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I: Lesbian

Carolyn Gammon

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Magisteriate in Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

February 1989

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ABSTRACT

I:Lesbian is a collection of poetry informed by lesbian feminist critical theory. It crosses genres by integrating historical fact, the epistolary, prose, and visual effect. It explores the issues of sexism and heterosexism. It reconstructs a rich lesbian poetic tradition by paying femmage to those poets who have been obscured or misrepresented by the male canon. It examines "Man Made" language even while using this language.

The collection begins by chronicling my biological origins and the particular personal oppression faced by lesbians within the dysfunctional nuclear family. It moves on to promote political action versus personal re-action. I then bring to life my new self-chosen "family": authors, scholars, old friends, lovers and the gay male community. One section documents lesbian relationships struggling with hetero-marriage models; another focuses explicitly on the female body. The last celebrates the erotic in lesbian terms.

The collection as a whole challenges the poetic genre in both form and content.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Bina and Robert, many thanks for taking on this project and seeing it through.

To Ina, for her endless cuddles of encouragement and the inspiration for some of my best lines.

To the Lesbian Studies Coalition of Concordia whose continued presence on campus has supported my work and given it a context.

To Hypatia*, my personal computer.

* 5th century philosopher, victim of Christian persecution of intellectual women. She was killed en route to the academy by a gang of monks, stripped, and the flesh scraped from her bones with oyster shells on the order of St. Cyril who attained sainthood in 1882. (The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets)

DEDICATION

For my parents,
Frances and Donald,
who thought higher education was a good thing.

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INTRODUCTION

I:Lesbian is a collection of poetry which is informed by lesbian feminist perspectives. These systems of value and critical thought, being both political and personal, address much of human experience--much of literature. Such an approach to reading and writing poetry, grounded in current feminist literary theory, will help to uncover meanings in women's texts which may have been previously ignored. It will also enable me to write an imaginative and uninhibited poetry, based in lesbian experience, a project I might not have undertaken without these critical tools. Following, I will briefly outline why I have chosen this approach.

Within the past twenty years, feminist scholarship has critiqued and influenced the sciences, social sciences, history, religion, literature ... virtually all aspects of learning. A feminist perspective has been used to revise what were previously considered 'universals' in thought and theory but were, in reality, those constructed by men. It has brought women's experience and contributions to society and culture to bear on traditions that have silenced or marginalized women.

The tradition of literary criticism is an example of an academic discipline which has denied woman a voice. It has

been dominated by male writers, editors, publishers and anthologizers. This has severely limited the accessibility of literature by any woman except a few established "greats" and effectively placed a male filter on subject matter. Feminist literary criticism and specifically a feminist deconstructive criticism has revealed classist, sexist, heterosexist, racist, etc. biases in works by both women and men.

Literature is "ideologically complicit," it "does more than transmit ideology, it actually creates it."¹ Feminists have long since shattered the myth of the 'value free' artist or the separation of art and politics. Behind every artist, writer, poet, there is an upbringing, a set of experiences and values that become the fabric of the artist's output. In the past few decades the New Criticism has effectively taught readers to ignore these givens, not to look beyond a work, not to criticize for content but for form. Supposedly, an aesthetic ideal exists into which 'good writing' automatically drops given a certain word combination, metaphoric play or expression of 'universal' concerns. A feminist literary critic might ask why, coincidentally, white middle class male poets have been 'good' all these years? "Aesthetic judgments are historically relative and also deeply saturated in political

¹Greene and Kahn, "Feminist scholarship and the social construction of women" in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, p. 5.

value judgments."² To understand and break the myth of raceless, classless, genderless criticism, is one of the first steps in reclaiming writers who have not so much been 'lost' as deliberately buried in the process of establishing the English literary canon as it is taught in universities today.

The task of exposing the injustices and imbalances of traditional literary criticism has been ardently pursued by many feminist critics in the past fifteen years (see Bibliography). A second task is to recover literary works by women who were abandoned by the male canonizing process. Again, such work has been extensively carried out and I now have available to me a tradition of women's writing that runs chronologically parallel to, but often differs in subject matter and ideology from the male tradition. Where New Criticism stressed ignoring historical evidence in favour of textual, feminist criticism encourages a critic to "read the silences"³, to consider birth records, wills, letters, diaries, autobiographical fragments, as well as the text. Traditional literary criticism has set theory above experience; feminist critics recognize the importance of personal experience in shaping critical thought. The male canon has been used as a means of exclusion whereas feminist

²Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 84.

³Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously," (1979) On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, p. 245.

critics have tried to establish a 'canon' which is inclusive and representative of all women.

Elaine Showalter has called "gynocriticism"--"the history of styles, themes, genres and structures of writing by women."⁴ Women's texts must be studied in relation to their cultural context, to the women themselves in their social roles--why they wrote, for whom, and they must be studied in relation to other women's texts and not to a male standard. Where Showalter stops short by wanting a revolution in critical thought without changing the language, French feminists have passed on the baton. Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray⁵ among others, have critiqued the foundations of a phallogocentric discourse which denies women even a pen.⁶ In English, Virginia Woolf attempted to articulate this when she spoke of a "sentence made by men."⁷ Dale Spender picked up the charge with a detailed analysis of the Man Made Language women writers are burdened with.

Gynocriticism, by exposing the myth of a genderless writer judged by 'universal' standards, is a stepping stone to gender criticism which deconstructs the woman/man

⁴"Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979) in Mary Jacobus, Women Writing and Writing about Women, pp. 22-41.

⁵See New French Feminisms.

⁶Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa (1976) in New French Feminisms, p. 253.

⁷"Women and Fiction" (1929) in Women and Writing, p. 50.

opposition so engrained in our culture and literature ?#5%
 ?^\$&^%@^%\$&%(&&^%\$#\$@797!!#&*&^%\$#!\$#@\$#&%\$&^(_*()*(&^*^%\$-
 4654* &^*69879756# \$#@#\$&^* & ()%65%6* &^089)(%# \$#!@#%^(* & ? " : > -
 < } { < & ^

* & ^ \$ % * ^ I interrupt this introduction to bring you the
 following thought: that, linear, beginning-middle-end
 sentences and paragraphs fraught with specialized jargon and
 footnotes, devoid of personal content, are suspiciously
 Western, masculine, academic constructs *(%&*)^%&*& (&^
 *^%\$ \$ # % ^ * & * () (% & & ^ % > > Although some of my favorite
 aforementioned feminist literary critics revel in this
 stuff, *(% ^ 7 * & ^ I am personally and politically unable
 to } ^ & (* & ^ % tolerate it further. As a decon-

structive

poet, committed to undoing such constructs which I've
 instinctively fought against my entire academic career, I
 *(& \$ * & * () (* & ^ will lean on their wisdom but modify their
 method of instruction and now fall into an expressive mode
 which more accurately represents my work.

These cross-genre, essay-prose-poem pieces integrate
 feminist reflexion with the experiential. They are exemplary
 of the difficulties and tensions that arise in questioning
 old traditions or old language and the inspiration that
 results in looking for alternatives.

* * *

When Jane Rule recently spoke at Concordia
 she said it was when she accepted being a fool

(having been an unpublished lesbian writing for 13 years)
that she could consider herself a writer

I don't have an ISBN #
I have yet to put in 13 years
but I will accept a fool's status
with my lesbian/feminist/socialist what-have-you
perspectives

I will foolishly write what I want
and recognize that that is what I am doing

* * *

In the Random House I looked up
clitoris: homologous to the penis of the male
(my mother gave me this dictionary as a gift?)
I looked up
female: a human being of the sex that conceives and bears
young
I'll never be female?

Do I burn my dictionary and suffer misspellings?
Go out and buy a new non-sexist version --
will I find it at the Bay?

