

**Cantatas of the Wild:  
Memoir, Mysticism, and Modern Feminist Poetry**

**By**

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## Abstract

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In this dissertation, the introduction defines the erotic-mystical mode, using the poetry and prose of the five feminist writers that I argue constitute a core poetic movement. Based on their shared understandings of the centrality of this disruptive new paradigm—with important influences from English Romanticism—these poets create both lyric and prose works that position them as major leaders in feminist thought in the seventies. Collapsing conventional binaries, their works offer examples of how to live, on the deepest level, as life-affirming beings, regardless of gender, race, class, or sexuality, on a damaged, yet still vibrant, planet. They never deny difference, embracing all that is living, yet still grounded in faith in possibilities of collective communication. No one style best expresses the erotic mystical mode; yet it occupies a place, in the seventies, I argue, linked with memoir-poems, paving the way for the contemporary surge of women's memoirs.

The first chapter concerns itself with selectively surveying the erotic mystical mode transnationally and across periods, while dipping into recent American examples, creating a kind of ground for the sustained individual author readings of H.D.'s *Sea Garden*, chapter three, and the poetry of Adrienne Rich, 1951-1984, chapters five and seven. The second chapter tells the stories of how this dissertation is constructed and why this particular methodology. It defines and justifies its hybrid methodology, attaching it to a history of genre-crossing writing by feminist critics. In order to do so, I draw from the fairly recent formation of an innovative, hybrid literary criticism by a vigorous diaspora of scholars, consisting of both second wave and contemporary feminist critics

A number of feminist literary critics have written about these four poets in the past three decades. The feminist critical attention, of course, has gone largely to the poet, most famous and most lauded by the literary establishment, Adrienne Rich, whose first published book of verse predates the publications of the other three by at least fifteen years. In chapter one, I discuss a number of critics relevant to this dissertation, figures such as Francine DuPlessis, Susan Friedman, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Wendy Martin, and Jan Montefiore.

Their works inspired me to juxtapose creative memoir writing, comprising chapters four and six, with the more traditional chapters of literary criticism, chapters three and five. This personal memoir sprang up in response to years of immersion in the life-altering poetry this dissertation explores and celebrates.

In loving memory of  
my grandmother, Ida White May (1907-2003)

For Stephen Keith, my forever joy  
and Julia Bader, dearest Professor

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Poetic Pillars of the Feminist Erotic-Mystical Paradigm:  
H.D., Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Susan Griffin, and Judy Grahn

A life-affirming flood of lyricism burst forth, in the 1970s, in the works of four feminist poets; fortified by political directness, their volcanic lyrics, erupting beyond the confines of the page, represent the vanguard of the second wave's articulations: whirlwinds of sound, clearing out eloquent passageways to personal and social change. Weapons of truth, these poems demonstrate this radical core's shared mission to incite ordinary women to communicate the realities of their lives, and, in so doing, break free from stupor, self-forgetfulness, centuries of "mind-forged manacles" (Blake, "London"). Manacles, "heavy as frost" (Wordsworth), muffle even inspiration itself. For an aspiring poetic crusader, the stony blockage of the "valves of her attention" (Dickinson, "303") results in an unconsciousness made invisible even to her, preventing an untold wealth of creativity from flowing forth. In such a dark time, the momentous necessity of unbolting the mental prisons that deny sharp hunger for connection, and muffle verbal expression, can activate a poet's personal rage: freeing energy, which functions as a catalyst of collective lyric plotting for language capable of making large public changes beyond the poems themselves. Thus, in light of minimal critical attention having been given to these writers as a cohesive group, my dissertation focuses on Rich, Grahn, Griffin, Lorde, and on H.D., an important influence; my use of a hybrid methodology, which combines conventional literary critical techniques with creative writing (personal memoir excerpts), becomes an integral component of the argument itself. Using this approach, I intend to illustrate how the memoir-like, life-affirming poetics of these seventies poets foretold and helped make feasible the recent, unprecedented surge in women's memoirs. What makes these poets cohere into a distinct movement of voices, I argue, occurs within each poet's independent creating of spiritual-sensual meeting places, thereby, collectively building an intertextual *erotic mystical* ethos and paradigm. My introduction is primarily devoted to defining the meaning of *erotic mysticism*, mainly through using the ideas and words of the poets themselves.

Multiple poetic works burst into print, simultaneously, in 1978; within a short, one-year period, an unprecedented feminist conspiracy of ideas erupts in the publications of the following works, all key to this dissertation's erotic mystical argument: *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) by Adrienne Rich; *The Black Unicorn* (1978) by Audre Lorde; *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) by Susan Griffin; *The Work of A Common Woman* (1978) by Judy Grahn. In this dissertation, lyrics from these crowning, second-wave, textual monuments to the innovators' newly constructed, intensely life-affirming, paradigm show intertextual elements that listen and speak to each other: poets expressing from places of deep attunement with the unsung feminist wild. Above all, my purpose is to demonstrate an erotic-mystical paradigm's core positioning within the political philosophy and poetry of this closely knit band of writers. Its all-pervasiveness makes it important to grasp its presence for a clearer appreciation of the full import of their works: their mirroring hues and far-reaching implications.

Reminiscent of Blake's "Robin Red breast in a Cage" in "Auguries of Innocence" (431), the sensibilities of these seventies lyricists, un-caged at last, explode into both writing and hearing each other into a new consciousness—an awareness akin at times to Blake's "Heaven in a Rage" (431): the primary emotion long-taboo for females to express. One of most innovative "strategies for ideological dissidence" (68), to borrow the words of Miranda B. Hickman, used by the poets is the abundant flowering of angry lyrics by women of this decade. Hence, one can find dynamic discontent, among the wide array of emotions, dispersed throughout all the poetic

works included in my study. Additionally, a significant influence on these four seventies poets' ideas, Mary Daly— especially through her early philosophy in *Beyond God the Father*, 1973— goes on, in 1978, to define rage as a “transformative focusing force” (*Gyn/Ecology* 43); she pronounces wittily that “rage is not a stage” (43), taking aim at critics who dismissed women artists' discontent as a passing whim. Seeing emotion as a healthy energy, merely a vehicle for moving in the direction of eventual freedom from pain and anger, these poets help women escape from the labels of madness; in their view, *rage*, then, persists only as long as is necessary. The necessity for such anger is driven home in the haunting refrain from Rich's love sonnet “XVII,” when she intones, “and these are the forces they had ranged against us, / and these are the forces we had ranged within us, / within us and against us, against us and within us” (*The Dream* 34): lines to remind her sister poets, readers, and followers, again and again, of the relationship between poetry and freedom, and the necessity for resisting the all-pervasive threat of “forces they had ranged against us, within us and against us.”

Wendy Martin observes, moreover, that it was not until the seventies that Rich's poetry “concentrated on emotional awareness and forceful self-presentation. . . . *Diving into the Wreck*, Rich has learned to use anger as a source of energy. . . . [It] is a creative force” (197). In sum, these poets were never “the Other” to each other, despite social conditioning to the contrary; indeed, Rich's enemy “forces” *are* identical to Lorde's “heavy-footed” in “A Litany for Survival,”<sup>i</sup> the same ones who “had hoped to silence us” (*The Black* 31), to suppress women's potential vocal opposition. However, no matter how forceful the unleashed sounds of raging banshees,<sup>ii</sup> this defiant tone is counterbalanced, paradoxically, by equally *soothing* syllables in tender lines found elsewhere in the verse of in all four poets. Rich lyrically encapsulates this complex autonomous and well-defined woman each poet speaks individually of becoming through her own personal writing process and emerging style: each, thereby, expanding the limits of her own self-understanding. She builds herself in words, offering readers much needed new models for womanliness. All in all, the erotic mystical feminist ethos I see in the literature at hand coheres into crucially life-affirming forms in its shared poetic movement towards shelter and comfort for all living beings.

*Life-affirming* involves some risk of chaos. Hence, this poetry's involvement with archetypal chthonic realms: inner caves wherein the ancient Sumerian Inanna's paradoxical nature of both tenderness and rage nests. All four of these poets were open to the possibility of a matrifocal time, during which women held substantial respect as creators and poets. It was a time spoken of by Joseph Campbell, in the 1960s, in idyllic terms; he writes, “[W]here the mother image preponderates, even the dualisms of life and death dissolve in the rapture of her solace” (70). “[I]n the rapture of her solace” expresses a strong element of the erotic mystical paradigm. Yet it fails to completely define it. Indeed, a crucial component, the public-political realm, is missing in Campbell's conventional shattering of *identity* into a dualistic paradigm: one in which mother-spirit-nature stands in opposition to father-dissociation-culture. Whereas Campbell's<sup>iii</sup> ideas remain sealed inside the traditional binary of father-politics-culture distinctly separate from mother-senses-nature, the erotic-mystical paradigm of feminist poetics, neither excludes intellect, culture, and politics from female archetypes and identity, nor does it dissociate emotion, body, and nature from femaleness. This poetic wholism exists in the integrated, overlapping visions of H.D., Rich, Lorde, Griffin, and Grahn. It is built into the very fabric of their verse: the resounding, closing line in “From an Old House,” “Any woman's death diminishes me,” speaks, in Rich's direct voice, for each of them (*The Fact* 222).

It is easy to understand, however, how literary critics and theorists of the past two decades might have overlooked the integrated *mystical sensual* paradox embedded within of each these four poets' individual visions, especially since—though embracing the intellect, emphatically—these writers do resist abandoning the body as a source of knowledge as well as refuse to turn away from nature as a place of female possibility. In merging body with mind into a poetic architecture of female autonomy, they reach towards an *earth-saving* vision far more apparently than any vision that emerges from those thinkers whom Barbara Christian calls the “monolithic, monotheistic” exalters of theory, the “New Philosophers” (624, 622). Christian herself contrasts an African American tradition of theory—which is very close to, if not threaded with, what I call *erotic-mystical*—when she argues against lionizing abstract ideas devoid of pleasure; she writes, “Inevitably monotheism becomes a metasystem, in which there is a controlling ideal, especially in relation to pleasure. *Language as one form of pleasure* [emphasis mine] is immediately restricted, and becomes heavy, abstract, prescriptive, monotonous. Variety, multiplicity, eroticism are difficult to control” (626). Furthermore, earlier in “The Race for Theory,” Christian even emphasizes that the reason she herself “raced from philosophy to literature” springs from the following:

[T]he latter seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as *sensual* [mine] as I knew it was. In literature I sensed the possibility of the *integration of feelings/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional* [emphasis mine] in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged. (624)

In fact, the kernel of a sensual-emotional literary sensibility that Christian lays before the reader—the seedling preferable to arid, strictly rational, philosophy—is a gift passed on to her by the poet-philosopher Audre Lorde.

After first having praised Lorde's writing as “far more succinct and sensual” (629) than her own, Christian chooses to end her own essay—in allegiance to the conceptual paradigm constructed by the older poet—with a substantial quotation by Lorde. All in all, one could argue that compared to Christian, Lorde further advances the melding of mysticism with sensuality. For instance, even within the excerpt from “Poetry is Not a Luxury” that closes Christian's essay, Lorde calls for collective faith in a feminist politics that arises from the act of merging feelings, intellect, and body: “[O]ur feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries [sic]. . . for ideas . . . Poetry is the skeleton [sic] architecture of our lives” (*Sister Outsider*, 37). To this poet's political imaginings, feminist poems of feeling-ness are *sanctuaries* themselves, making sacred the ideas they house within their finely chiseled *skeleton* forms. Such poems become, then, I propose, Keatsian in their embodiments of erotic-mystical truths: works that serve as mirrors and guides for sentient ideas and lives. Herein, Lorde's sentiments suggest, to me, a chronological line of literary descent: Keats to Millay to Lorde to Christian.

I recall an evening in the early eighties, when I raised my hand in an auditorium, perhaps in Dwinelle Hall, on Berkeley's campus; it was question and answer time at a poetry reading, and, feeling awkward, I asked a majestic, brightly-turbaned Lorde, “Which poet do you feel influenced you the most strongly?” She paused, and, to me, seemed pleased with the question, taking a second to turn within for genuine reflection, before, smiling, she answered, in the warmest possible voice, “Edna St. Vincent Millay.”<sup>iv</sup> She had read her as a young teenager, prior to other poets, she recalled, then, continued on, to praise Millay's passion and sensuality. As it

happened, Millay had been the first poet I had read cover to cover, eventually wearing out the hardback's binding; I was thirteen, landlocked in a tiny racist, misogynist, Southern Baptist town, and therefore incapable of imagining an Audre Lorde's existence in 1966. Millay's greatest influence was Keats. From Keats to Millay to Lorde: a life-affirming, erotic-mystical line of verse established, unearthed, and dwelling beyond the noxious confines of the "heavy-footed."

To further complicate and enhance the possible feminist generativity of this lineage, which led directly the second wave poets under consideration, I call on the words of Artemis Michailidou, in her exciting article proposing Millay's strong influence on Rich. Michailidou argues, "Millay was one of the first poets whose work presented women as allies, rather than rivals. . . . Rich's belief in the social potential of women's bonding, as well as her development of notions like female autonomy and individual selfhood are partly indebted to Millay's work" (40). Of particular relevance to my own argument regarding the development of Rich's inseparable personal and political consciousness, independence, and compassionate integrity—in all the multifarious senses of the latter word—is the work by another critic (mentioned by Michailidou), Margaret Dickie; she suggests that Rich's work evolves, first and foremost, into celebrating the solitary self, rather than into feting a fusion with another woman (Dickie, 1997: 150-3). In general, I agree with Michailidou's enthusiastic appraisal of Millay's influence on Rich, and, I would add, on Lorde and Griffin, the latter poet profoundly affected by Rich's lyrics. Having said that, it is also true that this dissertation devotes an entire chapter, not to Millay, but to H.D.: the reason being that Rich, Griffin, Grahn, and perhaps to a lesser degree, Lorde, all felt the colossal impact of H.D.'s revival in the seventies, with its hailed re-publication of many of her works—some of them, in fact, published for the first time.

In establishing a historic context for the feminist works examined in this dissertation, I will mention one topic that stimulated the fancies of all poets in this circle; it concerns the second wave's fascination with investigating the possibility of a utopian, woman-centered globe, pre-dating the fatherland. At the very least, whether or not an ancient matrifocal era is ultimately found to be historically accurate, the mere possibility of such an era—a time during which womankind possessed social and political clout—stirred these poets' imaginings, generating a collective mood of expanded dignity and hope. Lorde herself, in addition to Millay's passionate influence, studied the African Orisha, and incorporated evocative, black goddesses into poems such as "The Women of Dan" (*The Black* 14-15), a poem I discuss, later. The authority of African myth planted within Lorde's heart and imagination matched the power of Greek deities in H.D.'s psyche. Although discussion of mythology's presence in the seventies poems is not the primary concern of this dissertation, its significance needs to be acknowledged here, in order fully appreciate the complexity of internal terrain built by these poets. When I argue that these are mystical poets, writers exploring the limits of language, it is crucial to clarify that I refer to the ahistorical experience of immediate, direct contact with tangible reality: the apprehension, by means of heightened, sensate perceptivity, of the vibrant, organic, non-dualistic presence of life itself. The term *erotic* I gain from the poets themselves, many of whom not only define it, but also characterize it similarly, and all of whom associate immanent, mystical dimensionality with that which is living. Affirming life itself, then, becomes these collaborators' collective purpose as major poets of an erotic mystical paradigm.

This paradigm, created cumulatively by four feminist poets in their verse and prose, was followed, in 1984, by Mary Daly's naming of her own parallel conception, *pure lust*: the title of her book itself. It is helpful to consider the feminist lyricists' definitions and poems in light of

Daly's philosophical articulation of a kindred way of thinking; she writes in *Pure Lust*, "The philosophy here unfolded is material / physical as well as spiritual, mending / transcending this deceptive dichotomy" (7). Thus, in moving beyond the confines of patriarchal modes of intellectual normativity, Daly, through juxtaposing *pure* with *lust*, creates an oxymoron that functions, according to her, as a double-edged sword: the normal, darker meaning, which includes, "lechery, lasciviousness," as opposed to the life-affirming, playful one, also from *Webster's*, of "vigor, craving, enthusiasm, eagerness" (2-3). In reclaiming the latter meaning for feminist thinkers, Daly aligns herself with the seventies poets, giving critics a tool for better understanding their core principle. Vigor and enthusiasm are qualities that have been linked typically with English Romanticism. Keats's verse is the very definition of *vigor*. Romanticism's connection with feminist poets of the twentieth century has been beautifully commented upon by Rita Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*:

The Romantic feminist vision expresses a paradisaic longing for harmony fueled by a revulsion against the conditions of life under capitalism. It is the Romantic feminist text, whether in the form of fiction or essayistic prose [or poetry], which has expressed the most forceful condemnation of existing social values. . . . [L]onging for unity and wholeness . . . springs from a recognition of the destructive effects of social fragmentation and erosion of community. The Romantic desire for a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature reemerges as a highly relevant and by no means outdated theme as the potentially catastrophic effects of ideologies of progress . . . have become increasingly apparent. (148)

Daly, Keats, and Rich share more similarities than may seem to be the case upon first contemplating their works.

Susan Griffin's quintessential expression of erotic mystical verse, "Matter: How We Know," functions as the restorative conclusion to her methodologically groundbreaking text, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*; this prose-poem embodies within its very substance, a prime definition of erotic mysticism. Griffin sings of "[s]unlight pouring into, ingested into the bodies of fish, into the red-winged blackbird," creating a melodic, yet ecologically accurate, Whitmanesque catalogue of mystical interplay among living forms, into which she subtly weaves sensual, yet rarefied, threads of contact between the archetypal singer and her beloved, and composing a subtle crescendo of ecstatic communion into the lyric's very fabric. The "light from this bird enters my body . . . I love this bird, when I see, the arc of her flight, I fly with her, enter her with my mind . . . all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us" (227). These final five words of Griffin's book name mystical light as inhabiting, rather than transcending, earth and body, awakening in the consciousness of the lover-as-poet. The stylistic quietness and verisimilitude of the piece lends it a soft strength, bringing to mind the Eastern atmosphere that California writers frequently imbibe, simply from living geographically closer to Asia. Within this expansive state of awareness, a yin-like receptivity can exist, represented and sustained throughout this masterpiece as the interplay of shadow and light, touch and sound, intimacy and autonomy; she would describe this dance, seventeen years later, in "The Eros of Everyday Life," as a rhythmic, back and forth, movement that creates "an irresistible force field" (149). Additionally, Griffin defines *meetings* as the

location of the erotic. “[M]y hand,” she writes, for example, “meets the cotton sheets on my bed”(150). As the essay continues to unfold, the poet develops further the definition of the erotic mystical:

There is an eros present at every meeting, and this is also sacred. . . . When the divided between the sacred and the profane falls, everyday life is graced and all that is holy is heavy with vitality. Communion is not only an isolated ritual; it is also a manner of living. . . . The plum has been my lover. And I have known the plum. Letting the plum into the mind of my body . . . (151)

Clearly as much a student of the *Tao Te Ching* as she is of Wordsworth and Keats, Griffin absorbs their influence and spins its hues into a paradigm that draws—and shares, in common, even more colors—from the sensibilities of H.D. and the three seventies feminist poets. Revealing astonishing similarities to Griffin’s illustration, Audre Lorde’s definition of this feminist spiritual-erotic paradox is equally compelling.

In her seminal essay, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde fluently constructs her own illuminating definition of the poetic-political phenomenon, I am calling *erotic mysticism*. Writing this, in that watershed year, 1978, as a paper to deliver at Mount Holyoke College, she seems to adopt the role of African priestess, invoking the presence of her beloved warrior goddess, Seboulisa, in the poetic essay’s bardic proclamations. In this eloquent, hybrid blend of political manifesto, spiritual sermon, and erotic love song to life itself, she writes, for instance, the following silver-tongued excerpt, as an invocation of the mystical erotic, in readers, intending to stir us to feminist actions:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. . . . We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. . . . As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. . . . It has been made into . . . plasticized sensation . . . confusing it, with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. . . . When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our lives. (53-55)

Like Lorde, all of the poets, in question, define *erotic* as the opposite of pornographic. Readers find this demonstrated throughout both their prose and poetry. To illustrate, Griffin composes, in *Pornography and Silence*, a definition of *eros* as a state of pre-cultural innocence, unviolated by pornographic imagery or thoughts; she writes:

We are back in a natural world before culture tried to erase our experience of nature. In the world, to touch another is to express live; there is no idea apart from

feeling, and no feeling which does not ring through our bodies and our souls at once . . . [P]ornography exists to silence eros. (254-55)

This eros of *feelings*, valued by Millay, Lorde, and Griffin, appears, in all its wholeness, in *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde's most-applauded lyric collection.

Lorde triumphantly greets an unnamed woman, in "Meet," in lines that carry connotations of primordial sounds, "I have heard you calling across this land / in my blood before meeting / and I greet you again" ("Meet" 33). Assonance lends sensuality to the mystery of metaphorically hearing a geographically distant companion's call, both personal and universal in its measurements. Like the reception of the Hindu goddess Shakti's presence through sound vibrations in the initiate's body, the speaker hears in her blood the message from the faraway invoker of her presence. In this manner, speaker becomes listener, and listener speaker, in a mystical medley: classic maverick companions, sworn to loyalty as blood-sisters, across the expanse of the African plains. Soon, it is clear that this woman is both a specific individual and an *everywoman* figure; that the speaker herself is a timeless archetype, both sensual and immanent, in her mythic call for the bravest women to spiritually unite "high over halfway between your world and mine / rimmed with full moon" (33). Even as Griffin finds political moments of illuminating juncture within sacred sentient *meetings*, Lorde, too, is spurred onward by yearnings for the elusive, yet tangible, "nameless initiates," as H.D. had named them, in 1942, "born of one mother, / companions / of the flame" (*Trilogy* 521); thus, in "Meetings," the speaker seeks replenishment in sensual-mystical [meetings] "on the beaches in mines lying on platforms / in trees full of tail-tail birds flicking" (33). Nowhere is a life of erotic mystical connection and creativity impossible, in the poem's capacious embrace, as long as companions continue to recognize each other in the "innermost rooms of moment" and greet them there "out of the judging rain" (34). As Lorde's poem nears its end, it opens its arms to broader definitions of *meetings*, including those of a sheltering mother-daughter bond as well as communions-of-solace in sisterhood: "now you are my child and my mother / we have always been sisters in pain" (34). What Lorde's lyric suggests, however, is that meetings between sisters—whose "rivers flow from the same sea"—offer new knowledge, "heavy as August": sensual, free of pain, at least "for a season."

A pain-free communion, according to Adrienne Rich, generates "a modulated cantata of the wild" (*The Dream* 28), causing occasion for the speaker of "Twenty-One Love Poems" to celebrate a renunciation of needless pain, in the lines, "The woman who cherished / her suffering is dead" (29); thus, the speaker births a vow to herself, not "to make a career of pain" (*The Dream* 29). In this way, as she so often does throughout her poetic career, the poet sketches a blueprint for women to live by. It is, indeed, her personal-poetic history of almost making "a career of pain," recorded in memoir-like poetic logs, within seven published texts, which I map, in the Rich chapters—analyzing and explicating a number of the many poems written to a man, across the 1950s, 60s, and into the early 70s. Composing these poems cleared the way for her feminist consciousness to deepen, allowing for Rich's own definition of the erotic mystical to unfold lyrically: a definition most fully expressed in *The Dream of A Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. Echoing Griffin's and Lorde's understanding of nourishing true *connection*, she writes, in "Twenty-One Love Poems," "that creatures must find each other for bodily comfort, / that voices of the psyche drive through the flesh / further than the dense brain could have foretold" (*The Dream* 30-1). In three, succinct lines, she marries body, soul, and intellect, with an extraordinary reversal of the old Greek ranking of mind / soul above flesh.

Replacing the clichéd body-as-*dense* metaphor with the “dense” intellect reveals the latter to be the actual constituent that is the less knowledgeable of the two, and incapable of prophecy, after all. Additionally, Psyche, the soul-goddess in Greek mythology, is shown to “drive through the flesh”; in other words, the meeting between spirit and body—as sacred, warm animal-touch—is neither frozen into static forms, nor speechless as a dead mythic symbol. When dualistic myth disappears, the poem discloses, the seeker realizes that what she knew all along is indeed true: simply, that “without tenderness we are in hell” (30).

*Tenderness*, for the poet, becomes a goddess returned to earth, for good, and embodied as a distinctly female tendency, whether innately or socially conditioned; for, after all, it was—the sonnet insinuates—only an illusion, a lie, which we could survive without *her*, even for one season. Hence, the exhilaration of the line that follows can be attributed to the speaker having found tenderness: “I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain” (30) Sentient immanence becomes the road the poet imagines as freeing her from dependency on phallogocentric maps and forms. Most important, she does not have to do this alone, as she did in “Diving into the Wreck,” a contrasting journey, referring to which, Rich had observed, “I am having to do this . . . here alone” (*Diving* 22). Not the lone creator, yet still the autonomous voice, Judy Grahn envisions a dream of community aligned poetically, politically, and spiritually with Rich’s work, in *The Work of a Common Woman*.<sup>v</sup>

Judy Grahn erotic mystical conceptions are expressed vividly in “Enheduanna’s Forty-Fourth Century,” her foreword to *Inanna: Lady of Largest Heart, Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess* by Enheduanna, translated by Betty De Shong Meador. Grahn’s gusto for the earliest known literature is centered on the erotic mystical qualities of this 2300 BCE hieroglyphic poetry. She ends the piece with praise for Meador’s own insightfulness into the sensual-spiritual paradox that drives the poetics of the ancient priestess; additionally, Grahn’s observation, in the following sentence, is equally fitting when applied to her own verse: “Meador’s interpretation is itself an injunction for our age to reconnect fully with the mind of nature, that intelligent force the Mayan people of Columbia call ‘Alana’—the mind inside nature—and that the Sumerians called Inanna—Lady of Largest Heart” (xvi). The mind inside nature is also of course the intellect inside the body, an articulation that causes the reader to visualize nature / body as possessing a foundational, all-encompassing power of intelligence, not conventionally ascribed to matter itself.

As for Grahn’s poetry, it is in no way conventionally romantic, yet her impassioned commitment to true-to-life truth-telling melds with a paradoxical material-intelligence producing a spirited, witty, common sense style of delivery. Spiritual is embedded in tone itself; ethos has never been stronger in a lyric voice than in her tour-de-force, “A Woman is Talking to Death” (*The Work* 113) In Grahn states bluntly, for example: “my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me / my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands / we are the river of life and the fat of the land” (125). Metaphors expressing an empowering, tribal sense of women’s connection with nature, a major source of spiritual sustenance, are juxtaposed with a practical metaphor, “rope ladders”: the working class necessities of survival offered in small, concrete, daily acts of love—washing dishes, climbing up-or-down ladders, military style, to collectively escape the enemy. This is Grahn’s meeting place of eros and psyche.

In this dissertation, the introduction defines the erotic-mystical mode, using the poetry and prose of the five feminist writers that I argue constitute a core poetic movement. Based on their shared understandings of the centrality of this disruptive new paradigm—with important influences from English Romanticism—these poets create both lyric and prose works that

position them as major leaders in feminist thought in the seventies. Collapsing conventional binaries, their works offer examples of how to live, on the deepest level, as life-affirming beings, regardless of gender, race, class, or sexuality, on a damaged, yet still vibrant, planet. They never deny difference, embracing all that is living, yet still grounded in faith in possibilities of collective communication. No one style best expresses the erotic mystical mode; yet it occupies a place, in the seventies, I argue, linked with memoir-poems, paving the way for the contemporary surge of women's memoirs.

The first chapter concerns itself with selectively surveying the erotic mystical mode transnationally and across periods, while dipping into recent American examples, creating a kind of ground for the sustained individual author readings of H.D.'s *Sea Garden*, chapter three, and the poetry of Adrienne Rich, 1951-1984, chapters five and seven. The second chapter tells the stories of how this dissertation is constructed and why this particular methodology. It defines and justifies its hybrid methodology, attaching it to a history of genre-crossing writing by feminist critics. In order to do so, I draw from the fairly recent formation of an innovative, hybrid literary criticism by a vigorous diaspora of scholars, consisting of both second wave and contemporary feminist critics

A number of feminist literary critics have written about these four poets in the past three decades. The feminist critical attention, of course, has gone largely to the poet, most famous and most lauded by the literary establishment, Adrienne Rich, whose first published book of verse predates the publications of the other three by at least fifteen years. In chapter one, I discuss a number of critics relevant to this dissertation, figures such as Francine DuPlessis, Susan Friedman, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Wendy Martin, and Jan Montefiore.

Their works inspired me to juxtapose creative memoir writing, comprising chapters four and six, with the more traditional chapters of literary criticism, chapters three and five. This personal memoir sprang up in response to years of immersion in the life-altering poetry this dissertation explores and celebrates.

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**Chapter One**  
**The Erotic Mystical Lyrics of Seventies Feminist Poets:**  
**A Movement Towards Nineties Memoirs and Hybrid Literary Critical Forms**  
 I. Nets of Telepathy

“Whatever her situation, she lives ‘on the boundary’ of patriarchal institutions, and she lives dangerously” (*Beyond* 40-41), declares Mary Daly, alluding, in part, to feminist renegades such as the second wave poets I focus on in this project. In this dissertation, I intend to present, in chapters five and six, an analysis of Adrienne Rich’s long, poetic climb towards a place of openness to radical works, including Daly’s newly published words, in *Beyond God the Father*, 1971: a moment, both would agree, is evidence of “nets of telepathy” flung out between each other and other women. Writing and *reading* become embodied *mystical* acts of remembering. Thus, I aim to show that it is no wonder that the Adrienne Rich of this decade is deeply influenced by Daly’s controversial, yet groundbreaking, philosophy. American feminist poetry, especially during the seventies, challenges convention in its choice of language and topics; in situating themselves on the boundary, energized by shared risk-taking, reflected back and forth within inter-textual lyrics, the poets, H.D.<sup>vi</sup>, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, and Susan Griffin, bridge an abyss between two worlds, one foot in each—the domain of established institutions, on one side; the diaspora of an untamed “Society of Outsiders” (Woolf, *Three* 127), on the other. My choice to focus on their poetry occurs within the context of a growing swell of feminist academics, boundary-crossers themselves, frequently both literary critics and creative writers: composers of a new intermingling of literary with personal criticism.

As literary critic Leigh Gilmore explains, some academics “are producing personal criticism, a hybrid combination of scholarship and life writing and memoir proper” (*The Limits* 1). My own methodology models itself upon these feminist academics’ adoption of the hybrid form of literary criticism, in order to demonstrate not only how the poets under consideration also share in this propensity for cross-genre creations, but, additionally, to illustrate how decades of feminist poetry’s influence on one reader results in the construction of a tripod: literary memoir, conventional literary criticism, and literary criticism blended with personal reflection. This inevitable breakdown of genre stands as the logical outgrowth of a communal decade, the nineteen seventies, the era of living the feminist mantra, “the personal is political.”

Whether as poets, critics, or law professors, major feminist minds define themselves in unusual, even unexpected, ways—“disloyal to civilization” (*On Lies* 275), in Rich’s words, and daring to write in non-academic voices and styles, even within academic texts. Why would these literary critics risk careers merely to mix personal writing into their articles and books? University of Michigan law professor Catherine A. MacKinnon, the Special Gender Adviser to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (The Hague) since 2008, may offer one clue in her article “Are Women Human?”: a brave response to the sexist language of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She states, “Objectivity is the methodological stance of which objectification is the social process” (5). In claiming “objectivity,” one authorizes oneself to objectify those others one deems to be one’s subjects. But is “objectivity,” in actuality, a hoax, in some crucial sense? The poet Susan Griffin would seem to say it is inadequate, at least, in expressing deepest knowledge, in *Made From This Earth: An Anthology of Writings*; she argues poetically that *feelings* carry valuable messages that rational argumentation cannot convey, in the following:

In the process of writing a poem, one is moved, and is moving, and moves. The words one writes find feelings in oneself, and these feelings find words of their own, which in turn locate other feelings. In this way, slowly, step by step, a knowledge buried in the body comes to consciousness . . . We cannot live without reason, but reason can become too muscular and thus insensitive and incapable of knowing. (248)

Let us imagine then that subjective experience may possess more validity than it has been given in its current status as mere anecdotal evidence. A visceral response to a poem may, at times, call for a new way of responding “objectively” in criticism. Feminist theorists and poets have found each other, in part, through a shared medley, not completely irrational, of expressing how, paradoxically, the personal represents collective concerns. Paradox plays its own part, even in rational thought: an accepted technique, even in Aristotelian rhetorical strategy. I find it perfectly reasonable for otherwise scholarly individuals to hunger for inner details, for a subjective nitty-gritty of things, for the experiential crux of the matter. Hence, it makes sense that scholar and poet Susan Gubar offers a definition of a *subjectivity* expanding upon itself within the constantly metamorphosing context of collective versions: “multiple versions of particularized subjectives” (*Critical* 132). This *citizen-is-polis* concept may even have the added benefit of fortifying second-wave feminist theory against persistent, misleading accusations of essentialism.

My intention is to incorporate two distinct genres into my methodological strategy for the purpose of increasing the transparency and the truthfulness of my document. In this blended stylistic approach, I am preceded by two decades of feminist literary critics practicing mixed genre scholarship. Definitions, specific academic practitioners, and examples of this *new* style of feminist literary criticism will be woven into the contours of the first chapter as it unfolds. The same is true for the layered defining of the multifaceted paradigm of *erotic mysticism*—periodically elaborated upon by the poets themselves in definitive examples from poetry and nonfiction—enfolded into the initial and all ensuing chapters. In addition, choosing the topic of twentieth century American feminist poetry, especially key works written in the 1970s, was not arbitrary. It actually chose me: a choice that demanded my attention, having evolved out of decades of studying and engaging intimately with poetry as a genre. I hope that the dissertation’s individual literary critical and creative writing chapters will make clear, through expanding upon early ideas set forth, that my centralizing of a political poetics of *erotic mysticism*, in particular, is well-served by my blended genre methodology; after all, this hybrid approach arose largely as an organic response to these influential poets’ works. Indeed, their insistent lyrics shaped not only my inner world but also the course of my life.

Another way of describing the form this dissertation adopts, in order to best illustrate its claims, is that of collage, positioning itself on a feminist line between New Critical theory of organic unity (Cleanth Brooks) and hybrid form. Crossing the threshold between literary criticism and personal writing, within the boundaries of one text, is an inevitable outgrowth of the second-wave feminist movement’s questioning of all restraints on expression, all separations between objective and subjective. If the personal is political, subjective expression then has the potential to be inextricably related to objective analysis of literature, power, and reality. Therefore, in presenting my critical analysis of seventies literature juxtaposed with chapters of personal memoir, my purpose is to offer a historic, subjective document of a past time and place: an era whose continued impact—despite its having been much disparaged as essentialist from

many quarters—on current literature and society can be seen in the proliferation of literary memoirs by women during the past twenty years. I contend that women’s major role in producing the extraordinary explosion in the memoir genre should be examined and understood within the context of its having occurred in the wake of seventies feminist poetry; in other words, the latter’s contribution to elevating the literary status of *subjectivity* opened the floodgates, so that today a major feminist tributary remains active in the personal writings of feminists such as Jamaica Kincaid and Mary Karr.<sup>vii</sup>

## II. Setting Fire to Hypocrisies

In *Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (1999), Susan Gubar comes to the defense of seventies Anglo-American academic feminism, after its having been subjected to severe criticism, beginning with Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, in 1985, and continuing throughout the nineties. Since Moi divides feminist literary criticism into two categories, Anglo-American (a term which she coins) and French, she then takes the opportunity to rank them—despite social constructionists’ reputation for possessing a distinct distaste not only for essentialism and totalizing but also for binaries—judging the European discourse as superior in all ways. Gubar goes on to chronicle the onslaught of harsh denouncing that targeted her and other second wave feminist critics for having published allegedly essentialist, classist, racist, totalizing and universalizing works, but she also draws support from Columbia professor and well-known critic Marianne Hirsch, for aide in describing “the barrage of criticism” aimed at them “throughout the nineties” (13). Indeed, according to Hirsch: “There is a certain generation of feminist theorists who have really gotten it from all sides, and I don’t just mean criticized, I mean trashed” (“Practicing Conflict” 364-65).

This reductive climate seems to have continued throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century in some quarters of academia and certainly in mainstream popular culture as a whole. In making this point, I draw upon my own current experience in teaching first-year composition and world literature courses at a large, state university. Upon first entering my classroom, most students generally think more highly of the decade of the fifties than of the sixties. Not *one* knows the actual meaning of *Ms.*, and many are certain it means a divorced woman. Terms such as *woman*, *we*, *I*, and *feminist* have fallen out of fashion. In other words, the atmosphere generated by feminist seventies poets comes far closer in temperament to that of Virginia Woolf’s fiery integrity than to Camille Paglia’s clownish disingenuity. Hence, one way I choose to set a theoretical context, both for my dissertation’s blended methodology and its discussion of erotic mystical feminist poetics, is to call upon Woolf’s words, in *Three Guineas*: the latter text, originally appearing, as it did, after all, as recently as 1939, only three decades prior to seventies verse. She exclaims:

Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let the daughters . . . dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let the mothers lean from the upper windows and cry, “Let it burn! Let it burn! (43)

Satirically invoking daughters to destroy institutions and paradigms that have historically excluded them, Woolf—in a paradoxical spirit of great fun and prodigious earnestness—insists upon the importance of generational loyalty in creating literary and social change.

My early alliance with my own feminist foremothers, who worked tirelessly for the institutional and literary changes from which I have profoundly benefitted, necessitates that I remain loyal to the specialty of feminist literary criticism—even as I observe the term itself go in and out of style, as it certainly has over the duration of the past three decades. What comes to mind for me is a line from a poet-novelist with a keen knack for truth-telling: “I *cannot* live without my life!” (E. Bronte 130). Indeed, the spirit of risk-taking evidenced in Bronte, Woolf, H.D., and second wave poets and critics continues into the nineties, and beyond, in experimental methodological undertakings of a number of feminist literary critics such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Susan Gubar. Something quite enterprising did appear, then, within the context of the academy’s strict requirement for objective scholarship; arising in the nineties as a possible alternative mode of feminist literary criticism, its advent is interpreted by Gubar to be a “creative historical response” to all the dissension within the ranks. She further observes:

When ‘we’ became as impossible a word as ‘women’ for feminists, the ‘I’ emerged in new modes of critical writing, though ever tentative because so attentive to its lack of sovereignty, given its highly localized point of view. . . . [A]utobiographical criticism [might solve the dilemma for some non-theory feminist critics.] . . . If poststructuralism had discredited any notion of an imperial subject engaged in a master or metanarrative, if identity politics thwarted any one sort of person representing other types of people, a host of feminists could circulate multiple versions of particularized subjectivities in their own micronarratives. (*Critical Conditions* 132)

Producing these “multiple versions of particularized subjectivities,” through “new modes of critical writing,” represents, I maintain, an honest effort on the collective part of these feminist critics to sustain the seventies binary-collapsing message of mending and healing the old androcentric, establishment divide between personal and political.

It is additionally noteworthy that this same decade, the nineties, produced a major surge, a renaissance, in publications of non-academic women’s memoirs as well, including well-crafted works such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*, Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club*, and Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*. Although I agree with Gubar’s intriguing point, I would like to add that the autobiographical poetry of second-wave feminist writers paved the way, I believe, for the unprecedented rush of women choosing not only to write, but also, more importantly, to compose literary works of worth, within this memoir genre. This is not to say, however, that the genre’s purpose is limited to self-definition, which sounds suspiciously like narcissism to some. As for feminist literary criticism in this hybrid subjective-objective vein, I would argue that this collective feminist impulse to write herself into literary criticism was a move directed more outwards towards cultural and social change than inwards towards a merely introspective or isolated “confessional” act. A continuation of the pithy *personal is political* philosophical underpinning, in other words, sustains their experimental forays.

Fortunately, I unknowingly joined this throng of memoirists and critics, when, in 1993, I sat down in tall, olive grove grasses outside a classic blue and white Cretan cottage on the island’s rocky, southern shore facing Africa and began spontaneously writing a five hundred page memoir manuscript: the logical result of three decades of immersion in poetry, the women’s movement, an elite education, and a working class, Appalachian, Scotch-Irish, masterful storyteller of a grandmother, Ida May. The two creative writing chapters, chapters two and four, included in this dissertation, are excerpted from this memoir manuscript, then, suitably

sandwiched between conversant literary critical chapters centered on the life-shaping poetry that inspired my unexpected memoir's birth abroad.

### III. Reclaiming the Wild

Reclaiming the *wild*: a serious endeavor for a feminist posse of 1970s poets—Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, and Susan Griffin—who form a diverse, lyric movement<sup>viii</sup> of wild-thinking poets. The word *wild*—a living metaphor—morphs new meanings under their touch: *erotic* revealed as not merely sexual but as the moment of perceived sensation, the senses providing knowledge in glimpses of mystical connectedness among infinite life forms—the earthly ineffable source of creativity. Yet this metaphoric, erotic-mystical wild concurrently galvanizes practical action, beyond the texts' providing of political definition, into specific, life-affirming—personal-wedded-to-cultural—transformative actions. For these writers, speech is a form of action, inciting further action, only if rooted in a passion for change that Rich, I contend, in speaking for them, in “Coast to Coast,” names as “the passion of the speechless / driving” their impassioned “speech” (*A Wild* 7).

*Wild* meant, in Adrienne Rich's vision, “disloyal to civilization” (*On Lies* 275). “There are many forms,” she writes, in 1978, “of disloyalty to civilization” (296). Yet, such a literary politics demands, Rich discloses, in “Integrity,” what she brilliantly calls, “a wild patience” (*A Wild* 1), a disloyal departure from American civilization's *puritan* patience—devoid, as the latter is, of elemental vitality; it was, she writes, a paradoxical “wild patience,” after all, that had taken her this far. And far, she was, from the young poet of the early fifties, lauded by W.H. Auden, for well-behaved lines that knew their place. The *patience* called for in the late seventies charges her to sustain the fortitude needed to fight—alongside her feminist “companions / of the flame” (H.D. *The Walls* 521)—a fierce poetic-political battle against any future production of objectifying misrepresentations of women. This fight also embraces, she states, in “The Images,” re-labeling the “falsely named / faces of every past” (*A Wild* 5)—the female clay figurines, for example, that have been reduced by archeologists' and historians' museum tags to mere *fertility* deities; hence, “the war of the images” (5) that the speaker declares, includes erasing and replacing misogynist depictions of “our bodies strung / in bondage and crucifixion” (3) on “the queasy electric signs” (3) in pornography districts.

The poet names herself “a woman starving / for images” (5), hunger driving her to the point, no less, of choosing the mantle of activist warrior, whose mission is to fashion a new world, new language, and new consciousness of ardent, “clearheaded tenderness” towards silenced living beings. Erotic mystical images, “exuberantly budding” (*The Dream*, “Twenty-one” 25), washed clean of objectification, are as defiantly ordinary as stones, weeds, and “sycamores blazing” (14). Yet paradoxically, these exuberant materializations survive “rooted in the city” (no fantasy of escape to pastoral meadows), positioned on the frontlines, in order to overpower visual propaganda with something much vaster—primarily, as of yet, to be imagined: creative acts that will re-assemble the fragmented pieces of “half-born wom[e]n” (“Upper Broadway” *The Dream* 20). Out of an erotic mystical political vision, images of hope and possibility are born: “We are the thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower / each to each” (“The Images,” *A Wild* 98-99). Thus, a line heavily influenced by H.D.'s imagistic imaginings in *Sea Garden* ends a poem that maps out the “war of the images”—objectifying versus life-giving, pornographic versus erotic. The work of these particular poets is laid out for them here by Rich; they are warriors for the erotic, against reductionism. Their task, then, has been to define, poem

by poem, refinement upon refinement, what constitutes the erotic. In doing so, they will be defining *integrity*, the title of another poem in the same Rich volume. Furthermore, arriving at this *true* definition requires traveling to the edge of word possibilities where mystical language meets up with sensual: a place all five poets know well and articulate poetically, “each to each.”

One could easily argue that such a vision of two women together is idealized and impossible to sustain in the real world. Indeed, Marjorie Perloff is bluntly dismissive of any feminist positives whatsoever coming from Rich’s nature vision in a related poem of that era, “Transcendental Etude” (*The Dream*). Perloff has grave concerns about linking woman with nature; in fact, she is so disturbed by *this*, above all, that she seems not to see the masterful homage to sheer lyricism the poem quietly enacts. This is lyric poetry at peak beauty. I think we need to allow for the possibility that its celebration of female affinity with nature combined with its tribute to female folk art may actually serve as openings to notable, future feminist poetry and unprecedented stylistic discoveries by women. Must women align themselves with sterile intellect only, in order to compose transcendent etudes that emancipate? I should hope not. The issue is not whether womankind is closer than mankind to nature. The issue is that these seventies poets herald, and engage in, the inception of a massive re-writing of woman’s kinship with the natural world—exploring to determine precisely what that connection might involve, seeking to discover its possibilities; as the poets demonstrate within these same poems of re-claiming and re-visioning natural connections, they concomitantly value the active female intellect and its products. The poets’ point is that the two worlds need not be conceived of as separate.

None of us can envision what life would be like without this culturally constructed, false binary in place. On rare occasions, though, poets attempt to dream of wholeness, and may even write deliriously anticipatory lines: “a whole new poetry beginning here” (Rich, “Transcendental” 148). Rich is no more essentialist here, for seemingly excluding men from her visionary landscape, than Olson and the homosocial Beat poets of the fifties were essentialist in constructing their androcentric movement. Rachel Blau DuPlessis observes in *Jacket Magazine* that even though the Beats “constructed a dissident and analytic subjectivity on the periphery of their culture, including critiques of masculinity . . . simultaneously they claimed the powers and privileges of normative manhood” (“Manhood”). Yet no one questioned their exclusion of women, carried out in a manner similar to the increasing erasure of these second-wave poets in academic discourse and classrooms. Contrast, then, the Beat poets’ collective dissident, yet privileged, masculinities, with one, lone, feminist poet’s break with poetic convention in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” written around the same time, 1959. The poem’s closing lines reach prophetically towards the future of a sisterhood of poets whose insubordinate lines would carry—a philosophic poetic creed that brings the subjective right out into the public more translucently and paradigm-shifting-ly than ever before. They ignore Eliot’s call for concerning oneself as a poet with an “objective correlative” that cleanly divides subjective personality and feelings from poetic persona; however, their intermittent use (though to different ends) of handy fragments is a poetic technique arguably inherited from modernism’s tilting towards narrative disruption: Eliot’s land of scattered ruins, for example, his speaker can only hope to have “shored” up against (“The Waste Land”). Suddenly, though, the weariness of waiting for their historic moment of truth dissolves in the flood-burst of Rich’s, Lorde’s, Grahn’s, and Griffin’s blade-sharp inventiveness: bold new angles on defining a poem and its pathway to freedom. Rich writes in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”:

Well,

she's long about her coming, who must be	more
merciless to herself than history.	Her mind full
to the wind, I see her plunge	breasted and glancing
through the currents	
taking the light upon her	at least
as beautiful as any boy ( <i>Snapshots</i> 24)	

A mind open to natural elements—reduced to a static image, formerly, of a carved female bust on a ship's prow—can no longer be boxed in by labels. Such a re-claimed mind-body coupling is not to be oversimplified, minimized, and objectified by historic false categorization. When the object awakens from the dead, she now authors and enacts her own course; “breasted” and “palpable,” embodied, meaning at one with elemental “wind,” “currents,” and “light”—*matter* inextricably tied to air, water, and fire—in spirit, she appears. Rich's stark new style of free verse matches a newly defined “beautiful” girl, *both* flashing the bravado traditionally associated with “a boy”: “merciless” to the false, lacy trappings of socially constructed femininity and formal verse. A charge of essentialism leveled at this poetry, as I heard from various budding critics and theorists, at the 2009 National Women Studies Convention, seems beside the point. As the editors of *The Essential Difference* clarify, in their introduction, “To the extent that to be a feminist is to be committed to change through collective action, the issue of biological fixism is a red herring; what really matters is what is the best strategy for bringing about change” (Schor & Weed xiv).

What remains radical about these poets, in the end, is precisely their strategy: a staunch refusal—both publically and poetically—to join those hollow processions that march onward towards Armageddon. Thus, they have heeded their foresister Virginia Woolf's proclamation: “Let ‘freedom from unreal loyalties’ then stand as the fourth great teacher of the daughters of educated men” (*Three Guineas* 90). Loyalty to their shared cause, which necessitates a shared poetics, prevails, nevertheless: a real fidelity to an experiential model of “brilliance” generated through “the musing of a mind one with her body,” and “experienced” with crafting milkweed, seaweed, words and ideas to form a “stone foundation,” which merges in and out of the “rockshelf further / forming underneath everything that grows (Rich, “Transcendental” 76, 77): that anchors shared understanding—practical, yet, mystical. H.D.'s “spiritual realism” echoing here in Rich's lines. The lack of this animal warmth is what Rich had mourned, in *Diving Into the Wreck*, when she wrote, “The tragedy of sex / lies around us, a woodlot / the axes are sharpened for” (“Waking” [3] 1-3). This is *tragedy* precisely because it fails the authentically erotic; the splintering of trees that have already been needlessly felled continues the seemingly endless cycle of progress, destruction, profit, and consumerism—“the world” that “is too much with us”—that even Wordsworth himself mourned, although, historically, he lived too early to fathom the full extent of the horror.

Significantly, this Wordsworthian, romantic lineage of viewing nature as an equal is central to the erotic mystical ethos of H.D., Rich, Griffin, Lorde, and their kind. Anna Swir (1909-1984), an astonishing erotic mystical poet, could easily have been included in my study. Note, for example, the dazzling integration of spirit and flesh in the following lines from *Happy as a Dog's Tail*, translated by Czeslaw Milosz in 1985: “It was fleshy as a belly of a woman in labor / and spiritual / as a number” (72). This lyric movement *is* eco-feminist, at its core. All of

these poets strive, through their verse, to keep the natural world from further disaster. To affirm life. It is true that their poetic attempts at articulating woman's often dormant, yet deep, efficacy, as being rooted in consciousness at one with the body, is equally an embracing of the earth and a call for active conservation. The latter could well be the creation of a poem that raises awareness, or, better yet, stirs a reader's recognition of her own knowing. Such poets remind, broadcast, *and* whisper intimately one's forgotten, collective, and personal acumen. Mysticism should not be confused with essentialism. The latter belongs to science; the former does not. But these poets are not elite citizens of an esoteric cult. Listening attentively to the subtle pulsations of the broad earth, the ground that all bodies belong on, stands apart, in a deafeningly loud, sensationalizing, tech-driven era, as nothing short of a political act. In their shared philosophy, these poets define a sense-knowledge involving an immanence, real only within the context of a focused, disciplined intellect fiercely attuned to all that is living. Audre Lorde writes, for example, in *The Black Unicorn*:

and the rocks cry out  
while we tell the course  
of each other's tongue  
with stones  
in the place where the priestess  
hurtled out palm-nuts  
from enchanted fingers ("Timepiece" 69)

It is left to Rich to put into words a wider definition of erotic loss, after naming that there *is* indeed a tragedy; she does exactly that "naming" in a book curiously omitted from a number of online listings of her oeuvre, yet one which contains what to me is her magnum opus, "Transcendental Etude." It is in this definitive work *The Dream of a Common Language* (1974-1977), combined with the volume that follows it chronologically, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1978-1981), that one can discern Adrienne Rich's amplest definition of erotic mysticism: both a far more numinous and paradoxically ordinary philosophic vision than any existing in the philosophical line stretching from the Marquis de Sade through Nietzsche to Foucault and Judith Butler. Yet of course Rich is not a philosopher per se. Nonetheless, it is the accent Rich places on ordinariness that releases her "transcendental" from any similarity to Nietzsche's Superman ideal or Butler's dislocating performativity, smacking of what Rich would call "theatricality / the false glamour cast by performance" ("Transcendental" 89-90).

For Rich, the *ordinary* harbors an immanent transcendent; in a sense, there is no divide, then, between the "low" art of piecing quilts into a masterful design, embroidering grand tablecloths and the "high" art of composing etudes. Ultimate value exists, in part, within the active creative process (itself inseparable from artifact) as the path, the *Way* (Lao Tzu, *Tao*), of an erotic, life-nourishing, consciousness synchronously mystical in its pleasures; this state of *awareness* sustains a non-hierarchical ethics, containing "animal thoughts" ("Twenty-One" X. 5) not placed at odds with refined communication. Such awareness centralizes a truth-seeking dialogue still grounded in the flesh. Yet the finished artwork still matters. In spiraling, continuous loops of exchange, this art demonstrates to the initiate that the listening ear, senses-and-intellect one with each other, attuned to commonplace etudes—"bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps" as the intuition aligns with executive functioning—informs singing, weaving, and composing.<sup>ix</sup> ("Transcendental" 153). Nothing is sacrificed except the "false glamour" of a stale

heaven. Put another way, the poem's transcendental elemental realm does not abandon immanence; the corporeal refuses to be corrupted and objectified by *power over* schematics: protection, as described in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, is "the thorn-leaf guarding the purple-tongued flower / each to each" ("Images" 98-9) from degradation. This protective sheltering, integral to the erotic mystical paradigm, dwells also in the latter's refusal to fragment background reality: "the rockshelf further / forming underneath everything that grows" ("Transcendental" 178-79).

Rita Felski, in contrast with Marjorie Perloff, applauds Rich and Griffin's texts' ready embrace of nature as an ally of womankind's freedom march, when she lauds what she calls

the Romantic feminist text . . . which has expressed the most forceful condemnation of existing social values. . . and [in which] a longing for unity and wholeness springs from a recognition of the destructive effects of social fragmentation and erosion of community. The Romantic desire for a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature reemerges as a highly relevant and by no means outdated theme as the potentially catastrophic effects of ideologies of progress . . . have become increasingly apparent. (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 148)

Therefore, in assessing Rich's longing for wholeness represented in "The Images," it would be wise to at least recognize that at a pivotal time in recorded feminist history, a female poet expresses this particular deep-seated desire. Rich invokes a collective rising up against art and culture that erodes and fragments a sense of female integrity. From just such an impassioned reclaiming of her right to this integrity (whatever that may begin to look like), she dares to dream that both accurate and galvanizing imagery could spring forth—so that, at last, emerging from the rubble obscuring self-recognition, Rich, post-transformation, feels "washed clean / of the guilt of words" ("The Images" 64-65): freshly bathed of the same grossly erroneous words used by those who shattered and defaced by means of their inaccurate representations across millennia. *Her* own creations, having benefited from the speaker's newly awakened consciousness, will ultimately replace the lies and silence with cleansed words that "reassemble re-collect re-member / themselves" (88-89).

Words themselves, then, possess a kind of living intelligence that only need be freed by an intuitive touch, to find their own "fundamental" way—like iron particles to a magnet—into mystical sensual alignment with each other. Like the subtle bodily sensations set off by the sounds of ancient Sanskrit, carrying meanings beyond the intellect's grasp, such meetings of words can unearth new insights. The gift to the attuned reader is a rare moment of healing that reverberates beyond the personal, uncovering an inner authority: an authority, receptive to and mirroring the speaker's own, to be drawn upon for further radical transformation into advanced being-ness that becomes far more effectual in the world, than had been formerly the case for her in this "unmothered" (Rich "From an Old House" *The Moment* 8) corporate society. Rich, as literary daughter to Woolf, becomes a mentor and intellectual mother to Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn and thousands of other women, globally, who would attest to this.

It is significant to note that mere psychotherapeutic healing lacks the potential to incite unified social change in the way a fiery poetics can. Such poetry's capacity to ignite readers' passions can move them to collective action. Indeed, these writers share a fierce dedication to change, even digging into words and phrases to find the elemental, gyno-centric beginnings of

language. This major characteristic of seventies radical feminist poets will be further developed in later chapters. Like the female miners in Rich's poem "Natural Resources," conscious women labor to uncover and preserve the wisdom unearthed from erotic mystical places, "the emerald lying against the silver vein" (60), aware both that "gentleness is active" (63) and that these poets and thinkers are the ones whose work must somehow continue to "reconstitute the world" (67).

*Wild* was also the metamorphosing and unknown woman that word-wielding feminists were intentionally becoming, amidst the grit of the everyday. This woman strips down to *wild*, discards the mask, Lorde writes, in "The Women of Dan Dance," "of service with a smile / while the blood runs / down and out" (*The Black* 14): cloaked by urgent discourse and invention, swaddled by a multi-colored banner. Like Blake's Rintrah, wild things roared and flew. With Blakean energy, radical female poets surged forward, in a historic flash, broadcasting direct, confrontational lines such as the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (*Sister* 112).<sup>x</sup>

#### IV. Hybrid, Blended, or Auto-critical: Naming the New Cross-Genre, Feminist Literary Criticism— Scholarly Objectivity Meets Personal Memoir

Honoring Lorde's legacy as well as that of H.D., Rich, Grahn and Griffin, I have fashioned my dissertation as a collage of four academic chapters of literary criticism and four related personal memoir chapters. Each critical chapter is positioned as a prelude to the creative writing chapter directly following it; the personal material thus forms a nonconventional interlude, which, in turn, introduces yet another methodologically conventional chapter. In this manner, objective text is interrupted by subjective text, and vice versa, to construct, through methodology itself, an ironically postmodern design. Additionally, I intermittently analyze either lines or lyrics by other relevant, feminist poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Anne Sexton, Pat Parker, Diane Wakoski, Marge Piercy, Mary Oliver, Margaret Atwood, Olga Broumas, and Anna Swir. Most feminist poems selected exemplify the erotic mystical paradigm.

"One way to resist cultural imperialism, suggests Young, is for members of oppressed groups to create their own images that challenge the dominant norms of virtue, beauty, rationality, and coherence, to dispel stereotypes of themselves," contends Jean Dykstra in "Putting Herself in the Picture" (18). Sharing the autobiographical temperament of second-wave poetry and prose, the candid works of contemporary memoirist Kay Jamison, M.D., function to dispel stereotypes. A leading psychiatrist, researcher, academic, and a coauthor of the standard medical text on bipolar illness as well as a writer of highly regarded mixed genre texts, Jamison disclosed that she "had found discipline and a harsh optimism from living on the edges of sanity" (181). She, in fact, uses the experience of her own mental illness combined with her scientific knowledge to complicate and expand our understanding of both manic depression and the possible uses of language; this, in turn, with its continuing reverberations, advances the cause of women. In defiance of the pervasive casting of academic women, in particular, as *mad*, *scattered*, *crazy*,<sup>xi</sup> Jamison draws especially on stylistic inventiveness, blending rational with irrational, within her various mixed genre works. Positioning herself as the subject of her own objective/subjective study, she writes analytical sections in imaginative, poetic prose, even emerging as heroic in an anti-heroic age. Somehow the symmetry, she creates, between abstract and concrete affords her "a harsh optimism," in the end.

