THE DROWNED GIRL NOW RISES

by

Martha Courtot

A creative project submitted to

Sonoma State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Dr. Hélen Dunn, Chair

Dr. Barbara Lésch McCaffry

Dr. Janice Wilson

Date
AUTHORIZATION FOR REPRODUCTION
OF MASTER'S CREATIVE PROJECT

I grant permission for the reproduction of this creative project without further authorization from me, on the condition that the person or agency requesting reproduction absorb the cost and provide proper acknowledgement of authorship.

Dated April 28, 1987

(Signature)
THIS IS SOMETHING I HAVE TO TELL YOU
Original Poems and a Critical Introduction

A Creative Project

by

Martha Courtot

ABSTRACT

This creative project, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English, contains original poetry, prefaced by a critical introduction. In this introduction, I discuss three main issues in lesbian criticism, basic themes in lesbian poetry, and how my own work reflects these themes and deals with these issues.

I describe some of the ideas of contemporary lesbian writers such as Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Penelope Stanley, and show the relationship of the work of certain lesbian critics, such as Bonnie Zimmerman and Elly Bulkin, to this work. Images which recur in lesbian writing, such as mirrors and the witch, are explored in my own writing as well as other lesbian poets' work.

This preface connects the transformations in individual women's lives and my own urge to break the many silences imposed on women. It credits lesbian writers from Sappho through Audre Lorde with providing a rich tradition upon which to build my own individual poetic vision.

Chairperson: ___________________________
(Signature) ______________________

M.A. Program: English
Sonoma State University

Apr. 28, 1987 (Date)
DEDICATION

To Paul Keator
Who first listened with an open ear
To Lynn -- For Gifts Beyond Language
and
To the Drowned Girl in us all
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ................................. 1

Poems

I. Everything Breaks ....................... 30
II. The Woman Moving Through the Dark .... 44
III. The Edge of the Room .................. 55
IV. One Voice: The Survivor ................. 70
V. The Water Leaps .......................... 96
VI. The Drowned Girl Now Rises ............. 111

Works Cited ................................. 121
This is Something I Have to Tell You

I

Haltingly, the lesbian poet begins. She speaks in her mind and with her body these words--

I begin again

--creating a circular experience of being, to replace the fragment she has thought herself to be. She knows she must act as archeologist and futurist. It is necessary for her to inscribe her own vision of the future on a present which excludes her. She has learned through a difficult process of awakening the damage to essence which results from erasure, and she insists on an articulate presence for herself now and at some future time. Thus, in her work, images of amnesia and remembering rise and fall like waves in the sea, leaving on the shore essential connections between an imagined past and an imagined future, which helps to create the present moment, a moment which rejects fragmentation, erasure, silence, and victimization.

In the room in which everyone is gathered, this room which includes all of humankind, the lesbian lives at the edge. Assigned this place by a patriarchal consciousness which must continually deny the power of women, she sees differently than do those at the center. This lesbian witness brings with it special gifts of boundary vision. It is not a vision drained of power due to familiarity as so many contemporary visions seem to be. It changes the way the eye sees: vision becomes an act of will as well as an act of the eye. So much of patriarchal consciousness successfully distorts the individual perception. The lesbian poet, in her effort to remain awake, offers everyone a new way of seeing.
Muriel Rukeyser, in her last few books, drenches the page with varying images of waking. She wakes into and out of the dark, wakes to new knowledge and new understandings. Although Rukeyser is one of the innumerable poets whose lines were lesbian but masked, she instructs us deeply about the importance not only of waking, but accepting the knowledge that waking brings.

The Sixth Night: Waking

That first green night of their dreaming,
asleep beneath the Tree,
God said, "Let meanings move," and
there was poetry.

(Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 463)

II

In any discussion of lesbian/feminist poetry, three important issues must be addressed. First there is the definition of the word "lesbian" itself, which will determine whether we place individual authors inside or outside the lesbian canon. The dilemma of language, which seems to be a particularly troublesome one for lesbian writers, must be dealt with in any substantive work of lesbian poetry. And the question of tradition requires us to grapple not only with what is there, but with what is not there. Along with these questions, there are some basic themes which seem to occur frequently in works of lesbians. In many cases these themes are also part of the body of work of feminist writers who are not lesbian, of course, but the intent of this work is to focus on the work of lesbian writers. Here I will discuss some of the themes which bind us together and I will explore images as they move through the work of several poets. Some of the primary themes
lesbian/feminist writers work with are silences, transformation, racism, sexism, classism, power and powerlessness, survival, boundary living, the erotic as political, mythologizing and woman-bonding.

In this preface I will briefly explore some trends of thought of contemporary lesbian/feminist writers in relationship to these tensions and themes. I will present some of the questions—lesbian criticism is so much still in the questioning stage—and I will draw the connections between these themes and my own body of work.

"Wherever I seat myself, I die in exile," (Woolf p.68) Virginia Woolf writes in Jacob's Room. A lesbian in a homophobic culture finds herself in exile, wherever she sits. If she chooses safety, she lives a life of masks and possible betrayal, exiled from any honest relationship with others. On the other hand, if she chooses to honor her own nature, she suffers a loss of face as well as a loss of personal power. Often, having made choices in both directions, the lesbian experiences both kinds of exile simultaneously. For the lesbian, definition of herself will always be an essential struggle toward what is most real. How she defines herself, and the word "lesbian" itself, how she chooses to mask or unmask her heavily burdened identity, will determine to a great extent both the visibility of her true self to the world and her power to act for herself. For the community of feminist writers, the question of how we define the lesbian writer—of how inclusive the definition can be before it becomes meaningless—is an essential one. The answer will help us integrate lesbian writers into the feminist canon, as well as show us places where we come up against our own ignorance and fear. Lesbian writers ask: into what mirror do we gaze to see ourselves reflected wholly back?
Because of this need for personal as well as historical
definition, women writers and artists have repossessed the mirror image,
often associated with women's reflective relationship to men, to clarify
for themselves its true meaning. Lesbians have been like the women
Monique Wittig writes of: "They are prisoners of the mirror." (93)
Culture has too often shown a false mirror to them, an image of the
Medusa figure, meant to horrify, or an absence of any image. Melanie
Kaye says, "I come/ With the mirror backwards before my face. I perch on
her bed,/ I study the dark side." (29) Sometimes lesbian/feminist
writers must entirely smash the cultural mirror in order to find a
definition of themselves which is true. Lesbian/feminist criticism
struggles with this problem of lesbian identity and the struggling goes
on urgently because we are driven by an understanding that the answers
are vital ones, not only to lesbians, but to all of civilization.

Bonnie Zimmerman, in "What Has Never Been," writes of the
"shifting definitions of lesbianism from one era and one culture to
another." (467) In this overview of contemporary lesbian/feminist
criticism, she points out the underlying assumptions in all lesbian
criticism:

That a woman's identity is not defined only by her
relation to a male world and male literary tradition.
(As feminist critics have demonstrated.) That
powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in
women's lives, and that the sexual and emotional
orientation of a woman profoundly affects her
consciousness and thus her creativity. (452)

In spite of these agreed-upon assumptions, lesbian critics do not
agree on the extent of inclusivity which the word "lesbian" should
contain. Are women whose histories do not contain references to explicit
sexual preference for women be included as lesbians if their work and lives demonstrate a strong woman-bonding sensibility? Or does such a broad definition bleed the power from the word "lesbian?" Adrienne Rich has spoken powerfully for the more inclusive definition.

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had a consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support... We begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism.' (Compulsive Heterosexuality, 20-21)

In Rich's perspective of a continuum there is a very woman-oriented way of seeing which seeks to break out of the categorizing boxes of patriarchal consciousness. It opens to a new vision. Bonnie Zimmerman, however, cautions against falling into the trap of "reductionism:" "By so reducing the meaning of lesbian we have in effect eliminated lesbianism as a meaningful category." (205) Rich herself takes exception to the "ism" which Zimmerman continues to use. Rich contends, in Compulsory Heterosexuality, that the word lesbianism is a "clinical definition." Here we see that two respected lesbian critics disagree over the defining word itself, and so we begin to see the depth of the problem.

Lillian Faderman, in her landmark study of romantic friendship from the Renaissance to the present, offers a more middle-of-the-road definition:
'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sex contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. (17-18)

These questions and attempts to define are not mere semantic arguments; how we answer them determines who we can honorably include in the increasingly visible tradition of lesbian writing. Until the early 1970's very few poets, either historic or modern, wrote as open lesbians. Elsa Gidlow is a notable American exception. Perhaps we had Sappho, but even her lesbian nature has been questioned by male critics. Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, and countless other women writers are now being included in the lesbian canon, due to the lesbian critics' insistence on looking at the totality of their subjects' lives and work. This canon owes its beginnings to Jeanette Foster's Sex Variant Women in Literature, published in 1956, and to Barbara Grier (writing under the name of Gene Damon), whose 1967 work, The Lesbian In Literature: A Bibliography, also continues to be used by lesbian critics.

This question of definition leads us directly to the issue of a lesbian/feminist tradition. In some ways the lesbian poet has emerged not as something new, the never-imagined, but as something very ancient, although heretofore undisclosed. Elly Bulkin in Lesbian Poetry says: "Those of us who are lesbians seemed to have come from nowhere, from a great blankness with only a few shadowy figures to suggest a history." (24) Indeed, it is the presence of these few shadowy figures which has helped give heart to contemporary lesbian poets. Sappho was always ours and indeed has lent her name to women-identified women, who in the 19th
century were called Sapphists. Her poetry, so full of love for other
women and woman-bonding themes, was one of my earliest influences. It
seemed to recognize a world I knew for myself, but which had found no
other mirror in the external world. Love in her work is abundant and it
does not draw lines along gender nor does it attempt to imprison love.
Her poetry, those few available fragments, gave me a piece of myself,
when so much else around me tried to obliterate the truth.

Some there are who say that the fairest thing seen
on the black earth is an array of horsemen;
some, men marching; some would say ships;
but I say she who one loves best

is the loveliest. (Bankier 136)

Dale Spender, in her powerful book *Women of Ideas and What Men
Have Done to Them*, details how women through the centuries have been cut
off from knowing their own history and tradition. Radical women who have
resisted patriarchal consciousness have mostly had to function in a
framework in which they felt themselves to be unique. This so-called
"absence" of tradition creates the necessity for a woman to do all the
work at once, in one lifetime, while male writers have a rich and well-
accepted tradition on which to build. Zimmerman asks herself, "How are
women made to disappear?" (4) and it is her essential insight that "it is
men, not women, who control knowledge" (11) which leads us to the
understanding that we cannot accept absence of tradition at face value.
An important part then, of the lesbian canon, has to be this recognition
of a buried past.

