

# NARRATIVES



poems in the tradition of black women

by CHERYL CLARKE

### **Editorial Note:**

This electronic edition of *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* includes a new introduction by Cheryl Clarke and facsimile reproductions of both the first and second editions of *Narratives*.

The first facsimile reproduction of *Narratives*, which begins after the new introduction, is the second edition of *Narratives*, published and distributed by Kitchen Table Press in 1983. The second facsimile reproduction of *Narratives*, which begins after the first facsimile reproduction, is the first edition of *Narratives*, self-published by Cheryl Clarke under the imprint Sister Books in 1982.

## Introduction

*dedicated to the late Linda C. Powell—1953-2014*

Were it not for the late Linda C. Powell, originally of Chicago, I would never have put *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* out there, in print. She said, “Baby, you need a book.” She wasn’t calling me out of my name by calling me “Baby.” She called everybody “Baby” at some point or other. If I’m not careful this whole introduction could be about Dr. Powell, one of the first black feminists (and I insist on the lower case) I met, after Barbara Smith, thanks to the first “Black Feminist Retreat” organized by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, circa 1977. I had been “out” as a lesbian for three years, and I thought I was “hot stuff” and got on everybody’s nerves. (Attending these four “Black Feminists Retreats” has caused some to think I was a member of the Combahee River Collective. I wasn’t. I was living in New Brunswick, NJ not Boston, and had just been involved in the political defense of Assata Shakur.)

When I resolved to produce *Narratives*, as a book, I asked Linda, also a contributor to the iconic *Conditions: Five, the black women’s issue*, as well as to the later expansion, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, whether I should identify the work as addressing a black women’s aesthetics, politics, culture, and history. She was ambivalent about the efficacy of a brazen black identity in 1982. So was I. I began to think that I needed to write myself into the literary history of black women. I thought mostly of Alice Walker’s fiction and her recovery of Hurston. But Walker had a major press from early on, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. So, a poet, a friend of Linda’s, counseled, “Self-publishing is

an honorable route for poets. Walt Whitman.” I began to meet women who could help me produce the “book.” Gay Belknap, a graphic artist in New Brunswick to make the drawings. A printer—Iowa City Women’s Press. A distributor—Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. But back to the blackness angle: Yes, so, I cast myself into the sorority of black women writers writing black women’s stories, i.e., *poems in the tradition of black women*. I took on the language of that tradition. I retained the lower case letters as a critique of black nationalism and its arguments over how many capital letters should distinguish a black subject.

*Narratives* was a grassroots, communal effort. The first edition records the names of 98 people who contributed dollars to its production. Of that 98, 45 women came to Linda’s loft on W. 14th Street in 1982 to see the first performance of “Narratives: A Dramatic Event,” which dramatized in ensemble fashion the poems. My sister, Breena Clarke, directed and performed in it along with her performing partners, Gwendolen Hardwick and, yes, Linda C. Powell. We had learned to take the writing to the people who wanted it most—feminists and lesbian-feminists of all colors. Because of their donations I was able to pay for the printing of 1,000 copies, just in time for Kitchen Table Press to promote *Narratives* as its first book. This fact often gets lost in the retelling of feminist history.

The cover of the 1982 edition was red with a 2” x 4” black and white photo from circa 1954 in Washington, DC of my female relatives. You can see from left to right: Edna Payne Clarke (1916-2003), my mother, Hannah Logan (1898-1962), my cousin, Luise H. Jeter (1918-2008), my mother’s sister, and at the very end of that row, Pearl Edith Payne (b. 1933), my

sister; on the floor (l-r), me (b. 1947), Breena Clarke (b. 1951), my younger sister. My father, James S. Clarke (1912-2009), was the designated photographer. The idea of using that vintage photo on the cover was to create visual notions of who black women are.

Looks are everything. And I tried to give the narratives of *Narratives* a realistic visual sense. I tried to draw from what I presumed were a diversity of experiences. And like Judy Grahn did in *A Woman Is Talking To Death*, I got some lesbian desire and some lesbianism into the text, particularly in the poems “hair: a narrative,” “Of Althea and Flaxie,” “the moon in cancer,” and “Mavis writes in her journal.”

It is passing strange to be in the company  
of black women  
and be the only one who does not worry about  
not being with a man. (“hair: a narrative”)

But Rachel is cancer  
tropical and lovable,  
fluid,  
charismatic, self-contained,  
gregarious, predatory  
and mean.  
Unlike me  
who only ever wanted  
Rachel between me . . . .  
 (“The moon in cancer”)

. . . I know Geneva loves me  
More than the man she sleeps with every night.  
 (“Mavis writes in her journal”)

But any of the women, not just the lesbians,  
characterized in *Narratives* might have been lesbians.  
Look at Vashti in “If you black get back,” Rosaline in  
“gum,” Gail in “Gail,” and the narrator in “Waiting up.”

The second edition of *Narratives* included two new poems, which the publishers and editors at Kitchen Table were not ecstatic to add because of the extra cost. “The johnny cake” and “cantaloupe” were added. The photo prevailed with beige color on slick stock. I find I must talk about the physical production, because these tasks are often taken for granted in the world of Kindles, Nooks, print on demand--and I am not belittling these devices and options. Who knows whose life will depend on accessibility to a Kindle, Nook, or print on demand. Still, I want to remember and make visible the labor we did to get our words out into the world.

Of course being a 35-something when *Narratives* was first published, I was still coming of age. Coming of age in my writing, coming of age in my lesbian-feminism, and coming of age in my understanding of black women's lives. Perhaps I am still coming of age. I know neither black women nor our traditions are a primary consideration when major policy decisions like “My Brothers’ Keeper” are fostered by our current administration. One gets a little weary with the exercise of gender privilege. Hopefully, rereading or reading for the first time, you will find my first book of poems seriously engaged in the politics of gender privilege, sexism, racism, ageism, patriarchy. Hopefully, you will stand up for a feminist response as is being done.

I claim Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, ntozake shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuff*, and Alice Walker’s *In Love and Trouble* as force-fields of inspiration to “sing a black girl's song” (shange). I thank the Iowa City Women's Press for first printing me. I thank Gaia as always for her drawings; Breena Clarke, Gwendolen Hardwick,

and, of course, the late Linda C. Powell for continuing to perform *Narratives* as a theater piece in the 1980s; Julie R. Enszer for her own *work* to keep my *work* in front of you, dear readers. Enjoy this digital *Narratives*.

Always,

Cheryl Clarke

June 15, 2014

[cherylclarkepoet.com](http://cherylclarkepoet.com)



The late Linda C. Powell



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Benefit for the publication of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, c. 1983.

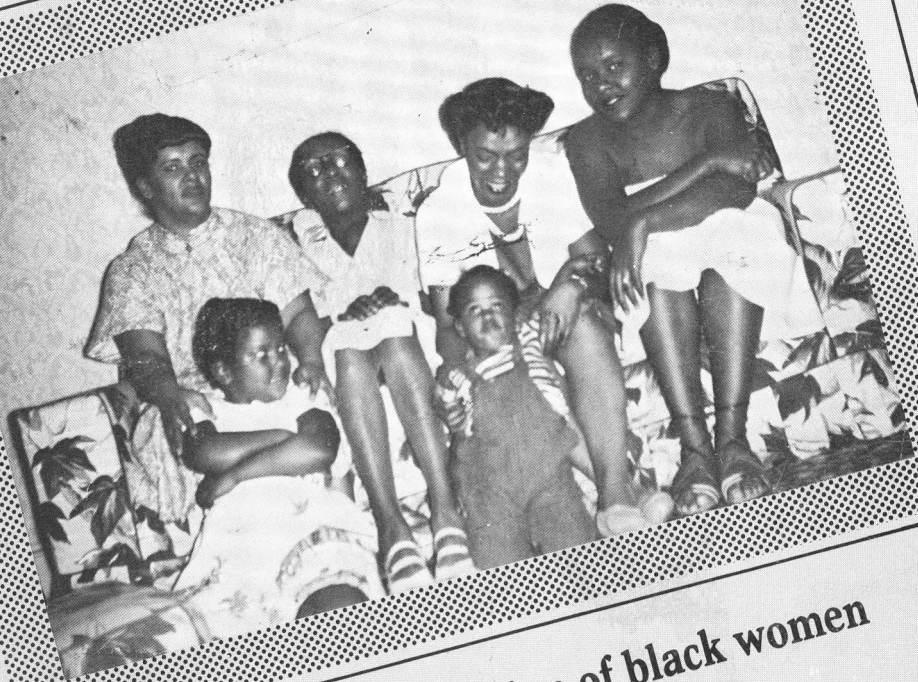
Front row, left to right: Raymina Mays, Donna Allegra, Linda C. Powell.

Back row, left to right: Jewelle L. Gomez, Audre Lorde, Michele Cliff, Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, Shirley Steele (bended), Akasha (Gloria) Hull.

Photo by Colleen McKay.



# NARRATIVES



poems in the tradition of black women  
Second Edition

by **CHERYL CLARKE**  
9 exquisite drawings by Gaia

written on paper napkins

*poems in the tradition of*

# NARRATIVES

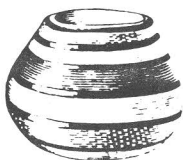
The

**poems in the tradition of black women**

Second Edition

by **CHERYL CLARKE**

**Kitchen Table**  
**Women of Color Press**



**New York**

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## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Finally all the scattered pieces of poems tucked in files and notebooks, written on paper napkins and envelopes have come together in *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women*.

The decision to publish my narrative poems has been a slow process. I have always been drawn to narrative poetry because my living has been infused with storytelling. Since I can remember, I have always wanted to be able to tell a good story. Fortunately, I had access to the stuff of good tales—the lives of black women and the history of black women. *Narratives* is an attempt to present one black woman poet's use of her imagination in this regard. It will be noted that several of the pieces are not narratives in the strictest sense. The narrative takes many forms for me as a poet: the telling of a life, the telling of an event, the telling of an image.

I am fortunate again, given the cultural-political climate which consistently undervalues and dismisses the power of poetry, to have been surrounded by women who believe in the power of poetry and the power of my poetry. This community of women has always encouraged me to write and to publish my poetry. I am happy to be able to show them the tentative fruits of their encouragement.

I would like to thank Linda Powell for pushing me to publish this volume and for her faithful performance of several pieces of the work you have before you on June 20, 1982 SYNERGY production of "Narratives: a dramatic event." Jean Sirius is to be resoundingly thanked for schooling me in the art of self-publishing, and spending many hours typesetting the manuscript. Elly Bulkin, editor par excellence, must be thanked for providing critical feedback on the poems in her tenacious editor's way. And I would like to thank Carol Sanchez, who early professed her belief in my ability to write poetry and who consistently supported my struggle to write it. My parents, Edna and James Clarke, have always supported my every endeavor to be and to say—"thanks" is not even sufficient.

Cheryl Clarke

June 30, 1982

## FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

*Narratives: Poems in the tradition of black women* is expanded in its second edition by two new narratives, "The johnny cake" and "Cantaloupe." The nine exquisite drawings by Gaia (Gay Belknap) remain as a celebration of the fusion of two artistic processes. And *Narratives* is still as much a celebration of living, of art, of poetry as it is a celebration of black women's lives.

Cheryl Clarke  
May 16, 1983

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**NARRATIVES**    poems in the tradition of black women





## hair: a narrative

it is passing strange to be in the company  
of black women  
and be the only one who does not worry about  
not being with a man  
and even more passing strange  
is to be among black women  
and be the only one wearing her hair natural  
or be the only one who has used a straightening  
iron

An early childhood memory:

me: sitting in the kitchen  
holding down onto my chair  
shoulders hunching  
toes curling in my sneakers.

my mother: standing behind me  
bracing herself against the stove  
greasing the edges of my scalp  
and the roots of my hair violently  
heating the straightening comb alternately  
and asking between jerking and pulling:

'why couldn't you have *good* hair?'

by the time mother finished pressing my virgin wool  
to patent leather,

I was asking why I had to have hair at all.

(the first time I heard a straightening iron crackle  
through my greased kitchen, I thought a rattlesnake  
had got loose in the room.)

so much pain to be black, heterosexual, and female  
to be trained for some *Ebony* magazine mail order man  
wanting a woman with long hair, big legs, and able  
to bear him five sons.

hardly any man came to be worth the risk of nappy edges.

the straightening iron: sado-masochistic artifact  
salvaged from some chamber of the Inquisition  
and given new purpose in the new world.

what was there  
about straight hair  
that made me want to suffer  
the mythical anguish of hell  
to have it?

made me a recluse  
on any rainy, snowy, windy, hot, or humid day,  
away from any activity that produced the least  
moisture to the scalp.  
most of all sex.

(keeping the moisture from my scalp  
always meant more to me  
than fucking some dude.)

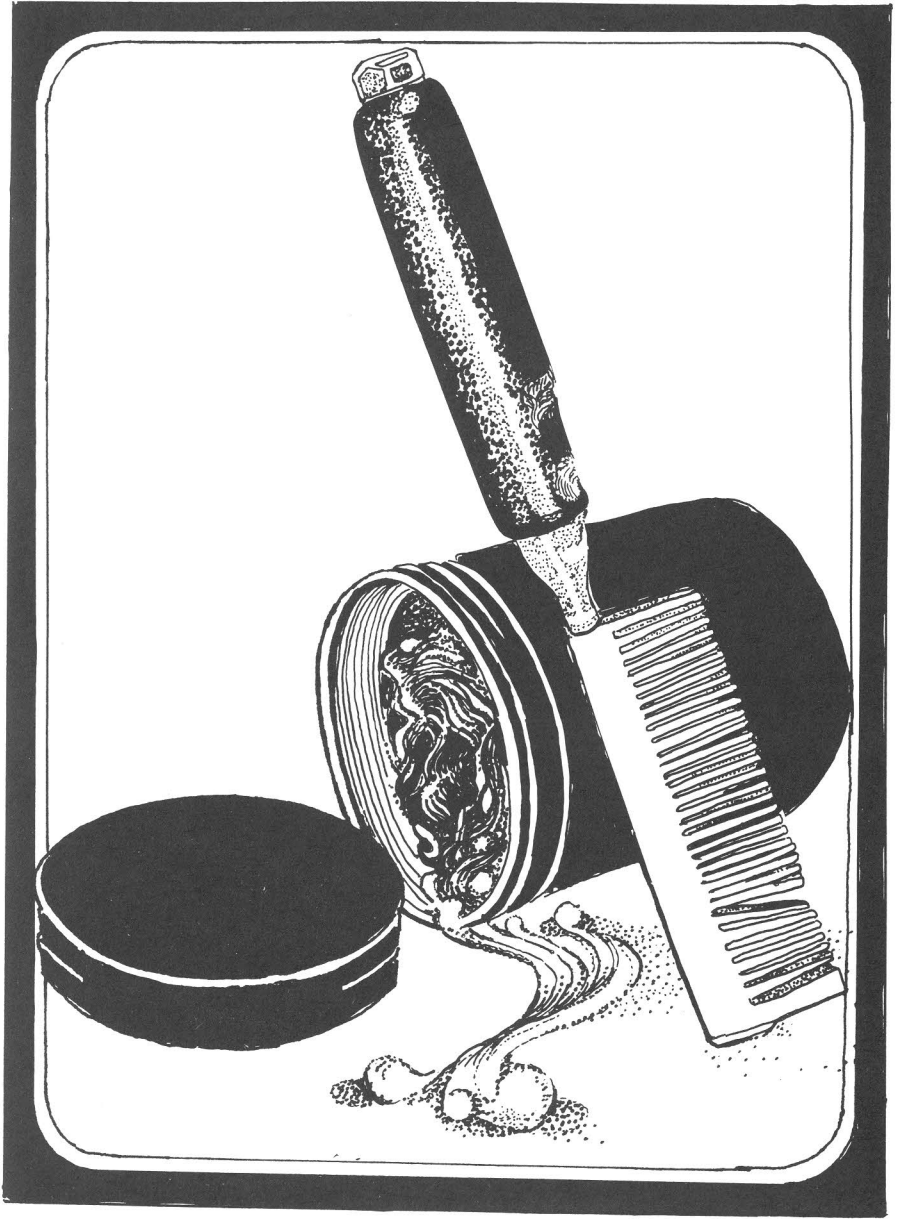
there was not  
a bergamot  
or a plastic cap  
that could stop  
water  
from undoing  
in a matter of minutes  
what it had taken hours of torture  
to almost perfect.  
I learned to hate water.

