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Lesbian POETRY

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an anthology

edited by:

Elly Bulkin & Joan Larkin

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Lesbian POETRY

an anthology

ELLY BULKIN (*b.* 1944), editor of *Lesbian Fiction: An Anthology* (Persephone Press), is a founding editor of *Conditions*, a magazine of writing by women with an emphasis on writing by lesbians. She has written about teaching lesbian poetry in *College English, Radical Teacher*, and *Women's Studies Newsletter*; about racism and writing in *Sinister Wisdom*; and about heterosexism and women's studies in *Radical Teacher*. Co-editor of *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology of Lesbian Poetry* (1975), she is a member of the Lesbian Caucus of the National Women's Studies Association and the Editorial Board of the Lesbian-Feminist Study Clearinghouse. She had reviewed women's poetry in a number of feminist periodicals. An intermittent college teacher of English and Women's Studies, she worked for five years at the Women's Center of Brooklyn College. A Jewish lesbian whose father and maternal grandparents emigrated from Eastern Europe, she grew up in the Bronx and has lived nearly all of her life in New York City. She now lives in Brooklyn with her lover and their ten-year-old daughter Anna.

JOAN LARKIN (*b.* 1939) is the author of a collection of poems entitled *Housework* (Out & Out Books, 1975). Her work appears in numerous periodicals and anthologies and on the LP recording *A Sign/I Was Not Alone*. She has published reviews in *Ms., Sinister Wisdom, Woman Poet*, and other journals, is co-editor of *Amazon Poetry*, and is the recipient of two CAPS grants for poetry (New York State Council on the Arts, 1975, 1979). She is a founding editor of Out & Out Books, a women's independent publishing company which has published several volumes of poetry and prose and a series of pamphlets documenting ideas important in the evolution of lesbian/feminism. She has taught writing since 1969 at Brooklyn College, where she is currently an instructor in the MFA program in poetry. She has taught at the national Women's Writing Workshops at Hartwick College and has organized and taught women's writing workshops in New York, Maine, and Florida. She grew up in five Massachusetts towns near Boston. Of Scottish and Russian/Lithuanian/Jewish ancestry, she dates from childhood her desire for/suspicion of neat labels. For the past thirteen years she has lived with her daughter Kate in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Still learning to live with irresolvable contradictions, she is working on a sense of humor.

Lesbian POETRY

an anthology

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Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology is available free to women in prison.

We are grateful to Judith McDaniel for her suggestion that we organize the poetry chronologically in the order of the poets' dates of birth.

We dedicate this book to women of every race,
of every class,
of every age,
of every physical ability and disability.

We dedicate it to the women poets in every state and in every country
who write as lesbians;
to those who write in prison, at their work places, in
mental institutions, in their homes;
to those who must publish their poetry anonymously;
to those who have long been out as lesbians and as lesbian
writers;
to those who have found in this book the right place to
come out publicly.

We dedicate it to the lesbian poets who could not allow us to print their work;
to the silent women who have not yet begun to write;
to all of the women who find something of themselves in it.

We dedicate it to the women we love who make possible our lives and our words;
to our daughters—and to other women's daughters and sons—
that they may grow up to understand.

1975/1980

Prefatory Note

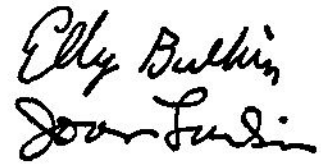
The appearance of this book raises the question—what *is* a "lesbian poetry anthology"? Some expect only love poetry; others, a collection of poems specifically about our oppression as lesbians. Instead, we have put together a book of poems that show the scope and intensity of lesbian experience. They were all written by women who define themselves as lesbians. And who have chosen, by publishing their poetry here, to affirm publicly that identity.

With us, they—and their poems—belie a simple sexual definition of lesbianism. Our lives have many sides. The poetry expresses them—growing up, sisterhood, sexuality, family, motherhood, physical disability, work, dying. Myth. Racism. Imprisonment. Old age, war, ritual. For us, this range says something essential about the nature and complexity of our lives.

The poetry also reflects our belief that, while we suffer special oppression as woman-identified women within a patriarchal society, our oppression does not stop there. Our lives are further circumscribed when we do not meet other norms of contemporary American society—when we are not white or able-bodied or young or Christian or middle-class.

For us, putting together this book combines the personal and the political. The poems convey both private joy and pain and humor, and a larger context of racial, economic, and social inequality and struggle. For many of these poets, the two points touch where there is a deep consciousness of the interrelatedness of women's experiences. Our decision to edit this book grew out of our awareness that, as Susan Griffin has written:

> . . . the risks other women take in their writings, casting off the academic shroud over their feelings, naming the unspeakable, moving with courage into new forms and new perceptions, make me able to write what before could not be written. In every sense, we do not work alone.