When women become visible, when they assert the
validity of that experience and refuse to be
intimidated, patriarchal values are under threat.
When we know that for centuries women have been
saying that men and their power are a problem, when we are able to share our knowledge of today and combine it with that of the past, when we construct our own alternative meanings and traditions, we are no longer invisible, unreal, non-existent. And when we assert that the reason for women's absence is not women, but men, that it is not that women have not contributed, but that men have 'doctored the records,' reality undergoes a remarkable change. (Spender 13)

Elly Bulkin reminds us that "much of the work...done on the best known lesbian poets—Sappho, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein—has been done by lesbians since the early seventies." (Bankier xxvii) Monique Wittig, a French lesbian writer, has exhorted women in her work to create their own past, if necessary.

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember...you say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember...make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. (89)

This inner necessity to reconnect us with our history is apparent in the work of many contemporary lesbian writers. Every piece of new information which is unearthed, every relationship looked at with this new eye, expands our possibilities. Bonnie Zimmerman tells of early attempts by lesbian writers to reestablish the traditions.

One of the first tasks of this emerging lesbian criticism has been to provide lesbians with a tradition, even if a retrospective one. Jane Rule...first attempted to establish this tradition...Along with Rule, Dolores Klaich in Woman Plus Woman and Louise Bernikow in the introduction to The World Split Open have explored the possibilities of a lesbian tradition. (460)

We must confront openly the difficulties inherent in trying to recapture
a tradition which has been taken from us, as well as the problems we encounter in shaping our own traditions for future generations of lesbian writers—but we should not let ourselves despair. As Zimmerman says,

...despite the problems raised by definition, silence and coding, and absence of tradition, lesbian critics have begun to develop a critical stance. Often this stance involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined. (459-60)

The documentation and the fleshing out of a lesbian canon has had a healthy beginning. In the necessity to reach into an absence to find ourselves we have enriched and enlarged the way everyone can look at human experience. However, it is in the perilous tightrope which lesbians must walk with language that we meet our most difficult and perhaps promising challenge. It is in language itself that the strongest internal battle for self-definition is fought. Language, that gift and prison, can be both an enforcer of patriarchal consciousness and a pathway to a new consciousness. The problems of definition and tradition are both made small as we find ourselves confronting the issue of language.

Stein says we no longer have the words people used to have so we have to make them new in some way but women haven't had them at all and how can you deconstruct a language you never constructed or it was never constructed by others like you, or with you in mind. (Marks 89)

To attempt to speak about something in a language which cannot contain the subject creates a dynamic tension in both the writer and the reader. If we imagine a people living in a tropical climate which does not know snow, and imagine trying to introduce the subject of snow into this
language, perhaps we can glimpse the difficulty. All of the words we would have to use would contain distortions of the sun and of a tropical wind: snow itself would remain a mystery. The subject of lesbian poetry is like this. Although civilization has heard whispers of this creature, lesbian, the whispers are contaminated by distortions which mask the true self of the lesbian. Like snow to the tropical people, lesbian remains a mystery to modern civilization.

"If we have been silenced for centuries and speak an oppressive tongue, then liberation for the lesbian must begin with language."

(Zimmerman 464) Language itself becomes a liberating subject in lesbian criticism. "Lesbian" is a new word, only now beginning to have its meanings enfleshed. Ostriker has shown how feminists have seized poetry in this century to forge their own new meanings. Now, when the work "lesbian" is combined with this word "poetry," it should not be seen as any kind of qualifier or limitation, but rather as a liberating adjective. The word "lesbian" used this way should be thought of more as a verb than as a noun, more as a way of seeing rather than what is seen.

Feminist critics wrench aside the heavy curtain of patriarchal falsification only to find themselves working with a language which is mendacious about their identities, their lives, their histories, and their futures. Ostriker in "The Thieves of Language" insists, "the language we speak and write has been an encoding of male privilege."

(Showalter 315) Marguerite Duras, in an essay on what "feminine" literature is, adds her own sense of women's struggle toward identity. "The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language." (174) This sense of women writing from a place which has not yet been seen is
one way the language which is dead begins to stir anew with life.

Madeleine Gagnon attempts to resolve the tensions in language inherent for feminist critics and writers by subverting the old language, by "Taking over this language which, although it is mine, is foreign to me." (178) She also quotes Annie Le Clerc in Parole de Femme, on the need "To invent a language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosens the tongue." (178) This loosening of the tongue is imperative, as both Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich have repeatedly maintained in their work.

Once it might have seemed almost enough to feminist critics to gain a little space for women in the accepted canon. Now, however, there is a much broader understanding of the work that will be necessary for us to do if women are truly to break through the wall of the imposed silence of centuries. This imposition is not a question of mere censorship alone, but involves the erasures, encodings, trivializations, and invisibility which patriarchal culture has enforced in the literature as in life. Helene Cixous, in her assertive essay in New French Feminism, demands

We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.

An act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history which has always been based on her suppression. (250)

In 1977 seven hundred women attended the Lesbian and Literature Panel at the Annual Modern Language Association convention. This historic event, which has laid the groundwork for so much recent
lesbian/feminist criticism, was initiated by Julia Penelope Stanley, who also acted as chair. The panel consisted of Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Judith McDaniel and Adrienne Rich, each of whom had been working for some time in their own writing on the subject of women and language. The text of their speeches was later printed in Sinister Wisdom. These five accomplished lesbian writers explored, each in her own way, the silences and erasures, and the coming to voice, not only of themselves but of thousands of feminists and lesbians.

Julia Stanley spoke of the rage and pain she felt in not being able to name herself lesbian.

Naming ourselves, naming our lives; naming our actions. Without language, I am nameless. I am invisible. I am silent. If I refuse language I refuse myself...My language always goes before me, illuminating my actions; through my language I create myself for myself, and for other wimmin.

This naming has become an important part of lesbian/feminist poetry. Each individual writer is found to contain her own rich sources which have been hidden, not yet named. She who names things has power over them. The names woman and lesbian are heavily burdened with patriarchal assumptions, which bear no relationship to the real experience of being woman, being lesbian. Lesbians begin to claim the power within themselves by being able to name themselves for the first time, as in Judy Grahn's poem:

I am the wall at the lip of the water
I am the rock that refused to be battered
I am the dyke in the matter, the other
I am the wall with the womanly swagger
I am the dragon, the dangerous dagger
I am the buldyke, the bulldagger
And I have been many a wicked grandmother
And I shall be many a wicked daughter. (98)

But naming is not enough. Mary Daly, at the same MLA convention, explored some of the old words that once held power for women, but which have been taken and used pejoratively by patriarchal culture. Daly, whose substantial body of work has emphasized the need for transformation of language, moves us from the Christian definition of hagiography, for instance, to the power that resides in a female definition of hags, "untamed women" who are holy, that is, wholly themselves. "Haggard writing is by and for haggard women, those who are intractable, willful, wanton, unchaste, and especially, those who are reluctant to yield to wooing." (Daly, MLA) In this way, she reverses the negative stereotypes of powerful women, which are meant to frighten all women into submission, and strongly asserts the need to grasp hold of the language, to see it more clearly, and to change it where necessary.

Audre Lorde, using her own recent experience with cancer as a tool, speaks lucidly of the necessity to reject silence. She recognizes that our silence has not saved us and cannot save us and that we can only have our lives by using our voices.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I have ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real work 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.

In the final speech of the panel at the MLA Adrienne Rich gave credit to many of the writers with whom she had been reading and talking on the
subject of silence. She credits, of course, Tillie Olsen in her
brilliant ground-breaking essay entitled "Silences" (later expanded to
book length), as well as Susan Griffin, Sandy Boucher and Michelle Cliff.
She names silence itself as an important subject, since it is "a crucial
element in civilization." She asks us to consider "namelessness, denial,
secrets, taboo subjects, erasure, false-naming, non-naming, encoding,
omission, veiling, fragmentation and lying" (Rich, MLA)--as elements
which contribute to the silencing which has made this civilization such
an anti-woman, racist, fearful one.

The past ten years of feminist writing and speaking,
saying our own words or attempting to, have show us
that it is the realities civilization tells us are
regressive or unspeakable which prove our deepest
resources. Female anger. Love between women. The
tragic, potent bond between mother and daughter.
(Rich, MLA)

III

My own experience as a writer has been similar to that of most
lesbian poets. The source from which I draw is a very private one. My
images are often idiosyncratic; estranged from the world of the accepted,
released from the necessity to please male critics, I am able to allow
the deep, unconscious female to seize her voice. When I speak, it is
solely from my own center; and yet, how often do my words and images find
their sister-images in other women's work!

Because I have chosen to sit (echoing Woolf's words) in exile
from my culture rather than in exile from myself, I have both gained
power and lost opportunity to speak. I remember walking through the
Adirondack Mountains, where I had organized an ongoing retreat for women,
when the news came through that Anne Sexton had killed herself. (How
every poet's suicide has struck me in these last three decades! How many
have not survived this death culture!) I realized then to the core of my
being I had been saved at least from Sexton's kind of death—a death
longed for in the hearts of the patriarchal world. Where I was living,
both in my community and in my internal world, there was no space or
allowance for a death dream. Certainly there was not the admiration for
it that so many of Sexton and Plath's fans had. The women who responded
to my work then did so because of the dynamic struggle to live they found
within it. When I think of what most shapes my work as a poet, I would
first say that it is: not the writers and artists whom I consider my
peers, in whose work I find validation, and with whom I share an image
and a value system; but it is the women to whom I want to speak, the
women who, along with me, are fighting their way out of so much death and
destruction to come to a new selfhood and a new life.

In my own work, as well as in the work of other lesbian writers,
there is this communal spirit which breaks through. Although we each
work alone, surely the voices of the women of our time are never silent
inside us. These voices clamour for space on the page. Sometimes they
are loud and strident; often they are mere whispers which, when we listen
to them, grow and flourish into full-throated cries. Shared themes weave
themselves in and out of lesbian poets' work. They grow in power as they
move from the body of work of one woman to another. This is an enactment
of a very woman-centered process, in which we gift each other with new
reflections. We are the mirrors into which we look and find therein deep
wells of meaning. My own struggle to work with a language which
restricts me, as well as my need to break the silence, not only of my own
particular history but that of women of my time, often creates a kind of stuttering tension in my work. This tension demands that the reader of the poem, my only witness, place herself at the center of the experience. There is no looking away, no permission to sink into the passivity of a receiver of language. The reader becomes the struggle of the language to render itself, at last, meaningful.