I might write in appropriate jargon(*&^%(&*(*PHallocentrism
is embodied in linguistics(*&)&^(&^%\$#

but instead I imagine
a female writer pinballing through her 'mother tongue',
bumpering off obstacles: paper penises, generic he's--
red lights flash
she gambles
and gamblers often lose

* * *

If "the rational exposure of false beliefs alone will not
undo the patriarchy"

then, perhaps poetry is particularly suited to the task

It can lure and metaphor readers to their own
de(con)struction

And if poetry doesn't work
there's always: self-help clinics
women only events
lesbian lands
the barricades

I'll let you know

* * *

I want to be a poet

No Carolyn, you want to write poetry

* * *

I want: conservation of word and image
accuracy in naming
fresh ideas and expressions

I want: to change the world
fight women's oppression
my work to be relevant
to the Nicaraguan literacy brigadista

And I have yet to learn the merge function on the word processor

* * *

Do I risk voyeurism when I write cunt?
Is self-revelation poetically messy?
Are some words beyond reclaiming?
Whose language am I prey to? Dale Spender's Man Made one?
What is erotic? what crude?
Is it possible, in a sexually repressed society, to write erotically?

During my first public poetry reading (I later learned) a woman got up and left saying "Lesbians don't fuck"

During my class poetry presentation a student said "I wondered what she looked like above the neck"

Me?

I? wrote my lover into a sum of her body parts!?

When are words mine?

When are they too stripped of my meaning to be of any use?

Can women fuck and remain women?

Is fucking an academic concern? political?

What do I risk

risk

risk

* * *

Write male they told Virginia
 Write rich they told Audre
 Write white they told Alice
 Write straight they told Carolyn
 but
 like Adrienne and Judy and Olga and Jane and Cam
 she decided
 not to

* * *

"The critical community sets theory above experience in its
 claim to dominance"

If I can't
 spend an afternoon making vulvic love
 march in Washington with 650,000 for Lesbian and Gay Rights
 dress up as a Masked Zucchini on Halloween, to reclaim
 vegetables from the phallic

If I can't
 read How to Stay Out of Your Gynecologist's Office
 rather than A Reader's Guide to 'Ecrits'
 especially when my recent bout of vaginitis seems more
 pressing than Lacan

If I can't dance
 I don't want to be a part of your "critical community"

And
 if there is a "dominance" to be claimed
 I claim it for experience

* * *

Sitting in a tree in Washington
 inspired to tears by hundreds of thousands of gays and
 lesbians
 marching, holding hands, commemorating their friends dead
 from AIDS
 moved by the spectacle even while considering the theory:

How a mass gay marriage reeks of privilege snatching from a
 bankrupt tradition

How applauding Jesse Jackson's:
 "Today I stand with you, on election day you stand with me"
 is a waste of hope, a substitute for action

How every person there with AIDS is being killed
 as effectively as Contras kill Nicaraguans

Sitting in a tree in Washington
 when is an experience not a theory?
 when is theory not a poem?

* * *

"Literary works can and should be criticized for having
 selected and shaped their fictional universes according to
 oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions"

You mean, I can and should care if Pound was a fascist?
 and Marx abandoned his family and Lawrence was misogynist
 I can even put down the book?

In the Creative Writing Seminar ...

Your poem is offensive to me
 You have written man as generic and thought you'd get away
 with a capital M
 You have portrayed a woman as a non-entity
 You have used the word rape lightly
 You have assumed the reader's heterosexuality

Your poem is objectionable

* * *

When I indicated the 'nature' of my lesbian/feminist project
 the program director asked: "Are you sure you want to limit
 yourself like that?"

(A poem about a tree is universal
 A poem about a lesbian is limited
 Learn Carolyn learn)

"Oh, of course not," I said
 "I'll write instead from the perspective of a bonsai
 with its roots and branches wired and strangled"
 And he offered me a \$10,000 Fellowship

"There are no women on faculty," I said
 "There aren't?" the reply

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those members
 of my department who have provided me with ongoing
 resistance

It has fed my poetry as only gasoline could a flame

* * *

Said the Creative Writing professor
 "Any such poetry is bound to have a limited audience"

Half-truth taken as whole

Please professor

don't just tell us what is "bound" to be
tell us

- how the public have been handed blinkers at the theater
doors

- how readers have been issued opaque glasses at the library
turnstyles

- how writers' works have been pre-washed by self-
censorship, fabric softened by publication, rinsed through
anthologizing, all to reach their "unlimited" audience

Please professor

tell us more than half the truth

or I'll tell you

*

*

*

I'd like to tell a story
a true story
you know, one of those,
'it happened here'

A story about _____

She returned to school after twenty years of servitude to a
man and family A mature student So mature that when she
was taken into a professor's office to discuss a paper, he
saw fit to handle her sexually

By another male professor she was told that her feminist
work on a woman writer was irrelevant and worthless, that,
in fact, her writing was worthless and she shouldn't bother
trying at all ...

She did not write for two years after

This is the power of silencing
this is how it is done

It is chance

if some fires are fed and others quenched by the same
tactics

it is happening

on the right support at the right time

it is having read Adrienne Rich before being told my work
was "limited"

it is that someone listens when the silence breaks

"he sexually harrassed me" "there are no lesbian texts"

"there are no women on staff"

and too many fires go out

* * *

If Shakespeare had a baby sister
". . . was she bitter, was she sweet"

Lesbian Poets I will conjure

Sappho "when she comes home from exile"

Sister G. who wrote to Sister A. in 1200 A.D.:

"how with tender words you caressed my little breasts"

Courtesan Ch'ing Lin to her beloved Wu Tsao in 19th century
China:

"I want to possess you completely

Your jade body

And your promised heart"

Emily D. to her lover Kate:

"Ourselves were wed one summer -- dear --"

H.D., Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell

Judy Grahn:

"The common woman is as common

as a rattlesnake"

Adrienne Rich:

"Your travelled, generous thighs

between which my whole face has come and come"

Audre Lorde, Olga Broumas, Cheryl Clarke, Marilyn Hacker:

"desire ticked over like a metronome"

and Canada's own Anne Cameron

I am the knife

I am the mound

I am the orb

I am the wand

I dyke

* * *

and so

and so

I will:

continue to slander the myth of the value free artist

practice gynocriticism, preach gender analysis

read the silences

favour experience over theory

write (de)constructive poetry

scrutinize my language for patriarchal hangovers

reincarnate those women writers I've missed all my life

include race, class, gender and sexual preference

as critical tools
refuse ever and ever to be considered marginal

type the word lesbian so many times
that my disk overflows
and I will dwell in the house of the Goddess
forever

NOTES

If source appears in bibliography, abbreviated reference will be given.

- P. 6 "paper penis"--Helene Cixous: "the act of writing is equivalent to masculine masturbation (and so the woman who writes cuts herself out a paper penis)" in "Le Rire de la Meduse" L'Arc, 61. Trans. as "The laugh of the Medusa" in New French Feminisms, p. 253.
- P. 6 If "the rational exposure of false beliefs alone ..."
Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 20.
- P. 7 Adrienne Rich re claiming an education:
"Claiming an Education" (1977) in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence.
- P. 7 Derrida re no essential meaning to words:
In Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 10.
- P. 7 Virginia Woolf re a sexual sentence:
"Women and Fiction" (1929) in Women and Writing.
- P. 7 Helene Cixous re a sexual sentence:
"The Laugh of the Medusa" in New French Feminisms.
- P. 9 Write male they told ... etc.:
Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker
Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas, Jane Rule,
Anne Cameron
- P. 9 The "critical community sets theory above experience"
Sydney Janet Kaplan, "Varieties of Feminist
Criticism" in Making a Difference.
- P. 9 How to Stay Out of Your Gynecologist's Office:
Carol Donner, Rebecca Chalker, Lorraine Rothmen (eds),
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- P. 9 Lacan and Language: A Reader's Guide to Ecrits John
P. Muller (New York: International Universities
Press, 1982).
- P. 9 "If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your
revolution" -- Emma Goldman
- P. 10 "Literary works can and should be criticized ..."
Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 45.