Brooklyn, New York
1975/1981

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Introduction: A Look At Lesbian Poetry

by Elly Bulkin

Of those hours,
Who will speak these days,
if not I,
if not you?
—Muriel Rukeyser,
"The Speed of Darkness"

1.

It was easy, a few years ago, to think that lesbian poetry didn't exist. It had, of course, always been there—dusty in rare book libraries, lost in love poems with changed or ambiguous pronouns, absent from the published writing of otherwise acceptable women poets.[1] Yet until fairly recently, we didn't know all this. Those of us who are lesbians seemed to have come from nowhere, from a great blankness with only a few shadowy figures to suggest a history.

We could find Sappho's poetry, all right, but only when preceded by the (male) assurances that "Neither the gossip of scandalmongers nor the scrupulous research of scholars should cause us to forget that [her reputation as a lesbian] is nothing but speculation."[2] We could surmise about Emily Dickinson's life, but until the fifties we were confronted only with a selected number of her published poems and letters.[3] We could stubbornly claim Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell and H.D. as lesbians—but they hardly constituted a lesbian literary tradition out of which to write or a history from which lesbians, especially lesbians of color or poor or working class lesbians, could draw strength.

The early women's movement in the late sixties and early seventies pulled together, uncovered, and touted a large group of respectable poetic foremothers. But not for lesbians. When commercial publishers decided several years ago that there was money in women's poetry anthologies, two appeared, but without more than token lesbian visibility. The 1973 publication of *No More Masks!* and *Rising Tides* was tremendously important, but it did almost nothing to establish lesbians as significant contributors to women's literature. The problem stemmed not from the lack of lesbian poets in each book, but from the impossibility of identifying them unless they were represented by poems about subjects connected directly and explicitly to lesbian oppression and/or sexuality.

I remember trying to read between the lines of the biographical statements in *No More Masks!* and *Rising Tides* to figure out whether the

author of a poem that moved me was a lesbian.[4] What, after all, did it mean when a woman was described as living with her young daughter? Who was the "you" addressed in very personal terms in a poem—a woman or a man? Where was I in these books? Was there a "we" in them?

The editors were of little help. In her long introduction to *No More Masks!* Florence Howe recognized the existence of lesbian poetry—at least *recent* lesbian poetry—but seemed to regard lesbianism as just one more theme women can write about; its political significance—and history—seemed lost. And *Rising Tides* managed to get through 400 pages (and five identifiably lesbian poets) without mentioning the word once (though we do have lesbian Judy Grahn's ironic description of herself as "insane, evil, and devious").[5]

Yet, however weakly, these early anthologies provided impetus toward the discovery of lesbian poetry for many women who lived away from urban and university centers and women's bookstores and who were unaware of and/or without access to women's press publications, readings, and periodicals. I did find in *No More Masks!* a poem by Wendy Wieber, "One, The Other, And," that I read over and over, having no other poems about the awakening that I myself was then experiencing; it begins:

> That sound like the scratch
> scratch of an old recording
> the static and scratch of an
> old recording that tight
> scratch was the sound of her
> hands in her head and that
> contracted scratch was the
> scar of her mouth and her
> eyes

and ends:

> They hadn't known
> for so much frost
> for bone cold fingers
> of the stunning hand
> and stings of the
> ice bee
>
> they hadn't known
> but gathered themselves
> unto one another
> gathered their selves

> into such a wholeness
> they took
> the blue knife
> and slit the belly of night
> spinning the sun into life . . . .

Experienced and written about by women all over the country, the expansive coming-out process Wieber describes resulted in a flowering of visible lesbian poetry. Included in such subsequent commerical-press anthologies as *We Become New* (1974), its own strength underscored its pivotal role in contemporary women's poetry.[6] A result was the type of critical consciousness about heterosexist assumptions displayed by Louise Bernikow in editing *The World Split Open* (1974). In her selection of women poets writing about loving women way back in the early 1600's, Bernikow begins to fill in the contour of a lesbian literary tradition and explains why the men who have written literary history have chosen to ignore its existence:

> Such men not only see themselves as "the world," they also see themselves as "love." Women who do not love men, and women who do not have sex with men, in the eyes of men, have loveless and sexless lives. Yet, for all obfuscation about it, the truth seems to be that most of these women poets have loved women, sometimes along with loving men. Women have found in other women exactly the same companionship, encouragement, and understanding that they did not find in men. Whether all the woman-to-woman relationships that exist in the lives of these poets were explicitly sexual or not is difficult to know, for taboo was always in the way and evidence that might have told the true nature of those relationships is missing. Yet what matters most is not who did what to whom in what bed, but the direction of emotional attention. Mostly, then, these women turned to women—and understanding that might be the beginning and end of a nonpatriarchal biography.[7]

This is new-found history. So, all except the youngest lesbian poets—or those who started very recently to read and write poetry—have had their work shaped by the simple fact of their having begun to write without knowledge of such history and with little or no hope of support from a women's and/or lesbian writing community. The differences between them are explicable, to a considerable extent, by the absence or the state of the women's movement when they began to write seriously.

The work of lesbian poets who began to write long before the existence of the women's movement must be understood within that context. Poets

like May Sarton and May Swenson have long worked in a world of traditional (white bourgeois male) academic values relating to every facet of poetry—its style, its structure, its subject, its audience.

We can sense Sarton's relief (and pain) when in her sixties—and only *after* her parents' deaths—she felt able to come out publicly through the appearance of her 1965 novel, *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*.[8] Finding Swenson's poem, "To Confirm a Thing," in a 1975 lesbian anthology, *Amazon Poetry*, we can read it, more than twenty years after it was written, with particular clarity:

> We are Children incorrigible and perverse
> who hold our obstinate seats
> on heaven's carousel
> refusing our earth's assignment[9]

If readers initially had some difficulty understanding these lines, their response is comprehensible given the poem's date of publication, 1954, two years before the first issue of *The Ladder*, the pioneering lesbian magazine. Even *The Ladder* reflects for at least a decade society's negative view of lesbianism (or what was long described in its pages as "deviance").[10] The weakness of the poetry it published before the late sixties seems to have resulted not only from the relative absence of other lesbian poetry but from the understandable reluctance of lesbian poets to appear in an identifiably lesbian periodical, especially during the assorted witch-hunts of the fifties.[11]

Given this context, the obliqueness of Muriel Rukeyser's coming out as a lesbian in her poetry is thoroughly understandable. Though I try to be alert to nuances that can reveal a poet's sexual and affectional preference, I had read through Rukeyser's work without thinking of her possible lesbianism until *after* I had heard that she had agreed to participate in the lesbian poetry reading at the 1978 Modern Language Association convention; when illness forced her withdrawal, she expressed to Judith McDaniel her hope that she would be included the following year, a desire that went unfulfilled because of her chronic ill health (and death in 1980 at the age of sixty-seven). Sending me back to her work, the discovery allowed me to understand for the first time that the opening poems in *The Speed of Darkness* (1971) celebrate coming out.[12] Only my continued ignorance of Rukeyser's lesbianism could support another reading of them.

Using the persona of Orpheus, Rukeyser speaks first in "The Poem as Mask" of having been "split open, unable to speak, in exile from/myself"; and the poem ends: "Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,/

the fragments join in me with their own music." A short lyric is followed by "The Transgress":

> . . . in the revelation
> thundering on tabu after the broken
>
> imperative, while the grotesque ancestors fade
> with you breathing beside me through our dream:
>
> bed of forbidden things finally known—

And the book's fourth poem, "The Conjugation of the Paramecium," describes how "when the paramecium/desires/renewal/strength another joy" it "lies down beside/another/paramecium," *like with like*, in a loving exchange that, we have been told in the poem's opening lines, "has nothing/to do with/propagating."

These few poems exemplify the potential for erroneous (or, at best, incomplete) reading of a writer's work if we are not aware of her lesbianism. "The Poem as Mask" has been—and can be—read as a positive statement of a woman's going beyond "masks" and "myth" to experience herself as an integrated whole. We can either perceive it in this general way—or apply what we know about Rukeyser's life (and about the following poems) and read it as a poem that thematically is very much like Wendy Wieber's "One, The Other, And." We have the further option of deciding whether to consider the "tabu" in "The Transgress" as a complete mystery or "The Conjugation of the Paramecium" as a purely playful extended metaphor without connection to the poet's lesbianism. We need, I think, to look at these poems within the historical framework of lesbian oppression and invisibility. How else to explain the obliqueness and obfuscation in work by a poet of characteristic clarity?

II.