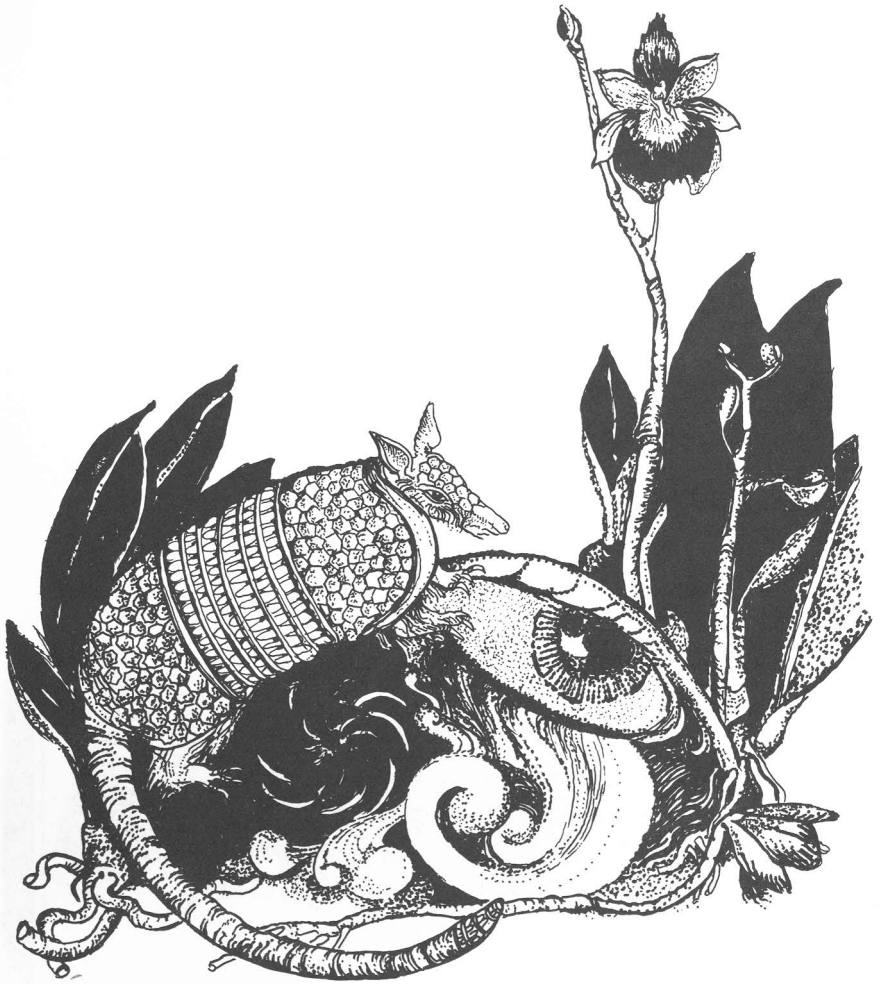
I am virgo and pragmatic  
at fifteen I made up my mind  
if I had to sweat my hair back with anyone  
it would be my beautician.  
she made the pretense bearable.

once a month I would wait several hours  
in that realm of intimacy  
for my turn in her magical chair  
for my four vigorous shampoos  
for her nimble fingers to massage  
my hair follicles to arousal  
for her full bosom to embrace  
my willing head  
against the war of tangles  
against the burning metamorphosis  
she touched me naked  
taught me art  
gave me good advice  
gave me language  
made me love something bout myself.

Willie Mays' wife thought integration  
meant she could get a permanent in a  
white woman's beauty salon.  
and my beautician telling me to love myself  
applying the chemical  
careful of the time  
soothing me with endearments  
and cool water to stop the burning  
then the bristle rollers  
to let me dry forever  
under stacks of *Jet*, *Tan*, and *Sepia*.  
and then the magnificence of the comb-out.

'au naturel' and the promise of  
black revolutionary cock a la fanon  
made our relationship suspect.  
I asked for tight curls.  
my beautician gave me a pick  
and told me no cock was worth so drastic a change.  
I struggled to be liberated from the supremacy  
of straight hair,  
stopped hating water  
gave up the desire for the convertible sports coup  
and applied the lessons of my beautician  
who never agreed with my choice  
and who nevertheless still gives me language, art,  
intimacy, good advice,  
and four vigorous shampoos per visit.





**if you black get back**

Vashti

with her one brown  
and one hazel eye  
was an ugly and dirty little black girl  
whose nappy hair could not hold a curl  
whose name nobody even wanted to say  
much less to play  
with her  
so in awe of browns and tans we were

Vashti

with her hard hazel eye  
was dull in school  
but broke no rule.  
Teachers laughed openly at her stutter.  
Frequently calling upon her to read aloud.  
Cowed, her face swelling like an udder,  
she would rise to the effort  
and the humiliation.



Vashti's hair was never straightened.  
To be black was bad enough.  
To be black and have nappy hair  
was just plain rough.  
Boys terrorized her.  
Girls scorned her.  
Adults walked the other way  
to avoid the play  
of Vashti's eyes  
marking their cruelty.

So black she could stand out in a coal bin.  
So black she was most nearly blue.  
So black it was a sin.  
So black she could stop the dew.  
Vashti learned to live  
and love with pain.  
Wore it like a coat of armor  
rather resembling an armadillo.

## The Older American

Lettie Walker was 71  
when she was struck unconscious in the street  
by a hit and run driver  
who seemed not to have obeyed the stop sign  
or perhaps became impatient with her halt gait.

Mrs. Walker,  
a widow  
long past the empty-nest syndrome  
living alone  
prone to speak symbolically  
metaphorically  
biblically  
content in having only to do for self,  
did not die.  
She lay at the curb unbloody for nearly an hour  
before anyone noticed her body.

At the hospital she regained her sense of things.  
A youngish, white coated, white man  
asked Mrs. Walker how she felt.  
Laughing, Mrs. Walker said: 'Like a leaf.'

'What happened?' the man continued, chagrined.

'They crucified Jesus. They only hit me with a car.'

Considering her color, her age, her seeming disorientation,  
and that no pocketbook had been recovered,  
the man presumed Mrs. Walker to be a cast off thing  
and probably a little demented.

After applying several pokes and squeezes to her rather vulnerable body  
the man ordered x-rays  
and the next thing she knew

Mrs. Walker was going under in the o.r. for something called 'exploratory'.

Since that time

Lettie Walker has been depressed

agoraphobic

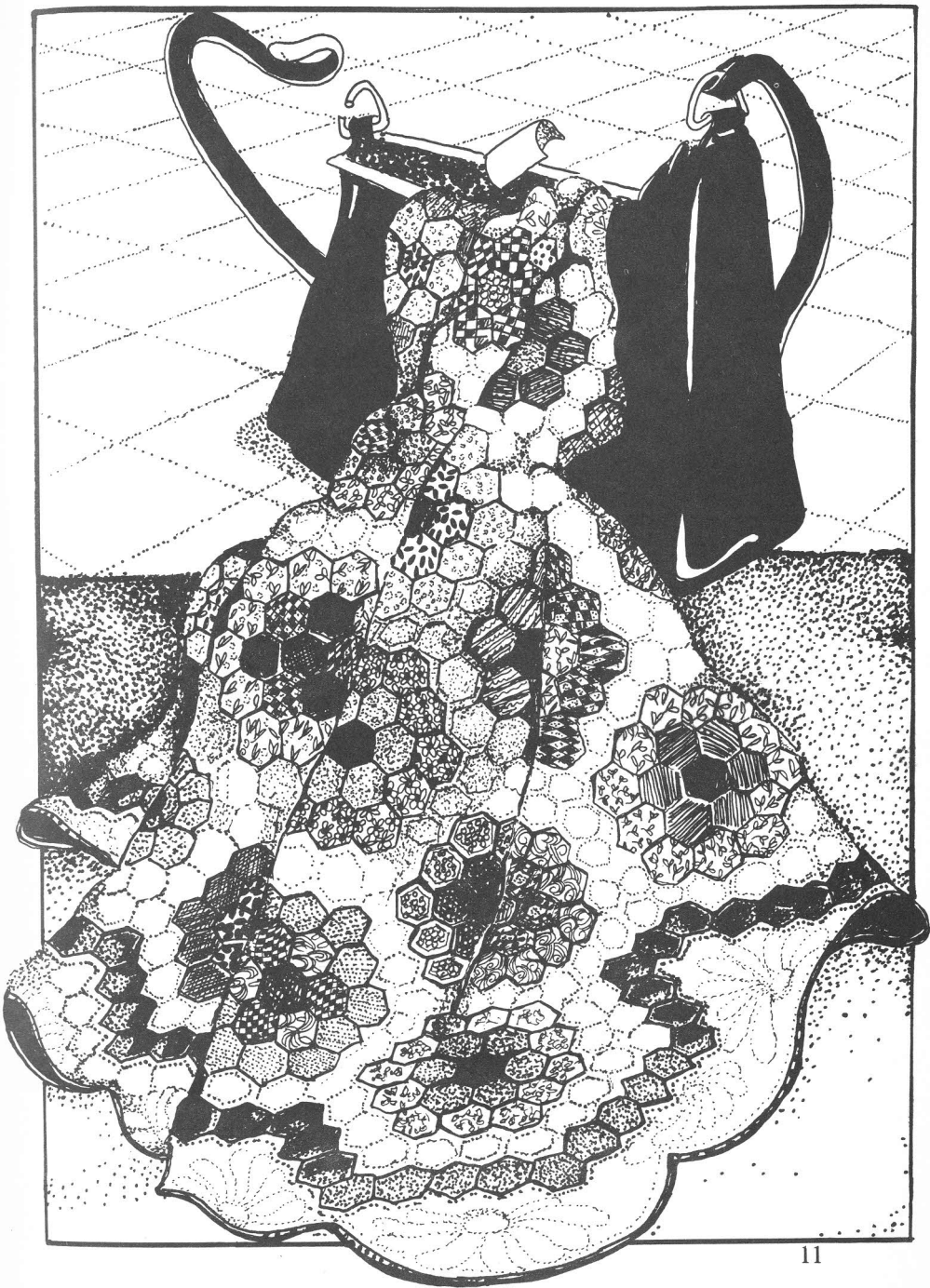
nearly anorexic

taken to walking with a cane

given up her home in the South

to stay with her daughter in the North

and ambivalent about wanting to live.



## Fathers

My father, a child himself,  
once defied the law  
and asked me what I told the priest.

I snap coyly that he is not the *father*  
I am sworn to tell my sins to.

He is relentlessly sweet as a pedophile.

I succumb  
give him details of my most recent confession  
juicy with childish improprieties.

The seal of secrecy is broken.  
But I preferred guilt to grace anyhow.

Grace is amazing.  
She is lean and tight in her flesh.  
A gymnast and a dancer.  
She is my sister.  
Her father, not the sweet child mine is,  
never lives with us.  
I see him pass our street in his green buick convertible  
looking askance  
for a glance  
of my mother or Grace.

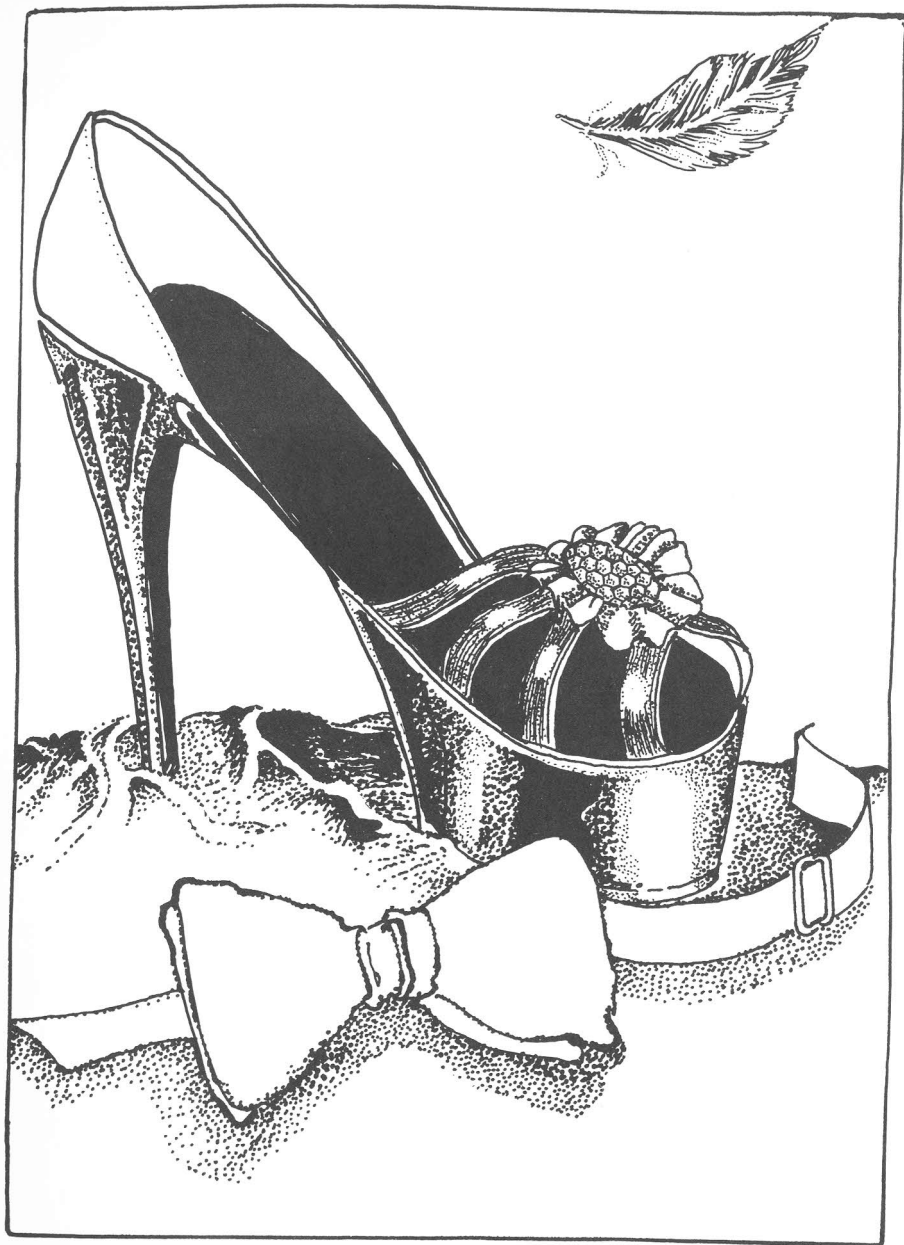
But Grace . . .  
amazing is the only word for her.

My mother loved Grace  
and required nothing of her.  
And berated me,  
dark, short-haired, big for my age.  
But Grace . . . amazing  
she never required anything of her.  
Only monotonously brushed and braided  
her waist-long, thick brown hair,  
while assaulting me with straightening irons.

Grace was never blamed for her diminished likeness to the West Afrikan  
the way I was blamed for diminishing my mother's  
two generations removed caucaso-indio bloodlines.

Grace was never required to be anything but amazing.

Even after she had my father's baby at 14  
Grace could still turn cartwheels  
do headstands  
and dance the stomp til dawn  
smiling furtively at me  
holding my nephew  
my brother  
holding the secret of the union  
that bore him  
and binds us.



## Of Althea and Flaxie

In 1943 Althea was a welder  
very dark  
very butch  
and very proud  
loved to cook, sew, and drive a car  
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman  
who met her every day after work  
in a tight dress and high heels  
light-skinned and high-cheekboned  
who loved to shoot, fish, play poker  
and did not give a damn who knew her 'man' was a woman.

