

ON BUTCH AND FEMME: COMPILED READINGS

I.M. Epstein

*For Siline,
whom I love, and who is just learning*

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DAGGER: ON BUTCH WOMEN

Why I Love Butch Women

Carol A. Queen

I don't like smoking, but I'll put up with cigarette breath to watch a woman curl a lit butt into her palm like the Marlboro Man.

I like femaleness -- the curves, the wet spots -- and I like femininity displayed, lace and lipstick and manicured nails, but it doesn't turn my head like worn Levi's and rolled tee-shirt sleeves, a stance like James Dean hustling on 42nd Street, the kind of womanness that isn't taught in school.

Simone de Beauvoir mused in *The Second Sex* that lesbian desire is related to desire for the mother, and that may be so, but honey, my mother was never like this:

Strong, I mean physically strong. Sexual, with a look in the eye that caresses and undresses. Attitude that comes from never fitting in, maybe from never even having tried.

Butch.

What is butch? Rebellion against women's lot, against gender-role imperatives that pit boyness against girlness and then assign you-know-who the short straw. Butch is a giant *fuck YOU!* to compulsory femininity, just as lesbianism says the same to compulsory heterosexuality. I do not associate respect for compulsory anything with butchness, though perhaps some butch bottoms will disagree. I first gravitated toward butch women because they were the easiest female allies to recognize in my war against the compulsory world.

In the 1970s, when I came out into the dyke community, butch was dead and androgyny was practically an imperative. I didn't mind at first; girliness as a way of life hadn't worked out for me, and though I had always exhibited distinctly femme sexuality, I wasn't presenting myself to the world that way: I hadn't really grown into the image. I was young; the men I had fucked played "Me Tarzan, You Jane." I couldn't figure out how to get them to play the game by different rules. As soon as sex with them was over (or even while it was still going on) the whole thing felt stupid. Men who didn't play Tarzan were fine, but I couldn't figure out

how to get them to fuck me. No doubt they were contending with their own straight (or not-so-straight) boy version of femme sexuality and were waiting for me to make the first move. Some men don't play Tarzan so as not to appear sexist; others just want you to do it -- grab their neckties and put them where you want them -- but I didn't know that at the time.

With some relief, then, I retired the Jane I never wanted to be, reconstructed myself as an androgyne, and forsook my vain attempt to present my femininity to the world. The Uniform, actually, was Butch Lite. Jeans or chinos, flannel shirts or tees, sensible shoes -- either boots, athletic shoes, or Birkenstocks (it turns out the latter were incredibly subversive if you wore them with scarlet toenail polish, but that's another story). Almost the whole dyke community dressed this way: If a woman didn't, her politics and her sexual orientation were automatically open to debate.

The butches who were left over from the era before the purge also dressed this way. We had renamed the identity, it seemed, but kept the look. That way we could say we'd vanquished it, even as we kept it around to turn us on.

The unschooled eye couldn't tell the two sorts of women -- butches and androgynes -- apart. Butchness had been so thoroughly declared passé that an entire generation of dykes could dress in what was essentially butch-woman drag and evoke defensive responses only from conservative straight people (and very straight-identified "gay women").

At first I believed the mythos of the Vanished Butch (and her symbiotic sister-species, the Vanished Femme). But certain women wearing the Uniform made my nostrils flare, my tongue tie, my skin prickle like an electrical storm had passed. They filled the clothes differently. It took me some years to begin to understand why I wanted to chew on some women's thick brown leather belts and not on others.

Non-butch women wore the Uniform like librarians who had just come in from gardening. It was not clothes that made the woman. It was stance. It was attitude -- it was impossible to picture one of the librarians wearing a tux, or myself dressing in silk or lace to present myself to her. It was impossible to think of presenting myself to her at all, to offer her that mixture of allure and willingness that I desired to give a butch woman.

The missing ingredient, I see in hindsight, was eroticism, worn on the sleeve and there in the step: Where political dykes would don a baggy

flannel shirt and think, “No one will sexually objectify me if I wear this,” the butches were tucking their shirts in, knowing that some little gal would love the softness of the flannel under her hands as she ran them over the butch’s peccs.

In that decade of butchness diluted and femme reviled, I had two lovers. Well, more than two, but only two who deserved *Lover* as a title, the way Radclyffe Hall called Una Troubridge *Wife* and Una called Radclyffe (whom she knew as “John”) *Husband*. There were not then and are not now enough words to name what we wanted to do differently, or wanted to do the old-fashioned way, but queerly, with each other, like John and Una. We were lovers, not wives or husbands, living yet-unnamed relationships that had not fully evolved (though we tried so hard to speed the mired-down process of that evolution).

One lover was a butchette; how can I describe this? A femmey butch, I guess. Remember, we didn’t talk this way then. Even reading Mary Daly together did not get in the way of our sex life. She was the most opinionated and assertive woman I’ve ever known, and though she did not fill out her clothes and went shopping the instant the Uniform lost its hegemony, she could lay me on my back more swiftly and skillfully than any woman has since. Though the seeds of my femme sexuality may have lain in abortive Tarzan and Jane scenes, it did not begin to blossom until our games of Sultana and captured princess. My lover oversaw that flowering: My own womanness had frightened me until the night we did Quaaludes, and I arched back off the bed, dizzy with the drug and a kind of power I had never relaxed into before, and purred: “I feel like Marilyn Monroe!”

To which she replied, hands full of me, “You *are* Marilyn Monroe.”

A truly androgynous dyke could not have said such a thing.

She had committed quite a breach of lesbian-feminist etiquette (as, obviously, had I). Marilyn Monroe was a faggot’s heroine, not a dyke’s. We were not supposed to swoon over or identify with a woman whose femininity was her appeal and then her downfall, though Judy Grahn had already reappropriated Marilyn’s thigh bone (by way of a poem) to bash in her enemies’ heads: Hubba. Hubba. Hubba. (We didn’t know that Grahn, as a butch, was thus privy to a more intimate vision of Marilyn than any self-respecting dyke was supposed to have, in those years before it came

out that Marilyn had spent the early '50s getting her pussy licked by Lili St. Cyr.)

In celebrating my choice of Marilyn Monroe as spirit guide, my lover allowed my uncomfortable post-girly androgyny to cook away in the crucible of her arms, and to let me reconstitute as a femme woman. It was a very butch thing to do. And it was very brave, because she was telling me I had her blessing in stepping off the path of political correctness; she was telling me that the wet truths of sex had our allegiance more fully, more instinctively, than the dry truths of lesbian feminism.

I love butch women because no one else would ever have reached into that flannel-clad bundle of inarticulate erotic yearning with a mirror that reflected a sex goddess. I love butch women because no one is quite so deeply affected by femme: I felt my sexual effect for the first time, and grew and grew like Alice in Wonderland drinking her magic potion. I love butch women because it was butch sexual response that gave me my body.

She created a monster, of course. I could no longer be considered a right-thinking dyke. I was a lesbian crossed with a transvestite, sporting lingerie under my 501s. Oh, I know that's normal now, but then it was heresy. She bought me crotchless panties and untied the bows like I was a present that had been wrapped just for her, and before I melted into mindless throbbing waves of orgasm I had a political epiphany: Women who decried being objectified had never had the opportunity to feel like this. They were an emblem of our sexual difference, those panties: We sinned, and shared our secret, together.

No one before her had paid such keen attention to my arousal, swooping down on my response like a claws-out hawk. In return I let her seize me, filled as full by her desire for me as by her cunt-slicked fingers.

What is butch? Sexual power of a kind no woman is supposed to have, active power. Prowess. The calm eye of a whirlwind of pleasure, getting from giving. Learning the pure *skill* of giving a woman pleasure like no other soul can.

My next lover did "androgyny" so well that the night clerk at the first motel we checked into together winked at her and said, "Have a good time, Slim," never once thinking she might be a woman. Thinking about her reminds me of the injustice of the '70s claim that butch women were

trying to ape male behavior to get “male privilege” (whatever the hell, in the hands of a woman, that is). This woman, like a lot of her sisters, couldn’t have pretended to much of anything on the feminine side of the gender scale. Nineteenth-century German sex scientists named people like her *Sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (“sexually intermediate types”). And though there exists a photo of her at five with bows in her hair, by the time she was in her teens such affectations of girliness were forever past: She had graduated to fast cars and drugs.

She had a low voice like honey mixed with whisky, not immediately recognizable as female, especially on the phone. She had muscles. She’s the one who gave me my cigarette-curled-into-the-palm Marlboro Gal fetish. She was a loner who worked on cars. Getting her painfully-turned-inward attention seemed infinitely precious, for she was a woman who did drugs, took apart engines, and studied alchemy to forestall the need to dwell upon where she fit into the world.

Butch/femme, perhaps especially when unnamed, is a secret world. The basis of my powerful attraction to her was mysterious to me then, was chemical, and all the stronger for my inability to understand it. She was not the most devoted lover I ever had -- far from it. There was too much sad-eyed stranger in her to ever get to know. She was barely domesticated, like the cat that spent its kittenhood wild; like simmering young Brando, ready to rebel against anything, even love.

My lover, so deeply Not-Feminine, came into her difference in a decade when what made her truly different from other dykes -- real androgyny, perhaps born in the body, but certainly not politically chosen -- was unnamed and less understood than it had been in any lesbian community in this century. To say her butchness was unsupported profoundly understates how alone she was in it; there was no discourse about it (except “It’s dead”), and so the way she wore her lesbianism was denied, even -- perhaps especially -- by other lesbians. She had no mentors to teach her how to wear her difference -- except men: But men could not teach her how a woman relates to another women.

I knew I could never have the kinds of experiences she had had, never know what it would feel like to go through life in her body. I wanted to reach out to her difference and honor it, and I could do that by wanting her; I could do that by giving myself to her. No one in my world had fit in less and still survived, and I loved that in her. I saw her as my

shadow-sister, given an even more difficult path to walk than mine. But part of my difference lay in my willingness -- no, my need -- to love her.

Loving masculinity in a woman differs crucially in one way from loving it in a man: In her it is a badge of standing out, not of fitting in. It is grown into through pain, or at least a sense of separation from those less different.

What I love about butch women is their profound inability, or refusal, to be "normal." In the war between the sexes we can see them as warriors or resisters, but in any case, they stand as living proof that gender is more fluid, its imperatives more socially contrived and less innately rigid, than our conservative culture wants to allow. I love butch women for the same reasons the enigmatically gendered are revered in more enlightened societies than ours: Their very existence says that boundaries can be crossed. Like the spiritual and cultural respect some indigenous American peoples accorded the two-spirit, when I'm with a butch woman I feel awe at being allowed to see that the dualistic world is not as big as it gets. What I love about butch women is the way they stand as sentries, maybe even guides, to expanded possibility.

I'm aware I'm making this sound pretty existential, and for me it is, but I don't want to forget the sexual charge that surpasses respect and recognition, that moves my spiritual awe right to my cunt. When I'm sexing with a butch woman I'm consorting with a changeling, off mundane ground, like Wendy suddenly learning that all it took to fly was reaching for Peter Pan's outstretched hand. What makes me able to give myself like a precious gift to a butch woman, I think, is her understanding that I *am* a gift; what makes her know this, when other women miss it entirely, is part of the ineffable, the alchemical resonance between butch and femme that begins to heat the crucible. Standing far outside of traditional femininity, she finds in my femme-ness a representation of the un/familiar, which is just what she represents for me.

Yet if she were simply unfamiliar there would be less basis for the gift of self, less grounding for our passion; Tarzan and Jane don't recognize each other, and their desire emerges from their difference. Heterosexuals often face this obstacle: making cross-cultural attempts at intimacy without the knowledge of likeness-in-difference in which homosexual pairings, especially butch/femme ones, are grounded.

I believe we know too little about heterosexual love to know

whether butch/femme relationships draw upon its premises or mirror it in any realistic way (I am not referring here to compulsory heterosexuality, which provides far too stifling an atmosphere for love and true fellow-feeling to flourish -- real heterosexual love, a profound bond between socially constructed “opposites,” is rare). Twin assumptions are that butch/femme mimics hetero bonding or, conversely, that it could have no relation to heterosexuality at all (since two women by definition are not heterosexual). I suspect that both butch/femme and hetero relationships share a sought-for balance between what is different and what is not, and difference is often eroticized. Butch and femme, though, experience their difference in like bodies; heterosexual difference is experienced in unlike bodies, embroidered to a greater or lesser degree by the cultural differences mandated by sex roles.

Most importantly, a butch/femme couple is queer. They do not meet social expectations even if they live exemplary role-differentiated lives -- lesbians from “Leave It to Beaver.” In fact, the more gender differentiation in their relationship, the queerer they are. In a heterosexual coupling, situated in this culture of hetero-hegemony, partners often live out their given roles unless mindful to do otherwise. In a butch/femme relationship the eroticized un/familiar exists not in the context of the normal, but of the forbidden.

What’s considered normal is so fenced off from the multitudes of realities that confront and beckon us with their rich differences. The rigid boundaries that define “normality” have left it cut off and arid. The question “Am I normal?” has thwarted more orgasms, more wet cunts, more stiff dicks than any other single impediment to erotic bliss. Is it any wonder that I should embrace and adore those “not-normal ones, the ones who wear on their sleeve their departure from the narrow, socially sanctioned path? I feel both inspired by their difference and safer in my own.

I love butch women because, in their big black boots, they step squarely across a line. I love butch women for the same reasons I love sissy men, the transgender, the slutty, the outrageous queers of every stripe; the women and men who sell sex, and the ones who use sex to heal; the fetishists whose eroticism is more complicated than anyone ever let on to us eroticism could be. I love butch women because, in the face of ridiculously constricting gender imperatives, they have the balls to say

Fuck it -- and to carve into our culturally empty space a different and powerfully confrontive way to live as a woman.

And that turns me on. Though I still can't altogether explain why my lover's "masculinity" was what aroused me, it's clear that I like masculinity in women better than in men! (Just as I love femininity better in men than in women.) My second lover's tales of teenaged fast-car adventure, the kind of adventure I was never likely to have, got me incredibly hot. Hearing that she'd once driven a car through the wall of a house was not a stunt I wanted to repeat: It just made me want her to fuck me. The manifestations of our greatest difference, in fact, called up that response in me, as if fucking was the one way I could bridge our disparate experience. But butchness is not the same as masculinity -- it's a version of masculinity reflected in a wavy mirror, masculinity where our culture tells us not to look for it: in women, or in "macho" gay men, where a very male presentation throws a curveball -- a fey lilt to the voice or a hungry, upraised butt. Loving butchness amounts to an attraction to what's not "supposed" to be there.

"Female maleness," "female masculinity": These simplistic ways of reading butch energy do not entirely miss the mark, but they do mislead. Maleness isn't male on a female, honey -- it's something else again, a horse of another color, something our gender-impooverished language doesn't offer us words to describe.

I love butch women even if their butchness is nothing more than cussedness: "If there are only two ways to be in this world, I'll pick the other one." I love butch women because they make straight people nervous. I love butch women because they resist. And even if I'm decked out in Frederick's of Hollywood fluff, if I'm on the arm of a butch woman, you can see that I'm a gender-resistor, too.

STONE BUTCH BLUES

Leslie Feinberg

Chapter One

Dear Theresa,

I'm lying on my bed tonight missing you, my eyes all swollen, hot tears running down my face. There's a fierce summer lightning storm raging outside. Tonight I walked down streets looking for you in every woman's face, as I have each night of this lonely exile. I'm afraid I'll never see your laughing, teasing eyes again.

I had coffee in Greenwich Village earlier with a woman. A mutual friend fixed us up, since we're both "into politics." Well, we sat in a coffee shop and she talked about Democratic politics and seminars and photography and problems with her co-op and how she's so opposed to rent control. Small wonder -- Daddy is a real estate developer.

I was looking at her while she was talking, thinking to myself that I'm a stranger in this woman's eyes. She's looking at me but she doesn't see me. Then she finally said how she hates this society for what it's done to "women like me" who hate themselves so much they have to look and act like men. I felt myself getting flushed and my face twitched a little and I started telling her, all cool and calm, about how women like me existed since the dawn of time, before there was oppression, and how those societies respected them, and she got her very interested expression on -- and besides it was time to leave.

So we walked by a corner where these cops were laying into a homeless man and I stopped and mouthed off to the cops and they started coming at me with their clubs raised and she tugged my belt to pull me back. I just looked at her, and suddenly I felt things well up in me I thought I had buried. I stood there remembering you like I didn't see cops about to hit me, like I was falling back into another world, a place I wanted to go again.

And suddenly my heart hurt so bad and I realized how long it's been since my heart felt -- anything.

I need to go home to you tonight, Theresa. I can't. So I'm writing you this letter.

I remember years ago, the day I started working at the cannery in

Buffalo and you had already been there a few months, and how your eyes caught mine and played with me before you set me free. I was supposed to be following the foreman to fill out some forms but I was so busy wondering what color your hair was under that white paper net and how it would look and feel in my fingers, down loose and free. And I remember how you laughed gently when the foreman came back and said, “You comin’ or not?”

All of us he-shes were mad as hell when we heard you got fired because you wouldn’t let the superintendent touch your breasts. I still unloaded on the docks for another couple of days, but I was kind of mopey. It just wasn’t the same after your light went out.

I couldn’t believe it the night I went to the club on the West Side. There you were, leaning up against the bar, your jeans too tight for words and your hair, your hair all loose and free.

And I remember that look in your eyes again. You didn’t just know me, you liked what you saw. And this time, ooh woman, we were on our own turf. I could move the way you wanted me to, and I was glad we’d gotten all dressed up.

On our own turf...“Would you dance with me?”

You didn’t say yes or no, just teased me with your eyes, straightened my tie, smoothed my collar, and took me by the hand. You had my heart before you moved against me like you did. Tammy was singing “Stand By Your Man,” and we were changing all the he’s to she’s inside our heads to make it fit right. After you moved that way, you had more than my heart. You made me ache and you liked that. So did I.

The older butches warned me: if you wanted to keep your marriage, don’t go to the bars. But I’ve always been a one-woman butch. Besides, this was our community, the only one we belonged to, so we went every weekend.

There were two kinds of fights in the bars. Most weekends had one kind or the other, some weekends both. There were the fist fights between the butch women -- full of booze, shame, jealous insecurity. Sometimes the fights were awful and spread like a web to trap everyone in the bar, like the night Heddy lost her eye when she got hit upside the head with a bar stool.

I was real proud that in all those years I never hit another butch woman. See, I loved them too, and I understood their pain and their shame

because I was so much like them. I loved the lines etched in their faces and hands and the curves of their work-weary shoulders. Sometimes I looked in the mirror and wondered what I would look like when I was their age. Now I know!

In their own way, they loved me too. They protected me because they knew I wasn't a "Saturday-night butch." The weekend butches were scared of me because I was a stone he-she. If only they had known how powerless I really felt inside! But the older butches, they knew the whole road that lay ahead of me and they wished I didn't have to go down it because it hurt so much.

When I came into the bar in drag, kind of hunched over, they told me, "Be proud of what you are," and then they adjusted my tie sort of like you did. I was like them; they knew I didn't have a choice. So I never fought them with my fists. We clapped each other on the back in the bars and watched each other's backs at the factory.

But then there were the times our real enemies came in the front door: drunken gangs of sailors, Klan-type thugs, sociopaths and cops. You always knew when they walked in because someone thought to pull the plug on the jukebox. No matter how many times it happened, we all still went "Aw..." when the music stopped and then realized it was time to get down to business.

When the bigots came in, it was time to fight, and fight we did. Fought hard -- femme and butch, women and men together.

If the music stopped and it was the cops at the door, someone plugged the music back in and we switched dance partners. Us in our suits and ties paired off with our drag queen sisters in their dresses and pumps. Hard to remember that it was illegal then for two men or two women to sway together. When the music ended, the butches bowed, our femme partners curtsied, and we returned to our seats, our lovers, and our drinks to await our fates.

That's when I remember your hand on my belt, up under my suit jacket. That's where your hand stayed the whole time the cops were there. "Take it easy, honey. Stay with me, baby, cool off," you'd be cooing in my ear like a special lover's song sung to warriors who need to pick and choose their battles in order to survive.