My argument, then, favors the philosophical viability of women writers' hard-won truths expressed in lucid poetic and prose "letter[s] to the world" (Dickinson "Poem 441" 211). Autobiographical novelist Dorothy Allison also favors the feasibility of second-wave writers' outlook. In a moment of disappointment and disbelief, she questions how it was possible that postmodernist texts had replaced voices of writers such as Rich, Lorde, and Grahn; baffled, she points out, "What made me a feminist were occasional glimpses of my real life on the page" ("Notes to a Young Feminist"). Clearly, this writer feels, neither nourished creatively nor moved to act by the complicated linguistics and theories of postmodernism and of Judith Butler's texts, especially. According to Allison, the *common language* dream of seventies feminist theory has been cast as overly emotional, subjective, essentialist, universalizing, and classist by many recent theorists. Still, some academic feminists join Allison's voice in resisting the new fashion. Somer Brodribb, for example, states the following: "A danger with poststructuralist analyses, however, is the tendency to depoliticize the women's movement. . . . as the existence of any reality beyond the text is denied by poststructuralists" (4) This poststructuralist theory could not be more diametrically opposed to second-wave poetry's philosophy. Additionally, certain nineties academic, feminist poet-critics demonstrate their alignment, both consciously and unconsciously, with the second-wave outlook, through their own stylistic breakthroughs; their new blended forms continue to validate the personal, bringing together, within one academic text, two historically opposed genres. Critic Diane P. Freedman states that cross-genre writing resists silencing by postmodernism's dismissal of the personal; nineties academic, feminist poet-critics "speak about refusing to be silenced, not only historically and by patriarchy in general, but within the privileged enclave of academia and its discourses. . . . Such writers refuse to deny their many voices" (5). Perhaps the best argument I have encountered that attempts to expose feminist postmodernism's alarming conservatism is that of Oregon State University philosopher Bonnie Mann. She writes that it

distinguishes itself . . . by defining itself over and against the 'essentialism' that would have any notion of 'nature' at all. . . . [T]his position seems to see persons as without relation to the natural world. . . . This amounts to a reiteration and reinstantiation of a prior and long-standing foreclosure that has accompanied Western philosophy since its inception . . . [This freedom from] the material world . . . depends on a fantasy of a world made of consciousness—now [called] discourse . . . This dramatic reversal, where the earth is dependent on us but we are independent of the earth, is perhaps the quintessential metatheory of Euro-masculinist philosophy" (82)

Thus, in contemporary philosophical terms, Mann clarifies how by implication the philosophy of the earlier feminist poetry, which she values as embodying truth, continues to be highly relevant.

Feminist literary critics have been experimenting with the merging of critical/creative forms for more than two decades now. Elaine Showalter's early, groundbreaking "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" contains the following thoroughly researched synthesis:

Feminist criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic's body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form. Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "Washing Blood," the introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Studies* on the subject of motherhood, proceeds, in short lyrical

paragraphs, to describe her own experience in adopting a child, to recount her dreams and nightmares, and to meditate upon the "healing unification of body and mind based not only on the lived experiences of motherhood as a social institution ... but also on a biological power speaking through us." . . . Such criticism makes itself defiantly vulnerable, virtually bares its throat to the knife, since our professional taboos against self-revelation are so strong. When it succeeds, however, it achieves the power and the dignity of art. Its existence is an implicit rebuke to women critics who continue to write, according to Rich, "from somewhere outside their female bodies." In comparison to this flowing confessional criticism, the tight-lipped Olympian intelligence of such texts as Elizabeth Hardwick's *Seduction and Betrayal* or Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* can seem arid and strained. (*Critical Inquiry* Winter 1981 189)

While it is by no means my wish to write criticism that "makes itself defiantly vulnerable," baring "its throat to the knife," I am nevertheless guided and influenced by the "innovative style and form" and ironically postmodern methodology of the scholar Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In decades subsequent to Showalter's article, DuPlessis's literary critical essays open up new genre possibilities, notably, for example, in her landmark essay, "For the Etruscans," which, according to Kay Hawkins, disrupts the entire field of representation with its diverse writing forms and topics" (Wallace 177). DuPlessis's work "[b]y turns—and sometimes all at once—autobiographical, critical, cultural, ethical, and poetic" (177) sets a precedent for any subsequent scholarly-creative collage of critical, cultural, autobiographical, and literary observations. DuPlessis, Hawkins claims, "demonstrates the importance of continuously rewriting an empowered female self into history and interrogating the entire field of representation by," among other things, "questioning the notion of 'pure' criticism, the claim that language is neutral, claims of objectivity" and "normative writing conventions" (Wallace 177). Diane P. Freedman, moreover, explains that she chooses to write of a "paradigm shift that is still in progress" (44). This shift away from strictly conventional scholarly methods towards cross-genre writing is modeled, in Freedman's view, by the American feminist poet-critics Grahm, Griffin, and Rich [and I would add Audre Lorde].

This shift to cross-genre writing is ideally suited for critically addressing the works of the second-wave poets, the originators of this feminist blended style. The blended critical approach that I adopt offers tools for identifying the presence of a major component of seventies feminist poetry. That component, the twentieth century emergence of what I call a feminist *erotic-mystical* poetic paradigm—a sensory yet conceptual formation—is illustrated through a host of related renderings, primarily by the five main poets under consideration. Their works dig deep into unmined territory, affording the empathic reader glimpses of a "rockshelf underneath everything that grows" (Rich "Transcendental" 183). On this rockshelf, their poems congregate to form a life-affirming meeting place, a shared haven from an encroaching wasteland; within this communal cave of sustenance—wherein primary connections link similar political missions—they chart new linguistic paths and expand lyric personal-and-political frontiers. Unlikely hope-filled moments arise in their earth visions and transformational literary politics.

While this dissertation focuses on a literary subject in one specific century and nation, the topic invites allusions to other times, places, and writers. On this global rockshelf, I join a chorus of writers and critics working towards dismantling what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie

calls “the single story.” In her well-known 2009 *TED* online speech, “The Danger of the Single Story,” Adichie warns of dangers lurking in reading and hearing only the old, narrow canon of works, merely one type of story, poem, novel, film: whole nations and generations of readers thereby brainwashed into mimicking circumscribed representations of human possibilities and reality. *One* “single story,” for example, is the all-pervasive tale of hierarchical dualisms: mind over body, spirit over nature. In contrast, I am proposing the existence of and movement towards definitions of an alternative paradigm—that of *elemental* or *erotic mysticism*—which appears to have roots in, and draw early definition from, assorted global literary works across the millennia, its tendrils sometimes arising out of and reaching into unlikely places. The past four years of reading and teaching world literature have increasingly affirmed for me that the connections I propose do indeed exist poetically and thematically in multiple cultures, ages, varieties, and versions. In this dissertation, I will sometimes refer to these as erotic mystical works: a 4000 year old Sumerian masterpiece, *Inanna: Lady of Largest Heart* (translated 2000 C.E. with a preface by the poet Judy Grahn) and written by the earliest known poet, the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna; the sixteenth century B.C.E. genderless Master in *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, translated by Stephen Mitchell; a 2000 year old Indian work, the *Bhagavad Gita*; thirteenth century Persian poetry of Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi, and the British Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Keats).

My own cross-genre approach chronicles a lifelong pursuit of defining, in various genres, the life-affirming *erotic mystical* paradigm. In defining erotic mysticism as a body-mind experience, one might think of it as a sensual gateway swinging open into deeper awareness, articulated through particular instances of lyric language by the poets under consideration. Susan Griffin, for example, sings majestically:

[A]ll that I know, I know in this earth, the body of the bird, this pen, this paper, these hands, this tongue speaking, all that I know speaks to me through this earth and I long to tell you, you who are earth too, and listen *as we speak to each other of what we know: the light is in us*” (*Woman and Nature* 227).

Attuned to the heart of living matter, listening, the enlivened senses function as an avenue to consciousness, rarefied yet immanent, which, in turn, invigorates the senses; one might consider, for example, Woolf’s “moments of being” as rare signposts leading to Griffin’s expansive and pervasive moments of being. In modernism these moments were more constricted, encroached upon, as they were, by the waste land. Philosopher Mary Daly joins Griffin in creating spacious realms of embodied consciousness (*Pure* 357). Woolf’s profound influence contributed to Daly’s abrupt departure, during the early seventies, from conventional philosophical methodology—evident, I would argue, in this philosopher’s expansion of “*being-ness* moments” into a vast panorama of constant *background* reality (*Gyn/Ecology*). I turn, accordingly, to Daly’s formulation of *foreground* and *background* realities to further contextualize the *erotic mysticism* paradigm, and for a useful way to describe the cognitive upheaval and radical transformation into new ways of thinking, shown in the works of seventies feminist poets. In contrast with background reality, the coexisting foreground endures as a coarse, boring domain of perpetual violation through *objectification; consumerism; environmental destruction; excessive “objectivity”; erasure of subjectivity; reductionism; and obsessive-compulsive fetishizing behavior and thought*. So-called authentic knowledge in this Orwellian foreground domain can

only be erudition that is *tedious, convoluted, barren of spirit, empty of feelings, and devoid of imagination*.

Occurring simultaneously with this lockstep foreground existence, background reality can be detected welling up through cracks in the waste land's systematic, citational grid, its mediated knowing—deep glimpses promising an ever-accessible, opposing realm of consciousness that remain dangerously obscured by cloudy foreground superficiality. Background—a multi-dimensional place of *integrity and connectedness; of embracing nature and honoring life; of humor, silliness, and playfulness*—provides *dynamic wildness*, a vital energizer for daily maneuvering through routine, “civilized” viciousness. It is a place where inner knowledge may be frequently touched upon, in deceptively simple words such as these by Anna Swir (1909-1984): “Happy as no matter what, / as any no matter what / Happy / as a dog's tail” (“Happy” 8-12). Swir's levity is not to be confused with Judith Butler's playful, yet seemingly noncommittal, performativity. Whereas performativity, according to philosopher critic Martha Nussbaum in “The Professor of Parody,” is treacherously apolitical, the purposeful jolliness, disseminated through World War II Polish Resistance activist Anna Swir's lyric, arises in a context of anti-fascist political poetry composed by a woman almost executed at one point. In fact, the speaker's ebullient outlook, which I call *erotic mystical*, is arguably the diametrical opposite of dismissals—such as those in the minor theatrics of random, performative acts—of the possibility for significant social change. A much warranted *hope*, however, for the dissolution of foreground reality, through calculated, life-affirming expressions and actions, is fundamental to an erotic mystical paradigm.

Although I first encountered erotic mysticism in poetry, it did not feel accidental that the philosophy of Daly's fourth book, *Pure Lust: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1984), appeared right on schedule with the direction my own intuitions, ideas, and emotions had been taking—as if even the title *pure lust* had been generated by an interwoven web, comprised of poets, thinkers, or *spinnners* (as Mary would say). Already the language I draw from, here, begins to place me in an awkward relationship to conventional academic discourse, particularly to the jargon of postmodernism. Already my choice of words stigmatizes. Yet as Rich writes in the concluding sonnet of “Twenty-one Love Poems,” “I meant this . . . to stake out / the circle . . . I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle” (5, 9-10, 15). I choose, then, to recall that it felt as if Daly's title had been inexorably spun from a collective maelstrom of spiraling insights, ideas, and experiences of a deep-seated, feminist historic moment; thus, time, place, and shared consciousness colluded to form the speaking, hearing, and arousing of this text's material existence: a wild-logical expansion.

At this point, I want to note that critic Morny Joy's comparison of Daly with Irigaray adds an unexpected, elucidating twist to the so-called abyss between the alleged American-feminist essentialism conundrum and the “high falutin” (Allison 1), respectable (mostly Continental) postmodernist anti-essentialism solution :

Daly is also in agreement with Irigaray on the passionate nature of this undertaking [that of women's pursuit of freedom]. Indeed, Daly's book *Pure Lust* (1984) is a paean to the wild and willful embracing of life by women in quest of Be-ing. Lust is appreciated as a primal life force and is a reformulation of the classical notion of potency (potential). For Daly, lust is no longer an impersonal concept but an animate power imbued with the vibrancy of women striving to

express their own experiences. It is not constrained by the alienating abstractions that dictated classical oppositional modes of reasoning. (Joy 105)

Daly's linguistic strategy of redefining the old, clichéd oxymoron *pure lust*<sup>xiii</sup> becomes, then, in and of itself, an inherently political act. Passionate "striving to express" oneself outside of the tottering binary paradigm, but within a newly articulated time and space, draws attention to itself; witty, spellbinding, such intelligent-erotic verbal expression sloughs off crass, pornographic connotations. Fresh meanings emerge, insisting on recognition.

For those who prefer meaning over meaninglessness, there is much to be salvaged from the second wave's collective and poetic personal-political movement. For unlike postmodernist scholars' propensity for divorcing language from political action, feminist theorists Daly, Rich, Lorde, Griffin, and Grahn meld language to political action. Relativism does not take hold to disembowel their thinking; rather, specifying details of decussated, experiential identities, including their differences as forming essential angles like leaves whose small stems intersect at ninety degree angles, despite having unshared origins. Yet they stood like nerve branches defining precisely what in essence is essentially shared: they liberated themselves through unearthing promising, formerly unnamed, interconnections. In other words, women (yes, we were indisputably *women* during that former era) were driven neither by sameness nor difference but by our shared passionate hunger for change felt in the marrow of our bones. Here, at our most impassioned moment as poets and activists, is where ironically we become nineteenth century romantic thinkers as opposed to modernist or postmodernist. It is accurate then to say that we sought out the words of feminist poets and wrote ourselves because we still believed truth could be found in poetry. "Until we find each other we are alone," states Rich ("Hunger" 25). Why, today, should anti-essentialism militants silence, distort, and even erase our words? Words, yes, that carry feminist truths; "truths," I argue, we are still, even as Rich declares,<sup>xiii</sup> "salvaging from / the splitting-open of our lives" ("Transcendental" 86-87).

Referring to Joy's previously cited passage, in which she compares Daly with Irigaray, note how it raises certain troubling questions for current-day postmodernist readers. The first of these is the pesky question of essentialism. Are seventies feminist poets essentialist theorists? The very "term essentialism," observes British critic Alison Assiter, "until recently took on the status of a term of abuse. To be guilty, according to some, of 'essentialism' was to commit a cardinal sin" (22). The second query, the question of dualism, is<sup>xiv</sup> simply the misguided impression, among some current critics, that Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and postmodernists, in general, have already thoroughly disposed of dualism, leaving no occasion in these critics' view for what they would label dismissively as the silly, metaphysical romanticism displayed in Daly's verbal inventiveness. These responses are serious and understandable; nonetheless, feminist critic Somer Brodribb, writing in *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, puts these academics' lofty flights from essentialism and dualism, under a dismantling floodlight. She argues that "the problem of dualism—reason/emotion, nature/culture, mind/body, and male/female—are inappropriately resolved in postmodern/ poststructuralist theory through a denial of female difference" (*Nothing Matters* 3). In her view, postmodern theory merely furthers the paradigm of mind/culture's separation from and dismissal of body/nature. Thus, Brodribb arrives at the following conclusion:

[R]ather than dismantling these binary oppositions, the deconstruction of the category 'woman,' which is central to such theories, actually represents the

ultimate triumph of reason over emotion, culture over nature, and mind over body. Postmodern theory ‘claims to lift identity right off the skin, the body . . . The mind will no longer need to make reference to body in its identity claims; unchained at last from the sensations and limitations of the flesh (4)

In contrast, the poets under discussion honor the inextricable relationship between sensations and cognition in an egalitarian union of emotion and reason. In *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich declares, “We write from the marrow of our bones” (29).

Along the same lines, Barbara Christian warns us, as early as 1989, in “The Race for Theory,” of the “takeover in the literary world by Western philosophers from the old literary elite” (620):

Critics are no longer concerned with literature but with other critics texts. . . . [T]hose, [the New Philosophers], who have effected the take-over have the power . . . to be published, and thereby to determine the ideas they deem valuable. My folk [African Americans] have always been a race of theory—though more in the form of hieroglyph, a written figure which is *both sensual and abstract* [my emphasis]. . . . The pervasiveness of this academic hegemony is an issue continually spoken about—but usually in hidden groups, lest we, who are disturbed by it, appear ignorant to the reigning academic elite. . . . [In fact, this] theory . . . has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature (621-622).

Such silencing is tragic and enraging. Silencing of women of all colors, classes, and sexual preferences is precisely what a significant number of seventies feminists had labored to expose and end.<sup>xv</sup> Thinking and feeling along the contours of a stark realist, Barbara Christian declares, “But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my life. And I mean that literally” (628). Passion of this intensity cannot be ignored, and I dare say she speaks here for many feminist writers with deep roots in the sixties Black Arts Movement or even in the seventies Women’s Liberation Movement. How else could we have dared to risk breaking normative silences? In her classic *Silences*, socialist feminist Tillie Olsen urges women into fiercer understanding: silence is the enemy. Adrienne Rich also speaks against silence in the very title *Of Lies, Secrets, and Silences: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, as does Susan Griffin in *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge Against Nature*, and Audre Lorde exhorts women in *The Black Unicorn*: “So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (“A Litany For Survival” 42-44).<sup>xvi</sup> Silencing comes in many forms.

## V. A Radical Complexity

I recall that my mid-to-late seventies, non-academic, study group, which met at our various apartments in Berkeley, was comprised of a brainy mix of Jewish, Buddhist, and formerly protestant, working and middle class, women: a “gaggle” (Daly *Wickedary* 54) of assorted young women keen to be analyzing feminist issues, inside or outside of the academy, yet with seriousness, rigor, and dedication. We read *anything* feminist, especially books hot off the press. Race and class were issues we included in our gender analysis, but without any sense of angst or abjection<sup>xvii</sup> about centralizing gender. In fact, some of us had come from Marxist

backgrounds and others from race work. To talk about our own experiences and ideas—as if they mattered in the larger scheme of things—energized, inspired, and even kept many women from despair.

As our knowledge expanded, we felt bound by an infrangible duty to follow this rugged path of compassion for women; politics and ethics were understood to be ideologically inseparable in our work. Need I say it? Not for a minute was our thinking so superficial as to conclude that *all* women’s experiences and concerns were identical; we knew we each, individually, had barely begun to imagine, at last, the full dimensions of her own capacity to speak for herself alone. But, within that historical context, was *that* imagining not itself a reason for amazement? Adrienne Rich, in “What is Found,” explains pointedly how the complex inter-relationship of our samenesses and differences was an ideal held central in our mind’s eye. Admitting to some difficult moments in her twenty- year friendship with Audre Lorde, for instance, Rich chooses not to commit a lie of omission:

We also debated, sometimes painfully, the politics we shared, and the experiences we didn’t share. The women’s liberation movement was a different movement for each of us. But we knew our common passion for its possibilities also held us in dialogue. (*What Is Found* 169)

And we also trusted, I would add, that all, yes, *all* women shared common experiences in some crucial ways: domestic violence, rape, incest, pregnancy, and in the vast majority of cases less land, money, and political power than men possessed—the list goes on. Frankly, it did not take fancy theories to reveal that to us; common sense made it all too obvious. As a respected spokeswoman for movement women, Rich promoted an ethics of “clear attempts to listen to and account for diverse women, all of whose voices make up a ‘radical complexity’” (*On Lies* 227). A “radical complexity” names accurately the intermingling and differences of ideas voiced in my own activist study group’s weekly meetings.

All of us were scraping by on very little money, attending graduate or law school, and on fire about feminism. What else would have brought us together voluntarily every week to engage in additional studying? Nothing short of a massive paradigm shift, a revolution; more accurately put, a global *transformation* was in the making. Elaine Showalter’s introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, & Theory* contributes to the group effort of conveying accurately the mood of the era: “Feminism spoke to our lived or our literary experience with the fierce urgency of a revelation or a Great Awakening. . . . It was an intellectual revolution, charged with the excitement of violating existing paradigms and discovering a new field of vision” (5). We were bent upon finding the exact language, and Rich clarified for us the inadequacy of the word “revolution”:

[T]he word ‘revolution’ itself has become . . . a dead relic of Leftism . . . [T]he ‘revolution’ of a wheel which returns in the end to the same place; the ‘revolving door’ of a politics which has ‘liberated’ women only to use them. . . . When we speak of a *transformation* we speak more accurately out of the vision of a process which will leave neither surfaces nor depths unchanged. . . .” (“Power and Danger” 8)

My point here is not to defend. It is simply to complicate the difficult conversation surrounding what feminists were up to in the seventies. If the young women in that little group had been told that someday their entire generation's efforts would be *totalized*, *essentialized*, and *dismissed* as irrelevant by certain factions of gender and queer studies' women and men—perhaps even more vehemently than by mainstream critics—they would not have believed this. As Susan Gubar unswervingly explains, in 1999, “[C]urrent conceptualizations may not always help us to distinguish feminist from misogynist claims” (“Feminist Misogyny” 136).

**Chapter Two**  
**Musings of a Mind at One with Her Body**  
 I. Journeys: A Passion for Poetry

My own interest in the erotic mystical theme began while writing an undergraduate thesis on Keats, in 1975; next, migrated abruptly, in 1976, to settle among contemporary American women poets, and, finally, set sail from British and American shores, in recent years, to arrive at continents, authors, and times, in far-flung places. On an alternate and equally satisfying journey, I might have stayed near home in my investigations and still found plenty of *other* stories, as American Emily Dickinson did, when she writes lines, both sensual and enchanting:

Wild Nights – Wild Nights!  
 Were I with thee  
 Wild Nights should be  
 Our luxury!  
 .....  
 Rowing in Eden—  
 Ah, the sea!  
 Might I but moor – Tonight  
 in Thee!  
 (*Poems* 249 114)

Invisible, unpublished— her erotic mystical “luxury,” her language feast—was possible, in a room with a shut door in Amherst, Massachusetts. Yes, Dickinson, did say to her niece that “freedom” was in her room (Rich “Vesuvius” 158). And, as Rich reflects, “Probably no poet ever lived so much and so purposefully in one house; even in one room” (158). However, as the poem reveals, “rowing” and stationary “mooring” would be Eden, the collapse of dualism: poet, *woman*, as both “home and wanderer” (Rich “Transcendental” 76). As Rich’s words indicate, it is not until the twentieth century that a renegade poet takes that next leap outward into the wide world, having found within herself the balance—domesticity and worldly adventure hand-in-hand—that constitutes a life free from dependency:

I am the lover and the loved,  
 home and wanderer, she who splits  
 firewood and she who knocks, a stranger  
 in the storm . . .  
 (75)

Though Dickinson, unlike her countryman Whitman, would never be permitted by circumstance to wander the nation, perhaps her lifelong seclusion was, ironically, a gift of enforced, invisible sacrifice to us; for had she not lived in such narrow confines, most likely her poetic syntax would not have attained the concentrated intensity of its tightly compressed lines with angry, ecstatic, ironic, discordant dashes, nor would her semantics have contained quite as subterranean a subject as its current charts of vast internal landscapes no other poet had recorded so exactly: so much so that Adrienne Rich would call hers “a mind capable of describing psychological states more

accurately than any poet except Shakespeare” (“Vesuvius” *On Lies* 167). Unpublished, on the whole, during her lifetime, her work did not attain full visibility until the 1950s.

“Visibility,” however, “is in itself a radical achievement,” according to Australian critic Dr. Devlin-Glass in *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred* (8). In the early twentieth century, traveling beyond her own narrow, American house, modernist poet H.D. explored Greek and Egyptian shores—though, as with Dickinson, public visibility itself would continue to slip away across decades. A rare poet’s poet, her epics unfortunately remain largely invisible:

Be firm in your own small, static, limited  
orbit and the shark-jaws  
of circumstance  
will spit you forth  
(*The Walls Do Not Fall* 514)

The steadfastness, the firmness, the speaker advocates, is strictly a matter of choice; choosing to persevere, despite externally imposed limitations, suggests levelheaded faith in not being swallowed up by darkness. Hence, one’s capacity for fierce endurance pays off: being “indigestible, hard, unyielding,” (42)—killing, as Woolf advised, “the Angel in the House” (“Prof.” 1385)—“so that, living within, / you beget, self-out-of-self” (*Walls* 514). H.D. was “firm” in her commitment to writing and eventually the “shark-jaws / of circumstance” had “spit [her] forth,” when her writings, accompanied by a comparable avalanche in literary critical attention for the past forty years, were brought back into print by feminist demand in the 1970s (514).

Precise language, an offshoot of her firmness, conveys wild “spiritual realism” (537) rooted in “the lines of the human body,” which “may be used” as an approach to “the over-mind or universal mind” (*Notes* 47). Thus, to access higher states of consciousness, an artist’s body functions as a finely tuned instrument, producing rarefied, yet practical, lyricism:

I go where I love and where I am loved  
into the snow  
I go to the things  
I love with no thought of duty or pity  
(*The Flowering* 578)

She “thought” of the human body *and* the fruit tree as

receiving stations, capable of storing up energy, over-world energy.  
That energy is always there but can be transferred only to another body or  
another mind that is in sympathy with it, or keyed to the same pitch . . . we  
cannot have spirit without body (*Notes* 47-48).

To H.D., this is “the mystery of Demeter, the Earth mother” (*Notes* 52). Notice here the name of this Greek deity: DA (earth) Meter (musical measures, matter, mother). In short, nature plus culture plus mother combines in this name; hence, a deity emerges whose potency resembles that of Inanna or Yaweh. Absence of a Cartesian split here renders absurd even the thought of culture emanating from Her/her.

Note, in addition, how similar the cultural cost of losing ancient Sumerian Enheduanna's cuneiform writings is to the cost of early loss of one of the Homeric hymns. This was tragic for Western culture; this lost poem, "The Homeric Hymn to Demeter," contains within it the only mother-daughter myth to emerge from ancient Greece. Only relatively recently, in 1777, the hymn of Demeter and her daughter Persephone was discovered in Moscow, taken there after having been found, oddly enough, in a Russian stable among chickens and pigs. In her name itself *mental* power is wedded to *generative* power. Two goddesses and their two myths of culture and nature are inseparably interwoven. Interestingly, the mind of Odysseus, though curious and clever, never encounters Demeter, since Homer intriguingly omits her (as anything more than an allusion) from his cast of alluring sirens. It would have changed Western history, of course. A powerful mother-daughter team to match father-son might have disrupted the epic's storyline and given women mythic options beyond sex and obedience.

The significance of this rebirthed Greek myth, however, can be felt in the works of the second-wave feminist poets. Arising from the dead, the cave, the daughter Persephone brings new life: fresh thoughts ascend from deep darkness into expansive light—*movement* out of stillness. A chthonic goddess, for love of whom, her mother could have destroyed "the entire race of humans" (lines 309-310). Persephone comforts like Susan Griffin comforts her dying mother in "The Eros of Everyday Life" (*The Eros* 89). The erotic mystical poetry inspired by the Eleusinian mysteries, associated with this ancient mother-daughter pair, streamed across three generations of poets from H.D. to Adrienne Rich to Susan Griffin. Recognizing herself as both "home and wanderer," Rich sings an etude praising a process of poetic "composition that has nothing to do with eternity," with splittings, but "only with the musing of a mind / one with her body." ("Transcendental" 77). Such a mind discovers attunement, in her wanderings, to what one feminist philosopher describes as "pure lust." A lust, at once cerebral and sensual, *for* life: anti-objectifying imagery. Similarly, Keats envisions pecking about the gravel with the sparrows, writing, "O for a life of Sensations, rather than of thoughts!" ("Letter to Benjamin Bailey" 234). Again, he writes, "O fret not after knowledge - I have none, / And yet my song comes native with the warmth" (*Collected* 9). In like manner, Griffin imagines in "The Eros of Everyday Life," a plum as lover. Eros, earthly or sensory love, is raised in stature, in both romantic and second-wave poetry, through merging opposing binaries.

Likewise, San Francisco Bay Area poet Judy Grahn emboldened herself and women with her own verbal inventions of union between spirit and body—her own "mind inside nature"—defining, in one 1972 poem, what the erotic is *not*; in this instance, by stringing together emphatically, a Whitman-like catalogue, she demonstrates how the "enemies" of the archetypal "She Who" draw from an avalanche of misogynist labels to crucify the archetypal *She Who's* spirit. Ironically, through chanting terms originally meant by the crucifiers to degrade, "a whore, a whore / a fishwife a cunt a harlot a harlot a pussy [. . .] you black bitch - you white bitch - you brown bitch - you yellow bitch - you fat bitch," she disrupts meanings; hence, the poem begins to temporarily erase the pornographic power to shame and silence, even as it pounds home its unsettling, guileless message of the destructive abundance of hate language handily available with which to degrade femaleness. Such potent revelations lead to more revelations and possible burgeoning, freedom-seeking creativity, which I can recall we thought, with all our youthful fervor, would never go away. We were transforming the world, word by word: "Failure is impossible," Susan B. Anthony had surfaced, only recently, to assure us.

Beginning with the yoni. The Sanskrit yoni <sup>xviii</sup> unto itself, like H.D.'s Greek vision—less than three decades prior to Grahn's—inspires a record of the apparition's realness. A vision

which leaves H.D. knowing, she proclaims, that all artistic renderings of female divinity across time fail to reveal Her “truthfully,” especially insofar as their having failed to depict the concept-shattering truth of Her supreme and solitary self-sufficiency (*Tribute* 44): “[S]he bore / none of her usual attributes; / the Child was not with her” (567). Almost as if in a visual response to H.D.’s call, ceramic representations of echoing autonomy materialize by artist Judy Chicago, in 1978. One day, under a radiant blue sky, *The Dinner Party*, Chicago’s visual rebirth of historic heroines, opened in San Francisco, in part, to trumpet the full capacity of the erotic to blot out porn’s flatness. To those present at the opening, this art show’s imagery was aligned with the words of radical poets, theorists, and Berkeley women strategizing in study groups to crumble dehumanizing images, to erase lies of non-existence, to reclaim and rename, and to salvage private body places. All this was intended to make political as much as aesthetic statements, define meanings, literally stake out spaces, construct ourselves—through our own tangible articulations—public in our own terms. Our personal erotic mystical creations built to defy the two before-mentioned bogus choices of binary reductionism. In stepping towards defining an erotic mystical paradigm, a maverick coterie “walked away / from the [endless revolution of] argument and jargon in a room” (Rich “Transcendental” 76): argument, for example, between right-wing moralism and left-wing defiance.

So, too, Judy Grahn heralded-in the event, reading her working class poems from her book *The Work of a Common Woman*, “My lover’s teeth are white geese flying above me / my lover’s muscles are rope ladders under my hands” (113). Her plain, brawny, anti-romantic language rescued us from Sara Teasdale’s girly imagery, and Edna St. Vincent Millay’s dangerously seductive emotional intensities. “Romantic thralldom,” DuPlessis calls this mind-forged manacle and worn-out trope. Rich would later poetically declare her intention “not to suffer needlessly.” The false erotic removes energy from the living of life: our searing intellects, authentic feelings, originality with ancient origins. The women in the audience had been raised, like our foremothers before us, ignorant of all this. Even for us, there was no cable television, no internet, and no cell phone. in *The Journey is Home*, we had learned *deep* listening from feminist theologian Nelle Morton, who writes, of “a depth hearing that takes place before speaking—A hearing that is more than acute listening—a hearing that is a direct transitive verb that evokes speech—new speech that has never been spoken before” (205). Through this deep focus we were hearing each other into being. We took each other very seriously. We awaited each new book by our poets and theorists, in order to know how to live our lives as intellectual and political revolutionaries. Like each poem by the radical poets, each ceramic plate by Judy Chicago was not anything we had ever seen or imagined before; we moved contemplatively, analytically, and reverently along the borders of the symbolic triangular table, shaped like the ancient Indian female yoni itself—a table set, place by place, with Chicago’s sculpted vulvas: Virginia Woolf, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony. Dinner plates.

Twenty-Two years later, Grahn wrote the foreword to *Inanna: Lady of Largest Heart* in which she observes Inanna’s paradoxical characteristic of “the mind inside nature” (Meador *Inanna* xvi). The invisibility of Sumerian hieroglyphic tablets until the twentieth century means that throughout recorded time, the world, uninfluenced by the first recorded literary work, wrote a different story from what it might have written under its influence: this ancient narrative, in which at least this one grown girl, the priestess writer Enheduanna, knew herself as big. Big enough to write her own personal story as an allegory of human experience. Inanna, vaster than Greece’s Zeus, as fierce as Jerusalem’s Yahweh, as sheltering as Nigeria’s Yemeyah, star of the sea. Written by the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna, 2300 BCE, its translation in 2000 CE

created fresh ground beneath what is visible and known in the literature of our globe. What jolted me upon first reading Enheduanna's raw descriptions of her goddess Inanna was the sheer volume of Her beingness as reflected in the priestess's inner life. Here was Jehovah's match. Located everywhere. Like him in all-encompassing vastness and specificity. Such a match had not been possible to experience until Enheduanna's 4,300 year old clay tablets emerged from the sands, fifty miles from Baghdad. Because of the skill of the writer, who has been called the Shakespeare of Sumeria, one may experience a shift in consciousness while one reads the poet's devotion to her deity.

In a flash of realization, her three-dimensional image, the images built upon images, integrated into a fluid realness for me: a visceral, conceptual, and paradigmatic experiential shift. One paradigm was swallowed up and absorbed by another. I also simultaneously felt it as the world rising off the page, so that my sense of self was not the same. I became entitled for the first time. It was an amazingly freeing and belonging feeling. I existed in a more important way and without a trace of shame. In her "Foreward" to Betty de Shong Meador's translation of the ancient cuneiform verse by the Mesopotamian poet Enheduanna, Judy Grahn describes this "philosophical story" as "sacred and profane" (xii). Sacred sensuality is non-existent in both Greek and Judeo-Christian paradigms. The senses are by definition profane and dangerous to the higher faculties: mind and soul. In the storm-tossed words of Shakespeare's mad King Lear:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
Though women all above; But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiends';  
There's hell, there's darkness, there's the sulphurous pit,  
Burning, scalding, stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!  
(*King Lear* 4.6.6)

Women, by nature, the old paradigm propounds, are sliced at the waist into two parts: half angel, half devil. Granted that the protagonist is insane, it is still a revealing exercise to glance at the contrast that British Renaissance Christian imagery forms with that of the following ancient Sumerian pagan metaphors:

Queen of all given powers  
unveiled clear light  
unfailing woman wearing brilliance . . .  
my queen of fundamental forces  
guardian of essential cosmic sources  
you lift up the elements  
bind them to your hands  
gather in powers  
press them to your breast  
.....  
swollen flood rushing down the mountain  
You are Inanna (171).

Light, brilliance, yet also simultaneously muddy, elemental: the hands, the breast, the swollen flood. Meador writes, "In these devotional poems, we see that the very being of this Goddess

infuses and vivifies all nature and natural processes. She is the divine in matter” (Meador 7). The 4500 lines by the priestess Enheduanna, describing Inanna, are “the oldest written litany of the characteristics of the active feminine principle in nature—known as Shakti in India” (Grahm xvi). Active Shakti surges up the spine, according to the ancient yogic texts; she is both body and spirit, erotic and mystical, simultaneously: the life force itself. This electric force appears again in Taoist China about 1700 years after Enheduanna’s works.

Opening the window is a choice to live a Taoist life. “The soft overcomes the hard”: so says Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, approximately 500 B.C. E. Contrasted with Confucian hierarchical rites and rigid practices, the philosophical Taoism is an egalitarian world of fluid, sensual borders. “Know the male / Yet keep to the female,” (42 line 12) teaches Lao Tzu, for example. One critic, Anne Baring, explains: “The Taoists never separated nature from spirit, consciously preserving the instinctive knowledge that life is One” (Baring 40). The following passage defines an erotic mystical outlook similar in significant ways to the one that typifies the 1970s feminist poets<sup>xix</sup>:

Taoist tradition never lost the shamanic understanding that relationship with Nature was the key to staying in touch with the source of life. They never followed the ascetic practices of other religions which sacrificed the body for the sake of spiritual advancement. They were never in a hurry to reach the goal of union with the divine or to renounce the world for the sake of enlightenment. Of all the religious traditions, with the exception of those of the First Peoples, they were the only ones not to split body from spirit, thinking from feeling, so losing touch with the soul. They never became lost in the mazes of the intellect and its rigid metaphysical constructions but, through patience and devotion, were able to realize the difficult alchemy of bringing their nature into harmony with the deeper harmony of life. (Baring 10)

Out of the four major second wave poets this dissertation considers, it is in the poetry and philosophy of west coast born and raised, and lifelong Berkeley resident, Susan Griffin, that this Taoist perspective becomes most clearly evident. Griffin’s ecofeminist concern for the natural world is expressed as passionately in the non-fiction writing of *The Eros of Everyday Life: Essays on Ecology, Gender and Society* as it is in the poetry of *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. She writes of the relinquishment of “a sense of the natural coherence of life, the textured complexity of implicate meanings which braid together every moment of existence,” for Americans now live in a “civilization disconnected from the weave of nature” (“Beyond” *The Eros* 141-42). Indeed, the “erotic relationship which binds all existence has been erased by a masculine ethos,” Griffin argues, and “violence, particularly the violence of warfare comes to replace this eros” (142).

Indeed, Griffin’s title *The Eros of Everyday Life* creates paradox: *mundane* is enjoyable; she thereby completely redefines sources of *pleasure*. Now the simple tasks of *ordinary* life become *sacred*, even as *erotic* is re-visioned as *pure* rather than *profane*. She writes, for example, “When the divide between the sacred and the profane falls, everyday life is graced and all that is holy is heavy with vitality” (Griffin 151). This collapses a tradition of fragmentation—mind from body and heaven from earth. The “everyday” or ordinary is no longer relegated to inferior status but elevated to divine sensuality. Sensuality itself is elevated to sacred status, overturning the concept of spirit as superior to, and separate from, the body.

Reaching back in time, one discovers in Griffin and her sister poets' verse a link with Rumi's thirteenth century lyrics, marked by a sensual mystical awareness: "Open the window in the center of your chest, / and let the spirits fly in and out" (Barks *Essential Rumi* 35). This is *specific* naming, personal and universal matter, yet beyond words: "your chest," *the* center, one location for an organ, the human heart literally and metaphorically. A window in a chest belongs to, by implication, a house: the body. Intimate flesh vast as spirits flying, warm yet airy: the erotic mystical here-and-now promises some momentary paradise in this life, if, as Blake writes, six centuries later:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age
  2. Energy is the life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
  3. Energy is Eternal Delight.
- ("The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" 35-9)

How oddly similar Rumi's impulse is to Blake's. Clearly, the erotic mystical paradigmatic connection between these ancient poets and second-wave poets is strong.

## II.Changes Elemental and Minute

To continue addressing the nature of my methodology, I would add that one might argue that the entire dissertation itself constitutes a memoir insofar as writing literary criticism that engages with texts that one also read and analyzed in an earlier time potentially produces a form of palimpsest; current layers added can be peeled back to show the views of an earlier self, though overlaid and complicated now by fresh understandings. Some appreciation must necessarily remain for the self (or selves), and her ideas, that one was in a former time. I have always turned to poetry to analyze life; as a critical thinker, my most ardent thoughts have arisen in the moments between lines and words of poems. It is there, in those reverberating silences, I have made my home since early childhood; inside those structures, my "fullest concentration of energy is available to me . . . to all the parts of who I am, allowing power from particular sources to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition" (*Skin Deep* 82). As Adrienne Rich elucidates, while reflecting across the range of the various essays included in her 1966-1978 prose collection, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, "A journey of this kind is not linear. . . . I trust the contradictions and repetitions. . . . I find in myself both severe and tender feelings toward the women I have been" ( 17-18). I have travelled to unexpected places also in my thinking, yet what I unfailingly return to is what has always appealed to me in the works of these poets and theorists: their rigorous allegiance to life itself as the central value of their works.

Love of life instills an erotic mystical ethos into their aesthetic and political sensibilities as demonstrated in the poetry and non-fiction alike. Thus, it is striking that Rich concludes the prior-mentioned anthology's "Forward," assuring the reader that only that which is "useful" has been included in this volume. A realist, similar to H.D., as much as a mystic, she has no interest in wasting our time. By and large, we were a practical bunch: all newly created theory—the poets seemed to intuitively agree—must be related to practice. Not simply poetry practice either, but actual ways to transform the world. Yes, every minute of every day was focused on replacing

the old crumbling systems with the freshly invented: the “leafbud / inching towards life” (Rich “Upper Broadway” 41). Hence, Lorde titles an essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” She trusts that its readers are largely members of the community of those seeking genuine answers to current language and social dilemmas: “part of the effort to define a female consciousness, which is political, aesthetic, and erotic [sic], and which refuses to be included or contained in the culture [pornographic] of passivity” (Rich *On Lies* 18).

The “most prevalent form of feminist poetry, the lyric narrative, is more often than not quiet, even prosaic, in its details and form, and yet in the majority of cases combines personal reflection and expression of feeling with contemplation of collective concerns” (46) states critic Kim Whitehead in 1996. This poetry of feeling and collectivity should not be viewed as merely confessional. British critic Jo Gill writes that the “received history” of twentieth century “American poetry is the history of a movement from an impersonal, modernist aesthetic to a personal, lyrical, confessional narcissism and onto a cool self-reflexive, linguistically sophisticated postmodernism” (83). To lump together feminist poetry of the 1970s—at the volcanic apex of these poets’ lyric uprising—and label it *confessional* is a reductive, misleading, and pathologizing gesture, yet one all too common among postmodernist critics.

A more accurate label for this style of poetry would take into account the social, cultural context: personal feelings and experiences were the necessary fire fueling political tropes and measures; for indeed, the general agreement that secured particular female poets together across race and class, within that brief decade, was the shared consciousness that the personal is political. Rich describes the burning intensity of this group commitment to seeing and articulating together, “our own forces so taken up and shared / and given back” (50-51), in a 1974 poem—dedicated to a Russian women’s climbing team—in precise terms: how, she says, “our minds” together “imprint” the “mountain,” even the obstacles to our climb altered forever:

through changes elemental and minute  
as those we underwent  
to bring each other here  
choosing ourselves each other and this life  
(*Dream* “Phantasia” 5)

Such hope and heroism proclaimed in a bleak, icy landscape surely does not strike all readers as the dangerously essentialist, despite the grave concerns of Marjorie Perloff in her harsh reflections on *The Dream of a Common Language*. Glimpses of hope, even in the death zone, are also found in H.D.’s *Sea Garden* and epic *Trilogy*; in Grahn’s long masterpiece “A Woman is Talking to Death” in *The Work of a Common Woman*; in Lorde’s *The Black Unicorn*, and in Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*.

None of these poets thought of herself as essentialist, nor concerned herself with that category as an issue that could threaten future assessments of her work, because all of them regarded the meaning of *woman* as, thus far, largely undefined, until they, experientially above all, defined themselves. Women everywhere in patriarchy, they agreed, were devalued on the basis of femaleness. Not always everywhere to the same degree and in the same way, but always somehow devalued, nonetheless. What was most essential was to *name* our experiences, an immense task, and to confront and overthrow cultural restraints. If this experience included feelings of closeness to nature, then nature was on our side and could be drawn from as an ally in making the monumental social, psychological, cultural, aesthetic and scientific transformations

needed for freeing ourselves. The androcentric culture had always found ways to reduce, distort, or dismiss what women wrote, so why, in Seiboulisa's<sup>xx</sup> name (Lorde), would we be worried about expressing views that would be used against us? Any views we expressed could serve that function. Why should we automatically adopt their system of valuing mind over nature, anyway?

All five poets my dissertation focuses upon could be classified as ecofeminist writers, and, as such, their sophisticated manner of articulating an affinity with animals, stars, sun, rivers, and meadows lends them an intellectual astuteness. Current worry about essentialism, with an accompanying dismissal of an entire movement, strikes me as yet another way to erase women's voices. Working class Judy Grahn, Jewish Adrienne Rich, African American Audre Lorde implicitly and explicitly valued women's intellects in speaking to each other's works; their words reached a primarily female audience, both in academia and in the world at large: *primarily* because that is the audience that listened. Some, such as myself, lived by their words. At the heart of their incendiary poetry flows an erotic mystical politics that saturates their texts with a profoundly life-affirming philosophy but is also just as concerned with including in its tenets the affirmation of female intellectual rigor and adventure; such rigor is necessary within the context of a "savagely fathered" world inhospitable to women's braininess, so that too often, as a consequence of such harsh reception, Rich's puts it, a "thinking woman sleeps with monsters" ("From an Old House" 214; "Snapshots" 22).

However, I did have the good fortune to either cross paths with, work with, or study with numerous cutting-edge feminist thinkers, writers, and leaders of that era, including Paula Gunn Allen, Lynn Campbell, Mary Daly, Judy Grahn, Sally Gearhart, Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Bonnie Mann, Cherrie Moraga, Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, Linda Scaparotti, Ellen Scott, and Luisah Teish.<sup>xxi</sup> I offer my ideas and recollections as an open window through which to glimpse some of the exuberance, fiery energy, hunger for knowing, and sheer creative genius that many of us shared with each other, forming academic and non-academic political, productive, creative, and emotional alliances in that extraordinary time.

Many contemporary theorists have travelled as far from mysticism as possible in their thinking. This brings to mind Freud's stance on H.D.'s mystical visions as recounted by this poet-memoirist in an autobiographical book, *Tribute to Freud*. Yet ironically if mysticism is to be defined as that which cannot be easily expressed in words, surely much of what the most abstract theorists, from Derrida and Lacan to Foucault and Butler, are attempting to convey cannot be readily expressed in language. We can agree at least that there is much protracted wrangling over the meaning of what they are saying. In commenting on Butler's texts, Martha Nussbaum writes, in "The Professor of Parody," "It is difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are. . . . Mystification as well as hierarchy are the tools of her practice, a mystification that eludes criticism because it makes few definite claims" (2-3).

I find myself, both as critic and creative writer, closer to Nussbaum's thinking, while hers, in turn, strikes me as more akin to the feminist theory of the poets themselves—H.D., Rich, Lorde, Griffin, and Grahn (all of whom have also written noteworthy non-fiction works)—than to Butler's disembodied abstractions. Indeed, each poet's integrally inter-related poetic and prosaic conceptualizations share striking similarities with theoretical underpinnings of the other poets' texts, providing more evidence for my claim that these women comprise a feminist movement of poets. Additionally, their cutting-edge poetic-philosophical movement was at one with the radical actions of grassroots American feminists of that era, and, in a pre-digital age when the globe seemed large and even Europe seemed remote, the majority of academic and

non-academic American feminists alike found the elite French writers impossibly esoteric, tangential to the pressing task of creating “a common language” (Rich); hands-on ideas arose in houses, streets, country sides, and class rooms of the United States. Far closer in disposition to Whitman and Williams than to Eliot and Ashberry—at odds in many ways with the soon-to-be popular continental critics and queer theorists—these second wave lyricists traded-in esotericism for mysticism; thus, in semantically and syntactically combining the tangible with a dynamic and mysterious life force, one central likeness that permeates the works of these five writers is what I came to call, by 1982, their *erotic mystical* quality.

Paradoxically, it is this permeating thread that links them, nevertheless, with the work of at least one French feminist, Helene Cixous. After I had begun adopting the phrase *erotic mysticism*, Sandra Gilbert refers<sup>xxiii</sup>, in *Rereading Women*, 2011, to Cixous’ “fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political that sometimes seems to characterize” this French theorist’s “thought” (85). And I am certainly not alone in wanting to keep alive and to further develop a plain-spoken brand of feminist criticism. Sandra Gilbert wrote, in 1999, of the danger of all feminist criticism being “engulfed in the clamorous tide of ‘discourses’ . . . if you dislike specialized or difficult terminology, you seem to be a know-nothing” (*Rereading* 89). Martha Nussbaum, in addition, contributes to the debate, when, in “The Professor of Parody,” she writes, “[W]hat feminism needs, and sometimes gets, is a subtle study of the interplay of bodily difference and cultural construction. And Butler’s abstract pronouncements, floating high above all matter, give us none of what we need” (8). Gilbert’s and Nussbaum’s words can be better understood, I think, if read within the context of an exhilarating, poetic literature that had been developing through an increasing collapse of binaries, affording glimpses of erotic mystical union. Both of these academic thinkers grew up as thinkers, in part, I propose, reading just such works. As if offering direct approval of Nussbaum’s disapproval of Butler’s transcendent language cut off from the senses—positioning women, for example, in intellectual roles that involve strange word-games, seemingly at odds with both nature and political actions—Audre Lorde’s ferocious, gentle words come to mind: “I did not come from the sky / I / nor descend like a plague of locusts . . . and I do not come like rain / as a tribute or symbol for earth’s becoming” (“The Women of Dan Dance” *The Black Unicorn* 14). In the first line, she asserts she is not spirit only, like a Christ descending from heaven. On the other hand, she quickly adds, in the last line, that she also defies traditional objectification of women through associating them with nature only. Yet, paradoxically, she goes on later in the poem to disclose that her spirit encompasses nature but does so on her own terms; in other words, acting as her own agent and author—and as a woman lusty in spirit, actively “spreading” life-affirming “laughter and promise,” with “dark heat / warming whatever” she “touch[es] that is living” (15), she perfectly exemplifies her own definition of erotic mysticism as stated in the following from her well-known essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”:

we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to the world of flattening affect . . . The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge. . . . Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. . . . I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

T.S. Eliot's citational collage, *The Waste Land*, offered poets and critics alike an invitation for radical departures from unified form. In his own version of idealism, Eliot imagines the stature of past masterworks as carrying an inviolable intactness, only insofar as wholeness is formed from out of their combined textual relatedness to each other: their allusions mirroring and extending each other's tropes, adding dimensions of meaning, within the unfolding unity of time. "Eliot saw no progress in the history of literature; it doesn't improve, its bodiless corpus only grows and changes," according to poet-critic Geoffrey G. O'Brien (1). Without internal allusions to each other, then, the works of Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton would carry far less lasting resonance. This elite world of words showcases an undeniably seductive beauty of its own, certainly one the poet H.D. shares in, up to a point. Until one's psyche has sufficiently absorbed Blake's unjustly caged Robin Redbreast, Keats's whistling autumn robin, and Dickinson's dreaded "first Robin," does one truly know robins, after all? Literary robins may not inform the natural world with *all* its meaning, but surely once a mind has encountered them, they themselves come to populate an inner landscape that one forever shares with the poets who honored them. This internal literary landscape, then, may offer a darkly ironic consolation in a time when living robins are hastily numbering fewer and fewer on our literal landscapes. Additionally, in appreciation for the contributions of Eliot's descendants, the critic Marjorie Perloff notes, "The language of citation . . . has found a new lease on life in our information age" (*Unoriginal* 4). Syntactical explosions themselves have become well-represented by lyricists such as John Ashbery and the Language Poets.

The seventies feminist poets, in particular, frequently allude to, and build upon, each other's language and ideas, though each accomplishes this literary web-building in her own unique style. They attempt to construct a gynocentric, poetic tradition, as Rich charges them to do, in her oft-referenced mantra, "a whole new poetry beginning here," in "Transcendental Etude" (*The Dream* 76); indeed, Rich would seem to articulate this fresh discovery as a shared erotic mystical mission, a unifying pledge, for the benefit all feminist radical poets. She dreams them, standing like poetry soldiers, "eye to eye / measuring each other's spirit / each other's limitless desire" (76). *Mystical* ("spirit")—intangibly "limitless," yet also, paradoxically and mysteriously, an entity to be sized up by an inner act of "measuring" the depth of one's own, or another's, fierce commitment to change—indissolubly merging into passion for multi-faceted, tangible freedom. All this intensity of purest desire adds up to ammunition for overthrowing the obsolete poetry order, generating, in turn, innovative political changes and art forms. Nonetheless, these daughters of Wollstonecraft, Blake, Keats, Whitman, and Dickinson, these four—Rich, Lorde, Grahn, and Griffin—in constructing a major new land of communicating woman-to-woman, both within and beyond the personal, conserve all that can be salvaged. Remnants of themselves and remnants of old poems with valuable clues must be rescued from the ever encroaching, technocratic bulldozers, saved from burial by the crone-poet-bag ladies, reaching "into wire trashbaskets pulling out / what was thrown away and infinitely precious" ("Broadway" 41).

As Lorde writes in *The Black Unicorn*, she triumphs as a warrior by "warming whatever I touch / that is living" ("The Women" 15): life-affirmation foregrounded as her central mission. "[C]onsuming," Lorde ends the poem, "only / what is already dead" (15). Ambassadors of life, not death, of an undefiled earth rescued, in their shared vision, from certain obliteration, these second wave, self-made heroines of a generation of wild women "starving / for images," as Rich intones in "The Images" (*A Wild* 5) are also gatherers of viable remnants of former truth and

beauty that remain useful. Rich discloses, for instance, in “Upper Broadway” (*The Dream* 41), that her own “slipperd crone”[-self] is faithfully “inching towards life,” wielding “her wand of thought,” calling on powers of the mind denied to women for millennia, in order to edge away from what she had labeled, in “From an Old House in America,” as that “savagely fathered and unmothered world” (*The Fact* 214): that waste land in which women, detained, are kept only “halfborn.” The middle-aged poet discovers fully the latter truth for herself at age forty-six. Hence, at this new precipice of awareness, she declares, “I am alive to want more than life,” in “Hunger,” dedicated to Audre Lorde (*The Dream* 14). *More* [emphasis mine] than life. Join me in language and spirit and action, she implores this recent listener, another poet, a woman matching her razor sharp words with the same: no longer the remote man of lonely poems across former decades, as I have demonstrated. Join me for “more than life,” she inspires. Mystical powers, insinuated in this poem, coalesce with bodily, when Rich imagines that she and Lorde, like priestesses joined in a global life-saving cause, rise up together to enact the following:

take and use our love,  
hose it on a city, on a world,  
to wield and guide its spray, destroying  
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses—  
like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be. (13)

For many twentieth century poets and critics, however, subjectivity and emotion disappeared into mere embarrassments associated with sloppy writing. Avant-garde critic Charles Bernstein, in “The Difficult Poem,” sheds light on why so-called “easy” poetry might have grown out of favor in academic circles, when he advises that struggling “[r]eaders of the difficult poem also need to beware of the tendency to idealize the accessible poem. Keep in mind that a poem may be easy because it is not saying anything” (5). Anyone who has ever tried to teach a Dickinson or Hopkins poem to students who prefer Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” can appreciate Bernstein’s point here. Yet one might still observe that, ironically, Bernstein himself, even in this statement, has idealized “inaccessibility” as being a surefire insurer of “saying” something significant. As if in direct response to Bernstein and his ilk, contemporary memoirist Mary Karr shoots back, “Poetry’s primary function” is to “move the reader. . . . Rarely before” have “poems been judged as formally good that in fact lack any relevance to human experience” (312, 327). Karr even goes so far as to proclaim, “I abhor [neo-formalism’s] current practice as perhaps the most emotionally vacant work ever written. . . . Deconstruction has permitted poets to be weak communicators. I am thinking specifically of the glib meaninglessness in poets like Ashbery. . . .” (312, 315). Clearly, the twenty-first century has at least two opposing camps, seemingly at odds over the appropriate direction poetry should take at this time. In sum, though, one can only hope for both styles to produce works of lasting merit in this perilously anti-art and humanities era.

Indeed, I do not wish to marginalize avant-gardism’s significance but to complicate the dichotomy that arose between feminist experimental writing such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s poetry and a plain-spoken poetics of personal-political experiences such as that represented in numerous poems by H.D., Grahn, Griffin, Lorde, Rich, and many additional, twentieth-century feminist poets. In my view, no complete escape from identity politics, a hugely controversial issue, is possible if internal and external changes are to occur. Creating change has always been a central concern of poetry. Ancient Greece would not have been united into one nation without

Homer's epics traveling by word of mouth from island to island, eventually establishing a common thread. This question of a shared nationality, a nation of one's own, is precisely what moves Lorde to write the deeply moving "Bicentennial Poem # 21,000,000."

In its lines, the speaker's "muddy tears" are evocative of an archetypal grief of the unacknowledged, landless refugee, dispossessed of a non-misogynist, non-racist land that may sadly never have existed in a patriarchal world. And yet even in that moment of the poet's shattering sense of personal-political loss—"no earth" to call her own—her compassion for (and simple human identification with) the "old French men weeping / hats over their hearts / singing a triumphant national anthem" (*The Black* 90), unexpectedly moves the reader. The speaker's breadth of love: a heart so immense, the poem shows us, that its "boundaries" embrace distant foreigners who may be, when all is said and done, even counted among her oppressors. Lorde's poem follows in its entirety:

I know  
 the boundaries of my nation lie  
 within myself  
 but when I see old movies  
 of the final liberation of Paris  
 with french tanks rumbling over land  
 that is their own again  
 and old french men weeping  
 hats over their hearts  
 singing a triumphant national anthem

My eyes fill up with muddy tears  
 that have no earth to fall upon.  
 (90)

The identity politics embedded here is indeed what powers the lyric. In other words, her African American femaleness infuses it with its rightful import, giving it both intimate and ontological impact. In fact, lack of familiarity with the contextualizing identity of this poet—African Caribbean American, lesbian, radical feminist activist—would deprive a reader of crucial levels of meaning; its full impact can only be felt in the moment of comprehending the full extent to which the speaker experiences life as that of an outsider among outsiders. Knows alien states—cast out initially—but now a self-defining wild woman who chooses to locate herself outside the paradigms of the dominant Eurocentric culture—is the lynchpin and the bottom line, in a reader's most accurate grasp of the poem's unfolding trajectory of meaning. It is not that Lorde wants to be a citizen of the old men's procession; rather it is simply that she craves her own land, her own voice, her own identity, "lustful now for [her] own name" ("Outside" 37).

In spite of some modernists' disregard for subjectivity and emotion, poems composed by Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale, and even by the Imagist H.D., began to appear, drenched with the two big no, no's—*feelings* and *I*—; both of the latter principally appealed to a female audience. Curiously, though, such poetry brought passion *and* detachment, yearning *and* self-sufficiency: paradoxes of verbal strengths, though, at times, corseted by reticent structural choices. Still, despite the conventional metrics, semantic intensities steeped in mystic eroticism open imaginative paths:

O white moon, you art lonely.  
 It is the same with me.  
 But we have the world to roam over.  
 Only the lonely are free.”  
 (Teasdale “Morning Song” 5-8)

A speaker only the moon befriends, its companionship far superior to human, in its invitation to wander the earth freely, independently, beyond the imprisoning, domesticated realm of romantic love. Her fervor to find the words is conveyed by a tone enamored with language itself. Yet, paradoxically, solitude is as haunting and mystical as a gothic moon. One might prefer this, after all, if it were not for the needs of the animal body. The plaintive undertow of eros works to tether us to a lonely earth, the absence of touch, “lonely” repeated, creating subtle tensions; the pull in the vowel sounds, especially *o*, hinting a soft cry of longing for both freedom *and* love, wandering *and* home, poetry *and* relationship. An experience rare for female poets who have often had to choose between the liberty of creating and the warmth of love.

“Like one gone mad I hugged the ground,” writes eighteen year old Millay, virtuoso of passion (“Renescence” 186). So, here we have it. The necessary tug of sensual delights, but pleasures well beyond the scope of sexuality alone: involving, for example, in Susan Griffin’s “The Eros of Everyday Life,” a representative numinous moment of tasting a plum (151); the sound of wind, in Woolf’s memory, sweeping at set intervals across seaside bedroom blinds; or Daly’s cosmic encounter with an ordinary clover blossom (*Amazon* 45-47); and Lorde’s archetypal sun and moon (*Black Unicorn*). The body, the emotions, the ineffable—all in one—located inside a century peppered with political poems by erotic mystical writers, united in seeking to “reconstitute the world,” (Rich *The Dream* 67) to restore this earth. Though I do not argue that this poetic territory is necessarily female native land only, it may nevertheless find its most urgent, twentieth century key, in a diaspora of versifying women’s voices. Consider the persistence, against the odds, of erotic mystical sounds echoing in poems by current lyric daughters such as Tracy K. Smith. Listen, for instance, to the traces of hope and humor in one of her recent lyric’s warm-breasted, yet also divinely “cosmic,” all-encompassing, and glorious mothering:

some like to imagine  
 A cosmic mother watching through a spray of stars,

Mouthing yes, yes as we toddle towards the light.  
 Biting her lip if we teeter at some ledge. Longing  
 To sweep us to her breast, she hopes for the best  
 (“My God It’s Full of Stars”)

### Chapter Three The Elemental Poetics of H.D.'s *Sea Garden*

In *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, Stacy Alaimo argues that the prose of many American women writers “demonstrate[s] that nature has been and continues to be a place of feminist possibility . . . The fact that most feminist theory distances woman from nature only underscores the importance of understanding how and why feminists inhabit nature as an undomesticated ground” (2). Alaimo goes on to point out that feminist theorists have often “identified the pervasive association of woman with nature as itself a root cause of misogyny and have advocated a feminist flight from this troublesome terrain.” She elaborates as follows:

If woman’s perceived proximity to nature is responsible for her oppression, then her liberation, it would seem, is contingent on her distance from nature . . . The recent rage to purge feminism of all vestiges of ‘essentialism,’ for example, is one of the most striking instances of feminist theories flight from nature . . . Placing nature and culture at opposite ends of the teleological spectrum [leads to the conclusion] that the further we progress from nature, the closer women will be to liberation. (3-6)

One problem with this popular theoretical position, Alaimo insists, is that this definition of nature as “the repository of essentialism and stasis” ironically reinforces the very nature/culture dichotomy it seeks to subvert. She posits that instead of either taking flight from nature, or, at the other extreme, retreating into nature, feminist theorists need to examine those subversive texts that “inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the nature that has been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space” (13).