P. 11 "Half-truth taken as whole" from Coleridge 1838:
 "The most mischievious errors on record ... [have
 been] half-truths taken as whole"

P. 12 "If Jesus had a baby sister
 was she bitter, was she sweet"
 From Heather Bishop's album Celebration

P. 12 Lesbian poets I will conjure:

Sappho - from [It was you, Atthis, who said] #43 in
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A bit of herstory

for Mary and Kim

And over and over
and over the round earth
women are
falling sideways
into bed, they are
sliding arms about waists
in the subways, they are
propped against the vine-covered walls
of the schoolyard, they are
two to a toilet stall, they are
touching knees
under the family gathering table

Women are
greeting and parting in custom
but with lingering lips, they are
braiding each other's hair, they are
playing toes between legs
on the shared rug, they are
long in returning from the well

Women are
struggling side by side
behind oxen, they are
weaving on one loom, they are
stooped between rows of corn, they are
entwining fingers
beneath the shallow water
of rice paddies, they are
loading each other's arms
with wood, they are
beating bright clothes
on the rocks, they are
seated by the blast furnace
sharing lunch

Women are
curled under that jacket
on the train, they are
stroking hands, thighs
through prison bars, they are
passing eyes
across a dark room, they are
separating
as the elevator door opens

Women are
exchanging vows
kneeled side by side
in prayer, they are
bent gathering violets
in the distant field, they are
soaping one another
in the gang shower
after the game, they are
strolling arm in arm
instead of carrying canes, they are
checking their make-up
during the office party, they are
crouched with guns
behind the barricade, they are
tucking children into bed

Women are
swinging
in the same hammock, they are
cuddled
seven to a communal mat, they are
keeping warm
under the caribou hide, they are
yawning and reaching to one another
as the days begin

Women are
and they always have
and they always will

I

Lesbian and Family

This woman is a lesbian, be careful

Judy Grahn

This section chronicles my biological origins. By the very personal (direct address) style of most of these poems, I am hopefully giving voice to the daily personal struggles that most lesbians face within a society made up of dysfunctional nuclear families. I position this section at the beginning of the collection for the classic "where I come from " approach but also as a gesture of "getting it over with"--leaving room to move on.

The Unaffectionate Gammons

All our lives
we were taught
not to "demonstrate affection"

not to hold hands
not to touch
not to kiss
ESPECIALLY in "public"

Hugs were for
greetings and partings

Hands were held
for crossing the street

Tears were for
coffins being lowered

And you Grannie
were the matriarch, residing over
these family rules of affection

For you, affection meant
dough-boys in the chicken stew
the warm smell of yeasty rolls
fresh salmon, salt cod fish cakes
that extra piece of strawberry-rhubarb pie

The way you loved a good game of crib
(except on Sundays) or playing 45's
with Sadie, Annie and the girls
the flowered deck worn thin

We never touched
we chatted a teacup away
We never held hands
we played a good hand of crib
We never kissed
though the hugs lingered
as you grew older

* * *

Now, you're ninety-nine
I go to see you in the hospital

Your arms are not flailed
to greet me

There will be no parting hug
or wave, with double hands
flipping from the wrists

I sit beside you
from the first moment
I take your hand
cool, tissue-soft

I hold it
I caress it

I compare your blue bulged veins
to my green flatter ones

I fondle the plain gold ring
worn 79 years
which now twists easily
to rest on your large arthritic joint

I remember
how your hands
so deftly folded
two halves of a deck
how they carried a late breakfast tray
to two lazy granddaughters in bed
how the tea slopped like an angry sea
as your hands
wrapped round the never-full mug
shook with goiter

Your hands
are the only part of you
I fully recognize

They've removed your teeth
and your tongue is too swollen
to talk or swallow

"Do you know who I am Grannie?"

"Yaaa"

Good
Then I'll tell you
about all the poems I've written
from stories you've told me
And I'll tell you
how you used to recite
long long verses from Hiawatha

and one called "After the Ball"
And I'll tell you
how strong your hands are
still
strong, milking hands

"Yaaa"

And I'll tell you

but I'm not sure
you're hearing me Grannie
and your unchanging pupils
tell me you're not seeing me

So I'll just hold your hand
and press it
and hold it
and cry when your fingertips
gently press my palm

And I'd like to
clamber past the bar on the bed
wrap you in my arms
like a teddy
but that's really not in the family rules
and the nurse just might come in
but let's pretend we did it Grannie

Let's pretend
together
we broke the Gammon rules

Overseas Funeral

Your father has died

"I would come with you
but it isn't the time"

I say

I see us at Heathrow
the smiles and embracing
you push me forward
proudly as always
holding my hand, saying
"This is my lover, Carolyn"

I see the tactile offense
etched on their faces
as they tactfully back up
maybe offering a fingertip
or two ... I hear them think
"As if a death isn't enough"

At the funeral parlour
you and me standing near the open casket
arm around waist
and no one approaching
the corpse, or us

The ceremony
family files to the front pew
husbands, wives seated somberly together
and us, during head-bowed prayers,
snatching glances across the church

Who will ride with the hearse?
What if you insist
and there ensues a loud Cockney row
in the parking lot?
caps flung
roses trampled

At the graveside
where would we stand?
Could we hold hands
to comfort?

It is the time
I want you to come
We should be together now

Yes, maybe you're right ...

Maybe they would greet us
with open arms and, if we hadn't eaten on the plane,
beans on toast and tea
there'd always be that extra space
at the edge of the pew
or tucked on your lap beside the driver in the hearse
Maybe they would need some extra hands
to carry bouquets to the cemetery
and there'd be a stool in the kitchen after
for sandwiches and chat

It is the time

but your salt and pepper hair
and blue union jacket
have disappeared behind security
I'm sitting on a bench
wanting to pull that plane back
out of the air

and say Yes, it is the time

but the plane has left

One poem to avoid another

for Jennifer

Two women
biologically sisters

whose red hair
when we're together
blazons our sisterhood

whose voices are so much alike
we fool friends
even our mother, on the phone

sisters who have learned to swim
in the same waves, been beaten
by the same leather strap
recited the same prayers
to Grannie upstairs
counselled beneath the same blanket-house
over the hot air register
climbed the same sticky sap pines

Two girls grown
one lesbian
one married to a man

Can we find
a common ground?

* * *

When you visit
my lesbian space

Large mauve vulvic flowers
of Georgia O'Keefe poster my bedroom wall
Lounging brown nudes poster Ina's
Hello-you-cute-cunt messages
tacked to the bulletin board
Dykes to Watch Out For
on the back of the flush
The music of Phranc, Lucie "Blue"
or Casselberry-Dupr e

When you visit this space
where few men come
your husband may enter
I will not ask
that your wedding rings
be left in a jar by the door

When I enter
your married space

Ring the doorbell
that no longer bears our shared name
Family photos framed
in the master bedroom
The baby's album
at afternoon tea
A bicycle-built-for-two
raised seat and handlebars up front

When I enter this space
where few dykes go
I will not shrug off
my lesbianism like a coat
to be hung in the closet

* * *

Eric will soon be one
he will soon be two, three, four
he will soon be aware
that this visiting aunt
shares her life with women

So I write now
to let you know

I will send amazon alphabets
or picture books which show
two daddies, three mummies
I will say the "L" word
in his presence
And I will be with my lover
as I always am
evident, intimate
in front of his asking eyes

Let's decide in advance
Let's not wait for
a scene
when I'm four thousand miles
from home

We have a chance
one of those small
personal decisions
that create a society

shall we find
a common ground?

To Lois, friend of fourteen years

I am outraged
 though you'll not see this raw angry woman
 I won't arrive at your door with an acid tongue
 I won't send letter bombs

we'll probably exchange
 civil correspondence
 after time has sifted my anger
 to a dust so fine
 you might only sneeze on it

but I am outraged

Through the years
 I thought I'd made the necessary adjustments
 dropped friends I had to
 separated past from present
 like a yolk from the white
 leaving me only family back home

and you

who say you value our friendship
 a friendship so full and magnanimous
 it leaves you room to ask me
 not to hold hands with my lover
 on your Island roads

We did not FUCK
 in front of you
 or your family
 or your friends
 We did not strip on your front lawn
 we did not neck, slobber, rub cunts
 or even
 kiss
 (as you and your husband did
 in front of us
 on the open ferry road)

We did not
 bring placards, megaphones
 We did not
 spraypaint women's symbols on the dock
 We did not
 compare clams to vulvas at the supper table

We held hands Lois
 held hands

* * *

I know Lois, I know
 you are not of the Island
 even living there now
 the rest of your life
 raising kids
 playing the church organ
 waving to every car that passes
 hauling fish from the weir
 even then
 you will never be an Islander

But your commitment is clear
 and chosen

How, are we threatening you?
 Are we so powerful?

