin will want to do it.”

“Uh-huh.” Emily nodded her head.

“Em-i-ly.” Lydia exaggerated the syllables of Emily’s name to show her extreme annoyance.

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were thinking it.”

“What was I thinking?”

“You were thinking, ‘Alix Dobkin would never waste her time on something as insignificant as Lydia Shapiro’s stupid Yiddish lesbian limericks.’”

“You wrote Yiddish limericks?” Emily asked.

“Oh shit. Now you made me give it away.” Lydia held her notebook up closer to her face. “Ready?”

“Fire away.” Emily stifled a yawn.

“Okay, now it’s in two parts; one part is the mother and one part is the daughter, okay?” Lydia looked up and Emily nodded. She looked

down at her notebook, read a few lines silently to herself, and then looked up again.

"Oh Emily, you're going to think this is really dumb. Promise me you won't laugh?"

"Lydia, would your Auntie Em even think of doing such a thing?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I promise I won't laugh."

"But Emily, it's funny. You have to laugh."

"Okay, okay. I'll laugh, I won't laugh. Quit stalling already."

"Okay." Lydia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It starts with the mother." She held her notebook up in front of her face so she couldn't see Emily, and began to read.

"'Oy Morris, have we got *tsouris*.

Vat can we do mit our *tochter* Doris?

It's worse than a *goy*,

It's not even a boy

She's in love mit the *maydl* Delores.'

Now this is Doris:

'Mama, Delores is such a *shayna maydl*

Her *punim*'s as smooth as a *knaydl*.

Such a *shayna shiksa*

Makes me *kvell* in *mein kishkes*

Oy I'm spinning from love like a *draydl*.' "

Emily howled with delight, and thus encouraged, Lydia went on.

"The Mama:

'Oy Doris come light the *menorah*.

We'll *zing* and we'll *tansig* the *hora*.

I'll buy you some *tchotchkes*

I'll fry you some *latkes*

If you don't see that Delores no more-a.

Doris:

'Mama, I don't want to say the *baruches*

I want *mein hentes* on Delores's *tuchus*.

She makes me all *shvitzig*

And soft like *gefilte fishes*

Oy, I'll love her from now until *Sukkos*.'

Lydia looked up, grinning wildly. "Now comes the responsive reading," she said. "The Mama:

'Oy Doris, you're worse than a *Vildeh Chaya*

You think Delores is maybe the Messiah?'

Doris:

'But Mama, she make's me so *fraylech*,

Like I've just eaten forty-nine *knaydlech*.' ”

Lydia shifted her weight and held the notebook so Emily could read along with her. “Now comes the Mama’s chorus.” she said, and both she and Emily began to read aloud:

“ ‘Oy oy oy oy  
She don’t vant to know from a boy  
Oy *vay iz mir*  
She won’t even wear a brassiere  
Oy oy oy *vay*  
Why can’t she be like cousin Fay?  
Oy *Gottinyu*  
What is the Mama to do?’ ”

Lydia took the notebook back on her lap and turned the page.  
“Now this is Doris.

‘Oy Mama don’t make such a *futz*  
Just because I don’t want me a *putz*.  
Last night I had a *cholem*  
The whole world had *shalom*  
So you see I’m not really a *klutz*.’

The Mama:

‘Oy Doris, you got such a shayna *smeckle*  
Maybe you got just a *bissele seckle*?  
Go get me some *lox*  
I’m ready to *plotz*  
I’m so *farmished*, I feel like a *yeckel*.’ ”

Lydia turned another page. “Oy, there’s more?” Emily asked.

“*Shah*,” Lydia said. “This is Doris.

‘Mama come sit down and essen a bagel.  
Nice and fresh they are, from *Tante Raizl*.  
I’ll bring *Delores* for *Shabbos*  
We’ll all *shep* some *naches*  
It’ll be fine, you’ll just be *amazel*.’ ”

“*Amazel*? What kind of *farshtinkener* Yiddish is that?” Emily asked.

“*Keep shtil*. Here’s the responsive reading again.” Lydia turned her head toward Emily to give her a dirty look. Then she turned back to the notebook again. “The Mama:

‘But what if the *Zayde* sits *shiva*?’

Doris:

‘I’ll bribe him mit *shmaltz* and chopped liver.’

The Mama:

‘And *Bubbe* Esther and Minnie the *Yenta*?’

Doris:

'Oy, their faces, like *borsht*, so magenta!'

The Mama:

'It's the same from Miami Beach to Poughkeepsie

The maydls go mit maydls just like gypsies.

Vot can ve do but say l'chiam.

And next year in *Yerushaliyem*

We'll *trink* und we'll *tanse* 'til we're tipsy.' "

"I thought Jews didn't drink," Emily whispered loudly.

"Only Manishevitz," Lydia whispered back. "This is Doris again.

'See Mama, I'm not such a *shlimazel*.

I'm giving you double *tou-mazel*.

Instead of ein *tochter*

You now have *tsvey tichter*

Even better than Harriet and Ozzl.' "

Emily cracked up. "Harriet and Ozzl? Oh my God, Lydia."

"Will you please stop interrupting? I'm almost done." Lydia glared at Emily. "This is the last verse. The Mama:

'Oy vat *vil* I do mit mein Morris?

He wanted for you the tailor named Boris.

We won't have a *chuppah*

We'll have *kugel* for supper

And then we'll all zing in the chorus.' "

Lydia turned the notebook so Emily could see the words again, and together they read aloud the grand finale:

" 'Oy oy oy oy

Our cup is all filled up mit joy

Oy vay iz mir

the *tochter*'s a little bit queer

Oy oy oy vay

The neighbors will give a *gershray*

Oy Gottinyu

The Mama will have to make do

la la! "

Lydia threw down her notebook triumphantly, jumped up and took a bow, with one arm draped across her belly and the other behind her back. Emily applauded wildly, and then put two fingers into her mouth and whistled shrilly.

"Thank you, thank you," Lydia said, taking another bow and blowing kisses at Emily. "So what do you think, Em? Are we talking total fabulousity, or what?" Lydia knelt down in front of Emily and leaned her elbows on the arm of her wheelchair.

"I think you've finally flipped your lid, Lyd," Emily said ruffling

Lydia's short curly hair. "I can't believe my best friend is turning into the Allen Sherman of the lesbian community."

"Well, if not me, who?" Lydia asked.

"I think it's 'If not now, when,'" Emily said, correcting Lydia's misquotation of Rabbi Hillel and still stroking Lydia's head. "It's great, Lydia, really. I love it. I think you should do it at the next lesbian talent show. The girls will go wild."

"Do you really think so?" Lydia sat up, clasped her hands together, turned them inside out and pulled, thus loudly cracking all eight knuckles at once, a gesture Emily hated. Emily responded by working up a good supply of saliva with her tongue, opening her mouth wide, and letting a big spit bubble form between her lips.

"Emily, gross!" Lydia looked away.

"Well you started, with your god-awful knuckles."

"Alright, alright, truce." Lydia spread her fingers wide and placed them on her thighs and Emily closed her mouth. Lydia scooted up and leaned her elbows on Emily's knee.

"You know Em, it's kind of ironic when you think about it," she said, running her fingers along the cold metal arm of Emily's wheelchair. "I mean, seventy years ago, my grandparents were taking English lessons, and here I am giving myself Yiddish lessons."

"Yeah, it is kind of funny." Emily picked up Lydia's notebook from the couch and turned a few pages, wondering for a minute if Lydia had misspelled shlimazel.

Lydia let out a deep sigh. "Em?"

"Yeah?" Emily put the notebook down.

"I wish my grandma was still alive so I could speak Yiddish with her." Lydia got up from the floor, sat down on the couch and rested her head on Emily's shoulder. "You know, seventy-seven years she spoke English, and still she didn't think she could speak it so good. When she spoke Yiddish with my mother, her whole energy was different. I don't know, she was just more alive."

"Maybe your mother would teach you," Emily said, stroking Lydia's cheek.

"I doubt it. She likes being an American. She only spoke Yiddish with my grandmother when they didn't want me to understand." Lydia took Emily's hand and started playing with her fingers. "Maybe I'll learn Yiddish really good, Emily, and then I'll raise my kid bilingual. That would be something."

"I'll say." Emily stretched her arms high over her head and arched her back. "It just goes to show you, Lydia. The more things change the more they stay the same."

"Can I quote you on that, *Rev Emily-Bat-Sylvia*?"

"I expect you to, *Rev Lydia-Bat-Harriet*." Emily let out a yawn. "I should be going."

"What, before dessert?"

"What dessert? I'm so full I'm plotzing."

"I made a little rice pudding, it shouldn't be a total loss. C'mon, I'll make some decaf." Lydia rose and started for the kitchen.

Emily followed, protesting. "I don't know, Lydia. I really don't think I could eat another thing."

Lydia, who had already put two small bowls on the table, turned around to face Emily, with two teaspoons in her hand.

"But Em, I made it special. I used brown rice and everything."

Emily stopped her chair in the middle of the kitchen floor. "Brown rice pudding? Feh!" She pretended to spit on the tips of her fingers and shook her hand at the floor. "What, all of a sudden a health-food nut you're turning into?"

Lydia finished filling the coffee maker with water and then turned to face Emily, a look of astonishment on her face. "But Emily, I thought you wouldn't eat it if I used white rice."

"Hey, bagels are bagels, but rice pudding is rice pudding," Emily said, taking two mugs Lydia was handing her and putting them on the table. Then Lydia took the big bowl of rice pudding out of the refrigerator and set it on the table. A minute later the decaf gurgled. Lydia poured some into each mug and then sat down across from Emily. The Shabbos candles were almost out, but the wicks still flickered above of the rims of the brass candlesticks.

"L'chaim," Lydia said, lifting her cup.

"Mishkafiyim." Emily answered, raising her own cup and touching it to Lydia's with a clink. Then laughing, they dipped their spoons into the rice pudding, and first Lydia fed Emily and then Emily fed Lydia, so that they would have a sweet week until they met again the following Friday night for Shabbos.

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## A GLOSSARY OF YIDDISH TERMS

*ayfo*: (Hebrew) where

*Ayfo hamishkafiyim?*: (Hebrew)

Where are the eyeglasses?

*baruches*: blessings

*bat*: daughter of

*bissele*: a little

*boch*: book

*borsht*: beet soup

*bubbe*: grandmother

*bubela*: an endearment

*cheder*: schoolroom

*cholem*: dream

*chuppah*: marriage canopy

*draydl*: spinning top, especially used on Chanukah

*dos*: this

*Dos iz mein tish*: This is my table

*ein*: one

essen: eat  
Essen in gezunt mein klayne  
kind: Eat in good health my  
sweet child  
farblonjet: confused  
farchadat: confused  
farmished: confused  
farshimmeled: confused, out of  
sorts  
farshtinkener: stinking, foul  
feh: ugh  
fish: fish  
fraylach: happy, joyous  
fus: foot  
futz: fuss  
gefилite fish: chopped fish cakes  
made of carp, eggs, matzo meal  
gershray: shriek  
gezunt: health  
Gottinyu: oh my God  
goy: gentile  
goyishe: non-Jewish  
hentes: hands  
himmel: sky  
hora: a circle dance  
ich: I  
Ich hob a boch: I have a book  
kichel: little round soup crackers  
kind: child  
kishkes: intestines  
klayne: sweet  
klutz: clumsy person  
knaydl, knaydlech: matzo ball(s)  
kop: head  
kvell: rejoice, take pleasure in  
kvetch: complain  
kugel: noodle pudding  
latke: potato pancake  
l'chaim: to life (a toast)  
lox: smoked salmon  
mamela: an endearment  
mandlen: almonds  
matzo: unleavened bread or  
cracker  
mazel tov: congratulations, good  
luck  
maydl: girl  
menorah: candleholder used for  
Chanukah  
mishkafiyem: (Hebrew) glasses

mit: with  
nu: so  
oy: expression of protest, dismay,  
joy, sorrow and anything else  
plotz: collapse  
punim: face  
putz: a jerk  
Rev: Rabbi  
rozhinkes: raisins  
"Rozhinkes mit Mandlen":  
"Raisins and Almonds" an old  
lullaby  
seckle: sense  
seder: (Hebrew) order  
Shabbos: Sabbath  
Shabbot Shalom: (Hebrew) Good  
Sabbath  
shah: quiet  
shalom: peace  
shayna: beautiful  
shep nachas: reap joy  
sheytl: wig worn by Orthodox  
women after marriage  
shiksa: gentile girl or woman  
shiva: seven-day mourning  
period  
shlimazel: unlucky person  
shmaltz: chicken fat  
shtil: quiet  
shul: synagogue  
shvitzig: sweaty  
smeckle: smile  
Sukkos: eight-day Jewish holi-  
day, Harvest Festival  
tanse, tansig: dance  
tish: table  
tochter, tichter: daughter(s)  
tov-mazel: good luck  
trink: drink  
tschotchkes: knickknacks  
tsouris: troubles  
tsvey: two  
tuchus, tush: buttocks  
vay iz mir: woe is me  
Vildeh Chaya: wild woman  
yeckle: a loser  
yente: busybody  
Yerushaliyem: Jerusalem  
yo: yes  
zayde: grandfather  
zetz: smack

# THE SALESMEN'S BANQUET

*Kathryn Gordon*

The fact that National was holding its most important sales meeting at an Eight Days Inn convinced Danielle once and for all that she had been taken in by a corporate con. But here she was driving through downtown Saginaw, where all the factories were laying off, or so the Saginaw salesmen claimed. She believed them. Sober, middle-aged vagrants leaned against store fronts like shoppers waiting for the big sale. Even the sky seemed a detail of poverty, its color that of a mildewed ceiling, its sun a dull bulb ringed by water stains. The same sky that had hung overhead all summer. She had not noticed it. She noticed it now.

She found the motel and parked beneath a sign that read *Goodbye Jack and Dave*. Sound seemed to cast a net: cars idling in the McDonald's drivethru, air-conditioners vibrating in the motel's windows. Engines. No wind, no bird. Music? From the banquet room of the motel came singing, salesmen singing the National fight song. They clap their hands. They scrape the floor with their chairs. Lora was asleep, her bare feet out the passenger side window. Maybe because she had quit selling midway through the summer, Lora was free of the net, slept through the slamming of car doors as the salesmen rushed to make the noon buffet. They had come from all the parts of Michigan eager to hear O'Reilly tell them that the state's poverty was a cover, that if only they remained steadfast in the face of Mrs. Jones they would reap from her the promised profits. Danielle knew what O'Reilly would say because she knew what the salesmen needed to hear: Mrs. Jones was an adversary, an obstacle, and most of all a liar.

She shook Lora awake.

"Are we here?" Lora pulled her feet in and slipped them into rubber thongs.

"We're here. Let's go over the plan."

"What's to go over? You go to the meeting and right when O'Reilly's getting all gossiped up, I come in with the fake door—"

"Does it look like the one he used at sales school?"

"It's close enough. It's in the trunk. You want to see it?"

"No. So you come in—"

"Right, I come in with the door and you jump up and knock on it just like O'Reilly had us do."

"Should I start the 'Hi, my name's Danielle Kinney' spiel?"



“If you want. But this Mrs. Jones isn’t going to let you get far. When this Mrs. Jones answers she’s not the dummy she is when O’Reilly plays her; she’s the real wicked mean Mrs. Jones and she lets loose on those rip-off books and says how if she ever bought one it was only to get rid of the jerk salesman. She wails on those guys like they never been wailed on before.”

“O’Reilly’s not going to like it,” Danielle said.

“That’s the whole idea,” Lora said. “What can he do to us?”

“Right. What can he do to us?”

When O’Reilly called her aside on her way to the buffet table Danielle thought he was going to ask her how she had let a fellow salesman quit. When he asked instead if she remembered him, she didn’t know what to say. Of course she remembered him. “Of course I remember you,” she said.

He smiled gratefully, as if he had been worrying all the flight north that she—Danielle Kinney—might have forgotten him. He said he had a small favor to ask of her. She waited, suspicious: had he somehow learned of Lora’s plan? Was Pam a spy? Pam stood in line smiling and nodding as the top salesman, a tall blond from Charleston, spooned potato salad onto her plate.

O’Reilly didn’t ask about Lora’s plan. He asked her if she wouldn’t mind sitting in the front row when he gave his talk. “Sure I will,” she said, amused: what did it matter to him where she sat? She wasn’t one of the leading sellers. Even if delivery week went well she wouldn’t make more than a thousand dollars.

Then he told her how proud he was. “I can’t tell you,” he came nearer, his deep voice encircling them, shutting out the clatter of silverware, “how very proud I am of the way you hung in there when God knows you had every right to quit.” From the way he looked at her, his full mouth slack with sympathy, she knew he referred to the rape. She backed away, experiencing a pang of insight in which she felt certain he had arranged it all, had picked the house on Gibbs Street and hired the man, had gone so far as to empower the judge who would set the man free. O’Reilly had sent her to Michigan so she would learn coming down those stairs what she had set herself against learning: that she was like the rest of them, the girls, and girls ought not to sell books.

That was crazy. She reminded herself that she had out of some ironic impulse given the hospital National as her billing address. That was how he’d found out. He was afraid, National was afraid, that she would sue them, publicize what crooks they were. He didn’t seem

afraid though. He was telling a story about the time he had been robbed. Plenty of salesmen had been robbed, he said. He said he didn't know what the country was coming to when an honest salesman couldn't go about his business unmolested. In this day and age, he said, he was glad to leave the tough door-to-door work to the younger generation.

Realizing that she was of that younger generation, Danielle tried to explain why Lora had quit.

He understood. He observed that were it not for Lora, Danielle's team might have led the division.

Yes, they might have, Danielle admitted, feeling herself lifted into his blue eyes. A smile wrinkled their corners just before he told her he would like very much to shake her hand. He said, "I'd like very much to shake your hand, Danielle Kinney," and he put out his hand, the neat knob of wrist showing white under the navy blue shirt cuff.

She shook his hand, noticing her own arm, bare and freckled. She wished she had not worn her Amelia Earhart T-shirt. She wished she had worn something more appropriate.

The meeting began as all the meetings of the summer had begun, with Clayton Jeffries, division head, announcing weekly totals. The tall blond, sitting to Danielle's left in the front row, was asked how he had sold more *Bible Stories That Live* books than any other salesman in the state. Standing, he removed his hands from the wide-mouthed pockets of his tennis shorts and clasped them before him.

"Why Mrs. Jones," he began, a hint of reproach in his voice, "you aren't asking me to split up the set, now are you? Mrs. Jones across the street—you know her?" Laughter. "Well she wanted to do the very same thing, but then she said to herself, 'If religion isn't important, what is?' And she just up and decided to go ahead and spend the few extra dollars." He put his hands back in his pockets and accepted their applause.

Clayton Jeffries wanted to know why they hadn't thought of that. Confidence. Confidence was the key. While he told them the story of how he had achieved confidence, they couldn't help thinking of O'Reilly, who did not steady himself on the lectern as did the younger Jeffries; O'Reilly, when he spoke, would hold it firmly between his chest and the audience, seeming at some point to throw it aside and face them head-on. Robert O'Reilly was a good speaker. On the summer's hottest days, when some block-mother alerted neighbors to the approach of a salesman and no door opened, they remembered O'Reilly's best story, the one about the silver dollar in the manure

heap. He never told where the silver dollar had come from, but that wasn't the important part, the important part was that he had lost it in a manure heap. Most importantly, he had recovered it. How? Not cleverly. O'Reilly did not present himself as a clever man, merely steady and everlastingly positive. They remembered how he had stopped in the telling of his story to listen to the quality of their listening. Danielle had coughed in defiance. She had not cared if he got the silver dollar back or if the horse shit in his face. But she could not help hearing and so had remembered, not because she thought it would ever in any way help her out of some dilemma, but because it was so stupid. He had dug for it with his hands. He had lifted each steaming patty until he found, on the very bottom of the pile, the warm clean coin. So when they were out there selling and the selling was going bad and the block-mother not only warned the neighborhood but phoned her state trooper brother, you were to tell yourself that under all that shit, house after clod-of-shit house, was the silver.

Slow Clayton Jeffries finally said what they all knew: O'Reilly was to speak.

Seeming slightly wearied by the long summer of worrying about his salesmen, Robert O'Reilly stood before them in his perfect suit. He projected concern. His resolute chin gave the smallest tremble. The words rose in him. What would he say? They hoped he would tell them what it meant to have made it, not to have quit. He alone could tell them the ways in which the summer had changed their lives.

He did not when he spoke speak of the silver dollar or of their formed characters. He spoke of his fear.

"I'm afraid for you," he told them. "I have come here today in great fear of the disillusionment each and every one of you faces." He leaned over the lectern on the tips of his ten fingers. His elbows formed blue right angles. "Since the beginning of time the young have risen up innocent and trusting and since the beginning of time their innocence has been knocked down by the very things they trusted."

Danielle, sitting in the front row, thought she had heard this before. Then she remembered the only piece of literature she had ever memorized: Howard Rorke's speech near the end of *The Fountainhead*—the best book she'd ever read. She'd memorized it so well she could not stop her memory from playing back now. Howard Rorke, renegade architect, individualist, had probably stood as O'Reilly now stood, his ringless fingers sturdying the lectern that trembled with his words, just as O'Reilly might well say what Rorke had said: Thousands of years ago the first man discovered fire. He was probably burned at the stake he had taught his brothers to light.

Centuries later the first man invented the wheel and was probably torn . . . The memory of the speech that had won Rorke his freedom slurred into the voice of O'Reilly asking them if they knew why he was afraid.

"We are gathered here on the eve of a fateful day. For tomorrow, each man, and each woman as well, will come face to face with human avarice. You may say to me, 'Robert, I have met all the challenges, overcome all the obstacles, defeated all the foes.' But I have come here today to say to you, National salesmen, you have not met the enemy. The enemy," he paused, seemed to meet each of their gazes, "the enemy is yourself. None other. The enemy is that part of yourself who wants to believe that the Mrs. Jones who took your time, purchased your product, and wished you well is the same Mrs. Jones who will meet you tomorrow when you come to fulfill your part of the bargain, just as you promised you would. But hear this National salesmen and hear it well: The Mrs. Jones you meet tomorrow will not care about your college education. She will not care that you worked harder this summer than she ever has in her life and now you want your rightful compensation. She doesn't care. To her you're just another bill collector. 'Books!' she'll scream when you come to her door at the appointed time. Maybe she'll claim she didn't order them, or that she doesn't have the money, that the plant has laid off her husband or the kids are sick or the plumbing's shot or the dog's got worms or the Lord God Himself has come down from on high and commanded her to read nothing but *The Enquirer*." He slapped the lectern, disallowing laughter. "There are those among us today who will accept the excuses, who will say to themselves, 'Let her off the hook, maybe she is broke. Maybe she really doesn't mean to cheat me.' Well let me tell you this, National salesmen: You let her off the hook and it's you who'll hang, the blood of your summer's labor draining."

After a long pause, during which the air-conditioning system gave an ineffectual burst, he said what they sensed were his last words. "I come here today not to disillusion, not to destroy your belief in mankind, but to illuminate, to build a belief in yourselves. Somewhere along the thankless path between houses you will lose your innocence; you will have seen the true face of Mrs. Jones. But you will have gained a thing far more valuable. The money you earn here will not last long, but the self-esteem you gain here will forever accrue interest."

Danielle thought it must have been the memory of Howard Rorke's triumphant speech and the sentence in the book that followed

it—When he was again seated at the defense table many men in the room felt as if they still saw him standing—that made her throat sting. She felt the way she did at the end of old West Point movies when the risen-from-the-ranks Irish officer bid his young soldiers farewell. O'Reilly sat down, eyes on his folded hands. He did not look up until from the back of the room there came the opening words of the National fight song. The middle rows took it up and soon all the rows were singing. Danielle allowed herself to sing. Why not, she thought, then stopped thinking as it became necessary to clap her hands, to sing louder.

Jeffries announced that O'Reilly would give out the awards. This quieted the room. O'Reilly declined the offered clipboard. He knew their names.

The first award given was for highest volume of sales. It went to the tall blond from Charleston. He accepted the plaque humbly. Was it true, O'Reilly asked, that he intended to use the \$5,800 he'd earned to help pay for law school? He said yes, he did; his father had always wanted him to go to law school.

Then O'Reilly called Pam's name. "Pam Nelson," he said, "has given more demonstrations than anyone in the entire division." Pam had won the Super-Seller sales case. She had shown her books to over three thousand households and was taking home the fourth largest check in the division.

"And that's not counting the books I mean to sell tomorrow between deliveries!" she said as she shook his hand and accepted the pearl-handled case. It had chrome bolts and a blue star on the red front. She held it above her head like a trophy and grinned, her cheeks collapsing into two deep dimples. *And she doesn't even need the money*, Danielle thought. Pam sat down in her front row seat and put the bright blue and red case between her knees.

O'Reilly asked for quiet. He had one more award to give. "Those of you who were with me last summer will not remember this award being given. It was not. There comes into the company every now and then a person for whom no established award exists. Such was the case with the first National salesman who with tattered leather cases and unpublicized books entered the mountains of Kentucky and braved the Depression era poverty of the poor souls living bookless there. There was no banquet at the end of that first summer, only an honored place in our memory and the gratitude of the people who even today keep the worn but sturdy *Student Handbook Set* beside the family Bible. Fortunately, the new pioneers among us can be honored in their lifetimes. The frontiers they explore are no less

hostile than the mountains of the past; they are the far more treacherous mountains of prejudice. To scale these mountains the new pioneers must carry with them a vision of the future. They must be able to circumvent all the obstacles thrown in their way.

"I must confess that I myself was once such an obstacle. Happily, I have seen my error. I have seen that if our way of life is to survive, if our society is to prosper, we must allow these pioneers to pass. We must, when we can, speed them on their way.

"I now gladly stand aside for one such pioneer. She has created—so that others might strive for—the title Saleswoman. That saleswoman, to whom I award these Super-Seller running shoes in recognition of her long run for equality," he let dangle from their laces two orange running shoes with gold stars emblazoned on the arches, "is Danny Kinney."

Danielle had guessed who he meant but when he said her name that way, the way her father had always said it, she could not move. Pam reached over and nudged her. Danielle didn't know why she couldn't move. Not finding any reason, not able to think of a single reason, she stood and took three steps in the direction of O'Reilly's outstretched arm. She gripped his hand and shook it hard. She held the running shoes up by the laces like caught fish. They were good shoes, if orange. What did she care about the color? They were good shoes and she had won them. O'Reilly had said so and why.

She turned back to her seat because the applause had stopped. When she saw why it had stopped, she could move no further. Lora had entered the room, the rectangle of cardboard held before her like a full-length mirror. She walked down the aisle between the rows of seated salesmen. Two wire clothes hangers serving as a stand, she steadied the frame in the middle of the room and stepped back.

The white kerchief knotted in the middle of her forehead looked like a Black maid's head rag. She wore an apron around her waist. She folded her arms and tapped her foot.

O'Reilly watched, his gaze unconcerned, mildly curious, perhaps bored. Danielle saw right away that he was a better actor than Lora. He jiggled the change in his pants pocket, his knuckles showing through the material. He leaned a shoulder against the wall. Just above his head hung a watercolor of geese flying over a vague marshland, one wing of their V shorter than the other.

Lora laughed—a solitary chuff. She said: "I suppose ya'll are wonderin' what I'm doin'."

Danielle winced at the theatrical voice, which in its attempt to mock O'Reilly's drawl sounded coy.

"This here," Lora went on, "is 'sposed to be a door."

"We can see what it's 'sposed to be," O'Reilly said.

Danielle glanced at the door and then quickly back at the geese on the wall. *It doesn't look like a door, she was thinking. You made it badly, Lora. How can I knock on a badly made door?*

"I'm sure we're all amused," said O'Reilly. "Have you some demonstration in mind, Miss Luedke? It is Miss Luedke, isn't it?"

*Please don't say Ms.*, Danielle thought, for that was just the kind of thing Lora would say. There would be such laughter if she did. Danielle could almost hear the laughter.

Lora said nothing. O'Reilly said, "I don't see what you can possibly demonstrate to the rest of us, who did not take the first menial job that happened along, who did not quit."

*See?* Danielle wanted to say to Lora, *he knows about you. He knows us.*

Lora stood among the salesmen, a dot joining their stares, not at all the vengeful Mrs. Jones she had planned to be, but a forlorn and lonely Mrs. Jones, one who had been waiting a very long time for the salesman's knock.

"Well, Miss Luedke?"

Lora folded the cardboard lengthways and held it under her arm as if it were a suitcase without a handle. She did not go away. *Please*, Danielle thought, but she did not go. Danielle raised her eyes.

Their gazes came together like cymbals—a shatter of sound, then the separation. Lora went.

Now the salesmen were staring at Danielle, who did the only thing she could think to do. She tried on the running shoes. They fit. She tied the orange laces and ran around the room. The salesmen cleared the chair from her path. They couldn't see how fast she was in so confined a space. So she told them. She told them she was pretty fast.

## FAMILIARS

*Julia Alvarez*

They were eating out at a restaurant, Christmas eve, when Elena began to recognize strangers. Her parents had taken her and her sister and brother-in-law to a new Spanish restaurant near their apartment, and the rich smells coming in strong waves from each table, the voices of the waiters speaking their native language had made them all think of holiday gatherings back home with their large, extended family. Elena felt transported to the old country.

Elena pointed out the elegant maitre'd to her mother and father and her sister. "Doesn't he look just like Tio Pedro?"

The mother craned her neck. "Where?" she kept asking, "where?"

"Oh my God, he does!" her older sister Laura said. "Look at the nose, the eyes. He even smiles like Tio Pedro!" By now the mother had spotted him too and nodded as the older sister itemized the resemblance.

Laura's husband Manny, the only newcomer in their group, kept asking, "Who's Tio?" His wife, whom he called Lori, explained that *tio* was the Spanish word for uncle. Pedro was Tio Pedro's first name.

"He's our crazy uncle," Elena began.

"Was your crazy uncle," her mother corrected, and then went on to tell how Pedro had had a heart attack and died in his sleep a few months back. "I thought I had told you?" her mother said when Elena said she had no idea her uncle had even been ill. "So many things I lose count."

"It's like Rip Van Winkle," Laura added. "Every time we go back there's a lapse of two to three years we have to catch up."

"Who's Rib and Winkle," the father asked. Of all them, he was the least comfortable in America. Every year after the dictatorship which had forced the family into exile had been toppled, the father made plans to go back "home" to live. But his two daughters had become used to the life here. Particularly Elena: she had stayed on teaching in the small town in the Midwest in which she had lived with her husband Jim. They had had a big family wedding in her country—and since her divorce seven years ago she had not wanted to go back. Sometimes her father would call her up—as if she were condemned to Siberia—"My daughter, do you have enough to eat? It must be freezer cold out there, are you warm enough?"