Lesbian writers have tried in their work to understand the connections between the isms of race, sex, and class. My own poems have a hunger for inclusivity. The erotic as political is an often unstated but implicit value in my love poems. As lesbians have been damaged by cultural misconceptions especially in the areas of love and sexuality, so then love itself becomes a territory in which old meanings must be destroyed, and new ways of loving be created. Civilization has most controlled lesbians in the area of their sexuality, thus the erotic becomes an affirmation of power. Audre Lorde, in Black Feminist Criticism, says

I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change. (202)

The imperative for transformation contains an urgency which seems often threatening in my poetry—the impending tsunami seems to be just a mile or so out to sea. Because my own life has been lived in several kind of exiles, the theme of boundary living finds a rich home in my work. Yet, no matter how deeply in despair a poem may begin, it usually finds its true voice in a calling for survival and resistance, often through the bonding of women and the coming to power in our voices.
my silence has been gathering
to itself drop by drop
the bitterness of that which is like itself
a wave that lives far out in wilderness water
inside me this water has been growing
(Courtot "Breaking Open")

Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and many other feminist writers have spoken very powerfully of an encrusted silence which perverts and destroys. Silence itself has become a special field for study. We understand now that what is unspoken nevertheless moves among us. We attempt to draw out of the well of our silent history a clear water, an envoiced presence, which will inform and refresh our lives.

In Sources, Rich begins to confront an old silence in her life, her childhood as a Jew in a Southern community. Directly addressing her father, who was a Jew, she says:

I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own. (15)

Rich's acceptance of her own suffering recalls Muriel Rukeyser's wonderful, telling poem:

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity. (239)

Perhaps lesbian writers understand that it is only in the acceptance of one's identity/suffering that real living can take place. May Sarton, who has written most of her life without benefit of a lesbian/feminist community, in a later book Halfway to Silence, states: "There is no
poetry in lies/ But in crude honesty/ There is hope for poetry." (61)

In my own poem, "The Drowned Girl Now Rises," I draw back the curtain of silence which has protected us from understanding the victim experience. This is a silence which has not yet been fully explored—how a person moves from being victimized to actually internalizing the brutal perpetrator as well as taking on the new "victim" identity.

she becomes
the acted upon
the object of
terrorist action
the cruel tongue
the brutal hand
the mouth which deceives
the drunken mind

In the image of the drowned girl, we are confronted with that innocent part of ourselves whose potential has been severely damaged, but whose insistent voice refuses to be silenced.

I am no stranger to violence
although you would like me to keep silent
my knife is in my hand
my teeth are sharpened and ready
my tongue is more dangerous than any weapon

This breaking of silence leads us to the energizing transformative process. In my poem "Prayer to the heart of the Wall," there is an almost pounding imperative to finally break the barrier which stands between myself and the light-filled world.

break open
(i whisper)
trying to sneak up
on this wall of myself
approaching the monster enclosured carefully
oh, the mouth with large teeth
the darkness which is all mouth
Similarly, Judy Grahn has created a ritual for her first lover who has died in "A Funeral Plainsong" in which she transforms the death of her beloved into an imperative to live the life her friend is no longer able to live. "i will take your part now, to do your daring/ lots belong to those who do the sharing./ i will be your fight now, to do your winning." (102)

The transformational poetry of lesbian/feminists concerns itself with both inner and outer worlds. Audre Lorde in her essay in Sister Outsider, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," insists on the primacy of poetry as a way to change the world and ourselves. "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." (37)

Of course, the ultimate urge for transformation in lesbian poetry is directed toward the changing of an entire civilization, a civilization based on gender-oppression, on an ingrained racism which kills, and on destructive attitudes toward the earth and nature which not only destroy that of which we are stewards, but also destroy the soul within us. Yet lesbian/feminist poets have often intuited that it is the earth of our own inner beings which we must first reclaim and learn to treat with tenderness and love. This taking over of our own identities is often a beginning place for other transformations.

Rukeyser, in her moving tribute to Kathe Kollwitz, the German artist who painted with an unsparing sensibility the horrors of war, asks "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?" and she answers, "The world would split open." (103) It is in this necessary
breaking apart that change can enter.

One of the silences which has begun to be broken concerns the connection between the isms, race, sex, and class. Lesbian/feminist writers have drawn parallels between these institutionalized oppressions to demonstrate the importance to each of us of the dissolution of these barriers. In my poem "The Voice of the Owl" which concerns violence against women, there is a determined inclusivity which connects us across the artificially imposed barrier of the race.

deep in the woods  my body changes
i can feel the bodies of other women
moving through me  women i have not known
tender and soft  muscled and hard
thin bird-like women  sumptuous strong fat women
Black women and white women  Asian women Jewish women
Chicana women  Native American women
martyred in public places

This inclusivity is crucial, because we must recognize that we are all bound together, not only by our separate oppressions, but by our love and our salvific roles. This is not an easy task, and although the love is basic, it is sometimes impossible to reach it through the barriers of our own racism and classism and/or our internalized oppression. Lorde says, "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." (Sister Outsider 129)

Women of color have an even more difficult time in becoming visible or making visible a tradition which would include them. Barbara S. Christian in her book Black Feminist Criticism attempts to bring this necessary visibility to Black women writers. In her essay, "No more Buried Lives," she discusses the theme of lesbian identity in Lorde's Zami, Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, Ntozake Shange's
Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo, and Alice Walker's The Color Purple. She cites the Black lesbian poet Angelina Weld Grimke, whose life was buried under so many oppressions, not the least of which was homophobia. J. R. Roberts, a white woman, has compiled a bibliography (1981) of Black lesbians in order to answer the complaint that there just isn't material on Black lesbians. Roberts gathered this material because she "...long had a commitment to making lesbian materials and information accessible generally," and particularly had strong concerns about "the lack of opportunity for the voices of black, Third World, poor white, and working class lesbians to be heard." (xl) In Barbara Smith's introduction to this work she says, "From the bibliography it is historically verifiable that it was Black feminist/lesbians who consistently and courageously raised the issue of racism from the beginning of the woman's movement." (lx)

In 1983 Sinister Wisdom, one of the most respected lesbian/feminist journals, published an issue devoted to North American Indian women's work. Carol Lee Sanchez, one of the authors represented, writes in "Sex, Class and Race Intersections," of the effect of colonialization of peoples and she demands that everyone "stop colonizing us and reinterpreting our experiences." (151)

Although this colonizing has been particularly destructive for women of color, all women have experienced the heavy iron boot planting itself on their interior being. Patriarchal consciousness cannot allow women to experience their own power as self-sufficient and self-motivated human beings. In every century it has defined the essence of womanhood to fit its own particular needs. Painful punishment has been meted out to any women who would defy this definition to assert their own. Thus
the figure of the witch has been an important one for lesbian poets to confront in recent years. The deaths of so many innocent women throughout Europe only a few hundred years ago assumes in our nightdreams a deep significance. I have learned for myself the importance of looking at my own power, accepting it and using it for the best good, where possible. In my poem "Snake Woman" I draw a portrait of a woman who is very powerful, very deadly, who brings change with her wherever she goes. She has refused to be socialized. In fact, she is that part of every woman who is untamed, powerful, at home with death and destruction.

she is a snake woman
she has no eyelids
she wears the skins of dead animals
they always smell like death
when she enters the room, the air parts like a river
her hands are too large, and always roaming
what they touch shrivels a little
and when light touches her skin
it does not yield

I insist that the reader look at this woman, recognize what part of her lives in her own mirror, so that she may learn

do you recognize this woman?
look in the mirror
under candlelight
trace with your finger your eyelids
find what lies under the skin
feel your own blooddance rising

her name begins with your initials
her face is very familiar
this woman moves the way your body does
crawling toward morning

do you know this woman?
do you know her?
do you know?  
(Courtot "Snake Woman")
Women are often afraid of this power within them, but it is necessary to resist this fear if we are to finally achieve a full recognition of self. In *The Witch in the Well* I reassure myself of both the power in myself and the power that waits in the unexplored terrain of even one human heart...

The witch lives in the well
at the bottom
of my heart
it is always dark there
do not be afraid.

Later in the poem, I compare the poet Robert Bly's attitude about witches, "Never answer a Witch's question/ She will eat you up," to my own response:

"...a long time ago
i asked my own questions
and then ate up the witch
now we are good friends
she tells me do not be afraid.

A male poet, even one as brave as Bly has often been, seems compelled to draw the line at the power of witches, perhaps because he feels he cannot himself become one. The lesbian poet, however, understands that she is the witch, both the innocent midwife burned at the stake, and the concentrated power of female energy which is so frightening to a phallocentric culture.
we smile then at all male poets
presuming they will ever understand
witches or women
knowing they are afraid
of both our questions and our answers

and especially afraid of the sound
of our white teeth

chewing carefully in the dark.

Even in a tearing and somewhat brutal poem such as "The Woman Moving Through the Dark," it is important to remember that the woman is not stuck in this place of terrible dread and grief, but is moving through.

the woman moving
through the dark
kicks the cat
stumbles over old chairs

she receives nothing

it is the dark of the moon...

the woman moving
is round and terrible
profoundly empty
she cries, she screams, she curses
as she drags herself across
the bottom of the dark
The poem ends with her acceptance of this place as a part of herself.

she learns to wear the dark like a friend
and she does not forget to dance.

