

ZAMI  
SISTER OUTSIDER  
UNDERSONG



AUDRE  
LORDE







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**AUDRE LORDE**



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*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

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**ZAMI**



To Helen, who made up the best adventures  
To Blanche, with whom I lived many of them  
To the hands of Afrekete

*In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair.*



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**ZAMI**



*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?*

My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving. But his is a distant lightning. Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home.

*To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?*

Days from pumpkin until the year's midnight, when my sisters and I hovered indoors, playing potty on holes in the rosy linoleum that covered the living-room floor. On Saturdays we fought each other for the stray errand out of doors, fought each other for the emptied Quaker Oats boxes, fought each other for the last turn in the bathroom at nightfall, and for who would be the first one of us to get chickenpox.

The smell of the filled Harlem streets during summer, after a brief shower or the spraying drizzle of the watering trucks released the rank smell of the pavements back to the sun. I ran to the corner to fetch milk and bread from the Short-Neck Store-Man, stopping to search for some blades of grass to bring home for my mother. Stopping to search for hidden pennies winking like kittens under the subway gratings. I was always bending over to tie my shoes, delaying, trying to figure out something. How to get at the money, how to peep out the secret that some women carried like a swollen threat, under the gathers of their flowered blouses.

*To whom do I owe the woman I have become?*

DeLois lived up the block on 142nd Street and never had her hair done, and all the neighborhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by. Her crispy hair twinkled in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on down the block while I watched, not caring whether or not she was a poem. Even though I tied my shoes and tried to peep under her blouse as she passed by, I never spoke to DeLois, because my mother didn't. But I loved her, because she moved like she felt she was somebody special, like she was somebody I'd like to know someday. She moved like how I thought god's mother must have moved, and my mother, once upon a time, and someday maybe me.

Hot noon threw a ring of sunlight like a halo on the top of DeLois's stomach, like a spotlight, making me sorry that I was so flat and could only feel the sun on my head and shoulders. I'd have to lie down on my back before the sun could shine down like that on my belly.

I loved DeLois because she was big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all over. I was scared of DeLois for those very same reasons. One day I watched DeLois step off the curb of 142nd Street against the light, slow and deliberate. A high yaller dude in a white Cadillac passed by and leaned out and yelled at her, "Hurry up, you flat-footed, nappy-headed, funny-looking bitch!" The car almost knocking her down. DeLois kept right on about her leisurely business and never so much as looked around.

To Louise Briscoe who died in my mother's house as a tenant in a furnished room with cooking privileges—no linens supplied. I brought her a glass of warm milk that she wouldn't drink, and she laughed at me when I wanted to change her sheets and call a doctor. "No reason to call him unless he's real cute," said Miz Briscoe. "Ain't nobody sent for me to come, I got here all by myself. And I'm going back the same way. So I only need him if he's cute, real cute." And the room smelled like she was lying.

"Miz Briscoe," I said, "I'm really worried about you."

She looked up at me out of the corner of her eyes, like I was making her a proposition which she had to reject, but which she appreciated all the same. Her huge bloated body was quiet beneath the grey sheet, as she grinned knowingly.

"Why, that's all right, honey. I don't hold it against you. I know you can't help it, it's just in your nature, that's all."

To the white woman I dreamed standing behind me in an airport, silently watching while her child deliberately bumps into me over and over again. When I turn around to tell this woman that if she doesn't restrain her kid I'm going to punch her in the mouth, I see that she's been punched in the mouth already. Both she and her child are battered, with bruised faces and blackened eyes. I turn, and walk away from them in sadness and fury.

To the pale girl who ran up to my car in a Staten Island midnight with only a nightgown and bare feet, screaming and crying, "Lady, please help me oh please take me to the hospital, lady..." Her voice was a mixture of overripe peaches and doorchimes; she was the age of my daughter, running along the woody curves of Van Duzer Street.

I stopped the car quickly, and leaned over to open the door. It was high summer. "Yes, yes, I'll try to help you," I said. "Get in."

And when she saw my face in the streetlamp her own collapsed into terror.

"Oh no!" she wailed. "Not you!" then whirled around and started to run again.

What could she have seen in my Black face that was worth holding onto such horror? Wasting me in the gulf between who I was and her vision of me. Left with no help.

I drove on.

In the rear-view mirror I saw the substance of her nightmare catch up with her at the corner—leather jacket and boots, male and white.

I drove on, knowing she would probably die stupid.

To the first woman I ever courted and left. She taught me that women who want without needing are expensive and sometimes wasteful, but women who need without wanting are dangerous—they suck you in and pretend not to notice.

To the battalion of arms where I often retreated for shelter and sometimes found it. To the others who helped, pushing me into the merciless sun—I, coming out blackened and whole.

*To the journeywoman pieces of myself.  
Becoming.  
Afrekete.*



# **Prologue**

*I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks.*

*I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered—to leave and to be left—to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way.*

*I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the “I” at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the “I” moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed.*

*Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser. The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone. Made in earth.*



# 1

Grenadians and Barbadians walk like African peoples. Trinidadians do not.

When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forbearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did. "Island women make good wives; whatever happens, they've seen worse." There is a softer edge of African sharpness upon these women, and they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability.

My mother and father came to this country in 1924, when she was twenty-seven years old and he was twenty-six. They had been married a year. She lied about her age in immigration because her sisters who were here already had written her that Americans wanted strong young women to work for them, and Linda was afraid she was too old to get work. Wasn't she already an old maid at home when she had finally gotten married?

My father got a job as a laborer in the old Waldorf Astoria, on the site where the Empire State Building now stands, and my mother worked there as a chambermaid. The hotel closed for demolition, and she went to work as a scullery maid in a teashop on Columbus Avenue and 99th Street. She went to work before dawn, and worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, with no time off. The owner told my mother that she ought to be glad to have the job, since ordinarily the establishment didn't hire "spanish" girls. Had the owner known Linda was Black, she would never have been hired at all. In the winter of 1928, my mother developed pleurisy and almost died. While my mother was still sick, my father went to collect her uniforms from the teahouse to wash them. When the owner saw him, he realized my mother was Black and fired her on the spot.

In October 1929, the first baby came and the stockmarket fell, and my parents' dream of going home receded into the background. Little secret sparks of it were kept alive for years by my mother's search for tropical fruits "under the bridge," and her burning of kerosene lamps, by her treadle-machine and her fried bananas and her love of fish and the sea. Trapped. There was so little that she really knew about the stranger's country. How the electricity worked. The nearest church. Where the Free Milk Fund for Babies handouts occurred, and at what time—even though we were not allowed to drink charity.

She knew about bundling up against the wicked cold. She knew about Paradise Plums—hard, oval candies, cherry-red on one side, pineapple-yellow on the other. She knew which West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue carried them in tilt-back glass jars on the countertops. She knew how desirable Paradise Plums were to sweet-starved little children, and how important in maintaining discipline on long shopping journeys. She knew exactly how many of the imported goodies could be sucked and rolled around in the mouth before the wicked gum arabic with its acidic british teeth cut through the tongue's pink coat and raised little red pimples.

She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep the soucoyants away, lest they suck the blood of her babies. She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep.

She taught us one to the mother that I never learned in school.

*Remember, oh most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was ever left unaided. Inspired with this confidence I fly unto thee now, oh my sweet mother, to thee I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. Oh mother of the word incarnate, despise not my petitions but in thy clemency and mercy oh hear and answer me now.*

As a child, I remember often hearing my mother mouth these words softly, just below her breath, as she faced some new crisis or disaster—the icebox door breaking, the electricity being shut off, my sister gashing open her mouth on borrowed skates.

My child's ears heard the words and pondered the mysteries of this mother to whom my solid and austere mother could whisper such beautiful words.

And finally, my mother knew how to frighten children into behaving in public. She knew how to pretend that the only food left in the house was actually a meal of choice, carefully planned.

She knew how to make virtues out of necessities.

Linda missed the bashing of the waves against the sea-wall at the foot of Noel's Hill, the humped and mysterious slope of Marquis Island rising up from the water a half-mile off-shore. She missed the swift-flying bananaquits and the trees and the rank smell of the tree-ferns lining the road downhill into Grenville Town. She missed the music that did not have to be listened to because it was always around. Most of all, she missed the Sunday-long boat trips that took her to Aunt Anni's in Carriacou.

Everybody in Grenada had a song for everything. There was a song for the tobacco shop which was part of the general store, which Linda had managed from the time she was seventeen.

3/4 of a cross  
and a circle complete  
2 semi-circles and a perpendicular meet...

A jingle serving to identify the store for those who could not read T O B A C C O .

The songs were all about, there was even one about them, the Belmar girls, who always carried their noses in the air. And you never talked your business too loud in the street, otherwise you were liable to hear your name broadcast in a song on the corner the very next day. At home, she learned from Sister Lou to disapprove of the endless casual song-making as a disreputable and common habit, beneath the notice of a decent girl.

But now, in this cold and raucous country called america, Linda missed the music. She even missed the annoyance of the early Saturday morning customers with their loose talk and slurred rhythms, warbling home from the rumshop.

She knew about food. But of what use was that to these crazy people she lived among, who cooked leg of lamb without washing the meat, and roasted even the toughest beef without water and a cover? Pumpkin was only a child's decoration to

them, and they treated their husbands better than they cared for their children.

She did not know her way in and out of the galleries of the Museum of Natural History, but she did know that it was a good place to take children if you wanted them to grow up smart. It frightened her when she took her children there, and she would pinch each one of us girls on the fleshy part of our upper arms at one time or another all afternoon. Supposedly, it was because we wouldn't behave, but actually, it was because beneath the neat visor of the museum guard's cap, she could see pale blue eyes staring at her and her children as if we were a bad smell, and this frightened her. *This* was a situation she couldn't control.

What else did Linda know? She knew how to look into people's faces and tell what they were going to do before they did it. She knew which grapefruit was shaddock and pink, before it ripened, and what to do with the others, which was to throw them to the pigs. Except she had no pigs in Harlem, and sometimes those were the only grapefruit around to eat. She knew how to prevent infection in an open cut or wound by heating the black-elm leaf over a wood-fire until it wilted in the hand, rubbing the juice into the cut, and then laying the soft green now flabby fibers over the wound for a bandage.

But there was no black-elm in Harlem, no black oak leaves to be had in New York City. Ma-Mariah, her root-woman grandmother, had taught her well under the trees on Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, overlooking the sea. Aunt Anni and Ma-Liz, Linda's mother, had carried it on. But there was no call for this knowledge now; and her husband Byron did not like to talk about home because it made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom for himself in this new world.

She did not know if the stories about white slavers that she read in the *Daily News* were true or not, but she knew to forbid her children ever to set foot into any candystore. We were not even allowed to buy penny gumballs from the machines in the subway. Besides being a waste of precious money, the machines were slot machines and therefore evil, or at least suspect as connected with white slavery—the most vicious kind, she'd say ominously.

Linda knew green things were precious, and the peaceful, healing qualities of water. On Saturday afternoons, sometimes, after my mother finished cleaning the house, we would go looking for some park to sit in and watch the trees. Sometimes we

went down to the edge of the Harlem River at 142nd Street to watch the water. Sometimes we took the D train and went to the sea. Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes. She told us about plants that healed and about plants that drove you crazy, and none of it made much sense to us children because we had never seen any of them. And she told us about the trees and fruits and flowers that grew outside the door of the house where she grew up and lived until she married.

Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth. She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel's Hill morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapadilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat. Made bearable because it was not all. This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back *home*.

We would walk the hills of Grenville, Grenada, and when the wind blew right smell the limetrees of Carriacou, spice island off the coast. Listen to the sea drum up on Kick'em Jenny, the reef whose loud voice split the night, when the sea-waves beat upon her sides. Carriacou, from where the Belmar twins set forth on inter-island schooners for the voyages that brought them, first and last, to Grenville town, and they married the Noel sisters there, mainlander girls.

The Noel girls. Ma-Liz's older sister, Anni, followed her Belmar back to Carriacou, arrived as sister-in-law and stayed to become her own woman. Remembered the root-truths taught her by their mother, Ma-Mariah. Learned other powers from the women of Carriacou. And in a house in the hills behind L'Es-terre she birthed each of her sister Ma-Liz's seven daughters. My mother Linda was born between the waiting palms of her loving hands.

Here Aunt Anni lived among the other women who saw their men off on the sailing vessels, then tended the goats and ground-nuts, planted grain and poured rum upon the earth to streng-

then the corn's growing, built their women's houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together. Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men's returning.

*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.*

In the hills of Carriacou between L'Esterre and Harvey Vale my mother was born, a Belmar woman. Summered in Aunt Anni's house, picked limes with the women. And she grew up dreaming of Carriacou as someday I was to dream of Grenada.

*Carriacou*, a magic name like cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, the delectable little squares of guava jelly each lovingly wrapped in tiny bits of crazy-quilt wax-paper cut precisely from bread wrappers, the long sticks of dried vanilla and the sweet-smelling tonka bean, chalky brown nuggets of pressed chocolate for cocoa-tea, all set on a bed of wild bay laurel leaves, arriving every Christmas time in a well-wrapped tea-tin.

*Carriacou* which was not listed in the index of the *Goode's School Atlas* nor in the *Junior Americana World Gazette* nor appeared on any map that I could find, and so when I hunted for the magic place during geography lessons or in free library time, I never found it, and came to believe my mother's geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned, and in reality maybe she was talking about the place other people called Curaçao, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles.

But underneath it all as I was growing up, *home* was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper, nor to throttle and bind up between the pages of a schoolbook. It was our own, my truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums.\*

\*Years later, as partial requirement for a degree in library science, I did a detailed comparison of atlases, their merits and particular strengths. I used, as one of the foci of my project, the isle of Carriacou. It appeared only once, in the *Atlas of the Encyclopedia Britannica*, which has always prided itself upon the accurate cartology of its colonies. I was twenty-six years old before I found Carriacou upon a map.

## 2

I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle.

What I really understand is a particular kind of determination. It is stubborn, it is painful, it is infuriating, but it often works.

My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the white american common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black. Therefore when I was growing up, *powerful woman* equaled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply "woman." It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal "man." What then? What was the third designation?

As a child, I always knew my mother was different from the other women I knew, Black or white. I used to think it was because she was my mother. But different how? I was never quite sure. There were other West Indian women around, a lot in our neighborhood and church. There were also other Black women as light as she, particularly among the low-island women. *Red-bone*, they were called. *Different how?* I never knew. But that is why to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma.

I've always thought that I learned some early ways I treated women from my father. But he certainly responded to my mother in a very different fashion. They shared decisions and the making of all policy, both in their business and in the family. Whenever anything had to be decided about any one of the three of us children, even about new coats, they would go into the bedroom and put their heads together for a little while. *Buzz buzz* would come through the closed door, sometimes in english, sometimes in patois, that Grenadian poly-language which was their lingua franca. Then the two of them would emerge and announce whatever decision had been arrived upon. They spoke all through my childhood with one unfragmentable and unappealable voice.

After the children came, my father went to real-estate school, and began to manage small rooming-houses in Harlem. When he came home from the office in the evening, he had one quick glass of brandy, standing in the kitchen, after we greeted him and before he took off his coat and hat. Then my mother and he would immediately retire into the bedroom where we would hear them discussing the day's events from behind closed doors, even if my mother had only left their office a few hours before.

If any of us children had transgressed against the rule, this was the time when we truly quaked in our orthopedic shoes, for we knew our fate was being discussed and the terms of punishment sealed behind those doors. When they opened, a mutual and irrefutable judgment would be delivered. If they spoke of anything important when we were around, Mother and Daddy immediately lapsed into patois.

Since my parents shared all making of policy and decision, in my child's eye, my mother must have been *other* than woman. Again, she was certainly not man. (The three of us children would not have tolerated that deprivation of womanliness for long at all; we'd have probably packed up our *kra* and gone back before the eighth day—an option open to all African child-souls who bumble into the wrong milieu.)

My mother was different from other women, and sometimes it gave me a sense of pleasure and specialness that was a positive aspect of feeling set apart. But sometimes it gave me pain and I fancied it the reason for so many of my childhood sorrows. *If my mother were like everybody else's maybe they would like me better.* But most often, her difference was like the season or a cold day or a steamy night in June. It just *was*, with no explanation or evocation necessary.

My mother and her two sisters were large and graceful women whose ample bodies seemed to underline the air of determination with which they moved through their lives in the strange world of Harlem and America. To me, my mother's physical substance and the presence and self-possession with which she carried herself were a large part of what made her *different*. Her public air of in-charge competence was quiet and effective. On the street people deferred to my mother over questions of taste, economy, opinion, quality, not to mention who had the right to the first available seat on the bus. I saw my mother fix her blue-grey-brown eyes upon a man scrambling for a seat on the Lenox Avenue bus, only to have him falter midway, grin

abashedly, and, as if in the same movement, offer it to the old woman standing on the other side of him. I became aware, early on, that sometimes people would change their actions because of some opinion my mother never uttered, or even particularly cared about.

My mother was a very private woman, and actually quite shy, but with a very imposing, no-nonsense exterior. Full-bosomed, proud, and of no mean size, she would launch herself down the street like a ship under full sail, usually pulling me stumbling behind her. Not too many hardy souls dared cross her prow too closely.

Total strangers would turn to her in the meat market and ask what she thought about a cut of meat as to its freshness and appeal and suitability for such and such, and the butcher, impatient, would nonetheless wait for her to deliver her opinion, obviously quite a little put out but still deferential. Strangers counted upon my mother and I never knew why, but as a child it made me think she had a great deal more power than in fact she really had. My mother was invested in this image of herself also, and took pains, I realize now, to hide from us as children the many instances of her powerlessness. Being Black and foreign and female in New York City in the twenties and thirties was not simple, particularly when she was quite light enough to pass for white, but her children weren't.

In 1936-1938, 125th Street between Lenox and Eighth Avenues, later to become the shopping mecca of Black Harlem, was still a racially mixed area, with control and patronage largely in the hands of white shopkeepers. There were stores into which Black people were not welcomed, and no Black salespersons worked in the shops at all. Where our money was taken, it was taken with reluctance; and often too much was asked. (It was these conditions which young Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., addressed in his boycott and picketing of Blumstein's and Weissbecker's market in 1939 in an attempt, successful, to bring Black employment to 125th Street.) Tensions on the street were high, as they always are in racially mixed zones of transition. As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse. Sometimes she fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit

into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random. It never occurred to me to doubt her.

It was not until years later once in conversation I said to her: "Have you noticed people don't spit into the wind so much the way they used to?" And the look on my mother's face told me that I had blundered into one of those secret places of pain that must never be spoken of again. But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else. It was so often her approach to the world; to change reality. If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it.

Both of my parents gave us to believe that they had the whole world in the palms of their hands for the most part, and if we three girls acted correctly—meaning working hard and doing as we were told—we could have the whole world in the palms of our hands also. It was a very confusing way to grow up, enhanced by the insularity of our family. Whatever went wrong in our lives was because our parents had decided that was best. Whatever went right was because our parents had decided that was the way it was going to be. Any doubts as to the reality of that situation were rapidly and summarily put down as small but intolerable rebellions against divine authority.

All our storybooks were about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white and lived in houses with trees around and had dogs named Spot. I didn't know people like that any more than I knew people like Cinderella who lived in castles. Nobody wrote stories about us, but still people always asked my mother for directions in a crowd.

It was this that made me decide as a child we must be rich, even when my mother did not have enough money to buy gloves for her chilblained hands, nor a proper winter coat. She would finish washing clothes and dress me hurriedly for the winter walk to pick up my sisters at school for lunch. By the time we got to St. Mark's School, seven blocks away, her beautiful long hands would be covered with ugly red splotches and welts. Later, I remember my mother rubbing her hands gingerly under cold water, and wringing them in pain. But when I asked, she brushed me off by telling me this was what they did for it at "home," and I still believed her when she said she hated to wear gloves.

At night, my father came home late from the office, or from a political meeting. After dinner, the three of us girls did our homework sitting around the kitchen table. Then my two sisters went off down the hall to their beds. My mother put down the cot for me in the front bedroom, and supervised my getting ready for bed.

She turned off all the electric lights, and I could see her from my bed, two rooms away, sitting at the same kitchen table, reading the *Daily News* by a kerosene lamp, and waiting for my father. She always said it was because the kerosene lamp reminded her of "home." When I was grown I realized she was trying to save a few pennies of electricity before my father came in and turned on the lights with "Lin, why you sitting in the dark so?" Sometimes I'd go to sleep with the soft chunk-a-ta-chink of her foot-pedal-powered Singer Sewing Machine, stitching up sheets and pillow-cases from unbleached muslin gotten on sale "under the bridge."

I only saw my mother crying twice when I was little. Once was when I was three, and sat on the step of her dental chair at the City Dental Clinic on 23rd Street, while a student dentist pulled out all the teeth on one side of her upper jaw. It was in a huge room full of dental chairs with other groaning people in them, and white-jacketed young men bending over open mouths. The sound of the many dental drills and instruments made the place sound like a street-corner excavation site.

Afterwards, my mother sat outside on a long wooden bench. I saw her lean her head against the back, her eyes closed. She did not respond to my pats and tugs at her coat. Climbing up upon the seat, I peered into my mother's face to see why she should be sleeping in the middle of the day. From under her closed eyelids, drops of tears were squeezing out and running down her cheek toward her ear. I touched the little drops of water on her high cheekbone in horror and amazement. The world was turning over. My mother was crying.

The other time I saw my mother cry was a few years later, one night, when I was supposed to be asleep in their bedroom. The door to the parlor was ajar, and I could see through the crack into the next room. I woke to hear my parents' voices in english. My father had just come home, and with liquor on his breath.

"I hoped I'd never live to see the day when you, Bee, stand up in some saloon and it's drink you drinking with some club-house woman."

"But Lin, what are you talking? It's not that way a-tall, you know. In politics you must be friendly-friendly so. It doesn't mean a thing."

"And if you were to go before I did, I would never so much as look upon another man, and I would expect you to do the same."

My mother's voice was strangely muffled by her tears.

These were the years leading up to the Second World War, when Depression took such a terrible toll, and of Black people in particular.

Even though we children could be beaten for losing a penny coming home from the store, my mother fancied a piece of her role as lady bountiful, a role she would accuse me bitterly of playing years later in my life whenever I gave something to a friend. But one of my earlier memories of World War II was just before the beginning, with my mother splitting a one-pound tin of coffee between two old family friends who had come on an infrequent visit.

Although she always insisted that she had nothing to do with politics or government affairs, from somewhere my mother had heard the winds of war, and despite our poverty had set about consistently hoarding sugar and coffee in her secret closet under the sink. Long before Pearl Harbor, I recall opening each cloth five-pound sack of sugar which we purchased at the market and pouring a third of it into a scrubbed tin to store away under the sink, secure from mice. The same thing happened with coffee. We would buy Bokar Coffee at the A&P and have it ground and poured into bags, and then divide the bag between the coffee tin on the back of the stove, and the hidden ones under the sink. Not many people came to our house, ever, but no one left without at least a cupful of sugar or coffee during the war, when coffee and sugar were heavily rationed.

Meat and butter could not be hoarded, and throughout the early war, my mother's absolute refusal to accept butter substitutes (only "other people" used margarine, those same "other people" who fed their children peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, used sandwich spread instead of mayonnaise and ate pork chops and watermelon) had us on line in front of supermarkets all over the city on bitterly cold Saturday mornings,

waiting for the store to open so we each could get first crack at buying our allotted quarter-pound of unrationed butter. Throughout the war, Mother kept a mental list of all the supermarkets reachable by one bus, frequently taking only me because I could ride free. She also noted which were friendly and which were not, and long after the war ended there were meat markets and stores we never shopped in because someone in them had crossed my mother during the war over some precious scarce commodity, and my mother never forgot and rarely forgave.

### 3

When I was five years old and still legally blind, I started school in a sight-conservation class in the local public school on 135th Street and

Lenox Avenue. On the corner was a blue wooden booth where white women gave away free milk to Black mothers with children. I used to long for some Hearst Free Milk Fund milk, in those cute little bottles with their red and white tops, but my mother never allowed me to have any, because she said it was charity, which was bad and demeaning, and besides the milk was warm and might make me sick.

The school was right across the avenue from the catholic school where my two older sisters went, and this public school had been used as a threat against them for as long as I could remember. If they didn't behave and get good marks in school-work and deportment, they could be "transferred." A "transfer" carried the same dire implications as "deportation" came to imply decades later.

Of course everybody knew that public school kids did nothing but "fight," and you could get "beaten up" every day after school, instead of being marched out of the schoolhouse door in two neat rows like little robots, silent but safe and unattacked, to the corner where the mothers waited.

But the catholic school had no kindergarten, and certainly not one for blind children.

Despite my nearsightedness, or maybe because of it, I learned to read at the same time I learned to talk, which was only about a year or so before I started school. Perhaps *learn* isn't the right word to use for my beginning to talk, because to this day I don't know if I didn't talk earlier because I didn't know how, or if I didn't talk because I had nothing to say that I would be

allowed to say without punishment. Self-preservation starts very early in West Indian families.

I learned how to read from Mrs. Augusta Baker, the children's librarian at the old 135th Street branch library, which has just recently been torn down to make way for a new library building to house the Schomburg Collection on African-American History and Culture. If that was the only good deed that lady ever did in her life, may she rest in peace. Because that deed saved my life, if not sooner, then later, when sometimes the only thing I had to hold on to was knowing I could read, and that could get me through.

My mother was pinching my ear off one bright afternoon, while I lay spreadeagled on the floor of the Children's Room like a furious little brown toad, screaming bloody murder and embarrassing my mother to death. I know it must have been spring or early fall, because without the protection of a heavy coat, I can still feel the stinging soreness in the flesh of my upper arm. There, where my mother's sharp fingers had already tried to pinch me into silence. To escape those inexorable fingers I had hurled myself to the floor, roaring with pain as I could see them advancing toward my ears again. We were waiting to pick up my two older sisters from story hour, held upstairs on another floor of the dry-smelling quiet library. My shrieks pierced the reverential stillness.

Suddenly, I looked up, and there was a library lady standing over me. My mother's hands had dropped to her sides. From the floor where I was lying, Mrs. Baker seemed like yet another mile-high woman about to do me in. She had immense, light, hooded eyes and a very quiet voice that said, not damnation for my noise, but "Would you like to hear a story, little girl?"

Part of my fury was because I had not been allowed to go to that secret feast called story hour since I was too young, and now here was this strange lady offering me my own story.

I didn't dare to look at my mother, half-afraid she might say no, I was too bad for stories. Still bewildered by this sudden change of events, I climbed up upon the stool which Mrs. Baker pulled over for me, and gave her my full attention. This was a new experience for me and I was insatiably curious.

Mrs. Baker read me *Madeline*, and *Horton Hatches the Egg*, both of which rhymed and had huge lovely pictures which I could see from behind my newly acquired eyeglasses, fastened around the back of my rambunctious head by a black elastic band running from earpiece to earpiece. She also read me an-

other storybook about a bear named Herbert who ate up an entire family, one by one, starting with the parents. By the time she had finished that one, I was sold on reading for the rest of my life.

I took the books from Mrs. Baker's hands after she was finished reading, and traced the large black letters with my fingers, while I peered again at the beautiful bright colors of the pictures. Right then I decided I was going to find out how to do that myself. I pointed to the black marks which I could now distinguish as separate letters, different from my sisters' more grown-up books, whose smaller print made the pages only one grey blur for me. I said, quite loudly, for whoever was listening to hear, "I want to read."

My mother's surprised relief outweighed whatever annoyance she was still feeling at what she called my whelpish carryings-on. From the background where she had been hovering while Mrs. Baker read, my mother moved forward quickly, mollified and impressed. I had spoken. She scooped me up from the low stool, and to my surprise, kissed me, right in front of everybody in the library, including Mrs. Baker.

This was an unprecedeted and unusual display of affection in public, the cause of which I did not comprehend. But it was a warm and happy feeling. For once, obviously, I had done something right.

My mother set me back upon the stool and turned to Mrs. Baker, smiling.

"Will wonders never cease to perform!" Her excitement startled me back into cautious silence.

Not only had I been sitting still for longer than my mother would have thought possible, and sitting quietly. I had also spoken rather than screamed, something that my mother, after four years and a lot of worry, had despaired that I would ever do. Even one intelligible word was a very rare event for me. And although the doctors at the clinic had clipped the little membrane under my tongue so I was no longer tongue-tied, and had assured my mother that I was not retarded, she still had her terrors and her doubts. She was genuinely happy for any possible alternative to what she was afraid might be a dumb child. The ear-pinching was forgotten. My mother accepted the alphabet and picture books Mrs. Baker gave her for me, and I was on my way.

I sat at the kitchen table with my mother, tracing letters and calling their names. Soon she taught me how to say the alphabet forwards and backwards as it was done in Grenada. Although

she had never gone beyond the seventh grade, she had been put in charge of teaching the first grade children their letters during her last year at Mr. Taylor's School in Greenville. She told me stories about his strictness as she taught me how to print my name.

I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELORENDE at four years of age, but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and because, as she always insisted to me, that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. No deviation was allowed from her interpretations of correct.

So by the time I arrived at the sight-conservation kindergarten, braided, scrubbed, and bespectacled, I was able to read large-print books and write my name with a regular pencil. Then came my first rude awakening about school. Ability had nothing to do with expectation.

There were only seven or eight of us little Black children in a big classroom, all with various serious deficiencies of sight. Some of us were cross-eyed, some of us were nearsighted, and one little girl had a patch over one of her eyes.

We were given special short wide notebooks to write in, with very widely spaced lines on yellow paper. They looked like my sister's music notebooks. We were also given thick black crayons to write with. Now you don't grow up fat, Black, nearly blind, and ambidextrous in a West Indian household, particularly my parents' household, and survive without being or becoming fairly rigid fairly fast. And having been roundly spanked on several occasions for having made that mistake at home, I knew quite well that crayons were not what you wrote with, and music books were definitely not what you wrote in.

I raised my hand. When the teacher asked me what I wanted, I asked for some regular paper to write on and a pencil. That was my undoing. "We don't have any pencils here," I was told.

Our first task was to copy down the first letter of our names in those notebooks with our black crayons. Our teacher went around the room and wrote the required letter into each one of our notebooks. When she came around to me, she printed a large A in the upper left corner of the first page of my notebook, and handed me the crayon.

"I can't," I said, knowing full well that what you do with black crayons is scribble on the wall and get your backass beat-

en, or color around the edges of pictures, but not write. To write, you needed a pencil. "I can't!" I said, terrified, and started to cry.

"Imagine that, a big girl like you. Such a shame, I'll have to tell your mother that you won't even try. And such a big girl like you!"

And it was true. Although young, I was the biggest child by far in the whole class, a fact that had not escaped the attention of the little boy who sat behind me, and who was already whispering "fatty, fatty!" whenever the teacher's back was turned.

"Now just try, dear. I'm sure you can try to print your A. Mother will be so pleased to see that at least you tried." She patted my stiff braids and turned to the next desk.

Well, of course, she had said the magic words, because I would have walked over rice on my knees to please Mother. I took her nasty old soft smudgy crayon and pretended that it was a nice neat pencil with a fine point, elegantly sharpened that morning outside the bathroom door by my father, with the little penknife that he always carried around in his bathrobe pocket.

I bent my head down close to the desk that smelled like old spittle and rubber erasers, and on that ridiculous yellow paper with those laughably wide spaces I printed my best AUDRE. I had never been too good at keeping between straight lines no matter what their width, so it slanted down across the page something like this: A

U  
D  
R  
E

The notebooks were short and there was no more room for anything else on that page. So I turned the page over, and wrote again, earnestly and laboriously, biting my lip, L

O  
R  
D  
E

half-showing off, half-eager to please.

By this time, Miss Teacher had returned to the front of the room.

"Now when you're finished drawing your letter, children," she said, "Just raise your hand high." And her voice smiled a big smile. It is surprising to me that I can still hear her voice but

I can't see her face, and I don't know whether she was Black or white. I can remember the way she smelled, but not the color of her hand upon my desk.

Well, when I heard that, my hand flew up in the air, wagging frantically. There was one thing my sisters had warned me about school in great detail: you must never talk in school unless you raised your hand. So I raised my hand, anxious to be recognized. I could imagine what teacher would say to my mother when she came to fetch me home at noon. My mother would know that her warning to me to "be good" had in truth been heeded.

Miss Teacher came down the aisle and stood beside my desk, looking down at my book. All of a sudden the air around her hand beside my notebook grew very still and frightening.

"Well I never!" Her voice was sharp. "I thought I told you to draw this letter? You don't even want to try and do as you are told. Now I want you to turn that page over and draw your letter like everyone . . ." and turning to the next page, she saw my second name sprawled down across the page.

There was a moment of icy silence, and I knew I had done something terribly wrong. But this time, I had no idea what it could be that would get her so angry, certainly not being proud of writing my name.

She broke the silence with a wicked edge to her voice. "I see." she said. "I see we have a young lady who does not want to do as she is told. We will have to tell her mother about that." And the rest of the class snickered, as the teacher tore the page out of my notebook.

"Now I am going to give you one more chance," she said, as she printed another fierce A at the head of the new page. "Now you copy that letter exactly the way it is, and the rest of the class will have to wait for you." She placed the crayon squarely back into my fingers.

By this time I had no idea at all what this lady wanted from me, and so I cried and cried for the rest of the morning until my mother came to fetch me home at noon. I cried on the street while we stopped to pick up my sisters, and for most of the way home, until my mother threatened to box my ears for me if I didn't stop embarrassing her on the street.

That afternoon, after Phyllis and Helen were back in school, and I was helping her dust, I told my mother how they had given me crayons to write with and how the teacher didn't want me to write my name. When my father came home that evening,

the two of them went into counsel. It was decided that my mother would speak to the teacher the next morning when she brought me to school, in order to find out what I had done wrong. This decision was passed on to me, ominously, because of course I must have done something wrong to have made Miss Teacher so angry with me.

The next morning at school, the teacher told my mother that she did not think that I was ready yet for kindergarten, because I couldn't follow directions, and I wouldn't do as I was told.

My mother knew very well I could follow directions, because she herself had spent a good deal of effort and arm-power making it very painful for me whenever I did not follow directions. And she also believed that a large part of the function of school was to make me learn how to do what I was told to do. In her private opinion, if this school could not do that, then it was not much of a school and she was going to find a school that could. In other words, my mother had made up her mind that school was where I belonged.

That same morning, she took me off across the street to the catholic school, where she persuaded the nuns to put me into the first grade, since I could read already, and write my name on regular paper with a real pencil. If I sat in the first row I could see the blackboard. My mother also told the nuns that unlike my two sisters, who were models of deportment, I was very unruly, and that they should spank me whenever I needed it. Mother Josepha, the principal, agreed, and I started school.

My first grade teacher was named Sister Mary of Perpetual Help, and she was a disciplinarian of the first order, right after my mother's own heart. A week after I started school she sent a note home to my mother asking her not to dress me in so many layers of clothing because then I couldn't feel the strap on my behind when I was punished.

Sister Mary of Perpetual Help ran the first grade with an iron hand in the shape of a cross. She couldn't have been more than eighteen. She was big, and blond, I think, since we never got to see the nuns' hair in those days. But her eyebrows were blonde, and she was supposed to be totally dedicated, like all the other Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, to caring for the Colored and Indian children of america. Caring for was not always caring about. And it always felt like Sister MPH hated either teaching or little children.

She had divided up the class into two groups, the Fairies and the Brownies. In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and

color usage, I don't have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies. I always wound up in the Brownies, because either I talked too much, or I broke my glasses, or I perpetrated some other awful infraction of the endless rules of good behavior.

But for two glorious times that year, I made it into the Fairies for brief periods of time. One was put into the Brownies if one misbehaved, or couldn't learn to read. I had learned to read already, but I couldn't tell my numbers. Whenever Sister MPH would call a few of us up to the front of the room for our reading lesson, she would say, "All right, children, now turn to page six in your readers." or, "Turn to page nineteen, please, and begin at the top of the page."

Well, I didn't know what page to turn to, and I was ashamed of not being able to read my numbers, so when my turn came to read I couldn't, because I didn't have the right place. After the prompting of a few words, she would go on to the next reader, and soon I wound up in the Brownies.

This was around the second month of school, in October. My new seatmate was Alvin, and he was the worst boy in the whole class. His clothes were dirty and he smelled unwashed, and rumor had it he had once called Sister MPH a bad name, but that couldn't have been possible because he would have been suspended permanently from school.

Alvin used to browbeat me into lending him my pencil to draw endless pictures of airplanes dropping huge penile bombs. He would always promise to give me the pictures when he was finished. But of course, whenever he was finished, he would decide that the picture was too good for a girl, so he would have to keep it, and make me another. Yet I never stopped hoping for one of them, because he drew airplanes very well.

He also would scratch his head and shake out the dandruff onto our joint spelling book or reader, and then tell me the flakes of dandruff were dead lice. I believed him in this, also, and was constantly terrified of catching cooties. But Alvin and I worked out our own system together for reading. He couldn't read, but he knew all his numbers, and I could read words, but I couldn't find the right page.

The Brownies were never called up to the front of the room; we had to read in anonymity from our double seats, where we scrunched over at the edges, ordinarily, to leave room in the middle for our two guardian angels to sit. But whenever we had to share a book our guardian angels had to jump around us and

sit on the outside edge of our seats. Therefore, Alvin would show me the right pages to turn to when Sister called them out, and I would whisper the right words to him whenever it came his turn to read. Inside of a week after we devised this scheme of things, we had gotten out of the Brownies together. Since we shared a reader, we always went up together to read with the Fairies, so we had a really good thing going there for a while.

But Alvin began to get sick around Thanksgiving, and was absent a lot, and he didn't come back to school at all after Christmas. I used to miss his dive-bomber pictures, but most of all I missed his page numbers. After a few times of being called up by myself and not being able to read, I landed back in the Brownies again.

Years later I found out that Alvin had died of tuberculosis over Christmas, and that was why we all had been X-rayed in the auditorium after Mass on the first day back to school from Christmas vacation.

I spent a few more weeks in the Brownies with my mouth almost shut during reading lesson, unless the day's story fell on page eight, or ten, or twenty, which were the three numbers I knew.

Then, over one weekend, we had our first writing assignment. We were to look in our parents' newspaper and cut out words we knew the meaning of, and make them into simple sentences. We could only use one "the." It felt like an easy task, since I was already reading the comics by this time.

On Sunday morning after church, when I usually did my homework, I noticed an ad for White Rose Salada Tea on the back of the *New York Times Magazine* which my father was reading at the time. It had the most gorgeous white rose on a red background, and I decided I must have that rose for my picture—our sentences were to be illustrated. I searched through the paper until I found an "I," and then a "like," which I dutifully clipped out along with my rose, and the words "White," "Rose," "Salada," and "Tea." I knew the brand-name well because it was my mother's favorite tea.

On Monday morning, we all stood our sentence papers up on the chalk-channels, leaning them against the blackboards. And there among the twenty odd "The boy ran," "it was cold," was "I like White Rose Salada Tea" and my beautiful white rose on a red background.

That was too much coming from a Brownie. Sister Mary of PH frowned.

"This was to be our own work, children," she said. "Who helped you with your sentence, Audre?" I told her I had done it alone.

"Our guardian angels weep when we don't tell the truth, Audre. I want a note from your mother tomorrow telling me that you are sorry for lying to the baby Jesus."

I told the story at home, and the next day I brought a note from my father saying that the sentence had indeed been my own work. Triumphant, I gathered up my books and moved back over to the Fairies.

The thing that I remember best about being in the first grade was how uncomfortable it was, always having to leave room for my guardian angel on those tiny seats, and moving back and forth across the room from Brownies to Fairies and back again.

This time I stayed in the Fairies for a long time, because I finally started to recognize my numbers. I stayed there until the day I broke my glasses. I had taken them off to clean them in the bathroom and they slipped out of my hand. I was never to do that, and so I was in disgrace. My eyeglasses came from the eye clinic of the medical center, and it took three days to get a new pair made. We could not afford to buy more than one pair at a time, nor did it occur to my parents that such an extravagance might be necessary. I was almost sightless without them, but my punishment for having broken them was that I had to go to school anyway, even though I could see nothing. My sisters delivered me to my classroom with a note from my mother saying I had broken my glasses despite the fact they were tied to me by the strip of elastic.

I was never supposed to take my glasses off except just before getting into bed, but I was endlessly curious about these magical circles of glass that were rapidly becoming a part of me, transforming my universe, and remaining movable. I was always trying to examine them with my naked, nearsighted eyes, usually dropping them in the process.

Since I could not see at all to do any work from the blackboard, Sister Mary of PH made me sit in the back of the room on the window seat with a dunce cap on. She had the rest of the class offer up a prayer for my poor mother who had such a naughty girl who broke her glasses and caused her parents such needless extra expense to replace them. She also had them offer up a special prayer for me to stop being such a wicked-hearted child.

I amused myself by counting the rainbows of color that danced like a halo around the lamp on Sister Mary of PH's desk, watching the starburst patterns of light that the incandescent light bulb became without my glasses. But I missed them, and not being able to see. I never once gave a thought to the days when I believed that bulbs were starburst patterns of color, because that was what all light looked like to me.

It must have been close to summer by this time. As I sat with the dunce cap on, I can remember the sun pouring through the classroom window hot upon my back, as the rest of the class dutifully entoned their Hail Marys for my soul, and I played secret games with the distorted rainbows of light, until Sister noticed and made me stop blinking my eyes so fast.

## How I Became a Poet

*"Wherever the bird with no feet flew she found trees with no limbs."*

*When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words.*

My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there. I did not speak until I was four. When I was three, the dazzling world of strange lights and fascinating shapes which I inhabited resolved itself in mundane definitions, and I learned another nature of things as seen through eyeglasses. This perception of things was less colorful and confusing but much more comfortable than the one native to my nearsighted and unevenly focused eyes.

I remember trundling along Lenox Avenue with my mother, on our way to school to pick up Phyllis and Helen for lunch. It was late spring because my legs felt light and real, unencumbered by bulky snowpants. I dawdled along the fence around the public playground, inside of which grew one stunted plane tree. En-

thralled, I stared up at the sudden revelation of each single and particular leaf of green, precisely shaped and laced about with unmixed light. Before my glasses, I had known trees as tall brown pillars ending in fat puffy swirls of paling greens, much like the pictures of them I perused in my sisters' storybooks from which I learned so much of my visual world.

But out of my mother's mouth a world of comment came cascading when she felt at ease or in her element, full of picaresque constructions and surreal scenes.

We were never dressed too lightly, but rather "in next kin to nothing." *Neck skin to nothing?* Impassable and impossible distances were measured by the distance "from Hog to Kick 'em Jenny." *Hog? Kick 'em Jenny?* Who knew until I was sane and grown a poet with a mouthful of stars, that these were two little reefs in the Grenadines, between Grenada and Carriacou.

The euphemisms of body were equally puzzling, if no less colorful. A mild reprimand was accompanied not by a slap on the behind, but a "smack on the backass," or on the "bamsy." You sat on your "bam-bam," but anything between your hip-bones and upper thighs was consigned to the "lower-region," a word I always imagined to have french origins, as in "Don't forget to wash your *l'oregión* before you go to bed." For more clinical and precise descriptions, there was always "between your legs"—whispered.

The sensual content of life was masked and cryptic, but attended in well-coded phrases. Somehow all the cousins knew that Uncle Cyril couldn't lift heavy things because of his "bam-bam-coo," and the lowered voice in which this hernia was spoken of warned us that it had something to do with "down there." And on the infrequent but magical occasions when mother performed her delicious laying on of hands for a crick in the neck or a pulled muscle, she didn't massage your backbone, she "raised your zandalee."

I never caught cold, but "got co-hum, co-hum," and then everything turned "cro-bo-so," topsy-turvy, or at least, a bit askew.

*I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.*

Sitting between my mother's spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. I feel my mother's strong, rough hands all up in my unruly hair, while I'm squirming around on a low stool or on a

folded towel on the floor, my rebellious shoulders hunched and jerking against the inexorable sharp-toothed comb. After each springy portion is combed and braided, she pats it tenderly and proceeds to the next.

I hear the interjection of *sotto voce* admonitions that punctuated whatever discussion she and my father were having.

"Hold your back up, now! Deenie, keep still! Put your head so!" Scratch, scratch. "When last you wash your hair? Look the dandruff!" Scratch, scratch, the comb's truth setting my own teeth on edge. Yet, these were some of the moments I missed most sorely when our real wars began.

I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace.

The radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into—the rhythms of a litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters' hair.

Saturday morning. The one morning of the week my mother does not leap from bed to prepare me and my sisters for school or church. I wake in the cot in their bedroom, knowing only it is one of those lucky days when she is still in bed, and alone. My father is in the kitchen. The sound of pots and the slightly off-smell of frying bacon mixes with the smell of percolating Bokar coffee.

The click of her wedding ring against the wooden headboard. She is awake. I get up and go over and crawl into my mother's bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth. She reclines upon her back and side, one arm extended, the other flung across her forehead. A hot-water bottle wrapped in body-temperature flannel, which she used to quiet her gall-bladder pains during the night. Her large soft breasts beneath the buttoned flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch.

I crawl against her, playing with the enflanneled, warm, rubber bag, pummeling it, tossing it, sliding it down the roundness of her stomach to the warm sheet between the bend of her elbow and the curve of her waist below her breasts, flopping sideward inside the printed cloth. Under the covers, the morning smells soft and sunny and full of promise.

I frolic with the liquid-filled water bottle, patting and rubbing its firm giving softness. I shake it slowly, rocking it back and forth, lost in sudden tenderness, at the same time gently

rubbing against my mother's quiet body. Warm milky smells of morning surround us.

Feeling the smooth deep firmness of her breasts against my shoulders, my pajama'd back, sometimes, more daringly, against my ears and the sides of my cheeks. Tossing, tumbling, the soft gurgle of the water within its rubber casing. Sometimes the thin sound of her ring against the bedstead as she moves her hand up over my head. Her arm comes down across me, holding me to her for a moment, then quiets my frisking.

"All right, now."

I nuzzle against her sweetness, pretending not to hear.

"All right, now, I said; stop it. It's time to get up from this bed. Look lively, and mind you spill that water."

Before I can say anything she is gone in a great deliberate heave. The purposeful whip of her chenille robe over her warm flannel gown and the bed already growing cold beside me.

*"Wherever the bird with no feet flew she found trees with no limbs."*

## 4

When I was around the age of four or five, I would have given anything I had in the world except my mother, in order to have had a friend or a little sister. She would be someone I could talk to and play with, someone close enough in age to me that I would not have to be afraid of her, nor she of me. We would share our secrets with each other.

Even though I had two older sisters, I grew up feeling like an only child, since they were quite close to each other in age, and quite far away from me. Actually, I grew up feeling like an only planet, or some isolated world in a hostile, or at best, unfriendly, firmament. The fact that I was clothed, sheltered, and fed better than many other children in Harlem in those Depression years was not a fact that impressed itself too often upon my child's consciousness.

Most of my childhood fantasies revolved around how I might acquire this little female person for my companion. I concentrated upon magical means, having gathered early on that my family had no intention of satisfying this particular need of mine. The Lorde family was not going to expand any more.

The idea of having children was a pretty scary one, anyway, full of secret indiscretions peeked at darkly through the corner of an eye, as my mother and my aunts did whenever they passed a woman on the street who had one of those big, pushed-out-in-front, blouses that always intrigued me so. I wondered what great wrong these women had done, that this big blouse was a badge of, obvious as the dunce cap I sometimes had to wear in the corner at school.

Adoption was also out of the question. You could get a kitten from the corner grocery-store man, but not a sister. Like ocean cruises and boarding schools and upper berths in trains, it was not for us. Rich people, like Mr. Rochester in the movie *Jane Eyre*, lonely in their great tree-lined estates, adopted children, but not us.

Being the youngest in a West Indian family had many privileges but no rights. And since my mother was determined not to "spoil" me, even those privileges were largely illusory. I knew, therefore, that if my family were to acquire another little person voluntarily, that little person would most probably be a boy, and would most decidedly belong to my mother, and not to me.

I really believed, however, that my magical endeavors, done often enough, in the right way, and in the right places, letter-perfect and with a clean soul, would finally bring me a little sister. And I did mean little. I frequently imagined my little sister and I having fascinating conversations together while she sat cradled in the cupped palm of my hand. There she was, curled up and carefully shielded from the inquisitive eyes of the rest of the world, and my family in particular.

When I was three and a half and had gotten my first eyeglasses, I stopped tripping over my feet. But I still walked with my head down, all the time, counting the lines on the squares in the pavement of every street which I traveled, hanging onto the hand of my mother or one of my sisters. I had decided that if I could step on all the horizontal lines for one day, my little person would appear like a dream made real, waiting for me in my bed by the time I got home. But I always messed up, or skipped one, or someone pulled my arm at a crucial moment. And she never appeared.

Sometimes on Saturdays in winter, my mother made the three of us a little clay out of flour and water and Diamond Crystal Shaker Salt. I always fashioned tiny little figures out of my share of the mixture. I would beg or swipe a little vanilla

extract from my mother's shelf in the kitchen, where she kept her wonderful spices and herbs and extracts, and mix that with the clay. Sometimes I dabbed the figures on either side of the head behind the ears as I had seen my mother do with her glycerine and rosewater when she got dressed to go out.

I loved the way the rich, dark brown vanilla scented the flour-clay; it reminded me of my mother's hands when she made peanut brittle and eggnog at holidays. But most of all, I loved the live color it would bring to the pasty-white clay.

I knew for sure that real live people came in many different shades of beige and brown and cream and reddish tan, but nobody alive ever came in that pasty-white shade of flour and salt and water, even if they were called white. So the vanilla was essential if my little person was to be real. But the coloring didn't help either. No matter how many intricate rituals and incantations and spells I performed, no matter how many Hail Marys and Our Fathers I said, no matter what I promised god in return, the vanilla-tinted clay would slowly shrivel up and harden, turn gradually brittle and sour, and then crumble into a grainy flour dust. No matter how hard I prayed or schemed, the figures would never come alive. They never turned around in the cupped palm of my hand, to smile up at me and say "Hi."

I found my first playmate when I was around four years old. It lasted for about ten minutes.

It was a high winter noontime. My mother had bundled me up in my thick one-piece woolen snowsuit and cap and bulky scarf. Once she had inserted me into all this arctic gear, pulled rubber galoshes up over my shoes and wrapped yet another thick scarf around the whole as if to keep the mass intact, she planted me out upon the stoop of the apartment building while she dressed herself hurriedly. Although my mother never liked to have me out of her sight for any period of time, she did this to keep me from catching my death of cold from becoming overheated and then going outdoors.

After many weighty warnings to me not to move from that spot, dire descriptions of what would happen to me if I did, and how I was to yell if any strangers spoke to me, my mother disappeared down the few feet of hallway back to our apartment to get her coat and hat, and to check all the windows of the house to make sure that they were locked.

I loved these few minutes of freedom, and treasured them secretly. They were the only times I ever got to be outside with-

out my mother urging me along on my short stubby little legs that could never run fast enough to keep up with her purposeful strides. I sat quietly where she had put me on the slated top of the stone banisters of the stoop. My arms stuck out a little from my sides over the bulk of my clothing, my feet were heavy and awkward with sturdy shoes and galoshes, and my neck was stiffly encased in the woolen cap and wrapped scarf.

The sun shone with a winter milkiness onto the sidewalks across the street, and onto the few banks of dirty soot-covered snow that lined the sidewalks near the gutter's edge. I could see up to the corner of Lenox Avenue, about three houses away. At the corner near the building line, the Father Divine man ran his Peace Brother Peace shoe repair business from a ramshackled wooden kiosk heated by a small round stove. From the roof of the kiosk, a thin strand of smoke drifted upward. The smoke was the only sign of life and there was nobody on the street that I could see. I wished the street was warm and beautiful and busy, and that we were having cantaloupe for lunch instead of the hot homemade pea soup that was simmering on the back of the stove awaiting our return.

I had almost made a boat of newspaper just before I had to start being dressed to go out, and I wondered if my bits of newspaper would still be on the kitchen table when we got back, or was my mother even now sweeping them away into the garbage bag? Would I be able to rescue them before lunch or would there be nasty wet orange-peelings and coffee grounds all over them?

Suddenly I realized that there was a little creature standing on a step in the entryway of the main doors, looking at me with bright eyes and a big smile. It was a little girl. She was right away the most beautiful little girl I had ever seen alive in my life.

My lifelong dream of a doll-baby come to life had in fact come true. Here she stood before me now, smiling and pretty in an unbelievable wine-red velvet coat with a wide, wide skirt that flared out over dainty little lisle-stockinged legs. Her feet were clad in a pair of totally impractical, black patent-leather mary-jane shoes, whose silver buckles glinted merrily in the drab noon light.

Her reddish-brown hair was not braided in four plaits like mine, but framed her little pointy-chinned face, tight and curly. On her head sat a wine-colored velvet beret that matched her coat, and on the very top of that sat a big white fur pompom.

Even with decades of fashion between us now, and the dulling of time, it was the most beautiful outfit I had ever seen in my not quite five years of clothes-watching.

Her honey-brown skin had a ruddy glow that echoed the tones of her hair, and her eyes seemed to match both in a funny way that reminded me of my mother's eyes, the way, although light in themselves, they flashed alight in the sun.

I had no idea how old she was.

"What's your name? Mine's Toni."

The name called up a picture book I was just finished reading, and the image came out *boy*. But this delectable creature in front of me was most certainly a girl, and I wanted her for my very own—my very own what, I did not know—but for my very own self. I started to image in my head where I could keep her. Maybe I could tuck her up in the folds under my pillow, pet her during the night when everybody else was asleep, and I was fighting off nightmares of the devil riding me. Of course, I'd have to be careful that she didn't get squeezed into the cot in the morning, when my mother folded up my bed, covered it with an old piece of flowered cretonne bedspread and shoved the whole thing tidily into a corner behind the bedroom door. No, that certainly wouldn't work. My mother would most assuredly find her when, in my mother's way, she plumped up my pillows.

While I was trying to image a safe place to keep her by a rapid succession of pictures in my mind's eye, Toni had advanced towards me, and was now standing between my outspread snowsuited legs, her dark-bright fire-lit eyes on a level with my own. With my woolen mittens dangling down from cords which emerged from the cuffs at each of my wrists, I reached out my hands and lightly rubbed the soft velvet shoulders of her frock-coat up and down.

From around her neck hung a fluffy white fur muff that matched the white fur ball on the top of her hat. I touched her muff, too, and then raised my hand up to feel the fur pompom. The soft silky warmth of the fur made my fingers tingle in a way that the cold had not, and I pinched and fingered it until Toni finally shook her head free of my hand.

I began to finger the small shiny gold buttons on the front of her coat. I unbuttoned the first two of them at the top, just so I could button them back up again, pretending I was her mother.

"You cold?" I was looking at her pink and beige ears, now slowly turning rosy from the cold. From each delicate lobe hung a tiny gold loop.

"No," she said, moving even closer between my knees. "Let's play."

I stuck both of my hands into the holes of her furry muff, and she giggled delightedly as my cold fingers closed around her warm ones inside the quilted dark spaces of the fur. She pulled one hand out past mine and opened it in front of my face to reveal two peppermint lifesavers, sticky now from the heat of her palm. "Want one?"

I took one hand out of her muff, and never taking my eyes off her face, popped one of the striped candy rings into my mouth. My mouth was dry. I closed it around the candy and sucked, feeling the peppermint juice run down my throat, burning and sweet almost to the point of harshness. For years and years afterward, I always thought of peppermint lifesavers as the candy in Toni's muff.

She was beginning to get impatient. "Play with me, please?" Toni took a step backward, smiling, and I was terrified suddenly that she might disappear or run away, and the sunlight would surely vanish with her from 142nd Street. My mother had warned me not to move from that spot where she had planted me. But there was no question in my mind; I could not bear to lose Toni.

I reached out and pulled her back gently towards me, sitting her down crosswise upon my knees. She felt so light through the padding of my snowsuit that I thought she could blow away and I would not feel the difference between her being there and not being there.

I put my arms around her soft red velvet coat, and clasping my two hands together, I slowly rocked her back and forth the way I did with my sisters' big Coca-Cola doll that had eyes that opened and closed and that came down from the closet shelf every year around Christmas time. Our old cat Minnie the Moocher did not feel much lighter sitting on my lap.

She turned her face around to me with another one of her delighted laughs that sounded like the ice cubes in my father's nightly drink. I could feel the creeping warmth of her, slowly spreading all along the front of my body through the many layers of clothing, and as she turned her head to speak to me the damp warmth of her breath fogged up my spectacles a little in the crisp winter air.

I started to sweat inside my snowsuit as I usually did, despite the cold. I wanted to take off her coat and see what she had on underneath it. I wanted to take off all of her clothes, and touch her live little brown body and make sure she was real. My heart was bursting with a love and happiness for which I had no words. I unbuttoned the top buttons of her coat again.

"No, don't do that! My grandma won't like it. You can rock me some more." She cuddled down again into my arms.

I put my arms back around her shoulders. Was she really a little girl or a doll come alive? There was only one way I knew for sure of telling. I turned her over and put her across my knees. The light seemed to change around us on the stoop. I looked over once at the doorway leading into the hall, half-afraid of who might be standing there.

I raised up the back of Toni's wine-red velvet coat, and the many folds of her full-skirted green eyelet dress underneath. I lifted up the petticoats under that, until I could see her white cotton knickers, each leg of which ended in an embroidered gathering right above the elastic garters that held up her stockings.

Beads of sweat were running down my chest to be caught at my waist by the tight band of my snowsuit. Ordinarily I hated sweating inside my snowsuit because it felt like roaches were crawling down the front of me.

Toni laughed again and said something that I could not hear. She squirmed around comfortably on my knees and turned her head, her sweet face looking sideways up into mine.

"Grandma forgot my leggings at my house."

I reached up under the welter of dress and petticoats and took hold of the waistband of her knickers. Was her bottom going to be real and warm or turn out to be hard rubber, molded into a little crease like the ultimately disappointing Coca-Cola doll?

My hands were shaking with excitement. I hesitated a moment too long. As I was about to pull down Toni's panties I heard the main door open and out of the front hallway hurried my mother, adjusting the brim of her hat as she stepped out onto the stoop.

I felt caught in the middle of an embarrassing and terrible act from which there could be no hiding. Frozen, I sat motionless as Toni, looking up and seeing my mother, slid nonchalantly off my lap, smoothing down her skirts as she did so.

My mother stepped over to the two of us. I flinched, expecting instant retribution at her capable hands. But evidently the

enormity of my intentions had escaped my mother's notice. Perhaps she did not care that I was about to usurp that secret prerogative belonging only to mothers about to spank, or to nurses with thermometers.

Taking me by the elbow, my mother pulled me awkwardly to my feet.

I stood for a moment like a wool-encased snow-girl, my arm stuck out a little from my body and my legs spread slightly apart. Ignoring Toni, my mother started down the steps to the street. "Hurry now," she said, "you don't want to be late."

I looked back over my shoulder. The bright-eyed vision in the wine-red coat stood at the top of the stoop, and pulled one hand out of her white rabbit-fur muff.

"You want the other candy?" she called. I shook my head frantically. We were never supposed to take candy from any body and certainly not strangers.

My mother urged me on down the steps. "Watch where you're stepping, now."

"Can you come out and play tomorrow?" Toni called after me.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. My mother was already one step below, and her firm hand on my elbow kept me from falling as I almost missed a step. Maybe tomorrow. . .

Once on the street pavement, my mother resumed hold of my hand and sailed forth determinedly. My short legs in the bulky wrappings and galoshes chugged along, trying to keep up with her. Even when she was not in a hurry, my mother walked with a long and purposeful stride, her toes always pointed slightly outward in a ladylike fashion.

"You can't tarry, now," she said. "You know it's almost noon." Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

"What a shame, to let such a skinny little thing like that out in this weather with no snowsuit or a stitch of leggings on her legs. That's how among-you children catch your death of cold."

So I hadn't dreamed her. She had seen Toni too. (What kind of name anyway was that for a girl?) Maybe tomorrow. . .

"Can I have a red coat like hers, Mommy?"

My mother looked down at me as we stood waiting for the street light to change.

"How many times I tell you not to call me Mommy on the street?" The light changed, and we hurried forward.

I thought about my question very carefully as I scurried along, wanting to get it exactly right this time. Finally, I had it.

"Will you buy me a red coat, please, Mother?" I kept my eyes on the treacherous ground to avoid tripping over my galoshed feet, and the words must have been muffled or lost in the scarf around my neck. In any case, my mother hurried on in silence, apparently not hearing. Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow.

We had our split-pea soup, and hurriedly retraced our steps back to my sisters' school. But that day, my mother and I did not return directly home. Crossing over to the other side of Lenox Avenue, we caught the Number 4 bus down to 125th Street, where we went marketing at Weissbecker's for the weekend chicken.

My heart sank into hopelessness as I stood waiting, kicking my feet in the sawdust that covered the market's floor. I should have known. I had wanted too much for her to be real. I had wanted to see her again too much for it to ever happen.

The market was too warm. My sweaty skin itched in places I couldn't possibly scratch. If we were marketing today, that meant tomorrow would turn out to be Saturday. My sisters did not go to school on Saturday, which meant we couldn't go pick them up for lunch, which meant I would spend all day in the house because my mother had to clean and cook and we were never allowed out alone to play on the stoop.

The weekend was an eternity past which I could not see.

The following Monday I waited again on the stoop. I sat by myself, bundled up as usual, and nobody came except my mother.

I don't know how long I looked for Toni every day at noon-time, sitting on the stoop. Eventually, her image receded into that place from which all my dreams are made.

## 5

Until this day, the essence of sorrow and sadness like a Picasso painting still-lifed and forever living, is the forlorn and remembered sight of a discarded silk stocking brick-caught and hanging against the rain-windy side of the tenement building wall opposite our kitchen window from which I hung, suspended by one hand, screaming at my elder sister who had been left in charge of the three of us while my mother went out marketing.

What our interactions had been before is lost, but my mother ~~would come home just in time to pull me back inside the dark kitchen,~~

saving me from a one-story drop into the air shaft below. I don't remember the terror and fury, but I remember the whipping that both my sister and I got. More than that, I remember the sadness and the deprivation and the loneliness of that discarded, torn, and brick-caught silk stocking, broken and hanging against the wall in the tenement rain.

I was always very jealous of my two older sisters, because they were older and therefore more privileged, and because they had each other for a friend. They could talk to one another without censure or punishment, or so I thought.

As far as I was concerned, Phyllis and Helen led a magical and charmed existence down the hall in their room. It was tiny but complete, with privacy and a place to be away from the eternal parental eye which was my lot, having only the public parts of the house to play in. I was never alone, nor far from my mother's watchful eye. The bathroom door was the only door in the house that I was ever allowed to close behind me, and even that would be opened with an inquiry if I tarried too long on the toilet.

The first time I ever slept anywhere else besides in my parents' bedroom was a milestone in my journey to this house of myself. When I was four and five, my family went to the Connecticut shore for a week's vacation during the summer. This was much grander than a day's outing to Rockaway Beach or Coney Island, and much more exciting.

First of all, we got to sleep in a house that was not ours, and Daddy was with us during the day. Then there were strange new foods to sample, like blue soft-shelled crab, which my father ordered for his lunch and would sometimes persuade my mother to let me have a taste of. We children were not allowed such alien fare, but on Fridays we did have fried shrimp and little batter cakes with pieces of clam in them. They were good, and very different from my mother's codfish-and-potato fishcakes which were our favorite Friday dinner back home.

A shimmering glare of silver coats every beach in my mind's eye. Glistening childhood summers that sparkled like the thick glass spectacles I could not wear because of the dilating drops in my eyes.

The dilating drops were used by the Medical Center eye doctors to examine the progress of my eyes, and since the effects seem to have lasted for weeks, my memories of those early summers are of constantly squinting against the piercing agony of direct sunlight, while stumbling over objects that I could not

The crabshells in the sand were distinguished from the clamshells, not by shape, but by the different feel of them beneath my brown toes. Delicate crabshells crumpled up like glasspaper around my heels, while the tough little clamshells crunched a hard and sturdy sound from under the balls of my fat little feet.

An old beached boat, abandoned on its side, lay in the sand above high tide down the beach a little from the hotel, and there my mother sat, day after day, in her light cotton dresses. Her ankles were properly crossed and her arms folded as she watched my two sisters and I play at the water's edge. Her eyes would be very soft and peaceful as she gazed over the water, and I knew she was thinking of "home."

Once my daddy picked me up and carried me into the water, as I squealed with delight and fear at being so high up. He dropped me into the ocean, holding onto my arms, and I remember, as he raised me up, screaming in outrage at the burning taste of saltwater in my nostrils that made me want to fight or cry.

The first year there I slept in a cot in my parents' room, as usual, and I always went to bed before anyone else. Just as at home, the watery colors of twilight came in to terrify me, shining greenly through the buff-colored window-shades which were like closed eyes above my bed. I hated the twilight color and going to bed early, far from the comfortingly familiar voices of my parents, downstairs on the porch of this hotel which belonged to my father's real-estate buddy who was giving us a good deal for the week.

Those yellow-green window-shade twilights were the color of loneliness for me, and that has never left me. Everything else about that first summer week in Connecticut is lost to me, except the two photographs which show me, as usual, discontent and squinting up against the sun.

The second year we were even poorer, or maybe my father's real-estate friend had raised his prices. For whatever reason, the five of us shared one bedroom, and there was no space for an extra cot. The room had three windows in it, and two double beds that sagged ever so slightly in the middle of their white chenille-spread-covered expanses. My sisters and I shared one of these beds.

I was still put to bed earlier than my sisters, who were allowed to stay up and listen to "I Love a Mystery" on the old upright cabinet radio that sat in the living room downstairs near the porch window. Its soft tones would drift out across the porch

to the cretonne-covered rocking chairs lined up in a row in the soft-salty back-street shore-resort night.

I didn't mind the twilights so much that year. We had a back room and it got darker earlier, so it was always night by the time I went to bed. Unterrified by the twilight green, I had no trouble at all falling asleep.

My mother supervised the brushing of my teeth, and the saying of my prayers, and then after assuring herself that all was in order, she kissed me goodnight, and turned out the dim, unshaded bulb.

The door closed. I lay awake, rigid with excitement, waiting for "I Love a Mystery" to be over, and for my sisters to come and get into bed beside me. I made bargains with god to keep me awake. I bit my lips and pinched the soft fleshy parts of my palms with my fingernails, all to keep myself from falling asleep.

After an eternity of about thirty minutes, during which I reviewed the entire contents of my day, including what I should and shouldn't have done that I didn't or did do, I heard my sisters' footsteps in the hallway. The door to our room opened and they stepped into the darkness.

"Hey, Audre. You still wake?" That was Helen, four years older than me and the closest to me in age.

I was torn with indecision. What should I do? If I didn't answer, she might tickle my toes, and if I did answer, what should I say?

"Say, you wake?"

"No," I whispered in a squeaky little voice I thought consistent with a sleeping state.

"Sure enough, see, she still wake." I heard Helen's disgusted whisper to Phyllis, followed by the sharp intake of her breath as she sucked her teeth. "Look, her eyes wide open still."

The bed creaked on one side of me. "What you still doin' up, staring like a ninny? On the way in, you know, I told the boogiemani come bite your head off, and he comin' just now to get you good."

I felt the bed sag under the weight of both of their bodies, one on either side of me. My mother had decreed that I should sleep in the middle, to keep me from falling out of bed, as well as to separate my two sisters. I was so enchanted with the idea of sharing a bed with them that I couldn't have cared less. Helen reached over and gave me a little preliminary pinch.

"Ouch!" I rubbed my tender upper arm, now sore from her strong little piano-trained fingers. "Oh, I'm goin' to tell Mommy

how you pinching me and you goin' to get a whipping sure enough." And then, triumphantly, I played my hole card. "And too besides, I'm goin' to tell her what among-you doing in bed every night!"

"Go ahead, ninny, run your mouth. You goin' to run it once too often 'til it drop off your face and then just see how it's goin' to gobble up you toes!" Helen sucked her teeth again, but moved her hand away.

"Oh, just go to sleep now, Audre." That was Phyllis, my eldest sister, who was always the peacemaker, the placid, reasonable, removed one. But I knew perfectly well what I had pinched my palms to stay awake for, and I was waiting, barely able to contain myself.

For that summer, in that hot back room of a resort slum, I had finally found out what my sisters did at home at night in that little room they shared at the end of the hall, that enticing little room which I was never allowed to enter except by an invitation that never came.

They told each other stories. They told each other stories in endless installments, making up the episodes as they went along, from fantasies engendered by the radio adventure shows to which we were all addicted in those days.

There was "Buck Rogers," and "I Love a Mystery," "Jack Armstrong, All-American Boy," "The Green Hornet," and "Quiet Please." There was "The FBI in Peace and War," "Mr. District Attorney," "The Lone Ranger," and my all-time favorite, "The Shadow," whose power to cloud men's minds so they could not see him was something I did not stop lustng for until quite recently.

I thought that the very idea of telling stories and not getting whipped for telling untrue was the most marvelous thing I could think of, and every night that week I begged to be allowed to listen, not realizing that they couldn't stop me. Phyllis didn't mind so long as I kept my mouth shut, but by bedtime Helen had had enough of a pesky little sister and my endless stream of questions. And her stories were always far and away the best, filled with tough little girls who masqueraded in boys' clothing and always foiled the criminals, managing to save the day. Phyllis's hero was a sweet strong boy of few words named George Vaginius.

"Please, Phyllis?" I wheedled. There was a long moment of quiet, with Helen sucking her teeth ominously, then Phyllis, whispering, "All right. Who' turn it is tonight?"

"I'm not saying a word 'til she asleep!" That was Helen, determined.

"Please Phyllis, please let me listen?"

"No! No such thing!" Helen was adamant. "I know you too well in the dark to have to shine a light on you!"

"Please, Phyllis, I promise I be quiet." I could feel Helen swelling up beside me like a bullfrog, but I persisted, not realizing or caring that my appeal to Phyllis's authority as the elder sister only infuriated Helen even more.

Phyllis was not only softhearted, but very practical, with the pragmatic approach of an eleven-year-old West Indian woman.

"Now you promise you never goin' to tell?"

I felt like I was being inducted into the most secret of societies.

"Cross my heart." Catholic girls never hoped to die.

Helen was obviously not convinced. I stifled a squeak as she nipped me again with her fingers, this time on the thigh.

"I'm getting tired of all this, you know. So if you ever so much as breathe a *word* about my stories, Sandman's comin' after you the very same minute to pluck out you eyes like a mackerel for soup." And Helen smacked her lips suggestively, giving way with a parting shot.

I could just see those little white rubbery eyeballs swimming about in the bottom of the Friday night fish stew, and I shuddered.

"I promise, Helen, cross my heart. I don't say a word to nobody, and I'll be so quiet, you'll see." I put both of my hands up across my mouth in the darkness, jittering with anticipation.

It was Helen's turn to begin.

"Where were we, now? Oh yes, so me and Buck had just fetched back the sky-horse when Doc. . ."

I could not resist. Down came my hands.

"No, no, Helen, not yet. Don't you remember? Doc hadn't gotten there yet, because. . ." I didn't want to miss a single thing.

Helen's little brown fingers shot across the bedclothes and gave me such a nip on the buttocks that I screeched in pain. Her voice was high and indignant and full of helpless fury.

"You see that? You see that? What I tell you, Phyllis?" She was almost wailing in fury. "I knew it! She can't keep that miserable tongue in she mouth one minute. Sure enough, I told you so, didn't I? Didn't I? And now too besides she want to steal me story!"

"Sh-h-h-h! The two-a-you! Mommy's comin' back here just now, and among-you two goin' to make us all catch hell!"

But Helen wasn't going to play any more. I felt her flop over on her side with her disgruntled back towards me, and then I could feel our bed shaking with her angry sobs of rage, muffled in the sweaty pillow.

I could have kicked myself. "I truly sorry, Helen," I ventured. And I really was, because I realized that my big mouth had done me out of a night's installment, and probably of all the installments for the rest of the week. I also knew that Mother would never let me out of her sight the next day long enough for me to catch up to my sisters, as they ran off down the beach to complete their tale in secret.

"Honest, I didn't mean to, Helen." I tried one last time, reaching over to touch her. But Helen jerked her body sharply backward and her butt caught me in the stomach. I heard her still outraged warning hissed through clenched teeth.

"And don't you dare pat me!" I had been on the receiving end of her fingers often enough to know when to leave well enough alone.

So I turned over on my stomach, said goodnight to Phyllis, and finally went to sleep, too.

The next morning, I woke up before either Phyllis or Helen. I lay in the middle of the bed, being careful not to touch either one of them. Staring up at the ceiling, I listened to my father snoring, in the next bed, and to the sound of my mother's wedding ring hitting the headboard in her sleep, as she flung her arm across her eyes against the morning light. I relished the quiet, the new smells of strange bedclothes and sea-salty air, and the frank beams of yellow sunlight pouring through the high windows like a promise of endless day.

Right then and there, before anybody else woke up, I decided to make up a story of my own.

## 6

In the Harlem summers of my earliest days, I walked between my two sisters while they plotted the overthrow of universes, in the casual make-believe language of comic books. For those comic books, the other reigning and possessive passion of our summer days besides the library, we walked for miles uphill. With determination and

great resolve, we trudged up Sugar Hill, 145th Street from Lenox to Amsterdam, to trade in old comic books at the used comic-book store up on Amsterdam Avenue in Washington Heights, which was an all-white section of town then, in those days before the war, and which is where my mother now lives.

The store was run by a fat white man with watery eyes and a stomach that hung over his belt like badly made jello. He tore the covers off the leftover comic books and sold the books at half-price, or exchanged them for other old comics in good condition, one for two. There were rows and rows and rows of table bins with garish, frontless comics in them, and as soon as my sisters took off down one of the rows for their favorites, Buck Rogers and Captain Marvel, I started searching for pictures of Bugs Bunny. The old man followed me down the aisle, puffing his evil cigar.

I tried to run back to my sisters, but it was too late. His bulk took up the whole row, and I was painfully aware that I was not supposed to have left their sides, anyway.

"Lemme help you up, sweetheart, you can see better." And I felt his slabby fingers like sausages grab my ribs and hoist me through a sickening arc of cigar fumes to the edge of the bins full of Bugs Bunny and Porky Pig comics. I seized whichever was nearest and squirmed to be put down, frantic for the feeling of the floor under my feet once more, and sickened by the squishy touch of his soft belly against the small of my back.

His nasty fingers moved furtively up and down my body, now trapped between his pressing bulges and the rim of the bin. By the time he loosened his grip and allowed me to slide down to the blessed floor, I felt dirtied and afraid, as if I had just taken part in some filthy rite.

I soon learned I could avoid him by staying close to my sisters. If I ran out the other end of the row he would not follow, but then when my sisters finally tallied up their transactions, there would be no extra one tossed in, "for the little sweetheart." The slabby fingers and the nauseating hoist were the price I paid for a torn and faceless copy of an old Bugs Bunny comic. For years I had nightmares of being hoisted up to the ceiling and having no way of getting down again.

It was a day's journey up the hill for us, three little brown girls, one not even yet able to read. But it was a summer outing, and better than sitting at home until our mother came back from the office or from marketing. We were never allowed to go out and simply play in the street. It was a day's journey there

and back again, across the two flat crosstown blocks to Eighth Avenue where the Father Divine shoe repair booth stood, and then up the endless hills, block after crosstown block.

Sometimes, when my mother announced to my father after dinner our planned journey the next day, they would slip into patois for a brief consultation. By searching their faces carefully, I could tell they were discussing whether or not they could afford to spare the few cents necessary to finance the expedition.

At other times, we were commissioned by our father to drop off his shoes at the Father Divine booth to be half-soled. That would also include a shoeshine, an allowable extravagance because it only cost three cents and a Peace, Brother, Peace salutation.

Right after breakfast was cleared away, my mother left to go down to the office and we walked with her as far as the corner. Then the three of us turned left to 145th Street, past the Lido Bowling Palace, a few bars and some indeterminate candy-grocery stores whose largest turnover was in little white slips with numbers scrawled upon them.

Three plump little Black girls, dimpled knees scrubbed and oiled to a shine, hair tightly braided and tied with threads. Our seersucker sunsuits, mother-made, were not yet an embarrassment to my budding older sister.

We trudged up the hill past the Stardust Lounge, Micky's Hair-Styling—Hot and Cold Press, the Harlem Bop Lounge, the Dream Café, the Freedom Barber Shop, and the Optimo Cigar Store which seemed to decorate every important street corner of those years. There was the Aunt May Eat Shoppe, and Sadie's Ladies and Children's Wear. There was Lum's Chop Suey Bar, and the Shiloh Baptist Mission Church painted white with colored storefront windows, the Record Store with its big radio chained outside setting a beat to the warming morning sidewalk. And on the corner of Seventh Avenue as we waited for the green light arm in arm, the yeasty and suggestively mysterious smell issuing from the cool dark beyond the swinging half-doors of the Noon Saloon.

We started up the hill, which was really six hills. Standing up at the bottom on Eighth Avenue and looking upward in the bright sunlight seemed like forever. Vertical trolley tracks dissected the hills. The sidewalks were ribbons of pavement and people. Halfway up the hill on the right side, between Bradhurst and Edgecombe Avenues, was the broad expanse of tufted green, surrounded by a high wrought-iron fence, that was Colo-

nial Park. It was not a public park, or at least it was not free. Since we never had the ten cents admission price, we had never been inside.

My arm was sore from being pulled along, but that was the price I had to pay if I dared fall behind. Just as taking me along was the price my literate, comic-book-reading sisters had to pay if they wanted to go out at all. I was always much too out of breath to complain.

We crossed over the busy thoroughfare of 145th Street, all holding hands. We paused halfway up the hills at Bradhurst, to press our faces against the wrought-iron bars around Colonial Park. I could barely hear the splashing of cool bright water and the liquid laughter rising up from the half-hidden private swimming pool. But even those faint sounds of coolness drifted greenly toward our dry mouths. By that time it seemed as if we had been walking forever. The sun beat down without mercy straight out of the sky over Colonial Park. There was no shade anywhere. But beside the park, the air was somewhat cooler. We hung around for a while even though there were no benches outside. The busy life of the Harlem thoroughfare swept along past us.

Despite Mother's cautionings not to tarry, we lingered near the green pool's fresh smell. The bags of comic books were jealously guarded in the hands of each of my sisters, and in my sweaty hands I clutched a bag of saltines and three bananas for a snack. Our lunch was prepared and waiting at home.

We each had a saltine cracker, leaning against the railing of the park. My sister Helen fussed at me because I had mashed up all the crackers by swinging the bag back and forth in time to my trot. We brushed off the crumbs with the napkin in the bag, and then continued our journey up the seemingly endless hills.

Finally we reached the crest of Amsterdam Avenue. On the clearest days, I could stand on tiptoe and look westward, barely sighting along the buildings across Broadway to Riverside Drive. Behind the drive's sharp dip of trees was the faint, almost imagined, line of water that was the Hudson River. For years, whenever I heard the song "America the Beautiful," I would think of those moments standing on the crest of Amsterdam Avenue. In my mind, the phrase "from sea to shining sea" was visualized as from the East to the Hudson Rivers.

As we waited for the light to change on the corner of Amsterdam and 145th, I turned around and looked back down the long narrow valley of 145th Street. My eyes took in the blocks

teeming with cars and horse-drawn wagons and people, straight across and down the hill all the way past Colonial Park and Father Divine and the drugstore on Lenox Avenue to the bridge across the Harlem River leading to the Bronx.

I shook with a sudden spasm of terror. Suppose I fell down at that crucial point? I could roll down hill after successive hill all the way back across Lenox Avenue, and if I happened to miss the bridge I could roll right on into the water. Everyone would jump out of my pathway on the way down the hills, just like the people did in the picture book *Johnny Cake*. They would jump aside to keep from being knocked over and crushed by the screaming little fat girl on her slide down to the Harlem River waters.

No one would catch me or hold me or save me, and eventually I would float slowly out to sea past the Armory at 142nd Street and the water's edge, where my father drilled regularly on weekends with the Black Home Guard. I would be carried out to the ocean on that treacherous current that flowed through the Harlem River from a mythic place called the "Spitting Devil" which our father had cautioned us about; this current which had claimed so many of our classmates every summer before the Harlem River Drive was finally built, cutting off access to the free cooling waters of the river for all those hot and dusty little Black children with no dime to buy the doors open into the green coolness of the Colonial Park pool and no sisters to take them comic-book trading.

**7** War came to our house on the radio one Sunday afternoon after church, sometime between "Olivio, the Boy Yodeler," and the Moylan Sisters. It was Pearl Harbor Sunday.

"The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor," my father announced gravely, as he came in from showing a house to a prospective buyer, making a beeline for the radio.

"Where's that?" Helen asked, looking up from trying to fit her cat Cleo into a dress she had just made for the animal.

"That must be why we can't get Olivio," Phyllis said, with a disappointed sigh. "I *thought* something was the matter because he always comes on this time."

And my mother left the parlor to check out her store of coffee and sugar under the sink in the kitchen.

I sat on the floor with my back against the wooden cabinet radio, *The Blue Fairy Book* in my lap. I loved to read and listen to the radio at the same time, feeling the vibrations of sound through my back like an activating background to the pictures that streamed through my head, spun by the fairy tales. I looked up, momentarily confused and disoriented as I usually was when I stopped reading suddenly. Had trolls really attacked a harbor where some hidden treasure of pearls was buried?

I could tell something real and terrible had happened from the smell in the living-room air, and from the tight grave lowering of my father's voice as he searched back and forth over the radio dials for Gabriel Heatter or H. V. Kaltenborn or some other one of his favorite news commentators. They were his constant links with the outside world, second only to the *New York Times*. And I could tell something real and terrible must have happened because neither "The Lone Ranger" nor "The Shadow" nor "This Is Your FBI" came on that night.

Instead, in newscast after newscast, grave and excited voices were talking of death and destruction and casualties and burning ships and brave men and war. I finally put down my fairy tales to listen more intently, captivated and frightened by the high drama swirling around me, and for once wise enough to keep my mouth shut. But my parents were too engrossed in the reports to think of banishing me to the kitchen. Even supper was later than usual that night.

My mother said something in patois and my father answered. Watching their eyes I could tell they were talking about the office and money. My mother got up and went back to the kitchen.

"Bee, it's time to eat," my mother called, finally, reappearing at the parlor door. "There's nothing we can do about this."

"You said it, Lin. But war is here." My father reached over and clicked off the radio, and we all went into the kitchen to supper.

A few days later, after school, all the students were lined up in the auditorium, class by class, and the nuns issued us little cream-colored bone discs that were engraved in blue ink with name, address, age, and something called *blood type*. Each one of us was to wear this disc around the neck on a long nickel

chain with no catch, and this was never never to be taken off for the duration, under pain of mortal sin, or worse.

That phrase, *for the duration*, began to assume a tangible life and energy all its own, like *infinity*, or *forever*.

The nuns told us that gas masks were coming later, and we should all pray that we did not have to do like the poor little english children did—leave their parents and be sent away into the countryside for safety. In my secret heart of hearts I thought that was a very exciting prospect, and hoped it might come to pass. I bent my head with the others, but could not bring myself to pray that it wouldn't happen.

Then we said another ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys for the souls of the brave young men who had lost their lives at Pearl Harbor the Sunday before, and then five more of each for the starving children in Europe.

When we had finished praying, we all stood up, and Mother Josepha showed us how to cross our arms over our chests and touch the opposite shoulder, the safest position in case we fell while running. Then we practiced how to run to the basement of the church through a connecting passageway during an air-raid drill. We practiced air-raid drills until we could do them absolutely silently and quickly. I began to be impressed with the seriousness of it all, as this went on for what felt like hours, while our mothers sat and waited in the auditorium. It was almost twilight by the time we were finally on our way home through the December cold, and the streets looked odd and eerie with the streetlamps dimmed and already capped on top, and the store windows shrouded in the blackout.

The following spring, all the mothers were asked to come to school on some regular basis to help watch the skies for enemy aircraft that might have slipped by our shore defenses. Mothers all over New York City were doing the same thing from the roofs of schoolhouses. Because of the careful censorship of the news, I don't think any of us, including our parents, realized how real a threat offshore shelling was, for there actually were german submarines in Long Island Sound. All we knew was that, perched as it was on the east coast facing Europe, New York City was a prime target for bombing.

Even simple conversation became suspect. *Silence was golden*, didn't all the posters say so? Despite the fact that I had no secrets at all to tell, I always felt a pang of self-righteous pleasure whenever I passed the corner lamp post at 140th Street and

Lenox Avenue. From it hung a brightly colored sign of a white man with his fingers to his lips. Beneath his half-turned face in big block letters it warned: A SLIP OF THE LIP MAY SINK A SHIP! I felt my silences socially and patriotically endorsed.

But meanwhile, life went on almost as usual, and it was hard at seven to distinguish between this real-life drama and the ones I was addicted to on the radio.

The mothers at St. Mark's watched for enemy planes from a roof culvert that adjoined the third grade classroom and was reached through a doorway in the front of our room. We had spelling right before lunch in the third grade, and my mother's turn to watch was from 11:00 A.M. to 12 noon.

I bent over my spelling book in the warm spring light, my stomach grumbling and anxious for lunch. Just outside the window, I could see my mother standing in her dowdy dark woolen suit and her severe cuban-heeled oxfords, a rakishly brimmed but no-nonsense hat shading her hawk-grey eyes. Her arms were folded across her ample chest as she frowned up at the sky intently from under the brim of her hat, daring any enemy plane to appear.

I was bursting with pride that this important woman was my mother. She was the only mother in my class who watched for airplanes, and was also involved with the mysterious process of giving out ration books from an official-looking table set up in the back of the school auditorium, on a special day set aside for that purpose. And, she was the only mother I knew who sat behind another table every Election Day in the lobby of the infamous public school, checking off voters in huge magic books, and guarding the magical, grey-curtained voting booths. Even though she was the only mother I knew who never wore lipstick, not even for Mass on Sundays, still, she was also the only mother I knew who "went to business" every day.

I was very proud of her, but sometimes, just sometimes, I wished she would be like all the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and home-baked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blonde smiling mother in *Dick and Jane*.

On catholic holidays or half-days when I was off from school, I loved to go down to the office with my mother and sit behind my father's oaken desk, in his great wooden swivel chair, watching my mother write out rent receipts, or interview prospective tenants, or argue imperiously with the coal delivery man over whether the coal should be dumped on the sidewalk or into the coal bin under the street.

During the war years, I remember days of standing beside my mother in front of the huge plate glass windows that swiveled inward, now taped up against the cold. We waited anxiously, watching up Lenox Avenue for the first glimpse of the Public Fuel coal truck that might bring whatever poor-grade coal was left from the "war-effort" to take the chill off the rooms in those dreary rooming houses that she and Daddy managed. Sometimes my father would join us; more often he was either showing a house or out on some real-estate business, or doing some minor repair work in one of the rundown houses. As labor demands increased and the war went on, my father was in the office less and less, because he had taken a night job as a maintenance man in a war plant out in Queens which made aluminum fittings for airplanes. He worked the night shift, and then came to the office early in the morning straight from the war plant. He did whatever repairs or work was needed, checking for leaks in the houses' plumbing in summer and frozen pipes in the winter. Then if he did not have another appointment to show a house, he went upstairs to a vacant room and caught a few hours sleep, while my mother came to the office and took care of business. If he had a real-estate appointment, he went upstairs to the room to shave and wash and change his clothes and then went out again, returning to the office in the afternoon to sleep for a few hours.

At noontime when my mother brought us back home for lunch, she busily reheated and packed up a hot meal for my father. It usually consisted of leftovers from supper the night before, or some delicacy that she had prepared earlier that morning. She packed the food into bottles and wrapped towels around them to keep it warm, and after she dropped us off at school, she would continue on her way back to the office and either wake my father up, or await his return.

She did the books, dealt with problems, sewed sheets and pillowcases on the Singer sewing machine kept in the back room, and made up rooms upstairs. If the woman who had been hired to clean was absent that day, my mother cleaned whatever rooms were vacant. It was soon time to fetch us home from school, ten blocks away.

Somedays, when time and need permitted or demanded, she walked to the market on 125th Street to try and find a piece of meat for supper, or some fresh fish and vegetables from the West Indian markets along the way. After marketing, she caught the bus back uptown to meet us at school, her arms heavy with

shopping bags. On those days, her face was drawn and tired and her eyes particularly fierce as she stepped off the bus at the corner of 138th Street where the three of us stood, silently waiting and watching for her. I would try to read and decipher the expression on my mother's face as soon as the bus stopped and she slowly descended the steps, shopping bags banging the sides of her legs. The look on her face would tell me what the tenor of our seven-block walk home would be like. A tight drawn mouth often meant a whipping for one of us, usually me, whether or not we helped her carry the packages.

Once in the house, discipline and reprimands all had to be postponed until supper was prepared and put on the stove to cook. Then the bad reports that had been given to my sisters about me that day at school would be trotted out and examined, and my mother's heavy-handed household justice would ensue.

At other times, for particularly wicked and sinful infractions, the ominous verdict would be "Wait until your father comes home." My father never hit us. There was a myth abroad among the relatives that Uncle Lorde was so strong if he ever laid a hand upon you he might kill you. But his very presence at the administering of punishment made that whipping somehow official and therefore all the more terrifying and terrible. Probably the postponement and dread expectation accomplished the same effect.

Whether it was true or not about my father's killing power I do not know. He was a very large, strong man, and his six-foot-four-inch frame in the beach pictures of that period do not show much fat. His eyes were small but piercing, and when he set his mammoth jaw and dropped his voice to the hoarse, intense low that signified he meant business, he was very scary.

I remember one light-hearted evening before the war when my father returned home from the office. I was sitting on my mother's lap while she brushed my hair. My father picked us up together and swung us over his head, laughing and calling us his "excess baggage." I remember being delighted and thrilled at his attention, as well as terrified by the familiar surroundings suddenly turning *cro-bo-so*.

During the war, my father was almost never at home in the evenings, except on weekends, so punishment, by and large, became much more immediate.

As the war lengthened, more and more money came into circulation among Black people, and my father's real-estate business got better and better. After the race riots of 1943, the area

around Lenox Avenue and 142nd Street became known as the “gutbucket” of Harlem. My family moved “up the hill,” the same long series of hills that my sisters and I used to traverse on summer days to trade comic books.

## 8

As a child, the most horrible condition I could contemplate was being wrong and being discovered. Mistakes could mean exposure, maybe even annihilation. In my mother’s house, there was no room in which to make errors, no room to be wrong.

I grew Black as my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing—copying from my mother what was in her, unfulfilled. I grew Black as *Seboulisa*, who I was to find in the cool mud halls of Abomey several lifetimes later—and, as alone. My mother’s words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white man’s tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time. All the colors change and become each other, merge and separate, flow into rainbows and nooses.

*I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street unacknowledged and unadmitted.* How much of this is the pretense of self-rejection that became an immovable protective mask, how much the programmed hate that we were fed to keep ourselves a part, apart?

One day (I remember I was still in the second grade) my mother was out marketing, and my sisters were talking about someone being *Colored*. In my six-year-old way, I jumped at this chance to find out what it was all about.

“What does *Colored* mean?” I asked. To my amazement, neither one of my sisters was quite sure.

“Well,” Phyllis said. “The nuns are white, and the Short-Neck Store-Man is white, and Father Mulvoy is white and we’re Colored.”

“And what’s Mommy? Is she white or Colored?”

“I don’t know,” answered Phyllis impatiently.

“Well,” I said, “If anybody asks me what I am, I’m going to tell them I’m white same as Mommy.”

"Ohhhhhhhh, girl, you better not do that," they both chorused in horror.

"Why not?" I asked, more confused than ever. But neither of them could tell me why.

That was the first and only time my sisters and I discussed race as a reality in my house, or at any rate as it applied to ourselves.

Our new apartment was on 152nd Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway in what was called Washington Heights, and already known as a "changing" neighborhood, meaning one where Black people could begin to find overpriced apartments out of the depressed and decaying core of Harlem.

The apartment house that we moved into was owned by a small landlord. We moved at the end of the summer, and I began school that year in a new catholic school which was right across the street from our house.

Two weeks after we moved into the new apartment, our landlord hanged himself in the basement. The *Daily News* reported that the suicide was caused by his despondency over the fact that he finally had to rent to Negroes. I was the first Black student in St. Catherine's School, and all the white kids in my sixth grade class knew about the landlord who had hanged himself in the basement because of me and my family. He had been Jewish; I was Black. That made us both fair game for the cruel curiosity of my pre-adolescent classmates.

Ann Archdeacon, red-headed darling of the nuns and of Monsignor Brady, was the first one to ask me what I knew about the landlord's death. As usual, my parents had discussed the whole matter in patois, and I only read the comics in the daily paper.

"I don't know anything about it," I said, standing in the schoolyard at lunchtime, twisting my front braids and looking around for some friendly face. Ann Archdeacon snickered, and the rest of the group that had gathered around us to hear roared with laughter, until Sister Blanche waddled over to see what was going on.

If the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament at St. Mark's School had been patronizing, at least their racism was couched in the terms of their mission. At St. Catherine's School, the Sisters of Charity were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it. I got no help at home. The children in my class made fun

of my braids, so Sister Victoire, the principal, sent a note home to my mother asking her to comb my hair in a more "becoming" fashion, since I was too old, she said, to wear "pigtails."

All the girls wore blue gabardine uniforms that by springtime were a little musty, despite frequent drycleanings. I would come in from recess to find notes in my desk saying "You Stink." I showed them to Sister Blanche. She told me that she felt it was her christian duty to tell me that Colored people *did* smell different from white people, but it was cruel of the children to write nasty notes because I couldn't help it, and if I would remain out in the yard the next day after the rest of the class came in after lunchtime, she would talk to them about being nicer to me!

The head of the parish and the school was Monsignor John J. Brady, who told my mother when she registered me that he had never expected to have to take Colored kids into his school. His favorite pastime was holding Ann Archdeacon or Ilene Crimmons on his lap, while he played with their blonde and red curls with one hand, and slid the other hand up the back of their blue gabardine uniforms. I did not care about his lechery, but I did care that he kept me in every Wednesday afternoon after school to memorize latin nouns.

The other children in my class were given a cursory quiz to test their general acquaintance with the words, and then let go early, since it was the early release day for religious instruction.

I came to loathe Wednesday afternoons, sitting by myself in the classroom trying to memorize the singular and plural of a long list of latin nouns, and their genders. Every half-hour or so, Father Brady would look in from the rectory, and ask to hear the words. If I so much as hesitated over any word or its plural, or its gender, or said it out of place on the list, he would spin on his black-robed heel and disappear for another half-hour or so. Although early dismissal was at 2:00 P.M., some Wednesdays I didn't get home until after four o'clock. Sometimes on Wednesday nights I would dream of the white, acrid-smelling mimeograph sheet: *agricola*, *agricolae*, fem., farmer. Three years later when I began Hunter High School and had to take latin in earnest, I had built up such a block to everything about it that I failed my first two terms of it.

When I complained at home about my treatment at school, my mother would get angry with me.

"What do you care what they say about you, anyway? Do they put bread on your plate? You go to school to learn, so

learn and leave the rest alone. You don't need friends." I did not see her helplessness, nor her pain.

I was the smartest girl in the class, which did nothing to contribute to my popularity. But the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament had taught me well, and I was way ahead in math and mental arithmetic.

In the spring of the sixth grade, Sister Blanche announced that we were going to hold elections for two class presidents, one boy and one girl. Anyone could run, she said, and we would vote on Friday of that week. The voting should be according to merit and effort and class spirit, she added, but the most important thing would be marks.

Of course, Ann Archdeacon was nominated immediately. She was not only the most popular girl in the school, she was the prettiest. Ilene Crimmons was also nominated, her blonde curls and favored status with the Monsignor guaranteed that.

I lent Jim Moriarty ten cents, stolen from my father's pocket at lunchtime, so Jim nominated me. A titter went through the class, but I ignored it. I was in seventh heaven. I knew I was the smartest girl in the class. I had to win.

That afternoon when my mother came home from the office, I told her about the election, and how I was going to run, and win. She was furious.

"What in hell are you doing getting yourself involved with so much foolishness? You don't have better sense in your head than that? What-the-france do you need with election? We send you to school to work, not to prance about with president-this election-that. Get down the rice, girl, and stop talking your foolishness." We started preparing the food.

"But I just might win, Mommy. Sister Blanche said it should go to the smartest girl in the class." I wanted her to see how important it was to me.

"Don't bother me with that nonsense. I don't want to hear any more about it. And don't come in here on Friday with a long face, and any 'I didn't win, Mommy,' because I don't want to hear that, either. Your father and I have enough trouble to keep among-you in school, never mind election."

I dropped the subject.

The week was a very long and exciting one for me. The only way I could get attention from my classmates in the sixth grade was by having money, and thanks to carefully planned forays into my father's pants pockets every night that week, I made sure I had plenty. Every day at noon, I dashed across the street,

gobbled down whatever food my mother had left for my lunch, and headed for the schoolyard.