Writing nature as feminist space, H.D., in her first book of verse, *Sea Garden* (1916), unveils a speaker who occupies a natural landscape made tangible through subversive songs: songs inhabiting nature, incorporating civilization into natural forms, free verse. Such songs endure as cultivated havens, metric homes, consonant with generative chaos; high culture at-one-with elemental nature; neither one nor the other but inseparable; refusing the syntactic, mythic, and thematic models of either/or dualism; intricate lyrics akin to that vein of American verse that grants nature itself agency and, in doing so, defies Western thought’s historical assumption that nature is the repository of stasis. Dickinson, for example, found in nature, far more stimulating companionship than in society, an indiscriminate fellowship vast, sane, and energizing: “Sweet Mountains—Ye tell Me no lie— / Never deny Me—Never fly—“ (Poem 722). Such songs hearken liberated forms for twentieth century poetics, and make sisterly companions for H. D.’s verse, which, in turn, discards the corseted, stultifying enclosures of late Victorian stanzas, serendipitously paving the lyric way for American women to win the hard-won vote (1920), four years after *Sea Garden*’s publication. Yet the *other* world described by H.D. in *Sea Garden* could not seem more removed from everyday social and political concerns. Is hers the poetics of escape, or does she build a haven for necessary, practical replenishment within an all-too-real world war setting—ignorant of both nature and spirit, increasingly darkening the European landscape H.D. inhabited.

H.D.’s undomesticated garden, a paradoxical terrain of high art informed by savage beauty, simultaneously evokes both the islands of Greece and those of her native Maine:

European tradition fused with American raw energy. H.D.'s presentation of nature's agency positions her emotionally-charged poetics outside of the impersonal enclosures of Eliot's artistry, whose own well-documented desire to escape the sterility of western civilization's cultural decline, ironically, failed to lead him to envision an incandescent landscape of collapsed dualisms. Understandably, then, the singular direction H.D.'s poetry took, its radical departure from despair, as early as her first book, *Sea Garden*, would appear to be child's play, diminutive exercises in Imagism, to many readers when juxtaposed with Eliot's celebrated poetic assaults on sentimentalism. Eliot's strategy, for example, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," is to ensconce the speaker squarely within the paradigm of dualistic discourse, depicting mindless women aimlessly coming and going: their empty chatter both violating, and, in contrast with, the misused genius of Michelangelo's works. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in its totality, then, represents an objective correlative for the poet's despair when faced with the meaninglessness wrought by modernity's advances, which includes gender role changes; horror at the decimation of high culture by popular culture (represented by the women's ineffectual talk) is placed at the forefront of this poem with far more intensity than is any concern for the fate of the natural world.

Eliot's backward gaze idealizes a traditional hierarchy of values, exalting culture above nature on the European totem pole: a measuring rod for the enforcement of impossibly high standards against which Prufrock judges himself inadequate, both in intellect and as sentient being. Picturing himself only as a degraded "pair of ragged claws / Scuttling" (73-74) in silence, across the vast, unintelligent, muteness of nature, this crustaceous creature--whose exoskeleton protects it from a harsh world--represents the most appropriate persona the speaker can envision for himself in a modern social order. Eliot's nature is not redemptive. Formerly admired gentlemen of letters, for example, are now relegated to the sidelines: ineffectual fops incapable of blurting out passion--not unlike John Marcher's beastly detachment from human *feeling* in Henry James's apocalyptic short story "The Beast in the Jungle." Prufrock, the "exemplar / of a botched civilization" (Rich "Natural Resources" 62), is doomed to "drown" in a final cacophony of "human voices" (130), tragically stranded from--yet torturously aware of--the singing mermaids of a lost past. These Homeric sirens, whom he claims to have "seen," dynamically "riding seaward on the waves" (126), are, in their transcendent elusiveness, analogous to Henry James's ineffable beast, when, like Prufrock, Marcher, lost and standing on the bleak shore of death, watches, stricken, the intangible beast destroy his final chance for "the taste of life" (488).

Still, in both of these emotionally shattering works portraying hollow men--recall, for example, the haunting lyricism of the climactic concluding stanza of Eliot's poem--*feelings* come at the price of entombing nature forever within the "chambers of the sea . . . wreathed with seaweed red and brown." These Victorian, funereal garlands are strewn over the sepulchers by seductive, yet ethereal, "sea-girls"--hardly full-blown women--trapped in their virginal and gothic realm. The final stanza of Eliot's love song echoes the necrophilic mood of his forefather Edgar Allan Poe's lines, which evoke the ideal woman, Annabel Lee, eternally imprisoned and unattainable in her "tomb by the side of the sea" ("Annabel Lee"). It is interesting to consider what sort of emotional intelligence the poets offer here. Certainly, the argument can be made that Eliot's yearning is of the same vein as Keats's longings, in "Bright Star," for his "fair love's ripening breast" (Sonnet XX, line 10). In both instances, the speaker longs for the comfort of proximity to the female muse, whether the make-believe mermaids of Prufrock's mournful sea dream or the real life woman, Fanny Brawne, of Keats's sonnet. However, Eliot's strain of romanticism belongs to a distinct sub-stream of nineteenth century poets, going back through

Baudelaire to Poe—with his sadomasochistic cultivation of the pleasures of literary despair: “[T]he death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world . . .” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1324). Interestingly, Shelley, Poe’s precursor, crafted airy, incorporeal lines, inspiring Keats to caution him in a letter “[B]e more of an artist, and ‘load every rift’ of your subject with ore” (August 16, 1820). Keats’s insistence on “plump[ing]” the lines with sensual, elemental imagery expressive of a life-affirming poetic philosophy inspires reflection on the possibility of an alternate line of philosophical descent—reaching from ancient Sumer’s Enheduanna, Egyptian love poets, Sappho, European medieval courtly love poets and Shakespeare, Blake, Keats, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to Americans such as Whitman, Dickinson, HD, Amy Lowell, D.H. Lawrence, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Sara Teasdale; then, Audre Lorde, Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Mary Oliver, and finally even, in select poems, the poet of ideas, Adrienne Rich. At least one common characteristic connects their works: an intrinsically elemental, sensual, yet, nonetheless, immanently spiritual dimension—what I have called *erotic* or *elemental mysticism*.

Although differences exist among these poets’ outlooks, an erotic mystical theme can be distinguished contrary to that of the Greek and Hebraic mind/body split that comprises the intellectual root of western civilization. “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call’d Body is a portion of Soul discern’d by the Five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age,” writes Blake (“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”). Whitman sings, “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (“I Sing the Body Electric”). J.W. Walkington argues, in 1994, that

the importance of Whitman as a spiritual guide [of H.D.’s] has been suppressed in recent studies . . . . An intense experience of nature allows Whitman to advance toward the tumultuous merging of spirit and body that launches him into the unknown . . . . When read against ‘Song of Myself,’ H.D.’s” poetry “expands beyond the limits of . . . recent feminist and post-structuralist readings and into its full significance as a work of mysticism. (124-134)

For example, it is significant to point to the similarity between Whitman’s defiant declaration, “If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred” (“I Sing the Body Electric”) and H.D.’s words, “The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important” (*Notes on Thought and Vision*, 21). It is difficult then not to agree with Walkington’s conclusion, “In her effort to throw off the restrictive ‘fathers’ of modernism, H.D. found inspiration in one of the grand patriarchs of American tradition, whose ‘Song of Myself’ can be seen as a model for twentieth century women’s spirituality so firmly associated with H.D.” (134).

Certainly, a number of H.D. literary critics and poets have written illuminatingly of her works’ mysticism and, in other instances, of the eroticism permeating flawlessly chiseled, tangible, yet impersonal, lines. (Later, I will comment on the prevalent notion that only H.D.’s prose and very late verse venture into the realm of the personal.) This haunting paradox of liminal object infused with supernatural vibrations, words housing electric matter, remains central to H.D.’s poetry throughout her career, although I would not necessarily argue that her poetry’s steadfast expression of elemental mystical components evolves, so much as it simply changes, when her lines expand, in later decades, to accommodate spacious, epic forms: *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*. For as weighty as these later works prove to be, I remain equally enchanted by the poems of *Sea Garden*, especially taken as a whole. Guided by some mysterious speaker—with her scientist’s eye for concrete detail, musician’s ear for rhythms, and pagan’s feel for wild

natural imagery—we can lose ourselves, perhaps even dissolve our heavy “burthen of the mystery” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”) in her timeless literary garden: modern and ancient, sensual and spiritual, at once. Having followed her through subtle byways, up and down dips and pinnacles, pausing to immerse ourselves in particularities—a sea rose, a lily, the violets upon violets—always moving, yet always stationary, we emerge into an outdoor chapel laid bare, refreshed and more tutored in nature’s hidden springs. “Although H.D.,” states critic Rachel Ann Connor, “did not produce formal manifestos to explain her use of the modern image, what is evident in *Sea Garden* and *Notes [On Thought and Vision]* is that she was engaged in a *theoretic*s—as well as an *erotic*s—of the sacred, both of which are intrinsically bound up with movement” (50). A meditative dance of delicate natural *mater* infused with enduring lyric spirit, its simplicity belies its complexity, recalling momentarily how the *Tao Te Ching*’s deceptively plain looking lines package oceans of meaning. Simple is not without intricacy and elegance, H.D. illustrates, even in her first book.

That her foremother Dickinson, too, dwelt in a luminous elemental paradise, painstakingly gathered by defiant “narrow Hands” (“I dwell in Possibility—“ J657), illuminates the existence of predecessors, in the Western literary canon, who share H.D.’s consciousness of the value of immanence. Both H.D. and Dickinson deliberately select language that resists clichéd concepts, the narrow models of transcendence; in carefully chosen diction, they each repudiate the stale trope of a so-called ecstasy sprung from the old paradigm of flesh severed from spirit. Thus, in “Wild Nights[‘s]” exclamatory directive for immediate satiation of unabashed erotic mystical yearning, “Eden” is found outside the gates of tradition, not during customary daylight, but within the pagan darkness of “Wild Nights”; the longed for communion—to “moor” in an uncharted “port” on an amniotic “Sea”—would be a luxurious experience of touching her own inherent oneness for a volcanic being, stranded inland (Poem 249). On the other hand, to suggest that instances of transcendence never occur in the vast poetry crafted by the imaginations of Dickinson and H.D. would be inaccurate; it is exciting, nonetheless, to come across examples of their forceful visions having leapt over narrow precipices, boldly expressing taboo concepts, refusing to write like little ladies. As Adrienne Rich in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” (1975) first showed us, the Amherst poet “[m]ore than any other poet,” tells us “that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological” are “inseparable from the universal” (168). It is not far to travel, then, to realize how the same poet must, therefore, necessarily express nature as inseparable from culture, as the lyric sings here: “And he unrolled his feathers / and rowed him softer home—“ (“A bird came down the walk—“ J328). Rowing can be conducted, either by human beings in oceanic bliss or birds whose wings “like Oars divide the Ocean,” a similarly blissful element, presumably; for is it not the very air the poet breaths, erasing the illusion of separateness between artist and creature: the bird she imagines herself to become, both symbolically and actually, dissolves seamlessly into the same mystical element that “Butterflies” swim and “Leap” through “plashless.” Culture and nature are experienced, in this reading of the poem, as *one*; thus, the very act of reading the poem can submerge the reader into mystical, *inexpressible* (suggested by the make-believe word “plashless,”) communion at its most lighthearted. Such liquid playfulness explodes any tendency as readers to relate this merging to traditional religious symbology, which would have called for transcendence—rather than immanence—the spirit rising above corrupted nature: flesh overridden by culture: a sail to Byzantium (Yeats).

Dickinson’s selection of radical solitude, thus peopled with nature, in sharp contrast with the Victorian woman’s prescribed role of wife and mother, is in keeping with the theme of

elemental immanence, of sensual mysticism. Only in solitude, like the outsider Lily of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and like H.D.'s unswerving speaker in dozens of poems, can these female creators discover the magnitude of their true selves; hence, alone with her pen and paper, the artist falls in love with her own forbidden creative powers, using them solely for herself, even if the lyric's speaker seemingly addresses another individual. Even, indeed, if she feels in the moment of pen touching paper that she writes for someone other than herself, some potent muse. At one time or another, all poets have their muses, their perfect listeners. Yet the poems finally arrive in which she expresses a recognition that it is her own thoughts and luxurious passions that occupy the page, after all. So that, if we, now, return to the poem "Wild Nights—," we can decipher its elemental mystical climactic moment of longing-to-merge with "Ah, the Sea!" as representing the primordial oneness of Persephone within the womb/brain of her own creative genius—ultimately, mothering her own powers: "might" she "but moor" in stillness paradoxically housed within the act of "rowing," free flowing writing, Edenic movement: a generating of culture inseparable from nature. Thus, the "female artist," according to Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "makes her journey into what Adrienne Rich has called 'the cratered night of female memory' ('Re-Forming the Crystal,' 228) to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, reconceive, and give birth to" creations akin to "Emily Dickinson's 'mystic green' where women 'live aloud' . . ." (99-100). This enchanting "mystic green" trope, drawn from "There is a morn by men unseen," correlates, of course, with H.D.'s equally idyllic sea garden metaphor: Woolf's *moments of being*, I suggest, are thus reconceived by, and encapsulated within, integrative images offered through these two poets' ethereal, flowering, and oddly similar imaginings.

As Adrienne Rich, fourteen years after H.D.'s death, writes, voicing the collective female consciousness of many seventies' women poets, "Now I must write for myself for this blind / woman scratching the pavement": tenderly retrieving discarded words, she discovers her language to be "infinitely precious" ("Upper Broadway," 1975). What, also, is infinitely precious is the kindheartedness towards her own creative genius, imparted to us by the awakening speaker. Robert Duncan, a faithful admirer of the numinous sensuality and precision of H.D.'s poems, writes, for example, in the *H.D. Book*, of his early exposure to *Sea Garden's* poems, by means of a quietly rebellious 1930's high school teacher who, on occasion, stealthily brought in works of literature from outside the canon:

I was aware that sensual intensity in this poem ["Heat"] of H.D.'s, like the sensual intensity in Lawrence's work, demanded some new beginning in life from my own intensity . . . The very movement of the line involved image: 'A new cadence,' we find in the preface to the *Imagist Anthology* of 1915, 'means a new idea.' There was no thing that was not image, *there was no image that was not a lure of the divine and elemental* in one [my emphasis]. Anguish and ecstasy gave presence to, and were aroused by a presence in, rocks and sea, thunderous surfs, gardens and orchards expose or sheltered. This was the famous rapture of H.D. in her early work, the root of her lyric genius. The line of her verse grew taut, tempered to keep an edge naked in experience, tensed to provide a mode in which reverberations of these presences might be heard. (9-10)

It was her imagery's "lure of the divine and elemental in one" that had enchanted me, in the late seventies, when I discovered a facsimile edition—a book of which I had never heard—

in a Telegraph Avenue bookstore. A stack of thin, deep blue, hardback *Sea Garden[s]* lay neatly on a table near the door; pausing there, I felt an instant recognition, something oddly familiar in the strange, delicate poems: ancient “reverberations” in their immediacy. Perhaps my experience approximated something like that which H.D. writes of in 1919, three years after the publication of *Sea Garden*: “The mystic . . . is content to contemplate . . . eternal, changeless ideas . . . dramas already conceived that he had watched: memory is the mother, begetter of all drama, idea, music, science, or song” (*Notes on Thought* 23). Additionally, when I recently read Duncan’s words in the *H.D. Book*, I thought of how, by the time he composes them, he also would have read H.D.’s *Notes on Thoughts and Vision*, in which she writes of the inextricable relationship between body and higher consciousness. She even arrives, in an almost stream-of-consciousness, associative manner, at an inevitably subversive point, contrasting it with Christianity’s devaluing of the senses: in “the Galilean’s” teaching about “the kingdom of heaven being a pearl of great price . . . the body was not a very rare or lovely thing . . . Yet . . . I saw that the body had its use. “The oyster [body] makes the pearl in fact” (51). The gently introspective tone in *Notes* reveals a frank “spiritual realism” that foreshadows the forthright tone of her epic *Trilogy*, more than two decades later (*The Walls Do Not Fall* 537). Continuing this exploratory process of unearthing thoughts, the poet arrives, organically, at the observation that an individual can “retard its [the spirit’s] growth by neglect of his body because the body of man as the body of nature is the ground into which the seed or spirit is cast. This is the mystery of Demeter, the Earth Mother. The body of the Eleusinian initiate had become one with the earth, as his soul had become one with the seeds enclosed in the earth” (52). Here, H.D.’s imagination journeys back in time to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the annual rituals in honor of Demeter and Persephone, the only major ancient Greek mother-daughter myth: their story providing her with the inspiration for a vision of spirit merged with body. Although, ironically, most of Greek mythology, literature, philosophy, and culture present fragmentation stories that split earth and heaven into the binaries upon which Western heroism and logic are founded—in H.D.’s pivotal work, *Notes on Thought and Vision*, the age-old fragmentation begins mending itself through a mother-daughter myth, long overlooked. Demeter towers above all others, as a figure of elemental mysticism, signifying H.D.’s unorthodox faith in the sacredness of flesh, so abundantly and consistently to be celebrated within her poems throughout her career.

It is no surprise, then, to find her friend D.H. Lawrence writing, in *The Man Who Died*, of a priestess of Isis—a figure some have linked to H.D.—giving new life to a Christ-figure: replacing the familiar asceticism with a parable of ecstatic body-soul immanence, of earthly rebirth through the sacred senses. Throughout his career, Lawrence’s work, though undoubtedly *erotic mystical* in its own way, presents a complex blend of life-affirming defiance of the waste land mentality, on the one hand, and abysmal misogyny, on the other. On the positive end, his tender portraits of his mother—in both his first novel, *Sons and Lovers*, and in the lyric poem “Piano”—foreshadow his affirmative tribute to female efficacy: to the goddess Isis—known either as Egyptian Mother of All, or Queen of the Universe, or Star of the Sea—and to H.D. herself, the novella’s priestess of Isis. Although others, including Susan Stanford Friedman and Gary Burnett, have written of H.D.’s significant role in inspiring this semi-feminist, yet little-known novella, I find H.D.’s own allusions to it truly telling. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. discloses, “Stephen Guest brought me a copy of *The Man Who Died*. He said, ‘Did you know that you are the priestess of Isis in this book?’”(141).

I had been contemplating the usefulness of the evocative term “elemental,” in part because of my decades-long familiarity with its sometimes metaphoric, paradigmatic meanings.

Philosopher Mary Daly, for example, subtitles her fourth book, *Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, 1984, defining *element* as having multiple meanings: *elements* of words, *elements* of earth, *elements* of cosmos; additionally, Daly—acknowledging indebtedness to Woolf for her delightful sense of words as living entities—capitalizes *Elemental* to distinguish it from the ordinary lower-case version; in doing so, like an archeologist, she unearths subterranean meanings, revealing cosmic and transformative dimensions of the chthonic *Elements*, such that “Elemental spirits / angels / demons may be understood as Metaphors manifesting the essential unity and intelligence of spirit/matter, the inherent telos of spirit/matter” (10-11). Similar definitions and concepts, arising virtually simultaneously from primarily feminist poets, became almost a cliché among many seventies’ feminist thinkers—perhaps its most well-known prose expression being Audre Lorde’s much referenced essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”: the erotic, she celebrates, “lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane” (53). My guess is that this association of *erotic* with one gender, in particular, may raise the hackles of anti-essentialists, whose views enjoy current popularity. Be that as it may, Lorde’s multi-layered focus, ironically, seems primarily to concern itself with collapsing body/mind, senses/spirit dualistic paradigms—the consequences of which have been particularly pernicious for women as a specific class; potentially, such a collapse of old, repressive concepts, provides all women not only with a sense of inviolable self-worth but also with a duty to access this innate source of creative power, utilizing it to transform personal and political circumstances. It was important to Lorde that women find their distinctness from men, seeing themselves as self-sufficient on every level, including spiritually and creatively. It is also important to read this essay within the historical context of that brief women’s uprising more than three decades ago. The audience to whom she spoke still had deep tendrils of self-doubt, body shame, and little sense of owning a voice for articulating—either aloud or on the page—their passionate spirits.

Women’s epidemic-proportion self-mistrust, in general—fostered by the classic mind/body split, which places femaleness with body/nature, “vilified, abused, and devalued” (53), in opposition to, and below, maleness/mind—compels Lorde to take care in distinguishing between the “superficially erotic,” which stands as “merely pornographic,” and the legitimately erotic, which represents the “Nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (56). *Erotic*, for her, encompasses far more than sexual; her *erotic* resonates with a wholesome dynamism, both a metaphor for untapped spiritual reserves and a reclamation of the word itself—much as feminists reclaimed and redefined other degrading labels: poet Judy Grahn’s “Edward the Dyke,” for example, and artist Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” a travelling exhibit of colorful ceramic plates, sculpted like vulvas, and arranged formally upon a triangular table—each plate representing a famous woman, from Sojourner Truth to Virginia Woolf. Upon viewing this notable display, one might say that the term “cunt” suddenly takes on positive connotations. Redefining terms and images as a community effort takes on the urgency of the “half-born woman” who decides to write for herself, above all: a Persephone, the “leafbud” who “straggles forth” not quite fully formed, yet, paradoxically, a Demeter, “crone,” also, “reaching into wire trashbaskets pulling out / what was thrown away and infinitely precious” (Rich, “Upper Broadway” 1975).

Hence, Lorde—in experiencing, herself, her newly defined *erotic*—gives voice to three mirroring female figures: Yoruban goddess Oshun, an orisha of life and sensuality; Demeter, Greek goddess of harvest, and Shakti, from India, the goddess of transcendence by way of the pathway of the spine, the energy that “flows through and colors” her “life” as an erotic mystical life-force; it “heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all” her “experience”(57): spirit and

body—one and the same. Depictions of the senses as a bridge to the spirit can be illustrated by the lines of another poet, appearing in this era, Olga Broumas: “White wine eases the mind along the slopes of the body” (“Artemis,” 197). “I work / in silver the tongue-like forms,” she writes, “whose significance stirs in me / like a curviform alphabet.” The body and mind merge here in a unified quest—as the poem continues—for origins of words, authentic selfhood, elemental traces belonging to a lost language of primordial being-ness, perhaps when human consciousness had not fallen from wholeness into warring, compartmentalized parts: “like amnesiacs / in a ward on fire, we must / find words / or burn” (24). Vibrant repose and states of enjoyment become vehicles for recovering precious clues to old integrity. Lorde writes of the sacredness of such pleasure, which is far fuller and more eloquent than mere surface sensation; indeed, such delight encourages “excellence,” rather than the “mediocrity” too often settled for in our “anti-erotic society” (58-59). Similarly Marilyn French in *Beyond Power: Women, Men, and Morals*, 1985

An ecofeminist literary critic who resists the recent ideological movement towards de-gendering nature and creating neutralizing metaphors instead, Catrin Gersdorf argues in “Ecocritical Uses of the Erotic” that the early, second wave ecofeminist literary critic Annette Kolodny does not, as some “ascetic” ecocritics have argued, “fall short of opening up new metaphoric ways of representing nature” in *The Lay of the Land* (1975) “because her analysis remains within the nature-as-female-body paradigm” (188). Comfortable, then, with this paradigm, she insists upon “highlighting pleasure and erotic desire instead of reproduction and economic gain as the dominant principle in human relations with nature” (189). She confronts the arising climate of “critical asceticism,” comprised of feminists and non-feminist critics alike, which is, in her view, indicative of “fear of the body,” and she even asserts that those theorists, Susan Griffin and Audre Lorde included, who create sensual spiritual bridges to the natural world are advancing the radical cause of dissolving old paradigms of an abyss between nature and culture, whereas “the rift” between culture and nature.

As has been well established, HD benefited from Sappho’s influence: her worship of earthly beauty, and, above all, her lyric elevation of *emotional intelligence* to the rank of rational thought. Viewed through this lens, perhaps we do not need to see the branch of feminist theory, which appears to claim the existence of a special bond between woman and nature, woman and emotion, as fundamentally threatening to woman’s struggle for recognition in the canon and the polis.

#### *In That Time, In That Place*

*“I go back to you in my heart, Keats,” I recall, on December 28, 2008, after re-reading his letter written to Fanny Brawne (July 5, 1819), declaring his love, not for the “admiration of” her “Beauty,” but for “the fire in her heart.” Is this not the same blazing, visceral fire that so many women poets (E. Bronte, A. Lowell, Millay) have responded to in his poetry? Could a poetess not feel in her gut, in the discriminating cells of her intelligent body, in her incendiary mind starved for respect, the authenticity and integrity of his tone? [A Berkeley graduate (summer 1975), I am visiting Tulane University, wearing white slacks and a gray, silk blouse, a stylish bow at my throat, age twenty-one, my incendiary zeal, as standing outside the campus cafeteria and considering graduate school, I speak courteously to the great and brilliant Romantic professor—the one I most admire and aspire to be—as young, Byronic Greek American, hanging out on a hallway counter—he chats animatedly with several male students, [eighteen years later, I am in Paleohora, Crete, walking past iconic tables of taverna men playing cards] but glancing contemptuously in my direction, he waves away my question with a sardonic smirk, “I am a*

*teacher of men!” Can there be any preparation for a moment like that? Is it possible in one searing instant to feel the concentrated misogyny of thousands of years channeled towards one person with a “fire in her heart,” her utterly trusting mind? Does the incendiary zeal, become, then, of necessity, in that time, in that place, a raging inferno for social change? Anticipating Susan Griffin’s roaring lioness, devouring the zookeeper, in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside her*, 1977, two years afterwards. That New Orleans’ day. (Not succumbing. Yet, always, always, buried beneath the protective fire, a terrible grief, an endless sadness, for the girl lost on that summer afternoon, sitting there on a bench outside the campus cafeteria, unguarded, shy, bludgeoned.)*

Whether a learned or intrinsic trait, according to Daniel Goleman, PhD, in his book grounded in brain and behavioral research, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (1995), women and men are “taught very different lessons about handling emotions. Parents, in general, discuss emotions—with the exception of anger—more with their daughters than their sons” (131). Goleman points out that Leslie Brody and Judith Hall, in a review published in *Handbook of Emotions*, 1993, “propose that because girls develop facility with language more quickly than do boys, this leads them to be more experienced at articulating their feelings and more skilled than boys at using words to explore and substitute for emotional reactions such as physical fights; in contrast, they note,” and as Goleman goes on to say, men “are less sophisticated than the opposite sex in the byways of emotional life” (131). Similarly, Deborah Tannen, PhD, in *You Just Don’t Understand*, points out that men, in conversation, “are content to talk about ‘things,’ while women seek emotional connection. . . . Hundreds of studies have found . . . that on average women are more empathic than men” and women, in comparison with men, “experience the entire range of emotions with greater intensity” (132). To say, then, that many women poets possess emotional genius does not undermine their brain power, but merely expands our understanding of why so many of them have composed emotionally intense works, and why some of them would be drawn to the works of an English poet who wrote with fire in his heart, “O fret not after knowledge I have none and yet my song comes native with the warmth.” Keats’s confidence in emotional wisdom’s primacy, a personal song of innate overflowing warmth, is life-affirming in its quiet defiance of any valuing of lives and works of intellectual aridity divorced from sensuality. In sharp contrast, dozens of twentieth and twenty-first century women poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, Jorie Graham, and many Language Poets, write highly cognitive, decidedly unemotional, poems of astonishing syntactical complexity. Doubtless, too, many male poets write brilliant, emotionally fluent lines, including Rainier Maria Rilke, Langston Hughes, and D.H. Lawrence. However, overall, the trend has been to largely devalue the poetry of the emotionally expressive women—such as H.D., Edna Millay, and Sara Teasdale—giving more critical attention either to *idea* poets, in general, or to cerebral poems. Female passion has not been popular in most critical circles.

*Another professor, another university, 1982, and, now, as an advanced candidate for the PhD, I am in his office, somewhere in beautiful Wheeler Hall, consulting with him (he looks the part) on tentative ideas I have for my final project; he is telling me he will do everything in his power to block me from writing a dissertation on Keats. I am too emotional about him, he says, too emotional, he repeats, with horror and irritation in his voice. My feelings are keeping me from thinking clearly. I had even, he grimaces, had tears in my eyes when I spoke of certain poems. Keats was a philosopher, he kept repeating, and although I can’t swear*

to this, I believe he was pacing around the room, as he expounded at length upon Keats's philosophic mind. Clearly, in his mind, philosophy and emotion were mutually exclusive. However, to be fair, was this not two years before the publication of the book *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* by controversial philosopher and Boston College professor, Mary Daly, who argues the necessity for serious philosophers, poets, and scholars to connect dynamically with "elemental e-motion," as distinguished from sentimental drivel, if they are to arrive at exact words; only through "experiencing e-motions that are her living threads of connectedness with external and internal reality" (200), can the poet or scholar realize, analyze, reason, and name with accuracy. In other words, deep emotion is perfectly congruent with and is necessary for, in fact, logic of the highest order: elemental logic (197-200).

In striking contrast with Eliot's style of idealizing old paradigms—through creating in *The Waste Land*, as poet and critic Geoffrey O'Brien notes, "a relentless citational environment"—H.D.'s style in *Sea Garden*, though evocative of Sappho, is stripped of the weight of frequent references to cultural icons. Indeed, the fresh quality of voice sounds brazen, ragged, American--a bard singing strangely integrative notes-- in the face of the grim social climate of World War I: intoning seemingly tangential, yet impassioned, lyrics, simultaneously mystical and elemental, imagistically set beyond the waste land, seeking a familiar, yet perpetually renewable, homeland: a poetry at-one-with nature. Although the Sapphic influence on her early poetry foreshadows her later verse's complex allusiveness, here the voice sounds innocent of questions of serious art's precarious position in the catastrophic war of popular culture against it. Yet, is this not, in and of itself, a kind of shoring up against despair? It is as if the poet, in the words of her admirer, Adrienne Rich, "walked away from the argument and jargon in the room," and, composing "with the musing of a mind/ one with her body," sought to discover, explore, and master, with great "care" and precision, "many-lived, unending/ forms," in a dance, balancing raw sensation with formal restraint, until she organically chisels and brings forth "the stone foundation, rockshelf further/ forming underneath everything that grows" ("Transcendental Etude"). H.D.'s rockshelf defies Eliot's crumbling language place, and, as O'Brien notes, Eliot's positioning of "criticism" in poetry's former, supreme domain; spontaneous feelings as wellsprings of poetic knowledge have been plastered over by criticism's "autonomic, if not involuntary, act of breathing" (2).

That culture and nature stand at odds with each other remains a given for most modernist poets. What is surprising to discover is *Sea Garden's* comfortable embedding of culture within nature, art at one with the elements: a sculpted wild. In its own way, then, this slender book of verse, published in 1916, stands apart from "the noise and the jargon in the room" (Rich "Transcendental Etude"), embodying high art wedded to natural setting—presenting a living Grecian urn, unspoiled by pollution, friendly both to human and nonhuman animals, plants, and song. Here is a world of perpetual motion. A world of wind, sea, rock, and light intermingling at the edges, yet distinct, crisp, and swift. An island of animate forms sung to in mounting, modulating waves of measured sounds; word repetition at the start of successive lines, enchanting receptive listeners, making them participatory pagans for the poem's length; ritual sound-technique lulls senses, quiets minds, dissipates resistance:

We wandered from pine-hills  
through oak and scrub-oak tangles,  
we broke hyssop and bramble,

we caught flower and new bramble-fruit  
 in our hair: we laughed  
 as each branch whipped back,  
 we tore our feet in half buried rocks  
 and knotted roots and acorn-cups.

“The Helmsman”

Constructing this poetic homeland, a garden of lyric possibilities, generating futures “like bread in our children’s mouths” (Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”), in which the “shark-jaws / of outer circumstance / will spit you forth.” The reader enters the consciousness of the lines, psyche merging with the “we” of the chthonic wild poem. The book overtakes us. How? Perhaps we do not want to follow the poet to this dimension of awareness, to open, to surrender control, allow our coarsened egos “perish on the path/ among the crevices of the rocks” (“Mid-day”): words HD’s American-speaking friend, William Carlos Williams, would admire, but a rhythm all her own; a length of line determined by the persistence of the sentences’ subject, the “we,” as well as by a plethora of verbs—“wandered,” “broke,” “caught,” “laughed,” “tore,” all tethered to earth by tree imagery—“pines,” “oaks,” “brambles,” “branches,” “roots,” and “acorns.” Motions of humans stir in and among the vibrant stasis of specific natural features alive on the page, intimate companions. No drawing-room awaits such unbound individuals with bare feet, and yet these classically beautiful figures seem quintessentially civilized in their exquisitely heightened sensibilities, their finely-tuned perceptivity, their refined tastes and rarefied energy. In short, they live in a dimension of non-hierarchical natural enchantment, mysteriously apart from the fallen world of “getting and spending” (Wordsworth, “The World is too Much with Us”), yet, paradoxically, fully cognizant of evil and “land-blight” (“The Shrine”). The more we read of this island-place, the more we come to recognize the dedicated artistry involved in journeying into this dimension of consciousness: the discipline of craft required, the surrender to not-knowing.

A leap of faith into uncharted seascapes is taken as decisively as Dickinson’s turning of a key in her own room’s door. A hermetic paradise behind that closed door liberated her explosive imagination, and would be passed down— though H.D. could only read the published handful of her foremother’s poems. Their works’ shared intensity appears in their similar disloyalty to civilization (Rich) through their highly selective processes of perfecting original word productions against the odds. They built indomitable language fortresses against the silencing tomes of the famous processions of educated men (Woolf, *Three Guineas*).

Additionally, and ironically in some respects, H.D.’s verse does not concern itself, then, as directly with rebellion against the Bloomian fathers—the Romantics and Victorians—as does Eliot and Pound’s work. H.D.’s early lyrics do not pattern themselves syntactically upon a formal resolution of a crisis of subjectivity, which M.H. Abrams (1965) unveils as the general model adopted by Romantic poets. Ironically, his model inadvertently serves to help us read her individual poems as works laying claim to an already unified field: art at-one-with nature, poem permeable to flower; in contrast to works seeking to resolve an internal, self-reflexive tension between dueling opposites: reason against emotion, spirit against flesh, culture against nature.

As another critic, Alice Templeton, writes, “[R]enewal that requires a destructive manipulation of the external world to complement the self is egotism, not transcendent” (23). By situating the psychic terrain of the poem, the “intact” work of art, among imagined, yet realistic, metamorphosizing and shifting natural borders, within accurately recorded elemental details of earth, wind, sun, and sea, the speaker’s voice in the poems of this first volume surely “comes

native with the warmth” (Keats). In this way, *Sea Garden*’s verse achieves its impassioned artistry by drawing a fine, yet definitive, line between unified immanence and traditional dualistic transcendence. Her unified immanence dwells in part in the spiritual potency of each living word. Each word she chooses becomes as tangible and energized as the particulars presented of the actual physical world. Ironically, H.D.’s early work has been dismissed at times, at one extreme, for being too localized, minimalistic, and narrow in its concerns, or, at the other extreme, too rarified, elitist, and removed from life’s larger questions. Either one of these opposing readings is easy to adopt, conditioned as western literary critics are to read poems through a lens split between contraries: attuned to the cognitive stimulation of a poetic tension created by this centuries-old device--romantic paradox. Even though her verse structurally diverges radically from nineteenth century forms, strains of Keatsian sensuality, for example, appear in select lines over the decades. Interestingly, Keats’s influence on numerous twentieth century women poets—Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example—has been widely noted by recent critics. In lines that would appeal to women with little access to formal education, Keats writes, “O fret not after knowledge—I have none, / And yet my song comes native with the warmth” (Keats “What the Thrush Said” 245).

Paradox, nonetheless, can be found as a lyric technique in *Sea Garden*, yet neither to the same degree, I would suggest, nor as central to a given poem’s structural progression, as can be found in Eliot’s “Love Song” and Stevens’s “Sunday Morning.” Unlike H.D.’s technique of situating the speaker inside nature, Stevens locates the speaker of “Sunday Morning” at a distance from its pagan celebrants, creating classic paradoxical tension between mind and body, even though the poem seeks to remedy Western civilization’s alienation from nature. The formalistic style of the poem itself plays a large part in establishing this cognitive remove from the wild exuberance of primal beings. The place of emotion in poetry has been controversial since the early twentieth century. Interestingly, one of our poets of the intellect, Adrienne Rich warns, “Trapped in one idea, you can’t have feelings / Without feelings perhaps you / can feel like a god” (“Transit” *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*).

#### *Barely Past Girlhood*

*In my ears, returning, the echo of a distant song: Wallace Stevens, priestly bard of pagan nature. As a Berkeley senior, 1975, (five years before some of us in academia would begin to read a newly emerging H.D., and fourteen years after her death), I read in tall, backyard grasses:*

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
 Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
 Their boisterous devotion to the sun  
 .....  
 Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,  
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky.  
 (“Sunday Morning”)

Iambic pentameter measuring noble sounds, the speaker prophesizes a day pagan men shall heal the rift between art and nature, mind and body. Majestic, impersonal, Stevens’s balanced intonations underscore the message that those boisterous *Others* shall be superior artists in their refound paradise of art at one with the natural order: nature singing nature. Admiring their

turbulent and manly orgy, a far cry from his own civilized poetics, this solitary bard is oddly removed from this tribal frenzy. Tonally solid within his philosophic detachment, his authoritative evenness, the speaker, in contrast to H. D.'s speaker, neither longs to be among them, nor invites our longings to be stirred. For serenity is to be found in the knowing that such merging of culture and nature already exists somewhere—at least, in an imagined place and time—immortalized in some idealized “blood, returning to the sky,” even now.

Juxtaposed with Stevens's well-mannered tone, H.D.'s verse's emotional intensity, throughout not only *Sea Garden* but also much of her later poetry, might be heard as nothing less than hysterical. Even as Stevens's voice can seem, at times, redolently even-toned and monotonous, might not her work sound, on occasion, excessively fervent? “Shall I hurl myself from here / Shall I leap and be nearer you?” (“The Cliff Temple”). And yet, ironically, H.D. would never have chosen Stevens's term *orgy*: not, however, because of lingering Victorianism; strangely enough, Stevens's persona can seem more dated than her contemporary-sounding candor. Yet to her aesthetic sensibility, *orgy* is a word, which would cheapen and dissipate the mystical sensuality her lyrics commonly exude.

“The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees, inseparably from art . . .” (Rich, “What Is Found There” 54). To love nature inseparably from culture opens up the possibility of a poem in which people, stones, and trees cohabit multidimensional, nonhierarchical, and fluid locales. (Such a poetry, however, might easily be misread as *slight*, as not taking on the big questions.) In other words, if violets, cliffs, seas are conceived of as existing on the same plane as art, then poetic forms ought to accommodate and mirror such a holistic vision, blending consciousness with image: nature carving nature. This, indeed, places *Sea Garden*'s poems solidly within what Altieri names “a new realism,” which, he demonstrates, emerges with Imagism. In reference to Pound's early Imagist works, he writes:

[T]hese poems seem slight vehicles . . . yet they are slight vehicles that make a point of how their own slightness emerges—a promising beginning. The poems might even be said to question their culture's habits for making judgments about slightness. Maybe what has seemed weightiness depends primarily on rhetorical traditions that purchase an aura of profundity at the cost of precision and subtlety. Perhaps we need new models of judgment that rely more on intricate blends of sensations and the precise ear for nuance than the grand gestures asserting their own significance” (*The Art of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry* 23).

My point is, then, that HD's frail-seeming early verse perhaps qualifies even more than Pound's for the category of seemingly insignificant lyrics of nature and feelings: a dangerously *trifling* duo. As Eliot, chief modernist literary theorist, writes, in a prescriptive moment, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “The emotion of art is impersonal” (38). Given modernist prejudices against emotionally expressive creations, H.D.'s early poems were perhaps, in part, composed to withdraw from the emerging climate of despair represented in much modernist poetry; while Pound's meager “In the Station of the Metro” persists in being discussed and taught as representative of early modernism, ad nauseum, H.D.'s early verse continues to be either ignored or misread. And yet she herself writes, in many stanzas in *Sea Garden*, only indirectly of emotion, with a distinctly impersonal perspective on “deep-purple / bird-foot violets” (“Sea Gods”) in playful stanzas, celebrating imagistic profusion and color as pathways to consciousness. Refined sensuality as a avenue to heightened awareness in H.D.'s lyrics,

according to Susan Friedman, “[c]onsciously reject[s] the mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality that formed the faith of the empirical modern age . . .” (“Who Buried H.D.?” 47). Thus, she continues, H.D. “affirmed a spiritual realism and the relevance of a quest for intangible meanings” (47). In addition, Alicia Ostriker affirms that H.D.’s “poems were, first to last, liminal” in her “refusal to submit to Western culture’s classic dualisms” (“My H.D.” 3). The literary potency of H.D.’s poetic refusal becomes fully evident in a more contemporary work, *The Dream of a Common Language*, in which Adrienne Rich writes of her own visionary dream of achieving holism through awareness of an already present reality of unified, non-hierarchical elements—a tapestry of “everything that grows”—glimpsed through a veil of dualistic concepts.

## II. “Stranger in the Storm”

“She who splits firewood, and she who wanders” is the same woman, at last (Rich “Transcendental Etude”). Upon reading this poem in 1977, its publication year, I felt seismic shifts akin to those I was experiencing reading Susan Griffin’s newly published *Woman Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. With all due respect to Margaret Homan’s analysis of Rich’s poem as being dangerously essentialist, and even anti-feminist, my own gut feeling, upon first reading it, was of having just entered a deeper layer of feminist awareness, more images revealed of true radical identity, returning momentarily to pre-patriarchal origins: origins buried deep in my own psyche, yet familiar as those fleet deer the speaker happens upon while driving through the Massachusetts’ countryside—a recognition of spirits, abundance, Keatsian plentitude, echoing his famous lines: “To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees” (“To Autumn”). Rich writes, in classic iambic pentameter, 158 years later, “the deer are still alive and free, / nibbling apples from early-laden boughs” (“Transcendental Etude”). In the second stanza of his Autumnal ode, Keats a simple peasant woman, the elegant grace of Demeter, “laden,” like Rich’s “early-laden boughs” with timeless poetic wisdom: “And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook .” As her poem unfolds, Rich reveals all this beauty is actually a Wordsworthian memory, she calls upon in solitude, standing in her familiar, very American and Whitmanesque “dooryard”: a recollection from which she draws hope, when faced with the encroaching “winters of rotgut violence.” Rich’s apples on “early-laden boughs” are “already yellowing fruit,” making them “Hesperidean / in the clear-tuned, cricket-throbbing air.” The yellow apples in Hesperidia, a mythological Greek paradise, tended by three nymphs/goddesses, Rich integrating opposing impulses—towards the chthonic cave, on one hand, the Hesperidean orchard and uncharted wilderness, on the other—envisions a whole and entire woman, no longer longing for the “stranger in the storm,” the *other*, the receding Heathcliff, outside herself. “Romantic thralldom,” the fitting phrase coined by Duplessis in reference to H.D.’s work—so often seen as a driving force in the voices of Dickinson, H.D., and Millay—has been transcended in this etude: a tribute to overcoming “suffer[ing] uselessly” (“Splittings” 1974). The energy of yearning can now be conserved and channeled into new forms and fresh phrases. The stranger in the storm turns out to be no stranger at all, no Heathcliff, but an aspect of self. This recognition that the sought-after “other,” with whom a given speaker yearns for contact, is not to be found externally, comes simultaneously with an understanding that a new autonomy, paradoxically, occurs only within the context of a collective consciousness. In other words, hackneyed romantic lyric themes, dating back to Petrarch’s sonnets and medieval songs of courtly love, are transcended in the twentieth century poem at the precise historic moment the female speaker dares to let go of deeply reflexive patterns. That this moment has been “long in coming”

(“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”) is evidenced by the persistence of the digressive dream of ecstatic union with another, which pervades too much of nineteenth and twentieth century poetry by women. The tragedy of this persistence, which Rich, in “Waking in the Dark,” named “the tragedy of sex” (8), has been that the psyches of intelligent readers, imbibing false lessons, were compelled to settle for narrow identities, generation after generation. Influenced by reading poems of exquisite pining, internalizing these theatrical configurations as the norm, readers, then, imitated in their own lives these self-destructive habits of mind.

“Transcendental Etude,” in contrast with these traditional love lyrics, can be read as an anti-romantic poem. The speaker’s audience, not a solitary imagined beloved, but a collective listener, keeps the poet honest, keeps her from the grandiosity of “I Sing Myself” (Whitman), even if the poem retains aspects of that ethic of narcissistic autonomy. Ironically, as the poem demonstrates, the newfound confidence—derived from fully embracing her “half-born” self—positions her to speak from a humble, disparate center: not a place we are accustomed to expecting from a fully formed autonomous voice. False theatricality.

### III. Headlong Motion of HD’s Poetry

In contrast with her cooler works, discussed earlier, the voice in the poem speaks from a place of heightened emotion, relentless in its insistence on the reader’s surrender to the poet’s vision. Its intensity runs the risk of alienating the reader. However, this passionately driven forward-moving energy is restrained, counterbalanced, by detailed descriptions of nature: concrete highly specific imagery chiseled into finely wrought forms. In other words, the elemental dimension of the poem can even be said to quiet the emotional content in particular moments, creating an atmosphere of suspended coolness: the ancient passion of Euripides elicited, yet contained, by modern structures.

The observant eye of the speaker details this island-world, painting a self-enclosed haven, a wild garden, evocative of Homeric landscapes, far away it would seem from the modern world of wars and politics, the real world of mundane lives. Adrienne Rich may help us to reconsider the temptation to dismiss *Sea Garden* as irrelevant, romantic, elitist, when she asks, “*What is political activism, anyway?* . . . there is still no general collective understanding from which to move. Each takes his or her own risk in isolation. We may think of ourselves as individual rebels, and individual rebels can be easily shot down. The relationship among so many feelings remains unclear. But these thoughts and feelings, suppressed and stored up and whispered, have an incendiary component. You cannot tell where or how they will connect, spreading underground from rootlet to rootlet till every grass blade is afire from every other. . . Poetry, in its own way, is a carrier of sparks “(*What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* [1993]).

After all, in many ways, *Sea Garden* wants nothing to do with civilization: the place of “sleep,” unconsciousness, ignorance. . . the place of “the city,” we “fled / through the city gate” to the elemental place of “hurled sand,” “rough stones,” and “broken shells” (“The Wind Sleepers”). To be awake calls for a militant focus, a discipleship of intentionality that is also a surrender to energies “unleashed”: energies for action. The exact nature of these actions the poet refuses to prescribe beyond metaphorical construction of the “altar,” we are collectively to cherish (July 9 ) in a “never halt[ing] . . . tribute” of self-sustaining “song” at one with “sea-birds that cry / discords.” On our way towards the “Howl” of Ginsberg’s voice, decades hence, in the aftermath of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp,” (“Song of Myself”), H.D. breaks with convention in

her own paradoxical “wail” of celebrant defiance. Like Whitman before her, and Ginsberg after, yet also uniquely her voice.

Here, in *Sea Garden*, though firmly rooted in Greek imagery, H.D.’s poems reach across cultural boundaries, through tribal rhythms and semantic clarity (footnote with Wole’s response to H.D.), what she would several decades later name “spiritual realism” (*Trilogy*) beyond cultural confines, mirroring the impassioned devotion of an Indian Mira-bai; the fierce mental focus of the Yoruban Oya’s whirlwinds scattering ancient cowrie-shells; the steady heartbeat of a New Mexican Hopi dancer. If Virginia Woolf’s famous declaration “as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (*Three Guineas* 125) is brought to mind by the unbounded wildness of H.D.’s settings, then we also may wish to hold, simultaneously, in the palimpsest of our collective awareness, the relatively recent lines in *The Black Unicorn* by Audre Lorde, another dispossessed poet:

I know  
 the boundaries of my nation lie  
 within myself  
 but when I see old movies  
 of the final liberation of Paris  
 with french tanks rumbling over land  
 that is their own again  
 and old French men weeping  
 hats over their hearts  
 singing a triumphant national anthem

My eyes fill up with muddy tears  
 That have no earth to fall upon.  
 (“Bicentennial Poem 21,000,000” 90)

Against despair that threatens, at every juncture, to overcome the speaker’s “meted words,” she chants for companions to “tear,” “tug,” “pile,” “wail,” “roar,” and “cry/discords.” For, paradoxically, within the city gates, the very state of consciousness that propels us out of stale patterns of the “death-march,” the ominous procession (Woolf, *Three Guineas*) brings with its unleashed purity “[whiter] / than the crust / left by the tide,” a stinging awareness of “brokenness”: “damage” done (Rich, “Diving Into the Wreck”) already, “within us and against us against us and within us”:

Chant in a wail  
 That never halts,  
 Pace a circle and pay tribute  
 With a song.

We are there with her invocation, yet we are also here with the song in our throats. Intimate and immediate, yet, simultaneously, impersonal and restrained. Multiplicities of time and place, subjectivity and objectivity. A world of possibilities and necessary hope, unexpected in the twentieth century. An elemental mystical vision born in *Sea Garden* to stand at odds with Mr. Eliot’s cruel April month, his beautiful despair.

### Chapter Three The Elemental Poetics of H.D.'s *Sea Garden*

In *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, Stacy Alaimo argues that the prose of many American women writers “demonstrate[s] that nature has been and continues to be a place of feminist possibility . . . The fact that most feminist theory distances woman from nature only underscores the importance of understanding how and why feminists inhabit nature as an undomesticated ground” (2). Alaimo goes on to point out that feminist theorists have often “identified the pervasive association of woman with nature as itself a root cause of misogyny and have advocated a feminist flight from this troublesome terrain.” She elaborates as follows:

If woman’s perceived proximity to nature is responsible for her oppression, then her liberation, it would seem, is contingent on her distance from nature . . . The recent rage to purge feminism of all vestiges of ‘essentialism,’ for example, is one of the most striking instances of feminist theories flight from nature . . . Placing nature and culture at opposite ends of the teleological spectrum [leads to the conclusion] that the further we progress from nature, the closer women will be to liberation. (3-6)

One problem with this popular theoretical position, Alaimo insists, is that this definition of nature as “the repository of essentialism and stasis” ironically reinforces the very nature/culture dichotomy it seeks to subvert. She posits that instead of either taking flight from nature, or, at the other extreme, retreating into nature, feminist theorists need to examine those subversive texts that “inhabit nature in order to transform it, not only contending with the nature that has been waged against women but writing nature as feminist space” (13).

Writing nature as feminist space, H.D., in her first book of verse, *Sea Garden* (1916), unveils a speaker who occupies a natural landscape made tangible through subversive songs: songs inhabiting nature, incorporating civilization into natural forms, free verse. Such songs endure as cultivated havens, metric homes, consonant with generative chaos; high culture at-one-with elemental nature; neither one nor the other but inseparable; refusing the syntactic, mythic, and thematic models of either/or dualism; intricate lyrics akin to that vein of American verse that grants nature itself agency and, in doing so, defies Western thought’s historical assumption that nature is the repository of stasis. Dickinson, for example, found in nature, far more stimulating companionship than in society, an indiscriminate fellowship vast, sane, and energizing: “Sweet Mountains—Ye tell Me no lie— / Never deny Me—Never fly—“(Poem 722). Such songs hearken liberated forms for twentieth century poetics, and make sisterly companions for H. D.’s verse, which, in turn, discards the corseted, stultifying enclosures of late Victorian stanzas, serendipitously paving the lyric way for American women to win the hard-won vote (1920), four years after *Sea Garden’s* publication. Yet the *other* world described by H.D. in *Sea Garden* could not seem more removed from everyday social and political concerns. Is hers the poetics of escape, or does she build a haven for necessary, practical replenishment within an all-too-real world war setting—ignorant of both nature and spirit, increasingly darkening the European landscape H.D. inhabited.

H.D.'s undomesticated garden, a paradoxical terrain of high art informed by savage beauty, simultaneously evokes both the islands of Greece and those of her native Maine: European tradition fused with American raw energy. H.D.'s presentation of nature's agency positions her emotionally-charged poetics outside of the impersonal enclosures of Eliot's artistry, whose own well-documented desire to escape the sterility of western civilization's cultural decline, ironically, failed to lead him to envision an incandescent landscape of collapsed dualisms. Understandably, then, the singular direction H.D.'s poetry took, its radical departure from despair, as early as her first book, *Sea Garden*, would appear to be child's play, diminutive exercises in Imagism, to many readers when juxtaposed with Eliot's celebrated poetic assaults on sentimentalism. Eliot's strategy, for example, in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," is to ensconce the speaker squarely within the paradigm of dualistic discourse, depicting mindless women aimlessly coming and going: their empty chatter both violating, and, in contrast with, the misused genius of Michelangelo's works. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in its totality, then, represents an objective correlative for the poet's despair when faced with the meaninglessness wrought by modernity's advances, which includes gender role changes; horror at the decimation of high culture by popular culture (represented by the women's ineffectual talk) is placed at the forefront of this poem with far more intensity than is any concern for the fate of the natural world.

Eliot's backward gaze idealizes a traditional hierarchy of values, exalting culture above nature on the European totem pole: a measuring rod for the enforcement of impossibly high standards against which Prufrock judges himself inadequate, both in intellect and as sentient being. Picturing himself only as a degraded "pair of ragged claws / Scuttling" (73-74) in silence, across the vast, unintelligent, muteness of nature, this crustaceous creature--whose exoskeleton protects it from a harsh world--represents the most appropriate persona the speaker can envision for himself in a modern social order. Eliot's nature is not redemptive. Formerly admired gentlemen of letters, for example, are now relegated to the sidelines: ineffectual fops incapable of blurting out passion—not unlike John Marcher's beastly detachment from human *feeling* in Henry James's apocalyptic short story "The Beast in the Jungle." Prufrock, the "exemplar / of a botched civilization" (Rich "Natural Resources" sec.7), is doomed to "drown" in a final cacophony of "human voices"(130), tragically stranded from—yet torturously aware of—the singing mermaids of a lost past. These Homeric sirens, whom he claims to have "seen," dynamically "riding seaward on the waves" (126), are, in their transcendent elusiveness, analogous to Henry James's ineffable beast, when, like Prufrock, Marcher, lost and standing on the bleak shore of death, watches, stricken, the intangible beast destroy his final chance for "the taste of life" (488).

Still, in both of these emotionally shattering works portraying hollow men—recall, for example, the haunting lyricism of the climactic concluding stanza of Eliot's poem--*feelings* come at the price of entombing nature forever within the "chambers of the sea . . . wreathed with seaweed red and brown." These Victorian, funereal garlands are strewn over the sepulchers by seductive, yet ethereal, "sea-girls"—hardly full-blown women—trapped in their virginal and gothic realm. The final stanza of Eliot's love song echoes the necrophilic mood of his forefather Edgar Allen Poe's lines, which evoke the ideal woman, Annabel Lee, eternally imprisoned and unattainable in her "tomb by the side of the sea" ("Annabel Lee"). It is interesting to consider what sort of emotional intelligence the poets offer here. Certainly, the argument can be made that Eliot's yearning is of the same vein as Keats's longings, in "Bright Star," for his "fair love's ripening breast"(Sonnet XX, line 10). In both instances, the speaker longs for the comfort of

proximity to the female muse, whether the make-believe mermaids of Prufrock's mournful sea dream or the real life woman, Fanny Brawne, of Keats's sonnet. However, Eliot's strain of romanticism belongs to a distinct sub-stream of nineteenth century poets, going back through Baudelaire to Poe—with his sadomasochistic cultivation of the pleasures of literary despair: “[T]he death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world . . .” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1: 1324). Interestingly, Shelley, Poe's precursor, crafted airy, incorporeal lines, inspiring Keats to caution him in a letter “[B]e more of an artist, and ‘load every rift’ of your subject with ore.” (August 16, 1820), Keats's insistence on “plump[ing]” the lines with sensual, elemental imagery expressive of a life-affirming poetic philosophy inspires reflection on the possibility of an alternate line of philosophical descent—reaching from ancient Sumer's Enheduanna, Egyptian love poets, Sappho, European medieval courtly love poets and Shakespeare, Blake, Keats, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to Americans such as Whitman, Dickinson, HD, Amy Lowell, D.H. Lawrence, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Sara Teasdale; then, Audre Lorde, Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Mary Oliver, and finally even, in select poems, the poet of ideas, Adrienne Rich. At least one common characteristic connects their works: an intrinsically elemental, sensual, yet, nonetheless, immanently spiritual dimension—what I have called *erotic* or *elemental mysticism*.

Although differences exist among these poets' outlooks, an erotic mystical theme can be dis that to the Greek and Hebraic mind/body split that comprises the intellectual root of western civilization. “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the Five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age,” writes Blake (“The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”). Whitman sings, “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (“I Sing the Body Electric”). J.W. Walkington argues, in 1994, that “the importance of Whitman as a spiritual guide [of H.D.'s] has been suppressed in recent studies . . . . An intense experience of nature allows Whitman to advance toward the tumultuous merging of spirit and body that launches him into the unknown . . . . When read against ‘Song of Myself,’ H.D.'s” poetry “expands beyond the limits of . . . recent feminist and post-structuralist readings and into its full significance as a work of mysticism” (124-134). For example, it is significant to point to the similarity between Whitman's defiant declaration, “If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred” (“I Sing the Body Electric”) and H.D.'s words, “The brain and the womb are both centres of consciousness, equally important” (*Notes on Thought and Vision*, 21). It is difficult then not to agree with Walkington's conclusion, “In her effort to throw off the restrictive ‘fathers’ of modernism, H.D. found inspiration in one of the grand patriarchs of American tradition, whose ‘Song of Myself’ can be seen as a model for twentieth century women's spirituality so firmly associated with H.D.” (134).

Certainly, a number of H.D. literary critics and poets have written illuminatingly of her works' mysticism and, in other instances, of the eroticism permeating flawlessly chiseled, tangible, yet impersonal, lines. (Later, I will comment on the prevalent notion that only H.D.'s prose and very late verse venture into the realm of the personal.) This haunting paradox of liminal object infused with supernatural vibrations, words housing electric matter, remains central to H.D.'s poetry throughout her career, although I would not necessarily argue that her poetry's steadfast expression of elemental mystical components evolves, so much as it simply changes, when her lines expand, in later decades, to accommodate spacious, epic forms: *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*. For as weighty as these later works prove to be, I remain equally enchanted by the poems of *Sea Garden*, especially taken as a whole. Guided by some mysterious speaker—with her scientist's eye for concrete detail, musician's ear for rhythms, and pagan's feel for wild

natural imagery—we can lose ourselves, perhaps even dissolve our heavy “burthen of the mystery” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”) in her timeless literary garden: modern and ancient, sensual and spiritual, at once. Having followed her through subtle byways, up and down dips and pinnacles, pausing to immerse ourselves in particularities—a sea rose, a lily, the violets upon violets—always moving, yet always stationary, we emerge into an outdoor chapel laid bare, refreshed and more tutored in nature’s hidden springs. “Although H.D.,” states critic Rachel Ann Connor, “did not produce formal manifestos to explain her use of the modern image, what is evident in *Sea Garden* and *Notes [On Thought and Vision]* is that she was engaged in a *theoretics*—as well as an *erotics*—of the sacred, both of which are intrinsically bound up with movement” (50). A meditative dance of delicate natural *mater* infused with enduring lyric spirit, its simplicity belies its complexity, recalling momentarily how the *Tao Te Ching*’s deceptively plain looking lines package oceans of meaning. Simple is not without intricacy and elegance, H.D. illustrates, even in her first book.