Althea was gay and strong in 1945  
and could sing a good song  
from underneath her welder's mask  
and did not care who heard her sing her song to a woman.

Flaxie was careful and faithful  
mindful of her Southern upbringing  
watchful of her tutored grace  
long as they treated her like a lady  
she did not give a damn who called her a 'bulldagger'.



In 1950 Althea wore suits and ties  
Flaxie's favorite colors were pink and blue  
People openly challenged their flamboyance  
but neither cared a fig who thought them 'queer' or 'funny'.

When the girls bragged over break of their sundry loves,  
Flaxie blithely told them her old lady Althea took her dancing  
every weekend  
and did not give a damn who knew she clung to a woman.

When the boys on her shift complained of their wives,  
Althea boasted of how smart her 'stuff' Flaxie was  
and did not care who knew she loved the mind of a woman.

In 1955 when Flaxie got pregnant  
and Althea lost her job  
Flaxie got herself on relief  
and did not care how many caseworkers  
threatened midnite raids.

Althea was set up and went to jail  
for writing numbers in 1958.  
Flaxie visited her every week with gifts  
and hungered openly for her thru the bars  
and did not give a damn who knew she waited for a woman.

When her mother died in 1965 in New Orleans  
Flaxie demanded that Althea walk beside her in the funeral procession  
and did not care how many aunts and uncles knew she slept with a woman.

When she died in 1970  
Flaxie fought Althea's proper family not to have her laid out in lace  
and dressed the body herself  
and did not care who knew she'd made her way with a woman.

**April 4, 1968: Washington, D.C.**

Ole black Joe was my old man.  
He was good.  
He loved me.  
And loved things.  
Loved to buy them,  
give them,  
collect them,  
sit or stand for hours in admiration of them.

He built a house for me and my unruly daughter Doe.  
The one we'd lived in for ten years didn't suit  
Joe's notion of upward mobility.  
I, uneasily, had no say in the matter.  
Arrived soon at the conclusion it would be Joe's house.  
Doe and I packed ten years into a U-Haul and hauled ass  
to Joe's house.

We each had our own room.

I set up my new sewing machine and old easel.

Doe resentfully set up her new five-component stereo set  
and stacked her warped 45's.

Joe set up a portrait of me and Doe and him,  
his coin collection, shell collection, his basketball,  
football, and fishing trophies, and his long guns.

I was used to my old house:

its sounds, its ill-repair, its tacky awnings.

Joe's house was big and spooky to me.

But ole Joe was kooky with glee.

Spent a day in each room, Joe did.

And Doe was bitter that she had to make new friends.

But Joe was good

was generous

joyful

and gently singing.

We could run around for days in Joe's house and not run into each other.

I was uncomfortable with its silence and sharp edges.

Longed for the noises of my old house.

But Joe could not contain himself.

Daily added some new piece of furniture, gadget, or shelf.

Doe laughed behind Joe's back when he asked her to call him 'Pop.'

Then that day.

I heard the news on my car radio.

When I came through the door to his room, Joe's eyes were red with tears  
and Gimlets.

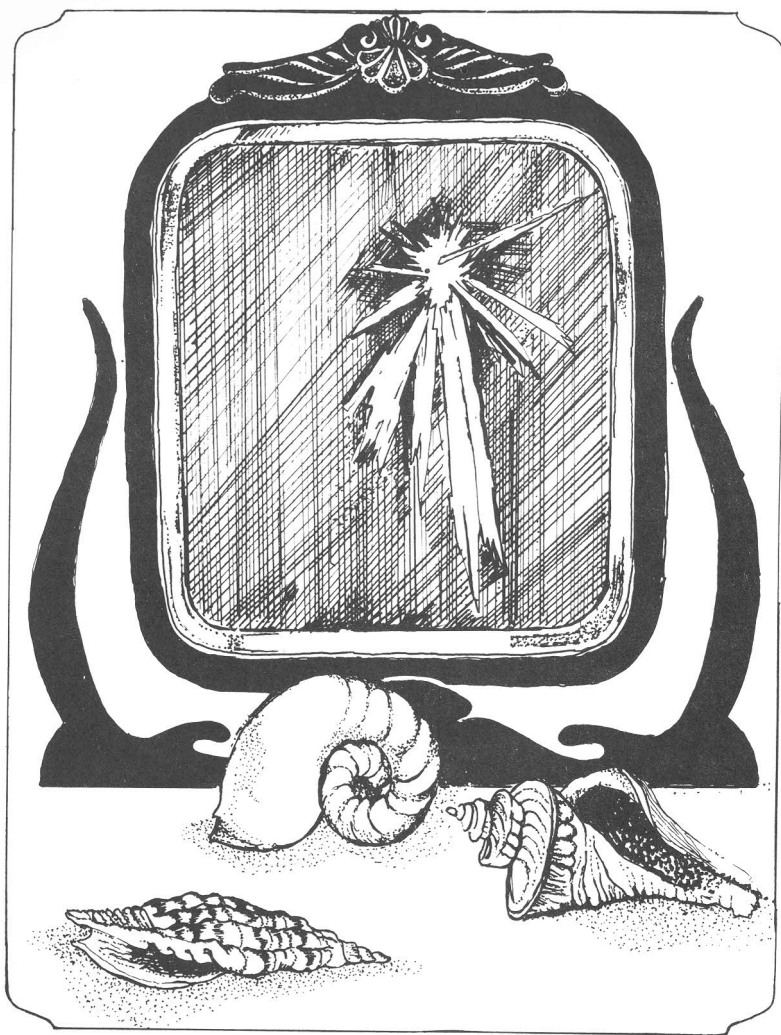
Doe was angry, pacing and swearing that she would not  
go to school with 'crackers' another day.

That night we sat in our separate rooms  
biting our lips  
picking our fingers  
hoping for some release  
from the cold reports of  
how the bullet took him on the motel balcony  
while he was humming 'Precious Lord' to his disciples.

Release did come next day.  
All over the streets  
glass shattered and splattered  
and wood and flesh burned  
traffic was jammed and rerouted  
in that colonial town.  
My car was stripped.  
Joe closed shop early.  
Doe was truant, evil, and bored.

Five o'clock curfew.

Joe sat a hostage in his den,  
swilling a Martini and oiling a rifle.  
Staring blankly at the t.v. screen  
which relayed images of fire hoses, flames, police,  
black folk running and milling on the streets.  
Some whose dwellings had already been razed.  
Others who editorialized on how  
the King had been about peace.  
'Peace or no,' Joe threatened,  
'No nigger is gonna put a match to my house.  
I'll kill first. Are the doors locked!'



Strained, I checked each room in his taciturn house.  
I stood outside Doe's room,  
while she applied mascara indifferently.

'You can't go nowhere. There's a curfew.' I warned.

'That curfew don't mean nuthin,  
cuz ain't nuthin happnin up this far.  
Just some mad niggers downtown  
stealin groceries and liquor.  
I'm going out.'

'No.' I spat.

Doe threw her hairbrush into her new vanity mirror.

I went to my own room.  
Took a shot of brandy, took a nap.  
When I woke the house was dark.  
I walked into Joe's room.  
He was cradling his rifle,  
his face stiff and shiny.

He jumped to look out the window  
to sight the rustling of leaving trees.  
I lay in his bed and dozed.  
He sat up against his headboard,  
listening to the radio.  
I woke again and did not feel his weight.  
I found him on the stair,  
rifle hoisted and cocked.  
'Shhhhhhhhh,' he hissed.

'This house aint worth nobody's life.' I pleaded.

'Shhhhhh,' he tensed.

The shell burned the door.

And then, frozen, he asked, 'Where's Doe?'

'In her room. Asleep.' I answered still not awake enough  
to believe the smell from shot  
and the taste of metal.

I ran dull to Doe's room.

Not there.

I ran to the middle of the hall  
and screamed her name.

No answer.

I heard the squeaking newness of the front door.

I saw the vacant terror of the doorway  
and the stiffness of Joe's back become trembling mush,  
heard the muffled thud of the rifle as it bounced back  
on the shag carpet.

The mortician, a friend of Joe's.

did everything he could to cosmetize the tunnel in Doe's head.

I ordered the casket closed.

## **gum**

Rosaline chews gum as a diversionary tactic.  
That way she does not have to think  
as she comes  
there  
her shoes appearing odd at that angle  
from her back.  
the socks strangling her ankles  
cheapen the encounter  
as she twists her buttocks  
in exultation.  
Death preoccupies her.  
And she chews her gum loud  
not to hear her body's question.

The window shade pull evokes the 'hanged man'.  
Rosaline lights a cigarette  
(cigarettes help her appreciate conclusions)  
and draws her socks to her knees  
to cheapen the reflection  
and chews  
pulling the tell-tale wrinkles into tight corners.



## The moon in cancer

The moon is orange tonight and sandwiched between charcoal clouds.  
Rachel is cancer  
tropical and lovable  
fluid and mean.  
Unlike me  
earthbound and melancholy  
indulging and always freely singing  
some womansung  
old  
didactic doo-ah:

‘understanding is something that makes everything just fine.  
understanding is something that makes everything just fine.  
so I’ll never be contented til you say that you are mine.’

The moon is orange and makes crabs scuttle  
scuttle from sand  
sometimes to cobblestone.  
Rachel is cancer  
charismatic and self-contained  
gregarious and predatory.  
Not like me  
who under the night’s reflection in her window  
nightly and loudly sang  
some old settlin down song:

'don't drift too far baby  
stick around and stay near  
stick around and stay near  
cause I got everything you need rightcheer.'

The street made Rachel's time.  
And me trying to mime its joyful and desperate rhyme.  
Never once did she celebrate in my ear  
the promise of some old unauthored  
womansung refrain:

'I'm gonna straighten up and fly right  
and quit my raising sand.  
straighten up and fly right  
and quit my raising sand.  
so don't put me down baby  
cause I want you in my plan.'

And me loudly singing to the crescent moon  
of her hidden circumference,  
and boldly changing nouns and pronouns  
for her  
so she could hear the wisdom  
of some old womansung advice:

'girls, if you got a good woman  
better keep her by your side.  
said, if you got a good woman  
better keep her by your side.  
cause if she flag this train  
I'm sure gonna let her ride.'

But Rachel is cancer  
tropical, lovable,  
fluid,  
charismatic, self-contained,  
gregarious, predatory  
and mean.

Unlike me  
who only ever wanted  
Rachel between me  
like the moon  
orange and sandwiched between  
charcoal clouds.

## **Mavis writes in her journal**

. . . I know Geneva loves me  
more than the man she sleeps with every night  
and still our conversation is reduced  
from talk of world events to  
news of the latest white sale  
whenever he blunders into the kitchen  
for a toothpick.

. . . Geneva can't tell him the same secrets she tells me. . . .

He draws the blood. I know the scars. I acknowledge her mind.  
He ignores her body and makes her sense a dartboard.

. . . Why is it we never act on our own hunger?

Yesterday we were listening to Billie Holiday sing  
'Do Your Duty' when Geneva lost track of time, rushed home to cook  
his dinner . . . . Men learn to be chefs and short order cooks  
but never learn to feed themselves.

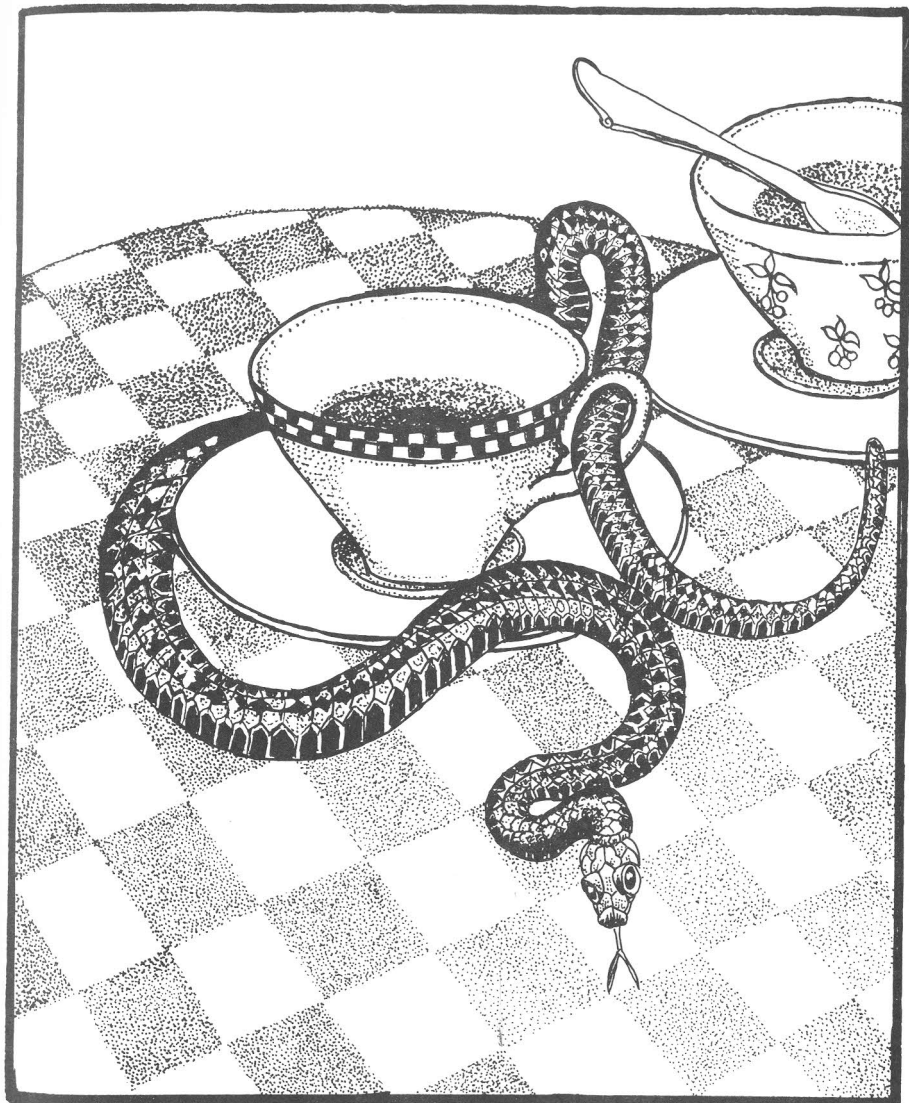
. . . *I am patient and relentless.*

Today I kissed Geneva square on the lips and today for the first time she asked me to leave when he came home from work and went straight to the icebox for a beer, grunting at us as he popped the cap, exploding the contents all over Geneva's highly polished linoleum.

. . . Our touches were tentative at first, then there was confidence, and passion, and wonder . . . then fear.

. . . He's too sure of his cock ever to suspect it will be supplanted. Tonight Geneva keeps him company.

Tonight I write another brazen love poem in secret, alone, patient, and relentless.



## waiting up

quick—a look of pain felt like shot  
across her face like the pain of skin scraped  
as my mother grabbed her left breast  
and quick like buckshot  
she was up from the table  
and every place at once  
humming the strains of hymns  
sung in church the day before.

unusual—that night she left me  
saying she'd go to walk her sister home from work  
humming and disappearing under the low-hanging clouds like udders  
leaving the door open wide  
to frame for me the urgent dusk  
fretful of events.

afraid of the bed by myself  
I wait up for her  
as she had waited up for my impetuous aunt  
—her sister—  
all those sultry nights  
as she would wait up for me years later humming sullenly.

late—my mother returns past midnight  
her stoop making slight her six feet  
slime squeezes from her brother's old dress pumps  
she had cut out and bent in  
a tire iron swings from one hand and  
her sister's pocketbook and shopping bag from the other  
humming she places them muddy with blood in the dusty corner  
next to the long-handled axe and the shiny hunting rifle  
I make no gestures  
she presumes my questions with asperity:

'Wasn't robbery nor rape.  
Not time nor sense enough to run.  
The craziest in a long line of menfolk she took her time up with.  
Caught in that poppin gait of hers with terror.  
Alone and unbelieving.  
Then face broken and chest broken.'

angry—my mother yells at me  
and knocks things from their places  
makes tea, reads cards, and vows penance  
walks me stiffly to her bed  
pushes me down by my shoulders  
tranced I let her cover me  
through the humid pitch of the room  
I hear her drag to the other side  
and feel her pressure gradual beside me  
in bawdy time she hums the strains of hymns  
sung in church the day before.



