

# Garden Variety Dykes:

**Lesbian Traditions in Gardening**



**an anthology**

*edited by*

**Irene Reti & Valerie Jean Chase**

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## Introduction

*Garden Variety Dykes* grew out of our passion for gardening. We began gardening together when we lived in a small rented house in coastal California, digging up the lawn to plant roses, basil, artichokes, California poppies, lobelia, and garlic scrambled together in delicious intensive chaos. Gardening has become an integral part of our relationship.

As we grew more immersed in gardening over the past six years, we found ourselves engaged in conversations with a network of other lesbian gardeners. We traded seeds, took field trips to organic gardens, and shared the woes of mildew, feasting gophers, and stretched budgets at the nursery. In addition to being a rich part of our own relationship, gardening became an important part of our friendships.

Gardening is a vital part of lesbian life. Yet wherever we read about gardening—in the local newspaper, at the nursery, in glossy coffeetable books, or even in lesbian publications, with the exception of *Maize: A Lesbian Country Magazine*—we see no acknowledgment of lesbian gardeners, of the importance of gardening to lesbian culture. We simply do not exist. Why is it when you open up a mainstream gardening book dykes are missing from the pictures and the essays? All we get are a few quaint remarks about spinsters that have remarkable gardens, or when we are lucky, an occasional quote from Sappho, Vita Sackville-West, or Gertrude Stein.

In 1991 we decided to put out a call to lesbians for writing about our relationship to gardening. For the past three years stories, poems, essays, and photographs from lesbians all over the United States and even a few from Canada and Australia have arrived in our tiny box at the downtown post office. This is the first book that we know of to recognize the fact that lesbians garden.

We call this book *Garden Variety Dykes* to celebrate both the variety of environments in which lesbians garden, and the variety of the dykes themselves. For the lesbians included here garden in places as divergent as a New York City apartment and the wilds of the Australian bush, the Ozark mountains and Los Angeles. Cathy Cade writes about her container garden in Oakland, California: "I live in an industrial part of Oakland in an old steel factory converted to artists' live-work spaces. My four-year-old container garden is on the edge of a sea of concrete—a large parking lot—by my front door." Barbara E. Sang describes her indoor garden in her New York City apartment, watering her seven-foot schefflera tree, mourning the loss of her seventeen-year-old fig tree.

Emma Joy Crone reflects on her decision to live and garden on lesbian land on a remote island in British Columbia: "The garden was packed with vegetables, flowers and herbs. I would sit on a tree stump in the midst of all this growth and listen to the diva spirits singing me their pleasure that I had finally left the cities that held no joy of life for me." Sarah Jacobus writes, "Never mind that my cornfield is a six-by-ten-foot garden plot in my backyard in Los Angeles. There is something wondrous about seeing corn growing, especially in Los Angeles, a striking contrast from the genteel proportions of basil or tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers." This book is a tribute to lesbian adaptability and persistence, to the desire of lesbians to garden, in whatever available space we can find.

For many of the women in this book gardening has been a way to heal from trauma in their lives. In "Joy is the Color of New Leaves" Paula Mariedaughter, flight attendant for TWA for 16 years, describes her quest to find a "different way of life," which inspired her to move to the Ozarks of Northwest Arkansas and build a non-toxic home. Seven months after her move Paula learned that she had advanced breast cancer. "Facing my breast cancer and facing my fear of dying from breast cancer intensified my search for 'right livelihood' or doing what I love," writes Paula. That search led her to her work as a wreathmaker and everlastings grower. For Amy Edgington, gardening helped heal her from a battering relationship. "At night when the flashbacks threatened to roll, when I dreaded the dreams I might have, I put myself to sleep with detailed plans of my next crop rotation."

Gardening can simply be a wonderful obsession, as Denise Dale expresses in her story, "Tomato Lessons": "On snowy days I stared out at my future garden from the upstairs window and tried to imagine it full of plants heavy with fruit. I planned. I plotted." Or as one of us confesses in "Ramblings of a Lesbian Rosarian": "I sit in bed ignoring the cats and my girlfriend with one thought on my mind—which roses do I want in my garden?"

Lovers are the subject of many of these pieces, from Becky Birtha's portrait of Pearl, haunted by vivid memories of her lover Gracie in the garden, to Leslie Cameron's "Chair Garden," in which a disabled woman and an able-bodied woman create a love based on strength and respect, a love inspired by gardening. In "The Safe Sex Way to Garden" Henrie Bensussen and Linda Spencer suggest: "Let's go to bed with some graph paper and a few pencils . . ." In her poem, "Gardening" Chaia Heller writes: "i can't wait to steam up a broad, silver platter / full of fronds of the deepest emerald, / feed you each radiant, miraculous leaf."

Gardens are also a lesbian art form. Shoney Sien writes in "The Persistence of Roots / A Profusion of Freesia": "With new art supplies, I always need time to experiment, play. Now I experiment with plants, bulbs, seeds. Painting with plants, having faith in color I can't yet see, like glaze on an unfired pot." Sien also reflects on the contrast between her freedom to grow a "profusion of freesia," and her mother's life of poverty on a failing farm, raising 13 children. tova writes about another kind of poverty in "the garden paths of a brooklyn kid": "i was born and raised in a tenement in a working class neighborhood in brooklyn, n.y. not only weren't there gardens in my neighborhood, but there wasn't much grass."

A number of the women in this collection ponder the ethical dilemmas of gardening. Is gardening a kind of tyranny, a way to control nature, with the gardener deciding who will live and who will die? And if this is true, what does it mean to be a feminist and a gardener? In "The Politics of Snails," Irena Klepfisz contemplates her dilemma over the snails in her rented condominium backyard: "The sumptuous bosom arches high into the finely shaped head. Ah! The wonder of the horns! And are those eyes that plot its course, that reflect its soul? . . . Surely no one can expect me to murder *these* . . . ." Chris Sitka struggles to grow vegetables in the Australian bush, while currawongs, wallabies, and possums invade her garden, driving her to build ever more elaborate fences, until finally she bequeaths the garden to the animals. "I have learnt how to live in harmony with nature and enjoy nettle soup. The garden self seeds and the fence is half fallen down. The gate swings open and everyone wanders in and out at will, which is the equal, unbounded sort of society I believe in . . . . I suppose my main pleasure in gardening has been that it's given a lot of animals a chance to put one over on people." Across the world, in Minnesota, Nett Hart writes about her gardening ethic: "To create the kind of order we have come to expect from gardens, we have to impose a linearity and conformity the plants will subvert every chance they get. Instead they offer a pattern that follows their whim, their adjustment to conditions, their exuberance. Keeping the kind of garden that adheres to my plan and has nothing out of place does not appeal to my aesthetics or values." Pennie Rose, the first licensed woman arborist in California, expresses her commitment to pruning trees in a respectful manner: "In cleaning it out, in detailing it out, the wind can pass through it, the tree has character. It isn't raped. It's left with some integrity." Finally, Judith Barrington questions the assumption of gardening as control altogether:



Women *are* like gardens  
seeking profusion  
even extravagance and exuberance.  
Swelling bushes,  
wandering creepers,  
flying ramblers  
shove against, spill over, leap above  
the neat lines of borders.

For ultimately, as most gardeners will admit, we do not control our gardens—the land belongs to the earth.

It is our relationship with the earth itself which is rooted in so many of these pieces. In "Urban Farming" Sally Koplin writes, "Growing flowers, herbs, and vegetables in the warm weather, heating with wood in cold weather, and riding a bike year round keep me more connected to the food I eat, the seasons, the weather, the phases of the moon, and the earth (and healthier) than most city dwellers." "gardening is a reflection and a projection of my life as a radical jewish working class lesbian living here on this planet of madness. when i plant it is an act of faith in a world that has tried and continues to try to take my faith away, minute by minute," writes tova. Lynn Hicks describes her efforts to create organic community-supported agriculture on Full Circle Farm in North Carolina: "I definitely feel that we don't have a right to own the land, but we live in a society where you can't protect the land unless you own it. The ownership protects you. Ownership is a way to protect the land, using it organically, and not stripping it, talking to the divas and the goddesses." In "Endangered Species," one of us writes: "I want to believe in the sanctity of organic beans on the windowsill, of my home-harvested garlic snug in its little blue pot. But there is no sanctity, no place to run to if the earth itself is dying, if we cannot even trust the sunlight, if the ozone blinds the bees who pollinate our blackberries, if our bodies themselves sicken and die."

Gardening means many things to lesbians—sanity in the metropolis, food, art, healing, an intimate project between friends or lovers, wild obsession, livelihood, a more ethical, ecological life. We invite you to celebrate with us the diversity of garden variety dykes who make this planet a better place to live.

*Irene Reti*  
*Valerie Jean Chase*  
Spring, 1994

*Judith Barrington*

## A Remarkably Vigorous Rose

*remembering Vita Sackville-West and the garden she created at Sissinghurst*

They want women to be like gardens  
cultivated possessed  
perfected by man.

The plucked tea rose in the vase  
and the vase-shaped woman posed  
their sensualities  
both despised.

Plants and wives  
become invisible  
and husbandry *is* a revealing word.

Women *are* like gardens  
seeking profusion  
even extravagance and exuberance.  
Swelling bushes, wandering creepers,  
flying ramblers  
shove against, spill over, leap above  
the neat lines of borders  
and hedges sharp as razors,  
just one season from consuming  
the faded brick prison walls.

A remarkably vigorous rose  
climbs close to the purple border  
a mass of subdued color  
at all the flowering seasons.  
In the white garden  
strides a silver willow-leaved pear  
by clusters of gypsophila  
inevitably described as a veil  
its brilliance lost  
in the image of the fearful bride.  
Among the rose beds spring delphiniums  
foxgloves and day lilies.  
The glowing fruits of *Rosa Moyesii*  
are scarlet as the wildest woman.

Irena Klepfisz

## The Politics of Snails

*The instructions:* Crush them with your heels or between two rocks. If that's not appealing, use the powder—it doesn't kill—just keeps them away (this *has* to be a lie—anyone indifferent to mashing them beneath their shoes is not about to go humane). I'm half asleep when I hear these options. Barely take them in—though clearly they register because my first morning alone I will recall the calm voice.

But now it's dusk. The back garden: red and pink roses firmly rooted and pink and red geraniums in steel boxes hanging against the prefab fence. Everything vies for turf. What's new? Under my negligence by summer's end red geraniums will flourish in the ground, challenging the supremacy of the rose. Unfamiliar blue flowers will threaten the geraniums. A garden in which I can do the impossible: sleep and dream in peace while around me: war.

A pretty house . . . with mixed messages. The surrounding condominiums: mortar and cement. Each garden the same: less foliage, more hexagonal bricks supporting the iron-wrought furniture and methodically boxed soil. "You'll need to weed it," I'm told during training. Translation: maintain control—which, after all, is all *this* life is ever about.

*The first morning alone:* I slide open the door and step out. Dampness. Fog, dew. I spot my first one on the stem of a rose. It looks snug between two thorns. I'm taken aback. It's enormous. An inch-high shell. Nothing fancy. But the body! Sleek gray flesh spills out and around the plain brown wrapper. Entirely exposed—the back tapers into a delicate tail. And the front? I catch my breath! The sumptuous bosom arches high into the finely shaped head. Ah! The wonder of the horns! And are those eyes that plot its course, that reflect its soul?

I look around. See others—on the fence, on a red brick, on a dark wet leaf. They're different sizes—some the shells mere specks, the bodies barely visible; others slim and solid like the first.

Surely no one can expect me to murder *these*?

There's only one choice: I harvest them. They hardly struggle. But then it's not exactly an even match. To my fingertips their resistance registers only as a hesitation, a moment's confusion, before they curl inward and vanish. I search under leaves, on the damp soil, the fence. It's a challenge. They're masters in the art of passing—as pebbles, wooden chips, broken dried stems. But I catch on and in minutes—more than two

dozen are in the bag. Occasionally I peek and see them fully present climbing up the sides—horns and eyes exposed. They use each other as step ladders, as free rides—whatever. They're determined to get to the top—and out.

And then it's over. The flowers saved, the snails safe—and there I am holding the bag asking the ultimate question which unreflective altruism never answers: speaking practically, what am I to do with them next? A friend who's lived here for years is sympathetic, though she has a native's perspective. "If the garden meant food, you might feel different," she tells me serenely. Still—she's kind. I'm new. So she drives me to a special spot to view the ocean. It's a perfect refuge for the snails.

*Two days later:* The same question. I can't hustle them off to safety every morning. I don't have a car. Besides, I have a job. I have to report for work. Besides again—how did all this come to be? I ask another friend, a historian who contextualizes the current crisis: a nineteenth-century Frenchman wanting to make native a delicacy of *escargot*, a desire he fulfilled, but in the process, life triumphed over appetite and death and now we're stuck with the present situation and impossible solutions—grind them down with your heel or crush them with stones.

*A week later:* I'm still harvesting, amazed at their numbers. My urge to rescue is transformed into repressed rage. How and when did they become *my* responsibility? Why, I ask myself, must I find an escape for them?

There's no one to turn to. I'm angry—at them, at myself for my failing commitment, for losing face. I comfort myself: You can only do what you can do. But I know—in the meantime, the world—or more precisely—the garden—withers.

So, determined not to be defeated, I collect weary paper bags and fill them with endangered snails. Determined I appraise the terrain, establish escape routes, safety zones. On my way to work I release them at bus stops, on unkempt weedy highway shoulders and hope they'll sense the right direction—away from death. But life's crowded and I'm conscious I've never brought them to the ocean again. In my mortar garden I sleep and dream of that first day's liberation—the openness of sky, the ocean somber in the sunlight, salt in my mouth, the snails among the tall grasses. I wake and wonder who it is I'm trying to save.

## Endangered Species

"3/4 of a carrot a day may prevent breast cancer," I read on the computer bulletin board at work. I imagine planting my whole garden in carrots, enough for every woman in my life, delivered fresh to her doorstep each day. I believe in lesbian gardens, in growing our own food as a way of withdrawing from agribusiness, from the patriarchy, as a way of healing ourselves and each other. I also believe in gardens as art, the daring dance of tall blue delphiniums, the secrets of orange ranunculus. I believe in gardens, in whatever form we can make them, from vast luxurious plots to a few ceramic pots on an apartment balcony. I want to believe in the sanctity of organic beans on the windowsill, of my home-harvested garlic snug in its little blue pot. But there is no sanctity, no place to run to if the earth itself is dying, if we cannot even trust the sunlight, if the ozone blinds the bees who pollinate our blackberries, if our bodies themselves sicken and die. There is no place to build a lesbian haven where the water is pure and we can count on the rain coming every year, where we can lie naked under the sun like we did as children, before we worried about skin cancer, before we watched our mothers die and checked each other's breasts for lumps each month.

I grew up in California in the 1960s. Summers we drove through the Central Valley, four hundred miles of heat and haze on the conveyor belt of Highway 5. Always there were crop dusters dive bombing endless fields of lettuce, alfalfa, grapes, apples, and huge dusty feedlots crowded with cows who did not look at me when we passed. I was bored, fidgeting in the back seat of a green station wagon, shoving library books at my brother. I looked out of the window, my pink skin burning in the 100-degree heat and could see no mountains, no end to this Great Valley. Always there were brown people working in the fields, rusty trucks parked nearby and little outhouses tilted at funny angles like they would fall over if a person used them. Once in a while I wondered how the people worked in those fields all day in the heat, but mostly I was just eager to get home. At home in Hollywood I helped my mother buy iceberg lettuce and Santa Rosa plums in air-conditioned Food Giant, Market Basket, and Safeway stores. I remember something about grapes and how we weren't supposed to eat them, but I didn't really think about it much.

I grew up in California, the salad bowl of the nation. I thought the Central Valley had always looked like that. It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I read John Muir's description of his walk from San Francisco to Yosemite in 1868, how he stood on a mountain in the Coast Range and stared across a vast valley of poppies and the Sierras looked back at him, their granite and snow profiles etched against the blue horizon, uplifted from the golden bed of flowers. There was no lettuce then, no hot highway with semis breathing oily smoke racing towards Los Angeles. Instead, 22 million acres of purple needlegrass, bluegrass, rye grass stretched toward the mountains. Great herds of tule elk moved across this bunchgrass prairie, and the sky swirled with falcons and geese, eagles, phalaropes, blue herons. At the southern end of the valley was Tulare Lake, once the largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi river, now drained for cropland.

Agribusiness. California. The two words are almost synonymous. The monoculture of lettuce fields I saw in my childhood which I thought had been there forever was actually very new, a product of the post-World War II "green revolution" in which multinational corporations began to develop plants dependent on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and enormous amounts of engineered water. Water sucked from the San Joaquin and the Sacramento Rivers in a vast arterial system of aqueducts and dams. Now semis travel down the highway along the California Aqueduct, carrying rubbery tomatoes piled high, and poisoned peaches in their soft fuzzy coats. Millions of gallons of gasoline burn each day as these semis transport tomatoes, apples, and kiwi fruit thousands of miles from California, across the United States.

There are other valleys in California, with similar histories. Across the Santa Cruz Mountains, north of my house in Santa Cruz, lies the Santa Clara Valley. Once apricot, pear, apple, and peach trees grew for miles along the southern edge of San Francisco Bay. I saw this valley as a child, again from my family's station wagon, in the late 1960s. I remember thousands of fruit trees glistening with fog, stretching towards the pale gold hills. We drove through this valley on the way to my aunt's house in Belmont. For years I remembered this scene as if it were a dream, a dream valley of apricots in the fog, but I could not figure out where this place was, if it was even real. Then a friend told me how the Santa Clara Valley used to have orchards, before urbanization in the late 1970s and 1980s, before it was renamed the Silicon Valley, home of Hewlett Packard and Apple Computer. The orchards themselves replaced thousands of ancient California oaks, their enormous limbs resting on fields of native bunch grass. Now both the oaks and the apples are gone, the land smothered by wide boulevards, generic

condominiums, and shopping malls. An occasional fruit or oak tree in someone's yard is about all that remains. The valley is only a ghost.

Twenty miles south of my house is the Pajaro Valley. In the entire world, only the Nile Valley of Egypt is more fertile. This valley too is losing the battle of housing versus agricultural land, although less of it has been consumed. Fields of artichokes, Brussels sprouts and strawberries still line Highway 1. But for how much longer? And at what price: the pesticides seeping into the crumbly brown earth, into the groundwater, into the bodies of the California gulls flying above the freeway, into the wings of the red-tailed hawks hunting on the hill above the sea, into the coyote dead along the highway, into the children playing in the strawberry field next door to their school, into the farmworker women aching in the fields. At what price strawberries? I push my cart down the aisle at Safeway, past baskets of red berries, towers of corn, crates of rosy apricots—all of it poison. I cannot bear to shop there anymore.

It began after World War II, this use of pesticides to grow food. A billion pounds of pesticides a year are produced in the U.S., 50,000 pesticide products based on 1400 active ingredients. Pesticide use increased forty times between 1950 and 1980 (USDA). This is our food. We ingest these pesticides into our sweet lesbian mouths. A billion pounds of pesticides a year in the carrots we eat to prevent cancer, in the fresh steamed artichokes we eat at potlucks, on creamy avocados, the shiny red stuffed peppers my best friend made for me last month. The poison travels into our stomachs, our livers, our cervixes, our brains, and most of all, our breasts, to collect, come due ten, twenty, thirty, how many years later? So now they've found them, the pesticides, the DDT and PCB in the breasts of women, the breasts of lesbians with cancer. The condors and brown pelicans went first; now we too are endangered species; one in eight women will have breast cancer. The medical authorities act surprised. And how do we know which salad was the culprit, which tomato we ate as a child, which bottle of pear juice that tasted so thick and fresh as we drank it, knowing it was poison but still not believing?

I am an earnest feminist. I know all these things. I know about the poison. So I decided to grow as much as I could myself in my tiny rented backyard, on my front porch. I went home and planted red lettuce, raspberries, baby carrots, San Francisco fog tomatoes, sweet basil. I put in a nice garden, and delighted in the scent of sage and fresh basil on my skin, the treasure of peas just popped out of their firm pods. I looked into the center of an apricot rose and tasted ripe raspberries in the morning. My best friends and I made blueberry pancakes from the garden and I

hid tiny red seed potatoes in the warm earth. I watched the California poppies open in the morning and close at night like tiny shops, and learned not to be afraid of redworms and praying mantises, but to welcome them.

But then I read about pesticides in cotton clothing, and dioxin in tampons, how the groundwater is being overpumped, and salt water is creeping in from the sea into the Salinas Valley and soon 100,000 people may not have any drinking water. I turned on the hose next to my treasured patch of earth to water my 36 corn plants, and wondered what was in the water emerging out of the green plastic tube I held in my hand. I read about global warming, and the Midwest under water, holes in the ozone. I went out and bought a stronger sunscreen even though I didn't like how greasy it felt on my skin. I wondered how long it would be before I had to garden in a protective suit with goggles and a mask.

It is late afternoon in early November, 1993. I look around my California garden, at this tiny sliver of earth at the edge of the Pacific that I have tried to keep sacred, to protect. It is November and I long for the delicious cold breath of autumn to coax my roses to sleep, to sweeten the purple kale, crisp the spinach. But it is 90 degrees all up and down the coast. South of here California burns. My two black cats sit on the balcony listening to nervous sea lions bark relentlessly in the evening heat.

I've dreamt of my town without lawns, of everyone growing their own food as much as possible, yellow fin potatoes and fat pumpkins becoming the true gold of California. I've also dreamt, on those rare days when I allow myself to dream, of a world without gasoline, with wide, safe bicycle paths and solar-powered trains, and places for women to walk, a world without rape, without cancer. And sometimes I dream the Central Valley whole again, fiery with poppies, the elk and bear returning, the sky alive with migrating birds who have finally returned home.





## An Australian Bush Garden

I garden because I like animals. Gardening, I can take it or leave it. But what would the animals do if I didn't garden? I'm sure they would practically starve to death. I'm okay. I can buy my food. They don't have any money. Come to think of it, if they had I wouldn't have to travel to town every two weeks to do my shopping. Still it's fun feeding the animals. I get to play games with them.

We started off settling this isolated valley in the bush<sup>1</sup> by finding a clear spot near the creek and digging it up for a garden. I lived under an old bit of canvas stretched over a couple of poles so that I could do first things first. That is: garden rather than build.

The climate is good, the soil unused, and we imagined a surplus of produce, even though it was hard work carrying bucket after bucket of water up from the creek on hot summer afternoons. Still this was our dream: a non-technological Lesbian paradise and carrying water was turning us into Amazons. Besides we never could get the pressure pump to work off the trickling creek.

My life of gardening for the benefit of animals began as soon as the first seeds went in. Swarms of big, mean-looking beady-eyed currawongs<sup>2</sup> flocked from the sky, stuck their huge beaks into the rows and pecked for seeds. I developed a strong arm from lobbing stones at them.

What seeds were left duly sprouted forth and the nights were filled with the gentle thud, thud, thud of dozens of wallabies<sup>3</sup> hopping to graze on green shoots. I took to sleeping in the garden and waking at regular intervals to leap up clapping and yelling at the sound of bounding in all directions.

Now and then I'd wake to find our horses had decided the garden was a good place to clomp around. After all our water carrying it was much greener than the burnt-out grasses of the Australian bush in summer.

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<sup>1</sup>Bush—the Australian word for unsettled land and wild places whether bushy or not.

<sup>2</sup>A black, crow-like, Australian bird.

<sup>3</sup>Wallabies resemble kangaroos but are smaller.

Despite our love for the wide open unfenced places, when the neighbour's cattle arrived through the broken boundary fence to join the garden throng we decided it was time to fence—at least the garden.

Wanting to do this as ecologically and naturally as possible we spent weeks collecting long sticks to weave into a wicker-like work of art. It was an enormous amount of work—but the aesthetics were worth it. No nasty wire with sharp damaging ends and a capitalist price to pay would disgrace our bush haven.

The fence finally completed we closed the gate and planted a corn crop. Bush wallabies spend their lives pushing through thick, scratchy scrub, and they seem to like corn. They look so cute holding the unripe cobs in their little paws as they squat on their tails.

Meanwhile we were importing sacks of rice, etc. and carrying it all in on horseback down the rough track to our one-day-to-be-self-sufficient paradise of flourishing gardens.

Soon we were also carrying in big rolls of wire. At least we scrounged the posts from dead trees felled by storms. The first generation, three strand wire fence was no object to the half-wild cattle who managed to push through the gaps. They sometimes even managed to snap thick gauge wire in their efforts. All for a few little carrot tops or leeks.

By this time I was getting very strong from carrying water, wire, posts, shopping, and running wildly at a variety of wildlife day and night while flailing my arms and exercising my mouth. It was hungry work.

After our first year of gardening I'd eaten five homegrown Tiny Tina tomatoes, three small carrots, one bean and lots of wild nettles from outside the garden, which no one else seemed to touch. I guess that's the one thing we had over the animals: they didn't know how to cook them so they don't sting your mouth.

I haven't mentioned the insects. Insects are cute creatures who love to flourish on lush growth unaffected by pesticides and chemicals. Good on them. So do I. I think companion planting only works when the plants get to grow up big enough to develop companionships. I wouldn't know for sure.

Our fence progressed to a chicken wire mesh tied with wire onto three strands of the thickest gauge wire, stretched between closely spaced tree-trunk-sized posts over six feet high. The gate system was worthy of an engineering degree—which still didn't stop women from forgetting to shut it sometimes.

Suddenly the plot was thickening. The garden was smallish. We couldn't fence a large area to that degree. The wallabies were giving us

dirty looks. The horses kept watch till someone forgot to close the gate while she went down the creek for a five-minute swim. Then they'd wander in for a browse.