That her foremother Dickinson, too, dwelt in a luminous elemental paradise, painstakingly gathered by defiant “narrow Hands” (“I dwell in Possibility—“ J657), illuminates the existence of predecessors, in the Western literary canon, who share H.D.’s consciousness of the value of immanence. Both H.D. and Dickinson deliberately select language that resists clichéd concepts, the narrow models of transcendence; in carefully chosen diction, they each repudiate the stale trope of a so-called ecstasy sprung from the old paradigm of flesh severed from spirit. Thus, in “Wild Nights[‘s]” exclamatory directive for immediate satiation of unabashed erotic mystical yearning, “Eden” is found outside the gates of tradition, not during customary daylight, but within the pagan darkness of “Wild Nights”; the longed for communion—to “moor” in an uncharted “port” on an amniotic “Sea”—would be a luxurious experience of touching her own inherent oneness for a volcanic being, stranded inland (Poem 249). On the other hand, to suggest that instances of transcendence never occur in the vast poetry crafted by the imaginations of Dickinson and H.D. would be inaccurate; it is exciting, nonetheless, to come across examples of their forceful visions having leapt over narrow precipices, boldly expressing taboo concepts, refusing to write like little ladies. As Adrienne Rich in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”(1975) first showed us, the Amherst poet “[m]ore than any other poet,” tells us “that the intense inner event, the personal and psychological” are “inseparable from the universal” (168). It is not far to travel, then, to realize how the same poet must, therefore, necessarily express nature as inseparable from culture, as the lyric sings here: “And he unrolled his feathers / and rowed him softer home—“ (“A bird came down the walk—“ J328). Rowing can be conducted, either by human beings in oceanic bliss or birds whose wings “like Oars divide the Ocean,” a similarly blissful element, presumably; for is it not the very air the poet breaths, erasing the illusion of separateness between artist and creature: the bird she imagines herself to become, both symbolically and actually, dissolves seamlessly into the same mystical element that “Butterflies” swim and “Leap” through “plashless.” Culture and nature are experienced, in this reading of the poem, as *one*; thus, the very act of reading the poem can submerge the reader into mystical, *inexpressible* (suggested by the make-believe word “plashless,”) communion at its most lighthearted. Such liquid playfulness explodes any tendency as readers to relate this merging to traditional religious symbology, which would have called for transcendence—rather than immanence—the spirit rising above corrupted nature: flesh overridden by culture: a sail to Byzantium (Yeats).

Dickinson’s selection of radical solitude, thus peopled with nature, in sharp contrast with the Victorian woman’s prescribed role of wife and mother, is in keeping with the theme of

elemental immanence, of sensual mysticism. Only in solitude, like the outsider Lily of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and like H.D.'s unswerving speaker in dozens of poems, can these female creators discover the magnitude of their true selves; hence, alone with her pen and paper, the artist falls in love with her own forbidden creative powers, using them solely for herself, even if the lyric's speaker seemingly addresses another individual. Even, indeed, if she feels in the moment of pen touching paper that she writes for someone other than herself, some potent muse. At one time or another, all poets have their muses, their perfect listeners. Yet the poems finally arrive in which she expresses a recognition that it is her own thoughts and luxurious passions that occupy the page, after all. So that, if we, now, return to the poem "Wild Nights—," we can decipher its elemental mystical climactic moment of longing-to-merge with "Ah, the Sea!" as representing the primordial oneness of Persephone within the womb/brain of her own creative genius—ultimately, mothering her own powers: "might" she "but moor" in stillness paradoxically housed within the act of "rowing," free flowing writing, Edenic movement: a generating of culture inseparable from nature. Thus, the "female artist," according to Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, "makes her journey into what Adrienne Rich has called 'the cratered night of female memory' ('Re-Forming the Crystal,' 228) to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, reconceive, and give birth to" creations akin to "Emily Dickinson's 'mystic green' where women 'live aloud' . . ." (99-100). This enchanting "mystic green" trope, drawn from "There is a morn by men unseen," correlates, of course, with H.D.'s equally idyllic sea garden metaphor: Woolf's *moments of being*, I suggest, are thus reconceived by, and encapsulated within, integrative images offered through these two poets' ethereal, flowering, and oddly similar imaginings.

As Adrienne Rich, fourteen years after H.D.'s death, writes, voicing the collective female consciousness of many seventies' women poets, "Now I must write for myself for this blind / woman scratching the pavement": tenderly retrieving discarded words, she discovers her language to be "infinitely precious" ("Upper Broadway," 1975). What, also, is infinitely precious is the kindheartedness towards her own creative genius, imparted to us by the awakening speaker. Robert Duncan, a faithful admirer of the numinous sensuality and precision of H.D.'s poems, writes, for example, in the *H.D. Book*, of his early exposure to *Sea Garden's* poems, by means of a quietly rebellious 1930's high school teacher who, on occasion, stealthily brought in works of literature from outside the canon:

I was aware that sensual intensity in this poem ["Heat"] of H.D.'s, like the sensual intensity in Lawrence's work, demanded some new beginning in life from my own intensity . . . The very movement of the line involved image: 'A new cadence,' we find in the preface to the *Imagist Anthology* of 1915, 'means a new idea.' There was no thing that was not image, *there was no image that was not a lure of the divine and elemental* in one [my emphasis]. Anguish and ecstasy gave presence to, and were aroused by a presence in, rocks and sea, thunderous surfs, gardens and orchards expose or sheltered. This was the famous rapture of H.D. in her early work, the root of her lyric genius. The line of her verse grew taut, tempered to keep an edge naked in experience, tensed to provide a mode in which reverberations of these presences might be heard. (9-10)

It was her imagery's "lure of the divine and elemental in one" that had enchanted me, in the late seventies, when I discovered a facsimile edition—a book of which I had never heard—

in a Telegraph Avenue bookstore. A stack of thin, deep blue, hardback *Sea Garden[s]* lay neatly on a table near the door; pausing there, I felt an instant recognition, something oddly familiar in the strange, delicate poems: ancient “reverberations” in their immediacy. Perhaps my experience approximated something like that which H.D. writes of in 1919, three years after the publication of *Sea Garden*: “The mystic . . . is content to contemplate . . . eternal, changeless ideas . . . dramas already conceived that he had watched: memory is the mother, begetter of all drama, idea, music, science, or song” (*Notes on Thought* 23). Additionally, when I recently read Duncan’s words in the *H.D. Book*, I thought of how, by the time he composes them, he also would have read H.D.’s *Notes on Thoughts and Vision*, in which she writes of the inextricable relationship between body and higher consciousness. She even arrives, in an almost stream-of-consciousness, associative manner, at an inevitably subversive point, contrasting it with Christianity’s devaluing of the senses: in “the Galilean’s” teaching about “the kingdom of heaven being a pearl of great price . . . the body was not a very rare or lovely thing . . . Yet . . . I saw that the body had its use. The oyster [body] makes the pearl in fact” (51). The gently introspective tone in *Notes* reveals a frank “spiritual realism” that foreshadows the forthright tone of her epic *Trilogy*, more than two decades later (*The Walls Do Not Fall* 537; sec.[35], line 4). Continuing this exploratory process of unearthing thoughts, the poet arrives, organically, at the observation that an individual can “retard its [the spirit’s] growth by neglect of his body because the body of man as the body of nature is the ground into which the seed or spirit is cast. This is the mystery of Demeter, the Earth Mother. The body of the Eleusinian initiate had become one with the earth, as his soul had become one with the seeds enclosed in the earth” (52). Here, H.D.’s imagination journeys back in time to the Eleusinian Mysteries, the annual rituals in honor of Demeter and Persephone, the only major ancient Greek mother-daughter myth: their story providing her with the inspiration for a vision of spirit merged with body. Although, ironically, most of Greek mythology, literature, philosophy, and culture present fragmentation stories that split earth and heaven into the binaries upon which Western heroism and logic are founded—in H.D.’s pivotal work, *Notes on Thought and Vision*, the age-old fragmentation begins mending itself through a mother-daughter myth, long overlooked. Demeter towers above all others, as a figure of elemental mysticism, signifying H.D.’s unorthodox faith in the sacredness of flesh, so abundantly and consistently to be celebrated within her poems throughout her career.

It is no surprise, then, to find her friend D.H. Lawrence writing, in *The Man Who Died*, of a priestess of Isis—a figure some have linked to H.D.—giving new life to a Christ-figure: replacing the familiar asceticism with a parable of ecstatic body-soul immanence, of earthly rebirth through the sacred senses. Throughout his career, Lawrence’s work, though undoubtedly *erotic mystical* in its own way, presents a complex blend of life-affirming defiance of the waste land mentality, on the one hand, and abysmal misogyny, on the other. On the positive end, his tender portraits of his mother—in both his first novel, *Sons and Lovers*, and in the lyric poem “Piano”—foreshadow his affirmative tribute to female efficacy: to the goddess Isis—known either as Egyptian Mother of All, or Queen of the Universe, or Star of the Sea—and to H.D. herself, the novella’s priestess of Isis. Although others, including Susan Stanford Friedman and Gary Burnett, have written of H.D.’s significant role in inspiring this semi-feminist, yet little-known novella, I find H.D.’s own allusions to it truly telling. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. discloses, “Stephen Guest brought me a copy of *The Man Who Died*. He said, ‘Did you know that you are the priestess of Isis in this book?’”(141).

I had been contemplating the usefulness of the evocative term “elemental,” in part because of my decades-long familiarity with its sometimes metaphoric, paradigmatic meanings. Philosopher Mary Daly, for example, subtitles her fourth book, *Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, 1984, defining *element* as having multiple meanings: *elements* of words, *elements* of earth, *elements* of cosmos; additionally, Daly—acknowledging indebtedness to Woolf for her delightful sense of words as living entities—capitalizes *Elemental* to distinguish it from the ordinary lower-case version; in doing so, like an archeologist, she unearths subterranean meanings, revealing cosmic and transformative dimensions of the chthonic *Elements*, such that “Elemental spirits / angels / demons may be understood as Metaphors manifesting the essential unity and intelligence of spirit/matter, the inherent telos of spirit/matter” (10-11). Similar definitions and concepts, arising virtually simultaneously from primarily feminist poets, became almost a cliché among many seventies’ feminist thinkers—perhaps its most well-known prose expression being Audre Lorde’s much referenced essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”: the erotic, she celebrates, “lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane” (53). My guess is that this association of *erotic* with one gender, in particular, may raise the hackles of anti-essentialists, whose views enjoy current popularity. Be that as it may, Lorde’s multi-layered focus, ironically, seems primarily to concern itself with collapsing body/mind, senses/spirit dualistic paradigms—the consequences of which have been particularly pernicious for women as a specific class; potentially, such a collapse of old, repressive concepts, provides all women not only with a sense of inviolable self-worth but also with a duty to access this innate source of creative power, utilizing it to transform personal and political circumstances. It was important to Lorde that women find their distinctness from men, seeing themselves as self-sufficient on every level, including spiritually and creatively. It is also important to read this essay within the historical context of that brief women’s uprising more than three decades ago. The audience to whom she spoke still had deep tendrils of self-doubt, body shame, and little sense of owning a voice for articulating—either aloud or on the page—their passionate spirits.

Women’s epidemic-proportion self-mistrust, in general—fostered by the classic mind/body split, which places femaleness with body/nature, “vilified, abused, and devalued” (53), in opposition to, and below, maleness/mind—compels Lorde to take care in distinguishing between the “superficially erotic,” which stands as “merely pornographic,” and the legitimately erotic, which represents the “Nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (56). *Erotic*, for her, encompasses far more than sexual; her *erotic* resonates with a wholesome dynamism, both a metaphor for untapped spiritual reserves and a reclamation of the word itself—much as feminists reclaimed and redefined other degrading labels: poet Judy Grahn’s “Edward the Dyke,” for example, and artist Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” a travelling exhibit of colorful ceramic plates, sculpted like vulvas, and arranged formally upon a triangular table—each plate representing a famous woman, from Sojourner Truth to Virginia Woolf. Upon viewing this notable display, one might say that the term “cunt” suddenly takes on positive connotations. Redefining terms and images as a community effort takes on the urgency of the “half-born woman” who decides to write for herself, above all: a Persephone, the “leafbud” who “straggles forth” not quite fully formed, yet, paradoxically, a Demeter, “crone,” also, “reaching into wire trashbaskets pulling out / what was thrown away and infinitely precious” (Rich, “Upper Broadway,” 1975).

Hence, Lorde—in experiencing, herself, her newly defined *erotic*—gives voice to three mirroring female figures: Yoruban goddess Oshun, an orisha of life and sensuality; Demeter, Greek goddess of harvest, and Shakti, from India, the goddess of transcendence by way of the

pathway of the spine, the energy that “flows through and colors” her “life” as an erotic mystical life-force; it “heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all” her “experience”(57): spirit and body—one and the same. Depictions of the senses as a bridge to the spirit can be illustrated by the lines of another poet, appearing in this era, Olga Broumas: “White wine eases the mind along the slopes of the body” (“Artemis,” 197). “I work / in silver the tongue-like forms,” she writes, “whose significance stirs in me / like a curviform alphabet.” The body and mind merge here in a unified quest—as the poem continues—for origins of words, authentic selfhood, elemental traces belonging to a lost language of primordial being-ness, perhaps when human consciousness had not fallen from wholeness into warring, compartmentalized parts: “like amnesiacs / in a ward on fire, we must / find words / or burn” (24). Vibrant repose and states of enjoyment become vehicles for recovering precious clues to old integrity. Lorde writes of the sacredness of such pleasure, which is far fuller and more eloquent than mere surface sensation; indeed, such delight encourages “excellence,” rather than the “mediocrity” too often settled for in our “anti-erotic society” (58-59). Similarly Marilyn French in *Beyond Power: Women, Men, and Morals*, 1985

An ecofeminist literary critic who resists the recent ideological movement towards de-gendering nature and creating neutralizing metaphors instead, Catrin Gersdorf argues in “Ecocritical Uses of the Erotic” that the early, second wave ecofeminist literary critic Annette Kolodny does not, as some “ascetic” ecocritics have argued, “fall short of opening up new metaphoric ways of representing nature” in *The Lay of the Land* (1975) “because her analysis remains within the nature-as-female-body paradigm” (188). Comfortable, then, with this paradigm, she insists upon “highlighting pleasure and erotic desire instead of reproduction and economic gain as the dominant principle in human relations with nature” (189). She confronts the arising climate of “critical asceticism,” comprised of feminists and non feminist critics alike, which is, in her view, indicative of “fear of the body,” and she even asserts that those theorists, Susan Griffin and Audre Lorde included, who create sensual spiritual bridges to the natural world are advancing the radical cause of dissolving old paradigms of an abyss between nature and culture, whereas “the rift” between culture and nature.

As has been well established, HD benefited from Sappho’s influence: her worship of earthly beauty, and, above all, her lyric elevation of *emotional intelligence* to the rank of rational thought. Viewed through this lens, perhaps we do not need to see the branch of feminist theory, which appears to claim the existence of a special bond between woman and nature, woman and emotion, as fundamentally threatening to woman’s struggle for recognition in the canon and the polis.

#### *In That Time, In That Place*

*“I go back to you in my heart, Keats,” I recall, on December 28, 2008, after re-reading his letter written to Fanny Brawne ( July 5, 1819), declaring his love, not for the “admiration of” her “Beauty,” but for “the fire in her heart.” Is this not the same blazing, visceral fire that so many women poets (E. Bronte, A. Lowell, Millay) have responded to in his poetry? Could a poetess not feel in her gut, in the discriminating cells of her intelligent body, in her incendiary mind starved for respect, the authenticity and integrity of his tone? [A Berkeley graduate (summer 1975), I am visiting Tulane University, wearing white slacks and a gray, silk blouse, a stylish bow at my throat, age twenty-one, my incendiary zeal, as standing outside the campus cafeteria and considering graduate school, I speak courteously to the great and brilliant Romantic professor—the one I most admire and aspire to be—as young, Byronic Greek American, hanging out on a hallway counter—he chats animatedly with several male students, [eighteen years later,*

*I am in Paleohora, Crete, walking past iconic tables of taverna men playing cards] but glancing contemptuously in my direction, he waves away my question with a sardonic smirk, “I am a teacher of men!” Can there be any preparation for a moment like that? Is it possible in one searing instant to feel the concentrated misogyny of thousands of years channeled towards one person with a “fire in her heart,” her utterly trusting mind? Does the incendiary zeal, become, then, of necessity, in that time, in that place, a raging inferno for social change? Anticipating Susan Griffin’s roaring lioness, devouring the zookeeper, in *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside her*, 1977, two years afterwards. That New Orleans’ day. (Not succumbing. Yet, always, always, buried beneath the protective fire, a terrible grief, an endless sadness, for the girl lost on that summer afternoon, sitting there on a bench outside the campus cafeteria, unguarded, shy, bludgeoned.)*

Whether a learned or intrinsic trait, according to Daniel Goleman, PhD, in his book grounded in brain and behavioral research, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (1995), women and men are “taught very different lessons about handling emotions. Parents, in general, discuss emotions—with the exception of anger—more with their daughters than their sons” (131). Goleman points out that Leslie Brody and Judith Hall, in a review published in *Handbook of Emotions*, 1993, “propose that because girls develop facility with language more quickly than do boys, this leads them to be more experienced at articulating their feelings and more skilled than boys at using words to explore and substitute for emotional reactions such as physical fights; in contrast, they note,” and as Goleman goes on to say, men “are less sophisticated than the opposite sex in the byways of emotional life” (131). Similarly, Deborah Tannen, PhD, in *You Just Don’t Understand*, points out that men, in conversation, “are content to talk about ‘things,’ while women seek emotional connection. . . . Hundreds of studies have found . . . that on average women are more empathic than men” and women, in comparison with men, “experience the entire range of emotions with greater intensity” (132). To say, then, that many women poets possess emotional genius does not undermine their brain power, but merely expands our understanding of why so many of them have composed emotionally intense works, and why some of them would be drawn to the works of an English poet who wrote with fire in his heart, “O fret not after knowledge I have none and yet my song comes native with the warmth.” Keats’s confidence in emotional wisdom’s primacy, a personal song of innate overflowing warmth, is life-affirming in its quiet defiance of any valuing of lives and works of intellectual aridity divorced from sensuality. In sharp contrast, dozens of twentieth and twenty-first century women poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore, Jorie Graham, and many Language Poets, write highly cognitive, decidedly unemotional, poems of astonishing syntactical complexity. Doubtless, too, many male poets write brilliant, emotionally fluent lines, including Rainier Maria Rilke, Langston Hughes, and D.H. Lawrence. However, overall, the trend has been to largely devalue the poetry of the emotionally expressive women—such as H.D., Edna Millay, and Sara Teasdale—giving more critical attention either to *idea* poets, in general, or to cerebral poems. Female passion has not been popular in most critical circles.

*Another professor, another university, 1982, and, now, as an advanced candidate for the PhD, I am in his office, somewhere in beautiful Wheeler Hall, consulting with him (he looks the part) on tentative ideas I have for my final project; he is telling me he will do everything in his power to block me from writing a dissertation on Keats. I am too emotional about him, he says, too emotional, he repeats, with horror and irritation in his voice. My feelings are keeping me*

from thinking clearly. I had even, he grimaces, had tears in my eyes when I spoke of certain poems. Keats was a philosopher, he kept repeating, and although I can't swear to this, I believe he was pacing around the room, as he expounded at length upon Keats's philosophic mind. Clearly, in his mind, philosophy and emotion were mutually exclusive. However, to be fair, was this not two years before the publication of the book *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* by controversial philosopher and Boston College professor, Mary Daly, who argues the necessity for serious philosophers, poets, and scholars to connect dynamically with "elemental e-motion," as distinguished from sentimental drivel, if they are to arrive at exact words; only through "experiencing e-motions that are her living threads of connectedness with external and internal reality" (200), can the poet or scholar realize, analyze, reason, and name with accuracy. In other words, deep emotion is perfectly congruent with and is necessary for, in fact, logic of the highest order: elemental logic (197-200).

In striking contrast with Eliot's style of idealizing old paradigms—through creating in *The Waste Land*, as poet and critic Geoffrey O'Brien notes, "a relentless citational environment"—, H.D.'s style in *Sea Garden*, though evocative of Sappho, is stripped of the weight of frequent references to cultural icons. Indeed, the fresh quality of voice sounds brazen, ragged, American--a bard singing strangely integrative notes-- in the face of the grim social climate of World War I: intoning seemingly tangential, yet impassioned, lyrics, simultaneously mystical and elemental, imagistically set beyond the waste land, seeking a familiar, yet perpetually renewable, homeland: a poetry at-one-with nature. Although the Sapphic influence on her early poetry foreshadows her later verse's complex allusiveness, here the voice sounds innocent of questions of serious art's precarious position in the catastrophic war of popular culture against it. Yet, is this not, in and of itself, a kind of shoring up against despair? It is as if the poet, in the words of her admirer, Adrienne Rich, "walked away from the argument and jargon in the room," and, composing "with the musing of a mind/ one with her body," sought to discover, explore, and master, with great "care" and precision, "many-lived, unending/ forms," in a dance, balancing raw sensation with formal restraint, until she organically chisels and brings forth "the stone foundation, rockshelf further/ forming underneath everything that grows" ("Transcendental Etude"). H.D.'s rockshelf defies Eliot's crumbling language place, and, as O'Brien notes, Eliot's positioning of "criticism" in poetry's former, supreme domain; spontaneous feelings as wellsprings of poetic knowledge have been plastered over by criticism's "autonomic, if not involuntary, act of breathing" (2).

That culture and nature stand at odds with each other remains a given for most modernist poets. What is surprising to discover is *Sea Garden's* comfortable embedding of culture within nature, art at one with the elements: a sculpted wild. In its own way, then, this slender book of verse, published in 1916, stands apart from "the noise and the jargon in the room" (Rich "Transcendental Etude"), embodying high art wedded to natural setting—presenting a living Grecian urn, unspoiled by pollution, friendly both to human and nonhuman animals, plants, and song. Here is a world of perpetual motion. A world of wind, sea, rock, and light intermingling at the edges, yet distinct, crisp, and swift. An island of animate forms sung to in mounting, modulating waves of measured sounds; word repetition at the start of successive lines, enchanting receptive listeners, making them participatory pagans for the poem's length; ritual sound-technique lulls senses, quiets minds, dissipates resistance:

We wandered from pine-hills

through oak and scrub-oak tangles,  
 we broke hyssop and bramble,  
 we caught flower and new bramble-fruit  
 in our hair: we laughed  
 as each branch whipped back,  
 we tore our feet in half buried rocks  
 and knotted roots and acorn-cups.

“The Helmsman”

Constructing this poetic homeland, a garden of lyric possibilities, generating futures “like bread in our children’s mouths” (Lorde, “A Litany for Survival”), in which the “shark-jaws / of outer circumstance / will spit you forth,” The reader enters the consciousness of the lines, psyche merging with the “we” of the chthonic wild poem. The book overtakes us. How? Perhaps we do not want to follow the poet to this dimension of awareness, to open, to surrender control, allow our coarsened egos “perish on the path/ among the crevices of the rocks”(“Mid-day”): words HD’s American-speaking friend, William Carlos Williams, would admire, but a rhythm all her own; a length of line determined by the persistence of the sentences’ subject, the “we,” as well as by a plethora of verbs—“wandered,” “broke,” “caught,” “laughed,” “tore,” all tethered to earth by tree imagery—“pines,” “oaks,” “brambles,” “branches,” “roots,” and “acorns.” Motions of humans stir in and among the vibrant stasis of specific natural features alive on the page, intimate companions. No drawing-room awaits such unbound individuals with bare feet, and yet these classically beautiful figures seem quintessentially civilized in their exquisitely heightened sensibilities, their finely-tuned perceptivity, their refined tastes and rarefied energy. In short, they live in a dimension of non-hierarchical natural enchantment, mysteriously apart from the fallen world of “getting and spending” (Wordsworth, “The World is too Much with Us”), yet, paradoxically, fully cognizant of evil and “land-blight” (“The Shrine”). The more we read of this island-place, the more we come to recognize the dedicated artistry involved in journeying into this dimension of consciousness: the discipline of craft required, the surrender to not-knowing.

A leap of faith into uncharted seascapes is taken as decisively as Dickinson’s turning of a key in her own room’s door. A hermetic paradise behind that closed door liberated her explosive imagination, and would be passed down— though H.D. could only read the published handful of her foremother’s poems. Their works’ shared intensity appears in their similar disloyalty to civilization (Rich) through their highly selective processes of perfecting original word productions against the odds. They built indomitable language fortresses against the silencing tomes of the famous processions of educated men (Woolf, *Three Guineas*).

Additionally, and ironically in some respects, H.D.’s verse does not concern itself, then, as directly with rebellion against the Bloomian fathers—the Romantics and Victorians—as does Eliot and Pound’s work. H.D.’s early lyrics do not pattern themselves syntactically upon a formal resolution of a crisis of subjectivity, which M.H. Abrams (1965) unveils as the general model adopted by Romantic poets. Ironically, his model inadvertently serves to help us read her individual poems as works laying claim to an already unified field: art at-one-with nature, poem permeable to flower; in contrast to works seeking to resolve an internal, self-reflexive tension between dueling opposites: reason against emotion, spirit against flesh, culture against nature.

As another critic, Alice Templeton, writes, “[R]enewal that requires a destructive manipulation of the external world to complement the self is egotism, not transcendent” (23). By situating the psychic terrain of the poem, the “intact” work of art, among imagined, yet realistic, metamorphosing and shifting natural borders, within accurately recorded elemental details of

earth, wind, sun, and sea, the speaker's voice in the poems of this first volume surely "comes native with the warmth" (Keats). In this way, *Sea Garden's* verse achieves its impassioned artistry by drawing a fine, yet definitive, line between unified immanence and traditional dualistic transcendence. Her unified immanence dwells in part in the spiritual potency of each living word. Each word she chooses becomes as tangible and energized as the particulars presented of the actual physical world. Ironically, H.D.'s early work has been dismissed at times, at one extreme, for being too localized, minimalistic, and narrow in its concerns, or, at the other extreme, too rarified, elitist, and removed from life's larger questions. Either one of these opposing readings is easy to adopt, conditioned as western literary critics are to read poems through a lens split between contraries: attuned to the cognitive stimulation of a poetic tension created by this centuries-old device--romantic paradox. Even though her verse structurally diverges radically from nineteenth century forms, strains of Keatsian sensuality, for example, appear in select lines over the decades. Interestingly, Keats's influence on numerous twentieth century women poets—Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, for example—has been widely noted by recent critics. In lines that would appeal to women with little access to formal education, Keats writes, "O fret not after knowledge—I have none, / And yet my song comes native with the warmth" (Keats "What the Thrush Said" 245).

Paradox, nonetheless, can be found as a lyric technique in *Sea Garden*, yet neither to the same degree, I would suggest, nor as central to a given poem's structural progression, as can be found in Eliot's "Love Song" and Stevens's "Sunday Morning." Unlike H.D.'s technique of situating the speaker inside nature, Stevens locates the speaker of "Sunday Morning" at a distance from its pagan celebrants, creating classic paradoxical tension between mind and body, even though the poem seeks to remedy Western civilization's alienation from nature. The formalistic style of the poem itself plays a large part in establishing this cognitive remove from the wild exuberance of primal beings. The place of emotion in poetry has been controversial since the early twentieth century. Interestingly, one of our poets of the intellect, Adrienne Rich warns, "Trapped in one idea, you can't have feelings / Without feelings perhaps you / can feel like a god" ("Transit," 1981, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*).

#### *Barely Past Girlhood*

*In my ears, returning, the echo of a distant song: Wallace Stevens, priestly bard of pagan nature. As a Berkeley senior, 1975, (five years before some of us in academia would begin to read a newly emerging H.D., and fourteen years after her death), I read in tall, backyard grasses:*

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
 Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
 Their boisterous devotion to the sun  
 .....  
 Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,  
 Out of their blood, returning to the sky.  
 ("Sunday Morning")

Iambic pentameter measuring noble sounds, the speaker prophesizes a day pagan men shall heal the rift between art and nature, mind and body. Majestic, impersonal, Stevens's balanced intonations underscore the message that those boisterous *Others* shall be superior artists in their

rebound paradise of art at one with the natural order: nature singing nature. Admiring their turbulent and manly orgy, a far cry from his own civilized poetics, this solitary bard is oddly removed from this tribal frenzy. Tonally solid within his philosophic detachment, his authoritative evenness, the speaker, in contrast to H. D.'s speaker, neither longs to be among them, nor invites our longings to be stirred. For serenity is to be found in the knowing that such merging of culture and nature already exists somewhere—at least, in an imagined place and time—immortalized in some idealized “blood, returning to the sky,” even now.

Juxtaposed with Stevens's well-mannered tone, H.D.'s verse's emotional intensity, throughout not only *Sea Garden* but also much of her later poetry, might be heard as nothing less than hysterical. Even as Stevens's voice can seem, at times, redolently even-toned and monotonous, might not her work sound, on occasion, excessively fervent? “Shall I hurl myself from here / Shall I leap and be nearer you?” (“The Cliff Temple”). And yet, ironically, H.D. would never have chosen Stevens's term *orgy*: not, however, because of lingering Victorianism; strangely enough, Stevens's persona can seem more dated than her contemporary-sounding candor. Yet to her aesthetic sensibility, *orgy* is a word, which would cheapen and dissipate the mystical sensuality her lyrics commonly exude.

“The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees, inseparably from art . . .” (Rich, “What Is Found There” 54). To love nature inseparably from culture opens up the possibility of a poem in which people, stones, and trees cohabit multidimensional, nonhierarchical, and fluid locales. (Such a poetry, however, might easily be misread as *slight*, as not taking on the big questions.) In other words, if violets, cliffs, seas are conceived of as existing on the same plane as art, then poetic forms ought to accommodate and mirror such a holistic vision, blending consciousness with image: nature carving nature. This, indeed, places *Sea Garden*'s poems solidly within what Altieri names “a new realism,” which, he demonstrates, emerges with Imagism. In reference to Pound's early Imagist works, he writes:

[T]hese poems seem slight vehicles . . . yet they are slight vehicles that make a point of how their own slightness emerges—a promising beginning. The poems might even be said to question their culture's habits for making judgments about slightness. Maybe what has seemed weightiness depends primarily on rhetorical traditions that purchase an aura of profundity at the cost of precision and subtlety. Perhaps we need new models of judgment that rely more on intricate blends of sensations and the precise ear for nuance than the grand gestures asserting their own significance” (*The Art of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry* 23).

My point is, then, that HD's frail-seeming early verse perhaps qualifies even more than Pound's for the category of seemingly insignificant lyrics of nature and feelings: a dangerously *trifling* duo. As Eliot, chief modernist literary theorist, writes, in a prescriptive moment, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “The emotion of art is impersonal”(38). Given modernist prejudices against emotionally expressive creations, H.D.'s early poems were perhaps, in part, composed to withdraw from the emerging climate of despair represented in much modernist poetry; while Pound's meager “In the Station of the Metro” persists in being discussed and taught as representative of early modernism, ad nauseum, H.D.'s early verse continues to be either ignored or misread. And yet she herself writes, in many stanzas in *Sea Garden*, only indirectly of emotion, with a distinctly impersonal perspective on “deep-purple / bird-foot violets” (“Sea Gods”) in playful stanzas, celebrating imagistic profusion and color as pathways to

consciousness. Refined sensuality as a avenue to heightened awareness in H.D.'s lyrics, according to Susan Friedman, "[c]onsciously reject[s] the mechanistic, materialist conceptions of reality that formed the faith of the empirical modern age . . ." ("Who Buried H.D.?" 47). Thus, she continues, H.D. "affirmed a spiritual realism and the relevance of a quest for intangible meanings" (47). In addition, Alicia Ostriker affirms that H.D.'s "poems were, first to last, liminal" in her "refusal to submit to Western culture's classic dualisms" ("My H.D." 3). The literary potency of H.D.'s poetic refusal becomes fully evident in a more contemporary work, *The Dream of a Common Language*, in which Adrienne Rich writes of her own visionary dream of achieving holism through awareness of an already present reality of unified, non-hierarchical elements—a tapestry of "everything that grows"—glimpsed through a veil of dualistic concepts.

## II. "Stranger in the Storm"

"She who splits firewood, and she who wanders" is the same woman, at last (Rich "Transcendental Etude"). Upon reading this poem in 1977, its publication year, I felt seismic shifts akin to those I was experiencing reading Susan Griffin's newly published *Woman Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. With all due respect to Margaret Homan's analysis of Rich's poem as being dangerously essentialist, and even anti-feminist, my own gut feeling, upon first reading it, was of having just entered a deeper layer of feminist awareness, more images revealed of true radical identity, returning momentarily to pre-patriarchal origins: origins buried deep in my own psyche, yet familiar as those fleet deer the speaker happens upon while driving through the Massachusetts' countryside—a recognition of spirits, abundance, Keatsian plenitude, echoing his famous lines: "To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees" ("To Autumn"). Rich writes, in classic iambic pentameter, 158 years later, "the deer are still alive and free, / nibbling apples from early-laden boughs ("Transcendental Etude"). In the second stanza of his Autumnal ode, Keats a simple peasant woman, the elegant grace of Demeter, "laden," like Rich's "early-laden boughs" with timeless poetic wisdom: "And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook ." As her poem unfolds, Rich reveals all this beauty is actually a Wordsworthian memory, she calls upon in solitude, standing in her familiar, very American and Whitmanesque "dooryard": a recollection from which she draws hope, when faced with the encroaching "winters of rotgut violence." Rich's apples on "early-laden boughs" are "already yellowing fruit," making them "Hesperidean / in the clear-tuned, cricket-throbbing air." The yellow apples in Hesperidia, a mythological Greek paradise, tended by three nymphs/goddesses, Quote "Ode on Melancholy." Now, quote, "T.E." Here, Rich integrating opposing impulses—towards the chthonic cave, on one hand, the Hesperidean orchard and uncharted wilderness, on the other—envisions a whole and entire woman, no longer longing for the "stranger in the storm," the *other*, the receding Heathcliff, outside herself. "Romantic thralldom," the fitting phrase coined by Duplessis in reference to H.D.'s work—so often seen as a driving force in the voices of Dickinson, H.D., and Millay—has been transcended in this etude: a tribute to overcoming "suffer[ing] uselessly" ("Splittings" 1974). The energy of yearning can now be conserved and channeled into new forms and fresh phrases. The stranger in the storm turns out to be no stranger at all, no Heathcliff, but an aspect of self. This recognition that the sought-after "other," with whom a given speaker yearns for contact, is not to be found externally, comes simultaneously with an understanding that a new autonomy, paradoxically, occurs only within the context of a collective consciousness. In other words, hackneyed romantic lyric themes, dating back to Petrarch's sonnets and medieval songs of courtly love, are transcended in the

twentieth century poem at the precise historic moment the female speaker dares to let go of deeply reflexive patterns. That this moment has been “long in coming” (“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law”) is evidenced by the persistence of the digressive dream of ecstatic union with another, which pervades too much of nineteenth and twentieth century poetry by women. The tragedy of this persistence, which Rich, in “Waking in the Dark,” named “the tragedy of sex” (8), has been that the psyches of intelligent readers, imbibing false lessons, were compelled to settle for narrow identities, generation after generation. Influenced by reading poems of exquisite pining, internalizing these theatrical configurations as the norm, readers, then, imitated in their own lives these self-destructive habits of mind.

“Transcendental Etude,” in contrast with these traditional love lyrics, can be read as an anti-romantic poem. The speaker’s audience, not a solitary imagined beloved, but a collective listener, keeps the poet honest, keeps her from the grandiosity of “I Sing Myself” (Whitman), even if the poem retains aspects of that ethic of narcissistic autonomy. Ironically, as the poem demonstrates, the newfound confidence—derived from fully embracing her “half-born” self—positions her to speak from a humble, disparate center: not a place we are accustomed to expecting from a fully formed autonomous voice. False theatricality.

### III. Headlong Motion of HD’s Poetry

In contrast with her cooler works, discussed earlier, the voice in the poem speaks from a place of heightened emotion, relentless in its insistence on the reader’s surrender to the poet’s vision. Its intensity runs the risk of alienating the reader. However, this passionately driven forward-moving energy is restrained, counterbalanced, by detailed descriptions of nature: concrete highly specific imagery chiseled into finely wrought forms. In other words, the elemental dimension of the poem can even be said to quiet the emotional content in particular moments, creating an atmosphere of suspended coolness: the ancient passion of Euripides elicited, yet contained, by modern structures.

The observant eye of the speaker details this island-world, painting a self-enclosed haven, a wild garden, evocative of Homeric landscapes, far away it would seem from the modern world of wars and politics, the real world of mundane lives. Adrienne Rich may help us to reconsider the temptation to dismiss *Sea Garden* as irrelevant, romantic, elitist, when she asks, “*What is political activism, anyway?*. . . there is still no general collective understanding from which to move. Each takes his or her own risk in isolation. We may think of ourselves as individual rebels, and individual rebels can be easily shot down. The relationship among so many feelings remains unclear. But these thoughts and feelings, suppressed and stored up and whispered, have an incendiary component. You cannot tell where or how they will connect, spreading underground from rootlet to rootlet till every grass blade is afire from every other. . . Poetry, in its own way, is a carrier of sparks “(*What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* [1993]).

After all, in many ways, *Sea Garden* wants nothing to do with civilization: the place of “sleep,” unconsciousness, ignorance. . . the place of “the city,” we “fled / through the city gate” to the elemental place of “hurled sand,” “rough stones,” and “broken shells” (“The Wind Sleepers”). To be awake calls for a militant focus, a discipleship of intentionality that is also a surrender to energies “unleashed”: energies for action. The exact nature of these actions the poet refuses to prescribe beyond metaphorical construction of the “altar,” we are collectively to cherish (July 9 ) in a “never halt[ing]. . . tribute” of self-sustaining “song” at one with “sea-birds

that cry / discords.” On our way towards the “Howl” of Ginsberg’s voice, decades hence, in the aftermath of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp,” (“Song of Myself”), H.D. breaks with convention in her own paradoxical “wail” of celebrant defiance. Like Whitman before her, and Ginsberg after, yet also uniquely her voice.

Here, in *Sea Garden*, though firmly rooted in Greek imagery, H.D.’s poems reach across cultural boundaries, through tribal rhythms and semantic clarity (footnote with Wole’s response to H.D.), what she would several decades later name “spiritual realism” (*Trilogy*) beyond cultural confines, mirroring the impassioned devotion of an Indian Mira-bai; the fierce mental focus of the Yoruban Oya’s whirlwinds scattering ancient cowrie-shells; the steady heartbeat of a New Mexican Hopi dancer. If Virginia Woolf’s famous declaration “as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (*Three Guineas* 125) is brought to mind by the unbounded wildness of H.D.’s settings, then we also may wish to hold, simultaneously, in the palimpsest of our collective awareness, the relatively recent lines in *The Black Unicorn* by Audre Lorde, another dispossessed poet:

I know  
 the boundaries of my nation lie  
 within myself  
 but when I see old movies  
 of the final liberation of Paris  
 with french tanks rumbling over land  
 that is their own again  
 and old French men weeping  
 hats over their hearts  
 singing a triumphant national anthem

My eyes fill up with muddy tears  
 That have no earth to fall upon.  
 (“Bicentennial Poem 21,000,000” 90)

Against despair that threatens, at every juncture, to overcome the speaker’s “meted words,” she chants for companions to “tear,” “tug,” “pile,” “wail,” “roar,” and “cry/discords.” For, paradoxically, within the city gates, the very state of consciousness that propels us out of stale patterns of the “death-march,” the ominous procession (Woolf, *Three Guineas*) brings with its unleashed purity “[whiter] / than the crust / left by the tide,” a stinging awareness of “brokenness”: “damage” done (Rich, “Diving Into the Wreck”) already, “within us and against us against us and within us”:

Chant in a wail  
 That never halts,  
 Pace a circle and pay tribute  
 With a song.

We are there with her invocation, yet we are also here with the song in our throats. Intimate and immediate, yet, simultaneously, impersonal and restrained. Multiplicities of time and place, subjectivity and objectivity. A world of possibilities and necessary hope, unexpected in the

twentieth century. An elemental mystical vision born in *Sea Garden* to stand at odds with Mr. Eliot's cruel April month, his beautiful despair.

#### IV. Notes on the Title

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What's more, representing profound vision by means of a metaphoric jellyfish invites comparison with Eliot's crab scuttling across the ocean floor. However, whereas Eliot's crustacean symbolizes the murky depths to which a modern poet's consciousness has sunk, H.D.'s primordial creature, in contrast, symbolically broadens the definition of consciousness to include a positive take on intuition divorced from tradition. Even the English romantics did not go this far in praise of nature's wisdom; Keats's nightingale juxtaposed with H.D.'s weird and wonderful trope underscores just how far she, philosophically and imaginatively, is willing to venture towards risking the absurd. Perhaps Whitman's "beetles rolling balls of dung" (52) in section 24 may be read as literary predecessors, but they, at least, carry dignified echoes of sacred Egyptian scarab beetles ("Song of Myself"). The representational stature H.D. bestows upon the jellyfish appears unprecedented in literature, though H.D. may have been aware that the name given, in most European languages, for the gelatinous creature springs from Greek Μέδουσα (Médousa)—its long tentacles corresponding with the Greek Gorgon's snake hair. Thus, H.D., by ennobling jellyfish (Medusa), possibly inadvertently, yet intuitively—through implicitly restoring to snakes their life-affirming, pre-patriarchal mythic meaning—transfigured the denigrated figure into a promising figure. Indeed, she writes, "The world of vision has been symbolized in all ages In, this way, H.D. re-creates her Self as Medusa, tentacles snaking from her second chakra, the eastern energy center of transformational power, her physical womb, to swirling antennae, a state of higher consciousness, above her head, the seventh chakra. Thus, H.D. explains how the "[a]im of men and women of highest development," poets, is to achieve "equilibrium" of mind, spirit, and body (17). Even as the kundalini snake, encircling the human spine and representing an individual's physical pathway to enlightenment in ancient Indian systems, offers an image of immortal growth available to all, so, too, the jellyfish becomes an equalizing symbol in *Notes*:

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tries by the serpent.  
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This unexpected egalitarianism sets H.D. apart from Pound and Eliot's unabashedly elitist attitudes concerning artists. Does not her keen and painful awareness of her lower rank, in their eyes, based solely upon being a *woman* artist, play a role in this inclusiveness?

Later, in *Notes*, her valuing of female artists can be discerned, when gutsily re-writing Christian myths, she places Christ outside of the norm--the Judeo-Christian system that separates soul from body, intellect from nature—envisioning him as a mystic, not unlike herself, and no more divine than Demeter. By vividly describing his potency with sea imagery, "the conch shell and the purple-fish" (53), she positions him in the realm of jellyfish consciousness, which for H.D. is the serpent's dwelling: "He was the body of nature." In her cosmology, Greek

Persephone/Yoruban Yemeyah/Christian Mary is not imagined standing upon the serpent's back, as in the famous Catholic depictions. As for the great mother of Persephone, Demeter, according to critic Meredith A. Powers, "The Mountain Mother of Asiatic origins . . . [b]y the Middle Minoan period . . . was a fully developed, multifaceted goddess in Crete . . . [S]he was the first significant deity in the cultural heritage of western civilization" (25). Her artifacts include the serpent. Thus, it is apt when H. D. claims that she writes from the perspective of an "Eleusinian mystic," stating "Christ and his mother are one." For, she adds, "Christ *is* the serpent, once a symbol of the mother goddess—a sensitive and continuously transforming state of awareness—represented equally by Dionysius and all transformational, pagan gods and goddesses: "He was the conch shell and the purple fish left by the lake tides . . . He was the body of nature . . . the small crabs from among the knotted weeds" (53). In this way, instead of abandoning Christian myth altogether, H.D. commits sacrilege by firmly denouncing Christ's stature as being that of purely a spirit god, the *one* true god; instead, she places him alongside, what are to her, equally divine figures drawn from the Greek pantheon, each one capable of evoking erotic mystical states of consciousness—"like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body" (18). These figures are ultimately states of consciousness located within highly balanced embodied-minds: embodied- minds in which, surprisingly, ordinary jellyfish and crabs are as likely as ancient gods and singing mermaids to represent various states of enlightenment.

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But this world is there for everyone. (40)

This unexpected egalitarianism sets H.D. apart from Pound and Eliot's unabashedly elitist attitudes concerning artists. Does not her keen and painful awareness of her lower rank, in their eyes, based solely upon being a *woman* artist, play a role in this inclusiveness?

Later, in *Notes*, her valuing of female artists can be discerned, when gutsily re-writing Christian myths, she places Christ outside of the norm--the Judeo-Christian system that separates soul from body, intellect from nature—envisioning him as a mystic, not unlike herself, and no more divine than Demeter. By vividly describing his potency with sea imagery, “the conch shell and the purple-fish” (53), she positions him in the realm of jellyfish consciousness, which for H.D. is the serpent's dwelling: “He was the body of nature.” In her cosmology, Greek Persephone/Yoruban Yemeyah/Christian Mary is not imagined standing upon the serpent's back, as in the famous Catholic depictions. As for the great mother of Persephone, Demeter, according to critic Meredith A. Powers, “The Mountain Mother of Asiatic origins . . . [b]y the Middle Minoan period . . . was a fully developed, multifaceted goddess in Crete . . . [S]he was the first significant deity in the cultural heritage of western civilization” (25). Her artifacts include the serpent. Thus, it is apt when H. D. claims that she writes from the perspective of an “Eleusinian mystic,” stating “Christ and his mother are one.” For, she adds, “Christ *is* the serpent, once a symbol of the mother goddess—a sensitive and continuously transforming state of awareness—represented equally by Dionysius and all transformational, pagan gods and goddesses: “He was the conch shell and the purple fish left by the lake tides . . . . He was the body of nature . . . the small crabs from among the knotted weeds” (53). In this way, instead of abandoning Christian myth altogether, H.D. commits sacrilege by firmly denouncing Christ's stature as being that of purely a spirit god, the *one* true god; instead, she places him alongside, what are to her, equally divine figures drawn from the Greek pantheon, each one capable of evoking erotic mystical states of consciousness—“like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body” (18). These figures are ultimately states of consciousness located within highly balanced embodied-minds: embodied- minds in which, surprisingly, ordinary jellyfish and crabs are as likely as ancient gods and singing mermaids to represent various states of enlightenment.

## Chapter Four Daughter-Right

My mother screamed at us to give her the gun. I had hidden it somewhere. I don't remember where. I was sixteen. We were in a rented summer house on Cape Cod: a house that belonged to my father's sister whose husband had divorced her, after designing this house for big family gatherings beside the sea; at night, the ocean opened out to the distant lights that were Provincetown, my grandmother's "necklace of diamonds," she would say, when I visited here once before flying off to Europe with Mama.

Mama wanted to have that gun. I tried not to think for what. But I knew it was to kill herself and all of us too. I had to protect my siblings, of course, 'cause I was the oldest. And I felt this as a responsibility that would stay with me for decades to come, to protect those smaller than myself. Did they realize the danger? Everyone was crying and begging to go to bed.

"It's bedtime," they pleaded, trying frantically to remind her that she, after all, was supposed to be the mother.

But her pain was as big as the house and the constant wind that howled and whined through the rafters, as we huddled in the dimly lit rooms that had unleashed this fury in her.

It was because my father had died. This I understood. He had died sixteen years before, right after I was born. And this had ruined my mother's life. My being born had not made it any better, except that I looked like him and would be the one to stay up all night with her, while she drank entire fifths of Chevas Regal scotch and told me, sobbing and shaking, the stories about his death until they were indelibly etched into my mind as if I had not merely heard them, but had lived them—lived them as my mother had but from a distance as an observer of a reality that was always stronger than the present moment and that seemed to gather force with each telling as a Georgia sky fills with thunder clouds before a tornado.

Tonight the tornado had hit out here in this house on a Cape I didn't care much for anyway with its icy water and pebbly beaches. I was a Southern girl raised on amniotic Florida waves and sand as white and silky as a dream. But Mama had wanted to come here—had in fact planned it as she always did our trips, as one who is stranded plans to finally be, at home, safe and happy in paradise at last—for months in advance. She had wanted to be near my father's people, as if somehow he himself would magically show up on the beach house doorstep and take her in his arms, the only man who had ever *really* loved her.

I knew ahead of time though that he wasn't going to be there and that it never was going to be what she wanted. But I was just her daughter. His daughter. Theirs. I wanted her to have a different life, for herself other than her present marriage to a man who'd made passes at me and complained that I was more beautiful than she—if only she were me—if only he were younger. In fact, no one in the whole world was more beautiful than my mother, even when she was drunk and raging. Which was often. Her auburn hair wild about her high cheek-boned face. Her big hazel eyes pleading, wandering off distractedly, looking for her lost lover, my Olympic wrestler father.

When she realized that she wasn't going to have him back ever ever again, she decided to destroy us all, though this was not how she would see it herself. Her own father had raped her when she was four and that was why my father's love had been such a big deal, It was not something she had guessed existed, And she was sure now that it could never exist again, Not for

herself or for any of us. That was why she would put an end to it all. To save us from a loveless future. I would never find a man to love ME, Only my father knew how to love a woman and treat her with respect, and he was dead. She was furious that I would not get the gun.

"Where is it? Where is it?" she hissed, a thirty-seven year old maenad ready to pounce on me and throw me to the floor, grabbing fists full of my Rapunzel-like hair and kicking my ribs, as the children squealed and hung on her, begging her to stop. I had hidden all of the butcher knives, I felt clever and indomitable, I wasn't going to let anyone die tonight, kick as she might. And I knew that sober, the next day, she wouldn't remember a thing about it. It was all a nightmare that hadn't really happened, and maybe none of us would remember a thing of any of this. It would simply cease to exist.

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I was sixteen and I was worried about my weight. I had seen enough copies of *Seventeen* magazine with those boyishly-limbed girls with flat chests. This was the era of Twiggy, and, despite all my ballet lessons, I had a round rear end and plump breasts. "A womanly body," my freshman year college roommate would say, When I took off my clothes and lay in the white carpet before the mirror, I would cup my hand tenderly beneath each breast and stroke the length of my outstretched body—the rises and dips and sudden swells—as if admiring a creature I had suddenly come to inhabit. I think I was surprised that I was in a woman's body and not at all sure how to live in it. It posed considerable problems for me. I knew I'd have to reshape it and learn to use it to my best advantage. It was the most important thing about me.

Mama spent hours and hours in her lavender dressing room making up in front of a big theatrical mirror. She was adorning herself to rule the planet through attracting the important men and getting them to give her what she needed. The only way she could get what she needed was through making herself look stunning and captivating them, Which she managed to do in a way, She caught a powerful attorney politician in the web of her charms, Jungle Gardenia perfume scenting the air around her, and her fire engine red lips glistening like Elizabeth Taylor's. I knew that Frank Sinatra, her teen-age heartthrob, would marry her if only he knew she existed. Secretly, I believed, she could have any man she wanted.

"I'll be in my lavender dressing room," she would say, as if addressing her attendants, her ladies-in-waiting: all of her children, None of my girlfriends' mothers had a lavender dressing room or any other kind of dressing room for that matter, They all wore pale pastel-colored shirtwaist dresses, pearl earrings, and neat little hairdos that announced them to be MOTHERS only and therefore sexless, desireless, without dreams and schemes and plans of mad getaways. My mother's favorite clothes were feathery boas, that swirled about her like Isadora Duncan's scarves, and leopard patterned anythings: belts, negligees, bathing suits, six inch heels! She was always planning for an adventure in a faraway place, and I was certain she could not fail to succeed with her Jackie Onassis looks and flamboyant personality.

She was in her lavender dressing room when I came home from college after my sophomore year and heard her talking to the man on the transistor radio propped on her make-up table, as she curled her eyelashes over Egyptian purple eyelids and applied thick black layers of Revlon mascaras. Her tubes and jars and sticks of make-up lay scattered over the surface like items of warfare blown asunder. She was laughing and whispering as if the man on the radio were in that very room with her, telling him which songs she liked and being quite commanding in her requests for attentiveness on his part. Later she told me that he was in love with her and

played songs he'd especially chosen just for her. I had heard her singing late nights, in melancholy intonations, the Cole Porter ballads of longing that were prayers to my father's ghost, but today I realized her imagination had taken a new turn into even stranger places, whereas it might seem at least somewhat feasible that my absent father's spirit could hear her crooning away in the star-studded night, it was definitely out of the realm of probability that the man on the radio—whoever he was—was in love with her and, what's more, could hear her talking to him from the confines of her lavender dressing room. But this she believed as wholeheartedly as a child believes in Santa Claus. It was simply true. That's all.

The lavender dressing room emptied into the red and black Spanish-decor living room with its low round coffee table made of a heavy slab of wood held up by black wrought iron legs that Mama invited guests to dance on. This was the room where she would play the upright piano with its yellowing ivory keys that her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday. She would play, and I would turn the pages as we sang, "Night and Day, you are the one, only you, beneath the moon," with a shared evangelical fervor that at times bordered on frenzy, delirium, Bacchanalian rapture. Sometimes she would read aloud—pausing at key moments to futilely attempt to choke back the tears—Edna St. Vincent Millay's "The Ballad of the Harp Weaver," The value of feelingness was, in such ways, impressed indelibly upon my psyche, Feelings were the province of women, and so we felt everything there is to feel, focusing especially on the tragedy of human existence.

And there could be no greater tragedy, we both knew, than my mother's life. If she could not act it out on stage—if there were no script that told it in all its intricacies and grandeur—then she would compensate for that greatest of losses — the loss of the fulfillment of her dream to be a famous stage actress—by dramatizing her life's events in the late night lamplight that poured over her drunken head from the red and black shaded lamp above the long "L" shaped red couch, I was her audience and her sympathizer, year after year. To be this was a privilege reserved for only a very few; I was ushered into the inner sanctuary of a great woman's life and became the spectator of her triumphs and her defeats. It never occurred to me that I could ever live a life that could match her own in sheer bigness and bravado. SHE was the *liver* of life and the one who told its stories; I was the witness, she who listened spellbound and empathic to the core. I knew I could never match her exploits, but I felt honored to at least be given the role of spectator of what had already transpired.

And so each time she told a story it was the first time and each telling was full of the splendor of the ultimate and final version, the fabulous finale of an impassioned woman's exploits.

"Men like a spirited woman," Mama would assure me. "In my life I've always attracted powerful men who admired my spiritedness. They don't really like the domestic ones like your father's sister. No, that's why Greg left her; she was always standing at the sink and drying dishes and just so neat and tidy about everything and this bored him and so he left her I was made by this to understand, through a telling look and not so subtle uplifting of the eyebrows, that he of course would have been attracted to my mother who disdained housework and bragged frequently, "I'm just not your apple pie Mom now, am I? I'm no Doris Day." A sip of champagne underscored her point about wild spiritedness.

My father's death formed the centerpiece of the network of tales she wove over the years. A bout of sobbing often preceded the telling of it and intermittently punctuated the unfolding plot, "He was so young." She would shake her head, then place her large hands over her crumpled face, "He wasn't even scheduled to fly that night," she would say, "He was on ground

duty. But he was at the controls when one of the three men scheduled to fly that night called in that he couldn't make it and asked to be replaced by another man, not by your father. Johnny decided not to disturb that other man but to take his place, He flew." At this point, we entered a dark place together, my mother and I. What had happened then no one would ever know. Only that a Navy plane flew out at night over the sea off the coast of Virginia and never came back. Later a wing was found. Did my father suffer at his death? Or was it all over in a flash so sudden he couldn't have realized what was happening? Did he think in his last moments of my mother and myself, of our future without him?

"I was at home with you that night in our little navy house. I had nursed you and put you down. In the early hours of the morning I saw the Admiral coming up the walkway and I knew." I suppose I never have really believed that any of this really happened. I was seven weeks old. It still seems utterly implausible, all of it, as implausible as my mother's story that the man on the radio was in love with her, I did not remember that night. It was a dark hole for me. But I learned that fathers and husbands go away and never come back. Calamity comes at the happiest of times. And then there is no returning to that heaven, a heaven I don't ever remember experiencing, but is a story told repeatedly by a grieving mother to her young daughter. We were a family of three for seven weeks, this I know, and then there were only two of us, my mother and me.

In some ways there has never been more than just us two for my whole life, though she has had several more husbands and four more children since. It is as if none of them count, are all a vague afterthought tacked on to the central story: the story of Peggy Lou and Johnny and their firstborn! I grew up knowing my mother needed me in a manner she needed no one else. In that way, I was a special child. But I was also, paradoxically, a constant reminder of her loss of him. And so I was both adulated and reviled; I was the best of children and yet also the worst, praised and despised randomly, erratically. Even to be singled out as the recipient of her most vitriolic assaults, I was made to know, was in and of itself a privilege. The loss of my father shattered my mother and left me to grow up attempting to somehow put it all back together for both of us. I've worked hard at mending the universe, restoring it to a former wholeness.

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I loved this boy. When I was fourteen, I fell in love with him. My best girlfriend lived with her grandmother on the opposite side of town on the same highway I lived on. One Saturday afternoon I was at her house. We spent almost every night together, the two of us did. There was drinking in both of our families, and she and I were in constant communication with each other. We both had long hair, which we vowed we would never cut, and we also vowed to each other that we would remain virgins until we got married. And of course we would never drink.

Nan wore browns and beiges and slept in men's shirts, I wore blues and flowery prints and slept in men's shirts. She wore a bra and shaved her legs before I did, and she got her period first, and when I got mine the summer before eighth grade when we went swimming at the golf course lake, she was the one who taught me how to insert a Tampax during my very first period. We were mothers like that to each other. At night we slept back to back with our butts lightly brushing for reassurance.

So it was just a typical Saturday afternoon that we were plopped on the king-sized bed—one of the only ones in that little Southern town—of her hefty grandmother Pansy's, and the telephone on the bedside table rang and Nan answered and I could tell right off it was a boy.

"Sure Layrrreee, Sure, I'd loooove to. Oh, is he looking for a date? Well, my friend, Priscilla, is here. Hold on just a minute and let me ask her," I said, "yes," and felt real excited. Going on dates was very new to me. In fact, technically speaking, Mama wasn't yet allowing me to date but a double date with Nan along would probably be acceptable. When I heard that my date was an older boy, sixteen, and that we were going to the Middle Georgia State Fair, I was on cloud nine, We could have been in Paris on the way to the Louvre Museum with a walk along the Seine judging by how elated I was.

Well, we went to the fair, and I sat in back with Larry, and Nan sat in front with her Larry, She always was the assertive one in our friendship, so it was fitting that she be seated right ahead of me. I sort of languished in the background a little Southern Bellish in my seeming reticence, beneath which lay regions of yet to come bold actions I was demurely veiling. But my prim demeanor did not put off my spunky date. He whizzed me around to ride on all the rides and won me a black onyx ring that made me feel like a grown woman when he placed it on my hand. And to be grown and away from the frequent drunken brawls in my household was exactly what I wanted, His charms played right into my needs. And Larry was outlandishly charming and breezy, making me forget everything except his dynamic presence. I felt also that beneath his rambunctious exterior lay a heart as vulnerable and passionate as my own. I was the youngest girl in love and had no plans.

He put his arm around me as we rode the fifteen miles home and leaned over and licked my ear, playfully whispering, "You're real pretty." I smiled and said, "Thank you."

Stars were very big in the sky and so many of them when I was fourteen, Handfuls and handfuls so close and yet so distant. My hunger for the divine was ravenous. Yet I did not know how to articulate it as such. Feelings awoke—wild yearnings—and my whole being ached with the pressure of them, I was a wild, wild creature with no place to put the full force of her energy except a romantic relationship. This is what I was taught to do and this is what I did with all the fervent devotion a disciple brings to a guru. Few high school boys would be able to receive such a force of attention. My beloved ran from me, and yet he could not help but be flattered by my intense adoration. So he came and went, and for all the years of high school, I remained his in my heart of hearts—even when I reluctantly dated others so as to get out of my troubled house.

