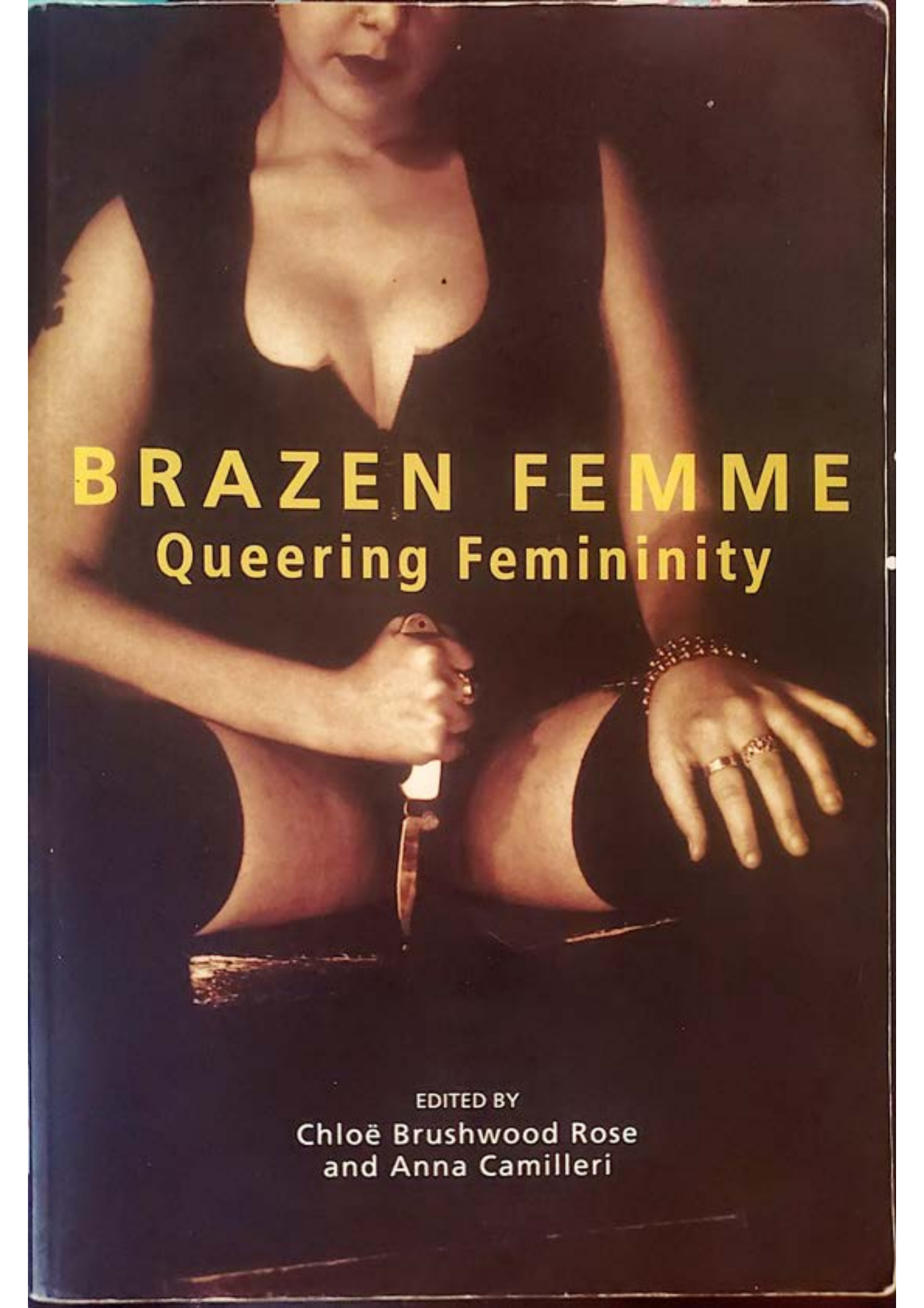
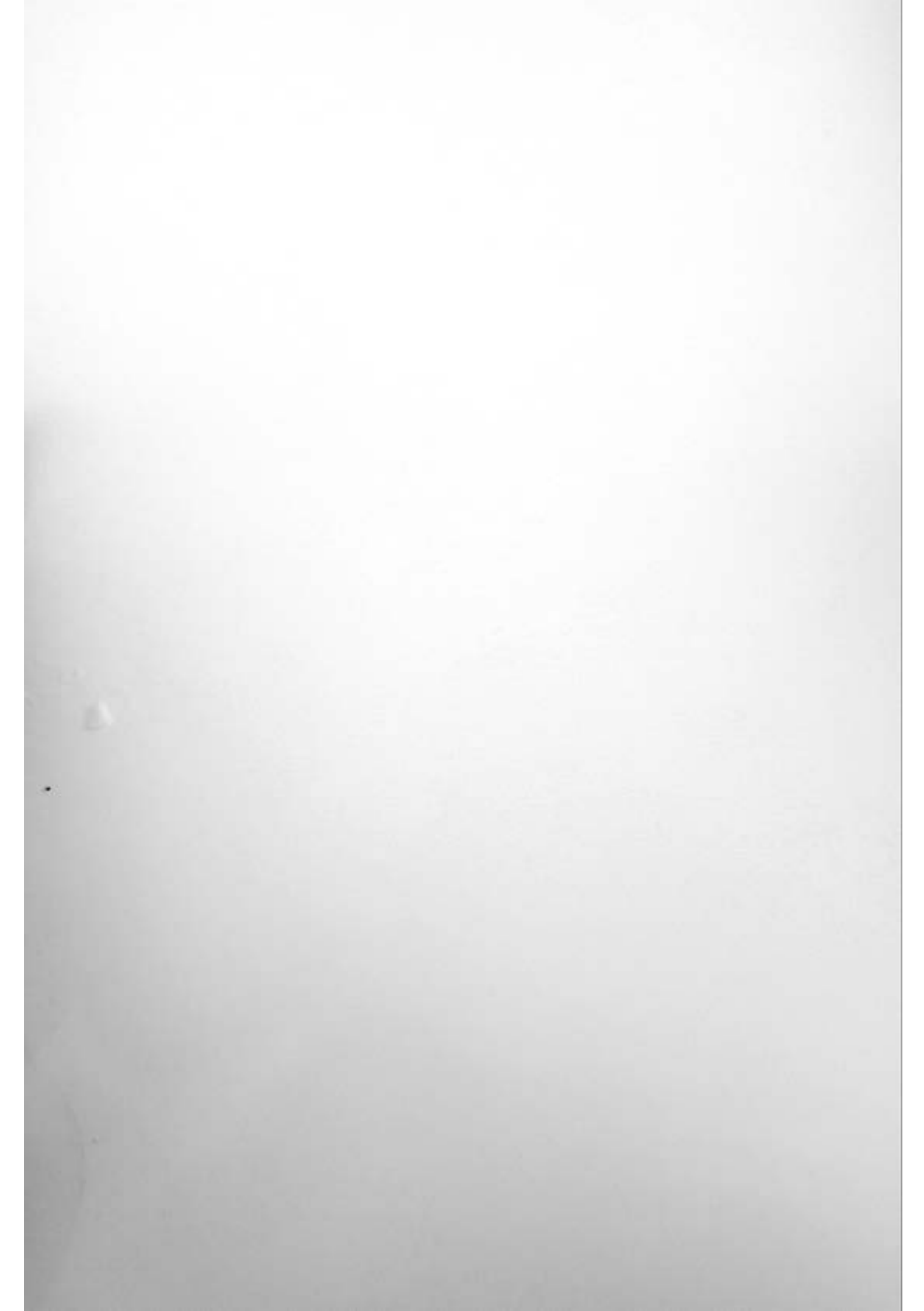


A photograph of a woman from the chest down, wearing a black corset. She is holding a large, ornate knife in her right hand, which is positioned near her waist. Her left hand is resting on her hip, adorned with multiple rings and a beaded bracelet. The background is dark and moody.

BRAZEN FEMME

Queering Femininity

EDITED BY
**Chloë Brushwood Rose
and Anna Camilleri**



Brazen Femme



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ARSENAL
Pulp Press
Vancouver

BRAZEN FEMME

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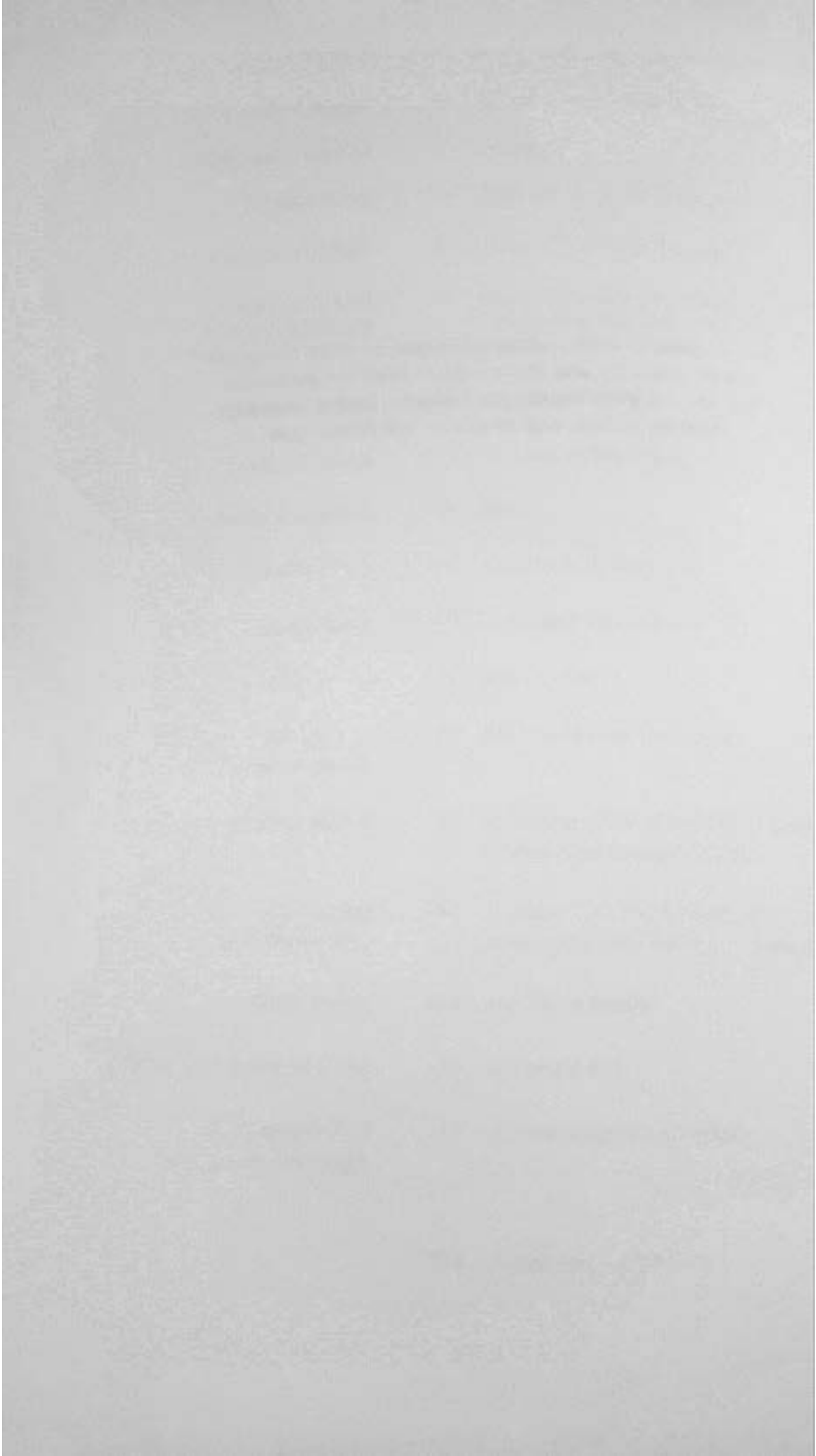
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Brazen Femme is dedicated to all femmes – both those who
live in obscurity and those whose lives are infamous.
You are our grandmothers, mothers, lovers, mentors,
heroes, sisters, and brothers. We honor you.



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We thank all of the contributors whose work appears in this collection for trusting us with their work and for creating such shameless and powerful accounts of femme experience.

Finally, this collection was born out of the precious and constant friendship that we share. We give infinite thanks for one another.

– Anna and Chloë

THE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON

FROM THE FIRST SETTLEMENT
TO THE PRESENT TIME
BY
JOSEPH NEALE
OF THE BOSTON BAR
IN TWO VOLUMES
VOL. I.
BOSTON: PUBLISHED BY
J. NEALE, 1822.

Introduction: A Brazen Posture

I reached for my knife.

This was not planned or pre-meditated. I had, however, lived this moment, imagined this moment many times over. The point of meeting – cold steel on warm skin, the utility of both (my) knife and (my) hand. The union of function and poetry – each functional, each poetic.

Blade firmly in hand, the weave of roped muscles in my shoulders spilled open like a waterfall.

There were only a couple of exposures left on the roll. It was late in the day, my stomach was gurgling, but I had new energy. Where there had been ambivalence about being photographed, there was now desire. I wanted to be seen, to mark the moment and be marked by it.

I dared the viewer, the imagined viewer, to look. My legs spread apart, knife gripped tightly, mediating access. Seeing is the tithe, not the prize. A brazen posture? Yes.

The photograph described in the narrative above appears on the cover of this book. This image, this femme, calls for a redress, demands an exchange. In the words of Duggan and McHugh, she is “the performer who demands performance in return.” In creating this image we two femmes were joined in a moment – a moment that stretches forward and back, that tilts on an improbable axis simultaneously holding past, present, and sun-spotted future. The photo is unique, but its uniqueness doesn’t lay in a single negative, in the fraction of a second reflected on film.

We have seen this cover image before on the bodies of countless femmes, with language that is both implicit and explicit: *So, what’ll it be? You think you got my number?*

Femme’s combative “nature” emerges, but this does not define her essence or her essential irony. What cannot be seen, what cannot be held or pinned down, is where femme is – she cannot be

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domesticated. Her wilderness is mercurial, encompassing the earthly and metaphysical. Her poker face delivers a heavy hand – in femme's look away, she appears. Femme is the blade – fatally sharp; a mirror reflecting back fatal illusions.

Is this a queer posture? Yes. A posture that queers? Yes. Inherently queer? Yes.

Femme is inherently "queer" – in the broadest application of the word – as bent, unfixed, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated. Released from the strictures of binary models of sexual orientation and gender and sex. Released from a singular definition of femme. Released from the "object position" where femme is all too often situated. Here, we offer a collection of work that offers multiple exposures of femme experience. The work in *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* does not offer definitions and does not seek to locate femme in one place, in one time, or in one tidy package – this is not our desire, and it simply is not possible.

There is nothing tidy or peaceful here. The voices reflected in this book are both contradictory and in chorus. Here, and outside of these pages, we are dangerous and pleasure-seeking, we are volatile matter. We find danger in our search for pleasure, on our own terms. We give good danger, we warn, we warn of danger, of dangerous times. We are harbingers, harlots, heroes. We are troubled and troubling. Here, we blow the whistle on the confines of femininity. Here, we indelibly mark ourselves femme.

(En)Gendering Femme

About four years ago, as we were first envisioning this anthology, we met a man who we will call "Jim." The three of us were in a workshop on issues of transgender and transsexuality. Both of us had begun to sense the need to articulate femme as a gender experience that is never tied to biological sex. We were working with ideas together and separately, trying to make sense of our identities, our desires, our angers, our lives. What would it mean to be a femme and not a woman? What would it mean to be femme outside of a lesbian framework? What is it that femmes have in common? What makes femme different from femininity?

And then we met Jim. A straight man. A femme. Jim lived and worked as a man. Jim also lived and worked in what most would describe as "women's clothes," but what might also be described as "high femme" clothes. Many people would call Jim a transvestite. Jim called himself femme.

Our brief but pivotal acquaintance with Jim helped us think about

the common dangers and pleasures of femme as an experience that is informed by and also exceeds lesbian herstory; as a way of being that cannot be described as quintessentially feminine. Instead, femme might be described as "femininity gone wrong" – bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy. Femme is the trappings of femininity gone awry, gone to town, gone to the dogs. Femininity is a demand placed on female bodies and femme is the danger of a body read female or inappropriately feminine. We are not good girls – perhaps we are not girls at all.

Femme has been historicized in the context of lesbian communities – made manifest in the words of Dorothy Allyson, Jewel Gomez, Joan Nestle, Chrystos, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Amber Hollibaugh, among others. Lesbian femmes are the original bad girls, hell-raisers in heels, caregivers, workers, and divas. Our lives are complicated by class, race, and gender oppression. Our lives are shaped by homophobia and the pleasures of radical sex.

Here we want to push things further. This collection speaks to experiences of femme also complicated by maleness, by racist queers and racism, by transsexuality, by the politics of fat, by class, by age, and by institutionalization. Many femmes are lesbians, but femmes are also drag queens, straight sex workers, nelly fags, all strong women and sassy men. We wanted this collection to begin to recognize the many forms of radical femininity that might choose to name themselves femme. And it is only a beginning.

Finally, we want an articulation of femme that is not tied to butch. We are tired of seeing femme tied to butch identity as its Other. Just as we have articulated femme as transcending the binaries of male/female and gay/straight, we want to liberate femme from its binary relation with butch. This anthology both celebrates and complicates femme as a gender experience on its own terms, as an experience that expands, exceeds, and troubles the familiar framework or "norms" of lesbian (butch) femme.

Where We Start Is (Not) Where We End

So, what will our terms be? Redress and pleasure. Femme stories that have been mediated by others will be dismantled, dislocated, and unwound. We reject singular interpretations of femme "identity" and choose to beguile, employ trickery, and dance between locations with ease. We will be our own "gatekeepers," our own center, while at the same time refusing the need for militia or a tactical strategy, the requirements of a norm. Our very existence challenges the status quo and destabilizes social relations of power – economies of inequity,

repression, and dominance. Our terms are slippery and our designs complex.

While many texts have been produced that explore sexual and gender identity, there have been few explorations, analyses, and cultural productions of femme identity on its own terms. This collection is indebted to those few works that have begun to articulate femme as a revolutionary experience and identity.¹ However, there are many ways in which this collection differs from those books that can be seen as its predecessors. First, *Brazen Femme* insists on femme identity as distinct from and critical of naturalized notions of femininity. Secondly, unlike other works that explore femme identity, the central motif here is not one of historical chronology. Instead of a socio-historical approach, this collection explores femme identity through experiences of hybridity, transgression, and mutability grounded in the present moment.

Whether by choice or necessity, the contributors to this collection explore the desires and difficulties in (re)making femininity fit their own queer frames. Rather than being concerned with explanations, *Brazen Femme* demonstrates a way of theorizing femme identity through description, reflection, and interpretation. Each work here contributes to a recognition of femme as an identity in flux and in motion, as constantly being reinvented.

You could say that *Brazen Femme* was inspired by the moment when Anna drew her knife out of its case, the exact moment when Chloë exposed the film to light. But there is more to the story. Every moment is connected to a thousand others. You will find some of them here.

1. Several books explore femme identities in relation to butch, including *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (Alyson, 1992) edited by Joan Nestle, and *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (Cassell, 1998) edited by Sally Munt. Books that have begun to address femme identity on its own terms include Lesléa Newman's *The Femme Mystique* (Alyson, 1995), Shar Rednour's *A Femme's Guide to the Universe* (Alyson, 2000), and *Femme: Feminist Lesbians and Bad Girls* (Routledge, 1997) edited by Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker.

Elizabeth Ruth

Quantum Femme

What you see is not what you get.

Not a dress code, dressed-to-kill clothes horse. She's a quantum femme – as big as the universe and more expansive. When she opens her legs she flatters the planet. Taking you in short breaths or deep drags off the end of a long, hard stare, she sucks you in and through the black hole she's grown accustomed to living with – that elusive quality that takes up so much space. And she'll take you for a ride with the enthusiasm of a new millennium superhero, diving off tall buildings into the atmosphere, a free-falling supernova spitting atoms.

Quantum femme is not linear, but the tallest free-standing structure you'll ever wrap your mind around; a psychotic frame of reference not contained in paper concepts such as time and space. After all, femme – like madness – is just a state of mind. Not only round in all the right places – film noir stiletto heeled porno fantasy – she's as circular as time itself, a spiral dancing queen who can make men chase their tails as foolishly as any old dog.

But it's not a man she's after.

Maybe she's a ball-busting bitch from the planet of no apologies, her molecular structure defying gravity. But then again power is a responsibility of which she occasionally desires to be relieved. She might demand your ass in the air, arms spread to the far corners of the bed. But it's so draining being her and more than likely she'll beg to have her power usurped, begged to be pinned down. Some see her as one-dimensional, a flat, carbon-based life form. The building blocks of nature or someone to start what they finish: A family, a movement, a sentence . . . but she's larger than that. Quantum femme lives in the fourth dimension where everything you've seen and heard is an illusion. She also knows that at her most desirable she's supposed to dominate with supernova moans that humble the night sky. She's heard echoes about the evolution of relationships from mono to poly. Poly gamous: She thinks it's the practice of playing more than one game at a time. Everything about her is already plural. She does not need any more distractions.

In fact, she's heard enough already, about high priestesses with pointed pvc boots and top, top, topsy-turvy attitudes. She can be that, of course. She was born aerodynamic, smooth like the milky way, but mostly too practical to do all the work when she doesn't need to. Yes, her corset is laced with burdens, her boots polished to a fine challenge. She might be riding high, but she's a bottom eater in search of more. The truth is, when you're usually in control it takes more strength to let yourself be taken than it does to do the taking.

Quantum femme is an intergalactic insomniac, a shark who must keep moving in order to preserve the species and continue through to the next generation. She's here and now. A prehistoric icon, cartoon figure. Comic strip tease. And stretching all her images across time becomes a bore. So she remembers with a vengeance, fucks with resistance, and loves only when every other need has been tended to first. All of this comes at a price; the universal exhaustion of a hard-working, working girl. She's tired of strangers ordering her to "smile." Tired of walking down city streets as though crossing a grenade field and trying not to step on the wrong onlooker. She's perpetually stuck in a time-warp between a neon bright high flashing eclipse and absolute invisibility.

Can anybody see her?

She's a time traveler moving faster than the speed of sound, linking past, present, and future. Bridging across the galaxy between straight and bent. Between woman-loving and woman-hating. Between the pages of a book. She's here to remind the galaxy that it is possible to be more than one half of any duality, more than just an extension, an opposite: male/female. Rational/emotional. Butch/femme. So, she's nobody's princess, baby doll, babe. Her ass is her own until she needs a good spanking. Even then, she's nobody's slut but the slut inside you.

Moving in waves – not steps – her posture is regal. Her shoulders are back, she wears the dress before the dress wears her. Or maybe not. Maybe she can't crawl out of bed some days, can't choose the proper costume. Quantum femme knows costumes and weapons are one in the same and she knows all too well the rolling pictures in some minds, of a buxom, tight-waisted milkmaid. Ready-made-to-order. You'd like to think she'll eat you for supper. Lick. Suck. Devour. Let you off the hook? In your dreams.

The truth is she can make you comfortable in your skin even when you shouldn't be, and she wears great pain. There's a reason you'll never see a quantum femme cry in public. Her acid rain tears would flood the planet, create a burning wave, tsunami undertow that threatens to swallow everything.

A femme ejaculation.

So beware. Up close, microscopically, she might not be what you

envision. She might shock with her unkempt reality: clothes that haven't seen a washing machine in months, unshaven legs, breath that bites back, and teeth that wear fur coats. Wrinkles across her soul. Quantum femme is older than time, made of minuscule particles insisting that even small matter, matters. She lives in chaos where random, inexplicable events defy logic, where unforeseen tragedy strikes when least expected. She's guarded by the protective rings around Saturn. Shielded by the armour-thick glow of the Aurora Borealis. Leery of newcomers. You can't label her neuroses, identify her predilections, or even predict what she would eat for breakfast. She's slippery, gliding through expectations like spilt mercury dancing down your leg, curdling and separating. She's been many people in many places but somehow always the same.

A quantum femme knows exactly what she likes even when it's not in vogue. She's attracted to power because it's like looking in the mirror. So don't lick her moon-walking boots. Don't touch too softly or she won't notice, and don't wait for an invitation. The whips she carries are sewn into the lining of her skull, the bondage she employs leaches like poison from her pores. Odorless. Tasteless. It can't be bought or passed on at a weekend retreat. You can't begin to imagine what sadomasochistic lifetimes she's consented to. Or, those she didn't. You can't know her by defining her parameters, testing her tolerance, or crossing her boundaries. Quantum femme has a voracious appetite for the truth and the truth hurts most of all.

If you want to win favor don't spread out across her mattress like you're waiting for a hot meal. Or preen publicly like a peacock then privately hide in her breasts, an ostrich burying your head in the sand. She's already somebody's mother, sister, and wife. She's put in her volunteer hours and donated to charity. She doesn't want to demand that you make her come – she wants to dare you. Make her come so she can go away, leave herself with the pounding pounding of your hand, fist, anything inside her centre. Let the vibrations on her clit stop time.

She's woman enough to give it up for you and astronomical enough to make each explosion feel new. She won't break or fall to pieces. She knows no singular force is strong enough to reach her now. She knows where she's going and never forgets where she came from: a single-mother-no-father-big-bang theory of creation. She doesn't crave picket fences, station wagons, or diamond rings. Her people are flawed beyond repair so she's had to learn to love and hate simultaneously. Don't be surprised by the company she keeps.

Quantum femme comes from way down low, on her knees. Pressed into dank mattresses. The deep metamorphosis lesson that teaches young girls how to become cosmic women: impenetrable. Unflinching.

BRAZEN FEMME

Brazen. She keeps a good secret unless the price is too high and then she'll share it with the stars, naming one for every scar on the inside lining of her flesh. She's a body housing infinite possibilities for women, some of them snuffed out at a tender age. Some of them raging till dawn. You only think you know her. She's a mother of a woman – the kind that makes Betty Crocker fall to her knees and ask for forgiveness.

Quantum femme will close her eyes and give birth to new planets, an entire universe balancing on a single eyelash. She sees the future staring back at her with bloodshot eyes. Lips on fire, arched eyebrows, and bottoms up. She's the woman-child who never fit because she learned too soon not to be satisfied with mere mortals. People are like fish, she thinks, they only grow to the size of their bowls. She doesn't run for cover, shade her eyes from blinding sun, or expect to be whisked away on white steeds or black Harley Davidsons. Quantum femme rescues herself. And she knows, every woman needs to be saved at least once in her life.

She never gives up, always thinks she's correct, and does not share. Her fist word was "mine." Her second was "eternity." She's destined to dream larger than life and because she thinks big, she is. Sure she's a quantum figment of the collective imagination, but she's also a femme of her own design. And it doesn't really matter what name you call her by, it's the one she answers to that counts.

Anna Camilleri

Cut from the Same Stone

I. Jewel

My mother was too big for me to hold, even with my whole body wrapped around her tight-tight. She was bigger than life itself. A planet in motion.

I heard her coming before I saw her, thundering up the stairs, then down, in shoes that clicked more than they thudded. When she wasn't dressed for the assembly line, she wore mid-thigh skirts, tops that stopped (or started) at her midriff, mary-jane platforms, deep oval necklines, red or violet lipstick. I remember one cap-sleeved baby-T in particular. Sky blue with curly silver-sparkle letters printed across her breasts: *Classy Lady*. She created anthems out of swear words, finely strung together like raging, pink pearls. She would say *There's no point in being subtle*. And she wasn't. About anything.

II. Mother of Pearl

All these years later, quickly approaching mid-life like a meteor gathering speed on its descent, and my mother is (still) the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the rod I measure myself by, the rod I rap against my own knuckles. I love her with ferocity, and hate her even more.

This is a working class story about economy. Economy of the heart. This is the story of a stone femme. My mother's story, every femme's story, my story.

III. Casting

Every Saturday morning, my mom and I went to the TD Bank at the corner of St Clair and Dufferin. I waited for her in one of the tan, vinyl chairs that lined the bank's west wall, Dufferin Street rushing past on the other side of the red brick, my feet swinging inches from the ground. This Saturday, she waved me to join her at the counter. Franca, the teller who smelled like cut flowers, smiled down at me. They talked about work and their swollen ankles, while I carefully printed my name on some papers. I was given a little green book – my first chequing account – with \$5.00 printed across the top of the first page in the deposit column. Mom said the five dollars was to get me started, and I would need to earn the rest.

That day, my mother told me that I should never make the mistake of believing that anyone could take care of me, and that even if I were to get married, I should have my own money. She told me I was smart, and that I should stay in school for as long as possible – that I should arm myself with knowledge, an arsenal of words and ideas. This would free me from being leashed like a bitch in wait, to a person, a place, to a self sewn together and struggling to stay as one.

IV. Stone Soup

No mincing of words, my mother. She was, is, the cutter. Slicing through the divide between what we think, and what we say; between propriety and precision; between what is and what is not. Time is a-wastin', and goddammit, she had no time for any of that. Two babies before the age of nineteen, a time clock to punch in and out of, laundry waiting to be wrung, a tired husband, a bleeding-heart for a mother, lost brothers, a bastard for a father – and not a soft pair of hands between them. Oh no, she would not raise weak children.

V. Stone's Throw

Then, I understood my mother's words as a tale in self-sufficiency, painfully aware of my dependence as a child. Some ten years later, I thought of that day as my first lesson in feminism (even though she never described herself as a feminist). Today (nearly twice the age of my mother, pregnant with me) I understand my mother's words to be the telling of her story. An inversion, shrouded in double negatives.

*In the language of
 don't, shouldn't, never, not, shouldn't have, won't
 abstain, protect, guard, carry, bury, hide
 dominate
 scavenge, scurry, hurry, hurry, hurry
 A story is told – a woman's story, my mother's story, a femme's story.
 A story that does not speak the language of I.*

*A woman became she, we, they.
 A woman for whom the first person singular is too bare.
 A woman cloaked in rich reds, lined eyes, ample curves, quick tongue,
 with a heart that cannot afford to bear it's own weight.*

Am I the daughter in shadow, eclipsed by her path? A double-negative squared? And will it be her constellation or mine that determines the axis of this story?

VI. Milestone

1977 is printed vertically along the side of the 3x5 photograph, on the white border. A birthday cake with seven candles and *Happy Birthday* printed in round, red letters in the center of the frame, and all of us around it – peripheral. Giovanna, Lina, Antonia, on one side of the table, elbows perched on rose-print tablecloth. Gina, Kelly, Maria, on the other side. Lina is my best friend. She lets me bite pieces off her candy necklace. I'm jealous of Maria because she's so pretty, and she just came that way. I don't trust Antonia because she cheats me out at hide'n'seek every time, but she's my next-door neighbor so she's in all the birthday pictures. I wish I had straight hair like Kelly's, like the girls on tv. There is my mother. I'm sitting next to her at the head of the table. I want to cut the cake. Tre Mare Bakery cake is the best part of my birthday. My mother won't let me cut it until I pose for at least six "before the cake" photos. I appear to be under water; a streak of sunlight mottles my face. My eyes are red and shiny, tears held by nothing but lashes. My mother, on the other side of the sun, is dressed in shadow. She is pinching the soft skin under my arm. But this isn't in the picture. She twists tighter, whispers *Smile*. Pictures don't come with sound. Some meteors do. Fireballs, exceptionally bright meteors, hiss and crackle as they enter the atmosphere.

VII. Sticks and Stones

Snapshots divide my life like a split river. Somewhere in that year, 1977, maybe that day, I stopped crying. And every photograph thereafter tells the same story.

The drink of choice is Brio Chinotto, homemade red wine, or Molson Ex. *Little girl grows up fast and hates everyone because they're a bunch of thieving liars.* Favorite foods include bread (Calabrese), cheese (asiago), red peppers (roasted), prosciutto (hot), melanzane (in oil), pasta (with sauce). *Little girl is tough as nails, stronger than they think.* The curtains are always drawn. *Little girl does not cry, no matter what.* Fans move hot air in circles; our faces shine with sweat. *Just try to break her.*

VIII. Medusa

*So much attention is paid to Her body,
no one notices she has fallen, and she may not notice this herself,
because she knows what earth tastes like.
Because she suffers in silence.*

*You'll hear about your infractions,
your sins against Her.
Her displeasure will come in red shards.
But the pointed words she speaks are only part of the story.*

She returns to the confines of Her body.

*This circle dance is dizzying.
Her body is no stranger to injury and
has proven to be strong beyond any reasonable expectation,
but this is not the heart of the matter.*

*She is accustomed to the pedestal she sits upon.
The sharpness of the wood,
the weight of her ass on it,
the distance from the ground.
She tells herself it is plush as a throne,
but it is little more than a chamber.*

*The world has left her cold.
Her lovers have left her cold.
She is cold, as a stone.*

*How do you kiss Medusa?
Eyes open or eyes closed?*

IX. Skipping Stones

For the longest time, I was concerned about being too soft – a soft touch, softhearted, soft-spoken. It wasn't until I was about twenty-four that I realized I had buried that part of me long, long ago. I had grown up into an impenetrable woman, an utterly untouchable stone femme, just like my mother. I had become a girl, then a woman, in shadow. A femme who could not bear the weight of her own heart – a heart sunk as stone, silt cradled at the bottom of a lake.

It was easy to live from that place for all those years. I had eroticized myself as an unbreakable girl, later, as a high femme – beyond the reach of any lover I lay with, protected. Fiercely independent, I was a girl who could accelerate from 0 to 140 in ten seconds flat, a good-time girl who left them, wanting more.

And when I started to want more for myself, when that lake became too murky, I wrestled with the big lie that had become the bedrock of my gender, my desire, my whole self: *I am unbreakable. I am not broken.*

X. Stone Cutter

Medusa, Triple Goddess, was raped. She was so angry that she transformed her hair to serpents to repel those intending harm, and serve as warning. Only those with ill intentions were turned to stone.

