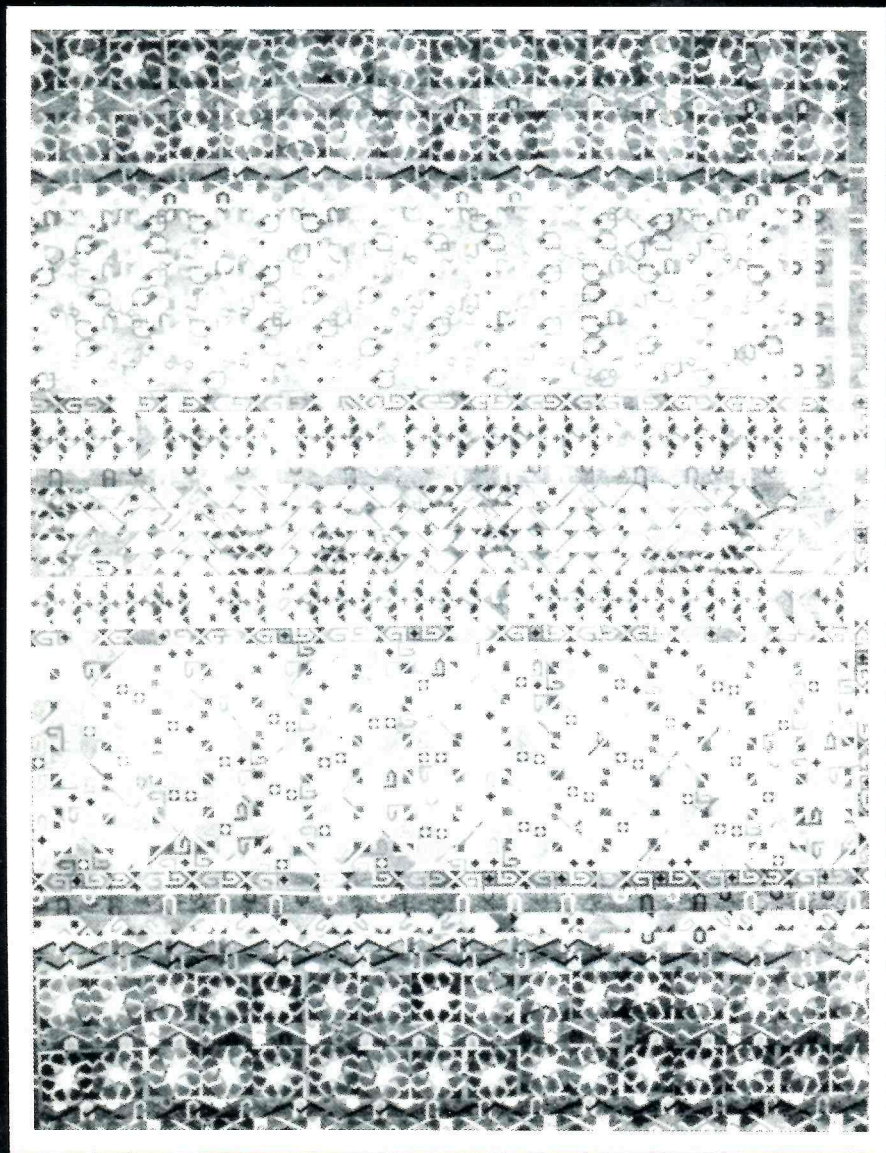


# conditions: two



# CONDITIONS: TWO

*a magazine of writing by women*

*with an emphasis on writing by lesbians*

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*Conditions* is free upon request to women in prisons and mental institutions.

Submissions will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

*Conditions* is now accepting advertising from women's businesses, presses, magazines, etc. CLASSIFIED ADS: 25 cents per word, 20 word minimum. DISPLAY ADS: Full-page (4½" x 7")—\$100; half-page (4½" x 3½")—\$50; quarter-page (2" x 3½")—\$25. Display ads must be in the form of camera-ready copy. All ads must be accompanied by a check or money order. Copy is accepted at the discretion of the editors.

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*Conditions* is edited by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore. We work collectively to select and edit material which will reflect women's perceptions of themselves, each other, the conditions of their lives, and of the world around them.

This collective process is a difficult one. We have found that the four of us do not always agree or identify with the viewpoints expressed by the women we publish, or with each other. Because we do not proceed from a single conception of what **Conditions** should be, we feel it is especially important to receive critical and personal reactions to the writing we publish.

After the publication of **Conditions: One**, we received many enthusiastic letters congratulating us on our first issue. This support has meant a lot to us.

We hope that in the future we will receive more letters, letters which broaden perspectives, question assumptions, support or challenge ideas which appear in the magazine. We look forward to printing such responses to **Conditions: One** and **Conditions: Two**.

# CONDITIONS:TWO

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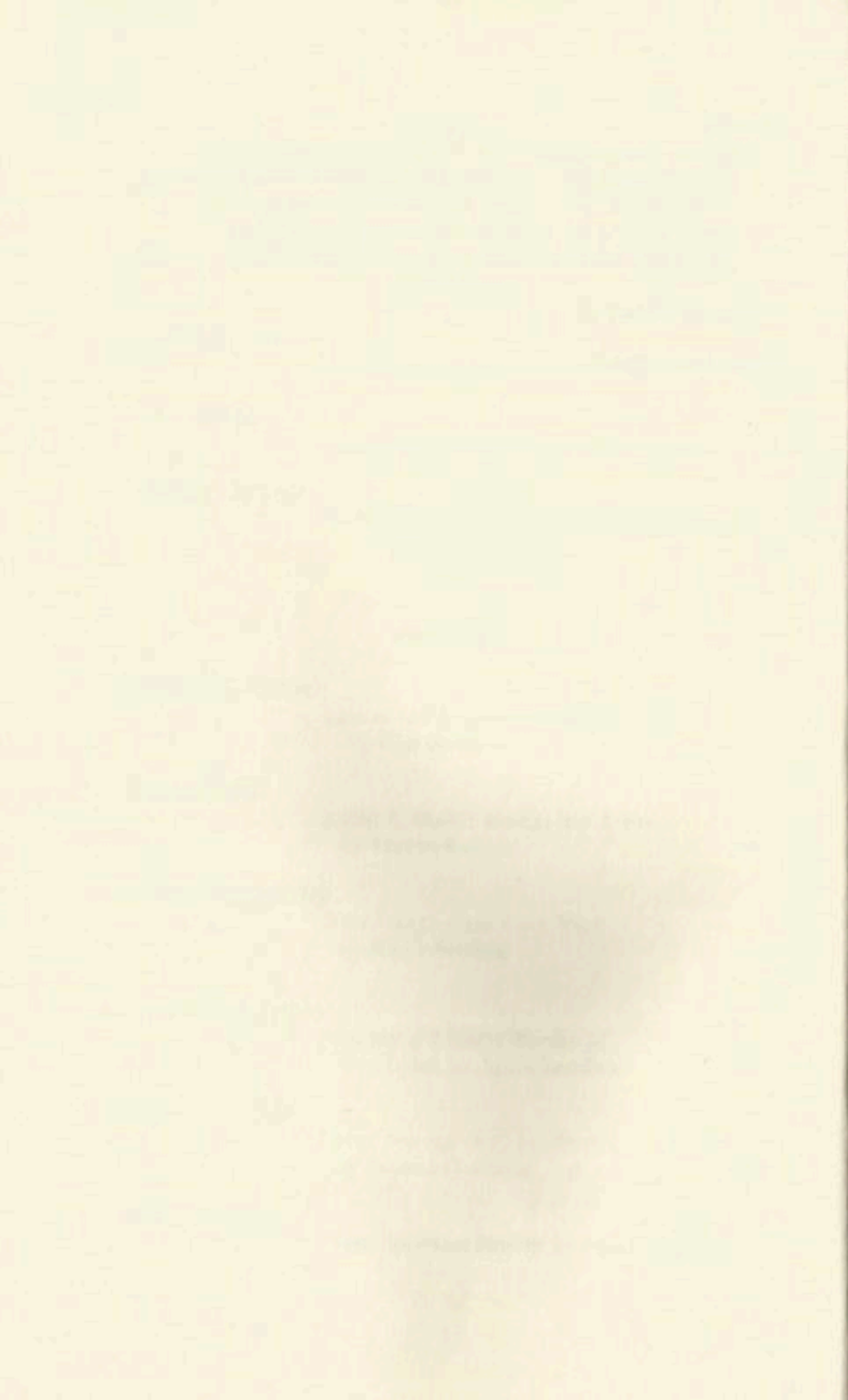
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PATRICIA JONES

MI CHINITA POEM

*for the waiters*

the real american does not know what flan is  
asks for whipped cream  
the chinese waiter mops his hands against the  
counter  
says "we don't have any" in perfect english  
the real american looks bewildered  
tastes the flan  
likes it  
but still wants whipped cream  
    what arrogance

all day long  
people called my name  
i developed amnesia

THE SECOND VISIT OF THE FAT BOY

with his take out order newly scribbled by  
his mother  
the fat boy returns  
for the second time  
the waiter peruses the script/notes the order  
for fried chicken/speaks in spanish/then chinese  
then says to the boy: "chicken soup or won ton soup"  
the boy replies: "two won soups"  
the waiter says: "chicken soup or won ton soup"  
the boy almost screams: "two won soups"  
the waiter stops writes out the check for  
the real american and his partner  
his partner asks for more coffee

the waiter finishes writing out the check  
more coffee demands the partner of the real american  
the waiter takes off the top of the styrofoam cup  
and proceeds to pour more coffee into the cup and  
onto the hand of the greedy partner of the real  
american  
he returns to the scene of the FAT BOY  
he says: "won ton soups"  
YES says the boy.

people mill around the lobby  
of the elgin theatre some  
come across 8th avenue enter  
the restaurant and buy espressos  
to go the elgin is playing  
*persona* i have never seen it  
i check my pocket for extra  
money i have none

the man sitting next to me eats there every day  
i tell him a friend of mine got msg poisoning  
he says, "from here?" "yes," i say, "but then i only  
eat the cuban food" "oh, what do you usually get?"  
he asks "oh *ropa vieja* but tonight i got *picadillo*"  
we stop talking the hippie commune types: long haired  
men and women with longhaired children all rise from  
the large table in the rear  
instantly, four S & M leather freaks sit down

*arroz amarillo*

i eat smile quietly try to arouse  
sympathy in the waiters i give up

go home

no one calls

i remember my name

write long letters  
think of stars and gardenias  
scent of *plantanos*  
earth shaking on the west coast  
spring ringing over the last hard air  
bandits steal race track money in yonkers wet time

the Deco gleam continues  
to stun my eyes  
recall the smells of beef  
msg those *plantanos*  
steaming water

the waiters wear jade rings  
edged in gold  
they move quickly  
graciously  
always  
in  
control.

from 14TH STREET/NEW YORK

*for noel*

1.

the procession for San Martin de Porres the only  
Black Saint I know of was not accompanied by police  
escort it moved through the street oblivious to  
the Saturday afternoon traffic the priests wore black  
the acolytes wore white over black the parishioners  
wore cloth coats and sensible shoes the garb of the  
religious poor the statue of San Martin de Porres  
bobbed over the heads of the marchers the cabbies  
cursed and swerved the truckers honked horns the marchers  
moved slowly singing a dirge like hymn two pretty  
black girls wore purest white carried flowers often  
smiled el procesion de San Martin de Porres shifted  
the traffic gently till the cars and trucks till the  
curses and sighs joined the slow music the sad funeral  
song for San Martin de Porres the only Black Saint I  
know of

5.

on the bus the medical personnel: two women and a man  
discuss the deterioration of the neighborhood my black  
face before them they do not mention race there is no  
telling i could be one of them militants or worse just  
plain angry they hint over and around this sorrow but  
who can be blamed? why me why they/the spanish speaking  
men at the back of the bus why us huh no one says what  
they are truly thinking everyone avoids an incident it's  
winter and well no one wants to see an incident on the  
crosstown bus

## SUSAN KRONENBERG

### SERIPHOS (*based on a journal kept in 1975*)

#### I

I was the foreigner. The one with no friends or relatives to see me off. Soon the ferry pulled away from Pireus towards Seriphos. There was nothing but blue sky and blue-grey water. For the hundredth time I wondered why I had come this far. I had no answer. The top deck was full of old men in black jackets and caps and old women in long black skirts—all of them tiny, bent, wrinkled. For better or worse, they were home, in their own country. I sat down on a bench, opened my coat, and turned my face up to the sun. For the first time in months, I didn't feel cold. Maybe nothing would go wrong anymore. I stretched out in the warmth and drifted off to sleep.

I was awakened by a blast from the ship's giant horn. Then a brown island appeared and, as we got closer, I saw how barren it was—a series of peninsulas. On each one, rocks covered with green-brown moss rose straight up from the shore. A giant floating amoeba—this was Seriphos. A little further on, we passed a few white houses high up in the hills. They stood out sharply, like specks of dust. No roads seemed to lead in or out.

We pulled into the dock, where a small group waited and waved. No houses here either, only more hills. I hesitated at the exit. I just wanted to keep riding on that top deck, to go on and on in warm sunshine on a deep gentle sea, drifting off to sleep. But later, light would come. We would reach other islands which might be like this one, or worse, and eventually we'd get to that last island and I'd have to get out, and then it would be night again and I'd have to find my way in the dark. At the last possible moment, I stepped off the boat.

#### II

I was in a white stucco village on top of a high cone-shaped hill—the village I had seen from the boat. To get there I had walked up a half-mile of steps. I knocked on the door of a house overlooking the sea. A very small thin girl answered. She wore a beige dress and

beige stockings that were loose and stretched around her knees and ankles. Her brown hair was wound in two long, tight braids. She could have been twelve or twenty.

"*Kalimare-Pouine Kiki?*" I said. The tourist police had told me Kiki was the only one who opened her home to guests in winter.

The girl stared at me suspiciously. Her skin was sallow, her face long and thin, eyes small and narrow. She put her arm across the door.

"*Pouine sou mamma?*"—where's your mother—I asked again. This time she stuck her chin out and shouted a few Greek words. Her eyes were like those dots I drew as a kid on faces of people who were very angry. Finally she went into the livingroom, sat down on the couch, and squinted sideways at me. I sat at the other end.

"*Ti sou onomia?*"—what's your name—I asked her. She didn't answer and I almost didn't care. At that point, nothing else mattered but finding a place to stay.

The rugs were worn out, rose colored, an intense floral print. The curtains were brighter, shocking red, almost orange. The couch was navy blue crushed velvet, brocaded with flowers, and one big easy chair was covered with green striped material. A chest and dresser were at opposite ends of the room. It was all cluttered, beat-up and dusty, except for a 36-inch T.V. set which dominated one corner. The wall above the couch was covered with photographs—some were of priests in long robes, some of soldiers on horses, and in the center hung a huge portrait of the former King and Queen of Greece.

Suddenly the girl jumped up and ran into a back room. Reappearing a minute later, she sat down, wrapped one skinny leg around the other like a twisted rubberband, and rocked back and forth, first gently, then harder, hunching way over so that her chest touched her knees. After a few minutes she unwound, rushed out of the room, rushed back in. She had just sat down when a woman opened the door.

"Kiki?" I stood up, and she smiled. She was small and had short dark hair. There were lines around her eyes and mouth, and although she probably wasn't much more than forty-five, she looked older. She dusted off the couch and asked me to sit.

"What's your name? How long you stay?" she said.

"Here—you like this," she said, and offered me hard licorice-like candy with white coating, white powdered sugar cookies, and sweet red wine, insisting I take more of everything. The girl wouldn't

eat or drink—just kept staring from her corner. Kiki opened the chest drawer and pulled out piles of letters and postcards. “*Touristas*,” she said proudly. She took out a framed picture of John Kennedy, sighed, and pressed it against her chest. “*Ah-ah*,” she said, shaking her head back and forth. “*Poli kalo. POLI poli kalo*”—very good. And there were tears in her eyes. Then she got very excited. “*Nixon-Ford-Kissinger*,” she said scornfully. “*Nixon-Ford-Kissinger. Ohi kalo*”—no good. Gently, she replaced Kennedy in his cradle-drawer. She spoke rapidly in Greek, asking questions, waiting expectantly for answers.

Meanwhile the girl raced around all over the house, then ran out without a coat, even though it was now cold and windy.

“*Sou 'koritsi?*” I said, asking Kiki if this was her daughter. She nodded.

“This Galatea. She go hospital—Athens. No like. Two months—come back.”

Galatea came in and sat down with a big transistor radio which emitted mostly static, hugged it to her chest, and began her autistic rocking. She sang along in a harsh grating monotone. Kiki screamed and tried to pull the radio away but Galatea wouldn't let go and yelled back, until Kiki gave up, took her sewing basket from the chest, and sat down in the easy chair. Five minutes later the girl turned the radio off and headed for the door, but as she passed Kiki, she stopped. Kiki sat her down on her lap and stroked her arm lightly. The girl seemed content—she was almost smiling, but the next minute she was up, hurrying outside. Kiki went back to sewing.

### III

The House was built around a courtyard. The bathroom, which had only cold water, was in a separate shed. To get from the livingroom to the kitchen, I had to go outside across the yard and down a steep flight of steps. The first night's dinner was a plate of spinach, a small bowl of macaroni, and bread. As soon as I began eating, a tall thin man with glasses and long dark priest's robes came down the steps and sat opposite me at the head of the table.

“This Pappas,” Kiki said.

We exchanged polite nods. He said a few words to Kiki and Galatea, then didn't speak for the rest of the meal. Kiki served him extra macaroni and some meat stew. He was quiet and dignified, but there was also something distant and severe about him. Galatea got

more restless and began complaining loudly to Kiki, but never said a word to him. His gloomy aura fit right in with the damp dinginess of the kitchen and diningroom. When he had finished he stood and nodded politely once again.

"*Kalinichta*"—goodnight—and he disappeared upstairs. Kiki's facial muscles relaxed as soon as he was gone.

#### IV

That night a storm began; it was to continue intermittently for the next six or seven days. The house was on an open hilltop, vulnerable. After dinner we all sat in the livingroom near the small heater, which warmed only the air in the immediate vicinity. I sat on the floor in my coat, and Galatea was next to me, listening to the radio, rocking. Every five minutes she ran out coatless into the cold. She always left the door open, despite Kiki's screaming, and gusts of wind blew into the room. She kept crossing the yard to another door, which must have led to a different part of the house. She entered there without knocking and closed the other door behind her.

I shifted around uncomfortably, unable to write much. The part of my body nearest the heater would burn, while other parts got progressively colder depending on how far away they were. I kept reaching for one or two sunflower seeds from a bowl on the coffee table, but I secretly wanted to empty the whole bowl into my mouth at once.

Kiki put down her sewing, took a deep breath, and poked the small of her back.

"*Ponos-ghiati?*"—pain, why?—She winced.

"Don't know—muscle?" I made a muscle.

"*Oh!*"—no—"I have many months. Soon, go boat Athenia."

"Do you want me to rub it?" I made a rubbing motion in the air.

She went to her room and got vaseline. Then she lifted her blouse and I rubbed, while she closed her eyes and said, "*Ah-kalo-Poli kalo.*" She was wearing a black bra. There were rolls of fat around her waist and stomach. She pointed to her shoulders, and soon I was massaging her whole back for ten minutes or more while she kept her eyes closed and sighed. When I finished Galatea came in and tried to squeeze in between us. I moved over, but she pushed me



even further away from Kiki and the warm spot.

At about 9:30, I went to sleep in Galatea's room; while I was a guest there she and Kiki shared the big double bed that took up most of Kiki's room. My room was poorly lit. There were clumps of dust on the floor and one tiny window over the sink in the corner—I had to bend to look through it: outside there was nothing but black. The sink was full of hair and grease and instead of running water there was a plastic jug attached to the wall—one of those picnic-type coolers with a tiny faucet and spout from which a few drops of icy water dribbled.

I had just gotten into bed when Galatea came in. Picking up a deck of cards from the nighttable, I shuffled it and made a bridge.

"Want to play?"

She smiled at me for the first time, went over to the sink, took a red pill from a bottle and swallowed it with a little water in a dirty plastic glass. As she left, she looked back at me over her shoulder, half friendly, half suspicious.

I lay awake for a long time, trying to keep my mind blank. I had gotten so passive—scared to keep traveling, scared to go home. Home was safe, but I also wanted adventure. I had met so many women who traveled alone for months. I had to prove I could do it too. I turned out the light.

## V

The other evenings were all the same: dinners of starches, bread and greens, with Pappas always getting extra, eating in silence, leaving the table before us, not to be seen again until the next night. Later we sat around the livingroom "campfire" and I'd rub Kiki's back, while Galatea ran around. The T.V. was broken, so we never watched. One night the heater hissed and began giving off black gas. For two days there was no heat at all and then it worked at half capacity and made loud clunking noises. Once I did my laundry on the terrace using two buckets of ice cold water, and my hands got red and chapped.

When the weather was a little better I hiked on donkey paths which criss-crossed the island. There was only one road. The paths were strewn with all kinds of rocks and boulders and I had to climb over them or jump from one to the other. It was like learning a new dance and required a lot of concentration. Sometimes an old woman

or man hopping from boulder to boulder passed by and I stopped and watched, admiring their agility and ruggedness. Despite its harshness, the island was beautiful.

I hardly ever wrote anymore; I hadn't bathed in three weeks. Mostly I wanted to scribble graffiti in red magic marker all over those white stucco walls. Sometimes I wanted to blend in with the cold rocks until I lost consciousness, but my self-awareness never disappeared no matter where I went. Staying in one place seemed better than traveling overnight on some horrible boat and finding a new place. Still, I had to keep going. As usual I had hung around just a little too long. Kiki was getting impatient: in summer, guests slept in a separate house on the hillside—they didn't take up Galatea's room.

## VI

One morning, after seven days on the island, I left a bottle of ouzo on the table as a parting gift and went out to look for Kiki. She wasn't around, so I knocked on the small door opposite the living-room—the one Galatea always used. Pappas answered. It was the first time I had seen him in daylight, and he looked tired and pale. He asked if I was leaving, and invited me inside. His room was subdued and orderly—bookshelves on the wall, a table with a small heater on it in the center, a cot covered with a brown wool blanket in the corner.

"I wanted to say goodbye and give this to Kiki," I said, putting 300 drachmas—ten dollars—on the table.

He thanked me and looked at me carefully. "There is not much to do on Seriphos in winter," he said.

"I know—I came to write—mostly."

"I write too—and study," he said. "Very difficult work, this writing." And he looked at the papers and open books on the table. In the village tavern, a man had told me he was married to Kiki, but because of the language barrier I never found out whether he was a priest or what connection, if any, he had with the church. As I stood next to him he seemed gentler and more human—delicate, troubled, almost helpless. I wanted to talk more, but it was too late, and I didn't have the energy to begin.

"Say goodbye to Kiki and Galatea," I said. We shook hands, and I left. In the lane, Galatea came running up.