Larry preferred a high school cheerleader, who was very cutesy and standoffish, over this vigorous, straightforward girl. I disdained cheerleading -- being a ballet dancer -- and yet, paradoxically, there never was a more loyal fan of a high school football quarterback than I. I rode school buses on weekends all over the state of Georgia to thrill to the sight of his agile form bolting towards a touchdown. He never came to a single one of my ballet performances, though I always gave him complimentary tickets. He was the son of a bricklayer who drank too much. And I, the stepdaughter of a powerful local politician who drank too much, went to a private high school his family couldn't afford. He told me, though, more than once, that he loved me and I believed him. "I love you, but I just can't be with you, You're too smart, you think too much," he said one night when we parked under the tall pines in my yard after a date, And then he kissed me, sadly, tenderly, as if to say, "Farewell forever." Shattered, I slammed into the house lit up in every window by the loud drinking party that was transpiring inside, and I was weeping openly as I made my way past the gaudy adults carousing aimlessly. I collapsed in a heap of sobs on my princess bed with the yellow satin headboard that I hated. For it symbolized that which divided me from the boy I loved.

He was right, of course, that he was not the proper match for me. But my energetic heart was madly in search of a place to pour its passion, and I was incapable of turning back the strong

currents of life that ripped through me and overflowed, even after I had danced and danced and written notebooks full of poetry.

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Tommie Sue and I would lie in her back yard, after cleaning her parent's house from top to bottom, and write poetry. She kept hers in a box under her bed. One day we were feeding tiny chicks that lived in a coop in my back yard that Claude, my step-grandfather, had built. The chicks were very ill, making feeble peeps and tottering about. We knew they were dying and wanted to help put them out of their misery, so Sue picked up one by the legs and began to toss it against a tree. Again and again, she threw the chick, but it held on stubbornly to life, chirping weakly after each thud against the hard tree. Finally, it ceased all movement, and Tommie Sue leaned over herself vomiting. We left the other chicks to die in their own time.

She would spend hours bathing and dressing to go with me to the softball field to watch the boys play on summer nights. We wore shorts and t-shirts, but the application of mascara, eyeshadow, blush, eyeliner, lipstick, perfume and the curling of hair on electric rollers was as elaborately carried out as if were wearing evening gowns to the Metropolitan Opera House. Sue was bigger than I was. She worked at a restaurant for tips after school, and she cooked huge meals for her mother, stepfather, sister, and brother. So, I always felt like a little girl in her company. I felt fragile, dainty, and far less capable than she. It was Tommie Sue who threw the chick at the tree, while I stood by and watched.

Tommie Sue and Nan went to high school in the red brick building that stood on the Main Highway in Gray, which I passed each morning on my way to a private Catholic school in Macon. They went to school with the boy I was in love with, while I went off to improve my mind under the instruction of the Sisters of Mercy from way up North. Mama wanted me to be prepared for an Ivy League college.

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The whole family sat out in the green 1965 station wagon with fake wood strips along the outside and little seats way in the back that opened up to face each other. The three middle children argued over who would get to sit in these. I sat with the baby and Gammy behind Mama and Finny in the front. Finny was driving us to a rental house in Ponte Vedra, Florida for one of our annual month-long vacations. He was drinking vodka, but not straight up the way he sometimes did when he drove me in to high school in the mornings. Every now and then he would run his stubby fingers over the crown of his balding head, and, taking a swig from a plastic cup, roar like an army sergeant, "Goddamn it, you kids, shut your Goddamn mouths back there."

Things would settle down temporarily, only to gradually build, through shrieks and giggles, into a cacophony of excitement. We were going to the beach away from the humid terrorism of the middle Georgia summer sun. We had stopped at a gas station and everyone piled out in the bright heat to buy Cokes and Mountain Dews and packages of orange-tinted cheese crackers. The highway stretched out flat and glistening in both directions like a long tongue. After we had peed and the attendant had gassed the car and cleaned the windshield with paper

towels, we piled back in and hit the road. About thirty minutes later one of the kids in the back shouted, "Where's Gammy?"

Gammy said she had come out of the toilet only to see that the car was gone. "I wasn't worried. Lord no, I told that filling station man, 'Oh don't you worry. They'll come back for me. I'm the baby-sitter,' But he was kind a worried. I could tell! He couldn't understand how they could accidentally go off and leave me. I reckon he figured he would be responsible for helping me if they didn't come back, and it was a long ways to anywhere from where we were in that gas station. But I jest kept telling him, 'Don't you worry a bit. They'll be back jest as soon as one of them realizes that I'm not there.'"

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In junior high school I would have "spend-the night" parties upstairs in my bedroom with the white furry carpet and fake French provincial furniture. Nan would come over early and sit on the white carpet and sob that her bedroom wasn't as pretty as mine, I never understood this self-pity, for I despised my feminine bedroom, especially the gold satin scalloped headboard that rested against dainty yellow-flowered wallpaper. To me, it all looked hollow and pretentious, and I would far rather have slept in Nan's plain little room with hardwood floors and brown twin beds. Even the drone of the window unit air conditioner in my room sounded sinister to me, when I pushed the "high" button and stood dripping sweat in front of its blast of warm, then cooler, then cold air. Mama had wanted me to have a nice room, though, when she married the attorney politician—so we'd gone shopping at a fancy furniture store in Macon and somehow this is what had gotten selected.

When the thirteen girls would come to stay overnight, we'd all walk the half a mile on the sidewalk of the Gray Highway to Child's Grocery store. Then up and down the few short aisles we'd go, filling a metal cart with boxes of bubble gum and candy, pop tarts, Hostess cakes, potato chips, frozen pizza, frozen blueberry turnovers and cans of pink lemonade, which would then be charged to Finway Stoover's account. I always felt like I was getting away with something and that one day this semi-juvenile delinquent behavior would get me in hot water. But Finny never even seemed to notice his bills anyway, what with his puffed up income and drinking sprees.

The girls and I would stay up all night, then, eating sugary goodies and playing strip poker, watching horror movies and talking about boys and who had kissed whom where and how far each of us had gone. We'd speculate on who outside of our circle had gone *all the way* and what that must have been like, for none of us would ever LOWER ourselves like THAT. Boys didn't respect girls who let them have their way with them. Every hour or so throughout the night, my stepfather would come to the bottom of the stairs leading up to the second floor where we squealed and chattered in my princess bedroom and boom, "Goddamn it, you girls, quiet down up there, or I'm coming up there next time," We'd clap our hands over our mouths and open our eyes wide in mock horror, believing this was truly our last chance at being good. When the national anthem was played on the T.V. to signal the end of a broadcasting day, I insisted on everyone standing up and saluting the American flag waving on the black and white screen. My father had died for this country, and I did not intend to forget that.

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Mama, Ian, Megan, Daddy Jack, and I moved from Seattle to Atlanta where I started out the first grade. The summer before school began in the East Point suburbs, Daddy Jack would lie on the couch in the dark den in his dingy t-shirt, while Mama went off to work as a secretary in downtown Atlanta. In all the other houses I knew of, men went off to work while Mamas stayed at home. All week long with Mama away, the house would disintegrate into a rubble of dirty dishes, empty containers, scattered toys, and clothes littering the floors. But on Friday nights, I would sit in the large picture window in the cathedral-ceilinged living room and watch the road for Gammy and Claude's 1957 Chevrolet.

As soon as they arrived everything would begin a magic transformation that would continue throughout the weekend until on Sunday night they would pull out of the driveway, while I again sat in the front window, tears streaming. It was forever, after all, before the next weekend would bring them back to me, restoring order and serenity to the hours of the day. While Claude went out to bring back paper bags full of groceries, featuring gallons of milk and chicken and okra for frying into crispy delights, Gammy would wash plies of dishes, loads of clothes, and bathe the three of us, scrubbing our knees raw. She put things in places and made the world clean and regulated. I didn't have to be quite so grown-up, when she and Claude were there.

When she was nine years old, a boy threw a rock and blinded Gammy in one eye. "Watch out for your eyes," she would yell out the front door when we played in her yard on Orange Terrace, "always be careful with your eyes." In the early mornings or late afternoons, she would come outdoors—as a sleek elephant will venture out of a jungle covering onto the abrupt open plain—and sweep the round porch and brick sidewalk all the way down to the street gutter. An occasional hot-rodder would zoom by in his jacked up car, wheels screeching and clattering over the brick roadway. Claude's rosebushes formed two neat rows, and sometimes there were fat blossoms to clip for a vase on the mantelpiece in the shadowy living room, their fragrance disseminating and giving depth to the air like the perfume of an exotic lady from a make-believe world. The voices in the odor of rose blossoms textured the air; the melody of Gammy's wallpaper, alive in its velvety contours on the walls framing the mahogany mantelpiece, colluded with the scent of roses, giving nineteenth century dimensions to the atmosphere. Rays of light fell down from the upper windows, filling with dust particles floating upward in an uninterrupted stillness.

Gammy never spoke bitterly of the boy who blinded her. When I was nursing her in the hospital while she recuperated from a broken hip, I discovered she had a glass eye. For thirty-four years, I had thought the flat, blue eyeball that stared fixedly at me from beneath her high brow was her own eye, frozen stiff with lifelessness. All this time, she had hidden from me her daily SECRET ritual of removing the glass eye, carefully cleaning it, and placing it back behind the stubby lashes into its hollow socket.

When she woke up from the hip replacement surgery and felt the white bandage over that empty socket, she asked anxiously, "Where is my eye?"

"It's right here, Gammy, right here in this little blue cup with the lid on it. Don't you worry, I'm watching it." And I became the one to clean it and help her put it back in place in the days ahead; she reluctantly admitted me, in this way, into her intimate losses.

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The Macon Mall was fairly new, when my little sister, Caitlin, started dating Tom. Up until the Mall was built on the outskirts of town, everybody went Downtown to shop. "Let's go downtown," we'd say, and Nan and Tommie Sue and I would head for Cherry St, where we could buy a pair of patent leather stacked heels with the rounded toes and little girl straps that were *all the go* then, as Gammy would say. Butlers had these for \$3.99 a pair, which left us some money to eat a vegetable plate of okra, turnip greens, creamed corn, cornbread, and biscuits followed by banana pudding at the S&S Cafeteria. We didn't do this too often 'cause none of us had the money for it. Tommie Sue worked after school and weekends as a waitress at the Bluebird Cafeteria from the sixth grade upwards, and I would go there to hang out and drink iced tea and talk with her in between her serving steaming plates, heaped with fried chicken and fried steak drenched in gravy, to the men who straggled in for lunch.

Nan's spending money came from her mother who barely made anything working as a bookkeeper for some man in Gray. She'd be sitting there in that little room at a desk next to several other women at identical desks when we came in the door, its bell jingling to announce our entrance, and everyone gratefully looking up from their tasks to see what new event the day might bring through the door, Nan's mother would flick ashes off her inevitable cigarette and chuckle, "Well what do you girls want now?" I'd feel vaguely guilty as she dug the dollars and change out of her wallet and handed them over with the expression of a martyr long acclimated to toiling to meet everyone's needs other than her own, and Nan would nonchalantly receive her Mama's sacrifice. Looking at her heavily lined, round face with pink lipsticked lips and rouge-smudged cheeks—her Doris Day flipped-up hair-do sprayed stiffly in place—I wondered at how anyone could get to be so complacent in her suffering. I stared distractedly out the window, hoping I wouldn't draw attention to myself and so risk others reading my thoughts of pity and revulsion.

My own mother was anything but complacent. Her own form of self-abnegation was at least more flamboyant and could even pass as social protest. That is why many husbands in town would not allow their wives to socialize with Peggy Lou, She had a reputation. She wore psychedelic colored loose-fitting caftans from hippy stores in Atlanta when she went into the Gray Drugstore to pick up some Oil of Olay and fingernail polish. She walked around with her head held aloof, as if she owned the town and only accidentally had come into the general public area. Her whole demeanor bespoke glamour. She was not to be messed with. What's more, if her beauty and personality were not intimidating enough to the local plebeians, she had the honorable badge of being the wife of the county's representative in the Georgia State Legislature. Once a policeman stopped her for driving over the speed limit past the school. When he saw her last name on her license and realized who she was, he apologized profusely, "Oh, I'm sorry, Ma'am. I didn't realize you were Finway Stover's wife. You just go on along now." "If I were anyone else would you give me a ticket?" she asked with a twinge of annoyance in her voice.

"Yes, Ma'am, I'm afraid I would."

"Well, give me a ticket too then." she commanded,

Later my stepfather would roar, "Goddamnit, Peggy Lou, that was goddamn stupid!"

"Shut up, Finny, I just didn't like that policeman's attitude!"

Another thing that made my mother suspect in Gray was the way she decorated her house. The living room, for instance, was in bold reds and black like some foreigner's home. "Spain," she proclaimed. And on each side of the fireplace—a working fireplace in and of itself was an oddity in Middle Georgia, hinting of northern Yankee allegiances—were rows and rows

of books all the way up to the ceiling, Who did she think she was, openly displaying all those books? Hardly anyone else had books in their homes, and if they did the living room was the place for the T.V., not cases of books. It was downright rude to put them out for everyone to see like that, as if you thought you knew something no one else did, as if you were smarter. To sit in front of an open fireplace with a book and read, while listening to classical music on the stereo, smacked of communism. It was what people in other places did, not God-fearing Middle Georgians who sat in pale, lime green living rooms on beige couches watching football and drinking cans of Budweiser.

My mother, who drank Chevas Regal scotch and champagne and hated football, was dangerous to the order of things. This I admired, too, even if I wasn't given money to shop for clothes in high school, while she wore furs and boas and designer outfits from an exclusive clothes shop all the way out in Warner Robins—stylish dresses that the sophisticated Jewish owners went all the way to New York to select and bring back. When I went shopping with my poorer girlfriends, I often had less money than they, but none of us ever said anything about it. We bought our white patent leather pumps and packages of pantyhose—a recent invention that did away with those dangling garter belt straps we'd started out our womanhood with—and we'd admire all the window displays of dresses that we couldn't afford to buy. So when Caitlin and Tom started dating, they missed out on downtown Macon and the Bibb Movie Theatre and all the pigeons and such. The Macon Mall made the downtown area into a ghost town.

My sister and her boyfriend walked up and down the long aisles of the Mail, eating hot giant pretzels with mustard squirted on top. And then they'd come back to the basement of our house on Pinewood Drive, in the ritzier neighborhood of Macon where we now lived, and watch TV. One night Gammy doubled over laughing when she told me of how, after making Tom the steak she always fed him at our house, Caitlin could be heard commanding quiet Tom in angry whispers, "Go home now, You stuck yore finger in my eye. You did! You did it on purpose too! You stuck your finger in my eye!"

"I kinda felt sorry for him," Gammy said.

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It's really eerie to know a person, your own mother for instance, and watch them become somebody you don't know. All throughout high school, during those first years of her marriage to the powerful Middle Georgia attorney, she was gradually becoming someone I didn't know. But I didn't realize this until I was nineteen years old and was standing with Gammy in Dr. Castellanos' office at the Georgia State Hospital in Milledgeville—that sultry town where Flannery O'Connor lived with her peacocks—and he said to me in a Cuban accent, offhandedly, "I diagnose her to be schizophrenic."

"Schizophrenic! My mother is schizophrenic? He must be crazy," I thought. But I knew it was true, or something like it was true, because of how she'd been behaving. Still, my whole universe collapsed with his utterance of that word. He might as well have been charging her with prostitution or even murder. There was a finality to the sound of it that made me feel that my real mother was sentenced to death, and he went on to say that even if she got well, which she might not, she could at any moment become insane again. There was no telling what would happen and worst of all there was no explanation for why any of this was happening. But I could tell that, to him, she was just another crazy patient -- and that he had no idea how to help her be uncrazy. He

merely said that the only thing that they could do for her was medicate her and give her shock treatments. So she had been sentenced to the electric chair and not once but over and over again.

Standing beside me, meek as she often got in the presence of official men, my grandmother shrunk into her own shock, surrendering to the news. I could feel a great sense of defeat weighing her down like a stone she'd tried for decades to remove and that had just increased in size. Although I didn't know what I could do to change the way things appeared to be, I knew that I was the only one who had the gumption to try to find a way out of all this. Knowing that it was up to me did not lighten my heart though. My heart felt buried beneath the rubble of all the preceding years, but I had enough of my mother's old spirit in me to sense that I would not rest until I saw to the bottom of all this perpetual crisis. It would be four more years until I enrolled in a Sociology of Women course at Berkeley, before I would begin to make sense out of the news that I received that day in the Georgia State Hospital, while my mother shuffled in a medicated haze, arms raised in front of her like a mummy in a horror movie, up and down the adjacent halls.

For the moment, here I was, home for the summer, after completing my sophomore year with high honors at Tulane, and Mama had just gotten divorced from my stepfather.

When spring semester at Tulane ended, Scott and I drove up to Gray. My boyfriend was on his way back to his parent's house in a coastal town of Connecticut. He did all the driving; Scott never let me drive his vehicles. He stopped over at Mama's house for a few days. The azaleas were in full bloom and you could still read clearly the print on the granite boulder in the front yard, "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?" This was Mama's satiric comment on the Hellfire-and-Brimstone warnings that you often see along Georgia roadsides. It was one way she could say "FUCK YOU" to the Southern Baptist majority in Gray and to my stepfather as well, who, as a local politician, was always concerned about appearances.

But he didn't have to be too worried. He always got elected anyway. Having a bitchy wife was merely cause for folks to sympathize with him; balding and hog-jowled, he, was the spittin' image the voters were looking for. They could tell just by looking at his photo on those little campaign cards that lay around in drawers and on tabletops, in purses and car seats, during campaign time, that he would represent their prejudices. But Mama, who seldom cooked even one meal in her kitchen, decided when I was a senior in high school, to paint it combustible red. The painter raised their eyebrows, "You want the whole thing RED, ma'am?"

"Yes, I do. I'm tired of white kitchens." When election time approached with its campaign parties, people's faces—as they walked into kitchen that howled with color—were something to behold.

Scott and Mama and I drove up to Peachtree Street in Atlanta to lunch at a fancy Italian restaurant. No sooner than the plates arrived, steaming with pasta and garlic bread, than Peggy Lou suddenly says, "Stop! Don't eat a bit! This food is poisoned!" So the food was sent back. Out comes more food awhile later. This time she begins to eat some I and calls the waiter over to tell him that someone has put mineral oil on hers. Without batting an eye, he gets her another salad. By now our entrees have arrived and Scott and I are starving, but Mama is sure this food is also poisoned and we aren't allowed to so much as taste it. The maitre d' has come over and she has given him a chewing out, and he is politely, desperately, trying to keep the other customers from overhearing any of this—offering that we leave without paying and go somewhere more to our liking to eat. "You're damn right I'm not paying for poisoned food," Mama blears out. Heads turn. A silence has come over the restaurant. I slide down a little further in my seat.

On her way to the toilet, as we are preparing to leave, Mama pauses at the boxes of plants that border separate eating areas and begins to look among the leaves for microphones she suspects the mafia has planted there to record our conversations. She reports back to us that she has found some, and we are therefore to get out of there immediately. As she passes the cash register, her hand darts out to scoop up a handful of those little pastel-colored, powdery, after-dinner mints typical to Southern restaurants. Popping them into her mouth and munching for a few seconds, she heads for a nearby ashtray and spits the rainbow colored mouthful into the metal container. Then she glares back at the open-mouthed cashier, who sits, in her neatly tailored suit, bolt upright like a mannequin, “You haven’t fooled me one bit! I know they’re CHALK!”

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The courts had granted her the crowded house in Gray and a meager amount of child support to raise my four younger siblings, but she was free of him at last—free of the chronic alcoholic whom she’d fought tooth and nail for a decade. And she was full of dreams of happiness. She would move herself and the children to Atlanta and start a new life. She’d already picked out a house. The one in Gray reeked of terrible memories, besides having always been too small, anyway she hated Gray and its small town commandments. Atlanta was the solution! So when I came home that strange June, having immersed myself in Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth—gorged on the verse of rebel poets served up to me by a cantankerous Greek-American professor—she drove me as soon as Scot left to the big city suburbs to see the wonderful prospective house.

It looked alright from the outside. Just an average Southern brick home, yet big enough and with a large yard too. But inside, I was to discover, it had no heat whatsoever. This wasn’t a problem in June, but come November or December . . . Well, that was something my mother was not interested in thinking about. She was too busy flirting with the young real estate agent who was giving her such a “good deal.” Since the house in Gray was selling for only \$18,000.00, she had to get a good deal if she was to live in Atlanta. And if she wasn’t to live in Atlanta or London or . . . well, there was just no discussing it: life was not worth living, unless she moved to a place where finally at last she could be appreciated. And that is why there was just no discussing the heat situation either. She let me know THAT quickly enough. My role was, as always, to nod, approve of, and appreciate all of her choices. Somebody had to, didn’t they? It didn’t even matter if I opened my mouth; in fact, it was usually better if I didn’t, merely keep on nodding, smiling, and agreeing with this glorious plan of hers.

Hey, what did I know anyway? As she frequently reminded me, “Hey kid, just wait until you’ve lived! You’ll see what it’s like! You haven’t even lived yet!” I don’t know what she thought I’d been up to, all these years, whatever it was, it did not, in her estimation, constitute “living” yet. My opinions simply did not qualify. Convinced as I was that my mother had indeed “lived”—she was nothing short of an expert in living—I usually went along with her views, if for no other reason than to keep the peace. And Gammy had persuaded me, through her submissive example and dire warnings when I did disagree, that the proof of authentic love was to agree with the one you loved no matter how outlandish—and in my mother’s instance, clinically insane—those opinions were.

As it turned out, the “heat” situation in the Atlanta house was to be inconsequential in the extreme, in light of the avalanching events in our lives. By the time the next winter rolled

around, Mama would be, like a child who keeps dreaming the same nightmare, marrying the attorney politician again, launching into a whole new decade of crisis with him. As soon as we got back to Gray from Atlanta, Mama went stark raving mad. When the movers came to pack up and haul our belongings to Atlanta, Peggy Lou began to give the stuff away as if she were loaded with cash. Boy, did those guys think they were having a field day with this looney broad! Here she was telling one guy that he could have the TV and another that he could have my brother's bunk beds, and if I opened my mouth she'd yell, "Shut up, kid, these are MY things, and I don't want them."

I didn't particularly like them either. They held the same raised voices and broken promises for me as they did for her, but I couldn't figure out how she was going to replace them on her income, which was nonexistent except for the child support that she was all too aware was not going to be enough. So as soon as she'd give a piece away and one of the movers had gleefully put it aside, I'd slip out through the back door and try to sneak it into the moving van. But I couldn't rescue the really heavy items, and many of them were never to be seen again. Years later she would thank me for grabbing a great big brass candlestick she was fond of.

When the huge van was completely packed, off it went to Atlanta, but we were not destined to follow it there. Mama took off in another direction entirely, and Gammy and I simply rode along like accomplices. She drove the station wagon, air conditioning going full blast, to Macon, in search of something or other, while moaning that her lung was hurting her, that she was in agony. She'd had half of it removed, due to T.B., when I was in first grade. I was skeptical about the pain of this long-healed lung, but, glanced over at Gammy who seemed to be on my wavelength, I seized the moment. "Why don't we go to a doctor then?" I asked sweetly. At first she didn't like this idea, and my heart sank. I knew if I urged her too enthusiastically, it would backfire. She was already suspicious. "Paranoid," even. So I just sort of nonchalantly suggested it could be part of the day's activities.

To my great surprise, she drove straight to a hospital. Somehow, we got her checked into a room to be examined and x-rayed and of course nothing was wrong with her lung. But still she complained of the excruciating pain, and it just happened that an old friend of hers, a doctor, walked into the room. Soon she was telling him that she knew he was a fake that he was sent by the mafia to fool her into thinking that he was her doctor friend, but that she could tell that he was a fraud. She must have hit a nerve with him, for he, after a brief attempt to convince her that she needed some sort of professional help, rapidly exited the room never to be seen again. My hopes of being helped were being dashed to smithereens. Nobody seemed to know what to do and nobody seemed to care really. Mama was someone to be gotten away from as quickly as possible. A real nut! This nice doctor had been visibly afraid of her, afraid of what she might say next. I was stunned at the power of my mother's tongue, and I was bitterly disappointed that a professional could be so easily stumped. Mama soon hopped up and dashed out of the hospital with Gammy and me in tow.

"Follow her, Priscilla, Oh Lord, don't let her get away," Gammy frantically pleaded. Things only got worse. Mama was sure, in the days that followed, that the FBI had sent an electrician to plant electrodes in her vagina and that random men we might encounter on the street, in cars that drove by, or in a room of neighboring apartment, were shooting her with excruciating electric shocks. She would scream out in pain, then rage at them. In a terrible prelude to the primitive shock treatments she would receive from psychiatrists in mental institutions, she relived the rape by her father when she was four in the form of these repeated assaults that could occur at any time or any place.

"Pass that car," she would order me, "he is shooting it to me from that angle, but he won't be able to if we are in front of him." Then walking along the street, she would suddenly break away and dash up to a passerby, exploding at him, "I know what you are doing. You can't fool me! Stop it right now. Stop shooting it to me, you bastard!"

"Hey, bitch, I ain't doin nothing to you! Are you crazy or something?"

"I'm not crazy, you fucking con artist," she'd retort.

She was indomitable. Huge. Larger than life like those superheros on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Only she was Eve. Right? The fallen woman. And this gave the stray passersby she confronted, license to retaliate in full force. No decent woman would say such things, even in the unlikely event that they might be true, and no decent woman would go crazy. There really was no difference, was there, between an angry woman and a crazy woman? It all amounted to the same thing: some blabber-mouthin' bitch mouthin' off some bullshit about her pain! Didn't she know she deserved all the pain she got? Didn't the Bible say so?

I stood on the sidelines, embarrassed, mortified even, and in some part of me—hidden even to myself—rooting her on. For I knew instinctively that I was her mainstay, her final holdout, and that her survival in this war that only seemed to escalate month by month, year by year, had everything to do with my own. Yet I was determined not to be like her. Crazy. In my style of warfare, I would be quintessentially sane; I would win with my intellect.

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Mama had already been seeing a psychiatrist on and off for four years, and of course Gammy and I were praying she would go see him that cataclysmic June. She hadn't been in awhile and when she had gone she had managed to behave like a regular sort of person—as regular as she ever behave, that is—so he hadn't a clue as to what was going on. I was still naïve enough to believe that the medical establishment could offer some significant help to my mother. One day, not long after the lung x-ray episode, she drove up unannounced to her psychiatrist's office with Gammy by her side.

As she waited to be seen by Dr. MacKintosh, she became irate with my grandmother, lunged at her and began choking her. The nurse, walking in upon this startling scene, reported the incident to the psychiatrist who realized then that my mother needed help. This meant that she would have a choice of either voluntarily admitting herself to a small private mental hospital or being committed involuntarily to the notorious state hospital in Milledgeville. Middle Georgians often joked with each other, "You ought to be sent to Milledgeville."

People who had been sent to Milledgeville, sometimes didn't come back. It was mixed up in my imagination with jailhouses—like the one in Jones County where Nan's hard drinking father worked, filthy and squalid in a steaming July sun when we once drove out there to look at puppies that one of the guard dog mutts had given birth to—or mill factories for underpaid garment workers, whose runny nosed children I sat next to in elementary school. To be sent to Milledgeville was to have sunk as low as you can go; it was as shameful a fate as being shackled by the ankle to the chain gangs of black men you could still see in the 1960's, working on the highway in the blazing sun, while a lean, white man with a rifle stood by in the shade somewhere, I was relieved then to hear that she had chosen to go to a private hospital.

For the next week I drove Mama's car over to College St. hospital—a discreet-looking brick building in the historical district of Macon, tucked in among antebellum mansions—to sit with her during afternoon, 12:00 to 2:00, and evening, 5:00 to 7:00, visiting hours. I wouldn't have considered missing one minute of the time I could be with her in that place and Gammy

was usually with me. It probably would have done me good not to go so often, but I was racked with guilt and also genuinely worried about my mother's condition. It was the usual sort of sterile, boring institutional environment—the place where wives of wealthy men came to rest during their periodic breakdowns. In some circles, it could almost be counted fashionable to go there, since it was, after all, very expensive. A stay there could be seen, then, as a sort of substitute for a brief vacation at Hilton Head Island, except that behind one of its innocuous looking doors lurked the shock treatment equipment. Of course, you could always brag that you hadn't had as many shock treatments as So and So. The degree of craziness could be ascertained by how many shock treatments had been given. Reminiscent of *rest cures* prescribed for late nineteenth century ladies like the groundbreaking feminist writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, these weekend getaways for nervous women were preferable to Milledgeville.

Perhaps the definition of a Southern lady is someone who never stops resting. The institutionalized passivity, required to qualify as a decent woman, certainly forbids anything as strenuous as artistic expression. The most one should do creatively would be to take up a hobby such as embroidery or china painting. So, at the hospital, the women were encouraged to participate in the daily crafts activities offered. Mama made a mosaic ashtray and painted little ceramic figurines. She had been here before off and on in the angry decade of her first marriage to the lawyer. "I'm just going to the hospital for a little relaxation," she would say.

She already knew how to relax at the College St. hospital. She would give me a long list each day of the week of items to bring to her: nail polish, cotton puffs, hairpins, skin cream, and so on. Each day she had devised somehow a new list of things she absolutely could not live without, and, in the main, they consisted of beauty items. She knew that getting out of this place meant looking good, and if there was one thing she was good at, it was looking good. And every day I dutifully brought in the items she ordered, or else she would bemoan the fact that her own daughter couldn't even provide her poor hospitalized mother with a few little things she desperately needed; I hopped-to-it, like a well-trained delivery girl.

The day she was admitted, this time, I arrived just as she was being assigned a room. She was alone in what looked like an admitting area, lying in a hospital bed. For weeks now she had shown nothing but fiery defiance and utterly self-assured commanding-ness in all situations, so I was shocked to look down at her and see a defeated-looking face. Tears sprang to her eyes, and suddenly she cried out from the depths of her being, "Oh dear God, please help me."

I was anguished. Her vulnerability, her uncharacteristic helplessness cut through the artificial fabric of the institution. I knew then, as she did, that no help was available her, that this place was designed to alienate rather to integrate. It would just be a matter of enduring its boring regimen, until she was released, pronounced, *cured*. Cured meant behaving oneself in decent ways. And, above all else, looking good!

Gammy's older sister, Myrtle, happened to be in Macon that summer, living in a rented room near the College Street Hospital. Gammy and I stayed with her at night that week. Her little poodle barked unremittingly when I came up the stairs to climb into the narrow bed next to theirs. They put on their hairnets, and Myrtle asked about Peggy Lou, Gammy would tell her how fabulous Mama looked and how she was improving miraculously, while I listened doubtfully. Myrtle had a daughter who had been living in the Milledgeville hospital for over a decade now. Nobody ever asked about her any more. She had ceased to exist, except as a dark blotch on the family's reputation.

But I was not destined to live out that Georgia summer, sweating nightly in that narrow back bedroom, listening to Gammy and Myrtle's snores, as I kicked the polyester sheets to the

foot of the cot. Mama escaped! Yes, she was the first person ever to escape from that squat little hospital on College Street, and she did it in style. Peggy Lou had managed to steal a day-pass from somebody or other, and, dressed to kill, adorned in make-up and ornaments I'd provided, she waved the slip of paper at the receptionist who buzzed her out of the TV lounge into the lobby where a crowd was just stepping in from outdoors, and in the commotion Mama was able to flash a big confident casual smile at the nurse and whisk out the door. She wandered lackadaisically down College to Mulberry Street where, pausing Ophelia-like, she plucked fat magnolia blossoms, reminiscent of the ones she used to float in a low porcelain bowl of water with fluted edges and a cherub sitting on the brim, cross-legged and gazing ponderously at velvety ivory-hued petals big enough to doze inside, their fragrance drugging the air with indolence. Free of the building, Peggy Lou lazed her way down to her old high school beau's used car lot and plopped herself, magnolia and all, on his desk. Popping the top off the 7-up can, he offered her, she held it up to his glad-to-see-you grin and announced nonchalantly, "I could slice my throat with this, if I wanted to."

Dick called Gammy who called the hospital who called Dr. Mackintosh who called the police who came and picked Mama up at her good friend's car lot and drove her thirty miles to the Georgia State Hospital in Milledgeville. She was pissed by the time she got there. They wouldn't stop on the way and let her pee and change her Kotex. It took six men to corral her, when later that day she tore off all her clothes and beat them off with a broom her foremothers would have ridden out of the barred windows over the pecan groves into the Isis-haunted sky.

But that was her last display of outrage for years to come. When I came to see her the next day, I was stunned by the transformation. Eyes glazed, she shuffled like a zombie towards me with stiff arms held before her, hands hanging limp, as if she were about to receive a manicure. I liked her better the other way. I wanted to get her back to the wild state she'd been in. At least she'd been alive, energetic, then, and the things she said always had a kernel of truth hidden in their fantastical proportions. Now she was subdued, frozen, shrunken to fit the established grooves, "Can't they do better than this?" my mind screamed. But I kept silent. Kept silent and brought paper bags of candy and chewing gum for Mama and her bleary-eyed girlfriends.

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The oaks that lined the long driveway through the sedate grounds of the Georgia State Hospital for the mentally insane at Milledgeville looked like they'd been there since the Civil War. When I arrived each day their deep shade was strangely welcoming, and I must have drawn strength from their majestic shapes, for there didn't seem much else to take courage from that July. The brick buildings, dispersed around the quadrangles, were reminiscent of the homes for orphans I had gazed at, as Mama drove me past an orphanage on our way to the Macon Little Theatre for rehearsals, years back.

A hushed passivity pervaded the air, throbbing with heat, as I walked from the air-conditioned car to the three-story building that held Mama. After she was diagnosed as schizophrenic, I'd stopped eating. Each day I'd stand before the refrigerator and eat a raw hotdog with two saltine crackers. Sometimes I'd have a hard-boiled egg instead. And I'd drink Frescas or saccharine-sweetened iced tea. So when I opened the car door and a blast of heat engulfed my cool body, I'd feel kind of woozy. Under more usual circumstances. Gammy would have said I looked *peaked*, but she was too preoccupied with Mama to notice. Already thin, I was losing

pounds with a vengeance. With my whole external world crumbling around me, at least I had an iron command over what went into my mouth.

I was pleased with my self-control; I deprived myself of nurturance, for as long as my mother was locked up in that loony bin.

Inside the building, I climbed stairs to the ward she was in. A huge metal door had to be unlocked to let me in. I was almost always the only visitor, and the other women would shuffle away when they saw it was me. I let Mama distribute the sweets I brought, as she wished. The linoleum hallway was about all I ever saw, since I wasn't allowed to sit in her cell-like room as I had at the private hospital. Maggie, a middle-aged woman who looked like a churchgoing housewife, was always the friendliest and most gregarious. Her intelligence cut through the drugs, and she was very fond of my mother. Maggie was sentenced to spend the rest of her life at this institution; she had poisoned three husbands with arsenic in their dinners, slowly, over a period of years. She was so sociable and warm that it was only with the death of her third husband that people became suspicious. Hers had been a much-publicized story in Georgia, and I was fascinated to meet her. The scariest thing about her was that she wasn't scary. She was protective—maternal even—towards Mama.

All the women there, Mama recalled to me later, had stories of fathers, husbands, and boyfriends who had done them wrong. They'd been beaten, raped, impoverished, abandoned, and now, to top it off, they were being punished for going crazy. For this place never once struck me as a place to get healthy in; it was a prison for females who'd gotten too wild, too desperate, too vocal.

Gray is located on the highway that runs from Macon to Milledgeville, so it didn't make sense for me to stay at Myrtle's room; though I'd wish I had, later, even if it meant driving thirty extra miles a day. Where I stayed at night was where my four siblings were sleeping: Finway Stooover's two bedroom apartment in the new brick apartment complex in Gray. I hadn't seen him since they were divorced the past winter, but I suppose I assumed he might be at least somewhat concerned about Mama's condition. He never once visited her at Milledgeville though, and I'd been sleeping over at his place only about a week when he exploded. I had said something about being worried about Mama, and he retorted—drunk as usual—that he was glad that crazy bitch was where she deserved to be. He might as well have whacked off one of my limbs with a machete, for pain seared through me. All that anguish that I had suppressed in the days of visiting her, to keep myself going, shot through me. I sputtered that he couldn't talk about my mother like that, and he roared that I was just like her, "A smart-ass cunt!"

In the nine years that I had known him, those were the standard sorts of things he would say to my mother, but he had never turned his full vehemence on me personally. He had never had to. She was always there to take the brunt of his misogynist violence. And suddenly it was me that he went after. I was stunned! Already grieved and worn out by concern for Mama—maybe she would never be released from Milledgeville—I was overwhelmed by this attack. I began to scream and cry, "You don't love her; you don't love any of us," I became a little girl begging for a compassionate father, but my pleading was a dangerous mistake. As soon as I showed abject vulnerability, he lunged at me and picked me up by the shoulders, tossing me halfway across the room to slam against the wall. Terrified, I lay in a frozen heap, as he charged out of the room, yelling at me, "Get the hell out of my apartment!"

It was 2:00 o'clock in the morning. I thought of going to the police. But thought better of it, as soon as the idea crossed my mind. The Jones County Police adored Finway Stooover. I was too embarrassed to call any of my old girlfriends at that hour. I hadn't kept in touch with them

during the past two years that I'd been away at a fancy private college. And the last thing I wanted to do was drive to Myrtle's shabby room and wake up my already heavily burdened grandmother. So, I sat in the car all night, trembling, hurting.

I didn't have the money to go to a motel. Throughout my childhood, I'd been told that thousands of dollars were being saved, out of the Veterans Administration and Social Security checks that came monthly since my Navy father's death, for my college education. But I had never set eyes on the bank statements. Well, now that Mama, who was my legal guardian, was hospitalized, it occurred to me to look at them. Sitting in my stepfather's living room, I stared at a statement that held only enough cash to get me through another year or so of undergraduate school. My stepfather's attitude was that I had far more money than I deserved anyway. He obviously resented every penny he'd ever put out in my direction. If I had ever hoped he felt at all fatherly towards me, those hopes were dashed by that conversation. He was not proud of my high grades, He was put-off, belligerent, I was on my own, alright.

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But I had recently read the poetry of John Keats, and I had been fed by its majestic humaneness. Not that I ever once picked up a volume of Romantic poetry that difficult summer, searching for just the right lines to see me through the day. No, I read nothing, just as I ate little, during the time of Mama's madness. But from the prior September through April, I had entered a world of revolutionary hope and inspiration, reading the six major Romantics daily and listening to dynamic lectures in a dank, basement room three days a week. Not once had I ever opened my mouth in class; I sat writing down almost every word that exited the professor's mouth.

I came to his classes as a devotee comes to a temple, absorbing the energy of the vibrant priest who pontificated so voluminously before me. Feeling small before his largeness, I opened my hungry mind to receive all that was offered. Though I was too timid to articulate any of the ideas and sensations that were awakening in me; I felt secretly that these poems and these lectures were especially aimed at my intellect. Somehow, the words that ran across the page and sentences that floated through the air exactly fitted the openings my consciousness formed upon imbibing them. A current of splendor poured in my direction and doused me in glorious language, uplifting and liberating. I saw possibilities. I felt inner strength. I communed with daffodils and skylarks. And I admired the teacher who relished those poems as much as I. His heroic passion for life matched my own intensity. I would go home after class, in a state of rapture, and sit in the air-conditioned bedroom I shared with an ordinary sort of boyfriend and read every word of the assigned poems over and over.

At that time, my response to the poetry was a deeply felt one of sensations and cellular transformations, rather than an intellectual grasp of the stanzas. Perhaps the professor had been right that it might be too soon for me—a mere sophomore—to enroll in a class comprised largely of seniors. I had heard about this wonderful poetry class from a rabbi's daughter who lived on my same dorm floor, when I arrived for fall semester, But since it said in the catalogue that this course was designed for upper division students, I had to get special permission from the instructor to enroll.

As I walked across campus, I envisioned a graying, middle-aged, stout professor who would answer my inquiries in fatherly tones. I asked about Professor Vardoulakis' office number from the departmental secretary and walked down a small dark corridor to rap on his door. The door opened quickly to reveal a strikingly handsome, dark haired, olive-complexioned, young

man with a sparkling grin. His mustached face was alive with intelligence, giving authority to his refined, delicate features. He had obviously been engrossed in some mental activity, but he appeared to have leapt up to open the door, as if some famous personage might be calling upon him. There was nothing sluggish whatsoever about this professor: no library circles beneath his lustrous eyes. And yet, even in that moment, I sensed a dark strain of sadness haunting his mobile, joyous physiognomy.

"May I help you?" he asked with a gentlemanly civility that blended well with his rakish yet rarefied features. I explained that I was a lover of poetry (he looked amused at this gushing confession) and that I would therefore love to take his course, even though I was just a sophomore. "Well, ordinarily, my classes are too sophisticated for lower division students," he explained in a rehearsed fashion. But I could detect a softness in him, and so I persisted, for now I was certain that I wanted to be in this intriguing being's class.

"Oh, I won't be at Tulane next year," I explained. "I'm transferring to Stanford or the University of California, so this is my only chance to take your class." I went on to add that I was a drama major and was leaving because I was disappointed in Tulane's theater department. He nodded his head thoughtfully, taking me in, and then, as if he himself were surprised yet pleased with his decision, he smiled and said, "You can take the course, *but*" he added as a sort of dutiful cautionary note, "it may be very difficult for you." I was quite happy to be enrolling in a challenging course, having been bored with my freshman year classes.

And, yes, it was a little beyond me at first. Still it was exactly what I needed. I grew intellectually and spiritually as his student. I determined to be as radically outspoken as this professor and to deepen my love affair with poetry in earnest now. As I listened to his lectures, I grew fond of the man who delivered them. But I couldn't imagine that he even noticed my presence. I was just another schoolgirl, I felt, and I wasn't foolish enough to think anything could come of the tender feelings that he evoked in me. It just wasn't possible, and besides I was leaving New Orleans. But at the end of spring semester, I wrote a note of impassioned gratefulness to him on the last page of the final exam. He would keep this note. Its forthright innocence touched his heart. But I didn't know this until years later. Armed with an intellect burgeoning with poetry, I drove away from the Louisiana lowlands through alligator infested swamps and up into the Appalachian foothills of central Georgia to learn that my mother had lost her mind.

When I walked with Mama on the campus-like grounds of the Milledgeville Hospital, did I recall my solitary strolls beneath ancient oaks that unfurled their gnarly Spanish moss-draped limbs across the sidewalks that led from Newcomb College campus to Tulane University? I had walked importantly, with armloads of books, in my cuffed shorts and K-Mart shirts, barefoot, back and forth from the girls' campus to the boys. I always felt my stature increase when I reached male territory. Now I was in the REAL college, I'd sense. Even the buildings appeared to be of more consequence over here, and, yes, I always felt a bit of an intruder on someone else's illustrious turf. Traces of the red clay of rural Georgia still stained my clothes, my flesh: a premonition of the neolithic Goddess figure, smudged with blood red paint, that would eventually be a gift to me from Professor Vardoulakis. My corn silk hair fell girl-like to my waist, as I walked beneath the elegant trees, thinking and thinking. Professor Vardoulakis had told us always to think as we walked. Never to waste a moment. I wanted to be just like him—intelligent, dynamic, powerful—so I "thought," and my thinking improved day by day.

One day, as I was walking and thinking, I looked up and saw a figure striding across a sidewalk in the near distance, hair floating voluptuously around his head, his body leaning into

the air before him, as if to cut his way through any encumbrances; he was deep inside himself, absorbed in motion. And he looked as out of place—robustly moving through thick Louisiana air—here, as I had always felt everywhere. A wildness leapt up inside me as he dashed along before me, and I yearned to join him, to walk beside him, discovering his deepest thoughts, revealing my own. I felt that this would satisfy me beyond even what I'd found in the poetry we shared. And the depth of my sudden yearning terrified me. I could not bear the thought of his stopping and turning around and speaking to me. I could not have spoken to this great man; I would have been frozen in silence. Shame imprisoned my tongue. I didn't realize then that what linked us, Professor Vardoulakis and myself, at this private college packed with well-heeled offspring of professionals, was our raw mutual passion for transcendence, laid open by brutal childhoods. Both of us were rushing to get away from memories that ate away like parasites at our soft insides. We recognized each other. And we frightened each other in that recognition. He had grown up on the streets of Manhattan: a frail, Greek-American kid whose emigrant father was a corner store grocer. In high school, he had been yanked out of those streets by the shirt-collar by an old Jewish teacher who encouraged him to use his mind. When he spoke once in class of this man, his voice broke. He loved him. And I loved Mr. Vardoulakis. Ferociously.

Still, I was appalled at the thought of being alone with him. I never went to office hours to discuss my work. I dreaded meeting him in the halls. Near him, I only felt safe sitting in the second row of a class of thirty students, head bent over the notebook into which I assiduously recorded his rambunctious, massively proportioned lectures, jammed with delicious words I'd never heard. His tiger mask mesmerized my lamb mask. I had tried to wear my fragility as an armor to ward off demonic forces. It didn't work. I still suffered vicious blows.

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The assaults had begun when I was a girl of four, living in a low-income housing project in Seattle, Washington. The rainy summer cast an apprehensive shadow over everything. Mama was pregnant. Her sadness dragged me into gray areas of isolation, cut off from nurturing as we both were. My adoration of her was insufficient to overcome the heavy burden of responsibility she felt, and so the months slumped along in hues of black and white. The only other color that reached me was the siren red of my favorite sweater. It wrapped me in warmth against the persistent sore throats and ear infections that invaded my thin body.

A spider and all her spider friends lived in the prickly bushes that grew along the sidewalk in front of my building. Many years later I would learn from feminist books that spiders are friendly to little girls, but all throughout that long ago Seattle summer of rain and fevers, I was terrified of the fat, crawly spiders in the chin-high bushes. When a big girl asked to see my ring with the sparkly green glass jewel, I'd gotten for my birthday, she threw it into those foreboding bushes, never again to be retrieved. She was one of the ones who taught me to steal for them, pulling me by the arm into a thicket where they held the sharp points of darts to my bicep and told me that unless I followed their orders they would stick them all the way in. So I began to steal penny candy to appease them, and to hide indoors, hoping Mama wouldn't make me go out and play. There, in a quiet corner, I recited the nursery rhymes that were a sort of mantra, warding off omnipresent dangers. But even inside, there were dangers; though nothing, not even my policeman stepfather's heavy pistol, frightened me more than the gang of boys who tore all the precious buttons off my beloved, red sweater.

That day the stubby blades of coarse grass were damp from morning showers; flat army-gray clouds gave the afternoon the foreboding quality that twilight sometimes has, as if the earth is slowly going blind, I played alone as I usually did, not quite sure how to play, but trying to entertain myself—more like an aging woman who has forgotten who she once was than a child on the verge of self-discovery. The boys came out of nowhere then. Whooping and charging, they descended upon me, and the smaller one grabbed me from behind, while the heavysset one smirked and glowered, and yanked all the buttons off my treasured red sweater. I was sobbing, much to their delight, and, then, as if they had an insatiable appetite for my suffering, they escalated their terrorism. As the smaller one squeezed my upper arms tighter until I thought they would snap off like twigs, pinching the tender skin and laughing triumphantly, his cohort, who had gone down the sidewalk to position himself—like a bully playing some sport learned in school—clenched his fists into fat little clubs, roaring and charging towards me. While screams for my mother filled the air, "Mommy, Mommy," I feared they would kill me before she heard my cries, I, who could not recall ever asking sad Mama for anything much, screamed and screamed, "Mommy! Mommy!" as if she were the only saviour on earth. And, indeed, a miracle did happen that distant afternoon, for only in the nick of time, Mommy appeared to stop them short. But it was too late to save my little red sweater from losing all its shiny pearl buttons, torn off by the second boy to show me how he would tear me into shreds.

That night Mama and I walked over to the building opposite ours, where one of the boys lived. We were on our way to report an injustice, and I felt brave, walking next to my mother's solid frame, and protected, from all evil. Up to the door, we marched and knocked loudly. We waited. Through the wall, the faint noise of the 1950's T.V. set did not sound promising. Eventually, the door was opened by a woman who'd come from the kitchen to let us into a steamy, dimly lit room. In a flash I knew that no justice would be forthcoming, and already felt like creeping away, but Mama was soon inside and talking to the boy's father. Fat-bellied in his white t-shirt, he never bothered to put down his beer can or get up from the low chair in which he seemed sunk like a befogged battleship before an eternal television show. I didn't really hear what Mama said to him, but suddenly she appeared not so solid anymore, and I sensed that nothing we had to say about his son was of any import to this identical father. Mama didn't want to talk about it, when we left, and I could tell her mind was already on other things by the time we got to the sidewalk. I knew that it would only make her angry with me, if I spoke and tried to bring her back from the faraway place where she usually was, during those gray years in the northwest corner of the United States.

From my bedroom window, the snowy form of Mt. Rainier arose in the distance inviting belief in fairytale places, And this possibility delighted me; I determined that someday I would go to that glistening white mountain of fantastical promises, leaving behind the gloom of city apartment dwellings forever. The nursery rhymes I knew by heart were full of the same intimations of freedom beyond the squalor of the 1950's, "The cow jumped over the moon," I crooned, "which was against the rules . . . to see a lamb at school," I pulled out my vivid Golden Dell books and entered pristine pages of trains that could go over impossible hills and tugboats more powerful than gigantic ships. "I'm like that," I intuited, "I'll show them!"

Out in the clover blossoms, blooming profusely in the quadrangle of grass between the two-story, lime-green rectangular boxes we lived in, children would catch bumblebees in mayonnaise jars, swiftly trapping the black and yellow bodies as they grazed on clover tops. The older children made elaborate shoebox houses for their bees, with little matchbox furniture and bottlecap dishes, and I envied them as if they were in possession of mansions I could only gape

at from my houseless station. I was always stuck on a lower plane from these clever, garrulous elders. Once after I had walked with round-bellied Mama, pushing a black baby carriage in front of her, to the basement washing machines that groaned like women in labor, I stopped on the way back to watch the bee hunt. A girl caught a Queen Bee, and this made her instantly superior to the rest of us drones. She took me and another girl into a staircase inside an entryway and there she explained that she had a special relationship with her enormous bee who would not fly away. To demonstrate her Queen Bee's loyalty, she let her crawl out on the stairs. But in a flash the Bee lifted herself into the air like a miniature helicopter and soared over our heads into the open heavens. The abandoned girl directed all her disappointed fury at me. Somehow it was my fault that the bee had flown free. I was the villain whose very presence made tame creatures suddenly go wild again. I felt wretched over the absurdity of this accusation, but I also knew that there was some truth in it; I was already an advocate for the imprisoned.

It was probably not too long after I was terrorized by the boys that I found myself playing, deliciously, in the mud created by the almost daily rainfall—mournful downpours that seeped into every particle of earth, making the grass soggy and thick with sinister thorns that made me howl in agony whenever one lodged in a tender foot, or weepy showers that sent me to bed with aching ears and fevers. Delirious I would dream of a bee stinging my thumb, which, swelling as big as my head, caused me to scream for my stepfather. The scream for his help was always in the dream, for, awake, I avoided him; he was perpetually a stranger to me, and I doubt that our eyes ever met. After my brother was born, I would stand in the living room doorway, watching Daddy Jack lie on his back and hold his son high above his head, eye to eye. Mama explained that fathers had special relationships with their sons. I could see THAT in the way he handled and ogled this tiny baby, who didn't do much of anything except gurgle and cry, Playing in the mud that sparkling morning—Mount Rainier, a snow-capped promise of fairyland adventures, in the background beyond the low buildings like an indomitable icon of dazzling hope—I sensed my own efficacy in the pleasure of wet dirt beneath my bare legs, caking toes and elbows; my hands busy with cupfuls of syrupy earth, plopped among the other girls, absorbed, each one, like Mary Cassatt's beach children, in her moist task, pouring and dipping and molding.

Then it was that a new girl came to play among us. Where she came from, we had no idea, for no one had seen this one before. She was not welcome. In fact, we were horror struck by the little red open cuts all over her body, tiny gashes that lay vulnerable to our stares and comments. Immediately, all attention was focused on her and the nervous jeers and taunts began.

"She can't play here; the mud will fill up her cuts and make her sick." "She is sick. Don't touch her, or you'll get those sores too." Her plump-cheeked face turned as red as her hair, and she sat very, very still, as if the breath would never come back into her body. For a split second, I wanted to understand her, to find out more about how she came to have torn flesh that flamed as wildly as her carrot curls. But at the instant I began to feel myself in her place, to imagine my own wounds exposed, I was filled with nausea. My revulsion increased in proportion to her advancing misery, until I positively hated her.

Spellbound with rage, I scooped my orange plastic cup deep into the cool puddle and did not hesitate to plop its runny contents right on the crown of her bent head. Like an avalanche of brown lava, the liquid dirt ran down her forehead over her cheeks and fell in turd-like plops upon her frozen shoulders. All sound had stopped, except for the hot roaring in my ears, and the waiting that begins after any cruel act occurs, began before her mouth opened wide and split the

air with sobs and screams. I felt nothing, for I was sure that it was not actually me who'd reached an arm across the void to destroy ugliness itself

With my mean act, all playing came to an end. Across the green, rectangular, common lawn, a vengeful mother loomed out of a second story window, bellowing at me, "I saw what you did to that poor child, you hateful girl, and you ought to be beat for that." I crept away, fearful and stricken with remorse. But somewhere inside was another sickly feeling: one that I was unfamiliar with and the sensation of which gave me a peculiar pleasure. For the first time ever, I felt what it feels like to wield power over another being. Although it was a relief to be the bully for a change, to see that indeed I could be tough and menacing, I recognized, on an experiential level, that what I had done was an act of cowardice. That my violent behavior did not help me overcome the violence that was done to me by other cowards, was apparent to me on some deep, intuitive level. Never again would I perform such a low deed. From that time forward, I would always take the side of the oppressed. Increasingly, my life would become a mission to help empower those of us whom the "heavy-footed," as Audre Lorde puts it, have tried to silence and destroy.

Mama, unhappily married and perpetually pregnant, would cook me dinners that I despised; so, alone, as I usually was in the dining area, I would get down on my hands and knees and carefully roll the round peas under the open hutch. The only thing that I had a taste for were the chewy cords of licorice, she would occasionally bring us; we'd sit together, and I'd be ecstatic, devouring the sweet, black stuff with her. For a short while, my twenty-five year old mommy would seem five, and I felt twenty-five; we were allies in our search for moments of enjoyment that were all too rare. At such times, her face would soften, and she would be very present to herself and to me; she would be okay, and for me this was the sweetest joy I could wish for: to see Mama happy. For this reason, I felt truly grand when, much to my surprise, I was eventually allowed to walk to a corner store for a loaf of white bread and a quart of milk. I was so small that I could barely reach the counter upon which I placed the change for my important purchases. The man behind the counter was gruff and indifferent to the import of my errand, but all obstacles could be overcome, I believed, if in the end I could be of some use to mommy.

Before my mother married the Irish baseball player who would father three children, then abandon all of us, running away with the money from a laundromat they had invested in, I lived with Gammy. In the morning light, Gammy would place me on top of an enamel-topped table in her sparkling kitchen. There, enveloped in a golden mist of warmth and fragrances, she would feed me spoonful after spoonful of scrambled eggs, torn bacon and bits of soft, white bread, all mixed together into a heavenly mush. Together, we were afloat in a sea of yellow light that poured through the window, rose petals of pure gold, bespeaking halos of happiness. Her deep voice rose with strains of "How Great Thou Art" and "royal blood" pouring through her veins. All the while, her hands would be eternally busy creating another mouthful of nourishment, wiping my chin, stuffing me to the gills with breakfast after breakfast. It seemed I could never be hungry again, as we sat and stood in whiteness, a timeless duo of implacable love.

Mama had eloped with my father, so for her second wedding when I was three years old she wore a white wedding gown. This garment would later be altered into a cocktail dress that she would come down Gammy's stairs in for a date when I was nine. She was positively mortified when I piped up, in front of her new beau, "That looks just like your old wedding dress!" It's true that I didn't like my mother to go out at nights on dates. I was jealous. And I hadn't liked my first stepfather, so I didn't expect I'd like any new ones either. I was satisfied

with Claude, Gammy's husband. And for once, I wanted to keep things the way they were, living in one place with people I already knew.

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Claude and I would sit on the front porch in warm weather and talk. Mostly we were silent though and very comfortable with quietness. Cicadas punctuated our intermittent conversation *with* their high strung tones; cars rolled past, from time to time, as if on their way to somewhere, rumbling like tanks along the irregular, brick roadway. We sat on the small octangular porch, the roses he had planted blooming in crimsons and whites and pale pinks, and I ran my palms over the marshmallow white surface of the metal glider. My step-grandfather sat across from me, rocking gently. Inside the house, past the screen door, sounds of dishes clinking and clattering drifted down a hallway from the remote kitchen. Gammy was cooking dinner—fried chicken, green beans and potatoes, canned biscuits, rice pudding—and no one was allowed in the kitchen.

The pecan tree Claude planted for me, when I turned eight, clung to its allotted spot of earth, reaching delicate branches upward, their tips sprouting green flames. I asked him how many years it would take to grow to full size and imagined watching it increase in might each season. I willed it to grow fast, for I was afraid I would never get to see it full grown and heavy with pecans that fell and hid inside the thick grass, rotting, unless someone came and filled paper bags with smooth, dappled nuggets. Claude often cracked open pecans for me, lifting the oblong nut from its case, perfectly intact, and popping it into my mouth. Sometimes a bit of shell would remain wedged within an underside fold of the nut and biting down on it, a bitter taste would mar the sweetness of the fruit. I would wrinkle my nose and stick out my tongue, and Claude would chuckle as if he had planned the occasion for his own merriment. He seemed capable of anything to me.

Once when I was two years old, Gammy's older sister, Willie, visited, Willie was the most genteel and worldly of all Lily April's sisters. Like my grandmother, she ran a boarding house for years; hers was a big old rambling three story building in Greenville, South Carolina, set among gigantic trees and always dark and cool inside in the steaming summers. Her lily skin looked dewy in the dim light, when she came down the hall to greet me warmly yet with the dignified air of a businesswoman. She had given birth to Violet, when she was thirteen years old, and they lived together as sisters until Willie's death. Her responsibilities fit her strength, as if no one else could come up to their demands; yet she bore them uprightly, a tender duchess.

Perhaps her own sense of her capabilities was why she was so amused, when, on this visit to Macon, I rolled over the edge of the bed, and, wedged against the wall, began to call out, "Get Claude! Get Claude!" She laughed that I would not let her help me, but cried out instead for this young man who had married her baby sister.

Gammy was thirty-three and Claude twenty-three when they got married, and within a month he had gone overseas to be a foot soldier for the next four years in World War II. He had been a boarder in Lily April's rooming house. "I married two handsome men," she would tell me, "your Granddaddy and Claude. But they were as opposite as day and night. Ted was the meanest man who ever walked on the face of the earth, but Claude was the best husband a woman could ever want. God sent me Claude to make up for Ted Lamont, and oh, Lord was I glad! Claude didn't have much money, but he was good to me and Peggy Lou, too. He loved us both, and that ole Ted Lamont, the lowdown devil, wasn't even good enough to wipe Claude's shoes."

Claude May was one of a family of eighteen children in Union, South Carolina. When he was eleven years old, the depression began, and he and an older brother hopped freight trains to look for work around America. He never went back to school after the sixth grade, but he grew to be tall and very strong and found work in an iron foundry when he was a teenager. When we sat on the porch those summer evenings, he would speak occasionally, yet sparingly, of the war, and I could sense that something huge and bleak was locked inside him that he dared not express to anyone, especially his granddaughter. I felt more like a daughter, actually. But I tried not to let *that* cross my mind, for even at eight, I was loyal to my lost father who had crashed into the sea in a Navy plane. Still, Claude found in me a daughter he could trust to hear his carefully worded stories. His confidences gave me confidence in myself. We had a private understanding: a communion of utterances in which no shame came between our hearts.