Sometimes when I came home for lunch my father was asleep in my parents' bedroom before he returned to work. I now had my very own room, and my two sisters shared another. The day before the election, I tiptoed through the house to the closed french doors of my parents' bedroom, and through a crack in the portières peeked in upon my sleeping father. The doors seemed to shake with his heavy snoring. I watched his mouth open and close a little with each snore, stentorian rattles erupting below his nuzzled moustache. The covers thrown partially back, to reveal his hands in sleep tucked into the top of his drawstring pajamas. He was lying on his side toward me, and the front of his pajama pants had fallen open. I could see only shadows of the vulnerable secrets shading the gap in his clothing, but I was suddenly shaken by this so-human image of him, and the idea that I could spy upon him and he not be aware of it, even in his sleep. I stepped back and closed the door quickly, embarrassed and ashamed of my own curiosity, but wishing his pajamas had gapped more so that I could finally know what exactly was the mysterious secret men carried between their legs.

When I was ten, a little boy on the rooftop had taken off my glasses, and so seeing little, all I could remember of that encounter, when I remembered it at all, was a long thin pencil-like thing that I knew couldn't have any relationship to my father.

Before I closed the door, though, I slipped my hand around the door-curtains to where Daddy's suit hung. I separated a dollar bill from the thin roll which he carried in his pants pocket. Then I retreated back into the kitchen, washed my plate and glass, and hurried back to school. I had electioneering to do.

I knew better than to say another word to my mother about the presidency, but that week was filled with fantasies of how I would break the news to her on Friday when she came home.

"Oh, Mommy, by the way, can I stay later at school on Monday for a presidents' meeting?" Or "Mother, would you please sign this note saying it is all right for me to accept the presidency?" Or maybe even, "Mother, could I have a little get-together here to celebrate the election?"

On Friday, I tied a ribbon around the steel barrette that held my unruly mass of hair tightly at the nape of my neck. Elections were to be held in the afternoon, and when I got home for lunch, for the first time in my life, I was too excited to eat. I buried the can of Campbell's soup that my mother had left out

for me way behind the other cans in the pantry and hoped she had not counted how many were left.

We filed out of the schoolyard and up the stairs to the sixth grade room. The walls were still lined with bits of green from the recent St. Patrick's Day decorations. Sister Blanche passed out little pieces of blank paper for our ballots.

The first rude awakening came when she announced that the boy chosen would be president, but the girl would only be vice-president. I thought this was monstrously unfair. Why not the other way around? Since we could not, as she explained, have two presidents, why not a girl president and a boy vice-president? It doesn't really matter, I said to myself. I can live with being vice-president.

I voted for myself. The ballots were collected and passed to the front of the room and duly counted. James O'Connor won for the boys. Ann Archdeacon won for the girls. Ilene Crimmons came in second. I got four votes, one of which was mine. I was in shock. We all clapped for the winners, and Ann Archdeacon turned around in her seat and smiled her shit-eating smile at me. "Too bad you lost." I smiled back. I wanted to break her face off.

I was too much my mother's daughter to let anyone think it mattered. But I felt I had been destroyed. How could this have happened? I was the smartest girl in the class. I had not been elected vice-president. It was as simple as that. But something was escaping me. Something was terribly wrong. It wasn't fair.

A sweet little girl named Helen Ramsey had decided it was her christian duty to befriend me, and she had once lent me her sled during the winter. She lived next to the church, and after school, that day, she invited me to her house for a cup of cocoa. I ran away without answering, dashing across the street and into the safety of my house. I ran up the stairs, my bookbag banging against my legs. I pulled out the key pinned to my uniform pocket and unlocked the door to our apartment. The house was warm and dark and empty and quiet. I did not stop running until I got to my room at the front of the house, where I flung my books and my coat in a corner and collapsed upon my convertible couch-bed, shrieking with fury and disappointment. Finally, in the privacy of my room, I could shed the tears that had been burning my eyes for two hours, and I wept and wept.

I had wanted other things before that I had not gotten. So much so, that I had come to believe if I really wanted something badly enough, the very act of my wanting it was an assurance

that I would not get it. Was this what had happened with the election? Had I wanted it too much? Was this what my mother was always talking about? Why she had been so angry? Because wanting meant I would not get? But somehow this felt different. This was the first time that I had wanted something so badly, the getting of which I was sure I could control. The election was supposed to have gone to the smartest girl in the class, and I was clearly the smartest. That was something I had done, on my own, that should have guaranteed me the election. The smartest, not the most popular. That was me. But it hadn't happened. My mother had been right. I hadn't won the election. My mother had been right.

This thought hurt me almost as much as the loss of the election, and when I felt it fully I shrieked with renewed vigor. I luxuriated in my grief in the empty house in a way I could never have done if anyone were home.

All the way up front and buried in my tears, kneeling with my face in the cushions of my couch, I did not hear the key in the lock, nor the main door open. The first thing I knew, there was my mother standing in the doorway of my room, a frown of concern in her voice.

"What happened, what happened? What's wrong with you? What's this racket going on here?"

I turned my wet face up to her from the couch. I wanted a little comfort in my pain, and getting up, I started moving toward her.

"I lost the election, Mommy," I cried, forgetting her warnings. "I'm the smartest girl in class, Sister Blanche says so, and they chose Ann Archdeacon instead!" The unfairness of it all flooded over me again and my voice cracked into fresh sobs.

Through my tears, I saw my mother's face stiffen with rage. Her eyebrows drew together as her hand came up, still holding her handbag. I stopped in my tracks as her first blow caught me full on the side of my head. My mother was no weakling, and I backed away, my ears ringing. The whole world seemed to be going insane. It was only then I remembered our earlier conversations.

"See, the bird forgets, but the trap doesn't! I warned you! What you think you doing coming into this house wailing about election? If I told you once I have told you a hundred times, don't chase yourself behind these people, haven't I? What kind of ninny raise up here to think those good-for-nothing white piss-jets would pass over some little jacabat girl to elect you

anything?" Smack! "What did I say to you just now?" She cuffed me again, this time on my shoulders, as I huddled to escape her rain of furious blows, and the edges of her pocketbook.

"Sure enough, didn't I tell you not to come in here bringing down tears over some worthless fool election?" Smack! "What the hell you think we send you to school for?" Smack! "Don't run yourself behind other people's business, you'll do better. Dry up, now, dry up!" Smack! She pulled me to my feet from where I had sunk back onto the couch.

"Is cry you want to cry? I'll give you something hard to cry on!" And she cuffed me again, this time more lightly. "Now get yourself up from there and stop acting like some stupid fool, worrying yourself about these people's business that doesn't concern you. Get-the-france out of here and wipe up your face. Start acting like a human being!"

Pushing me ahead of her, my mother marched back through the parlor and into the kitchen. "I come in here tired from the street and here you, acting like the world is ending. I thought sure enough some terrible thing happened to you, come to find out it's only election. Now help me put away this foodstuff."

I was relieved to hear her tone mollify, as I wiped my eyes. But I still gave her heavy hands a wide berth.

"It's just that it's not fair, Mother. That's all I was crying about," I said, opening the brown paper bags on the table. To admit I had been hurt would somehow put me in the wrong for feeling pain. "It wasn't the election I cared about so much really, just that it was all so unfair."

"Fair, fair, what's fair, you think? Is fair you want, look in god's face." My mother was busily dropping onions into the bin. She paused, and turning around, held my puffy face up, her hand beneath my chin. Her eyes so sharp and furious before, now just looked tired and sad.

"Child, why you worry your head so much over fair or not fair? Just do what is for you to do and let the rest take care of themselves." She smoothed straggles of hair back from my face, and I felt the anger gone from her fingers. "Look, you hair all mess-up behind from rolling around with foolishness. Go wash your face and hands and come help me dress this fish for supper."

## 9

Except for political matters, my father was a man of few words. But he carried on extensive conversations with himself in the bathroom every morning.

During the last years of the war, my father could be found more often away from home than not, or at best, sleeping a few hours before going back out to his night job at the war plant.

My mother would rush home from the office, market, fuss with us a little, and fix supper. Phyllis, Helen, or I would have put on the rice or potatoes already, and maybe my mother had seasoned some meat earlier in the day and left it on the stove with a note for one of us to turn on the fire low under the pot when we came home. Or perhaps there would be something left on purpose from last night's supper ("Leave some of that for your father's dinner tomorrow!"). On those afternoons, I didn't wait for my mother to come home. Instead, I packed the food up myself and took off downtown on the bus, headed for my father's office.

I heated each separate portion until it was piping hot. Carefully, I packed the hot rice and savory bits of meat stew or spicy chicken and gravy into scoured milk bottles which we saved for that purpose. I packed the vegetables separately in their own bottle, with a little pat of butter if we could get it, or margarine, on top. I wrapped each bottle in layers of newspapers, and then in an old towel, to keep the food warm. Placing them in a shopping bag together with the shirt and sweater that my mother had left for me to take to my father, I set off by bus down to the office, heavy with a sense of mission and accomplishment.

The bus from Washington Heights ran downtown and across 125th Street. I got off at Lenox Avenue, and walked the three blocks up to the office, past bars and grocery stores and small groups of people in lively conversation on the street.

Sometimes when I arrived, my father was downstairs in the office already, poring over receipt books or taxes or bills. Sometimes he was still asleep in a room upstairs, and the janitor had to go up and knock on the room door to waken him. I was never allowed to go upstairs, nor to enter the room where my father slept. I always wondered what mysteries occurred "upstairs," and what it was up there my parents never wanted me to see. I think it was that same vulnerability that had so shocked

and embarrassed me the day I peered into their bedroom at home. His ordinary humanity.

When my father came downstairs, I kissed him hello, and he went into the back of the office to wash his face and hands preparatory to eating. I spread out the meal carefully, on a special desk in the back room. If anyone came in to see my father while he was eating, I wrote out a receipt, proudly, or relayed the message to him in the back room. For my father, eating was too human a pastime to allow just anyone to see him at it.

If no one came in, I sat quietly in the back room and watched him eat. He was meticulously neat, placing his bones in even rows on the paper towel beside his plate. Sometimes my father looked up and saw me watching him, and he reached out and gave me a morsel of meat or a taste of rice and gravy from his plate.

Other times I sat with my book, quietly reading, but secretly waiting and hoping for this special treat. Even if I had already just eaten the same food, or even if it was some dish I did not particularly like, these tastes of my father's food from his plate in the back room of his office had an enchantment to them that was delicious and magical, and precious. They form the fondest and closest memories I have of warm moments shared with my father. There were not many.

When my father was finished with his meal, I rinsed out the bottles, and washed his dish and silverware. I placed them back upon the shelf especially cleared for them, and covered them with the cloth napkin that was kept there for that purpose, to protect them from the dust of the back room. I carefully repacked the bottles into the shopping bag, and took the nickel carfare that my father gave me for the bus trip back. I kissed him goodbye and headed for home.

Sometimes no more than two or three sentences passed between us during the whole time we were together in the office. But I remember those evenings, particularly in the springtime, as very special and satisfying times.

# 10

The first time I went to Washington, D.C. was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child. At least that's what they said to us all at graduation from the eighth grade. My sister Phyllis graduated at the same time from high school. I don't know what she was supposed to stop being. But as graduation presents for us both, the whole family took a Fourth of July trip to Washington, D.C., the fabled and famous capital of our country.

It was the first time I'd ever been on a railroad train during the day. When I was little, and we used to go the Connecticut shore, we always went at night on the milk train, because it was cheaper.

Preparations were in the air around our house before school was even over. We packed for a week. There were two very large suitcases that my father carried, and a box filled with food. In fact, my first trip to Washington was a mobile feast; I started eating as soon as we were comfortably ensconced in our seats, and did not stop until somewhere after Philadelphia. I remember it was Philadelphia because I was disappointed not to have passed by the Liberty Bell.

My mother had roasted two chickens and cut them up into dainty bite-size pieces. She packed slices of brown bread and butter and green pepper and carrot sticks. There were little violently yellow iced cakes with scalloped edges called "marigolds," that came from Cushman's Bakery. There was a spice bun and rock-cakes from Newton's, the West Indian bakery across Lenox Avenue from St. Mark's School, and iced tea in a wrapped mayonnaise jar. There were sweet pickles for us and dill pickles for my father, and peaches with the fuzz still on them, individually wrapped to keep them from bruising. And, for neatness, there were piles of napkins and a little tin box with a washcloth dampened with rosewater and glycerine for wiping sticky mouths.

I wanted to eat in the dining car because I had read all about them, but my mother reminded me for the umpteenth time that dining car food always cost too much money and besides, you never could tell whose hands had been playing all over that food, nor where those same hands had been just before. My mother never mentioned that Black people were not allowed into railroad dining cars headed south in 1947. As usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention.

I learned later that Phyllis's high school senior class trip had been to Washington, but the nuns had given her back her deposit in private, explaining to her that the class, all of whom were white, except Phyllis, would be staying in a hotel where Phyllis "would not be happy," meaning, Daddy explained to her, also in private, that they did not rent rooms to Negroes. "We will take among-you to Washington, ourselves," my father had avowed, "and not just for an overnight in some measly fleabag hotel."

American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *why* was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will. Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, I was supposed to know without being told. It always seemed like a very strange injunction coming from my mother, who looked so much like one of those people we were never supposed to trust. But something always warned me not to ask my mother why she wasn't white, and why Auntie Lillah and Auntie Etta weren't, even though they were all that same problematic color so different from my father and me, even from my sisters, who were somewhere in-between.

In Washington, D. C. we had one large room with two double beds and an extra cot for me. It was a back-street hotel that belonged to a friend of my father's who was in real estate, and I spent the whole next day after Mass squinting up at the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson had sung after the D.A.R. refused to allow her to sing in their auditorium because she was Black. Or because she was "Colored," my father said as he told us the story. Except that what he probably said was "Negro," because for his times, my father was quite progressive.

I was squinting because I was in that silent agony that characterized all of my childhood summers, from the time school let out in June to the end of July, brought about by my dilated and vulnerable eyes exposed to the summer brightness.

I viewed Julys through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country.

My parents did not approve of sunglasses, nor of their expense.

I spent the afternoon squinting up at monuments to freedom and past presidencies and democracy, and wondering why the light and heat were both so much stronger in Washington, D. C. than back home in New York City. Even the pavement on the streets was a shade lighter in color than back home.

Late that Washington afternoon my family and I walked back down Pennsylvania Avenue. We were a proper caravan, mother bright and father brown, the three of us girls step-standards in-between. Moved by our historical surroundings and the heat of the early evening, my father decreed yet another treat. He had a great sense of history, a flair for the quietly dramatic and the sense of specialness of an occasion and a trip.

"Shall we stop and have a little something to cool off, Lin?"

Two blocks away from our hotel, the family stopped for a dish of vanilla ice cream at a Breyer's ice cream and soda fountain. Indoors, the soda fountain was dim and fan-cooled, deliciously relieving to my scorched eyes.

Corded and crisp and pinafored, the five of us seated ourselves one by one at the counter. There was I between my mother and father, and my two sisters on the other side of my mother. We settled ourselves along the white mottled marble counter, and when the waitress spoke at first no one understood what she was saying, and so the five of us just sat there.

The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. "I said I kin give you to take out, but you can't eat here. Sorry." Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed, and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the same time, loud and clear.

Straight-backed and indignant, one by one, my family and I got down from the counter stools and turned around and marched out of the store, quiet and outraged, as if we had never been Black before. No one would answer my emphatic questions with anything other than a guilty silence. "But we hadn't done anything!" This wasn't right or fair! Hadn't I written poems about Bataan and freedom and democracy for all?

My parents wouldn't speak of this injustice, not because they had contributed to it, but because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it. This made me even angrier. My fury was not going to be acknowledged by a like fury. Even my two sisters copied my parents' pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had occurred. I was left to write my angry letter to the president of the united states all by myself, although

my father did promise I could type it out on the office typewriter next week, after I showed it to him in my copybook diary.

The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D. C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all.

## 11

When I was growing up in my mother's house, there were spices you grated and spices you pounded, and whenever you pounded spice and garlic or other herbs, you used a mortar. Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar. Now if you lost or broke your mortar, you could, of course, buy another one in the market over on Park Avenue, under the bridge, but those were usually Puerto Rican mortars, and even though they were made out of wood and worked exactly the same way, somehow they were never really as good as West Indian mortars. Now where the best mortars came from I was never really sure, but I knew it must be in the vicinity of that amorphous and mystically perfect place called "home." And whatever came from "home" was bound to be special.

My mother's mortar was an elaborate affair, quite at variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with her projected public view of herself. It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly.

The mortar was of a foreign fragrant wood, too dark for cherry and too red for walnut. To my child eyes, the outside was carved in an intricate and most enticing manner. There were rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear. In between these were smaller rounded shapes like cherries, lying in batches against and around each other.

I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval but suddenly businesslike. The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object always made me feel secure and

somehow full; as if it conjured up from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall, visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come.

The pestle was long and tapering, fashioned from the same mysterious rose-deep wood, and fitted into the hand almost casually, familiarly. The actual shape reminded me of a summer crook-necked squash uncurled and slightly twisted. It could also have been an avocado, with the neck of the alligator pear elongated and the whole made efficient for pounding, without ever losing the apparent soft firmness and the character of the fruit which the wood suggested. It was slightly bigger at the grinding end than most pestles, and the widened curved end fitted into the bowl of the mortar easily. Long use and years of impact and grinding within the bowl's worn hollow had softened the very surface of the wooden pestle, until a thin layer of split fibers coated the rounded end like a layer of velvet. A layer of the same velvety mashed wood lined the bottom inside the sloping bowl.

My mother did not particularly like to pound spice, and she looked upon the advent of powdered everything as a cook's boon. But there were some certain dishes that called for a particular savory blending of garlic, raw onion, and pepper, and souse was one of them.

For our mother's souse, it didn't matter what kind of meat was used. You could have hearts, or beefends, or even chicken backs and gizzards when we were really poor. It was the pounded-up saucy blend of herb and spice rubbed into the meat before it was left to stand so for a few hours before cooking that made that dish so special and unforgettable. But my mother had some very firm ideas about what she liked best to cook and about which were her favorite dishes, and souse was definitely not one of either.

On the very infrequent occasions that my mother would allow one of us three girls to choose a meal—as opposed to helping to prepare it, which was a daily routine—on those occasions my sisters would usually choose one of those proscribed dishes so dear to our hearts remembered from our relatives' tables, contraband, and so very rare in our house. They might ask for hot dogs, perhaps, smothered in ketchup sauce, or with crusty Boston-baked beans; or american chicken, breaded first and fried crispy the way the southern people did it; or creamed something-or-other that one of my sisters had tasted at school;

what-have-you croquettes or anything fritters; or once even a daring outrageous request for slices of fresh watermelon, hawked from the back of a rickety wooden pickup truck with the southern road-dust still on her slatted sides, from which a young bony Black man with a turned-around baseball cap on his head would hang and half-yell, half-yodel—"Wahr—deeeeeeee—mayyyyyy—lawnnnnnnn."

There were many american dishes I longed for too, but on the one or two occasions a year that I got to choose a meal, I would always ask for souse. That way, I knew that I would get to use my mother's mortar, and this in itself was more treat for me than any of the forbidden foods. Besides, if I really wanted hot dogs or anything croquettes badly enough, I could steal some money from my father's pocket and buy them in the school lunch.

"Mother, let's have souse," I'd say, and never even stop to think about it. The anticipated taste of the soft spicy meat had become inseparable in my mind from the tactile pleasures of using my mother's mortar.

"But what makes you think anybody can find time to mash up all that stuff?" My mother would cut her hawk-grey eyes at me from beneath their heavy black brows. "Among-you children never stop to think," and she'd turn back to whatever it was she had been doing. If she had just come from the office with my father, she might be checking the day's receipts, or she might be washing the endless piles of dirty linen that always seemed to issue from rooming-houses.

"Oh, I'll pound the garlic, Mommy!" would be my next line in the script written by some ancient and secret hand, and off I'd go to the cabinet to get down the heavy wooden mortar and pestle.

I took a head of garlic out from the garlic bottle in the ice-box, and breaking off ten or twelve cloves from the head, I carefully peeled away the tissue lavender skin, slicing each stripped peg in half lengthwise. I dropped them piece by piece into the capacious waiting bowl of the mortar. Taking a slice from a small onion, I put the rest aside to be used later over the meat, and cutting the slice into quarters, I tossed it into the mortar also. Next came the coarsely ground fresh black pepper, and then a lavish blanketing cover of salt over the whole. Last, if we had any, a few leaves from the top of a head of celery. My mother sometimes added a slice of green pepper, but I did not

like the texture of the pepper-skin under the pestle, and preferred to add it along with the sliced onion later on, leaving it all to sit over the seasoned and resting meat.

After all the ingredients were in the bowl of the mortar, I fetched the pestle and placing it into the bowl, slowly rotated the shaft a few times, working it gently down through all the ingredients to mix them. Only then would I lift the pestle, and with one hand firmly pressed around the carved side of the mortar caressing the wooden fruit with my aromatic fingers, I thrust sharply downward, feeling the shifting salt and the hard little pellets of garlic right up through the shaft of the wooden pestle. Up again, down, around, and up—so the rhythm began.

The *thud push rub rotate up* repeated over and over. The muted thump of the pestle on the bed of grinding spice as the salt and pepper absorbed the slowly yielding juices of the garlic and celery leaves.

*Thud push rub rotate up.* The mingling fragrances rising from the bowl of the mortar.

*Thud push rub rotate up.* The feeling of the pestle held between my curving fingers, and the mortar's outside rounding like fruit into my palm as I steadied it against my body.

All these transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied.

Sometimes my mother would look over at me with that amused annoyance which passed for tenderness.

"What you think you making there, garlic soup? Enough, go get the meat now." And I would fetch the lamb hearts, for instance, from the icebox and begin to prepare them. Cutting away the hardened veins at the top of the smooth firm muscles, I divided each oval heart into four wedge-shaped pieces, and taking a bit of the spicy mash from the mortar with my fingertips, I rubbed each piece with the savory mix, the pungent smell of garlic and onion and celery enveloping the kitchen.

The last day I ever pounded seasoning for souse was in the summer of my fifteenth year. It had been a fairly unpleasant summer for me. I had just finished my first year in high school. Instead of being able to visit my newly found friends, all of whom lived in other parts of the city, I had had to accompany my mother on a round of doctors with whom she would have long whispered conversations. Only a matter of utmost importance could have kept her away from the office for so many mornings in a row. But my mother was concerned because I

was fourteen and a half years old and had not yet menstruated. I had breasts but no period, and she was afraid there was something "wrong" with me. Yet, since she had never discussed this mysterious business of menstruation with me, I was certainly not supposed to know what all this whispering was about, even though it concerned my own body.

Of course, I knew as much as I could have possibly found out in those days from the hard-to-get books on the "closed shelf" behind the librarian's desk at the public library, where I had brought a forged note from home in order to be allowed to read them, sitting under the watchful eye of the librarian at a special desk reserved for that purpose.

Although not terribly informative, they were fascinating books, and used words like *menses* and *ovulation* and *vagina*.

But four years before, I had had to find out if I was going to become pregnant, because a boy from school much bigger than me had invited me up to the roof on my way home from the library and then threatened to break my glasses if I didn't let him stick his "thing" between my legs. And at that time I knew only that being pregnant had something to do with sex, and sex had something to do with that thin pencil-like "thing" and was in general nasty and not to be talked about by nice people, and I was afraid my mother might find out and what would she do to me then? I was not supposed to be looking at the mailboxes in the hallway of that house anyway, even though Doris was a girl in my class at St. Mark's who lived in that house and I was always so lonely in the summer, particularly that summer when I was ten.

So after I got home I washed myself up and lied about why I was late getting home from the library and got a whipping for being late. That must have been a hard summer for my parents at the office too, because that was the summer that I got a whipping for something or other almost every day between the Fourth of July and Labor Day.

When I wasn't getting whippings, I hid out at the library on 135th Street, and forged notes from my mother to get books from the "closed shelf," and read about sex and having babies, and waited to become pregnant. None of the books were very clear to me about the relationship between having your period and having a baby, but they were all very clear about the relationship between penises and getting pregnant. Or maybe the confusion was all in my own mind, because I had always been a very fast but not a very careful reader.

So four years later, in my fifteenth year, I was a very scared little girl, still half-afraid that one of that endless stream of doctors would look up into my body and discover my four-year-old shame and say to my mother, "Aha! So that's what's wrong! Your daughter is about to become pregnant!"

On the other hand, if I let Mother know that I knew what was happening and what these medical safaris were all about, I would have to answer her questions about how and wherefore I knew, since she hadn't told me, divulging in the process the whole horrible and self-incriminating story of forbidden books and forged library notes and rooftops and stairwell conversations.

It was a year after the rooftop incident, when we had moved farther uptown. The kids at St. Catherine's seemed to know a lot more about sex than at St. Mark's. In the eighth grade, I had stolen money and bought my classmate Adeline a pack of cigarettes and she had confirmed my bookish suspicions about how babies were made. My response to her graphic descriptions had been to think to myself, *there obviously must be another way that Adeline doesn't know about, because my parents have children and I know they never did anything like that!* But the basic principles were all there, and sure enough they were the same as I had gathered from *The Young People's Family Book*.

So in my fifteenth summer, on examining table after examining table, I kept my legs open and my mouth shut, and when I saw blood on my pants one hot July afternoon, I rinsed them out secretly in the bathroom and put them back on wet because I didn't know how to break the news to my mother that both her worries and mine were finally over. (All this time I had at least understood that having your period was a sign you were not pregnant.)

What then happened felt like a piece of an old and elaborate dance between my mother and me. She discovers finally, through a stain on the toilet seat left there on purpose by me as a mute announcement, what has taken place; she scolds, "Why didn't you tell me about all of this, now? It's nothing to get upset over, you are a woman, not a child anymore. Now you go over to the drugstore and ask the man for . . ."

I was just relieved the whole damn thing was over with. It's difficult to talk about double messages without having a twin tongue. Nightmarish evocations and restrictions were being verbalized by my mother:

"This means from now on you better watch your step and not be so friendly with every Tom, Dick, and Harry . . ." (which must have meant my staying late after school to talk with my girlfriends, because I did not even know any boys); and, "Now remember, too, after you wrap up your soiled napkins in newspaper, don't leave them hanging around on the bathroom floor where your father has to see them, not that it's anything shameful but all the same, remember . . ."

Along with all of these admonitions, there was something else coming from my mother that I could not define. It was the lurking of that amused/annoyed brow-furrowed half-smile of hers that made me feel—all her nagging words to the contrary—that something very good and satisfactory and pleasing to her had just happened, and that we were both pretending otherwise for some very wise and secret reasons. I would come to understand these reasons later, as a reward, if I handled myself properly. Then, at the end of it all, my mother thrust the box of Kotex at me (I had fetched it in its plain wrapper back from the drugstore, along with a sanitary belt), saying to me,

"But look now what time it is already, I wonder what we're going to eat for supper tonight?" She waited. At first I didn't understand, but I quickly picked up the cue. I had seen the beefends in the icebox that morning.

"Mommy, please let's have some souse—I'll pound the garlic." I dropped the box onto a kitchen chair and started to wash my hands in anticipation.

"Well, go put your business away first. What did I tell you about leaving that lying around?" She wiped her hands from the washtub where she had been working and handed the plain wrapped box of Kotex back to me.

"I have to go out, I forgot to pick up tea at the store. Now make sure you rub the meat good."

When I came back into the kitchen, my mother had left. I moved toward the kitchen cabinet to fetch down the mortar and pestle. My body felt new and special and unfamiliar and suspect all at the same time.

I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my body back and forth, like lunar winds across the moon's face. I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious.

Years afterward when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other's most secret places.

I took the mortar down, and smashed the cloves of garlic with the edge of its underside, to loosen the thin papery skins in a hurry. I sliced them and flung them into the mortar's bowl along with some black pepper and celery leaves. The white salt poured in, covering the garlic and black pepper and pale chartreuse celery fronds like a snowfall. I tossed in the onion and some bits of green pepper and reached for the pestle.

It slipped through my fingers and clattered to the floor, rolling around in a semicircle back and forth, until I bent to retrieve it. I grabbed the head of the wooden stick and straightened up, my ears ringing faintly. Without even wiping it, I plunged the pestle into the bowl, feeling the blanket of salt give way, and the broken cloves of garlic just beneath. The downward thrust of the wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly, and then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat. Back and forth, round, up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down. . . . There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous.

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer.

The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, now pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice. And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information.

The jarring shocks of the velvet-lined pestle, striking the bed of spice, traveled up an invisible pathway along the thread into the center of me, and the harshness of the repeated impacts became increasingly more unbearable. The tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of the strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition my downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler, until its velvety surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar.

The whole rhythm of my movements softened and elongated, until, dreamlike, I stood, one hand tightly curved around the carved mortar, steadyng it against the middle of my body; while my other hand, around the pestle, rubbed and pressed the moistening spice into readiness with a sweeping circular movement.

I hummed tunelessly to myself as I worked in the warm kitchen, thinking with relief about how simple my life would be now that I had become a woman. The catalogue of dire menstruation-warnings from my mother passed out of my head. My body felt strong and full and open, yet captivated by the gentle motions of the pestle, and the rich smells filling the kitchen, and the fullness of the young summer heat.

I heard my mother's key in the lock.

She swept into the kitchen briskly, like a ship under full sail. There were tiny beads of sweat over her upper lip, and vertical creases between her brows.

"You mean to tell me no meat is ready?" My mother dropped her parcel of tea onto the table, and looking over my shoulder, sucked her teeth loudly in weary disgust. "What do you call yourself doing, now? You have all night to stand up there playing with the food? I go all the way to the store and back already and still you can't mash up a few pieces of garlic to season some meat? But you know how to do the thing better than this! Why you vex me so?"

She took the mortar and pestle out of my hands and started to grind vigorously. And there were still bits of garlic left at the bottom of the bowl.

"Now you do, so!" She brought the pestle down inside the bowl of the mortar with dispatch, crushing the last of the garlic. I heard the thump of wood brought down heavily upon wood, and I felt the harsh impact throughout my body, as if some-

thing had broken inside of me. Thump, thump, went the pestle, purposefully, up and down in the old familiar way.

"It was getting mashed, Mother," I dared to protest, turning away to the icebox. "I'll fetch the meat." I was surprised at my own brazenness in answering back.

But something in my voice interrupted my mother's efficient motions. She ignored my implied contradiction, itself an act of rebellion strictly forbidden in our house. The thumping stopped.

"What's wrong with you, now? Are you sick? You want to go to your bed?"

"No, I'm all right, Mother."

But I felt her strong fingers on my upper arm, turning me around, her other hand under my chin as she peered into my face. Her voice softened.

"Is it your period making you so slow-down today?" She gave my chin a little shake, as I looked up into her hooded grey eyes, now becoming almost gentle. The kitchen felt suddenly oppressively hot and still, and I felt myself beginning to shake all over.

Tears I did not understand started from my eyes, as I realized that my old enjoyment of the bone-jarring way I had been taught to pound spice would feel different to me from now on, and also that in my mother's kitchen there was only one right way to do anything. Perhaps my life had not become so simple, after all.

My mother stepped away from the counter and put her heavy arm around my shoulders. I could smell the warm harness rising from between her arm and her body, mixed with the smell of glycerine and rosewater, and the scent of her thick bun of hair.

"I'll finish up the food for supper." She smiled at me, and there was a tenderness in her voice and an absence of annoyance that was welcome, although unfamiliar.

"You come inside now and lie down on the couch and I'll make you a hot cup of tea."

Her arm across my shoulders was warm and slightly damp. I rested my head upon her shoulder, and realized with a shock of pleasure and surprise that I was almost as tall as my mother, as she led me into the cool darkened parlor.

# 12

At home, my mother said, "Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers." She meant white people, like the woman who tried to make me get up and give her my seat on the Number 4 bus, and who smelled like cleaning fluid. At St. Catherine's, they said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers," and they meant non-catholics. In high school, the girls said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers," and they meant men. My friends said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers," and they meant the squares.

But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust.

In high school, my best friends were "The Branded," as our sisterhood of rebels sometimes called ourselves. We never talked about those differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the *others*. My friends and I talked about who studied german or french, who liked poetry or doing "the twist," who went out with boys, and who was "progressive." We even talked about our position as women in a world supposed to be run by men.

But we never ever talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and white, and the effects that had on our being friends. Of course, everybody with any sense deplored racial discrimination, theoretically and without discussion. We could conquer it by ignoring it.

I had grown up in such an isolated world that it was hard for me to recognize difference as anything other than a threat, because it usually was. (The first time I saw my sister Helen in the tub naked I was almost fourteen, and I thought she was a witch because her nipples were pale pink against her light brown breasts, not deeply purple like mine.) But sometimes, I was close to crazy with believing that there was some secret thing wrong with me personally that formed an invisible barrier between me and the rest of my friends, who were white. What was it that kept people from inviting me to their houses, their parties, their summer homes for a weekend? Was it that their mothers did not like them to have friends, the way my mother didn't? Did their mothers caution them about never trusting outsiders? But they visited each other. There was something here that I was missing. Since the only place I couldn't see clearly was behind my own eyes, obviously the trouble was with me. I had no words for racism.

On the deepest level, I probably knew then what I know now. But it was not serviceable to my child's mind to understand, and I needed too much to remain a child for a little bit more.

We were The Branded, the Lunatic Fringe, proud of our outrageousness and our madness, our bizarre-colored inks and quill pens. We learned how to mock the straight set, and how to cultivate our group paranoia into an instinct for self-protection that always stopped our shenanigans just short of expulsion. We wrote obscure poetry and cherished our strangeness as the spoils of default, and in the process we learned that pain and rejection hurt, but that they weren't fatal, and that they could be useful since they couldn't be avoided. We learned that not feeling at all was worse than hurting. At that time, suffering was clearly what we did best. We became The Branded because we learned how to make a virtue out of it.

*How meager the sustenance was I gained from the four years I spent in high school; yet, how important that sustenance was to my survival. Remembering that time is like watching old pictures of myself in a prison camp picking edible scraps out of the garbage heap, and knowing that without that garbage I might have starved to death. The overwhelming racism of so many of the faculty, including the ones upon whom I had my worst schoolgirl crushes. How little I settled for in the way of human contact, compared to what I was conscious of wanting.*

*It was in high school that I came to believe that I was different from my white classmates, not because I was Black, but because I was me.*

For four years, Hunter High School was a lifeline. No matter what it was in reality, I got something there I needed. For the first time I met young women my own age, Black and white, who spoke a language I could usually understand and reply within. I met girls with whom I could share feelings and dreams and ideas without fear. I found adults who tolerated my feelings and ideas without punishment for insolence, and even a few who respected and admired them.

Writing poetry became an ordinary effort, not a secret and rebellious vice. The other girls at Hunter who wrote poetry did not invite me to their homes, either, but they did elect me literary editor of the school arts magazine.

By my sophomore year in high school, I was in open battle on every other front in my life except school. Relationships with my family had come to resemble nothing so much as a West Indian version of the Second World War. Every conversa-

tion with my parents, particularly with my mother, was like a playback of the Battle of the Bulge in Black panorama with stereophonic sound. Blitzkrieg became my favorite symbol for home. I fantasized all my dealings with them against a backdrop of Joan of Arc at Rheims or the Revolutionary War.

I cleaned my flintlocks nightly, and poured my lead-mold bullets after midnight when everybody else in my family was asleep. I had discovered a new world called voluntary aloneness. After midnight was the only time it was possible in my family's house. At any other time, a closed door was still considered an insult. My mother viewed any act of separation from her as an indictment of her authority. I was allowed to shut my door to my room only while I was doing my homework and not for a moment longer. My room opened into the living room, and an hour after dinner I could hear my mother calling me.

"What's that door still closed about? You not finished your homework still?"

I came to the door of my room. "I'm still studying, Mother, I have a geometry test tomorrow."

"You can't bring the book and study out here? Look your sister working on the couch."

A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence for which the punishment was swift and painful. In my junior year, I was grateful for the advent of television into our house. It gave me an excuse to retreat into my room and close my door for an acceptable reason.

When I finally went to bed, scenes of violence and mayhem peopled my nightmares like black and white pepper. Frequently I woke to find my pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds during the night, or damp and saturated with the acrid smell of tears and the sweat of terror.

I unzipped my pillow-covering and washed it by hand surreptitiously every weekend when I changed my bedlinen. I hung it on the back of the radiator in my room to dry. That pillow-covering became a heavy, unbleached muslin record of all the nightly blitzes of my emotional war. Secretly, I rather enjoyed the rank and pungent smells of my pillowcase, even the yeasty yellow stains that were left after my blood was washed away. Unsightly as they were, the stains, like the smells, were evidence of something living, and I so often felt that I had died and wakened up in a hell called home.

I memorized Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "Renascence," all eight pages. I said it to myself often. The words were so

beautiful they made me happy to hear, but it was the sadness and the pain and the renewal that gave me hope.

For east and west will pinch the heart  
that cannot keep them pushed apart  
and he whose soul is flat, the sky  
will cave in on him, by and by.

My mother responded to these changes in me as if I were a foreign hostile.

I tried confiding in a guidance counselor at school. She was also the head of the English department, who kept telling me that I could do much better work if I tried, and that I could really be a credit to my people.

“Are you having trouble at home, dear?”

How did she know? Maybe she could help, after all. I poured my heart out to her. I told her all my unhappiness. I told her about my mother’s strictness and meanness and unfairness at home, and how she didn’t love me because I was bad and I was fat, not neat and well-behaved like my two older sisters. I told Mrs. Flouton I wanted to leave home when I was eighteen, or go away to school, but my mother didn’t want me to.

The sounds of traffic outside the window on Lexington Avenue grew louder. It was 3:30. Mrs. Flouton looked at her watch.

“We’ll have to stop now, dear. Why don’t you ask your mother to drop in to see me tomorrow? I’m sure we can fix this little problem.”

I didn’t know which problem she meant, but her condescending smile was sweet, and it felt good for once to have a grown-up on my side.

Next day, my mother left the office early and came to Hunter. The night before I had told her Mrs. Flouton wanted to see her. She fixed me with a piercing look from out of the corner of her tired eyes.

“Don’t tell me you’re making trouble again in this school, too?”

“No, Mother, it’s just about going to college.” Somebody on my side. I sat outside the guidance room door while my mother was inside talking to Mrs. Flouton.

The door opened. My mother sailed out of the office and headed for the school exit without so much as a look at me. Oh boy. Was I going to be allowed to go away to school if I could get a scholarship?

I caught up with my mother at the door leading to the street.

"What did Mrs. Flouton say, Mother? Can I go away to college?"

Just before the street, my mother finally turned to me, and I saw with a shock that her eyes were red. She had been crying. There was no fury in her voice, only heavy, awful pain. All she said to me before she turned away was, "How could you say those things about your mother to that white woman?"

Mrs. Flouton had repeated all of my words to my mother, with a ghoulish satisfaction of detail. Whether it was because she saw my mother as an uppity Black woman refusing her help, or both of us as a sociological experiment not involving human feeling, confidentiality, or common sense, I will never know. This was the same guidance counselor who gave me an aptitude test a year later and told me I should consider becoming a dental technician because I had scored very high on science and manual dexterity.

At home, it all seemed very simple and very sad to me. If my parents loved me I wouldn't annoy them so much. Since they didn't love me they deserved to be annoyed as much as possible within the bounds of my own self-preservation. Sometimes when my mother was not screaming at me, I caught her observing me with frightened and painful eyes. But my heart ached and ached for something I could not name.

## 13

In my first year at Hunter, there were three other Black girls in my term, although not in my class. One of them was very proper, and she avoided all The Branded with great care. The other two girls came from the same school in Queens and they hung together in self-protection.

In the middle of my freshman year, two more Black girls came to Hunter. One was sister to Yvonne Grenidge, who had dated my cousin Gerry. This brought my totally separate worlds of school and home threateningly close together. I was accustomed to thinking of them as separate planets.

The other girl was Gennie.

Gennie was the beginning of a double life for me at Hunter; actually, it was a triple life. There was The Branded, with whom I held seances and raised the ghosts of Byron and Keats. There was Maxine, my shy piano-playing Jewish friend with whom I

roamed the locker rooms after curfew, and who later had a nervous breakdown because she was afraid she was dying of leprosy. And there was Gennie.

Each part of my school life was separate from the other, with no connection except through me. None of the other people involved would have anything at all to do with each other. Maxine thought The Branded were too dangerous, and Gennie too flamboyant. The Branded thought Maxine was a mama's baby, and Gennie, a snob. Gennie thought they were all bores, and said so loudly at any provocation.

"You surely do hang around with some funny people. They act like they think the stars are their garters." I laughed as she stuffed her toeshoes with lambswool and tied them around her ankles. Gennie was always either coming from or going to dance class.

I shared classes and lunchtime with The Branded, some lunches and after-school time with Maxine, and study periods, and every other chance I could get, with Gennie. She was the only one I saw on weekends.

Suddenly life became an exciting game of how much time I could spend with the people I wanted to spend it with. We learned to appreciate each other's softness behind the lockers, calling it all different kinds of names and games—from touch tag, to how-does-that-feel, to I-can-hit-harder-than-you. Until Gennie said to me one day, "Is that the only way you know how to make friends?" and right then and there I began to learn other ways.

I learned how to feel first and ask questions afterward. I learned how to cherish first the facade and then the fact of being an outlaw.

That spring term, Gennie and I did things that I thought made The Branded look like kindergarten kids. We smoked in the bathrooms and on the street. We played hookey from school and forged notes for each other in our mothers' handwriting. We hid out at Gennie's house and toasted marshmallows in her mother's bed. We stole nickels from our mothers' purses and roamed Fifth Avenue singing union songs. We played sexy games with the Latino boys up in the bluffs of granite above Morningside Park. And, we did a lot of talking. The Berlin Airlift was just beginning, and the state of Israel represented a newly born hope for human dignity. Our budding political consciousness had already soured us on Coca-Cola democracy.

Gennie had been trained in classical ballet. I never saw her dance except privately, for me. In the beginning of our junior year she left Hunter so she could have more time to dance, she said. Actually it was because she hated to do schoolwork. Our friendship, then, became less connected with school.

Gennie was the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving.

She was my first true friend.

The summer of 1948 was a time of powerful change all over the world. Gennie and I felt ourselves a part of it, as did most of the girls at Hunter High. We envied the girls who were Jewish, and who already were making plans to go to Israel and work on a kibbutz in the new nation. The mild-mannered skinny little man in the white sheet had prevailed, and India was finally free, but they had killed him for it. There was no longer any doubt in anybody's mind that China would soon be Red China, and three cheers for the communists. My revolutionary fervor that had begun with a white waitress refusing to serve my family ice cream in the nation's capital was becoming a clearer and clearer position, a lens through which to view the world.

We had huddled under schooldesks for air-raid drills, and had shaken with terror at the idea of a whole city instantly destroyed by a bomb of atoms. We had danced in the streets and listened to the horns of the fire engines and tugboats in the river the day the War was over. For us in 1948, Peace was a very real and vivid issue. Thousands of american boys had died to make the world safe for democracy, even though my family and I couldn't be served ice cream in Washington, D. C. But we were going to change all that, Gennie and I, in our full skirts and ballet slippers, the New Look.

There was a wind blowing all over the world, and we were a part of it.

Gennie lived with her mother in a one-bedroom kitchenette apartment on 119th Street between Eighth and Morningside Avenues. Gennie had the bedroom, and her mother, Louisa, slept on a wide couch in the living room.

Louisa went to work every day. I woke Gennie up whatever time I came over, cutting summer school, and we spent the next few hours deciding what she would wear, and who we were going to be for the world on that particular day. If we did not have something suitable, we stitched and pinned

an assortment of wide skirts and kerchiefs into place. Since Gennie was slimmer than I, we often had to alter things on the spot to fit me, but always in such a way that it could be easily restored.

We took hours and hours attiring each other, sometimes changing entire outfits at the last minute to become two different people, complimenting each other always. We blossomed forth, finally, after hours of tacking and pinning and last-minute ironing-board decisions.

That summer all of New York, including its museums and parks and avenues, was our backyard. What we wanted and couldn't afford, we stole money from our mothers for.

Bandits, Gypsies, Foreigners of all degree, Witches, Whores, and Mexican Princesses—there were appropriate costumes for every role, and appropriate places in the city to go to play them all out. There were always things to do to match whomever we decided to be.

When we decided to be workers, we wore loose pants and packed our shoe-dyed lunchboxes, and tied red bandannas around our throats. We rode up and down Fifth Avenue on the old open double-decker omnibuses, shouting and singing union songs at the tops of our lungs.

Solidarity foreverrrrr, the Union makes us strong!

When the unions' inspiration through the workers' blood shall run...

When we decided to be hussies we wore tight skirts and high heels that hurt, and followed handsome respectable-looking lawyer types down Fifth and Park Avenues, making what we thought were salacious worldly comments about their anatomies, in loud voices.

"What a beautiful behind he has."

"I bet he sleeps bare-angle." That was a Hunter euphemism for naked.

"He's pretending not to hear us, foolish boy."

"No, he's just too embarrassed to turn around."

When we were African we wrapped our heads in gaily printed skirts and talked our own made-up language in the subway on our way down to the Village. When we were Mexican, we wore full skirts and peasant blouses and huaraches and ate tacos, which we bought at a little stall in front of Fred Leighton's on MacDougal Street. Once, we exchanged the word "fucker" for

"mother" in a whole day's conversation, and got put off the Number 5 bus by an irate driver.

Sometimes we roamed through the Village in dirndl skirts and cinch-belts, with flowers in our hair, taking turns strumming Gennie's guitar and singing songs which we adapted from Pablo Neruda's early poems.

All you red yankees are sons of a shrim  
Born of a bottle, a bottle of rum.

Sometimes we made up our own:

Drinking gin goddam drinking gin, drinking gin  
goddam drinking gin,  
If you won't drink gin with me, goddam  
You'll drink no gin with no dam man  
Drinking gin goddam drinking gin . . .

to the most monotonous plunking beat.

In the Village, we met Gennie's friend, Jean, who was a dancer also. She was dark and beautiful and lived around the corner from Gennie and went to the High School of Music and Art. Jean was engaged to a white boy named Alf, who had left school and gone to Mexico to paint with Diego Rivera. Sometimes I accompanied them to one of their dance classes at the New Dance Group on 59th Street.

But mostly, Gennie and I went out into the city by ourselves. By tacit agreement, we usually didn't see each other on weekends that summer because of our families. Weekends became endlessly dull bridges between Friday and Monday. The whole summer was made up of glorious and exciting days with Genevieve, and evenings of war at home, commencing with my mother's, "Where have you been all day, and why aren't your clothes done?" Or my room cleaned, or the kitchen floor washed, or the milk bought.

We sallied forth in the afternoon sun to launch our joint assault upon the city. On the days when we had no money for carfare downtown, we went to Central Park to watch the bears. Sometimes we just held hands and walked through the streets of Harlem around her house. They seemed so much more alive to me than the streets of Washington Heights where I lived. They reminded me of the streets around where I grew up, on 142nd Street.

We bought and ate icies which were scraped up from a block of ice and packed into a little paper cup and then liberally covered with brilliant sticky syrups kept in a rainbow of bottles lined up on either side of the ice. They were sold from rickety homemade wooden wagons with bright umbrellas shielding the ice, which was always slowly melting under an indifferently clean old turkish towel.

These chilly cups of shaved ice were the most deliciously cooling confection in the world, made more so by the vehemence with which both of our mothers had forbidden them to us. Icies were suspected by many Black mothers of spreading polio through Harlem, and they were to be shunned, along with public swimming pools. Eventually, the icie-carts were banned from the streets by Mayor La Guardia. Wherever we were, as the shadows of late afternoon began to grow long, we began to wind our way homeward. We both knew that there was only so much we could presume before our freedom would be cut off, and we tried to keep this side of that line. Sometimes we goofed and overstepped some ignored rule, and then Gennie would be decked for a few days. For me at home, punishment was always much more swift and direct and short, and many days that summer my arms and back were sore from whatever handy weapon my mother could lay her hands on to hit me with.

When Gennie was decked, I would go over to her house for the day. We sat and talked and drank coffee at the kitchen table, or lay naked on her mother's sofa bed in the living room and listened to the radio and drank Champale, which the cornerstore man gave Gennie on credit because he thought it was for her mother. Sometimes we visited her grandmother who lived upstairs, and she would let us play her Nat King Cole records.

Dance Ballerina dance  
and do your pirouettes  
in rhythm with your aching heart

Gennie's mother had raised Genevieve alone from the time she was an infant. Her father had left Louisa before Genevieve was born. I liked Mrs. Thompson. She was young, and pretty, and very reasonable, I thought, compared to my mother. She had been to college and that made her somehow even more acceptable in my eyes. She and Gennie could talk to each other in a way not possible between my mother and me. Louisa seemed very modern. Genevieve and she shared many of the same interests, and the same clothes, and I thought how exciting it must

be to have a mother who wore and liked the same kinds of clothes you did.

That summer, Genevieve met her father, Phillip Thompson, for the first time. She fell completely under his charming net. He was a quick and bitter man of much wit and little love, who preyed upon whatever admiration he could find. (Genevieve was fifteen when she first met her father. She was two months short of sixteen when she died.)

Frequently, Gennie visited Phillip and Ella, the woman with whom he lived. She and Louisa began to fight more and more often over Gennie's seeing her father. Louisa had worked fifteen years by herself to provide Gennie with a home and food and clothes and schooling. Now suddenly Phillip appeared, handsome and irresponsible, to sweep Gennie off her feet. Louisa Thompson was not a woman to bite her tongue.

By the middle of the summer, and with Phillip's prodding, Gennie decided she wanted to go and live with him and Ella. Louisa was beside herself, and very emphatic in her "no." It was then that Gennie began telling me, and anybody else who would listen, that she was going to kill herself at the end of the summer.

I both did and didn't believe her. She wasn't pushy about it. Gennie wouldn't mention committing suicide for days and days at a time, and I would believe that she had forgotten about it, or changed her mind in the quick and decisive way she often did. Then on the bus she'd make a casual comment or reference to something we were planning to do in terms of the time element, or how much time there was left before she was going to die.

It gave me a very eerie feeling, and I didn't want to think about it. Gennie spoke about killing herself as an irreversible and already finished decision, as if there were no more questions and I had only to accept it with the finality that I accepted approaching winter. A piece of me always screamed inside no, no, no, and one day coming home from Washington Square Park I said to her, "But Gennie, what about all of us who love you?" meaning me and Jean and all her other friends whom I did not know but always imagined. Gennie gave her familiar arrogant toss of her two long black braids. She beetled her thick eyebrows over great dark eyes and said, in her most imperious manner:

"Well, I guess you will all just have to take care of yourselves, now won't you?" And it suddenly seemed like a very foolish thing to have said, and I had no answer for her.

The day Gennie picked for dying was the last day of August. It was a damp rainy Saturday, and I lay on the couch of my family's darkened living room hugging a pillow and praying to god not to let Genevieve die. I had not talked to god in a very long time, and did not really believe in it anymore. But I was willing to grasp at any straw. I felt powerless to do anything else.

I promised not to steal my Sunday church collection money, and to go back to confession after so many years.

It was the Saturday before Labor Day, and the summer was over. All summer long, Gennie had said she was going to cut her wrists when the summer was over.

And, that is exactly what she did.

Her grandmother found her, smoking a blood-stained cigarette in a bathtub full of warm and already reddened water.

We didn't see each other for two weeks, but we talked daily on the phone. Gennie said she was annoyed at herself for botching the job, but satisfied at the outcome. Louisa had agreed to let her go and live with Phil and Ella.

I was just grateful she was still alive. I started going back to Mass on Sundays for a while, and found an out-of-the-way church on the East side and went to confession.

Autumn came very quickly. Gennie and I saw less of each other since we were at different schools. I told her I missed her over the phone. Life over at Phil and Ella's was very different, I sensed, from living with Louisa, but Gennie didn't like to talk about it much. Sometimes I'd visit her there, and we sat on the daybed in Phil and Ella's room and drank Champale and ate marshmallows toasted on a pencil with a match. You have to keep blowing the flame around the candy.

But there was an uneasy feeling about that house for me, and Gennie always seemed different around there, probably because I heard Ella always listening outside the closed door from where she was sweeping or dusting. It seemed Ella was always cleaning house, with carpet slippers on and a rag around her head, humming the same little tune over and over and over and over under her breath.

We could never go over to my house because my parents didn't allow visitors when they were not home. They didn't approve of friends in general, and they did not care much for Gennie because my mother thought she was too "loud." So

we usually made dates to meet at Columbus Circle or in Washington Square Park, and for a while the golden leaves near each fountain hid the harshness of the confused and alien colors that were sweeping up over our paths.

Without Gennie, Hunter was another set of worlds. Mostly, that autumn, it was Maxine and her music and her acne treatments and her desperate crush on the chairwoman of the music department. It matched my own on the latest addition to the english faculty who wore suits and flats and had a most charming malocclusion. And it was our getting into constant trouble for hanging out in the lockers after school.

We never really knew what we were being accused of doing down there. We just knew that we weren't supposed to be there, and that it was the only place where we could be totally alone, meaning without our mothers. Neither one of us ever wanted to go home to the family wars. The lockers were a private world for Maxine and me. Sometimes, when we roamed through the locker room, we crossed the private worlds of other fugitives from the warlight, whispering animatedly two by two in the aisles of lockers, as we ran by.

I played gallant swain and stepped boldly and fearlessly upon the hard swift waterbugs that seemed to ride back and forth on horseback. They were a very common sight, surrounded by frozen and screaming girls. I became the offical waterbug killer of the locker room society, and that served to make me braver. Once I even killed a sleek four-inch american cockroach. It was years before I ever admitted how terrified of them I was, also. It was too important to me to seem fearless and in charge and brave, an applauded champion killer of waterbugs.

Maybe that is all any bravery is, a stronger fear of not being brave.

Gennie and I had a fight over something or the other at the end of January. We didn't talk or see each other again for two weeks. She called me on my birthday, and we saw each other a few days later, on Washington's Birthday. We held hands in Central Park Zoo and watched the monkeys. The mandrill looked at us with great sad eyes and we agreed with him that whether we were angry or not we'd never go that long without talking again, because friendship was too important and besides, neither one of us could remember what we'd argued about.

Afterward, we went to her house. It started to snow and we lay on the couch with Gennie's head on my tummy, and we

toasted marshmallows and smoked cigarettes. That bedroom was the only private room in the house. Gennie slept on a couch in the living room, except when her uncle came, and then she slept on the floor. She said she hated not having anywhere permanent to sleep, or keep her clothes.

It was the middle of March when Gennie came to my house one night. She called and said she had to talk to me and could she come over. My mother gave a grudging permission. I said we had to study for a geometry midterm. It was almost nine o'clock when Gennie came in. No hour to be visiting on a school night, my mother observed acidly as she acknowledged Gennie's greeting.

We went into my room and shut the door. Gennie looked terrible. There were circles under her eyes, and long ugly scratches on both sides of her face. Her usually neat long braids were disheveled and mussed. All she would tell me was that she and her father had had a fight and she didn't have any place to sleep and she didn't want to talk about it anymore. She asked if she could spend the night at my house. I knew that was impossible. My parents would never allow it, and they would want to know why. I was torn, but I knew I had pushed them as far as I could with the visit.

"Can't you go stay with Louisa?" I said. What father would scratch up his daughter like that? "Don't go back there, please Gennie."

Gennie looked at me as if I couldn't understand anything, but her voice wasn't as impatient as usual. She looked tired. "I can't go back there, she doesn't have room for me anymore. She's fixed over the bedroom and everything, and besides she said I had to choose and I did. She said if I went to Phillip's I couldn't come back. And now Ella's gone down south to see her mother, and my father and Uncle Lennie are drinking all the time. And when Phillip drinks he doesn't know what . . ."

It looked like Gennie was going to cry and suddenly I was terribly scared. I heard my mother in the living room, warning, in a raised voice:

"It's nine-thirty P.M. in the night, are you children finished? You sure it's study you studying this time of night?"

"Gennie, why don't you at least call your mother?" I was pleading with her. She would have to go soon. In another minute my mother was going to come in, storming nicely.

Gennie stood up with a sudden dash of her old spirit. "I said

no already, didn't I? I can't talk to my mother about Phil. He's crazy sometimes." She fingered the scratches on her face. "All right, I'm going. Look, I'll meet you at Hunter after your exams on Friday, okay? What time are you done?" She was pulling on her coat.

"Twelve o'clock. What are you going to do, Gennie?" I was worried by the way she looked. I was also relieved that she was going. I could already anticipate the scene between my mother and me as soon as Gennie left.

"Never mind about me. I'm going over to Jean's house. Good luck with your midterms. I'll see you on Friday near the 68th Street entrance at noon." I walked her to the front door, and we ran the gauntlet of the living room together.

"How'd'do, Genevieve," my father said, sternly, and returned his eyes to his newspaper. He did not get involved in these matters unless I gave my mother a hard time.

"Good night, dear," my mother said, sweetly. "Your father doesn't mind you traveling by yourself so late at night?"

"No, ma'am. I'm just taking a bus straight to my mother's house," Gennie lied, smoothly, giving my mother one of her most radiant smiles.

"Well, it's very late." My mother gave the slightest of her reproachful hums. "You get home safely, now, and say good-night to your mother for me." I saw my mother shrewdly eyeing Gennie's scratched face, and I hurried her into the hallway.

"Bye, Gennie. Please be careful."

"Don't be silly, I don't need to be careful, I just need some sleep." I locked the door behind her.

When I came back into the living room, I was surprised to find that my mother was more worried than angry.

"What's wrong with your friend, now?" My mother peered at me closely from on top of her spectacles.

"Nothing's wrong, Mother. I needed some of her geometry notes."

"You have all day long to get work in school. You come home here and all of a sudden you need geometry notes this time of night? Huh!" My mother was not convinced. "Come give me your bed linen if you want it to go to the wash tomorrow." She got up, laying her sewing aside, and followed me across to my room.

My mother's intuitions had fastened upon something; she did not examine what. She could not question her perceptions;

I could not utilize the concern in her voice. How dare she follow me into my room like a peremptory reminder that no place in this house was sacrosanct from her!

My mother smelled trouble, but her concern was misplaced; it was not I who was in danger.

She poked at my soiled clothes for a moment, abstractedly, snatching up a torn slip on one finger. "You don't have anything better to put on besides this piece of rags-knit you call slip? You going to be walking the streets pretty soon one-hand-before one-hand-behind?" She tossed the garment aside as I gathered up the rest of my laundry.

"Listen, my darling child, let me tell you something for your own good. Don't get mix-up with this girl and her parents' business, you hear? What kind of jackabat woman... and to let her go off with that good-for-nothing call himself father..." My mother had met Phil Thompson once on 125th Street when we were shopping for school clothes. Gennie had introduced him proudly, and he had been his most superficial and debonair self.

She took the laundry out of my hands. "Well, anyway. Look. I don't want you hanging around till all hours of the night with that girl. Whatever she doing she buying trouble to feed it. You mark my words. I wouldn't be a bit surprise if she bring a stomach..." I could feel rage like a thin curtain rising over my vision.

"Mother, there's nothing wrong with Genevieve and she's not like that." I tried to keep the outrage out of my voice. But how could she say something like that about Gennie? And she didn't even know her. Just because we were friends.

"Don't let me hear that tone of voice to your mother, young woman," my father warned ominously from the living room.

Real or fancied insolence to my mother was the cardinal sin, and it always brought my father out of his pose of neutral observer to the war between my mother and me. My father was about to become involved, and that was the last thing I needed.

One of my sisters was typing a report. The staccato sound from the room which they shared came through the french doors which separated it from the living room. I wondered if Gennie had gotten down to Jean's yet. If I got into a fight with them now I might have to come straight home after all my exams this week. I swallowed my fury and it lay like a rotten egg halfway between my stomach and my throat. I could taste the sour in my mouth.

"I didn't mean to use any tone, Daddy. I'm sorry, Mother." I stepped back out into the living room. "Goodnight."

I kissed each one of them dutifully and retreated back into the relative safety of my room.

We did not weep for the thing that was once a child  
did not weep for the thing that had been a child  
did not weep for the thing that had been  
nor for the deep dark silences  
that ate of the so-young flesh.

But we wept at the sight of two men standing alone  
flat on the sky, alone,  
shoveling earth as a blanket  
to keep the young blood down.

For we saw ourselves in the dark warm mother-blanket  
saw ourselves deep in the earth's breast-swellings—  
no longer young—  
and knew ourselves for the first time  
dead and alone.

We did not weep for the thing—weep for the thing—  
we did not weep for the thing that was  
once a child.

May 22, 1949

# 14

*Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt. Go to a Village gay bar, or any bar anywhere.*

*Smoke reefer. Derail the freight that took circus animals to Florida. Take a course in international obscenities. Learn Swahili. See Martha Graham's dance troupe. Visit Pearl Primus. Ask her to take us away with her to Africa next time. Write THE BOOK. Make love.*

Louisa's voice on the phone at 3:30 P.M., tight and unbelieving.

"They found Gennie on the steps of the 110th Street Community Center this morning. She's taken rat poison. Arsenic. They don't expect her to live."

That wasn't true. Gennie was going to live. She'd fool all of us again. *Gennie, Gennie, please don't die, I love you. Some-*

thing will save her. Something. Maybe she's run away, maybe she's just run away again. Not to her relatives in Richmond this time. Oh no. Gennie'll think of someplace nobody'll think of looking, and then eventually she'll come sauntering in with a new outfit she got someone to buy her and that quick toss of her head, saying, "I was fine all the time."

"Where is she, Mrs. Thompson?"

"She's at Sydenham. Evidently she rode the subways all night, that's what she told the police, but nobody knows where she'd been before. She didn't go to school yesterday."

Cutting through Louisa's voice is the sound of the jukebox in Mike's Food Shoppe. Yesterday, after school, hearing Genie's favorite song these days—the richly elongated tones of Sarah Vaughan's chocolate voice repeating over and over,

I saw the harbor lights they only told me we were parting  
The same old harbor lights that once brought you to me  
I saw the harbor lights, how could I help the tears were  
starting,  
                        were starting,  
                        were starting. . .

Mike came over and kicked the box. "Albanian magic," he grinned, and went back to his griddle. The hateful taste of black coffee and lemon in my mouth. *Gennie Gennie Gennie Gennie.*

"Can I see her, Mrs. Thompson? When are visiting hours?"  
Could I go see Gennie and still get back before my mother got home?

**“You can come anytime, honey, but you better hurry.”**

Rifling my mother's old pocketbooks for ten cents carfare.  
My empty stomach churning. Louisa's tears as she greets me at  
the door of the emergency room, as she takes my hands.

"They're working on her again, honey. They won't even admit her up in the ward. They say she won't last 'til night."

The hospital bed in the glass cubicle behind the emergency room in Harlem Hospital. Her mother and grandmother and I clutching each other for comfort. Louisa smelling of Evening in Paris that always made me sneeze. My head an endless kaleidoscope of numb images, jumbled, repeated.

Speech class, the only class we ever had together.

**Jenny come tie my, Jenny come tie my, Jenny come  
tie my bonny cravat.**

I've tied it behind and I've tied it before  
and I've tied it so often, I'll tie it no more.

Miss Mason's monotonous voice drilling us through the exercise over and over. "Nice wide i's, now. Again, class." Gennie's grandmother, her insistent southern voice looking for meaning.

"She didn't talk about it this time. Nobody knew. If only she'd said something. I'da believed her this time. . ." The young white doctor, "You can go in now, but she's asleep."

*Gennie Gennie Gennie I never saw you asleep before. You look just like you awake except your eyes are closed. Your brows still bend down in the middle like you frowning.* What time is my mother coming home? Suppose I get on the same bus as she does coming uptown from the office? What shall I tell them when I get home?

My mother was home when I got in. An unwillingness to share any piece of my private world, even the pain, made me lie. I said Gennie was in the hospital because she had swallowed poison, by accident. Iodine, from the medicine chest.

"But what kind of house is that for a young girl to grow up in? How could she make such a mistake, poor thing? Wasn't her stepmother home?"

"I don't know, Mother. That's all her father told me." Under my mother's curious gaze I kept my face carefully blank.

Early early the next morning. Using my church collection for carfare. The hospital odor and the muted sound of the p.a. Nobody around, nobody to stop me. The hospital bed in the glass cubicle. *You can't just die like this, Gennie, we haven't had our summer yet. Don't you remember? You promised.* She can't die. Too much poison, they say. She stuffed rat poison into the gelatin capsules, ate them, one by one. We had bought two dozen capsules on Friday.

A crumpled flower on the hospital bed. Arsenic is a corrosive. She lingered, metallic-smelling foam at the corners of her mouth, blackened and wet. Her Gennie braids askew, unraveling. The last five inches of them revealed as a hairpiece. How could it be that I never knew? Gennie had plaited false hair into her braids. She was so proud of her long hair. Sometimes she wound them around her head like a crown. Now they were unraveling on the hospital pillow as she tossed her head from side to side, her eyes closed in the emptiness and quiet of the early Sunday morning hospital light. I took her hand.

"I'm supposed to be at church, Gennie, but I had to come see you." She smiled, her eyes still closed. She turned her head towards me. Her breath was foul and shallow.

"Don't die, Gennie. Do you still want to?"

"Of course, I do. Didn't I tell you I was going to?"

I bent close to her and touched her forehead. "Oh why, Gennie, why?" I whispered.

Her great black eyes flashed open. Her head moved on the pillow in a parody of her old arrogance. Her brows came down in the center. "Why what?" she snapped. "Now don't be silly. You know why."

But I did not know why. I scanned her face turned toward me, eyes closed again. The wrinkle-frown still between the thick brows. I did not know why. Only that for my beloved Gennie, pain had become enough of a reason not to stay. And our friendship had not been able to alter that. I remembered Gennie's favorite lines in one of my poems. I had found them doodled and scrawled along the margins of page after page of the notebooks which she had entrusted to my care in the movies that Friday afternoon.

and in the brief moment that is today  
wild hope this dreamer jars  
for I have heard in whispers talk  
of life on other stars.

None of us had given her a good enough reason to stay here, not even me. I could not escape that. Was that the anger behind her great closed eyes? The skin of Gennie's cheek was hot and rough under my fingers.

*Why what? You know why.* Those were the last words Gennie ever said to me.

Don't go, Gennie, don't go. *I mustn't let her go. Two dozen empty capsules. Sitting through the movie twice. Standing on the corner waiting for the 14th Street bus. I should never have left her. But it was getting dark already. Scared of another whipping for getting home too late. Come home with me, Gennie. Not caring any more what my mother would say to that. Gennie, angry with me. Telling me to go away. I went. Don't go, Gennie, don't go.*

By Monday afternoon Genevieve was dead.

I called the hospital from Hunter. I walked out of the building and went home, leaving my books behind, wanting to be alone. My mother opened the door. She put one arm around me as I walked into the kitchen.

"Genevieve's dead, Mother." I sat down heavily at the table.

"Yes, I know. I called her father to see if there was anything we could do, and he told me." She was looking into my face.

"Why didn't you tell us it was suicide?"

I wanted to cry—even that little piece was gone.

"It's her father himself said so. Do you know anything about it? You can tell me, I'm your mother, after all. We won't say anything more about your lying this time. Did she talk to you about it?"

I put my head down on the table. From there I could see out the kitchen window, slightly open. The woman across the air shaft was fixing food.

"No."

"I'll fix you some tea. You mustn't be upset too much by all this, dear heart." My mother turned, rubbing the edge of the tea strainer dry, over and over again. "Look, my darling child, I know she was your friend and you feel bad, but this is what I been cautioning you about. Be careful who you go around with. Among-you children do things different in this place and you think we stupid. But this old head of mine, I know what I know. There was something totally wrong there from the start, you mark my words. That man call himself father was us-ing that girl for I don't know what."

The merciless quality of my mother's fumbling insights turned her attempt at comfort into another assault. As if her harshness could confer invulnerability upon me. As if in the flames of truth as she saw it, I could eventually be forged into some pain-resistant replica of herself.

But all this was so beside the point. Across the darkening air shaft Mrs. Washer pulled down her window-shade. *Gennie was dead. Dead dead dead, a nickel a rabbit's head.*

When my father came home, he knew, too. "Next time, don't lie to us. Was your girlfriend in trouble?"

Days later, I sat on the low bench beside Louisa's window, newly opened after its end-of-winter untaping. It was an early spring afternoon. The season had begun unusually warm. The

street outside was runny with old rain, the still slick pavement reflecting oily rainbows.

Louisa perched upon her window ledge. One high hip nudged against the wooden window frame, her stockinginged leg moving back and forth ever so slightly. The other drooped down over the edge of the bench where I was sitting.

"You and Gene were such good friends." Louisa's tones were clipped and longing. "Matter of fact, she saw you more than. . ." she fingered the spirals of Gennie's notebook which I had just given her, keeping the diary for myself. Louisa's eyes were dry and desperately conversational. I suddenly remembered Gennie saying her mother had once been a schoolteacher down south and prided herself on proper speech. ". . . than she saw anybody else." Louisa finished abruptly. I savored this piece of information in silence. *Gennie's best friend.* "You looked enough alike to be sisters, people said." *Except Gennie was lighter and thinner and beautiful.*

Something about Louisa's eyes warned me and I stood up quickly. "I gotta go, Miz Thompson, my mother. . ." I reached for my coat on the couch. It had once been Louisa's daybed, the one where Gennie and I lay laughing and talking and smoking. When Gennie left, Louisa had redone the tiny apartment and taken over the bedroom. I suddenly saw again Gennie's scratched face and tired eyes as she snapped at me that night, "I can't go back, there's no room for me anymore. . . I can't talk to my mother about Phillip. . ."

I buttoned my coat hurriedly. "She's waiting for me to go marketing, because my sisters have a rehearsal at school." But swift-moving Louisa caught me, one hand on my arm, before I could open the door.

Louisa took off her rimless glasses and she did not look like anybody's mother at all. She looked too young, and too pretty, and too tired, and her red-rimmed eyes were full of tears and pleading. She was thirty-four years old and tomorrow we were going to bury her only child, a sixteen-year old suicide.

"You-all were best friends," insistent, less proper, her fingers tight through my coat sleeve. "Do you know why she did it?"

Louisa had a mole on her face beside her nose, almost exactly the same place as Gennie's had been. It was magnified by the tears rolling down her cheeks. I looked away, my hand still on the doorknob.

"No, ma'am." I looked up, again. I remembered my mother's words, resisting them, "That man call himself father was using that girl for I don't know what."

"I have to go now."

I opened the door, stepped over the floor-anchored metal rod upon which I had tripped so many times before, and closed the door behind me. I heard the metallic clang of the police lock rod as it slid back into place, mingled with the muffled sounds of Louisa's sobbing.

Gennie was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery on the first day of April. The *Amsterdam News* story about her death announced that she was not pregnant and so no reason for her suicide could be established. Nothing else.

*The sound of dirt clods flying hollow against the white coffin. The sound of birds who knew death as no reason for silence. A black-clad man mouthing words in a foreign tongue. No hallowed ground for suicides. The sound of weeping women. The wind. The forward edge of spring. The sound of grass growing, flowers beginning to blossom, the branching of a far-off tree. Clods against the white coffin.*

We drove away from the grave, down a winding hill. The last thing I saw of that place was two large gravediggers with unshaven faces pulling the lowering straps from the grave. They tossed the still living flowers into a waiting bin, and shoveled earth into the grave. Two grave-hands, putting the finishing touches on a raw mound of earth, outlined against the suddenly grey and lowering April sky.

## 15

Two weeks after I graduated from high school, I moved out of my parents' home. I hadn't planned it that way; that's just the way it worked out. I went to stay with a friend of Jean's who had her own apartment on the Lower East Side, on Rivington Street.

I worked at Beth David hospital nights as a nurses' aide, and had an affair with a boy named Peter.

I met Peter at a Labor Youth League party in February and we made a date. He arrived to take me to the movies the next afternoon. It was Washington's Birthday, and both of my parents were home. My father answered the door, and would not let Peter into the house because he was white. That immediately catapulted what would have been a passing teenage fancy into a revolutionary cause célèbre.

The precipitating factors in my leaving home were some disparaging remarks my father made about Gennie, now dead almost two years, and a fight with my sister Helen. My mother threatened to call the police and I left. I went to work, returned home after my family was asleep, and packed. What I couldn't carry I dumped into a sheet and dragged down the street and left at the foot of the steps of the police station. I took my clothes, some books, and Gennie's guitar and went to Iris's house. The next day I hailed a man on the street with a pick-up truck and paid him five dollars to come uptown with me and get my bookcase out of my family's house. Nobody was home. I left a cryptic note on the kitchen table which read, "I am moving out. Since the causes are obvious, the results are well-known." I think I meant it the other way around, but I was very excited and very scared.

I was seventeen years old.

When I moved out of my mother's house, shaky and determined, I began to fashion some different relationship to this country of our sojourn. I began to seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile, whose streets I came to learn better than my mother had ever learned them. But thanks to what she did know and could teach me, I survived in them better than I could have imagined. I made an adolescent's wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, closer to my own strength, which was after all not so very different from my mother's. And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving. How to cook the foods I had never tasted in my mother's house. How to drive a stick-shift car. How to loosen up and not be lost.

*Their shapes join Linda and Gran'Ma Liz and Gran'Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they were all warriors.*

*In libation, I wet the ground to my old heads.*

I spent the summer feeling free and in love, I thought. I was also hurting. No one had even tried to find me. I had forgotten at whose knee I learned my pride. Peter and I saw each other a lot, and slept together, since it was expected.

Sex seemed pretty dismal and frightening and a little demeaning, but Peter said I'd get used to it, and Iris said I'd get used to

it, and Jean said I'd get used to it, and I used to wonder why it wasn't possible to just love each other and be warm and close and let the grunting go.

In September I moved to my own place out in Brighton Beach. The Branded and I had found the room at the beginning of the summer, but it was occupied. The landlady said it could be rented all winter for twenty-five dollars a month. Since I was only making a hundred dollars plus one meal a day at the hospital, I couldn't afford any more.

My landlady's name was Gussie Faber. Her brother offered to help me move my stuff from Iris's house. When it was all moved in and Mrs. Faber had gone upstairs, her brother closed the door to my room and said I was a nice girl and I wouldn't have to pay him for moving me if I'd just be quiet and stand still for a minute.

I thought it was all pretty stupid, and he got cum all over the back of my dungarees.

It was a single large room with the use of a community bath and a kitchen down the hall. I shared both of them with a permanent tenant, an old woman whose children paid rent for her not to live with them. At night she would talk to herself aloud, crying because her children were making her live with a schwartz. I could hear her through the common wall adjoining our very common kitchen. By day, she sat at the kitchen table and drank my soda while I was away at work and school.

When college started, Peter and I broke up. I hadn't known really why it had begun, and I didn't know why it ended. One day Peter just said we should probably stop seeing each other for a while, and I agreed, thinking that must be the thing to do.

The rest of the autumn was an agony of loneliness, long subway rides, and not enough sleep. I worked forty-four hours a week at the hospital and went to school for fifteen more. I traveled three hours a day to and from Brighton Beach. That left half-day Saturday and all day Sunday to cry over Peter's silence and to wonder if my mother was missing me. I couldn't study.

Near the end of November I simply stayed in bed for three days, and when I got up I found I had lost my job at the hospital.

Being out of work brought a lot of new and starkly instructive experiences. It meant pawning my typewriter, which gave me nightmares, and selling my blood, which gave me chills.

Coming out of the bloodbank on the Bowery and Houston Street, clutching my five dollars, I had an image of myself ad-

justing the transfusion tube over a patient while I worked at Beth David. Into whose veins would my blood soon be flowing? And what would that person then become to me? What kind of relationship was established by the selling of blood, one to another?

Most of all, being out of work meant drinking hot water, free in the college cafeteria, and the grinding annihilation of employment agencies and the personnel clerks who grinned at my presumption in applying for jobs as a medical receptionist, and part-time at that. (I had ten dollars a week from a scholarship, most of which went towards my rent.)

Just before Christmas, I got a job through college, working afternoons for a doctor. That provided me with money to get my typewriter out of hock, and a little more time to be depressed. I took long walks along the winter beach. Coney Island was a mile away, and now that the concessions were closed, the boardwalk was a lovely quiet that matched my need. I could not go to the movies, even though I loved the pictures, because all around were people in couples and groups, and they underlined my solitary state until I felt my heart would break if I were any more alone.

One night I couldn't sleep, I walked down to the beach. The moon was full, and the tide was coming in. On the crest of every little wave, instead of whitecaps, was a fluorescent crown. The joining line of sea and sky was veiled; angles of green flame rode the night, line upon line, until the whole darkness was alight with brilliant scallops of phosphorescence, moving rhythmically in toward shore upon the waves.

*Nothing I did could stop them, nor bring them back again.*

That was the first Christmas I ever spent alone. I stayed in bed all day long. I could hear the old lady next door vomiting into her basin. I had put *nux vomica* into a bottle of my cream soda.

That night, Peter called, and I saw him again during the next week. We made arrangements to go away for the New Year's Eve weekend to a furriers union camp. I was to meet him at the Port Authority bus station after I finished work. I was excited; I had never been to the camp before.

I brought my boots and my jeans and my knapsack to work with me, together with a sleeping bag I had borrowed from Iris. I changed in Dr. Sutter's back office, and arrived at the bus sta-

tion at 7:30. Peter was due at 8:00 and our bus left at 8:45. He never showed up.

By 9:30 I realized he wasn't going to show up. The bus station was warm and I just sat there for another hour or so, too stunned and tired to move. At last, I gathered up my belongings and started to trudge across town to the BMT subway. The holiday crowd was already beginning to form, and the festivities and horn-blowing to welcome in the New Year were already beginning. I walked through Times Square in my jeans and my jackboots and my lumber jacket, carrying my knapsack and sleeping bag, and the tears rolled down my face as I made my way through the crowds and the slush. I could not quite believe this was all happening to me.

He called me a few days later with an explanation and I hung up on him immediately, in self-protection. I wanted to pretend he had never existed and that I had never been someone who could be treated so. I would never let anyone treat me like that again.

Two weeks later I discovered I was pregnant.

I tried to recall half-remembered information garnered from other people's friends who had been "in trouble." The doctor in Pennsylvania who did good clean abortions very cheaply because his daughter had died on a kitchen table after he had refused to abort her. But sometimes the police grew suspicious, so he wasn't always working. A call through the grapevine found out that he wasn't.

Trapped. Something—anything—had to be done. No one else can take care of this. What am I going to do?

The doctor who gave me the results of my positive rabbit test was a friend of Jean's aunt, who had said he might "help." This help meant offering to get me into a home for unwed mothers out of the city run by a friend of his. "Anything else," he said, piously, "is illegal."

I was terrified by the stories I had heard in school and from my friends about the butchers and the abortion mills of the *Daily News*. Cheap kitchen table abortions. Jean's friend Francie had died on the way to the hospital just last year after trying to do it with the handle of a number 1 paintbrush.

These horrors were not just stories, nor infrequent. I had seen too many of the results of botched abortions on the bloody gurneys lining the hallways outside the emergency room.

Besides, I had no real contacts.

Through winter-dim streets, I walked to the subway from the doctor's office, knowing I could not have a baby and knowing it with a certainty that galvanized me far beyond anything I knew to do.

The girl in the Labor Youth League who had introduced me to Peter had had an abortion, but it had cost three hundred dollars. The guy had paid for it. I did not have three hundred dollars, and I had no way of getting three hundred dollars, and I swore her to secrecy telling her the baby wasn't Peter's. Whatever was going to be done I had to do. And fast.

Castor oil and a dozen bromo quinine pills didn't help.

Mustard baths gave me a rash, but didn't help either.

Neither did jumping off a table in an empty classroom at Hunter, and I almost broke my glasses.

Ann was a licensed practical nurse I knew from working the evening shift at Beth David Hospital. We used to flirt in the nurses' pantry after midnight when the head nurse was sneaking a doze in some vacant private room on the floor. Ann's husband was a soldier in Korea. She was thirty-one years old—and *knew her way around*, in her own words—beautiful and friendly, small, sturdy, and deeply Black. One night, while we were warming the alcohol and talcum for p.m. care backrubs, she pulled out her right breast to show me the dark mole which grew at the very line where her deep-purple aureola met the lighter chocolate brown of her skin, and which, she told me with a mellow laugh, "drove all the doctors crazy."

Ann had introduced me to amphetamine samples on those long sleepy night shifts, and we crashed afterward at her bright kitchenette apartment on Cathedral Parkway, drinking black coffee and gossiping until dawn about the strange habits of head nurses, among other things.

I called Ann at the hospital and met her after work one night. I told her I was pregnant.

"I thought you was gay!"

I heard the disappointed half-question in Ann's voice, and remembered suddenly our little scene in the nurses' pantry. But my experience with people who tried to label me was that they usually did it to either dismiss me or use me. I hadn't even acknowledged my own sexuality yet, much less made any choices about it. I let the remark lay where Jesus flang it.

I asked Ann to get me some ergotrate from the pharmacy, a drug which I had heard from nurses' talk could be used to encourage bleeding.

"Are you crazy?" she said in horror. "You can't mess around with that stuff, girl; it could kill you. It causes hemorrhaging. Let me see what I can find out for you."

Everybody knows somebody, Ann said. For her, it was the mother of another nurse in surgery. Very safe and clean, fool-proof and cheap, she said. An induced miscarriage by Foley catheter. A homemade abortion. The narrow hard-rubber tube, used in post-operative cases to keep various body canals open, softened when sterilized. When passed through the cervix into the uterus while soft, it coiled, all fifteen inches, neatly into the womb. Once hardened, its angular turns ruptured the bloody lining and began the uterine contractions that eventually expelled the implanted fetus, along with the membrane. If it wasn't expelled too soon. If it did not also puncture the uterus.

The process took about fifteen hours and cost forty dollars, which was a week and a half's pay.

I walked over to Mrs. Muñoz' apartment after I had finished work at Dr. Sutter's office that afternoon. The January thaw was past, and even though it was only 1:00 P.M., the sun had no warmth. The winter grey of mid-February and the darker patches of dirty Upper-East-Side snow. Against my peacoat in the wind I carried a bag containing the fresh pair of rubber gloves and the new bright-red catheter Ann had taken from the hospital for me, and a sanitary pad. I had most of the contents of my last pay envelope, plus the five dollars Ann had lent me.

"Darling, take off your skirt and panties now while I boil this." Mrs. Muñoz took the catheter from the bag and poured boiling water from a kettle over it and into a shallow basin. I sat curled around myself on the edge of her broad bed, embarrassed by my half-nakedness before this stranger. She pulled on the thin rubber gloves, and setting the basin upon the table, looked over to where I was perched in the corner of the neat, shabby room.

"Lie down, lie down. You scared, huh?" She eyed me from under the clean white kerchief that completely covered her small head. I could not see her hair, and could not tell from her sharp featured, bright-eyed face how old she was, but she looked so young it surprised me that she could have a daughter old enough to be a nurse.

"You scared? Don't be scared, sweetheart," she said, picking up the basin with the edge of a towel and moving it onto the other edge of the bed.

"Now just lie back and put your legs up. Nothing to be scared of. Nothing to it—I would do it on my own daughter. Now if you was three, four months, say, it would be harder because it

would take longer, see? But you not far gone. Don't worry. Tonight, tomorrow, maybe, you hurt a little bit, like bad cramps. You get cramps?"

I nodded, mute, my teeth clenched against the pain. But her hands were busy between my legs as she looked intently at what she was doing.

"You take some aspirin, a little drink. Not too much though. When it's ready, the tube comes back down and the bleeding comes with it. Then, no more baby. Next time you take better care of yourself, darling."

By the time Mrs. Muñoz was finished talking she had skillfully passed the long slender catheter through my cervix into my uterus. The pain had been acute but short. It lay coiled inside of me like a cruel benefactor, soon to rupture the delicate lining and wash away my worries in blood.

Since to me all pain was beyond bearing, even this short bout seemed interminable.

"You see, now, that's all there is to it. That wasn't so bad, was it?" She patted my shuddering thigh reassuringly. "All over. Now get dressed. And wear the pad," she cautioned, as she pulled off the rubber gloves. "You start bleeding in a couple of hours, then you lie down. Here, you want the gloves back?"

I shook my head, and handed her the money. She thanked me. "That's a special price because you a friend of Anna's," she smiled, helping me on with my coat. "By this time tomorrow, it will be all over. If you have any trouble you call me. But no trouble, just a little cramps."

I stopped off on West 4th Street and bought a bottle of apricot brandy for eighty-nine cents. It was the day before my eighteenth birthday and I decided to celebrate my relief. Now all I had to do was hurt.

On the slow Saturday local back to my furnished room in Brighton Beach the cramps began, steadily increasing. Everything's going to be all right now, I kept saying to myself as I leaned over slightly on the subway seat, if I can just get through the next day. I can do it. She said it was safe. The worst is over, and if anything goes wrong I can always go to the hospital. I'll tell them I don't know her name, and I was blindfolded so I couldn't know where I was.

I wondered how bad the pain was going to get, and that terrified me more than anything else. I did not think about how I could die from hemorrhage, or a perforated uterus. The terror was only about the pain.

The subway car was almost empty.

Just last spring around that same time one Saturday morning, I woke up in my mother's house to the smell of bacon frying in the kitchen, and the abrupt realization as I opened my eyes that the dream I had been having of giving birth to a baby girl was in fact only a dream. I sat bolt upright in my bed, facing the little window onto the air shaft, and cried and cried and cried from disappointment until my mother came into the room to see what was wrong.

The train came up out of the tunnel over the bleak edge of south Brooklyn. The Coney Island parachute jump steeple and a huge grey gas storage tank were the only breaks in the leaden skyline.

I dared myself to feel any regrets.

That night about 8 P.M., I was lying curled tightly on my bed, trying to distract myself from the stabbing pains in my groin by deciding whether or not I wanted to dye my hair coal black.

I couldn't begin to think about the risks I was running. But another piece of me was being amazed at my own daring. I had done it. Even more than my leaving home, this action which was tearing my guts apart and from which I could die except I wasn't going to—this action was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That's what living was all about. I clung to that and tried to feel only proud.

I had not given in. I had not been merely the eye on the ceiling until it was too late. They hadn't gotten me.

There was a tap on the alley door, and I looked out the window. My friend Blossom from school had gotten one of our old high school teachers to drive her out to see if I was "okay," and to bring me a bottle of peach brandy for my birthday. She was one of the people I had consulted, and she had wanted to have nothing to do with an abortion, saying I should have the baby. I didn't bother to tell her Black babies were not adopted. They were absorbed into families, abandoned, or "given up." But not adopted. Nonetheless I knew she was worried to have come all the way from Queens to Manhattan and then to Brighton Beach.

I was touched.

We only talked about inconsequential things. Never a word about what was going on inside of me. Now it was my secret; the only way I could handle it was alone. I sensed they were both grateful that I did.

"You sure you're going to be okay?" Bloss asked. I nodded.

Miss Burman suggested we go for a walk along the boardwalk in the crisp February darkness. There was no moon. The walk helped a little, and so did the brandy. But when we got back to

my room, I couldn't concentrate on their conversation any more. I was too distracted by the rage gnawing at my belly.

"Do you want us to go?" Bloss asked with her characteristic bluntness. Miss Burman, sympathetic but austere, stood quietly in the doorway looking at my posters. I nodded at Bloss gratefully. Miss Burman lent me five dollars before she left.

The rest of the night was an agony of padding back and forth along the length of the hallway from my bedroom to the bathroom, doubled over in pain, watching clots of blood fall out of my body into the toilet and wondering if I was all right, after all. I had never seen such huge red blobs come from me before. They scared me. I was afraid I might be bleeding to death in that community bathroom in Brighton Beach in the middle of the night of my eighteenth birthday, with a crazy old lady down the hall muttering restlessly in her sleep. But I was going to be all right. Soon this was all going to be over, and I would be safe.

I watched one greyish mucous shape disappear in the bowl, wondering if that was the embryo.

By dawn, when I went to take some more aspirin, the catheter had worked its way out of my body. I was bleeding heavily, very heavily. But my experience in the OB wards told me that I was not hemorrhaging.

I washed the long stiff catheter and laid it away in a drawer, after examining it carefully. This implement of my salvation was a wicked red, but otherwise innocuous-looking.

I took an amphetamine in the thin morning sun and wondered if I should spend a quarter on some coffee and a danish. I remembered I was supposed to usher at a Hunter College concert that same afternoon, for which I was to be paid ten dollars, a large sum for an afternoon's work, and one that would enable me to repay my debts to Ann and Miss Burman.

I made myself some sweet milky coffee and took a hot bath, even though I was bleeding. After that, the pain dimmed gradually to a dull knocking gripe.

On a sudden whim, I got up and threw on some clothes and went out into the morning. I took the bus into Coney Island to an early-morning foodshop near Nathan's, and had myself a huge birthday breakfast, complete with french fries and an english muffin. I hadn't had a regular meal in a restaurant for a long time. It cost almost half of Miss Burman's five dollars, because it was kosher and expensive. And delicious.

Afterward, I returned home. I lay resting upon my bed, filled with a sense of well-being and relief from pain and terror that was almost euphoric. I really was all right.

As the morning slipped into afternoon, I realized that I was exhausted. But the thought of making ten dollars for one afternoon's work got me wearily up and back onto the weekend local train for the long trip to Hunter College.

By mid-afternoon my legs were quivering. I walked up and down the aisles dully, hardly hearing the string quartet. In the last part of the concert, I went into the ladies room to change my tampax and the pads I was wearing. In the stall, I was seized with a sudden wave of nausea that bent me double, and I promptly and with great force lost my \$2.50-with-tip Coney Island breakfast, which I had never digested. Weakened and shivering, I sat on the stool, my head against the wall. A fit of renewed cramps swept through me so sharply that I moaned softly.

Miz Lewis, the Black ladies-room attendant who had known me from the bathrooms of Hunter High School, was in the back of the room in her cubby, and she had seen me come into the otherwise empty washroom.

"Is that you, Autray, moaning like that? You all right?" I saw her low-shoed feet stop outside my stall.

"Yes ma'am," I gasped through the door, cursing my luck to have walked into that particular bathroom. "It's just my period."

I steadied myself, and arranged my clothes. When I finally stepped out, bravely and with my head high, Miz Lewis was still standing outside, her arms folded.

She had always maintained a steady but impersonal interest in the lives of the few Black girls at the high school, and she was a familiar face which I was glad to see when I met her in the washroom of the college in the autumn. I told her I was going to the college now, and that I had left home. Miz Lewis had raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, shaking her grey head. "You girls sure are somethin'!" she'd said.

In the uncompromising harshness of the fluorescent lights, Miz Lewis gazed at me intently through her proper gold spectacles, which perched upon her broad brown nose like round antennae.

"Girl, you sure you all right? Don't sound all right to me." She peered up into my face. "Sit down here a minute. You just started? You white like some other people's child."

I took her seat, gratefully. "I'm all right, Miz Lewis," I protested. "I just have bad cramps, that's all."

"Jus' cramps? That bad? Then why you come here like that today for? You ought to be home in bed, the way your eyes looking. You want some coffee, honey?" She offered me her cup.

"Cause I need the money, Miz Lewis. I'll be all right; I really will." I shook my head to the coffee, and stood up. Another cramp slid up from my clenched thighs and rammed into the small of my back, but I only rested my head against the edge of the stalls. Then, taking a paper towel from the stack on the glass shelf in front of me, I wet it and wiped the cold sweat from my forehead. I wiped the rest of my face, and blotted my faded lipstick carefully. I grinned at my reflection in the mirror and at Miz Lewis standing to the side behind me, her arms still folded against her broad short-waisted bosom. She sucked her teeth with a sharp intake of breath and sighed a long sigh.

"Chile, why don't you go on back home to your mama, where you belong?"

I almost burst into tears. I felt like screaming, drowning out her plaintive, kindly, old-woman's voice that kept pretending everything was so simple.

"Don't you think she's worrying about you? Do she know you in all this trouble?"

"I'm not in trouble, Miz Lewis. I just don't feel well because of my period." Turning away, I crumpled up the used towel and dropped it into the basket, and then sat down again, heavily. My legs were shockingly weak.

"Yeah. Well." Miz Lewis sucked her teeth again, and put her hand into her apron pocket. "Here," she said, pulling four dollars out of her purse. "You take these and get yourself a taxi home." She knew I lived in Brooklyn. "And you go right home, now. I'll cross your name off the list downstairs for you. And you can pay me back when you get it."

I took the crumpled bills from her dark, work-wise hands. "Thanks a lot, Miz Lewis," I said gratefully. I stood up again, this time a little more steadily. "But don't you worry about me, this won't last very long." I walked shakily to the door.

"And you put your feet up, and a cold compress on your tummy, and you stay in bed for a few days, too," she called after me, as I made my way to the elevators to the main floor.

I asked the cab to take me around to the alley entrance, instead of getting out on Brighton Beach Avenue. I was afraid my

legs might not take me where I wanted to go. I wondered if I had almost fainted.

Once indoors, I took three aspirin and slept for twenty-four hours.

When I awoke Monday afternoon, the bed-sheets were stained, but my bleeding had slowed to normal and the cramps were gone.

I wondered if I had gotten some bad food at the foodshop Sunday morning that had made me sick. Usually I never got upset stomachs, and prided myself on my cast-iron digestion. The following day I went back to school.

On Friday, after classes, before I went to work, I picked up my money for ushering. I sought out Miz Lewis in the auditorium washroom and paid her back her four dollars.

"Oh, thank you, Autray," she said, looking a little surprised. She folded the bills up neatly and tucked them back into the green snap-purse she kept in her uniform apron pocket. "How you feeling?"

"Fine, Miz Lewis," I said jauntily. "I told you I was going to be all right."

"You did not! You said you *was* all right and I knew you wasn't, so don't tell me none of that stuff, I don't want to hear." Miz Lewis eyed me balefully.

"You gon' back home to your mama, yet?"

## 16

My apartment on Spring Street was not exactly an enchanted palace, but it was my first real apartment and it was all my own. Iris's apartment on Rivington Street was a brief stopover after the trauma of declaring myself independent. The place in Brighton Beach was, after all, only a large furnished room with cooking privileges. But Spring Street was really my own, even though it was on a sublet from a friend of Jean's who was in Paris for a year. He had left a very complicated hi-fi hookup, a wooden rocking horse, and unbelievable filth encrusting everything in the kitchen. Otherwise, there wasn't much else except dirty linoleum in every room and ashes in a fireplace which was the only source of heat for the whole little three-room apartment. But the rent was only ten dollars a month.

I moved in two weeks after the abortion. Since I was physically fine and healthy, it didn't occur to me that I wasn't totally free from any aftermath of that grueling affair. But the months between that birthday weekend in February and the first stirring smells of spring in the air, as I took a train to Bennington for a weekend, are very much a blur. I was visiting Jill, one of The Branded.

I came home from school and my part-time job, to sometimes sit on the edge of my boxspring bed in the center room, still with my coat on, and would suddenly realize that it was the next morning, and I had not taken off my coat yet, much less put away the container of milk I had bought for the cat I had found to join me in my misery.

The house was the only thing I had that belonged to me, and the cat I got from the neighborhood grocery store, and two Javanese temple birds in a little cage that Martha and Judy had brought me as a housewarming gift. They were still seniors in high school, and had appeared one Sunday afternoon with the birds and a bottle of apricot brandy and four strong young willing arms. After we hung some curtains on the tall narrow windows of the front room, which faced the back windows of the tenement in front, the three of us sat on my couch before the fireplace, contemplating ripping off the cracking plaster above the fireplace to expose the beautiful old red brick of the firewall just beneath. We sat, listening to the indignant caw of the temple lovebirds, and Rachmaninoff on the record player, and drinking apricot brandy in the chill. Later that evening we built a fire in the fireplace, and I knocked over the bottle of brandy or Martha did, because she was always doing things like that and then apologizing profusely. So we all made a lark of it and fantasized about digging through the softwood boards to see if we could find clean wood for apricot-brandy-flavored toothpicks.

But that's the only day I can recall between moving in and the first of summer. Yet I went to school, and passed all my subjects that term. I also went uptown every Thursday night to meetings of the Harlem Writers Guild.

The apartment was very small, and it is shocking to think of any more than one person living there, but of course a whole family had once lived in these three tiny rooms. The building faced a narrow courtyard separating its three stories from the main tenement, which was six stories high.

In the front room was the fireplace, and the main door of the flat. The center room was even smaller, with no windows at all and just enough space for a double bed, a thin chest of

drawers, and the door to the kitchen, which had a sink, stove, refrigerator, and bathtub. There was another door leading to the outside hall, but it was bolted shut. This kind of apartment was called a floor-through. There was no hot water at all in the building, which had six apartments in it, two on each floor. The toilets were in the outside halls, one to a story, every two apartments. Ralph, my next-door neighbor, and I put a padlock on ours to keep the Bowery bums from coming upstairs and using it.

I scrubbed the apartment as best as I could, not quite believing the dirt that the former owner had allowed to accumulate. I got rid of what was possible, and resolved to ignore what I couldn't erase. The kitchen was the worst, so I concentrated on making the two other rooms my own.

I moved in my bookcase and my books and records, my guitar and my portable typewriter, and it seemed like I was acquiring an awful lot of things, including a little electric space-heater.

