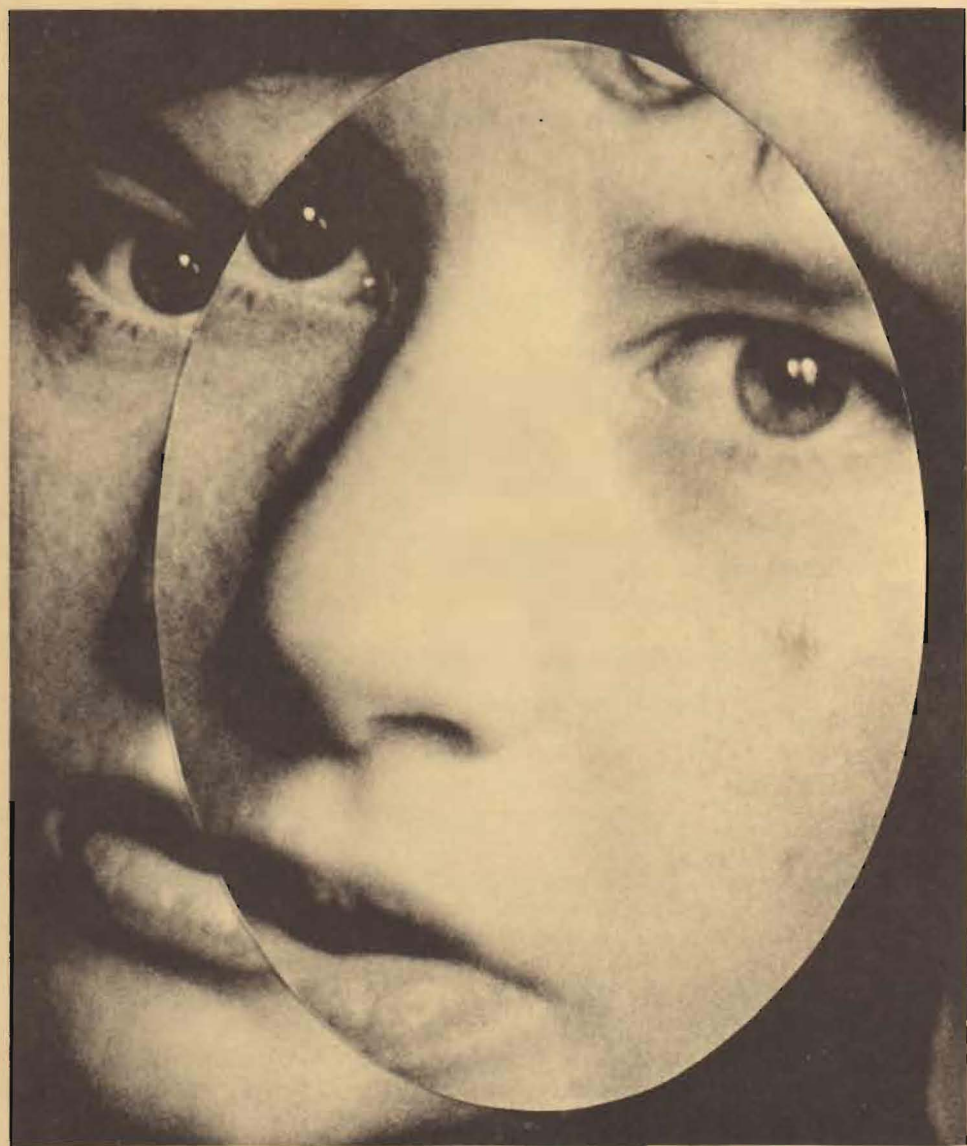


SINISTER WISDOM -





SINISTER WISDOM 7

*A Journal of Words and Pictures for the Lesbian
Imagination in All Women*

FALL, 1978

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Printed by Iowa City Women's Press

Special Thanks to the Lincoln Collating Crew!

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Published quarterly

Individual subscriptions: one year (4 issues) \$7.50

two years (8 issues) \$13.00

Institutions: 4 issues, \$12.00

Single copy, no. 7: \$2.50

Back issues, while available:

No. 1, \$2.00

No. 2, Book issue, "Lesbian Writing and Publishing," \$2.50

No. 3, sold out

No. 4, \$2.25

No. 5, \$2.25

No. 6, \$2.50

(Add 50 cents postage when ordering single copies.)

Address: Box 30541, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503

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Special Thanks:

- to Paulette French and Cheryl Greaney who transcribed the tapes of the "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" MLA panel published in *Sinister Wisdom* 6.
- to Lee Kinard whose contributions keep us going.



photo by Tee Corinne

trying
to see
ourselves
without
mirrors...

"In order truly to search for the Sister it is necessary to see the dis-membered Sister within, the Sister Self, and to remember her, coming into touch with the original intuition of integrity. Once mindful of the Sister, the Self need no longer resist her, her mind is full of her. She IS her. She is her Self. Re-membering is the remedy. The reign of healing is within the Self, within the Selves seen by the Self and seeing the Self. The remedy is not to turn back but to become in a healing environment, the Self, and to become the healing environment."

—Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*

TRYING TO SEE MYSELF WITHOUT A MIRROR

for the children we were
and the older women we are becoming

by Susan Wood-Thompson

I have known more women
than men all my life
so the violence
and the love
have come more from them.

My first memory is peaceful
coloring pictures
on the bedroom floor
with my cousin Tootsie
neither talking
each absorbed in her picture
in coloring with a friend.
Tootsie had brown straight hair
and a barrette on either side
and a brown plaid jumper.

I did not see myself then or later
because I was inside myself.
You can never see your own face
the way any stranger can
directly, without a mirror.

No one else can see
from behind my face.

I lay on my bed in my panties
waiting for naptime to be over.

When Bessie made beds
I rolled up like a hedgehog
in the middle of Mother and Daddy's
and she made it up over me
and I lay still or flopped around
and Bessie would let me out
whenever I wanted out.
With her were no unexpected angers.
I was not her demon
so I was not exorcised.

At four o'clock
behind the louvered pantry door
she powdered her face
with a red rubber sponge
put on lipstick
and even though she was fat
falsies (with nipples)
and let me wait with her
at the bus stop.

When I was ten
my girlfriend whose parents
made her act like a boy
raped me with a stick up the butt
in the bushes on their estate.
She ground it in until the nurse
stood in the sun and called her.
I was afraid to go there again
but I could not tell my mother
so I had to go every time
but she never did it again.

Mother, my favorite
magic princess by day
at night climbed the stairs
to ask why wasn't I
a perfect child
as she had been.

Daddy and I read aloud
Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet
and sang "The Whiffenpoof Song"
with friends by outdoor fires
on cold mountain nights
and I saw that if he died
all the earth would stop.

My cousin Sissy
nine years older
came to live with us.
We ate sour balls
and played gin rummy
and she let me dance around
in her net petticoats
one pink, one blue
with her blue hairnet
around my shoulders for a shawl.
She wrote a poem about how
I was a pink and blue princess.
No one had ever written a poem
about me before. She rolled
up the two ends to make a scroll
and tied a ribbon around it.
I knew she loved me.

In my eighteenth summer
near Copenhagen
the boy I loved told me
if I didn't let him kiss me
he'd get involved with Jane.
I let him. We were sitting
on a wooden fence and later
he spent the night in my room
at an inn secretly
but did not make love
because I was afraid.
The room had a slanted ceiling
and a pitcher full of water
and a basin for the pitcher.
He put my hands on his penis
and it felt different
from any part of my body.

At ten I had sat in a tree
in the rain, wearing blue jeans
and a blue jean jacket and crying
because I didn't want to grow up.

At twenty-one
every day at four o'clock after work
I put on a Harry Belafonte record
that had no surprise sharp noises
and closed the blinds
so no light could sting my eyes
and I smoked and cried

until I fell asleep
too chicken to use pills or a gun.
In February, after the third try
of putting the lighter flame
to my hair and the hair just sizzling
I couldn't stand not dying
and in the shower I couldn't breathe
even though I figured I was breathing.
I called Sister Dymphna.
They put me in the hospital.
I cried all night and into the morning
so they wouldn't think I was well.

I became a Catholic to grow strong
and sure like Sister Dymphna.

Finally the thirteenth time
I was hospitalized
they put me in a locked ward
and gave me insulin coma treatments
and I thought I was starving to death
going four hours each day into coma.
I planned how I'd write a friend
to send me all the boxes of chocolate
from some dime store. And I thought
"I cannot stand this" but I knew I was.
I couldn't solve what you do
if you can't endure something
but they make you anyway.
I had found the place
where life does not yield.

The nurse kicked the addict cold
turkey to get up off the floor.
The doctor electroshocked
the streetwalker until she threw
out her cigarettes and embraced God.
This was her third such conversion.
She and her parents were grateful.
Women who didn't want treatments
were dragged down the hall
after shots were slammed into their hips.

Across thick screens I saw people
walking in the winter sun.

The morning I found out by overhearing
that I was to get an electroshock
treatment during each coma
comas where I could see and hear
then that was worse than physical force
and I refused. The nurse bullied me
I bullied her back saying the doctor
promised that the nurse would call him.
I kept refusing. They let me out
after my psychoanalyst of four years
slammed out yelling "You don't want help!"
and I shouted back "This isn't help!"

I no longer played at being crazy
dancing on the school lawn
in my sheer blue nightie
while the nuns filed back
from chapel in black and white.
But I had four more years
of other doctors until I found
one who told me to stop trying
so hard to pass for normal but to live
out my crazy part, my best part.
Then I could stop going to doctors
and seeing myself at eighty
in some back ward, stringy, limp
having forgotten how to be conscious
eternally dealing with the fear
of pills and guns and how to live
through what cannot be stood.

I grew stronger.
I wanted to be a nun.
I read Saint Teresa
on meditation and contemplation.
I read **The Spiritual Exercises**
of Saint Ignatius of Loyola
and meditated all the scenes
except the one in hell.
I thought that would be bad for me.
I knelt for an hour every day
across the grille from the Pink Sister,
the Sister Servant of the Holy Spirit,
who knelt before the Host
each sister taking her turn
an hour at a time around the clock
around the seasons.

I focused on the thin line
between God and me and was peaceful
the sister and I kneeling
concentrating on our work of loving God.

I had to decide.
I will be a nun, a psychologist
or an English teacher.
I was afraid I wanted to be a nun
for the greater glory of me, not God.
I was afraid I couldn't pass
statistics to be a psychologist.
I chose English because I knew
I did that well but I did not want
to be an English teacher.
Most English teachers were creeps.
I didn't want my work to turn me
into a creep.

A month after I decided
not to be a nun
I invited up the lusty
looking young man who lived
in the apartment below me.
I wore my bikini.
I read **Playboy** ostentatiously.
It worked. On the couch I wasn't sure
he'd gone completely in
since this was the first time
I wasn't sure how to know.
I liked it. Then I bled a lot.
He and I were frightened
by so much blood.

I decided not again until
I find one I'm in love with.
I made it my business
to fall in love.

I had a history of people
who were impossible
or supposedly unavailable.
Ira had been crazy like me
so when one of us wanted to get married
the other could say "We can't
what if schizophrenia is hereditary?"

We said "Instead we will be friends for life
that way we will always have a friend."
and we always have.

Father Hyacinth
had been my confessor.
I confessed lust
for my cousin Sissy's husband.
Father Hyacinth liked that.
He was planning to leave
lining up a Ph.D. and a wife.
I did not know that at first.
When I had no money he found me a shack
behind the Poor Clares' convent.
Father Hyacinth cuddled me to him
under a pine tree one afternoon
in a rainstorm. The next week
he came drunk to my room, lay
on my body saying "You can trust me."
Trust you which way? I thought
jumping up to stand by the fire.

Now that I was ready to fall in love
I chose a man from my therapy group.
He had three girls and a boy
like my father. He was a contractor
like my father. He wore glasses
and his auburn hair waved
like my father's. He was faithful
to his wife, he told me.
I told him I wanted an affair.

He waited for me
in an Italian restaurant
after my Chaucer exam
a British cap pulled down
his feet up, a copy of **The Crack-Up**
on the table. We drove to the lake
to see his boat with a yellow sail
and sat in the car in the rain
talking about philosophy and poetry
and showing each other the books
where we wrote down the ideas
that caused the moments we lived for.

He who had been depressed and impotent
a year no longer was. For the first time
I wanted the rest of my life.

Later when his best friend called
I expected him to say Steven wanted me
to pick him up at the airport.
Instead he told me he had been found dead
in the snow on his business trip. I asked
over and over to be sure I understood
"Does that mean he won't be coming back?"
My group therapy friends came.
I showed them Steven's nightshirt
he had given me, holding it up
the shape of a man but no one inside.
At the funeral his body was there
and that was a comfort. Death was near
because he had made it safely there
death was safe for me now
and God was my friend.

But later
if God could choose things
to be any way he wanted
and he included death
I was not his friend
I was his enemy and he mine.
I knew if I stopped going to Mass
I'd lose my faith. I stopped going.

When I told Margaret Steven was dead
I cried. She fed me wine
and we cried and laughed
and cried and laughed
like waves coming in.

I was afraid to return
to my rock hut by the woods
where deer stepped into the field
and sunset turned the yellow road pink.
I was afraid I would feel
like I was walking on bodies
all Steven's bodies in his funeral suit
slipping under my feet
throwing me off balance

like trying to walk on water.
While I was alone at Margaret's
when she went to work
I would hear him
calling me at the door
and I would turn and say "Yes!"
and see the door empty.

I had the flu for weeks.
My shrink said "You don't get well
because you're trying to die
you identify with Steven."
The internist could find
no blood pressure, no pulse
my period came red crust
that crumbled to powder.
The internist said I would die
if I didn't go into the hospital.
I'd heard that before so I drank
water and did not throw it up
and did not go into the hospital
but started teaching college.

I was well but still
no way to end my grief.
Later Carrie, old woman divorced
said "I always think when someone marries
again soon after the death of a spouse
it was a good marriage, the person
welcomes another one."

And that let me know
I didn't have to feel guilty when Margaret
made love to me and I was glad. I repeated
over and over in my head on the first kiss
this is a woman kissing me
these are a woman's lips.

What goes through my mind
when my eyes are closed
before sleep, after sleep?
Forms swim behind my eyes
voices talk to me, I to them.

Sister Benedict's black veil
nods toward me
when I understand a poem.
Her letter "I am in love
with Father Eric
I must leave." Sister Dymphna
asking me to mail a letter
she doesn't want the superior to see.
I feel the warmth of women
who showed me they fit
no rule for perfection.

I remember my fear
of offending Margaret
sitting at tables
in the Pancake house
when I first heard my voice
say aloud "I notice
that all people are disabled
but mostly it doesn't show
for everyone to see
as it does with you
and other blind people"
and my relief that I had a friend
who did not believe herself perfect
would not assume I should be.

The bond of suffering
is that we know
we begin with what we have
and do not measure each other
against a perfect husk
that never burst with pain.

I have taken lovers
from the hospital ward
from the school for the blind
who know whereby we are equal
and our language shows we have listened
for the same signs that there are words
for pain and we speak with the same knowledge
that if we survive, we survive together
therefore we speak carefully
trying not to give unnecessary hurt.

I remember Gloria
with a gun in her purse
so she could kill herself
at any moment when it was
too much. I remember Allison
pulling out her own hair
they had stopped her from dying
when she had not wanted
to have to go crazy again.

I see Margaret kissing me
and I her through the years
coming home from our separate jobs
laying our heads in each other's laps
to hush the din of the workday
lying together arms and legs and feet
happy under the quilt on cold mornings
breathing silently, sleeping side by side
without a sheet on warm nights.

I remember my students
coming tired and scared of confusion
calmed to hear I too had had
to take remedial English
to discover that the teacher
has been as prickly with sweat
as small and troubled as they
over not being perfect.

Students forever poets
writing about the death of their fathers
ringing over and over in their ears, students
saying the bells out, peeling the sound for me
so that maybe between us we can softly still
the bells from ringing all the time.

She kissed me
and we live together still.
We have held each other in grief
many times in many houses
at the kitchen table, in bed,
in our studies.

We have hurt each other
beyond what we could have pictured
before we did it, in ways that cut
into the flesh, ways that left scars
to help us know ourselves

and we have healed the wounds
in ways that make us beautiful.
We have found and lost friends.
We have hid ourselves and puzzled
over the word "lesbian" and hated
each other for what she proved we were.

We have said after the worst fight
"Without you I do not know
if anyone will touch me today"
and "Without you I do not know
that I am beautiful" and have known
these were reasons enough
to learn the complicated work
of being kind to one another.
And from this kindness
we have been glad to find ourselves
lesbians and have said
"We will adopt a lesbian teenager
so she will not be shamed by her parents"
and "We will help each other's dreams come true"
and "I will be your friend."

Today the cold bites through the sunshine
and the wind stiffens what it blows against.
This morning I work at my desk
and she across the hall at hers
like children coloring, like nuns praying
like white-haired women knowing
that though we may die alone
we will live together
the hair falling down the sides of our faces
as we bend over our work.

SELF-PORTRAIT

by ALICE BLOCH

Hair

A gray streak is developing at my right temple. Each hair turns red before gray, brightens before it pales. Soon I will be "salt-and-pepper," much spicier than I have ever been. Each dark and light tone will be accentuated. I will be more striking. Then all my hair will be gray or white. I will be lighter, more translucent. You will see my bones through my skin. I hope I live that long.

Age

I am thirty, going on.

Ecology

I live with Nancy. We spend a great deal of time hugging each other.

Body

The top half comes from the men in my family: long, thin arms, fingers, neck, nose, chin. The bottom half comes from the women: short, wide, stocky. From the waist up I am a scholar, a dreamer, elegant, light, elongated, reaching for the heavens. From the waist down I am earthy, muddy, guttural, heavy, a heathen, a baker, a farmer, a burden-bearer. My fingers have been cultivated in the Gentile world, they have learned to play the piano, to write from left to right. My toes could tap out a Semitic alphabet on the ground, because once their grandmother did and they never forgot how. Ancient striving and ancient survival are imprinted in the form of my body.

For many years I hated my body. I was fat, ugly, awkward. My mother's body of a woman had killed her early; she was always pregnant, and then she was dead. I had inherited this body of a woman, and I felt it to be a time-bomb that would kill me too.

Then I became a lesbian. I loved my body madly.

That was six years ago. By now the infatuation is over, replaced by a complex but steady friendship. We are companions, Body and I: we break bread together. We sometimes annoy or even hurt one another, but we suffice to accompany each other through life. For now, a toast to us.

Nose

My nose was small at first. It grew at the same time as my legs and breasts. Growing pains, Daddy said. He knew: I had inherited his nose. On a man it would pass, its long line would be absorbed into the rough beard and harsh cheekbones. But on a girl, it was no asset. Ungainly as my suddenly long arms that kept knocking things over, my nose lengthened, it became gangly and inconvenient, there seemed to be no end to it.

I am grateful to my father for never having suggested a nose job. He could have afforded the operation, and the idea must have occurred to him, but his philosophy on these matters was similar to my own. The nose was an embarrassment, but it was mine and it would stay. I suspect that he was even pleased to see me growing to look more and more like him.

It was Mom, his second wife, my stepmother, who recommended the operation. Had I ever considered, she said, and while we were at it we could ask the surgeon to correct my uneven smile. I never forgave her for that.

Mom thought my nose was one reason for my dating so little. Maybe she was right, in a way: my long, fragile nose of a Biblical scholar was always in a book. My nose was too sharp for the comfort of the boys in my class, and sharp enough to smell something about them that I didn't like.

Away at college, I nearly broke my nose on a blind date. I went upstairs to the bathroom and fell all the way down, landing on my nose at Barry Pomerantz's feet. Barry fainted at the sight of my blood. At the hospital a doctor prodded my nose and pronounced it crooked. He held up a mirror, and I saw the same nose as ever.

Now, I wonder what effect this nose has had on me. Do I mind my own business so carefully, for instance, because I am afraid of being called nosy?

My nose is the keenest of my sensory organs. I can smell out the ingredients of a dish before I taste it. I like to sniff. Sex is nearly devoid of pleasure for me when my nose is clogged. When my nose is clear, body scents hit me, surround me, cling to me. My favorite fragrance is the combination of Nancy's smell and my own.

Nancy has had quite an effect on my nose. I loved her smell long before I loved her, and I am coming to like my nose largely because she likes it.

Yes, Mom, my nose has a lot to do with my not dating.

Teeth

It is important that my father was a dentist. My teeth still have no life of their own: they belong to Daddy. They are precise, efficient, well-cared-for, polite, inoffensive. They tell the world that I am a good girl.

Breasts

My breasts ride low and loose. When I run, they flap against my rib cage like a pair of rabbits. On cold nights they warm my stomach; on hot days they give it shade.

My breasts are full of surprises: cysts, granules, nodules. Pressed against bone, my breasts feel like cooked rice in a satin pillowcase.

My breasts will never suckle a child. were not designed with today's clothes in mind. flop to both sides when I lie on my back. would gladly strain to reach a finish line. love pleasure as much as any part of me. sprouted at just the wrong time. are trying to become wings. do not like to be scraped by my arms when I walk. are sensitive to criticism. tread cautiously but know how to give. are tired of my policy of containment. need a lot of support.

One of their fears has entered my dreams: a woman with firmly styled hair and heavy makeup, who advances toward me, holding out an orange juicer, and leers as it begins to squeeze my nipple. My voice and arms become paralyzed.

I awaken, screaming in terror of being sucked dry. Then I feel calmer: if I am screaming, my voice is not paralyzed, and I will not be sucked dry. My voice comes from my breasts, and it nourishes me. My arms can move, I can write, and my breasts vibrate with the sound of my words. They are pleased. They need more of this kind of power.

Feet

My feet are my breasts' other selves. They trudge, they stumble, they refuse to run. They are firmly planted in the ground, they resist uprooting.

They think the English language has entirely too many words for the parts of the foot and leg. They prefer the Hebrew "raglayim," one word to include the foot, calf, knee, thigh. They want to be a single unit from toe to hip, a proud klutz clanking noisily through the world. They want me to remember my past as a child of Israel tramping the desert in heavy sandals, a Yiddish-speaking peasant clomping to market in broken-down old boots. They are Grandma's feet.

Stubborn and slow, they are easily stubbed. They trip over anything: a shadow on the floor, a leaf on the sidewalk. They want me to be as close to the earth as I can become.

At night when I've had a bit of wine, they loosen. They dance like hammers on a xylophone, they leap and land with a force that jars the record needle out of the groove. The next day they ache and protest, they cannot remember quite what they did but they know it was foolish.

Like my breasts, they make their worst fear known to me in a dream: I am a porpoise, standing up straight in a pool of water. I have no feet, only this liquid base. People call to me, and as I turn to respond to them, water flows from my pool to them. I still am balanced, I stand without effort, but I am aware that my base is disappearing from under me.

When I wake from this dream, I go barefoot to the garden. I plant my feet in the dirt and wave my arms to the sun. I wiggle my toes in the ground, and my feet are comforted. This is where they belong, this is their element.

Car

I am not by nature a driver. I suffer from gravity, absent-mindedness, myopia. My eyes were meant to watch the telephone wires pass by. I tend to miss the signs ahead. I know the curves by heart, but sometimes I forget one or two. I don't always know when to exit.

I learned to drive in a suburban family station wagon, a car much too large for my ideas about myself. In parking lots, I kept crumpling the corners, trying to make the wagon smaller and rounder.

The beetle suits me. It is my vehicle. I roll around in this funny blue machine, almost unaware of its existence. For the most part it works cheerfully and inconspicuously. When it does not, I am willing to depend on the mechanic. I prefer to let the inner workings of my car remain a mystery.

Like my mind, my car sometimes threatens to run away on its own. I have a recurring dream in which I am driving down a hill on a canyon road. My mind wanders, the car goes out of control. I jerk back to attention, but it may be too late.

This is the danger, but every day feels safe enough.

House

My house is my mother, my child. It holds me, protects me, shelters me, gives me safety. I take care of it, worry about it. I would like to rock it in my arms.

It is my home now. Not my only possible home, but my home now.

It is not only mine. It is ours: Nancy's and mine.

Sometimes I feel as though I am my house, as though my house is my body. My skin stretches taut over its rough pointed roof, its wood frame. I perch on the hill, looking out through my windows, welcoming people into me through my doors. My belly purrs like a huge cat, like a refrigerator.