"So Papi, listen," Laura resumed her effort to educate them on Central America. Manny had recently defended a refugee family, and



his wife was reiterating the deportation case for the table. Each time Elena's sister took issue with the immigration officials, her father defended the Americans. "My country right and wrong," he chanted.

His son-in-law addressed him formally as "Sir," for he was exasperated with the father's ignorance. His own grandparents had been Jewish immigrants from Poland. He knew the stakes. "But Sir," he kept saying. "Sir, let me explain."

"Let's talk about something else," the mother steered them carefully from Charybdis only to head them straight into Scylla: "shall we go to midnight mass at St. Vincent's?" It was a bone of contention between her and her daughters that they no longer believed in God.

"Oh Mami," Elena rolled her eyes, but before her mother could give her the lecture on respecting her elders, Laura piped up with the delicate excuse that stopped all further argument. "Mami," she reminded her mother in a whisper in Spanish, "remember that Manny is Jewish."

Stumped, their mother picked up the thread of her lecture. "When I was a girl, I wouldn't have dared answer my mother back." Their father added to his wife's case: "I used the formal you with my parents."

"The formal you, Sir?" Manny asked his father-in-law.

"Unlike in your English," the father waxed professorial. "In Spanish, we have two forms of address: "The formal *usted* and the familiar *tu*." He gave several examples.

"You know, Sir, that came up in the case. The translator said something about that to me. That the Mirabals trusted me because they had dropped the formal you."

"The formal you is still used in the countryside by children when speaking to their elders," the father continued, for they had circled back to the controversial topic. He was not as out-of-it as his daughters thought he was.

They decided to walk the ten blocks to the apartment rather than take a cab in order to work off some of their dinner. The father went ahead with his two daughters, one at each arm, the mother followed behind with her son-in-law. As they passed by a paper stand, the Pakistani woman in her dark little hutch looked so much like Adela, the maid who had been their nursemaid growing up, Elena called out to her sister and father. "Remember Adela?"

The mother and brother-in-law had caught up to them by now. "Who's Adela?" the brother-in-law asked.

The mother peered into the darkness of the little hut. "Can I help you?" the shadowy figure leaned forward. The mother asked her if

she carried today's *Diario*, knowing full well the foreign papers would not be out until the day after Christmas. Still, her pretense gave her gawking purposefulness and rounded off the edges of her bad manners. Unlike her daughters, who were as rude as Americans and would just as soon stare the paperwoman down as make a purchase, she had been raised to fine manners by her prominent family. She carried on as if she still had a reputation to uphold, the family name to keep clear of gossip like weeds from a flower garden.

"Adela's clone," Laura shook her head as if to make sure she was not seeing things.

"Merry Christmas," the mother wished the scowling woman as they turned away, empty-handed.

"God, Mami, she's probably Muslim," Elena snapped at her mother. They had never gotten along very well and on holidays especially, when the pressure was on them to share their lives, they had terrible fights that made them both feel lonelier in this country.

The night doorman at her parents' apartment building was *pin-pun*, as they said in the old country for exact copies, *pin-pun*, her ex-husband. He was as tall and fair as Jim; dressed tidily in his navy uniform he gave off a formal air of a policeman or someone in charge, just as Jim, in his neatly-pressed business suits always looked uniformed. That had appealed to her back then. Marrying Jim had allowed her to move out of her parents' house and become part of America in what her family called the correct way, through a fine young man with education and money.

Elena did not note this resemblance out loud to her family. It would have saddened her parents since they had liked Jim so much and the divorce had come as a shock to them, particularly to her mother. She had gotten along with Jim famously. "Better than she ever did with me," Elena used to tease her husband. Later, she might have added, "Better than I ever did with you!" Jim and her mother had gone on several trips to the old country together, planning an export-import business they were about to set up when the marriage had fallen apart, way off in that small midwestern town where Jim's firm had its headquarters. If she had just held out, Elena sometimes berated herself. Jim would have started his Island business with her mother, and Elena would have ended up living in her own country. It wouldn't have mattered as much then that Jim and she had their differences. With family all around, there wasn't as much pressure as in the States to share everything with one's spouse. Sometimes, Elena wondered if she hadn't chosen a husband for her native land instead of a pal for this country.

They rose in the elevator to their floor, already her parents were planning the next day. They would visit their old Tia Ana, the only relative they had in this country. Christmas night, they had reservations for dinner at the same restaurant since it was sure to be good food. "Better to go the long way you know than the shortcut you've never tried out," something like that, a favorite saying of her parents Elena did not want to believe was true. Then a movie, she could tell what kind that would be too, a happy one, for why pay money to get depressed? The day was in the bag.

It annoyed Elena the way her parents clung to the few things they knew in this country and refused to change. Every time they went shopping, it was to the mall in Queens they had always gone to growing up even though there were closer, main branches in the city. Their food was always bought at a specific grocery store, and it wasn't in order to patronize so-and-so's store, for the young, ambitious managers of the chain came and went. Even a store of the same chain, somewhere else, was not suitable. "We know ours has good products, and they won't cheat us." Everything had to have precedent, everyone had to have history they knew. The anonymity of Americans made them draw in on themselves—their social life consisted of calling their daughters long distance and taking Tia Ana a weekly stack of old country newspapers. Sundays they now went to mass. Once a year, summers, they visited the old country.

Perhaps because they had clung so fiercely to the old ways, Elena had, as her sister put it, become more American than the Americans. Of the two sisters, Laura was the Hispanic: Laura, who could pass! In the old country, the family had teasingly, proudly, called her, "Gringita," because of her ash-blond hair and fair skin that burned pink in the sun. Elena, on the other hand, was olive-skinned, small, delicate-boned with dark hair and shiny dark eyes. "Like your father's side of the family, like your Tia Ana," her mother noted, holding her out there among those who were related to her only by law as if she were ashamed of her daughter. Elena's self-doubts had sprung up again in small town life.

"I don't see how you can stand it?" Her sister shrugged off an imaginary chill. "You must be like the only Latin within a radius of several hundred miles?"

Elena felt a familiar warmth in her eyes, but she had grown used to braving it on her own. The job she now had was a good job, and after shuttling around the country with Jim's job, she desperately needed a place to call home. How homey was home was another issue, altogether. That had been a big part of her marriage's breakdown. Jim

had not believed her stories of prejudice and had accused her of having “a victim personality.”

“What the hell is that?” Elena had asked him.

“You make eye contact in malls, that kind of thing.” Jim had tried to pass off the grave accusation with a light example.

Elena herself often joked about the racism she encountered. “It’s not even personal,” she laughed. Her neighbor, for instance, in the building where she lived was an elderly widow, half-blind and almost totally deaf. Occasionally, Elena would stop in on her way home to check on the old woman. Once they had gotten into a conversation, and Mrs. Coopriider had asked Elena where she was from—expecting, Elena was sure, one of the states for an answer, a big city on the east or west coast to account for the young woman’s trace of accent. When Elena had repeated for Mrs. Coopriider the name of her island several times, the old woman had gone completely still, her lips moving, no doubt pronouncing the name over and over to herself as if to make sense of it. Finally, she had patted Elena’s leg, comfortingly. “That’s all right, Dear,” she had said. “You’re a nice person.”

Manny chuckled. “At least they’re not deporting you or anything. . . .”

“Not yet.” Elena laughed, but the incident had stung her.

That night, the family opened their gifts. Laura and Manny were out to raise the political consciousness of the whole family by giving appropriate books to each member. The least informed was a Cuban cookbook for the mother; the father paged through a history of Latin America as Elena unwrapped hers, *Women Of The Revolution*. On the flyleaf in back was an informal portrait of the author, dark hair flying like two black flags on either side of her face. The butt of her gun poked up from behind one shoulder. “She looks a lot like Lin, don’t you think?” Elena held up the book for the room to see. Their cousin had always been known as the trouble-maker in the family.

“What’s it with you?” her sister noted. “You keep seeing all these ghosts tonight. Maybe your conscience is bothering you like Scrooge, you think?”

“May be,” Elena said pensively.

Manny smiled at her. “What I’ve heard is people do that right before they’re about to die. Don’t get me wrong,” he put out his hand to calm the disturbed look on his sister-in-law’s face, “it’s all supposed to happen in a split second. You know, like on a plane before a crash.”

“Oh God,” Elena said, “maybe I should take the train back?”

She didn’t know if the power of suggestion had now gotten the better of her, but the next day also, Elena spotted more relatives. It was

not just her own private, distorted vision, though, because each time she noted a resemblance, her family agreed there was an uncanny similarity between the two faces. Christmas afternoon, they went to visit Tia Ana by car since her parents were afraid to take the subway. Too many bad neighborhoods one had to cross to get to that part of the Bronx. At each stop light, Elena scanned the crowds, picking out now a cousin, now a great aunt. Her mother checked that each door was locked on her control panel. "They might look like family," she explained, "but they'd just as soon kill you as be related to you." She began a horrific recount of the latest crimes.

"Tia Ana takes the subway when she comes to see you," Elena argued.

"That's different," her mother argued. "Ana Ramirez is a poor old woman." Even so, Elena's mother cited examples of the old and infirm being mugged in the best of neighborhoods.

Tia Ana was waiting for them at the door when they had climbed the four flights of stairs after being buzzed in at the front door. She was a small, slender woman with white hair packed so tightly in a bun, there was a sheen to it from the tautness. She wore a black-and-white checked housedress—still in mourning after twenty years—with a kerchief draped over the belt which Elena could not remember ever having seen rumpled. The old woman welcomed them warmly in Spanish; it was something of a patriotic feat that in her thirty years in this country, she hadn't picked up a word of English, so she said. Her work for most of those years had been in a nearby *factoria*, sewing clothes with other Latin women. A Puerto Rican gringa translated orders from the Jewish foreman.

Elena, she held out before her, a warm, confronting look in her dark, shiny eyes. "You've forgotten your old aunt," she accused. Elena had been something of her favorite. Whenever she had had problems with her mother during her teens in this country, Elena had been shipped off for weekends to her aunt's. "Never a note, never a little phone call," the old woman grumbled affectionately. She turned to Elena's parents. "They become Americans, and then the old people are just a nuisance." She looked older, shabbier to Elena. In the cramped living room, there was a small tray table before a sofa chair with the half-eaten remains of her Christmas dinner.

"We've interrupted your dinner," the father apologized to his oldest sister. "Dinner, dinner," the old woman waved it off as an inconvenience. "I can have dinner every day, but it's not every day I get to see my girls. Have you taught your Manuel to speak Spanish?" Tia Ana chucked Laura under the chin. Manny smiled, nodding he

understood. The old woman hugged the young people again and sat them all down like dolls in her living room. It made Elena sad to think of her old aunt alone, waiting for her weekly visits and her daily phone call at bedtime. ("In case anything happens to her," Elena's mother had explained. "She won't be dead for days before being found." "We can't have that," Laura had teased her mother.)

Elena studied the old woman as she chatted now with one or another of her visitors. After days of sighting relatives, she was curious to see what the old face might hold out for her since she was supposed to resemble Tia Ana. Would she too spend her old age cooped up in a small, chilly apartment in America somewhere, surrounded by strangers and condescended to by some well-off relatives? Elena could not help shivering at the thought.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," her old aunt interrupted Elena's musings. She put the shawl in back of her rocker over Elena's shoulders.

"She has been seeing ghosts." Laura told their aunt how Elena had spotted half a dozen relatives on the way to the apartment. The old woman studied the younger woman's face. She touched the chin, a sweetness suffused her expression, and in that instant, Elena saw herself, the younger woman, in the older woman's face. "You must be homesick," her aunt observed. "You come visit your Tia Ana and we'll have a long talk like we used to, you promise?"

Elena nodded and gave her aunt a warm hug. She knew they could no longer have one of their talks. Her aunt would not have approved of the Americanized portions of her life, and since those were almost the whole of her life these days, their long talk would have to be a remembrance of things past.

Later in the car, Elena's mother warned her about taking the subway alone to her old aunt's. "You better take a taxi," her mother warned. "I'll pay for it." "Come on, Mami, a million people—" Elena invented a figure— "over a million ride the subway every day. Why should something happen to me?" "A word to be wise is sufficient," her mother warned in her garbled English.

A few days after Christmas, Laura and Manny left to spend New Year's with his folks in Florida. ("Equal time," they joked.) Elena went with them, her arm draped across her sister's shoulders, to the terminal where the couple boarded a bus to the airport. She wished her sister were not leaving: Laura was the only person her age that Elena knew in this country who had shared her past. In her current hometown, there was no one she had known for more than a couple of years. After a childhood crowded with cousins and aunts and

uncles, Elena led such a solitary life in America; usually, she felt it to be a source of freedom and independence. But lately, especially at holiday times, it seemed a diminished life—life, liberty, and the pursuit of loneliness was what America could really guarantee.

Once the bus had pulled out, Elena descended two flights to the subway, her vision blurry with tears so that the faces around her seemed a mirage and only her loneliness was real. She entertained the idea of going shopping, and so taking advantage of the bargain sales after Christmas in the big department stores, but the idea of substituting consumerism for comfort only made her feel more depressed. She remembered her promise to Tia Ana and decided to surprise the old woman with a visit.

Elena entered the train and found a seat in the nearly empty car. Slowly, the subway began to fill. At the fashionable uptown stops, several elderly women got on, their fur collars tight at their chins gave their heads an odd look of being presented formally to the world; a harried mother hurried in, clutching two, wide-eyed, pacific children by the hand. And then, Elena sat up for a better look, for it was as if she were seeing Laura herself entering the train.

A young woman got on: tall, fair-skinned, her hair blonder and a little shorter and her figure a little plumper than Laura's. But the face was *pin-pun* her sister's: the soft, full lips and high cheekbones, the wide-spaced eyes that gave both women a childlike look of having no guile. The woman was dressed casually in a jean skirt, down jacket, and snowboots as if she were headed for bad weather out of town. Draped over her arm was a spare blue coat and over her shoulder either a large pocketbook or an overnight case. She sat down across the aisle from Elena, placed her gear at her feet, and withdrew a sheaf of papers from a manila folder under her arm. She began to read, oblivious to the scene around her and to the stares of the young woman across the way, for Elena could not help but be enthralled. It seemed as if her yearning for her sister had manifested Laura right before her eyes. Recollecting Jim's diagnosis, she chuckled: eye contact on a subway train was probably an aggravated case of the milder mall form of victim personality.

The train was now headed towards an area of the city Elena did not know at all; she had only heard from her mother that it was not a safe place for her to be alone. . . . Well, she was not alone, and furthermore, her parents' fear of their new country had kept them from being at home here. Perhaps they would not have felt so isolated if they had made friends with other immigrants from their part of the world. But Elena's mother, particularly, had resisted such friendships and steered

her two daughters clear of unlikely acquaintances, sending them away to summer camps and boarding schools where they interacted only with Americans. "They're not people of our background," their mother explained of the Hispanics they met in New York City. "They're poor unfortunates. . . ." Elena knew what her mother meant, back home these were people who would have been maids and chauffeurs. She was too embarrassed to bring anyone home and subject them to her mother's patronage. Of course, where she lived now, it was she who suffered from people's kindness.

The complexion of the crowds was changing drastically, stop by stop. Most of the well-dressed whites had disembarked. Now there were people of all different shades of skin color, blacks, Asians, East Indians, Puerto Ricans crowded into the car. Elena heard Spanish spoken, English in all sorts of accents, a Patois French. Her young woman had put her papers away in their folder and had grown attentive to the crowds around her. At one stop, she stood up, offering her seat to an elderly Hispanic woman who had just boarded the train. As she was accommodating herself and her luggage at the center post, the train gave a sudden lurch. The coat draped on her arm flew out and the contents of her folder scattered at her feet. She retrieved the coat while the elderly Hispanic woman, who had been offered the seat, collected the sheets, accepting the ones Elena handed her, noticing as she did that several of the boldface words were in Spanish. A moment later, Elena distinctly heard her young woman say "Gracias" to the Spanish lady. The *r* was mispronounced, but the word was unmistakable. Odd though it seemed at first, Elena reasoned that everyone knew a word or two of Spanish if they lived in the city. Elena's father, in fact, had a favorite joke: "What is our country's largest city?" The answer was New York.

The young woman began craning her neck at each stop and checking some writing on the back of her manila folder. Elena reviewed her subway map: she was three stops away from her station. If her young lady got off, Elena would too and walk the rest of the way to her aunt's. At the very next stop, they disembarked. The station reeked of urine, and soon, Elena could see why. Lined on the walls were forgotten bundles, which disturbed by the screeching departure of the train, squirmed, twisted and turned; they were alive! This station certainly confirmed her mother's worst fears. Elena hurried ahead to catch up with her young woman, afraid to be left in this underworld alone without a guide.

As she rose up the stairs to the street, the bright sunlight blinded her momentarily, and Elena was forced to stop a moment and regain her



balance. In that moment, she lost sight of her young woman, and when she again opened her eyes, she thought she was back in the old country but for the nip in the air: a dark-haired, dark-eyed, sometimes dark-skinned crowd milled around racks of clothing and bins of every conceivable type of merchandise—from shoes to plantains to mangoes to leather belts and saints' candles. Now she saw lookalikes everywhere! Elena smelled familiar, rich smells of frying foods and dark, aromatic coffees; she heard Spanish spoken with different accents, intonations, but all within the range of her understanding. Music blared into the street from a record shop, and several girls danced merengue together on the sidewalk, laughing with embarrassed pleasure when the young men, combing their hair nearby, gave them gallant compliments. Elena was forced to walk between a dancing couple, ducking her head in apology. She avoided a group of men, who passed paper bags and leered at her: a motley group to be sure: their winter outfits seemed an odd collection of hand-me-downs from secondhand bins, plaids and stripes and checks, mismatched bright colors Elena had seen only on children in the better neighborhoods of the city. She suspected that her countrymen were not likely to invest much in winter clothes since the outfits would not figure in that eventual homecoming to the tropics they all dreamt of. Many of the people in the crowd had turned their jacket collars up. The sky was bright and blue today, and the air so chilly that Elena could see her own breath condensing in the air before her. It joined the many breaths of these familiar-looking strangers, a sad congregation of ghosts from the old country expiring in this cold city air.

Up ahead, Elena caught sight of her young woman, lifting the latch and letting herself in the iron gates around a church. Sacred Heart, the glassed-in placard read, and then the name of the pastor, Father John Hennessy, and the schedule of daily and weekend masses. At the bottom was a quote which did not seem biblical: "*Venceremos.*" We will overcome. Overcome what? Elena wondered.

Elena followed close behind, climbing up the steps to the church proper when her young woman veered off to the door of a smaller building connected to the church, the rectory perhaps. The door opened, a tall, bearded young man looked out, up and down the length of the street, worried, brief glances before letting the young woman inside. A scandalous thought crossed Elena's mind: maybe her young woman was having an affair with the priest! If her mother should hear her, badmouthing a representative of god on earth: that was probably worth an eternity in hell.

Elena pulled the handle of the door and entered the melancholy

darkness. Familiar, soothing smells filled the air, incense and burning wax and day-old flowers and a smell like her mother's Pinesol—maybe pine needles from the creche. She was glad to be out of the cold, recalled to an old haunt of her Catholic childhood. Before they had come to this country, the church had been so much a part of their lives. Every day singled out by being such and such a saint's day or a holy day of obligation. It was not seasons that divided the year back in the tropics but the liturgical calendar.

When they had first arrived in the city, the family used to go regularly to mass on Sundays, then other things intervened. It was her father's patients' one day off, so he kept his office opened for them. Her mother always suited herself and sighed, "God will understand," as if mass were a social occasion and a real friend would forgive her for not showing up. Elena lost her faith in her prep school history class: Miss Saltonstall, a thin, cross young woman, was as evangelical in her atheism as a missionary. She took pleasure in disclosing to the class the corrupted practices of the medieval church. Elena's family had fled their country to get away from a dictatorship; no way she was going to promote authoritarianism of any kind! "Let's not get carried away," her father sighed, except his English was accented and broken. What he actually said was, "One should not get transported."

Inside the vestibule was a card table laid out with pamphlets and forms; Elena gazed at the tabletop. Brochures in English and Spanish were arranged in tidy stacks. Photos drew her eyes, blurry, grainy snapshots, mug shots, they looked like, of this disappeared man in Argentina, this tortured student in Ecuador. No one she knew. There was information on the revolution in Nicaragua, American intervention in Central America, the Witness for Peace program—Manny and Laura would have taken one of each at this table! Then Elena saw the sign-up sheet on the clipboard: the twenty-four-hour vigil of the Mendozas, the Sanctuary family at Sacred Heart. Names with lines blocking off time slots. A xeroxed sheet of instructions for those doing vigil duty: certain words boldfaced in Spanish. Could that be what her young woman was up to? It made sense: the frightened look of the young man who had let her in must have been on account of the illegal nature of what they were about. What if there were a raid, and Elena were hauled off with the others? One look at her, and no way the authorities would believe she was not involved in helping illegal refugees. Sooner her sister's lookalike would be released than she, a young Hispanic woman, with every reason to be helping out her own people.

Unlike her sister—whose involvement in politics was actually quite

recent and had to do, Elena suspected, with Manny's legal interests—Elena had never felt at ease partaking politically in her new country. In college, most of her classmates had demonstrated against the war, but Elena used her immigrant status as an excuse for not participating. She was terrified of any confrontation with the law. Even a traffic cop stopping her on a highway would set her heart beating frantically as if she were about to be deported. Elena knew the source of her terror: they had left her own country suddenly in the middle of the night, after her father had been caught plotting a coup with the same Americans who had installed the cruel dictator twenty-five years back. Now they wanted him ousted. But her father and his co-plotters had been discovered and were forced to flee the country. From the beginning of her family's exile, Elena's mother had warned her daughters to be careful what they said and did lest the whole family be sent back to certain death. That first year, Elena's mother had managed to transform Elena from a poor student to one on honor roll by warning that one bad grade could be grounds for the whole family's deportation. Elena studied frantically for each examination and worried herself sick over her papers. Even now that she was an American citizen and knew all about her bill of rights from Miss Saltonstall's class, the habits of fear persisted.

Quietly, Elena opened the inner doors of the vestibule, curious to discover what adventure her young woman might be about before making her own escape. Inside, candles flickered; bowed figures dotted the pews, most wore kerchiefs, old women whose sole purpose in life was to shorten the sentences of deceased relatives in purgatory and, of course, acquit themselves for their upcoming deaths. At the first pew was a family group—she could only see their backs except when the small, nervous man turned around as if he expected someone. He was dark-skinned with Indian features; beside him, side by side, were three children, who looked very much like him. Then, at the other end of the pew, a woman, her figure more bowed down than the others; from her issued a low, frightened wail. As Elena spied the group, the young bearded man who had looked worriedly out the door and an older man in a black cassock approached the pew. The Indian man rose and beckoned to the women and children. Elena let the door fall shut, and buttoning her coat, hurried to the front doors, eager to get away.

But it was too late, beyond the front doors and blocking her escape was a caravan of cars and a small congregation of young people, Elena's age mostly, young Americans, casually dressed. The look of them was the look of friends, sorting themselves out for rides to a

party or a day out together hiking in the country. Elena stepped back, reconsidering entering the church and checking for another exit onto a side street.

The doors of the rectory opened. The man Elena had seen indoors in the black cassock descended: Father Hennesey, most probably. He spoke to several of the young people in the head car, made motions towards the rectory. Instructions were shouted out. The young people began mobilizing themselves. Engines started, their exhaust fuming the air about them as if the ghosts she had seen earlier were being routed by a furious cloudy volley. A woman emerged, leading a child by the hand. Elena guessed the little girl to be one of the young Mendoza children, though it was impossible to tell. Her face was covered by a bandana such as children wear when they are playing cops and robbers. It made Elena sad to see a child masked.

Behind them came a tall, bearded man whom Elena recognized as the young man who had let her young woman in the door at the rectory, his arm around the small-boned, Indian man Elena had seen inside the church, a child at his side. Their hands were gloved but Elena felt the pressure of their grasp almost as if she had seen the bare hands veined with the effort of holding on. At last, her young woman emerged, a child in one hand and in the other—it was a brief glimpse—an Indian woman, a kerchief on her head and one across her face. She was wearing the blue coat the young woman had been carrying in the subway, and below the coat, a colorful, embroidered skirt to her ankles. Her hands and forehead, the only skin that showed, were Elena's light tan color, her eyes shiny and dark. But no sooner did she catch sight of the street and the fuming caravan than she ducked back inside the building, screaming to her husband and children, "No! No! No!" Her cries were somewhat muffled by the kerchief over her mouth.

The priest hurried forward—Elena could hear his rough Spanish, coaxing the young woman out. But her wails and cries only grew louder. The two little girls, who had been stowed in one of the cars, scrambled out, screaming for their mother. The driver of the front car poked his head out. "What's up?" he called; a chorus of explanations were cried out to him, but he had to turn the car engine off so he could hear them. The small Indian man hurried out of the lead car, shaking his head. As he reached sight of the rectory door, the woman's cries were decipherable: "They will kill us, kill us!" she screeched in Spanish. The man lunged forward and with one violent gesture dragged the sobbing woman down the steps after him. Her screams grew frantic, "Please, please," she pleaded with the strange faces

around her. "For the love of God," she cried out in Spanish, tearing the kerchief from her face to make her pleas more credible. The children began to cry. The young Americans alternated between trying to calm the woman and her frightened children and trying to arrest the husband's furious progress forward, his wife in tow, the three children clutching at her coat. But their Spanish was awkward and hesitant, and their words to the woman only seemed to aggravate her terror.

Elena rushed down the steps. The way the cars had edged forward to receive the family, a way was open for her to cross the street, but she was no longer interested in making a getaway. She wanted to ease the woman's terror. "Wait! Wait a moment," she cried out, and at the sound of her Spanish words, the husband stopped mid-step and let go of his wife's hand. The woman stopped screaming and stared at Elena. Only the wailing of the frightened, unconvinced children sounded in the quiet that succeeded Elena's words.

The woman she had followed turned to Elena, relief written on her face. "Please tell her we're not sending her back," she pleaded with Elena in English. "I think she thinks we're sending her back. We've tried explaining that we're only moving them to . . ." The woman hesitated, unsure of this stranger's trustworthiness. She continued, more vaguely, "We're taking them to a safer location. But she doesn't believe us. As why should she?" the young woman added, shamefaced. "We are your friends," she repeated to the Indian woman in her accented Spanish. "Friends." The dark shiny eyes darted quickly over the white woman's face. She looked to Elena, her eyes wild and frightened and disbelieving.

Elena looked at the young woman she had followed. This close up the resemblance to Laura was not as striking, the hair was thoroughly blonde and the eyes were not Laura's light brown but a grey-blue. It was a face that she might have seen at any of the local establishments in her small town, staring at her. "Friends," Elena said gently to the Indian woman, "they are friends." Though she had been using Spanish with her family this last week, the words spoken publicly and with her breath forming before her seemed strange on her tongue. "Do not fear them," she said in a surer voice to the Indian woman. The children huddled at her side looked up astonished, their eyes wide and bright from their tears, their sad little faces masked. "They are moving you to where you will be safer."

"You are sure?" the woman asked; Elena nodded. The woman smiled tentatively at the faces around her—a smile that could have doubled for a grimace of pain if there hadn't been a new lustre of hope in her eyes.

Elena's young woman bent down and retrieved the refugee woman's kerchief where it had fallen underfoot. "Please put this on," she said to the Indian woman in her classroom Spanish.

"It's to protect you," Elena explained when the Indian woman backed away from her disguise. "In case there should be someone who recognized you." She followed the woman's glance over her shoulder. Who could possibly recognize her in this country of strangers? But the Latin woman allowed the young American to tie the kerchief behind as Elena held it up to her face.

The engines were starting up again, the young people scrambling back into their cars. Elena looked down and smiled at the three young girls, "You take care of your mother, you hear." They nodded seriously and entered the car side by side with their mother right behind them. The young priest waved to them as he shut the door of the car.

Elena's young woman was set to enter the passenger side. She turned and smiled openly at Elena. "*Gracias*," she said with a shy smile.

"I should thank *you* for helping my people," Elena replied in Spanish, using what her father would have called the familiar *you*.

The young woman was about to say something back but she was interrupted by a double tap on the horn. "I better go," she laughed, ducking into the car. Once the door was shut, she rolled down the window and waved to the priest and Elena. Then the cars pulled out in a slow progression down the street before turning the corner. Elena stood vigil until the caravan was out of sight and the ghostly fumes of their exhaust had disappeared, as if exorcised, from the cold city air.

## ON THE WAY FROM CHINA

Valerie Miner

*Monica learned about the Great Lakes as a Peking school girl in 1935. "H-O-M-E-S: Huron-Ontario-Michigan-Erie-Superior," she practiced for her visit one day. The American nuns made her nostalgic for those inland shores very far from China.*

Madame Chen sits on the edge of a borrowed wicker chair, savoring the accents of her two American guests and remembering the days she was called Monica. She grasps every moment of these two hours with the blonde woman and the rosy one. How remarkable that they are writing about Chinese poetry, about her own work. Madame Chen is caught between listening and impressing them with her sophistication about American life. What do they all want from each other, she wonders.

*Monica was a bright one, the nuns acknowledged. This scholarship girl who spoke English and French would go far. Certainly she would get to Chicago. But someone would have to explain she could not swim across the Great Lakes. Such an imagination, this Monica.*

Madame Chen passes the nougat candies. "Delicious," says the blonde woman. Now Madame offers English chocolates, wrapped in striped foil. "My husband was the first to introduce Copland to China," she hears herself saying. "Arthur Miller visited our house." Watch the immodesty, she inhales, remember the taxi will fetch them soon. Three orange cats peer into the parlor from a courtyard window.

*Monica's long march led to Yenan, not university. Instead of packing for the windy city, she watched the nuns board ship. Father Foyle carried a chalice under his cape. "This is my body. This is my blood." Monica felt dizzy, her soul rocking east to west.*

Madame Chen hears the familiar American accent. "Do you still attend Catholic Church?" She recognizes this voice of innocent curiosity. She knows the rules. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." Yet those she grew up calling "neighbors" were now "foreign friends." "No," she answers, wondering if they hear her quaver, thin as Suzhou silk.

*Monica contributed to the countryside, brick by brick, fueled with actual grace. Rising by the rooster, she recalled how Peter betrayed Him thrice before dawn. She remembered the martyrs. She promised Him and herself never to forget. Each night before sleep, she prayed, "Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem. Huron-Ontario-Michigan-Erie-Superior."*

Madame serves them bamboo shoots and marinated beef with her

own chopsticks. She toasts them with Chinese rum. "No, no trouble," she insists. "My daughter Augusta cooks while preparing for exams." She watches the two Americans, pleased at their appetites. The rosy one is so like Sister Colomba, who was in charge of the rice.

