

# **WOMAN IS TALKING TO DEATH**

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a woman is talking to death

*One*

Testimony in trials that never got heard

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me  
my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands

we were driving home slow  
my lover and I, across the long Bay Bridge,  
one February midnight, when midway  
over in the far left lane, I saw a strange scene:

one small young man standing by the rail,  
and in the lane itself, parked straight across  
as if it could stop anything, a large young  
man upon a stalled motorcycle, perfectly  
relaxed as if he'd stopped at a hamburger stand;  
he was wearing a peacoat and levis, and  
he had his head back, roaring, you  
could almost hear the laugh, it  
was so real.

"Look at that fool," I said, "in the  
middle of the bridge like that," a very  
womanly remark.

Then we heard the meaning of the noise  
of metal on a concrete bridge at 50  
miles an hour, and the far left lane  
filled up with a big car that had a  
motorcycle jammed on its front bumper, like  
the whole thing would explode, the friction  
sparks shot up bright orange for many feet  
into the air, and the racket still sets  
my teeth on edge.

When the car stopped we stopped parallel  
and Wendy headed for the callbox while I  
ducked across those 6 lanes like a mouse  
in the bowling alley. "Are you hurt?" I said,  
the middle-aged driver had the greyest black face,  
"I couldn't stop, I couldn't stop, what happened?"

Then I remembered. "Somebody," I said, "was on  
the motorcycle." I ran back,  
one block? two blocks? the space for walking  
on the bridge is maybe 18 inches, whoever  
engineered this arrogance. in the dark  
stiff wind it seemed I would



be pushed over the rail, would fall down screaming onto the hard surface of the bay, but I did not, I found the tall young man who thought he owned the bridge, now lying on his stomach, head cradled in his broken arm.

He had glasses on, but somewhere he had lost most of his levis, where were they? and his shoes. Two short cuts on his buttocks, that was the only mark except his thin white seminal tubes were all strung out behind; no child left in him; and he looked asleep.

I plucked wildly at his wrist, then put it down; there were two long haired women holding back the traffic just behind me with their bare hands, the machines came down like mad bulls, I was scared, much more than usual, I felt easily squished like the earthworms crawling on a busy sidewalk after the rain; I wanted to leave. And met the driver, walking back.

"The guy is dead." I gripped his hand, the wind was going to blow us off the bridge.

"Oh my God," he said, "haven't I had enough trouble in my life?" He raised his head, and for a second was enraged and yelling, at the top of the bridge--"I was just driving home!" His head fell down. "My God, and now I've killed somebody."

I looked down at my own peacoat and levis, then over at the dead man's friend, who was bawling and blubbering, what they would call hysteria in a woman. "It isn't possible" he wailed, but it was possible, it was indeed, accomplished and unfeeling, snoring in its peacoat, and without its levis on.

He died laughing: that's a fact.

I had a woman waiting for me, in her car and in the middle of the bridge, I'm frightened, I said.

I'm afraid, he said, stay with me, please don't go, stay with me, be my witness--"No," I said, "I'll be your witness--later," and I took his name and number, "but I can't stay with you,



I'm too frightened of the bridge, besides  
I have a woman waiting  
and no license--  
and no tail lights--"  
So I left--  
as I have left so many of my lovers.

we drove home  
shaking, Wendy's face greyer  
than any white person's I have ever seen.  
maybe he beat his wife, maybe he once  
drove taxi, and raped a lover  
of mine--how to know these things?  
we do each other in, that's a fact.

who will be my witness?  
death wastes our time with drunkenness  
and depression  
death, who keeps us from our  
lovers.

he had a woman waiting for him,  
I found out when I called the number  
days later

"Where is he" she said, "he's disappeared."  
"He'll be all right" I said, "we could  
have hit the guy as easy as anybody, it  
wasn't anybody's fault, they'll know that,"  
women so often say dumb things like that,  
they teach us to be sweet and reassuring,  
and say ignorant things, because we dont invent  
the crime, the punishment, the bridges

that same week I looked into the mirror  
and nobody was there to testify;  
how clear, an unemployed queer woman  
makes no witness at all,  
nobody at all was there for  
those two questions: what does  
she do, and who is she married to?

