

Design for the City of Women

Jacqueline Lapidus

to Catherine Blake

I.

a newborn conch
sparkles on wet sand
no bigger than a grain of rice
already
she knows how to secrete
her own house

II.

Walking along the shore at low tide, I came to a place where the cliffs were white with salt, as if the tears of an entire continent had dried in an instant on the rock's flushed face. Above the high water mark was a row of irregularly shaped holes in which birds nested; above these, the earth was brick-red, and at the summit tufts of wild rosemary, thyme and fern thrust their heads into a hazy sky. As I stood admiring the wheeling flight of the gulls, I heard music coming from the next beach. I climbed over a shelf of mossy rocks, following the sound, and stumbled into the entrance of a grotto worn away in the cliff. The sun had not yet set. A shaft of late afternoon light slipped violet into the grotto and fell upon a circle of women sitting around a slab of rock that jutted out from the cavern wall like a table.

The women were not surprised to see me. They moved over to make room for me at the table. In the center of the table was a tide pool filled with mussels and clams. One of the women dipped her hand into the pool and scooped up several fresh clams with fluted shells which she offered to me. I pulled one from its shell with my teeth and swallowed it live; it slipped easily down my gullet, and in a few seconds I felt a warm, insistent throbbing between my legs as my clitoris emerged from its bed of wet moss. The women smiled at me and began to sing, in a language strangely familiar. I lay down naked on the rock ledge with my buttocks in the tide-pool, my arms and legs outstretched. The women leaned over me. Their cool fingers stroked my hands and feet, then my nipples and my clitoris. One woman slid her tongue deep into my cunt, and I felt a great wave surge through my entire body.

III.

concerned we are concerned
we have always been alone together
we have always confided in one another
we have always found time to whisper
amongst ourselves concerning our concerns
long ago we learned to speak to each other
with borrowed cups of sugar
singing together as we washed our blood
from endless sheets and towels
nourishing each other with perpetual
soup concerned we have

always been concerned
for centuries our cheeks have brushed
each other's cheeks at weddings,
funerals, fairs and church bazaars
we have tasted each other's tears
laying out corpses
we have stroked our sisters' bellies
and held our daughters' hands
and sung to their screams, and drawn
babies gasping from their wombs
concerned we are always concerned,
oh yes we are used to one another
bearing our burden together, struggling
for a common cause: our own survival
and now we are doing it
openly and for ourselves

IV.

The women live in the grotto. They gather seaweed, moss and wild flowers which they eat raw, or pound into paste to form little cakes baked in the sun. Mussels, clams, shellfish and tiny crabs caught in the cracks of the rocks at low tide also nourish the women. Their bodies are strong, tanned and healthy. They have learned to conceive their babies parthenogenetically. Any woman, by concentrating her energy and projecting it into her lover's fertile womb, can get her with child. During pregnancy, the women caress each other's bellies to prepare the child for community. They give birth squatting: friends support the mother as she breathes, blows and grunts in rhythm with the others, who also sing to encourage her and maintain the breathing pattern. When the baby has emerged from the womb, they bathe it in sun-warmed sea water, lay it on the mother's belly, and massage it gently until it begins to smile. When a mother lacks milk for her child, another nursing mother offers the baby her breast. The women delight in the taste of one another's nipples, and send shivers of pleasure through their entire bodies by drinking one another's milk.

The women have lived together for so long that nearly all menstruate at the same time. During the menstrual period they feel particularly strong and exuberant. The power of their blood surges through them. Squatting on the beach, they study the patterns made by their blood on the sand, acquiring an intimate knowledge of the inner self. At night they perform the following ritual: The women reach into each other's cunts, extracting the blood with loving fingers, then paint each other's bodies with it. Images of pleasure flow from each woman onto her partner's face, breasts, belly and buttocks. Then they dance in spiral formation, singing of their lives, their loves. When a young girl menstruates for the first time, her mother or wet-nurse initiates her into the blood-painting ritual. Older women who no longer menstruate, excited by the younger women's caresses, secrete enough cyprine to paint their bodies. Although the symbols are colorless on their wrinkled skin, everyone can see them clearly.

V.

Dear Catherine, the message
you could not then transmit to us
has nonetheless arrived
as surely as if etched with acid
on the moon's dark side
spreading like bacteria
nourishing as bread
decoded in our guts
absorbed into the very tissues of our being
and suddenly appearing
as sweat, saliva, blood, cyprine
women's language of love

*the words of the poems dance across the page,
the birds in the air dance above the clouds,
the fish in the water dance among the waves*

let us leave the drones to build cities
let us play with each other like ribbons of light

VI.

The women are developing a new language, fully aware that although they have become a people capable of reproducing themselves, they can not consider themselves a nation unless they share a mother tongue. They expect this to take several centuries.

"We live," says Catherine, "in the crevices, the hollows, the spaces, the secret places, we live on the edge of the wave. The tide never goes out exactly as she came in—she always leaves us something we can use."

She reminds me that the little mermaid's fatal error was not that she longed for feet, but that she paid for them with her voice.

VII.

Point.
Pirouette.
Spiral.

Each dwelling shall begin with the self
firmly planted on her own spot
concentrating energy.

Clitoris.
Navel.
Plexus.
Psyche.

Stretching, unfolding, expanding,
turning, whirling
outward upon her axis.

Ears.
Nostrils.
Mouth.
Vagina.
Anus.

Each orifice dilates, opening
like windows, the air
dances through the body.

Cell.
Chromosome.
Molecule.
Atom.
Particle.

Elements in orbit, exchanging
surplus for need in perpetual motion,
pleasurebound
syntax, uniqueness
incorporate.

Jacqueline Lapidus is a radical lesbian feminist who lives in Paris. Her latest book of poems is Starting Over, published by Out and Out Press.