The two big purchases were a boxspring and mattress on sale, with two plushy feather pillows. Sheets and pillow-cases I had from Brighton Beach. I also bought another woolen blanket on Orchard Street. It was a bright red and white Indian-design blanket, warm and fuzzy, and it seemed to heat up the cold, dark bedroom.

I could seldom bring myself to use the kitchen, except to boil water. It was mostly a place to store the refrigerator, in which I kept whatever little food I did not bring home already fixed. I do remember making chicken-foot stew for Jean and Alf one Saturday night. I got very thin, for me.

When summer came, The Branded descended upon Spring Street one weekend and scrubbed and scoured. After that, I cooked more often.

I tore down the plaster wall around and over the fireplace and hand-sanded the old brick until it was rich and smooth and even. I hung Gennie's guitar over the fireplace, a little to one side.

Summer came down with a vengeance into the tiny backyard tenement, and the two windows in the apartment gave no relief. I began to learn how to lay back and enjoy heat, how not to fight it, to open up my pores and let the heat in and the sweat out.

I used to sit in my underpants and a half-slip and type on a card-table in the living room, at 3:00 A.M. in the morning, with the sweat pouring down the front of me and between my breasts.

The lovebirds were now dead, and the cat had run away after he killed them. Writing was the only thing that made me feel like I was alive.

I never reread what I was writing. They were strange poems of death, destruction, and deep despair. When I went to the *Harlem Writers' Quarterly* meetings, I only read old poems from my high school days, a whole year before.

I came from the valley  
laughing with blackness  
up between the mouth of the mountains I rose  
weeping, cold  
hampered by the clinging souls of dead men  
shaken  
with reverberations of wasted minutes  
unborn years. ....

.....

I was the story of a phantom people  
I was the hope of lives never lived  
I was a thought-product of the emptiness of space  
and the space in the empty bread baskets  
I was the hand, reaching toward the sun  
the burnt crisp that sought relief. . .

.....

And on the tree of mourning they hanged me  
the lost emotion of an angry people  
hanged me, forgetting how long I was  
in dying  
how deathlessly I stood  
forgetting how easily  
I could rise  
again.

April 20, 1952

**17** When I found out that I had failed german and trig in summer school that year, it never occurred to me to think that it was because I had spent the summer wetnursing the girls of The Branded in my tiny tenement apartment.

It never occurred to me that it was because every evening when I came home from work, instead of doing the assignments for my classes the next day, I was serving us coffee and cinnamon ice cubes in powdered milk with dexedrine chasers. We were all poor and ravenous. We sat around on the tiny living-room floor with the now dead fireplace and the two tall windows open, trying to catch a breath of air as we sprawled on the mattress pulled out of the bedroom. Our only coverings were nylon half-slips pulled up over our breasts, sometimes with a sash tied around.

I told myself I had failed in summer school because I just could not learn german. Some people can, I decided, and some people can't; and I couldn't.

Besides, I was very bored and disappointed with Hunter College, which seemed to me like an extension of a catholic girls school and not at all like Hunter High School, peopled as it had been with our exciting and emotionally complicated lives. For most of the women I met in my freshman classes at Hunter College, an emotional complication meant cutting class to play bridge in the college cafeteria.

I was also beside myself with sexual frustration, given the presence of all the beautiful young women whom I was sheltering like a wounded banshee. The abortion had left me with an additional sadness about which I could not speak, certainly not to these girls who saw my house and my independence as a refuge, and seemed to think that I was settled and strong and dependable, which, of course, was exactly what I wanted them to think.

Whether or not they were sleeping with each other on my Bloom & Krup double boxspring with mattress while I was at school and work, I did not know. We joked about it often enough, but if they were, they did not tell me, and I never mentioned how enticing and frightening I found their strange blonde-and red- and chestnut-colored secrets that peeked out from beneath their pulled-up half-slips, in the hundred-degree heat of the small backyard apartment.

That summer I decided that I was definitely going to have an affair with a woman—in just those words. How I was going to accomplish that, I had no idea, or even what I meant by an affair. But I knew I meant more than cuddling under the covers and kissing in Marie's bed.

Marie, like me, had been on the fringes of The Branded in high school. She was short and round, with immense Mediter-

ranean eyes shining out of a heart-shaped face. We shared a passionate weakness for memorizing the same romantic ballads, and for reciting Millay. Marie did not want to go to college, and got a job after high school which gave her nominal independence, even though she still lived with her very strict Italian family.

I went to dinner a few times at their house, the fall after I left home. The food was plentiful and filling, served by Marie's silently generous mother who did not approve of me at all, mostly because I was Black, but also because I now lived alone. No nice girl left her mother's house before she was married, unless she had become a whore, which in Mrs. Madrona's eyes was synonymous with being Black anyway.

Sometimes I would sleep over, and get to share Marie's Castro Convertible in the living room, because her brother had the second bedroom. We lay awake far into the night, snuggling under the covers by the light of the votive candle on Our Lady's altar in the corner, kissing and hugging and giggling in low tones so her mother wouldn't hear us.

When the other members of The Branded came back from their various ivy-league colleges in the late spring, we all had the grand reunion/clean-up party at my apartment.

All except Marie. She had run away from home and moved into the YWCA, and then married someone who sat down at her table in the Waldorf Cafeteria. The same night. They drove into Maryland and found a justice of the peace.

I opened my house to The Branded and they saw it as a second home. Since it was summer, none of us minded too much that there was no heat or hot water in the apartment, although not having a shower was a problem.

Sometimes my next-door neighbor and I would go to his friend's apartment around the corner and have a hot shower.

There was a constant stream of young women in and out of my apartment, most of them in varying periods and conditions of distress. I particularly remember Bobbi, who lived around the corner and had been a year behind us in high school. She was now in her senior year, and was always being beaten by her mother. Bobbi decided to run away to California even though she had not yet finished school. In those days, that was an unusually bizarre and courageous thing to do, and she hid out at my apartment until her plane left. We all thought she was very daring, even if she was also very young and silly.

Luckily, Bobbi and her equally silly boyfriend had already left when the FBI came to my house looking for her.

This was 1952, the height of the McCarthy era, and I knew enough not to let them past my door. They stood outside, stupid and male and proper and blonde and only a little bit threatening in their buttoned-down shirts and striped ties. One had a crew cut, the other's hair was center-parted and slicked down.

All of my friends knew we were a menace to the status quo, and defined our rebellions as such. Scientists had broken the code of Linear B, enabling them to read ancient Minoan script. The day before the FBI agents stood in my doorway, Eva Perón had died in Argentina. But somehow *we* were a threat to the civilized world.

One day Marie came through my door with her new husband. I didn't like him at all, so although I was very fond of Marie I was glad to send them on their way. He had liquor on his breath and a nasty smile and some very bizarre sexual appetites that Marie whispered to me about while he was out buying more whiskey. My heart hurt to think of her with him, but she insisted he loved her. I couldn't understand how, but I took her word for it.

It was just as well, because two days later her mother showed up on my doorstep with a fresh contingent of FBI men, indistinguishable from the last. The economy was still in recession; there were few jobs around for veterans. White college students were obsessed with security and pensions, and there seemed to be a never-ending supply of slightly stupid-looking, slightly menacing, blonde, blue-eyed gumshoes available in 1952.

Marie's mother was hysterical and I knew Ralph, my friendly pacifist, slept during the day, so I let them inside the door this time. My cousin, Gerry, was asleep in the inner bedroom and his shoes and pants were in plain view on the couch. I could tell it didn't make a very good impression on either the FBI men or on Marie's momma. Young girls did not live alone unless they were whores, and here was the evidence slung across my couch. I paid no attention. It was obvious that the lump in my bed was a single one, and it didn't too much matter what Marie's mother called me.

Marie and Jim, her husband, were not in my house, and that was all the FBI legitimately could ask. I breathed a sigh of relief as I closed the door behind them. Before they left, they told me

that Jim was wanted on a white-slavery charge in Texas, for transporting under-aged girls across state lines for purposes of prostitution.

I was so shaken up by this exchange that I woke Gerry up, and he persuaded me to go with him to an air-conditioned movie.

It was one of The Branded, Lori, who told me about the many jobs to be had in the factories of Stamford, Connecticut. The idea of leaving New York for a while, with its emotional complications, felt good to me, and the idea of plentiful jobs was particularly appealing. I had decided to leave college, since I couldn't learn german.

I put a combination padlock on the door of my apartment, giving the combination to The Branded, who would soon be returning to college. I packed my few clothes, some of my books and records, took my portable typewriter and moved to Stamford.

I had sixty-three dollars in my pocket.

I arrived in Stamford on the New Haven local on Thursday afternoon. I went to the Black Community Center whose address I had gotten from a previous visit the week before. From there, I got the address of someone who had a room to rent. I rented the room, which was a shockingly high eight dollars a week, stored my gear, and said goodbye to Martha, who had come up with me to help carry all my portable possessions. The next morning, I got a job at the ribbon factory where Lori had worked during the summer. I was to begin the following Monday morning.

My room was very tiny, and I shared the bathroom with two other women who also rented rooms in the private house. There were no cooking facilities, so I sneaked in a hotplate to warm up the cans of soup which became my standard evening meal.

That weekend I walked around Stamford, trying to get a feel of the place. I had never lived in a small town before, nor anywhere other than New York. The Liggett's Drugstore on Atlantic Avenue, the main thoroughfare, did not know what an egg cream was. They also called soda, pop. Walking down Atlantic Avenue to the railroad station and back, across the little bridge over the Rippowam River which separated East from West Main Street and the Black from the white communities, I marveled at the different scale life seemed to move on here.

On a Saturday afternoon, the streets seemed strangely uncrowded and unhurried. As I looked into the little dingy stores along the lower end of Atlantic near the station, I wondered why, if they had so much business, they all looked so poor and dull. I didn't realize for a few weeks why Saturday was not the shopping day that it was in New York.

I decided that weekend that I was going to work in Stamford, save money, and go to Mexico.

I could do that, I thought, by conserving on food, which would be no big thing since I couldn't cook in my room, anyway. I found a supermarket and bought five cans of Mooseabec sardines, a loaf of bread, and five cans of Campbell's pepperpot soup, my alltime favorite. I figured I was set for the week, a sandwich for lunch, and a can of soup for dinner. I would treat myself on the weekend, I decided, with franks or chicken-foot stew.

On Monday I started work, at 8:00 in the morning. I could walk to work in a half-hour from where I lived. I sat at a long table with other women, running a hand-cranked hanking machine which made up ribbon into gaily turned hanks and clipped them with a tiny band of metal. The work was unbelievably boring, but the colors of the ribbons were bright and cheerful, and the table by lunchtime looked like a Christmas tree. This was September, but the factory was working on Christmas orders. It took me a while to get the hang of the machine, and how to turn neat hanks that were not returned by the foreman with a sneer. The woman I worked next to consoled me.

"Don't worry, honey. In three weeks he'll let you alone."

Stamford was a closed-shop town, and workers had to join the union within three weeks of beginning work. When I started, I was paid ninety cents an hour, which would increase to \$1.15, the standard minimum wage, when I joined the union. My co-worker knew something I did not. It was standard procedure in most of the "software" factories to hire Black workers for three weeks, then fire them before they could join the union, and hire new workers. The work was not hard to learn. So three weeks later, I found myself with my first paycheck and no job.

That autumn I began to write poems again, after months of silence. My weekend nights became noisy with the limping clatter of my battered portable typewriter. The woman next door mildly suggested, when we passed on the outside stairs, that silence after midnight was the usual house rule for radios and

typewriters. I folded up my blanket and used it as a pad to deaden the sound, as I worked away at the machine, perched upon my rickety table wedged in between my contraband hot-plate and the two neat stacks of Mooseabec sardines and Campbell's soup cans.

In the soft September evenings of this new place, it was as if Gennie had come alive again. I found myself on Saturday nights, walking through unfamiliar streets, explaining to Gennie in an undertone which streets were which, what the plant was like, and discussing with her the strange mannerisms of these non-New Yorkers.

And you did not come back to April  
though spring was a powerful lure  
but bided your time in silence  
knowing the dead must endure.

And you came not again to summer  
nor till the green oaks were leaving  
traces of blood in the autumn  
and there were hours for grieving.

Gennie was the only companion with whom I shared those first few weeks in Stamford, and sometimes, for days at a time, she was the only person to whom I spoke.

# 18

It was 10:00 A.M. on a crispy Monday morning, and the West Main Community Center was almost empty. I stared straight ahead of me as I sat, waiting for Mrs. Kelly to finish. Starched and cocoa-brown, every iron-grey curl in place, she studied my application through gold-rimmed glasses. Across the lobby a printed white sign hung in front of the bronze name plaque on the wall. CRISPUS AT-TUCKS CENTER, the sign read. Some local dignitary, no doubt.

I turned as Mrs. Kelly sighed and looked up. "And what can we do for you today, young lady?" She smiled at me, her voice kindly and mama-soft, but I could tell from her eyes that she was remembering the strange new girl in town from New York who had come looking for a place to stay.

I smoothed the skirt of the shirtwaist dress I had worn to make a good impression. It was the only one I had, and I hunched my shoulders forward slightly, hoping Mrs. Kelly hadn't noticed how, like all cheap dresses, the bodice pulled too tightly across my breasts.

"I'm looking for work, Mrs. Kelly."

"And what kind of job are you looking for, dear?"

I leaned forward. "Well, really, I'd like to work as a medical receptionist."

"As a what, did you say?"

"A medical receptionist, ma'am. I've worked for two doctors before in New York."

Mrs. Kelly's arched eyebrows and averted eyes made me feel like I'd just belched without covering my mouth.

"Well, there was an opening for a ward maid up at Newton State Hospital last week, but I think that's already taken. And they usually like older women." She rifled absently through a file box on her desk and then turned back to me, her refined and motherly mouth slightly pursed. "You know, dear, there's not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls. Now if you could type . . ."

"No, ma'am, I can't," I said quickly. She closed her file with a snap.

"I tell you what, dear. Most of our unskilled people find some sort of work in the 'hardware' factories on the other side of town. Why don't you try some of the places over there? They don't register with us, but you can walk right in and ask if they're hiring. I'm sorry I can't help you." Mrs. Kelly pushed her chair back, stood, and gave a little tug to her fawn-grey tailored suit. "As soon as you learn how to type you come back and see us, now, you hear?"

I thanked her and left.

The following week, I got a job running a commercial X-ray machine.

Keystone Electronics was a relatively small factory as factories went in Stamford. It had a government contract to process and deliver quartz crystals used in radio and radar machinery. These small crystals were shipped from Brazil, cut at the plant and then ground, refined, and classified, according to how heavy an electrical charge they carried.

It was dirty work. The two floors of the plant rang with the whine of huge cutting and refining machines. Mud used by the

cutting crew was all over everything, cemented by the heavy oil that the diamond-grit blades were mounted in. Thirty-two mud saws were always running. The air was heavy and acrid with the sickly fumes of carbon tetrachloride used to clean the crystals. Entering the plant after 8:00 A.M. was like entering Dante's Inferno. It was offensive to every sense, too cold and too hot, gritty, noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking, and dangerous.

Men ran the cutting machines. Most local people would not work under such conditions, so the cutting crew was composed of Puerto Ricans who were recruited in New York City and who commuted every morning up to Stamford on company-paid tickets. Women read the crystals on a variety of X-ray machines, or washed the thousands and thousands of crystals processed daily in huge vats of carbon tetrachloride.

All the help in the plant, with the exception of the foreman and forewomen, were Black or Puerto Rican, and all the women were local, from the Stamford area.

Nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys. Nobody mentioned that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days. Keystone Electronics hired Black women and didn't fire them after three weeks. We even got to join the union.

I was hired to run one of the two X-ray machines that read the first cuttings of raw quartz. This enabled the cutters to align their machines in such a way as to maximize the charge from each rock. Two machines were therefore stationed directly outside of the cutting room, open to the noise and mud and grit flying from the stone-cutters. These were the least desirable jobs for women because of the working conditions, and because there was no overtime or piecework bonuses to be made. The other machine was run by a young woman named Virginia, whom everybody called Ginger. I met her the first morning in the luncheonette across the street from the plant where I stopped to get coffee and a roll to celebrate my first day on the new job.

We worked from 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. with ten-minute coffee breaks at 10:00 A.M. and 2:30 P.M., and a half-hour lunch break at noon.

The cutting "boys" made the first cut through the thick grease and mud of the machines, and then brought rough two-inch slabs to Ginger or me to be read for an electrical charge before they set the axis of their machines. The reading was obtained by a small X-ray beam passed through the crystal. There was

a hood to be flipped to cover your fingers and prevent the X ray from touching you, but the second that it took to flip it down was often the difference between being yelled at for being too slow and a smooth-working relationship with the cutters.

The rock was then sliced along the axis that had been marked with an oil pencil. We read it again, and it was sliced into slabs. Ginger and I read these slabs, tossing them, thick with grime and mud, into the barrels next to our machines. Those slabs were then taken away, washed in huge trays of carbon tetrachloride and cut into squares for the X-ray "reading room." This was a cleaner, quieter place to work, where the crystals were read one last time and stacked according to degree charge.

The women in the X-ray reading room made piecework bonuses over a large base expectation output, and these jobs were considered desirable. By cutting corners, saving time and not flipping the hood, it was possible to make a small weekly bonus.

After the first week, I wondered if I could stick it out. I thought that if I had to work under those conditions for the rest of my life I would slit my throat. Some mornings, I questioned how I could get through eight hours of stink and dirt and din and boredom. At 8:00 A.M. I would set my mind for two hours, saying to myself, you can last two hours, and then there will be a coffee break. I'd read for ten minutes, and then I'd set myself for another two hours, thinking, now all right, you can last two hours until lunch. After lunch, when the machines behind us kicked over, I felt a little refreshed after my sardine sandwich, but those two hours were the hardest of the day. It was a long time until the 2:30 break. But finally, I could tell myself, now you can make it for two more hours and then you'll be free.

Sometimes I stood waiting for the freight elevator in the early morning half-dark with the other workers, anxiously hoping it wouldn't stall and the time clock tick over into red. I tried to propel myself back out of the alley and toward home, because I knew I could not possibly go through another day like the day before. But the elevator came, and I got on with the others.

There were women who had worked at the plant for the entire ten years it had been open.

I would not get paid for three weeks, and my meager hoard of money was running dangerously low. (It was customary in factories in Stamford to hold back your first week's pay until you left your job, as a deposit, so to speak, on your space.) It

did not cover coffee breaks. Sometimes I would stay right at the machines and read the book I brought. Ginger would bop off to the relative cleanliness of the reading room to talk with the other women. One day she clued me in.

"You better get your bottom off that chair in your breaks, girl, before you get stuck to it. You can go crazy like that."

Those were my sentiments, exactly.

With different motivations in mind, my forewoman, Rose, also advised me on my off-work habits. Pulling me aside at lunchtime, and with an archly significant smile, she told me that she thought I was a bright girl and could go places except I went to the bathroom too much.

The cutters made piecework bonuses on their work, but Ginger and I did not. One day the men had hassled me all morning, saying I was not giving them their readings fast enough, and was holding up their cuttings. At 10:00 A.M. they trooped downstairs for coffee, leaving their machines running. Under the cover of the noise, I dropped my head over the nape of the X-ray machine and burst into tears. At that point, Ginger appeared, having forgotten her change purse under the hamper of her machine. She punched me gently on the arm.

"See that? What'd I tell ya? You can go nuts with all that reading. What do ya take in your coffee? I'll buy you a cup."

"No, thank you." I wiped my eyes, ruffled to be caught crying.

"No, thank you." Ginger giggled, mimicking my tone. "You sound just like a lady. C'mon, girl, *please* have some coffee. I can't handle these motherfuckers by myself for the rest of the day and they's out for blood this morning. Hurry up, what'll you have?"

"Very light with sugar." I smiled in gratitude.

"Atta girl," she said, with her usual jocular laugh, and rolled on down the narrow aisle separating our machines from the cutting-room din.

That's how Ginger and I became friends. That Thursday, she invited me to drive downtown with her mother and her to cash our checks.

It was my first paycheck from Keystone.

Since Thursday was payday, the shops on Atlantic Avenue were lively and open late. Everybody turned out to market and shop and cash checks and socialize downtown. People parked on the main streets and chatted with the passersby, no matter that tomorrow was a Friday workday to contend with.

Ginger told me she had spotted me in town the first Thursday I was there, before I even came to work at Keystone.

"That's right. Blue jeans and sneakers on Atlantic Avenue on Thursday night! I said to myself, who's this slick kitty from the city?"

I laughed at the idea that anyone could call me *slick*, and held my peace.

Ginger invited me home for dinner that Thursday night, and I realized, as I had a third helping of mashed potatoes, that I had almost forgotten what home-cooked food tasted like. I could see red-headed Cora, Ginger's youngish brash mother, looking at me half in amusement, half in annoyance. Ginger had four younger brothers at home, and Cora had a lot of hungry mouths to feed.

Sometimes Ginger would bring me a roll from home in the mornings; sometimes she would walk over to my house on Mill River Road in the evening after work and invite me out for a hamburger at the White Castle near the bridge, the only place in town open after 6:00, except on Thursdays.

Ginger had a battery-powered portable radio, a gift from her now-divorced husband, and before the weather turned cold, we would go out in the beautiful autumn evenings and sit by the embankment of the Rippowam River that faced my house, and listen to Fats Domino on WJRZ. His "Blueberry Hill" was tops on the hit parade through most of that fall, and Ginger had a special place in her heart for him anyway, since they looked so much alike. She even walked like Fats, with a swing-bopping step.

Ginger talked, and I listened. I soon discovered that if you keep your mouth shut, people are apt to believe you know everything, and they begin to feel freer and freer to tell you anything, anxious to show that they know something, too.

The old Ford swooped elegantly into the curb at the corner of Atlantic and Main, just the other side of the railroad tracks.

"End of the line, girls." CeCe, Ginger's brother, pulled loose the rope that held the front passenger door in place. Ginger and I clambered out into the autumn afternoon sun, bracing but not yet chill. Up and down Atlantic Avenue, schoolchildren were painting garish and ghostly murals in brilliant tempera and soap paint onto the windows and doors of the shops that had agreed to participate in the Halloween pageant and parade. Tomorrow was Halloween. The parade would wind through most of the

downtown area, Ginger explained, and include most of the town's children.

"One big treat. The stores figure it'll save on tricks. They do it like that every year. Keeps the windows from being scratched and marked up. Watercolor's easier to wash off than house-paint. They don't do it in the city, do they?"

We walked into Gerber's Department Store looking for stockings for Ginger, because Cora insisted Ginger wear nylons to church on Sunday.

"I've never seen Halloween celebrated like that before."

"Well," Ginger drawled, fingering the nylons on display. "That's small-town stuff. There's a lot you haven't seen goes on here different from the big city. Like fo'instance, these stockings ain't shit. Let's go see at Grants'." We crossed the avenue and walked back up the other side of Main Street. From the record shop, snatches of Rosemary Clooney's voice singing "*Come on a my house, my house a come on,*" mixed with the Saturday afternoon traffic.

A tow-headed boy on a bike rolled past us, sucking a bright green pickle. The sharp smell of knife-clean dill and garlic pulled a rip-cord in my head, dropping me into the middle of Rivington Street, between Orchard and Delancey.

*Bright Sunday morning on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York's eager and determined bargain-hunters searching through the sidewalk bins for good buys and old friends. On the corner of Orchard Street, the Pickle Man presided over wooden vats of assorted sizes and shades of green and succulent submarines, each hue denoting a different stage or flavor of pickle-mint. Half-submerged beneath the floating bits of garlic and peppercorns and twigs of dill, schools of pickles drifted like spiced fish waiting belly up for a bite. Nearby, sawhorse tables extended onto the sidewalk under a striped awning, holding flats of dried apricots, dark orange and mysteriously translucent. Beside them on the tables, long square wooden boxes half-open, waxed paper pulled back over the long slabs of halvah, ground sesame-paste candy. There were boxes of vanilla, smooth chocolate, and the crazy-quilt mixture of the two—my favorite, marble.*

*Over all, in the sharpening autumn air, the smells from Ratner's Dairy Restaurant drifting around the corner and over the rooftops, cheese blintzes and freshly baked onion rolls. They mingled with the heavier smells of the delicatessen next door, where all-beef garlic sausages and stuffed derma nestled along-*

*side of the kasha knishes in the window-warmer. To the noses on the busy street, religious and dietary separations did not matter, and Sunday morning shopping on Rivington Street was an orchestra of olfactory delights.*

I wondered where the boy had gotten a half-dill pickle in Stamford, Connecticut.

"Do they sell pickles in Grants', Ginger?"

"What a great idea!" Ginger grinned as she took my arm. "You like pickles, too? Big sour juicy ones, and the little—hey, watch it!" Ginger yanked back on my arm as I glanced up the avenue absently and stepped down into the street. "Speedy Gonzales, you get tickets for jay-walking around here, and New Yorkers get most of them. You don't have anything better to do with your money?" She grinned again as the light changed. "How'd you hear about the job at Keystone, anyway?"

"At the West Main Community Center."

"Good ole Crispus Attucks."

"What's that?" We turned the corner onto Main Street and headed for Grants'.

"The center, stupid. It was just renamed in honor of a Negro, so we shouldn't mind that they don't want us using the center downtown."

"Who's it named for?"

"You mean you don't know who he is?" Ginger screwed her face up, unbelieving. She cocked her head and wrinkled her brow at me.

"I haven't been around here that long, you know," I countered, defensively.

"Well I'll be dipped. Slick kitty from the city! What kind of a school was that you-all went to?" Her round, incredulous eyes almost disappearing into the folds of her wrinkled-up face. "I thought everybody knew about *him*. The first cat to die in the Revolutionary War, in Concord, Massachusetts. A Black man, name of Crispus Attucks. The shot heard 'round the world. Everybody knows that. They renamed our center after him." Ginger squeezed my arm again as we entered the store. "And they got you the job at Keystone. I'm glad they did something useful, after all."

Grants' didn't sell pickles except with sandwiches. But there was a sale on nylons, three pair for \$1.25, or fifty cents a pair. The Korean War was already pushing prices back up, and this was a good buy. Ginger tried to decide if she wanted to spend that much.

"Come on, girl, get a pair with me," she urged. "They're real cheap, and your legs are going to get cold, even in pants."

"I hate nylons. I can't stand the way they feel on my legs." What I didn't say was that I couldn't stand the bleached-out color that the so-called neutral shade of all cheap nylons gave my legs. Ginger looked at me, pleadingly. And I relented. It wasn't her fault I was feeling so out of sorts all of a sudden, so disjointed. *Crispus Attucks*. Something had slipped out of place.

"Oh, buy them," I said. "You want them and you can always use them. 'Sides, your mother will never let them go to waste." I ran my fingers over the fine mesh of the display stockings hung from a T-rack on the counter. The dry slippery touch of nylon and silk filled me with distrust and suspicion. The effortlessness with which those materials passed through my fingers made me uneasy. They were illusive, confusing, not to be depended upon. The texture of wool and cotton with its resistance and unevenness, allowed, somehow, for more honesty, a more straightforward connection through touch.

#### *Crispus Attucks.*

Most of all, I hated the pungent, lifeless, and ungiving smell of nylon, its adamant refusal to become human or evocative in odor. Its harshness was never tampered by the smells of the wearer. No matter how long the clothing was worn, nor in what weather, a person dressed in nylon always approached my nose like a warrior approaching a tourney, clad in chain-mail.

I fingered the nylon, but my mind hammered elsewhere. *Crispus Attucks, Boston?!* Ginger knew. I prided myself on my collection of odds and ends of random information, more and less useful, gathered through avid curiosity and endless reading. I stored the garnered tidbits on the back-burner of consciousness, to be pulled forward on any appropriate occasion. I was used to being the one who knew some fact that everybody else in the conversation had not yet learned. It was not that I believed I knew EVERYTHING, just more than most people around me.

Ginger handed three pair of tissue-wrapped stockings to the woman behind the counter, and stood waiting for her change. I wondered where that half-dill pickle had come from.

*Crispus Attucks.* How was that possible? I had spent four years at Hunter High School, supposedly the best public high school in New York City, with the most academically advanced and intellectually accurate education available, for "preparing

young women for college and career." I had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet, I never once heard the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the american revolution, nor ever been told that he was a Negro. What did that mean about the history I had learned?

Ginger's voice was a cheerful, soothing murmur over my thoughts as she talked me part way up the hill back to my room on Mill River Road.

"What's wrong with you today? Cat got your tongue?"

Before long, I was totally dependent upon Ginger for human contact in Stamford, and her invitations to Sunday dinner represented the only real food I ever ate. She built up an incredible mythology about me and what my life had been in New York, and I did nothing to dissuade her. I told her that I had left home when I was seventeen and gotten my own apartment, and she thought that was very daring. She had gotten married when she was twenty, in order to get out of her mother's house. Now she was back, divorced, but with a certain amount of autonomy, purchased by her weekly contributions to the family income. Her mother worked as a bench-press operator at American Cyanimid, and her father was diabetic and blind. Her mother's lover lived with them, along with her four younger brothers.

For some time, I had known that Ginger was flirting with me, but had ignored it because I was at a loss as to how to handle the situation. As far as I knew, she was sweet and attractive and warm and lovable, and straight as a die.

Ginger, on the other hand, was convinced that I had everything taped. She saw me as a citified little baby butch—bright, knowledgeable, and secure enough to be a good listener *and* to make the first move. She was sure that I was an old and accomplished hand at the seduction of young divorcees. But her inviting glances and throaty chuckles were never enough to tempt me, nor were the delicious tidbits she would sneak out of Cora's kitchen and wrap up in handkerchiefs, persuading Uncle Charlie to drive her over to Mill River Road in the truck on his way to his night job. I remained determinedly oblivious to all this for as long as possible.

Ginger, perfumed and delectable, perched on my desk chair in the tiny second-floor room, watching incredulously as I sat crosslegged on my bed, wolfing down her mother's goodies.

"I don't believe you're only eighteen. Come on, how old are you, really?"

"I told you already." The chicken was crisp and delicious and totally preoccupying.

"When were you born?"

"Nineteen-thirty-four." Ginger calculated for a minute.

"I never met an eighteen-year-old like you before." Ginger spoke with the lofty advantage of her twenty-five years.

One weekend, Ginger stole a lobster claw for me. It was a make-up present that Charlie had bought for Cora's dinner, and when Cora found out she threatened to throw Ginger out of the house. Ginger decided then that this was all getting too costly. Long goodnight kisses on the back porch were definitely not enough; so she finally made her own move.

By the beginning of November, autumn was closing down. The trees were still incandescent colors, but the edge of winter was already in the air. The days were getting shorter and shorter, and this made me unhappy. There was very little time after work before sunset. If I went to the library, it was dark by the time I walked back to Mill River Road. Keystone was a daily trial that did not seem to get better nor easier, despite Ginger's warm-hearted attempts to cheer me up during our frightful days.

One Thursday after work, Ginger borrowed her brother's old beat-up Ford and we went downtown to cash our checks alone, without Cora, or Charlie, or any of the boys. It was still light when we were through, and I could tell Ginger had something on her mind. We drove around town for a while.

"What's up?" I asked.

"C'mon," Ginger said. "Let's go up on the hill."

Ginger was not much of a nature lover, but she had taken me to see her favorite spot, a wooded hill on the west edge of town where, hidden from view by the overgrown bushes and trees, we could sit on two old tree stumps left from long ago, smoking and listening to Fats Domino and watching the sun go down.

I found ma' thrill-l-l-l-l  
On Blueberreeeee Hill——lllll.

We left the car and climbed to the top of the hill. The air was chill as we sat on the stumps to catch our breaths.

"Cold?"

"No," I said, pulling my ragged suede jacket, inherited from CeCe, around me.

"You ought to get a warm coat or something, winters around here ain't like in New York."

"I've got a coat, I just don't like to wear it, that's all."

Ginger cut her eyes at me. "Yeah, I know. Who you think you kidding? If it's money, I can lend you some till Christmas." She knew about the two-hundred-dollar phone bill The Branded had run up that summer at Spring Street, which I was now paying off.

"Hey, thanks, but I don't need a coat."

Ginger was walking back and forth now, puffing nervously on her Lucky Strike. I sat looking up at her. What was going on, and what was Ginger wanting me to say? I didn't want a coat, because I didn't mind the cold.

"You really think you're slick, huh?" Ginger turned to face me, regarding me with a slight smile and narrowed eyes, head up and to one side like a pigeon. Her voice was high and nervous.

"You always say that, Ginger, and I keep telling you it's not true. What are you talking about?"

"Slick kitty from the city. Well, kiddo, you don't have to keep your mouth shut around me, because I know all about you and your friends."

What was it that Ginger had discovered or invented in her own mind about me that I would now have to pretend to fulfill? Like the time I promptly downed two straight vodkas to fulfill her image of me as a hard-drinking New York Village girl.

"About me and my friends?" I was starting to get the drift of her conversation, and beginning to get acutely uncomfortable. Ginger butted her cigarette, took a deep breath, and moved a few steps closer.

"Look, it's no big thing." She took a deep breath. "Are you gay or aren't you?" She took another deep breath.

I smiled up at her and said nothing. I certainly couldn't say *I don't know*. Actually, I was at a loss as to what to say. I could not bring myself to deny what I had just this past summer decided to embrace; besides, to say no would be to admit being one of the squares. Yet, to say yes might commit me to proving it, like with the vodka. And Ginger was a woman of the world, not one of my high school girl friends with whom kissing and cuddling and fantasizing sufficed. And I had never made love to a woman before. Ginger, of course, had made up her mind that *I* was a woman of the world and knew "everything," having made love to all the women about whom I talked with such intensity.

I stood up, feeling the need to have our eyes on a level.

"C'mon, now, you can't just not say *anything*, girl. Are you or aren't you?" Ginger's voice was pleading as well as impatient.

She was right. I couldn't just not answer. I opened my mouth, not knowing what was going to come out.

"Yes," I said. Maybe it would all stop there.

Ginger's brown face broke into her wonderful full-cheeked half-smile, half-grin. Instinctively, I grinned back. And joining hands there on the top of the hill, with the sound of the car radio drifting upward through the open door below, we stood grinning at each other while the sun went down.

### *Ginger.*

*Snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf. Ginger was gorgeously fat, with an open knowledge about her body's movement that was delicate and precise. Her breasts were high and ample. She had pads of firm fat upon her thighs, and round dimpled knees. Her swift, tapered hands and little feet were also deeply dimpled. Her high putchy cheeks and great mischievous smile was framed by wide bangs and a short pageboy that was sometimes straightened, sometimes left to wave tightly over her ears.*

*Whenever Ginger went to the beauty parlor she came back feather-bobbed and adorable, but much less real. Shortly after we met at the plant, she began to resist Cora's nagging, and stopped going to the hairdresser's altogether.*

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" Ginger turned back to me; our hands, still joined, fell apart.

"It's getting late," I answered. I was hungry.

Ginger's brow puckered and she sucked her teeth into the fading light. "Are you for real? What'd ya mean, it's getting late? Is that all you can think about?"

Oh. Obviously that was not the right thing to say. What am I supposed to do now?

Ginger's round face was a hand's span away from my own. She spoke softly, with her usual cockiness. Her close voice and the smell of her face powder made me at once both uneasy and excited.

"Why don't you kiss me? I don't bite."

Her words were bold, but beneath them I could feel fear bellying their self-assurance.

Oh, hell, I thought. What am I doing here, anyway? I should have known it wasn't going to stop there—I knew it, I knew it and suppose she wants me to take her to... oh shit! What am I going to do now?

Afraid to lose some face I never had, obediently, I bent forward slightly. I started to kiss Ginger's cupid's-bow mouth, and her soft lips parted. My heart went snatch-grab. Down the hill, the car radio was just finishing the news. I felt Ginger's quick breath upon my face, expectant and slightly tinged with cough drops and cigarettes and coffee. It was warm and exciting in the chilly night air and I kissed her again thinking, this isn't a bad idea at all...

When Ginger and I got back to the house, Charlie had left for work with his Railroad Express supply truck. Cora and the boys had already eaten dinner, and the two younger ones were ready for bed. As we came in the front door, Cora was just coming downstairs with her husband's dinner tray. Ginger had explained to me that her father never left his room any more except to go to the bathroom.

Cora and CeCe had just come back from marketing, and Cora was tired. Her henna-red curly hair was caught behind each ear with a baby-blue ribbon, and untidy bangs almost covered her heavily made-up eyes.

"We ate Chinese tonight to give me a break. And we didn't leave any for you girls because I didn't know if you were going to come home. Ginger, don't forget to leave your house-money on the table."

There was only a hint of triumphant reproach in Cora's voice. Chinese food was a rare treat.

I usually spent the night at Ginger's house on the Thursdays we got paid. While Ginger put away the dishes her brothers had washed, and made the boys' lunches for school, I went upstairs to take a quick bath. The morning started early, at 5:00 A.M., when Cora rose to take care of her husband before she went to her job.

"And don't leave that water running in the tub the way you like to, neither!" Cora called out to me from the room she and Charlie shared as I passed by. "You're not in New York now and water costs money!"

Ginger's room was downstairs at the front of the house with its own entrance. It was rather secluded from the rest of the house, once everyone had retired.

By the time Ginger finished taking her shower, I was already in bed. I lay with my eyes closed, wondering if I could pretend to be asleep, and if not, what would be the sophisticated and dykely thing to do.

Ginger took much longer than usual preparing herself for bed. She sat at her little desk-table, creaming her legs with Jer-

gen's lotion and braiding her hair, humming snatches of songs under her breath as she buffed her nails.

*"If I came home tonight, would you still be my . . .?"*

*"Come on a my house, my house a come on, come on. . ."*

*"I saw the harbor lights, they only told me we were. . ."*

In between anxieties about my anticipated performance, I began to feel the rising excitement of the hill return. It challenged the knot of terror I felt at the thought of Ginger's unknown expectations, at the thought of sexual confrontation, at the thought of being tried and found wanting. I smelled the little breezes of Cashmere Bouquet powder and Camay soap as Ginger moved her arm back and forth, buffing away. What was taking her so long?

It didn't occur to me that Ginger, despite her show of coolness and bravado, was as nervous as I. After all, this wasn't just playing around with some hometown kid at the plant. This was actually going to bed with a real live New York City Greenwich Village Bulldagger.

"Aren't you coming to bed," I asked, finally, a little surprised at the urgency of my voice.

"Well, I thought you'd never ask." With a relieved chuckle, Ginger shed her robe, snapped off the dresser lamp, and bounced into bed beside me.

Until the very moment that our naked bodies touched in that old brass bed that creaked in the insulated sunporch on Walker Road, I had no idea what I was doing there, nor what I wanted to do there. I had no idea what making love to another woman meant. I only knew, dimly, it was something I wanted to happen, and something that was different from anything I had ever done before.

I reached out and put an arm around Ginger, and through the scents of powder and soap and hand cream I could smell the rising flush of her own spicy heat. I took her into my arms, and she became precious beyond compare. I kissed her on her mouth, this time with no thought at all. My mouth moved to the little hollow beneath her ear.

Ginger's breath warmed my neck and started to quicken. My hands moved down over her round body, silky and fragrant,

waiting. Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire.

Our bodies found the movements we needed to fit each other. Ginger's flesh was sweet and moist and firm as a winter pear. I felt her and tasted her deeply, my hands and my mouth and my whole body moved against her. Her flesh opened to me like a peony and the unfolding depths of her pleasure brought me back to her body over and over again throughout the night. The tender nook between her legs, moist and veiled with thick crispy dark hair.

I dove beneath her wetness, her fragrance, the silky insistence of her body's rhythms illuminating my own hungers. We rode each other's need. Her body answered the quest of my fingers my tongue my desire to know a woman, again and again, until she arced like a rainbow, and shaken, I slid back through our heat, coming to rest upon her thighs. I surfaced dizzy and blessed with her rich myrrh-taste in my mouth, in my throat, smeared over my face, and the loosening grip of her hands in my hair and the wordless sounds of her satisfaction lulling me like a song.

Once, as she cradled my head between her breasts, Ginger whispered, "I could tell you knew how," and the pleasure and satisfaction in her voice started my tides flowing again and I moved down against her once more, my body upon hers, ringing like a bell.

I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered, silently, how I had not always known that it would be so.

Ginger moved in love like she laughed, openly and easily, and I moved with her, against her, within her, an ocean of brown warmth. Her sounds of delight and the deep shudders of relief that rolled through her body in the wake of my stroking fingers filled me with delight and a hunger for more of her. The sweetness of her body meeting and filling my mouth, my hands, wherever I touched, felt right and completing, as if I had been born to make love to this woman, and was remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time.

In wonder, but without surprise, I lay finally quiet with my arms around Ginger. So this was what I had been so afraid of not doing properly. How ridiculous and far away those fears seemed now, as if loving were some task outside of myself,

rather than simply reaching out and letting my own desire guide me. It was all so simple. I felt so good I smiled into the darkness. Ginger cuddled closer.

"We better get some sleep," she muttered. "Keystone tomorrow." And drifted off into slumber.

There was an hour or so before the alarm went off and I lay awake, trying to fit everything together, trying to reassure myself that I was in control and did not need to be afraid. And what, I wondered, was my relationship now to this delicious woman who lay asleep on my arm? Ginger by night now seemed so different from the Ginger I knew in the day. Had some beautiful and mythic creature created by my own need suddenly taken the place of my jovial and matter-of-fact buddy?

Once earlier, Ginger had reached out to touch the wet warmth of my own body and I had turned her hand aside without thinking, without knowing why. Yet I knew that I was still hungry for her cries of joy and the soaring wonder of her body moving beneath mine, guided by a power that flowed through me from that charged core pressed against her.

Ginger was my friend, the only friend I had made in this strange town, and I loved her, but with caution. We had slept together. Did that mean we were lovers?

*A few months after Gennie's death I walked down Broadway late one Saturday afternoon. I had just had another argument with my mother, and I was going to the A&P to get milk. I dawdled along the avenue looking into shop windows, not wanting to return to the tensions and misunderstandings waiting for me at home.*

*I paused in front of Stoltz's Jewelers, admiring their new display. In particular, I marked a pair of hanging earrings of black opals, set into worked silver. "Gennie will love those," I thought, "I must remember to tell her . . ." and then it hit me again that Gennie was dead, and that meant that she would never be there ever again. It meant that I could not ever tell her anything more. It meant that whether I loved her or was angry at her or wanted her to see a new pair of earrings, none of that mattered or would ever matter to her again. I could share nothing at all with her any more because she was gone.*

*And even after all the past weeks of secret mourning, Gennie's death became real to me in a different way.*

*I turned away from the jewelry store window. And right then and there in the middle of Broadway and 151st Street on a Sat-*

urday afternoon at the beginning of the summer of my sixteenth year, I decided that I would never love anybody else again for the rest of my life. Gennie had been the first person in my life I was conscious of loving. And she had died. Loving hurt too much. My mother had turned into a demon intent on destroying me. You loved people and you came to depend on their being there. But people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much. The only way to avoid that pain was not to love anyone, and not to let anyone get too close or too important. The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving.

It is the last dream of children, to be forever untouched.

I heard the oil-burner in the basement at Walker Road kick over at 4:30 A.M. and Ginger shifted and sighed softly in her sleep. I started to kiss her awake and stopped, as the smells of our loving and the moist top of her sleepy head engulfed me in a sudden wave of tenderness so strong that I pulled back.

"You better watch out," I said to myself soundlessly in the darkness. The alarm went off, and Ginger and I, galvanized by the hectic morning routine of the house, grabbed our robes and raced upstairs to the bathroom.

One more minute and we would have to stand in line with the boys. There was just time for a hurried hug and a kiss over the washbowl, as Ginger brushed out the tangles in her hair that had become unbraided during the night.

Charlie dropped us off on the other side of the railroad tracks, a block away from the plant. Ginger stopped in and bought buttered rolls and coffee for us in the luncheonette across the street from Keystone.

"We gonna need something to keep us awake today after last night," she grunted, then grinned, nudging me under the cover of pushing through the mob at the entrance to the plant building. We winked at each other as we waited in the crowd for the freight elevator to take us up into hell.

All day, I watched Ginger carefully for a lead as to how we were going to treat the extraordinary events of the night before. A piece of me was invested in her image of me as the gay young blade, the seasoned and accomplished lover from the big city.

(Later, Ginger told me that it was my questioning why she always had to make school lunch for the boys every morning before her work that made Cora conclude one day, "She's got to be a bulldagger!")

I enjoyed paying court to Ginger, and being treated, in private, like a swain. It gave me a sense of power and privilege that was heady, if illusory, since I knew on another level it was all play-acting. On one level it was play-acting for Ginger, too, because she would not allow herself to regard a relationship between two women as anything other than a lark. She could not consider it important, even as she sought it and cherished it.

At the same time, on a true and deeper level, Ginger and I met as two young Black women in need of each other's warmth and blood-assurance, able to share the passions within our bodies, and no amount of pretending that we were pretending could change that. Yet, we were both very much invested in the denial of our importance to each other. For different reasons, we both needed to pretend we didn't care.

Each of us was very busy being cool, ignoring and misnaming the passionate intensity with which we came together wherever possible, usually on that old brass bed in the insulated sunporch, that drafty haven on Walker Road which we turned tropical with the heat of our young bodies' wildness.

As long as I convinced myself that I wasn't really involved emotionally with Ginger, I could delight in this new experience. Her favorite expression was, "Be cool, girl," and I congratulated myself on how cool I *was*. It didn't bother me, I maintained, that Ginger went out on dates which Cora arranged.

With her typical aplomb, Cora welcomed my increased presence around the house with the rough familiarity and brow-beating humor due another one of her daughters. If she recognized the sounds emanating from the sunporch on the nights I slept over, or our haggard eyes the next day, she ignored them. But she made it very clear that she expected Ginger to get married again.

"Friends are nice, but marriage is marriage," she said to me one night as she helped me make a skirt on her machine, and I wondered why Ginger had asked me over and then gone to the movies with a friend of Cora's from American Cyanimid. "And when she gets home don't be thumping that bed all night, neither, because it's late already and you girls have work tomorrow."

But I thought of little else at work now other than the night pleasures of Ginger's body, and how I could arrange to get her over to Mill River Road for an hour or so after work. It was a little more private than Walker Road, except that my old bed creaked so badly that we always had to put the mattress on the floor.

## 19

The week before Christmas I fell off my stool at work, hitting my head against the brick half-wall that separated us from the cutters, and getting a mild concussion. I was in the hospital when Ginger brought me a telegram from my sister saying that my father had had another severe stroke. It was Christmas Eve. I signed myself out of the hospital and caught a train for New York City.

I had not seen any member of my family for a year and a half.

The next few weeks were a haze of headache, and other people's emotions swirling around me. I went back to work after Christmas, commuting to and from New York City to visit my father in the hospital. Sometimes Ginger came with me after work.

The fog was heavy and chilling over the streets of Stamford the night my father died. No cars moved. I walked two miles to the station to catch the 9:30 train to New York. Ginger walked with me as far as Crispus Attucks. I was terrified I was going to trip on a curbstone, the fog was so thick. The streetlights glowed faintly like distant moons. The streets were empty and eerily quiet, as if the whole world had died, not only my father in that dim oxygenated room on the terminal ward of the Medical Center in New York.

During the week after my father's death, I stayed at my mother's house. Most of the time she was sedated against her frenzied and awful grief, and Helen and I handled the flow of people passing through the house. Phyllis was married and expecting her second child in two weeks, and could only attend the funeral. She lent me a dark grey coat to wear to the church.

During the week, I fought hard to remind myself that I was now a stranger in this house. But it did give me a new perspective on my mother. There had only been one human being whom she had ever entertained upon the earth as her equal; this was my father, and now he was dead. I saw the desolate loneliness that this exclusiveness had won her, and against which she only occasionally closed her hawk-grey eyes. But she looked through me and my sisters as if we were glass.

I saw my mother's pain, and her blindness, and her strength, and for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her.

My sister Helen withdrew into her flippant shell for protection, and endlessly played a record which she had just gotten on the phonograph in the parlor. Day and night, over and over, for seven days:

I get the blues when we dance  
I get the blues in advance  
For I know you'll be gone  
and I'll be here all alone  
So I get the blues in advance.

Some get the blues from a song  
Some when love has come and gone  
You don't know how I cry  
When you tell me goodbye . . .

Returning to Stamford after the funeral, I realized that I needed to be even further away from New York. I decided to make as much money as I could and go to Mexico as soon as possible.

To that end and because Cora invited me, I gave up my room on Mill River Road with its creaky bed, and moved my belongings into the sunporch on Walker Road. The ten dollars a week room and board was less than what I was spending for both before. Cora said the extra cash was a help to her already strained budget, and besides, I was eating her out of house and home anyway.

Ginger told me that a new girl, Ada, had been hired to run my machine at the plant. When I returned, since I was a member of the union, I was given another job. I was moved on to an X-ray machine in the reading room, where the finished electronic crystals were fine-read according to strength of charge, then racked for packing.

Although this job paid the same \$1.10 an hour, all the jobs in the RR were preferable and sought after. The room was in the middle of the floor, enclosed by glass panels, and the fierce sensory assaults of the rest of the plant were somewhat muted.

We sat at our machines in a circle, facing outward, our backs to each other to discourage talking. There were six commercial X-ray machines and a desk in the middle for Rose, our forewoman. We were never long away from her watchful eye.

But working in the RR meant there was a chance to make piecework bonus.

Each reader obtained her crystals from the washing cage in boxes of two hundred. Taking them back to our machines, we inserted the tiny,  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch squares of wafer-thin rock one by one into the throat of the X-ray machine, twirled the dial until the needle jumped to its highest point, powered by the tiny X-ray

beam flashed across the crystal, snatched it off the mount, racked it in the proper slot, and then shot another crystal into the machine. With concentration and dexterity, the average amount one could read in a day was one thousand crystals.

By not taking the time to flip down the protective shield that kept the X ray from hitting our fingers, we could increase that number to about eleven hundred. Any crystals over twelve hundred read in one day were paid for as piecework, at the rate of \$2.50 a hundred. Some of the women who had been at Keystone for years had perfected the motions and moved so swiftly that they were able to make from five to ten dollars some weeks in bonus. For most of them, the tips of their fingers were permanently darkened from exposure to X ray. Before I finally left Keystone Electronics, there were dark marks on my fingers also, that only gradually faded.

After each crystal was read, it was flipped out of the machine and rapidly slipped into one of five slots in a rack that sat to the side of each of our machines. From these racks, periodically, a runner from the packing department would collect the crystals of whatever category was needed for the packers. Since it was not possible to keep track of the crystals after they were read, a tally was kept at the washing cage of how many boxes of crystals were taken daily by each reader. It was upon this count that our bonuses were based.

Throughout the day, Rose came by each machine regularly and spot-checked crystals from each of our racks, checking to make sure that no one racked unread crystals, or rushed through crystals with incorrect readings in order to raise our counts and make bonus.

The first two weeks I worked in the RR I talked to no one, raced my readings every day, never flipped the shield, and made three dollars in bonus. I decided I would have to reassess the situation. Ginger and I talked about it one night.

"You'd better slow down a little at work. The word's going out you're an eager beaver, brown-nosing Rose."

I was offended. "I'm not ass-kissing, I'm trying to make some money. There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Don't you know those rates are set high like that so nobody can beat them? If you break your ass to read so many, you're going to show up the other girls, and before you know it they're going to raise the day rate again, figuring if you can do it so can everybody. And that just makes everybody look bad. They're

never going to let you make any money in that place. All the books you read and you don't know that yet?" Ginger rolled over and tapped the book I was reading on my pillow.

But I was determined. I knew I could not take Keystone Electronics for much longer, and I knew I needed some money put aside before I left. Where would I go when I got back to New York? Where would I live until I got a job? And how long would I have to look for work? And on the horizon like a dim star, was my hope of going to Mexico. I had to make some money.

Ginger and Ada, her new workmate, went to the movies more and more often now that I was living at the Thurmans', and I was determined not to care. But my sixth sense told me I had to get away, and soon.

My daily rate of crystals began to increase steadily. Rose came by more and more often to my machine, but could find nothing wrong with my crystals, nor their slotting. She even went so far as to ask me to turn out my jeans pockets one evening. I was outraged, but complied. By the next payday, I had made an additional thirty dollars in bonus money for two weeks. That was almost as much as my weekly wages. It became the talk of the RR women.

"How does she manage to do all those?"

"Just wait and see. She's going to burn her fingers off before she's through." The women lowered their voices as I came back from the cage with a fresh box of crystals. But Ada, who had stopped by for a brief chat, did not care whether or not I heard her parting words.

"I don't know what she's doing with them crystals, but I bet she's not reading them!"

She was right. I could not even tell Ginger how I was managing to pull down such high bonuses, although she often asked. The truth was, I would slip crystals into my socks every time I went to the bathroom. Once inside the toilet stall, I chewed them up with my strong teeth and flushed the little shards of rock down the commode. I could take care of between fifty and a hundred crystals a day in that manner, taking a handful from each box I signed out.

I knew Ginger was hurt by my silence, and by what she saw as my disloyalty to the other RR women. I was angered by the feeling of persistent guilt that her words aroused in me, but I could say nothing. I could also say nothing about the increasing time she and Ada spent together.

I longed for a chance to be alone, to enjoy the privacy that was not possible once I started to share the sunporch on Walker Road. I hated the amount of time I spent thinking about Ginger and Ada. I began to feel more and more desperate to get out of Stamford, and my bonuses went up.

One day in the beginning of March, I saw Rose talking to Bernie, the plant's efficiency expert, and looking after me speculatively as I came out of the john. I knew my days at Keystone were numbered. That week I made forty dollars in bonuses.

On Friday, Rose told me that the plant was cutting back readers and they were going to have to let me go. Since I was a member of the union, they gave me two weeks severance pay, so I would leave immediately and not make a fuss. Even though it was what I wanted to happen, I still cried a little on the way home. "Nobody likes to be fired," Ginger said and held my hand.

Cora was sorry to lose the extra income. Ginger said she'd miss me, but I could tell she was also secretly relieved, as she confided to me months later. I made plans to return to New York City.

## 20

I don't know why I was seized with such a desire to go to Mexico. Ever since I could remember Mexico had been the accessible land of color and fantasy and delight, full of sun, music and song. And from civics and geography in grade school, I knew it was attached to where I lived, and that intrigued me. That meant, if need be, I could always walk there.

I was happy to learn that Jean's boyfriend, Alf, who was in Mexico painting, would soon be coming home.

When I returned to New York after my father's death, going to Mexico became my chief goal. I saw very little of my mother. Where I would have expected grief for my father, there was only numbness. I stayed with Jean and her friends in a West Side apartment while I hunted for work. I eventually went to work as a clinic clerk in a Health Center, and moved in to share an apartment with Rhea Held, a progressive white woman who was a friend of Jean and Alf's.

No matter what emotional scrapes I got into that summer, the idea of Mexico shone like a beacon that I could count on, keeping me steady. The money I was saving from work, together with the small amount I had received from my father's insurance, would make it possible. I was determined to go, and that determination was fed by the deepening political gloom and red-baiting hysteria.

I became deeply involved in working with the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs; even so, the months in New York between my return from Stamford and my going to Mexico were very much a sojourn to me.

Rhea Held and I lived quite well together in the bright, sunny seventh-floor walk-up apartment on Seventh Street on the Lower East Side, now becoming known as the East Village. It was at times difficult and new—learning to live with Rhea, learning to share space with anyone, and a white woman, too, especially since I had no deep emotional bonds with her, only warm and casual pleasantries.

The work at the health center was interestingly medical and the hours, not tedious. I felt set apart from the other women with whom I worked, by virtue of their lunch-talk about weekend dates (while my noontime fantasies were still filled with the remembered joys of Ginger's bed).

Spring moved to summer. We demonstrated, picketed, stuffed envelopes, rang doorbells, and went to Washington for the Rosenbergs.

*The second time I came to Washington, I traveled by bus. The trip took six hours and we boarded the buses at Union Square at 6:00 A.M. on a Sunday morning. It was not a pleasure trip, this time. We were seeking life for the parents of two little boys who traveled on the same bus in which I was riding. The Rosenbergs were about to be sacrificed, and this was a last-ditch visit to the white house to beg for a stay of execution.*

*Sunday morning, drizzly and cold for early June. I marched up and down with Jean and Rhea and the other women I had come with, hoping it would make a difference, still not really believing that any country I was associated with could murder these children's parents and call it legal. And they were white, too, which made it even harder for me to believe.*

*This time, whether or not I could eat vanilla ice cream at a soda fountain never came up. I had neither the money nor the time to find out. We picketed the white house, sang our brave*

*little songs, handed in our petitions of mercy, and then climbed back into the buses for the long wet ride home.*

*One week later, President Eisenhower signed into law an executive decree that said I could eat anything I wanted to anywhere in Washington, D.C., including vanilla ice cream. It didn't mean too much to me by then.*

In the evenings after work, I saw Jean and Alf, who were now married, or went to meetings with Rhea. Meetings where frightened people tried to keep some speck of hope alive, despite political disagreement, while all around us was the possible threat of dying like the Rosenbergs, or at least the threat of losing jobs or being fingered for life. Downtown at political meetings and uptown at the Harlem Writers Guild, friends, acquaintances, and simple people were terrorized at the thought of having to answer, "Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

The Rosenbergs' struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings. But my feelings of connection with most of the people I met in progressive circles, were as tenuous as those I had with my co-workers at the Health Center. I could imagine these comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, "Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?" For them, being gay was "bourgeois and reactionary," a reason for suspicion and shunning. Besides, it made you "more susceptible to the FBI."

The Rosenbergs were electrocuted on June 19, 1953—two weeks after we had picketed the white house. I walked away from the memorial rally in Union Square Park into the warm Village night, tears streaming down my face for them, for their sons, for all our wasted efforts, for myself—wondering whether there was any place in the world that was different from here, anywhere that could be safe and free, not really even sure of what being safe and free could mean. But it did not mean being lonely, disillusioned, betrayed. I felt like I was thirty years old.

I ran into Bea coming out of a music store next to Rienzi's Coffee Shop. I was grateful for her face, familiar yet different from the ones with which I had shared the grief and intensity of the last few weeks. I invited her home to Seventh Street for more coffee. Rhea had left for the weekend, seeking her own solace for the failure and grief we both shared.

Bea and I had met at Bennington College the year before in spring when I was visiting Jill. Bea was also there visiting a friend. Our eyes had met several times during that crazy drunken weekend, and once at 2:00 A.M. in the cafeteria, Bea and I had talked while the others slept, deciding that she and I felt separated from the other girls because we were both a few months older, and we lived alone; that is, we were responsible for ourselves. There was some brief, guarded intellectual conversation about a shared appreciation of so many beautiful girls in one dormitory. Since then, Bea had broken up with a lover and was living in Philadelphia with a group of other women who had rented a house together. In the meantime, I had been to Stamford and met Ginger.

We walked east across town holding hands, my tears and her sympathetic silence both mute memorials for Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. I began to feel eased. It was obvious to both of us that in the past year we had each moved beyond investigative discussions about loving women. I felt this—something in the frankness with which we held each other as we walked.

That night, I invited Bea to stay over. The rest was surprisingly easy. I made love to a woman for the first time in my very own bed. This was home, feeling the physical tensions of the last months of hope and despair loosen inside of me, as if a long fast had broken. The sense of relief was only lessened by Bea's unresponsiveness. The quiet stillness of her sculptured body was disappointing beside the remembered passion of Ginger.

For the next few months, outside of work, I concentrated my energies on preparations to go to Mexico and being long-distance lovers with Bea. We saw each other every other weekend, on the average, alternating between the YWCA in Philadelphia and New York. Bea had roommates and I had Rhea, who determinedly knew nothing of my sexual life. More often than not, I went to Philadelphia since the Y there was cheaper and had better beds.

Meeting other lesbians was very difficult, except for the bars which I did not go to because I did not drink. One read *The Ladder* and the Daughters of Bilitis newsletter and wondered where all the other gay-girls were. Often, just finding out another woman was gay was enough of a reason to attempt a relationship, to attempt some connection in the name of love without first regard to how ill-matched the two of you might really be. Such were the results of loneliness, and this was certainly the case between Bea and me. For starters, our back-

grounds and outlooks on important issues could not have been more different. Her family was old, mainline, white, and monied. Psychologically, she had left very little of them behind. Most importantly, our attitudes toward sex were totally different.

Sexual expression with Bea was a largely theoretical satisfaction, a very pleasant pastime, and one to which she had great intellectual commitment but apparently little visceral response. It was hard to believe her protestations and assurances that this had nothing to do with me. Whatever fears of reprisal from her upper-class family had turned her off, they had been quite successful. Despite our hours of love-making, our most impassioned shared connections were our love of guitars and old music.

I would take the night train to Philly and then a bus to the Arch Street YWCA, where Bea would have rented a room for us for the weekend. The rooms were small and plain and all alike, with single beds.

Bea's face was square and rosy-cheeked, with a rosebud mouth whose corners always pointed down. She had wide, light blue eyes and strong beautiful teeth. Her blonde body was smooth and without fault—small-breasted, long-waisted, with sturdy hips and long smooth legs. It was a body not unlike the ivory statues I used to buy in Oriental import stores when I was in high school, with the money that I stole from my father's pants pockets.

At first, I looked forward to our weekends with wild anticipation. The hope that this time it was going to be different. Bea's acknowledged gayness was some connection, some living reality within the emotional desert around which I existed. And she was always quite honest about what she didn't feel.

So weekend after weekend, in YWCA bed after YWCA bed, I ran my hot searching mouth over her as against a carved mound of smooth stone, until lip-bruised and panting with frustration, I fell back for a brief rest.

"That was really nice," she would say. "I think I almost felt something."

The scenario was always depressingly the same. We were both strong, physically healthy young women with lots of energies. Starting Friday night, I would make almost non-stop love to Bea for two days on our single bed while she sighed sadly. By Sunday noon, distraught and ravenous, I would come up for air, raving like a maniac, a sex fiend, a debaucher of virgins. We would dress to music—Bea had perfect pitch—and then essay forth, blinking, into daylight. Companionable in our spent frus-

trations, hand in hand, we would go to the Rodin Museum and then get something to eat in a diner before I caught my train back to New York. I grew fond of her forthrightness and her wit. And in a way, we even grew to love each other.

Sometimes to this day, whenever I think of Philadelphia, which is as infrequently as possible, I think of it as a boring grey-stone backdrop to a well-worn triangle, circumscribing the Arch Street YWCA, the Rodin Museum, and the 30th Street Station.

Across the table from me, Bea chewed each mouthful thirty-two times and told me how much she looked forward to our being together again I was beside myself. Every Sunday night, I got onto the train vowing to myself that I would never see her again. That's the way it would be for about a week. Then she would call me or I would call her, and one of us would be on the next Friday train to or from Philly. The prospect of breaching that insurmountable calm endlessly sparked my desire.

By Thanksgiving, we were planning to go to Mexico together. I knew this was a mistake, but I did not have the strength to say no. Finally, two weeks before we were planning to leave, on the way to the station one Sunday evening, I told Bea we had to stop seeing each other. That I was going to Mexico alone. No explanations, no preliminaries. It was self-preservation on my part, and I was horrified at my own cruelty. But I did not know any other way to do it. Bea stood in the gateway of the 30th Street station and wept as I ran for my train.

When I got home I sent her a telegram. It said, "I'M SORRY."

I had believed that if I could bring myself to say it, harsh as it was, that would be the end of it, and I could go off and be guilty in private, as I made last-minute arrangements for my trip. But I had reckoned without Bea's thoroughness and determination.

The whole disastrous affair terminated with Bea coming to New York the following day and camping on the steps of our seventh-floor landing outside the apartment, trying to catch hold of me. I was hiding out at Jean and Alf's place, having been warned by an incredulous Rhea that a weeping girl was trying to find me. Rhea ran interference, making excuses to Bea as she went in and out of the apartment to work. Luckily, I had already quit my job at the Health Center, for Bea had gone there first.

Bea sat on the landing for two days, with quick forays downstairs to the corner foodshop for Cokes and trips to the john. She finally gave up and went back to Philadelphia.

She left me a note saying that what she really wanted to know was why, this way. I couldn't tell her; I didn't know why myself. But I felt like a monster. I had made a desperate bid for self-preservation—or what felt like self-preservation—in the only way I knew how. I hadn't wanted to hurt anyone. But I had. I promised myself never to get involved like that again.

Guilt can be very useful.

For the three days this went on in the hallway, Rhea was her usual quizzical and accepting self. I had to tell her about the affair, couched in the fact that it was now over. What she thought about Bea I never stopped long enough to ask, but what she said made good sense to me.

"Just because you're strong doesn't mean you can let other people depend on you too much. It's not fair to them, because when you can't be what they want they're disappointed, and you feel bad." Rhea was sometimes very wise, just not for herself.

I never forgot that conversation, and we never discussed Bea again. I left for Mexico a week later.

It was eleven months after I had come back from Stamford, and two weeks before my nineteenth birthday.

I leaned back in my airplane seat, in the first skirt I'd bought in two years. The Air France night flight to Mexico City was half-empty. Rhea had made a surprise going-away party for me the night before, but even so I had been hounded by nightmares of arriving at the airport with no clothes on, or having forgotten my suitcases, or my passport, or neglected to buy a ticket. Not until I looked down and saw the lights of the city spread like electric lace across the night, did I actually believe I had gotten out of New York in one piece and under my own steam. Alive.

In the back of my head, I could hear Bea sobbing disconsolately in the stairwell. I felt like I was fleeing New York with the hounds of hell at my heels.

The stewardess was very solicitous of me. She said it was because this was my first flight, and I was so young to be traveling so far alone.

# 21

From the Palace of Fine Arts to El Angel de la Reforma, along the broad Avenida Insurgentes, lay the central hub of the Distrito Federal,

Mexico City. It was a sea of strange sounds and smells and experiences that I swam into with delight daily. It took me two days to adjust to the high altitude of the city, and to the realization that I was in a foreign country, alone, with only rudimentary language skills.

The first day I explored tentatively. By the second day, alight with the bustle and easy warmth of the streets, I felt filled with the excitement of curiosity and more and more at home. I walked miles and miles through the city, past modern stores and old museums, and families eating beans and tortillas over a brazier between two buildings.

Moving through street after street filled with people with brown faces had a profound and exhilarating effect upon me, unlike any other experience I had ever known.

Friendly strangers, passing smiles, admiring and questioning glances, the sense of being somewhere I wanted to be and had chosen. Being noticed, and accepted without being known, gave me a social contour and surety as I moved through the city sightseeing, and I felt bold and adventurous and special. I reveled in the attention of the shopkeepers around the hotel, from whom I bought my modest provisions.

“¡Ah, la Señorita Moreña! [moreña means dark] buenas dias!” The woman from whom I bought my newspaper on the corner of Reforma reached up and patted my short natural hair. “¡Ay, que bonita! ¿Está la Cubana?”

I smiled in return. Because of my coloring and my haircut, I was frequently asked if I was Cuban. “Gracias, señora,” I replied, settling the bright *rebozo* I had bought the day before around my shoulders. “No, yo estoy de Nueva York.”

Her bright dark eyes widened in amazement and she patted the back of my hand with her dry wrinkled fingers, still holding the coin I had just given her. “Ay, con Dios, niña,” she called after me, as I moved on up the street.

By noon, it amazed me that the streets of a city could be so busy and so friendly at the same time. Even with all the new building going on there was a feeling of color and light, made more festive by the colorful murals decorating the sides of high buildings, public and private. Even the university buildings were covered with mosaic murals in dazzling colors.

Lottery-sellers at every corner, and strolling through Chapultepec Park, with strings of gaily colored tickets pinned to their shirts. Children in uniforms coming home from school in groups, and other children, equally bright-eyed, too poor to go to school, sitting crosslegged with their parents on a blanket in the shadow of a building, cutting out soles for cheap sandals from the worn-out treads of discarded tires.

The National Pawn Shop across from the Seguro Social on Friday at noon, long lines of young government workers redeeming guitars and dancing shoes for the weekend ahead. Wide-eyed toddlers who took my hand and led me over to their mothers' wares, set out upon tables shielded by blankets from the sun. People in the street who smiled without knowing me, just because that was what you did with strangers.

There was a beautiful park called the Alameda which ran for blocks through the middle of the district, from Netzahuacoytl down behind the Palacio de Bellas Artes. Some mornings, I left my hotel as soon as it was light, taking a bus to the center of the city to walk in the Alameda. I would have loved to walk there in the astonishing moonlight, but I had heard that single women did not go out alone after dark in Mexico City, so I spent my evenings those early days in Mexico reading *War and Peace*, which I had never been able to get into before.

I got down from the bus in front of the Fine Arts Museum, breathing in the clean smells of wet bushes and morning blossoms and the beautiful delicate trees. Before I entered the park, I bought a *pan dulce* from a delivery boy pedaling past, his huge sombrero with the upturned brim carefully balanced upon his head and piled high with the tasty little buns, still warm from his mother's ovens.

Marble statues dotted the paths throughout the park, where later on in the day workers from the buildings across the street would take their lunchtime *paseo*. My favorite statue was one of a young naked girl in beige stone, kneeling, closely folded in upon herself, head bent, greeting the dawn. As I walked through the fragrant morning quiet in the Alameda, the nearby sounds of traffic increasing yet dimming, I felt myself unfolding like some large flower, as if the statue of the kneeling girl had come alive, raising her head to look full-faced into the sun. As I stepped out into the early morning flow of the *avenida* I felt the light and beauty of the park shining out of me, and the woman lighting her coals in a brazier on the corner smiled back at it in my face.

It was in Mexico City those first few weeks that I started to break my life-long habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. There was always so much to see, and so many interesting and open faces to read, that I practiced holding my head up as I walked, and the sun felt hot and good on my face. Wherever I went, there were brown faces of every hue meeting mine, and seeing my own color reflected upon the streets in such great numbers was an affirmation for me that was brand-new and very exciting. I had never felt visible before, nor even known I lacked it.

I had not made any friends in Mexico City, although I existed quite happily on part-English, part-Spanish conversations with the chambermaid about the weather, my clothes, and the bidet; with the señora from whom I bought my daily evening meal of two hot tamales wrapped in cornhusks and a bottle of blue-labeled milk; and with the day clerk of the small second-class hotel where I had my tiny room.

At the end of my first week, I went out to the new bemuraled University City and registered for two courses in the history and ethnology of Mexico, and in folklore. I began to think of looking around for cheaper and more permanent living accommodations. Even with eating inexpensive foods bought from street vendors, not being able to cook was cutting into my small store of money. It also restricted my diet greatly, since I ate only those foods I could be sure would not give me the diarrhea which was the visitors' downfall in Mexico City.

One day, after two weeks in and around the District, I traveled south to Cuernavaca by bus to see Frieda Mathews and her young daughter Tammy. Frieda's name had been given to me by a friend of Rhea's who had been a nurse with Frieda in the Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. I had been visiting museums and pyramids, wandering the streets of the city, and generally satisfying my hunger and curiosity for the feel of this new place. Although I was feeling more and more at home, I began to feel the need for someone to talk to in English. Classes at Ciudad Universitaria began the following week.

Cuernavaca was a garden spot south of the District and closer to sea level, in the Morelos Valley about forty-five miles from Mexico City.

When I telephoned, Frieda greeted me warmly and immediately invited me down to Cuernavaca to spend the day. She and Tammy met me at the bus. The weather was warmer and sunnier than in the District, and there was a much more relaxed air about the town square.

As soon as the bus pulled into the square, I recognized the tall blond american woman and the tanned smiling young girl beside her. Frieda looked like she sounded over the phone, a calm, intelligent, and forthright woman in her early forties. Frieda and Tammy had lived in Cuernavaca for nine years, and Frieda was always hungry for news from New York, her original home. "Is the Essex Street Market still open, and what are the writers doing?"

We spent the morning talking about mutual acquaintances and then wandered through the markets on Guerrero buying foodstuffs for dinner, which Tammy brought back to their housekeeper to cook. Later, we sat drinking foamy *café con leche* at a table in the open-air cafe that occupied one whole corner of the town square. Strolling musicians were tuning their guitars in the afternoon sun, and the *chamaquitos*, street urchins, descended upon us begging for pennies, then ran away laughing as Tammy engaged them in rapid spanish. In short order, other americans, all of them white and most of them women, strolled over to our table to see who was this new face in town. Frieda introduced me to a host of cordial welcomes.

After the day spent in the easy beauty of Cuernavaca and easy-going company of Frieda and her friends, it took little urging on Frieda's part to persuade me to consider moving down to Cuernavaca. I was still anxious to find cheaper lodgings than the Hotel Fortin. I could commute to the District for classes, she assured me. Many people in Cuernavaca worked in Mexico City, and transportation by bus or group *taximetro* was very inexpensive.

"I think you'll be happier living here than in Mexico City," Frieda offered. "It's a lot quieter. You can probably get one of the small houses in the compound over at Humboldt Number Twenty-four, which is a pretty place to live."

Tammy, who was twelve, was delighted to have somebody come to town who was closer to her age than Frieda and her friends.

"And Jesús can help you with your things from the District," Frieda added. With her divorce settlement, Frieda had bought a small farm in Tepotzlán, a tiny village further up the mountain. Jesús managed the farm, she explained. They had once been lovers. "But that's all quite different now," Frieda said brusquely, as Tammy called to us from the patio to come see her *pato-ganso*, a duck so big it could have been a goose.

I went to see about the little house in the compound that same afternoon.

I was open to anything. Cuernavaca felt like a gift. The house consisted of one large room, with huge windows facing the mountains, and a bathroom, kitchen, and tiny dining alcove; my own little house with trees and flowers and bushes around a path that led to my own front door, where no one else would enter except by my invitation. The one-and-a-half hour trip over the mountains to make my 8:00 A.M. class in the mornings seemed a minor inconvenience. On the bus back to Mexico City, I made up my mind to move.

Jesús came to pick me up with my bags and my typewriter one afternoon after school. It was late afternoon as we drove around and around the mountain on the new *autopiso* from the Federal District to Cuernavaca. The top of his old Chrysler convertible was down. Mariachi music twanged out of the turned-up radio as we careened around curve after curve, each one revealing a brand-new vista, a new landscape. (And I had once thought of Stamford, Conn., as "the country!") The thunderheads on the horizon as we came around the crest of Morelos mountain shone purple-edged and brilliant in the lowering sun, and I was happier than I'd been in what seemed like a very long time. What was even better, I was wholly conscious that I was.

I settled back against the worn upholstery of the capacious seat. As we rode down into the valley toward Cuernavaca that March evening, with a *mañanitas* blaring from the radio, the back seat full of my bags and typewriter, the screech of Jesús's tires around the curves and his ready reassuring guffaw, I knew I was quite glad to be exactly where I was.

. . . la luna se oculto,  
Levantate, Amiga mía,  
mira que le amanaceo.

*La Señora. La Periodista. La Morenita. La Alta Rubia. La Chica.* The people who worked in the compound at Humboldt No. 24 had names for most of the *norteamericanas* who lived and visited there. A bit nickname, a bit designation, a bit endearment. Nobody who was disliked had one. They were never used in anger or displeasure. The Lady. The Newspaper-woman. The Dark One. The Tall Blond. The Little One.

By 1954, Cuernavaca had earned a name as a haven for political and spiritual refugees from the north, a place where American middle-class non-conformists could live more simply, cheaply, and quietly than in Acapulco or Taxco, where all the

movie stars went. A small beautiful town, largely supported by the expatriates from many different countries who lived there.

Along Cuernavaca's sleepy streets were iron gates and high adobe walls bright with sun, and with brilliant jacaranda trees dripping their flowers over the walls from inside.

Beside the walls, little boys sat napping with their burros, taking a rest halfway up the hilly packed-mud streets. Behind the iron gates, american Cuernavaca led a complex and sophisticated life.

A high percentage of single women of moderate means, mostly from California and New York, owned shares in the little tourist shops that lined the Plaza; others supplemented whatever income they had by working in those shops, or teaching and nursing a few days a week in Mexico City. Some of these women were divorced and living on alimony; others were nurses like Frieda who had served in the Lincoln Brigade and run into trouble with the american government because of it. Members of the brigade had been granted citizenship by Mexico. There were members of the red-bait Hollywood Ten and their families, whitelisted out of work in the movie industry, and eking out a living in less-expensive Mexico by editing and ghostwriting. There were victims of other McCarthyist purges, still going on in full swing. We had in common many of Rhea's friends, and many of the people I had met while working on the Rosenberg committee in the years before.

For the american colony in Cuernavaca, the political atmosphere was one of guarded alertness. There was not the stench of terror and political repression so present in New York; we were 3,500 miles away. But any idea that immunity from McCarthyism might be conferred by borders had been shattered two years before in the minds of anyone who had ever been the least bit politically active. FBI agents had descended upon Mexico and hustled Morton Sobell, alleged co-conspirator of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, out of Mexico and right back across the border to stand trial for treason.

Caution and fear of newcomers was everywhere, mixed up with a welcoming excitement at any new face. Expectation of some new political disaster from the north, as yet unspecified, was also everywhere. So were the ripe luscious bougainvillea with their flame-red voluptuous flowers, and the delicate and persistent showers of jacaranda blossoms, with their small white and pink and purple petals, behind which all of these anxieties flourished.

It was here in the breathtaking dawns and quick hill-twilights of Cuernavaca that I learned it really is easier to be quiet in the woods. One morning I came down the hill toward the square at dawn to catch my ride to the District. The birds suddenly cut loose all around me in the unbelievable sweet warm air. I had never heard anything so beautiful and unexpected before. I felt shaken by the waves of song. For the first time in my life, I had an insight into what poetry could be. I could use words to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was what so much of my writing had been before.

*The little blind bird-boy, Jeroméo, slept on a stone bench next to the bandstand in the center of the square, near his cages of brightly-colored birds for sale. In the pre-dawn darkness, the birds high in the trees sensed the coming of the sun, and as the moist fragrant air filled with an orchestra of song from the birds in the trees surrounding the Plaza, the caged birds filled the square with their singing answer.*

*Jeroméo went on sleeping.*

In the afternoons when I came home from the District I went sightseeing in the Morelos Valley, or sat with Frieda and her friends in the square over coffee. Sometimes I went swimming with them in Ellen Perl's pool.

The women I met through Frieda were older and far more experienced than I. I learned later that they speculated at length in private as to whether or not I was gay, and whether or not I knew it. It never occurred to me that they were gay, or at least bisexual, themselves. I never suspected because a large part of their existence was devoted toward concealing that fact. These women pretended to be straight in a way they never would have pretended to be conservative. Their political courage was far greater than their sexual openness. To my provincially New York and naive eyes, "gay-girls" were just that—young, obvious, and definitely bohemian. Certainly not progressive, comfortable, matronly, and over forty, with swimming pools, dyed hair, and young second husbands. As far as I knew all the american women in the Plaza were straight, just emancipated.

Weeks later, I mentioned as much to Eudora on our way to the pyramids at Teotihuacan, and she almost laughed us off the road into a ditch.

## 22

*Eudora. Mexico. Color and light and Cuernavaca and Eudora.*

At the compound, Easter Saturday, she was just coming out of a week's drinking binge which started with the firing of Robert Oppenheimer, the atomic scientist, in the states. I was full of the Good Friday festivities in Mexico City, which I had attended with Frieda and Tammy the day before. They had gone to Tepotzlán. I was sunning myself on my front lawn.

"Hello, down there! Aren't you overdoing it?" I looked up at the woman whom I had noticed observing me from an upper window in the two-story dwelling at the edge of the compound. She was the only woman I'd seen wearing pants in Mexico except at the pool.

I was pleased that she had spoken. The two women who lived separately in the double house at that end of the compound never appeared at tables in the Plaza. They never spoke as they passed my house on their way to the cars or the pool. I knew one of them had a shop in town called La Señora, which had the most interesting clothes on the Square.

"Haven't you heard, only mad dogs and englishmen go out in the noonday sun?" I shaded my eyes so I could see her better. I was more curious than I had realized.

"I don't burn that easily," I called back. She was framed in the large casement window, a crooked smile on her half-shaded face. Her voice was strong and pleasant, but with a crack in it that sounded like a cold, or too many cigarettes.

"I'm just going to have some coffee. Would you like some?"

I stood, picked up the blanket upon which I'd been lying, and accepted her invitation.

She was waiting in her doorway. I recognized her as the tall grey-haired woman called La Periodista.

"My name's Eudora," she said, extending her hand and holding mine firmly for a moment. "And they call you La Chica, you're here from New York, and you go to the new university."

"Where did you find all that out?" I asked, taken aback. We stepped inside.

"It's my business to find out what goes on," she laughed easily. "That's what reporters do. Legitimate gossip."

Eudora's bright spacious room was comfortable and disheveled. A large easy chair faced the bed upon which she now perched crosslegged, in shorts and polo shirt, smoking, and surrounded by books and newspapers.

Maybe it was her direct manner. Maybe it was the openness with which she appraised me as she motioned me towards the chair. Maybe it was the pants, or the informed freedom and authority with which she moved. But from the moment I walked into her house, I knew Eudora was gay, and that was an unexpected and welcome surprise. It made me feel much more at home and relaxed, even though I was still feeling sore and guilty from my fiasco with Bea, but it was refreshing to know I wasn't alone.

"I've been drinking for a week," she said, "and I'm still a little hung-over, so you'll have to excuse the mess."

I didn't know what to say.

Eudora wanted to know what I was doing in Mexico, young, Black, and with an eye for the ladies, as she put it. That was the second surprise. We shared a good laugh over the elusive cues for mutual recognition among lesbians. Eudora was the first woman I'd met who spoke about herself as a lesbian rather than as "gay," which was a word she hated. Eudora said it was a north american east-coast term that didn't mean anything to her, and what's more most of the lesbians she had known were anything but gay.

When I went to the market that afternoon, I brought back milk and eggs and fruit for her. I invited her to dinner, but she wasn't feeling much like eating, she said, so I fixed my dinner and brought it over and ate with her. Eudora was an insomniac, and we sat talking late into the night.

She was the most fascinating woman I had ever met.

Born in Texas forty-eight years before, Eudora was the youngest child in an oil-worker's family. She had seven older brothers. Polio as a child had kept her in bed for three years, "so I had a lot of catchin' up to do, and I never knew when to stop."

In 1925, she became the first woman to attend the University of Texas, integrating it by camping out on the university grounds for four years in a tent with her rifle and a dog. Her brothers had studied there, and she was determined to also. "They said they didn't have living accommodations for women," Eudora said, "and I couldn't afford a place in town."

She'd worked in news all her life, both print and radio, and had followed her lover, Franz, to Chicago, where they both worked for the same paper. "She and I were quite a team, all right. Had a lot of high times together, did a lot of foolishness, believed a lot of things.

"Then Franz married a foreign correspondent in Istanbul," Eudora continued, drily, "and I lost my job over a byline on the Scottsboro case." She worked for a while in Texas for a Mexican paper, then moved into Mexico City for them.

When she and Karen, who owned La Señora, were lovers, they had started a bookstore together in Cuernavaca in the more liberal forties. For a while it was a rallying place for disaffected Americans. This was how she knew Frieda.

"It was where people came to find out what was really going on in the states. Everybody passed through." She paused. "But it got to be a little too radical for Karen's tastes," Eudora said carefully. "The dress shop suits her better. But that's a whole other mess, and she still owes me money."

"What happened to the bookstore?" I asked, not wanting to pry, but fascinated by her story.

"Oh, lots of things, in very short order. I've always been a hard drinker, and she never liked that. Then when I had to speak my mind in the column about the whole Sobell business, and the newspaper started getting itchy, Karen thought I was going to lose that job. I didn't, but my immigration status was changed, which meant I could still work in Mexico, but after all these years I could no longer own property. That's the one way of getting uppity Americans to keep their mouths shut. Don't rock big brother's boat, and we'll let you stay. That was right up Karen's alley. She bought me out and opened the dress shop."

"Is that why you broke up?"

Eudora laughed. "That sounds like New York talk." She was silent for a minute, busying herself with the overflowing ashtray.

"Actually, no," she said finally. "I had an operation, and it was pretty rough for both of us. Radical surgery, for cancer. I lost a breast." Eudora's head was bent over the ashtray, hair falling forward, and I could not see her face. I reached out and touched her hand.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"Yeah, so am I," she said, matter-of-factly, placing the polished ashtray carefully back on the table beside her bed. She looked up, smiled, and pushed the hair back from her face with the heels of her hands. "There's never enough time to begin with, and still so damn much I want to do."

"How are you feeling now, Eudora?" I remembered my nights on the female surgery floor at Beth David. "Did you have radiation?"

"Yes I did. It's almost two years since the last one, and I'm fine now. The scars are hard to take, though. Not dashing or romantic. I don't much like to look at them myself." She got up, took down her guitar from the wall, and started to tune it. "What folksongs are they teaching you in that fine new university up the mountain?"

Eudora had translated a number of texts on the history and ethnology of Mexico, one of which was a textbook assigned for my history class. She was witty and funny and sharp and insightful, and knew a lot about an enormous number of things. She had written poetry when she was younger, and Walt Whitman was her favorite poet. She showed me some clippings of articles she had written for a memorial-documentary of Whitman. One sentence in particular caught my eye.

I met a man who'd spent his life in thinking, and could understand me no matter what I said. And I followed him to Harleigh in the snow.

The next week was Easter holidays, and I spent part of each afternoon or evening at Eudora's house, reading poetry, learning to play the guitar, talking. I told her about Ginger, and about Bea, and she talked about her and Franz's life together. We even had a game of dirty-word Scrabble, and although I warned her I was a declared champion, Eudora won, thereby increasing my vocabulary no end. She showed me the column she was finishing about the Olmec stone heads, and we talked about the research she was planning to do on African and Asian influences in Mexican art. Her eyes twinkled and her long graceful hands flashed as she talked, and by midweek, when we were not together, I could feel the curves of her cheekbone under my lips as I gave her a quick goodbye kiss. I thought about making love to her, and ruined a whole pot of curry in my confusion. This was not what I had come to Mexico to do.

There was an air about Eudora when she moved that was both delicate and sturdy, fragile and tough, like the snapdragon she resembled when she stood up, flung back her head, and brushed her hair back with the palms of her hands. I was besotted.

Eudora often made fun of what she called my prudishness, and there was nothing she wouldn't talk about. But there was a reserve about her own person, a force-field around her that I did

not know how to pass, a sadness surrounding her that I could not breach. And besides, a woman of her years and experience—how presumptuous of me!

We sat talking in her house later and later, over endless cups of coffee, half my mind on our conversation and half of it hunting for some opening, some graceful, safe way of getting closer to this woman whose smell made my earlobes burn. Who, despite her openness about everything else, turned away from me when she changed her shirt.

On Thursday night we rehung some of her bark paintings from Tehuantepec. The overhead fan hummed faintly; there was a little pool of sweat sitting in one wing of her collarbone. I almost reached over to kiss it.

“Goddammit!” Eudora had narrowly missed her finger with the hammer.

“You’re very beautiful,” I said suddenly, embarrassed at my own daring. There was a moment of silence as Eudora put down her hammer.

“So are you, Chica,” she said, quietly, “more beautiful than you know.” Her eyes held mine for a minute so I could not turn away.

No one had ever said that to me before.

It was after 2:00 A.M. when I left Eudora’s house, walking across the grass to my place in the clear moonlight. Once inside I could not sleep. I tried to read. Visions of Eudora’s dear one-sided grin kept coming between me and the page. I wanted to be with her, to be close to her, laughing.

I sat on the edge of my bed, wanting to put my arms around Eudora, to let the tenderness and love I felt burn away the sad casing around her and speak to her need through the touch of my hands and my mouth and my body that defined my own.

“It’s getting late,” she had said. “You look tired. Do you want to stretch out?” She gestured to the bed beside her. I came out of my chair like a shot.

“Oh, no, that’s all right,” I stammered. All I could think of was that I had not had a bath since morning. “I—I need to take a shower, anyway.”

Eudora had already picked up a book. “Goodnight, Chica,” she said without looking up.

I jumped up from the edge of my bed and put a light under the water-heater. I was going back.

"What is it, Chica? I thought you were going to bed." Eudora was reclining exactly as I had left her an hour before, propped up on a pillow against the wall, the half-filled ashtray next to her hand and books littering the rest of the three-quarter studio bed. A bright towel hung around her neck against the loose, short-sleeved beige nightshirt.

My hair was still damp from the shower, and my bare feet itched from the dew-wet grass between our houses. I was suddenly aware that it was 3:30 in the morning.

"Would you like some more coffee?" I offered.

She regarded me at length, unsmiling, almost wearily.

"Is that what you came back for, more coffee?"

All through waiting for the *calendador* to heat, all through showering and washing my hair and brushing my teeth, until that very moment, I had thought of nothing but wanting to hold Eudora in my arms, so much that I didn't care that I was also terrified. Somehow, if I could manage to get myself back up those steps in the moonlight, and if Eudora was not already asleep, then I would have done my utmost. That would be my piece of the bargain, and then what I wanted would somehow magically fall into my lap.

Eudora's grey head moved against the bright serape-covered wall behind her, still regarding me as I stood over her. Her eyes wrinkled and she slowly smiled her lopsided smile, and I could feel the warm night air between us collapse as if to draw us together.

I knew then that she had been hoping I would return. Out of wisdom or fear, Eudora waited for me to speak.

Night after night we had talked until dawn in this room about language and poetry and love and the good conduct of living. Yet we were strangers. As I stood there looking at Eudora, the impossible became easier, almost simple. Desire gave me courage, where it had once made me speechless. With almost no thought I heard myself saying,

"I want to sleep with you."

Eudora straightened slowly, pushed the books from her bed with a sweep of her arm, and held out her hand to me.

"Come."

I sat down on the edge of the bed, facing her, our thighs touching. Our eyes were on a level now, looking deeply into each

other. I could feel my heart pounding in my ears, and the high steady sound of the crickets.

"Do you know what you're saying?" Eudora asked softly, searching my face. I could smell her like the sharp breath of wildflowers.

"I know," I said, not understanding her question. Did she think I was a child?

"I don't know if I can," she said, still softly, touching the sunken place on her nightshirt where her left breast should have been. "And you don't mind this?"

I had wondered so often how it would feel under my hands, my lips, this different part of her. Mind? I felt my love spread like a shower of light surrounding me and this woman before me. I reached over and touched Eudora's face with my hands.

"Are you sure?" Her eyes were still on my face.

"Yes, Eudora." My breath caught in my throat as if I'd been running. "I'm very sure." If I did not put my mouth upon hers and inhale the spicy smell of her breath my lungs would burst.

As I spoke the words, I felt them touch and give life to a new reality within me, some half-known self come of age, moving out to meet her.

I stood, and in two quick movements slid out of my dress and underclothes. I held my hand down to Eudora. Delight. Anticipation. A slow smile mirroring my own softened her face. Eudora reached over and passed the back of her hand along my thigh. Goose-flesh followed in the path of her fingers.

"How beautiful and brown you are."

She rose slowly. I unbuttoned her shirt and she shrugged it off her shoulders till it lay heaped at our feet. In the circle of lamplight I looked from her round firm breast with its rosy nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder and arm down across her ribs. I raised my eyes and found hers again, speaking a tenderness my mouth had no words yet for. She took my hand and placed it there, squarely, lightly, upon her chest. Our hands fell. I bent and kissed her softly upon the scar where our hands had rested. I felt her heart strong and fast against my lips. We fell back together upon her bed. My lungs expanded and my breath deepened with the touch of her warm dry skin. My mouth finally against hers, quick-breathed, fragrant, searching, her hand entwined in my hair. My body took charge from her flesh. Shifting slightly, Eudora reached past my head toward the lamp

above us. I caught her wrist. Her bones felt like velvet and quicksilver between my tingling fingers.

"No," I whispered against the hollow of her ear. "In the light."

Sun poured through the jacarandas outside Eudora's window. I heard the faint and rhythmical whirr-whoosh of Tomas's scythe as he cut back the wild banana bushes from the walk down by the pool.

I came fully awake with a start, seeing the impossible. The junebug I had squashed with a newspaper at twilight, so long before, seemed to be moving slowly up the white-painted wall. It would move a few feet up from the floor, fall back, and then start up again. I grabbed for my glasses from the floor where I had dropped them the night before. With my glasses on, I could see that there was a feather-thin line of ants descending from the adobe ceiling down the wall to the floor where the junebug was lying. The ants, in concert, were trying to hoist the carcass straight up the vertical wall on their backs, up to their hole on the ceiling. I watched in fascination as the tiny ants lifted their huge load, moved, lost it, then lifted again.

I half-turned and reached over to touch Eudora lying against my back, one arm curved over our shared pillow. The pleasure of our night flushed over me like sun on the walls of the light-washed colorful room. Her light brown eyes opened, studying me as she came slowly out of sleep, her sculptured lips smiling, a little bit open, revealing the gap beside her front teeth. I traced her mouth with my finger. For a moment I felt exposed, unsure, suddenly wanting reassurance that I had not been found wanting. The morning air was still dew-damp, and the smell of our loving lay upon us.

As if reading my thoughts, Eudora's arm came down around my shoulders, drawing me around and to her, tightly, and we lay holding each other in the Mexican morning sunlight that flooded through her uncovered casement windows. Tomas, the caretaker, sang in soft Spanish, keeping time with his scythe, and the sounds drifted in to us from the compound below.

"What an ungodly hour," Eudora laughed, kissing the top of my head and jumping over me with a long stride. "Aren't you hungry?" With her towel around her neck, Eudora made *huevos*, scrambled eggs Mexican-style, and real *café con leche* for our breakfast. We ate at the gaily painted orange table between the tiny kitchen and her bedroom, smiling and talking and feeding each other from our common plate.

There was room for only one of us at the square shallow sink in the kitchen. As I washed dishes to insure an ant-free afternoon, Eudora leaned on the doorpost, smoking lazily. Her hip-bones flared like wings over her long legs. I could feel her quick breath on the side of my neck as she watched me. She dried the dishes, and hung the towel over a tin mask on the kitchen cabinet.

"Now let's go back to bed," she muttered, reaching for me through the Mexican shirt I had borrowed to throw over myself. "There's more."

By this time the sun was passing overhead. The room was full of reflected light and the heat from the flat adobe over us, but the wide windows and the lazy ceiling fan above kept the sweet air moving. We sat in bed sipping iced coffee from a pewter mug.

When I told Eudora I didn't like to be made love to, she raised her eyebrows. "How do you know?" she said, and smiled as she reached out and put down our coffee cup. "That's probably because no one has ever really made love to you before," she said softly, her eyes wrinkling at the corners, intense, desiring.

Eudora knew many things about loving women that I had not yet learned. Day into dusk. A brief shower. Freshness. The comfort and delight of her body against mine. The ways my body came to life in the curve of her arms, her tender mouth, her sure body—gentle, persistent, complete.

We run up the steep outside steps to her roof, and the almost full moon flickers in the dark center wells of her eyes. Kneeling, I pass my hands over her body, along the now-familiar place below her left shoulder, down along her ribs. A part of her. The mark of the Amazon. For a woman who seems spare, almost lean, in her clothing, her body is ripe and smooth to the touch. Beloved. Warm to my coolness, cool to my heat. I bend, moving my lips over her flat gentle stomach to the firm rising mound beneath.

On Monday, I went back to school. In the next month, Eudora and I spent many afternoons together, but her life held complications about which she would say little.

Eudora had been all over Mexico. She regaled me with tales of her adventures. She seemed always to have lived her life as if it were a story, a little grander than ordinary. Her love of Mexico, her adopted land, was deep and compelling, like an answer to my grade-school fantasies. She knew a great deal about the

folkways and beliefs of the different peoples who had swept across the country in waves long ago, leaving their languages and a small group of descendants to carry on the old ways.

We went for long rides through the mountains in her Hudson convertible. We went to the Brincas, the traditional Moorish dances in Tepotzlán. She told me about the Olmec stone heads of African people that were being found in Tabasco, and the ancient contacts between Mexico and Africa and Asia that were just now coming to light. We talked about the legend of the China Poblana, the Asian-looking patron saint of Puebla. Eudora could savor what was Zapotec, Toltec, Mixtec, Aztec in the culture, and how much had been so terribly destroyed by Europeans.

"That genocide rivals the Holocaust of World War II," she asserted.

She talked about the nomadic Lacondonian Indians, who were slowly disappearing from the land near Comitán in Chiapas, because the forests were going. She told me how the women in San Cristobál de las Casas give the names of catholic saints to their goddesses, so that they and their daughters can pray and make offerings in peace at the forest shrines without offending the catholic church.

She helped me plan a trip south, to Oaxaca and beyond, through San Cristobál to Guatemala, and gave me the names of people with whom I could stay right through to the border. I planned to leave when school was over, and secretly, more and more, hoped she could come with me.

Despite all the sightseeing I had done, and all the museums and ruins I had visited, and the books I had read, it was Eudora who opened those doors for me leading to the heart of this country and its people. It was Eudora who showed me the way to the Mexico I had come looking for, that nourishing land of light and color where I was somehow at home.

"I'd like to come back here and work for a while," I said, as Eudora and I watched women dying wool in great vats around the market. "If I can get papers."