*"Kalimare Galatea."*—goodbye—I touched her arm. She saw my backpack and smiled almost shyly.

*"Batu?"*—boat—she said. I nodded..

*"Kalimare,"* she said. Then quickly she reached into her coat pocket and put a gold-colored coin in my palm. I tried to give it back, but she wouldn't take it. I hugged her tightly, feeling her ribs underneath the thin jacket. She rushed inside the gate, opened Pappas' door and went in without knocking. I stared at the closed door, then at the coin—a copy of an ancient one, lumpy and rough, with a crack along the edge and a picture of Athena in the center. I put it in the special zippered compartment of my backpack. Then I started down to the boat.

## A NEW BEGINNING

1.

When you hide, they search for you. Nothing must be missing. Everything must be in its correct, its proper place.

What does it take to change things? Does anyone or anything ever really change? Perhaps first of all one must consciously make a decision to allow change to enter. To become open to it. To sacrifice control. To break convention. To become someone new, someone different. To make a conscious decision to enter the unknown.

And sometimes you are thrown into it. Enter it almost by accident—the ultimate consequences being vague, obscure. As I entered Berkeley in 1959, New York in 1961. As I decided to go to Cuba that year, 1967, to return to New York, to a place I had lived for six years and see it for the first time. To become ill and experience pain. To live through, see through, months and months of pain.

Some things are not absurd, are not in themselves absurd. The Fool chases a butterfly. A dog snaps at his heels. In some worlds he is dressed in rags, in others in colors of yellow and red and green. In some worlds the Fool is a man. In others, a woman. In some places a child. In others, an adult. It is always a question of place. In another world it would be different. And, for moments, in this.

When did things begin to change for me? At what moment, in what year? When was it I began to feel a difference? It came in stages. First a sense of one thing, and then another. As a baby first grows and discovers, puts together, a world.

2.

If you ask for nothing, that is exactly what you get. Even if, on the other hand, you lay out your demands, your heart, inch by inch, anxious for negotiation, ready for compromise, the result is often the same. But at least something is spared.

If she were an umbrella, what kind of weather would she conceal? If she were a road, where would she wind? If she were a color, would she be bright or dull? How many miles would you have to walk her before you would begin to understand? How many times would you have to play her before you would begin to hear?

As a child, I closed the world around me like the pages of an unwanted book. I created another world, a world of dreams and pictures. I never confused the two worlds, never tried to mix them. The other, the world in which I could live, was always just around the corner, behind some secret door, hidden, but expected.

I touched you as I would touch myself. I named you as I would name myself. I loved and hated you as I would hate and love myself.

What does it mean to live with someone for eight years and no longer remember the sound of their voice, what they ate for dinner, the things they liked, that you were eager, then, to give them. Even the way they kissed, made love. I remember one day in spring when I realized for the first time that grass is green. For me it was a new way of being in the world. That grass is green.

Her face as she turned toward the window was outlined in light. She turned toward me. Her eyes the color of light. I sat very still. Afraid to move. Afraid to let the moment pass. Afraid.

Where were you the night I lay in the hospital. Fifteen, with the body and needs of an adult? The next day you came with flowers and jokes, ignoring what had happened. I no longer liked you. I needed you, but no longer called out your name.

Myself went to the window, closed it, opened it again. Myself in a green velvet dress with a lace collar graduating from the eighth grade, with an unknown fever, full of certificates, letters, grades, checks, stars, points.

It is so easy to forget, to lapse into confusion. In the center, the struggle, the motion which is the center, clarity is simple. Distance, a way of constructing stories, making up lies. The easiest thing in the world—to forget, to lose the center. To fail to hold it together.

3.

How quiet the streets are at five in the morning. An old woman with a wide kerchief/plaid coat searching through the garbage cans. A young man with the Sunday Times curved under his arm. An Irish Setter sniffing aimlessly on the fire-escape across the street. For once, the city, quiet. Only the sound of the TV in the other room, and this typewriter.

You spoke in your letter of immortality. Of the loss of immortality. How well I know that fear. How it has consumed the last three years of my life. How it haunts me even now, settles in my mind, like an old diary you keep returning to, expecting it to tell you something new, reveal some mystery, the despair knowing somewhere there is an end, somewhere in the distance, undefined, there is an end, of whatever sort, after years of never dealing in beginnings and endings, of never thinking of the past and the future except as abstractions, the present being all and still all, now, even in these moments, all.

The morning is still. And dark. In the half-hour before sunrise I sit here at this desk. Grey. And then streaks of light. Waiting for the sun to rise so I can go to sleep. As I do some mornings. Somehow knowing things are different in daytime. That in the daylight things move, and breathe.

It was exactly three years ago today that I began to face the fact that I was mortal, vulnerable, could be hurt irrevocably, could fail.

4.

It is strange that a city can be so noisy, even a city like New York. They are tearing up Second Avenue now to put in a subway where it is not needed, when three blocks away it is needed. The noise returns promptly each morning at seven o'clock. It reminds me constantly and with great precision of that real futility, not what we each face, which is not futile, because it is real, is part of us as human beings, and as part of our own life has meaning, but that other futility, that noise, which means nothing, because it is not needed here, is not a need here, is happening here, where it is not needed, when so close to us, the need exists.

One attempts to deal with failure, but how does one learn to live

with success. One tries to adjust to rejection, but how does one deal with support. With the responsibility it brings. With the necessity to act, to speak, to reveal.

Your letter, this morning, when I so desperately needed it, unexpected, reminded me again of those other people, who, like you, I swore I would never forget. Who gave reason, meaning to my life. Because it has always been people who have given me that meaning. Not ideas, but people. As they pinpointed segments of my life. And were buried, were covered, finally, are covered, finally, layer by layer, with the soot, dirt, confusion of this city, the piles of newsprint, the voices, blurred, blurring, shouting out of radios, cars, TVs, mouths, noise, noise, noise...

5.

Maybe getting older simply means not taking things for granted so much anymore. In a plane this summer, after many such trips, for the first time, afraid. Seeing the world swerve beneath me. The round shell of the plane, small, somehow, not another world, but a piece located somewhere in space, in time. A gnawing in my stomach. The first symptom of fear. And below, the land, tidy, safe. Not afraid of crashing, but a more basic fear—of leaving the ground, my ground. What holds me down, secures me. Not like this. Lost against the clear morning sky. Growing older every minute. Exposed.

I think all my life I have loved women. Have been in love with what I am, what I wanted to be. With what I thought was beautiful. Gentle. With what I wanted, gently, beautifully, to touch, to be.

You can only see them in the dew. Otherwise they're invisible. The cobwebs. Holding blades of grass together. Hundreds of them. In the early morning fog. Stretching beyond eyesight, beyond the length of eye. It was like that with us, when we were alone together. It was easy to understand why they could no longer see us, why they were no longer a part of us. Their language, their customs, all their places. Your touch—the opening, that which opened out of, which freed.

I have been sitting here for one week. Seven days. Trying to construct/reconstruct a life. Trying to form, to create a life. In flashes. Fragments of heat and years. In moments of insight,

confusion. For one week now I have been sitting here, in this apartment, alone, in silence. And now I can begin to move, to speak. The way a person really moves. Not step by step through a series of events, incidents, people—but layer by layer, building, forming, assimilating, a life.



BARBARA SMITH

## TOWARD A BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

*For all my sisters, especially Beverly and Demita*

I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I realized that I was attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all. These things have not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists. And most crucially not by Black women critics who, although they pay the most attention to Black women writers as a group, seldom use a consistent feminist analysis or write about Black lesbian literature. All segments of the literary world—whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist.

For whites, this specialized lack of knowledge is inextricably connected to their not knowing in any concrete or politically transforming way that Black women of any description dwell in this place. Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown.

This invisibility, which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing, is one reason it is so difficult for me to know where to start. It seems overwhelming to break such a massive silence. Even more numbing, however, is the realization that so many of the women who will read this have not yet noticed us missing either from their reading matter, their politics, or their lives. It is galling that ostensible feminists and acknowledged lesbians have been so blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood and that they have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness.

I think of the thousands and thousands of books, magazines

and articles which have been devoted, by this time, to the subject of women's writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of those pages that mention Black and other Third-World women. I finally do not know how to begin because in 1977 I want to be writing this for a Black feminist publication, for Black women who know and love these writers as I do and who, if they do not yet know their names, have at least profoundly felt the pain of their absence.

\* \* \* \* \*

The conditions that coalesce into the impossibilities of this essay have as much to do with politics as with the practice of literature. Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life. In her landmark essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker discloses how the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of Black women.<sup>1</sup>

At the present time I feel that the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of Black Women's literature. A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art. At the same time a redefinition of the goals and strategies of the white feminist movement would lead to much needed change in the focus and content of what is now generally accepted as women's culture.

I want to make in this essay some connections between the politics of Black women's lives, what we write about and our situation as artists. In order to do this I will look at how Black women have been viewed critically by outsiders, demonstrate the necessity for Black feminist criticism and try to understand what the existence or non-existence of Black lesbian writing reveals about the state of Black women's culture and the intensity of *all* Black women's oppression.

The role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable and real hardly needs to be explained here. The

necessity for non-hostile and perceptive analysis of works written by persons outside the "mainstream" of white/male cultural rule has been proven by the Black cultural resurgence of the 1960's and '70's and by the even more recent growth of feminist literary scholarship. For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Because of racism Black literature has usually been viewed as a discrete subcategory of American literature and there have been Black critics of Black literature who did much to keep it alive long before it caught the attention of whites. Before the advent of specifically feminist criticism in this decade, books by white women, on the other hand, were not clearly perceived as the cultural manifestation of an oppressed people. It took the surfacing of the second wave of the North American feminist movement to expose the fact that these works contain a stunningly accurate record of the impact of patriarchal values and practice upon the lives of women and more significantly that literature by women provides essential insights into female experience.

In speaking about the current situation of Black women writers, it is important to remember that the existence of a feminist movement was an essential pre-condition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism and women's studies, which focused at the beginning almost entirely upon investigations of literature. The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot help but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why during this very same period we have been so ignored.

There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women's experience through studying our history, literature and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about our lives. Finally, there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women's art. When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are

crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean. The citations from a variety of critics which follow prove that without a Black feminist critical perspective not only are books by Black women misunderstood, they are destroyed in the process.

Jerry H. Bryant, the *Nation's* white male reviewer of Alice Walker's *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, wrote in 1973:

The subtitle of the collection, "Stories of Black Women," is probably an attempt by the publisher to exploit not only black subjects but feminine ones. There is nothing feminist about these stories, however.<sup>2</sup>

Blackness and feminism are to his mind mutually exclusive and peripheral to the act of writing fiction. Bryant of course does not consider that Walker might have titled the work herself, nor did he apparently read the book which unequivocally reveals the author's feminist consciousness.

In *The Negro Novel in America*, a book that Black critics recognize as one of the worst examples of white racist pseudo-scholarship, Robert Bone cavalierly dismisses Ann Petry's classic, *The Street*. He perceives it to be "...a superficial social analysis" of how slums victimize their Black inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> He further objects that:

It is an attempt to interpret slum life in terms of *Negro* experience, when a larger frame of reference is required. As Alain Locke has observed, "*Knock on Any Door* is superior to *The Street* because it designates class and environment, rather than mere race and environment, as its antagonist."<sup>4</sup>

Neither Robert Bone nor Alain Locke, the Black male critic he cites, can recognize that *The Street* is one of the best delineations in literature of how sex, race, and class interact to oppress Black women.

In her review of Toni Morrison's *Sula* for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973, putative feminist Sara Blackburn makes similarly racist comments. She writes:

. . . Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. *And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working.*<sup>5</sup> [Italics mine.]

Recognizing Morrison's exquisite gift, Blackburn unashamedly asserts that Morrison is "too talented" to deal with mere Black folk, particularly those double nonentities, Black women. In order to be accepted as "serious," "important," "talented," and "American," she must obviously focus her efforts upon chronicling the doings of white men.

The mishandling of Black women writers by whites is paralleled more often by their not being handled at all, particularly in feminist criticism. Although Elaine Showalter in her review essay on literary criticism for *Signs* states that: "The best work being produced today [in feminist criticism] is exacting and cosmopolitan," her essay is neither.<sup>6</sup> If it were, she would not have failed to mention a single Black or Third-World woman writer, whether "major" or "minor" to cite her questionable categories. That she also does not even hint that lesbian writers of any color exist renders her purported overview virtually meaningless. Showalter obviously thinks that the identities of being Black and female are mutually exclusive as this statement illustrates.

Furthermore, there are other literary subcultures (black American novelists, for example) whose history offers a precedent for feminist scholarship to use.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism. The final insult is that she footnotes the preceding remark by pointing readers to works on Black literature by white males Robert Bone and Roger Rosenblatt!

Two recent works by white women, Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* and Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* evidence the same racist flaw.<sup>8</sup> Moers includes the names of four Black and one Puertorriqueña writer in her seventy

pages of bibliographical notes and does not deal at all with Third-World women in the body of her book. Spacks refers to a comparison between Negroes (sic) and women in Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* under the index entry, "blacks, women and." "Black Boy (Wright)" is the preceding entry. Nothing follows. Again there is absolutely no recognition that Black and female identity ever co-exist, specifically in a group of Black women writers. Perhaps one can assume that these women do not know who Black women writers are, that they have had little opportunity like most Americans to learn about them. Perhaps. Their ignorance seems suspiciously selective, however, particularly in the light of the dozens of truly obscure white women writers they are able to unearth. Spacks was herself employed at Wellesley College at the same time that Alice Walker was there teaching one of the first courses on Black women writers in the country.

I am not trying to encourage racist criticism of Black women writers like that of Sara Blackburn, to cite only one example. As a beginning I would at least like to see in print white women's acknowledgement of the contradictions of who and what are being left out of their research and writing.<sup>9</sup>

Black male critics can also *act* as if they do not know that Black women writers exist and are, of course, hampered by an inability to comprehend Black women's experience in sexual as well as racial terms. Unfortunately there are also those who are as virulently sexist in their treatment of Black women writers as their white male counterparts. Darwin Turner's discussion of Zora Neale Hurston in his *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* is a frightening example of the near assassination of a great Black woman writer.<sup>10</sup> His descriptions of her and her work as "artful," "coy," "irrational," "superficial," and "shallow" bear no relationship to the actual quality of her achievements. Turner is completely insensitive to the sexual political dynamics of Hurston's life and writing.

In a recent interview the notoriously misogynist writer, Ishmael Reed, comments in this way upon the low sales of his newest novel:

. . .but the book only sold 8000 copies. I don't mind giving out the figure: 8000. Maybe if I was one of those young *female* Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can *do no wrong*. . . .But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of the situation of Black women are glaringly illuminated by this statement. Neither Reed nor his white male interviewer has the slightest compunction about attacking Black women in print. They need not fear widespread public denunciation since Reed's statement is in perfect agreement with the values of a society that hates Black people, women and Black women. Finally the two of them feel free to base their actions on the premise that Black women are powerless to alter either their political or cultural oppression.

In her introduction to "A Bibliography of Works Written by American Black Women" Ora Williams quotes some of the reactions of her colleagues toward her efforts to do research on Black women. She writes:

Others have reacted negatively with such statements as, "I really don't think you are going to find very much written," "Have 'they' written anything that is any good?" and, "I wouldn't go overboard with this woman's lib thing." When discussions touched on the possibility of teaching a course in which emphasis would be on the literature by Black women, one response was, "Ha, ha. That will certainly be the most nothing course ever offered!"<sup>12</sup>

A remark by Alice Walker capsulizes what all the preceding examples indicate about the position of Black women writers and the reasons for the damaging criticism about them. She responds to her interviewer's question, "Why do you think that the black woman writer has been so ignored in America? Does she have even more difficulty than the black male writer, who perhaps has just begun to gain recognition?" Walker replies:

There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer. One is that she's a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the works of black women. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write. And, since black women writers are not—it would seem—very likable—until recently they were the least willing worshippers of male supremacy—comments about them tend to be cruel.<sup>13</sup>

A convincing case for Black feminist criticism can obviously be built solely upon the basis of the negativity of what already exists. It is far more gratifying, however, to demonstrate its necessity by showing how it can serve to reveal for the first time the profound subtleties of this particular body of literature.

Before suggesting how a Black feminist approach might be used to examine a specific work I will outline some of the principles that I think a Black feminist critic could use. Beginning with a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing, she would also work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition. The breadth of her familiarity with these writers would have shown her that not only is theirs a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country, but that thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share. The way, for example, that Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence, nor is their use of specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters' thoughts accidental. The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black women.

Another principle which grows out of the concept of a tradition and which would also help to strengthen this tradition would be for the critic to look first for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other Black women. In other words she would think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women's art. Black feminist criticism would by definition be highly innovative, embodying the daring spirit of the works themselves. The Black feminist critic would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work and would



assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women. Logically developed, Black feminist criticism would owe its existence to a Black feminist movement while at the same time contributing ideas that women in the movement could use.

Black feminist criticism applied to a particular work can overturn previous assumptions about it and expose for the first time its actual dimensions. At the "Lesbians and Literature" discussion at the 1976 Modern Language Association convention Bertha Harris suggested that if in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature. As usual, I wanted to see if these ideas might be applied to the Black women writers that I know and quickly realized that many of their works were, in Harris' sense, lesbian. Not because women are "lovers," but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another. The form and language of these works is also nothing like what white patriarchal culture requires or expects.

I was particularly struck by the way in which both of Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, could be explored from this new perspective.<sup>14</sup> In both works the relationships between girls and women are essential, yet at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives.

Sula and Nel find each other in 1922 when each of them is twelve, on the brink of puberty and the discovery of boys. Even as awakening sexuality "clotted their dreams," each girl desires "a someone" obviously female with whom to share her feelings (51). Morrison writes:

...for it was in dreams that the two girls had met. Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened, even before they marched

through the chocolate halls of Garfield Primary School. . .they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone who, quite like the dreamer shared the delight of the dream. When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. But always, watching the dream along with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as she herself in the flow of her imagined hair, the thickness of the mattress of flowers, the voile sleeves that closed below her elbows in gold-threaded cuffs.

Similarly, Sula, also an only child, but wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors, spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of someone who shared both the taste and the speed.

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (51-52)

As this beautiful passage shows, their relationship, from the very beginning, is suffused with an erotic romanticism. The dreams in which they are initially drawn to each other are actually complementary aspects of the same sensuous fairytale. Nel imagines a "fiery prince" who never quite arrives while Sula gallops like a prince "on a gray-and-white horse."<sup>15</sup> The "real world" of patriarchy requires, however, that they channel this energy away from each other to the opposite sex. Lorraine Bethel explains this dynamic in her essay "Conversations With Ourselves: Black Female Relationships in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*." She writes:

I am not suggesting that Sula and Nel are being consciously sexual, or that their relationship has an overt lesbian nature. I am suggesting, however, that there is a certain sensuality in their interactions that is reinforced by the mirror-like nature of their relationship. Sexual exploration and coming of age is a natural part of adolescence. Sula and Nel discover men together, and though their flirtations with males are an important part of their sexual exploration, the sensuality that they experience in each other's company is equally important.<sup>16</sup>

Sula and Nel must also struggle with the constrictions of racism upon their lives. The knowledge that "they were neither white nor male" is the inherent explanation of their need for each other. Morrison depicts in literature the necessary bonding that has always taken place between Black women for the sake of barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves.

Their relationship is severed only when Nel marries Jude, an unexceptional young man who thinks of her as "the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges" (83). Sula's inventive wildness cannot overcome social pressure or the influence of Nel's parents who "had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" 83. Nel falls prey to convention while Sula escapes it. Yet at the wedding which ends the first phase of their relationship, Nel's final action is to look past her husband towards Sula:

. . . a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road. . . . Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that litheness was amused. (85)

When Sula returns ten years later, her rebelliousness full-blown, a major source of the town's suspicions stems from the fact that although she is almost thirty, she is still unmarried. Sula's grandmother, Eva, does not hesitate to bring up the matter as soon as she arrives. She asks:

"When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you. . . . Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man." (92)

Sula replies: " 'I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself ' " (92). Self-definition is a dangerous activity for any woman

to engage in, especially a Black one, and it expectedly earns Sula pariah status in Medallion.

Morrison clearly points out that it is the fact that Sula has not been tamed or broken by the exigencies of heterosexual family life which most galls the others. She writes:

Among the weighty evidence piling up was the fact that Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck. (115)

In other words she is not a domestic serf, a woman run down by obligatory childbearing or a victim of battering. Sula also sleeps with the husbands of the town once and then discards them, needing them even less than her own mother did, for sexual gratification and affection. The town reacts to her disavowal of patriarchal values by becoming fanatically serious about their own family obligations, as if in this way they might counteract Sula's radical criticism of their lives.

Sula's presence in her community functions much like the presence of lesbians everywhere to expose the contradictions of supposedly "normal" life. The opening paragraph of the essay "Woman Identified Woman" has amazing relevance as an explanation of Sula's position and character in the novel. It asks:

What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with her self. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society—the female role.<sup>17</sup>

The limitations of the *Black* female role are even greater in a racist and sexist society as is the amount of courage it takes to chal-

lenge them. It is no wonder that the townspeople see Sula's independence as imminently dangerous.

Morrison is also careful to show the reader that despite their years of separation and their opposing paths, Nel and Sula's relationship retains its primacy for each of them. Nel feels transformed when Sula returns and thinks:

It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. (95)

Laughing together in the familiar "rib-scraping" way, Nel feels "new, soft and new" (98). Morrison uses here the visual imagery which symbolizes the women's closeness throughout the novel.

Sula fractures this closeness, however, by sleeping with Nel's husband, an act of little import according to her system of values. Nel, of course, cannot understand. Sula thinks ruefully:

Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of *that*. Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits. Now Nel was one of *them*. (119-120)

Sula also thinks at the realization of losing Nel about how unsatisfactory her relationships with men have been and admits:

She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. (121)

The nearest that Sula comes to actually loving a man is in a brief affair with Ajax and what she values most about him is the intellectual companionship he provides, the brilliance he "allows" her to show.

Sula's feelings about sex with men are also consistent with a lesbian interpretation of the novel. Morrison writes:

She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the

only place where she could find what she was looking for: *miser* and the ability to feel deep sorrow... During the lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. *And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power.* . . . When her partner disengaged himself, she looked up at him in wonder trying to recall his name. . . . waiting impatiently for him to turn away. . . . *leaving her to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony.* (122-123) [Italics mine.]

Sula uses men for sex which results not in communion with them, but in her further delving into self.

Ultimately the deepest communion and communication in the novel occurs between two women who love each other. After their last painful meeting, which does not bring reconciliation, Sula thinks as Nel leaves her:

"So she will walk on down that road, her back so straight in that old green coat. . . . thinking how much I have cost her and never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price." (147)

It is difficult to imagine a more evocative metaphor for what women can be to each other, the "pricelessness" they achieve in refusing to sell themselves for male approval, the total worth that they can only find in each other's eyes.