* * *

We've been friends
 fourteen years
 agreed all our mutual influences
 our coaches, idols,
 our crushes
 all all all
 were lesbian
 are lesbian still

You have said
 you could have
 gone either way

Then
 in six months
 you find a man
 and God
 dip into the gelid Island water
 and come out
 born again
 better than me

Your fine judgmental God
 your fucking Bible
 where only procreative fucking is fine

You chose by a pill
 when to have a child
 was sex good then Lois?
 And what about Christ

did he have sex for kids?
 did he hold hands with his "brothers?"
 was Christ gay, eh?

What about Sodom?
 Why was it written?
 You, with your Ph.D. in sociology
 why is the Bible the only book
 you don't look at "objectively"?

"This is our house"
 "We'll be the gossip of the community"
 "It isn't normal"

Listen Lois
 Listen to your Christian words--
 there you'll find an "abomination to the Lord"

* * *

I'm tired Lois
 tired to disinter this
 once again
 this simple act of holding hands

I visited before with lovers
 we held hands in your living room
 this passed--green light

I thought
 I thought
 at this most basic level
 the borders of respect were drawn
 But a living room is not a lawn
 and a lawn is not an Island road
 and hands joined are not just hands joined
 and gestures of affection are not normal
 in a living room yes
 on a road no
 for you yes
 for us no
 yes
 no
 Lois I'm tired

tired to find myself
 crying on holiday

* * *

Fortunate for me
 the outraged angry woman

comforts the bawling one

You can have
your gay-damned Island

You can have
your stingy invitations
that come with open arms and loopholes

but you can't have my friendship
not on those terms
Lois

Dear Ma, the poem not written

New Brunswick, Summer '87

Miraculously, we find the porch door to my parents' cottage, open. Large drops hassle us inside. We hang the candle lantern from the fishnetting, spread camping mats, light the gas stove. You eat your first lobster, suckle each joint, slather the fine meat in hot garlic butter.

Next day, I bring my brother. You talk philosophy and cameras. I'm glad you get along. Curled into your stomach, I dip in and out of sleep, feel your hands unconsciously tracing my face.

He later asks my mother, "Why does Carolyn get such nice women, and not me?"

Well into the night, when Geoff takes his scotch-soaked mind to bed in the guest tent, we light sparklers and wave electric women's symbols along the beach--feminist fireflies.

We're not too tired to make lobster-scotch-country-sweat-love till night no longer holds us.

At the lake's edge, we watch the sun rise on Palmer's Point, rinsing our laughing, swollen vulvas.

II

Political Lesbian

Everything we write
will be used against us
or against those we love
These are the terms
take them or leave them

Adrienne Rich

"Lesbian Family" and "Political Lesbian" are the two sections which appear most obviously "in reaction to." I want "Political Lesbian" following directly after "Lesbian and Family" to emphasize the connection between "private/personal" family oppression and public oppression. Also, by juxtaposing the two sections, the choice between political action versus personal re-action is highlighted.



Flaming Women

Running, flowing
together
in hot, powerful
charge

Fists forward
screaming
in ceaseless
molten desire

Women
Flaming together
running in fire
loving together

Threat

1 a.m.
phone rings
a death? I think
accident?
my lover who just left?

I pick it up
Hello?
A twisted voice
one word
hard to my ear
"DYKE"
click
dial tone

The receiver hangs in my hand
How--
did that voice
know my number?
Has he watched in windows?
binocular eyes across the street
Has he followed me?
been in the house already
read posters on the wall
taken my number
found keys, made copies?
Will he call again?
grab me in the back alley
as I park my bike
or jump me from behind
the shower curtain ...

I am a scared lesbian

And because of that
fear
that 1 a.m.
one word
spewed across phone lines

Because of that
one beautiful word
charred to an insult

Because of that
one threat
and any
any other

I will never stop
marching in the streets
shouting in front of the courts
churches, schools
I will never stop
holding hands with lovers
on buses, in lobbies
I will never stop
writing to newspapers, politicians
writing for students, for comrades,
for union sisters, for dykes,
for straights, for children
for grandmothers, for lovers

for myself
I will never stop
writing/fighting

po	tical
polit	poet
poetry	politry
politics	poetics
po	tical
po ^e ₁ tical	p ^o _e ₁ tical
poelitical	poli-poe-tical
	po ^o ₁ tical
po	tical
	(political poetry)

EDUCATION

LESSON 1: Aristotle, Generation of Animals
733a 26-30 Adaptation

the male is
as it were
a deformed female

and the semen
is menstrual discharge
though in an impure condition:

i.e.
it lacks one constituent
and one only,

the principle of
blood

LESSON 2: Dictionary

Random House
defines
penis:

the male organ of urination and copulation

Random House
defines
clitoris:

the erectile organ of the vulva
homologous to the penis of the male

Random House
defines
not so randomly at all

LESSON 3: Consideration

Class, let us consider Shakespeare
Fellow Scientists, let us consider Darwin
Americans, let us consider our Forefathers
Brothers, let us consider Jesus
Comrades, let us consider Marx
Mankind, let us consider His-tory

Women, let us consider 'only' Ourselves

CBC 6 o'clock news

A German shepherd has saved the life of a new-born baby in Detroit. The new-born was found in a back alley with the dog curled around it. The dog likely saved the baby's life by keeping it warm.

Where is the woman?
Where is that god-damn-bitch-of-a-woman
who could leave a newborn
in a back alley to die!?

Will she be arrested?
Who has seen her?

Police will ask the neighbours:
- Do you know a pregnant woman?
- Do you know if she is no longer pregnant?
- Do you know where the baby has gone?
Who is the WOMAN?

A few will answer
but some, who have been there,
will not

What was in that woman's head?
Had she tried to abort? Was she out of quinine?
the stairs not steep enough?
the coat-hanger too dull?
Had she first tried to drown the unwanted child?
Did she leave it for already dead?

Will the mother give up?
Will the infant's cry sound like a siren in her head,
its tiny fingered clasp never let her go?
Will she run to another city? another back alley?
This time, her body

When the investigation is over
the dog fed, the baby saved
will anyone think to ask

who is the man?

PMS

Part of half the world's lives
labelled or not, every twenty-eight days

Pre Menstrual Syndrome
not fit for a poem?
the headaches and backaches
bloating and hunger
tears waiting for the right insult

Days of waiting to stain your sheets, your jeans
feeling a flow? no?
Days of false alarms
choosing loose waistbands, dark underwear

Het women praying to the Goddess of menstrual drops
willing them to splash and diffuse red-orange
in the toilet bowl

Your breasts get harder and sore
you hold them when you run downstairs
(if no one's looking)

And some women get really aroused
nature's gift--the urge to fuck
yourself, other women, or fuck
with less threat of pregnancy

Those rash actions, slammed doors or phones
kicking your cat or wanting to
demanding arms around you
broken love affairs
suicides, murders
that can be PMS

so why don't we read more about it?
why isn't it in ballads? the odes?

maybe because it belongs
exclusively
to women

*

*

*

Ode to Wise Blood

Earliest humanity

believed menstrual blood coagulated into new life
 Maoris and Africans thought human souls
 were made of menstrual blood

The Greeks called it "supernatural red wine"
 and the Celts, "red or royal mead"
 One Norse god bathed in a river of menstrual blood
 from the giantesses

The Chinese gained immortality by drinking
 red yin juice
 Egyptian pharaohs deified their dead
 with amulets of our menstrual blood
 In Mycenae, the word for "the people"
 was "mother blood"

The Bible calls it "blood the flower"
 or fruit of the womb
 and Adam means "bloody clay"

Some called it
 wise blood
 moon dew
 elixir of immortality

and the Goddess-given menstrual calendar
 with thirteen annual lunar months
 was established by Chinese women
 three thousand years ago*

*

*

*

That's a lot of history
 to ignore
 every twenty-eight days

Dyke Meets Modern Medicine

STD's
 happen to other people
 to prostitutes and johns
 to dumb hets and gays
 who don't use safes
 They might even happen
 to Napoleon, Meryl Streep
 or the guy down the street

but not to lesbians
 clean, safe-sex dykes
 no cocks
 no sperm
 no bizarre little bacteria
 hidden under penal flaps

So why do I find myself
 in the hospital?
 Five day fever
 burning, runny cunt
 swollen nodes
 pain rolling down my throat
 like an ostrich swallowing

When diagnosed
 the doctor explained
 "It is passed
 from tip of the penis
 directly to the squamo-columnar junction of the cervix"

"Can it be passed,"
 I asked politely
 "From cervix to cervix?"