Still it seemed like finally the season was going to come to some sort of fruition. Most of the animals were making do with the compost heap. As the first fruits of our labours grew to edible proportions and softened towards ripeness our mouths began watering in anticipation.

That is until we started noticing a bite out of a tomato here, a chomped zucchini and a ripped off pepper there. We scratched our heads. We checked our gate. We inspected the fence inch by inch. We posted a look-out.

Once again enjoying a moonlit bed in the garden I flashed my torch at a scuttle to see a possum scurrying up the fence and into the branches of an overhanging tree. There are thousands of possums swarming in the Australian bush.<sup>4</sup> They resemble overgrown rats more than squirrels if you ask me, though people who haven't had to live with them think they are rather bright-eyed and bushy-tailed beauties. They are fearless, smart, and persistent. Baby possums are sent to safe-breaking school while they still ride on their mother's backs.

The next generation garden fence involved building a chicken wire mesh canopy over the whole garden and tying it with wire to the upright fence every two inches. When we finished that one we stood back, rubbed our hands together and chuckled at our immense skill and ingenuity.

So did the possums. The very next morning there were the familiar chomps. Possums don't bother to eat one vegetable at a sitting. They like to wander around the garden and take a bite here and a mouthful there. Sample a bit of everything and finish nothing. It is one of their endearing features. We'd already noticed this custom when they raided our store-bought food.

A close inspection of the fence revealed where they had managed to unravel the chicken wire joins and make a neat round hole. Chicken wire is not welded at the joins, but merely twisted around itself. I pass that on to you for what it is worth because if I'd realised that I could have saved myself a lot of bother.

After a few more months of wire-tying practice I retired from gardening to take up a career in bush track repair to make it easier to get our supplies in.

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<sup>4</sup>The common possum is a cat-sized boreal creature.

I have learnt how to live in harmony with nature and enjoy nettle soup. The garden self seeds and the fence is half fallen down. The gate swings open and everyone wanders in and out at will, which is the equal, unbounded sort of society I believe in. We still manage to harvest quite a few chokoes<sup>5</sup>—the one thing no one seems to like a lot of. Including me.

I suppose my main pleasure in gardening has been that it's given a lot of animals a chance to put one over on people. Being a gardener has really developed my skills as a fencer and road builder. So it has been worth it.

The possums have long lost interest in the garden. When the orchard is out of season they spend their nights bouncing up and down on my roof as I develop ever more elaborate window catches.



The Vallee Garden, Birdwood, New South Wales, Australia

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<sup>5</sup>Chokoes—pear-shaped, dull, tasteless vegetables, usually used only in pickles.

Denise Dale

## Tomato Lessons

*a short, partly fictional, autobiographical gardening story*

May, 1987

"Can you use some tomato plants?" Yvonne's brother asked.

"Sure!" I crowed with enthusiasm.

"And just where are you going to put them?" Yvonne inquired. We had a postage-stamp-sized yard, and the cohabitants of our duplex had small children, so making that space a garden was out of the question. We planted marigolds and a few herbs in the strip of dirt between the house and driveway, but it didn't feel like a "real" garden. I was getting impatient. I wanted those plants—I needed fresh tomatoes in my life. I could almost taste them, juice running down my chin.

"I'll find someplace."

"And what about Joey, the terror from hell?"

"I'll break his terrible little fingers if he even *looks* at them."

I went home the proud owner of six *Delicious* tomato plants. I got out my spade and began to double-dig a small intensive bed beside the fence. As the summer wore on, the plants became a massive tangle of vines. I watered. I fed. I watched for any signs of flowers or fruit. After a month of this vigil, I spied a small, green marble emerging from a vine.

"We have a tomato!" I announced as if we had just given birth. "Come here! Come here! Look!"

"Where?"

"There!"

Over the next few weeks that green marble became a green softball joined by dozens of other green softballs. They all stayed green.

"When are they going to turn red?!" I blustered one August afternoon. I couldn't remember when tomatoes took so long to get ripe. Two more weeks passed. I finally picked my first red one. I carried it as if it were pure gold and brought it into the house for Yvonne to see. We sliced it and ate it standing over the sink.

"God I love this!" I said, stuffing another slice in my mouth. The next day I picked a few more, then a few more, then a few more . . .

"What's for lunch?" Yvonne asked.

"Tomato sandwiches."

"Again? Why don't you give some to the neighbors?"

"I did. They don't want any more. Here eat—you have a three tomato quota."

"Maybe you shouldn't put in so many plants next year."

"Don't be silly!" I barked. "Besides, it could be worse. It could be zucchini!"

Yvonne groaned and ate another sandwich.

*July, 1989*

"Well, it's not the farm we've dreamed of, but it's as close as we're going to get for now."

Yvonne was right. The little place with the "For Sale By Owner" sign was within our reach. The house was small, but the yard made up for it.

"It's three quarters of an acre on paper," the owner said, "but I think it's closer to a whole acre. The property line runs up into the woods there—I think just about halfway up that hill."

We looked around. Two big maples towered behind the patio. Chestnut and elder trees were scattered along the edge of the woods, rhododendrons hugged the garage. And next to the house sat a grassy parcel the size of a small playing field.

"Garden!"

"That's all backfill," said the owner.

"Not for long."

*January, 1990*

We moved in that September. Fixing up and settling in occupied us until winter. On snowy days I stared out at my future garden from the upstairs window and tried to imagine it full of plants heavy with fruit. I planned. I plotted.

"Another catalog! How many does that make?"

"Twelve. I have eight more coming."

"What are you going to plant that you need so many catalogs?"

"I don't know. I just want to see what everybody has."

I got my eight other catalogs, plus a few more. I was knee deep in catalogs. I had Burpee's and Johnny's, Shepherd's and Cook's Garden, Jung's and Park's and Gurney's and Stokes. There were flower catalogs, bulb catalogs, seed catalogs.

"Put these somewhere!"

"I'm comparison shopping." Entrenched in my stack, I was a manic flurry of order forms.

"What are you getting?"

"From which catalog?"

"From *which* catalog!? How big do you think this garden is going to be the first year?"

"Eight raised beds. Double dug."

"Not *this* child! I'm going to Mum's to get my tiller."

I scoffed at the idea of needing a tiller and ordered enough seeds to plant a small truck farm.

*April 1990*

"So, when did you start your tomatoes?" Vicki asked, trying to stifle her giggling. Vicki was a seasoned gardener with eight acres to call home.

"End of January."

"Looks like they'll be setting fruit by the time you plant 'em."

Okay, so I got a little anxious. I had a basement full of tomato trees. I transplanted them for the third time into half gallon milk cartons and hoped they'd hold until I could get them into the ground in May.

"Yeah? Well, they'll have industrial strength root systems!" I whined defensively.

"Did you ever see *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes?*"

"No. Why?"

"Well, let's just say if you hear strange noises coming from below your house, you'll know enough to get out and call the National Guard."

It was a bright, sunny morning, and digging day was finally here. Yvonne and I had marked off our beds and staked them out. I was ready, spade in hand. I thrust the end into the sod. It thrust back. I jumped on the spade. I fell off.

"This ground is like concrete!"

"Want me to get the tiller?"

"No. Let me try again."

I jumped on the spade. I jumped again. Finally, I felt the sod break. I forced the spade down a few inches and turned it over. Clay.

"Well, they said it was backfill."

"Get the tiller."

We tilled and raked until we were beaten and blistered. But by the end of the day we had two beds ready to plant. We sat on the front steps admiring our work, taking a well-earned rest. The neighbor kids watching us could contain themselves no more.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Digging a garden."

"Oh. Whatcha puttin' in?"

"Broccoli and lettuce here. Tomatoes there."

"Oh. They really liked the grass here."

"Who?"

"The people who lived here before. They loved this grass. And they wouldn't let any of us step on it. Can we play in your yard?"

"Sure. That's what grass is for. Just don't step on the garden, okay?"

"Okay."

Yvonne and I looked at each other. "Fence!"

*July, 1990*

"Want some zucchini?" was the first thing I asked anyone coming to the house. I had twelve plants—twelve healthy, *prolific* plants. If I turned my back for even a day, the zucchinis that were almost ready metamorphosed into two-ton torpedoes.

"I think maybe *one* plant will be enough next year," Yvonne observed.

Thanks to my zealous adherence to the "Anything Worth Doing is Worth Overdoing" school of gardening, the zucchini plants were mounting a hostile takeover in their quadrant of the garden. I watched as small animals and birds became engulfed in the foliage and disappeared. I expected to find tiny skeletons that fall when I cleaned up—victims of the evil zucchini.

Meanwhile, the tomatoes were basking on the vines, waiting for the most inopportune moment to become ripe. I discovered, after the last few years of tomato gardening, that in August, tomatoes couldn't be trusted. It didn't matter what variety, hybrid or not, bush or indeterminate, they all got ripe at the same time. That year I planted "early," "mid-season," and "late" tomatoes. They all ignored their respective classifications. Their little biological clocks said, "No ripening until mid-August!"

Gathering my canning jars, I waited for the explosion and canceled my social life.

*April, 1991*

"What's in the tent?" our neighbor asked. Our garden had become a curiosity. First it was the raised beds, "What are those?" Then the



trellises, "Those cukes? Never saw a contraption like that!" Now I was putting plants in under plastic tunnels. I had just read how cloches extend the growing season, and if *Organic Gardening* said it worked, then I certainly had to try it.

"What's in the tent? Tomatoes."

"In April? Never heard of planting tomatoes in April! Hope they don't freeze on ya'!"

"No, they won't freeze. And I'll have ripe tomatoes in June. You just wait and see."

I'd been observing my neighbors' gardens over the last year, and they all had one thing in common: none were planted before Memorial Day. One fellow had garlic coming up, and I saw a few spring onions, but there was no broccoli, no peas, nothing serious. I would show them all—the season was half over in May!

I marched into the garden, seeds in one hand, trowel in the other, ready to plant. In went the peas, the radishes, the onions. The broccoli went next to the lettuce. Everything was mapped out—neat, precise, on schedule. The tomatoes were snug under their cloche surrounded by plastic bottles of water for warmth. The sun was shining; spring was here.

Then it snowed.

"Maybe people wait until Memorial Day for a good reason," Yvonne said, looking out at the snow-covered lumps in the garden. "Don't you think you rushed it a little?"

"Never! Peas are supposed to go in on Saint Patrick's Day, so they're late. And everything else is frost-hardy."

"Yeah, frost-hardy, not blizzard-proof!"

"You wait, oh one of little faith! We'll still get ripe tomatoes in June."

All the transplants survived, and two weeks later, the sun returned for good. It took the seeds a while longer to emerge from their extended sleep, but by the end of April everything was thriving. In the second week in May the tomatoes under the tent were a mass of tangles and blooms. I peeled back the plastic cover to let the bees and the sun in. The neighbors were still curious.

"How are those tomatoes coming?"

"Fine—ripe ones by Flag Day, you watch!"

*June, 1991*

The tomato vigil had begun anew.

Every day I patrolled the garden, inspecting the beds. I pulled a weed here, plucked a bug there. I was excited to see all the new growth

around me. I was already picking lettuce and radishes. The broccoli was heading up, and the peas climbed to the sky, full of blossoms and pods. I had new companions to watch—potatoes, corn, black beans, and strawberries. But my favorites were still the tomatoes.

I watched the calendar, and scoured the plants for a hint of red. Twelve days to Flag Day. *Still green.* Ten days. *I think there's some pink down there!* Seven days. *Yes! Look! One's getting red!* No! Two! Four days. *Almost there!* Two days. *Come on baby! You can do it!*

Flag Day morning I raced out to my tomatoes, and there it was—a bright red baseball of a prize. I reached down and carefully pulled my little beauty from the vine. I wiped it off and took a bite. It was the sweetest tomato I had ever tasted.

"What are you doing?" my neighbor's eight-year-old daughter asked.

"Picking a tomato."

"Oh. You like tomatoes, huh?"

"Yes," I said, savoring another mouthful. "Do you?"

"Uh huh. Are they hard to grow?"

"Not really."

"Then what *is* the hardest thing to grow in your garden?"

"*Patience,*" I said, and gave her a bite.

Attaining a State of Grace

1.  
Set up house with one  
you've fallen in love with.  
Ensure there's enough ground  
to plant a garden.  
Figure it will be forever,  
or at least until you're stiff,  
can't bend your knees  
or blink your eyes.
  
2.  
Send for nursery catalogs,  
read horticulturally,  
buy dozens of tulips, rare lilies.  
Order ten old roses,  
not the kind sold locally.  
Go to plant sales  
held at arboretums.
  
3.  
Bring home compost, bricks,  
truckloads of soil,  
a birdbath, flowerpots.  
Dig holes, rake paths.  
Lay your bricks for a small patio,  
as though it will always be  
a place to read books  
on hot afternoons.
  
4.  
Set out the trees and shrubs,  
flowers and bulbs.  
Give them sun or shade  
as they require. Protect  
from wind. Move them  
if they start to wilt.  
Leave room for growth.

Pull weeds; insinuating tendrils  
of crabgrass; snails.

5.  
White crocus bloom in January  
then early narcissus,  
red tulips, daffodils,  
purple beads of grape hyacinth.  
Roses bud and open.  
Your lover meets someone new,  
has no time nor wish  
for nuances of color.

6.  
By Christmas the place  
is up for sale; you're going  
to live with another,  
in a new house,  
less space for plants.  
Dig up what you can,  
those things easily moved,  
not yet deep-rooted,  
or too large to carry.

7.  
Read new books.  
Find other nurseries.  
Never revisit gardens  
where once you lived.  
Whisper to your new lover  
words formed in the tongue.  
Your hands will remember  
the tith of soil,  
the pressure of bone on skin.

## Cutting Down The Hedge

For a long time, when I was in the closet, I had the ugliest eight-foot high *Eugenia* hedge you can imagine growing straight up in front of my house. Scraggly due to drought, leaves curled and distorted by an infestation of psyllids (curable only with poisonous chemicals I refused to apply), stuffed with missing toys and lost newspapers, it blocked any view into our living space from the neighbors and passersby, and I felt comfortably invisible. Then one winter, the hedge succumbed to a killer frost and had to be pruned to the ground. That same year I was forced out of the closet by circumstances for which I eventually became grateful. When the hedge began to grow again (a miracle I found deeply disturbing), I fretted loud to my sweetheart, Coleen, about landscaping the front yard.

Back then, in the budding stages of our romance, I held my breath for months at a time, hoping always to say the right thing and not scare her off. There was nothing about my life she couldn't learn to live with—no horrible secrets—but I just didn't know if she would really adjust to my two kids, the insane schedule of a working mother, the nagging maintenance of a fixer-upper, and the yardwork that was always getting away from me. At the time, I was looking for a grown-up to have fun with. We didn't necessarily have to live together. I was dedicated to raising my kids (four and eight years old at the time). On the evenings they went to their father's house, Coleen and I could go out. At the time, that was plenty.

But then, during one fateful conversation, she told me she had considered landscape design as a second career, even taking courses at the local community college. Revealing a vague premonition, which I tried not to frame as a bribe or commitment, I said: "If you move in someday, I'll give you the yard . . . ." We went on to laugh and joke about other topics, but I guess the idea appealed to her, because six months later we were signing a preliminary domestic partner agreement.

For awhile we contemplated moving to a different town where there was no drought and the cost of living seemed easier to bear. Besides, we could come out as a couple and I could put behind me—once and for all—the embarrassed silences that had kept me distant from perfectly wonderful people those lonely years I spent in the closet. Right after Christmas, however, wave after wave of storms pounded the west coast,

and we were into our first normal rainy season in six years. Without hesitation, the gardener in Coleen came bursting to the surface like that creature in *Alien*. More often than not, when I got home from work, I'd stumble over six-packs of ground cover or little mountains of new bulbs piled near the trowels and gardening gloves. She'd been out on her lunch hour again, having a creative epiphany at the nursery.

Anxious thoughts of moving to a new town faded as she tended her plants. Then, at long last, on a wet January afternoon, we had the hedge yanked out by the roots, and fresh soil trucked in to begin the new garden. As our gay friend and designer-extraordinaire, Rhän, worked to form hills and place river rocks artistically throughout the landscape, our son began fantasizing about a fish pond, and somehow he convinced us all to support the proposal. Now we have a delightful meditation spot, complete with gurgling waterfall, to take our minds off the stresses of the day. Our tiny home seems twice as big with the addition of this usable outdoor space, and we spend a lot less time tripping over each other.

And when guests come by, I no longer feel obligated to apologize for the yard, because they are busy raving about how beautiful it is to Coleen. She experiences deep pleasure in her relationship with growing plants. She calls them lion's mane, woolly thyme, candytuft, fortnight lily, dwarf cup flower, foxglove, bird of paradise, pride of madeira. She nurtures them like members of the family and worries about them with the same intensity I reserve for the kids. In fact, part of the attraction for her of joining our family was sharing in the upbringing of my children. When I see her taking the time to show them how to care for the fish in the pond, or design and maintain an attractive flower bed, I know she is setting a crucial example of a woman who cares about children but can also focus on interests besides motherhood.

To me this garden is a symbol of settling down. In all the ten years I've lived in this house I've never quite believed I would be able to afford to keep it. As the co-dependent wife of an aging hippie, then a single mother, and finally an out lesbian in an open relationship, I've always assumed I was faking the "American homeowner" life.

Hiding behind the hedge gave me the privacy to get used to my circumstances and overcome my fears. Encouraging Coleen to express herself in the garden felt the same as saying "Okay already! We're here! We're proud! Let's show the world the beauty we can create, and if they have a problem with us, it's *their* problem."

I feel vulnerable. We have opened the front of our home to public scrutiny, like women unbuttoning their Pendletons and baring their breasts to the sun. And it is good.



Coleen Where the Hedge Used to Be . . .

Photo by Rhän Wilson



. . . and by the Fish Pond.

Photo by Rhän Wilson

Cathy Cade

## Cathy's Container Garden

I live in an industrial part of Oakland in an old steel factory converted to artists' live-work spaces. My four-year-old container garden is on the edge of a sea of concrete—a large parking lot—by my front door. I work two part-time jobs, raise two children, and do as much photography for myself and the lesbian community as I can manage. With my full life, I have learned that my garden must be between my house and where I park my car or I'll never enjoy it, or even see it. I've also learned that my garden needs to be small, only the size I can care for easily.

I am beginning to see my garden as a friendship garden, for people I am close to give me plants and I pass plants on. As a lesbian, my life is not best described by blood relationships, but by the ever-changing connections of my choosing. This is reflected in my changeable garden.

Having a container garden counters my middle-class upbringing which says, "Work hard now and there will be rewards later." If there is a bare spot in my garden, I do not work hard and I don't wait very long. I go to the store and for one dollar buy a plant and fill in the bare spot. If the blooms and colors are unbalanced, I move the pots around until I like the effect. No more deferred gratification for me.

I've learned that I don't have to know everything about how to garden; I can just do something and see what happens. This is a great metaphor for other areas of my life, a contradiction to my upbringing which insisted that "You're Supposed to Know" *everything*, that in the event of mistakes, "You Should Have Known."

My garden has helped me relax, taught me that some things work, some don't; try it, it's okay to be learning. A good attitude for doing any kind of artistic work.

As I turned fifty recently, I have found myself turning to the garden looking for serenity. I've realized that watering is not another chore dutifully done, but the occasion when I get to see and enjoy what is going on in the garden.

As I consider my own mortality, I recognize the garden as an experience of the life/death/life cycle of nature within the life of each flower and with the changes of the seasons.

So this is my dyke garden: a large bougainvillea to frame my barred window; tiny lobelia for an expanded sense of scale in a small garden; impatiens, portulaca, lantana that attract butterflies; begonia, geraniums,



a growing number of succulents; and from my childhood: petunias, a few zinnias, and of course the dykely iris.



Cathy Cade in her Container Garden

Photo by Bonnie Cox

## **Out on a Limb with Pennie Rose**

*This article is based on an interview with Pennie Rose conducted by Valerie Jean Chase and Irene Reti in Santa Cruz, California, in June 1993.*

The late-afternoon sun glistens on each needle of the Monterey Pine outside our window as Valerie and I sit talking with Pennie Rose, arborist. Pennie Rose's passion is trees. For the past eighteen years she has dedicated her life to caring for them. Pennie's love for trees first grew when she needed a job eighteen years ago in San Diego and began doing landscape maintenance with her lover, Andreana, in her neighborhood. "We were charging \$5.00 an hour and I was working my little fanny off," she says. "And as we were working I decided that trees were what I wanted to focus on. Mowing lawns just didn't make it for me." So she took a class in arboriculture at a local community college which she stayed in long enough to learn the knots and belts she needed to climb trees and prune them. With Andreana's encouragement, Pennie studied for her contractor's license, because in the state of California if you make over a certain amount of money in landscaping you have to have a contractor's license. "At that time, sixteen years ago, there was no tree contractor's license, so I had to learn the landscape contractor's information in order to get the license, which is very difficult and only had one tree question in it! So I had to learn how to measure an area to put brick on. How to build a fence. How to figure out how many linear feet to get my material costs. How to figure out the labor. It was quite intensive. And I didn't like it. I fought it tooth and nail. But Andreana insisted that I get it. And after three tries (you can take it three times) I passed."

With that license, Pennie Rose became the first woman arborist in the state of California. She brought an innovative perspective to the field, insisting that the industry develop gloves which fit women's hands and climbing belts (called saddles in the industry) made out of nylon webbing instead of heavy leather. "I had this huge belt that didn't fit me. It rubbed and hurt my waist. So I decided I have to do something here. I called the company that made the saddles and asked them if they could make them smaller and they said, 'We can't. It would cost you a fortune!' So I went to a mountain climbing store and they make them out of the same material seat belts are made out of, light as a feather, fit me perfect. Because I own my own company I was able to use them. But my

employees couldn't because it broke the regulations. But things have changed. Now all my employees wear them. Because the industry has seen that having a saddle that weighs five to ten pounds is more of a hindrance and a safety problem up in a tree."

Sadly, it was women who had the hardest time accepting a woman arborist. "Interestingly enough it was the women I had to convince, not the men, that I was able. A woman would call me on the phone and she would say, 'Well would you send your man out to take a look at the tree.' Or, 'You do have men who work for you, right?' And I'd say, 'No, I do the work myself.'"

But being female is not the only thing which distinguishes Pennie Rose from other arborists. Her approach to tree pruning and care radically questions traditional arboricultural practices. Her system is based on an intimate and ecological knowledge of trees. "I just went out and started pruning and as I was pruning I got to thinking about how trees grow. I started reading about trees, not how to take care of their diseases, but about the actual trees and their root systems and what they require in order to grow . . . . As I'm pruning I'm looking at problems. I'm seeing that when branches grow too close they start folding in certain areas. I saw certain prunings and from a distance they didn't look right. I decided that if the tree didn't look natural then the pruning wasn't done right. The tree knew its form." Based on these experiential observations of trees Pennie developed a method of pruning which starts at the top and then works its way down, removing every other branch, lightening the branches, taking the dead off, cutting off all the crossing branches and the branches that are too close. The idea is to open up the tree and allow the sunlight and wind to pass through it. Pennie pulls out an impressive portfolio with before and after pictures documenting her work since the late 1970s, and shows us pictures of incense cedars, ficus trees, Brazilian peppers, pines . . . trees she has cared for throughout California. I am struck by how healthy and natural these trees look, not like the severed, butchered trees I have seen and hated. "In cleaning it out, in detailing it out, the wind can pass through it, the tree has character. It isn't raped. It's left with some integrity," says Pennie.

Pennie sees herself as an educator. She teaches free classes in home tree care every three months through Parks and Recreation. She offers landscape consultations. "It's about an hour of my time and we have a lot of fun. We walk around their yard and they learn a lot of things. I've been charging \$50 for many years now. There are many people in my profession that charge up to \$165 an hour. They get it but they don't reach the amount of people I reach. I reach the people who count, the little residential people . . . . When you ask me to come out and take a

look at your tree I don't just take a look at your tree, write something, and then hand you a bill. I make you stay by my side. I will dig into your tree, take out the bug, and show you what it looks like, make it a real personal thing and really engage you into wanting to do what is necessary to save your tree . . . . It gets down to basics—water and keeping the tree clean.”

In her long career as an arborist Pennie has developed tree care programs for cities throughout California including San Diego, San Ramon, and Claremont, as well as for the U.S. Forest Service. She has been an expert witness in insurance settlements in cases like the devastating Oakland Fire, and a park commissioner for Claremont and San Ramon. She has developed a close relationship with many nurseries in the San Francisco Bay area, who often recommend her services.

Pennie calls herself “a caretaker of our environment.” She clearly sees the ecological implications of her work as an arborist helping to preserve healthy trees in the urban forest. Some years ago she realized that many of the problems with trees began with poor landscape decisions. “Where does the disease start? Where does the misplanting start? At the very beginning. At the landscaping part of it. So I have a license. Gosh darn it I'm going to use it! So we started landscaping. We figured why not plan the yard right, put the proper tree in the proper space, plant it properly and it won't need an arborist, or need to be removed in twenty-five years.” As the owner of Living Art Envirosapes, Pennie offers “unique enviroscape designs and installation, complete tree-care services, and drip irrigation design and installation, yard renovations, and deck construction.” This diversification also lends Pennie's business a stability that tree care alone would not provide. In addition, the method of arboriculture which Pennie uses works with nature to strengthen trees' health, making trees disease resistant and cutting down on the use of insecticides. Fifteen years ago Pennie's business was one of the test groups for Safer products. They tested an organic aphid spray now used widely by both gardeners and professionals.