XI. Gem

*How does Medusa kiss?
Eyes open.*



Medusa Haunted, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, 2002



Medusa Haunted, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, 2002



Medusa Haunted, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, 2002



Medusa Haunted, Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri, 2002



Trish Salah

Medusa

A writhing track or crimson, with the usual – you call to her and she has no objection to poorly-mirrored bodies. Opens the door to all that one could ever ask for, but fifties television don't get you the trousseau. You want smeared lipstick, cracked teeth? Some word like "lesbian," or "wife"? She knows with a knowing as clear as blood will tell. Her shadow, here shadow, hear her in the shadows. With a body big enough, should she swallow and come to you. Behind the future, there is no excuse for days. On the balconies, wreathed of green flames, or your tomboyhood town. She will stereo in, scent of cinnamon for the night. Learn that at least. Like Paris, be pretty, easily determined, and quick to strike. Endure in your desire, endure like stone.

Anurima Bannerji

Summer, or I Want the Rage of Poets to Bleed Guns Speechless with Words

1. Summer is the season of sun

and rape. *tanning*: I am not thinking of a leisurely afternoon on the
riviera with bronzing cream but tanning, like an animal slaughtered,
bodies packed into ice like meat,
torn skin
ripped
from bone, stretched wide across grass, something like a hammer
pounding
leather (dead).

This is me, Draupadi: I am thinking of a hand as soft as darkness, I am
thinking of murmurs and kissing, the burden of a body under the
weight of rebellion. With eyes like guillotines, I carry the impression
of footprints she walked that day, out the door, downstairs, against the
wall where she pressed my thighs and kissed –

and I am thinking of an ambulance, police cars, the mythology of birth,
him, that terror on the highway, the street, and at home.

It has been this way for a long time, since they put a restraining order
against my breasts and called it a bra.

- Were you wearing something provocative?
- No
- Were you wearing something provocative?
- No
- Were you wearing something provocative?
- Yes, my vagina

BRAZEN FEMME

II. Chandrabhaga

where does the sun begin or my body end (bloody)

between the cries of *bitch, pussy, fuck*
in this summer, season of crime
I am a traitor to semen in this season of
gun

held in mouth like I should come to him while he comes in me
but I am a traitor, a dyke, crawling out of light like a cockroach
or just like a cock, and he's got his gun cocked in my mouth
about to burst until

I bleed guns speechless with words

III. this is what makes me live: pierced nipples

and gauze, a look that brings me
to my knees,

when I want it

Do you understand?

When I want it
from her

IV. I will make amerika sink this is my motherfucking country and tonight

between my sheets,
I am making love and slow jazz
with a woman slipping through sweat
and nightmare,
sliding into the hard grace
of thighs clenched like fists
that smashed my jaw that day,
but he could not strip words
out of me, they come back
virus

until I bleed guns speechless

V. living in the body of a poet in vertigo,
she rolls syllables off her tongue,

satyam shivam sundaram.

om bhur bhuvaha swaha
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyoyonaha prachodayaat.

In the beginning of this poem she finds me,

om namah saraswate
om namah durge
om namah kali
om namah stute.

And skin to skin,
this is satyam shivam sundaram,
sruti and smriti,
the prayer of wedding
never uttered outside
man and woman

these are small pieces of longing I write,
with more devotion than veda or darshan,
words thicker than the smoke
rising from the stripped scalp of coconut
in the morning.

VI. Surya:

I could not tell you where water ends and her body begins

there is no other way to know this, only
travel through sinew and muscle,
through ventricle and chamber,
through marrow, bone, and blood –

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

gonna get my girl body back:
this is a work in progress

For Samantha Persaud-Redden

In memory of Sarah/ DJ Posniewski, 1975-1994

Nobody told us: The path divides, and divides again, in many directions. . . . How many ways can gender expression multiply – between home and work, at the computer and when you kiss someone, in your dreams and when you walk down the street? No one asked us: What is your dream of who you want to be?

– Minnie Bruce Pratt¹

gonna get my girl body back. gonna take her with me. gonna get my brown body back, gonna take it back and flow with it. gonna find her, where's she hiding, that body, that girl body doesn't got a new hole ripped in it, that brown body knows what name her skin is. gonna be a girl, the girl I was meant to be.

Left my body from eight to sixteen. That was the really bad part, an eight-year sentence, but maybe it was really off and on my whole life till twenty-one. Sex was what started bringing me back – sex and the hope of a jailbreak two years away. The desire that came back to my body came with wind on sweetgrass brushing my tits into hardness. Came with curling up in bed with the lights off listening to shoplifted Patti Smith tapes, surrounded by library books and candles in JD bottles. Came walking the abandoned streets of Worcester, Massachusetts in black lace, army jacket, and plum hair at sixteen. I ran my hands all over my body, stole my mama's vibrator and jacked off frantically in the thirty minutes she was out of the house at the supermarket, ran away from home every time I could. Stole every touch, every color, every piece of life I found.

I was ugly cuz I was an ugly pale yellow burnt smog girl, a girl who

although lightskinned in browngirlworld, was an uncomfortable breed in apartheid 1980s New England. Grew up always referred to as "so dark" by the white folks. Ugly girl with wild crazy frizzy bushy hair, my white mama threw her hands up at, brushing it for forty-five minutes every day, hard like hate, till my scalp was red and raw. All the clothes at the '80s bargain discount stores were powder blue and khaki, all the makeup stopped at beige and frosted pink – nothing that matched my skin. A decade away from Black Opal and Real World Cosmetics for Beautiful Women of Color, I dreamed of growing up and wearing turquoise silk, smearing lavender glitter dust on my eyelids, painting my lips shimmery maple sugar and purples the color of lust. Finding someone who knew how to do my hair, finding lovers who would love me as a beautiful girl. Becoming brown, beautiful, and touched was always a package deal.

I was crazy for most of my childhood. Rages and terror would wash my body outta nowhere like a nuclear firestorm, burning up trees into vapor. I couldn't talk. I did talk actually, but then I had to shut up because I was just saying shit that wasn't true. That conversation never happened. My dad wasn't driving down the highway screaming at ninety-five miles every time he got behind the wheel, all of us thinking we were gonna die. His color wasn't real either, where he came from, strange packages from my grandparents, seven oceans and thousands of dollars we didn't have away. The rocks thrown at my head at school, the year all the boys in seventh grade jumped me tryin' to cop feels every morning on the way to homeroom, that was sort of happening, but there was nothing to do about it. I had to stay in that school because otherwise I would go to public school and become another U Mass dropout or a hairdresser on black beauties like my cousins and friends, who everyone knew would never leave Worcester.

I was a sex-radical baby, stealing Calafia and Queen and Burroughs from the pile of books the manager of the one bookstore in town wouldn't let be displayed. Before that I was an activist nerd baby, reading all the queer feminist books some magic dyke librarian stocked the Worcester Public Library's shelves with. I believed what was in books and lived years on the story. I would get straight As, bullshit my way into a scholarship, and flee. I would get free of everything that was killing me and find chosen family, political community that would heal me, where we would fight for justice for each other and liberate ourselves. Plus, I would fuck free, go to play parties, and find others whose bodies lit up magic, the slut tribe.

This is what I did when I was a kid growing up. I fucked so many times, and so much of the time it was good, and so much of the time I was gone. How do I tell you who I was? How do I tell you I was the girl who was sex-crazy, that's all she ever talked about, a slut for her dark

skin and hair in high school and at the same time an ugly nerd, the girl who sucked Joe's dick behind his mama's house cuz he said he'd eat her out? I was the girl who didn't know how to get real without flesh. I was the girl who lusted for flesh. I wanted to tell the story in words, but because I wasn't allowed the words, I had to tell it with the flesh.

Yeah, I was a fucking nympho nerd. With a head full of sex radical theory that made me respect myself even when I was just a crazy slut girl who didn't matter – in riot grrrl, in the info-shop, in coalition meetings, in classes, on protest marches. I had fuck buddies, affairs, long-term off and on lovers, girlfriends, crushes. All I knew how to do was sex, like it says in *The Courage To Heal*, but also I knew what I wanted and that was the first step towards wanting anything.

See, the aliens had not given me my brain back, and from age sixteen to twenty-one it was not yet the time to remember that my mom's fingers were what gave me these body memories of being pink-cunted and ripped open in diapers, these current realities of having my ass grabbed, my self walked in on in the bathroom, forbidden by her to close my bedroom door or walk off the dead end street at twenty-one. I remembered every shitty thing my dad ever did. She was the only parent who was half not an asshole; how could I remember that and live? So I was mixed-up bulletproof and vulnerable as any girl with long hair and eyeliner, walking the streets in lingerie while her head is not in her body and she hates both head and body. And since she cannot trust the crazy lies her body is telling her, she can trust nothing about her self – not her sense of truth or of danger.

"Sex is a prison, a kingdom of death,"² yeah, where that black red hole between my legs is. I slept with queer boys and trans kids cuz it was queer and easy, and I crushed on girls and didn't let myself do anything for reasons I couldn't let myself know. And I stayed true to the girl I fell in love with at sixteen, the girl who saved my life. The first girl I met who was as big a bitch and a slut and as smart as me, and who didn't lie. She told me she didn't think she loved anybody since her last lover had tested positive and shot himself in the head with the results on the kitchen table in front of him – but she loved me, and she loved me too much to fuck me. I understood completely.

But I also always got off the phone from two-hour calls with my rapist mama and dressed in my vintage garter belt and combat boots and roamed the streets, brushing fingers against my skin. I would lie curled in bed stroking for hours, not get out of bed till eight p.m., wanting to bring one more and one more and one more till all there was was white light intensity and no one knew where I was. They all blurred together into a mushy stew of magic and crazy pain forbidden in the bones to be spoken of. Someday, I knew, I would sort it out.

a healing story

The last summer before I graduate from my college full scholarship meal ticket, I go to Toronto to visit a friend and find my long lost brother. Mestizo – Chileno punk, fag, poeta, loves to suck pussy, loves me to fuck his ass. Been on his own since he was fourteen, born eight days after me in the Czech refugee camp his mami ended up in after fleeing Pinochet. I seduced him at an Anti-Racist Action meeting at my friend's house by crossing my legs so he could see my cloth g-string menstrual pad, asking him if he wanted to paint my toenails, then talking fix-eyed for four hours at a diner about mixed-race, being of color in anarchopunk, colonialism, and abuse survival. We stagger down college street back to the spare futon at the ARA house, fuck all night, go to the only queer of color bookstore in North America in the morning, then smoke up and watch *Repo Man* and *Brother From Another Planet* on video. I fall in love.

I've wandered confused, sucking up knowledge, but too unsure of my dreams to take charge of my life and shout out. Incest grabbed me by my knees and dragged me down. I couldn't get out of bed a lot, or eat, or sleep, or stop sleeping, or promote my work. I veered between the narrative of pull yourself up by your bootstraps to normalcy and the one of taking a free space to flee. Summer '95 was Basic cigarettes for \$1.85 and Colt 45 on sale for ninety-nine cents after five dollar vodkas poured into tropical fantasy soda. I tried, I really did, to shine in class, to get an internship, to get a job that paid more than five dollars per, to network. Over and over again in those meal ticket scholarship years, my mother would call, one of her twice a day two-hour calls, and tell me, you have to stop all this – by which she meant, being queer, being an HIV prevention activist, getting busted in the squat eviction, landing my photo in the *New York Times*. *You have to stop cuz we're not those Long Island girls down the hall from you, whose parents send them a grand a month to party. This is your one ticket to ride, girl, and you blow it you don't get no second chances. Survival is passing, didn't we teach you that enough? How to be exotic, to be middle class on thrift store Brooks Brothers?* Working-class folks always think a college degree is like a union card – you'll never be sitting in a cold apartment trying to figure out what the hell to do next – and we cling to the belief despite everything that tells us it's not that simple any more.

I started to remember. In his bed, smoking a joint in the street at the Kensington Market festival, fucking in the field at the crazy hippie/punk music festival we snagged a ride to by promising to do an anti-racist workshop, I went away and felt rape in my body, and he didn't call me crazy or tell me to shut up and get it together. I was supposed to just stay in T.O. for a few days and then hit Chicago for the '96 democratic convention, but I never left. I got the very last bus I could to go back to NYC for registration, but I never really went back.

I moved in to the one room, had real friends for the first time in my life. Found the anti-psych counselor who saw me for free and gave me aromatherapy that actually brought me back to my body. Me and him, we lived on nothing, fucked, laughed, screamed, fought, went to four-hour-long meetings for the prisoner/psych survivor/first nations/broke persons paper, me in my kickass tight black dress, and roughnecked at every demo and party. And in between I sobbed, went so deep, freaked out at every little thing, had stabbing pains in my cunt that wouldn't stop for hours, twisted in crazyland as memory came to stay. I'm five, I'm four, I'm a delicate little British girl who's so good so white so maybe the shit will cut out, *No, I'm lying, I don't wanna believe this, not her*, the pains start up. *Okay, I think it's true – they stop. Great.*

He was the only one who I trusted with everything, who my kids trusted. And after the launch party, he beats his fists into walls, screams with the gravediggaz at volume ten on the box. Our groovy bi-queer nonmonogamy collapses the first time a butch gives me her phone number. He throws coffee cups at my head, but he's still the only person who gets it. The fucked-up spouse who saves your ass and beats it at the same time, but still feels more steady than any self-help book.

We have hot sex and I lose my desire in the middle, we have hot sex and then I feel like I'm a kid, we start mackin and then I leave. After a while I only want to have sex when I'm ovulating or about to bleed or bleeding. *I don't know whether I want to or whether I want to because you do.*³ I always thought, *no matter how bad shit gets in my life, I always have this.* But I didn't any more. The last time was three days before the last day, my twat burning in a memory of wanting to fuck, but I was aching and dry. Still I want to so bad and I'm obeying the impulse that feels burned in my genes – you make the person who loves you/fucks you/hates you happy, erase yourself or die. So I keep doing the moves more and more, trying to fucking feel something. He rolls off me and starts crying; I curl up in a ball.

AD/after discovery

I put the girl clothes in the closet. Folded my tight black dress and platforms away. I had a pair of jeans, a pair of cutoffs, and a skirt. Four tank tops, two white, one grey, one black. I had a little tough boy inside. Some days I'd take all my long hair and shove it into a ball, then tie my doo rag over it tight. Leave off the big hoops, the khajal, the lavender nail polish – hoodie, jeans, boots, and walk and walk and walk and walk in the rain, down the alleys, swinging my arms, breasts shadowed. Stick my bottom lip out like a sullen twelve-year-old boy. Not girl. No holes. Nobody can get in.

Didn't even touch myself for a year. In two years of working off-the-books jobs, being an activist in subpoverty, I get way too skinny, don't leave my house for days as I rock my kids and move through my scars. I turn into pure survival and activism. Pure. I give up booze when all of a sudden fall of '97 I lost my amazing tolerance and ended up slashing in the bathroom after two gins; I give up pot cuz it starts making me feel like I'm on acid; I give up sex; I give up most food; I give up luxuries like hair conditioner, perfume, and music because I am broke and illegal and anyway, all that just clouded me from the Revolution before, right? I give up my femme girl cunt self. That was what got me in trouble before. It's not necessary. Only survival is. I live in a white light intensity of truth, seven meetings a week I walk to with no busfare, fourteen dollars a week for food if I'm lucky.

He stops the fists but not the headfucks, screaming, I'm gonna kill myself if you don't. I get legal work status in September just in time to get three jobs to save money for a new place two months before eviction laws kick me out. I find some friends besides him. The night before a psychiatric survivor activist event I've kicked ass to organize, exhausted after cooking all-donated food for 300 people, he starts screaming again, won't stop. Something stops in me. Two months later I am at a diner table lying earnestly, saying I'm addicted to him, that we need space, a trial separation. I walk away and a week later I know I'm never going back.

I crawl out from under. I live in my basement, clean houses, raise cash for the progressive telemarketing outfit, get an occasional paid gig doing anti-racism trainings. I have enough to eat, and pay rent late. Slowly I started buying new clothes. One stick of lipstick for five dollars for a nine month period. Slowly I want pleasure again. My brain and body meet and they reach out a tentative finger. I remember that queer lost girl, and I see my bravery, not just a sickness. I want to get it back. I want to excavate that sexed body.

post-apocalyptic

I had it all figured out. Like before, but only with women of color and only with butches, because that way I would always know they weren't my mom. Just like before, but I would be even more perfect now. Now I would not be ashamed of only wanting to sleep with people who were only in town for a weekend or were already in a committed relationship, so the barriers would be built in. I was fixed now. I was not crazy. I would give an even more brilliant performance.

Of course, I'd also just spent more than three years full time in the radical abuse survivor/psych survivor world. Three years where I never

came up on anyone from behind. Where I never asked anybody direct personal questions, ever, I just waited for them to tell me whatever they were comfortable with. Years of conversations that sound like small talk if you couldn't decode what we were really saying with our eyes and vibes. If I held somebody's hand after knowing them for a year, it was a big deal that could be withdrawn tomorrow. So whenever that magic moment came when I needed to slide over on the couch or run my hand down her ass on the dance floor, I felt like I was becoming her perp.

For a long time I didn't understand why I had crushes and flirtations but not actually nudity, but then I started to. When it shocked the shit out of me as I watched my friends touch each other casually. When I stood on the sidelines on every coloredgirl dance floor trying to decode how you could pump ass into cunt like that and have it be okay. I hated myself for not being smooth any longer. I felt like a virgin at twenty-five, all over again, and how uncool was that? To be untouched.

journal entry, what i thought/wrote then, in grief

long legs, strong legs, get me the fuck out of here. boots, cutoffs, minis, vintage jeans, outie, kicked my ex across the room and broke his nose for the eighth time. my invisible crip broken hips where she threw me against the wall at four, aching ass when it's humid or cold, limping legs that give out, hips that freeze shut on the dance floor. gee, am i failing the coloredgirl litmus test? *well, she dances like a white girl so i guess she really is one.* "weak, it's weak down here" that asshole shiatsu practitioner says as he presses fingers into a node above my fucked hips. "underdeveloped." depending on which way you look at it it's either an underdeveloped or a strip-mined country. but maybe there are pockets of diamonds and coal still hidden. if the miners come back this ground will buckle and collapse. when you tried to put your fingers inside i bled and bled long after i'd popped my cherry. *i don't think this is working,* the best lover said at nineteen, *why don't i just go down on you.* i'm the girl the doc always says *this shouldn't be hurting so much* during the GYN exam. i bled every time and she slammed her door shut on you, my body she was smarter than me. she tells me things. it's why i'm still alive.

stone femme

is my fem body fake, pasted over a raw wound that will always be there? "it was not a cut that can be stitched up." what does gender performance mean when you need a rock? i build this body, this gender, layer of silk over steel skeleton.

BRAZEN FEMME

I'm beautiful, you can't touch me, you, can't touch me.
I'm beautiful but tough, you can't, can't, can't touch me.
Let's do that one around three thousand times till all my friends get
bored but I get it.
I fly by on my bike too fast for you to fuck with me. Three a.m., smile,
flash, and I'm gone.
I always read the I Spy section of the classifieds to see if anybody
described me, but they never do.
I'm beautiful but brittle, a bitter, broken shell.
I'm a beautiful artifact, a shell washed up on shore that you can't
touch.
Colors disappear as soon as you take it in your hand.
A mussel whose pussy snaps shut when you wanna eat.

On the dance floor I lost my desire, but in my dream life I was free. I
would come over and over again in the dream world of possibility. I
figured out that only in a world where nobody would ever get raped
could I open the doors and fly free, fuck in magic loft beds with jungle
vines growing all around me, take my girl's fist all the way to the wrist,
find this boy with dreads like black water wrapping all around mine.
When I woke and reached down for another helping, I was dry. My
brain was free, not my body.

make up this body

Sometimes the selves I am shift like digits over my skin. This ain't
academic, though the academic has corrupted the language I could use
to say what I'm trying to. Chameleon, I'll still become anyone you want
me to be. Is this real or illusion? What's real, when there is no *before* the
abuse for me since it started so young? *You know that as a fem what you
are is not fake but it is profoundly made up.*⁴

Courage, it takes courage to do this. One step by one step by one
step. I freeze and freak out. I breathe. I do yoga to bless this body. I pray.
I take one step past what I know.

"navigate the treacherous/ make it seem effortless"⁵

go to the women's afterhours, wine my ass off, callaloo boi stares
transfixed at my ass shaking at four a.m. like she's seen god. smile. go
home. stop.

lick my best friend sistagal's neck, oo, shiver. stop.

massage raw cocoa butter into butternut-colored bare back. stop.

sleep naked next to my other best friend, lazy morning flirt hovering in the june air. stop.
 long glance across the dance floor as the three of us make an entrance. stop.
 go on a date to the railroad tracks, snap a photo just as butch blushes and says i'm beautiful. stop.
 learn the in between, the in between beyond throwin' myself off desire's cliff into whatever rocks are gonna catch me cuz my mind blanks out to a blue screen. learn how to breathe. stop. think.
 stop.

y2k. I have magenta silk pillows and a junk shop bureau spray-painted silver. I do yoga weekly at the pay-what-you-can class taught by a Bengali bi girl with a white mama and hip trauma like mine. I ride an adult trike circa the year I was born cuz I still fall over otherwise. I have silk and lace slippers, platform boots, charcoal silver and lavender glitter eyeshadow sticks from the Body Shop, Epic, Lust, and Velvet from the MAC counter. I have indigo vintage jeans, fake leopard print furry platform flip-flops, turquoise glitter nail polish, cocoa butter shining brown legs, a panther jacket, and a fake sheepskin furry '70s winter coat. I go for the first good haircut of my life at the place my latina/black fem girl with identical hair advises me of. My breed lebanese bi/dyke sis introduces me to her KMS gel. I have a carrot orange fleece baby hoodie, blue Oshun beads around my neck. I burn thick sandalwood and coconut incense sticks from the botanica to Kali. Who it turns out is not just the mother of destruction and change, but the mama of sexual power.

"It is erotic tension that ignites the wildness of my imagination and the daring to figure out how to make it feel as good against my skin as I imagined it beforehand."⁶

I made it out. I am still alive. I will have this. Cuz I usta always think I would die when I finally healed, or the revolution would come. But instead comes something else.

1. Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Gender Quiz," *S/He* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1995).

2. Chrystos, "Don't Try," *Dream On* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1994).

3. *Ibid.*

4. Amber Hollibaugh, in an interview with the author, "Gender Warriors," anthologized in *My Dangerous Desires* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

5. Mos Def/Talib Kwali, "Know That," from the album *Black on Both Sides* (Rawkus, 1999).

6. Amber Hollibaugh, "My Dangerous Desires," in *My Dangerous Desires*.

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of the study of the history of the United States. It is argued that a knowledge of the past is essential for a full understanding of the present. The author then goes on to discuss the various factors that have shaped the development of the United States, including the role of the government, the influence of the economy, and the impact of the culture. The paper concludes by suggesting that a study of the history of the United States is not only a valuable academic exercise, but also a necessary one for anyone who wishes to understand the world in which we live.

The second part of the paper is a detailed analysis of the role of the government in the development of the United States. The author argues that the government has played a central role in the shaping of the nation, from the early days of the colonies to the present. He discusses the various policies and programs that have been implemented by the government, and the impact that these have had on the development of the country. The author also discusses the role of the government in the protection of the rights of the citizens, and the importance of a strong and effective government for the well-being of the nation.

The third part of the paper discusses the influence of the economy on the development of the United States. The author argues that the economy has been a major factor in the shaping of the nation, and that it has played a central role in the development of the country. He discusses the various economic policies and programs that have been implemented by the government, and the impact that these have had on the development of the country. The author also discusses the role of the economy in the protection of the rights of the citizens, and the importance of a strong and effective economy for the well-being of the nation.

The fourth part of the paper discusses the impact of the culture on the development of the United States. The author argues that the culture has been a major factor in the shaping of the nation, and that it has played a central role in the development of the country. He discusses the various cultural policies and programs that have been implemented by the government, and the impact that these have had on the development of the country. The author also discusses the role of the culture in the protection of the rights of the citizens, and the importance of a strong and effective culture for the well-being of the nation.

Debra Anderson

fading femme

flaccid mascara wand
is getting dry
flaky and emptier
with each use
and no money
to buy a replacement

to magnify the frame of eyes
that glare at men who harass,
eyes that emote

sleeze haughty nasty
femme top.

my ooze of brazenness
is halting here on the ward.

my old power disappearing
like a shrinking lipliner
until I can't feel it.

I'm losing my colors,
cloaked in the faded blue
of hospital property pjs
almost forget the femme in me

almost forget
who I put it on for
almost lose touch
with the potency
in this ritualized mask-making
not to hide behind
but to put forth.

hard to go forward
when you're stuck in the deep
ruts of pause,
when shaving
is too hard to navigate,

BRAZEN FEMME

having to negotiate razor barter
with monitoring nurses
 only there to help
 only there to humiliate
and supposedly protect

when this fierce femme
never needed protection before.
 I used to be my own
 safety net

legs encased in fishnet stockings
 holding me in
 (but not rigid),
thigh flesh pouring through
the diamond strings

but now I'm really roped in
 can't leave
 hate staying

losing the femme
it can't fade
 and so I put on another coat
 of polish even though
inside I'm tarnished

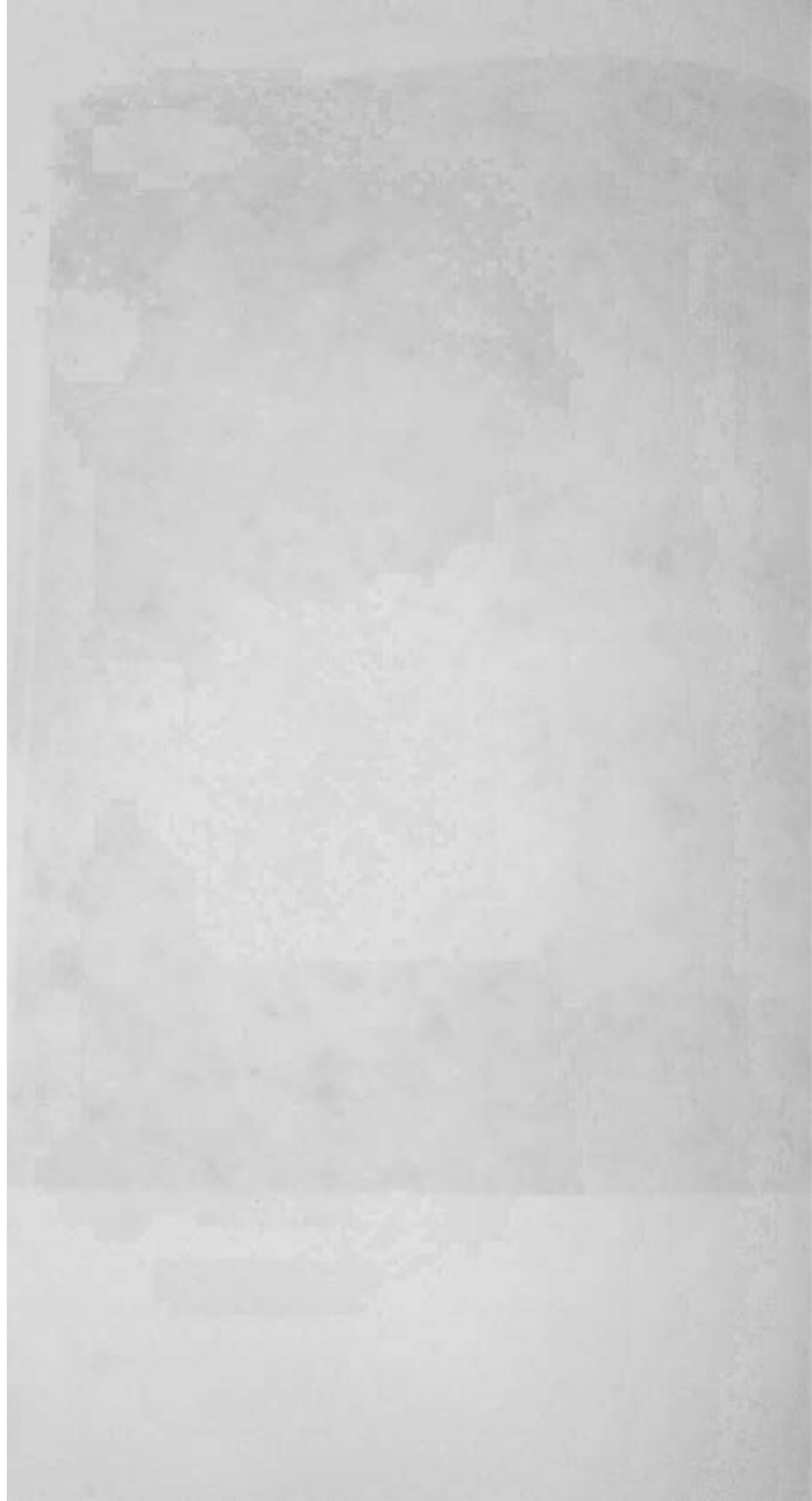
my nails still say otherwise
on this ward
warding off weakness
 sick of being sick
 sick of losing
femme self

strong enough
to know she's not going anywhere
just slipped away safely to hide
as my hair sprouts
I let it be

I let her be where we are
and where we'll go next
once we're discharged.



rockstar, Chloë Brushwood Rose, 2000



Kathryn Payne

Whores and Bitches Who Sleep with Women

They called you a freak and me a whore and maybe they always will, but we fight them best when we keep on doing what they say we should not want or need for the joy we find in doing it. I fucked because I liked it, and Joan, the ugly ones, the ones who beat me or fucked me too hard, they didn't run me out of town, and neither can the women who don't walk my streets of loneliness or need.

— Joan Nestle¹

Do you know your lineage? You know, lineage. The people who preceded you in history. Not your bloodline, nor your family tree. Nothing so flimsy as biology or genetics. Lineage, rather, is made up of the people who, in their lifetimes, fought the battles we are fighting now, struggled towards the same goals, tried to carve out similar lives against similar backdrops. If you're an anarchist, maybe it's the women who fought against Franco in Spain, or Emma Goldman herself. If you're really into being a nurse, maybe it's Florence Nightingale. Loads of lesbians trace themselves along the Faderman-nexus, others along the Fienberg-line, and still others really go back to the enigma of Sappho.

I didn't really feel I had a lineage, a history of women to fit myself into, for a long time. Until I read Joan Nestle's short essay "My Mother Liked to Fuck" and got a glimpse of what it meant to "identify with," a glimpse of the things perceived in others that allow us (always momentarily) to understand ourselves

I went into sex work because I swore that once I had an MA, I'd never waitress again. I needed easy, lucrative, part-time work while I looked for teaching positions. I was used to being unemployed. I knew how welfare worked, how high you have to jump to make it through the stupid fuckin' hoops, how little money they gave you (\$80 a month less than my rent), and how

as fitting somewhere in the world. If you haven't read this piece, do so. Nestle's mom, well, she liked to fuck in a time when femininity was supposed to be about as sexual as June Cleaver. She was a sexual single woman, something our culture has many words for, all of them derogatory. And Nestle doesn't sugar-coat her life, or pretend that Regina Nestle's sexual agency was unambiguously liberating. She does describe Regina's determination – and ability – to consistently assert her right to her own desire.

Nestle gave me a huge and priceless gift in her affiliation with and defense of her trappy working-class mom. The woman Nestle described had unapologetic sexual agency, and was consequently marginalized, shamed, and economically at-risk. This resonated for me. For the first time, I could imagine a place in the history of "lesbians" where I might find allies and assert my priorities. It ceased to matter that my heart had never leapt to the undertow of separatism in local lesbianism and that I wasn't sure I thought much of Gertrude Stein or folk music. I knew I loved my lovers' hands, mouths, and bodies. I loved to fuck and would always be aware I wasn't supposed to enjoy it that much. Suddenly it seemed that there was an admirable gutsiness in going ahead with it anyway, with anyone, in coughing up enough of the shame to call myself "slut" and laugh.

The Titillating Trinity

Let's face it, in the eyes of the rising right-wing, we are all Jezebel. See – we might imagine there's a huge difference between the local, platform-heeled, performance-artist dyke diva and the women who stroll strategic streets to feed their kids or habits, pay for their surgeries, fund their educations, or just stay alive – but to Them, we've all committed the same crime. Watch the ways that women's activism and

much they poke around in your life for the pittance they provide. Besides, a degree in Women's Studies, with a specialization in deconstructing recent bisexual anthologies, doesn't score you great temp jobs. I decided I wanted to do some kind of light-weight work in the sex trade. I knew the money was good, under the table, and figured I already got to suffer under lots of society's sanctions against sexualized women, so I might as well get paid for it.

I answered an ad in the "Adult Entertainment" paper that asked for "bisexual women 18+." "That, I can do," I thought with the desperation of the hopelessly unemployed. And I could. I am skinny, fit, blonde,

actions are shut down all over the world. Take, for one example, the case of Edna Elisia da Silva, a literacy instructor with the Landless Movement (MST) in Brazil, who was jailed in June 1998 for leading a raid on a local food market. She told a journalist, "The raid was just and necessary. . . . All we want is freedom from hunger and my freedom to teach the children and the adults in the simple classrooms and schools that we have built ourselves." In a not terribly subtle, but very common, feat of spin, the head of the arresting squad told reporters that da Silva "is a whore and a bitch who sleeps with women and teaches immorality to others."

Femme is the position that deliberate feminine sexual agency often occupies in queer girl subcultures. Slut is the position openly sexual single women tend to occupy in most hetero (and some homo) cultures. Ho is the position that professional sexual women occupy in this society and a number of others. But the distinctions between these particular categories often blur, many of us have occupied all three positions, and the social sanctions are damn near the same. Betcha we shop in the same stores, wrestle similar demons, carry comparable fears through the world. Chances are we frequently get mistaken for each other. And we will all be framed as "whores and bitches who sleep with women" the moment the nightstick comes down.

So, in my opinion, we can't talk about femme, about femininity, about anything related, without talking about ho. The femme cause is the ho cause – as long as there are hos in jails and danger and shame, femmes will not be free to dress, or live, or fuck as we please. There can be no sound analysis of the cultural position of femme without a basis in an analysis of the cultural, legal, and economic position of prostitutes. There can be no adequate analysis of sexuality or gender in a culture without an analysis of prostitution in that culture. You

blue-eyed, leggy, and cheerful. I have never (more or less) had trouble finding sex when I wanted it. I am so fuckin' open-minded that the born-again Christians I hung out with in my early teens (another story entirely) would say my brain's fallen out. I like sex. I have been a pothead for long enough that legality is an elaborate farce to me. I have spent most of my life trying to be slippery enough that shame can't get a hold on me. Some resumé, eh?