And yet much went unsaid that would never be expressed, even in a later time, perhaps healing places in him that wars had scarred. His stomach churned with the denied feelings, and the ulcers he'd developed during the war flared up to agonize him almost weekly. Those battle wounds would kill him when he was forty-nine years old, but we didn't know that on those lamp-lit evenings of conversation: a middle-aged man with no pretensions and a half-orphaned girl who listened to his teachings with her whole attention riveted on his select offerings, "Whenever you go into a room full of grown-ups, jest sit there without saying a word and listen to them. Now, they think they are saying something, and they think what they have to say is important, but if you jest listen you'll notice that all they are saying are a lot of words, but they aren't *really* saying *anything*. They don't have anything to say, but they sure do want you to think they do. So they jest talk and talk and talk, but they don't know any more than you, a little girl, know. And they try to use big words to impress you. But those words are just a big put-on. They are puttin' on airs!"

He'd speak all this in the gentlest tone. Never scornfully. But amused with the foibles of humanity, half-affectionate in his observations. He wanted me to be real, to escape from social chitchat, to bypass the superficialities of life and to live in the depths of what is authentic. Truth lay in silent places, I nodded knowingly. Claude and I were just alike, he was proclaiming in this wisdom. This message of likeness was what he was imparting to me. As I pinched the blackheads on his face, cleansing his skin of the foundry dirt—evidence of his daily toil to feed us, not even his own offspring, yet loved as though we were—I believed myself to be no different essentially from this much older member of the opposite sex, who had fought in a war and poured heavy vats of hot molten iron into casts he himself designed.

I was sure this big wise man would live forever. We all were. Gammy had always informed us that she would die of a heart attack long before Claude, her junior by a decade, would pass away. Any day at all, we were assured, Gammy would suddenly drop dead. And she had had a heart attack in her early forties, it was true, "I've got a bum heart," she would say proudly, "it could give out on me at any second. But if the Lord is willing, I'll go shopping with you tomorrow."

Death hung over her like a dear old companion she just couldn't stave off for too much longer, and this went on year after year, with death looming ever larger all the while. Every moment she was spared was a miracle, for somehow, the fragility of her life was far greater than anyone else's. She was, we were made to understand, in grave danger always, and therefore we must all treat her with great delicacy. This meant never ever arguing with her or each other. Always being perfectly happy and staying home together, preferably in the same room, and if

possible all of us in one gigantic four-poster bed cuddled together against the vagaries of the world like well-fed puppies.

But when death came, it came to Claude, abruptly yanking him away from us. The ulcers had been hurting him and finally the doctor had convinced him to have surgery, it was supposed to be a simple operation, but Claude didn't trust doctors, so it was a long time, years, before he would submit to the surgeon's knife. I came to the hospital each day that week after eighth grade class, from the private school I was enrolled in: that arid place that echoed the barrenness of the hospital he lay in, feverish and weak. So weak he could not lift his head. I sat in a metal chair and did my lessons, getting up to give him sips of water from a plastic glass with a long straw that curved, accordion-like, in the middle. He smelled like medicines and his breath was hot and stale. I was worried but determined not to show it, "I bet you never thought you'd see me this sick, Prissy, did you?" He was right. And I desperately wanted him to be well again, right that minute. But then my stepfather would arrive to drive me out to Gray, and I would go, promising to be back the next day.

Bertha, the maid, woke us earlier than usual. Her mouth was set in a funny way. I could see something in her face, and her eyes wouldn't meet mine, Mama was up and gone. This was strange, Mama always slept till ten. After we'd eaten the cheese toast that was always soggy on the untoasted side, we climbed into the car to be driven to school. "Where are we going, Daddy?" the little ones questioned, amazed that he had driven right past their school on the Gray Highway.

"We're going to Gammy's house. She wants to see you."

We all grew silent after this. Something in his tone said don't ask more questions now. I knew. And yet I didn't know. I couldn't know. I made up stories in my mind about how Claude was sick and Gammy needed us near, or maybe he was better or something like that, as we drove the fourteen miles to the house on Orange Terrace. My stepfather was a stranger, driving me home.

And then we were there. And all of us children were coming through the front door together, and Mama stood in the next door with that stunned look on her face, saying for us to come on into the room where Gammy was, and we all stood stock still in the door when we saw Gammy's face which suddenly wrenched itself into a large endless wail. "Claude has gone to heaven, children. Ooh Ooh Ooh," And our sobs and moans merged with her great gasping agony as we flung ourselves—all four of us—onto her lap, her arms around us, and it seemed like the crying would never stop. That we would weep there together so long and so loudly that God would have to change his mind, and give us back our Claude or else surely we would all be allowed to go away, then and there, and be with him wherever he was.

Where was he? Now he was in that emptiness beyond me, beyond the warm room of sobbing bodies clinging to each other, unsure of how to live without his reassuring presence; he was gone as far away as the father I had never known. And yet how quickly we forget those who leave us. We have to. It is time to take a bath. It is time to eat. It is time to sleep.

And soon we are living our lives again and discovering that we can go on, after all, and that much is the same as it was before. That book is still on the table opened to the same page where I left it. The tube of toothpaste is still half full. There is a movie that I'd like to see. And soon the hours are filled again with familiar activities, and one forgets that someone very dear, someone irreplaceable, is gone. And sometimes it seems as though they've only gone away for a trip, a little vacation, and they will return; only the trip turns into years and then decades and they still aren't back and yes you seldom think of them anymore but then one day you are walking

somewhere with your friend and you see a rose on a bush growing near a wall and it reminds you, mid-conversation—you're expressing important ideas—but this rose is there, interfering with the train of thought, interrupting the flow of conversation; it reminds you of something, or is it someone? Oh never mind, I was saying. And you push the memory away because to remember would be to forget what you are just now saying and what you are saying is important, isn't it? But you remember anyway. Claude loved roses.

His casket had an American flag draped across it, which they folded and handed to my grandmother, and she put it in a box in a closet to mildew: a symbol of her husband's patriotism. But it wasn't enough, this piece of cloth; it didn't snore at night or eat her lemon meringue pie. Gammy picked out his best suit—the blue, satiny one, I'd only seen him wear once to my mother's wedding to the lawyer—for him to be buried in. I didn't want to see him laid out dead. Lily April stayed with his body, though, until the last minute. She had been raised to do this. He was her beloved. And then after he was buried, she started smoking cigarettes for the first time in her life. Years earlier, he had stopped smoking when she asked him to.

**Chapter Five**  
**Towards Erotic Mystical Seventies Poetry (1952-1972):**  
**Mapping Adrienne Rich's Early Verse-Memoir**

The arrival of erotic mysticism in the poems of the 1970's most canonically established female poet, Adrienne Rich, hailed a developmental peak in her personal and political radicalization. Her earlier poems' fury, now transfigured into exuberance and hope energized by collective vision, drove her verse into historically unprecedented veneration of female worth, lines impossible to erode. By and large, the same readership applauding the revival of H.D.'s works during the 1970s welcomed Rich's lyric reverence towards embodied female intelligence: an intelligence that often resonates with mystical overtones. Her service to freedom extended beyond the grueling hours devoted to composing these poems—as if that were not enough; Rich used her considerable literary respectability to position herself as an ambassador of lyricists such as H. D., Audre Lorde, Susan Griffin, and Judy Grahn: all four intimately influencing her poetics and theory. In their works, she found the voices she had been seeking since 1952. Each of them, in turn, listened to her lines, and were changed by her poems. I propose that these four seventies poets form a crucial lyric movement situated within the broader feminist poetry movement that Kim Whitehead outlines in *The Feminist Poetry Movement* (xv).

Significantly, Whitehead comments that the “bulk of the extensive feminist critical work of fully understanding the feminist poetry movement still remains to be done. . . . Because of the deficit in feminist criticism of the feminist poetry movement, the critical model I have provided is in many ways simply groundwork” (214-15). My argument, in part a response to her invitation, is that each of the aforementioned poets' works became vital in individual, yet inter-related ways, to what I call Rich's political poetics of an erotic mystical paradigm. I, therefore, recognize and insist on ways in which Lorde's, Griffin's and Grahn's reciprocally echoing voices carve a shared path through the dark thicket of women's historic silencing towards a mutually-established and interwoven personal-political poetic community and movement. Their shared vision, which will be discussed further in the final chapter, was enacted through the collective task of constructing a life-affirming erotic mystical “common language.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

This chapter concentrates upon how the poetry of Adrienne Rich, from 1952 to 1972, constitutes an autobiographical lyric-narrative pressured into new forms by the poet's own volcanic internal shifts. As an exemplary record of a prototypal poetic quest for truthful communication—genuine communion—between two genders, her heroic journey culminates in a leadership role in the seventies collective construction of a personal and political poetry community: a gathering of voices built upon the rockshelf of an erotic-mystical feminist poetics. In detailing this journey, my chapter illustrates the centrality of an intense longing for connection: on one hand, an *obsession* (from a psychological perspective); on the other hand, the *steadfast yearning* of a truth seeker (from a mystical perspective). The former angle, a pathologizing approach, would be as reductive as the one—in *Tribute to Freud*—shown by his diagnosis of H.D.'s condition upon hearing her vision of a goddess image, “a common-or-garden angel” (55). Her poetically-generative “angel” vision, she tells readers, was selected by Freud as her “one” and only experience labeled as “dangerous, or hinting of danger, or a dangerous tendency or symptom” (41).

It must be noted, converse to Freud's<sup>xxiv</sup> reductionist analysis, that in an opposing, iconoclastic paradigm, heightened states of yearning and communion have long *inspired* mystic

poets who bestow stunning poetry upon humanity: Sumerian Enheduanna's "The Exaltation of Inanna," (2300 BCE), the first poetry of record; ancient Egyptian love poems, Sappho's lyrics, Jalaladin Rumi's best-selling verse, and the English Romantic and American Transcendentalist poetics of "Hope," in Dickinson's words, "the thing with feathers— / that perches in the soul—" ("Poem 254"). As J.W. Walkington writes, in "Mystical Experience of H.D. and Walt Whitman," "H.D.'s Lady is in many ways a vision of self, the new self which has arisen during the mystical adventure. Janice S. Robinson, Susan Friedman, and Albert Gelpi all find that H.D. looks on "an apotheosis of the Self" (Gelpi, "Re-Membering the Mother," 185), when she envisions the Lady" (132). If mystical experiences, then, are mere symptoms of pathologies, my view of the debate parallels Emily Dickinson's, when she famously writes in "Poem 435," "Much Madness is divinest Sense—" (*The Complete Poems* 209). In addition, "mad" members of the fused sensible-with-mystical tribe influence lyric descendants; as critics, such as Susan Friedman, have indicated, H.D.'s woman-centered "spiritual realism" profoundly shapes Rich's own version of mystical embodiment, its paradoxical nature, as both an ineffable spirit and as a politically-charged somatic fact: "not as applying a Marxist principle *to* women, but locating the grounds from which to speak with authority *as* women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman" (Rich, *Blood* 213). This then was part of Rich's heritage from H.D. Nevertheless, many volumes of poems are written by Rich before H.D.'s work significantly impacts her life and poems, particularly in these two books: *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*.

Rich herself, who has elsewhere been correctly deemed "a poet of ideas" (Ostriker 102), is, in other ways, strikingly, a poet of mysticism, especially in her second-wave poetry. "Rich, like Audre Lorde, visualized poetry in terms of illumination," writes Sonali Barua in an essay concerning Rich's poetic tribute to Ghalib's ghazals (108). In "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib," Rich conveys the cosmic dimension of sensuality, "Eternity streams through my body: / touch it with your hand and see" (*Leaflets* 65). A comparison with Rumi's poetry may seem odd to some, but consider how the thirteenth century Sufi poet's lines showcase sensations as sacred avenues: "The grief you cry out from / draws you toward union" (155). What's more, the recent words of M.N. Ahmed claim a direct connection between the two male poets, "Ghalib took Urdu poetry to new heights and became a real successor of Rumi (Turkish mystic and poet)" (12). Union itself illuminates and generates a politics of the personal, shedding light on how individuals' deep yearnings for collective communion can be directed towards social transformation. It is not so much that her work is consistently and thoroughly an exclusive attempt to express the inexpressible; it is rather that mystical moments arise frequently enough in the poems to warrant critical attention. The significance of these moments reaches its peak in the seventies lyrics, when it becomes clear that hers is a paradoxical mysticism of the body, of immanence, of the earthly, political commonplace itself.

As she arrived at a place and time generating the most sensual and spiritual of her career, it is no surprise that Rich's promotion of select feminist writers would have been based on lyric quality as much as on politics. She reveals, in "Taking Women Students Seriously (1978)," an intense dislike for the patronizing ways in which women's colleges had often set low expectations for the quality of work required from young women; Rich insists, "We can become harder on our women students, giving them the kinds of 'cultural prodding' that men receive . . . We need to keep our standards very high, not to accept a woman's preconceived sense of her limitations; we need to be hard to please, while supportive of risk-taking, because self-respect

comes only when exacting standards have been met” (*On Lies* 244). One can only imagine that Rich’s standards for assessing the quality of the numerous, new poems floating across her desk would have been rigorous. Hence, given the general eminence of Rich’s own work, her endorsement of these three seventies poets’ writings calls for increasing the serious literary critical attention given to them as well.

I propose that a segment of Rich’s feminist readership itself seemed to yearn for a new, sensual-spiritual language; thus, the unwavering attendance, by critics and ordinary readers alike, at frequent poetry readings offered by Rich and the three younger poets. The significance of these readings cannot be overstated; simply leap over the past four decades to land in spring, 2012, when the poet Honor Moore, in an achingly beautiful memorial tribute to Rich, captures the profoundly personal impact the feminist leader’s readings had, at that earlier time, on so many *thinking* women and writers:

And I remember her 1970s readings, packed, standing room only, often in large rooms, even Battelle Chapel at Yale in the early 1990s. How often were they? Two or three times a year? More often? I longed for them, we all longed for them. Waiting for them was like waiting for a storm—for the wind before thunder that upends leaves so you see their silver undersides—we waited that way, preparing ourselves for the knowledge in the extraordinary new poem she was sure to read, knowledge that would surely change the way one thought, excavate the surface of who one was at that moment, unearth—you would realize this, leaving the hall in a throng—the woman you were becoming. (*Norton on Tumblr*, April 2012)

Rich’s hope-generating words, her erotic-mystical vision of women constructing a linguistic map to freedom, inspired new voices to come forth. Women knew she was articulating for them who they were to themselves—what they were feeling and thinking but had not expressed—at that precise moment in history and in their own personal lives. Hence, an alignment of consciousness occurred, while listening to or reading her words: a personal experience through one’s senses as much as the intellect. Such awakening, in a crowd of others also alert to new sensations, spun a group-experience of political communion that went beyond language into a subtle dimension of practical mysticism: a peculiarly American “evangelical” intimacy, minus patriarchal rhetoric.

Even so, one may inquire as to which compositions by Rich and her poetic predecessors lead up to the works she read to the faithful in those lyric gatherings of the seventies? Which lyrics precede this momentous decade: a decade in which Rich becomes a cutting-edge theorist, staunchly refusing to see herself as alone in this movement of words and social changes? As if to answer the first question, a number of feminist literary critics, chiefly Susan Stanford Friedman,<sup>xxv</sup> have noted that Rich was drawn to H.D.’s works in this time period. Jo Gill, after acknowledging Friedman’s contribution, discusses how *The Dream of a Common Language*’s poems, principally “Cartographies of Silence,” “Splittings,” and “Toward the Solstice,” are indebted to H.D.’s poetics in explicit ways (*The Cambridge* 83-84). In addition, Gill reminds critics of Jan Montefiore’s claim, in *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing*, that not only Rich’s *The Dream* volume, but also her poem “From an Old House in America” drew from the modernist poet’s style (84). Nick Halpern, Gill adds, argues Rich’s “Orion” was influenced by H.D. (85). These literary critics advance our understanding of H.D.’s impact on some of Rich’s most feminist lyrics.

Indeed, I would add that Rich's passion for H.D.'s writings must have helped elevate the status of this culturally exiled modernist writer, so that the latter became an indispensable foremother within feminist literary circles. As a consequence of Rich's literary prestige and dedicated following, her promotion of H.D.'s work, surely assisted in bringing the modernist writer a readership, including an intensified literary critical interest. One major example of her service in making visible H.D.'s erotic-mystical World War II epic, *Trilogy*, occurs when Rich, as Friedman notes in "'I go where I love': An Intertextual Study of H.D. and Adrienne Rich" (229), chooses to open her most feminist volume of poetry, *The Dream of A Common Language*, with H.D.'s plain-spoken, epigrammatic mantra<sup>xxvi</sup>:

I go where I love and where I am loved,  
into the snow;

I go to the things I love  
With no thought of duty or pity.  
(*The Flowering of the Rod* 578)

Hollow "duty" has held female writers in thrall as much as has romantic myth: "stooping," as some women do, to "half our height," according to Rich in "Natural Resources" (*The Dream* 64) and bending beneath creativity-smothering demands, legions of women globally still embody Woolf's dreaded "angel in the house" (Gilbert and Gubar, *Feminist Literary* 1385). Rich welcomes H.D.'s exchange of false "pity" for genuine compassion, necessitating shedding disingenuousness to speak and write with one's authentic voice, fragmented or not.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis has argued that H.D., on the other hand, throughout much of her career, remains fettered to a romantic ideal (*Contemporary* 178); yet, in stark contrast, only a generation later, Adrienne Rich manages to destroy that ideal midway through her six-decade career. My chapter, then, is dedicated to examining elements of Rich's poetics on her way to discarding old paradigms for new. Her poetry maps an intense struggle to do so. Her final release of stale, parasitic, courtly love<sup>xxvii</sup> ideals occurs in seventies poems such as "Splittings," when she declares heroically: "I am choosing / not to suffer uselessly . . . I choose to love this time for once / with all my intelligence," 1974 (*The Dream* 11). Here, at last, she pours forth a declaration of integrating intellect and emotions, mind and eros; it is this erotic mystical union that surfaces as her most daring act, overturning the androcentric splittings that keep women unaware of their true capacities. Although Rich never wholly rejects dream-life, she reshapes her fantasies, transforming her ideals, as her understanding of social reality deepens and expands; the more accurately she knows the actualities of her relation to her environment and her companions, the more she remakes her "dream of tenderness," as she calls it in "From an Old House in America," 1974 (*The Fact* 119), into a vision replacing the "old, needless story" (*Snapshots* 30) of Tristan and Isolde—alluded to years earlier in "Antinoüs: The Diaries," 1959—(30) with a refreshingly mundane landscape such as that described in "Necessities of Life," 1962: "women knitting, breathless / to tell their tales" (*Necessities* 10). Finding an eager audience in each other, these newly apprehended women, speak, in "starved, intense" voices, Rich writes, in "Face to Face," 1965, "the old plain words / and each with" her

secret  
spelled out through months of snow and silence,

burning under the bleached scalp; behind dry lips  
a loaded gun (49)

Women with untold secrets are more dangerous, apparently, than women with lives visible to the world, telling their tales to eager audiences.

By 1975, Rich believes that to cling to old dreams by ignoring “all that [she] know[s] of history” would be unethical, an act of masochism harmful to the lives of all beings on the planet. In “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying (1975),” for example, she points out that women “have been rewarded for lying” (*On Lies* 186), but the “unconscious wants truth as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfill [one’s] desire. The complexity and fecundity of poetry come from the same struggle” (188). For Rich, the body holds its own knowledge, its own memory, held captive by lacking access to self-expression. Truth expressed by a woman after long silence can explode the lie of masochism, even as a loaded gun suggests potential for annihilation of an enemy. Telling the truth becomes her mission. Telling the truth is an erotic experience of a keener order: the pleasure of language well-chosen, paradoxically, brings one into a mystical state of a resounding silence: complex and fecund.

Rich’s struggle to speak truthfully, I contend, has brought her again and again to “the split.” From her first book, *A Change of World*, to her seventh book, *Diving into the Wreck, Poems 1971-1972*, she repeatedly comes up against “the split,” which thrusts her out onto the edge of the void: “The void is the creatrix, the matrix. It is not mere hollowness and anarchy . . . We [women] are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core . . . Yet, if we can risk it, the something born of that nothing is the beginning of that truth” (“Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” 1975, 191). Yet it takes twenty years of facing that void, and retreating, over and over, before Rich acquires the momentum to descend into the wreck of the unconscious submerged beneath the social institutions of marriage and motherhood. Exploring her own interior world of darkness, in “Diving into the Wreck,” 1972, the poet discovers a landscape of pain, anger, and hunger, forcing her, for survival’s sake, to grasp onto “the treasures that prevail . . . [the] silver, copper, vermeil cargo [that] lies / obscurely inside barrels / half-wedged and left to rot . . .” (*Diving* 24). If the discoverer in the poem is seen as archetypal, this diver, then, can be said to locate lost treasures that belong to all Woolf’s *Outsiders*<sup>xviii</sup>: the very kinds of promising treasures that Rich herself unveiled to the audiences of her seventies poetry readings.

Adventuring into the inner unknown reveals creative powers, reflective not only of personal transformation but also of womankind’s capacity to make changes socially and politically. In addition, in “Meditations for a Savage Child,” 1972, her glimpses of the unrecognized, undeveloped resources within herself and other women gives her the bravery to choose faith in that heretofore unspoken void—arising from the part of the self which has been ignored, the

most primitive part  
I go back into at night  
.....  
Go back so far there is another language  
go back far enough the language  
is no longer personal (*Diving* 57)



Not yet, however, equipped to be as independent as Jane, the speakers in Rich's early poems practice restraint, even making a virtue of mastering self-denial, using "antique discipline" (54) to communicate with the orthodox fifties male in "At a Bach Concert" as well as from a static center in "An Unsaid Word" (51) that "leaves him free," so that "when his thoughts return to her," she is still standing "where he left her." But in spite of her valiant efforts at "proud restraining purity" ("Bach" 54), too often, as stated in "Mathilde in Normandy," "anxiety . . . [p]layed havoc with the skein, and the knots came undone" (53), especially when thinking, as she does in "An Unsaid Word," of his "estranged intensity / when his mind forages alone . . ." (51). The ways in which the poems of the fifties repeat intratextual and intertextual themes, I argue, readily allows for the meaningful assembly of my patchwork of quotations, emphasizing, I hope, the pervasive autobiographical nature of the books. My own creation of a sort of hybrid form arises from a feminist postmodern manner of reading the poems; my experimenting with piecing lines of various poems together in close proximity to each other, in this way, perhaps suggests a fresh, critical approach to Rich's verse. Rich, though writing from the personal, is not a *confessional* poet; instead, her poetry's personal revelations strike me as well-crafted emblems, representative of the *Everywoman* experience of an era. As shall be shown later, countless readers have responded to her lines as speaking for them personally. Thus, in this intra-and-intertextual, and thematically repeating, manner, her personal poetic narrative stands for collective experience as well.

What happens, then, when the man in a relationship abandons the woman for "harsher hunting on the opposite coast"? ("Mathilde" 52). Sitting "at home," weaving tapestries or writing poems for "a pastime," in the middle ages, or in 1955, the woman whose "patient handy work" is "esteemed proper" only when it displays a constrained "grace in what [she] bear[s]" ("Bach" 54) is inevitably disturbed by the departure of "wooden ships putting out from a long beach, / And the grey ocean dimming to a void, / And the sick strained farewells, too sharp for speech" ("Mathilde" 53). Increasingly Rich's poetry reveals—often in spite of itself—a growing awareness of and concern with the "unsaid word" (51): the split between men and women, and the barriers the gap imposes, when individuals strive to construct a network of lucid communication. Left alone on the beach, the woman who is also a poet may begin the only journey open to her, an inward searching of a "chartless zone" ("Unsounded" 66). Left alone with her powers, an Emily Dickinson or an Adrienne Rich, restricted to being a "Vesuvius at Home" ("Poem 1705"), becomes her "own Magellan / In tropics of sensation" ("Unsounded" 66). In a paradoxical union, her innermost explorer's vast creative powers arise from her core experiences, and are therefore intricately interrelated with its life-affirming "tropics": an inexpressible paradise bordering a mystical "chartless zone."

The poet listens to her own body/imagination in a "latitude" separate from the men who "extend their ken / In mathematical debate / With slide and photographic plate" ("For the Conjunction of Two Planets" 82). Susan Griffin, following consciously in Rich's footsteps, writes—with similar acerbic wit—of the generic man's naming of the order of things to secure his controlling position. In her breakthrough hybrid-genre, a philosophical prose-poem titled *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. She contrasts, in "Terror," as she does throughout the text, the clinical, entitled tone of the disembodied androcentric voice, with the life-affirming, perceptive, erotic-mystical voice that seeks connections and emotion; Griffin writes, "He speaks of the natural order of things and the regular movement of the heavenly bodies. As for her efforts to make everything different, he directs her gaze to the skies" (148). This astronomer expects his listener to be awed and silenced by his cognitive grasp of the universe's systematic workings, or

his mastery of orderly poetic forms. In contrast with his conventional, methodical mindset, Adrienne Rich—although at the onset of her career having adopted the formal style of an Auden—nevertheless, sows early seeds of rebellion; to illustrate, consider “In Conjunction,” in which some “corner” of the speaker’s “mind . . . keeps watch” on “starry skeins” (*A Change* 82) that emphatically “keep their awe” beyond the comprehension of logic and scientific formulation. Returning to Griffin’s poem, one notes how it again models the opposing androcentric view: “There is no caring in natural law, he says, things are as they are” (148). In short, even in the older poet’s first book, Rich already mistrusts the range of expressiveness possible through merely skillfully imitating the fathers’ methods and tools. Locked in her little sphere, the speaker of “For the Conjunction” is driven “out of doors at night / to gaze at anagrams of light” (*A Change* 82). A mystical universe welcomes a woman’s “gaze,” in these lines, conjoining playful (*anagrams* as word games) consciousness, visual insight, with light, releasing her from an enclosed experience of systematic sensory deprivation. Indeed, playfulness in the face of doomsday seriousness becomes a characteristic of the erotic mystical seventies poets.<sup>xxix</sup>

The poet is driven by unconscious longings to search “in starry places,” in dreams and uninhabited landscapes, to “see the things” she yearns “to see / In fiery iconography” (83). A fiery wildness calls the writer away from civilized forms. Years later, Griffin writes of the arid meaninglessness represented by mere calculations divorced from mysterious movements: “As to any meaning in these movements, he says, he cannot say, but listen, he says, to the measurements” (*Woman* 148). Both Rich and Griffin ultimately trust in a deeper connection with internal than with measurable zones, promising a more satisfying communion among members of this “small and lonely human race” (“Stepping Backward” 56). That these poets write in the tradition of the Romantics is apparent here: Blake and Whitman, in particular. Recall, for instance, both Blake’s disdain for Newton and for all things single-mindedly mechanistic, and Whitman’s own dislike of an astronomer’s droning lecture, as depicted in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” Upon hearing the “learn’d Astronomer . . . divide, and measure” the night sky, Whitman’s speaker soon becomes

tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
look’d up in perfect silence at the stars (83)

The “mystical” and erotic glide, away from unhealthy, creativity-deadening lecture rooms, the “rising” above barren computations, into the angelic spaciousness of life’s “moist” air represents a philosophic movement towards a paradigm that Griffin’s consciousness also embraces. Her female speakers rally for the opposite of a Newtonian universe. Similar to the radical dissent of his twentieth-century heirs, Blake protests the lie that body and soul are at odds with each other, writing in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” “Man has no Body, distinct from his Soul” (*Complete* 149). Nevertheless, the intimately personal realm of such a marriage is equally a collective, political reality in both Blake and Rich’s poetry. Mirroring Blake’s “London,” Rich’s “The Rain of Blood” shows a degree of social realism that appears in many of her poems.

Despite foreboding omens, Rich writes in “The Rain of Blood” of a “dark year” of “angry rain” and “streets of terror” (55); Rich, nevertheless, not only expresses, in “Stepping Backward,” the hope of “mastering solitude” (56), but also dreams, in another early poem, “For

the Conjunction,” of actually healing the split between “Venus and Jupiter,” woman and man, mind and body (82). In what becomes for the poet a signature poetic gesture, the speaker longs for meaningful communication. In this case, the connection would be between the “brightest planet and her [the planet’s] guest,” whose “dual circuit of the west” is traditionally, forebodingly “separate to each” (“Unsounded” 56). Analogously, Griffin depicts a menacing separation of paradigms in terms of a breakdown in communication between a prototypical woman and man:

She may say the stars look like jewels on a velvet cloth. But he knew to distrust appearances. She had too much eagerness to attach meaning to things. He reminded himself that all this life is determined, that what meaning there is in the movement of matter is undecipherable, that he himself is made up only of particles in space. And beyond this, he tells himself, only the stars burn in a dreadful void. (*Woman* 149)

Yet, in sharp contrast, Rich knows that “the void is not something created by patriarchy, or racism, or capitalism. It will not fade away with any of them. It is part of every woman” (“Women and Honor” 191). A certain breed of male elites—Rich and Griffin imply—dreading the void, create ways to avoid encountering and entering it.

According to these two poets, women, having been conditioned to believe their “own truths are not good enough,” have been expected, ironically, to adopt androcentric methods in their intellectual and artistic pursuits, even though doing so may mean lying about their own truths (“Women and Honor” 186). Nevertheless, although Griffin’s scientific thinker is male, it is not clear that essentialism is being propounded in her prior passage, so much as adhering to the historic accuracy of scientists having been a largely male domain. Her passage may be no more essentialist than is Whitman’s poem’s juxtaposition of male astronomer with male erotic mystical speaker. However, it seems inevitable and understandable that some readers would jump onto the essentialist bandwagon upon reading Griffin’s and Rich’s poetic discussions of woman, nature, and the void; after all, these writers’ shared intention to transform constricting paradigms and conceptual styles would seem, at first glance, to place them in that camp, in particular lines. Still, so few women historically having had access to education, it can be no surprise that two feminist poets, writing in a socially turbulent era, surmise that womankind, in general—whether by nurture or nature—accesses alternative ways of knowing, ways less obvious to mechanistic thinkers.

It may be helpful, also, to consider that philosopher Mary Daly’s 1973 book, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, was a strong influence on both poets; Daly’s insistence on women finding courage to enter the unknown, “courage in the face of the risks that attend the liberation process” (23), did support, guide, and uphold Rich in her own struggle, in those years.<sup>xxx</sup> Rich wrote of the momentousness of Daly’s thought, even on the original jacket of this volume, claiming: “It is truly the first philosophy of feminism . . . a milestone on the movement toward human liberation.” Compare the following by Daly, which Rich read in 1973, with Rich’s own excerpt juxtaposed thereafter: “This becoming who we really are requires existential courage to confront the experience of nothingness . . . [A]t this point in history women are in a unique sense called to be the bearers of existential courage in society” (23). Similarly, in “Women and Honor” (1975), composed two years later, Rich calls on women specifically, to encounter the void:

“The dark core,” Virginia Woolf named it, writing of her mother. The dark core. It is beyond personality; beyond who loves us or hates us.

We begin out of the void, out of darkness and emptiness. It is part of the cycle understood by the old pagan religions, that materialism denies. Out of death, rebirth; out of nothing, something. (*On Lies* 191)

Eliot’s empty waste land opens the door for the exit of seventies feminist poets, who take an entirely alternate direction. The crumbling of an old culture brings opportunities.

From Woolf to Daly to Rich, this feminist conversation about a “dark core” occurs across generations, disciplines, and genres. Woolf links it with the figure of the mother and Daly with having the existential courage to face one’s aloneness. In early books, Rich had revealed her fear of the “darkness and emptiness” was at least as great as her desire to enter it. After all, as she writes in her groundbreaking essay, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” the “liar in her terror wants to fill up the void with anything. Her lies are a denial of her fear; a way of maintaining control” (*On Lies* 191). Hence, years earlier, in her second book, *The Diamond Cutters*, rather than writing in the relaxed, open lines of later years, she busies her lines with “maintaining control,” such as in “The Insomniacs”: not daring to set loose words in confident free verse, to unreservedly

let each cadence fall  
Awkward as learning newly learned  
Simple as children’s cradle songs  
As untranslatable and true (84)

Adopting a “shifting mask” (82) in lines of practiced control, she suggests her fear of darkness within:

My voice commands the formal stage;  
A jingle thrives beyond the wings—  
All formless and benighted things  
That rhetoric cannot assuage.  
I speak a dream and turn to see  
The sleepless night outstaring me.  
My pillow sweats; I wake in space.  
This is my hand before my face.  
This is the headboard of my bed  
Whose splinters stuff my nightmare mouth (83)

Images of theatricality, nightmares, and surreal, out-of-body experience suggest a life restricted by convention, “splinters stuff[ing]” a poet’s “mouth.”

In the next stanza, she realizes that the fact that “[w]e are split” (84) is integrally related to her inability to “conceive a way” of articulating the “unconquerable drouth / I carry in my burning head” (83). In the 1950s, she wonders if “such infamous knowledge” is the “flaw” that causes a break-down in communication; decades later, in “Origins and History of Consciousness,” the same internal “jingle,” which she fears as disruptive to her art and

relationship, as severing her from a man, becomes the fecund “darkness” (*The Dream* 7) that she and her woman-lover lower themselves into, in order to give birth to their authentic selves. Indeed, in this same seventies poem, she will write that she and her lover “[c]onceived / of each other, conceived each other in a darkness / which I remember as drenched in light” (*The Dream* 8). The dramatic shift between the fifties and the seventies in Rich’s depiction of the speaker’s full embrace of the unknown, the darkness, reveals the significant degree to which the second-wave impacted on this poet’s consciousness. Darkness, once avoided, becomes a welcomed cauldron of light from which the longed-for erotic mystical moments emerge, at last.

Increasingly, even in the fifties, the poet dares to expose more and more of her inner self. Even as self-awareness materializes from a “poetry of fur and manners” such as that depicted in “Antinoüs” (*Snapshots* 30), the speaker demands that her male companion, in another poem, “Merely to Know,” join her in this process of risk-taking and exploration:

I’ll give you back  
yourself at last to the last part.  
I take nothing, only look  
Change nothing. Have no need to change.  
Merely to know and let you go (*Snapshots* 28)

The speaker wants to know “what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman”; in short, she is asking, as she explains in an interview, “[H]ow do you deal with that inward person who you are—whether a male or a female? How do you look at that? How much of it do you accept as being intrinsically you? How much of it do you . . . reject as being something you’ve been told about yourself?” (*The Ohio Review* 45). Thus, Rich writes in “A Marriage in the Sixties,” 1961, of her longing to communicate and the gap between two genders that persists:

Two strangers, thrust for life upon a rock  
may have at last the perfect hour to talk  
that language aches for, still—  
two minds, two messages (*Snapshots* 46).

Steadfastly, she struggles for a meeting of their minds, for an “hour” of “perfect” communication; ironically, the actuality of their differences is acutely perceived.

In “Novella,” a man and a woman “speaking harshly” seem to exist on separate planets even while living in the same house: “Outside, separate as minds / the stars too come alight” (57). There is so much that they do not talk about, yet Rich perceives this dark sea of silence between them as being the crucial territory to be excavated somehow with language. Sadly, at a time when she is “beginning to speak,” 1961, when, in “Attention,” she writes, “Veils of dumb air / unwind like bandages / from” her “lips” (*Snapshots* 48), her companion seems more alien than ever. In 1963, in “Like This Together,” the speaker regrets the “silence between our teeth” (*Necessities* 16); nevertheless, the poet begins a solitary effort to “whisper” (“Spring Thunder” 44) what is inside herself: to fill the void between them. Suddenly, her poetry seems “fresh” and “open” (“The Trees,” 15); disengaging her roots from stale tradition, “The trees inside are moving out into the forest” (15). This gloriously liberating line, even if playfully surreal, hints at mystical possibilities imaginable only in that erotic moment trees reunite with forest, inner melds with outer—as Susan Griffin would affirm: “in a state of communion” (*The Eros* 150).



crushing his chest with their weight (*Snapshots* 14)

In fact, her compassion for him increases, as she perceives the vulnerable self beneath this “breastplate” of conditioned defensiveness, reserve, and objectivity. Paradoxically, feeling more assured of her own strengths and capacities increases her tendency to empathize with others, in “After Dark,” “I grow protective toward the world” (*Necessities* 30). As she urges him out of his shell, in “Orion,” she reassures him that she means no harm, “Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon / out here in the cold with you” (*Leaflets* 45). The speaker mothers him in her effort to have him stand face to face with her; ironically, by reducing him to a child, she throws their relationship off-balance again; the split remains.

“But you burn, and I knew it / as I threw back my head to take you in / an old transfusion happens again,” she writes sardonically of a distant, fiery partner (“Orion” 45). The “old transfusion” is ambiguous. On the one hand, it could refer to an ancient erotic-mystical moment that keeps her psychologically tied to him, but, on the other hand, it could be a tongue-in-check reference to empty copulation. If he does not take her in, intimately and compassionately—as she indicates with the line, “Pity is not your forte” (45)—then she must use her own creative powers to achieve the deep connection within herself she so urgently desires. The poet’s personal experience, as painted in this poetry, is representative and political; many readers recognize themselves in the autobiographical lines: lines resonating with the truths of their lives. Clearly, she achieves a profound connection with a female audience. Pamela Fisherman describes recurring patterns in taped household conversations of three couples. Although the women tried more often than the men to initiate conversations, the women succeeded less often because of minimal response from their male companions. In contrast, the women pursued the topics the men raised, asked more questions, and did more verbal support work than the men. Fishman concludes that the conversations were under male control but mainly produced by female work (14). Feminist poetry of the seventies is replete with examples of miscommunicating couples caught in dissatisfying relationships, the women always shown as verbal, the men silent; Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, and Diane Wakoski represent noteworthy poets writing in this vein.

Nevertheless, there are times—such as “In the Evening” depicts—even a male figure’s brief empathy cannot sustain Rich’s speaker; for consistently, inevitably, after the conversation, the “[t]hree hours chain-smoking words” (*Leaflets* 15), he moves on, psychically withdrawn from her. Like ageless archetypal symbols, they “stand on the porch / two archaic figures: a woman and a man” (15). In an interview by David Kalstone, from *The Saturday Review*, 1972, Rich states, “Certain Kinds of experiences—some of them we have over and over—are like pieces of an iceberg above water. We don’t know what that iceberg is for a long time; maybe we never know” (58). She cannot find an explanation for the breakdown in their communication, through merely turning to the “old masters, the old sources”; recorded history has not “a clue what we’re about / shivering here in the half-dark sixties,” she chronicles in “In the Evening” (*Leaflets* 15). Like some arctic explorer, she can only travel to submerged portions of the iceberg to see if she herself can hack and chip out linguistic answers. Her senses and spirit merge to find a hidden clue. She knows that once again, “Our minds hover in a famous impasse / and cling together. Your hand / grips mine like a railing on an icy night”(15). If only they could move beyond that “impasse,” Rich intuitively explores the wreck of their relationship, they might find the missing elements, the essential clues as to the true nature of the “split,” they keep desolately reenacting. A kind of repetition compulsion, one may be tempted to surmise. Alternately, a

patient persistence, one may deem it, in their laboring towards the longed for mining of a hidden, sparkling manner of being with each other. It is no accident that deprived of all other methods of connection—figurines deadlocked in a frozen cameo—their last meeting point is finally a sort of desperate touching. She is the “railing” upholding him, as his hand grips hers; this Titanic grip grounds and tethers them to each other outside the “bleeding” house, the “cracked” moon, the shattered, androcentric myths inherited(15); this “grip” secures her on an otherwise comfortless night, but this “grip” is also a prison, preventing her from imagining a landscape in which touch is not emblematic of loss and suffering.

Finally, the greatest “tragedy of sex” that envelops them with its bleak, devouring eye is that touch itself has become futile to mend the excruciating distance between them, Rich writes, in “Waking in the Dark,” 1971 (*Diving* 8). To touch a stranger, someone whose deepest knowledge is not only hidden from her, but also from him, is to betray the true needs of the human psyche; it is to diminish human experience and potentialities; it is to dehumanize and belittle what might be—if only he could expose and explore his own subjective fears, insecurities, and longings, could admit her strengths and allow her a public voice in worldly matters. But he clings to this one spot, his last stronghold, like iron.

In the early seventies, Rich suffers what many poets of the second wave suffered collectively: they railed against themselves, questioned their own sanity, and lost the men they loved. As is well known, some of these poets committed suicide, though, as Tillie Olsen teaches, “Every woman who writes is a survivor” (Rich *On Lies* 123). I would add, especially any risk-taking poet such as Plath, Sexton, and Rich. “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters,” announces the latter, early on, in a line pitched to searing objectivity, in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” (*Snapshots* 22). The detached speaker saves her own sanity by placing herself among millions of “thinking” women across place and time. The collective difficulties, having been falsely normalized as individual shortcomings, produce collective “monsters” outside of mere random psychological illnesses. Rich herself becomes a model warrior-survivor of that generation of female poets. Although numerous reasons play into this—including the ravaging bipolar conditions of Plath and Sexton—Rich’s resilient poetic style, uncompromising content, and exacting journey itself, also built a lyric fortress against self-destruction. Above all, her survival hinged on empathy, however: empathy with her own kind. She writes, after Sexton’s sudden death, that she thinks of this woman who is so vastly different a person from herself, “as a sister whose work tells us what we have to fight” (*On Lies* 123).

As repeatedly reflected in Rich’s poetry, the sudden increase in women’s self-assurance, and empathy with each other, shook the confidence of male companions. Historically, literary men in general held to a tradition of infatuation with an ideal female figure, “a muse,” a perfect daughter; meanwhile, a mature woman was required to “stand off,” like Penelope, to the side, while, as Rich writes, in “The Demon Lover,” “In her place / stands a school girl, morning light / the half-grown bones / of innocence” (*Leaflets* 19). This artificial vision of the ephemeral goddess—what a woman *should* be—enabled an avoidance of wrestling with the real “tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain”(20), according to Rich, of a female companion. Hence, man’s “heart utters its great beats / in solitude,” she writes, despite his being in the same room with a *thinking* woman who aches “brilliantly” to communicate with him (19). In *Of Woman Born*, Rich calls for women to no longer tolerate the behavior of spoiled children whose egos are too fragile to sustain the weight of responsibilities that ordinary women take upon themselves every day (45). It may sound harsh to some, but from a perspective garnered from her own experiences—years of

experiences bearing out the realism in Woolf's characterization of a childish, archetypal figure, Mr. Ramsey, in *To the Lighthouse*—Rich's point-of-view was reasonable.

"He doesn't know," writes the poet, whose speaker observes this prototypical man, as a mother looks upon a spoiled son "made of such nerve / and flare and pride and swallowed tears"; she humors him with "Go home. Come to bed" (*Leaflets* 20). After all, the "skies look in at us, stern"; she knows all too well that there is little compassion in this "new / era" (20). For far around the tiny human figures, the "nebula / opens in space, unseen" (19), and yet even as she reaches to comfort him she exclaims, "Oh futile tenderness / of touch in a world like this" (21). At this point in history, the poet records, she blinds herself, speaking to him as if to an obstinate child. Even though "subtlety stalks" in "his eyes," it seems to her that the only hope for saving the world lies in ghosts of a chance, "a breath / on the long-loaded scales" (21). "Dear child," she implores earnestly, bitterly, do you not know there "might have been a wedding that never was" (21). In sharing secrets with each other, the speaker seems to say, they could prove that under their "skins," they are "laughing," and that even with words "black and bruised and blue" from "centuries of misuse" (21), they could begin to compose a world not broken with "fatigue, regrets": a world in which heterosexual relations are not marred by "this almost / never touching. This / drawing-off, this to-and-fro" (22), which continue to "imprison"—like Blake's "mind-forged manacles" ("London")—her imagination (*Leaflets*).

"The Demon Lover" (1966) is a crucial point in Rich's development. In it, she makes startling connections between the personal (her sexual relationship) and the political (the Vietnam war). Blinded by "an old story" and silenced by apathy, suburban couples stand "off motionless," apathetic, while the world is being destroyed (19). Sex becomes an inadequate substitute for responsible language; their "finger-ends / nervously lied the hours away," while "prisoners howled and children ran through the night" (19). At a time when they should be wrestling with "tongue, hips, knees, nerves, brain;" struggling with all their capacities, to discover and articulate what they are thinking and feeling beneath the "cast iron" roles they are trapped in, instead

He's watching  
breasts under a striped blouse  
this bull's head down. The old  
wine pours again through my veins  
(20)

Intoxicated by superficial physical desire, she nevertheless continues to struggle to understand him, to know his "secret," because, as the speaker determines, "only where there is language is there world" (21). His refusal to come to terms with her as more than a "daughter" or a "muse," as more than a body, "all Rubens flesh and happy moans" (20) is a demonic perpetuation of the same old paradigmatic "unavailing" split between flesh and intellect, destroying both the couple and the world.

Ironically, he says to her, "The world, we have to make it," even though he rigidly refuses to join her in an exploration of the Siberian void which "hulks" between them (21). Though she insists that when he "falter(s), all eludes," and that his "tongue knows what it knows," he will not accompany her when she "drop(s)" into the unconscious "sea" beneath their masks (22). Incongruously, the female speaker is the genuine neo-troubadour, the one who wistfully mourns as follows:

There might have been a wedding  
 that never was  
 two creatures sprung free  
 from cast iron covenants (21)

Additionally, the reason “[d]eath’s in the air,” she knows, is that too often Mr. Ramsey types customarily held back crucial “secrets” from themselves and from women (21). “I want your secrets—I *will* have them out,” she warns, because only if he breaks the “cast iron” silence erected between them for centuries can the world be saved from annihilation (22). Imprisoning her in a purdah of silence, veils of oppressive systematic lies destroy life itself.

Bound to him by touch alone, the speaker, in “Night Watch,” wonders, “Can the touch of a finger mend / what a finger’s touch has broken?” (*Leaflets* 29) To this poet, a fundamental problem is the pervasive lie that body and mind exist disconnected from each other: a hierarchical, disjointed outlook that she suggests is the source of war. If the patriarchal language she uses sprang out of this split, such language perpetuates the violation of life. Consequently, Rich poetically attempts, in conjunction with other erotic-mystical poets, to rediscover a lost matrifocal language, through following linguistic crumb-trails buried in the body. In 1972, the young, Greek poet, Olga Broumas, winner of the Yale Series of Younger poets, describes, in “Artemis,” creating lyric forms that follow the “slopes” of the body, “chromosomes” yielding “a curviform alphabet” for a silversmith poet to shape. She writes in this same poem, in a book that praises Adrienne Rich as her personal foremother, a “Demeter” (21), the following echoes of Rich’s search for erotic mystical clues:

What tiny fragments  
 survive, mangled into our language.  
 I am a woman committed to a politics  
 of transliteration . . . (23-24)

Paradoxically, the senses—sources of utopian linguistics innocent of corrupt syllables—acquire a refreshing purity. “Politics,” too, is charged with fresh connotations within this original context. The erotic, pulsating core of life reveals itself as conjoined mystically with an intellect, a “mind,” purified of destructive conditionings.

Compelled, in contrast with Broumas, to still use the “oppressor’s language,” it seems to Rich, in “Charleston in the Eighteen-Sixties” that she is “writing, blind with tears of rage / In vain” (*Leaflets* 25). This language which is disconnected from her body seems useless to heal wounds caused by violence that also erupts from the same historically imposed gap between mind and body. She needs a language capable of bridging fragmentation, yet her verbal powers are siphoned off in habitual patterns, exemplified, in “Night Watch,” by the following lines:

Everything, even you  
 cries silently for help . . .  
 What can I do for you?  
 What can I do for you? (26)

Empathic habits urge her to help him, to be what he thinks he needs. Momentarily she envisions herself, in “The Demon Lover,” as his ideal, a “tree of blondness” (19), but finally realization arrives that his obsession with an angelic dream woman obliterates real human beings. To the last minute, nonetheless, she paradigmatically clings to life, despite having adopted the appearance of his fantasy woman, while he obdurately trudges ahead towards death :

Blue-eyed now, yellow-haired  
I stand in my old nightmare  
beside the track, while you  
and over and over and always you  
plod into the deathcars” (“Night Watch” 26)

This stagnant clinging to stale ideals paralyzes them, leaving her, Rich writes, in “Charleston in the Eighteen-Sixties,” with “[n]o imagination to forestall woe” (25). While he lies “pale in sleep” dreaming of a “pure” and “poster-like” (“Night Watch” 26) landscape of Shellian bliss, she wakes “up in tears / and hear(s) the sirens screaming” (“Jerusalem” 24). They exist in separate worlds, two divergent paradigms within the same house.

Meanwhile, during this same time period, select male poets continue to write out of an archaic tradition; for instance, in his poetic horror story, “Lovesong,” Ted Hughes, describes, in *Crow*, the following:

His smiles were the garrets of a fairy palace  
Where the real world would never come  
Her smiles were spider bites  
So he would lie still till  
she felt hungry (32)

A poet caught in the web of timeworn myths that perpetuate fear of women’s potency is doomed to write an increasingly futile verse. For example, Hughes, in “Crow’s First Lesson,” composes in startlingly graphic terms: “And woman’s vulva dropped over man’s neck and tightened / The two struggle together on the grass / God struggled to part them, cursed, wept—” (32). Lamentably, one of the few times “vulva” appears anywhere in poetry, it is portrayed in a degrading manner. Eve has fallen, in the speaker’s eyes, to a subhuman creature as grotesque as Homer’s Charybdis, whirling men to their deaths. In contrast, Rich’s poetry, though grim at times, resists this nihilistic trend for the most part. Women poets will find it necessary to explore, on their own, the uncharted underpinnings of myths that prevent poets from taking women’s words seriously.

Alone, as recorded in “Implosions,” Rich struggles in 1968 to “choose words that even” he “would have to be changed by . . .” (*Leaflets* 42). *Changing* a man occupies a central position in her sixties verse, mirroring the personal core of the second-wave’s collective intention to make political *changes*. Increasingly, however, the poet feels limited by the language itself, attuned to the structural violence of conventional discourse. Attempts to transform and connect are blocked by fixed semantics and syntax, “My hands are knotted in the rope / And I cannot sound the bell” (42). Indeed, the very words she uses to heal her companion contain “blades” that could “cut” him “to ribbons”; thus, she fears that when “it’s finished,” she will have “done

nothing / even for” him (42). Through the language of the speaker’s body, Rich discloses, in “On Edge,” “the word” of her “pulse” is “loving, ordinary”; in contrast, his language divorced from body contains “delicate hooks, scythe-curved intentions” (45). In order to decipher the meaning of his words, she must piece together “what syllables” she “can / translating at top speed like a thinking machine” (45). She fails to find words that effectively communicate empathy for him, which “bridge” the chasm between them. Roped in by the limitations of an alien language, it takes all her “nerve / to trust to the man-made cables”: the very same poetic materials she herself, ironically, is obliged to employ (45). Paradoxically, the writer ultimately discovers compassion in directness and honesty, even at the risk of great pain, rather than masking one’s identity, one’s perceptions, in seemingly kind forms that are actually damaging lies. For example, in “On Edge,” Rich declares, the speaker would rather

taste blood,  
yours or mine, flowing  
from a sudden slash, than cut all day  
with blunt scissors on dotted lines  
like the teacher told (45)

The more *disembodied* the language and the more formulaic the structure, the easier to misunderstand, to mistranslate what is being said, the poem suggests.

Adrienne Rich’s increasing commitment to lucid, “plain” language becomes a political, eventually sensual-spiritual, rebellion against obscure, general, and therefore concealing terminology. Her poem’s speaker feels a moral responsibility in “5:30 A.M.,” 1967, to tell “the truth about truth” (*Leaflets* 31). For her, it is a fact, as revealed in “Ghazals,” that “every existence speaks a language of its own” (75). Every existence, a localized contributor to the whole, has a need to be heard. Therefore, to be specific and personal in her poetry is an ethical decision; no longer can she merely pose as the distant observer, for she has come to consciousness in the midst of tremendous threats to the continued existence of her “tribe.” Urgency permeates the poetry. To illustrate, in “The Observer,” 1968, the speaker describes awakening in a prison cell and “observing the daily executions / rehearsing the laws” she “cannot subscribe to” (47). Conscious of extreme vulnerability and exposure, the speaker feels “unsheltered by any natural guardians” (47), knowing, as shown in “Nightbreak,” that “there are / no agencies / of relief” (48). This is a poetry of life or death choices, sharing in this trait, oddly enough, commonality with verse by Plath and Sexton. Left to give birth to her new self, new vision, without psychic support, the anger characterizing the poetry of *The Will to Change* and *Diving Into the Wreck* begins to erupt. As shown throughout poems across a span of time, Rich’s speaker repeatedly opens herself to life, in search of an unprecedented equanimity in dialogues, reaching for reciprocal correspondence, hoping for deepening collaboration, mutually personal and political. Yet again, she faces isolation in her struggle to conceive of an erotic-mystical paradigm.

Rich’s speaker, impatient after long empathy, asserts that anger “has to be gone through,” if she is to repair her “body,” harboring its “list of wounds”; the “enemy” even “becomes invisible,” after the damage is done. Such destruction, so commonplace it has become institutionalized within marriage and war. Nevertheless, the crucial issue still remaining is her persistent care for the human heart, “what can be broken”; despite the risk involved, the speaker believes she needs him to join her in the full exposure of open communication, unprotected by

conventional structures and roles—seeking the active tenderness of a language, a touch, capable of soothing the wounds of a fractured relationship. Anger erupts now that “someone” she loves has not only broken “something” she wants, but also he did not even “finish the job”—having “withdrawn” instead, leaving her “in pieces” to repair the damage (“Nightbreak” 48). This abandonment drives her back stalwartly to herself, to her own body and unknown language.

Additionally, the second-wave poet shows, in “Gabriel,” 1968, the prototypical gap between man and woman seems irreparable; he plainly becomes an “enemy” when, recognizing “he wants to kill me / for using words to name him,” she usurps his Yahweh-given right (50). Though he “is barely / speaking” to her with his face “shut-off” like “the dark side of the moon,” he appears to feel threatened by her attempt to articulate their experience. Though Judeo-Christian lore would have her believe that he is an “angel” with a special communiqué from Jehovah, she suspects that beneath his attractive “young” façade is a “plumed serpent” refusing to listen to her, to respond to her as an equal. His “eyes reflect [her space] something / like a lost country”; he is a refugee from dying myths of love and ritual, which were never realized in actuality, yet he clings to those hollow pre-determined roles: “[H]e isn’t giving / or taking any shit” (*Leaflets* 51). Rich acknowledges the appeal of his powerful aura, even as she recognizes it is merely a defense, when underneath there is “nothing alive left / in their depths” (50); he asks her to assume he has “a gentle heart,” simply because history and poetry record it as such:

once in a horn of light  
he stood or someone like him  
salutations in gold-leaf  
ribboning from his lips (50)

However, she knows there “are no angels”; in actuality, she sits in a “bare apartment,” while, like an ironic Odysseus, he comes and goes as he pleases, leaving her emotionally and materially impoverished.

Even the poetry she is “reading” for comfort—the “twentieth-century rivers” of words—does not address her needs, with its

disturbed surfaces reflecting clouds  
reflecting wrinkles neon  
but clogged mostly  
nothing alive left in their depths. (50)

They are no longer even touching each other, set within this crumbling artifice, among evidence of a former housewife’s undone tasks—“wrinkles” to iron out, toilets “clogged”—as they “glance miserably / across the room at each other” (51). Yet because she also no longer has any illusions about him, having lost faith in the old stories, she feels oddly closer to him than ever before. At the point, then, of experiencing the void between them most acutely, she also senses their mutual humanity. The fact “there are moments / closer and closer together” (51) offers her a remnant of hope they may overcome this impasse. Nevertheless, the poem ends on an ambivalent note, suggesting the relationship has reached a standstill. In sum, though she needs much more, all she currently asks for is that he “stay looking / straight at” her “a while longer” (51).

Mapping out a thinking woman’s inner life shows its relevance to the world, in the case of Adrienne Rich’s poetry. Even her early work rings political. Records of an inner journey

across the difficult tundra of a 1950s relationship, the poems trace her lived reality as representative of at least an educated, white, heterosexual, middle class Everywoman's reality of that era. Perhaps, though, other women of other times, classes, races, sexualities, ethnicities, and nationalities find their own truths well up in Rich's lines. Perhaps, even, some universal female experience does peek through in a random line here and there. "Oh futile tenderness / of touch in a world like this!" any ordinary woman may mourn, like Rich's speaker in "The Demon Lover" (*Leaflets* 23). A speaker, the reader finds, consistently adopting an array of roles, exploring the globe's terrain more sweepingly than any female poet had imagined, prior to Rich's poems' arrival. Mountains. Oceans. Deserts. Caves. Islands. Meadows. Places unusual to find a human, much less a woman. Occupations defined by manliness, now a woman's terminology, too. Her miner's lamp floods the brilliant landscape with icy light. A mystical light. A poet, like a surgeon determined to heal an inoperable wound, can only obsess on re-examining the same frayed edges until the poem's lines collapse into time. Hers is a poetry, written from the bones, strangely sensual in spirit.

## Chapter Six Strayaway Child

As soon as I got home from school, age six, and then all summer long, I donned my corduroy britches and headed for the badlands. “Hi Ho Silver!” My hero Davy Crockett who wore a cap just like mine. Annie Oakley wore cowgirl clothes that I begged to be given for Christmas; you could *do* things in them have adventures. Nothing would hold you back. Freddy, Granddaddy’s live-in housekeeper, who told me stories of her childhood, girls riding out on the range and roping cattle, was exactly who I wanted to be like. She and I would take a trip to Texas, she promised, and I could learn to swing a lasso—Whoopee!—and ride wild mustangs. Freddy was little in build—like me, I thought—and wore her hair cropped as short as a man’s. Well, of all the women I knew, she was the one I most looked up to really, cause, well, she knew how to do things. All sorts of different things. And what’s more she’d sometimes show me how to do them, and let me help and never said to me, “Oh you won’t be able to do that.” She knew what I was capable of.

On the way to Horseshoe Farm, one of Granddaddy’s six dairies, off of the side of the road and down a steep incline, tucked neatly in a tree-enshrouded vale, I could just see the roof of a small log cabin, This cabin would be the home that Freddy and I ran away to, when I grew up and she grew small. We would wallpaper the rooms with patterns like those on the flowery, cotton feed sacks that she cut up to make into shirts for me: a tangle of green and blue buds run amuck over the log walls. An attic loft would be my room to which I’d ascend by ladder, and there I would sleep on a cornshuck mattress all by myself, listening to the great-eyed owls in the rafters, Evenings, she and I would sit around a huge fire over which hung a cast-iron cauldron of simmering something or other, and ‘we’d tell stories long into the darkness. She let me know, through her stories of faraway, outdoorsy adventures, that she, too, was discontent with usual lifestyles. We were conspirators, then: a tomboy of eight and a sinewy woman of fifty-four. It seemed we were almost gone away already, when we planned, as she’d gaze up into the lamplight over the lazy Susan, the table having been cleared; only she and I were left to talk.

Granddaddy had introduced me to this fantasy of a log cabin home, when he, on a rare occasion, talked to me as we lay in bed. He would put *Field and Stream* on the bedside table and roll over and whisper into my ear, holding my hand, about taking me way up into the woods when I got older to stay with him in a cabin. We’d ride our horses up there, and he’d carry a rifle to protect me from bears and mean men. But in my own imaginings, it was Freddy, who used to rope cows in Texas, that I escaped with. Freddy, who also read *Field and Stream*, but who slept in a high, canopy bed at the other end of the house, and never touched me except to button my sweater, or comb my hair, or wipe the biscuit dough off my fingers, was my comrade.