MY LOVER IS A WOMAN

Lesléa Newman

Night On the Town

When I step into my red silk panties and swivel into
the matching strapless bra my butch bought me for Valentine's Day

When I slide on my black mesh stockings with toes pointed,
sitting on the edge of the bed like some Hollywood movie queen

When I shimmy into my spandex dress that sparkles and turns
over the tops of my thighs like a disco ball over a snappy crowd

When I puff on my pink clouds of blush, brush my eyelashes
long and lush, smear my lips and nails richer than ruby red

When I step into my sky high heels, snap on some shiny earrings
and slip seventeen silver bracelets halfway up my arm

When I dab my shoulders and neck, earlobes and wrists,
cleavage and thighs with thick, musky perfume

When I curl my hair into ringlets that dip over one eye
and bounce off my shoulder like a Clairol girl gone wild

When I turn from the mirror, pick up my purse
and announce to my butch that I'm ready to go

When I see her kick the door shut, hear her
declare, "We're not going anywhere, tonight"

When I whine and say, "But we never go out,"
following her back to the bedroom, my lips in a pout

When I give in and let her have her way
with me pretending that wasn't my plan all along

BUTCH IS A NOUN

S. Bear Bergman

What A Butch May Use

1. I keep a fountain pen in my pocket, full of green ink; snotty though you may think it is to collect something like fountain pens, I am nevertheless a writer. Though writers today are really more typists than people who indulge in an act of actual writing and perhaps need a new name, we still do write, or at least I do. I jot down notes with my fountain pen, I sign things with it, I use it to write postcards so that my friends across the country know at a glance which card is from me by the bold stroke of my shoddy penmanship made grand with emerald ink and a good nib. Carrying a Bic gets the job done, but the fountain pen gives it style, a little bit of Bond, and makes you stand out as someone who takes care with the details, makes people think you're the kind of butch who not only won't forget flowers but will know to trim the stems with the kitchen shears under running water and then put them in a vase with an aspirin you bring in your suitcoat pocket while she puts the finishing touches on her ensemble, but will not try to arrange them in any way. It seems like the kind of thing that goes with a basic understanding of the waltz, the stock market, the combustion engine, or all three, like the sort of item purchased and used by a butch who will not lose your number, who will call when she says she will, and who will never, ever leave you hanging on call waiting, who has in fact disabled call waiting, in case you call. The fountain pen belongs to the hopeless throwback, the romantic individual, the one who has Miss Manners' Guide to Life around the house and isn't afraid to use it.

2. In my pants pocket is a pocketknife, always; a modest battered little silver one I picked up at a flea market for four dollars and has sharpened down the row for a buck by a man named Buck, not coincidentally I imagine, and it gets a lot of use. You never know how frequently a pocketknife could come in handy until you start carrying one and realize that you have it out a dozen times a day, that someone nearby is practically always struggling to rip or tear something open with teeth, keys, fingernails, the back of an earring or bare hands, and that a butch

with a pocketknife can slide it out of her pocket, open it, and hand it over, handle first. A butch with a pocketknife -- not a candy-assed French brand that can't tolerate the oils of skin but an old workhorse that can be used to slice cheese, cardboard, rope, or anything else -- and who is willing to let others use it probably also has jumper cables for you, and a spare dry sweatshirt that's likely to fit, and will be perfectly happy and in fact quietly pleased to put on a jacket and shoes and go out and drive ten miles in the rain at night because you think you might like to have a slice of lemon pie, and will also remember that you like a glass of warm vanilla milk with it and will make sure that she picks some milk up on the way home against the possibility that you might happen to be out. The pocketknife belongs to the butch who deals in practicalities, in service, in capacity rather than intention, and if this butch cannot fix your wiring then she will arrange to have it done for you while you're at work one day, and think of this as a romantic surprise, which it is.

3. I wear cufflinks, which I consider a harmless affectation on my part. I wear them one pair at a time with my plain shirts and my heavy silk ties, a little bit of pizzazz at the ends of my sleeves. I consider them as I dress because I want to make sure my cufflinks match my mood, that they have the same feel as the outfit and the outing, and girls coo appreciatively over them, fondle my French cuffs and smile, take my hands and hold them up so they can see my cufflinks. I shop for these, sometimes at the same time I shop for jewelry for girls of my acquaintance, and for ties and socks and other accessories of life, things I use to make myself look sharp for dates, to convey that the extra step of care has been taken in my appearance. Buttoned cuffs are certainly perfectly serviceable, and if you remember to button your gauntlet button you're well on your way for sure, but a butch who wears cufflinks knows how to shop for jewelry and will present you with the loveliest, most surprising things; she will understand that you have seventeen pairs of black silk trousers and why. A butch who wears cufflinks will happily sit for an hour in her underwear on the sofa, reading, until you say, "Okay, sweetie, I'm almost ready," whereupon she knows it is time for her to dress in five minutes and get out of the way again, fastening her cufflinks in the kitchen and tying her tie in the reflection of the television and holding the right coat out for you when you appear from the bathroom, a vision of beauty, ready to leave. The cufflinks belong to

the butch who will buy you a scarf that matches either your eyes or your very favorite sweater exactly, and present it as merely the wrapping for another, more interesting, smaller box that turns out to contain something thoroughly delightful -- maybe a lemondrop, maybe a butterfly, maybe an engagement ring.

Your Faithful Servant

Let me take that for you. No, kiddo, you don't have to carry anything, you go right ahead and I'll just make a couple of trips. Get in the house where it's warm. It's not that heavy. I can get it. This is dirty, you don't want to touch it. I'll wrestle with it, if you could just get me a towel? Let me drop you off, it's raining pretty hard. I'll go get the car. It's not that cold. Sure, I can help you. Three flights of stairs isn't that much. You don't have to take the shuttle, I'll pick you up. Four a.m. isn't that early. It'll give me a good start on the rest of the day. It'll be nice to have your company. Let me drive. You worked all day. I'll get this check. No, no, you can get the next one. Did I say that last time? You can leave the tip, how about that. Just tell me what you want to do whenever you decide. Last minute is okay. See if any of the other things you'd rather do work out, and if not it'll be nice to see you. I don't mind, I want you to have what you want. Don't worry about that, I'll take care of it. Let me make a few calls for you. Hold on, I have the number right here. Did you want me to go with you? I'd be happy to; it's no trouble at all. Sure, I have time. I always have time for you. Here's an extra twenty bucks. Pay me back when you can. I don't want you driving around with no cash at all. Are you cold? Take my coat. No, it's not bad out. Here, I have an extra sweatshirt in the car. Go ahead and take the last of it. I'm not that hungry today. Call me any time, day or night. I just want you to understand that I'm here for whatever you need. Yup, I can give you directions. Sure, I have stamps. No, baby, that was great, just let me hold you know. Let me run out, it'll just take a second. I'll be back before you know it, and then you won't have to wait until morning. Sure, I'll look at it right now. It's no trouble. Sure, I can wait. Just let me know when you're ready, we can go. Sure, I'll come over and bring my tools. I don't mind. Sure, I have time. I always have time for you. Sure, whatever you need. Whatever you need. Me? I'm all set. Thanks, though.

BEYOND THE PALE

Elana Dykewomon

Stone Soup

From our makeshift tent, Rose and I could see the occasional shape of a girl walking by. We lay in the night heat listening. Branches and dry leaves crackled as they were added to late cooking fires. Laughter, bits of song and discussion floated on the humid air. A layer of perspiration enclosed me like a sticky soap bubble, making me feel that no matter how much I wanted to touch Rose, she'd find me unappealing. A firefly flew inside our sheet-wall. I watched it try to find its way out again, blinking through the shadows. Rose took my hand.

"No one will bother us here," she said.

"I'm covered with sweat."

She licked my arm slowly. "Yes," she said, "salty."

"I don't smell bad?"

"You smell better than dinner to a laid-off seamstress."

A light breeze came up the cliffs from the river and dried my arm where her tongue had been, giving me a shiver. I leaned up on my side and looked at her. There was just enough light from the moon and the camp lanterns to see by. Her hair was pinned up off her neck and I could make out the small mole below her ear. She was wearing her lightest cotton slip, twisting tight across the mound of her belly. Sometimes her body seemed as far away was the moon when I watched her cleaning up on Essex Street or coming out of work with her friends. But tonight the moonlight was in the river and I could dip my hand in and drink it if I dared.

"Maybe I don't smell so good to you?" she asked. Her eyes, which had echoed the July sky all day, were gray in the dark. Even so I could see, now that I was looking at her body, her confidence leak away. I put my nose close to her armpit.

"You smell like the plum orchards of Bessarabia."

"You're a liar."

"You accuse me, your own family, of lying?" I poked her side lightly and she poked me back.

"At the very least, a flatterer," she said pressing her hand against my arm.

“I know what I smell, and you smell delicious.” I put my face under her breasts, resting on the upward curve of her stomach. In fact, we both smelled sweaty and smoky. How she really smelled was familiar and strange at the same time, the smell of a freshly bound leather folio, compelling. “Rose --”

“Yes?”

I turned my face up to look at her. “Would you take your slip off?”

She looked at me intently and we both sat up. All these years, we’d never lain naked together. We’d hardly seen each other’s bodies unclothed except for the few seconds between pulling off our skirts and putting on our nightgowns, and when we let our towels loosen in the baths. I could feel a stone poking in my thigh through the featherbed. I didn’t care. From a few directions I could hear soft moans but no footsteps.

Rose heard the moans too and smiled. “Yes,” she said as she pulled the slip over her arms. She folded it neatly. “Now you.”

I peeled mine off and used it to wipe the sweat from my face before I threw it in the corner. Sitting, Rose’s flesh made a generous fold above her belly. I slid my hand under the fold and squeezed her flesh upward lightly. Rose’s eyelids trembled, her lips parted as an “aaah” crept up her throat, and then she opened her eyes wide, as if she were frightened.

“Rose,” I said, leaning close to her ear, “you are my heart’s desire.”

“Flatterer,” she mumbled into my cheek, relaxing as she kissed me. Then we were prone again, naked on our bedrolls. And scared. Strangers surrounded us. Yet we were also beyond fear -- the shop girls’ camp was like a wall protecting us against our ordinary tenement life. I loved her softness, the resiliency of her flesh when I pressed my palm into it, the way a mossy riverbank springs back from your step. I rolled over on her body.

“I’m not too heavy like this?” I could feel the pressure of my chest flattening her breasts.

“No, you feel good.”

We were sweating so profusely that I slid against her. I swayed into that sliding sensation, holding myself up on my wrists, back and forth, my small breasts tickling the pillowy surface of hers. We giggled when I guided my nipple exactly onto her nipple, and they both puckered, taking

on the shape of ancient towers. I started to rock, my thighs slipping up and down hers. She pushed her belly up hard into mine and rocked with me.

“Put your whole weight on me again,” she whispered.

I fell into her mouth, grabbing her thighs for balance. We kissed and swayed, slipping. My feet tilted off her calves and curled back around her toes. Between my thighs the sweat gave way to a different stickiness and behind my shut eyes a bright green flashed, seesawing my focus between mouths and lower limbs. Our legs tightened together, straining into each other, as if we wanted to get beneath the thin cover of our skins or melt the skin together, like candle wax. In a corner of my mind I could see the havdalah candles I made as a child, felt my hands braiding the warm wax while it was pliant, two wicks intertwining, mingling with the sharp smell of the spicebox.

I opened my eyes to watch her face as she filled, moving beyond self-consciousness, moving with me. I arched to let one hand move between our bodies, supporting myself on my other arm. Rose seemed to hold her breath. I rubbed the curly hair below her belly, tugging it lightly until she gasped, and opened her eyes.

“Anything,” she breathed, “anything you want.”

“Anything you want,” I echoed with the same urgency, “--everything.” I turned my hand sideways, holding the fingers tightly together, and entered the folds of her as I might slice through the uncut leaves of a book. I closed my eyes again, listening. Rose was taking short, hungry breaths and I could feel the rhythm of her breathing in the pulse I felt coming up through her inside lips. I turned my hand again so that two fingers stroked her small mound. We called it the inner nipple, since it grew larger and harder when we excited each other and seemed connected to our other nipples by an invisible thread of flame. Rose grabbed my arm. Her grip was strong from years of sewing and carrying, and I felt almost faint from the pressure, from flooding. Rose was moaning and for the first time I didn’t feel a need to shush her. I heard myself groan as I slipped the two fingers deep inside her and she tightened her muscles around me, claspng me as I shook and pumped.

For a moment Rose seemed to stop breathing altogether. Her muscles grabbed my fingers tight and her hips strained upward from the featherbed while her head rolled back. Then she gave a cry and jerked, gasping for air, relaxing and then squeezing my fingers and crying out a

second, a third time. I felt my interior muscles contracting with hers, and cried out too. Then she collapsed in on herself.

Her laughter surprised me. At home she often pushed a pillow over her head when we got this far, to stifle any noise. I pulled my hand out. A thin film made a web between my thumb and forefinger. I held it to my nose and sniffed, smiling at her strong smell, which carried a faint scent of the herring we'd eaten for dinner.

She took my hand put it to her lips, kissing my fingers. "You are a blessing, Chava, my blessing."

Far away I heard another girl laughing -- because of listening to us or her own pleasure? I rolled back onto my side, wiping my hand on the bottom sheet of our makeshift tent. Then I lay in her arm, nuzzling her breast slowly. What a pleasure to be naked. Rose stroked my hair, murmuring deep in her throat.

"And you?" she asked after awhile.

"I'm completely satisfied," I said.

"Completely?" she asked, moving her fingers down to the hair of my vee.

"Completely," I said, stopping her exploration. All I wanted was to lie there in the calm, feeling the liquid surface of my skin suffused with her body.

"All right, if you say so."

We played with each other's fingers for maybe a minute, maybe twenty. Every once in awhile I opened my eyes and saw the firefly blink.

"Would you like to hear a story?" Rose asked after a long silence.

"Yes." I felt some tender place tear open, an unused room, where the doorway was covered in cobwebs. Someone rediscovered it, clearing the debris, opening the shutters, bringing in the world. This was a welcome change, yet each cobweb was attached to a nerve in my breast bone and ached as it was wrenched away.

"Do you know the story about stone soup?" Rose asked.

"Stone soup?" I moved my hand down her side, stroking and pressing into her sweet fatness. Of course I knew the story. Who didn't? Mama used to tell us.

"You know, where the beggar comes to town and asks for something to eat --"

"A woman or man beggar?"

“I don’t remember woman beggars at home, but for now we’ll make it a woman, if you like.”

“I like.”

“Fine,” Rose said. “So the beggar got thrown out of the first town she went to. The people threw rocks at her. She picked up one of the rocks and put it in a small velvet pouch she had found the week before.”

“Where?”

“In the woods, near where the deer live.”

“Did the deer make it for her?”

“I don’t know, Chava. She found it, that’s all.” Rose poked me in the side. “Anyway, she comes to the next town and this time shows off her magic stone, which, the beggar bragged, you could put into a pot with some water and make the most delicious soup in the world.”

“What town was it?” I asked, remembering Russia.

“Chava, it doesn’t make any difference. Let’s say it was -- it was a shtetl, just a little bump of a town like you could see for a minute from the train.”

“Okay, the shtetl of Bump,” I said, tickling her knee.

“You’re impossible,” she said, swatting my hand. “Do you want to hear this story or not?”

“Very much.”

“Then let me tell it,” she said, ruffling my hair. “So in the shtetl of Bump the women all gathered around the beggar woman to see the stone. The beggar held up the velvet bag with a big lump in it. ‘From this bag it must go directly into water,’ the beggar said. ‘Ah, if only I had a kettle of water.’

“Then one of the townswomen ran home for her kettle. ‘But the water must be boiling,’ the beggar said. And so the women built a fire and filled the pot with water from their pumps. When the water was boiling, the beggar woman circled the pot with her velvet pouch, mumbling words in a language the townspeople had never heard before. Then she made a quick gesture and the rock flew into the boiling water.

“‘Did you see that?’ the women said to each other --”

“But they hadn’t really seen anything, had they?” I asked. I looked beyond Rose’s breast and could see that now there were two fireflies in the tent, winking at each other in the dark. Something crawled over my toe and I simply flicked it off. Rose nodded and continued.

“‘Ah,’ the beggar said, bending over the pot, ‘this is going to be delicious, if I do say so myself. But --.’ The beggar took a big sniff. ‘What?’ asked a housewife. ‘Well, if we could throw in some carrots, this soup would rival my grandmother’s, of blessed memory.’”

“So the woman found some carrots, right?”

“Of course. And then onions, celery, salt, and finally a chicken. One after another, the townspeople ran and got whatever the beggar woman suggested. Finally, the beggar said, ‘One last thing, and the soup will be done.’”

“What else could she need?” I nestled into Rose even more closely and she pressed back. Not a blade of grass would have found a passage between our bodies.

“Bowls and spoons, of course. And there was enough for everyone in the village as well as the beggar to eat their fill. When they were done, the beggar reached into the pot and pulled out her stone, which of course was gleaming from the soup and the chicken fat.”

The fireflies appeared to be dancing for each other, signaling in some code I thought it might be possible to understand. “It was a miracle,” I yawned.

“That’s what the townspeople thought. A miracle that soup so good could be made from just a stone.” Rose paused and ran the back of her hand along my cheek. I nibbled at her fingers with my lips but my eyes were too heavy to keep open.

“Sweet dreams, my darling,” were the last words I heard Rose say.

PERSISTENCE: ALL WAYS BUTCH AND FEMME

Coming Back Around to Butch

Miriam Zoila Pérez

My first real girl-crush was a butch. Well, she didn't call herself that (and maybe never has), and she was in the closet (just like I was), but it was something about her short hair, expertly chosen jeans and T-shirts, boyish lines, and masculine sensibilities that drew me to her. When D and I met, I still believed there was an imaginary line down the middle of the clothing store that meant only the right side was for me. She was the fashion role model I'd never had and even took me to buy my first baseball cap.

I'd ignored minor crushes like these for years: my thirteen-year-old mind wandering to thoughts of kissing my drama teacher and seventeen-year-old me secretly wanting to kiss my math tutor. But this one I couldn't ignore, even though it was more than two years of friendship before my feelings for her finally forced me to come out.

The line between wanting to date her and wanting to look like her felt tenuous, and looking back, I'm pretty sure any attempts at being sexual would have failed miserably. But my complicated feelings for D taught me this crucial lesson: I needed to figure out who I wanted to be before I could figure out who I wanted to be with.

I was barely a dyke then, let alone butch, but it was the lure of female masculinity that drew me out and into the queer world. When I was coming out, butch was no longer new. There was both popular knowledge and an underground cultural understanding of what it meant to be butch -- and there were books written from both perspectives. I may not have known it intimately, as a late-blooming queer who grew up in an extremely straight southern-US town, but I knew enough to feel self-conscious about claiming butchness.

You see, I was never a tomboy. There, I said it. I was never a goddamn tomboy; I never resisted the dresses my mom wanted me to wear, never hid in my dad's closet trying on his clothes. I did gender conformity without any real fight, and when I came out to my mom, she used it against me -- "But you were always so feminine!"

Maybe I didn't have the fight in me, maybe I wanted to fit in more

than I wanted to know myself, but until I was well past twenty, I wore my hair long, with earrings dangling, and makeup on my face. I wore spaghetti-strap tank tops and flowing skirts. I flaunted my cleavage.

The butch narrative I had absorbed, the one I began to furtively read about as I came out, wasn't mine. I wasn't a rough-and-tumble butch kid, all scabby knees and hardness, fighting against mom over Sunday dresses. I wasn't good at sports, didn't have trouble being friends with girls, didn't feel more "boy" than "girl." So when I slowly started easing toward the masculine side of the spectrum, I was self-conscious as hell. I felt like an impostor. I felt like a phony. I had similar feelings when I came out as lesbian, but my fantasies about women quickly assuaged my fears of being a queer fraud.

With my gender presentation, I couldn't get over the feeling that I was trying too hard. Even as I slowly shed the layers of femininity in my presentation, the self-consciousness still affected what labels I used. I knew what butch was, and I still felt it couldn't be me. I had dated men. I wore a pink dress to prom. I was short and chubby and more giggly than tough.

It was a fierce femme who bossy-bottomed me into the role of butch top. It was easy to be the butch to C's femme, and she delighted in my enjoyment of her high heels, pretty dresses, and makeup. In those moments, when my insecurity was stronger than my sense of self, the contrast between my budding masculinity and her strong, well-articulated femininity were just what I needed to feel whole, strong, even butch. C didn't change me, exactly, but our gender-play heavy sex gave me room to figure out what my gender could look like in those private spaces we shared.

There are people who believe you can't be butch without a femme, that you need the two ends of the spectrum all the time to be in balance. For me, that was only half-true. I did need the strength of my lover's femininity to bring me into my own identity. I did need the contrast with her to let me see myself. But now that I'm there, I haven't forgotten the tomboys I had crushes on in the early days. I still fantasize about fucking them -- but now, not exactly as a girl. I needed my own sense of gender first so that I could come back to them.

We were at T's mom's apartment in Los Angeles the first time I painted her nails. I took the cheap, runny fire-engine red polish out of the

bathroom cabinet and into the bedroom, kneeling on the scratchy carpet at the foot of the bed. T sat at the edge of the mattress, and I took each of her fingers into my hand, carefully removing the old chipped pearl-coloured polish she had messily applied herself. The acetone stung my nostrils, and I inhaled the scents of sleepovers and beauty parlors as I covered each nail with the bright red polish. You wouldn't know it by looking at us, but I, with my short hair, white undershirt, and men's jeans, was the expert manicurist in the room. T, with her chin-length curly hair, eye shadow, and purple low-cut blouse was the newbie to all things girly.

I'd had years of practice painting nails -- my own and others -- I had countless manicures and pedicures under my belt, courtesy of my mom, a once-a-week regular at the nail salon. After years of keeping my nails painted and long (between compulsive bouts of nail biting), I was happy to save my skills for a girlfriend-pampering session. T was impressed by my skillful use of the nail polish applicator, and I had a good excuse to worship her feet.