Decades later the novel concludes with Nel's final comprehension of the source of the grief that has plagued her from the time her husband walked out. Morrison writes:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

Again Morrison exquisitely conveys what women, Black women, mean to each other. This final passage verifies the depth of Sula and

Nel's relationship and its centrality to an accurate interpretation of the work.

*Sula* is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed. The very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics. The confusion that many readers have felt about *Sula* may well have a lesbian explanation. If one sees Sula's inexplicable "evil" and non-conformity as the evil of not being male-identified, many elements in the novel become clear. The work might be clearer still if Morrison had approached her subject with the consciousness that a lesbian relationship was at least a possibility for her characters. Obviously Morrison did not *intend* the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian. However, this lack of intention only shows the way in which heterosexist assumptions can veil what may logically be expected to occur in a work. What I have tried to do here is not to prove that Morrison wrote something that she did not, but to point out how a Black feminist critical perspective at least allows consideration of this level of the novel's meaning.

In her interview in *Conditions: One* Adrienne Rich talks about unconsummated relationships and the need to re-evaluate the meaning of intense yet supposedly non-erotic connections between women. She asserts:

We need a lot more documentation about what actually happened; I think we can also imagine it, because we know it happened — we know it out of our own lives. <sup>18</sup>

Black women are still in the position of having to "imagine," discover and verify Black lesbian literature because so little has been written from an avowedly lesbian perspective. The near non-existence of Black Lesbian literature which other Black lesbians and I so deeply feel has everything to do with the politics of our lives, the total suppression of identity that all Black women, lesbian or not, must face. This literary silence is again intensified by the unavailability of an autonomous Black feminist movement through which we could fight our oppression and also begin to name ourselves.

In a speech, "The Autonomy of Black Lesbian Women," Wilmette Brown comments upon the connection between our political

reality and the literature we must invent:

Because the isolation of Black lesbian women, given that we are superfreaks, given that our lesbianism defies both the sexual identity that capital gives us and the racial identity that capital gives us, the isolation of Black lesbian women from heterosexual Black women is very profound. Very profound. I have searched throughout Black history, Black literature, whatever, looking for some women that I could see were somehow lesbian. Now I know that in a certain sense they were all lesbian. But that was a very painful search. 19

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining "straightness" is our last resort. Being out, particularly out in print, is the final renunciation of any claim to the crumbs of "tolerance" that non-threatening "ladylike" Black women are sometimes fed. I am convinced that it is our lack of privilege and power in every other sphere that allows so few Black women to make the leap that many white women, particularly writers, have been able to make in this decade, not merely because they are white or have economic leverage, but because they have had the strength and support of a movement behind them.

As Black lesbians we must be out not only in white society, but in the Black community as well, which is at least as homophobic. That the sanctions against Black lesbians are extremely high is well illustrated in this comment by Black male writer Ishmael Reed. Speaking about the inroads that whites make into Black culture, he asserts:

In Manhattan you find people actively trying to impede intellectual debate among Afro-Americans. The powerful "liberal/radical/existentialist" influences of the Manhattan literary and drama establishment speak through tokens, like for example that ancient notion of the *one* black ideologue (who's usually a Communist), the *one* black poetess (who's usually a feminist lesbian). 20

To Reed, "feminist" and "lesbian" are the most pejorative terms he can hurl at a Black woman and totally invalidate anything she might say, regardless of her actual politics or sexual identity. Such accusations are quite effective for keeping Black women writers who are writing with integrity and strength from any conceivable perspective in line, but especially ones who are actually feminist and lesbian.



Unfortunately Reed's reactionary attitude is all too typical. A community which has not confronted sexism, because a widespread Black feminist movement has not required it to, has likewise not been challenged to examine its heterosexism. Even at this moment I am not convinced that one can write explicitly as a Black lesbian and live to tell about it.

Yet there are a handful of Black women who have risked everything for truth. Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Ann Allen Shockley have at least broken ground in the vast wilderness of works that do not exist.<sup>21</sup> Black feminist criticism will again have an essential role not only in creating a climate in which Black lesbian writers can survive, but in undertaking the total reassessment of Black literature and literary history needed to reveal the Black woman-identified-women that Wilmette Brown and so many of us are looking for.

Although I have concentrated here upon what does not exist and what needs to be done, a few Black feminist critics have already begun this work. Gloria T. Hull at the University of Delaware has discovered in her research on Black women poets of the Harlem Renaissance that many of the women who are considered "minor" writers of the period were in constant contact with each other and provided both intellectual stimulation and psychological support for each other's work. At least one of these writers, Angelina Weld Grimké, wrote many unpublished love poems to women. Lorraine Bethel, a recent graduate of Yale College, has done substantial work on Black women writers, particularly in her senior essay, "This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Blues Lyricism and Hurston's Black Female Folk Aesthetic and Cultural Sensibility in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in which she brilliantly defines and uses the principles of Black feminist criticism. Elaine Scott at the State University of New York at Old Westbury is also involved in highly creative and politically resonant research on Hurston and other writers.

The fact that these critics are young and, except for Hull, unpublished merely indicates the impediments we face. Undoubtedly there are other women working and writing whom I do not even know, simply because there is no place to read them. As Michele Wallace states in her article, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood":

We exist as women who are black who are feminists, each strand-

ed for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—[or our thoughts.]

I only hope that this essay is one way of breaking our silence and our isolation, of helping us to know each other.

Just as I did not know where to start I am not sure how to end. I feel that I have tried to say too much and at the same time have left too much unsaid. What I want this essay to do is lead everyone who reads it to examine *everything* that they have ever thought and believed about feminist culture and to ask themselves how their thoughts connect to the reality of Black women's writing and lives. I want to encourage in white women, as a first step, a sane accountability to all the women who write and live on this soil. I want most of all for Black women and Black lesbians somehow not to be so alone. This last will require the most expansive of revolutions as well as many new words to tell us how to make this revolution real. I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience, fiction or non-fiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream.

#### NOTES

1. Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Ms.*, May 1974 and in *Southern Exposure: Generations Women in the South*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (Winter, 1977), pp. 60-64.
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3. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (Yale University Press, New Haven: orig. c. 1958), p. 180.
4. *Ibid.* (*Knock on Any Door* is a novel by Black writer, Willard Motley.)
5. Sara Blackburn, "You Still Can't Go Home Again," in the *New York Times Book Review*, 30 December 1973, p. 3.

6. Elaine Showalter, "Review Essay: Literary Criticism," *Signs*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter, 1975), p. 460.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 445.
8. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Anchor Books, Garden City, New York: 1977, orig. c. 1976).  
Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (Avon Books, New York: 1976).
9. An article by Nancy Hoffman, "White Women, Black Women: Inventing an Adequate Pedagogy," in *Women's Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 5, nos. 1 & 2 (Spring, 1977), pp. 21-24, gives valuable insights into how white women can approach the writing of Black women.
10. Darwin T. Turner, *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville: c. 1971).
11. John Domini, "Roots and Racism: An Interview With Ishmael Reed," in *The Boston Phoenix*, 5 April 1977, p. 20.
12. Ora Williams, "A Bibliography of Works Written by American Black Women," in *College Language Association Journal*, March 1972, p. 355. There is an expanded book-length version of this bibliography: *American Black Women in the Arts and Social Sciences: A Bibliographic Survey* (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N. J.: 1973).
13. John O'Brien, ed., *Interviews With Black Writers* (Liveright, New York: c. 1973), p. 201.
14. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Pocket Books, New York: 1972, 1976, orig. 1970) and *Sula* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1974). All subsequent references to this work will be designated in the text.
15. My sister Beverly Smith pointed out this connection to me.
16. Lorraine Bethel, "Conversations With Ourselves: Black Female Relationships in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*," unpublished paper written at Yale, 1976, 47 pp. (Bethel has worked from a premise similar to mine in a much more developed treatment of the novel.)
17. New York Radicalesbians, "Woman Identified Woman," in *Lesbians Speak Out* (Women's Press Collective, Oakland: c. 1974), p. 87.
18. Elly Bulkin, "An Interview with Adrienne Rich: Part I," in *Conditions: One*, Vol. 1, no. 1, April 1977, p. 62.
19. Wilmette Brown, "The Autonomy of Black Lesbian Women," ms. of speech delivered July 24, 1976, Toronto, Canada, p. 7.

20. Domini, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

21. Audre Lorde, *New York Head Shop and Museum* (Broadside, Detroit: 1974).

—, *Coal* (W.W. Norton, New York: 1976).

—, *Between Our Selves* (Eidolon Editions, Point Reyes, California: 1976).

Pat Parker, *Child of Myself* (Women's Press Collective, Oakland: c 1972 and 1974).

—, *Pit Stop* (Women's Press Collective, Oakland: c 1973).

Ann Allen Shockley, *Loving Her* (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis: 1974).

There is at least one Black lesbian writers collective, Jemima, in New York. They do public readings and have available a collection of their poems. They can be contacted c/o Boyce; 1970 University Ave., Bronx, N. Y. 10453.

22. Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," in *The Village Voice*, 28 July 1975, p. 7.

DIALECTICS

*Outside and inside are just an illusion.*  
Assata Shakur, "What Is Left?"

1.

scarlike, the continent  
puckers, drawn together  
by dreams, by what  
i remember: the bulk  
of land traversed  
to get here, not  
in airplanes, unreal,  
but actually, on roads

an even winter wearies  
and ice breaks up  
on the river  
piss-yellow sun  
soaks through the haze  
above Flatbush  
cells poise to divide  
the first forced crocuses  
choke the florist's shop

too long i have been  
floating, dreaming  
mountains, the future  
safe like money  
in the bank, a lack  
of limits, fistful  
of lottery tickets,  
dreaming (what's wrong  
with this picture?)  
i am the exception

*you can be anything*  
is what they taught me  
down the road apiece  
i caught them in their lie  
i have known the odd half-life  
of the emigree  
wintering on the fat  
of the old regime  
scraping the privilege, bitter,  
from my plate

i'm what  
i have  
to hate  
white skin  
and history

2. (Assata on trial in New Jersey)

contradictions, ice cream  
at the demo, a beautiful  
day in New Brunswick,  
picket fences, black cops,  
neat red brick jail, that  
all-white jury

we shout around the courthouse  
free to leave  
to take the bus  
be someone else in the city

and never yet for us  
the patient faces  
that watch the prosecutor  
know they can do this

and never the handcuffs  
and never the sun denied  
and never the muscles destroyed  
and never the love postponed  
and never the life abridged  
and never the isolation  
articulated in concrete  
and never the testing  
never the testing of limits  
and never New Jersey's  
obliterating eyes

and never anything irrevocable

and never the headlines:  
**CHESIMARD GUILTY OF MURDER**

### 3. (the road)

spring comes late to these  
upthrust slabs  
of granite  
evergreens sheltering  
rotten snow

maples bud red  
in the hollows  
it is raining  
onto rock, onto elms  
knee-deep  
in watery fields,  
onto bright bulldozed  
embankments, barns  
falling in

to see clearly, is that  
the greatest gift?

this austere country  
floods me with its  
narrow band of colors:  
dark-layered earth  
dark sky

brimming  
i drive  
north

4.

in childbirth  
you focus on technique

how difficult  
to stay awake  
keep moving

like climbing Everest  
without equipment  
snowblind  
hand over hand  
up the ice face

how difficult  
to live inside my story



5. (reading Plath's *Letter's Home*;  
rereading *Ariel*)

i skim like a thriller  
these last communiques.  
the hyperactive poet  
proclaims she's coping.  
*I'm happier than ever.*  
manic. dead-ended.  
and yet the release it is,  
the icy comfort  
after the cloying tone  
of Ted and babies.  
*I am a genius poet.*  
she knew her power,  
knew images pouring,  
the epileptic's aura.  
hoped, for a moment,  
that gift could be turned  
to profit. but signed  
her suicide, her QED.

nothing  
is preparation  
for these poems,  
the mathematics,  
cold unanswerable facts,  
pain buffed  
to the luster  
of science,  
impersonal art.  
i will not deny  
her February death.  
i tell you this,  
who have no use  
for quitters:

the blood  
jet is  
self-  
hatred

6. (upstate poetry tour)

i ask what lake this is.  
they tell me Erie.  
there are widows' walks here,  
nowhere near the sea.  
there's pinball  
to be played  
in the Greyhound station  
in Rochester, ugly  
under April rain.

i want to talk  
about these pitted  
faces. the station  
is the same  
as any other:  
mixture of sweat,  
impatience, lack  
of sleep. someone  
with choices  
would not choose  
to sit here.

the word "workingclass"  
doesn't say it  
doesn't describe

on the bus, a woman  
holding her year-old baby  
six or eight hours,  
rocked and cursed to sleep;

how the houses  
left unpainted  
go downhill faster;

or the snatched, furtive  
pleasures, leeching  
away of a life.

7.

snow in a strange city  
hungry in the morning  
in a cluttered room  
that makes me think of Portland  
i pick the book from the shelf  
and read before breakfast  
of the Cuban woman  
who told the prison guards  
*If he has not talked under torture*  
*much less will I*  
when they brought her  
the bloody eye  
of her blinded brother.  
of several women  
who had been prostitutes.  
of one who died  
disarming a faulty bomb.  
of Che not come back  
from the hills. of anonymous  
others.

it says here  
certain scars  
can never heal.

8.

i am a lesbian, forfeit  
the universal. i cannot  
tour Cuba in comfort  
nor read my poetry  
to rooms with kind men in them  
smiling kindly  
to halls with well-  
heeled poetry  
lovers in them  
clamoring for the truth.

9.

listen, my ancestors  
rooted up stumps  
from their thin-soiled farms  
in northern Minnesota,  
ate roots  
before the first greens  
could be gathered.  
they knew  
an immediacy of fields,  
the next row of corn  
to be planted.

10.

to choose a side  
is only the half of it  
and nothing is simple  
and nothing is finished, ever  
the truth is dense and shaded,  
a living forest  
there are no guarantees

to choose reality  
is to wake in chains  
on stony ground  
in the ice-edged desert dawn

all things sharp-outlined  
peculiarly themselves

it is to begin

AN INTERVIEW WITH ADRIENNE RICH

*Adrienne Rich has written eight books of poems and a prose book, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976). She was born in 1929 and has three sons, all born in the 1950's.*

*The following is Part Two of an edited transcript of interviews taped on October 19 and 27, 1976. Part One appeared in the first issue of Conditions.*

EB: You keep getting back to the silence about loving women—especially the literary silence. I share your sense of looking to literature “to find out what was possible, what could be, how it was possible to feel....”

AR: I can remember being in bed with the flu a few years ago, several years after I had begun to recognize there was no way that my emotional energy, my intellectual energy, my primary caring was ever going to focus upon a man again. It was so clear to me that there was nothing for me there that was in any sense commensurable with what I was getting from women, what I felt I could give to women. I was lying in bed reading Judy Grahn's “A Woman Is Talking to Death” in *Amazon Quarterly*, and feeling this utter exhaustion and ascribing it to the flu. It was like the exhaustion of a sudden infusion of a reality that you've known was always there; it was just recognizing what was, a process that had been going on for years, suffering all kinds of abrogation and abortion but that still kept on. What happened was this total fatigue. And then of course there was great exhilaration.

It was the power of the poem, it was the meshing of the poem with where I was at that point, it was as though I had been waiting for that, as though I'd been waiting for something, certain words in a certain order. I guess I'm saying how powerful language has been for me—in some way it had to be confirmed through language. There

were plenty of women with whom it could have happened and nearly did, but it had to happen first in that way. I don't think that's saying I'm such a goddamned intellectual, but language *is* one of the places where I've always lived and, in that sense, I could say that a poem changed my life. My life would have changed anyway, but language was the catalyst.

**EB:** Has that happened with other books?

**AR:** When I was very young, with certain kinds of women's literature—with *Jane Eyre*, for example. I just went back to it, and I went back to it for certain passages, not to where she finally married Rochester. Poems of Emily Dickinson, certainly.

*The Second Sex* did that for me, especially certain passages in it. But it was like having it under a glass bell, there was absolutely nothing in the atmosphere in 1958 that could make me know that it wasn't just that I and this unknown French woman were thinking these things. It was tremendously exhilarating that someone else had not just had such thoughts, but actually had the daring to put them on paper, and in such a way that was utterly self-affirming, self-confident, nonapologetic. It changed my life in certain ways, but the changes were much more underground. It gave me a certain kind of courage to put on paper things that I wouldn't have. It's hard to envision now what it meant to read that book in the mid-1950's; so much of the book seems almost old-fashioned today. I think some of it is still incredibly radical, but it's very hard to imagine now what it was to read that when there was no other current book on feminism around—this was pre-Betty Friedan. But poems of Dickinson, part of George Eliot, Wollstonecraft, had that kind of galvanizing force.

One thing I've been trying to come to terms with, reading H.D.'s long poems over the past six months, was that I was totally deprived of them when I was learning to write poetry. I was deprived of Dickinson too, except in modified versions and selected editions; Dickinson's work wasn't available in a complete unbowdlerized edition until the Fifties. Again, silence. I think about going through an apprenticeship as a young woman poet in the university and what was available. How one worked one's way through *The Pisan Cantos* or *The Waste Land* as the great poems of the early twentieth century, and knew H.D., if at all, as the author of a few gemlike Imagist lyrics.

But in her long, late poems, like "The Flowering of the Rod" and "Hermetic Definition," she was reaching out beyond the disintegration Pound and Eliot were recording, beyond the destruction of World War II, to say, "We did not create this, we women/poets, and the future belongs to us who will leave the ruins and seek something else." The poems are feminist poems, lesbian poems. She is seeking in the past for myths of the female, creating female heroes, a female divine presence, and claiming her vision as a woman poet. None of this was known to me then. I know why Louise Bogan's "Sleeping Fury" and "Medusa" were the only poems of hers that mattered to me. But I couldn't have explained that to anyone in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the Fifties.

**EB:** What do you see as having happened to your poetry since then—not just in terms of content, your changing consciousness—as a result of reading a lot of women's poetry? I think of your early poems which are in couplets or blank verse or other traditional forms; then I think of Grahn's "A Woman Is Talking to Death," which is fantastic poetry that seems to me to go to tremendous lengths to seem as "unpoetic" and slapdash as possible, until you read it over and over and realize that all those pieces fit together. I wonder what kind of effect you see women's poetry—especially in the last couple of years—having on your own writing?

**AR:** A lot of sense of the proliferation of images. It's not just a question of being able to use body images and menstrual images and abortion images and sexual images, but that there is a kind of imaginative freedom going on in the best women's poetry that makes everything else seem very tight, ingrown. It's reaching out into the universe, into history, science, the depths of the body, the most mundane, trivial details of life and focusing on those things as if under a burning glass. I feel constantly renewed by the possibilities—of imagery, for one thing.

I'm very much interested in the kind of rhythms that are coming into women's poetry, both the fact that there are these long-line poems, very open, very loose, yet very dynamically charged, and also the kind of thing that Susan Griffin does, where the poem interrupts itself, where there are two voices against each other in the poem or maybe three or the poet's own voice against her voice, which echoes the kind of splitting and fragmentation women have lived in, the sense of being almost a battleground for different

parts of the self. This is something I haven't seen before in poetry. The dialogue poem is a very old form, but the dialogue in which two voices are one voice which is constantly interrupting itself....

The kind of thing that Joan Larkin, for example, does, which is to take what has always been described as safe terrain—the privacy of the home, the taken-for-granted area—and disclose its nightmares and its quality of menace. It's really what I think poetry has always had to be about, taking the world as it was given to us and seeing it absolutely afresh. These are places that have not been seen before. I see women's poetry as expanding the world, the known world.

**EB:** When you talk about "places that haven't been seen," I think about your book of love poems. Lesbian love poetry seems to me also something new that has to be created, because there is no established tradition out of which it can be written.

**AR:** Even the language of sexuality is so hard to come by. I was reading Julia Stanley's essay in *Sinister Wisdom*, in which she discusses Elinor Langer's attack on Kate Millett in *Ms*. She's trying to talk about what kind of feminist criticism is possible and what kind of standards Langer is applying to *Flying*. She talks about the fact that Langer refers to Millett's description of love scenes as "pornography" and then she quotes a passage of Henry Miller against a passage of Millett and says, "Which is the pornography?" and "What does pornography consist in?" I think her point is very well taken.

But even in the passage by Millett, which is really very beautiful, she uses the term "I take her, she takes me," meaning, I think, "bring her to orgasm," or "she brings me to orgasm." I was stopped by that and I was thinking, what does this mean—"to take"? Again that language of possession, that language of incorporating the other, and that's not what lovemaking between women is about. It *is* the old language. It's this endless search for a way of saying, a way of describing what we are experiencing, what we are feeling, what we are actually doing with each other. I don't mean just in bed, but that does seem to be a crucial thing to be able to describe. Do you know what I mean?

**EB:** Yes, the fact that there's no language to pull out, in some way.

**AR:** But, you know, I think of that as an immense challenge. It



sends you back to your experience. You have to ask yourself what is really happening here, which is absolutely essential for a writer anyway, to get any truth into her language. I know a lot of women who have been questioning the term "lesbian," the term "lover," saying that such words either mean too many different things to different people or they don't name what I experience. That whole question of what do you do with just nouns themselves? But I see that as an enormous advantage for poetry, for any kind of writing, having to name for the first time—it isn't even renaming, but it's hellishly difficult.

**EB:** I know. I think that both Joan Larkin and I were very aware, after we had edited *Amazon Poetry*, that love poetry was in rather short supply in the anthology, even though we must have received submissions of fifteen to twenty love poems for every poem we received on some other subject. It seemed to me as if one of the biggest difficulties was getting away from essentially male-identified language and concepts, and, at the same time, going beyond a simply literal description of making love.

**AR:** Well, that's, of course, what I feel is so amazing in Susan Griffin's "The Woman Who Swims in Her Tears," which opens *Amazon Poetry*. That poem has just never been written before; it condenses in one poem so much of a very long process that two women may go through in order to come together at all.

**EB:** And makes the sexual element just one part of the whole relationship. It seems very integrated to me.

**AR:** The complex spectrum of things that go on between and among women has to be understood as also erotic. One thing I was trying to do in *Twenty-One Love Poems* was constantly to relate the lovers to a larger world. You're never just in bed together in a private space; you can't be, there is a hostile and envious world out there, acutely threatened by women's love for each other. Women who are lovers have to recognize that—in the sense that I was trying to express in "From An Old House In America": "I cannot now lie down/...with a lover who imagines/we are not in danger." And that danger and threat is also internalized within ourselves. So many of these things enter in when two women are together: joy like none other, vulnerability like none other, the breaking of the core prohibition at the heart of patriarchy.