The flowering of lesbian poetry that began slowly in the late sixties and had reached full bloom by the mid-seventies was rooted in the civil rights and anti-war movements, which supported challenging the various racist, imperialistic values of contemporary American society. Many of the lesbians who published their work in the growing number of feminist periodicals and who began the Women's Press Collective and Diana Press viewed themselves as radicals, as well as lesbians and feminists. Before we could find their poems bound in books, we could find them scattered through a newspaper like *off our backs*, whose 1971 headlines capture the general

political climate into which this lesbian poetry was born—*Indochina Lives; Angela Davis Needs Defense Funds; Women March on the Pentagon; Underground in America.*

Many lesbian writers found themselves pushed even more firmly out of the American mainstream by the anti-war, radical left politics of the times. Martha Shelley wrote for *Rat,* a radical newspaper in New York City; Judy Greenspan organized in Madison, Wisconsin against the Vietnam War. Others came from a poor or working-class background that seemed ignored or denigrated by a predominantly white, middle-class women's movement; Rita Mae Brown helped establish *The Furies,* a monthly publication (1972-1973) concerned with issues of class, sexism, and racism. Still others, like Willyce Kim and Pat Parker, suffered additional oppression as lesbians of color.

These lesbian poets were outsiders in American society. They felt no stake in its traditions, in its establishments, in its social/political/aesthetic values. Instead they sought to create a tradition that was anti-literary, anti-intellectual, anti-hierarchical. The tone was captured by Judy Grahn, whose "The Common Woman" poems (first published in 1970 in *off our backs*) celebrate the waitress, the mother, the lesbian, the prostitute, the childhood friend:

> For all the world we didn't know we held in common
> all along,
> the common woman is as common as the best of bread
> and will rise
> and will become strong—I swear it to you
>
> I swear it to you on my own head.
> I swear it to you on my common
> woman's
> head.

Grahn's direct, everyday language with a rhetorical drive draws on oral traditions of poetry—biblical, Black, beat, protesting—and seems meant to be read aloud at women's meetings. This oral quality, the sense that the poem should be heard with others, not read by oneself, is in the ending, too, of Judy Greenspan's "To Lesbians Everywhere":

> and someday
> there will be a great rumbling
> and we will join with all people
> charging forth like the wind
> they will never know what hit them.[13]

The focus in these and other poems is on the poem as bridge, not as obstacle. The work of these early lesbian writers seems to be deliberately, perhaps even defiantly, "anti-poetic." When they were gathered into books in the early seventies, the poems of these writers stood for a brief while as a separate, identifiable body of lesbian poetry.

Yet, even as these books were being printed, newer poems, appearing with increasing regularity in women's magazines and newspapers, were being written by an ever-widening group of women who defined themselves as lesbians. The reasons for this sudden increase in the number of women poets who so defined themselves are complex, involving changes within individual women, the women's movement, and women's poetry. These interactions—personal, political, poetic—are basic, but different for each woman.

Contemporary lesbian poetry comes from many sources. The earlier lesbian poets—Judy Grahn, Pat Parker, Fran Winant—continue to write. Long established poets like May Sarton and May Swenson have allowed themselves to be identified publicly as lesbians. Lesbian poets like Audre Lorde (published by Diane di Prima's Poets Press in the late sixties and by a small black male press in the early seventies) and Susan Sherman (published by a small white male press in the early seventies) can become more direct in their work and more publicly perceived as *lesbian* activists. Women who had already published heterosexually-identified poetry with large commercial presses and reaped Establishment rewards for it—Marilyn Hacker, Adrienne Rich—write from a lesbian-feminist perspective. A whole range of lesbian poets (most of whom had written earlier heterosexual poetry) put out exciting self-published and women's press books.

III.

The dramatic increase in the number of lesbian poets has also helped provide the impetus for uncovering an historical tradition of lesbian poetry. Much of the work that has been done on the best known lesbian poets—Sappho, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein—has been done by lesbians since the early seventies, contemporaneous with the growth of this poetry. Ongoing current work by Judith McDaniel on white, economically privileged poets who wrote at the beginning of the century—Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, Elinor Wylie, and others—reveals the tremendous extent to which they fueled each others' poetry and lives; while not necessarily lesbian in the narrowest sense, the community and the poetry they created certainly rests solidly on the "lesbian continuum" of woman-identified experience discussed by Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."[14] Unequivocally lesbian is the life of Angelina Weld Grimké, the Black descendant of slaves and

slave-owners, whose unpublished love poetry, diary entries, and letters were unearthed by Gloria T. Hull in her research on women poets of the Harlem Renaissance.[15]

Uncovering a poetic tradition representative of lesbians of color and poor and working-class lesbians of all races involves, as Barbara Noda has written, reexamining "the words 'lesbian,' 'historical,' and even 'poet'." A beginning problem is definitional, as Paula Gunn Allen makes clear in her exploration of her own American Indian culture:

> It is not known if those
> who warred and hunted on the plains
> chanted and hexed in the hills
> divined and healed in the mountains
> gazed and walked beneath the seas
> were Lesbians
> It is never known
> if any woman was a lesbian

The search is further compounded when the goal is finding not just a lesbian, but a lesbian *poet*, especially among those groups—Latinas, Appalachian women, and others—whose historical poverty leaves them without a tradition of "literacy" (or "literacy" in English), and without a way to get their written or oral poetry reproduced and distributed. We face a particular obstacle in attempting to uncover historical material by/about American Indian lesbians: the obligation to respect the beliefs of those tribes which maintain that the very act of writing down myths and stories is an act of disempowerment.[16]

The near impossibility of doing certain kinds of historical research is illustrated by Noda's response to my question about the feasibility of locating an Asian-American lesbian poetry tradition:

> Perhaps I could ask my 87-year-old grandmother who is one of the still remaining Issei women *if* she remembers any "strange" women who did not marry and associated mainly with other women. *If* by chance she could relate to the question and did remember such a woman, I would then have to trace the whereabouts of the woman. *If* the woman was still alive or not, *if* the woman left any available writings, I would then have a glimmer of a source that is historical rather than contemporary of an Asian-American lesbian. With the Goddess' blessing she would have been a poet and truthfully such a *woman would not be considered an Asian-American. Because if she* was an Issei like my grandmother, then she had been born in Japan and emigrated to the United States to become the first generation of women to live here.[17]

While the exact situation Noda describes is specific to Asian-Americans as a comparatively recent immigrant group, it also outlines general problems of finding lesbians—let alone lesbian poets.

Even where a lesbian poet is alive and quite ready to tell us that she has always been a lesbian, we need to look carefully at a concept of the "historical" that probably makes us more likely to place within a "lesbian historical tradition" someone like H.D., who was born in 1886 and died in 1961, than someone like Elsa Gidlow who was born in 1898, was writing lesbian love poetry at sixteen, and today continues to write. Gidlow, of course, lacked H.D.'s economic benefits—Bryn Mawr, travel to London, acceptance into the "cultured" world of Ezra Pound and the "Imagists." Instead, Gidlow reminds us to look for part of our tradition in the work and life of a lesbian who was the first born to a large, poor, white family; went without "the grammar school-high school-college education" she "craved"; spent "a lifetime of working fulltime to support . . . [herself] (and others at times)" and wrote both love poetry and "bitter social protest poetry."[18] Gidlow movingly depicts her attempts to combine writing and paid work "during decades when there was no unemployment insurance, if we (and those close to us) were out of work, no food stamps, no medicare, no social security or welfare for parents or others who might become dependent."[19] Despite the "crushing" burden of her economic situation, significantly compounded by her oppression as woman and as lesbian, Gidlow continued to write—and to fill in one chunk of an historical tradition of lesbian poetry.

No less valuable in beginning to put together that mosaic is Angelina Weld Grimké, whose unpublished work provides solid documentation of the forces that buried her own life and poetry—and certainly those of other lesbians of color who might have written poetry. As Hull writes:

> The question—to repeat it—is: What did it mean to be a Black Lesbian/poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century? First, it meant that you wrote (or half wrote)—in isolation—a lot which you did not show and knew you could not publish. It meant that when you did write to be printed, you did so in shackles—chained between the real experience you wanted to say and the conventions that would not give you voice. It meant that you fashioned a few race and nature poems, transliterated lyrics, and double-tongued verses which—sometimes (racism being what it is)—got published. It meant, finally, that you stopped writing altogether, dying, no doubt, with your real gifts stifled within—and leaving behind (in a precious few cases) the little that manages to survive of your true self in fugitive pieces.[20]

While Grimké wrote in forms that were generally compatible with the white male literary definition of poetry, some other Black women (lacking

Grimké's economic advantages and formal education) did not. Blues lyrics have proved a rich source of lesbian expression. Bessie Jackson, for instance, did a song called "B.D. Blues" (Bull Dagger Blues) during her career (1923-1935), while Bessie Smith sang several songs with explicitly lesbian lyrics.[21] Along with the songs of working-class white women, song lyrics by Black women and other women of color need to be explored seriously *as poetry* in order to find expressions of lesbian experiences, sometimes by women who might not meet a 1980's definition of "lesbian," most often by women whose own lives we can learn little or nothing about.[22] Where necessary, women's song lyrics—and other poems or poetic fragments—will have to be translated so that the words of lesbians whose sole or primary language was Spanish or Navajo or any of the multitude of immigrant tongues will not remain lost to us.[23]

While we have survived as lesbians for centuries "without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning,"[24] that mode of survival is finally ending. The work has already begun that gives historical shape to our lives and our literature. Hopefully it will continue in directions that encompass the diversity of past and present lesbian poetry and lesbian existence.