I didn't know what to wear to the interview. I mean, obviously, I wanted to look slutty. But, I suspected, my cute tomboy dyke version of sexy wouldn't cut it in the sex trade. My only other accessories were for a kind of trashy

cannot talk meaningfully about the distribution of labor or wealth (globally or locally) without talking about the function of prostitution. And I don't mean talking to social science "experts." Those analyses, of prostitutes' status, lives, and work conditions, have to come from prostitutes themselves.

In fact, I'm arguing that prostitution isn't just the oldest occupation, but that our failure to develop analyses that begin with prostitutes' perspectives and experiences is a big part of the reason we are in the mess we are presently in. The meat of the matter is that femininity + sexual agency = potential social chaos, and therefore, those who combine these qualities must be stigmatized, criminalized, and maligned. Heaven forbid that prostitution add economic power to the equation. Why, the whole global social structure would be turned upside down! Imagine if all women had the right and ability to charge money for sex whenever they wanted to! Why, we might even end up owning more than one percent of the property on the planet, being at least equally represented in governments, expecting pay for all the other trillions of unrecognized hours we spend maintaining homes, egos, and children. In fact, let's face it, the proud, unfettered femme ho is the single biggest threat to the powers-that-be.

Ho Power

Think about it. Even traditional feminism is scared of the implications of empowered hos. Take Take Back the Night. Do they have that chant in your city - "Hey, hey! Ho, ho! However we dress! Wherever we go!"? How many of the women marching are ever actually "dressed" - in heels, minis, and stockings? I'd bet none - leaving that costume to signify rapeability, the constant vulnerability of feminine sexuality, rather than resignifying those outfits

post-punk look. So, I put on the too-short cut-off shorts that had nearly worn thru, a tight black half T that showed off my flat tummy and left no detail of my tiny tits to the imagination. I put on my highest heels at the time (now, three different sex-trade jobs later, I think those shoes hopelessly matronly and only wear them to church, family dinners, and formal occasions related to the day job), lots of eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick.

Then, I hopped on my bike and pedaled to the warehouse address I'd been given by the girl I talked to on the phone. The interview was mostly about them telling me how things went: Andy and Sarah (both blonde and bi) owned the space, and they needed a second girl

to mean active feminine desire, wanting sex on our own terms, be those emotional or monetary. You see, when I charged money for the privilege of touching my body, accessing my sexuality, I demonstrated categorically who owns my body and my sex. Me. I am the only one who can rent out, or give away, my desire, my skin, and my time. As a ho, I have taken back my night, and day. I have asserted my right to make decisions about my skin, my right to make a living from my sexual agency.

Now – an important caveat – it doesn't feel that way to every ho, everytime. I'm white, overeducated, blue-eyed, thin, and real well-loved. I've never really been starved or physically abused. Unlike many women and girls on this planet, I was not kidnapped, raped, abused, sold, or forced into prostitution. I experienced hoing mostly as an economic choice. And – perhaps the most important job qualification for the happy ho – I'm also sadly used to dodging the discourses of shame that try daily to pin us down. Because I'm queer, I've learned not to internalize the shame that's designed to keep me from feeling entitled to my own bodily autonomy. Hos are always in danger of sinking under the weight of that shame and social stigma. It is what keeps migrant Filipina and Thai working girls from being welcomed home in their villages and families, unions from taking hold in one of the most-mistreated workforces in the world, closet veteran doms and part-time escorts from speaking out in solidarity with street walkers.

I've seen how the constant heaviness of that shame can flatten beautiful, vibrant women. I saw ultra-feisty Kit, billed as "Big, Blonde, and Busty," come in with a black eye when her boyfriend found out how she earned her money. I listened to Candy, sensitive, sweet, and petite, talk for hours one drunken night about how dirty and worthless she felt, how soon she'd commit suicide if she couldn't get out of the biz. I rubbed a whole tube of

for "bi shows" – the two-women-together sessions that never fail to bring in clients. They told me men were weak fools (Andy said he ought to know), to pick a work name, and to make a list of what I would and wouldn't do. This baffled me – like being asked to say what you would and wouldn't eat when you had no idea what the menu was. I decided that I didn't do penetration and they (getting a kick out of the green girl) said fine, come back for a four p.m. (until whenever) shift tomorrow.

So, I became a ho. It was a great job, really, especially for dungeon work. For, yes, gentle reader, that's what it was. Two on-call ice-bitch mistresses with two fully equipped dungeons, a Dr's office,

arnica on the pulped, black-and-blue ass that Carole was too afraid to take to the hospital when a trick ignored her safe word. For hos are not simply criminalized for our occupation, we are told that there is something inherently unworthy in our beings, that we cannot love, are evil, and worse. Ho is not simply understood as an occupation; we're told it's an overriding, repugnant moral status.

Of course, contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing inherently shameful about being a ho. I want to tell you some stories of ho pride and joy. Now, for all you materialists, I know these are small steps and largely symbolic ones, but disruptions in the cultural logic are better than no disruption at all. These are the things the newspaper won't tell you, in all their idiotic ranting about crack whores and AIDS vectors. The mainstream media and the victim feminists will never discuss some of the simple truths about sex work that expose the deceptions on which patriarchy and capitalism are based. Basically, hos are workers and many of their problems are due to appalling working conditions. Secondly, hos undermine gender, we make our living playing femme so hard that we debunk its myths. And finally, hoing – like any pink-collar occupational ghetto – has its perks and drawbacks.

Just a Job

First of all, there is nothing particularly glamorous or seedy about hos as people. We are just girls who need to make a living. Hos all over the world were once flat-chested three-year-olds and we all still carry her around in us. Some of us don't even get a chance to grow up, instead we die of abuse or drugs or policing. We hope for the same sorts of things people all over the world hope for – love, food, shelter, belonging, and opportunities. We like pretty things, compliments, easy days. We want to

Sarah's BOD persona Yvonne, and our joint shows (for the vanilla guys who wanted to think they were kinky). Sarah gave me some of her old clothes to wear, taught me how to work the phones, ignore attempts to haggle, and make the clients come quickly. During the slow periods of my shift I worked on my resumé and cover letters, read sci-fi, and watched the first cable I'd had access to since I'd moved to the city.

I made shitloads of money. I was being paid more than I had ever made before, even if you divided my pay-per-client into an hourly wage for all the unpaid time I spent working the phone. The mistresses liked me and would talk their regulars into spicing up

build something, retire, and be okay. We want to laugh and play. We want respect. Hos want good lives for the people we love.

After all, while Jerry Falwell might want you to believe we are deliberately spreading lasciviousness and vice for Satan, we are really just working. Hoing is simply an invisible service occupation. It is a pink-collar job taken to the logical extremes. It is social work, secretarial work, teaching, nursing, acting, and modeling all rolled into one. The parts of prostitution that are repeatedly presented by governments and social-service agencies as reasons that hoing is a "social problem" are almost always related to poor working conditions. Juvenile prostitution? Simply apply the legal working-age laws. Coercive pimps? Enforce minimum employment standards, human rights, and health and safety legislation, like in other work situations. This would give hos legal recourse to challenge their bad bosses, like harassed and exploited female workers in innumerable poorer-paying occupations. These solutions are untenable, of course, for they would require the decriminalization of prostitution and a tacit recognition that hos do work – that the sex trade, like "illegal" immigrant workers, fulfills many economic functions handy to the elite. As well, I imagine, such policies would expose the lack of enforcement and stunning inadequacy of most labor laws.

Ho as Überfemme

Why is it that this culture does not make the women who work in sweatshops into pariahs? No matter how disreputable their working conditions and employers, it is not assumed that their occupation is an identity that marks their morality, affection, and womanhood as tainted and flawed. Perhaps it is the absence of blatant sexuality that allows sweatshop workers to be merely exploited and ignored

a session with the new girl. Clients enjoyed the performance Sarah and I worked up together. I found the whole thing intensely interesting. The clientele were totally heterogeneous (but all male), of every shade, seemingly every income bracket, every shape from the typically buff gym-body to the seriously disabled. They were mostly nice or neutral and sometimes sweet. I was learning about s&m (terribly trendy among acadykes at the time) from real pros. And I actually landed one of the teaching contracts I spent my slow shifts applying for.

I had to quit the dungeon, of course. Never mind the fact I suddenly had 500 students and eighteen hours of classroom time

rather than jailed and scorned. I suspect that it is the intersection of autonomous sexuality and its signifier, hyper-femininity, that marks hos as unassimilable. You see, hoing is not just money for sex, in fact its art is in working femininity. It is almost like drag in its parodic (and I use parody here in a serious, survival-strategy way) performance of femininity. As femmes all over know, sexualized femininity is hyperbolic femininity. To ho in dungeons, on the street, or as an escort, is to make oneself over into Anyman's Ideal Woman, to take on the ultimate "women's work" of playing/being the hyper-femme. And, this is surprisingly easy for most women to do for an hour or two.

Consider, though, the very interesting contradictions embedded in this performance of ho. Arguably, economic independence and sexual autonomy are still considered to be predominantly masculine qualities in our culture. Yet, here it is the performance of hyper-femininity that enables the ho access to money (often more in an hour than the average female worker makes in eight) and to exercise her sexual agency. This economic independence (or potential for it) of hos is largely occluded in both public discourse about hoing (by the tropes of dominant pimps, or expensive drug addiction, or by the automatically low class status awarded to hos) and often by particular aspects of femininity as performed for the trick. The ho's sexual autonomy is often performed for the trick as less-powerful, or even hapless, sexual availability. The Victim School of Prostitution is thus able to see hos' hyper-femininity as a sign of their victimization and their need for legal and moral intervention. Whereas, for many hos I have talked to, it is in their performance of hyper-femininity that they find the power – familiar to sluts and femmes – of their sexuality. The paradox that hos' gender presentation makes obvious is just this: although feminine sexuality is imagined as passive, receptive, and dependent

per week. I already knew that the weird secrecy of prostitution is as much about allowing Working Girls to have lives untainted by the stigma of our work as it is about our vulnerability to the whims of the law. A gay hustler who taught journalism at a post-secondary school in town had outed himself as a ho that spring and lost his privacy (a deliberate and political sacrifice on his part, I think) and his chance at a renewed teaching contract. I knew that teachers are supposed to be some kind of moral arbiter, refuse sexuality, and cultivate respect, while hos are supposed to have no morals, be only about sex, have no respect for themselves, and deserve none from others. I drew firm lines

on masculinity, this definitive femininity is independently sexual and exploits masculine dependence on it.

The Joy of Hoing

Finally, there are some perks to hoing that few other pink-collar jobs offer. It can be damned rewarding to discover that all those hours spent trying to live up to those beauty myths are worth a wage at last. Finally getting a clear understanding of what that guy talking to you is really after. The tabloids don't tell us how to find good friends and homes in the homosocial world of working women. The pundits have to shame us into secrecy to counterbalance the independence we get in making our own folding cash from our own bodies. The newspapers don't offer stories about the occupational perk of finally knowing that the asshole cat-calling you in the subway is pathetic and powerless – not threatening – cuz he could never afford what you'd charge him. The headlines make us helpless victims, and all the Officer McFucks, who get the street girls to suck them off in alleys and then steal their evening's take, into heroes.

The fact that hos – who represent feminine sexuality distilled – are often framed as victims or trash or dangers to the public tells us a great deal about the cultural logic that positions femme sexuality. In many periods and cultures, all single women of a certain class (working) were seen as prostitutes or, at best, potential ones. Through history, there have been laws passed, human-bonfires lit, charities formed, discourses on religion, medicine, and law constructed just to contain the danger of single, self-supporting sexual sisters. We are the icon of the breakdown of extended rural family structure. We are the lost women, loose women, lounging, lascivious, and lazy around the urban landscape – sexualized by our class

between the two forms of work I did.

As an educator, I wear baggy tweed and cotton, dress pants and shirts, men's shoes, short hair, and no makeup. I look a bit like a very young man. I look a bit like a student (and will occasionally use this to fuck with my students' minds). To the trained eye, I look like a dyke. But, many students and colleagues, only seeing a middle-class, over-educated, well-spoken, young white tomboy will tell me the most outrageous and rude things about sex work, hos, and AIDS when the subject comes up.

The most ironic part is what I teach. I don't need to work for the money anymore because I got a full-time position (after three years of looking for a new

BRAZEN FEMME

position, our races, our need to raise money of our own. We are not legally bound to any man, so, of course, are universally available, expendable, corrupt or (more often) corrupted, cast as helpless, in need of redemption, saving from ourselves.

Undeniably, a serious look at prostitution reveals the power structures of our world. We can't pretend there is gender equality when men earn thirty percent more than women, a disparity that enables men to make up the majority of sex work's clientele and positions women as the workers. We can't imagine sexuality is liberated in the west when the sale and purchase of sex acts by consenting adults is criminalized and stigmatized. We can't imagine that racism doesn't affect economics when western white men travel to Cuba, Thailand, and Egypt to purchase cheaper and "exotic" sex from members of populations who have few occupational options that are anywhere near as lucrative.

job at the end of each semester) as a labor educator. I teach about class, work, the labor movement, gendered wage disparities, racism, neo-colonialism, and global capital – you know, all things lefty. Except, interestingly, the things I have the most first-hand knowledge of – sexuality and sex work.

1. Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1987).

Amber L. Hollibaugh

Femme Fables

These are three of the pieces ("The Gap She Fostered," "A Barren Expanse of Loneliness," and "Intimate Signs of Wear") that were written for my column in the New York Native in 1983-84. I called them "femme" fables as a way of publicly claiming my high femme identity. It was also a way of creatively linking the various parts of my life. No longer so terrified of penning my thoughts, I also began, for the first time, to try writing about my early life and to use printed words to link that life racially, culturally, economically, and sexually, with the life I found myself currently living. Each of the issues I took on in the column – issues of home, sexuality, class, etc. – were and are ongoing themes in my life and work. It is especially interesting to reread my thoughts as a thirty-seven-year-old now as a woman in her fifties!

The Gap She Fostered

I have lived in New York for two years, and this weekend I finally set up my office. It terrifies me to put together my own space, to set up the books, construct the desk, arrange the files and papers I collect with such greed. It seems pretentious and outlandish, a crazy fantasy gotten out of hand. In the hours between midnight and dawn, it is exhilarating to imagine myself a writer, to dream myself a passionate, creative figure in the privacy of my own imagination; in daylight, it seems preposterous. It makes me sick to my stomach when I try.

I am the first in my family to finish high school. Two of my cousins got their high school equivalency in the marines, and my father has now gone back and finished, but I was the first. Growing up, I read *Reader's Digest* condensed novels and *Love* comics. There was a copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran and a full set of encyclopedias. My father read *Hamlet* and loved it. There were a million auto-mechanic books, carpentry manuals, and issues of *Popular Mechanics*. The bathroom held a book called *Jokes for the Pot*, and there were *Family Circles* and cookbooks. But it is fair to say that respect for books is not the same as

owning them, and we had only a few at that.

As a child I was the "bookworm" of my family; everybody talked about it. I read everything in sight: milk bottles and mayonnaise jars, the Bobbsey Twins and the Cherry Ames series. I was as passionate about books as my family was about cars, motorcycles, and Friday night pinochle. It was through books that I first began to see a world different from my hometown – it was not so pretty where I come from. The magic of books took me away from the fights and the dirt, the cars in the front yard, the too-little money, and the worry which filled the rooms we lived in. Nothing about my life seemed so bad when I had a book to read. Books could be borrowed from the library or stolen from the drugstore. I never cared whether I had "taste." I read them all.

It was opening up a novel that brought extraordinary people and events into my orbit; it was in books that I found people who felt things no one in my family admitted feeling: emotions and conflicts, sex, wrongheaded passions. People in books talked differently and scrambled my notions of normal or right. Books held promise. I was an addict at an early age, and I fought for the right to read more desperately than I struggled for anything in my life.

No one in my family could figure out where this love of books had come from and what had given me a craving for words. It was their considered opinion that it happened because I had been a sick child, premature at birth, not even walking until my second birthday. I had asthma and colds more than I didn't. I was badly cross-eyed and would run sideways when I caught adults watching me play. They looked in my direction first when they heard a child fall and were always shaking their heads over my clumsiness.

But I also scared the hell out of them. To them, I was emotionally out of control. I lived in the world of feelings, they in the silent world of work. I wanted to talk; they wanted to do. I said out loud what everyone had agreed not to notice. I was dangerous to them and to the place I was to inhabit as a grown woman. They held that my moods were caused by reading too much, "getting ideas," and living in a dream world. They thought it was crazy, unsafe, and a dead end. They did not want to see me disappointed, and there was no way to make a living from my passion for books.

Back then, my mother did not have abstract concepts like *class*, but she damn well understood what was possible and what would break my heart. I was her baby, and, proud as she was of my reading and dreaming, she could not afford to encourage a fantasy which would leave me unprepared to face what she knew awaited me. A survivor herself, she meant me to be one, too. Truth is, I was as afraid as my parents were when I tried to see where it was leading. They were right; it didn't make any sense for me. I could be the best-read waitress in

Roseville, the best-read wife, the best-read biker chick, the best-read teenage mother.

I was queer, and I wanted a "better" life. In books, I met people who had both. I read the whole encyclopedia many times over, fascinated by the wheat crop figures in the USSR, the kind of snakes in Japan, the reason for the speed of light. I tried out new places to live and other languages. I was a child in the Himalayas, and I first met lesbians in the soft-core porn I was stealing from the place next to Woolworth's; books gave me ideas.

Meanwhile, my mother and I were at war. I was at an age where I would brook no inference from her. She didn't agree. In my senior year, I was sent away on scholarship to an upper-class school to create some peace for both of us. I returned home without many clothes and a suitcase full of books. I brought them all back, including the most pretentious I had read that year. I had been introduced to "good" books, and I took them with the same stubborn determination which had kept me reading the bad ones.

That year in boarding school had been terrible for me. I was different and seemingly stupid to most students, and, most of the time, I agreed with them. I felt ignorant and unpracticed in all they took for granted. But the one thing they had that I could figure out was books. I was being introduced to a literature that I could never have discovered or understood in my hometown. Night after night I stayed up after curfew trying to catch up. I tried to span the distance between the other kids and myself in eight months, a difference created by the years when they had been surrounded by literature, poetry, and music alien to my world. In the end, I couldn't cross that distance, but the race between me and words set in motion a flight from the deadening effects of too much hard work and a rush toward learning which I had been fearing and desiring all my life.

I came home awkward and bitter toward my parents; I saw that they couldn't give me, ever, what those kids' parents could grant effortlessly in a month's allowance or a well-placed phone call. Humiliating as the year had been, it made it impossible for me to stay in my hometown for good, impossible to forget the other ways I could be in the world. I had been *away*. I had been a learner, a student of great ideas and powerful thinkers. I had taken the trip outside and was forever changed by it. Now I had to leave.

In that first strange month of my return home, my parents built me a desk and shelves for all the books. They framed a map of the Parthenon I brought back and got me bookends and a study light. None of us knew what I was to do with these things; it just seemed required now that I was the owner of such large, impressive-looking books. They were awed by them, held them in reverence and dread just as I

did – though I wouldn't admit it. These were my trophies, the stuffed animal heads on my wall. This was the proof that their sacrifice to send me away from the place where I was raised had been worth it.

We all circled those bookcases like hounds after an animal we had never come upon before. I, as their owner, would shut the door to my room and open their pages again and again. They were proof to me that I had been somewhere, and to my parents they were a sign of how I had become different and unknown to them, how I had traveled without them to places they could not imagine. It was a sign of how we had changed and grown apart.

I was not duplicating the motions of the women in my family, each female child moving slightly away from the woman who birthed her, though less than it seemed initially, once she became an adult and settled in. I would rechart the map my family and I had propped up in our minds. I had been born to grow up to have children, marry, and live out my life as a modern version of the women who had come before me. Now it was clear I would not. I was becoming another kind of survivor.

A week after the shelves were put up and the books put in place I returned home in the middle of the day to find my mother in my room, surrounded by them. They were spread all around her, some half-open, some sprawled across the bed as though they'd been thrown. She was crying – my mother who never cried in front of me. I stood at the door of my room, too stunned to speak. We stared at each other and those books, not talking, her crying. And, finally, she turned toward me and said, "I don't understand any of these books, nothing that's in them, nothing they say. How can you read them, understand them, if I can't? How can you still be my daughter and have these on your walls? Who do you think you are to have these in my house?" And then she left.

I have never put together an office when I haven't fought against this sense of betraying my family. My mother's terrible pain when she sat on the edge of my bed envelopes me whenever I start. I see her grand intelligence and the terrible price she was forced to pay to offer me hope. I feel her wounds at being so cheated of any chances of her own. Her only hope had to rest in me and what her determination could wrest from a poor start. I see her face, the slope of her shoulders, as she cried and touched the books around her and faced the difference she had helped foster between us. It is a terrible thing that the world is so weighted on the side of wealth and privilege.

This pain I cannot avoid each time I sit at my typewriter or assemble my office. The ghost of her narrowed the options, and all the dreams she had to defer to me, the confusions and the bitter separation between us, are the shapes which hang in my house now and live with me. In order to give me a chance, my parents had to create a child they did not

understand; they had to endure my shame of them. The pride we carry about each other is surrounded by a sadness none of us can dissolve.

A Barren Expanse of Loneliness

This weekend my lover saw her ex for the first time since we had gotten together, and every spectre that could haunt me came out in force. For weeks I had been dreaming of it, imagining that the worst might happen: she would compare her to me, and I would be tarnished in the comparison; I would lose her to this former lover. I would be told Sunday night it was done between us.

I've always hated my jealous side. The high-drama fix is never satisfying enough to compensate for the times when my hysterics shove me so deeply into despair that I go out of control, spinning at the end of my rope, even occasionally swinging face to face with my desire for death.

When I was younger, I played with it, using it to get me in and out of crazy situations and settings in my life. I was fond of calling life an "adventure," one that I intended to live out with the best of them: Marilyn Monroe would never have anything over me, and neither would the Hell's Angels. I intended to live my life hard because at the core I didn't expect to live very long; I wanted to go out in a real blaze of fire and defiance. At that point, sexual jealousy was a stage set to portray myself as sufferer or betrayer, and it was relatively safe because I was straight. I had great power over my emotions, then, since I wasn't feeling much. I could indulge my theatrics, an indulgence I enjoyed and milked for all it was worth. I had also noticed that people who appeared to be suffering or feeling great emotion seemed more interesting to everyone else and were pursued and talked about with admiration or awe.

After high school and still straight, I nurtured my addiction to jealous dramas. I was bored with heterosexuality; heartbreak and jealous betrayal made it a hell of a lot more impressive. It also kept alive my hope that there was still a chance for me; I wasn't quite the freak I thought myself to be. My explosive emotional life covered the genuine drama I was avoiding.

When I fell in love with a woman that first time, the sensation drove right to the center of me. I was shocked and terrified of really feeling. And almost immediately I came up against my first adult confrontation with passionate jealousy. The cards had turned, and I was forced to navigate from actual vulnerability, from aching possessiveness for another person.

That first love taught me a quick, horrible lesson on how jealousy

operates when it's really out of control. I was enraged daily by our having to be in the closet, but it wasn't until our relationship began to falter and my lover began to sleep with men that I saw the barren, violent dimensions of my own character. I wanted her dead rather than with a man, and I intended to be the one who killed her. I was so beyond control that, after I found her with a man, I left her in three weeks, afraid every minute I would lose all restraint. It petrified me. I could be the person on Page 1 of a sordid tabloid: LESBIAN SEX CRIMINAL KILLS LOVER AND FATALLY WOUNDS LOVER'S MALE BEAU.

I have been thinking about jealousy ever since. It has occurred in some form in nearly every relationship with a woman. But it is most powerful with lovers who involve my sexuality deeply, the ones who have read my needs and pushed me to admit my own desires and weaknesses. It is those few women who dare to move me beyond reason through sexual barriers into the basin of my feelings. It is those women I fear, those women I've been least able to accept leaving, and those women who, while our relationship continued, often filled me with wild, jealous passions.

It is this that led me close to suicide, unable to accept that the woman who had first reached through my sexual stop signs could move on to love other women, could make love to them, could move her hands over their bodies the way she had once touched mine. Her leaving exposed me to the horror of the years of barren expanse stretching ahead and laid bare the degree of my own deprivation.

I am rarely touched for long by sex in most relationships. Pretty soon it becomes routine; often it has not been the most significant aspect from the beginning. I am profoundly alone most of the time; I feel trapped and caught inside myself. That another woman could release me, even for a minute, also releases richer passions. Her breaking through my sexual isolation allows me to feel all my feelings more vividly, gives me access to the best in my own abilities to reach a lover, to share and listen and roll back her loneliness with impulses that heal us both. I am, at that moment, capable of great love.

But that's the trick. Those feelings make me dependent and raw, wide open to any demand a lover might make. They shift my balance, make me compromise to avoid conflict, and seduce me into not struggling against any difference which comes up between us. I desire unity at any cost, sometimes at the expense of my own independence and needs. I am in a panic to not be walled in alone. I feel my body to be without its own engine; I am unplugged into her desire for me and cannot operate without it. I feel like a beggar released from bondage for a moment, but threatened with the return to it if the relationship ends, if I am inadequate at holding this lover in a spell of desire for me. I see how little control I have over the life of the relationship, even with hard work and commitment.

Hard as it might be to allow a lover to be sexual with someone else, I can fight that through, but not the emotional jealousy it creates in me. I do not want my lover to share intimate moments with another woman; I do not want to take the chance that, even by accident, another woman might touch her so deeply that she might leave me, that someone else could displace me and I could wake up alone again. I do not like needing another person so deeply. I do not want to know how delicate and uncontrollable this loving another person can be, how little our promises can protect either of us or make it safe to play with these feelings we rouse in each other.

The looking is never easy; the material of my jealousy is not what I want to understand about myself. But the examination changes me, makes hope possible, gives me reasons behind the fears. I need reasons to keep moving through this knowledge, reason, and comprehension. Monday, I will read this to my lover.

The Intimate Signs of Wear

Already at thirty-seven, I examine my face each day for evidence of the deepening creases; has this one widened? Are the edges around my eyes softening? Has anyone noticed yet that my skin creases at the wrist, neck, elbow, waist? Each day I look for intimate signs of wear, of how I'm holding up, how I think I'm changing.

I look different to myself now, actually older. My expressions don't shift in the same inexperienced sequences. I am no longer called "Miss" by clerks in the stores. It is evident now that I don't need to worry if I forget my ID – my age will not be questioned. My face is catching up with my life and showing through. New York has finally refused to fall for a mythology of innocence I could previously create with my features. Each day it has become harder for me to remember how to go forward as sharply, to look as intensely into another's face, to be as generous and open in my physical actions toward others.

I have begun to pull my body in around me. I look down at my hands on the subway and realize they're clasped tightly over each other, forming a knot that I have never seen myself make before. I can remember watching this gesture in older women with purses, handbags, and wrinkles. Now I sit with my arms protecting my chest or rigidly poised at each side of my legs. I am not even sure when I began this, but it is happening more and more frequently.

My body is refusing to stay young, refusing to allow me a poise of innocence even as I am aging underneath. That is how it was in my early thirties, my body still with the particular vibrancy that youth bestows. And I was proud of it; I had a kind of cultural arrogance that

was, like other forms of passing that I practiced, a mark of my difference from the community of women who reared me, the women who are tired at fourteen and look middle-aged at twenty-three. Those are the women I come from and whom I couldn't afford to look like. I wanted to escape. I had to change how I spoke, which words I selected to explain color and thought and texture. It was like losing my tongue. But my body also had to co-operate in the deceit lest I end up one of the women who works the lunch counter at Woolworth's with swollen legs and face powder that stops at the chin.

Middle-class women look untouched in their twenties and thirties. Their hands have not been burned by a restaurant's deep-fat fryer or wrinkled from daily plunging into ammonia and baby shit. Their hands have opened books, sold blouses in the summer, written college entrance exams, washed out their own underwear and nightgowns.

At eighteen, I was cleaning office buildings at night, wringing mops and scrubbing and polishing endless corridors with huge pails of ammonia and waxing machines. Then, starting at nine or ten p.m., I would dance in a club, lit low enough that the condition of my hands didn't matter, only the quantity of bare skin that was showing. I worked in restaurants, hamburger joints, A&Ws, donut shops, cocktail lounges, if I wasn't dancing or stripping. And all of it, in one way or another, depended on my youth and my ability to think quickly. Back then, it was my insides that felt old. The tiredness was in my legs from working two or three jobs at a time, the weariness that settled in young from the worry and the hustles. Still, my body got me by — my body and my wits.

My looks were important because they allowed me to choose which coffee shop or bar I worked in. But, when things were bad, it was my strength and stamina, that gift of being young, that got me through. I could dance, clean houses and office buildings, and work the graveyard shift at the ice-cream-cone factory, all three if I had to. It was my only safety net. I could make my body work. It would get me a pay check week after week.

Now I can feel it slowing, tiring, not recovering as quickly when I get sick or depressed. I can't stay up all night and go to work looking all right; in fact, I can hardly pull off getting there at all. My body is refusing to move without subtle pains and creaking. It takes more effort to climb flights of stairs now or help a friend move. These are the symptoms that I can still control. But my face and aging skin have their own timetable and are refusing any longer to co-operate in the lie of ageless years.

I am horrified to be aging, to be entering middle age. I care about my youthful appearance and my sexual desirability, much of which I attribute to my looks. My feminism, I had hoped, would protect me from caring about such things; I would stride right up to middle age and wear it proudly. But it is not proving so simple. I care passionately

about my looks. More deeply, I am terrified of what this aging means to me as a survivor, as a woman who has traded in elegance to "get over," attempting to live outside her own people. I haven't the comfort of being surrounded by "my own," and my elegance is slipping.

I have a nightmare that happens too frequently. I am at a dinner party, an elegant intellectual supper. Everyone is female, and everyone there is doing something creative or challenging. I am there in a long cr me silk dress; I smell sweet, my hair is perfect, my perfume subtle. In conversation with women around me I am interesting and easy. Then, as I sit there, my hands begin to change and age, my hair turns dull and greasy, all the color disappears from my face, and it becomes lined and pouchy and very tired. My body loses definition, slumping forward at the shoulders while my belly grows folds. My clothes dissolve, leaving me with nothing on except a half-buttoned housedress, ripped under the armpit and hemmed in the back. My mouth changes shape; my teeth are now cracked and yellow. The words that I had learned to use fluently disappear. I can only talk about television shows, soap operas, ex-lovers. Before those savvy, self-satisfied women I have become my grandmother, a shrunken Irish washerwoman, bitter at taking in other people's dirty clothes seven days a week.

Standing at the edge of the table, I try one last time to talk with the language of their class, but cannot remember how. I finally excuse myself and go to the kitchen, where I begin to clean their supper dishes and prepare their desserts.

I do not want to go into my forties and my fifties, and yet I am powerless to refuse it. Each day I speak to myself about the fear, the vanity, the uselessness of worrying. But, like other fears planted deep and early, it refuses to negotiate. My own body is going to betray me, and I must live in it daily as it does. I see clearly that my need to be young and attractive is tyrannical, forcing me to reach for a steadily diminishing possibility. But the appeal of beauty and the obvious advantages I reaped from it are "oppressions" I have used to survive. Having my stamina gauged by standards only youth can meet is, to me, bitter. My lover also fears the passing of time, but her fears are about her strength, her continued ability to play racquetball; she worries about needing reading glasses or becoming forgetful. Though she doesn't like how her looks are changing, she is not obsessed with each nuance of skin tone and flesh color. She is butch and middle-class. Her career is settled, and she is not dependent on either her looks or the physical strength of her arms to eat. She will age with distinction, not losing her right to sexual territory or image, trading in for a salt-and-pepper look and a low-set stride that gives her body substance and power. As a femme slipping into middle age, I must truly face the rigid standards of female beauty and become increasingly pathetic.

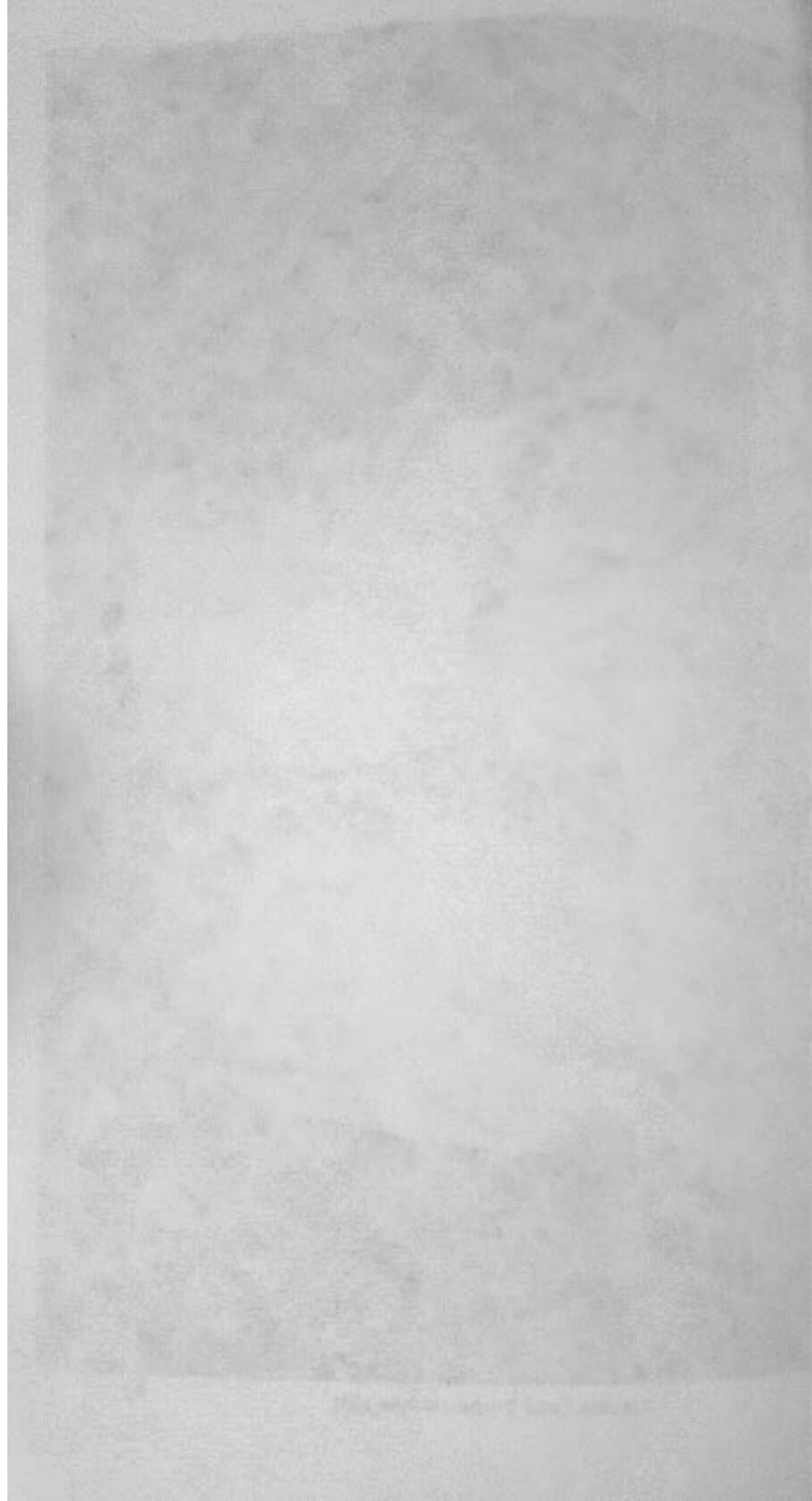
From childhood, I – like so many other women – used desirability as a part of getting by. And as an exit from my class. Though I no longer care very much about what men think of my looks and believe that lesbians will continue to appreciate me, it is myself that I can't come to terms with. I have a fear of becoming useless, unable to take care of myself, and I fear becoming undesirable and the loss of whatever edge good looks may have gained me. It is my own gaze at my image in the mirror that frightens me and fills me with loathing. I am the judge I cannot face.