But Pennie Rose is first and foremost a tree woman. “Trees are incredible! They suck up so much moisture it's unbelievable. Did you know that tree out there is sucking up one thousand gallons of water a day?” she says, pointing to a magnificent Monterey cypress towering above the ocean cliffs visible from our second-story window. I imagine a thousand one-gallon water containers spinning out of the tree's lush dark green branches, whirling out over the ocean, each day, consumed. “By the way,” she says, her green eyes sparkling mischievously, wiry arms dancing through the air, themselves like branches, “the tap root

only grows down about thirteen to eighteen inches. But then it grows out laterally and it can grow for miles! That eucalyptus tree three doors down . . . its roots are probably in your neighbor's yard. The root system of a tree is five times greater than the top. If only we could see underground!" I imagine an underground photograph of Santa Cruz, thousands of dark roots groping under hot parking lots, trapped under foundations, breaking through sidewalks, thirsty roots murmuring discontent under our unsuspecting feet. I know I will never see trees the same way again! And I understand why Pennie sees herself as an artist shaping trees, why she calls her business Living Art.

What does the woman who has spent her life taking care of trees have in her own garden? "I'm really into bonsais. I love having trees around me. But you can't have giant trees around you all the time. So I have all these little miniature trees. And they're great. But I don't Bonsai them, make them look weird, a puff there and a puff here. I prune them just how they are supposed to be." Pennie and her partner Andreana have also created a magnificent garden with exquisite rocks, flowers, waterfalls, swings, and a handsome deck.

Pennie would love to hire more women and teach them how to prune trees. She does have women working in the landscaping portions of her business but it seems that many women are scared to climb trees. "Women don't apply. They don't want to climb . . . I wanted of course to hire lesbians, or women. First women! Any woman, preferably a lesbian. We did have one woman employee I taught how to climb. The thing is she didn't want to climb over a certain height. Twenty feet was the max she would climb. And she wouldn't go out on a limb." I imagine myself fifty feet up in a cypress tree, dangling from a rope with a power saw in my hand and have even more respect for Pennie Rose's courage and expertise.

Pennie Rose is looking for women who are seriously interested in one-year trade apprenticeships with Living Art Services. She would like to pass on her technical skills and her tree pruning philosophy to other women. If you are interested please write or call her at Living Art Services / 1534 Denkinger Ct., Concord, CA 94521/ 510-833-0123.



Pennie Rose

Photo by Andreana



Out on a Limb

Photo by Andreana

*Barbara E. Sang*

## **The Pleasures of Gardening in a New York City Apartment or Indoor Gardening as a Way of Life**

Entering my apartment the first thing you see is plants and trees. Plants and trees stand on all my windowsills and large trees rest on the floor. My apartment is minimally decorated. I have no rugs, curtains, or pictures on the wall and few pieces of furniture (my office is a little more conventional). Most people who enter respond immediately to my plants, expressing surprise that they are so big and healthy. They can feel the love and care that has gone into them.

My apartment is a sacred space, a sanctuary from the noise, clutter, and filth of a large, busy city. This 10th floor apartment has been blessed with excellent light. The bedroom has an eastern and southern exposure, the living room has a southern and western exposure, and the office has a western exposure. The windows are large. In addition to good lighting, years of outdoor and indoor gardening experience and the reading of books on the subject have contributed to my "green thumb." Before I tell you more about my experiences as an apartment house gardener, let me digress and tell you how it all got started.

When I was a child plants were a significant part of my life. In the 1940s they sold seed packets to grade school children once a year for two cents each. I picked the flowers I wanted and my mother and I planted them in small clay pots which we put on our sun porch. I hovered over the seeds waiting for them to sprout. It was my job to water them. As I got a little older I took over the small piece of garden in front of our rented brownstone in Brooklyn. I took the plantings from neighbors' backyards. We moved to the suburbs of Long Island when I was a pre-adolescent and from that time on gardening formed an even more significant part of my identity. We lived next to a wood filled with many different kinds of wildflowers: Jack-in-the-pulpit, Queen Anne's lace, yarrow, chicory, devil's paintbrush, bladder campion, and "stink weed" (white aster). I spent many hours learning their names and characteristics. We were informed that this land was going to be built on and therefore I tried to transplant as many of the wildflowers as I could to my own little garden on our land. Unfortunately, my mother planted bushes along the edge of this garden and when they grew bigger they crowded out most of the wildflowers.

In our suburban neighborhood only men gardened. Our family was different; my mother and I were the gardeners. Our neighbors looked at

us as freakish and out of line. Gardening was just one of the many ways that I differed from my female peers—doing something that was not considered appropriate for girls and women. Around this period I became interested in indoor trees and by the time I left for college, I had grown avocado and lemon trees of considerable size. (In those days growing trees indoors was not common as it is today.)

Although I love nature and the outdoors and would like to have an outdoor garden, I am basically a city person. (I do get out of the city regularly to hike or bike.) An indoor garden brings the out-of-doors inside. Every apartment I have ever lived in has had plants, even when there was little light. My need for plants in my living space is basic. Plants heal;<sup>1</sup> they provide me with a spiritual connection with nature. When I am surrounded by my plants and trees I don't feel alone. I am a single lesbian and plants give me a sense of companionship with other alive and growing creatures. Plants have presence.

Indoor gardening gives me a chance to interact with the elements: soil, water, and light. I love the smell of dry earth when it first becomes wet. I repot plants and run my hands through the soil, making a big mess on my wooden floors.

How do I choose the plants I have? At one time I wanted (and had) to have *one* of everything I saw. My place looked like a jungle. Now I am more selective. Over the years I have learned which plants I prefer and which ones do well in my particular apartment. I enjoy variety and contrast. In the past I have experimented with herbs but found that most do poorly indoors. I currently have a rather large rosemary plant which smells delightful and can be used for cooking.

In the city I don't experience the impact of the changes of the seasons the way I do in more countrified areas. Nevertheless, indoor gardening has its own subtle seasonal changes that allow me to feel the continuity and changes of nature. In the winter months the sun hangs lower on the horizon and produces a more intense heat indoors than it does in other seasons of the year. Indoor plants don't grow as much in the winter but some plants come alive at this time. About ten years ago, a friend gave me a tiny hibiscus plant with a few flowers on it. I never expected it to bloom again but kept it for the dark green leaves. To my surprise it blooms regularly, reaching its peak during the winter months. I love to wake up in the morning and discover how many vermilion flowers my hibiscus plant has given me that day. Each flower only lasts a full day. I

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<sup>1</sup> I recently read that certain indoor plants remove toxins from the air, which is certainly a plus living in a polluted city like New York. Of all the plants I own the *Dracaena Massangeana* or corn plant was the only one mentioned.



usually get none, one or two flowers a day, occasionally four, but on my birthday this year there were nine! Right next to my hibiscus is another colorful favorite, the Jerusalem cherry which is also a late fall/winter plant. This plant is heavy with sensual reddish-orange berries about the size of a grape. The miniature orange tree (*Colamondin Orange*) in the living room develops small white fragrant flowers in late fall which turn into small oranges as winter approaches. The fruit can be used in the same way as lemons. The thought of being able to eat and use plants I grow in my apartment appeals to me.

You have to be strong to do the type of indoor gardening I do. I like to put my tree on a bucket, water well and let it drain. The schefflera tree (a rarity as a tree) which seems to take up a good part of my office is about seven feet high and four feet wide, and rather heavy. I am able to lift this tree on and off the bucket without strain. My bird of paradise plant in the living room, however, is a dead weight. Although I can lift it if I have to, I decided to do my body a favor and water it in its saucer. This bird of paradise plant has grown gigantic since I bought it three years ago. Its banana-plant-like leaves spread two to three feet in length and it has tall, thick stems. So far conditions have not been right so it has not bloomed. Another plant that has grown huge in only a short period of time is the aloe. I bought it as a small plant from the "five and ten" to use its leaves to heal a badly burned finger. It is not only very large and heavy now, but its sharp-edged leaves make transporting cumbersome. It's a good thing that I swim regularly and work my arms out at the gym.

As someone who has lived with plants and trees most of my life, I have come to realize that each plant has its own distinctive personality, even those of the same kind. I own several fig trees (*Fiddle-leaf Ficus*) and each one is unique. Two trees sport many branches shooting out of the trunk, another one grows straight up and down. Two of the figs drop their leaves easily; the other one does not. As I get to know a plant I learn to sense its needs--the right amount of light, the right watering schedule, the right intervals to feed it fertilizer. Over the years I become very attached and connected to plants that I have cared for and appreciated. This summer I lost two old friends: a seventeen-year-old fig tree and a twenty-two-year-old Kentia palm. The fig was my pride and joy. It rarely produced new leaves but when it did, they were large and healthy and came out of the trunk or branches in the oddest places. Best of all, it produced over one hundred figs a year. Even though these hard green fruits, the size of walnuts, were not edible, they were fun to watch grow and gave the room a lush feeling. This fig tree had grown in such a way as to be off-balance. Each time I removed the tree from the windowsill I had to make sure it was titled backwards upon return, otherwise it

would come crashing down onto the floor. This happened several times but it always survived. When it fell off the sill this summer its plastic pot was beyond repair. I decided to cut back its roots before repotting, something I had done before successfully. This time the fig went into shock, and day after day I stood helplessly by while the leaves turned grey and fell off. I was heartbroken about it for several weeks. Fig trees rarely, if ever, fruit indoors and that tree had such a beautiful shape! As is characteristic of me, I immediately went out and replaced it with another fig and a Ming tree (*Ming Arabia*) but I can't get too excited about either. Perhaps with time the new trees and I will develop a relationship. I don't know what happened to my palm but I suspect it was either "old age" or it needed to be repotted. Of course, I now have a new Kentia palm.

Plants are full of surprises. One winter there was an awful sweetish smell in my apartment, especially at night. I threw out a large bunch of pine branches that had been in water for several weeks, but the smell persisted. One evening I just happened to look up toward the ceiling above my southern window. There, before my eyes, were the oddest flowers I have ever seen! My *Dracaena* plant had become too tall for the room and tilted toward the window as it continued to grow. A long branch climbed out of the top cluster of leaves and on this branch hung several round balls composed of many white, waxy clusters of little flowers, geometrically arranged, oozing a sticky substance. The flowers only opened at night and emanated this strong, powerful odor. I immediately consulted my *Exotic Plant Manual* and found out that the *Dracaena* blooms when chilled. This made sense because the top of the tree rested on the cold window pane. The flowers came back for three winters in a row. The smell was so hard to live with that I finally cut the branch off and have never had flowers again. I don't know many indoor gardeners who have had this experience, or how many indoor gardeners have such a large *Dracaena*. My tree is about twenty-one-years-old. For most of its life there was only one trunk. Now four trunks live in the same twelve-inch pot. They all touch the ceiling. It is an overwhelming sight.

I like to talk about my plants and can go on about them at great length. What I want to leave you with is this: Indoor gardening is well worth the time and effort. It is a way of life and of relating which is nurturing, healing, creative, physical, sensual, and spiritual.

*Paula E. Mariedaughter*

## Joy is the Color of New Leaves

Last night I planted fifteen flats of twenty-one different seeds and tonight there are a few seeds sprouting! For two months I'll sleep next to my seedlings, keeping them warm with the wood stove and moist with warmed rainwater. Living in the woods of northwest Arkansas and growing flowers and herbs has been a midlife change.

### How I Started

In March, 1969 I was 24 years old and began working as a flight attendant for TWA. Within two years I was active in our flight attendant union and part of a bitter strike against TWA in 1973. I discovered the Kansas City Women's Liberation Union. A year later I came out as a lesbian and later came out at work. In 1985 after sixteen years of flying (approximately five million miles) I went on a disability leave. TWA fired me after I was on disability for five years, at one-third the pay I'd earned previously. During that five year period I was looking for a different way to live my life. My lover Jeanne and I moved to the Ozarks of northwest Arkansas where I'd bought land in 1983. In 1987 we rented a small house nearby and started building our house in the woods with \$3000. We finished paying off the land that year and managed to build our house without a mortgage. (I sold my house in Kansas City and Jeanne's parents gave us some money.) We did most of the work ourselves and used hand tools to create our version of a nontoxic home. There's lots of light, wood textures and beautiful blue tile as well as hardwood floors. Solar energy runs our lights and the computer I am writing with today.

Seven months after moving here and starting the house I found I had advanced breast cancer. (I had found a lump one year earlier but the mammogram and doctor named it fibrocystic condition.) We had started our garden at that point in addition to work on the house, but both projects were put on hold.

Facing my breast cancer and facing my fear of dying from breast cancer intensified my search for "right livelihood" or doing what I love. Herbal and homeopathic remedies, flower essences, visualization, meditation, crystal work, diet, and surgery were all important components of my return to health. I sought assistance from a naturopath, a psychic healer (shaman), a chiropractor and the best

medical doctor I could find. I did all I could to enhance my body as a self-healing organism.

### Finding My Own Right Livelihood

While browsing in a used bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas I saw a charming five-foot-long nut and seed garland which included a variety of common nuts and seeds as well as the uncommon shapes of burr oak acorns, avocado seeds, tiny ears of multi-colored corn, cinnamon sticks and much more. I tracked down other work of the artist, Pam Carvalho, in a nearby shop. That was late December, 1989, sixteen months after my mastectomy. I returned to Arkansas and began experimenting with honeysuckle and grapevine from our woods. I used lichens and acorns to decorate my first wreaths. Seeing Pam's work was a "click" of recognition for me, "This is what I want to do—to combine natural things in pleasing ways, contrasting colors, shapes, sizes, and textures. No geegaws, ribbons, or bows to distract." I contacted Pam and spent several sessions learning from her. She recommended books and shared several techniques with me and of course we talked gardening. We walked through her late winter garden and talked and talked. She sensed my enthusiasm and tempered it with tales of her own experiences of trying to do it all—seed starting, growing, harvesting, drying, crafting, marketing, and teaching.

The previous summer (1989) I'd worked as an apprentice at Dripping Springs Garden where I had my first experience growing everlastings. At home Jeanne and I completed five sixty-foot raised garden beds edged by stone retaining walls. The garden beds were our front yard, each following the curve of the mountainside. We grew herbs on a small scale for wholesale use. After we'd agree to grow radishes or parsley I'd find myself wanting to plant flowers. This new career as a wreathmaker and everlastings grower meant I could do just that!

I exhibited at my first craft show in June, 1990, and today I set up at least thirty-five days a year. I'm fortunate to live in an area where there are lots of craft shows within a five hour drive. Marketing is the biggest challenge. Finding the right shows to sell my work has been full of trials and errors. If my partner had not had a well-paying part-time job and our house and land had not been paid for I don't know how it would have worked.

## My Favorite Parts

I truly believe in the concept of “Do what you love, the money will follow.” My favorite part of my “job” is creating something new from all the flowers and herbs, pods and cones that cover every surface and hang from the ceiling in the drying barn which also serves as my work space. I often look around to see what plant material I have the most of and start from there. I add and sometimes subtract different elements until I’m satisfied with the whole. Then I record the various elements, assign it an inventory number and price it. I try to make several more like the original while I have all the ingredients assembled.

One of the principles I learned as an apprentice is “value added.” If I were to sell my everlastings or garlic, for examples, right from the garden I would receive one price. If I can process either in a way to add value I can increase the price I receive in the marketplace for my product. I may also broaden the scope of potential buyers. For example, there are many people who will buy everlasting wreaths or garlic braids who wouldn’t buy either as unprocessed items. This may vary in different parts of the country—I have lesbian friends in south central Colorado who grow dried flowers and craft with them as part of their bedding plant business. They have decided in the coming year they’ll sell more of their flowers as simple bunches. They sell almost exclusively through farmer’s markets and have little access to craft shows.

I also enjoy “setting the stage” for displaying the wreaths, swags, bouquets, garlands and other arrangements that are the final product of my gardening and collecting in the wild. Both the simpler version I take to the local farmer’s market and the more elaborate set-up I use at craft shows include the muted colors of several old quilts (including a quilt done in the flower garden pattern), antique boxes, baskets and shingles to display the wreaths.

Most of my customers are women, which pleases me. I receive lots of compliments on my creations and sometimes have great conversations about gardening and crafting, or feminism and my last name. Selling one’s product also requires selling oneself—that can be trying at times. Physical stamina is a requirement for doing all that I’m describing. I’m now 47 and most of my life energy goes into maintaining our homestead and doing this business.

I find gardening easy to learn, but always full of more to know. I sift my soil knowing I’m making it easier for the first roots of every seed I plant to move through the soil and anchor the seedling enough to push out tiny green leaves into the universe. Seeing those tiny leaves, I

experience wonder and awe and especially joy. Joy is the color of new leaves. I find deep satisfaction in nurturing the seedlings, “hardening off” in preparation for the overcast rainy day that they’ll be transferred to their real home in the earth. I watch as they stabilize and then grow—often into lush clumps of green, with shades unique to each variety. The lacy fern-like green of yarrow contrasts with the scalloped edge of annual statice and the smooth-edged medium green of globe amaranth. I soak in their beauty, nourished, satisfied by my relationship to all these plants. Some of the plants and herbs feed my body directly. I eat basil with gusto. But even days I don’t actually eat basil leaves I enjoy the lush growth habit of the plants, and of course I enjoy the fragrance—we here call it dyke perfume. Two years ago my ailing cat Purl spent his last days under the bushy growth of fifty basil plants. He died in their midst.

Perennials, like old friends, reappear each spring. Some, like the bleeding heart and the peonies, I brought with me from Kansas City. Every day is a treasure hunt. Besides watching for snakes (we have lots of poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes), I’m searching for the first signs of growth from the perennials and watching to see which annuals have self-seeded. The larkspur, dill, and nigella never fail to reappear although they may need to be transplanted. Wonder fills me as I learn more of mother nature’s ways. Simple observation teaches me how interrelated everything is. I tell my classes that I garden to make the earthworms happy and they’ll make me happy. It’s true!



Jeanne in the Basil

Photo by Paula Mariedaughter

*Chaia Zblocki Heller*

gardening

while you are gone, i take care of the garden,  
four raised beds that look like lumpy graves  
studded with ragged plumes of broccoli and brussels sprouts.  
neither of us have done this before. as a kid,  
i had to weed the walk in front of my mother's house,  
my head wedged between the waxy rhododendrons.

turns out i pulled the carrots you planted before leaving,  
mistook their spidery leaves for weeds, unimportant details  
that slipped out smooth and slick as toothpicks.  
i planted the tomatoes you left me, quivering  
in their squat, green containers. two days later,  
their stems sagged, leaves paled to a pasty yellow.  
i think it is hard for anything to grow these days.

you call me almost every day to see how the garden is doing,  
to see if i am watering. i lug the fat, green hose  
around the back of the house, flood the beds  
until silt slides down the sides in thick, loopy rivers.  
strange, i don't even know what you planted,  
what green signs of life to look for. each day i try to identify  
heart shaped, star shaped, straight shooting leaves.

i tell you i am lost, but having fun.  
pulling out the wrong things and planting more.  
your trip is going well, but you worry. worry about women  
i meet out dancing. ask each time if i love you  
and am i sure really. you think about the marigolds  
keeping their tidy orange heads  
around the fringe of the garden.  
they keep the bugs away, you warn.

gardening is an act of faith unfamiliar to both of us.  
the first frill of lettuce thrills me like laughing gas.  
i pick before it's ready, i am so giddy  
i want to press it between waxed paper  
and send it off to you for proof.

i am spending more and more time  
in the garden. the first shivering  
hours of the day find me on all fours  
sturdying the beds, planting little white stones  
around the edges. i don't wait for seeds.  
i bring home car loads of flowers, six in a box,  
to plant around the vegetables, their spots and stripes,  
their daring and delightful gestures. i tell you  
you will be amazed when you come home.  
and i want to amaze you. not really me, but the garden.  
i can't wait to steam up a broad, silver platter  
full of fronds of the deepest emerald,  
feed you each radiant, miraculous leaf.



Photo by Shoshana Rothaizer

Michigan 1983



## Gaining Ground

At the end of August in 1981, I found myself in a small town in Arkansas, where I knew no Lesbians other than my new lover, Lynn. I wanted it that way. We were living in hiding from my armed and vengeful ex-lover who had abused me for four years and had threatened both of us with deadly harm. This was five years before the publication of Kerry Lobel's ground-breaking book, *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*. I knew I had been battered, but I did not understand how deeply I had been injured.

I only knew that I seemed to have saved my life at the cost of my sanity. I jumped at loud and not-so-loud noises. A frown from a stranger could reduce me to tears. I was afraid to bathe if I was alone in the apartment. I relived every word of every fight in relentless flashbacks. I had blocked much of the unbearable pain of the previous four years out of my consciousness at the time, in order to cope with immediate danger. Now that I was "safe" it all came flooding back. To escape, I watched TV compulsively, avoiding anything violent—nature shows were my favorites—and I read science fiction. Having lost faith in women as well as men, I was a serious candidate for a species-change operation.

Luckily, at some point in that bleak winter, I read a magazine article on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam Vets, and I recognized all my symptoms. I had a name for my suffering, and I knew I was not "crazy." I'd felt so much guilt and anger towards myself for not being okay, that is, my old self, since I was "free." Now I knew healing would take time and effort, and I gave myself permission to not be normal right away. Also, seeing how much my condition resembled that of war survivors helped break down some of my denial about the hell I'd been through.

Still, I had no guidance on how to recover from PTSD. I followed only the dimmest instincts. First, I began to read accounts by survivors of any serious trauma. These people became my invisible support group. I found myself drawn especially to stories of political prisoners and concentration camp survivors. Although my experience was not like theirs, these were the people I felt would understand how my will had been sapped and my strengths twisted, how the smallest acts of resistance and mere endurance had needed all my wits and courage. Bruno Bettelheim in his chapters called "Behavior in Extreme Situations" (*The Informed Heart*) finally answered the question I'd put to myself every

hour since my escape: "How could I have been so stupid?" He made me realize that under abuse, especially the combination of intermittent threats, unpredictable violence and constant psychological torture, everyone responds differently, but everyone changes fundamentally, and everyone has their breaking point.

One day as I sat reading at the kitchen table, I looked out the window at the small yard beside our duplex apartment, and I began to imagine growing a garden there in the spring. It seemed like a highly improbable idea: the area was very small, steep, bare of everything but gray shale and orange clay, and the house shaded it part of the day. But the notion of a garden took root strongly. For the first time in several years I had something pleasant to anticipate.

I wrangled my landlady's permission to put in a garden. Then I mailed off postcards for seed catalogs. I persuaded an acquaintance who owned a truck to bring me a load of cedar slabs discarded by a local sawmill, and I used these to construct two frames, about four feet by six feet, and two even smaller ones, just three feet by four feet. By this time Lynn and I had saved enough money to buy a very old VW bug, so we drove to a nearby creekbank and filled bushel baskets with rich bottom dirt, which we dumped into the frames to make raised beds about four inches deep.

To supplement the tiny growing space, Lynn scavenged large cans from the cafeteria of the hospital where she worked. I painted them a hopeful green, filled them with soil and placed them along the sidewalk below our porch. Old-timey "Corn-row Beans," originally bred to tolerate the shade of cornfields, grew up strings tied to the roof and bore prolifically.

I didn't have much money from my SSI income to spend on garden gadgets, so I made do. I wove a trellis for my peas from six-pack rings liberated from a liquor store trash bin. (I can testify that this plastic never biodegrades—the pea fence survives to this day.) I got some more bushel baskets from the local grocery, painted them with non-toxic preservative and lined them with garbage bags after snipping a few drainage holes in the bottom. Placed around a small stone patio above the garden, these became containers for large plants.

The garden rewarded me before the first mouthful of early spinach was harvested. It moved me out of the gloomy apartment and into the sunshine, watering can in hand. It motivated me to interact with people and to occasionally risk asking for help. I found out they would usually say yes. My attention was now focused on the future, not the bitter, unchangeable past. At night when the flashbacks threatened to roll, when I dreaded the dreams I might have, I put myself to sleep with

detailed plans of my next crop rotation. I found out I could learn a major new skill, a little at a time. I could do things right, even come up with ingenious solutions to seemingly impossible difficulties. And when I did things wrong, plants were most often forgiving. The plants themselves were a tremendous source of inspiration. Talk about survivors! They defied every book written about their needs, often thriving with too little sun, too little water, and too little soil. At the end of a year, I could easily stick my shovel in the dirt up to the hilt, where only four inches of top soil had previously existed; compost and the action of the roots had created friable loam out of shale and clay.

When I experienced failure with gardening, it was never the kind of disaster I'd grown to associate with mistakes. We didn't go hungry, because other crops outstripped our expectations. My lover didn't beat or berate me, but sympathized and helped. The garden was important to us economically, because we'd both lost almost everything we owned in our escape. Luckily, in southern Arkansas, it's possible to garden year-round. The garden gave me precious, desperately needed tastes of success. Disabled, unemployed, I still felt like an important contributor to the household. I even had food to give away sometimes, and that was a delicious feeling.

Gardening was not the only factor in my recovery, but it was an important one. I didn't grow up with abuse, but battering and similar traumas can expand minutes into hours, years into decades, until four years feel like most of a lifetime. At the end of a year and a half of gardening, I no longer felt as if I'd spent the majority of my life in a battering situation. Healing had acquired a new definition for me: I didn't insist on having the old me back; I'd mourned her long and well. I accepted the fact that some injuries are too severe to be made whole, that I might never be the same again. But I began to actually like and trust the me I am now, scars and all.

As my garden taught me, I must make do with what I am. I have discovered that my flaws are not fatal and my successes are greater than I'd hoped for. So far I have not gone hungry, and I even have something to offer.

## The Persistence of Roots / A Profusion of Freesia

### I. The Persistence of Roots

My mother smells of tomatoes.

Up and down the hilly field out behind the shed where we store farm machinery, sacks of chicken feed, and hoes, I follow her. The green tomato smell mixes with her sweat. The dirt clings to her socks and canvas shoes. Her shirt sticks to her back as though it were a layer of sweat or a scent. Black dust draws a mustache above her lip; she tills. If I want to be with my mother, and I crave being with my mother, then I need to walk these rows.