"Chica, you can't run away to this country or it will never let you go. It's too beautiful. That's what the *café con leche* crowd can never admit to themselves. I thought it'd be easier here, myself, to live like I wanted to, say what I wanted to say, but it isn't. It's just easier not to, that's all. Sometimes I think I should have stayed and fought it out in Chicago. But the

winters were too damned cold. And gin was too damned expensive." She laughed and pushed back her hair.

As we got back into the car to drive home, Eudora was unusually quiet. Finally, as we came over the tip of Morelos, she said, as if we'd continued our earlier conversation, "But it would be good if you came back here to work. Just don't plan on staying too long."

Eudora and I only went to the Plaza once together. Although she knew the people who hung out there, she disliked most of them. She said it was because they had sided with Karen. "Frieda's all right," she said, "but the rest of them don't deserve a pit to hiss in."

We sat at a small table for two, and Jeroméo ambled over with his bird cages to show his wares to the newcomers. The ever-present *chamaquitos* came to beg *centavos* and errands. Even the strolling mariachi players passed by to see if we were a likely prospect for serenading. But only Tammy, irrepressible and pre-adolescent, bounded over to our table and leaned possessively against it, eager for conversation.

"Are you coming shopping with me tomorrow?" she inquired. We were going to buy a turtle to keep her duck company.

I told her yes, hugged her, and then patted her fanny. "See you tomorrow," I said.

"Now the tongues can wag again," Eudora said, bitterly. I looked at her questioningly.

"Nobody knows anything about us," I said, lightly. "And besides, everybody minds their own business around here."

Eudora looked at me for a moment as if she was wondering who I was.

The sun went down and Jeroméo covered his birds. The lights on the bandstand came on, and Maria went around, lighting candles on the tables. Eudora and I paid our bill and left, walking around the closed market and down Guerrero hill toward Humboldt No. 24. The air was heavy with the smell of flowers and woodfire, and the crackle of frying grasshoppers from the vendors' carts lining Guerrero hill.

The next afternoon when Tammy and I came from the market, we joined Frieda and her friends at their table. Ellen was there, with her cat, and Agnes with her young husband Sam, who was always having to go to the border for something or other.

"Did we interrupt something?" I asked, since they had stopped talking.

"No, dear, just old gossip," Frieda said, drily.

"I see you're getting to know everybody in town," Agnes said brightly, sitting forward with a preliminary smile. I looked up to see Frieda frowning at her.

"We were just saying how much better Eudora looks these days," Frieda said, with finality, and changed the subject. "Do you kids want *café* or *helada*?"

It bothered me that Frieda sometimes treated me like her peer and confidante, and at other times like Tammy's contemporary.

Later, I walked Frieda and Tammy home, and just before I turned off, Frieda said off-handedly, "Don't let them razz you about Eudora, she's a good woman. But she can be trouble."

I pondered her words all the way up to the compound.

That spring, McCarthy was censured. The Supreme Court decision on the desegregation of schools was announced in the english newspaper, and for a while all of us seemed to go crazy with hope for another kind of america. Some of the *café con leche* crowd even talked about going home.

SUPREME COURT OF U. S. DECIDES AGAINST SEPARATE EDUCATION FOR NEGROES. I clutched the Saturday paper and read again. It wasn't even a headline. Just a box on the lower front page.

I hurried down the hill towards the compound. It all felt monumental and confusing. The Rosenbergs were dead. But this case which I had only been dimly aware of through the NAACP's *Crisis*, could alter the whole racial climate in the states. The supreme court had spoken. For me. It had spoken in the last century, and I had learned its "separate but equal" decision in school. Now something had actually changed, might actually change. Eating ice cream in Washington, D. C. was not the point; kids in the south being able to go to school was.

Could there possibly, after all, be some real and fruitful relationship between me and that malevolent force to the north of this place?

The court decision in the paper in my hand felt like a private promise, some message of vindication particular to me. Yet everybody in the Plaza this morning had also been talking about it, and the change this could make in american life.

For me, walking hurriedly back to my own little house in this land of color and dark people who said *negro* and meant something beautiful, who noticed me as I moved among them—this decision felt like a promise of some kind that I half-believed in, in spite of myself, a possible validation.

Hope. It was not that I expected it to alter radically the nature of my living, but rather that it put me actively into a context that felt like progress, and seemed part and parcel of the wakening that I called *Mexico*.

It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible. In the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the Plaza, in the particular attention within Eudora's eyes. Sometimes, half-smiling, she would scan my face without speaking. It made me feel like she was the first person who had ever looked at me, ever seen who I was. And not only did she see me, she loved me, thought me beautiful. This was no accidental collision.

I never saw Eudora actually drinking, and it was easy for me to forget that she was an alcoholic. The word itself meant very little to me besides derelicts on the Bowery. I had never known anyone with a drinking problem before. We never discussed it, and for weeks she would be fine while we went exploring together.

Then something, I never knew what, would set her off. Sometimes she'd disappear for a few days, and the carport would be empty when I came from school.

I hung around the compound in those afternoons, waiting to see her car drive in the back gate. Once I asked her afterwards where she'd been.

"In every *cantina* in Tepotzlán," she said matter-of-factly. "They know me." Her eyes narrowed as she waited for me to speak.

I did not dare to question her further.

She would be sad and quiet for a few days. And then we would make love.

Wildly. Beautifully. But it only happened three times.

Classes at the university ended. I made my plans to go south—Guatemala. I soon realized that Eudora was not coming with me. She had developed bursitis, and was often in a lot of pain. Sometimes in the early morning I heard furious voices coming through Eudora's open windows. Hers and La Señora's.

I gave up my little house with its simple, cheerful long-windowed room, and stored my typewriter and extra suitcase

at Frieda's house. I was going to spend my last evening with Eudora, then take the second-class bus at dawn south to Oaxaca. It was a fifteen-hour trip.

Tomás's burro at the gate. Loud voices beneath the birdsong in the compound. La Señora almost knocking me over as she swept past me down Eudora's steps. Tomás standing in Eudora's entryway. On the orange table an unopened bottle of pale liquor with no label.

"Eudora! What happened?" I cried. She ignored me, speaking to Tomás in Spanish, "And don't give La Señora anything of mine again, understand? Here!" She handed him two pesos from the wallet on the table.

"Con su permiso," he said with relief, and left quickly.

"Eudora, what's wrong?" I moved toward her, and she caught me at arm's length.

"Go home, Chica. Don't get involved in this."

"Involved in what? What's going on?" I shrugged off her hands.

"She thinks she can steal my bookstore, ruin my life, and still have me around whenever she wants me. But she's not going to get away with it any more. I'm going to get my money!" Eudora hugged me tightly for a moment, then pushed me away. There was a strange acrid smell upon her.

"Goodbye, Chica. Go on back to Frieda's house. This doesn't concern you. And have a good trip. When you come back next time we'll go to Jalisco, to Guadalajara, or maybe up to Yucatan. They're starting a new dig there I'm going to cover. . . ."

"Eudora, I can't leave you like this. Please. Let me stay!" If only I could hold her. I reached out to touch her again, and Eudora whirled away, almost tripping over the table.

"No, I said." Her voice was nasty, harsh, like gravel. "Get out! What makes you think you can come into someone's life on a visa and expect. . . ."

I flinched in horror at her tone. Then I recognized the smell as tequila, and I realized she had been drinking already. Maybe it was the look on my face that stopped her. Eudora's voice changed. Slowly, carefully—almost gently—she said, "You can't handle this, Chica. I'll be all right. But I want you to leave, right now, because it's going to get worse, and I do not want you around to see it. Please. Go."

It was as clear and as direct as anything Eudora had ever said to me. There was anger and sadness beneath the surface of her words that I still did not understand. She picked up the bottle

from the table and flopped into the armchair heavily, her back to me. I had been dismissed.

I wanted to burst into tears. Instead, I picked up my suitcase. I stood there, feeling like I'd been kicked in the stomach, feeling afraid, feeling useless.

Almost as if I'd spoken, Eudora's voice came muffled through the back of the armchair.

"I said I'll be all right. Now go."

I moved forward and kissed the top of her tousled head, her spice-flower smells now mixed with the acrid smell of tequila.

"All right, Eudora, I'm going. Goodbye. But I'm coming back. In three weeks, I'll be back."

It was not only a cry of pain, but a new determination to finish something I had begun, to stick with—what? A commitment my body had made? or with the tenderness which flooded through me at the curve of her head over the back of the chair?

To stick with something that had passed between us, and not lose myself. And not lose myself.

Eudora had not ignored me. Eudora had not made me invisible. Eudora had acted directly towards me.

She had sent me away.

I was hurt, but not lost. And in that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths.

"Goodbye, Eudora."

When I arrived back in Cuernavaca just before the rains—tired, dirty, and exhilarated—I headed for Frieda's house and my clean clothes. She and Tammy had just come in from the farm in Tepotzlán.

"How's Eudora?" I asked Frieda, as Tammy fetched us cool drinks from the kitchen.

"She's left town, moved up to the District, finally. I hear she's reporting for a new daily up there."

Gone. "Where's she living?" I asked dully.

"Nobody has her address," Frieda said, quickly. "I understand there was one hell of a brawl up at the compound between her and La Señora. But evidently they must have gotten their business settled, because Eudora left soon afterwards. It all happened right after you left." Frieda sipped her *fresca* slowly. Glancing at me, she took some change from her pocket and sent Tammy to the market for bread.

I carefully kept what I hoped was an impassive expression on my face as I toyed with my fruit drink, screaming inside. But Frieda put her drink down, leaned forward, and patted me on the arm reassuringly.

"Now don't worry about her," she said kindly. "That was the best thing in the world Eudora could have done for herself, getting out of this fishbowl. If I wasn't afraid of losing Tammy to her father in the states, I think I'd leave tomorrow." She settled back in her chair, and fixed me with her level, open gaze.

"Anyway, you're going back home next week, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, knowing what she was saying and that she was quite right.

"But I hope to come back some day." I thought of the ruins at Chichen-Itzá, of the Olmec heads in Tabasco, and Eudora's excited running commentaries.

"I'm sure you will, then," Frieda said, encouragingly.

I returned to New York on the night of July 4th. The humid heat was oppressive after the dry hot climate of Mexico. As I got out of the taxi on Seventh Street, the sound of firecrackers was everywhere. They sounded thinner and higher than the fireworks in Mexico.

**23** I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, feeling I had the truth and the light and the key, but a lot of it was purely hell.

There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour. Just as there were no rings to make tangible the reason for our happy secret smiles, there were no names nor reason given or shared for the tears that messed up the lab reports or the library bills.

We were good listeners, and never asked for double dates, *but didn't we know the rules?* Why did we always seem to think friendships between women were important enough to care about? Always we moved in a necessary remoteness that made "What did you do this weekend?" seem like an impertinent

question. We discovered and explored our attention to women alone, sometimes in secret, sometimes in defiance, sometimes in little pockets that almost touched ("Why are those little Black girls always either whispering together or fighting?") but always alone, against a greater aloneness. We did it cold turkey, and although it resulted in some pretty imaginative tough women when we survived, too many of us did not survive at all.

I remember Muff, who sat on the same seat in the same dark corner of the Pony Stable Bar drinking the same gin year after year. One day she slipped off onto the floor and died of a stroke right there between the stools. We found out later her real name was Josephine.

During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lay in our fewness, our rarity. That was the way it was Downtown. And Uptown, meaning the land of Black people, seemed very far away and hostile territory.

Diane was fat, and Black, and beautiful, and knew it long before it became fashionable to think so. Her cruel tongue was used to great advantage, spilling out her devastatingly uninhibited wit to demolish anyone who came too close to her; that is, when she wasn't busy deflowering the neighborhood's resident virgins. One day I noticed her enormous bosom which matched my own and it felt quite comforting rather than competitive. It was clothed in a CCNY sweatshirt, and I realized in profound shock that someone else besides me in the Village gay-girl scene was a closet student at one of the Uptown (meaning past 14th Street) colleges. We would rather have died than mention classes, or tests, or any books other than those everyone else was discussing. This was the fifties and the gulf between the Village gay scene and the college crowd was sharper and far more acrimonious than any town-gown war.

There were not enough of us. But we surely tried. I remember thinking for a while that I was the only Black lesbian living in the Village, until I met Felicia. Felicia, with the face of a spoiled nun, skinny and sharp-brown, sat on my sofa on Seventh Street, with her enormous eyelashes that curled back upon themselves twice. She was bringing me a pair of Siamese cats that had terrorized her junkie friends who were straight and

lived on a houseboat with the two cats until they brought their new baby home from the hospital and both cats went bananas back and forth all over the boat, jumping over everything including the box that the baby screamed in, because Siamese cats are very jealous. So, instead of drowning the cats, they gave them to Felicia whom I ran into having a beer at the Bagatelle that night and when Muriel mentioned I liked cats, Flee insisted on bringing them over to my house right then and there. She sat on my sofa with her box of cats and her curly eyelashes and I thought to myself, "if she must wear false eyelashes you'd think she'd make them less obviously false."

We soon decided that we were really sisters, which was much more than friends or buddies, particularly when we discovered while reminiscing about the bad days that we had gone to the same catholic school for six months in the first grade.

I remembered her as the tough little kid in 1939 who came into class in the middle of winter, disturbing our neat tight boredom and fear, bringing her own. Sister Mary of Perpetual Help seated her beside me because I had a seat to myself in the front row, being both bad-behaved and nearsighted. I remembered this skinny little kid who made my life hell. She pinched me all day long, all the time, until she vanished sometime around St. Swithin's Day, a godsent reward I thought, for what, I couldn't imagine, but it almost turned me back to god and prayer again.

Felicia and I came to love each other very much, even though our physical relationship was confined to cuddling. We were both part of the "freaky" bunch of lesbians who weren't into role-playing, and who the butches and femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Ky, or AC/DC. Ky-Ky was the same name that was used for gay-girls who slept with johns for money. Prostitutes.

Flee loved to snuggle in bed, but sometimes she hurt my feelings by saying I had shaggy breasts. And too, besides, Flee and I were always finding ourselves in bed together with other people, usually white women.

Then I thought we were the only gay Black women in the world, or at least in the Village, which at the time was a state of mind extending all the way from river to river below 14th Street, and in pockets throughout the area still known as the Lower East Side.

I had heard tales from Flee and others about the proper Black ladies who came downtown on Friday night after the last show at Small's Paradise to find a gay-girl to go muff-diving

with, and bring her back up to Convent Avenue to sleep over while their husbands went hunting, fishing, golfing, or to an Alpha's weekend. But I only met one once, and her pressed hair and all too eagerly interested husband who had accompanied her this particular night to the Bagatelle, where I met her over a daiquiri and a pressed knee, turned me off completely. And this was pretty hard to do in those days because it seemed an eternity between warm beds in the cold mornings seven flights up on Seventh Street. So I told her that I never traveled above 23rd Street. I could have said 14th Street, but she had already found out that I went to college; therefore I thought 23rd was safe enough because CCNY Downtown was there. That was the last bastion of working-class academia allowed.

Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget.

It was not that I didn't have friends, and good ones. There was a loose group of young lesbians, white except for Flee and I, who hung out together, apart from whatever piece of the straight world we each had a separate place in. We not only believed in the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later, but we also tried to put it into practice, with varying results. We all cared for and about each other, sometimes with more or less understanding, regardless of who was entangled with whom at any given time, and there was always a place to sleep and something to eat and a listening ear for anyone who wandered into the crew. And there was always somebody calling you on the telephone, to interrupt the fantasies of suicide. That is as good a working definition of friend as most.

However imperfectly, we tried to build a community of sorts where we could, at the very least, survive within a world we correctly perceived to be hostile to us; we talked endlessly about how best to create that mutual support which twenty years later was being discussed in the women's movement as a brand-new concept. Lesbians were probably the only Black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other; we learned lessons from each other, the values of which were not lessened by what we did not learn.

For both Flee and me, it seemed that loving women was something that other Black women just didn't do. And if they did, then it was in some fashion and in some place that was to-

tally inaccessible to us, because we could never find them. Except for Saturday nights in the Bagatelle, where neither Flee nor I was stylish enough to be noticed.

(My straight Black girlfriends, like Jean and Crystal, either ignored my love for women, considered it interestingly avant-garde, or tolerated it as just another example of my craziness. It was allowable as long as it wasn't too obvious and didn't reflect upon them in any way. At least my being gay kept me from being a competitor for whatever men happened to be upon their horizons. It also made me much more reliable as a confidante. I never asked for anything more.)

But only on the full moon or every other Wednesday was I ever convinced that I really wanted it different. A bunch of us—maybe Nicky and Joan and I—would all be standing around having a beer at the Bagatelle, trying to decide whether to inch onto the postage-stamp dance floor for a slow intimate fish, garrison belt to pubis and rump to rump (but did we really want to get that excited after a long weekend with work tomorrow?), when I'd say sorry but I was tired and would have to leave now, which in reality meant I had an already late paper for english due the next day and needed to work on it all that night.

That didn't happen too often because I didn't go to the Bag very much. It was the most popular gay-girl's bar in the Village, but I hated beer, and besides the bouncer was always asking me for my ID to prove I was twenty-one, even though I was older than the other women with me. Of course "you can never tell with Colored people." And we would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black, since, of course, gay people weren't racists. After all, didn't they know what it was like to be oppressed?

Sometimes we'd pass Black women on Eighth Street—*the invisible but visible sisters*—or in the Bag or at Laurel's, and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other's eyes. We acknowledged our kinship by passing in silence, looking the other way. Still, we were always on the lookout, Flee and I, for that telltale flick of the eye, that certain otherwise prohibited openness of expression, that definiteness of voice which would suggest, I think she's gay. *After all, doesn't it take one to know one?*

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that

fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me.

This was not to deny the closeness of our group, nor the mutual aid of those insane, glorious, and contradictory years. It is only to say that I was acutely conscious—from the ID “problem” at the Bag on Friday nights to the summer days at Gay Head Beach where I was the only one who wouldn’t worry about burning—that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay or straight. The question of acceptance had a different weight for me.

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society—Black or gay—I felt I didn’t have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight. To be proper. To look “nice.” To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn’t realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying.

But in this plastic, anti-human society in which we live, there have never been too many people buying fat Black girls born almost blind and ambidextrous, gay or straight. Unattractive, too, or so the ads in *Ebony* and *Jet* seemed to tell me. Yet I read them anyway, in the bathroom, on the newsstand, at my sister’s house, whenever I got a chance. It was a furtive reading, but it was an affirmation of some part of me, however frustrating.

If nobody’s going to dig you too tough anyway, it really doesn’t matter so much what you dare to explore. I had already begun to learn that when I left my parents’ house.

Like when your Black sisters on the job think you’re crazy and collect money between themselves to buy you a hot comb and straightening iron on their lunch hour and stick it anonymously into your locker in the staff room, so that later when you come down for a coffee break and open your locker the damn things fall out on the floor with a clatter and all ninety-five percent of your library co-workers who are very very white want to know what it’s all about.

Like when your Black brother calls you a ball-buster and tricks you up into his apartment and tries to do it to you against the kitchen cabinets just, as he says, to take you down a peg or two, when all the time you’d only gone up there to begin with fully intending to get a little in the first place (because all the girls I knew who were possibilities were too damn complicating,

and I was plain and simply horny as hell). I finally got out of being raped although not mauled by leaving behind a ring and a batch of lies and it was the first time in my life since I'd left my parents' house that I was in a physical situation which I couldn't handle physically—in other words, the bastard was stronger than I was. It was an instantaneous consciousness-raiser.

As I say, when the sisters think you're crazy and embarrassing; and the brothers want to break you open to see what makes you work inside; and the white girls look at you like some exotic morsel that has just crawled out of the walls onto their plate (but don't they love to rub their straight skirts up against the edge of your desk in the college literary magazine office after class); and the white boys all talk either money or revolution but can never quite get it up—then it doesn't really matter too much if you have an Afro long before the word even existed.

Pearl Primus, the African-American dancer, had come to my high school one day and talked about African women after class, and how beautiful and natural their hair looked curling out into the sun, and as I sat there listening (one of fourteen Black girls in Hunter High School) I thought, that's the way god's mother must have looked and I want to look like that too so help me god. In those days I called it a natural, and kept calling it natural when everybody else called it crazy. It was a strictly homemade job done by a Sufi Muslim on 125th Street, trimmed with the office scissors and looking pretty raggedy. When I came home from school that day my mother beat my behind and cried for a week.

Even for years afterward white people would stop me on the street or particularly in Central Park and ask if I was Odetta, a Black folksinger whom I did not resemble at all except that we were both big Black beautiful women with natural heads.

*Besides my father, I am the darkest one in my family and I've worn my hair natural since I finished high school.*

*Once I moved to East Seventh Street, every morning that I had the fifteen cents I would stop into the Second Avenue Grid-dle on the corner of St. Mark's Place on my way to the subway and school and buy an english muffin and coffee. When I didn't have the money, I would just have coffee. It was a tiny little counter place run by an old Jewish man named Sol who'd been a seaman (among other things) and Jimmy, who was Puerto Rican and washed dishes and who used to remind Sol to save me the hard englishes on Monday; I could have them for a dime.*

*Toasted and dripping butter, those english muffins and coffee were frequently the high point of my day, and certainly enough to get me out of bed many mornings and into the street on that long walk to the Astor Place subway. Some days it was the only reason to get up, and lots of times I didn't have money for anything else. For over eight years, we shot a lot of bull over that counter, and exchanged a lot of ideas and daily news, and most of my friends knew who I meant when I talked about Jimmy and Sol. Both guys saw my friends come and go and never said a word about my people, except once in a while to say, "your girlfriend was in here; she owes me a dime and tell her don't forget we close exactly at seven."*

*So on the last day before I finally moved away from the Lower East Side after I got my master's from library school, I went in for my last english muffin and coffee and to say goodbye to Sol and Jimmy in some unemotional and acceptable-to-me way. I told them both I'd miss them and the old neighborhood, and they said they were sorry and why did I have to go? I told them I had to work out of the city, because I had a fellowship for Negro students. Sol raised his eyebrows in utter amazement, and said, "Oh? I didn't know you was cullud!"*

*I went around telling that story for a while, although a lot of my friends couldn't see why I thought it was funny. But this is all about how very difficult it is at times for people to see who or what they are looking at, particularly when they don't want to.*

*Or maybe it does take one to know one.*

## 24

It seemed preordained that Muriel and I should meet.

When Ginger and I had been getting to know each other over the cutting-room X-ray machines in the heat and stink and noise of Keystone Electronics, she was constantly telling me about this crazy kid called Mo who had worked at my machine a year or so before. (It was her way of letting me know that she knew I was gay and it was all right with her.)

"Yeah, she sure was a lot like you."

"How do you mean; did she look like me?"

"Very funny." Ginger cut her doll-baby-round eyes at me. "She's white. Italian. But both you-all have that easy way about

you, and that soft way of talking. 'Cept you're this slick kitty from the city and she's a strictly local product. Used to say her father never let her smell the night air 'til she was eighteen.

"She wrote poetry, too. All-a-time, even on lunch hour."

"Oh." Somehow I knew there was more. What Ginger couldn't bring herself to tell me was that Muriel liked girls.

I saw Ginger one last time before I left for Mexico. She told me that her friend Mo had come back to live in Stamford because she had had a nervous breakdown in New York.

During the time I was in Mexico, Muriel was slowly crawling out from under the basket of shock treatments she had been thrust into. When she began seeing her friends again in Stamford, Ginger made sure she told her about "this crazy kid from New York City who worked your old machine a year before and who wrote poetry, too."

When I returned to New York from Mexico, I returned full of sun and great determination to re-order my life and someday get back to Mexico and, of course, Eudora. I moved back into my old Seventh Street walk-up and started the discouraging work of job-hunting.

One Sunday evening, the telephone rang, and Rhea answered.

"One of your cool-voiced young women," she said, handing me the phone with a smile. It was Ginger, whose smoky tones sounded anything but cool to me.

"H'ya doin', kiddo?" she began. "I have somebody here who wants to meet you." There was a short pause and then a little chuckle, and then a high, nervous voice saying, "Hello? Audre?"

We made a date.

As I opened the door into the malty dusk of the Page Three, it was still early, and Muriel was the only person standing at the bar. She looked like no one I had ever seen living in Stamford while I was there. Her mid-brown eyes were large and almond-shaped, with thick lashes that outlined each eye with darkness. They peered from a high and flat-cheeked face whose paleness was intensified by the almost straight dark hair that framed her head like a monk's cut, or an inverted bowl. Thick black eyebrows drew together like a scowl.

As usual, I was a little bit late, and she was waiting. Muriel always seemed shorter to me because of the way she stood, shoulders hunched and all folded in upon herself. She held a bottle of beer and a cigarette in her left hand, the pinky of which sported a wide silver band, and was perched archly upon its neighbor. I came to think of this typical stance of hers as Muriel's fetal-finger pose.

Her black turtleneck sweater fell low over her slightly rounded tummy, clad in a pair of well-creased woolen slacks, black with a fine white pinstripe. A soft black beret was pulled slightly to one side of her head, and just beneath her straight thick hair, tiny gold dots sparkled from the lobes of her barely visible ears.

On the bar beside her lay a worn suede jacket, and on top of that a pair of black leather fur-lined gloves. There was something romantically archaic about her sharp contrasts, and the neat polish on her black-laced oxford shoes made her seem vulnerable and schoolgirlish.

I thought she looked quite odd. Then, recalling the days that Gennie and I had wandered the streets together in our adventurous scenarios, I suddenly realized that Muriel had dressed for being a gambler.

What looked like a malocclusion was only a gap between her front teeth. It became visible as Muriel slowly smiled, charging her face with a great sweetness. The tight scowl disappeared. Her hand was dry and warm as I shook it, and I saw how very beautiful her eyes were when they came alive.

I bought a beer and we moved to the front and sat at a table.

"Those look like gambling pants," I said.

She smiled shyly, pleased. "Yeah, that's right. How'd you know? Not many people notice things like that."

I smiled back. "Well, I had a friend once and we used to get dressed up a lot, all the time." I surprised myself; usually I never talked about Gennie.

She told me a little bit about herself and her life; how she had come to New York City two years ago shortly after her friend, Naomi, had died; how she had fallen in love here, gotten "sick," and gone home again. She was twenty-three years old. She and Naomi had met in high school. I said I was thirty-five.

Then, I told her a little bit about Gennie. And on that first Sunday night in the Page Three on Seventh Avenue, Muriel and I put our heads forehead to forehead, over a small table in the front, and shed a few tears together over our dead girls.

We shyly exchanged the thin sheaf of poems we each had brought as an introductory offering. Once on the street, we promised to write to each other as we separated, Muriel going off to meet Ginger and catch the train back to Stamford.

"Here, take my gloves," she'd said, impulsively, just as she ran into the subway. "Your hands are gonna get cold walking home." I hesitated as she tucked the suede gloves into my

hands with an almost pleading smile. "Keep them for me till next time." Then she was gone.

Something in her face reminded me of Gennie giving me her notebooks.

The strongest and most lasting sense I had of Muriel after she was gone was of great sweetness hidden, and a vulnerability which surpassed even my own. Her gentle voice belying her dour appearance. I was intrigued by her combination of opposites, by her making no attempt to hide her weaknesses, nor even seeming to consider them shameful or suspect. Muriel radiated a quiet self-knowledge which I mistook for self-acceptance.

Her sense of humor was sudden and appealing, with only a trace of the gallows behind it, and her frequent joking asides were insightful and without malice.

From our very first meeting and without explanation, Muriel made me feel that she was understanding whatever I was saying, and, given the massive weight of my inarticulate pain, a great deal of all that I could not yet put into words.

Rhea was still up as I came back into the house, whistling.

"What's making you so happy all of a sudden?" she asked jokingly, and I realized that for the first time since I'd come home from Mexico, I felt lighthearted and excited again.

Two weeks later on a Sunday night, Muriel and I met for dinner, and then went to the Bagatelle. Fast and crowded, it was a good place for cruising, but had always seemed a little too rich for my blood, or too threatening to face alone. Laurel's and the Sea Colony and the Page Three and the Swing were called bars, but the Bag was always The Club.

The first room we entered was already smoky, although it was still early in the evening. It smelled like plastic and blue glass and beer and lots of good-looking young women.

Muriel ordered her inevitable bottle of beer so I did, too, pretending to drink it for the rest of the evening. Neither Muriel nor I danced, and the tiny dance floor at the rear of the club was already crowded. We stood in the archway between the tables and the dancers, talking to each other, and drinking in the feeling of the other women around us, some of whom, like us, were no doubt coming to love.

I soon adapted to Muriel's fascination with gay bars. Whenever she came to the city, she explained to me, she came to go barring. She never felt truly alive except in gay bars, she said, and needed them like a shot in the arm.

What we both needed was the atmosphere of other lesbians, and in 1954, gay bars were the only meeting places we knew.

When Muriel and I weren't talking, we stood feeling a little out of place, trying to look cool and a bit debonair. Every other woman in the Bag, it seemed, had a right to be there except us; we were pretenders, only appearing to be cool and hip and tough like all gay-girls were supposed to be. Totally unapproachable in our shyness, we were never approached, and besides, in those days gay-girls were usually not very sociable outside of their own little group.

You never could tell who was who, and the protective paranoia of the McCarthy years was still everywhere outside of the mainstream of blissed-out suburban middle America. Besides, there were always rumors of plainclothes women circulating among us, looking for gay-girls with fewer than three pieces of female attire. That was enough to get you arrested for transvestism, which was illegal. Or so the rumors went. Most of the women we knew were always careful to have on a bra, underpants, and some other feminine article. No sense playing with fire.

The evening ended all too quickly, and Muriel returned to her part-time job in a denture lab in Stamford, promising more of her ribald and creative letters.

I was still looking for work, any work, and the bleakness of prospects was discouraging. I had survived McCarthy and the Korean War, and the Supreme Court had declared desegregated schools illegal. But racism and recession were still realities between me and a job, as I crisscrossed the city day after day, answering ads.

Wherever I went, I was told that I was either overqualified—who wants to hire a Black girl with one year of college?—or underexperienced—what do you mean, dear, you don't type?

Jobs were scarce for everyone in New York that autumn, and for Black women, they were scarcer still.

I knew I could not afford the luxury of hating to work in another factory or at a typewriter. I applied for a practical nursing program, but was told that I was too nearsighted. Whether this was concern for me or another excuse for racist choices, I never knew.

Through an employment agency, I finally got a job at a hospital in the accounting department, by lying about my bookkeeping skills. But that didn't matter too much because they

had lied about what I was supposed to do. I was not to be a bookkeeper at all, but girl-friday-step-n-fetch-it for the head of the accounting department.

Mrs. Goodrich was an overbearing and awe-inspiring woman, who was the first woman ever to head the accounting department of a major hospital in the state. She had fought hard to achieve her position and the wars had left her with a harsh cold manner and little tact. In my spare time, when I wasn't delivering her messages or buying her coffee or sharpening her pencils, I sat at a separate desk near the door of the typists' pool, and typed insurance company letters while I waited to be buzzed for another errand. I answered Mrs. Goodrich's telephone when her secretary was at lunch, and she ranted and raved at me until I learned to remember those people to whom she would speak and those to whom she would not.

Mrs. Goodrich was a tartar, a woman who had fought long and hard to make herself a place in a world hostile to her as a woman accountant. She had won by the same terms as the men whom she had fought. Now she was wedded to those terms, particularly in dealing with other women. For some unstated reason, we took immediate and deep exception to each other. Whatever the recognition was that passed between us, it did not serve to make us allies. Yet our positions were clearly unequal. As my boss, she had the power, and I would not retreat. It was much more complex than simple aversion. I was outraged by her attitude towards me, and despite the fact that she found me clearly unsatisfactory, Mrs. Goodrich would not release me to the clerical pool, nor would she leave me alone.

Mrs. Goodrich told me I walked like a lumberjack, and made too much noise in the halls. I was too uppity for my own good and would never get ahead. I would have to learn to be prompt, even though my "people" were never on time. Anyway, I didn't belong in the hospital, and should quit work and go back to school. In one of our few civil conversations, I told her I couldn't afford to.

"Well, then, you'd better straighten out around here or you'll be out on the street in short order."

I cringed secretly as she bawled me out for typing errors, in front of the whole typing pool, then called me across the hall into her private office to pick up a pencil she'd dropped.

I dreamed of stepping on her face with an ice pick between my toes. I felt trapped and furious. I had gotten the job a week before Thanksgiving, and the last weeks of the year were agony

for me. Mrs. Goodrich became the symbol of a job which I hated (I had never really learned to type) and I came to hate her with the same passion.

I was hungry for the sun in my days. I walked west through Union Square and up through Stuyvesant Park to work. Coming across 14th Street, some mornings I could catch a glimpse of it over near the river, but the sun was never really up past the buildings before I went into the grey stone building. It had gone down by the time I left work. We were given free lunch in the hospital cafeteria, so I couldn't go out at noon. It was a recurring sadness to me as I walked home in the winter evenings, cars' rear lights along Second Avenue flickering like those on a Christmas tree. I thought if I had to spend the rest of my life working in places like Keystone Electronics and Manhattan Hospital I would surely go mad. I couldn't figure it out, but I knew there had to be some other way.

At work, my only weapon was retreat, and I used it with the indiscriminateness of any adolescent rebel. I fell asleep at my desk at every opportunity, and upon the slightest provocation, usually in the middle of typing Mrs. Goodrich's letters. In these mini-sleeps, I would type snatches of poems or nonsense phrases into the middle of straight formal sentences. I never bothered to proofread my letters, but only checked them as a work of art, brushing my eye over the paper for correct margins and no strike-overs. Letters would arrive upon Mrs. Goodrich's desk for her signature neatly and correctly typed, but with appalling sentences tucked into them.

Dear Sir:

Claim forms may be obtained strange gods worship the evening hours by writing the Main Office at . . .

I had nightmares of the sound of Mrs. Goodrich's buzzer, followed by her deep bellow from across the hall, summoning me into her office.

In the meantime, Muriel and I corresponded. To be more exact, Muriel wrote long and beautiful letters and I read and cherished them in silence.

Muriel's lyrical and revealing letters held a hunger and an isolation that matched my own, and a precious unfolding of her humorous and prismatic vision. I came to marvel and delight in the new view she afforded me of simple and unexpected things. Re-seeing the world through her unique scrutinies was like re-

seeing the world through my first pair of glasses when I was a child. Endless and wonderful re-discoveries of the ordinary.

There was a pain in Muriel to become herself that engaged my heart. I knew what it was like to be haunted by the ghost of a self one wished to be, but only half-sensed. Sometimes her words both thrilled me and made me weep.

*Snail-sped an up-hill day, but evening comes; I dream of you.  
This shepherd is a leper learning to make lovely things  
while waiting out my time of despair. I feel a new kind of  
sickness now, which I know is the fever of wanting to be  
whole.*

My hands shook a little as I put the letter down and poured myself another cup of coffee. Each day I would rush to my mailbox after work, looking for one of her thick blue envelopes.

Slowly but surely, Muriel became more and more like a vulnerable piece of myself. I could cherish and protect this piece because it was outside of me. Hedging my emotional bets, inside safe and undisturbed. With each of Muriel's letters there blossomed within me the need to do for her what I never really believed I could do for myself, even while I was in the midst of doing it.

I could take care of Muriel. I could make the world work for her, if not for myself.

With no intent and less insight, I fashioned this girl of wind and ravens into a symbol of surrogate survival, and fell into love like a stone off a cliff.

I sent Muriel little scraps of paper with pieces of poems on them. Some were about her, some were not. Nobody could tell the difference. Muriel told me later she was convinced I was quite mad, also. I counted the days between her letters which brought me pieces of herself like special and anticipated gifts. On December 21st, in answer to her entreaties and the solstice, I sent her a greeting card of a greek urn filled with stones which read, "I must have rocks in my head."

By that I meant I loved her.

*More than twenty years later I meet Muriel at a poetry reading at a women's coffee-house in New York. Her voice is still soft, but her great brown eyes are not. I tell her, "I am writing an unfolding of my life and loves."*

*"Just make sure you tell the truth about me," she says.*

It was New Year's Eve, the last day of 1954. Rhea was in love again, and had gone out for the evening and I imagined for the rest of the night. I had settled down to reading and writing and music when the phone rang.

"Happy New Year!" It was Muriel. "Are you going to be in this old evening?"

My voice was jittery with anticipation and unexpected surprise. "Yes, some friends are coming over later. Can you come too? Where are you?"

"At home, but I'm catching the next train." I heard her warm half-laugh and could almost see the trickle of smoke and the fold between her eyes. "I've got something to ask you."

"What is it?" I asked, wondering.

"Nope, have to do it in person. I gotta run now."

Two hours later in she walked, bereted and smoking. The apartment was bustling with laughter and the voice of Rosemary Clooney.

*Hey there,  
you with the stars  
in your eyes  
love never made  
a fool of you*

I ran to take her jacket. "It's so good to see you," I said.

"Yeah? That's what I came down to find out, because I couldn't understand that card. What did it mean?"

Bea and Lynn and Gloria had dropped by with wine and reefer, and I introduced them to Muriel as I poured her a glass of Chianti. Bea and Lynn were dancing belt-to-belt in the middle room; Muriel, Gloria, and I munched over the cartons of savory chinese food which they had brought with them.

At a few minutes to midnight, we switched off the tinny portable phono and turned on the radio to hear the cheer go up in Times Square to greet 1955, even while we were saying how square that all was. Muriel gave me a copy of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, an underground bestseller which she'd lifted, she said, from a Stamford bookstore. Then we all kissed each other, and had some more wine.

We turned the music back on, and people told wild stories about other New Year's Eves. I had to admit that this was my first New Year's Eve party ever, but I managed to say it in a way that nobody believed me.

By 3:00 A.M., everybody had decided to spend the night. I rolled out Rhea's double bed in the front room, and opened up my couch in the middle room. There was a place for everyone. I finally had to slip Lynn a sleeping pill from my hoard of doctor's samples, because she kept insisting she wasn't sleepy, and I was determined to be the last one awake. It had been a heady evening for me, and even with amphetamine, I was getting sleepy.

Muriel had gone to bed in the middle room with all her clothes on, because this was a strange house filled with strange people, she said, drolly, and she was very shy. The other three sacked out in the front room. I had assumed Rhea would stay over at her boyfriend's house. Unfortunately, Rhea and Art had their big fight that night.

At 4:00 A.M., just about the time everyone had finally settled down and I had crawled into my faded green studio couch beside Muriel, just about that time I heard Rhea's key in the door.

I jumped up, instantly awake. Oh shit. Pulling on my shirt, I tiptoed into the kitchen to find my roommate standing forlornly, her bright party dress wrinkled and sad. Rhea was addicted to having affairs with men who were only interested in shafting her, literally and figuratively. She was in tears. Art had told her, while they were in bed, that he was going to be married to the nineteen-year old daughter of one of their progressive comrades. At thirty-one, Rhea was sure it was her age. On the other hand, I was sure it was because he was getting some from Rhea and not getting some from his teenager. But I couldn't say that to Rhea in her condition.

Half my mind, besides, was on the collection of people in the house and how was I going to explain them to Rhea? Not that I had to explain, really, but after all it was her bed that Bea and Lynn and Gloria were sharing.

"That's awful, Rhea," I said as I took her coat. "Let me heat up some coffee."

"It'll be all right," Rhea said abstractedly, wiping her eyes and managing a brave little smile. Her long voluptuous black hair was all awry. "I just want to go to bed for now."

"Well," I hesitated only a moment, "There're some people in your bed, honey; some friends came over and you said you didn't think you'd be home. . . ."

Tears welled up in Rhea's eyes again as she reached distractedly for her pocketbook and the shoes which she'd so gallantly dyed to match her dress, an electric-blue taffeta, just a few hours before.

"But I'll wake them right up," I said hurriedly, as I saw her heading for the front door. Her cousin lived two floors down, but I could never bear to see Rhea cry. "I'm getting them right up."

And that's exactly what I did, posthaste.

Sleepily, the three girls moved, and we all crawled back into bed, spoon-wise, in the middle room with Muriel. Rhea went to her troubled sleep in her own bed. By this time, it was almost dawn and too late for me to sleep any more. Anyway, I had gotten my second wind. And I loved being the first one up in the mornings. I took some obetrol and sat reading in the john until dawn.

Tiptoeing past the sleeping women, I leaned out of the seventh-story front window, looking eastward through the still streets to the lightening sky. The air was mild for January, and I caught a faint whiff of malt from the Hartz Mountain birdseed factory across the East River. The January thaw. It reminded me with a start that spring was only three months away. Yet it seemed forever. I was tired of winter.

I switched on the radio softly; on this holiday morning it was mostly stale news, except for the automobile fatalities and the results of the recent congressional censure of McCarthy. As I listened to the weather report, unseasonably warm, I cleaned my sneakers with a dash of dry Dutch Cleanser, rubbed in with an old toothbrush. Cleaned shoes was a New Year's Day ritual that I carried over from my parents' house without question or consideration.

At 8:30 A.M. I woke everyone except Rhea. I was eager to start the day. "Who needs a toothbrush?" I called, breaking out the little store of them which I kept for such occasions. I was secretly pleased to have Muriel see how in charge I was of all situations. Always prepared, too. Just like the Marines' motto.

Everybody knew a thirty-five-year old woman could run any world, and I considered myself to be permanently in practice.

I made coffee the way I used to do it in Mexico, using very little coffee and straining it through the little fabric net which I'd brought home with me. I turned off the radio and started the phonograph, putting on Roberta Sherwood's "Cry Me a River" real low, so as not to disturb Rhea's fretful, sighing sleep. The rest of us sat around the table in the kitchen near the shaft window drinking coffee. Muriel's sturdy feet stuck out beneath the cuffs of her jeans, her broad toes moving up and down in time to the music as her soft musical laugh moved

through the smoke of her ever-present cigarette. Bea and Lynn in their dungarees and flannel shirts; and Gloria, her flamboyant spanish huaraches over woolen stockings and her baggy peasant pants made from handwoven magenta cotton. The click of Gloria's fruitwood necklaces and bracelets was a contrapuntal echo behind the morning's conversations of politics, gay-girl gossip, and the advent and use of the new tranquilizers in mental hospitals.

The house grew even warmer as the steam came up, and I got up to fix us a beautiful New Year's breakfast. I mixed our last two eggs, well-beaten, into the leftover chinese food, added a drizzle of the foo yong gravy and some powdered milk, and scrambled it all together with a healthy amount of chopped onions quailed in margarine with lots of paprika and a dash of dill for color. It was a dish reminiscent of the Sunday-morning concoction of eggs, onions, and scraped chicken livers which my father called entre and which he used to cook for us each weekend while my mother and the three of us were at Sunday Mass.

After breakfast, we exchanged long goodbyes and Happy New Years, and the other three left. Muriel and I sat talking in the kitchen over cups of black coffee, because all the powdered milk was used up.

Rhea woke up about noon, and I introduced her to Muriel. We made Rhea some coffee, and she and Muriel argued the pros and cons of Marxism (although Muriel insisted she was apolitical, which I translated as naïve) for about an hour while I took a bath. Rhea dressed and went off to her parents' house for dinner, only a little sodden around the eyes.

I turned off the record player and double-locked the door. Then Muriel and I, with no more to-do about it, went to bed with each other in the New Year's watery sunlight in Rhea's front room double bed. The afternoon unfolded into a blossom of loving from which she rose to me like a flame.

I had not been close to a woman since those nights with Eudora in Cuernavaca more than six months before.

We lay entwined and exhausted afterward, laughing and talking excitedly. The camaraderie and warmth between us breached places within me that had been closed off and permanently sealed, I thought, when Genevieve died.

When Muriel and I talked, as we did, about Naomi and Genevieve, each dead at fifteen, the spirit of those two dead girls seemed to rise up from the earth, bless us, and then depart. A

particular and terrible loneliness seemed at last about to give way.

We made love over and over and over again, pausing only to turn on the lights in the early dusk and to feed the cat. The sun went down and the steam came up, and the whole room seemed alight with the fragrance of our bodies.

For every secret hurt of Muriel's, there was one of mine to match, and the similarities of our lonelinesses, as well as of our dreams, convinced us that we were made for each other.

January 2, 1955.

I rolled over and raised myself up on one arm, regarded the sleep-sweet cheek and tousled hair of the woman curled away from me, one arm under her head. I bent to kiss the curl that swept over her ear, and ran my tongue slowly down the nape of her dark hair to where the covers draped her shoulders.

With a sigh and a slow smile, Muriel opened one eye as I advanced, whispering, toward her ear. "In the West Indies, they call this raising your zandalee."

Later, I called Mrs. Goodrich from bed, Muriel drowsing beside me. I explained that I was sick and could not come in to work. The whole department had been warned by Mrs. Goodrich the last day before the holidays to make sure that such "sicknesses" did not occur, under any circumstances.

Mrs. Goodrich fired me on the spot.

## 25

Rhea had all the cues she needed about my relationships with women. She had witnessed the melodrama with Bea. But on the surface, Rhea did not *know* I was gay, and I did not *tell* her. Homosexuality was outside the party line at that time; therefore, Rhea defined it as "bad," and her approval was important to me. Without words, we both more or less agreed never to allude to what was obviously the guiding passion of my life, my involvement with those female friends to whom Rhea always referred as "your cool-voiced young women."

Rhea and I loved each other, yet she would have professed horror had she been forced to imagine an extension of our love into the physical.

Fortunately, or maybe because of her attitudes, I was never physically attracted to Rhea. She was a beautiful, strong, and vivacious woman, but I have never found straight women physically appealing. Self-protective as this mechanism is, it also has served me as a sixth sense. In those days, whenever two or more lesbians got together, the most frequent topic of conversation was "Do you think she's gay?" It was a constant question about any woman we happened to be interested in. Nine times out of ten, if I felt a strong physical pull toward a woman, whatever her protective coloration might be, she would usually turn out to be either gay, or so strongly women-oriented that being gay became only a question of time or opportunity.

Always before, the few lesbians I had known were women whom I had met within other existing contexts of my life. We shared some part of a world common to us both—school or work or poetry or some other interest beyond our sexual identity. Our love for women was a fact that became known only *after* we were already acquainted and connected through some other reason.

In the bars, we met women with whom we would have had no other contact, had we not all been gay. There, Muriel and I were pretty well out of whatever was considered important. That was namely drinking, softball, dyke-chic fashion, dancing, and who was sleeping with whom at whose expense. All other questions of survival were considered a very private affair.

When Muriel came into the city on weekends that spring, she stayed at the YWCA over on Hudson Street in the West Village, which is now a nursing home. We spent the weekend in her tiny room making love, in between barring and trips back to Seventh Street for something to eat. Sometimes, we didn't have the money to rent a room at the Y, because I was not working again and she only had a part-time job in Stamford. Then, we braved Rhea's bewildered and questioning glances and stayed at the apartment. After Muriel left one Sunday, Rhea and I talked.

"Muriel's around a lot, isn't she?" I could see Rhea remembering the weeping Bea in the stairwell.

"I love Muriel very much, Rhea."

"I can see that." Rhea laughed. "But *how* do you love her?"

"In every way I know how!" And Rhea turned back to the dishes, shaking her head, trying to find some correlation between my loving Muriel and her own painful love affairs. She did not dare to see the similarities and so she could not see the differ-

ences. And the words were never spoken. I was too chicken to come right out and say, "Hey, look, Rhea, Muriel and I are lovers."

Rhea could not bear the heartbreak of her affair with Art, and began to make plans to move to Chicago later in the spring. The idea that I would soon have the apartment all to myself delighted me. I made up my mind that I would never live with anyone else again, unless we were lovers.

Muriel and I were beginning to envision the world together. I didn't know how I was going to bring my personal and political visions together, but I knew it had to be possible because I felt them both too strongly, and knew how much I needed them both to survive. I did not agree with Rhea and her progressive friends when they said that this was not what the revolution was about. Any world which did not have a place for me loving women was not a world in which I wanted to live, nor one which I could fight for.

One Friday night, Muriel and I spent the evening making love on my studio couch in the middle room of the apartment. Dusk crept away from the window on the air shaft and night came in. We were just resting briefly when we heard Rhea's key in the front door in the kitchen. Muriel and I lay curled into each other's arms on the now-familiar single couch. Without moving much, we simply pulled the covers up over us, closed our eyes, and pretended to be asleep.

We heard Rhea come into the kitchen and turn on the light. I could feel the glow of the sudden brightness from the room next door as it shined through the arched doorway and along the floor of my room, parallel to where the two of us lay. Rhea entered, proceeding across my room to hers at the front of the house. Her footsteps stopped beside the bed where Muriel and I were, our eyes squeezed shut like children. She stood there for a moment looking down at our supposedly sleeping figures under the covers entwined within the narrow space, lit by the dim reflected light from the kitchen.

And then, without warning, Rhea burst into tears. She stood over us sobbing wildly as if her heart was being broken by what she saw. She wept over us for at least two minutes while we both lay there, our arms around each other and our eyes closed tightly. There was nothing else we could do; I felt it would just be too embarrassing to Rhea for me to look up and say, "Hey, what's going on here?" Besides, I thought I knew. Our obvious

happiness in our "incorrect" love was so great besides her obvious unhappiness in her "correct" ones, that the only response to such cosmic unfairness was tears.

Finally, Rhea turned and ran into her own room, closing the door. We could hear her sobbing through the closed door until we both fell asleep.

I never discussed that night with Rhea, nor whether those furious tears had been for her own loneliness or for the joy that Muriel and I were finding in each other. Perhaps, if I had, both of our lives might have been different. Rhea left New York City one week later, and I did not see her again for many years.

Much later, I discovered the real reason why Rhea left New York that spring to take a job in Chicago, on what seemed at the time to be such short notice. A visiting higher-up in progressive circles had come to the house one evening while I was there. She later returned to headquarters in New Jersey with the shocking report that Rhea shared a house with a homosexual, and a Black one, at that. In other words, Rhea had been denounced for her association with me. A progressive in good standing could not afford such questionable company in 1955. I had become an embarrassment.

I was totally oblivious to all this, immersed as I was in the fact of Muriel and me. I only knew that Rhea was becoming more and more troubled, culminating in the scene over my couch. But the word had come down to her; get rid of me or give up her work. Rhea loved me, and valued our friendship, but her work was more important and she had to protect herself. Her last affair was a perfect excuse. Rather than ask me to leave or let me know what was going on, Rhea decided to give me the apartment and move to Chicago.

## The Last of My Childhood Nightmares

*My Mother's House,  
July 5, 1954*

*Hickory-skinned demons with long white hair and handsome demonical eyes stretch out arms wide as all tomorrow, across the doorway exit from a room through which I run, screaming, shrieking for exit. But I cannot stop running. If I collide with those long arms barring my pathway out, I will die of electrocu-*

*tion. As I run I start to shout in despair, "Our father who art in heaven . . ." and the arms start to dissolve and drip down the walls and the air between the door and me.*

*I then pass into another room of my parents' home—their bedroom, the room in which I am now asleep. It is dark and silent. There is a watermelon shaped like an egg on the bureau. I lift the fruit up and it drops down upon the linoleum floor. The melon splits open, and at the core is a brilliant hunk of turquoise, glowing. I see it as a promise of help coming for me.*

*Rhea is asleep, still, in my parents' large bed. She is in great danger. I must save her from the great and nameless evil in this house, left here by the hickory-faced devils. I take her hand. It is white and milky in the half-dark.*

*And then suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me. The doors refuse to open. The glass cracks when I touch it. Even the bureau drawers creak and stick when I try to close them. The light bulbs blow out when I switch on the light. The can-opener won't turn; the eggbeater jams mysteriously.*

*This is no longer my home; it is only of a past time.*

*Once I realize this, I am suddenly free to go, and to take Rhea with me.*

## 26

In March, I got a job as a library clerk in the New York Public Library Children's Services, and I was truly delighted. Not only was I relieved to be making money again, but I loved libraries and books, and was so pleased to be able to do work which I enjoyed. Muriel and I saw each other as often as we could now, and we began to discuss her coming back to New York to live.

When she was animated, with her tousled dark hair and her round monkish head, Muriel reminded me of a chrysanthemum, always slightly bent over upon itself. She talked incessantly about her "sickness" of the years before, and about what being schizophrenic meant. I listened but did not know enough to realize that, out of her love, she was also warning me.

On the few occasions that we smoked reefer together, she waxed most eloquent and I was most open.

"Electric shock treatments are like little deaths," Muriel said, reaching across me for the ashtray. "They broke into my head

like thieves with official sanction and robbed me of something precious that feels like it's gone forever."

Sometimes she sounded angry, and sometimes she sounded curiously flat, but however she sounded it made my arms ache to hold her. Pieces of her memory had gone too, she told me, and that made Suzy, her old New York lover, keeper of that piece of her past.

It was the equinox, and we lay smoking in bed in the evenness of springtime, with summer already coming.

"Did it make anything better?" I asked.

"Well, before shock, I used to feel this deep depression covering me like a huge bushel basket, but somewhere inside at the very core of it all, there was a little feeble light shining, and I knew it existed, and it helped illuminate chaos." She shuddered and lay silent for a moment, her lips tight and pale over her front teeth.

"But the thing I can never forgive the doctors for, is that after shock, the bushel only lifted a little; you know what I mean? But that little light had gone out, and it just wasn't worth it. I never wanted to trade my own little flame, I don't care however crazy it was, for any of their casual light from outside."

All this made me very sad. The only answer I had was to hold her tight. I swore to myself that I would never let that happen to her again. I would do anything in the world to protect Muriel.

That night, lying in the front room on Rhea's bed, Muriel warned, "If I give up my job in Stamford to come down here, I don't know how I'll ever be able to get another one. I just can't ask someone to hire me and run the risk of their saying no. I don't know why, but I know I can't take that. It will break me."

Having gone through the horrors of looking for work just recently myself, I thought I knew what she was talking about. But I did not, for the depths of her shaky reality were alien to me, although I never considered that possibility. I felt confident that eventually, out of our love, Muriel would find the strength to face that hurdle, too. So I did not heed her words as a warning, the only kind she could give me.

Rhea left, and in the beginning of April, Muriel returned to New York City to live. I painted the kitchen and bathroom and put up new bookshelves in anticipation.

Once Muriel quit work in Stamford, the physical transition to New York began in trickles. For months, every time she went back home for a visit, Muriel would reappear on Sunday after-

noon with a stool or a box of tools or some wood or a shopping bag of books. Sometimes her friend Rupert would drive her down in his Volkswagen beetle with a load of books and papers.

Although the change from "staying over" to "living together" was a gradual one, I knew I had made a major decision. And I knew that decision would affect the rest of my life, although exactly how was not really clear to me then. When I had moved into the apartment with Rhea, I had merely scratched my name beside hers on the slip of paper stuck into the slot of our mailbox in the hall.

But one blustery day in the first week of April, on my lunch hour, I walked around to Hite's Hardware on East Broadway and ordered a proper metal mailbox tag, with Muriel's and my names upon it. I stood watching as the machine stamped the two names into the shiny brass rectangle, feeling proud, excited, and a little bit scared. It felt like a ritual joining, a symbolic marriage.

Afterward, I bought an egg cream on Chatham Square to celebrate, and stood looking at the little shiny plate with our two names side by side, separated only by a little dash. This would be my surprise for Muriel when she came down to New York on her birthday, the following week.

No more playing house.

For me, this was the real thing, a step from which there was no turning back. I wasn't just playing around any more, gay-girl. I was living with a woman and we were lovers. I had done, silently and easily, what I had longed and feared to do, I had made a commitment which was irrevocable. Without conscious articulation of why, I knew *together* meant *forever* for me, even though there was no troth plighted, no wedding ceremony, no paper signed. Muriel and I were united together by our loving and our wills, for good or ill.

Through the spring, I had thought long and hard about whether or not I could live that closely with anyone, and for the rest of my life, as I felt this was going to be—without question.. Once I decided I could make that commitment, I never doubted for a minute that Muriel was the person I wanted to make it with.

We made our own vows of love and forever. As the spring evenings turned warmer, Muriel met me at the Chatham Square Library. Sometimes we went wandering through the back streets of Chinatown, buying strange succulent vegetables and peculiar fragrant pieces of dried meat to experiment with,

along with hard wrinkled mushrooms by the piece. Each of us knew a different New York, and we explored together, showing each other secret treasured places in the middle of the alleyways south of Canal Street.

Sometimes she met me for lunch and we munched Musli apples leaning up against the Catherine Slip tenements in the strengthening sunlight, watching the sparks fly as workmen continued the complex task of dismantling the last great piece of the Third Avenue El, the Chatham Square Station. Sometimes we walked home together on the nights I worked late.

We talked about leaving New York, about homesteading somewhere in the west where a Black woman and a white woman could live together in peace. Muriel's dream was to live on a farm and it felt like a good life to me. I borrowed pamphlets from the library, and we wrote to all the appropriate government offices to find out if there were any homestead lands still available anywhere in the continental United States.

Sadly enough for us, the word came back that there was not, except in some of the more desolate northern reaches of Alaska, which was not yet a state. Neither Muriel nor I could stand the thought of living in a cold climate, and that far away from the sun. Besides, since we would not be able to support ourselves by farming, northern Alaska was definitely out.

When I came home from work with my arms full of the latest books and my mouth full of stories, sometimes there was food cooked, and sometimes there was not. Sometimes there was a poem, and sometimes there was not. And always, on weekends, there were the bars.

Early Saturday and Sunday mornings, Muriel and I wandered the streets of the Lower East Side and the more affluent West Village, scavenging the garbage heaps for treasures of old furniture, wonders that the unimaginative had discarded. We evaluated their future possibilities and dragged our finds back up six flights of stairs, to add them to the growing pile in the kitchen of things we were one day going to repair. There were wooden radio cabinets, gutted, that could be fitted with shelves for a fine record-holder. Old dresser drawers supplied stout wood for bookcase shelves, supported by scavenged bricks. There were brass lamps and rococo fixtures to be re-wired, and a magnificent old dentist's chair with only one arm support missing. Occasionally we found something that needed no repair (my bed-lamp still sits on a Victorian lampstool that we dug out of a junkheap in Chelsea on our way home from the Grapevine one Sunday morning).

Ordering and re-ordering our world, Muriel and I sat up into the small hours reading the books I would sneak out of the cataloguing bins at the library, and eating pasta with margarine and oregano when we were poor. Other times we had wondrous meals concocted from our adventurous buys in Chinatown, together with a scrap of meat or a few chicken feet or a piece of fish or whatever we could afford and took a fancy to in the First Avenue Public Market. Around the corner from us, we did most of our food shopping there in the many stalls of busy hawkers.

I met the few of Muriel's friends that she could remember from the old days, and she met mine. There were Mick and Cordelia whom I had met in high school. Nicky and Joan, friends of Suzy, Muriel's old lover. We were poor and always hungry, and always being invited to dinner. Going to Suzy's house for dinner was always chancy. Suzy had once heard that pork fat was nutritious, so she kept a skillet of bacon drippings permanently on the back of her stove and cooked everything in it.

There were Dottie and Pauli, two skinny blonde artists from our neighborhood whom we met at Laurel's; Bea and Lynn, her new girl; Phyllis, who wanted to be an architect, but only talked about it when she was drunk; and, of course, there was Felicia, my adopted little sister, as I called her, and the only other Black woman in our group. Together, we formed a loosely knit, emotionally and socially interdependent set, sharing many different interests, some overlapping. On the periphery there existed another larger group of downtown gay-girls, made up of congenial acquaintances and drinking buddies and other people's past lovers, known by sight and friendly enough, but not to be called upon except in emergencies, when of course everybody knew everybody else's business anyway.

But the fact of our Blackness was an issue that Felicia and I talked about only between ourselves. Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. "We're all niggers," she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false.

When Muriel and I received stares and titters on the streets of the West Village, or in the Lower East Side market, it was a toss-up as to whether it was because we were a Black woman and a white woman together, or because we were gay. Whenever that happened, I half-agreed with Muriel. But I also knew that Felicia and I shared both a battle and a strength that was un-

available to our other friends. We acknowledged it in private, and it set us apart, in a world that was closed to our white friends. It was even closed to Muriel, as much as I would have liked to include her. And because that world was closed to them, it was easy for even lovers to ignore it, dismiss it, pretend it didn't exist, believe the fallacy that there was no difference between us at all.

But that difference was real and important, even if nobody else seemed to feel that way, sometimes not even Flee herself, tired as she was of explaining why she didn't go swimming without a bathing cap, or like to get caught in the rain.

Between Muriel and me, then, there was one way in which I would always be separate, and it was going to be my own secret knowledge, if it was going to be my own secret pain. I was Black and she was not, and that was a difference between us that had nothing to do with better or worse, or the outside world's craziness. Over time I came to realize that it colored our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the worlds we shared, and I was going to have to deal with that difference outside of our relationship.

This was the first separation, the piece outside love. But I turned away short of the meanings of it, afraid to examine the truths difference might lead me to, afraid they might carry Muriel and me away from each other. So I tried not to think of our racial differences too often. I sometimes pretended to agree with Muriel, that the difference did not in fact exist, that she and all gay-girls were just as oppressed as any Black person, certainly as any Black woman.

But when I did think about it, it was as something that set me apart, but also protected me. I *knew* there was nothing I could do, including wearing skirts and being straight, that would make me acceptable to the little old Ukrainian ladies who sunned themselves on the stoops of Seventh Street and pointed fingers at Muriel and me as we walked past, arm in arm. One of these old ladies, who ran the cleaners across the street, tried to give Muriel a used woolen skirt one day. "For nothing," she insisted, pressing it into Muriel's hands. "No money, for nothing. Try it on, is nice. Make you look nice, show you legs little bit."

I had gone in and out of that store in dungarees for years, and this little old Ukrainian lady had never tried to reform me. She knew the difference, even if Muriel did not.

Somehow, I knew that difference would be a weapon in

my arsenal when the "time" came. And the "time" would certainly come in one way or another. The "time" when I would have to protect myself alone, although I did not know how or when. For Flee and me, the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance nor solely bureaucratic. We met them every day, even in our straight clothes. Pain was always right around the corner. Difference had taught me that, out of the mouth of my mother. And knowing that, I fancied myself on guard, safe. I still had to learn that knowing was not enough.

Every one of the women in our group took for granted, and would have said if asked, that we were all on the side of right. But the nature of that right everyone was presumed to be on the side of was always unnamed. It was just another way of silently avoiding having to examine what our living positions were within our small group of lesbians, dependent as we were upon each other for support. We were too afraid those differences might in fact be irreconcilable, for we had never been taught any tools for dealing with them. Our individuality was very precious to each one of us, but so was the group, and the other outsiders whom we had found to share some more social aspects of our lonelinesses.

Being gay-girls without set roles was the one difference we allowed ourselves to see and to bind us to each other. We were not of that *other* world and we wanted to believe that, by definition, we were therefore free of that *other* world's problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc. This was not so. But we continued to visit each other and eat together and, in general, share our lives and resources, as if it were.

One evening coming home from work I ran into Nicky and Joan on Houston Street and invited them home to dinner on the spot. There was only \$1.50 in my pocket and no food in the house. We stopped off in the market on First Avenue and bought a pound of extra-thin spaghetti, some fresh parsley, half a pound of chicken hearts, and a packet of powdered milk. With the other seventy-five cents I bought a huge bunch of daffodils and we all had a fine dinner, although I forget what we were celebrating. Because we were always celebrating something, a new job, a new poem, a new love, a new dream.

For dessert, we had a home-cooler: tall glasses of skim milk poured over cubes of frozen coffee heavily laced with cinnamon and almond extract.

The bars on weekends were a ritual of togetherness that I only came to fully understand years later when I was tired of being alone. Every Friday night, it was the same.

"Hurry up, Audi, let's try to get a table tonight." In Laurel's, like in most of the other bars, the tiny tables lining the dance area were first come, first served. Sometimes we'd run into Vida and Pet, two of the few Black gay-girls we knew. They preferred the word "dyke," and it seemed much more in charge of their lives to be dykes rather than gay-girls, but we were still a little scared of the way the word was used to badmouth someone. Vida and Pet shared a house with another dyke named Gerri, and we went to parties at their house out in Queens. Vida and Pet were older than most of our friends, and more settled. They were both very kind to Muriel and me, sometimes even buying us food when we had no money, and mothering us in a way that I both resented and appreciated, like making sure after their parties that we had a ride back to the city or somewhere to stay over for the night.

One warm Saturday evening, Muriel and I stood eyeing the ripe melons piled high on the sidewalk stands in front of Balducci's. Cartons and crates of beautiful and expensive fruits and vegetables extended out onto the sidewalks of Greenwich Avenue. Across the Village street in the early summer dusk, a handful of impatient husbands and lovers stood, calling up back and forth to unseen but well-heard inmates within the grated windows of the Women's House of Detention on the west side of Greenwich Avenue. Information and endearments flew up and down, the conversants apparently oblivious to the ears of the passersby as they discussed the availability of lawyers, the length of stay, family, conditions, and the undying quality of true love. The Women's House of Detention, right smack in the middle of the Village, always felt like one up for our side—a defiant pocket of female resistance, ever-present as a reminder of possibility, as well as punishment.

"Think we can cop a honeydew?" My mouth was watering for the fresh sweet fruit. I looked up Greenwich, which was growing more crowded with evening strollers. I made up my mind, more daring than scared.

"I don't know, but let's try. I'll get one from the side and go down Sixth. If he comes after me, yell 'Cheeko!' then meet me around the corner on Waverly."

We separated with elaborate casualness and Muriel walked over to the oranges, feeling them in deep consideration. The

fruit vendor approached her expectantly. I sidled around the other side of the crates behind his back, snatched the ripest golden green melon that caught my eye, then took off. First rule of snatching anything outdoors: try to do it on one-way streets and always run against the flow of traffic. I sprinted down Sixth Avenue, avoiding startled pedestrians, turning into Waverly Place a block away only slightly winded. Pleased with my feat, I leaned against a railing to observe the luscious spoils and wait for Muriel.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed my arm from behind. My heart in my mouth, I tried to wrench free without even looking, still clutching our melon. Oh shit!

"Take it easy, girl, you're lucky it's just me!" I recognized Vida's rough kindly voice with a wave of relief. I sagged against the railing, unable to talk. "I *thought* that was you. I'm driving up Sixth and I see you tear-assing along, said to myself, lemme park this car and see what my buddy's doin'."

Muriel sauntered around the corner, stopping short with surprise at the sight of Vida. She and I exchanged quick glances. This was not exactly what we'd have preferred Vida find us doing. Uncool, definitely, stealing fruit on Saturday night. Vida laughed a broad laugh.

"Scared you good, didn't I?" Her voice changed, earnestly. "Well, I'm glad. You-all better stop this jiveass shit before next time it isn't me. Come on, Pet's in the car, let's go for a ride."

Muriel and I talked endlessly. I knew who I was going to spend the rest of my life with, yet it seemed as if there was never enough time to talk and share and catch up with all the pieces of each other that had existed before we met. As our newness became more known to each other, I marveled at how very dear Muriel's face was becoming to me. The fact of us was a most wonderful and novel idea, one that I pondered over, examining and savoring every aspect of what it meant to be permanently connected to another human being.

To go to bed and to wake up again day after day besides a woman, to lie in bed with our arms around each other and drift in and out of sleep, to be with each other—not as a quick stolen pleasure, nor as a wild treat—but like sunlight, day after day in the regular course of our lives.

I was discovering all the ways that love creeps into life when two selves exist closely, when two women meet. Like the smell of Muriel on my sweatshirt, and the straight black hairs caught

in my glove. One night, I cried to think of how lucky we both were to have found each other, since it was clear that we were the only ones in the world who could understand what we understood in the instantaneous manner which we understood it. We both agreed ours was a union made in heaven, for which each of us had already paid several hells.

For our close friends, we were Audi and Muriel without definition. For our other friends, we were just another young gay couple in love, maybe a little more peculiar than most, traipsing around with notebooks under our arms, all the time. For the regulars at the Colony and the Swing we were Ky-Ky girls because we didn't play roles. And for the fast set at the Bag we were weirdos who deserved each other because Muriel was crazy and I was Black.

Meanwhile, Muriel and I built bookcases and had writing bees and adopted two little scrawny Black kittens which we named Crazy Lady and Scarey Lou.

Muriel was very much the dandy about her clothes. Like everything else about her, what she wore had to be precisely so, according to some secret guide in her own head, or Muriel would not go out. As long as something was not touched by her inner rules, it didn't matter, but Muriel's rules were inflexible and unmoving and once you came up against one of them, it was unmistakable. What those various rules were, I only found out slowly.

When I lived in Stamford, I had worn old dungarees and men's shirts to work. Just before Thanksgiving, I bought some corduroy and Ginger's mother helped me make a skirt for the holidays. When I lived in Mexico, I wore the full peasant skirts and blouses so readily available in the marketplaces of Cuernavaca. Now I had my straight clothes for working at the library—two interchangeable outfits of skirts, sweaters, and a warm-weather blouse or two. I had a pair of shoes for work, and a flamboyantly cut woolen suit which I had made out of the old coat my sister had given me to wear at my father's funeral. Since I never wore stockings, I stood waiting for the bus some days in the icy winds blowing down East Broadway and prayed for the warm protection of my dungarees or riding pants.

I had very few clothes for my real life, but with the addition of Muriel's quixotic wardrobe, we developed quite a tidy store of what the young gay-girl could be seen in. Mostly I wore blue or black dungarees which were increasingly being called *jeans*. I fell in love with a pair of riding pants which Muriel gave me,

and they became my favorite attire. They became my uniform, along with cotton shirts, usually striped.

Muriel had her gambler's pants for winter, and in the warmer weather she preferred Bermuda shorts and knee-socks, usually black. Winter chic demanded our navy surplus turtleneck sweaters, and we pressed the point, often wearing them into the late spring on any air-conditioned occasion. I loved the deep dark secure feel of wool against my body, and the freedom of casual clothes. I always fancied that they made my large breasts look smaller.

Other than army-navy stores, for which both of us had an absolute passion, we did most of our other clothes shopping at John's Bargain Store. For each of us, there was a positive virtue in being able to live poor and well at the same time, and this took effort and ingenuity and a sharp eye for real bargains. When John's failed us, there were always the little open shops along Rivington and Orchard Streets on Sunday mornings. In these side streets near the Public Market on Essex, men in yarmulkes hawked their wares. A sale on sneakers for \$1.98, or solid-color sweatshirts selling for ninety-nine cents were finds to boast about.

We were reinventing the world together. Muriel opened me to a world of possibilities that felt like a legacy left me by Eudora's sad funny eyes and patient laugh. I had learned from Eudora how to take care of business, be dyke-proud, how to love and live to tell the story, and with flair. Muriel and I were making the lessons become real together.

*When I recall the time Muriel and I spent together, I remember the assurances we gave each other, the sense of a shared niche out of the storm, and the wonder grounded in magic and hard work. I remember always the feeling that it could continue forever, this morning, this life. I remember the curl of Muriel's finger and her deep eyes and the smell of her buttery skin. The smell of basil. I remember the openness of our loving that was a measurement against which I held up whatever was called love; and which I came to recognize as a legitimate demand between all lovers.*

Muriel and I loved tenderly and long and well, but there was no one around to suggest that perhaps our intensity was not always too wisely focused.

Each one of us had been starved for love for so long that we wanted to believe that love, once found, was all-powerful. We wanted to believe that it could give word to my inchoate pain

and rages; that it could enable Muriel to face the world and get a job; that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne. We were like starving women who come to believe that food will cure all present pains, as well as heal all the deficiency sores of long standing.

## 27

In that golden summer of 1955 we were very busy and full of light. During the week I worked at the library and Muriel built beds across town for Mick and Cordelia. On the weekends, we wrote and read and studied Chinese calligraphy and went to the beach and the bars.

Jonas Salk announced his new vaccine for polio at my sister Helen's graduation from City College, and since so many of the girls I knew from Hunter High School had varying degrees of disabilities from polio, this news had a personal meaning.

Life had so many different pieces. *Jet* was a girlie magazine trying to be a Black newsmagazine which I borrowed from my brother-in-law Henry on my infrequent visits to the Bronx, read avidly on the long subway ride downtown, and then surreptitiously dropped onto the next seat as I got off. When I mentioned at the library that I wrote poetry, somebody was bound to mention Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*, the runaway bestseller that year. It had no more to do with my work than a scallop to a whale. Spurred on by Muriel, I sent some of my poems to *The Ladder*, a magazine for lesbians published by the Daughters of Bilitis. Their prompt and unaccompanied return crushed me.

I supplemented our reading from the library with a steady trade in the used bookstores over on Fourth Avenue. Muriel spent a lot of her time over there too, where used copies of Byron and Gertrude Stein could be bought at the Strand one week and traded in for a little less at the Pine down the street a week later. Books were not so much in excess then; I remember trading a birthday copy of Lindbergh for a handful of used paperbacks, two hardcover volumes of minor poets, and a first issue of *MAD* magazine, which cost ten cents.

In June, Lynn came to live with us. We hadn't planned it that way, that's just the way it worked out. Muriel and I had re-established a guarded communication with Bea, and Lynn was

her ex-lover whom we had first met on that infamous New Year's Eve.

She came to call unexpectedly from Philadelphia one Sunday evening in early summer, her long blonde hair streaming around her short sturdy neck, and an overstuffed duffle bag slung across one shoulder. Rumpled army fatigues covered her ample hips. Lynn had a sly smile and screwed up her face whenever she laughed. She was broad, and squat, and very sexy, and in terrible emotional shape. She was the same age I was, twenty-one, but had lived a very hectic life.

Lynn's young husband, on army leave, had died three months before, burned in a truck accident from which he had thrown her clear. They had been moving Lynn's belongings to her new lover's house in Philly.

Lynn arrived on our doorstep with no place to go. She and Bea had broken up for reasons I knew only too well, and Lynn had followed the gay lorelei to New York. Jittery with dexedrine and crazed with exhaustion, she was afraid to go to sleep because of her nightmares of death and dying and the burning wreck from which arose billows of guilt over Ralph's death.

Nobody I knew could have remained immune to this game little girl-woman's piteous story. This was a chance to put into practice the kind of sisterhood that we talked and dreamed about for the future.

Muriel and I took Lynn into our home to live with us. For a while that summer, we had a vision and possibility of women living together collectively and sharing each other's lives and work and love. It almost worked. But none of us knew quite enough about ourselves; we had no patterns to follow, except our own needs and our own unthought-out dreams. Those dreams did not steer us wrong, but sometimes they were not enough.

I found myself day-dreaming over the library catalogue, imaging Lynn's malocclusion, and I had to finally admit to myself how physically attracted to her I was. I was frightened and embarrassed as well as perplexed by this strange and unexpected turn of events. I loved Muriel like my own life; we were pledged to each other. How could I desire another woman physically? But I did. Naturally, the thing to do was to examine this new state of affairs in all of its endless ramifications, and to discuss each one of them in detail.

That is what the three of us did, endlessly, over and over until all hours of the morning. Muriel thought it was an exciting

idea, possible in a new world of women. Lynn wanted to sleep with us both and no more to-do about it. I knew what I wanted, which was everybody one at a time, and since my wants felt contradictory, I had to figure out some way I could have everything that I wanted and still be safe. That was very difficult, because we were in uncharted territory.

What we were trying to build was dangerous, and could have enormous consequences for Muriel and me. But our love was strong enough to be tested, strong enough to provide a base for loving and extended relationships. I always used to say that I believed in sleeping with my friends. Well, here was a chance to put theory into practice. Besides, every time Lynn laughed her slightly hysterical laugh or wrinkled her nose, my knees turned to pudding. I could smell her like wilted fall flowers throughout the house as soon as I opened the door of the apartment from work.

Our conversations went on all night. Sometimes I arrived at the library without having slept at all, looking like something the cat dragged in and the kittens wouldn't eat. I said that my boyfriend Oliver had a fatal disease and had been sick all night and his sister Muriel and I had stayed up to nurse him. Mrs. Johnson, head of the children's room, looked at me with a very funny eye, but never said a word. I think she was gay too.

So all in all, I was rather relieved one day when I opened the door after work to find Muriel and Lynn just getting out of bed together. A piece of me was furious (What, another woman's hands on Muriel's body?), and another piece of me was afraid (Well! Now I'd really have to fish or cut bait). But a large piece of me was just relieved that we had moved beyond talking, and that the direction of that movement was out of my hands.

The three of us kissed and held hands and had dinner, which Lynn cooked for the first time. Then Muriel went to Laurel's for a beer, and I found out that Lynn was every bit as delicious as I had fantasized her to be.

Our new living arrangement called for a celebration, so I took the next two days off from work. I called the library and told Mrs. Johnson that Muriel and I were taking Oliver to a nursing home in Connecticut because we couldn't care for him any longer.

Muriel and I decided that nothing could break the bonds between us, certainly not the sharing of our bodies and our joys with another woman whom we had come to love, also. Our

taking Lynn to our bed became, not merely a fact to be integrated into our living, but a test for each one of us of our love and our openness.

It was a beautiful vision but a difficult experiment. At first Lynn seemed to be having the best of it. She had both of us totally focused upon her and her problems, as well as upon her little horsewoman's body and her ribald lovemaking.

I helped Lynn get a job at the library, in another branch. She rented a basement space over on West Bleecker Street to store her furniture, but mostly she lived at Seventh Street.

We were certainly the first to have tried to work out this unique way of living for women, communal sex without rancor. After all, nobody else ever talked about it. None of the gay-girl books we read so avidly ever suggested our vision was not new, nor our joy in each other. Certainly Beebo Brinker didn't; nor Olga, of *The Scorpion*. Our much-fingered copies of Ann Bannon's *Women in the Shadows* and *Odd Girl Out* never so much as suggested that the perils and tragedies connected with loving women could possibly involve more than two at a time. And of course none of those books even mentioned the joys. So we knew there was a world of our experience as gay-girls that they left out, but that meant we had to write it ourselves, learn by living it out.

We tried to make it all work out gracefully and with a certain finesse.

Muriel, Lynn, and I made spoken and unspoken rules of courtesy for ourselves that we hoped would both allow for and help allay hurt feelings: "I thought you were staying with me tonight." The pressures of close quarters: "Hush, she's not asleep yet." And of course, guilt-provoking gallantry: "I'll go on ahead and the two of you meet me later; but don't be too long, now."

Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. Muriel and I attempted to examine why, endlessly. For all her manipulative coolness, Lynn was seldom alone with either of us for any length of time. Increasingly, she got the message that, try as we might to make it otherwise, this space on Seventh Street was Muriel's and my space, and she, Lynn, was a desired and sought-after visitor, but a visitor forever.

I had wanted it to be different. Muriel had wanted it to be different. Lynn had wanted it to be different. At least in all the places we consciously touched. Somehow, it never was, but

neither Muriel nor I wanted to notice that, nor how unfair such a stacked deck was. She and I had each other; Lynn had only a piece of each of us, and was here on sufferance.

We never saw nor articulated this until much later, despite our endless examinations and theme-writing about communal living. And by then it was too late, at least for this experiment in living out our visions.

Muriel and I talked about love as a voluntary commitment, while we each struggled through the steps of an old dance, not consciously learned, but desperately followed. We had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers, both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given.

One Sunday night in the beginning of August, Muriel and I came home from Laurel's to find that Lynn had left. Her knapsack and the boxes in which she kept her assortment of mementos from different lives were gone. In the middle of the kitchen table was Muriel's Cassell's german dictionary, the book in which we kept our savings, ninety dollars to date. It was open, and the pages were empty.

That ninety dollars was all the money we had, and it represented a huge loss to us. Our roommate was gone, our house-keys were gone, our savings were gone. The loss of the dream was even greater.

Even many years afterward, Lynn was never able to say to us why she had done it.

## 28

That fall, Muriel and I took a course at the New School in contemporary american poetry, and I went into therapy. There were things I did not understand, and things I felt that I did not want to feel, particularly the blinding headaches that came in waves sometimes.

And I seldom spoke. I wrote and I dreamed, but almost never talked, except in answer to a direct question, or to give a direction of some sort. I became more and more aware of this the longer Muriel and I lived together.

With Rhea, as with most of the other people I knew, my primary function in conversations was to listen. Most people never

get a chance to talk as much as they want to, and I was an attentive listener, being really interested in what made other people tick. (Maybe I could squirrel it off and examine their lives in private and find out something about myself.)

Muriel and I communicated pretty much by intuition and unfinished sentences. Libraries are supposed to be quiet, so at work I didn't have to talk, except to point out where books were, and tell stories to the children. I was very good at that, and I loved to do it. It felt like reciting the endless poems I used to memorize as a child, and which I would retell to myself and anybody else who would listen. They were my way of talking. To express a feeling, I would recite a poem. When the poems I memorized fell short of the occasion, I started to write my own.

I also wanted to go back to college. The course we were taking at the New School didn't make too much sense to me, and the idea of studying was not a familiar one to me. I had managed high school without it, and nobody had bothered to notice. I entered college believing one learned by osmosis, and by concentrating intently on what everybody said. That had meant survival in my family's house.

When I left college, I said to myself at the time that one year of college was more than most Black women had and so I was already ahead of the game. But when Muriel came to New York, I knew I was not going back to Mexico any time soon, and I wanted a degree. I had had tastes of what job-hunting was like for unskilled Black women. Even though I had a job which I enjoyed, I wanted someday not to have to take orders from everybody else. Most of all, I wanted to be free enough to know and do what I wanted to do. I wanted not to shake when I got angry or cry when I got mad. And the city colleges were still free.

I started therapy on the anniversary of the first day Muriel and I met the year before.

On Thanksgiving Day, we fixed a great feast in celebration and invited Suzy and Sis for dinner. Since even at student rates therapy was a luxury, and we had only one income between us, money became even tighter. The day before Thanksgiving, I took my mail-pouch pocketbook and Muriel put on her loosest fitting jacket, and we went across town to the A&P next to Jim Atkins's, the all-night diner in the Village. We came back with a little capon, two pounds of mushrooms, a box of rice, and asparagus. The asparagus was the hardest of all to get, and

some of the tips were broken from being tucked so quickly into Muriel's waistband. But we managed without mishap or detection, and walked home whistling and pleased.

About stealing food from supermarkets—I felt that if we needed it badly enough, we would not get caught. And truth to tell, I stopped doing it when I no longer had to, and I never did get caught.

On our way home we splurged on a pint of cherry-vanilla ice cream for dessert, and Suzy and Sis brought the wine. Muriel made an Italian pepper and egg pie, and we had a wonderful feast. I brought out all my Mexican rugs and *rebozos*, and decorated the walls and the chairs and the couch with bright colors. The house looked and smelled holiday happy.

That night, I announced that I had made up my mind to register for college at night in the spring term.

Muriel and I kept Christmas on Christmas Eve, such keeping as we did. We exchanged our presents, grumbled a lot, and prepared to go our separate families' ways the next day. We wrapped their presents, and worried about what we could wear home that would not be too uncomfortable, yet appropriate enough to forestall questions and comments.

On Christmas Day, with many kisses and long goodbyes, Muriel went to Stamford and I went up to the Bronx to my sister Phyllis's home to have dinner with her and Henry and the children, along with my mother and Helen. Phyllis had a family and a real house, not an apartment, so it was tacitly agreed that she keep Christmas. It relieved me of another direct confrontation with my mother's house, and gave me a chance to enjoy my two nieces, whom I loved but did not often see. I made a big project of inviting them down to Seventh Street afterward, but they never came.

Christmas we gave to our families; New Year's we kept for ourselves. They were two separate worlds. My family knew that I had a roommate named Muriel. That was about all. My mother had met Muriel, and as usual, since I had left her house, knew it was wise to make no comment about my personal life. But my mother could make "no comment" more loudly and with more hostility than anyone else I knew. Muriel and I had been to Phyllis's house for dinner once, and whatever Phyllis and Henry thought about our relationship, they kept it to themselves. In general, my family only allowed themselves to know whatever it was they cared to know, and I did not push them as long as they left me alone.

On New Year's Eve, Muriel and I went to a party at Nicky and Joan's house. They lived in a brownstone in the eighties near Broadway. Nicky was a writer who worked on a fashion newspaper and Joan was a secretary at Metropolitan Life. Nicky was tiny and tight; Joan was lean and beautiful, with dark spaniel eyes. Unlike Muriel and I, they looked very proper and elegant in their straight clothes, and for that reason, and because they lived so far uptown, it felt like they lived a far more conventional life than we did. In some ways, this was true, for Nicky in particular. Joan was talking about quitting her job and becoming a bum for a while. I envied her the freedom of choice that allowed her to consider this, knowing she could get another job whenever she wanted one. That was what being white and knowing how to type meant.

This was to be a holiday fete, not simply a wash-your-foot-and-come. I never enjoyed parties much if Muriel and I weren't giving them, although I had started to really enjoy the parties out in Queens that we went to with Vida and Pet and Gerri. Those parties given by Black women were always full of food and dancing and reefer and laughter and high-jinks. Vida with her dramatic voice and sense of the absurd, and Pet with her dancing feet that were never still, made it easy not to be shy, to move with the music and laughter. It was at those parties that I finally learned how to dance.

Joan and Nicky's parties were different. Usually there wasn't much music, and when there was, it was not for dancing. There was always lots of wine around, both red and white, because Nicky and Joan were more Bermuda shorts than dungarees. One of the noticeable differences between the two sets was wine versus hard liquor. But more than one glass of any kind of wine gave me heartburn, and besides it was all too dry for my taste. It was not sophisticated to like sweet wine, and that became another one of my secret vices, like soft ice cream, to be indulged only around tried and true friends.

And there was never enough food. Tonight, for the holidays, a beautifully laid table graced the corner of Nicky and Joan's great, high-ceilinged parlor. Upon an old linen tablecloth that had belonged to Nicky's mother, and bright red poinsettia mats cut from felt, sat little plates of potato chips and pretzels and crackers and cheeses, a bowl of sour cream and onion dip made from Lipton's onion soup mix, and tiny little jars of red caviar with bright green bibs around them. There were saucers of olives and celery and pickles on the edges of the table, and in

various corners of the room, baskets of mixed nuts. I kept thinking of the pigs-in-a-blanket and fried chicken wings and potato salad and hot corn bread at Gerri and them's last "do," knowing it wasn't a question of money, because red caviar cost a lot more than chicken wings.

The feeling in the room was subdued. Mostly, women sat around in little groups and talked quietly, the sound of moderation—thick and heavy as smoke in the air. I noticed the absence of laughter only because I always thought parties were supposed to be fun, even though I didn't find them particularly so, never knowing what to say. I busied myself looking through the bookshelves lining the room.

Muriel circulated with ease. She seemed in her element, her soft voice and fall-away chuckle moving from group to group, cigarette and bottle of beer in hand. I studied the books, uncomfortable and acutely aware of being alone. Pat, a friend of Nicky's from the paper, came over and started to talk. I listened appreciatively, greatly relieved.

Muriel and I left shortly after midnight, walking over to the subway on Central Park West arm in arm. It was good to be out in the sharp cold air, even good to be a little tired. We frolicked through the almost empty streets, talking and laughing about nonsensical things, joking about our uptown friends who drank dry wine. Occasional blasts from party horns were still erupting from gaily lit windows, holiday open.

In the freshness and nip of the winter's late night, alone now with Muriel, something powerful and promising inside of me stretched, excited and joyful. I thought of other New Year's Eves that I had spent, alone, or wandering through Times Square. I was very lucky, very blessed.

I squeezed Muriel's hand, and felt her tight squeeze back. I was in love, a new year was beginning, and the shape of the future was a widening star. It was one year to the day that Muriel and I had locked the door of Seventh Street behind Rhea and turned off the fire under the coffee on the stove and laid down together with our hearts against each other. This was our first anniversary.

We went home and ushered it in quite properly, until dawn sang with the rhythms of our bodies, our heat.

Later, we got up, and Muriel cooked a huge pot of hoppin' john, black-eyed peas and rice, which Suzy's friend Lion from Philly had taught her how to do, and of which she was very

proud. I laughed to see her strutting around the kitchen rosy-cheeked, waving her wooden spoon aloft in triumph as the food reached exactly the right consistency without becoming mushy.

Evening moved upon us, and as our friends dropped by, we wished each other good times and ate and ate. Some of the women were hung-over, and some were depressed, and some were just plain sleepy from being out all night and thinking of work tomorrow. But we all agreed that Muriel's pot was the best hoppin' john we'd ever tasted, and that it was going to be a super year for us all.

Nicky and Joan were the last to leave. After they had gone, Muriel and I put the dishes and pots to soak in the covered part of the sink, and we climbed back into bed with our notebooks and wrote New Year themes. Muriel chose a subject—A Man from the Land Where Nobody Lives. When we finished, we exchanged our notebooks and read each other's work before moving on to the next theme.

Muriel had written:

#### The Year 1955

*Audi*

got a new job  
started therapy  
sent out some poems  
is going back to school

*Me*

NOTHING!

I stared at the notebook page in silence, feeling like cold water had been thrown at me. I reached over and took her hand. It lay cool and still beneath my fingers, without movement. I did not know what to say to Muriel. The idea that anyone could measure herself against me and find that self wanting was truly shocking. The fact that it was my beloved Muriel who was doing it was nothing less than terrifying.

I thought of our life as a mutual exploration, a progress through the strength of our loving. But as I read and re-read the stark outline in her notebook, I realized that Muriel saw that joint becoming in terms of achievements of mine which somehow defined her inabilities. They were not mutual triumphs, the notebook said in inescapable terms, and there was nothing either I or our loving could do to shield her from the implications of that truth, as she saw it.

# 29

I walked down those three little steps into the Bagatelle on a weekend night in 1956. There was an inner door, guarded by a male bouncer, ostensibly to keep out the straight male intruders come to gawk at the "lezzies," but in reality to keep out those women deemed "undesirable." All too frequently, undesirable meant Black.

Women stood three-deep around the bar and between the tables, and in the doorway to the postage-stamp-sized dance floor. By 9:00 P.M., the floor was packed solid with women's bodies moving slowly to the jukebox beat of Ruth Brown's

When your friends have left you all alone  
and you have no one to call your own

or Frank Sinatra's

Set 'em up, Joe  
I got a little story . . .

When I moved through the bunches of women cruising each other in the front room, or doing a slow fish on the dance floor in the back, with the smells of cigarette smoke and the music and the hair pomade whirling together like incense through charged air, it was hard for me to believe that my being an outsider had anything to do with being a lesbian.

But when I, a Black woman, saw no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black.

The society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it, and which allowed the Bagatelle to survive as long as it did, selling watered-down drinks at inflated prices to lonely dykes who had no other social outlet or community gathering place.

Rather than the idyllic picture created by false nostalgia, the fifties were really straight white America's cooling-off period of "let's pretend we're happy and that this is the best of all possible worlds and we'll blow those nasty commies to hell if they dare to say otherwise."

The Rosenbergs had been executed, the transistor radio had been invented, and frontal lobotomy was the standard solution for persistent deviation. For some, Elvis Presley and his stolen Black rhythms became arch-symbols of the antichrist.

Young america's growing pains, within the Bagatelle, were represented by the fashion conflicts between the blue-jeans set and the bermuda-shorts set. Then, of course, there were those who fell in between, either by virtue of our art or our craziness or our color.

The breakdown into the mommies and the daddies was an important part of lesbian relationships in the Bagatelle. If you asked the wrong woman to dance, you could get your nose broken in the alley down the street by her butch, who had followed you out of the Bag for exactly that purpose. It was safer to keep to yourself. And you were never supposed to ask who was who, which is why there was such heavy emphasis upon correct garb. The well-dressed gay-girl was supposed to give you enough cues for you to know.

For some of us, however, role-playing reflected all the depreciating attitudes toward women which we loathed in straight society. It was a rejection of these roles that had drawn us to "the life" in the first place. Instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic, we recognized oppression as oppression, no matter where it came from.

But those lesbians who had carved some niche in the pretend world of dominance/subordination, rejected what they called our "confused" life style, and they were in the majority.

Felicia was so late one Sunday afternoon for our photography lesson, that Muriel and I went off to Laurel's without her, because you had to be early on Sundays to get something to eat. The Swing Rendezvous had closed its table, but at Laurel's on Sunday afternoons there was free brunch with any drink, and that meant all you could eat. Many of the gay bars used this to get Sunday afternoon business at a traditionally slow time, but Laurel's had the best food. There was a Chinese cook there of no mean talent, who cooked back and kept it coming. After the word got around, every Sunday afternoon at four o'clock, there would be a line of gay-girls in front of Laurel's, smoking and talking and trying to pretend we had all arrived there at that time by accident.

When the doors opened, there was a discreet but determined stampede, first to the bar and then to the food table, set up in the rear of the lounge. We tried to keep our cool, pretending that we couldn't care less for barbecued spareribs with peach and apricot sweet sauce, or succulent pink shrimp swimming in thick golden lobster sauce, dotted with bits of green scallion

and bright yellow eggdrops, tiny pieces of pork and onion afloat on top. There were stacked piles of crispy brown eggrolls filled with shredded ham and chicken and celery, rolled together and fried with a touch of sesame paste. There were fried chicken bits, and every once in a great while, a special delicacy such as lobster or fresh crab. Only the first lucky few got to taste those special dishes, so it was worthwhile being first in line and pushing your cool image a little bit askew.

We were healthy young female animals mercifully more alive than most of our peers, robust and active women, and our blood was always high and our pockets empty and a free meal in convivial surroundings—meaning around other lesbians—was a big treat for most of us, even if purchased at the price of a bottle of beer, which was fifty cents, with many complaints.

Dancing wasn't allowed at Laurel's so it never got to be as popular as the Bag, except on Sunday afternoons. Muriel preferred it because it was always quieter. Trix ran the place, and always had a hand for "her girls." Tiny and tough, with a permanent Florida tan and a Bronx accent, she took a shine to Muriel and me, and sometimes she would buy us a beer, and sit down and talk with us if the place wasn't too crowded.

We all knew the situation with gay bars, how they came in and out of existence with such regularity and who really profited from them. But Trix was pretty and bright and hard and kind all at the same time, and her permanent tan particularly endeared her to me. She looked like one of the nicer hickory-skinned devils who used to people my dreams of that period.

Actually, the life span of most gay bars was under a year, with the notable exception of a few like the Bag. Laurel's went the way of all the other gay bars—like the Swing and Snooky's and the Grapevine, the Sea Colony and the Pony Stable Inn. Each closed after a year or so, while another opened and caught on somewhere else. But for that year, Laurel's served as an important place for those of us who met and made some brief space for ourselves there. It had a feeling of family.

On summer Sunday afternoons, Muriel and I would split from the gay beach at Coney Island or Riis Park early, take the subway back home in time to wash up and dress and saunter over to Laurel's in time for the food at 4:00. I had my first open color confrontation with a gay-girl one Sunday afternoon in Laurel's.

Muriel and I had come back that day from Riis Park, full of sun and sand. We loved with the salt still on our skins, then bathed, washed our hair, and got ready to go out. I put on my

faded cord riding britches with the suede crotch, and a pale blue short-sleeved sweatshirt bought earlier that week at John's on Avenue C for sixty-nine cents. My skin was tanned from the sun and burnished ruddy with the heat and much loving. My hair was newly trimmed and freshly washed, with the particular crispness that it always develops in sustained summer heat. I felt raunchy and restless.

We walked out of the hot August afternoon sun into the suddenly dark coolness of Laurel's downstairs. There was Muriel in her black Bermuda shorts and shirt, ghost pale, her eternal cigarette in hand. And I was beside her, full of myself, knowing I was fat and Black and very fine. We were without peer or category, and on that day I was conscious of being very proud of it, no matter who looked down her nose at us.

After Muriel and I had gotten our food and beer and copped one of the tables, Dottie and Pauli came over. We saw them a lot at the Bag and in the supermarket over on Avenue D, but we'd never been to their house nor they to ours, except for New Year's food, when everyone came.

"Where you guys been?" Pauli had an ingenuous smile, her blonde hair and blue eyes incandescent against the turquoise mandarin shirt she wore.

"Riis. Gay Beach." Muriel's finger crooked over the bottle as she took a slug. All of us eschewed glasses as faggy, although I sometimes longed for one because the cold beer hurt my teeth.

Pauli turned to me. "Hey, that's a great tan you have there. I didn't know Negroes got tans." Her broad smile was intended to announce the remark as a joke.

My usual defense in such situations was to ignore the overtones, to let it go. But Dottie Daws, probably out of her own nervousness at Pauli's reference to the unmentionable, would not let the matter drop. Raved on and on about my great tan. Matched her arm to mine. Shook her pale blonde head, telling whomever would listen that she wished she could tan like that instead of burning, and did I know how lucky I was to be able to get such a tan like that? I grew tired and then shakingly furious, having enough of whatever it was.

"How come you never make so much over my natural tan most days, Dottie Daws; how come?"

There was a moment of silence at the table, punctuated only by Muriel's darkly appreciative chuckle, and then we moved on to something else, mercifully. I was still shaking inside. I never forgot it.

In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape upon my lips. For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion. It was no different in the gay world.

Most Black lesbians were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community's lack of interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society. It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal. And if you were fool enough to do it, you'd better come on so tough that nobody messed with you. I often felt put down by their sophistication, their clothes, their manners, their cars, and their femmes.

The Black women I usually saw around the Bag were into heavy roles, and it frightened me. This was partly the fear of my own Blackness mirrored, and partly the realities of the masquerade. Their need for power and control seemed a much-too-open piece of myself, dressed in enemy clothing. They were tough in a way I felt I could never be. Even if they were not, their self-protective instincts warned them to appear that way. By white America's racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing "femme" had very little chance in the Bag. There was constant competition among butches to have the most "gorgeous femme" on their arm. And "gorgeous" was defined by a white male world's standards.