*Monica met her husband Yu in the countryside. "Richard," he whispered, explaining how he had been trained by Jesuits before the Revolution. Together they said Hail Marys and obeyed two sets of commandments. They did not drown their daughter. They secretly baptized her Augusta.*

Madame Chen checks the clock: in forty-five minutes the car will arrive for her guests. Still, she is unsure what she wants from this precious, private visit. Should she tell or listen or give or take? She wants a ticket on that old steamer; she wants to slip under Father Foyle's cape. "No," she answers the rosy woman quietly, "I will not go to America. But my daughter Augusta has applied." "Augusta?" the visitor catches on. "Why did you name her Augusta?"

*Monica was lucky to find a flat with space for sleep and study. The two rooms cramped with her husband and daughter were not like the HOMES she had imagined. Still, Monica wrote to Sister Colomba through the sympathetic French officer, they were grateful. They did not forget.*

Madame Chen hears her own voice again, high and urgent. "Will you have another chocolate?" Thirty minutes left. "Susan Sontag came to our house." The women nod uncomfortably, overfed perhaps. "Yes, many foreign friends have visited. Augusta will meet them in America. She has applied to Northwestern University. That is near Chicago. On the Great Lakes."

*Monica was not prepared for the Cultural Revolution. "Bourgeois," she was called because of the night school degree. So the family was separated into three provinces for two years. During this time Sister Colomba's letters failed to reach her. Monica's faith stretched only as far as her husband and daughter, willing them all back to that courtyard apartment in Peking which was the only home she dreamt of anymore.*

Madame Chen's dinner is ending and still she does not know what she wants from these two American women. Books they give her, unsolicited. And addresses for her trip to the States, because they insist she *must* come some day. "One more picture," says the blonde one. Polaroid makes her an instant present. Here she slowly materializes in glossy color, standing beside the one who resembles Sister Colomba. "No, you keep it," declines Madame Chen. The rosy woman looks perplexed, but slips the photo into the pocket of her dark cape. A taxi honks. Madame Chen waves, sending Monica home.



## WIDOW

*Barbara Sheen*

Violet smashed out her cigarette. It tasted vile. She hadn't had a cigarette in ten years, not since Prissy broke her of the habit. She walked into the bathroom, filling a cup with water. As she brought the cup up to her lips she noticed that her hands were shaking. She drank the water and gazed almost without seeing at her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. She looked awful, the dark circles beneath her red eyes, her hair wild, her nose bright pink. She had to do something about it, if not for herself then for Prissy, out of respect. "*Oh Prissy,*" she thought, "*if you could see me now, you wouldn't be impressed.*" She gulped feeling her body begin to tremble. She wouldn't give in to the tears again. Her head ached and there was no sense in it. She sighed, taking a deep breath, walking into the bedroom. There was their dog, Isis, lying on the foot of the bed and looking forlorn. Ever since the other night, ever since it all happened, poor Isis had been watching the front door sadly, waiting for Prissy to come home. The dog really loved Prissy.

Violet sat down on the bed beside Isis, petting her. "There, there girl. I'm all you have now." A sob wracked at her as the thought came to her, "*you're all I have too, Isis.*" Violet sobbed, her grey head buried in the Irish setter's red fur. "Why did she have to go and die like that? She was always so healthy, fifty-one years old and they say women live to be at least seventy-two. It's not fair," she sobbed, "not fair, Prissy dead, just like that, gone. I always thought I'd be the one to die first." She sniffled as the dog licked her tear-stained face. "I know it's selfish of me, but it will be so hard to live without her." The dog's warm pink tongue licked and licked her face. Slowly, Violet smiled, hugging the dog tightly. "At least we have each other girl, and we both have to be strong and go on, just the way Prissy would want us to. If I can get through this service today . . . Then, I'll just have to take it one day at a time." She looked tenderly down at the dog. "You're a good dog Isis," she whispered petting the animal, then went to the closet she had shared with Prissy for twenty-seven years.

They'd met at a party when they were both such young women and it was, trite as it sounded, love at first sight. From the moment Violet had seen Prissy, gazed into the other woman's sea-green eyes, she was lost. They'd been together ever since, a couple of dykes as comfortable as an old pair of shoes like any other couple, male or female, where each finds something they lacked in the other person,

something they needed, their other half. Prissy was Violet's other half and now she felt so shattered, so torn apart. She sighed sadly staring into the closet. The closet smelled like Prissy, the scent of her favorite perfume lingered on all the clothing. Violet trembled as the scent assaulted her. White Shoulders, so like Prissy with her thick blonde hair and her soft white skin. She choked back a sob, pulling a plain black dress and black shoes out of the closet. They'd do for the service and maybe getting dressed would take her mind off Prissy, take her mind off the way her lover was sitting beside her at the dinner table one minute and then a minute later was grimacing in pain, grabbing her chest, her lips gasping for air. In what seemed like a moment it was all over; she was gone. A massive coronary, the doctor said. Violet wiped a tear off her face as she pulled on the black dress. At least it was fast, at least Prissy didn't suffer. It was the living who were left to suffer.

She ran a comb through her silver grey hair and dabbed on some lipstick. Isis watched her, following her from room to room. She smiled at the dog as she walked to the front door. "It's okay girl. Don't worry. I'll come back," because she knew that the dog would worry. Her stable dog world was just as shaken up as Violet's own world. She bent down to pat the dog's red head and impulsively kissed her hairy face. "I know you'll be waiting for me girl," she murmured. "I know."

The chapel was overflowing with people. Violet was glad of that, glad that Prissy was so well liked, so well thought of. It would have made Prissy happy. She took her seat in the front row and gazed around. There were so many people in the chapel, friends of hers and Prissy's, people they knew from work, neighbors, people from the different clubs they belonged to. There were a lot of strange faces in the back rows, schoolteachers, Violet guessed, schoolteachers who had worked with Prissy, in the same school where Prissy had taught first grade for almost thirty years. There were younger faces too, faces of some of Prissy's former students, all grown up now but still remembering their first teacher, still wanting to honor her. Violet smiled. Prissy would have loved to see them. She probably would have remembered every last one of their names, even though they looked nothing like they did when they were six years old, but Prissy would have remembered them, would have loved talking to each and every one of them, finding out about their lives. There was their mechanic in the back pew with his wife, and their handyman. Even their veterinarian was here. Prissy would have been pleased by all this, and the chapel looked lovely with all the flowers.

The flowers were Bobbie's doing. Bobbie was their best friend. She'd taken care of all the arrangements for Violet; it was just like her.

Violet wondered where she was, then sighed. Bobbie would be here, but late. She was always late for everything, always a little too busy. Prissy used to always joke about her, always say that Bobbie would even be late for her own funeral. It was ironic. But Bobbie was busy enough with her three teenage daughters and her job as the head animal control officer in the county. Violet turned around to watch the door, waiting for her friend to arrive. Instead, she saw a short round bald man in a too-tight grey suit, his bald pate gleaming in the sunlight, walk in beside a tall, skinny, thin-lipped woman. She was encased in a too-warm fur stole and sweating profusely. It was Prissy's younger brother, JoeBill, and his wife, DoDo. The sight of them was a shock. Prissy hadn't heard from her brother in years. He only lived forty miles away but Prissy never saw him. It was what JoeBill and DoDo wanted. Prissy was an embarrassment to them. The couple disapproved of her in every way and never ceased telling her. When Prissy and Violet first started living together and JoeBill learned about it, he threatened to have his sister committed to a mental institution. Nothing ever came of it. A court case would have proved too embarrassing for him and his stiff broom of a wife.

Violet had never forgiven him even though his good-natured sister had. Who needed him, Violet always told Prissy, him and his pole-stuck-up-her-butt wife with their ridiculous pretensions. But it seemed Prissy did need her brother and it hurt her, especially with her parents both dead and JoeBill the only family she had; JoeBill and DoDo and their two sons, Prissy's nephews, Joey and Billy, nephews that she never got to visit or even talk to because her brother and sister-in-law were afraid she would be a bad influence on them, taint them somehow, turn them into flaming homosexuals. It was so bad because Prissy loved children and had molded so many other children for so many years in her first grade classroom. All she wanted to do was love her nephews. Violet sighed. Since the day those boys were born Prissy lived for them, sending them birthday and Christmas presents, chocolate hearts on Valentine's Day and baskets full of goodies on Easter. Never once, did she ever get a thank-you note or a phone call but Prissy wouldn't blame her nephews. It was their parent's fault, she would say and she wouldn't punish the children for their parents' sin. Personally, Violet always thought that the boys were probably just like their mother and father. How could they be otherwise? But she never said a word. The whole family was disgusting. But she would have to be civil to them for Prissy's sake. Prissy would have wanted that much and, she supposed, in the end it was better to forgive and forget. So they were here, read the obituary Bobbie had

put in the newspaper like everybody else. She sighed, blood, after all, was thick. Frowning, Violet watched the beady little man, his stomach hanging over his belt like it was inflated with an airpump and his ladder-back wife march down the aisle. "Please lord," Violet whispered, "let them have the decency not to try to sit down beside me." She didn't know if it was decency or embarrassment over being seen with her that caused them to sit down three rows behind her, next to Violet's school principal. Violet exhaled with relief as she saw Bobbie dash into the chapel and make a bee line for her. She sat down in a rush beside her grabbing her hand and squeezing it.

"How are you doing?" she whispered.

"Alright," Violet answered.

Bobbie's dark eyes inspected her closely. "Bull. Have you eaten anything since that soup I made you yesterday?"

She shook her head. "I can't eat when I'm upset. When this is all over I'll eat."

"You're too skinny. You have to eat. What about sleeping? Are you sleeping? I have some tranquilizers and a good stiff drink wouldn't kill you."

Violet shook her head. "I'm alright."

"I can send Pam over to look after you for a few days. You'd be doing me a favor. I wanted to paint her room." Pam was Prissy and Violet's godchild, one of Bobbie's three daughters, one of their three godchildren, children they loved and doted on as much as if they were their own.

"I really don't need Pam. It would be hard for her without Prissy in the house. She has to get used to this too. Besides, I have Isis and Robert is out of town so you need Pam for company yourself."

Bobbie nodded, her husband Robert traveled constantly on business. It always seemed to Violet and Prissy that Robert was away more than he was ever home but the couple seemed to thrive and Robert was a very dear man. "Well, Pam and I do have Holly, their dog and Isis's mother. I can always spare Pam if you want her Vi. . . ."

Violet smiled sadly at her friend. "It's okay. Maybe at Christmas when Sara and Kristi come home from college, maybe then you can send me one of them. I think I'll be ready by then."

Bobbie laughed her deep throaty laugh. "Well lord knows I'll be ready." She looked around the chapel then turned to Violet in surprise. "Do you know who is here Vi?"

"Everyone, Prissy would have liked to see it."

Her friend looked at her. "She's seeing it Vi, believe me, she's seeing it. She's seeing everything now and her soul will always be watch-

ing over you until you can be together.” A tear ran down her face, “And she’s watching over me and the girls and Robert too.”

Violet clasped her friend’s hand tightly, grateful for the comfort.

“Reverend Barker will be starting any minute,” Bobbie said, “but did you notice who is sitting three rows behind us? What trash someone dumped in here?”

Violet nodded. “I know,” she whispered. “I saw them slink in, but we shouldn’t think these things Bobbie. They are Prissy’s family.”

“Some family.”

“She’d want them here. She’d want us to forgive and forget.”

The organ started and the minister droned on with his eulogy. This was their own church. The minister was a friend. He’d known Prissy well. He spoke of her tenderly. Violet dabbed at her eyes. When he finished he handed Violet a tiny urn. All that remained of Prissy. At the sight of it Violet wanted to burst into tears, but Bobbie was squeezing her arm and what seemed like a million people were coming up to her to pay their respects. It was funny how all the people Prissy worked with, the teachers from her school, all knew to give their condolences to her even though Prissy never told them the truth about herself. Schoolteachers couldn’t and keep their jobs. But everyone knew, knowing she was unmarried and living with the same “roommate” for more than twenty-five years. They knew and they didn’t care as long as Prissy didn’t go announcing her sexual status at a schoolboard meeting. No one cared except Prissy’s family. These people were wiser. It was none of their business. Prissy was a nice person and an excellent teacher. They all liked and respected her.

It seemed forever until the last trickle of people finally left. Violet found herself standing alone with Bobbie. Bobbie looked tired. They weren’t getting any younger, Violet thought. “Do you want to come home with me and spend the night?”

Violet shook her head. “I promised Isis I’d be back and I have these ashes to deal with. Prissy would want me to drop them into the ocean. I want to get out to the beach before dark.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Violet shook her head. “I want to do this by myself. I’ll be alright.” She looked at her friend. “What about you?”

Bobbie nodded. “Then I’ll go back to the animal shelter. I have three people out with the flu and another one on vacation. Believe it or not I left Pam in charge, a thirteen-year-old kid. That’s why she didn’t come today.”

“She didn’t need to come to this,” Violet said. “She probably did fine in your place today. She’s very competent.”

“Just like her Auntie Vi,” Bobbie said reassuringly. “So, I’ll be at the shelter ’til about five, if you need me, then Pam and Holly and I will be home.”

Violet nodded absently, walking to her car. Her and Prissy’s car actually since they shared everything. “I’ll be okay and I’ll call you.”

Bobbie hugged her friend. “Okay, call me when you get home from the beach or I’ll worry. You know how I am.”

Violet nodded, getting into the car, the urn on the seat beside her. She wanted to go home first and change her clothes then she and Prissy would take a walk on the beach, their last walk together.

She was not pleased to find JoeBill and Dodo waiting on the front porch, sitting on the porch swing as if they owned the place. At the sight of them she wished she had asked Bobbie to come home with her. This was all she needed. She heard Isis growling loudly at the strangers from inside the house. She bit back the words forming on her tongue at the sight of these wretched people, thinking of Prissy and her nephews, trying to do the right thing. “JoeBill and Dodo, this is a surprise. I saw you in the chapel. I know Prissy would have been happy that you came. It’s just too bad you couldn’t have settled your differences sooner.”

JoeBill nodded his double chin and puffed on his stinky cheap cigar. “How well I know that now,” he said, his voice glib.

Violet looked at them. “Thank you for stopping by. I’d ask you in, but I’m going to change my clothes and take Prissy’s ashes to the beach.”

The couple nodded, pushing their way into the house after Violet. Violet stared at them in surprise. Isis stood in the corner of the room growling softly. “Easy Isis,” Violet said reassuringly to the dog. “It’s okay.” She turned to Prissy’s family. “She’s a little high-strung, upset with Prissy being gone.”

DoDo eyed the dog, her nostrils flaring. “Is she a purebreed?”

Violet nodded, “Lady Isis Rubarnick the third, we have papers on her and everything. She was a birthday gift to Prissy a few years ago from one of our friends.” Violet petted the dog standing protectively at her side. “She’s a real comfort to me now.”

DoDo’s steely eyes scanned the room. “Might we have a drink. It was warm waiting out there.”

Violet nodded wanting to tell the old bat that no one asked her to wait out there but too flustered by confusion and grief to even think straight, wanting to do the right thing by Prissy. She poured her two guests each a glass of Seven-Up.

“You and Priscilla had yourself a real nice little place here,” JoeBill

said smoothly. "Of course I haven't been here in years. You say you both owned this little house? Seems like you accumulated a lot of fine things."

Violet nodded, grief and exhaustion creeping up on her. "Prissy and I traveled a lot. That jade collection over there is from our trip to China and the ivory is from India. The ormolu clock is French and the figurines are all Hummel, Prissy collected them. I got her one every Christmas. The delf plate collection is mine. I started it in Europe. Prissy never cared too much for delfware, but she had a whole set of Wexford crystal that she loved dearly."

DoDo sniffed loudly. "I always thought that people who traveled were running away from something. But of course, we've always been too busy to go anywhere. JoeBill selling insurance day and night like he does and I taking care of my home and our sons and of course my charity work." She looked at Violet coldly. "What is it again that you do?"

"I'm a writer," she said hoping to end the conversation and the visit, looking at her watch. "I don't mean to rush you but it's getting late and I want to take Prissy's ashes to the beach before it gets dark. I know she'll be glad you came and I hope you'll remember her to Joey and Billy."

JoeBill cleared his throat. "Well, that's why we came down to the house. You know those boys of mine always talk about their Aunt Priscilla. Even though they never met her, they think the world of her. I was hoping that I might take something of Priscilla's for each of them, something small and insignificant that they could remember their dear aunt by."

Overcome with the burden of the day, Violet's eyes filled with tears. It was such a nice thought. Prissy would have loved it. "Of course," she murmured. "That's a beautiful idea. I'll just go and change. You can look around the room a little. There's a bunch of photo albums over by the fireplace. Maybe you could find something in one of them."

When she came out of the bedroom in her old chinos and a sweater the couple were flipping through a photo album. "My," JoeBill said, turning to Violet, his voice silky, "all this brings back so many memories of my sister. All these years, I made a terrible mistake in not seeing her."

Violet nodded, genuinely touched by the man's feelings.

"Might DoDo and I stay here a little bit longer and look through these other albums while you are gone? Then we'll pick a memento for the boys and lock up tightly behind us?"

Violet look at her watch and back at the couple. After all was said and done he was Prissy's brother. She nodded her head. "Alright, I'll put Isis out back so she doesn't bother you."

The couple nodded watching her leave.

At sundown when Violet came home her first thought was that she had been robbed. The house was ransacked. She wandered from room to room looking at all the empty spaces, the dusty shelves. There was so much missing, Prissy's valuable doll collection, their ivory and jade, the crystal, the fine china, their clock collection, an original lithograph that hung over their bed and Isis, where was Isis?

She wandered the house in shocked tears, slowly putting two and two together and coming up with the only solution. It had to have been JoeBill and DoDo. It was just like them. She called the police and explained it all. The officer was very nice but since Prissy hadn't left a will and JoeBill was Prissy's next of kin, there was nothing they could do for her. Her head pounded. Thank heavens the house was in both their names or she imagined JoeBill would have taken it too. And Isis, she didn't care so much about the things, although the things were so full of memories, but what would she do without Isis? Now she was really alone and poor Isis living with those horrible people. She knew they wouldn't feed her canned food; they were too cheap and they wouldn't exercise her either. All they'd do is breed the poor dog to death and sell all the puppies. She picked up the phone to call Bobbie just as it rang. "Vi," Bobbie's throaty voice said into the phone. "Are you alright?"

"NO," Violet blurted out. "I was just going to call you." She told her friend about JoeBill and DoDo.

Before she could finish Bobbie interrupted. "It's just what I thought. Not ten minutes ago JoeBill and DoDo came into the animal shelter."

"What?"

"They were practically hysterical. JoeBill said he inherited a dog from his poor dead sister."

"That's Isis. But he didn't inherit her. He stole her."

"I know that," Bobbie said, "calm down. It seems that Isis bit both him and DoDo then jumped out of his car."

"Good for her. Is she ok? Did she get hurt jumping out of the car?"

"Relax, they said she jumped out over on McNutt Road, at the stop sign. That's less than a mile from your house. You always walk her up there, don't you?"

"Yes," Vi said, relieved. "She should be home any minute. But what about those SOB's JoeBill and DoDo? What did they want?"

Bobbie laughed. "You'll love this. They wanted to check to see if



Isis has been vaccinated lately. Did you know she was due for her shots two weeks ago?"

"Dr. Baker is out of town," Vi explained. "I planned on taking her in as soon as he gets back."

"Just as well," Bobbie chuckled. "I had to tell old JoeBill and DoDo that I had no recent shot record on Isis, and of course, her owner, Priscilla Winchester, was quite eccentric. I couldn't vouch for her when it came to these things. I told them not to panic, but we have had quite a few cases of hydrophobia recently and the dog did break the skin . . ." She laughed. "That little dickens actually drew blood on DoDo's calf. I didn't think Isis had it in her."

"They must have provoked her, Bobbie."

"Hey, you don't have to convince me. I'd like to bite them myself." Vi laughed.

"Anyway, I told them that it was their decision. But if it were me, I'd start rabies treatment immediately. One can never be too safe. And of course, I told them that I'd have my people look for the dog but we are so short-handed right now that it might take weeks."

"You didn't!"

"I was just doing my job Vi. Last I heard they were in the emergency room. Dr. Bruce called to tell me he was starting the injections." She smiled into the phone. "Sometimes I really do love my job."

Vi smiled in spite of herself.

"They deserved it. I'll stop by in about an hour with some ice cream for you and Isis. She ought to be home by then."

That night Violet was up late straightening out the mess that JoeBill and DoDo had made, filling in the empty places on the shelves and cabinets with other pieces of her life. When she finally got into bed she was so tired that she knew she would sleep. Isis's warm body stretched out beside her in Prissy's place comforted her, making her feel a little less alone.

# Interview/Reviews



# **I WANT WHAT I WRITE TO BE NECESSARY: AN INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA MARÍA ESTEVES**

*Luzma Umpierre*

*(I interviewed Sandra María Esteves on July 10, 1985  
at her home in Manhattan.)*

## **Family bones**

*Umpierre:* Who is Sandra María Esteves? How would you describe yourself? What things shaped you when you were growing up?

*Esteves:* First of all I would like to start by saying that Sandra María Esteves is still discovering who she is, and it's a process that I believe is going to take many years. But I think I've begun, at least I hope I've begun to understand her. I was born in 1948 in the Bronx. My mother is Dominicana, de Santo Domingo. She came to the United States when she was sixteen. Her name is Christina Huyhue, which is a Dutch name. Her parents were a mixture of Dutch and Black, and I think Danish. Her parents died when she was very young. So she lived with an aunt. She lived in St. Thomas for about ten years, went to high school there, and from there she stayed in Puerto Rico for a few months, and from Puerto Rico she escaped to New York, and it was really an escape for her. She supposedly came for a visit and refused to go back. My father is puertorriqueño and was basically raised in New York. His parents were from the early group that migrated, but he was born in Puerto Rico and spent most of his time back and forth. His name is Charles Esteves. I know less about my father than my mother, because my father was not around as I grew up. My parents met in New York. It's an interesting story. I don't know if I should reveal these family bones, but I think it's important in how it affected me. My mother and father didn't live together, but they were lovers, *novios*. They were going to be married, and then my mother turned up pregnant, and in those days *eso era una verquenza* (that was a shame), and it seemed that my father's side of the family turned out to be somewhat racist. They didn't like my mother. My grandmother, in particular, didn't like her, because she felt she was too dark. His family were people who believed in *mejorando la raza* (bettering the race) or some nonsense like that. So, supposedly she did a *brujo* (conjure) so my parents would not get together. My father stayed with

his mother, and my mother had her own place and wound up having me. So, she struggled through single parenthood. My father, on the other hand, was an irresponsible parent. I never heard from him. If I got any gifts in his name it was usually my grandmother who sent them to me.

This affected me very much when I was young because I always longed to have my father in the house. I saw him fairly regularly up until I was thirteen and then he moved to the West Coast, and I never heard from him again. But when I was very young I remember insisting that we always have a sofa bed in the house. In case he ever came back, he would have a place to sleep.

*Umpierre:* So, you are an only child?

*Esteves:* Yes, I am an only child. I think for my mother it was very traumatic, because not only was she new in this country, but she didn't know English and had to raise a child in an environment that was essentially very hostile to Hispanics, to Hispanic women. She was an intelligent woman, but that didn't mean anything when she got here because of the language situation, but at least she was able to learn. She learned English by reading newspapers every day and now she considers herself a New Yorker.

I grew up in the Bronx. We lived on Longwood Avenue and Beck Street. The first nineteen years of my life I spent in that area. We had one room in a furnished apartment, and as my mother's conditions improved with her job, she was able to get her own place. But I grew up there. Being a single parent and very protective, perhaps over-protective, she put me in a boarding school when I was six. I spent seven years in this boarding school on the Lower East Side of New York. I would go home on weekends and return on Sunday evening. It was called Holy Rosary Academy. It was a Catholic school for girls. That was also another important influence on my being who I am. The nuns were very strict, very disciplined and very academic—and that was good. We lived a sort of contemplative life and that was good for nourishing creativity.

It was in that boarding school that I began to draw, out of frustration at not being able to speak. When I first went into the boarding school I only spoke in Spanish, and the nuns did not allow me to speak Spanish. So I had to learn English. I had great difficulty understanding or just deciphering what was English and what was Spanish, because the two languages were jumbled in my head. That, I think, was the beginning of paying attention to language, having to struggle through that. I used to draw paper dolls for myself and for the other kids. I would fill up ten-cent notebooks with dolls and little dresses to cut out,

and that was the beginning of the artist. And I also had the good fortune to have for the first and second grade a teacher who was an artist. She would draw, she would use color chalk and draw these magnificent fairy tale scenes on the blackboard and we would all be watching and would copy her.

The other side to that story is that I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be home. I loved being with my family. I loved being on Beck Street, a poor neighborhood, because it was what I knew and there was a lot of life and vibrancy that I missed when I was with the nuns. There was a coldness that I felt with the nuns. They were somehow violent. I didn't understand it when I was younger. I internalized it to the point that I thought there was something wrong with me, because they convinced me that I was of an inferior class, of an inferior race. They constantly cited me as an example of someone who is lazy and shiftless because she is Hispanic. They would look at my hands and say these are the hands of a lazy person. They constantly reinforced in my mind that I came from a broken home because my parents were not together. So, therefore, there was something deficient in me. These things left their mark. That together with the language problem left me feeling very frustrated a lot of the time.

After that I went to another Catholic school for eighth grade and then I went to a Catholic high school for four years. At the time it was a new school, so it was basically very well equipped. I think the most important thing that happened for me personally was my art studies and a teacher who took a personal interest in me. I had a full load of art classes. But at the time I kind of resented it because I wanted to go to Art and Design. All my other artist friends were going there and I had been accepted, but my eighth grade teacher convinced my mother that I would be better off in Catholic high school because the public schools are a mess.

### ***'Black is Beautiful'***

*Umpierre:* What did you do after high school?

*Esteves:* From there I went to Pratt Institute. When I got to Pratt, it was the first time I was in coed classes, which was a new experience for me. It turned out not to be such a big deal anyway. There were all kinds of people there, not just Catholics, and that was important. I got to dialogue and interact with other people outside of my immediate cultural group. People from the other side of the country, and even some foreign students were there, and it was sort of a turning point in my consciousness, but still I thought that my mother was following the

best approach through assimilation, which also meant denying who she was, denying her Blackness, denying her language and always reinforcing in me that I had to learn English to get ahead in life. That made me very sensitive to criticism, and I didn't really know how to handle criticism.

The instructors at Pratt dump criticism on you constantly, because that's part of the process, and if you don't understand what that is, it can be devastating, and it was devastating. So, after my first year there, I had very serious doubts about my identity. I didn't know who I was. I was in an extreme crisis. I didn't know who my friends were. When I got there I immediately identified with Afro-Americans because they somehow seemed close to me, historically. But the Afro-Americans I encountered there were very middle class and bourgeois and essentially anti-Puerto Rican, and I think many didn't understand that culturally we were family. So, there was a lot of anxiety created from that interaction.

But it was still good because it was at the end of the sixties, and it was at the time when *Black is Beautiful* emerged. Even though Blacks had problems dealing with me as a Puerto Rican, there was something to be learned from them, and that was to be proud of who I was, even to acknowledge myself culturally and historically and begin to understand that part of me. And even then I didn't know what being Puerto Rican meant. So I had to discover it.

By the time I finished that first year and about halfway into the second year, I had to leave because there was an emptiness and I didn't know what that was. My teachers with their criticism which was so severe, convinced me that I was in the wrong place, I didn't belong there, and I should go and maybe take up accounting or computers or something else. It was like not knowing where to go, where to turn. There wasn't a strong person around to give me the kind of guidance I needed then.

My mother was against my art career to begin with, from the time I was in grammar school. I mean, when I told her I wanted to be an artist, she almost died. She thinks I wasted my life following my creative instinct. And what's interesting is that my mother is a very creative person in what she does. She used to work in a factory and she sews and she is very good and creative in what she does. But she doesn't see how that was carried over to me. I see it very clearly, but she doesn't understand it at all.

*Umpierre:* Because if she saw it she would have to accept you as an artist, or herself, and that would be difficult.

*Esteves:* But she kind of wanted me to make up for what she wanted and couldn't achieve.

### ***Somewhere in there I began writing***

*Umpierre:* So you left Pratt.

*Esteves:* I left Pratt and started drawing and painting for about four years, and I went on and had my first job. Somewhere in there I began writing, and it wasn't a conscious thing, you know, "I want to be a poet," "I want to be a writer." It was just a personal expression. It was more a relief for getting out a lot of frustrations.

*Umpierre:* Are any of those things you first wrote published or were they just sketches of things?

*Esteves:* They were sketchy things, more personal things. They were about love, heartaches and stuff like that. I think the most important thing was "Maria Christina." That was the very first piece to emerge. That piece somehow put together what I was beginning to understand in terms of being a Puerto Rican and being colonized, and what that means. I think that "Maria Christina" was the predecessor of "From the Commonwealth," without doubt. "Maria Christina" was the first important move for me. I didn't write it right away, it took me a while, because these were concepts that I understood instinctively but didn't know how to verbalize because I didn't know what they were.

Somewhere in there I met the fellows from Taller Boricua. It was the first time I encountered puertorriqueños who drew and painted. So immediately we had an affinity. It seemed that they understood the crisis I was going through, especially after Pratt Institute, and they immediately started feeding me information. They showed me works by other Puerto Rican artists. They showed me their own works, which were a tremendous education.

Specifically I am talking about people like Jorge Sotos, Fernando Salicrub, Marcos Dimas, Carlos Osorio, and Martin "Tito" Perez. It was about the same time that I also met Jesús "Papoletto" Meléndez who then became my mentor, and he introduced me to everyone else: Américo Casiano, José Angel Figuéroa. There was an Iris Zavala, who is not the Iris Zavala that is fairly well known, but another Iris Zavala who was also a writer. That's when I think I began learning and seriously consciously began writing with purpose, with a direction, wanting to make statements and searching, discovering. . . .

*Umpierre:* Yes, I think that your poetry is very much a poetry of discovery.

*Esteves:* It is because I don't stay in any one style or any one theme.

*Umpierre:* Your repertoire is incredible and this is in my opinion what makes you important, because some people tend to write in one style or one vein of thought while your repertoire is very varied. You have many changes and I think that's important. It is really like you are discovering who you are, and discovery is also essential to poetry. You already began to speak to me about the groups that you belonged to in the seventies and people that you associated with. Where do you fit within a literary tradition and also what other writer or writers have you been influenced by, what one work?

*Esteves:* I think I can answer the second part of your question better than the first part. Which literary tradition I fit in? I'm not quite sure, because I have been influenced from many places. The spark that started me writing, besides those other things I talked about, was that one day I went to a community poetry reading at the National Black Theatre, on 125th Street and Fifth Avenue, and there were a number of people from the community, from about eleven years old up to very old, who got up and recited poems. All kinds of poems, some rhymed, some were funny and cute, some were very serious and very straight and some were very militant. What impressed me was that these people wrote about things that were very immediate to their lives.