Some of the issues which give rise to explorations of power and powerlessness are centered in the pervasive violence against women. In *Fight Back! Female Resistance to Male Violence* edited by Frederique Delacost and Felice Newman, Mariana Romo Carmona writes of a threatening incident and of her response to it.

i tried to imagine the danger, to weigh rape against death and my muscles ached...to weigh rape against murder and my vagina tightened. to weigh rape against death against murder against life in pain against life in any possible shape against the taste of their blood in my teeth and my vagina tightened and i sweated and exuded the most hate i have ever hated and walked resolutely past the six of them toward the subway station clutching my keys between my fingers ready to shred skin like i'd been doing it all my life. (38)

Again in my poem, "The Voice of the Owl," I insist that women are moving out of powerlessness into power.

we will never surrender to you
although you treat us as if we were footnotes
in your important lives
although you discard us
we will always give birth to more daughters
who will not surrender to you
In "This Is Something I Have To Tell You" I explore the internal gender definitions and the conflict between openness and power which is a false dichotomy. We have come to believe that vulnerability is a sign of weakness rather than strength. We have been deceived. In the poem I plead with the reader to pay close attention, to avoid blindly accepting given cultural definitions of power.

your worst fear about being female
may crawl up your spine
to taunt me

you like it when i come to you
so open
you can hardly imagine what it must be like

Love, if you love the female in me
this lush open prairie and wilderness
let her live...

so that together we may refute forever
the lies told about women
by cowards afraid of the dark

Lesbian poets come to the issue of survival with an understanding of the hard choices women are often forced to make. Lesbian poetry honors survival itself as an inmportant form of resistance. In my poem "Face To The Wall" I draw a portrait of a broken woman who can only survive by actually breaking into herself—a walled fortress.

she becomes her own drum
her music is that of the broken
the broken into
she deforms the shapes of mind
body spirit to fit
into closed spaces
crawling into plaster and splintered wood
surrounding herself with the dark
listen to the sound she makes at night

a small, tenacious thief
with strong hands
The new lesbian poet rejects self-destruction. For instance, Rich, in her poem "From A Survivor" addresses her husband dead of suicide.

and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making
which i live now
not as a leap
but a succession of brief, amazing movements
each one making possible the next

The core of my poetry burns with this desire to survive. Moving out from the damages inflicted, straining toward new definitions, it examines the colonization of the self, picking apart those pieces which are so intertwined in order to know what to keep and what to discard. Listening images are common in my poetry, the ear an active agent for change. "The survivor is not proud/ she thinks she is supposed to tell about it/ but when she opens her mouth/ everyone runs away." (The Survivor) My poetry does not take place only in itself but rather lives and moves through the witness of some waiting ear.

please will you please listen please
I wheedle, whine, turning myself round in circles
to catch your ear
to trap it in my hunger to be heard
please listen (Breaking Silence)

I agree with Muriel Rukeyser that poetry is always a triadic experience in which the poet and the audience/witness together make a third experience which is the actual heart of the poem (Rukeyser, The Life of Poetry 53). Poetry is not the mere crafting of a beautiful piece of language which could sit for a thousand years in its crystalline beauty, doing nothing; it must break out of its own form, abandon its original
maker and take up home with an audience. In this way it moves and flows through the world and through what it yields in longevity it gains in transformation. My poetry is written in resistance to all the turned backs of the world. I want to impel them to face me.

In this preface I have kept out the long historical tradition of patriarchal criticism, to which lesbian criticism is so often, falsely, compared. But it seems useful here to at least acknowledge one main complaint which has been leveled against lesbian writing: that is, that it lacks a universality which seems necessary for good art. When phallocentric critics speak of universality, too often they mean only the realm of privileged white males. Nevertheless, we must meet this complaint head on. It is true that lesbian poetry is intently focused on woman-bonding, women surviving, women being victimized. But lesbian poets move far beyond this focus to finally include a universe which contains not only lesbians, not only women, but all of us, female and male, on this planet and beyond.

Another way of thinking of this seeming paradox is to understand that each human being contains the lesbian within herself and himself. This lesbian nature insists on the love of itself: it belongs to the world and in the world. It loves women and women's capacity to create and sustain life. It refuses destruction by hatred, whether this is the hatred of sexism and racism or a self-hatred absorbed from phallocentric brainwashing. Rukeyser understands this need to include all within the self and in her later poems, there is a pulsating, insistent energy which compels us to listen.

never to despise in myself what I have been taught to despise. Not to despise the other. Not to despise the it. To make this relation with the it: to know that I am it. (Poems 492)
Thus the lesbian poet, myself, begins haltingly. I place myself in my world as central and I name my vision central. I move in circles in my work and in my connections with other writing lesbians. An image seems to enter one of our poems and it grows in power as it moves through other women's work. If the patriarchal world assigns me to a place on the boundary, I use this boundary vision and name it central. This shifts everything. No longer can my work or the work of other lesbians be dismissed as being "fringe" writing, not universal enough. Anyone who is human, who has had some essential connection with themselves and the world they live in, can experience my poetry and the work of other lesbian poets in a very direct way.

No longer a fragment, a poet without a poetic tradition, a woman looking for her lost history, I come to the ear of the world with an open voice, a voice rich in images and wild with intent to change; to change myself, to change everything.

As I come, I bring with me my sister poets, from Sappho to Judy Grahn, the still masked ones and the recently unmasked. Dickinson comes with her mystery and Amy Lowell with her sensuous love poems. The lost dead come with me, Plath and Sexton; their voices are full of fury. I come with all the unknown lesbian poets, read only by the few, and I come with Adrienne Rich, beloved by the many. Lynn Rogers and Lois Van Houten come with me, and my voice grows stronger. The community of lesbian poets within me—women from every class, ethnic group, religion, geographical area—grows.

I come, beginning again.
EVERYTHING BREAKS
Everything Breaks

everything breaks
vases, glasses, pictures, dishes, windows
anything that is delicate
anything in which a person passing can see herself breaks:
lightning seams across the ordered world
i should get up and stop it
this room fills with broken glass under my feet rainbows of fragments dance
i should get up and stop it
a crack begins to slide across the floor
each day i can see more of my downstairs neighbor doing the dishes or singing looking off into space each day the crack widens but she hasn't noticed me yet
i should get up and stop this but if i sit here with my hands folded no one will blame me
at night, afraid to move to disturb the delicate balance beams of light ascend from my neighbor's apartment like moonlight on broken glass
i fear mostly earthquakes and being alone
i should get up and stop this
Woman in Ice

i am a woman in ice melting

piece by piece
slowly
i am divested
of the cold cage

sharp as glass
the splinters fall at my feet
do not cut yourself

when i listen
to the train's wail
i can feel
through underground caverns
of stalactal promises

the earth
full and steady
under me
move

i never thought
i'd love the sun again
but now my fingers move
in a panic
of wanting to be burnt
Limits Reconsidered

I am not an opening

I am not a flower, whose pollen-heavy center
awaits the bee

I am not an opening, not a cave, not an entrance

Because I am soft and big, you think of me as plant
but I am more stone than plant

If you insist, consider these:

The artichoke, whose tasty center
is surrounded by sharp spikes

The persimmon, who seduces you with its sweet sensuality
then leaves the taste of bitterness, strung across your day

(remember your furred tongue)

Remember the cactus fruit, the sharp points
which sting, and the thick, thick skin

If you make me yield my mouth to yours
to give us both pleasure

You will be surprised by my big teeth
and the taste of blood

* * *

I am not a door for you, I am not an ear, not an opening
not a tunnel, I am not the cleft in the hill

Or the riverbed waiting

I am not the center of a Georgia O'Keeffe painting
(O sweet black center)

I am not an opening for anyone
Limits Reconsidered

If I am a door it is only for myself to enter and exit

3 a.m. I hang on my hinges banging open and closed an old door in a bad neighborhood clang bang bang all night it echoes across the railroad tracks and the closed saloons and the wind sweeping through the deserted house freezing both the spider and the spider's fly

oh my grief lying wordless and forever at the very bottom of this house

Do not use this opportunity to slither through you may get caught forever in an empty ghost house whose walls are teeth whose windows are mouths whose basements full of coal and terror conceal the dead bodies of saints

* * *

There was once a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead and when she was good she was very very good and when she was bad she was herself

The owner of her large body, forty-year-old body, the queen of cunt, mouth, ear, and mind her legs went where she told them her hands touched only what she commanded her mouth opened to anger a flower blooming on the desert after a rain

Her mouth opened to kisses she wanted to give

* * *

everyone always leaves me, she said their faces are stacked in the corner grinning everytime you touch me they laugh until the tears pry themselves out of my body

for us love is a mined field at night they tell me where the bombs are hidden (whisper whisper fervent trees in a bad storm)

Sometimes they are lying Sometimes they are not lying
Limits Reconsidered

you know that everytime we make love
a place in me unravels
a snake of pain crawls from my center
to strike with an old poison

if you were your own weapon against yourself
into whose hands would you place the knowledge?

* * *

I have been the plundered earth too long
You can take the tractors of your mind
out of my body now

I am changing metaphors in the middle of my life
this one is killing me:

my softness no longer carries
the same significance

if I cry it does not mean
you've won

* * *

I am simple: you may not want to know me
many of my nights are lonely
everyone always leaves me

I am a woman trying to stay
This may not be possible
Limits Reconsidered

I am not an opening

I am not a hillside full of flowers
I am not a crevice waiting for your hand to find me

I am not a metaphor for the earth
I do not blossom in the springtime

I am not the vessel where the seed is stored
I am not your mother

No cave no womb no sacred dwelling

I am a woman opening to herself
A woman with choices

I choose myself
You Measure Me

you measure me
in the way you design a train schedule
for practical purposes
for what makes sense
for typical destinations

but no one alive
can feel the delicacy of my bones

because i have had to dig my feet in deep
to the earth in order not to fly away
you think i am earthbound

i have never let you see the spirit in me
which rises
in the way gold rises
to the miner's longing

there is also in me a profound sorrow
there are so many words
they fill me up like sunday dinner
with a family suffering from too much love

oh the sounds of distress
the twilight skies where loneliness
covers us in a second skin
who can escape this?

it is true what they say about trees
how the best of them have forgotten
how to fly and even animals
refuse to speak to us

and yet, you measure them also
by what they will become for you

so deep in me is a knowledge
a sorrow there is no one alive who can feel
the sweet delicacy of my bones
no one who will know with certainty
how I lift

how I lift, again, between night and morning
a ship full of secrets
immeasurable secrets:

i am a river of gold waiting for discovery
when the light breaks upon my surface
i shine
Into the Deep

nothing stirs
in the water
no thing moves

all through the water
peace rests
upon itself

the mirror is safe:

slowly
your face
descends

enters the wet realm
the water parts

i am opened
as the mirror
cracks

i am a black space
surrounded by light
i am the water and in it

it waits
for one of us
to close things up

but i have fallen
too far into the deep
into the dark
to ever come up again

the water
closes over me
a heavy lover

while your face
slowly
takes itself away

returning the mirror
to itself
safe again
but under the still space
like lost stars
my fingers scrape at silver
slivers

while no thing moves
across the silent wet
This Is Something I Have To Tell You

in the beginning, light
and leaves and the shadow of light
upon the leaves
my whole being shimmered
in its cave of flesh

lifted up I was so open
there was nothing between me
and the way the wind blew
no skin held my spirit back
from the great spirits of the world
and the winds blew as light changed
moment to moment each moment forever
and I was enraptured

caught in a trap of joy

*

but there is a club loose in the world
that smashes babies' faces
an iron-toed boot which kicks and kicks
until it no longer meets flesh, but more iron

and I too have known this iron
and made it a part of me
from the wreckage of my heart
I have hauled up whole pieces of timber
on my back alone with no one waiting for me
and little bits of glass
like crystal to catch the sun
have embedded themselves in my skin
and I have brought back seasons
where weather is a harsh queen