My center is very old, dilapidated but sturdy. I have seen many inhabitants. Some have stayed a short while and left little mark upon me. Others have added rooms, changed colors and textures, given me different personalities. In general I have been treated with respect. Occasionally I have been abused.

Now I am not the house. I am dwarfed by the house, I sit in one of its many tiny corners.

My house is threatened by fire. I fill my car with papers and drive away. I cannot take my house on my back. I would pack it in a knapsack. I would dehydrate it and pour it into an envelope for later use. I would swallow it and roll down the hill.

I leave it behind. I cannot protect it. It roars like a lion, like the ocean. It wants to become small, to fold up like a rug and get stuffed into the back seat.

After the fire it welcomes me back. It hugs me, comforts me through the night.

Like a bird I make my nest here.

Back

Nancy says that my back is my best feature. I say, what good is a back that can't even lift a 25-pound bag of manure without hurting for days afterwards.

I have always had poor posture. My back never learned how to pose. My spine has settled into the shape of a question mark. "What's the use?" it asks.

My back is the first part of me to get depressed, to need rest, to curl up in self-defense. It wants to become a circle; its top and bottom ache to be reunited like a snake swallowing its tail. It thinks evolution has gone much too far. It longs to recapture the peace and continuity of the embryo. It wishes I were an egg or a turtle, so it could be my shell.

Stomach

I have what is known as a strong stomach. I have not vomited in nineteen years, since the morning of the city-wide spelling bee. My stomach is an oyster that refuses to release the pearl of my anger. It holds my anger tight, it clamps shut like the jaws of a monster.

Anger is a pit in my stomach, a small stone polished smooth by the years. It sits there, hard and round. It will not dissolve. It poisons my insides. Can my tears dissolve it? Maybe, but this will take a long time, and even then a tiny seed will remain.

I imagine vomiting out my anger. A pit, it sinks into the soil, it grows into a flowering shrub. A gem, it becomes a glass dome to live in; showers of light reflect from its facets, rain pours off in all directions. A stone, it becomes an amulet to wear at my throat, an anger bead that will not harm me but will ward off dangers from outside.

Give, stomach! I need my anger where I can use it.

Some Deaths in My Life

My mother died when I was nine. My father died when I was twenty-five. My sister died when I was twenty-six. Some day I will die too.

I was once a practicing religious Jew, and now I am not. I once believed that I would always love anyone I had once loved, but now I do not. I have left and been left by some of my closest friends in such places and ways that I will probably never see them again, or if I do, we will hardly know each other.

I gave up on men a long time ago. Sometimes I fear that I will also give up on women, and then what will there be?

But a fear is not the same thing as a death.

Belly

My belly contains both a uterus and a womb. These two organs are indistinguishable to the hands of my doctor or the eye of the x-ray machine, but they are both there. Friend and foe, they coexist uneasily within me.

Uterus says, "I bear nothing, but I live, and that is enough. I am a hard little muscle, a baseball glove that was never meant to catch but only to be oiled and admired. I am just the right size."

Womb says, "I am a widow, an orphan. Every month I make a plush home for you. I roll out the red carpet. I line my walls with velvet cushions. I make a pot of thick soup. I wait. Then, I am empty again, I am forlorn, I cry tears of blood. Please, fill me, use me."

Uterus says, "No way, baby! Just give me my monthly Unemployment check and let me spend my days meditating. I'm having a fine time."

Uterus is in touch with things. She dips down in back to find out what's going on in the intestine. She expands and contracts freely. When my body is excited, Uterus is the first to know: she swells and softens, she turns to butter, she throbs and tingles, she peals like a bell, she opens like a tulip.

After each menstrual period, Uterus feels dry as a skull bleaching in the desert. She wants to be swabbed with rosewater, ginseng cream, aloe vera. She has no other requests.

Womb wants me to become my mother, to bear a child every year until I die. She wants me to concentrate all my energy in my gut, to wear my heart up-front, to swell with purpose, to bear as much as I can, to hide in a cave, to become heavy, to serve only that which grows within me. She is the source of my writing, but she is not satisfied with that. She is a hungry, furry animal inside me. She has a very large mouth. She wants to grow huge on my resources. If need be, she will settle for a tumor.

Several of my friends have had hysterectomies. Uterus says, "Don't let the bastards get me! I've never felt better."

Womb sighs. "Oh, well, if I'm not going to be put to use, I might as well live in a jar." But I don't think she means it, she just wants some attention.

Sometimes I wish I could get rid of Womb: she is no good to me at all, I think.

"But don't forget," says Womb, "in Hebrew, the only language you really believe in, my name is 'rehem.' My name is the root of the word 'rahamim': compassion, love, mercy."

She is right. Uterus gives me pleasure and strength, but only Womb can give me compassion. Before I can make peace with her, before Uterus and Womb can be one, I must know that Womb will not kill me as her mother killed my mother. I still don't know that.

Clothes

My clothes fit me only in dressing rooms. They change on the way home and never look right again.

None of my clothes go with any of my other clothes. They match, they are chosen with color schemes in mind, but they just don't go together. They decline to become an outfit. Dispirited and unsociable, they hang on me individually.

I get revenge by being hard on my clothes. I spill foods on them, I let my cats climb all over them, I wear them to bed for naps.

My clothes accuse me of having no style. They want to cling and billow, to make dramatic entrances, to collect more compliments than lint. I just want them to serve me quietly, to be fitting and proper, to cover my skin in a manner that draws attention away from my body. I long for the austerity of an old-fashioned girls' school: the rows of identical white beds, the simple blue garments laid over wooden chairs for the next morning.

Nancy chooses my clothes for a party. She leans toward the tight fit, the sexy line. I suspect her of being in cahoots with my clothes; the conspiracy is to make me appear immodest, even indecent.

"Whore" is the worst name I can imagine being called. I try to dress in such a way that no one can ever call me a whore.

It's not exactly that I'm ashamed of my body or my sexuality. The shame is in sexiness, display of sexuality, "sex appeal."

Perhaps this is how I survive as a lesbian in a straight world, by keeping my sexuality to myself and my lover. Perhaps this is how I mostly kept the men away before I was a lesbian, and the habit stuck. Perhaps a proud and earnest side of me refuses to play the sexy game, insists that I gain recognition for my mind.

"Clothes are basically dishonest," I say at my most extreme. "Their purpose is to make the body appear in some shape other than its own."

"Bullshit," say my clothes at their most extreme. "You are ashamed. Quit being such a puritan."

"Better a puritan than a whore," I say. I recognize no middle ground. I am rigid on this point.

I feel like a sad statue, frozen in place, stuck in an ill-fitting vestment of stone. My tears have calcified on my cheeks. My mouth hangs partially open, permanently fixed in that "uh" shape, the shape of before swallowing, of watching a movie kiss or touching my own body, caught in the act, caught acting just like everybody else, caught, ashamed and frozen, gagging on the tip of an iceberg.

I shudder, petrified by the sight of my own lust. I may crack, but I will not thaw. I defend this second virginity much more fiercely than I defended the first. I will not surrender to myself.

I slide from the pedestal, I let the wind sweep me down the valley, I melt in the rain. Wet with my own juices, I move. The salt of my fluids covers me, and this crusty skin, this suint, is my first real garment.

Clothing is a map, a tattoo, a writing on the body. Like writing, it leads me to myself by letting me become many different people. Like writing, it both hides and exposes me. Like writing, it needs to be fluid.

Self

I imagine turning myself inside out: my liver for a hat, my sweater for a stomach.

I begin to see that I contain all things.



ACTING

(for G.C.)

You erased the notes you'd made in my play.
I told you I wanted to read how you'd found the character.
You said bees don't ask honey how to make it,
they don't ask their feet to be sticky;
as for any clues they might leave—
one could always buy a microscope.
I did.

I found the imprints of a silent alphabet
that told me nothing new about the character you'd played
or even how you'd discovered it;
they did tell me how I was seeing.

my desire was a transparent fluid
filling your impressions.

your markings had become small pools—
each of my fingers, immersed.

electricity was conducted.

I didn't have the sense to withdraw my hand.

The heat made the liquid boil:
it rose up and steam burned my eyes.
I had to close them.
I knew this would happen.
I knew I'd be tracing your moments through lightning in the dark.
I was glad the blind had taught me to read.

—Gloria Dickler

connections—

a story of a story of a story
a genetic memoir

by LINNEA JOHNSON

Let me ask you how you've come to where you are now. I mean how did you get 'here' from 'there' and where is 'here' and, of course, where is 'there.' I ask you to tell me a story. I will sit here and enjoy. Once upon a time, perhaps. I would enjoy that. You don't answer. I'll move back a bit. Fluff up the knoll behind you and tell me a story, won't you. Silence. Alright, easier then: I will ask you questions. You were born in Chicago, weren't you? Like me—Chicago? Perhaps about the same time? Yes? No? Silence again. Then I will tell a story for you.

Legend has it that I may have been born at the very edge of a birch forest outside New Hampster, New Jersey. The pasture was full of single file cows dripping milk for they had not been milked in a very long time. I believe I was born at sunset. The nuns from the cloister adjoining my mother's property found me fully born between my mother's legs perhaps a day after that first sunset. I was like a rubber ball, fat and rosy, dimpled and, from the first, resilient. Through the care of the sisters, my mother recovered her health, the cows were eventually milked and we all have lived in concert near there for what may have already been centuries.

When I was barely old enough to walk, still quite short as I am to this day, I remember playing with the calves and nursing with them from their mothers. They thought me an odd sort and, though none of us were terribly steady on our feet, they could even then outrun me. They grew away from me rapidly and eventually decided they would not play with me. Though we remain distant friends, I still wonder.

The sisters took up the slack; where I had wandered amongst the stick-legs of the cows and calves, I soon began to rustle amidst the skirts of the habits, darting about, virtually twirling the nuns dizzy. A delight. I thought it delightful. When I grew older, I was taught, by these same nuns, to make candles. I would dip my hands in the paraffin when I was in a playful mood, letting the scalding wax cool and cloud on my hands. Until I was fully nine years old, I was of little use in candlemaking. The Christmas of my tenth year found me in the birch woods nailing candles to each of the trees. At dark, I lit them all. When I had finished, just as some of the first candles I'd lit were beginning to flicker out, I called the sisters to come look. We stood silent in the snow until the last candle went out.

My mother seemed to become absorbed by the sisters. On the infrequent occasions I would return home nights, only sometimes would she

be there. Sometimes only I would put myself to bed. Sometimes one of the sisters from the cloister would be there or would have recently been there—there would be a fire in the fireplace and water on for a cup of tea. I was free therefore to concentrate on my thoughts. I did not have to contend with the menacing presence of someone whose moods would rule my own.

When we would find other children abandoned or partially ravaged by parents or other predators, the sisters would take them in or I, upon occasion, would take them home with me. I did not enjoy rescuing the abandoned as the sisters did although, since the first time I saw a baby, I have known how much they know and I respect them. I can, it seems, better communicate with the animals I know and, pleasantly enough, with the trees, so, I prefer them.

But, I wanted you to tell a story: how you got here from there, and here it is me telling you. Whenever you wish to speak, please do so. I am eager to listen to you.

It may be that I was truly born in Chicago. Like you, in Chicago. I have heard that life for a little girl there was much like my own may have been. There are stories that I was born there in a hospital on the Near West Side not far from where I may have grown up. In these stories, I am a baby longer. Many of the stories center around lying in bed in wool soakers to which I developed a violent allergy. Many other stories.

Whatever else happened, by the time I reached what must have been my mid-teens, I lived in an ancient stone farm building in the countryside outside an ancient French settlement. But it was near a river! I am remembering it as I tell this to you. Springs, the countryside was a sort of duck-down green. You know, the fluffiness of baby poultry—the Spring grass seemed that texture—but green: duck-down green. And the dirt! The dirt was rich as a grandmother's devil's food cake! On cloudy days in Spring, the colors seemed clearer, richer though I could never understand why that would be true. One Spring morning—I remember it well—I walked down the slope straddling the dribble of a stream pressing the spongy earth in on itself. It went, and I followed, around the backs of the seven stations of the cross which, in turn, rimmed the tombstone settlement now permanently settled but being carved out by this and other maverick streams which seemed to create themselves as if from meandering wells. The riverlet, I believe I remember thinking, probably went on for as much a forever as rivers are likely to have in a way akin to a thread sewn to a cloth. The feel of the grass on the toes in the Spring, the springy earth on the soles of the feet, the snip of chill in the sunny air—I have remembered them all as if they all happened at once to me. I don't know that they did.

I may not have so easily escaped the city. A city I may have grown to love. Glass shapes treasured and worked together with masking tape to form a cathedral window of clear, and green, and brown, and the blue from broken Noxzema bottles was, I remember, superimposed on a window, perhaps mine, in an apartment of the people who may well have been parents of mine. It was there I have heard that I grew into the person I now am. I celebrated all the holidays I could get my hands on.

Passover was my favorite though on Easter I would paint tongues of fire on shells of eggs I would have found blown from their nests, keeping them sacred by my own rituals until Whitsuntide. On that day I would pretend to become a victim of automatic writing, slathering words onto paper with a fervor. Then I would read the scribblings in high pastoral drone to my congregation in whatever language I knew that day. My congregation would consist of whoever was still allowed to play with me at whatever point in time that may have been. Occasionally all who could gather would be my dolls, who, imbued with lives of their own, would listen attentively.

Whatever my childhood was like, I remember attaining the height of five foot in an apartment with a long hall. An apartment common to railroad settlement houses and other company-built accommodations. Perhaps a father I don't remember worked for a railroad. Perhaps not. Perhaps a mother worked for a railroad. Perhaps not. Perhaps I was just visiting when the event occurred; a not-unlikely supposition, considering. I do remember it well. I could turn my head and see—full-face—the pictures. I neither had to strain my head nor crane my neck. The ancestors looked out at me as though they were stuffed into the wall, immobilized somehow and in perpetual trance behind glass windows.

When I consider that time, I tend to remember it as, perhaps, an egg would remember the moon. There seems to be some kinship in that analogy. When I remember, I dream. And I dream in white though I have had several conversations with friends about the possibilities of dreaming in color. But usually, it is winter and, where I may be from, I remember winter as white most generally. There is a scene which seems to act as preface to my dreams: of course it is white. A white sphere lies on the white ground near a silver pool drenched in white light from the white moon. And then, when I have dreamed that, my dreams can begin—or go on, if I wish to consider that preface as a part of my dreams. I like thinking about it and what I like it to mean when I am awake. Though it may seem cold to others as it has seemed to my friends, it is infinitely serene to me. At all times.

But what of you? How can you sit so still on such hard ground? Don't you ever wonder about these things? I would tell you a story if I could think of one. I would tell you yours if I knew it. Perhaps you know these things about you I seem only able to suppose. Are they so much a part of you you don't think about them. But you seem restless behind your clothes.

No matter. I was at the verge of relating an experience I once encountered. I had completed restoration of a painting by Sofonisba Anguissola. I had been working in a temperature-controlled dank which oppressed me, made me constantly feel I was beneath ground about to lose my breath. But I continued work because I loved the painting and wanted to know it as intimately as one can when one dusts and cleans the smallest spaces of another person's work. I don't recall not being entirely alone. Dabs of paint on toothpicks; I labored vigilantly—as vigilantly as I imagined Sofonisba to have labored centuries ago in her father's domain. I was transfixed by dots of paint on bits of pieces of canvas which could become palpable

as my own apparel at times. Twice I felt as if I could almost easily absorb onto the canvas and perhaps through it. The first time I felt that way, I was dabbing the light onto an eye's iris. I moved my hand reflexively because I sensed her blink her eye. I must have looked into her eyes until I fell asleep or fainted because I woke up the next morning on the floor beneath the painting in a position suggesting I might have been paint or tears draining from the masterpiece.

The next time that sensation pervaded me was when I retraced her signature. I could hear her spell her name into my ear as I worked from letter to letter. Again I woke up the next morning feeling as if I were a part of the painting which had fallen off.

Perhaps it was because of those sensations that I seem to see through the painting to Sofonisba's studio. Sofonisba paints in the nude in the sun. The slope of one side of the roof of her studio was taken off by Sofonisba herself. She has shown me the time when she did it. Now she laughs when she remembers her father wailing prohibitions at her: "No, you may never do this!", she has said he'd said waving her arms in mimic of her father who forbade her to paint. She absconded with the saw of her brother's wife's brother who built tables. During the same night as the theft, she sawed open the skylight with the gleeful assistance of her brother's wife. She laughs as if she were as pleased with her feat as with her art. I have walked around her studio and marveled at her paintings, some of the best of which are dead to us now, some others of which have her father's signature affixed to them. The first time I saw them, she seemed to read my mind. I was thinking: "But you've been allowed no training and this is better than anything I've seen. Ever." She laughed. She loves to laugh. She laughed and said: "They need the training. Let them have it. I let my Self paint. I do cry that so many of us are so good and we only really know our own work. But I work." Again she laughed.

And then one time as our eyes met she handed her brush (she'd made) to me and I painted as if I were her. She would stand behind me—almost as if she were standing within me—and I would lavish a mouth with her smile or tilt an eyelid with her flash or light a cheek with her anger. I eventually painted some of the detail on the neck of the painting I eventually restored. I'd worked on the eye, I found out too. And we had, in fact, signed the painting, her hand over mine laughing softly during the act, falling onto the floor in laughter after it.

I have since been to the Los Angeles exhibition in which Sofonisba's paintings have been displayed. I joined a tour conducted by a woman I remember from another place too perhaps. She described the paintings with a vivacity usually reserved for a person who'd perhaps once worked on the art. I wonder if you've seen the exhibition. It is superb. I took home some souvenirs myself and touched the body of the masterpiece—Sofonisba's—but there was surface there and though I could not get through again, if I ever really had, I felt a part of her work.

I wonder how you can keep your silence for so long. Do you not wish to interject your suppositions amidst mine, to reach out for me as I do for you. Have you nothing to say. Very well, then, I will let you rest. Return with you and visit you again, taking you out, pouring through you until perhaps we can experience one another. Another time, perhaps.



Sofonisba Anguissola
Self-Portrait, ca. 1552
Oil on copper
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts

(from **Women Artists: 1550-1950** by Ann Sutherland Harris & Linda Nochlin, Museum Associates of the L.A. County Museum of Art, 1976, p. 27.)

POWERS

I dream of double cups
wet clay on a round rim
shirred

I dream of sea cones bent
in each other
brimming with jelly

it is the sea hare you tell me
that mates by nesting
inside another

that is both female and male
that neither
is preyed on nor preys

yes there's powers you said
but what
if you're scared of power

the dreams snail cool
the air a zither between us
lines like a field of force

grass fritters
to parched fringe on stalks
blown in a hot dry wind

except to touch one another
I don't know what
to do with this power

—Monica Raymond

en attendant

by SYLVIA SPRING

The days begin to melt into each other. I've been sitting here in my room waiting for 'it' to happen, something that will move me towards it but instead everything is dissolving. Each morning I awake expectantly but dare not move too quickly. I must wait until they settle: the snowflakes in the crystal ball that every night storm around my stagnant figure. It's not I who have shaken them loose. As I said, I do nothing but wait. Finally, when the last particle has settled, I carefully dislodge myself and tiptoe to the window. But the storm has passed and today becomes like every other, grey and uninspiring.

I used to try to make it happen. One drama after another. My life a chain of episodes somehow never fitting together no matter how hard I tried to find the thread. So I gave up that waste of energy and retired to this grey confinement.

I hear voices on the other side of my walls, and footsteps on the stairs. I try to imagine faces and feet as they pass my door but dare not look. Eyes have a habit of looking back. I must not allow anything to destroy my concentration. I must be ready when it comes. I keep myself fit by typing letters on my machine each day. My daily exercise. I used to mail them and wait for replies but have given that up as well: the silence of my efforts falling into the void outside began to interrupt my concentration. Now they lie in a pile on my table. When I run out of things to write to 'them' out there, I amuse myself by imagining their replies. I am never disappointed.

Dear You,

It was so good of you to write me with news of your exciting life in that foreign land. How I envy your freedom to do as you please, when the spirit moves you...

In my letters there are no greys, only vivid technicolour action. Is this not the perfect forgery? A counterfeit life? My art, that of a forger.

I once knew a woman who would lock herself in her room for days while we, those on the other side of her door, ran here and there doing "useful" things, talking about change, responsibility, duty. When she finally emerged, her face held a serenity that all my furtive running and challenging had never attained. She gave no reasons but her clear eyes sought mine. I could not return her gaze then, my feeble actions stumbled and fell against a wall of doubt. In my mind, in their actions, there was the righteousness of our cause. She often joined us in our marches, our glorious

crusades, yet something in her movements defied inclusion. I could not afford myself the luxury of contradictions then. I felt too poor. Instead, I chose to mock her distance, ignoring its nutritive promise. If I stumbled over my reasons or found myself on the fringes watching, I invented tactical trenches within which to hide. But more than once I found myself sharing my vantage point with her. One day she emerged from her room after days of seclusion, her smile radiating past my doubting stance. She handed me a small book and said, "Please accept my reasons." I have not seen her since.

Her little book of poems lies beside my bed now. **Notes from No Man's Land.** Each day I read a verse and wonder if my dissolving greys will ever render such clarity.

Dear You Who Gave Me Reasons,

I never thanked you in my great haste to leave, and leaving found I never left you behind. I sleep and wake with your reasons beside me yet despite my daily efforts find I can not make them my own. But I talk to you now, calling you my sister, the meaning of that name having become more than a political position. You recognized our kinship long before I was able. You did not push your meanings since I couldn't return your gaze. I had thought of you as a traitor to the cause, preferring personal solutions to our collective problems. You saw my indignant curiosity and chose not to respond. You were wise. I would not have heard you then. But it is much later now and everything has changed, especially the colour of my room. You see, I have become an expert of greys. It is not as bleak as one might think, as I used to think at the beginning. I'm sure you'll understand that coming from that technicolour world, the change was severe. But as the days passed, I began to see beyond the sameness of this grey life into the complexity of hues. The range and variations now seem infinite. The subtleties of each change sharpen my perceptions, bring me closer to you. Now I am ready to speak to you of reasons, of cause and effect, of the need to translate into our many tongues.

Sister dear, your language touches me and makes me want to sing in harmony, but I have not found my voice, my throat still raw from howling in the rain. Your reasons have helped me believe I am not a traitor. You and I standing on the fringes of the battleground: you knowing why, I feeling like a coward, an imposter. I had no thoughts or time for music then, thinking it superfluous while losing energy fighting back the tunes. You, seeing my struggle, could only give me your reasons, hoping they would help me find my own. I thought at first that you wanted me to take them for my own, and resisted, thinking still that the voice of solidarity had only one key, one tune. It is true that I have heard your tune on other lips, but so too have I heard other tunes. We are complex creatures with a vast repertoire. I found what you have known for years: your reasons taught me. Some of us live the songs, others write them, others sing them. To do all is admirable but to do only one is no less worthy. We need many voices, tunes, marchers. I, who tried to do all, failed badly, felt a casualty until your reasons spoke to me of perseverance, preparation, moons and moments. I am meditating on the greys now,

feeling my strength grow with my perceptions. One day, dear sister, I hope we will be able to harmonize with our voices the melodies I know now we share in our hearts.

I never mailed this letter but placed it on the pile with the others. I wanted to wait for the day when I could send her my reasons so that we would finally sing together. What use to speak to her of incubators, gestation, perseverance: she who lived them? I spoke to no one but myself in these memos. I was the first to admit it. Nevertheless, while I waited for the moment to arrive, I could not resist receiving her reply.

Dear Gradations of Grey,

I read the melody in your eyes. Try looking in the mirror but remember what you see will be the exact opposite of what is. Keep up the struggle, dear sister. I too look forward to our concert. By the way, I now share my room with my lover who also sings. The solitary life is not easy. Good luck.