For me, going into the Bag alone was like entering an anomalous no-woman's land. I wasn't cute or passive enough to be "femme," and I wasn't mean or tough enough to be "butch." I was given a wide berth. Non-conventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community.

With the exception of Felicia and myself, the other Black women in the Bag came protected by a show of all the power symbols they could muster. Whatever else they did during the week, on Friday nights when Lion or Trip appeared, sometimes with expensively dressed women on their arms, sometimes alone, they commanded attention and admiration. They were well-heeled, superbly dressed, self-controlled high-steppers who drove convertibles, bought rounds of drinks for their friends, and generally took care of business.

But sometimes, even *they* couldn't get in unless they were recognized by the bouncer.

My friends and I were the hippies of the gay-girl circuit, before the word was coined. Many of us wound up dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon. But when we survived, we grew up strong.

Every Black woman I ever met in the Village in those years had some part in my survival, large or small, if only as a figure in the head-count at the Bag on a Friday night.

Black lesbians in the Bagatelle faced a world only slightly less hostile than the outer world which we had to deal with every day on the outside—that world which defined us as doubly nothing because we were Black and because we were Woman—that world which raised our blood pressures and shaped our furies and our nightmares.

The temporary integration of war plants, and the egalitarian myth of Rosie the Riveter had ended abruptly with the end of World War II and the wholesale return of the american woman to the role of little wifey. So far as I could see, gay-girls were the only Black and white women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements.

Black or white, Ky-Ky, butch, or femme, the only thing we shared, often, and in varying proportions, was that we dared for connection in the name of woman, and saw that as our power, rather than our problem.

All of us who survived those common years had to be a little strange. We spent so much of our young-womanhood trying to define ourselves as woman-identified women before we even knew the words existed, let alone that there were ears interested in trying to hear them beyond our immediate borders. All of us who survived those common years have to be a little proud. A lot proud. Keeping ourselves together and on our own tracks, however wobbly, was like trying to play the Dinizulu War Chant or a Beethoven sonata on a tin dog-whistle.

The important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps.

In times of need and great instability, the place sometimes became more a definition than the substance of why you needed it to begin with. Sometimes the retreat became the reality. The writers who posed in cafés talking their work to death without writing two words; the lesbians, virile as men, hating women and their own womanhood with a vengeance. The bars and the

coffee-shops and the streets of the Village in the 1950s were full of non-conformists who were deathly afraid of going against their hard-won group, and so eventually they were broken between the group and their individual needs.

For some of us there was no one particular place, and we grabbed whatever we could from wherever we found space, comfort, quiet, a smile, non-judgment.

*Being women together was not enough. We were different.  
Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different.  
Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being  
Black women together was not enough. We were different. Be-  
ing Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.*

Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning.) It was years before we learned to use the strength that daily surviving can bring, years before we learned fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own.

The Black gay-girls in the Village gay bars of the fifties knew each other's names, but we seldom looked into each other's Black eyes, lest we see our own aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness. Some of us died inside the gaps between the mirrors and those turned-away eyes.

*Sistah outsiders. Didi and Tommy and Muff and Iris and Lion and Trip and Audre and Diane and Felicia and Bernie and Addie.*

Addie was Mari Evans beautiful, a wasted sister-soul. Driven as we all were driven, she found ways out that were still alien to some of the rest of us—harsher, less hidden.

That Sunday afternoon while Muriel and I waited for Flee and our photography lesson, Addie was turning Flee onto smack for the first time in a borrowed apartment across Second Avenue.

## 30

The spring of 1956 came with a plethora of ambiguous omens. I had stopped therapy because of our shortage of money. What had seemed just enough to get by on a year ago had shrunk through inflation or recession or whatever they chose to call it in the *New York Times*. Fingering over my private structures became a luxury I could not afford. Therapy was the last possible cut to be made. Neither of us said a word about Muriel's inability to look for work. She did not deal with her self-loathing, and I did not deal with my resentment. My physiology professor at Hunter College tried to help my financial problems by offering me a job as a live-in maid in her Park Avenue house.

The night before my last session in therapy, I dreamt that Muriel and I stood waiting for a train in a midnight-blue subway station. There are clusters of people about, but their backs are turned and I cannot see their faces. As the train pulls into the station, Muriel falls off the platform beneath its wheels. I stand on the platform as the train rolls over her, powerless to do anything, my heart breaking beneath the wheels. I awake to tears and a sense of mourning too deep for words, that would not go away.

Muriel was having trouble sleeping. Night after night she sat up on the couch in the middle room, reading and smoking and writing in her journal, and sometimes I woke to hear her talking to herself. I found out only later the desperate quality of those hallucinations which she hid from me under irascibility or humor.

Other nights she stayed out drinking until I had gone to sleep. I could wake and look through the doorway of our bedroom to find her, night after night, leaning against the pillows on the couch propped up against the wall. Her dear dark head outlined in a circle of lamplight, Crazy Lady and Scarey Lou curled up together against the warmth of her thighs. Sometimes I felt we were as lost to each other as if one of us were dead.

In the morning when I got up to dress for work, I would find her asleep on the couch looking worn and vulnerable, her pale hand still holding the book fallen upon her breast, the two little kittens entwined, asleep, upon her tummy. She was getting thinner and thinner, eating less and less, insisting she was not hungry, even though it seemed very dangerous to me to be living on beer and cigarettes. I turned off the lamp over her head, pulled the covers over her, and went on to work.

Que Será, Que Será,  
Whatever will be, will be . . .

Spring came in with extraordinary fervor, and the sounds of Doris Day's wide-mouthed rendition of "Whatever Will Be, Will Be" resounded from every jukebox and soda fountain radio.

One brisk Sunday evening in early April, Muriel and I ran into my old school friend Jill crossing East Houston Street, huddled into a worn pea coat two sizes too big for her. I had not seen her for almost two years, since she and The Branded had used my Spring Street apartment after I left for Stamford to work. Both poets, renegades, and very determined young women, there was much that connected Jill and me across our differences. There was also a lot of unfinished business that separated us. It made us wary of each other, at the same time as we valued each other's insights.

Jill was on her way to her father's law office downtown to use his electric typewriters after business hours. Muriel and I joined her, and for several Sundays thereafter, we typed our poems and themes on elegant IBM machines. There was a guarded truce between Jill and me, as if we had decided to forget whatever had occurred before without speaking of it, as if the connections and the history we shared were enough to bridge the differences between us. At least Jill was a fighter too, another confirmed outsider. As infants, we had grown up in the subliminal echo of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's determinedly optimistic fireside chats. We each had absorbed some of his prescription for progress: When times are hard, do something. If it works, do it some more. If it does not work, do something else. But keep doing.

The next week, coming out of my german class one evening, I heard someone calling me by name. Turning, surprised, I saw Toni, ex-varsity star of Hunter High School. We had only been bare acquaintances before, but here in the inhospitable wastelands of Hunter College, we greeted each other's familiar face warmly and with welcome relief.

"Let's go for coffee next week," I suggested, as the bell rang for the next class and we dashed for the elevator. Toni laughed and shook her close-cropped blonde head.

"Why coffee? How about a drink! There's a great bar downtown on the West Side called the Sea Colony. We can drive down after class, and it's not too far from where you live, is it?"

So Toni was gay. Another welcome not-quite-surprise. And she had her own car, no mean accomplishment three years out of high school.

Toni was by now a registered nurse, teaching a course in Hunter's nursing program once a week. I was amazed. It seemed as if she had gotten on about the business of making her life work while we were still trying to reconstruct the world. Toni seemed so grown-up and capable and settled and prosperous in comparison to Muriel and me. She was a year younger than I was, and she owned her own car and rented a summer house at Huntington Station and never had to worry about what she spent for food. Very much in the closet at work and school, Toni still had a reputation for having "unconventional" friends.

We saw a lot of Toni; Muriel saw more of her than I did, since I was in school until 10:00 four nights a week.

I had just finished my advanced algebra homework, still confused about the function of sines, and climbed into bed when I heard Muriel's key in the door. I felt the rush of damp air around her from the spring storm outside before I saw her now-gaunt face, glistening with wet from the long walk across town.

"You still up?" She shed her navy sweater onto the couch and came in to sit down on the edge of our bed. Happy to see her home before I slept and in a good mood, I sat up and reached for my glasses. Her note had said that she and Toni were going for a beer.

"Where's Toni; why didn't she drive you home?" I kissed her. She smelled of beer and smoke and April rain.

"She got a flat near the hospital today so she didn't have the car." Neither of us was used to including wheels in our lives.

"I got an eight on my quadratics exam tonight." Trig had been a major stumbling block in math that term. "Where did you-all go?"

"We went to the Swing but it was closed up, and I don't know if it's for tonight or for good. So then we went to a new place over on Bleecker called the Mermaid, but they had a dollar minimum which is shit-for-the-birds during the week, so we wound up at the Riv." The Riviera was not primarily a gay bar, but its sawdust floors and cheap beer made it everybody's standby on Sheridan Square.

"How's Toni?"

Muriel chuckled. "Getting looser all the time. She didn't even have her head-nurse's cap with her tonight." Muriel reached

over and took a puff from my cigarette. "How would you feel if Toni and I slept together?"

I looked at her deep brown eyes, shining and open for the first time in so long. So that was it. Her expectant half-smile helped cushion my surprise at how easily this whole question had arisen, again.

"Well, have you?"

"Not yet, of course not. You know I'd tell you."

She spoke with such animation and lightness of spirit that I had to smile in spite of myself. Old Muriel had come back to town. I butted my cigarette and settled back into bed. "Well, I'm glad you asked. Come on to bed." Muriel was taking off her sneakers.

My stabs of jealousy were tempered by my lessening sense of guilt; for what, I could not say. I lay beside Muriel, listening to her gentle snoring, still not really sure of what I felt. I liked Toni, and what was even more important, I trusted her. Trusted her to take care of Muriel.

I loved to see Muriel's eyes alight. I recalled the disruption Lynn had caused in our lives last year. But this felt very different. I had learned a lot. Muriel certainly needed something.

But another piece of myself turned over in the darkness, filled with a great sadness. I suddenly thought about my last year at home. One morning going into my parents' bedroom to get the iron in the pre-dawn hours before I left for school. Turning in the dimness of the early-morning light, I was startled suddenly to find my mother's open eyes silently regarding me as I crept around quietly. I sensed that she had been awake for a long while, listening to me going about my adolescent business in the quiet apartment. Our eyes met for a moment, and it was the only time that I felt the full weight of my mother's pain at the hostilities forever between us.

That moment was short and sharp and incredibly poignant.

I stood there with my hand on the bedroom doorknob. No word passed between us, but I suddenly remembered the day I first menstruated, and I felt like I was about to cry. I tucked the iron under my arm and closed the door softly behind me.

In the dim glow from the Seventh Street streetlamps, I turned my head to regard Muriel's sleeping face. What did my mother think about at night now that I had gone away?

More and more of my own energies were being focused elsewhere. I thought of life between Muriel and me, certainly not

as idyllic, but as something precious to both of us that we were still committed to build. And besides, we had said *forever*.

Muriel seemed to gain a new lease on life. She began to sleep better, and she spent less and less time on the couch in the middle room.

Soon, big brusque Toni became a part of our lives, with her gymnastic jackets and her lacy RN cap perched incongruously on her aggressive head. She would come over on Sunday afternoon bringing homemade blintzes and charts from school, upon which we would try to diagram the interpersonal relationships possible in our future world of women.

School was going better for me than I had ever hoped. For the first time in my life, I began to know, really know, I was smart—smart as defined by being able to do the white man's work, being able to study. I was finally learning german, and doing a fine job of it. Mostly, with the help of Muriel and my old therapist, I had learned to study. Muriel, who had studied german in school, also helped me with german conversation, and for a while I was more articulate in german than I was in english.

Sometimes Toni stayed over on Seventh Street. In the chilly exultations of middle spring, the three of us would wake at dawn, pick up Nicky and Joan, and go fishing in Sheepshead Bay on Saturday mornings. We returned in the afternoon, the boats heavy with flounder and blackfish.

And on Sundays, often, there was Jill and her daddy's typewriters.

Muriel, Jill, and I walked back to Seventh Street through the darkening Sunday city—the unmistakable smell of early May was on the warming air. It was late when we got home, and Jill stayed over. The next day was Monday, which meant work as usual. I went to bed and left them both still talking in the middle room.

Sometime between midnight and morning I woke with a start in horror and disbelief. The muffled sounds coming from the next room were unmistakable. Muriel. Muriel and Jill were making love on the middle-room couch. I lay rigid, trying not to hear, trying not to be awake or there at all, trapped like some wild animal between a seven-story drop out the front windows and the activity going on in the next room. NO EXIT.

Had it been anyone else on our couch with Muriel my pain and fury might have been less. There was so much unsettled history between Jill and me. The cruellest weapon at hand, or

so it felt. In our own house. With me in the next room. A veil of red fury settled over my consciousness which I had not felt since those days in my mother's house when I used to burst into nosebleeds instead of tears. I bit down on a mouthful of woolen blanket, feeling like I had to commit murder, only there was no one to kill. I fell asleep again immediately in desperate self-protection.

When I got up the house was quiet and empty. I could not even say, "How could you, you little bitch, with her of all people?" We couldn't even talk about it. Muriel wasn't there.

I walked back and forth through the apartment wringing my hands until the fingers tingled and grew red. How was I going to manage this day? Where was she? I wanted to wring her neck. Slowly I got dressed, and engineered myself out onto the street.

The street and the sky and the people I passed were all covered with a veil of rage fastened to an iron ring that was anchored with a steel bolt through the middle of my chest.

I had to get to work, which was now at a library in the Bronx. I huddled against the back wall in the Astor Place Station, afraid I was going to push someone or myself under an approaching train.

I rode up to Morris Avenue, my eyes filmed in red, my hands shaking. I could not separate the pain of betrayal from the pain of raw fury. Fury at Muriel, fury at Jill, fury at myself for not killing them both. The train rocketed on, with a delay at 34th Street. If I could not let this poison out of me I would die. A blinding headache came and went, without increasing or lessening my agony. My nose started to bleed around Grand Central Station. Somebody gave me a tissue and a seat and I leaned my head back, closing my eyes. The pictures of mayhem that flashed across the screen of my eyelids were too terrifying. I kept my eyes open for the rest of the way.

That morning, there was a staff meeting at the library. On these days, the staff took turns preparing tea, an old library custom. This week it was my turn. In the sparsely furnished, immaculate staff kitchen, I lifted a large pot of boiling water from the stove to pour it into the teapot standing in the sink.

Out of the kitchen window I could see fuzzy buds on the acacia tree in the tiny backyard that separated the library from the row of tenements fronting on the next street. In the dampness of this overcast Monday morning, the brightness of the new green was startling. Spring was coming on inexorably and Muriel had slept with Jill on our middle-room couch a few hours ago.

My left hand closed around the open mouth of the teapot as the steaming pot of boiling water rested in my other hand against the edge of the sink. The snake ring that Muriel had given me for my birthday curled around my left index finger, silver against my brown skin. I considered the back of my hand and my wrist as it disappeared into the cuff of my shirt and sweater. Almost casually, I realized what was about to happen, as if all of this was a story in some book that I had read thoroughly some time before.

I felt the tension rising in my right arm, and my right hand began to shake. I watched as the pot slowly rose from the edge of the sink, and the boiling water poured over the lip of the pot in slow motion onto my left hand as it rested upon the teapot. The water cascaded down, bounced off the back of my hand and flowed down the drain. I watched the brown skin cloud with steam, then turn red and shiny, and the poison began to run out of me like water as I fumbled at the buttons of my shirt cuff and peeled back the wet cloth from my scalded wrist. The steamed flesh had already started to blister.

Walking into the staff room next door where the rest of my colleagues sat discussing book orders. "I've burned myself by mistake." Then pain erupting into the space left empty by the draining away of the poison.

Someone took me home in a taxi from the doctor's office. It was Muriel who opened the door for me, and helped me off with my clothes. She did not ask what had happened. Next to the pain in my hand and wrist, everything else felt like it had never been. I fell immediately asleep. The next day I went to St. Vincent's burn clinic, where the snake ring had to be cut away from the scalded swollen flesh.

During the next few days, when I felt anything at all other than pain, it was guilt and embarrassment, as if I'd done an unforgivable and unmentionable act. Self-mutilation. Displaying a rage that was neither cool nor hip. Otherwise, I was quite empty of passion.

Muriel and I never spoke of Jill nor of the accident. We were very guarded and tender with each other, and a little bit mournful, as if we were both acknowledging with our silence what was irretrievable.

Jill had gone, to appear again some other time when one least expected her. She was not really important here, only what she represented. Now, most of all, when we needed the words between us, Muriel and I were both silent. What was lying between

us had moved beyond our old speech, and we were both too lost and too frightened to attempt a new language.

We went out with Joan and Nicky to celebrate Nicky's birthday. My burns were healing. Luckily, there was no infection, and I had returned to work, wearing a white glove to hide the ugly scarring around my wrist and the back of my hand, oddly intertwined with new high-pink flesh. My mother had told me that cotton gloves and daily rubs with cocoa butter would keep the heavy keloid scars from forming, and she was right.

Muriel and I made love for the last time on May 20th. It was the night before my final exams at college.

The house was empty when I got home the next day. I'd come home early to study. It was empty when I left in the late twilight to catch the subway up to Hunter, and it was empty when I came home that night and finally went to bed. No one to exult with, no one to worry with, my first term back at school. It felt very lonely.

When we realized Muriel and Joan were having an affair, Nicky and I both predicted it would come to no good in the end. Neither Joan nor Muriel was working.

Summer became a nightmare of separation and endings. Muriel was going and I could not let her go, even though so much of me wanted to. An old dream of us together forever in a landscape blinded me.

Nightly, the floor around my lonely bed was carpeted and pitted with volcanoes through which Muriel wandered with great bravado and little caution. I tried to warn her, but my tongue was mute. My bed was safety, but my life, too, was bound up in where she put her feet. Molten fire flowed across the linoleum. If only she would do it my way, if only she could hear me, walk where I could see paths shining dully through the flames, then we would both be safe, forever. Dear god, make her listen to me before it's too late!

But we were unknowing partners in an intimate and complicated minuet. Neither one of us could break out. Neither one of us had the tools to recognize nor to alter the steps and the tone of our tight little dance. We could destroy each other, but we could not move beyond our pain. Our living together now was no longer even a matter of convenience, but neither of us would let go, nor admit to needing the devastating contact. If we did, we would have to ask the question, why; obviously, love was no longer enough of an answer.

Muriel spent most of her time now over at Nicky and Joan's in their new street-level apartment on Sixth Street and Avenue

B. Whenever we were alone together, venom and recriminations leaped out of my mouth like wild frogs, raining down upon her sullen, unresponsive head.

Before the summer solstice, Muriel was wildly in love again. I used to lie awake nights wondering how I could have lost my girl to thin willowy Joan, with the indecisive smile and the air of permanent potential.

The day I got my final marks from Hunter, there were riots in Poland. We lived in a Polish neighborhood, and the neighboring stoops were buzzing with excitement and apprehension as I took my grade cards from the mailbox. I had received a C in math and an A in german. This was the first A I had ever gotten in any subject other than english.

Of course, I was convinced that I had nothing to do with that grade. As soon as a challenge was overcome, it ceased to be a challenge, becoming the expected and ordinary rather than something I had achieved with difficulty, and could, therefore, be justly proud of. I could not own my own triumphs, nor give myself credit for them. Getting the A became not an achievement won by my hard work and study, but only something that had happened—probably, german must be getting easier to understand than it used to be. And besides, if Muriel was leaving me, obviously I couldn't be a person who did anything right, certainly not get an A in german under her own steam.

Some nights I couldn't sleep. Dawn found me walking up and down in front of the building where Joan and Nicky lived, the sharp edge of a fingered butcher knife up my sleeve. Muriel was in there, and most likely not asleep. I had no idea what I was planning to do. I felt like an actor in some badly written melodrama.

My heart knew what my head refused to understand. Our life together was over. If not Joan, then someone else. Another piece of me insisted this could not possibly be happening, while images of murder, death, earthquake harrowed my dreams. The psychic discord was ripping my brain apart. There must be something I could do differently that would take care of everything, end my agonies of bereavement, return Muriel to reason. If only I could figure out how to convince her this was all ridiculous behavior, unnecessary. We could start from there.

Other times, fury, cold as dry ice, strummed behind my eyes. When she did not come home for days, I stalked the streets of the Village, hunted and hunting her and Joan, at the mercy of emotional typhoons over which there was no control. Hate. I blew through summer pre-dawn streets like a winter wind, sur-

rounded by a cloud of pain and rage so intense that no sane person would dare to intrude upon it. Nobody approached me on those journeys. I was sometimes sorry about that; I longed for an excuse to kill. My piercing headaches went away.

I called my mother to see how she was doing. Out of a clear blue sky, she inquired as to how Muriel was doing. "How's your friend? She's all right?" My mother was nothing if not psychic.

"Oh, she's fine," I said hurriedly. "Everything's fine." Desperate that my mother not know of my failure. Determined to hide this shame.

Summer school started and I registered for english and german. I was dropped in the first two weeks because I never attended classes. I was now working half-day at the library, which meant less money but more time.

I mourned Muriel in a wildness of grief with which I had never mourned Gennie. This was the second time in my life that something intolerable was happening; I could do nothing to affect it, nothing to help myself in it. I could do nothing to encompass it, nor to alter it. I was too beside myself to consider altering me.

For if knowing what we knew, and sharing all that we shared, Muriel and I could not make it together, then what two women on earth could? For that matter, what two people on earth could possibly make it together? The heartbreak of holding on seemed preferable to the heartbreak of ever having to try again, of ever again attempting to connect with another human being.

All the pains in my life that I had lived and never felt flew around my head like grey bats; they pecked at my eyes and built nests in my throat and under the center of my breastbone.

*Eudora, Eudora, what was it you used to say to me?*

*Waste nothing, Chica, not even pain. Particularly not pain.*

I rubbed cocoa butter onto the keloid scars on the back of my wrist and hand, and they gradually grew smaller. I started to wear the West Indian bangles my mother had brought back from Grenada for me. They covered up the scars and the discolored skin, and I no longer had to give explanations of what had happened.

Most of our friends had been through the trauma of the breakup of an affair. But this one was different, I thought. Muriel and I had actually lived together, for almost two years, and we had said forever.

"You'll get over it," Toni said, the day she taught me to swim underwater at Huntington Station. "Open your eyes,

goddammit, open your eyes!" Toni was yelling at me through the chill water. "It's always easier with your eyes open." I dipped under again. Coming up. "Anyway, you know Muriel's crazy. She's not worth all this."

But to me, she was.

One steamy August midnight a voice from the past came over the telephone. Marie called quite suddenly after a year's absence. She was in Detroit. She had been in hiding, eluding police across country with her husband Jim, the white-slaver from Texas. Marie had finally run away from him and was now living under an assumed name in Detroit. Our giggled confidences on the daybed in her mother's living room seemed centuries ago.

I borrowed money from Toni and went to Detroit for a week, by bus.

The trip was a welcome change. Marie's problems were external, and solvable on some manageable plane: evading Jim's search for her, finding a new job, fending off inquisitive family and friends. We had a good time in Detroit.

Back in New York, Muriel stayed at the apartment to feed the cats and to straighten out her messes in the kitchen, which over the summer, through both of our lacks of concern, had become an archeological dig of remains from other people's lives. She tidied up our collections of tools and nails and old wood, and the potentially lovely results of our once idyllic Sunday scavenging through the city. She also refinished the wooden cabinet which we had been building to store the stuff.

To top it all off, as a surprise, she decided to paint the whole kitchen. But Muriel had difficulty in finishing any project.

I got back from Detroit two days later. It was late afternoon as I dragged my valise back up the familiar flights of stairs and unlocked my front door. Open cans of dried-out paint stinking in the summer heat. The half-painted kitchen, brilliant yellow on one wall, pale cream on the others. And the kittens, who had gotten into the turpentine looking for something to eat. Little Crazy Lady and Scarey Lou were quite dead and rigid on the floor under the kitchen table.

I packed their small bodies into a toolbox lined with an old pillowcase, and took them down Seventh Street to the East River Park in the beginning twilight. I left them there, in a scrambled grave, under a bush as close to the muddy river waters as I could get, piling stones and dirt around the heap to keep the dogs away. The ballplayers in the park opposite watched curiously.

On my walk home through the late summer evening, I thought of the rapid transition from Detroit back to the same old New York. But something had given inside of me. I did not stop by Sixth Street to ask Muriel what had happened. No need; she'd loved the kittens, and she'd let them die. Suddenly, and curiously without drama, the two stiff little black bodies in the toolbox under the bush became tangible evidence I needed, the last sacrifice.

When two women construct a relationship they enter together, the anticipated satisfactions are mutual if not similar. Sometimes that relationship becomes unsatisfactory, or ceases to fulfill those separate needs. When that happens, unless there is a mutual agreement to simultaneously dissolve the relationship, there must always be one person who decides to make the first move.

The woman who moves first is not necessarily the most injured nor the most at fault.

The first week in September. The *Journal-American* was predicting that Elvis Presley, whose voice decorated every jukebox and radio, would be only a flash-in-the-pan. Muriel's clothes were still at the house, although I saw little of her.

I stood on the corner of Second Avenue waiting for the bus. Already, even though the weather was still quite warm, the days were getting visibly shorter. The pain of the early summer had dulled. I had never before wanted a summer to end, but now, the bleakness of this year's approaching winter seemed like a relief.

The bus door opened and I placed my foot upon the step. Quite suddenly, there was music swelling up into my head, as if a choir of angels had boarded the Second Avenue bus directly in front of me. They were singing the last chorus of an old spiritual of hope:

Gonna die this death  
on Cal—va—ryyyyy  
BUT AIN'T GONNA  
DIE  
NO MORE...!

Their voices sweet and powerful over the din of Second Avenue traffic. I stood transfixed on the lower step of the bus.

"Hey girlie, your fare!" I shook myself and dropped my two coins into the fare-box. The music was still so real I looked around me in amazement as I stumbled to a seat. Almost no one else was in the late-morning bus, and the few people who were there were quite ordinarily occupied and largely silent. Again the angelic orchestration swelled, filling my head with the sharpness and precision of the words; the music was like a surge of strength. It felt rich with hope and a promise of life—more importantly, a new way through or beyond pain.

I'll die this death  
on Calvary  
ain't  
gonna  
die  
no  
more!

The physical realities of the dingy bus slid away from me. I suddenly stood upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name.

Muriel moved out of Seventh Street the same way she had moved in, in trickles. She packed the last of her books just before Christmas. I came home from school one night and she was there, come to finish packing. Muriel had fallen asleep in her clothes on the couch. This was where she used to sit and write until dawn whenever she couldn't sleep, that last winter we were together. Her arm was raised against the light. On the back of one of her hands she had doodled a little pattern of stick-figure daisies, the way children write upon themselves when they are bored or lonely.

The lamplight shone down upon her form in a tight circle, illuminating her as vulnerable and untouched. Looking down at Muriel asleep in the light, even after all of the pain and anger, a remembered love at the core of me made my heart move. She opened her eyes, asked me what I was looking at. "Nothing," I answered, turning away, not wanting another angry exchange. She was not my creation. She had never been my creation. Muriel was herself, and I had only aided that process, as she had mine. I had released her anger in much the same way as she had released my love, and we were precious

to each other because of that. It was only the Muriel in my head I had to give up, or keep forever; the Muriel peering up from the couch belonged to herself, whoever she wished to be.

Alone, I began to drop by the bars during the week—the Bag, the Page Three, the Pony Stable, the Seven Steps... A few times that winter, after Joan had run away from her, I found Muriel sitting in a corner of some bar, crying. I had never seen her crying in public before. Her voice had lost its sweetness. Sometimes, she yelled or made a scene and got thrown out of a club. I had never seen her drunk before, either. I remembered the night in Cuernavaca when I listened to Eudora roaring in the compound gardens, sodden with tequila.

Drunk, with her dark hair disheveled and falling about her face, her crooked pinkie at half-mast, Muriel looked like a buttery angel, fallen from grace, become all too human. Nicky said she was finally recovering from the effects of electro-shock. Sometimes I took Muriel back to her apartment and put her to bed; sometimes I took her to my house. One night, as she slept at Seventh Street, I lay awake in the next room, listening to her crying out in her sleep for Joan to come play in the snow. Finally, one night I started downstairs into the Seven Steps and spotted Muriel, slumped over the far corner of the bar, her back towards me. I swung around, walking quickly out before she could turn around and see me. I was tired of playing keeper.

The stolen, bastardized yet familiar rhythms of Presley drape like garlands over that winter.

Now that my baby's left me I've found a new place to dwell  
It's down at the end of Lonely Street in Heartbreak Hotel

Muriel went home to Stamford for Christmas. She did not come back, in any real sense. The following spring she signed herself into a state hospital insulin unit, where Toni was working in an experimental program for schizophrenics.

The last thing Muriel did before she left Seventh Street for the last time was to burn all of her poetry and her journals in a galvanized tin bucket which she set on the floor in front of the green couch in the middle room. The bottom of the pail left a permanent burn in the shape of a ring upon the old flowered linoleum. Felicia and I cut out the old square and pieced in a remnant of the same pattern which we found on Delancey Street the following spring.

# 31

Gerri was young and Black and lived in Queens and had a powder-blue Ford that she nicknamed Bluefish. With her carefully waved hair and button-down shirts and grey-flannel slacks, she looked just this side of square, without being square at all, once you got to know her.

By Gerri's invitation and frequently by her wheels, Muriel and I had gone to parties on weekends in Brooklyn and Queens at different women's houses.

One of the women I had met at one of these parties was Kitty.

When I saw Kitty again one night years later in the Swing Rendezvous or the Pony Stable or the Page Three—that tour of second-string gay-girl bars that I had taken to making alone that sad lonely spring of 1957—it was easy to recall the St. Alban's smell of green Queens summer-night and plastic couch-covers and liquor and hair oil and women's bodies at the party where we had first met.

In that brick-faced frame house in Queens, the downstairs pine-paneled recreation room was alive and pulsing with loud music, good food, and beautiful Black women in all different combinations of dress.

There were whip-cord summer suits with starch-shiny shirt collars open at the neck as a concession to the high summer heat, and white gabardine slacks with pleated fronts or slim ivy-league styling for the very slender. There were wheat-colored Cowden jeans, the fashion favorite that summer, with knife-edge creases, and even then, one or two back-buckled grey pants over well-chalked buckskin shoes. There were garrison belts galore, broad black leather belts with shiny thin buckles that originated in army-navy surplus stores, and oxford-styled shirts of the new, iron-free dacron, with its stiff, see-through crispness. These shirts, short-sleeved and man-tailored, were tucked neatly into belted pants or tight, skinny straight skirts. Only the one or two jersey knit shirts were allowed to fall freely outside.

Bermuda shorts, and their shorter cousins, Jamaicas, were already making their appearance on the dyke-chic scene, the rules of which were every bit as cutthroat as the tyrannies of Seventh Avenue or Paris. These shorts were worn by butch and femme alike, and for this reason were slow to be incorporated into many fashionable gay-girl wardrobes, to keep the signals clear. Clothes were often the most important way of broadcasting one's chosen sexual role.

Here and there throughout the room the flash of brightly colored below-the-knee full skirts over low-necked tight bodices could be seen, along with tight sheath dresses and the shine of high thin heels next to bucks and sneakers and loafers.

Femmes wore their hair in tightly curled pageboy bobs, or piled high on their heads in sculptured bunches of curls, or in feather cuts framing their faces. That sweetly clean fragrance of beauty-parlor that hung over all Black women's gatherings in the fifties was present here also, adding its identifiable smell of hot comb and hair pomade to the other aromas in the room.

Butches wore their hair cut shorter, in a D.A. shaped to a point in the back, or a short pageboy, or sometimes in a tightly curled poodle that predated the natural afro. But this was a rarity, and I can only remember one other Black woman at that party besides me whose hair was not straightened, and she was an acquaintance of ours from the Lower East Side named Ida.

On a table behind the built-in bar stood opened bottles of gin, bourbon, scotch, soda and other various mixers. The bar itself was covered with little delicacies of all descriptions; chips and dips and little crackers and squares of bread laced with the usual dabs of egg-salad and sardine paste. There was also a platter of delicious fried chicken wings, and a pan of potato-and-egg salad dressed with vinegar. Bowls of olives and pickles surrounded the main dishes, with trays of red crab apples and little sweet onions on toothpicks.

But the centerpiece of the whole table was a huge platter of succulent and thinly sliced roast beef, set into an underpan of cracked ice. Upon the beige platter, each slice of rare meat had been lovingly laid out and individually folded up into a vulval pattern, with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex. The pink-brown folded meat around the pale cream-yellow dot formed suggestive sculptures that made a great hit with all the women present, and Pet, at whose house the party was being given and whose idea the meat sculptures were, smilingly acknowledged the many compliments on her platter with a long-necked graceful nod of her elegant dancer's head.

The room's particular mix of heat-smells and music gives way in my mind to the high-cheeked, dark young woman with the silky voice and appraising eyes (something about her mouth reminded me of Ann, the nurse I'd worked with when I'd first left home).

Perching on the edge of the low bench where I was sitting, Kitty absently wiped specks of lipstick from each corner of her mouth with the downward flick of a delicate forefinger.

"Audre... that's a nice name. What's it short for?"

My damp arm hairs bristled in the Ruth Brown music, and the heat. I could not stand anybody messing around with my name, not even with nicknames.

"Nothing. It's just Audre. What's Kitty short for?"

"Afrekete," she said, snapping her fingers in time to the rhythm of it and giving a long laugh. "That's me. The Black pussycat." She laughed again. "I like your hairdo. Are you a singer?"

"No." She continued to stare at me with her large direct eyes.

I was suddenly too embarrassed at not knowing what else to say to meet her calmly erotic gaze, so I stood up abruptly and said, in my best Laurel's-terse tone, "Let's dance."

Her face was broad and smooth under too-light make-up, but as we danced a foxtrot she started to sweat, and her skin took on a deep shiny richness. Kitty closed her eyes part way when she danced, and her one gold-rimmed front tooth flashed as she smiled and occasionally caught her lower lip in time to the music.

Her yellow poplin shirt, cut in the style of an Eisenhower jacket, had a zipper that was half open in the summer heat, showing collarbones that stood out like brown wings from her long neck. Garments with zippers were highly prized among the more liberal set of gay-girls, because these could be worn by butch or femme alike on certain occasions, without causing any adverse or troublesome comments. Kitty's narrow, well-pressed khaki skirt was topped by a black belt that matched my own except in its newness, and her natty trimness made me feel almost shabby in my well-worn riding pants.

I thought she was very pretty, and I wished I could dance with as much ease as she did, and as effortlessly. Her hair had been straightened into short feathery curls, and in that room of well-set marcel and D.A.'s and pageboys, it was the closest cut to my own.

Kitty smelled of soap and Jean Naté, and I kept thinking she was bigger than she actually was, because there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women. I caught another spicy herb-like odor, that I later identified as a combination of coconut oil and Yardley's lavender hair pomade. Her mouth was full, and her lipstick was dark and shiny, a new Max Factor shade called "WARPAINT."

The next dance was a slow fish that suited me fine. I never knew whether to lead or to follow in most other dances, and

even the effort to decide which was which was as difficult for me as having to decide all the time the difference between left and right. Somehow that simple distinction had never become automatic for me, and all that deciding usually left me very little energy with which to enjoy the movement and the music.

But "fishing" was different. A forerunner of the later one-step, it was, in reality, your basic slow bump and grind. The low red lamp and the crowded St. Alban's parlor floor left us just enough room to hold each other frankly, arms around neck and waist, and the slow intimate music moved our bodies much more than our feet.

That had been in St. Alban's, Queens, nearly two years before, when Muriel had seemed to be the certainty in my life. Now in the spring of this new year I had my own apartment all to myself again, but I was mourning. I avoided visiting pairs of friends, or inviting even numbers of people over to my house, because the happiness of couples, or their mere togetherness, hurt me too much in its absence from my own life, whose blankest hole was named Muriel. I had not been back to Queens, nor to any party, since Muriel and I had broken up, and the only people I saw outside of work and school were those friends who lived in the Village and who sought me out or whom I ran into at the bars. Most of them were white.

"Hey, girl, long time no see." Kitty spotted me first. We shook hands. The bar was not crowded, which means it probably was the Page Three, which didn't fill up until after midnight. "Where's your girlfriend?"

I told her that Muriel and I weren't together any more. "Yeah? That's too bad. You-all were kinda cute together. But that's the way it goes. How long you been in the 'life'?"

I stared at Kitty without answering, trying to think of how to explain to her, that for me there was only one life—my own—however I chose to live it. But she seemed to take the words right out of my mouth.

"Not that it matters," she said speculatively, finishing the beer she had carried over to the end of the bar where I was sitting. "We don't have but one, anyway. At least this time around." She took my arm. "Come on, let's dance."

Kitty was still trim and fast-lined, but with an easier looseness about her smile and a lot less make-up. Without its camouflage, her chocolate skin and deep, sculptured mouth reminded me of a Benin bronze. Her hair was still straightened, but shorter, and her black Bermuda shorts and knee socks matched her

astonishingly shiny black loafers. A black turtleneck pullover completed her sleek costume. Somehow, this time, my jeans did not feel shabby beside hers, only a variation upon some similar dress. Maybe it was because our belts still matched—broad, black, and brass-buckled.

We moved to the back room and danced to Frankie Lymon's "Goody, Goody," and then to a Belafonte calypso. Dancing with her this time, I felt who I was and where my body was going, and that feeling was more important to me than any lead or follow.

The room felt very warm even though it was only just spring, and Kitty and I smiled at each other as the number ended. We stood waiting for the next record to drop and the next dance to begin. It was a slow Sinatra. Our belt buckles kept getting in the way as we moved in close to the oiled music, and we slid them around to the side of our waists when no one was looking.

For the last few months since Muriel had moved out, my skin had felt cold and hard and essential, like thin frozen leather that was keeping the shape expected. That night on the dance floor of the Page Three as Kitty and I touched our bodies together in dancing, I could feel my carapace soften slowly and then finally melt, until I felt myself covered in a warm, almost forgotten, slip of anticipation, that ebbed and flowed at each contact of our moving bodies.

I could feel something slowly shift in her also, as if a taut string was becoming undone, and finally we didn't start back to the bar at all between dances, but just stood on the floor waiting for the next record, dancing only with each other. A little after midnight, in a silent and mutual decision, we split the Page together, walking blocks through the West Village to Hudson Street where her car was parked. She had invited me up to her house for a drink.

The sweat beneath my breasts from our dancing was turning cold in the sharpness of the night air as we crossed Sheridan Square. I paused to wave to the steadies through the plate glass windows of Jim Atkins's on the corner of Christopher Street.

In her car, I tried not to think about what I was doing as we rode uptown almost in silence. There was an ache in the well beneath my stomach, spreading out and down between my legs like mercury. The smell of her warm body, mixed with the smell of feathery cologne and lavender pomade, anointed the car. My eyes rested on the sight of her coconut-spicy hands on

the steering wheel, and the curve of her lashes as she attended the roadway. They made it easy for me to coast beneath her sporadic bursts of conversation with only an occasional friendly grunt.

"I haven't been downtown to the bars in a while, you know? It's funny. I don't know why I don't go downtown more often. But every once in a while, something tells me go and I go. I guess it must be different when you live around there all the time." She turned her gold-flecked smile upon me.

Crossing 59th Street, I had an acute moment of panic. Who was this woman? Suppose she really intended only to give me the drink which she had offered me as we left the Page? Suppose I had totally misunderstood the impact of her invitation, and would soon find myself stranded uptown at 3:00 A.M. on a Sunday morning, and did I even have enough change left in my jeans for carfare home? Had I put out enough food for the kittens? Was Flee coming over with her camera tomorrow morning, and would she feed the cats if I wasn't there? If I wasn't there.

If I wasn't there. The implication of that thought was so shaking it almost threw me out of the car.

I had had only enough money for one beer that night, so I knew I wasn't high, and reefer was only for special occasions. Part of me felt like a raging lioness, inflamed in desire. Even the words in my head seemed borrowed from a dime-store novel. But that part of me was drunk on the thighed nearness of this exciting unknown dark woman, who calmly moved us through upper Manhattan, with her patent-leather loafers and her camel's-hair swing coat and her easy talk, from time to time her gloved hand touching my denim leg for emphasis.

Another piece of me felt bumbling, inept, and about four years old. I was the idiot playing at being a lover, who was going to be found out shortly and laughed at for my pretensions, as well as rejected out of hand.

Would it be possible—was it ever possible—for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both.

And how was it possible, that I should be dreaming the roll of this woman's sea into and around mine, when only a few short hours ago, and for so many months before, I had been mourning the loss of Muriel, so sure that I would continue being broken-hearted forever? And what then if I had been mistaken?

If the knot in my groin would have gone away, I'd have jumped out of the car door at the very next traffic light. Or so I thought to myself.

We came out of the Park Drive at Seventh Avenue and 110th Street, and as quickly as the light changed on the now deserted avenue, Afrekete turned her broad-lipped beautiful face to me, with no smile at all. Her great lidded luminescent eyes looked directly and startlingly into mine. It was as if she had suddenly become another person, as if the wall of glass formed by my spectacles, and behind which I had become so used to hiding, had suddenly dissolved.

In an uninflected, almost formal voice that perfectly matched and thereby obliterated all my question marks, she asked,

"Can you spend the night?"

And then it occurred to me that perhaps she might have been having the same questions about me that I had been having about her. I was left almost without breath by the combination of her delicacy and her directness—a combination which is still rare and precious.

For beyond the assurance that her question offered me—a declaration that this singing of my flesh, this attraction, was not all within my own head—beyond that assurance was a batch of delicate assumptions built into that simple phrase that reverberated in my poet's brain. It offered us both an out if necessary. If the answer to the question might, by any chance, have been no, then its very syntax allowed for a reason of impossibility, rather than of choice—"I can't," rather than "I won't." The demands of another commitment, an early job, a sick cat, etc., could be lived with more easily than an out-and-out rejection.

Even the phrase "spending the night" was less a euphemism for making love than it was an allowable space provided, in which one could move back or forth. If, perhaps, I were to change my mind before the traffic light and decide that no, I wasn't gay, after all, then a simpler companionship was still available.

I steadied myself enough to say, in my very best Lower East Side Casual voice, "I'd really like to," cursing myself for the banal words, and wondering if she could smell my nervousness and my desperate desire to be suave and debonair, drowning in sheer desire.

We parked half-in and half-out of a bus stop on Manhattan Avenue and 113th Street, in Gennie's old neighborhood.

Something about Kitty made me feel like a rollercoaster, rocketing from idiot to goddess. By the time we had collected her mail from the broken mailbox and then climbed six flights of stairs up to her front door, I felt that there had never been anything else my body had intended to do more, than to reach inside of her coat and take Afrekete into my arms, fitting her body into the curves of mine tightly, her beige camel's-hair billowing around us both, and her gloved hand still holding the door key.

In the faint light of the hallway, her lips moved like surf upon the water's edge.

It was a 1½ room kitchenette apartment with tall narrow windows in the narrow, high-ceilinged front room. Across each window, there were built-in shelves at different levels. From these shelves tossed and frothed, hung and leaned and stood, pot after clay pot of green and tousled large and small-leaved plants of all shapes and conditions.

Later, I came to love the way in which the plants filtered the southern exposure sun through the room. Light hit the opposite wall at a point about six inches above the thirty-gallon fish tank that murmured softly, like a quiet jewel, standing on its wrought-iron legs, glowing and mysterious.

Leisurely and swiftly, translucent rainbowed fish darted back and forth through the lit water, perusing the glass sides of the tank for morsels of food, and swimming in and out of the marvelous world created by colored gravels and stone tunnels and bridges that lined the floor of the tank. Astride one of the bridges, her bent head observing the little fish that swam in and out between her legs, stood a little jointed brown doll, her smooth naked body washed by the bubbles rising up from the air unit located behind her.

Between the green plants and the glowing magical tank of exotic fish, lay a room the contents of which I can no longer separate in my mind. Except for a plaid-covered couch that opened up into the double bed which we set rocking as we loved that night into a bright Sunday morning, dappled with green sunlight from the plants in Afrekete's high windows.

I woke to her house suffused in that light, the sky half-seen through the windows of the top-floor kitchenette apartment, and Afrekete, known, asleep against my side.

Little hairs under her navel lay down before my advancing tongue like the beckoned pages of a well-touched book.

How many times into summer had I turned into that block from Eighth Avenue, the saloon on the corner spilling a smell of sawdust and liquor onto the street, a shifting indeterminate number of young and old Black men taking turns sitting on two upturned milk-crates, playing checkers? I would turn the corner into 113th Street towards the park, my steps quickening and my fingertips tingling to play in her earth.

*And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the under-edge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava—those magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s or in the Puerto Rican bodegas within the bustling market over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the Central Railroad structures.*

“I got this under the bridge” was a saying from time immemorial, giving an adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say, was as authentic—as was possible.

We bought red delicious pippins, the size of french cashew apples. There were green plantains, which we half-peeled and then planted, fruit-deep, in each other’s bodies until the petals of skin lay like tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between our upspread thighs. *There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower.*

*I held you, lay between your brown legs, slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh. Our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other’s flame, from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms, we rode each other across the thundering space, dripped like light from the peak of each other’s tongue.*

We were each of us both together. Then we were apart, and sweat sheened our bodies like sweet oil.

Sometimes Afrekete sang in a small club further uptown on Sugar Hill. Sometimes she clerked in the Gristede’s Market on 97th Street and Amsterdam, and sometimes with no warning at all she appeared at the Pony Stable or Page Three on Saturday

night. Once, I came home to Seventh Street late one night to find her sitting on my stoop at 3:00 A.M., with a bottle of beer in her hand and a piece of bright African cloth wrapped around her head, and we sped uptown through the dawn-empty city with a summer thunder squall crackling above us, and the wet city streets singing beneath the wheels of her little Nash Rambler.

There are certain verities which are always with us, which we come to depend upon. That the sun moves north in summer, that melted ice contracts, that the curved banana is sweeter. Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women's bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before.

By the beginning of summer the walls of Afrekete's apartment were always warm to the touch from the heat beating down on the roof, and chance breezes through her windows rustled her plants in the window and brushed over our sweat-smooth bodies, at rest after loving.

We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women, and what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent. Afrekete had a seven-year-old daughter whom she had left with her mama down in Georgia, and we shared a lot of our dreams.

"She's going to be able to love anybody she wants to love," Afrekete said, fiercely, lighting a Lucky Strike. "Same way she's going to be able to work any place she damn well pleases. Her mama's going to see to that."

Once we talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies' strongholds, too much and too often, and how our psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns.

"And don't I have the scars to prove it," she sighed. "Makes you tough though, babe, if you don't go under. And that's what I like about you; you're like me. We're both going to make it because we're both too tough and crazy not to!" And we held each other and laughed and cried about what we had paid for that toughness, and how hard it was to explain to anyone who didn't already know it that soft and tough had to be one and the same for either to work at all, like our joy and the tears mingling on the one pillow beneath our heads.

And the sun filtered down upon us through the dusty windows, through the mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously.

I took a ripe avocado and rolled it between my hands until the skin became a green case for the soft mashed fruit inside, hard pit at the core. *I rose from a kiss in your mouth to nibble a hole in the fruit skin near the navel stalk, squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut-brown belly.*

*The oil and sweat from our bodies kept the fruit liquid, and I massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly licked from your skin.*

Then we would have to get up to gather the pits and fruit skins and bag them to put out later for the garbagemen, because if we left them near the bed for any length of time, they would call out the hordes of cockroaches that always waited on the sidelines within the walls of Harlem tenements, particularly in the smaller older ones under the hill of Morningside Heights.

Afrekete lived not far from Genevieve's grandmother's house.

Sometimes she reminded me of Ella, Gennie's stepmother, who shuffled about with an apron on and a broom outside the room where Gennie and I lay on the studio couch. She would be singing her non-stop tuneless little song over and over and over:

Momma kilt me  
Poppa et me  
Po' lil' brudder  
suck ma bones . . .

And one day Gennie turned her head on my lap to say uneasily, "You know, sometimes I don't know whether Ella's crazy, or stupid, or divine."

And now I think the goddess was speaking through Ella also, but Ella was too beaten down and anesthetized by Phillip's brutality for her to believe in her own mouth, and we, Gennie and I, were too arrogant and childish—not without right or reason, for we were scarcely more than children—to see that our survival might very well lay in listening to the sweeping woman's tuneless song.

I lost my sister, Gennie, to my silence and her pain and despair, to both our angers and to a world's cruelty that destroys its own young in passing—not even as a rebel gesture or sacrifice or hope for another living of the spirit, but out of not noticing

or caring about the destruction. I have never been able to blind myself to that cruelty, which according to one popular definition of mental health, makes me mentally unhealthy.

Afrekete's house was the tallest one near the corner, before the high rocks of Morningside Park began on the other side of the avenue, and one night on the Midsummer Eve's Moon we took a blanket up to the roof. She lived on the top floor, and in an unspoken agreement, the roof belonged mostly to those who had to live under its heat. The roof was the chief resort territory of tenement-dwellers, and was known as Tar Beach.

We jammed the roof door shut with our sneakers, and spread our blanket in the lee of the chimney, between its warm brick wall and the high parapet of the building's face. This was before the blaze of sulphur lamps had stripped the streets of New York of trees and shadow, and the incandescence from the lights below faded this far up. From behind the parapet wall we could see the dark shapes of the basalt and granite outcroppings looming over us from the park across the street, outlined, curiously close and suggestive.

We slipped off the cotton shifts we had worn and moved against each other's damp breasts in the shadow of the roof's chimney, making moon, honor, love, while the ghostly vague light drifting upward from the street competed with the silver hard sweetness of the full moon, reflected in the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide.

I remember the moon rising against the tilted planes of her upthrust thighs, and my tongue caught the streak of silver reflected in the curly bush of her dappled-dark maiden hair. *I remember the full moon like white pupils in the center of your wide irises.*

*The moons went out, and your eyes grew dark as you rolled over me, and I felt the moon's silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids.*

*Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys.*

When we came down from the roof later, it was into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer, with canned music in the streets and the disagreeable whines of overtired and

overheated children. Nearby, mothers and fathers sat on stoops or milk crates and striped camp chairs, fanning themselves absently and talking or thinking about work as usual tomorrow and not enough sleep.

It was not onto the pale sands of Whydah, nor the beaches of Winneba or Annamabu, with cocopalms softly applauding and crickets keeping time with the pounding of a tar-laden, treacherous, beautiful sea. It was onto 113th Street that we descended after our meeting under the Midsummer Eve's Moon, but the mothers and fathers smiled at us in greeting as we strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand.

I had not seen Afrekete for a few weeks in July, so I went up-town to her house one evening since she didn't have a phone. The door was locked, and there was no one on the roof when I called up the stairwell.

Another week later, Midge, the bartender at the Pony Stable, gave me a note from Afrekete, saying that she had gotten a gig in Atlanta for September, and was splitting to visit her mama and daughter for a while.

We had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange.

I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo.



# Epilogue

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me—so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.

A year later, I finished library school. The first summer of a new decade was waning as I walked away from Seventh Street for the last time, leaving that door unlocked for whatever person came after me who needed shelter. There were four half-finished poems scribbled on the bathroom wall between the toilet and the bathtub, others in the window jambs and the floorboards under the flowered linoleum, mixed up with the ghosts of rich food smells.

The casing of this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. *Zami*.

*Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.*

We carry our traditions with us. Buying boxes of Red Cross Salt and a fresh corn straw broom for my new apartment in Westchester: new job, new house, new living the old in a new way. Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance.

*Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.*

Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward visions of all our lives.

Once *home* was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home.

There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood.

# SISTER OUTSIDER



# Contents

- 7 Introduction
- 13 Notes from a Trip to Russia
- 36 Poetry Is Not a Luxury
- 40 The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action
- 45 Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving
- 53 Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power
- 60 Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface
- 66 An Open Letter to Mary Daly
- 72 Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response
- 81 An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich
- 110 The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House
- 114 Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference
- 124 The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism
- 134 Learning from the 60s
- 145 Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger
- 176 Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report



# Introduction

WHEN WE BEGAN EDITING *Sister Outsider* – long after the book had been conceptualized, a contract signed, and new material written – Audre Lorde informed me, as we were working one afternoon, that she doesn’t write theory. “I am a poet,” she said.

Lorde’s stature as a poet is undeniable. And yet there can be no doubt that *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays and speeches drawn from the past eight years of this Black lesbian feminist’s nonfiction prose, makes absolutely clear to many what some already knew: Audre Lorde’s voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory. She is at the cutting edge of consciousness.

The fifteen selections included here, several of them published for the first time, are essential reading. Whether it is the by now familiar “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” opening us up to the potential power in all aspects of our lives implicit in the erotic,

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.<sup>1</sup>

or the recently authored “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” probing the white racist roots of hostility between Black women,

We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred.<sup>2</sup>

Lorde's work expands, deepens, and enriches all of our understandings of what feminism can be.

But what about the "conflict" between poetry and theory, between their separate and seemingly incompatible spheres? We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist's mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced "subjectively," and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the "objective" world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them.

The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think – between poetry and theory. We are easier to control when one part of our selves is split from another, fragmented, off balance. There are other configurations, however, other ways of experiencing the world, though they are often difficult to name. We can sense them and seek their articulation. Because it is the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions, *Sister Outsider* is a reason for hope.

Audre Lorde's writing is an impulse toward wholeness. What she says and how she says it engages us both emotionally and intellectually. She writes from the particulars of who she is: Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother of two children, daughter of Grenadian immigrants, educator, cancer survivor, activist. She creates material from the dailiness of her life that we can use to help shape ours. Out of her desire for wholeness, her need to encompass and address all the parts of herself, she teaches us about the significance of *difference* – "that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."<sup>3</sup>

A white Jewish lesbian mother, I first read "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" several years ago as I was

struggling to accept the inevitability of my prepubescent son's eventual manhood. Not only would this boy of mine become a man physically, but he might act like one. This awareness turned into a major crisis for me at a time and place when virtually all the lesbian mothers I knew (who I realized, with hindsight, were also white) either insisted that their "androgynous" male children would stay that way, would not grow up to be sexist/misogynist men, or were pressured to choose between a separatist vision of community and their sons. I felt trapped by a narrow range of options.

Lorde, however, had wider vision. She started with the reality of her child's approaching manhood ("Our sons will not grow into women"<sup>4</sup>) and then asked what kind of man he would become. She saw clearly that she could both love her son fiercely *and* let him go. In fact, for their mutual survival, she had no choice but to let him go, to teach him that she "did not exist to do his feeling for him."<sup>5</sup>

Lorde and I are both lesbian mothers who have had to teach our boys to do their own emotional work. But her son Jonathan is Black and my son Joshua is white and that is not a trivial difference in a racist society, despite their common manhood. As Lorde has written elsewhere:

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you; we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.<sup>6</sup>

I read "Man Child," and it was one of those occasions when I can remember something major shifting inside me.

I came to understand it was not merely that Lorde knew more about raising sons than I did, although I had been given expert advice. I realized how directly Lorde's knowledge was tied to her difference — those realities of Blackness and lesbianism that placed her outside the dominant society. She had information that I, a white woman who had lived most of my life in a middle-class heterosexual world, did not have, information I could use, information I needed.

For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers . . .<sup>7</sup>

I was ashamed by my arrogance, frightened that my ignorance would be exposed, and ultimately excited by the possibilities becoming available to me. I made a promise to my future to try and listen to those voices, in others and in myself, that knew what they knew precisely *because* they were different. I wanted to hear what they had to tell me.

Of course, the reverberations continue.

When I read "Man Child" again several years later, having done a lot of work reclaiming my Jewish identity in the interim, I thought about the complexities of my son being a white Jewish man in a white Christian society. I had not seen this as an issue the first time around; it is hard now to reconstruct my short-sightedness.

When we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I'm not excluding you from the joining — I'm broadening the joining.<sup>8</sup>

There is a further reduction of the distance between feeling and thinking as we become aware of Lorde's internal process. We watch her move from "the chaos of knowledge . . . that dark and true depth within each of us that nurtures vision"<sup>9</sup> to "the heretical actions that our dreams imply."<sup>10</sup> Understanding — the figuring out and piecing together, the moving from one place to the next, provides the connections.

What understanding begins to do is to make knowledge available for use, and that's the urgency, that's the push, that's the drive.<sup>11</sup>

Movement is intentional and life-sustaining.

Nowhere is this intentionality more evident than in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Here Lorde grapples with a possible diagnosis of cancer. "I had the feeling, probably a body sense, that life was never going to be the same. . . ."<sup>12</sup> She deals in public, at an academic gathering, in front of 700 women. She tells us that she is afraid but that silence is not a protection.

And it [speaking] is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now, that if I were to have been born mute, and had maintained an oath of silence my whole life for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Lorde's commitment to confront the worst so that she is freed to experience the best is unshakeable. Although *Sister Outsider* spans almost a decade of her work, nine of the fifteen pieces in this book were written in the two years following Lorde's discovery that she might have/did have cancer. In the process of her growth, her coming to terms and using what she has learned, she shows us things we can take with us in our struggles for survival, no matter what our particular "worst" may be.

What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?<sup>14</sup>

Audre Lorde asks no more of us than she does of herself: that we pay attention to those voices we have been taught to distrust, that we articulate what they teach us, that we act upon what we know. Just as she develops themes, reworking and building on them over time to create theory, so, too, can we integrate the material of our lives.

Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother of two children, daughter of Grenadian immigrants, educator, cancer survivor, activist. The essays and speeches in *Sister Outsider* give new resonance to that fundamental but much abused feminist revelation that the personal is political. We are all amplified by Audre Lorde's work.

I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.<sup>15</sup>

NANCY K. BEREANO  
December 1983

## Notes

1. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," p. 55.
2. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," p. 151.
3. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," p. 112.
4. "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," p. 73.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
6. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," p. 119.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
8. From an interview in *The Feminist Renaissance*.
9. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," p. 100, and "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," p. 68.
10. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," p. 38.
11. "An Interview," p. 109.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
13. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," p. 43.
14. *The Cancer Journals*, Spinsters, Ink., 1980, p. 25.
15. "Eye to Eye," p. 147.

# Notes from a Trip to Russia\*

SINCE I'VE RETURNED from Russia a few weeks ago, I've been dreaming a lot. At first I dreamt about Moscow every night. Sometimes my lover and I had returned there; sometimes I would be in warmer, familiar places I had visited; sometimes in different, unfamiliar cities, cold, white, strange. In one dream, I was making love to a woman behind a stack of clothing in Gumm's Department Store in Moscow. She was ill, and we went upstairs, where I said to a matron, "We have to get her to the hospital." The matron said, "All right, you take her over there and tell them that she needs a kidney scan and a brain scan . . ." And I said, "No, they're not going to do that for me." And she looked at me very strangely and she said, "Of course they will." And I realized I was in Russia, and medicine and doctor bills and all the rest of that are free.

My dreams don't come every night anymore, but it seems as if they've gotten deeper and deeper so that I awake not really knowing any of the content of them but only knowing that I've just dreamt about Russia again. For a while, in my dreams, Russia became a mythic representation of that socialism which does not yet exist anywhere I have been. The possibilities of liv-

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\* These are edited journal entries from a two-week trip to Russia that I made in 1976 as the invited American observer to the African-Asian Writers Conference sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers.

ing in Russia seem very different in some respects, yet the people feel so Western European (so American, really) outside of Tashkent. And the afternoons in Moscow are so dark and gloomy.

## I

The flight to Moscow was nine hours long, and from my observations on the plane, Russians are generally as unfriendly to each other as Americans are and just about as unhelpful.

There was a marvelously craggy-faced old blue-eyed woman in her seventies wearing a babushka, with a huge coat roll. On the plane everyone had one kind of huge coat roll or another except me. When I stepped out into the Moscow weather I realized why. But this woman was sitting in the seat right in front of me. She was traveling alone and was too short to wield her roll easily. She tried once, and she tried twice, and finally I got up and helped her. The plane was packed: I'd never seen a plane quite so crowded before. The old woman turned around and looked at me. It was obvious she did not speak English because I had muttered something to her with no reply. There was in her eyes a look of absolutely no rancor. I thought with a quick shock how a certain tension in glances between American Black and white people is taken for granted. There was no thank you either, but there was a kind of simple human response to who I was. And then as she turned to sit back down, under her very dowdy cardigan I saw on her undersweater at least three military-type medals, complete with chevrons. Hero of the Republic medals, I learned later. Earned for hard work.

This is something that I noticed all over: the very old people in Russia have a stamp upon them that I hope I can learn and never lose, a matter-of-fact resilience and sense of their place upon the earth that is very sturdy and reassuring.

I landed on September 10th about 3:30 p.m. Moscow time and stepped out into a very raw, familiar greyness. There was a winter smell to the air; almost nostalgic. The trees were

Thanksgiving-turned and the sky had that turkey-laden grey-pumpkin color. I saw three large, square-faced women arm-in-arm, marching across the airfield laughing and joking as they came. They were evidently workers just going off shift — they had grey coveralls and jackets with engineer caps and carried lunch buckets. They stopped beside a truck that had paused and started beating against the closed window, drawing the attention of the other woman inside with some half-hello/half-joke at the driver, who was obviously their buddy, because they all pointed fingers at each other laughing uproariously together there on the Moscow airstrip in the grim light, swinging their lunch pails and cutting up.

My Intourist guide's name was Helen, a very pleasant and attractive large-boned young woman in her thirties. She was born in the East, near Japan, and her father, who'd been a military man, was dead. She lived with her mother now, and she said that she and her mother had to learn to do a lot of things for themselves since there are so few men around these days and service is so hard to get.

In Russia you carry your own bags in airports and hotels. This, at first, struck me as oppressive because, of course, carrying a laden bag up seven flights of stairs when the elevator isn't working is not fun. But the longer I stayed there the fairer it seemed, because in this country it appears that everything is seen in terms of food. That is, the labor of one's hands is measured by how much food you can produce, and then you take that and compare its importance to the worth of the other work that you do. Some men and women spend their whole lives, for instance, learning and doing the infinitely slow and patient handwork of retouching Persian Blue tiles down in Samarkand to restore the ancient mausoleums. It is considered very precious work. But antiquities have a particular value, whereas carrying someone else's bag does not have a very high priority because it is not very productive either of beauty or worth. If you can't manage it, then that's another story. I find it a very interesting concept.

It's about thirty miles from the airport to the city of Moscow, and the road and the trees and the drivers could have been peo-

ple from Northern Westchester in late winter, except I couldn't read any of the signs. We would pass from time to time incredibly beautiful, old, uncared for Russian-Orthodox-style houses, with gorgeous painted wooden colors and outlined ornate windows. Some of them were almost falling down. But there was a large ornate richness about the landscape and architecture on the outskirts of Moscow, even in its grey winter, that seemed to tell me immediately that I was not at home.

I stayed at the Hotel Younnost, which is one of the international hotels in Moscow. The room was a square studio affair with Hollywood bed couches, and a huge picture window looking towards the National Stadium, over a railroad bridge, with a very imposing view of the University buildings against the skyline. But everything was so reminiscent of New York in winter that even as I sat at 9:30 P.M. after dinner, writing, looking through the blinds, there was the sound of a train and light on the skyline, and every now and then the tail lights of an auto curving around between the railroad bridge and the hotel. And it felt like a hundred nights that I remembered along Riverside Drive, except that just on the edge of the picture was the golden onion-shaped dome of a Russian Orthodox church.

Before dinner I took a short walk. It was already growing dark, but down the street from the hotel was the Stadium stop on the Metro, which is a subway. I walked down there and into the Metro station and I stood in front of the escalators for awhile just watching the faces of the people coming and going. It felt like instant 14th Street of my childhood, before Blacks and Latins colored New York, except everyone was much more orderly and the whole place seemed much less crowded. The thing that was really strangest of all for the ten minutes that I stood there was that there were no Black people. And the token collector and the station manager were women. The station was very large and very beautiful and very clean – shockingly, strikingly, enjoyably clean. The whole station looked like a theater lobby – bright brass and mosaics and shining chandeliers. Even when they were rushing, and in Moscow there's always a kind of rush, people lack the desperation of New York. One thing that characterized all of these people was a pleasantness in their

faces, a willingness to smile, at least at me, a stranger. It was a strange contrast to the grimness of the weather.

There are some Black people around the hotel and I inquired of Helen about the Patrice Lumumba University. This is a university located in Moscow for students from African countries. There were many Africans in and around the hotel when I got back from the Metro station and I think many of them were here for the Conference. Interestingly enough, most of them speak Russian and I don't. When I went downstairs to dinner, I almost quailed in front of the linguistic task because I could not even find out where I was supposed to sit, or whether I should wait to be seated. Whenever the alphabet is unfamiliar, there are absolutely no cues to a foreign language. A young Black man swaggered across my eyesight with that particular swagger of fine, young Black men wanting to be noticed and I said, "Do you speak English?" "Yes," he said and started walking very rapidly away from me. So I walked back to him and when I tried to ask him whether I should sit down or wait to be seated, I realized the poor boy did not understand a word that I said. At that point I pulled out my two trusty phrase books and proceeded to order myself a very delicious dinner of white wine, boiled fish soup that was lemon piquant, olive rich, and fresh mackerel, delicate, grilled sturgeon with pickled sauce, bread, and even a glass of tea. All of this was made possible by great tenacity and daring on my part, and the smiling forebearance of a very helpful waiter who brought out one of the cooks from the kitchen to help with the task of deciphering my desires.

## II

It's very cold in Moscow. The day I arrived it snowed in the morning and it snowed again today, and this is September 16th. My guide, Helen, put her finger on it very accurately. She said that life in Moscow is a constant fight against the cold weather, and that living is only a triumph against death by freezing. Maybe because of the cold, or maybe because of the shortage of

food in the war years, but everyone eats an enormous amount here. Tonight, because of a slight error on the part of the waitress, Helen had two dinners and thought very little about eating them both. And no one is terribly fat, but I think that has a good deal to do with the weather. We had wine at dinner tonight, and wine seems to be used a lot to loosen up one's tongue. It almost seems a prescription. At every dinner meal there are always three glasses: one for water, one for wine, and one for vodka, which flows like water, and with apparently as little effect upon Russians.

A group from the conference with our Intourist guides went sightseeing today. It's hard to believe that today's Sunday because the whole city seems so full of weekday life, so intent on its own purposes, that it makes the week seem extended by an extra day. We saw the Novagrodsky Convent Museum and the brilliant, saucy golden onion steeples that shock me back from the feeling this is Manhattan. We went to see the University and of course many plaques for many heroes, but I never saw one that moved me as much as the tough old lady coming in on Aeroflot. And the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre. It was rainy and grey and overcast — a New York December day — and very imposing in the way the Grand Concourse at 161st Street in the Bronx can be imposing in the middle of December, or Columbus Circle. The golden onion steeples on some older buildings are beautiful and they glisten all the time, even in this weather, which makes them look like joyful promises on the landscape, or fairy palaces, and the lovely colors of greens, whites, yellows and oranges decorating and outlining windows make a wonderfully colorful accent in the greyness. I hope that I get a chance to see the Pushkin Museum.

I was interviewed by a sweetly astute, motherly woman who was one of the members of the Union of Soviet Writers. She was doing a study of "Negro policy," as she said, and of course she was very interested in women in the States. We talked for a good two hours and one of the things I told her was about the old woman on the plane with the medals, and I asked her if she had any idea what they were. She said the woman was probably an older farm worker who had been awarded and named a

"Hero of the Republic." Those were mostly given to people who worked very hard, she said. It was interesting because earlier, at lunch, I had seen a side of Helen, my interpreter, that surprised me. She was quite out of sorts with one of the waitresses who did not wait on her quickly enough, and it does take a long time to get waited on. Helen made a remark that the workers rule the country, and her manner and response to that seemed to be one of disgust, or at least rather put-off. I think Helen felt that she was being discriminated against, or that she was at a disadvantage, because she was an "intellectual," a translator as well as an interpreter. Which struck me as an odd kind of snobbishness because Helen worked at least as hard, if not harder, than any waitress, running after me and living my life as well as hers. Because always, she stuck to me like white on rice.

We were at the University and our guide was talking to us, in English, about the buildings, which had been built during Stalin's time. Material had been brought down from the Ukraine to sink into the earth to build such buildings because Moscow, unlike New York, is not built upon bedrock. This strikes me as strange, that this city of oversize, imposing stone buildings should not be grounded on bedrock. It's like it remains standing on human will. While we were standing in front of the reflecting pool having this discussion, a little tow-headed boy sidled up to me with a completely international air, all of ten years old, stood in front of me and with a furtive sideways gesture, flipped his hand open. In the center of his little palm was a button-pin of a red star with a soldier in the middle of it. I was completely taken aback because I did not know what the kid wanted and I asked Helen who brushed the child off and shooed him away so quickly I didn't have a chance to stop her. Then she told me that he wanted to trade for American buttons. That little kid had stood off to the side and watched all of these strange Black people, and he had managed to peg me as an American because, of course, Americans are the only ones who go around wearing lots and lots of buttons, and he had wanted to trade his red star button. I was touched by the child, and also because I couldn't help but think that it was Sunday and he was probably hitting all the tourist spots. I'm sure his parents did

not know where he was, and I really wondered what his mother would do if she knew.

The woman from the Writers' Union who was doing her book on Negro policy was, I'd say, a little older than I was, probably in her early fifties, and her husband had been killed in the war. She had no children. She offered these facts about herself as soon as we sat down, talking openly about her life, as everybody seemingly does here. I say *seemingly* because it only goes so far. And she, like my guide and most women here, both young and old, seem to mourn the lack of men. At the same time they appear to have shaken off many of the traditional role-playing devices vis-a-vis men. Almost everyone I've met has lost someone in what they call the "Great Patriotic War," which is our Second World War.

I was interviewed by Oleg this evening, one of the officials of the Union of Soviet Writers, the people who had invited me to Russia and who were footing the bill. In my interview with him I learned the hotel that we're staying in was originally a youth hostel and Oleg apologized because it was not as "civilized," so he said, as other Moscow hotels. I came across this term *civilized* before, and I wondered whether it was a term used around Americans or whether it meant up to American standards. Increasingly I get a feeling that American standards are sort of an unspoken norm, and that whether one resists them, or whether one adopts them, they are there to be reckoned with. This is rather disappointing. But coming back to the hotel, I notice that the fixtures here *are* a little shabby, but they *do* work, and the studio beds are a bit adolescent in size, but they are comfortable. For a youth hostel it's better than I would ever hope for. Of course, I can't help but wonder why the African-Asian Conference people should be housed in a youth hostel, particularly an "uncivilized" one, but I don't imagine that I'll ever get an answer to that. All hotel rooms cost the same in the Soviet Union. Utilities, from my conversation with Helen while we were riding the Metro down to send a cable, utilities are very inexpensive. The gas to cook with costs sixteen kopecs a month which is less than one ruble (about \$3.00) and the most electricity Helen says that she uses, when she's translating all day long

in winter, costs three rubles a month. That is very expensive, she says. The two-room apartment which she and her mother share costs eight rubles a month.

Oleg does not speak English, or does not converse in English. Like many other people I was to meet during my stay in Russia, he understands English although he does not let on. Oleg said through Helen that he wants me to know it was very important for us to meet other writers and that the point of the Conference was for us to get together. I thanked him for the twenty-five rubles I had been given as soon as I arrived here in Moscow, which I have been told was a gift from the Union of Soviet Writers for pocket money. I spoke of the oppressed people all over the world, meeting to touch and to share, I spoke of South Africa and their struggle. Oleg said something very curious. "Yes, South Africa is really very bad. It is like a sore upon the body that will not heal." This sounded to me both removed and proprietary. Unclear. Willy, my South African poet friend, lives in Tanzania now and he may be here, which I am very excited about.

### III

We traveled south to Uzbekistan for the Conference, a five-hour journey that became seven because of delays. We arrived in Tashkent after dark following a long, exhausting plane ride. As I have said, Russian planes are incredibly packed, every single inch being taken up in seats. They absolutely utilize their air space. Even coming from New York to Moscow it was like air mass transit. Certainly from Moscow to Tashkent this was true since there were 150 delegates to the African-Asian Writers Conference, myself, one observer, interpreters, and press personnel. All together, a traveling group of about 250 people, which is a large group to move around a country at least four or five times the size of the United States (and in a standard, not wide-bodied, plane).

As we descended the plane in Tashkent, it was deliciously hot and smelled like Accra, Ghana. At least it seemed to me that it

did, from the short ride from the airport to the hotel. The road to the city had lots of wood and white marble all around broad avenues, and bright street lights. The whole town of Tashkent had been rebuilt after the 1966 earthquake. We arrived tired and hot, to a welcome that would make your heart grow still, then sing. Can you imagine 250 of us, weary, cramped, hungry, disoriented, overtalked, underfed? It is after dark. We step out of the plane and there before us are over a hundred people and TV cameras, and lights, and two or three hundred little children dressed in costumes with bunches of flowers that they thrust upon each of us as we walked down the ramp from the plane. "Surprise!" Well, you know, it was a surprise. Pure and simple, and I was pretty damn well surprised. I was surprised at the gesture, hokey or not, at the mass participation in it. Most of all, I was surprised at my response to it; I felt genuinely welcomed.

So off to the hotel we went and I had the distinct feeling here, for the first time in Russia, that I was meeting warm-blooded people; in the sense of contact unavoided, desires and emotions possible, the sense that there was something hauntingly, personally familiar — not in the way the town looks because it looked like nothing I'd ever seen before, night and the minarets — but the tempo of life felt hotter, quicker than in Moscow; and in place of Moscow's determined pleasantness, the people displayed a kind of warmth that was very engaging. They are an Asian people in Tashkent. Uzbeki. They look like the descendants of Ghengis Khan, some of whom I'm sure they are. They are Asian and they are Russian. They think and speak and consider themselves Russian, for all intents and purposes so far as I can see, and I really wonder how they manage that. On the other hand, the longer I stayed the more I realized some of the personal tensions between North Russian and Uzbek are national and some racial.

There are only four sisters in this whole conference. In the plane coming to Tashkent, I sat with the three other African women and we exchanged chitchat for 5½ hours about our respective children, about our ex-old men, all very, very heterocetera.

## IV

Tashkent is divided into two parts. There's the old part that survived the huge earthquake of 1966, and there's the newer part which is on the outskirts of old Tashkent. It's very new and very modern, rebuilt in a very short time after the earthquake that practically totaled the area. It was rebuilt by labor from all over the Soviet Union. People came from the Ukraine, from Byelorussia, from all over, and they rebuilt the city. And there are many different styles of architecture in the new part of town because every group who came built their own type of building. It's almost a memorial to what can be done when a large group of people work together. It was one of the things that impressed me greatly during my stay in Tashkent. The old part, which is really the center of Tashkent, looks very, very much like a town in Ghana or Dahomey, say Kumasi or Cotonou. In the daylight it looks so much like some parts of West Africa that I could scarcely believe it. In fact, if Moscow is New York in another space, in another color — because both New York and Moscow have a little over eight million population and should apparently have many of the same problems, but Moscow seems to have handled them very differently — if Moscow is New York, Tashkent is Accra. It is African in so many ways — the stalls, the mix of the old and the new, the corrugated tin roofs on top of adobe houses. The corn smell in the plaza, although the plazas were more modern than in West Africa. Even some flowers and trees, Calla lilies. But the red laterite smell of the earth was different.

The people here in Tashkent, which is quite close to the Iranian border, are very diverse, and I am impressed by their apparent unity, by the ways in which the Russian and the Asian people seem to be able to function in a multinational atmosphere that requires of them that they get along, whether or not they are each other's favorite people. And it's not that there are no individuals who are nationalists, or racists, but that the taking of a state position against nationalism, against racism is what makes it possible for a society like this to function. And of course the next step in that process must be the personal ele-

ment. I don't see anyone attempting or even suggesting this phase, however, and that is troublesome, for without this step socialism remains at the mercy of an incomplete vision, imposed from the outside. We have internal desires but outside controls. But at least there is a climate here that seems to encourage those questions. I asked Helen about the Jews, and she was rather evasive, I think, saying only that there were Jews in government. The basic position seems to be one of a presumption of equality, even though there is sometimes a large gap between the expectation and the reality.

We visited a film studio and saw several children's cartoons which handled their themes beautifully, deeply, with great humor, and most notably, without the kind of violence that we have come to associate with cartoons. They were truly delightful.

After two very busy days of meetings in Tashkent, we started out at about 7:30 one morning by bus for Samarkand, the fabulous city of Tamerlane the Great. After a short snooze on the bus I began to feel a little more human, to look about me and the countryside. We're heading southeast from Tashkent, and Tashkent was southeast of Moscow. The countryside is very beautiful. It feels strange and familiar at the same time. This is cotton country. Miles and miles of it, and trainloads of students were coming south from Moscow on a two-week vacation to party and pick cotton. There was a holiday atmosphere all around. We passed through small villages where I could see little markets with women sitting cross-ankled on the bare earth selling a few cabbages or a small tray of fruit. And walls, behind which you could see adobe houses. Even the walls themselves reminded me very much of West Africa, made of a clay mud that cracks in the same old familiar patterns that we saw over and over again in Kumasi and south of Accra. Only here the clay is not red, but a light beige, and that is to remind me that this is the USSR and not Ghana or Dahomey. Of course, the faces are white. There are other differences that creep through also. The towns and the villages are really in very good repair and there is a powerful railroad running parallel to our road. Long, efficient looking trains and tanker cars and ten-car

passenger trains pass by us, going through switch houses with blue and white ceramic tiles and painted roofs, all managed by women. Everything looks massive, bigger, in Russia. The roads are wider, the trains longer, the buildings bigger. The ceilings are higher. Everything seems to be on a larger scale.

We stopped for a harvest festival lunch at a collective farm, complete with the prerequisite but very engaging cultural presentation, while vodka flowed. Then we all danced and sang together with the busloads of students who had come to help pick cotton. Later on along the roads there were literally hills of cotton being loaded onto trains.

Each town that we pass through has a cafe, where the villagers can come and spend an evening or chat or talk or watch TV or listen to propaganda, who knows, but where they can meet. And all over, in between very old looking villages, there are also new four story buildings in progress, factories, new apartment houses. Trains full of building slabs and other kinds of materials, coal and rock and tractors pass by, even one with row after row after row of small automobiles. There are three different Russian automobiles. This is the cheapest, and most popular – hundreds and hundreds of cars stacked, all the same lemon color. Obviously, that month the factory was producing yellow.

I watched all of this industry pass and it came through to me on that bus ride down to Samarkand that this land was not industrial so much as it was industrious. There was a flavor of people working hard and doing things and it was very attractive. On top of that, I learned that this area between Tashkent and Samarkand was once known as the "Hungry Desert" because although it was fertile, no rain ever fell and it was covered with a coat of salt. Through technology devised to lift the salt, and a great deal of human hands and engineering, this whole area has been made to bloom, and it really does bloom. It is being farmed, mostly with cotton. People live here and there are massive irrigation ditches and pipes that maintain trees where there are towns and collective farms. All through Uzbekistan the feeling of a desert having been reclaimed and bearing huge fruit is very constant. Later on, as we headed on south after the great feast, we

stopped at an oasis, and I picked some desert flowers that were growing — small little scrub flowers that were growing in the sand. And just for so, I tasted one of them and as honeysuckle is sweet, so is this flower salt. It was as if the earth itself was still producing salt or still pouring salt into its products.

There's very beautiful marble throughout Uzbekistan. The stairs of the hotels and sometimes the streets have a beautiful pink and green marble. That was in Tashkent, which means "Stone City." But on this ride from Tashkent to Samarkand I saw no stones or rocks of any kind near the road. I don't know why, except that it is a reclaimed desert. The roads felt very good, and they were very broad because of course there was always heavy machinery and trucking traveling back and forth.

We had another glowing welcome in Gulstan, which means the "Hungry Desert." This is now the village of roses. We visited a collective farm, went into a house, saw the kindergarten. The woman's house into which we went was very impressive, as I said to someone later at lunch who asked me what I thought. I said, "She lives better than I do," and in some ways she did. The collective farm in Gulstan, called the Leningrad Collective, is one of the wealthiest collectives in the area. I will never know the name of the very kind young woman who opened her home to me, but I also will not forget her. She offered me the hospitality of her house, and even though we did not speak the same language, I felt that she was a woman like myself, wishing that all of our children could live in peace upon their own earth, somehow make fruitful the power of their own hands. Through Helen, she spoke about her three children, one of whom was only a nursing infant, and I spoke of my two. I spoke in English and she spoke in Russian, but I felt very strongly that our hearts spoke the same tongue.

I was reminded of her a few days later in Samarkand when Fikre, an Ethiopian student at Patrice Lumumba University, and I went shopping in the marketplace. I remember the Moslem woman who came up to me in the marketplace, and she brought her little boy up to me asking Fikre if I had a little boy also. She said that she had never seen a Black woman before, that she had seen Black men, but she had never seen a Black woman,

and that she so much liked the way I looked that she just wanted to bring her little boy and find out if I had a little boy, too. Then we blessed each other and spoke good words and then she passed on.

There was the accomplished and very eloquent young Asian woman, an anthropology student, she said, who acted as our museum guide in Samarkand and shared her great store of historical knowledge with us. The night that we arrived in Samarkand and again the next day in looking through the museums, I felt that there were many things we were not seeing. For instance, we passed a case where there are a number of coins which I recognized as ancient Chinese coins because I'd used them for casting the I Ching. I asked our guide if these were from China. She acted as if I'd said a dirty word. And she said, "No, these were from right here in Samarkand." Now obviously they had been traded, and that was the whole point, but of course I couldn't read the Russian explanation under it, and she evidently took great offense at my use of the word *China*. In all of the women I've met here I feel an air of security and awareness of their own powers as women, as producers, and as human beings that is very affirming. But I also feel a stony rigidity, a resistance to questioning that frightens me, saddens me, because it feels destructive of progress as process.

We arrived in Samarkand about 9:30 p.m., quite wearied by a very full day. We got into the main square just in time to catch the last light-show at Tamerlane's tomb. The less said about that the better. But the following day, Helen, Fikre, and I played hooky from one mausoleum and ran across the street and went to a market. It is very reassuring and good as always. People in markets find a way of getting down to the essentials of I have, you want; you have, I want.

The tile tombs and the madrasas (ancient schools) of Samarkand are truly beautiful, intricate, and still. Incredibly painstaking work is being done to restore them. I could feel stillness in my bones, walking through these places, knowing that so much history had been buried there. I found two feathers in the Tomb of Bebe, Timor's favorite wife, and I felt almost as if I had come there to find them. The Tomb of Bebe

has beautiful minarets, but the Tomb itself was never used. The mosque was never used. There is a story that Bebe was Tamerlane's favorite wife and he "loved her with all of his heart." However, he had many, many journeys to go upon and he left her so often that he broke her heart and she died. When he returned and found she was dead, he was very upset because he had loved her so much, and he vowed that he would build the biggest mausoleum in the world, the most ornate mosque for her, and that is what he did. But then, just before it was completed, it collapsed. They say it was due to an error of the architect, but it was never used. One up for the lady shades.

The tile tombs and the midrasas are engrossing, but it's the market that caught my heart. We went later in that afternoon to another meeting of solidarity for the oppressed people of Somewhere. The only thing that I was quite sure of was that it was not for the oppressed Black people of America, which point, of course, I had questioned a number of days before and was still awaiting a reply. So we stood in the hot sun at the porcelain factory and it almost baked my brains, and I thought about a lot of things. The peoples of the Soviet Union, in many respects, impress me as people who can not yet afford to be honest. When they can be they will either blossom into a marvel or sink into decay. What gets me about the United States is that it pretends to be honest and therefore has so little room to move toward hope. I think that in America there are certain kinds of problems and in Russia there are certain kinds of problems, but basically, when you find people who start from a position where human beings are at the core, as opposed to a position where profit is at the core, the solutions can be very different. I wonder how similar human problems will be solved. But I am not always convinced that human beings are at the core here, either, although there is more lip service done to that idea than in the U.S.

I had a meeting the following day with a Madam Izbalkhan, who was the head of the Uzbekistan Society of Friendship. This meeting came about as a result of my request for clarification of my status here at the Conference. When all was said and done, why was there no meeting for oppressed peoples of Black

America? Enough said. Madam Izbalkhan talked two hours and she essentially said, well, here's what our revolution has done for us. And I felt she was implying that any time you want to get yours going, you know, be our guest, just don't expect us to be involved.

But she talked most movingly of the history of the women of Uzbekistan, a history which deserves more writing about than I can give it here. The ways in which the women of this area, from 1924 on, fought to come out from behind complete veiling, from Moslem cloister to the twentieth century. How they gave their lives to go bare-faced, to be able to read. Many of them fought and many of them died very terrible deaths in this battle, killed by their own fathers and brothers. It is a story of genuine female heroism and persistence. I thought of the South African women in 1956 who demonstrated and died rather than carry passbooks. For the Uzbeki women, revolution meant being able to show their faces and go to school, and they died for it. A bronze statue stands in a square of Samarkand, monument to the fallen women and their bravery. Madam went on to discuss the women of modern Uzbekistan and how there was now full equality between the sexes. How many women now headed collective farms, how many women Ministers. She said there were a great many ways in which women governed; there was no difference between men and women now in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I was touched by these statistics, of course, but I also felt that there was a little more to it than met the eye. It sounded too easy, too pat. Madam spoke of the daycare centers, of kindergartens where children could be cared for on collective farms. The kindergartens are free in large cities like Moscow and Tashkent. But in Samarkand, there's a nominal fee of about two rubles a month, which is very little, she said. I asked her one question, whether "men are encouraged to work in the kindergartens to give the children a gentle male figure at an early age." Madam Izbalkhan hesitated for a moment. "No," she said. "We like to believe that when the children come to the kindergarten they acquire a second mother."

Madam Izbalkhan was a very strong and beautiful and forthright woman, excellently in charge of her facts, with a great deal

of presence, and I returned from my meeting with her almost overwhelmed and over-graped.

The grapes in Uzbekistan are incredible fruit. They seem to have a life of their own. They're called "the bridesmaid's little finger," and that's about the size of them. They're very long, and green, and they're absolutely the most delicious.

I came away with revolutionary women in my head. But I feel very much now still that we, Black Americans, exist alone in the mouth of the dragon. As I've always suspected, outside of rhetoric and proclamations of solidarity, there is no help, except ourselves. When I asked directly about the USSR's *attitude* toward American racism, Madam said reproachfully that of course the USSR cannot interfere in the internal affairs of any other nation. I wish now I had asked her about Russian Jews.

In Samarkand, Helen and I went looking for a fruit market. She inquired directions from a man who had passed by with either his little girl or his granddaughter, but I tend to think his little girl because so many of the adults here in Uzbekistan look much older than they are. It must be a quality of the dry air. Anyway, Helen stopped to inquire directions to the market and this gave him an opening, as frequently happens in Russia, to discuss anything. He wanted to know from Helen whether I was from Africa, and when he heard I was from America, then he really wanted to discuss American Black people. There seems to be quite an interest in Black Americans among the peoples of Russia, but it's an interest that is played down somewhat. Fikre, my Ethiopian companion who studied at the university, was often questioned about me in Russian. I had developed enough of an ear for the language to be able to notice that. Fikre frequently did not say I was from America. Most people in Tashkent and Samarkand who I met thought I was African or from Cuba, and everyone is also very interested in Cuba. This fascination with all things American is something that keeps coming up over and over again.

This man wanted to know from me whether American Black people were allowed to go to school. I said yes, and Helen said yes to him, and then he wanted to know if we were allowed to teach, and I said yes, I was a professor at the University of the

City of New York. And he was surprised at that. He said that he had seen a television program one time about the Black people of America. That we had no jobs. So Helen started to answer him and he stopped her. Then she angrily said he wanted me to speak because he wanted to look at my face so he could see how I answered. I told Helen to tell him that the question was not that we could never go to college, but that frequently even when Black people went to college, we had no jobs when we came out. That it was more difficult for Black people to find work and make any kind of living, and that the percentage of unemployment among American Black people was far higher than that of American white people.

He pondered that a little while and then he asked, do Black people have to pay for their doctors, too? Because that's what TV programs had said. I smiled a little at this and told him it's not only Black people who have to pay for doctors and medical care; all people in America have to. Ah, he said. And suppose you don't have the money to pay? Well, I said, if you don't have the money to pay, sometimes you died. And there was no mistaking my gesture, even though he had to wait for the translator to translate it. We left him looking absolutely nonplussed, standing in the middle of the square with his mouth open and his hand under his chin staring after me, as in utter amazement that human beings could die from lack of medical care. It's things like that that keep me dreaming about Russia long after I've returned.

There's much that I think that Russian people now take for granted. I think they take for granted free hospitalization and medical care. They take for granted free universities and free schooling as well as the presumption of universal bread, even with a rose or two, although no meat. We are all more blind to what we have than to what we have not.

One night after midnight, Fikre and I were walking through a park in Tashkent and we were approached by a Russian man with whom Fikre had a short, sharp conversation, after which the man bowed and walked away. Fikre would not tell me what they'd said, but I had the strong feeling he had tried to pick one of us up, either Fikre or me. Tashkent is, in some respects, a

Russian playground. I asked Fikre what the Soviet position was on homosexuality, and Fikre answered that there was no public position because it wasn't a public matter. Of course, I know better than that, but I have very few inroads into finding out the truth, and Helen is much too proper to discuss anything sexual.

## V

The last few days after we returned to Moscow I got to meet one woman I had noticed all through the Conference. She was an Eskimo woman. Her name was Toni and she's Chukwo. They are from the part of Russia closest to Alaska, the part that wasn't sold by the Russians, across the Bering Straits. Toni did not speak English and I didn't speak Russian, but I felt as if we were making love that last night through our interpreters. I still don't know if she knew what was going on or not, but I suspect that she did.

I had been extremely moved by her presentation earlier in the day. We sat down to dinner, about ten of us, and Toni started speaking to me through our interpreters. She said that she had been searching for my eyes in the crowd all through her speech because she felt as if she were talking to my heart. And that when she sang the little song that she did, she sang it for a beginning that she hoped for all of our people. And this lady cast, let me tell you, a very powerful spell. There are only fourteen thousand Chukwo people left. In her speech at one point she said, "It is a very sad thing when a whole people ceases to exist." And then she sang a little song which she said her people sing whenever something new happens. Her dark round eyes and seal-heavy hair flashed and swung in time to her music. It sent a chill down my spine at the time, because although there are 21 million Black Americans, I feel like we're an endangered species too, and how sad for our cultures to die. I felt as if we alone, of all the people at the Conference, shared that knowledge and that threat, Toni and I. At dinner Toni kept telling me how beautiful I was, and how it was not only my

beauty that she would carry with her always but my words, and that we should share our joys as well as our sorrows, and some day our children would be able to speak freely with each other. She made toast after toast to women and to their strength. All of this was through our interpreters. I was trying to decide what to make of all this when Toni got up, moved over, and sat down beside me. She touched my knee and kissed me, and so we sat all through dinner. We held hands and we kissed, but any time we spoke to each other, it was done through our interpreters, blond Russian girls who smirked as they translated our words. I suppose Toni and I connected somewhere in the middle of the Aleutians.

She kissed my picture on my book before she got up, thanked us for dinner, and went off with the male Latvian delegate from Riga.

## VI

Now it is back to Moscow again, which is still cold and rainy. Moscow across rainy rooftops looks about as dreary as New York does, except the skyline is broken up by huge building cranes. There is an incredible amount of building, it appears, going on all the time in Moscow. There is in New York also, but it's not so obvious on the skyline. The buildings are not built in solid blocks the way they are in New York. You'll have perhaps two large apartment houses to a block, set at different angles, with a lot of greenery and perhaps some parks in between. In other words, it appears that quite a bit of thought has been given to urban planning and how people like or need to move about where they are. Both New York and Moscow have a population of about eight million and in Moscow it is possible and pleasant to walk out after dark without fear. Crime on the streets seems not at all a problem in Moscow. The official reason why and the actual reason why may be very different, but it is a fact. I was struck by the sight of many people, even children, walking through the parks after sundown.

Earlier, when I had first come to Moscow from the airport, I had noticed quite heavy steady traffic, but there did not appear

to be a traffic jam or great delay although this was the time when most people were coming home from work. It seemed quite an achievement in a city of eight million people, and I thought Moscow must be handling her problems of urban transportation in a new and creative way. Of course, when I saw the Metro, I realized why. Not only are the stations spotlessly clean, but the trains are quick and comfortable, and I'd never really thought that it could be an actual joy to ride on the subways.

## VII

It will take a while and a lot of dreams to metabolize all I've seen and felt in these hectic two weeks. I haven't even discussed the close bonding I felt with some of the African writers and how difficult it was to get to know others. I have no reason to believe Russia is a free society. I have no reason to believe Russia is a classless society. Russia does not even appear to be a strictly egalitarian society. But bread does cost a few kopecs a loaf and everybody I saw seemed to have enough of it. Of course, I did not see Siberia, nor a prison camp, nor a mental hospital. But that fact, in a world where most people — certainly most Black people — are on a breadconcern level, seems to me to be quite a lot. If you conquer the bread problem, that gives you at least a chance to look around at the others.

So, for all of the double messages I received (and there were many — because of the places in which I stayed, because of a kind of both deference and unpleasantness that I received as an American, and because no matter how much is said and done, America still appears to have some kind of magic over many countries), no matter what the shortcomings were, there is enthusiasm about the people that I met in Russia, particularly the people I met in Uzbekistan. And I recognize some of the contradictions and problems that they have. I am deeply suspicious of the double messages that kept coming and of the fact that when they are finished with you (and by *they*, I mean the government), when they are finished with you, they drop you

and you can fall very far. So what's new? I also am intrigued by the idea that there are writers who are paid to be writers and that they survive and they wield considerable power. I am also very well aware that if what they write is not acceptable, then it never gets read or it never gets printed. So what's new?

But you do have a country there that has the largest reading population in the world, that prints books of poetry in editions of 250,000 copies and those copies sell out in three months. Everywhere you go, even among those miles of cotton being harvested in the Uzbekhi sun, people are reading, and no matter what you may say about censorship, they are still reading, and they're reading an awful lot. Some books are pirated from the West because Russia does not observe International Copyright. In Samarkhand, Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was the latest best seller. Now, how many Russian novels in translation have you read this past year?

# Poetry Is Not a Luxury\*

THE QUALITY OF LIGHT by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, "beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/""\*\* and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each

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\* First published in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, no. 3 (1977).

\*\* From "Black Mother Woman," first published in *From A Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973), and collected in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1982) p. 53.

one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that

language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. We can sometimes work long and hard to establish one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live, only to have that beachhead assaulted or threatened by those canards we have been socialized to fear, or by the withdrawal of those approvals that we have been warned to seek for safety. Women see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniversality, of changeability, of sensuality. And who asks the question: Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foundations of our lives.

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

However, experience has taught us that action in the now is also necessary, always. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? "If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!" shouts the child.

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old

ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare.

If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core — the fountain — of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds.

For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt — of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead — while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths.

# The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action\*

I HAVE COME to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect. I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been. Less than two months ago I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

But within those three weeks, I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me still shaken but much stronger. This is a situation faced by many women, by some of you here today. Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action.

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\* Paper delivered at the Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel," Chicago, Illinois, December 28, 1977. First published in *Sinister Wisdom* 6 (1978) and *The Cancer Journals* (Spinsters, Ink, San Francisco, 1980).

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.

The women who sustained me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge — within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not — I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself — a Black woman

warrior poet doing my work -- come to ask you, are you doing yours?

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, "Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside."

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear — fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.

In my house this year we are celebrating the feast of Kwanza, the African-american festival of harvest which begins the day after Christmas and lasts for seven days. There are seven principles of Kwanza, one for each day. The first principle is Umoja,

which means unity, the decision to strive for and maintain unity in self and community. The principle for yesterday, the second day, was Kujichagulia – self-determination – the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others. Today is the third day of Kwanza, and the principle for today is Ujima – collective work and responsibility – the decision to build and maintain ourselves and our communities together and to recognize and solve our problems together.

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

And it is never without fear – of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing – their experience is so different from

mine." Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, "She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or, "She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?" Or again, "This woman writes of her sons and I have no children." And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

# Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving\*

Racism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.*

Sexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.*

Heterosexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.*

Homophobia: *The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.*

THE ABOVE FORMS of human blindness stem from the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals.

To a large degree, at least verbally, the Black community has moved beyond the “two steps behind her man” concept of sexual relations sometimes mouthed as desirable during the sixties. This was a time when the myth of the Black matriarchy as a social disease was being presented by racist forces to redirect our attentions away from the real sources of Black oppression.

For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment. The development

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\* First published in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 9, no. 7 (1978).

of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war for Black liberation. The image of the Angolan woman with a baby on one arm and a gun in the other is neither romantic nor fanciful. When Black women in this country come together to examine our sources of strength and support, and to recognize our common social, cultural, emotional, and political interests, it is a development which can only contribute to the power of the Black community as a whole. It can certainly never diminish it. For it is through the coming together of self-actualized individuals, female and male, that any real advances can be made. The old sexual power relationships based on a dominant/subordinate model between unequals have not served us as a people, nor as individuals.