Her brows furrowed
 she leafed through books
 she thought through ten years of education
 and lastly she taxed her imagination
 all to no avail
 Her medical expertise
 just could not stretch
 from one cervix to another

I did have chlamydia though
 she couldn't deny
 so I left
 with enough drugs
 to keep me going in yeast infections
 for the following year

On reading Sexual Politics

How to explain
to Kate Millett
to myself

while reading
a Norman Mailer extract
where a woman gets fucked
to a pulp

How to explain
while reading
I reached down
into my pants and stroked my clitoris
wet fingers and probed inside

How to explain
I went back to his words
and working faster
jammed my cunt on the corner of the chair--

came gloriously
head on the open book

"The prevailing culture . . .
is saturated with sexuality . . .
that simultaneously
tantalizes and repels."

Thank-you Adrienne Rich

"I don't do SM"

I don't do SM
 because my father made me fetch
 the strap to beat me with
 and I find nothing erotic
 in that

I don't do SM
 because a boot in a face
 is not a sexual matter
 in South Africa

I don't do SM
 because Black women were raped
 for centuries in chains

I don't do SM
 because swastikas
 cannot be reclaimed

I don't do SM
 because I've seen handcuffs
 used on students
 as cops threw them
 down the school steps

I don't do SM
 because when I come
 I want my mouth free to scream

I don't do SM
 because welts and bruises
 are too many women's
 daily diet

I don't do SM
 because

I don't do SM
 but I like a harness and dildo
 I don't do SM
 but I love how a cunt
 can swallow my fist

I don't do SM
 but I do fantasize
 and act it through
 I don't do SM
 but I recognize
 the power play in any sex

I don't do SM
 but I'm thrilled
 by anonymous sex

I don't do SM
 but a double dildo
 makes fine fucking
 cunt to cunt

I don't do SM
 but I may wear leather

I don't do SM
 but I'd take many in bed
 any time

I don't do SM
 but I like to lie
 at my lover's feet
 and eat her from there

I don't do SM
 but

Fucking Dykes

I grew up
 hating
 the word
 lesbian

hating
 the word
 dyke

On the field hockey team
 a friend and teammate
 backed out of an elevator crying
 she'd heard that Mona
 was "one of them"
 and would not risk
 the ride down three floors

On long van trips
 the girls discussed boyfriends
 what contraceptive they used
 and who made noise with whom
 in the next residence room

Though not guilty
 I remained silent

I was so careful
 those words
 were never used
 on me

* * *

Now
 skating
 with my lover
 Parc LaFontaine
 a bright, cold
 snappy day
 laughing, chatting
 hand in hand
 in unison
 we propel our blades
 slantways
 carving sharp golden angles
 on the ice

"FUCKING DYKES"

we are buzzed by
 jolted

"YES!"
 "YES!"
 "THAT'S IT"
 "YOU'VE GOT IT RIGHT!"

and we skate on
 the day
 as bright and cold
 as before

III

Between Lesbians

Our labour has become
more important
than our silence

Audre Lorde

In essence, this section identifies my new, self-chosen "family" by paying femmage to those lesbians and women who have been instrumental in the making of I:Lesbian. From well known authors and scholars to old friends and lovers, these poems are part of the conjuring process I wrote of at the end of the introduction; they are the "dialogue with brave and imaginative women" promised in "A Creative Tradition."

A Creative Tradition

for Kathleen Martindale

I remember looking at The Joy of Lesbian Sex
 for the first time,
 glossy drawings of women
 touching women, intimately
 women enjoying
 other women's bodies
 I remember thinking
 it is okay then . . .

For years it was the only relief I had

Years later, at a university
 I asked to see a feminist
 She had written and published
 and published and written
 but when she said "ho-mo-sex-u-al"
 with eggshells in her mouth
 my creative being
 like a shadowless groundhog
 hibernated till a better season

Now, reading Adrienne Rich
 I jump again and again
 She tells how our love
 has been scratched off walls
 concealed in museum basements
 purged from anthologies:

"For a creative tradition . . .
 we need concrete artifacts
 the work of hands
 written words to read
 images to look at
 a dialogue with brave and imaginative women
 who came before us"*

After the glossy drawings
 after an eggshell enunciation of our love
 I will meet with these brave women
 to create our own tradition

*On Lies, Secrets, and Silences

For, "Elizabeth Brewster who is never ...
on television or magazine covers"

In Canada we have a remarkable number of gifted and articulate women who will not be reduced to what New York or feminist presses think women want to read ... It is not a question of whether Margaret Atwood or Elizabeth Brewster are feminists but whether the women's movement is confident enough to claim their power ...

Jane Rule A Hot-Eyed Moderate

It took Jane Rule
who returns your words and calls you
"our seventh wave"
to bring you back to me

You, who lived across the street
had tea with my mother
held my small fevered body when I had strep throat
always asked for a large glass of water at meals
closed your eyes upward when speaking

Your books arrived Christmas after Christmas
poems I was too young to want to read
except the one for my sister and her loose tooth
and the one about my brothers, their passion for magnets

That you lived across the street, wrote about us,
reduced you in my eyes
"Poets" were supposed to be
distant fellows, living on heaths

Then, reading women's poetry
I left no room for you
There were no obvious clenched fists, lesbian symbols,
not enough of the raging feminist
I call myself and wanted to read

When Ma would tell me
"that one of yours is just like Betty's"
I wondered why and how ...

It took Jane Rule
to bring you back to me

To Amy Lowell

I wish you had not died like that
fat, bandaged, a stroke at fifty

I wish I could enter a room
to smell cigar smoke and know you were there

I wish I could walk in your garden at Severns
and smell the lilacs

I wish I could have stood with you
to see Peter streaking nude
among the flowers
and watch you turn her into a poem

I wish time and critics
did not conceal what was your life's source,
one reference in six hundred pages:
"Mrs. Russell--her life-long friend"

I wish you had not died like that
fat, bandaged, a stroke at fifty
but at least Peter was there
to take your hand

* * *

Amy Lowell, American Imagist poet (1874-1925) and actress
Ada Russell (nicknamed "Peter") enjoyed a publically
recognized dyke marriage for over twenty years.