Dear Reason for Doubt,

Is your room so large? Are your reasons hers? Or has she become your reason? Can you share this new reason with me? My mirror has become fogged with greys. I can do nothing but wait for it to clear. Before I found this room, I too shared mine with another. She was also searching for a melody. Our double image in the mirror only distorted our vision. We chose a larger space still not believing in solitary voices. She had her room, I had mine but the house we shared developed echoes. We tried to comfort each other, hide our alarm, inside the other's arms. Soon the echoes disappeared but so too, our reasons. It seemed our arms were not large enough to contain the contradictions. We tried to share our struggles, listening patiently while the other practised her scales. We had more success when it came to empathy but still found the echo of the other when we dreamed. You know how important are our dreams: the seed of every tune. Well, even they began to betray their solitary function. It was sharing we wanted, both of us tired veterans of the field, seeking meaning in perspective yet not convinced of solitary solutions, or at least exclusivity of voice. But by sharing what we fought so hard to find, we lost our way and ended finally by sharing only our mutual technicolour confusion. So now we live and struggle apart. I believe now we can only share what we are sure we have, and even then only occasionally. Since I am still deciphering the greys and she is sifting through all the available reasons, we have nothing to give each other except our personal confusion. The sad reality is that although I care for her, I can not help her, nor she, me. So we stay in our solitary but necessary confinement. Although we know better than to make promises for the future, we do hope to one day harmonize: the gift of our melodies valued, never taken as daily bread.

If you have other solutions than I have managed to find, I would appreciate your examples. Until then, I remain skeptically aloof and alone.

I am still waiting for her reply.



photo by Honey Lee Cottrell

MARIAM

by PAT SUNCIRCLE

From where Phoebe stands, just outside the door, only Mariam's back is visible as she leans forward in her chair to point something out to the little sister, her broad, stretching back and the long black leather coat like a scholar's robes or bat wings momentarily obstructing Phoebe's view of the girl. Phoebe smiles, but that fades as quickly as if it has been met by a frown. The girl is fascinated by Mariam's stories of Georgia, or her army days in France, or her coming out on the southside of Chicago in 1953, and if Phoebe could read lips it would only take a few words for her to recall which story. She'd listened to Mariam and heard them all. Three years ago, when she was only eighteen and unsure what to say to strangers Mariam had filled their hours by talking about herself. She took Phoebe and they wove back through the beauty and repulsiveness to the time she lost her eye in a fight with her first lover to the houseparties and rentparties and marriages and how she performed a ceremony herself in '58 and the couple was still together. Sometimes she talked so softly that it seemed she spoke to herself but Phoebe listened to the older woman and learned things that other women her age never knew existed.

At the time Mariam's words had been golden, they still were she knew by watching in the girl's eyes a subdued kind of awe that only escaped from adolescents in the presence of an adult they truly respected.

She walks slowly back to the desk, pulls out the chair but then just walks past it and over to a shelf of neatly arranged books and begins to straighten them. Nothing will get done in the store today she knows, so she won't even attempt it. Laughter comes from the little office. It angers her. Not because she isn't part of the laughter, jealousy could be dealt with. This is something that the thought and sight of Mariam, and even recalling her words, stirs. A keen anger at the woman who has taught her so much and scary wishes that she had never learnt it. And then a thick shame at having this anger towards another black woman.

She whirls abruptly and goes into the office with them, slamming the door purposely to scatter their words. But Mariam and the girl have an energetic rap going about Cuba and Phoebe knows how it is, for a couple of years ago when she was only interested in style and the latest dances, Mariam could coax her to Brooklyn and the lament of the Haitian refugees there. Mariam is a history teacher and Phoebe's anger softens a little.

She sits listening to them for maybe a whole half hour before her gaze rests on the older woman and she stops hearing her words and grows sour again. "Goddamn butches." She says the words far beneath a whisper and as close to tenderness as to anger.

The first time that she saw Mariam the woman was enfolded in butch like a bat inside its wings and upside down, leaning against the bar with the patch over one eye which sucked attention to her stern chocolate face. Phoebe's gaze had traveled over Mariam's vest and black leather coat down to the pair of cowboy boots keen enough at the toe to go up a rat's behind; Phoebe had decided now here was a butch with class at least, and had forgiven her a little. But not quite enough. Walking down the street people stared, did double-takes at the woman they thought was a man. It angered Phoebe that they thought she wanted an imitation man—any man—and she became silent and didn't talk to Mariam. And did not answer Mariam's questions.

A customer comes into the store and Phoebe goes out to wait on her, but the woman only wants to browse so Phoebe paces the room, swinging her arms like a bored child, blanking her mind, trying to savor only the sweetness of Mariam.

The word bulldyke was something that she could not deal with, its connotations violated every sensitive thought that she had ever had about herself; she was lesbian and she was gay. She was not what the sisters in her family called 'bulldyke' and pronounced only in hushed or sneering tones. 'Bulldykes' were tightlipped and when they spoke every other word was a curse word, 'bulldykes' got puking drunk everytime they set foot in a bar, they beat women with their fists, they looked at women like men did, and, of course, they dressed like a man. The sisters said all this about 'bulldyke'; the words lesbian and gay weren't in their vocabulary until Phoebe put them there. She called herself a lesbian and acted like she always did and treated them like she always had; their keen sense of threat had nearly been laid to rest, and then along came Mariam. The sisters saw her and shot Phoebe an 'uh huh' look and went quiet.

'Bulldyke,' of course, was a part like 'sissy' or like 'preacher,' but when Phoebe cautiously mentioned this to Mariam all she did was chuckle and talk about being 'old-fashioned.' If Phoebe insisted she said less and less, so, afraid that Mariam would start avoiding her, or worse, get tightlipped, Phoebe accepted the 'bulldyke' part, always weaving past it anyway to the woman she called her friend. Then last winter, when she quit work and returned to school, she moved in with Mariam to save money.

She walks towards the door, stares through it at the street, stares until her eyes strain and squint and stares until they pull and become wet with pain because for the second time that afternoon, to remedy an anger growing scary, she is recounting the detail of last winter.

They became tight. They went to movies together, they barhopped and danced and looked at women together and they gave each other time apart when Phoebe went to meetings and classes and Mariam watched television. Phoebe was becoming more and more involved in politics and the two of

them talked for hours about black politics, but when she mentioned gay issues the conversation waned. She talked then and Mariam nodded and smiled. The time or two that she practically dragged Mariam to gay rallies, the older woman merely reared back in her chair and looked and made unsettling remarks about the 'white boys' who ran it. Sometimes she fell asleep and displayed her scorn by snoring. But when the meeting was over and everybody filed out they all somehow meshed with the other people on the street and Mariam was the only one who resembled the issues discussed. Mariam was who all the eyes followed. And sometimes Phoebe would walk down the sidewalk shoulder to shoulder with her friend and sometimes she would walk as far apart as she dared.

In the apartment just below Mariam's lived Thompson, a gay brother with his hi-fi speakers on the ceiling and usually loud enough for their whole end of the building to hear. The reason that nobody complained, it soon became obvious, was that he played the right kind of music. Mariam had long ago made his acquaintance. She would occasionally even make special requests by stomping on the livingroom floor, three stomps for Al Green, four for the Emotions, and he would cut short whatever he was playing and comply immediately. Sometimes Thompson came over with Sonia and she brought Mexican soul food and she and Thompson would put on salsa and invent new steps and teach them all at the same time. Mariam would call to Phoebe from the kitchen, "this is the gay rally right here baby, gay tarry meeting, gay revival meeting, Sunday go-to-meeting meeting it's all right here and no white boys allowed." Phoebe partied too.

Sisters. Thompson said he was tight with the sisters. He stopped the sisters of their building on their way from the grocery store, the day care center, on their way to pick up the mail and introduced them to Phoebe. They smiled coolly. Phoebe was familiar with the nature of that smile; a sissy kept abreast of all the latest fashions and knew how to rap what the New York models were doing with their hair like a beauty pageant moderator and he invited them over for elaborate meals and movie star gossip. Sissies were fun; but the women didn't have no use for lesbians.

Phoebe hurt. She would wear her brother's air force jacket then, and say that they were going to look at her funny anyhow so why leave any doubt in their minds and she and Mariam would be 'butch' together. But it was easier not to, because then she could talk to sisters on the street, on the bus, at the laundromat, sisters she'd never seen before and it would be alright to. She pulled off the jacket, walked differently and looked at Mariam more and more disconcertedly out of the corner of her eye.

An old stray cat took to following them around and when they went in he would lay outside their door sometimes all night. He would disappear for a few days and then turn up at the kitchen window and they would make a circle place in the frost there for his moon face to stare in. Then one morning Phoebe went downstairs and almost stumbled over him lying dead on the front steps with a car aerial jammed halfway up his ass. She numbly chipped away with her boot at the ice freezing him to the steps and pushed him over the side. When she came back the body was gone. But when she got to their door she recognized laying there the aerial sticky with blood. Perhaps the hallway was just quieter in winter, but now it seemed listening quiet.

Mariam, when she was told, shook her head and cursed under her breath. That was all.

Phoebe had seen in the older woman's eyes flickers of the same pain that came to the surface when she told her horror stories. Phoebe had expected her to be outraged at least. Wearing cowboy boots be a crazy cowboy shoot up the building especially the sisters. But all that Mariam did was hold her and cradle her wet face and for just a little bit she lost herself in Mariam, becoming aware of the firm flesh which was almost hard on her upper arms and grew softest down around the breasts and she felt herself in one of Mariam's history stories and that was the closest they'd ever been. But the anger came back when she insisted to Mariam that they start confronting the people in their building—especially the sisters—and Mariam reacted like she really had suggested shooting up the building. When she insisted Mariam set her face and said less and less and finally grew silent—big butch immovable-black matriarch lie cohabited and gave birth to so much chickenshit, to Phoebe's way of thinking. She wanted to say so, but already Mariam sat facing the window.

Phoebe remembered the massages. How when there had been warm times, that was the core. How Mariam's hands took her farther and farther out like a string unwinding from the top of her head working her until finally she was a big chunk of dough under Mariam's great big hands molding her into any shape she desired and back out again and rolling her over and over and over spinning her tossing her in the air squeezing her between the fleshy palms until she felt as amicable as the fabric of a sweet dream as light as the airhole in a biscuit. Mariam's hands massaging were simply the hands of a mother working on the family supper.

Mariam sitting back in her robe and her yellow, green, red, purple, patterned headrag, her Jamaican headrag, talking on the phone to her brother.

"I'm the only daughter," Mariam said, "when somebody gets sick I have to go home."

Her first night in an apartment by herself, Phoebe heard the sounds very clearly. The footsteps of neighbor boys just inside the door, women's voices whispering in fear, the scratching of the cat at the window. For one hour just before the sun rose, she slept.

The next morning when she opened the door, three sisters were standing in front of 219; they hushed their conversations as she stood locking the door, fumbling a little because their fishhook eyes caught at her skin. She walked away without looking at them.

—"Ummmmmm, her girlfriend left her you know, saw her moving out yesterday."

—"She be on the lookout for another one, Marcy you better watch out."

—"Huh, I ain't worried. I got my man, he'll stomp that little scrawny ass scandalous he catch her eye on me."

—"Well me, I carry a blade..."

She would not run she would not let them see that, but if she had run she would not have heard what she heard.

They were talking to her as sure as her mother had, as sure as her grandmother when they went about the kitchen putting things back in their

proper place again after dinner, after company, not looking her way often but with a steady stream of good advice and gossip about poetic justice; calling to her as she ran out the door to school telling her to avoid so-and-so and she better not do such-and-such, for her own good.

A week later when she heard Mariam's heavy boot on the hallway she knew that all of the other women heard it too and was ashamed. A god-damned lumberjack; no wonder they were scared. Mariam's key turned in the lock and she did not even look towards the door. A week after the first day of spring, she moved into her own place.

She looks at her own reflection in the door; slender, dark and the 'you put me in mind of my niece' of an elder sister who lives in her new building. There are elder brothers and sisters and some younger sisters with children in the new building and everyone has told a story and had it listened to carefully by the others. They are a family. Phoebe has told a story...

"Where's your man today?" a grey-haired brother asks her jestfully.

"I don't have one," she replies.

The simple, unsmiling reply does not lend itself to another joke and so the brother nods to himself and a minute later smiles quietly. ...but Mariam has never visited her there.

She opens the door to get a lungful of smoked autumn air from the university campus, and stands there awhile watching the people. College students and the black children from the community that is surrounding gradually seeping color onto the fringes of the academic pale green. Mariam often speaks of this area years ago when you didn't even see black street cleaners here.

She turns to pace the floor again, but instead walks to the office to ask Mariam to watch the store. She hurries out intending to get a quick breath of air. She walks the rest of the afternoon thinking that if she had not met Mariam things might be much simpler, however to love Mariam is to be unable to lie.

Someone comes behind her and puts their arm around her shoulder. It is Mariam.

"I closed early," she says, not moving her arm. Phoebe looks about, it is a busy sidewalk, late afternoon classes are letting out, dinner is beginning in the student dining hall.

Right away she hears snickering, they are young brothers around nine and ten having passed going the opposite direction now doing a leprechaun dance and poking each other laughing. A very proper white professor carrying a briefcase goes by, looking down his nose at them, but he would probably do that anyway, they both know. Everyone is either looking at them or making it a point not to. Phoebe's anger subsides a bit as she genuinely wonders how Mariam has managed all these years. She wonders if her walk has always been steady like this, like a graceful, proud lumberjack, even when children carefreely tossed epithets at her so often that sometimes they slipped into her own mind in place of her name, so that when she got up and looked into the mirror on Monday morning she would think of the worst name she had been called that weekend.

—“Why do you put on an act?”

—“What act?”

—“Dressing like a damn gangster or a cowboy...walking like you John Wayne.”

—“That’s the way I am, baby. I remember when I first bought this coat...”

—“No.” Mariam would edge her way into a story and never answer. It was scary, demanding things of Mariam, it seemed nearly disrespectful to someone who had taught you so much, but only Mariam could help her to clear her mind of everything the sisters said—the mother, the grandmother, the aunt, the daughter—only Mariam was closer to her now.

—“Mariam no. I’ve seen people severed...” She is trying to place together the words that explain how there are millions of people in the world but they are of the chosen few. And alienation is unhealthy.

—“I got my eye on you all the time, Phoebe. I’m watching what you do. I really am.”

She smiles an assurance then, and will say no more and does not look at Phoebe, only keeps her arm tightly around her shoulder. “Okay.” Mariam has listened to every word she ever said, every story she has ever told too; even the ideas of the white boys at the gay rallies, so long as they came through Phoebe’s mouth. Mariam is listening. Okay. The anger at her friend that has been straining for an entire summer now loosens, leaving a fine dull ache in every single muscle in her body... She takes a deep breath and without thinking about it, puts her arm around Mariam. It is nice. The warmth of her flesh is either coming through the big coat or has over the years and stories become meshed with it. It is a worn, smooth old skin, sweet to her fingers. Phoebe thinks about nothing else for awhile. Then she considers what they are doing now, walking directly to her new home—two women in the situation of lovers, a simple guerrilla action.

She strokes Mariam’s arm gently, almost lingeringly as if they sat already in her apartment with no one looking but two women in a mirror. The thought of the sisters is painful, but worrying about that brings exhaustion and costs precious things. They are nearly home.

There are distinct voices and words that she will hear inside her head for weeks to come and ringing out constantly like the rhyme in a poem is the classic ‘bulldyke’ playing on itself ‘bulldagger.’ She realizes that she is biting her lip...someone tall and muscular, larger than Mariam, is walking on her other side, pressing against her, stepping on her heel but she does not turn her head and finally he falls away behind laughing at the top of his voice...and she is afraid that her fingernails might be tearing through Mariam’s tough coat-skin, she is clutching so hard.

There are distant silences, mostly in the eyes of women her mother’s age. There are the voices of children that most times she would not even hear. She looks over at Mariam’s hard profile and feeling her eyes the woman turns and gives her a gentle look that nearly warms her into a smile. Mariam is here. Again and again.

For a few moments, Phoebe holds the eyes of a young girl of about ten, not fearful eyes, nor angry nor scornful, instead eyes that simply search their faces.

SONG OF THE DEVIANT SISTERS

If they knew us, they would let loose the hounds
whose predatory hunger feeds only on periodic blood,
the beasts who destroyed the last great mother.
If only they knew how we meet at night in secret gardens
where we serve no purpose,
providing them with no service or entertainment,
they would deny us food,
would cover our heads with sackcloth
to prevent the young from falling under our spell.

For we are the fire under the stone;
the madness in our gaze is legendary;
we have won over thousands in our time;
and they who bury us will never know who we are.

Our kind of love means that there is no possession,
no longer any province, no coercion and no deceit.
We give ourselves against all odds,
against the makers of guns and the
steel-jawed trap of house and bed;
we speak for the outcasts rising like molten streams
through cracks in the earth;
who pour out our lives like an oblation for the dead
and a sacrifice for the living dream.

—Teresa Anderson

ON BEING PHYSICALLY DIFFERENT

by JUDITH SCHWARZ

Shortly after I moved from California to Washington, D.C., I chanced upon a small community of lesbians, all of whom had professional-level jobs with the federal government. None of them were particularly feminist; their lives were essentially lived in middle-class suburban isolation apart from the large dynamic Washington area lesbian/feminist community.

While chatting with one of the women, I realized that she vibrated like harp strings. A chunky, strong-looking woman, of the type that society calls "masculine," she was wound up so tight even a stranger could tell she was near her breaking point. When she asked me why I had moved here, I answered that I was doing research for a book on American lesbian history. She gave a nasty snort of laughter.

"Ha! That'll be the shortest book ever written!"

Puzzled by her instant hostility, I started my spiel (usually reserved for educating heterosexuals) about how important it is for us to know our history, how many excellent and courageous women in history have also been lesbians— She cut me off fast.

"Don't use that word! I hate that word—I'm no lesbian, I just happen to love Doris, and both of us happen to be women. I hate being thought of as queer. I just hate it!" She spit the words out of her mouth as if she had tasted something rotten. "I hate being looked at by strangers, always knowing they're talking about me behind my back. I can't stand having to go to sleazy over-priced bars in the worst part of town, having to be with the rest of the freaks just to dance with Doris. I just wanted to live like normal people do and not feel like a misfit, a slimy thing that just crawled out from a rock. Some days, it's about all I can do not to blow my brains out! The next time anyone stares at me on the street or calls me "sir" in a store, I just might do that!"

She turned on her heel and stormed out of the room, leaving me standing there, stunned from the self-hatred, anger and pain in her words.

Later, I mulled over the incident, and slowly it occurred to me what was so familiar between the feelings she had expressed and my own feelings about myself. I could not understand in even the smallest way what she felt about her lesbianism, since I bless the day I discovered I was a lesbian. Yet, I know what it feels like to be stared at, and I well remember how it felt as a child to be thought of by others as a "freak," "misfit," "queer," an object of derision. I understood what the woman meant about wanting so desperately to be "normal." The encounter with her brought up all the old pain, the old memories, and would not let me be until I wrote about it: being born and growing up physically different.

The first time my mother saw me, she felt a strong mixture of love and apprehension. I looked like any other newborn infant, except for the bruised indentation on my left temple.

She later wrote that "the nurse was quick to explain the red marks on my baby's forehead would soon disappear. The doctor [drafted into service at an Army stateside hospital during World War II] had used forceps." My seventeen-year-old mother had no way of knowing that during the birth process, along with other problems caught soon after birth, the forceps had marked me irreparably where no one could see the damage: my brain.

When I was placed on my right side to nurse for the first time, I made an "inhuman, penetrating cry," halfway between an infant's and a wounded animal's yelps. My mother's apprehension turned into a cold fear. "The nurse quickly lifted you and smiled as she said it was necessary to return you to the nursery," Mama recalled. "I slept through the night and awoke to find the doctor standing at the end of my bed. He asked that I not get upset. I should not be alarmed when the nurse brought my baby to me."

Looking like a miniature mummy, I was then carried into her room, a tiny face peering out of a mass of bandages covering my upper body and strapping me tightly onto what she later described as a wooden cross. During the night, they had X-rayed me and discovered that my shoulder had been broken during the difficult birth. I was to be kept immobile and in the hospital for the next six weeks.

When the cross was removed at the age of seven weeks, my right arm was completely motionless and turned inward at an odd seventy-five degree angle. Under the direction of therapists, she learned how to massage my arm, but there was little more that anyone could recommend for her to do.

My mother began to realize something more serious was wrong with me when at the age of nine months I attempted to walk. I moved stealthily along on tip-toe, never touching the floor with my heels. The family made jokes about the "little ballet dancer," but I was also totally uncoordinated. My right hand had no grip to it, I fell even more than most small children, and my body began to have spasms when I was frightened or upset.

In the meantime, stories began floating around our small Southern town about a child born the year before me. It was said she was a "monster-child," that her parents (very poor, nearly illiterate) kept her locked away out of sight. Sometimes, when people stopped my mother on the street, they seemed to have confused her child with the hidden one, and asked her prying questions about my looks and health "as if you had horns, for God's sake!" Mama became determined to find someone who would tell her what was wrong with me and what could be done about it. The Army doctors gave her conflicting reports, with the majority agreeing that I was simply mentally retarded. Mama refused to believe them. She later told me that she was too young to understand all the "high-falutin' words they used," but knew they were wrong, for all their book learning. Mama vowed "that I would find a way to help my daughter before it was too late."

Like many of the marriages made in the rush and hurry of World War II, Mama's was falling apart under the pressures of civilian reality. In an attempt to salvage it, and also in flight to freedom away from the small-minded people of her home town, she took me with her to meet her husband's people near Chicago. My father, a handsome man from a working class family who loved to drink and gamble, had a hard time adjusting to non-Army life. He lost jobs soon after he was hired, and got into trouble with the law many times by writing bad checks while dressed in an Army officer's uniform. Mama got a job as a telephone operator at \$18 a week, and paid rent to a family for a room for us and babysitting for me. I was a constant source of worry for her, getting worse, not better. I fell down if not watched closely, and held my right arm close to my body, never using it at all. My mother grew desperate and began the unending round of visits to doctors, specialists, clinics and hospitals, rearranging her schedule to work nights so she could take me back and forth on the buses during the day.

Then she was told that it would be possible to have a team of physicians at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago study me as an in-patient for one month, and possibly discover a solution to all my mysterious symptoms. She wrote later:

"I didn't have the funds for this but I found a way. It was necessary to declare myself a charity case in order to pay the minimum fee from the wages I received as a telephone operator."

She told me that my screams of "Mama! Mama!" as she walked off the children's ward and left me still haunted her years later. She was only allowed to see me once a week for a couple of hours, and it must have been a terrible two hours, since both of us cried throughout the visit and long afterwards. A worse blow came at the end of the month, however. Mama was told that she would have to accept the fact that she had a crippled child who would retard rather than improve as time went on. I was nearly three years old by then, still stumbling, falling, now showing a speech problem, but in other ways appearing a very bright and capable child.

Refusing to accept the diagnosis, Mama saved as much as she could out of her pay, and three weeks later took me by bus to the famous Mayo Clinic. [She would have taken me to Lourdes if there had been a way to get there, I think.] The doctors there were also unable to tell my mother what was wrong with me, but they all agreed that I could improve "somewhat" if she took over responsibility for extensive daily therapy and massage sessions with me. Relieved beyond measure, Mama set to work, tying down the left arm of a long-sleeved shirt or nightgown to force me to use my right arm, making me lift weights (tiny rubber balls at first, then books, and then real one-pound weights) with my right hand, correcting my speech with a joke or a funny story or song that would fix the right pronunciation in my mind.

My father finally landed in prison for a long sentence, and Mama—homesick, lonely and exhausted from her job and hours spent with me as her only company—decided to return to her hometown and my grand-

mother's house. She got a job with the civil service as a clerk-typist on the same Army post where I was born, and was soon being courted by a sergeant nearly fifteen years older than she. He had been a customer in her mother's bar and met Mama for the first time when she was only fourteen. He seemed a generous man. Faced with the fact that I obviously needed more therapy than anyone but a professional team of doctors and therapists could give me, and also her own personal need to escape the alcoholic life of her mother's home and make up for her previous "failure" in marriage, Mama accepted and married the sergeant when I was four. She was then twenty-one, and not in love.

"I thought that at least then I wouldn't have to worry about you getting the treatments and help you needed," she told me once. "The Army medical care for dependents was completely free."

Now my own memories begin. In the first, I am walking across the long, long, cold expanse of a hospital clinic. My mother is standing behind me, holding my clothes and urging me on. I am wearing cotton panties, nothing else—except leg braces, heavy cold steel and leather weighing down my skinny legs. I am about five years old. The man in the white coat across the room is speaking very harshly to me, telling me to keep my feet **down**, walk on my heels, keep walking, come on, you can do it, stop crying like that, you aren't a baby anymore, you don't want to go to school next year with those ugly old braces on, now do you? My conscious mind woke for the first time, and I vividly remember hating that man with a murderous passion, wondering why Mama didn't help me, feeling very cold, starting to shake spasmodically and being ashamed of my spasms and my tears.