Two friends of mine, both artists, wrote me about reading the *Twenty-One Love Poems* with their male lovers, assuring me how "universal" the poems were. I found myself angered, and when I asked myself why, I realized that it was anger at having my work essentially assimilated and stripped of its meaning, "integrated" into heterosexual romance. That kind of "acceptance" of the book seems to me a refusal of its deepest implications. The longing to simplify, to defuse feminism by invoking "androgyny" or "humanism," to assimilate lesbian existence by saying that "relationship" is really all the same, love is always difficult—I see that as a denial, a kind of resistance, a refusal to read and hear what I've actually written, to acknowledge what I am.

*Twenty-One Love Poems* is not a contemporary *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In a very real sense, Barrett-Browning was defying Victorian patriarchy by refusing to let her father control her; she was also refusing the Victorian model of the neurasthenic woman on her couch, when she stood up and walked out and married Robert Browning. Her poems are as much a celebration of choosing life over death as of her feelings for Robert. But suppose she had eloped with a woman, and written a sequence of poems about it? Do you think they would have become enshrined—that hypothetical couple—as the great Victorian romance? Would gilt-edged editions of her poems have been on every parlor table for young women to read? Would those poems have become her anthology pieces? They would have become buried in silence. It's interesting that Barrett-Browning's truly feminist work, *Aurora Leigh*, is still virtually unread.

To be "universal" seems to me a dubious distinction as long as we are still in such ignorance of what it means to be woman, to be lesbian. I believe that lesbian/feminist art is starting to create a new center from which to voice compassion, human caring, the protection of life. But that center, that space, will not be reached by any short-cut through the dread inspired by women's primary intensity directed toward women. We're not trying to become part of the old order misnamed "universal" which has tabooed us; we are transforming the meaning of "universality."

E.B.: The awareness of that taboo and the decision to act anyhow, to transform your language and your life, seem to me to create much

of the impact of *Twenty-One Love Poems*; there's such tremendous strength in the line, "I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle." I was also struck by how right it seemed that the poems be published as a sequence.

**AR:** I wrote three or four of them and knew that I was going to go on for a long time in this mode. I suppose in some ways it's a reversion to form; you could say the lines are roughly iambic, they are not fourteen lines but they could be said to be sort of roughly sonnet form, or they could be kind of quasi-sonnets. I don't think of them as that. And I don't quite know how it happened that way; it just did. It seemed a very flexible mode, having that much space—I think most of them are roughly thirteen to sixteen lines—and each section able to deal individually with a certain facet of relationship or whatever is going on in the outer world at that moment, and having a rhythm that kind of bound them together and a certain amount of reference back and forth. I don't think of them as separate poems at all; I think of them very much as one long poem, although they were written over quite a long period of time, I guess they were written in about a year and a half. A couple of them were shifted around, but they're basically chronological as printed.

**EB:** What went into your decision to let a women's press do them first?

**AR:** A lot of things. I certainly wasn't going to publish with a small press that was male-controlled. I had seen Bonnie Carpenter's work because she had published Susan Griffin's *Letter* and a book of Barbara Gravelle's. I knew that she did very beautiful printing and I was also concerned with having the book available to women at a price they could afford. Effie's Press seemed like a very natural place to publish it. I wanted it in women's hands.

**EB:** What are your feelings about having it eventually published by a commercial press?

**AR:** I don't know what I'll do at this point. If it appears, it'll be in a collection. I'm very much in a state of transition in my thinking. I feel strongly, on the one hand, that any woman, any lesbian should have all possible options, that there should be no attempt to tell anybody where she should publish or with whom she should publish.

I think there just has to be an individual decision; most lesbians have never had options about where they could publish. At the same time, I've been thinking a great deal about the politics of publishing. I have to trust this process that I'm in. I know that publishing with Bonnie felt better than any publishing experience I've had.

I have had a rather unique experience with commercial presses because I started publishing so long ago—1951—with the Yale University Press. I had some bad experiences with Harper & Row, then Denise Levertov urged Norton to publish my work—she was their poetry advisor and I was fairly unknown at that point. Norton kept my books in print and put them out in paperback and they were very loyal to me for a long time before my books were really selling.

It's a small independent house and I've had good relationships with them in general. It happens to be incredibly sexist—about as patriarchal as you can get. The fact that they publish me obviously has nothing to do with how they treat women in the house, or the possibility of more women becoming editors or what other kinds of books they publish—how many women appear in the Norton anthologies?

I feel strongly that the women's presses and the women's media are a lifeline that have to be supported. They are making possible the art and ideas of the future. But making the move to a woman's press is something I have yet to do. For a variety of reasons—one being that I want my books to be distributed, to be available as widely as possible. There are many women for whom publishing with a commercial press is an economic issue purely and simply. And making that kind of choice under pressure or out of guilt feelings creates a very false decision. But it is something I am thinking a great deal about.

**EB:** When do you see another book of poems happening?

**AR:** I guess that I have three quarters of a book now. I won't see something happening until I get back to writing poetry. I only now feel it coming on very strong. I haven't written poetry since before summer.

**EB:** That's a long time.

**AR:** It is for me. This prose book has been taking up an enormous area of my life. I've written a couple of new prose pieces also, but I want to be writing poetry very much now. I have a lot to assimilate at this point. Those love poems in a sense delineate the end and the beginning of a certain part of my life and it's as if I haven't assimilated what's happened since. That's the only way that it comes, a certain kind of material reaches a point where it's ready. I wrote a long poem to my sister in the spring which is coming out in *Chrysalis*. I feel as if that's part of the beginning of something new, but I don't yet know what.

**EB:** We've been talking a lot about publishing creative writing, but very little about criticism.

**AR:** What form is feminist criticism taking? I was at a meeting recently at San Francisco State, which has been going through a political struggle to have women writers acknowledged in the M.F.A. program. This particular discussion was about feminist criticism and one of the things we were talking about was that kind of male criticism that is directed over the head of the author to the reader of the review and attempts to establish some kind of dominance over the author—the critic comes on as more learned, more capable, more valid than the author. So the critic is never vulnerable and the author is never addressed directly, but is always talked through or talked over.

One thing that feminist criticism possibly could do—and in some ways is doing—is talk about the work in a way that would be useful to the writer who is going to go on writing, and talk about strengths and weaknesses and deal with them in a way that is creative and fostering rather than annihilating. There has to be some way of saying, “this seems to work and this doesn't—why?” More than that, we need a kind of pointing toward what isn't being dealt with, what is creating silences and evasions, what is creating problems with language—trying to help the writer to deal with the problems, issues, crises that she has to deal with to grow as an artist and to grow as a woman. This obviously is going to take a lot more thinking and concern for the ongoing work than writing that just smashes the book or says, “this is great!”

The whole question of judgment is closely tied to the question of power: women have been so restricted by male judgment and the

male critical establishment and women have suffered so much from male power that the idea of any kind of judgment or any kind of criticism is tainted; just as for many women the idea of any woman having any kind of power is horrifying and detestable. I think that that all has to be rethought too.

I think we have to set very high standards for ourselves and each other. The most supportive thing we can do is elicit from each other better and better thinking. The kind of friendship and support that consists of saying that anything you do is valuable because you're my friend or because you're a woman or a lesbian is really failing to elicit the strength that is actually there in a lot of women. We don't explore our capacity until we're challenged.

**EB:** I think we also need to get women to stop writing comparatively—the business of reviewing a half dozen books in one article and saying that one poet does something better than another does it, while the second writer might not have been trying to do that at all. I think critics need to come to terms with the politics of setting up a ranking, so that at the end of a review of three books they don't have to say, "*this* is the best book."

**AR:** The problem with women's art is not that there are too many writers. There aren't enough women artists. How can we create an environment, create a situation and atmosphere, in which more women push themselves to work which is—in and of itself and for what *they* want to do—better than they thought they could do, raising the artist's or thinker's standards for herself, not in a competitive way, but because she and she uniquely is equipped to do certain things. Competitiveness is very strong and there is always that model of the pyramid—but it shouldn't have to be that way.

**EB:** It seems to me to be an essentially male model, a patriarchal model. I think that a basic critical issue for me involves what to take from a traditional, basically academic, male-identified approach to literature that is consistent with feminist criticism—tools, I think, rather than values and assumptions. Yet this is only one aspect of the larger problem of functioning within a male-dominated society.

**AR:** One of the things that I find myself thinking about increasingly and that I feel I want to confront almost as a moral issue, but as a

poetic issue and as a political issue is man-hating—this sounds retrogressive but I think it's not. What does it mean "to hate men." I think that that probably is one of the most terrifying labels, even worse than "lesbian." If you can prove that you're a lesbian who likes men, it's okay. But how do you deal with the essential sense that you have no particular *need* for men, I don't mean just sexually, but that men are not at this point in history going to fill any of our needs.

For myself it's a complex personal issue because I have three sons whom I love, and they are distinct people to me, and it's not a question of whether they fill my needs or not—our bonds are so old and so deep that they are just there for me. There's nothing that I can do about that even if I wanted to—and I don't.

But I think that there is a profound moral issue here and a profound psychic issue. On the one hand we hear it said that men are really an aberrant strain (a lot of women really feel that way) and at the other end of the spectrum is, "Men are just as oppressed as we are, poor things." Both positions seem to me just a complete and utter failure to confront a moral issue.

It takes in so many things. If we try to create completely separate institutions, women's institutions—I don't mean simply lesbian institutions, but women's institutions—how are we to deal with the existence of enormous numbers of women who are in no position to avail themselves of those institutions—and I don't mean just here in America, but around the world—who are still in the grip of male-dominated institutions. How do we relate ourselves to those women? How do we reach toward them? How do we have any sense of what their lives are going to be? It seems to me a very privileged situation in some ways; it's also a very difficult, challenging situation to try to create new space. It's paradoxical; in one sense it's divesting yourself of privilege, in another sense it's being privileged enough to have the strength to divest yourself of privilege, economically and in many, many other ways.

I've come up against the most simplistic kind of lesbian separatism, which has also amounted to a kind of downward mobility: "I will have nothing to do with any job or any institution that has any man connected with it in any possible way." Except that such

women very often end up in the lowest-paying, worst jobs, which happen to be male-controlled in some way or other. It seems to me a dead end; divesting oneself of a lot of energy sources, including energy sources that come from other women who aren't in that place. Have you been thinking about this at all?

**EB:** The lesbian-separatist issue?

**AR:** Well, not just the lesbian separatist issue, but what does it mean to live in a world in which men still exist, or in which men exist? How do you deal with issues of power, their power, how do you deal with them—on the most individual level—a man who happens to exist for you as a person and may not be in any way contributing vastly to your life, but there's some level at which, as a human being, he cannot be written off? It involves tremendous anger. I feel in many ways that anger is deeper in women who still think they need something from men or that they can get something from men.

**EB:** I think that's true.

**AR:** But I still feel that in all of us it has to be dealt with. I don't mean just the anger but—

**EB:** The fact that they're there.

**AR:** The fact that they're there. Whatever connection there is. And I don't mean that this is the primary issue of survival, but I think it's an intensely interesting issue once women get beyond hoping that men will somehow change miraculously and "understand," because I don't believe that for a minute. I gave up on that long before I came out.

**EB:** Are you thinking about dealing with it in poetry?

**AR:** I don't know whether in poetry or not. I'd like to deal with the term "man-hater": what does it mean to hate, and what does it mean simply not to love, and what does indifference mean, and what are women afraid of? I think this has to do also with women who fear the lesbian in themselves, fear their own feelings for women. Those feelings are so powerful and so compelling and feel so right that they



can pull a woman away from men. And they know that, and that's partly what they're fighting; I'm convinced of that. They know that if they were really to acknowledge the intensity and the overall rightness and compellingness of those feelings that they would pull away from men. So what are the consequences that they fear? Obviously they are consequences implicit in the taboo, implicit in the law, implicit in labelling, in sanctions against deviants. But there's something else, I feel, that goes on.

**EB:** What do you think it is?

**AR:** I don't know. This is what interests me. Perhaps a fear of being hated even more than women are ordinarily hated. One thing that's abundantly clear is that the notion of the "man-hating" woman is a projection of men's hatred of women. It's men's hatred of women that literature is full of and that institutions are full of. It's not the reverse.

**EB:** When a woman says, "I can do without men," people say, "You must hate men."

**AR:** Yes. "I don't need you" must mean "I'm going to kill you." I really think the whole thing has to be turned around. If misogyny—woman-hating—ever became in people's consciousness as negative a term as racism...but it isn't. Men can take misogynist positions all the time very openly and very brazenly and it's considered kind of an alternate world-view or a civil liberties issue, as with pornography. And yet it is killing us.

Following is a list of some of the material referred to in this interview.

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AMAZONS

they came astride grey horses dappled with sun  
and their hair flew behind them  
pointing back to the village  
where the babies grew. they sang and i was alive  
to hear them. i was hungry.  
my hair hung heavy on my back.  
if i spoke at all, i whispered  
or else dug letters in the deep earth. their song  
touched me on my face, breasts,  
slid down my spine. i had never heard such  
music. the village, i knew, would be  
uncluttered. they would feed me.  
when i found the way.

ANATOMY LESSON

Up to my neck in water green and oval as a soap,  
the lights like footlights shining up from the surface,  
my legs cooked down to bones deep in the glutinous soup,  
I watched the big animal move in front of the glass.

I saw her sex hanging like a catch of meat,  
her breasts like fruit with long angry stems,  
her Frankenstein appendix. I knew the dangers there -  
being pierced, being eaten, being swallowed, being buried alive.

But her mate was off-stage, even before he left  
for good, for better, for worse, really for the best, for  
the children...

He was never naked. He was so dangerous  
we were never allowed to see the gun he carried,  
the knife, the clippers, the garden shears, whatever  
he had beneath his shorts, robe, towel,  
those suits heavy as strips of sod, whatever  
it was there -

the wound  
where something had been pierced, eaten,  
swallowed, buried alive, Father,  
long before any of us had met.

## AIRPORT HOTEL

The mother leans against the hotel window,  
eleventh floor, watching the jets  
float like sharks along runways of blue lights.

The sky is black as charred wood,  
the moon stuck in it like an axe. The mother  
hangs over the airport, moaning in disbelief.

She tries not to think, watches TV:  
men leap out of trains, their backs on fire.  
She turns to make sure the children are asleep

and sees their eyes shut, their mouths  
open, their arms flung out just like  
the bodies on the screen. She is taking them up  
where she cannot save them.

She leans against the sealed window,  
planes the size of silverware  
beneath her hand. She stands over them now  
like a cook at the cutlery, a murderer  
selecting a weapon.

## MOTHER IN CALIFORNIA

Under the redwood beams of her ceilings,  
Mother moves quietly on deep rugs.  
The maid has polished the silver and the glossy  
mahogany wainscoting.

Soft as a cat Mother climbs the padded stairs,  
turns at the landing. The light pours down the hill  
steep with eucalyptus. The grandfather clock  
makes its decorous claims.

Every object is exact and silent,  
everything has been seen to. Each item  
stands in its place. There is no dust. The porcelain  
tea-cup collection lines up behind glass  
its tiny waists and fine elbows.

Mother lies down, Mother rises,  
goes to her little writing table,  
her grey-blue watered-silk slippers lying  
side by side. You cannot hear a thing.  
In perfect order Mother leads her  
life here on the side of the hill  
in the heavy house built across  
the San Andreas fault.

## YOUNG MOTHERS V

In the room with the baby, the young mother  
busies herself. It smells good.  
The hands curl like nests. When she nurses  
it feels like being drunk, the swallows  
pulling at her breast, delicious, but when she leaves

the small room, closes the door,  
she is sure the baby's not breathing. She hears  
somebody picking her lock. She sees  
the image of a baby slipping out the window.  
She drops the knife on her foot, seeing the  
baby's dimple in the meat.

Dreading the cry, longing for the cry,  
the young mother leads what is called  
her own life  
while the baby sleeps.

Crossing the sill again, she inhales that  
peace like ether. Leaving again she  
enters the dream of murder, mutilation, her  
old self bleeding in pieces on the butcher paper.

There is no language  
between these worlds.  
On the sill all is dark, the transformation  
rushes through her like a train in a tunnel.

Take it in slow motion, you see the young mother  
swimming over the threshold through silted air,  
the soot falling like black rice, she is  
struggling down the corridor, her own mother  
hanging onto her ankles and bearing down.

WOMEN WITHOUT CHILDREN/

WOMEN WITHOUT FAMILIES/

WOMEN ALONE

*This article has grown out of my need to express some of my feelings and conflicts about being a woman who has chosen to remain childless, as well as to break the silence surrounding the general issue of women without children.*

*That the silence has persisted despite the presence of the women's movement is both appalling and enigmatic, since the decision not to have a child shapes both a woman's view of herself and society's view of her. I have read a great deal about woman as mother, but virtually nothing about woman as non-mother, as if her choice should be taken for granted and her life were not an issue. And though I have heard strong support for the right of women to have choices and options, I have not seen any exploration of how the decision to remain childless is to be made, how one is to come to terms with it, how one is to learn to live with its consequences. If what follows seems at moments somewhat bleak, it is because I feel very strongly that in celebrating a woman's liberation from compulsory motherhood, we have neither recognized nor dealt with the pain that often accompanies such a decision.*

*My intent is to be neither objective nor exhaustive. I am aware that this issue evokes many other feelings than those expressed on the following pages, the feelings of women whose lives differ drastically from mine. I hope that they too will break the silence.*

**1: The Fantasy**

At the center of my bleakest fantasy is the shopping-bag lady. I see her sitting on the subway, trudging along the highway, or



crouched in a doorway at dusk. Invariably she clutches her paper shopping bags close to her. From a distance, her face looks blank, her skin grey. She is oblivious to the things around her, unresponsive to sounds and movements. She is particularly indifferent to people. Periodically she makes a quick motion, like an animal automatically brushing itself free from an irritation, a tic. Her gesture is loose, flabby, hardly aimed. It is perhaps the tremor of a muscle.

I keep my distance from her, though at times in my imagination I venture closer, detecting a faint stale odor, an odor distinctly communicating stagnation. In reality, however, I have moved only close enough to discern the discolored skin, the broken blood vessels on her legs, stained purple bruises, barely healed wounds. I have eyed her socks and stockings, her shoes, her faded dress, the safety pins which hold her coat together. I have studied the surface content of her bags, seen the bits of material (clothing perhaps), newspapers. I always want to know more, to know if the entire bag is filled with rags and papers, or if deep inside wrapped neatly and carefully in a clean cloth lies an object from the past, a memento from a life like mine. But my desire to know has never overcome my real terror of her. So I have never ventured closer.

I have a distinct fear of contagion. But it is not necessarily of disease—though there is that too, the physical fear of being touched by such a creature. My greater fear is that she carries another kind of disease. On a subway, I watch as this creature sits, harmless, self-contained, oblivious to the other people in the car, while an invisible circle seems to form around her. No one will come near her, no one will sit close to her, no one will risk being touched by her. If she has succeeded in excluding us from her world, we must remember that our response to her reflects our equal determination to keep her out of ours. It is almost as if I, as if everyone else in the subway car, were determined to classify her as a species apart, to establish firmly that there is no connection between her and us. By keeping my distance, I affirm she is not of my world, reassure myself that I could never be like her, that there is nothing she and I have in common, in short, that her disease is not communicable.

It is, I think, the most comfortable way of looking at her, for it deems her irrelevant to my life. Of course, if I were totally convinced, I would lose my fear of contagion. But this is not the

case. More and more, I sense my connection to her, allow myself to absorb the fact that her world and mine overlap; more and more I dismiss as romantic the notion that some great, swift calamity, some sudden shock must have overtaken her and reduced her to her present condition. It is far more probable that her separateness, her isolation, resulted not from fire, nor from sudden death, nor from unexpected loss, but rather from a slow erosion, an imperceptible loosening of common connections and relations—a process to which I too am subject. Her “disease” is one to which I am and will remain vulnerable. She is not an anomaly, nor is her isolation from the rest of us a freak accident. She came from the same world I did, underwent the same life processes: she was born, grew up, lives.

So I remain in a state of terror and keep myself separate from her. I fear that I will not build up the proper immunity to resist the erosion; I am afraid I too will end up alone, disconnected, relating to no one, having no one to care for, being in turn forgotten, unwanted and insignificant, my life a waste. In the grip of this terror, I can only anticipate a lonely, painful old age, an uncomforted death.

It is difficult to own up to this fantasy. I do so both because it is true that I have it, but also because I know I am not unique in having it. I have heard many other women express it, perhaps not always in terms of shopping-bag ladies, but in terms of old age, insecurity. And it is not surprising because among my friends, many in their late thirties and early forties, these issues are becoming increasingly important. It is not surprising because we are living in a period of depression when everyone is worried about money and jobs, about the possibility of surviving in some decent way. For me, the shopping-bag lady epitomizes these fears, and though I often tell myself that she is an exaggerated example, equally often I think that she is not.

## 2: The Myths

For a long time I believed (and on some non-rational level still believe) that I could acquire “immunity” to the shopping-bag lady’s disease by having a child. When depressed about the fragility and transiency of friendships, or the inconstancies of lovers, it was the

myth of a child, a blood relation and what it could bring me, which seemed to me the only real guarantee against loneliness and isolation, the only way of maintaining a connection to the rest of society. And certainly one of the difficulties for me, a woman who now knows that she will never bear children, is to let go of that myth without sinking into total despair.

That the myth is powerful is not surprising, since it is nurtured by everything around us, fostered by the media, by popular literature, by parents, by the questionnaires we fill out for jobs: *Are you married?* No. *Do you have children?* No. *Do you live alone?* Yes. *How many members in your household?* One. It is a myth perpetually reinforced by the assumption that only family and children provide us with a purpose and place, bestow upon us honor, respect, love, and comfort. We are taught very early that blood relations, and only blood relations, can be a perpetual, unfluctuating source of affection, can be the foolproof guarantee that we will not be forgotten. This myth, and many others surrounding the traditional family, often make it both frightening and painful for women to think of themselves as remaining childless.

In reality, of course, I know that many shopping-bag ladies are mothers, have families, have children. What is obvious to any mature, rational woman is that children are not a medicine or a vaccine which stamps out loneliness or isolation, but rather that they are people, subject to the same weaknesses as friends and lovers. I have talked to many women whose ties to their families seem to be irrevocably broken. It is common to hear stories of the prodigal daughter going cross-country, returning home after fourteen, fifteen years to parents who are strangers. Expecting a traumatic, painful reunion, the woman returns numbed by her lack of connection, by her indifference to strangers. They are people with no special relation. They follow the accepted and expected rules, in a dire crisis write dutiful checks, and, upon their death, bequeath china to their unmarried daughters. But the emotional pull is not there from either side. There is no exchange of love, of comfort. Blood might indeed be thicker than water, but it too is capable of evaporating and drying up.

Yet despite this, despite having read Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle*, despite having been taught by

experience that children often come to love their ideals more than their parents (and vice versa), that children may take different roads rejecting all ties to the past, despite all this, the myth retains its power and dominates my fantasy life. And there are important reasons why it does.

First, what I have just described is what I would like to believe is an extreme, an exception. There are, after all, many warm, loving relationships between parent and child. In these relationships, one can recognize genuine affection and ties among members of the family, even if often the very same relationships are fraught with tensions and painful encounters.