I sleep and toss with dreams of abrupt heavy things on me  
not feeling my mother's weight beside me  
I awake quiet and hysterical  
slow—I move in the dark to the room we wait up in.

the door stands open again  
the moon's refraction reveals signs of ritual  
iridesces the bloody tire iron, my late aunt's estate,  
and things missing from the dusty corner.

silent—my mother returns past dawn  
like a hunter secretive and sated  
concealing things laid in the corner  
searching through crowded drawers and cabinets  
and humming in bawdy time hymns  
sung in church the sunday before.

## Ruby the runaway

Women excite me and move me  
in the way those old midnite conferences  
with my rebel sister Ruby  
made my childhood memorable.

Ruby left me for the girl next door  
for what she said 'won't even be a minute'  
and turned into 14 years  
and I mourned my sentence to the cell of my parents  
wishing Ruby would come back and bust me out.

My father gave me cigarettes  
from his commissary chest of drawers  
for the violence of his sex  
and my mother allowed me to smoke them  
for colluding her silence.

With a cigarette between my fingers  
I practiced adulthood in front of my mirror daily.  
I was grown.  
Not like Ruby who never satisfied herself with symbols.

For the sake of appearances my mother made cold predictions:  
'First cigarettes, then alcohol, then sex, then vee dee  
or pregnant  
or a bulldagger  
like that black Ruby!'

I had had it all  
except been pregnant or a bulldagger  
and still longed for Ruby's soft buzz against my ear  
cried to be black and grown like Ruby  
to have my sentence commuted  
to be protected from my father's intrusions  
and my mother's indifference.

Escape was imminent.  
Amidst my father's threats to keep my hem below my knees,  
to sit with my legs together,  
and my mother's admonition never to let the roots of my hair revert  
and to ignore the male need to call me out of my name in the streets  
I became engaged to Claude when I was sixteen.  
Something Ruby was too wild to do.

Claude was arrogant, intrusive, and clumsy.  
He was dumb and impudent  
and never understood my body's resistance.  
I went to work and lied about my salary.

Upon being told to hand over my check for  
the joint account  
I rebelled.  
Claude snatched my pocketbook  
fished out the check  
saw my net was ten dollars more than his  
and beat me with my pocketbook from the living-  
room floor to the bathroom tile.

That ass-whipping amazed me to the point of  
calling the police  
and calling for the courage of Ruby's big fists.  
Claude nearly broke my nose with the telephone receiver  
locked me in the bathroom  
answered the door.

I heard him assure the police we were having an argument  
not a fight.

The door shut.

The closet opened and shut.

His footsteps faded from where I sat in terror  
and indifference.

I heard the front door open and shut.

Ten minutes: I retched his name out.

No answer.

Euphoria.

Hysteria.

Twelve hours in the bathroom recalling Ruby's escape

I made decisions.

I heard the front door open.

I did not start.

Straight to the bathroom

he came

to relieve his bladder.

He pushed my rigid body off the toilet seat  
where I had begun to live  
in that twelve-hour isolation.  
Chivas Regal dulls dexterity.  
And clumsy Claude could never do two things at once  
like grab me and pee.

I was out.  
He was in.  
I locked him in.  
He was noisy to be out.  
And so was I. Out. Out. Out.  
Running to Ruby.

Women excite me and move me  
in the way those old, midnite conferences  
with my rebel sister Ruby made my childhood memorable.



## Gail

Gail

Chicago nightingale  
bred on blues and Bigger Thomas  
and extreme weather.

Lover of cocaine and marijuana  
on tropical and early mornings in summer  
and one hundred years of solitude in winter.

Gail

toucan and nightingale.

Sitting reading Jung in a Newark food stamp office  
and speaking in dreams of atavistic masks.

Gail

girl mother.

Brushing, braiding other women's daughters' hair between your thighs  
before that marauding time of womb-swelling, scraping, and pillage.

Gail

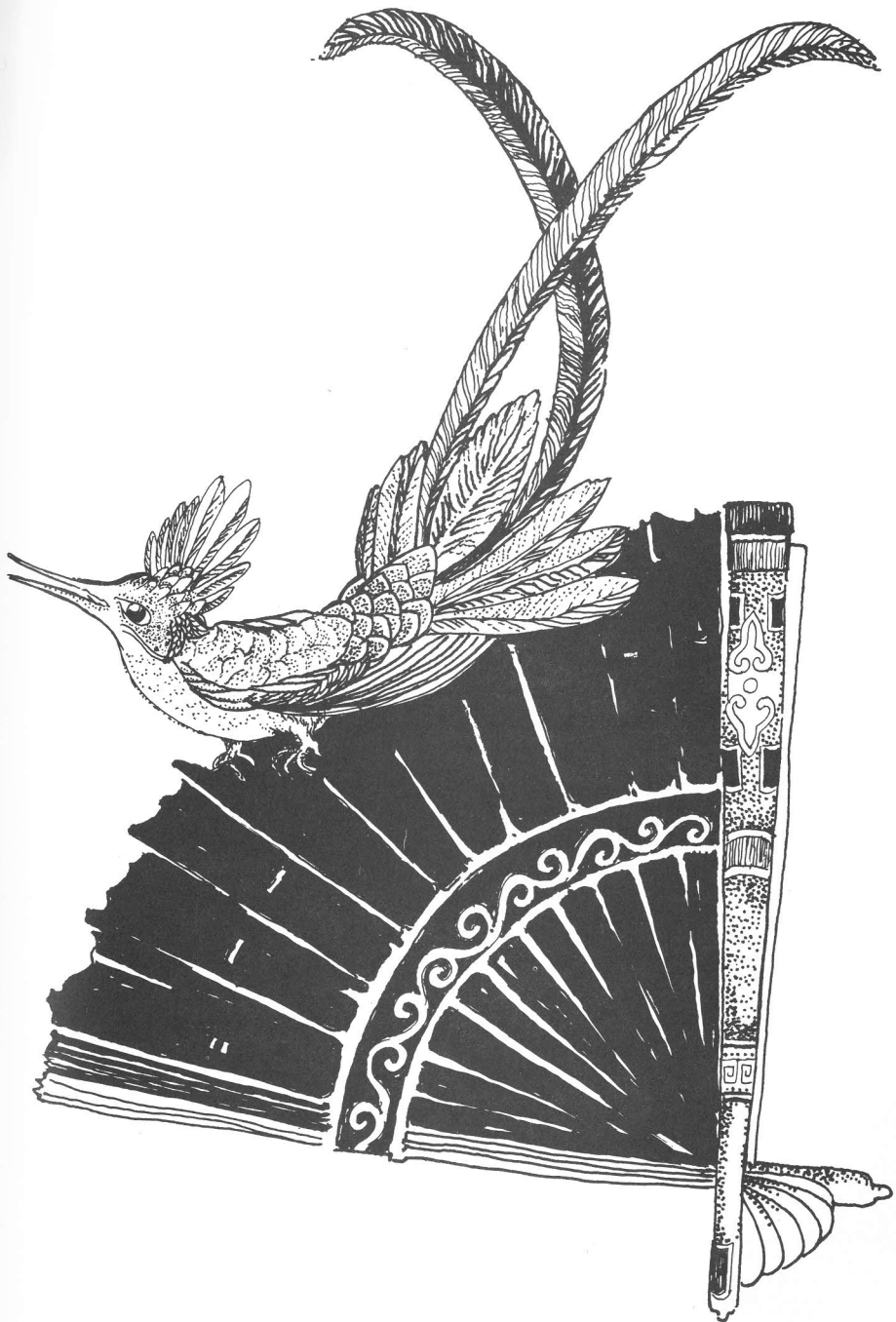
plumèd amazon.

Tearing up diary pages filed in boxes and drawers crowded with  
scents and sachets

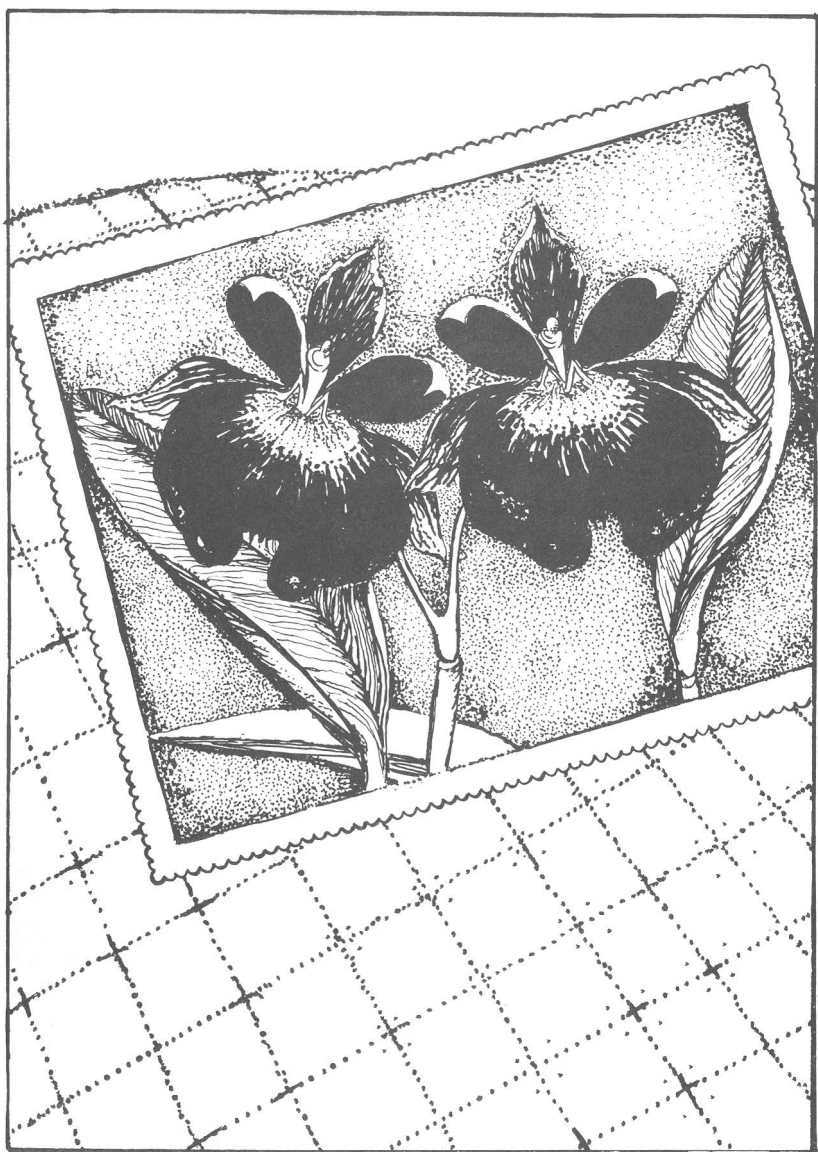
singing r&b in Spanish  
beating out a latin two-step  
with your fist.

Gail

midwest nightingale in an eastbound flight.







## **a mother's story**

my mother calls them sinister  
to this day  
and blames their father's genes  
though they are dead-ringers for my mother's mother's sister  
whose daguerreotype I found pressed in the 'Book of Numbers'  
in my grandmother's forgotten bible.  
my great aunt was said to have possessed formidable powers.

. . . to this day I cannot tell them one from the other.  
there is no mark on one that is not on the other  
same skin  
same rebellious grade of hair  
same voice—dark, petulant, monotone  
every word said the same.  
in every trait identical.

if I spotted dirt under Leora's fingernail  
the same speck would be under Leona's same finger,  
though she'd been nowhere near the dirt.  
they spooked me out the whole time I raised them.  
I was certain I had two children who were meant to be one child.  
siamese twins joined at the souls, they were.  
in every trait the same.

I hardly ever had to discipline them  
remotely controlled by some other frequency  
they always knew  
exactly what to do.  
the one more territorially inclined  
the other more materially inclined  
but still to this day  
I do not know who is who.

if one was sprawled in front of the t.v.  
head blocking my view, comic books, school books, coke bottles,  
and potato chips spread east and west,  
I'd suggest:

'Leora, try to mind your belongings.'

she'd say:

'Mama, I'm not Leora.'

and smile distantly, drawing her diversions to her, backing away from  
the set, eyes still glued to the shenanigans of Alfred Hitchcock.

or

if I brought them gifts unexpectedly  
one would rush to me, grab bags from me,  
run to their room cupping parcels clumsily.

I would assert:

'Leona, they're not all for you.'

the sister who'd reserved her curiosity by the door would correct me:

'Mama, that's not Leona.'

when they became ten years old  
my confusion becoming embarrassment  
I just began to address my daughters inspecifically:  
'sweetheart', 'sugar', 'baby', 'honey', 'dears'.

to this day they refuse to be separate.

in eighth grade their principal advised me to dress them differently  
she became impatient with my helpless 'the girls choose not to.'  
for the rest of the year, brow-beaten and ostracized, both  
refused to answer to either name.

it pained me  
and it made them closer.

Leora and Leona never registered anyone's amazement or resentment  
so aloof and self-contained they were.

I followed my minister's advice  
and sent my geminis to the christians  
who might as well have been lions.  
when the novelty of their two-in-one  
rivaled the wonder of the trinity  
my daughters asserted their gladiatorial indifference  
and resisted the catechism  
the 'pledge of allegiance'  
and spoke in whispers of other kinds of baptism  
to cherry-cheeked nuns.

they were heretics and I was crazy about their heresy.

I never pushed romance on my geminis.  
I let them choose their own drugs.

men on the streets harangued them with 'double my pleasure,  
double my fun.'

boys followed them home.

the mature adult male left them alone

men did not impress them.

to this day I cannot tell them one from the other.

same skin

same rebellious grade of hair

same voice—dark, petulant, monotone

every word said the same

in every trait identical.

## **The johnny cake**

**(for Charley)**

Death frees people for new experiences.  
At the funeral of my friend's mother I was to learn this.  
As no one in my family I cared about had died then  
I knew nothing of grief.

It was hurricane season.  
The mother's death had been sudden.  
My friend and I drove 95 South like thieves.  
Relentless as hunters.  
Through torrents.  
Through vaults of foliage.  
Every now and then a palmetto.  
The car and inexperience between us.  
Miles and miles of curves and turns to his ancestral home  
where would be the body.

We arrived at the bungalow.  
The evening tropical.  
The gnats persistent.  
Her scent enveloping as the ocean  
a woman, the aunt, welcomed us  
with her body.  
Eyes hazel like his  
in that cocoa skin of theirs.  
He cried onto her breast all night.  
In rhythmic sorrow she rocked him.  
I watched from my pallet on the floor.  
Their noises kept me vigilant.

I rose early purposefully.  
Already she was moving through the rooms.  
Eyes topaz signals.  
Nipples protuberant against the sheer and floral duster  
The covers fell from me.  
Following her I passed, looking askance,  
at the black naked beauty of my sleeping friend,  
and the lace shrouded corpse  
of the mother.

In the kitchen  
the aunt fed me peaches  
and showed me city pictures  
of her in bow ties and suspenders  
leaning over the mother seated  
and wearing eye glasses and dark suits  
smoking cigarettes.  
Behind them tables and tables  
full of women and women.  
*Intense* people.  
Unceremoniously the aunt left  
to comfort my friend again.

By noon the kitchen was stacked with food.  
The rooms filled with the talk of bold  
independent women comforting the aunt  
and commending her on how well the body looked.  
They were distant with my friend.  
From their plates  
they offered me forkfuls and spoonfuls  
of the rich fare they'd brought.  
They were solicitous of me.