From age five to age twelve, I went daily before school to the Army hospital physical therapy clinic for whirlpool baths, heat-ray treatments, exercises, and speech therapy. My friends would sometimes wait for me, and since most of them had never been inside a hospital since the day they were born, they enjoyed themselves tremendously. I got a lot of mileage out of my "differentness" once I decided being different could also be a way to be special and noticed. I became the pet of the hospital staff, always knowing that the lab technicians kept a bottle of Dr. Pepper waiting for me in the refrigerator next to the bottles of blood and urine samples. I dressed in enormously oversized doctor's coats and masks and made the rounds of the wards when I could sneak up the stairway without being caught. As "Dr. Judy," I became somewhat of a hospital legend, and the sight of my small self flapping the wards in white coat and leg braces telling patients to "take your pills and eat your spinach!" was known to send very depressed patients into gales of giggles. Finally, though, my luck ran out when a team of high-ranking Army surgeons came down from Walter Reed Hospital on an inspection tour. They were not amused to find "Dr. Judy" standing on a chair playing pool with several ambulatory soldier-patients. My mother's husband received an official warning about my conduct, and I was forbidden to roam the wards.

The whole hospital staff was very stern with me for a long time, which felt worse than the spanking I had gotten.

At times the medical powers decided to experiment with me, and I would spend a week or so in the children's ward being probed and X-rayed. At one point the X-ray staff refused to take any more of me that year, since I had been X-rayed more than any one living being ever at that hospital, and they were running out of room to store all the photos of my right arm and legs. I enjoyed myself thoroughly while a guest on the children's ward. I was always the most healthy child there, and since I had learned to read at age four, I played teacher as often as I could, with kids recuperating from tonsillectomies and appendectomies as my helpless students. I also made up stories to tell after the lights went off at the early hour of seven p.m., only occasionally telling horror stories when I didn't like the boy or girl in the bed next to mine. The many times I was hospitalized were happy vacations from the increasing trouble at home between my mother and stepfather: vacations spent doing jigsaw or crossword puzzles, developing my love of books, and trying to make the days a little less boring for the sick kids as well as myself by playacting or storytelling. (There was no television on the wards in the early 1950's.)

The parts I did not like were the ever present needle, the daily blood samples and X-rays, and the sometimes cruel as well as cold hands of the doctors and nurses on my frail limbs. I would often be placed upon a high metal table wearing little more than an open-backed white gown, and have to wait an hour or more until the doctors were ready to examine me. The table was higher than I was tall, and if I needed to go to the bathroom (as I often did immediately upon being placed on the table), the nurse would have to stop her preparations, lift me down and carry me to the toilet.

After I had counted all the tiles in the ceiling and floor and all the instruments in the cabinets around the room and on the table beside me (hoping against hope that none of them would be used on me that day), I would hear voices outside the door. I could smell the doctors before they entered the room, a strong odor of cigarettes and cigars, cologne and after-shave. The nurse would bustle about even more, and then stop still in her tracks as the men (always men) entered the room, at least four and occasionally almost a dozen doctors at a time. One in particular would always joke with me, saying each time: "Well, Dr. Judy, are you ready to have us work you over?"

They would poke and prod, saying over and over, "Does this hurt? How about this? What if I turn your arm (legs) in this direction? Or this?" A few were exceptionally kind and fatherly, concerned about warming their hands or instruments before touching me, but most were oblivious to me, flirting with the nurse and talking about their golf scores as they bent my legs into painful positions. I felt a mixture of respect and fear towards them—seldom hope that what they would do to me would help me walk, talk or move my arm better. Because I was constantly reminded of the fact that my treatment would have cost thousands of dollars if I were not lucky enough to be an Army dependent, neither my mother nor I thought to complain about most of the things that were done to me in

the name of science. The only time I remember Mama raging at a doctor was when a team of medical "experts" decided, for some still inexplicable reason, to put my deformed and immobile right arm in a cast for six weeks. When the cast came off, of course, my arm had atrophied even more. Then the doctors informed her that she should sign a permission slip to have my arm operated on, since a famous orthopedic surgeon was coming down from Walter Reed for a couple of weeks and could easily perform the surgery while he was on the post.

"What kind of surgery?" she asked them. I sat beside her reading a Classic comic.

"Your daughter is very, very fortunate. This is one of the best surgeons in the Armed Services. All he'll do is break her right arm at the elbow, insert a new plastic pin which will serve as a hinge so she can bend her arm normally, and sew her back up."

I had dropped the comic book, and was slowly edging out of the room. Mama asked him, in a strange, strangled voice, "How many patients has this been done to successfully?"

The doctor began shouting at her about her gall in questioning their judgment, and if she had to pay for it, it would cost more than she made in five years' salary, etc. By that time, I had reached the door, dashed down the hall, and out to the car. Mama soon came out, her face red and her eyes blazing. I thought she was angry with me, and started to babble something about how I wasn't too keen on getting my arm broken, but she exploded when she got into the car, and slammed her fist into the steering wheel, cutting her finger open as she cursed the doctors, hospitals, medical schools and butchers. "What the hell do they think we are, lab rats? Do they think I'm just going to lick their goddamned boots and beg them to take my daughter and experiment on her like the Nazis did in the concentration camps?"

The year I was in second grade, I was given the role of the Christmas tree in the annual holiday school skit, mainly because I was the only kid with a complete matching green outfit, including leggings, coat, mittens, and cap. The teacher changed the script a little to accommodate my unusual features, and renamed it, "The Christmas Tree with the Broken Branch." Decorated with tinsel, Christmas balls and ornaments hanging from my fingers and cap, I came out and recited a poem about how I hoped the toys would not mind being under an "imperfect" Christmas tree. My classmates were acting the roles of various toys, and all went well until John Earl Tyler, Jr. came rolling out of the wings in his disguise as a big red rubber ball. John, the class chubby, rolled a little ways, stood and said his stupid poem, then rolled over under the tree, knocking down said tree and breaking many of her ornaments. The audience was then treated to an unscheduled scene in which the Christmas tree with the broken branch tried to deflate the rubber ball right there on stage. Poor John Earl had big bruises for several weeks thereafter from the tree's lethal leg braces hidden under the leggings. [When I first read Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, I moaned for days that she had written something so similar to one of my best childhood stories—at last I get to tell my version!]

By the time I was nine, however, my physical self was markedly improved. My mother had fought many major battles for me, not the least of which was her fight to let me go to the regular elementary school on the Army post instead of being sent twenty miles away to the specially equipped handicapped children's school—or "freak school," as the local townspeople so colorfully called it. She had finally been told my condition had a name, "Cerebral Palsy": a catch-all label for birth defects occurring before, during or directly after birth. Symptoms listed under this label range from mental retardation, spasmodic and involuntary muscle jerks, inability to hold one's head up, drooling, and twisted limbs to the most terrifying existence as little better than a vegetable strapped in a wheelchair or a bed, totally without control of muscles or bodily functions. Over and over in my childhood, I was told how lucky I was, all things considered.

"If the forceps had gone in an inch deeper...." they'd say, letting the sentence trail off with a shudder of horror. And of course, I was damn fortunate, as I finally realized when I was made the president of the newly formed regional Cerebral Palsy "teenage club"—at the age of nine and a half. I sat on the platform at the local women's club during the first meeting and looked down on the thirty or so other members, ranging in age from eight to twenty-one, who had been brought there by their families or guardians.

Several of them were strapped in their wheelchairs, their bodies limp and their motions jerky. Some drooled as their eyes watched me from wobbling heads cocked to one side. The room seemed filled with life-sized puppets made with a defective mechanism so they jerked when they moved. The club, formed by well-meaning adults and parents eager to see us all "socialize," was a surreal nightmare. I thought the meeting would never end; each time one of the members spoke, his/her unintelligible half-formed words mixed with saliva had to be repeated by a "normal" relative whose experienced ears were used to translating the message to other normals. The C.P. kids would then begin to get frustrated in their attempts to bypass the relative and be understood, and their voices would take on a high-pitched urgent tone.

I remember sitting on the platform with the club's adult "advisors," trying to understand what the broken dolls were saying and what I was doing there when I obviously wasn't anything like they were—my spasms weren't so noticeable now, my speech was getting very good, and I could walk without leg braces and almost always remember to keep my heels on the floor. Trying to follow the garbled discussion of a future picnic, I looked over at my mother, who was talking to another parent. Her hands were absent-mindedly stroking the tousled hair of a boy lying in a wheelchair, his body held up by the straps surrounding his twisted torso. Our eyes met and she flashed a quick, proud smile at me. I felt a flash of shame for my feelings of repulsion. Suddenly I was called on in my new capacity as a nine-year-old president of a group I'd never seen before. I stood up, shaking a little (no, not spasms, I told myself, just plain ole fear)—and immediately knocked a glass of water off the table in front of me, right into the lap of one of the advisors. Sounds unearthly and raucous echoed through the room as all the Cerebral Palsied members broke into laughter at the flustered and angry advisor's comic appearance. 47

Later that night, when my mother tried to comfort me, she told me that I had been "elected" the first president of the club because I had the best speaking voice, and was the only one everyone else could understand.

"How many times a day do you think those children spill and knock things over? There you were, sitting up there looking so normal that I had to justify to Mrs. Thompson you even being in the club at all. Then you went and proved you were an honest-to-God C.P., too," she smiled, wiping away my tears.

"Look at it this way, honey, you like to make people feel good, and just think—that was the most fun some of these kids have had in ages. The whole group got to share a laugh with other kids who understood just what they were laughing at. Ole Mrs. Jones did look hilarious, didn't she? The pompous thing looked just like she wet her panties!"

I began to giggle and we ended up laughing together, rolling around on the bed clutching our sides and howling with delight.

That was my childhood, and those my memories that will not let me go. There are others: being exhibited like a two-headed cow on TV telethons for Cerebral Palsy; terrible battles to force me to eat with my right hand, even though the spoon or fork overturned half-way to my mouth, spilling the food down the front of my clothes; sitting on my grandmother's porch railing, overhearing one of her cronies sigh over the shelled peas in her lap: "Tsk! Ain't it a crying shame that Vivian had such a sorry-looking child?"

What am I left with besides memories? Small things, like not wearing short-sleeved shirts, or sandals without heels, until I was nearly thirty. Hiding my arm by holding books and packages close to my breasts. Slipping into the role of comedian when I drop things.

Bigger things: the belief in the pronouncement that I was brain-damaged held me back more than almost anything else. The first time I enrolled in a college course, I was twenty-eight years old and scared to death "they" would find out I was an imposter masquerading as a "normal." I kept thinking there had been a mistake whenever I got good grades and that "they" would, somehow, take back the credits I had already won.

When I started college, I had a recurring dream that a Black family was hiding me from Nazi stormtroopers who were beating down the door to take all "defectives" to the incinerators. One pre-dawn morning when I woke soaked to the sheets again, I finally remembered: as a child I had often half-hidden myself, quiet as a mouse, in a corner of the Walker's, the Black family that lived down the street from my grandmother's, and had read their books for hours. It was Mr. Walker who had shown me a way to escape from the taunts of callous children into the dream world between the covers of a book. Now, in college, I was at once exhilarated and frightened by the challenge of not only reading a book, but thinking about it, and sometimes even arguing in my head with the author.

Despite my fears, I found a whole new world opening up for me in the women's studies courses I took, and at the college women's center, I began to teach classes in lesbian literature, building from my years of plowing through the San Francisco Daughters of Bilitis library. It was an exciting class and very popular. But, teaching it, I became aware once again that I did not pronounce words as they should be pronounced. Some words are unspeakable, in the literal sense of that term—I cannot for the life of me say them. Sometimes I say words backwards, or read them one way and say them another. I began to fear speaking in front of groups, yet much of what I want to do with my life continues to involve public speaking.

Uncoordinated: there's a word that will haunt me to my grave. "How does it feel to have your elbow always sticking up in the air?" a lover once asked me. What was I supposed to answer? It felt like it has always felt, as normal for my right arm to be crooked as it is for the left arm to be straight. (She was complaining, I think, because she felt there was something vaguely unromantic about an elbow in her ear while she was trying to sleep—or make love.)

Worst of all the left-overs from childhood, though, is a lack of belief in myself. The messages were too loud, they were heard too often, and stabbed too deep. I want to believe that I am more than a "monster-child," "a sorry-looking thing," "brain-damaged," "defective," "abnormal." I want to hear the **other side** of those words—that I am special, that I am of value to myself and to others because I am different, unique, that out of my unique experience I have something to share.

It was from lesbians that I first began to hear the other side of those words. When I was nineteen, I got a job on the assembly line of a photo-finishing factory in San Francisco. Over half the workers there were lesbians, and many of the others were immigrants from South America, Korea, Hong Kong, Mexico, and Germany. We made up a small world of outsiders who were all "different." Many of the lesbians were women who had entered the armed services in the '50's and had been tossed out with dishonorable discharges after one of the many periodic "witchhunts," when the powers that be were threatened by the strength and numbers of women in the service who had no need or desire for men. After months of working long hours together, we became an extended family—especially the lesbians, who grew even closer from a need to replace their original families that had often ostracized their daughters far more than if they had become lepers.

I fit into that world like a cold hand into a warm fur glove. I was not a lesbian when I went to work there, and didn't have the slightest idea what that word meant (if indeed I had ever heard it), but I knew the women there were nicer than most people I had met, and within two years I began to see a better life unfold for me as a lesbian. There always came a time when a friend or co-worker, lover or acquaintance, asked, after seeing me awkwardly do something most everyone else could do with ease, "What's wrong with your arm?" But it was seldom asked with more

than idle curiosity. Lesbians laughed at the reactions of innocent bystanders when "One-Eyed Nancy," one of the most popular lesbians in San Francisco, took out her glass eye and floated it in her drink at a bar. But their laughter was insiders' laughter, mingled with warmth and affection. We who are not like most others know the difference every time.

I have spent much of the last three years reading the diaries and letters of other women who were also different—"queer"—in one way or another. Supported by knowledge of their lives and by a strong network of excitingly varied women with whom I can share my life, much of myself has become glad that I am so individual a person.

But I still have a strong sense of having been damaged in a way that no one else can see, in a way that I cannot explain to my therapist, friends, or lover. I do not want to grow old still wondering whether I have the right to exist, still lying awake in the dead of night wondering whether anyone could ever love me if they really knew me, if they knew the things I did to survive, if they knew my bone-chilling fears, if they knew all my secrets.

I have never written anything so hard in my life as this article, but then, I haven't been writing such a long time, either. This is my life, and the writing of a small part of it has been a step toward sharing who I really am, and confirming my value as a human being who has a story to tell, a talent to share, a value in my own uniqueness. It has taken a year to write, and I have not told one-tenth of who I am to you. It is a start, though.



Judy, Age 4

SCRAMBLED EGGS:

feminist notes & musings

—Melanie Kaye

"Scrambled Eggs" will appear regularly in Sinister Wisdom. Some future topics I want to address are: change, guilt inside and outside the women's movement, white women fighting racism, current creative activities in the movement to stop violence against women. I welcome comments and suggestions from SW readers, and would be happiest to open this space to dialogue."

(I began writing this as a journal entry while recuperating from a mysterious pelvic infection at a cabin in the country. Brina is a friend's dog, with me for protection. She has a history of killing chickens.)

from my journal:

now the question is, can i relax while watching for brina? the other question is, will this be my last free chunk of time before learning something that will change things, something about my body, that the infection will not heal and they won't know what it is or how to treat it: they will test things out on me, pretend to know more than they do, i will pretend to trust, believe and respect them more than i do, out of fear. if hospitals were not such cruel places, if surgery were not so frequent, so leapt to as the first/the final solution.

brina breathes fast through her mouth, sniffing the air. is it just grass trees earthy smells that make her tremble, or a memory of chicken blood? **once they get a taste of it, they never forget**, they say, and i've lived it with one dog. this is different from people, from women, anyway. if i killed, i think i would not like to kill again. i don't know if dogs are born wanting chicken blood. i don't think men are born with a will to power, though you could think it. you could think they were born hating women, so thoroughly steeped in ways of hating, of disregarding our human likeness. i have relearned my girlhood habit, which women smarter than i never forgot: to see male and female as separate species. men do. and i am afraid. i have pain in my female organs, most doctors, most inventors of medical technology are men, and you could think they were born hating women.

i feel like a mother here. brina is my charge. i am responsible to keep her from killing chickens against everything in her instincts? experience? mothers of sons, especially, must feel this way: always vigilant, ultimately helpless.

the question is, will the parts that mark me a separate species be subject to their hate at this time? does something **in there**, the female cavity, hurt because i swallowed hormone pills for 4 years? because i wore plastic in my cervix for 3? because men rammed in and out of me like so many trains at a busy station? because my abortions were not well-performed: **infection very frequent**, my doctor said, and i've seen it.

so at 32 and the peak of my health, the slothful fatty grown hardened and trained to a dancer at 29, a bike-rider at 30, a runner just these last 2 months, busy energetic and committed in all ways to women, my powerlessness rises to haunt me. i have pain in my female organs.

last night i dreamed the war between women and men was over. ceremonial papers were being passed among the women to sign. the papers crinkled, i woke. it was some hidden animal chewing on the cabin's insulation. i lay awake for a bit, hoping it was a mouse, not a rat, hoping it wouldn't scurry across my face while i slept, or—if a rat—that it wouldn't bite me.

in harlem i knew black children bitten by rats. i knew black men who started a campaign to shoot rats and went door to door in groups with rifles, and within days the NY health department was sending in exterminators. they couldn't tolerate blacks with guns. as women in portland patrolled tryon creek state park where 10 women had been raped and the police would do nothing until we did the intolerable: protected ourselves.

strategy: when something is intolerable to us, do something intolerable to them, less tolerable than the solution we want

6/27/78

INADEQUATE &/or DANGEROUS CONTRACEPTION INCOMPETENT &/or EXPENSIVE ABORTION FORCED STERILIZATION INAPPROPRIATE &/or FORCED HYSTERECTOMY PELVIC INFLAMMATORY DISEASE MENSTRUAL CRAMPS MENOPAUSE DISORDERS INFANT MORTALITY YEAST TRICHOMONIS & OTHER VAGINAL INFECTIONS OVARIAN CYSTS CANCER OF THE BREAST UTERUS CERVIX

last year blue shield announced that they would no longer pay "routinely" for 28 outmoded surgical procedures, including "female circumcision" (removal of the clitoris). i suppose this is progress.

pelvic inflammatory disease is mis-diagnosed about 50% of the time.

"The uterus has but one function, reproduction. After the last planned pregnancy, the uterus becomes a useless bleeding symptom-producing potential cancer-bearing organ and therefore should be removed."

-from an editorial in an obstetrics journal

in the US hysterectomies are performed on about 800,000 women each year.

the average specialist in obstetrics-gynecology each year earns \$69,000* and takes a vacation of between 5-11 weeks.

*the average MD earns a puny \$53,000/year

question: what about alternative medical care, women doctors, etc.?

answer: the doctor i saw at a free clinic was a woman, a lesbian from my own community. she was kind and gentle. she let me look at my urine specimen under the microscope, explained to me what she could. but there were tests she couldn't give me: the clinic hasn't the equipment. and she couldn't explain the pain, though i think she's competent.

what isn't known about our bodies is one more indication of how little our culture cares for us. without a body of research defined and controlled by women, she was helpless.

(besides, how many cities have free clinics and kind women doctors?)

at some point our alternative survival systems are not enough. inside the monster patriarchy at some point we crash against walls, in need or desire. either we break through or fall back, defeated. if this were not true, we would not need a revolution. since it is true, we must figure out how to make the revolution we need. this means choosing to act.

to **have** a choice means to know it as choice. but choice is not a thing, a book or a chair. choice is a field of activity. any choice triggers consequences, even the choice to evade. if i don't act, i am acted upon. i am shoved this way and that. this is a painful sleepy way to live.

why would i choose to live this way?

because i'm afraid: what will happen to me if i act? my fear may be accurate or not. it is always real.

in fear, i forget to ask, **what will happen if i don't act?**

i forget that danger and deprivation are already upon me.

because i feel helpless: what can i do? might as well settle for what i have (to have a choice is to know it as choice).

because i feel despair: what good will it do? in the end, this is the same as feeling helpless.

from ignorance of our bodies to social security numbers
from the spectre of rape to being put on hold: everything
seems designed to make us feel helpless. this design is
no accident.

in helplessness, i hardly dare imagine what i want or need. the contradiction is harsh; and leads to madness.

women's liberation is both a vision and a movement. without the movement, the vision narrows—unisex, tokenism, inadequate alternative structures—or disintegrates. without a movement, i am reduced to asking, what can i do? and the answer is, **not much.**

because a movement provides a context of possibility.

if i think of how many we are, if i imagine the gathered force of women asking, what can we do? the answer, whispered at first, is, **almost anything.**

what can we do?

for example: can we force the government to issue a susan b. anthony coin? they are issuing one.*

*a new dollar coin, which may signal how much the dollar is worth these days.

dialogue:

—this coin is not the same as adequate income for all women. what good is it?

—but without the pressure created by the women's movement, there'd be no coin with a woman's image. without feminist pressure, the coin would offer betsy ross instead of susan b.

strategy: do not underestimate our power

—so they dispel the pressure by giving us something symbolic or empty or useless or too little. like more women doctors, not control of our bodies.

—too little is more than nothing. it matters that there are more women doctors, and even a tiny victory bears witness to our power.

if we see the new coin as testimony to women's power, if not a significant victory, we see most clearly:

—that our potential to force change is real

—that we have not yet won what we are determined to win: control of our lives

strategy: name our victories, see them clearly, communicate them to other women

women's liberation is and is not a flourishing movement.

is: hundreds of thousands of women share experience, rage, longing, thousands of women are engaged in feminist activities and projects—study groups, collectives, clinics, women's studies, etc.

is not: rarely is that power of numbers gathered and focused.

for example, imagine thousands of women picketing or sitting in at hospitals, medical schools, local AMA offices

strategy: create and maintain pressure

free abortion on demand/no forced sterilization is only a beginning.

if thousands of women pushed for what we really want—

women in control of medical technology concerning women's bodies
research, funded, with priorities chosen by women, performed by women, including women trained in naturopathy, chiropractics, acupuncture, etc.
women to control credentialing of doctors who treat us
patient's access to medical records & to a trained advocate to explain medical information
(not to mention) free medical care for all

—our demands about abortion and sterilization might look good to them.

strategy: make them try to buy us off; don't let them off the hook easily

but we are not at this point organized to pull off our wildest imaginings. we function largely as individuals locked in private struggle. but we are organized to function in certain kinds of groups: in the above-named feminist projects and political groups; and in babysitting coops, food coops, PTA's, neighbor and friendship networks. coffee klatches. tupperware parties.

strategy: develop tactics which use forms that already exist, or almost exist, forms requiring minimal organization

imagine:

you & 5 friends design a questionnaire about women's medical histories and treatment. you make 500 copies at a quick-print shop (cost: under \$10, or less than \$2 each, cheaper than most movies). one afternoon, the 6 of you (or 3 of you, because 3 of you work days) plus 2 other friends of friends distribute these questionnaires at doctor's offices and clinics.

strategy: ask women to consider their experience & share it, instead of defining it for them

imagine:

you invite women who complete the questionnaire to work with you on compiling the results and figuring out what to do with them.

strategy: always look for ways to extend the possibility of action to other women

imagine:

you establish a complaint file on doctors and medical procedures in your city or neighborhood (maybe based on the questionnaires). make the information public, in leaflets posted on telephone poles, in newsletters, etc.

strategy: make accessible to women knowledge of our commonality

imagine:

your next door neighbor was insulted, abused or mistreated by her obstetrician.

you and she and some friends show up at his office and perform a bit of theater, accusing him of his misdeeds and judging him guilty. pick a time when the waiting room is full; or, on the wall of his office building, on his car door, or on the sidewalk in front of his house appears a spray-painted statement of what he did; or, if he works in a clinic or hospital, you print a leaflet telling the story and distribute it around his work place, sneakily, bathrooms, cafeterias, etc.

strategy: direct pressure at weakest links first; AND develop ways to expose men who abuse women

women have done/are doing all these things. and more.

they are not the same as taking power over the medical establishment. some would call them frivolous acts.

i call them empowering acts. performing them extends our sense of possibility: what can we do **next**? besides, unlike much of what we have come to define as political work, the sheer fun of actions like these is self-validating and self-sustaining.

imagine:

10, 20 such small groups functioning in unison.

strategy: develop tactics to build our collective power

we need to believe we can win. we need to understand that when we are not winning, we are losing—abortion rights, for example.

if we look at change as something which is in any case happening, as something we have made happen and can make happen again, we use our history. we defeat their categories.

we empower ourselves.

august 1978

endnotes:

—a friend who read this piece passed on to me a copy of *The Witch's Os*, a fine small anthology on women's health, published in 1972 by New Moon Publications, Inc., Box 3488, Ridgeway Station, Stamford, Conn. 06905, Lolly & Jeanne Hirsch.