Once when talking with a woman about our feelings about being childless, she began to tell me about her relationship with her mother, a relationship which for years had been filled with anger and pain. But I could sense that on some level the woman felt a deep attachment, had genuine concern and responsibility towards her mother, despite the fact that the relationship remained problematic and many painful conflicts were still unresolved. While she was describing this to me, she suddenly revealed that her mother was on welfare and was receiving \$180 a month. When I asked her how her mother could possibly manage on such an absurd amount, the woman laughed and said that, of course, she helped her out financially. We continued talking more generally about the issue, but then the woman suddenly said: "You know it scares me. Being alone, without family. I think about my mother and what she would be doing now without me. I keep trying to think of her as just a woman, like me, trying to cope with the world. But there is a difference, a major difference between us. She has a daughter."

A second reason for the myth's ability to retain its hold on my fantasy life is that I have found no adequate substitute for it. To discard it is to be left with nothing, to be faced with the void (or so I think in my most depressed moments). I admit this with some hesitancy, because certainly one aim of the lesbian/feminist movement has been to expose the superficiality of the family myth. The movement has consciously struggled to develop new alternatives for women, has, in a certain sense, offered itself as a new and better "home," a source of the support, affection, security that many of us seek. I think, however, that for women who at one time or another

were involved in various movement activities, support groups, collectives, business projects, experimental communes, for those women who as a result of these activities and groups experienced the first flush of excitement in their discovery of other women and in the sharing of feelings and goals, for those women who thought that they had indeed found new and permanent homes, alternate families—for them the disappointment has been quite keen. Too often, instead of providing a new and supportive home, the collective experiments ended in frustration, bitter anger, a hard silence that severed what everyone had hoped would be permanent ties. That this occurred, is repeatedly occurring, is not surprising. Because expectations were so high, because we wanted these groups to fulfil so many divergent needs, they were destined to disappoint. For me and for many other women it was a sobering kind of experience, to say the least.

I do not mean to imply that nothing has worked or that we are standing in the midst of ruins. What I wish to emphasize is rather the sense of disillusionment and disappointment experienced by me and by many women with whom I have spoken, a sense which has contributed to a feeling of insecurity and, to some degree, pessimism. It is when these feelings become acute that I am most vulnerable, that my fantasy returns again to the concept of family and children. The old images surface again. But the difference between envisioning them now and envisioning them years ago is that now they hold no solace; they remain empty. Their uselessness in my life creates further pain, for I am without the alternatives which a few years ago, when I first became involved in the lesbian/feminist movement, I thought I had. I find the community's present and future only vaguely delineated; whatever community exists is still very young and rather shaky. The emptiness of the past, the vagueness of the future, leave me fearful, hesitant about my decision not to have a child.

Many women have had to face a similar issue on a more personal and more immediate level. They have had to face the fact that lesbian relationships are not *instantly* more stable, more secure, more permanent than heterosexual ones. And because of this, the myth of motherhood takes on added power. A woman who thought she was about to break up with her lover told me: "For the first time in a really long time, I thought about having a child. I won't do

it of course. But I did think about it." She was clearly expressing the idea that somehow a child would guarantee her a permanent relationship.

The emphasis is of course on "guarantee" and on "permanent." If the parent is good, so the logic of the fantasy goes, then the relationship with the child will withstand shock, change, growth, poverty, differences in temperament and ideals: in short, anything and everything. The woman who dreams this way may acknowledge that such a relationship has yet to be realized, but she may be quick to add that she has learned a great deal from her own experience as a daughter, that with *her* child, she will avoid all the mistakes that her parents made with her. By learning from their errors, the woman now fantasizes, she will establish a far more perfect, loving, supportive relationship with her child and, thereby, guarantee for herself a permanent connection during her lifetime.

My fantasy of being a mother and my desire to have a child have been with me for a long time. It has taken me years to realize, however, that both the fantasy and the desire were to a great degree expressions of my dissatisfaction with my relationship with my own mother. It seems to me clear now that by becoming the calm, loving, patient, supportive mother that I have so often envisioned, I have hoped in effect to annihilate the impatient critical voice within myself, the voice that has kept me insecure and dissatisfied. Thus, my desire to become the perfect mother, to act out that fantasy, has in reality nothing to do with having a child, but rather with my desire to experience something I wish I had experienced. It is not a child I wish to mother, it is myself.

In my fantasy, of course, the understanding, the patience, the support are always outwardly directed, because the myth of motherhood demands that they be so. According to the myth, if I do not have a child I will never experience that caring, that uncritical peace, that completely understanding sensibility. Only the role of mother will allow me that. This is clearly a wrong reason for having a child—one which can be ultimately disastrous.

This kind of thinking, however, points up another aspect of the myth about having children, i.e. that certain qualities can only be expressed through a relationship with a child. I am not saying that a relationship with a child is not unique. It is. But some of the

qualities which we attribute to it are not limited to child-parent relationships. I would like to discuss just one of these qualities. Women expressing a desire to have a child often explain that they want their values and beliefs to be passed on; they feel that by having a child they can have some measure of control, some input into the future. A child, after all, can be molded and influenced; to a child can be passed on a whole way of life. That parents have tremendous influence over their children is, of course, self-evident. But the myth excludes the fact that they do not have total influence over their children, that they can never exert total control. As a woman once said to me about her child who was going to a day-care center: "Oh yes, I have great influence. I send her off in the morning looking like a human being and she comes back in the evening with green nailpolish because green nailpolish is some teacher's idea of femininity."

There is something extraordinary in the idea of being able to participate so immediately in the shaping of another life, no matter how much other factors attempt to undermine that influence. Nevertheless, it is not only through a growing child that a woman can influence the world around her, though in the interest of the traditional family, women are taught to believe that it is the most direct and most meaningful way for them. Obviously, a woman taught to think this way will think that her life, her work, are totally useless and ineffectual if she does not have a child, an heir to her ideals and values. This is another real impasse for many women who decide to remain childless. I was interested in a conversation I had with a woman who told me she was considering adopting a child. One of her main reasons was the one I have just discussed. Later in the conversation, she told me about a talk she had had with a friend. Sometime after the talk, her friend told her that she had had a tremendous impact on her, that the talk had helped her in making certain basic decisions about her life. The woman told me: "I was really stunned. I always consider conversations with friends just talk. It never occurs to me that anyone really listens to me, or that what I say has any effect on anyone."

This is not to say that for every aspect of a relationship with a child we can find a substitute, and women who decide not to have children can somehow "make up for it" by looking elsewhere. I believe a relationship with a child is as unique as a relationship with

a friend or a lover. Each has its own special qualities. But myths about having children do prevent women from seeing just what it is they want from having a child and from participating in such a close way in another life. It is something which needs closer examination, so that when a woman decides not to have children, she knows what she is giving up—both the negative and the positive aspects of being a mother—knows it in a real, concrete way, and not in the foggy, idealized, sticky-sentimentalized version with which we all are so familiar.

### 3: The Consequences

Myths and private fantasies are not the only obstacles in the way of women coming to terms with their childlessness. There are also the very real, and often harsh, circumstances of living in a society where a woman who does not marry and, above all, who does not have a child, is stigmatized, characterized as cold, as unwomanly and unfeminine, as unnatural in some essential way. I wince when I recall how throughout my twenties, when I was certain that I was destined to marry and to have children, I would assume with total confidence that a married woman who did not have children must either have physical problems or deep psychological ones. And I remember with some shame the freedom with which I would mouth these opinions.

Today, many of us know better. But although we may understand that a woman has a right to choose to remain childless, the society in which we live still does not, and most of the time it is extremely difficult to be a woman who is deliberately *not* a mother. On the most immediate level, a childless woman must deal with the painful confrontations and equally painful silences between her family and herself. Let me use myself as an example. I am an only child, a survivor of World War II. My father was killed during the war, as was his whole family; my mother was the only family I had. Most of her friends were, like us, surviving members of families which had been wiped out. It was an unstated aim of the individuals of this circle to regenerate the traditional family, thereby making themselves "whole." And over the years, most of them were quite successful. Some re-married; those who did not had the satisfaction



of watching their children grow up and of knowing that they would take the "normal" route. Soon there were in-laws, then grandchildren. The nuclear family seemed to reassert itself.

It has been extremely difficult as well as painful for me to live with the knowledge that I willingly, deliberately never produced the child who could have continued "my father's line," that I never provided my mother with the new family and the grandchildren she was sure would appear, which she thought were her right to expect. I know that other women, coming out of different circumstances, have experienced similar difficulties and pain—women who were raised as only children, who were given the burden of providing their parents with the stereotypical props of old age. These women have complained bitterly about how their parents' disappointment in *them* (as if they had failed at something) has affected them. The "you're-the-last-of-the-line" argument always makes the woman who chooses not to have children appear perverse, stubborn, un giving, selfish. Equally painful can be the excitement of parents when they inform the childless daughter of the birth of a friend's grandchild. I have heard this kind of excitement in my mother's voice, and have often resented the fact that nothing that I could achieve could elicit that tone of voice, that kind of lasting, enduring satisfaction. Her envy of her friend is clear; and underneath it, I know, lies a silent, unstated criticism of me. I have held back.

A woman who was not an only child is often relieved of this kind of burden and pressure when one of her siblings marries and gives birth. But this too creates its own problems; often the childless woman feels resentment and jealousy because the parents seem so pleased with the other sibling for making them grandparents. A woman once told me how her sister, who had recently given birth, said to her that she was glad she had been able to provide their mother with the pleasure of seeing her first grandchild. The mother was dying. The woman felt deeply hurt, not only because of her sister's insensitivity to her feelings, but also because she felt she had nothing comparable to offer her mother.

At moments like these, women often yearn for the perfect excuse which will relieve them of the burden of having chosen to remain childless, which will convert them back into "warm, loving women." The choice seems too great a responsibility, seems too

much against the values of our society. I remember a few years ago, when I had to have surgery on my uterus, how frightened I was at the prospect of having a hysterectomy. I told the doctor that, if at all possible, I wanted to keep my ability to have children. What I did not express to anyone, and barely to myself, was that a part of me wished that in fact a hysterectomy would be necessary. By becoming sterile, I would be relieved of having to make an agonizing decision. Remaining childless would no longer be a result of my "perverseness." I would be childless because I could not bear children. What could anyone possibly say to me after I had had my hysterectomy? I have heard other women reluctantly confess similar "secret thoughts," women with raised, feminist consciousnesses, who nevertheless find it difficult to make the decision not to have children, and also to take full responsibility for it without feeling defensive and to some degree unjustified.

In the end, I did not have a hysterectomy and my childlessness is a result of my own decision. The process by which that decision was made is in large measure difficult for me to trace or reconstruct. To a certain degree, I think I made it over a long period of years, during many of which, on the surface at least, I was not consciously thinking about the issue. Certainly, for a long time I thought there was no decision to be made; I was sure that I would marry and have a family. Furthermore, I never doubted my intense desire to have a large family, never stopped to question whether I really wanted this, or whether it was something I thought I should want. Looking back, I find that often, in order to appear "normal" to myself, I adopted attitudes and values which were clearly not my own. In this particular case the unconscious argument went as follows: A normal woman wants children; I am a normal woman; I want children. This kind of short-circuiting of real feelings is quite common with many women, women who cling to fantasies created by others. These fantasies, many women think, will keep them in the mainstream, will prevent them from appearing different or conspicuous.

I fantasized about my future family for a long, long time, though in my actual life there was nothing to indicate that I was moving in that direction, that the fantasy would become a reality. I never married, never became pregnant. Yet I continued to assume that it was simply a question of time, that of course *it* would happen. *It* did not.

At the age of thirty, I was finally able to admit to myself that I did not want to marry. That realization, however, did not resolve the question of whether or not I should have children, and so I began to think about the issue in more real, more concrete terms. Two years later I became involved with a woman, and a year later I had to have my operation. At that point I was already thirty-three, was beginning to realize that I had to make a clear decision. And I made it by doing nothing about it. I thought a good deal about children, my need for them, my intense longing for them, my fears about being without them. But I did nothing.

The long years during which I was making my decision were extremely difficult. Most of the time I felt inadequate and incomplete. I was conscious that many people around me thought it peculiar that I was not being swept away by "a normal woman's instinct" to bear and rear children, an instinct which should have overridden any of my qualms about marriage. The message communicated to me was that I—a woman alone, without a partner, without children—was enigmatic at best, superfluous at worst. In those years, I was unable to articulate to myself or to others that I was following other instincts. The best defense that I could muster was to say: "I'm too *selfish* for that life." Nevertheless, I evolved my decision and stuck to it.

#### 4: Conclusion

This past April I became thirty-six and I think it is not accidental that it was around that time that I began thinking about writing this article. Though most of the time I really do not know what to make of my age, what to think of its significance, it is around the issue of having a child that my age becomes real to me. For if I do not feel thirty-six (whatever feeling that is supposed to be), I certainly know that biologically my body is thirty-six, that the time for bearing children is almost over for me, and that once I pass a certain point, the decision not to bear a child is irrevocable. That the decision has already been made is very clear to me, though I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when I made it. No matter what my age, the issue is closed.

Often, of course, I wish I had done *it*, done it in those

unconscious years when so many women I knew were doing it. They are now mothers whose children are almost real adults—eight, ten, twelve years of age. Frequently I find myself envying these mothers for having gotten it over with in those early years. That certainly seems to be the perfect solution: have the child in the past, so you can have it now. Fantasizing in this way, I can easily skip over all the hardships and frustrations that many of these women have experienced in the past ten or twelve years of raising their children under extremely difficult circumstances, hardships which they continue to experience, and which I can only partially understand.

Still, there are moments when I can actually assert a certain amount of pride in the way I have chosen to lead my life, when I can feel extremely good about the fact that I did not succumb and did not keep myself in line. I am pleased that I withstood the pressures, that I kept my independence, that I did not give in to the myths which surrounded me. I know of course that there are various reasons why I did not and others did, which include conditions over which none of us had very much control. Nevertheless, I do experience momentary delight in the fact that I escaped and did what I wanted to do (even when that was somewhat unclear), that I did not give in to the temptation to please my mother, did not give in to the pleas of my father's ghost to keep him alive, did not conform with the rest of my friends, but instead kept myself apart and independent in some essential way. In moments like these, I can easily take responsibility for my life and say it is the life that I have chosen.

None of this is ever very simple. There are pleasures that one gives up when one decides not to have children. But as I keep telling myself: you can't have everything. Choices have to be made, and consequences have to be lived with. The act of choosing inevitably brings loss. It is a difficult lesson to understand and accept. I keep trying to relearn it.

While writing this article, I saw my mother who had just discovered stuck away somewhere in a closet my favorite doll. I was surprised by my instant sadness at seeing and then holding it. The sweetness of the face, the smallness of the head against the palm of my hand. I felt as if I wanted to cry. But in touching it, it was not a baby that I envisioned, but rather myself, five or six years old, cradling the doll in her arms and rocking it gently to sleep.

GEORGETTE CERRUTTI

THAT BONE PLACE WHERE THERE IS LIGHT

That bone place where there is light  
without scent, Emily Dickinson saw—  
She must have fondled flowers close to her face,  
exploding the heady, almost manure,  
definitely earth trace—  
and folded the experience away.  
Her daily toilet: corsetting,  
putting on ironed laces,  
she could turn her neck only partially  
on one side—

In front of her window, a petunia was the  
universe—and the elm tree  
filtered light through  
without musk.

Mind is the soul, mind against fear is  
a faith dealer and does not smell  
the alarming animal.  
And the heart, late at night, under the hand,  
in the pillow, moves still.

## BETWEEN MOTHER AND ME

*Between Sylvia and me there existed as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which at times was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy.*

Aurelia Schober Plath

I have lost a lot of it but  
in my dream my cat is covered with barnacles.  
I keep picking them off and underneath  
is almost worse than the sight of him clawing  
the growths. I go in and out  
of trying to tear them off.  
The dream has something to do with you.  
You are in your big, black, soft coat.  
You are smiling through your red lips.  
Your eyes are bright behind your glasses.  
You fold me in your rich folds. I huddle  
against you. Your fingers are damp curling the hairs  
along my neck. I think this  
as I watch you from across the room. We have hardly spoken  
this evening, we have danced around each other.  
But you have been smiling at me through your lips.  
The thought of being naked and floating inside you  
is like the cat dream and the barnacles and the rawness  
underneath.

It was a few months ago I told you I loved you.  
It was the first time I can remember anyone in our house  
saying I love you. I told you again and every time  
I saw you. One day you hugged me more than holding me  
away, you said, I love you too.

There is something I am feeling for you that does  
not have to do with loving you. I have only a glimmer  
but what it is makes me afraid.  
I am afraid you will huddle against me,  
that you will be soft against me,  
and I will rise up, all this anger  
will rise up, and my words will come—

You should never use certain words  
I told my high school friends, later, my husband,  
there are some words which eat so deeply  
they should never be spoken,  
what are some, a friend said, my husband just nodded, he believed  
in pockets and casings,  
and that much should never be said. I said  
I cannot say them  
but they are words I have heard in the back  
of my head, in rooms dimly in the dark, as I woke  
from sleep, words and parts of words—

When I was twelve, we took the stroller and my baby brother  
and walked, our breath steaming the cold past the oaks  
that were finally turning colors. There was a pair  
of dead birds in the gutter, beebeed, my mother said, by  
boys. We walked past the school and the fields and  
the apartment buildings; the baby lay to one side  
in the stroller, sleeping. We went down the path  
with eucalyptus trees on either side, the wind tearing.  
We were going to get a dress, mother said, a pretty  
dress for me. We looked and looked in the stores. I  
don't remember who first saw the lavender dress we kept  
going back to, it didn't fit, my breasts were barely  
buds, spaghetti straps and a satin skirt  
that cost too much, let's buy it, mother said, opening a  
secret compartment in her wallet, pulling out what she  
called her mad money. Don't tell your father. I was  
shaking, oh mother, let's buy another. No arguing,  
she said, this will be perfect. Before we returned  
home, we stopped at the liquor store, she bought four  
bottles of Fleishmann's, packed them in the stroller,  
and we wove home. It was a vague feeling and I could  
not pin it, but I knew with a child's sense I had something  
to do with the sea that was rising outside my bedroom  
door, my father's voice trembling the house,  
my father entered my room, pulled me by one arm,  
twisted, his face in my face he stung, he stung,  
he stung from me what mother had done with the whiskey—  
I remember her face, all cockeyed, her mouth where  
her cheek should be, she was rocking back and forth as he  
broke the bottles in the bathroom sink, she was looking at me,  
she kept looking at me.

Even now I am afraid of a certain quiet when I enter the house, and I study you, at the sink, peeling your potatoes. I study how fast and how rhythmically the peels hit the sink. I remember how you kept the same hair pins in your head a week, you wore the same unbecoming dress. I am so afraid of the silence between us, you walk about the room, scratching yourself, your face emptying its features, you are afraid of pain, you stuff oil of cloves inside the holes in your teeth.

You are fat and invisible in turns.

I am afraid of the silence

and that I am not your quiet, good girl.

We have never spoken of the lavender dress or how that evening, you meandered through the house, and oh, how small I felt in my room, crying, not loud enough for you to hear, you might come in, loud enough, you might come in.



## LILIAN

Like the pages of a pop-up book, the scenes of love remain, three-dimensional, the furniture asking more attention than the flat doll who is more like wallpaper, a bedspread, a detail rather than the focus of memory. It might have been a way of dealing with pain but instead is the source of it, flat loss in so many really remembered rooms. Like a book, too, it can be shut and stored on a shelf with only the spine exposed, *Lilian*, without author or publishing house, but there is a prominent date, 1952. The twinge of pain is like the ache of a bone broken twenty-five years ago; you tend to think of the present weather rather than the old accident. Until someone asks, "How did it happen? Why does it still hurt?" A lover's question. Then there is the furniture again and the flat figure, and you, like a huge, old child, poke a finger as large as your old self once was into the flimsy trap of a very old beginning.

"There," you say, "are the twin beds pushed together. That's my desk at the foot of them. You can see the photographs I kept under the glass, the list of letters owing, a pair of gloves with the tips cut out of the fingers. It was very cold. That little gas fire didn't work very well, and it was expensive. We hadn't any money. That's the door to the kitchen, and that one went into the hall."

"But where is Lilian?"

"Out, probably... no, she's in the kitchen. She's just come in from work and is putting on a kettle for tea."

"I want to see her."

There she is, simply a woman standing by a small gas stove, her back turned.

"Her face!" she insists.

But none of her faces is properly filled in. One has only the trace of a cheek bone, another simply a pair of glasses, and the hair's not real, put on carelessly by a crayon the wrong color. Her clothes, like those of a paper doll, are more important: a suede jacket, a grey skirt with two pleats down the front nearly to the ankles. She has a purple and grey scarf, a pale lavender twin set. She can be undressed. How long has it been since anyone wore that sort of bra? You'd forgotten about the peach colored underwear. The body itself is an

exaggeration of breasts and pubic hair, done in black and white.

"She looks very...English," she says, charmingly daunted.

You laugh, touch the very real red-gold hair, turn a face to you which you don't have to struggle to remember or forget, never sure which it is, and kiss a mouth which will never taste of tea. Her breasts are freely available to you under the pale green shirt. Trousers the same color are on an elastic waist band. You have made love with her often enough to know that she likes to come first, quickly, in disarray, one exposed breast at your mouth, your hand beneath trousers pulled down only low enough to reveal the mound of curly red-gold hair. To feel compromised excites aggression, and you have learned not to be surprised at the swiftness of her retaliation, fake coming to her assault so that you can both finally lie naked in a long feasting pleasure, where she can make no comparisons because her husband never does that, because you and Lilian had never even heard of it. When you came upon it in a novel written by a man, she was long since gone, but your need to taste her was as sharp as your simpler desire had been on those dark, English afternoons when she came in, her hair smelling of the tube, her face and hands cold, wanting a bath first to get warm, wanting her tea, before the ten minutes of touching which was all it ever occurred to either of you to do.

"Was she very good?" her voice asks, breath against your thigh.

Your tongue lies into her what is not a lie. The first woman is perfect, being a woman, even if everyone after that is far, far better, as has certainly been the case. Nearly without exception.

"Look at me."

You do. She is the age Lilian was, thirty. Nearly all of them have been, though you've grown twenty-five years older, will be forty-five in a few days' time. Her mouth from so much lovemaking is dark and swollen, her chin chafed, as if by winter weather. You are glad it is very cold outside, an excuse for her if she needs one.

"She's the only one you ever lived with?"

You nod.

"Why?"

"She was free."