I am the woman who stopped on the bridge  
and this is the man who was there  
our lovers teeth are white geese flying  
above us, but we ourselves are  
easily squished.

keep the women small and weak  
and off the street, and off the  
bridges, that's the way, brother  
one day I will leave you there,



as I have left you there before,  
working for death.

we found out later  
what we left him to.  
Six big policemen answered the call,  
all white, and no child in them.  
they put the driver up against his car  
and beat the hell out of him.  
What did you kill that poor kid for?  
you mutherfucking nigger.  
that's a fact.

Death only uses violence  
when there is any kind of resistance,  
the rest of the time a slow  
weardown will do.

They took him to 4 different hospitals  
til they got a drunk test report to fit their  
case, and held him five days in jail  
without a phone call.  
how many lovers have we left.

there are as many contradictions to the game,  
as there are players.  
a woman is talking to death,  
though talk is cheap, and life takes a long time  
to make  
right. He got a cheesy lawyer  
who had him cop a plea, 15 to 20  
instead of life  
Did I say life?

the arrogant young man who thought he  
owned the bridge, and fell asleep on it  
he died laughing: that's a fact.  
the driver sits out his time  
off the street somewhere,  
does he have the most vacant of  
eyes, will he die laughing?

*Two*

They don't have to lynch the women anymore

death sits on my doorstep  
cleaning his revolver

death cripples my feet and sends me out  
to wait for the bus alone,



then comes by driving a taxi.

the woman on our block with 6 young children  
has the most vacant of eyes  
death sits in her bedroom, loading  
his revolver

they don't have to lynch the women  
very often anymore, although  
they used to--the lord and his men  
went through the villages at night, beating &  
killing every woman caught  
outdoors.

the European witch trials took away  
the independent people; two different villages  
--after the trials were through that year--  
had left in them, each--  
one living woman:  
one

What were those other women up to? had they  
run over someone? stopped on the wrong bridge?  
did they have teeth like  
any kind of geese, or children  
in them?

### *Three*

This woman is a lesbian be careful

In the military hospital where I worked  
as a nurse's aide, the walls of the halls  
were lined with howling women  
waiting to deliver  
or to have some parts removed.  
One of the big private rooms contained  
the general's wife, who needed  
a wart taken off her nose.  
we were instructed to give her special attention  
not because of her wart or her nose  
but because of her husband, the general.

as many women as men die, and that's a fact.

At work there was one friendly patient, already  
claimed, a young woman burnt apart with X-ray,  
she had long white tubes instead of openings;  
rectum, bladder, vagina--I combed her hair, it  
was my job, but she took care of me as if  
nobody's touch could spoil her.



ho ho death, ho death  
have you seen the twinkle in the dead woman's eye?

when you are a nurse's aide  
someone suddenly notices you  
and yells about the patient's bed,  
and tears the sheets apart so you  
can do it over, and over  
while the patient waits  
doubled over in her pain  
for you to make the bed again  
and no one ever looks at you,  
only at what you do not do

Here, general, hold this soldier's bed pan  
for a moment, hold it for a year--  
then we'll promote you to making his bed.  
we believe you wouldn't make such messes

if you had to clean up after them.

that's a fantasy.  
this woman is a lesbian, be careful.

When I was arrested and being thrown out  
of the military, the order went out: dont anybody  
speak to this woman, and for those three  
long months, almost nobody did; the dayroom, when  
I entered it, fell silent til I had gone; they  
were afraid, they knew the wind would blow  
them over the rail, the cops would come,  
the water would run into their lungs.  
Everything I touched  
was spoiled. They were my lovers, those  
women, but nobody had taught us to swim.  
I drowned, I took 3 or 4 others down  
when I signed the confession of what we  
had done together.