—just read that the flip side of the new susan b. anthony coin will be an eagle landing on the moon, lest our enthusiasm at seeing one of our strongest mothers obscure our memory of phallic imperialism.

CRUSADE

1.
Cross legged and still
sole upon thigh
the receptive pose —
like women

repetition, chants:
the aspirants turn cupped palms
to the ceiling, to the North Star

venerable men embrace
the waiting posture
unlike women —
they are called holy

:

Name all the female gurus you know

2.
Examine the consciousness of piety:

consider **the** position of celibacy
the thanks for not being born female
meditate upon the horror of menstrual blood,
beautiful women and barren wives
who cheat their owners of a high crop yield

:

Name all the Bible's men you'd marry

3.
Be wicked.
Sweep away the ashes,
you sleeping witches

break the covenants
you had no part in making

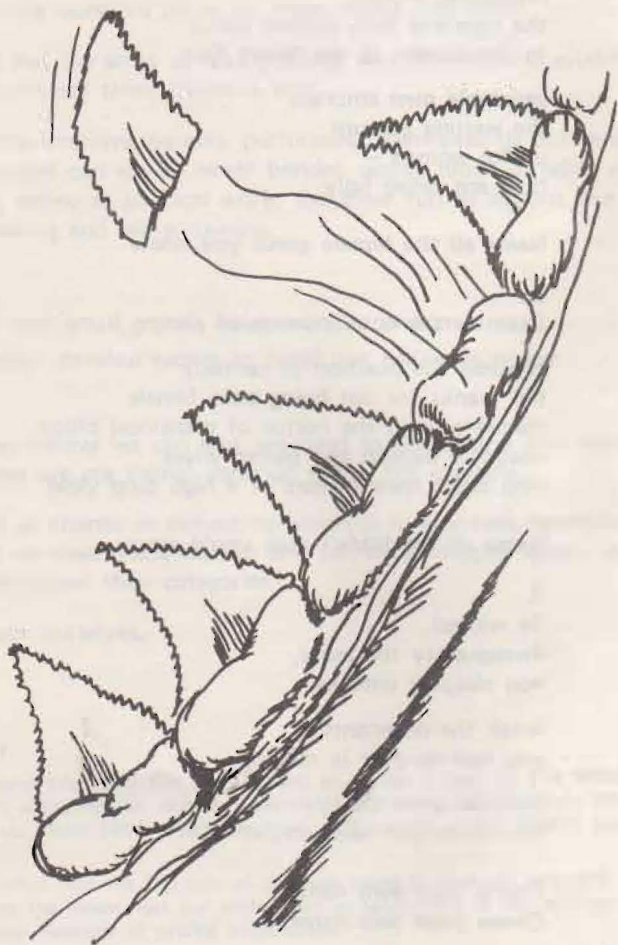
Dare to cross the line
into your own sassy circles

:

Divine your own name.
Divine your own name.

—Janine M. Veto

MYTHS, MONSTERS, TEETH, &c.



Scientists suspect that an adult shark grows a new set of teeth annually.

(from *Jaws 2 SHARKS*, a coloring book; N.Y.: Grosset & Dunlap,
1978, p. 27)

A MYTH OF THE CLITORAL ORGASM

And Inanna created the world
through an act of masturbation:
rolled her fingers around her clit
and out of her cunt sent the nations,
and atoms and storms, the fish and the worms.

She put her hand to her mouth
for a little more spit,
and the black holes and quasaes
squirmed out of her slit.
She grinned to herself, a mischievous smile,
"They'll keep my physicists busy a while!

"I wish I could see what I'm doing here clearer,"
she mused, and squeezed out the Atlantic Mirror,
hung a sun on the wall for some light on the matter
at hand, and saw photons just shimmer and scatter.
Her fingers were tingling, her bones all were humming,
and Inanna rolled backwards, just coming and coming.

When the people and pine trees began flashing by
it got kind of hard to tell ground from the sky.
"If the critics got hold of this work, they would pan it,"
she sighed. "Can't have chaos, I'd better planet."
Which she did. There are thousands of worlds that she birthed,
including the one we've the nerve to call Earth.

Inanna created without hesitation
the gravity of our situation,
spun round on her heels, green eyes flickering,
and said to a toad, "I heard that snickering!"
With a star in her hand and a manner imperious
(and a wink to the toad), she said, "This is Sirius!"

And it is, which is why I agree when I hear
a petulant voice with consonants clear
say that novelists, artists, and illustrators
and poets are nothing but masturbators!

—Rebecca Gordon

TEETH

Men fear the teeth
in the vagina,
the *dentata* of greed
that we hide in the abyss,
the insatiable maw
which waits
eager (they think)
to eat up forever
their one thin fruit,
seeds and all.

I thought men foolish.
Then I saw Cris smile,
her teeth set sharp
in her hungry mouth,
and I wanted to turn
into quince or apricot,
I wanted her to eat me up,
bite me, entice me,
let me nibble
her tender hand.

When women make love
we know how to play
the game both ways:
with our hands
outstretched we set
stone to stone,
paper against paper,
blade to blade.
We know that we
can play any way
we choose.
We dare each other
to jump, to turn.
We watch the other's face
change through every mask
that we possess,
each face our own
and hers and hers.

We are pleased
to eat and be eaten,
to die and live
by falling into another's
mouth, eyes, and hand.

We indulge ourselves
in all our transformations.

So when Cris smiles,
I see the fury of a candle flame,
a momentary blaze of fireworks,
the starry, constant Pleiades,
the white flowers
of wild clematis,
virgin's bower,
and the fangs of the hounds
that tore Actaeon
for violating Diana's peace.

I see Cris smile
and know why
men fear
and women love.

—Minnie Bruce Pratt

her mother

PLAINSONG

the lady
in the green
forest (wold)

was
a dyke

and
even our
yesterdays
have their
perfections

the lady
in the grey
grove
wintering

was she, and
with her
me, and

never, no
never was
a lady

—Judith Crewe

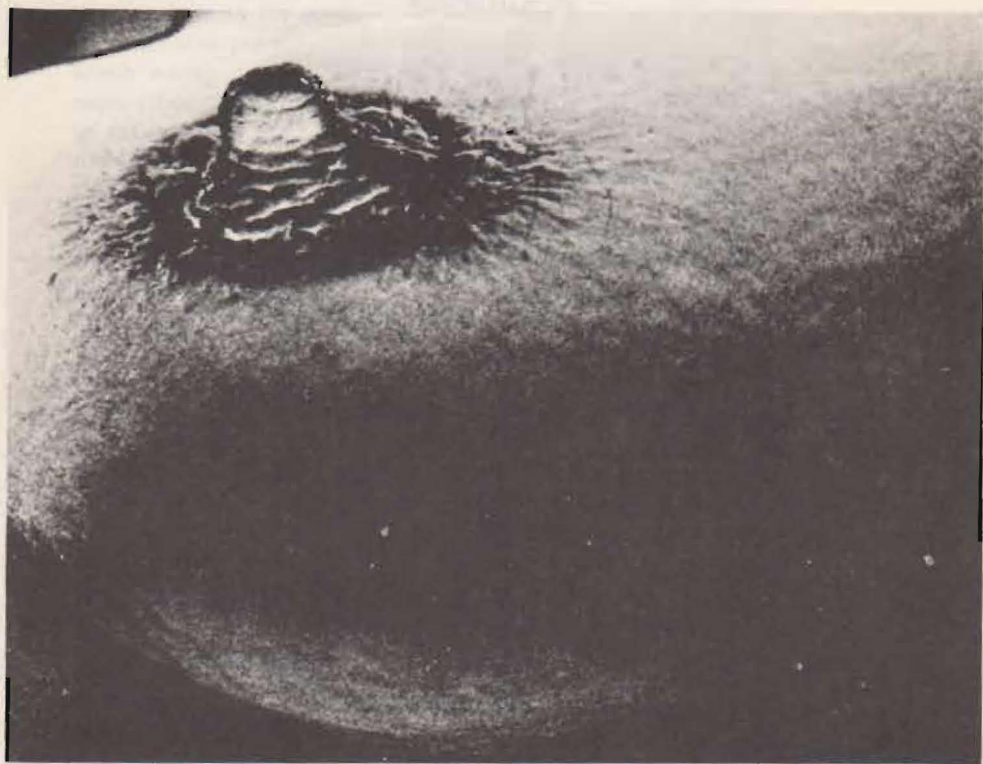


photo by Tee Corinne

her mother

by arny christine straayer

I sat upon the firm gray dirt, leaning my shoulders against a monotonous shack. I remember no grass or shrubs, no water or clouds, no bends or cavities. The sun boasted no shadows. The entire scene consisted of ground, the air being a dilution of it, undisturbed by noise or motion. There seemed no obvious reason for my being there, but I bothered nothing.

She came from a concealed doorway, across a road on my right, and walked away from me. I guessed her age to be about nine, though her small body was enveloped with many skirts and shawls ranging in color from dull red to faded maroon. Overlapping collars and emerging hems reached loosely toward thin legs, and flat dirty feet diffused into the brown powder beneath her. Hugged level at her side was a cardboard box containing a naked and tangled doll-baby, and an unborn child. I was not certain that the child was unborn, for the girl aroused a translucent dust about herself as she moved.

Suddenly, water gushed from her belly, erupting into the dry like spat saliva. The thirsty terrain was immediately vitalized. It crashed against her, like a storm, squeezing and sucking desperately for further moisture. As I staggered toward her, the violent wind pushed its dirt against my sweat, caking my body with mud. The girl clutched her stomach but remained upright. Her back suppressed an anxious spasm as I slowly urged her back to the doorway. My knock was answered by an extremely old woman, emerging from the pit of an indistinct room.

"Old woman, do you know a young girl with many skirts and shawls?"

"I am her mother."

"Her water has broken on the road, Her Mother."

"It is yet too early! Did you see the sky darken, Visitor?"

"No, Her Mother. I saw nothing. Only the fierce wind and dirt."

"Wait here."

The young girl was taken inside, and the entrance barred as I knelt to wait. Several hours later, I was motioned to enter by Her Mother. "An evil spirit has attempted her. She is weakened. I will carry and bear the child for her."

"Her Mother, is the girl barren?"

"No, Visitor. A young girl has much strength. Evil forces are of huge power. Still she can endure. I tell you though, that I am old, and only ancient eyes can see the importance of youth."

I gazed at the small body sleeping, a doll-baby in her arms, an open wound upon her forehead resembling the beak of a large bird. I understood much, but not all.

MYTHOLOGIES

1. Penelope

To keep away
my unwelcome suitors
I said they must wait
till I finished my weaving.

And every night
I would unravel
what I had woven
the day before.

So slight a thread it takes
to bind the strongest;
so thin a web to blind the wise.

2. Atalanta

Throwing golden apples in my path
will not deceive me now.
I am the swiftest runner
since winged Diana.
Whoever outruns me must run fair.

3. Antigone

Dying for one's principles
is all very well
but it can be carried to extremes.
The next brother
of mine that dies
I have a good mind
to let him rot.

—Gail White

SONG FOR MY SISTERS

dedicated to the women at Alexandria Bookstore
who helped write this poem

We are the flame at the flower's center
The hearth of warm ashes
All life proceeds from our force

Remember how the Greeks put the Sibyl
Down under the temple to guard the fire
To save man's gods

Men fear the teeth in our cunts
Men fear to be sucked down
into the pit of Gehennah

Men invented the serpent eating its tail
As they felt eaten
Back into us the circle eternal

Gods are just man's ruse
His bible club
His book collective

Men know they will be recycled
Up the Jacob's ladder
To the mother of burning rods

—Arlene Stone

"JAWS" : Fish Stories

At last he was going to confront the fish—the beast, the monster, the nightmare... He wiped his hands on his trousers, took the rod out of the holder, and stuck it in the swivel between his legs.

—Peter Benchley, *Jaws*

We know how often the goddess appears as an animal, as cow and swamp bird, as ewe and lioness. She also "is" a fish.

—Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*

"'Jaws' ... is good, clean, mindless Saturday matinee fare; it has no religious, moral or philosophical pretensions but simply exists to make us scream with horrified pleasure," (S. Rice, *Media and Methods*). "It is a noisy, busy movie that has less on its mind than any child on a beach might have," (Vincent Canby, *New York Times*). Such statements are typical of professional film comment on the movie "Jaws." Most reviewers seemed a bit too eager to assure us that no hidden morals or messages lurked beneath the film's surface. Yet despite these denials, "Jaws" demands genuinely critical and feminist analysis for it is, in fact, a profoundly mythic and religious movie. By no means merely a scare story, "Jaws" is, rather, a good, clean, and ritual retelling of the essential patriarchal myth—male rape and vanquishment of the female symbolized as a sea monster, dragon, serpent, vampire, etc.,¹ administering a needed fix to a culture hooked on and by male control. Beneath its facade of light entertainment "Jaws" carries a message of dread and loathing for the female and enacts her annihilation. Although I will refer to the book my main concern is with the film—a film which Molly Haskell judged, "a scare machine that works with computer-like precision,"² a film that has grossed (and grossed out) millions in the world market.

My analysis of the myth rests upon the scholarship which proves the existence of a previous civilization on this planet which was gynocentric. This form of civilization, however, succumbed to the advance of a patriarchal one. The evidence of myth indicates that this transition was a violent one. Indeed, male dominance over women forms a continuum of warfare historically evinced in legends of separatist and militant Amazon tribes, in worldwide traditions of male heroes slaying dragons, serpents, and monsters, and in the ritual rapings of the older Greek goddesses by

and Patriarchal Myth

by Jane E. Caputi

newly arrived gods.³ Most glaring of all is the content of what patriarchy calls its "creation myths," myths which from a female perspective would more truthfully be called destruction epics. Charles Doria describes this type of myth:

Both of these stories depend on the still more ancient view of creation as flowing from the womb of a fish or whale woman: Leviathan or Tiamat. The oldest known versions of this creation story embody the sea as a whale/serpent/fish woman locked in combat/making love with a god of light/sperm, being defeated/impregnated, cut open/giving birth to the various orders of the universe.⁴

Here the primordial battle of the sexes is outlined; here "making love" and making war fuse and become identical.⁵ Here also emerges the rudimentary plot of "Jaws" as this film joins that continuum of warfare against the female. For myths such as these do not simply remain fixed in the past, but travel through time changing form and style. Their function is to stitch together the seams of the prevailing reality or world view, to bestow legitimation and credibility upon the reigning social order. Patriarchy is the ruling social order, thus myths of male superiority and victory over the female must be continually retold, participated in, internalized, and believed. Enter "Jaws" as the latest installment of a time-honored serial.

One reviewer described "Jaws" as essentially a "fish story," a phrase which implies deception and exaggeration. Myth and fish story coincide perfectly in "Jaws" for it, like other patriarchal myths, is a subtle mix of truth and lie, in essence propaganda in the warfare against women.

The Mythic Base: "She Was the First"

When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him
He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips . . .
Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.

—The Babylonian Creation Epic

In that day Jehovah with his hard and great and strong sword
will turn his attention to Leviathan, the gliding serpent,
even to Leviathan, the crooked serpent, and he will certainly
kill the sea monster that is in the sea.

—Isaiah 27:1

Quint grabbed the harpoon dart at the end of the rope and,
with his hand, plunged it into the soft white belly of the fish.
Blood poured from the wound and bathed Quint's hands.

—Peter Benchley, *Jaws*

In the most widely displayed advertisement for "Jaws" a naked woman swims on the surface of the water while underneath looms the head of a gigantic shark, its mouth wide open and full of excruciatingly sharp teeth. The poster announces, "She was the first. . ." Interestingly enough, this is precisely the point of a major feminist work, *The First Sex*, by Elizabeth Gould Davis. In her book Davis claims that the female sex preceded the male, that goddesses predated gods, and that in all myth originally "the first creator of all is a goddess."⁶ Many ancient epics relate a usurper god challenging and destroying this original female creator. "Jaws" is modeled upon this archetype and, as the above quotations illustrate, closely parallels certain of these, particularly that of the Babylonian fish goddess Tiamat. Thus the "she" in the poster's phrase refers not only to the swimming woman, but to the shark itself as a symbol of this primary goddess.

It does not matter that the shark is referred to as "he" in the film. This technique of gender disguise is a prime example of the truth/deception mix in patriarchal myth and is common to the evolution of many of the most important ones. Although now it is unquestionably assumed that the serpent in the garden of Eden was male, this was not always the case. Medieval art depicted the serpent as "having female breasts and head in accordance with a theological tradition."⁷ This transsexing process is also evident in the myth of the infant Apollo slaying a dragon who was the guardian of the Delphic Oracle. Although the earliest accounts vividly name this dragon as female, later versions regard it as male.⁸ In his study of the Great Mother, Erich Neumann likewise observed this phenomenon and concluded:

The guardian spirit is either female or of indeterminate sex, but its terrible, female-matriarchal character is in any event clear. Its uroboric bisexuality is explained by mixture with the destructive power of the Feminine, which at a "later" stage is often represented as male.⁹

Although deceptively called "he," the shark in "Jaws" is meant as a symbol of the primordial female and her most terrifying aspects.

One myth which has retained the female sex of its monster is the Babylonian epic in which Tiamat, the original creator and fish goddess, is challenged by Marduk (a child god). During their battle he enfolds her in his net, drives an "Evil Wind" into her wide-open mouth, and tears her belly with his arrows, slaying her. He then "paused to view her dead body" deciding to "split her like a shellfish," forming the land and sky from her dismembered body.¹⁰ In the film "Jaws" the shark is finally destroyed through its wide open mouth by an exploding oxygen tank. The Evil Wind strikes again.

The Biblical counterpart of Tiamat is Leviathan and "Jaws" also holds similarities to christian tradition. As patriarchy evolved in western civilization the chief god in one of its religions went 3-D, becoming one god

with three distinct persons, the mysterious Christian Trinity. (This is blatantly imitative of matriarchal religion which revered a widely known Triple Goddess.) This triune god retained the function of the gods and heroes who had gone before him, namely to dispose of female being. He can be found doing just that in "Jaws." As the reviewers urge us, "...spectacular final confrontation between the three men and the great white shark," (Vincent Canby); "'Jaws' is eminently worth seeing for its second half: three men against a killer shark," (Marcia Magill). We need not strain to discern that these three men are the superstar surrogates of three other well-known figures, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the christian religions, performing their appointed and mythic mission.

Womb of Life/Jaws of Death

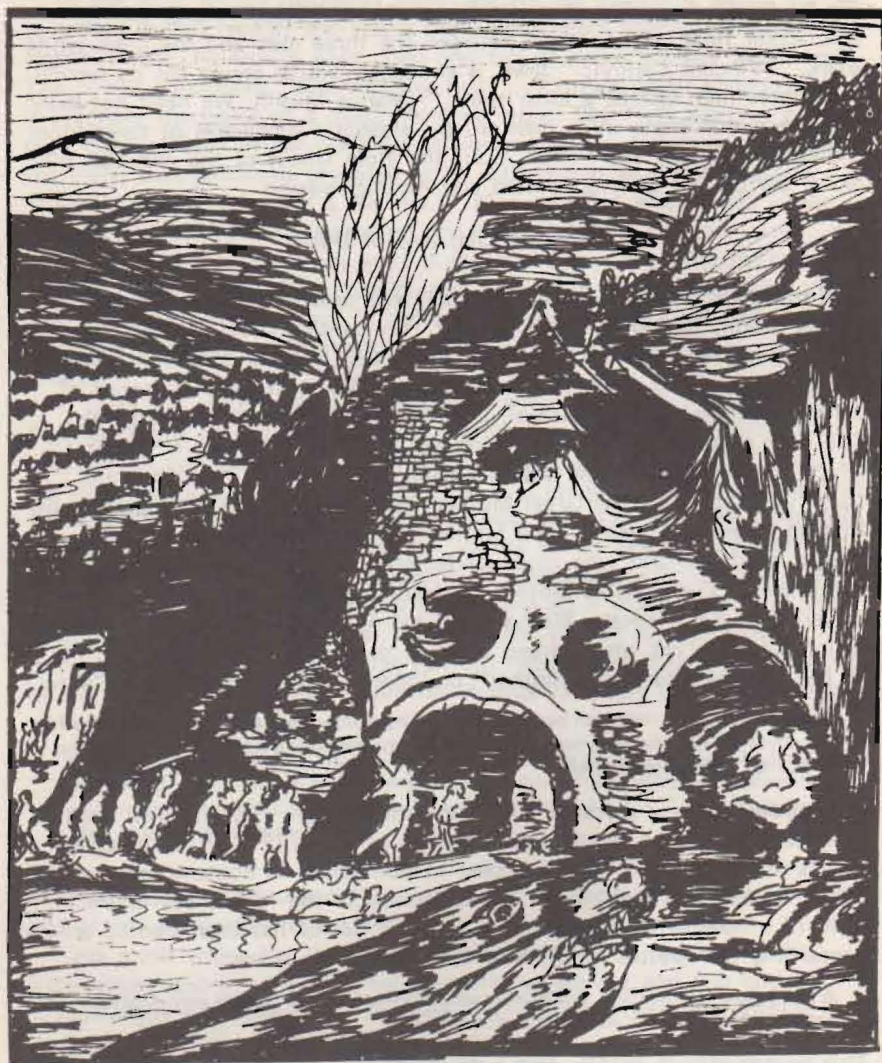
Both scientifically and mythologically the ocean has been regarded as a primal uterus, the source of all life.¹¹ This consideration has also been extended to sea creatures. Campbell notes the "worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale,"¹² (appearing in the most familiar stories of Jonah, Herakles, and Pinocchio). Dolphins have been similarly regarded. The very name of the species is derived from the Greek word "delphis," which means womb. While dolphins generally represent the life-giving, fructifying womb of the Great Mother, her character also contains an antithetical elementary nature. The Mother not only gives life but is the bringer of death—and who could better epitomize this aspect than a great white shark. The Terrible Mother of death appears in universal personas as varied as Kali, Hekate, Medusa, and the Malekulan Lev-hev-hev, a name which means "That which draws us to It so that It may devour us."¹³ In her negative character "Mother" or "Mom" appears precisely as "Maw":

Thus the womb of the earth becomes the deadly devouring **maw** of the underworld... the abyss of Hell, the dark hole of the depths, the devouring womb of the grave and of death.¹⁴ (emphasis mine)

Hebrew theology pictured hell as a hole or a pit. Hell has also been artistically portrayed as the gaping mouth of a fish.¹⁵ The mythological motifs of the negative female appear in new forms in contemporary mythology. Sartre has raved against the obscenity of the female sex as the form of a hole.¹⁶ Currently a new wave of horror has been booted around concerning the spectre of terrible "black holes" in space:

A black hole is a cannibal, swallowing up everything that gets in its way. Once engorged by it there is no hope of escape.¹⁷

This sounds almost exactly like a description of the shark in "Jaws." Whether in the form of black holes or the gaping mouths of great white sharks, the symbols associated with the female still provide the basic substance of man's most awesome and recurring fears.



—after Herri met der Bles' Hell-Mouth in Robert Hughes' *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*, N.Y., N.Y.: Stein & Day, 1968, p. 196.
Original in Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague.

The Teeth of the Sea

Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis—a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

“Jaws” is the perfect movie for anyone with a larger-than-life castration complex.

—Christopher Sharp

When “Jaws” hit the international market the French translated its title as “Les Dents de la Mer” (“The Teeth of the Sea”), a fact which can easily lead us not only to the idea of castration, but to the consideration of two related themes—the mythological motif of the *vagina dentata* (the toothed, i.e., castrating vagina)¹⁸ and male obsessive fear of abortion.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as one definition of “jaws”: “the seizing action or capacity of any devouring agency, as death, time, etc.” Metaphoric use of the word suggests the end of life, the grave, annihilation. Tennyson wrote in “The Charge of the Light Brigade”: “Into the Jaws of Death, Into the mouth of Hell/ Rode the six hundred.”