She begins to cry, tears of a sort you had not seen until after Lilian. You wonder if that's one of the ways you've set Lilian apart, being able to remember that she never cried like that for herself or you. They are tears you have watched on a dozen faces since. You

don't really want her to begin to talk about her children, but you don't stop her as you do if she mentions her husband, even to abuse him. You have not asked her to leave any of them. It is she, not you, who is unhappy about spending only a rare night in your bed. Most meetings have to be timed as if they were evenings at the PTA. She tries not to share her guilt about how she is neglecting her children's teachers. The guilt she feels about neglecting you is confused by the fact that you are never neglected in her thoughts. You are her private obsession. She leaves behind a toothbrush, a comb, a shirt to encourage the same state of mind in you.

"I must go. It's time to go," she is saying, wiping her eyes on the clothes she is gathering up.

You admire her fully realized body as she walks across the room. She pauses and turns to you.

"Why did she leave you?"

"Because I'm not a man," you answer, as you have answered the same question a dozen times before.

"She married then?"

"No. Eventually she found a woman to live with."

She turns away again, puzzled. You would not have tried to explain further even if she'd stayed to ask. Once you did try. The anger that had obliterated Lilian's face and left her body grossly exposed in black and white, like a cheap polaroid picture, obliterated the face and stripped the questioner, who should have known then she was being raped and did not, flattered by the force of it.

The water is running in the shower now. She must go home, smelling as if she'd been to the PTA. On a better night, you would shower with her, mark her with quick pleasures. You might even joke about putting a little chalk dust in her hair. Tonight you put on a kimono, tidy your own clothes away, open the door to your study and turn the light on over your desk. You are sorting papers when she comes to the doorway, dressed and ready to leave.

"Are you angry with me?"

"Of course not."

You are never angry now. You go to her, kiss her throat, smile.

"God, she must regret it. Every time she reads about you..."

You shake your head, wearing your expression of tolerant indulgence for her admiration of your work, your success. The fantasy she is calling up is one you've tried to nourish for years, but even the most outlandish fantasy needs some shred of evidence to feed on. You have none. Lilian always believed in your work.

Success wouldn't increase or diminish that, and it would never bring her back.

"Don't shake your head. You're too modest... well, you are, about your work." But you have made her laugh now at the immodesties she enjoys. "You're so beautifully unlike a man."

Usually you help her to leave, but now you cannot because you so much want her to go.

"I want to be with you on your birthday. Why does it have to be on a Sunday night?"

"It isn't. It's on any night you can get away."

"You don't let yourself mind about anything, do you? I wish I could be like that. I'll be horrible to the children and to him all evening, knowing you're alone, wanting to be with you. Will you be alone?"

"Actually, I like to be alone on my birthday. It's my one anti-social day of the year. Well, that and New Year's Eve."

"Just the same, miss me a little."

You agree to. You know you will miss her...a little. Inflicting a little pain is necessary to her as a way of sharing it. When she can't, she won't come back, and you are slower now to encourage the break though you know that to extend the strain on her for too long is a matter of diminishing returns. It's not that you'd have any difficulty replacing her. There is an understudy in the wings right now, who is free on your birthday, but you won't see her. She seems young, though she's thirty. Lilian at that age had none of the vestiges of childishness you notice increasingly now. She had not been raising children, of course, was not absorbed, as all the others have been, with the ways of children and therefore inclined to tip into baby talk or take delight in small surprises. She had been as absorbed in her work as you were in yours.

"You're tired," she says.

"I'm getting old."

Again she laughs, as you intend her to, and now you must help her leave even though you want her to go. It takes only a gesture, a quick fingering into her still wet center.

"Oh, don't, love, don't. I've got to go."

"Then go...quickly."

So beautifully unlike a man? So unbeautifully like one, and you've gotten so good at it that you manage this sort of thing very well by now. Then, as you turn back from seeing her out, there before you again, instead of your carefully tidied livingroom, is that

small pop-up book interior, the desk with its comic gloves at the foot of the shoved-together twin beds. You try to stay as large as the years have made you, as invulnerable to that anger and pain, suffered by a person twenty-five years ago, no bigger than your fucking finger, but your hand is on the desk chair. You pull it out and sit down. The gloves fit. The notes you are taking are for a book written so long ago you have almost forgotten it. The kitchen door opens, and there in it is Lilian, not a cardboard caricature, but Lilian herself. You keep on working. You do not want her to speak.

"Look at me," she says, and you do, surprised by the clarity of her face, afraid.

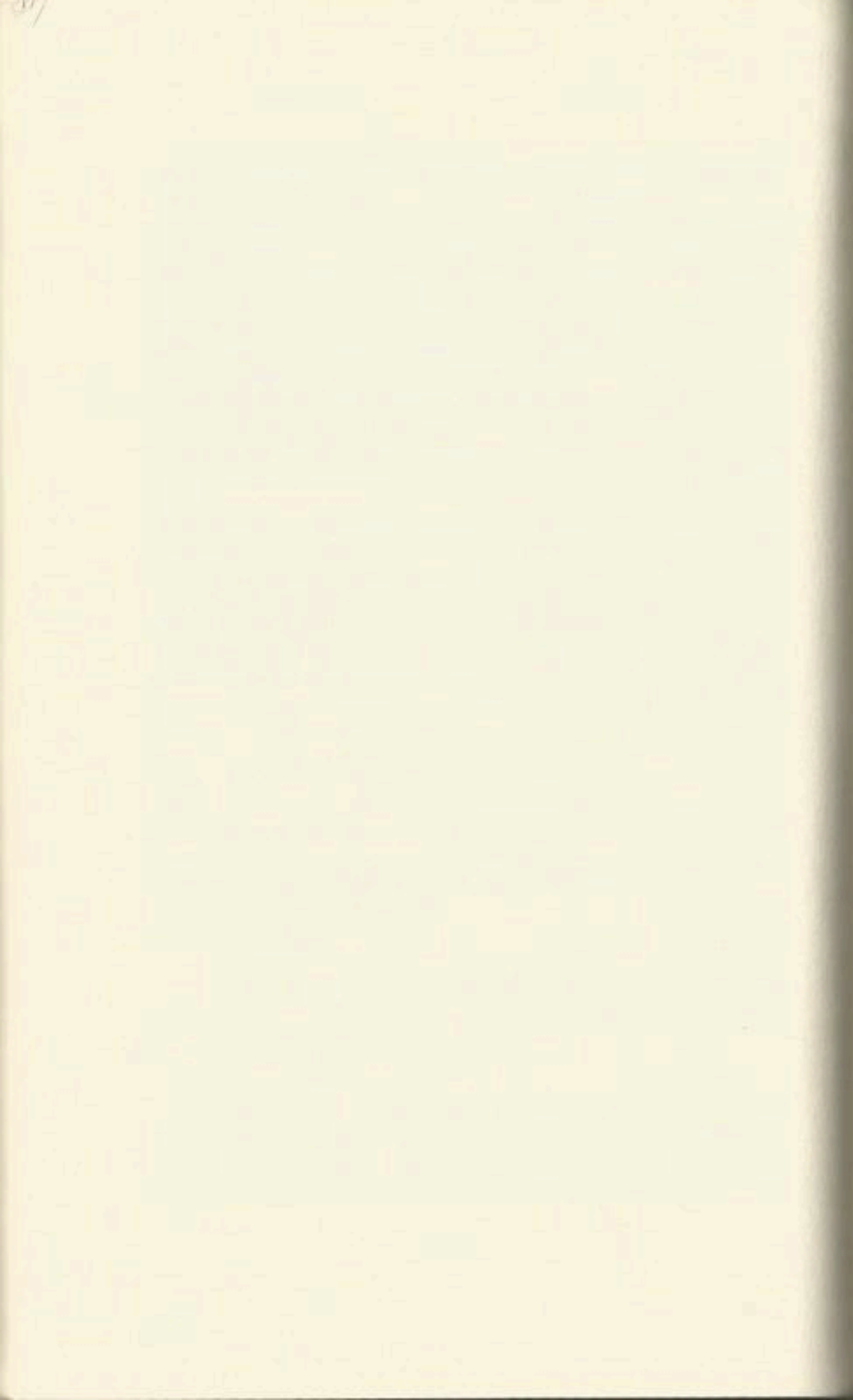
"You don't want a lover and a friend; you want a wife or a mistress."

"What's the difference?" you ask.

"You're not a man. You have to grow up to be a woman, caring as much about my work as I care about yours."

"I can't."

As she begins to change, fade, flattens to the cardboard figure you are now so familiar with, you grow into that huge, old child again, alone again as you have been at every beginning since, whether birthday, New Year's Eve, or love affair, closing the cover of the one book you will never write, *Lilian*.



# reviews

**CARITAS** by Olga Broumas

Jackrabbit Press, 454 Willamette, Eugene, Oregon. 1976. 12 pp. \$2.50.

**BEGINNING WITH O** by Olga Broumas

Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. 1977. 74 pp. \$2.95.

Problems of form—finding new forms, transformations—are at the center of these two books by Olga Broumas. Her concerns as a poet will be recognized by many lesbian writers and visual artists: our process now is a birthing of our own culture. Broumas' note on *Caritas* clarifies her direction. The word itself is Latin and means "dearness, esteem, preciousness, affection." She has chosen *caritas* "because none of the available English words signifying affection are free from either negative heterosexist connotations, or limitations of meaning so severe or so totally genital as to render them useless as names for our womanly songs of praise."

*Caritas* is a small book of five poems about the forms of lesbian love. These poems are held together by their subject: praise of the lover's body. At times *Caritas* is an awkward book; the imagery seems exaggerated, forced in places. And yet it is a book in which Broumas has clearly allowed herself the freedom for these kinds of risks. She attempts to find new ways to talk about our bodies, to express sensual awareness, describe our love. And perhaps one way to break stereotypes of what a "love poem" *should* be is to begin

With the clear  
plastic speculum, transparent  
and when inserted, pink like the convex  
carapace of a prawn, flashlight in hand, I  
guide you  
inside the small  
cathedral of my cunt....

The mundane speculum leads us, further on in the poem, into the inner recesses of the exotic Hagia Sophia "with its circlet of openings/to the Mediterranean Sun." We may yet become accustomed to finding speculums in our love poetry and they will no longer jar.



Years ago I recall thumbing through a college poetry text of my mother's and finding next to T.S. Eliot's simile of the evening sky draped "like a patient etherized upon a table," an outraged marginal note exclaiming: *This* is poetry? Broumas seems willing to chance that it is.

In each of these poems I sensed her difficulty in beginning. I wished she'd begun in the center of the poem and not been concerned to lead us so precisely and mechanically into it.

...When I tell you  
that it would take more brilliance than Mozart  
more melancholy precision than Brahms  
to compose a sonata in the form of  
your breasts, you  
don't believe me....

and neither do I, even though the musical image is then wonderfully transformed into lovemaking—"my tongue/flat on your double lips, giving/voice"—and again the tongue and voice transmute, becoming the sea, singing, lapping the sleeping islands of ancient civilizations.

While *Caritas* drew me into dialogue, *Beginning With O* is a book that excites me. As I read it I wanted to run around shouting, yes, yes! At the most simple level of description the book begins with a series of love poems, lesbian love poems. The center section moves backward to a marriage and the poet's realization that she is a lesbian. The third section describes the coming out process, which brings us full circle in time to the first poems, the love poems from now, from this life. The "O" also becomes omega in one of the poems, hence we are "beginning with" the ending. And in the last poem in the book a woman who loves women returns to her mother,

Defenseless  
and naked as the day  
I slid from you  
twin voices keening and the cord  
pulsing our common protest, I'm coming back  
back to you  
woman, flesh  
of your woman's flesh, your fairest, most  
faithful mirror....

("Snow White")

Within this tightly conceived circular structure, nothing wanders. There is an intensity born of necessity: the realization that the recreation of our lives through words is a matter of survival: "like amnesiacs/in a ward on fire, we must/find words/or burn" ("Artemis"). Like amnesiacs, women possess knowledge that is hidden from us; we know more than we remember and Broumas is looking for that primary knowledge.

She finds it first in childhood memories. The sense of rightness with her body and nature she experienced

Sometimes, as a child

when the Greek sea  
was exceptionally calm  
the sun not so much a pinnacle  
as a perspiration of light, your brow and the sky  
meeting on the horizon....

Diving into the water she re-emerges into a perfect moment of connection:

...Something immaculate, a chance

crucial junction: time, light, water  
had occurred, you could feel your bones  
glisten  
translucent as spinal fins.

("Sometimes, as a child")

This memory is inaccessible to the adult, to be repeated again and again when

...In rain-  
green Oregon now, approaching thirty, sometimes  
the same  
rare concert of light and spine  
resonates in my bones, as glistening  
starfish, lover, your fingers  
beach up.

Old myths, legends and fairy tales, similarly, contain our half-remembered truths, and the voices of Io, Artemis, Little Red Riding Hood and others speak to us from Broumas' poems, as though they spoke from within us:

One would know nothing.  
One would begin by the touch  
return to her body....

...

I am a woman  
who understands  
the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin  
still lie beyond me.

("Artemis")

...

I kept  
to the road, kept  
the hood secret, kept what it sheathed more  
secret still. I opened  
it only at night, and with other women  
who might be walking the same road to their own  
grandma's house, each with her basket of gifts, her small hood  
safe in the same part. I minded well.

("Little Red Riding Hood")

With each turn of the meaning, each retelling of the stories that shape our lives, Broumas transforms our world. We become "archaeologists of the right/the speechless zones/of the brain," trying to salvage some part of ourselves, trying to imagine "how to describe/ what we didn't know/ exists" ("Rumpelstiltskin"). And as that knowledge grows, as the betrayals and distortions become obvious, the poet pauses:

i slice the bread  
in the kitchen, i hold the knife

and wonders:

...how long  
can i keep the knife

in its place

("the knife & the bread")

And this is the book Stanley Kunitz has selected for the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Award, citing its "impassioned lyric outburst," its "unabashed eroticism." This is true and the book deserves recognition, awards. But Kunitz couldn't have known—fully—what Broumas is writing about. I cannot imagine that the implications, the full excitement of this book, could be realized apart from a growing lesbian culture and community. Both *Caritas* and *Beginning with O* belong to us.

**KATHE KOLLWITZ: WOMAN AND ARTIST** by Martha Kearns The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. 1976. 237 pp. \$5.50.

I have long known that Käthe Kollwitz is my mother's favorite artist. This has always worried me a bit, for looking at reproductions of Kollwitz' graphics and sculpture—her self-portraits, her depictions of mothers and children, her drawings of working people—I could not help but be struck by what seemed an intense sense of desolation, a refusal to give or take comfort. How could Kollwitz have lived seventy-eight years with such an unyielding consciousness of human misery? What could her day-to-day existence have been? Leafing through a thick book of Kollwitz reproductions before I began Kearns' biography, these questions came into sharper focus.

I read *Käthe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist* as perhaps we all read everything: looking for clues to a private mystery. I was not disappointed, for Kearns conceived this biography in a way which acknowledges that this is how we read lives, particularly lives of women. Hers is an "emotional biography," recording not only what Kollwitz did, or why she did it, but how she felt while she was doing it. Kearns attempts to give us glimpses of Kollwitz' life as Kollwitz herself might have experienced it. The result reads something like a third-person journal, recording stomach aches and nightmares, confusion over sexual identity, reasons for marrying, anxiety about menopause.

This effort necessarily involves quite a bit of speculation, and many pages are full of qualifiers like "undoubtedly," "probably," and "in all likelihood." Imagination also plays a role here, for each chapter opens with a dramatized reconstruction of events in Kollwitz' life. We are there with Kollwitz' mother nursing the newborn; we leave home with the young artist to begin training; we hear what the aging Kollwitz is thinking as she walks in the countryside with her husband.

This kind of narration is not without hazards, and Kearns does not always sidestep the pitfalls. She sometimes suggests a causality which imposes on Kollwitz's biography a simplicity, a logic, which life itself does not have. Although Kollwitz herself noted the great impact which Gerhart Hauptmann's play *The Weavers* made on her thinking and on her work, it is hard to believe that "she was thus transformed, overnight, into an artist who celebrated revolution" (70). Elsewhere Kearns notes that Kollwitz attended lectures by the articulate Marxist August Bëbel, and read his 1883 work *Woman and Socialism*. "With her reading of this work," Kearns suggests, "Käthe now added a feminist perspective to her socialist one."

In fact, the kind of feminist perspective which Kollwitz brought to her work could not have been tacked onto an otherwise complete personality, as Kearns' statement (though not her work as a whole) seems to suggest. Kollwitz continually searched for new ways to communicate the experiences of a woman's life, and she rethought this task in basic ways. She worked at this throughout her seventy-eight years, during which she created more than that number of self-portraits. In this sense, even had she not lent ardent support to feminist causes, had she not worked for a woman's right to choose abortion, had she not given her name to the homosexual rights movement, had she not expressed in so many ways her determination not to be confined by traditional women's roles, even so Kollwitz would have been a feminist.

In her diaries and letters, Kollwitz articulated certain principles which she evolved in her own effort at creating the portrait of a life. A 1909 journal entry recorded her desire to create a new etching "so that all the essentials are strongly stressed and the inessentials almost omitted" (118). Speaking of her own life, she wrote: "It always comes back to this: that only one's inner feelings represent the truth" (137). In a letter to her son she spoke of her growing conviction that "whether and how I am able to work is altogether independent of [external] experience" (166).

Martha Kearns seems to have been mindful of these principles when she wrote *Käthe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist*. Despite the hazards of the "emotional biography," I ended up feeling that this is the kind of effort at representing her life that Kollwitz would have

appreciated. It is not an exhaustive history; a 1972 work on Kollwitz by Mina C. Klein and H. Arthur Klein is in many respects more complete. But Kearns has made every effort to stress the essentials. And conscientious documentation gives this speculative biography more solidity. Aside from journals, Kearns made use of some sources which other biographers have not stressed, such as the 1925 interview with Kollwitz by American feminist Agnes Smedley. The annotated bibliography is very useful, for one is inspired by this account to know more. An index might have been helpful, particularly so that looking through a Kollwitz collection, one might locate references to specific works in Kearns' text.

Kearns has made good use of the fascinating Kollwitz journals, making some passages available in English for the first time. Journal excerpts are extensively supplied; the text sometimes seems a narrative linking journal entries. I found the chapter headings, phrases taken from the journals, both effective and moving.

It is perhaps ironic that from this biography, one gets a better sense of Kollwitz as a *writer* than as a visual artist; her verbal self-portraiture was so direct and striking that almost an entire section of Muriel Rukeyser's poem "Käthe Kollwitz," which forms the epilogue to this biography, is taken from Kollwitz' own writings.

This took me somewhat by surprise. Reading the life of a visual artist, I had expected to encounter a way of thinking, a means of expression, entirely different from my own. And in the early part of the biography, Kearns does suggest a highly non-verbal mode of experience:

It is often true that artists who express themselves visually—painters, sculptors, graphic artists—find it difficult, often impossible, to communicate the visual message in words. Some simply can't do it; many don't even try. Käthe's [adolescent] ailments probably expressed her frustrations at living in a stranger's land where, as yet, no one spoke her language... (25)

And yet, there are the journals—eleven volumes written over thirty-four years which include only one sketch. In them Kollwitz reflects, with both fluency and precision, on her life, her relationships, her cycle of depressions and creative periods, her

conflicting roles in relation to her family and her work, her changing image of herself. She *does* convey visual messages in words, telling how a family gathering in a "polygonal arbor" looked to her, how the light struck her mother and her cat on a particular morning, how she conceived of a finished piece of work.

Kollwitz the artist is not neglected. Kearns works into her narrative clear and informative descriptions of the processes with which Kollwitz worked as a graphic artist. It is easier to imagine what Kollwitz actually did everyday knowing the steps involved in the various media she worked in. There are more than twenty reproductions of her work in the book (making its \$5.50 price not unreasonable); many other works are characterized verbally by Kearns, who stresses the positive image of women in Kollwitz' works, and seeks to correct the biases which have marked academic treatment of her work. In one instance, when she discusses the comment by some critics that Kollwitz' subjects are "types," she seems to overstate the case:

The argument that her subjects are "types" may very well be class-biased. If oppressed people "all look alike" to middle-class and upper-class viewers, then indeed her subjects (in their eyes) may represent "types." But in fact, Kollwitz had a genius for creating particular people, feelings, and scenes. (81)

I found this approach rather threatening at first, for to my eyes, many of Kollwitz' subjects did indeed seem to be types. And while I don't doubt that there has been a class bias in criticism of an artist who chose subjects almost exclusively from among working people, who wrote that "middle-class people held no appeal for me at all," still, the question of types in her work seems more complex. By trying to stress the essentials, to make statements about the human condition in black and white and with a minimum of detail, she was trying to create not *stereotypes*, certainly, but perhaps *archetypes*. This is certainly suggested by many of her titles, such as *The Downtrodden*, and by the statement in her journal that she would like to think that she was able "to communicate myself or—more than that—to have been the direct mediator between people and something they are not conscious of, something transcendent, primal" (148).

With this single exception, I thought Kearns' emphasis on Kollwitz' politics, on her ardent Socialism and devotion to the plight



of the working class, totally appropriate, for Kollwitz' consciousness of class issues could hardly be overstated. One sees her defiance of the Nazi party and creed late in her life not as an isolated act of resistance, but as a consistent and deeply-rooted part of her character. But the relationship between her political activism and the solitude and independence she needed as an artist remains in her biography, as in her life, unresolved.

Finally, I want to express my admiration for Kearns' willingness to rethink the genre of biography, to ask questions that women working in other literary forms have been asking: How is one to represent in words the course of a human life? What is it about a woman's experience that needs to be told? She succeeds in giving a sense of the emotional work that Kollwitz was doing while she produced the artistic work for which she has become so well known.

Leafing through the same collection of Kollwitz' works after I finished the biography, I was better able to sense her changing moods, her compassion. And now that I have finished this review, I will give my copy of *Käthe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist* to my mother.

SUSAN GOLDBERG

**SLOW JUGGLING** by Karen Brodine

Berkeley Poet's Workshop and Press, P.O. Box 459, Berkeley,  
CA 94701. 1975. \$3.00

**WORK WEEK** by Karen Brodine

Kelsey Street Press, 425 Hudson Street, Oakland, CA 94601.  
1977. \$3.00

Karen Brodine's two books of poetry represent an interesting, if uneven, body of work — the work of a young woman poet in process of coming to terms with her experience, of transforming it through poetry, of growing through and beyond it. Indeed, the central theme of both books is that of growth, of the poet's own *becoming*.

I find the poems of the first book, *Slow Juggling*, more successful than those of *Work Week*, although neither successes nor problems are confined to one or the other. Brodine's language is often proselike, sometimes fragmentary. In *Slow Juggling* it is less concentrated and opaque; the poems are shorter, airier, the experiences more immediate, less intellectual. The voice in both books is that of a woman unraveling her experience, trying to confront it with honesty, trying not to hide from its pain. She has felt trapped in herself, and hopeless. She has lived in a relationship where she and another person, probably a man, have sat "puzzled and alone over dinner"; she has discovered her feelings for other women and become a lesbian. She has lived through the illnesses of her mother and grandmother, experienced the numbing dehumanization of meaningless work, and fought continually to allow herself the freedom to be. These are the threads of experience which run through most of the poems, representing those parts of the poet's life through which she must work again and again in her journey toward clarity.