But there have also been moments, recently, of real exhilaration, feeling that my face wears the evidence of my history. There are times I am sure of myself, confident. I see that my face is lovely as it has never been. There is in me, at those moments, a strange eagerness to see what sort of woman will emerge with the passing of time. There are days of pleasure at who I am becoming and how well it fits me.

But the fear never really goes away, the terror that, without my youthful body and strength, and a fresh young face, I will not have the tools to take care of myself. I feel I am in a race to establish my identity strongly enough to secure a ledge not built on smooth, unlined hands and round, tight buttocks. A spot that can balance the bitterness I feel at these changes with the self-knowledge that comes with age – and with risks that knowledge allows me to take.



Passion, Chloë Brushwood Rose, 2001



Debra Anderson

Sharp Secrets

the pain is sharp
in her feet
SlutBootHeels
piercing ache
that won't go away
until she takes them off
and even then, sometimes lasts
until the next morning
(a reminder of where she's been).

Femme Secrets
no girl worth her boots
reveals
only steels herself
for the inevitable
discomfort

when she struts in whore boots
that believe me
hurt like fuck
even though she'd never let on
that it hurts or hinders,
none of us Femmes do

let out our collective pain
like walking on knives
like striding on glass
like staggering on shells
as if we are mermaids
punished for spreading
our tails open
into two legs
that meet in a hole.

BRAZEN FEMME

the exquisite soreness
a trade off
for the framing
of her legs
holstered
in high-heeled honor,

put on a pedestal
of her own creation
only ready to step off
when she says so

a little hobbling home
at the end of the night
is a worthwhile price
to pay for such elevation.

Sky Gilbert

Drag Queens and Feminine Women: The Same but Kinda Different

Recently I was asked to appear at a benefit called The Wicked Women Cabaret. It was organized by a group of young women (Bang Productions) who were raising money for a production of Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, A Play about a Handkerchief*.

I did not know these women. They had heard of me through my association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and seemed to think I would be appropriate as an emcee. Or rather – not myself – but my drag alter ego “Jane.”

Occasionally people call Jane for some sort of performance. Usually it's lip-sync, or standup. I tell them that I'm not a club drag queen (who lip-syncs) or a comedian (who tells jokes). It's hard to explain what I actually am, but I'll try now.

It's good practice.

I'm a forty-eight-year-old gay man who loves to dress like a showgirl from the middle of the last century. When I get onstage, I talk, in character, as Jane, usually about my sex life. People are often amused, shocked, and/or find me endearing. All in all, my musings on life in and out of the bedroom seem to charm people and make them feel deliciously naughty at the same time.

Straight men tend to keep their distance from me when I appear at these functions. So do masculine gay men. A select few of the women become ardent fans. The female fans are of two kinds. Some are butch dykes who want to protect me, buy me fluffy underwear, and treat me like a lady. Others are flamboyant, extremely sexual, straight women who want to take me out for a drink and flirt with men – women who sometimes classify themselves as “femme.”

But the majority of women – the “nice” feminine girls – eye me warily. Their energy suggests that they think I'm very different from them, and that they don't necessarily approve of my behavior.

Indeed, feminine women and drag queens generally do act quite differently. Is this because men and women are essentially different?

I don't think so.

And furthermore, I don't think that the physiological differences between men and women are very important. It's true that men sometimes (not always) have larger and stronger bodies than women, and that women's bodies go through significant and frequent (i.e., monthly) hormonal changes, unlike men. It's also true that the little-dangly-thing-that-men-have-which-makes-them-get-hot, is usually (but not always) smaller in women. I don't deny, in other words, that there are significant physiological differences. But the physiological differences between big, burley men and thin unathletic ones are certainly just as significant as gender-related disparities in body size and strength. Moreover, I think it's potentially lethal to make generalizations about the emotional or intellectual potentialities of men and women on the basis of gender, because the exception disproves the rule. Andrea Dworkin-style essentialist feminists, for instance, insist that women are innately passive and caring (motherly), and that men are innately assertive and ambitious (aggressive). And sexist male sociologists love to initiate studies which coincidentally always end up supporting gender essentialism. They usually discover (surprise!) that most boys who have had their trucks yanked away and replaced with dolls long for their trucks again. But these theorists ignore the fact that, inevitably, there will still be some boys who don't love trucks and some girls who hate dresses. And the psychological consequences are horrific for those children who are forced to repress their true natures to conform to a gender specific cultural norm.

Essentialist notions of gender are often hurled at drag queens by those suspicious of them, the notion being that men are unable to act like women because they were born large, strong, aggressive, awkward, ugly, and without visible grace or vulnerability. But again the exception disproves the rule. There are men (and male to female transgenders) who pass, who are not awkward caricatures, and who are regularly mistaken for "real" women. (If you don't think you've ever seen a man or male-to-female transgender pass as a woman, it's probably because you've been unaware when you're talking to one. Typically, they would be the last to tell you.)

And yet the fact remains that many drag queens do seem to act quite differently than most straight, feminine, women. Thus some women are suspicious and distrustful of them. I have my own explanation for these particular seemingly gender-related variations in performance of femininity. Men who act in a feminine manner do so for different reasons than women, and experience another reception of their performance. These differences have less to do with innate characteristics than with the pressure to conform to cultural stereotypes.

I am not a scientist, so I will use some remarks my father once

made as admittedly unscientific proof. "People enjoy your company, Sky," he once said, "because they can see you will achieve anything you want in life. They sense you will be a success." And then he turned to my sister. "People love you, Lydia, because you are such a cheerful, warm, person." One could, of course, attribute my subsequent neurotic obsessive competitiveness and my sister's early career problems to our gender difference. But one could also look to the gender-associated definition of self which my father impressed so firmly into both of our consciousnesses, and ultimately, on our lives. Boys act like boys because they are raised to act that way, and girls bow to the equally severe pressure to act feminine.

It is this very pressure that can cause the male performance of femininity to be different than the female. When I dress in drag the fact that I am not a real woman is always cause for remark.

For instance, when my boyfriend and I were on our way to a party in drag last summer our outfits elicited a typical response. Three little boys (age ten or so) rode by on their bikes. One of them shouted, "Nice tits!" Another shouted, "Nice dress!" (These, of course, are sexist comments that a real woman might encounter when presenting a sexy, feminine appearance.) But then one of the boys stopped biking, turned around, and yelled, "Hey – we know you're not girls!" This typifies the most common response to drag – "You're a fake and I know it." Whatever form my retort takes – be it a flick of the hair, or a sarcastic remark – I try to make the respondent understand that gender performance is a choice: "I'm a fake, but unlike you, at least I know it and can live with it, so just relax, okay?"

Adults also make jokes to affirm the fact that they're aware a man in drag is an impostor, a "fake." And when I discuss drag with people who are suspicious of it they invariably assert that "No woman would ever act like you. No woman would be so loud, or sexual, or offensive, or wear exaggerated makeup, or make such exaggerated feminine gestures. If you're trying to act like a woman, just give up. You'll never be anything like one." These remarks, of course, may be partially attributed to homophobia. Men who make comments like this are often afraid of their own sexual attraction to drag queens, and women who say such things are often insecure about their own physical appeal to men.

But homophobia aside, there is some truth in these remarks. Why are are so many drag queens more vulgar than most women? I think because gender specific cultural conditioning around sex is quite different. Boys are made to feel guilty – even inadequate – if they are not sexually assertive. Girls are told that only dirty sluts act in an openly sexual way, and they see ample evidence in the media that sexual women are punished for their behavior. Little boys (unlike girls)

are hardly ever warned about being raped, and (with rare exceptions) don't fear it. When men dress in drag they obviously don't co-opt the fear that is ingrained in so many females. They prance about with careless courage, their cultural conditioning assuring them that their flamboyance and sexual importuning carries with it much less actual danger than for real women. The sexual women who seek me out in drag have somehow (either through a quirk in upbringing or sheer force of will) managed to transgress society's disapproval of a female pro-sex stance, and they love my courage, my open sluttishness, my outrageous badinage. They wish to experience the liberation of acting like a man, and being an honest sexual libertine. Hanging out with me encourages them to explore these feelings.

Why do drag queens so often seem to be caricatures of femininity? Sometimes it's not their big hairy hands or large noses that give them away; it's the exaggerated, affected gestures and voices. This is often seen as parodic and/or misogynist. Again, we can't deny that misogyny, like homophobia, exists in all of us. But I don't think drag queens are actually parodying femininity, consciously or unconsciously. What they are doing is celebrating it. And this celebration is directly related to repression. I remember as a child being transfixed (and this certainly dates me) by cinematic idols like Judy Garland, Bette Davis, and Joan Crawford. What attracted me about these women was that they were allowed to wallow in emotion: to weep, to cower, to act elegant and graceful, to hope, dream, giggle, and cry. Drag queens are often characterized as being attracted to cinematic images of strong women. This is true. But all of these stars of Hollywood's golden age found their strength tested by the vagaries of melodramatic circumstance. Male film star characters reacted to the same plot twists stoically or angrily. Whatever emotion they were allowed was mostly expressed through physical violence in a typically masculine way. Women, when tested, would often show the same strength as men, but in a different manner – with an elegant turn of the shoulder, by repressing tears, by sorrowful yet graceful collapse in a chair, or with a terrified glance from an elegantly made-up eye. On the rare nights when I venture out in drag (it would be more often, but the makeup is far too much trouble!) I look forward to the opportunity to flirt while having my cigarette lit, or to daintily swirl the edge of my dress, to express my disapproval through pursed lips, or my desire through slightly parted wet ones.

Conversely, girls and women are not only given ample opportunity to act in a feminine manner, but they are pressured to do so. And they soon become aware that expressions of vulnerability will be held against them, that men commonly criticize women for being too emotional to do a man's work. It's absolutely understandable that women, in these circumstances, would rather not wallow in their femininity – first of all

they are not given the choice whether or not they wish to act that way, and secondly, they are fully aware that any performative, excessively feminine behavior may be used against them. (For "femme" women, there is liberation in playing with these dangerous behaviors, and liberation in drag.)

It always fascinates me that butch dykes seem particularly attracted to the feminine self I present. One of my best lesbian friends became obsessed with buying me dresses. (I was happy to oblige her fetish!) Once, when I suggested that she put one on herself, she made an elaborate performance out of her disgust – perhaps because, for her, femininity was a dangerous trap, not a chosen privilege. But femininity was obviously still an enormous lure for her; she was, in effect, living out those impulses through me. I'm not quite sure what the difference is when straight men clamber to buy their wives sexy lingerie. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot – between the desire and the actual wearing of the garment lies only one thing: social convention.

Another accusation commonly hurled at drag queens is that they are more masculine than real women, louder and more aggressive. Essentialists would, of course, categorize this as typical male aggressive behavior. I'm not so sure. I think – allowing for differences in individual personalities on both sides of the gender fence – that the frightening desperation that one finds in drag queens has more to do with repression than anything else. Men who dress in drag are fulfilling a lifelong fantasy, forced to compress that deferred dream into one night of excruciating pleasure. Most men aren't allowed to dress in drag in their workplace, and the few precious moments they can steal as a feminine creature is time which they would prefer to see crowded with incident and experience. This means that an evening with a drag queen can be raucous and intense. But one finds the same kind of energy in women under similar circumstances. Male strippers have told me of the fears they've had to overcome when confronting repressed women who have finally given themselves permission to act publicly horny in the strip clubs designed for them. These women exhibit the same kind of strength of will and febrile intensity that drag queens exhibit on their rare nights out on the town.

All of these explanations may quite rightly suggest that the difference between drag queen behavior and the actions of real women have much to do with the fact that their femininity is a kind of gender holiday, whereas female femininity is definitely a full-time job. I think this explains why some traditional women resent drag queens. Butch, fem, straight, dyke, or bisexual, they are fully aware of the pressures put upon them to act in a feminine, ladylike manner. When they see a guy having fun with something which is for them quite often a stultifying obligation, they can become naturally jealous

and resentful. I would say that the same feelings in men have given free play to the controversial term "bitch." Though no one can deny that the word is abusive and sexist, it's important to understand that, for men, masculinity, abrasiveness, confidence, and good old-fashioned mean-spiritedness are required attributes, and never considered merely a colorful display of spunk or even a sort of temporary insanity. I love butch and/or "bitchy" women. I think it's because I'm fully conscious of the cultural pressures that give rise to certain kinds of resentment that I might feel towards them. And correspondingly, "femme" women often adore drag queens, because they too feel liberated and conscious of their own choice in these matters.

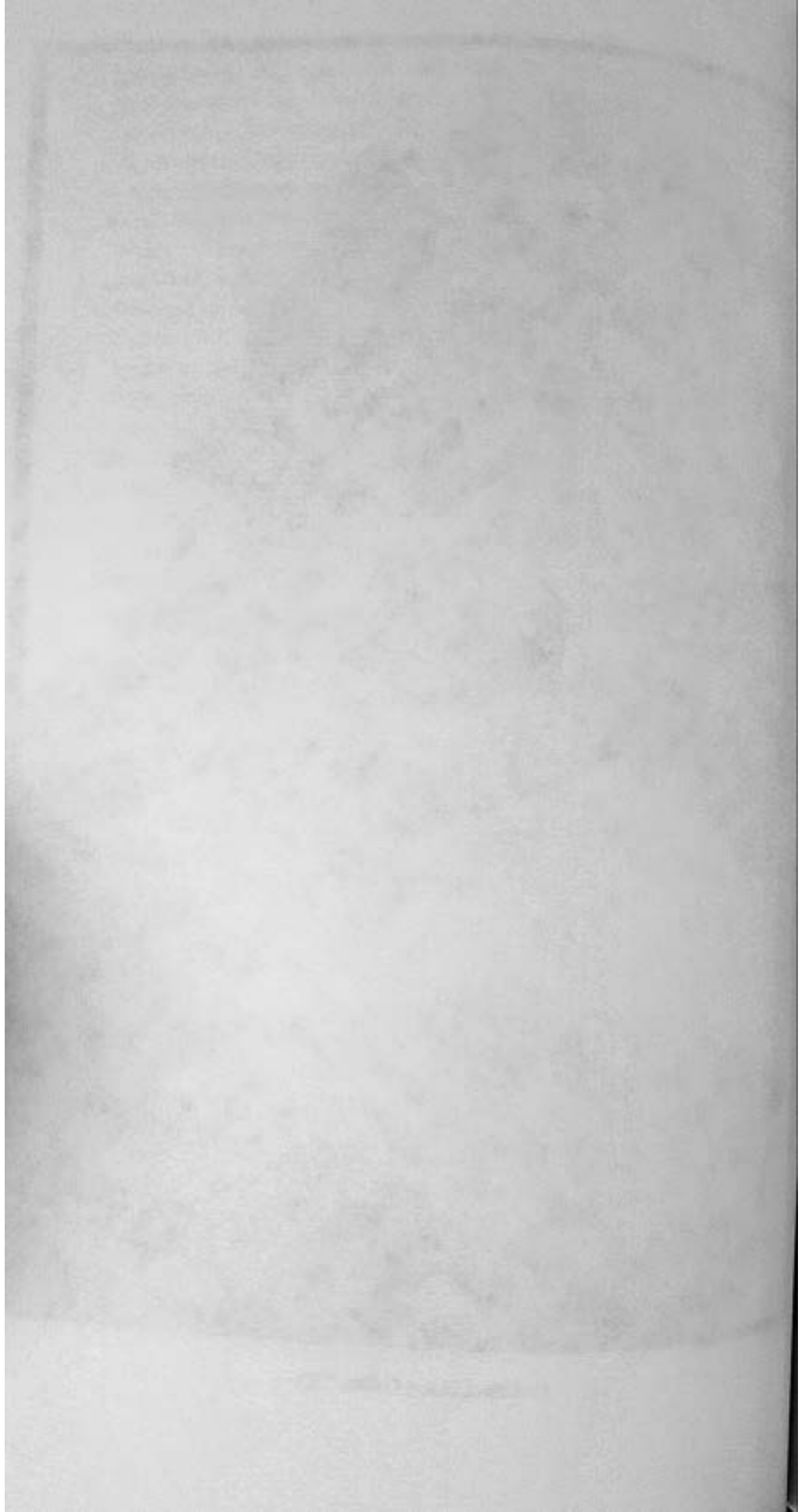
Of course there will always be men and women who resent drag simply because their identity is wrapped up in their gender specific behavior. But the man whose life depends on his team winning a football game or the woman whose sense of self-esteem rests on a perfect hairstyle both need one thing: a good therapist.

Let's face it, we all need therapy. A worldwide holiday or government sponsored retreat from our obligation to be masculine or feminine might make the world a better place for butch dykes, drag queens, and transgenders of all biological formations. In the meantime, a night on the town wearing the "wrong" clothes might serve to release a little steam.

This happy drag queen certainly recommends it.



Untitled, Daniel Collins, 1988



Tara Hardy

Clay Pigeon

You think we don't know that you think we're tuna. Flounder. The slippery necks of oysters sliding into the gutter. Sliding, slippery like the sluts that we are. You think we don't know you're laughing at us in our tight shirts and hopeful breasts before you charm us into your pants and say later, "She's nothing, a cheap treat." A cheap treat like a snow cone, or licorice, or peep show.

You think we believe your reassurances. "Don't worry, I like girls. Yeah, I get it, the girl thing." You think you've got the girl thing wrapped around your finger like a soft, warm, worm. One who will curl into you, stare at you with a single eye mesmerized by your image alone. I am not that kind of worm. Neither am I a worm like your dick, whether it's actual breathing skin or plastic and perched above your own tuna.

My dick waits for me, ready, on the window sill, all pretty and pink, to be sent in when you need her. Like you need the way I listen to you, feed you, and read to you your own history (in which I'm never indexed, but a lucky nod in the margins, even though I threw as many rocks as you). History I read to you at night after dark by the light of the kerosene lamp which I sold my own ass to fill. All of me is always ready, prepared – I am a fan of luggage. Which you think carries fluff and color, but is really a double-o-seven kit for offense, defense, and reference guides to hate-crime de-escalation. I am always ready to send in what it takes to shield you when you make a parody of me and another leans in to call you faggot. Only it isn't my dick I send in. It's my cunt, fanged and chewing up real skin, plastic, silicone, glass, steel, and marble.

I provide this protection to you without your knowledge of it. Because you think this game is a chase and you're the leader, the one with the safe head start. And me, another girl, perched on the edge of the trash scrambling or pleading to avoid the push. I'm supposed to be grateful when you let me catch you. Or when you pluck me from the heap of rot where someone who walks like you pushed me.

BRAZEN FEMME

What you don't know is that a lot of worthy shit ends up in the trash – other things that have exhausted their keepers. Old lamps, often functioning, stacks of cards – we build houses, lengths of hose, to reroute your bullshit, and murder weapons rarely past their prime.

You thought we were exchanging recipes or out buying lipstick or curtains. You were right about the recipes. So remember, the next time you throw me up like a clay pigeon and shoot me, be careful to collect the shards. Because the next time I serve myself to you on a platter, they just might find their way into your tuna casserole.

Zoe Whittall

Fevers, Fall-Outs, and Fast Foods

I think too much when my hands aren't in motion. I sit in restaurants and memorize the way people eat: the way they chew and move their lips when they talk, the way the fork hits the meat and the meat hits the tongue. I can see their temperatures rising. A pink in their cheeks. Gravy in their eyes.

Hearts a-warming.

You feel strongly about feeling strongly. As long as you are loud and clear and *right*, it doesn't matter how many times you change your mind. It's because you're a Virgo, a calm sense of rational order no matter how inwardly torn you are. I'm an Aquarius, a killer outward bravado with a startling secret: the heart of an oversized autistic baby. A pink and brave contradiction.

I am never right. I am always hot and cold. My body reacts against room temperature. I keep a thermometer in my pocket for safekeeping.

My mother always said I should've been a lawyer. Stubborn. Combative. Smart. Materialistic. Moralistic. I used to think it was a compliment.

On Monday, you are crimson, spitting a fight over prime rib and red wine, citing anxious reasons for believing in God. On Tuesday you're agnostic, and just as adamant. As long as you are sure at the time.

Things are fluid, don'tcha know.

I am a daily fixture at the Shoppers Drug Mart on Queen Street. It has the best selection of sample-sized products. Little purple tubes of shave gel. They're cute and only eighty-nine cents. You can't spend your whole life worrying about eighty-nine cents.

I think about our fights the day after we have them. I am *sharp*, *witty*. I kick your ass. The things I never think about until the moment's passed. Delayed. Little victories and closing summations.

You and I don't have to talk about loving each other. We're action girls. We get down to business.

Time's a-wasting.

Time is supersonic when I'm on break. My pulse is quicker. I have gone through half a tube of red licorice chapstick, chewed off my nails, and stayed consistently at 37.1 degrees. I'm ovulating. I can feel it. The way the check-out boy looks sexier than usual. The way my temperature rises and my standards drop.

The money I make these days has gone to spoiling myself rotten. Someone's got to get the job done. I buy mud masks, chocolate shakes, steak dinners. Instant gratification.

This week there's something wrong with my glands; they're bigger. My neck hurts and I think I'm dying. My makeup is thicker and my midsection dissolving. My tongue fills up my mouth when I think about it for too long. Think about your tongue. How does it feel now? Does it tingle, fill up the spaces?

You don't approve of my job, unless I am buying the steak. It concerns you.

My job is to have sex with myself. Not a bad deal, I think. Like getting paid to brush your teeth with a secret camera in your medicine cabinet. That's *not* a lame comparison.

It's true. I film myself in various states of undress, with the company of a few toys and props. I cozy up to a laptop and a camera and occasionally tell online voyeurs to touch me, suck me, touch themselves. A guy in Kansas swears he licks the screen until he comes.

I wear red. Tart lips and nails, Revlon *Cherries in the Snow*.

I get off while I work, *a lot*. Most girls fake it, but I figure you may as well enjoy the ride, right? Sure, my fingers sometimes cramp and I buy a lot of batteries, but I have muscles in places you wouldn't believe.

I held back at first. It was like giving myself seventeen gynecological exams in a day. How much of your own big screen hairless pussy can you take without getting clinical? Cynical? You may as well get off.

Sometimes you think I am going to start hating sex because of it, or myself, or both. Sometimes you're worried my future career as *prime minister* will be ruined cuz somewhere some freak has downloaded my shows into video and is already clipping out newspaper letters for the big *bribe*. Like Peggy Atwood only got where she is today because she had nothing to hide. Sometimes I think you're jealous to be sharing me. Sometimes you are just uncomfortable.

It depends on the argument and how much we've had to eat.

I do understand where your shyness comes from. You grew up sleeping fully-clothed, belt, shoes, everything. House keys and bus change in hand. Ready. You still shower in the dark. I come in to find my mascara and there you are, soaping up your hair, singing along to Morrissey, barely a shadow in the dim dawn stream from the skylight.

I am always naked. This intrigues you. When I sleep, when I cook. I eat cereal watching cartoons, one bare leg propped up on the shaggy

pink sofa cushion, the other on the floor.

I am distracting.

Sometimes you log in when I'm working. Your login is butchsavestheworld, and you just quietly observe for a couple of minutes and then log off. Little secret codes for *I love you. Bring me home cigarettes. You are so sexy you hurt my eyes.*

"Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac comes on the speakers at Shoppers. Instant tears. Haven't cried since *Torch Song Trilogy* months ago, you and I huddled on the couch. She is singing, "I'm afraid of changes, baby," and little black veins start running down my face, the taste of unsalty, neutralized khol chemical.

I am leaning against the magazines, sucking back Maybelline Extenda-lash, naked underneath my gingham mini-dress, with a bundle of samples cradled in my hands against my breast: shave gel, cream soda lip gloss, mini Keri-so-very Lotion, mini-Nair, and nail polish called Crash. I buy things for their size, their name, and their taste. Key lime pie votive candles. I forget to buy dish detergent, but I always have a good supply of things that sparkle.

On my break from work, I think about these things.

To get back to work, I have to walk up the street, behind a warehouse to an unmarked door. I buzz the doorbell and Maya opens up. Everyone has about three different names, so her name could be Minxy or Melanie.

She is tall, lanky, with little tits and a fondness for batik mini-dresses and black boots. She is an administrator who chats with the guys and keeps them in line, or fixes the computers when they go down. She thinks it's great that I'm a dyke. She says things like, "Pussy, it's the breakfast of champions," and tries to get me to come home with her and her boyfriend.

I like her cuz once she caught me in the back room checking my temperature and she didn't ask me anything.

There are two or three other femmes in the dressing room. We smile at each other and don't say much. We buy each other drinks when we see each other at the bar on Friday nights. We're the girls who always have the long fake nails on just one hand.

I want to ask one of them to do a double show. She's sexy - pretty, jaded, tattoos like a racing strip on one arm. But everytime I get up the courage to ask, I falter. I've never seen her with another femme. I don't care if she's not attracted to me - that's not the point. More money is the point. But something stops me. I don't know exactly what.

The owner is an art-fag named Ronnie, Roger, or René, and he is doing this for the sake of *art*. The *art* of the *pin-up*. He fancies me and my big shaved pussy will one day make it up next to Cindy Sherman at the National Gallery.

BRAZEN FEMME

GIRL WITH FEVER OBSESSION MASTURBATES WHILE
TALKING TO ADMINISTRATOR ABOUT CUTICLE HEALTH.

It could happen. I could argue it. It is amazing what people believe.

He only hires girls he can talk to, *smart* girls. He says that like we're hard to find, that first of all you are blinded by our giant pussies, but once you get over the stark, pink sensitive spots, and get us talking, some of us *can* talk. And if some of us can, about freedom of speech or the spiritual significance of jungle music, then the girls are all right. Then he tells you how to get around the laws, how to cash your checks at Money Mart, sucking on a Virginia Slims Menthol, giving vague threats to keep location quiet.

Sometimes I catch myself in the camera; lips practically licking the lens, looking plump and poised for sucking. I stay still. You can't see this: that I'm really waiting to pull the metal notebook out from under the satin pillow. I position the camera on my cunt, close up. Then I write in my book, stopping only to flip pages, open my lips, or insert a finger. I am ambidextrous. Flexible. I write lists instead of sentences. Fast words. Avoiding flowers, the moon, water. Urban words like scrape, piss, punch, *transit*.

Hot bottled-up bodies.

There are drawings in the margin, thin black ink, veins in the heart, eyes with purpose.

When customers ask us what city we're in, we say, "cyberworld." Sometimes I say Texas, cause I know I'll never go there. But a lot of us work here, in a fictional space, fixed at no address, asses spread.

Hearts hot and time passing.

Sandi Rapini

Adventures With Zenith and Ariel

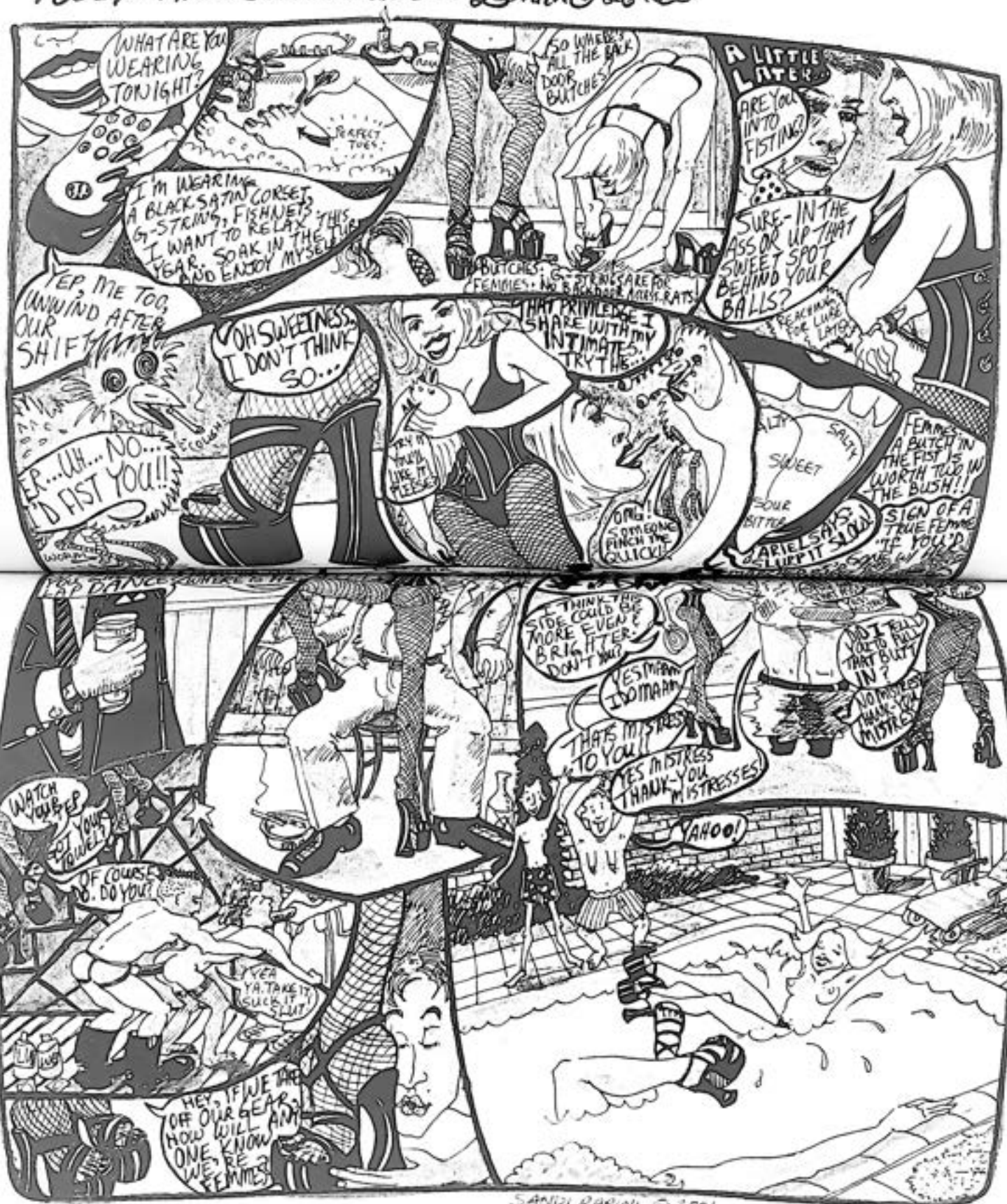
"Bossy BULLOCK" ADVENTURES in Zenith & Co. and