Black women who define ourselves and our goals beyond the sphere of a sexual relationship can bring to any endeavor the realized focus of completed and therefore empowered individuals. Black women and Black men who recognize that the development of their particular strengths and interests does not diminish the other do not need to diffuse their energies fighting for control over each other. We can focus our attentions against the real economic, political, and social forces at the heart of this society which are ripping us and our children and our worlds apart.

Increasingly, despite opposition, Black women are coming together to explore and to alter those manifestations of our society which oppress us in different ways from those that oppress Black men. This is no threat to Black men. It is only seen as one by those Black men who choose to embody within themselves those same manifestations of female oppression. For instance, no Black man has ever been forced to bear a child he did not want or could not support. Enforced sterilization and unavailable abortions are tools of oppression against Black women, as is rape. Only to those Black men who are unclear about the pathways of their own definition can the self-actualization and self-protective bonding of Black women be seen as a threatening development.

Today, the red herring of lesbian-baiting is being used in the Black community to obscure the true face of racism/sexism. Black women sharing close ties with each other, politically or emotionally, are not the enemies of Black men. Too frequently, however, some Black men attempt to rule by fear those Black women who are more ally than enemy. These tactics are expressed as threats of emotional rejection: "Their poetry wasn't too bad but I couldn't take all those lezzies." The Black man saying this is code-warning every Black woman present interested in a relationship with a man — and most Black women are — that (1) if she wishes to have her work considered by him she must eschew any other allegiance except to him and (2) any woman who wishes to retain his friendship and/or support had better not be "tainted" by woman-identified interests.

If such threats of labelling, vilification and/or emotional isolation are not enough to bring Black women docilely into camp as followers, or persuade us to avoid each other politically and emotionally, then the rule by terror can be expressed physically, as on the campus of a New York State college in the late 1970s, where Black women sought to come together around women's concerns. Phone calls threatening violence were made to those Black women who dared to explore the possibilities of a feminist connection with non-Black women. Some of these women, intimidated by threats and the withdrawal of Black male approval, did turn against their sisters. When threats did not prevent the attempted coalition of feminists, the resulting campus-wide hysteria left some Black women beaten and raped. Whether the threats by Black men actually led to these assaults, or merely encouraged the climate of hostility within which they could occur, the results upon the women attacked were the same.

War, imprisonment, and "the street" have decimated the ranks of Black males of marriageable age. The fury of many Black heterosexual women against white women who date Black men is rooted in this unequal sexual equation within the Black community, since whatever threatens to widen that equation is deeply and articulately resented. But this is essentially unconstructive resentment because it extends sideways only. It

can never result in true progress on the issue because it does not question the vertical lines of power or authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of that competition. And the racism of white women might be better addressed where it is less complicated by their own sexual oppression. In this situation it is not the non-Black woman who calls the tune, but rather the Black man who turns away from himself in his sisters or who, through a fear borrowed from white men, reads her strength not as a resource but as a challenge.

All too often the message comes loud and clear to Black women from Black men: "I am the only prize worth having and there are not too many of me, and remember, I can always go elsewhere. So if you want me, you'd better stay in your place which is away from one another, or I will call you 'lesbian' and wipe you out." Black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests.

The tactic of encouraging horizontal hostility to becloud more pressing issues of oppression is by no means new, nor limited to relations between women. The same tactic is used to encourage separation between Black women and Black men. In discussions around the hiring and firing of Black faculty at universities, the charge is frequently heard that Black women are more easily hired than are Black men. For this reason, Black women's problems of promotion and tenure are not to be considered important since they are only "taking jobs away from Black men." Here again, energy is being wasted on fighting each other over the pitifully few crumbs allowed us rather than being used, in a joining of forces, to fight for a more realistic ratio of Black faculty. The latter would be a vertical battle against racist policies of the academic structure itself, one which could result in real power and change. It is the structure at the top which desires changelessness and which profits from these apparently endless kitchen wars.

Instead of keeping our attentions focused upon our real needs, enormous energy is being wasted in the Black community today

in antilebian hysteria. Yet women-identified women — those who sought their own destinies and attempted to execute them in the absence of male support — have been around in all of our communities for a long time. As Yvonne Flowers of York College pointed out in a recent discussion, the unmarried aunt, childless or otherwise, whose home and resources were often a welcome haven for different members of the family, was a familiar figure in many of our childhoods. And within the homes of our Black communities today, it is not the Black lesbian who is battering and raping our underage girl-children out of displaced and sickening frustration.

The Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women. In the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way. For so long, we have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion, as eternal competitors, or as the visible face of our own self-rejection.

Yet traditionally, Black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding. We have banded together with each other for wisdom and strength and support, even when it was only in relationship to one man. We need only look at the close, although highly complex and involved, relationships between African co-wives, or at the Amazon warriors of ancient Dahomey who fought together as the King's main and most ferocious bodyguard. We need only look at the more promising power wielded by the West African Market Women Associations of today, and those governments which have risen and fallen at their pleasure.

In a retelling of her life, a ninety-two-year-old Efik-Ibibio woman of Nigeria recalls her love for another woman:

I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself. We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin

sisters. When I was out of gear with my husband, she would be the one to restore peace. I often sent my children to go and work for her in return for her kindnesses to me. My husband being more fortunate to get more pieces of land than her husband, allowed some to her, even though she was not my co-wife.\*

On the West Coast of Africa, the Fon of Dahomey still have twelve different kinds of marriage. One of them is known as "giving the goat to the buck," where a woman of independent means marries another woman who then may or may not bear children, all of whom will belong to the blood line of the first woman. Some marriages of this kind are arranged to provide heirs for women of means who wish to remain "free," and some are lesbian relationships. Marriages like these occur throughout Africa, in several different places among different peoples.\*\* Routinely, the women involved are accepted members of their communities, evaluated not by their sexuality but by their respective places within the community.

While a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place — when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power — other pieces of us, less functional, eye one another with suspicion. In the interests of separation, Black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence. This dehumanizing denial of self is no less lethal than the dehumanization of racism to which it is so closely allied.

If the recent attack upon lesbians in the Black community is based solely upon an aversion to the idea of sexual contact between members of the same sex (a contact which has existed for ages in most of the female compounds across the African continent), why then is the idea of sexual contact between Black men so much more easily accepted, or unremarked? Is the imagined threat simply the existence of a self-motivated, self-defined Black woman who will not fear nor suffer terrible retribution from the

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\* Iris Andreski, *Old Wives Tales: Life-Stories of African Women* (Schocken Books, New York, 1970), p. 131.

\*\* Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 2 vols. (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1967), 1:320-322.

gods because she does not necessarily seek her face in a man's eyes, even if he has fathered her children? Female-headed households in the Black community are not always situations by default.

The distortion of relationship which says "I disagree with you, so I must destroy you" leaves us as Black people with basically uncreative victories, defeated in any common struggle. This jugular vein psychology is based on the fallacy that your assertion or affirmation of self is an attack upon my self — or that my defining myself will somehow prevent or retard your self-definition. The supposition that one sex needs the other's acquiescence in order to exist prevents both from moving together as self-defined persons toward a common goal.

This kind of action is a prevalent error among oppressed peoples. It is based upon the false notion that there is only a limited and particular amount of freedom that must be divided up between us, with the largest and juiciest pieces of liberty going as spoils to the victor or the stronger. So instead of joining together to fight for more, we quarrel between ourselves for a larger slice of the one pie. Black women fight between ourselves over men, instead of pursuing and using who we are and our strengths for lasting change; Black women and men fight between ourselves over who has more of a right to freedom, instead of seeing each other's struggles as part of our own and vital to our common goals; Black and white women fight between ourselves over who is the more oppressed, instead of seeing those areas in which our causes are the same. (Of course, this last separation is worsened by the intransigent racism that white women too often fail to, or cannot, address in themselves.)

At a recent Black literary conference, a heterosexual Black woman stated that to endorse lesbianism was to endorse the death of our race. This position reflects acute fright or a faulty reasoning, for once again it ascribes false power to difference. To the racist, Black people are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate a whole lineage; to the heterosexist, lesbians are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate the whole sex. This position supposes that if we do not eradicate les-

bianism in the Black community, all Black women will become lesbians. It also supposes that lesbians do not have children. Both suppositions are patently false.

As Black women, we must deal with all the realities of our lives which place us at risk as Black women — homosexual or heterosexual. In 1977 in Detroit, a young Black actress, Patricia Cowan, was invited to audition for a play called *Hammer* and was then hammered to death by the young Black male playwright. Patricia Cowan was not killed because she was Black. She was killed because she was a Black woman, and her cause belongs to us all. History does not record whether or not she was a lesbian, but only that she had a four-year-old child.

Of the four groups, Black and white women, Black and white men, Black women have the lowest average wage. This is a vital concern for us all, no matter with whom we sleep.

As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism. But most of all, as Black women we have the right and responsibility to recognize each other without fear and to love where we choose. Both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us.

# Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power\*

THERE ARE MANY kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.

It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values

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this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence. But giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies.

This internal requirement toward excellence which we learn from the erotic must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process. For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion,

we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness.

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision — a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects — born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because

of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether

it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to

suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need. But within

the european-american tradition, this need is satisfied by certain proscribed erotic coming-together. These occasions are almost always characterized by a simultaneous looking away, a pretense of calling them something else, whether a religion, a fit, mob violence, or even playing doctor. And this misnaming of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity – the abuse of feeling.

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation.

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

# Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface\*

BLACK FEMINISM is not white feminism in blackface. Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black. To attempt to open dialogue between Black women and Black men by attacking Black feminists seems shortsighted and self-defeating. Yet this is what Robert Staples, Black sociologist, has done in *The Black Scholar*.

Despite our recent economic gains, Black women are still the lowest paid group in the nation by sex and race. This gives some idea of the inequity from which we started. In Staples' own words, Black women in 1979 only "threaten to overtake black men" [italics mine] by the "next century" in education, occupation, and income. In other words, the inequity is self-evident; but how is it justifiable?

Black feminists speak as women because we are women and do not need others to speak for us. It is for Black men to speak up and tell us why and how their manhood is so threatened that Black women should be the prime targets of their justifiable rage. What correct analysis of this capitalist dragon within which we live can legitimize the rape of Black women by Black men?

At least Black feminists and other Black women have begun this much-needed dialogue, however bitter our words. At least

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\* First published as "The Great American Disease" in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 10, no. 9 (May-June 1979) in response to "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" by Robert Staples in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 10, no. 8 (March-April 1979).

we are not mowing down our brothers in the street, or bludgeoning them to death with hammers. Yet. We recognize the fallacies of separatist solutions.

Staples pleads his cause by saying capitalism has left the Black man only his penis for fulfillment, and a "curious rage." Is this rage any more legitimate than the rage of Black women? And why are Black women supposed to absorb that male rage in silence? Why isn't that male rage turned upon those forces which limit his fulfillment, namely capitalism? Staples sees in Ntozake Shange's play *For Colored Girls* "a collective appetite for black male blood." Yet it is my female children and my Black sisters who lie bleeding all around me, victims of the appetites of our brothers.

Into what theoretical analysis would Staples fit Patricia Cowan? She answered an ad in Detroit for a Black actress to audition in a play called *Hammer*. As she acted out an argument scene, watched by the playwright's brother and her four-year-old son, the Black male playwright picked up a sledgehammer and bludgeoned her to death. Will Staples' "compassion for misguided black men" bring this young mother back, or make her senseless death more acceptable?

Black men's feelings of cancellation, their grievances, and their fear of vulnerability must be talked about, but not by Black women when it is at the expense of our own "curious rage."

If this society ascribes roles to Black men which they are not allowed to fulfill, is it Black women who must bend and alter our lives to compensate, or is it society that needs changing? And why should Black men accept these roles as correct ones, or anything other than a narcotic promise encouraging acceptance of other facets of their own oppression?

One tool of the Great-American-Double-Think is to blame the victim for victimization: Black people are said to invite lynching by not knowing our place; Black women are said to invite rape and murder and abuse by not being submissive enough, or by being too seductive, or too . . .

Staples' "fact" that Black women get their sense of fulfillment from having children is only a fact when stated out of the

mouths of Black men, and any Black person in this country, even a "happily married" woman who has "no pent-up frustrations that need release" (!) is either a fool or insane. This smacks of the oldest sexist canard of all time, that all a woman needs to "keep her quiet" is a "good man." File that one alongside "Some of my best friends are . . ."

Instead of beginning the much-needed dialogue between Black men and Black women, Staples retreats to a defensive stance reminiscent of white liberals of the 60s, many of whom saw any statement of Black pride and self-assertion as an automatic threat to their own identity and an attempt to wipe them out. Here we have an intelligent Black man believing -- or at least saying -- that any call to Black women to love ourselves (and no one said *only*) is a denial of, or threat to, his Black male identity!

In this country, Black women traditionally have had compassion for everybody else except ourselves. We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers. History and popular culture, as well as our personal lives, are full of tales of Black women who had "compassion for misguided black men." Our scarred, broken, battered and dead daughters and sisters are a mute testament to that reality. We need to learn to have care and compassion for ourselves, also.

In the light of what Black women often willingly sacrifice for our children and our men, this is a much needed exhortation, no matter what illegitimate use the white media makes of it. This call for self-value and self-love is quite different from narcissism, as Staples must certainly realize. Narcissism comes not out of self-love but out of self-hatred.

The lack of a reasonable and articulate Black male viewpoint on these questions is not the responsibility of Black women. We have too often been expected to be all things to all people and speak everyone else's position but our very own. Black men are not so passive that they must have Black women speak for them. Even my fourteen-year-old son knows that. Black men themselves must examine and articulate their own desires and positions and stand by the conclusions thereof. No point is

served by a Black male professional who merely whines at the absence of his viewpoint in Black women's work. Oppressors always expect the oppressed to extend to them the understanding so lacking in themselves.

For Staples to suggest, for instance, that Black men leave their families as a form of male protest against female decision making in the home is in direct contradiction to his own observations in "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy."\*

Now I am sure there are still some Black men who marry white women because they feel a white woman can better fit the model of "femininity" set forth in this country. But for Staples to justify that act using the reason it occurs, and take Black women to task for it, is not only another error in reasoning; it is like justifying the actions of a lemming who follows its companions over the cliff to sure death. Because it happens does not mean it should happen, nor that it is functional for the well-being of the individual nor the group.

It is not the destiny of Black America to repeat white America's mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If Black men continue to define "femininity" instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism.

As Black women and men, we cannot hope to begin dialogue by denying the oppressive nature of male privilege. And if Black males choose to assume that privilege for whatever reason — raping, brutalizing, and killing Black women — then ignoring these acts of Black male oppression within our communities can only serve our destroyers. One oppression does not justify another.

It has been said that Black men cannot be denied their personal choice of the woman who meets their need to dominate. In that case, Black women also cannot be denied our personal choices, and those choices are becomingly increasingly self-assertive and female-oriented.

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\* "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy" by Robert Staples in *The Black Scholar*, vol. 1, no. 3-4 (January-February 1970).

As a people, we most certainly must work together. It would be shortsighted to believe that Black men alone are to blame for the above situations in a society dominated by white male privilege. But the Black male consciousness must be raised to the realization that sexism and woman-hating are critically dysfunctional to his liberation as a Black man because they arise out of the same constellation that engenders racism and homophobia. Until that consciousness is developed, Black men will view sexism and the destruction of Black women as tangential to Black liberation rather than as central to that struggle. So long as this occurs, we will never be able to embark upon that dialogue between Black women and Black men that is so essential to our survival as a people. This continued blindness between us can only serve the oppressive system within which we live.

Men avoid women's observations by accusing us of being too "visceral." But no amount of understanding the roots of Black woman-hating will bring back Patricia Cowan, nor mute her family's loss. Pain is very visceral, particularly to the people who are hurting. As the poet Mary McAnally said, "Pain teaches us to take our fingers OUT the fucking fire."\*

If the problems of Black women are only derivatives of a larger contradiction between capital and labor, then so is racism, and both must be fought by all of us. The capitalist structure is a many-headed monster. I might add here that in no socialist country that I have visited have I found an absence of racism or of sexism, so the eradication of both of these diseases seems to involve more than the abolition of capitalism as an institution.

No reasonable Black man can possibly condone the rape and slaughter of Black women by Black men as a fitting response to capitalist oppression. And destruction of Black women by Black men clearly cuts across all class lines.

Whatever the "structural underpinnings" (Staples) for sexism in the Black community may be, it is obviously Black women who are bearing the brunt of that sexism, and so it is in our best interest to abolish it. We invite our Black brothers to join us,

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\* From *We Will Make A River*, poems by Mary McAnnally (West End Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1979), p. 27.

since ultimately that abolition is in their best interests also. For Black men are also diminished by a sexism which robs them of meaningful connections to Black women and our struggles. Since it is Black women who are being abused, however, and since it is our female blood that is being shed, it is for Black women to decide whether or not sexism in the Black community is pathological. And we do not approach that discussion theoretically. Those "creative relationships" which Staples speaks about within the Black community are almost invariably those which operate to the benefit of Black males, given the Black male/female ratio and the implied power balance within a supply and demand situation. Polygamy is seen as "creative," but a lesbian relationship is not. This is much the same as how the "creative relationships" between master and slave were always those benefiting the master.

The results of woman-hating in the Black community are tragedies which diminish all Black people. These acts must be seen in the context of a systematic devaluation of Black women within this society. It is within this context that we become approved and acceptable targets for Black male rage, so acceptable that even a Black male social scientist condones and excuses this depersonalizing abuse.

This abuse is no longer acceptable to Black women in the name of solidarity, nor of Black liberation. Any dialogue between Black women and Black men must begin there, no matter where it ends.

# An Open Letter to Mary Daly

The following letter was written to Mary Daly, author of *Gyn/Ecology*,\* on May 6, 1979. Four months later, having received no reply, I open it to the community of women.

DEAR MARY,

With a moment of space in this wild and bloody spring,\*\* I want to speak the words I have had in mind for you. I had hoped that our paths might cross and we could sit down together and talk, but this has not happened.

I wish you strength and satisfaction in your eventual victory over the repressive forces of the University in Boston. I am glad so many women attended the speak-out, and hope that this show of joined power will make more space for you to grow and be within.

Thank you for having *Gyn/Ecology* sent to me. So much of it is full of import, useful, generative, and provoking. As in *Beyond God The Father*, many of your analyses are strengthening and helpful to me. Therefore, it is because of what you have given to me in the past work that I write this letter to you now, hoping to share with you the benefits of my insights as you have shared the benefits of yours with me.

This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an

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\* *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1978).

\*\* In the spring of 1979, twelve Black women were murdered in the Boston area.

old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope.

I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish, and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change. In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a Black and a white woman.

When I started reading *Gyn/Ecology*, I was truly excited by the vision behind your words and nodded my head as you spoke in your First Passage of myth and mystification. Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power.

So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western european women.

Then I came to the first three chapters of your Second Passage, and it was obvious that you were dealing with noneuropean women, but only as victims and preyed-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. Your inclusion of African genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

To dismiss our Black foremothers may well be to dismiss where european women learned to love. As an African-

american woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized, but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much touches my own.

When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.

What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other noneuropean women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.

It is obvious that you have done a tremendous amount of work for this book. But simply because so little material on non-white female power and symbol exists in white women's words from a radical feminist perspective, to exclude this aspect of connection from even comment in your work is to deny the fountain of noneuropean female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions. It is to make a point by choice.

Then, to realize that the only quotations from Black women's words were the ones you used to introduce your chapter on African genital mutilation made me question why you needed to use them at all. For my part, I felt that you had in fact misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of Color. For my words which you used were no more, nor less, illustrative of this chapter than "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" or any number of my other poems might have been of many other parts of *Gyn/Ecology*.

So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question.

To me, this feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-ology and work of women of Color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing only out of a patriarchal western european frame of reference. Even your words on page 49 of *Gyn/Ecology*, "The strength which Self-centering women find, in

finding our Background, is our own strength, which we give back to our Selves," have a different ring as we remember the old traditions of power and strength and nurturance found in the female bonding of African women. It is there to be tapped by all women who do not fear the revelation of connection to themselves.

Have you read my work, and the work of other Black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words that would legitimize your chapter on African genital mutilation in the eyes of other Black women? And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming? If, on the other hand, it was not Black women you were attempting to reach, in what way did our words illustrate your point for white women?

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women — the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of Color, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make Black women prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city. When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.

This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western european herstory is not acceptable.

Mary, I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself that aids your speaking. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other

necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.

I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force toward change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share and some of which we do not. For instance, surely you know that for nonwhite women in this country, there is an 80 percent fatality rate from breast cancer; three times the number of unnecessary eventrations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. These are statistical facts, not coincidences nor paranoid fantasies.

Within the community of women, racism is a reality force in my life as it is not in yours. The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight. (If you and I were to walk into a classroom of women in Dismal Gulch, Alabama, where the only thing they knew about each of us was that we were both Lesbian/Radical/Feminist, you would see exactly what I mean.)

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

For then beyond sisterhood is still racism.

We first met at the MLA panel, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." This letter attempts to break a silence which I had imposed upon myself shortly before that date. I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy because of destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hear-

ing. But I would like not to destroy you in my consciousness, not to have to. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

Whether or not you do, Mary, again I thank you for what I have learned from you.

This letter is in repayment.

In the hands of Afrekete,  
Audre Lorde

# Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response\*

THIS ARTICLE IS NOT a theoretical discussion of Lesbian Mothers and their Sons, nor a how-to article. It is an attempt to scrutinize and share some pieces of that common history belonging to my son and to me. I have two children: a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old daughter Beth, and a fourteen-year-old son Jonathan. This is the way it was/is with me and Jonathan, and I leave the theory to another time and person. This is one woman's telling.

I have no golden message about the raising of sons for other lesbian mothers, no secret to transpose your questions into certain light. I have my own ways of rewording those same questions, hoping we will all come to speak those questions and pieces of our lives we need to share. We are women making contact within ourselves and with each other across the restrictions of a printed page, bent upon the use of our own/one another's knowledges.

The truest direction comes from inside. I give the most strength to my children by being willing to look within myself, and by being honest with them about what I find there, without expecting a response beyond their years. In this way they begin to learn to look beyond their own fears.

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All our children are outriders for a queendom not yet assured.

My adolescent son's growing sexuality is a conscious dynamic between Jonathan and me. It would be presumptuous of me to discuss Jonathan's sexuality here, except to state my belief that whomever he chooses to explore this area with, his choices will be nonoppressive, joyful, and deeply felt from within, places of growth.

One of the difficulties in writing this piece has been temporal; this is the summer when Jonathan is becoming a man, physically. And our sons must become men — such men as we hope our daughters, born and unborn, will be pleased to live among. Our sons will not grow into women. Their way is more difficult than that of our daughters, for they must move away from us, without us. Hopefully, our sons have what they have learned from us, and a howness to forge it into their own image.

Our daughters have us, for measure or rebellion or outline or dream; but the sons of lesbians have to make their own definitions of self as men. This is both power and vulnerability. The sons of lesbians have the advantage of our blueprints for survival, but they must take what we know and transpose it into their own maleness. May the goddess be kind to my son, Jonathan.

Recently I have met young Black men about whom I am pleased to say that their future and their visions, as well as their concerns within the present, intersect more closely with Jonathan's than do my own. I have shared vision with these men as well as temporal strategies for our survivals and I appreciate the spaces in which we could sit down together. Some of these men I met at the First Annual Conference of Third World Lesbians and Gays held in Washington D.C. in October, 1979. I have met others in different places and do not know how they identify themselves sexually. Some of these men are raising families alone. Some have adopted sons. They are Black men who dream and who act and who own their feelings, questioning. It is heartening to know our sons do not step out alone.

When Jonathan makes me angriest, I always say he is bringing out the testosterone in me. What I mean is that he is representing some piece of myself as a woman that I am reluctant to

acknowledge or explore. For instance, what does "acting like a man" mean? For me, what I reject? For Jonathan, what he is trying to redefine?

Raising Black children — female and male — in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive. And in order to survive they must let go. This is what mothers teach — love, survival — that is, self-definition and letting go. For each of these, the ability to feel strongly and to recognize those feelings is central: how to feel love, how to neither discount fear nor be overwhelmed by it, how to enjoy feeling deeply.

I wish to raise a Black man who will not be destroyed by, nor settle for, those corruptions called *power* by the white fathers who mean his destruction as surely as they mean mine. I wish to raise a Black man who will recognize that the legitimate objects of his hostility are not women, but the particulars of a structure that programs him to fear and despise women as well as his own Black self.

For me, this task begins with teaching my son that I do not exist to do his feeling for him.

Men who are afraid to feel must keep women around to do their feeling for them while dismissing us for the same supposedly "inferior" capacity to feel deeply. But in this way also, men deny themselves their own essential humanity, becoming trapped in dependency and fear.

As a Black woman committed to a liveable future, and as a mother loving and raising a boy who will become a man, I must examine all my possibilities of being within such a destructive system.

Jonathan was three-and-one-half when Frances, my lover, and I met; he was seven when we all began to live together permanently. From the start, Frances' and my insistence that there be no secrets in our household about the fact that we were lesbians has been the source of problems and strengths for both children. In the beginning, this insistence grew out of the knowledge, on both our parts, that whatever was hidden out of fear could always be used either against the children or

ourselves — one imperfect but useful argument for honesty. The knowledge of fear can help make us free.

*for the embattled  
there is no place  
that cannot be  
home  
nor is.\**

For survival, Black children in america must be raised to be warriors. For survival, they must also be raised to recognize the enemy's many faces. Black children of lesbian couples have an advantage because they learn, very early, that oppression comes in many different forms, none of which have anything to do with their own worth.

To help give me perspective, I remember that for years, in the namecalling at school, boys shouted at Jonathan not — "your mother's a lesbian" — but rather — "your mother's a nigger."

When Jonathan was eight years old and in the third grade we moved, and he went to a new school where his life was hellish as a new boy on the block. He did not like to play rough games. He did not like to fight. He did not like to stone dogs. And all this marked him early on as an easy target.

When he came in crying one afternoon, I heard from Beth how the corner bullies were making Johathan wipe their shoes on the way home whenever Beth wasn't there to fight them off. And when I heard that the ringleader was a little boy in Jonathan's class his own size, an interesting and very disturbing thing happened to me.

My fury at my own long-ago impotence, and my present pain at his suffering, made me start to forget all that I knew about violence and fear, and blaming the victim, I started to hiss at the weeping child. "The next time you come in here crying . . .," and I suddenly caught myself in horror.

This is the way we allow the destruction of our sons to begin — in the name of protection and to ease our own pain. My son get beaten up? I was about to demand that he buy that first

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\* From "School Note" in *The Black Unicorn* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978), p. 55.

lesson in the corruption of power, that might makes right. I could hear myself beginning to perpetuate the age-old distortions about what strength and bravery really are.

And no, Jonathan didn't have to fight if he didn't want to, but somehow he did have to feel better about not fighting. An old horror rolled over me of being the fat kid who ran away, terrified of getting her glasses broken.

About that time a very wise woman said to me, "Have you ever told Jonathan that once you used to be afraid, too?"

The idea seemed far-out to me at the time, but the next time he came in crying and sweaty from having run away again, I could see that he felt shamed at having failed me, or some image he and I had created in his head of mother/woman. This image of woman being able to handle it all was bolstered by the fact that he lived in a household with three strong women, his lesbian parents and his forthright older sister. At home, for Jonathan, power was clearly female.

And because our society teaches us to think in an either/or mode — kill or be killed, dominate or be dominated — this meant that he must either surpass or be lacking. I could see the implications of this line of thought. Consider the two western classic myth/models of mother/son relationships: Jocasta/Oedipus, the son who fucks his mother, and Clytemnestra/Orestes, the son who kills his mother.

It all felt connected to me.

I sat down on the hallway steps and took Jonathan on my lap and wiped his tears. "Did I ever tell you about how I used to be afraid when I was your age?"

I will never forget the look on that little boy's face as I told him the tale of my glasses and my after-school fights. It was a look of relief and total disbelief, all rolled into one.

It is as hard for our children to believe that we are not omnipotent as it is for us to know it, as parents. But that knowledge is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of power as something other than might, age, privilege, or the lack of fear. It is an important step for a boy, whose societal destruction begins when he is forced to believe that he can only be strong if he doesn't feel, or if he wins.

I thought about all this one year later when Beth and Jonathan, ten and nine, were asked by an interviewer how they thought they had been affected by being children of a feminist.

Jonathan said that he didn't think there was too much in feminism for boys, although it certainly was good to be able to cry if he felt like it and not to have to play football if he didn't want to. I think of this sometimes now when I see him practising for his Brown Belt in Tae Kwon Do.

The strongest lesson I can teach my son is the same lesson I teach my daughter: how to be who he wishes to be for himself. And the best way I can do this is to be who I am and hope that he will learn from this not how to be me, which is not possible, but how to be himself. And this means how to move to that voice from within himself, rather than to those raucous, persuasive, or threatening voices from outside, pressuring him to be what the world wants him to be.

And that is hard enough.

Jonathan is learning to find within himself some of the different faces of courage and strength, whatever he chooses to call them. Two years ago, when Jonathan was twelve and in the seventh grade, one of his friends at school who had been to the house persisted in calling Frances "the maid." When Jonathan corrected him, the boy then referred to her as "the cleaning woman." Finally Jonathan said, simply, "Frances is not the cleaning woman, she's my mother's lover." Interestingly enough, it is the teachers at this school who still have not recovered from his openness.

Frances and I were considering attending a Lesbian/Feminist conference this summer, when we were notified that no boys over ten were allowed. This presented logistic as well as philosophical problems for us, and we sent the following letter:

Sisters:

Ten years as an interracial lesbian couple has taught us both the dangers of an oversimplified approach to the nature and solutions of any oppression, as well as the danger inherent in an incomplete vision.

Our thirteen-year-old son represents as much hope for our future world as does our fifteen-year-old daughter, and

we are not willing to abandon him to the killing streets of New York City while we journey west to help form a Lesbian-Feminist vision of the future world in which we can all survive and flourish. I hope we can continue this dialogue in the near future, as I feel it is important to our vision and our survival.

The question of separation is by no means simple. I am thankful that one of my children is male, since that helps to keep me honest. Every line I write shrieks there are no easy solutions.

I grew up in largely female environments, and I know how crucial that has been to my own development. I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging.

As a Black woman, I find it necessary to withdraw into all-Black groups at times for exactly the same reasons — differences in stages of development and differences in levels of interaction. Frequently, when speaking with men and white women, I am reminded of how difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message.

But this does not mean that my responsibility for my son's education stops at age ten, any more than it does for my daughter's. However, for each of them, that responsibility does grow less and less as they become more woman and man.

Both Beth and Jonathan need to know what they can share and what they cannot, how they are joined and how they are not. And Frances and I, as grown women and lesbians coming more and more into our power, need to relearn the experience that difference does not have to be threatening.

When I envision the future, I think of the world I crave for my daughters and my sons. It is thinking for survival of the species — thinking for life.

Most likely there will always be women who move with women, women who live with men, men who choose men. I work for a time when women with women, women with men, men with men, all share the work of a world that does not barter bread or self for obedience, nor beauty, nor love. And in

that world we will raise our children free to choose how best to fulfill themselves. For we are jointly responsible for the care and raising of the young, since *that they be raised* is a function, ultimately, of the species.

Within that tripartite pattern of relating/existence, the raising of the young will be the joint responsibility of all adults who choose to be associated with children. Obviously, the children raised within each of these three relationships will be different, lending a special savor to that eternal inquiry into how best can we live our lives.

Jonathan was three-and-a-half when Frances and I met. He is now fourteen years old. I feel the living perspective that having lesbian parents has brought to Jonathan is a valuable addition to his human sensitivity.

Jonathan has had the advantage of growing up within a nonsexist relationship, one in which this society's pseudonatural assumptions of ruler/ruled are being challenged. And this is not only because Frances and I are lesbians, for unfortunately there are some lesbians who are still locked into patriarchal patterns of unequal power relationships.

These assumptions of power relationships are being questioned because Frances and I, often painfully and with varying degrees of success, attempt to evaluate and measure over and over again our feelings concerning power, our own and others'. And we explore with care those areas concerning how it is used and expressed between us and between us and the children, openly and otherwise. A good part of our biweekly family meetings are devoted to this exploration.

As parents, Frances and I have given Jonathan our love, our openness, and our dreams to help form his visions. Most importantly, as the son of lesbians, he has had an invaluable model — not only of a relationship — but of relating.

Jonathan is fourteen now. In talking over this paper with him and asking his permission to share some pieces of his life, I asked Jonathan what he felt were the strongest negative and the strongest positive aspects for him in having grown up with lesbian parents.

He said the strongest benefit he felt he had gained was that he knew a lot more about people than most other kids his age that he knew, and that he did not have a lot of the hang-ups that some other boys did about men and women.

And the most negative aspect he felt, Jonathan said, was the ridicule he got from some kids with straight parents.

"You mean, from your peers?" I said.

"Oh no," he answered promptly. "My peers know better. I mean other kids."

# An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich\*

Adrienne: What do you mean when you say that two essays, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" and "Uses of the Erotic" are really progressions?

Audre: They're part of something that's not finished yet. I don't know what the rest of it is, but they're clear progressions in feeling out something connected with the first piece of prose I ever wrote. One thread in my life is the battle to preserve my perceptions — pleasant or unpleasant, painful or whatever . . .

Adrienne: And however much they were denied.

Audre: And however painful some of them were. When I think of the way in which I courted punishment, just swam into it: "If this is the only way you're going to deal with me, you're gonna have to deal with me this way."

Adrienne: You're talking about as a young child?

Audre: I'm talking about throughout my life. I kept myself through feeling. I lived through it. And at such a subterranean level that I didn't know how to talk. I was busy feeling out other ways of getting and giving information and whatever else I could because talking wasn't where it was at. People were talking

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\* This interview, held on August 30, 1979 in Montague, Massachusetts, was edited from three hours of tapes we made together. It was commissioned by Marilyn Hacker, the guest editor of *Woman Poet: The East* (Women-In-Literature, Reno, Nevada, 1981), where a portion of it appears. The interview was first published in *Signs*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer 1981).

all around me all the time — and not either getting or giving much that was useful to them or to me.

Adrienne: And not listening to what you tried to say, if you did speak.

Audre: When you asked how I began writing, I told you how poetry functioned specifically for me from the time I was very young. When someone said to me, "How do you feel?" or "What do you think?" or asked another direct question, I would recite a poem, and somewhere in that poem would be the feeling, the vital piece of information. It might be a line. It might be an image. The poem was my response.

Adrienne; Like a translation into this poem that already existed of something you knew in a preverbal way. So the poem became your language?

Audre: Yes. I remember reading in the children's room of the library, I couldn't have been past the second or third grade, but I remember the book. It was illustrated by Arthur Rackham, a book of poems. These were old books; the library in Harlem used to get the oldest books, in the worst condition. Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners" — I will never forget that poem.

Adrienne: Where the traveler rides up to the door of the empty house?

Audre: That's right. He knocks at the door and nobody answers. "Is there anybody there?" he said." That poem imprinted itself on me. And finally, he's beating down the door and nobody answers, and he has a feeling that there really is somebody in there. Then he turns his horse and says, "Tell them I came, and nobody answered. That I kept my word.' I used to recite that poem to myself all the time. It was one of my favorites. And if you'd asked me, "What is it about?" I don't think I could have told you. But this was the first reason for my own writing, my need to say things I couldn't say otherwise when I couldn't find other poems to serve.

Adrienne: You had to make your own.

Audre: There were so many complex emotions for which poems did not exist. I had to find a secret way to express my feelings. I used to memorize my poems. I would say them out; I didn't use to write them down. I had this long fund of poetry in

my head. And I remember trying when I was in high school not to think in poems. I saw the way other people thought, and it was an amazement to me — step by step, not in bubbles up from chaos that you had to anchor with words . . . I really do believe I learned this from my mother.

*Adrienne: Learned what from your mother?*

*Audre:* The important value of nonverbal communication, beneath language. My life depended on it. At the same time, living in the world, I didn't want to have anything to do with the way she was using language. My mother had a strange way with words: if one didn't serve her or wasn't strong enough, she'd just make up another word, and then that would enter our family language forever, and woe betide any of us who forgot it. But I think I got another message from her . . . that there was a whole powerful world of nonverbal communication and contact between people that was absolutely essential and that was what you had to learn to decipher and use. One of the reasons I had so much trouble growing up was that my parents, my mother in particular, always expected me to know what she was feeling and what she expected me to do without telling me. And I thought this was natural. My mother would expect me to know things, whether or not she spoke them . . .

*Adrienne: Ignorance of the law was no excuse.*

*Audre:* That's right. It's very confusing. But eventually I learned how to acquire vital and protective information without words. My mother used to say to me, "Don't just listen like a ninny to what people say in their mouth." But then she'd proceed to say something that didn't feel right to me. You always learned from observing. You have to pick things up nonverbally because people will never tell you what you're supposed to know. You have to get it for yourself, whatever it is that you need in order to survive. And if you make a mistake you get punished for it, but that's no big thing. You become strong by doing the things you need to be strong for. This is the way genuine learning takes place. That's a very difficult way to live, but it also has served me. It's been an asset as well as a liability. When I went to high school, I found out that people really thought in different ways — perceived, puzzled out, acquired information

verbally. I had such a hard time. I never studied; I literally intuited all my teachers. That's why it was so important to get a teacher who I liked because I never studied, I never read my assignment, and I would get all this stuff — what they felt, what they knew — but I missed a lot of other stuff, a lot of my own original workings.

*Adrienne:* When you said you never read, you meant you never read the assignments, but you were reading?

*Audre:* If I read things that were assigned, I didn't read them the way we were supposed to. Everything was like a poem, with different curves, different levels. So I always felt that the ways I took things in were different from the ways other people took them in. I used to practice trying to think.

*Adrienne:* That thing those other people presumably did. Do you remember what that was like?

*Audre:* Yes. I had an image of trying to reach something around a corner, that it was just eluding me. The image was constantly vanishing. There was an experience I had in Mexico, when I moved to Cuernavaca . . .

*Adrienne:* This was when you were about how old?

*Audre:* I was nineteen. I was commuting to Mexico City for classes. In order to get to my early class I would catch a six o'clock turismo in the village plaza. I would come out of my house before dawn. You know, there are two volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtacuhuatl. I thought they were clouds the first time I saw them through my windows. It would be dark, and I would see the snow on top of the mountains and the sun coming up. And when the sun crested, at a certain point, the birds would start. But because we were in the valley it would still look like night. But there would be the light of the snow. And then this incredible crescendo of birds. One morning I came over the hill and the green, wet smells came up. And then the birds, the sound of them I'd never really noticed, never heard birds before. I was walking down the hill and I was transfixed. It was very beautiful. I hadn't been writing all the time I was in Mexico. And poetry was the thing I had with words, that was so important . . . And on that hill, I had the first intimation that I could bring those two together. I could in-

fuse words directly with what I was feeling. I didn't have to create the world I wrote about. I realized that words could tell. That there was such a thing as an emotional sentence. Until then, I would make these constructs and somewhere in there would be a nugget, like a Chinese bun, a piece of nourishment, the thing I really needed, which I had to create. There on that hill, I was filled with the smell and feeling and the way it looked, filled with such beauty that I could not believe . . . I had always fantasized it before. I used to fantasize trees and dream forest. Until I got spectacles when I was four I thought trees were green clouds. When I read Shakespeare in high school, I would get off on his gardens and Spanish moss and roses and trellises with beautiful women at rest and sun on red brick. When I was in Mexico I found out this could be a reality. And I learned that day on the mountain that words can match that, re-create it.

*Adrienne:* Do you think that in Mexico you were seeing a reality as extraordinary and vivid and sensual as you had been fantasizing it could be?

*Audre:* I think so. I had always thought I had to do it in my head, make it up. I learned in Mexico that you can't even make it up unless it happens, or can happen. Where it happened first for me I don't know; I do remember stories my mother would tell us about Grenada in the West Indies, where she was born . . . But that morning in Mexico I realized I did not have to make beauty up for the rest of my life. I remember trying to tell Eudora about this epiphany, and I didn't have the words for it. And I remember her saying, "Write a poem." When I tried to write a poem about the way I felt that morning, I could not do it, and all I had was the memory that there must be a way. That was incredibly important. I know that I came back from Mexico very, very different, and much of it had to do with what I learned from Eudora. But more than that, it was a kind of releasing of my work, a releasing of myself.

*Adrienne:* Then you went back to the Lower East Side, right?

*Audre:* Yes, I went back to living with my friend Ruth, and I began trying to get a job. I had had a year of college, but I could not function in those people's world. So I thought I could be a nurse. And I was having such a hard time getting any kind of

work. I felt, well, a Practical Nursing license, and then I'll go back to Mexico . . .

Adrienne: With my trade.

Audre: But that wasn't possible either. I didn't have any money, and Black women were not given Practical Nursing fellowships. I didn't realize it at the time because what they said was that my eyes were too bad. But the first thing I did when I came back was to write a piece of prose about Mexico, called "La Llorona." La Llorona is a legend in that part of Mexico, around Cuernavaca. You know Cuernavaca? You know the big barrancas? When the rains come to the mountains, the boulders rush through the big ravines. The sound, the first rush, would start one or two days before the rains came. All the rocks tumbling down from the mountains made a voice, and the echoes would resound and it would be a sound of weeping, with the waters behind it. Modesta, a woman who lived in the house, told me the legend of La Llorona. A woman had three sons and found her husband lying in another woman's bed — it's the Medea story — and drowned her sons in the barrancas, drowned her children. And every year around this time she comes back to mourn the deaths. I took this story and out of a combination of ways I was feeling I wrote a story called "La Llorona." It's a story essentially of my mother and me. It was as if I had picked my mother up and put her in that place: here is this woman who kills, who wants something, the woman who consumes her children, who wants too much, but wants not because she's evil but because she wants her own life, but by now it is so distorted . . . It was a very strange unfinished story, but the dynamic . . .

Adrienne: It sounds like you were trying to pull those two pieces of your life together, your mother and what you'd learned in Mexico.

Audre: Yes. You see, I didn't deal at all with how strong my mother was inside of me, but she was, nor with how involved I was. But this story is beautiful. Pieces of it are in my head where the poetry pool is, phrases and so on. I had never written prose before and I've never written any since until just now. I published it under the name *Rey Domini* in a magazine . . .

Adrienne: Why did you use a pseudonym?

Audre: Because . . . I don't write stories. I write poetry. So I had to put it under another name.

Adrienne: Because it was a different piece of you?

Audre: That's right. I only write poetry and here is this story. But I used the name *Rey Domini*, which is *Audre Lorde* in Latin.

Adrienne: Did you really not write prose from the time of that story until a couple of years ago, when you wrote "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"?

Audre: I couldn't. For some reason, the more poetry I wrote, the less I felt I could write prose. Someone would ask for a book review, or, when I worked at the library, for a precis about books — it wasn't that I didn't have the skills. I knew about sentences by that time. I knew how to construct a paragraph. But communicating deep feeling in linear, solid blocks of print felt arcane, a method beyond me.

Adrienne: But you'd been writing letters like wildfire, hadn't you?

Audre: Well, I didn't write letters as such. I wrote stream of consciousness, and for people who were close enough to me this would serve. My friends gave me back the letters I wrote them from Mexico — strange, those are the most formed. I remember feeling I could not focus on a thought long enough to have it from start to finish, but I could ponder a poem for days, camp out in its world.

Adrienne: Do you think that was because you still had this idea that thinking was a mysterious process that other people did and that you had to sort of practice? That it wasn't something you just did?

Audre: It was a very mysterious process for me. And it was one I had come to suspect because I had seen so many errors committed in its name, and I had come not to respect it. On the other hand, I was also afraid of it because there were inescapable conclusions or convictions I had come to about my own life, my own feelings, that defied thought. And I wasn't going to let them go. I wasn't going to give them up. They were too precious to me. They were life to me. But I couldn't analyze or understand them because they didn't make the kind of sense I had

been taught to expect through understanding. There were things I knew and couldn't say. And I couldn't understand them.

*Adrienne:* In the sense of being able to take them out, analyze them, defend them?

*Audre:* . . . write prose about them. Right. I wrote a lot of those poems you first knew me by, those poems in *The First Cities*,\* way back in high school. If you had asked me to talk about one of those poems, I'd have talked in the most banal way. All I had was the sense that I had to hold on to these feelings and that I had to air them in some way.

*Adrienne:* But they were also being transformed into language.

*Audre:* That's right. When I wrote something that finally had it, I would say it aloud and it would come alive, become real. It would start repeating itself and I'd know, that's struck, that's true. Like a bell. Something struck true. And there the words would be.

*Adrienne:* How do you feel writing connected for you with teaching?

*Audre:* I know teaching is a survival technique. It is for me and I think it is in general; the only way real learning happens. Because I myself was learning something I needed to continue living. And I was examining it and teaching it at the same time I was learning it. I was teaching it to myself aloud. And it started out at Tougaloo in a poetry workshop.

*Adrienne:* You were ill when you were called to go down to Tougaloo?

*Audre:* Yes, I felt . . . I had almost died.

*Adrienne:* What was going on?

*Audre:* Diane di Prima — that was 1967 — had started the Poets Press. And she said, "You know, it's time you had a book." And I said, "Well, who's going to print it?" I was going to put those poems away because I found I was revising too much instead of writing new poems, and that's how I found out, again

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\* *The First Cities* (Poets Press, New York, 1968).

through experience, that poetry is not Play-Doh. You can't take a poem and keep re-forming it. It is itself, and you have to know how to cut it, and if there's something else you want to say, that's fine. But I was repolishing and repolishing, and Diane said, "You have to print these. Put 'em out." And the Poets Press published *The First Cities*. Well, I worked on that book, getting it together, and it was going into press . . . I had gotten the proofs back and I started repolishing again and realized, "This is going to be a book!" Putting myself on the line. People I don't even know are going to read these poems. What's going to happen?

It felt very critical, and I was in an absolute blaze of activity because things were so bad at home financially. I went out and got a job; I was with the two kids in the daytime and worked at the library at night. Jonathan used to cry every night when I left, and I would hear his shrieks going down this long hall to the elevator. I was working nights, and I'd apprenticed myself to a stained-glass window-maker, and I was working in my mother's office, and making Christmas for my friends, and I became very ill — I had overdone it. I was too sick to get up, and Ed answered the phone. It was Galen Williams from the Poetry Center asking if I'd like to go as poet-in-residence to Tougaloo, a Black college in Mississippi. I'd been recommended for a grant. It was Ed who said, "You have to do this." My energy was at such a low ebb that I couldn't see how. It was very frightening to me, the idea of someone responding to me as a poet. This book, by the way, hadn't even come out yet, you understand?

Adrienne: And suddenly you were already being taken seriously by unseen people out there.

Audre: That's right. In particular, I was asked to be public; to speak *as*, rather than *to*. But I felt as if I'd come back from the dead at that point, and so everything was up for grabs. I thought, hey, very good, let's see — not because I felt I could do it, I just knew it was new and different. I was terrified to go south. Then there were echoes of an old dream: I had wanted to go to Tougaloo years before. My friend Elaine and I were going to join the Freedom Riders in Jackson when we left California in 1961 to return to New York, and Elaine's mother got down on

her knees in San Francisco and begged us please not to do this, that they would kill us, and we didn't do it. So going to Tougaloo in Jackson was part of the mythic . . .

Adrienne: But it sounds as if earlier you had been more romantic about what going south would mean, and six years later, with two kids and everything that had happened in between in the south . . .

Audre: I was scared. I thought: "I'm going." Really, it was the first thing that countered the fury and pain I felt at leaving that little boy screaming every night. It was like — all right, if I can walk out and hear that child screaming in order to go down to the library and work every night, then I'm gonna be able at least to do something that I want to find out about. So I went.

Adrienne: Were you scared at Tougaloo, in terms of teaching, meeting your first workshop?

Audre: Yes, but it was a nurturing atmosphere. I lived there for two weeks before I went around really gathering people, and there were eight students who were already writing poetry. The ways in which I was on the line in Tougaloo . . . I began to learn about courage, I began to learn to talk. This was a small group and we became very close. I learned so much from listening to people. The only thing I had was honesty and openness. And it was absolutely necessary for me to declare, as terrified as I was, as we were opening to each other, "The father of my children is white." And what that meant in Tougaloo to those young Black people then, to talk about myself openly and deal with their hostility, their sense of disillusionment, to come past that, was very hard.

Adrienne: It must have been particularly hard since you knew by then that the marriage was going nowhere. It's like having to defend something that was not in itself defensible.

Audre: What I was defending was something that needed defense. And this moved it out of "I'm defending Ed because I want to live with him." It was, "I'm defending this relationship because we have a right to examine it and try it." So there's the northern Black poet making contact with these young southern Black people who are not saying, "This is what we need you for," but were telling me by who they were what they needed from

me. In the poem "Black Studies"\*\* a lot of that starts coming through. Tougaloo laid the foundation for that poem, that knowledge born five years later. My students needed my perception, yet my perception of their need was different from what they were saying. What they were saying aloud was, "We need strong Black people," but what they were also saying was that their ideas of what strong was had come from our oppressors and didn't jibe with their feelings at all.

It was through poetry that we began to deal with these things – formally. I knew nothing. Adrienne, I had never read a book about poetry! I picked up one day a book by Karl Shapiro, a little thin white book. I opened it and something he said made sense. "Poetry doesn't sell Cadillacs." It was the first time I'd ever talked about writing; always before I'd listened – part of my being inarticulate, inscrutable; I didn't understand in terms of verbalization, and if I did I was too terrified to speak anyway. But at Tougaloo we talked about poetry. And I got the first copies of my book there at Tougaloo.

I had never been in this relationship with Black people before. Never. There had been a very uneasy dialogue between me and the Harlem Writers' Guild where I felt I was tolerated but never really accepted – that I was both crazy and queer but would grow out of it all. Johnny Clarke adopted me because he really loved me, and he's a kind man. And he taught me wonderful things about Africa. And he said to me, "You are a poet. You are a poet. I don't understand your poetry but you are a poet, you are." So I would get this underlining of me. "You're not doing what you're supposed to do, but, yes, you can do it and we totally expect you to. You are a bright and shining light. You're off on a lot of wrong turns – women, the Village, white people, all of this, but you're young yet. You'll find your way." So I would get these double messages, this kind of underlining and rejection at the same time. It reduplicated my family, you see. In my family it was: "You're a Lorde, so that makes you special and particular above anybody else in the world. But you're not our kind of Lorde, so when are you going to straighten out and act right?"

\* New York Head Shop and Museum (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1974), pp. 52-56.

Adrienne: And did you feel, there in the Harlem Writers' Guild, the same kind of unwritten laws that you had to figure out in order to do right?

Audre: Yes, I would bring poems to read at the meetings. And hoping, well, they're gonna tell me actually what it is they want, but they never could, never did.

Adrienne: Were there women in that group, older women?

Audre: Rosa Guy was older than I, but she was still very young. I remember only one other woman, Gertrude McBride. But she came in and out of the workshop so quickly I never knew her. For the most part, the men were the core. My friend Jeannie and I were members but in a slightly different position; we were in high school.

Adrienne: And so Tougaloo was an entirely different experience of working with other Black writers.

Audre: When I went to Tougaloo, I didn't know what to give or where it was going to come from. I knew I couldn't give what regular teachers of poetry give, nor did I want to, because they'd never served me. I couldn't give what English teachers give. The only thing I had to give was me. And I was so involved with these young people — I really loved them. I knew the emotional life of each of those students because we would have conferences, and that became inseparable from their poetry. I would talk to them in the group about their poetry in terms of what I knew about their lives, and that there was a real connection between the two that was inseparable no matter what they'd been taught to the contrary.

I knew by the time I left Tougaloo that teaching was the work I needed to be doing, that library work — by this time I was head librarian at the Town School — was not enough. It had been very satisfying to me. And I had a kind of stature I hadn't had before in terms of working. But from the time I went to Tougaloo and did that workshop, I knew: not only, yes, I am a poet, but also, this is the kind of work I'm going to do.

Practically all the poems in *Cables to Rage*\* I wrote in Tougaloo. I was there for six weeks. I came back knowing that my relationship with Ed was not enough: either we were going to

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\* *Cables to Rage* (Paul Breman, Heritage Series, London, 1970).

change it or end it. I didn't know how to end it because there had never been any endings for me. But I had met Frances at Tougaloo, and I knew she was going to be a permanent person in my life. However, I didn't know how we were going to work it out. I'd left a piece of my heart in Tougaloo not just because of Frances but because of what my students there had taught me.

And I came back, and my students called me and told me — they were all of them also in the Tougaloo choir — they were coming to New York to sing in Carnegie Hall with Duke Ellington on April 4, and I covered it for the *Clarion-Ledger*, in Jackson, so I was there, and while we were there Martin Luther King was killed.

Adrienne: On that night?

Audre: I was with the Tougaloo choir at Carnegie Hall when he was killed. They were singing "What the World Needs Now Is Love." And they interrupted it to tell us that Martin Luther King had been killed.

Adrienne: What did people do?

Audre: Duke Ellington started to cry. Honeywell, the head of the choir, said, "The only thing we can do here is finish this as a memorial." And they sang again, "What the World Needs Now is Love." The kids were crying. The audience was crying. And then the choir stopped. They cut the rest of it short. But they sang that song and it kept reverberating. It was more than pain. The horror, the enormity of what was happening. Not just the death of King, but what it meant. I have always had the sense of Armageddon and it was much stronger in those days, the sense of living on the edge of chaos. Not just personally, but on the world level. That we were dying, that we were killing our world — that sense had always been with me. That whatever I was doing, whatever we were doing that was creative and right, functioned to hold us from going over the edge. That this was the most we could do while we constructed some saner future. But that we were in that kind of peril. And here it was reality, in fact. Some of the poems — "Equinox"\*\* is one of them — come

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\* First published in *From a Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973), and collected in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1982), pp. 39-40.

from then. I knew then that I had to leave the library. And it was just about this time that Yolanda took my book, *The First Cities*, to Mina Shaughnessy\* who had been her teacher, and I think she said to Mina, "Why don't you have her teach?" — because that's the way, you know, Yolanda is.

Adrienne: But also, Mina would have listened to that.

Audre: So Yolanda came home and said, "Hey, the head of the SEEK\*\* English program wants to meet you. Maybe you can get a job there." And I thought, I have to lay myself on the line. It's not going back south and being shot at, but when Mina said to me, "Teach," it was as threatening as that was. I felt at the time, I don't know how I'm gonna do it, but that's the front line for me. And I talked to Frances about this, because we'd had the Tougaloo experience, and I said, "If I could go to war, if I could pick up a gun to defend the things I believe, yes — but what am I gonna do in a classroom?" And Frances said, "You'll do just what you did at Tougaloo." And the first thing that I said to my SEEK students was, "I'm scared too."

Adrienne: I know I went in there in terror. But I went in white terror; you know, now you're on the line, all your racism is going to show . . .

Audre: I went in in Audre terror, Black terror. I thought, I have responsibility to these students. How am I going to speak to them? How am I going to tell them what I want from them — literally — that kind of terror. I did not know how to open my mouth and be understood. And my commandre, Yolanda, who was also a student in the SEEK program, said, "I guess you're just going to have to talk to them the same way you talk to me because I'm one of them and you've gotten across to me." I learned every single thing in every classroom. Every single class I ever walked into was like doing it anew. Every day, every week. But that was the exciting thing.

Adrienne: Did you teach English 1 — that back-to-back course where you could be a poet, a writing teacher, and not teach

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\* Mina Shaughnessy (1924-78), then director of the SEEK Writing Program at the City College, City University of New York.

\*\* "Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge": A pre-baccalaureate program in compensatory education in the City University of New York in which a number of writer-teachers participated in the 1960s and early 1970s.

grammar, and they had an English instructor to teach the grammar? That was the only way I could have started doing it either.

*Audre:* I learned to teach grammar. And then I realized that we can't separate these two things. We have to do them together because they're integral. That's when I learned how important grammar is, that part of the understanding process is grammatical. That's how I taught myself to write prose. I kept learning and learning. I'd come into my class and say, "Guess what I found out last night. Tenses are a way of ordering the chaos around time." I learned that grammar was not arbitrary, that it served a purpose, that it helped to form the ways we thought, that it could be freeing as well as restrictive. And I sensed again how as children we learn this, and why. It's like driving a car: once we know it we can choose to discard it or use it, but you can't know if it has useful or destructive power until you have a handle on it. It's like fear: once you put your hand on it, you can use it or push it away. I was saying these things in class and dealing with what was happening with Frances and me, what was going on with this insane man I lived with who wanted to continue pretending life could be looked at one way and lived another. All this, every bit of it funneling into that class. My children were just learning to read in school, and that was important too because I could watch their processes. Then it got even heavier when I went up to Lehmann College and was teaching a class on racism in education, teaching these white students how it was, the connections between their lives and the fury . . .

*Adrienne:* You taught a course on racism for white students at Lehmann?

*Audre:* They were inaugurating a program in the Education Department for these white kids going into teaching in the New York City schools. Lehmann used to be 99 percent white, and it was these students coming out of the Education Department who were going to teach Black children in the city schools. So the course was called "Race and the Urban Situation." I had all these white students wanting to know, "What are we doing? Why are our kids hating us in the classroom?" I could not believe that they did not know the most elementary level of in-

teractions. I would say, "When a white kid says  $2 + 2 = 4$ , you say 'right.' In the same class, when a Black kid stands up and says  $2 + 2 = 4$ , you pat him on the back, you say, 'Hey, that's wonderful.' But what message are you really giving? Or what happens when you walk down the street on your way to teach? When you walk into class? Let's play act a little." And all the fear and loathing of these young white college students would come pouring out; it had never been addressed.

*Adrienne:* They must have been mostly women, weren't they? In the Education Department?

*Audre:* Yes, mostly women, and they felt like unwilling sacrifices. But I began to feel by the end of two terms that there ought to be somebody white doing this. It was terribly costly emotionally. I didn't have more than one or two Black students in my class. One of them dropped out saying this wasn't right for him, and I thought, wait a minute, racism doesn't just distort white people — what about us? What about the effects of white racism upon the ways Black people view each other? Racism internalized? What about Black teachers going into ghetto schools? And I saw there were different problems, that were just as severe, for a Black teacher going into New York City schools after a racist, sexist education.

*Adrienne:* You mean in terms of expectations?

*Audre:* Not just in terms of expectations, but of self-image, in terms of confusion about loyalties. In terms of identifying with the oppressor. And I thought, who is going to start to deal with that? What do you do about it? This was where I wanted to use my energies. Meanwhile, this is 1969, and I'm thinking, what is my place in all this? There were two Black women in the class, and I tried to talk to them about us, as Black women, having to get together. The Black organizations on the campuses were revving up for the spring actions. And the women said, "You are insane, our men need us." It was a total rejection. "No, we can't come together as women. We're Black." But I had to keep trying to straighten out the threads because I knew the minute I stopped trying to straighten this shit out, it was going to engulf me. So the only hope I had was to work at it, work on all the

threads. My love with Frances, Ed, the children, teaching Black students, the women.

And in '69 came the Black and Puerto Rican occupation at City College. Black students outside of class on the barricades. Yolanda and I would bring over soup and blankets and see Black women being fucked on tables and under desks. And while we'd be trying to speak to them as women, all we'd hear is, "The revolution is here, right?" Seeing how Black women were being used and abused was painful — putting those things together. I said, "I want to teach Black students again." I went to John Jay College and discussed a course with the dean on racism and the urban situation, and he said, "Come teach it." I taught two courses, that one and another new course I introduced to the English Department, which approached remedial writing through creative writing. It was confrontation teaching.

Adrienne: John Jay was largely a police college, right?

Audre: It had been a police college, but I began in 1970 after open admissions started, and John Jay was now a four-year senior college with a regular enrollment as well as an enrollment of City uniformed personnel. There were no Black teachers in English or history. Most of our incoming freshmen were Black or Puerto Rican. And my demeanor was very unthreatening.

Adrienne: I've seen your demeanor at John Jay and it was not unthreatening, but that was a bit later . . .

Audre: . . . and also, I was a Black woman. So then I came in and started this course and really meant business. And it was very heavily attended. A lot of Black and white policemen registered for it. And literally, I used to be terrified about the guns.

Adrienne: They were wearing guns?

Audre: Yes. And since open admissions made college accessible to all high school graduates, we had cops and kids off the block in the same class. In 1970, the Black Panthers were being murdered in Chicago. Here we had Black and white cops, and Black and white kids off the block. Most of the women were young, Black, together women who had come to college now because they'd not been able to get in before. Some of them

were SEEK students, but not all, and this was the one chance for them. A lot of them were older. They were very streetwise, but they had done very little work with themselves as Black women. They had done it only in relation to, against, whitey. The enemy was always outside. I did that course in the same way I did all the others, which was learning as I went along, asking the hard questions, not knowing what was coming next. I wish I had recorded some of it. Like the young white cop in the class saying, "Yeah, but everybody needs someone to look down on, don't they?" By then I'd learned how to talk. Things weren't all concise or refined, but enough of it got through to them; their own processes would start. I came to realize that in one term that is the most you can do. There are people who can give chunks of information, perhaps, but that was not what I was about. The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot. And then, just possibly, hopefully, it goes home, or on.

By that time the battle over the Black Studies Department had started at John Jay. And again I saw the use and abuse of women, of Black people, saw how Black studies was being used by the university in a really cynical fashion. A year later, I returned to the English Department. I had made a number of enemies. One of the attempts to discredit me among Black students was to say I was a lesbian. Now by this time I would have considered myself uncloseted, but I had never discussed my own poetry at John Jay, nor my sexuality. I knew, as I had always known, that the only way you can head people off from using who you are against you is to be honest and open first, to talk about yourself before they talk about you. It wasn't even courage. Speaking up was a protective mechanism for myself — like publishing "Love Poem" in Ms. magazine in 1971 and bringing it in and putting it up on the wall of the English Department.

Adrienne: I remember hearing you read "Love Poem" on the Upper West Side, a coffeehouse at 72nd Street. It was the first time I'd heard you read it. And I think it was about that time, the early seventies. You read it. It was incredible. Like defiance. It was glorious.

*Audre:* That's how I was feeling, back against the wall, because as bad as it is now, the idea of open lesbianism in the Black community was — I mean, we've moved miles in a very short time — totally horrible. My publisher called and literally said he didn't understand the words of "Love Poem." He said, "Now what is this all about? Are you supposed to be a man?" And he was a poet! And I said, "No, I'm a loving woman."

*Adrienne:* Well, don't tell me that your publisher had never heard of lesbians.

*Audre:* I'm sure he had, but the idea that I'd write a poem . . .

*Adrienne:* . . . That one of his poets in the Broadside Series . . .

*Audre:* That's right. And he was a sensitive man. He was a poet.

*Adrienne:* But he did print your work.

*Audre:* Yes, he did. But he didn't print that poem, the first time around. "Love Poem" was supposed to have been in *From a Land Where Other People Live*.

*Adrienne:* And it wasn't published in that book? You took it out?

*Audre:* Yes. But when you heard me read "Love Poem," I had already made up my mind that I wasn't going to be worrying any more over who knows and who doesn't know that I have always loved women. One thing has always kept me going — and it's not really courage or bravery, unless that's what courage or bravery is made of — is a sense that there are so many ways in which I'm vulnerable and cannot help but be vulnerable, I'm not going to be more vulnerable by putting weapons of silence in my enemies' hands. Being an open lesbian in the Black community is not easy, although being closeted is even harder.

When a people share a common oppression, certain kinds of skills and joint defenses are developed. And if you survive you survive because those skills and defenses have worked. When you come into conflict over other existing differences, there is a vulnerability to each other which is desperate and very deep. And that is what happens between Black men and women because we have certain weapons we have perfected together that white women and men have not shared. I said this to some-

one, and she said, very rightly, the same thing exists within the Jewish community between Jewish men and Jewish women. I think the oppression is different, but the same mechanism of vulnerability exists. When you share a common oppression you have certain additional weapons against each other because you've forged them in secret together against a common enemy. It's a fear that I'm still not free of and that I remember all the time when I deal with other Black women: the fear of the ex-comrade.

*Adrienne:* In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," you wrote: "The white fathers told us, 'I think, therefore I am,' and the Black mother within each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams, 'I feel, therefore I can be free.'" I've heard it remarked that here you are simply restating the old stereotype of the rational white male and the emotional dark female. I believe you were saying something very different, but could you talk a little about that?

*Audre:* I have heard that accusation, that I'm contributing to the stereotype, that I'm saying the province of intelligence and rationality belongs to the white male. But if you're traveling a road that begins nowhere and ends nowhere, the ownership of that road is meaningless. If you have no land out of which the road comes, no place that road goes to, geographically, no goal, then the existence of that road is totally meaningless. Leaving rationality to the white man is like leaving him a piece of that road that begins nowhere and ends nowhere. When I talk about the Black mother in each of us, the poet, I don't mean the Black mothers in each of us who are called poets, I mean the Black mother . . .

*Adrienne:* Who is the poet?

*Audre:* The Black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us. Now when males or patriarchal thinkers (whether male or female) reject that combination, then we're truncated. Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. Too often, that's what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking. But ultimately, I

don't see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations.

Adrienne: Which we are constantly making. We don't make it once and for all. We constantly have to be making it, depending on where we are, over and over.

Audre: But I do think that we have been taught to think, to codify information in certain old ways, to learn, to understand in certain ways. The possible shapes of what has not been before exist only in that back place, where we keep those unnamed, untamed longings for something different and beyond what is now called possible, and to which our understanding can only build roads, But we have been taught to deny those fruitful areas of ourselves. I personally believe that the Black mother exists more in women; yet she is the name for a humanity that men are not without. But they have taken a position against that piece of themselves, and it is a world position, a position throughout time. And I've said this to you before, Adrienne, I feel that we're evolving. In terms of a species . . .

Adrienne: That women are evolving . . .

Audre: That the human race is evolving through women. That it's not by accident that there are more and more women – this sounds crazy, doesn't it – women being born, women surviving . . . and we've got to take that promise of new power seriously, or we'll make the same mistakes all over again. Unless we learn the lessons of the Black mother in each of us, whether we are Black or not . . . I believe this power exists in men also but they choose not to deal with it; which is, as I learned, their right. Hopefully this choice can be affected, but I don't know. I don't believe this shift from conquering problems to experiencing life is a one-generational shot or a single investment. I believe it's a whole signature which you try to set in motion and have some input into. But I'm not saying that women don't think or analyze. Or that white does not feel. I'm saying that we must never close our eyes to the terror, to the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy which is . . .

Adrienne: Sinister . . .

Audre: Sinister, smelly, erotic, confused, upsetting . . .

*Adrienne:* I think we have to keep using and affirming a vocabulary that has been used negatively and perjoratively. And I assume that's the statement you're making in that sentence, that you make over and over in your poetry. And it's nothing as simplistic as saying "Black is beautiful," either.

*Audre:* There's nothing beautiful about a black machine. You know, Adrienne, when I was in high school, the editor of the school magazine said to me, softening her rejection of a poem, "After all, Audre, you don't want to be a sensualist poet."

*Adrienne:* I was told, as a poet, you're not supposed to be angry, you're not supposed to be personal.

*Audre:* After I published "Uses of the Erotic," a number of women who read it said that this is antifeminist, that the use of the erotic as a guide is . . .

*Adrienne:* Antifeminist?

*Audre:* Is reducing us once again to the unseen, the unusable. That in writing it I am returning us to a place of total intuition without insight.

*Adrienne:* And yet, in that essay you're talking about work and power, about two of the most political things that exist.

*Audre:* Yes, but what they see is . . . and I address this at the very beginning: I try to say that the erotic has been used against us, even the word itself, so often, that we have been taught to suspect what is deepest in ourselves, and that is the way we learn to testify against ourselves, against our feelings. When we talk in terms of our lives and our survival as women, we can use our knowledge of the erotic creatively. The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out. A Black woman devaluating another Black woman's work. The Black women buying that hot comb and putting it in my locker at the library. It wasn't even Black men; it was Black women testifying against ourselves. This turning away from the erotic on the part of some of our best minds, our most creative and analytic women, is disturbing and destructive. Because we cannot fight old power

in old power terms only. The only way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting.

*Adrienne:* And as you were saying about courses, Black studies, women's studies: this is not just a question of being "allowed" to have our history or literature or theory in the old power framework. It is every minute of our lives, from our dreams to getting up and brushing our teeth to when we go to teach . . .

*Audre:* There are different choices facing Black and white women in life, certain specifically different pitfalls surrounding us because of our experiences, our color. Not only are some of the problems that face us dissimilar, but some of the entrapments and the weapons used to neutralize us are not the same.

*Adrienne:* I wish we could explore this more, about you and me, but also in general. I think it needs to be talked about, written about: the differences in alternatives or choices we are offered as Black and white women. There is a danger of seeing it in an all-or-nothing way. I think it is a very complex thing. White women are constantly offered choices or the appearance of choices. But also real choices that are undeniable. We don't always perceive the difference between the two.

*Audre:* Adrienne, in my journals I have a lot of pieces of conversations that I'm having with you in my head. I'll be having a conversation with you and I'll put it in my journal because stereotypically or symbolically these conversations occur in a space of Black woman/white woman where it's beyond Adrienne and Audre, almost as if we're two voices.

*Adrienne:* You mean the conversations you have in your head and your journal, or the conversations we're having on this earth?

*Audre:* The conversations that exist in my head that I put in the journal. This piece, I think, is one of them — about the different pitfalls. I've never forgotten the impatience in your voice that time on the telephone, when you said, "It's not enough to say to me that you intuit it." Do you remember? I will never forget that. Even at the same time that I understood what you

meant, I felt a total wipeout of my modus, my way of perceiving and formulating.

Adrienne: Yes, but it's not a wipeout of your modus. Because I don't think my modus is unintuitive, right? And one of the crosses I've borne all my life is being told that I'm rational, logical, cool — I am not cool, and I'm not rational and logical in that icy sense. But there's a way in which, trying to translate from your experience to mine, I do need to hear chapter and verse from time to time. I'm afraid of it all slipping away into: "Ah, yes, I understand you." You remember, that telephone conversation was in connection with the essay I was writing on feminism and racism. I was trying to say to you, don't let's let this evolve into "You don't understand me" or "I can't understand you" or "Yes, of course we understand each other because we love each other." That's bullshit. So if I ask for documentation, it's because I take seriously the spaces between us that difference has created, that racism has created. There are times when I simply cannot assume that I know what you know, unless you show me what you mean.

Audre: But I'm used to associating a request for documentation as a questioning of my perceptions, an attempt to devalue what I'm in the process of discovering.

Adrienne: It's not. Help me to perceive what you perceive. That's what I'm trying to say to you.

Audre: But documentation does not help one perceive. At best it only analyzes the perception. At worst, it provides a screen by which to avoid concentrating on the core revelation, following it down to how it feels. Again, knowledge and understanding. They can function in concert, but they don't replace each other. But I'm not rejecting your need for documentation.

Adrienne: And in fact, I feel you've been giving it to me, in your poems always, and most recently in the long prose piece you've been writing,\* and in talks we've been having. I don't feel the absence of it now.

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\* *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, originally published by Persephone Press in 1982 and reissued by Crossing Press in 1983.

Audre: Don't forget I'm a librarian. I became a librarian because I really believed I would gain tools for ordering and analyzing information. I couldn't know everything in the world, but I would gain tools for learning it. But that was of limited value. I can document the road to Abomey for you, and true, you might not get there without that information. I can respect what you're saying. But once you get there, only you know why, what you came for, as you search for it and perhaps find it.

So at certain stages that request for documentation is a blinder, a questioning of my perceptions. Someone once said to me that I hadn't documented the goddess in Africa, the woman bond that moves throughout *The Black Unicorn*.\* I had to laugh. I'm a poet, not a historian. I've shared my knowledge, I hope. Now you go document it, if you wish.

I don't know about you, Adrienne, but I have a difficult enough time making my perceptions verbal, tapping that deep place, forming that handle, and documentation at that point is often useless. Perceptions precede analysis just as visions precede action or accomplishments. It's like getting a poem . . .

That's the only thing I've had to fight with, my whole life, preserving my perceptions of how things are, and later, learning how to accept and correct at the same time. Doing this in the face of tremendous opposition and cruel judgment. And I spent a long time questioning my perceptions and my interior knowledge, not dealing with them, being tripped by them.

Adrienne: Well, I think that there's another element in all this between us. Certainly in that particular conversation on the telephone where I said you have to tell me chapter and verse. I've had great resistance to some of your perceptions. They can be very painful to me. Perceptions about what goes on between us, what goes on between Black and white people, what goes on between Black and white women. So, it's not that I can just accept your perceptions unblinkingly. Some of them are very hard for me. But I don't want to deny them. I know I can't afford to. I may have to take a long hard look and say, "Is this something I can use? What do I do with this?" I have to try to stand back and

\* *The Black Unicorn* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978).

not become immersed in what you so forcefully are pronouncing. So there's a piece of me that wants to resist wholly, and a piece that wants to accept wholly, and there's some place in between where I have to find my own ground. What I can't afford is either to wipe out your perceptions or to pretend I understand you when I don't. And then, if it's a question of racism — and I don't mean just the overt violence out there but also all the differences in our ways of seeing — there's always the question: "How do I use this? What do I do about it?"

*Audre:* "How much of this truth can I bear to see/ and still live/ unblinded?/ How much of this pain/ can I use?"\* What holds us all back is being unable to ask that crucial question, that essential step deflected. You know the piece I wrote for *The Black Scholar*?\*\* The piece was useful, but limited, because I didn't ask some essential question. And not having asked myself that question, not having realized that it was a question, I was deflecting a lot of energy in that piece. I kept reading it over, thinking, this isn't quite what it should be. I thought at the time I was holding back because it would be totally unacceptable in *The Black Scholar*. That wasn't it, really. I was holding back because I had not asked myself the question: "Why is women loving women so threatening to Black men unless they want to assume the white male position?" It was a question of how much I could bear, and of not realizing I could bear more than I thought I could at the time. It was also a question of how could I use that perception other than just in rage or destruction.

*Adrienne:* Speaking of rage and destruction, what do you really mean by the first five lines of "Power"?\*\*\*

*Audre:* "The difference between poetry/ and rhetoric/ is being/ ready to kill yourself/ instead of your children." What was I feeling? I was very involved in a case . . .

*Adrienne:* The white policeman who shot the Black child and was acquitted. We had lunch around the time you were writing that poem and you were full of it.

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\* From "Need: A Choral of Black Women's Voices" in *Chosen Poems*, p. 115.

\*\* "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," see p. 45.

\*\*\* *The Black Unicorn*, pp. 108-110.

*Audre:* I was driving in the car and heard the news on the radio that the cop had been acquitted. I was really sickened with fury, and I decided to pull over and just jot some things down in my notebook to enable me to cross town without an accident because I felt so sick and so enraged. And I wrote those lines down — I was just writing, and that poem came out without craft. That's probably why I was talking to you about it because I didn't feel it was really a poem. I was thinking that the killer had been a student at John Jay and that I might have seen him in the hall, that I might see him again. What was retribution? What could have been done? There was one Black woman on the jury. It could have been me. Now I am here teaching in John Jay College. Do I kill him? What is my effective role? Would I kill her in the same way — the Black woman on the jury. What kind of strength did she, would I, have at the point of deciding to take a position . . .

*Adrienne:* Against eleven white men . . .

*Audre:* . . . that atavistic fear of an articulated power that is not on your terms. There is the jury — white male power, white male structures — how do you take a position against them? How do you reach down into threatening difference without being killed or killing? How do you deal with things you believe, live them not as theory, not even as emotion, but right on the line of action and effect and change? All of those things were riding in on that poem. But I had no sense, no understanding at the time, of the connections, just that I was that woman. And that to put myself on the line to do what had to be done at any place and time was so difficult, yet absolutely crucial, and not to do so was the most awful death. And putting yourself on the line is like killing a piece of yourself, in the sense that you have to kill, end, destroy something familiar and dependable, so that something new can come, in ourselves, in our world. And that sense of writing at the edge, out of urgency, not because you choose it but because you have to, that sense of survival — that's what the poem is out of, as well as the pain of my spiritual son's death over and over. Once you live any piece of your vision it opens you to a constant onslaught. Of necessities, of horrors, but of wonders too, of possibilities.

Adrienne: I was going to say, tell it on the other side.

Audre: Of wonders, absolute wonders, possibilities, like meteor showers all the time, bombardment, constant connections. And then, trying to separate what is useful for survival from what is distorted, destructive to self.

Adrienne: There's so much with which that has to be done — rejecting the distortions, keeping what we can use. Even in work created by people we admire intensely.

Audre: Yes, a commitment to being selectively open. I had to do that with my physical survival. How am I going to live with cancer and not succumb to it in the many ways that I could? What do I have to do? And coming up against, there's no one to tell you even possibilities. In the hospital I kept thinking, let's see, there's got to be someone somewhere, a Black lesbian feminist with cancer, how'd she handle it? Then I realized, hey, honey, you are it, for now. I read all of those books and then I realized, no one can tell me how to do it. I have to pick and choose, see what feels right. Determination, poetry — well that's all in the work.

Adrienne: I'm thinking about when you had just had the first biopsy, in 1977, and we were both supposed to speak on a panel in Chicago. On "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." And you said there was no way you were going to the MLA — remember? That you couldn't do it, you didn't need to do it, that doing it could not mean anything important to you. But in fact you went out there and said what you said, and it was for yourself but not only for yourself.

Audre: You said, "Why don't you tell them about what you've just been through?" And I started saying, "Now that doesn't have anything to do with the panel." And as I said that, I felt the words "Silence," "Transformation." I hadn't spoken about this experience. . . . This is silence. . . . Can I transform this? Is there any connection? Most of all, how do I share it? And that's how a setting down became clear on paper, as if the connections became clear in the setting down. That paper\* and "A Litany for Survival"\*\* came about at the same time. I had the feeling,

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\* See "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," see p. 40.

\*\* *The Black Unicorn*, p. 31.

probably a body sense, that life was never going to be the same. If not now, eventually, this was something I would have to face. If not cancer, then somehow, I would have to examine the terms and means as well as the whys of my survival — and in the face of alteration. So much of the work I did, I did before I knew consciously that I had cancer. Questions of death and dying, dealing with power and strength, the sense of "What am I paying for?" that I wrote about in that paper, were crucial to me a year later. "Uses of the Erotic" was written four weeks before I found out I had breast cancer, in 1978.

*Adrienne:* Again, it's like what you were saying before, about making the poems that didn't exist, that you needed to have exist.

*Audre:* The existence of that paper enabled me to pick up and go to Houston and California; it enabled me to start working again. I don't know when I'd have been able to write again, if I hadn't had those words. Do you realize, we've come full circle, because that is where knowing and understanding mesh. What understanding begins to do is to make knowledge available for use, and that's the urgency, that's the push, that's the drive. I don't know how I wrote the long prose piece I have just finished, but I just knew that I had to do it.

*Adrienne:* That you had to understand what you knew and also make it available to others.

*Audre:* That's right. Inseparable process now. But for me, I had to know I knew it first — I had to feel.

# The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House\*

I AGREED TO TAKE PART in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women: difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. The absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy

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\* Comments at "The Personal and the Political Panel," Second Sex Conference, New York, September 29, 1979.

are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a Black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists between lesbians and women-identified women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive *be* and the active *being*.

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future,

along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference — those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older — know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.

Why weren't other women of Color found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists? And although the Black panelist's paper ends on an important and powerful connection of love between women, what about interracial cooperation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often, "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps Black women's art out of women's exhibitions, Black women's work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue," and Black women's texts off your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us — white and Black — when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women — in the face of tremendous resistance — as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

Simone de Beauvoir once said: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting."

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.* Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

# Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference\*

MUCH OF WESTERN EUROPEAN history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.

As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong. Traditionally, in american society, it is the members of oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap between the actualities of our lives and the consciousness of our oppressor. For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. I

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\* Paper delivered at the Copeland Colloquium, Amherst College, April 1980.

am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children's culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.

*Racism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over the other and thereby the right to dominance. Ageism. Heterosexism. Elitism. Classism.*

It is a lifetime pursuit for each one of us to extract these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed. For we have all been raised in a society where those distortions were endemic within our living. Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change

within our lives. We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance.

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practising. By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.

Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each others' energy and creative insight. Recently a women's magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less "rigorous" or "serious" art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time. The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose. In this day of inflated prices for material, who are our sculptors, our painters, our photographers? When we speak of a broadly based women's culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art.

As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which

interferes without vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes. The "generation gap" is an important social tool for any repressive society. If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question, "Why?" This gives rise to a historical amnesia that keeps us working to invent the wheel every time we have to go to the store for bread.

We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen. For instance, how many times has this all been said before? For another, who would have believed that once again our daughters are allowing their bodies to be hampered and purgatoried by girdles and high heels and hobble skirts?

Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power.

As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become "other," the outsider whose experience and tradition is too "alien" to comprehend. An example of this is the signal absence of the experience of women of Color as a resource for women's studies courses. The literature of women of Color is seldom included in women's literature courses and almost never in other literature courses, nor in women's studies as a whole. All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot "get into" them because they come out of experiences that are "too different." I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes. Surely there must be some other explanation.

This is a very complex question, but I believe one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black

women's work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves. To examine Black women's literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities — as individuals, as women, as human — rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women. And I believe this holds true for the literatures of other women of Color who are not Black.

The literatures of all women of Color recreate the textures of our lives, and many white women are heavily invested in ignoring the real differences. For as long as any difference between us means one of us must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex.

Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women.

Thus, in a patriarchal power system where whiteness privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same. For example, it is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women. Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways. Out of that shared oppression we have developed joint defenses and joint vulnerabilities to each other that are not duplicated in the white community, with the exception of the relationship between Jewish women and Jewish men.

On the other hand, white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power. This possibility does not exist in the same way for women of Color. The tokenism that is sometimes extended to us is not an invitation to join power; our racial "otherness" is a visible reality that makes that quite clear. For white women

there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools.

Today, with the defeat of ERA, the tightening economy, and increased conservatism, it is easier once again for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right men, then you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace, at least until a man needs your job or the neighborhood rapist happens along. And true, unless one lives and loves in the trenches it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is ceaseless.

But Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living — in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us.

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.

The threat of difference has been no less blinding to people of Color. Those of us who are Black must see that the reality of our lives and our struggle does not make us immune to the errors of ignoring and misnaming difference. Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people. Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only

by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear. Exacerbated by racism and the pressures of powerlessness, violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black women.

As a group, women of Color are the lowest paid wage earners in America. We are the primary targets of abortion and sterilization abuse, here and abroad. In certain parts of Africa, small girls are still being sewed shut between their legs to keep them docile and for men's pleasure. This is known as female circumcision, and it is not a cultural affair as the late Jomo Kenyatta insisted, it is a crime against Black women.

Black women's literature is full of the pain of frequent assault, not only by a racist patriarchy, but also by Black men. Yet the necessity for and history of shared battle have made us, Black women, particularly vulnerable to the false accusation that anti-sexist is anti-Black. Meanwhile, womanhating as a recourse of the powerless is sapping strength from Black communities, and our very lives. Rape is on the increase, reported and unreported, and rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression. As Kalamu ya Salaam, a Black male writer points out, "As long as male domination exists, rape will exist. Only women revolting and men made conscious of their responsibility to fight sexism can collectively stop rape."\*

Differences between ourselves as Black women are also being misnamed and used to separate us from one another. As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing

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\* From "Rape: A Radical Analysis, An African-American Perspective" by Kalamu ya Salaam in *Black Books Bulletin*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1980).

power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.

A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves. It has led some of us into destructive alliances, and others into despair and isolation. In the white women's communities, heterosexism is sometimes a result of identifying with the white patriarchy, a rejection of that interdependence between women-identified women which allows the self to be, rather than to be used in the service of men. Sometimes it reflects a die-hard belief in the protective coloration of heterosexual relationships, sometimes a self-hate which all women have to fight against, taught us from birth.

Although elements of these attitudes exist for all women, there are particular resonances of heterosexism and homophobia among Black women. Despite the fact that woman-bonding has a long and honorable history in the African and African-American communities, and despite the knowledge and accomplishments of many strong and creative women-identified Black women in the political, social and cultural fields, heterosexual Black women often tend to ignore or discount the existence and work of Black lesbians. Part of this attitude has come from an understandable terror of Black male attack within the close confines of Black society, where the punishment for any female self-assertion is still to be accused of being a lesbian and therefore unworthy of the attention or support of the scarce Black male. But part of this need to misname and ignore Black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified Black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships.

Black women who once insisted that lesbianism was a white woman's problem now insist that Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically un-Black. These accusations, coming from the very women to whom we look for deep and real understanding, have served to

keep many Black lesbians in hiding, caught between the racism of white women and the homophobia of their sisters. Often, their work has been ignored, trivialized, or misnamed, as with the work of Angelina Grimke, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Lorraine Hansberry. Yet women-bonded women have always been some part of the power of Black communities, from our unmarried aunts to the amazons of Dahomey.

And it is certainly not Black lesbians who are assaulting women and raping children and grandmothers on the streets of our communities.

Across this country, as in Boston during the spring of 1979 following the unsolved murders of twelve Black women, Black lesbians are spearheading movements against violence against Black women.

What are the particular details within each of our lives that can be scrutinized and altered to help bring about change? How do we redefine difference for all women? It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.

As a tool of social control, women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men. And we have learned to deal across those differences with the urgency of all oppressed subordinates. All of us have had to learn to live or work or coexist with men, from our fathers on. We have recognized and negotiated these differences, even when this recognition only continued the old dominant/subordinate mode of human relationship, where the oppressed must recognize the masters' difference in order to survive.

But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles.

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us. The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.

For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,\* the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.

Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival.

*We have chosen each other  
and the edge of each others battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose  
someday women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win  
there is no telling  
we seek beyond history  
for a new and more possible meeting.\*\**

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\* Seabury Press, New York, 1970.

\*\* From "Outlines," unpublished poem.

# The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism\*

*Racism.* The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied.

*Women respond to racism.* My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also.

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation.

My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes. If your dealings with other women reflect those attitudes, then my anger and your attendant fears are spotlights that can be used for growth in the same way I have used learning to express anger for my growth. But for corrective surgery, not guilt. Guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall against which we all flounder; they serve none of our futures.

Because I do not want this to become a theoretical discussion, I am going to give a few examples of interchanges between

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\* Keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut, June 1981.

women that illustrate these points. In the interest of time, I am going to cut them short. I want you to know there were many more.

For example:

- I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you." But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?
- The Women's Studies Program of a southern university invites a Black woman to read following a week-long forum on Black and white women. "What has this week given to you?" I ask. The most vocal white woman says, "I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from." As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem.
- After fifteen years of a women's movement which professes to address the life concerns and possible futures of all women, I still hear, on campus after campus, "How can we address the issues of racism? No women of Color attended." Or, the other side of that statement, "We have no one in our department equipped to teach their work." In other words, racism is a Black women's problem, a problem of women of Color, and only we can discuss it.
- After I read from my work entitled "Poems for Women in Rage,"\* a white woman asks me: "Are you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with *our* anger? I feel it's so important." I ask, "How do you use *your* rage?" And then I have to turn away from the blank look in her eyes, before she can invite me to participate in her own annihilation. I do not exist to feel her anger for her.
- White women are beginning to examine their relationships to Black women, yet often I hear them wanting only to deal with little colored children across the roads of childhood, the beloved nursemaid, the occasional second-grade classmate — those tender memories of what was once mysterious and intri-

\* One poem from this series is included in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1978), pp. 105-108.

guing or neutral. You avoid the childhood assumptions formed by the raucous laughter at Rastus and Alfalfa, the acute message of your mommy's handkerchief spread upon the park bench because I had just been sitting there, the indelible and dehumanizing portraits of Amos 'n Andy and your daddy's humorous bedtime stories.

- I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, "Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!" And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and dis-ease.

- A white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection by non-Black women of Color.\* "It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women," she says to me.

- At an international cultural gathering of women, a well-known white american woman poet interrupts the reading of the work of women of Color to read her own poem, and then dashes off to an "important panel."

If women in the academy truly want a dialogue about racism, it will require recognizing the needs and the living contexts of other women. When an academic woman says, "I can't afford it," she may mean she is making a choice about how to spend her available money. But when a woman on welfare says, "I can't afford it," she means she is surviving on an amount of money that was barely subsistence in 1972, and she often does not have enough to eat. Yet the National Women's Studies Association here in 1981 holds a conference in which it commits itself to responding to racism, yet refuses to waive the registration fee for poor women and women of Color who wished to present and conduct workshops. This has made it impossible for many women of Color — for instance, Wilmette Brown, of Black Women for Wages for Housework — to par-

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\* *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York, 1984), first published in 1981.

ticipate in this conference. Is this to be merely another case of the academy discussing life within the closed circuits of the academy?

To the white women present who recognize these attitudes as familiar, but most of all, to all my sisters of Color who live and survive thousands of such encounters — to my sisters of Color who like me still tremble their rage under harness, or who sometimes question the expression of our rage as useless and disruptive (the two most popular accusations) — I want to speak about anger, my anger, and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions.

*Everything can be used / except what is wasteful / (you will need / to remember this when you are accused of destruction.)\**

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives.

I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism.

But anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.

Anger is loaded with information and energy. When I speak of women of Color, I do not only mean Black women. The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with

\* From "For Each of You," first published in *From A Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973), and collected in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1982), p. 42.

racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy. And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed.

In this place we speak removed from the more blatant reminders of our embattlement as women. This need not blind us to the size and complexities of the forces mounting against us and all that is most human within our environment. We are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit. Women responding to racism is a topic so dangerous that when the local media attempt to discredit this conference they choose to focus upon the provision of lesbian housing as a diversionary device — as if the Hartford *Courant* dare not mention the topic chosen for discussion here, racism, lest it become apparent that women are in fact attempting to examine and to alter all the repressive conditions of our lives.

Mainstream communication does not want women, particularly white women, responding to racism. It wants racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like eveningtime or the common cold.

So we are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people — against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action.

Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite

serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here.

And while we scrutinize the often painful face of each other's anger, please remember that it is not our anger which makes me caution you to lock your doors at night and not to wander the streets of Hartford alone. It is the hatred which lurks in those streets, that urge to destroy us all if we truly work for change rather than merely indulge in academic rhetoric.

This hatred and our anger are very different. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change. But our time is getting shorter. We have been raised to view any difference other than sex as a reason for destruction, and for Black women and white women to face each other's angers without denial or immobility or silence or guilt is in itself a heretical and generative idea. It implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around our difference. For it is those distortions which separate us. And we must ask ourselves: Who profits from all this?

Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always libation for my fallen sisters.

Anger is an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes, as is fury when the actions arising from those attitudes do not change. To those women here who fear the anger of women of Color more than their own unscrutinized racist attitudes, I ask: Is the anger of women of Color more threatening than the woman-hatred that tinges all aspects of our lives?

It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment.

I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.

Most women have not developed tools for facing anger constructively. CR groups in the past, largely white, dealt with how to express anger, usually at the world of men. And these groups were made up of white women who shared the terms of their oppressions. There was usually little attempt to articulate the genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual identity. There was no apparent need at that time to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor. There was work on expressing anger, but very little on anger directed against each other. No tools were developed to deal with other women's anger except to avoid it, deflect it, or flee from it under a blanket of guilt.

I have no creative use for guilt, yours or my own. Guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices, out of the approaching storm that can feed the earth as well as bend the trees. If I speak to you in anger, at least I have spoken to you: I have not put a gun to your head and shot you down in the street; I have not looked at your bleeding sister's body and asked, "What did she do to deserve it?" This was the reaction of two white women to Mary Church Terrell's telling of the lynching of a pregnant Black woman whose baby was then torn from her body. That was in 1921, and Alice Paul had just refused to publicly endorse the enforcement of the Nineteenth Amendment for all women

- by refusing to endorse the inclusion of women of Color, although we had worked to help bring about that amendment.

The angers between women will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves against the manner of saying. When we turn from anger we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar. I have tried to learn my anger's usefulness to me, as well as its limitations.

For women raised to fear, too often anger threatens annihilation. In the male construct of brute force, we were taught that our lives depended upon the good will of patriarchal power. The anger of others was to be avoided at all costs because there was nothing to be learned from it but pain, a judgment that we had been bad girls, come up lacking, not done what we were supposed to do. And if we accept our powerlessness, then of course any anger can destroy us.

But the strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame, but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform difference through insight into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth.

My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapor. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in my experience and the experience of my people only new reasons for fear or guilt. And my anger is no excuse for not dealing with your blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of your own actions.

When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are "creating a mood of hopelessness," "preventing white women from getting past guilt," or "standing in the way of trusting communication and action." All these quotes come

directly from letters to me from members of this organization within the last two years. One woman wrote, "Because you are Black and Lesbian, you seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering." Yes, I am Black and Lesbian, and what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference.

To turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation is to award no one power — it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact. Guilt is only another form of objectification. Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning. But that time is over. My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant survival, and before I give it up I'm going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity.

What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

I am a lesbian woman of Color whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Color whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or for further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even

when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.

I speak here as a woman of Color who is not bent upon destruction, but upon survival. No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman. I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter. We are not goddesses or matriarchs or edifices of divine forgiveness; we are not fiery fingers of judgment or instruments of flagellation; we are women forced back always upon our woman's power. We have learned to use anger as we have learned to use the dead flesh of animals, and bruised, battered, and changing, we have survived and grown and, in Angela Wilson's words, we *are* moving on. With or without uncolored women. We use whatever strengths we have fought for, including anger, to help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman's difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction.

For it is not the anger of Black women which is dripping down over this globe like a diseased liquid. It is not my anger that launches rockets, spends over sixty thousand dollars a second on missiles and other agents of war and death, slaughters children in cities, stockpiles nerve gas and chemical bombs, sodomizes our daughters and our earth. It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the annihilation of us all unless we meet it with what we have, our power to examine and to redefine the terms upon which we will live and work; our power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices.

We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.

# Learning from the 60s\*

MALCOLM X is a distinct shape in a very pivotal period of my life. I stand here now – Black, Lesbian, Feminist – an inheritor of Malcolm and in his tradition, doing my work, and the ghost of his voice through my mouth asks each one of you here tonight: Are you doing yours?

There are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath and power in our own living. I'm not going to pretend that the moment I first saw or heard Malcolm X he became my shining prince, because it wouldn't be true. In February 1965 I was raising two children and a husband in a three-room flat on 149th Street in Harlem. I had read about Malcolm X and the Black Muslims. I became more interested in Malcolm X after he left the Nation of Islam, when he was silenced by Elijah Muhammad for his comment, after Kennedy's assassination, to the effect that the chickens had come home to roost. Before this I had not given much thought to the Nation of Islam because of their attitude toward women as well as because of their nonactivist stance. I'd read Malcolm's autobiography, and I liked his style, and I thought he looked a lot like my father's people, but I was one of the ones who didn't really hear Malcolm's voice until it was amplified by death.

I had been guilty of what many of us are still guilty of – letting the media, and I don't mean only the white media – define the bearers of those messages most important to our lives.

When I read Malcolm X with careful attention, I found a man much closer to the complexities of real change than anything I

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\* Talk delivered at the Malcolm X Weekend, Harvard University, February 1982.

had read before. Much of what I say here tonight was born from his words.

In the last year of his life, Malcolm X added a breadth to his essential vision that would have brought him, had he lived, into inevitable confrontation with the question of difference as a creative and necessary force for change. For as Malcolm X progressed from a position of resistance to, and analysis of, the racial status quo, to more active considerations of organizing for change, he began to reassess some of his earlier positions. One of the most basic Black survival skills is the ability to change, to metabolize experience, good or ill, into something that is useful, lasting, effective. Four hundred years of survival as an endangered species has taught most of us that if we intend to live, we had better become fast learners. Malcolm knew this. We do not have to live the same mistakes over again if we can look at them, learn from them, and build upon them.

Before he was killed, Malcolm had altered and broadened his opinions concerning the role of women in society and the revolution. He was beginning to speak with increasing respect of the connection between himself and Martin Luther King, Jr., whose policies of nonviolence appeared to be so opposite to his own. And he began to examine the societal conditions under which alliances and coalitions must indeed occur.

He had also begun to discuss those scars of oppression which lead us to war against ourselves in each other rather than against our enemies.

As Black people, if there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. For we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves. Through examining the combination of our triumphs and errors, we can examine the dangers of an incomplete vision. Not to condemn that vision but to alter it, construct templates for possible futures, and focus our rage for change upon our enemies rather than upon each other. In the 1960s, the awakened anger of the Black community was often expressed, not vertically against the corruption of power and true sources of

control over our lives, but horizontally toward those closest to us who mirrored our own impotence.