Up to that point my understanding of poetry was something very static and very European and something from the eighteenth century, because that was all the poetry I was exposed to in school. Even at that point I was not familiar with people like William Carlos Williams or Walt Whitman. So, I immediately went home and wrote about eight poems. These poems were very down, full of trauma and tragedy. A few months after that I had written thirty poems or so. I had already written "Maria Christina," when I met Papoleto. At the same time I met him I also met Suni Paz and Bernardo Palombo. They had a cultural day at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, and the group Taoné was there.

Taoné is a group from Puerto Rico, essentially the cultural wing of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. They were touring New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, and they asked me, Papoleto and Américo if we would accompany them and read some of our work because all of theirs was in Spanish, and we had material in English. They wanted to bridge the language gap. So we did that for about two weeks. We went with them. We received no money for this. The community fed us.

But at that point Suni Paz and Bernardo wanted to form a group here because they were going back to Puerto Rico and there would be



nothing. Not knowing what to call us, we called ourselves El Grupo. That was important because from them I began to learn about South American tradition. Suni Paz and Bernardo were both from Argentina. They knew more Puerto Rican songs than I did, so from them I heard different sounds and different voices.

Because she was a woman and because of the type of woman she was, Suni Paz had a big effect on me. I started to write Spanish, even tried to write some songs in Spanish, which for me was a very important accomplishment, because I couldn't communicate well in Spanish and I still have difficulties. But I can converse now. I can read now. At the time I couldn't even formulate one line in Spanish. I had to look up every word. I had to check the spelling. That was good, that was healthy. Suni Paz is a militant woman, very clear politically about what she does.

And not only Suni Paz, but Bernardo Palombo as well and the other members of El Grupo, like Ilsa Montañez and José Valdés, who were also from Puerto Rico. We got to collaborate and we interacted. I would recite and they would play. I would get to sing background for them. I learned how to play maracas. It might seem silly, but when you don't have these things, and you know it is a part of you, finally to be able to touch those parts of yourself is so fulfilling and so meaningful in terms of placing, focusing on yourself. Not only myself individually but myself socially. I think by that point I kind of had an insight into who I was individually, that I did want to be this creative person, but socially I didn't know who I was. I had to learn that.

### ***The women didn't have books***

*Umpierre:* When did you start publishing?

*Esteves:* The first poem that was ever published was in Sunbury Press and I forget exactly which poem it was, but Virginia Scott was publishing new writers and I sent her some work at the suggestion of Papoleto. I had a poem published in *Black World*, which I was kind of glad about because that was supposedly a popular kind of magazine.

And then came *Yerba buena*, my first book. *Yerba buena* has an interesting story. Back in those days Papoleto, myself, and Américo had talked about collaborating on a book and we all were part of a writers conference at Stevens Point, Wisconsin in 1973. It was an ethnic writers conference which was also another interesting experience in my literary career, because it was the first time that I interacted with other ethnic writers from around the country. I think the most important thing I learned there was that Chicanos, Native

Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Black Americans were all being victimized by the same situation and the same competition. In that sense we shared a communion and it was important for us to understand that, so then we could go on, not only in discovering who we are from looking back, but also understanding who we need to become, looking forward.

At that conference I met the publisher of *Greenfield Review* and that's when he invited Papoleto, myself and Américo to publish a book which would be a collection of our work. Eventually Papoleto pulled out of the anthology. Then Américo, at a later point, pulled out. The editor said, "Well, why don't each of you do a book." That was around 1972, 1973, and *Yerba buena* was published at the end of 1980, beginning of 1981. So it took me that long to get it together, to even write the work that went into the book because I wasn't satisfied with the work I had written at that point and I said to myself, "If I am going to publish, I have to make statements that are important," Not that I am fully satisfied with *Yerba buena*. I think it is an important book, but it is not what I want my work to be yet. I don't know if my work is what I want it to be yet, although I feel that I am getting closer to that.

*Umpierre*: So, you are still writing poetry?

*Esteves*: I'm still writing poetry. I'll probably be writing poetry until the day I die, because that's a very personal and internal part of me. Poetry is another way of painting. I don't paint as much anymore, I don't draw as much anymore, but I work with words and sounds and feelings, and all those things; and I try to bring many elements into my work. I think my training as a graphic artist has helped my poetry because I am not trained to be a poet. Like I said, I am still writing, and I'll be writing forever, but mostly when I write a poem, it is out of inspiration. I don't get up in the morning and sit down and then say, "Okay, now I am going to write a poem." Usually it is after a period of crisis, a period of discovery or an important realization that causes me to write. I've tried it the other way—writing on demand. What I write is very unsatisfactory, it's flat and it's lacking what I want my work to have. After I get my initial impulses out then I go back, I rewrite and I work the material. I had to learn to do that.

At first when I started writing, because it was so personal, I didn't consider rewriting as part of anything to do—because it was for me. But when I started reading my work in 1973—and remember, I only started writing in 1972—I felt that there was something wrong; that I should not be the one reading my work. Who was I to tell people anything. I didn't even know who I was, how could I get up there and

have the nerve to read poetry when my life was such a mess. It was the conditions of the time. What really happened was that there was a new group of Hispanics, essentially English-speaking and English-oriented, not only in the universities but in the communities.

The men have been doing it for years, you know. We start with Victor Hernandez Cruz. There are maybe a couple before him, but he was the first one, or the earliest one that I knew about. We also had Pedro Pietri, Papoleto, Algarín, Piñero and José Angel Figuéroa. They all had books, but the women didn't have books, and it was not that the women were not writing. They were hiding what they were writing in closets and drawers, on shelves and not wanting to show their work to anyone, because, after all, when you show your work you reveal yourself fully and totally with all your deficiencies as well as qualities to whomever the audiences may happen to be. And that can be a very intimidating thing; and, if culturally you come from a colonial situation, you are even more intimidated because it has already been reinforced hundreds of times that you are inferior. That you are not as important. That you are not as good. So you are even more reluctant to share your work, and then if that colonized group happens to be Puerto Rican, that is even worse, because in our culture the women tend to hide in the background and let the men take the forefront; because that's the way things are, that's where we came from.

I guess that at that time and moment, there was a need for a female voice in English. But many women were writing at that time. I have met women who have been writing since they were children and have diaries and journals and nobody knows about them. So I began reading and feeling very inadequate about everything I had to say, but also feeling a sense of responsibility for what I was being asked to do, which was to be a voice and at that point I realized that I had to learn, I had to educate myself, I had to develop and to study my work and the works of others. At that time I went to readings all over the place. At that time the writers were very close, and every weekend there would be something happening in someone's apartment. We read our works to each other and surprisingly we even had audiences and packed houses. I don't see that happening now, but it was happening then, and that was very encouraging because I learned from every person that I would hear. I learned, and I met all kinds of people. They all had an important effect on my work.

*Umpierre*: Back to the question of *tradition*. Do you consider yourself mostly part of a literary tradition in this country or would you say that

you belong to something larger than that, like the Latin American tradition or the Caribbean tradition?

*Esteves:* My influences have been many and they come from many places, but somehow it all focuses in to me. And I think it is because I am here, in New York, a town that is essentially anti-Hispanic and has been throughout my entire life, and I am a woman who has been victimized by sexism in ways that I am not going to elaborate on in this interview. But the fact that I went through that and I know that every other Latin woman has to go through that, not just because we are Hispanic, but also doubly because we are women, and what the society wants to impose on us, on our identity. Maybe that means that I am from the tradition here. I think I am at the beginning of a literary tradition that is evolving. But at the same time, if we go back to the literary tradition of Puerto Rico, starting with the Jibaro movement, when that began, we can analyze that and see that it was essentially anti-colonial. Even though I speak English and write primarily in English, my themes are similar. So, in that sense I am also part of that tradition.

*Umpierre:* So, it is an anti-colonial tradition that you ultimately consider yourself part of.

*Esteves:* Part of that, too, although I think I'm part of many things.

*Umpierre:* What writers, what Puerto Rican writers did you read that you think exercised some influence on you, if any. Or what black writers or what writers in general do you think you have read that have been meaningful in your own writing?

*Esteves:* That's a lot of people. The first dynamic poetry that caught my attention was the Last Poets who come essentially from a black oral tradition and also a militant tradition, which was fine for me, because, I said, "Well, I am black too." So, that is a part of me. I identify with that because our music, the lyrical quality of our Salsa, I think, is very easy to connect, to identify with the Last Poets, who also have a very lyrical quality even though their work was in English and was, essentially, an Afro-American expression. And then I met Papoieto, Pedro Pietri, Américo, José Angel Figuéroa, Victor Hernández Cruz and they all were Puerto Ricans. I learned something from all of them.

Later, I was very much affected by the works of Gabriel García Márquez, when I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, even though I read it in English. I want to read it in Spanish, but I have a lot of difficulty reading Spanish. But the essence of what he is about, I can decipher from the English because that is something I've learned to do, to pierce through, to go beyond the boundaries of the language and see what is at the heart. But then Márquez, I think, was very much in-

fluenced by Walt Whitman and probably many other writers. Everyone influences everyone else. “Maria Christina,” for example, was stylistically influenced by a poem of Papoieto’s. I don’t remember the exact name, but it was about this shoeshine man. It gave rise to my poem, but the content of what happens in “Maria Christina” is different in many ways, because it is coming from a woman’s perspective and what happens to us as women.

### ***A Julia y a mí***

*Umpierre*: What about a poem like “A Julia y a mí?” Have you been influenced by women writers?

*Esteves*: The first important encounter with Julia de Burgos\* was when I saw a play that Victor Fragoso and Dolores Prida collaborated on. It was called *Dadme mi número* and was based on Julia’s letters. When I saw the play I was touched. I was very moved by her work. It was very powerful. She was making the kind of statements I wanted to make, that I felt inside and couldn’t find how to bring them out. So, that led me to want to know more about her. And I looked for her work. Someone sent me a collection from Puerto Rico. So I was able to read it in Spanish. I found some English translations in different anthologies—not too many. But with Julia, you don’t need a lot of her work to be affected by it. One poem of hers is a complete education. She was very important. After I saw it, I wrote “A Julia y a mí.” I was already familiar with her poem, “A Julia de Burgos.” What she did in that poem was talk to herself as two people, the one inside and the one outside. What I wanted to do was talk about myself as two people, the Hispanic-oriented one and the English-oriented one in my poem “A Julia y a mí.”

*Umpierre*: There is a group that is emerging, not only writers of poetry, but also writers of prose like Nicholasa Mohr and Lorraine Sutton.

*Esteves*: Lorraine Sutton was also a strong influence. Lorraine Sutton has essentially written seven poems. I don’t believe that’s all she’s ever written, but she claims that that’s what she wrote. And still, those seven poems of hers are so potent, so full of energy and make such important statements in regard to women’s politics and our need to

\* Julia de Burgos is the most influential poet of Puerto Rico in the twentieth century and one who has had the greatest influence on women poets of Puerto Rico. She died in the streets of New York City in 1953. She published four books of poetry, including *El mar y tu*, which was published posthumously in 1954. She was an activist for both women’s rights and Puerto Rican independence.

develop ourselves and our need for self-determination. I met Lorraine Sutton through Virginia Scott. I think it was she who published *Sacryd Lady*, which is Lorraine's book. She was probably the only woman around at that time, other than Suni Paz, that I was very much influenced by. She was the only woman that I knew of who wrote in English. I didn't know Nicholasa until later on.

*Umpierre*: Do you feel that you have a stronger commitment to what you are doing in this country and your work—a commitment to the community—or that you have a strong commitment in general because of the fact that you are a woman writer and there are so few Puerto Rican writers in this country.

*Esteves*: I think so. I think that is a very important part of who I am and why I write. Not only to expose the injustices that we have been subjected to for centuries, but also to bring a hopefulness to our need to go forward, to develop, to listen to ourselves, to become our own voices. In fact, it has probably become the most important of all the work that I do, it's that wanting to develop a meaningful expression. Well, you know, I have three daughters, and I don't have a farm in Colorado to leave them. I don't even have a farm in Puerto Rico. I don't have a house in Queens to leave them. I want to leave them a legacy that's important. That's probably more meaningful than whatever property I have or I don't have. That's part of why I do what I do. I think wanting to be creative, no matter where or what form it takes is very important. I don't think being creative has anything necessarily to do with being male or female, even though being female allows us to give birth, which is probably the most creative act that we are capable of. But other than giving birth, we as women have not been given those opportunities to develop. You can be very creative, but if you don't have the vehicle to express that and develop that, it will never go anywhere, and your creativity can stay locked up inside of you in a massive frustration. I believe it is a very important part of where we have to go.

### ***I want what I write to be necessary***

*Umpierre*: And then you recently published *Tropical Rain: A Bilingual Downpour*.

*Esteves*: Yes, and it is essentially a personal endeavor. I am responsible for putting it together, and I did all the work. I had to print it. I collated the pages, stapled them, and I am the one who distributed them in the stores. But, on the other side, it is also a way that we raise money for the African-Caribbean Poetry Theater. It was my choice to

do that, and it works both ways. It helps me to get my work out, and it also helps to bring more attention to the organization, which we wanted to as well as fundraise.

The African-Caribbean Poetry Theater is a cultural organization. Mostly what we have done is theater and other areas of the literary arts. We sponsor poetry readings and performances. It is a young organization in existence for five years. I've been directing it for two years now.

*Umpierre:* As you know, sometimes there is a very strict separation between the person who is writing and the person who is doing criticism of that writing, and, perhaps because I am a feminist, and perhaps because I am someone who has to write criticism in order to eat—but actually what I do most is write poetry—what I'd like to know from you is if you have any expectation of critics. Also, what would help you as a writer?

*Esteves:* Well, I think criticism is very much like directing a play. When a director directs, a good director that is, he has to be able to, number one, penetrate the personality of the person who is interpreting the character and understand the nature of that person and establish if that person is compatible with this character that is being portrayed and then the director has to be able to know whether that person accurately and successfully portrays the character. I think criticism is partly a way for me to know if my work is making an impact, if it is coming across the way I want it to. Very often we get locked in our creative thoughts and expressions and we don't see aspects, facets of it that someone who is trained to be critical, to be able to decipher, to analyze, to break down. Not only that, but I'll assume that most people who do literary criticism have a lot of training in literary tradition, they are familiar with a lot of information. There are many writers who are also just as familiar, such as yourself.

A critic is also like an astrologer in the sense that when an astrologer looks at a person's horoscope, he has to understand not only what is happening in the horoscope, but also look at the individual and realize that the life of an individual is a process. Who you are in 1984 is different from who you are in 1985. A good astrologer can somehow pinpoint where you are now and give you information you need to proceed to your next step. Maybe not where you are going to be ten years from now, but where you'll be the following year, and I think that that's probably the most valuable aspect of criticism that I can absorb as a writer. I try to understand fully and I read thoroughly what is written about my work. I don't always agree with what some people have written about my work because I think they don't fully under-

stand or they misunderstand something, but that is alright too because I can still absorb something from them.

*Umpierre:* So, where do you see yourself going?

*Esteves:* I want to keep developing as a writer. I want to be meaningful, I want to make statements, I want my work to be important. I don't care if the world doesn't know who I am, but I want what I write to be necessary. I want the statements to affect how people think. I want them to affect how we as women see ourselves, to learn how to not only respect ourselves, but to love ourselves, because we come from so much self-hate.

I want to leave a legacy to my children very directly, but also in the sense my community is all of our children. We are responsible for each other. I guess being raised as Christians, we are our brothers' and our sisters' keepers. One has to help one.

*Umpierre:* Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

*Esteves:* Absolutely. I may not focus on it in my work. I don't go around playing a priest. I don't follow any specific religion. I learn from all and I believe they are all valid and they are all important, but they each evolve according to the need of each particular group, whatever it is; but very much spiritual because that's as much a part of my work as my creativity. My creativity is a spiritual thing. I realized that when I was a painter. I would sit and I would draw things, and then later on I would come back to the things I had drawn. Sometimes there were things that I didn't remember drawing. Other times I would look into the work, which is a form of meditation, and I would find things that I was not even aware of, realizations would happen, and I realized that this wasn't Sandra María Esteves alone. That this was Sandra María Esteves influenced by . . . I don't know how to describe it . . . perhaps my angel, perhaps my guardian, perhaps my *santo*, perhaps God, perhaps the Virgin. I can't be specific as to who or what it is, but that it is there I am very clear about because it has passed through me.

I believe that the inspirations I get are like children. There are different types of children, and that I have a responsibility to those children. One, to get them out and give them expression, give them realization, and then two, to nurture them, and take care of them, clean them up, change their diapers.



# **A la Mujer Borriqueña**

## **Sandra María Esteves**

My name is Maria Christina  
I am a Puerto Rican woman born in el barrio

Our men . . . they call me negra because they love me  
and in turn I teach them to be strong

I respect their ways  
inherited from our proud ancestors  
I do not tease them with eye catching clothes  
I do not sleep with their brothers and cousins  
although I've been told that this is a liberal society  
I do not poison their bellies with instant chemical foods  
our table holds food from earth and sun

My name is Maria Christina  
I speak two languages broken into each other  
but my heart speaks the language of people  
born in oppression

I do not complain about cooking for my family  
because abuela taught me that woman is the master of fire  
I do not complain about nursing my children  
because I determine the direction of their values

I am the mother of a new age of warriors  
I am the child of a race of slaves  
I teach my children how to respect their bodies  
so they will not o.d. under the stairway's shadow of shame  
I teach my children to read and develop their minds  
so they will understand the reality of oppression  
I teach them with discipline . . . and love  
so they will become strong and full of life

My eyes reflect the pain  
of that which has shamelessly raped me  
but my soul reflects the strength of my culture

My name is Maria Christina  
I am a Puerto Rican woman born in el barrio  
Our men . . . they call me negra because they love me  
and in turn I teach them to be strong.

**A Julia y a Mí**  
**Sandra María Esteves**  
*For Julia De Burgos*

Me fui a la obra y te vi Julia  
en tus versos camine tu río  
andé los pisos de la tierra roja  
combatiendo la tierra blanca  
me entregue adentro tus palabras  
but why did you let the dragon slay you  
why did your visions suffocate  
in suicidal premonition you could not die  
within the flesh beat the heart  
and my child need no image of despair  
or too much poetry of this and that  
but not enough to rise above the clouded cross

Me fui, y me diste un vaso florida de ser  
una oja de verde cortada  
eres mujer y mujeres muriendo  
I viewed a saint and saw myself instead  
in cracks of time  
and my sister, she dances around with your words  
she springs new life from your roots dried and seasoned  
accidents stepping across your occult  
roll along in purple hymn

Pero díme, cuando llegaste a ser la eternidad del barrio?  
te doy mis sueños  
y cojo mi número que nunca viene de otra mano  
con mi misma mano fuerte  
mi carácter de ser  
libertada por el viento en el ambiente social

Y tu Julia?  
te perdistes en palabras no en vida  
you let the dragon slay you  
you let life cut your sorrow from wrinkles young  
you let the wine mellow your hatred  
dissolving the fuel that nourished your fires of wisdom  
you gave in a breath at a time  
and the eagle's wing consumed your existence

Miro a tu cara, tus ojos mirando el mundo  
el mismo que miraba mi madre  
siento el ritmo en tu pecho  
el mismo que cubre mis canciones corriendo  
encima del rio superficial  
oigo tus versos del universo, humanidad, y de mujer  
it is the same world that has not moved  
but an inch from your suffrage  
women still tend fires that men burn  
and lovers still imprison dreams  
and truth remains cold like your bones yet bittersweet

Mujer, siente el frio a que te das el gusto  
de cojer la vida colorosa  
cai en lo duro a que reconosca el viento  
amaneciendo en tu cara suave y felis

A ti Julia, ya sera tarde  
pero a mi no  
Yo vivo!  
y grito si me duele la vida  
y canto con la gente  
y bailo con mis hijas  
no soy lagrimas de ser  
soy el rio  
la mariposa y culebra  
my fist is my soul  
it cuts into the blood of dragons  
and marks time with the beat  
of an afrocuban drum.

**FLAMINGOS AND BEARS** by **Jewelle Gomez**.  
Grace Publications, Jersey City, N.J., 1986  
*Kamili Anderson*

Jewelle Gomez's latest book of poetry sent me racing to the dictionary: why is there no feminine form of the word *mastery*? Why must a woman (the reviewer, in this case) be at a loss for words to describe those of another woman who has empowered her, first of all, to speak sublimely, and secondly, to explore the battlefields of female experience? With an irreverent flair, Gomez has assembled bold, uncloseted words to explicate life, love and lesbian sexuality. She has cajoled the language to serve her own immense expressive needs, in effect "de-man-cipating" language to speak in the name of women unbound.

These poems reach out with seductive urgency. They beguile and arrest the reader with their commanding sensuality, as in "Hands:"

My words have the power of tongues  
lashing wetness down your back  
seeping 'round the broadness  
to suck at your breast. (38)

Gomez finesses even the remotest disparities into congruity. When she blends *woman* and *hardness*, *mocha* and *silver*, *comfort* and *passion*, it delights the senses. Even sweetness and electricity combine as she adds a sardonic twist in the poem, "Oral Tradition:"

Shocking realization this year  
I do envy man his penis  
the freedom to stand  
discreetly  
and pee  
against building walls.  
Still, I wouldn't trade  
the sweet electricity  
of my clit  
as it sings with her tongue  
merely for the chance  
to deface public property. (4)

Gomez is also a gifted imagist. In "Between 180th and Freeman," love takes form, "like the odd shape of buildings," and is, likewise, "made more apparent by abandonment" (20). In the same poem, desire is incarnated as "a sculptured stone/gone black with city acid," which lurks behind empty-eyed windows. Desire appears again in "Approach," this time "standing full as a night storm" (14) beside a bed holding tentative lovers. Whether she is describing death as an exit "through the revolving door to the other side of prayer" (32), or cap-

turing, as if in song, “pouting lips stretched around the end of phrases” (8), Gomez displays an acuity of vision that is a pleasure to share.

This poetry takes on everything, even the poet herself, and it takes them all seriously—up to a point. Irony and angst are countered by flirtatious, often tongue-in-cheek humor. For example, how honestly we talk about the things that we do in the dark, even in purportedly liberated, feminist circles, is examined in “Our Feminist Who Art in Heaven,” a poem which playfully begs penance for (and definition of the term) “politically incorrect sex” (20). Consider further her poem, “Blatta Occidentalis, NYC, USA”—is not our wanton annihilation of the world’s cockroach population on a par with genocide? And, how does one *explain* “atomic art,” much less passively eat one’s lunch or drink one’s coffee around it, as in “Hiroshima Red in Black and White,” which is literally a gut (pun intended) reaction to a cafeteria exhibit of photos of the aftermath of the bombing of Japan. These poems ask large, round questions whose answers defy specificity but invite speculation. They wring wry confessions for atrocities that we have allowed to become all too commonplace in our lives.

On the question of relationships, Gomez’s poems further ask: how much do any of us—women, men, blacks, whites, straights, gays—in any of our roles—as mothers, daughters, lovers, and/or strangers—have to offer anyway? The poem, “My Chakabuku Mama,” though comical, is stinging in its realism. It tells of the poet’s “first big love,” a woman who led her through a maze of spiritual calisthenics only to leave her flat, “exiting serenely on a cloud of universal love” (43), “Tanya Rienzi 1939–1976” is a sweet, bitter eulogy for a torch singer caught in a tragedy that repeats itself far too frequently in relationships between men and women. Gomez’s phrasing and sense of timing in this poem is so captivating that the poor woman’s last defiant “no” echoes in one’s ears long after we read of her death, at the hands of her irate lover man, “who wouldn’t believe that she could live without him” (9). In “Sir Raleigh,” a woman, “happy, alone, and flying,” refuses to be trivialized by a group of men on a street corner. She is aided in her escape from sexual harrassment by “the only thing a man ever gave [her]/that was always good/between [her] legs,” her Raleigh three-speed (17). The title poem fantasizes a world in which allegorical odd-ball animals, no doubt standing in for lesbians and gays, will have risen above parental “greedy gazes,” the hisses of “frightened sly weasels,” and other repressive elements of hetero-society (23). In a bit of caprice, Gomez propitiously asserts that a new age of openness will evolve, in which sexual non-comformists will be

able to affirm their love joyously, publicly and without fear.

"Rooftop Sonata" and "The Servants" are two extremely satisfying poems that identify the elements of woman-bonding as the intensely personal and significant linkages they are. "Women's handiwork always lasts" (28), Gomez writes in the former poem, of the enduring ties of intimacy between women. The tragedy described in the latter poem is that our affinities for each other are often acknowledged too late. Gomez's words follow women journeying boldly or cautiously to the ends of intimacy, towards their truest, most vulnerable or indestructible selves. The hands of women making love in a previously cited poem are given the power to "open up the sky/fold back the earth" in spiritually erotic "high midnight rituals of harvest/deep inside"(38). Poems such as "Love Poem for C.C." speak of connection, redemption and absolution:

for you my love comes round  
like our cycles of blood  
like the seasons  
round like a hip  
or an eye or a music note  
round like you  
round like me. (46)

Claudia Tate, editor of *Black Women Writers at Work*, asserts that, as a consequence of historical biases, black women writers have had to forge ahead with neither the assurance nor the encouragement of publishers or audience. Gomez's efforts exemplify that credo. She is the author of an earlier volume of poetry, *The Lipstick Papers* (1980, out of print). An indefatigable reviewer of books, Gomez is currently working on a novel about a black lesbian vampire (!). While most self-published poetry makes its lack of professional scrutiny glaringly obvious, this attractive and artful book notably escapes such criticism. It is this particular attentiveness to craft that takes the reader of *Flamingos and Bears* inside its message, inside the language and eventually inside oneself. From there, it is an easy road to the other side of understanding. Until the world comes around to a broader acceptance of a woman-centered orientation, her vanguard poetry definitely deals, in dreams and in reality:

All my words prelude  
to this command of your body  
locked in half secret by solid bands  
of afternoon and evening  
painted across the room . . . .  
I want to press my mouth  
to your sighs  
sucking in your insistent  
movement  
Or I want the dream of that. (52)

All of which makes for a world of difference.

**THE SUN IS NOT MERCIFUL** by **Anna Lee Walters**. Firebrand Books, Ithaca, N.Y., 1985  
*Breena Clarke*

Simplicity is a key here. The eight stories in Anna Lee Walters's collection, *The Sun Is Not Merciful*, are all written in a *simple*, straightforward, narrative style. The sentences are descriptive but without complex construction. They are spare but full of pictures. They are stories of the ordinary lives of contemporary Native American women as they live in their tribal communities within the dominant culture. This is an area where so little is documented that comparisons are difficult. Native women writers such as Paula Gunn Allen, Joy Harjo, Chrystos, Beth Brant, Linda Hogan and anthologies such as *A Gathering of Spirit (Sinister Wisdom, 1983)*, *Bearing Witness (Calyx, 1984)* and *Gathering Ground (Cochran, Stewart and Tsutakawa, eds. 1984)* are challenging the silence and the lies. For many non-Native North Americans, the prevailing image is still that of the powerless, quiet, self-effacing, submissive adjunct to the stereotypically colorful macho "brave." Public opinion of our Native sister usually runs toward a romantic imitation of her lifestyle, a patronizing glorification of her customs and usurpation of her artistic traditions as well as her lands. We, on both sides of the American color line and both sides of both borders can claim the Native American woman as foremother. But she is a mother about whom we know little. Separated by a gulf of stereotypes, half-truths and vicious lies, I found it difficult to critique Walters's work until I dared simply recognize our common blood and tradition. I'll let the blood and spirit talk and keep all that rings true.

The collection itself starts off slowly. Walters seems, at first, not to know what voice to use. The language of the first two stories, "The Warriors" and "Mythomania," is a bit stiff and falls back on a too-pat allegorical style. She breaks out of this mold very soon and by the third piece, "Going Home," has found a comfortable style. Despite some unevenness of craft, the collection proceeds like a good story—growing and developing as we grow accustomed to each other. There is no indication that the stories are arranged in any order, but the work seems to mature as it moves from beginning to ending. "The Sun Is Not Merciful," the final story, is thus a proper culmination as it draws together the major themes of the collection.

In "The Resurrection of John Stink," nineteen-year-old Effie

Grayeyes honors an aunt's request that she help an old man, plagued by seizures, with cooking and cleaning. Though a property owner, John Stink is considered poor and pitiful because he has no family. Effie works for him and develops a caring relationship with him which enriches both. Effie builds an alternate life in John Stink's house.

Effie fell in love with John Stink, The way she fell in love with the start of every autumn. Both things touched her soul deeply. (53)

All of Walters's tales emphasize natural imagery, i.e., likening human behavior and physiognomy to natural phenomena. In "Going Home," a spare, absorbing story of a marriage and death, the middle-aged Nita's face is compared to a stone worn by time in one complex, succinct sentence: "Sun hated to look at Nita and be reminded of the chipping away of time" (40). Nita becomes a metaphor of the land. Thus we know them both—land and woman. They become indistinguishable, underscoring the theme of woman's intimate relationship with nature.

She came into his life like a storm blown from the flat prairie land in the east. He found her in the desert, a flower which he picked for himself and carried home. (39)

"The Laws" speaks clearly to all Third World peoples whose traditional system of justice has been corrupted and supplanted by commerce with Europeans. Sallie's son, Sonny, becomes "too big for his britches" and the tribe exacts a painful punishment. Collectively, all ages, men and women, whip him in punishment for having beaten his mother and her parents. It is a loving punishment because it is just and because it reclaims Sonny's spirit. After the whipping, Sonny goes to confront old man High Water and instead is brought to tears of remorse and catharsis. High Water joins him in tears, and a puzzled Sonny asks why. High Water replies: "It's one of the laws, boy, 'High Water told him. 'We can't let none of our people cry alone.'" (107)

Though all of the pieces have dramatic tension and conflict, "Apparitions" is the most unsettling. It is the only story to address a sexual theme or to deal more than peripherally with white people. The young Wanda is fingered, probed, violated by a shoe salesman in a department store while her mother is suffering humiliation at the lay-away counter. Anger chokes. The burning insult of Wanda's abuse and Wanda's mama's perceived silence in the face of this abuse heightens this tragedy. Very particularly I live in this story. Whether or not they put their hands, eyes or their thoughts on me, the racist-sexist venom sears. In every sentence there is the reality that this is so many little girls; yet it never stops being Wanda's story. The seven other pieces in the collection button their endings. "Apparitions" is left



open. Mother and daughter are abused by whites, and each is powerless to help the other. Each woman shields the other through silence. There is strength here—no denying—but no dialogue from these women about this experience. Why? We understand their stoicism with regard to the townspeople, but want them to let their guards down with each other. I am afraid of what not talking about this incident will do to Wanda. I want to know or have a clue about what will happen to Wanda and her mama.