My friend stood at the mother's corpse for hours  
that day.

Tears standing in his eyes, amber-flecked.  
Every time the tears ran  
the aunt pressed his body to hers.  
Secretly I distracted myself with photographs  
in boxes under beds  
with a jigsaw puzzle the mother had started  
and the talk of the bold  
independent women.  
Early in the evening  
the aunt brought me cloying peach cobbler  
and watched me eat it and lick the plate.  
She licked the plate after me.

Death frees people for new experiences.  
So I was to learn at the funeral of my friend's mother.  
As no one I cared about had died yet  
I knew nothing of grief.

By dusk of the next day  
I had lit ninety candles  
under the aunt's tutelage  
in the room where lay the body.  
A sweet smell lingering at the edges of the box.  
In the yard the bold  
independent women gathered  
suited in pastel and warm colors.  
Their grief a vivid spectacle.  
Exquisite.  
A quartet of them jazzed songs of Jordan.



My friend enters the yard  
leaning heavily on the aunt  
a mauve veil covering her face.  
I walk behind them  
cleaving wild roses  
azaleas  
and purple geraniums.  
Through the surprising gauze  
the aunt stares at me.  
She strokes inside the thigh of my weeping friend.

The body lowered.  
The geraniums planted.  
The exequies complete.  
My friend regains his sense of place.  
Grows conscious of the aunt.  
The family makes room for him.  
He welcomes the bold  
independent women back into the house.  
Instead of cornbread  
He asks the aunt to make johnny cake.

She laughs and grabs me like a playmate.  
Pulls me into the kitchen.  
We hold each other there  
for long moments.  
Tongues in throats.

In the other room  
my friend and the bold  
independent women talk  
of cars  
the weather  
and the road I would travel back.

In the kitchen  
the aunt slides her hand between my thighs.  
The same hand she makes her dough with.  
I pull my tunic above my breasts for her.

I hear them in the other room  
talk of the mother  
the aunt  
their lives in the bungalow.

I welcome her hand inside my drawers.  
And come for the first time  
for the rest of the day.  
With the same hand she kneads the dough  
short  
and asks nothing back.

I give her my tongue in places she does not remember.  
And touch her there.

*It* bakes.

In the other room  
voices recede to a far corner.

Butter oozes from the hot and ready bread.

Death frees people for new experiences.  
I learned this at my friend's mother's funeral.  
As no one I cared for had died then  
I knew nothing of grief.

I left soon and by myself.  
For the trip back  
the aunt and my friend filled the car  
with wild flowers  
stolen melons  
fallen cake.  
The sky was stark.  
There were gauntlets of foliage.  
Every now and then a palmetto.

## Cantaloupe

Wednesdays Mama'd skip from her station at the sink  
to look out the window.  
Jealous of her attention I'd follow behind.  
She'd reach her hand back to my shoulder  
without turnin round  
pull me by her side  
and yell down:

'dozen egg  
five pound green  
fo ham hock.'

then smile to herself, pat and gently  
shove me out the door  
as would get me to do anything she ask.

Wednesdays make me think of horses and watermelon.  
I'd take Mama's staples from the wild boy man  
who hawked wild foodstuff from his horse drawn  
wagon I longed to climb into.

Summers he'd be bare chest.  
Cold weather he'd wear a plaid and fringe  
scarf over head and ears.  
Red beard.  
Never spoke nor smiled  
cept on hot days to sing out:

'watermelon  
red to the rine.  
three fo a quarter  
one fo a dime.'

There was always somethin else he'd draw from  
the shadow corners of the wagon and give me—  
orange, peach, cantaloupe  
dependin on season.  
I loved to pet the neck of his horse  
russet as his beard.

Smilin from the window where she'd watch us  
Mama'd call me.  
He'd set his jaw, swell in his breeches  
and just as gently as Mama sent me to him  
send me back to her.

Never bein told  
I discover that wild child man  
my brother, my father.  
Cantaloupe make me remember the  
pink inner part of his lip  
as he weigh Mama turnip and water cress  
and the inside of Mama hand as she clean them.

'watermelon  
red to the rine.  
three fo a quarter  
one fo a dime.'

would haunt the air long moments after  
and haunt me still with memory of Wednesdays  
and that brief intimacy.



CHERYL CLARKE (b. 5/16/47, Washington, D.C.) is a poet in the tradition of Afro-American women; and the lives of black women as well as the lives of all women are the focus of her poetry. Clarke believes that poetry must be performed not simply read and internalized. *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* is her first book of poetry. Clarke considers her black, lesbian, and feminist identities to be the filter of her imagination. Clarke lives and writes in New Brunswick, N.J. and is currently at work on a book of poems which explores sister relationships. Clarke is a member of the CONDITIONS Magazine editorial collective.







## **NARRATIVES**    poems in the tradition of black women

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Cheryl Clarke's poems take fire from a deep and intelligent caring for other Black women and herself in them. For any woman-loving woman, this is a precious and celebratory book.

—Adrienne Rich

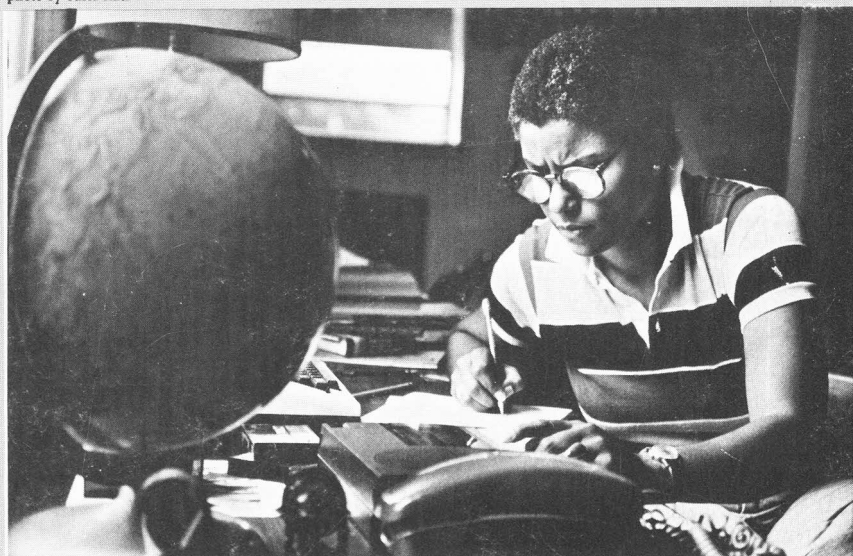
These new and surprising narratives present authentic stories of real lives, hitherto unnoticed: sassy/hilarious/grim lives of Black women honestly perceived with a clearly hardworking respect and without affectation. Cheryl Clarke speaks with a direct and unique voice that develops very different sounds of family into a dramatic medley of intimate portraits.

—June Jordan

I know these Black women well; in Cheryl Clarke's poems they carry their stories like flashlights.

—Audre Lorde

photo by Carla Katz



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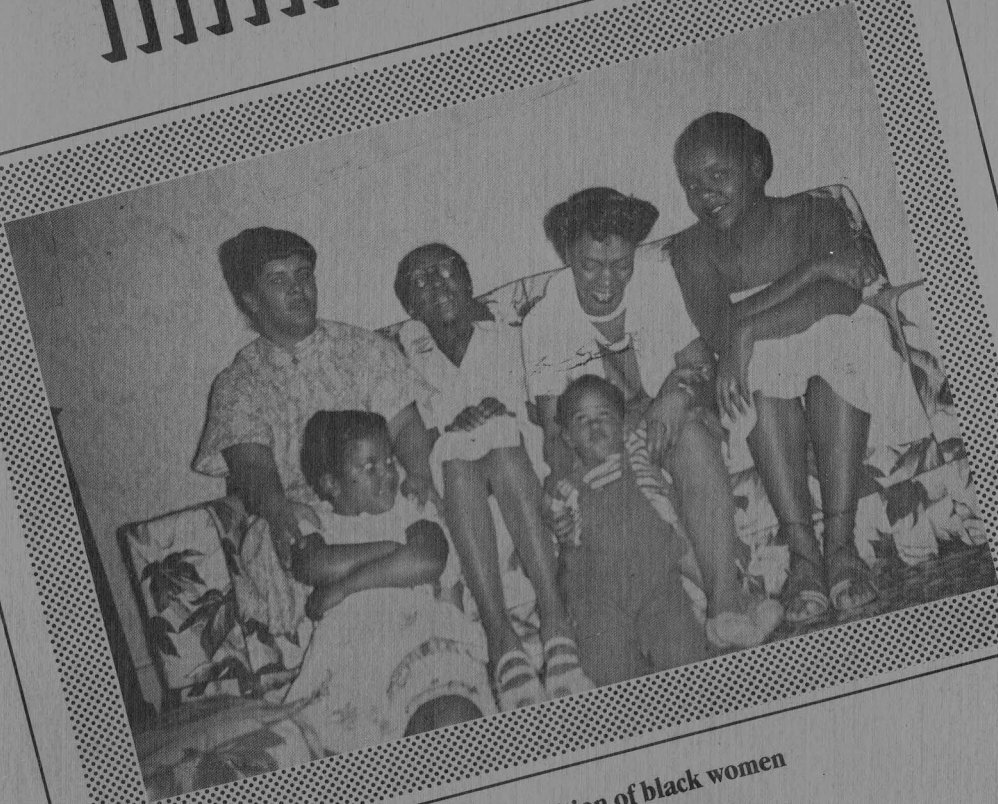
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poems in the tradition of black women

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**SISTER BOOKS**

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## FOREWORD

Finally all the scattered pieces of poems tucked in files and notebooks, written on paper napkins and envelopes have come together in *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women*.

The decision to publish my narrative poems has been a slow process. I have always been drawn to narrative poetry because my living has been infused with storytelling. Since I can remember, I have always wanted to be able to tell a good story. Fortunately, I had access to the stuff of good tales—the lives of black women and the history of black women. *Narratives* is an attempt to present one black woman poet's use of her imagination in this regard. It will be noted that several of the pieces are not narratives in the strictest sense. The narrative takes many forms for me as a poet: the telling of a life, the telling of an event, the telling of an image.

I am fortunate again, given the cultural-political climate which consistently undervalues and dismisses the power of poetry, to have been surrounded by women who believe in the power of poetry and the power of my poetry. This community of women has always encouraged me to write and to publish my poetry. I am happy to be able to show them the tentative fruits of their encouragement.

I would like to thank Linda Powell for pushing me to publish this volume and for her faithful performance of several pieces of the work you have before you on June 20, 1982 SYNERGY production of "Narratives: a dramatic event." Jean Sirius is to be resoundingly thanked for schooling me in the art of self-publishing, and spending many hours typesetting the manuscript. Elly Bulkin, editor par excellence, must be thanked for providing critical feedback on the poems in her tenacious editor's way. And I would like to thank Carol Sanchez, who early professed her belief in my ability to write poetry and who consistently supported my struggle to write it. My parents, Edna and James Clarke, have always supported my every endeavor to be and to say—"thanks" is not even sufficient.

Cheryl Clarke

June 30, 1982





**NARRATIVES: poems in the tradition of black women**



## hair: a narrative

it is passing strange to be in the company  
of black women  
and be the only one who does not worry about  
not being with a man  
and even more passing strange  
is to be among black women  
and be the only one wearing her hair natural  
or be the only one who has used a straightening  
iron

An early childhood memory:

me: sitting in the kitchen  
holding down onto my chair  
shoulders hunching  
toes curling in my sneakers.

my mother: standing behind me  
bracing herself against the stove  
greasing the edges of my scalp  
and the roots of my hair violently  
heating the straightening comb alternately  
and asking between jerking and pulling:

'why couldn't you have *good* hair?'

by the time mother finished pressing my virgin wool  
to patent leather,  
I was asking why I had to have hair at all.

(the first time I heard a straightening iron crackle  
through my greased kitchen, I thought a rattlesnake  
had got loose in the room.)

so much pain to be black, heterosexual, and female  
to be trained for some *Ebony* magazine mail order man  
wanting a woman with long hair, big legs, and able  
to bear him five sons.  
hardly any man came to be worth the risk of nappy edges.

the straightening iron: sado-masochistic artifact  
salvaged from some chamber of the Inquisition  
and given new purpose in the new world.

what was there  
about straight hair  
that made me want to suffer  
the mythical anguish of hell  
to have it?  
made me a recluse  
on any rainy, snowy, windy, hot, or humid day,  
away from any activity that produced the least  
moisture to the scalp.  
most of all sex.  
(keeping the moisture from my scalp  
always meant more to me  
than fucking some dude.)

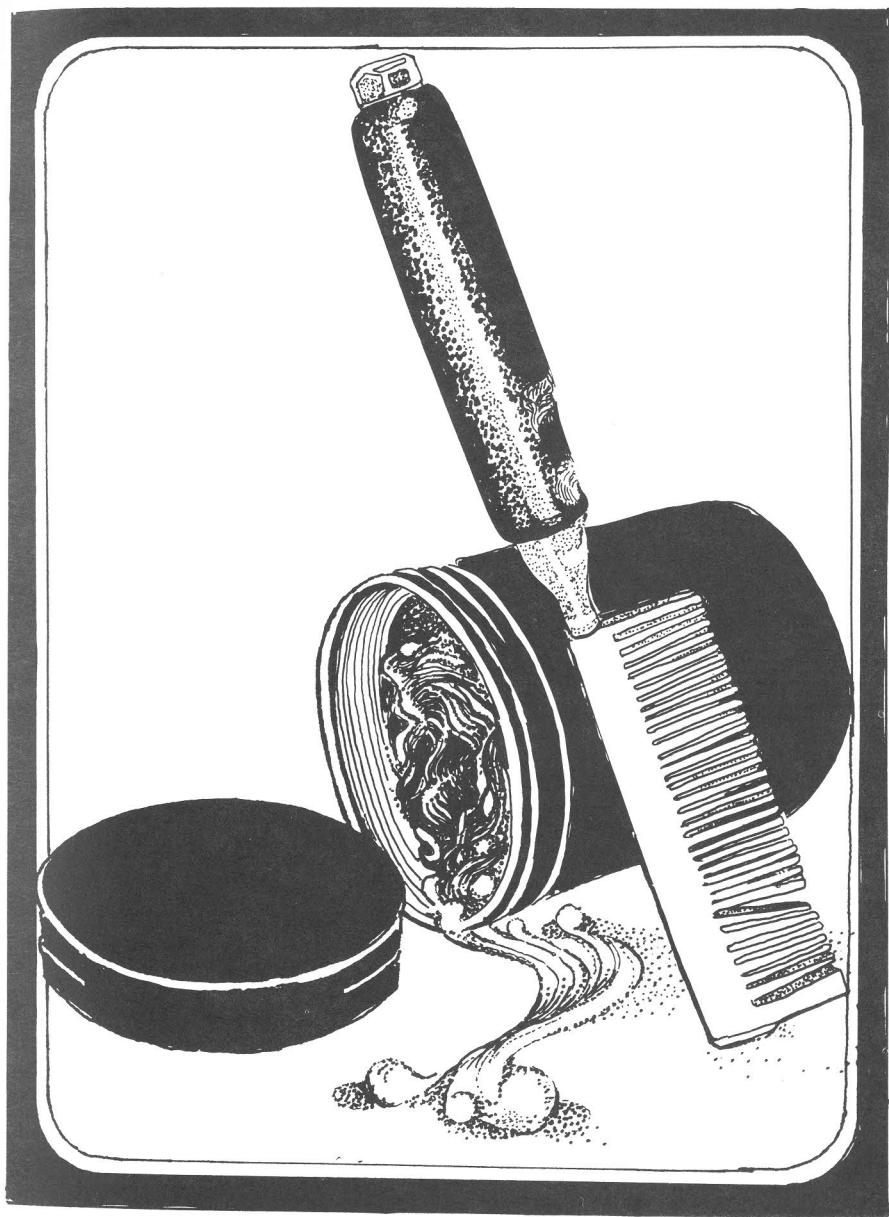
there was not  
a bergamot  
or a plastic cap  
that could stop  
water  
from undoing  
in a matter of minutes  
what it had taken hours of torture  
to almost perfect.  
I learned to hate water.