The basis for such dire associations with the word is rooted solidly in the symbology of the Terrible Mother:

The positive femininity of the womb appears as a mouth; that is why “lips” are attributed to the female genitals ... Similarly, the destructive side of the Feminine, the destructive and deathly womb, appears most frequently in the archetypal form of a mouth bristling with teeth.¹⁹ (emphasis mine)

This archetypal form of the Terrible Mother (the gaping mouth of the shark) provided the major drawing card for this filmic blockbuster. The irony is that this form actually represents the primordial ballbuster, the dreaded *vagina dentata* of worldwide mythology. For the mouth of the goddess is often identified with the *vagina dentata*,²⁰ the mouth with bared teeth representing the destructive power of the vagina and womb.

Many ancient cultures possessed legends which described the first women of the world as having toothed vaginas, making the vagina impassable and penile penetration impossible. This extremely prevalent motif²¹ is most distinct in the folklore of the Native Americans. Their myths speak of a culture hero who manages to overcome the Terrible Mother and with sticks, stones, or some medicinal concoction breaks the teeth out of her vagina, and thus “makes her into a woman.” (As de Beauvoir observed, “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman.”²²) Patriarchal civilization can commence only after this act has been accomplished. An extremely interesting variant is recorded by the Waspishiana and Taruma Indians who relate that the first woman had a **carnivorous fish** inside her vagina.²³

Such legends are encountered in India and Africa as well. In some of these one tooth is not knocked out and it becomes the clitoris. Here apparently is the basis for the mutilating and misogynist ritual of clitoral excision, still practiced widely in parts of Africa where legend holds that if a man has intercourse with an uncircumcised woman he will suffer a puncture from her “dart” or clitoris.²⁴

Although W.S. Pechter, writing in *Commentary*, was sure that “the fear [in “Jaws”] never strikes anything primal or profound,”²⁵ it is the *vagina dentata* itself which rips across the screen as the bloody, gnashing mouth



FIG. 30. MAW OF THE
EARTH

Aztec, from a codex

—from Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, Bollingen Series XLVII,
Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 149.



of the shark. In one scene from the film men peer into the mouth of a safely dead shark and quip, "Deep throat." As most of us are aware, fellatio was the subject of a popular pornographic film of that name. Yet obviously men are quite frightened by the castration implications of that act.** In another sea story, *Moby Dick*, Ahab's amputated leg can be seen as a euphemism for an amputated "dick"²⁶—can this be why he pursues the white whale so relentlessly? Referring once again to the advertising poster for the film, if you look at what appears to be the bottom part of the shark, you will notice that it is not part of the fish at all but the top of a penis which is heading straight for the toothy mouth.²⁷

Dismemberment in the Ocean

With the sea symbolically evoking the uterus and the shark's teeth the ferocious mouth of that womb, "Jaws" emerges as a full-blown male nightmare, not only of castration, but of **abortion**. For what is abortion but the action which most typifies a "Terrible Mother," a "destructive and deathly womb."

Mary Daly has made the remarkable perception that men deeply identify with the fetus, particularly with "unwanted fetal material," and thus is rooted their terror of abortion.²⁸ There is no place this terror is clearer than in "Jaws." The action takes place mainly in the ocean, the primal womb and source of life, but this is a uterus full of blood, gore, danger and death. There are scenes of dismembered limbs, legs falling off into the deep, etc. All of the victims of the shark, except one, are male—usually swimming or floating peacefully unaware when attacked.

Significant to this aspect is the strong emphasis the film deliberately places on boy children, closer to the fetal stage and more vulnerable to the mother, encouraging fetal feelings among the viewers. Again and again little boys are the focus of peril. First we have to worry about the boy scouts, then on the beach it is little boys who greatly predominate in the crowded water. The climax is reached when little Alex Kintner, happily floating on his raft, grotesquely exits in a geyser of blood. (The name "Kintner" is of course very similar to the German word for children, "kinder.") Later, one of the police chief's sons goes into shock as he narrowly escapes an attack. One appalled reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* warned, "'Jaws' is a nightmare for the young." Did he realize, however, quite how young? Perhaps the current anti-abortion backlash is linked to the horrific propagandizing in "Jaws."

**Fellatio or "blowjobs" must awaken some deeply sublimated castration fears in men because of their association of women's mouths with the vagina dentata. Thus men attempt to destroy the threat of the toothed vagina. Yet look at the method they use: both Tiamat and the shark in "Jaws" were dispatched via a form of an "Evil Wind." Certainly this method can be seen as a reversed and lethal form of "blowjob." Similarly, "Jaws" is a rather vicious effort to blow women's minds.

Deliver Us from Evil

There is not only a boyish slant to the victims of the shark, its two surviving killers are also markedly and stupidly puerile. One is terrified of the water and looks like he is perpetually in danger of wetting his pants; the other sticks his tongue out and makes faces behind the back of Big Daddy Quint. Brody and Hooper join a long line of distinguished boy killers, for youth is one of the more prominent characteristics of monster-slayers. Marduk was the infant grandson of Tiamat when he killed her. Philip Slater notes that three of the most important heroes in Greek mythology—Zeus, Apollo, and Herakles—initiated their careers as very young children by killing a serpent. He further adds that all the serpents are of maternal origin.²⁹ The prevalence of this type of myth indicates the existence of a popular male fantasy, namely, that in the act of birth, or at an initiatory ritual of rebirth, the son is able to kill the mother.

Men's antipathetic predisposition toward the mother is widely and diversely apparent. She is killed off in the oldest fairy tales and blamed for the most modern of male discontents. Yet one of the most glaring expressions of this is found at a most primary level, in the concept most closely associated with the act of birth, i.e., *deliverance*. Under the paternal care of modern medicine births are effected by the god-surrogate, the doctor, who delivers the baby while the mother is usually drugged and strapped to apparatus in an abnormal position. Her genitals are often sliced (episiotomy), an almost always unnecessary procedure which recalls the treatment of Tiamat at the hands of Marduk. This obstetrical practice is not simply a male takeover of the female realm of birthing but the enactment of a gynophobically rooted ritual by which a man must "save" the baby from its mother. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as the primary meaning of "deliver": "1. to set free, liberate, release, rescue, save. 2. To set free from restraint, imminent danger, annoyance, trouble or evil generally." This word and the birthing practice it describes point to a system which views all mothers as "Terrible," as evil from whom the child must be saved. Further evidence is unwittingly offered by Frederick LeBoyer. In his book, ironically titled *Birth Without Violence*, he gives this interpretation of the delivery room drama:

She is driving the baby out. At the same time she is holding it in, preventing its passage. It is she who is the enemy. She who stands between the child and life. Only one of them can prevail; it is mortal combat.³⁰ (emphasis his)

Apparently mythic violence attends every birth, no matter the procedure.

The association between the shark and the birthing Terrible Mother was suggested quite early in the film. When a shark is caught and displayed as the killer, Hooper remains unconvinced. To be sure, he proposes, they must cut open the dead shark to see if the little boy is inside of it. He subsequently performs a post-mortem caesarean section (amid much grunting and letting of waters) while Brody watches in revulsion.³¹ Later on, the final scene in "Jaws" is clearly the enactment of an initiation ritual of matricidal rebirth. All the necessary ingredients are present: con-

frontation with marine monsters is the typical ordeal of initiation.³² Immersion in the waters (sacramentalized as baptism) is the classic symbol of rebirth. The sea monster successfully torn apart (and Daddy rid of in the bargain), the two boys—now men—emerge from the waters to paddle fearlessly for shore.

Cinematic Rape

In a recent work Gerald Mast discusses the use of kinesics (emphasis on movement rather than, for example, dialogue) in films and notes that many of these films are both sensually assaultive and sexually explicit. He remarks: "We film spectators are not only voyeurs; we also experience a kind of rape."³³ What Mast misses in this metaphor is that there are, in fact, two distinct experiences of rape—the rapist's and the experience of the one who is raped. "Jaws" sets up its viewers for just these experiences. Men can gloat over the rape/defeat of the primordial female; women are invited to internalize this defeat. Yet, there is still another rape in "Jaws"—as a matter of fact, the film opens with one.

A group of teenagers sits around a campfire smoking and drinking. One boy keeps giving a girl the eye. She gets up and begins to run toward the beach. He gives chase, continually calling to her, "Slow down. Wait. I'm coming." As she throws off some of her clothes he adds, "I'm definitely coming." Reaching the water naked, the girl enters for a swim. By this point the boy has reached the beach and lies down on the sand. The girl calls out, telling him to take a swim too, but he refuses. Suddenly the shark attacks, whirling the girl on a labyrinthine path of death through the water. She screams for what seems an eternity. Some of her words, though very scrambled, can be made out. She is yelling, "It hurts. It hurts." At this precise moment the camera cuts to the boy stretched out on the beach intoning, "I'm coming, I'm coming." No doubt he was.

Because of the suspense and horror in this scene, the implications of the dialogue and succession of events are difficult to consciously grasp. But logically there is no reason for the boy to still be repeating, "I'm coming," since they have already ascertained that he is, in fact, on the beach. Are we to believe that he has, within seconds, slumped into a drunken stupor, oblivious to her piercing cries, and that his loaded words are really meaningless? No. This scene reeks with meaning and the scent is unmistakably that of rape/murder. (The suggestion of rape is actually inserted into the dialogue later when men, viewing her remains, joke about Jack the Ripper.) One can protest that the boy did not touch the girl, that it was indisputably the shark who killed her. Yes, but this is not supposed to be enacted and perceived as a "normal" rape scene. Rather, it is a carefully constructed form of subliminal/cinematic rape with the visual images leading to one interpretation, but the sound and succession of

events suggesting another. ** The double message is deliberate; the intent is to manipulate the viewer and deceive her as to the actual message she is receiving.

As I have previously noted, this was the only female the shark attacked; every other victim, anyone who was even actively threatened by the shark, was male. There is, again, a mythic rationale for this construction. The plotting of "Jaws" draws heavily upon the patterns of ancient sea monster myths. One type of these is so prevalent that an entire genre, the Andromeda Theme,³⁴ has been named for them. In these a hero or god rescues a chained maiden from a ravaging sea monster. He generally slays the beast and marries the girl. However, Robert Graves offers a radically different interpretation of this scenario:

Theophilus was wrong to suggest that the hero rescues the chained virgin from a male sea-beast. The sea-beast is female—the Goddess Tiamat or Rahab—and the God Bel or Marduk, who wounds her mortally and usurps her authority, has himself chained her in female form to the rock to keep her from mischief ... It has even been suggested that in the original icon, the Goddess's chains were really necklaces, bracelets and anklets, while the sea-beast was her emanation.³⁵

With this relevant background in mind we can wonder if the visual appearances of "Jaws" are as potentially deceptive as those of ancient myths. If the subliminal message is that the girl has been raped and murdered, then the shark is clearly the archetypal revenging guardian spirit, who, throughout the rest of the film, with deliberate vengeance, attacks only males.

Extensions of the Myth

Man is the hunter; woman is his game
The sleek and shining creatures of the chase,
We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;
They love us for it and we ride them down.

—Alfred Lord Tennyson

"Jaws" incorporates many of the most misogynistic and gynophobic elements of patriarchal civilization. These elements are by no means restricted to symbolic representation in the media but are enacted with dire consequences for women. Here I will pinpoint some of these and briefly explicate their extension into life.

Fear of the vagina dentata: As previously mentioned, this primal belief is one of the causes of the practice of female genital mutilation. This takes form in the removal of parts of the external genitalia, the clitoris and labia, to the most severe form—infibulation—(practiced in the Sudan), in which the clitoris, labia minora and parts of the labia majora are amputated, the vulva scraped raw and sewn together. It is estimated that over

**To understand this point, some background on the concept of subliminal manipulation is needed. It is a technique by which hidden messages (pictures, words, or sounds) are embedded in advertisements, magazine or newspaper copy, music, etc. These messages are intended to be perceived only by the unconscious mind, and often contradict the surface, or consciously apprehended, message. For an analysis and expose of this practice in advertising see: Wilson Bryan Key, *Subliminal Seduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); and Wilson Bryan Key, *Media Sexploitation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

30 million women alive today have been subjected to some form of genital mutilation.³⁶

The "deathly and devouring womb": In "Jaws" the fetishized object of attack was the shark's mouth, symbol of the vaginal jaws, the "fishy" vulvas of women. Currently American medicine is leading a similar battle against the uterus. Each year more than 690,000 hysterectomies are performed, making it the second most frequently performed major operation. Almost half of all women over 40 are advised to undergo it. The operation ends in death for 12,000 women per year. Researchers estimate that 15-40% of these operations are unnecessary.³⁷ Its popularity, however, is in part due to an attitude expressed openly by some gynecologists that the post-child-bearing uterus becomes a "potentially lethal organ." Dr. Ralph C. Wright, a Connecticut gynecologist, termed the womb a "useless, bleeding, symptom-producing, potentially cancer-bearing organ... [which] therefore should be removed."³⁸ Behind each of Wright's words scatters of male dread of the womb of death, of which "Jaws" is the latest projection. When he announces that the womb is a "potentially lethal organ," we might respond, yes, but lethal to whom? Who, indeed, is afraid of the Big Bad Womb?

Woman as fish; the shark as a symbol of women: Current male homosexual slang designates women as "fish."³⁹ This is the latest descendent in a long line of this symbolic association. To the contemporary imagination the shark, as the most dangerous fish, signifies the perilous aspect of women. Anyone who reads the current literature on sharks will soon begin to notice a creeping, pervasive fear and tendency to obsession which cannot be caused only by the species' potential danger. Rather, the source of this fear is the identification of the shark with that which is outside the comprehension and control of man—the wild, primitive danger—similar to the dread with which man views woman.⁴⁰ Jacques Costeau wrote of this fear:

Second in violence only to the monstrous fury of hungry sharks is the blind hatred of men for this species. I have watched and filmed scenes of carnage of implacable cruelty, in which normally quiet and reasonable men used axes to hack at the bodies of sharks they had caught, and then plunged their hands and arms into the blood streaming from the entrails, to extract their hooks and bait. Floundering about among the gutted carcasses for hours on end, pushing hood and bait back up to within inches of the quivering jaws they would normally never have gone near, these men were gratifying some obscure form of vengeance.⁴¹

Do these men really aim at some form of vengeance, or do they, rather, act out of fear, frustration, and ontological impotence. This dismembering carnage is similar to the tearing asunder of the Leviathan, to the slicing of Tiamat by Marduk. These are legends which give intuitions about a past for which we have no real details. But details are available about the maddeningly similar rituals which are performed today. The following account is taken from the testimony of a Vietnam veteran concerning war crimes he witnessed and participated in in Vietnam. A squad of men had just beaten and shot a woman to death. One of them, a representative of USAID, approaches her body:

He went over there, ripped her clothes off, and took a knife and cut from her vagina almost all the way up, just about to her breast and pulled her organs out, completely out of her cavity, and threw them out. Then he stooped and knelt over and commenced to peel every bit of skin off her body and left her there as a sign for something or other.⁴² (emphasis mine)

As a sign—a sign of the times, a sign of approval, a sign from god, signed, sealed and delivered. A sign of the identity of all patriarchal wars. A sign which reads, "The State of Patriarchy is the State of War ... and the primordial, universal Enemy of patriarchy and its wars is the female sex."⁴³ In view of the gynocidal and sadistic myths which pervade this world, can there be any shock at such atrocities. Mircea Eliade, purveyor and historian of these myths, can write this:

One becomes a man only by conforming to the teaching of the myths, that is, by imitating the gods ... in *illoc tempore* the god had slain the marine monster and dismembered its body in order to create the cosmos. Man repeats this blood sacrifice—sometimes even with human victims.⁴⁴ (emphasis his)

A Knock on the Unconscious

The sea is the favorite symbol for the unconscious, the mother of all that lives.
—C.G. Jung

The Terrible Female is a symbol for the unconscious. And the dark side of the Terrible Mother takes the form of monster.
—Erich Neumann

Although "Jaws" is the product of male guilt, fears and anguish, its implications are truly devastating to women, and many women, including myself, were really frightened by it. To further understand this, I will consider one last theme suggested by "Jaws"—its manipulation of the unconscious mind.

The surface story of "Jaws," the action of the shark and the men killing it, is directed to our conscious perception. Yet our unconscious minds are observing and understanding the hidden messages. While watching we are being given a nightmare that we may never remember having. The ocean setting of "Jaws" is precisely appropriate for a patriarchal horror film; its sea and shark are the unconscious mind, the mind which comprehends the language of symbols, the realm of the mind which remains a wilderness, beyond the immediate colonizing grasp of patriarchal socialization.

This socialization process divides the mind, carving out an area (the conscious) which is drawn into a specific, controlled reality.⁴⁵ Subliminal (subconscious) incursions are then launched into the remainder, the sub- or unconscious. This uncontrolled territory, though vulnerable to subliminal suggestion and manipulation, remains in essence mysterious, primitive, even wild, as evidenced by dreams, intuitions, creativity. "Jaws," however, implants the suggestion that these depths of the mind and of the self are, in fact, deadly. It floods us with the image of a zone inhabited by terrifying creatures where we are out of our element, completely vulnerable, and ultimately subject to destruction. As it subliminally dips into our minds, "Jaws" asks us to become terrified of that mind, warning us to

“Stay off the beaches,” “Keep out of the water,” for naturally if we’re not there, what remains to keep invaders out. Women’s minds should grow teeth and barbs against such invasions, our signs should read, “Keep Out,” “No hunting, no fishing, no trapping, no trespassing.” We do not forgive those who trespass against us.

The purpose of fish stories such as “Jaws” is to instill relentless terror, embedding a paralyzing image of an inevitably vanquished female. Yet behind this *deceptive cover*, one can also discern elements of truth which men usually do their best to conceal. Thus all who reeled and wondered under the ferocious assault of patriarchal myth in “Jaws” should remember that this great white shark, as well as whales, dragons, serpents, and sea monsters, are all actually intimations of the untamed female, the Great Mother, the *vagina dentata*, the Lesbian, the White Goddess, Tiamat, the wild, the free, the unconscious.⁴⁶As Ishmael in *Moby Dick* allowed, “And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?”



LADY OF THE BEASTS
Painting: terra-cotta amphora
VII century B.C.

—from Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*,
Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 1922, p. 265.

Notes

¹Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. from the German by Ralph Manheim. 2nd ed., Bollingen Series 47 (1955, rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963; Bollingen paperback, 1972), p. 187. Here Neumann writes, "In the westerly symbol group of the Terrible Mother—night, abyss, sea, watery depths, snake, dragon, whale,—all the symbols color one another and merge with one another."

²Molly Haskell, "The Claptrap of Pearly Whites in the Briny Deep," *Village Voice*, 23 June 1975.

³Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, revised ed. (1955, rpt. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), II, Vol. I, pp. 56, 74, 93. Graves recounts the multi-rapes of the goddesses and suggests that these rapes represent the usurpation of shrines as well as the seizure of control of agriculture, fishing, etc.

⁴Charles Doria, "The Dolphin Rider," in *Mind in the Water: A Book to Celebrate the Consciousness of Whales and Dolphins*, ed. Joan McIntyre (New York: Scribners, 1974), pp. 33-34.

⁵This brings to mind the testimony of a Vietnam veteran in which he related that a squad of nine men raped a Vietnamese woman, "But at any rate they raped the girl, and then, the last man to make love to her, shot her in the head." *Vietnam Veterans Against the War, The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 29.

⁶Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (New York: Putnam, 1971), p. 33.

⁷Lyvia Morgan Brown, "Sexism in Western Art," in Jo Freeman, ed., *Woman: A Feminist Perspective* (New York: Mayfield, 1975), p. 310.

⁸Edward Tripp, ed., *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology* (New York: Crowell, 1970), s.v. "Python."

⁹Neumann, *Great Mother*, pp. 173-4.

¹⁰For a translation of the Babylonian epic see Charles Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: Brazilliar, 1963), pp. 83-93.

¹¹See C. Kerenyi, "The Primordial Child in Primordial Times," in C.G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series XXII (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969).

¹²Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. Bollingen Series 17 (1949, 1968, rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen paperback, 1972), p. 90.

¹³Neumann, *Great Mother*, p. 174.

¹⁴Neumann, *Great Mother*, p. 149.

¹⁵For illustrations of this, see Robert Hughes, *Heaven and Hell in Western Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968).

¹⁶See Peggy Holland, "Jean-Paul Sartre as a NO to Women," *Sinister Wisdom* 6, Summer 1978, for a critique of Sartre's misogynist philosophy.

¹⁷John G. Taylor, *Black Holes* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), p. 73.

¹⁸For a concise explication of the vagina dentata motif see Maria Leach, *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1949-50), s.v. "vagina dentata."

¹⁹Neumann, *Great Mother*, p. 168.

²⁰Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Rites and Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader*, ed. Wendell C. Beane and William G. Doty (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) II, Vol. II, p. 409.

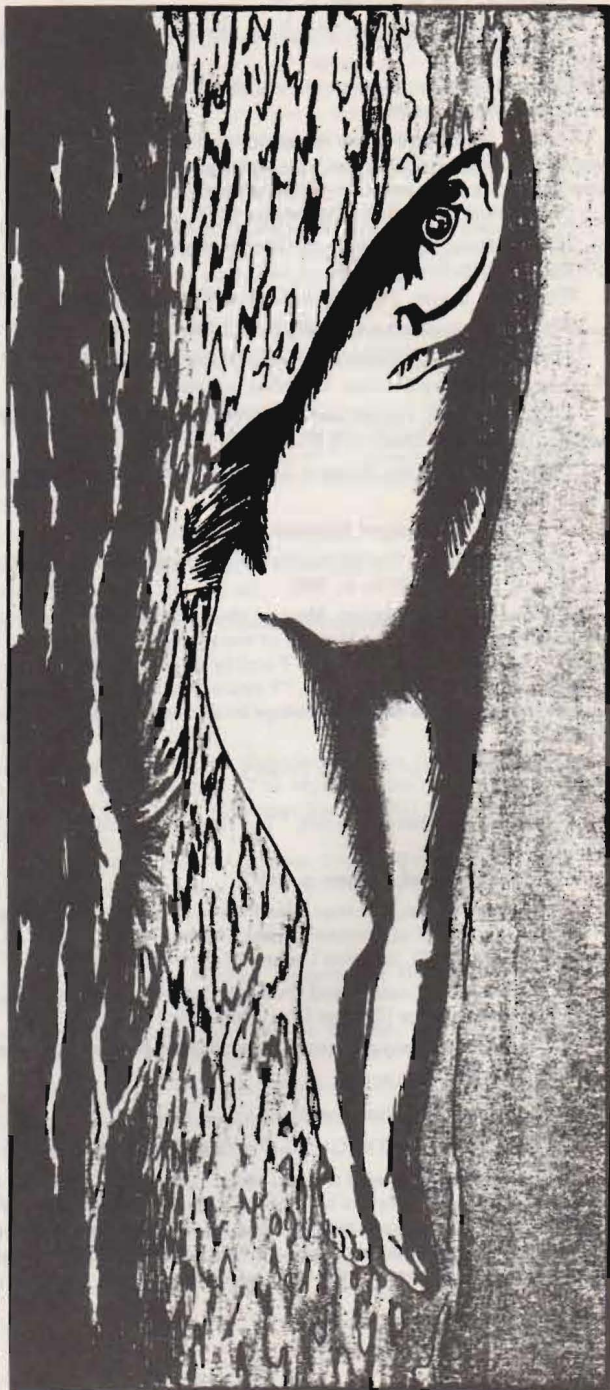
²¹Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 46.

²²Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley (1952, rpt. New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 267.

²³Leach, *Dictionary of Folklore*, s.v. "vagina dentata."