I have spent so many years
in the bed of my enemies
just to know where the next blow was coming from
I have known so intimately the iron boot
the club that swings

and I learned early how to change myself
into the densest stone

* 

now when you see me sitting
quietly attentive to no worldly thing
you might name me passive
when you watch my refusal
to take any simple action
you might decide I am weak
and dangerous
your worst fear about being female
may crawl up your spine
to taunt me

but I am telling you this:
I have dived down deep into a ship of ghouls
to wrest back my own innocence
I have come back with a hunger for life
a hunger that is all female

and Listen
I have danced on waves
climbed mountains of desire
run Olympian races
with no one cheering me on
exhausted beyond exhaustion

*

you like it when I come to you
so open
you can hardly imagine what it must be like

you like the way I spread my body
and my spirit
under you
an open blanket
you know you can have as much of me
as you want
but this is something I have to tell you:
when I have let myself get this close to you
I return to beginning
falling down through time
light changes
everything dances
dappled intense joyous
I reach out for it
with an innocent hand

Love, if you love the female in me
this lush open prairie and wilderness
let her live
let the little wild animals in her roam freely
the grasses grow wildly and the fires come
when they will
let her live without fear of the iron boot
without having to avoid the swing of the club

and I will love the female in you
so fierce and open and strong
so that together we may refute forever
the lies told about women
by cowards afraid of the dark
THE WOMAN MOVING THROUGH THE DARK
In the Dark

stumbling through your house
at night in the dark
i can imagine i am trying to find my way
through the unilluminated places
of your mind

(my own darkness
i cannot walk through
just because it no longer bears the shape
of a house
but floats like a fruit with wings
above my head)

there are edges to these rooms
that the day knows nothing of
stillness here
i might find some comfort in
but walking through darkness
is still a risky business
damage can occur so easily
to the tender root of belief

2

snail hunting
should not be dangerous
still in this room of light
i think of you outside in the dark
and i am afraid

your hands reaching
through green your whole body
alive
to the scent of sunflowers and
Petunias baked in a hot day's sun
(taking a breath between words
i have been saying to myself
i see in front of me the vision
of your hand reaching)

your hands reaching
through all my darkness
to a core of light

for what mystery?
in what darkness do you reach down
what do you expect to find
and where do the snails go?

4
dreaming i walk
through my own garden
which is dark
no moon showing
wet earth heavy-scented flowers
labial fruits

(dreaming i turn
in your bed reaching
i almost touch you)

almost you touch my darkness

5
now we are wrapped around each other
stumbling falling in and out of dreams
wet earth your hand reaches

touch this now
while the house around us
breathes for us
surrounds us
something is smiling in the dark
your hand reaches for me
touch now the delicate dark mouth
of my being
give to me now this gift
of my own sweet darkness

sweet wet dark earth
touch this now

(6)
(in the morning
across the ridges of my body
a delicate silver trail
forms almost in the shape
of a river)
Prayer To The Heart Of The Wall

break open
(I whisper)
trying to sneak up
on this wall of myself
approaching the monster enclosured carefully
oh, the mouth with large teeth
the darkness which is all mouth

i pretend to be gentle
come on break open i plead
whining, seductive i lower my voice
but it is obdurate hard obelisk
something sharp and shining
made to last

a wall
a wall around someone's heart
oh, my own poor heart
trapped
afraid to gnaw its leg away

my heart hungers for the light
so lost in the dark
no hands to hold no face to give
or take a smile

wall knows
wall lives
and breathes and knows
what light might do
burn
not simply like a hand against a stove
more like a fire in a California wood
after a dry summer
the masculine heat of the flames
penetrates everything
soft open leaves shrivel slowly
this would be an excruciating burning

break open (i whisper)
better open break open break open
spoken and unspoken this prayer
wraps itself around my days
a flag endlessly repeating itself
syllables lost to the wind
and then the wind returns them
open break open break open
but i cannot turn i cannot break open
this prayer, etched into my forty-year face
which refuses to cry all the griefs
it has known, stumbles and repeats

break open break open break open
endlessly repeating

egg of night solidity which is all
aggression
relentless clenched fist of my heart
thou shalt not trespass

Wall As God

break open let the waters
pour forth
let the rain come
let the sorrow flow
break open break open
every pulsebeat repeats to the unrelinquishing wall
around my heart

wall of stone of darkness
of merciless days
wall of the unnameable
desire frozen
wall which sits like an enemy
watching me

break open i cry
but i cannot hear myself
so i repeat this prayer
my longing to be free
to break open
to let myself once
hold myself close and open
before the final closing

break open
Face To The Wall

she bangs her head
in the same spot
until a dent appears
in the wall
spreading like blood
the thick lines
like her grandmother's hands
spreading slowly over the wall
opening it
the plaster falls
down her face
onto lips
over eyelashes
a white rain
everywhere is falling
the wall opens for her
she can see the worn wooden beams
and the small insects
which house themselves on the insides of things
gnawing on the discomfort of the world
deforming their bodies to fit
into closed spaces
to become the private dark
she can see the night
clearer than any day sky
engraved permanently on each of her eyes

she is banging the wall with her head
her body loses everything
but the knowledge and meaning
of wall
after it is broken into
and what a head becomes
when it can move in only one direction
against something

she becomes her own drum
her music is that of the broken
the broken into
she deforms the shapes of mind spirit body
to fit into closed spaces
crawling into plaster and splintered wood
surrounding herself with the dark
listen to the sounds she makes at night

listen to the sound of a woman
breaking into herself

a small tenacious thief
with strong hands
Persephone

i descend into the earth which calls itself Winter

it grows like new skin around me

there are caves here where the ice grows thick in every direction

my breath startles the small birds which sit on the edges of wet rounded stones

i am digging in now this land is solid and my own

2

over my head there is the worked earth
some other woman's garden growing winter vegetables squash, potatoes, pumpkin
under a nest of shuddering trees

the fruits of the dead are all red fruits tomatoes persimmon pomegranate
the journey down into the sweet seed the mourning seed

the flesh turned inside out
the taste on the tongue stays longer than the sun does

3

this is the season when light takes itself away into the deep cave
molds itself to fit the insides of the dark

i am turning myself inside out now a winter glove all five fingers crossing themselves
can you see me here?

a sweet fruit of the dead
inside the thick skin the fleshe\textless seeds dance

if you touch me now you will taste on your skin
a new reign of light

above use the sky thickens with birds
The Woman Moving Through The Dark

down

the woman
moving through the dark
kicks the cat
stumbles over old chairs
is betrayed by clutter
longs for order

in falling, she falls only
into herself, nothing flings itself at her
she receives nothing
it is the dark of the moon
there are no crystal caves here
and no candle burns

deeper into the center of the earth

the sea itself is dark
no wave approaches with light
only the sound of the shoreline retiring

deeper into the center of the earth

the woman moving through the dark
maintains the illusion
of immobility

in order to comfort herself
her hands seem empty
though they are full of darkness
her eyes cleave to the farthest walls
two brown magnets
trying to suck even the corners
into her hollow

the woman moving through the dark
is round and terrible
profoundly empty
she cries as she moves
she screams, she whispers curses
as she drags herself across the bottom
of the dark
her cries shake the foundations

the woman moving through the dark
disguises herself to avoid capture
trusts no one, especially mirror images
shakes herself like the rattle of a snake
uninvited to a children's birthday
she learns to wear the dark like a friend

the woman moving through the dark
deserves our blessings

and she does not forget to dance
THE EDGE OF THE ROOM
The Edge Of The Room

from this edge
the eye, unliaded,
sees differently
remorseless, corners plan vengeance
faces float like balloons
across inviolate space

cross inviolate space

words leave my mouth
how long will they take
to reach you?

this is my life
at the edge of the room

i am part wall
part resistance to wall
and there is a part of me
unknown      unnamed

the cry is in me
it rises upward like a snake
you imagine it a cloud
you wonder how it came here
to violate your quiet

we have a secret agreement
we have placed me here, at the edge,
who remembers when?
history and nature have married me
to this place
the rough and intricate texture
of wall
tattoos itself    onto my palm

a longing rises in me
hunger for center
i am nauseous from a desire to belong
as if the edge of the room were
an obsession    an addiction
i could learn to get over

when you notice me
you believe my essence is wall
or edge
that which is pushed against
wall
alien
the unacknowledged
the reason for silence
the lesbian in every woman

i am so tired of resisting silence
of giving voice to the unspeakable

this illusion of choice!
we imagine we are in a room
which we can leave at any time
if there are four corners somewhere
there must be a door

outside the great wave waits
grave and destitute
the wall that i stand against
so far from all of you
is weak and damp
at night i can hear water cracks
beginning to form

if i tell you we are a part of each other
will you believe me?
if i tell you
i have been holding up this wall
only for you
will you come join me at the edge?
the essence of the Other
all the pores of my skin
fill with this odor
it must drift across to you
safely in the center
you know many of my secrets
my hillbilly mothers have shaped
my wide, softened body
i do not belong
i have loved women too much and too early
you can tell how i wrap my arms around them
to protect
i do not belong
my manners lack finesse
my father drove a taxi for a living
i do not belong
i have been poor for forty-two years
the smell of poverty is full of fear
this must drift across to you
so far away from me
i do not belong

i am married to this wall
to this edge
we have all agreed to this
that i will be the one to stay
at the edge of the room

you are so far away from me
how can we look into each other's eyes?

there is a shout in me which rises
sometimes i turn my back on you
face against wall
my hands bleeding from scraping
the edges of the room

i imagine wave against wave
beating against the room
i hold both arms out, up against the wall
my back is tired

you will never know how much i have hated you
you will never know how much i love you
how much i long to be held by you
to be brought to the center of this room
which belongs to all of us
this is my gift to you
i hold up the edge
i am lesbian  i am working-class
i am Other

this is my confession
sometimes i find a happiness
in your happiness

at the edge of this room
the darkness is deep
i have looked into it
and beyond the assaultive waves
i have seen a future
that is possible for all of us

this is your gift to me
i have been able to look into the dark
and found immeasurable richness there

if i tell you we are a part of one another
will you finally believe me?
Cincinnati On A Visit Home

i could have lived here for twenty years
worked at Proctor and Gamble's making soap
walked along the Ohio River
mused under the angel in Fountain Square
and eaten sweet cakes and been lonely
what would I have learned?

but i left
dreamed the greyhound blues
into gypsy exile
ripped myself away from the women i loved
and was aflesh with
moved into colder climates
i lived in other cities
where i had no history
no one knew my name
i ate sweet cakes and was lonely
what is it i have learned?