“The Sun Is Not Merciful” consolidates the three major themes of Walters’s work: the intimate relationships humans share with the natural world, the intrinsic value of individual lives and the responsibility of sharing them, the value of women and women’s contributions to the community. A major aspect of the theme of the intrinsic value of the individual lives is a veneration of the aged. In each tale is portrayed a vigorous relationship between an elder and a younger tribesperson. The elders, Lydia and Bertha are taken to a lake by their sons to fish. The lake is a place of personal significance, for their father taught them to fish there as children and in so doing informed their existence.

Old Man said, “Girls, we’re fishermen from way back yonder, way back when time first began. Fact is, alla us came outta water. Happened up north, round Canada somewhere. . . . And that’s why we’re fishermen from way back, fore time even began.” (116)

Each day the women face down a ranger who tries to enforce trespassing and licensing laws, with the simple conviction that they are doing what they have always done and, further, what they must do. Forced to sell Old Man’s land to developers, Lydia and Bertha retreat to a small cabin on the back road to town. More than just two plucky old women, Lydia and Bertha survive the oppressive heat of summertime fishing, the rigors of childbirth, the amputation of Lydia’s leg symbolic of the “amputation” of Old Man’s land and the challenges of beginning anew in the cabin. Though they rely on their sons, at each turn they make independent decisions and ultimately are responsible for themselves. Walters takes care to emphasize the respect and caring each generation has for each other. I am tempted to question what seems an elders’ utopia. I’ve agreed to accept all that rings true. I know next to nothing here. I must rely on integrity, taste, common sense and curiosity. It is a quantum leap for me to say, with these, I am equal to the task.

Sexuality is one aspect of the Native woman’s life which is not addressed in the stories, except for the incident in “Apparitions.” The strength of the collection is not diminished, but it is not embellished.

Walters, a Pawnee-Otoe Indian, accurately says of her collection:

These stories are by no means of a vanishing or defeated people . . . The substance of the stories is both what we've lived collectively as a people and individually as human beings who are ultimately alone. (back cover)

The truth of the relationship between indigenous peoples of the Americas and the European interlopers cannot be recounted too often, because it has too often not been told. But portraits of Native American women as helpless victims betray lives of personal courage. Portraying characters as individuals who are part of a long, vigorous tradition of community is the strength of these stories. These women have determined, muscular spirits. They are faced with adversity, and they grow and endure. Wanda and her mama, though humiliated, put the pair of shoes on lay-away necessitating a return to the store. Lydia and Bertha continue to live and adapt. Nita has options, somewhere to go and some things to take with her when confronted with her husband's infidelity. Effie Grayeyes carves out a creative alternative which benefits her and John Stink. None of Anna Lee Walters's women are defeated nor are they superwomen. Each is a woman of ordinary circumstance leading a life of personal courage. While avoiding the mistake of suggesting that she speaks for all, it is safe to say—with Anna Lee Walters—our Native sisters are beautifully “spoken for.”

**STEPPING OUT: SHORT STORIES ON FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN. Edited by Ann Oosthuizen.** Pandora, New York and London, 1986

*Valerie Miner*

Stepping Out is *live* fiction—fresh, engaging, alarming, written from the pulses of real women. Many feminists will see themselves revealed with striking familiarity in this British collection of stories. Such fiction reminds us that no matter how alienated we are in the larger world, the women's movement has provided a society, a scene, a culture and sometimes even a community.

These stories are about women *stepping out* together—out of social stereotypes and into many different spheres. Personally, the book made me nostalgic for a country in which I used to live and for the literary milieu in which I first started to write fiction. But I do have two criticisms. The subtitle is misleading, for some of these pieces are not about friends. Perhaps this subtitle describes the editor's original intention more accurately than her outcome. My other criticism is that the collection is uneven, and several stories need more work and development. Generally, however, this is a gripping book—both in the originality of the styles and in the breadth of cross-cultural perspectives. In fact, it is the “common differences” among these authors and their subjects that make *Stepping Out* so provocative.

*Stepping Out* is an inspiring contrast to the current revival of mainstream short fiction in the United States. Magazines and newspapers are running more short stories, recalling an era when writers could actually earn a living from periodical sales. But so much of what passes as “serious” American fiction today is self-conscious nihilism. Ennui in Westport is a typical narrative journey. The most celebrated contemporary stories are suffocated in the narrow province of “sensibility.” We get too many books in which nothing happens and people with time on their hands spend hours pondering their vacuous lives.

However, *Stepping Out* is filled with social connection and individual expression. Things happen in these funny, angry glimpses of everyday women's lives, four of which I want to discuss in some detail. I don't believe hierarchical rating is useful. But these did capture my fancy.

The lively, realistic pace of "5½ Charlotte Mews" is clear from the opening.

'Base to Lizzy. Base to Lizzy. Over.'

Middle of New Oxford Street. Damn the bloody radio. Impossible to stop now, have to edge to the kerb, just when she'd achieved the right-hand lane. (1)

Lizzy rides a messenger bike around London twelve hours a day, ekeing out her living in the rain. The only thing that makes the job bearable is a friendship with Kit, an older woman dispatcher. One day Kit learns that Lizzy is a dyke. This ends her special favors to the messenger, to say nothing about her friendly nods and winks. The story is spun with tenderness and humor. You hold your breath as Lizzy tries to navigate through the London exhaust and her own exhaustion until . . . until Kit makes that special call. Suddenly there is new meaning to the phrase, "Over and out" (*italics mine*).

In "Falling," Barbara Burford tests the lines between black and white, heterosexual and lesbian with grace, intelligence and ultimately surprise. Alison, a white lesbian, is nervously awaiting the arrival of Joan, a black woman who will be staying in her flat while she takes a dance therapy course. Alison and Joan have known each other through many years of feminist conferences, and they have not always been allies. Joan is, of course, just as nervous as Alison.

Burford draws both women with an intricate empathy as they slowly approach and avoid one another—Alison trips over her racist assumptions, as Joan offends Alison by referring to a male lover. Gradually the two women come together.

Joan was dancing. In a big empty room with no barres or mirrors. Dancing by herself, but not alone, for her gestures and movements clearly outlined for Alison the partner, invisible with whom she danced, or tried to dance. Again and again Joan would approach this other, trying to make her aware of her. Just the movement of her hand as she tenderly turned the invisible face towards her, only to have it turn heedlessly away, tightened Alison's throat, raised her off her heels, so that she felt herself beginning to flow forwards. (47)

Everyone knows the Judy in Michelene Wandor's story, "Judy's Kiss." Wandor writes about the reunion of Judy's consciousness raising group. Although Judy doesn't appear, she is the center of attention, as each woman recounts how Judy has managed to step into her own life, use her temporarily, and then disappear. Their stories are a capsule of the personal/political choices made by many contemporary feminists: childbearing, political activism, poetry writing, lesbianism, spiritual growth, female friendship.

Wandor leaves the reader with uncomfortable questions about who used whom.

How can someone be everywhere and nowhere? Ubiquitous and absent, at one and the same time. . . . A heroine? No, not at all. The very opposite? We feminists don't believe in villains. We don't believe in saints and therefore we don't believe in devils. Or do we? (51)

"Since Agnes Left" had an unnerving effect on me. At this point, I'll digress from the standard critic's role: the evening *before* I read this story, my partner and I celebrated our anniversary. That night I had a bad dream. I woke my partner, whose Confirmation name is Agnes, and asked if she were going to leave me. "No," she said, "not if you go back to sleep." The next morning I opened the book to "Since Agnes Left," a story about a woman who is abandoned after her anniversary.

This story by Jackie Kay begins as Beulah reflects on the past two years without her lover, Agnes. Her descriptions of these characters are vivid and engaging from the beginning.

Deep and dark, [Beulah's] eyes looked as if once you went into them, you would never return. Her cheeks were black with an orange-glow like the highlights in a fire. She had that fresh look of someone often outside in the tough winter air.

Agnes was taller than Beulah and younger by seven years. She dressed with style and her face was often dramatically made up. Her hair was thick and straightened, her skin, lighter than Beulah's, a sort of cinnamon brown. She loved dancing and listening to music and her expressions conveyed her passion for life. (90-92)

Beulah reexperiences the stunning blow of Agnes's farewell note, the possible reasons for the breakup, the bitterness, the emptiness. It's an exquisite piece, rendered with understanding, delicacy and passion. Kay writes about their struggles in the outside world with economic pressures and discrimination as well as their own domestic drama about self-determination. Eventually "Since Agnes Left" is a healing testimony, ending on the perfect note.

They listened to Sarah [Vaughan] sing, in a voice that crossed the country of their imagination and traveled the pain of their pasts. She sang, *In this world of overrated pleasures, of underrated treasures, I'm glad there is you.* (109)

Not all the stories are so satisfying. In particular, Honora Barlett's "Some Notes on Evolution" and Moy McCrory's "Strangers" need more development. "Some Notes" was more a philosophical statement than an engaging narrative. And "Strangers" struck me as the core of a novel rather than a natural short story.

The rest of the pieces range over a variety of cultures and styles. Ann Oosthuizen's "A Fine Romance" tells about the friendship between two publishers and their romance with words. Marsha Rowe's "Who's she—the cat's mother?" describes women who learn that growth doesn't come without destruction. "The Mother Right," by Andrea Freud Lowenstein, an American temporarily living in

England, reveals the struggles between two women for custody of a child. Told in alternating voices, it recalls her interesting experimentation with point of view in the novel, *This Place* (1984). Jo Jones reminds us of the continuing presence of Joan of Arc in our lives through her stunning tribute, "Superbity." And Sara Maitland fantasizes a Chagall-like world in which women fly over London in her "Let us now praise unknown women and our mothers who begat us."

*Stepping Out* made me consider moving back to London. I miss the particular ways our British sisters integrate politics into character and setting as well as their tantalizing, worldly humor. Even if this collection doesn't make you book passage on the next transatlantic vessel, it will have you playing with new possibilities of *stepping out* in your own life.

**GETTING HOME ALIVE** by **Aurora Levins Morales** and **Rosario Morales**. Firebrand Books, 1986  
*Annette Peláez*

*Getting Home Alive* is about just that: making it through a world of symbiotic identities—immigrant, native and refugee all at the same time. From Rosario's adoption of communism in the era of McCarthy to Aurora's awakening to her "logjam of emotions" (200) upon hearing the news of Sabra and Shatila, Aurora and Rosario Morales, in poetry and prose, move back and forth through eight chapters, taking the reader on a journey spanning more than fifty years through the country and city, sights and sounds, smells and even tastes of their U.S./Puerto Rican/Jewish/Native/African heritages.

There is very little direct discussion of the mother-daughter relationship, but the fact that the relationship exists has a very clear bearing on the intent of *Getting Home Alive*. Rosario, the mother, was raised in New York by Puerto Rican immigrant parents. Aurora, the daughter, was born and raised in Puerto Rico. Aurora's father (and husband of Rosario) is the American-born son of European Jewish immigrants. How these combinations are portrayed allow this reader to view, with great recognition, the daily challenges and reminders of always being the outsider. Though two typefaces are used "to distinguish their work visually," the typefaces did not contrast enough and often, at first glance, left me wondering who was speaking. At times it didn't matter because the weave of their histories and impressions created a greater sense of the generational influence on their perspectives of identity.

Yes, there have been many books written about the personal experiences of finding one's roots, "going home," remembering growing up in a racist society, surviving. However, what sets this book apart is not that it is written from the mixed blood/culture sensibility of a mother-daughter team but rather, because of what is discussed in it. The book *feels* like the last chapter in the self-discovery process of one's basic understanding of who one is in the world. *Getting Home Alive* is indeed about discovery, understanding and self-acceptance.

I am what I am.

A child of the Americas.

A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean.

A child of many diaspora,  
born into this continent at a crossroads.

I am a Puerto Rican. I am U.S. American.

I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx.

A mountain-born, country-bred, homegrown jibara child,  
up from the shtetl,  
A California Puerto Rican Jew. (212)

*Getting Home Alive* is also very much about racism. For Rosario and Aurora, whose political perspectives overrule the concept of colonization or imperialism as just or inevitable, the struggle to maintain their personal identity is ever present. For both of them even the kitchen rituals of preparing food—*island food*—is not only memory but the day-to-day affirmation of their roots.

In the first section, “Living In The Borderlands,” a title inspired by a poem by Gloria Anzaldúa, which is the epigraph to this work, Aurora and Rosario, in separate writings, reminisce about their old neighborhoods, events in their young lives and contrast them to the present. For Rosario it means finding the South Bronx in ruins:

I knew the signs,  
The smell of death permeating the brick like urine  
The occasional casualty spilling brick and glass into the pavement.  
Did I get out in time? (18)

She felt like a refugee fleeing a war. She moved to Chicago only to find the “persecution. . . it is always all around me” (21). She makes the connection that, be it Guernica, Shatila, Chicago or the Bronx, the unwanted color or class faces, sometimes, more than just the threat of violence and death; and, should one survive the physical destruction, the signatures of one’s culture may not.

In this first section the background is developed. We learn that Rosario had returned to Puerto Rico and begun a family. From Aurora we find out what it means for her to have grown up in Indiera, in the Puerto Rican countryside and then, at twelve, to find herself in Chicago, “the immigrant child of returned immigrants who repeated the journey in the second generation” (26). We learn of Aurora’s Russian immigrant grandparents as she tries to discover what it was like for her grandmother to come to the U.S. We find that there is a bond between Aurora and Rosario that is not only of blood and Puerto Rico but also of political perspective and human values.

Throughout the book whether it is Rosario, who writes about oppression from anthropologists: “pest control takes on a different meaning now” (68), or Aurora, writing about the human destruction of whales, theirs is a challenge to all that derive comfort from another’s pain. Considering the conditions of all life on this planet, for Rosario and Aurora, nothing is secure.

Of being immigrant Aurora writes:

Place. How I always begin with place: the most potent imagery for a wandering Jew, an immigrant Puerto Rican. What will this place give me, do to me? What landscapes, what house will it leave in my



dreams? What layers will it add to the collage of my identity, my skin,  
my permanent passport? (192)

Full circle is the story of Rosario and Aurora. For Aurora (fitted with her discoveries, challenges and choices), returning to Puerto Rico, the land of her childhood and its memories, or for Rosario, coming to find “. . . only the landscape is home,” Puerto Rico is the past and maybe the future, but for the present (wherever that may be) “the most sacred thing you can do with the earth is sink roots into it” (132).

# Essays



Mercado Oriental 1982

Margaret Randall

# **INTERNATIONAL FEMINISM IN ACTION: THE CASE OF THE THREE MARIAS**

*Jacqueline Lapidus*

(I ask  
if no other alternative is given to us but open warfare  
against a whole social system which we refuse at base,  
and if we must destroy everything including, if necessary,  
our own homes, will we turn back?)

I say: Enough.  
It is time to cry: enough,  
and form a block with our bodies.

—*New Portuguese Letters*

The case of the Three Marias, which mobilized women around the world between May 1973 and May 1974 in the first international feminist campaign, was both unique and exemplary in the contemporary history of women's liberation. Many articles have already been written about the three Portuguese women whose trial in Lisbon on charges of "outraging public morality and abusing freedom of the press" was the occasion for this campaign, and about their book, the cause of the charge. What concerns us here is primarily the campaign itself, how it developed, its effect on the outcome of the trial, and its significance in the context of the women's movement.

The details of the case are crucial to an understanding of the responses it evoked. Three women in their mid-thirties, all mothers of little boys, all known in Lisbon literary circles for their published writings, decided to collaborate on a book about the condition of women in Portugal. The project was an expression of personal concern, a literary exercise and a collective action, the potential impact of which they understood from the beginning. Taking as their point of departure a Portuguese literary classic, they created an intricate chorus of voices which spoke for women everywhere.

Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria de Fatima Velho da Costa had been friends for over a decade when they met Maria Teresa Horta in December 1970 and first discussed writing a book together. Isabel, author of two novels and several sociological studies of women, and Fatima, author of a novel and a book of short stories, both worked for the Ministry of Economics; Teresa, a literary critic, had published a novel and eight volumes of poetry, one of which<sup>1</sup> had been banned by the Caetano dictatorship as "pornographic." The coincidence of their

first names may have suggested the theme for the proposed book: an overwhelming majority of girl babies in Portugal are baptized "Maria" as a lifelong reminder of the models, virgin and mother, which they are expected to emulate. Barreno, Horta and Velho da Costa decided to embroider on the story of Mariana Alcoforado, born into a "good family" in the town of Beja in the seventeenth century and confined to a convent against her will. Mariana had a love affair with the Chevalier de Chamilly, a soldier in the French forces defending Portugal. The lovers were caught and separated, Chamilly returned to France, and Mariana was locked up again in her convent, where she is supposed to have written five passionate letters to her lover, telling him what the experience meant to her and, by extension, what loving a man means to every woman. *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* is now generally regarded as having been written, in fact, by a Frenchman at a later date, which only reinforces one of the basic premises of the three Marias' *New Portuguese Letters*: that in our society, men have always defined and used women for their own convenience.

*New Portuguese Letters* is a collection of poems, stories, letters, essays and extracts from the Portuguese penal code. It speaks of love, sex, marriage, motherhood, rape, adultery, madness, masturbation and solitude, of the economic bondage of women, of their social and political oppression. Home, convent, prison, madhouse become symbols of the confinement to which all women are subjected in a patriarchal system. As they met to read and discuss their contributions, Fatima, Teresa and Isabel began to influence one another's outlook and style. The book itself became a discussion, an argument, and each tried her hand at the others' usual forms of writing. They agreed that no text would be altered, no matter how much the others criticized or disagreed with it, and that none of the contributions would be signed. They saw individual anonymity as a step toward collective responsibility, and thus as part of their challenge to women's status quo.

Several Lisbon publishers rejected the manuscript on the grounds that it was too explosive, too dangerous to pass the Caetano regime's post-publication censorship commission. The book criticized the Portuguese colonial wars and the mass emigration of Portuguese workers, sore points for this particular dictatorship, and it dealt with both sex and politics in very frank terms. A woman writer friend finally persuaded Romeu de Melo to take the risk of publication. While the book was being typeset, one of the printers brought its contents to the attention of the political police, hoping to avoid being prosecuted with his employer if the regime should take action against the book.

*Novas Cartas Portuguesas* appeared in April 1972. Two-thirds of the first printing of three thousand copies were sold within a month. Then the political police banned the book, confiscated the remaining copies and arrested the three Marias and their publisher. Freed on unusually high bail, the authors were obliged to report to the political police once a month until the end of the trial—whenever that might be. They faced six months to two years in prison, and, in the meantime, harassment, ostracism, possibly the loss of their jobs.

“It is no accident that we are faced with an obscenity charge and not a political charge,” Teresa Horta remarked to an American feminist during the trial. “A political charge carries dignity and some importance, but an obscenity charge is humiliating, degrading, and that is what the government wants to do to us.”

Press censorship forbade any mention of the case in the newspapers, since the book was banned and the authors awaiting trial. There was no feminist movement in Portugal to take up the case, and the Democratic Women’s Movement, a moderate middle-class group in favor of reforming women’s economic opportunities and status, did not try. The male-dominated Left, in Portugal as elsewhere, tended to consider women’s problems as secondary or diversionary. Some forty Lisbon intellectuals signed a petition protesting the arrest of the three Marias, which was certainly an act of courage, but this had little public impact. For nearly a year following their indictment, the three Marias waited, alone and ignored by the rest of the world.

Several months after their arrest, a copy of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* arrived in Paris, addressed to novelist Christiane Rochefort who was connected with a women’s liberation group. Rochefort, not knowing what to do with a book in a language she couldn’t read, did nothing for several months more. Then a long letter arrived, anonymous as the parcel but written in perfect French, explaining the book and its authors’ plight. Since Rochefort’s group included several women who were also members of a Latin American feminist group, they decided to have their Brazilian sisters read the book, and urged that some kind of action be taken.

Official contacts among feminist groups in Paris were limited, at the time, to sporadic collaborations on public demonstrations: the pro-abortion march in November 1971, the forum on crimes against women in 1972 at the Mutualite. Foreign women had participated in these demonstrations, but only as individuals. The *Feministes Revolutionnaires* and the Latin American Women’s Group had a few

overlapping members. Some of the Brazilians also participated in an English-speaking group then called NOW-Paris, which included American, British and even some French women. The other major group in French feminism, *Psychanalyse et Politique*, kept pretty much to itself.

The idea of some kind of international liaison among feminists was being discussed, particularly when feminists from other European countries visited Paris friends. One of the Brazilians held "open house" every Saturday afternoon in the spring of 1973, and women from all three Paris groups were in the habit of dropping in to see friends, talk and read whatever feminist publications had been received recently. The case of the three Marias was presented at one of these informal gatherings in April 1973.

The letter alone evoked an immediate response from the women present. It appealed to their sense of sisterhood and their concern for intellectual freedom. Although the authors of *New Portuguese Letters* dared not ask directly for aid, it was obvious that one of them must have written the letter herself. The women's first action was to reply. Many went home and wrote letters of support, encouragement and solidarity to the three Marias; these were forwarded to a return address in Lisbon.

At the next open house, the Brazilians, who had read the book during the week and translated a few excerpts with the help of French and American friends, read some of the poems and polemics aloud. The literary quality of the text was so remarkable, the tone so strong, the themes so moving, that the women clamored for immediate action.

Gilda Grillo, a Brazilian stage director, and Faith Gillespie, an American writer, translated additional excerpts for future public readings. Grillo also teamed up with a French reporter, Evelyne LeGarrec, to translate the same pieces into French. At a press conference the following week, the feminists explained the case to as many journalists as they could round up on short notice. A small task force from NOW-Paris distributed the English translations and a press release to American and British publications and wire services.

On May 24, 1973 Faith and Gilda gave a dramatic reading of the English translations to an open meeting of NOW-Paris in a rented Left Bank parish hall.

These initial actions produced newspaper articles and wire service dispatches of varying quality. Many emphasized personalities at the expense of real issues. The "straight" press picked up "freedom of expression," "dictatorship," "pornographic" but did not grasp the fact that the book was subversive because it was feminist in its implications.

The Three Marias had become a "case." But their case was not yet an international feminist cause.

If Paris was the jumping-off point for the campaign in support of the three Marias, then Cambridge, Massachusetts was a trampoline on which it landed. N.O.W. had scheduled an International Feminist Planning Conference for the first week in June 1973 and invited women from twenty-eight countries. Nobody from the French feminist groups was going, partly because the Americans hadn't known whom to invite and partly because the French women saw N.O.W., a moderate, mixed organization, as a female-oriented outfit tainted with American imperialism. However, a few members of NOW-Paris and the Latin American Women's Group were going. Grillo and Gillespie decided to go to Cambridge with the specific aim of bringing the Three Marias' case to the attention of the conference.

The International Feminist Planning Conference intended to take no position on "issues." Its purpose was to organize a network to set up an international feminist conference somewhere in Europe in a year or two. Between topical workshops and plenary sessions, Faith and Gilda gave two readings of excerpts from *New Portuguese Letters* and explained the situation of the three Marias. The readings impressed and moved the conference audience as dramatically as they had stirred the Paris feminists. At its final plenary session, the International Feminist Planning Conference voted, unanimously, a resolution calling for international support for the Three Marias in their struggle to defend women's right to define and express themselves. Both American and foreign delegates pledged to organize demonstrations, publicize the case and keep one another informed concerning their efforts. They would try to synchronize the first demonstrations on the morning the trial began: July 3. The conference ended in an atmosphere of excitement and sisterly emotion, and it seemed to the delegates that their decision to campaign for a common cause had helped create this feeling.

The time was ripe for a concrete, practical manifestation of the women's commitment to international solidarity, and the Three Marias' case fitted the circumstances perfectly. The themes of their book were precisely those experiences common to all women, whatever their class, nationality or culture. The fact that a reprehensible dictatorship was not only prosecuting them as troublemakers but denying the "seriousness" of the trouble they were making, just because they were women, proved the feminist contention that where women struggle against their oppression, the personal and

political meet and fuse. The indifference of the Portuguese Left showed that women could not expect much help even from supposedly progressive political groups, and would have to fight their own battles. It also reassured some women, notably the Americans, who were wary of conventional political labels. As Grillo and Gillespie were quick to point out, *New Portuguese Letters* was indeed a revolutionary piece of literature, since women's refusal of traditional roles threatened the entire structure of society, from the foundation upward. But it was a call to revolution on women's own terms.

An inter-group meeting was called in Paris on July 2 to report on the conference and confirm plans for the next day's demonstration in support of the Three Marias. Women from the Feministes Revolutionnaires, NOW-Paris, the Latin American group and M.L.F.<sup>2</sup> neighborhood groups crowded into a small, airless room on a ground-floor railroad flat at 73 rue Buffon, which also served as a meeting place for other radical groups including the weekly GIS/MLAC<sup>3</sup> referral center for illegal abortions. There was some disagreement about the wording of the petition to be circulated, notably on the part of the neighborhood groups whose text contained some typically leftist expressions contested by the Feministes Revolutionnaires (a predominantly lesbian group). But all concurred that the cause of the three Marias should be defended jointly, and that actions should continue throughout the trial and, if necessary, beyond, in the event the Portuguese writers were convicted. The July 2 session was the first formal meeting uniting feminist groups of different nationalities in Paris, and the women present felt, even at this early stage in the campaign, a sense of achievement and of herstory in the making.

On July 3, Portuguese embassies and consulates in Paris, Brussels, London, Oslo, Stockholm, The Hague, Rome, Milan and Tokyo were surprised, to say the least, when delegations of women appeared on their doorstep demanding admission and brandishing petitions protesting the trial of the Three Marias. In Boston, women demonstrated in front of the Consulate and dumped Portuguese wine into Boston harbor. Los Angeles feminists turned out with picket signs, so did women in New York, Chicago and Houston. Many of the officials who received them were not even informed of the case. The demonstrations caught the attention of the press everywhere and awakened the curiosity of the public.

The feminists were somewhat unnerved to learn that at the opening session, the trial was postponed until October 25. The official reason was that Maria Teresa Horta, who had tuberculosis, was not fit to



stand trial. Possibly the Portuguese authorities needed to rework their tactics in the light of a growing international flap over the defendants. In any case, the postponement gave the feminists time to prepare more spectacular actions for the fall. It also suggested that this campaign was going to require endurance as well as imagination.

Lawyers representing the three Marias intended to defend them by refuting the charge contained in the indictment. Prominent Portuguese intellectuals and officials would be called to testify to the high literary quality of *New Portuguese Letters* and the honorable intentions of its authors. To get an acquittal, they had to prove that the work was not pornographic and did not threaten the average citizen's morals. However, the women's movement wanted to stimulate international support for the three Marias on a different basis: by underlining the truthfulness and universal applicability of what the book was saying about women's conditions, and by pointing out that in all likelihood, these writers would never have been brought to trial if they had been male. They would of course protest against the repressive character of the Portuguese regime—after all, the book could have been published in New York, London, Stockholm, Paris or Tokyo without being attacked as either obscene or subversive. But it was even more important to stress that the terms of the indictment, the conditions under which the trial was taking place, the cloak of secrecy surrounding the case in Portugal, the silence of the Portuguese opposition all stemmed from the fact that this was a book by women, about women, challenging women's traditional roles and accusing men of abusing and enslaving women, particularly by means of those two sacrosanct institutions, the Family and the Church.

The simplest way to let women know what was at stake in this trial, not only for the three Marias but for themselves, was to read them selections from *New Portuguese Letters*. Publishing contracts were already being negotiated abroad by women representing the authors personally, and any publicity given the book would benefit the campaign, but the first foreign editions would not be out for at least a year. Public readings of the excerpts already translated were therefore to be the main attraction of the October demonstrations.

The multinational Paris task force met twice weekly, starting in September, to plan a theatrical evening around these readings. The questions that arose indicated what problems any international feminist campaign could expect to have to deal with. First, leadership: the Paris show was to be staged by Gilda Grillo, a theater professional. Some women weren't happy about this, and all agreed the rest of the work should be done collectively. Some objected to having well-

known actresses do the readings, instead of group members. Others insisted that only big names would bring in the public. The latter view won out, and three feminist actresses were approached: Delphine Seyrig, Isabelle Ehni, both French, and Ruth Escobar, Portuguese but based in Brazil and known as both actress and producer. Since the audience was expected to be international too, excerpts in English and Portuguese were included in the program, but the number of these was reduced as a concession to the French majority. To avoid boring or bewildering the audience, the group composed an introduction, collected slides showing women in many countries to illustrate it and got three French women to do a musical accompaniment on percussion, reed and string instruments. Then came the interrelated problems of the theater, finances, publicity and whether or not to allow men in the audience. A small theater could easily be filled by the feminists and their friends. A larger theater would allow for a broader public, and perhaps better fund-raising, but to fill it, they would have to admit men. Opponents of a mixed audience feared hecklers or even violent incidents, such as had occurred at the Women's Fair held by the M.L.F. in June. Some argued that an all-female audience would be more supportive and unified: everyone in it would feel directly concerned, as a woman, by what was being said on stage. Others objected to excluding men because this would be merely reverse sexism. Finally, the Paris task force voted to admit women only, after a stormy debate that lasted three weeks. Gilda managed to borrow a municipal theater. They had to pay the stage manager and technical advisor (both male). To avoid taxes, they wouldn't charge admission, but simply appeal for contributions to cover costs and hopefully, a donation to the three Marias' legal expense fund. A Brazilian woman artist contributed the poster design. A French-American team contacted reporters and issued a press release in French and English. An ad in *Pariscope* cost a whopping forty dollars but was considered necessary. Only French women put up the posters, because posterhanging often means violating municipal ordinances, and the foreign women couldn't risk trouble with the police, for fear of being expelled from France. Feminist books, pamphlets, badges and buttons were donated for sale in the lobby.

*La Nuit des Femmes* packed the Salle Gemier to overflowing on October 21, and the all-female audience responded to the readings with spontaneous outcries, tears and applause. The show was recorded on video tape by a French-Brazilian team from the task force. The *International Herald Tribune* ran a long article on the case two days later, and the French press mentioned the show briefly. But the

appeal for funds raised only half the show's cost; the rest was paid by task force members out of their own pockets.

The Paris feminists also initiated, at the same time, a mass mailing of letters in Portuguese to addresses chosen at random from the Lisbon and Porto telephone directories, explaining the case of the Three Marias. Groups in London, Brussels, New York and Tokyo received the text in advance, and each sent out a thousand copies at its own expense. They hoped in this way to break the barrier of silence imposed by the Caetano government. Nobody knows how many of these letters reached Portugal. Some were undoubtedly intercepted by post office censors who would have noticed a sudden influx of mail from abroad addressed by the dozens in similar handwriting. But other letters were probably read by Portuguese women who would otherwise have known nothing about the trial.