- 24 Lederer, *Fear of Women*, p. 46.
- 25 W.S. Pechter, "Movies: Man Bites Shark and Other Curiosities," *Commentary*, 60, Nov. 1975, pp. 68-72.
- 26 Melville is no stranger to literary phallic symbols as any reader of his short story "I and My Chimney" knows.
- 27 Here I am referring to a rather obvious use of a technique which Wilson Key has termed "Subliminal Seduction," by which a message or picture is embedded in an advertisement and is intended to be perceived only by the unconscious mind. See Wilson Bryan Key, *Subliminal Seduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).
- 28 Marv Daly, manuscript of *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).
- 29 Philip E. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 126.
- 30 Frederick LeBoyer, *Birth Without Violence* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 26.
- 31 The significance of this particular scene was pointed out to me by Dr. Estelle Jussim, Professor of Library Science, Simmons College.
- 32 Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 158.
- 33 Gerald Mast, *Film, Cinema, Movie: A Theory of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 59.
- 34 Leach, *Dictionary of Folklore*, s.v. "Andromeda."
- 35 Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, amended and enlarged edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966), p. 363.
- 36 Mary Daly, manuscript. Most of the information about female genital mutilation has been gathered by Fran Hosken of the Women's International News. See especially her article "Female Circumcision and Fertility in Africa," *Women and Health*, Nov./Dec. 1976, p. 8. See also Asim Zaki Mustafa, "Female Circumcision and Infibulation in the Sudan," *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the British Commonwealth* 73, April 1966, pp. 302-306.
- 37 Joann Rodgers, "Rush to Surgery," *New York Times Magazine*, 21 Sept. 1975, pp. 34-42.
- 38 Quoted in Deborah Larned, "The Greening of the Womb," *New Times*, 27 Dec. 1974, pp. 35-39.
- 39 Lederer, *Fear of Women*, p. 249.
- 40 The observation that men dread women has been made most persuasively by Karen Horney, "The Dread of Woman" in her *Feminine Psychology*, ed. Harold Kelman (New York: Norton, 1967). See also Lederer, *Fear of Women*.
- 41 Jacques-Yves Costeau and Phillippe Costeau, *The Shark: Splendid Savage of the Sea*, trans. by Francis Price (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) p. 23.
- 42 Vietnam Veterans Against the War, *Winter Soldier Investigations*, p. 74.
- 43 Mary Daly, manuscript.
- 44 Eliade, *Myths, Rites, Symbols*, Vol. I, p. 254.
- 45 Jane E. Caputi, "The Glamour of Grammar," *Chrysalis* 4, Winter 1977, pp. 35-43.
- 46 Bertha Harris has also written about "Jaws." In "What We Mean to Say: Notes Toward Defining the Nature of Lesbian Literature," *Heresies* 3, Fall 1977, pp. 5-8, she places "Jaws" in a literary tradition (which includes *Beauty and the Beast* and *Dracula*), in which "maiden, beast and nature are fused into one giant ravenous killer form (Jaws)," a Lesbian, and a monster, "the quintessence of all that is female and female enraged."

—after Rene Magritte's *L'invention collective*, in Suzi Gablik's *Magritte*,
Greenwich, Ct.: N.Y. Graphic Society, Ltd., 1970, p. 114.
Original: E.L.T. Mesens, Brussels.



we stand witness
to the grave misgivings of a culture preoccupied
with self-disembowelment; too engrossed in maso-
chistic agony to note the certain significance
of rampant malcontent. this is our advantage.

we stand witness
as the tenuous underpinnings start to curve finally
beneath ancient strain, warped and false with age.
this is our nightmare.

we stand witness
it sets our remaining
teeth on edge.

not only is there no going back, after a time,
there is no looking back except in flat pastel hues
as the brilliant charm of the moment,
elusive experience of full being, dims all else
into shadow.

we can find our most excellent amazons
among the walking wounded, ready to be nurtured and emerge
solid and streetwise,
able to dislodge the cornerstones of patriarchy,
they rise full woman amazon, wearing gabardines and scars,
camouflaged as mothers, waitresses,
wives.

ADDRESS

over on the outskirts, doing doubletime. darting
through the hinterland, one zone at a time. time
doing doubletakes. taking our taking our goodsweet
time. doubling our time taking, doubledoing all
time taken, doubletiming all time given and so on.

poems by enya gracechild

BOOKS

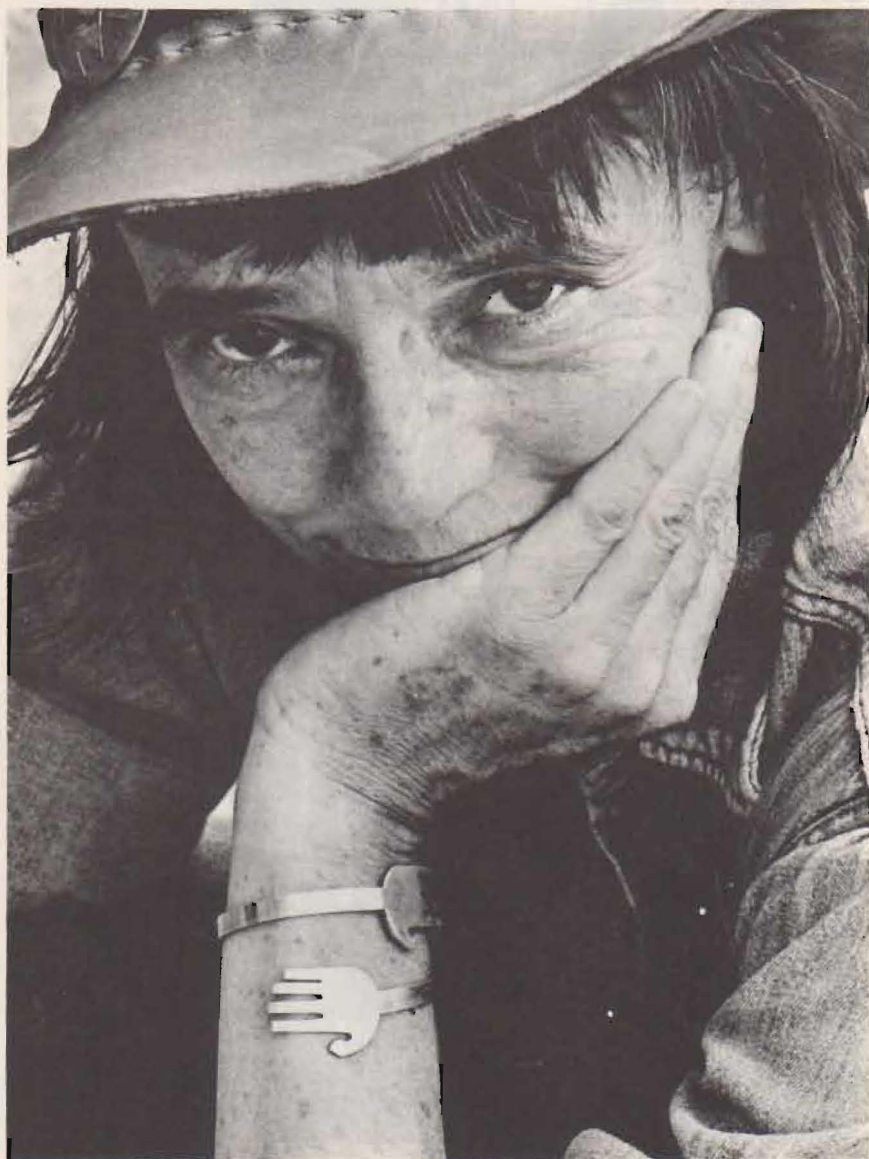


photo by Diana Davies

EXCERPT

The NoteBooks that EMMA gave ME

a lesbian autobiography

by KADY VAN DEURS

January 15, 1976

I dreamed that my mother died, and having died she took my hand and said, "I want to give you something." She led me into the house—a shack—and gave me her body. It was on the kitchen table, without head, arms or legs—looking rather like a trussed, roasted turkey. My mother and I stood looking at it. I reached out my hand and touched it. It felt smooth and soft. "It feels good," I said. Then a hearse drove up. My mother threw a shawl over the body. "Take it quickly before they get it," she said. I picked up my mother's body and carried it in my arms—out of the shack, through bushes, down a slope.

January 9, 1977

Dear Rose,

I am writing, writing, writing.

I have come upon this thing I wrote in 1959, and it reminds me of you. It's from a letter I wrote to a friend that I loved: With words and words and words, I fling myself as close to you as I can. But exposure is not closeness, and I am a small animal nailed over a barn door. I did it all by myself.

Please let me hear from you. I am afraid to call you. But I must reach you, if I can, if you will let me.

The book is better now—plumper.

It is, on one level, an attack upon *The Necessity of Writing Fiction*.

And now, this moment, I am directing all of my energy toward you—wondering how you are and whether there is anything I can do to cheer you. And begging you to reach out with words and speak to me—to be close to me.

Last month, I dialed your number and a machine answered and told me that this was no longer a working number or had been temporarily disconnected. Gave me a bad fright. Called Miriam. She said that you had moved. Said your husband had had a heart attack. That you are confined to a wheel chair. That you live on separate floors with the children in between. It is impossible, absurd, arrogant of me to demand attention from you at this time, but I do. It was you who taught me that the soul selects its own society, and from an ample nation selects one.

Tell me whatever it is, but tell me. I am crashing upon your silence. Let me visit you, please. Let me see you and talk to you and hear you and hold your hand and be seen by you. Or, at least, send me a note or telephone. Please, if you can. You see, if you don't answer, I wonder why. Are you too ill? Or is the answer so awful that you don't want to say it? Something out of a Willie Tyson song.

I am magnificent now: all gouged with age and suffering and endurance and strength and—most exciting and improbable—radiating hope and expectation, and insight and happiness. Any intelligent person (and you were always brilliant) would love me.

I am, myself,

Kay

P.S. You get the manuscript I sent? Do you ever go, or would you go with us some time, to hear the new women's music? We have a car. That chair of yours folds up? Emma will be singing some new songs with friends at the women's coffee house soon. Would you like to come with us? Emma is marvelously strong if you need a hand.

January 12, 1977

Dear Mama,

How are you getting along?

My book pleases me. It seems to write itself. Do you remember that in Spanish you do not drop things—they drop themselves upon you. The book seems to have a life of its own and it drags me along saying, "Write me."

We have a visitor from Los Angeles who is sleeping on the floor in front of the fireplace. Very cold in the bed. Must be awful on the floor. Today we cut a piece off a door so we could close it, and pasted tape and plastic over a drafty window. It is 14 degrees outside. Snow has frozen so it's not wet, but very slippery. I don't like to go out and so I stay in except for brief turns with the dogs. Even they seem glad to come back in the house after a few minutes in the wind.

Dogs seem to know what I'm writing and they have come up to me and are nuzzling me, nudging me, and I say, not yet, not yet.

Emma is reading in bed. The guest is talking on the telephone. There is a nice fire in the fireplace. All is well. We are fine.

My love to you,

Kay

January 13, 1977

Dear Father,

Your letter asking, "What's patriarchy? Would matriarchy be any better?" has just arrived. Read again the second chapter of Kate Millet's book *Sexual Politics*, now 6 years old. Read *Woman Hating*, by Andrea Dworkin. Then, check back with me.

You say you can't understand why I hate patriarchy and you talk about churches and governments. Patriarchy means that women and children are the property of men. It means that women are raised to be unpaid house servants. Pater familias means owner of slaves.

Your question "Would matriarchy be any better?" is, on one level, this question: would it be better for women if they were not slaves? And my answer is "yes." On another level your question is: should men be slaves instead of women? I am not into slavery. I do not believe, as you seem to, that somebody has to be on top—telling everybody else what to do and what to think. People do not have to be arranged like a pile of apples with most of them on the bottom.

I cannot give you a lot of energy right now because I am trying to finish my book before the money runs out. But if you would read the above two things, we could continue this conversation without my having to do so much of the work for you. Yours are important questions and important answers have been written and are available for you to read.

Kay

February 1, 1977—rent's due.

It was so much easier to be "for the children" than it is now to be "for the women." Everybody was "for the children." And yet, they are treated like property, too, and neglected, and "battered." The really outrageous "battering" that wives and children receive is the non-physical, psychological, social, all the time and all of our lives and everywhere battering that each woman and child receives. We are not things. We are not pieces of property. We must free ourselves because those property holders sure aren't going to do it for us.

The century moves on and there have been small changes in the half century I have seen. Too small. Too slow. Too few. It is still so much easier to be rich than poor, so much easier to be white than black, so much easier to be a man than a woman, so much easier to be a woman than a lesbian. There is still a Ku Klux Klan in upper New York State and a woman was the head of it. I read it in the newspaper. I read everything about women in the newspaper. There isn't much....

When I tell Emma that the whole legal system has got to go—that we've got to write a new constitution because the old one was written by a bunch of rich white men who considered us as property, Emma says, "That's fantasy!"

"But look at the laws! There is no justice for women under the existing laws."

"That's what Emma Goldman said."

"But if women had listened to her—instead of putting all of our energy into getting the vote—it might have saved some time."

"Fantasy!" Emma says. "You can write a constitution and live by it and that's all it will mean."

Why can't we be happy—as happy as I am now—all of our lives? When I recognize—identify—this feeling of euphoria, I begin to be afraid because I know that it doesn't last. Do you know what euphoria means? I just looked it up. Healthy. And "an often unaccountable [I would say unex-

pected] feeling of well-being or elation." It happens to me when I am writing.

Dancing is a sexual, sensual thing. I never felt like doing it with men. I never knew how to do it until I met Emma. Six years have passed. Two years ago, I could dance all night. Now, I get tired before the end of the first record. I can no longer move. I just sit down in the middle of the dance floor and go on listening and watching. And this afternoon, as we were making love, I began to sob. I sobbed. Sobbed. Sobbed. Because, it occurred to me, someday I will no longer be able to make love.

"It will never happen," Emma said.

"Oh, yes. It will happen," I said.

And then she fell asleep and I went into the kitchen and made myself some toast with butter and honey on it. "What's the use of commanding the universe," I said to the yellow dog, "if you can't make yourself some toast with honey on it." And I looked at the honey bottle—clear plastic and shaped like a bear. "Bears like honey, too." And the bears are gone and there's nobody here but me and Sally and toast and honey and the see-through plastic bottle. And Billie Jean Cat Woman. She likes honey, too. But I wish we could have the bears back.

I like the plastic bottle because it's shaped like a bear, but I'd rather have the bears back.

I have many blue denim shirts and trousers and I have a blue denim jacket and a warm tan jacket with a hood I bought in a grocery store in Michigan, on the way home from The Women's Music Festival. I have a brown suit. I have a pair of boots and a pair of sneakers....

The slave will wear slave uniforms at all times. When she refuses to wear the uniform, she will be denied slave privileges: being kept alive.

Other regulations (Infractions are punishable by slow death.): the slave will marry (become the private property of one man) so he knows that her children belong to him, and she will teach her sons and daughters the rules of the patriarchy and will set them free to fuck or be fucked over.

Failure to comply means failure to comply. The great virtue of a slave is compliance. If a slave fails to comply, she must be punished. If punishment fails to make her compliant, she is a failure as a slave—she is dangerously close to becoming a person. Therefore, she must be destroyed.

Therefore, I choose my clothes carefully. I will not comply is my message. I will not dominate or subjugate is my message. I will not steal my power from others. I will no longer allow others to steal my power. It is mine. I will use it myself.

If each woman is allowed to speak, to think, to decide—as in C.R.—then how can any small group control them? If women refuse to arrange themselves at the bottom of a pyramid and insist upon sitting in circles, what is to become of us? What is to become of us?

The mind—my mind—is not orderly, not chronological. A word, a day, a wisp of life, a person appears again months, years after the event, and then appears again. Now, for instance, I am thinking about the day we

held hands with lesbians and male homosexuals and made a line that stretched all the way across the George Washington bridge, joining New York and New Jersey. And I am thinking about the day we sat down in the street, blocking the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge, the day the City Council failed to pass Intro 475—the gay civil rights bill. Some of us were arrested. I was arrested. But Emma had disappeared, looking for more film, and I didn't want to go to jail without her. So I ran away into the crowd.

Perhaps I should eliminate all of the messy details and print neatly my conclusions. Something like:

On typing: don't.

I'd really like to build a house for myself. And I'd like to work with other women who are building houses for themselves. The house for myself will be in the country. I don't know what it will look like. I always begin inside of myself and work out. When I am finished, I know what it looks like on the outside, but that doesn't interest me. That is, it looks fine because it is the outside of the inside.

I begin inside of me and I say: what do I want? Immediately, I answer: a long desk by a large window looking out at something marvelous: an ocean or an orchard or a deep pond. Running water—hot water for a hot bath and for washing dishes. Perhaps I could manage with a pump in the kitchen sink and some big tin pails of water heating on a good wood stove—an Ashley. In the summer, at my grandmother's house in Poley, Alabama, we used to fill a big tin tub—out in the sunshine by the pump—and the sun warmed the water and we bathed out there when there was no fire to heat the water. I don't know how to build a solar heated house, do you? It would probably be too expensive for me. It would be a warm house—therefore rather small, low, tight. Storm windows and good screens. A lovely place to sleep, up where it is warm, with a lovely window. Workbenches and cupboards and walls and lockers full of tools. Someplace nice to eat—a round table with comfortable chairs in a warm place with a view. Shelves and closets for clothes and sheets and books and pots and toys. A windmill for electricity. Bird feeders outside the bedroom window and outside the window by my desk.

I would rather live alone unless I can live as though I were living alone. That means private, independent, separate lives together. (If you run up the phone bill or the oil bill or get the oven dirty, that's your problem, not mine.) Separate gardens near water. Separate tools. If yours rust, clean them. If you lose them, buy more or do without. (Linda used to mess up our kitchen and lose our screw drivers.) (I have borrowed Emma's gloves after losing my own and have allowed my dog to chew off a finger and have not replaced or returned them.)

Our windows look out on a dirty, ugly, busy street in Brooklyn. Otherwise, we have almost everything I have described: a long desk by a big window, hot water for hot baths and dishes, heat, round table with comfortable chairs with a view of four large closets—a warm place to sleep—and most important, we have found ways to live free, separate lives to-

gether. We both cook. We both clean. We don't do much of either—just what we feel like doing. My space can be messy or clean depending on the way I feel—how much energy and time I want to spend on being clean. We go off to the laundromat together because we like to be together, but we each fold our own clothes. When you are very poor as we are, it is easier to survive in the city. There is a free clinic. Heat is included in the rent. Tenants have the right to heat and hot water in New York City, but in the country we have no such rights. There are cheap, good schools, good libraries, public transportation. In the country, a car is necessary and it costs a lot. My magnificent view is busy: there are many people in the city. It is easier to find friends who are feminists and lesbians. Of course, for us, it is difficult now: our best friends live in the country...Each of us is important. We will go around in a circle—a circle that can't be broken—and each of us has the right to speak, to think, to decide. Let's begin by telling ourselves the stories of our lives. I have told you mine. Please, tell me yours.

One by one, most of us will not be able to survive. We will have to stop being the people we are—will have to close our notebooks and get our hands on some money. But together, we can help one another to find the selves we left behind and to become the people we never had a chance to be.

Yes, there is a limit to the amount of energy that any one of us has. But if most of us devoted all of our energies to doing things that seem to us worth doing, what would happen? The world would be different—better, I think.

Good grief! The yellow notebook. I had forgotten about the yellow notebook. It says: "To Kay, My best Friend & love, from Emma, Dec. 1976."

Perhaps women's voices, like the feelings of individual women who have been caged too long, will burst out now—will explode. And together we may be able to figure out what all of this means—how we can arrange ourselves so that each child, woman, man has enough food and warmth and space and time and shelter and freedom and ocean and joy and books and friends and lovers and, oh, how I would love to travel! And medical care.

Today and yesterday, I managed to cover a nifty three years in 26 pages.

I no longer write in this notebook. I snatch any blank page and then these no longer blank pages drift back and forth into drawers, across the desk, from pile to pile of pages and books. The natural disorder of my mind (and it is marvelously disorderly) is made more complicated now by these drifting pages.

Have been trying to get everything where it belongs—the past in the past and other things after that, in order by time. That is dishonest. It does not happen that way inside my head. And that is what writing and reading are about—getting inside other people's heads.

The air and sky and all the space between me and those buildings across the street—all the space over the streets and sidewalks—is filled with snowflakes. How I wish I could catch and look at each one. The deer must be hungry. It is a very cold winter.

Last night, and all day yesterday, Emma wrote a song about witches. She said she did not write it—that it wrote itself. Then we went outside and saw that the moon was almost full. Then we learned that it was Candlemas—the day new witches are initiated.

Emma says, "Write it down"
And I do.

This is an excerpt from *The Notebooks that Emma Gave Me: The Autobiography of a Lesbian*. Order from Kady Van Deurs, Box 199, Youngsville, N.Y. 12791. \$5/copy (postage included).



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REVIEW

TO BE OF USE: POLITICS AND VISION IN ADRIENNE RICH'S POETRY

a review by Judith McDaniel

The Dream of a Common Language, by Adrienne Rich
W.W. Norton & Company, 500 Fifth Ave., N.Y. 10036, 1978, 77 pp.

It begins with power. A section. The title poem. For several years we have known of Adrienne Rich's preoccupation with power, its use, its potential, its abuse under the patriarchy. In **Of Woman Born** she wrote of women's quest "for models or blueprints of female power which shall be neither replications of male power nor carbon-copies of the male stereotype of the powerful, controlling destructive woman." She asks vindication for the belief "that patriarchy is in some ways a degeneration, that women exerting power would use it differently from men: nonpossessively, non-violently, nondestructively."

"I believe I am choosing something new"
(Splittings)

Power is in our knowledge of our own past; power is in the tools with which we explore "in the earth-deposits of our history." In the first poem in this new collection, "Power," the complexities of power are inherent in the story of Marie Curie who discovered the vital powers of uranium... and who died from radiation poisoning, "denying/ her wounds came from the same source as her power." Power is not simple. Marie Curie did not know—literally—how to handle power. The same action creates both power and vulnerability. I know that from my own experience. Breaking a silence of years and beginning to write gives me power. Putting words on this page makes me vulnerable.

"Only she who says
she did not choose, is the loser in the end"
(Love Poem XV)

The choice of accepting power ... to choose to use power ... brings danger. Each of these poems shares that awareness. In "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" the women's climbing team dies in an attempt on a mountain, dies, in the words of the team leader, while seeing in the struggle "my own forces so taken up and shared/ and given back" by each of the women on the team. Nothing is lost. They lose their lives. But each of us

must die and these women know now "we have always been in danger/
down in our separateness ... but till now/ we had not touched our strength."
There is a striking difference between surviving to live and only living to
survive.

"life and death take one another's hands"
(Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff)

These women will choose to survive only to live a life of their own choos-
ing: "We will not live/ to settle for less." But they will not die, living in
Adrienne Rich's poem as the poet assumes the voice of Shatayev, taking
up her vision and sharing it, giving back to the women who died a new
kind of life. The climb and the poem are a communal endeavor.

"a whole new poetry beginning here"
(Transcendental Etude)

Language, poetry, contains a power of its own. And the poet has a re-
sponsibility to that power, to the power of consciousness, self-awareness
and growth. "Origins and History of Consciousness" is a poem about
Adrienne Rich's life-long commitment to poetry. We enter the space in
which she creates, share her process of analyzing and testing each idea that
enters a poem. Writing poetry is a life-serious undertaking for this woman;
we, her readers, have always sensed that, known that

No one lives in this room
without confronting the whiteness of the wall
behind the poems, planks of books,
photographs of dead heroines.
Without contemplating last and late
the true nature of poetry. The drive
to connect. The dream of a common language.

The dream of commonality is the easiest part of this process: lovers turn-
ing in their sleep, meeting under water/sleep, in that first knowing that
imitates simplicity.

What is not simple: to wake from drowning
from where the ocean beat inside us like an afterbirth
into this common, acute particularity
these two selves who walked half a lifetime untouched ...

The problem is one of knowing beyond the instinctual; knowing, conscious-
ly, of the decision to trust another woman—whether lover or reader—in
that intimate space of life and creativity. The image Adrienne Rich uses
to show us this "trust" is one of devastating difficulty:

... Trusting, untrusting,
we lowered ourselves into this, let ourselves
downward hand over hand as on a rope that quivered
over the unsearched.

To trust one woman, to live in a "secret circle of fire" with a lover, is
still not enough. It is tempting "to call this, life,"

But I can't call it life until we start to move
beyond this secret circle of fire
where our bodies are giant shadows flung on a wall
where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps
like a dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner.

A larger world is really out there and the necessities of that world call the poet (and reader) out of the drama of the intensely personal to an integration: it is the urgency of life and death established in "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," each woman's individual power taken up and shared in the community endeavor:

What is not simple....
to wake to...
a scream
of someone beaten up far down in the street
causing each of us to listen to her own inward scream

And the process of this integration—while not specific—will involve each woman coming to terms with "her own inward scream," meeting in her own "inner darkness" Rich's image of incipient power, our sleeping "dumb beast, head on her paws, in the corner."