I am virgo and pragmatic  
at fifteen I made up my mind  
if I had to sweat my hair back with anyone  
it would be my beautician.  
she made the pretense bearable.

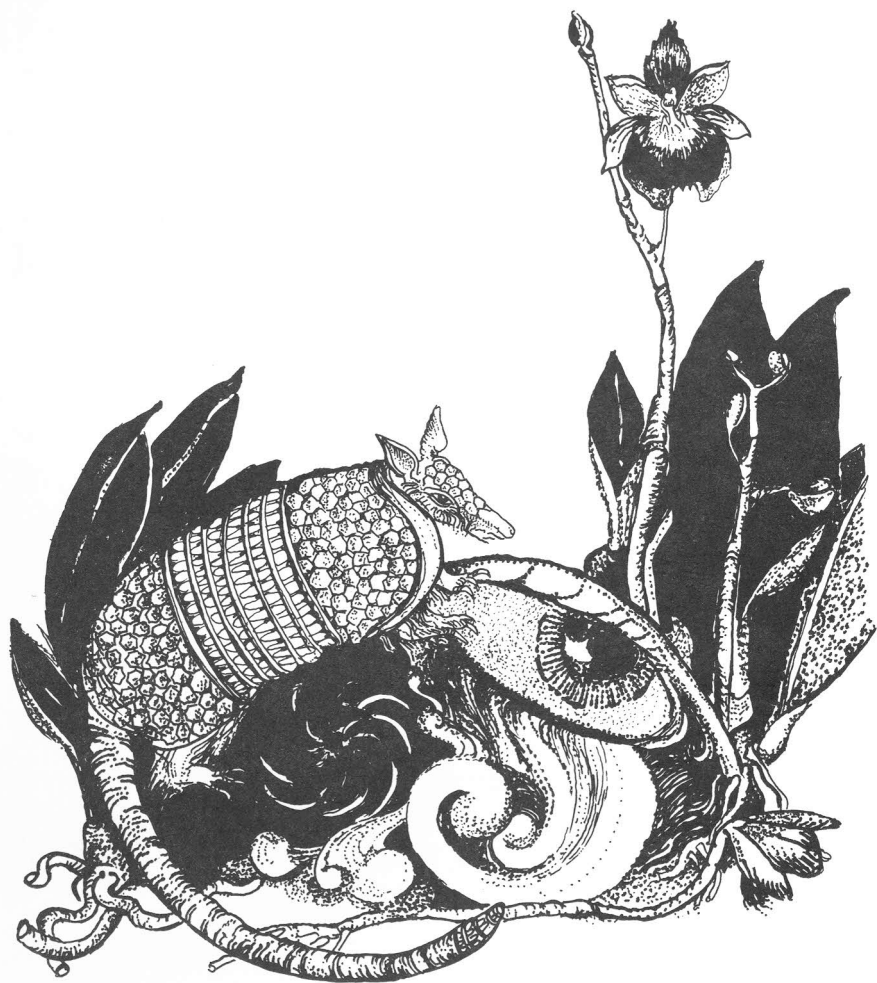
once a month I would wait several hours  
in that realm of intimacy  
for my turn in her magical chair  
for my four vigorous shampoos  
for her nimble fingers to massage  
my hair follicles to arousal  
for her full bosom to embrace  
my willing head  
against the war of tangles  
against the burning metamorphosis  
she touched me naked  
taught me art  
gave me good advice  
gave me language  
made me love something bout myself.

Willie Mays' wife thought integration  
meant she could get a permanent in a  
white woman's beauty salon.  
and my beautician telling me to love myself  
applying the chemical  
careful of the time  
soothing me with endearments  
and cool water to stop the burning  
then the bristle rollers  
to let me dry forever  
under stacks of *Jet*, *Tan*, and *Sepia*.  
and then the magnificence of the comb-out.

'au naturel' and the promise of  
black revolutionary cock a la fanon  
made our relationship suspect.  
I asked for tight curls.  
my beautician gave me a pick  
and told me no cock was worth so drastic a change.  
I struggled to be liberated from the supremacy  
of straight hair,  
stopped hating water  
gave up the desire for the convertible sports coup  
and applied the lessons of my beautician  
who never agreed with my choice  
and who nevertheless still gives me language, art,  
intimacy, good advice,  
and four vigorous shampoos per visit.







## **if you black get back**

Vashti

with her one brown  
and one hazel eye  
was an ugly and dirty little black girl  
whose nappy hair could not hold a curl  
whose name nobody even wanted to say  
much less to play  
with her  
so in awe of browns and tans we were

Vashti

with her hard hazel eye  
was dull in school  
but broke no rule.  
Teachers laughed openly at her stutter.  
Frequently calling upon her to read aloud.  
Cowed, her face swelling like an udder,  
she would rise to the effort  
and the humiliation.

Vashti's hair was never straightened.  
To be black was bad enough.  
To be black and have nappy hair  
was just plain rough.  
Boys terrorized her.  
Girls scorned her.  
Adults walked the other way  
to avoid the play  
of Vashti's eyes  
marking their cruelty.

So black she could stand out in a coal bin.  
So black she was most nearly blue.  
So black it was a sin.  
So black she could stop the dew.  
Vashti learned to live  
and love with pain.  
Wore it like a coat of armor  
rather resembling an armadillo.

## **The Older American**

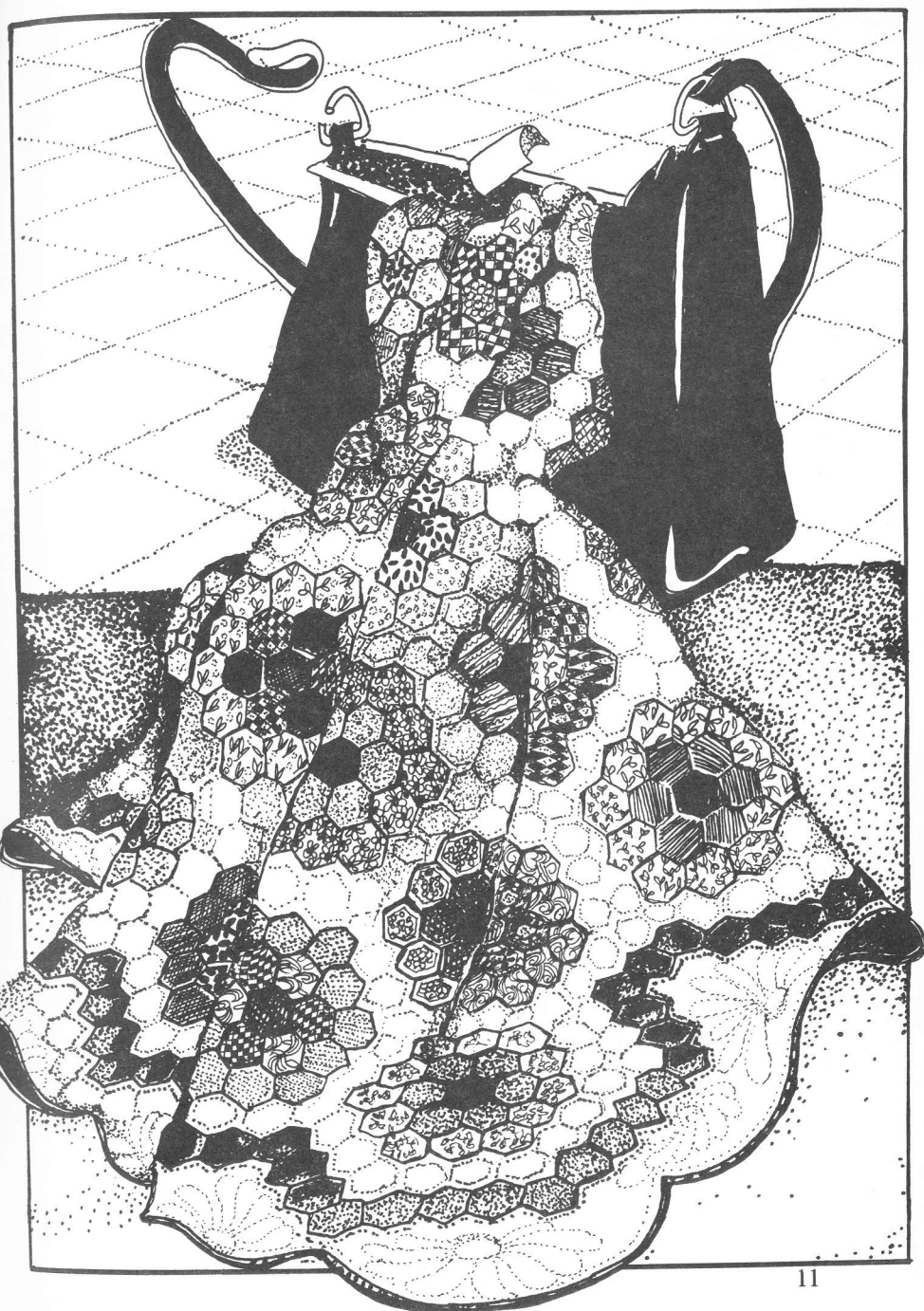
Lettie Walker was 71  
when she was struck unconscious in the street  
by a hit and run driver  
who seemed not to have obeyed the stop sign  
or perhaps became impatient with her halt gait.

Mrs. Walker,  
a widow  
long past the empty-nest syndrome  
living alone  
prone to speak symbolically  
metaphorically  
biblically  
content in having only to do for self,  
did not die.  
She lay at the curb unbloody for nearly an hour  
before anyone noticed her body.

At the hospital she regained her sense of things.  
A youngish, white coated, white man  
asked Mrs. Walker how she felt.  
Laughing, Mrs. Walker said: 'Like a leaf.'  
'What happened?' the man continued, chagrined.  
'They crucified Jesus. They only hit me with a car.'

Considering her color, her age, her seeming disorientation,  
and that no pocketbook had been recovered,  
the man presumed Mrs. Walker to be a cast off thing  
and probably a little demented.  
After applying several pokes and squeezes to her rather vulnerable body  
the man ordered x-rays  
and the next thing she knew  
Mrs. Walker was going under in the o.r. for something called 'exploratory'.

Since that time  
Lettie Walker has been depressed  
agoraphobic  
nearly anorexic  
taken to walking with a cane  
given up her home in the South  
to stay with her daughter in the North  
and ambivalent about wanting to live.



## Fathers

My father, a child himself,  
once defied the law  
and asked me what I told the priest.

I snap coyly that he is not the *father*  
I am sworn to tell my sins to.

He is relentlessly sweet as a pedophile.

I succumb  
give him details of my most recent confession  
juicy with childish improprieties.

The seal of secrecy is broken.  
But I preferred guilt to grace anyhow.

Grace is amazing.  
She is lean and tight in her flesh.  
A gymnast and a dancer.  
She is my sister.  
Her father, not the sweet child mine is,  
never lives with us.  
I see him pass our street in his green buick convertible  
looking askance  
for a glance  
of my mother or Grace.

But Grace . . .  
amazing is the only word for her.

My mother loved Grace  
and required nothing of her.  
And berated me,  
dark, short-haired, big for my age.  
But Grace . . . amazing  
she never required anything of her.  
Only monotonously brushed and braided  
her waist-long, thick brown hair,  
while assaulting me with straightening irons.

Grace was never blamed for her diminished likeness to the West Afrikan  
the way I was blamed for diminishing my mother's  
two generations removed caucasio-indio bloodlines.

Grace was never required to be anything but amazing.

Even after she had my father's baby at 14  
Grace could still turn cartwheels  
do headstands  
and dance the stomp til dawn  
smiling furtively at me  
holding my nephew  
my brother  
holding the secret of the union  
that bore him  
and binds us.





## Of Althea and Flaxie

In 1943 Althea was a welder  
very dark  
very butch  
and very proud  
loved to cook, sew, and drive a car  
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman  
who met her every day after work  
in a tight dress and high heels  
light-skinned and high-cheekboned  
who loved to shoot, fish, play poker  
and did not give a damn who knew her 'man' was a woman.

Althea was gay and strong in 1945  
and could sing a good song  
from underneath her welder's mask  
and did not care who heard her sing her song to a woman.

Flaxie was careful and faithful  
mindful of her Southern upbringing  
watchful of her tutored grace  
long as they treated her like a lady  
she did not give a damn who called her a 'bulldagger'.

In 1950 Althea wore suits and ties  
Flaxie's favorite colors were pink and blue  
People openly challenged their flamboyance  
but neither cared a fig who thought them 'queer' or 'funny'.

When the girls bragged over break of their sundry loves,  
Flaxie blithely told them her old lady Althea took her dancing  
every weekend  
and did not give a damn who knew she clung to a woman.

When the boys on her shift complained of their wives,  
Althea boasted of how smart her 'stuff' Flaxie was  
and did not care who knew she loved the mind of a woman.

In 1955 when Flaxie got pregnant  
and Althea lost her job  
Flaxie got herself on relief  
and did not care how many caseworkers  
threatened midnite raids.

Althea was set up and went to jail  
for writing numbers in 1958.  
Flaxie visited her every week with gifts  
and hungered openly for her thru the bars  
and did not give a damn who knew she waited for a woman.

When her mother died in 1965 in New Orleans  
Flaxie demanded that Althea walk beside her in the funeral procession  
and did not care how many aunts and uncles knew she slept with a woman.

When she died in 1970  
Flaxie fought Althea's proper family not to have her laid out in lace  
and dressed the body herself  
and did not care who knew she'd made her way with a woman.

**April 4, 1968: Washington, D.C.**

Ole black Joe was my old man.  
He was good.  
He loved me.  
And loved things.  
Loved to buy them,  
give them,  
collect them,  
sit or stand for hours in admiration of them.

He built a house for me and my unruly daughter Doe.  
The one we'd lived in for ten years didn't suit  
Joe's notion of upward mobility.  
I, uneasily, had no say in the matter.  
Arrived soon at the conclusion it would be Joe's house.  
Doe and I packed ten years into a U-Haul and hauled ass  
to Joe's house.

We each had our own room.

I set up my new sewing machine and old easel.

Doe resentfully set up her new five-component stereo set  
and stacked her warped 45's.

Joe set up a portrait of me and Doe and him,  
his coin collection, shell collection, his basketball,  
football, and fishing trophies, and his long guns.

I was used to my old house:

its sounds, its ill-repair, its tacky awnings.

Joe's house was big and spooky to me.

But ole Joe was kooky with glee.

Spent a day in each room, Joe did.

And Doe was bitter that she had to make new friends.

But Joe was good

was generous

joyful

and gently singing.

We could run around for days in Joe's house and not run into each other.

I was uncomfortable with its silence and sharp edges.

Longed for the noises of my old house.

But Joe could not contain himself.

Daily added some new piece of furniture, gadget, or shelf.

Doe laughed behind Joe's back when he asked her to call him 'Pop.'

Then that day.

I heard the news on my car radio.

When I came through the door to his room, Joe's eyes were red with tears  
and Gimlets.