T and I both play with gender, and sometimes our orbits seem to be on opposite sides of the universe. But butch-femme doesn't really suit us, even though gender play propels our relationship. The first time sex between T and I was ever really good -- you know, the room-spinning, grin-plastering, sweaty kind -- I gave our gender play credit.

It was Halloween, a holiday second only to Pride for its ability to release us queers from convention and let the real divas and dappers out for a night on the town. I had been using Halloween as an excuse to do just that for the last few years, and each time, my drag became more convincing and less of a costume. T also used it as an excuse to dress in full rockabilly femme gear: black dress with deep cleavage, high heels, and red lipstick -- the works. We were glued together that night, making out on the dance floor of the crowded bar, my tube-sock-enhanced package against her bare thigh. Later, when we finally undressed in the privacy of my room, the awkwardness fell away, propelled by the intensity of the night out as our better selves. We might not be a conventional butch-femme couple, but I'll be damned if our gender play isn't hot as hell.

It was almost a year before I talked to anyone other than my first girlfriend about gender. We'd actually just broken up when I met S -- who I affectionately referred to as my gender friend -- at a conference in

Massachusetts. S and I were walking through the lobby after a few beers at the hotel bar when the conversation turned to shopping. We bonded over the difficulty of finding clothing to fit our frames -- short and on the chubby side -- when we wanted to wear mostly men's clothes.

That conference was an exhilarating weekend of bits and pieces of gender conversation, something I was starved for after hesitantly coming out as genderqueer to my girlfriend only a year before. When the weekend was over, S gave me a business card with her contact info and a note scribbled on the back: *Don't forget to share outfits through the mail. I need more faggy butches in my life.*

Faggy butch was good. It accurately described my pink button-down shirts, my giggles, the fact that I talk with my hands. I once saw a tape of myself in which I made a gesture that looked more like it belonged in *A Chorus Line* than in the middle of an interview. Faggy butch was like genderqueer -- not quite this or that, a little of both, maybe. A friend once said to me, "I access my femininity through my masculinity."

I feel lucky to have grown up in a world with butch pioneers, and I feel lucky that I had an idea about what being butch might have meant. But instead of making me feel part of the community, these constructions of what butch was -- stereotypes, really -- pushed me away from the word and the identity. Instead, I chose a newer term, genderqueer, which had yet to be defined; it was in flux, it was a new frontier. I may not have been butch "enough," but genderqueer was all mine to rewrite and redefine.

I still like the word "genderqueer," still claim it and own it and love the way it makes room for me, in all my complexities. But I'm coming back around to butch. Maybe it's because the years of pink prom dresses are further and further behind me, maybe it's because I'm learning from butch elders who talk in terms that make room for me, giggles and all. Maybe it's also because the people I know have no idea (unless I tell them) that I was never a tomboy. They only know me -- my short hair, tightly bound chest, and button-down shirts.

I think that every new generation feels the need to reject their elders, reject what came before them, and feel that they are the new gender rebels. We invent terms, we create new spaces, and sometimes, we come back to where our big brothers started -- home.

Never Be Hungry Again
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

I know what femme is, and it's about honour.

Femmes are my oxygen. My water. I have fallen for queer masculinity that still gets it up for femmes since I was sixteen, but you, you are my daily love letter. You are my Trader Joe's dried chili mango, \$1.99 in my purse, every day. Something sweet and fiery and full of flavour; I can reach for it, and it will feed me, sustain me, keep me going. Every day, gorgeous, perfect, needed. I reach for you. Femmes are my wealth. If I shine, it's because of you.

When I met you, I fell in love with you utterly. Never wanted to fuck you, not once (didn't let myself), but I fell in fierce, femme, best-friend-forever love with you. Dizzy. Delish. Tasty. Luscious. All the words that are satisfying in your mouth.

I friend-dated you. Prepped my outfits careful because I knew you would notice every little thing about them, love them best. Got myself ready like I got myself ready for dates with lovers, ready to be on and perfect and attentive. The first time we hung out, your teal suede pointy flats matched my teal knotted peep-toe slight heels, and it felt like a sign. We lay giggling in your Craigslist four-poster iron bed heaped with pillows and scarves from the homelands. Took two hours to get our outfits together, three to put on five layers of eyeshadow, were five hours late to pick up the shark we were trying to bust out of her horrible relationship, who was pissed, tapping her foot waiting on the corner. Made it to the gay Arab club on Market and 6th, and dirty danced together like it wasn't a thing.

You disappeared, and I found you chain-smoking outside, flirting with that Tunisian butch union organizer. One of us got finger fucked through the crotch hole of her fishnets in the corner. But the best part of the night was the silent smooth ride home in your black Honda Accord that had nothing wrong with it. Together, dizzy and happy from the night out, safe and alive. Whichever one of us was less drunk would get us home over the bridge safe. I got it down, memorized how to drive home next to everyone else drunk-driving home to Oakland. The quiet -- us next to each other after a night of being drunk wild girls with some kind of uncertain wind between our thighs -- it's all I needed. That was what I

loved about us: that we were drunk and insane and loving, screaming, laughing, half-naked brown girls. It's just like Lisa Jones said. Give me an army, a gang of girls. A million sistas ain't enough.

My pack, my prayer, my everyday, my everyday till it blows up and out. Sometimes I feel like I've been writing the same story since I started writing, about love that stays and love that blows up no matter how careful you tend it.

...

When you left me for good, I mourned for you worse than I had for lost lovers. Because femmes are each other's wealth. Riches. Gold and fake gems that glint purple, amber. Food in the pantry. Massage on tired brown limbs. The effortless bliss of each other. My rock, my oxygen, my dearest and most passionate love.

You left, and I am hungry. And I will feed myself and feed others and be fed. But part of the hunger's consummation is this. Because femme is about honour. And I honour this love.

What We Know To Be True
Sasha T. Goldberg

When we wake up together in Brooklyn, we are three thousand miles away from our daily lives on the West Coast, and I already know that I am in love with her. We have slept facing East, and sunrise, Jerusalem, farther; the morning light streams in through the thin curtains, and when I open my eyes I can see her smiling at me. We have grown close to one another, and then closer; I look at this smile of hers, and I think that maybe she has started to see her future in me. That night we celebrate Shabbat with her family, and then we return to bed, to celebrate with each other.

This is a simple Jewish story and a simple love story. A nice Jewish boy meets a nice Jewish girl in the woods, and they start what seems to be a summer camp romance, only it holds, and through the campfire flirtation, they become an us. But their story here is also between two queers, and this infuses each layer: My butch self to her femme self, my tattoos against her bare skin, the glasses that we each have to take off when we kiss, my white T-shirt against her black slip, and my palms, pressed into hers, fingers entwined; all of the ways that love has threaded itself between us, the most simple and complex of revelations.

Before we know each other well, and before we tell each other our stories, and before I am hers, and she is mine, there is the beginning, and in the beginning I walk across the room to talk to her. She is on one side, and I am on the other, and I am immediately drawn to her, compelled. And then there is also the act of standing near her: there is this deep flash of recognition between us, this low hum just below the surface. There is this feeling of familiarity and ease underneath all the words that we are saying, and all the words that we are not saying -- and this feeling between us is like speaking a second language, like speaking the language of our homeland, uncovered. Right from the start, this standing near her, it leaves me wanting more.

The desire is pronounced: I realize that I have started looking for her every time I enter a room. That night we share our first Shabbat dinner together, and though we are in a dining hall with a sea of people, I can only see her. I am watching the way she moves, the way she stands, the way she holds herself; it's so familiar that I don't need to say the word

femme, and watching her feels like watching my history, like I'm watching everything I know in this world. I do not know, yet, that I will start to see my future in her; I do know that I want to be near her, and that is an unmistakable feeling.

When I kiss her for the first time, the air is cold outside, the kind of dark and cold and crisp and clear that only happens at night in the country. We have been sitting together outdoors, finally alone. We stare at the moon, and we have the conversation that takes us from this to that, and before I take her to my room I tell her that we can do whatever she wants, and I mean it. And so we are sitting side by side on the twin bed, facing each other, talking, the left side of my body and the right side of her body touching, and I kiss her, sitting just like that; I touch her face, and I kiss her, and she kisses me back, and she makes a sound. That sound that she makes, that sound is like no other, and it undoes me.

After that first kiss, she asks, "So this is what I missed at summer camp?" and I laugh and tell her, yes, this is what you missed -- but I do not say that it's what I missed, too. She is referring, quite literally, to the fact that she never went to summer camp -- and I did go to summer camp, but I can also remember the feeling of what it was like to be shamed, afterward, by a letter of proposed dismissal, the punishment for knowing myself so well, so young. And besides, girls like this girl, this girl sitting on my bed now, in the middle of these woods, girls like her didn't exist back then. Instead of explaining all of this, I kiss her again, and we begin to make up for lost time.

I put my arms around her waist and I pull her to me, the thick red wool of my shirt pressed against the thin red cotton of her shirt, my hand on her stockinged thigh, her legs next to my legs, against the denim of my jeans. Though we barely know each other, right then, she puts her hands on the back of my neck, on my arms, against the flat of my chest, and she lets me kiss her until we could be anywhere, or everywhere. I kiss her until I can feel the hands of the clock starting to move backward. Isn't this the way it was always supposed to be?

Later, she tells me that she has spent years looking for this, years spent searching for a butch who could reflect her *femme* self back to her. Years of going to queer parties where the only celebrated femininity was the femininity attached to male pronouns, years of feeling invisible as a *femme*. Years of being dismissed because she still didn't want to date

men, even if those men were declared female at birth. When she tells me that she is finally getting her heels fixed, the ones that have been sitting broken for so long, I understand. I am lying in the dark, listening, and I can hear the second hand on my watch keeping time; all those years she wanted someone to stand with her and revel in each perfectly measured high-heeled step to the subway.

On the night that I invite her to my home, I have the distinct feeling that I am done for, but I don't tell her so. As I am falling asleep with her for the first time, I forget that this is new between us; it is suddenly as if she has always been there, right there with me, all along. I do not remember to guard myself against this feeling; caught between being asleep and awake, between then and now, I wrap my arms around her and ask if we can have a really big breakfast in the morning. And that's when I know. The next morning, over breakfast, we stare at each other. After that, we make a habit of this staring.

I tell her that I have spent years looking too, first as a young butch hoping to find people like me, looking for the women like the ones in those books about lesbian "history," then feeling saved by the reflection that femmes offered to me and, finally, finding other butches, generations of bulldaggers who could give me a glimpse of my own existence.

And I tell her that I know about the parties -- years of queer parties where the default pronouns have all become male, and that I feel erased and exhausted from having to explain that my butch identity is not for use on a "transmasculine spectrum"; that my butch identity does not have a "slash" or an "and" or an "or" attached; that butch is a valid stand-alone identity with a proud lesbian history -- and doesn't anyone know this history anymore? I am really going at it now, but she tells me she understands; all of those years, we have both just been waiting to be seen.

When I look at the photos of our time in Brooklyn, they are gorgeous. We are in the park, and though it is only mid-May, the photos promise the first days of summer: bright, green, endless. The photos show us as we were, beaming, together in the sun, her soft fingertips resting on my shoulder, my arm around her waist. It is a moment in time, captured, and one that makes clear what we know to be true; by the time I look at the photos, we have already spoken of love.

When I see photos of myself lately, especially photos taken in the bright sun, I have started to notice the lines around my eyes. And just last

year the grey hair started to come in, and that's when I realized, with certainty, that I really was going to grow up to look like one of those old bulls, and my heart swelled with pride. Looking again at the photos of her and me together, I can see every photo that came before, every black-and-white snapshot, all of the butches and femmes that gave way to this story. This is a simple Jewish story, and a simple love story. It is a butch-femme story. This is the story of reaching for one another across the bellows of time on an accordion, bending and expanding our history and our present, and our future. In this story, time again becomes a faithful companion; we are sustained and redeemed by the reflection of what we know to be true. And perhaps, most of all, it is an old story: On all counts, the desire persists.

Split Myself Apart
Redwolf Painter

Sometimes I wonder if I can split myself in half or pick the parts I want to be white and the ones I want to be Indian. Can I name my almond-shaped eyes white and my right popping and creaking knee Indian? Can I pick my light skin, name it Indian and call my high cheekbones, which squeeze my eyes shut when I smile wide, white? Can I tear myself apart and put myself back together to name what part of me is butch and what part trans? My right eyebrow butch and my large chest trans. And if I can choose the parts of my body that belong to each identity, can I choose which ones fight each other for the right to be here, take up space, and be recognized?

My grandparents lived across the street from Totem Park, a historical battlefield, thick with totem poles carved by Native folk to commemorate the deaths that occurred there. Russians, with their Aleut slaves, and Tlingit all died trying to claim their right to be in this particular spot where the Tlingit people had lived for at least 10,000 years. Sometimes I walked alone through the totems, imagining what each pole meant rather than reading the signs underneath them, wondering why I was never taught how to read a totem or speak Tlingit, feeling the weight of each story coursing in my veins.

Grandma and I would occasionally walk through the park together, her telling me stories about growing up on the Native side of town, about living with brown skin, and about the deaths of family members too tired to continue being Native, eventually taking their own lives through alcohol or suicide. She often reminded me to hold my head up high when people made derogatory remarks about my mixed-up, mixed-blood family, made even more complicated by my father's Aleut and Russian blood. As we walked through the battlefield, searching for arrowheads or remnants of the story, Grandma would say, "Don't you ever forget that our people fought and died here defending our home. Don't you forget your heritage, you hear me? You be proud of our Indian blood: hold your head up high." How could I forget? I was constantly reminded when I looked in the mirror or saw the scars on my family's carapace, marking the passing of another alcoholic.

My move to San Francisco was a conscious choice, one made to

help me come out of the closet and own my space in the world. Little did I know how ill-equipped I was, coming from a small Alaskan island with seventeen miles of road. I'd grown up facing the ocean, with mountains at my back. I spent time alone surrounded by trees, with a good book and whatever I could gather for food for the day -- sometimes salmonberries, blueberries, red huckleberries, thimbleberries, beach peas and goose tongue. Every day, I was reminded that my tiny life was nothing to a land so vast and unforgiving.

The constant influx and outflow of people, cars, and things to do in San Francisco left me somewhat breathless with excitement and fear at first. In time, though, culture shock wore off and I took root. I found myself searching every crowd for a glimpse of a familiar set of jowls and almond-shaped eyes, wondering why white folks seemed to think they could ask me things like, "What are you?" I wondered if they knew whether they were asking about my race or gender -- or both?

One day, I got a newsletter that mentioned a gathering of a group of Bay Area Tlingits. I was ecstatic at the thought of seeing familiar features, of being seen as Native, the way I was back home. So I called and introduced myself as a recently relocated two-spirit looking for other Tlingits. Only to not be called back. My hurt and anger surprised me, even though a part of me knew that being queer and open about it might be a problem.

There is a roar inside me I have choked off more times than I care to count. A place of duality that I neither fully understand nor want to claim because it seems easier to blend in. This place is so deeply rooted inside me; sometimes I wonder at the Creator's sense of humour. I'm both Indian and white, man and woman. My light skin, hair, and eyes may have made it easy to blend into the crowds in San Francisco -- at least until I got in the sun -- so it must have been my punk gender ambiguity that caused some people to cross the street to avoid me.

One day, flanked by rows of condoms, harnesses, dildos, lube, porn, *SM 101*, *The Topping Book*, and the slew of other sex toys and goodies that the Good Vibrations store where I worked had to offer, a few of my coworkers tried to get me to accept the identity "butch," pointing at the way I'm often mistaken for a boy. Maybe it's a result of growing up with strong women of colour, or maybe it's that Alaska doesn't have a defined set of rules for what you are allowed to wear or do based on your

gender, or maybe it was the fact that the men in my family would never, ever talk to a woman the way I saw butches talking to or about femmes, it didn't matter; if being butch meant I had to treat women or anyone as callously as I'd seen butches treat women, I wanted nothing to do with it.

After a friend/coworker and I unboxed a new shipment of porn and toys, we headed outside to smoke and chat. Over the last couple of weeks, she had been telling me about a two-spirit community she did ceremonies with and formally invited me to my first sweat. As we two punks -- sporting different coloured Mohawks and ragged, worn-out clothes that showed our tattoos and piercings -- sat on the sidewalk discussing spirituality, my friend suddenly brought up my unwillingness to claim the term "butch." I asked her why she wanted to be identified with folks who wore misogyny on their sleeves, with an identity that was quantified into comparative statements of worth, as in, "You aren't as butch as so-and-so."

She sighed, told me to read *Stone Butch Blues*, and then got up and left me sitting alone on the sidewalk.

I had identified with very few books, up to this point in my life. *Stone Butch Blues* was the second such book. While it is not the sum total of who I am, butch is a place inside me, it's part of the whole. The battle of quantification still haunts me in various forms, as I try to define what part is white (the deep red-brown my skin gets in the sun), what part is butch (my large hips), what part is Indian (my blue eyes), and what part is two-spirit (my birth name).

I feel like I am just beginning to understand the place inside me that slides back and forth from man to woman, as two-spirit implies. As a child, I wandered Totem Park making up stories to go with the totem poles. I had no foundation; my family was too tired from surviving colonialism to tell me the stories I needed to hear. Since then, I have been seeking the stories out one by one, listening to them and creating my own history (Tlingit, Aleut, Russian) and definitions (two-spirit, trans, butch) upon which to stand.

FEMME SHARK MANIFESTO!
Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

FEMME SHARKS DON'T EAT OUR OWN.
FEMME SHARKS LIKE TO EAT, THOUGH.
FEMME SHARKS RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES COME IN ALL
KINDS OF SIZES AND EACH KIND IS LUSCIOUS. WE WORK
TOWARD LOVING OUR CURVY, FAT, SKINNY, SUPERSIZE,
THICK, DISABLED, BLACK AND BROWN FINE-ASS BODIES
EVERY DAY. WE REALIZE THAT LOVING OURSELVES IN A
RACIST/SEXIST/HOMO/TRANSPHOBIC/ABLEIST/CLASSIST
SYSTEM IS AN EVERYDAY ACT OF WAR AGAINST THAT
SYSTEM. FEMME SHARKS DON'T THINK ANOREXIA IS CUTE.
WE THINK EATING A BIG-ASS MEAL IS SEXY.
WE SAY SCREW "HEIGHT-WEIGHT PROPORTIONATE PLEASE"
IN CRAIGSLIST WOMEN-SEEKING-WOMEN ADS AND IN LIFE.

WE HAVE BIG MOUTHS AND WE KNOW HOW TO USE THEM.
DON'T FUCK WITH US! ASK US IF WE WANT TO FUCK,
THOUGH!

FEMME SHARKS WILL RECLAIM THE POWER AND DIGNITY OF
FEMALENESS BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.
WE'RE GIRLS BLOWN UP, TURNED INSIDE OUT, AND REMIXED.

FEMME SHARKS ARE OVER WHITE QUEERS' OBLIVIOUSNESS
TO QUEER OF COLOUR, TWO SPIRIT, AND TRANS OF COLOUR
LIVES.

WE KNOW THAT WE ARE A CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE.
WE'RE OVER WHITE FEMMES AND BUTCHES WHO THINK
THAT FEMME ONLY COMES IN THE COLOUR OF BARBIE.
WE'RE OVER BUTCHES AND BOYS AND OTHER FEMMES
TELLING US WHAT WE NEED TO DO, WEAR, OR BE IN ORDER
TO BE "REALLY FEMME."

FEMME SHARKS RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES, BUTCHES,
GENDERQUEER, AND TRANS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN IN
COMMUNITIES OF COLOUR SINCE FOREVER.
THAT BEFORE COLONIZATION WE WERE SEEN AS SACRED
AND WE WERE SOME OF THE FIRST FOLKS MOST VIOLENTLY
ATTACKED WHEN OUR LANDS WERE INVADED AND
COLONIZED. FEMME SHARKS WON'T REST UNTIL WE
RECLAIM OUR POSITIONS AS BELOVED FAMILY WITHIN OUR
COMMUNITIES.

FEMME SHARKS AREN'T JUST DIMEPIECES AND TROPHY
WIVES.

FUCK THAT!

WE MIGHT BE YOUR GIRL,
BUT WE'RE OUR OWN FEMMES.

WE RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE LEADERS OF OUR
COMMUNITIES.

WE HOLD IT DOWN, CALM YOUR TEARS, ORGANIZE THE
RALLY, VISIT YOU IN JAIL, GET CHILDCARE HOOKED UP,
LOAN YOU TWENTY DOLLARS.

FEMMES ARE WELDERS, AFTERSCHOOL TEACHERS,
ABORTION CLINIC WORKERS, STRIPPERS, WRITERS, FACTORY
WORKERS, MOMS, REVOLUTIONARIES DEDICATED TO TAKING
THE SYSTEM THE HELL DOWN SO WE CAN BE FREE!

FEMMES ARE LEADERS IN TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS/
DEFENDING OUR QUEER AND TRANS OF COLOUR
COMMUNITIES.