This silent beast stalks through *The Dream of a Common Language*. In "Splittings" it is the pain of self-separation inflicted by the expectations of a patriarchal culture. "What kind of beast would turn its life into words?" asks "Love Poem VII," drawing on the expectation and fear of the power of self-revelation. The caged beast (or the empty cage) surface in image after image, as in "Natural History" or in "Mother-Right" when the mother and child run from the father/oppressor, "the woman eyes sharpened in the light/ heart stumbling making for the open."

The beast becomes manifest in the last poem in this section on Power. "The Lioness" is an essential truth. Like women, she knows more than she has experienced. The poet addresses her:

"In country like this," I say, "the problem is always
one of straying too far, not of staying
within bounds. There are caves
high rocks, you don't explore. Yet you know
they exist." Her proud, vulnerable head
sniffs toward them. It is her country, she
knows they exist.

The poet stands watching the lioness and although she sees much from that perspective, sees that the power of the beast is "half-abnegated" and that "three square yards/ encompass where she goes," there is no overt recognition that the lioness is caged. Standing on the outside, looking perhaps between the bars, the poet naturally sees only the lioness. It is a partial vision: not true. The poet must learn more than sympathy; she must be able to enter the lioness's frame of reference, and this she does:

I look into her eyes
as one who loves can look,
entering the space behind her eyeballs,
leaving myself outside.
So, at last, through her pupils,
I see what she is seeing...

From inside, the cage of course is visible. The lioness knows what lies in the distance—freedom, “the volcano veiled in rainbow”—and she sees what is immediately before her, that which was not strikingly visible from the outside:

a pen that measures three yards square.
Lashed bars.
The cage.
The penance.

The poet now sees and understands those elements that create the oppression of one who is like and unlike her.

Under patriarchy, power almost always has a flip side: oppression. Power is something we hold over someone else. The exercise of power, as it is understood in patriarchy, is at someone or some group's expense. For there to be oppression, there must be an oppressor, one who holds and wields power. Adrienne Rich's vision of that oppression is complex. As women, we have been able to examine our roles in a sexist society and to identify our own oppression. It's easy to “see” what is being done to us. It is much harder to see through the eyes of others what is being done to them, especially when that involves an examination of our own assumption of certain privilege, privileges of class, race, or institutionalized heterosexuality, for example. If Rich's assumption is correct, “that women exerting power would use it differently from men,” we will only make it so by understanding power so thoroughly that we will always know when it is an issue. We do not live in the lioness's “three yards square” cage. But the survival of every woman requires that each of us develop the vision to see that space as the lioness herself sees it.

“Hunger,” dedicated to Audre Lorde, is the poem in this volume that deals most specifically with these issues. It is, as Emily Dickinson would have said, a poem that could take the top of your head off. “Until we find each other, we are alone,” is the concluding line; and finding each other is a most precarious task, illustrated by the recurring image of a Chinese painter's line drawing:

a scene of desolation comforted
by two human figures recklessly exposed
leaning together in a sticklike boat
in the foreground.

For one moment, I must confess, I had an hilarious and wonderful vision of Audre and Adrienne standing nervously in a sampan, clutching each other's shoulders, Audre in her turban and flowing cape, Adrienne smaller, but quite determined and not smiling. But the humor is momentary because the image is poignant. As the boat lurches treacherously, with whom can we balance? It is not a question about lovers, but about politics.

"we have to take ourselves more seriously
or die"

(Transcendental Etude)

Adrienne Rich sees the desolation, the wasteland that encompasses a large part of the female experience. Again, she sees from her own limitations, seeing "in my Western skin,/ my Western vision," a landscape that is at first alien:

huts strung across a drought-stretched land
not mine, dried breasts, mine and not mine, a mother
watching my children shrink with hunger.

The transition here is subtle but encompassing. The land is **not hers**, the breasts are "**mine and not mine**," but they are "**my children**." The involvement is complete and necessary. Because Rich says, if they can convince us that "our pain belongs in some order," that, for example, some of us will suffer a little, and these of us will suffer more because they are more powerless, or black or lesbian, and that's just the way it is, then "They can rule the world." We are separated from one another and powerless as long as suffering can be "quantified," as long as the question can be asked:

Is death by famine worse than death by suicide.
than a life of famine and suicide, if a black lesbian dies,
if a white prostitute dies, if a woman genius
starves herself to feed others,
self-hatred battenning on her body?

Adrienne Rich also knows that no analysis of the problem of hunger by a white middle class American can be separated from one's own sense of class guilt, of passivity—even when it stems from the knowledge that circumstances are so complex that one person of good will can do little or nothing to effect change. "I stand convicted by all my convictions," Rich confesses, "you, too." We will not, she says, accept the responsibility of our vision:

We shrink from touching
our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves
and each other, we're scared shitless
of what it could be to take and use our love,
hose it on a city, on a world,
to wield and guide its spray, destroying
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses—
like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be.

But our failure, the failure of women and mothers and lesbians and all those whose very existence depends on balancing a precarious and rudderless boat, is a failure of nerve; "even our intimacies are rigged with terror," and we confess this, as our "guilt at least is open." Our powers are expended on the struggle to survive and "to hand a kind of life on to our children/ to change reality for our lovers."

Other failures are more damning.

The decision to feed the world
is the real decision. No revolution
has chosen it. For that choice requires
that women shall be free.

The words are deceptively simple; there are no images for the reader to puzzle over. The tone is matter-of-fact, straightforward. There are three simple statements and the connections which lead to their conclusion are so far reaching that they still stun me after weeks of study. They have everything to say about a feminist apprehension of power, the failures and necessities of power relationships.

I suspect that it will be these lines of Adrienne Rich's, and perhaps a few others with similar impact and intent, that will become the focus of reviews of this book in the establishment press. They will perhaps insist, yet again, that she is writing propaganda, not poetry. They may find these lines simplistic, confusing profundity with obscurity. Whatever the judgment of the literary establishment (and, as Rich herself warned in "The Lioness," "the problem is always/ one of straying too far"), feminists know what her work and the example of her life have meant to us. I was sitting with a group of lesbians when one of them asked visiting lecturer Helen Vendler what was her literary judgment of **Twenty One Love Poems**? Her opinion was that they weren't particularly outstanding and one couldn't write love poetry any more anyway since the tradition of love poems pretty much encompassed what was to be said on the subject. I am sure that will be the "establishment" opinion of that group of poems, which are included in this volume, but not a lesbian in the group could believe what she had just heard. "But they're lesbian love poems," one of us spluttered, remembering the awe and exhilaration and love with which we had approached this collection of poems which gave us a portion of our own experience for the first time, it seemed, in a very long time, shared by one of our own poets.

"No one has imagined us,"
(Love Poem I)

The problem of "straying too far," however, can be a poetic difficulty if it is not a political one. And in one or two of the poems in this volume, I do lose touch with the poet and her meaning. This happened for me particularly in "Cartographies of Silence," a poem about lying, particularly those lies that come out of acquiescent silence, or language that is twisted and misused. It is never clear to me who the poet is addressing: the problem is one of audience, the "you" shifting from intimate to abstract without apparent focus. In section 4, for example, the poem seems to be addressing a general audience of readers:

How calm, how inoffensive these words
begin to seem to me
though begun in grief and anger
Can I break through this film of the abstract

without wounding myself or you.

Later, the address seems more personalized, but no more clear or specific:

This was the silence I wanted to break in you
I had questions but you would not answer
I had answers but you could not use them
This is useless to you and perhaps to others.

Perhaps some of my discomfort with this poem comes because I am too familiar with Rich's prose/poem "Notes on Lying," which resonated so exquisitely for me and did not carry with it those feelings of weariness and futility that weight "Cartographies of Silence." I am troubled by the last line I quoted above and by "It was an old theme even for me:/ Language cannot do everything." I am troubled also that I am troubled by these lines, for I would not wish that Adrienne Rich not explore every range of thought and feeling. Within the context of this poem, however, that exploration seems fragmented and the resolution, while strikingly beautiful and positive, seems less connected to the experience of the poem itself.

I am a lesbian feminist academic. Adrienne Rich's words have moved me for years, moved me emotionally and moved me along politically. So many of her realizations have been mine that I often felt as though we were discovering them together, as we each did the different work it was essential for us to do. And in many ways, we have been. Adrienne Rich thinks so too. She says so in her poems. How often her work uses images of women creating beautiful quilts out of small pieces of fabric and experience that many women have made, saved and cherished, "piecing our lore in quilted galaxies," as she says in "Sibling Mysteries." In "Natural Resources" she gathers up "these things by women saved,"

these ribboned letters, snapshots
faithfully glued for years
onto the scrapbook page
these scraps, turned into patchwork,

and the effort is the poet's attempt to give women back the past that has been lost to us, a past of "humble things" without which we have "no memory/ no faithfulness, no purpose for the future/ no honor to the past." It is against this knowledge of other women that we must now analyze and test our perceptions and visions for the future. It is this process that gives political action both possibility and direction.

The images of women's work come together and spill over the boundaries of what we have ever expected—joyfully spill over—in the final poem in this volume, "Transcendental Etude." It is a poem for lesbians, whose "natural history" is "unnatural,/ the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves,/ for that acute joy" of discovering ourselves in another. It is a new world when women can realize "this/ is how I can love myself—as only a woman can love me." And in this new world women can work and grow,

two women, eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit, each other's
limitless desire,

a whole new poetry beginning here.

Vision begins to happen in such a life
as if a woman quietly walked away
from the argument and jargon in a room
and sitting down in the kitchen, began turning in her lap
bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards
in the lamplight...

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity,
the striving for greatness, brilliance—
only with the musing of a mind
one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing
dark against bright, silk against roughness,
pulling the tenets of a life together
with no mere will to mastery,
only care for the many-lived, unending
forms in which she finds herself,
becoming now the sherd of broken glass
slicing light in a corner, dangerous
to flesh, now the plentiful, soft leaf
that wrapped round the throbbing finger, soothes the wound;
and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further
forming underneath everything that grows.

The Dream of a Common Language is an invitation to vision; I believe
it is an invitation we must not ignore.

Judith McDaniel's study of Adrienne Rich's complete works is available
as a monograph, "Reconstituting the World: the Poetry and Vision of
Adrienne Rich," from Spinsters, Ink, R.D. 1, Argyle, N.Y. 12809, for
\$1.50 (includes postage).

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

- J. Bankier, C. Cosman, D. Earnshaw, J. Keefe, D. Lashgari, and K. Weaver, eds., foreword by Adrienne Rich, **The Other Voice: Twentieth Century Women's Poetry in Translation** (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, N.Y.), 218 pp., \$10.00.
- Robin Becker, Helena Minton, Marilyn Zuckerman, **Personal Effects**, poetry (Alice James Books, 138 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Ma. 02138), 86 pp., \$3.50.
- Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, **Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men & Women**, An Official Publication of the Institute for Sex Research founded by Alfred C. Kinsey (Simon and Schuster, New York, N.Y.), 505 pp., \$12.95.
- Janet Bode, **View from another Closet: Exploring Bisexuality in Women** (Hawthorn Books, Inc., New York, N.Y.), 252 pp., \$8.95.
- The Common Women Collective, **Women in U.S. History: An Annotated Bibliography** (The Common Women Collective, 5 Upland Rd., Cambridge, Ma. 02140), 114 pp., \$2.00 plus postage.
- Judith Crewe, **The Ancient, and Other Poems** (Catalyst Press, 315 Blantyre, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada MIN 2S6), 62 pp., \$3.50.
- George-Therese Dickenson, **Striations** (The Good Gay Poets, Box 277, Astor Station, Boston, Ma. 02123), 74 pp., \$3.00.
- Carol Anne Douglas, **Loving Women is Dangerous** (Jo March Press, 3616 Connecticut Ave. N.W. no. 300, Washington, D.C. 20008), \$2.00.
- Barbara Emrys, **Wild Women Don't Get the Blues: Stories** (Metis Press, 815 Wrightwood, Chicago, Il. 60614), 51 pp., \$3.00.
- Bernice Goodman, **The Lesbian: A Celebration of Difference** (Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 69 pp., \$3.75.
- Judy Grahn, **She Who: A Graphic Book of Poems with 54 Images of Women** (Diana Press, 4400 Market St., Oakland, Ca. 94608), 89 pp., \$6.00.
- Bertha Harris, **Confessions of Cherubino** (Daughters Publishing Co., Inc., MS 590, Box 42999, Houston, Tx. 77042), 211 pp., \$5.00.
- Andrew Hodges and David Hutter, **With Downcast Gays: Aspects of Homosexual Self-Oppression** (Pink Triangle Press, Box 639, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5W 1G2), 42 pp., \$1.35 plus 50 cents postage.
- Laurel Holliday, ed., **Heart Songs: The Intimate Diaries of Young Girls** (Bluestocking Books, Box 475, Guerneville, Ca. 95446), 192 pp., \$3.95 (includes postage).
- Laurel Holliday, **The Violent Sex: Male Psychobiology and the Evolution of Consciousness** (Bluestocking Books, Box 475, Guerneville, Ca. 95446), 254 pp., \$4.95 (includes postage).
- Ruth Ikeler/Mountaingrove, **For Those Who Cannot Sleep**, poetry, with drawings by Chrystos and essays by Ann Kreilkamp (New Woman Press, Box 56, Wolf Creek, Or. 97497), 82 pp., \$3.50.
- Jacqueline Lapidus, **Starting Over**, poems (Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), \$3.00.
- Linda J. Lovell, **Buried Stone**, poetry (available from Women in Distribution, Box 8858, Washington, D.C. 20003).

- Lynne Markstein, **screaming: poems** (Lynne Markstein, Rt. 5, Box 398-A, Zebulon, N.C. 27597), 75 pp., \$2.95.
- Sara Miles, Patricia Jones, Sandra Maria Esteves, Fay Chiang, eds., **Ordinary Women/Mujeres Comunes: An Anthology of Poetry by New York City Women**, introduction by Adrienne Rich (*Ordinary Women*, Box 664, Old Chelsea Station, New York, N.Y. 10011), 136 pp., \$3.95.
- Oriethyia, **Love Song to the Warriors** (Oriethyia, Box 255, East Durham, N.Y. 12423), 42 pp., \$2.50.
- Victoria Ramstetter, **Root Chakra**, poems (Moonshadow Press, Box 20152, Cincinnati, Oh. 45220), 50 pp., \$2.50.
- Kimi Reith, **Poems for my Mother and the Other Women I Have Loved** (Second Coming Press, Box 31249, San Francisco, Ca. 94131), 21 pp., \$2.00.
- Sarah Ruddick and Pamela Daniels, eds., foreword by Adrienne Rich, **Working It Out: 23 Women Writers, Artists, Scientists, and Scholars Talk About Their Lives and Work** (Pantheon Books, New York, N.Y.), 349 pp., \$4.95.
- Joanna Russ, **Kittatinny: A Tale of Magic**, illustrated by Loretta Li (Daughters Publishing Co., Inc., MS 590, Box 42999, Houston, Tx. 77042), 92 pp., \$5.00.
- Barbara Ruth, **From the Belly of the Beast**, \$2.50.
- Barbara Sheen, **Shedevils: Stories**, photographs by Arny Christine Straayer (Metis Press, 815 Wrightwood, Chicago, Il. 60614), 74 pp., \$3.50.
- Betsy Sholl, **Appalachian Winter**, poetry (Alice James Books, 138 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Ma. 02138), 72 pp., \$3.50.
- Diane M. Smith and Deborah L. Steinberg, **Through the Windows of Silence** (Johanna Press, Wisconsin), 62 pp.
- Lillian Smith, **The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith**, ed. by Michelle Cliff, preface by Paula Snelling (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York, N.Y.), 218 pp., \$10.95.
- Verena Stefan, **Shedding**, trans. from the German by Johanna Moore and Beth Weckmueller (Daughters Publishing Co., Inc., MS 590, Box 42999, Houston, Tx. 77042), 118 pp., \$5.00.
- Nancy Stockwell, **Out Somewhere and Back Again: The Kansas Stories** (available from Women in Distribution, Box 8858, Washington, D.C. 20003), 100 pp., \$3.00.
- Beverly Tanenhaus, **To Know Each Other and Be Known: Women's Writing Workshops** (Out & Out Books, 476 Second St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11215), 70 pp., \$3.50.
- Juanita H. Williams, **Psychology of Women: Behavior in a Biosocial Context** (W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., New York, N.Y.), 444 pp., \$8.95.
- The Women and Literature Collective, **Women and Literature: An Annotated Bibliography of Women Writers**, 3rd ed. (The Women and Literature Collective, Box 441, Cambridge, Ma. 02138), 212 pp., \$3.50.
- Stereo cassette tapes from Watershed Tapes, Box 4174, Washington, D.C. 20015:
- Carolyn Kizer, **An Ear to the Earth: Selected Poems 1977**, 59 min., \$7.95.
 - Deena Metzger, **The Book of Hags**, novel, 127 min., \$7.95.
 - Marge Piercy, **At the Core: Selected Poems 1977**, 59 min., \$7.95.
 - Judith Johnson Sherwin, **The Town Scold**, poems, 59 min., \$5.50.

Contributors' Notes

Teresa Anderson is a feminist poet who has worked for the last year and a half as Poet-in-the-Schools for the state of Oklahoma. In July of 1977 she attended the Women's Writing Workshop in Oneonta, N.Y.

Alice Bloch teaches Lesbian Literature at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles.

Jane Caputi lives in Boston, loves going to the movies, and at times has a pretty big mouth.

Tee Corinne lives in San Francisco and is currently researching images of Lesbian sexuality in the fine arts.

Honey Lee Cottrell is a photographer who has lived 13 of her 32 years in San Francisco, is studying film and enjoys erotic images of women.

Judith Crewe is a reporter on *The Advocate*, a Canadian newspaper, and writes a literary criticism column called "Tapestries" for *The Body Politic*. She wrote her first book of poetry, *The Ancient, and Other Poems*, as a diversion from an academic thesis.

Gloria Dickler is a poet-playwright living all over the country. This is her first publication.

Rebecca Gordon works at A Woman's Place Bookstore in Portland, Oregon.

Enya Gracechild is struggling and rejoicing somewhere near Boston.

Linnea Johnson is a refugee from the CWLU abortion ring. Photographs courtesy Chicago Red Squad.

Melanie Kaye is currently underemployed at Portland State Women's Studies (in Oregon) and is looking for new forms with which to create, make trouble, and earn a living.

Judith McDaniel has been enjoying the first September since she was 6 years old that she didn't have to go back to school. She's writing a book on contemporary Lesbian poets and establishing a feminist press with Maureen Brady, called *Spinsters, Ink*.

Minnie Bruce Pratt lives in North Carolina and is an editor of *The Feminary*, a Lesbian feminist journal for the South.

Monica Raymond lives in Cambridge, Ma. and has written several books of poetry and an astonishing novel, all as yet unpublished.

Judith Schwarz is finishing research on her book about Lesbians in U.S. history.

Sylvia Spring is a writer-turned-film-maker-turned-writer who presently lives on an island in Canada. She has stopped fighting her Cancer nature.

Arlene Stone. "I started writing at 40. I have been writing 7 years. My books include *The Image Maker* (Emmanuel Press, 1976), *The Shule of Jehovah* (Plowshare Press, 1976), and *Through a Coal Cellar, Darkly* (Juniper Press, 1977). In preparation now are *The Women's House* (Allegheny Mtn.) and *Mad Arlene Poems*.

Arny Christine Straayer, writer and photographer, also works with Metis Press.

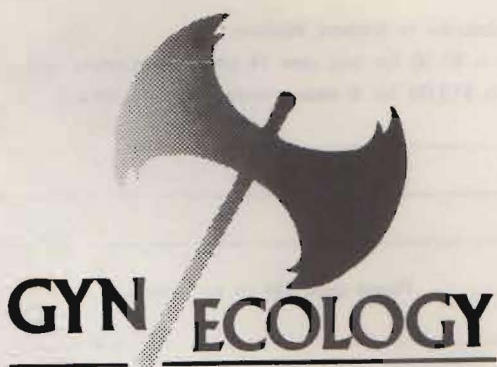
Pat Suncircle is a writer in San Francisco.

Kady Van Deurs, an axemaker to the Queen, has been rejected almost everywhere because she and her work are very queer. She is a homeless Lesbian feminist silversmith and writer.

Janine M. Veto. "After years of suffering through the maze of professional TV land ("Network" was not as broad a parody as most people think), I left to devote more time to my first love—writing. The past two years I've supported myself in a humble manner as a free lance writer and editor."

Gail White is obsessed with seeing her name in print. She practices her religion in New Orleans; has a black cat named Pandora, and would have a lot more cats if Pandora would stand for it; and believes that the best novels were written before 1900, and the best buildings built before 1300.

Susan Wood-Thompson works full-time as a poet in South Carolina.



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In the spring of 1977, a Tee Corinne solarized photograph of two women making love appeared on the cover of **Sinister Wisdom** 3, followed by a deluge of requests for a poster. The poster was printed in the summer of 1977: a duplicate of that cover, black on gray, 17" x 22". You can have your own for a contribution of \$3.00 toward the survival of **Sinister Wisdom** plus 50 cents to cover mailing costs. (They make nice gifts for friends, too; bulk rates available.)

Send \$3.50 per poster to: **Sinister Wisdom**, Box 30541, Lincoln, Ne. 68503.
Also available in feminist bookstores.

SINISTER WISDOM ON TAPE

The sixth issue of **Sinister Wisdom** is now available on cassette tape to women who cannot or prefer not to read the print copies. If you are interested in borrowing or purchasing the cassettes for issue 6, please write **Sinister Wisdom**, Box 30541, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503.

SUBMISSIONS

Sinister Wisdom welcomes unsolicited manuscripts and art work. Please type (double-spaced) all written work. Enclose self-addressed stamped envelope and 2-3 line description of yourself. At this time, we can pay only with a subscription or copies of the issue in which your work appears. Please indicate which "payment" you prefer. Allow six weeks for reply.

Important: Please mail poetry directly to Susan Leigh Star, 52 Mars Street, San Francisco, California, 94114. All other manuscripts, correspondence and art work should be sent to **Sinister Wisdom**, Box 30541, Lincoln, Nebraska 68503.

BACK ISSUES, WHILE THEY LAST

Issue 1 (Summer '76): "solid politically, beautiful to look at, breaks the male language barrier..." 72 pp., \$2.00.

Book Issue 2 (Fall '76), **Lesbian Writing and Publishing**, guest editor Beth Hodges: Susan Griffin on breaking the conspiracy of silence; June Arnold and Bertha Harris re-inventing the world in Lesbian fiction; panel on reading, writing & teaching Lesbian literature; essays on a woman-identified aesthetic; reviews; interviews; photographs; listing of Lesbian titles (with ordering information), and 21 Lesbian writers on why, when & how we publish with women. 136 pp. \$2.50.

Issue 3 (Spring '77): Sold out.

Issue 4 (Fall '77): Stories of mothers and daughters and witches and lovers; Joanna Russ' tale for the girlchild in all of us; Lesbian separatism from the inside; photo-essay; interview; reviews, letters and poetry. 96 pp. \$2.25.

Issue 5 (Winter '78): Susan Leigh Star, "Lesbian Feminism as an Altered State of Consciousness"; Judith Schwarz, "Researching Lesbian History"; Michelle Cliff on speechlessness; Lesbian Day speech by Barbara Grier; fiction; poetry; photo-essay; reviews; interview. 104 pp. \$2.25.

Issue 6 (Summer '78): Julia Stanley, Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel, Adrienne Rich on Language & Silence; Marilyn Frye on separatism and power; fiction by Sandy Boucher, Thyme Seagull; poetry by Adrienne Rich, Melanie Kaye, Vicki Gabriner, Martha Courtot, Madeline Bass, M.H. North, Jennifer Turner, Melanie Perish, Susan Robbins; interviews; essays by Sarah Hoagland & Peggy Holland; drawings & photographs. 104 pp. \$2.50.

(Add 50 cents postage for every 1-2 copies ordered.)

COMING IN SINISTER WISDOM 8 (WINTER '79): LOVE LOVE LOVE

Sinister Wisdom 8 will feature a sizable section on love: essays, poetry, fiction. Also "Notes on Deafness"; reviews of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* and Olga Broumas' *Beginning With O*; and much, much more.