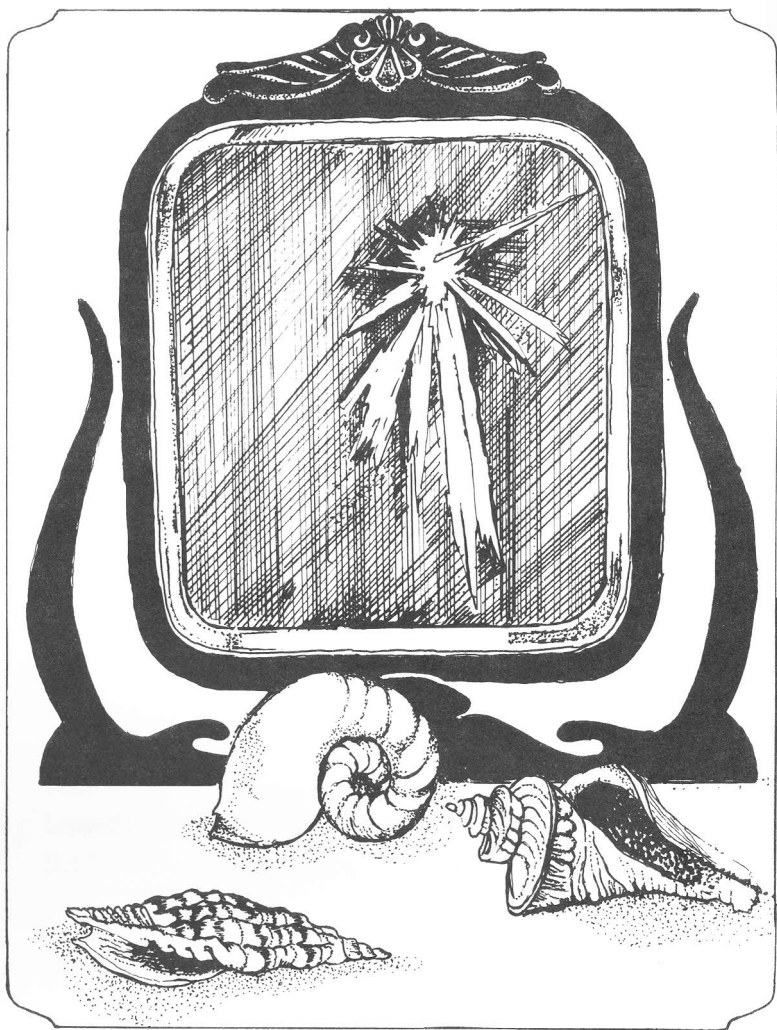
Doe was angry, pacing and swearing that she would not  
go to school with 'crackers' another day.

That night we sat in our separate rooms  
biting our lips  
picking our fingers  
hoping for some release  
from the cold reports of  
how the bullet took him on the motel balcony  
while he was humming 'Precious Lord' to his disciples.

Release did come next day.  
All over the streets  
glass shattered and splattered  
and wood and flesh burned  
traffic was jammed and rerouted  
in that colonial town.  
My car was stripped.  
Joe closed shop early.  
Doe was truant, evil, and bored.

Five o'clock curfew.

Joe sat a hostage in his den,  
swilling a Martini and oiling a rifle.  
Staring blankly at the t.v. screen  
which relayed images of fire hoses, flames, police,  
black folk running and milling on the streets.  
Some whose dwellings had already been razed.  
Others who editorialized on how  
the King had been about peace.  
'Peace or no,' Joe threatened,  
'No nigger is gonna put a match to my house.  
I'll kill first. Are the doors locked!'



Strained, I checked each room in his taciturn house.  
I stood outside Doe's room,  
while she applied mascara indifferently.

'You can't go nowhere. There's a curfew.' I warned.

'That curfew don't mean nuthin,  
cuz ain't nuthin happnin up this far.  
Just some mad niggers downtown  
stealin groceries and liquor.  
I'm going out.'

'No.' I spat.

Doe threw her hairbrush into her new vanity mirror.

I went to my own room.  
Took a shot of brandy, took a nap.  
When I woke the house was dark.  
I walked into Joe's room.  
He was cradling his rifle,  
his face stiff and shiny.

He jumped to look out the window  
to sight the rustling of leaving trees.  
I lay in his bed and dozed.  
He sat up against his headboard,  
listening to the radio.  
I woke again and did not feel his weight.  
I found him on the stair,  
rifle hoisted and cocked.  
'Shhhhhhhhh,' he hissed.



'This house aint worth nobody's life.' I pleaded.

'Shhhhhh,' he tensed.

The shell burned the door.

And then, frozen, he asked, 'Where's Doe?'

'In her room. Asleep.' I answered still not awake enough  
to believe the smell from shot  
and the taste of metal.

I ran dull to Doe's room.

Not there.

I ran to the middle of the hall  
and screamed her name.

No answer.

I heard the squeaking newness of the front door.  
I saw the vacant terror of the doorway  
and the stiffness of Joe's back become trembling mush,  
heard the muffled thud of the rifle as it bounced back  
on the shag carpet.

The mortician, a friend of Joe's.  
did everything he could to cosmetize the tunnel in Doe's head.  
I ordered the casket closed.

## **gum**

Rosaline chews gum as a diversionary tactic.  
That way she does not have to think  
as she comes  
there  
her shoes appearing odd at that angle  
from her back.  
the socks strangling her ankles  
cheapen the encounter  
as she twists her buttocks  
in exultation.  
Death preoccupies her.  
And she chews her gum loud  
not to hear her body's question.

The window shade pull evokes the 'hanged man'.  
Rosaline lights a cigarette  
(cigarettes help her appreciate conclusions)  
and draws her socks to her knees  
to cheapen the reflection  
and chews  
pulling the tell-tale wrinkles into tight corners.

## The moon in cancer

The moon is orange tonight and sandwiched between charcoal clouds.

Rachel is cancer  
tropical and lovable  
fluid and mean.

Unlike me  
earthbound and melancholy  
indulging and always freely singing  
some womansung  
old  
didactic doo-ah:

'understanding is something that makes everything just fine.  
understanding is something that makes everything just fine.  
so I'll never be contented til you say that you are mine.'

The moon is orange and makes crabs scuttle  
scuttle from sand  
sometimes to cobblestone.

Rachel is cancer  
charismatic and self-contained  
gregarious and predatory.

Not like me  
who under the night's reflection in her window  
nightly and loudly sang  
some old settlin down song:

'don't drift too far baby  
stick around and stay near  
stick around and stay near  
cause I got everything you need rightcheer.'

The street made Rachel's time.  
And me trying to mime its joyful and desperate rhyme.  
Never once did she celebrate in my ear  
the promise of some old unauthored  
womansung refrain:

'I'm gonna straighten up and fly right  
and quit my raising sand.  
straighten up and fly right  
and quit my raising sand.  
so don't put me down baby  
cause I want you in my plan.'

And me loudly singing to the crescent moon  
of her hidden circumference,  
and boldly changing nouns and pronouns  
for her  
so she could hear the wisdom  
of some old womansung advice:

'girls, if you got a good woman  
better keep her by your side.  
said, if you got a good woman  
better keep her by your side.  
cause if she flag this train  
I'm sure gonna let her ride.'

But Rachel is cancer  
tropical, lovable,  
fluid,  
charismatic, self-contained,  
gregarious, predatory  
and mean.  
Unlike me  
who only ever wanted  
Rachel between me  
like the moon  
orange and sandwiched between  
charcoal clouds.

## **Mavis writes in her journal**

. . . I know Geneva loves me  
more than the man she sleeps with every night  
and still our conversation is reduced  
from talk of world events to  
news of the latest white sale  
whenever he blunders into the kitchen  
for a toothpick.

. . . Geneva can't tell him the same secrets she tells me. . . .

He draws the blood. I know the scars. I acknowledge her mind.  
He ignores her body and makes her sense a dartboard.

. . . Why is it we never act on our own hunger?

Yesterday we were listening to Billie Holiday sing  
'Do Your Duty' when Geneva lost track of time, rushed home to cook  
his dinner . . . . Men learn to be chefs and short order cooks  
but never learn to feed themselves.

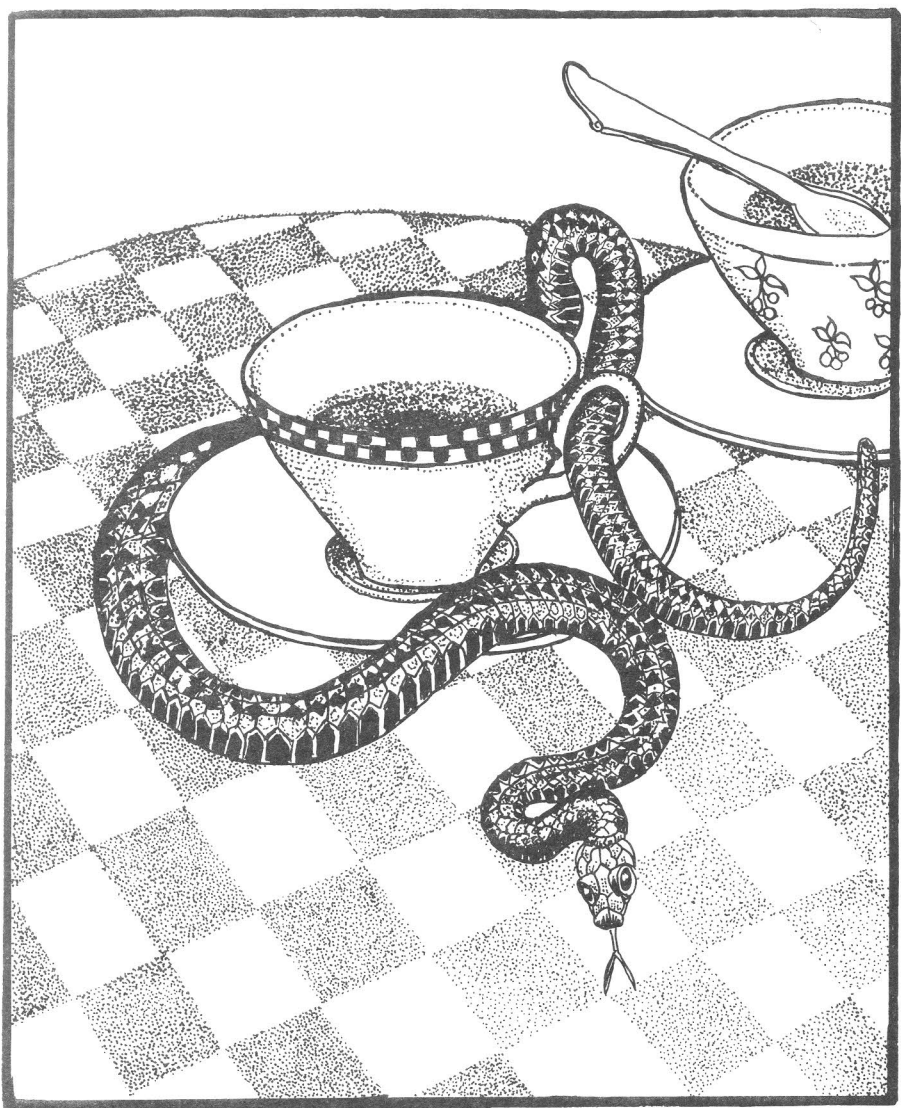
. . . *I am patient and relentless.*

Today I kissed Geneva square on the lips and today for the first time she asked me to leave when he came home from work and went straight to the icebox for a beer, grunting at us as he popped the cap, exploding the contents all over Geneva's highly polished linoleum.

. . . Our touches were tentative at first, then there was confidence, and passion, and wonder . . . then fear.

. . . He's too sure of his cock ever to suspect it will be supplanted. Tonight Geneva keeps him company.

Tonight I write another brazen love poem in secret, alone, patient, and relentless.





## waiting up

quick—a look of pain felt like shot  
across her face like the pain of skin scraped  
as my mother grabbed her left breast  
and quick like buckshot  
she was up from the table  
and every place at once  
humming the strains of hymns  
sung in church the day before.

unusual—that night she left me  
saying she'd go to walk her sister home from work  
humming and disappearing under the low-hanging clouds like udders  
leaving the door open wide  
to frame for me the urgent dusk  
fretful of events.

afraid of the bed by myself  
I wait up for her  
as she had waited up for my impetuous aunt  
—her sister—  
all those sultry nights  
as she would wait up for me years later humming sullenly.

late—my mother returns past midnight  
her stoop making slight her six feet  
slime squeezes from her brother's old dress pumps  
she had cut out and bent in  
a tire iron swings from one hand and  
her sister's pocketbook and shopping bag from the other  
humming she places them muddy with blood in the dusty corner  
next to the long-handled axe and the shiny hunting rifle  
I make no gestures  
she presumes my questions with asperity:

'Wasn't robbery nor rape.  
Not time nor sense enough to run.  
The craziest in a long line of menfolk she took her time up with.  
Caught in that poppin gait of hers with terror.  
Alone and unbelieving.  
Then face broken and chest broken.'

angry—my mother yells at me  
and knocks things from their places  
makes tea, reads cards, and vows penance  
walks me stiffly to her bed  
pushes me down by my shoulders  
tranced I let her cover me  
through the humid pitch of the room  
I hear her drag to the other side  
and feel her pressure gradual beside me  
in bawdy time she hums the strains of hymns  
sung in church the day before.

I sleep and toss with dreams of abrupt heavy things on me  
not feeling my mother's weight beside me  
I awake quiet and hysterical  
slow—I move in the dark to the room we wait up in.

the door stands open again  
the moon's refraction reveals signs of ritual  
iridesces the bloody tire iron, my late aunt's estate,  
and things missing from the dusty corner.

silent—my mother returns past dawn  
like a hunter secretive and sated  
concealing things laid in the corner  
searching through crowded drawers and cabinets  
and humming in bawdy time hymns  
sung in church the sunday before.

## **Ruby the runaway**

Women excite me and move me  
in the way those old midnite conferences  
with my rebel sister Ruby  
made my childhood memorable.

Ruby left me for the girl next door  
for what she said 'won't even be a minute'  
and turned into 14 years  
and I mourned my sentence to the cell of my parents  
wishing Ruby would come back and bust me out.

My father gave me cigarettes  
from his commissary chest of drawers  
for the violence of his sex  
and my mother allowed me to smoke them  
for colluding her silence.

With a cigarette between my fingers  
I practiced adulthood in front of my mirror daily.  
I was grown.  
Not like Ruby who never satisfied herself with symbols.

For the sake of appearances my mother made cold predictions:  
'First cigarettes, then alcohol, then sex, then vee dee  
or pregnant  
or a bulldagger  
like that black Ruby!'

I had had it all  
except been pregnant or a bulldagger  
and still longed for Ruby's soft buzz against my ear  
cried to be black and grown like Ruby  
to have my sentence commuted  
to be protected from my father's intrusions  
and my mother's indifference.

Escape was imminent.

Amidst my father's threats to keep my hem below my knees,  
to sit with my legs together,  
and my mother's admonition never to let the roots of my hair revert  
and to ignore the male need to call me out of my name in the streets  
I became engaged to Claude when I was sixteen.  
Something Ruby was too wild to do.

Claude was arrogant, intrusive, and clumsy.  
He was dumb and impudent  
and never understood my body's resistance.  
I went to work and lied about my salary.

Upon being told to hand over my check for  
the joint account

I rebelled.

Claude snatched my pocketbook  
fished out the check  
saw my net was ten dollars more than his  
and beat me with my pocketbook from the living-  
room floor to the bathroom tile.

That ass-whipping amazed me to the point of  
calling the police  
and calling for the courage of Ruby's big fists.  
Claude nearly broke my nose with the telephone receiver  
locked me in the bathroom  
answered the door.

I heard him assure the police we were having an argument  
not a fight.

The door shut.

The closet opened and shut.

His footsteps faded from where I sat in terror  
and indifference.

I heard the front door open and shut.

Ten minutes: I retched his name out.

No answer.

Euphoria.

Hysteria.

Twelve hours in the bathroom recalling Ruby's escape

I made decisions.

I heard the front door open.

I did not start.

Straight to the bathroom

he came

to relieve his bladder.

He pushed my rigid body off the toilet seat  
where I had begun to live  
in that twelve-hour isolation.  
Chivas Regal dulls dexterity.  
And clumsy Claude could never do two things at once  
like grab me and pee.

I was out.  
He was in.  
I locked him in.  
He was noisy to be out.  
And so was I. Out. Out. Out.  
Running to Ruby.

Women excite me and move me  
in the way those old, midnite conferences  
with my rebel sister Ruby made my childhood memorable.