born to the middle of a large continent
although i have wandered to both edges
as if to test a deep fear of falling
i belong to you still, oh middle of the land

* 

near the Atlantic i gave birth
my daughters played at the European edge
soaking up the wisdom
Jewish and tough
of generations of immigrants
to the Pacific I brought my exile in my hands
it is a heart I carry in a wooden box
I carry it with me wherever I go
here all of Asia drifts
across the cold water
here Buddhist and Catholic
I listen to the great voice
of the oldest trees
whispering

you can never go back
never go back

*

it is true I am too used
to a rain which brings me blessings
which opens me like a finger and thumb
and places little flowers inside me

*

I could have lived in this city
Cincinnati
for twenty years
worked a factory job
grown older
broken hearted from the lives of women
what would have been different?
Mother city here you are
within me
like the food my own mother used to cook
before she got too tired to cook
thick and rich
heavy with memory
you will sit a long time on my bones

sweet, like the sweet cakes
i used to eat from your German bakeries
you are bitter
like the bitterness in a woman's heart
who has been abandoned for something small

(was it the sound of a song
i thought i heard
hidden in the train's long whistle?)

sweet and bitter city
come here to me at last
i will wrap you in my arms
let us lie down together
finally, in peace

look at the wonderful gifts i have for you
east and west, they are sweet cakes
of wisdom,

finally, let us eat them together.
perhaps the Hunter
does not wish
to believe his search
has ended

how many times has he boarded a plane
and then disembarked from it
always stepping on ground where Jews have died?

(Jews have died everywhere)

how many times did he think
he was that close
almost smelling the stink of Nazi
on his own clothes

*  

ash
and bones in a box

a whole generation of Jews
illuminated
across the skies
ashes blown across the shame-faced
world

overnight
ashes and bones in a box

*  

who lies buried under the ashes
bones and ashes
and a whole world gone?
Testigo

(2)

In The Hollow Of My Own Heart

when she stood above me
in her long lean form
her sharp-witted and cruel mouth
twisting my life as if it were an old rag
i could not surrender
not even for my own good

no one of the other children
came with me
even a little way

when she hounded me
to exile

not even one small voice
spoke for me

ashes and bones
and a rotting box

*

o my god i am heartily sorry
for i have grievously offended thee
for i have not saved thy people
from the injustice of my own heart
for i have not dragged children from ovens
for i have not stopped lynchings
for i have not fed the hungry
for i have not purified my own failing heart

now i am looking for the nazi
in harder places
than South American cities

in this deep country
i am armed only with a nameless guilt
a shame which slices me neatly in two
like some ordinary round and simple thing
and then squeezes
object not person
now i am looking
in the deep hollow
of my own heart

this meeting cannot take place
without immense suffering
Testigo

(3)

Is There A Politics Of Metaphor?

i am neither
nazi nor Jew

but i am also both

witness to torture which drags itself
a bad leg
across the sweet earth, honeyed earth

testigo (3)

these words nazi Jew
they do not roll easily off the tongue
to be put to use in a poem
they are not simply syllables
to rouse a lazy mind
too much death has already been wrapped around them

i think of the Jews i love
their faces rise before me
i tremble
if they had been only slightly less lucky
older, born to a different country
they too...

would i have said then
take me also i too am a Jew?

*

still, when i think of you, my old enemy
you who are so clever at putting on a new face
you who appear in every group i've ever given my heart to
i imagine you as nazi soul-destroyer
you with a hunger to root out difference
you who want to eradicate what you cannot understand
you who want vengeance on death
and instead, become it

and i am the Jew who whispers
never again never again never again
until it becomes the only language i know

i remember those who resisted you
i honor their deaths

never again never again never again
always there is a cell
what happens inside it
i cannot tell you
although i know i should

a woman told me her father's story
he was dying when he told her
tell them this, he said, be sure,
por favor, tell them this

he had crawled out of a cell in El Salvador
to die in Mexico
so that his life, his death, might be a witness

i cannot tell you what she told us then
the horror is too much

you wouldn't believe it

ashes and bones
ceniza y hueso

una lengua no es bastante
por el horror
ceniza y hueso
somos testigos

we are victim or witness
there is nothing else to be now

or Torturer
or Torturer

i honor the lives of those who resist
the makers of cells
Testigo
(5)
Old Enemy

you meet me at night
in the deep of night
in my ash/bone/box
in my skirts of dread
in my torn flesh
in my clenched hands
in my angry sex
you meet me
we enter into each other

who wins? who loses?

i do not like the way
your face
rises up in my mirror

i move quickly away

in my self-righteousness
i hear your grating sinister voice

and i want to throw away all that i am
to avoid being you

i have found myself too often
at the bottom
of this ash box of bones

i know there is a killer in me
who might torture
if the last of the good in me
bled away

ashes and bones
in a box
and in my mirror
a face i do not want

vivir en la verdad
to live in truth

i must live in truth
Between Myself and Everyone

now i am the Hunter

i rummage through boxes
of bones
looking for the one piece
intricate and deadly
which i own

always outside the child
is suffering

not one person speaks up for her

i am not the only witness to this
but i am the only one with a mouth

what flowers have grown from this speaking?
who has listened and what has been changed?

my enemy looks at me across the room
i exile myself rather than become her

i want to love you all
but the door which separates us
is thick and strong
there is always a nun inside
who thinks she has God in her pocket
she has a wicked smile

i want to love you all
but between myself and everyone
lies a great field of ash and bone

night comes the torturer goes home
listens to music
maybe he maybe she
writes poems

reaching down into this box
i want to take finally
only what is mine

to end my Hunt i must remove finally
the torturer from my own heart

screaming in its cell of rage
ONE VOICE: THE SURVIVOR
you make it sound easy
like breaking bread:

I imagine holding this bread of my silence
delicately
and then the ritual breaking
my hands strain—knuckles whitening
but it will not break
pain travels up my arms
stops in my chest
something breaks in me but not
the bread of my silence

do you imagine if there had been words
words to tell you
I would have resorted to this?
poems torn from me
stutterings and smokescreens
each word a further bar in my own imprisoning
believe this—
if there were a language to express it
it could not live for long in any human mouth...

there is a child in the room with me
she too has passed beyond language
her eyes see everything and it burns her
she wants to tell you everything
do you want to hear it?

please will you please listen please
I wheedle whine turning myself round in circles
to catch your ear
to trap it in my hunger to be heard
please listen
and then the goddamn stuttering lies
come I speak them so carefully
what a story they make when put together
and the stories put together make a life
a life-story:
breaking silence
like a wave breaking on the shore
drop of water—sea—salt taste
clings to itself and what is like itself
calls to other drops of water

and the wave builds
and the wave builds
from far out in the sea
and the wave builds
and the wave breaks
upon the shore
and what is broken is only itself

my silence has been gathering
to itself drop by drop
the bitterness of that which is like itself
a wave that lives far out in wilderness water
inside me this water has been growing
year upon year grave after grave
through deaths and births and roads
which did not know their own endings
this water
has built itself into mountain
my silence a mountain of ice
the glacier now moves close to my outside edge
if you get too close
oh cold the breath of unexpressed fury

imagine a great wave of ice moving inside you
building to break
building to break

break breaking

[ SILENCE ]

the child wrapped in silence
sits in the quiet
outside is chattering
people die out there
hit each other on the front lawn
a nun moves out there against another child
(this child was never me—no—never)
the nun is vicious and beautiful
no one has ever been cleaner
the child is dirty her hair tangles her clothes not clean
she touches her body at night
(does the nun know?)

this nun slices a sentence in two parts
she uses it against the child a knife
she cuts across her face
she cuts across her unrisen breasts
she cuts across her undeveloped genitals
(I know you do not want to hear this)

pools of blood rise all over the soft skin
of the child
she says nothing

I will take this left-over sentence
wear it on my insides
amulet and weapon
prison and bird-wing

who will claim this child?
she is wrapped in silence
please don't try to wake her
it might break her

breaking silence in simple language
no poetics
I was a child invaded
as an army would invade a country struggling to be free
they entered me—planted a flag in the middle
of who I was
it still waves its filthy message there
mired in an unredeeming mud

and no one was there to listen
no ear heard the small child's voice
breaking open

Stop, she said,
you cannot break into me.

and I turned all eye
night-eye, eye of never forget,
eye that never sleeps and I turned

never breaking
never breaking

silence

only breaking breaking breaking
The Voice Of The Owl Rises Within Me

walking through November woods the air is cold and i am lost among the leaves

back where the road begins a bird hangs from nailed wings hangs from a worn post a wild owl with night-rimmed eyes

and it has taken a strong hand a steady hand to nail her down to subdue her flight

the struggle has left two kinds of blood behind and the ground all round is covered with brown and white feathers soft as morning

* * *

the air smells of a horrible anguish although the bird hours ago has flown beyond any further human cruelty

walking through woods i think of the hand that has done this act and of the mind that moved it and the civilization that formed it

if i close my eyes i can see the shadows of a figure mindlessly moving nailing the bodies of owls to barns and posts moving through every forest moving through the gray streets of cities marking the doors of tenements as warning to women as warning to everything that lives which is soft and wild and wanting to nourish life
deep in the woods  my body changes
i can feel the bodies of other women
moving through me  women i have not known
tender and soft  muscled and hard
thin  bird-like women  sumptuous and strong fat women
Black women and white women  Asian women  Jewish women
Chicana women  Native American women
martyred in public places

left to die  on the tops of mountains
left in the wilds  nameless and forgotten
killed on city streets
killed in bedrooms
found in gutters
found in drainage ditches
found near contaminated rivers
found in their apartments

their deaths crackle  around me
leaves of autumn
everywhere i step  i hear them
crying out in strong voices
captured birds

i mourn for the soft bodies of children
wounded by large male hands
left to die  alone in the city
thrown from bridges
thrown from the tops of tenements
found in garbage cans
found in city dumps
found on roof-tops

their lives bent into ruin
before they have found  their own faces
in the mirror

now  there is a word in me  rises
on wings
which cannot be spoken
without the shedding of blood  help me
walking through woods  i hear the words
of the news story
"Two bodies were found today"
and how solidly i knew  they would be bodies
of women or children
you knew too, didn't you?

this is not even unusual
the bodies of women and children
turn up every day as if we were a crop
harvested at random  who plants the seeds?

whose sister will be the next body found
at the far side of the lake?

whose daughter will disappear from a crowded street
to be found months later  her beautiful skull
pushing its way up out of a ravine?

who are the harvesters?
who plants the seeds?
if the bodies of men randomly began appearing
in remote areas naked genitals violated
their last expressions
a mirror of terror and violence

would the news stories notice a pattern?
would they call this genocide
or retribution?