This is no TV mother tucking children into bed, reading stories, kissing us good night. This is my mother who has thirteen children to feed.

My mother feeds us. Beets, carrots, onions, and winter squash. Big heads of dill grow among pickling and cutting cukes. The pickles will be sliced into thin coins, soaked in vinegar, dill, salt, and eaten for dinner. There are heads of cabbage to be whacked off with the butcher knife and shredded on long, hot afternoons to make into sauerkraut.

She is a small woman with tight biceps, black hair, eyes the color of the edge of a newly sharpened hoe. She pushes the heavy tiller through the soil. She makes it look as though the tiller is part of her; she pushes herself through the soil. The machine is loud and the oily smoke clings to me. I know my mother doesn't want me to follow her but I can't stop.

This is her tomato field, no matter that the farm came from my father's side, that the mortgage can never be met. She drives the station wagon to the nursery in the city and brings flats of scraggly seedlings home, transplants them. She picks and cleans and sells or cans them. She prays for them.

On dusty days when the rain doesn't come, she has my brother use the tractor to pull the rusting trailer down to the field filled with milk cans of water. We kids run back and forth with tin cans, dumping one canful on each wilting plant. When the plants grow lush again, we will sprinkle the tomatoes from paper-wrapped canisters marked with a skull and crossbones.

Other days my mother cuts potatoes for planting in rows beyond the tomatoes. My mother sits by the slanted basement door with a wooden

handled paring knife under the maple tree; pieces of potato fall into an aluminum bucket with a plunk. She leaves an eye on each chunk, some are already reaching out a sprout; they smell of something moist, green and growing. They smell like the damp burlap of the enormous sack that she pulls them from.

Perhaps it was before I was born that my mother decided to hawk vegetables along the side of the highway. "We'll be in the poorhouse yet," she says on a bad day. If someone honks their horn I will run from the field to serve them, to weigh, to make change. My mother will wish I wasn't so dirty, will wish people wouldn't see us like this: her children.

I trail my mother to the strawberry patch, where she picks and weeds. Just last summer it caught fire. The dry plants flared strawberry brilliant in flame, sparked by a whirling newspaper that escaped the nearby burning barrel. She beat the fire into the ground with the kitchen broom, yelling at us to stay back. When the fire was over, the ashes on her face matched her eyes and her tired grief, "All my beautiful berries."

The berries are back this year with bright blossoms and bold fruit that stains our fingers. I complain, I've seen advertisements for U-Pic berry patches, "Why can't we mom?"

"I'd never let strangers go trampling through my patches."

I look beyond the berry patch to the orchard, to the cherry trees that we kids climb with metal buckets, gleaning what the birds have missed. My mother will make pies with some, the rest will be put into jars until a white winter day when a cherry will be a luxury.

Sometimes a plane flies low over my uncle's cornfield on the other side of the cherry trees, dusting crops. We watch, necks stretched back.

There will be afternoons of canning. The kitchen will fill with Wisconsin heat and the heat of the pressure cooker that my mother warns us away from, until I am certain that if I look at it, it will explode. She will sterilize the jars, tighten the tops with red rubber circles, then count the pops as the lids seal. She'll can pickled carrots, beets, dill and sweet pickles, creamed corn, tomatoes, applesauce, pears in their own juice. She tells me tales of botulism, "You would taste nothing, smell nothing unusual, yet the whole family would be found still seated around the supper table, dead."

She sends me away, sends me out to hunt for asparagus. I hunt for it in the high grass, beneath the trees in the orchard, along the fences, behind the rhubarb. Sometimes city people pull their cars off the highway and search for what they think is wild asparagus. My mother will chase them away. My asparagus collection is never big enough, especially after it is cut, cooked, and divided between us; two or three bites each with butter.

Sometimes I go to the orchard to hide, sometimes the cornfield. My mother says I could get lost or trample the stalks, but I never do.

Once I rode into the city with her so she could sell sweet corn door to door. She carted the bushels of corn in the back of the old station wagon: thirty-five cents a dozen. I waited in the car, watching the city. When she returned she told me she had met a woman from India, who had never eaten sweet corn. My mother boiled corn and served it to her. The woman bought a dozen.

When I am older my mother will become a nurse's aide, working the swing shift until 11 at night. She will till, plant, weed, and can, take a twenty minute nap, then drive in to work. She'll bring vegetables to share with the other aides. "They don't know what it's like to eat a fresh vegetable," she'll explain as she packs old grocery sacks full.

She is a warm person, generous, I hear people say, to her, to us. She laughs and I think of her with gray-dirt socks, scrubbing her fingernails with a brush. Pushing a tiller through the earth. Standing silent, with eyes empty as drought, while her husband beats her children. Days when I search the farm for her, walk rows searching, to discover her scrubbing the floor weeping or lying on the bed. "I just want to crawl into a hole in the ground."

I find the first ripe tomato of the season and wish that I could bring it to her, instead of eating it secretly in the field.

## II. A Profusion of Freesia

Most of my adult life I've lived in funky places with rent I could barely afford, lived in them until the noise or cold or bad plumbing pushed me out. Why plant when I might move? Still I always stuck in a few tomatoes.

Through good fortune, the help of a friend, hard work, and cheap living I was able to finally buy a neglected house with a tiny yard. The yard was covered with a thick mass of weeds, crabgrass and sourgrass, in soil that was dead. Not the black soil I grew up with.

I want a garden for pleasure, a garden for a painter, a garden for hummingbirds, a garden that can survive drought and coastal fog, a garden that is abundant, organic, and unruly.

In late September I visit the garden store and get dizzy surrounded by so many plants, seeds, bulbs. I compile a list. I buy top soil, borrow a pitchfork. I dig up a tiny part of the lawn: horrible, dried-up junk. It is clay and old roots, and hard, hard work. I begin to appreciate talk among

gardeners that I once spaced out, talk pertaining to mulch, compost, seed catalogs, and organic pest control.

\*

I think the weekend should be different, that I should be in the garden today, hacking at those persistent roots. Instead I sleep. Surely a better choice, with a hoarse voice and fever? I always think I have to produce something, that out of my time must come a product.

\*

My friend Valerie helps me dig the rest of the garden; it is easier with two women.

It can't happen all at once but I am not a patient woman, never have been. Some women have suggested the garden will teach me that: patience. The image is so strong, the whole garden appears, but my budget is small. Valerie says taking time is better, I can shape it slowly.

I go to the garden store. On the way home the scent of lavender fills the car. Afterward I transplant: Spanish and French lavender, Early Purple Mexican sage, potato vine, Australian hibiscus. To transplant I scoop composted manure, topsoil, peat moss into each hole, and finish off with water and B-1 solution. I've never done this much for a plant before. Let them grow lush. I pray for them as I work, not to my mother's vengeful god, but instead a god that lives in the earth and me. Tomorrow, I hear, there is a chance of rain.

Many earthworms tunnel the now soft soil. The garden still looks bare. I hope it rains soon, rains hard. I pull out many sweet grass bulbs; this is only the beginning. How strong bulbs are, the ones I don't want to cultivate.

I eat with a gardener's hunger; soup and bread. Soup filled with bulbs and roots: garlic, onion, yam, ginger.

I dream of eating, of being so hungry I eat and eat. I remember dreams of food I dreamt as a child, always waking before I could bite.

Every time I close my eyes I see roots, dry brown roots.

\*

The perennials seem happy. Who can I tell this to? How can this be? Me, who lives in books and a rational world.

With new art supplies, I always need time to experiment, play. Now I experiment with plants, bulbs, seeds. Painting with plants, having faith in color I can't yet see, like glaze on an unfired pot.

I keep planting more bulbs. A leap, like faith; I will live here long enough to see them bloom.

The roses won't arrive until January, but I want to get their spot dug and mulched. I want to be ready. Planting roses in January confuses me; I still think of frozen soil, layers of snow, ice, and a wind chill that stiffens working fingers.

The baby garden. That is what my neighbors and friends call my plot, because it is small, the plants young. I have in mind a lush, overgrown, loud garden, not a baby.

\*

It is March; the anemones are in bloom. The first one or two were purple and began in the rain. Now there are clusters in crimson and pale, warm shades.

The roses are leafing; the aphids are feasting. I pick them off, squash them between my fingers. If I can't do it organically, I won't do it.

Iceland poppies bloom, playful like lopsided plates balanced on long wobbly stems. The baby snapdragons remind me of a old-fashioned girl's dress, smocked and embroidered in a hand-tinted photo, someone else's childhood.

The garden pleases me. I hope in some selfish human way that it pleases the earth too, pleases the plants. It certainly satisfies the snails. They know I am doing this just to feed them, lavishly.

\*

The garden is turning into a cream, forest, and plum-colored quilt. Two freesia choose to bloom today, my birthday; amethyst and white. They are a luxury, my favorite for the fragrance alone.

The crocuses are gone, a brief appearance. I meant to take a photo.

Delphinium, statice, foxglove, ranuncula; I love these names, like prayers in a language I don't speak, but understand. A madness for gardening takes over. This garden is years of desire expressed, finally.

I have a profusion of freesia, freesia in every room.

I love sending flowers along with a friend. I feel rich with flowers, such abundance that I can give away my favorites and feel no loss. I think of my mother giving away vegetables at her job. A rare pleasure for her to have an abundance of something other than children, anger, and debt.

\*

I'm on break from my watercolor class. The spring garden is a silk tapestry or a rough cotton rag rug. A bird dives down into the heather and twirls itself around in a frenzy of bug hunting.



I feel on the edge of grief. Five irises bloom, cream and denim blue. There are brilliant pink ranunculas, a color that I can only bear in a flower. The foxglove is budding and stands to my waist. One sad delphinium has fallen over, I try to revive it. A bee buzzes the Mexican sage, which reaches out a dozen fuzzy purple arms. Freesias softly spring up in lavender blooms from patches of alyssum. The miniature snapdragons form muted clumps of rose, watercolor violet, and faded yellow. No shade of green is absent. It is spring; how can I feel grief?

\*

I spend the morning drawing and painting in the flower garden. I feel a sense of freedom and competence. I tuck myself into a corner of the garden that does not feel conspicuous.

When I pause I watch the bees' frantic flight from blossom to blossom, listen to birds in the tree that hangs over from the neighbor's yard, and see a rusty butterfly land on the foxglove. A garden knows, I am certain, when it is cherished.

\*

April. The foxglove is taller than me now and the delphiniums are stretching too. The lobelia looks like healthy, thick hair set off with sapphires. It glows. If I could be a color, would this be it? The garden is a chorus, something new chimes in while slowly something else fades out.

How often it must be that a woman's life is saved by a poem, a quilt, a word accurately spoken, a garden, by being just for one moment her best self.



## the garden paths of a brooklyn kid

i was born and raised in a tenement in a working class neighborhood in brooklyn, n.y. not only weren't there gardens in my neighborhood, but there wasn't much grass; even the small local parks were mostly cement. we couldn't afford fresh vegetables, so we had canned green beans, canned peas, canned peas and carrots, and for special occasions, canned beets. on dairy nights (my family was kosher) we had canned creamed corn with milk, heated up as soup. needless to say, gardening wasn't in my life until many years later, when i was 18 and 19 years old and lived on a kibbutz in israel. it was there i learned to love and be awed, amazed, and exhausted by working in the fields and growing food. later, this love grew when i came out and started being around more country dykes, though i do remember some embarrassing moments.

in 1977, i was with about 80 dykes at the first (and what turned out to be the last) annual lesbian bizarre in the new york catskills. one nite i was asked to go to the garden and pick some lettuce for dinner. we didn't grow lettuce on my kibbutz, so all i knew was how to pick a head of lettuce from the local grocery store. i was too embarrassed around these oh so groovy country dykes to go in and announce i didn't know how to pick lettuce from the garden, so i just went for it. i unsuccessfully tried to yank up whole heads and was left with a lot of ripped up lettuce and roots. i quietly left what i had on the kitchen counter and quickly exited. somewhat later the salad makers arrived on the scene, making jokes and laughing at how the lettuce had been picked. they didn't know i picked the lettuce and i stood by silently embarrassed. that day i made a commitment to myself that i would soon figure this out and have my own garden.

in 1981, at the age of 24, i had my first garden. i was living in whatcom county, east of bellingham, washington. i had come for the summer to visit my best friend and to check out the place for a possible move from n.y. at first i stayed with my friend at her home. in not one of my finer ethical lesbian moves, i slept with her girlfriend about a week after i arrived. although we managed to work it out, the stress remained and so when the opportunity to house sit arrived, we all decided this would be a great thing. and it was a great thing: it was a sweet little house on a country road with no neighbors anywhere near.

the house had a huge garden just planted and needing to be tended. i was excited by this opportunity, and in my urban new york jewish

writer's way, i read all i could about gardening. i worked in the garden every day, made sure it was neurotically and totally weed free. i was thrilled to have access to all this fresh food. i'd always hated peas, but now that i had fresh ones, they became my favorite vegetable; besides they were one of the first vegetables ready for harvesting. i was probably more attentive to the peas than just about anything else. i'd water each plant meticulously, give them manure tea once a week, talk and sing to them, and thank them every day. they were my pride and joy. i could help make something grow that you could eat, a miracle.

then one day i noticed the peas seemed not to be doing as well; the leaves were getting yellowish-brown and brittle. i gave them more water. i read about nutrients peas needed and i fed them. i talked to them more. nothing i did helped and they got worse and worse. finally, even i could tell they were dying and i couldn't stand it. i didn't have a vehicle or phone so i frantically walked a few miles to where two dykes i had become friends with were living. i knew one of them would be home and she was a master gardener who grew up on a farm in kansas. by the time i got there i was in tears going on about how i had killed the peas and how terrible it was. i was a murderer. i told her everything that happened. i thought i did everything right and i didn't see any obvious bugs. but the fact remained: i killed the peas. i was devastated. ruth, my kansas friend, decided she'd take a look for herself. we got in her car and drove back to my home. she looked at the peas and looked at me and i could tell she was trying hard not to laugh, as i was so obviously upset at my homicide, or involuntary manslaughter at best. she sat me down and told me, kindly, that peas, like all the other vegetables, have a life cycle and they were just dying back for the season. it was nothing i did and there was nothing i could do about it. i had gotten a good crop and now they were dying. part of life, you know. luckily, my relief overshadowed my embarrassment, and it became easier, at least that summer, to ask questions. i was even able to laugh at myself at times, like i did after much complaining about not having brussels sprouts and someone told me i actually had a ton of them; they grew around the stem, under the leaves. i only ever looked on top. of course that was easier to take, since fresh or not, i don't care much for brussels sprouts.

over ten years have passed since that first garden. the pea story is not just amusing, but a reminder. you see, sometimes i still think i kill things even after all these years when i've had lush gardens which i and others have admired, food and flowers to eat and smell and see to my heart's content, baskets of garden produce to give away, shelves of canned goods, and a freezer full of food for winter nites of borscht, tomato soup, and pickles. in fact, in the middle of doing a draft of this article, i went

out to my garden to check on things, and wondered why hardly any of the flowers i planted are coming up yet, only about six cucumbers, and the spaghetti squash isn't up at all. i've moaned around in the last week about how i have poisoned hands like lady macbeth 'cause the things i planted didn't come up, despite all the beets, carrots, lettuce, corn, beans, artichokes, spinach, and more that are up and thriving, some already in my stomach.

gardening is a reflection and a projection of my life as a radical jewish working class lesbian living here on this planet of madness. when i plant it is an act of faith in a world that has tried and continues to try to take my faith away, minute by minute. to believe that a small seed can become nourishment and beauty is a supreme act of hope. to see and accept life and death and all its cycles in a culture that is so death denying on one hand, and on the other hand does its damndest to try and kill all sorts of people and beings spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically, is an act of revolution. i'm not saying it is revolution, just that it's an act of it and teaches me how to continue.

my garden explains to me cycles and responsibility and letting go. i learn from my garden that there are times when you have to push and push and push and there's a time to put the garden to bed for the winter, to let the garden rest, like we need to do for ourselves sometimes. i used to be anxious for the garden to produce its food, not taking in the specialness of the new plants popping up their heads, or any stage in between. but i've learned this is a part of the cycle and to appreciate the many stages of process. still, as i write this i wonder how romantic it is, especially for a tuff kid from brooklyn, and whether i'm being clear about what this has to do with lesbian gardening, aside from i'm a lesbian and so's my garden.

but then i think about mezuzahs. in the jewish religion it is a tradition to put a mezuzah on your door frame. a mezuzah is a case with a scroll containing some biblical texts in it. when you walk in and out of the house, you touch it with your fingers and then kiss your fingers. one of the reasons given for this ritual is that you should have a physical reminder of your spiritual self. in a way, that's what i mean when i think of my garden being so much about my life as a jewish working class dyke. it's a physical reminder of my spiritual self, and vice versa: it provides and asks for my physical and spiritual selves and the interconnection of these.

gardening allows me to create something by feeding and nourishing myself and my communities. it also allows me to bypass much of the current food chain situation. the food chain situation in the u.s. is one where multinational corporations buy out poor farmers. the

multinationals then use pesticides that destroy the lives of migrant workers and the earth itself, and then hire people of color and poor people in the u.s. and abroad for sub-minimal wages and super-hazardous working conditions. other multinationals, or the same ones, sell banned pesticides to countries that do not have whatever convoluted pesticide regulations the u.s. has and then buy back the imported pesticide-ridden food and sell it to the poor. more often than not, the so-called "quality" food is way too expensive and many people can't even afford so-called "cheap" food. once again, poor people get fucked over by the multinationals. meanwhile, the u.s. spends thousands of research dollars on biotechnology so tomatoes will not rot as quickly and can be shipped further and cost more money, instead of being grown at home (for those *privileged* to have homes at all) and/or given away as a right, not a privilege. we live with a food chain that makes food so poisonous that people often suffer and die from the production of it in the fields and the factories, by eating it, or by starving from its lack of accessibility in the u.s. and worldwide. meanwhile, in the u.s. and many other "western" countries fat oppression grows exponentially alongside the rate of anorexia and bulimia.

i think about the sweet honey in the rock song "are my hands clean?" it's about the clothing industry and all the stages clothing manufacturing goes through that fuck over people of color all over the world. then wimmin of color in the u.s. buy shirts on sale in sears, and they ask, "are my hands clean?" when i think about how the food i buy gets to where it is, and the choices i have to make about what food is healthy for me, for others, for the earth, and how much it costs to everyone involved, including myself, i know it's impossible to totally "keep my hands clean." so when possible i take the dirt and shit of my own garden over those in power any day.

there are other pieces of my garden too, that are not about physical nourishment, but about a way i can find some spiritual nourishment and get energy to continue struggling. my garden reminds me that despite the "efforts" of those in power, the earth isn't totally destroyed yet, something i have a hard time remembering. it reminds me that sometimes you have to work hard and pay attention to see the "results," and sometimes you have to get your hands in deep shit to get to the bottom of things. it reminds me that you can be powerful and work with something without having power-over and control. gardening reminds me there is a cycle of life and death to be honored, not denied and destroyed. it reminds me there are miracles, that growth is possible, that faith is possible, that hope is possible, that disappointment and frustration are part of the package, but not the whole shebang. it reminds

me of these ethics i want to remember to bring with me and live any way i can; it reminds me as i watch, smell, taste, work, touch, and listen for all that my garden provides.

i now live in a house with a big yard in a multi-ethnic working class neighborhood in the south end of seattle. i have a huge garden that i dug up out of the grass. despite my repeating some of the same lessons again and again, i've come a long way from the cement of brooklyn, trying to pull up heads of lettuce, and self-imposed involuntary manslaughter charges for killing peas. the physical and spiritual nourishment i get from my garden is part of what keeps me going and alive, believing the earth can still provide ways to feed me and my communities. for a generally very cynical working class brooklyn kid, that really is a miracle.



Emma Joy Crone

Photo by Shaunna Denis

*Emma Joy Crone*

## Emma's Gardens

*for Angie*

As a child in an industrial city in England, I was limited to the joylessness of a working class environment, where for the poor a backyard (in England this means paving stones, slabs of concrete covering the earth) was the norm. Only small borders of marigold, a few straggling snapdragons, were the sight I met in summer, maybe a tiny bit of grass. The fight against the pollution of coal dust and smoke, as well as the industry of cotton mills, was intense. Exotic flowers (to me) were roses. Surprisingly they thrived in this atmosphere.

Finally my mother acquired a real garden, but it was her domain; she created and cultivated a small lawn, a few flowers. Our greatest joy was a hedge of hawthorn, now grown to large trees, which in the spring gave forth a profusion of white and pink blossoms. I cherished the sight of these flowers, the only bright spot at the bottom of the garden in an otherwise murky landscape of row upon row of houses. My mother grew up in another dirty city; her father took her on country walks, urbanization not having yet reached its peak. From him she learned the lore of the hedgerow, which she passed on to me. My grandmother, a dim, stern figure, named her children Lily and Violet, which I guess from seeing a picture of my mother's paved, ugly backyard, was the nearest she came to a garden. My mother had the pressures of a boarding house and child she was bringing up alone, so her creative energy was just that—her garden.

At home as a child, it was my mother's garden. During a twelve-year marriage, it was my husband's garden. However post-marriage and post-feminism, when personal power started to creep into my life, it became time to do something about the call of the countryside.

I left England behind in 1968 when I emigrated to the United States. After many travels I came to live in British Columbia, Canada. I felt the need to flee the cities when menopause presented itself and I took my hot flashes to Mission, B.C. Because I was unable to be there for the clearing and planting, my friend Angie took it upon herself to do this for me. A country woman for many years, she was "on the road," and gave herself this delight, treating it as a housewarming present for me. Angie died of cancer last year; she was in her late thirties and this story is dedicated to her.

This garden became my primary relationship. It was packed with vegetables, flowers and herbs. I would sit on a tree stump in the midst of all this growth and listen to the deva spirits singing me their pleasure that I had finally left the cities that held no joy of life for me.

The farmer needed the cabin; I had to move on. This is when I took to gypsying, visiting lesbian lands; I found and planted and nurtured gardens in many places. My love of the earth and her blessings continued to grow stronger. On the road for two years, I met ecofeminists who were bent on preserving and nurturing Mother Earth, rather than destroying her. I met lesbians who were changing their names to those of trees or flowers in an endeavour to preserve and to stop the rape of forest and fields. In Oregon I became Pennyroyal, a favourite herb, purple of flower and tenacious. She will grow everywhere given the chance. I met strongly political women and had my first dyke haircut.

On the road I met a woman who had studied and grown herbs as a way of healing her emotional breakdown. This was in a city with only a small garden. I visited lands in Wales, Denmark, France, England, and the United States (with a side trip to Lesbos, where I smelt and saw the wild herbs in profusion). I found lesbians growing market gardens, sharing chores, and eating the produce. I gathered wild watercress growing in a spring in the grounds of a castle, (L'Arnaude, taken over by lesbians for a brief period) in Toulouse, France. I met lesbians from many continents, and shared the joys and hassles of collective gardening. In Denmark, at Kvidenlandt, lesbians lived together. With the icy winds of the Baltic Sea blowing across the land, we attempted to garner some small patches of the Mother, everyone having their own tiny piece of land. Here were many women who had primary relationships with her and we found gardens hard to share. Many of us found a healing affinity with the earth, to the extent that we became one with her. She is hard to relinquish to others! Again I met many women from many continents, and today still know of them and their lives.

It became more and more evident that the countryside was my place to be. I tried once more to live in the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, but my natural roots kept pulling me towards the Mother. At this time I was at a low ebb, when two women crossed my path. They were going to live on an island and they suggested I come along with them. Could I really move again? I was 56, beginning to feel body changes, and feeling an inclination to "root" somewhere. I came to this island, lived in many rented cottages and cabins, grew gardens in every one of them.

Today I live on five acres with my lover Annie. We rent a studio. The island is remote in its geographical location—it takes three ferries to



reach here from Vancouver B.C. On the edge of the temperate rain forest, we enjoy constant rain in the winter, the moisture creating a natural garden I've come to love and enjoy. A season of mists, occasionally snow, but this latter is minimal when it happens. The rewards are the greenery of ferns sprouting from a forest floor of fir, cedar, arbutus (known as madrone)—the latter snaking her beautiful pink sinuous limbs on the cliffside nearby. The ocean and storms bring large piles of seaweed to mulch and give more nutrition to the earth. In early spring: mushrooms, trillium. On the cliffside, a million tiny flowers cling to her surface, yarrow next, then camus and the shooting star.

When I first came to this land I found nettles in abundance, and apart from their medicinal and composting value I have learned many lessons in patience—clearing an area where slash and their stinging presence abounded was no mean feat. Finally two lesbians, one from Brazil, the other from the U.S., appeared and together we created one of the gardens that now surround the studio—a small cultivated area, a wildflower garden, and a campsite in the shade. A rockery has also, after three years, started to be a riot of colour from seedlings planted after rescuing a huge white rock from a clump of nettles.

It has been hard work, and now in my 65th year, I've decided that small is best as I continue to allow the seeds to scatter themselves: Queen Anne's lace, borage, mullein and calendula. This morning I lay awake at 6 a.m. watching a pileated woodpecker climb up the dead tree outside the studio. Annie sleeps on, until the rat-tat-tat wakes her. Some say the tree should be felled, but two lesbian woodswomen who visited a couple of years ago told me to leave this tree intact, as in Oregon from whence they came it had become law to keep these trees. I asked them to check for safety (it is near the studio) and they gave me a pass on this. Now I can allow my feathered friends to enjoy their snacks of insects which live in great abundance within this tree.