I was strictly forbidden, however, to ever spend the night in Freddy’s distant room, even though I knew down to my bones that my true buddy was a wiry, shorthaired maker of blackberry jam. After all, I’d never seen Granddaddy DO much of anything other than ride around in one of the new Chevrolets he purchased annually, overseeing women picking beans in fields and men hooking cows up to milking machines. Or he would drive out across a bumpy pasture, with me standing in the middle, while he talked to some man beside me about the cows that scattered as the car approached. But Freddy, on the other hand, seemed capable of anything. Her strong, square hands mesmerized me as they kneaded, dusted, and cut the biscuit dough into perfect circles, or wrung out a hand-washed garment until not one drop of

water fell, then piled it neatly upon the other tight knots of color along the edge of the green, enamel sink.

At dog-feeding time, she would lift the bag of dry food, pouring just the right amount into a corn-colored bowl; then, upon opening the Kennel Ration can—with the blue and yellow paper picture of a happy, eager hound—she would spoon out large spoonfuls of pink, glistening meat, still beautifully shaped like the cylindrical can. With great precision, her forefinger scooped the remaining food from the tablespoon and wiped it off into the bowl. Then, like some priestess offering oblations to the divine, she would carry the heavy bowl to the exact spot on the stone walk where the dogs would feed. Or we would walk down to burn the garbage. The flames would roar and lick through the rust-eaten holes in the barrels, and black ashes, diaphanous wings, would drift upwards and be snatched higher into mysterious wind currents I longed to follow. We stood and watched for dangerous sparks, until every last piece of paper was burned to smithereens, in the twilight air. The delicious smell of burning rubbish carried me into another mountain night of fireflies and stars. I fell asleep easily.

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I was never alone outdoors. My wild, always peopled with old friends more intimate than the new, in the waking hours when I played in the iris bed that lined one yard. Each blossom was a memory restored. Here I was again among the radiant ones I'd always known. They greeted me in spring, vibrant with colors I'd borrow to paint Easter eggs. Once, I came upon the cement birdbath opening its round mouth to the sky, surrounded by sapphire-blue hyacinths—waxy cones of starry blossoms, clusters of buds expounding the same fragrance—and tiptoed slowly through wet grasses to see the circle of toadstools that had popped up overnight.

Freddy said it was called a fairy ring. I pictured the fairies leaping from mushroom to mushroom in gauzy wings from other worlds; they were as real in their unseen intensity as the dogs whose tangible tongues dripped hot drops of saliva onto the stone walkway where Freddy and I fed them in yellow pottery bowls. I'd wish I were a dog.

And so I tried to be one of them at times. The dogs curled up in the afternoon sun on the stone walkway, dozing on the warm surface of flat rocks pieced together into an irregular quilt, Approaching them on my hands and knees—they ignored me much to my disappointment—I'd try to fool them by panting loudly and wagging my behind back and forth. Curled beside them, I felt what it must be to be a dog, indifferent to the humans who clattered by, waiting to be fed fragrant piles of steamy mush, twitching my ear when flies landed on it. But dogs stayed close to the house most of the time—occasionally I'd crawl around under the breakfast room table, dipping my face into a bowl of Grapenuts, munching voraciously—and I preferred a less domesticated lifestyle.

The life of a calf, for instance, was spent mostly in open pastures, once it had been weaned from the buckets of milk devoured in its earliest months. When the new calves were delivered to our farm, each placed in a narrow straw filled stall—side by side—in a long row of hungry moos, I would rejoice with the appearance of each baby. Taken from its mama over at one of the dairies, it would teeter precariously on its wobbly legs, deer-like liquid eyes rolling upward, the umbilical cord dangling like a loose thread beneath its brown and white belly. Soft gums slid eagerly onto my two fingers, suckling mightily, back slanted downwards as if bowing to the mother of life. Mistaken for a cow, I belonged, if only momentarily; for as soon as the pail

was hooked over the crib's rail, the infant clamored for the rubber nipple. The fierce suckling that ensued enthralled me to the last drop, the bucket clanking emptily as the Guernsey tugged and tossed it, seeking more sweet rivulets. I'd run my fingers over its star-like forehead and stroke the soft spots where horns would bud. Nourished, the little one lost interest in me, and buckled her spindly legs, knees first, collapsing in a heap of sleep departure.

The cool, shadowy barn buzzed with flies, as I stepped outside into light, squinting my way towards the upper pasture of yearlings. Here among the beginnings of grass-munching that obsessed all cows, I joined them in their secret ministry, cropping the earth's greenery. Staining the legs of my britches, I crawled through succulent blades until my knees ached, my palms smarted, chewing bits of bitter vegetations, awed at the capabilities of these absorbed creatures. I steered through round offerings of manure, creeping ever closer to the tall calves. But they eluded me every time, as they politely sidestepped my friendly overtures. Even if I ran my tongue across their salt block—lapped into snowy caves and valleys like a melting square of ice cream—they hung together, a conservative gathering from which I was excluded. Blue sky lifted its decorative clouds into other shapes, while I communed with calves who ignored me.

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Where are you now, Dora Dean? Mornings I woke in the peeping light, Granddaddy gone already to the dairies for dawn milking, "Bossman," as the milkers called him, had to oversee his workers, while his oldest granddaughter tore all the way to the homestead barn to play with a hired hand's daughter. You were always still sleeping, sleepyhead, when I arrived to tap on the windowpane of the front door. Your lean-boned mama let me in, and I stood on the linoleum living room floor, looking out through plastic drapes while she called wearily, "Dora Dean, Dora Dean," opening your bedroom door to reveal a lump hidden in piles of quilts. You'd emerge drowsy, to dress before the pot-bellied stove, long-legged and shivery. Buttermilk biscuit with salt-cured ham in hand, you'd follow me out into the long day.

We were buddies in the outland, equals in play, You impressed me, tall one, with your mansion-sized playhouse built from small stones lined up. And your refrigerator was gargantuan: those three wooden crates piled up oblong and filled with imaginary foods. You helped me make a smaller house, reversing our actual social status. And I learned humility. We went searching the dump, against our elders' warnings, for broken dishes: little bits of shattered plates, flowered centers singing colors, more treasured than those we ate off at suppertime. Once you struck it rich with an almost whole plate, a pie-shaped corner sliced away; I envied your good fortune. Among the broken bottles, discarded boxes, and piles of cans, bedsprings, broomsticks, I came upon a dead puppy, belly swollen, in the mud. It seemed almost alive, still as a sack of potatoes. For eggs, we gathered smooth white stones to place in discarded cartons. So real, yet better. And Queen Anne's Lace made cottage cheese. Slabs of moss for steaks. Rusty water was orange juice served alongside coffee poured from jars of steeping acorns. We reinvented housewifery like that to make our lives exposed, untamed.

You were the one with most of the dolls, stored safely in a closet, seldom seen. I was doll-less, preferring toys that rolled, and a miniature farm complete with plastic animals. The dolls I was given sat frozen and unattended in out of the way places, as picturesque as lampshades. While the toy lamb, the fluffy rabbit, the stuffed-sock monkey were living presences to me. Often you and I rode our sticks, galloping over gravel, our horse-legs switched by our own hands for greater speed, stopping at a brook to offer gulps of water to our thirsty mares, our

frisky stallions. Or we'd just disappear into thickets and fields on our own two legs, forgetting to pretend, finding reality in our bodies: expanded into hills, skies, beyond the beyond. Perched in the arms of an apple tree, I glutted on hard green fruit, sucking the sour meat of the lunch, they told us not to eat. Forbidden juices quenched my girlhood thirst, cradled in familiar branches, self-sustaining, clear.

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But one day Dora Dean and I disagreed. We had a squabble about a horse she'd claimed to be hers. It was my horse and I knew it, I insisted; she was foolish to think it was hers. In my ignorance, I said I'd ask someone else what they thought. It hurt me to think the horse might not be mine, for then it would mean I'd been lied to again. And that in turn would signal uncertainties I had no wish to face; it seemed I had to be right or all I trusted was an illusion, able to crumble at the whim of another who simply had to pronounce a different version of reality. I marched off, deadset on proving my version, securing my future. I loved Dora Dean and wanted to live here with her forever. And, too, I was a little jealous of her: she was taller, she got to go to school in the country on a school bus—I rode in a boring car to the city—and she had the biggest playhouse.

I expect I got a confirmation of my ownership from Freddy and came directly back down to the faded green house, her family was allowed to inhabit as partial payment for Bob Belcher's farm work. I heard the wailing before I got to the porch. Terrified, I slipped around the side of the house towards my best friend's bedroom window, the cries, and sobs ever louder. Her mother's voice was yelling, "Don't you ever disagree with her again, you hear me. You'll cause your Diddy to git fired, youngin'. Her Granddaddy will fire yore Diddy cause you don't know to keep yore big mouth shet!" And she was beating her with great walloping thuds. I turned and ran, heart breaking, tears streaming, a huge wave of darkness swallowing me whole. Never, never would I be able to give her back what this took away, I knew. And I was flooded with remorse, no longer the same child. As changed as the one who was being beaten, torn from her by forces we had not created.

Dora Dean's mother worked constantly, though I perceived this, at that time, as a stream of fascinating activities, filling me with admiration, She wasn't one of those ladies that Gammy wanted me to be. She didn't sip Lipton tea like Mama Lydia, nibbling dry bits of toast late afternoons after resting in a dark room with a cloth over her eyes to ease her migraine headache. If she ever had a sinking spell, I never knew about it. I don't recall ever seeing her sitting down, except at the dinner table. Darlene Belcher, thin black hair pulled back tight into a rubber band, gaunt face startlingly devoid of make-up—like a blackboard that's been washed clean—grasped an axe in her hands each morning and, raising it high over head, chopped kindling for her wood burning stove. Stooping over in her threadbare cotton dress, she'd pile her sinewy arms high with splintered wood, slamming the screen door into the kitchen. There she'd fry and bake everything good to eat that Freddy made on the electric stove. Times I ate dinner on their plastic tablecloth; I relished the cakelike biscuits bigger than the ones I was used to. And they ate slices of raw onion that made my eyes water, salad made from wild poke leaves picked that afternoon.

But what was really *fun* was to watch Dora Dean take her bath in the round tin tub hauled out before the kitchen stove and filled with pots of boiling water, And she didn't have to take one every day, I yearned to have just such a bath. It seemed like an extravagance with Darlene

pouring water over me, rinsing off the embryonic film of ivory soap. On the other hand, I didn't envy the long walks down a hill past the dump to the outhouse, though the stacks of newspapers and dry leaves for toilet paper had a certain anarchical appeal.

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Twilights I'd find myself like Thumbelina in that tale of a tiny girl who'd ridden in a walnut shell down a river and flown on a bluebird's broad back, nestling inside its feathers, peering down at all the world below—among the fireflies galore, lanterns blinking as rapidly as falling stars. The toad that lived beneath a rock near the house came out for insects, all warty as a witch's face. I befriended the squat fellow in his meditative stasis: the size of a human heart, throat pulsing, linking us inexorably, Toad and girl. White rambling roses cavorted alongside the gravel driveway, suggesting intimate conversations; their wedding cake petals, creamy blossoms, drooping openmouthed. The manicured lawns, laid out around the white, gabled house, sloped graciously to greet hedges that partially blocked my view of surrounding apple orchards. Catching fireflies in a glass jar, I made my way to the cement pool that I'd never once been swimming in.

The pool, built for me presumably, by Ted, with some of the millions he made selling milk to Biltmore and Sealtest distributing companies, stood empty every summer. I'd walk down its porous steps into the slanting bottom hollering, "echo, echo," to hear my voice answered by myself in distant places. My multiple selves communicated through the resonating hollow of cement; tadpoles burgeoned, their metamorphosing shapes scattering, as I cupped my hands in stagnant water that collected at the deep end. Sometimes raindrops plunked into the dark water, making concentric orgasmic ripples beneath which the tadpoles' glossy bodies darted like the fluttering eyeballs of a sea monster.

A Sunday afternoon, I came into the house much earlier than usual to find Granddaddy sunk into his television chair, watching fat-bellied men fling and kick and other, grunting proverbially like oversized toddlers, on the black and white screen. He seemed engrossed, but I was upset. "Granddaddy, Dora Dean said that they have to move away. Why are they going?" He looked annoyed then, and with a voice of dismissal, he said, "I fired her daddy. He's no good, Prissy. Bob Belcher's a lazy man." Stunned, I crept away, furious at Granddaddy. I knew that this couldn't be true, for I had seen Mr. Belcher, his front teeth rotting beneath lips syrupy with chewing tobacco, mixing the sweet-smelling powdered milk for calves in a big drum, then pouring it, careful so as not to slosh any over the sides, into the twenty or thirty pails. He'd be cleaning the stalls with a pitchfork other times, his jean overalls splattered with straw and manure. I had seen, when I rode around to the dairies with Ted, that he only watched others hook the metal milking machines to the cows' udders, and yet I'd always thought he liked the Belchers. Now I knew. Tears of rage soaked my face, as I felt the crush of losing my only girlfriend. My whole body grieved the ruthless amputation of my earliest friendship.

It had been hard to make the transition, midway through the first grade, from an Atlanta school to the Hendersonville school. They were at different levels in everything. Arithmetic became a mysterious alien code to me that I never unravelled completely, but even reading suddenly had its terrors. There were certain words that I always jumbled now: who, what, which, where, why. "WH" words baffled me. No one noticed that the particular meanings of these words might hold a clue as to why they stumped me. Where was I going next, and who knows, when, or why? No one invited me to ask such questions. Instead, Mama Lydia placed flash cards with the

words printed on them in big bold letters that seem to blare out, "Read this, you idiot!" around the house at crucial junctures: the dinner table, the sink, a bedside table. I was to read the word on the card at each designated site before proceeding. In this way, I gradually learned my "WH" words. As for arithmetic, well everyone expected that a girl would have problems with arithmetic, so they just let that go. It was a sign of normalcy that I fumbled with addition and subtraction: a built-in deficiency that wouldn't affect the future of someone not destined to be a doctor anyway.

To Mama Lydia, I was destined to be a Victorian lady, Southern style of course. This meant that the inevitable day arrived when she had a little talk with me about my behavior up to that point. She had noticed that I liked to play outside all day and every day in my elastic-waist corduroy pants, preferably the red ones, that Freddy had made me. As she talked, I began to have a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. I sniffed out big trouble up ahead, fidgeting in my seat, squirming to get away from this outlandish turn of events being outlined in carefully paced, mincing tones by Mama Lydia. I sensed the hugeness of the shift that was about to be required of me and everything in me recoiled instinctively, as if on the brink of disaster. And yet, I could not then have fathomed just how grotesque and unnatural the transition from a tomboyish girlhood to being a grown woman would be. It never really struck me as plausible that I would ever be a woman. I would always be myself. Why not? But I heard Mama Lydia saying now, "It's time for you to stop running around outside so much. Little girls need to learn to do indoor sorts of things like sewing. It would be better if you went out for only an hour or so each day, and the rest of the time you can play right in here near Freddy and me."

"But I don't have anything to do inside," I insisted, the creak of prison gates closing in my ears.

"Oh we can find some interesting things to do in the house," she reassured me. I could sense that this conversation wasn't entirely easy for her. It smacked of hollow duty. There was no real inspiration igniting her words, so I persisted, "But I can't think of anything I want to do inside." I meant to win this one, come hell or highwater, for on the rainy days that I was compelled to be indoors I was restless and shiny, often pronouncing miserably, "I'm BORED. What can I do?" And I would be allowed to rummage through old drawers of junk, but how much rummaging could I do day after day? Mama Lydia couldn't have forgotten my disconsolate moods on those drizzly afternoons. She was merely hoping against hope that suddenly I would be someone else: a docile, old-fashioned girl, content to sit for hours doing small things. She herself was so certain that such feminine traits were innate that she just assumed that at a certain age—surely by eight—I would simply lose interest in climbing apple trees, disappearing over hills and roaming the wild in general.

Luckily, Freddy was in the room and I turned a frantic face towards her. The housekeeper almost always agreed with Mama Lydia on most matters; she knew her place. But this time something amazing happened. She casually said, "Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt her any just to play outdoors a little longer. Prissy behaves herself so nicely. I don't think any real harm will be done by letting her go outside on sunny days." Mama Lydia sighed. She looked dogged by Freddy's unexpected opinion. With an air of, "Weil, I'm just giving this matter over to someone else less delicate than myself," she gave up on improving me, I was set free once again. Only this time I knew it might not last.

The one thing I really liked to do indoors was read. Despite my difficulties with "WIC" words, my passion for books matched my passion for nature. Adventures lured me to the pages I poured over at night, sprawling on my stomach on the den floor. I discovered the Bobbsey twins,

a blue leatherbound set, behind the glass doors of the built-in bookcase, and relished each volume. But there never were enough books around to satiate my appetite. I would reread many of those that were, but since the adults read only magazines—*Field and Stream* for Freddy and Granddaddy, and *Woman's Day* and *The Ladies Home Journal* for Mama Lydia—it never occurred to them to provide me with books. Somehow, though I discovered the Black Stallion series, and from then on I dreamed of raising Arabian horses—the friskier the better—and I started saving my money in a pink piggybank for a horse farm.

Then I read a book about a little girl who came to America from Europe back in the olden days and got kidnapped by the Indians. She was raised as an Indian in the forest and not until she was grown up did she ever see white people again. Wow! This was exactly what I wanted to happen to me. Nobody would miss me really. Gammy and Mama were already memories. Granddaddy was never around, and Mama Lydia wanted someone who would stay indoors, so THAT would have to be my sister, Polly. And, well, I would miss Freddy, but I'd get to see her again someday—maybe on a Texas desert, riding a mustang through pitchfork-shaped cacti—so, yes, being an Indian was the answer for me. I begged and begged to be taken to Cherokee Indian reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina. I imagined girls my age in long braids and soft moccasins, showing me the ins and outs of life in a teepee. And I saw myself riding horses bareback to get everywhere I went. This dream of being a real Indian seemed entirely plausible. I wished for the sound of hooves thundering through the night to come and rescue me, and take me home to the wilderness, every time I saw a twilight star's first twinkle. When I finally did get taken to the Cherokee reservation high in the mountains, I was shocked to see ordinary buildings lining a paved street. I bought a doll-sized pair of wee little beaded moccasins that I put in a drawer and forgot about until, from time to time, pulling it open to search for matching plastic barrettes in primary colors. I'd rediscover the tiny, baby blue shoes and stroke one finger regretfully over their alluring perfection.

The closest I ever came to living the life of a wild Indian was when a dream of visiting Dora Dean, way up in a remote mountain area, came true. The Welchers had moved the winter I was in second grade, and the next summer Mama Lydia drove me on back roads that snaked through Appalachia to the wood frame house propped high on a steep hill banked by leafy woods. Out onto the front porch came Dora Dean and a passel of cousins. For two days I lived in a house without running water, I delighted in the icy mountain spring that rushed down fifteen feet beyond the house where we'd fill buckets with water. An atmosphere of participation enjoined all of us to life, shadows mingling with light across the meadowy lawn lush with dandelions as yellow as the mound of home-churned butter on the wooden kitchen table. In the sparseness of life here, things spoke to me in clearer tones. Water from a brook tasted like something new and precious, yet it flowed abundantly, free to anyone who thirsted. Even the feel of my cotton shirt sewn from flour sacks was more necessary in the chill bedroom air, Voices flowed together, all interwoven and casual, where people lived in smaller spaces. Sometimes they rose in shouts, and screen doors were allowed to slam, but no one treated me like a china doll, I was a person just like anyone else, and, paradoxically, this rare experience of sameness made me feel special.

Not long after my respite with the mountaineers, I went into the woods alone, not doing anything in particular. Just being outdoors was enough to put me in that state of wonder that I would rediscover in Wordsworth's poems on the splendor of communion with nature, years later. Expecting nothing, yet open to seeing what was around me, I stepped through thickets that snagged my clothes, swimming into a clearing. A shaft of light dove through thick foliage,

dappling the floor of leaves at my feet. The air was quiet with midsummer completions, and ahead of me, lit by sunshine, one pink flower, upright among pine needles. As tall as a daisy, this blossom drew me to its orchid-like mouth, bonneted by jubilant petals, unfurling. A blushing cave, Thumbelina could crawl inside, hung down below the protective, freer petals. Freddy told me, when I ran to her that night, "It sounds like a lady's slipper to me."

I always wished longingly for snow in winter. Each night as I went to bed I would ask Freddy if she thought it would snow. Freddy was an oracle to me, "Well, I can't exactly say now, but there's always a chance." And I'd fall asleep full of hope, bounding out of bed to the window when I awoke, to see if the world was transformed. Sometimes I'd wake in the night, as if to the sound of a deeper silence made by drifting snowflakes that fell outside the dark panes like fairies from paradise. Each flake was alive unto itself, twirling and tumbling blithely.

But one winter, the ground was barren morning after morning, until at last the day came when Freddy pointed out the window at the heavy snow clouds. I was sure that this time my wish would be answered. It was strong in me now from the waiting: a prayer for change that pulsed through all my cells. I could taste the single pointed flavor of my wanting in the back of my mouth. So I made a private ritual to welcome in the whiteness. I gathered crayons and sheets of paper and propped myself beneath a window on the staircase landing: a spot I'd never previously inhabited. There I determined to create pictures until I felt throughout my body that snow covered the ground and iced the branches near the window pane. Only then would I permit myself to look and to take in what I had helped to happen by my patient attentiveness. So I flung myself into the bright colors on the empty pages, absorbed in my task. Hours seemed to melt away, and I grew giddy with confidence in the outcome of my magic. And, yes, when I raised my head slowly above the windowsill and peered out into the late afternoon yard, snow had obliterated the former scene. The world was different: a place of sledding and snowmen with pitch black lumps of coal buttoning up their round bellies, and sugary bowls of snow cream better than a cone from Dairy Queen.

Mama Lydia had been a nurse long before I was born. She gave me lots of enemas, and one day she noticed a suspicious looking mole on my neck. The mole was fun for me because when I pushed it, it would get all watery and disappear. In a few days, it would grow back to the same size. I knew about witches having warts, so I felt an inexplicable happiness to have this melting mole. I bragged about it. Mama Lydia took me to a doctor who put a rubber glove on and stuck his thumb in my rectum and told me to grunt, while a nurse stood nearby—who'd promised me nothing would hurt, which wasn't true—and Mama Lydia sat in a chair in the corner. He ran his fingers all around down there in places I never even touched, in a businesslike matter of fact manner, and I felt like something was very wrong about me. I felt dirty. I felt ashamed. Everyone behaved as if nothing unusual were happening, but I felt at the mercy of people much larger than myself. The man touched me, as if he were examining one of Granddaddy's cows. And then after all of this invasion, I was pronounced healthy. But I felt a lot worse than I had before.

Sometimes I'd play on the sand pile Granddaddy had had delivered in a dump truck. It had tiny holes that ants crawled in and out of in alphabetic streams. Granddaddy would lie in the hammock hung between two nearby trees, napping with his Humphrey Bogart hat over his face. I couldn't swing the hammock cause that made him dizzy. Old people were delicate like that.

Ted had a friend who was a leading editor of the Asheville newspaper and sometimes we'd visit Phil and Heidi in one of their homes. Heidi had two gray poodles with rhinestone collars that lived inside the house, but she warned me on every visit not to track mud on her

white carpets. There were numerous rooms that I wasn't allowed to enter even with clean shoes. They had a manmade pond at one house, stocked with trout for the men to fish, but Granddaddy only walked around the land surveying the property. I knew that surveying property was something that men did to pass the time and that it was somehow more important than just taking a walk. The women always sat inside in the kitchen, even though there were fancy parlors and living rooms with big windows for viewing the views.

Then there was the man who owned Sunshine Cookie Company. He always brought a big box of assorted cookies when he paid a rare visit to Granddaddy. But mostly Granddaddy was alone. He got up at 4:00 a.m. to drive around to the six dairies and oversee the milking, and everyone he associated with all day worked for him. His workers were all "below" him, so he couldn't invite them out to lunch or anything. And just about the only time Ted and Lydia saw each other was at the dinner table where conversations were always thin and formal. He got to bed by 8:00 p.m., sleeping on the right side of his double bed.

Many nights I was requested to come in and say goodnight to Granddaddy. His six-foot frame would be stretched out stiffly beneath the covers, his head on a thick pillow. I always felt awkward and resistant to this ceremony. But I was obliged to perform before I could go to my twin bed next to Mama Lydia's. Urging me onward, Lydia would stand in the bedroom doorway, while I would reluctantly go over to the large bed the gray-haired man lay upon. Stiff as a board, he seemed, upon his back, turning his pink-veined face towards me. With bloodshot eyes upon me, he would reach a huge, heavy hand out from beneath the covers and grasp mine, tugging me until I thought I'd be crushed or dissolved by his need. I stood as far afield as possible, though his hot breath beat down upon me. If only I could disappear. Mama Lydia smiled her witless, subservient, nervous approval across the room. No help forthcoming. Then, like King Lear he growled the memorized lines, "How much do you love your Granddaddy?" And I knew his life depended on me to answer in obedient tones the line he'd taught me. Barely audible, out of the pit of numbness that enshrouded me, I would mumble the proscribed formula, "As BIG as the whole world, Granddaddy, The WHOLE WORLD."

He'd smile at the ceiling, offering me his cheek to kiss. But this staged performance only made me sad. I couldn't understand why this hollow ritual meant so much to him—I couldn't fathom his isolation. And I knew that he and I lived in different realms and who I was to him had nothing to do with who I was to myself. But I put up with this make-believe game of love, because Granddaddy didn't seem to know how to just be natural. His life was mostly for show. The long walk-in closet beside his bed was jammed with fancy suits. As he grunted his satisfaction and squeezed my unhappy hand, my heart shrank into a hollow howl of emptiness. Against my will, something, I knew not what, was being exacted from me, and I would creep away from his side, shrunken and divorced from myself.

The realm that a girl child lives in grows smaller and smaller as she grows older. She is destined for the kitchen, for attending to the needs of others, some of whom walk across nations surveying land. Granddaddy had a rifle case with a glass door through which I could see the hunting rifles he owned. He used to go bird hunting, and once he brought a fawn home for me to raise on a baby bottle. Her mother had been shot. My speckled pet leapt fences into pastures, sure she was a calf. But the calves kept their distance. She was like me. On her own. Frolicsome. Quiet. Ted's bird dogs were kept in cages along the outside of a tractor shed. I was instructed not to pet them; they would forget how to retrieve birds, if I stroked their heads, I was told. This puzzled me. Hunting was something mysterious that men and boys did, and I was asked to keep my distance.

Sometimes I wore dresses, always in public places: schools and churches. Outdoors I wore britches like a boy. But people liked me most when I stayed indoors in dresses. I could ride horses, but someday soon, I would be expected to focus on boys instead. When I asked for toys like trains or building sets, I was told that girls don't play with those. Why did I want them then? Was I really a girl? I didn't want to be a boy though. They weren't as smart as girls in school, for one thing. And they played so rough, it wasn't fun. No, I didn't want to be a boy or a girl. I wanted to be a fairy or an Indian or an angel or a cow.

When I was five, I came to visit from Seattle, and a teenage boy lived in the house at the barn. He was tall and skinny with dirty hands and feet. He had sandy hair that flopped down over his eyes, so he kept shaking back his head to try to see better. This boy had an idea for the two of us to go up in an apartment over the garage where Ted parked the Chevrolets he traded in yearly for a brand new one, I said okay, though I couldn't think of any fun indoor games, and besides the boy had never actually played with me. He was too old for make-believe. Upstairs, a room was scattered with dusty furniture, stored haphazardly. Cobwebs hung in corners, the windowpanes dim with dirt. An old single bed with a lumpy gray and white mattress stood between dressers and bureaus in the center of the room. He told me we were going to have fun now, to lie down, but I said, "No! I'm not tired."

Then he sat beside me and stuck a slimy, cold tongue in my mouth and said, "How do you like this kissing?" I didn't one bit. Then he acted crazy and wanted to put his hands under my clothes and have me touch the lump under his pants. What was that bump anyway? He was breathing funny. And I started feeling suffocated and sick to my stomach. All this time I kept his hands outside my clothes, and he was begging me to play with him just a little. I couldn't believe how silly he was acting, getting more and more insistent all along and rougher. I think I was scared, then suddenly I heard Mama Lydia and Freddy outside the building calling, "Prissy, Prissy," in loud, upset voices. The big boy leapt up and told me not to tell. He was very nervous, and suddenly I was frightened I'd get in trouble. We ran downstairs and off he went.

"What did he do? Did he do anything?" they questioned.

"No, Ma'am. I don't remember anything."

"Well, little girls shouldn't ever be alone with big boys. You just come let us know if he ever comes around here again."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Granddaddy would prop me in the front seat of his newest Chevrolet, usually muddy already from driving across bumpy cow pastures to inspect the hundreds of Guernsey's and heifers that grazed his hilly acres. He drove me down to the "work camp," located a few miles from our house. The work camp was where a colored man named Wine lived with his wife Molasses. Wine sometimes came shuffling up furtively to the kitchen door and asked me, "Is bossman home?" He almost never came inside the back door; he wasn't allowed, unless a rare invitation was extended and then he never sat down but stood there not making eye contact. I felt his sweetness mingled with fear on these occasions, as he spoke deferentially to the bossman. Once he came asking for some food for his wife, "Molasses she real bad sick and she hongry." He seemed desperate and terribly embarrassed, I couldn't understand how they got to be hungry, but, just like with Dora Dean's daddy, I was told that colored people are lazy. I had seen them picking beans in Granddaddy's fields, but they were lazy I was told.

The colored people in the work camp were from Haiti. Granddaddy had gone down there and brought a bunch of them back with him to work his fields. They lived in one-room tarpaper shacks with no windows, all clustered alongside each other. I was five when Granddaddy drove

me there for the first time. The pitch-black shacks frightened me, as I stood on the transparent plastic-covered front seat. "These are my people," Granddaddy would say, "they all work for me." They stood indoors looking out at us in the car with its motor running, children staring at the little blond girl staring at them, I knew I was not allowed to get out of the car, much less play with any of them. And they knew the boundaries, too. We lived in different countries, lives as different from each others as mine was from Granddaddy's.

Just like he'd promised me the dairy cows someday, Ted told me these folks would work for me. He wanted me to be proud, the way he felt. But I wasn't. It meant nothing to me; I had no comprehension of ownership, of power. And I couldn't understand why these odd little shacks had no windows. Then one day there was a fire in the work camp; Molasses died, asleep in her bed, I felt a strange kinship with these dark-skinned people, trapped in a girl's manhandled body, photographed on ponies for Lamont Produce Company's advertising campaign. My female face, and body helped sell the vegetables that their black bodies labored to grow. Granddaddy was a multimillionaire.

Blackberry picking time found me out in brambles near a riding ring, Ted had had built up a dirt road near the house. I'd fill tin pails, pricking my fingers till flecks of blood dotted them. The thorns that the blackberries were buried within stabbed my tender hands, but I wanted plenty of fruit for the jars of jam that Freddy made from it. Nothing was as delectable as Freddy's blackberry jam on hot biscuits soaked with butter. I could eat a dozen at a time and still be skinny as a rail. The mason jars of plump berries lined the cellar walls, promising months of mouth-watering bliss ahead. Often when I came in from a long day's escapade, I'd step down into the dank stairwell to peer through the darkness at the rows of round jars, glistening gifts of purplish light!

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Lily April had put up with Ted's gallivanting for years when she went to the hospital to visit him that day. He was in the hospital for some, not too serious, illness. Mama was six; it was 1938. She'd recovered by now from the venereal disease Granddaddy had given her, and Gammy had thrown out the guilty washcloth that was, to her, responsible for its transmission. Lily April opened the door of Ted's private room, and there he was in bed. A nurse was also in the same bed. Outraged, my grandmother reported the young nurse to the head nurse. Lydia was fired. Her state license was revoked. Never again was she to practice nursing in the state of North Carolina. Gammy filed for divorce from Ted against her own parents' wishes. They liked him; he was charming, and now he was making loads of money. Gammy's mother, America McGuinness, had grown up poor in an Appalachian cabin. She scrawled her name slowly with a pencil she spit on in order to make it write better. And she was dependent on Lily April and Ted to take care of her in her old age. No, she didn't support Gammy's decision.

"I'd had enough of that lowdown rascal," Gammy told me, "I was just plum fed up to the gills! Glory be to Peter, that jackass Ted just thought he could get away with anything." Well, he got away with all the money. Lily April got no alimony and no steady child support. She was dirt poor now and had to somehow earn a living, with only one good eye to boot, to support Peggy Lou and America, too. So, she found a big rundown house to rent, "I whitewashed them walls, after I throwed out the dead rats." She bought some cheap furniture on credit and began to rent out rooms. Out of necessity, her first boarding house got under way. Lydia went to live with Granddaddy, and thirteen years later, not long after I was born, he finally married her. She

always seemed to me like a deferential guest in his house, sleeping discretely in the twin bed next to mine. Eating wee bits of food at each meal. Saving Lipton teabags in a cup in a cabinet to use repeatedly. And when she walked, she tiptoed, speaking meekly in a pinched, high-pitched voice with girlish overtones. Mama Lydia, I figured, was the very model of a Southern lady. Granddaddy seldom spoke to her, except about his business matters. They never argued. She was too polite to disagree, "Okay, Ted, whatever you say." Oh, she was agreeable, pursing her lips, whispering to Freddy in the kitchen.

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Lily April had three sisters. She, Willie, and Johnsie were all variations on the same theme: sweetness. Then, there was Myrtle. Myrtle had a whole chord unto herself. Whenever heavysset Myrtle came to visit us on Orange Terrace, Claude would chuckle and whisper to me, "Here comes lard." He had nicknames for everyone, but if Gammy overheard him saying this she'd get angry. And Lily April was rarely openly angry with anyone.

"Why Claude," she'd say, "that's just awful. I'll be derved if I want my sister to hear you say that. I swear it'd be a sin. She can't help how she looks, bless her heart." So Claude whispered, or waited till Gammy was out of earshot, and I giggled like a secret conspirator. Myrtle sat in an overstuffed chair in the living room most of the day, dipping snuff and wiping the brownish corners of her mouth with a crumpled tissue that she clutched in her fist like a rosary. She believed every word of the Bible was literally true and was convinced that somewhere in it, it stated that heaven was paved in gold, with gold everything everywhere; and she spoke at length and in detail about what was awaiting her in paradise in an angry tone, as if everyone listening were a heathen enemy to be intimidated into agreeing with her views. I thought she was exaggerating, but she did frighten me with her crazed intensity, so I kept quiet. I'd seen her get red in the face, when someone dared to suggest an alternative view. It was better just to keep my distance.

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When Gammy and Violet visited each week on Pinewood Drive where my mother and stepfather lived' until their final divorce, they would stay only a night, or maybe two, because they were worried to leave the house unattended. Houses, in their view, were in constant need of attendance. As with people, you never knew when something might go wrong. Pipes could burst; fires could start; burglars could break in. Often, when I was in town for a visit from California, I decided to ride back over with them to their house for the evening. Here we would sit up late into the night, telling stories and smoking cigarettes. The only time I ever smoked cigarettes was with them and then I smoked packs. The back room, as dense with smoke as pool hall, I'd lounge on the couch across from them in their two personal chairs: Gammy's royal burgundy recliner and Violet's daffodil-yellow cushioned seat. Lily April's storytelling covered the length and breadth of her long life and the lives of all her loved ones. She spoke with exactitude, relating in detail events of fifty years ago as if they'd happened yesterday. She spoke animatedly, giving great significance to her own experiences, impressing us with tall tales more real than the Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman stories that I read aloud for us. They pleaded to hear these turn-of-the-century renditions of the lives of elderly women in New England. And these works,

in turn, would inspire Lily April to relate some remembered tale that Jewett's story had stirred in her.

"My Mama, America McGuinness, was the prettiest woman where she grew up in the mountains of North Carolina. She was so tiny and beautiful they called her the Belle of Swannanoa. She had long coal black hair that just shimmered in the sun and white white skin without a wrinkle. Why, Mama didn't hardly have a wrinkle in her face when she was way up in her eighties. One time when she was just a girl—why I reckon she was about twelve years old—Merky was walkin' from her house way out in the country to somewheres, and she looked up and thar-a-runnin' right straight towards her was a mad dog, just a foam in' at the mouth. This big ole dog wasn't looking to the left or to the right, but it was just a runnin' ahead on in her direction. So Mama she said she just started running as fast as she could until she came to this GREAT BIG pile of tires by the side of the road, and she climbed up them tires jest as that dog was snapping at her heels. And that mad dog couldn't git near her up thar, and she was safe." My great grandmother's bravery in the face of life threatening danger was related to me by my grandmother over and over again for decades. America married a man twenty-seven years her senior who'd already courted and been rejected by her mother. Her granddaughter, Peggy Lou, remembers her fiery temper; her daughter, Lily April, remembers her constantly sweet disposition. She struggled to write her name with a pencil she spit on, but America was an expert seamstress, making all the clothes her family wore. I remember her through a red, white and blue basket quilt that she made that hangs on my wall.

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My stepfather drove the three of us across Macon from his split-level brick house with the water moccasins in the backyard, the deer at twilight, in wealthy Shirley Hills, over to Violet's house five blocks above the Ocmulgee river's muddy red water flowing under Macon's two bridges. He was a big shot in town, elected to represent Bibb County in the Georgia State Assembly for almost two decade's by then, except for the seven years he resided in and represented Jones County. For the entire seven years I lived in the same house with him, he drank heavily. He'd drive me the thirty minutes to Mt. de Sales high school in 1968, sipping straight vodka, listening to the a.m. news. We hardly ever spoke. This evening, he drove the three of us to the house on College Street. We all three chose to sit in the back seat. He shouted out suddenly, for no reason, to my grandmother and Violet, "You two old bitches! You're just a couple of old bitches!" Then he chuckled. My stomach churned. Years later when I learned the meaning of the word "misogyny," I recalled his brutal words and laughter. I would walk into my classrooms at the University of California, Berkeley, the first day of class, and, teaching diction, write, "MISOGYNY," on the blackboard. "What does this word mean? Write a paragraph defining it and giving an example." None of the students ever knew its meaning, initially.

I try to recall lighthearted memories of my stepfather. My stomach churns. He sometimes, in the first years of their marriage, played poker with his stepchildren. This was fun. We learned about five card draw and royal flushes. But mostly he never spoke to us. He lived in a world of courtrooms and statehouses. A home was a place to spend the night before going back to the office to be brought breakfast from the Krystal hamburger stand by a secretary he eventually married in 1984, after his second divorce from my mother. His first wife ended up in a wheelchair, a hypochondriac who claimed she was crippled. His second wife, my

mother, made periodic visits to mental hospitals. His third is addicted to pills. Women and blacks were put on earth to serve him. This was what he stood for. How could I not feel revulsion in his presence? He did not want my freedom; he wanted to rule me. He made me his enemy, set out to muffle my self-belief, so I revolted.

But this is not how he sees it. He has said to me more than once, "One hundred percent of the pussy is one hundred percent of the power." This means, in his way of thinking, that though a man has control over money and laws and property, he is still in need of the sexual pleasure that a woman provides. Women are, all of us, then, prostitutes designed to satisfy men. It is only through our objectified bodies that we wield power, demonstrated only by the degree to which we can seduce a man into

desiring us. I suppose I was supposed to have been flattered when he said to me, age fifteen, one afternoon in his bedroom, "Come over here, and give your Daddy a kiss. You're much prettier than your mama." I despised him for trying to pit me against my mother. I lost all final shreds of respect for him and his smooth talking politics. He made himself into my enemy. And later when the Equal Rights Amendment failed to pass in the Georgia State legislature, my stepfather was a key figure in blocking it. "Women need protection," he insisted, feigning compassion for all the helpless little ladies of the world. "Protection" is a right wing euphemism for enclosure, veils, purdah. He is the descendent of nineteenth century slavemasters. Tragically, Peggy Lou married a man like her father.

They fought. He broke her arm. He gave her black eyes. I would wake at night to the sound of shouting. Caustic words hurled. Glass shattering. Doors slamming.

"People who don't fight, don't love each other," Mama would explain. At least once a month, my stepfather would throw his suits into a suitcase and storm out the back door yelling, "You won't be seeing me again. I'm leaving for good this time."

"Good riddance, bastard!" Mama would retort.

"So long bitch!" He'd drive to his office and sleep on a couch. The following evening he'd be back, silent, gearing up for the next round.

Mama threw things: champagne glasses, ashtrays, books, whatever was close at hand. Flying objects satisfied some longing in her to be free of all this. The bigger the holiday, the bigger the uproar. Christmas was a dangerous time. She threw a wine glass the full length of a Thanksgiving day table, striking him on an arm upraised to guard his face, cutting an artery. Blood spurted across the white tablecloth. I rushed for a towel. Too soused to realize his condition, my stepfather protested, "I'm not going to the goddamn hospital. This ain't nothing but a scratch." But someone finally dragged him there for stitches.

When Megan was thirteen, she gave her first teenage party. By the time her friends were knocking on the front door, her parents were well into a major disagreement. Her stepfather left, yet again, never to return. Her mother, irate, dragged all the clothes he'd left behind out to the garbage cans in the back yard. As darkness fell, a young girl ran into the living room and shouted, "Megan, Megan, your mama's burning all your Daddy's clothes!" The party rushed to the kitchen window to watch the

wild-eyed lady presiding over the scene of destruction, flames shooting hot sparks skyward.

Like holidays and special occasions, trips, especially to foreign countries, were favorite times for them to decide on a divorce. My seventeenth summer, we all jetted down to San Juan, Puerto Rico. We had reservations for the San Christobal Hotel. Before we caught a taxi to head for the hotel from the airport, the two adults were edging towards an explosion. I knew that our hotel was supposedly at the beach, so I expressed some surprise when we headed for the old

section of downtown San Juan. "Shut up, Priscilla," my stepfather growled, "the goddamn taxi driver knows where he is going." As we drove further and further into a shabby section of the city, my siblings and I—who'd all been told for months now about the wonders of where we'd be staying—covertly raised our eyebrows at each other. I looked out the window to see a yellowing building ahead, crumbling plaster walls exposing bombed-out looking pocks of white, five story high windows thrown open to the July heat, tattered curtains framing an occasional woman who leaned out suggestively. I averted my eyes from these slovenly looking women, announcing despair in their very postures, to catch sight of a large sign, several letters missing, that read, "SAN CRISTOBAL." Where was the swimming pool we'd heard so much about?

"Mama, this doesn't look like the place you told us about," Ian piped up.

"I don't like this hotel," Megan added.

Caitlin quietly commented, "Me either, Mama."

"You children are just spoiled, so stop complaining." She was quickly losing patience with us. She was hot; she'd had several drinks. All she and my stepfather wanted to do was lie down somewhere—anywhere—and have a rest. This place looked just fine. So out of the cab we piled with all our luggage and into the hotel we piled with all our luggage. But the drowsy looking man at the front desk had no reservations for us. Mama was sure she'd received a confirmation from THIS HOTEL! However, it was "no problem," he assured us, there were plenty of rooms available.

"No joke!" I muttered, "Who in their right mind would stay here?" We took a suite on the top floor, so up we went to the penthouse on a rickety elevator. One of the rooms had no sheets on its stained mattresses. Another had dirty sheets and an empty cigarette package. The bathroom contained a filthy tub, a dysfunctional toilet and a dead rat. There was no swimming pool. Never had been. And never would be in the foreseeable future.

Certain now that our parents would renege and whisk us away from this shady establishment, we chanted in unison, "Let's go." But, lo and behold, my stepfather had already plopped down on one of the beds with crumpled sheets to take a sudden nap. The four of us looked at each other and decided to go for walks, all night if necessary, rather than stay in this weird place. Luckily, by the time we tromped back in the early evening, the two with the money had sobered up enough to agree to seek out more comfortable surroundings.

As it turned out, the next taxi driver drove us to another hotel by the same name. This one, modern. With a pool. At the beach. The drinking and fighting escalated, but we children could now go to the pool or the beach to avoid the commotion. However, my sisters, twelve and thirteen, and I, seventeen, were soon to spend most of our time fending off the incessant advances of dozens of Puerto Rican males of all ages. They hooted and whistled so obdurately, as we passed construction sites of upscale hotels on our way to and from the ocean, that Megan and I finally resorted to holding hands in the hopes that they would mistake us as "perverted" lesbians. But nothing could dissuade these guys; they leered and pawed their way through each day, grotesque in their rampant sexual overtures. I felt assaulted, endangered. But the whole world seemed to support their confrontative behavior as being normal, charming even in some instances. Sadly, the three of us were finally intimidated into staying at our own hotel by an elderly man who leeringly exposed his penis to us on the beach. Now we only had to battle the guys who hung out around our pool. This was an exhausting job, and, unfortunately, I finally succumbed to the onslaught of one particularly persistent teenager. Weary of pushing him away, I lay there for eternal minutes enduring his crazed bucking, while huge drops of sweat dripped

onto my numb body. Only this rape secured me some days of solitude, for, of course, he and his friends avoided me after that. I had been conquered, so they moved on to new territory.

Two summers earlier, in Portugal, a married Austrian in his forties had raped me. He also had persisted with me, refusing to take "no" for an answer. These men acted as if my body were more theirs than mine; they expected unlimited access to females, especially if we were "innocent." Virgins were prized. I was amazed at how impersonal they were about sex. It meant nothing to them whatsoever. I was seen as useful only insofar as they had a satisfying orgasm. Of course, I told no one about the rape. Rapes weren't talked about; this was 1969. I hadn't even heard the word "feminism" yet. For all I knew, I was the only girl anywhere, experiencing these things, and so I was excruciatingly ashamed. These incidents were to be as quickly forgotten as possible. Only I couldn't completely. I decided to take the situation in my own hands in the only way I knew how. Feeling utterly disempowered, I reversed the decreed roles and became sexually aggressive. In this way, I managed to frighten off a number of boys. The ones who succumbed to my advances, I viewed as proof of my power. At least *they* couldn't get me now. I'd move on ahead to other places, other men. Of course, at that time I didn't grasp the significance of my behavior. I lacked the conceptual tools to understand that I was seeking to free myself from oppressive mindsets. Until I experienced my own power, I would never be able to love. Love flows from strength. Love is freedom.

**Chapter Seven**  
**The Sentient Words of a “half-born” Woman:**  
**Adrienne Rich’s Electric Lyrics**  
 Part I. The Strange Smell of Life, Not Death

Adrienne Rich’s poetic expedition carries her career forward, through chiseled renderings of *isolation*’s bite reiterated in lines that ride out existential loneliness, towards her mid-career’s arrival at *solitude*’s embrace—the latter not unlike the embodied self-reliance that Elizabeth Cady Stanton called for in her 1890s essay “Solitude of Self”; Rich’s hard-wrought transformation of *isolation* into *solitude*, ironically necessary for building radical community, transports her artistry beyond repeated depictions of a sustained moment of consciousness—that crucial turning point characterizing her lyrics from *Leaflets* to *Diving into the Wreck*—to her crowning erotic mystical expressiveness in *The Dream of a Common Language*. Echoing Nora’s nineteenth century iconic metaphor, “I am taking off my costume,” near the end of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*—which the heroine proclaims, as she strips off roles, both of wife and mother (65), Rich declares, a century later, “For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself” (12). Her works’ vital and constant marker of changes-to-come emerges as “electric”<sup>xxxix</sup> jolts punctuating the scoured forms of much of Rich’s sixties and seventies poetry. This mystical energy emanates from felt experience and expresses, in chthonic, sentient words, a politics of both local and global feminist transformation; indeed, these poems stir woman after woman, until eventually attaining a far-reaching, international scope.

Twenty years after the publication of *Diving into the Wreck*—a defining moment for her works’ recognition<sup>xxxii</sup>—in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich aptly maintains, for example, “We write from the marrow of our bones” (55). “We,” rather than “I,” so apropos of Rich, ever the community builder, the coalition maker, resembling at times social activist Muriel Rukeyser, whom Rich came to admire in recent decades. Rich’s characteristic body-mind unifying line, also alludes to Elinor Wylie’s opening from a sonnet sequence, “Wild Peaches,” “Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones” (*Selected* 10). How then ignite the ordinary with fire? *Felt* experience sparks body-language, energizing select lines, in Rich’s poetry: lines chosen with great care for the “many-lived unending forms” (“Transcendental”) of life transmitted through them. A pioneering erotic mystical, political poet, she delivers a fire of a different order in ways that include *and* reach beyond rational thought. If her lyrics occasionally reverberate with strains of romanticism, this, however, should not qualify them to be relegated by Marjorie Perloff<sup>xxxiii</sup> to the bin of thematically-and-stylistically-dated work—accused of being mired in dangerous nineteenth century idealism—regardless of how close Rich’s ideas touch upon Blake’s or Shelley’s. For if literary critics such as Lena Petrovic are to be taken seriously, Rich, in fact, is as much a post-modernist as a romantic. Petrovic claims that Rich’s work successfully reconciles the tensions between Anglo-American feminist and French feminist literary critics, regarding the very definition of “feminism” itself. The Yugoslav literary critic writes, in “Gender and Difference in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich,” that Kristeva’s feminism is tied to her view that “for language to happen,” pre-Oedipal repression is not total. Continuing to elaborate on Kristeva, she writes, “In modern literature, the speech of the body appears as a pulsational pressure inside the language itself: in its tone, rhythm, and also in contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, absence and silence” (4). Likewise, my prior chapter’s discussion of “the void” as the stomping ground of feminist poets echoes Kristeva’s ideas of “absence and silence.” In literary creation,

today, women's voices fill that void: for them, it beckons as a fecund place of potential, rather than a pit of existential meaninglessness.

By threatening to disintegrate "sacred social meanings," such as "God, father, state, reason, property, order," explains Petrovic, modern literature can produce "such a shock in the consciousness of a reader" as to force questioning of "the absoluteness" of conventional abstract signs. Hence, I offer, for example, Rich's seventies line "From an Old House in America," "Any woman's (emphasis mine) death diminishes me," as one delivering a shock to the consciousness, tantamount to extinguishing the father's false paradigm, "Nobody's [a woman's] death diminishes me." (*The Fact* 222). In a related vein, Rich's life-affirming realism paradoxically roots itself in mystical energy in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics 2001*. For instance, she writes, "The revolutionary artist . . . draws on powers [of the natural world], in opposition to technocratic society's hatred of multiformity, hatred of the natural world, hatred of the body . . . The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art" (92). *Trees inseparably from art* could offer a mantra to erotic mystical feminist poets. Certainly, the phrase relays embodied, yet liminal, creative possibilities, hearkening back to H.D.'s *Sea Garden*. Hiking the searing lyric terrain of Rich's early books, readers may welcome the oasis of rare possibilities, appearing as it does, from time to time, in the poet's otherwise unvarnished, sometimes severe idiolect: writing which soon circles back to such deeply ethical reminders as the closing line of "From an Old House in America": "Any woman's death diminishes me" (*The Fact* 222). To feel such sudden connected-ness with one's own gender. To feel this in the moment of reading the line, assuming one has heretofore never felt *that* bond in full: to know this, on a conscious level—as primary energy's potential birth, stored within the filaments, therefore, sourced in the body—catalyzed by Rich's words entering ear canal, resonating on tympanic membrane, energizing temporal lobe and cerebrum until awareness inhabits oneself, expanding to embrace a personal dignity of human selfhood. Thus, from a single line situated at a key juncture, the fibers *knowing* receive and generate honorableness to the core.

Reflecting again on Rich's revolutionary poet, note that upon speaking of loving the natural and the body, Rich adds that the revolutionary poet is "not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved" (92). "Leaflets," in fact, conjures the inseparability of public and intimate. The integrity central, then, to "Leaflets" appears in the poet's daring to speak in an ordinary, untranslatable language. This poem is no metaphor: "life without caution / the only worth living" (52). Increasingly suspicious of figurative language's misleading ambiguities, Rich's lines show "courage to enter the fire," to expose herself to criticism that what she writes is not poetry but political jargon, because as she puts it, if "I do not go into the fire / I will not be able to live with my soul" (54). For Rich, poetry without caution is the only worth writing. As her "head clears of sweet smoke / and poison gas" (52), her poetry also clears of obscure allusions, metrics, and images. The language, nevertheless, which she chooses to use is not flat rhetoric; it blazes with urgency and compassion. If it is blunt in its exposure of the harsh realities in which we live, its very truthfulness offers optimism that if human beings tell each other what they are "going through," they might be compelled to put an end to the atrocities committed by "the mad who live in the dried-up mote / of the War Museum" (55). The exigency of her tone is "not manic"; it arises out of "love for a man / love for a woman / love for the facts" (52). Difficult poetry, in that it is enormously psychologically demanding, it asks of readers "that self-defense be not / the arm's first motion" (52). Humans are all "gray strayers still straying dusty paths" of a twentieth-century

wasteland, until we begin to demand of ourselves, “what are we coming to / what wants these things of us / who wants them” (55). Clearing away the detritus makes room for life-embracing moments of being-ness, articulated, several years later, in *The Dream of a Common Language*’s erotic mystical “whole new poetry” (“Transcendental Etude” 76).

But in this earlier, less awakened state, she yet again confronts the one whose “face / stretched like a mask / begins to tear” (53). Her greatest desire has been to save him from the consequences of the old patriarchal myths in which manhood translates into “[c]rusader . . . galloping at the fortress / . . . bloodcaked, lion-hearted” (54). Wanting to “restore him to life,” by exploding lies that perpetuate terrorism,<sup>xxxiv</sup> she insists he listen to her words and recognize the global value of subjectivity, imagination, and candid discourse between men and women. She wants him to take her language as seriously as he takes the public speech of “Che Guevara / Bolivia, Nanterre,” for it is this that has “torn” his “smile into pieces . . . over and over” to no avail. She wants the two of them to leap past the “impasse” dividing them, to connect with each other as men and women have never dared to connect before, so that together they might discover their authentic selves and in doing so begin to save “this world” (53). Looking at his “broken” smile, she has much cause to wonder “how a beauty / so anarchical, so ungilded / will be cared for in this world” (55). Traditionally, of course, women have taken care of men arriving from battle. Her caring, herein, however, is an even greater caring, through urging him to heed her terms. At last, in *The Dream of a Common Language*, the poet reaches a place of hitherto unspoken knowledge, accessed in moments of calm; in their clarity and simplicity, the lines might be spoken by any mother. In “Hunger,” 1974, to illustrate, Rich, addressing Lorde, confides that everything they longed for they possess, if only they dare to use it, to “hose” their love “on a city, on a world / to wield and guide its spray, destroying / poisons, parasites, rats, viruses—” (*The Dream* 13). This untapped power, both mystical and practical, provides an impassioned cleansing and resurrecting of a defiled planet.

However, in 1968, Rich persists in imagining that what does and does not happen between a man and a woman forms the creatrix of world events. “Sleeping back-to-back, man and woman, we were more conscious / than either of us is awake and alone in the world,” she writes in “Ghazals” (*Leaflets* 62). Even when they are not connecting in obvious ways, she believes, the couple shares a silence that has universal implications more valuable than anything they might accomplish apart from each other. At the same time that she continues to have faith in whatever interaction remains between them, she begins to concentrate even more pointedly on the silences, “[W]hen you read these lines, think of me / and of what I have not written here” (61). What she has “not written here” is what happens among women while “[p]risoners” are “explaining the unforgivable to a wife, a mother, a lover”(75). She hopes to “drive a tradition up against the wall” (63) by reaching a level of meaningful dialogue never before achieved; even though every “existence speaks a language of its own,” (75), they “regard each other” like two “hesitant Luna moths” (75). They are “fascinated with each other”; two people “outside the law” between “the white whale’s loneliness / and the grouper’s mass promiscuities, only ourselves” (68). Still, they are not alone in their struggle against oppressive forces, if only they recognize each other’s transformational potency: “when your sperm enters me, it is altered / when my thought absorbs yours, a world begins” (68). The body altering the body, with the mind absorbing the mind: a dance transpires between mind and body, language and senses.

Rich grows increasingly aware of her body as a source of knowledge. She explains, five years after “Ghazals,” in “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” how bodily experience instigates change, personally and politically:

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction. Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process . . . for many women I knew, the need to begin with the female body—our own—was understood not as applying a Marxist principle *to* women, but as locating the grounds from which to speak with authority *as* women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman. Begin, we said, with the material, with matter, ma, madre, mutter, moeder, modder, etc., etc. (213)

Her mission is to “reconnect” thinking with the tangible, living particular. Not to transcend! Speaking “with authority as women” needs roots in the conscious experience of living on earth in a female body. Hence, even as early as 1963, she writes, in “The Corpse Plant,” of the essential entanglement of senses and intellect, “I felt my body slipping through / the fingers of its mind” (*Necessities* 13). Attuned to physical sensations, to “the material,” she begins to trust her very flesh itself, its subtly mystical messages, as a primary source of truthful language:

I tell you, truth is, at the moment, here  
 burning outward through our skins  
 Eternity streams through my body.  
 touch it with your hand and see  
 (*Leaflets* 65)

In the “electronic jungle” of mid-twentieth-century America—an era in which “a vision of asphalt” blinds the poet to the “sapling springs, the milkweed blooms” of “obsolete Nature”—that which is “tender and sensual” breaks open miraculously “under the mocking eyes of the way things are” (*Leaflets* 69). Even touch becomes obsolete, though she questions, “when we fuck, there too are we remoter / than the fucking bodies of lovers used to be?” (69). When the mind disconnects from the body—when compartmentalization becomes the design of lives—actions and creations become grotesque metaphors for this disjointedness: “Whoever thought of inserting a ship in a bottle / Long weeks without women do this to a man” (73). A student of Thoreau’s, and especially of Whitman’s, Rich, in this poem, doubts the efficacy of an androcentric system that can perform technological miracles far surpassing, yet resembling, this useless ship inside a bottle, yet still offer nothing concrete to deliver the unification and healing of “this savagely fathered and un-mothered world” (“From an Old House” *Poems* 235).

A correlation exists, as has been indicated, between Rich’s poetic transformations and her affirmation of biological rhythms. She testifies to sudden moments of painful revelation transpiring in the process of reentry into awareness: the censoring intellect at war with searing consciousness cut off in the body whose voices had been made “stupefied” and “leaden” (“Winter” 71). As if recalling Blake’s injunction to continue “cleansing the Doors of perception,” the poet declares, “A pair of eyes imprisoned for years inside my skull / is burning its way outward, the headaches are terrible” (*Leaflets* 71). Seeing things with “staggering distinctness, her camera-eye focuses on the particular with an intent to “leap into the unknown” (77). Such detailed scrutiny streams out of profound empathy with her lover: “I’m speaking to you as a woman to a man / when your blood flows / I want to hold you in my arms” (77). Speech and touch intermingle here as a social avenue away from life-draining violence. Blood flows on

battlefields, but also, in a radically different sense, throughout healthy veins, while cradled in a companion's arms. Choose a path, this verse suggests.

Even in an America in which "[o]ur senses were out on parole, under surveillance," the poet imagines "the world reformed" by a numinous "physical desire" (71): a last remnant of evidence that beneath the "rubble of broken" relationships, hidden within each intricate organism, endures a "magic" spring from which "one necessary word" might make possible a transformative connection (71). Such language would bridge "the existing and non-existing," would erase the "fissures," arising from a profound capacity for participating in another's feelings and ideas (76). "If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student / his mind is simply practicing rape, and deserves at best our pity" ("Ghazals" 68), the poet warns an increasingly Orwellian world. Empathy itself, as the source of "some weaving figured as magic against oppression," would end the "wars on earth, and in the skull"; the new order would spiral out of newly tapped, but deeply ancient, knowledge: "the order of the dark and starlit soul" (77). "Our words" would then form the "dream-work" of a "greener" paradigm, when, on rare occasion, even "at the edge of the death-camps," they suddenly "rise and wheel croaking above the tree tops" (68).