Eleven Years

You rock me
like a cradle in the utmost boughs

You hold me
like a cabin holding on a wind-swept point
like your hands, large knuckled, soft

Years you fought while I crawled
laboured while I made puzzles

While you were marching for lesbian rights
I was dropping balls through a hoop

while you were loving
I was waiting to love

Unknown to us
I struggled to catch up,
travelled, opened my eyes
put a big house behind me

Then
we meet and love--
those years dissolve
sand through an hourglass

Except
I cry more often
maul you with moods

And sometimes I wonder why you bother
There are so many other women
who don't need their strength instilled

One night we discuss my fears
a threadbare blanket I spread on our time together
I cry and there you are, rocking me,
tending me with your years

"Wait for me to catch up"
You wrap arms around me

And I'll hold you
like an iron bar above my head
all that love muscle
to strengthen me

For Rebecca in barter on the occasion of my first
Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

August 16, 1987

Before Michigan
I'd never seen
a womon with one breast

I'd never seen
womyn walking nude
hand in hand
very simple
but I'd never seen it

Before Michigan
I'd never seen
thirty Amazon mud wrestlers

or womyn whose breasts
held worlds of their own

womyn creating crafts
for womyn only:
purple velvet
silver labyris
clitoris in pearl

I'd never walked alone
in the woods, unafraid
of rape
never
before Michigan

I'd never seen
so many stomachs, thighs,
breasts, buttocks,
so many colored
pubic hairs
made public
with ease

I'd never had the chance
to so openly
stand pressed to my lover
outside our tent,
our stomachs sweat-slick
cum still running through us
flute and laughter on the air
womyn stirring, womyn moving

womyn loving
like us
near by

Before Michigan
I'd never seen
girls and boys
living an education
I'd missed:

Black womyn, white womyn
native, latinas
womyn of colors
Over Forties, young womyn
Sober Support, DART
womyn talking by hand,
listening by eye
mothers, grandmothers
singles, couples, triangles
s/m and celibates
hets, bi's
monogamous and non

Lesbians
I'd never seen
so many
Lesbians

Before Michigan
I'd never seen
a womon with one breast

Thank-you
Rebecca

IV

Lesbians and Gays

Behaviour lawless as snowflakes words simple as grass

Walt Whitman

Continuing with the family analogy, this section includes a recognized part of my new extended "family". That the life/ politics/awareness of I:Lesbian has been shaped in part by gay culture, should be reflected in this section.

Parc LaFontaine, July, 12 a.m.

In Parc LaFontaine
the gays
come and go

go and come

White muscle shirts
on young tapered bodies
bare tanned legs
and close cropped hair

bodies talk
clothes talk
eyes talk
in the quiet park

Car beams
flash white
an approach
window down
door open
hand on shoulder
they're off

And on a bench
at the park's edge
two lesbian
observers

Trips to the fountain
matches flare faces
red glow of cigarettes
gather and part

Double trees
afford a particular
nesting ground
twos and threes
meet there

Fingers? fists? cocks?
how much do you want?
how much do you have?

Up from pink zinnias
rise, a couple
buffing dirt
from their sex-scented clothes
a man, a woman
even het coupling goes
in Parc LaFontaine

And on a bench
at the park's edge
two lesbian
participants
nestled one in the other's crotch
hand twitching a hardened nipple
observing
and observed

12 a.m.
cops play the pruning game
"Parc fermé à minuit!"

- sex closed at midnight
- turn off your fuck now
- pull up your pants
- pack up that cock now
It's midnight
and the Pope just might be by

A search light
strips away the night
where the lesbian couple sit
"Parc fermé à minuit!"

They disentangle
assemble street faces
and hand in hand
walk off

Someone shit
in front of our house

He was there shitting
on the cement step
when my neighbour came home
after dark

"This isn't a toilet"
my neighbour said

"It's a houseful of queers"
yelled the shitting man

and so it is

This man must not be queer
himself

He most likely
has a girlfriend

Freud as a R.E.A.L. Woman

Harry is having problems. More and more he finds himself...
No Harry! Not that! Yes, attracted to ... boys!

His father is very worried and sends Harry off to the shrink.

Harry, says the shrink, checking her watch and pocketbook, tell me how you feel Harry. Well, says poor hopeless Harry, when I see a boy I want to touch him gently on the neck, or maybe the arm--Not the arm! says the shrink. Yes, says Harry, and not only that, I want to lie beside him and stroke his hair under a blue summer sky--(Banal Adjectives) scribbles the shrink.

Harry! she raises her voice, Harry! Have you ever wanted to ... wear a bra!?

Nnnn ...

Harry! she interrupts, have you ever spread your fingers over your nipples and hoped they would grow!?

Harry is cowering now.

You want to nurse a child don't you Harry!

In one last determined effort Harry blurts: NO! I love a boy, I want to be with him forever, I want ...

Harry! The shrink is packing her alligator briefcase now as her digital watch beeps incessantly. I'm sorry Harry, your case is simple and decided:

Breast Envy

Report to my office three times a week for coital therapy. Here, take this rubber vagina and practice. I'll be instructing your father to keep you from all male company.

Breast envy is serious Harry. Remember who saved you.

Michel

Michel
breeds rare Australian finches
with amber plumage

He grows a garden on his balcony
leaves extras for the squirrels

He keeps ornamental marijuana plants
has a Siamese cat
and a grey parrot, Peter

Michel has shock black hair, hennaed,
a small black moustache
He has native status

He needs a coffee before he can function
and smokes home-rolled all day long

Michel frequents the bars of the Village
He and his mother shared a lover
within weeks of one another

He has a police record
which takes four minutes
to spit from the computer--he refuses
to leave the parks after midnight
But the cops are cute at station 34
they serve coffee and donuts
Once he avoided arrest
by fording the wading pool

Michel is a registered nurse
He assisted at the delivery
of five Pomeranian pups

He is on welfare,
used to be a taxidermist
and says if it gets too bad,
he's got what he needs

Michel has AIDS
he is dying
faster than most of us

He has travelled all over the world
and in Guatemala, nannied
the youngest of eleven children

He says, in Greece,
he never met a man
who wouldn't fuck
though they'd all return
to their families by dawn

Michel has a picture book
of Mel Gibbs propped in a frame
Jimmy Dean on the bathroom door
Dianne Dufresne in the hall, and
the Quebec flag on the balcony
facing the street

He was picked up once
while feeding his birds
by the third floor window
a guy stopped, the doorbell rang

Michel has a video camera
and wants to go to Queensland
to film finches there

He has a purse
of linked silver mail
which belonged to Queen Victoria
He has an entire outfit
from the Third Reich

Michel spends fall days
canning, preserving:
jams, tomatoes, apples
for three families

He bakes great pies and cakes,
shares them with his neighbours

He likes a tequila or two
while watching movies at home

Michel used to have a bald eagle
He spends a lot of time
where he grew up, especially
now that his parents know

He's leaving Montreal
to set up an aviary
in the country, like before

Lesbians loving Lesbians

Beautiful women
my feelings for you
will never falter

Sappho

I consider this section the fulcrum, the tofu and potatoes of the collection. The poems cover ground in lesbian relational experience, from the "one night stand" to obvious "commitment" to threesomes, break-up, etc.--stages which are borrowed from the hetero-marriage model. The poems are sometimes hopelessly romantic, often confused and contradictory thereby commenting on the model and terms used. The quote from Sappho should stand as a qualifier for any reading.

Victorian Ladies

High tailored ceilings
mahogany mantel
a fireplace - set

sliding doors of stained and bevelled glass
are drawn; around the room
all brass knobs turned tightly shut

Needlepoint figures link arms
and stroll from a cushioned chair
its maple ankles boldly unsocked

The bay window
proffers garden light
pink and purple lupin and pansies
orange tongues of the day lily
and bright yellow bells
laugh along the lawn
Between fence slats, wild rose
and fern vie for sun

* * *

On embroidered white
in morning's naked sleep
two women sprawl
murmur and meet
full body, melon breasts
and able stomach
coddle and cradle
another

One plucks a striped candy
from the bedside commode
sucks and releases it to roll
along an open thigh
laps the sticky trail

They loll and yawn
mid-morning light
exposing their leisure

* * *

Visitors
at the "Fresh Start"
Bed and Breakfast
Gottingen Road, Halifax

at Gampo Abbey

All day
rain
low and ponderous sky
menacing wind
enough to rip a tent from its pegs

We take refuge
at Gampo Abbey
Buddhist Monastery
on the rough highland shores
of Cape Breton

A weird darker than blue
presses on the steadily thrusting sea

The Abbey strains
with a structural gong
as we sit chatting away the storm

Then, from a torn sky pocket
a pastel peach-orange ball
slips onto the thick horizon

Like a child's spent helium balloon
it descends, loses shape
and, with a linger of peach on the wave caps
disappears into the sea

I knew we came here
for something

This storm sunset

Gynaevores

(or two Dykes take their summer vacation in the Maritimes)

On the briny strands of Cape Breton
 off the misty shoals of Meat Cove
 through the patient fogs of the Ceildhi Trail
 to coniferous stands and perennial bogs

In the atavistic summer of '88
 in a duo they came
 combing the beaches for muscle and clam
 crouching about damp fires at night
 bathing their lithe or lumbering flesh
 in fresh water falls
 or icy salt surf

In open fields they played
 entertaining their limbs
 in vast quantities of sun

In dark woods they trod
 seeking the salamander, the snake, the frog

They were ungainly
 their bulbous and hairy breasts
 beating together in furious song
 their leg-long labia
 slapping wet earth where they walked
 their excessive juices washing the land
 forming natural dykes in their wake

They were female
 yet coupled as if mating
 their unearthly screams
 shattering the sullen skies

Wherever they went
 the natives scattered
 fearing their way of life
 was ending

Their presence was unexpected
 their departure, celebrated

Gynaevores!