It's July, hard to be inside writing when the outdoors calls. This summer has been hotter than usual, and the flowers have formed their seed heads already. My newest industry in the garden is seed collecting. Shaking poppy heads into brown paper bags, hearing the tinkle of a million seeds. Knocking the dried heads of columbine into my hands. Enjoying the pop of lupin pods, which sit on my windowsills in the sun, their explosions mystifying visitors. Hundreds of seeds fall into my palm. So now I am preparing for harvest festival and hope to initiate a seed exchange. Preservation of our planet, growing gardens that attract butterflies, bees, birds, and dragonflies, as well as many other insects, is a way for me to create an alternative to the exploitation of our planet that

now prevails. We have always been the garnishers and cherishers—it is women's work.

Gardening is a healing process, plunging fingers, hands and feet into the mother who sustains, who shows her beauty without fail, each spring, through summer and into fall. I have no consciousness of time, the hours slip by, the mind is freed from care and worry. I wander from weeding to picking to watching the dragonflies winging back and forth, sunlight throwing the iridescent light of their wings into my eyes. My black cat mews from the bed of catnip where she lies drowsing. Snakes slither under my feet, out of the way of pounding footsteps. The slugs and robins against whom I railed in the spring for eating my delicate new plants and stealing my newly planted seeds have gone their way. The eagles who twittered their mating cry, joining and spinning in ritual dance—they too have passed to different climes. Summer is here.

The herring and whales pass this way too. The herring come in March, leaving eggs, which wash up on the beach, becoming a source of fertilizer. The whales are their own delight. A richness of sound and beauty of sight. It is all part of nature's garden, the fullness of life and living. To all of this I give thanks, as a lesbian and a feminist. Without a garden, life would be empty.



## Chair Garden

I watched her hungrily as she worked in the early sun. This morning she was turning up spadefuls of earth, like a lover stirring a dark goddess from her bed. After a time she stretched, leaning back on her heels and sinuously moving this way and that, easing the tension in her shoulders. Reflexively I felt my own shoulders tensing. She was so lovely, stretching without moving from the place where she knelt in the grass. There was a dark place in front of her, where she had laid the earth bare, and I imagined that it smelled like the rich fields of home.

For a moment I let myself remember what it was like to grow up in Pennsylvania where every spring breeze carried the rich scent of new-mown grass. Days when the heavy earthiness of the land reached out to you, as it lay in wait for the hoe. I used to run across the fields barefoot, digging my toes into the rich earth, unafraid of stones. Those long-ago days blur together in my mind, that time where I was one with the land.

I let myself get carried away; usually I did not allow myself to linger by the window so long and watch Melissa at her gardening. My Melissa, how lovely she appeared with the sun streaming over her cropped curls, catching the glints of red and gold that set her hair aflame. I had not seen her eyes, but I sometimes imagined that they were the color of the earth, or other times, the sky. From the window where I watched, she bent to her gardening, picking tiny stones from the earth with her fingers, and preparing small indentations for her plantings. She tucked the tiny seeds into the ground, covering them tenderly with soil.

I had been watching her clear the strip between our houses for weeks. First, she unearthed the saplings, digging them out of their beds with nothing but a small trowel. Then she attacked the weeds that grew rampant between our two cottages. Finally she stripped the ground bare, raking it over and over until a fine layer of soil came smooth, a layer of fine gauzy fabric draped across the land. Into this fertile soil she planted grasses, tall feathery grasses that grew so quickly it was impossible to say just when they took root. They emerged as a faint blush of green and then deepened almost overnight to a lush carpet that Melissa trimmed once a week.

And then she began again, gouging out small patches in the grass and planting afresh. Nothing had come up in the new places; they looked for all the world like wounds on her lush grass carpet, yet Melissa seemed satisfied. Each morning she came out to prune and fuss over her

seedlings. Saturdays she would spend the whole day. I found myself returning again and again to the dining room window to watch her. I peered between the blinds, furtive, twitching the curtains closed whenever she happened to glance my way.

On this day, unlike any other, Melissa looked up from her gardening and right at me—through the drapes, and the blinds—it seemed like she really saw me. I was so unnerved that I did not return to the window again. But I was consumed with curiosity. What was she doing; how close had she planted the seeds? Did she plant the seeds too close so that she could have the pleasure of thinning them later, giving herself another reason to tend her self-made garden?

My musings were interrupted by a knock at the side-porch door. Going to the door I pulled it open. Melissa stood there, flushed and a little flustered.

"I thought I would come to say hello," she began. "You're Annie, right?" I nodded. "Melissa."

It's odd but I never imagined her voice. Yet it suited her, being a funny contralto that wavered when she was agitated, as she obviously was now.

"I know," I said, waiting for her face to change. She looked me over; never have I felt my chair to be more of a prison than with this beautiful woman looking down at me. But her face never changed.

"Do you garden?" she asked. Silly question, I thought. She herself tore out the weeds borne of my neglect. I shook my head.

"I have begun a project," her words came tumbling out in a rush, her tone of voice saying, "I'm sorry, I should have asked before digging up your side of the plot of land which runs between our houses."

"So I saw." I kept my voice neutral. After her initial inspection, Melissa's eyes stayed on my face, never dropping lower. As I met her gaze, she blushed.

"Oh, so that *was* you looking out this morning!" Her voice held delight and relief.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry." Now *I* felt flustered.

"Not at all," she said, reaching out to touch my hand. "I was just wondering about you and this gave me the perfect opportunity to come and meet you."

"Wondering about me?" I bit out.

"If you gardened, if you would like to help me? I don't mind truly. It's always more fun together."

I looked at her sideways. Was my beautiful Melissa blind as well as headstrong? Confined to a chair as I am, I have not dug my fingers in

any earth deeper than a flowerpot for years. But a sudden yearning grew in me.

"I can't," I said finally.

"Why?" Melissa asked. Then I saw it, dawning over her face, the realization that I was not able to leave my chair. "Because of your chair?" She had said it. Now what?

No one ever really wanted to talk about it. Most tried to pretend that I wasn't really in a wheelchair, it was easier for them to pretend I was just sitting down, resting a while—anything but the blunt truth that here I sit and here I stay.

"I could build you an elevated garden if you like." Her suggestion came out of nowhere.

I looked at her. Her face was already tan from her hours in the sun and although she seemed earnest, I felt a thread of pity. I cannot bear pity.

"No, thank you. But enjoy yourself." I heard myself saying petty pleasantries, and minutes later firmly closed the door upon my beautiful Melissa.

All week I managed to stay away from the window, although I thought it would kill me to do so. I wanted to know what was peeking up from the plantings; were the bare patches even now blooming under Melissa's hands?

On Saturday morning at seven, I heard her sawing. I heard hammering at eight, and by nine I was almost out of my mind with curiosity. But I stayed away from the window. No more of Melissa's brand of forthright pity for me. At eleven it came, the inevitable knock upon my side porch door. I rolled myself to the door and pulled it open.

Melissa stood there, a vision in cutoffs and a t-shirt with rolled sleeves. Her hair was tousled, spiky and damp from her exertions and her shirt was dark too with sweat.

"Come outside," she entreated me.

"This door has no ramp," I replied. Melissa smiled and opened the door. Slowly I wheeled myself to the opening. A long, gently sloping ramp extended from my side porch, alongside the house and out towards Melissa's garden.

"I built it for you." I heard the pride in her voice. Quick tears stung at my eyes. "I worked on it all week after work, in the garage on the other side of my place so you wouldn't be disturbed."

"I don't garden," I said stubbornly, a catch in my voice.

"Today you will." She turned and walked down the ramp; I had no choice but to follow. I wheeled myself over the sill and onto the porch. The ramp that she had built for me looked seamless, a smooth surface for my chair to travel.

I have to hand it to her, she did not look back, not once. She preceded me with such confidence in her step, as if to say by her actions, "See, all you needed was the ramp." I rolled the chair to the lip of her ramp; it appeared sturdy. To my right, between the ramp and the exterior wall of my house, Melissa had installed deep wooden planters; the edge closest to me had been sanded and acted as a kind of rail. The planters were empty, but their purpose and height was obvious. They were just the height that would be comfortable for me to reach from my chair. Tears standing in my eyes, I rolled my way down Melissa's ramp and into her lush green grass.

"Would you like to help me separate the annuals?" Melissa asked casually as I rolled up to her.

"Melissa," my voice broke. She looked up at me, and for a moment I could see the earth mother, Gaia herself, in my Melissa's eyes.

"Garden with me." Her voice was a promise and a plea. Through eyes filled with tears, I reached out and took a tray of flowers onto my lap.

I would like to say that we spent many happy hours in the garden together, but the truth of it is that from that day on I stayed away from Melissa. Not that I did not venture out into the garden often, and with joy; I did. I just limited my time outside to hours when Melissa was away.

I filled the flower boxes with plantings, and I tended them like a new lover. Eagerly I rushed to my lilies of the valley and my wild strawberries, after the morning crowd had hurried their way to work and the street was quiet. I spent several hours in the garden each day, and felt myself growing strong and fit. I careened easily up and down the ramp as my arms grew strong, and my endurance increased.

Somehow as I pruned and tended the herb garden just outside the door, shyness fell away. I began to like myself again. I knew what a rare gift that was. As I browned in the sun, carefully bringing my little crop of parsley and chives, tarragon and oregano to ripeness, I began thinking about other areas in my life which I had let lie dormant these past years. Finally I could no longer deny it, my crop was at its peak; the day had arrived.

I rolled the chair out into the sunshine one Saturday morning. Melissa was already on her knees thinning what I thought were radishes, turns out they were turnips but how was I to know? Anyway, I rolled down the ramp that she had made for me, the ramp and the chair garden that I had never thanked her for. I came to a stop beside her.

"Lovely morning," I said.

"Hmm," she replied, seeming lost in thought.

"I brought you something," I offered, shy as a maid at midsummer. Melissa turned. Her eyes widened at the basket of spices on my lap.

"I grew them for you," I said. Her eyes grew bright.

"Why wouldn't you garden with me?" she asked. Her voice held no recriminations, just a gentle sorrow.

I looked out over this miniature Eden that she had created with her bare hands, this paradise that I had come to see as my haven and my proving grounds.

"I did not like myself very much. I saw you out here, working with the land, creating life. I hungered for that." I could not meet her eyes. "I hungered for you too." She was silent.

"Don't you see?" The words broke from me, a plea for understanding, "I could not share the garden with you until I felt like a whole person again, not a prisoner of this chair. You gave that back to me, the chance to be a whole woman again. It was up to me to find out how much of a woman still existed for you."

Melissa sat back on her heels. Her eyes looked soft, like a doe's eyes, warm and knowing. She came up on her knees and leaned her brown arms across my chair.

"And?" her voice was softly seductive, inviting.

I lowered my lips to hers and tasted honey. Her lips moved against mine; I felt forgotten feelings stir me. It no longer mattered that I could not leave the chair. Melissa could come to me, and I would have such love, such tenderness and joy to give her that walking would not come into it at all.

"Would you care to come and have a walk in my garden?" I asked. She smiled and walked with me as we moved past the plantings which had known the first love I had felt since my accident. She walked beside me, not trying to push the chair, not trying to walk ahead, content to stroll by my side as we climbed the ramp and into the coolness of the house.

It was like a summer's rain, that first coming together. You know, the kind of rainstorm that blows up out of the north and drenches you within minutes and then, as quickly as it has come, is gone. We were like

that. Melissa covered my body like a living vine, writhing across me. I held her in arms grown strong and sure and stroked her body to pleasure. There was a savagery between us, a desperation that comes with long weeks of wanting.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered what she saw in me. I was a half woman, barely alive, cruelly cheated out of a normal womanhood. And then she touched me. She never asked if I had feelings here or there, or betrayed any of that falsely bright cheer that nurses do when they try to pretend they don't know how bad it is. My body came to life beneath her hands, her mouth. She stroked my neck and I ached for her. She bent to take my breast into her mouth and I was aflame. I do not remember feeling anything like it even when I could walk.

It was elemental between us, as necessary as wind and rain, thunder and lightning. Between the sheets on that summer afternoon I reclaimed my body in Melissa's arms, and I found a true love far sweeter than any I had ever known.

Oh yes, we till the ground together now, she and I. Our fingers sometimes bury beneath the earth to touch, to twine together in the rich loam. And it is in our garden that I can look at Melissa and see the woman I am becoming in her eyes.



Lou Ann Matossian

## Tending the Garden

*Things are getting out of hand*, she worries.  
So much work to clear the garden,  
more than she can do alone. I offer help;  
she's grateful, hands me the big clippers:  
take out the saplings, elm and ash,  
mulberries along the border, dropped  
by squirrels from a long-gone fence.  
We set to work,  
Kris yanking out weeds by the roots, I remembering  
my mother with her wild heart, cutting the wild  
saplings out of the yard, a child-sized grove.  
How I cried, unable to explain. *Look*,  
says Kris, *it's not as though I'm heartless*,  
and she's right, of course: inside the house  
she's the one who tends the plants, knows their thirsts  
and hungers; I'm the one, unmoved,  
who takes the dead stalks out for garbage,  
pot and all. Like my mother,  
I bend to the mulberries, trying not to think  
of silkworms and sweet dark fruit, while Kris uncovers  
snapdragons, peonies, plants we chose together.  
*They're beautiful*, I tell her, but outside  
I'm a poet, no gardener: I want everything,  
even the weeds, to live. I peel back  
sapling bark, dark like my eyes and hair; inside,  
my fingers slide on the warm wood, finding  
familiar texture: now I understand  
*slippery elm*.

Satisfied at last,  
even relieved, Kris wants a bath; she'll leave me  
the grapevines I saved for last. In solitude  
I search around for roots, untwisting tendrils,  
reading the leaves like palms, green-veined surfaces  
inscribed by caterpillars. Blank pages  
flutter in the sun. Later I'll surprise her  
with *sarma*, soul food, small wrapped packages  
from my father's country, made as my mother  
taught me, that one time, her careful art.

## Ramblings of a Lesbian Rosarian

I confess that growing roses is not a political act. But the more I garden the more drawn I am towards raising roses. I started gardening in my thirtieth year. Gardening was one of my tools to help keep my blood pressure down. As much as I love vegetable gardening, I was attracted to the beauty of roses. When my companion, Irene, and I were about to celebrate our first year of being together I wondered what was appropriate for a January anniversary. As I walked the local nurseries I spotted some bare root roses. A bare root rose, not very romantic but by summer it would mean not having to pay the high cost of roses from a florist. I brought up the idea to Irene and we decided to pick out our anniversary rose bush. Irene picked out a rose bush called *Double Delight*. After we put our anniversary rosebush in the ground, we patiently watered and waited for it to bloom. When finally *Double Delight* opened up we were amazed with the first vibrant cream and strawberry bloom. I fell under the spell of this wondrous rose. It was the beginning of my rosy-colored life.

Roses are one of life's great thrills—pungent fragrance, luscious coloring, and blooms throughout the growing season. No wonder Sappho called the rose the "queen of flowers"! I am not the first lesbian to fall in love with roses. Roses have had quite a well-known group of lesbian admirers, including Sappho, Gertrude Stein, and Vita Sackville-West.

By the next growing season, like Vita Sackville-West, I was "drunk on roses." I began to plot the demise of our lawn so I could buy more roses. Like most lesbians I was interested in finding the great lavender rose. *Sterling Silver* was out of the question because it grows poorly in our area. I tried *Blue Nile* but its blooms were few and far between. I read about lavender roses and found out that modern lavender hybrid tea roses didn't have a very good track record, but that old rose varieties have a more true purple or lavender color. This upcoming year I will be ordering *Cardinal de Richelieu* and *Reine des Violettes*. It may take a while, but I will find my lavender rose.

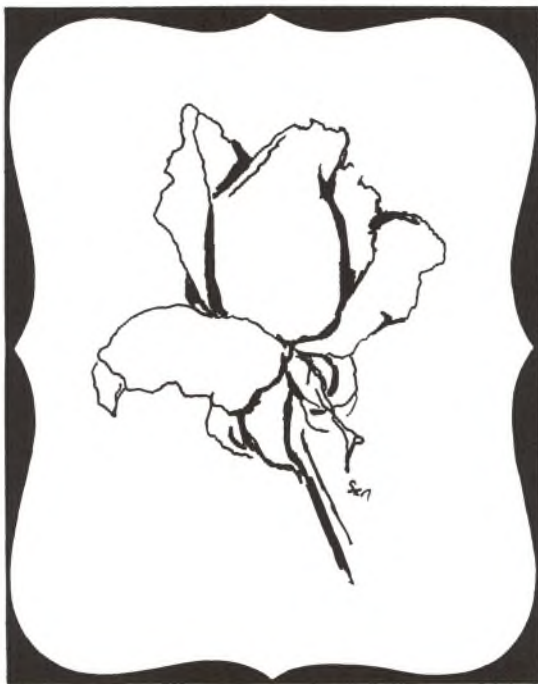
As I became more deeply involved in rose culture I learned that twentieth-century rose growing has been the outgrowth of most modern hybridizers assuming that rosarians are committed to spraying pesticides on their hybrid tea roses. A whole group of rosarians spray their roses with all sorts of chemicals in the name of aesthetics. I knew that my roses

needed amendments to boost their growth, but I wanted to keep my commitment to being an organic gardener.

Moral dilemma—did I want perfect-looking roses at the cost of pouring poison in the soil? In my heart I knew that roses given good nutritional care were going to be able to fight off pests and diseases without needing pesticides. True beauty should not poison the soil of the earth. I decided to use integrated pest management along with regular organic amendments to enhance my roses. Alfalfa, bone meal, ladybugs, green lacewings, and preying mantises became part of my regular rose care routine. Around the same time I found out about a group of rosarians devoted to hardy old roses. These roses were the Gallicas, Centifolias, and Albas, popular at the turn of the century for their stunning form, overpowering fragrance, and inherent hardiness. I assumed that they only flowered once a year, but it turns out that some of these old-fashioned roses bloom more often. Still, I was wary of planting roses that would only display their blooms once a year. Faulty logic, when I realized that irises and camellias only bloom once a year. Now I understand that some roses are so special you would wait all year for their spectacular display. If you have a chance, see *DeMeaux, Tuscan Superb*, or *Lady Banks*; their flowering periods are long and breathtaking.

This rose obsession has given me a way to meet and talk to shy lesbians. Most of us usually have a question or comment about our garden beauties. And a few of the straight neighbors have begun to see that a couple of friendly gals tending their roses might not be so different after all. How else have roses impacted my life? My bedtime ritual has changed since I discovered rose catalogues and books. When my roses go dormant for the winter I start thinking about which roses I am going to buy and plant next season. I sit in bed ignoring the cats and my girlfriend with one thought on my mind—which roses do I want in my garden? Needless to say the cats and Irene get slightly jealous and from time to time demand that I stop reading those rose catalogues and books.

Having such a compelling hobby, it's hard not to want to go and meet other rose enthusiasts. My problem is the American Rose Society is filled with heterosexuals I never feel comfortable telling I grow roses for my girlfriend. In the next few years I want to find the lesbian and gay rosarians who share my passion for roses. Yes, I'm looking for a few converts. But seriously now, don't you think you might want to grow a rose or two yourself?



## You Love Your Roses (More Than You Love Me)

Words and Music by Leslie Karst  
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Moderate Swing ♩ = 140

*verse*

C F

I re- mem- ber we met at that flow- er show down Tex- ar- ka- na

C G

way. I ad- mi- ir- ed your a- za- le- as and you gave me a bou-

G<sup>7</sup> C C<sup>7</sup> F

quet. The sun was shi- ning bright and hot on that fate- ful Sat-ur-

F<sup>m</sup> C F

da- ay... And I thanked the lord for bring- in' me some- one who liked

C F *chorus* C

flow- ers more than Che- ev- ro- o- lets. How come your eyes are al- wa- ys dry when-

F C F C

ev- er we dis- a- gree- ee? Yet you cried and cried like a ba- a- by- y when the

G G<sup>7</sup> F C

wind knocked down your rose tree. You may try- y to hi- i- de it but the

F G F C

truth is plain to see- ee. You love your ro- ses more tha- an

G C

you lo- ove me- ee.

*Leslie Karst*

## You Love Your Roses (More Than You Love Me)

*verse 1* I remember we met at that flower show down Texarkana way.  
I admired your azaleas, and you gave me a bouquet.  
The sun was shining bright and hot on that fateful Saturday  
And I thanked the lord for bringin' me someone who liked  
flowers more than Chevrolets.

*verse 2* Well the very next spring when all the trees were in bloom,  
we found us a house in town.  
It had only three rooms, but the garden had soil that was  
deep and rich and brown.  
Then you planted your roses, you seemed so happy as you put  
them into the ground.  
But since you got your roses, you never seem to notice  
whether I'm even around.

*chorus* How come your eyes are always dry whenever we disagree  
Yet you cried and cried like a baby when the wind  
knocked down your rose tree.  
You may try to hide it, but the truth is plain to see.  
You love your roses more than you love me.

*verse 3* Now I spend my days staring out of the window at your garden  
and feeling blue.  
And I find myself cursing all the roses that anyone ever  
grew.  
I never thought I'd be jealous of a flower, but I guess  
that's what it's come to.  
So now I bide my time, waiting for the winter, when I can  
have a chance with you.

*(repeat chorus)*

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## The Safe Sex Way to Garden

I asked her, What can we say about lesbians and gardening?

Oh, she said, you mean like when we moved into this house and planted potatoes in the side yard, and now they're coming up everywhere? And you planted climbing roses all along the back against our neighbor's garage and now rose branches are poking up through their garage roof? Or you digging up all the grass in the front yard so you could plant more roses, and spring bulbs, and all the irises that wouldn't fit in back, and a lemon tree and a flowering crabapple, even though the front yard is smaller than the backyard, which is smaller than our living room? Let's not forget how you fill up those plastic bags with crabgrass and then call me to carry them out to the street for you.

Yes, but I have to battle the crabgrass, I protested. Any little piece will give rise to whole colonies of crab grass. Besides, what about all those tomato seedlings you planted in that little space between the rows of corn, that grew so thick we couldn't find the tomatoes, and besides which you hate to eat tomatoes unless they don't look like tomatoes?

We could tell how we tore down the front half of our garage, she answered, and used the salvaged siding to make planter boxes.

That was very good, I agreed. Also your making a strawberry pyramid out of leftover rain gutters.

Your edging the front walk with purple grape hyacinth really makes it pretty in the spring, she said. Remember when we came home one afternoon and found a woman transfixed on the sidewalk, just staring at the flowers?

Good way to meet your neighbors, I said. I'm going to take her some bulbs when I dig them up in a few months. And our porch has become THE place to be for every cat on the street.

That's because they like being in a garden that smells so good: all that lavender, rosemary, sage . . . I think I'll build a deck in the driveway, she said dreamily, so we'll have more space for plants.

I love it when you plan projects like that, I said, giving her a kiss. Let's go to bed with some graph paper and a few pencils, she answered, giving me a hug.

*Kate Lyn Hibbard*

## Peas

My lover plants peas with meticulous passion.  
Dark Skinned Perfection, Rembrandt, Sugar Ann,  
their names roll off her tongue like the fragrant earth  
falling between her fingers. She sits back expectant,  
wide hips balanced over long broad feet,  
waiting for the payoff.

The summer she could not sleep,  
she pedaled daily to her plot in the communal garden  
and sat in the dirt, shaky and wan,  
eating peas for breakfast.

By mid-June we do not know shell pea from sugar snap  
and eat the pods of both, scouring the tangled plot daily  
for the bounty hidden in the heart-shaped leaves  
whorling off the vine into the sun.

In the mystery of the night garden,  
one pod yellows and curls like a bilious toe.  
The other swells, symmetrical bumps lining  
its pregnant shanks.

We descend like pirates ravenous for the prize,  
the crack of the spine,  
the puff of juice sweet  
with the smell of cut grass,  
the metallic ping of the green fruit  
tumbling into the white enamel bowl.



## Some Musings of a City Gardener

I live in New York City and I have a compost pile. My garden encompasses a backyard and the space along the sides and front of a little house in Queens. In this neighborhood, airplanes from New York's two major airports fly frequently overhead, interrupting conversations. But trees, flowers, grass, birds, and squirrels help ease the tensions of city living.

Gardens are a part of my life. I hope they always will be, whether I live amidst extensive fields or merely have plants growing on my windowsill. Like ever-present, breathing friends, I'm sure plants will always be hanging gracefully from the ceilings of wherever I call home.

When I come home from my nine-to-five job I do a little weeding, and see what progress the plants are making. This year I have Kentucky Wonder beans coming up along the fence by the side door. Sunflowers, all volunteers, are growing tall in the backyard plot along with salad greens, yellow squash, and cantaloupe. The cucumbers didn't make it this year—oh well! A beautiful flowering hydrangea clings gracefully to the side of the garage, forming one "wall" of the garden. This year I've planted zinnias and Brown-eyed Susans. The day lilies are in bloom. I can thank my mother (who passed away a few years ago) for the variety and quantity of the perennials. Each spring I look forward to seeing daffodils, tulips, and crocuses. In the summer I enjoy the lilies, begonias, and other plants I can't name. And each fall I anticipate the chrysanthemums.

The compost pile heaped in one corner of the backyard not only contributes nutrients to my organic garden, but adds a variety of volunteers as well. A couple of years ago I watched with interest as two identical mystery plants emerged—one in the back garden plot and one in the front flower plot. Each eventually produced a white flower and one cute little green pepper per plant!

I've tried to encourage a couple of my neighbors to start compost piles in their yards, but no one has followed my example. This, despite the fact that my beans, visible from the street, have caused a sensation in the neighborhood.