WE USED OUR STILETTOS AS WEAPONS AT STONEWALL.

WE WERE THE TRANS WOMEN WHO FOUGHT BACK AT THE
COMPTON CAFETERIA.

WE'RE THE GIRLS WHO STARE DOWN ASSHOLES STARING AT
OUR LOVERS AND FRIENDS ON THE SUBWAY.

WE WALK EACH OTHER HOME,

ACT CRAZY ON THE BUS TO GET ASSHOLES TO MOVE AWAY,
AND KNOW HOW TO BREAK SOMEONE'S LEGS.

WE SHARE WHAT WE KNOW.

FEMME SHARKS STAND UP FOR THE NEW JERSEY FOUR AND EVERY OTHER QUEER AND TRANS PERSON OF COLOUR IN THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX FOR DEFENDING OUR LIVES. WE BELIEVE IN SELF-DEFENSE AND SELF-DETERMINATION. WE BELIEVE THAT WE HAVE A RIGHT TO DEFEND OURSELVES AND OUR COMMUNITIES AGAINST ANY KIND OF ATTACK -- FROM ASSHOLES ON THE STREET TO RACIST WHITE CLUB OWNERS WHO WANT THREE PIECES OF ID TO FOLKS THAT INSIST THAT WE'RE STRAIGHT. TO PEOPLE WHO TAKE OUR LAND.

WE REMEMBER OUR DEAD -- SAKIA GUNN, GWEN ARAUJO, AND MANY OTHER QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOUR WHO DIED BECAUSE OF RACIST, HOMO/TRANSPHOBIC VIOLENCE.

NOT AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT,
BUT AS WOMEN WE LOVED IN REAL LIFE,
WOMEN WHO COULD'VE BEEN US OR OUR LOVES.
WE ARE NOT GOING TO BE LEFT OUT OF "THE STRUGGLE."
NOT THIS TIME.
WE'RE NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE.

FEMMES GODDAMN WELL KNOW HOW TO STRAP IT ON,
CHANGE THE OIL IN THE CAR, AND PUT UP SHELVES.
WE CAN DO ANY GODDAMN THING WE WANT!
THAT'S WHY WE'RE FEMME SHARKS!
FEMME IS NOT THE SAME THING AS BEING OUR MOMS
FEMMES ARE BEAUTIFUL AND STRONG WHEN WE BOTTOM
AND WE'RE HOT AS HELL WHEN WE TOP.
OUR BOTTOMING AND TOPPING ARE BOTH GIFTS TO BE MET
WITH RESPECT.
WHEN WE TAKE OUR LOVERS' FISTS ALL THE WAY INSIDE,
ASK FOR WHAT WE WANT,

BE THE BEST DIRTY GIRL OR MAKE OUR LOVERS FLIP,
WE'RE A FUCKING MIRACLE.
IN THE WORDS OF JILL SCOTT, "YOU GOTTA DO RIGHT BY ME.
IT'S MANDATORY, BABY."

FEMME SHARKS SHOP AT ROSS, FOXY LADY, VALUE VILLAGE,
THE HM \$5 RACK, TORRID, AND THE DOLLAR STORE, AND
KNOW HOW TO SHOPLIFT.
WE CONCOCT BRILLIANT STRATEGIES TO LOOK FINE
ON TEN DOLLARS OR LESS.
WE'RE ONLY "INVISIBLE" IF YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOOK
FOR US.

WE TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER,
RECOGNIZE THAT FEMMES ARE EACH OTHER'S WEALTH.
HOS BEFORE BROS, ALWAYS!
FEMME SOLIDARITY AND LOVE FOR EACH OTHER
IS A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE.
WE BELIEVE IN GIRLS LOVING GIRLS, RESPECTING EACH
OTHER'S' BRILLIANCE,
NOT FIGHTING OVER BOIS OR BUTCHES,
NOT TRYING TO BE THE ALPHA FEMME.
WE'RE ANTI-DRAMA,
WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF COMMUNITIES THAT HEAL
HURT, APOLOGIZE, LISTEN TO EACH OTHER, AND MAKE
THINGS RIGHT.
WE BELIEVE IN BUILDING OUR QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE OF
COLOUR COMMUNITIES STRONG.

FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE WHEN FRIDA KAHLO HOOKED
UP WITH HER GIRLFRIENDS,
WHEN JOAN NESTLE, CHRYSSTOS, JEWELLE GOMEZ, ALEXIS DE
VEAUX, SYLVIA RIVERA, DOROTHY ALLISON, MINNIE BRUCE
PRATT, AND AMBER HOLLIBAUGH MADE QUEER FEMME
HISTORY,
WHEN ZAPATISTA WOMEN HOOKED UP,
WHEN OUR COUSINS WERE MAKING OUT IN THE WOMEN'S

SECTION OF THE MASJID,
WHEN OUR GRANDMAS AND QUEER AUNTIES SNUCK OUT AT
NIGHT,
DIDN'T GET MARRIED TILL LATE -- OR AT ALL --
HAD A BEST GIRLFRIEND
AND STOOD UP FOR HER.
FEMME SHARKS WERE THERE.

FEMME SHARKS ARE IN THE BODIES OF COUNTLESS SEX
WORKERS, NEIGHBOURS, AND LADIES WAITING FOR THE BUS
AND IN THE LINEUP AT CENTURY 21.
AT RIIS BEACH, FUNKASIA, LOVERGIRLNYC, BUTTA, MANGO,
MANHATTAN'S, DESILICIOUS, AND BIBI!
FEMME SHARKS LIVE ON THE REZ, IN CAPETOWN, NEWARK,
OAKLAND!!!!!! , THE SOUTH SIDE, NEW ORLEANS, COLOMBO,
JUAREZ, AND BROOKLYN, SUBURBIA, THE FARM, AND LITTLE
SMALL TOWN.
WE'RE IN FOSTER CARE, THE PSYCH WARD, JUVIE, AND
ABOUT TO BE EVICTED.

WE ARE SURVIVORS WHO ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE
SURVIVED.
WE ARE FIGURING OUT HOW TO HEAL
AND HOW TO MAKE IT SO THAT NO ONE
WILL HAVE TO SURVIVE SEXUAL VIOLENCE EVER AGAIN.
WE BELIEVE IN THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF THE SYSTEM AS
WE KNOW IT
TO MAKE SOMETHING MUCH MO BETTA,
AND WE BELIEVE IN MAKING OUR OWN WAYS TO FIGHT AND
RESIST ON THE DAILY.

A FEMME SHARK IS ANY GIRL
WHO IS TOUGH, HUNGRY, FIGHTS FOR HERSELF AND HER FAM
AND IS WORKING ON BECOMING THE KIND OF GIRL
WHO FINDS GOD IN HERSELF
AND LOVES HER FIERCELY.

WE'RE YOUR BEST GIRLFRIEND AND YOUR WORST
NIGHTMARE.

LOVE AND RAGE,
THE FEMME SHARKS

Spotlight
Debra Anderson

My favourite childhood photo is taped onto the fridge.

I stand on a chair and proudly hold up my dress, underwear exposed. The pink elastic waistband hugs my puffed belly. My face is cracked wide open in a smile. My mother sits beside me, arms raised, about to yank my dress back down where it belongs. Her smile is the kind she brings out for company she doesn't want. I am out of her reach.

Femme.

I am frozen in the frame, my image emblazoned from corner to corner.

Who I am is imprinted loudly, unmistakably. I am who I am meant to be, long before I understand what it is or all that it means. This snapshot was taken long before I get to that place where I finally embody what I have been from the start, who I already am. Undeniable and persistent. Femme.

When my parents go out, I open up my mother's dresser drawer, flutter my hands through her filmy things. I try on bras so big it's as though they are made for a giantess when held up against my tiny, flat frame. Still, I hope anxiously for the day when I can finally have one of my own, in all of its elaborately hooked wonder, complete with adjustable straps and stiff underwires, like a beautiful work of art.

I rummage through her jewellery box, careful when lifting necklaces over my head. I tighten sparkling earrings against my small earlobes. Their weight tugs at my ears. I make sure to remember where I found each item so I can return it to its place. I don't want her to find out I've been playing with her things. She says that I'm not old enough, yet.

Later, in my grandmother's apartment, I lurk behind the dresses in her walk-in closet; run my fingers over the skirts that hang down and cover me during games of hide-and-seek. Her fancy clothes are draped in flimsy plastic; they tremble like ghosts. She lets me walk in her strappy high-heeled sandals with the shiny gold buckles. When I rub my fingertips against their black patent leather, they squeak. She claps her hands and laughs at the noise I make as I smack against the floor with each step.

I note the brownish-orange line that rides across her jaw. Untouched by foundation, her neck seems barren. I assume that one day I will also

possess this magic mark and cross the line from child to adult. I tie her vibrant scarves loosely around my neck. When the tails catch the breeze from the open window, they float in the air like butterfly wings trembling around my face.

Sitting at her telephone table, my grandmother looks up numbers in her black book. I hope that my telephone book will be just as full of as many girlfriends as hers is when I get older. She dials each number with a pen to protect her painted nails, swings the plastic disk patiently around with the pen tip slotted into the correct hole. My grandfather sits in the kitchen in his slippers and robe and reads the newspaper, occasionally rattling the stiff pages so we don't forget he's there.

On the phone, she tells her girlfriends what to do next. What the answers are. Her Ruby Desire lipstick leaves marks on her coffee cup like little rose petals. At the end of her conversations, all that's left are sticky toast crumbs and blobs of Damson plum jam dotted across her plate. Brown coffee rings remain like time stamps. She sets her silver hairclips in a treasure pile on the telephone table and steps into the washroom to remove her pink plastic curlers. I fondle the sunny yellow headscarf she wore tied in a knot at the top of her head and then left draped over the gold vinyl seat of her chair.

In her washroom she keeps a little dish of pink, scented seashell soaps that are not for hand washing. She has an entire bowl full of lipsticks on the counter. I look at them and hope, deeply, instantly, that I will have just as many someday. Mine. I open one and inhale the stale, powdery smell. I'm always surprised that the lipstick doesn't smell sweet, like strawberries or red Jell-O. I smear the colour across my mouth and step on the pink, fuzzy toilet seat so I can see myself in the mirror. Because this is a secret I keep for myself, I wipe the toilet paper across my mouth and drop it into the toilet to get rid of the evidence. It looks like a little bright kiss in the bowl.

When I come out as a lesbian, it is after I have come out as a feminist. I know everything about what is sexist and wrong in our society, and I make sure I tell everyone -- from my mother to my grandmother to the cashier who sells me pizza bagels at our local bakery. It doesn't immediately occur to me why I always have these conversations with women, except that talking about women with women seems necessary. I wear overalls and sensible shoes and eschew makeup, which I understand is a tyrannical

tool of the patriarchy. I righteously tell my mother *No!* when she asks, *Don't you want to pluck those thick eyebrows?* Her tweezers have no place in the progressive future I think I am building with all of my sisters.

Because I come out as a lesbian, I think that now everything is going to click inside of me. All around me, the androgynous in the women's community dress in plaid shirts, baggy jeans, and baseball hats. No one seems to need purses to carry any of their things. I cut my hair short and use a backpack so that everyone will stop treating me like a straight girl. But no one ever cruises me. I want to be seen. Recognized. Welcomed.

I want that big "coming home" feeling you're supposed to get once you come out where, all of a sudden, your whole life makes sense and you can't be anyone but who you've always been meant to be. Instead, I still feel like some kind of alien, implanted in my own life. Like I don't belong anywhere. I don't even know what it is that I'm waiting for, what the big thing is that is supposed to have happened, but hasn't yet. I don't know how to get from here to there, so I sit on a bar stool and I wait.

And then a door opens. A promise. When I first notice them, the older femmes at the bar flash bravely from corners of the room amidst a sea of sameness. Dark eyes. Bare shoulders. Dresses hug and highlight curves, demanding you pay attention. Sharp heels holster pretty legs. Cleavage plunges, and earrings swing against exposed necks. These women coat themselves that glisten with metallic fortitude and shine under the pulsing lights. Their magic strips the humdrum off the everyday.

I watch the femmes that everyone always wants, femmes who make people hang from their every word, as if their sentences are wrapped in gold. Cherished. I discover how to make an entrance like it is your birthright -- as though you are in the centre of a stage and people lined up all night just for the chance to get close to you. I watch femmes who walk into every room as if they own it. As if it was created just for them.

"Someone is always watching you," a femme I admire tells me, her curls raining red around her face, eyes pressing into me. I can't believe this is true, that I have anything worth watching. I realize that this conversation is a signal; she has been observing me. Inside, something hot and hard glows like she has reached down, wrapped her fist around something I never knew I had, and squeezed tight. I am recognized for the first time. And I start to recognize myself -- draped in my mother's costume jewellery,

hopeful that some of the sparkle will rub off on me. The reflection of my small, made-up face peering back at me from my grandmother's mirror, a reminder of who I've always been, waiting to emerge. The sound of me walking in her oversized high heels, a loud, clattering declaration.

I begin to learn how. I learn how to work a room. How lipstick stains the end of a white-tipped cigarette, leaving a breathtaking, bold crimson imprint. The beauty of an ashtray full of finished smokes, their bruised red tips packed together like flowers, powdered with the sparkle of grey ash. The snaking exhalation of smoke pluming upwards and the aching heat a slow drag can fetch. The splendour that is imperfection -- a nylon run racing down a tensed thigh, the jagged chips in nail polish daring anyone to comment. Realizing that they will want whatever I am, as long as I make it shine. I learn that it is okay to take my time. Not to rush. To act as if I am worth it, because there are those who believe I am. I learn to take up space, my space. It feels like home.

The older femmes teach me that all public adjustments are arresting. A work-in-progress is something to behold. So go ahead -- pull up stockings, tug at boots, fix those underwires. Make yourself even more perfect for them. They will wait. Others may rush out of a bathroom, eyes on the floor. But you can stop to redefine all your best details -- smudged eyes and a formidable mouth. Your lips leave a mark, hot and brazen, on paper towels you toss in the trash, lingering there for those waiting for a stall to witness. It's not wrong to want to make a fuss. Over yourself. Over each other.

I watch the older butches. They have perfectly shined shoes and crisply ironed dress shirts; ties that point politely down, slung around necks I want to carefully touch; thick belts and square edges and hair that looks like it's been freshly cut at all times; change in a loose jangle at the bottom of pockets calling out an insistent rattle as they walk by; neatly clipped nails on hands that are forever ready to hold open the door. Their postures are straight and stiff, except for the ones who stoop shoulders to hide their softness.

The butches are always quietly determined to get the drinks. I watch their calm circle to the bar and back, nobly presenting cocktails to femmes who take them like prizes. At the end of the night, I see them hold up coats with outstretched arms for their tired femmes, hail cabs with one authoritative arm reaching for the stars, the other wrapped lightly around

their girl's waist. They make everything look charmed and easy -- rolling coins across the table with a silver flash; arm-wrestling with their sleeves rolled up as my eyes hungrily lock on their tensed forearms; swinging Zippo lighters open before I've even contemplated having a cigarette. I crave their softness, how gentle they can be in touch and gesture; I love their hardness, all of the sharp lines and angles I want to feel the pinch of and press myself against. They wear their difference out there every day in a mostly hostile world. They take refuge in the approving nods of other butches, in the welcoming smiles of the femmes at the bar. When they are here, they are home. When they are here, there is nowhere else.

I want to be a part of this. I want to walk this road and know every inch of tender, every strip of sore, every piece of same and difference. I'm greedy for all of the troubled and glorious bits of us and them that make us femme and butch. That make us exactly who we are when we are together and who we are when we are apart. I want to be the kind of femme who will always fight for a butch's right to be exactly who she is in this community and outside of it. To be a femme who will always stand up for my boy. And for myself. I want someone to ache for me. I want someone to fight for the chance to win my affection. I want nothing less than history spread out before me to pull me into the promise of my own gleaming future.

I shoot each femme I see a shy smile. I wonder if she knows how thankful I am that she has been there. That she has helped teach me what this is so that I have learned each baby step until I can get to where I was supposed to be all along.

These femmes have helped me to unlearn everything I have ever known. There is no shame in spectacle; how wrong it is to be made to want to disappear. I learn that the best moments happen when you look back -- or when you choose to look away. I learn to make the butches that I meet work for it.

I learn, relearn, and learn again the hardest lesson of them all -- to make sure that they deserve you.

She knows not to assume. Anything.

On the couch in her living room, she gratefully works on my feet after leisurely unbuckling the tiny straps of my high-heeled sandals. She ignores the ugly red marks banding my ankles. A history of each step is

bitten into my skin. The shoes lay on the floor, tangled together in a complicated pile of straps and hardened soles. My shoes seem almost taller now that I am out of them. The heels rise spectacularly. I think, *I wore those?*

I know that earlier tonight I strode forcefully across the bar in those heels, my warrior hips sliding back and forth in a delicate figure eight as I wrapped my body deliberately around every step. That was who I chose to be tonight. I know that I make a choice every time I put something on or take it off. That I construct the intricacies of this thing called femme, framed from the inside out.

She tenderly works her way up from the bottom, running over my feet with steady palms, holding me with a lax enough grip that I don't feel that familiar urge to bolt. I ease back against the rough couch cushions and let myself loosen. We both pretend to watch late-night TV. She stops flipping channels and puts down the remote. Lays both hands back on me. Stevie Nicks sings onscreen. She's draped in flowing scarves and sways with the music. I close my eyes and let her voice fall over me in waves. I allow this butch's hands to wander upward, sink into my tight calves, softening me. I stay here, on this couch, right behind the red velvet of my closed eyelids, my legs partly spread, askew in her lap like they've always been there.

Our first kiss is slow, tentative. My hair cloaks her face. I straddle her. My skirt is raised around my hips. The material pinches at my waist. The denim of her coarse jeans brushes against my bare, straining, summertime thighs. Later, my feet grip the sides of the couch, sink into second-hand sofa cushions on either side of her. I press her deep against the back of the couch and feel her arms lightly touch my back, encircling me. A question -- *Is this okay? Am I allowed?* When I don't push her away, she holds me more firmly in place.

What's left is only this darkened room, this couch, the heat of her mouth under mine. Her breath is sweet and ragged, hitting against my neck and into my ear, feather-brushing my insides. Her chest is a forced concave, shoulders rolled inward to hide her curves. She raises her face upwards, gently seeking me when I pull away even the slightest bit. Her tenderness ropes me back in.

The soft brush of her lashes against my cheek, a flutter. The beauty in her closed lids, blissful. She palms the cheeks of my ass, coated silky

with the tight pull of panties. Although they are unfamiliar, I already know her hands. We are bucking in a quick rhythm, locking necks and pushing against each other. Straining. The light of the TV flickers across her. I grip the short hairs at the back of her head in my fist and tug. Her mouth is left open, a slack circle, gaping slowly for me when I pull away.

I leave her wanting, even though part of me doesn't really want to go. But I would like this to be more than just a tumble after a night out at the bar, for her to think about this, about me, for longer than just tonight. I can feel the imprint of her palm, hot; five fingers spread and wrapped across the back of me long after it is gone. She watches me slip into my shoes. Bends down onto her knees to help me do up the straps. She looks up at me with full eyes as I smooth my skirt.

I kiss her goodbye and leave marks all over her mouth and down her neck, a red stain that trails like a roadmap. She walks me to the door coated in my girl. I don't offer to wipe off my lipstick, and she leaves it planted across her skin. In everything, there is a beginning and a middle and an ending. We are somewhere in between these places.

At her front door, she watches me as I fix my hair and reapply my lipstick in my compact mirror before I go. She isn't afraid of my femme -- a femme who fights hard for her rightful spot in the bar, cleavage bubbling over a short skirt and tall boots. This butch is not afraid of someone who feels the utmost delight when she stumbles across the perfect pair of new earrings that will dangle sparkling thrills or of someone who takes her satisfaction from the stretch of lace gloves pulled tight across ready fingers. This butch craves each purposeful detail, yearns for each determined choice that a femme makes, which allows for who they are on the inside to shine on the outside, so that they may be recognized and revered.

I leave her holding the door handle and know she is watching me walk away. She can't help it. Just like I can't help walking, knowing she's watching. I walk from this place that I was meant to come to. Femme. I walk from this place of home, my centre. Each step loaded, weighted with history, consequence, desire. Each step mine, prized, leading exactly where I want to go -- somewhere that no one else can alter or predict. The pavement is hard underneath my feet; my bare thighs are tense and push me forward. My heels leave a trail of staccato sound behind me, marking my path. The sky is dark, a navy curtain hanging over my head. I pass by a

streetlight that shines down yellow bright light, a circle swooning around me. I'm in my own spotlight.

THE PERSISTENT DESIRE: A FEMME-BUTCH READER

Of Althea and Flaxie
Cheryl Clarke

In 1943 Althea was a welder
very dark
very butch
and very proud
loved to cook, sew, and drive a car
and did not care who knew she kept company with a woman
who met her every day after work
in a tight dress and high heels
light-skinned and high-cheekboned
who loved to shoot, fish, play poker
and did not give a damn who knew her “man” was a woman.