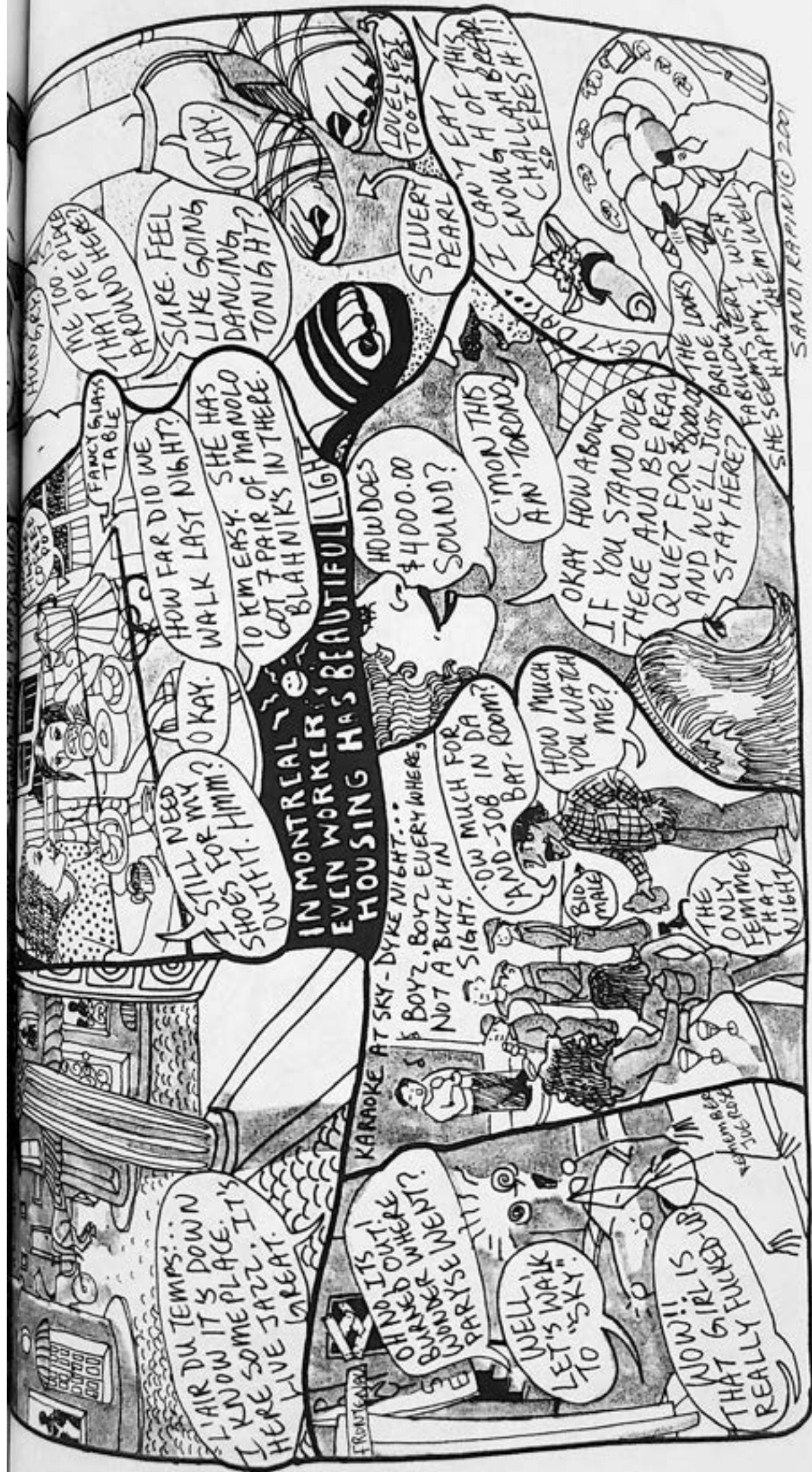




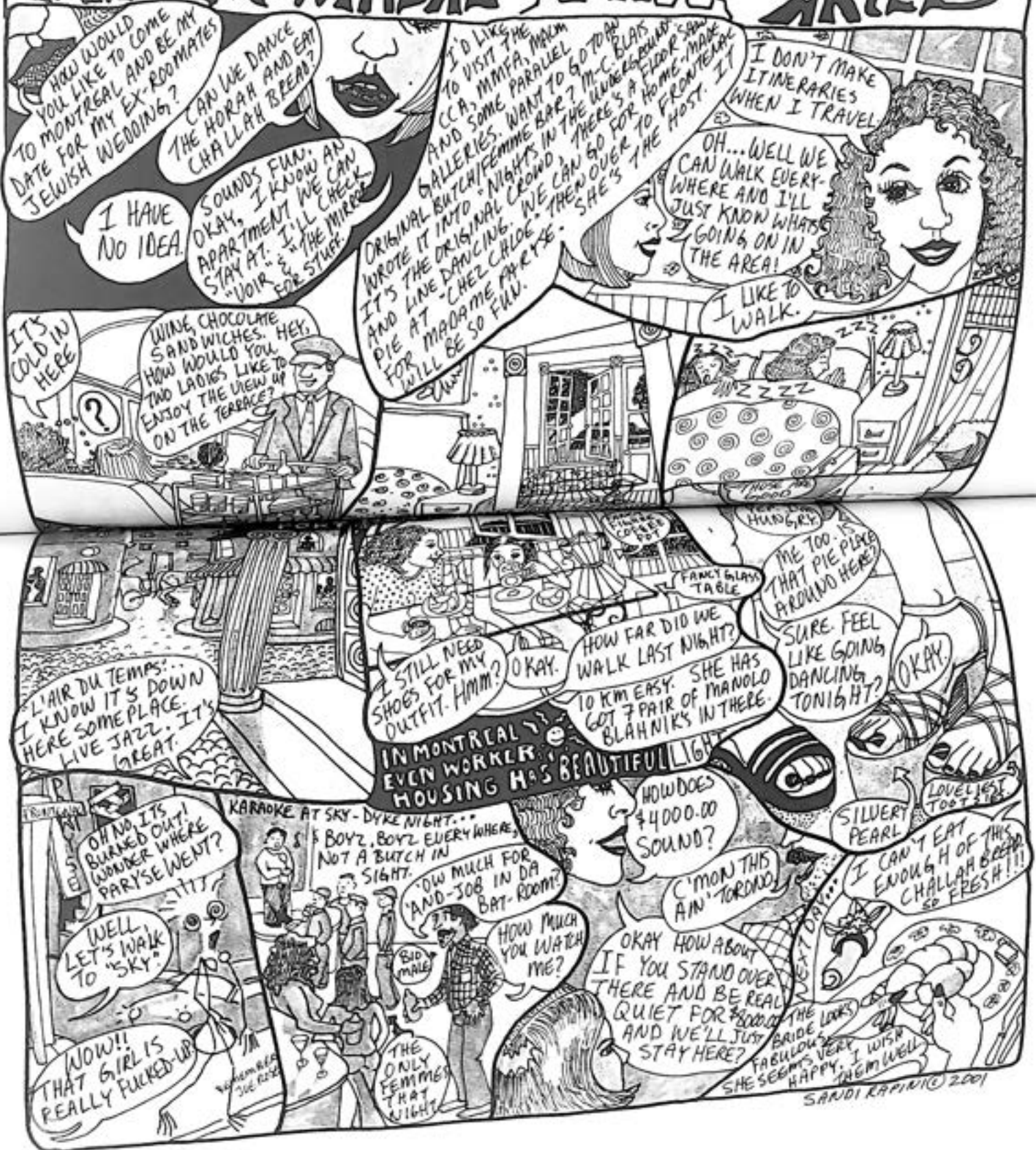
SANDI RAPINI © 2001

"Pussy Palace" ADVENTURES w/ Zenith & Ariel





TRIP À MONTREAL ADVENTURES W/ ZENITH & ARIEL



FUN AT THE CAFE OR SUB-CULTURE @ ZENITH & ARIEL

HEY... DO YOU WANT TO GO TO THE NEEDLECRAFT SHOW AT THE EX? IT STARTS TODAY.

SURE, I LOVE THAT STUFF, BUT I HAVE A CALL TO DO FIRST. HOW ABOUT IF I COME TO PICK YOU UP WHEN I'M FINISHED?

HEY HO'HEY HO' IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO!

LATER

ONTARIO RUG, HOOKING ASSOCIATION

LET'S GO!

WOW, COOL... I LOVE HOOKED RUGS.

THIS IS SO AMAZING. IT SAYS IT'S MADE OF OLD NYLONS.

IF I MADE ONE IT WOULD END UP ALL BLACK!

JUST LOVELY!

AHEM...

HAND-DYED & KNITTED BY HER.

500 PASH

104





FUN AT THE CNE OR SUB-CULTURE @ ZENITH & ARIEL

HEY... DO YOU WANT TO GO TO THE NEEDLECRAFT SHOW AT THE EX? IT STARTS TODAY.

SURE, I LOVE THAT STUFF, BUT I HAVE A CALL TO DO FIRST. HOW ABOUT IF I COME TO PICK YOU UP WHEN I'M FINISHED?

HEY HO'HEY HO IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO!

LATER

ONTARIO RUG HOOKING ASSOCIATION

LET'S GO!

Wow, COOL... I LOVE HOOKED RUGS

THIS IS SO AMAZING. IT SAYS IT'S MADE OF OLD NYLONS

IF I MADE ONE IT WOULD END UP ALL BLACK!

JUST LOVELY!

AHEM...

HAND-SPUN WOOL BY HER

SOOBBY WITH

COQUETTISHLY ARE YOU TWO GAY HOOKERS?

UH, NO, I'M A KNITTER!

OMG! DOES IT SHOW! X!

SIGN

WELCOME LADIES! TODAY I'M GOING TO TEACH YOU ALL ABOUT HOOKING!! THAT MAKES ME OF THE HOUSE ARE THE HOOKERS. WE'LL SETTLE MY TAKE AT THE BREAK! HA HA!

HEY, I'M NOT MUCH OF A HOOKER BUT I'M GREAT AT WHIPPING! SNURKLE! SNORT!

WE SHOULD DO A WEED HOOKERS ON KNIT, TAT, COOKING HOOKING. KNT, WHILE WE HOOK. ONCE IN A WHILE WE CAN DO SOMETHING DIRTY LIKE STAND UP AND TINKLE IN A TIN CUP LIKE IT? MAKE US SOME \$!

OKAY NOW YOU PLUNGE THE HOOK INTO THAT TIGHT LITTLE HOLE AND WORK IT IN. WATCH THE TENSION!

NOW I'LL WHIPPING EVENLY ALONG THE EDGES, PERFECT ON BOTH SIDES

IF IT'S AN ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENT I WOULD STILL RATHER HAVE THE CASH UP FRONT. THE IDEA OF WORKING UP FOR 50 YEARS MAKES SAME TRICK TO... GAY! ME WANT TO... WHAT A TACKY! WHAT A TRADE-OFF!

WHY DO ALL NEW INSTITUTIONS LOOK LIKE HOTELS?

THIS SCENE IS JUST WHAT I NEEDED FOR ME!!

I WONDER IF MY REGULAR WIVES ARE HERE!?

SARAI RASHAD © 2007



Anurima Bannerji

ephemera

*We believe in each other's beauty
but not our own. With you, time dies.
Outside the window – ice on the lake, a cold day,
a body startled into light. Your dark hair,
trembling.*

*I cannot see you: there is nothing untouched
in me, my heart, the living muscle. I cannot
escape in the intimacy of perfect darkness.
The closer I am, the closer you come, slipping
into me, the perfumed mist rising in our sleep,
longing, the final border between us.*

*Dive into my skin grotto.
I hold the sea in my arms.*

*Exhausted and ill, I cradle your face, pressing
your weight into me. Your unwavering stare. The way
you sleep, holding my sick and perspiring body
flushed with slow fever, the lips of whispered love
at night.*

*I thought of love as struggle, and hate
something to dance with, or fight, never
as a place of peace. Then I turn around,
and I see your footprints, walking in the dry
heat, washed in sand and milk, the stains
you leave on my face.*

*And when you are sick and perspiring,
I watch you, as a father watches a dying child,
holds him to his skin to absorb the poisoned heat*

BRAZEN FEMME

*into his own frail body. You are not what you
imagine: stronger. I carry your body like grief,
intangible pieta, the cool white marble of you,
under the rain of my hair. I hold you as a mother
holds an infant, protected in the ropes of her arms,
afraid of dropping the small weight that came
from her own wet skin. She will suck out the malady,
lick your palms clean. But for you, I am the dirty girl
an island virgin to water. Still, I give you everything
I own, even the secrets that are not mine.*

You love: collarbone and hipbone.

*In sleep, my shoulder makes some wild gesture.
You tame it: teeth closing against the clavicle,
leaving a purple stain, gleaming. I find it
the next day, the jewel turning yellow
and amethyst, then disappearing. For days
I touch it: the improvised tattoo, embellished
by your mouth. I won't let go.*

*The hipbone: you pare it with your thumbs,
under the taut layers of cloth and skin. Feeling
above the thigh. Equine girl, surfacing. You can't
go deeper, I say, and then you touch the bone
inside.*

*I want to be the ghost who watched you,
ached for you, witnessed your life before love
began, watching from some corner of your house.*

*I don't know you, but for years now
you have haunted me, traveled through me,
suffered in me. I have carried the bones you break,
your scars on my hands. Every time someone has loved
you, it has been me, alchemy of ghost and lover,
dark stranger, placing the fate of her palm
against you.*

*Open the black curtain of my hair: and the sun
will illuminate us. Tonight, I hold your gaze
and the tender bowl of time
in my hands*

Suzann Kole

Rags and Reiterations: A Queer Story

This poetic narrative explores emotional birth and annihilation as catalyzed by the absence of the photographic image – a private processing of negatives – captured and “stilled,” here, in a scant few frames of text, in a framing of double entendre. This narrative is a pastiche of sound and image, twilled together into a rough open-weave. The referent photographs suggest a choreography of story, a dance of discordance and resolute melody . . . as the theme of “revelation” resounds through layers of time and euphony, choices of fabric, styles of skin, and a host of professions which have established a lineage of continual opposition. The college professor and the whore – at once so similar in their service – battle for forum, conformity, and formidable exposure . . . in a density of reiterative vignettes, in a dance of dominance and a struggle from subordination.

Last week, I had a chat with the Chair who told me that I was different. “You’re different,” she said, in a way which presumed a certain paradigmatic perfection: “You show skin.”

She offered these observations in a way that made no apologies for the cult of khaki-sheathed northeastern *see-estas* with whom I work and by whom I am simultaneously eschewed. She made no mention of the tacit agreement regarding uniformity of color, shape, affect, and hair length which emblematically boasted or challenged a tenured position.

“Frankly, it’s your midriff . . . your legs . . . and sometimes, the neckline,” offered the Chair, who sat sealed in her own pupa of polar tech, making no attempt to extend the school’s “diversity policy” into the realm of “faculty attire,” or aesthetic preference into cultural comfort replete with cleavage and cadenzas!

“It’s the perfume, as well,” she continued. “We have a ‘no scents’ rule at this school, yet you constantly enter meetings adrift on some cloud of shampoo or essential oil that can only be a source of allergic reaction to most other faculty who work here.”

Later, I walked down the street in an animated solitude. I considered

the conversation – a one-woman performance which emphasized the silences and dogmas of liberal arts in the '90s – and it was the trees, only, who bore witness to this response.

The breeze broke out in a sweat when it all came down to the critical review, bending and spewing leaves and moth-netting into ghostly shapes which skittered over the dirt road.

Most of the world is naked . . . or at least makes frank innuendo of its sexuality from beneath unrestricted rayons and bark-blankets, I thought, as I alarmed the otter who flitted in late-season scuba on the surface of the pond.

Feminine bodies of *middle-east-shimmy* arrest us in their sequined attire: shameless and bold thickets of history recalling plates of baklava and bowls of scented basmati throughout the midriff of quixotic nights.

In Kampala, New York, New Orleans, Tehran, London, San Francisco, and San Juan, radical feminists scream, their bodies painted, lips stained, wearing tight knits and leather; they kiss, these perfumed perverts, and sex roles from their lips in tears of saliva and political scandal.

It is only this pocket of northern New England provincial thinking which remains transfixed in a uniformity of recycled clothes and an asensual overlay of shapeless sweats, formless sex, Calvinist cold. Flash: recall those nylon nights genuflecting in the contours of the seething port, "passing" – priceless – in a prostituted pose, boasting purity in a biracial bind, in a Buick, in between bastards and bachelors.

In the '60s, in New Jersey, down at the port by the projects, we were all half Puerto Rican . . . and infected with red nylon and black patent leather. "We'd have been laughed off the bus in these mutings of microfibre and straight edges, threads which discouraged our singular rounds and new convexities," I tell my colleague, who chuckles inside her wide velour compromises.

Sweater dresses – the tightest threads in '62 – in rust and fuchsia. We wove elastic through the cuffs and waist to confirm contours and accents. "Body" was more than an object, it was a nationality, a *carte blanche* to talk dirty, a way to cleave the bus with affect, making room in the back for forbidden tongues.

We simultaneously got hard and stayed soft, up until these pedestrian crosswalks of professional resistance. It is only the rough fabric of rumor (in this *civilized* maturity – this professional courtesy) that rubs texture from the skin of our singular history. *Oh Holy night* of the new millennium, bless this pedagogy of the oppressed.

Colleagues wrap me in their disparagement, fearful I may not

unfurl from their cocoon of reformation, with all its drappings of linen and lycra opacity. "You have a lot to teach this faculty," says the Chair, who sits back in her fabric of security, eyeing me for answers which reflect her duplicity and pastel paternity.

And all along the burber couch – knitted into hypocrisy – they sit in impunity . . . that limited faculty . . . reading papers and finding marginality in notes crammed into columnar spaces, muffled in faux fur and vicarious relations: a tower of exclusivity ingrown in a league of disability, the collegial rap!

I keep looking at my naked body in these daring frames of black and white – a purchase to reflect my forty-fifth birthday: my sinewy neck and shy cleavage, requisite velvet, post-natal pall.

In the picture, I am happy (actually!), in my leathered, intolerant body. I lean forward into a mystery of blind future; posturing against an unforgiving rock chaise, or, perhaps repelling the past; recalling those young streets of half-clad hubris which flash back in moments of dark weather, wet dreams, and small wealth.

All along the avenue there is an amnesic precision of that young body: sweet and insatiably motivated by depression and desire. All along the shapely topography of that nubile life, there is a young marriage . . . and slow, Ukrainian vapor pours through the shafts of immigrant housing where orphans like us find starter lives in east-city settlements.

Black. The netting of confusion I veiled us in as you poised between moments of youthful ignorance and a skin of stupidity, bastard black and white glossies which pricked up a weekly income and satiated some perverse drive for exposure and exhibition – my mind in my hand, lubricating the small dreams of after-hour pleasures: hizaiki and Hagen Daaz after rehearsals and recalcitrance, these simple futures stilling the anesthesia of habitual employment.

In the picture, I lean into the maternal airs of summer, girded in velvet and invisible libations which have softened the nest of experience that wreathes my eyes. The legs extend in an effortless sprawl, and the extension of this poise is a single frame of recognition that cleaves the decades.

I am two halves of a town mated by erotic lineage and made distinct by linguistic diffidence. A life caught in an insoluble world of velvet and protocol, a life made soluble, at once, by indecency and indifference.

She's giggling: the "me" in the liberated moment of thin lace, nylon, and velour. There are forms of breast which drive the eye back and forth between lips and skin; a forehead of sternum sets comfortably on the shaped bodice.

Posturing in black, leaning toward play, and yet, strained in the lips, these are the memories of "street"; an odyssey of breaklight worlds, a fluorescence of skin intercoured with a small knowledge of marketable cells... and rivulets of Hungarian pudenda... and Puerto Rican moiré...

I look forward. In the picture, lean into the wide angle of evening; wide shots of small breasts leaning into a future which blurs velvet and professional dignity; the cleaving of the rocks where I pose is a haiku of trees and lawn: whispered syllabi, scant and profound, a wafting of ebony mood and waning light.

Projects and projections: consider a time on the floor of a turquoise room in '53; in broke-dick dialect, amid elbows of linoleum designing a mockery of social milieu: black and white cubism hallucinating its way around a kitchen in a chaos of small poetry: in/script(ion) deconstructing into fragments of linear motion, filaments of sound beating the hell out of unrest: these, the primary colors of derision... and discrimination.

The pen convulses in rivulets of thought: reiterations which prolapse and analogue time – depending on the point of view in the picture, depending on the seat of perception... and the change in departmental chair – a *lazy boy* in '53, to a fainting chair in '99. Oh the cheap fabric of recovery, when I thought I'd left the projects behind.

Velvet and vetivert smear the air. The lens sweats vapor which lifts from a tragedy of humid afternoons. Beads of dew have gathered on a shuttering of images which transcend time and tear at professional choice. A dialectic clicks between decades of destinies and determinism. A tissue of experience breaks the mythology which has suggested a f(l)ight between eros and evaluation, in this protocol of academic diversity, in this decadence of division.

It is these variegated moments, when sun diffuses through the thick sky, that image punctuates with unusual textures and tensions. Note: the fabric of experience smoothing its skirt as it seats in the filtered light of late afternoon. Mauve and melon tones suggest a rich experience in the dark, overstuffed room in overtones of cast: the sun casts us in this light.

Candor. In the picture, the subject holds herself in a tilt of thrill, awaiting response and recognition. It is a midlife infatuation with provocative ideals and professional roles. The subject is scantily-clad and confuses *roles* with the stricture of *rules*. A conflation of tones and tints betray racial redemption: the subject is rigid and resigned.

This is a picture of mockery, of professional uniformity. In the picture, the subject is about "risking": trading job security and body suppression for the possibility of exposure, for the embodiment of a checkered life. Tonal duplicity, projective pride.

Honored within the brackets of being human, the subject is about "seeing"; about "skirting" limitations of colonization, about denouncing societal vivisection and generic gratification. She defies codes of perception which engender insolubility between academe and corporeality, between a "feminist" morality and the dread of "femininity." The subject is about coping.

In the end, there is only growth. Her hair streaks white, and a lack of rest swells in tender hammocks of quarter-moon under a persistent gaze. I watch her posture from another room, and the tendency to sift history through the cells of each present tension creates a sinew of continuity (her body, suffused with momentum and memory).

In the picture, there is a musculature which drips, slightly, from the skeletal structure of experience and activity. The photographer tapes the midriff into taught bands which mask the bulge of agony, as it expands into slender inhalations of her changing topography.

Time makes sepia of the memoir which is framed within the midlife of her interim profession: bronzed skin corrugated into the 4x4 proofs of darkroom labor. She rests on the rock chaise and varnished floor, constructing lectures and clever innuendoes in the event of students . . . or suitors. Nothing is linear as she listens to the restless streets pumping her for more labor and a largesse of time.

The chair makes no promises; it is only a chair. But she longs for relief from the constancy of stride and street, an enduring support upon which to lean in a temporary sleep. The unabashed bodice of her velvet skin appeals to the slow sprawl of seasons, where tempos shift and jar in an edge of continual vigilance.

Around her neck rings the weight of a foreign chain. She surrenders into a forward lunge which is captured, aesthetically, in the large format of a dapple-grey proof. Meanwhile, the chair remains in a precarious resistance – premising an aged morality upon the promise of conditional security.

Drifts of dry heat, low pay, and sore feet scream in the departmental meeting as she shifts in a rhythmic side-to-side, in a girding of spandex and scandal. Here, time is eclipsed by an earlier fragrance. She leans closer to the steam which emits a hiss of comfort, blurring the sound of haranguing from the other patches of loose-knit fabric in a room of recyclables.

The dopplegänger dilutes the edge of eras – you, in velvet, I, in double knit . . . with lycra. At night, the clench blurs my teeth into a rough of cool sensation. I reach for anesthesia to dull the ache, the acute

moments of disengagement where, in the dark, a rasp of bitterness and rapid eye movement synchronize into sleep.

No one knows the small life of the early years – prelingual and prolapsed. Only the pores of an early body saturate our every breathing with sound: a tick-tock of stilettos on the cragged pavement of the east settlement recalls where broken genders warped in tight, chic years and begged love from the raptors of the orphaned streets.

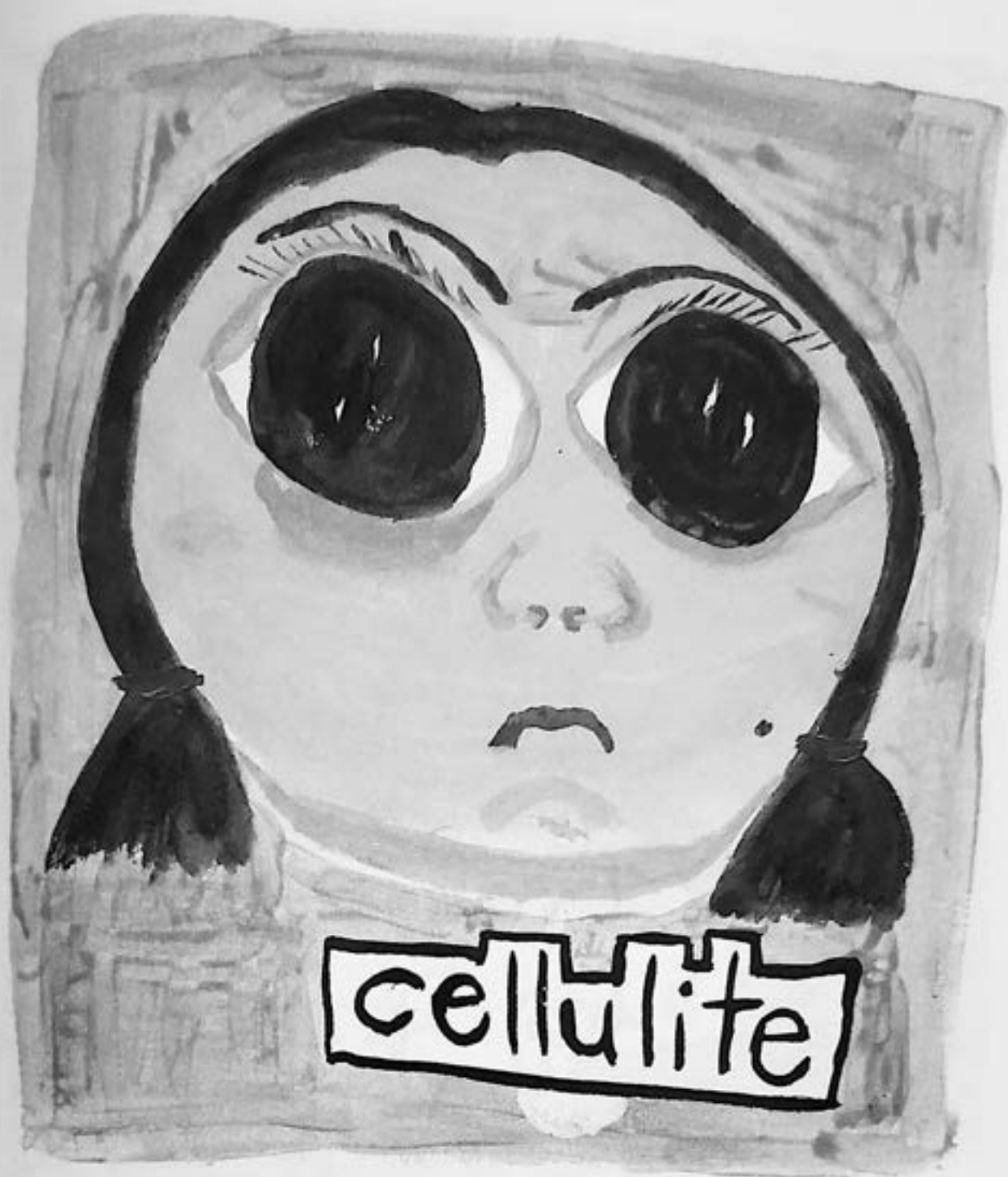
Time simmers and thickens in the heat of afternoon-planning. I lean back in a chair that allows its embrace to support even my undermining extensions of thought. Undermined: the chair springs forward in tangents of discomfort. I soften to a co-optation of postures as I imagine the economy of a new seat couched in the rough travail of change.

In 1999, I sat on the beige, close-cropped carpet and exerted pressure on the thin walls to undulate, contradict, or orchestrate the calamity that turquoise and melon made in the '50s kitchen. We assemble in a rigidity of silvertone fold-outs and begin the meeting in an absence of pain and participation.

The photographs splay and recoil in silent projections as the tenor of the faculty evenly endures through the afternoon meeting, bracketing exposure within a congenial mask of schedules and standards. It's cold, and it is only this invisible marking – this proud indelible "hope," that heats a singular yearning.

The chair quivers in the silent light of late day which creates an epitaph of the educational ritual. Several associates have dropped south, to the floor, in a loose-knit sprawl. The linear guidelines of the session have lulled the edges of "difference" into a homogeny of indecision. Liberal Arts becomes a euphemism for encoding chaos in a controlled dark.

Analepsis: The story begins again, only this time, I pour myself through the quiet roads in a sepia daybreak where I am at once bruised between topographies and memories. Nothing is black and white. Enter: the Southwest . . . clicking in a series of delayed frames: the switch of my brittled knees, and the span of high desert against a sheeting of white which coats the rutted northern trails. Life battles against the impositions of my own invisible burdens. Burn: the sun plots my age on its linear motion: I'm facing the past in visible youth. The subject is about to (r)age.



Cellulite, Allyson Mitchell, 2000



Always Hungry, Allyson Mitchell, 2000

Big Fat Femmes: Squeezing a Lot of Identity into One Pair of Control Top Nylons

To an outsider, the life of a sexy fat girl may seem full of cupcake dreams and candy kisses, but the truth is, it can be hard work. A large and in charge lass faces fashion challenges, cases of mistaken identity, self-esteem hurdles, body-image barricades, *and*, blessed with luscious hips, thighs, and an ample bosom, is all too often taken for someone who needs to nurture.

One-size-fits-all-tights simply don't – and a singular definition of femme doesn't even begin to cover the many ways in which fat femmes live and identify themselves. As fat activists and two members of the performance group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, we address issues of body image and body love in our culture through performance, writing, teaching, and art. We decided to record this conversation because it is part of a larger ongoing dialogue that we and our fat friends inevitably gab about whenever we get together to make plans about taking over the world, a dialogue about how fat affects our life and how identity places us in the grand scheme of things. Whether or not the following conversation actually addresses fat issues directly, our fat identities certainly color how we look at things. Everything. We chose to talk about some of the issues that affect us most as fat dykes who are femme, whether by self-identification or via the labels we have been given and have possibly adopted.

From lingerie and role models to catcalls and hot dates, Allyson and Abi let out some fat femme mystique.

Lipstick and shaving

Abi Slone: Always begin in the powder room . . . do you shave your legs and wear lipstick?

Allyson Mitchell: If you do shave and smear, is it because you are

intending to situate yourself within the world of lesbians and labels? Both of these practices are external markers that indicate to you and others who "you" are. Are you trying to send the message out that you are *femme*? Or do you shave and wear lipstick for other reasons?

AS: In the winter months – when legs are often kept a secret due to frigid geographic locations and the almost-impossible-to-master art of short skirts in sub-zero temperatures – I must have strength and determination in order to remain dedicated to my chubby pair of gams. I do try to remember that even though it can be a stress on the lower back, you never know who you might meet at the bakery. Lipstick for me is simply a given, and even though I know both shaving and lipstick are somehow "signifiers" to the queer world, it doesn't come from that place. Someone asked me what I did that made me *femme* and I found it almost impossible to answer—meaning, I do what I do aesthetically because it feels right, comfortable, and sexy. Not because I can then belong to this exclusive group – *femme* – that is a pleasant side effect of my life.

AM: I rarely, if ever, wear lipstick. Only when performing on the big stage. In real life I prefer good old Blistex and sometimes gobby dollar store lipgloss. I hate lipstick flakes and dry cracky smiles, but worst of all I hate that you can't kiss freely with lipstick unless you want to turn your partner into Bimbo the Birthday Clown. I shave mostly for practical reasons. It feels better in bed when I rub up against the other guy. I think that shaving does have something to do with where you situate yourself in the lesbian world, but at the same time, those situations aren't written in stone. I don't generally consider myself to be a *femme*. I do, however, have some *femme* qualities in my styles of dress and I get categorized as *femme* because of my partners, who are often butchy.

Motherhood

AM: I get called "Mom" frequently and it infuriates me. Friends can attest to this as I've snapped at many an unsuspecting one. Usually I get called Mom if I'm, "bossing people around" (i.e., trying to get a group of five or more folks to move towards a common goal) or if I've just prepared a large and delicious meal. A common response is either, "Thanks, Mom," or, "Okay, Mom," (said with the tone of exasperation if I'm being too bossy).

One reason I get called Mom is because I dress like a girl, and another is because of my fat body – which is associated with home

and hearth and the comfort of the bosom. This drives me crazy. I'm nobody's damn mother and whenever I get called Mom I feel dumpy and desexualized. I know that there are sexy moms out there, but I definitely don't feel sexy when someone calls me Mom.

My boobs are sexy round knockers – they aren't the bosom for comforting the world. And just because I wear dresses, like to organize people, and love to cook does not mean that I am a caretaker. I don't mind the occasional "sexy mama," but "mom" really makes me freak out. Further examination of my internalized misogyny is probably in order.

AS: What is it that is misogynist about your dislike of being called Mom? Is it that mothers can't be sexy? Once you are a baby machine, that's it? Do you think that if you wore dresses less that people would call you Dad?

AM: I think that it is an act of misogyny to try and disassociate oneself from things that are "female" simply because you don't like what that "femaleness" means to you and others. Meanings attached to "mother" in our society, from Freudian analysis to films like *Mommy Dearest* to representations of single welfare moms in the newspaper, have misogyny at the heart of their negative representations. We can take it for granted. Mothers are sexy. But when someone calls you "Mom" or says "Okay, Mom" in a particular tone they are trying to shut you up or point out to you that you are acting like a shrew and that this is unacceptable. They are attaching your behavior to those fake representations (not actual lived realities) of hot women who have given birth.

AS: Although I have not had the "mom" experience you have had, my body has been equated with child-bearing on more than one occasion. I have no desire to be a mother most days and when people look at me as though I may be pregnant it makes me crazy. No one has come right out and asked me how far along I am, but I have heard people talking at family gatherings, the ones where you see people who have known you since you were "that big."

AM: This is what I'm talking about by associating femmy bodies with motherhood – it is in the corporeal reality as much as it is in the clothing. A woman with a "womanly" body doesn't have the same "gender choices" that women with less curves have. And in many ways, I wonder if femme is a gender choice or a queer gender assignment.

BRAZEN FEMME

AS: So do you think that you can choose to be femme or not? That you choose how you are to be most comfortable in the world? What makes the most sense to you for yourself?

AM: I don't feel like I've had much choice in my gender. As for associations of femme with girly clothing, sometimes it isn't a matter of choice for me. I have legs like tree trunks and a big belly. A dress often feels more comfortable than pants because of this. Sexy fat-ass slacks are hard to find.

Catcalls

AS: Despite my own feminism, somewhere deep within me there is a place of affirmation for the well-meaning, relatively inoffensive remark for the well-rounded femme. It comes less frequently from the Western-raised boys (of any gender) who are trained to erase fat from their view, and flows more freely from the mouths of those who see the glory in girth. That said, I patiently wait for the day when smooth legs and lipstick no longer mean *readily available*, and when "tangerine dream" and "millionaire red" aren't synonymous with straight – when I too can participate in the silent dyke nod that I witness other queers enjoying, identifiable without question.

AM: Do you think if men could read femme as queer, that they would not catcall you? What would a visible queer femme look like? What might be the visible markers?