In London, a feminist theater group based at the Women's Liberation Workshop staged a dramatic reading of selections from *New Portuguese Letters* preceded by a sketch in which Mariana Alcoforado, the seventeenth-century nun, defies her confessor/inquisitor and denounces the oppression of women. The actresses came from the group itself, and the "names" needed to attract the general public were authors known for their books about women, Fay Weldon, Eva Figs and Margaret Drabble, who participated in a discussion following the show. Faith Gillespie, who directed *The Trial of the Three Marias*, reported conflicts within the workshop group over the same questions that had arisen in Paris, plus some abrasions due to the fact that she was American while most of the others were British. But the first two performances, at the ICA Cinema Theatre before a mixed audience, were so successful that people were turned away for lack of seats. Requests for repeat performances showered on the group during the next few months. The London press, which had already covered the case after the Massachusetts conference in June, gave *The Trial of the Three Marias* advance coverage and reviews. There was also a reading on the BBC a week before the trial and another on October 23 at the Almost Free Theatre. The Women's Action Coalition distributed leaflets at the Portuguese Church, picketed the Portuguese Travel Agency and held a vigil at the Portuguese Embassy.

Protests also continued around the U.S. Poets Marge Piercy and Anne Sexton participated in a reading in Cambridge, Mass., and other poetry readings and rallies were held in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington and smaller cities where N.O.W. had chapters.

When the trial finally opened on October 25, spectators were ex-

cluded from the courtroom after the first five minutes, on the grounds that "offensive material" was to be read aloud. This absurdity set the tone of the proceedings. Only the three Marias testified that first day, and the trial was then adjourned until January. Obviously the government meant to make it drag on as long as possible. The defense meant to call thirty-two witnesses, the prosecution at least half that many. At the rate of four a day, testifying at three-month intervals, it might be years before a verdict was handed down.

The feminists, realizing they were in for a long haul, discussed the problem of maintaining public interest in the case, and decided to continue having simultaneous demonstrations around the world on the eve of each courtroom session. By this time, groups in New York, London and Paris had regular contacts with the three Marias by mail and telephone, and were exchanging reports on the progress of the campaign with all the women who had signed the "political action" list at the Massachusetts conference. This list covered two countries where Portugal had no diplomatic representation: Israel and Finland, as well as the U.S., England, Japan, Mexico, Germany and Scandinavia.

Archives of press cuttings from all over the world were accumulating in Europe and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Many of these articles, written by men, described the "international protest movement" as if it were merely a manifestation of opposition to the Portuguese dictatorship, mentioning feminist participation only as an afterthought. The American branch of P.E.N. Club had written indignantly to the Portuguese ambassador in Washington; prominent British authors had written to the *Times* of London; the League for Human Rights (in French: *Rights of Man*) announced it was sending Mme Marion Fondaneche, a lawyer, to the January 31 hearing as an observer. But even these actions can justly be claimed as the result of feminist pressure and publicity, without which nobody else would have taken up the case. Discrimination against women affected press coverage directly. A male reporter imposed his by-line on a story researched for *L'Express* (France) by a woman; the Paris feminists reacted energetically, and the next article on the Three Marias carried the woman reporter's by-line. The far-left Liberation press service didn't give the feminists credit for the international campaign, though it was getting its information from the Paris task force. Even women journalists covering the case were not always feminists or well-informed about the women's movement, but they tended, on the whole, to give credit where credit was due. The task force tried, wherever possible, to contact women journalists on the eve of a demonstration and to

place articles by feminists in the “straight” press to offset the supposedly objective reporting of male staff and stringers.

During the Christmas holidays, Maria Isabel Barreno visited Paris and spent ten days conferring with the women working on the campaign there. She reported all the details of the trial, explained the procedure and its pitfalls, and commented favorably on the international actions. Meeting Isabel in person encouraged the Paris group tremendously. Isabel confirmed that the three Marias’ future looked somewhat brighter since the case had become a worldwide *cause célèbre*. The demonstrations and press coverage greatly embarrassed the Portuguese authorities, who were already baffled by the defendants’ solidarity and their refusal to get off easy by saying which of them had written the incriminating sections of the book. The government could no longer pretend that it was just another dirty book, nor rattle on about freedom of the Portuguese press. Indeed, a supposedly liberal French magazine (*L’Express* - again) had deleted an article on the case from all copies destined for Portugal, without waiting for the Portuguese censors to request it!

Demonstrations at the end of January 1974 focused on the trial and the theme of silenced and oppressed women. In The Hague, a feminist group stormed the Portuguese Embassy and occupied it for forty-five minutes before the police dislodged them. In Brussels, thirty women in black shawls, members of Women Overseas for Equality, marched to the embassy with their petitions and also gave a dramatic reading of excerpts from *New Portuguese Letters*. In London, performances of *The Trial of the Three Marias* continued. In Paris three hundred women dressed in black gathered in front of Notre Dame at sundown, playing flutes and cymbals and singing canticles and carrying lighted torches. Plaster effigies of the Three Marias appeared at the head of the procession, followed by banners reading: All Women Are Named Maria. Feminist rallies were held in Rome and Los Angeles. And in New York, on January 28, a multinational feminist task force presented *Women on Trial* at the Circle in the Square theatre to an audience of over seven hundred women. Robin Morgan delivered a militant introduction to this show, which was directed by Gilda Grillo. It included readings from *New Portuguese Letters* by actresses Carole Cole, Zoe Caldwell and Tammy Grimes, and a slide show by Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie (authors of the *New Woman’s Survival Catalog*), accompanied by feminist musicians.

Now the influence of the campaign on the trial itself began to show. The next hearing was set for February 7, and the one after that for a fortnight later. Apparently the Portuguese government preferred to

meet the defendants' demand for a speedy trial rather than risk another year of unfavorable publicity at the hands of international feminists. The courtroom was opened to the public. The original judge and prosecutor were both replaced by somewhat less rigid individuals. The three Marias' lawyers now believed they would get suspended sentences or be fined, rather than jailed.

The hearings continued in March, and other Portuguese women writers took the stand to testify in favor of Teresa Horta, Isabel Barreno and Fatima Velho da Costa. One courageously declared, "It is this trial, not the book, that is obscene," and was expelled from the courtroom. The judge scheduled the final hearing, at which the verdict would be announced, for April 18. Then the prosecutor stood up and to the astonishment of everyone present, recommended the acquittal of the three Marias and their publisher.

On April 18, the judge failed to appear. The hearing was postponed until May 7. Nobody knew the real reason for the postponement. On April 23, Isabel wrote to a friend in Paris that according to rumors going around Lisbon, the judge had been subjected to considerable pressure, but it was not clear who was exerting it or in what direction. This letter reached Paris on April 26—just twenty-four hours after the military coup led by General Antonio de Spínola toppled the Caetano dictatorship.

In the general excitement and confusion, it was anyone's guess as to what might happen the following week, but an acquittal appeared fairly certain. A delegation of women flourishing feminist banners participated in the mammoth May Day demonstration in Lisbon, and the next day, the Movimento da Liberação das Mulheres held its first meeting, organized by Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria Teresa Horta.

The three Marias and their publisher were acquitted, on May 7, to the delight of a packed and cheering courtroom and thousands of sisters all over the world. Editorial Futura had already prepared, in secret, a second printing of six thousand copies of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, which hit the bookshops shortly after the verdict and immediately became a best-seller for the second time. Though the outcome of the trial did not automatically guarantee the future of feminism in Portugal, it certainly paved the way for a new mobilization of Portuguese women in the context of a democratic regime.

Then Maria De Fatima Velho da Costa dropped a bomb in the midst of the general rejoicing, by announcing, publicly, that she was not a militant feminist and preferred not to be associated with the

M.L.M.—she wanted to defend the rights of women as part of the class struggle.

Fatima's declaration notwithstanding, the Three Marias had become synonymous, for the public, with Portuguese women's liberation, and women from other countries, eager to find out what they were doing, sought them out during the summer of 1974. Not all got to see them, not all were able to make contact with the newly-founded feminist groups in Lisbon and Porto, but at least some of these women met one another and exchanged addresses for future contact. Several women journalists who came to interview the Marias were already active in the feminist movement, notably in Germany and Italy.

The case of the Three Marias clearly demonstrated that the right to freedom of expression and public action for social change, so readily acknowledged by the governments and press of Western democracies as fundamental to mankind, is not always seen in the same light with regard to women writing and organizing as women. In stressing that the three Marias were in fact standing trial for all women, the feminist movement mobilized its forces around a cause both immediate and symbolic. Many women who had not previously questioned the assumptions on which their society, their role and their expectations were based, began to do so upon learning about the trial and the campaign it had provoked. The campaign cemented contacts between women's groups in different countries, and demonstrated the possibilities for communication and common action in spite of distance, political disagreement or cultural and economic differences.

No permanent formal structures were set up during the campaign. It would be an exaggeration to call what emerged an international feminist organization. All participants agreed, however, that the movement needed to apply this experience on other fronts and synchronize actions on issues of concern to women everywhere. Women who met or corresponded during the mobilization in favor of the Three Marias met again, at the international women's camp on the Danish island of Femø and at the November 1974 International Feminist Conference in Frankfurt, Germany. The Frankfurt conference voted to establish an international feminist communications and press network, and to collect information for a tribunal on crimes against women. Feminist activities related to International Women's Year (1975), and the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women (Brussels, 1976) undoubtedly drew on the lessons learned during the Three Marias campaign. The authors of *New Portuguese Letters* have many sisters who will continue to proclaim with them:

“Whores or lesbians, we do not care what they call us, as long as the battle is fought and not lost.”<sup>5</sup>

### *AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT*

This essay, written in 1975 during the U.N.'s International Women's Year, tells how the first international feminist campaign since the suffrage movement developed out of a network based on personal friendships and small-group interaction, plus a touch of serendipity. The following year, in 1976, the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women, organized by feminists, was held in Brussels, Belgium: women from all over the world testified to persistent patterns of discrimination and violence against females, at all social and economic levels in a wide variety of cultures.

I believe now, as I believed then, that neither of these events could have taken place if the Three Marias' struggle for justice and freedom of expression had not issued a warning to patriarchal governments everywhere that women would no longer submit to that violence and discrimination, lying down or otherwise. It showed what organized feminists could accomplish; it articulated and explained the visions and goals of our movement. If it seemed a middle-class luxury for us to be able to read, write, publish, travel, speak in public, mail and distribute flyers, even risk arrest, we were donating that privilege to a movement for all women, in the hope of encouraging others to participate too. We were not “professionals”—we were doing it out of our own grass-roots, from the gut and with whatever resources we had, because we felt it was essential and necessary.

Under a so-called socialist, democratic but conventional government over the past ten years, many Portuguese women have acceded to the educational and economic opportunities previously reserved to the middle class, under pressure from a small but persistent women's movement which has also focused on such issues as abortion rights and shelter for battered women. In 1980 a political amnesty was declared in Brazil, and most of the Paris-based “exmatriates” went home to help organize women's groups around similar issues. One of their first concerns was to share their access to the media with working-class women, some of whom, though illiterate, became eloquent community leaders. The Brazilian Left, supported by the Roman Catholic Church on most socioeconomic issues, is still resisting the feminists' campaign against gender-based oppression. Since abortion was legalized in France in 1975, feminist groups there flourished, then faltered after 1981 under the weight of burnout,



cooptation and backlash. However, European bookstores abound in feminist-oriented publications, as they do here. The international feminist press and communications network voted at the Frankfurt conference is still functioning today as ISIS, based in Geneva. We are fighting; we have not lost.

Provincetown, April 26, 1987

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *Minha Senhora de Mim* (My Lady of Me), Editorial Futura, Lisbon.

<sup>2</sup> Mouvement de la Liberation des Femmes. This was not an organization but a general term used more frequently by the press than by French feminist themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Groupe Information Sante, a radical organization of medical professionals in favor of, among other things, abortion on demand. Mouvement pour la Liberte de l'Avortement et de la Contraception, a mixed, radical pro-abortion organization.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, an important collection of press clippings from all over the world was accidentally destroyed in a fire in Paris on Christmas Eve, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> *Nouvelles lettres portugaises* (Editions du Seuil), translated by Vera Alves da Nobrega, Evelyne LeGarrec and Monique Wittig, appeared in September 1974. *New Portuguese Letters* was published by Doubleday (US) and Gollancz (England) in 1975.

# WHAT FEMINISTS CAN LEARN FROM THE LESBIAN SEX RADICALS

*Margaret Nichols*

Nothing I wouldn't do for the woman I sleep with  
When nobody satisfy me the way she do.  
kiss her in public places  
win the lottery  
take her in the ass  
in a train lavatory . . .  
sell my car  
tie her to the bed post and  
spank her  
lie to my mother  
let her watch me fuck my other lover . . .  
buy her cocaine  
show her the pleasure in danger . . .  
to keep her wanting me.<sup>1</sup>

In women's groups, the political clones, the Dworkinites, see my studded belt and withdraw. I am obviously a sex pervert, and good, real true lesbians are not sex perverts. They are high priestesses of feminism, conjuring up the "wimmin's" revolution. As I understand it, after the wimmin's revolution, sex will consist of wimmin holding hands, taking their shirts off and dancing in a circle. Then we will all fall asleep at exactly the same moment. If we didn't all fall asleep, something else might happen—something male-identified, objectifying, pornographic, noisy, and undignified. Something like an orgasm.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary lesbian culture has bred some interesting developments in the area of sexuality. "Mainstream" lesbian feminist culture (the primarily white, middle-class lesbian culture that grew out of the feminist movement of the seventies) has tended to celebrate traditional female attributes of sexuality—gentleness, egalitarianism, sensuality (as opposed to genital focus), tenderness and other not necessarily orgasmic aspects of sex. At the same time other lesbians have explored domains of sex previously believed to be outside the bounds of "normal" female sexuality: rough sex, dirty sex, "promiscuous" sex, s/m sex.

The sex radicals have been much maligned and sharply attacked within the lesbian/bisexual women's community. This stands in sharp contrast to the way sexual exploration was received by the gay male community before AIDS. Between Stonewall and AIDS, gay men elevated sexual expansion to the status of a political mandate, seeing it as central to the expression of male homosexuality. The very same behaviors, practiced by lesbian sex radicals, have been censored,

denounced and excoriated by the mainstream lesbian-feminist community.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary lesbian community has created an atmosphere in which some women have begun to experiment with a sexuality that defies the constraints of gender role, transcending and separating sex from gender. Feminists who oppose the sex radicals argue that they have, by virtue of their socialization in a patriarchal society, been brainwashed and are perpetuating and/or mimicking oppressive sexuality. But these critics ignore the fact that sex between women cannot possibly carry the same power differential as sex between a man and a woman. The lesbian sex radical movement has developed (with no corresponding movement developing in the heterosexual feminist world) precisely *because* lesbians are freer of patriarchal sex roles.

I want to emphasize that while I polarize two extremes of lesbian sexuality for this analysis, I am not saying that lesbian sex radicals have a better or truer form of sexuality than anyone else. In sex, pluralism is critical. True sexuality is diverse sexuality. We need to celebrate diversity, especially in the realm of sex. Our culture as a whole polarizes female sexuality, praising the Madonna and damning the Whore. I applaud a movement which challenges that, pushing at the boundaries, redefining female and lesbian sexuality. The lesbian sex radicals say: if it gives pleasure and is consensual, *do it*.

Many feminists and sexologists agree that contemporary female sexuality is repressed, rather than being a natural expression of women's sexual potential. This is fundamental. If current female sexuality is repressed, it makes sense to encourage efforts to uncover sexual desire. If current female sexuality is natural, it's better not to tamper with the order of the universe.

We know from Masters and Johnson<sup>4</sup> that women's physiological capacity for sexual arousal and orgasm is as great or greater than men's. Anthropological research, especially by feminists, shows that in many cultures women are as sexual or more sexual than men, and that attributes we take to be indisputably male, such as sexual aggression, are relative. Rubin reports that in New Guinea "men's fear of sex is so extreme that rape appears to be feared by men rather than women. Women run after the men, who flee from them, women are the sexual aggressors, and it is bridegrooms who are reluctant."<sup>5</sup>

We know that the sexual behavior of women in contemporary Western culture has not matched their biological potential. What accounts for this discrepancy between potential and behavior? Many feminists, including myself, believe that sexuality is socially con-

structed and misogyny is principally responsible for repressing and distorting female sexuality.

### ***Feminist Construction of Female Sexuality, or After the Revolution, How Will Women Do It?***

While most feminists would agree on the cultural factors which constitute misogyny, there has been and continues to be much less agreement about the “true” nature of female sexuality. In a culture free of male dominance, what kind of sexuality would women want, practice or experience?

Within the contemporary women’s movement, two answers have emerged. One has been characterized by Echols and others as the cultural feminist line. Andrea Dworkin, Susan Brownmiller, Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich are the best known representatives of this position.<sup>6</sup> The cultural feminist position on sex approaches biological determinism: they appear to believe that male sexuality is essentially, by its nature, violent and destructive, and that female sexuality is essentially gentle, pacifist and life-preserving. Cultural feminists see male and female sexuality as polar opposites. While they acknowledge that women’s sexual freedom has been hampered by misogyny, they contend that such characteristics as gentleness, etc. are “natural” to women, rather than the result of repression.

Some of the consequences of this thinking are obvious. Heterosexual sex verges on being oppressive to women under any circumstances. Pornography is solely an expression of male objectification of women. Diffuse, non-genitally-oriented, sensual behavior in the context of a loving relationship is the only natural sexual behavior for women. Other forms of sexuality must then be male-identified. As Gayle Rubin points out, the cultural feminist view of sex is very similar to the Western/Puritan/Victorian sexual ethic, with the exception of the exalted status of lesbianism.<sup>7</sup> Rubin describes a “sex hierarchy” of socially condoned sex as defined by society at large. The inner circle includes sex that is married, heterosexual, monogamous, procreative, free, coupled, in a relationship, same generation, at home, no pornography, bodies only and vanilla. The outer circle includes sex that is homosexual, promiscuous, non-procreative, for money, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public places, with manufactured objects or s/m. Rubin maintains that the cultural feminists unwittingly promote most of the sexual values and taboos held by the most conservative elements of our society.

The alternative to the cultural feminist view, espoused by feminists

such as Ann Snitow, Carole Vance, Gayle Rubin and many others, is that, while we must take seriously the effects of misogyny, the connection between it and female sexuality is not obvious. That is, while we know some things about how women have been sexually oppressed and repressed, we have little idea of what a free female sexuality would be.<sup>8</sup> This point of view does not assume that current stereotypic female expression is natural to women; nor that, come the revolution, women will eschew pornography, domination/submission fantasies or casual sex. It assumes, rather, that we don't know what is natural to women, or even if such a concept makes sense. Thus we must carefully examine all of women's (and men's) expressions of sexuality in a value-free atmosphere. This strain of feminist thought emphasizes the importance of sexual pluralism and of listening to what women say they want and do sexually.

I tend to take a more cautious position on what is and is not natural to women. Feminists tend to assume both that sexuality is socially constructed and that gender and gender relations are responsible for that construction. But what if gender is not as critical as we assume? What if sexism determines some of the content but not much of the structure and function of sexuality? Take the example of rape, and remember Rubin's New Guinea tribe. Feminists assume that rape is an expression of men's power over women. Rubin shows that gender can be reversed in this relation. Maybe we need to drop gender out of the picture and focus instead on how sex and aggression work together. Feminists tend to assume that any association of power and sex is negative (based on the assumption that power is always held by men), but there are alternative ways of seeing this issue.

We must assume that men and women exhibit polarized and exaggerated forms of sexuality and that these extremes each contain functional and nonfunctional attributes. Our task is to dissect and analyze these polarizations. But we also need to see how much of sexuality is constructed separate from male/female dynamics. As Rubin says:

It is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to more accurately reflect their separate existence. This goes against the grain of much contemporary feminist thought, which treats sexuality as a derivation of gender. . . . Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications, feminist theory has some explanatory power. But as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes irrelevant and often misleading.<sup>9</sup>

## ***The Lesbian Sex Radicals: Who Are Those Women and What Are They Doing, Anyway?***

Pat Califia describes the origins of the lesbian/bisexual sex radical movement in the mid-seventies as an offshoot of lesbian feminist activity.<sup>10</sup> In response to pressures for sexual conformity, lesbians who did or wanted to do s/m organized groups to provide support for “politically incorrect” sex. Many sex radicals are experimenting not only with s/m sex, but with various forms of bisexual sex, multiple sexual relationships, sex with more than one partner at a time, casual or anonymous sex, butch-femme roles and other types of gender-bending and with all sorts of sexual toys, enhancers, costumes, symbols and paraphernalia enlisted in pursuit of pleasure. Sex radicals are also creating a lesbian erotica: pornographic audio and video tapes, photographs and movies, erotic stories, novels, poetry and essays in magazines, newsletters and books.

What are these women doing that goes against the grain of contemporary feminist culture, indeed against the grain of the culture at large? In an era in which our society as a whole seems to be growing more conservative, lesbian sex radicals are valorizing recreational sex, non-monogamy and group sex. Further, they are going beyond accepted feminist analyses of sex. While mainstream feminists are still decrying “women as sex objects,” the sex radicals are redefining the meaning of the term. “Sex object” originally referred to several things: men viewing women only as potential sex partners; ignoring women’s choices about participating in sex; and imposing narrow standards of beauty on all women. Over the years, feminists began to apply the term more loosely. I have heard lesbians complain that their partners are viewing them as sex objects when they comment on what nice breasts they have.

Sex radicals also destroy the idea of “natural” sexuality. Our culture holds that certain uses of certain body parts are sexually acceptable. The lesbian sex radicals eroticize all parts of the body, find a wide range of activities sexual in particular contexts and recognize no boundaries on accessories. A razor is an erotic tool for shaving a partner’s pubic hair in a sexual ritual; a foot is an erogenous zone if a lover is kissing it; a spanking is a sexual act if administered with proper panache during a state of heightened sexual arousal.

What do these women have to teach us? Very concretely, they can teach us new ways to achieve pleasure. This alone may be worth espousing and protecting. The sex radicals also deliver a very important message to women, who have been taught their sexual desires

are evil, sick or unfeminist by the culture at large and their own movement. Sex radicals also expand our knowledge of what women do and don't like sexually, given a setting of freedom and permission. Last, sex radicals, interacting sexually without the confounding variable of heterosexual dynamics, can perhaps begin to teach us something about the deep structure of human sexuality. To look at this last issue, I want to examine in some detail two aspects of sex radical activity: s/m and gender-bending.

### ***Power Dynamics and Sex: Playing with S/M***

More than once an olive skinned nun pulled her skirts up for me; later bribed me with a wild orange palm leaf; thought its color was a miracle awesome as the resurrection; whispered it was the palm leaf of Mary Magdalene, laughed; side to side, stroked her unfrocked breasts and shoulders with it; tied my wrist to hers with it and took my forgiveness.<sup>11</sup>

A major focus of the lesbian sex radical movement has been sadomasochistic sexual practices. As Rubin points out, s/m is on the farthest fringes of the social outer limits of sexuality. Although sadomasochism is a statistically unusual activity, it is by no means rare. Hunt's 1974 survey showed nearly 5% of respondents acknowledging s/m sexual activity;<sup>12</sup> the *Gay Report* indicates that 37% of gay men and 15% of lesbians had some experience with sadomasochistic practices.<sup>13</sup> Yet even within the field of sexology s/m is rarely acknowledged and when mentioned, is typically described as abnormal.

The lesbian sex radicals (and, for that matter, most gay male s/m practitioners) define s/m sex quite differently from the mainstream. The majority of s/m practitioners define the essential elements in s/m as domination and submission, not pain:

sadomasochism is . . . an erotic ritual that involves acting out fantasies in which one partner is sexually dominant and the other partner is sexually submissive. This ritual is preceded by a negotiation process that enables participants to select their roles, state their limits, and specify some of the activities that will take place. The basic dynamic of sexual sadomasochism is an eroticized, consensual exchange of power—not violence or pain.<sup>14</sup>

And one might say that the *ritual* itself is an essential element, serving the same complex functions of drama, reverence and catharsis as do rituals in spiritual or religious contexts. Sadomasochism is physically safe and probably no more or less psychologically safe than other types of sexual expression. Its practitioners are not "addicted" to

s/m. While there are individuals for whom s/m sex can be addictive or self-destructive, these problems are no more or less common than abuses of, say, alcohol, recreational drugs or food. Anything pleasurable can and will be abused by some people. Sex is no exception, and s/m sex is no exception.

Let us first deal with the issue of physical pain; while it is less pivotal than dominance/submission, it is easier to explain. The pain administered/received during an s/m “scene” (a prearranged s/m sexual encounter) is not experienced as pain because of heightened levels of arousal and probably also because pain thresholds tend to rise for experienced s/m participants. People who like pain during sex do not enjoy pain at other times, and in fact the same stimuli that might be enjoyable at a time of high sexual arousal might be noxious when arousal is still low. When painful stimuli—spanking, slapping, whipping, nipple clamps, etc.—are administered to an already aroused person, the pain serves to heighten arousal, prolong the “plateau” (preorgasm) phase of sex and make the orgasm more intense. Some kinds of pain can also make the skin affected much more sensitive.

Why does pain have this effect? There is a complex interaction between different arousal states such as fear, anger, sex and pain. Think about horror movies; sometimes we seek fear for pleasure’s sake. We might similarly seek pain. Tripp posits a “barrier” principle of sexuality, hypothesizing that sexual arousal is produced by overcoming barriers, whether of romantic love (the unattainable, distant or forbidden lover) or physical pain.<sup>15</sup> The anthropologists Ford and Beach note that:

societies in which intercourse is regularly associated with biting, scratching or hair pulling prove inevitably to be the ones in which children and adolescents are allowed a great deal of sexual freedom. Furthermore, if the cultural stereotype of satisfactory intercourse includes a considerable amount of moderately painful interaction, it also represents the woman as an active, vigorous participant in all things sexual.<sup>16</sup>

Larry Mass speculates on a biological link between pain and pleasure via endorphins, the opiate-like substance released in the brain in response to stress or noxious or painful stimuli.<sup>17</sup> Whether any of these theories turn out to be right, they get away from the frameworks of sickness/health and political correctness/incorrectness to speculate about the essence of sexuality.

Dominance/submission is a more complex issue than the question of pain. A striking feature of much s/m, especially lesbian s/m, is the theme of trust and love. In a typical s/m story, the bottom (also called masochist or submissive) gives herself in complete trust and surrender



to the top (sadist, dominant) who administers pain, bondage or punishment lovingly, respectfully and with much appreciation for the courage of her partner. Is this theme sexist? Certainly if we assume the top is male and the bottom female, it can look sexist. But the theme can be gendered in many ways, depending on the gender of the actors and on whether they see the theme as symbolic of peer love relationships or of childhood age-discrepant relationships. The ambiguity of s/m themes and their multiply-determined origins make s/m sex in some ways the most genderless of all sex.

Parent/child and teacher/student s/m themes seem to show no particular patterns of gender. Mommy/little girl is as likely to emerge as Daddy/little girl. The connection between child/parent themes and s/m is especially clear in one of the most typical experiences of the bottom:

Why would anyone want to be dominated, given the risks? Because it is a healing process. As a top, I find the old wounds and unappeased hunger I nourish, I cleanse and close the wounds. I devise and mete out appropriate punishments for old, irrational sins. I trip the bottom up, I see her as she is, and I forgive her and turn her on and make her come, despite her unworthiness or self-hatred or fear.<sup>18</sup>

Gender is not the most important issue here. Think of Cheryl Clarke's poem "palm leaf of Mary Magdalene," part of which introduced this section. The hints of bondage and submission are in a lesbian context, and the connection between childhood and s/m is clear. The lesbian context shows that lesbian s/m is not simply a gender-rearranged version of patriarchal heterosexist themes.

Indeed, Califia sees s/m on a political level and connects it to what she interprets as the sexual underpinnings of political/social power, as explained in the following passage:

This may be why S&M is so threatening to the established order, and why it is so heavily penalized and persecuted. S&M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class. . . . Our political system cannot digest the concept of power unconnected to privilege. S&M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our systems, and seeks to reclaim them.<sup>19</sup>

While Califia is undoubtedly correct about a relationship between eroticism and political power, it is probably incorrect that s/m roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or class. It is more correct to say that the relationships between s/m themes and these variables of power are complex and not systematic.

For s/m participants, power is experienced as fluid, not static. It can be granted, denied, exchanged and then reclaimed. This picture of power is totally unlike the rigid and static notion of power held in our culture as a whole.

This brings us to another level: the fluidity and complexity of power differentials in s/m. Most people do not always hold top or bottom roles, but switch between them. More interestingly, s/m roles rarely match real relationship and real-world roles. Most important is the interdependency of top and bottom:

While it is true that S&M involves dominance and submission, it is seldom clear whether the sadist controls the slave, or the masochist controls the master. . . viewing S&M merely as a power relationship between two participants still misses one of its central characteristics. This is the ultimate unity of sadism and masochism. Rather than taking these to be polar extremes. . . [see them] as elements of the same erotic attitude.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of power in an s/m exchange goes against the grain of much contemporary feminist thinking, which is based on a victim/perpetrator model. This may be why many feminists find s/m hard to understand. S/m shows a type of power relationship in which the power of the dominator derives from the consent of the dominated and in which the participants are ultimately equal. This is part of the eroticism of s/m. It is also a way of seeing power that is very different from the hierarchical constructs in which even feminists have been trained.

### ***Gender-Bending Sex***

Not surprisingly, the lesbian sex radical movement has been a haven for those who experiment with sex roles and for women who play with the boundaries of sexual orientation. One of the ways the sex radicals have rebelled against the feminist concept of woman-identified woman is by bringing back butch-femme roles. Joan Nestle has been particularly eloquent in her defense of herself as a femme and of the history of butch-femme in lesbian culture:

A butch lesbian wearing men's clothes in the 1950's was not a man wearing men's clothes; she was a woman who created an original style to signal to other women what she was capable of doing—taking erotic responsibility. In the feminist decades, the fem is the lesbian who poses this problem of misinterpreted choice in the deepest way. If we dress to please ourselves and the other women to whom we want to announce our desire, we are called traitors by many of our own community, because we seem to be wearing the clothes of the enemy. Make-up, high heels, skirts, revealing clothes, even certain ways of holding the body are read as capitulation to patriarchal control of women's bodies. An accurate critique, if a woman feels uncomfortable or forced to present herself this way, but this is not what I am doing when I feel sexually powerful and want to share it with other women. Fems are women who have made choices, but we need to be able to read between the cultural lines to appreciate their strength. Lesbians should be mistresses of discrepancies, knowing that resistance lies in the change of context.<sup>21</sup>

Nestle's analysis of butch-femme lesbian culture opposes that cur-

rently espoused by the movement, sociologists, etc., who say that butches and femmes of the fifties were only mimicking heterosexual culture, out of self-hatred and identification with the aggressor. Nestle's analysis of how an oppressed group can seize the symbols of political repression and turn them on their heads is reminiscent of the way the meaning of words like "nigger," "fag" and "dyke" were turned around by minority groups.