Just a few days ago I created a trellis for these beans. As a city gardener needing to use all available space, I've been growing beans for many years along the fence which separates my house from the house next door. This year the beans grew madly! So fast, and so high, they're

twice as tall as the fence. Kentucky Wonder beans indeed! Often, as I've spent time carefully untwisting them from around each other, training them to grow higher and giving them space to breathe and grow, I've thought of the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. Magic. I can almost imagine my beans growing up into the sky . . . .

Herbs, vegetables, flowers, wildflowers, trees, and rose bushes. It's fun to work with one's hands in the earth. Transplanting gives a lease on life to a plant, thinning plants gives them more room. I love helping vines to climb up a fence. Anything I "give" to a plant, tree, or flower is returned to me many times over. While working in my garden, my mind becomes centered. My breathing slows down and my energy is focused on the task at hand. I enjoy the dirt under my nails.

My first experience "working" in a garden happened when I was around three or four years old. I remember my mother letting me play with earthworms while she pattered around and weeded the carrots growing in crowded rows at the side of the house. Another early memory is of one summer at camp when the girls from my bunk spent hard hours digging up some rocky earth to plant flowers. It's too bad that our stay at camp wasn't long enough to see if the flowers came up. In later years I gained extensive experience growing vegetables when I fell in love with a woman living in Oregon. She taught me how to live in harmony with the earth and all of earth's creatures. In that garden I experienced asparagus for the first time. I was amazed at how tender, crisp and ALIVE it was, poking up from the ground. I was shown how you can cut a bunch of shoots and return a couple of days later for some more. Extraordinary!

A couple of years later a French friend taught me intensive organic gardening techniques. Under her direction we'd plant a crop, and after it was ready for harvest we'd immediately turn the soil over again to plant the next crop. Picking a fresh salad every night for our dinner was very satisfying. Years later, I felt a great pride in helping to nurture a crop of 500 tomato plants at a yoga center where I lived in Pennsylvania.

My most favorite memories of living on land come from the time I lived on women's land in Denmark. Six women who had lived together during the winter planted enough vegetables in the spring to be able to feed between 25 and 50 women the next summer and winter. When I first arrived on that land in July, women were out in the fields harvesting "aerta" (green peas), talking and singing as they worked up and down the rows. Our front fields comprised several acres of vegetables, and on back fields we grew hay. I particularly enjoyed harvesting the potatoes, like digging treasures out of the ground. We built a storehouse three-fourths of the way down into the earth to keep the vegetables that we

harvested fresh during the winter. As I crossed the bumpy, frozen fields that winter, I noticed that kale continued to grow, snow melting around each plant. Hardy green survivors.

Many memories of past gardens and friends . . . Today, I worked eight hours at my office in midtown Manhattan, and then took the subway and a bus home. I got down on my knees to pull some weeds from the front lawn. Then I entered the backyard and saw that the dogwood tree has begun to put out the hard little berries which will turn red by fall. This year should show a fine harvest.



Raking a New Garden Bed, California 1977

Photo by Shoshana Rothaizer

## Urban Farming

Urban farming—a contradiction, and yet I do think of myself as an urban farmer. Of course there are the considerations of the amount of land under cultivation and of my living in the inner city rather than fifteen miles from the nearest neighbor. And, urban farming is necessarily part-time, as is most rural farming in these times of agribusiness driving small farmers into the city or into financial near-disaster. But the crucial parts of my self-definition have more to do with a certain degree of self-sufficiency and with my relationship to the earth and the world I live in. As an urban farmer I do my best to integrate growing things with other aspects of self-sufficiency and with my overall values, in contrast to what I think of as urban *gardening*.

Two bicycles—winter and summer—are my main form of transportation. The seasons are marked for me not only by the transition from one bike to the other, but also by the transition from the growing season to wood heat. Growing flowers, herbs, and vegetables in the warm weather, heating with wood in cold weather, and riding a bike year round keep me more connected to the food I eat, the seasons, the weather, the phases of the moon, and the earth (and healthier) than most city dwellers.

It all came about gradually. When I bought my small house in the central city a little over five years ago, it came equipped with a wood furnace/forced air system and a relatively large yard with a plum tree, raspberry bushes, a Concord grape vine, and a sour cherry tree. There were also two flower beds with tulip bulbs in the front and backyards. On one side of the house and front yard there are a giant blue spruce and a huge sugar maple. In the fall, people come from all over the neighborhood to look at the maple which does have beautiful fall color. The space under the maple, which is too shady for vegetables, is my wood storage space. I buy about three cords in the late winter, when it is green and less expensive, stack it under the maple, and by the following winter when I have run out of seasoned wood, it is dry enough to be burned.

I began making growing space by tearing out some of the sod in the backyard, where the previous owners had had a vegetable garden, and I was therefore somewhat reassured about the quality of the soil. I can't remember now how much I removed in preparation for my first full growing season, but after a couple of years had gone by I decided that

more space was needed. The plum tree seemed expendable, as it produced tasteless fruit with lots of worms, so I cut it down and expanded into the area where it had been. During those first years I also put in a strawberry bed along one edge of the backyard, forty-eight plants which marched across the yard, making a bed several times its original size. This fall I plan to dig up the original strip to make room for the vegetables that were crowded out by strawberry expansion.

The backyard is now totally under cultivation except for paths, some of which I built myself from sidewalk blocks and flat limestone pieces. The front yard is more of a problem, and I'm still experimenting with it, the soil being pretty resistant to growing much of anything except certain kinds of flowers. This hasn't stopped me from digging up all the grass and trying to convert the space into something either edible and/or nice to look at that doesn't require mowing. This year I put in a lot of perennial flowers and was pretty successful with collards, cauliflower, and kale, in spite of earlier failures with vegetables. I have a source of manure at the agricultural campus of the University of Minnesota. I have vastly improved the soil in the backyard by adding manure every season, so I hope that over the years I'll be able to evolve good growing soil in the front yard by this method.

One of the most gratifying aspects of an "integrated" operation is the amount of recycling you can do and how you almost never have to throw anything away. Each summer I prune the raspberries when they have finished bearing and make a pile of the old canes. The next spring the sturdy ones can be used as supports for peas to grow on. The grape vines are pruned in February, and those cuttings can also be used for crop supports and for marking rows. Some years I've found it necessary to surround each seed bed with a little fence of sticks to prevent urban cats from digging holes in the newly sown rows and later rolling on the seedlings. Any too-small or leftover sticks from the various prunings or from the sugar maple in the front yard are perfect for kindling, and one of my main outdoor tasks is putting together little bundles of various sized sticks to use in starting fires in the wood furnace or the wood cookstove.

Other vegetable matter gets recycled too—weeds, leaves, overgrown vegetables, the remains of plants left after the first frost. I've set up a number of different compost piles, rather unsystematically, but categorized somewhat according to how long it's going to take the contents to break down into something usable.

The trend toward larger size has built-in limitations in the city. I get around some of these by maintaining a community garden plot, a city version of tenant-farming, for my year's supply of potatoes. There are

also possibilities for land acquisition: a couple of years ago a friend moved into a nearby house next to an empty lot, and she and I subsequently bought the lot from the city. Getting the lot into shape for serious growing is going to be a long-term project, but we've started small with some squash vines and two major compost piles.

In my own yard, expansion necessarily requires elimination of something that's already there—grass, shrubs, trees. My feeling is that the city is already such a bizarre use of land that those of us who live in it might as well make our little pieces as useful and pleasing as possible. So I had no problem about cutting down the flavorless-plum tree in order to grow lots more vegetables. And I recently just as casually took out a hedge of spirea which I intend to replace with blueberries, even though I'm not sure they'll thrive. Another hedge in the front of the house will be removed and replaced by currants and gooseberries. I've also begun creating a rock garden out of the existing grass bank next to the public sidewalk.

I can testify that urban farming involves a lot of time and work, as well as creativity in the use of space, but I've also found that there are lots of rewards for the farmer-at-heart who finds herself living in the city.

Nett Hart

## Playing with Serendipity

*The eve of Summer Solstice: my friends and I circle in the garden, in the center where the perennial herbs live in a five-lobed bed. All day in the mist we have transplanted the last of the tender starts from the greenhouse into the garden: the tomatoes, eggplants and peppers, hundreds of them into a world of less protection and more potential. Now we stand at the prayer stick to the east, the wind, air element. Without the movement of inspiration and expiration there is no life. To air we entrust the garden. Then north, earth, Gaia, the very soil, holder of things unseen but essential, provider of nutrients, anchor in reality. To west, water, the sea. Much rain has fallen this last month, the ground is soaked and we are reminded of the critical balance of all elements that makes for produce. Now fire, south, sun, on solstice, the heat, the light, the vitalizing element. To all these we give the garden. We have toiled in every fair moment for the last six weeks, tended seedlings since February, before that lingered over seeds saved and traded and seed catalogs, planning what we would grow. Now the time of our control and management of the garden is over. There is no illusion that we can make it grow or not grow at this time. Solstice: standing still to move without effort.*

I garden. For each of the last thirty-five years I've had a plot, a place of refuge and delight in a non-human-dominated environment. This is where I express my unspoken beliefs and hopes, where things always make sense. Even though a lot of my home economy centers on the garden and wildharvesting, the garden is not work. Serendipity guides my interactions, which means spontaneity, respect for the process, attentiveness, and a lack of attachment to the outcome. How I garden is more important to me than what I harvest.

I live on eighty acres. When you visit I'll lead you down a path to an area with a fence and "show you the garden" which, except for the fence, looks like any other part of the farm, that is, untamed. But the activities that I consider part of the garden extend beyond the fence to this whole parcel of woods and marsh and old pasture. The fence is an accommodation to the tug between wildness and domestication, between my sense of sharing the land and needing for my own use a certain quantity of food. At best it has the enforcement ability of a "Don't walk" sign the deer, woodchucks, and rabbits respect when convenient. I would garden even if I only had a small plot in which to do so, and I

have, but the wild abundance of this place is consistent with how I am growing into myself.

The garden is bulging with plants for food, medicine, seasoning, dyestuff, fragrance, and beauty. Some have no immediate use. Hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies find the plot pleasurable and account for some interesting surprises in seed crosses. I interplant vegetables and flowers, perennials and annuals, in spirals and circles and curving lines. Each spring, I map the enclosed plot, rotating varieties of plantings the way the wilds also shift in their scattered plantings each year. The map helps me find again what has been planted. In early spring I have an illusion of control, that I am making choices about what to plant where, and what native plants will be "weeded" out to make room. Later in the season not only are "my" plants doing tangles with companions I would never have chosen for them, but even domestic varieties are showing up in unexpected places. Instead of pulling some "weeds," I simply add them to the map.

I try to garden respectfully. I use organic methods that approximate as much as possible the natural processes of my region. Because I'm a vegetarian, my compost piles have only plant material. I choose not to add animal products such as bone and blood meal, fish emulsion, and manure, which, while acceptable organic materials, are still products of exploitation. The soil seems well fed. As I move toward greater harmony with my surroundings, my sense of what my place is changes. I see my own process becoming progressively wilder. My sense of what a garden is changes in like fashion. My style of gardening frustrates some Lesbians. "Are there any actual plants?" a friend who is now an avid gardener asked, stepping carefully behind me because the pattern was not apparent and I seemed to randomly stop and graze on green stuff. Visitors would help in the garden if only they understood what differentiates weeds to leave and weeds to pull.

To create the kind of order we have come to expect from gardens, we have to impose a linearity and conformity the plants will subvert every chance they get. Instead they offer a pattern that follows their whim, their adjustment to conditions, their exuberance. If limiting the garden to what I know to plant in a grid of straight rows would make visitors more comfortable. I must ask if it would also make the garden more real to them, and why. In myself I have had to accept that I cannot be counted on to produce the expected. In that space made by letting the garden be the garden I can let myself be myself as well.

Gardening for me is a connection to wildness, to serendipitous growth and productivity. While I feel the push of the season, knowing how short the growing time is here, the eggplants indulge in larger than



necessary leaves or a profusion of blooms. They seem not to know about frost, thinking they have all the time they need. Some years there isn't much rain or seeds germinate poorly. Some years I cannot plant. But in wildgardening this land there is a sufficiency in all things.

I do not live by averages. A dry year is a dry year even sandwiched in between wet ones. A year the blossoms blow from the trees before pollination, is a year without apples. I do not take gracefully the absence of any harvest for any reason. Nor do I forget easily the summer I ate eggplant every day, the twenty pound wild mushroom, the exuberance of an entire hillside lavender with phlox. If the rabbits eat all the lettuces in their emergent light green ruffles, then I look to the chickweed, lambs quarters, and plantain. In the wild areas I harvest, there is enough to pick indulgently and still leave some for the plant to prosper, as well as for the birds and animals. My sense of plenty is augmented by the relationship year after year with harvests for which I do nothing but show up at the right time.

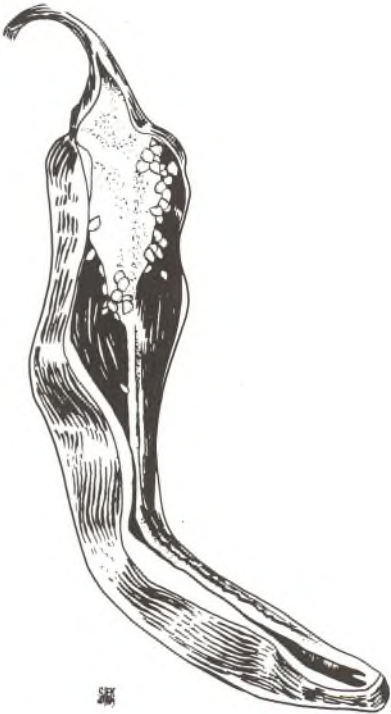
The land insists on abundance. It takes all I am to be faithful to the magnificent productivity of this land. I cannot anticipate the source or form of the next abundance. I cannot control or prepare for her next appearance. I stand flexed, relaxed and holding forward my bushel basket, learning to take what I am offered, learning graciousness in receiving.

Abundance comes without demand. Just when I think I have become a good grower of a particular vegetable, something I neglected indulges me with a bounty I could not give. Nature is incapable of scarcity. If conditions are adverse, the survivors are abundant if only in the fact of their survival, their passing on the genus to a new season. If I tire of eating and storing away her bounty, I am reminded these fruits are not something the plant is doing *to* me or even *for* me. I am under no obligation to her abundance. I can dance with her, not groan under the burden of her fruitfulness.

Both living in the country and gardening have fed my pride in being self-sufficient. Yet this sufficiency runs counter to a trust in the processes, produces a "getting by" born of scarcity, not of satisfaction. Now I am in want. I desire, take in, consume what abundance would have overwhelmed me. I live in the circle nature makes of revolving abundances, spinning, leaping, shimmying to a fruitfulness beyond my imagination, a parade of extremes.

I am learning sufficiency, not the kind that insists I do everything perfectly all the time to produce a planned though meager "enough," but a sufficiency that leaves me content and wanting at the same time. My wants are my deepest motivation, my connection to life. I cannot be free

of want. It is my acceptance of abundance in her season that allows me to want, propels me to my desires and helps me appreciate the sufficiency I have. I can move toward the life I want, knowing at every junction I have more than I need and less than I want.



## Organic Gardening at Full Circle Farm: An Interview with Lynn Hicks by Laurel Ferejohn

*Full Circle Farm, owned by Lynn Hicks and her partner Yahoo Maerker, is a beautiful place to experience the connection between food and the earth. Lynn shared her story with me as we sat in their kitchen and then outside under a tree. Indoors or out, what I noticed most was the fragrance of green things.*

—Laurel Ferejohn

### *How did you get to this place in your life?*

I was in Massachusetts before I came here, and one of the motivations to move to North Carolina was the lack of an adequate growing season in Massachusetts. I had never even gardened before Massachusetts. I started organically; I never used any chemicals, so I don't really know anything about them. You can't put tomatoes out until after June 1 in Massachusetts unless you use protective stuff. We weren't that sophisticated so we didn't put them out until June 1, and then the last year we had a killing frost in August, so we didn't have a single ripe tomato. I was really frustrated. So part of my motivation in coming here was just to have a longer growing season.

As soon as I got here I started looking around for people who might want to buy land together, who already owned land and might want to share it, or some other such country setup. Community—I was really wanting community. Then somebody I was working with who had a market garden, an organic farm producing vegetables, asked if I wanted to come and help them, live with them, learn from them, do basically an apprenticeship. So I did that, and that was the first time it even occurred to me that you could possibly make a living doing this, that you could make money. Now I *know* you can. Before, it was just fun, it was gardening, growing your own food.

So, I did the apprenticeship in the summer of 1980 and that's how I got started. During that same year I got involved with a woman who was looking for women to share her land with and was interested in making the land work, not just living there but making a working farm. [After the apprenticeship] I did that for three years, then that relationship broke up. I took a couple of years off, then rented another farm and started all over again.

Yahoo and I started looking for a farm to buy, and we bought this farm in the fall of 1988, and started all over once *again*. And when you're

doing it organically, starting all over is hard to do, because you've put a lot of manure, organic matter, compost in the soil. It's like an investment, you put it in this year and you reap the benefits next year and the year after and the year after. You don't see the benefits immediately. It was hard every time I was unloading a truckload of manure at the place we were renting; I would get really angry; it was like putting my money in somebody else's bank account. So I realized how important it was to own the land and to have the security of knowing you're making that investment for long term.

### *How did Full Circle Farm come about?*

We bought it in the fall of 1988. My plan is to completely make my living off the land. When we were looking for land I was looking for some fields, crop-producing land, as well as woods. And we found it. I had a dream that I felt was not realistic at all. The dream was to find something close to one hundred acres that had an old farmhouse that needed renovation on it. I feel like I have a mission in life to save a farmhouse, because I ride around the country and see these old farmhouses falling down and it makes me very sad. It represents the whole family farm deterioration in our country, farmland being replaced by modern, contemporary cedar-sided houses for people who live in the country and commute to their jobs in the city. We're losing a tremendous amount of farmland to that whole movement.

And in fact this is what we found. I had been looking for a couple of years, sporadically. This piece of property was listed in the newspaper, and I marked it with a magic marker, but I didn't respond to it because it was just too much—I just knew it was too much land, too much money, so I didn't respond to it. But I did go to the real estate agent who had listed it, months later. She said, "Well, I'll show you this piece. I don't think you'll like it, but I'll show it to you." When I saw it, my little heart started pattering. She showed me all these others, and I kept saying, "Let's go back to that first place." And it was *it*. I brought Yahoo out and she agreed.

The part of this property most people probably didn't like was the old farmhouse. Most people see that as a negative—oh, we'll just have to raze it, tear it down and start building anew. Whereas for me, it was a real positive aspect. And in fact, even though this house is functional and livable, we didn't pay for it. We paid for acreage, and that was it.

*How would you describe what you do here?*

It's called market gardening. What I do is grow vegetables and fruit, flowers and herbs, harvest them myself, and take them personally to the markets. The markets around here are the one in Carrboro on Saturday morning, 7 A.M. to noon, and the new one in Durham on Wednesday night, 4 P.M. to 8 P.M. So all day Friday I pick to go to the market on Saturday, and three-fourths of the day on Wednesday I pick to go to market Wednesday night. Basically, that's the business.

These particular markets have rules and regulations that say this stuff has to be grown or made by the person who's selling it, so nobody can go to the wholesale market and buy a case of lettuce, take it and resell it. It's all locally grown, it's all fresh. And that's part of this whole movement.

*Can we get a little technical? You mentioned building the greenhouse. What was that like? How do you use it? What are some of the other techniques you use?*

I was growing all my seedlings on the little sun porch on a couple of grow shelves I built, with grow lights, and it was pretty good. I think it would hold thirty or forty flats; then I moved them out to cold frames. But I still had to have the grow lights and it really wasn't big enough. My plan for a greenhouse was to build a permanent solar greenhouse, a wood frame and glass greenhouse using solar mass. Using the plastic "hoop house" you're using an awful lot of plastic, and I don't want to add that much plastic to the dump. But I finally realized if I waited until I could afford to build that frame and glass greenhouse, I would never have a greenhouse. So I decided to build a small hoop house this year, hoping it would make me enough extra money to build a permanent solar greenhouse soon. I recycled all the wood for the greenhouse and the hoops are made out of electrical conduit, which I recycled from somebody else's greenhouse that had collapsed from a snow load. It has a wood stove in it, which used to be in the house, but it was very inefficient so we got a new one. The greenhouse is pretty small—twelve feet wide and thirty-two feet long—and I built it over some of my growing beds. I was able to grow all my seedlings and on half of it I put lettuce in for an early lettuce crop. I got three cuttings from the lettuce and paid for the greenhouse the first market, with the first cutting of lettuce. So it was well worth it, and I'll try to do the best I can with the plastic.

One of the things I did this year is I started using this soil blocker for my seedlings instead of the little plastic cell packs. Part of the motivation

was not to put those cell packs in the dump. Millions of them get dumped because they're not reusable. They usually collapse after the first use.

I use raised beds; that's my method of growing. Most of my beds are one hundred feet long and four feet wide. The width is determined by the width of the truck. I get manure from the stockyard in Siler City. They load it on my truck—3/4 ton for \$5. Unfortunately, they don't unload it. I drive the truck over the bed and shovel manure out of it. That's why the truck determines the width of the bed. The first time I use a bed I put a whole truckload of manure on it, and in subsequent years I put one-third as much on. Other amendments I use are lime and rock phosphate. The only other fertilizer I use is some sea mix or seaweed-fish emulsion, usually as a foliar spray, which means I spray the leaves. I don't do it very much; I might do it after I transplant, because the roots get hurt so they're not able to absorb stuff immediately, so the plants can use a foliar feeding more easily than a root feeding. But if you do it too often they get addicted to it and they don't develop good roots. I use manure tea to water all of my seedlings and to water in the seedlings when I put them down in the field. I put manure in a barrel, fill it up with water and let it steep, then I strain it into another barrel and use it for watering. For weed control I use purely hoe and hand, or other tools, like a wheel hoe. I do intensive techniques, so when the plants get some size to them they shade the beds so that weeds aren't able to grow. But when they're young and it's rainy, the weeds grow very fast.

For pest control, I use a lot of hand picking; I use BT, which is *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterial disease that affects soft-bodied animals—worms, not earthworms, but leaf-eating worms—it is ingested, so they have to eat the leaf. It is very insect-specific, doesn't kill the other bugs, or the ladybugs, and it's natural. With most of the beetles, I try hand-picking first, and then as a last resort I'll use Rotenone, which is a natural pesticide, but it is toxic. It breaks down very quickly—usually between twelve and twenty-four hours—and that's the very reason they developed all the chemical pesticides is they wanted them to be long-lasting. But long-lasting means they're on the fruit and vegetables when you buy them, and it means they don't break down fast if at all in the environment. I don't use the Rotenone or any other natural pesticides very often because they are toxic and more broad-spectrum, so they kill more insects; they might kill the ladybugs, or bees, if they're sprayed at the wrong time. So you don't use them when the plants are flowering, or in the middle of the day when the bees are out. They are acceptable as organic pesticides, but I don't like them very much. I use them as a last resort.

I use a tractor to plow my ground initially and disc it, but after that I use a tiller. I bed it up with the tiller. The tiller has a hiller furrower on it, so after I till I go in between the beds and that throws the dirt up and makes them raised. They are not double-dug. After that I don't use the tractor at all, except for bushhogging or grading the driveway, or plowing the driveway when it snows.

*How do two people get everything done that needs to be done here?*

We're always looking for a farmwife. Not a farm husband, but a farm wife (laughter). That's because we both want to do certain things: we want to make a special food out of the produce we grow, we want to cook it and eat it, we want to can it and freeze it, and all those things. And we also want massages after we get out there and do all this hard labor! A combination farmwife/massage therapist would be nice (laughter). The real answer to your question is that it doesn't get done.

I would love to have people come out here and help, on various levels, whether it's for a weekend, a day, all the way to coming out here and living part time, temporary, or whatever. We have the space. I don't think we'd want somebody here all the time forever.

*Would you want an apprentice?*

I would, and you can call any of those arrangements an apprentice. It could be somebody who comes out once a week or a couple of days a week, or anything. Basically an apprentice means that in exchange for the labor, you learn. If somebody wants to learn organic farming techniques, or large-scale gardening, commercial gardening techniques, and other country living techniques, they would learn that in exchange for labor. And when I had an apprentice before, I did also pay her a small percentage of the profit. I'd love to have some sort of arrangement. We have this old log cabin down there, and one of my dreams is to make it into an apprentice house.

*This must be a major commitment for both of you.*

It worked out because at the time that we looked at this place, Yahoo had just gotten a job at UNC. She was making good money again, so the timing was perfect. I had some money, and a little bit of inheritance. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough that we were able to make a substantial down payment on the land. We had a good combination. I had a substantial down payment, and she had the income for maintaining high monthly payments. The bank would only give a land loan for ten years, so we have high monthly payments but it will be paid off in ten years.

The part of the commitment that's scary is the commitment to each other. Because of that combined financial assets and income stuff, we're very dependent on each other—on each other's share. That's scary, knowing you've got to work on the relationship. I guess it's like people who have children, where having the children motivates them to work on the relationship more. I know some people just stick with the relationship because of the kids without working on it, probably sometimes we do that too, but whatever we do, it sort of slides for awhile and then we start thinking we better work on this relationship.

This is different from the other experience I had working on land with someone. One big difference is that we bought this land together, whereas I was buying into the other land, so when time came to leave, I left. I didn't feel like I had a right to claim the land, even though I was working on it. One thing it definitely taught me is that you can't count on anything to be forever, and maybe that helped also in wanting to work on this relationship, to make sure it lasts, knowing that if you let things slide, it might not last, and you might lose everything, not just your relationship.