No one will ever speak to me again.

I read this somewhere; I wasn't there:  
in WW II the US army had invented some floating  
amphibian tanks, and took them over to  
the coast of Europe to unload them,  
the landing ships all drawn up in a fleet,  
and everybody watching. Each tank had a  
crew of 6 and there were 25 tanks.  
The first went down the landing planks  
and sank, the second, the third, the  
fourth, the fifth, the sixth went down



and sank. They weren't supposed to sink, the engineers had made a mistake. The crews looked around wildly for the order to quit, but none came, and in the sight of thousands of men, each 6 crewmen saluted his officers, battened down his hatch in turn and drove into the sea, and drowned, until all 25 tanks were gone. did they have vacant eyes, die laughing, or what? what did they talk about, those men, as the water came in?

was the general their lover?

*Four*

A Mock Interrogation

Have you ever held hands with a woman?

Yes, many times--women about to deliver, women about to have breasts removed, wombs removed, miscarriages, women having epileptic fits, having asthma, cancer, women having breast bone marrow sucked out of them by nervous or indifferent interns, women with heart condition, who were vomiting, overdosed, depressed, drunk, lonely to the point of extinction: women who had been run over, beaten up. deserted. starved. women who had been bitten by rats; and women who were happy, who were celebrating, who were dancing with me in large circles or alone, women who were climbing mountains or up and down walls, or trucks or roofs and needed a boost up, or I did; women who simply wanted to hold my hand because they liked me, some women who wanted to hold my hand because they liked me better than anyone.

These were many women?

Yes. many.

What about kissing? Have you kissed any women?

I have kissed many women.

When was the first woman you kissed with serious feeling?

The first woman ever I kissed was Josie, who I had loved at such a distance for months. Josie was not only beautiful, she was tough and handsome too. Josie had black hair and white teeth and strong brown muscles. Then she dropped out



of school unexplained. When she came back she came back for one day only, to finish the term, and there was a child in her. She was all shame, pain, and defiance. Her eyes were dark as the water under a bridge and no one would talk to her, they laughed and threw things at her. In the afternoon I walked across the front of the class and looked deep into Josie's eyes and I picked up her chin with my hand, because I loved her, because nothing like her trouble would ever happen to me, because I hated it that she was pregnant and unhappy, and an outcast. We were thirteen.

You didn't kiss her?

How does it feel to be thirteen and having a baby?

You didn't actually kiss her?

Not in fact.

You have kissed other women?

Yes, many, some of the finest women I know, I have kissed. women who were lonely, women I didn't know and didn't want to, but kissed because that was a way to say yes we are still alive and loveable, though separate, women who recognized a loneliness in me, women who were hurt, I confess to kissing the top of a 55 year old woman's head in the snow in boston, who was hurt more deeply than I have ever been hurt, and I wanted her as a very few people have wanted me-- I wanted her and me to own and control and run the city we lived in, to staff the hospital I knew would mistreat her, to drive the transportation system that had betrayed her, to patrol the streets controlling the men who would murder or disfigure or disrupt us, not accidently with machines, but on purpose, because we are not allowed out on the street alone--

Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing, I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat to keep us from leaving, because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly; I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that



tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly.

*Five*

Bless this day oh cat our house

"I was allowed to go  
3 places, growing up," she said--  
"3 places, no more.

there was a straight line from my house  
to school, a straight line from my house  
to church, a straight line from my house  
to the corner store."

her parents thought something might happen to her.  
but nothing ever did.

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me  
my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands  
we are the river of life and the fat of the land  
death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman?  
if we use each other up  
on each other  
that's a little bit less for you  
a little bit less for you, ho  
death, ho ho death.

Bless this day oh cat our house  
help me be not such a mouse  
death tells the woman to stay home  
and then breaks in the window.