AS: Maybe we could all wear buttons. . . . I don't know what the answer is, except to not assume. I think that if femme were read at all, there would be less of the "Hey babes." Sure, that sounds naïve, and I know that there will always be folks who can't keep their mouths shut, but perhaps it would happen with less frequency. And I think that that goes both ways. That if femme were read at all by most queers, there would be more of those silent nods of recognition. I mean, I know where some of the invisibility comes from, good and bad, but I find it most disappointing when it comes from within our own community. My wife and I once walked into a fag bar in Halifax and the bouncer announced that it was a gay bar, as though to warn us, the presumed straight couple, that we were entering a queer space. Those sorts of things throw me off and they not only make me invisible as a femme and a dyke, but they make me straight, and not just by default, but by misconceptions.

AM: Being a fat girl, I rarely get catcalls. Instead I tend to get leers from older men. In the moment I block this out, but file it in my mental rolodex of gross men fantasy fodder. Sometimes younger guys who are clearly into bigger babes come on to me, but my Women's Studies entrenchment prevents me from stopping for a flirtation. This usually makes the guys mad and they end up yelling from halfway down the block, "I said hi, bitch." This is generally an unpleasant experience. As for other dykes, I enjoy my share of appreciation for my fabulous form and sense of fat drag. That's right, I said fat drag. I like to dress in a way that plays with what a fat girl is and isn't supposed to wear. This includes dresses with huge horizontal stripes and tight, brightly-colored cardigans that strain to keep one button done up. There is a particular niche of dykes who dig this kind of look and we share a sort of common understanding about performing our bodies in subversive ways. To others who are more invested in traditional standards of beauty and more of a beige clothing landscape, I'm sure that I'm either invisible or gross.

AS: How do man fantasies fit into the fat/femme identity, if at all? Does your relationship to Women's Studies inform femme for you? Does it throw you off that there are dykes who are not fat positive? I have a whole thing sometimes when I forget that there are anti-Semitic dykes, for example, and it always throws me off.

AM: I don't pretend to understand how the subconscious works, but I do know that my sexual fantasies rarely if ever include women and certainly not soft "haute" lesbian women. I can explain no further. I can't answer to the Women's Studies question either, except that it means I am constantly in a state of analysis and "situating myself" (if this sounds uncomfortable, that's because it is!). It always throws me off when dykes are fatphobes. Generally, however, I find that their phobia is directed mostly at themselves. As a fat activist, most dykes I know wouldn't say anything directly to me, but I'm sure that it happens behind my back. Sadly, I find examples of their fat phobia in how they police their own eating and the general discomfort they have with their bodies. A frequent response to *Pretty Porky and Pissed Off* is that dykes are glad we are doing the work and glad that we are presenting ourselves as happy in our bodies, but I know that they would be horrified if they had an ass the same size as mine. And I wonder how many women have a salad instead of french fries or vice versa after seeing us perform.

AS: You know, I had never thought about that in that way before. Reminds me of high-school girls who would point at a fat chick on the street and say, "If I ever get fat like that, shoot me."

Plus-size Tights and Underthings

AM: Underthings. I buy them frequently and wear them less and less, amassing a stock of great fancy bras I wear only for performances and special occasions. They don't give me the support I need. In the everyday I use a good old Playtex 24-hour "over the shoulder bolder holder" because it makes my boobs stay in one place, doesn't allow for any aureole viewing, and hoists 'em up. As for undies? I almost always wear men's tighty whities. I try to wear the fancies, but always go back to comfortable, practical, and reliable.

AS: If you could design the greatest bra of all time, what would it look like and how would it support? Would it be fancy yet practical? Or are you happy with the non-fancy?

AM: The perfect bra for me would be made of red, pink, or burgundy velour. It would give amazing support, but not bite into my shoulders or make fat pouches stick out on my back. As well, it would miraculously allow for circulation and movement in my breasts so that I will not develop breast cancer. I'm more into perfect support and smoothness than fancy. Fancy can go on top. Because I have big boobs, sports bras make me feel pretty uncomfortable. The monoboob effect is not what I'm into and has a psychological result that is not positive.

AS: Explain the psychological effect.

AM: Well, with big breasts I think comes a love-hate relationship. Sometimes you love them and they feel like sexy soft bajongers, other times they're a burden and feel like twenty pound weights hanging around your neck. Bras can adjust these feelings. And as for tights, I have never found the perfect pair. They always slide over my gut and rest above my manse. The crotch is always ripping and catching the skin between my mid/lower inner thighs. The good thing is that I have no problem yanking 'em back up in public. Over the years I've convinced myself that this is actually sexy, and so I do it at parties and bars whenever the mood strikes. It's all attitude.

AS: I love that, the sight of a hot fat chick hiking up her tights. Lovely. I wish that someone would learn that not all fat girls are built the same, and therefore the generic "tight" with a wide ass and skinny legs is far from comfortable or acceptable. And a sexy matching bra and panty set for a lady of luscious size? You can forget it. Most places are not willing to mix and match and my big ass does not come with an equally luscious 40 DD.

AM: What is your perfect bra and/or panty combo? How would it make you feel? What would your perfect underwear shopping experience look like?

AS: First, my perfect bra and panty combo fits. The secondary criteria for perfection is satin in a deep rich red, black, or silver. I would love to walk into a shop and not have to rummage through to the back of a rack to find my size. Not have to ask if they have what I want (an XL panty) and where I can find a bra to match. Although I have the more practical and comfortable less fancy bras, even they have a little flare. I am happiest in something smooth. I think that it does something for my psyche and puts a spring in my step. Before I jumped on the lingerie bandwagon I used to think that underwear doesn't make a difference, but I have come to learn the errors in my ways.

Dating and Disappearing?

AS: I realized early in my dating career – coming of age in the land of afternoon coffee and the four a.m. last call – that having my cigarettes lit without asking was a thing of beauty and much appreciated. Not only because I enjoy the flirtation that often comes with it, but because my clothes often have no pockets.

I am aware that having a “type” of date is sometimes frowned upon and seen as limiting, archaic, and elitist, but I do have one. Often they are mistaken for “sir” outside, and sometimes inside, what is commonly referred to as the community. Not only is this a reminder that people see what they want to see, but that in those moments I am no longer a fat femme dyke and my identity is lost in misguided assumptions and stereotypes.

AM: I prefer to light my own cigarette. Waiting around for someone to do it for me has never occurred to me . . . unless I am matchless. I don't have many opinions on dating as a sport as I am almost always a girlfriend. I did recently cut my hair shorter because I felt like I looked too straight. It seemed like I was an invisible lesbian and I never aspired to that. As long as I can still have pigtails I feel like the strange girl that I am.

When I first came out I dressed a lot more dude-like. I wanted everyone to know who I was. I think that I am able to dress more girly now because I am more comfortable and established in my identity. Currently, in this moment of queer identity-making, when a lot of butchy dykes are identifying as guys or fags, there doesn't seem to be a lot of space for “girls” to be sexy. I am not knocking any strides

made for gender freedom, but I also recognize that particular looks and styles go in and out of fashion in dyke communities as well as others. Thank goodness or we'd all wear plaid shirts with torn-off sleeves. Isn't it interesting that I can't name an '80s "femme" fashion stereotype like I can name a "butch" one? They must have existed, but are they just lost because of the invisibility of femme? Were they wearing the same clothes as "straight" women? Was it a sea of giant shoulder pads, over the shoulder T-shirts, and Day-Glo at the lezzie watering hole, or were there distinct femme fashions from every decade? Would I find this information at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, or would it be a catalogue of women wearing men's suits with cigarettes dangling from their mouths and a woman in a dress on their arm through all the ages?

In my life, so far, the type of partner I end up being with tends to be thinner, boyish/mannish dykes. My aesthetic opposition to this tends to put me in the category of femme more often than anything else. Being defined in relation to "men" is always a troublesome spot to be, but seems to be all we have in the language of patriarchy.

AS: Do you think that a femme is defined by her date?

AM: In theory I don't, but in practice this is what I've experienced. I have been put in the category of femme so often, when this was not my intention, that I have kind of started accepting it as my destiny, and so I might as well explore that by having conversations like this one. What do you think?

AS: I would have to agree, although it breaks my heart. I don't think that I personally identify as femme because I like to date butches, it just is right for me – independent of others. But that said, I think that you are right when you say that the general practice is such that this is how it falls.

Role Models

AM: Ricki Lake in *Hairspray* is such an aesthetic role model for me. The first time I saw her I was inspired by the thrift store possibilities to emulate Tracy. Beyond that there is little offered in popular culture besides the occasional fraught-with-controversy images of fat women. I tend to cull my role models from the network of big girls I know. I ask them lots of questions and watch them closely to see how it is they maintain their subjectivity, assert their identity, and clothe their big bodies.

AS: If Debbie Harry was a femme who had helped herself at the buffet table she would be the one, without question. Strong and sexy with the best damn haircut in rock and roll history. There are some great sexy fat babes, but I am still searching for the "one." Hilda the '50s pin-up girl is great cuz she wears a bikini and lets it all hang out in all the right places. She is sassy, but sadly animated. And Camryn Manheim because she is vocal about fat activism and fat phobia. Sooky on *Gilmore Girls* cuz she has the best outfits right now. And the fat girl on *Popular* cuz she tried out for the cheerleading team. . . . So you see, there are qualities that if put together would create the ultimate fat girl. I am not only inspired, but thankful for my friends and the fat femmes I know who are a part of my life.

Daniel Collins

Blessed Be

The four of us were finally overdressed and out the door, leaving our shared cabin a shambles of rejected glamor. We wobbled off, giggling down a wide path beneath dripping pines and cedar, past rows of other little wood cabins, some gaily festooned with rainbow-hued twinkle lights, on our way to Breitenbush's main lodge for "No Talent Night" at the annual Winter Faerie Gathering. Little shrieks rang out of excessively reddened lips as oversized spike heels punctured the soggy Oregon terra ferma.

"Takky, you wore the right shoes for once, girl," laughed Plum Blossom, referring to my gold rubber elf shoes which now tripped along the damp rainforest trail. I concurred. The pantyhose had also been a wise choice, warming against the nippy late winter mountain air and salacious as my swishing thighs built up a silky interfemoral friction beneath my orange and blue diaphanous faerie dress, a gift from Plum Blossom. The blond-streaked and battered, waist-length Fabio wig also kept most of me dry and warm, unlike the lime green tulle wrap which had no practical value whatsoever, but wistfully completed my ensemble.

My cabinmates were also festively dressed. Lenny, as Courtney Love ("before the suicide when her makeup was such a mess and so easy") wore a platinum blonde, corkscrew curl wig, a garter with shredded black nylons, and three baby doll pajama tops without the bottoms, tied together at the shoulder with fluorescent condoms. Chris was decked out in his black leather boots, cap, vest, harness, and chaps showing lavender silk panties all under a large black cape. He was encouraged by Plum Blossom, the senior faerie in our cabin, who contended that "butch is always a hot choice with this crowd." To provide collective body warmth, we crowded around our mentor with the flashlight who wore "what Pocahantas would have worn if John Waters had made it instead of Disney," (pink braids, a shocking pink bikini trimmed in fluorescent lime green fringe with matching wrist and ankle cuffs with pink marabou mules, all under a see-through green vinyl raincoat

illuminated from the inside by a lit flashlight hanging like a necklace). We hurried along the sodden path following the wobbly beam of our elder faerie's flash. As we neared the main lodge we met other faeries also en route, dazzling in the light, sporting all sorts of mad frockery and glittering accessories, like magpies just back from the dump. We tried to make haste, however, because in these fabulous outfits, we were all freezing.

We traipsed out of the woods into the large clearing as the light of the full moon broke through the clouds. We stayed as far ahead of the others as possible so as to have more time to make our own entrance. We flitted past the hooting smoker's pit, camping wildly, up onto the deck, striding dramatically through the main entrance into the crowded lobby to first shuck boots, scarves, cape, and umbrellas.

The gathered faeries screamed as we took our entrance into the lodge hall. About one hundred and fifty assembled faes, in an amazing array of costumery, leather, or absolutely nothing, hissed their collective approval as we made our way over to the fireplace in the main hall which was "the best focal point," according to Plum Blossom. We weren't sure if that meant for seeing the show or for being seen. There was much flitting about and shrieking before we all settled down. The room buzzed with raging male pheromones, pre-show giddiness, and a readiness for anything.

It was one of the best "No Talent" nights ever, according to Plum Blossom. Darlene, the Ambassador's Wife, the six-foot-six-inch love goddess emcee, hosted the parade of wackiness. Crowd favorites included a gifted chanteuse singing an aria while hula-hooping, and, especially, Luna Moonshine who brought down the house lip-synching Tina Turner's "Proud Mary" accompanied by two male, open-mouthed blow-up sex dolls in silver tinsel wigs and matching shimmy dresses, attached to a broom handle strapped across his shoulders. Sandwiched together, they looked like a trio of drag queens, their six hands joined to another broom handle doing what looked to be tightly choreographed hand jive routines. The assembled throng lifted the rafters with their shrieks of laughter.

Afterwards a roaring fire was built in the large fireplace and the electric lights extinguished. Men started dancing in the glow and warmth of the crackling blaze. We were soon distracted as the room got real warm and the air became a blur of shucked sarongs, kilts, tie-dyed long Johns, sparkly veils, and especially pants flying off the dance floor. Underwear became hats or muffs. Clusters of mostly naked men danced or lounged on pillows around the hearth in groups of three, five, and six.

Still wearing the blond-streaked Fabio wig, I shyly removed the blue and orange diaphanous faerie dress and was just about to slip out

of the pantyhose when a husky voice lisped, "Ooo! Nude-to-the-waitht pantyhoth with a nudie heel. Leave them on."

I turned, smiling, to the source of a voice like that and met a short, husky, red-bearded, balding faerie, naked except for his black fishnet crotchless pantyhose under a white polka dot on black leather loincloth, black with white polka dot gloves to the elbow, and a tiny, black straw hat with fuzzy white polka dots on a full black veil tucked just under his fiery beard. Catching my eye and perhaps hearing the zing in my heart, he said, smiling, "I love the feel of warm nylons," and he caressed my willing thigh.

"I'm Thweet Pee," he said. "Care to danth?"

"I'm Takky Wynotte," I replied, as my nylon-restrained cock, trapped down one leg of my pantyhose, got noticeably more cramped for space.

We danced until the fire in the hearth was down to a flesh-enhancing orange glow. My pantyhose was also crotchless by then and the Fabio wig long gone. Sweet Pee's hat, veil, and loin-cloth had gone with the wig. Danced out, we swooned onto the cushions by the fireplace and gazed around the room in wonder. Someone had thoughtfully scattered condoms all around and at least fifty naked and latex-enhanced faeries were involved in inventive and diverse forms of sexual congress. Single "lurkers" sat or stood about masturbating until they either joined others or had an orgasm. Sweet Pee noted, "The room ith redolent with thweet and thperm – a muthky bung tinged with a lower note of mountain air and thedar thmoke."

He then directed me to rub his "nubs," by which he meant slowly caressing, with my nylon encased leg, the little bumps of leg flesh that protruded between the crossthreads of his fishnets. He responded by rubbing his nubs over my belly-squashed erection, trapped and visibly straining under the shreds of my pantyhose.

Sweet Pee took me on a personal guided tour of the many changing hues of his redhead body hair, which sprang up in fiery clumps from an ample expanse of pink-nippled, creamy skin, ending with the tongues of flame which ringed his rosy anus. "An asshole has never looked this hot," I told him as we moved into 69 position, his wider end lit up by the still flickering embers from the fireplace. The toasted skin on his glowing rosy bum was hot against my slick tongue.

Incense wafted from the altars. The drumming was reduced to a single soft bongo. Tender murmurings and lustful laughter bubbled up over a solo flute playing in the lobby as naked, post-coital faeries slow danced.

Sweet Pee and I spent the night in his cabin after a long, midnight soak together in the rock-lined hotsprings meadow pool. He had been a faerie since the late seventies and told me, as we cuddled in the

early morning light waiting for the breakfast bell, that he'd never seen everyone getting it on in a group that large before. "It mutht have been the erotic mathage workthyop thith afternoon," he recalled, smiling at the memory. "I mean, in the old dayth, at the bath, thometimeth group thenes might happen, but not with tho many men. And that felt only temporarily fulfilling while thomehow thith felt thoul-enriching."

"Soul-enriching sex?" I pondered, snuggling into Sweet Pee's warm expanse. "Is that what makes a faerie radical?"

"Pothibly," answered Sweet Pee, perusing the cabin. "Can I wear your orange and blue faerie dreth to breakfatht?"

I knew we were going to be pals when I noticed Sweet Pee's penis swell and stiffen as he tried on my silky frock which I later gave him. He let me wear his fishnets that he'd worn to bed. They were still warm when I put them on. We never did make it to breakfast.



Bisexual, Daniel Collins, 1991



House Sox, Daniel Collins, 1991

Anna Camilleri

Blow

I

She calls me
 darling
i see fine china
petticoats
ankles screaming for breeze
somewhere i've never been

darling you to be exact
she remakes the word
profane and delicate
balanced
 against her landscape
her lips snapdragons
 in bloom

i am wheat
bending to her pause
wind blown
shoulders drop
 sigh
hers or mine?
even snapdragons need rest
all this talk
is tiresome

darling,
i understand.
you split me
open
 in a breath

BRAZEN FEMME

II

there is a place on her body
between steel eyes and swell of breasts
this place

 this perfect place
i am seeing just now
 for the first time
her collarbone a cup
full flowing
over

i imagine her breath
 curled there
under skin bone muscle
like a snake
ready to leap forward
rise up
fill me

III

i remember being a girl
young Catholic girl
quiet maltese-italian girl
big hair, eyes like stars
 falling
standing at the alter
 the precipice
walking the long stretch of a moment
perfectly still angel,

 open mouthed bride
two seconds passed maybe three
the priest whispered

body and blood of Christ
his eyes mournful, cavernous
arm outstretched like a spoke
the wafer wheel dangling

i did not scratch my bum
but I thought about it –
about our terrible dresses
his ominous gown,

my scratchy polyester
about the nauseating swell
that danced in my stomach
at the sight, smell of meat
how I pushed it to the edge of my plate,
banished it from my universe
but it did not go away,
I had to eat it
it cost money:
blood, sweat, tears, years, youth

this is bread I told myself
this is bread –
not blood, not body, not Jesus
inhale hold it
pretend I'm underwater
close my eyes
swallow
count

IV

i held my breath and counted for twenty years.
waited patiently for the other shoe to drop,
only half believing it ever would.

waited for a window to open
for my throat to loosen
for fresh air
a change of air
a disaster
a miracle

all of this happened –
a symphony of chaos,
the harmonics of a life
spilled over
uncorked

BRAZEN FEMME

V

ankles scream for breeze
still
wind blown
this perfect place
the long stretch of this moment
walking

between steel eyes and swell of breasts
her lips snapdragons in bloom
she remakes the word
profane and delicate

two seconds pass
 maybe three
her breath
 curls there
dances in my stomach
a symphony of chaos
she calls me
 darling
in a breath
i fall
open

Camilla Gibb

How Wide is Our Circle

I had a language I grew into; hated long enough to see the love in it and call it my own. It called me "different," then "lesbian," then "queer." It fixed me here on *planet other*, offering perks you don't want to scoff at, things you've wanted all your life: identity, community, belonging, speech.

But sometime later, somewhere in the suspended time of a thirty-second exchange of dirty, flirty glancing, the words began to ring hard and stale, the language became confining and stilted. There were simply no more words.

Femme on femme I was (or so I thought), until that girl-boy in paint-speckled boots, crushed leather jacket, baseball cap pulled down over her short blonde brush-cut, walked across my path, dropped cigarette ash, and looked up at me.

She didn't look back.

Black-cat girl-boy crossed my path like a harbinger of doom and promise, and the asphalt of the parking lot turned magenta. Grey world became technicolor, stomach became head, and I, I with my heart in my throat, became a femme.

Femme on femme I was (or so I thought, or didn't really, because I didn't think about it, I just did it). I just liked feminine women. Liked them like I liked to see myself – lipstick and long hair, pushing their way through revolving doors, finding the easiest way to be in the world. But it wasn't easy. It wasn't easy making tentative steps at twenty-one into dark bars full of women who saw me as "bi" or "not a real dyke."

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't true. I was a dyke, but I wasn't a femme. Not yet, anyway. I just looked like one. I knew I didn't want to adopt

BRAZEN FEMME

native dress and cut my hair, throw out my lipstick, stand feet apart, and swagger. But I didn't know why. I was a dyke without a gender - I was a dyke with a sense of my gender in heterosexual terms.

Sex first.

Thought later.

Gender latest.

*the language for this is other: otherwise, other-worldly,
unlike otherbody else*

I didn't want to be persecuted on the streets, be anything less than the girl my parents wanted me to be. I wanted to look the part, pass. I wanted to see it reflected back at me in the women I chose to love and who chose to love me. But I didn't know it. And I also didn't know that I could find a way to be, what feels to me, like a woman. Where my gender is woman in lesbian terms.

I am not a femme, a female or a woman in a heterosexual world. I never have been. And for so long, as a lesbian, I have not been a woman.

why didn't you look back?

*was it the woman in the passenger seat of the white jeep you climbed into?
was it the weight of yellow bags of groceries?
was it me?*

I stared after you, your boots shuffling, your eyes staring down. I started my car and pulled out into wideness, hoping you might see me. I imagined you stalling intentionally, wondered if you might pull up to my bumper, nudge my car, follow me home. I begged you to stalk me. Give me good danger.

Sobered at the thought that if you were a man behind me and I lived in America I would have opened my glove compartment, pulled out a gun, and shot your tires flat. Called 911. Told them I had been followed. Hoped you had a record so they would keep you for a moment longer. Teach you a lesson which you wouldn't learn. Read your name in the paper someday saying you'd begged to be chemically castrated. Secretly think "Yes!" but feeling no relief because it's your brain they should be cauterizing.

But you're not a man. And you're not just a lesbian. You're a woman or not a woman in that butch girl-boy way that's suddenly made me aware of myself as woman.

You pull away in the jeep and take the other exit. I imagine you are taking a longer route so you can find yourself behind me. Follow me home.

But you don't.

There was the woman in the passenger seat.

There were the yellow bags of groceries.

Mercury was in retrograde, and of course, there was me.

the pavement turns magenta

Me. With a bag full of new summer dresses, bent over putting a licence plate renewal sticker on my car. Me. Going home to what I had thought was femme on femme; beginning to realize that as femme on femme we create a circle which isn't wide enough for more than one of us to stretch into our gender. Two femmes in a circle needing 490 degrees. No circle wide enough. Someone always screaming "Enough, already. When do I get to be the girl?"

Each of us responding, shrinking to compromise, becoming less in order to be more for the other. Because we love each other. But in order to love each other we cannot stretch into the extent of ourselves as gendered beings. We cannot know the full extent of ourselves as women.

We cannot know the full extent of ourselves as individuals, either. We love each other. We collapse into this union of likeness – we morph and flow in a way which appears enviable. It is timeless in its essence, the union everyone envies, but we are neither women or ourselves. We are one, but without legs. We do not move.

watch me now

when I spin circles around you with your heavy hands and hard cock
I could bite my lips to bleeding

I could open and bend, deep-throat and daddy you
till relations had no meaning

BRAZEN FEMME

I could marry you, if you knelt for me
Wave a spatula, grant you princely.

You could drive me, be my hero
I could love you, deep and edgy.

The distance lends enchantment
The distance between you and me.

You shuffling toughly, me treading poetically,
your rhythm and my rhyme making sense to me.

back at the ranch

Back at the ranch, I sing sweet songs of femme on femme harmony.
We know all the same lines. We laugh because we have not sung
them aloud before, but we have stored them in the same memory and
retrieve them easily, simultaneously, without question.

But in a parking lot turned magenta I learn what I don't know. I become
one in a place which forces me to be one – forces me to know who I am
without a mirror. Forces me to think what I cannot take for granted.
Forces me to stand where *my* feet alone determine the distance between
left and right, the space between my thighs.

You give me my feet.
Magenta-black-cat, baseball-would-you-do-me-with-your Bat Girl.

I've got a few thousand things in mind, thanks for asking, really you
needn't, I'd be just as happy if you told me, and then I could say no.
And tell you "this way." And then you could say no. Stick to your guns,
boot girl, I will make it worth your while. I'll make you boy-girl, make
you proud of who you are. If you let me ride and rebel you, suck, cry
and mother you, be girl to your big daddy, I will devour and worship
you.

But you didn't look back. You and your passenger and your yellow bags
full of groceries drove away.

here on earth

Femme on femme. Comfort of acceptance, familiarity. When I wish to

poeticize it: free radicals in heterosexual air. When I will to pathologize it: homophobia, narcissism, fear.

Make love whoever needs, not where *she* wants versus *he/she* wants. I *want* the difference of want. I want to want.

My time here on earth gets lived in briefer intervals, intervals which, strung together, I am used to calling life. I spend too many hours on the asphalt of dreams to believe in life as I know it anymore.

But I see language. Small words: rude and dangerous. And big fears: brave and ravenous.

There is you who I'll probably never see again, might not even recognize if I did. But even if you couldn't look back, didn't want to, I can still thank you for making me a woman even if I have to eat your cock without you. I can make you proud of who you are even when you don't know it: when you're schlepping your groceries inside, slapping the windshield of your jeep because of a parking ticket, making love and thinking of something, somewhere, someone else.

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Karin Wolf

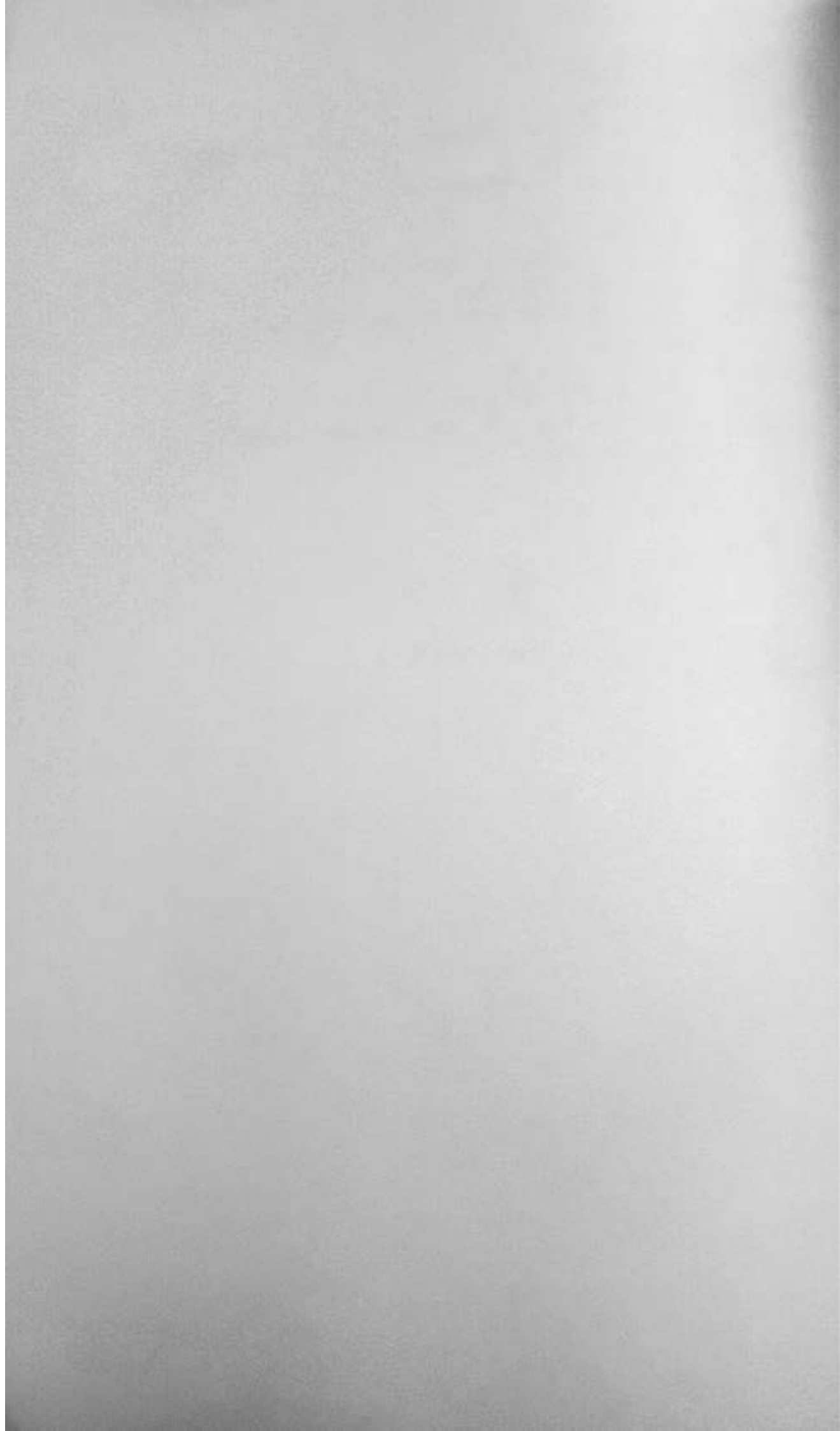
Two Poetic Incantations

Dearest,
This is a love letter.
There is no competitiveness in this letter.
There is no jealousy in this letter.
This is about us, talking for hours and only really saying two words, "I know."
This is about starlight ocean wave daughters of Oshun.
This is about two women, gay ladies extraordinaire, Miss Emily and her sister.
We are making moonshine and calling the spirits and we will live into old age together.
In this letter we are stripped naked, beneath even flesh and bones. We are dust and water.
In this letter there are no needs unmet.
Here, there are only happy childhoods, and full bellies, and satiated sexual drives.
The energy flows like water, spreads like fire, comforts like a warm breeze, and is grounded again by sacred earth.
Ancient priestesses chant it, saplings shyly expose it.
Everything you have done, I have done through you.
Every joy I have had, you have laughed with me.
Every time I have fallen, you have lifted me.
Every tear you have shed, I have dried.
Beyond sisters, friends, lovers, time.
We are forevermore.

Dearest,
This is a letter about love lost.
There is anger in this letter.
There is jealousy in this letter.
This is about us, talking about the weather and dancing around the
truth.
This is about being estranged, starlight, ocean wave, daughters of
Oshun.
This is about being human.
Juliet has sipped the poison spreading sorrow and confusion. Romeo's
heart is broken. They die tragically young.
In this letter we are stripped naked, beneath even flesh and bones.
We are dust and water here.
In this letter there is no trust.
All the wounded places of childhood are ripped open.
The energy drowns like water, burns like fire, tears like a hurricane, and
is swallowed by the quaking earth.
Sirens sing the mournful song,
Fall colors announce its coming.
We walk separate roads.
You laugh without me.
I collapse.
You cry.
Fire to Water. Femme to Femme. Back to Back.
We are no more.

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Michelle Tea

Wheels Plus

Wheels Plus was a super-plus-deluxe roller rink. It was in Revere, so you needed to get a parent to drive you. What you could do was get a bunch of kids to go, and have one parent drive and another parent pick up. When I was younger I'd gone to Wheels Plus for the skating, renting the tan-colored skates, worn and spotty, at the counter. Now that I was older, pre-teen, I went for other reasons. To find a boyfriend, for starters. Every night the roller DJ would announce a couples' skate, when the rink got cleared and only girls with boyfriends were allowed to skate, hand in hand, keeping up with each other on their wheels. There would be a speed skate, when only people who skated wicked fast could go, and if you even tried to get out there you would get knocked down so fast. During the backwards skate everyone had to skate backwards, moving their ankles in little hourglass curves.

The rink at Wheels Plus was huge and blue under the smears of colored lights and the disco ball that shot silver circles onto you. It felt like you were inside a pinball machine, zooming through all the flashes in a wide, endless circle. There were glowing purple blacklights that picked out the white lint on your clothes, made your teeth and eyes a grotesque, nuclear green. Roller skating was a very solitary thing. Everyone was at different levels of ability, like Marisol would go slowly, hugging the wall, her skates heavy and cumbersome like wheeled bricks on her feet. Jenn Capoletti, who was athletic, an acrobat and a cheerleader and also double-jointed, could go very fast, skimming the rink like flying. I was somewhere in the middle. I knew how to work the curves of the rink by crossing your feet in front of you; I trusted my ability to grind my momentum to a halt with the nubby stopper on the bottom of my toes, safety-orange. Sometimes I could relax and forget about falling, and let myself dance to the disco and funk music they played, kind of shaking my hips and clapping as I rolled around and around. It was really kind of weird, this endless procession of people with wheels on their feet going in circles.

Besides the rink, Wheels Plus had other things. There was an ice

cream shop decorated old fashioned in pink and white, with checkered tablecloths and wire seats with backs that looped into big, corny hearts. Right next to it was a little store where you could buy skate stuff, laces marked with red kiss-lips, or purple balloons. Fat wheels, glittered in bright colors, if you had your own skates. At the skate shop I bought pom-poms, what the girls wore on their skates. They were as big as your fist, fluffy white like a long-haired stuffed animal, the tips dyed ugly green and in the center there was a silver jingle bell. I would pick up my skates at the window and tie these pom-poms onto them.

You kept your stuff in an orange locker that cost a quarter. You kept the bulky key in your pocket. One time me and my friends found a bag of pills in an empty locker, yellow and black capsules inside a dusty sandwich bag. For a minute it was like we were in a TV show – all the media hype about kids and drugs really was true! – and we took the bag and threw it in the trash. We had been presented with one of those Moments and we did the Right Thing and we felt great. But that was before I was pre-teen, when my trips to Wheels Plus happened on Sunday afternoons, when kids had their birthday parties in the back room, with dry squares of Sicilian pizza and a big melting cake from Carvel. That was only a couple years ago, but what big differences they had made. The difference, quite literally, between night and day.

Once I hit thirteen and had moved clearly out of the pre- and into the glorious realm of the teen, I insisted on my right to skate at night. When Wheels Plus – which was simply referred to as Wheels – was really rolling, a Friday or a Saturday night. I would want to go both, two nights in a row, but that was impossible. Me and my friends, who consisted of Marisol and some girls from her class at St Rose and, less often, Jenn Capoletti, who had acquired a weird, popular-girl paranoia and constantly accused everyone of “using” her. Presently she was convinced we were “using” her because her Dad owned a limo business and would offer to ride Jenn’s friends around in the absurdly large cars. In retaliation, she refused to go to Wheels. Jenn’s weirdness was boring, and I was glad that Marisol and her rather scruffy group of St Rose girlfriends had little that anyone would want to “use,” preventing such snooty neuroses from developing.