IV.

In 1975, at a point at which this work had begun with full force, Joan Larkin and I self-published *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology of Lesbian Poetry*, under the imprint of Out & Out Books. A slender volume (112 pages and 38 poets) compared to *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology, Amazon Poetry* appeared at a time that now seems long ago in terms of lesbian publishing: Violet Press was putting out its first two perfect-bound (as opposed to stapled) books of lesbian poetry; the Women's Press Collective and Diana Press were publishing frequently, prior to their merger and eventual folding; *Amazon Quarterly*, then the one widely distributed lesbian literary magazine, had just put out its final issue; and none of today's lesbian-feminist literary magazines—*Azalea, Conditions, Feminary, Sinister Wisdom*—had begun to appear.[25]

The poetry that has been written since the appearance of our 1975 anthology seemed to us to necessitate a new volume of lesbian poetry. Since no lesbian publisher existed until fairly recently with the printing and distribution capacity to reach our potential audience, Joan and I tried for a year and a half to sell the expanded anthology to a large commercial publisher. The proposed book was turned down by eleven publishing houses with a variety of comments: "limited scope" (Doubleday); "difficult to market" (Dutton); "quality . . . varies too greatly to justify the collection on the basis of poetics rather than of politics" (Harper & Row). A few of

the publishers had already printed "a lesbian book" and were waiting to see how it sold. We were fortunate that during this time Persephone Press emerged as a viable publisher. Keeping the book within the lesbian community, rather than publishing with one of the white male publishing conglomerates, was attractive to us, especially given our own involvement in lesbian publishing—Joan as publisher of Out & Out Books, mine as one of the founding editors of *Conditions*.

While we have reprinted *Amazon Poetry*'s Dedication and Prefatory Note, both slightly revised, and used work by all of those lesbian contributors who chose inclusion, *Lesbian Poetry* has turned out to be a new book, not simply an expanded version of an old one. As in the early seventies, women poets have continued to come out; some of the poets published here—Paula Gunn Allen, Marilyn Hacker, Honor Moore, and others—had not identified themselves as lesbians when *Amazon Poetry* first appeared. Joan's and my work in lesbian publishing introduced us to many lesbian poets, those published in a range of lesbian and non-lesbian feminist publications, as well as many whose work we had seen only in manuscript. Our physical proximity to the Lesbian Herstory Archives enabled us to read through both unpublished manuscripts and less widely distributed periodicals and books. Reading through this poetry, we have been well aware that we were putting together a book that reflects our own poetic tastes and personal/political priorities, rather than one which could be seen in any way as "definitive." In the time lapse between editing and publication, we expect many poems to be published which, had we seen them earlier, we would have published. From this viewpoint, the very vitality of lesbian poetry alone makes any published effort less than totally up-to-date and comprehensive. It will, we hope, lead to the appearance of other anthologies compiled by other editors.

Even in the apparent inclusiveness of an anthology entitled *Lesbian Poetry*, there is considerable invisibility. Our list of lesbian poets is shorter, and therefore less broadly representative, than the list of poets known in our community as lesbians. We have included only poets who have indicated a willingness to be so identified. Considering the external realities—the threat of loss of one's children, one's job, one's political and/or literary credibility in non-lesbian circles—the decision against inclusion here is far less surprising than the decision made by a sizable number of poets who, here and elsewhere, are willing to acknowledge publicly their lesbianism.

From this perspective alone, *Lesbian Poetry* must be seen as a the tip of an iceberg. The presence in it, for example, of Jean Mollison, a 63-year-old woman from rural New York who has many poems that have previously been seen only by close friends, serves as a crucial reminder of the existence of those lesbians whose work we have not seen, but who might very well have been writing poetry for four decades or more. They too, no less than

Sappho and Angelina Weld Grimké and Elsa Gidlow, are a part of the tradition of lesbian poetry.

In reading the lesbian poetry in this anthology, we cannot afford to forget the background of silence and denial and oppression out of which a vital, visible lesbian poetry has stubbornly emerged. While this background is important because it is at the same time not very far behind us and still present, the appearance of *Lesbian Poetry*—like the appearance of other publications by women who clearly identify themselves as lesbians—affirms our diversity, our creativity, our strength, our determination to continue to struggle and survive in a hostile world.