Thank-you note

Thanks for this chance
 at sex
 without the questions
 what next, when next

The "one night stand"
 so overused, abused
 by bad movies, bad jokes
 Can we reclaim
 even that?

It seems so

Sure
 I learned some things new
 how teeth can spark my skin
 how a woman's full stomach breathes
 like a warm animal between my legs
 how a needy cunt beats rhythmically

how to take friendship
 and make love with it

I liked it after
 in the shower
 soap smoothed on my ass
 then sitting in the kitchen
 your face in my hands
 at my breasts

the coffee tasted good

I like the smile
 my roommate tells me not to lose

I could use a few more hours sleep
 but I'll catch it up later

another night

maybe?

Fucking Love

Just now
after thinking of you for hours
juiced by the train's vibration
I find the note you slipped in my lunch
"Dear baby . . ."
and I can't stand it any more

I close myself in the toilet
propped against the door
facing the mirror
I fuck myself
force an orgasm as fast
as fingers will jam and vibrate

No love here
no gentle thoughts
no fantasy
just hard core fuck

I slide down
onto the toilet
see my face
haggard, relieved

Back in my seat
I re-read the note
". . . come back soon"

Now it is warm, gentle, kind
and I love you

Mustard in a Sugar Cake

One Spring
an Australian woman
came to Canada
to meet the promise of a woman
made in the heat of bodies
in a January cold

But when she arrived
her lover-to-be
was being a lover
elsewhere
so what was there to do?

If chivalry were in
they might have
dueled or triored
to death, by sword
all three

If machoism were their game
they might have fist-fought,
roller-derbied or butch and femmed
and sold it as lesbian pulp

If they had known the rules
or the recipe
they might not have suffered
so . . .

Instead
they baked a cake
a sugar cake
with mustard in it

They ate and ate
for over a month they ate

sometimes it was sweet
but then the mustard
always tasted through

Until one of the cooks
said, no
I don't think mustard
goes in a sugar cake

and she left
taking the recipe
with her

Now that we've said
 we're breaking up
 down, a-part
 this
 is with me all the time

Like a sore foot
 a headache, a cloudy day
 something that isn't quite right

Once I was told
 I had cells changing to cancerous
 in my cervix, and my life split
 into before and after knowing

Before, I could miss you or not
 think of you or not

After, the day ticks by
 like a metronome

I-love-you-
 I-love-you-
 not?

I am a comic strip character
 with a clean, clear hole
 blown through her middle
 yet, I keep walking about
 normally

(Headache
 cancer cells
 before
 after
 daisies
 bullet hole
 breaking
 up?)

After tea and disagreement

This afternoon
two women
loved to their capabilities

Pinpoint of our history

I wake
you are not in bed
I rise, grab a long shirt, yours,
go out through the door

and you are there, on the couch
in a pink dressing gown
cigarette suspended between fingers
cup of tea on your lap

the air stalled
smoke hovers, undulating
like phantom manta-rays

I sit at your legs
hold your calves
look at you

and the moment pops out of time and place
a pressurized cork
to a pinpoint of our history

(your hands
tea cup
stalled smoke
pink terry-cloth, warm flesh
lips printed on cigarette
my hand clutching your calf)

a moment that shouldn't be
like a tin-type that couldn't catch
the movement of a child's arm

us
snapped out of time

Arrived

I'd lived with a lover before, swore never again. Hets encouraged us to move in--they long to see lesbians ape marriage. Dykes laughed, said our polyerotic plans would be a joke, the romance, guillotined.

A grey, listless day
you're asleep
your large body
breathing under a yellow puff

the continual attentions
passing in the hall
a hand trailed across an ass

at my desk
a caress I didn't hear
entering the room

at the sink
arms snuck about a waist

a head appearing in the shower
for a soap-faced kiss

the meals
you make for me on Mondays
I make for you on Tuesdays

the games
tearing to the morning bathroom
first to pee

piggy-back rides
eyes closed
to unknown destinations:
kitchen stool, toilet,
your bedroom or mine

the plain intimacy
of walking naked
about the apartment

the freedom to fuck at noon
in front of the hall mirror

just that
enough to make me feel
arrived

My lover wades through wet sand
to the sea Her prints remain
to be filled and flushed
the sea pulling back like a cackle
over pores of warm sand
leaving a rounded impression
a tiny sea puddle
where once five toes and a heel
had sharply marked

Sometimes the waves draw short
but eventually the tide will carry them
up the shore, to smooth
with laughing surf
even the deepest imprint

VI

Lesbian Body

Write yourself. Your body must be heard.

Hélène Cixous

These are poems which focus on the female body from one lesbian's perspective. I strive for explicitness as a continuing project to counteract centuries of our being denied such an expression.

Woman Exulting

Rise out of the water
Rise up

Your arms spread
like an albatross
Or a peacemaker
unconsciously exulting

Your strong hips
slip through the waves
of the bay
Your hair long
and slick wet behind you
Your neck craned
open and back

The halo of sun
dies into an ebony horizon
But you rise
then swim clean strokes
to shore

Body Memory

body
the space between
finger and footprints
hair roots and tips
between tongue and cheek
between lips and lips

body holds
the sting of a browbending cold
the chafing heat of an August beach

body holds
blood
surging and crashing
on vaginal walls

body holds
the flesh-moment

but mind holds
memory

the times and times punched into the factory
the time a woman first touched her clitoris
the time when rape came expectedly

first times, many times
memories without choice

Standing at a window
mind tumbles out
follows a pink cap or dark coat
up the street, skirts a snowbank
catches a flight to Australia

but body stays
arms taut against the pane

body
naked
body of exposed ribs
small wrists
spread and solid legs

body
burdened
with this mind
which re-members
your history

Washing her Clothes

I washed her clothes today
a huge laundry, four washers, two dryers
eight dollars in change

pulled pure colors from the dryer
the hot pink shirt that bites over her breasts
the tight green pants that mold around her bike seat
the checkered jacket for the bars

I washed her clothes today
and folded the blue and white stripes
that first seduced me

swimming in a cold lake
rough towel
rubbing down flesh

bloom of flowers
in an arctic spring
rapid and brilliant

a dog
tearing across the tundra
ice-blue eyes, a long-ranging howl

a storm
clear hard rain to run in
and lightning jagged

a tree
which bears a different fruit
each morning

tasting
the season's first
strawberry

At a womyn's festival

I saw a womon
dancing
dancing naked to bongos

Sweat poured from her head
laughter teemed from her face
her arms were raised and swaying
palms strobed the setting sun behind her

and instead of breasts
she wore scars
with a live tattoo
bright leaf greens
flowing across her chest
defying the lies of porn
that breasts equal wo-man
wo-man equals breasts

Here was a womon
without

proud dancing womon

Time to talk

We have not pretended
that sex is as easy as animals
who know how to rut

we have left
'groping in the dark'
to the back seat drive-ins
of our pasts

We have talked
tasted, touched and said
yes, this feels good
no, not that

or masturbated
to show each other
just how

(At the campsite
on the outjut of land
you watched in the sun
as I pulled lips apart
talked, stroked
and we agreed for the lesson
not to be sexual
but it happened anyway)