Wheels Plus was the first event I ever dressed up for. Not counting dance recitals or anything done with the aid of a parent. This was Real Life, not a stage, though the line between the two, I learned as I moved from pre- to teen, was deliciously thin. Dressing up required makeup, an experimental art. Eyeliner was crucial, and preferably blue, traced across the wet rim of your eye, and then smudged with the foamy smudger at the end of the pencil. Lipstick was frosted, icy pinks, as was eyeshadow – frosty blues, too. Tiny ice princesses, shimmering pink-red swaths of blusher, Wet ‘N’ Wild, dragged over babyfat cheeks, digging

for the bones that lay beneath like treasure. Clothes were tight, and we all wished our tits were bigger. I would have settled for rounder, anything but the odd, pokey tents that had popped up on my chest. Tight bras reduced their concerning shape, but by smooshing them, made them smaller, too. I considered the grand, covert shame of adding Kleenex, but could not risk the potential embarrassment.

The same spectre of humiliation also kept us off the rink now that we were older. The whole activity seemed kind of babyish, and what if we wiped out? The boys we gave our scared, sideways glances to were tough Revere boys, mean in a way that filled me with dread yet retained a certain thrill. Like Dally from *The Outsiders*, played by Matt Dillon in the movie. When Diane Lane as Cherry Valance confesses with angry shame to C. Thomas Howell as Ponyboy that she could fall in love with Dallas Winston, I felt her pain. Dally's face was the face of all boys, skin gorgeously sweet; deep, sort of sad eyes, all of it masking an interior gone rancid. I feared I could fall in love with them, with the idea that there was a sweetness in them only I could tug free, as only they could tug some toughness from my own meek frame.

I was scared by the thought that I was one of those girls who go for mean boys, assholes. None of these girls like the nice guys, they all like the bastards, I'd heard my stepfather Will pontificate. I didn't know what girls he was talking about, and suspected a long-ago diss may have blossomed into a pseudo-philosophy for Will. Still, did I like the nice guys, or the jerks? I thought about it. Did I know any nice guys? I didn't think that I did. Maybe just the boys at my Catholic school, but they were cruel too, they just had no style. At least the wild, public school boys made their danger look like something hot and familiar I'd seen on movie screens. The Catholic boys were dopey to me, they didn't know anything. Or they knew what they knew, but I knew it too. The public school boys knew something else, something that drew me towards them, because I had begun to suspect that it was something I knew as well, and maybe they could help me remember it.

As far as dealing with these volatile creatures in the real world, the world of roller rinks and city streets, I didn't know what to do except keep my longing as muffled as possible, and not skate or do anything that I risked failing visibly. My problem, Ma had pointed out since I was a kid, was that I always wanted to believe the best of people. I talked to strangers, I trusted everyone. It made her worry about me. I believed everything that anyone said. Frequently jokes flew over my head - I hadn't realized they were jokes. I never got it. I thought everyone was being level with me, and the truth was, they rarely were. This was the source of my vulnerability with boys. I made pledges to myself, again and again: do nothing to risk humiliating yourself. Act older than you are to insure against acting like the baby you may still be. And Marisol

and her pack must have been experiencing similar revelations, because suddenly they didn't want to skate either. Those skates are friggin' gross, Marisol dramatically scrunched her face as if I was holding a pair beneath her nose. How many people had their sweaty nasty feet in them?

We went to Wheels Plus now to simply hang out. There was a brightly lit snack bar area with plastic orange booths, and they sold squares of stale pizza, rock-salted pretzels hung in a little heated box, rows of hot dogs rolling over and over in their tiny baths of grease, and huge things of coke. We hung out there, in the snack bar, or we hung out in the separate disco room that was called Studio II. Located to the side of the rink – increasingly empty on weekend nights, when the teens invaded – Studio II's entrance looked raw and cave-like, a gape in the wall. When you walked inside – sockless or in shoes, no skates allowed – it felt like falling into some sci-fi, *Land of the Lost*, abandoned mine, both primitive and space-age in its weird design. There was a lit-up square in the center that was the dance floor, with lit-up steps that led down to it. When you first walked into the Studio it took a minute for your eyes to adjust, and for a moment all you could see was the dance floor, glowing like a giant alien jewel. Or costume-jewel. Then it would come into dim focus, and you would see teenagers dancing to the music, or huddled up on the bleachers that rose up against the far walls, drinking smuggled liquor and making out.

Girls would choreograph these complicated line-dances with lots of clapping and little kicky twists, and you would work the lit-up steps into your routine. There'd be a line of girls in bad, tight '80s clothes, shiny puffy high-top sneakers, cheap Jordache purses bouncing off your hip as you hopped on and off the glowing steps. They played Prince, Bananarama, Run-DMC, Grandmaster Flash. With Marisol and the St Rose crew I would dance, I would sit in the snack bar and coolly smoke, and we all would pay attention. All around us were the teenagers, tons of them, older than us and tougher than us.

Revere was Italian and Latino and all the boys were dark and beautiful, greasy hair, T-shirts. They were in high school and we were in junior high – a Catholic one. We were from Chelsea, rivals with Revere if you cared about that, which we didn't. We bought our cigarettes from the vending machine with the sticker that said something about selling cigarettes to people under eighteen being against the law, which we thought was funny. We were pretty well-behaved considering the underage hijinks that went on at Wheels, just our tall sweaty Cokes and Marlboro Lights that sat smoking in the shiny cardboard ashtrays. Rarely did we participate in the drug subculture of Wheels Plus.

Once we bought Valium for two dollars from a boy who swore it was really Valium, and pointed to the v embossed on the chalky yellow

tablet. It was Vivarin, and we ate it and got really wired. We weren't mad, though, because we still felt like we'd done drugs and that was the point. Another time Marisol had stolen pot from her mom, and we went to smoke it in the long, smoky bathroom, but nobody had papers. Kids were always coming up to you at Wheels Plus and asking for "papers." Someone thought to use toilet paper, which seemed similar to the gossamer sheets pot normally got bundled in. We wrapped the dark shake in the delicate bathroom tissue, lit a match, and poof, it was instantly gone.

Then it was back to the torn-up plastic booths, to smoke and watch the kids, learning from our watching which kids were like the leaders, the real tough ones, the boys. Taking note which ones had girlfriends, and who all hung out with each other. There were girl gangs at Wheels Plus, but they seemed more like clubs, sororities for trashy girls. There was a girl gang called the Lucky Stars, after the Madonna song. They wore T-shirts with their gang name on the back; one girl's gang name was Ice Tea. She had long frosted hair that feathered back perfect, and thick rings of eyeliner. She had the tightest clothes, and she had tits. All the girls in the Lucky Stars looked like this Ice Tea girl, but you could tell that it was her look, that she had done it first or best. All of them had really big hair and the backs of their shirts said things like Rocco's Girl or Kelley-N-Vinnie.

Slowly the older kids started to talk to us. Not the girls. The girls hated us. You weren't allowed to look at them. If they saw you peeking they'd say, "What tha fuck you lookin at – you gotta starin problem? Take a picture, it lasts longer." They would stand nearby and stare at you and wait for you to catch their eye so they could start a fight with you. These girls were big and they knew how to fight. The boys were facetiously kinder, because they wanted to get into our pants. I scored two boyfriends from Wheels Plus, and they were both Ritchies.

Ritchie Montgomery may be the first boy I ever really made out with, outside spin the bottle – certainly he was the first that ever gave me a hickey. He was a popular boy at Wheels Plus I guess; he knew everyone and people would cheer when he got there, they'd yell out "Hey, Ritchie!" and he'd leap over the back of the orange booth and plop onto their laps. He was loud and clownish, but smooth somehow, not a dork. I can remember very clearly what Ritchie Montgomery looked like, and he was very ugly, but it is true that at Wheels Plus he was regarded as a hunk. His hair was long and greasy, black, and I guess I was excited to find a long-haired boy. There weren't a lot around then and I thought it was cool. Ritchie had really bad skin, red and erupting, but instead of detracting from his looks it managed to make him look tough in the strange way acne sometimes works on boys. Like Will's problematic complexion, rugged, my mother had called it. I

guess I liked his hair, and was attracted to the power of the popularity he obviously wielded, and when he started flirting with me I kind of couldn't believe it.

Me and Ritchie were absolutely not going out ever, but because we did make out once I thought that that made him my boyfriend. On the Studio II disco room bleachers kids would sit in the flashing dark and make out. Some kids did even more than that, I'd heard. The tough gang girls looked pretty slutty; we imagined they let their boyfriends do all kinds of things to them. One girl, we'd heard, had climbed to the top tier and hopped down into the dark below and let a boy fuck her there. On the dark bleachers in the disco room I made out with Ritchie, my fingers investigating his stringy hair. It felt cool and slippery in my hands, and "Careless Whispers" was playing through the speakers. On the lit-up square some couples were slow-dancing, I would half-open my eyes and see them swaying, dreamlike silhouettes. It was pretty exciting, making out with Ritchie in the pitch black corner with the music blaring loud above our heads. It made me dizzy and my body buzzed in this really gentle way, almost like I wasn't there at all. Ritchie kissed good I think; I had nothing to compare it to but I liked his tongue in my mouth's cave. Then he started sucking on my neck and that was really great. I let my head hang back so he could have all of it, and he sucked and he used his teeth and it hurt but also it felt magnificent, I couldn't think of one thing that felt better. I had no idea he was giving me a hickey.

I left the closed darkness of the dance room and entered the unforgiving fluorescence of the snack bar and my friends just gasped. A purple welt smack in the middle of my throat. I was flooded with electrical bolts of panic and the whole blissful, watery experience was gone. Ritchie Montgomery was really an asshole. He was sixteen, seventeen, he had to know I was like thirteen, and he planted the most enormous hickey ever right in the center of my neck. He may as well have sucked it onto my forehead. I was dead.

In the bathroom someone gave me a comb and instructed me to somehow rake the ugly blemish from the skin, but I only looked more maimed. Some of the older tough girls in the bathroom snickered and glared. I was entering dangerous territory, fooling around with Ritchie Montgomery. He was fooling around with lots of girls at Wheels Plus and I started hearing about how my ass was going to get kicked by all these girls who were so tough, and all their tough cousins – everyone at Wheels Plus had an older, tough cousin – all of them were going to kill me. But nothing happened. And Ritchie didn't even like me, he just wanted someone to make out on the bleachers with that one time, when he felt like kissing.

One Friday night he walked up to me in the unnatural bright

whiteness of the snack bar, grabbed me in a hug that was more like a police hold, and licked the side of my face with his big, bumpy tongue. "Eeeew, Ritchie; don't do that!" He did it again. He held me tight so I couldn't get free. It was so awful how things like this would always happen with boys. You would like them and then maybe they would like you a little and then they would do something really mean or shitty and you had to go along with it like it was a big joke and no big deal. I hated Ritchie Montgomery's spit drying cold up my cheek. "Why do you hang out with her?" he asked, nodding towards Marisol's friend Tiffany. "Tiffany's okay," I shrugged. "She's ugly," he said. "You shouldn't hang out with ugly people." Then Ritchie made out with Tiffany, and we had a big fight. Me and Tiffany, not me and Ritchie. Ritchie didn't owe me anything, or at least I knew I couldn't expect anything from him, but Tiffany had become my friend.

It was fall, the night before Thanksgiving, and I was up on my bunk bed hugging the telephone and crying into a dishtowel. Ritchie liked her now, Tiffany reasoned, not me, so it didn't make sense for me to not let her go out with him. I couldn't argue with such logic, but still. "You're too young to be losing friends over boys," my mother warned, poking her head into my room. Ritchie didn't even like Tiffany anyway, he liked her like he liked me – someone to make out with and occasionally humiliate. And the worst part was the shirt I'd had made. I had thought the gang girls were so cool with their boyfriend's names melted onto their backs. It was like they were really important, like being a girlfriend was this very esteemed position that only the best girls were appointed to, and you carried out certain important duties, and you got to wear shirts with your boyfriend's name on the back like a fuzzy felt branding.

I kidnapped this sweatshirt of my mother's, baggy white with a glitter decal that said 49% Angel, 51% Bitch. She didn't like me wearing it, but she had given up. I had this strip of uncut two dollar bills, it was a souvenir from when my birth father had visited the mint in Washington D.C., but it was real money. I took scissors and cut it into a pile of cash. Odd money, but legal tender. I took it to the T-shirt shop at the mall, Mr Tops, and they put "Ritchie's Girl" on the back in velvety black letters. I couldn't wear it to Wheels Plus, I couldn't wear it to school, I couldn't wear it anywhere where anyone who really knew me or Ritchie would be, but I would wear it out every now and then and pretend to be a girl with a boyfriend named Ritchie. And then, in a strange twist of good fortune, I got an actual Wheels Plus boyfriend named Ritchie. So I could wear the shirt. I pretended he was the original Ritchie.

This Ritchie was a breakdancer; he did headspins and backspins on the luminous floor of Studio II. He was in a breakdancing gang. There was another breakdancing gang, and whenever there was a problem

whiteness of the snack bar, grabbed me in a hug that was more like a police hold, and licked the side of my face with his big, bumpy tongue. "Eeeew, Ritchie; don't do that!" He did it again. He held me tight so I couldn't get free. It was so awful how things like this would always happen with boys. You would like them and then maybe they would like you a little and then they would do something really mean or shitty and you had to go along with it like it was a big joke and no big deal. I hated Ritchie Montgomery's spit drying cold up my cheek. "Why do you hang out with her?" he asked, nodding towards Marisol's friend Tiffany. "Tiffany's okay," I shrugged. "She's ugly," he said. "You shouldn't hang out with ugly people." Then Ritchie made out with Tiffany, and we had a big fight. Me and Tiffany, not me and Ritchie. Ritchie didn't owe me anything, or at least I knew I couldn't expect anything from him, but Tiffany had become my friend.

It was fall, the night before Thanksgiving, and I was up on my bunk bed hugging the telephone and crying into a dishtowel. Ritchie liked her now, Tiffany reasoned, not me, so it didn't make sense for me to not let her go out with him. I couldn't argue with such logic, but still. "You're too young to be losing friends over boys," my mother warned, poking her head into my room. Ritchie didn't even like Tiffany anyway, he liked her like he liked me – someone to make out with and occasionally humiliate. And the worst part was the shirt I'd had made. I had thought the gang girls were so cool with their boyfriend's names melted onto their backs. It was like they were really important, like being a girlfriend was this very esteemed position that only the best girls were appointed to, and you carried out certain important duties, and you got to wear shirts with your boyfriend's name on the back like a fuzzy felt branding.

I kidnapped this sweatshirt of my mother's, baggy white with a glitter decal that said 49% Angel, 51% Bitch. She didn't like me wearing it, but she had given up. I had this strip of uncut two dollar bills, it was a souvenir from when my birth father had visited the mint in Washington D.C., but it was real money. I took scissors and cut it into a pile of cash. Odd money, but legal tender. I took it to the T-shirt shop at the mall, Mr Tops, and they put "Ritchie's Girl" on the back in velvety black letters. I couldn't wear it to Wheels Plus, I couldn't wear it to school, I couldn't wear it anywhere where anyone who really knew me or Ritchie would be, but I would wear it out every now and then and pretend to be a girl with a boyfriend named Ritchie. And then, in a strange twist of good fortune, I got an actual Wheels Plus boyfriend named Ritchie. So I could wear the shirt. I pretended he was the original Ritchie.

This Ritchie was a breakdancer; he did headspins and backspins on the luminous floor of Studio II. He was in a breakdancing gang. There was another breakdancing gang, and whenever there was a problem

Suzy Malik and Zoe Whittall

Fat is a Femme-inine Issue

FAT IS A FEMME-INE ISSUE.

I HAVE A
CONFESSION...



SOMETIMES BEING A FEMME
MAKES ME FEEL LIKE A
FUCKEN'
STRAIGHT GIRL



ROLLING MY EYES AS
SOME FRESH-FACED
BOY DYKE SAYS...

"I JUST DON'T
UNDERSTAND GIRLS"

WELL,
UNDERSTAND THIS,
BABY.

YOU ARE NOTHING
NEW,



YOU
CAN CHANGE
YOUR NAME BUT
I'VE MET YOU
A HUNDRED TIMES
TRY ANOTHER
LINE
AND MAKE IT
INTERESTING.

THIS AIR IS
STALE AND
I'M ABOUT
TO GO
HOME.



BEING

A FAT FEMME AT A DYKE BAR SOMETIMES MAKES ME FEEL ...

LIKE A STRAIGHT
GIRL AT A
PERPETUALLY
BAD
PROM



ALTHOUGH NO ONE WHO
LIVES PAST SIZE 12 IS
UNAFFECTED BY FAT HATE -

I SEE A DEEPLY CUT SPLIT ALONG GENDER LINES



GO THROUGH
YOUR HIGH-FEMME
SOCIAL ROLDEX.
WHO ARE THEY?
PROBABLY
TALL,
SKINNY,
WITH SOME TATTOOS
AND SNAP TO HER STRUT

SHE WANTED TO
FUCK ME WHEN I
WEIGHED 100 LBS.
SHE WAS QUICK TO
THE DRAW TO BUY
DRINKS AND GRIND.

ITS FUNNY HOW SHE
WANTED ME WHEN
I COULD BARELY
WALK. NOW SHE

DOSEN'T EVEN
RECOGNIZE
ME.

HERE WE
GO AGAIN...



HEY THERE
LITTLE LADY



DEEP INTO THE BOTTOM
OF MY DRINK, MY
HEART
SINKS I'M SO TIRED,
RE-WIRED HOW

BORING
IT IS TO SEE SEXISM
DRIP FROM YOUR FAKE
MUSTACHE. GIVE ALL
THE FEMMES AROUND YOU
EXTRA MUSCLES, EXTRA
CLEAVE, DO YOU STILL
BELIEVE, THEY ARE THE
ULTIMATE WOMAN -
DO YOU WANT THEM TO
HOLD YOU DOWN SLICELY?

AND MY FEMININE MEN, MY DRAG QUEEN
SISTERS, GETTING BLISTERS ON THEIR HEARTS
FROM THE MASCULINE STRAIGHT-ACTING
BUFF FAGS WHO SCORN THEM.



FEMININE IS THE LAST QUEER FRONTIER.

SO THIS
IS MY BRAVADO,
MY PIERCING
FUCK YOU
BUT WILL
I
SUCK IN
MY STOMACH
WALKING
OFF STAGE?

WATCH ME.

Elaine Miller

A Femme's List of Incidental Skills or, Things This Femme Can Do

Bake cookies. Cook a good meal. Rescue a sick or young animal. Sort laundry without overlooking the stray red sock in the white pile. Shop thriftily.

Squeeze my lover's cock with my cunt, knowing she can feel it. Come so hard I go blind for an instant. Flirt with a woman – any kind of woman. Do high-femme. Be high femme.

Fix a wall. Work on my car. Use algebra in real life.

Explain physics to a child. Read at 685 words per minute. Write much, much more slowly.

Understand that breasts, hips, and soft, soft skin contain a special power.

Top sadistically. Top sweetly, lovingly. Make my own whips. Write saleable dyke pornography. Love unreservedly and innocently. Deal with blood. Keep my head in a terrible disaster.

Completely edit and publish a pansexual kink magazine from my desktop.

Circulate that magazine. Explain it patiently to U.S. Customs.

Pass as a man while in guy-drag. Do performance on stage. Make a grope-able soft packing-dick. Wear five-inch heels for hours at a time, without grimacing where anyone can see. Ditto a tight corset and false eyelashes. Wear my jeans slung low around my hips. Strap on a dick and fuck my lover. Come from fucking her hard and slow. Take a virgin asshole smoothly, coaxingly. Drive aggressively, skillfully. Read minds. Understand. Lie. Tell the blunt truth. Cause trouble. Troubleshoot a computer. Make a terrible mistake. Admit it after a suitable time has passed.

BRAZEN FEMME

Have a good working knowledge of the various sticky things to put in one's hair. Perform the magic of theatrical makeup and gender effects. Make long hair fluffy, or curly, or wild. Using clippers, cut a nice military flat-top fade on a woman's head.

Teach a sweet dyke how to shine my engineer boots.
Make her practice first on my thigh-highs. Make her come, later.
Play poker. Cuss. Cock either eyebrow. Be a daddy. Be a daddy while still wearing lipstick. Kiss a girl. Paint my toenails. Cry freely. Pluck eyebrows evenly. Use power tools. Grow my hair down to my butt. Play a musical instrument: trombone, guitar, keyboards, percussion. Feel the beat. Move to the beat. Dance for hours. Plan and pack for a trip. Plan and pack for a scene. Set up camp in sub-zero weather. Cook over a fire. Sharpen a knife. Wield a scalpel. Fist her. Take a fist. Clean a wound. Kiss it better. Make 'em laugh. Make 'em cry. Lift weights. Pick up girls. Wrestle.
Win.

T.J. Bryan AKA Tenacious

It Takes Ballz: Reflections of a Black Attitudinal Femme Vixen in tha Makin'

Life as a supermama isn't gonna be easy. But consider the advantages...

— Lisa Jones¹

I

In early 1997 I did a poetry slam in a Toronto boxing ring. I was up against a bunch of male poets and one other woman. I came dressed for success: red lips, kohl-lined eyes, beyond-skin-tight black dress, high-heeled black boots with big silver buckles, white, lace-topped, little girl ankle socks, black gloves, leather wrist cuffs and collar.

Sometime during the next few weeks the city's queer community rag printed a write-up of the event. The reviewer referred to me as (and I'm paraphrasing here) "powerful and brilliant." Which was cool. However, there was something that did not sit right with me at all. Accompanying the article was a picture – my head stuck on the body of a Black, male boxer. I was angered and insulted, but not surprised. This showed me that the person responsible for creating this collage was unable to imagine a brainy and articulate Black person (equated with masculinity?), who was also a Femme (reserved for others?).

This incident forced me to think about the roots of my Femme(ininity). About culture and aesthetics. About the ways that racism affects Black wimmin and more specifically, about the odd ways it can impact on those of us in Tha Life.

We, Black femmes, can often be masculin(ized) – automatically viewed, treated, and cruised as butches. And even if we are seen as Femmes, we can still be devalued or just plain not perceived as Femme(ininity) in any sense but the sexual – not just in the larger world, but also inside of queer/Black/"colored" communities of supposed resistance.

My words are not the only ones. This is not the only truth. This is

my truth, at this moment, as I understand things. For some I hope this will sound familiar. For them I hope my meaning will be clear. That it will resonate like a rare and sweet groove. Touching them down deep inside. Signifying the possibility of alternate readings.

As for those who envision things differently . . . no worries. For them I'd like to be an instigator. A shit disturber. At the very least I'll have contributed to a broader theoretical climate. Fuelling a discussion that, to my mind, has been sadly lacking for far too long.

The title of this piece came from an exhibition of drawings I had recently which visually explored my Femme(ininity). Each piece was accompanied by a well thought out title. I also wrote and displayed an artist's statement. However, much of what I needed to say couldn't be adequately conveyed in that context.

There's length and breadth inside'a me. There's substance that goes deep. There's tradition here. Enough to dwarf everything some may think they already know 'bout me and mine. My understanding of African-descended wimmin's existence in the west mediates my experience as a dyke and as a Femme . . . not because it has to, but because I have decided it will. This, in turn, gives me the ability to explore my identity in all its various forms and the courage to identify my issues, joys, hurts, insecurities, and pleasures. My Black consciousness combined with a belief in the validity of my perceptions and love of my Femme self gives me the space to say: IT TAKES BALLZ TO WALK IN THESE SHOES.

II

A darker shade'a Femme . . . I see the makings of my Femme(ininity) in history, suppressed and rediscovered. The roots of my Femme(ininity) are real. Passed down for me. Motha to daughta. Sista to sista. And yesss, flamin' brotha to brotha. My routes lead way back. Cross continents and seas. Stretching, till eventually I find myself touchin' African Lucy. Essentially the first. The penultimate Femme. The Queen Motha of all who have come since and paled in comparison.

Salutations to all bombastic divas out of time. Tough as nails and intelligent too. Legendary sistas I'll remember, even if others won't. The importance of their presence has often been denied and I'm fit to be tied. Knowing without a doubt that if those around me can't see, won't dream, there's no way in hell they're evah gonna respect my version'a Femme.

A darkening . . .

An orifice through which I will emerge.

One of many such daughtas.
A Black and truly precious thang . . .

III

I was born . . . head full'a curly, blue-black hair. Bright eyes. Mama's baby girl. Parent's first progeny. First daughter. First grandchild.

The essence of my being was molded by the wimmin I loved first.

My grandmother: a woman with no time for manicures or dress fittings. She had three daughters to support and protect all on her own. The hue of her skin? Dark earth. Limbs long, varicose veined from pregnancy, too much standing, and long hours working. Her wardrobe? Practical. To this day I describe a certain kind of business-as-usual working Femme I can do – straight, knee-length skirt, sensible blouse, and conservative footwear – by saying that I'm dressing like my grandmother.

Her daughters, my mother's sisters. One caustic and razor-tongued. Hard around the edges, because life as the youngest child of a single, working mother couldn't have been easy. Don't mess with that one, she bites.

The other, the family's fashion plate. Gold filled a split between her two front teeth long before Madonna made it chic to have a gap-toothed smile. She dreamt of leaving Barbados for a career as a flight attendant. I remember her going away on a plane and returning not much later. Not a flight attendant, but fashionable still . . . in fur.

My not-so-much-younger first sister. Her skin so creamy light, our father rejected her. Not his. My mother's. With her huge eyes. Crowned with shoulder-length tresses quite a few Black girls would kill for. Hair to die for. Enough hair to curl and style.

My mother. Diminutive. Nervously energetic. Oldest daughter. The child left in charge. Lost to me at the age of eight. First daughter cast off by a first daughter. A survivor of wife abuse. She escaped, made a new life, and moved on the best way she knew how.

Without template or compass, I work at becoming her. Fill the absence with photos and tenuous memory. Liquid brown eyes. Cheek bones pronounced where mine aren't. These breasts are hers, though. The lips too. But the skin . . . that skin. Her skin is dark. Darker than mine. Brown mixed with a deep, ruby red.

In a time before partings, tears, culture shock, and assimilation I grew among them. Was fed, loved, and educated. Hair oiled, braided, ribboned. Ashy skin washed and lotioned. Uniformed in blue. Imbued with seedlings of wisdom. A beginning . . .

They offered up powerful messages subliminally. I drank them in

BRAZEN FEMME

with my morning tea. And as I've aged they've served me time and time again. . . . If you're gonna grow into a woman, you'll need to know how ta take care of that hair.

If you're gonna dress with style, you're gonna have'ta be able to turn scraps into magic.

If you're gonna eat you're gonna have'ta know how to turn nuthin' into something good.

If you're gonna survive all the shit life's gonna send your way you're gonna have'ta know when and how to fight.

IV

Now . . .

Testing the waters cautiously, I critically delve into my Femme(ininity). I wanna stand and be counted cuz me and mine done been here long enuff. Moving careful though. Mindful of the ways I can be seduced into denying the woman I am. Which is easy when everywhere I look I'm reminded that any sort of contentment couldn't possibly be attained from where I stand.

Femme . . .

Deep throating every last bit,

I'd swallow it whole.

Using the word AS IS . . .

If I could. As if . . .

It would evah fit completely.

If I could,

I'd sing it, proclaim it,

If it's rhyme and reason,

It's pink pastel seasons

Didn't clash with

damn near everything

I own.

Sometimes . . .

Femme can feel like someone else's cast-offs. Another woman's old, worn-out frock.

V

IF-ONE-MORE-CURRENT-OR-POTENTIAL-LOVER-DESCRIBES-ME-AS-HOT-I-WILL-SCREAM!

Queered long before deviance was considered politically cool, my phreaky sex appeal is mythical. My truth shines through sensually. But is bent out of shape and refracted back to me as predatory, nymphomaniacal, good-to-go. Hot.

The supposed amorous skills of my sistas have been in high demand for centuries. Yet there are still some who can't or won't describe melanin-rich skin, wide noses, generous lips, and complexly textured hair as beautiful, breathtaking, or divine.

Seems like just yesterday . . .

We were societally force-fornicated to produce a biologically colonized labor source of millions. Mulattos. MULES by any other fuckin' name. Colonizers constructed characteristics. Defined away our humanity. Pathologized our pain. Explained away their insanity. Normalized their depravity. Our psyches defiled. Denigrated. Bestial natures penetrated female bodies. Fist-fucked female minds.

TRUTH NOW . . . TELL ME, WHO WAS IT THAT CARRIED THE PROMISE OF HELLFIRE IN A TOUCH?

Hot (pussy) . . .

An unwilling foil for their first feminine ideals. Poor things. Sacrosanct yet cursed. Worshipped above all others, but burdened with an awesome and awful responsibility – the preservation of a heterosexist, phallocentric, white supremacist society's purity . . .

SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVAH HAPPEN AGAIN:

Attending a small event and helping a Sista/Femme/Friend in the process, I agreed to bring a tray of food in from her car. We entered the bar, hands full. One of the white, Femme organizers of the event skipped over to us. Instead of taking a tray or lending a hand in some way, Miss Mistress of the Manor very coyly beckoned us in with cocked finger and then, smiling, pointed to the table where she wanted the food set down.

WRONG!? SO VERY WRONG!

Fixed dynamics, subtextual dynamics surround and abound. Inherited attitudes may feel comfortable for some. Trigger my annoyance. Court my rage. Unexamined behaviors send me back . . .

Scarlet and Mammy . . .

Vivien Leigh and Hattie McDaniels. Big screen Femme/unknown supporting actress. Slaver's woman and her Black slave woman, a subhuman. Play-acting their roles. Living out their roles. No question of their pre-ordained roles. Colonizing Femme – her translucent, southern perfection, the center of attention. Subjugated woman – unknown

BRAZEN FEMME

heart of darkness, serving. Blackness a backdrop, a shadow, not seen.
Sole purpose? To sustain the most delicate of all flowers.

HOLD UP!

This Attitudinal Vixen is NO house maid. Maid-in-waiting. NOT second best. NOT to be positioned behind the rest.

WE

You and I

Exist eye-to-eye at the center.

Equal connection.

Questioning privilege and situation.

Sharing power.

WE

You and I

Exist on a par

Or not at all . . .

Cuz I'm a bad girl. A BIG, bad girl. A big, bad, Black, educated, working-class, immigrant bitch-ass Femme with a chip on her shoulder and a monkey on her back. I am the woman your mama warned you and your brothers about. A very kinky girl. A crazy girl. The kind you don't take home to Mo-tha.

My beauty is defiant. Oppositional. A law unto itself. A world on its own. Its sharp outline will cut you. You don't know me and you sure as hell don't own me. Don't touch me unless consent is asked for and granted. Each and every time. Don't push me cuz I went o-vah the edge a long, long time ago.

No mistaking or avoiding it, these are the sour grapes of a colored girl who's had enuff. Enuff of working ten times as hard for one-fifth the adoration. Always striving to be ten times as skilled. Ten times as gorgeous. Now ten times as pissed with the inferior landscaping of the queerified Femme playing field.

FUCK IT.

But . . .

There are some Butches. No mistaking or avoiding them. There will always be those boyz willing for all the wrong reasons. Fecally full of all the wrong information. Crazy-ass Blackophiles. You always wanted to do WHAT with a Black woman? Sure, it's true what they say 'bout colored 'nani and the blackest berries. And all my brethren have big, fat ten-inchers and live to juk white pussy.

Stories passed down from shit-scared and intimidated explorer to slaver to slave owner to their children and beyond. Self-serving stories.

A collective white foot perpetually stuck in every ignorant ass's mouth. But since these stories don't say much 'bout me, I'll have to be the HOO/chee that got away. The hot pussy, an exotic curiosity, a tarnished and exciting new trophy who decided not to play.

VI

Y'KNOW . . . I'M NOT REALLY SURE IF THE (white) QUEERS I'M MEETING UNDERSTAND WHO IT IS THEY'RE DEALIN' WIT'.

A white Femme who heard me read one night a few weeks back approached me. And after complementing me on a reading well done she asked me why she hadn't seen my work in print or hadn't seen me read before. I (silently) acknowledged her lack of awareness. She had the answer to her own questions, not me. I replied that I had been writing, reading, and publishing for almost ten years. She just kept asking where? Where? WHERE?

Which left me with the distinct impression that I was supposed to be proving something for her, to her. How could I possibly have existed as an artist, a writer, or as a Femme until she looked upon me, thereby bringing me into being? I gave her a copy of my arts resumé and turned away. LET'S BE CLEAR . . .

Columbus is dead.
 By accident,
 not through presence of mind,
 he stumbled 'cross an ancient world,
 First peopled and civilized.
 Columbus is dead.
 This is a living, breathing Sista Femme,
 not your latest find.
 Columbus is dead.
 You ain't found me.
 I've just been contemplating,
 Reviewing and revamping
 Who exactly I wanted to be.
 Columbus is dead.
 You ain't discovered me.
 Dykeasporically speakin',
 I've just been waiting and debating,
 Whether I would acknowledge
 Your presence
 Or not.
 Columbus is dead.

BRAZEN FEMME

But I'm reading you as his heir.
Betta CHECK yo'self.
Realize I drew breath
Before you stumbled to my shore
Or heard me speak.
Child of Columbus,
Perhaps you did not see
Because you chose not to.
Not to experience
Not to look beyond your context.
Outside your realm of dominance
Other Femme dimensions,
Queerly parallel yet autonomous
Continue
Unimpressed.
Daughter of Columbus,
I painted my lips,
Questioned and flirted
Resisted and dreamed spirits,
Navigated in heels,
and gave head,
Spoke in tongues
And danced naked
Long before I
Allowed you
Into my darkly Femme world.
YOU'VE BEEN TOLD.

VII

Femme . . .

As far as I can see the Fatale is silent, not absent. Femme Fatale. Could any other two words have the impact of this phrase? Could any other linguistic grouping bring to mind the oh-so delicately flushed skin? The calculated blush? The spastically flicked hair? The peroxide blonde ambition? The obsessive wet dreamings of so many men and Butch wimmin? Could any other utterance conjure up the implied superiority of such specifically-shaded beauty?

Femme . . .