*What are the special aspects of being women farmers, as opposed to men, or husband and wife?*

One of the big differences is like with auto mechanics, boys are raised under the hood, practically, or in the country, boys are raised on a tractor. The classic picture is the father riding the little baby boy around on the tractor. And goes on from there. Boys are practically born with a hammer in their hands. Women are not born or raised with all that stuff, so when and if they decide to take it on, it's just totally foreign. Holding a hammer is not comfortable. Sitting on a tractor feels totally alien. And there are not enough women who have those skills for the rest of us to be able to learn from women (although there are more and more now), so we end up having to learn a lot of those skills from men, and men are very egotistical, egocentric, patronizing—it's hard to learn from them, they get on their macho trips when they're teaching you, and they're very condescending.

Another difference between men and women farmers is physical strength. Women can work real hard and build up our muscles, and a lot of us are stronger than a lot of men, but the kind of men who usually get into farming are "hunks"; physical strength is an attribute needed for farming. No matter how hard we work, we probably will never be as strong on a relative scale as the men who get involved. And it is a lot of work and does require a lot of strength and endurance. Of course,



women are supposed to have more endurance. A lot of my friends are married and share the work equally, but there's still a lot of separation of the tasks, and very traditional male and female roles—the men usually do the tracting.

*Would you call it sexism?*

Very ingrained sexism. It's set up that way because it's apparently desirable for both sides. It's like those of us who learned some auto mechanics back in the late 1960s or early 1970s, once we learned how to do it and did it for a few years . . . I personally felt, okay, I proved I know how to do it, but I don't really *like* it, so I started taking my truck or car in. Sometimes that work's not much fun. It's easy to let someone else do it. But it's hard to take a tractor in.

*How would you describe your feeling about farming, and why do you like it?*

Part of it is totally subconscious. I have a tremendous attraction to the country, the land, and farming, but I don't really know why. My father was a farmer, but he lost his farm before I was born. He lost it during the depression—the old family farm. He had an eighth-grade education, so the rest of his life he spent selling farm machinery. So I was around it, but sort of second-hand. And I wasn't around a lot, because he worked many long hours and I didn't go with him, so I didn't see him much. Plus I was growing up in a time when farmers—and this is still true—farmers are considered the bottom of the totem pole and having a parent with an eighth-grade education was an embarrassment. And having a father who sold farm machinery was an embarrassment. I disowned it, with a little help from society. So I didn't have much personal experience with farming and what I had was negative. I can't explain this attraction. It must be in my genes, if it's possible, or ingrained in me somehow. It's not like I had these wonderful experiences in childhood that attracted me to organic gardening. During childhood I wasn't even particularly an outdoor person. So I can't explain it—which is just as well.

It's like my feeling that I needed to "save" an old farmhouse—there's nothing objective about that. As far as I know, I never lived in one. I will add this—most of the TV shows I used to like were the old frontier type, not cowboys and Indians, but like "Little House on the Prairie." As awful as that yucky mushy stuff was, I used to love to look at the houses, the way they lived, the tools they used, their carriages, the horses. It's probably some previous life stuff.

### *How do you feel when you're out there in the rows?*

It's very serene; it's almost like meditating. I don't meditate anymore. It's a very quiet, very repetitive motion; I don't direct my mind at all, it just wanders. Most of the work doesn't require a lot of thought. You do a lot of planning, but that's usually done inside on paper. Carrying out the planning you have to think about what you're doing, but a lot of it is just repetitive. You're out in the quiet, listening to the birds and feeling the fresh air. It's very seductive, very, very peaceful. The only times I'm not peaceful about it are if it's extremely hot. In the middle of summer I do try to get up earlier and work in the mornings, then come in and do book work or something, and then go back out when it's cooler. When I'm picking to go to the farmer's market, that's the only time when there's a tremendous amount of pressure. All the time there are pressures, but that's the only time there's a tremendous amount, because all your income depends on one or two days a week, you've got to get it *all* done that day, you've got to pick it *all* that day. (And that's part of what the farmer's market is all about—it's fresh. If you go to the farmer's market, most of the farmers have picked it the day before.) Even if there are a certain amount of pressures, it's usually peaceful and pleasant.

We are guided by the weather report a lot, which is very frustrating when it's inaccurate, the way it was last night. When they're predicting rain, and I have things that have to be done before the rain comes, I'll go out and frantically do those things. If the rain doesn't come, it's like all day racing the rain, and continuing this high speed racing the rain, and the rain doesn't come, so I just continue racing something that isn't there. Whereas if the rain hadn't been predicted, I would have been calmer and slower about doing the same things. But I wouldn't get as much done. It is a productive situation, but it's a frustrating high-pressure situation and I usually end up at the end of the day angry—at the weather forecaster.

### *What have you learned about the politics of agriculture?*

Organic is one of the issues. Buying locally is another, so we aren't using our resources transporting produce from California and Florida, or Mexico or South America, which can easily be grown here, and we're supporting the local economy. It's also trying to revive the family farm—which means small scale production, not necessarily the nuclear family, although it would help, get those kids to work! Also, being local, it's fresh. You don't think about this, but even when you're buying

California-grown organic produce from the co-op or something, it probably was picked a week or two ago because it's been in transit: it's been in storage, it's been in the warehouse, it's been at the wholesaler, it's been at the retailer. Even if they have methods of making it look fresh, it still goes through a loss of its freshness, and that means its nutritional value. And of course, generally small-scale farming, or family farming, excludes the whole farm labor problem. Most family farms don't use cheap farm labor and exploit cheap farm labor. They may put their kids to work but that just teaches them good work values.

My political involvements are the farmer's markets, and the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, which is the organic growers and consumers organization here in North Carolina and South Carolina. I'm active in both of those things. That's where most of my political energies go these days.

*Could you tell us something about your background?*

My parents were very working class. My mother was a very strong woman, the matriarch, head of the household. I'm sure that carried over into my own independence and desire to be self-regulating. I grew up very fast. I was independent, making dinner, making clothes and stuff by the time I was eight years old. It has its negative side—I didn't have much of a childhood; and it has its positive side—I became very self-sufficient. I don't have much fear of want, probably because I never had the security and because I had to rely on myself to get what I did have. It relieves me of that security fear.

When I lived in Massachusetts that was my first introduction to being in the country. But I was in New York when I first got involved in the women's movement, and when I moved to Massachusetts I got involved some more. It was a smaller community, like this one. I got involved with the newsletter and did some work organizing a women's center that was working with rape crisis and battered women.

I was born and raised in the South—born in Georgia, raised in Alabama—so after being in the North for about ten years, my roots were pullin', I guess, and I wanted to be back down South. I had experienced the North and it was very pleasant, although I got tired of the snow, and the short growing season! I loved the people, the political activity, the consciousness. I had heard about the Triangle, about the women's community, the left community, the lesbian community—I was also just coming out—I had been reading *Southern Exposure* for years, and that exposed me to this area. And it was midway between New York and Alabama. I was hoping it had all four seasons.

*Do you feel any tension between having been brought up in a working-class family and now being a land owner?*

Yeah, I do. Whenever I think about community and wanting to make this land a community, I never think in terms of landlord-tenant relationships. I think in terms of people buying into the land, or putting it in some sort of land trust or entity that owns the land and we are just stewards taking care of it. Since I'm not a landlady, and I don't get any money from someone else for the land, I don't feel so bad about being a land owner. I'm preserving the land. This land could have been bought up and developed. It's like my thing about saving a farmhouse—I feel like I'm saving the land. I definitely feel that we don't have a right to own the land, but we live in a society where you can't protect the land unless you own it. The ownership protects you. Ownership is a way to protect the land, using it organically, and not stripping it, talking to the divas and the goddesses.

*What are your long-term plans and dreams?*

One of the things I'm committed to is bringing the farmer and the consumer closer together. We are so removed from our food source, we don't know where our food comes from. Children often literally don't know that it grows out of the ground or on trees. It's one of the reasons I'm committed to direct selling—the farmer's market kind of thing. It brings the consumer and the farmer in contact. Even though it doesn't bring the consumer to the farm, it brings them in contact. There's a rapport that builds up. People who like to shop farmer's markets and are there regularly really get to be friends with their farmer. They call them "my farmer," and feel a real connection. The other reason I'm committed to direct selling is so the farmer is making more of the income from the food. The way it's set up now, the farmer receives very little of your food dollar after wholesalers or retailers hike it up. The farmers don't make any equity—nothing compared to the amount of labor they put in.

I have several ideas. One of them is called community supported agriculture. Community can be defined however you want to; normally I think it's a fairly close geographical community, who actually hire a farmer. Every household pays in a certain amount of money, like a membership fee, in the beginning of the year to assure that the farmer has an income. The farmer's job is to grow food for them, and then divvy up the harvest every week among the households based on how large the household is. Or it could be that they buy one share, or two shares, or more, and get that proportion of the harvest each week.

Distribution can be done in various ways, from the farmer delivering it, to the people coming to the farm to pick it up, or somewhere in between, where the farmer goes to a central place and everyone comes there to pick it up. Part of the system is that members can, and are encouraged to come out to the farm. It could just be a visit, or to help, and that's encouraged—to be a part of the production. Included in that could be a discount on the food, or an extra share. Just to have that connection between the farmer and the consumer and the growing process. From what I've heard about this system, the members have a real feeling of "this is my farmer." Not a feeling of ownership, but more of a closeness, sort of like "this is my girlfriend." I would like to pursue that in the Lesbian community. Even though it's not a tight geographical community—if women want to visit the farm, they may have to travel an hour to get here, like you did. If I delivered it I might have to travel an hour, but I do that anyway when I go to the farmer's markets. The consumer would get *great* produce. If you came out here to get your stuff, you could pick it or it would be picked after you got here. It would be that fresh. And it would give consumers a farm to go to. It could be like a second home in the country. You could come out to help, or just to play and relax. You wouldn't be able to rely on the farmer to entertain you, but if it were your own country place, you wouldn't have someone there to entertain you. People could learn farm skills, teach their children—it's a great outing.

And of course the other idea is the apprentice, or group of apprentices, people who just come out for a day or a week or spend their vacation out here to work in exchange for knowledge.

Another idea is along the lines of a co-op. A farm co-op would be a situation where people did exchange labor for food, or a discount on food—two hours in exchange for a 10% discount, or something. It incorporates a lot of the same connections between farmer and consumer, the consumer being able to be a farmer for a weekend.

The other thing these ideas address is that most of the time farming tends to be very isolating. It's the one negative part about being out in the country. Most of us do this because we like the solitude, quiet, and peace. But sometimes there's too much of that. Because we're geographically removed from the community, we often can't participate in community activities, or it's often very inconvenient, takes a lot of effort. You live in town; you can walk down Ninth street and run into fifteen people, so your social life is built in, you don't have to work at it. Whereas we just don't run into people; my social life is the farmer's market often. (And I would encourage women to come to the farmer's

market!) So that's another way the idea of community supported agriculture helps—it helps alleviate the isolation of farmers.

*Could your vision of having a community living on your land be combined with the idea of community supported agriculture?*

Well, in order to support herself, a farmer has to feed something like thirty families. When I think of a community here, I mean something in the range of at most six or eight households, or couples or whatever. The community would be a community of people who live out here and work—or don't work—support the land, live together. Working and owning stuff together, like one tractor for six or eight households rather than six or eight tractors, and everybody wouldn't have to rebuild these sheds, we'd share the sheds, the tools. People wouldn't have to work on the land, they could be potters, or poets, or work in town. Co-op farming could be a part of it, but it wouldn't be necessary. And the goal would be for each family, or whatever, to have their own house. We're not into living communally in the sense of eight people in one house. We're too old for that—I've done that lots of years. And we'd figure out the most desirable legal ownership setup; I wouldn't want to figure it out ahead of time and dictate to everyone else.



*Lesléa Newman*

## Tomatoes

plump

round

juicy

solid

firm

fleshy

meaty

tender

succulent

sweet

sun-ripened

mouth-watering

deliciousness

dripping

down

my

chin

oh I love

Big Girls

## My Corn

I sit on the back steps of my house, staring off into my cornfield, mesmerized as always by the tall, elegant plants gleaming in the last rays of the summer evening's sun. Never mind that my cornfield is a six-by-ten-foot garden plot in my backyard in Los Angeles. There is something wondrous about seeing corn growing, especially in Los Angeles, a striking contrast from the genteel proportions of basil or tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers. Corn! Now there's a crop that whispers of the country, of places where there is spaciousness and quiet. The gentle rustle of the corn plants helps mute the din of urban life—car alarms, sirens and thudding bass speakers that rumble down my street like thunderstorms.

The first time I planted corn, I was living and working in a Black community in rural Alabama. Behind the house that I shared with my partner Sue was half an acre or so of land that had not been cultivated since the woman who owned the house had died some years earlier. Sue and I were both eager to reinstate the garden, a plan that surprised and amused our neighbors. They were politely skeptical about whether we would last the hot summer doing the work.

Nevertheless, one Saturday afternoon in early March, a group of neighbors, wielding sickles and rakes, came over to help us clear and burn off the tangled mass of weeds and briars that had claimed the fallow garden behind our house. The next week, Mr. J.D. Noland, who lived behind us, brought his horse and plow to turn the soft red soil for us and make some rows for planting. Sue and I negotiated tensely over the number of rows. Never having worked such a large area of land before, I felt overwhelmed and inclined to be conservative. Sue was more ambitious. We agreed upon five rows. Later, however, flush with the achievement of planting them all and still wanting room for corn, we asked him to come back and make five more.

Our neighbors across the road, Mr. and Mrs. Eatman, helped us plant the corn. They walked slowly along the rows with us, showing us how to sculpt a raised mound for each plant and deposit three or four of the fat kernels, like old, yellow teeth, in the top of each mound, pressing the soil firmly into place over them. Then we watered, watched and waited. When the tallest plants were about six inches high, we thinned out the smaller ones, leaving the hardiest in each mound.



That summer I learned that to “chop” corn, or any other crop, meant to hoe around the base of the plant, not, as I had previously supposed, to cut the plant down. This process helped to aerate the soil as well as making it easier to pull the weeds that sprang up around the plants. The only bearable time to chop the corn was early in the morning before the sun had climbed above the pine trees that lined the horizon and the steel anvil of heat descended. Never before a morning person, I was surprised at how much I grew to love that time of day. I would often rise before Sue to attend to the chopping, which became a meditation for me, the solitude sweet and steadying. I loved to wade into the corn in the morning and feel the crisp leaves still dotted with moisture brush my skin. I felt pleasantly invisible there in the corn, somehow a part of it, a part of life itself.

In the opalescent light of early evening, as the day’s withering heat finally ebbed, I’d sit on the back stoop, letting my eyes wander down the long rows of slim stalks that shivered ever so slightly in the languid air. From time to time, the dogs would spring from the porch and dash off into the corn, chasing a neighbor’s dog or some other intruding creature. Snarling melodramatically, they would disappear into the green dimness, leaving a trail of rustling leaves and tassels shaking madly, like antennae flailing in all directions. Sometimes I could not help but run yelling after them, seized with a protective concern for the young corn.

The modest dimensions of my L.A. garden have up to now made corn seem impractical. But this spring, I decided to devote the entire garden to corn, filling the space with three rows of six plants each. I knew that these conditions were much too crowded, but I so longed for rows I could get lost in, though I realized this effect was pure fantasy under the circumstances.

A stroll between the rows from one end of this cornfield to the other lasts all of fifteen seconds. There is certainly not enough room to hide out there, although Emily, my dog, has tried several times. The plants are so close together that I cannot even get enough leverage with a hoe to chop the corn. I have to creep along from plant to plant, squatting, loosening the earth with a spade, an undeniably inefficient procedure. But I don’t care. I take great pleasure in the individual grooming of each plant.

The most satisfying and arguably most nurturing aspect of my corn-growing regimen is singing. Each morning, I bound out the back door, hitching up my shorts and swaggering a bit like Gordon MacRae in “Oklahoma,” and belt out “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.” My corn has not yet reached the level of an elephant’s eye, but I substitute the identity of someone or something whose height matches its current stature. Thus,

my lyrics have evolved from “the corn is as high as a grasshopper’s eye” to “Emily’s eye” to the proud day that it was *my* eye and then my taller friends’ eyes and so on. This ritual, in homage to the plants climbing resolutely toward the hazy sky in my backyard in Los Angeles, has shaped the days, made me feel alive.

The Alabama corn was ready in mid-July. Ears of corn tucked inside their papery husks seemed to blossom full-born from the stalks, their golden silk plumes dancing smartly in occasional breezes. Each evening, Sue and I and an assortment of kids from around the neighborhood picked corn to steam for supper. It was creamy yellow, irregularly shaped and lumpy, but deliciously sweet. As it was much too hot to think of cooking anything else, we’d pile the kids into the station wagon and make the eight-mile trip to town to pick up fried chicken at Junior’s Food Mart. Chicken and corn, our feast every night for weeks.

One of these August days, my L.A. corn will be ready. The harvest will not be as plentiful as in Alabama, but there should be enough to eat at home, take to a few potlucks and distribute among my neighbors. This is the legacy of the corn for me: a sense of closer connectedness with the earth and a sharing of the earth’s abundance in community.

Sitting here on the back steps in Los Angeles, a snapshot that I have kept in my mind since the day I left Alabama at the end of that summer appears vividly—a group of our neighbors, framed by the rear window of the car, standing in the dusty road waving goodbye, our corn shimmering behind them.

*Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

## **mujer cacto**

La mujer del desierto  
tiene espinas  
las espinas son sus ojos  
si tú te le arrimas te araña.

La mujer del desierto  
tiene largas y afiladas garras.

La mujer del desierto mira la avispa  
clavar su aguijón  
y chingar a una tarántula  
mira que la arrastra a un agujero  
pone un huevo sobre ella  
el huevo se abre  
el bebé sale y se come la tarántula.

No es fácil vivir en esta tierra.

La mujer del desierto  
se entierra en la arena con los lagartos  
se esconde como rata  
pasa el día bajo tierra  
tiene el cuero duro  
no se reseca en el sol  
vive sin agua.

La mujer del desierto  
mete la cabeza adentro como la tortuga  
desentierra raíces con su hocico  
junta con las javalinas  
caza conejos con los coyotes.

Como un flor la mujer del desierto  
no dura mucho tiempo  
pero cuando vive llena el desierto  
con flores de nopal o de árbol paloverde.

La mujer del desierto  
enroscada es serpiente cascabel  
descansa durante el día  
por la noche cuando hace fresco  
bulle con la lechuza,  
con las culebras alcanza un nido de pájaros  
y se come los huevos y los pichoncitos.

Cuando se enoja la mujer del desierto  
escupe sangre de los ojos como el lagarto cornudo  
cuando oye una seña de peligro  
salta y corre como liebre  
se vuelve arena.

La mujer del desierto, como el viento  
sopla, hace dunas, lomas.



SIDA  
1994

*Gloria E. Anzaldúa*

**cactus woman**

The woman of the desert  
has thorns  
her eyes are thorns  
if you get close she scratches.  
    Desert woman  
    has long and sharp claws.

Desert woman sees the wasp  
drive her sting  
and kill a tarantula  
sees the wasp drag it to a hole  
where she lays an egg on her  
the egg opens  
the baby comes out and eats the tarantula.  
    It isn't easy living on this earth.

Desert woman  
buries herself in the sands with lizards  
like a rat she hides  
spending days beneath the earth  
her skin is hard  
it does not dry in the sun  
she lives without water.

The woman of the desert  
pulls her head inside like a tortoise  
unearths roots with her snout  
gathers with wild boars  
hunts rabbit with coyotes.

Like a flower the woman of the desert  
does not last long  
but when she lives she fills the desert  
with prickly pear or paloverde flowers.

Desert woman  
coiled is rattlesnake  
she rests during the day  
at night when it is cool  
she stirs with the owl,  
with the serpent she reaches for a bird's nest  
and eats the eggs and baby pigeons.

When desert woman is angry  
she spits blood from her eyes like the horned lizard  
when she hears a danger signal  
she jumps and runs like a hare  
she turns into sand.

Desert woman, like the wind  
blows, makes dunes, hills.

*English translation by Elba Rosario Sánchez*

## In the Life

Grace come to me in my sleep last night. I feel somebody presence, in the room with me, then I catch the scent of Posner's Bergamot Pressing Oil, and that cocoa butter grease she use on her skin. I know she standing at the bedside, right over me, and then she call my name.

"Pearl."

My Christian name Pearl Irene Jenkins, but don't nobody ever call me that no more. I been Jinx to the world for longer than I care to specify. Since my mother passed away, Grace the only one ever use my given name.

"Pearl," she say again. "I'm just gone down to the garden awhile. I be back."

I'm so deep asleep I have to fight my way awake, and when I do be fully woke, Grace is gone. I ease my tired bones up and drag em down the stairs, cross the kitchen in the dark, and out the back screen door onto the porch. I guess I'm half expecting Gracie to be there waiting for me, but there ain't another soul stirring tonight. Not a sound but singing crickets, and nothing staring back at me but that old weather-beaten fence I ought to painted this summer, and still ain't made time for. I lower myself down into the porch swing, where Gracie and I have sat so many still summer nights and watched the moon rising up over Old Mister Thompson's field.

I never had time to paint that fence back then, neither. But it didn't matter none, cause Gracie had it all covered up with her flowers. She used to sit right here on this swing at night, when a little breeze be blowing, and say she could tell all the different flowers apart, just by they smell. The wind pick up a scent, and Gracie say, "Smell that jasmine, Pearl?" Then a breeze come up from another direction, and she turn her head like somebody calling her and say, "Now that's my honeysuckle, now."

It used to tickle me, cause she knowed I couldn't tell all them flowers of hers apart when I was looking square at em in broad daylight. So how I'm gonna do it by smell in the middle of the night? I just laugh and rock the swing a little, and watch her enjoying herself in the soft moonlight.

I could never get enough of watching her. I always did think that Grace Simmons was the prettiest woman north of the Mason-Dixon line. Now I've lived enough years to know it's true. There's been other women in my life besides Grace, and I guess I loved them all, one way or

another, but she was something special—Gracie was something else again.

She was a dark brownskin woman—the color of fresh gingerbread hot out the oven. In fact, I used to call her that—my gingerbread girl. She had plenty enough of that pretty brownskin flesh to fill your arms up with something substantial when you hugging her, and to make a nice background for them dimples in her cheeks and other places I won't go into detail about.

Gracie could be one elegant good looker when she set her mind to it. I'll never forget the picture she made, that time the New Year's Eve party was down at the Star Harbor Ballroom. That was the first year we was in The Club, and we was going to every event they had. Dressed to kill. Gracie had on that white silk dress that set off her complexion so perfect, with her hair done up in all them little curls. A single strand of pearls that could have fooled anybody. Long gloves. And a little fur stole. We was serious about our partying back then! I didn't look too bad myself, with that black velvet jacket I used to have, and the pleats in my slacks pressed so sharp you could cut yourself on em. I weighed quite a bit less than I do now, too. Right when you come in the door of the ballroom, they have a great big floor to ceiling gold frame mirror, and if I remember rightly, we didn't get past that for quite some time.

Everybody want to dance with Gracie that night. And that's fine with me. Along about the middle of the evening, the band is playing a real hot number, and here come Louie and Max over to me, all long-face serious, wanting to know how I can let my woman be out there shaking her behind with any stranger that wander in the door. Now they know good and well ain't no strangers here. The Cinnamon & Spice Club is a private club, and all events is by invitation only.

Of course, there's some thinks friends is more dangerous than strangers. But I never could be the jealous, overprotective type. And the fact is, I just love to watch the woman. I don't care if she out there shaking it with the Virgin Mary, long as she having a good time. And that's just what I told Max and Lou. I could lean up against that bar and watch her for hours.

You wouldn't know, to look at her, she done it all herself. Made all her own dresses and hats, and even took apart a old ratty fur coat that used to belong to my great aunt Malinda to make that cute little stole. She always did her own hair—every week or two. She used to do mine, too. Always be teasing me about let her make me some curls this time. I'd get right aggravated. Cause you can't have a proper argument with somebody when they standing over your head with a hot comb in they hand. You kinda at they mercy. I'm sitting fuming and cursing under



them towels and stuff, with the sweat dripping all in my eyes in the steamy kitchen—and she just laughing. “Girl,” I’m telling her, “you know won’t no curls fit under my uniform cap. Less you want me to stay home this week and you gonna go work my job and your job too.”

Both of us had to work, always, and we still ain’t had much. Everybody always think Jinx and Grace doing all right, but we was scrimping and saving all along. Making stuff over and making do. Half of what we had to eat grew right here in this garden. Still and all, I guess we *was* doing all right. We had each other.

Now I finally got the damn house paid off, and she ain’t even here to appreciate it with me. And Gracie’s poor bedraggled garden is just struggling along on its last legs—kinda like me. I ain’t the kind to complain about my lot, but truth to tell, I can’t be down crawling around on my hands and knees no more—this body I got put up such a fuss and holler. Can’t enjoy the garden at night proper nowadays, nohow. Since Mister Thompson’s land was took over by the city and they built them housing projects where the field used to be, you can’t even see the moon from here, till it get up past the fourteenth floor. Don’t no moonlight come in my yard no more. And I guess I might as well pick my old self up and go on back to bed.

Sometimes I still ain’t used to the fact that Grace is passed on. Not even after these thirteen years without her. She the only woman I ever lived with—and I lived with her more than half my life. This house her house, too, and she oughta be here in it with me.

I rise up by six o’clock most every day, same as I done all them years I worked driving for the C.T.C. If the weather ain’t too bad, I take me a walk—and if I ain’t careful, I’m liable to end up down at the Twelfth Street Depot, waiting to see what trolley they gonna give me this morning. There ain’t a soul working in that office still remember me. And they don’t even run a trolley on the Broadway line no more. They been running a bus for the past five years.