Notes

[1] See Louise Bernikow's "Introduction" to *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950* (New York: Vintage, 1974), especially her comments regarding Katherine Philips, "The English Sappho" (1631-1664); Aphra Behn (1640-1689); and Christina Rosetti (1830-1894). See also the entry on Margaret Fuller in Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Crowell, 1976), pp.461-467; Josephine Donovan's "The Unpublished Love Poems of Sarah Orne Jewett," *Frontiers* (Fall, 1979), pp.26-31; Willa Cather's *April Twilights (1903)* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976); and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981).

[2] Dudley Fitts in his "Foreword" to *Sappho: A New Translation* by Mary Barnard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), pp.vii-viii. Fitts goes on to say: "We have heard a great deal about Sappho, and we know almost nothing." [Has anyone who has read John Donne's heterosexual love poetry ever even suggested that only by going outside his poems to learn about the details of his life could we establish that he had been intimately involved with women?] For a discussion of Sappho's reputation since her death in 558 B.C.; the burning of her poems in the Eastern Roman Empire (c.380 A.D.) and Western Europe (eleventh century A.D.); and several distorting translations of her poems, see Dolores Klaich's "Sappho and the Lesbian Ghetto" in *Woman + Woman: Attitudes Toward Lesbianism* (New York: Morrow, 1974), pp.129-160.

[3] In "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes: "The essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as heterosexual or homosexual. The twentieth-century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love, is alien to the emotions and attitudes of the nineteenth century and fundamentally distorts the nature of these women's emotional interactions" (*Signs*, Vol.1, No.1, Autumn, 1975, p.8). I include Dickinson here because she wrote poetry that expresses profound emotional attachments to other women. For her and for other women who lived before this century, this seems to me to be the key issue, *not* whether her love for women was expressed sexually and regardless of the state of her relationships with men; I agree with Smith-Rosenberg that our definitions of lesbian and heterosexual, especially in the 1980's, have no applicability to an earlier period.

See, for example, poems 51, 84, 158, 346, 458, 494, 631, 727, 1219, 1249, 1414, 1568 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H.Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) and letters 73, 74, 88, 94, 172, 177, 222 in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, eds. Thomas H.Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). These letters are cited by Lillian Faderman in "Emily Dickinson's Letters to Sue Gilbert," *Massachusetts Review* (Summer, 1977), pp.197-225 and "Emily Dickinson's Homoerotic Poetry," *Higginson Journal*, 1978, No. 18, pp. 19-27. See also Frederick L. Morey, "Emily Dickinson's Elusive Lover," *Higginson Journal*, 1978, No. 18, pp. 28-34; Paula Bennett, "The Language of Love: Emily Dickinson's Homoerotic Poetry," *Gai Saber* (Spring, 1977), Vol. 1, No.1; Jennifer Woodul, "Much Madness is Divinest Sense," *The Furies* (February, 1972).

[4] *Rising Tides: 20th Century American Women Poets*, eds. Laura Chester and Sharon Barba (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973). *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women*, eds. Florence Howe and Ellen Bass (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973).

[5] *Rising Tides*, p.280.

[6] *We Become New*, eds. Lucille Iverson and Kathryn Ruby (New York: Bantam, 1975).

[7] *The World Split Open*, pp.14-15.

[8] May Sarton, *A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations* (New York: Norton, 1976), p.22.

[9] Swenson, "To Confirm a Thing," *Amazon Poetry: An Anthology of Lesbian Poetry*, eds. Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin (Brooklyn, New York: Out & Out Books, 1975), p.81. "To Confirm a Thing" was originally published in Swenson's *Another Animal: Poems* (New York: Scribner's, 1954). See also "Poet to Tiger" and "Deciding" in *New & Selected Things Taking Place* (New York: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1978).

[10] *The Ladder* was published by the Daughters of Bilitis from 1956 to 1970; it was published independently until 1972 when it ceased publication. A reprint of the complete *Ladder* was issued in 1975 by Arno Press (New York). *Lesbiana, Book Reviews from the Ladder* (1976), edited by Barbara Grier, is available for $5.00 from Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302; *Lesbian Lives, Biographies of Women from the Ladder; The Lavender Herring, Lesbian Essays from the Ladder*; and *Lesbians Home Journal, Stories from the Ladder*, all edited by Barbara Grier and Coletta Reid, were published by Diana Press (1976). Editor of *The Ladder* from 1968 to 1972 and a frequent contributor for most of the life of the magazine, Barbara Grier wrote most frequently under the name of Gene Damon, as well as under a number of other pseudonyms.