Nothing should impede the individual from searching for "those joining" them, selecting them, as in the Dickinson poem's "Soul selects her own society"; in life's skirmish, "groping" her "way among artificial limbs," hollow people, "stumbling / here on the spine of a friend, there on the hand of a brother," Rich is "always returning" to those select dreamers "who breathed thin air and kept walking" (71). For to "resign *yourself*" to "being alone" in the quest for "a still place in the woods" remains ultimately an unethical "act of betrayal," she believes (77). It is tragic to turn away from each other, for the truth is that in the last scene we "all are blown away like dust" (63). To desert each other, losing faith in connection, is the guarantee that each of us will continue to say, "in our loneliness, 'I hardly know the names of the weeds I love / I have forgotten the names of so many flowers'" (69). Wordsworth's "meanest flower that blows" is scarcely remembered as the source of thoughts "too deep for tears" ("Ode: Intimations of Immortality"). Each person's inmost ideas and feelings "must tangle with all the others," if we are ultimately to say that "the wall has tumbled down" (71). Paradoxically, individuals connect only if they risk exposing their most "private" inner truths to each other.

Rich's conviction, in that era, is that all beings share kinship on the most primal level. To speak from the gut, to articulate what is buried in the silence of the unconscious, takes courage. Such words often threaten the "order of the small town on the riverbank" (74). Nevertheless, she declares in "Ghazals," "Every mistake that can be made, we are prepared to make / anything less would fall short of the reality we're dreaming" (72). History books, she insinuates, must stop idolizing "Custer, the Squaw-killer, hero of primitive schoolrooms," for in "the theatre of the dust no actor becomes famous" (74). Mortality itself razes the rankings. In Keats's address to the bird, he laments "no hungry generations mow thee down" ("Ode to a Nightingale"), yet a working class outlier such as himself can see his way through the elfin deceptiveness of a merely envisioned nightingale's static bliss to his final, unpretentious preference: a sensual connection with another imperfect human being, simply to listen softly to the immanent "fall and rise" of her "tender-taken breath" ("Bright Star"). Humans must recognize core similarities, among us all, in order to live in a world providing for the uniqueness of each existence. Rich's similarly practical-minded speaker insists this is not a romantic fantasy based on naïve belief in the innate goodness of all. She declares, "I long ago stopped dreaming of pure justice, your honor / my crime was to

believe we could make cruelty obsolete” (74). Rich’s vision, however, does entail acts of faith, even as it demands grappling directly with mundane specifics.

The lyricist confesses to having retained a tendency to idealize, to dream of unrealized possibilities. It is, however, this very inclination to imagine, which, paradoxically, has enabled her to strive for more than mere survival. Thus, she writes, “How did we get caught up in fighting this forest fire / we, who were only looking for a still place in the woods?” (77). The merging of romanticism with pragmatism, childlike faith with soberness, is one of Rich’s distinctive poetic offerings. Her pen delineates particularities with such precision that readers, moved to examine their own lives with the same painstaking care, discover beauty in the midst of everyday occurrences, even slight semantic alterations. “I now no longer think / ‘truth’ is the most beautiful of words” (34), she writes, for instance, in “Double Monologue,” 1960:

Today, when I see ‘truthful’  
written somewhere, it flares  
like a white orchid in wet woods  
rare and grief-delighting  
up from the page” (*Snapshots* 34).

The tropical moistness of “truthful,” merely a word, evokes a “grief-delighting” moment like an orgasmic union of poetry and life itself. In 1963, similarly detailed observations, in *Necessities of Life*, characterize “Like This Together”; she informs—in an early erotic mystical poetic celebration of attentive cerebrum wedded to carnal flowerings—that

only our fierce attention  
gets hyacinths out of those  
hard cerebral lumps  
unwraps the wet buds down  
the whole length of the stem  
(17)

From Wordsworth and Whitman to Williams to Rich, the poets who celebrate the commonplace have had to concentrate with increasingly scientific precision on the exact moment of perception. However, Rich breaks from tradition, in the 1970s, to explode the basic tenets of the conventional romantic dream itself. She discovers something is awry in a canonized poetics that ignores the experience of half of the human race on the grounds that the incidents of women’s lives are not of universal import. Still, those forefathers who praise the ordinary and focus on the commonplace are the very predecessors who guide her to the edge of a tradition beyond which she must leap into the unknown, if she is to create a style unique to her own vision. As long as she is fixated on her male companion, held in thrall by the demon-lover, she is unable to completely trust her own powers to name the world. Throughout *The Will to Change* and even into *Diving into the Wreck*, she circles back, in poems or lines, to an impasse in her imagination. This is not to say that this crucial stage in her process of self-becoming, as recorded in these books, did not produce vital poetry. She needed, as she states in “Ghazals,” “to live each day through, have them and know them all” (*Leaflets* 76), before turning towards women with a drive to connect as urgent as the one she had directed towards men. Judy Grahn’s

poem, “A Woman is Talking to Death,” was the poetic catalyst she had waited for all her life (*The Work of a Common Woman* 111).

The closing lines of *Leaflets* illustrate Rich’s persistence in clinging to a vision of shared tenderness with a man; the last stronghold of an old myth is in the physical bond between them. Awake herself, in “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib,” the speaker lingers, observing his unconsciousness, with an eye detailing, in a curious blend of maternal and clinical precision, “The hairs on your breast curl so lightly as you lie there / while the strong heart goes on pounding in its sleep” (77). In *Poems: Selected and New, 1950-1947*, a section of previously unpublished poems—titled for her new collection, “Uncollected Poems,” 1957-1969—is inserted between poetic selections from *Leaflets* (1969) and selections from *The Will to Change* (1971). The poems in this section provide future insight into Rich’s development. One discovers that as early as 1957, she uses the speaker’s erotic enthrallment with a man as a metaphor for woman’s oppression. In “Moving in Winter,” she links “old silences,” for example, to “the bed / where she has lain desiring him,” but in this same bed “overhead his sleep will build / its canopy to smother her once more” (emphasis mine 191).

Similarly, in “The Parting: II,” 1963, she writes of the “everyday familiar failure”—the communication break-down rooted in medieval courtly love myth—fettering her imagination to the same old groove: “How they slept last night / the dream that caged them back to back / was nothing new” (195). As long as they are bound together on an unconscious level of archetypal dream-structure, they remain shackled to an ironically futile lie that there is “the chance of beginning again.” Still, “[f]rom always fewer chances / the future plots itself,” Rich realizes, in “The Days: Spring,” 1969, (*Collected Early* 417). Stubbornly, she fantasizes that “hidden in all that tangle / there is a way,” if only they can move beyond “the failure of the classics” (417), the culturally-embedded psychic traps they have inherited. Wanting him to overcome “the paralysis of his floodlit lips” (*Collected* 21), so that “in pauses of lovemaking / that immense, scarred domain” of “The Days: Spring,” they will speak out their deepest truths, rather than silently “look at the ceiling,” the poet rewrites versions of the same poem, throughout the sixties, until, by the seventies, she has worn it to a fine filament in the skeletal forms of *Diving Into the Wreck*.

To bring her style to the photographic clarity of her seventh volume, in 1973, Rich holds tenaciously, in “Postcard,” to insisting upon the plausibility of “a dream of language / unlive”; she “persist(s) in thinking / every fantasy,” she has, “comes true” (*Collected* 22). This tenaciousness grinds her psyche and her lines down to the bone. As long as the men whom the speaker addresses continue “to be cast in bronze,” through their inability to hear “the woman in #9,” who “is locked in the bathroom,” then, no amount of political activism “in the street” will save “Amerika” (23). It has come to this. The woman who “screams for five hours / pounds the walls, hears voices / retreating in the hall” does so, in the poet’s view, because the archetypal man in that decade treats raging women, as if their experiences are “illusions,” not “facts” (24). While his imagination often still envisions, Rich writes in *Leaflets*, a “tree of blondness”: (“The Demon Lover” 65)<sup>xxxv</sup>, the real woman, “if she lives: will necessarily” live “sea-zones away, and the meaning grows colder” (“Winter” 56). All the while, in her enforced alienation from him, this unimagined woman may find herself beginning to consciously choose “migration,” rather than the martyred entrapment of “a woman’s body nailed with stars” (56). Such sensitivity, reminiscent of Dickinson, yet, even so, this crucified female may choose to resist the temptation of screaming in the bathroom; she may discover herself plotting a future in which her whole being awakens “from having been stupefied in a den” to realize that she has “chosen to be a woman. Not a beast or a tuber!” (56). She may even venture to “walk Third Avenue / bare-armed

with flowing hair” away from a static relationship in which she has felt too often “Dead, dead, dead, dead” (56).

In 1969, in *The Fact of a Doorframe*, “Tear Gas” (198) achieves the same lucidity as the poems in *Leaflets*, 1968, though I see it as a poem she had been building towards, a summation: in some respects, her most personal poem to date, and, at the same time, her most political. The erotic and the mystical may seem remote in such a poem. In its search for language to register complex emotion, however, an inexplicable capacity for empathy is shown, expanding beyond conventional norms; the speaker empathizes not only with the turncoat but also with the woman threatening her relationship. Analogously, she sees that demonstrating outside a stockade is an ineffectual form of protest unless accompanied by an overt display of sincere compassion, arising from total identification with the imprisoned. The woman threatening her relationship is imprisoned by patriarchal mores dictating that women must relate to each other as competitors, even commit acts of psychic violence upon each other: all to become the “prisoner” of the man they both want. The speaker refuses to regard the other woman as her enemy; she refuses to adhere to traditional adages, which split women from each other. Furthermore, the “G.I. prisoners in the stockade at Fort Dix” (198) become a metaphor for epidemic numbers of those incarcerated by institutionalized fear of subjectivity, of mere “tears.” The verbal play on “Tear Gas,” the idea that individuals would need a chemical to make them cry, makes explicit all that humans have lost in a world that punishes people for protesting violence. Violence has become the norm; empathy is obsolete. To dare to speak out on behalf of excruciating suffering, she declares fervid commitment not to hold “back from false pride, false indifference false / courage” (198). What she chooses to maintain, despite fear—for she intermittently repeats, “I am afraid”—is her own defiant, prophetic voice.

The poem, “Tear Gas,” takes striking semantic and syntactic risks. “This is how it feels to do something you are afraid of” (198). Without compromising her craft, meticulously selecting each word, she uses a language and a form stripped bare of tortuous poetics. The perspicuous style establishes her clear-headedness message as intelligible and straightaway understood. Noteworthy, too, are the decisive lack of linguistic ambiguity; the rhythm, simple and elegant. Here is the voice of one made sane by emotional conviction. Yet the poem, written in 1969, was not published until 1975; “I am afraid,” confides its speaker, anxious that the poem might “speak badly” of “the language in” her “head” (200). Ultimately the poem questions the power of language to change a world or a life. Knowing that patriarchal language, including poetic language, manifests the mind/body split and functions to separate intellect from emotion, Rich is urgently “wanting a word that will shed itself like a tear / onto the page / leaving its stain” (199). The poetic conventions that dictated her early style have burst “under pressure.” With a desire for “change” inseparable from desire for connection, she sees the source of transformation in the merging of physical and intellectual activity: the point at which words arise directly out of physical action and action arises out of words through the discarding of image and metaphor “for the open air / of another kind of action” or language (200). Such words begin “accruing and expanding with every / act of resistance and each of my failures” (199). This new vocabulary arises from the pregnant silence of “open air.”

Silence which expresses a truth. Silence which is a lie. In trying to communicate with a man, Rich’s speaker braves the archetypal wall of silence: a place of existential longing as mystical as Rumi’s yearning for his beloved, though lacking its crucial element of ecstasy. Rumi’s ecstasy-in-yearning *necessitates* absence from the lover, but prevails because of prior glimpses of union—a union Rich is only left to imagine, thereby, also leaving for her the grim

possibility of both poetic stagnation and real-life emotional indigence. This New Englander's mettle tested in fire survives against the odds, in contrast with her two sister-poets—the only ones matching her public stature, during the sixties: Plath and Sexton.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Rich's longing itself, as is the case with all mystics, contains the energy of transformational possibilities, both as a spiritual being and a poet. Without it, no drive to abolish established forms would burst forth, at reliable intervals, in her life and work. With it, her poetry across the decades impacted and mirrored the times in which she lived.

For thousands of women, the longing for words that thousands of men never spoke left them feeling lonely and unrecognized; for Rich, a self-created bard for those women and others, yearning for connection evolves into crafting life as art, and art as life. Hence, in "Our Whole Life," 1969 (37), she envisions herself in a prototypical personal-political struggle, mourning in "Your Letter" that "almost, you spoke to me . . . but you're not a whole film" (*The Will* 39). It is she herself who takes center stage, at last, both as director and as lead actor, in art she generates, using life experiences and social realities: crafting moving snapshots, magic words. Ultimately, in "November 1968," she carries herself to the far edge of language and consciousness, fashioning liberating lines—this time directed to her own expansion—more fully alive within both poem and gender role's "collapse" of the "last absolutes" (*The Will* 11). As she and lines "begin to float free," she acknowledges awe over how she "broke open"; she "know[s] nothing about it"—the embodied, yet spiritual, self—but her palpable exuberance can no longer be contained, in "November 1968." Rich exclaims to this new self:

my ignorance of you amazes me  
now that I watch you  
starting to give yourself away  
to the wind (11)

The depiction of becoming one with natural forces, an erotic mystical moment, conveys pure energy, "unsheathed," awakening to speak to herself.

In the imagination's cauldron, life and art and politics have merged for Rich: the Whitmanesque poet, the lyric crafter, and the Shelleyan legislator of the world are one and the same. Throughout *The Will to Change*, she continues to write, for example, of the long-established gulf separating women and men. "What happens between us / has happened for centuries / we know it from literature" ("The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" 17). Yet her tone is more detached. As if playing the role of news anchor, sending out bulletins to the universe across the airways, the speaker-bard introduces herself in "I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus," as an emerging, seemingly unprecedented, unidentified, and, presumably localized, American-feminist agent of this particular historic moment: "a woman in the prime of her life, with certain powers / and these powers severely limited" (*The Will* 19). The limitations placed upon strong female voices, she intimates, persist; enforced by archetypal male figures portrayed in her lyrics as lacking the will to change—the narrow circumstances of women's lives silently march on. Even the man with whom she has spent "[f]ifteen years of sleepwalking" is disclosed, in "Blue Ghazals" (20), as not fully present for her. They are "together, touching, yet not side by side" (23). Repeatedly, still another poem's representative speaker struggles to reveal her inmost self, while also summoning the never-to-be arrival of his authentic identity from beneath his silent mask.

It is absurdly as if a filmmaker were in “an empty room stacked with old films” and “kneeling on the floor,” searching among the reels, laments, “I still haven’t found you” (*The Will* 27). The poem’s title, “Pierrot Le Fou,” alludes to Jean-Luc Godard’s film, 1965, by the same name, depicting a young woman looking for a mentally disturbed older man. One could also argue that distinctive elements of the poetics mimic postmodernist features of the film, in which a relationship disintegrates under the disjointed eye of the invasive camera. Rich’s verse, like Godard’s film, employs pop art devices and fragmented contemporary cultural references. A “woman sworn to lucidity,” Rich writes, in “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus,” must now come to realize—mirroring numerous women at that historic moment—that the choosing of a particular individual to love with tenderness and “sexual heat” is itself a political act (*The Will* 19). Hence, having arrived at this insight, the writer inevitably exclaims, in “The Blue Ghazals”: “*The moment when a feeling enters the body / is political. This touch is political*” (*The Will* 24).

Seeing the implications of sharing her bed with an oppressor—though together, they have been “[v]iolently asleep in the old house” (20)—she awakens, in “The Blue Ghazals,” to a clear-headedness, denouncing his passivity about her concerns. Now, resisting his demands, she declares, “Early and late I come and set myself against you / your phallic fist knocking blindly at my door” (20). If he is blind to the catastrophic political consequences for the planet of such insensitivity to her personal hunger and the waste of her unused powers, the archetypal second wave reader grasps that no longer can she afford to obey his laws, in this cataclysmic “[c]ity of accidents” (24). Nevertheless, giving him up still feels like a betrayal, she continues in “Letters: March 1969,” so that even though it has been *she* who has soothed him, *she* who “sucked the wound in” his “hand to sleep” countless times, she ironically begs him, “Tell me how to bear myself / how it’s done . . .” (32). In “Images for Godard,” still imagining herself lacking in the self-sufficiency to provide herself with the emotional sustenance she has so readily offered him, she drives “to the limits / of the city of words” (*The Will* 47). Poem after poem, the speaker comes to that wildest brink from which she views habitual futility and reiterates, “Always the same, wherever waking / the old position assumed by the mind” (“Pieces,” *The Will* 35). If they cannot communicate on an intellectual or emotional plane, love-making only accentuates awareness of alienation. Likening the ballet of lovers’ bodies to the robotics of modern devices, Rich exposes the vacancy that objectification imposes on human life, in “Pieces”:

Plugged-in to her body  
 he came the whole way  
 but it makes no difference  
 if not this then what  
 would fuse a connection (34)

Nothing either erotic or mystical here. A vacuum of indifference separates these two, alienation sucking out any tendrils of eroticism. Again, in yet another poem, “The Photograph of the Unmade Bed,” 1969, the poet in describing “silence” as a “cruel” indicator of his “indifference” (*The Will* 45) to her words, calls him, all the same, to awaken, “knowing it vain / knowing” he “slept unhearing” (“Pieces” 36).

In 1969, speaking, it would appear, on behalf of the women’s movement, Rich writes the poem “Tear Gas,” a forewarning to patriarchy:

These repetitions are beating their way

toward a place where we can no longer be together  
 where my body no longer will demonstrate outside your stockade  
 and wheeling through its blind tears will make for the open air  
 of another kind of action (*The Fact* 200)

As she makes a “last attempt” to reach him before she leaves for “another kind of action,” in the final poems of *The Will to Change* such as “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” she focuses routinely on “the experience of repetition as death” (50). Despite her desire to connect, to move beyond the limits of language to another level of conversation, they inevitably run up against the old impasse: “To be stopped, to shoot the same scene over and over” (“Images for Godard” 48). He refuses to explore with her the landscape of the “interior monologue”; he refuses to be vulnerable, to risk greater openness; he remains in his “casements of shockproof glass” because he believes “it’s impossible” to create certain scenes, that “love” is as “difficult to show / as horror and war and sickness are” (47). In this refusal to risk “the moment of change” that would truly connect them, his passive resistance paralyzes their relationship. In such a relationship, Rich writes, couples are “Always falling” in love and “ending / because this world gives no room / to be what we dreamt of being” (“Pieces” 34). A “film” or a “conversation” between a man and a woman in which they explore “love / to speak in the mouth / to touch the breast / for a woman / to know the sex of a man” is that which would change their relationship (“Images for Godard” 49). But he declines to “love, to move perpetually / as the body changes,” for he has said that it is impossible to make such a film (48). Thus, Rich writes the following:

the film begins  
 that you’ve said you’d never make . . .  
 That film begins here  
 yet you don’t show it  
 we leave the theatre  
 suffering from that (“Images for Godard” 49)

Writing ever more pressingly of the “endless conversation” in which her words remain a “monologue waiting for” him “to interrupt it” (53), Rich, in “Shooting Script,” the closing poem of *The Will to Change*, forewarns, “You are beside me like a wall” (58). In her acute isolation, always a “shell waiting for” him “to listen,” she becomes an outlaw even to herself. The poet divulges, for example, “Even when I thought I prayed, I was talking to myself” (54). All expressiveness here, on her part, winds a circular path, ineffectual in its ability to connect inner with outer, failing to integrate, to become whole within a shattering war zone: *this is not the “leafbud” self “inching towards life” in the 1975 poem “Upper Broadway,” announcing a new “faith” in herself, “Now I must write for myself . . . for this slippered crone”* (The Dream 41). No, this is a prelude to that unimagined future, a purely not wanting his response to her to be riddled with shabby myths and all too familiar “folklore”; she directs him to speak candidly of his palpable suffering, “Now tell me your story till the blood drips from our lashes” (54). For, in fact, she explains, merely his concentrated focus on her words would make the connection she needs, “Your clarity may not reach me; but your attention will” (58). She is not asking for “mythic powers.” The speaker wants simple frankness: “No, I don’t invest you with anything; I am counting on your weakness as much as your strength” (58). Nevertheless, he does not hear even this plea as “over and over the point is missed and still,” as doggedly her own “blind will

turns for its target” (55). For, alas, he *is* that endless wall; he *is* “[s]omeone who never said, ‘what do you feel?’ Someone who sat / across from” her, “picking apart the strands of pain” (59). Finally, this scenario builds to the final, following line, a compact crescendo to photogenic clarity: “[Y]ou never cared to learn the structure of my language” (54).

The ways in which a woman may choose however to counter patriarchal indifference to, and description of, her “soul” (63) are presented in the closing sections of “Shooting Script.” Through her own creativity, she may develop a language that has “the force of a waterfall,” slashing through culture’s hoarded, iconic lore that encumbers her. The lyricist details, for instance, women’s mid-twentieth century outdated entrapment in a nineteenth century’s cult of domesticity,<sup>xxxvii</sup> the poisonous prettiness “fasten[ing]” like Blake’s “mind-forged manacles” around your life force, morbidity entombing your present visionary possibilities, “They have family trees to plant for you, photographs of dead / children, old bracelets and rings they want to fasten onto you” (63). Yet the woman suffocating behind the “grimmed blinds” of their dogma that her “future has a history and that it is themselves” may find “instantaneous immediate relief” in isolated acts of self-expression such as “Entering the poem as a method of leaving the room” (63). Each poem breaks manacles, marches, like Woolf’s errant daughters, towards erotic mystical freedom: a liberty imagined later—in *The Dream of A Common Language*—as an ancient “Mother-Right” (59). Here, she will paint impressionistically a free verse image of an unnamed mother and her small son “running in a field . . . in the light / heart stumbling making for the open” (59). This archetypal figure’s essence, her innermost self, eludes their definitions, their labels, even if her body and the material conditions of day-to-day existence remain monitored by his regulations. Creative expression can be a means by which she gains the courage and skills to run out of the life they share. Eventually the representative thinking woman finds that *poetry*, her means of relief, teaches her its own current limitations; it reveals to her that “the woman is too heavy for the poem, she is a swollenness, a foot / an arm, gone asleep, grown absurd and out of bounds” (“Shooting Script” 14). Soon, then, the poem must change to accommodate her growth, or it will die with her; in this way, poetry becomes both a spiritual haven and a springboard for other forms of political activism.

Though she has attempted for a “lifetime” to show him who she is, who she longs to be; though her “secret hangs in the open like Poe’s purloined letter,” his “methods will never let” him “find it” (63). He still waits for her “to unfold for” him “like a paper flower,” though she is “spilt” here like “mercury on a marble counter” (63). Rich focuses her “power / -glass” vision on their failed relationship “to locate the pain” (64), noting that the feathers, ferns, fans, grasses “that men” drop at “the foot of” a woman’s “bed” are mere “mementos,” diverting attention from her “own intenser life behind the lamp they light in front of” her (63). However, she adds by way of explanation, “I was looking for a way out of a lifetime’s consolations,” as she continues (65), preparations for diving into the wreck and moving beyond the impasse. By exploring the wreckage itself, she will discover “the map of the future” (67). Her desire to shed the endless conversation—the repetition—the blank wall—“the image that stopped you, the one on which you came to grief, projecting it over and over on empty walls,” leads her to discover her “lifeline” in “the roads radiating from the initial split, the filaments thrown out from that impasse” (67). The “darkness” of what is unknown, unconscious, unexplored between them and within each of them is the impasse she must face alone, if she is to “give up being paraphrased” and “let go” of “the beautiful solutions” that have prevented her from knowing herself (65). Her task: pioneering darkness.

Rich's books often end with lines that mark "the pivot of a fresh beginning." *The Will to Change* closes with, "To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in / your old neighborhood" (67). In the opening poem of her next book, *Diving into the Wreck*, she lists, in "Trying to Talk with a Man," what she "had to give up" when she left the old "neighborhood" (3). In order to speak lucidly, she had to strip her psyche bare of lies defining life and cluttering vision. More specifically, she had to discard the clichéd legacy of Tristan and Isolde, permeating Western culture and serving as a dysfunctional model for heterosexual relationship. To get to "this desert" meant emptying their lives of "whole LP collections, films we starred in / playing in the neighborhoods, bakery windows / full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies" (3). In addition to letting go of seemingly benign cultural artifacts, they must renounce "the language of love-letters, of suicide notes" (3). After shedding the illusions represented by "this condemned scenery," the only thing which endures, is the familiar "silence," she again faces. "Coming out to this desert," to this barren landscape, the final "testing" ground, the last battlefield of their struggle to communicate with each other, she writes, they are

surrounded by a silence  
that sounds like the silence of the place  
except that it came with us  
and is familiar  
and everything we were saying until now  
was an effort to blot it out (3).

What has not been spoken between them can be evaded no longer, at last, "coming out here we are up against it."

Not only is it impossible for him to rescue her, but, also, Rich's following observation turns the damsel in distress myth on its head, "Out here I feel more helpless / with you than without you" (4). Though he is silent, she sees "EXIT" in his "eyes" (4). He does not want to acknowledge that the "danger" he mentions has its origins and existence in their relationship. That the personal is political. He wants to talk about emergencies, as if they were occurrences that happened to people in other places. She keeps bringing them back to the present, what is happening between them right now, when she says, for instance, "[Y]ou look at me like an emergency" (4). But he continues to distance himself from their relationship, to use evasive jargon in "talking of the danger / as if it were not ourselves / as if we were testing anything else" (4). The ironic truth that she keeps wanting him to see is that even while they "talk of" other "people caring for each other / in emergencies" and of the "equipment" necessary for survival in war, the imbalance of power in the "private" heterosexual relationship is, according to Rich, designed to perpetuate those wars (4). Unless the script for the relationship is rewritten, no amount of strategic planning and safety measures will alleviate worldwide destruction from "bombs" that keep exploding in the silent impasse between men and women.

"Trying" to awaken him to "the way / guerillas are advancing / through minefields," Rich declares in *Diving into the Wreck* that the external desiccation of the world, that "everything outside our skins is an image / of this affliction . . . everything outside my skin / speaks of the fault that sends me limping" ("When We Dead Awaken" 5). The "fault" or impasse dividing the couple, and emblematic of fragmentation and compartmentalization, deadens senses, numbs, until anger awakens to clear a path to compassion. The more Rich is in touch with her own "matrix of need and anger," the more she dares to love outside the patriarchal calendar. To "give



The “strange smell of life, not death,” lingering in the “last rotting logs”—like the “weeds flowering in tar” overcoming the very remnants of despair that “nothing will save”—indicates Rich’s bedrock optimism. For if she can still wonder “what on earth it might have become,” she can still imagine, dream, design a world in which a woman, having braved “the unconscious forest” alone, might recognize other women walking the same wasteland in search of the “smell of life” (8). Such life might flourish in a landscape constructed on the boundaries, outskirts, furthest edges of the “man’s world” which is “finished,” long ago “sold” to “the machines” (8). But until Rich is more fully awake, more fully conscious, she will not recognize the companionship to be found with women; she still wanders “alone” and “lost at moments,” alienated, not yet ready for further awareness, she rejoins this man for animal warmth (8). Yet she is aware that “Over and over, starting to wake” to herself, to other women, “I dive back to discover you / still whispering, *touch me*, we go on” (10). With all of her knowledge of the tragic history of their relationship she is not quite ready to abandon this “dream of tenderness” (“From an Old House in America” 218). Thus, in “Waking in the Dark,” compelled to explore and re-explore the wreck of their relationship in order to find patterns and clues that explain more lucidly the wreck of civilization, she longs for companionship, someone to share equally in this investigation, this internal struggle for truthfulness. She wants both of their visions to search out the ruins for an understanding of the disaster, even if there is no way back to each other. Hence, she writes hauntingly the following:

I wish there were somewhere  
actual we could stand  
handing the power-glasses back and forth  
looking at the earth, the wild wood  
where the split

between the sexes, the mind and the body, the personal and the political “began” (10).

She dives even deeper into “the unconscious forest” (8), in order to live, as she puts it in “Incipience,” and to “be more acutely awake” to the deadly “ice” which “is forming over the earth” (11); while he sleeps next to her oblivious to the destruction he has both instigated and resolved himself to. As Rich says, “the deadly ‘radical passivity of men’ (Daly’s phrase) has given us an essentially passive-voiced dominant culture, whose artifacts are the kind that lead to a deepening passivity and submission: ‘pop’ art; television; pornography” (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 13). What is incipient or beginning to be apparent to Rich is that in his refusal to awaken to her vision, her words, he is choosing “manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core” (*On Lies* 14). Though she feels powerless, she admits in *The Will to Change*, in the face of his deadly passivity, to change things in an instant, though it seems that this is “an hour when nothing can be done / to further any decision,” her own powers are “severely limited / by authorities whose faces” she “rarely” sees (“I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus” 19); in spite of this, she “use[s],” as described in *Leaflets*, what she has learned from having endured these limitations in order “to invent what we need” (“Leaflets” 56).

## II. Adrienne Rich’s Consummate Passion: The Fundamental Self-Love of Her “Oppositional Imagination”

As a woman, her “power is brief and local / but” she knows her “power” (“From an Old House” 216), Rich assures the reader, in *The Fact of a Doorframe*, echoing H.D.’s epic lines:

“Be firm in your own small, static limited / orbit . . . so that, living within, / you beget, self-out-of-self” (*Trilogy* 514). Like her foremother, Rich knows not only the intricate inner workings of the solitary self but also that all transformations commence from this core, housing what she names as her twin “angels”: “anger” and “tenderness,” her paradoxical, synchronous guides (“Integrity” *A Wild* 9). Similar to Blake’s energies of experience and innocence, tiger and lamb, her energies of untamed wrath and softest compassion are not diluted by each other’s steadying presence. Yet Rich takes pains to differentiate these twins from those famous poetic pairings of literary history such as Blake’s, when she writes, “they breathe in me / as angels, not polarities” (9). Not polarizing movements, but angelic ones. Mystical angels *are* her two “selves,” as she herself calls them “my selves,” but also *breathing*; spiritual *and* embodied: *erotic mysticism* is thus defined. Balancing active forces, however, requires the utmost discipline and vigilance to sustain within constant awareness: a return to an original marriage of nature and civilization, body and spirit, which androcentric cultural paradigms had all but erased.

An erotic mystical poet, then, according to Rich, houses “the spider’s genius / to spin and weave in the same action / from her own body” (9). The spider metaphor is Rich’s old friend, more resonant with each re-appearance. One may again be reminded of the striking relevance of Blake’s wrathful spider in “Auguries of Innocence”: “The wanton boy that kills the fly / Shall feel the spider’s enmity” (431). Yet Rich’s arachnid, in contrast, is found in her former verses’ old houses and cabins of New England, the poetic landscape of Whitman, Thoreau, and Frost. Indeed, the very title of Whitman’s well-known “A Noiseless, Patient Spider” (290) directly links a spider with the virtue of *patience*, as does Rich; Frost’s sinister, “fat” with the kill, “dimpled spider,” in “Design” (302), appears chosen to represent an automated universe, eerily empty of generative chaos. The void looms as a dead-end. His poem veers closer in outlook to Eliot’s waste land paradigm than to Rich’s patient “faith” that “The leafbud straggles forth / toward the frigid light . . . inching towards life” (“Upper Broadway” *The Dream* 41), despite the encroaching horrors of an industrialized, technocratic civilization at war with nature. And as for the void—that vacant emptiness, the fear of which, on the part of the “heavy footed” (Lorde 31), seems to spell the death of civilization’s old order—it offers, in the hopeful vision of seventies feminist poets, a capacious space for the fullness of mystery wherein a Demeter, or a Seboullisa, a Rich, or a Lorde, discovers her own and her comrade’s creative clout.

Not surprisingly, then, “Integrity[’s]” vision of *spinning* anger creates, in conjunction with *weaving* tenderness, lines of consonant chaos, lucid and groundbreaking, even as the poem that *is* change arises from the poet’s “own body.” To integrate anger with tenderness means dedicating intense attentiveness to “constant active presence . . . in a culture of manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core” (*On Lies* 14). Such rigorous awareness requires more than intellectual practice, though that too is part of it. Decades of sharpening her intellectual prowess brought the poet to this heightened capacity; but insisting, in her definition of *integrity*, on emotion’s equal stature, she roots both theory and feeling to the corporeal, the mind soundly at home within wild terrain—in an emerging poetics of numinous animal genius: thus, “having a different mission,” she elucidates, from those thinkers whose dissociation from their habitats arms them to “at will become abstract and pure” (“What is Possible” *A Wild* 24). She refuses pure abstraction for ethical reasons she has disclosed to herself, in fact, through the laborious process of crafting poems as documentations, close readings of personal experience, honing them into impersonal statements, archetypal representations of impassioned thinking: seeking a lens through which to peer into harsh material circumstances as well as into spirit-wells in the very

cells of the senses when experience is stripped down to the mysterious juncture where body is indistinguishable from soul.

Here, Rich does indeed achieve a creative leap beyond the confines of the old radical gestures of her romantic ancestors. Though impatient for change, this renegade archeologist acknowledges, in “Integrity,” that, ironically, only a *wild* version of *patience*, “hour by hour, word by word / gazing into the anger of old women on the bus” (“Incipience” 11)—dredging up, and storing carefully, their discarded treasures, perhaps in “little jars and cabinets of the will” (Brooks, G.),—could ever have “taken” her “this far” (*A Wild* 8). “Wild” ensures that her virtue remains outside the New England protestant, prescribed canon of proprieties for the chosen on the hill; indeed, hers belongs to the wilderness of Sacagawea and Grizzly Bears. In order to endure this waiting, which has smoldered in women for generations, she keeps “imagining the existence / of something uncreated / this poem / our lives” (11). Soldiering on, she chronicles crucial details, untold within her prior poetic accounts, in lyrics that expand, refine, and complicate her identity: daring, wild, historically unprecedented poems, strung each to each, in which she records, diary-like, her own self-chosen, incarnate story—a six-decade long, modern “letter to the World” (Dickinson, 211).

Early on, “Incipience,” in Part 2, brings a futuristic landscape where those kindred women who find each other on the outskirts of his civilization fortify their shared struggle to live “life,” to be “awake” (11). Each of the three stanzas in this section opens with the line, “A man is asleep in the next room” (11). In his dreams, the kind of women who never come together to “sit up smoking and talking of how to love” take on the mythic proportions of Sirens (11). They “have the heads and breasts of women / the bodies of birds of prey / Sometimes” they “turn into silver serpents” (11). Serpents like the ones a surviving Minoan goddess statue<sup>xxxix</sup> holds, victorious and fearless, in her upheld hands. Serpents associate with female deities in positive terms before Christianity; however, this view is not shared by the frightened man of androcentric dreams. Rich herself sheds light on the fears of the prototypal unconsciousness of this slumbering man, whose hallucinatory nightmares produce brilliant renditions of terror, scattered across millennia: the artifacts and poems distorting female efficacy into monstrous proportions: Medusa, witches, Kali, Oya, Hel, for instance. “In a world dominated by . . . institutions dispensing violence, it is extraordinary to note how often women are represented as the perpetrators of violence,” particularly “when we collectively attempt to change the institutions that are making war on us” (*On Lies* 16), Rich comments in her collection’s Introduction. Hence, “when we (women) begin to sketch the conditions of a life we have collectively envisioned, the first charges we are likely to hear is a charge of violence: that we are ‘man-haters’” (16), or, as noted in this poem, Siren-like monsters.

In the second stanza, a woman who might be any woman (but who has acquired the skill of analyzing detailed patterns from waiting “to feel the fiery future / of every matchstick in the kitchen” and from “remembering the striations / of air inside the ice cube”), “begins to dissect his brain” in an effort to understand his inner workings more intricately than ever dared before. She searches for a clue to the subconscious motivations of a creature who “has spent a whole day / standing, throwing stones into the black pool / which keeps its blackness” (12). Rich imagines herself investigating this “black pool,” the “old impasse,” the void, the wreck itself, without his assistance or approval (12). His persistent obliviousness, “the black pool,” and implicit refusal to join her search to bring unspoken secrets to the surface, to break the silence engulfing the earth, will no longer detain her. “Outside the frame of his dream we (two women) are stumbling up the hill / hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other / over the scarred volcanic rock,” she

declares (12). With great care, “hour by hour, word by word,” she breaks free of the paralysis of their relationship, finding a road that leads away from “the same scene / over and over” (“Incipience” 11). The two women want new roads, even volcanic ones, to hike, to write, to build together, as sisters, just as men have always adventured the earth in brotherhood. The stumbling sisters, in flight from “the experience of repetition as death” (“A Valediction” *The Will* 50), will find their way to unique places, far from mind-numbing redundancy.

Opening a window onto a future inhabited by women, Rich composes “The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One,” exploring the complexities of a woman’s relationship with her sister. In fact, scattered throughout Rich’s first two decades of books are poems which begin to address this issue of a woman’s identity as it relates to, and is defined by, other women. “Stepping Backward,” for example, a poem written while Rich was in college, is, in her own words, “addressed to a woman whom I was close to in my late teens, and whom I really fled from—I fled from my feelings about her. But that poem does remain, and it was unquestionably addressed to her. It’s very intellectualized, but it’s really the first poem in which I was striving to come to terms with feelings for women” (*Conditions One* 64). Published in her first book, *A Change of World*, in “Stepping Backward,” she questions her woman-friend, “How far dare we throw off the daily ruse . . . Have out our true identity?” (56). Although the poem ultimately only skirts their “true identity,” by concluding that they *must* part from each other, because, as she says, “the harshest fact is, only lovers—[implicitly heterosexual] . . . Unlearn that clumsiness or rare intrusion / And let each other freely come and go” (57), ironically, Rich possesses, as does her female friend, the knowledge that “we know each other, crack and flaw / Like two irregular stones that fit together” (58-59). Indeed, the majority of Rich’s few early poems about women’s relationships with women remain poems in which the two women find themselves geographically distant from each other, even while, paradoxically, remarkable psychic closeness and experiential understanding of the friend persists. Hence, poems such as “Stepping Backward,” “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” (1958-1960), “Sisters” (1961), “To Judith Taking Leave” (1962), “Roots” (1963), “For a Russian Poet” (1968), “Abnegation” (1968), and “Women” (1968) exist in contrast to the larger body of poems written in *The Dream of a Common Language*, in which women find themselves together in cities, on boats, in caves, on mountains, and in a verdant countryside. As early as 1962, Rich could write “that two women can meet . . . as two eyes in one brow / receiving at one moment / the rainbow of the world” (“To Judith, Taking Leave”) in stark reversal of what occurred for two decades in a marriage: the woman and the man, though physically close, are psychically distant from each other, emblemized by “the split” (“Waking in the Dark” 1971), the “famous impasse” where their “minds hover” (“In the Evening” 1966). The two women merge into one woman, guarded by over-arching hope, presaging the next two decades’ social and poetical transformations.

“Sisters,” 1961, composed a decade after “Stepping Backward,” repeats the pattern of questioning the extent of her knowledge of another woman, her sister, “I can easily say / I know you of course now . . . Do I know you better?” (47). They try to part, in keeping with the design of Rich’s additional, early female-to-female poems, but the poem ends, “Her I should recognize / years later, anywhere” (48). Again, “For a Russian Poet,” 1968, continues this theme of women meeting and recognizing each other in some future landscape; Rich addresses the Russian poet Natalya Gorbanivskya, “I’m a ghost at your table / touching poems in a script I can’t read / we’ll meet each other later” (29). Whereas in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law,” 1958-1960, the poet writes of women, “Knowing themselves too well in one another,” in the poem “Women,” 1968, on the other hand, the speaker, refers to “three sisters” who prophetically allow her “to know the

composing of the thread / inside the spider's body . . . visible tomorrow" (*Leaflets* 41). A tomorrow of networked women poets and activists will soon manifest, yet she is frustrated nonetheless that "Nothing can be done / but by inches. I write out my life / hour by hour" ("Incipience" *Diving* 11).

Two sisters, the writer reflects, "For the first time, in this light, I can see who they are." Throughout these poems Rich tentatively embarks on experimenting with the concept of two women being one, as well as with the idea of embodying, within one woman, the voices of many women. The ancient Greek split of mind from body, manifested in life and in work by "the abyss" between self and other, is experienced as a lie in certain rare moments of deep self-awareness. Springing from her feeling of sameness with another woman, she strives towards woman-centered allegiance. Such mutual integrity, or wholeness, occurring between women who recognize themselves in each other enables them, she writes, in "To Judith, Taking Leave," to "meet / no longer as cramped sharers / of a bitter mutual secret," but as two who

think it possible  
now for the first time  
perhaps, to love each other  
neither as fellow-victims  
more as a temporary  
shadow of something better  
(*The Fact* 193).

On the other hand, if one reads these early poems as being not only voiced to actual women, but as simultaneously signifying one part of Rich in dialogue with another part of herself, such a reading would disclose other ways in which patriarchal fragmentation has affected women's sense of self. For example, in a poem such as "Women," the poet addresses each of her "three" sisters in three separate stanzas; these women might be read as representing three aspects of Rich's self. However, nothing in them suggests psychosis or multiple personalities; rather, it is more the case, that complexity of identity is at play here, a kind of imaginative move on the poet's part. In fact, Rich seeks to articulate the layered dimensionality of her own person, not merely repeat conventionalities in clichéd, pathologizing, and abstract psychological jargon.

Indeed, her frequent allusions to sisters throughout these early works could be, in part, a way of indirectly talking about herself; this reading would be in keeping with Rich's commentary, as she reflects on damage done to women's sense of wholeness, that one's internal disjointedness "echoes the kind of splitting and fragmentation women have lived in, the sense of being almost a battleground for different parts of the self" (*Conditions Two* 55-6). In other words, inner disturbances originate from external social and cultural violence, Rich emphasizes. For example, the poet's relation to herself or to a "sister" is investigated in "The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One" for answers to the following, earlier question about women:

Pinned down  
by love, for you the only natural action  
are you edged more keen  
to prise the secrets of the vault? Has Nature show  
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,  
that her sons never saw? ("Snapshots")

Reflecting first upon these lines, one may notice that the poem points to the split self, the common woman who experiences herself as alternately intellectual-artist and embodied-nurturer, in a culture, which has “pinned down” her psyche with inscriptions that these two identities are mutually exclusive. The same thinking woman’s gradual acceptance of her female body occurs with awareness that living in that body may shape her thoughts—that her fullest creative power may dwell in tapping into the vitality released from mind merging with body: ideas sparking from palpable experiences. Otherwise, the mind detached from the body can only repeat learned patterns, patterns perpetuating “the split” that annuls her true self. In order to abolish the “lie,” to break the silences, connect “the abyss” between mid-twentieth century man and woman, her mind must somehow re-merge with her female body.

What does this mean? It means for one thing to look in the mirror and be able to name oneself as coming from the same unnamed source as one’s sister: that regardless of whether the “sister” is professional or housewife, lesbian or straight, African American or white, rich or poor, one may still recognize, if only for an instant, some shared, basic experience of bodily femaleness—though immediately the differences begin. Still, that body undergoes living in the world, in specific, overlapping, and gendered ways. Neither more nor less important than other defining characteristics, yet surely this brief, baseline similarity is a fact. Can we add that on a patriarchal globe, female still walks behind male, then and now? Rich teaches, in “The Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One,” that a woman’s body connects her sister with her in ways that have far-reaching implications and potentialities. An act as simple as writing the words, “She is the one you call sister,” can proclaim a poet’s allegiance, definitively, to her sex (*Diving* 14). Words are actions, she insists; indeed, “the mind of the poet is changing . . . the moment of change is the only poem” (*The Will* 49). Transformations will bring the mind and body into moments of a new kind of expressiveness in the hard-earned erotic mystical verse of *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*.

For a woman who develops that area of herself called the intellect, an area long associated with maleness, to see in herself, and to commend, that which is biophilic, and also to desire more than familiar forms—beginning with the affirmation of her own physiology—becomes a political act of self-integration. Rich announces, in the late fifties, “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters” (“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law” *Snapshots* 22). In coming to consciousness, in awakening to “the tragedy of sex,” which “lies around” her (“Waking in the Dark” *Diving* 8), a “thinking woman” disassembles myths that have defined a Carolyn Herschel, a Marie Curie, an Adrienne Rich—in short, any woman who does not function first and foremost as a nurturer of men and children—as a monster. The “monsters” with whom a “thinking woman sleeps” result from her inadvertent internalization of myths that fragment and distort her own self-image. Thus, part of the complex process towards self-integration and self-nurturance is her own valuing not only of her cerebral faculties, but also of that home, which has been historically devalued, her body, including what she can *do* with it within externally imposed limitations. The “eros of everyday life” (Griffin), celebrated in the following lines, suggests mystical depths exemplified in words like “glamour,” “flashes,” and “burnishes”:

Her simplest act has glamour  
as when she scales a fish the knife  
flashes in her long fingers  
no motion wasted or when

rapidly talking of love  
 she steel-wool burnishes  
 the battered kettle ("The Mirror" 14)

As illustrated by these images, this poem is in part a recognition of ordinary women's skill in that "taken-for-granted area" labeled "women's work" (*Conditions Two* 56). But it is also a work in which those functions women accomplish in the imaginary "safe terrain—the privacy of the home" are focused on, in order to "disclose its nightmares and its quality of menace" (*Conditions Two* 56). Words such as "knife" and "battered" cast sinister shadows over the scene: the juxtaposition of light and dark, mystic embodiment positioned next to encroaching violence that threatens to overwhelm the personal as surely as the public arena develops imagistically, ever more vivid contrasts, in her next two volumes, 1978 and 1981.

The prolific use of the particulars of domestic life is a localizing device Rich continues to employ in numerous poems throughout her career—poems which examine "the most mundane, trivial details of life and" focus "on those things as if under a burning glass" (*Conditions Two* 55). In the second stanza, for example, kitchen items represent the combined manual and emotional tasks many women labor under daily, in order to provide sustenance for others. She composes with wry allusions to Keats's "To Autumn," the following lines:

Love apples cramp you sideways  
 with sudden emptiness  
 the cereals glutting you, the grains  
 rope clusters picked by hand  
 Love: the refrigerator  
 with open door  
 the ripe steaks bleeding  
 their hearts out in plastic film  
 the whipped butter, the apricots  
 the sour leftovers (14)

A woman who prepares food, and supplies love to men and children, is expected to be like a "refrigerator with open door," always sympathetic, replenishing, "bleeding" her heart out for those around her until inevitably she cramps "sideways" with her own "sudden emptiness"; she is the one who must refurbish herself with "the sour leftovers," while the man eats, after "waiting" like a "crate" in "the orchard / for" her "to fill it." Her "hands are raw with scraping / the sharp bark, the thorns" (14), but she continues to "pick, pick, pick" from her own inner resources, "this succulent tree." Yet since she herself is starved for "Love," for nurturance, even while she restores others, the speaker declares, "this harvest is a failure / the juice runs down" her "cheekbones / like sweat or tears" (14).

It is made clear, in section 2 of the poem, that this is a woman starving in silence. It is only by looking into "her wide eyes" that the poet can see her "listing her unfelt needs" (15). This mothering woman is so out of touch with her own sharp "needs" that they are unfelt. Yet she maintains a calm, dignified strength, as others "blaze like lightening about the room / flicker around her like fire" (15) and "dazzle" themselves "in her wide eyes," while they blindly thrust "the tenets of" their lives "into her hands." All the while that the professionals theorize and develop principles, beliefs, and doctrines, she quietly holds together these patriarchal "tenets"

with the work of her “long fingers,” her “raw” hands. While the scientists and generals formulate the constraints of her life, plan war strategies, out there in a world of abstractions, she

moves through a world of India print  
 her body dappled  
 with softness, the paisley swells at her hip  
 walking the street in her cotton shift  
 buying fresh figs because you love them  
 photographing the ghetto because you took her there. (15)

This poem’s focus on the female “body” is, in Rich’s words, “only beginning a long process of reunion with the body I had been split from at puberty; my mind loved on one plane, my body on another, and physical pleasure, even in sex, was problematic to me” (*Of Woman Born* 171). Her incessant giving, the little gestures of kindness she extends to others, has left her nothing for herself, not even the ability “to list,” to articulate, and to thereby bring to consciousness “her unfelt needs.”

It is her poet self, the self re-entering her own body, that is recorded as empathizing with another woman’s condition and is the only one capable of *naming* these needs. With an eye trained, like her sister’s, in intricate observation of and participation in the commonplace minutiae of material life, she crafts an “edge more keen / to prise the secrets” (“Snapshots” 23) of her untouched powers; thus, Rich perceives the immeasurable loss to self and to women as a caste, that is the consequence of the *institution* of motherhood. (All women are expected to nurture, to provide for the needs of others, regardless of whether or not they are biological mothers.) Hence, in an effort to comfort, to sooth, her depleted “sister,” who may represent that part of her own self that gives to others what she has failed to give to herself, Rich breaks this taboo, “Why are you crying / dry up your tears / we are sisters” (“The Mirror” 15). This act of verbalizing her concern for another woman, and indirectly for herself, is frighteningly unfamiliar; hence, even while she is breaking the historic silence about compassion between women, her voice falters:

words fail you  
 in the stare of her hunger  
 you hand her another book  
 scored by your pencil  
 you hand her a record  
 of two flutes in India reciting.  
 (“The Mirror” 15)

How can patriarchal culture represented by “a book” and a “record,” regardless of how lovely the latter creations may be, possibly compensate for and replenish her with what she herself has been constrained from creating? The “stare of her hunger” is the starvation of a woman who has never known either the “time/space” (Daly *Beyond*) or the acknowledgement necessary, in order for her to embrace her own solitary self. Like most women, her creative energy siphoned off by bending to the needs of others—androcentric institutions having enlisted her energies for their own ends—she is, by this means, denied freedom for discovering what forms her vast personal resources might take, otherwise; indeed, how will she know what it is that she desires, how can

she realize her own need for self-expression, if she has never been told stories that mirror her true dimensions and complexities? She must write these for herself with “no one / to tell” her “when the ocean / will begin” (“Diving” 23).

## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Surely, “A Litany for Survival” endures as one of the very greatest poems of the decade, if not of the twentieth century. Lorde, Audre. *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978.

<sup>ii</sup> Daly, Mary in cahoots with Jane Caputi. *Webster’s’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> Joseph Campbell’s classic, but outdated, book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1972, is frequently taught in world literature courses in universities. The archetypes he presents are then applied to literary works from various continents and eras. One wonders if any of the concerns of this dissertation, and of many other up-to-date, innovative scholarly books written across the past four decades, are ever applied to examining his book or especially to analysis of the literary works themselves.

<sup>iv</sup> Lorde’s depth of kindness and gratitude for even a graduate student’s sincere interest graced my life more than once during her own brief lifetime.

<sup>v</sup> Adrienne Rich wrote the introduction to the first edition of *The Work of a Common Woman* by Judy Grahn. New York: The Crossing Press, 1978.

<sup>vi</sup> Though classified, understandably, as a modernist, attention to H.D.’s work blossomed in the seventies. In many ways, it seems appropriate to include her as a second wave or even seventies poet. Certainly her influence on the poetry and thought of Rich, Grahn, and Griffin, if not Lorde, was profound. See *The Dream of a Common Language*, *The Work of a Common Language*, and *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> I was a personal friend of Mary’s for well over a decade, and I spent many quintessential hours sitting with her and helping her pour over her manuscripts. Lounging on cat-clawed furniture in her tiny apartment in Newton, Massachusetts, one of my favorite delights was to browse her brick and board bookcases, lining the walls. Nothing fancy. Anywhere. Only the mind of a genius constantly wrestling with the events transpiring around her in the immediate and the global scenes, never escaping from witnessing them, but also never taking her attention off of nature’s fathomless dimensionality and communicative presence. Cats, cats, cats, above all. And the messages of seagulls on the Gloucester beach, as we sat looking at exploding waves. Her thoughts and words charged the air with life; she spent most of her personal relationship time with working class, educated feminists—ordinary, smart women who had labored to educate themselves, often against the odds. Mary died in a simple nursing home, but not alone.

<sup>viii</sup> Audre Lorde’s voice prematurely silenced by cancer in 1992. She records experiences with this disease that haunted, then ravaged, sixteen years of her most productive outspokenness on paper and in person. For a well-done biography, see Alexis de Veau’s *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*.

<sup>ix</sup> Alice Walker’s canonized essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” celebrates the beauty and feminist cultural significance of an archetypal work of art presented through one of the only art forms her rural southern mother could comfortably inhabit.

<sup>x</sup> A much-quoted decree from Audre Lorde, African American Caribbean poet, whose lyrics one can currently find on pages of the big anthologies.

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<sup>xi</sup> I am referring to the infamous website, <ratemyprofessors.com>, in presenting these typical labels chosen by students to describe female professors. Much scholarly research has been carried out, and a number of peer reviewed articles written, on the lower teaching ratings female instructors, as compared with male, receive across the board. This is especially true for women of color.

<sup>xii</sup> Almost three decades ago, I sat with another Berkeley graduate student on the steps outside of the Faculty Club building. She and I were enthusiastically engaged in earnest discussion of our emerging ideas, when a very aged and frail professor emeritus made his way down the steps. As he passed us, the phrase “pure lust” was at that precise moment exiting my mouth and entering into his hearing range. He paused decidedly, and gathering his voice together into a decidedly professorial tone, he pronounced

slowly, “*Pure Lust?* Ah, *that* is simply logically impossible.” Clearly, it was a teaching moment. Then, onward the charming fellow tottered.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rich has been posthumously attacked for so-called essentialist and anti-trans thinking on all public memorial websites. Rich, ironically, as much as any leading American theorist and activist of the past half-century, and throughout a brave publishing career, soldiered on across decades as a stalwart proponent of marginalized voices.

<sup>xiv</sup> In this, I concur with Somer Brodribb, Rita Felski, Barbara Christian, Bonnie Mann, Susan Gubar and many other feminist critics.

<sup>xv</sup> I contend that the Grahn, Lorde, Rich, and Griffin labor to include and address the concerns of varied women, including race, class, nationality, and sexuality. For example, see Susan Griffin’s, “I Like to Think of Harriet Tubman,” from *Like the Iris of an Eye*, p. 10

<sup>xvi</sup> Students today, I have observed, are frequently intimidated into believing that the incomprehensible jargon of a postmodernist theory professor is a badge of brilliance, next to the comparative plain-spokenness of a feminist theory professor.

<sup>xvii</sup> A favorite word of French feminist Julia Kristeva.

<sup>xviii</sup> Symbol of a woman’s fertility.

<sup>xix</sup> In the following additional passage from Baring’s book, she helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of the paradoxical core of this non-hierarchical lifestyle:

The Taoist artist or poet intuitively reached into the secret essence of what he was observing, making himself one with it, then inviting it to speak through him, so releasing the dynamic harmony within it. He imposed nothing of himself on it but reflected the creative soul of what he was observing through the highly developed skills that he had cultivated over a lifetime of practice. Through the perfection of his art, he did not define or explain the Tao which, as Chuang-Tzu said, cannot be conveyed either by words or by silence, but called it into focus so that it could be experienced by the beholder. The Tao flows through the whole work as cosmic Presence, at once transcendent in its mystery and immanent in its form. The distillation of what the Taoist sages discovered is bequeathed to us in the beauty and wisdom of their painting and poetry, and in their profound understanding of the relationship between body, soul and nature, and the eternal ground that underlies and enfolds them all. (150)

<sup>xx</sup> Seboulisa is an African goddess of special significance to Lorde. *The Black Unicorn’s*

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glossary identifies her as the “goddess of Abomey—‘the Mother of us all’” (121).

<sup>xxi</sup> Luisah Teish. *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. New York: Harper Collins, 1985.

<sup>xxii</sup> I read this for the first time in researching for the dissertation, July 2, 2012. This frequent totalizing, distortion, and generalizing of seventies feminism remains shocking and painful to me.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Still, in my own intense idealization of her as a leader, for example, I must take some responsibility for the demand for perfection I placed on her. Inevitably, the day appeared, when that dream was abruptly deflated; arriving first, as usual—at one of Rich’s many Bay Area poetry readings—I sat on the linoleum floor outside a San Francisco auditorium to wait several hours. So, there I sat, cross-legged, eager for her to help me know “the woman I was becoming” (Moore). Afterwards, as 500 listeners milled around or left, I summoned enough courage to speak to her, the one and only time I ever did this. I had an expectation that she would be pleased, and encouraging, when I told her of my current efforts as a mere graduate student to teach and write about not only her works, but also Lorde’s, Griffin’s, and Grahn’s. For an instant, forever sealed in my memory, she looked up intently into my admiring face, and, in —what sounded to me—an admonishing tone scolded abruptly, “I hope you are using *that* book!” My heroine turned away. Stunned and hurt, I knew instantly which book she referenced: *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*, 1981, edited by poets Joan Larkin and Elly Bulkin and put out by one of the small feminist presses—Persephone’s.

I had read this anthology with disappointment; it was by no means a volume I would ever have chosen to teach. Most of the poems were weak. Did she not realize that the title alone shouted out something a mere graduate student could not undertake teaching without unduly risking alienating students, faculty, and future employers? I was stunned by Rich’s lack of insight into the career vulnerability I faced and how risk-taking (perhaps even rash) I was already being by working on radical feminist poets. She must have mistaken me as occupying a much more privileged position than the one I actually did. She must have felt morally bound to promote the many working class and multiracial writers in the book. In short, she had no realistic comprehension of *my* life, the life of a female graduate student, and, in that moment, I glimpsed instantly and ironically how her own privileged position had failed to equip her with discernment, how it had insulated her from the treacherous challenges a feminist graduate student faces. Ironically, even in striving to help those less privileged, she had failed to recognize one of them standing before her.

<sup>xxiv</sup> William Blake would say *Newtonian*.

<sup>xxv</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman. “I Go Where I Love: An Intertextual Study of H.D. and Adrienne Rich.” *Signs: A Journal of Culture and Society*. 9.2 (1983): 228-245. Print.

<sup>xxvi</sup> The use of “mantra” is mine, rather than Friedman’s. Mantra is a Sanskrit term meaning a short line or word carrying spiritual significance when repeated over and over to quiet the mind. These lines did seem to become a mantra for a select society of feminists in the seventies, reminding them to renounce care-taking as a knee jerk response, sometimes even towards abusive individuals in their lives.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Andreas Capellanus’ twelfth-century treatise, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1941. (Reprinted: New York: Norton, 1969)

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<sup>xxviii</sup> Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* identifies the Outsiders' Society. Composed of the daughters of the processions of educated men and dwelling outside the bounds of warring nations, they are well-positioned, according to Woolf, to overthrow patriarchy.

<sup>xxix</sup> Susan Griffin's "Dancing" in *Woman and Nature: the Roaring Inside Her*. Judy Grahn's "She Who" poems, *The Work of a Common Woman*. Audre Lorde's "The Women of Dan Dance with Swords," *The Black Unicorn*. Overall, I would claim that this is true to a lesser degree in Rich's writings.

<sup>xxx</sup> It is important to acknowledge Daly here because of the magnitude of her philosophical impact on Rich's and Griffin's works. Too often her ideas have been taken up by women and used in their works, without acknowledging her as the source. It can easily be deduced that they feared stigmatization because of the controversial nature of her reputation, more than they feared charges of plagiarism.

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Robin Morgan's *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism*. New York: Norton, 1989.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Diving into the Wreck* received the National Book Award in 1974.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> See especially Marjorie Perloff's evisceration of "Transcendental Etude" (*The Dream of a Common Language*) in her review of the book.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were key poets of fathomless longing. Tragically, theirs ended in they suffered is highly lethal—and was particularly deadly in the years prior to mood-balancing pharmaceuticals.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Barbara Welter's early second wave academic article, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," describes aptly the atmosphere of the 1950s also, while shedding light on these domestic details Rich lists. See also her earlier poem, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," and, additionally, "From an Old House in America," for colorful particulars of the personal realm that comprised females' domesticated, but very active, lives—segregated from the public realm of males.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Biophilia. *Love of life*—term defined by Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, 1978, and contrasted with necrophilia. Rich would have been very affected in various ways by this book. A academic study is long overdue on Daly's influence on Rich's intellectual development, poetics, and prose in that decade.

<sup>xxxix</sup> See the arresting image of this Cretan statue in Marija Gimbutas's *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 B.C.: Myths and Cult Images*. UC Press, 1982.

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