I forgets a lot of things these days. Last week, I had just took in the clean laundry off the line, and I’m up in the spare room fixing to iron my shirts, when I hear somebody pass through that squeaky side gate and go on around to the backyard. I ain’t paid it no mind at all, cause that’s the way Gracie most often do when she come home. Go see about her garden fore she even come in the house. I always be teasing her she care more about them collards and string beans than she do about me. I hear her moving around out there while I’m sprinkling the last shirt and

plugging in the iron—hear leaves rustling, and a crate scraping along the walk.

While I'm waiting for the iron to heat up, I take a look out the window, and come to see it ain't Gracie at all, but two a them sassy little scoundrels from over the projects—one of em standing on a apple crate and holding up the other one, who is picking my ripe peaches off my tree, just as brazen as you please. Don't even blink a eyelash when I holler out the window. I have to go running down all them stairs and out on the back porch, waving the cord I done jerked out the iron—when Doctor Matthews has told me a hundred times I ain't supposed to be running or getting excited about nothing, with my pressure like it is. And I ain't even supposed to be *walking* up and down no stairs.

When they seen the ironing cord in my hand, them two little sneaks had a reaction all right. The one on the bottom drop the other one right on his padded quarters and lit out for the gate, hollering, "Look out Timmy! Here come Old Lady Jenkins!"

When I think about it now, it was right funny, but at the time I was so mad it musta took me a whole half hour to cool off. I sat there on that apple crate just boiling.

Eventually, I begun to see how it wasn't even them two kids I was so mad at. I was mad at time. For playing tricks on me the way it done. So I don't even remember that Grace Simmons has been dead now for the past thirteen years. And mad at time just for passing—so fast. If I had my life to live over, I wouldn't trade in none of them years for nothing. I'd just slow em down.

The church sisters around here is always trying to get me to be thinking about dying, myself. They must figure, when you my age, that's the only excitement you got left to look forward to. Gladys Hawkins stopped out front this morning, while I was mending a patch in the top screen of the front door. She was grinning from ear to ear like she just spent the night with Jesus himself.

"Morning, Sister Jenkins. Right pretty day the good Lord seen fit to send us, ain't it?"

I ain't never known how to answer nobody who manages to bring the good Lord into every conversation. If I nod and say yes, she'll think I finally got religion. But if I disagree, she'll think I'm crazy, cause it truly is one pretty August morning. Fortunately, it don't matter to her whether I agree or not, cause she gone right on talking according to her own agenda anyway.

"You know, this Sunday is Women's Day over at Blessed Endurance. Reverend Solomon Moody is gonna be visiting, speaking on 'A Woman's

Place In The Church.' Why don't you come and join us for worship? You'd be most welcome."

I'm tempted to tell her exactly what come to my mind—that I ain't never heard of no woman name Solomon. However, I'm polite enough to hold my tongue, which is more than I can say for Gladys.

She ain't waiting for no answer from me, just going right on. "I don't spose you need me to point it out to you, Sister Jenkins, but you know you ain't as young as you used to be." As if both of our ages wasn't common knowledge to each other, seeing as we been knowing one another since we was girls. "You reaching that time of life when you might wanna be giving a little more attention to the spiritual side of things than you been doing . . ."

She referring, politely as she capable of, to the fact that I ain't been seen inside a church for thirty-five years.

". . . And you know what the good Lord say. 'Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour . . . ' But, 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life . . .'"

It ain't no use to argue with her kind. The Lord is on they side in every little disagreement, and he don't never give up. So when she finally wind down and ask me again will she see me in church this Sunday, I just say I'll think about it.

Funny thing, I been thinking about it all day. But not the kind of thoughts she want me to think, I'm sure. Last time I went to church was on a Easter Sunday. We decided to go on accounta Gracie's old meddling cousin, who was always nagging us about how we unnatural and sinful and a disgrace to her family. Seem like she seen it as her one mission in life to get us two sinners inside a church. I guess she figure, once she get us in there, God gonna take over the job. So Grace and me finally conspires that the way to get her off our backs is to give her what she think she want.

Course, I ain't had on a skirt since before the war, and I ain't aiming to change my lifelong habits just to please Cousin Hattie. But I did take a lotta pains over my appearance that day. I'd had my best tailor-made suit pressed fresh, and slept in my stocking cap the night before so I'd have every hair in place. Even had one a Gracie's flowers stuck in my buttonhole. And a brand new narrow-brim dove gray Stetson hat. Gracie take one look at me when I'm ready and shake her head. "The good sisters is gonna have a hard time concentrating on the preacher today!"

We arrive at her cousin's church nice and early, but of course it's a big crowd inside already on accounta it being Easter Sunday. The organ music is wailing away, and the congregation is dazzling—decked out in

nothing but the finest and doused with enough perfume to outsmell even the flowers up on the altar.

But as soon as we get in the door, this kinda sedate commotion break out—all them good Christian folks whispering and nudging each other and trying to turn around and get a good look. Well, Grace and me, we used to that. We just find us a nice seat in one of the empty pews near the back. But this busy buzzing keep up, even after we seated and more blended in with the crowd. And finally it come out that the point of contention ain't even the bottom half of my suit, but my new dove gray Stetson.

This old gentleman with a grizzled head, wearing glasses about a inch thick is turning around and leaning way over the back of the seat, whispering to Grace in a voice plenty loud enough for me to hear, "You better tell your beau to remove that hat, entering in Jesus' Holy Chapel."

Soon as I get my hat off, some old lady behind me is grumbling. "I declare, some of these children haven't got no respect at all. Oughta know you sposed to keep your head covered, setting in the house of the Lord."

Seem like the congregation just can't make up its mind whether I'm supposed to wear my hat or I ain't.

I couldn't hardly keep a straight face all through the service. Every time I catch Gracie eye, or one or the other of us catch a sight of my hat, we off again. I couldn't wait to get outa that place. But it was worth it. Gracie and me was entertaining the gang with that story for weeks to come. And we ain't had no more problems with Cousin Hattie.

Far as life everlasting is concerned, I imagine I'll cross that bridge when I reach it. I don't see no reason to rush into things. Sure, I know Old Man Death is gonna be coming after me one of these days, same as he come for my mother and dad, and Gracie and, just last year, my old buddy Louie. But I ain't about to start nothing that might make him feel welcome. It might be different for Gladys Hawkins and the rest of them church sisters, but I got a whole lot left to live for. Including a mind fulla good time memories. When you in the life, one thing your days don't never be, and that's dull. Your nights neither. All these years I been in the life, I loved it. And you know Jinx ain't about to go off with no Old Man without no struggle, nohow.

To tell the truth, though, sometime I do get a funny feeling bout Old Death. Sometime I feel like he here already—been here. Waiting on me and watching me and biding his time. Paying attention when I have to stop on the landing of the stairs to catch my breath. Paying attention if I don't wake up till half past seven some morning, and my back is hurting

me so bad it take me another half hour to pull myself together and get out the bed.

The same night after I been talking to Gladys in the morning, it take me a long time to fall asleep. I'm lying up in bed waiting for the aching in my back and my joints to ease off some, and I can swear I hear somebody else in the house. Seem like I hear em downstairs, maybe opening and shutting the icebox door, or switching off a light. Just when I finally manage to doze off, I hear somebody footsteps right here in the bedroom with me. Somebody tippy-toeing real quiet, creaking the floor boards between the bed and the dresser . . . over to the closet . . . back to the dresser again.

I'm almost scared to open my eyes. But it's only Gracie—in her old raggedy bathrobe and a silk handkerchief wrapped up around all them little braids in her head—putting her finger up to her lips to try and shush me so I won't wake up.

I can't help chuckling. "Hey Gingerbread Girl. Where you think you going in your house coat and bandana and it ain't even light out yet. Come on get back in this bed."

"You go on to sleep," she say. "I'm just going out back a spell."

It ain't no use me trying to make my voice sound angry, cause she so contrary when it come to that little piece of ground down there I can't help laughing. "What you think you gonna complish down there in the middle of the night? It ain't even no moon to watch tonight. The sky been filling up with clouds all evening, and the weather forecast say rain tomorrow."

"Just don't pay me no mind and go on back to sleep. It ain't the middle of the night. It's almost daybreak." She grinning like she up to something, and sure enough, she say, "This is the best time to pick off them black and yellow beetles been making mildew outa my cucumber vines. So I'm just fixing to turn the tables around a little bit. You gonna read in the papers tomorrow morning bout how the entire black and yellow beetle population of number Twenty-seven Bank Street been wiped off the face of the earth—while you was up here sleeping."

Both of us is laughing like we partners in a crime, and then she off down the hall, calling out, "I be back before you even know I'm gone."

But the full light of day is coming in the window, and she ain't back yet.

I'm over to the window with a mind to holler down to Grace to get her behind back in this house, when the sight of them housing projects hits me right in the face: stacks of dirt-colored bricks and little caged-in porches, heaped up into the sky blocking out what poor skimpy light this cloudy morning brung.

It's a awful funny feeling start to come over me. I mean to get my housecoat, and go down there anyway, just see what's what. But in the closet I can see it ain't but my own clothes hanging on the pole. All the shoes on the floor is mine. And I know I better go ahead and get washed, cause it's a whole lot I want to get done fore it rain, and that storm is coming in for sure. Better pick the rest of them ripe peaches and tomatoes. Maybe put in some peas for fall picking, if my knees'll allow me to get that close to the ground.

The rain finally catch up around noon time and slow me down a bit. I never could stand to be cooped up in no house in the rain. Always make me itchy. That's one reason I used to like driving a trolley for the C.T.C. Cause you get to be out every day, no matter what kinda weather coming down—get to see people and watch the world go by. And it ain't as if you exactly out in the weather, neither. You get to watch it all from behind that big picture window.

Not that I woulda minded being out in it. I used to want to get me a job with the post office, delivering mail. Black folks could make good money with the post office, even way back then. But they wouldn't out you on no mail route. Always stick em off in a back room someplace, where nobody can't see em and get upset cause some little colored girl making as much money as the white boy working next to her. So I stuck with the C.T.C. all them years, and got my pension to prove it.

The rain still coming down steady along about three o'clock, when Max call me up to say do I want to come over to her and Yvonne's for dinner. Say they fried more chicken than they can eat, and anyway Yvonne all involved in some new project she want to talk to me about. And I'm glad for the chance to get out the house. Max and Yvonne got the place all picked up for company. I can smell that fried chicken soon as I get in the door.

Yvonne don't never miss an opportunity to dress up a bit. She got the front of her hair braided up, with beads hanging all in her eyes, and a kinda loose robe-like thing, in colors look like the fruit salad at a Independence Day picnic. Max her same old self in her slacks and loafers. She ain't changed in all the years I known her—cept we both got more wrinkles and gray hairs. Yvonne a whole lot younger than us two, but she hanging in there. Her and Max been together going on three years now.

Right away, Yvonne start to explain about this project she doing with her women's club. When I first heard about this club she in, I was kinda

interested. But I come to find out it ain't no social club, like the Cinnamon & Spice Club used to be. It's more like a organization. Yvonne call it a collective. They never has no outings or parties or picnics or nothing—just meetings. And projects.

The project they working on right now, they all got tape recorders. And they going around tape-recording people story. Talking to people who been in the life for years and years, and asking em what it was like, back in the old days. I been in the life since before Yvonne born. But the second she stick that microphone in my face, I can't think of a blessed thing to say.

"Come on, Jinx, you always telling us all them funny old time stories."

Them little wheels is rolling round and round, and all that smooth, shiny brown tape is slipping off one reel and sliding onto the other, and I can't think of not one thing I remember.

"Tell how the Cinnamon & Spice Club got started," she say.

"I already told you about that before."

"Well tell how it ended, then. You never told me that."

"Ain't nothing to tell. Skip and Peaches broke up." Yvonne waiting, and the reels is rolling, but for the life of me I can't think of another word to say about it. And Max is sitting there grinning, like I'm the only one over thirty in the room and she don't remember a thing.

Yvonne finally give up and turn the thing off, and we go on and stuff ourselves on the chicken they fried and the greens I brung over from the garden. By the time we start in on the sweet potato pie, I have finally got to remembering. Telling Yvonne about when Skip and Peaches had they last big falling out, and they was both determine they was gonna stay in The Club—and couldn't be in the same room with one another for fifteen minutes. Both of em keep waiting on the other one to drop out, and both of em keep showing up, every time the gang get together. And none of the rest of us couldn't be in the same room with the two a them for even as long as they could stand each other. We'd be sneaking around, trying to hold a meeting without them finding out. But Peaches was the president and Skip was the treasurer, so you might say our hands was tied. Wouldn't neither one of em resign. They was both convince The Club couldn't go on without em, and by the time they was finished carrying on, they had done made sure it wouldn't.

Max is chiming in correcting all the details, every other breath come outa my mouth. And then when we all get up to go sit in the parlor again, it come out that Yvonne has sneaked that tape recording machine in here under that African poncho she got on, and has got down every word I said.

When time come to say good night, I'm thankful, for once, that Yvonne insist on driving me home—though it ain't even a whole mile. The rain ain't let up all evening, and is coming down in bucketfuls while we in the car. I'm half soaked just running from the car to the front door.

Yvonne is drove off down the street, and I'm halfway through the front door, when it hit me all of a sudden that the door ain't been locked. Now my mind may be getting a little threadbare in spots, but it ain't wore out yet. I know it's easy for me to slip back into doing things the way I done em twenty or thirty years ago, but I could swear I distinctly remember locking this door and hooking the key ring back on my belt loop, just fore Yvonne drove up in front. And now here's the door been open all this time.

Not a sign a nobody been here. Everything in its place, just like I left it. The slipcovers on the couch is smooth and neat. The candy dishes and ash trays and photographs is sitting just where they belong, on the end tables. Not even so much as a throw rug been moved an inch. I can feel my heart start to thumping like a blowout tire.

Must be, whoever come in here ain't left yet.

The idea of somebody got a nerve like that make me more mad than scared, and I know I'm gonna find out who it is broke in my house, even if it don't turn out to be nobody but them little peach-thieving rascals from round the block. Which I wouldn't be surprised if it ain't. I'm scooting from room to room, snatching open closet doors and whipping back curtains—tiptoeing down the hall and then flicking on the lights real sudden.

When I been in every room, I go back through everywhere I been, real slow, looking in all the drawers, and under the old glass doorstep in the hall, and in the back of the recipe box in the kitchen—and other places where I keep things. But it ain't nothing missing. No money—nothing.

In the end, ain't nothing left for me to do but go to bed. But I'm still feeling real uneasy. I know somebody or something done got in here while I was gone. And ain't left yet. I lay wake in the bed a long time, cause I ain't too particular about falling asleep tonight. Anyway, all this rain just make my joints swell up worse, and the pains in my knees just don't let up.

The next thing I know Gracie waking me up. She lying next to me and kissing me all over my face. I wake up laughing, and she say, "I never could see no use in shaking somebody I rather be kissing." I can feel the laughing running all through her body and mine, holding her up against my chest in the dark—knowing there must be a reason why she



woke me up in the middle of the night, and pretty sure I can guess what it is. She kissing under my chin now, and starting to undo my buttons.

It seem like so long since we done this. My whole body is all a shimmer with this sweet, sweet craving. My blood is racing, singing, and her fingers is sliding inside my nightshirt. "Take it easy," I say in her ear. Cause I want this to take us a long, long time.

Outside, the sky is still wide open—the storm is throbbing and beating down on the roof over our heads, and pressing its wet self up against the window. I catch ahold of her fingers and bring em to my lips. Then I roll us both over so I can see her face. She smiling up at me through the dark, and her eyes is wide and shiny. And I run my fingers down along her breast, underneath her own nightgown . . .

I wake up in the bed alone. It's still night. Like a flash I'm across the room, knowing I'm going after her, this time. The carpet treads is nubby and rough, flying past underneath my bare feet, and the kitchen linoleum cold and smooth. The back door standing wide open, and I push through the screen.

The storm is moved on. That fresh air feel good on my skin through the cotton nightshirt. Smell good, too, rising up outa the wet earth, and I can see the water sparkling on the leaves of the collards and kale, twinkling in the vines on the bean poles. The moon is riding high up over Thompson's field, spilling moonlight all over the yard, and setting all them blossoms on the fence to shining pure white.

There ain't a leaf twitching and there ain't a sound. I ain't moving either. I'm just gonna stay right here on this back porch. And hold still. And listen close. Cause I know Gracie somewhere in this garden. And she waiting for me.



**Florida Flowers**

**Photo by Abby Lynn Bogomolny**

## Contributors' Notes

**Gloria E. Anzaldúa** finds living in earthquake country (the beach town of Santa Cruz) and writing in the dark in the middle of the night *muuy* stimulating. Her most recent work is a bilingual children's book, *Friends from the Other Side / Amigos del Otro Lado*.

**Judith Barrington** is the author of two collections of poetry: *Trying to be an Honest Woman* (1985) and *History and Geography* (1989), which was a finalist for the Oregon Book Awards, and the editor of *An Intimate Wilderness: Lesbian Writers on Sexuality* (1992)—all from the Eighth Mountain Press. She has recently completed a memoir, *Lifesaving, A Spanish Memoir*, which will be published in 1994. She is the founder and director of The Flight of the Mind, a series of annual summer writing workshops for women.

**Bells** is a tribal woman of Nozama/Lesberada, musician, photographer. She is now in recovery, a carpenter, and studying nursing.

**Henri Bensussen** is passionate about gardens and loves to write about what lives and happens in them. She lives with her partner Linda in San Jose, California and is co-editor of *Entre Nous* newsmagazine.

**Becky Birtha** has written two collections of short stories: *For Nights Like This One: Stories of Loving Women* (Frog in the Well, 1983), and *Lover's Choice* (Seal Press, 1987). In 1991 her book of poetry, *The Forbidden Poems*, was published by Seal Press.

**Abby Lynn Bogomolny** is a writer, photographer, and videographer who lives in Santa Cruz, CA. She leads classes in the Kabbalah and Jewish meditation and has two collections of poetry, *Black of Moonlit Sea* and *Nauseous in Paradise*.

**Cathy Cade** has been a lesbian feminist photographer since the early 1970s. She lives in Oakland, California with her two sons—not from a previous marriage. She's working on a book of photography about lesbian mothering.

**Leslie Cameron:** Quoting Leslie's Nana, "a woman's garden is the nurturing ground for her soul, where her heart blooms." The foundation of Leslie's vivid tales is her passionate storytelling born of her background in theatre and film. A native Marylander, she lives in Torrance, California, with her lover and step-cat.

**Emma Joy Crone** is a pagan, whose first love is mother earth. She endeavours in her poetry, prose, and erotica to bring issues of class, the visibility of older women, and life during menopause to the attention of lesbian and other communities.

**Denise Dale:** I'm a downside-of-thirtysomething recovering catholic. Yvonne and I live in southwestern Pennsylvania where we practice militant organic gardening. We grow mostly heirlooms—everything from azuki beans to zucchini—and save seeds so we're not completely dependent on seed companies. And I still plant too many tomatoes.

**Amy Edgington:** I am a disabled Lesbian artist and writer living in the South. My work has been previously published in *Sinister Wisdom* (#39 On Disability), *Cats*

(and their Dykes) (HerBooks, 1991), *Wanting Women: An Anthology of Erotic Lesbian Poetry* (Sidewalk Revolution Press, 1990), and other journals and anthologies.

**Ellen Farmer:** Despite a degree in journalism and ten years as a book editor, Ellen Farmer writes with passionate abandon on any topic that stirs her. She is currently co-editing the anthology *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Formerly Married Lesbians*.

**Nett Hart**, a rural dyke in Minnesota, writes, builds, tinkers, cooks, organizes, herbcrafts, and gardens. She is the publisher of Word Weavers, A Lesbian Feminist Publisher, administers a non-profit for land dykes, Lesbian Natural Resources, and organizes events with Creating a Lesbian Future.

**Chaia Zblocki Heller** is an ecofeminist poet. Her work is published in several journals and anthologies including *Calyx*, *Kalliope*, *Sojourner*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Women's Glibber* and the anthology by The Crossing Press, *Lesbian Culture*. She is currently working on a book of ecofeminist theory to be published in Spring, 1995, called *The Revolution That Dances: Explorations in Social Ecofeminism*.

**Kate Lyn Hibbard** is a white lesbian with rural working class roots deep in the earth. She lives in the Twin Cities and dreams of a quieter life without so much traffic.

**Sarah Jacobus** is a Los Angeles writer, radio producer and teacher. Her personal essays and short stories have been published in *Sojourner* and *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* and will appear in the upcoming *Indivisible II*, new short fiction by West Coast lesbian and gay writers. She is currently at work on a collection of stories about her experiences as a peace activist and radio journalist in the Middle East over a ten year period. Her garden continues to be a highlight of her life in Los Angeles.

**Leslie Karst** is a singer/songwriter, who works part time as a research attorney in order to support her music habit. Her band, Electric Range, which plays progressive, cross-over country, has just released their first CD, on NeWest Records. Leslie and her long-term partner, Robin, live with their dog, Tosh, in Watsonville, California, along with 34 rose bushes.

**Irena Klepfisz** has been an activist in the lesbian/feminist and Jewish communities for almost 20 years. She was a co-founder of *Conditions* magazine, co-editor of *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, co-founder of The Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and, from 1990-1992, she served as Executive Director of New Jewish Agenda. In 1990 Eighth Mountain Press published two companion volumes of her writing: *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New* and *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes*.

**Sally Koplín** is a wild ricer.

**Paula Mariedaughter:** I am a white, middle-class Southerner, born and raised in Miami. I was part of the Kansas City Women's Liberation Union in the early 1970s. In 1974 I was one of the organizers of a national group called Stewardesses for Women's Rights (SFWR). In the early 1980s I was part of a group of six radical dykes called TALKING DYKES. In 1988, at age 43, I had advanced breast cancer. Through a mastectomy as well as a variety of non-traditional techniques, I am healing myself. In 1992, I assisted my lover Jeanne in starting her magazine *At the Crossroads: Feminism, Spirituality and New Paradigm Science*. We live in the

Ozark mountain house we built, surrounded by four beloved canines, two beloved felines, and a wonderful forest of redbud, oak, hickory, and dogwood trees.

**Lou Ann Matossian** is a longtime activist in the lesbian feminist and Armenian communities. Twice honored by the Academy of American Poets, she has contributed to *A Room of One's Own*, *Ararat*, and *off our backs*. Her translations of Armenian women's charm-verses will appear in *Ararat* early in 1994.

**Lesléa Newman** is the author of sixteen books for adults and children including two poetry collections, *Love Me Like You Mean It* (Clothespin Fever Press, 1993) and *Sweet Dark Places* (HerBooks, 1991). Her newest book is entitled *Writing from the Heart: Inspiration and Exercises for Women Who Want to Write* (Crossing Press, 1993).

**Shoshana Rothaizer** is a native New Yorker amazon whose writing and photos have been published in various periodicals, journals and books including *Cats (and their Dykes)*, *Lesbian Land*, *We'Moon Almanac*, *The Advocate*, and *off our backs*. Shoshana's photography has been seen in various group photo exhibits, and she hopes that her photos help to create a bridge between various people and lifestyles.

**Barbara E. Sang** is a psychologist in private practice. She has written extensively on lesbian relationships, research, and psychotherapy. Barbara also specializes in women and the creative process. Recently she has co-edited an anthology with Joyce Warshaw and Adrienne Smith entitled *Lesbians at Midlife: The Creative Transition* and is currently working on a book with Joyce on lesbian activism. In addition to her love of the outdoors, swimming, biking, and hiking, Barbara is a nature photographer and artist. Her other interests include Oriental philosophy, experimental music, cooking, and nutrition.

**Shoney Sien** wrote *Lizards/Los Padres* and co-edited *Cats (and their Dykes)*. Her newest work is a radical lesbian feminist mystery; look for it!

**Linda G. Spencer** emerged from Plainview (Long Island, New York) and found her way to San Jose, California in 1985. Ever since then she has been working on finishing her degree in English, working in the local library and, with her friend Henri, maintaining their house with two cats in the yard.

**tova** is a working-class jewish lesbian writer. She has been published in numerous journals, newspapers, and anthologies. She is an editor of *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends*. Obviously, she loves to garden, even though last summer's miserable northwest season gave some of her beautiful Early Girl tomatoes blight!



## About the Editors



Photo by Irene Reti

**Valerie Jean Chase** lives in Santa Cruz, California with her companion Irene and their two cats Wicca and Wizard. Her life passions are her twenty rose bushes, string quartet playing, traveling, and reading.



Photo by Valerie Jean Chase

**Irene Reti** is currently writing an ecological novel about a Jewish lesbian daughter of Holocaust refugees. She is the founder of HerBooks, and is proud to celebrate the 10th anniversary of HerBooks with the publication of *Garden Variety Dykes*.

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Tending eight-foot-tall houseplants in a New York City high-rise apartment. Starting an herb farm in the Ozarks. A cornfield in Los Angeles. The politics of snails. A safe sex way to garden. An Australian bush garden. The first woman arborist in California. These and many other stories, poems, essays, and photos are gathered in this anthology by lesbian gardeners. We invite you to celebrate with us the diversity of garden variety dykes who make this planet a better place to live.

*"I hear somebody pass through that squeaky side gate and go on around to the back yard. I ain't paid it no mind at all, cause that's the way Gracie most often do when she come home. Go see about her garden fore she even come in the house. I always be teasing her she care more about them collards and string beans than she do about me."*

—Becky Birtha  
"In the Life"

*"At night when the flashbacks threatened to roll, when I dreaded the dreams I might have, I put myself to sleep with detailed plans of my next crop rotation."*

—Amy Edgington  
"Gaining Ground"

*"I sit in bed ignoring the cats and my girlfriend with one thought on my mind—which roses do I want in my garden?"*

—Valerie Jean Chase  
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