Althea was gay and strong in 1945
and could sing a good song
from underneath her welder’s mask
and did not care who heard her sing her song to a woman.

Flaxie was careful and faithful
mindful of her Southern upbringing
watchful of her tutored grace
long as they treated her like a lady
she did not give a damn who called her a “bulldagger.”

In 1950 Althea wore suits and ties
Flaxie’s favorite colors were pink and blue
People openly challenged their flamboyance
but neither cared a fig who thought them “queer” or “funny.”

When the girls bragged over break of their sundry loves
Flaxie blithely told them her old lady Althea took her dancing
every weekend
and did not care who knew she loved the mind of a woman.

In 1955 when Flaxie got pregnant
and Althea lost her job
Flaxie got herself on relief
and did not care how many caseworkers
threatened midnight raids.

Althea was set up and sent to jail
for writing numbers in 1958.
Flaxie visited her every week with gifts
and hungered openly for her thru the bars
and did not give a damn who knew she waited for a woman.

When her mother died in 1968 in New Orleans
Flaxie demanded that Althea walk beside her at the funeral procession
and did not care how many aunts and uncles knew she slept with a
woman.

When she died in 1970
Flaxie's fought Althea's proper family not to have her laid out in lace
and dressed the body herself
and did not care who knew she'd made her way with a woman.

How The Butch Does It: 1959
Merril Mushroom

1. The butch combs her hair

The butch combs her hair. She combs it at home in private. This is the functional combing. She stands in front of the mirror. Holding the comb between her thumb and first two fingers, she slaps the flat of it against her other palm, then places the comb down on the edge of the sink.

She leans forward and peers at her reflection, flicks her first three fingers through the front of her hair, pulls a curl down over her forehead. She tilts her head sideways and looks at her reflection from beneath lowered eyelids. The butch is sultry. The butch is arrogant. The butch is tough. She picks up the bottle of Vitalis and pours a generous amount into her palm, rubs her hands together, and strokes the lotion through her hair, rubbing carefully to be sure that each strand is well coated, yet not greasy. Then she turns on the water and wets her hair with her hands. Now she is ready to begin.

The butch lifts the comb from the side of the sink. She stretches both her arms forward, then bends her elbows. Now! One-two-three-four, she strokes the comb carefully through one side of her hair, following the path of the teeth without the flat fingers of her other hand, barely touching herself as she smooths. The pattern of hair wings back above her ears, back, back, all the way to the middle of her head. Then, five-six, the sides are lifted on the comb to fall in a wave over the top.

Okay, one-two-three-four, comb the other side in the same manner, five-six, over the top. Now back to the first side again, going straight up to the top this time, seven-eight-nine-ten, then the other side in the same pattern. The butch pats her hair as she combs it, pressing it gently into place. She admires her reflection, tilting her this way and that. Then she lifts the comb to vertical, places the edge of the teeth carefully at the top of the middle of the back of her head, and draws it precisely down the center, pushing the ends of her hair into the furrow, creating a longitudinal cleft above her neck -- a perfect DA.

Now the butch concentrates on the top of her hair. She uses the comb expertly to settle the waves into a pompadour. When she is finally satisfied with the effect, she pulls the teeth of the comb carefully down through the center and over her forehead, then uses her fingers to push,

pull, and tease the front into one very casual-looking lock that curls over her brow.

The butch makes eyes at her reflection. She is ready to go out. She is satisfied with her appearance.

2. The butch combs her hair

The butch combs her hair. She combs it in public. This is the “show” combing, done primarily for effect. The butch shows off. She draws the comb from her pocket smoothly, holding it between the thumb and index finger of the dominant hand. She stretches both arms out forward, then crooks her elbows, ready to begin.

The butch spreads her legs, balancing her weight on the balls of her feet. She holds the comb ready to her hair, the fingers of her other hand extended, ready to smooth stray ends if necessary. She leans over to the side, bending away from the side she will be combing, tilting her head toward the comb. Her elbows jut until they are almost horizontal. She squints, concentrates, and then she lowers the comb. She will not comb her hair just yet -- there is something more she wishes to do to show off:

With the first two fingers of the hand that does not hold the comb, the butch pulls a cigarette out of the pack that is either in her breast pocket or rolled up into the sleeve of her t-shirt. She places the white cylinder between her teeth, closes her lips around it, and rolls her head back just a little. She pulls out her Zippo, flicks the flame on and ready to the end of the cigarette in one expert motion, inhales deeply, then snaps the Zippo closed with her thumb, palms the lighter, and curls the index finger of that same hand around the cigarette, withdrawing it from her mouth. Still holding the cigarette, she slips the lighter into her hip pocket, pushing it down with her thumb, then grasps the cigarette firmly between the tips of her thumb and index finger. She places it back between her lips, then swiftly combs her hair, four strokes on each side, then two, then the top. Skillfully, seemingly carelessly, the butch fingers her pompadour and casual curl into place. Then, with a flourish, using her comb followed by the fingertips of her other hand, she creases the duck’s ass down the middle of the back.

All this time, smoke from the cigarette in her mouth has been curling up into her face. Although she squinted her eyes, she did so only in concentration on her task. At no time did she close her eyes against the

smoke, nor did she cough or gasp for breath. The butch is tough, stoic. Only at the completion of the combing does she remove the cigarette from between her lips, and she does not draw in a deep breath immediately thereafter.

Now the butch returns her comb to its pocket. She does not reach up to check on her hair, to make sure that all is as it should be. She trusts that she looks wonderful, that her hair is impeccably in place, perfectly styled. She is satisfied with her performance.

3. The butch plays pool

The butch selects her cue. She eyes the sticks that line the wall, looking every one over from end to tip. The four fingers of each hand are thrust into her hip pockets, thumbs resting outside the fabric beneath the swell of her belly, causing her elbows to jut out from her sides. She tosses her head and throws her shoulders back, nods once, then pulls one hand from her pocket to take the stick of her choice from the wall. Now her other hand comes up to stroke the length of the wood. She feels the weight of the stick, tests its balance. As she sights down it, she strokes it along her cheek. She smiles, moving her tongue slowly back and forth behind her slightly parted lips.

Now the butch sets the butt of the stick against the floor and straightens out the elbow of the hand she holds it with, turning her arm slightly so that her triceps bulge and ripple. Then, giving the stick a little toss into the air, she catches it neatly at the middle and strides over to the pool table, where she picks up the little cube of blue chalk. She blows across the top of it, looking around the bar, lips pursed into a kiss for the one whose eye she catches. She lowers the chalk deliberately, grinds it suddenly and hard against the end of the cue stick, rubs it around until tiny blue grains shower from it. Gently, she blows away the excess, then leans the stick up against the side of the table.

Now the butch reaches into her breast pocket and pulls out a half-full soft pack of Camels. She gives it a sharp flick of the wrist, and two cigarettes shoot out of the pack a half inch and a quarter inch respectively. Raising the pack slowly to her mouth, the butch takes the end of the end of the longer cigarette between her lips and pulls it free. She tucks the pack back in her breast pocket, then pulls her Zippo from her hip pocket. She crooks her elbow, raising the lighter. Slowly, deliberately, she

flicks open the lid so that it rings, thumbs the wheel smartly, and dips the end of her Camel into the flame. Inhaling deeply, loudly, she snaps the Zippo shut and returns it to her hip pocket. She grips the cigarette between her thumb and first two fingers and takes several more deep drags, blowing smoke out sharply. Then she places the cigarette on the edge of the pool table.

The butch bends and lifts the wooden rack from beneath the table. She runs her fingers suggestively around the lower point of the triangle, grins, raises one eyebrow. Suddenly she flips the rack into the air, catches it, raps it against the palm of her other hand, and sets it down smartly in its proper place with the top point just touching the silver mark. She picks up her cigarette again, smokes some more, then drops the butt to the floor and grinds it out with the toe of her boot. She places her middle finger on the quarter that her challenger has placed on the edge of the pool table, hesitates for just one moment, then slides the quarter off the edge of the table, snaps it up against her thumb, and spins it smoothly into the spot.

The balls crash down. The butch pulls them from the tray quickly, four at a time, two in each hand, banging them onto the table top inside the rack. She plucks a few of the balls out with her fingertips, swiftly, snapping them down, expertly rearranging them so that they alternate striped and solid with the eight ball in the center. That done, she grips the rack, pauses for a moment, then snaps the balls into place with a sharp crack and smoothly lifts the rack up and away, leaving the balls in a perfect triangle on the surface of the table.

Flaunting etiquette, the butch picks up the cue ball and carries it to the other end of the table. She spins about, bending backwards slightly and leading with her shoulder. She sets the white sphere down with a flourish, holds her stick out at arm's length for a moment, then takes her stance. Turning sideways toward the table, she spreads her legs, bends her knees, and finds her balance. She raises her stick, sights along it, then lowers it. She rearranges the cue ball, then rearranges her stance, aware of the many eyes on her. Aware of the women who are watching her every move, she poses, then turns back to the table, and quickly, gracefully, projecting all strength and energy, she places her left hand on the tabletop, bends at the hips, rests the cue stick in the crease between her thumb and forefinger, and wallops the cue ball with the end of the stick. The cue ball hurtles across the table and smashes into the side of the triangle of the balls just

next to the upper point. With a crash, pool balls scatter across the table, and two solid-colored balls with low numbers roll into the corner pockets.

The butch looks over at her opponent, her face expressionless except for one slightly lifted eyebrow. She casually picks up the chalk and rubs it over the end of her cue stick. She does not smile, but she is very pleased with her performance. She nods magnanimously to her opponent, then turns back to the table to take her next shot.

But, first, she lights another Camel.

The Femme Question

Joan Nestle

For many years now, I have been trying to figure out how to explain the special nature of butch-femme relationships to feminists and lesbian-feminists who consider butch-femme a reproduction of heterosexual models, and therefore dismiss lesbian communities both of the past and of the present that assert this style. Before I continue, my editor wants me to define the term *butch-femme*, and I am overwhelmed at the complexity of the task. Living a butch-femme life was not an intellectual exercise; it was not a set of theories. Deep in my gut I know what being a femme has meant to me, but it is very hard to articulate this identity in a way that does justice to its fullest nature and yet answers the questions of a curious reader. In the most basic terms, butch-femme means a way of looking, loving, and living that can be expressed by individuals, couples, or a community. In the past, the butch has been labeled too simplistically the masculine partner and the femme her feminine counterpart. This labeling forgets two women who have developed their styles for specific erotic, emotional, and social reasons. Butch-femme relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic and social statements, not phone heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy. In the 1950s particularly, butch-femme couples were the front-line warriors against sexual bigotry. Because they were so visible, they suffered the brunt of street violence. The irony of social change has made a radical, sexual, political statement of the 1950s appear today a reactionary, nonfeminist experience. My own roots lie deep in the earth of this lesbian custom and what follows is one lesbian' understanding of her own experience.

I am a femme and have been for over twenty-five years. I know the reaction this statement gets now: many lesbians dismiss me as a victim, a woman who could do nothing else because she didn't know any better, but the truth of my life tells a different story. We femmes helped hold our lesbian world together in an unsafe time. We poured out more love and wetness on our bar stools and in our homes than women were supposed to have. I have no theories to explain how the love came, why the crushes on the lean dark women exploded in my guts, made me so shy that all I could

do was look so hard that they had to move away. But I wasn't a piece of fluff and neither were the other femmes I knew. We knew what we wanted, and that was no mean feat for young women of the 1950s, a time when the need for conformity, marriage, and babies was being trumpeted at us by the government's policymakers. Oh, we had our styles -- our outfit, our perfumes, our performances -- and we could lose ourselves under the chins of our dancing partners, who held us close enough to make the world safe; but we walked the night streets to get to our bars, and we came out bleary-eyed into the deserted early morning, facing a long week of dreary passing at the office or the beauty parlor or the telephone company. I always knew our lives were a bewildering combination of romance and realism. I could tell you stories...

About the twenty-year-old femme who carried her favorite dildo in a pink satin purse to the bar every Saturday night so that her partner for the evening would understand exactly what she wanted...

Or how at seventeen I hung out at Pam Pam's on Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street in Greenwich Village with all the other femmes who were too young to get into bars and too inexperienced to know how to forge an ID. We used this bare, tired coffee shop as a training ground, a meeting place to plan the night's forays. Not just femmes -- young butches were there too, from all the boroughs, taking time to comb their hair just the right way in the mirror beside the doorway...

Or how I finally entered my world, a bar on Abingdon Square, where I learned that women had been finding one another for years, and how as young femmes we took on the vice squad, the plainclothes policewomen, the bathroom line with its allotted amount of toilet paper, the johns trying to hustle a woman for the night, and the staring straights who saw us as entertaining freaks. My passion had taken me home, and not all the hating voices of the McCarthy 1950s could keep me away from my community.

Every time I speak at a lesbian-feminist gathering, I introduce myself as a femme who came out in the 1950s. I do this because it is the truth and it allows me to pay historical homage to my lesbian time and place, to the women who have slipped away, yet whose voices I still hear and whose V-necked sweaters and shiny loafers I still see. I do it to call up the women I would see shopping with their lovers in the Lower East Side

supermarkets, the femme partners of the butch women who worked as waiters in the Club 82. I remember how unflinchingly the femme absorbed the stares of the other customers as she gently held onto the arm of her partner. Butches were known by their appearance, femmes by their choices. I do it in the name of the wives of passing women whose faces look up at me from old newspaper clippings, the women whom reporters described as the deceived ones and yet whose histories suggest much more complicated choices. And if femmes seemed to be “wives” of passing women, the feminine protectors of the couple’s propriety, it was so easy to lose curiosity about what made them sexual heretics, because they looked like women. Thus femmes became the victims of a double dismissal: in the past they did not appear as culturally different enough from heterosexual women to be seen as breaking gender taboos, and today they do not appear feminist enough, even in their historical context, to merit attention or respect for being ground-breaking women.

If we are to piece together a profound feminist and lesbian history, we must begin asking questions about the lives of these women that we have not asked before, and to do this we will have to elevate curiosity to a much more exalted position than concepts of politically correct sexuality would ever allow us to do. Politically correct sexuality is a paradoxical concept. One of the most deeply held opinions in feminism is that women should be autonomous and self-directed in defining their sexual desire, yet when a woman says, “This is my desire,” feminists rush in to say, “No, no, it is the prick in your head; women should not desire that act.” But we do not yet know enough at all about women -- any women -- desire. The real problem here is that we stopped asking questions too early in the lesbian and feminist movement, and rushed to erect what appeared to be answers into the formidable and rigid edifice that we have now. Our contemporary lack of curiosity also affects our view of the past. We don’t ask butch-femme women who they are; we tell them. We don’t explain the social life of working-class lesbian bars in the 1940s and 1950s; we simply assert that all those women were victims. Our supposed answers closed our ears and stopped our analysis. Questions and answers about lesbian lives that deviate from the feminist model of the 1970s strike like a shock wave against the movement’s foundation, yet this new wave of questioning is an authentic one, coming from women who have helped

create the feminist and lesbian movement that they are now challenging into new growth. If we close down exploration, we will be forcing some women once again to live their sexual lives in a land of shame and guilt, only this time they will be haunted by the realization that it was not the patriarchal code they have failed but the creed of their own sisters who said they came in love. Curiosity builds bridges between women and between the present and the past; judgment builds the power of some over others. Curiosity is not trivial; it is the respect one life pays to another. It is a largeness of mind and heart that refuses to be bounded by decorum or by desperation. It is hardest to keep alive in the times it is most needed, the times of hatred, of instability, of attack. Surely these are some times.

When I stand before a new generation of lesbians and use this word *femme*, I sometimes feel very old, like a relic from a long-buried past that has burst through the earth, shaken the dust off its mouth, and started to speak. The first reaction is usually shock and then laughter and then confusion, as my audience must confront their stereotyped understanding of this word and yet face the fact that I am a powerful woman who has done some good in this brave new world of lesbian-feminism. But the audience members are not the only ones going through waves of reactions. I too wonder how I will be perceived through these layers of history. A 1980s lesbian activist who defines herself as a femme poses the problem of our plight as an oppressed people in a most vivid way.

Colonization and the battle against it always pose a contradiction between appearances and deeper survivals. There is a need to reflect the colonizer's image back at him yet at the same time to keep alive what is a deep part of one's culture, even if it can be misunderstood by the oppressor, who omnipotently thinks he knows what he is seeing. Butch femme carries all this cultural warfare with it. It appears to incorporate elements of the heterosexual culture in power; it is disowned by some who want to make a statement against the pervasiveness of this power; yet is a valid style, matured in years of struggle and harboring some of our bravest women. The colonizer's power enforces not only a daily cultural devaluing but also sets up a memory trap, forcing us to devalue what was resistance in the past in a desperate battle to be different from what they say we are.

Both butches and femmes have a history of ingenuity in the creation of personal style, but since the elements of this style -- the

clothing, the stance -- come from the heterosexually defined culture, it is easy to confuse an innovative or resisting style with a mere replica of the prevailing custom. But a butch lesbian wearing men's clothes in the 1950s was not a man wearing men's clothes; she was a woman who created an original style to signal to other women what she was capable of doing -- taking erotic responsibility. In the feminist decades, the femme is the lesbian who poses this problem of misinterpreted choice in the deepest way. If we dress to please ourselves and the other women to whom we want to announce our desire, we are called traitors by many of our own community, because we seem to be wearing the clothes of the enemy. Makeup, high heels, skirts, revealing clothes, even certain ways of holding the body are read as capitulation to patriarchal control of women's bodies. An accurate critique, if a woman feels uncomfortable or is forced to present herself this way, but this is not what I am doing when I feel sexually powerful and want to share it with other women. Femmes are women who have made choices, but we need to be able to read between the cultural lines to appreciate their strength. Lesbians should be mistresses of discrepancies, knowing that resistance lies in the change of context.

The message to femmes in the 1970s was that we were the Uncle Toms of the movement. If I wore the acceptable movement clothes of sturdy shoes, dungarees, work shirt, and backpack, then I was to be trusted, but that is not always how I feel strongest. If I wear these clothes because I am afraid of the judgment of my own people, then I am a different kind of traitor, this time to my own femme sense of personal style, since this style represents what I have chosen to do with my womanness. I cannot hide it or exchange it without losing my passion or my strength. The saddest irony of all behind this misjudgment of femmes is that for many of us it has been a lifelong journey to take pleasure in our bodies. Butch lovers, reassuring and kind, passionate and taking, were for many of us a bridge back to acceptance of what the society around us told us to scorn: big-hipped, wide-assed women's bodies. My idiosyncratic sexual history leads me to express my feminist victories in my own way; other women, straight or gay, carry these victories of personal style within, hesitant to publicly display them, because they fear the judgment of the women's community. Our understanding of resistance is thus deeply diminished.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the femme is also charged with the crime of passing, of trying to disassociate herself from the androgynous lesbian. In earlier decades, many femmes used their appearance to secure jobs that would allow their butch lovers to dress and live the way they both wanted her to. Her femme appearance allowed her to cross over into enemy territory to make economic survival possible. But when butches and femmes of this style went out together, no one could accuse the femme of passing. In fact, the more extremely femme she was, the more obvious was their lesbianism and the more street danger they faced. Now lesbian style occurs in the context of a more and more androgynous-appearing society, and femme dress becomes even more problematic. A femme is often seen as a lesbian acting like a straight woman who is not a feminist -- a terrible misreading of self-presentation that turns a language of liberated desire into the silence of collaboration. An erotic conversation between two women is completely unheard, not by men this time but by other women, many in the name of lesbian-feminism.

When one carries the femme identity into the arena of political activism, the layers of confusion grow. In the spring of 1982, Deborah, my lover, and I did a Lesbian Herstory Archives slide show at the Stony Brook campus of SUNY. We were speaking to fifty women health workers, four of whom identified themselves as lesbians. I wore a long lavender dress that made my body feel good and high, black boots that made me feel powerful. Deb was dressed in pants, shirt, vest, and leather jacket, I led a two-hour discussion working with women's honest expressions of homophobia, their fears of seeing their own bodies sexually, and the different forms of tyranny they faced as women. Finally, one of the straight women said how much easier it was to talk to me rather than to Deb, who was sitting at the side of the room. "I look more like you," she said, pointing to me. She too was wearing a long dress and boots. Here, my appearance, which was really an erotic conversation between Deb and myself, was transformed into a boundary line between us. I walked over to Deb, put my arm around her, and drew her head into my breasts. "Yes," I said, "but it is the two of us together that makes everything perfectly clear." Then I returned to the center of the room and lied. "I wore this dress so you would listen to me but our real freedom is the day when I can wear a three-piece suit and tie and you will still hear my words." I found myself faced with the paradox of having to fight for

one freedom at the price of another. The audience felt more comfortable with me because I could pass, yet their misunderstanding of my femmeness was betraying its deepest meaning.