[11] In *Gay American History*, Jonathan Katz documents "the simultaneous witch-hunting of 'perverts' and 'subversives'... taking place" from 1950-1955 (p.91). A supporter of Senator Joseph McCarthy, Senator Kenneth Wherry, Republican floor leader, is quoted in a July 17, 1950 *New York Post* interview with Max Lerner: "'You can't hardly separate homosexuals from subversives,' the Senator told me. 'Mind you, I don't say every subversive is a homosexual. But a man of low morality is a menace in the government, whatever he is, and they are all tied up together'" (p. 95). In the same interview, he says: "You can stretch the security risk further if you want to... but right now I want to start with the homosexuals. When we get through with them, then we'll see what comes next" (p. 96).

[12] All quotes are from the Vintage edition. See also Judith McDaniel's "A Conversation with Muriel Rukeyser," *New Women's Times Feminist Review* (April 25-May 8, 1980), pp. 4-5, 18-19.

[13] *To Lesbians Everywhere* (New York: Violet Press, 1976), pp.42-43.

[14] Unpublished material and discussions with Judith McDaniel. Rich, *Signs*, Vol.5, No.4 (Summer, 1980), 648. Rich writes: "I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear it in such associations as *marriage resistance* and the 'haggard' behavior identified by Mary Daly . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism' " (648-649).

[15] Hull, " 'Under the Days': The Buried Life of Angelina Weld Grimké," *Conditions: Five, The Black Women's Issue* (1979), pp.17-25.

[16] Conversation with Paula Gunn Allen; see also her article, "Beloved Women: The Lesbian in American Indian Culture," *Conditions: Seven* (1981). Jacqueline Higgins Rosebrook makes the same point regarding loss of power in "Look What You've Done to My Song," *Heresies No. 10* (1980), p.84.

[17] Noda, letter to the author, October 4, 1978. See also Barbara Noda, Kitty Tsui, and Zee Wong, "Coming Out: We Are Here in the Asian Community: A Dialogue with Three Asian Women," *Bridge*, Vol.7, No.1 (Spring, 1979), pp.22-24.

[18] Gidlow, "Footprints in the Sands of the Sacred," *Frontiers*, Vol.IV, No.3 (1979), pp.48-49.

[19] Gidlow, p.50.

[20] Hull, p.20. See also Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," *Black Scholar*, Vol.9, No.7 (April, 1978), pp.31-35. Barbara Smith writes: "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 and not, must face" ("Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions: Two* [Fall, 1977], p.39).

[21] Bernikow includes blues lyrics and protest songs of working women in *The World Split Open*, although none of the songs she cites has lesbianism as a theme. "B.D. Blues" is available on *When Women Sang the Blues* and on *AC/DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues*. In Chris Albertson's discussion of Bessie Smith in *Gay American History*, he quotes "The Boy in the Boat": "When you see two women walking hand in hand,/Just look 'em over and try to understand . . ." (p.76).

[22] Paul Lauter's "Working-Class Women's Literature—An Introduction to Study" contains a lengthy bibliography (*Radical Teacher* [December, 1979], pp. 16-26).

[23] Rich, p.649.

[24] *Azalea*, A Magazine By & For Third World Lesbians is available from 306 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11238 ($6/4 issues; $10 institutional subscriptions; $2/single issue; free to women in prison—make checks payable to J.Gibbs). Information about these other lesbian magazines is included under Works by Contributors. The most up-to-date information about lesbian periodicals is in the Media Report to Women *Index/Directory of Women's Media* ($8 from Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, 3306 Ross Place, NW, Washington, DC 20008).

Lesbian POETRY

an anthology

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Moving, beautiful and of prime importance. Recovery and discovery that establishes the substantial contribution to literature by lesbian poets, in all their complexity and diversity. Should be taught and read wherever there is concern for poetry of women.

Tillie Olsen

The rare quality of many of these poems is their integrity—the truth that happens when women talk directly to each other. At a time when differences among us and repression from outsiders seem ready to crush us, it is enlivening to find such a variety of Lesbians who are willing to deal in truths. Because they do, Lesbian Poetry is a book I need.

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The complexity and richness of the work in Lesbian Poetry is a testament to our art and our survival.

Audre Lorde

There is in literature a speaking 'from' and a speaking 'to.' Most poets naturally speak 'from,' that is they say—oh, I want, see, think, rage, feel—but the speaking 'to' which artists long for, to be heard and even answered, doesn't happen so often; it requires an identifiable 'from.' The poets in this anthology say—I am a woman, a lesbian, one among many, and now I will tell you a song.

Grace Paley

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