## **Gail**

Gail

Chicago nightingale  
bred on blues and Bigger Thomas  
and extreme weather.

Lover of cocaine and marijuana  
on tropical and early mornings in summer  
and one hundred years of solitude in winter.

Gail

toucan and nightingale.  
Sitting reading Jung in a Newark food stamp office  
and speaking in dreams of atavistic masks.

Gail

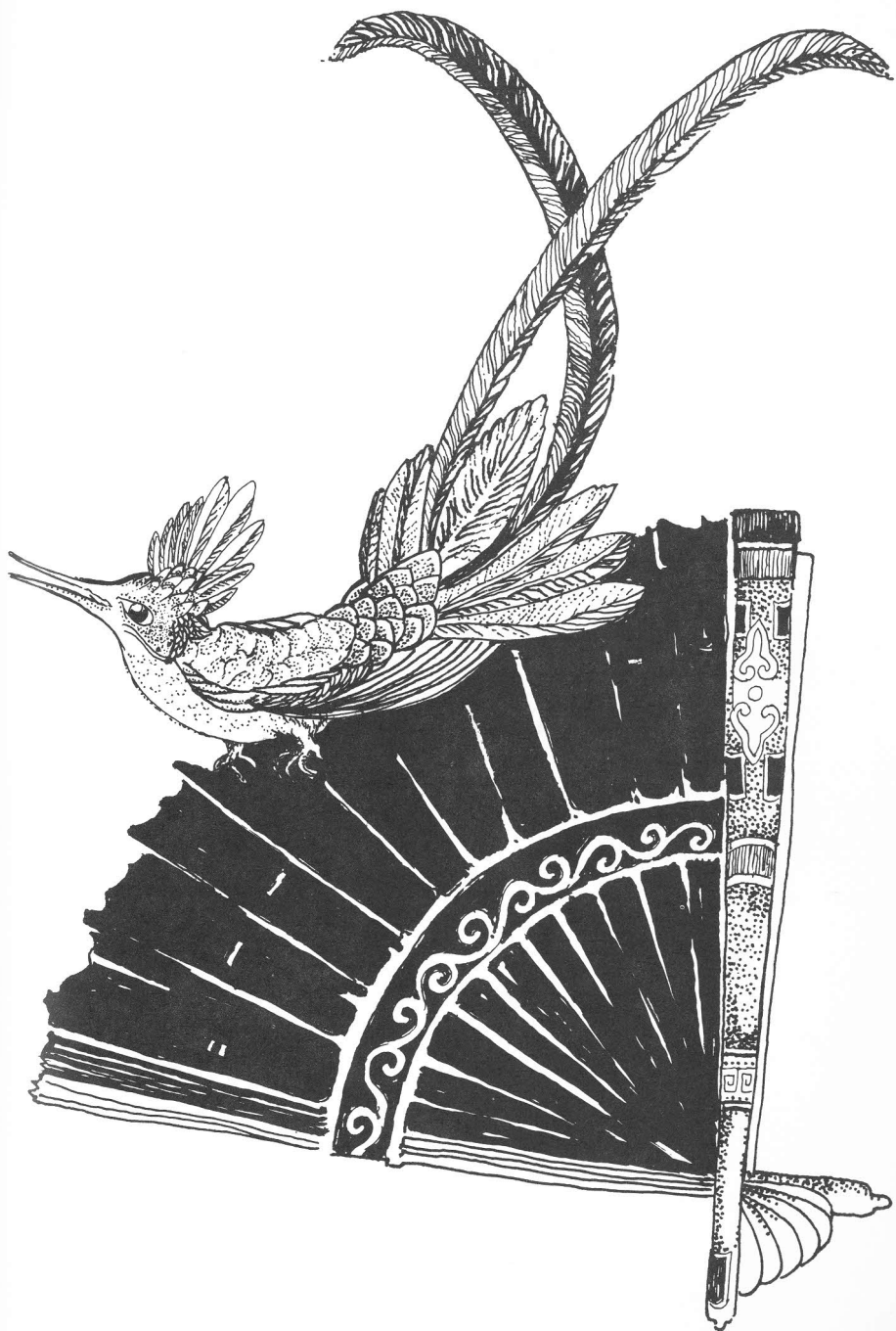
girl mother.  
Brushing, braiding other women's daughters' hair between your thighs  
before that marauding time of womb-swelling, scraping, and pillage.

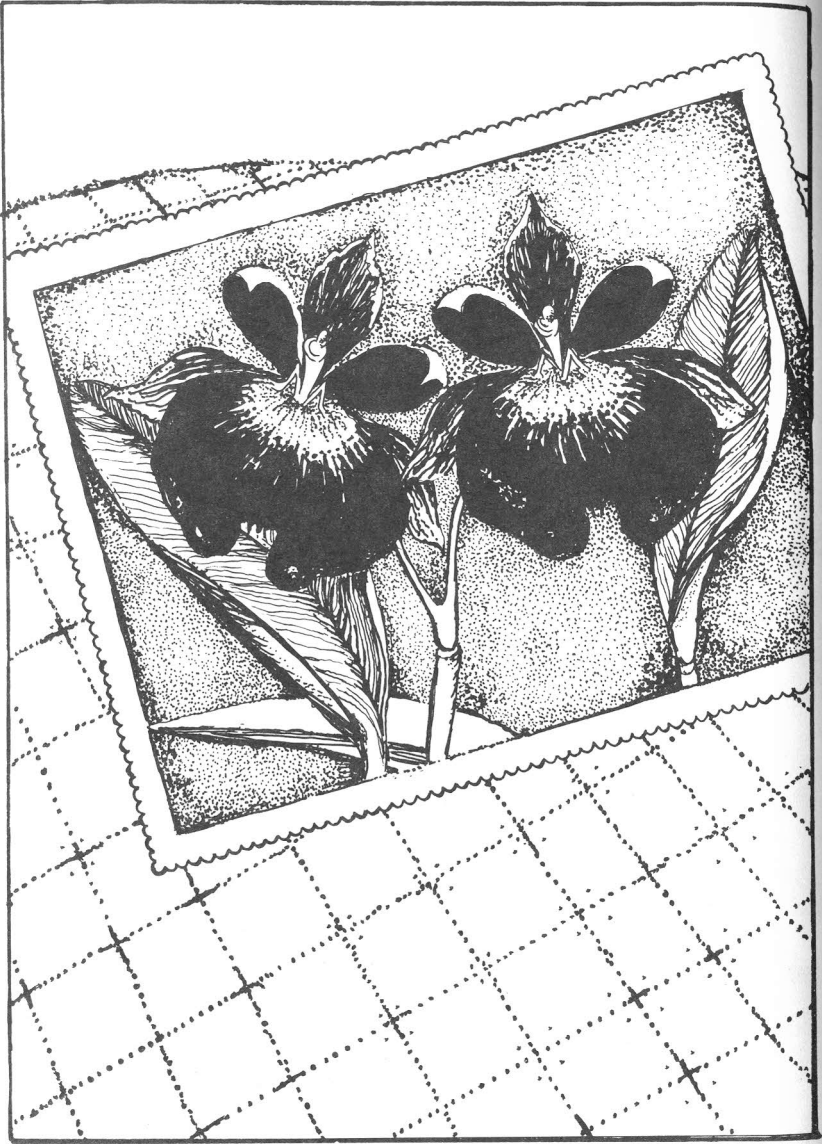
Gail

plumèd amazon.  
Tearing up diary pages filed in boxes and drawers crowded with  
scents and sachets  
singing r&b in Spanish  
beating out a latin two-step  
with your fist.

Gail

midwest nightingale in an eastbound flight.





## **a mother's story**

my mother calls them sinister  
to this day  
and blames their father's genes  
though they are dead-ringers for my mother's mother's sister  
whose daguerreotype I found pressed in the 'Book of Numbers'  
in my grandmother's forgotten bible.  
my great aunt was said to have possessed formidable powers.

. . . to this day I cannot tell them one from the other.  
there is no mark on one that is not on the other  
same skin  
same rebellious grade of hair  
same voice—dark, petulant, monotone  
every word said the same.  
in every trait identical.

if I spotted dirt under Leora's fingernail  
the same speck would be under Leona's same finger,  
though she'd been nowhere near the dirt.  
they spooked me out the whole time I raised them.  
I was certain I had two children who were meant to be one child.  
siamese twins joined at the souls, they were.  
in every trait the same.

I hardly ever had to discipline them  
remotely controlled by some other frequency  
they always knew  
exactly what to do.  
the one more territorially inclined  
the other more materially inclined  
but still to this day  
I do not know who is who.

if one was sprawled in front of the t.v.  
head blocking my view, comic books, school books, coke bottles,  
and potato chips spread east and west,  
I'd suggest:

'Leora, try to mind your belongings.'

she'd say:

'Mama, I'm not Leora.'

and smile distantly, drawing her diversions to her, backing away from  
the set, eyes still glued to the shenanigans of Alfred Hitchcock.

or

if I brought them gifts unexpectedly  
one would rush to me, grab bags from me,  
run to their room cupping parcels clumsily.  
I would assert:

'Leona, they're not all for you.'

the sister who'd reserved her curiosity by the door would correct me:

'Mama, that's not Leona.'

when they became ten years old  
my confusion becoming embarrassment  
I just began to address my daughters inspecifically:  
'sweetheart', 'sugar', 'baby', 'honey', 'dears'.

to this day they refuse to be separate.

in eighth grade their principal advised me to dress them differently  
she became impatient with my helpless 'the girls choose not to.'  
for the rest of the year, brow-beaten and ostracized, both  
refused to answer to either name.  
it pained me  
and it made them closer.

Leora and Leona never registered anyone's amazement or resentment  
so aloof and self-contained they were.

I followed my minister's advice  
and sent my geminis to the christians  
who might as well have been lions.  
when the novelty of their two-in-one  
rivalled the wonder of the trinity  
my daughters asserted their gladiatorial indifference  
and resisted the catechism  
the 'pledge of allegiance'  
and spoke in whispers of other kinds of baptism  
to cherry-cheeked nuns.

they were heretics and I was crazy about their heresy.

I never pushed romance on my geminis.  
I let them choose their own drugs.

men on the streets harangued them with 'double my pleasure,  
double my fun.'

boys followed them home.  
the mature adult male left them alone  
men did not impress them.

to this day I cannot tell them one from the other.

same skin  
same rebellious grade of hair  
same voice—dark, petulant, monotone  
every word said the same  
in every trait identical.

*Sunday, June 20 1982*  
*You are enthusiastically invited*  
*and warmly welcomed to witness...*

# NARRATIVES

A Dramatic Event

*directed by*

*written by*

Breena Clarke Cheryl Clarke

*performed by*

Linda Powell Breena Clarke  
Freda Scott

*an ensemble performance of Narratives,*  
*a forthcoming book of poems by*  
*Cheryl Clarke, recounting the*  
*lives and traditions*  
*of black women.*

*a synergy production*



The author would like to thank the gracious premiere audience of  
"Narratives: a dramatic event," June 20, 1982.

Cessie Alfonso  
Ivette Alfonso  
Dorothy Allison  
Sonia E. Alvarez  
Marianne Ardito  
Richard Arnold  
Ide B.  
Maureen Burnley  
Linda Baker  
Gay Belknap  
Madelyn Berensmann  
Adrienne Braxton  
Gwen Braxton  
Elly Bulkin  
Roslyn Cady  
Ellen C.  
Sahli Cavallaro  
Karen Chester  
Maria Chisolm (cousin)  
Barbara Clarke (cousin)  
Edna P. Clarke (mother)  
James S. Clarke (father)  
Jan Clausen  
Liz Connick  
Louise Connor  
D. Cox  
Linda Daniels  
Davine Del Valle  
Glenda Dickerson

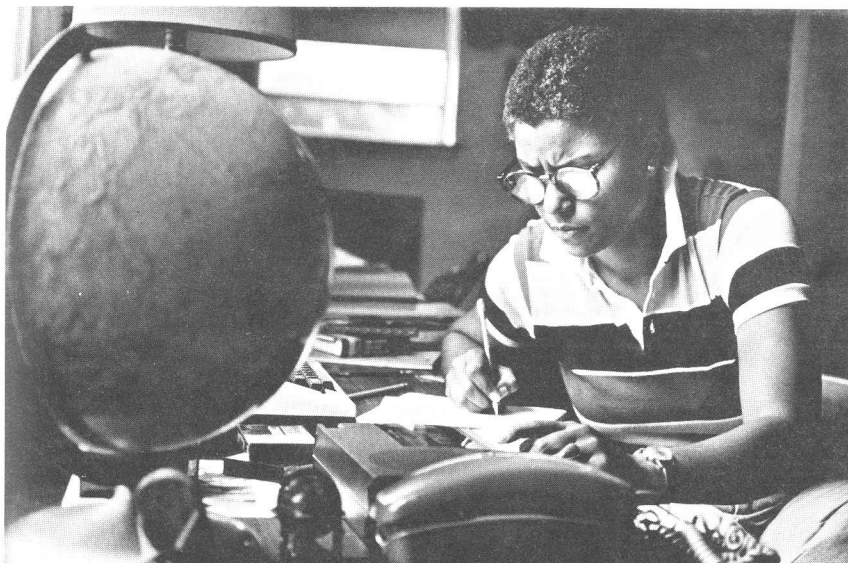
Rita Doryce  
Elaine M. Downes  
Beverly Echols  
Anne Eng  
Phyllis M. Evers

Charley B. Flint  
Barbara Gaines-Leovna  
Marilyn Garber  
Mr. L. R. Giles  
Rochelle K. Glick  
Alma Gómez  
J. Gomez  
Diane Grassi  
Judy Greenwald  
Barbara Greene  
Frieda Greer  
Monica Gross  
Linda Gui  
Gwen Hardwick  
Ivana Hocutt  
C. Inza  
Marian Ivry  
Luise Jeter (aunt)  
Bonnie Johnson  
Floresta D. Jones  
Brenda Joyce  
Barbara Kerr

Sharon Kleinberg  
Deborah Leoni  
Barbara Levy  
Lucy Lopez  
Marie Logue  
Mary Lum  
Mary Lyon  
Cecilia Marchetti  
Michele Maxian  
D. McArthur  
Cherrié Moraga  
Milledge Mosley  
M. Navarro  
Carroll Oliver  
Andresa Person  
Martha Pitts  
Bonni Price  
Mirtha Quintales  
Hazel Rodgers  
Robyn Royal  
Bill Russell  
Carol Sanchez  
Chris Sanchez  
Debbie Sanchez  
Rima Shore  
Jean Sirius  
Amadis Spearman  
Gail Stokes  
Debby Swayne  
Judi Swindle

Liz Szabo  
Celeste Tibbets  
Amy Tousits  
Cara Vaughn  
Elizabeth Waters  
Ruelle M. Watson  
Margaret Woods  
Celia Younger  
Lee Zevy





CHERYL CLARKE (b. 5/16/47, Washington, D.C.) is a poet in the tradition of Afro-American women; and the lives of black women as well as the lives of all women are the focus of her poetry. Clarke believes that poetry must be read aloud or performed, not simply read and internalized. *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* is her first book of poetry. Clarke considers her black, lesbian, and feminist identities to be the filter of her imagination. Clarke lives and writes in New Brunswick, N.J. and is currently at work on a book of poems which explores sister relationships.

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# NARRATIVES

poems in the tradition of black women

Cheryl Clarke's poems take fire from a deep and intelligent caring for other Black women and herself in them. For any woman-loving woman, this is a precious and celebratory book.

Adrienne Rich, poet

These new and surprising narratives present authentic stories of real lives, hitherto unnoticed: sassy/hilarious/grim lives of Black women honestly perceived with a clearly hardworking respect and without affectation. Cheryl Clarke speaks with a direct and a unique voice that develops very different sounds of family into a dramatic medley of intimate portraits.

June Jordan, Poet

I know these Black women well; in Cheryl Clarke's poems they carry their stories like flashlights.

Audre Lorde, poet



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In memory of Linda C. Powell, 1953-2014



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