The title poem of *Slow Juggling* suggests—as does the title itself—the conflict between caution and risk which is central to the poet's experience, and which is echoed repeatedly in the poems:

she cracks the egg on the edge of the white bowl  
pours one half into the other.  
her mother taught her this as risk,  
*you have to be careful.*  
the eggwhite, stubborn, slips over,  
pulls to take the rest along  
but the yoke's skin holds.

.....

she recalls a way to separate  
an egg by breaking it into your palm  
the white streams through your fingers  
you are left with the yolk in your hand  
left with it, bright, round.

The act of pouring the egg's contents back and forth may be taken further as an image. Slow and careful juggling—seemingly a difficult feat—suggests a kind of self-contradiction, perhaps an action which only defeats itself. It may be seen as rearrangement without solution, or as fruitless repetition of a meaningless pattern, a marking of time. To be sure, “juggling” also suggests skill, even pleasure, but the poet has been cautioned to juggle with care, to impose the kind of limitations on the act which will likely deplete it of life and interest. The poet wishes “to pour/back and forth/till she feels clear.” At the end of the poem she suggests that more success might come from allowing the eggwhite to stream freely than from juggling according to her mother's instructions.

Slow juggling thus serves as a metaphor for a state in which change comes slowly if it comes at all. The first three sections of *Slow Juggling* are permeated by an atmosphere of suspension and inconclusiveness. A desire for change alternates with a fear of it. The poet wishes to break free, but is held back; she wishes to “fly apart in crystals,” but is afraid of the light:

The eyelid is the eye's red tent  
each day my body eats the light  
and gives back fever.

(“The House Is Alive, The Snow Is Burning”)

At other moments she feels a desperation about wrenching herself free from what is insignificant—about becoming clear, about becoming herself. In “Silent Pictures” the poet wishes to dispose of her past:

now the room tilts  
shoulder deep in water  
I want to pry open its mouth  
and collect all I own:

pastel dresses ten years old  
the shoes, the books  
the photo of a child  
whose thin body put on flesh  
and became *me*.

let it all go  
I let it sink and disappear.

And in "The House Is Alive, The Snow Is Burning," she wills her present to discard itself, as well:

My books, plates, shoes, hang on the porch  
clanging and swinging in the wind  
let them fly off the rope and roll into the dark.

The poems of this section, called "Windows," describe the pain of stasis; frustration and fear mingle to create an impulse toward change which is as yet only partially defined and articulated. The section's predominant images are those of rooms and light, symbols which are reiterated throughout Brodine's poetry. The poet locates herself continually in rooms—rooms which are "held together by light," rooms with sharp corners, rooms which tilt, rooms where "we used to sleep," rooms with windows

letting the cast-off skin of the sun  
into the body of the room, letting  
the room breathe.

("The Window Hovering At My Room")

It is light which will let her breathe. The poet yearns toward the light as toward freedom, revelation, clarity—and fears it, as risk, as the brightness whose intensity can destroy. In another poem the poet

ran head-on into this  
summer blinded  
by the moon huge and complete  
ran toward it  
like a deer moving  
into a headlight.

("I ran head-on into this")

In "Ladies, Moths," the light which the poet offers to the kind of women who are frail and mindless like moths, who have "tattered edges," suggests a kind of purification by fire:

What I have to give you  
is light

I switch on the lamps  
light the candles  
hold bunches  
of flaring matches  
in my hands

This image is repeated in a later four-part poem in this section, "Caterpillar Years," which equates the burning of the caterpillars out of trees with the poet's need to violently destroy her connection with "the spun-white shawl," the "cocoon" of her home and childhood. And finally, having left her home in the north, she returns to the home of her present where "the light delineates the bones/the light is the kind you can breathe." In the last poem of *Slow Juggling*, "we have let the woman in," the light has become the woman's own creation, conceived, perhaps, in her own image:

then she walked  
slowly in  
carrying a fragile  
bundle in her arms

we saw  
it was no child  
but light  
she held

The suggestion of birth here has been prepared for in the two poems which link the first and third sections of the book: "What I Did In His Dream" and "What She Did In My Dream." In the first, the poet has gone away "to have a child not his or any man's" and has given birth to a creature with "forked tongues, jabbering away in dialects he could not understand." In the second, the poet dreams of a woman who tells her to "walk up that path and write how it is to be a woman who has decided to have no children." The woman has made her choice. She has separated herself from the man and has, she thinks, become incomprehensible to him. She has embraced herself, her writing, light.

\* \*

Work—institutionalized work—is the theme of the first section of *Work Week*. Brodine has chosen for the book's cover a daily work schedule card, giving her own name and the depressing little measured blocks of time that make up her day. An atmosphere almost of horror pervades these poems, as in the closing lines of "Please Sketch The Woman Holding A Power Drill": "The telephones have blank ears, we're on the top floor, locked in./The boss will starve us." But at the same time, something else is happening to the women who work under these conditions:

(in the offices we are recording stealthily,  
slipping pressed moths into the machines—  
our logo, no one knows what we do  
in the noon hours. The copy machines  
open their quiet mouths.  
we lay our faces down on the hot  
afternoon, relay messages  
of cheekbone, eyelash,  
a tower across the city blinks,  
taking in the data.

("Passenger")

In the last section of the book, titles like "Gardening At Night," "Selling The House," "Repairing The Old Road," "Growing," suggest a different kind of work—inner-directed, life-giving, healing, work for oneself. The poem "More" refers, as well, to the kind of work that dismantles in order to examine and understand: "There are whole companies to build walls./I want company dismantling them." In "Jen's Notes" there is talk of dismantling a car "part by part until the horse is calm." The speaker dismantles her "joke hat" under which she has "slouched" all year "keeping notes under the brim." She is dismantling her own disguises and self-preoccupations. In the same poem "we are taking the house apart, furniture stacked in the yard/floor bared and powdery. we search in the dark space/behind walls, for our small parents." Nothing is to be left intact.

The poems of the last section of *Work Week* in general have a positive and forward-looking sense about them, suggesting that the poet has reached a kind of plateau, has emerged from an earlier state in which things were only intermittently clear, in which she felt frightened, alienated, out of control. There is also a suggestion that

she has located herself in a community, apparently the women's community. In "Dear Frances" Brodine makes a very clear statement of where she has come from and what she has arrived at. We are reminded of the sense of almost formless fear in the earlier poems; it is perhaps only now that she is actually able to name that fear:

Dear Frances,

Thinking yesterday how I used to perceive things...  
separate quick takes, or intense focus, self at sad center.  
a consistent depression. tomatoes, oranges, green peppers,  
so brilliant - they seemed to explode.

not seeing the connective links, dazed, gliding through,  
a jumble of parts. Forgiving that one who said he liked  
my breasts and not my hips, forgiving that.

now it is a calmness about taking things in. an amazement  
that my eyes see a whole field, yet they are two separate  
light blue spaces on my face.

though we move always through weathers, we have to feel  
our own skin, the bones of our hands, delicate or not.

Some of Brodine's poems, especially those in the section of *Work Week* entitled "Jigsaw," do not work, because, although we sense in them a great intensity to which we would like to respond, they remain closed to us. Even the two poems about her mother's illness, "Stroke" and "Heart Of The Matter," communicate a feeling of having been written at a great distance from the emotion that inspired them. The less successful poems are characterized by a disturbing inaccessibility: an obscurity which does not yield even after many rereadings, metaphor so intensely personal that the poems fail to come across, and imagery that does not cohere, that evokes only confusion in the reader. A poem like "Cable Vision" gives almost no clues; "The Wolves Were Silver," while it communicates a mood, is far too obscure to evoke more than an initial response. "The Woman Who Runs" suffers from an overabundance of unrelated images.

Brodine is at her best when she is least convoluted and self-conscious, when she is most simple. In the beautiful four-part love poem "Gardening At Night," she expresses quite directly her feelings for another woman. In the love poems of the first book, I sensed a feeling of newness, of innocence, conflict, fear and anticipation. How

long will it be, she asked, "...till we lie unnightgowned together speaking in tongues"? By the end of the second book, there is a clear sense of fulfillment:

gardening at night, the barrow full,  
you wheel in slow circles, your shoulders  
filling my hands,

you stoop to weed, or heft stones, listening  
to the train rattle the windows  
you touch a toe to cold track  
quick, pull it back  
dip your wrist in water near the bridge  
we shivered under

the train shakes  
the waterfall  
down

I stand at the window  
in my flannel gown lightning shows you  
raking in each pale astonished instant

pillows crowd the bed  
with their wrinkly cheeks

they could bob down the river like new potatoes

if we are a skiff  
then our arms  
are the long cool oars.

Here idea and image work flawlessly together to create a mood of intense poignancy, at once dreamlike and passionate. It is totally evocative of that timelessness which is part of love and making love, of those feelings of joy "so astonished," so sharp, as to be almost indistinguishable from pain.



**PORTRAITS OF CHINESE WOMEN IN REVOLUTION**  
by Agnes Smedley

Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568. 203 pp., \$3.95.

Agnes Smedley was born in the 1890's. Her father, a miner, was often unemployed. Her mother beat her and regularly accused her of lying. The family survived on money from a prostitute aunt who turned tricks for the homestead. These startling details are indicated briefly by Jan MacKinnon and Steve MacKinnon in the biographical introduction to *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*; Smedley's own dramatic account of her early life gives a sense of her remarkable resilience, a sense which is necessary for a full appreciation of the sketches in *Portraits*. Fortunately, the Feminist Press has made this account accessible, by reissuing Smedley's autobiographical novel *Daughter of Earth*, which she wrote at age thirty as an important stage in her psychoanalysis.

Having developed and reaffirmed her own psychological stamina, Smedley went on to become a war correspondent of international stature, and to publish four books on her experiences in China in the 1930's. She had gone to China with several goals, including her continuing mission—previously undertaken in Germany and India—to establish birth control clinics for women. Her involvement both in feminism and psychoanalysis gave Smedley a unique perspective on the underlying nature of conflict in historical events. In *Portraits*, excerpts collected from her writings on China, she recorded the revolutionary context with a depth of perception and emotional involvement unusual in political writings.

Through these 165 pages of sketches—which often read like short stories—we get a sense of the complexity of Chinese society of this period. The selections show how sexual politics fanned the flames of the revolutionary upheaval, and how it felt for Smedley, as an intellectual woman, to walk through them. One feels her courage. She mixed with revolutionary and reactionary men, rebellious and conservative women. She entered modern night clubs and war

trenches, went in and out of poor and wealthy homes. She made a sensitive record of what she saw and heard concerning women: not only the personal and political struggle of women, which in itself would have been an important contribution, but also men's threatened responses to the subversion of the traditional position of women. She elicited the intimate confessions of soldiers, the blood-curdling pasts of the strangest comrades, the sufferings of small boys. She wrote of young revolutionary men jealously pining for their fathers' concubines. She wrote of the anti-footbinding movement in the South, where women's associations took their cause door to door. She wrote of being a courted dinner companion of sophisticated Chinese patricians who were interested only in dynastic relics found in the countryside by anthropologists, and not at all in class or poverty or war. She wrote of a woman raped and killed while acting as a messenger on a revolutionary mission.

Since so many of the young Communists who became and remained powerful leaders were men from privileged backgrounds, Smedley's insights into their familial interaction, often reported through conversation, becomes useful for understanding long-range historical trends.

"I hate this man called my father," one of the male comrades said then. "Our families are a great load dragging all of us down to the bottom of the sea. I know so many young men ruined in this way. You may say we deserve it or we would rebel. In my native village they do not even know how to rebel; it is not we who are at fault—it is the system."

Some of the men from whom she drew such intimate confessions were furious at their fathers' privilege of buying second wives—at the emotional expense of the original wives, *their* mothers. One woman, whom Smedley described in a 1930 *New Republic* sketch entitled "Five Women of Mukden," unwittingly allowed Smedley to witness a dramatic scene: a son's protest against his father's purchase of a "sing song girl of 16."

My little hostess does not dare object. But her eldest son is a modern student in long black flowing robes, and he objects. He has told his father that he leaves home, never to return, the day he takes a second wife....They say Chinese sons love their fathers. Not the sons I have known.

The frequent disagreement between father and son over the proper treatment of wives and daughters was but part of the sex-role conflict; as imperialist penetration turned traditional China topsy-turvy, sons of all classes saw eroding from their own futures the kind of power exercised over women by their fathers. The conflict generated by this dynamic underlay the ambivalent relationship between feminism and the revolutionary movement, which later culminated in the crackdown on autonomous feminism. Smedley recorded the early aspect of this long-term conflict in an excerpt from *Battle Hymn of the Republic* entitled "Silk Workers." There she remarked upon the transformation of sex roles brought on by rapid developments in the Cantonese silk industry. Peasant daughters left their homes and were able to earn a living. Some refused to marry, preferring to live in Sisterhoods with women.<sup>1</sup> Others married but refused to live with their husbands. Thus, traditional male power within the family was undermined.

Smedley wrote lovingly about her interactions with some of these rebellious young women, whom her young male guide disapprovingly called "lesbians"; Smedley in turn makes clear her disapproval of *him*. In a moving scene of non-verbal communication, Smedley coaxed members of these Sisterhoods to re-enact, in pantomime, the gains which they had made through autonomous factory agitation. She did this by sketching pictures in her notebook, encouraging them to respond. By humming the Internationale, and not getting the reaction to those strains which would be familiar to any Communist, she discovered that their famous strike waves had occurred independently of Party organization.

Smedley didn't live long enough to hear the distortion of this history years later; today visitors to China are told only of the bitter slave-like past of Chinese women, and not of the victorious moments of rebellion that these working daughters carried out on their own. Smedley saw that men too were sold into slavery, that men too committed suicide over arranged marriages; she didn't live long enough to hear the post-revolutionary interpretation that passive resistance to marriage through self-inflicted death was the only protest method that Chinese women had been able to take into their own hands. She wrote of the spread of early Chinese feminism into the countryside, without knowing how the strength of the early Chinese women's movement would be denied, written off as a "tiny

handful of urban petit-bourgeois intellectual women," as if these epithets were not applicable to the students of the 1919 May Fourth Movement whose pasts are proudly recounted.<sup>2</sup>

Smedley was also a personal friend of Ting Ling, one of the early Chinese feminist writers who, in Yanan in 1942, was asked to withdraw her public stand on the lack of Party support for women in the sexual-political struggle.<sup>3</sup> Smedley herself had been asked to leave the liberated zones over similar issues, as we are told in the biographical introduction to *Portraits*. She didn't know that years later Ting Ling would be out of the Party, buried, unpublished, unknown. But perhaps the early relationship between the two women provided each with feminist solidarity, with support to speak out.

We owe gratitude both to Agnes Smedley and to the Feminist Press for reclaiming this part of feminist history. And Florence Howe's essay at the end of the volume helpfully examines Smedley's writings from the point of view of literature and style. She points out that Smedley was influenced by Eastern genres unfamiliar to the West; her writings must also be considered in the context of the genre of revolutionary writing which developed in her time, and which was highlighted by Mao's "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Art and Literature."<sup>4</sup>

*Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution* closes with a photographic collection: pictures taken by Smedley of nurses, women's corps members ready for guerrilla action, delegates to women's congresses. Best of all is a portrait of Smedley herself taken in 1939, which I wish had been put on the cover. Those of you who get the book should open it right away to page 192. There you will see a stunning portrait: backed up against shady trees, her face in the shadows, her short-cropped head off to one side, Smedley looks poised for action, yet pensive. A pen in her pocket, a star on her chest, a straw belt tucking her dark uniform shirt into her military-cut tight-waisted bottoms. This is the woman who will lead you through China with her own personal vision in these, her stories.

#### NOTES

1. Margery Topley has published a study of marriage resistance in *Women in*

*Chinese Society* (Stanford University Press, 1975), edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke.

2. In "The Fourth Mountain" (*Working Papers for a New Society*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall, 1973), Linda Gordon reiterates the official dismissal of early Chinese feminism available to the North American traveler in China. In her article "Response to 'Women and Revolution,'" Nancy Milton, a socialist and Maoist who lived in China, mounts a virulent attack against feminist Janet Salaff's critical discussion highlighting the need for an autonomous feminism even within post-revolutionary China. Their exchange has been reprinted in *Women in Modern China* (University of Michigan Press, 1973), edited by Marilyn Young. That volume includes other articles relevant to analysis of early Chinese feminism, as does *Modern China* (October, 1975), and *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford University Press, 1975), edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke.

3. Ting Ling's "Thoughts on March 8th," the article which drew her into public criticism, is available in pamphlet form from the Femintern Press, P.O. Box 5426, Tokyo International, 100-31, Japan, along with further information on the difficulties of the Chinese feminist. "March 8th" has also been reprinted in the *New Left Review*, No. 92 July-August 1975. A short story by Ting Ling and an article about her appeared in *Signs* Vol. 2, No. 1, Autumn, 1976.

4. In *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tse Tung* (Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1971). Interestingly enough, both the *Signs* and *New Left Review* articles cited above mention this as part of a rebuke aimed specifically at Ting Ling and several other writers.

**LETTER FROM AN OUTLYING PROVINCE** by Patricia Cumming. Alice James Books, 138 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138. 1976. 79 pp. \$3.50.

Patricia Cumming's book of poems, *Letter From An Outlying Province*, is as intricately formed as her individual poems. The book is divided into four sections, the first a thematic frame, the remaining three a chronological narrative tracing the efforts of a girl-child to cope with a trauma that began at birth, a trauma that is both social and personal.

The title poem, section one, introduces some of the natural and social sources of pain that the child of the poems will have to contend with. The woman of this poem is a piece of property to be bartered or captured by various mates. Their class determines her access to luxury, work, and nature. The higher the male's class, the greater is the woman's luxury and the less her labor, but the more absolute is her separation from nature:

Now the Commander's  
 wife, I'm heavy with gold chains,  
 silk; I scream at the servants  
 who *can not* keep the fires hot.  
 We use the skins  
 for bridles, girths,  
 for the soles of our shoes.

Thus the child being born in the next poem, the beginning of section two, not only faces the natural trauma of falling into air, but lands on an earth where generations of men have created "civilization," and where women have been alienated from one another and from the earth itself. The third poem, "An Attempt to Explain," then generalizes: mothers and daughters are pinned "flat" by civilization, are inadequately fed and hopelessly bound together. The personal aspect of the child's trauma is her particular relationship with her mother. The mother of these poems wants her daughter to mother her and is inevitably dissatisfied. The daughter thinks:

...Shut up!

Find someone other  
than a little girl to suffer  
at, someone else  
to scream to. You exact  
an audience for every act....

"Oh mother, please,  
have just a little, the turkey  
you cooked is so good," I said.

The alienation from both nature and mother results in alienation from self. The child's sense of her identity becomes self-hatred:

I none, she none,  
poor not anyone,  
I'll make you someone,  
hate

no one. Dark.

The rest of the poems in the book are a fascinating account of the daughter's journey from loveless despair and terror to adult willingness to be healed. This journey is linked not only thematically, but imagistically. The images of flesh against earth, of dance, of a tree, of eyeless sockets, of mirror eyes, of hollow people, and of teeth and food are woven in and out of the poems. Changes in these images signal changes in the psyche of the speaker. Ultimately, resolution of the speaker's trauma is embodied in the transformations of the images.

Cumming's handling of the image of the tree illustrates these transformations. The tree is first introduced in the second section, the "Raggedy Ann" poems. Once Cumming has established the suffering of the child, she records the child's dream. "Her dream, a Tree" begins:

I rot. In the forest  
the grown-up, wooden dolls  
laugh. The tree blooms.  
You say they're shadows,

tell me (*my mother  
said she'd hang me by the neck  
from that tree*), tell me!

The tree is seen both as a symbol of life and as an instrument of death.

In "Raggedy Ann Meets a Guide," Chiron, "hard as/rock in the winter wood," uses his hoof to smash the street, the facade with which civilization covers the earth:

his hoof cracked  
the street:...

and underground, underneath the splintered  
pavement, the waters  
smoked, Acheron! She fell  
through them, ran through the fire  
to a green  
changing  
wood, raging....

This is the first poem in which Raggedy Ann breaks away from entrapment in suffering. The tree and woods are no longer the destructive instrument of the mother; rather they are the image of the meeting of the daughter and nature. It is appropriate that in this first meeting, she is led by the half-beast, half-human Chiron; she arrives in a state of fury.

The anger which the daughter has discovered in the green wood finally erupts into violent poems of purgation.

the daughters and sons,  
mad, in the streets—

Everyone will see them...  
clacking their clappers like lepers  
clamoring at your iron doorsteps,

till you retch and split,  
and your guts become rivers  
of green fields, roots  
of orchards drive down deep  
in your breasts....

Here the orchard functions as an image of the transformed parents.

The entire latter part of the third section, "Accounts," is devoted to the image of the tree. The child tries to grow her own



mother in the form of a tree, an imitation of a legendary tree whose leaves and branches warded off nightmare, danger, fright, and loneliness. Even extraordinary care cannot prevent the tree from growing wild, covering her home, her body, herself. Fighting the tree's wild growth becomes so overwhelming that "one grows to love the vine, to need it. One becomes afraid of living without it." Finally, to save herself, she must abandon all she has known. As she does so, she sees the dreamed-of tree, but it is stone and she must walk away.

These poems and their imagery are so rich that they deserve more extensive comment than space permits. Suffice it to say that they identify a connection to nature with a connection to mother. They suggest that this identification must be escaped, and that when it is, the dream of connection to nature seems to turn to stone.

In the final section of the book, where the daughter has herself become a mother, her children become yet another obstacle to a reunion with nature; but in the last poem they leave and "will not be/back." At that point the daughter, through a dream, is led to "the center of the forest" by the magic dogs of a "man who knew all the plants." This time, in the heart of the woods, she is beyond rage: "I've come for herbs, to find clay,/to be still." The evolving pattern of tree imagery serves as one of the motifs resolving the trauma with which the book began. It is, of course, only one of the motifs in this amazingly intricate book, and is itself enriched by its connections with the others.

Patricia Cumming's book is notable for its variety of poetic forms, for use of cartoon, fable, and "how-to" formats. Its most distinguishing—and distinguished—characteristic, however, is the meshed connections, thematic and imagistic, among the poems themselves.

**GAY AMERICAN HISTORY** Lesbians and Gay Men in  
The U.S.A., A Documentary by Jonathan Katz

Thomas Y. Crowell Company. 1976. 690 pp. \$9.95.

Reading the accounts of lesbians in *Gay American History* is like taking the Rorschach, for they are lesbian lives or pieces of lives, often recorded in intimate detail, that beg our personal response. The book is tremendously exciting since it is impossible to read it without confronting oneself. Katz gives no comprehensive theoretical view, only the documents, selected and arranged to reveal six aspects of gay American history. All material relating to lesbians is conveniently identified, making a focus on this material easy.