We have spoken
with other lesbians
heard them say what they like

(At the solstice party
when we pulled out On Our Backs
asked and answered:
"I come inside"
"I want clitoral always"
"I like my ass")

We have charted our bodies
with flashlight and speculum

I am not lost as I travel
to cup your protruding cervix
finger the folded, clutched
vaginal walls

You've spoken to my tongue
urged her along your clitoral shaft
told her to spread your vulval lips
purple and swelled

Our words
breed confidence
to leave arousals peaked
wander to face, underarms, thighs
continually talking eyes
return at our leisure
to offer tenderly, forcefully
orgasm
we want and thrive on

We've taken time
hours, afternoons
dusks, dawns
time when we might come
or not

Time to talk

Telephone Call

As I crawl up
between your legs
think of

my face brushing your calves
my head nudging apart
your knees
my cheeks touching
both inner thighs
my nose probing
your coarse, sparse pubes

listen to
the wet pop of saliva
pulled between my lips

anticipate
my tongue

my tongue edging out
to contact
the fleshy joint
between thigh and pelvis

feel
my tongue-tip
touch the puckered skin
between ass and cunt

wait
as I
stretch
slowly
into you

a sharp breath

tongue
enters
and re-treats

suction slurp
your cunt
swallows

Now
lie back
as tongue wet-slides
along your inner labia

mouth folding around your lips

your clit waits
wants

My mouth surrounds
your clit
tongue strokes it
very
softly
very
smoothly
saliva thickly lubes
the stroking

your mound
shoves at my face .
your hands
hold my head down

"Oh yes, just like that
Don't stop
Don't you ever stop"

I pause

continue
fingertips prodding
lower lips apart
continue
licking, lapping
you like the sounds

fingers
grow inside you
massage with viscous cunt-cream
whole hand inside

clit grows
rounder, thicker
more exposed

lips draw lips
teeth nip
tongue hovers
flits, flirts

clit breathless
tongue trills

you
YELLLLLLLL

cunt
GRAB-grab-GRABS
my hand
pushing, pulsing
inside

hand pulsing
cunt answering
hand answering
cunt pulsing

your hands
reach for me
body wants company

I crawl up onto you
hand inside
cunt-waves jolt
us both

Your eyes
open now
want to see

body to body
hand inside
close
body to body
hand inside
close

Ina

goddess knows
 I like your body
 thick ass and thighs

our preamble to sex
 standing in the kitchen
 glued at the pelvis

the low key, slow
 arousal, the gathering
 of cream

the popping kisses
 you send off, like tiny
 flesh firecrackers

I like your crude
 lesbian mouth
 and how little
 men mean to you

I like licking, tugging
 your closed eyelids

I like how you bite
 (though my tricep is sore today)
 with your inner ragged tooth edge
 and your nails etching my spine

I like tongueing
 through your wiry pubes
 to plump-ripe labia and clit

your strong, acrid
 cunt-woman taste

I like how you want a hand in
 long after you come
 (last night
 I left it there as we slept,
 woke to find it pruned and numb--
 the hazards of lesbian sex)

I like lying tangled
 two cubs
 struck to sleep by play

I like waking with you
 the alarm on snooze
 enwrapping you
 like a small gift

I like being served
 cereal with peach
 then packing you a lunch

I like our smell
 kissing good-bye

VII

Lesbians Ignited

Nothing I wouldn't do for the woman I sleep with
... to keep her wanting me

Cheryl Clarke

This could be considered the erotic section of the collection, except that the erotic is infused through many of the other sections. I want surprising, (un)serious poems here. I want the erotic to weigh as vitally as the struggle with family and the more obviously political struggles. By placing this section at the end, it is to act as a cover statement. Critics as diverse as D.H.Lawrence and Cheryl Clarke have said--"sex" is at the root of it all and sexual oppression may be, if not the, then one of the primary oppressions operating today.

These poems are meant to infer this message by reflecting on the entire collection. I say infer, because they are really poems of celebration and liberation.

I: lift weights
 walk at night
 travel alone
 play rugby
 own a tool box
 use a chainsaw
 wear a tie
 defend myself
 talk loudly
 run fast
 swim nude
 piss in the woods
 drink beer from the bottle
 eat lots
 pay for myself

I: examine my breasts
 inspect with a speculum
 inject yoghurt
 suffer cramps
 run blood
 plug-up
 take pap tests
 fight cancer

I: love women
 love fucking
 munch muffs
 nibble nipples
 cream jeans
 lube assholes
 cuke cunts
 masturbate

I: cry often
 collect teddies
 say I'm sorry
 send valentines
 kiss photos
 miss my granny
 feed squirrels
 hold hands
 bake muffins
 write love poems

. . . who

am I?

. . . what

Packing

I'm packing my bags
for travel

I've got one long slim pink cotton tote bag
for one long lavender
1 1/4 inch on one end, 1 3/8 inch on the other
Double Venus Rising

I've packed a couple of flexible
silicone rubber dildoes
for the red leather harness
with additional opening

The Eager Beaver with vibrating tongue
and pearl-size beads to rotate the shaft,
I've slid into a side pocket
next the G-spotter
and the a.p.d.

I won't forget my Ben Wa Balls
14-karat gold--they pack small

Let's see
multi-colored condoms
water-soluble lube
a couple of lube inserts
just in case

Clove soap in my cosmetics bag
almond oil, rosewater
and a lickable amaretto cream

I've got GAIA'S Guide
to find my way around
and Sapphisty for those spare moments

I'm a touch worried
about crossing the border

but I'm ready
to go!

Where we have had to make love

a stairwell

a ferris wheel

a churchyard

a guest couch

a toilet cubicle

a dance floor

a rocky beach

a covered bridge

a field of purple flowers

When you called

when you called

on an urge

to tell me

you loved me

i was masturbating

and didn't

answer

the

p

h

o

n

e

Earth-shaken Woman

It was Ferron who touched the moment
to her music we danced

You, clothed,
swung in front of me
hips, breasts, music borne
Me
so naked I could cry
looking on you laughing

Cream flushed impossibly soft
my most wanting part
and wet your jeans
your thigh playing up to her rhythms
music to music

When we moved
on the floor beneath the window
I pulled lust from you
thick as lava

You shook hard
fall's last leaf in storm
And you gave like a dam
forced by spring rains

"Carolyn, look at me, I'm coming"
and I opened my hard closed eyes
I did look

Your face:
an earthquake, a terror,
a shatter

This is you
Coming

"Why did I say that?"
You're crying now
I can only hold you
with as much of me
as I am

"I'm glad you did," I say
"I wanted to see you"

Now I have more to love
This terror
This earth-shaken woman

Pillowslips and Roses

You gave me
Pillowslips and Roses

and now

You sleep in my bed
And eat my honey

An (un)serious poem

you
make me
smell cunt
while studying

you make me
crawl on you
like a water buffalo
shaking its ass to shore

you make me
swan dive your muff
at the slightest
invitation

you make me
want to fuck all day
and leave the revolution
to others

you make me flail
my body before you
as if for sacrifice:
cannibal cunts

you make me
do things
with my tongue
that even I can't write home about

you make me
strip at mid-day

you make me
sway off your hips
like an elephant's trunk

you make me
dip my fingers
in a chocolate-cream cunt

you make me
yell
scream, cuddle, couple
you make by blood bubble

you make me
clit-happy
and labia-laughing

Camping, Saguenay Lac St.-Jean

spider nimbles across a twig
salmon river blurts over stones
sun sets pink behind rock and fir
wind washes leaves

kindling in a teepee waiting for fire
a question mark of smoke
tea on the boil

a two-woman tent

now with the river
two bare bodies splashing

now with the wind
oil and onion

now with the stars
flames juggling close conversation

now with the night
orange tent-glow
shadows stretch and settle
turn over and under

two clitorises ignited

Saguenay Lac St.-Jean

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