I read this somewhere, I wasn't there:  
In feudal Europe, if a woman committed adultery  
her husband would sometimes tie her  
down, catch a mouse and trap it  
under a cup on her bare belly, until  
it gnawed itself out, now are you  
afraid of mice?

*Six*

Dressed as I am, a young man once called  
me names in Spanish

a woman who talks to death  
is a dirty traitor



inside a hamburger joint and  
dressed as I am, a young man once called me  
names in Spanish  
then he called me queer and slugged me.  
first I thought the ceiling had fallen down  
but there was the counterman making a ham  
sandwich, and there was I spread out on his  
counter.

For God's sake I said when  
I could talk, this guy is beating me up  
can't you call the police or something,  
can't you stop him? he looked up from  
working on his sandwich, which was my  
sandwich, I had ordered it. He liked  
the way I looked. "There's a pay phone  
right across the street" he said.

I couldn't listen to the Spanish language  
for weeks afterward, without feeling the  
most murderous of urges, the simple  
association of one thing to another,  
so damned simple.

The next day I went to the police station  
to become an outraged citizen  
Six big policemen stood in the hall,  
all white and dressed as they do  
they were well pleased with my story, pleased  
at what had gotten beat out of me, so  
I left them laughing, went home fast  
and locked my door.

For several nights I fantasized the scene  
again, this time grabbing a chair  
and smashing it over the bastard's head,  
killing him. I called him a spic, and  
killed him. my face healed. his didnt.  
no child in me.

now when I remember I think:  
maybe he was Josie's baby.  
all the chickens come home to roost,  
all of them.

### *Seven*

Death and disfiguration

One Christmas eve my lovers and I  
we left the bar, driving home slow  
there was a woman lying in the snow



by the side of the road. She was wearing a bathrobe and no shoes, where were her shoes? she had turned the snow pink, under her feet. she was an Asian woman, didnt speak much English, but she said a taxi driver beat her up and raped her, throwing her out of his care.

what on earth was she doing there on a street she helped to pay for but doesn't own?  
doesn't she know to stay home?

I am a pervert, therefore I've learned to keep my hands to myself in public but I was so drunk that night, I actually did something loving I took her in my arms, this woman, until she could breathe right, and my friends who are perverts too they touched her too we all touched her.

"You're going to be all right" we lied. She started to cry "I'm 55 years old" she said and that said everything.

Six big policemen answered the call no child in them.  
they seemed afraid to touch her, then grabbed her like a corpse and heaved her on their metal stretcher into the van, crashing and clumsy.  
She was more frightened than before. they were cold and bored.  
'don't leave me' she said.  
'she'll be all right' they said.  
we left, as we have left all of our lovers as all lovers leave all lovers much too soon to get the real loving done.

*Eight*

a mock interrogation

Why did you get into the cab with him, dressed as you are?

I wanted to go somewhere.

Did you know what the cab driver might do if you got into the cab with him?



I just wanted to go somewhere.

How many times did you  
get into the cab with him?

I dont remember.

If you dont remember, how do you know it happened to you?

*Nine*

Hey you death

ho and ho poor death  
our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us  
our lovers muscles are rope ladders under our hands  
even though no women yet go down to the sea in ships  
except in their dreams.

only the arrogant invent a quick and meaningful end  
for themselves, of their own choosing.  
everyone else knows how very slow it happens  
how the woman's existence bleeds out her years,  
how the child shoots up at ten and is arrested and old  
how the man carries a murderous shell within him  
and passes it on.