"Trouble" begins early for the lesbian and continues late: in 1636, the Rev. John Cotton of Massachusetts proposed legislation which identified lesbianism as an "unnatural filthiness, to be punished by death," and in 1966, Louisiana determined lesbianism to be a "crime against nature," punishable by imprisonment. This is only legal "trouble"; "trouble" with family is revealed dramatically in the life story of Alice Mitchell who in 1892 murdered her lover when prevented from living with her. "Trouble" in women's prisons and reform schools, with their highly ritualized lesbian practices, seems more nearly a problem for the authorities than for the inmates who managed fairly well. Significant historically is the documentation that "The Captive," was responsible for the 1927 New York City statute which outlawed any treatment of homosexuality on the stage, and which remained on the books until 1967.

As with "Trouble," the "Treatment" section shows little progress from a document of 1893, in which a Dr. Daniel calls for the "asexualization" (removal of ovaries) of women with lesbian tendencies, to its last document of 1970 which reports the use of aversion therapy for treatment of lesbianism. Included also are a Kinsey source, Dr. Potter, who in 1933 identified the cause of lesbianism as psychological and hormonal disturbances, and a 1967 report which asserted that lesbianism was not a "conscious volitional preference" but a "massive adaptational response to a crippling inhibition of normal heterosexual development," hence justifying

attempts to "cure."

The documents in the "Passing Women" section, dating from 1782-1920, are the most intriguing in the book, partly for their detail but more importantly for the questions of motivation which they raise. Passing as men, these women were soldiers, hunters, politicians, doctors, artists, and railroad employees, often escaping detection until their death. Some explain their reasons for cross-dressing as feminist: Cora Anderson in 1914 asks rhetorically, "do you blame me for wanting to be a man—free to live as a man in a man-made world?" And Dr. Mary Walker cross-dressed in defense of the feminist dress reform movement of the early 1850's.

However, all of the passing women except Walker lived with women, most often legally married to them, thus suggesting other motives for cross-dressing. At one extreme are Mary East and her lover who in 1731 drew lots to decide which one would pass as a man, thereafter living together for 34 years. At the other extreme are Anna Mattersteig (1908), who "felt herself wholly a man" and Nicholas de Raylan (1906), whose wives both *believed* she was a man, aided no doubt by the fact that she wore an artificial penis. The most compelling of these accounts of passing women is that of Alberta Hart, born in 1892; as Katz says, her story reads like fiction, and, I would add, like lesbian life, capturing both struggle and joy. Its utter honesty should encourage lesbian readers to write their own life stories.

Accounts of lesbians in the "Native Americans/Gay Americans" section begin with a *Confessional* of 1593 which assumes the existence of lesbianism among Native Americans. Two accounts here are particularly interesting: one describes Sahaykwisa (c. 1850-c. 1895) of the Mohave tribe, who "professed to be a man," and married several times; each wife left her after being teased by the men or by her jealous former wives. The other describes a Crow woman chief (1855), a famous hunter and warrior, who for 20 years "had fame, standing, honor, riches, and as much influence over the band as anyone except two or three leading chiefs." Although this woman did not cross-dress, she did "cross-act" to the extent of having four wives who "added to her dignity as a chief." Noteworthy and shocking here are the tribal legends which depict the "offspring" of lesbian couples to be unnatural, one like a soft-shelled turtle, another like a football.

The "Resistance" section, though identifying lesbian materials from 1895, suggests that lesbians have been fairly quiet in their own defense. Of significance is material surrounding the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* in 1929, and a 1974 interview with Barbara Gittings which provides a valuable perspective on the beginnings of a lesbian movement in the 1950's.

The final section, "Love," with documents from 1823-1933, contains absolutely tantalizing stuff. Here, the sources are mostly the women themselves, speaking a language of love for women in diaries or letters, although their public lives for the most part are heterosexual. By definition these are women whose lives are of sufficient public significance to justify memoirs. Margaret Fuller recalls her first crush at age 13 for an older woman whose "whole impression, which, though too young to understand, I was able to feel." Almeda Sperry's excited letters to Emma Goldman reveal her jealousy of Goldman's devotion to a cause, but also her consolation that she has had "proof that the human side responds." Dorothy Thompson's diary exposes her ambiguous feelings about lesbianism: her words convey the intensity of a woman trying to get in touch with feelings she tries to deny by calling them perverse.

Thus ends the Rorschach. It seems to me that more than anything, more than their significance in documenting a lesbian history, these accounts enable us to better see ourselves—our denials, our struggles, and our affirmations.

**LESBIANA**, Book reviews from *The Ladder* by Barbara Grier [Gene Damon].

Naiad Press, P.O. Box 5025, Washington Station, Reno, Nev. 89513. 1976. 309 pp. \$5.00.

**LESBIAN LIVES**, Biographies of women from *The Ladder*. Edited by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid.

Diana Press, 4400 Market St., Oakland, CA 94608. 1976. 433 pp. \$5.75.

**THE LAVENDER HERRING**, Lesbian essays from *The Ladder*. Edited by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid.

Diana Press, 1976, 357 pp. \$5.75.

**THE LESBIANS HOME JOURNAL**, Stories from *The Ladder*. Edited by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid.

Diana Press, 1976, 326 pp. \$5.75.

If you have twenty-three dollars and a political, uncritical interest in lesbian lore, rush out and buy all four volumes. If not, continue reading this review. According to the editors of these anthologies, readers of *The Ladder* preferred book reviews and biographies. This might have been due to the lesbian's need for information during the murky fifties and the overcast sixties when *The Ladder* was a rare beacon to guide us through the fog of those unenlightened times. From 1956 until 1970 the magazine was the D.O.B. publication, becoming an independent feminist/lesbian review from 1970 until its demise in 1972. During this final period, subscriptions rose from 1,200 to 3,800. A complete reprint of *The Ladder* was published by Arno Press in 1975, but the three "best of" anthologies and the volume of book reviews now give us a more practical way to fill the nostalgia gap in our bookshelves.

Under the general heading of "Lesbian Resources" (120 entries), the Lesbian Liberation Front Newsletter for June lists

forty-one periodicals. Times have changed—styles have changed. If you shudder when you read “Miss” and could not care less about the bad old days, you can forego this trip down memory lane and subscribe to some of the current forty-one. If you care about our pioneer days, read on.

*Lesbiana* is an unedited reprint of Gene Damon’s book review column from 1966 through 1972. The format is maddeningly consistent in its fragmented state of one- to two-paragraph reviews. One wants to hear more about familiar titles, particularly when an evaluation one agrees with (*Sister George* is dreadful) or doesn’t agree with (Nin’s diary is great) is not explained, but simply stated, due to space limitations. This problem arises from the happy fact that the subject matter is so interesting that one reads the book cover to cover like a novel, rather than using it as the reference work it is intended to be.

The plot is fascinating. Our heroine, the lesbian as fictional character, is alternately, in any given year, exploited, tolerated, stereotyped or honestly portrayed. As the years go by, her lot improves and a happy ending is in sight. In 1966 our heroine is a stock character in the fictional repertoire, having survived the newsstand paperback exploitation period: “The tripe paperback titles declined in number—only 104 of them compared to 187 titles in 1965.” Instead of providing titillation for the male reader-voyeur, she becomes the major or minor character in thirty-three serious works during that year.

Reviews of biographies, bibliographies, and reprints of classics are predictable, but what amazes is the number of novels which Damon has unearthed. Many “best book of the year” titles are unknown to the general lesbian public: *The Microcosm* by Maureen Duffy, *Waltzing Matilda* by Judy Garniner, *A Jingle Jangle Song* by Mariana Villa-Gilbert, *A Compass Error* by Sybille Bedford, etc. etc.

At a time when the lesbian became an accepted character in general literature, Damon did not seem to miss a sub-plot in American popular fiction. In an aside to her puzzled readers who always ask “How do you find these books??” she details the laborious

process. She read and learned to interpret the book reviews in about twenty periodicals aimed at book dealers and librarians. Then on to general reviews for "suspicious" titles and "category novels" (school and college, segregated-institution, feministic, multi-cast family and isolated-situation novels). She also kept a file on promising authors who were bound to treat the Subject someday. She had scouts in other countries and always solicited help from her readers. From 1956 until 1971 she reviewed 2,500 books. All this was, of course, an unpaid labor of love.

Unlike the anthologies, this is a one-author book, and a sort of sub-plot develops as the reader watches Damon enter the era of feminism. Long after we have accepted her anti-marxist bias (the fifties, the midwest), we do breathe a sigh of relief when she renounces "Miss" and "Mrs." in 1971, upon receiving a reprimand from a reader. Right to the end, however, she refers to the women's liberation movement in the manner of an outsider, as do the women who even now write for *The New York Times*. Yet reading this book and the anthologies is a good cure for the malaise that often arises from our very own lesbian generation gap, for the work that Damon has done makes her, despite changing fashions, a heroine of our times.

*Lesbian Lives* is an anthology which should be kept in a drawer if one has straight feminist friends. All biographical sketches are illustrated with paintings or photos, and many of them will confirm the lurking suspicion that lesbians are man-identified women. Those not in drag are likely to be famous and only lesbian by speculation, which then confirms the suspicion that we exaggerate our numbers. But just between us, the faithful, it's a wonderful book—"entertaining," to be sure, as such popular non-fiction tends to be—but even informative, as the vague images of our rumored predecessors come into focus. Just what was Marie Antoinette doing? (a lot) or Virginia and Vita? (little, if anything) or Amelia? (nothing but looking fine). Others have done the detective work, and now the collection brings it all together, even if "it" is largely, by necessity, more interpretive than factual. The book is divided into sections entitled Famous Couples (3), Adventurers (7), Novelists (10), Queens and their consorts [sic] (6), Poets (8), Artists (6), Writers (7) and Pathbreakers (3). Herstory can be fun.

*The Lavender Herring* is a collection of essays which appeared in *The Ladder* between 1968 and 1972. The level of writing is uneven, but generally good; many of the ideas are radical enough for contemporary debates. There has been no legislative or PR breakthrough to make the rhetoric obsolete, as if often the case when the prose of other political groups is viewed retrospectively. With the current campaign against our civil rights, it is a time for marshalling our polemic forces, and the theoretical essays in this volume should be required reading before we take on our articulate enemies. The basic straight-gay understanding gap remains the same, so the arguments are classic—and all here in collected form. Rita Laporte in "Sex and Sexuality" goes even further than justifying our existence, showing that homosexuality is the true norm. Essays by Anita Cornwell deal with the persistent question of priorities for the Black lesbian. The only clearly dated (things are better now) topic is the struggle of the lesbian for acceptance into the hierarchy of the young feminist movement. The worst days are documented here and the continuing struggle for equality is analyzed.

Theory is only one category of articles, and they are interspersed with humorous essays, case histories of the everyday atrocities suffered by lesbians, and chapters from a fictionalized saga by Mary Phoebe Bailey on growing up gay in Kentucky. A final section of the book offers a series of essays on "The Lesbian Image in Art" by Sara Whitworth.

I must mention that several of the essays in *The Lavender Herring* display a racism and class bias which unfortunately have not been eradicated from the lesbian/feminist movement, though today they would probably be expressed in more veiled language. In "Getting Ripped Off," for example, Mary Phoebe Bailey views both her would-be rapist and the women she sees in her professional capacity as a caseworker with a contempt clearly related to their race and class.

*The Lesbians Home Journal* is subtitled "The Magazine Women Believe In." For true believers, the thematic content of this anthology will compensate for a certain stylistic awkwardness that is



endemic to amateur writing. Some readers might even be bothered by the content. In her introduction, Coletta Reid characterizes the stories as thematic "precursors, the first stage of a woman-identified literature." Skip this one if you are turned off by descriptions such as "I was not properly dressed, being properly dressed in navy silk with a green silk coat." (The editors might have dated the stories in order to make them more easily understood as a reflection of the consciousness of the times.) If, however, you are neither a literary critic nor a complusive trendie, relax and enjoy.

The timeless world of the first adolescent crush is the scene of five excellent stories, two of which are identified in the closing credits as "classics" from 1917 and 1919, reprinted in *The Ladder*. Another eternal theme is our first and unrequited love, as we crash against the structures of the straight world. Two stories by Isabel Miller, who will later write *Patience and Sarah*, recall all of that. As we grow older and reality sets in, we have special problems (family, shrinks, hecklers, etc.) and ordinary problems (seductions, jealousy, breakups, etc.), all of which are treated in these stories about us. Happy endings and sad endings get equal time, the way they do in real life. The fictional beginnings of our story make us aware of how much is still to be told.

## PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

- \* Kathleen Aguero, *Thirsty Day* and Miriam Goodman, *Permanent Wave*, poems (Alice James Books, 138 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138), 78pp., \$3.50.
- \* Robin Becker, Helena Minton, Marilyn Zuckerman, *Personal Effects*, poems (Alice James Books), 86pp., \$3.50.
- \* Shelley Blue, *The Fourteenth Witch*, poems with photographs by Deborah Snow (Persephone Press, P.O. Box 7222, Watertown, Mass. 02172), 63 pp., \$4.50.
- \* Stephanie Boyd, *25 Years of Malcontent*, poems (Good Gay Poets Press, P.O. Box 277, Astor Station, Boston, Mass. 02123), 25 pp., \$2.00.
- \* Jodi Braxton, *Sometimes I Think of Maryland*, poems (Sunbury Press, P.O. Box 274, Jerome Avenue Station, Bronx, N.Y. 10468), 51 pp., \$3.00.
- \* Karen Brodine, Patricia Dienstfrey, Marina LaPalma, Laura Moriarty, and Rena Rosenwasser, *Making The Park*, poems. (Kelsey Street Press, 425 Hudson Street, Oakland, Ca. 94601), \$3.75.
- \* Rita Mae Brown, *A Plain Brown Rapper*, illustrated by Sue Sellars (Diana Press Publications, 4400 Market Street, Oakland, Ca. 94608), 236 pp., \$5.00 + 15% post. & hand.
- \* George-Therese Dickenson, *Striations*, poems (The Good Gay Poets Press), 74 pp., \$3.00.
- \* Jeannette Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, afterword by Barbara Grier (Diana Press Publications), 420 pp., \$8.00 + 15% post. & hand.
- \* *GAIA's Guide 1977*, fourth edition (The Girls' Guide 1, North End Road, London, W. 14, England), 300 pp., \$5.00.
- \* Elsa Gidlow, *Ask No Man Pardon* (Druid Heights Books, 685 Camino del Canyon, Mill Valley, Ca. 94941), 16 pp.
- \* Gidlow, *Sapphic Songs*, poems (Diana Press Publications), 80 pp., \$3.50 + 15% post. & hand.
- \* Gidlow, *Shattering the Mirror*, illustrated by Kathleen Roberts (Druid Heights Books), 5 pp.
- \* Jane Canary Hickok, *calamity jane's letters to her daughter* (Shameless Hussy Press, Box 424, San Lorenzo, Ca. 94580), 44 pp. \$1.95.
- \* Rochelle Holt, *A Summer of the Heart*, poems (Ragnarok

- Press, Birmingham, Ala.), 7 pp., \$1.50.
- \* Ruth Ikeler, *For Those Who Cannot Sleep*, poems (New Woman Press, Box 56, Wolf Creek, Oregon 97497), 82 pp.
  - \* Willyce Kim, *Under the Rolling Sky*, poems (Maud Gone Press, 4220 Terrace St., Oakland, Ca. 94611), 39 pp., \$2.50.
  - \* Jacqueline Lapidus, *Starting Over*, poems (Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 63 pp., \$3.00 + 35c post. & hand.
  - \* Miriam Levine, *To Know We Are Living*, poems (Decatur House Press, Ltd., 2122 Decatur Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008), 94 pp.
  - \* Lynn Lonidier, *A Lesbian Estate*, poems (ManRoot Box 982, South San Francisco, Ca. 94080), 88 pp., \$4.00.
  - \* Carolyn Manning, *I Didn't Write This Poem* (Thorp Springs Press, 2311-C Woolsey, Berkeley, Ca. 94705), 6 pp., \$1.00.
  - \* Julia Markus, *La Mora*, a novel (Decatur House Press), 179 pp.
  - \* d. pat mattie, *No Lies No More Not Now*, poems (d. pat mattie, 61 Diamond St., San Francisco, Ca. 94114), 36 pp. \$2.00 + 25c post.
  - \* Shelley Neiderbach, *Lovestalk*, poems (Sunbury Press), 32 pp., \$2.00.
  - \* Christina Pacosz, *Shimmy Up to this Fine Mud*, poems illustrated by Patricia Sexton, calligraphy by Terry Tindall (C.V. Pacosz, Box 354 Chimacum, Wash. 98325), \$2.50 + 25c post.
  - \* George Sand, *Lavinia*, translated by G. Burnham Ives (Shameless Hussy Press), \$1.95.
  - \* San Francisco Conference on Violence Against Women, *Poetry From Violence* (Lighthouse), 55 pp.
  - \* Claudia Scott, *portrait*, poems (Lavender Press, P.O. Box 60206, Chicago Ill. 60660), 43 pp., \$1.50.
  - \* Maxine Silverman, *Survival Song*, poems (Sunbury Press), 27 pp.
  - \* Joyce Carol Thomas, *Blessing*, poems (Jocatu Press, P. O. Box 402, Berkeley, Ca 94701), 48 pp.
  - \* Gail Todd, *Family Way*, poems (Shameless Hussy Press), 32 pp.
  - \* Cornelia Veenendal, *Green Shaded Lamps*, poems (Alice James Books), 62 pp., \$3.50.

## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**ELLY BULKIN** is co-editor of *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* of lesbian poetry (Out & Out Books). She has written about women's poetry for *Majority Report*, *Big Mama Rag*, and other women's periodicals. She works at the Women's Center of Brooklyn College.

**GEORGETTE CERRUTTI** teaches English in Santa Cruz, California, has been published in *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology* and numerous other books and magazines. Her first book is *From a Dead Star the Light Is Moving Out*. *That Bone Place* is her book in progress.

**JAN CLAUSEN** was born in Oregon and lived in the Pacific Northwest before moving to New York in 1973. She has published a book of poems, *After Touch* (Out & Out Books, 1975), and is now working on a novel.

**SUSAN GOLDBERG** was born in New York City, where she continues to live, with a menagerie of cats. She is an unpublished writer, a singer of Yiddish folksongs, and does free-lance editing for a living.

**LIZ HESS** teaches college in the provinces.

**EMILY JENSEN** teaches at Lycoming College in Pennsylvania, where she conducts a poetry workshop for women which recently published its first collection (*Voices*). Currently on sabbatical, she is working on contemporary fiction written by women.

**PATRICIA JONES** Black poet from Arkansas now living in New York. Currently co-editing a women's poetry anthology tentatively titled *Critical Degrees*. Poems and literary criticism have or will appear in *Telephone*, *Out There*, *Bop*, *The Grackle*, *Hoodoo*, *Synergy*, *Big Deal*, *Dodeca*, *Chrysalis*.

**MELANIE KAYE** lives in Portland, Oregon where she does free-lance writing and teaches women's studies. She is a co-author/publisher of *Naming: Poems by 8 Women* (Olive Press, 1976). Her poems and articles have appeared in various journals. She is currently preparing a travelling mixed-media feminist art show with artist Paula King, and fantasizing about a state-wide women's art festival.

**IRENA KLEPFISZ** is a poet who has focused much of her poetry on the woman alone. Most recently her work appeared in the September issue of *Heresies*. A collection of her poetry, *periods of stress*, is available from Out & Out Books.

**JOYCE KOZLOFF** is a painter who lives in New York City, exhibits regularly at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, and is a member of the *Heresies* collective.

**SUSAN KRONENBERG** does street theatre and peddling, and lives on New York's Upper West Side. Her poems have been in *City Magazine* and will be in *Gold Star Mother*. She is in the *Women's Collage*—a poetry collective which is publishing a chapbook.

**JUDITH MCDANIEL** is a writer and teacher presently employed at Skidmore College. Current projects include preparation of a Contemporary American Women Poets course and an article on Christina Rossetti.

**INEZ MARTINEZ** received her basic formal education in Catholic schools, her political education in the anti-war and women's movements, and her education in symbols in literature and Jungian therapy. She teaches reading, writing, and women's literature at Kingsborough Community College.

**SHARON OLDS** lives in New York City, over the Hudson River. She teaches poetry at the Herzl Institute. She has had poems recently in *Ms.*, *Ironwood*, and *The American Scholar*, and she's in the market to give readings in 1977-8.

**JANE RULE** was born in Plainfield, New Jersey in 1931. She is the author of *Lesbian Images*, as well as three novels, *The Desert of the Heart*, *This Is Not For You*, and *Against the Season*, and the short story collection *Theme for Diverse Instruments* (Talonbooks). She lives on Galiano Island, British Columbia.

**SUSAN SHERMAN's** two books of poems *With Anger/With Love* and *Women Poems Love Poems* are available through Out & Out Books. She is currently working on a prose book about social change and the creative process, *An Autobiography of Change*.

**RIMA SHORE** studies Russian literature. She is co-author of *The Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Biography*, to be published by McGraw-Hill.

**BARBARA SMITH** lives and writes in Roxbury, Massachusetts. For the past three years she has been involved in a Black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective. Through Black feminist politics, she is beginning to find a synthesis between literature and life.

**BATYA WEINBAUM** has written about feminism and Chinese socialism in the women's issues of *Review of Radical Political Economics*. She is currently at work on a book entitled *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism*, and is also revising a novel. She has published essays, articles, short stories, and photographs in several magazines and journals.

Small-press books by contributors to *Conditions*: Two are available from:

Olive Press, 333 S.E. Third, Portland, Oregon

Out & Out Books, 476 Second Street, Brooklyn, New York 11215

Talonbooks, 201 1019 East Cordova, Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1M8,  
Canada

# Submissions

We are interested in manuscripts of POETRY, SHORT FICTION, NOVEL excerpts, DRAMA, and other creative forms (JOURNAL entries, excerpts from CORRESPONDENCE, TRANSLATIONS) as well as CRITICAL ARTICLES on the women's/lesbian movements and institutions, issues involving race, class, age and aspects of lesbian relationships. We welcome REVIEWS and review copies. We are especially committed to publicizing and reviewing women's press publications.

We are concerned that women's/lesbian publications have often failed to reflect the experiences and viewpoints of Third World, working-class, and older women. We want *Conditions* to include work in a variety of styles by both published and unpublished writers of many different backgrounds. We welcome submissions from all women who feel that a commitment to other women is an integral part of their lives.

We are also interested in receiving submissions for covers for *Conditions*. We have no specific preconceptions as to subject matter or theme, and will consider any form appropriate for an 8½" x 5" black and white cover bearing the title of the magazine and issue number. This might be a line drawing or other graphic, a photograph, or a half-tone of a painting, a collage, or sculpture. Please send a *photocopy* and not the original work.

Send manuscripts and art work to:

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Only manuscripts and photocopies accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope will be returned.

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