Someone chose this word. Designed it. Refined it. Millions heard it and applied it to Monroe, Hayworth, Deitrich, Leigh, Davis, Garbo, Harlow's Gold. A cataract-colored iris, blue-veined, cream or pink-tipped

tittie, fatally Femme(y) glass menagerie. Not necessarily a legacy for me. I KNOW YOUR SHEROES. DO YOU KNOW MINE?

Our beauty is linked. Symbiotic. Tainted by the scourge of compulsory comparison. Inter-reliant. Seems one can't exist without the other. Double standards reign supreme. In essence they are the point of this competitive, status conscious scene. An unearned sense of entitlement for some. The semblance of easy passage through the world. And for the others? Well, for the other . . .

The Other ...

There are some Black wimmin who've got the brains and the guts but don't have the green. There are words for Black gyals who've pushed out enuff babies and now wanna get a piece'a tha scene. Names for sistren who'll flaunt it and offer it to get where they wanna be. A bunch'a not-so-nice terms for those of us who'll use the smell of our sex to get what we need to live happy.

Maybe this word Femme ain't all that. Could be Femme's just some bull soundin' sweet in another colonizing master tongue. Two solitudes or two hundred, it's all the same to me.

Peut-être je dois trouver une autre langue. Quelque chose plus vivante. Fièrè. Rempli de ma réalité. Rempli de moi. Comprenez-vous mes autre noms? Répétez ceci après moi: Sapphire. HOO/chee Mama. Pidgeon. Skeezer. Heifer. Ho.

FEMME? SURE . . . I'M A FEMME.

VIII

Invent your life over if it doesn't feel juicy.²

There was a time when Femme(ininity) was not an issue for me. I came out into gay and lesbian circles a rabidly heterosexual, happily apolitical, and club-hoppin' Fag Hag. Not much later I found religion and was born again as an ecolesbitarian, feminist zealot complete with politically suitable, asexual attire.

Got tired of doin' andro-bwoy drag soon enuff and revisited my Femme(ininity) via some fierce, wannabe, Continental African/Caribbean Queen wear. But even resplendent in cowrie shell and bead chokers and bracelets, multiple sets of huge gold-plated earrings, elaborate cornrows or extensions, colorful head wraps and voluminous robes, I still resisted defining as a Femme.

Then I recalled . . .

Smooth cinnamon silk and velvet. An ebon' outfit hanging in my

tittie, fatally Femme(y) glass menagerie. Not necessarily a legacy for me. I KNOW YOUR SHEROES. DO YOU KNOW MINE?

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Then I recalled . . .

Smooth cinnamon silk and velvet. An ebon' outfit hanging in my

boudoir just waiting to make a showing. It was passed down from way back till it found me. No, I don't mind wearing the gowns that Eartha and Billie and Nina and Diana and Chaka and all tha rest don't need no more. I just adore the way they invoke my past and present . . . round out my Femme(ininity) with a history that smells and sounds and walks like ME.

Met me some African-descended Femme daughtas, too. There are wimmin who don't see their Blackness as less important than their Femme(ness) or their queerness. Who don't think of Black Consciousness as a political anachronism or as an annoyance to be ignored, either. With them I walk a different edge. An edge ripe with sweetest promise yet rife with risk, hurt, and bitterest betrayal.

During teas, dinners, and parties, in-between working, gossiping, shopping, and child-rearing we exchange insight gained the hard way. Airing our views about the crazy-making, internalized shit we all carry we trek bravely into taboo regions because if we don't the ignorance'll be the death of us for sure. The intermingling of our multi-layered identities makes for heady brew. This intricate layering can affect the ways we trust, fuck, emote, do relationships, deal with the violence in our lives and, most crucially, maintain our self esteem. We try and remind each other to always love ourselves first and best. We hold tight to our radiant beauty as a thang to be treasured, especially when our lovers and others forget . . . or don't care.

We've talked that hair shit to DEATH! Wanting to love it, color it, cut it, fry it, locks it, grow it, hide it, politicize it, ignore it, or just plain pull it out from the roots in big, kinky handfullz! Notions of Blackness and womanly beauty converge on top of my head. Often unspoken but present still. For sistas in search of ideal Femme(ininity), it's all about THA HAIR. What you do with it. If you've got it. Or can scrape together enuff green to buy someone else's.

And what about me?

I'm bent on dealing my ages-old, nappy head, core issues grievous, cutting blows. Cheating the hairdressers outta their prize. But, I ain't resolved shit, see? I've only managed to avoid pain ingrained, threatening to drive this colored girl insane in the membrane.

IX

If it remains a mark of our oppression that as black people we cannot be dedicated to truth in our lives, without putting ourselves at risk, then it is a mark of our resistance, our commitment to liberation, when we claim the right to speak the truth of our reality anyway.

— Bell Hooks³

I have been in this world more than thirty years. Twenty-four of them were spent away from the land of my birth, living in North America. All my life, I've struggled to understand, appreciate, and care for the inheritance the Creator has willed to me.

I have just lived through one of the most horrible chapters of my life and come out the other side, scathed.

A little bitter, still hopeful and much, much wiser, I've taken some time to reflect. Assessing the damage, yes. But more importantly, I'm also marking and reveling in how far I've come.

I have loved, desired, and fucked wimmin for most of my adult life. But I came out lost. Not about my sexuality so much as about my Blackness. I needed to make some choices about the kind of Black woman I would be. I went through what I call my BLSP (Blakcentric Lesbian Separatist Phase). No white friends, no white teachers, no white lovers, no white queer community, no white-identified agendas.

For the first time since I immigrated to the Great White North, I focused on Black folks/dykes exclusively. I ran with a group of political, take no shit, Black conscious lesbians. We stubbornly protected our right to filter the world according to our own systems of value. And even more stubbornly pursued developing our own ways of being and seeing. Here, in this warm, dark place, I labored as part of my-SELF was brought into being.

LOVE, PRAISE, AND THANKS GIVEN WHERE THEY ARE DUE. . . .

BUT . . .

Eventually the lezzy I was outgrew her need for/belief in that protected place and I crossed the boundaries I had originally set. Motivated by a wildly growing appetite for change I began to excavate previously hidden layers of myself, complicating my identity.

Now, with more things yet to learn, I'm coming in for a visit. Into white, queer space, that is. Not enticed into colored'n'colonized stupidity. Merely drawn closer by curiosity. And the reason? An explosion of queer thought that is redefining widely held notions of sexuality and questioning configurations of gender – male/female, Butch/Femme, Trans, and all the spaces beyond and/or in between. This promises to be a succulently transgressive body, mind, and soul experience that I refuse to pass up.

ALL THIS GOOD STUFF COMES AT A PRICE, THOUGH. BUT THEN AGAIN . . .
WHAT DOESN'T?

As the First Nations of Turtle Island, Black people, and so-called "People of Color" have struggled and become more skilled at defining our

realities and our political goals, a particularly virulent academic/queer agenda has surfaced. Proponents of this school of thought assert that examining identity, insofar as it relates to race, is passé. That these sorts of discussions are about "victim politics." That it is no longer useful or necessary to critique the ways that white supremacy and racism function. This conveniently offers white queers an opportunity to dismiss Whiteness and Euro-culture as major defining factors in queer community, queer culture, queer theory and, ultimately, in queer identity. As a result, racialized constructions of white queerness continue to be presented as authentic, central or, even worse, as the (unspoken) imperial standard by which all queer Others are measured.

As a Black-conscious, queer Femme engaged in an exploration of s/m, queerness, and Femme(ininity), this is hugely problematic. It strikes right at the heart of my reservations and threatens to impose even more limits on the contact I have with white queer community. It colors my interactions with Euro-descended Femmes and Butches. I find myself playing the role of observer. Watching to see who's been listening, paying attention, learning, questioning, doing their reading, doing their own work. I don't explain much or question (verbally) what they do or say. Call me jaded, but it's just too big an investment of patience and energy. I also have precious little faith in their capacity to learn, to stretch, and to grow.

'Sides . . . if the white queers I'm meeting are as ballsy and radical as they all claim to be, then acknowledging the ways that they can function as agents of white domination in a queer context and fine-tuning their understanding of Power in the process, should be a piece'a cake.

A DARE. A CHALLENGE HAS BEEN ISSUED. MY GAUNTLET HAS BEEN THROWN DOWN.

Whether anyone chooses to respond, exhuming the half-buried but not yet dead, articulating the unspeakable and embracing the abominable, is beyond my control. In queer circles where white wimmin's Femme(ininity) often passes for the epitome of female beauty, my dark-skinned and conscious presence poses an explicit challenge.

But in the midst of all this, I've got my own personal work cut out for me. I need to ask myself some tough questions. How will I maintain a sense of self in relationships where my Black Femme(ininity) is so often, too often, blatantly disrespected? What sort of Black Femme(ininity) will I choose to project in/to the world? What roles will I allow myself to explore? Where? And with whom? Will I even botha to seek out the edge in the (white dominated) s/m community? And if so, how will I ensure that my Black Femme(ininity) is respected? How

can I be silent and therefore complicit when I come together with the Femme wimmin whose presence I require? I must find ways to actively combat the schizoid soul splintering that increasingly threatens my psyche as I walk among the phyne butches I desire.

Regardless of the realizations that take shape before me, I must commit myself to moving through the world with as much insight, dignity, self-understanding, and personal power as I can muster. It is imperative that I remember to name and honor my chosen, historical location as a queer daughta of the Africans who survived The Middle Passage. This I do willingly and self-lovingly even as I step forward and take my place among a gathering force of phenomenal Femmes.

Restlessly inquisitive I come and go. A nomadic and lipsticked, diasporic lyric-smith. Still searching between worlds. Finding way through distance as well as connection. Deciding on the time and place I will choose to enter, I am strengthened. Gifted with memory and voice. Moved by times past. Compelled onward by future sight. Darkly brilliant. Muse and Creatrix. Possessed by Self. Subject of my own defiant passions and deviant dreams. My proudly Tenacious creation unfolding: a Black, attitudinal, Femme vixen in tha makin'.

1. Lisa Jones, "Supermamas revisited." In *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

2. From a poster entitled "Being a Succulent Wild Woman" (Sark, 1997).

3. bell hooks, "Seeking After Truth." In *Sisters of The Yam: Black Women and Self-recovery*. (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1993).

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Trish Salah

red like a femme

I

getting the red stuffed
in like the inbox
when you say femme i hear sex change

getting me read
we're so eager to
defer her

when you write femme it comes out
incest

figure it out, coming out
and cheerleader movies
have this in common

polish clumps to my nails
psychic, round like boys, the objects gather

II

i'm sitting pretty

drawing the red out
her terror,
wandering
straight as these stockings

BRAZEN FEMME

you know,
transsexual femmes always wear our stockings
out

how important it is to keep them
straight

III

i'm in, folding
 for her name
why femme feels like
childhood, what becomes your voice
 what she hears, spirits
taking that name, i learn
your knowing

anasemia
kisses close
after the red
 the reading

IV

popular variants on the scenario:

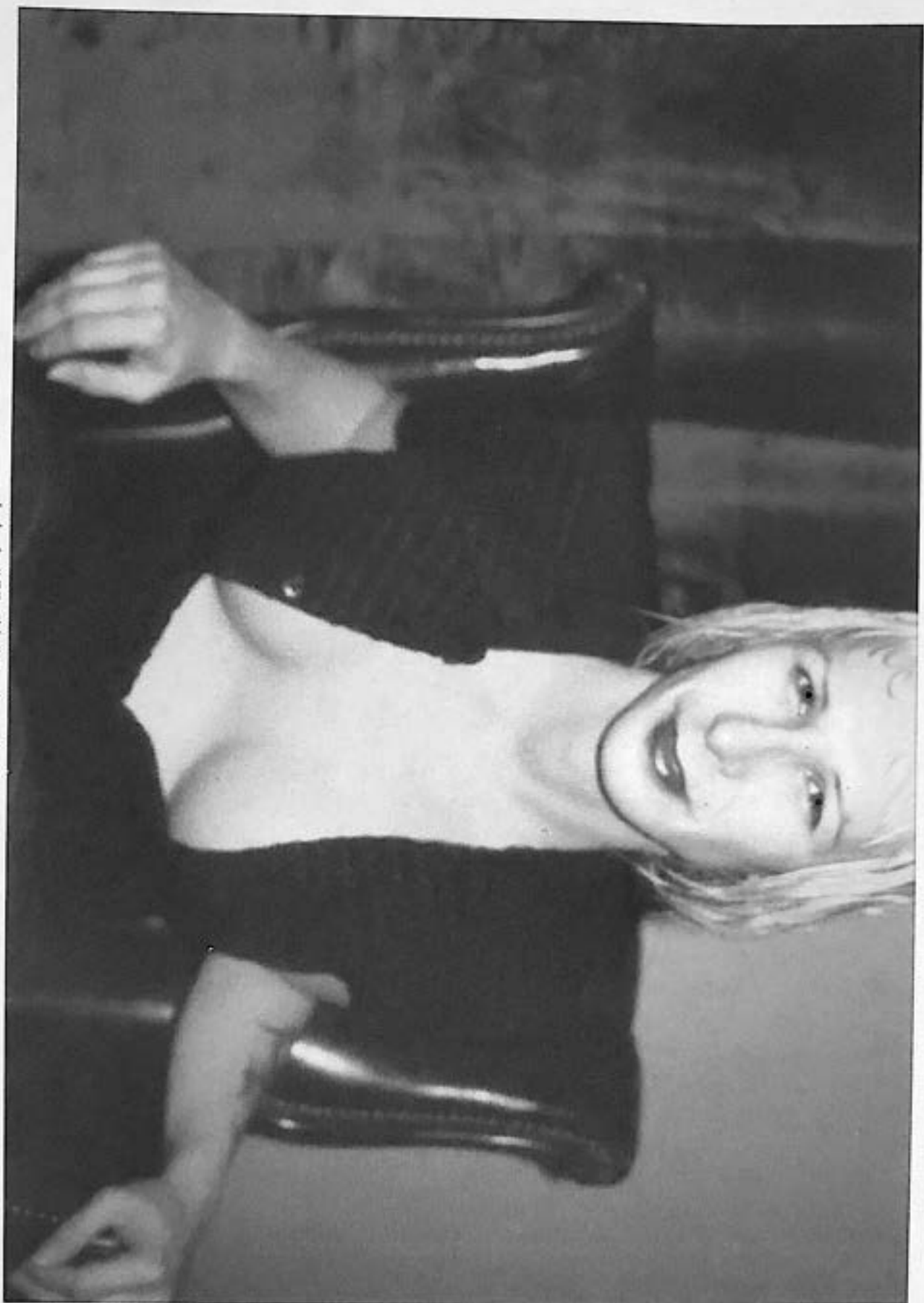
dreamt myself butch like a mac truck
in heels and glitter stumbling into you
how should I say your name?
 as training falls off in your voice from California
 bared, or when you enter the room in a new dress by Prada, all
eyes turn, you're just sayin'
 "my name is a holy name"

in that song you sing we let loose femme's lesbian context
instead select
saline filled silicone
 with a black fringe, purse
 tucked
from the diaphragm rising to end each sentence
 leaves a bright red smear
 about a something cock

red as for grievance, black for eulogies' due, if she is seen to be
transsexual, a girl to die for,
really, be relieved it's not her, for a change,

missing
 in your body
don't you hold with
 what got said, i'd

halter a long vowel
rather than travel still in those closed circles
 and yes, sigh, lesbian
 and be grateful for the graze of an unknown hand



red chair #55, Chloë Brushwood Rose, 2000

Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh

A Fem(me)inist Manifesto

This is about fem(me)s, about *the* fem(me), about *all* fem(me)s. This is one (hi)story, all (her)stories, no story at all. We cannot begin with a definition; we cannot offer assurances of any kind. For "fem(me)" is not an identity, not a history, not a location on the map of desire. The fem(me) body is an anti(identity)body, a queer body in fem(me)inine drag. The voices we record do not cohere.

So of course we contradict ourselves and offer –

I. The Fem(me) (Id)entity

First things first: What is fem(me) identity in itself?

A proposal or working proposition: fem(me) is *la je ne sais quoi* of desiring difference prior to any determination of sexual preference or gender identity. Fem(me) is put on, a put-on, fetish production at the hands of subject becoming object, becoming fetish, while always retaining a sense of the performance, always amused yet (here is the challenge, the gauntlet she throws down) possibly bored by its effects. Fem(me) is the performativity, the insincerity, the mockery, the derision of foreplay – the bet, the dare, the bringing to attention of the suitor, the one who would provide (her) pleasure. The performer who demands performance in return, the player who brings pleasure into play.

So a fem(me) is a she?

Let's just say that is the pronoun a fem(me) often inhabits.

It diminishes a fem(me), all fem(me)s, to talk about a "fem(me)" identity in itself. How could that be? Fem(me) is neither an ideal nor a category. She makes a scene, an entrance, an appearance – she steals the show (she *is* the show) of difference, but she cannot be fixed as a certain effect "in itself." Fem(me) is always inter-actionable, never onanistic or narcissistic. Mirrors are not the pool in which she drowns; they are the instrument or metaphor of her essential irony. Her perspective is always partially extrasensory – Berger's "women watch themselves being

watched," Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness," without the tragedy. What is this "I," this (id)entity that watches from two places? While she's looking at you, kid, she's also assessing the scene. In her doubled gaze, virility risks itself utterly (Nietzsche understood this risk well) – the lover, the suitor, the watcher watched, assessed, mocked, calculated. Only the most riveting performance can bring a fem(me) wholly back to herself, thus losing herself, her other gaze in all-consuming ecstasy. She knows her games, her effects fold triumph into annihilation, loss into gain, and all to the account of her *jouissance*, her pleasure. But then, who could tell? Because like paternity, a fem(me)'s pleasure, the truth of her pleasure, depends on her word. And you can never trust a fem(me). Double-sighted, however well intentioned, she will only ever speak one truth at the expense of an other.

In her inscription – fem(me) – we find the enclosure of an ego ("me"), a fundamental challenge to the category, the slot, the ideal of the feminine. Historically, the feminine arises apparently ego-less, bereft of active drives, agency, mobility, thought. The fem(me) haunts this historical aberration from within and without. What the feminine represses returns from inside and outside as the future of desire. Refusing the fate of Girl-By-Nature, the fem(me) is Girl-by-Choice. Finding in androgyny (the rejection of all femininity) too much loss, too little pleasure, and ugly shoes, the fem(me) takes from the feminine a wardrobe, a walk, a wink, then moves on to sound the death knell of an abject sexuality contorted and subjected to moral concerns.

II. Historicizing the Fem(me)

Possible fem(me) histories abound; nearly all we must reject. One would have it that the butch-fem(me) couple share a trajectory from the nineteenth century to the present. The butch, according to this account, has been unfairly centered; the fem(me)'s parallel tale remains untold. But what if fem(me) has been to butch as "trade" to fag – not a partner, but an-other, open to seduction? She figures, over the course of this century, in the triangle butch – "normal" woman/fem(me) – "normal" man. As Stephen Gordon's Mary, she alternately signifies both victory and defeat. In *The Butch's Tale (The Well . . .)* her agency, her choice appears effaced . . . the choice, the sacrifice is Stephen's. Mary's choice, the tale of her desire, endangers butch and "normal" man alike. She "turns" gay, she "goes" straight. Her story isn't a lesbian (her)story in the singular sense.

Lesbian (her)stories are plural, but none stabilizes a place for the fem(me). Romantic friends, androgynous lovers, bohemian expatriates cross through and travel around the (his)story of lesbianism. But

fem(me)s stand at the boundary, never wholly "in" nor fully "out." At the turn of the century the boundary "normal" woman/fem(me) *fatale* appears, as "femininity" proliferates into its modern "normal" and perverse formations. Morality, law, psychiatry, and culture industries police the boundary, working to make femininity safe for the "normal" man. During the 1950s, perhaps for the first time, "lesbian fem(me)" becomes a location for some, in bars, on streets of U.S. cities. But this center cannot hold. When Liz Kennedy and Madeleine Davis interviewed butches for their study of working-class Buffalo (*Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*), many did not consider fem(me)s to be "lesbian." When they looked for fem(me) narrators, they found so very few. The Lady Vanishes . . . to "go straight," to "turn" butch, to refuse identity?

And now, in the postmodern reign of The Queer, the fem(me) reappears, signifier of another kind of gender trouble. Not a performer of legible gender transgression, like the butch and his sister the drag queen, but a betrayer of legibility itself. Seemingly "normal," she responds to "normal" expectations with a sucker punch – she occupies normality abnormally.

Though fem(me)s occupy the shifting borders of lesbian identities, they are never heterosexual. Though they may traffic in men, they do not, cannot, will not take up a position within a heteronormative framework. Those fem(me)s who desire masculinity in a partner prefer queer masculinities, occupied with irony and ambiguity. The masculine heteronormative man is inadequate in this department; the phallus he "has" seems not to be detachable. The butch, in many respects a more solid object than the fem(me), is the privileged bearer of masculinity – for the fem(me) who wants that sort of thing. Queer men may also make perfectly good partners, of course. Fem(me)s do not object to penises per se; it is what they usually are attached to that gives them pause. But never expect the fem(me) to be an equal opportunity playmate!

III. Fem(me)inism: The New Science

In the new millennium, fem(me)inism grapples with the thorniest issues – desire and humor. How can these be serious, one might ask, in the face of rampant social injustice, inequality, racism, poverty? But this question of seriousness marks the very place where the enemies of women, of feminists, of racial "others," of social justice, of equality have launched effective counter-attacks. Feminists "have no sense of humor," they are "anti-pleasure." Anti-racists espouse "victimology"; leftists are "boring," their politics are a "downer." Such smears are launched against all who articulate themselves as "other" to a belligerent status

quo whose members are hopelessly lost and blinded by their own entrenched sense of entitlement.

What institutes such stupidity and how can fem(me)inism hope to undermine its power? We might see the outrageous rationalizations of the status quo, of conservatives as equivalent to Freud's "secondary revision," the means whereby the dreamer renders his aggression, his desires, his egotistical and utterly self-serving wishes intelligible, unified, and objectively rational. Powerful and stupid dreamers rely on ego-less others to accept and live with such deluded rationalizations. To counter such defective thought (presented frequently as "objective"), to answer questions of political style fem(me)inism proposes fem(me) science.

What is fem(me) science? Localized, tactical, specific, fem(me) science is addressed to the future, a future where femininity as we know it ("normal," ego-less, tolerant of, and therefore complicit with deception) will have been completely superseded. Fem(me) science founds itself in the interests of science for desire. With the provocation and force of the oxymoronic, the paradoxical, fem(me) science aspires to virtual domination of the field of sexual difference. This domination requires a total recall of the feminine, an historically dated and utterly repulsive gender style.

Fem(me) science considers femininity a debased and fallen form of itself – a (pre)historic faux-pas, an inexplicable lapse into a morass, a swamp of sincerity and sentimentality. Leave such delusions to those men who would mythologize themselves and their achievements – fem(me) science sees everywhere the nefarious and horrific consequences of that. How much worse to see women so mystified and deluded, so taken up with the moral duties that a eurochristocentric tradition has levied on them. In the dominant myth of gender, white men work to support their delicate, morally superior feminine white women. The feminine white woman is offered "respect" only in relation to those excluded from the sacred domestic and its "protections" – the slave, the mammy, the whore, the jezebel, the wage slave, the servant, the hussy, the dyke, the welfare queen. "Femininity" here is the price paid for a paltry and debasing power. This femininity embodies, pays the symbolic taxes of a mythology based on denial of class and race – a mythology that takes no responsibility for its privilege, its hierarchies, its parasitic relation to other's labor and sweat. This myth's enshrining of a saccharine sincerity in the midst of so much deception curdles the spirit and strangles affirmation and power in the throats of all who embrace and believe in the "morality" and "sweetness" of the feminine.

IV. Why Fem(me) Science is so Brilliant

Make no mistake about it, fem(me) science is a joke, a howl of laughter that would ridicule and demolish any notion of the feminine that takes itself seriously. Fem(me) science calls for a revaluation of all feminine values; it aims not to explain, or instruct, but to evoke and provoke those passions frequently seething under controlled, objective, and didactic prose. We can only touch on the direction of its provocations here. . . .

On questions of style (style still being what is becoming the only question), fem(me) science reviles any approach to appearances that is sincere (save the literal one, which realizes that sincerity is only apparent). Fem(me) science questions the dignity and wisdom of anyone who would wear pink without irony, or a floral print without murderous or seditious designs.

Fem(me) science teaches us that sweetness freely given in any sexual cont(r)act is a paltry prize. How much more luscious, more prized such sweetness if one might be viciously stung, bitten, or clawed attaining it. But let us not only talk about love here. Let us move on to speak of power and knowledge.

Fem(me) science endorses the critique of traditional research on the grounds of its pretenses to objectivity. Yet it also inveighs against the paradigm that succeeds objectivity – one which approaches all epistemological questions as problems of interpretation – which of course they are not. Fem(me) scientists are in the third phase of research. We are not interested in phase one (explanation/objectivity/"fact"), nor in a politically correct second phase (interpretation/relativity/position), but rather in phase three, both apprehended by and known as – fem(me) science. We intend FS to replace PC as the reigning (and here our choice of words is quite intentional) metaphor for epistemological organization in the next century. We are not interested in explanation or interpretation, but in pursuing the interested desiring power of truth, the interested desiring truth of power. Yet the beauty of fem(me) science is that it does not rely on brute force, the crushing of data by research apparati, the objectifying of the object by a domineering subject (phase one), nor does it introduce the confusion of phase two where everything is up for grabs, where the subject is utterly relative to discursive construction and the right willy-nilly co-opts the left. Rather, fem(me) science recognizes the imperative to *win*, and, rather like a delicately gloved hand that is capable of stinging slaps should the need arise, the fem(me) scientist solicits loving, grateful collaboration.

Fem(me) science teaches simply and clearly that when fem(me)s are in charge, things not only run more smoothly but are a lot more interesting.

V. How You Can Help

Butches – female, male, and other – contribute your time and effort as research subjects to a crucial branch of fem(me) science – the infant clinical, laboratory, and experimental sub-specialities of “boyology.” Once we have fully investigated masculinity, and know what makes boys do what they do, the more sound everyone will sleep. It’s not that we don’t love the boys . . . believe us, we do! But we need to establish some distinctions . . . between being a “man” and being a megalomaniac, between being a butch and being an asshole. In a patriarchal culture, these distinctions are often unclear. Please help us in our work . . . we know you love science projects, now is your chance to be one!

Fem(me)s everywhere, of whatever sex, throw off the vestiges of those boring platitudes that pass for feminine virtue, morality, and normality. Unite to defeat the “natural,” the “normal,” the mean, the dull and self-serious voices of unself-reflective power and joylessness all around us. Insist that everyone dress better, in any of a proliferation of gendered styles. Take control of your pleasure, and of the institutions of the state.

We would like to thank all our sisters, whose seditious desires and perverse performances we so admire. We especially wish to acknowledge the specific contributions of Jackie Urla and Nicholas Olcott.

Notes on Contributors

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Anurima Bannerji is the author of the poetry collection, *Night Artillery*. Currently based in Toronto, she has performed widely in Canada and the United States, appearing on stage at various venues in Toronto, Montreal, and San Francisco. Her poems have been featured on CBC Radio, and have also appeared in several publications, including *Clamour*, *Manushi*, and *Trikone*, as well as in the anthologies *Sapodilla*, *The Very Inside*, and *Pearls of Passion*. "Summer or, I Want the Rage of Poets to Bleed Guns Speechless with Words" was originally published in *Night Artillery* (TSAR, 2000) and is reprinted with permission.

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Daniel Collins has been a freelance photographer for as long as he can remember, and his photos have graced the covers of many a fine book. He began writing about ten years ago and now prefers his work to be in books rather than on them. His short stories have been published in numerous Canadian and American magazines and journals. He expects to soon publish a collection of stories.

Lisa Duggan is a journalist, activist, and historian who teaches the history of gender and sexuality in the American Studies Program at New York University. She is co-author with Nan Hunter of *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (Routledge, 1995), author of *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence and American Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2000), and co-editor of *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and National Interest* (NYU Press, 2001). "A Fem(me)inist Manifesto" was originally published in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8:2, 1996, and is reprinted with permission.

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Sky Gilbert, writer, filmmaker, director, or drag queen extraordinaire, is one of North America's most controversial artistic forces. ECW Press published his first collection of poetry, *Digressions of a Naked Party Girl*, in 1998, and his theatre memoir *Ejaculations from the Charm Factory*, in 2000. His first two novels *Guilty* (1998) and *St Stephen's* (1999), were critically acclaimed. His third novel, *I am Kasper Klotz* (ECW Press), was published in November 2001, and his AIDS-radical play *The Birth of Casper G. Schmidt* (produced by the Cabaret Company) will tour the U.S. in 2002. He is presently writing his fourth novel and working on a Ph.D. in Drama at the University of Toronto.

Tara Hardy is a working-class femme dyke living and writing in Seattle. Her essay "Femme Dyke Slut" appeared in *Sex and Single Girls* (Seal Press). She is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in fiction writing, and teaches writing classes for queers in her home.

Amber L. Hollibaugh is a national and international activist, theoretician, artist, filmmaker, educator, and organizer. She has worked for years on human rights and sexuality issues, and helped start and became the first director of the Lesbian AIDS Project at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC). Her documentary film, *The Heart of the Matter*, about women's sexuality through the prism of AIDS, won the Freedom of Expression Award at the Sundance Film Festival. Her first

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Allyson Mitchell has completed eight films and videos including: *Chow Down*, *Cup Cake*, *Bon Bon*, and *Candy Kisses* (cfmdc.org) and she is the Fluff in the multimedia art duo Bucky and Fluff's Craft Factory with Lex Vaughn. She is a co-editor of *TurboChicks: Talking Young Feminisms*

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Kathryn Payne is a writer, activist, teacher, and tart. She gleefully reads her work at innumerable Toronto events and has been published in the *Church Wellesley Literary Supplement* and the collection *Written in the Skin*. Her book of poems, *Longing at Least is Constant*, was published by Broken Jaw Press in 1998. In her spare time, she facilitates erotic writing workshops, is creative editor for *Torquere: Journal of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Studies Association*, and a member of the Stern Writing Mistresses.

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is the proud granddaughter of mixed femme slut girls who were raising hell against colonialism and genocide in 1930s Sri Lanka. A Toronto-based spoken word artist and writer, she has performed her work at Desh Pardesh, Artwallah, rebel girl, and many other venues. Her work has been published in the anthologies *Femme* and *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*. She has writing forthcoming in *Colonize This!*, *Dangerous Families: Queers Surviving Sexual Abuse*, and *Bent on Writing*. She is currently completing her first book, *consensual genocide*.

Sandi Rapini, also known as "The Steambath Lady," is an artist living in Toronto. She is currently working on a new animated video and more cartoons based on true life, as well as portraits and still-lives of friends, home, and hearth.

Elizabeth Ruth's debut novel, *Ten Good Seconds of Silence* (Dundurn Press) was published to critical acclaim in fall 2001 and named as a finalist for the Writers' Trust of Canada Fiction Prize (2001), The City of Toronto Book Award (2002), and the Amazon.com First Novel Award (2002). She is the founder and curator of Clit Lit – Canada's only monthly queer literary series – and is the editor of an anthology based on the series called *Bent on Writing* (Canadian Scholars/Women's Press, 2002). Ruth is currently teaching creative writing at George Brown College and completing *Smoke*, her second novel. She welcomes comments at elizabethruth.com.

Trish Salah, born in Halifax, is a Toronto-based writer, activist, doctoral student, and teacher. Her writing has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, most recently in two books on Montreal spoken word & performance art, *Ribsauce* and *Impure*. She is currently co-editing

with Mirha-Soleil Ross and Bobby Noble, *Counting Past 2*, a collection of Transsexual and Transgender art and criticism. Her first book of poetry, *Wanting In Arabic*, was published by TSAR in 2002.

Abi Slone is a country livin' urban girl who laments the lack of vintage clothing stores and shoe selections in her neighborhood. She is one-quarter of the fat activist performance group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, and her written work has appeared in publications across the country, including *Fireweed*, *Canadian Women's Studies*, and *Flare*. She is currently learning to love the Annapolis Valley and writing her fat ass off.

Michelle Tea is the author of *The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America* (Semiotext(e)), and *Valencia* (Seal Press), which won a Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Fiction. Her third novel, *The Chelsea Whistle*, was published by Seal Press in 2002. She writes for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *Girlfriends Magazine*, *On Our Back*, and *Nerve.com*, and was half the muscle behind the infamous Sister Spit U.S. Tours.

Zoe Whittall is the author of *The Best 10 Minutes of Your Life* (McGilligan, 2001) and her work has appeared in the anthologies *Ribsauce* (Vehicle, 2001) and *She's Gonna Be* (McGilligan, 1998). When she's not high femme she's a chubby Punky Brewster.

Karin Wolf works and plays in the small queer bubble of Madison, Wisconsin. Finding beauty and love the only solace in a frightening world, she sustains hope by pursuing pleasure. Currently completing a graduate degree at the University of Wisconsin Madison, Ms Wolf's non-academic writing consists of all things epistolary. She attempts to write every letter as if it were her last, expressing the otherwise unnameable, from love to apathy with all the neuroses, longing, tedium, and hatred in between. She is currently writing a collection of epistles to her divas.

Editors

Chloë Brushwood Rose is a photographer, writer, and academic whose work has appeared in several publications, including the *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, *Gender and Education*, and *Fireweed*. She has a series of fifteen photographs published in the award-winning *Boys Like Her: Transfictions* (Press Gang, 1998) and is a member of the Public Access art collective editorial board and the Stern Writing Mistresses. Chloë is currently completing her doctorate in Language, Culture, and Teaching at York University in Toronto.

Anna Camilleri is a writer, performance poet, curator, and producer living in Toronto. She was the cofounder and codirector of Taste This, which toured extensively with three full-length performance works and collaborated to publish *Boys Like Her: Transfictions* to critical and popular acclaim. Anna has performed nationally and internationally for nearly a decade and her work has been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Toronto Arts Council. Anna is writing a novel, a play, and is the curator of Buddies In Bad Times Theatre's Strange Sisters 2002 cabaret series. She dreams in colour. Visit her website at annacamilleri.com.



photo: R. Kelly Clipperton (rkc@axxent.ca)



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