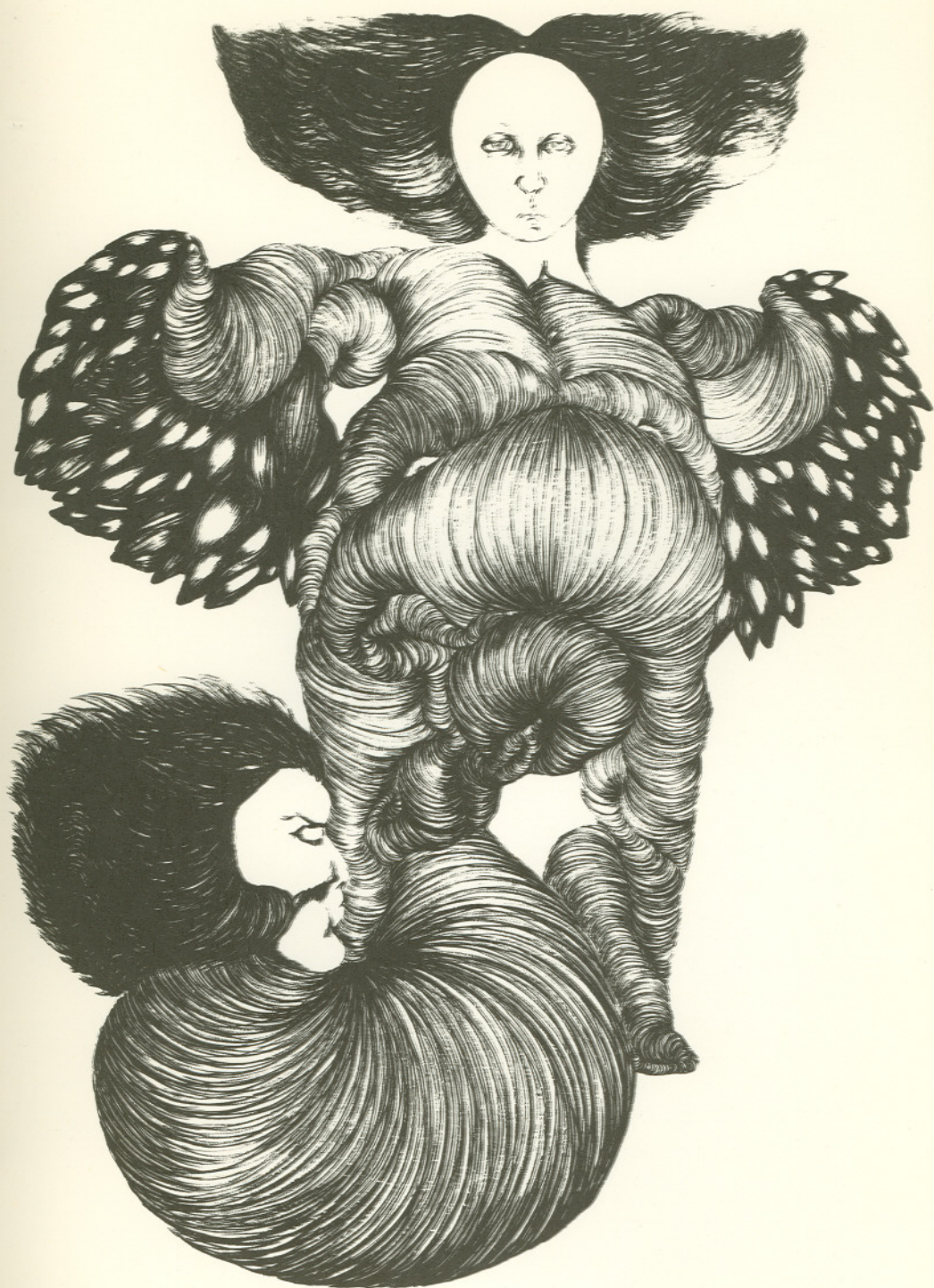
we are the fat of the land, and  
we all have our list of casualties

to my lovers I bequeath  
the rest of my life

I want nothing left of me for you, ho death  
except some fertilizer  
for the next batch of us  
who do not hold hands with you  
who do not embrace you  
who try not to work for you  
or sacrifice themselves or trust  
or believe you, ho ignorant  
death, how do you know  
we happened to you?

wherever our meat hangs on our own bones  
for our own use  
your pot is so empty  
death, ho death  
you shall be poor







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