The existence and apparent erotic importance of butch-femme to lesbians raises further questions about the nature of sexual attraction. Try to disgender butch-femme, think of butch-femme as polarized aspects of personality, like being outgoing or shy. Imagine that our culture, and most others, have tended to assign these aspects to the opposite sexes, but that they actually have little to do with biological gender. If gender is divorced from biology, there could be more than two genders. If we consider the interaction of biology with these different aspects of personality, we can identify people not only by their physical gender but by their psychological gender as well. This could turn out to be a better basis for explaining erotic attraction than our current concept of sexual orientation, which relies only on biological gender.

Indeed, Newton and Walton have proposed a new schema for defining an individual's sexual preference that includes sexual orientation but goes beyond it. They also have a concept they call erotic identity (how one imagines oneself as an erotic object). Erotic identity is most typically modeled along gender lines but need not be. Erotic identity is more complex; it contains subcategories and refinements of the two-gender system. Newton and Walton distinguish erotic identity from erotic role, which corresponds most closely to active/passive or top/bottom and can be fluid or static.<sup>22</sup>

Sex radicals are experimenting in other ways with new views of gender. One of them is by their acceptance of bisexuality. This comes partly from their political commitment to support all types of "deviant" sexuality. It also comes from seeing bisexuality as a type of gender-bending. At least, bisexuality sees gender as drastically less important than it is for either homosexuality or heterosexuality. For some women, gender is less important than s/m identity; for others it is less important than some other aspect of personality. Still others are attracted only to butches or only to femmes—but they can be male or female butches or male or female femmes.

Gay male culture, at least before the ascendance of the "clone," provided numerous examples of gender-bending: the drag queen, the men who will only have sex with men dressed as women, the

weight-lifter with a diamond stud in his ear. The lesbian sex radicals celebrate the same kind of gender-bending in women. The lesbian who fistfucks a gay man, the lesbian who straps on a dildo under a pair of jeans and slips a condom on it to screw her female partner, the lesbian who wears garter belt and stockings in order to dominate her lover, are all playing with our concepts of gender.

### **Conclusion**

We need to celebrate the diversity of women's sexuality—whether it be gentle or wild and voracious, whether it be unified, easy to understand, complex or contradictory. We cannot do that until we stop passing judgments on each other's likes, dislikes, activities and desires.

The lesbian sex radical movement has the potential to be enormously liberating. Although it is difficult to assess the impact this movement is having on women's sexuality in general, I suspect there is beginning to be a ripple effect, at least within the lesbian community. Many lesbians have now been exposed to the movement and have had opportunities to hear diverse sexual experiences presented in a positive light. Recently I have begun to conduct sexuality workshops for lesbian and bisexual women in which I show lesbian-made video porn and other erotica and ask women to speak about their own sexuality. Two of the most common responses to the videos are "It validated what I already like to do but felt ashamed of" and "It gave me ideas of things to do that I never thought of before." If the sex radical movement can do these two things—alleviate sexual guilt and help create new modes of sexual pleasure—it will be of invaluable service to women.

On a more theoretical level, the example of lesbian sex radicals can teach us much about female sexuality. For instance, I have been told by both gay men and lesbians involved in s/m that women approach s/m differently than do men, with more concern for safety and consensuality, especially the subtleties of emotional safety and the ability to give true consent. If this is so, then perhaps women have a unique contribution to make in the area of sex: the development of a humanistic, rather than a moralistic ethic of sex.

Finally, their example can help us get past the constraints of gender. They can teach us how to step beyond simplistic renderings of sexuality, such as the essentialist/biological view, the patriarchal view, the pathology model and yes, the feminist model of sexuality. In short, they can show us meaning in previously unfamiliar and maligned acts and ways of negotiating sexuality.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cheryl Clarke, *Living as a Lesbian* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986), 56.
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- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Nichols, "Lesbian Sexuality: Issues and Emerging Theory," in *Lesbian Psychologies*, ed. Boston Women and Psychology Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
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- <sup>5</sup> Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 166n.
- <sup>6</sup> Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1984).
- <sup>7</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.
- <sup>8</sup> Carol Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.
- <sup>9</sup> Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 309.
- <sup>10</sup> Califia, "Lesbian Sexuality."
- <sup>11</sup> Clarke, *Living as a Lesbian*, 28.
- <sup>12</sup> Morton Hunt, *Sexual Behaviours in the 1970's* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1974).
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- <sup>14</sup> Califia, "Lesbian Sexuality," 130.
- <sup>15</sup> C. A. Tripp, *The Homosexual Matrix* (New York: New American Library, 1975).
- <sup>16</sup> Clellan Ford and Frank Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
- <sup>17</sup> Larry Mass, "Coming to Grips with Sodomasochism," in Weinberg and Levi Kamel, *Studies in Sodomasochism*.
- <sup>18</sup> Califia, "Lesbian Sexuality," 131.
- <sup>19</sup> Califia, "Lesbian Sexuality," 132.
- <sup>20</sup> Califia, "Lesbian Sexuality," 132.
- <sup>21</sup> Joan Nestle, "The Fem Question," in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.
- <sup>22</sup> Esther Newton and Shirley Walton, "The Misunderstanding: Towards a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary," in Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*.

# Poetry



La Habana 1979

Margaret Randall

# THE WINGS OF A WILD GOOSE

*Chrystos*

*for Beth Brant*

A hen, one who could have brought more geese, a female,  
a wild one, dead  
Shot by an excited young blond boy, his first, his mother threw  
the wings in the garbage  
I rinsed them, brought them home, hung them spread wide on  
my studio wall  
A reminder of so much Saving what I can't bear to be wasted  
Wings  
I dream of Wings which carry me far above human bitterness  
human walls  
A goose who will have no more tiny pale fluttering goslings  
to bring alive, to shelter, feed, watch fly off on new wings,  
different winds  
He has a lawn this boy A pretty face which was recently paid  
thousands of dollars  
to be in a television commercial I clean their house every  
Wednesday morning  
2 dogs which no one brushes flying hair everywhere  
A black rabbit who is almost always out of water usually in a  
filthy cage  
I've cleaned the cage out of sympathy a few times although it is  
not part  
of what are called my duties I check the water as soon as I arrive  
This rabbit & those dogs are the boy's pets He is very lazy  
He watches television constantly leaving the sofa in the den  
littered  
with food wrappers, soda cans, empty cereal bowls If I'm  
still there  
when he comes home, he is rude to me  
If he has his friends with him he makes fun of me behind my back  
I muse on how he will always think of the woods as an exciting  
place to kill  
This family of three lives on a five-acre farm They raise no crops  
not even their own vegetables no animals for slaughter  
His father is a neurosurgeon who longs to be a poet

His mother frantically searches for Christian enlightenment  
spiritual guidance  
I'm sad for her though I don't like her because I know she  
won't find any  
The boy does nothing to help around the house without being  
paid  
I'm 38 & still haven't saved the amount of money he has in a  
passbook found  
in the pillows of the couch under gum wrappers  
That dead goose This boy who will probably never under-  
stand that it is not right  
to take without giving He doesn't know how to give His  
mother who cleaned & cooked  
the goose says she doesn't really like to do it but can't under-  
stand why  
she should feel any different about the goose than a chicken or  
hamburger from the market  
I bite my tongue & nod I could explain that meat raised for  
slaughter  
is very different from meat taken from the woods where so few  
wild beings survive  
That her ancestors are responsible for the emptiness of this land  
That lawns  
feed no one That fallow land lined with fences is sinful  
That hungry people need the food they could grow  
That spirituality is not separate from food or wildness or respect  
or giving  
But she already doesn't like me because she suspects I read her  
husband's  
poetry books when no one is around & she's right I do  
I need the \$32 a week that tolerating them provides me  
I wait for the wings on my wall to speak to me, guide my  
hungers, teach me winds I  
can't reach I keep these wings because walls are so hard  
wildness so rare  
because ignorance must be remembered because I am female  
because I fly only  
in my dreams because I too, will have no young to let go



## **25,000 WOMEN PYRAMID**

*Dorothy Randall Gray*

Abuse comes in flavors  
In chocolate and strawberry  
Flesh beat raw with fists  
In cherry and vanilla  
Blood and bones laid bare  
By knives and baseball bats  
And, "Baby, I swear  
It'll never happen again"  
Black women in love and in traction  
Black women as property  
As possessions  
As home plate  
Sliding in feet first  
Black women as time clocks  
Punched with regularity  
Black women as circular files  
Receptacles for toxic wastes  
Experimental pills  
Cigarette butts  
And razor blade rage  
What goes around continues  
What stays around gets killed  
It's the 25,000 women pyramid  
Sitting on sands that surround  
but do not accept

Abuse comes in textiles  
In bedsheets and business suits  
Signs your paycheck  
Computerized smiles  
Program degrees for despair  
Shred resumes to rags  
Black women overqualified  
Out of existence  
A threadbare song  
Hummed often and out of tune  
Black women as the fiber of life  
Weaving the fabric

Of shrouds and silence  
Black women as imports  
That sell for less  
And settle for less than that  
Black women unemployed/undermined  
Underpaid/under attack  
In uniforms and aprons  
In sensible shoes and straight jackets  
In factories and shelters  
In barrooms and board rooms  
The hand that squeezed your breast  
Fucked his daughter  
And abuse is abuse is abuse  
It's the 25,000 woman pyramid  
And we lie beneath stones  
Carried from nowhere  
For reasons still unknown

Abuse comes in colors  
In blinding spectrums  
Of Boston rednecks  
Hospital whites  
And policeman blue  
A flag of indifference  
Waved in emergency rooms  
Where Bessie Smiths lay dying  
Cause they would not salute  
Black women painting the blues  
In 3/4 time  
In a time that colors them targets  
For death by disillusionment  
And death by rape  
And death by eviction  
And death by denial  
And death by powerlessness  
And death by accident . . . they say  
And death because they felt like it  
Black women sterilized into oblivion  
Black women as statistics  
Black women as victims  
Of husbands and boyfriends  
Killing 41%

Of *all* women in this country  
Our lives don't count  
As we're counted out  
Of the colors of our rainbow  
And abuse keeps playing reel to reel  
Playing loud in purples and reds  
On a tape taking names  
Abuse waits in clothing we know  
And faces we don't know  
And in eyes of children  
Who'll repeat a cycle  
They don't understand  
It's the 25,000 women pyramid  
Ancient and here and now

But what has always been  
Must not always be  
The blue note gets louder  
And our sound grows stronger  
A sound like oceans and thunder  
A sound that crumbles stones  
And moves the earth  
A sound to end this world  
And shape the next one  
The sound of Black women  
Millions strong  
Chanting with one voice  
That we've had enough  
We've had enough  
We've had enough . . .

## **EL GATO**

*Carmen Naranjo*

Yo le pregunto al gato, al gato callejero  
y al que se relame en el rincón caliente,  
en dónde aprendió a vivir su rato largo de paz,  
en dónde conoció esa cadena de cacerías tranquilas,  
en dónde se hizo indiferente y contemplativo,  
en qué escuela tomó cursos de orgías,  
cómo perfeccionó su erotismo,  
desde cuándo perdió el insomnio,  
hasta qué profundidad llega su silencio.  
Ese gato de misticismos  
beato de siestas y ajedrecista de pupilas,  
cazador de moscas y golondrinas,  
bajo el látigo de los ladridos  
fiel adicto a las paredes y a las butacas,  
silencioso y húmedo como los templos.  
Ese gato con su figura de ilustre bibelot  
para ser testigo mudo en la escena de los espejos,  
mágico espectro de carnavales,  
habitante majestuoso de los palacios y de las chozas,  
catedrático investigador del equilibrio,  
aristócrata trovador rompe porcelanas,  
fiera de caricaturescos rasgos humanos.  
Yo le pregunto al gato, a ese gato doméstico,  
quién quebró la lámpara del siglo dieciocho  
y quién se comió el pastel de fresas  
con una lengua de pergamino  
que agoto mieles centenarias  
como si fueran nueces de cosecha  
yo de lluvias y de ventoleras  
sin calendario.  
El gato responde con desnudeces de terrazas  
en que con hambre eterna de sexo  
cae loco en vertigós de lunas sin cortina  
porque enfermo de soledades  
no basta un siglo de conquistas.  
Y herido en los muslos,

## THE CAT

*Carmen Naranjo*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

I ask the cat, the alley cat  
the one who licks himself basking in the sun,  
where did he learn to live in peace  
for such long spans of time,  
how did he acquire such a laidback hunting style,  
get so indifferent and contemplative.  
From what school did he take courses in orgies,  
how did he perfect his eroticism,  
and from then on overcome insomnia,  
until basking in profound thought brought its silence.  
That cat of mysticisms  
devotee of catnaps and chess,  
with f-stop eyes glued to every move,  
hunter of swallows and flies,  
even under threat of ceaseless yapping,  
faithful addict to niches and easy chairs  
temple quiet and musty moist.  
That cat with its pose  
immortalized in bric-a-brac,  
mute witness to the mirrored scene,  
magic spectacle of carnivals—  
regal dweller of palaces and huts,  
a fellow endowed to study factors of equilibrium  
aristocrat whose soprano meow cracks the crystal,  
beast of human-faced caricatures.  
I ask the cat, that domestic housecat,  
who broke the eighteenth-century lamp  
and with a tongue of parchment  
ate the strawberry mousse,  
finished off the hundred-year-old honey  
as if a tropical storm hit  
taking a whole harvest  
without an almanac's forecast.  
On the terrace without a stitch,

cargado de sarnas,  
con ojos rojos de guerras civiles  
regresa solo a la trinchera  
del sueño erótico en que la bandera  
de otra luna blanca rellena el sexo  
de serpentinas en noches largas  
con murmullos de batallas.  
On gato de gatunas orgías,  
gallo de hojalata y cacareos  
de trovador con tarantas.  
Ante el crimen su maullido inocente,  
ante el banquete su no importa el protocolo,  
ante la injusticia su filosofía de lava patas,  
ante la rebeldía su primero la siesta en el sofá,  
ante la acción el prefiero el rincón del mirar  
y ante la protesta su devoción al bostezo.

the cat answers with all his cool,  
anyone with quotidian sexual hungers  
flips out seeing the moon discurtained  
for not even a century of conquests  
cures the ailment of loneliness—  
its muscular aches and pains,  
the problem of mange,  
eyes red from civil wars  
the return forlorn to a trench  
leaving behind an erotic dream where the flag,  
like serpentine streamers streaking the long nights  
with rumors of battle,  
is yet another moon fair and full of sex.  
Oh cat of feline orgies,  
rooster of timplates and braggardly yawls  
of a troubadour's hasty wooing.  
At the scene of a crime it's his meow in all innocence,  
at a banquet his disregard for etiquette or protocol,  
confronted by injustice the philosophy his paws are clean,  
or rebellion, first a snooze on the couch,  
when it's time to act, he prefers a perch to watch  
and any sign of protest—his dutiful yawn.

## **LA FLOR, LA ABEJA . . .**

*Carmen Naranjo*

Tal vez la flor, la abeja,  
ese perfume de siembras  
en que el sexo redondea los rojos  
y remienda las alforjas del vacío.  
La flor que cuelga del aire  
para caer en la desnudez del tiempo  
y resucitar en la pericia del milagro.  
Esa flor superior a la palabra y al credo,  
mejor que la pintura y la buena profecía,  
niña, bella niña, simple ninfa,  
que no juega a las rondas,  
que se duerme sin arrullos,  
que despierta para soñar  
y muere sin lágrimas y funerales.  
Esa flor con labios que besan,  
con manos que acarician,  
con almohadas de almendra y miel,  
con meriendas de libres albedríos,  
sin raza y con alma de colores,  
con especie y sin nacionalidades,  
con género y sin lucha de contenidos.  
Esa flor en que se mire la paloma y el halcón,  
en que se esconde un nido de abejones  
y los mundos hacen génesis sin biblia.  
Alguien, siempre alguien, vendió las flores,  
las disecó en lenguajes estúpidos,  
los invernaderos las planificaron,  
las metrallas fusilaron las abejas,  
un ruido de tangués destetó los pétalos,  
las granadas estallaron corolas y sangre  
y las bombas reventaron ojos y margaritas.  
Se cortaron rosas, manos, claveles, piernas,  
porque la azucena se vendió junto al fusil,  
porque las pistolas se compraron con dalias,  
porque en las ferias internacionales la flor  
fue condecoración de los mata gente,  
ésos que apuntaron al conejo y al leopardo  
para matar al niño; al niño fruta,  
al niño abeja, al niño flor, al niño niño.



# **PERHAPS THE FLOWER, THE BEE . . .**

*Carmen Naranjo*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

Perhaps the flower, the bee,  
after planting time that perfume  
when sex ripens ovalar the reds  
to mend the knapsacks of emptiness.  
The blossom held aloft by air  
left to fall on the nakedness of time  
and afresh anew by a miracle's craft.  
That flower superior to word and creed,  
more precious than a work of art or fortune,  
child, lovely girchild, a nymph  
who doesn't play ring-around-the-rosy,  
who sleeps minus lullabies  
who wakes to dream  
and dies without tears and funerals.  
That flower with lips that kiss,  
hands that caress,  
with marzipan cushions of almond and honey,  
with outings to run about free as the wind,  
without race yet with a multicolored soul,  
with species and not with nationalities,  
with gender and without suppression of struggle.  
That flower in which is seen dove and falcon,  
which conceals a hive of drones  
and worlds of genesis outside The Word.  
Someone, always someone, sold the flowers,  
dissected and labeled with stupid names,  
planned the greenhouses,  
the spraying of the bees with automatic fire—  
a rumble of tanks dropped the petals,  
grenades splattered corollas and blood,  
bombs detonated eyes and daisies.  
Roses cut down, hands, carnations, legs  
sheared because the lily is sold with the gun,  
because pistols are bought with dahlias,  
because at international flower shows  
garlands go to the ones who kill the people,  
the ones who aim at rabbit and leopard  
to kill the child; the child fruit,  
the child bee, the child flower, the child child.

# **CANCION DE CUNA PARA UN NIÑO SALVADOREÑO**

*Carmen Naranjo*

No te ponen pañales  
envuelto naces  
en túnica de muerte.  
Te arrulla el hambre  
te consuela el sufrimiento  
un canto de metralas  
persigue tu sueño  
Apenas andas  
y ya el militar te pateo.  
No juegas no hay tiempo  
trabajas en cosechas  
y miras con desconfianza  
carreteras con tanques  
rincones con morteros.  
Te robaron los helicópteros  
y los aviones de caza  
el cielo de la paz armoniosa y justa.  
Temes cuando tocan  
tu miserable puerta  
porque ya se llevaron a tu padre  
ya se llevaron a tu madre  
ya se llevaron a tus hermanos  
y sólo supiste de su sangre en los ríos.  
No cantas ni lloras  
el dolor te hizo fuerte  
el volcán te hizo firme  
y te enseñó a estallar  
a su debido tiempo.

Nadie te contó cuentos  
el terror se encargó de narrarlos  
y la muerte se volvió rutinaria  
y cotidiana.

Tu única canción de cuna  
fue el aprender de prisa  
a vivir en el riesgo

# LULLABY FOR A SALVADORAN CHILD

*Carmen Naranjo*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

They don't diaper you  
you are born swaddled  
in death's shroud.  
Hunger dulls you  
suffering consoles  
and a song of gunfire  
pursues your dream.  
You can hardly walk  
when army boots kick you.  
No time to play  
you work in the fields  
and stare with mistrust  
at tanks on the roads  
the stacked mortars.  
Helicopters and fighter planes  
rob you of the sky's  
just and harmonious peace.  
You tremble when they knock  
at your hapless door  
they've already taken away  
your father, your mother  
your brothers and sisters  
and you only learned about this  
from their blood in the rivers.  
You do not sing nor cry  
grief has made you strong  
the volcano mettled you  
and taught you to erupt  
at the proper time.

No one told you stories  
the terror in charge told them  
death became routine  
and commonplace.  
Your only lullaby  
was to learn fast  
live at risk

con el riesgo y para el riesgo.  
Una vez una única vez  
te viste en un espejo  
y no supiste a quién veías.

Aquel día en que caíste  
en medio del cafetal  
despiertos azahares  
te perfumaron  
y la lluvia te sirvió de mortaja.  
Una bomba dos bombas  
te enterraron  
indiscutiblemente  
eficiente es la guerra.  
No hubo vela  
ni misas  
ni ceremonias  
ni esquelas.  
Con tus cinco eternos  
años a cuesta  
aún vives  
en la memoria del pueblo.

with and for that risk.  
The one and only time  
you looked in a mirror  
you didn't know  
who you were looking at.

That day when you fell  
in the coffee grove  
orange blossoms in bloom  
perfumed you  
rains dressed you for burial.  
One bomb two bombs  
put you to earth.  
Categorically  
war is efficient.  
There was no wake  
no mass  
no ceremony  
no obituary.  
With your five eternal years  
on your shoulders  
you are very much alive  
in your people's memory.

**stuck**  
*Cheryl Clarke*

*where i am you may also be. — The Hermit*

i laughed at that boy  
a tropical bird trapped  
in his fear of mounds of leaves  
where he saw children hiding  
and straight pins he thought  
would fall in his food  
and driving by himself.  
i laughed at him and roughly  
pulled his pants and shorts down.  
then, when he cried at how i  
mocked him,  
i pretended empathy,  
so i could fuck him.  
i did not want to know his demons  
(or his angels).  
i did not want to know my own.  
i was full of appetites then  
and quick poetry.  
my menses flowed many days.  
arrogance was my way.  
i ate that boy.  
i laughed so hard at that boy  
placing his pleading personals  
each week and waiting tables.  
i was mean and capable of any  
metaphor.  
smoked a lot.  
kept late hours.  
(that boy's shower was so hot  
i was scalded before i knew  
the water wasn't cold.)  
ego is numbing.

my blood lasts two days now.  
and now i understand that boy's fear  
if he drove in the country

in fall he might run over a child  
hiding in a mound of leaves.  
i tore through a heap myself  
this year,  
thought i heard the screams  
of a bleeding child.  
i laughed at myself  
and saw the boy in my rearview  
mirror crying.  
for distraction  
i bought a shirt  
and removed seven of its  
straight pins.  
the eighth was mysteriously missing,  
its hole gaping at me  
fish eye.  
i counted the odd number of pins  
stuck between my teeth and  
counted the holes.  
it was missing.  
i felt myself choking on the  
eighth one.  
my lover calmed me, told me  
i hadn't swallowed it.  
looking askance, i laughed at her  
desperate reassurances  
and wore the shirt anyway.  
all day i felt it sticking me  
but couldn't find it though  
i undressed several times.  
i was afraid to eat or drink.

that night i saw that boy  
on my fire escape peeping in  
my window, a toucan lighting  
on his shoulder.  
'the pin is in you,' he said.  
'so is the bleeding child.'

# **CUALQUIERA TIENE DERECHO**

*Ana María Rodas*

Cualquiera tiene derecho  
a decir lo que piensa.  
Cualquiera tiene derecho  
siempre que estén de acuerdo  
las leyes, las costumbres,  
los colegas,  
el que te paga el sueldo  
el vecino de enfrente y el gobierno.



# **EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT**

*Ana María Rodas*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

Everyone has the right  
to say what they think.  
Everyone has the right  
as long as they always agree  
with the laws, the customs,  
their colleagues,  
the one who pays your salary  
the nextdoor neighbor and the government.

# **LOS DÍAS SON LAS CIUDADES**

*Ana María Rodas*

Los días son las ciudades de mi cuerpo.

Algunas calles  
conservan fielmente tu recuerdo.  
Ahora viajo y no sé cuál de todas  
mis ciudades  
me está echando de menos.  
No sé tampoco cuál de aquellas calles  
provoca más dolor a mi cerebro.

# **THE DAYS ARE THE CITIES**

*Ana María Rodas*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

The days are the cities of my body.

A few streets

remember you faithfully.

I am traveling now and I don't know which of all  
my cities

is missing me.

Nor do I know which of these streets  
gives me this splitting headache.



# **LOOK AT ME**

*Ana María Rodas*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

Look at me:

I am those tortured you describe;  
those feet,

those mutilated hands.

I am the symbol

of all that you have to annihilate

so as to relinquish being human  
and profile the likes of Ubico

Somoza

or whatever tyrant

you play with

using them, like me, to build up your act  
for a big show.

## **SER GUERRILLERA**

*Ana María Rodas*

Quizás deje la lucha  
ser guerrillera no conduce a nada  
  más que a esas cosas  
que tú trazas con línea tan sutil.

No voy a esperar tu próxima tortura  
  ni el día que me eches  
escaleras abajo  
para que los perros muerdan mi calavera.

## **BEING GUERRILLERA**

*Ana María Rodas*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

Being guerrillera  
perhaps I might let the struggle accomplish nothing  
more than those things  
you trace with very subtle lines.

I am not going to wait for your next torture  
nor the day you throw me  
down the stairs  
so the dogs below can gnaw my skull.

## **THE SUPER** *Shirley Hinkamp*

Peering down from the top of metal stairs  
into the furnace room, she watched  
He shoveled coal into the blaze  
his face glowing, flames reflected in sweat  
She watched as he mopped the long tiled hall  
inhaling damp ammonia fumes, they talked

Once, on the tar-covered roof, he'd caught her  
she and a girlfriend, pants down, examining each other  
Threatened to tell, if they did it again

His dungarees collected dust, sweat, wet mop stuff  
He cleaned, she followed and watched  
His bulky ring of keys called out as he swept  
She left the 9-year-old games and followed

One summer day he unlocked the owner's apartment  
He watered the plants, fed the cats, she watched  
Massive dark furnishings, brass knobs and handles  
Oriental rugs wearing out at the edges

Asking for a kiss, his grey-stubbled chin near her face  
He pushed her down on the dark paisley spread  
Arm scratched by keys as she squirmed from his grasp  
running down the long hallway, trembling, ashamed

Later he confessed to her father, said he was sorry  
it happened. (She would never have told.)  
Said she reminded him of a grandchild,  
he'd forgot who she was

Her father was serious but calm  
Said she ought not to follow him ever again  
ought not be alone with the super, though  
nothing had happened, it might not be safe

After that, the summers dragged out. . .  
Long hallways of summers with little to do



**WENDY**  
*Julie Murphy*

Saying nothing  
we went to bed, an evening  
spent by the TV, videos  
pop music macaroni & cheese.

I began as always  
her pubic hair plastic like  
cheap licorice that bent unwilling  
under my hand. Her vulva  
bit my fingers—  
a rubber band that snapped  
when I tried to enter.

I stifled my sigh.  
The ocean breeze found the window  
entered the room to finger my temples  
then cupped my body with thick thighs  
and drew my eyes to the moon.

I did not want her  
a blow-up doll with frizz-blonde hair  
Spirograph eyes and breath like the steam  
from tonight's noodles leaking  
from her adolescent lips.

All I wanted for myself  
for her  
was a piece of the moon caught  
between her legs like my face in the wind  
quivering with laughter tears  
anything  
but the closed cavern of her silence.

# **Y EN ESTE IR Y VENIR**

*Diana Avila*

y en este ir y venir  
quiero saber  
quién va?  
quién queda?  
quién con sus palabras muere?  
quién aun llora?  
éste que no pudo salir de su olor herrumbrado  
de su dolor de cabeza  
de su dolor de lengua  
este ennocturnado animal al que todas las íes se le agolpan le  
soplan  
fuego en los oídos le perturban  
su tranquilo sexo  
éste que patalea rabioso  
contra todas las frutas y todos los colores  
este con olor de diario/de mercado/de puta/de basura  
en sus axilas  
éste que marcan con una funesta sangre  
en la puerta de su corazón  
este oscurecido temprano demasiado temprano  
éste pobre  
mareado por la sal de su mar y silencio

# AND IN THIS COMING AND GOING

*Diana Avila*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

and in this coming and going  
i want to know  
who goes?  
who stays?  
who dies with their words?  
who still weeps?  
this one who couldn't get rid of his rusted smell  
his headache  
his tongue ache  
this nocturnalized animal whom all the vowelish *i*'s mob blow  
fire in the ears disturbed him  
his tranquil sex  
this one who kicks wild  
at all the fruit and all the colors  
this one with the day's odors/of market/whores/waste  
in his armpits  
this one marked with ill-fated blood  
on the threshold to his heart  
this one obscured early way too early  
this poor wretch  
seasick from the salt of his sea and silence

# **PALABRA AMOR MÍO . . .**

*Mirna Martínez*

Palabra amor mío  
que titubeas de estallar en vida,  
tu gemido de prisión  
habra de volverse algún día  
grito desbordante de libertad.  
Palabra amor mío  
no te rompas en quejidos ahogados,  
mira que eres el único arma  
que levanto en esta lucha,  
y no se te puede ocurrir ahora,  
precisamente ahora,  
dejarme con la sangre entre los dedos.  
Ah, palabra amor mío  
álzate cuanto antes.  
No olvides  
que también hay fusiles . . .

## **WORD**

*Mirna Martínez*

*Translated by Zoë Anglesey*

My love  
you who hesitates to explode in life,  
your prison moan  
will someday become  
freedom's pent up crescendo.  
My love  
don't break into muffled cries,  
see you're the only weapon  
i raise in this struggle,  
and you can't stop me now,  
precisely now,  
don't leave me with blood between the fingers.  
Oh, my love  
quickly rise to the occasion.  
Don't forget  
yes there are guns . . .

# THE CUPOLA

*Yvonne Zipter*

I want to make love to you in the cupola,  
in this bare room, so small  
we can fill it easily,  
no corner untouched, with our passion.  
Bare, as your skin, cream-colored walls  
marked from all that came before  
and flat, wide boards holding us firmly below,  
honest in their matter-of-fact brown and dusty faces.  
I want to make love to you in this bare room  
hiding nothing.

I want to make love to you beneath these twelve windows,  
bold in their excess, the sun  
adding lines and angles  
to your breast as it answers  
the cup of my hand. The sharp  
turns of collarbone and elbow  
carving their image on my eye:  
I want to see it all: the harsh light  
of noon underscoring every scar;  
the reflective light  
at dusk, touching you softly  
echoing my hand; the selfish light  
of moon, tracing you on the floor  
until I can see where you've been.

I want to make love to you in the cupola,  
windows open, your sighs and moans resonating  
on the stones of the courtyard below,  
filling my ears, the room, the air,  
boards beneath us  
creaking out loud, telling our secret  
and we won't care.

# STRUCTURES

*Yvonne Zipter*

Sometimes it rises to my lips like a sigh  
or a hiccough or a prayer:

*I want my mother—*

an early born instinct

for an eager ear and slightly-beefy always-open arms,  
an instinct that did not die  
when she did.

There has never been as secure a place to rest  
as “mother,”

like the pyramids built from love and rock and conscription.