* * *

walking through woods the trees speak to me
in a female language the green fern sings
in soft feminine tones the eyes of small animals
remind me we are sisters

water running underground from an unseen source
tells me there was a time when the bodies of women
were sacred when the earth was loved

the paths of small insects remind me
there was a time when women did not fear men

the voices of the dead tell me
if this is not true we will make it true
i know the mind that drives the nails
is the deformed mind

i know the hand that kills the women
has already killed the life that is in him

but words rise in me which cannot be spoken
in any known language

words which cannot live in any poem

within me i feel a powerful whoosh!
of wings

lifting, i feel myself rising
carrying the bodies of the dead
across night-skies

listen, these women are not anonymous
these women have faces and names
some of them have children
these women loved and got angry
some gave birth and some wrote poems
and some did both

these women lived the best way they knew
they have skin which is every color
these women are not anonymous

their voices rise in me
simple, eloquent, in several languages
their voices insist to the deformed mind:

we will never surrender to you
although you treat us as if we were footnotes
in your important lives
although you discard us like trash
we will always give birth to more daughters
who will not surrender to you

* * *

i will insist on this always

my own daughters are stronger than i am
i am stronger than my mother was

and with each generation we come closer
to learning how to fly

above your iron nails
Of Timber and Grief

when the tree splits from the root
and the wood falls
the sound
delicate as desire
flies upward
through a leafless and beautiful sky

of timber and grief
i have made a song
of surviving
i will carry it with me
wherever i go now

standing in the night
i can hear a sharp wooden sound
something is splitting itself
into smaller pieces

a new world
green as morning
rises

        under a winter sun
A Woman With Her Purse on Fire
For Helen Dunn

a woman with her purse on fire
invites comment

a woman with her purse on fire
has money to burn
or someplace to go which requires
anonymity

a woman sitting in a meeting room
notices a certain heat around her
flames rise she muses on the symbolism
and rises herself, only slowly,
to extinguish the fire

a woman remembers Jeanne, a French girl,
and six million women whose lives
turned to fagots beneath them
who would have thought there could be
so many dangerous women on one continent!

a woman enters rooms unarmed
she is lonely in the room
surrounded by others
she has left some piece of herself behind
but she can't remember where
leaving an airplane the woman forgets her wallet
it contains her money, essential numbers, and photographs only she can really see
after she leaves the plane ignites
days later the sky is still full of ash

once a woman lived in the country of Phoenix
that female bird was full of surprises
she taught fire a new language
and the children in that country spoke in tongues of fire
a whole country of holy spirits

a woman with her purse on fire discusses symbolism
remembers the color in the eyes of a certain bird
readies herself for flight

all women carry in their purses potential for flame
be careful!
fire grows from the smallest of embers
The Sorrow Poem

Somewhere there is a happiness
which does not carry my mother's poison
in its full mouth

i have stumbled through her world of sorrow
so long i have made it my own
mother you know this is true
you loved the sufferer in me
how i took you in my heart
wrapped myself around you
and you around me
until we were one
but i was too small for such a big promise

*  

now i am a mad woman breaking free
this is a cruel poem mother
there is nothing soft about my fear of you
or the guilt i have harvested year after year

i admit i abandoned you
left you in the greyhound bus station
when i was nineteen
good-bye, good-bye, i cried
then forgot to leave
i am a mad woman now  looking
looking for a happiness
somewhere it waits for me  it's a little lonely
wears bright clothes which shimmer
and brighten the dark

my happiness has soft hands
and a woman's mouth
it carries wisdom in its back pocket
it wants to enfold me
it has been looking for me for such a long time

*  
mother  i loved you through your absence
you were so solid on the outside
so fleshy  so brown skinned warm to touch
but mother  i never found you
the you that hid inside you

remember how i dedicated myself to loving you
i wanted to make you happy
how many pieces of myself i sliced
from secret places  to give to you
i always found them in the garbage later

now i hear your voice in her voice
telling me i deserve to suffer
i am promised to pain
i have a birthright of sorrow
your voices insinuate themselves
seductive so familiar
an old bed soft enough
to break one's back

    your voice her voice
    sings to me
    a song i want to give away

do you really want me to stay here
in this Cincinnati of the heart
holding my body against the cold walls
where shadows enter the bones and twist
and a chill enters in to last a lifetime

do you think you would be happy then
if only i would stay?

*

outside my California window
there are wild green parrots crying
crying for their own lost home
all summer they have led me with their voices
through the tops of alien trees
to a wild happiness
i thought had forgotten me
i am leaping into space now
from this mountainous sorrow
falling clear of pain
and i am leaping after all
only into myself
this cavernous well of joy

i am carried now on the luxuriant voices of birds
to some place full of surprise
the wild green parrots have taken me away now
i will not be back
Childhood Saints: One

Maria Goretti
long after my childhood saints
have cracked and perished
under the heavy fist of cool reason
your small bony arms continue to clutch
    (the wounded body bleeds
    in some dark corner
    of my life)

we pretended you were a joke for us
they tried so hard to make you a saint
dragging your body up from the grave
hanging your withered arm
in a glass case
    (the arm which resisted)
we carried your picture
in our purses
consigning ourselves secretly
to a future frigidity
fearful always of the knife
in the hands of the man
you lived with and trusted

there was some appetite loose in your house
sly and sickening
it walked like a man
you were supposed to trust him
but the day he found you alone
he moved his body against you
an accident which maims
his knife was secure in his lonely cool hand

you were supposed to trust him
your small body was vulnerable and pretty
perhaps you were just growing
into appetite
but you held out against him

the Church told us it was your chastity
you protected with your life
but oh Maria, i can feel you
moving inside me
raising the withered resisting arm
your small warrior self
is not frightened of sensuality
but of violation

it was your self whole intact
you refused to relinquish
not willing to give even one moment
of surrender
to this man
your body fell under his blows
your early death
flutters through my dreams
a bird wanting to escape
in and out of my choices
it flies
trapped in the deepest corridor
forgotten and locked away
in some basement of my mind
it bangs ruthlessly against dirty windows
no one can see through
it wants to fly free

Maria i wanted to forget you
and your death
i wanted to live

i lived
i lived and when the man came
the man with the knife
and sometimes he was a woman
i stepped forward
i lived and gave to him
those pieces of myself
he thought he wanted
i lived
opening the knife-soft places for him
just to make it easier
to be more accessible
for him

i was supposed to trust him
i was supposed to trust her

your resistance whispered to me
as i tried to forget you
escape you whispered
escape the knife, you pleaded

O this knife in the mind
O this knife in the heart
how it kills and goes on killing forever
forever until that day
i remember you
in my resistance i place my body
against the enemy's will
refuse to surrender the light
at the center of my being
let them misunderstand you
Maria
the Church-Fathers/the men in our houses
whom we trusted
the laughers and the sneerers
we who have been assaulted
and given in
understand you

i name you for myself: saint

resistance fighter
even the church cannot contain
your meaning

the twelve-year-old inside me
salutes you

in the sweet open flesh/love
river of appetite, passion, surrender in joy
i share with my lover
you have a part also
you showed me the way

now you come too.
Every Grief

every grief
is the same grief
whether it is screaming
through the empty middle of the night
or suffocating through the silence of a dead cold Sunday
bodies torn apart in a war-zone
or the death of one old woman
every grief carries in its suitcase
all the others

it is very heavy
sometimes refuses to be taken away
or packed into attics
sometimes it wants to talk
high-pitched words
we can hardly understand them
even when grief follows us around all day
and climbs into bed with us at evening
we want to deny it

i have loved my grief
and held it to myself
as if it were special
as if it might be what made me special
but everyone's father dies sometime
and everyone's mother refuses something essential
everyone's children leave too soon
and everyone finally walks out some night alone

after I left you this morning
a happiness settled down in me
the brown summer hills laughed with me
and I wondered if all happiness
is the same happiness

life comes to us so slowly
we can hardly see it
it is ordinary like water
every day we drink riches beyond imagining

today I drink with a simple happiness
loving you and myself and everybody's grief
including my own
which we insist on bringing with us
everywhere we go
the survivor is not proud
her shame lives inside her
a permanent guest
the only one who never goes away

the survivor takes long walks
through her own defiled mind
it is always raining there
there are streets full of plague
and back alleys where rats' eyes gleam

the survivor eats hungrily
all fruits of the dead
all other food refuses to pass
through her practiced teeth
the simple everyday bread of life
honey of happiness
becomes indigestible

she is afraid of joy
watch what happens when it knocks on her door
a jaunty woman with a beautiful face
the survivor backs into a corner
and trembles
she looks around for the faces of the dead
and listens for their warning voices

the survivor never wanted to be alone
yes, she loved the sunlight on her face
and took solitary walks
looking for God
but she wanted always someone to come back to
she did not want such a large space for herself

the survivor doesn't know why
doesn't know why
doesn't know why
the ship wrecked
the house burned down
the town was buried by mud
the car crashed
the family died
the world blew up
(and only she was saved)

she tries to explain it to herself
accidents, she says
the non-malignity of fate, she insists
the necessary will to survive, she calls up
but the only sound she can hear
is the sound of feet, walking away
always away
doors close shut
the earth over graves is weighty
lovers take on the muteness of Sundays

there is a small girl
crying in the woods

the survivor is not proud
she thinks she is supposed to tell about it

but when she opens her mouth
everyone runs away
THE WATER LEAPS
What She Said

she said warning! warning! 
do not

do not fall in love with me
i am not who you think i am

i will promise you everything
then disappear

notice my teeth against your skin
they can be sharper than you imagine
or could want

do not come too close

warning:
i am nobody's mate
i cannot move into your soul
do not

i feel i should warn you
she said
these are some limits
i am not really a lesbian
i may leave you at any time
for the arms of a man

when you make love to me
sometimes i feel insubstantial
next to you
like air i must keep moving on
do not fall in love with me
she said
i am warning you

later, do not blame me
it will not be my fault

and then she said
come here come here

and i came
Tenderly

tenderly you rendered my body helpless under your hands

open you said
with bright and colorful fingers and i opened into rainbow

and falling
i forgot to watch for shadows and the corners of the room i forgot my name

tenderly you entered places inside me forbidden and mysterious

what did you find there waiting for you?