Because I am on the defensive many times in raising these issues, it is tempting to gloss over the difficulties that did exist in the past and do now. Being a femme was never a simple experience, not in the old lesbian bars of the 1950s and not now. Femmes were deeply cherished and yet devalued as well. There were always femme put-down jokes going around the bar, while at the same time tremendous energy and caring was spent courting the femme women. We were not always trusted and often seen as the more flighty members of the lesbian world, a contradiction to our actual lives, where we all knew femmes who had stood by their butch lovers through years of struggle. We were mysterious and practical, made homes and broke them up, were glamorous and boring all at the same time. Butches and femmes had an internal dialogue to work out, but when the police taunts and jeers followed us down the streets, this more subtle discussion was transformed into a monolithic front where both butch and femme struggled fiercely to protect each other against the attackers. Feminists need to know much more about how femmes perceived themselves and how they were seen by those who loved them. Certainly the erotic clarity that was for me and many other femmes at the heart of our style has never been clearly understood by sexologists or by feminists.

Since the butch-femme tradition is one of the oldest in lesbian culture, it came under investigation along with everything else when the sexologists began their study of sexual deviance. The feminine invert, as femmes were called then, was viewed as the imperfect deviant. The sexology literature from 1909 stated that the “pure female invert feels like a man.” A few years later, the femme is described as an “effeminate tribadist.” In the 1950s, our pathology was explained this way:

The feminine type of Lesbian is one who seeks mother love, who enjoys being a recipient of much attention and affection. She is often preoccupied with personal beauty and is somewhat narcissistic ... She is the clinging vine type who is often thought and spoken of by her elders as a little fool without any realization of the warped sexuality which is prompting her actions.

And then the doctor adds the final blow: “She is more apt to be

bisexual and also apt to respond favorably to treatment.” Here the femme lesbian is stripped of all power, made into a foolish woman who can easily be beckoned over into the right camp. Historically, we have been left disinherited, seen neither as true inverts nor as grown women.

An example from early twentieth-century lesbian literature also shows the complexity of the femme tradition. In *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928, two major femme characters embody some of the mythic characteristics of femmes. One is an unhappy wife who seduces Stephen Gordon, the butch heroine, but then betrays her, choosing the security of a safe life. The other is Beth, the lover Stephen turns over to a future husband at the end of the novel so she may have a chance at a “normal” life, thus enabling the author to make a plea for greater understanding of the deviant’s plight. The reality of the author’s life, however, gives a different portrait of a femme woman. Lady Una Troubridge, the partner of Radclyffe Hall, who saw herself as Hall’s wife, was a major force in getting *The Well of Loneliness* published, even though she knew it would open their lives to turmoil and worse.

She [Radclyffe Hall] came to me, telling me that in her view the time was ripe, and that although the publication of such a book might mean the shipwreck of her whole career, she was fully prepared to make any sacrifice except -- the sacrifice of my peace of mind.

She pointed out that in view of our union and of all the years that we had shared a home, what affected her must also affect me and that I would be included in any condemnation. Therefore she placed the decision in my hands and would write or refrain as I should decide. I am glad to remember that my reply was made without so much as an instant’s hesitation: I told her to write what was in her heart, that so far as any effect upon myself was concerned, I was sick to death of ambiguities, and only wished to be known for what I was and to dwell with her in the palace of truth.

Why Radclyffe Hall with this steadfast femme woman by her side could not portray the same type of woman in her lesbian novel is a topic that needs further exploration. Troubridge’s cry, “I am sick of ambiguities,” could become a femme’s motto.

What this very brief examination of examples from sexology and literature points out, I hope, is how much more we need to know, to question, to explore. Femmes have been seen as a problem through the

decades both by those who never pretended to be our friends and now by those who say they are our comrades. The outcry over the inclusion of a discussion of butch-femme relationships in the Barnard sexuality conference was a shock to me; I had waited for over ten years for this part of my life to be taken seriously by a feminist gathering. I marched, demonstrated, conferenced, leafleted, CRed my way through the 1970s, carrying this past and the women who had lived it deep within me, believing that when we had some safe territory, we could begin to explore what our lives had really meant. Yet even raising the issue, even entertaining the possibility that we were not complete victims but had some sense of what we were doing, was enough to encourage a call for silence by feminists who feared our voices. Those of us who want to begin talking again are not the reactionary backlash against feminism, as some would call us. We are an outgrowth of the best of feminism in a new time, trying to ask questions about taboo territories, trying to understand how women in the past and now have had the strength and the courage to express desire and resistance. We ask these questions in the service of the belief that women's lives are our deepest text, even the life of a femme.

Old Femme
Madeline Davis

I know what I am
when I look at old pictures
long, wavy hair, eyeliner, mascara
demure and mysterious.

I know what I am
when I wander on my lunch hour
to sample new fragrances
and linger near lace lingerie.

I know what I am
when I paw through these letters
still warm with old passions
held firmly in wide rubber bands.

I know what I am
when the sight of white t-shirts
and the smell of Old Spice
can still make me shiver and smile.

I know what I am
in the dark when you fill me
your hands and your mouth
in the heat of the heart of my center

I know what I am.

When She Wears A Tie For Me
Christine Cassidy

The first time,
she wanted kudos for style --
her silk the color of wine,
bordeaux, matched my enameled
nails. I knew she was all mine

that night we
dressed up for each other, she
and I shy as teens, itchy
for kisses snuck between songs.
I longed for her to take me --

no problem
if the traffic hadn't been
so thick on Broadway. Brazen
behavior she rather likes --
uppity dykes unbuttoned

(or unlaced,
to be precise) from the waist,
ready for her tongue to taste,
her hand to give. Brown satin
the second time: my pulse raced

as I touched
it to my breasts. Narrow swatch
of knotted cloth, its stitches
close and even -- how does it
elicit such a strange rush,

magnetic
paths of wanting, It's phallic,
she says. Innate, totemic
strength. I concede, though other
signs rouse power -- concentric

circles, swirls
etched in soft stone; the loose curls
of fronds I see in carved, burled
oak; the wheatfields in her eyes;
an oyster's ivory pearl.

And today,
against corduroy, a gray
tie, pinpricked with red. Waiters
hovered like bees while she teased
and tried to tempt me to stray

from the cool
demeanor, professional,
I proffered over lunch. All
my defenses rapidly
fell. Over coffee, I failed

to keep my
composure, wanting her tie
in my mouth, down my throat. I
would squeeze then twist the flared base,
the familiar mystified,

resistant
yet yielding to persistent
fingers clenching her. On bent
knees I'd slowly lick its tip,
torture it, desire extant

in her grip,
my head pulled down to worship.
My reply, red nails I slip
to the knot, along her seam.
I smell her need as her hips

press to my
face, the silk damp where I wind
it over my hand, her tie
a spent piece of herself, used
as I wished, for the first time.

My Woman Poppa
Joan Nestle

You work at a job that makes your back rock-hard strong; you work with men in a cavernous warehouse loading trucks while others sleep. Sometimes when you come to me while I work at home, you fall asleep in my bed on your stomach, the sheet wrapped around your waist, the flaming unicorn on your right shoulder catching the afternoon sun.

I just stand and look at you, at your sleeping face and kind hands, my desire growing for you, for my woman poppa who plays the drums and knows all the words to “Lady in Red,” who calls me sassafras mama, even when I am sometimes too far from the earth, who is not frightened off by my years or my illness.

My woman poppa who knows how to take me in her arms and lay me down, knows how to spread my thighs and then my lips, who knows how to catch the wetness and use it and then knows how to enter me so women waves rock us both.

My woman poppa who is not afraid of my moans or my nails but takes me and takes me until she reaches far beyond the place of entry into the core of tears. Then as I come to her strength and woman fullness, she kisses away my legacy of pain. My cunt and heart and head are healed.

My woman poppa who does not want to be a man, but who does travel in “unwomanly” places and who does “unwomanly” work. Late into the New Jersey night, she maneuvers the forklift to load the thousands of pounds of aluminum into the hungry trucks that stand waiting for her. Dressed in the shiny tiredness of warehouse blue, with her company’s name white-stitched across her pocket, she endures the bitter humor of her fellow workers, who are men. They laugh at Jews, at women, and, when the black workers are not present, at blacks. All the angers of their lives, all their dreams gone dead, bounce off the warehouse walls. My woman grits her teeth, and says when the rape jokes come: “Don’t talk that shit around me.”

When she comes home to me, I must caress the parts of her that have been worn thin, trying to do her work in a man’s world. She likes her work, likes the challenge of the machines and the quietness of the night, likes her body moving into power. When we go to women’s parties, I watch amused at the stares she gets when she answers the traditional

question “What do you do?” with her nontraditional answer “I load trucks in a warehouse.” When the teachers and social workers no longer address their comments to her, I want to shout at them, Where is your curiosity about women’s lives, where is your wonder at boundaries broken?

My woman poppa is thirteen years younger than I, but she is wise in her woman-loving ways. Breasts and ass get her hot, that wonderful hot which is a heard and spoken desire. I make her hot and I like that. I like her sweat and her tattoos, I like her courtliness and her disdain of the boys, I mother her and wife her and slut her, and together we are learning to be comrades.

She likes me to wear a black slip to bed, to wear dangling earrings and black stockings with sling-back heels when we play. She likes my perfume and lipstick and nail polish. I enjoy these slashes of color, the sweetened place in my neck when she will bury her head when she is moving on me. I sometimes sit on her, my cunt open on her round belly, my breasts hanging over her, my nipples grazing her lips. I forbid her to touch me and continue to rock on her, my wetness smearing her belly. She begins to moan and curves her body upwards, straining at the restrictions.

“Please, baby, please,” my woman poppa begs. “Please let me fuck you.” Then suddenly, when she has had enough, she smiles, opens her eyes, says, “You have played enough,” and using the power she has had all along, throws me from my throne.

Sometimes she lies in bed wearing her cock under the covers. I can see its outline under the pink spread. I just stand in my slip watching her, her eyes getting heavy. Then I sit alongside her, on the edge of the bed, telling her what a wonderful cock she has, as I run my hand down her belly. I reach her lavender hardness. I suck her nipple and slowly stroke her, tugging at the cock so she can feel it through the leather triangle that holds it in place.

“Let me suck you,” I say, my face close to hers, my breasts spilling out on hers. “Let me take your cock in my mouth and show you what I can do.” She nods, almost as if her head is too heavy to move.

Oh, my darling, this play is real. I do long to suck you, to take your courage into my mouth, both cunt, your flesh, and cock, your dream, deep into my mouth, and I do. I throw back the covers and bend over her carefully so she can see my red lips and red-tipped fingers massaging her cock. I take one of her hands and wrap it around the base so she can feel

my lips as I move on her. I give her the best I can, licking the lavender cock its whole length and slowly tonguing the tip, circling it with my tongue. Then I take her fully into my mouth, into my throat. She moans, moves, tries to watch, and cannot as the image overpowers her. When I have done all that I can, I bend the wet cock up on her belly and sit on her so I can feel it pressing against my cunt. I rock on her until she is ready, and then she reaches down and slips the cock into me. Her eyes are open now, wonderfully clear and sharp, and she slips her arms down low around my waist so I am held tight against her. Very slowly, she starts to move her hips upward in short strong thrusts. I am held on my pleasure by her powerful arms; I can do nothing but move and take and feel. When she knows I have settled in, she moves quicker and quicker, her breath coming in short hard gasps. But I hear the words, “Oh, baby, you are so good to fuck.”

I forget everything but her movements. I fall over her, my head on the pillow above her. I hear sounds, moans, shouted words, know my fists are pounding the bed, but I am unaware of forming words or lifting my arms. I ride and ride harder and faster, encircled by her arms, by her gift.

“Give it all to me, let it all go,” I know she is saying. I hear a voice answering, “You you you you,” and I am pounding the bed, her arms, anything I can reach. How dare you do this to me, how dare you push me beyond my daily voice, my daily body, my daily fears. I am changing: we are dancing. We have broken through.

Then, it is over. We return and gently she lifts me off her belly. I slide down her body, rest, and then release her from the leather. We sleep.

Yes, my woman poppa knows how to move me, but she knows many other things as well. She knows she will not be shamed; she knows her body carries complicated messages. My woman poppa, my dusty sparrow, I know how special you are. Your strength, both of loving and of need, is not mistaken for betrayal of your womanness.

The Dance of Masks
Barbara Smith

Tonight I feel hot. I don't just mean that I feel randy, horny, whatever your euphemism is. I mean, I feel more than sexual; I feel powerful; my whole body is sizzling with something that feels outside and beyond me and yet at the same time has its beginnings in me.

Like when my neighbor phones me and says, "Okay, what's her name?" and I act all innocent and coy and say, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." And she says, "Come on now, who's the new woman?" and I prolong the innocence and protest, "What makes you think I'm seeing someone?" And she replies, "Because you're walking differently. Because your head is up, your shoulders are back, your stride has a purpose, and my god, your chest is puffed out like a strutting pigeon, so don't fucking lie to me, girl!" That's how I feel tonight, except the feeling comes from me.

Or other times, when one of the women at work makes some comment about my new haircut, such as when it's really short they know I'm feeling bad about something. But they're straight -- well, that's another story -- and they don't understand the message. Short hair means business, means no more messing, means I'm getting serious, getting back to myself. Short hair means tidying up my act, getting down to it, being a dyke, being butch. Short hair is me, and over the years I might have fucked around with perms and mohicans and crimping and trying to grow a tail and all the rest of that butchy-femme nonsense, but it's like masturbating with your own image. In the end you want the real thing.

So tonight I feel hot. In my cunt I can feel something's going to happen. Tonight I am hot to trot, as they say. Had a good night's sleep. Woke up feeling alive. The sun was streaming through the shades, and for once the cat hadn't shat under the bed. Checked the post. Not only no bills, but that check I'd been waiting for for ages had finally turned up and it was hundreds of pounds more than I'd expected. So, first step, bank it, pay the bills -- oh, nothing nicer than seeing all those red forms being stamped one after another by the bank clerk -- and then work out how much is left. What can I buy?

New clothes, of course, and a haircut, because I'm going out tonight and I want to look so sharp and cleaned up that I'll cut someone.

Feel like an overgrown field, like watching my dad getting ready for some big dinner or something, watching him lather his stubbly face and shave off the deadwood, stroke after stroke with the razor. He always wet-shaved when I was a little girl. I'd watch him clear away the facial debris, slick back his hair with Brylcreem, everything smoothed down, everything in its place and no superfluties. Just enough and no more.

My dad is wiry, spare face, prides himself on being the same weight now as he was in the air force during the war. A very dapper man, my dad, looks good in a suit, a three-piece suit since he always wears the waistjackets too, shirt pressed just right, suit just back from the cleaners, small knot in his tie, hankie in his breast pocket, and no sideburns, so you can see all his face. Never hides under sideburns, moustache, or beard. And his face shines, his cheekbones standing out and gleaming white in the reflection of the bathroom light as if he had warpaint on. I always thought my dad was David Niven, minus the moustache, and I wished that I could shave my face too.

Shaving for men is not the same as makeup for women, you know, even though they are similar rituals on the face of it, so to speak. Shaving is a revelation, a paring off of layers of dirt, dead skin, and unwanted bristle. It lays bare the man, and he can't hide from himself. But makeup is a pasting over of the cracks, a concealment -- not a conceit, because makeup can only work with what you've got in the first place. It's a guessing game, but one that intrigues me. I love women in makeup. I want to know what's underneath but without removing the pancake, mascara, lipstick. No, they're not dolls. They are actors in an ancient theatre, real people playing fantasies, actors playing characters wearing comic or tragic masks. I am as fascinated by the mask as I am curious to remove it.

So I stroll up to that unisex hairdresser someone recommended. I want a short back and sides like my dad; I want it really short, so short that no one will be able to resist running her hands over my hair, against the direction of growth, to feel it bristle busily under her palms. No one, thank god, can resist that bristle. Yeah, I want to cut and bristle; I want clean straight lines.

Then up the West End. Oxford Street, New Bond Street, Knightsbridge? Yeah, let's go to the posh places, get good clothes with a good cut, dole out a bit more dosh because it's going to be worth the extra. I want to cut a clean straight line. I want a suit, a nice tailored sharp man's

suit, and a smooth pair of booths that I can see my face in. I want a crisp shirt that feels like it crackles when I move. Listen to me: sharp, cut, bristle, crisp, crackle; like breakfast cereal, I'll make so much noise that they'll hear me coming before I arrive. I want to cut a clean straight line. I want to cut a broad swath through the fallow field. It's not only femmes who can make an entrance.

Butch on the streets, femme in the sheets maybe, but I've been fucking around with the femme in me for too long now. No wonder no one knows how to read me anymore, no wonder I don't know how to act anymore. I don't know who I am, and if I don't know I am, how can I know who I want? And if I don't know what I want, how the fuck are they supposed to know? No, knock it on the head. Playing around with contradictions is fine if you know what you're doing, but if you don't forget it. Go back to basics and start again. The minute you lose it, this playing around, knock it on the head and buy a suit. So be cool. Dress for yourself. I like me butch, I know me butch, I know how to act butch. Be butch and dress for sex.

Well, that's what you want, isn't it, sex? You want a good fuck, don't you? Of course, I do, but I want an interesting chase. Don't want a pushover, don't like it too easy. I like a little challenge on the way to foregone conclusion: fancied you the minute you walked in thought you'd never come over blah blah. I want to be obvious, obviously butch, obviously on the make, obviously want a fuck, obviously want to connect with someone. Steaming with passion, I want to smell of it, I want to ooze it, I want it sweating out of every pore, written in and between every line with no room for ambiguity, hidden behind every gesture and always on the surface, manifest in every easy joke that always gets a laugh, so far into me that it's almost in the background, my hungry cunt standing behind me like a predatory shadow. Watch out, here comes Barb with her cunt on a lead again. Yeah, but which one's the cunt? And does it bite?

So I'm going to stand at that bar, real cool, and hunt. Stand where I get a clear view of the door. Watch them all come in, eyeing them up and trying them on for size. I want to play that frightening, dangerous game with myself -- how long can I act the cool butch? How long can I stand there looking mean and moody or bored or uninterested when my heart is racing with anticipation? How long can I pretend to them that it doesn't matter, easy come, easy go? How long can I keep it going before I run out

of steam and they realize I'm lonely and shy and embarrassed?

You can see through me if you want, but be gentle with what's underneath. In these situations I have only a patina of power, lying along the surface of my skin. I want to want and be wanted so badly that the merest finger touch, the slightest lifting of a femme's eyebrow when she evaluates me, feels like a knife slipping under my skin. But sometimes I can balance on that knife edge; sometimes it doesn't cut my skin. Sometimes I'm so on the spot, so well measured, so poised with my posing, that I can breakdance on the point of a needle.

Tonight all the jokes will be funny. I will be the entertaining, laugh-a-minute, woman-of-the-world butch. I will be the writer with the funny anecdotes, the witty comments. I will be barbed and bristling, busy, busy with my butch performance. I will stand at that bar and select my femme, who picked me out moments beforehand anyway, and I will dance my butch's dance for her. I will be dapper and aching to please this woman who spied the shark and reeled her in with a hand line. I will stand there with my strong, clean, straight, sharp lines and wait for her to lay a gentle hand on me that will barely touch me, that will stroke me like a feather, she will slip her femme's dagger beneath my chain mail and expose the soft flesh underneath. And later, when she strips for me, when she dances her femme's dance for me as both reward and punishment, when she reveals the lace and satin and silk underneath, she will show me that vulnerability has its own power.

There was a woman once for whom I danced my butch's dance. And she danced her femme's dance for me and showed me what was underneath the mask. She was soft and curvy and as hard as flint, and she showed me that the mask was not a lie, not hers of apparent soft femininity nor mine of seeming steel of bluster. She taught me the excitement, the meaning of contradiction -- not a flat negation of mutually exclusive opposites but the energizing of molecules oscillating constantly from one extreme to the other, always in flux.

And she initiated me, as surely as any high priestess, into the wonders of women's power. She would lay her soft, curvy, naked woman's body on the bed, place her hands behind her head, and unconsciously flex a brace of muscled biceps, and I'd think: where the fuck did they come from? Hidden strength, deceptive power, always beneath the tranquil surface, a mask of apparent vulnerability and

powerlessness. But with one swift movement women's power lashes out of the soft curves and slaps you in the face with startling muscularity, a punishment for simplistically and impudently believing that the looked-at have no power.

Nothing is as it seems. Women are strong. Women can open doors for themselves, carry their own suitcases, change a tire, repair a fuse -- if they want to. It all comes down to choice. If men want to set us up as being both Madonna and Whore simultaneously, then they have to accept that we might contrarily choose to do both. Our strongest choice, the one they didn't allow for, is to choose not to choose.

This is what I love about women, what I love about femmes, what I love about myself. I danced my blatant butch's dance for such a femme once, who thought I was powerful in that angular way, but who could take me in the palm of one hand like a precious talisman and excite me to power simply by touching me. She could hold me like that in a doorway, in midsentence, neither in nor out, neither touching nor untouching. She could suspend my movement and move me to the core of my being. She could stop my breath, my heart, and in that instance of timelessness I would die a thousand deaths, held in suspended animation, in the thrall of her femme's powerful contradiction, and my cunt would ooze its admiration.