No friend, no lover has ever had such a well-laid foundation;  
they all sway and groan like clapboard cottages in wind.

And I feel like the woman

whose first house burnt down

while she was away for the afternoon.

it isn't the structure that matters:

it's the creak of the floorboards,

the set of the screen door,

the soapstone figure from her mother—

it's everything

that's locked inside.

# **GRANNY'S DEATH**

*Michelle M. Tokarczyk*

There comes a time  
when your veins  
constrict blood,  
toes crumble  
wearing of walking,  
body sagging  
with memory.

First bound  
to an old age home  
then bound  
to a hospital bed  
you pray;  
they plan  
to chop off  
one limb  
at a time.

Plastic nourishment  
pumps through  
your veins  
a few teeth  
are all  
you have left  
and all you need  
to sever it.



## **AFTER WOYKO'S DISAPPEARANCE**

*Michelle M. Tokarczyk*

Grandma walked  
the same park  
the same streets  
everyday,  
the pain  
as constant  
as the concrete,  
the bottle  
as constant  
as the pain  
until there were  
bouts of darkness  
stretching over  
days of concrete.

At twenty-two  
I envisioned  
hope in  
stretched-thin skin,  
yanked a bottle  
from wrung-out hands,  
even said  
"I want you  
to be happy"  
to ears babushka-sealed  
eyes turned toward  
the lost brother  
the dead husband,  
head shaking no  
to these days.

In my new apartment  
I pulled down the shades,  
watched the darkness  
with a whiskey bottle.

# **KALEIDOSCOPE**

*Margaret Randall*

At night the monkeys, gorillas or baboons,  
golden they laugh with bits of colored light,  
leap and dance a ravenous stageset, green land.  
On each head a tall wooden mask, headress  
set above animal features swinging  
long wooden arms shoulder-to-hand  
beside the double totem, face and meaning.  
It is the reaching up, unfolding of hands  
as hair and flesh grasp wood,  
dream repeating dream.

My children look out from those sockets,  
mother looks away, for a moment father runs  
light catching a ridge of gold along the upraised arm.  
My own arm rises and falls, crashes  
hard against the bed. Raging.

Mother has memory, ideas grow in her garden, voices.  
In the time left  
she wants to know, doesn't, does.  
Custom looms, comfort spins a new dimension, call it  
animal vegetable or mineral, this  
is no game.

Father insists. I won't forget  
how the sun played with the windshield  
exactly where and when he told me  
how he built and kept a family, ours,  
carefully, with honor, inside the thunder,  
against desire, against pride.

One fears change, the other blinded by it.

My children's skin so tender to my touch,  
I pick up the pieces,  
shards of mirror spiralling through bone,  
its needle-eye.

One fears change,  
the other blinded by it.  
Begin again.

# **BLOOD LOOSENS ITS STRANGLE-HOLD**

*Margaret Randall*

*Why is not how . . .  
it is meaning . . .* — Susan Sherman

My age moves its monthly burden of blood  
as opening a book to a particular page, how and why,  
our hands stay where they will  
my body stays where it will, waiting.  
Blood loosens its strangle-hold upon my running feet.

We chose to ignore the writing *and* the wall, the dream  
filled our eyes, we didn't want  
the commercials.  
Somewhere a bell ringing through motionless air  
announced a separation of sisters.

We understood that why is not how  
beyond words, with a great voice we knew  
there is power called creativity  
wearing a mask called change.  
I know because you taught me this.

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.

# LA MUERTE ES UN REPLIEGUE

Ana Istarú

Todos seremos despeñados  
en álgido preludio hacia el adiós,  
la oscuridad, la nube indescifrable.  
Llegar a ser no ser  
ni nada de la nada.  
A quién tender el viaje umbilical  
de la nostalgia,  
decirle sollozantes,  
ya nos vamos, que voy, me voy.  
Estamos en la muerte chapoteando,  
enrarecidos.  
Lleva el filo de este beso a la testuz  
poblada de la fresa,  
al polvo calcinado por el brillo,  
al punto sacro sobre este territorio  
donde por vez primera vi y así lo supe:  
*este es mi amado*,  
rozando, tangencial, el infinito. El sol,  
los mármoles celestes,  
los que viajan aún: los argonautas  
que elevan la nave azul del mundo.  
Lleva este beso y ponlo  
como un dardo de amor encarnizado  
en todo lo que existe.  
Mi muerte es un repliegue,  
una estrategia genial  
de la semilla.  
Partículas de mí rodando por el cosmos,  
hilando el trance ileso de los astros.  
El pulso de la nada es la tibieza,  
el átomo dormido que retorna,  
no la amargura.  
Agua que fui y carbono dulce  
que el orbe recupera,  
engendran orta faz, orta costilla flamante,  
locomotoras,

# DEATH IS A RETREAT

Ana Istarú

Translated by Zoë Anglesey

All of us will be plunged  
into the algid prelude of farewells,  
the obscurity, the indecipherable cloud.  
We arrive being non-beings  
not a part of anything.  
With nobody to extend the umbilical trip  
of nostalgia,  
to say to in tears,  
let's go now, i must go, i'm going.  
Here we are at death's door in smithereens,  
rarified.  
Take the sharp hunger of this kiss  
to the strawberry's nape collared in leaves,  
to dust calcined by the bright,  
to the sacred point above this territory  
where for the first time I saw and thus understood:  
*this is my beloved*,  
tangentially caressing the infinite. The sun,  
celestial marbles,  
even the seasoned travelers: The argonauts  
who exalt the blue ship of the earth.  
Take this kiss and put it  
like a dart of merciless love  
to all that exists.  
My dying is a retreat  
a brilliant strategy  
of the seed.  
Particles of myself swirling in the cosmos,  
spinning in the unscathed orbit of stars.  
The void's pulse is what is warm,  
the dormant atom that returns,  
not bitterness.  
Water I was and sweet carbon  
so the orb can recover,  
beget another face, another shiny rib,  
locomotives,

la fe de los salmones,  
la naranja,  
la rabia irreverente de los hombres,  
los que elevan  
la nave azul del mundo  
y dan su trozo  
de luz a cada cosa,  
su migaja de paz sobre la tierra.

faith of the salmon  
the orange,  
the irreverent rage of humans,  
they who exalt  
the planet's blue ship  
and give their bit  
of light to each thing,  
their patch of peace over the earth.





# WORD IN THE MIRROR

## *Minerva Salado*

*Translated by Mariana Romo-Carmona*

Somewhere in a part of the night  
part of the world  
universe of shadows  
deepest nest of your body  
someone  
is writing your name in the odd shapes of her bed  
someone pronounces your silence with eternal voice  
and records on the wall her circumstance  
like a grain of rice dropped over incense  
and the subtle virginity of the word.  
Poetry  
the ghost of your belly bursts within the moisture of herbs  
breaks through the futile manure that gathers round your legs  
after a brief journey  
and your voice exhausted yet unable to sleep pours over us  
all the useless urgency of afternoons  
fleeting past the mire  
conjuring up the rain's precocious missives.  
You are no longer the girl in fevered wait by the window  
for the happy return of the struggle.  
You are the prodigious dagger  
who sells us to the highest bidder and laughs  
laughs after our foolish purchase.  
A bird overpowers me, the violence of your unspeakable cry  
your discomfort.  
Bewitched by bronze when your light burns  
and the lark reaches towards Hell.  
You enter, then  
Poetry  
and surrender your fertile embrace to the warming mist of  
mankind.

## **ESCARAMUZA**

### ***Minerva Salado***

Hay un eclipse roto en mi ventana a través de tu cuerpo  
lo veo y me descubro como si fuera a ser la mariposa  
sin instinto ni flor sin aventura.

Hay un aroma suelto en mi extravío olor dé trashumancias  
de presagios que rondan la caverna el alcatraz  
que pálido me cubre. Artesano inverosímil maderas  
apreciables perfuman tus dedos en tránsito obsesivo  
hacia la espuma. La luz huye en derrota bajo el odio  
terreno de tu carne y es otra realidad la de tus piernas  
abriendo galerías urgentes cañadas senderos frágiles  
en el confín perpetuo de mi nombre. Hay una tempestad  
que sé avecina se cierne en tu cintura quebrando  
los extremos de la noche el eclipse sin sol se ha vuelto  
a vernos aproxima su estampa en mi desvelo y nos cede  
su miel su lozanía. Llevo la tez mojada y el desprecio  
por los ídolos fútiles los astros viven bajo mis batallas  
no hay equivocación que no me toque advertencia fugaz  
tiempo en el tiempo. El eclipse me tiende sus estrías  
no hay protección ni manto que lo rasgue.

## **SKIRMISH**

### ***Minerva Salado***

*Translated by Mariana Romo-Carmona*

There is an eclipse broken at my window  
I see it and uncover myself as though prepared to be the butterfly  
without instinct without adventure.  
There is a floating aroma about me a scent smoky  
with omens surrounding the cave and the pelican  
that lightly covers me. Unbelievable craftsman wood of  
appreciable quality perfume your fingers in obsessive transit  
towards the foam. The light flees defeated by the hate  
territory of your flesh and it is another reality that of your legs  
opening galleries urgent canefields fragile paths  
in the perpetual confines of my name. There is a storm  
approaching gathers about your waist breaking  
the extremes of the night it has turned to the eclipse without sun  
to glimpse up     it quickens its impressions upon my  
wakefulness and lends us  
its honey its verdant vigor. My brow is damp and without care  
for futile idols the stars live beneath my battles  
there is no chance I will be touched by a fleeting warning  
time within time. The eclipse lays its bridle down  
there is no protection nor cape that can stroke it.

## **ENCUENTRO CON EL MORRO DE LA HABANA**

*Minerva Salado*

Cada uno con su pasado ya no tan inocentes  
como hace diez años en que podíamos solo  
escuchar la voz de Alfonsina y era exclusivamente  
Storni y sus poemas fogosos tiernos lúgubres  
palabra sobre palabra como ahora riza la mar y digo  
piedra sobre piedra del siglo antiguo en que estábamos  
amurallados tras las miradas que nos cubren porque  
el faro destella cada quince segundos ni más ni menos  
para que los marinos equivoquen su ruta sepan  
que está la Isla enfrente mariposa dibujada en el cristal  
entre un grabado añoso y nuestros intentos  
los restos del cañón disueltos junto al tiempo  
barco que sale desafiante la revesa de La Habana  
evade las boyas del canal los Baños de la Reina  
retando a los tiburones sorteando las banderas inglesa  
española yanqui definitivamente cubana para que tu y yo  
hagamos un paseo silencioso juntos y tal vez taciturnos  
cada uno en su pasado repito falta la inocencia  
pero yace el mar la ciudad en este preciso ángulo de la vida  
amurallada cual torres carcomidas por el curso del salitre  
todavía existen rincones por descubrir bajo las piedras  
grutas inescrutables túneles  
quizás devorados como toda la historia.

# ENCOUNTER WITH EL MORRO \* OF HAVANA

*Minerva Salado*

*Translated by Mariana Romo-Carmona*

Everyone's past is no longer so innocent  
as it was ten years ago when we could  
listen to Alfonsina's† voice and it was exclusively  
Storni and her poems fiery tender somber  
word upon word as the sea curls now and I say  
stone upon stone of the ancient century we occupied  
walled up behind the glances that cover us because  
the lighthouse flashes every fifteen seconds no more no less  
so that the sailors who mistake their route know  
that this is the butterfly island traced upon glass  
between an old etching and our attempts  
the remains of a cannon dissolved with time  
a ship that sails challenging the tide off Havana  
avoids the buoys of the canal Baños de la Reina  
challenging the sharks among the English flags  
Yankee Spanish definitely Cuban so that you and I  
can promenade in silence together and perhaps in melancholy  
each one's past I repeat lacking in innocence  
but the sea lies beside the City in this precise angle of life  
walled up like towers gnawed by the passage of saltpeter  
there are still crevices to be discovered under the rocks  
grottos inscrutable tunnels  
perhaps eventually devoured like all of history.

\*Fortress on a hill in Havana overlooking the harbor, symbolizing the remnants of Spanish colonialism.

†Alfonsina Storni (Argentina, 1882—1938) was one of the leading Latin American feminist poets of the 1920's.

# CONTEXTOS DE SOR JUANA INES

*Mirta Yáñez*

Madre, madrecita Juana,  
todos eran hombrazos en us pueblo,  
las espuelas empezaron a morir contra su frente,  
nadie colmaba  
las tardes impúdicas  
bajo los lienzos del patio del abuelo;  
no era feliz la muchachita,  
quién iría a sospechar entonces aquella vena férrea  
y cálide  
que le espetaba el corazón.  
Sabihonda retenida en nuestras manos, ya decían,  
se burlaban los pálidos superiores,  
¿se recuerda sus nombres?  
los de aquellos hombrazos;  
el padre natural era uno de ellos, qué duda cabe,  
y también los hidalgos con sus cosméticos pedestres,  
los amantes, los patrones de casi todos los oficios,  
ya se sabe, eran los dueños  
de la fe y de la moneda,  
del sexo también;  
desconcertante mujer ya madurando en la celda,  
las gongorinas voces rescatando los polvos malditos,  
allí saquea con tesón la poesía y se llena  
los bolsillos de esas piedras volcánicas  
para castigar la vesania.  
Madrecita Juana del cilicio en bandolera,  
el propio dios era todo un hombrazo  
y tú así, qué remedio,  
recordada por los siglos, la criatura imperfecta.

# CONTEXTS OF SOR JUANA INES

*Mirta Yáñez*

Mother, dear mother Juana,  
they were all big men in your town,  
the spurs began to die against your brow,  
nobody filled  
the immodest afternoons  
under grandfather's backyard awnings;  
the little girl was not happy,  
who was to suspect then the iron and warm  
vein  
that sprang from the heart.  
A know-it-all retained in our hands, they already said,  
the pallid superiors you,  
are their names remembered?  
the names of those big men;  
the natural father was one of them, undoubtedly,  
as well as the noblemen with their pedestrian cosmetics,  
the lovers, the patrons of almost every trade,  
it is already known, they were the owners  
of the faith and the coin,  
of sex too;  
disconcerting woman already maturing in the cell,  
the Gongoran voices rescuing the damned dust,  
there she tenaciously plunders poetry and fills  
her pockets with volcanic rock  
to punish insanity.  
Dear mother Juana of the shoulder-belt haircloth,  
god himself was indeed a big man  
and you thus, what else,  
remembered by the centuries, the imperfect creature.

## **QUEHACER GENERACIONAL**

*Mirta Yáñez*

Aquellos, los nostálgicos poetas del pasado  
nunca vieron la nieve,  
pero el palpito silencioso de los copos  
cayó escrupulosamente sobre sus verso;  
siempre desconfiaron  
de los océanos,  
de las atroces distancias sin más grito que el viento,  
aunque a menudo olfatearon el sándalo  
y jugaron, como niños,  
con las chinerías;  
es más  
supieron del estrago en los estómagos bohemios,  
de la soledad  
que se asemejaba a una helada mancha en el horizonte  
y a la libertad sólo la conocieron  
para romper la métrica de sus estrofas,  
auténticas y desatinadas como los tiempos que corrieron.  
Ah, me joven poeta del mañana  
recibe sobre el poema el sol del trópico  
como una andanada de salvajes cerbatanas;  
empleapalabras feroces  
para denunciar tu epoca;  
dispón de lo necesario para registrar en la secreta costura  
de la letra  
el cambiante dolor del universo  
e las leyes de la ternura que siempre fluye,  
siempre fluye.

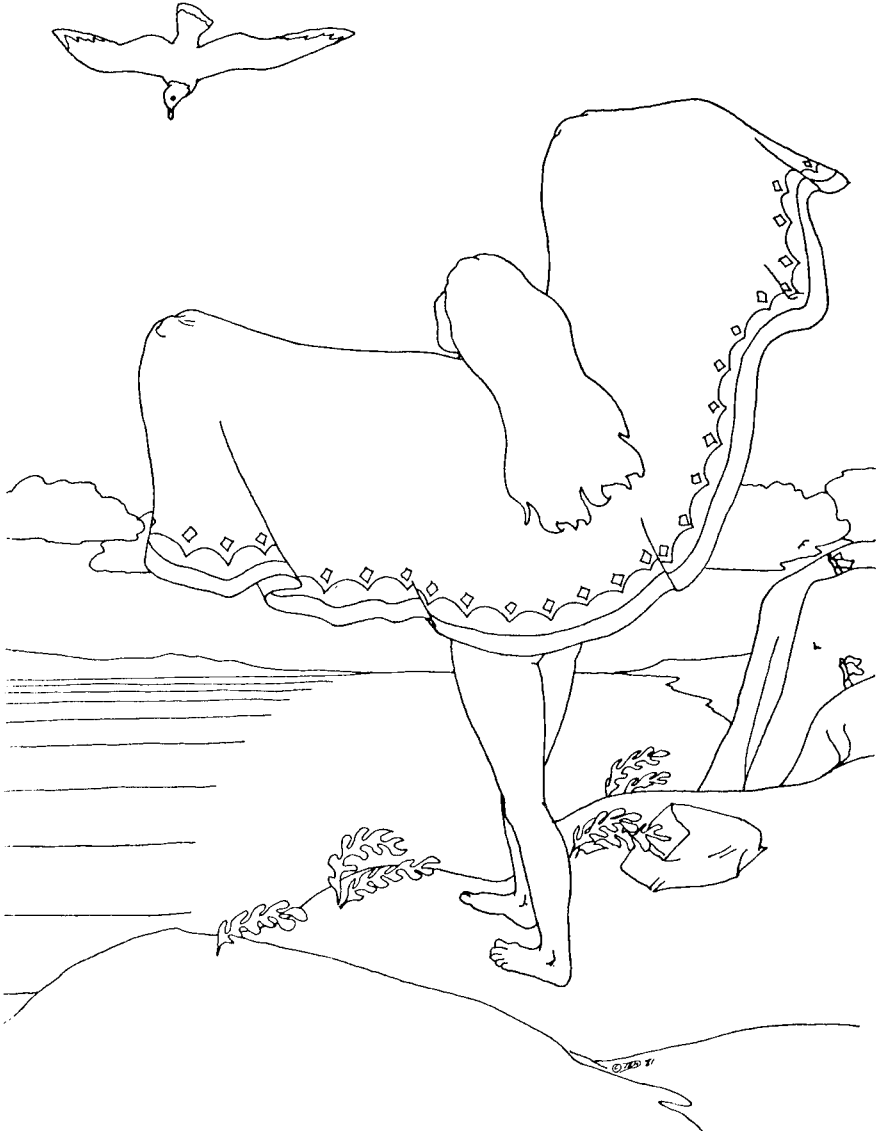


## **GENERATIONAL TASK**

***Mirta Yáñez***

Those, the nostalgic poets of the past,  
never saw snow,  
yet the silent beat of the flakes  
fell scrupulously on their verses;  
they always distrusted  
the oceans,  
the atrocious distances with no other cry but the wind,  
although they often smelled sandalwood  
and played, like children, with Oriental filigrees;  
what is more  
they felt the emptiness of bohemian stomachs,  
the loneliness  
that was like an icy stain on the horizon  
and they only knew  
to break the meter of their stanzas,  
authentic and nonsensical as the times they lived.  
Ah, my young poet of tomorrow,  
revive with the poem the sun of the tropics  
like a volley of savage blow-guns;  
use fierce words  
to denounce your epoch;  
avail yourself of what is needed to register in the secret seam  
of the letter  
the changing pain of the universe  
and the laws of the tenderness that forever flows,  
forever flows

# Ads & Info



# Contributor's Notes

**Julia Alvarez**, b. 1950, New York, early childhood in the Dominican Republic. Returning to New York in 1960, Julia began to write poems and stories in her new language. Author of a collection of poems, *Homecoming* (Grove, 1984), she is working on a collection of stories about her childhood in the Caribbean and her immigrant life in the United States.

**Mila D. Aguilar**, b. 1949, the Philippines. Author of three poetry collections: *Pall Hanging over Manila* (Fishy Afoot), *Why Cage Pigeons?* (Manila) and *A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling* (Kitchen Table). The second collection was written while she was a political prisoner under the Marcos dictatorship. Among the first group of detainees freed by President Cory Aquino, Mila Aguilar currently works in St. Joseph's College in Quezon City.

**Kamili Anderson**, b. 1955, South Carolina. She is a writer and critic who works in publishing in Washington, D.C. Her articles have also been published in *Belles Lettres* and *Sage*.

**Zoë Anglesey**, b. 1945, Oregon. Since 1968 introducing Central American writing. Translated books of poems by Carmen Naranjo, Ana Istaru, Roberto Sosa (Honduras), Mirna Martinez, Reyna Hernandez (El Salvador), Etelevina Astrada, Ruben Vela (Argentina). Manuscripts: *Climate of Deep Waters*, *Is it Dangerous*, *Central to America*.

**Diana Avila**, b. 1952, Costa Rica. Her books include *El Sueno Ha Terminado* (1976) and *Contracanto* (1980). She founded a poetry group "Oruga" which has published poems in Costa Rica and internationally. She works as a translator for an international news service in San Jose, Costa Rica.

**Breena Clarke**, b. 1951, Washington, D.C. Currently an administrative assistant at the nation's leading newsmagazine, Breena Clarke has had a long career as a theater professional. Her New York debut was as stage manager and performer in *Reggae* on Broadway. She is founder and artistic director of the Narratives Performing Company.

**Cheryl Clarke**, b. 1947, Washington, D.C., is the author of *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* (Kitchen Table, 1982) and *Living as a Lesbian* (Firebrand, 1986). She is currently working on a new book, tentatively titled, *Diaspora Narratives*, to be published in 1989.

**Chrystos**. I was born in San Francisco in 1946. My father is Menominee and my mother's parents were from Lithuania and Alsace-Lorraine. Press Gang in Canada is coming out with a collection of my works entitled, *Not Vanishing*. My peas and broccoli and tomatoes are thriving.

**Sandra María Esteves**, b. 1948, the Bronx. Puerto Rican Dominican American poet, widely published in anthologies and journals. Works include *Yerba buena* (Greenfield Review, 1980) and *Tropical Rains: A Bilingual Downpour* (African Caribbean Poetry Theater, 1984). Executive Artistic Director of the African Caribbean Poetry Theater.

**Dorothy Randall Gray.** I was born, of that I'm sure. Davidsboro, Georgia spit me out like a watermelon seed. Took root in Chinatown a.k.a. Lower East Side a.k.a. Little Italy. My writings are guided by my place of origin, Polaris (the North Star), from whence I'm convinced also came my predilection for writing on subways, after midnight, and during rainstorms.

**Kathryn Gordon,** b. 1957, Flushing, NY. Author of *Sighting the Deer*. She's at work on a second novel, *The Certainty of Others*, and a comparative study of the artist and community in Black and white women's fiction.

**Pauline Guillermo,** b. 1957, New York, also known as Turtle-Bear, is a Latina lesbian artist living in New York City.

**Shirley Hinkamp,** b. 1935, New Jersey. She is a copy editor, living and working in midtown Manhattan. Visited Nicaragua in 1986 and is actively involved in working for peace and justice. Began writing poetry two years ago and participated in workshops with Jean Valentine, Jewelle Gomez and Cheryl Clarke.

**Merritt Hoyt,** b. 1938, New Jersey. Moved to New Mexico in 1974. She writes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and has recently won a national literary contest with one of her poems. She is also a photographer and has several exhibits in Sante Fe.

**Ana Istarú,** b. 1960, Costa Rica. Has published *New Word*, and the prizewinning books *Poems for Whatever Day*, *Open Poems and Other Sunrises* and *The Season of Lust*. Her recent manuscript *Death and Other Ephemeral Offenses* has been translated by Zoe Anglesey.

**Alycee Lane,** b. 1963, Buffalo, NY. She is currently an organizer for the Nation Third World Student Coalition, and is a recent graduate from Howard University's Department of English.

**Jacqueline Lapidus,** b. 1941, New York City. Author of several books of poems. Lives in Provincetown, works in Boston for *The Walking Magazine*, still feels a little foreign here after two decades abroad. Looks forward to re-involvement in passion and politics. Her books include *Ready to Survive* (Hanging Loose, 1975), *Starting Over* (Out&Out, 1977), *Yantras of Womanlove* (Naiad, 1981) and *Ultimate Conspiracy* (forthcoming).

**Audre Lorde,** b. 1934, New York City, is a Black-Lesbian-Feminist professor of English at Hunter College, where she's been appointed the Thomas Hunter Professor. Her latest book of poetry is *Our Dead Behind Us* (Norton, 1986). *A Burst of Light*, a book of essays from which the excerpts for this issue were taken, is forthcoming from Firebrand Books.

**Mirna Martínez,** b. 1966, El Salvador. Has had poems published in the Salvadoran literary and arts magazines *El Pregon* and *Codices*. She has also been published in the literary supplements of *El Mundo*, a daily newspaper in San Salvador. She is a student in literature and is a member of the El Salvador Cultural and Art Workers Associates for which she edits their cultural publications.

**Valerie Miner**, b. 1947, New York City. Her novels include *All Good Women* (Crossing, 1985); *Murder in the English Department* (St. Martin's, 1983; Crossing paperback, 1987); *Movement* (Crossing, 1982) and *Blood Sisters* (St. Martin's, 1982). A new anthology, *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*, which she has co-edited with Helen Longino, will be published in the fall of 1987 by The Feminist Press.

**Ilze Mueller**, b. Latvia, currently teaches German in St. Paul, Minnesota, and has translated feminist and lesbian writing from German, Swedish and Latvian. She is now at work translating the autobiography of Latvian writer Anna Brigadere.

**Julie Murphy**, b. 1965, Washington, D.C. is currently a part-time potter, student and library technician hoping to become a professional potter and to continue writing poetry. She has recently published a poem and a book review in *off our backs*.

**Carmen Naranjo**, b. 1931, Cartago, Costa Rica. Her books include *America* (1961), *Cancio de la Ternura* (1964), *Hacia tu Isla* (1966), *Idioma del Invierno* (1971) and *En el Circulo de los Pronombres*. She has twice won the Premio Nacional de Novela (1966 and 1971); her work is included in the anthology *Poesia Contemporania de Costa Rica*, (1973). She has served as Secretary of Culture in Costa Rica.

**Leslea Newman**, b. 1955, Brooklyn, NY. A Jewish Lesbian who has been writing stories and poems ever since she can remember. "One Shabbos Evening" comes from her collection, *A Letter to Harvey Milk and Other Stories* to be published by Firebrand Books in 1988. She has also written *Good Enough to Eat* (Firebrand, 1986).

**Margaret Nichols**, b. 1947, Newark, NJ, is a bisexual/lesbian woman who runs the Hyacinth Foundation/New Jersey AIDS Project and the Institute for Personal Growth, a psychotherapy and counseling center in New Jersey. Sex is a big interest of hers.

**May Opitz**, b. 1960, Hamburg, Germany, has a Master's degree in Adult Education. Currently she studies speech therapy. She is involved in the Afro-German movement and is developing a research project on Afro-German history. She is a major contributor to the anthology *Farbe Bekennen*.

**Annette Peláez**, b. 1953, NY. Taurus. Mixed blood. Tries always to consider more than three dimensions and questions everything, sometimes too late. Anti-imperialist. First love, music. Loves art but doesn't care to own it. Needs solitude, needs to move. Grateful to have met Turtle-Bear.

**Margaret Randall**, b. 1936, New York City. She currently fights a legal battle to be allowed to stay in this country, after twenty-three years in Latin America. Poet, Photographer, teacher. Her works include *Women Brave in the Face of Danger* (Crossing, 1985) and *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (Smyrna, 1981). Most recent work: *This is About Incest* (Firebrand, 1987).

**Ana María Rodas**, b. 1937, Guatemala City, Guatemala, *Poems of the Erotic Left* (1973), *Four Corners of a Doll's Game* (1975), *The End of Myths and Dreams* (1984). Formerly a columnist and critic, Ms. Rodas now teaches journalism at San Carlo University in Guatemala.

**Marianna Romo-Carmona**, b. 1952, Santiago, Chile, is a Latina lesbian writer and activist and the mother of a teenage son. She is a contributor to various feminist and gay publications. Currently she is an editor with the Latina Lesbian History project.

**Minerva Salado**, b. 1944, Havana, Cuba, graduated in journalism from the University of Havana in 1969. In 1974, she won the "David" Prize for a first book of poetry for *Al cierre*. In 1977, her second book of poetry, *Tema sobre un paseo* won first prize in the UNEAC (National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers). She is the assistant editorial director of the magazine, *Revolucion y cultura*. Her most recent book of poetry is *Palabra en el espejo*.

**Barbara Sheen**, b. 1949, U.S.A. Lives in southern New Mexico. She is a writer of fiction and nonfiction for adults and children. Her work has been translated into 2 languages and published internationally. Books include *Shedevils* (Metis, 1978) and *Biesters* (Verlag Coudula Lorez, 1984).

**M. Tokarczyk**, b. 1953, New York City. Poet, critic and teacher, residing in New York City. Her work has been published in small magazines and literary journals. Currently she is an Assistant Professor of English at Rutgers University and a Consulting Editor to *Belles Lettres*.

**Luz Maria Umpierre**, b. 1947, Santurce, Puerto Rico. She is a poet, critic and Associate Professor at Rutgers University. She is the author of two books of literary criticism as it relates to Puerto Rican literature and Minority women writers in the USA. She is an Associate Editor for *Third Woman*. Her books include *The Margarita Poems* (Third Woman, 1987) and *Y otras desgracias/ And Other Misfortunes* (Third Woman, 1985).

**Mirta Yáñez**, b. 1947, Havana, Cuba. She has been an assistant professor in the School of Philosophy at the University of Havana. She holds a degree in Spanish literature and language with a specialization in pre-colonial literature. She writes poetry, prose, criticism and children's literature as well as documentary film scripts. Her book of poems, *Las Visitas* won the 1970 "March 13th" Award. One of her more recent articles "A favor de las ninas" was published in the journal *En julio como en enero*, in 1986. She lives and writes in Havana.

**Yvonne Zipter**, b. 1954, Milwaukee. Has had poems published in *IKON* and *WomanSpirit*. A columnist for Chicago's *Windy City Times*, she is currently working on a nonfiction book about lesbians and softball for Firebrand Books and a young adult novel.

# Submissions

Submissions will be accepted for the upcoming edition of **conditions: 15** from September 1987 to April 1988. The collective welcomes writing by women from all over the world who feel that a commitment to women is an integral part of their lives.

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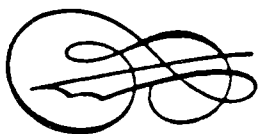
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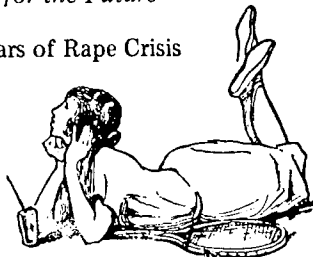
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