We were poised for attack, not always in the most effective places. When we disagreed with one another about the solution to a particular problem, we were often far more vicious to each other than to the originators of our common problem. Historically, difference had been used so cruelly against us that as a people we were reluctant to tolerate any diversion from what was externally defined as Blackness. In the 60s, political correctness became not a guideline for living, but a new set of shackles. A small and vocal part of the Black community lost sight of the fact that unity does not mean unanimity — Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity. In order to work together we do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk. Unity implies the coming together of elements which are, to begin with, varied and diverse in their particular natures. Our persistence in examining the tensions within diversity encourages growth toward our common goal. So often we either ignore the past or romanticize it, render the reason for unity useless or mythic. We forget that the necessary ingredient needed to make the past work for the future is our energy in the present, metabolizing one into the other. Continuity does not happen automatically, nor is it a passive process.

The 60s were characterized by a heady belief in instantaneous solutions. They were vital years of awakening, of pride, and of error. The civil rights and Black power movements rekindled possibilities for disenfranchised groups within this nation. Even though we fought common enemies, at times the lure of individual solutions made us careless of each other. Sometimes we could not bear the face of each other's differences because of what we feared those differences might say about ourselves. As if everybody can't eventually be too Black, too white, too man, too woman. But any future vision which can encompass all of us, by definition, must be complex and expanding, not easy to achieve. The answer to cold is heat, the answer to hunger is food. But there is no simple monolithic solution to racism, to sexism, to homophobia. There is only the conscious focusing

within each of my days to move against them, wherever I come up against these particular manifestations of the same disease. By seeing who the *we* is, we learn to use our energies with greater precision against our enemies rather than against ourselves.

In the 60s, white america — racist and liberal alike — was more than pleased to sit back as spectator while Black militant fought Black Muslim, Black Nationalist badmouthed the non-violent, and Black women were told that our only useful position in the Black Power movement was prone. The existence of Black lesbian and gay people was not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black america. We know in the 1980s, from documents gained through the Freedom of Information Act, that the FBI and CIA used our intolerance of difference to foment confusion and tragedy in segment after segment of Black communities of the 60s. Black was beautiful, but still suspect, and too often our forums for debate became stages for playing who's-Blacker-than-who or who's-poorer-than-who games, ones in which there can be no winners.

The 60s for me was a time of promise and excitement, but the 60s was also a time of isolation and frustration from within. It often felt like I was working and raising my children in a vacuum, and that it was my own fault — if I was only Blacker, things would be fine. It was a time of much wasted energy, and I was often in a lot of pain. Either I denied or chose between various aspects of my identity, or my work and my Blackness would be unacceptable. As a Black lesbian mother in an inter-racial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody's comfortable prejudices of who I should be. That is how I learned that if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive. My poetry, my life, my work, my energies for struggle were not acceptable unless I pretended to match somebody else's norm. I learned that not only couldn't I succeed at that game, but the energy needed for that masquerade would be lost to my work. And there were babies to raise, students to teach. The Vietnam War was escalating, our cities were burning, more and more of our school kids were nodding out in the halls, junk

was overtaking our streets. We needed articulate power, not conformity. There were other strong Black workers whose visions were racked and silenced upon some imagined grid of narrow Blackness. Nor were Black women immune. At a national meeting of Black women for political action, a young civil rights activist who had been beaten and imprisoned in Mississippi only a few years before, was trashed and silenced as suspect because of her white husband. Some of us made it and some of us were lost to the struggle. It was a time of great hope and great expectation; it was also a time of great waste. That is history. We do not need to repeat these mistakes in the 80s.

The raw energy of Black determination released in the 60s powered changes in Black awareness and self-concepts and expectations. This energy is still being felt in movements for change among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped — among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society. That is a legacy of the 60s to ourselves and to others. But we must recognize that many of our high expectations of rapid revolutionary change did not in fact occur. And many of the gains that did are even now being dismantled. This is not a reason for despair, nor for rejection of the importance of those years. But we must face with clarity and insight the lessons to be learned from the oversimplification of any struggle for self-awareness and liberation, or we will not rally the force we need to face the multidimensional threats to our survival in the 80s.

There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone. We are not perfect, but we are stronger and wiser than the sum of our errors. Black people have been here before us and survived. We can read their lives like signposts on the road and find, as Bernice Reagon says so poignantly, that each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible. To learn from their mistakes is not to lessen our debt to them, nor to the hard work of becoming ourselves, and effective.

We lose our history so easily, what is not predigested for us by the *New York Times*, or the *Amsterdam News*, or *Time* magazine.

Maybe because we do not listen to our poets or to our fools, maybe because we do not listen to our mamas in ourselves. When I hear the deepest truths I speak coming out of my mouth sounding like my mother's, even remembering how I fought against her, I have to reassess both our relationship as well as the sources of my knowing. Which is not to say that I have to romanticize my mother in order to appreciate what she gave me — Woman, Black. We do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present. We do not have to suffer the waste of an amnesia that robs us of the lessons of the past rather than permit us to read them with pride as well as deep understanding.

We know what it is to be lied to, and we know how important it is not to lie to ourselves.

We are powerful because we have survived, and that is what it is all about — survival and growth.

Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust. If we are to keep the enormity of the forces aligned against us from establishing a false hierarchy of oppression, we must school ourselves to recognize that any attack against Blacks, any attack against women, is an attack against all of us who recognize that our interests are not being served by the systems we support. Each one of us here is a link in the connection between antipoor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people. I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for? Survival is not a theory. In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people? Insight must illuminate the particulars of our lives: who labors to make the bread we waste, or the energy it takes to make nuclear poisons which will not biodegrade for one thousand years; or who goes blind assembling the microtransistors in our inexpensive calculators?

We are women trying to knit a future in a country where an Equal Rights Amendment was defeated as subversive legisla-

tion. We are Lesbians and gay men who, as the most obvious target of the New Right, are threatened with castration, imprisonment, and death in the streets. And we know that our erasure only paves the way for erasure of other people of Color, of the old, of the poor, of all of those who do not fit that mythic dehumanizing norm.

Can we really still afford to be fighting each other?

We are Black people living in a time when the consciousness of our intended slaughter is all around us. People of Color are increasingly expendable, our government's policy both here and abroad. We are functioning under a government ready to repeat in El Salvador and Nicaragua the tragedy of Vietnam, a government which stands on the wrong side of every single battle for liberation taking place upon this globe; a government which has invaded and conquered (as I edit this piece) the fifty-three square mile sovereign state of Grenada, under the pretext that her 110,000 people pose a threat to the U.S. Our papers are filled with supposed concern for human rights in white communist Poland while we sanction by acceptance and military supply the systematic genocide of apartheid in South Africa, of murder and torture in Haiti and El Salvador. American advisory teams bolster repressive governments across Central and South America, and in Haiti, while *advisory* is only a code name preceding military aid.

Decisions to cut aid for the terminally ill, for the elderly, for dependent children, for food stamps, even school lunches, are being made by men with full stomachs who live in comfortable houses with two cars and umpteen tax shelters. None of them go hungry to bed at night. Recently, it was suggested that senior citizens be hired to work in atomic plants because they are close to the end of their lives anyway.

Can any one of us here still afford to believe that efforts to reclaim the future can be private or individual? Can any one here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?

Revolution is not a one-time event. It is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change

in established, outgrown responses; for instance, it is learning to address each other's difference with respect.

We share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable. We know what it is to be lied to. The 60s should teach us how important it is not to lie to ourselves. Not to believe that revolution is a one-time event, or something that happens around us rather than inside of us. Not to believe that freedom can belong to any one group of us without the others also being free. How important it is not to allow even our leaders to define us to ourselves, or to define our sources of power to us.

There is no Black person here who can afford to wait to be led into positive action for survival. Each one of us must look clearly and closely at the genuine particulars (conditions) of his or her life and decide where action and energy is needed and where it can be effective. Change is the immediate responsibility of each of us, wherever and however we are standing, in whatever arena we choose. For while we wait for another Malcolm, another Martin, another charismatic Black leader to validate our struggles, old Black people are freezing to death in tenements, Black children are being brutalized and slaughtered in the streets, or lobotomized by television, and the percentage of Black families living below the poverty line is higher today than in 1963.

And if we wait to put our future into the hands of some new messiah, what will happen when those leaders are shot, or discredited, or tried for murder, or called homosexual, or otherwise disempowered? Do we put our future on hold? What is that internalized and self-destructive barrier that keeps us from moving, that keeps us from coming together?

We who are Black are at an extraordinary point of choice within our lives. To refuse to participate in the shaping of our future is to give it up. Do not be misled into passivity either by false security (they don't mean me) or by despair (there's nothing we can do). Each of us must find our work and do it. Militancy no longer means guns at high noon, if it ever did. It means actively working for change, sometimes in the absence of

any surety that change is coming. It means doing the unromantic and tedious work necessary to forge meaningful coalitions, and it means recognizing which coalitions are possible and which coalitions are not. It means knowing that coalition, like unity, means the coming together of whole, self-actualized human beings, focused and believing, not fragmented automatons marching to a prescribed step. It means fighting despair.

And in the university, that is certainly no easy task, for each one of you by virtue of your being here will be deluged by opportunities to misname yourselves, to forget who you are, to forget where your real interests lie. Make no mistake, you will be courted; and nothing neutralizes creativity quicker than tokenism, that false sense of security fed by a myth of individual solutions. To paraphrase Malcolm — a Black woman attorney driving a Mercedes through Avenue Z in Brooklyn is still a “nigger bitch,” two words which never seem to go out of style.

You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness.

If our history has taught us anything, it is that action for change directed only against the external conditions of our oppressions is not enough. In order to be whole, we must recognize the despair oppression plants within each of us — that thin persistent voice that says our efforts are useless, it will never change, so why bother, accept it. And we must fight that inserted piece of self-destruction that lives and flourishes like a poison inside of us, unexamined until it makes us turn upon ourselves in each other. But we can put our finger down upon that loathing buried deep within each one of us and see who it encourages us to despise, and we can lessen its potency by the knowledge of our real connectedness, arcing across our differences.

Hopefully, we can learn from the 60s that we cannot afford to do our enemies' work by destroying each other.

What does it mean when an angry Black ballplayer — this happened in Illinois — curses a white heckler but pulls a knife on a Black one? What better way is there to police the streets of a minority community than to turn one generation against the other?

Referring to Black lesbians and gay men, the student president at Howard University says, on the occasion of a Gay Student Charter on campus, "The Black community has nothing to do with such filth — we will have to abandon *these people*." [italics mine] Abandon? Often without noticing, we absorb the racist belief that Black people are fitting targets for everybody's anger. We are closest to each other, and it is easier to vent fury upon each other than upon our enemies.

Of course, the young man at Howard was historically incorrect. As part of the Black community, he has a lot to do with "us." Some of our finest writers, organizers, artists and scholars in the 60s as well as today, have been lesbian and gay, and history will bear me out.

Over and over again in the 60s I was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was a Lesbian, because I was not a separatist, because some piece of me was not acceptable. Not because of my work but because of my identity. I had to learn to hold on to all the parts of me that served me, in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others. And I don't know what I'd say face to face with that young man at Howard University who says I'm filth because I identify women as my primary source of energy and support, except to say that it is my energy and the energy of other women very much like me which has contributed to his being where he is at this point. But I think he would not say it to my face because name-calling is always easiest when it is removed, academic. The move to render the presence of lesbians and gay men invisible in the intricate fabric of Black existence and survival is a move which contributes to fragmentation and weakness in the Black community.

In academic circles, as elsewhere, there is a kind of name-calling increasingly being used to keep young Black women in line. Often as soon as any young Black woman begins to recognize

that she is oppressed as a woman as well as a Black, she is called a lesbian no matter how she identifies herself sexually. "What do you mean you don't want to make coffee take notes wash dishes go to bed with me, you a lesbian or something?" And at the threat of such a dreaded taint, all too often she falls meekly into line, however covertly. But the word *lesbian* is only threatening to those Black women who are intimidated by their sexuality, or who allow themselves to be defined by it and from outside themselves. Black women in struggle from our own perspective, speaking up for ourselves, sharing close ties with one another politically and emotionally, are not the enemies of Black men. We are Black women who seek our own definitions, recognizing diversity among ourselves with respect. We have been around within our communities for a very long time, and we have played pivotal parts in the survival of those communities: from Hat Shep Sut through Harriet Tubman to Daisy Bates and Fannie Lou Hamer to Lorraine Hansberry to your Aunt Maydine to some of you who sit before me now.

In the 60s Black people wasted a lot of our substance fighting each other. We cannot afford to do that in the 80s, when Washington, D.C. has the highest infant mortality rate of any U.S. city, 60 percent of the Black community under twenty is unemployed and more are becoming unemployable, lynchings are on the increase, and less than half the registered Black voters voted in the last election.

How are you practicing what you preach — whatever you preach, and who exactly is listening? As Malcolm stressed, we are not responsible for our oppression, but we must be responsible for our own liberation. It is not going to be easy, but we have what we have learned and what we have been given that is useful. We have the power those who came before us have given us, to move beyond the place where they were standing. We have the trees, and water, and sun, and our children. Malcolm X does not live in the dry texts of his words as we read them; he lives in the energy we generate and use to move along the visions we share with him. We are making the future as well as bonding to survive the enormous pressures of the present, and that is what it means to be a part of history.

# Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger\*

*Where does the pain go when it goes away?\*\**

EVERY BLACK WOMAN in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers.

My Black woman's anger is a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret. I know how much of my life as a powerful feeling woman is laced through with this net of rage. It is an electric thread woven into every emotional tapestry upon which I set the essentials of my life — a boiling hot spring likely to erupt at any point, leaping out of my consciousness like a fire on the landscape. How to train that anger with accuracy rather than deny it has been one of the major tasks of my life.

Other Black women are not the root cause nor the source of that pool of anger. I know this, no matter what the particular situation may be between me and another Black woman at the moment. Then why does that anger unleash itself most tellingly against another Black woman at the least excuse? Why do I judge her in a more critical light than any other, becoming enraged when she does not measure up?

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\*\* From a poem by Dr. Gloria Joseph.

And if behind the object of my attack should lie the face of my own self, unaccepted, then what could possibly quench a fire fueled by such reciprocating passions?

When I started to write about the intensity of the angers between Black women, I found I had only begun to touch one tip of a three-pronged iceberg, the deepest understructure of which was Hatred, that societal deathwish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America. From that moment on we have been steeped in hatred – for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live. As children we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions. Echoes of it return as cruelty and anger in our dealings with each other. For each of us bears the face that hatred seeks, and we have each learned to be at home with cruelty because we have survived so much of it within our own lives.

Before I can write about Black women's anger, I must write about the poisonous seepage of hatred that fuels that anger, and of the cruelty that is spawned when they meet.

I have found this out by scrutinizing my own expectations of other Black women, by following the threads of my own rage at Blackwomanness back into the hatred and despisal that embroidered my life with fire long before I knew where that hatred came from, or why it was being heaped upon me. Children know only themselves as reasons for the happenings in their lives. So of course as a child I decided there must be something terribly wrong with me that inspired such contempt. The bus driver didn't look at other people like that. All the things my mother had warned me not to do and be that I had gone right ahead and done and been must be to blame.

To search for power within myself means I must be willing to move through being afraid to whatever lies beyond. If I look at my most vulnerable places and acknowledge the pain I have felt, I can remove the source of that pain from my enemies' arsenals. My history cannot be used to feather my enemies' arrows then, and that lessens their power over me. Nothing I accept about

myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.

America's measurement of me has lain like a barrier across the realization of my own powers. It was a barrier which I had to examine and dismantle, piece by painful piece, in order to use my energies fully and creatively. It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another.

But what is the nature of that reluctance to connect with each other on any but the most superficial levels? What is the source of that mistrust and distance maintained between Black women?

I don't like to talk about hate. I don't like to remember the cancellation and hatred, heavy as my wished-for death, seen in the eyes of so many white people from the time I could see. It was echoed in newspapers and movies and holy pictures and comic books and Amos 'n Andy radio programs. I had no tools to dissect it, no language to name it.

The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve, her arms full of shopping bags, christmas-heavy. The wet smell of winter clothes, the train's lurching. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsued body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us — probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds

on to a strap in the speeding train. Born and bred a New York City child, I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down. No word has been spoken. I'm afraid to say anything to my mother because I don't know what I've done. I look at the sides of my snowpants, secretly. Is there something on them? Something's going on here I do not understand, but I will never forget it. Her eyes. The flared nostrils. The hate.

My three-year-old eyes ache from the machinery used to test them. My forehead is sore. I have been poked and prodded in the eyes and stared into all morning. I huddle into the tall metal and leather chair, frightened and miserable and wanting my mother. On the other side of the eye clinic's examining room, a group of young white men in white coats discuss my peculiar eyes. Only one voice remains in my memory. "From the looks of her she's probably simple, too." They all laugh. One of them comes over to me, enunciating slowly and carefully, "OK, girlie, go wait outside now." He pats me on the cheek. I am grateful for the absence of harshness.

The Story Hour librarian reading *Little Black Sambo*. Her white fingers hold up the little book about a shoebottom-faced little boy with big red lips and many pigtails and a hatful of butter. I remember the pictures hurting me and my thinking again there must be something wrong with me because everybody else is laughing and besides the library downtown has given this little book a special prize, the library lady tells us.

#### SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU, ANYWAY? DON'T BE SO SENSITIVE!

Sixth grade in a new catholic school and I am the first Black student. The white girls laugh at my braided hair. The nun sends a note home to my mother saying that "pigtails are not appropriate attire for school," and that I should learn to comb my hair in "a more becoming style."

Lexie Goldman and I on Lexington Avenue, our adolescent faces flushed from springtime and our dash out of high school. We stop at a luncheonette, ask for water. The woman behind the counter smiles at Lexie. Gives us water. Lexie's in a glass. Mine in a paper cup. Afterward we joke about mine being portable. Too loudly.

My first interview for a part-time job after school. An optical company on Nassau Street has called my school and asked for one of its students. The man behind the counter reads my application and then looks up at me, surprised by my Black face. His eyes remind me of the woman on the train when I was five. Then something else is added, as he looks me up and down, pausing at my breasts.

My light-skinned mother kept me alive within an environment where my life was not a high priority. She used whatever methods she had at hand, few as they were. She never talked about color. My mother was a very brave woman, born in the West Indies, unprepared for America. And she disarmed me with her silences. Somewhere I knew it was a lie that nobody else noticed color. Me, darker than my two sisters. My father, darkest of all. I was always jealous of my sisters because my mother thought they were such good girls, whereas I was bad, always in trouble. "Full of the devil," she used to say. They were neat, I was untidy. They were quiet, I was noisy. They were well-behaved, I was rowdy. They took piano lessons and won prizes in deportment. I stole money from my father's pockets and broke my ankle sledding downhill. They were good-looking, I was dark. Bad, mischievous, a born troublemaker if ever there was one.

Did *bad* mean *Black*? The endless scrubbing with lemon juice in the cracks and crevices of my ripening, darkening, body. And oh, the sins of my dark elbows and knees, my gums and nipples, the folds of my neck and the cave of my armpits!

The hands that grab at me from behind the stairwell are Black hands. Boys' hands, punching, rubbing, pinching, pulling at my dress. I hurl the garbage bag I'm carrying into the ashcan and jerk away, fleeing back upstairs. Hoots follow me. "That's right, you better run, you ugly yaller bitch, just wait!" Obviously, color was relative.

My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example. Her silences also taught me isolation, fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness. My survival lay in learning

how to use the weapons she gave me, also, to fight against those things within myself, unnamed.

And survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost. My mother bore me into life as if etching an angry message into marble. Yet I survived the hatred around me because my mother made me know, by oblique reference, that no matter what went on at home, outside shouldn't oughta be the way it was. But since it was that way outside, I moved in a fen of unexplained anger that encircled me and spilled out against whomever was closest that shared those hated selves. Of course I did not realize it at the time. That anger lay like a pool of acid deep inside me, and whenever I felt deeply, I felt it, attaching itself in the strangest places. Upon those as powerless as I. My first friend asking, "Why do you go around hitting all the time? Is that the only way you know how to be friends?

What other creature in the world besides the Black woman has had to build the knowledge of so much hatred into her survival and keep going?

It is shortly after the Civil War. In a greystone hospital on 110th Street in New York City a woman is screaming. She is Black, and healthy, and has been brought here from the South. I do not know her name. Her baby is ready to be born. But her legs have been tied together out of a curiosity masquerading as science. Her baby births itself to death against her bone.

Where are you seven-year-old Elizabeth Eckford of Little Rock, Arkansas? It is a bright Monday morning and you are on your way to your first day of school, draped in spittle, white hatred running down your pink sweater and a white mother's twisted mouth working — savage, inhuman — wide over your jaunty braids held high by their pink ribbons.

Numvulo has walked five days from the bleak place where the lorry deposited her. She stands in the Capetown, South Africa rain, her bare feet in the bulldozer tracks where her house once was. She picks up a piece of soaked cardboard that once covered her table and holds it over the head of her baby strapped to her

back. Soon she will be arrested and taken back to the reserve, where she does not even speak the language. She will never get permission to live near her husband.

The bicentennial, in Washington, D.C. Two ample Black women stand guard over household belonging piled haphazardly onto a sidewalk in front of a house. Furniture, toys, bundles of clothes. One woman absently rocks a toy horse with the toe of her shoe, back and forth. Across the street on the side of a building opposite is a sign painted in story-high black letters, GOD HATES YOU.

Addie Mae Collins, Carol Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair. Four little Black girls, none more than ten years of age, singing their last autumn song in a Sunday church school in Birmingham, Alabama. After the explosion clears it is not possible to tell which patent leather Sunday shoe belongs to which found leg.

What other human being absorbs so much virulent hostility and still functions?

Black women have a history of the use and sharing of power, from the Amazon legions of Dahomey through the Ashanti warrior queen Yaa Asantewaa and the freedom fighter Harriet Tubman, to the economically powerful market-women guilds of present West Africa. We have a tradition of closeness and mutual care and support, from the all-woman courts of the Queen Mothers of Benin to the present-day Sisterhood of the Good Death, a community of old women in Brazil who, as escaped slaves, provided escape and refuge for other enslaved women, and who now care for each other.\*

We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred. As African women together, we once made the earth fertile with our fingers. We can make the earth bear as well as mount the first line of fire in defense of the King. And having killed, in his

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\* Unpublished paper by Samella Lewis.

name and in our own (Harriet's rifle speaks, shouldered in the grim marsh), we still know that the power to kill is less than the power to create, for it produces an ending rather than the beginning of something new.

Anger — a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred — an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used, does not destroy. Hatred does.

Racism and sexism are grown-up words. Black children in america cannot avoid these distortions in their living and, too often, do not have the words for naming them. But both are correctly perceived as hatred.

Growing up, metabolizing hatred like a daily bread. Because I am Black, because I am woman, because I am not Black enough, because I am not some particular fantasy of a woman, because I AM. On such a consistent diet, one can eventually come to value the hatred of one's enemies more than one values the love of friends, for that hatred becomes the source of anger, and anger is a powerful fuel.

And true, sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive; it burns with a bright and undiminished flame. Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge. More useful than hatred, but still limited. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. Such strength does not focus upon what lies ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it — hatred. And hatred is a deathwish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else.

To grow up metabolizing hatred like daily bread means that eventually every human interaction becomes tainted with the negative passion and intensity of its by-products — anger and cruelty.

We are African women and we know, in our blood's telling, the tenderness with which our foremothers held each other. It is that connection which we are seeking. We have the stories of Black women who healed each other's wounds, raised each other's children, fought each other's battles, tilled each other's

earth, and eased each other's passages into life and into death. We know the possibilities of support and connection for which we all yearn, and about which we dream so often. We have a growing Black women's literature which is richly evocative of these possibilities and connections. But connections between Black women are not automatic by virtue of our similarities, and the possibilities of genuine communication between us are not easily achieved.

Often we give lip service to the idea of mutual support and connection between Black women because we have not yet crossed the barriers to these possibilities, nor fully explored the angers and fears that keep us from realizing the power of a real Black sisterhood. And to acknowledge our dreams is to sometimes acknowledge the distance between those dreams and our present situation. Acknowledged, our dreams can shape the realities of our future, if we arm them with the hard work and scrutiny of now. We cannot settle for the pretenses of connection, or for parodies of self-love. We cannot continue to evade each other on the deepest levels because we fear each other's angers, nor continue to believe that respect means never looking directly nor with openness into another Black woman's eyes.

*I was not meant to be alone and without you who understand.\**

## I.

I know the anger that lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other.

As Black women, we have shared so many similar experiences. Why doesn't this commonality bring us closer together instead of setting us at each other's throats with weapons well-honed by familiarity?

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\* From "Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978" by Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith in *Conditions: Four* (1979).

The anger with which I meet another Black woman's slightest deviation from my immediate need or desire or concept of a proper response is a deep and hurtful anger, chosen only in the sense of a choice of desperation — reckless through despair. That anger which masks my pain that we are so separate who should most be together — my pain — that she could perhaps not need me as much as I need her, or see me through the blunted eye of the haters, that eye I know so well from my own distorted images of her. Erase or be erased!

I stand in the Public Library waiting to be recognized by the Black woman library clerk seated a few feet behind the desk. She seems engrossed in a book, beautiful in her youth and self-assuredness. I straighten my glasses, giving a tiny shake to my bangles in the process just in case she has not seen me, but I somehow know she has. Otherwise motionless, she slowly turns her head and looks up. Her eyes cross mine with a look of such incidental hostility that I feel pilloried to the wall. Two male patrons enter behind me. At that, she rises and moves toward me. "Yes," she says, with no inflection at all, her eyes carefully elsewhere. I've never seen this young woman before in my life. I think to myself, "now that's what you call an attitude," recognizing the rising tension inside of me.

The art, beyond insolence, of the Black girl's face as she cuts her elegant sidelong glance at me. What makes her eyes slide off of mine? What does she see that angers her so, or infuriates her, or disgusts her? Why do I want to break her face off when her eyes do not meet mine? Why does she wear my sister's face? My daughter's mouth turned down about to suck itself in? The eyes of a furious and rejected lover? Why do I dream I cradle you at night? Divide your limbs between the food bowls of my least favorite animals? Keep vigil for you night after terrible night, wondering? Oh sister, where is that dark rich land we wanted to wander through together?

*Hate said the voice wired in 3/4 time printed in dirty type all the views fit to kill, me and you, me or you. And whose future image have we destroyed — your face or mine — without either how shall I look again at both — lacking either is lacking myself.*

*And if I trust you what pale dragon will you feed our brown flesh to from fear, self-preservation, or to what brothered altar all innocent of loving that has no place to go and so becomes another face of terror or of hate?*

*A dumb beast endlessly recording inside the poisonous attacks of silence – meat gone wrong – what could ever grow in that dim lair and how does the child convert from sacrifice to liar?*

My blood sister, across her living room from me. Sitting back in her chair while I talk earnestly, trying to reach her, trying to alter the perceptions of me that cause her so much pain. Slowly, carefully, and coldly, so I will not miss one single scathing word, she says, "I am not interested in understanding whatever you're trying to say – I don't care to hear it."

I have never gotten over the anger that you did not want me as a sister, nor an ally, nor even a diversion one cut above the cat. You have never gotten over the anger that I appeared at all. And that I am different, but not different enough. One woman has eyes like my sister who never forgave me for appearing before she had a chance to win her mother's love, as if anybody ever could. Another woman wears the high cheekbones of my other sister who wanted to lead but had only been taught to obey, so now she is dedicated to ruling by obedience, a passive vision.

Who did we expect the other to be who is not yet at peace with our own selves? I cannot shut you out the way I shut the others out so maybe I can destroy you. Must destroy you?

We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting. Because we survived and survival breeds desire for more self. A face we never stopped wanting at the same time as we try to obliterate it.

Why don't we meet each other's eyes? Do we expect betrayal in each other's gaze, or recognition?

If just once we were to feel the pain of all Black women's blood flooding up to drown us! I stayed afloat buoyed by an anger so deep at my loneliness that I could only move toward further survival.

*When one cannot influence a situation it is an act of wisdom to withdraw.\**

Every Black woman in america has survived several lifetimes of hatred, where even in the candy store cases of our childhood, little brown niggerbaby candies testified against us. We survived the wind-driven spittle on our child's shoe and pink flesh-colored bandaids, attempted rapes on rooftops and the prodding fingers of the super's boy, seeing our girlfriends blown to bits in Sunday School, and we absorbed that loathing as a natural state. We had to metabolize such hatred that our cells have learned to live upon it because we had to, or die of it. Old King Mithridates learned to eat arsenic bit by bit and so outwitted his poisoners, but I'd have hated to kiss him upon his lips! Now we deny such hatred ever existed because we have learned to neutralize it through ourselves, and the catabolic process throws off waste products of fury even when we love.

*I see hatred*

*I am bathed in it, drowning in it  
since almost the beginning of my life  
it has been the air I breathe  
the food I eat, the content of my perceptions;  
the single most constant fact of my existence  
is their hatred . . .*

*I am too young for my history\*\**

It is not that Black women shed each other's psychic blood so easily, but that we have ourselves bled so often, the pain of bloodshed becomes almost commonplace. If I have learned to eat my own flesh in the forest — starving, keening, learning the lesson of the she-wolf who chews off her own paw to leave the trap behind — if I must drink my own blood, thirsting, why should I stop at yours until your dear dead arms hang like withered garlands upon my breast and I weep for your going, oh my sister, I grieve for our gone.

When an error of oversight allows one of us to escape without the full protective dose of fury and air of contemptuous disdain,

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\* From *The I Ching*.

\*\* From "Nigger" by Judy Dothard Simmons in *Decent Intentions* (Blind Beggar Press, P.O. Box 437, Williamsbridge Station, Bronx 10467, 1983).

when she approaches us without a measure of distrust and reserve flowing from her pores, or without her eyes coloring each appraisal of us with that unrelenting sharpness and suspicion reserved only for each other, when she approaches without sufficient caution, then she is cursed by the first accusation of derision — *naïve* — meaning not programmed for defensive attack before inquiry. Even more than *confused*, *naïve* is the ultimate wipeout between us.

Black women eating our own hearts out for nourishment in an empty house empty compound empty city in an empty season, and for each of us one year the spring will not return — we learned to savor the taste of our own flesh before any other because that was all that was allowed us. And we have become to each other unmentionably dear and immeasurably dangerous. I am writing about an anger so huge and implacable, so corrosive, it must destroy what it most needs for its own solution, dissolution, resolution. Here we are attempting to address each others' eyes directly. Even if our words taste sharp as the edge of a lost woman's voice, we are speaking.

## II

A Black woman, working her years, committed to life as she lives it, the children fed and clothed and loved as she can into some strength that does not allow them to encyst like horse chestnuts, knowing all the time from the start that she must either kill them or eventually send them into the deathlands, the white labyrinth.

I sat at our Thanksgiving Day table listening to my daughter talk about the university and the horrors of determined invisibility. Over the years I have recorded her dreams of death at their hands, sometimes glorious, sometimes cheap. She tells me of the teachers who refuse to understand simple questions, who look at her as if she were a benign — meaning powerless — but unsightly tumor. She weeps. I hold her. I tell her to remember the university doesn't own her, that she has a home. But I have let her go into that jungle of ghosts, having taught her only how

to be fleet of foot, how to whistle, how to love, and how not to run. Unless she has to. It is never enough.

Black women give our children forth into a hatred that seared our own young days with bewilderment, hoping we have taught them something they can use to fashion their own new and less costly pathways to survival. Knowing I did not slit their throats at birth tear out the tiny beating heart with my own despairing teeth the way some sisters did in the slaveships chained to corp-ses and therefore was I committed to this very moment.

*The price of increasing power is increasing opposition.\**

I sat listening to my girl talk about the bent world she was determined to reenter in spite of all she was saying, because she views a knowledge of that world as part of an arsenal which she can use to change it all. I listened, hiding my pained need to snatch her back into the web of my smaller protections. I sat watching while she worked it out bit by hurtful bit — what she really wanted — feeling her rage wax and wane, feeling her anger building against me because I could not help her do it nor do it for her, nor would she allow that.

All mothers see their daughters leaving. Black mothers see it happening as a sacrifice through the veil of hatred hung like sheets of lava in the pathway before their daughters. All daughters see their mothers leaving. Black girls see it happening through a veil of threatened isolation no fire of trusting pierces.

Last month I held another Black woman in my arms as she sobbed out the grief and deprivation of her mother's death. Her inconsolable loss — the emptiness of the emotional landscape she was seeing in front of her — spoke out of her mouth from a place of untouchable aloneness that could never admit another Black woman close enough again to matter. "The world is divided into two kinds of people," she said, "those who have mothers and those who don't. And I don't have a mother anymore." What I heard her saying was that no other Black woman would ever see who she was, ever trust or be trusted by her again. I heard in her cry of loneliness the source of the romance between Black women and our mommas.

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\* From *The I Ching*.

Little Black girls, tutored by hate into wanting to become anything else. We cut our eyes at sister because she can only reflect what everybody else except momma seemed to know — that we were hateful, or ugly, or worthless, but certainly unblessed. We were not boys and we were not white, so we counted for less than nothing, except to our mommas.

If we can learn to give ourselves the recognition and acceptance that we have come to expect only from our mommas, Black women will be able to see each other much more clearly and deal with each other much more directly.

I think about the harshness that exists so often within the least encounter between Black women, the judgment and the sizing up, that cruel refusal to connect. I know sometimes I feel like it is worth my life to disagree with another Black woman. Better to ignore her, withdraw from her, go around her, just don't deal with her. Not just because she irritates me, but because she might destroy me with the cruel force of her response to what must feel like an affront, namely me. Or I might destroy her with the force of mine, for the very same reason. The fears are equal.

Once I can absorb the particulars of my life as a Black woman, and multiply them by my two children and all the days of our collective Black lives, and I do not falter beneath the weight — what Black woman is not a celebration, like water, like sunlight, like rock — is it any wonder that my voice is harsh? Now to require of myself the effort of awareness, so that harshness will not function in the places it is least deserved — toward my sisters.

Why do Black women reserve a particular voice of fury and disappointment for each other? Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation? We reduce one another to our own lowest common denominator, and then we proceed to try and obliterate what we most desire to love and touch, the problematic self, unclaimed but fiercely guarded from the other.

This cruelty between us, this harshness, is a piece of the legacy of hate with which we were inoculated from the time we were

born by those who intended it to be an injection of death. But we adapted, learned to take it in and use it, unscrutinized. Yet at what cost! In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest.

How do I alter course so each Black woman's face I meet is not the face of my mother or my killer?

*I loved you. I dreamed about you. I talked to you for hours in my sleep sitting under a silk-cotton tree our arms around each other or braiding each other's hair or oiling each other's backs, and every time I run into you on the street or at the post office or behind the Medicaid desk I want to wring your neck.*

There are so many occasions in each of our lives for righteous fury, multiplied and dividing.

• Black women being told that we can be somehow better, and are worse, but never equal. To Black men. To other women. To human beings.

• The white academic feminist who tells me she is so glad *This Bridge Called My Back\** exists, because now it gives her a chance to deal with racism without having to face the harshness of Black undiluted by other colors. What she means is she does not have to examine her own specific terror and loathing of Blackness, nor deal with the angers of Black women. So get away with your dirty ugly mean faces, all screwed up all the time!

• The racist filmstrip artist who I thought I had handled so patiently and well. I didn't blow up his damned machine. I explained how his racial blindness made me feel and how his film could be altered to have some meaning. He probably learned something about showing Black images. Then I came home and almost tore up my house and my lover because some invitations happened to be misprinted. Not seeing where the charge of rage was born.

• A convicted Black man, a torturer of women and children, army-trained to be a killer, writes in his journal in his death cell:

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\* *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York, 1984).

"I am the type of person you are most likely to find driving a Mercedes and sitting in the executive offices of 100 big corporations." And he's right. Except he's Black.

How do we keep from releasing our angers at them upon ourselves and each other? How do I free myself from this poison I was force-fed like a Strasburg goose until I vomited anger at the least scent of anything nourishing, *oh my sister the belligerent lift of your shoulder the breath of your hair . . .* We each learned the craft of destruction. It is all they knew to allow us, yet look how our words are finding each other again.

It is difficult to construct a wholesomeness model when we are surrounded with synonyms for filth. But not impossible. We have, after all, survived for a reason. (How do I define my impact upon this earth?) I begin by searching for the right questions.

Dear Leora,

For two Black women to enter an analytic or therapeutic relationship means beginning an essentially uncharted and insecure journey. There are no prototypes, no models, no objectively accessible body of experience other than ourselves by which to examine the specific dynamics of our interactions as Black women. Yet this interaction can affect all the other psychic matter attended profoundly. It is to scrutinize that very interaction that I sought you out professionally, and I have come to see that it means picking my way through our similarities and our differences, as well as through our histories of calculated mistrust and desire.

Because it has not been done before or at least not been noted, this particular scrutiny is painful and fraught with the vulnerability of all psychic scrutinies plus all of the pitfalls created by our being Black women in a white male world, and Black women who have survived. This is a scrutiny often sidestepped or considered unimportant or beside the point. EXAMPLE: I can't tell you how many good white psychwomen have said to me, "Why should it matter if I am Black or white?" who would never think of

saying, "Why does it matter if I am female or male?" EXAMPLE: I don't know who you are in supervision with, but I can bet it's not with another Black woman.

So this territory between us feels new and frightening as well as urgent, rigged with detonating pieces of our own individual racial histories which neither of us chose but which each of us bears the scars from. And those are particular to each of us. But there is a history which we share because we are Black women in a racist sexist cauldron, and that means some part of this journey is yours, also.

I have many troubled areas of self that will be neither new nor problematic to you as a trained and capable psychperson. I think you are a brave woman and I respect that, yet I doubt that your training can have prepared you to explore the tangle of need, fear, distrust, despair, and hope which operates between us, and certainly not to the depth necessary. Because neither of us is male nor white, we belong to a group of human beings that has not been thought worthy of that kind of study. So we have only who we are, with or without the courage to use those selves for further exploration and clarification of how what lies between us as Black women affects us and the work we do together.

Yet if we do not do it here between us, each one of us will have to do it somewhere else, sometime.

I know these things: I do not yet know what to do about them. But I do want to make them fit together to serve my life and my work, and I don't mean merely in a way that feels safe. I don't know how they can further and illuminate your life and work, but I know they can. It is sometimes both the curse and the blessing of the poet to perceive without yet being able to order those perceptions, and that is another name for Chaos.

But of course it is out of Chaos that new worlds are born.

I look forward to our meeting eye to eye.

Audre

### III

There has been so much death and loss around me recently, without metaphor or redeeming symbol, that sometimes I feel trapped into one idiom only — that one of suffering and its codicil, to bear. The same problem exists with anger. I have processed too much of it recently, or else the machinery is slowing down or becoming less efficient, and it creeps into my most crucial interchanges.

Perhaps this is why it is often easier for Black women to interact with white women, even though those interactions are often a dead end emotionally. For with white women there is a middle depth of interaction possible and sustainable, an emotional limit to relationships of self upon self acknowledged.

Now why is this not so with Frances, who is white, and whom I meet at a depth beyond anyone? When I speak of Frances and me I am talking about a relationship not only of great depth but one of great breadth also, a totaling of differences without merging. I am also speaking of a love shaped by our mutual commitment to hard work and confrontation over many years, each of us refusing to settle for what was easy, or simple, or acceptably convenient.

That middle depth of relationship more usually possible between Black and white women, however, is less threatening than the tangle of unexplored needs and furies that face any two Black women who seek to engage each other directly, emotionally, no matter what the context of their relationship may be. This holds true for office workers and political activists as well as lovers. But it is through threading this tangle that new visions of self and possibility between Black women emerge. Again, I am speaking here of social relationships, for it is crucial that we examine dynamics between women who are not lovers as well as between women who are.

I ask myself, do I ever use my war against racism to avoid other even more unanswerable pain? And if so, doesn't that make the energy behind my battles against racism sometimes more tenuous, or less clearheaded, or subject to unexpected stresses and disappointments? White people can never truly

validate us. For example: At this point in time, were racism to be totally eradicated from those middle range relationships between Black women and white women, those relationships might become deeper, but they would still never satisfy our particular Black woman's need for one another, given our shared knowledge and traditions and history. There are two very different struggles involved here. One is the war against racism in white people, and the other is the need for Black women to confront and wade through the racist constructs underlying our deprivation of each other. And these battles are not at all the same.

But sometimes it feels like better a righteous fury than the dull ache of loss, loss, loss. My daughter leaving her time of daughterhood. Friends going away in one way or another.

*. . . as those seemingly alike mature, nature emphasizes their uniqueness and the differences become more obvious.\**

How often have I demanded from another Black woman what I had not dared to give myself – acceptance, faith, enough space to consider change? How often have I asked her to leap across difference, suspicion, distrust, old pain? How many times have I expected her to jump the hideous gaps of our learned despisals alone, like an animal trained through blindness to ignore the precipice? How many times have I forgotten to ask this question?

Am I not reaching out for you in the only language I know? Are you reaching for me in your only salvaged tongue? If I try to hear yours across our differences does/will that mean you can hear mine?

Do we explore these questions or do we settle for that secret isolation which is the learned tolerance of deprivation of each other – that longing for each other's laughter, dark ease, sharing, and permission to be ourselves that we do not admit to feeling, usually, because then we would have to admit the lack; and the pain of that lacking, persistent as a low-grade fever and as debilitating?

Do we reenact these crucifixions upon each other, the avoidance, the cruelty, the judgments, because we have not

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\* From *The I Ching*.

been allowed Black goddesses, Black heroines; because we have not been allowed to see our mothers and our selves in their/our own magnificence until that magnificence became part of our blood and bone? One of the functions of hatred is certainly to mask and distort the beauty which is power in ourselves.

I am hungry for Black women who will not turn from me in anger and contempt even before they know me or hear what I have to say. I am hungry for Black women who will not turn away from me even if they do not agree with what I say. We are, after all, talking about different combinations of the same borrowed sounds.

Sometimes exploring our differences feels like marching out to war. I hurl myself with trepidation into the orbit of every Black woman I want to reach, advancing with the best of what I have to offer held out at arms length before me — myself. Does it feel different to her? At the same time as I am terrified, expecting betrayal, rejection, the condemnations of laughter, is she feeling judged by me?

Most of the Black women I know think I cry too much, or that I'm too public about it. I've been told that crying makes me seem soft and therefore of little consequence. As if our softness has to be the price we pay out for power, rather than simply the one that's paid most easily and most often.

I fight nightmare images inside my own self, see them, own them, know they did not destroy me before and will not destroy me now if I speak them out, admit how they have scarred me, that my mother taught me to survive at the same time as she taught me to fear my own Blackness. "Don't trust white people because they mean us no good and don't trust anyone darker than you because their hearts are as Black as their faces." (And where did that leave me, the darkest one?) It is painful even now to write it down. How many messages like that come down to all of us, and in how many different voices, how many different ways? And how can we expunge these messages from our consciousness without first recognizing what it was they were saying, and how destructive they were?

## IV

What does it take to be tough? Learned cruelty?

Now there is bound to be a voice saying that Black women have always helped one another, haven't we? And that is the paradox of our inner conflict. We have a strong and ancient tradition of bonding and mutual support, and the memorized threads of that tradition exist within each of us, in opposition to the anger and suspicion engendered by self-hate.

*When the world moved against me with a disapproving frown / It was sister put the ground back under my feet.\**

Hearing those words sung has always provoked the most profound and poignant sense of loss within me for something I wanted to feel and could not because it had never happened for me. There are some Black women for whom it has. For others of us, that sense of being able to depend upon rock bottom support from our sisters is something we dream about and work toward, knowing it is possible, but also very problematic across the realities of fear and suspicion lying between us.

Our anger, tempered over survival fires, shuttered behind downcast eyelids, or else blazing out of our eyes at the oddest times. Looking up from between the legs of a lover, over a notebook in the middle of a lecture and I almost lost my train of thought, ringing up groceries in the supermarket, filling out the form behind the unemployment office window, stepping out of a cab in the middle of Broadway on the arm of a businessman from Lagos, sweeping ahead of me into a shop as I open the door, looking into each other's eyes for a split second only – furious, cutting, sisters. My daughter asking me all the time when she was a little girl, "Are you angry about something, Mommy?"

As Black women, we have wasted our angers too often, buried them, called them someone else's, cast them wildly into oceans of racism and sexism from which no vibration resounded, hurled them into each other's teeth and then ducked to avoid the impact. But by and large, we avoid open expression of them,

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\* From "Every Woman Ever Loved A Woman" by Bernice Johnson Reagon, song performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock.

or cordon them off in a rigid and unapproachable politeness. The rage that feels illicit or unjustified is kept secret, unnamed, and preserved forever. We are stuffed with furies, against ourselves, against each other, terrified to examine them lest we find ourselves in bold print fingered and named what we have always felt and even sometimes preferred ourselves to be — alone. And certainly, there are enough occasions in all our lives where we can use our anger righteously, enough for many lifetimes. We can avoid confrontation with each other very readily. It is so much easier to examine our anger within situations that are (relatively) clearcut and emotionally unloaded. It is so much easier to express our anger in those middle depth relationships that do not threaten genuine self-exposure. And yet always that hunger for the substance known, a hunger for the real shared, for the sister who shares.

It is hard to stand up in the teeth of white dismissal and aggression, of gender hatred and attack. It is so much harder to tackle face-on the rejection of Black women who may be seeing in my face some face they have not discarded in their own mirror, who see in my eyes the shape they have come to fear may be their own. So often this fear is stoked between Black women by the feared loss of a male companion, present or sought after. For we have also been taught that a man acquired was the sole measure of success, and yet they almost never stay.

One Black woman sits and silently judges another, how she looks, how she acts, how she impresses others. The first woman's scales are weighted against herself. She is measuring the impossible. She is measuring the self she does not fully want to be. She does not want to accept the contradictions, nor the beauty. She wishes the other woman would go away. She wishes the other woman would become someone else, anyone other than another Black woman. She has enough trouble dealing with being herself. "Why don't you learn to fly straight," she says to the other woman. "Don't you understand what your poor showing says about us all? If I could fly I'd certainly do a better job than *that*. Can't you put on a more together show? The white girls do it. Maybe we could get one to show you

how." The other woman cannot speak. She is too busy keeping herself from crashing upon the ground. She will not cry the tears which are hardening into little sharp stones that spit from her eyes and implant themselves in the first woman's heart, who quickly heals over them and identifies them as the source of her pain.

## V

There are myths of self-protection that hold us separate from each other and breed harshness and cruelty where we most need softness and understanding.

1. That courtesy or politeness require our not noticing each other directly, only with the most covert of evaluating glances. At all costs, we must avoid the image of our fear. "How beautiful your mouth is" might well be heard as "Look at those big lips." We maintain a discreet distance between each other also because that distance between us makes me less you, makes you less me.

When there is no connection at all between people, then anger is a way of bringing them closer together, of making contact. But when there is a great deal of connectedness that is problematic or threatening or unacknowledged, then anger is a way of keeping people separate, of putting distance between us.

2. That because we sometimes rise to each other's defense against outsiders, we do not need to look at devaluation and dismissal among ourselves. Support against outsiders is very different from cherishing each other. Often it is a case of "like needs like." It doesn't mean we have to appreciate that *like* or our need of it, even when that *like* is the only thin line between dying and living.

For if I take the white world's estimation of me as Black-woman-synonymous-with-garbage to heart, then deep down inside myself I will always believe that I am truly good for nothing. But it is very hard to look absorbed hatred in the face. It is easier to see you as good for nothing because you are like me. So when you support me because you are like me, that merely confirms that you are nothing too, just like me. It's a no-win position, a

case of nothing supporting nothing and someone's gonna have to pay for that one, and it sure ain't gonna be me! When I can recognize my worth, I can recognize yours.

3. That perfection is possible, a correct expectation from ourselves and each other, and the only terms of acceptance, humanness. (Note how very useful that makes us to the external institutions!) If you are like me, then you will have to be a lot better than I am in order to even be good enough. And you can't be because no matter how good you are you're still a Black woman, just like me. (Who does she think she is?) So any act or idea that I could accept or at least examine from anyone else is not even tolerable if it comes from you, my mirror image. If you are not THEIR image of perfection, and you can't ever be because you are a Black woman, then you are a reflection upon me. We are never good enough for each other. All your faults become magnified reflections of my own threatening inadequacies. I must attack you first before our enemies confuse us with each other. But they will anyway.

*Oh mother, why were we armed to fight with cloud-wreathed swords and javelins of dust? "Just who do you think you are, anyway?" Who I am most afraid of (never) meeting.*

## VI

The language by which we have been taught to dismiss ourselves and our feelings as suspect is the same language we use to dismiss and suspect each other. Too pretty — too ugly. Too Black — too white. Wrong. I already know that. Who says so. You're too questionable for me to hear you. You speak THEIR language. You don't speak THEIR language. Who do you think you are? You think you're better than anybody else? Get out of my face.

We refuse to give up the artificial distances between us, or to examine our real differences for creative exchange. I'm too different for us to communicate. Meaning, I must establish myself as not-you. And the road to anger is paved with our unexpressed fear of each other's judgment. We have not been allowed to experience each other freely as Black women in

america; we come to each other coated in myths, stereotypes, and expectations from the outside, definitions not our own. "You are my reference group, but I have never worked with you." How are you judging me? As Black as you? Blacker than you? Not Black enough? Whichever, I am going to be found wanting in some way . . .

We are Black women, defined as never-good-enough. I must overcome that by becoming better than you. If I expect enough from myself, then maybe I can become different from what they say we are, different from you. If I become different enough, then maybe I won't be a "nigger bitch" anymore. If I make you different enough from me, then I won't need you so much. I will become strong, the best, excel in everything, become the very best because I don't dare to be anything else. It is my only chance to become good enough to become human.

If I am myself, then you cannot accept me. But if you can accept me, that means I am what you would like to be, and then I'm not "the real thing." But then neither are you. **WILL THE REAL BLACK WOMAN PLEASE STAND UP?**

We cherish our guilty secret, buried under exquisite clothing and expensive makeup and bleaching creams (yes, still!) and hair straighteners masquerading as permanent waves. The killer instinct toward any one of us who deviates from the proscribed cover is precise and deadly.

Acting like an insider and feeling like the outsider, preserving our self-rejection as Black women at the same time as we're getting over — we think. And political work will not save our souls, no matter how correct and necessary that work is. Yet it is true that without political work we cannot hope to survive long enough to effect any change. And self-empowerment is the most deeply political work there is, and the most difficult.

When we do not attempt to name the confusion of feelings which exist between sisters, we act them out in hundreds of hurtful and unproductive ways. Never speaking from the old pain, to beyond. As if we have made a secret pact between ourselves not to speak, for the expression of that unexamined pain might be accompanied by other ancient and unexpressed hurtings embedded in the stored-up anger we have not ex-

pressed. And that anger, as we know from our flayed egos of childhood, is armed with a powerful cruelty learned in the bleakness of too-early battles for survival. "You can't take it, huh!" The Dozens. A Black game of supposedly friendly rivalry and name-calling; in reality, a crucial exercise in learning how to absorb verbal abuse without faltering.

A piece of the price we paid for learning survival was our childhood. We were never allowed to be children. It is the right of children to be able to play at living for a little while, but for a Black child, every act can have deadly serious consequences, and for a Black girl child, even more so. Ask the ghosts of the four little Black girls blown up in Birmingham. Ask Angel Lenair, or Latonya Wilson, or Cynthia Montgomery, the three girl victims in the infamous Atlanta murders, none of whose deaths have ever been solved.

Sometimes it feels as if I were to experience all the collective hatred that I have had directed at me as a Black woman, admit its implications into my consciousness, I might die of the bleak and horrible weight. Is that why a sister once said to me, "white people feel, Black people do"?

It is true that in America white people, by and large, have more time and space to afford the luxury of scrutinizing their emotions. Black people in this country have always had to attend closely to the hard and continuous work of survival in the most material and immediate planes. But it is a temptation to move from this fact to the belief that Black people do not need to examine our feelings; or that they are unimportant, since they have so often been used to stereotype and infantilize us; or that these feelings are not vital to our survival; or, worse, that there is some acquired virtue in not feeling them deeply. That is carrying a timebomb wired to our emotions.

There is a distinction I am beginning to make in my living between *pain* and *suffering*. Pain is an event, an experience that must be recognized, named, and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else, strength or knowledge or action.

Suffering, on the other hand, is the nightmare reliving of unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain. When I live through

pain without recognizing it, self-consciously, I rob myself of the power that can come from *using* that pain, the power to fuel some movement beyond it. I condemn myself to reliving that pain over and over and over whenever something close triggers it. And that is suffering, a seemingly inescapable cycle.

And true, experiencing old pain sometimes feels like hurling myself full force against a concrete wall. But I remind myself that I HAVE LIVED THROUGH IT ALL ALREADY, AND SURVIVED.

Sometimes the anger that lies between Black women is not examined because we spend so much of our substance having to examine others constantly in the name of self-protection and survival, and we cannot reserve enough energy to scrutinize ourselves. Sometimes we don't do it because the anger's been there so long we don't know what it is, or we think it's natural to suffer rather than to experience pain. Sometimes, because we are afraid of what we will find. Sometimes, because we don't think we deserve it.

The revulsion on the woman's face in the subway as she moves her coat away and I think she is seeing a roach. But I see the hatred in her eyes because she wants me to see the hatred in her eyes, because she wants me to know in only the way a child can know that I don't belong alive in her world. If I'd been grown, I'd probably have laughed or snarled or been hurt, seen it for what it was. But I am five years old. I see it, I record it, I do not name it, so the experience is incomplete. It is not pain; it becomes suffering.

And how can I tell you I don't like the way you cut your eyes at me if I know that I am going to release all the unnamed angers within you spawned by the hatred you have suffered and never felt?

So we are drawn to each other but wary, demanding the instant perfection we would never expect from our enemies. But it is possible to break through this inherited agony, to refuse acquiescence in this bitter charade of isolation and anger and pain.

I read this question many times in the letters of Black women, "Why do I feel myself to be such an anathema, so isolated?" I

hear it spoken over and over again, in endless covert ways. But we can change that scenario. We can learn to mother ourselves.

What does that mean for Black women? It means we must establish authority over our own definition, provide an attentive concern and expectation of growth which is the beginning of that acceptance we came to expect only from our mothers. It means that I affirm my own worth by committing myself to my own survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women. On the other hand, it means that as I learn my worth and genuine possibility, I refuse to settle for anything less than a rigorous pursuit of the possible in myself, at the same time making a distinction between what is possible and what the outside world drives me to do in order to prove I am human. It means being able to recognize my successes, and to be tender with myself, even when I fail.

We will begin to see each other as we dare to begin to see ourselves; we will begin to see ourselves as we begin to see each other, without aggrandizement or dismissal or recriminations, but with patience and understanding for when we do not quite make it, and recognition and appreciation for when we do. Mothering ourselves means learning to love what we have given birth to by giving definition to, learning how to be both kind and demanding in the teeth of failure as well as in the face of success, and not misnaming either.

*When you come to respect the character of the time you will not have to cover emptiness with pretense.\**

We must recognize and nurture the creative parts of each other without always understanding what will be created.

As we fear each other less and value each other more, we will come to value recognition within each other's eyes as well as within our own, and seek a balance between these visions. Mothering. Claiming some power over who we choose to be, and knowing that such power is relative within the realities of our lives. Yet knowing that only through the use of that power can we effectively change those realities. Mothering means the laying to rest of what is weak, timid, and damaged – without

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\* From *The I Ching*.

despise — the protection and support of what is useful for survival and change, and our joint explorations of the difference.

I recall a beautiful and intricate sculpture from the court of the Queen Mother of Benin, entitled "The Power Of The Hand." It depicts the Queen Mother, her court women, and her warriors in a circular celebration of the human power to achieve success in practical and material ventures, the ability to make something out of anything. In Dahomey, that power is female.

## VIII

Theorizing about self-worth is ineffective. So is pretending. Women can die in agony who have lived with blank and beautiful faces. I can afford to look at myself directly, risk the pain of experiencing who I am not, and learn to savor the sweetness of who I am. I can make friends with all the different pieces of me, liked and disliked. Admit that I am kinder to my neighbor's silly husband most days than I am to myself. I can look into the mirror and learn to love the stormy little Black girl who once longed to be white or anything other than who she was, since all she was ever allowed to be was the sum of the color of her skin and the textures of her hair, the shade of her knees and elbows, and those things were clearly not acceptable as human.

Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that "Black is beautiful." It goes beyond and deeper than a surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning. But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we risk another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging, since it pauses at the superficial. Certainly it is no more empowering. And it is empowerment — our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future — that will be the result of this pursuit.

I have to learn to love myself before I can love you or accept your loving. You have to learn to love yourself before you can love me or accept my loving. Know we are worthy of touch

before we can reach out for each other. Not cover that sense of worthlessness with "I don't want you" or "it doesn't matter" or "white folks feel, Black folks DO." And these are enormously difficult to accomplish in an environment that consistently encourages nonlove and cover-up, an environment that warns us to be quiet about our need of each other, by defining our dissatisfactions as unanswerable and our necessities as unobtainable.

Until now, there has been little that taught us how to be kind to each other. To the rest of the world, yes, but not to ourselves. There have been few external examples of how to treat another Black woman with kindness, deference, tenderness or an appreciative smile in passing, just because she IS; an understanding of each other's shortcomings because we have been somewhere close to that, ourselves. When last did you compliment another sister, give recognition to her specialness? We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other. But we can practice being gentle with ourselves by being gentle with each other. We can practice being gentle with each other by being gentle with that piece of ourselves that is hardest to hold, by giving more to the brave bruised girlchild within each of us, by expecting a little less from her gargantuan efforts to excel. We can love her in the light as well as in the darkness, quiet her frenzy toward perfection and encourage her attentions toward fulfillment. Maybe then we will come to appreciate more how much she has taught us, and how much she is doing to keep this world revolving toward some livable future.

It would be ridiculous to believe that this process is not lengthy and difficult. It is suicidal to believe it is not possible. As we arm ourselves with ourselves and each other, we can stand toe to toe inside that rigorous loving and begin to speak the impossible — or what has always seemed like the impossible — to one another. The first step toward genuine change. Eventually, if we speak the truth to each other, it will become unavoidable to ourselves.

# Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report\*

THE FIRST TIME I came to Grenada I came seeking "home," for this was my mother's birthplace and she had always defined it so for me. Vivid images remained of what I saw there and of what I knew it could become.

- Grand Anse Beach was a busy thoroughfare in the early, direct morning. Children in proper school uniforms carrying shoes, trying to decide between the lure of a coco palm adventure to one side and the delicious morning sea on the other, while they are bound straightforward to well-worn chalky desks.
- The mended hem of the print dress the skinny old woman wore, swinging along down the beach, cutlass in hand. Oversized, high rubber boots never once interfering with her determined step. Her soft shapeless hat. Underneath, sharp, unhurried eyes snapped out from chocolate skin dusted grey with age.
- Another woman, younger, switch held between elbow and waist, driving seven sheep that look like goats except goats carry their tails up and sheep down.
- The Fat-Woman-Who-Fries-Fish-In-The-Market actually did, and it was delicious, served on the counterboards with her

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\* I spent a week in Grenada in late December, 1983, barely two months after the U.S. invasion of the Black Caribbean island my parents left some sixty years earlier. It was my second visit in five years. This is an interim essay, a report written as the rest of *Sister Outsider* was already being typeset.

fragrant chocolate-tea in mugs fashioned from Campbell's Pork 'n Beans cans with metal handles attached.

- The full moon turning the night beach flash green.

I came to Grenada for the first time eleven months before the March 13, 1979 bloodless coup of the New Jewel Movement which ushered in the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) of Grenada under Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. This brought an end to twenty-nine years of Sir Eric Gairy's regime — wasteful, corrupt, and United States sanctioned.

The road from tiny Pearl's Airport in Grenville, up over Grand Etang mountain through Beauregard and Birch Grove, a rainbow of children calling after us down the one narrow road through these hamlets cut into the hills. Tree ferns straight up like shingles along the mountainside. In 1978 there was only one paved road in Grenada. During the People's Revolutionary Government, all roads were widened and reworked, and a functioning bus service was established that did more than ferry tourists back and forth to the cruise ships lying at anchor in the careenage. Wild banana fronds, *baligey*, in clumps below the road's slope. Stands of particular trees within the bush — red cocoa fruit, golden apple, mango, breadfruit, peach-ripe nutmeg, banana. Girls on the road to Annandale, baskets of laundry balanced on their heads, hands on hips, swaying, reminiscent of 100 roads through Africa.

Grenada, tiny spice island, is the second largest producer of nutmeg in the world. Its cocoa has a 45 percent fat content and sells for premium prices on the world market. But Grenadians pay eight times more than that price if they wish to drink processed hot chocolate, all of which is imported.

The second time I came to Grenada I came in mourning and fear that this land which I was learning had been savaged, invaded, its people maneuvered into saying thank you to their invaders. I knew the lies and distortions of secrecy surrounding the invasion of Grenada by the United States on October 25, 1983; the rationalizations which collapse under the weight of facts; the facts that are readily available, even now, from the back pages of the *New York Times*.

1. *That the St. Georges Medical School students were in danger.* Officials of the school deny this.<sup>1</sup> Students deny this.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. government had received assurances from General Hudson Austin of the Revolutionary Military Council guaranteeing the students' safety. These assurances were ignored.<sup>3</sup>

2. *That the U.S. was invited to intervene by the signers of an Organization of Eastern Caribbean States Treaty.* This would only have been internationally legal had *Grenada* invaded another island.<sup>4</sup> The decision to invade was made by four of the seven signatories. The invitation itself was actually drafted by the U.S. State Department and sent down to the Eastern Caribbean nations.<sup>5</sup>

3. *That Grenada threatened U.S. security because of the construction of a military airport and the stockpiling of an arsenal of modern weapons.* Grenada's new airport is a civilian airport built to accommodate tourists. It has been in planning for over twenty-five years, half financed by several western European countries and Canada. According to Plessey, the British firm who underwrote the project, the airport was being built to civil, not military, standards.<sup>6</sup> All U.S. reports on Grenada now stress the necessity of this airport for a Grenadian tourist industry.<sup>7</sup> The "stockpile" of weapons was less than two warehouses. Of 6,300 rifles, about 400 were fairly modern; the rest were very old, and some antique.<sup>8</sup>

As even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. observed, "Now we launch a sneak attack on a pathetic island of 110,000 people with no army, no navy or air force, and claim a glorious victory."<sup>9</sup>

A group of men and women mend the road ahead of us with hoes and rock hammers, wheelbarrows, and other hand tools. They step to one side as we pass by. One woman wipes her face with the end of her headcloth, leaning upon the handle of her scythe. Another woman is barefooted, young, but when she smiles I see all of her front teeth are missing. The PRG brought free medical care to Grenada, and no more school fees. Most estate workers and peasants in the small villages saw a dentist for the first time in their lives. Literacy was raised by teacher education and a planned each-one-teach-one program through the countryside.

Revolution. A nation decides for itself what it needs. How best to get it. Food. Dentists. Doctors. Roads. When I first visited Grenada in 1978, one-third of the farmable land in the country lay idle, owned by absentee landlords who did not work it. The PRG required that plans be filed either for farming that land, turning it over to those who would, or deeding it to the state. Small banana collectives started. Fishing cooperatives. Beginning agro-industry. The World Bank notes the health of the Grenadian economy, surpassing all other Caribbean economies in the rate of its growth and stability despite the opposition of the U.S. Unemployment dips from 40 percent to 14 percent. Now there is no work again.

Four years ago, the U.S. acted through the International Monetary Fund to assure that there would be no western money available for the Grenadian economy, much less for protecting her shores from an invasion threatened by Gairy operating out of San Diego, California, where he had sought asylum. When the PRG sought economic aid from the U.S. in 1979 to help rebuild the infrastructure of a country fallen into despair during the twenty-nine years of Gairy's regime, the U.S. response was to offer the insult of \$5000 from an ambassador's discretionary fund! Now it is 1983, post-invasion, and the conquerors are promising Grenadians welfare, their second main exportable drug. Three million dollars thus far, administered under U.S. guns, so long as the heads that take it are bowed.

Had the amount this invasion cost each one of us in taxes been lent to the PRG when it requested economic aid from the U.S. five years ago, the gratitude of Grenadians would have been real, and hundreds of lives could have been saved. But then Grenada would have been self-defined, independent; and, of course, that could not be allowed. What a bad example, a dangerous precedent, an independent Grenada would be for the peoples of Color in the Caribbean, in Central America, for those of us here in the United States.

The ready acceptance by the majority of americans of the Grenadian invasion and of the shady U.S. involvement in the events leading up to the assassination of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop both happen in an america whose moral and

ethical fiber is weakened by racism as thoroughly as wood is weakened by dry rot. White america has been well-schooled in the dehumanization of Black people. A Black island nation? Why, don't be ridiculous! If they weren't all so uppity, we'd have enough jobs and no recession. The lynching of Black youth and shooting down of Black women, 60 percent of Black teenagers unemployed and rapidly becoming unemployable, the presidential dismantling of the Civil Rights Commission, and more Black families below the poverty line than twenty years ago — if these facts of american life and racism can be passed over as unremarkable, then why not the rape and annexation of tiny Black Grenada?

The Pentagon has been spoiling for a fight it could win for a long time; the last one was the battle for Inchon in the 1950s. How better to wipe out the bitter memories of Vietnam defeats by Yellow people than with a restoration of power in the eyes of the american public — the image of american marines splashing through a little Black blood? ". . . to keep our honor clean" the marine anthem says. So the american public was diverted from recession, unemployment, the debacle in Beirut, from nuclear madness and dying oceans and a growing national depression and despair, by the bombing of a mental hospital where fifty people were killed. Even that piece of proud news was withheld for over a week while various cosmetic stories were constructed. Bread and circuses.

If the United States is even remotely interested in seeing democracy flourish in the Caribbean, why does it continue to support Haiti and the Dominican Republic, two of the most corrupt and repressive governments in the Americas? The racism that coats the U.S. government lies about Grenada is the same racism that blinded american eyes to the Black faces of 131 Haitians washed up on shore in Miami, drowned fleeing the Duvalier regime. It is the same racism that keeps american eyes turned aside from the corrosive apartheid eating like acid into the face of White South Africa and the Reagan government which shares her bed under the guise of "constructive engagement." White South Africa has the highest standard of living of

any nation in the world, and 50 percent of Black South Africa's children die before they are five. A statistic. The infant mortality rate for Black Americans is almost twice that of white Americans — in the most highly industrialized country in the world. White America has been well-schooled in the acceptance of Black destruction. So what is Black Grenada and its 110,000 Black lives?

Unemployment in Grenada dropped 26 percent in four years.<sup>10</sup> On October 25, 1983 American Corsair missiles and naval shells and mortars pounded into the hills behind Grenville, St. Georges, Gouyave. American marines tore through homes and hotels searching for "Cubans." Now the Ministries are silent. The state farms are at a standstill. The cooperatives are suspended. The cannery plant in True Blue is a shambles, shelled to silence. On the day after the invasion, unemployment was back up to 35 percent. A cheap, acquiescent labor pool is the delight of supply side economics. One month later, the U.S. Agency for International Development visits Grenada. They report upon the role of the private sector in Grenada's future, recommending the revision of tax codes to favor private enterprise (usually foreign), the development of a labor code that will ensure a compliant labor movement, and the selling off of public sector enterprises to private interests.<sup>11</sup> How soon will it be Grenadian women who are going blind from assembling microcomputer chips at \$.80 an hour for international industrial corporations? "I used to work at the radio station," says a young woman on the beach, shrugging. "But that ended in the war."

This short, undeclared, and cynical war against Grenada is not a new direction for American foreign policy. It is merely a blatant example of a 160-year-old course of action called the Monroe Doctrine. In its name America has invaded small Caribbean and Central American countries over and over again since 1823, cloaking these invasions under a variety of names. Thirty-eight such invasions occurred prior to 1917 before the Soviet Union even existed. For example, in 1897, U.S. marines landed in Puerto Rico to fight the Spanish-American War. They never left.

Beginning in 1981, the United States rehearsed the invasion of Grenada openly. It practiced the war game *Ocean Venture* in which it bombed the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, calling it "Amber of the Ambergardines" (Grenada of the Grenadines). In this grisly make-believe, a situation is supposed to occur where americans are held hostage. As we know, this was the first excuse used to justify the invasion of Grenada. As for americans really being in danger, there were still over 500 resident american citizens who chose to remain in Grenada during and after the invasion. But since *Ocean Venture* appears to be the script, we must remember that it also calls for the assassination of the Prime Minister of Amber. Are we now to believe that the U.S./CIA was not involved directly or indirectly with Prime Minister Maurice Bishop's death? Was the coup which served as the opening for *Ocean Venture* to become a reality merely an unhappy coincidence of personal intrigue, or was it an event lengthily orchestrated by clever manipulators?

The Pentagon has admitted in secret Congressional briefings that it knew of the coup against Bishop two weeks before it happened.<sup>12</sup> The Ranger unit participating in the invasion had spent six days between September 23 and October 2, 1983 practicing the takeover of an airport and the liberation of hostages, a maneuver about which the Pentagon had requested no publicity.<sup>13</sup> One Senator disclosed that there were CIA agents accompanying the seventy students flown out of Grenada on October 26, the day after the invasion.<sup>14</sup>

There will be a long and painstaking search for answers to these questions.

P.S.Y.O.P.S., the psychological operations unit of the U.S. occupation forces — a new development heard from in combat here for the first time — was quick to plaster St. Georges and the rest of Grenada with posters of Bernard Coard and General Hudson Austin, stripped naked and blindfolded, holding them up to ridicule and scorn as the slayers of the Grenadian people's beloved Maurice Bishop. It is well known that had Bishop lived, Grenada would have fought any invasion down to the last child. So scapegoats for his death were essential. The details of the power struggles which occurred within the New Jewel Move-

ment Party — if such they were — are yet to be known and assuredly complex. Yet months later, these men are still being held incommunicado in Richmond Hill prison, St. Georges, by "security forces," non-Grenadian. They have not been charged nor brought to trial as of this writing, nor have the forty-odd other Grenadians still detained with them.

Nothing is now heard of the two Americans known to have been involved in the last days of the Bishop regime, one of whom was wanted on a weapons charge here in the U.S., and one of whom holds passports in two countries.<sup>15</sup> Who were they working for and on what side? Their identities have never been divulged — a favorite tactic to cover destabilization operatives — and their existence attested to only by one line in the back pages of the *New York Times*. So, too, was the assertion by Ambassador to France Evan Galbraith on public TV that the U.S. was involved in Grenada "weeks before Bishop's death."<sup>16</sup>

A West German nurse working in Grenada, Regina Fuchs, reports she was jailed and relentlessly interrogated after being falsely accused of harboring fugitives by two Americans, one of whom, Frank Gonzales, identified himself to her as CIA.<sup>17</sup>

The action in Grenada served many purposes for the United States, provided the grounds for many tests. A major one was addressed to the concern long expressed by the Pentagon as to whether or not Black American soldiers could be gotten to fire upon other Black people. This becomes a vital question as the U.S. military-industrial complex executes increasingly military solutions to this country's precarious position in the Third World, where the U.S. either ignores or stands upon the wrong side of virtually every single struggle for liberation by oppressed peoples. Of course, there were also lesser tests. In addition to trying out new armaments, there was the question of whether the marines liked their new Nazi-style helmets. They did not because they couldn't shave in them. And whether the new army uniforms were too heavy to be worn comfortably in the tropics. They were.<sup>18</sup>

Listen to the language that came from the Pentagon, orchestrated by the psychological warfare experts operating in Grenada.

- *We got there just in time.*
- *Not an invasion, a rescue mission.*
- *Mopping up.*
- *It was our turf. We had every right.*
- *Armed thugs (the Grenadian militia).*
- *An Idi Amin-type character, capable of taking hostages (General Austin.)*
- *Imprisoned for spreading ill will among the people.*

This language is calculated to reduce a Black nation's aspirations in the eyes and ears of white Americans already secretly terrified by the Black Menace, enraged by myths of Black Progress, at the same time encouraged by government action never to take the life of a Black person seriously.

Even many Black Americans, threatened by some spectre of a socialism that is mythic and undefined at best, have bought the government line of "them" against "us." But which one of us as a Black American has ever taken the time to examine this threat of socialism for any reality nearly as destructive as racism is within all of our lives? With the constant manipulation of the media, many Black Americans are honestly confused, defending "our" invasion of Black Grenada under a mistaken mirage of patriotism.

Nineteen eighty-four is upon us, and doublethink has come home to scramble our brains and blanket our protest.

In addition to being a demonstration to the Caribbean community of what will happen to any country that dares to assume responsibility for its own destiny, the invasion of Grenada also serves as a naked warning to thirty million African-Americans. Watch your step. We did it to them down there and we will not hesitate to do it to you. Internment camps. Interrogation booths. Isolation cells hastily built by U.S. occupation forces. Blindfolded stripped prisoners. House-to-house searches for phantom Cubans. Neighbors pressured to inform against each other. No strange gods before us. U.S. soldiers at roadblocks and airports, assisted by former members of Gairy's infamous Mongoose Gang, carrying notebooks with lists of Bishop and PRG sympathizers.<sup>19</sup> The tactics for quelling a conquered people. No courts, no charges, no legal process. Welfare, but no

reparation for damaged businesses, destroyed homes and lives. Street passes. Imprisonment of "trouble-makers." The new radio station blaring The Beach Boys rock group music hour after hour.

Whose country was Grenada?

Hundreds of Grenadian bodies are buried in unmarked graves, relatives missing and unaccounted for, survivors stunned and frightened into silence by fear of being jailed and accused of "spreading unrest among the people." No recognition and therefore no aid for the sisters, mothers, wives, children of the dead, families disrupted and lives vandalized by the conscious brutality of a planned, undeclared war. No attention given to the Grenadian bodies shipped back and forth across the sea in plastic bodybags from Barbados to Grenada to Cuba and back again to Grenada. After all, they all look alike, and besides, maybe if they are flown around the world long enough they will simply disappear, or become invisible, or some other peoples' sacrifice.

"My brother died in Calliste when they shot up the house," Isme said, "because they thought Cubans were living there. My father lost his arm and a leg. They took him to hospital in Barbados but he passed away there. His body was brought back to Pearl's Airport but I've got to borrow some money now to bring him home for his funeral."

Weeks after the invasion, Grenadians were still smelling out and burying bodies which lay all over the island. The true casualty figures will never be known. No civilian body count is available. Even the bodies of Maurice Bishop and his slain ministers are never positively identified, no doubt to forestall any possible enshrinement by the people who loved him, no doubt to make the task of smearing his popular memory more easily accomplished. It has already begun.

For the first time in an american war, the american press was kept out until the stage could be set. This extends by precedent the meaning of military censorship in this country. At the time, it also deflected attention from the invasion itself. Mission accomplished with "surgical precision" meant attempting to conceal the bombing and destruction of civilian homes, the destruc-

tion of a hospital and a radio station and police headquarters; attempting to conceal the american heavy transports left mangled on the side of the road by soldiers not trained to drive to the left, and the civilian cars those army vehicles collided with. It meant the appropriation, use, and destruction of homes and stores and other businesses with no compensation. When the american press was finally admitted after the cosmetic cleanup, we were treated to photographs of smiling Grenadians welcoming their conquerors (look what your tax dollars have bought). But no photos of the signs calling for information about neighbors. No photos of the signs throughout the countryside calling for an end to yankee imperialism. NO BISHOP NO REVO.

So what did Revolution in Grenada mean? It meant the inauguration of an agro-industry which for the first time in the island's history processed the island's own fruit, its own coffee, under its own brand, Spice Isle Foods. Canned products from their own soil available in stores. The beginning of a fishing and fish-processing industry. In a country rich with tropical fruit, whose waters abound with fish, why should the most common fruit juice be Florida orange juice, the most commonly used fish, imported saltfish from Canada?

It meant almost doubling the number of doctors on the island from twenty-three to forty, a health center set up in every parish for the first time, a dental clinic. It meant a public health anti-mosquito cleanup campaign implemented by the National Youth Organization that successfully protected Grenada from the wave of Dengue Fever sweeping through the rest of the Caribbean in the summer of 1981.<sup>20</sup>

It meant twelve-year-old Lyndon Adams of L'Esterre, Carriacou, teaching a seventy-three-year-old woman how to read and write as part of the each-one-teach-one program against functional illiteracy conducted by the Center for Popular Education. This highly successful program enlisted the aid of one of the most brilliant educators of all time, Paulo Friere, head of the World Council of Churches' literacy program. When the echos of *Ocean Venture* drifted across the Caribbean from Vieques in 1981, and the stench of the threat of U.S. inva-

sion hung over the hills from Grand Etang to Harvey Vale, Lyndon, one of the youngest teachers in the CPE program, was quoted as saying: "Before the revolution we were not in the light. I will never give up. I rather they kill me dead than I go work for them if they come to take over we land and try to oppress we again." His seventy-three-year-old neighbor and student says: "In L'Esterre now, I find things is plenty better and getting better still. And look how the children developing and doing good! For that boy's age I find he was doing all right!"<sup>21</sup>

The american medical student who witnessed the shooting of the first american marine killed landing on Grenada resists the prompting of her TV interviewer. *Pockets of foreign resistance. Cubans hiding in the hills.* "Oh no, he wasn't shot by Cubans. It was an old man and his son, firing from their house." Lyndon Adams and his neighbor are not Cuban. The old man and his son defending their home were not Cubans. They were Grenadians who dared to believe that they could have a right to define themselves and the future of their nation independent of the United States.

Grenada is a highly stratified society made up of a large, extremely poor mass of estate workers and small land-holding peasants, a small but growing group of urban service workers, and a tiny well-to-do middle class, civil servants and landed, who traditionally have involved themselves with the economics of import-export rather than the economics of national production. The Bishop government was becoming a successful bridge between these different groups. Problems of colorism and classism are deep, far-reaching, and very complex legacies left from successive colonialisms. Grenadians, rightly so, are highly resistant to any external suggestions of a superficial solution. By bringing the goals of these diverse groups together, the Revolution became even more threatening to the U.S.

To the average Grenadian, the United States is a large but dim presence where some dear relative now lives. Until the information campaigns of the PRG, the lack of international news coverage and commentary kept Grenadians largely unaware of the U.S. position in world politics and its history of institutionalized racism and classism. Ronald Reagan was seen as a

fatherly movie star unconnected to policies of systematic economic and military oppression of people of Color throughout the developing countries of the world.

But the average Grenadian is also extremely involved with the political affairs of his and her own country, wherever there is room beyond survival concerns for such involvement. Facets of the October events surface in every conversation, guarded or unguarded, casual or otherwise.

The conflicts in the New Jewel Movement, Bishop's house arrest, the subsequent demonstration of ten thousand Grenadians, the second smaller march which resulted in Bishop's liberation and murder along with other Ministers and hundreds of Grenadians on Richmond Hill, and the four-day military curfew that followed these events left terror in the hearts of all Grenadians. Any ending seemed preferable at the time.

The U.S.-operated Spice Island Radio went into operation the afternoon of the invasion, and most Grenadians obtained whatever information they got about events from posters and handbills put up around the countryside by P.S.Y.O.P.S. Rumors have been rife among the people, attempting to explain the inexplicable. One shopgirl in St. Georges told me she had heard the reason why the army fired upon the people at Fort Rupert was because "the Russians had put tablets into their milk that would make them shoot anybody on sight."

It remains to be seen if the future plans of the U.S. for Grenada will justify the vision of many Grenadians of the United States as savior. Even now this view is not nearly as widespread as the american media would have us believe. Says a newly unemployed nineteen-year-old laborer in St. Georges, "They can call it a rescue mission all they want, but I haven't been rescued yet." There is much pain beneath the veneer of gratitude: too many fathers and uncles and brothers and daughters injured and killed because "the americans thought there were Cubans living in there." All over Grenada I felt the deadening effect of horror and disbelief in every conversation about the war, often beneath a surface animation.

I came to Grenada my second time six weeks after the invasion, wanting to know she was still alive, wanting to examine

what my legitimate position as a concerned Grenadian-american was toward the military invasion of this tiny Black nation by the mighty U.S. I looked around me, talked with Grenadians on the street, the shops, the beaches, on porches in the solstice twilight. Grenada is their country. I am only a relative. I must listen long and hard and ponder the implications of what I have heard, or be guilty of the same quick arrogance of the U.S. government in believing there are external solutions to Grenada's future.

I also came for reassurance, to see if Grenada had survived the onslaught of the most powerful nation on earth. She has. Grenada is bruised but very much alive. Grenadians are a warm and resilient people (I hear my mother's voice: "Island women make good wives. Whatever happens, they've seen worse"), and they have survived colonizations before. I am proud to be of stock from the country that mounted the first Black english-speaking People's Revolution in this hemisphere. Much has been terribly lost in Grenada, but not all — not the spirit of the people. *Forward Ever, Backward Never*<sup>22</sup> is more than a mere whistle in the present dark.

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14. Ibid., p. 5.
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18. CBS Evening News, December 18, 1983.
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22. Slogan of the Grenadian Revolution

# **UNDERSONG**



TO GLORIA, WITH ALL  
THE TIME IN THE WORLD.



## C O N T E N T S

Introduction    xiii

### P a r t 1

#### F r o m C O A L , F I R S T C I T I E S , a n d C A B L E S T O R A G E

Memorial	3
Memorial II	4
Return	5
To A Girl Who Knew What Side Her Bread Was Buttered On	6
Oaxaca	7
Gemini	9
Pirouette	11
The Maiden	12
Echo	13
Suspension	14
Father Son And Holy Ghost	16
Father, The Year Has Fallen	18
Bloodbirth	19
Coal	21
Song	23
Conversation In Crisis	25
Now That I Am Forever With Child	26
What My Child Learns Of The Sea	28
The Woman Thing	30
And What About The Children	32
Suffer The Children	33
Spring People	35

Generation	37
Bridge Through My Window	39
A Family Resemblance	40
Summer Oracle	42
Rites Of Passage	44
Rooming Houses Are Old Women	45
On A Night Of The Full Moon	47
Hard Love Rock	49
When The Saints Come Marching In	50
Dreams Bite	51
The Dozens	53
Fantasy And Conversation	55
Sowing	56
Martha	57
Poem For A Poet	68
Story Books On A Kitchen Table	71

## Part 2

### From A LAND WHERE OTHER PEOPLE LIVE

Equinox	75
The Seventh Sense	77
Change Of Season	78
For Each Of You	80
New Year's Day	83
Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap	85
As I Grow Up Again	86
Neighbors	87
Love, Maybe	89
Conclusion	90
The Winds Of Orisha	92

Who Said It Was Simple	95
The Day They Eulogized Mahalia	96
Progress Report	98
Black Mother Woman	100
Teacher	102
Generation II	104
Relevant Is Different Points On The Circle	105
Dear Toni . . .	106
Prologue	110
Moving Out Or The End Of Cooperative Living	114
Signs	117
Movement Song	119

### Part 3

#### From NEW YORK HEAD SHOP AND MUSEUM

Mentor	123
Revolution Is One Form Of Social Change	124
The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon	125
A Sewerplant Grows In Harlem Or I'm A Stranger Here Myself . . .	127
Cables To Rage Or I've Been Talking On This Street Corner . . .	129
Release Time	132
Ballad From Childhood	134
New York City	135
To The Girl Who Lives In A Tree	138
Hard Love Rock II	140
Love Poem	141
Song For A Thin Sister	142
St. Louis A City Out of Time	143

To My Daughter The Junkie On A Train	144
The Bees	146
A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street	148
My Fifth Trip To Washington Ended In Northeast Delaware	152
Barren	154
Separation	155
Vietnam Addenda	156
The Workers Rose On May Day Or Postscript to Karl Marx	157
Keyfoods	159
A Trip On The Staten Island Ferry	161
Now	162
Memorial III—From A Phone Booth On Broadway	163
And Don't Think I Won't Be Waiting	165
For My Singing Sister	166
Monkeyman	168
Oya	169
The Brown Menace Or Poem To The Survival Of Roaches	170
Sacrifice	172
Blackstudies	174

#### Part 4

#### NEW POEMS 1978 - 1982

The Evening News	183
Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot	185
Afterimages	186
A Poem For Women In Rage	191
October	195
Sister, Morning Is A Time For Miracles	196
Need: A Chorale For Black Woman Voices	199

This volume represents revisions of the poems contained in *Chosen Poems—Old and New* (1982). Three poems have been dropped from the first edition because they required reconstruction rather than revision. Nine poems from the same time period that were not included in the earlier edition have been added because time and distance have illuminated their use.

The process of revision is, I believe, crucial to the integrity and lasting power of a poem. The problem in reworking any poem is always when to let go of it, refusing to give in to the desire to have that particular poem *do it all*, say it all, become the mythical, unattainable Universal Poem.

In order to revise effectively rather than construct a new work, one must establish the world of the poem—that constellation within emotional time and space from which the poem draws power and life. Within that world, the problem of revision is to make the poem become more itself, rather than another poem. I found this required me to propel myself back into the original poem-creating process and the poet who wrote it. Once I reestablished the world of the poem, revision served to help the poem do its work more effectively.

This is a fascinating and demanding process, one that requires reinventing the emotional climate of the often diverse experiences out of which the poem grew—recalling what the task of the poem originally was and keeping that task firmly in mind, rather than some other task the poet now might like the poem to accomplish. In other words, I set myself the task of revising, not rewriting, these poems.

This project began while I was trapped in the nightmare aftermath of Hurricane Hugo. Our house, library, and whole way of

life had been destroyed in one night. While shoveling out the soaked remains of my studio, I came across a waterlogged but readable copy of *Chosen Poems*, one of the few salvageable books from my library after the storm. Weary from crisis and from lugging and hauling debris, I sat down for a few minutes and found myself reading these poems as if I were in a workshop. They were touching and powerful, but with certain nonuseful ambiguities that I would advise any young poet to reconsider in order to strengthen the poem.

If a poem has a job, how best can we help it do that job across several decades? The answers are never simple.

For every poem written, there is the bedrock of experience(s) within which the poem is anchored. A molten hot light shines up through the poem from the core of these experiences. This is the human truth that illuminates the poem, surrounding it in the light that makes it come alive.

That light can shift and alter; but if the poem is firmly anchored, it will not be quenched. How to honor that light, do justice to the subtlety of its changing auras, without shifting or fracturing the bedrock from which the poem arises—that is the task of revision: to make the poem more of what it needs to be in order to do the emotional work it was intended to do.

In order to achieve that goal, I kept two questions before me: the first, What did I want my readers to feel? and, second, What was the work of this poem (its task in the world)?

If the poem is not firmly anchored or the illumination too muddled or confused, then the poem must be reconstructed rather than revised. Hopefully, by the time a poem reaches print, it may profit from revision but does not have to be rebuilt.

In the next three months of kerosene lamps and generators, hauling water and cooking over driftwood fires, I held myself each day to a brief discipline of refeeling, reliving, and revising these poems. That enterprise taught me much about the process

of revising poetry and the heightened level of honesty that revision demands. It also helped preserve my sanity in a difficult time, giving me a different and solitary clearing within which to recall the enduring qualities of the human spirit, and the girl and young woman I was when these poems were being written. I marveled at what she knew as well as what she did not know, and how she learned to put both together into a working poem.

I find these poems are still useful to me, and I wish to make them even more useful for other readers.

Audre Lorde

St. Croix, Virgin Islands

January 2, 1990–August 30, 1991





From COAL, FIRST CITIES,  
and CABLES TO RAGE

part I



## MEMORIAL

If you come as softly  
as wind within the trees  
you may hear what I hear  
see what sorrow sees.

If you come as lightly  
as the threading dew  
I will take you gladly  
nor ask more of you.

You may sit beside me  
silent as a breath  
only those who stay dead  
shall remember death.

If you come I will be silent  
nor speak harsh words to you  
I will not ask you why, now,  
nor how, nor what you do.

But we shall sit here softly  
beneath two different years  
and the rich earth between us  
shall drink our tears.

(1950)

## MEMORIAL II

Genevieve  
what are you seeing  
in my mirror this morning  
peering out like a hungry bird  
behind my eyes  
are you seeking the shape of a girl  
I have grown less and less  
to resemble  
do you remember  
I could not accept your face dying  
do not know you now?

Surely your vision stayed  
stronger than mine  
Genevieve tell me  
where do dead girls wander  
after their summer?

I wish I could see you again  
far from me even  
birdlike flying into the sun  
your eyes are blinding me  
Genevieve.

(1954)

## RETURN

You did not clock the turning of the leaves  
the silent browning of the grass  
nor view brief bright November  
rising out of the hills.

You came  
with the sun set the bough stripped  
to the curtness of winter  
an accomplished act.

So you well could say  
“I never trusted autumn”  
who did not cradle the weeping root  
of flamed October sorrel  
nor taste the bitter hard-won peace  
red-browning autumn brought  
one whom you loved  
and left  
to face the dark alone.

(1955)

TO A GIRL WHO KNEW  
WHAT SIDE HER BREAD  
WAS BUTTERED ON

He, through the eyes of the first marauder  
saw her, his catch of bright thunder, heaping  
tea and bread for her guardian dead  
crunching the nut-dry words they said  
and thinking the bones were sleeping  
broke through the muffled afternoon  
calling an end to their ritual's tune  
with lightning-like disorder:

"Leave these bones, Love! Come away  
from their summer breads with the flavor of hay  
your guards can watch the shards of our catch  
warming *our* bones on some winter's day!"

Like an ocean of straws the old bones rose  
fearing the lightning's second death;  
he had little time to wonder  
at the silence of Bright Thunder  
as, with a smile of pity and stealth,  
she buttered fresh scones  
for her guardian bones  
as they trampled him into the earth.

(1955)

## OAXACA

Beneath the carving drag of wood  
the land moves slowly.  
But lightning comes.

Growing their secret in brown earth  
spread like a woman  
daring  
weary work for still-eyed men  
who break the crust   nurse the seed  
and a hard watch through the dry season.

Yet at the edge of bright thin day  
past the split plow   they look  
to the hills   to the brewing thunder  
for the storm is known.

The land moves slowly.  
Though the thunder's eye  
can crack with a flash  
the glass-brittle crust  
of a mountain's face  
the land moves slowly.

All a man's strength  
his son's muscled arms  
to carve one sleeve  
into rock-defiant earth.  
And the spread land waits.

Slow long the plowing  
through dry-season brown  
and the land moves slowly.

But lightning comes.

(1955)

## GEMINI

Moon-minded the sun goes  
farther from us  
split into swirled days  
smoky and unkempt  
no longer young.

All the earth falls down  
like lost light frightened  
out between my fingers.

Here at the end of night  
our love is a burnt-out ocean  
a dry-worded, brittle bed.  
Our roots, once nourished  
by the cool lost water  
cry out "Remind us!"  
and the oyster world  
cries out its pearls like tears.

Was this the wild calling  
I heard in the long night past  
wrapped in a stone-closed house?  
I wakened to moon  
to the sound-breached dark  
and thinking a new word spoken  
some promise made  
broke through the screaming night  
seeking a gateway out

But the night was dark  
and love was a burning fence  
about my house.

(1956)

## PIROUETTE

I saw your hands  
on my lips blind needles  
blunted from sewing up stone  
where are you from

you said

your hands  
reading over my lips  
for some road through uncertain night  
for your feet to examine home  
where are you from

you said

your hands  
on my lips like thunder  
promising rain

A land where all lovers are mute.

Why are you weeping  
you said  
your hands in my doorway  
like rainbows  
following rain  
why are you weeping

I have come home.

(1957)

## THE MAIDEN

Once I was immortal  
beside an ocean  
having the names of night  
and the first men came  
with a sledge of fire  
driving the sun.

I was brought forth  
in the moonpit of a virgin  
condemned to light  
to a dry world's endless mornings  
sweeping the moon away  
and wherever I fled  
seeking some new road home  
morning had fingered  
the harrowing rivers  
to nest in the dried-out sparkling bed  
of my mother sea.

Time drove the moon  
down to crescent  
and they found me  
mortal  
beside a moon's crater  
mouthing  
the ocean names of night.

(1958)

## ECHO

I hear myself  
drought caught pleading  
a windy cause  
dry as the earth without rain  
crying love  
in a tongue of false thunder  
while my love waits  
a seeded trap  
in the door of my house  
a mouth full of perfect teeth  
sure of their strength upon bone  
waits  
to swallow me whole  
and pass me  
as echoes of shadowless laughter.

Quiet love hangs  
in the door of my house  
a sheet of brick-caught silk  
rent in the sun.

(1958)

## SUSPENSION

We entered silence  
before the clock struck

red wine into crystal  
not quite  
fallen  
the air solidifies  
around your mouth  
once wind has sucked the curtains in  
like fright against the evening wall  
prepared for storm  
the room exhales  
your lips  
unfold  
within their sudden opening  
I hear the clock begin  
to speak again.

I remember now  
the filled crystal shattered  
the wind-whipped curtains  
bound  
and the chill storm  
finally broken  
how the room felt  
when your word was spoken

Warm  
as the center of your palm  
and as unfree.

(1959)

FATHER SON AND  
HOLY GHOST

I have not ever seen my father's grave.

Not that his judgment eyes  
have been forgotten  
nor his great hands' print  
on our evening doorknobs  
one half turn each night  
and he would come  
drabbled with the world's business  
massive and silent  
as the whole day's wish  
ready to redefine  
each of our shapes  
but now the evening doorknobs  
wait and do not recognize us  
as we pass.

Each week a different woman  
regular as his one quick glass  
each evening  
pulls up the grass his stillness grows  
calling it weed.

Each week a different woman  
has my mother's face

and he  
who time has changeless  
must be amazed  
who knew and loved  
but one.

My father died in silence  
loving creation  
and well-defined response  
he lived still judgments  
on familiar things  
and died knowing  
a January 15th that year me.

Lest I go into dust  
I have not ever seen my father's grave.

(1960)

FATHER, THE YEAR  
HAS FALLEN

Father the year has fallen  
leaves bedeck my careful flesh  
like stone  
one shard of brilliant summer  
pierced me  
and remains.

By this only unregenerate bone  
I am not dead  
but waiting.

When the last warmth is gone  
I shall bear in  
the snow.

(1961)

## BLOODBIRTH

That which is inside me  
screaming  
beating about for exit or entry  
names the wind  
wanting wind's power  
wanting wind's voice  
it is not my heart  
and I am trying to speak  
without art or embellishment  
with bits of me flying out in all directions  
screams    memories    old pieces of pain  
struck off like dry bark  
from a felled tree    bearing  
up or out    holding or bringing forth  
child or demon

Is this birth    or exorcism  
or the beginning machineries of self  
outlining    recalling  
my father's business  
what I must be about  
my own business  
minding.

Shall I split    or be cut down  
by a word's complexion  
or its lack  
and from what direction  
will the opening be made

to show the true face of me  
lying exposed and together

My children your children  
their children  
all bent  
on our conjugating business.

(1961)

## COAL

I is the total black  
being spoken  
from the earth's inside.

There are many kinds of open  
how a diamond comes  
into a knot of flame  
how sound comes into a word  
colored  
by who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open  
diamonds on a glass window  
singing out within the crash  
of passing sun  
other words are stapled wagers  
in a perforated book  
buy and sign and tear apart  
and come whatever wills all chances  
the stub remains  
an ill-pulled tooth  
with a ragged edge.

Some words live in my throat  
breeding like adders  
others  
know sun  
seeking like gypsies  
over my tongue

to explode through my lips  
like young sparrows  
bursting from shell.

Some words  
bedevil me.

Love is a word, another kind of open.  
As the diamond comes  
into a knot of flame  
I am Black  
because I come from the earth's inside  
take my word for jewel  
in the open light.

(1962)

## SONG

Wild trees have bought me  
and will sell you a wind  
in the forest of falsehoods  
where your search must not end

for their roots are not wise.  
Strip our loving of dream  
pay its secrets to thunder  
and ransom me home.

Beware oaks in laughter  
know hemlock is lying  
when she sings of defiance.  
The sand words she's saying

will sift out and bury us  
while the pale moons I hate  
seduce you in phases  
through oceans of light.

And the wild trees will sell me  
for their safety from lightning  
to sand that will flay me  
for the next evening's planting.

They shall fill my limp skin  
with wild dreams from their root  
and grow from my dark flesh  
new handfuls of hate

till our ransom is wasted  
and the morning speaks out  
in a thin voice of wisdom  
that loves me too late.

(1962)

~

CONVERSATION IN  
CRISIS

I speak to you as a friend speaks  
or a true lover  
not out of friendship or love  
but for a clear meeting  
of self upon self  
in sight of our hearth  
but without fire.

I cherish your words that ring  
like late summer thunders  
to sing without octave  
and fade, having spoken the season.  
But I hear the false heat of this voice  
as it dries up the sides of your words  
coaxing melodies from your tongue  
and this curled music is treason.

Must I die in your fever  
as the flames wax take cover  
in your heart's culverts  
crouched like a stranger  
under the scorched leaves  
of your other burnt loves  
until the storm passes over?

(1962)

NOW THAT I AM  
FOREVER WITH CHILD

How the days went  
while you were blooming within me  
I remember each upon each  
the swelling changed planes of my body

how you first fluttered then jumped  
and I thought it was my heart.

How the days wound down  
and the turning of winter  
I recall you  
growing heavy against the wind.  
I thought now her hands  
are formed her hair  
has started to curl  
now her teeth are done  
now she sneezes.

Then the seed opened.  
I bore you one morning  
just before spring  
my head rang like a fiery piston  
my legs were towers between which  
a new world was passing.

Since then  
I can only distinguish  
one thread within running hours  
you flowing through selves  
toward You.

(1963)

WHAT MY CHILD  
LEARNS OF THE SEA

What my child learns of the sea  
of the summer thunder  
of riddles  
that hide in the vortex of spring  
she will learn in my twilight  
and childlike  
revise every autumn.

What my child learns  
as her winters grow into time  
has ripened in my own body  
to enter her eyes  
with first light.

This is why  
more than blood  
or the milk I have given  
one day a strange girl  
will step to the back  
of a mirror  
cutting my ropes  
of sea    thunder    sun.

Of the ways  
she will taste her autumns  
toast-brittle or warmer than sleep  
and the words  
she will use for winter  
I stand already condemned.

(1963)

## THE WOMAN THING

The hunters are back  
from beating the winter's face  
in search of a challenge or task  
in search of food  
making fresh tracks  
for their children's hunger  
they do not watch the sun  
they cannot wear its heat  
for a sign of triumph  
or freedom.

The hunters are treading heavily  
homeward through snow  
marked by their own bloody footprints.  
Emptyhanded the hunters return  
snow-maddened  
sustained by their rages.

In the night after food they will seek  
young girls for their amusement.  
Now the hunters are coming  
and the unbaked girls  
flee from their angers.

All this day I have craved  
food for my child's hunger  
emptyhanded  
the hunters come shouting  
injustice drips from their mouths  
like stale snow  
melted in sunlight.

The woman thing  
my mother taught me  
bakes off its covering of snow  
like a rising Blackening sun.

(1964)

## AND WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN

We've made a child.  
Now the dire predictions  
have turned into wild grim  
speculations.  
Still the negatives  
are waiting watching  
and the relatives  
keep  
right  
on  
touching . . .  
and how much curl  
is right for a girl?

But if it is said  
at some future date  
that my son's head  
is on  
straight  
he won't care  
about his hair  
nor give a damn  
whose wife  
I am.

(1964)

## SUFFER THE CHILDREN

To Addie Mae Collins, 8, and Cynthia Wesley, 10, two  
of four children killed in a racial bombing of a Baptist  
church in Birmingham, Alabama, Sunday, September  
16, 1963.

He is forever trapped  
who suffers his own waste.  
Rain leaching the earth for lack  
of roots to hold it  
and children who are murdered  
before their lives begin.

Who pays his crops to the sun  
when his fields lie parched by drought  
will mourn the lost water  
waiting another rain.  
But who shall disinter these girls  
to love the women they were to become  
or read the legends written beneath their skin?

We who love them remember their child's laughter.  
But he whose hate robs him of their gold  
has yet to weep at night above their graves.

A year rolls out. Rains come again.  
But however many girls be brought to sun  
someday a man will thirst for sleep  
in a southern night  
seeking his peace where no peace is  
and come to mourn these children  
given to the dust.

(1964)

## SPRING PEOPLE

FOR JONNO.

What anger in my hard-won bones  
what heritage of water  
makes me reject this insane season  
fear to walk the earth  
in spring?

At April and evening  
I recall how we came  
like new thunder  
beating the earth  
leaving the taste of rain and sunset  
all our young hungers  
before us.

Away from peaceful half-truths  
and springtime passing unsaid  
we came in the touch of fire  
came to the sun  
lay with the wild earth  
until spent and knowing  
we brought forth young.

Now insolent Aprils bedevil us  
earthly conceits  
reminding us  
all else is forfeit  
and only the blood-hungry children  
remember  
what face we had  
what startling eyes.

(1965)

## GENERATION

How the young attempt  
and are broken  
differs from age to age  
we were brown free girls  
love singing beneath our skin  
sun in our hair in our eyes  
sun our fortune  
and the wind had made us golden  
made us gay.

In seasons of limitation  
we wept out our promises  
now these are the children we try  
for temptations that wear our face.

But who comes back  
from the latched cities of falsehood  
warning  
the road to nowhere  
is slippery with our blood  
warning  
you need not drink the river  
to get home  
we have purchased bridges  
with our mothers' bloody gold  
now we are more than kin  
who have come to share  
not only blood  
but the bloodiness of failure.

How the young are tempted  
and betrayed  
into slaughter or conformity  
is a turn of the mirror  
time's question only.

(1966)

BRIDGE THROUGH  
MY WINDOW

In-curve scooped out and necklaced with light  
burst pearls stream down  
my outstretched arms to earth.  
Oh bridge my sister bless me  
before I sleep  
the wild air is lengthening  
and I am tried  
beyond strength or bearing  
over water.

Love, we are both shorelines  
a left country where time suffices  
and the right land  
where pearls roll into earth  
and spring up day.  
Joined  
our bodies make a passage  
without merging  
as this slim necklace  
is anchored into night.

And while the we conspires  
to make secret its two eyes  
we search the other shore  
for some crossing home.

(1966)

## A FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

My sister has my hair my mouth my eyes  
and I presume her trustless.

When she was young open to any fever  
wearing gold like a veil of fortune on her face  
she waited through each rain  
a dream of light.

But the sun came up  
burning our eyes like crystal  
bleaching the sky of promise and  
my sister stood  
Black unblessed and unbelieving  
shivering in the first cold show  
of love.

I saw her gold become an arch  
where nightmare hunted  
the porches of her restless nights.  
Through echoes of denial  
she walks  
a bleached side of reason  
secret now  
my sister never waits  
nor mourns the gold  
that wandered from her bed.

My sister has my tongue  
and all my flesh  
unanswered  
and I presume her  
trustless  
as a stone.

(1966)

## SUMMER ORACLE

Without expectation  
there is no end  
to the shock of morning  
or even a small summer.

The image is fire  
blackening the vague lines  
into defiance  
across this city.  
The image is fire  
sun warming us in a cold country  
barren of symbols for love.

Now I have forsaken order  
and imagine you into fire  
untouchable in a magician's cloak  
covered with symbols for destruction  
and birth  
sewn with griffins hammers arrows  
gold sixes stitched into your hem  
your fingers draw fire  
but still the old warlocks shun you  
for no gourds ring in your sack  
no spells bring forth peace  
and I am still fruitless and hungry  
this summer  
the peaches are flinty and juiceless  
and cry sour worms.

The image is Fire  
flaming over you burning off excess  
like the blaze planters start  
to burn off bagasse from the canefields  
before a harvest.

The image is fire  
the high sign  
ruling our summer  
I smell it in the charred breeze  
blowing over your body  
close hard essential  
under its cloak of lies.

(1967)

## RITES OF PASSAGE

To MLK JR.

Rock the boat to a fare-thee-well.  
Once we suffered dreaming  
into the place where the children are playing  
their child's games  
where the children are hoping  
knowledge survives if  
unknowing  
they follow the game  
without winning.

Their fathers are dying  
back to the freedom of wise children  
playing  
at knowing  
their fathers are dying  
whose deaths will not free them  
from growing  
from knowing  
when the game becomes foolish  
a dangerous pleading  
for time out of power.

Quick children  
kiss us  
we are growing  
through dream.

(1968)

ROOMING HOUSES  
ARE OLD WOMEN

Rooming houses are old women  
rocking dark windows into their whens  
waiting incomplete circles—  
rocking  
rent office to stoop to  
community bathrooms to gas-rings to  
under-bed boxes of once useful garbage  
city-issued with a twice-a-month check

and the young men next door  
with their loud fragrant parties  
and fishy rings left in the bathtub  
no longer arouse them  
from midnight to mealtime  
no stops in between  
light breaking  
to pass through jumbled-up windows  
and who was it who married that widow  
that Buzzie's son messed with?

To Welfare and insult  
from the slow shuffle  
from dayswork to shopping bags  
heavy with leftovers

Rooming houses  
are old women waiting  
searching

through darkening windows  
the end or beginning of agony  
old women seen through half-ajar doors  
hoping they are not waiting  
but being  
an entrance to somewhere  
unknown desired  
but not new.

(1968)

ON A NIGHT OF THE  
FULL MOON

I

Out of my flesh that hungers  
and my mouth that knows  
comes the shape I am seeking  
for reason.

The curve of your waiting body  
fits my waiting hand  
your breasts warm as sunlight  
your lips quick as young birds  
between your thighs the sweet  
sharp taste of limes.

Thus I hold you  
frank in my heart's eye  
in my skin's knowing  
as my fingers conceive your warmth  
I feel your stomach  
move against mine.

Before the moon wanes again  
we shall come together.

II

And I would be the moon  
spoken over your beckoning flesh  
breaking against reservations  
beaching thought

my hands at your high tide  
over and under inside you  
and the passing of hungers  
attended forgotten.

Darkly risen  
the moon speaks  
my eyes  
judging your roundness  
delightful.

(1968)

## HARD LOVE ROCK

I heard my heart screeching like a subway train  
loudly enough to remind me it was still human  
loudly enough to hurt but telling me still  
you were a ghost I had  
better left in the cradle  
telling me still  
our tracks ran around  
instead of straight out past the sewers  
and I would have nothing for barter left  
not even the print of love's grain  
pressed into my flesh  
from our wooden cross  
splintered and shapeless  
after the slaughter.

And when it was over  
only pain.

(1968)

WHEN THE SAINTS  
COME MARCHING IN

Plentiful sacrifice and believers in redemption  
are all that is needed  
so any day now I expect  
some new religion  
to rise up like tear gas  
from the streets of New York  
erupting like the rank pavement smell  
released by a garbage truck's  
baptismal drizzle.

High priests are ready and waiting  
their incense pans full of fire.

I do not know their rituals  
nor what name of the god  
the survivors will worship  
I only know she will be terrible  
and very busy  
and very old.

(1968)

# DREAMS BITE

## I

Dreams bite  
Dreamer and legend  
arm  
at the edge of purpose  
waking  
I see the people of winter  
put off their masks  
to stain the earth red with blood  
and on the outer edges of sleep  
the people of sun  
are carving their own children  
into monuments  
of war.

## II

When I am absolute  
at once  
with the black earth  
fire  
I make my now

and power is spoken  
peace  
and hungry means never  
or alone

I shall love  
again

when I am obsolete.

(1968)

## THE DOZENS

Nothing says that you must  
see me in the street  
with us so close together at that red light  
a blind man could have smelled his grocer—  
and nothing says that you must  
say hello  
as we pass in the street  
but we have known each other  
too well in the dark  
for this  
and it hurts me when you do not speak.

But no one you were with was quite so fine  
that I won't remember this and  
suffer you in turn and  
in my own fashion which is  
certainly not  
in the street.

For I can count on my telephone  
ringing some soft evening and you  
exploding into my room  
through the receiver  
kissing and licking my ear. . . .

I hope you will learn your thing  
at least  
from some of those spiteful noseless people  
who surround you  
before the centipede in you  
runs out of worlds

one for each foot.

(1968)

FANTASY AND  
CONVERSATION

Speckled frogs leap from my mouth  
drown in our coffee  
between wisdoms  
and decision.

I could smile  
turn these frogs into pearls  
speak of love  
making and giving  
if the spell works  
shall I break down  
or build what is broken  
into a new house  
shook with confusion

Shall I strike  
before our magic  
turns color?

(1968)

## SOWING

It is the sink of the afternoon  
the children asleep or weary  
I have finished planting tomatoes  
in brief sun after four days of rain  
brown earth under my fingernails  
honey-thick sun on the back of my neck  
the tips of my fingers are stinging  
from the rich earth  
but more so from the lack  
of your body.

I have been to this place before  
blood seething commanded  
my fingers fresh from the earth  
dream of a furrow  
whose name should be you.

(1968)

## M A R T H A

I

Martha this is a catalog of days  
passing before you looked again.  
Someday you shall browse and order them  
at will or in your necessities.

I have taken a house at the Jersey shore  
this summer. It is not my house.  
Today the lightning bugs began.

On the first day you were dead.  
With each breath your face  
fell in like crumpled muslin.  
We scraped together smashed images of flesh  
preparing a memory. No words.  
No words.

On the eighth day you startled the doctors  
speaking from your death place  
to reassure us you were still  
trying.

Martha these are replacement days  
should you ever need them  
given  
for those you once demanded  
and never found.  
May this trip be rewarding.

No one can fault you again Martha  
for answering necessity too well.  
May the gods who honor hard work  
keep this second coming  
free from that lack of choice  
which hindered your first journey  
to this Tarot house.

The doctors said  
no hope no dreaming  
accept this case of flesh for evidence  
of life without fire  
wrapped you in an electric blanket  
kept ten degrees below life.  
Fetal hands curled inward  
upon a bed so cold  
bruises could not appear.

On the second day I knew you were alive  
the gray flesh of your face  
suffered.

I love you and cannot feel you less than Martha  
I love you and cannot split this shaved head  
from Martha's pushy straightness  
asking in a smash of mixed symbols  
*How long must I wander*  
*in this final house of my father?*

On the Solstice I was in Providence.  
You know this town we visited your friends here.  
It rained in Providence on the Solstice  
we passed through twice

on route 6 through Providence to the Cape  
where we spent our second summer  
trying for peace or equity.  
It always seemed to be raining  
by the time we got to Providence.  
The Kirschenbaums live in Providence  
and Blossom and Barry.  
And Frances. And Frances.  
Martha I am in love again.

Listen, Frances, I said on the Solstice  
our summer has started  
today we are witches with enough energy  
to move the mountain back.  
Think of Martha.

Back in my hideous city  
I saw you today. Your hair has grown  
your armpits are scented  
by some fastidious attendant.  
*testing testing testing*  
explosive syllables warning me  
*the mountain has fallen into dung*  
no Martha remember remember Martha  
warning *dead flowers*  
*will not come to your bed again.*

The sun has started south  
our season is over.

Today you opened your eyes  
they give  
a blue-filmed history to your mangled words

help me understand how  
you are teaching yourself to learn  
again.

I need you need me  
*Je suis Martha I do not speak french kissing*  
*OH WOW! Black and . . . Black and . . . beautiful?*  
*Black and becoming*  
*somebody else maybe Erica maybe*  
who sat in the fourth row  
behind us in high school  
but I never took French with you Martha  
and who is this *Madame Erudite*  
who is not me?

I found you today in a womb full of patients  
blue-robed in various convalescences.  
Your eyes are closed you are propped  
into a wheelchair, cornered, a parody of resting.  
The bright glue of tragedy plasters all eyes  
to a television set in the opposite corner  
where a man is dying  
step by step  
in the american ritual going.  
Someone has covered you  
for this first public appearance  
in a hospital gown, the badge of your next step.  
Evocative voices flow from the set  
horror is thick in this room  
full of broken and mending receptions.

But no one has told you what it's all about Martha  
someone has shot another Kennedy

and we are drifting closer to what you predicted  
your darkness is indeed speaking

Robert Kennedy is dying Martha  
not you not you not you  
he has a bullet in his brain Martha  
But surgery was never considered for you  
since there was no place to start  
and no one intended to run you down on a highway  
being driven home at 7:30 on a low summer evening  
I gave a reading in Harlem that night  
and who shall we try for this shaven head now  
in the courts of heart Martha  
where his murder is televised over and over  
with residuals  
they have caught the man who shot Robert Kennedy  
another one of difficult journeys—  
he has a bullet in his brain Martha  
and much less of a chance than you.

On the first day of July you warned me again  
*the threads are broken*  
you darkened into explosive angers  
refused to open your eyes, humming interference  
your thoughts are not over Martha  
they are you their task is  
to remember Martha  
we can help with the other  
the mechanics of blood and bone  
and you cut through the pain of my words  
to warn me again  
*testing testing whoever passes*

*must tear out their hearing aids  
for the duration.*

I hear you explaining Neal  
*my husband whoever must give me a present  
he has to give me  
himself where I can find him for  
where can he look at himself  
in the mirror I am making  
or over my bed where the window  
is locked into battle with a wall?*

Now I sit in New Jersey  
with lightning bugs and mosquitoes  
typing and thinking of you.  
Tonight you started seizures  
a temporary relapse  
but this lake is far away Martha  
and I sit unquiet in New Jersey  
thinking of you.

I Ching the Book of Changes  
says I am impertinent to ask of you obliquely  
but I have no direct question  
only need.

When I cast an oracle today  
it spoke of the Abysmal again  
very difficult but promising  
in it water finds its own level, flowing  
out from the lowest point.  
I cast another one also that cautioned  
the superior man to seek his strength  
only in its own season.

Martha what did we learn from our brief season  
when the summer grackles rang in my walls?  
one and one is too late now  
you journey through darkness alone  
leafless I sit far from my present house  
and the grackles' voices are dying

we shall love each other here if ever at all.

## II

*Yes foolish prejudice lies*  
I hear you Martha  
that you would never harm my children  
but you have forgotten their names  
and that you are Elizabeth's godmother.  
You offer me coral rings, watches  
even your body  
if I will help you sneak home.

No Martha my blood is not muddy my hands  
are not dirty to touch Martha  
I do not know your night nurse's name  
even though she is Black  
yes I did live in Brighton Beach once  
which is almost Rockaway  
one bitter winter  
but not with your night nurse Martha  
and yes I agree this is one hell  
of a summer.

No you cannot walk yet Martha  
and no the medicines you are given

to quiet your horrors  
have not affected your brain  
yes it is very hard to think but  
it is getting easier yes Martha  
we have loved each other and yes I hope  
we still can  
no Martha I do not know if we shall ever  
sleep in each other's arms again.

### III

It is the middle of August and you are alive  
to discomfort. You have been moved  
into a utility room across the hall  
from the critical ward because your screaming  
disturbs the other patients  
your bedside table has been moved also  
which means you will be there for a while  
a favorite now with the floor nurses  
who put up a sign on the utility room door  
I'M MARTHA HERE DO NOT FORGET ME  
PLEASE KNOCK.

A golden attendant named Sukie  
bathes you as you proposition her  
she is very pretty and very gentle.  
The frontal lobe governs inhibitions  
the damage is after all slight  
and they say the screaming will pass.

Your daughter Dorrie promises you  
will be as good as new, Mama  
who only wants to be *Bad as the old.*

*I want some truth good hard truth  
a sign of youth  
we were all young once we had  
a good thing going  
now I'm making a plan  
for a dead rabbit a rare rabbit.  
I am dying goddammit dying am I  
Dying?*

Death is a word you can say now  
pain is mortal

*I am dying for god's sake won't someone please  
get me a doctor PLEASE*

your screams beat against our faces  
you yell  
begging relief from the blank cruelty  
of a thousand nurses.

A moment of silence breaks  
as you accumulate fresh sorrows  
then through your pain-fired face  
you slip me a wink.

Martha Winked.

#### IV

Your face straightens into impatience  
with the loads of shit you are handed  
'You're doing just fine Martha what time is it Martha'  
'What did you have for supper tonight Martha'  
testing testing whoever passes for Martha  
you weary of it.

Those you must straighten out  
pass your bedside in the utility room  
bringing you cookies  
and hoping  
you will be kinder than they ever were.

*Go away Mama and Bubie  
for 30 years you made me believe  
I was shit you shat out for the asking  
but I'm not and you'd better believe it  
right now would you kindly  
stop rubbing my legs  
and GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE.*

Next week Bubie bring teglach  
your old favorite  
and will you be kinder Martha  
that we were to the shell the cocoon  
out of which the you is emerging?

## V

No one you were can come so close  
to death without dying  
into another Martha.

I await you  
as we all await her  
fearing her honesty  
fearing  
we may neither love nor dismiss  
Martha with the dross burned away  
fearing  
condemnation from the essential.

You cannot get closer to death than this Martha  
the nearest you've come to living yourself.

(June–August 1968)

## POEM FOR A POET

I think of a coffin's quiet  
when I sit in the world of my car  
separate and observing  
windows closed and washed clean  
in rain. I like to sit and watch  
other worlds pass. Yesterday evening  
I sat in my car on Sheridan Square  
flat and broke and a little bit damp  
thinking about money and rain  
and the Village broads with narrow hips  
rolling like drunken shovels  
down Christopher Street.

Then I saw you unmistakably  
darting out from between a police car and  
what used to be Atkin's all-night diner—  
where we sat making bets the last time I saw you  
on how many busts we could count  
through the plate-glass window  
in those last skinny hours before dawn  
with our light worded-out but still burning  
the earlier evening's promise  
dregs in our coffee cups  
and I saw you dash out and turn left at the corner  
your beard spiky with rain and refusing  
shelter under your chin.

But I had thought you were dead Jarrell  
struck down by a car at sunset on a North Carolina road

or were you the driver  
tricked into a fatal swerve by some twilit shadow  
or was that Frank O'Hara  
or Conrad Kent Rivers  
and you  
the lonely spook in a Windy City motel  
draped in the secrets of your convulsive death  
all alone all poets all loved  
and dying alone that final death  
less real than those deaths you lived  
and for which I forgave you?

I watched you hurry down Fourth Street Jarrell  
from the world of my car in the rain  
remembering Spring Festival Night  
at Women's College in North Carolina  
and wasn't that world a coffin's retreat  
of spring whispers romance rhetoric  
Untouched by winds  
buffeting up the road from Greensboro  
and nobody mentioned the Black Revolution  
or Sit-Ins or Freedom Rides or SNCC  
or cattleprods in Jackson Mississippi—  
where I was to find myself  
how many years later:

You were mistaken that night and I told you  
in a letter beginning Dear Jarrell  
if you sit in one place long enough  
the whole world will pass you by . . .  
you were wrong when you said I took  
living too seriously  
meaning you were afraid

I might take you too seriously  
you shouldn't have worried  
I dug you too much  
to put you down  
but I never took you at all  
except as a good piece of my first journey south  
except as I take you now  
gladly at a distance  
and wondering as I have so often  
how come being so cool  
you weren't also a little bit  
Black.

And also why have you returned  
to this dying city  
and what piece of me is it then  
buried down there in North Carolina.

(1970)



STORY BOOKS ON  
A KITCHEN TABLE

Out of her womb of pain my mother spat me  
into her ill-fitting harness of despair  
into her deceits  
where anger reconceived me  
piercing my eyes like arrows  
pointed by her nightmare  
of who I was not  
becoming.

Going away  
she left me in her place  
iron maidens to protect me  
and for my food  
the wrinkled milk of legend  
where I wandered  
through lonely rooms of afternoon  
wrapped in nightmare  
from the Orange Red Yellow  
Purple Blue Green  
Fairy Books  
where white witches ruled  
over the kitchen table  
and never wept  
or offered gold  
nor any kind enchantment  
for the vanished mother  
of a Black girl.

(1970)







From A LAND WHERE OTHER  
PEOPLE LIVE

part 2



My daughter marks the day that spring begins.  
I cannot celebrate spring without remembering  
how the bodies of unborn children  
bake in their mothers' flesh like ovens  
consecrated by the flame that eats them  
lit by mobiloil and easternstandard  
Unborn children in their blasted mothers  
floating monuments  
in an ocean of oil.

The year my daughter was born  
DuBois died in Accra while I  
marched into Washington  
to the death knell of dreaming  
which 250,000 others mistook for a hope  
believing only Birmingham's Black children  
were being pounded into mortar in churches  
that year some of us still thought  
Vietnam was a suburb of Korea.

Then John Kennedy fell off the roof  
of Southeast Asia and shortly afterward  
my whole house burned down  
with nobody in it  
and on the following Sunday  
my borrowed radio announced  
that Malcolm was shot dead  
and I ran to reread all he had written  
because death was becoming such an excellent measure

of prophecy

As I read his words dark mangled children  
came streaming out of the atlas

Hanoi Angola Guinea-Bissau Mozambique Phnom Penh  
merging into Bedford-Stuyvesant and Hazelhurst Mississippi  
haunting my New York tenement that terribly bright summer  
while Detroit and Watts and San Francisco were burning

I lay awake in stifling Broadway nights afraid  
for whoever was growing in my belly  
and suppose it started earlier than planned  
who would I trust to take care that my daughter  
did not eat poisoned roaches  
when I was gone?

If she did, it doesn't matter  
because I never knew it.

Today both children came home from school  
talking about spring and peace  
and I wonder if they will ever know it  
I want to tell them that we have no right to spring  
because our sisters and brothers are burning  
because every year the oil grows thicker  
and even the earth is crying  
because Black is beautiful but currently  
going out of style  
that we must be very strong  
and love each other  
in order to go on living.

(1969)

THE SEVENTH  
SENSE

Women  
who build nations  
learn  
to love  
men  
who build nations  
learn  
to love  
children  
building sand castles  
by the rising sea.

(1969)

## CHANGE OF SEASON

Am I to be cursed forever with becoming  
somebody else on the way to myself?

Walking backwards I fall into summers  
behind me salt with wanting  
lovers or friends a job wider shoes  
a cool drink something to bite into freshness  
a place to hide out of the rain  
out of the shifting melange of seasons  
where cruel boys i chased  
and their skinny dodgeball sisters  
flamed and died in becoming  
the brown autumn  
left in search of who tore the streamers down  
at graduation christmas my wedding day  
and as winter wore out the babies came  
angry effort and reward  
in their appointed seasons  
my babies tore out of me  
like poems after  
I slept and woke  
promise had come again  
this time more sure than the dream of being  
sweet sixteen and somebody else  
walking five miles through the august city  
with a free dog hoping  
now we could be the allamerican family

we had just gotten a telephone  
and the next day my sister cut his leash  
on Broadway

That dog of my childhood bays at the new moon  
as I reach into time up to my elbows  
extracting the taste and sharp smell  
of my first lover's neck  
rough as the skin of a brown pear ripening  
I was so terribly sure  
I would come forever to April  
with my first love who died on a Sunday morning  
poisoned and wondering  
was summer ever coming.

As I face the ocean of seasons  
they separate  
into distinct and particular faces  
listening to a cover begin to crack open  
whether or not the fruit is worth waiting  
thistles and arrows and apples are blooming  
individual beautiful faces smiling moving  
even the pavement begins to flow  
into new concretions  
the eighth day is coming

I have paid dearly in time for love  
I hoarded unseen  
summer goes into my words  
and comes out reason.

(1969)

## FOR EACH OF YOU

Be who you are and will be  
learn to cherish  
that boisterous Black Angel that drives you  
up one day and down another  
protecting the place where your power rises  
running like hot blood  
from the same source  
as your pain.

When you are hungry  
learn to eat  
whatever sustains you  
until morning  
but do not be misled by details  
simply because you live them.

Do not let your head deny  
your hands  
any memory of what passes through them  
nor your eyes nor your heart  
everything can be used  
except what is wasteful  
(you will need to remember this  
when you are accused of destruction).  
Even when they are dangerous  
examine the heart of those machines  
which you hate  
before you discard them  
but do not mourn their lack of power

lest you be condemned  
to relieve them.

If you do not learn to hate  
you will never be lonely  
enough to love easily  
nor will you always be brave  
although it does not grow any easier.

Do not pretend to convenient beliefs  
even when they are righteous  
you will never be able to defend your city  
while shouting

Remember our sun  
is not the most noteworthy star  
only the nearest.

Respect whatever pain you bring back  
from your dreaming  
but do not look for new gods  
in the sea  
nor in any part of a rainbow.

Each time you love  
love as deeply  
as if it were  
forever  
only nothing is  
eternal.

Speak proudly to your children  
where ever you may find them  
tell them  
you are the offspring of slaves  
and your mother was  
a princess  
in darkness.

(1970)

## NEW YEAR'S DAY

This day feels put together hastily  
like a gift for grateful beggars  
being better than no time at all  
but bells are ringing  
in cities I have never visited  
and my name is printed over doorways  
I have never seen.

Extracting a bone  
or whatever is tender or fruitful  
from a core of indifferent days  
I have forgotten the touch of sun  
cutting through uncommitted mornings  
The night is full of messages  
I cannot read  
I am too busy forgetting  
air like fur on my tongue  
these tears  
do not come from sadness  
but from grit in the sometimes wind.

Rain falls like tar on my skin  
my son picks up a chicken heart at dinner  
asking "Does this thing love?"

Ghostly unmalicious fingers  
pluck over my dreaming  
hiding whatever it is of sorrow  
that would profit me  
I am deliberate  
and afraid  
of nothing.

(1970)

GOOD MIRRORS ARE  
NOT CHEAP

It is a waste of time to hate a mirror  
or its reflection  
instead of stopping the hand  
that makes glass with distortions  
slight enough to pass  
unnoticed  
until one day peering  
into your face  
under a merciless light  
the fault in a mirror slaps back  
becoming what you think  
is the shape of your error  
and if I am beside that self  
you destroy me  
or if you can see  
the mirror is lying  
you shatter the glass  
choosing another blindness  
slashed helpless hands.

At the same time  
down the street  
a glassmaker is grinning  
turning out new mirrors  
that lie . . .  
selling us new clowns  
at cut rate.

(1970)



## AS I GROW UP AGAIN

A little boy wears my mistakes  
like a favorite pair of shorts  
outgrown at six  
my favorite excuse was morning  
and I remember that I hated  
spring's change.

At play within my childhood  
my son works hard learning  
which doors do not open easily  
and which clocks will not work  
he toys with anger like a young cat  
testing its edges  
slashing through the discarded box  
where I laid my childish dreams to rest  
and brought him brown and wriggling  
to his own house.

He learns there through my error  
winning with secrets  
I do not need to know.

(1970)

## NEIGHBORS

FOR D.D.

We made strong poems for each other  
exchanging formulas for each particular magic  
all the time pretending  
we were not really witches  
and each time we would miss  
some small ingredient  
that one last detail  
that could make the spell work  
Each one of us too busy  
hearing the other voices  
the sound of our own guards  
calling the watch at midnight  
assuring us  
we were still safe and asleep  
so when it came time to practice  
what we had learned  
one grain was always missing  
one word unsaid  
and the pot did not boil  
the sweet milk would curdle  
or the bright wound went on bleeding  
and each of us went back  
to her own particular magic

confirmed believing  
she was always alone  
believing  
the other  
was always lying  
in wait.

(1970)

LOVE, MAYBE

Always  
in the middle  
of our bloodiest battles  
you lay down your arms  
like flowering mines

to conqueror me home.

(1970)

## CONCLUSION

Passing men in the street who are dead  
becomes a common occurrence  
but loving one of them  
is no solution.

I believe in love as I believe in our children  
but I was born Black and without illusion  
and my vision  
which differs from yours  
is clear  
although sometimes restricted.

I have watched you at midnight  
moving through casual sleep  
wishing I could afford the nondesperate dreams  
that stir you to wither and fade  
into partial solutions.

Your nights are wintery long and very young  
full of purity and forgiveness  
and a meek Jesus who rides through your cities  
on a barren ass whose braying  
does not include a future tense.

But I wear my nights as I wear my life  
and my dying  
absolute and unforgiven  
nuggets of compromise and decision  
fossilized by fierce midsummer sun  
and when I dream

I move through a Black land  
where the future  
glows eternal and green  
but where the symbols for now  
are bloody and unrelenting  
rooms  
where confused children  
with wooden stumps for fingers  
play at war  
and cannot pick up their marbles  
or run away home  
whenever a nightmare threatens.

(1970)

I

This land will not always be foreign.  
How many of its women ache to bear their stories  
robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain  
or thrash in padded chains mute as bottles  
hands fluttering traces of resistance  
on the backs of once lovers  
half the truth  
knocking in the brain like an angry steampipe  
how many long to work or split open  
so bodies venting into silence  
can plan the next move?

Tiresias took 500 years they say  
to progress into woman  
growing smaller and darker and more powerful  
until nut-like, she went to sleep in a bottle  
Tiresias took 500 years to grow into woman  
so do not despair of your sons.

Impatient legends speak through my flesh  
changing this earth's formation  
spreading  
I become myself an incantation  
dark raucous characters  
leaping back and forth across bland pages  
Mother Yemanja raises her breasts to begin my labor  
near water  
the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together  
in the heat of her body's truth  
my voice comes stronger  
Shango will be my brother roaring out of the sea  
earth shakes our darkness  
swelling into each other  
warning winds announce us living  
as Oya, Oya my sister my daughter  
destroys the crust of the tidy beaches  
and Eshu's Black laughter  
turns up the neat sleeping sand.

### III

The heart of this country's tradition is its wheat men  
dying for money  
dying for water for markets for power  
over all people's children  
they sit in their chains on their dry earth  
before nightfall  
telling tales as they wait for completion  
hoping the young ones can hear them  
earthshaking fear wreathes their blank weary faces  
most of them have spent their lives and their wives  
in labor  
most of them have never seen beaches  
but as Oya my sister moves out of the mouths  
of their sons and daughters against them  
I swell up from the page of their daily heralds  
leap out of the almanacs  
instead of an answer to their search for rain  
they will read me  
the dark cloud  
meaning something entire  
and different.

When the winds of Orisha blow  
even the roots of grass  
quicken.

(1970)

**WHO SAID IT WAS  
SIMPLE**

There are so many roots to the tree of anger  
that sometimes the branches shatter  
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks  
the women rally before they march  
discussing the problematic girls  
they hire to make them free.  
An almost white counterman passes  
a waiting brother to serve them first  
and the ladies neither notice nor reject  
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see cause in color  
as well as sex.

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations.

(1970)

## THE DAY THEY EULOGIZED MAHALIA

The day they eulogized Mahalia  
the echoes of her big voice stilled  
and the mourners found her  
singing out from their sisters' mouths  
from their mothers' toughness  
from the funky dust in the corners  
of Sunday church pews  
sweet and dry and simple  
and that hated Sunday morning fussed-over feeling  
the songs  
singing out from their mothers' toughness  
would never threaten the lord's retribution  
anymore.

Now she was safe  
acceptable that big Mahalia  
Chicago turned all out  
to show her that they cared  
but her eyes were closed  
And although Mahalia loved our music  
nobody sang her favorite song  
and while we talked about  
what a hard life she had known  
and wasn't it too bad Sister Mahalia  
didn't have it easier earlier  
**SIX BLACK CHILDREN**  
**BURNED TO DEATH IN A DAY CARE CENTER**  
on the South Side

kept in a condemned house  
for lack of funds  
firemen found their bodies  
like huddled lumps of charcoal  
with silent mouths wide open.

Small and without song  
six Black children found a voice in flame  
the day the city eulogized Mahalia.

(1971)

## PROGRESS REPORT

When you do say hello I am never sure  
if you are being saucy or experimental or  
merely protecting some new position.  
Sometimes you gurgle while asleep  
and I know tender places still intrigue you.  
When you question me on love now  
shall I recommend a dictionary  
or myself?

You are the child of wind and ravens I created  
always my daughter I cannot recognize  
the currents where you swim and dart  
through my loving  
upstream to your final place of birth  
but you never tire of hearing  
how I crept out of my mother's house  
at dawn, with an olive suitcase  
crammed with books and fraudulent letters  
and an unplayed guitar.

I see myself flash through your eyes  
in moments caught between history  
and obedience  
those moments grow each day  
before you comply  
as, when did washing dishes  
change from privilege to chore?  
I watch the hollows deepen over your hips  
wondering if I have taught you Black enough

until I see  
all kinds of loving still intrigue  
you growing more and more  
dark rude and tender  
unafraid.

What you once took for granted  
you now refuse to take at all  
even I knock before I enter  
the shoals of furious choices  
not my own  
that flood through your secret reading  
nightly under cover.

I have not yet seen you, but  
I hear the pages rustle  
from behind closed doors.

(1971)

## BLACK MOTHER WOMAN

I cannot recall you gentle  
yet through your heavy love  
I have become  
an image of your once-delicate flesh  
split with deceitful longings.

When strangers come and compliment me  
your aged spirit takes a bow  
jingling with pride  
but once you hid that secret  
in the center of your fury  
hanging me  
with deep breasts and wiry hair  
your own split flesh  
and long-suffering eyes  
buried in myths of little worth.

But I have peeled away your anger  
down to its core of love  
and look mother  
I am a dark temple  
where your true spirit rises  
beautiful tough as chestnut  
stanchion against nightmares of weakness  
and if my eyes conceal  
a squadron of conflicting rebellions  
I learned from you  
to define myself  
through your denials.

(1971)

I make my children promises  
in wintery afternoons  
lunchtime stories  
when my feet hurt from talking too much  
and not enough movement  
except in my own  
worn down at the heel shoes  
except in little circles of broken-down light  
I am trapped in  
the intensities of my own (our) situation  
where what we need and do not have  
deadens us  
and promises sound like destruction.

White snowflakes clog the passages  
drifting through halls and corridors  
while I tell stories with no ending  
at lunchtime  
the children's faces wear uneasy smiles  
like a heavy question  
food is provided with a frightening efficiency  
the talk is free/dom meaning state  
condition of being.

We are elementary forces  
colliding in free fall.

And who will say I made promises  
better kept in confusion

than time grown tall and straight  
in a season of snow  
in a harsh time of sun that withers  
who will say as they build  
ice castles at noon  
living promises I made  
these children who will say  
we have laid out the new cities  
with more love than our dreams?

Who will hear freedom's bell deaden  
in the clang of the gates of the prisons  
where snowmen melt into darkness  
unforgiven and so remembered?

How we romped through so many winters  
made snowballs played at war. . . .

As the promises I make children  
sprout like wheat from an early spring's wager  
who will hear freedom  
ring in the chains of promise  
who will forget the curse  
of the outsider  
who will not recognize our season  
as free  
who will say  
Promise corrupts  
what it does not invent?

(1971)

## GENERATION II

A Black girl going  
into the woman  
her mother desired  
and prayed for  
walks alone afraid  
of both their angers.

(1971)

RELEVANT IS DIFFERENT  
POINTS ON THE CIRCLE

To BWC.

History bless me  
with my children's growing rebellion  
with love in another tongue  
teach me what my pride will not savor  
like the fabled memory of elephants  
I have loved them and watched over them  
as the bird forgets but the trap doesn't  
and I shall be buried with the bones of an eagle  
with a fierce detachment  
and legends of the slain buffalo.

This is a country where other people live.

When agate replaces dead wood  
slowly opal and bone become one.  
A phoenix named Angela  
nests in my children's brain  
already growing herds of bison  
unnoticed are being hunted down  
the federal canyons of Yellowstone Park.

(1971)

DEAR TONI  
INSTEAD OF A LETTER OF  
CONGRATULATION UPON YOUR  
BOOK AND YOUR DAUGHTER  
WHOM YOU SAY YOU ARE  
RAISING TO BE A CORRECT  
LITTLE SISTER

I can see your daughter walking down streets of love  
in revelation;  
but raising her up to be a correct little sister  
is doing your mama's job all over again.  
And who did you make on the edge of Harlem's winter  
hard and black  
while the inside was undetermined  
swirls of color and need  
shifting, remembering  
were you making another self to rediscover  
in a new house and a new name  
in a new place next to a river of blood  
or were you putting the past together  
pooling everything learned  
into a new and continuous woman  
divorced from the old shit we share  
and shared and sharing need not share again?

I see your square delicate jawbone  
the mark of a Taurus (or Leo) as well as the ease  
with which you deal with pretensions.  
I dig your going and becoming .

the lessons you teach your daughter  
our history  
for I am your sister corrected  
already raised up  
our daughters will explore the old countries  
as curious visitors to our season  
using their own myths to keep themselves sharp.

I have known you over and over again  
as I've lived through this city  
taking it in storm and morning strolls  
through Astor Place and under the Canal Street Bridge  
The Washington Arch a stone raised to despair  
Riverside Drive too close to the dangerous predawn  
waters and 129th Street  
between Lenox and Seventh  
burning my blood but not Black enough  
and threatening to become home.

I first saw you behind a caseworker's notebook  
defying upper Madison Avenue and my roommate's concern  
the ghost of Maine lobsterpots trailing behind you  
and I followed you into East Fourth Street and out  
through Bellevue's side entrance one night  
into the respectable vineyards of Yeshiva's intellectual gloom  
and there I lost you between the books and the games  
until I rose again out of Jackson Mississippi  
to find you in an office down the hall from mine  
calmly studying term papers like maps  
marking off stations  
on our trip through the heights of Convent Avenue  
teaching English our children citycollege  
softer and tougher and more direct

and putting your feet up on a desk you say Hi  
I'm going to have a baby  
so now I can really indulge myself.

Through that slim appraisal of your world  
I felt you grinning and plucky  
and a little bit scared  
perhaps of the madness past that had relieved you  
through your brittle young will of iron  
into the fire of whip steel.

I have a daughter also  
who does not remind me of you  
she too has deep aquatic eyes  
that are burning and curious.  
As she moves through taboos  
whirling myth like a gay hoop over her head  
I know beyond fear and history  
that our teaching means keeping trust  
with less and less correctness  
only with ourselves  
History may alter old pretenses and victories  
but not the pain my sister never the pain.

In my daughter's name  
I bless your child with the mother she has  
with a future of warriors and growing fire.  
But with tenderness also  
we are landscapes, Toni,  
printed upon them as surely  
as water etches feather on stone.

Our girls will grow into their own  
Black Women  
finding their own contradictions  
they will come to love  
as I love you.

(September 1971)

## PROLOGUE

Haunted by poems beginning with I  
seek out those whom I love who are deaf  
to whatever does not destroy  
or curse the old ways that did not serve us  
while history falters and our poets are dying  
choked into silence by icy distinction  
death rattles blind curses  
and I hear even my own voice becoming  
a pale strident whisper  
At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin  
sometimes at noon I dream  
there is nothing to fear  
now standing up in the light of my father sun  
without shadow.  
I speak without concern for the accusations  
that I am too much or too little woman  
that I am too Black or too white  
or too much myself  
and through my lips come the voices  
of the ghosts of our ancestors  
living and moving among us.

Hear my heart's voice as it darkens  
pulling old rhythms out of the earth  
that will receive this piece of me  
and a piece of each one of you  
when our part in history quickens again  
and is over:

Hear

the old ways are going away  
and coming back pretending change  
masked as denunciation and lament  
masked as a choice  
between an eager mirror that blurs and distorts us  
in easy definitions until our image  
shatters along its fault  
or the other half of that choice  
speaking to our hidden fears with a promise  
our eyes need not seek any truer shape—  
a face at high noon particular and unadorned—  
for we have learned to fear  
the light from clear water might destroy us  
with reflected emptiness or a face without tongue  
with no love or with terrible penalties  
for any difference  
and even as I speak remembered pain is moving  
shadows over my face, my own voice fades and  
my brothers and sisters are leaving;

Yet when I was a child  
whatever my mother thought would mean survival  
made her try to beat me whiter every day  
and even now the color of her bleached ambition  
still forks throughout my words  
but I survived  
and didn't I survive confirmed  
to teach my children where her errors lay  
etched across their faces between the kisses  
that she pinned me with asleep  
and my mother beating me  
as white as snow melts in the sunlight

loving me into her bloods black bone—  
the home of all her secret hopes and fears  
and my dead father whose great hands  
weakened in my judgment  
whose image broke inside of me  
beneath the weight of failure  
helps me to know who I am not  
weak or mistaken  
my father loved me alive  
to grow and hate him  
and now his grave voice joins hers  
within my words rising and falling  
are my sisters and brothers listening?

The children remain  
like blades of grass over the earth and  
all the children are singing  
louder than mourning  
all their different voices  
sound like a raucous question  
they do not fear empty mirrors  
they have seen their faces defined in a hydrant's puddle  
before the rainbows of oil obscured them.  
The time of lamentation and curses is passing.

My mother survives  
through more than chance or token.  
Although she will read what I write  
with embarrassment or anger  
and a small understanding  
my children do not need to relive my past  
in strength nor in confusion  
nor care that their holy fires

may destroy  
more than my failures.

Somewhere in the landscape past noon  
I shall leave a dark print of the me that I am  
and who I am not  
etched in a shadow  
of angry and remembered loving  
and their ghosts will move  
whispering through them  
with me none the wiser  
for they will have buried me  
either in shame  
or in peace.

And the grasses will still be  
Singing.

(November 1971)

**MOVING OUT OR THE END OF  
COOPERATIVE LIVING**

**FOR CUZ GERRY.**

I am so glad to be moving  
away from this prison for Black and white faces  
assaulting each other with our joint oppression  
competing for who pays the highest price for this privilege  
I am so glad I am moving  
technicolored complaints aimed at my head  
mash up on my door like mosquitoes  
each time my lips move sideways  
the smile shatters on the in-thing racing  
dictator through our hallways  
on concrete faces on soul compactors  
on the rhetoric of incinerators and plastic drapes  
for the boiler room  
on legends of broken elevators  
blowing my morning cool  
avoiding me in the corridors  
dropping their load on my face down 24 stories  
of lives in a spectrumped madhouse  
pavilion of gnats and nightmare remembering  
once we all saved like beggars  
to buy our way into this castle  
of fantasy and forever now  
I am so glad to be moving.

Last month a tenant was asked to leave  
someone saw him wandering  
one morning up and down the tenth floor

with no clothes on  
having locked himself out the night before  
with the garbage  
he could not fit into the incinerator  
but it made no difference  
the Floor Captain cut the leads to his cable TV  
he left covered in tangled wires of shame  
his apartment was reconsecrated by an exterminator  
I am so glad I am moving.

Although workmen will descend at \$100 an hour  
to scrape my breath from the walls  
refinish the air and the floors with their eyes  
and charge me the exact amount  
of whatever is owed me  
called equity  
I am so glad to be moving  
from the noise of psychic footsteps  
beating a tune that is not my own  
louder than any other sound in the neighborhood  
except the blasting that goes on all day and all night  
from the city's new toilet being built  
outside our main entrance  
from the spirits who live in the locks  
of the other seven doors  
bellowing secrets of living hells revealed  
but not shared  
for everybody's midnights  
know what the walls hide  
our toilets are made of glass  
wired for sound

24 stories

full of tears flushing at midnight  
our only community room  
children set their clocks to listen at the tissue walls  
gazing upward from their stools  
from one flight to another  
catching the neighbors in private struggle  
next morning it will all be discussed  
at length in the elevators  
with no secrets left  
I am so glad to be moving  
no more dreams of caged puppies  
grinding their teeth into cartoon-like faces  
that half-plead half-snicker  
then fold under and vanish  
back into snarling strangers  
I am so glad I am moving.

But when this grim house goes  
slipping into the sewer prepared for it  
this whole city can read  
its own obituary  
written on the broken record of dreams  
of ordinary people  
who wanted what they could not get  
and so pretended to be someone else.

Ordinary people having  
what they never learned to want  
themselves  
and so becoming pretension  
concretized.

(1972)

## S I G N S

No one is left to eat by my fire.  
My children have gone to the wood  
their earth-colored laughter  
stitched up in a market blanket  
I wore to announce my coming of age  
and that day  
other girls went pale and wanting  
between the stalls in the noon sun.

May their journey be free from ghosts.  
I have heard the old spirits chattering  
down by the river planning my downfall  
for my yam has always been eaten  
with pleasure  
and my body has not been unfruitful  
I do not squander my days at the market  
nor bargain for what I cannot sell  
I do not cover my yams with a cloth  
when creditors pass  
pretending they belong to another.

But I have only two children.  
neither was born in conjure nor hiding  
now they go to the wood  
to the night to the gradual breaking.  
They will return men  
and silent  
draped in impatience and indigo  
signs of our separation.

As I go to wash myself before sun  
I search my dooryard and tremble  
lest I find the shattered pot  
left as a sign to warn me  
they will never return.

(1972)

## MOVEMENT SONG

I have studied the tight curls  
on the back of your neck  
moving away from me beyond anger  
or failure your face  
in the evening schools of longing  
through mornings of wish and ripen  
we were always saying goodbye  
in the blood in the bone over coffee  
before dashing for elevators going  
in opposite directions  
without goodbyes.

Do not remember me as a bridge nor a roof  
as the maker of legends nor as a trap  
door to the world  
where Black and white clericals  
hang on the edge of beauty  
in five o'clock elevators  
twitching their shoulders  
to avoid other flesh  
and now  
there is someone to speak for them  
moving away from me into tomorrow's  
morning of wish and ripen  
your goodbye is a promise of lightning  
in the last angel's hand  
unwelcome warning  
the sands have run out against us  
we were rewarded by journeys

away from each other into desire  
into mornings alone  
where excuse and endurance mingle  
conceiving decision.

Do not remember me  
as disaster  
nor as the keeper of secrets  
I am a fellow rider in the cattle cars  
watching you move slowly  
out of my bed  
saying we cannot waste time  
only ourselves.

(1972)



From NEW YORK HEAD  
SHOP AND MUSEUM

part 3



## MENTOR

Scaling your words like crags I found  
silence speaking  
in a mouthful of sun  
yet I say you are young  
for your lips are not stone  
to the rain's fall  
I say you are lovely to speak  
in a mouthful of sun  
nor does summer await you.

I see the midnight  
heavy as windows sealed against fire  
and tears coiled like snakes  
in your eyes  
I see your forehead like snow  
and the names of so many winters  
your fingers play over  
plucking out rays of light  
to anoint me home;

Yet I say you are young  
and your lips are not stone  
to be weathered  
rather a song  
learned when my aprils were fallow.  
I sing this for beacon  
lighting us home  
each to our separate house.

(1959)



REVOLUTION  
IS ONE FORM  
OF SOCIAL  
CHANGE

When the man is busy  
making niggers  
it doesn't matter  
whose shade  
you are.

If he runs out of one  
particular color  
he can always switch  
to size  
and when he's finished  
off the big ones  
he'll change to sex  
which is after all  
where it all began.

(1968)

THE AMERICAN CANCER  
SOCIETY OR THERE IS MORE  
THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A COON

Of all the ways in which this country  
Prints its death upon me  
Selling me cigarettes is one of the most certain  
Yet every day I watch my son digging  
ConEdison General Motors Garbage Disposal  
Out of his nose as he watches a 3-second spot  
On How To Stop Smoking  
And it makes me sick to my stomach.  
It is not by cigarettes  
That you intend to destroy my children.

Not even by the cold white light of moon-walks  
While half the boys I knew  
Are doomed by quicker trips in a different capsule;  
No, the american cancer destroys  
By seductive and reluctant admission  
For instance  
Black women no longer give birth through our ears  
and therefore have A Monthly Need For Iron:  
For instance  
Our Pearly teeth are *not* racially insured  
And therefore must be Gleamed For Fewer Cavities:  
For instance  
Even though the astronauts are white  
Perhaps Black People *can* develop  
Some human attributes  
Requiring

Dried dog food frozen coffee instant oatmeal  
Depilatories deodorants detergents  
And other assorted plastic.

This is the surest sign I know  
The american cancer society is dying—  
It has started to dump its symbols onto Black People  
A convincing proof those symbols are now useless  
And far more lethal than emphysema.

(1969)

A SEWERPLANT GROWS IN  
HARLEM OR I'M A STRANGER  
HERE MYSELF WHEN DOES THE  
NEXT SWAN LEAVE

How is the word made flesh made steel made shit  
by ramming it into No Exit like a homemade bomb  
until it explodes  
smearing itself made real  
against our already filthy windows  
or by flushing it down in a verbal fountain?  
Meanwhile the editorial They—  
who are no less powerful—  
prepare to smother the actual Us  
with a processed flow of all our shit  
nonverbal.

Have you ever risen in the night  
bursting with knowledge and the world  
dissolves toward any listening ear  
into which you can pour  
whatever you knew before waking  
Only to find all ears asleep  
drugged perhaps by a dream of words  
because as you scream into them  
over and over nothing stirs  
and the mind you have reached  
is not a working mind  
please hang up and die again?

The mind  
you have reached is not a working mind  
Please hang up  
And die again.

Talking to some people is like talking to a toilet.

(1969)

CABLES TO RAGE OR  
I'VE BEEN TALKING ON  
THIS STREET CORNER  
A HELL OF A LONG TIME

This is how I came to be loved  
by loving myself  
loveless.

One day I slipped in a snowy gutter of Brighton Beach  
and booted feet passing  
me by on the curb squished my laundry ticket  
into the slush I thought fuck it now  
I'll never get my clean sheet and I cried bitter tears  
into the snow under my cheek in that gutter in Brighton Beach  
Brooklyn where I was living because it was cheap  
In a furnished room with cooking privileges  
and an old thrown-away mama who lived down the hall  
yente who sat all day long in our common kitchen  
weeping because her children made her live with a schwartz  
and while she wept she drank up all my cream soda  
every day before I came home.  
Then she sat and watched me watching my chicken feet stewing  
on Fridays when I got paid  
and she taught me to boil old corn in the husk  
to make it taste green and fresh.

There were not many pleasures in that winter  
and I loved cream soda  
there were not many people in that winter

and I came to hate that old woman.  
That winter I got fat on stale corn on the cob  
and chicken foot stew and the day before Christmas  
no presents to wrap  
I poured two ounces of Nux Vomica into a bottle of cream soda  
and listened to that old lady puke all night long.

When spring came I crossed the river again  
moving up in the world six and a half stories  
and one day on the corner of Eighth street  
across from Wanamakers  
which had burned down while I was away in Brooklyn—  
where I caught the bus to work  
a bus driver slowed down at the bus stop one morning—  
I was late it was raining my jacket was soaked—  
then speeded past without stopping when he saw my face.

I have been given other doses of truth—  
that particular form of annihilation—  
shot through by the cold eye of the way things are baby  
and left for dead on a hundred streets of this city  
but oh that captain marvel glance  
brushing up against my skull like a steel bar  
in passing  
and my heart withered sheets in the gutter  
passing passing  
booted feet and bus drivers  
old yentes in Brighton Beach kitchens

SHIT! said the king and the whole court strained  
passing me  
out as an ill-tempered wind  
lashing around the corner  
of 125th Street and Lenox.

(1969)

## RELEASE TIME

I came to their white terror first  
shackled  
nuns with their ghostly motives  
hidden in black motionless  
yet always upon us before we sinned  
knowing and smiling  
sadly.

The neat sample loaves  
of stale Silvercup Bread  
and free lukewarm milk  
in the chalky afternoons  
the threat of public school  
always hanging over us  
making me want to believe  
the slight faces of magic  
marooned in an ocean of Black.

I pray to almighty god to  
blessed michael the archangel defend us  
in battle be our protection  
against the wickedness and snares of  
the devil who comes white-robed  
to our daily crucifixions

restrain him oh lord we beseech and implore  
you who shall not hear us  
praying again except to seek  
in ourselves what is most human  
to sustain us  
and less terror  
for our children.

\

(1969)

## BALLAD FROM CHILDHOOD

Mommy mommy come and see  
what the strawmen left for me  
in our land of ice and house of snow  
I have found a seed to grow  
Mommy may I plant a tree?

*What the eyes don't see the heart don't hurt.*

Mommy look the seed has wings  
my tree might call a bird that sings . . .  
the strawmen left no spade no earth  
and ice will not bring my seed to birth—  
but what if I dig beneath these things?

*Watch the bird forget but the trap doesn't.*

Please mommy do not beat me so!  
yes I will learn to love the snow!  
yes I never wanted seed nor tree!  
yes ice is quite enough for me!  
who knows what trouble-leaves might grow!

*I don't fatten frogs to feed snakes.*

(1969)

I

How do you spell change  
like frayed slogan underwear  
with an emptied can of yesterday's meanings  
with yesterday's names?  
What does the we-bird see with  
who has lost its I's?

There is nothing beautiful left in the streets of this city.  
I have come to believe in death and renewal by fire.  
Past questioning the necessities of blood  
why it must be mine or my children's time  
that will see this grim city quake to be reborn perhaps  
blackened again but this time with a sense of purpose;  
tired of the past tense forever of assertion  
and repetition of ego-trips through an incomplete self  
where two years ago proud rang for promise but now  
it is time for fruit and all the agonies are barren  
only the children are growing:

How else can the self become whole  
save by making self into its own new religion?  
Yet I am bound like an old lover a true believer  
to this city's death by accretion and slow ritual  
and I submit to its penance for a trial  
as new steel is tried  
I submit my children also to its agonies  
and they are not even the city's past lovers.

But I submit them  
to the harshness the growing cold  
to the brutalizations which if survived  
will teach them strength or an understanding  
of how strength is gotten and will not be forgotten:  
It will be their city then:

I submit them  
loving them above all others save myself  
to the fire to the rage to the ritual sacrifices  
to be tried as new steel is tried;  
and in its wasting this city shall try them  
as the blood-splash of a royal victim  
tries the hand of the destroyer.

## II

I hide behind tenements and subways  
in fluorescent alleys watching as flames  
walk the streets of this empire's altar  
rage through the veins of this sacrificial stenchpot  
smeared on the east shore of a continent's insanity  
conceived in the psychic twilight  
of murderers and pilgrims rank with money  
and nightmare and too many useless people  
who will not move over nor die  
who cannot bend even before the winds  
of their own preservation even under the weight  
of their own hates  
Who cannot amend nor conceive  
nor even learn to share their own visions  
who bomb children into mortar in churches  
work plastic offal and metal and the flesh of their enemies

into subway rush-hour temples  
where obscene priests  
finger and worship each other in secret.

They think they are praying when they squat  
to shit money-pebbles shaped like their parents' brains—  
who exist to go into dust to exist again  
grosser and more swollen  
and without ever relinquishing space  
or breath or energy from their private hoard.

I do not need to make war nor peace  
with these prancing and murderous deacons  
who refuse to recognize their role  
in this covenant we live upon  
and so have come to fear and despise  
even their own children;  
but I condemn myself  
and my loves past and present  
and the blessed enthusiasms of all my children  
to this city without reason or future  
without hope to be tried  
as the new steel is tried  
before trusted to slaughter.

I walk down the withering limbs  
of New York my last discarded house  
and there is nothing worth salvage left in this city  
but faint reedy voices like echoes  
of once beautiful children.

(1971)

TO THE GIRL WHO LIVES  
IN A TREE

A letter in my mailbox says you've made it  
to Honduras and I wonder what is the color  
of the wood you are chopping now.

When you left this city I wept for a year  
down 14th Street across the Taconic Parkway  
through the shingled birdcotes along Riverside Drive  
but I was glad because in your going  
you left me a new country  
where Riverside Drive became an embattlement  
even dynamite could not blast free  
where making both love and war  
became less inconsistent  
and as my tears watered morning I became  
my own place to fathom.

While part of me follows you still  
thru the woods of Oregon  
splitting dead wood with a rusty axe  
acting out the nightmares of your mothers'  
creamy skin soot-covered from communal fires  
where you provide and labor  
to discipline your dreams  
whose symbols are immortalized  
in lies of history told like fairy tales  
called power behind the throne  
called noble frontier drudge and  
we both know you are not white

with rage or fury only  
from bleeding too much while trudging  
behind a wagon and confidentially  
did you really conquer Donner Pass  
with only a handcart?

My mothers' nightmares are not yours  
but just as binding.  
If in your sleep you tasted a child's blood  
behind your teeth  
while your chained black hand could not rise  
to wipe away his death upon your lips  
perhaps you would consider why  
I choose brick and shitty stone  
over the good earth's challenge of green.

Your mothers' nightmares are not mine  
but just as binding.  
And we share more than a trap  
between our legs  
where long game howl  
back and forth across country  
finding less than what they bargained for  
but more than they ever feared  
so dreams or not you will be back soon  
from Honduras where the woods are even thicker  
than in Oregon.  
You will make a choice too  
between loving women or loving trees  
and if only from the standpoint of free movement  
women win hands down.

(1971)

HARD LOVE  
ROCK II

Listen brother love you  
love you love you love you  
dig me  
a different colored grave  
we are both lying  
side by side in the same place  
where you put me down  
deeper still we are  
aloneness  
unresolved by weeping  
sacked cities not rebuilt  
by slogans by rhetorical pricks  
picking the lock  
that has always been open.

Black is  
not beautiful baby  
beautiful baby beautiful  
let's do it again  
It is

not being screwed twice  
at the same time  
from on top as well as  
from my side.

(1971)

## LOVE POEM

Speak earth and bless me  
with what is richest  
make sky flow honey out of my hips  
rigid as mountains  
spread over a valley  
carved out by the mouth of rain.

And I knew when I entered her I was  
high wind in her forest's hollow  
fingers whispering sound  
honey flowed from the split cup  
impaled on a lance of tongues  
on the tips of her breasts on her navel  
and my breath howling into her entrances  
through lungs of pain.

Greedy as herring-gulls  
or a child  
I swing out over the earth  
over and over again.

(1971)

**SONG FOR A  
THIN SISTER**

Either heard or taught  
as girls we thought  
that skinny was funny  
or a little bit silly  
and feeling a pull  
toward the large and the colorful  
I would joke you when  
you grew too thin.

But your new kind of hunger  
makes me chilly like danger  
I see you forever retreating  
shrinking into a stranger  
in flight  
and growing up  
Black and fat  
I was so sure that skinny  
was funny or silly  
but always  
white.

(1971)

ST. LOUIS A CITY  
OUT OF TIME

If a city  
takes its rhythms  
from the river  
that cuts through it  
the pulse of the Mississippi  
has torn this city  
apart.

St. Louis is  
somebody's home  
and not answering  
was nobody shovels snow  
because spring will come  
some day.

People who live  
by rivers dream  
they are immortal.

(1971)

TO MY DAUGHTER  
THE JUNKIE ON A TRAIN

Children we have not borne  
bedevil us by becoming  
themselves  
painfully sharp unavoidable  
like a needle in our flesh.

Coming home on the subway from a PTA meeting  
of minds committed to murder or suicide  
in their own private struggle  
a long-legged girl with a horse in her brain  
slumps down beside me  
begging to be ridden asleep  
for the price of a midnight train  
free from desire.

Little girl on the nod  
if we are measured by dreams we avoid  
then you are the nightmare  
of all sleeping mothers  
rocking back and forth  
the dead weight of your arms  
locked about our necks  
heavier than our habit  
of looking for reasons.

My corrupt concern will not replace  
what you once needed  
but I am locked into my own addiction

and offer you my help one eye  
out for my own station.

Roused and deprived  
your costly dream explodes  
in terrible technicolored laughter  
at my failure  
up and down across the aisle  
women avert their eyes  
as other mothers who became useless  
curse our children who became junk.

(1972)

## THE BEES

In the street outside a school  
what children learn  
possesses them.

Three little boys yell  
stoning a swarm of bees caught  
between the lunchroom window and a grate  
Their furious rocks graze metal.

The bees are cold and slow  
to self-defense. One boy is stung  
into quicker destruction.

School guards come  
long wooden sticks in hand  
advancing on the hive  
they beat the almost finished  
rooms of wax apart fresh honey  
drips down their broomsticks  
little boy-feet becoming experts  
trample the rain-stunned bees  
into the pavement.

Curious and apart the girls  
look on in fascination learning  
secret lessons one steps  
across the feebly buzzing ruins  
to peer up at the empty grated nook  
“We could have studied honey-making!”  
tries to understand  
her own destruction.

(1972)

A BIRTHDAY MEMORIAL  
TO SEVENTH STREET

I

I tarry in days shaped like the high staired street  
where I became a woman  
between two funeral parlors next door to each other  
sharing a dwarf who kept watch for the hearses  
Fox's Bar on the corner  
playing happy birthday to a boogie beat  
Old Slavic men cough in the spring thaw  
hawking painted candles cupcakes fresh eggs  
from under their dull green knitted caps  
When the right winds blow  
smells of bird seed and malt  
from the breweries across the river  
stop even our worst hungers.

One crosstown bus each year  
carries silence into these overcrowded hallways  
plucking madmen out of mailboxes  
from under stairwells  
cavorting over rooftops in the full moon  
cutting short the mournful songs that soothed me  
before they cascaded into laughter every afternoon  
at four P.M.  
from behind a door that never opened  
masked men in white coats dismount  
to take the names of anyone  
who has not paid the rent

batter down the doors  
to note the shapes of each obscenity  
upon the wall  
hunt those tenants down  
to make new vacancies.

## II

These were some of my lovers processed  
through the corridors of Bellevue Mattewan  
Brooklyn State the Women's House of D.  
St. Vincent's and the Tombs  
to be stapled onto tickets for their one-way ride  
on the unmarked train that travels  
once a year cross country east to west  
filled with New York's rejected lovers  
the ones who played with all their stakes  
who could not win nor learn to lie  
we were much fewer then  
who failed the entry tasks of Seventh Street  
and were returned back home  
to towns with names like Oblong and Vienna  
(called Vyanna)  
Cairo Sesser Cave-in-Rock and Legend.

Once a year the train stops unannounced  
at midnight just outside of town  
returns the brave of Bonegap and Tuskegee  
of Pawnee Falls and Rabbittown  
of Anazine Elegant Intercourse  
leaving them beyond the tracks  
like dried-up bones sucked clean of marrow  
rattling with citylike hardness  
soft wood petrified to stone in Seventh Street.

The train screams  
warning the town of coming trouble  
then moves on.

### III

I walk over Seventh Street stone at midnight  
two years away from forty  
the ghosts of old friends  
precede me down the street in welcome  
bopping in and out of doorways  
with a boogie beat.

Freddie sails before me like a made-up bat  
his Zorro cape level with the stoops  
he pirouettes upon the garbage cans  
a bundle of drugged delusions  
hanging from his belt

Joan with a hand across her throat  
sings unafraid of silence anymore  
and Marion who lived on the scraps of breath  
left in the refuse of strangers  
searches the gutter with her nightmare eyes  
tripping over a brown girl  
young in her eyes and fortune  
nimble as birch and I try to recall her name  
as Clement comes smiling from a distance  
his fingers raised in warning  
or blessing over us all.

Seventh Street swells into midnight  
memory ripe as a bursting grape  
my head is a museum  
full of other people's eyes  
like stones in a dark churchyard  
where I kneel praying  
my children  
will not die politely  
either.

(1972)

MY FIFTH TRIP TO  
WASHINGTON ENDED IN  
NORTHEAST DELAWARE

FOR CC—RING AROUND CONGRESS, JUNE 1972.

Halfway between the rain and Washington  
as we stopped  
stuck in the middle of Delaware and a deluge  
At least she said  
as the muddy waters rose covering our good intentions  
At least she said  
as we sat stranded neither dry nor high enough  
somewhere over a creek very busy becoming a river  
somewhere in northeast Delaware  
At least she said  
as we waited for an engine  
to tug us back to where we'd started from  
and my son complained he could have had more fun  
wrapped up in an envelope  
At least she said  
as the flooded-out tracks receded  
and the waters rose around us  
and the children fussed and fretted but were really  
very brave about it  
and the windows started to leak in on our shoes  
and the gum and the games and the *New York Times*  
and the chocolate bars and the toilet paper  
all ran out  
as the frozen fruit juice melted  
and the mayonnaise in the tuna fish went sour

At least she said  
as the rain kept falling down  
and we couldn't get through to Washington  
as we slumped  
damp and disappointed in our rumpled-up convictions  
At least she said  
The Indians Aren't Attacking.

(1972)

Your lashes leave me naked in the square  
but I have bled on prouder streets than these  
so my executioner beware!  
The song that haunts you through the trees  
as you ride home to comfort  
will not leave you at your door.

The warm maid brushing back her hair  
who greets you with a kiss  
knows my tune very well.  
She hums it under-breath  
while your wine sours in the cup.

Smiling she serves your dinner up  
and need not ask what sound your ear  
mulls over and over  
like witches' laughter  
nor whose sweet flesh  
your rope cut in the square.

Her tongue has tasted your death  
many nights and you asleep  
beside her dreamed me  
your tormentor.

She and I  
have come this way  
before.

(1972)

## SEPARATION

Stars dwindle  
they will not reward me  
even in triumph.

It is possible  
to shoot a man  
in self-defense  
and still notice  
how his red blood  
decorates the snow.

(1972)

## VIETNAM ADDENDA

FOR CLIFFORD.

Genocide doesn't only mean bombs  
at high noon the cameras  
panning in on the ruptured stomach  
of somebody else's pubescent daughter.

A small difference in time and space  
names that war  
while we live  
117th street at high noon  
ruthlessly familiar.  
Raped of our children  
we give birth to spots  
rubbed out at dawn  
on the streets of Jamaica  
or left all the time in the world  
for the nightmare of idleness  
to turn their hands against us.

(1972)

THE WORKERS ROSE  
ON MAY DAY OR  
POSTSCRIPT  
TO KARL MARX

Down Wall Street  
the students marched for peace.  
Above, construction workers looking on  
remembered the old days  
how it was for them  
before their closed shop white security  
and daddy pays the bills  
so the hardhats climbed down girders  
and taught their sons a lesson  
called Marx as a victim of the generation gap  
called I grew up the hard way so will you  
called  
the limits of a sentimental vision.

When this passion play was over  
and the dust had cleared on Wall Street  
500 Union workers together with police  
had mopped up Foley Square  
with 2000 of their striking sons  
who broke and ran  
before their fathers' chains.

Look here Karl Marx  
the apocalyptic vision of amerika!  
Workers rise and win  
and have not lost their chains

but swing them  
side by side with the billyclubs in blue  
securing Wall Street  
against the striking students.

(1973)

## KEY FOODS

In the Keyfood Market on Broadway  
by the window a woman waits  
daily and patient  
the comings and goings of buyers  
neatly labeled old  
like yesterday's bread  
restless experienced eyes  
weigh fear like grapefruit  
testing for ripeness.

Once in the market  
she was more  
comfortable than wealthy  
more Black than white  
proper than friendly  
more rushed than alone  
her powers defined her  
like a carefully kneaded loaf  
rising restrained  
working and loving  
behind secret eyes.

Once she was all  
the sums of her knowing  
more somebody  
else's mother than mine  
now she weighs faces  
as once she weighed fruit.

**Waiting**  
she does not count change  
Her lonely eyes measure  
all who enter the market  
are they new  
are they old enough  
can they buy each other?

(1973)

A TRIP ON THE STATEN  
ISLAND FERRY

Dear Jonno  
there are pigeons who nest  
on the Staten Island Ferry  
and raise their young  
between the moving decks  
and never touch  
ashore.

Every voyage is a journey.

Cherish this city  
left you by default  
include it in your daydreams  
there are still secrets  
in the streets  
even I have not discovered  
who knows if the old men  
shining shoes on the Staten Island Ferry  
carry their world in that box  
slung across their shoulders  
if they share their lunch  
with the birds flying  
back and forth  
on an endless journey  
if they ever find their way  
back home.

(1973)

**N O W**

Woman power  
is  
Black power  
is  
human power  
is  
always feeling  
my heart beats  
as my eyes open  
as my hands move  
as my mouth speaks

I am  
are you

Ready?

(1973)

**MEMORIAL III—  
FROM A PHONE  
BOOTH ON  
BROADWAY**

Sometime turns inside out  
and the whole day collapses  
into a desperate search  
for a telephone booth  
that works  
quick

quick

I must call you  
now  
who has not spoken  
inside my head  
for over a year  
but if this phone burrs  
long enough  
pressed up against my ear  
you will blossom  
back into sound  
you will answer  
must answer  
answer me  
answer goddamn it  
answer

please  
answer this  
is the last time  
I shall ever call  
you.

(1973)

AND DON'T THINK  
I WON'T BE WAITING

I am supposed to say  
it doesn't matter look me up some  
time when you're in my neighborhood  
needing  
a drink some books good talk  
a quick dip before lunch  
but I never was one for losing  
what I couldn't afford  
from the beginning  
your richness made my heart  
burn like a roman candle.

Now I don't mind  
your hand on my face like fire  
like a slap turned inside out  
quick as a caress  
but I'm warning you  
this time  
you will not slip away  
under a covering cloud  
of my tears.

(1973)

## FOR MY SINGING SISTER

Little sister, not all Black  
people are all ready  
people  
are not always Black  
people  
finding them  
selves close  
to how they see  
themselves  
being most important.

I see your friends are  
young skinny girls sometimes  
tall sometimes slight sometimes  
beige and neutral or mean or honest or weak  
sometimes warm some  
times even you  
haunted by fat Black women who alter  
like dreams in a shattered mirror  
becoming sometimes  
tall sometimes slight sometimes  
beige and neutral or mean  
sometimes even you  
hiding in a bloodbath of color  
as you slice up love  
on the edge of your little mirrors  
making smaller but not safer  
images of your sun.

Cherish your nightmare sister  
or under the cloak of respect  
a fat Black witch may be buried  
the silver stake  
through your heart.

(1973)

## MONKEYMAN

There is a strange man attached to my backbone  
who thinks he can sap me or break me  
if he bleaches out my son my water my fire  
if he confuses my tongue by shitting symbols  
into my words.

Every day I walk out of my house  
with this curious weight on my back  
peering out from between my ear and my shoulder  
each time I move my head  
his breath smells like a monkey  
he tugs at my short hairs  
trying to make me look into shop windows  
trying to make me buy  
wigs and girdles and polyurethane pillows  
and whenever I walk through Harlem  
he whispers—"be careful—  
our nigger will get us!"

I used to pretend  
I did not hear him.

(1972)

God of my father discovered at midnight  
mother asleep on her thunders  
my father returning at midnight  
out of tightening circles of anger  
days' punishment  
the inelegant safeties of power  
midnight empties your house of bravado  
passion sleeps like a mist  
outside desire your strength  
splits like a melon  
dropped on the prisoners' floor  
midnight glows a jeweled love  
at the core of broken fruit.

My mother is sleeping  
Hymns of dream lie like bullets  
in her nights' weapons  
the sacred steeples  
of nightmare are secret hidden  
in the disguise of fallen altars  
I too shall learn how to conquer yes  
Yes yes god  
damned I love you  
now free me quickly  
before I destroy us.

(1973)

THE BROWN MENACE  
OR POEM TO THE  
SURVIVAL OF  
ROACHES

Call me  
your deepest urge  
toward survival  
call me  
and my brothers and sisters  
in the sharp smell of refusal  
call me  
roach and presumptuous  
nightmare upon your white pillow  
your itch to destroy  
the indestructible  
part of yourself.

Call me  
your own determination  
in the most detestable shape  
you can become  
friend of your own image  
within me I am you  
your most deeply cherished nightmare  
scuttling through painted cracks  
you create to admit  
me into your kitchens  
your fearful midnights  
your values at noon

into your most secret places  
hating  
you learn to honor me  
by imitation as I alter  
through your greedy preoccupations  
through your kitchen wars  
through your poisonous refusal  
to survive.

To survive.

To survive.

(1973)

## SACRIFICE

The only hungers left  
are the hungers allowed us.

By the light of our sacred street lamps  
by whatever maps we swore to follow  
pleasure will betray us  
unless we do what we have to do  
without wanting to do it  
feel enemy stone give way  
without satisfaction  
look the other way  
as our dreams come true  
as our bloody hands move over history  
writing we have come we have done  
what we came to do.

Pulling down the statues of rock  
from their high places  
we must level the expectations  
upon which they stand  
waiting  
for us to fulfill their image  
waiting for our feet  
to replace them.

Unless we refuse to sleep  
even one night in their houses of marble  
the sight of our children's false pleasure  
will undo us

for our children have grown  
in the shadow of what was  
the shape of marble  
between their eyes and the sun.

We do not wish to stand  
great marble statues  
between our children's eyes  
and their sun.

Learning all we can use  
only what is vital  
The only sacrifice of worth  
is the sacrifice of desire.

(1973)

I

A chill wind sweeps the high places.  
On the ground bearers of wood  
carved in the image of old and mistaken gods  
labor in search of weapons against blind dancers  
who balance great dolls on their shoulders  
scrambling over the same earth  
searching for food.

In a room on the 17th floor  
my spirit is choosing  
I am afraid of speaking the truth  
in a room on the 17th floor  
my body is dreaming it sits  
bottom pinned to a table  
eating perpetual watermelon  
inside my own head  
young girls assault my door with curse rags  
stiff from their mothers old secrets  
covering up their new promise  
with old desires no longer their need  
old satisfactions never enjoyed  
outside my door they are waiting  
with questions that feel like judgments  
when they go unanswered.

The palms of my hands  
have black marks running across them.

So are signed makers of myth  
sworn through our blood  
to give legends  
the children will come to understand  
to speak out living words like this poem  
knitting truth into fable  
to leave my story behind  
though I fall through cold wind condemned  
to nursing old gods for a new heart  
debtless without color  
while my flesh is covered by mouths  
whose din keep my real wants secret.

## II

I do not want to lie. I have loved other  
young women deep into their color  
who now crawl over bleached earth  
bent into questionmarks ending a sentence  
of men who pretend to be brave.

I am afraid  
the mouths I feed will turn against me  
will refuse to swallow in the silence  
I am warning them to avoid  
I am afraid  
they will kernel me out like a walnut  
extract the nourishing seed  
as my husk stains their lips  
the mixed colors of my pain.

While I sit choosing the voice  
in which my children hear  
my prayers above the wind  
I am afraid  
they will follow these black roads  
out of my hands unencumbered  
by guilty secrets remembered sorrows  
use legend to shape their own language  
make it ruler measuring the distance  
between my hungers and their purpose.  
I am afraid  
They will discard my most ancient nightmares  
where fallen gods become demon  
instead of dust.

### III

Just before light devils woke me  
trampling my flesh into fruit  
that would burst in the sun  
until I came to despise every evening  
fearing strange gods at the fall of each night  
and when my mother punished me  
by sending me to bed without my prayers  
I had no names for darkness.

I do not know whose words protect me  
whose tales or tears prepared me  
for this trial on the 17th floor  
I do not know whose legends blew  
through my mother's furies  
but they fell through my sleeping lips  
like the juice of forbidden melons

little black seeds sown through my heart  
like closed and waiting eyes.

Although demons rode me  
I rose up a child of morning  
and deep roads sprouted across the palms  
of my hidden fists dark and growing.

#### IV

Chill winds swirl through these high places.  
It is a time when the bearer of hard news  
is destroyed for the message  
when it is heard.

A.B. is a poet who says our people  
fear our own beauty  
has not made us hard enough  
to survive victory  
but he too has written his children  
upon women I hope with love.

I bear mine alone  
in the mouth of the enemy  
upon a desk on the 17th floor  
swept bare by cold winds  
bright as neon.

#### V

Their demon father rode me  
just before daylight  
before he could touch the palms  
of my hands

to devour my children  
I learned his tongue  
I ate him and left his bones  
mute in the noon sun.

Now all the words of my legend  
come garbled except anguish.  
Visions of chitterlings I never ate  
strangle me in a nightmare of leaders  
at crowded meetings to study the problem  
I move awkward and ladylike  
through four centuries of unused bathtubs  
that never smile  
not even an apologetic grin  
I worry on nationalist holidays  
make a fetish of lateness  
with limp unbelieved excuses  
shun the use of pronouns  
as an indirect assault  
what skin I have left unbetrayed  
by scouring uncovered by mouths  
that shriek but do not speak  
real want glistens and twinkles  
blinding all beholders  
“But I just washed them, Mommy!”

Only the black marks itch and flutter  
shredding my words and wherever they fall  
earth springs up denials I pay for  
only the dark roads over my palms  
wait for my voice to follow.

The chill wind is beating down  
from the high places.  
Students wait outside my door  
searching condemning listening  
for what I am sworn to tell them  
what they least want to hear  
clogging the only exit from the 17th floor  
begging in their garbled language  
beyond judgment or understanding  
“Oh speak to us now mother for soon  
we will not need you only your memory  
teaching us question.”

Stepping into my self  
I open the door  
and leap groundward wondering  
what shall they carve for weapons  
what shall they grow for food?

(1973)





NEW POEMS 1978 - 1982

part 4



*First rule of the road: attend quiet victims first.*

I am kneading my bread Winnie Mandela  
while children who sing in the streets of Soweto  
are jailed for inciting to riot  
the moon in Soweto is mad  
is bleeding my sister into the earth  
is mixing her seed with the vultures' seed  
greeks reap her like olives out of the trees  
she is skimmed like salt  
from the skin of a hungry desert  
Ganvie fisherwomen with milk-large breasts  
hide a fish with the face of a small girl  
in the prow of their boats.

Winnie Mandela I am feeling your face  
with the pain of my crippled fingers  
our children are escaping their birth  
in the streets of Soweto and Brooklyn  
(what does it mean  
our wars  
being fought by our children?)

Winnie Mandela our names  
are olives salt sand  
like the opal amber obsidian  
that hide their shape well.  
We have never touched shaven foreheads  
together yet how many of our sisters'

and daughters' bones    whiten  
in secret  
whose names we have not yet spoken  
whose names we have never spoken  
I have never heard  
their names spoken.

*Second rule of the road:  
any wound will stop bleeding  
if you press down  
hard enough.*

(1979)

Z A K I T A N K E  
P A R L A Y L O T\*

*Oh za ki tan ke parlay lot*  
you who hear tell the others  
there is no metaphor for blood  
flowing from children these are  
your deaths your judgment

*za ki tan ke parlay lot*  
you who hear tell the others

This is not some other cities' trial  
your locks are no protection  
hate chips at your front doors like flint  
flames creep beneath them  
my children are resting in question  
so your tomorrows flicker  
a face without eyes without future

*Za ki tan ke parlay lot*  
whose visions lie dead in the alleys  
dreams bagged like old leaves  
anger shorn of promise  
you are drowning in my children's blood  
without metaphor za ki tan  
ke parlay lot. oh you who hear  
tell the others.

(1980)

\* Called in the streets of Carriacou, West Indies, before a funeral or burial.

## AFTERIMAGES

### I

However the image enters  
its force remains within  
my eyes rockstrewn caves  
where dragonfish evolve  
wild for life relentless and acquisitive  
learning to survive  
where there is no food  
my eyes are always hungry  
and remembering  
however the image enters  
its force remains.

A white woman stands bereft and empty  
a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson  
recalled in me forever  
a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep  
etched into my vision  
food for dragonfish learning  
to live upon whatever they must eat  
the fused images beneath my pain.

### II

The Pearl River floods the streets of Jackson  
A Mississippi summer televised.  
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain  
a white woman climbs from her roof into a passing boat

her fingers tarry for a moment on the chimney  
now awash  
tearless no longer young she holds  
a tattered baby's blanket in her arms.  
A flickering afterimage of the nightmare rain  
a microphone  
thrust against her  
flat bewildered words

"We jest come from the bank yestiddy  
borrowing money to pay the income tax  
now everything's gone. I never knew  
it could be so hard."

Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud  
caked around the edges  
"Hard, but not this hard."

Two towheaded children hurl themselves against her  
hanging upon her coat like mirrors  
and a man with hamlike hands  
pulls her aside snarls  
"She ain't got nothing more to say!"

And that lie hangs in his mouth  
like a shred of rotting meat.

### III

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.  
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till  
his 14 years puffed out like bruises  
on plump boy-cheeks  
his only Mississippi summer

whistling a 21-gun salute to Dixie  
as a white girl passed him in the street  
and he was baptized my son forever  
in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year  
when I walked through a northern summer  
eyes averted from each corner's photography  
newspapers protest posters magazines  
*Police Story Confidential True*  
the avid insistence of detail pretending  
insight or information  
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins  
his grieving mother's lamentation  
all over  
the veiled warning the secret relish  
of a Black child's mutilated body  
fingered by street-corner eyes  
bruise upon livid bruise.

And wherever I looked that summer  
I learned to be at home with children's blood  
with savored violence  
with pictures of Black broken flesh  
used crumpled up discarded  
lying amid the sidewalk refuse  
like a raped woman's face.

A Black boy from Chicago  
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi  
testing what he'd been taught  
was a manly thing to do  
his teachers ripped out his eyes

his sex his tongue  
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone  
in the name of white womanhood  
they took their aroused honor  
back to Jackson celebrating  
in a whorehouse  
the double ritual of white manhood  
confirmed.

#### IV

*"If earth and air and water do not judge them who are we to refuse a crust of bread?"*

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl River whistling  
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a ravished woman  
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor  
(what did she pay to never know its price?)  
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment  
and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

"Hard, but not this hard."  
Her face is flat with resignation and despair  
with ancient and familiar sorrows  
a woman surveying her crumpled future  
as the white girl besmirched by Emmett's whistle  
never allowed her own tongue  
without power or conclusion  
she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor  
and a man with an executioner's face  
pulls her away.

Within my eyes  
flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain

a woman wrings her hands  
beneath the weight of agonies remembered  
I wade through summer ghosts  
betrayed by visions  
becoming dragonfish surviving  
the horrors we live with  
tortured lungs adapting  
to breathe blood.

A woman measures her life's damage  
my eyes are caves chunks of etched rock  
tied to the ghost of a Black boy  
whistling crying frightened  
her towheaded children cluster  
little mirrors of despair  
their father's hands already upon them  
and soundlessly  
a woman begins to weep.

(1981)

## A POEM FOR WOMEN IN RAGE

A killing summer heat wraps up the city  
emptied of all who are not bound to stay  
a Black woman waits for a white woman  
leans against the railing in the Upper West Side street  
at intermission the distant sounds of Broadway dim  
until I can hear the voice of sparrows  
like a promise I await  
the woman I love our slice of time  
a place beyond the city's pain.

The corner phonebooth. A woman  
glassed in by reflections of the street  
between us her white face dangles  
a tapestry of disasters  
seen through a veneer of order  
mouth drawn like an ill-used roadmap  
eyes without core a bottled heart  
the impeccable credentials of old pain.

A veneer cracks open hate  
launches through the glaze into my afternoon  
our eyes cross like hot wire  
and the street snaps into nightmare  
a woman with white eyes is clutching  
a bottle of Fleischmann's gin  
is fumbling at her waistband  
is pulling a butcher knife from her ragged pants  
her hand arcs back "You Black Bitch!"  
the heavy blade spins out

toward me slow motion  
years of fury surging upward like a wall  
I do not hear it clatter  
to the pavement at my feet.

Gears of ancient nightmare churn  
swift in familiar dread and silence  
but this time I am awake released  
I smile. Now. This time is  
my turn.

I bend to seize the knife  
my ears blood-drumming  
across the street my lover's voice  
the only moving sound within white heat

"Don't touch it!"

I straighten, weaken, then start down again  
hungry for resolution simple  
as anger and so close at hand  
my fingers reach for the familiar blade  
the known grip of wood against my palm  
oh I have held it to the whetstone  
a thousand nights for this  
escorting fury through my sleep  
like a cherished friend to wake  
in the stink of rage  
beside the sleep-white face of love.

The keen steel of a dreamt knife  
sparks honed from the whetted edge  
with a tortured shriek

between my lover's voice and the gray spinning  
a choice of pain or fury  
slashing across judgment a crimson scar  
I could open her up to my anger  
with a point sharpened upon love.

In the deathland my lover's voice  
fades like the roar of a train derailed  
on the other side of river  
every white woman's face I love  
and distrust is upon it  
eating green grapes from a paper bag  
marking yellow exam-books  
tucked into a manila folder  
orderly as the last though before death  
I throw the switch.

Through screams of crumpled steel  
I search the wreckage  
for a ticket of hatred  
my lover's voice  
calling a knife at her throat.

In the steaming aisles of the dead  
I am weeping to learn  
the names of those streets  
my feet have worn thin with running  
and why they will never serve me  
nor ever lead me home.  
“Don't touch it!” she cries  
I straighten myself in confusion  
a drunken woman is running away

down a West Side street my lover's voice  
moves me  
to a shadowy clearing.

Corralled in fantasy  
the woman with white eyes has vanished  
to become her own nightmare  
in my house  
a French butcher blade  
hangs love's token  
I remember this knife  
it carved its message into my sleeping  
she only read its warning  
written upon my face.

(1981)

~

194

## OCTOBER

Spirits of the abnormally born  
live on in water  
of the heroically dead  
in the entrails of snake.

Now I span my days like a wild bridge  
swaying in place caught  
between poems like a vise  
I am finishing my piece of this bargain  
and how shall I return?

Seboulisa mother of power  
keeper of birds fat and beautiful  
give me the strength of your eyes  
to remember what I have learned  
help me attend with passion  
these tasks at my hand for doing.

Carry my heart to some shore  
my feet will not shatter  
do not let me pass away  
before I have a name  
for this tree  
under which I am lying

Do not let me die still  
needing to be stranger.

(1980)

SISTER, MORNING IS  
A TIME FOR MIRACLES

A core of conversations we never had  
lie in the distance between  
your wants and mine  
a piece of each navel cord buried  
beneath a wall that separates  
our sameness a talisman of birth  
hidden at the root  
of your mother's spirit my mother's rage.

Reaching for you with my sad words  
between sleeping and waking  
what is asked for is often destroyed  
by the very words that seek it  
like dew in an early morning  
dissolving the tongue of salt  
as well as its thirst  
and I call you secret names  
of praise and fire  
that sound like your birthright  
but are not the names of friend  
while you hide from me under 100 excuses  
lying like tombstones  
between your house and mine.

I could accept any blame I understood.  
Picking over the fresh loneliness  
of this too-early morning  
I find relics of my history

fossilized into a prison  
where I learn how to make love forever  
better than how to make friends  
where you are encased like a half-stoned peach  
in the rigid art of your healing  
and in case you have ever tried to reach me  
and I could not hear you  
these words are in place  
of the dead air  
still between us.

A memorial to the conversations  
we won't be having  
to revelations we buried still-born  
in the refuse of fear and silence  
to your remembered eyes  
which don't meet mine anymore.

Nothing  
is more cruel  
than waiting and hoping  
an answer will come.

I never intended to let you slip through my fingers  
to ever purchase your interest again  
like the desire of a whore  
yawning behind her upturned hand  
pretending a sigh of pleasure  
I have had that, too, already.

When I opened my eyes I thought  
we would move  
into freer and more open country

where the sun could illuminate our different desires  
and fresh air do us honor for who we are  
but I have awakened at 4 A.M.  
with a ribald joke to tell you  
and found I had lost the name of the street  
where you hid under an assumed name  
and I knew I would have to bleed again  
in order to find you

Yet just once in the possibilities  
of this too-early morning  
I wanted you  
to talk not as a healer  
but as a lonely woman  
talking to a friend.

(1979)

## NEED: A CHORALE FOR BLACK WOMAN VOICES

For Patricia Cowan\* and Bobbie Jean Graham† and the hundreds of other mangled Black Women whose nightmares inform these words.

*tattle tale tit.*

*your tongue will be slit  
and every little boy in town  
shall have a little bit.*

—Nursery rhyme

I

(Poet)

This woman is Black  
so her blood is shed into silence  
this woman is Black  
so her blood falls to earth  
like the droppings of birds  
to be washed away with silence and rain.

(Pat)

For a long time after the baby came  
I didn't go out at all  
and it got to be pretty lonely.  
Then Bubba started asking about his father  
made me feel  
like connecting to the blood again  
maybe I'd meet someone  
we could move on together

\*Patricia Cowan, 21, bludgeoned to death in Detroit, 1978.

†Bobbie Jean Graham, 34, beaten to death in Boston, 1979. One of twelve Black women murdered within a three-month period in that city.

help make the dream real.

An ad in the paper said

"Black actress needed

to audition in a play by Black Playwright."

I was anxious to get back to work

and this was a good place to start

so Monday afternoon

on the way home from school with Bubba

I answered the ad.

In the middle of the second act

he put a hammer through my head.

*(Bobbie)*

If you're hit in the middle of Broadway

by a ten-ton truck

your caved-in chest bears the mark of a tire

and your liver pops like a rubber ball.

If you're knocked down by a boulder

from a poorly graded hill

your dying is stamped with the print of rock.

But when your boyfriend methodically

beats you to death

in the alley behind your apartment

while your neighbors pull down their window shades

because they don't want to get involved

the police call it a crime of "passion"

not a crime of hatred.

Yet I still died

of a lacerated liver

and a man's heelprint

upon my chest.



(*Poet*)

Dead Black women haunt the black maled streets  
paying our cities' secret and familiar tithe of blood  
burn blood beat blood cut blood  
seven-year-old-child rape-victim blood  
of a sodomized grandmother blood  
on the hands of my brother  
as women we were meant to bleed  
but not this useless blood  
each month a memorial  
to my unspoken sisters fallen  
red drops upon asphalt.

(*All*)

We were not meant to bleed  
a symbol for no one's redemption  
Is it our blood  
that keeps these cities fertile?

(*Poet*)

I do not even know all their names.  
Black women's deaths are not noteworthy  
not threatening or glamorous enough  
to decorate the evening news  
not important enough to be fossilized  
between right-to-life pickets  
and a march against gun-control  
we are refuse in this city's war  
with no medals no exchange of prisoners  
no packages from home no time off  
for good behavior  
no victories. No victors.



*(Bobbie)*

How can I build a nation  
afraid to walk out into moonlight  
lest I lose my power  
afraid to speak out  
lest my tongue be slit  
my ribs kicked in  
by a brawny acquaintance  
my liver bleeding life onto the stone.

*(All)*

How many other deaths  
do we live through daily  
pretending  
we are alive?

### III

*(Pat)*

What terror embroidered my face  
onto your hatred  
what unchallenged enemy  
took on my sweet brown flesh  
within your eyes  
came armed against you  
with only my laughter my hopeful art  
my hair catching the late sunlight  
my small son eager to see his mama work?  
On this front page  
My blood stiffens in the cracks of your fingers  
raised to wipe a half-smile from your lips.  
Beside you a white policeman  
bends over my bleeding son



decaying into my brother  
who stalked me with a singing hammer.

*I need you.* For what?  
Was there no better place  
to dig for your manhood  
except in my woman's bone?

(*Bobbie*)

And what do you need me for, brother,  
to move for you feel for you die for you?  
We have a grave need for each other  
but your eyes are thirsty  
for vengeance  
dressed in the easiest blood  
and I am closest.

(*Pat*)

When you opened my head with your hammer  
did the boogie stop in your brain  
the beat go on  
did terror run out of you like curdled fury  
a half-smile upon your lips?  
And did your manhood lay in my skull  
like a netted fish  
or did it spill out like milk or blood  
or impotent fury off the tips of your fingers  
as your sledgehammer clove my bone  
to let the light out  
did you touch it as it flew away?

(*Bobbie*)

Borrowed hymns veil a misplaced hatred  
saying you need me you need me you need me

a broken drum  
calling me Black goddess Black hope Black  
strength Black mother  
yet you touch me  
and I die in the alleys of Boston  
my stomach stomped through the small of my back  
my hammered-in skull in Detroit  
a ceremonial knife  
through my grandmother's used vagina  
the burned body hacked to convenience  
in a vacant lot  
I lie in midnight blood like a rebel city  
bombed into submission  
while our enemies still sit in power  
and judgment  
over us all.

(*Bobbie & Pat*)

Do you *need* me submitting to terror at nightfall  
to chop into bits and stuff warm into plastic bags  
near the neck of the Harlem River  
they found me eight months swollen  
with your need  
do you need me to rape in my seventh year  
bloody semen in the corners of my childish mouth  
as you accuse me of being seductive.

(*All*)

Do you need me imprinting upon our children  
the destruction our enemies print upon you  
like a Mack truck or an avalanche  
destroying us both

carrying their hatred back home  
you relearn my value  
in an enemy coin.

## IV

(*Poet*)

I am wary of need that tastes like destruction.

(*All*)

I am wary of need  
that tastes like destruction.

(*Poet*)

Who learns to love me  
from the mouth of my enemies  
walks the edge of my world  
a phantom in a crimson cloak  
and the dreambooks speak of money  
but my eyes say death.

The simplest part of this poem  
is the truth in each one of us  
to which it is speaking.

How much of this truth can I bear  
to see  
and still live  
unblinded?  
How much of this pain can I use?

*"We cannot live without our lives."*

(All)

*"We cannot live  
without our lives."\**

(1979, 1989)

\* "We cannot live without our lives." From a poem by Barbara Deming.





**A**udre Lorde was born in 1934 in New York City. Her parents were from Grenada and Barbados, and in the Harlem of her childhood, she soon learned what it meant to be thought of as “the other.” It was this knowledge that prompted the mission of Lorde’s work: to illuminate and celebrate the power and beauty of difference.

Lorde earned degrees from Columbia University and Hunter College, where she became a professor of English. *The First Cities* (1968) was the first of her 16 books. *A Burst of Light* (1988), a collection of essays on subjects ranging from the political to the personal, won an American Book Award. *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), a book of poetry, was a finalist for the National Book Award. *The Cancer Journals* (1980), an intimate account of her own experiences, inspired thousands of women living with the disease.

Lorde was the recipient of three National Endowment for the Arts grants and the Walt Whitman Citation of Merit. She was the poet laureate of New York State in 1991-92 and received honorary degrees from Oberlin College, Haverford College, Hunter College, and the University of Osnabrück in Germany.

Also a political activist, Lorde was a founding member of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa. In a ceremony shortly before her death in 1992, she took the name Gamba Adisa (which means “warrior” and “she who makes her meaning known”).



## TRIANGLE CLASSICS

ILLUMINATING THE GAY AND LESBIAN EXPERIENCE

This exclusive edition brings together a selection of Audre Lorde's poetry and essays with "bio-mythography," the form that she created in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).

*Zami* combines biography, mythology, and history as it records Lorde's experiences as a West Indian in America and the growth of her emotional and sexual resonance with women. Zami grows up, goes to high school and college in New York City, and looks for women like herself. Ultimately she discovers Afrekete, a kindred spirit whose passion and will match her own. She must learn to deal with racism, sexism, and opposition to her lesbian identity, but she has the spirit to retain her individuality.

Lorde tackles the complexities of her multiple identities in *Sister Outsider* (1984). It includes essays such as "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in which she declares that poetry is "a vital necessity of our existence."

Published just months before her death, *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* (1992) covers 30 years of Lorde's poetry. Here, Lorde demonstrates her mastery of the love poem, but she writes with equal passion and eloquence about everything from a conversation to her identity as a black woman.

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