And on occasion, I have danced the femme's dance too, for myself and for another. I have danced it on the street and in the privacy of my home. I have danced it in the real world out there, and in the context of my imagination. In my fantasy, I can do anything and everything. I danced the femme's dance and I danced it well. Took off my butch's mask, maneuvered myself to the edge of the cliff, and drove myself to distraction. I stood in front of the mirror that usually reflected my cock, and dressed myself in a lacy camisole, garter belt, and nylons. I put makeup on my face, where normally I dreamed of shaving straight lines. I put femmy earrings in my ears. I put on the femme's mask and danced the femme's dance and watched myself in the mirror. And when I danced this femme's dance, I danced the butch's dance too, somewhere in my head. I became a whore for myself and wanted to straddle my own thighs, lower myself onto my own cock, and fall in love with myself.

A dildo is not a penis, but it is a mask. Cunt can also be a mask. Why can't I be anything and everything I please just because I want it and

it pleases me? I can wear my cock and admire it in the mirror, like the satyr and the mask and the mirror of revelation. I can fuck my lover with my cock mask, I can take it off and fuck myself with it, or she can fuck me with it. Or I can put it away and forget about it. Tell me, how many men can castrate themselves, bugger themselves with their own cocks, fellate their own cocks attached to someone else's body, take their cocks off, put them in a drawer and forget them -- all that and not bleed to death? I can do anything that a "man" can. I can do anything that a woman can -- if I so desire. And if I do not so desire, I can choose not to choose.

THE ARC OF LOVE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF LESBIAN LOVE POEMS

In the Duchess

Joan Larkin

Women swayed together
on a packed square of scuffed
floor. I stared at the strong

beauty who shook the tambourine,
the poised girl pouring short
pale drinks, the women

whose hips -- ample, thin,
pressed close and apart --
cast waves of fire.

I drank their half-closed
eyes, half-opened lips,
link-bracelets, ease

of illegal dancing. Soon
I'd cut my hair, soon
sharpen cuffs and creases,

burn bold as the stone
butch staring back
in whose smile my fear

and wanting found a mirror.
There, amid booze, smoke,
loud unmerciful music,

my whole body was praying
that soon my real life --
dazzling animal whose soft

pelt shone like a woman's
skin -- would come
touch me, and at last, I'd dance.

I Met Her At The Bar / 1983

E.J. Graff

Oh her battered leather jacket, oh her throat's cool curve,
oh did I believe in her sunglasses' twin mirrors?
Did I believe in her bruised and narrow wrists?
Did I believe in her palm against my hip that afternoon

as it wavered in the muck and slag of Central Square,
bums propped against the storefronts, papers slapping hot asphalt,
as ahead of us a dog limped and gnawed its red bandana,
her apartment door unlocked and I

walked in? Don't say the kiss was ruined
by her neighbor's teenage drums. Don't say I wasn't ready
for her sudden hands, her grunts. Don't say
I lay there startled by the dust motes in the sun, the broken
chair beside me on the rug.

Dumpling Child
Dorothy Allison

A southern dumpling child
 biscuit eater, tea sipper
 okra slicer, gravy dipper,
I fry my potatoes with onions
 stew my greens with pork

And ride my lover high up
on the butterfat shine of her thighs
where her belly arches and sweetly tastes
of rock salt on watermelon
sunshine sharp teeth bite light
and lick slow like mama's
favorite dumpling child.

BEST LESBIAN EROTICA 2007

Sweet Thing

Joy Parks

Watching Petey Ginoa knead bread dough is like watching a thing of beauty.

Watching her do it when she doesn't know anyone is watching her is even better.

First there are her hands, which are large but not too large; peachy pink hands that get washed soft over and over again every day, strong with short square nails and slightly knobby knuckles, the kind you get when you crack them too much. And flour. I don't think I've ever seen those hands when they weren't covered in flour. Strong hands, but not rough at all. Hands that can shape delicate flutes on a tartlet crust or fix a tiny broken motor on the mixer or, I believe, unfasten a button so slow and perfect, sliding a finger down the space between breasts, sliding past a slight mound of belly, sliding down. I take a gulp of Fair Trade fresh-ground something or other to keep me still and watch how she grabs a hunk of sunflower rye or cornbread with organic red pepper slices, or whatever delightful concoction is in her bowl today, and drops it onto the breadboard, her hands dancing it into a perfect round, her fingers disappearing inside, then out, inside again. Kneading. Needing. I watch those fingers turn and poke and stretch the dough. I feel heat welling up between my thighs, try not to squirm. I watch her with my lips parted like I'm waiting for a kiss.

And then she stops. I hold my breath. She pushes up the sleeves of the white shirt she's wearing beneath her apron and begins to knead some more, flexing her perfectly shaped muscles, girl muscles but firm and healthy and strong looking. The kind of arms that make you wonder what it would be like to be inside the circle of her body, to feel those muscles tighten and press against you, what that would be like. That close.

It's warm in here and the windows are sweating from the steam of the kitchen; it's still morning cold outside. I should go. I should get up and walk out of here as best I can and get to work on time for a change; that walk would do me good right now. If I could just stand up.

I could watch those hands for hours.

Yeah, I know I've got it bad. And I don't quite know what to do with it.

Everyone back home told me I was going to hate moving to a small town even if it was the only place I could get a job. In a small town everybody knows everybody's business and I'd have to watch my P's and Q's, they said. Growing up in the city and having the natural luck to get away with a whole lot of stuff, I hadn't had to work very hard at being discreet. Who was going to know and who was going to care?

So I've been laying low, working at the library as the junior librarian in training, trying to make it look like I'm far more interested in learning how to organize the periodicals and start a community reading circle than I am in running back and forth to Petey's all day to buy coffee. I can't sleep most nights now. I don't know if it's all that caffeine or the fact that when I do sleep I keep dreaming about those hands on my skin and then I have to get up and drink a lot of cold water just to keep from melting in my own heat.

But bless the gossips in town for helping me learn all about Petey. I guess since some of them saw me spending so much time in the bakery, they wanted to warn me so I could be on guard and not fall prey to her seductions. You'd never know from looking at me that I've dealt with plenty of seductions by women like Petey and enjoyed every single one of them. From the very first day I walked into her shop, if she'd ever even looked at me with half a hint that she might be interested, I'd have fallen on my back so fast I might have ended up with whiplash. It's funny being femme. Sometimes you hate the fact that no one knows, and you have to go out of your way to make sure some butch realizes you're available, 'cause you look so straight. But the good ones know. The smart ones. They can look past the heels you wear to work and the lipstick and the girly clothes, and love all that about you, know what you are beneath your clothes, not just any woman, but special. One who would fall on your back for them, let them touch you all over, let them reach inside your body, fuck you hard and tender and whatever it takes to make you both feel so good about what it is that you are.

But since I'm not so obvious to normal people, I got the whole deal on Petey.

Petey Ginoa is a legend in town. Everybody knows she's a lesbian even though nobody's ever seen her with any woman at any time. She's

too smart for that -- to get caught. It's a small town and she's got a damn good business and she'd be crazy to take a chance on losing it all. Petey's not her real name; it's Pia, which is the name on the sign above the door. Her father named the shop that back when she was a baby. But everybody calls the place Petey's. They eat Petey's bread and take Petey's cake home for birthdays and baby christenings and stop by Petey's for coffee. Sometimes I think if not for her, the whole damn town would go hungry. Petey suits her more. That's just how it is with some lesbian children; they outgrow the names their mommas gave them, grow into something different, someone different from what anyone could have expected of them. Taking a new name is like being born all over again into who they should have been all along.

Not that Petey's the kind of woman who'd think about it that way. She probably just realized she was becoming someone for whom a delicate name like Pia didn't fit. It made her feel uneasy. So she gave herself a more comfortable handle. I get the feeling she's the kind of woman who would do whatever she needed to feel okay about herself and not give a damn about what anyone might think.

I wonder if any of her lovers -- who no one's ever seen -- call her Pia.

Wouldn't seem right somehow.

I want to be one of those women no one's ever caught her with.

I want those hands needing me.

On a belt under her apron Petey wears a measuring cup that looks like it was made by Black and Decker. She wears clean, crisp, white pants that cup her fine ass just right and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She wears a full-length, white apron slung over her neck and tied real loose, and clean white sneakers that don't make a sound. Her dark hair is cut short and loose around her face, which seems a little tanned. Even in winter that hair curls up at the back of her collar when she's moving around the kitchen in the heat. That collar, those curls. I have to keep my hands in my coat pocket or flat, fanned on the counter, when I order my coffee. I look the other way when she slides the little waxed paper bag of cannoli my way; stop myself from reaching across the counter; stop myself from reaching out to touch her neck, smooth those curls. Touch her face real slow. I think her forehead would smell like butter, that her skin would be lightly glazed all over with a fine dusting of

sugar, that if you put your mouth to her skin, you would come away tasting sweet.

I'm thinking Valentine's Day will be the time to make my move, 'cause that's when everybody's all crazed over romance and hearts and flowers and wanting to be loved. Petey can't be all that different from anyone else. Can she?

Today is Friday the thirteenth, and not a soul on the street fails to comment on it. I don't feel unlucky, just a little racy knowing I've got just today to figure out how I'm going to pull off the seduction of the town dyke. I wonder if she has a girlfriend now, but only for a minute, because something tells me I'd sense it if she did. At this point I don't think it would matter if she'd been dating my own best friend -- if I'd been in town long enough to have one.

When I hit the doorway of the bakery, I almost swoon. It's the clouds of moist heat that gather inside, rain on the window, plus the scent of something sweet and deep, along with something fresh, like fruit juice, underneath it. And there's Petey. She's behind the counter, smiling at me. It must have been my reaction to the aroma that wrapped around me as I came inside. I wrinkle my nose like I'm sniffing for more and look at her grinning, as if to ask what's making such a delicious smell. Her eyes are actually lit, wide and open, more so than I remember ever seeing them. She motions me over. I've never been that close to her aside from her pouring my coffee or taking my money when I paid for bread or muffins or those slices of all-natural Queen Anne's cake with caramel covered nut crust swirled with spidery feathers of toasted coconut. Or crème brûlée custard on a toasted almond crust. Or shiny pecan buns, moist and slippery as the flesh of my thigh right now. I'm weak. I don't think she's ever really talked to me. Specifically to me. And she still isn't -- talking. I step up to the counter and she's still smiling and motioning me even closer. I move in like I'm in a trance, move in for a kiss to touch my lips to her cheek, her lips. Desire bubbles up within my belly, there are tiny flutters inside my cunt. Like wings. I wonder if she can see down my blouse, see my breasts nestled in the pink, lacy, silk demi-cup I bought mail order from Victoria's Secret just in case something like this ever happened. I catch myself when my eyes start to close. She raises a fork to my lips like

a present, speared with a tiny piece of something pink and fluffy, like cotton candy covered in chocolate. Oh baby. She directs the fork toward my lips as I open them on command, take the gift inside. Something sweet and deep breaks on my tongue; my mouth wells up with wetness. I think about the pink of it, pink like the tender underside of a breast set free, pink skin of a vulva, all shower fresh and warm; my tongue roaming my mouth to seek out and find every touch of sweetness, the citrusy aftertaste a surprise. I worry about drooling. I swirl it around my mouth, take it in, inhale it. Most of your taste buds come from scent. I taste an orange cream chocolate like from the Whitman's Sampler but warm. I want to tell her it's like sex on a fork, but that's too bold, too early in the dance. She's close still, watching me, silent. I open my eyes wide now, finally able to open my mouth.

Then she speaks real low, her voice deep but clear against the clang of coffee cups and beaters in the kitchen.

"So, you like? It's blood orange cheesecake iced with a bittersweet chocolate glaze. Did them special for Valentine's Day this year. It's the blood orange that makes it pink. They're in season right now."

She beams.

Oh the pride in her voice. Hands in her pockets, shoulders dropped back, slight smile drawing tiny lines around her lips like a frame. She makes me want to leap over the counter, pull her head down into the pink silk of my too-far-open shirt, whisper, "You are magical," wrap my legs around the clean white apron over her clean white pants, beg her to take me right there, right on the kneading board covered with flour and dabs of bittersweet chocolate glaze.

It takes three more trips to the bakery for me to get up the nerve to do what I have to do. All that coffee and anxiety is making me feel dry-mouthed, and it's now or never. So while she's ringing up the roasted red pepper and cilantro quiche with butter crust that's going to end up being my supper, I finally manage to find my femme courage and make my intentions known. At least to one of us.

"So, what are you doing for Valentine's Day?" I ask her.

She looks down at the floor like I've caught her in a lie.

"Nothing," she says. She kicks imaginary sand with the toe of her clean white shoe.

I'm tempted to look down too, but I keep my eyes right on her, make sure she can feel them.

"How come?"

It hurts almost to keep my voice this even.

More kicking at nothing. I've turned her into a twelve-year-old boy.

"I don't know. I don't go in for that sort of stuff. Romance and stuff. Phony."

Yeah, I think so too. If you do it their way. But I can't say that. Instead, I say, "Me neither. Maybe we ought to hang out and do nothing together."

She stops kicking. Goes still. I wait. There's a buzz rising in my ears. Bubbles flip upside my stomach, more tickle inside. I feel a coffee burp rising, wish it away.

She lifts her head, swings it up slow as if she's trying to get unstuck from something.

I don't think she knows. She doesn't see it. Too long stuck here in town. If she never saw my kind before, how would she know what I looked like?

Sweet thing, I think. You ain't seen nothing like me yet.

She finally speaks. "Sure. Why don't you come tomorrow night? I'll be here after we close."

She moves her eyes around the room as if to remind me, or maybe her, where she means.

I say I will. Like it's nothing at all. Like I'm not already thinking about what to wear, what looks best when it's taken off. Like I'm not planning what I'll scent myself with to draw her close, how I want her to remember me when she first sees me naked and vulnerable and writhing beneath her. I smile and turn and take my steps just so, knees bent just so to roll my hips slow, knowing she's watching me walk out the door....

"I'll try to save us one of the cheesecakes—" I hear her call to me.

But I'm already out the door.

I manage to stay away from the bakery all day Saturday until the streets and the lights outside the bakery are dark and the moon is large, ringed with silver bracelets of cold. I can feel the air dry inside my lungs; it almost hurts to breathe. Inside it will be moist as always.

Petey's alone in the bakery when I walk in. She's got an apartment in the back, but it's tiny and it's obvious she prefers being in the shop. The radio is playing low and I keep wondering if she knows why I'm really there. She's a little different now that no one's around. A little more animated. A little more herself, I think. The self she can't be when she's on display. We sit and I talk about nothing at all until there's a Johnny Rivers song on the radio and I start swaying to it without thinking about it. Petey grins at me.

"I bet you like to dance."

"I do." I smile. "Want to dance with me?"

There. I've said it. Turning point. No turning back. Either I'm in her arms or I'm out the door in the next couple of minutes.

"With me?" She acts surprised, but I've been around the block enough to know it's an act. "I'm not much of a dancer."

Wonder how many times it's started out this way.

"Come learn," I say. Stand up. Motion for her to come my way.

While Johnny is crooning on about the poor side of town, I take her hand, which feels as smooth and warm and clean as I knew it would, and put it at my waist. I put my arm around her shoulder, resisting the urge to slide my fingers through the curls that have gathered there. She's sweating. Just a little. I grin and slide my other hand into the one that's dangling by her side.

"You want to dance slow, like this?" she asks. Goes limp. I feel a little like I'm being baited. I nod and try to get us synced up with the music.

All the time she's staring at me like I've grown a second head. And then she starts to laugh.

"You really want to dance that bad?"

I stop moving. That about does it. I'm sick to death of drowning myself in caffeine and eating twice my own weight in pastry to get this sad-ass closet case to realize she's got a willing victim here. And now this. I feel my dignity slipping away like pearls on a broken thread and figure, what the hell. So I reach up and kiss Petey Ginoa square on the lips. I slide my fingers into those dark curls that have been as tempting as chocolate shavings for weeks; they feel like wet silk between my fingers. And I press my breasts into hers and slip my leg around hers, press close so she can't miss the kind of heat I'm giving off. I may not get what I want, but

I'm definitely going to give her a taste of what she's missing. And after what feels like about three years, I let go of her and push her back onto her feet and stare at her as if to ask what she plans on doing next.

Petey looks at me sideways, almost glaring, and if I hadn't seen that look in the eyes of plenty of women who remind me of Petey, I'd think she was mad at me. But that look's not about mad. It's about fear.

"You aren't exactly the shy type, are you?" she snarls low.

"You like shy?" I'm looking at her straight in the eyes.

"No. Not necessarily. Just most people. Most women that I've been with. They aren't full-time like you. Mostly just sad women who want to forget for a little while that they're married to someone they can't stand being touched by. Others that just want a little vacation from their lives, a little adventure, and when it starts to get over their heads or there's a chance of getting caught, they run back to where they started. You're not like that. You're a different kind altogether, aren't you?"

Something about that makes me feel really proud, like I've just won a contest. So I'm her first real lesbian, her first real pure femme.

"And you like it?" I smile all coy. I know she does.

"I could get used to it," she says, noncommittal. But then, before I have time to think about what that means, she is beside me, her arms around me, kissing me, her lips beating a tattoo down my neck, her pelvis pressed into mine, making me strain backward.

"I don't think you should look a gift horse in the mouth," I say.

And she smiles. It's a new one, a little too knowing, but it's a beautiful smile. I'm so heady and fluttering from being so close to the one I adore that I hardly even notice when she pushes me upward onto the breadboard and hoists herself up beside me. I don't know if I am gift or being gifted, treat or being treated, but it doesn't matter. The flour on my back feels dry and the air in the bakery is still warm enough from so many Valentine's cakes that I don't feel a chill at all as she slides off my sweater and pants, runs her fingers over the pearl heart trim of my red lace bra, and kneads the knuckle of her thumb in the crotch of my red lace panties before she slides them over my hips and down to the floor, grinning all proud at the heat and wet inside my cunt, grinning at the way I press against her hand. She whispers, "How long have you wanted this...?" and my head falls back as if it's very heavy all of a sudden and I whisper back, "Forever, since I first saw you, maybe even before that."

And she shudders, that butch shudder of realization at being wanted by a woman. She unbuttons her jeans and slides them off, kicks off her shoes, wraps her arms around me as if I'm something that might slip away, and pushes me gently down on my back.

Petey Ginoa makes love even better than she makes bread and cookies and pies and cakes. She touches me all over slow, achingly slow, and kisses my face and breasts and belly with creamy wet kisses that make me ache and open my legs wide, press hard against any touch of hers I catch just to get some relief. And when she finally slides her fingers between my legs, when my cunt overflows with want of her and opens easy and hot to draw her inside, she cries out my name high and surprised. And Petey Ginoa fucks as sweet as her eight-minute frosting. Her want is hot enough to make me feel the steam rising from her body, her fingers kneading me inside, her mouth hungry on me, her tongue tracing sweet glazed circles, her head rising at times so I see her mouth wet and shiny with me, while I cry out, "Petey!" and tug at those mythical curls at her collar and wrap my legs around as much of her clean, sweet, white-cotton self as I can, try to take all of her inside. I can tell by her eyes and her moans and the way she keeps her lips on me; the way her fingers gather inside me, thrust higher and deeper without asking, simply taking, knowing it's freely mine to give; that Petey Ginoa has never had a woman want her wholly like this, has never had a real love to call her own. I arch my back, strain up against those strong knuckles slipping, twisting, filling me; those dear arm muscles straining to take me as I come screaming, shivering, crying out, grinding my ass hard against the smooth wood.

It's warm here lying beside the oven. Petey lies silently beside me while I come back inside myself, her fingers resting on my hip bone, her cheek against my hair. I snuggle closer; the board is wider than you'd think to see it in the daylight, but I'm not afraid of falling. I'm facing her now, her shirt is open, her T-shirt and plain white underpants still on. I cuddle against her, kiss her neck, then place my hands at the bottom edge of her shirt, slide up slowly, graze her breasts. She catches her breath. Stops my hand. Holds it tight against her heart.

"Aren't you tired?"

It sounds like she's afraid I'm not satisfied.

"Not tired, relaxed," I whisper, "and I want to touch you."

She stiffens slightly beneath my hand. Her heart is beating hard enough for me to hear it; I expect to see it thumping up like a cartoon character's does when he falls in love. Or gets chased by something wild.

"I...usually...don't..."

It hits me. Petey's used to nice straight girls who like to get finger-fucked all night but don't offer to give anything back. No touch back, no tongue back. That might make them gay. And I sigh.

"Do you want this?" I whisper. "Do you want me to love you?"

She turns her face away from me. Mumbles into her arm, into the makeshift pillow the dish towel has become. I lean in to listen and there's only one word I hear.

Never?

Petey the butch goddess is a virgin?

Chaste despite sexually servicing what seems like a third of the married women in town, if you can trust the stories. Fortysomething and never been touched. *Jackpot*, I think, but then I panic; I want to get up and—presto change-o—my clothes would be on and I would be gone.

But that doesn't happen.

What happens is...

First I roll my eyes upward and curse and thank the Goddess for making me brave enough to bring Petey out. All the way out.

And I remember everything I know about butches and sex and surrender and what that means, and prepare myself for anything.

Then I slowly slip my hand inside the rib-knit tee she's wearing beneath her open shirt and caress her belly with my open palm. She gurgles something low and deep inside her throat. Her stomach contracts under my touch, new nerve endings coming to life for the first time. I feel terribly powerful and daring. She settles her shoulder closer into me, stretches out her legs; I try not to think of her feet in her white sports socks hanging over the breadboard, but I do and I giggle. She smiles at me as she strokes my hair with her hand. Slowly, oh so slowly, as if her stomach stretched for miles, I take my time and slide my hand further up her shirt, grazing her breasts with my knuckles. She sucks in air, twitches. I can hear my own breathing and hers, imagine it rising up into the moist steamy air that sits inside the bakery. Joined at the breath, I think. I kiss her neck, kiss her shoulders, raise her T-shirt further and bend to trace with my tongue the places my hands have been. Her skin is clean and sweettasting, and

moist with heat. Glazed. All that sugar, all that goodness. She's moving down, rising up to meet my hand, still palm flat; my mouth, tiny sighs breaking from her mouth. My fingers find her breast; it's small and easy to cup within my hand and her nipple is firm as the dried currants I've watched her stir into dough and almost as dark. She gasps; I find my courage and rise up further on my side so I can move more easily. Gently, I gather her breasts under my hand. She likes a little more pressure than I would have expected, croons out soft little cries of want as I grasp her breasts and release them slowly, knead her gently as I have watched her do so many times. And eventually, when I'm not sure how much more she can take, I smile and kiss her lips and bend my face to her chest, sucking each hard curranty nipple; one, then the other, until her hips start to rise off the board. She's starting to get loud. With my mouth still on her, licking a trail over her breast, I retrace my path down her belly, further, further still, slipping my fingers beneath the waistband of her cotton underwear, moving slowly over a mound of damp curling hair, slowly, so slowly.... She widens her legs to greet me and she is wet and slippery and smooth as pearls underwater, she is open and gasping. In the dark, I imagine shiny deep pink like the filling of the cheesecake she fed me before. And I need the sweetness. She's rising and crashing into my fingers, so hard and so new that I rise up and turn, stretching out, never moving my hand, and use the other to push off what bit of her underwear still clings to her. Spread her open, slip a finger inside, gentle, so gentle, and she yells something I can't hear, as if part of her is far away now. And I move inside her slowly as she wriggles all over the cutting board, and all of a sudden, I need to taste her. I throw my head down between her moving legs, trade my finger for my tongue. She is sweet there too, sweet and fresh and slippery wet as cream. I lap her up, suck her sweetness into my mouth, my tongue fluttering hard and fast, then soft and slow inside her lips. I grasp her thighs on either side so I can hang on, stay with her, buckle in as if she's a wild ride in a small-town midway and she cries out loud, almost a scream, and comes shaking and gushing wetness into my mouth, the insides of her thighs stretching, ass grinding and bucking under my tongue.

And she is done.

For a few moments, she lies in my arms and we ride out her aftershocks with the heel of my hand nestled inside her lips and she sighs

over and over, stretches arms out long and languid and pulls me close, and for a split second, I feel all Prince Charming come to curl up and sleep with the princess. Until she kisses me, tongue searching out all taste of her, until she rolls me onto my back, and I feel the wetness spreading out beneath me; I must have come too, when she did. She gathers up the wetness on my thighs and hair and slips her fingers inside me. Oh. One. Two. Yes. Three. More. Petey pushes my knees apart, spreads me wide open, lowers her still trembling body onto mine, grinds her wetness into mine with a fury I never expected, and I wrap my legs around her hips, shelter her as she rides me hard, her hands grasping my shoulders, my body rising up to meet every stroke. She is gasping now, breathing loud and calling out, sweet bits and pieces of words whispered, *fuck sweet wet baby, come, mine, mine, oh fuck, beautiful you, oh*. And I feel the climb and rise of us both as she comes hard and loud into me while I lock my legs around her, grasping, grinding, shivering, up, up and over, screaming and trembling against her as she falls into me, done, head full of dark sweet curls, fine strands of burnt sugar candy, warm and swirled over my breasts.

MY LESBIAN HUSBAND

Barrie Jean Borich

When I Call Her My Husband

Linnea and I have been lovers for all these years, and I wonder -- are we married?

I ask her as we sit at our red kitchen table, in our South Minneapolis corner duplex with peeling walls and crumbling Victorian trim. Outside, the spotlight on Portland Avenue sends a shallow green, yellow, red wash in through the front windows as gearhead cars and accessorized Caddies with dark-tinted glass shriek through the intersection. As downtown commuters in tidy Hondas plod home south after work. As Harley guys rumble past with pipes clattering. As red Isuzu Troopers with big speakers in the back cruise buy slow, bellowing with low bass, hip-hop, thump-da-thumps. As another family of kids we haven't seen before careens around the corner on bikes, the little ones on Big Wheels, pumping to keep up with tires growling and buckling over loose stones and broken glass.

Inside, our three cats lounge beneath the ceiling fan. Our dog digs through her basket of bones and toys. We are surrounded by the clutter of ourselves. Snapshots of friends and nieces. Funny postcards of women in vintage drag. Homemade valentines too sweet to throw away. Herb tinctures, and big bottles of vitamins. Big bottles of olive oil and every kind of tea. Glossy urbane magazines and mail-order catalogues for things we never order -- books on tape, or down comforters, or loose-fitting casual clothing. Piles of clippings from the *Village Voice* that we don't have time to read. City newspapers and poetry books or volumes of lesbian and gay theory or books about quantum physics or *Star Trek* or dogs. Our moderate collection of plastic dinosaurs, including the five-foot-long, blowup pteranodon hanging from the kitchen ceiling. our large and varied collection of holy statues and candles, Catholic and Orthodox, mostly the Madonna, along with a few other saints and goddesses: Saint Lucy with her eyes on a plate, Kannon with her many arms, Marilyn in plunging black décolletage, shell ladies from ocean-beach resorts, and a piñata rendition of Madonna (the pop star) we made a few years back for a party. All this is seven years of us. So are we

married?

I ask her in the summer as we ride in her Chevy Blazer truck on our way to a week in a one-room cabin on the shore of blue-gray and unblinking Lake Superior, the dog's head hanging between us from her spot in the back as the forests along the northern highway grow more blue-green and needled.

I ask her in the winter over big bowls of steaming seafood soup at our usual table, between bright white walls and abstract prints of fish, in the nonsmoking section of our favorite restaurant, run by a Chinese family emigrated here from Vietnam. Mostly daughters, black-haired and half our size, one-by-one they interrupt us to admire the silver jewelry Linnea buys me at gem shows, to ask us questions about our relationship, to describe how *their* lives are changing -- a wedding engagement, a new baby, a college acceptance on the East Coast.

In all these spots, public and private, I ask Linnea, "Are we married?"

Her response is always to move closer, pull me closer if she can. Let's say we're at home, lying side-by-side in the king-sized bed that we bought with our only joint charge card (Slumberland). The bed is one of just three joint purchases we've made in our first seven years. The others were a TV and a queen-sized waterbed that we sold later when we started waking up aching, my back, her knees. The waterbed was our first joint purchase, and I cried when we bought it in our second year together because it was so complicated. There were enough boards and rubber and cords to fill up the back of a pickup truck. "I moved my whole life to Minnesota in a Pinto," I sobbed. "And now just the bed takes up a whole truck." Now we lie on our king-sized King Koil on a plain steel base, big enough for both of us, the dog, and a cat or two if there isn't any roughhousing. We're still waiting to be able to afford a frame for this extravagant mattress. We want something showy and romantic, like a Victorian sleigh bed, to match our feeling for each other. But our dreams surpass our credit limits. If the state of marriage is determined by property, we may not have enough to qualify.

So we're lying in this bed on a Sunday evening, the dog curled up just under my stocking feet, one of the cats annoying me by obsessively kneading at my chest, and I ask her "Do you think we're married?"

Linnea rolls over, shooing away the cat, resting her belly,

alongside my hip as her chin nuzzles my shoulder. "I think you're my wife," she says.

I laugh and squeeze in closer, turn so I can kiss the soft exposed flesh below her ear. She is completely serious and not serious at all, in that queer way we learn to roll with a language we are at once completely a part of and completely excluded from.

"Yes, honey," I say. "You are my wife, too." But this is not the right word for it. I can feel the vague tensing in her limbs as she holds me, the structure of her embrace still solid as something deeper steps away. What is it in her that is compromised, knocked off its feet, when I call her wife? A sort of manhood? But this is not the right word either. "I don't know the word," she would say. "But I'm not a man."

So I press myself even closer, sliding my thigh up to rest between her legs, sliding my hip up against her hip so I can feel our bones touch. The evening sun falling through the lace we have hung on our bedroom window scatters bright, sun-colored roses across her face and chest.

"Not your wife," she says.

"My handsome wife?" I try.

"I don't like wife."

It's true, it doesn't fit her. But who does the word wife fit? Fishwife. Housewife. I don't like it either. But when Linnea calls me her wife all that falls away. Then it is a word filled with all the attention she gives me, plump with kisses on the neck as my thighs part to her hands. We can only use this word if we steal it. Hidden in our laps it's better.

Better for me. When I say, wife, her muscles stiffen. She becomes strange, unknowable to me while the sun outside falls behind clouds, while there is no light dappling our bare arms and faces, while the surface of our skin chills.

"OK," I say. "How about husband?"

With this word, husband, I feel her relax, the flow between us returning. Can I call her my husband without meaning a man? Without meaning a woman who wants to be a man? Without even meaning a woman who acts like a man? Even now, over thirteen years a lesbian, I still meet men I am attracted to, but just from the surface layers of my skin. No man can touch my face, my lips, and cause everything in me to drop, bones to water, as Linnea can, as women like her, butch lesbians, do. Who in the world can fly you to the moon, set you to swoon, send you

down with that old black magic in a Tony Bennett ballad kind of love fever? For me it's a woman who would rather be a husband than a wife.

When I call Linnea my husband I mean that she's a woman who has to lead when we slow dance, who is compelled to try to dip and twirl me, no matter that I have rarely been able to relax on a dance floor since I stopped drinking. She leads me between the black walls of a gay bar, our faces streaked with neon and silver disco light, the air so dark Linnea's black leather belt and both pairs of our black boots seem to vanish, leaving parts of us afloat in the heavy smell of booze and cigarettes. She leads me slipping under streamers and lavender balloons, in the center of the light cast by several dozen candles, on some friend's polished oak dining-room floor cleared for party dancing. She leads me across a Sunday morning, sun streaming into our living room through southern exposed windows, so bright it sets the dust spinning. We dance clumsily on the purple oriental rug we bought cheap at a garage sale, the worn wool covered with cat and dog hair, the dog barking and nipping at our heels, me in stocking feet, Linnea wearing athletic shoes because the arches of her feet went bad a few years back.

When I call her my husband I mean that she's a woman I saw dressed seriously in a skirt and heels just once, early on, when she still tried to cross over for job interviews. Her head, shoulders, hands looked too large, her gait too long, an inelegant drag queen. This is a woman who's happiest straddling a motorcycle, who wears a black leather jacket and square-toed biking boots even when she's not riding. For years I've been telling her that her thick, curly hair would look fantastic long, wild with its own life like the hair of Botticelli's Venus or Arlo Guthrie's hair in the *Alice's Restaurant* days, but she will always be a woman who wears her hair short, cut to look slicked back at the sides, a grease-free DA. She's a woman who does not look like a man, yet is often mistaken for one, a woman who meets a clamor of gasps when she enters into the pale green light of shopping-mall rest rooms. The other women are caught with their naked hands motionless over the bright white sinks. The boldest and least observant among them checks her own reflection in the mirror, straightens her back, breaks from the pack to protect the others, points to some unseeable place on the other side of the cloister wall -- "*This is the women's room.*"

I mean Linnea is a woman who once stood at the center of the Gay

Nineties Saturday-night throb, her Levi's tight across the ass, her black leather boots and black leather jacket absorbing the speckled silver light refracting from the spangled curtains of the drag stage. She was caught in a fast second of instinct when she swung around and decked a drunk flat in the nose. He had reached between her legs from behind to grab what he thought was her dick. "He got two surprises that night," is what Linnea says about it.

I mean Linnea is a woman who is a woman because she was born with a woman's body. The large breasts and tender nipples. The monthly swelling, cramps, and blood. The opening up into her that she will do anything to protect, even break a man's nose in the glittering dark of a bar where drag queens sway on a sequined stage in sequined gowns and sequined eyelashes, *their* breasts made of foam rubber or silicone, *their* dicks taped up safe between their buttocks, as they smile like pop stars before paparazzi and mouth the words of Whitney Houston songs.

When I say husband I mean the woman lying beside me on a cool spring Sunday evening while the thinning light streaked over our bed from the west turns rose-colored. "You are my husband," I whisper to her, and we both laugh a little under our breaths, as we kiss, as she rocks me until I am nearly asleep, as the light flickers and sinks into night, as we listen to Luis outside in the yard behind ours crooning in Spanish to his four little dogs while his pet parrots shriek, as our dog pants alongside our bed, waiting for her supper, as the cat kneads my chest, using her claws, and I shoo her off to the floor. "But does that mean we're married?" I whisper to Linnea. But she is drifting off into a nap. We won't solve this today. The rose light flickers and I drift off with her.

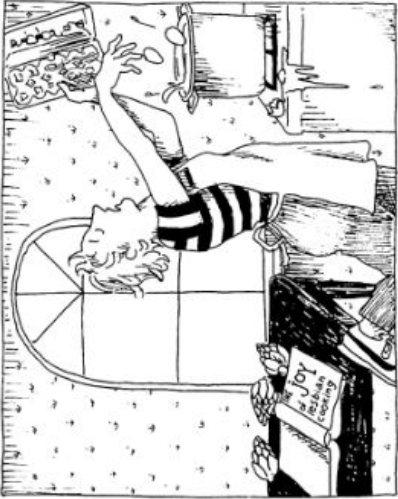
DYKES TO WATCH OUT FOR A-Z, Alison Bechdel



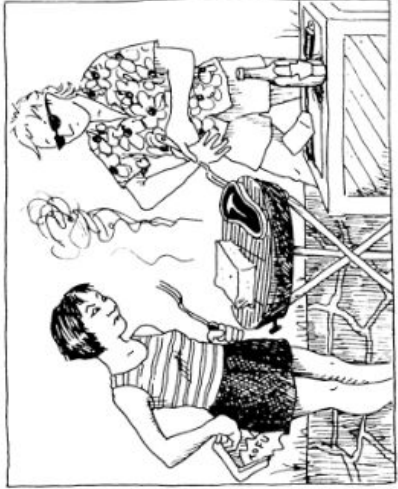
B is for Bianca, who sat on the stoop.



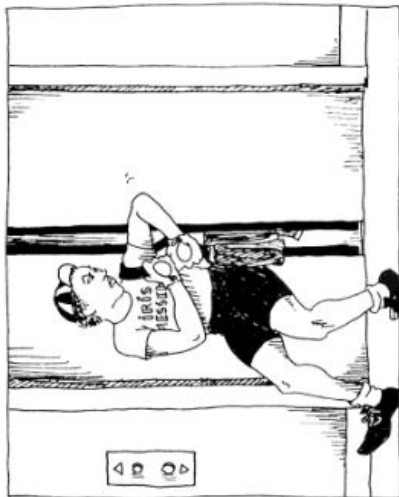
D is for Deirdre, who worked on Wall Street.



A is for Alice, who liked to cook soup.



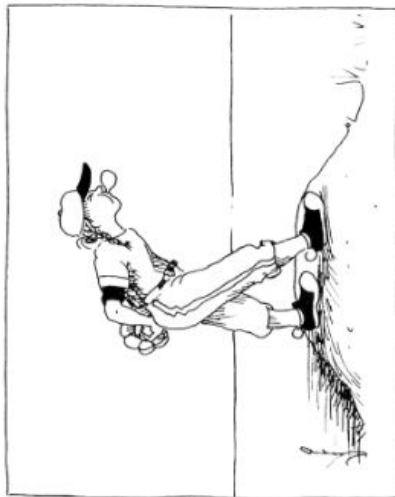
C is for Cleo, who wouldn't eat meat.



H is for Elsie, who came with a message.



H is for Fanny, who lost all her luggage.



G is for Gretchen, who knew at age seven.



H is for Hope, who would not go to heaven.



I is for Iris, a very wise crone.



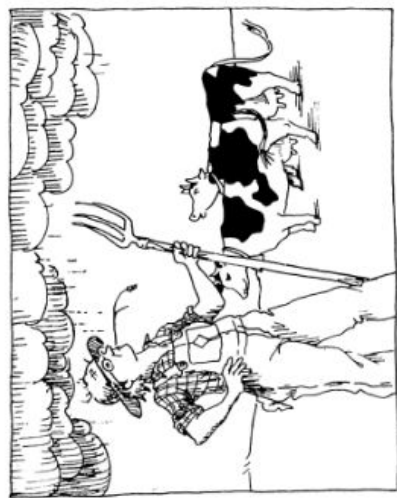
J is for Jasmine, who sculpted in stone.



K is for Kate, a confirmed academic.



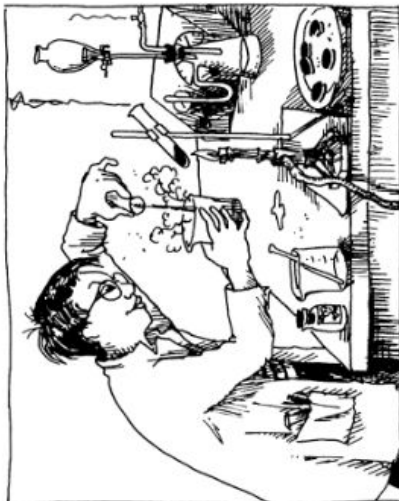
L is for Leila, who was more Kinetic.



M is for Maude, who predicted the weather.



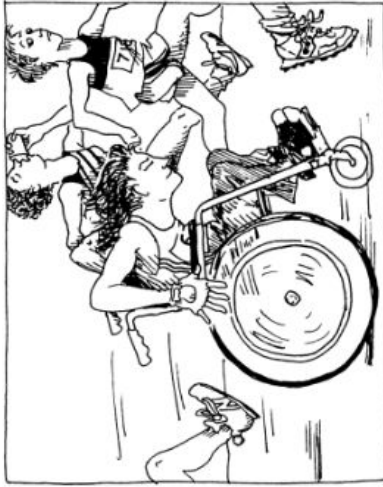
N is for Noelle, who liked to wear leather.



O is for Opal, who brewed an amalgam.



P is for Prudence, who threw out her diaphragm.



Q is for Queenie, who raced in her chair.



R is for Rachel, who cut off her hair.



S is for Sybil, who didn't like weeding.



T is for Tess, at the 4 a.m. feeding.



U is for Una, with charts astroligical.



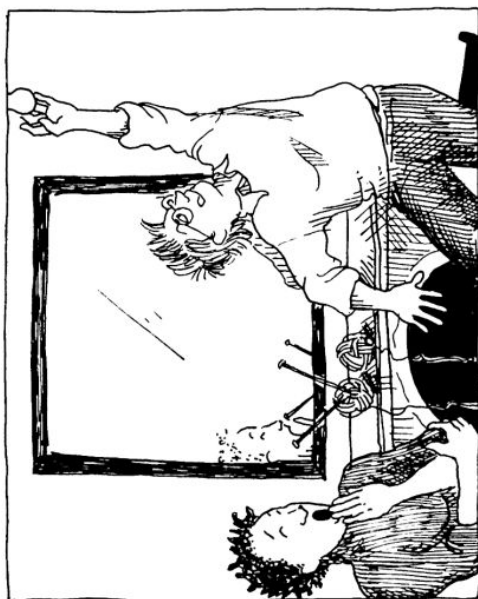
V is for Violet, with passions pedagogical.



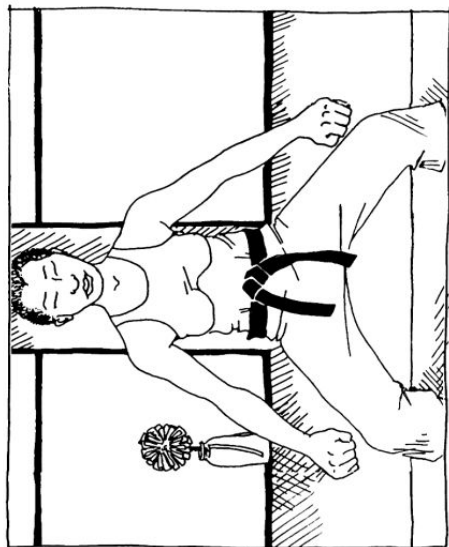
W is for Wanda, who preferred to hitch.



X is for Xaviera, who dug in a ditch.



Y is for Yolanda, who lacked only length.



Z is for Zara, who knew her own strength.