when morning came your hand reached for me my body knew your hand and went with it

all day long i have been lost in a shimmering so deep everything vibrates

this music only my heart can hear i am all ear now
Before Bed  The Water Leaps

my hand reaches under the tap
to scoop up a handful of water
it contains everything
the love we made last weekend
and my daughter’s voice
talking to herself in the next room
it holds gently the way the sky looked today
and how my friend turned her wedding rings
around her arthritic hand
as we listened to a blind man play
a song from her youth
the water also carries my own mother’s life
and death
and it vibrates with my dead father’s laugh

how this water slides down my throat
insisting I acknowledge for once
everything together
did I have a thirst for less than this?
i am gifted anyway with a taste for the ineffable
the water only a moment ago secure in my palm
leaps into this poem

now I will close my eyes and sleep
i will dream of an animal which looks back at me
she has wet and luminous eyes
when she closes her eyes she too will dream

i awaken thirsty
forgetful
everything has come apart

now I will begin again
This Feeling

this feeling of being underwater
all blue and green under the eyelids
this feeling of moving through something
powerful and wet
of moving into new space

down deeper under the wave
catch me! catch me!

and the wave rising and falling
lifting me up
and then falling

this feeling of being underwater

when you touch me now
anywhere on my body
a space inside me opens
i am the color blue
oceanic and tidal i lift to you
from my deepest edge
and can feel the storms
stored and breaking
in your many-fingered hands

my body remembers now
a life underwater
a life of fishes pink coral
mysteries beyond language
majestic slidings into wet and wide open spaces
when you touch me now
the sea rises inside me
like a woman just coming into her power
dancing on the edge a whirlpool
dangerous and daring

i can taste now the fishes
falling
from your beautiful mouth rainbow
salt on my tongue

and i am filled
with the music
of deep water
Edges: A Metaphor

the water jug was not empty
but the water was down very deep
no one wanted to look there

your small brown hands
traced relentlessly
the curved outside edge
until your hands and the clay married

and the water rose up
rose to the top of the jug

when you tasted that water
you smiled

2
the water leaps out to you
while the jug moving around your hands
enters you through your faraway eyes

come close! come close! it tells you
the blue sky of your eyes
is a thirst
like the thirst of the jug
for emptying

3
wild running water
cannot be contained

reckless leaping and dancing
dissolving all boundaries
everything you touch
changes a little

4
now the clay of your fingers
opens
now the fields behind your eyes
ignite
now it is raining through the deepest drought
now you open me

5
hands fly water sings jug dances
eye and sky become sisters
this tree sends its voice
to root under our skin

there are no more edges
The Turtle

the blind turtle wades
slowly
through dead leaves
all around the house she moves
slowly like a Sunday afternoon
on ancient turtle feet

your hands move through me
as if you were scooping up water
notice how pieces of me are left
around your mouth
drops of water for your tongue to find

my eyes wander
all around the house of your body
where the wounds are hidden deep
my mouth plants flowers
and a prayer to end all woundings

how can you touch me like this
while a turtle moves so slowly
around this house

today the sun is shining
there are no wars in either of our neighborhoods
and our children are safe for a while

take me now
while the turtle
moves slowly
gathering her strength
notice in my own reptile eyes
a long wave building
it will carry us far across the longing sky
before this day dies
Lesbian Bears

here they have not heard of lesbian bears
if they knew they would be afraid
they would form a vigilante party
to hunt wild perverse bear in the mountains

at night while they slept
they would dream of unnatural acts
in brown fur
sleeping in the open a female bear would come
wrapping her lustful arms around the bodies
of all the women
then they too would be lost
is this where lesbians come from?

i have seen lesbian plums which cling to each other
in the tightest of monogamous love
and i have watched lesbian pumpkins
declare the whole patch their playground
profligate and dusky their voices arouse
something in us which is laughing

ah, everything is lesbian which loves itself
i am lesbian when i really look in the mirror
the world is lesbian in the morning and the evening
only in mid-afternoon does it try to pretend otherwise

and when the lesbian wind flutters the leaves
of the bright lesbian trees
golden shudders of delight in the lesbian light
the sound which returns to you
is only an echo of your own lesbian nature

admit it you too would like to love yourself
and each other
now while the vigilantes
are wandering in the mountains
now is the perfect time

embrace the nearest to you woman or child
apricot, salmon, artichoke, cow

embrace yourself
Cave Of Tree

cave of tree we found
inside smooth
where it was not charred
i leant
my whole body against
against the dark edge, leant

wanting to lean into and become the sharp quick flesh of wood

words, words flew into the sky
my mouth itself a cave of silence and the deep

closer to me you moved

do not touch, i should have said
do not pass through my boundary here
in this secret place

but i could not speak
and you read beyond the look in my eyes
you moved closer, your hand, oh your hand touching me there
even now i can feel
the loosening of all
bonds

you touched me and we fell
earth so substantial slipping into all soft yieldings
fell deep through centuries
  you touched me and now
  we are tree inside of tree

what grows between the two of us
at night
is visible only, only
to luminous mushrooms and the wide sword ferns
keeping watch

invisible, the past winds itself around us
inside us, between us, we remember everything here
in sunlight we are ordinary women
we walk down ordinary streets
grey faces float above the sidewalks

when you reach for me
under the dark
a whole forest stands quiet for a moment
and then shudders its way
into our future

the sound falling from a long place away
brings us back, brings us back
to this cave,
of tree,
begin now to grow toward the sky
THE DROWNED GIRL NOW RISES
Deepen: A Mystery

One: The Phone Call

your voice came through the wire
like the snow in your hair
the first time we met
a clue, a secret, a season
to enter into or to refute

Two: The Critic

what is this, so unforgiving in you?
this mr. fault-finder
this Uncle Critical
his hand is in the pocket of your mind
filthy and pornographic
aren't you tired of his sleazy hands
tearing apart your loveliest flowers?

why do you let him embrace your sweetest lovers?
Deepen: A Mystery
The Test Question

SHOW ME THE WAYS IN WHICH NIGHT-CREATURES CAN BE SAID TO "DEEPEN."

One: When night enters through their mouths, they drink the stars and the long yearning of humans for salt.

Two: At night, by the water, everything falls into a dark well. Night creatures fall the deepest.

Three: History has lost the language of the night. Meanwhile, every evening, animals and fishes perfect it, season upon season.

(When you touched in my most sacred places i fell into a deep dark well. Fishes swam in and out of my mouth. I gave myself to deepening, and became a river of light, night-creature, out of season and surface, always falling...)

Is this a correct answer?
secrets:
we are filled with secrets

nothing you know can match
what we refuse to acknowledge

i want always to be lost under you
under your cave mouth, full of malice
my own will open to the light

i have made a contract with rivers of pain
i have promised not to reveal
i have fled when no one was looking
(no one was ever looking)
i have promised my voice to history
and hidden my true face

secret: i gave you the way to my sorrow
because your face burned an emptiness
inside me
under a shower of water i became water

although i will never know who i am to you
your face crouches still
in my sorrow place
The Drowned Girl Now Rises

One

she does not request the blow
and she does not invite it
yet once received
she becomes
the victim
heir to a future and a past
of injuries
maltreatments
misconceptions

now she has to step
into victim-clothes
even at the very moment
the hand comes down
the law forces down

she becomes the acted upon
object of
terrorist action
the cruel tongue
the brutal hand
the mouth which deceives
the drunken mind

she does not want to submit
she does not want to submit
she does not want to submit:

this is the worst conspiracy
the wound which insists on naming itself friend
the crime that climbs, parasitic, into the heart of the will
the hand which maims
year after year
over and over again
though she surrounds herself with silence

the days are covered with blame
the weeks become charts of obsession
the months turn against her
the years deceive
until she is layered in victim-skin
when she looks in the mirror
nobody smiles back
except the face which belongs to the hand
the hand that wields the blow
it is always just before the dark falls

Two

the drowned girl
now rises

she is not pretty
she does not make promises
a deep water smell clings to her
you do not want to come too close

the drowned girl
now rises

who runs away?
whose heart fills with dread?
who turns her face away forever?
who breaks the mirror of her life
    and then steps carefully over the glass?

the drowned girl
now rises
she is lifting, lifting
lifting herself above the deep
above the stark and drowning sea
she is finding herself on land
breathing her own air
she is here to stay

the drowned girl
now she rises:
she is too old, too old
she is younger than morning
her eyes grab the day
night falls immediately
her mouth terrifies
her hands are not gentle

Three

the drowned girl all that time ago
do you remember?
so long ago now
she looked once quickly and then fell
forever falling

(how you wanted her, fear her, longed for her,
dreaded her, loved her, hated her, thought about her,
forgot her, desired her, desexed her, tried to eliminate her
no longer matters)

the drowned girl now rises
what rises with her
is beautiful and small and dangerous

she is rising
now!
split into pieces  
we are halved and doubled  
we were once whole in ourselves  
now you walk through my world  
carrying your stiletto  
your teeth grind  
you snarl  
you are not friendly to my enemies

i sit quietly by water  
dream of Tibetan wisdom  
not even Buddha can match  
my quiet joy  
my body is solid on the earth  
as i lift my spirit to meet  
the spirits of the sky

you lock our door at night  
i am afraid of what you do to us  
when i am not looking

Five  
Promise

i am no stranger to violence  
although you would like me to keep silent  
my knife is in my hand  
my teeth are sharpened and ready  
my tongue is more dangerous than any weapon  
i will have my revenge  
while you sit quietly speaking to God
(the waters rise
the earth begins to move
what is not seen moves toward the light)

Six
The Drowned Wings

she may not be pretty
she may not be able to dance
or write poems

on her back she will wear
great black wings
wings which have never flown
never felt the freedom of flight
the way the air feels
at a certain height
the drowned wings have a scent of ruin
desolation stormy days a smell of shame

i want the wings to be able to lift
to lift up skyward
but they are weighed down with grief

Seven
What The Sea Brings With It

finally we must love ourselves
the pieces of ourselves, bitter and torn,
which rage in corners
we must love the ones we have destroyed
and also those who have destroyed us
hatred imprisons the heart
i did not request the blow
the drowned girl now rises
we are split into pieces
i am no stranger to violence
once there was a child
once there were many children
i grow older
the drowned wings come with me
when i see a bird now i almost always cry

i did not request the blow
i am no stranger to violence
once there was a child
always too heavy

the drowned girl
now rises
WORKS CITED


Brant, Beth. Ed. *A Gathering of Spirit*. Iowa City: Sinister Wisdom,
1983.


Daly, Mary. Address. Lesbian and Literature Panel. Modern Language


Morrow, 1981.

Foster, Jeanette. *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. Baltimore: Diana


1978.

Grier, Barbara. *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography*. Tallahassee:


