

## **RUTHANN ROBSON**

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### **Genealogy**

Almost better to be an orphan

than to be a woman holding sea-rotted  
twigs and looking for ancestors;  
clutching a driftwood divining rod that  
will never discover a grand matriarch or  
patron of the arts. My mothers had to work.

I come from a family of women with double  
first names and dubious  
surnames, of half sisters with half-told  
stories, of women who would use their family  
trees when firewood is scarce.

We have no leather bibles to edify  
our descendants. In fact, the custom  
among us has been to burn birth  
certificates, to change names like  
clothes stolen from someone else,

to hide from husbands and bad debts.  
We moved across oceans and mountains and  
never learned how to write a letter home.  
You could say I have no history.  
Of course, I could send twenty dollars

somewhere for a picture of my family  
crest, complete with instructions in genealogy.  
The rich spent years writing history  
and now they need the cash. But what  
could they tell me? But what would I find?

A white woman caring for her daughter dying  
of childbed fever, and a hillbilly quilting  
while coughing with black lung, and a chinese  
woman ironing white boys' shorts, and a black  
woman rolling other women's hair on Saturdays

and cigars during the week, and a woman not speaking  
the language while she sewed in the cold  
garment factory. A woman waitressing in Birmingham  
and whoring in New Orleans and imprisoned  
in Sydney. A blind woman selling newspapers and

a woman with one leg who wanted to love other women  
but was afraid and a woman whose family changed  
their names in disgrace and moved away, looking  
for work where no one knew their debts and crimes.

These women are the salt  
of my sea, the sweat that collects  
on the rims of my scars. I do not need  
to know their names, their places  
of birth, their dates of death,

to know I am their daughter.

## waves, night

1.  
the moon looks full, but it's waning  
your mother  
wails that she's tired of life  
at this edge her same complaints  
salted over years  
irregular as tides out &  
farther out you are bloated  
& have abandoned your attempts  
to rescue her or any other woman  
including yourself

2.  
we make our own traps, certainly  
but what did you expect? you were born  
with the moon in cancer born under  
a steel pier your first toys  
were the sharp & pliable wires  
of crabtraps you artfully constructed  
your own prison silly now  
to say what you intended: *i thought*  
*i was building a barricade a home*

3.  
Georgia O'Keeffe had no children  
now she is famous  
for Elizabeth Arden flowers gigantic  
in their femininity famous also  
for skulls & bones of bleached white masks  
raped from the desert gleaming fertile  
in unmitigated sun not-so-famous  
for her oiled testament to her brief affair  
with the midnight Atlantic deep blue slants  
& a pinpoint house of incandescence

4.  
the not-yet-ripe peaches color  
of shore light  
five seconds before dusk the suntan oil  
color of beach foam when there's a frantic storm  
miles out at sea the color you are tempted

to call yellow    the color of a single  
fleck in the marine    blue iris  
of your mother's    left eye  
when she is angered    dangerous as broken coral  
& as useless

5.

remember that woman writer, British  
(something about a lighthouse)  
(about a room)    the woman who walked  
into a cold spring river    rock in her pocket  
(something about death    being the only experience  
she would never write about)    madness comes  
not like a tidal wave    but like eddies  
on a sandbar    the water is shallow & warm  
harboring pieces of claws    & eggs frail as air bubbles  
she had no children either

6.

your mother bays like a sea wolf  
a mythical siren    a self-appointed  
sisyphus    the waves crash her flesh  
with dark rhythms    rimmed in foam  
leaving patterns of white    like undecipherable runes  
all round & content    salt renders choice  
& fate indistinguishable    but the bait  
is as shiny as ever    submerged in its slowly  
too slowly    rusting cage of metal

## **the consort**

1.  
all romance is a parody of this:  
child  
& woman as Madonna/Goddess

the day you learned to kiss:  
the souring smell of my breast  
on your excited wet breath

your giggles like the bluest baubles  
on a sapphire necklace

more precious than precious

2.  
when i was engaged  
i stole my mother's pearls  
& hocked them  
to pay for an abortion  
for my lover's lover

then i eloped  
alone  
with you in my womb

& we gave birth  
alone  
in a room at the Desert Inn

3.  
that winter night  
the stars brightly gossiping  
& the moon  
a bastard itself  
almost full & approving

the cord was cut  
by a paring knife  
no doctor stitched me shut

there are scars  
not meant  
to be completely healed

4.  
no one needs to tell me  
this is forbidden  
:in bed together  
sleeping through night after  
cold night after hot night

our scent is so mingled  
no animal could distinguish  
between us

or would need to

5.  
i know how  
Mary believed herself a virgin  
never have i been purer  
less subjugated  
more sensuous  
sweet sweet Jesus

something bares its rubied teeth  
& howls  
in the desert

## each winter

after the first chill sets    like a splinted bone  
& my hands seem webbed    with paperish ice  
you appear    blonde as my breath

i remember the months we lived    in our heatless  
tenement    & you crossed each day off  
the kitchen calendar    as if each midnight  
were a splendid accomplishment

each dark morning    after the witching hour  
we warmed our hands & cracked ribs  
with sugared tea    lusting near the only window  
for the sun    my arm in a sling

your eyebrows stitched slants    we pretended to read  
a text on mythology    stared at each other  
two battered Persephones    each waiting  
for the other    to reveal herself

as Demeter    powerful mother who would rescue  
us into a fruitful spring    by August  
your patience had faded    you marked the book  
at Antigone    & froze time into a private

eternity    the snap of your neck echoed  
through the closets    the calendar  
fell    from the unpainted wall  
sweat chipped    at the ridges of your forehead

each winter  
when i consider    my countless failures  
first i count    the failure of my warmth  
to thaw your flesh    my bones

ring the years    like pagan trees  
documenting survival    as if endurance  
of each cold season    since your death  
were a brutal success

## Nightshade

“Une lesbienne qui ne réinvente pas la monde est  
une lesbienne en voie de disparition”

—Nicole Brossard, *Lesbiennes d'écriture*

### I.

i am going away a little each day

i don't necessarily feel bad about this.  
facts, my mother taught me, are facts.  
nothing more.

but the other women i know, the women i call friends, the lesbians  
i called family until i learned not to,  
accuse me: “you lack imagination,” they tell me.  
sometimes they say it in French, a language beautiful  
as a slap on a high cheekbone, reminding me  
of all the things i could never do:  
plié, tour jeté, arabesque,  
order in a restaurant,  
sound like i came from Manhattan instead of the Bronx.

i wonder what happens to clichés  
in translation; things like “every woman is  
a lesbian because she loved her mother first.”  
i've always liked that one.  
i never asked my mother what she thought about it.  
i was one of those kids who kept her mouth shut.

i never told my mother that i loved her.  
we were women who believed there were places words could not go.  
though i loved her most, i think, the day she let me quit the ballet  
lessons i hated so much they made my throat sore as silence.

### II.

i am going away a little each day.  
i am not lonely, although i get a bit bored, divorced  
from the gossip.  
so i start to make up stories: amusing, witty, meaningful;  
my family—i mean, community—doing delightfully raucous deeds.  
i laugh. when Margot asks me what is so funny,  
i tell her a story about Glenda&Sammy&Gloria and their three-way



romancing under the nightshade while the cat watched.  
she doesn't laugh.  
she brings back Glenda&Sammy&Gloria for a confrontation  
of epic proportions. i tell the same story,  
"to their faces," as they say, only  
i change the cat to a snowy owl and make the nightshade a  
bloodier purple.  
no one laughs.  
Margot shouts that i am a liar.  
Sammy says i'm crazy.  
Glenda&Gloria agree i need therapy, but i know  
that even if i had the money to slink into someone's sliding scale,  
i am impatient-able.  
i have slept with every therapist in the state,  
or if not her, then her lover,  
or if not her lover, then i would tell her i had.

### III.

i am going away a little each day.  
someone sends my ex-lover to fetch me as if i am an empty pail of water.  
Jackie—or so she was called when she was my lover,  
though now she insists on Jacqueline—  
has always wanted to be a writer. Jacqueline,  
even when she was known as Jackie, has always said she is a writer.  
once i told her that to be a writer, one had to write  
*something*. that's when she kicked me out. after  
a mediation session, of course.

when we were together, she'd read Brossard in bed, first  
in French, then in English translation, then in French again.  
she called us lov(h)ers. i liked that.  
i thought there was a world, as original as the wheel, invented  
in that "H" so snug in its parentheses.  
i never told her that my mother did not know what parentheses were;  
that my mother saw them on a sign once, and became scared, as if  
there was yet another letter, another signal, she could neither read nor write.

i am one of those women who keeps her mouth shut, at least  
about certain things. still, i thought that Jackie, if not Jacqueline,  
might understand my stories. but these days  
Jacqueline is re-re-reading Virginia Woolf and quoting  
something about the sacrifice of truth being "abject treachery."  
Jacqueline also tells me that a story isn't a story unless its written,

otherwise it's a lie. "what about oral history?"  
i ask her. "history," she says, "is history. nothing more."  
she's becoming as tight-lipped as the British.

i tell her i am going to take a trip.  
i tell her i'm going somewhere, where i will get away  
from both French and English. she buys me a calligraphy set  
as a *bon voyage* present. she must think i'm going by boat.

IV.

i am going away a little more each day.  
truth: Jackie/Jacqueline had said.  
*vérité*: in French.  
but it's the wrong path, no matter which fork  
i choose. i am interested in something different, less boring.  
a fact is nothing more  
than a fact, as my mother always said: she was a woman who never  
put facts in parentheses.

(but could i kill the trees to say something?) there was a paper in the kit  
from Jackie; white as bladderwort, dead as timber.  
i practiced Gothic lettering.  
i changed the story: i told myself how my family  
representative of patriarchy made me abandon the only thing i ever loved  
because girls should not be seen in leotards. i practiced  
the lie of my love for Mme. Claudé, my ballet teacher.  
i liked that one. i would never ask my father what he thought.

it was easy to rearrange the world once i started.  
first, i moved the Bronx into Manhattan, confined it all  
in the East Village. my mother was an artiste, didn't you know?  
she was a poet and a painter and a radical revolutionary who  
could bake cookies  
and braid my hair and read Flaubert all at the same time.

i was a dancer (not in the topless clubs  
which supported me and my lov(h)er (not Jackie, or even Jacqueline)  
the junkie) in the Royal Ballet.  
my lover was a gorgeous choreographer. we were both  
very political and went around changing people's lives for the better.  
we had seven cats, all named for characters of Colette.

V.

i am going away a little more each day.  
farther & further  
and no longer caring that i can never remember the difference  
between those two words. (is there one?)  
my writing is getting smaller & smaller, not only because i'm becoming  
practiced in italics, but because i'm running out of paper.  
the trees grow more alive each night.  
living in the woods, romantic as the witch i've always wanted to be, but  
without the vocabulary.  
my mother never taught me the names of plants.  
i call most things nightshade.  
my mother taught me never to take food from strangers.  
i name most things deadly.

i am hungry. i am thirsty as an empty pail of water. the days dance  
shorter & shorter. in the winter sun, i recognize  
rabbit bells (a memory from a walk with Margot  
her: spouting off botany  
me: telling of Glenda&Sammy&Gloria).  
the dried pods pop like children's guns.

the seeds are small and shiny, accurate as obsidian.  
i wonder what would happen if i eat this jewelry?  
if i don't?

or i could gather bunches of them, go  
to a Women's Craft Fair, and market them as lesbian rattles.  
i could write "grown on sacred lesbian land" in well-rounded  
calligraphy on vellum notecards.  
i could make my fortune.

VI.

i am going away a little more each day.  
no one knows where i am, or everyone does, but no one cares, which is nearly  
as good as being invisible.  
if i can't be seen, i can't be shot.  
i am one lesbian, living alone in the woods.  
i am not one or the other of two lesbians, camping, when a crazed man  
(as if all men aren't) (oh, father, forgive all words supported by parentheses)  
aimed his rifle and fired&fired&fired&fired&fired.  
both women are shot.  
one can't move & the other can.

one goes for help & the other stays.  
one dies & the other doesn't.

the one walking, the one trying to hold her blood on the right side of her flesh,  
does she try to reinvent reality?  
does she try to spin the world back to a safer moment:  
when both women were walking & spotting a plant on the trail,

trying to identify nightshade?  
does she feel like disappearing?  
do her bones scream for her lov(h)er?  
while back at the campsite, a woman, a lesbian, each breath  
(like an "H" trapped in parentheses of blood) closer &  
closer to the last one, closer & closer to that place  
where words don't go.

(at the man's trial,  
his defense is that his mother  
was a lesbian.)

## VII.

i am going away a little each day.

i am one lesbian, disappearing in the woods, trying to imagine  
that those two women made love/slept/broke camp/and  
are now safely home arguing  
with sharp words about how one of them told a lie (oh, so tiny)  
to the other one. i am trying to imagine which one suggests  
mediation. the dead one or the not-dead one.

i want to reinvent, not the wheel, but those two women.  
i want to tell them that Jacqueline is Jackie  
and that her tongue licks me instead of slicing me.  
i want to tell them my mother read Baudelaire.  
i want to tell them i was born in Paris, *s'il vous plait*.  
i want to tell them about translation: "*Une lesbienne  
qui ne réinvente pas la monde est une lesbienne en voie  
de disparition*"  
one woman translates literally: a lesbian who does not reinvent  
the world.  
one woman translates differently: a lesbian who does not  
reinvent the word.

i want to tell them that the hurricane that is coming is not  
a hurricane, but a simple storm;  
no, not even a storm, but a change in the weather;  
not even a change, just something i will name: nightshade.

the winds of nightshade are strong.  
the trees bend like parentheses.  
the rains of nightshade are sharp.  
the rabbit bells are pierced like spitting jewels.  
this world—  
this word—  
i have not invented could kill me.  
i must reinvent.  
i must reinvent this roar which sounds like many men with many guns.  
i must be a lesbian who will not disappear; unless it suits me;  
i must be a woman who will speak only in my own language,  
unless i find another.  
i must be the girl who loved her mother first.  
the boy who did. the boy who loved his mother, the lesbian.

my throat is smooth from screaming out “nightshade.”

the world—  
the word—  
i have reinvented, spins beautiful as the first wheel making the wind gentle  
as a mother’s slap,  
making the rain round as it fills the pail of water.  
or so she wrote.

*la lesbienne d’écriture.*

## **authenticity**

there were other things that could have been said  
about distance and love

i never escaped entirely  
i learned withdrawal  
i never denied my history  
i edited it

this morning i watched men mow grass in the graveyard  
across from city university  
no matter how crowded or intelligent,  
there is always room for death  
i wanted the mist to cling like halos to the mowers  
instead of shackles around their ankles  
unlockable because untouchable  
i wanted my lover to rise like an archangel  
bearing a beautiful parking space,  
crowned with a garland of brilliant footnotes

there are other things i could have said  
about death and my lover

i have killed myself twice now  
and am qualified to lecture on the vagaries of survival  
i have loved her too long now  
not to keep quiet about the nuances of passion

this summer, i'm the only one i know  
who isn't in therapy or suing her therapist  
who isn't recovering from her mother's death  
or incest  
i want to live on a beach in New Zealand  
with a sheepdog smelling of kiwi  
two hundred miles from a library  
i want these days to be a flashback, backlit  
by a beautiful blonde sun  
bleached, burnt and hazy as a cherub's hair

there were things i heard them say  
about her and the city

she was supposed to be a mirror, a knife  
she is neither  
here was supposed to be a culture, a life  
it isn't even close

this year, i'm taking my lover and leaving the city  
this place where only nature is unnatural  
this place that makes me worship any pink inch of light  
i am the mirror, the knife  
with my dull side always out  
shininess and sharpness are dangerous here  
and never adequate as self-defense  
i am the fence with garbage stuck in my throat  
too frozen to decompose  
or too styrofoam

there are other things i cannot say  
like who i am and who i'm not

i thought fiction was poetry  
it is theory  
i thought theory was a solution  
it is practice

this lifetime, my excuse is postmodernism  
my identity is nothing other than a sin  
called essentialism  
authenticity is worse than co-dependency  
it's self-dependency, how ugly  
we were alone  
trapped in a gridlock  
when we lost  
our sense of humor, sold  
our imaginings of each other for tenure

there are other things we still need to say  
about the streets, about the academy, about

the distances between our love  
of death and our love  
of masks and our love  
for each other and our love

**Anne Brigman in the Doorway of her Studio c. 1908**

*Anne Brigman's photographs of female nudes  
in the landscape are intensely personal, symbolic  
expressions of her inner feelings and mystical  
fantasies. As such, these photographs have  
remained inaccessible to many . . .*

—from a catalog of an exhibition

Here in the austere Sierras  
Take off your clothes, the sturdy  
boots and jeans—no—the shirt first  
yes, you are magnificent, don't worry  
now climb that outcrop of granite  
turn your face toward the glitter  
caress the gnomic cypress, your lover  
you are the rhythm of trees and rocks  
and i am all power and abandon  
wielding that despised and desperate weapon  
a camera

Here in the Dungeness darkroom  
The deep erotic bottom of being alone  
diluvial and demanding  
nudes swim to the surface  
happy to sacrifice their aquiline features  
to be blurred into angels and archetypes  
the etching tool my incessant ally  
attending to my incantations  
as i alter the interpositives  
hour after night after season after year after  
time stops

Here in the doorway caught by some other hunter  
The threshold is always a pagan place  
straddling the sanctum of the mystical  
and the paddocks of paradises lost and found  
every obverse is reverse as the lens has taught us  
what can a photograph of a photographer reveal?



that light lurks in the flesh?  
that desire is the mirror embodied?  
you wanted to know if i loved women  
(a dyke!), but my only secret was my lust for life  
at the aperture.

## **White and Black Photography**

The man at Ashmore's always asks me  
whether I'm White or Black. I never answer.  
I'm here only to buy my mother's dream book.  
If you dream of Indians, the number 42.  
If you dream of death, the number 9.  
When my mother wins the lottery, she will buy  
herself that fine white house on the corner;  
the one with the triple windows and black shutters  
that open and close. The neighbors will joke  
about my professional quality tripod, calling it an old woman  
with a cane or a young man with a hard-on.  
I will laugh, ready to travel and photograph  
across each of seven dark continents.

**Elizabeth “Tex” Williams**  
**Black Photographer**  
**1924 -**

*I married the military at twenty  
and never divorced. I shot  
thousands—millions—of soldiers,  
finally learning the right lightings,  
the right timings, to prevent overexposure  
of even the most ghost-like faces. I  
preserved forever the soon-to-be-dead.*

My first lover said I was gray in bed.  
My second lover said I was dangerously unfocused  
I pretended both times not to know what was meant.

My first lover had long white hair.  
My second lover had a bald black head.  
They were married, to each other.

They gave me their Japanese camera.  
It was a present; they hardly ever used it.  
If it was payment, I still would have taken it.

The first photograph I took was myself:  
I was a shadow, the camera was a flash  
that burned a white hole in the mirror  
where my face would have been.

**Berenice Abbott**  
**White Photographer**  
**1898 -**

*Every age is dangerous for a woman:  
the Age of Science, the Age of Reason,  
the age of 23 when I escaped to Paris  
to sculpt, but found strength instead  
in the sharp subjects of women. Black  
and white always; color only crowds  
a photograph, like a man in an artist's life.*

I want to marry a photograph  
of my mother when she was my age. Her white  
collar is starched skyward, like a supplicant  
to some unnamed goddess of toughness.  
I want to go to school, to the city, to somewhere  
where I can preserve the sleek survivals  
of women on high contrast paper.  
I want to be a photographer.  
But once among the gray buildings, I find success  
on the wrong side of the mirror. I am a model:  
the exotic, the object, the lie instead of the liar.  
My mother sends back the money I send her, hissing  
“slut.” I purchase expensively new equipment.

**Dora Miller**  
**Black Photographer**  
**1918–1951**

*Even my mother was excited by the scholarship,  
impressed by the lettering on the vellum envelope:  
The California Institute of Photography.  
Nothing is free. I had to model, to answer phones  
in the damned charm school. Still, I learned enough  
to open my own studio in L.A., but not enough  
to avoid a hard marriage, an early heart attack.*

Like a marriage bed with running water,  
like a passionate lover who is always at home,  
my darkroom comforts. Pity my life  
does not possess a safelight and a triple  
goddess of plastic trays and  
neatly labeled bottles of fixer  
eager to stabilize every negative.  
I want the ability to crop and dodge  
my days, to increase the exposure time  
of my stop-bath nights. My only weather  
would be cool tones or warm ones.  
I would choose my contrasts:  
a whiter white, a bluer black.

**Billie Louise Barbour Davis**  
**Black Photographer**  
**1906–1955**

*Before I was married I danced, but  
now I leap in the laundry room. I lined  
the windows with blackout shades from the War.  
It was easy to do, almost as easy as shooting  
the Virginia skies, cloudless with drought.  
I huddle inside, manipulate the light,  
execute prints which are exotically crisp.*

It is my aunt who calls her whore-niece back  
to the Florida hospital where my mother's body  
bruises the over-bleached sheets. The White doctor  
informs me there are 63 tests for the head.  
The technician administers the EEG, explaining  
it is like "little pictures of the brain,"  
as she pastes pieces of cotton into my mother's hair.  
Although the tiny cameras are held by my mother,  
she is not the photographer,  
but a photograph labeled "Pickaninny, 1935, Mississippi."  
The technician switches on the strobe.  
My mother is overexposed.  
White light flashes where her brain should be.

**Margaret Bourke-White**  
**White Photographer**  
**1904–1971**

*Black and white is the technique of reality.*  
*I learned this in the thirties*  
*as I photographed the Black Florida*  
*sharecroppers, against their newspaper wallpaper, for*  
*the book I was doing with my soon-to-be-second husband.*  
*Later, they would say I lacked subtlety.*  
*Later, they would send me to South Africa for LIFE.*

It is a small exhibit of huge photographs, my first.  
There is a polite white wine with a California label.  
My lover of the moment has refused to come,  
protesting that my work is too dark, as in “depressing.”  
My mother is a thousand miles elsewhere, dying.  
My favorite print is 20 by 24 inches, with successfully  
imperceptible graininess. Three Seminole daughters,  
posed on the Everglades Reservation, in front of their mother’s  
government home. There is a triple window with black shutters  
to their right, as partially focused as a childhood dream,  
a sharp triangle of roof overhead.  
No one buys this photograph.  
Or any other.

**Laura Gilpin**  
**White Photographer**  
**1891-1979**

*I wanted to know the Navajo I photographed  
almost as well as I knew my Betsey, my  
"companion of fifty years" as her newspaper obituary  
labeled her. I never burned in the background sky,  
cloudless or otherwise. I always waited  
in the desert for the right weather. I never  
wanted to work for LIFE, only to live.*

I was a girl here, in this thin white house facing  
the cemetery where my mother is being buried.  
I learned my first shapes by tracing the headstones,  
etched with names because of white powders or black metals  
or lack of love. I learned life  
was an image to be captured: transitory, tenuous.  
I learned death was transparent. I vowed to be unmarried.  
Today, I sit in the single window photographing  
my mother's mourners: White, Black, and my own  
grainy shade of gray. I cannot read the light  
meter. Every exposure is wrong. When I develop,  
I will burn in the faces, burn in a background.



## **The Animus of Diane Arbus, the Photographer**

I've always been afraid of everything  
Human. I was schooled in rooms with  
Heavy drapes and taught that civilization  
Insisted I ignore my cousin's prominent  
Harelip. But I secretly studied it for  
Hours, and learned that being polite  
Is the ultimate savagery. I made collages  
Of orifices that refused to be perfectly  
Round. It was easy to let my eyes do  
All my thinking; easier still to  
Hide behind the three cameras I began to  
Wear like gaudy necklaces. My goal was to make  
Emotion one-dimensional. I photographed  
What other people called freaks, but these  
Were people I entertained, men and women  
Worth at least one afternoon of dangerous  
Sex. I wanted to develop the fear  
Of the flesh. But I never thought  
Anything was ugly—or beautiful—  
Only that experience which teetered on the  
Edge of consciousness seemed the most  
Authentic. There is a thin lip  
Around even the most gentle abyss  
Of the soul. I circled and slid toward  
Suicide, because all else is  
Ambiguity, the cruelest focus of all.

**Käthe Kollwitz, Graphic Artist, Sketches  
a German Working-Class Woman**

the distance between us is a piece of bread,  
black and thick crusted. we both stand  
on long lines, but i can pay you to stand  
naked in my studio, pay you to stand  
holding a child that is not yours. his  
head is a pea in the giant pod of your hands.  
i linger with charcoal, studying  
the bulk of your fingers. i want  
to etch each one with such concentration  
that you will be mistaken  
for a lithograph. i've always loved  
hands. i've always loved  
the hands of women. i've always loved  
women. these are the reasons i married  
a physician. and why did you marry  
a worker in tortoise shell? and why  
does he drink? i want to make you  
beautiful. most of my subjects  
are mothers and children of the fatherland.  
do you believe i am asked why my art  
is so tragic? but i want to make you  
different. i have dreams  
of week old babies. i have dreams  
of you as a delicate hooped animal  
dancing in a forest. i have dreams  
of innocence. i want to make you  
a curve commanding space, a creature  
that does not need to eat. wait,  
why does your face twist as if you're  
insulted? please understand, i'm weary  
of my woodcuts of poverty, of struggle,  
of hunger. another life, i would  
have devoted myself solely to my hands,  
sculpting the sweet earth into vessels.  
but the death of children and women  
demands sharper instruments. come, hold  
me in your huge hands like you hold  
that borrowed infant. wait, let me hold  
you like a tree in the dead dead winter  
can hold both roots and sky.

## **Regine's Rebuke to Kierkegaard**

The years  
flew by like magpies trailing bright  
ribbons through the twilight. I  
have fourteen sons. Not even one is  
named Soren. Their eyelashes curl  
dark and thick as the tails of Danish ducks  
in winter. Some of my boys have handsome  
fathers. Do not worry, my jejune darling, you  
are not being charged with paternity.

The nights  
I seduced you under my red coverlets  
produced nothing; only your extravagant  
guilt about acquiring a few basic skills.  
It was distressingly easy to feign innocence.  
The blood was a chicken's. I would blow  
out the flickering romance of the candle and laugh  
at you under my breath. Afterwards,  
you would beseech God with your boring sins.

The morning  
you decided you were too god-like to marry,  
we sat on a hill round as my breast. The park  
was fertile with spring and made me think  
of all the places you had never kissed.  
At that moment, you were more serious, more  
tormented, more interestingly blond, than anyone  
I ever knew, but your words were dishonest as parrots  
caged as pets. I stilled the wings of my banter.

The day  
you first touched me, you had taken me to  
a museum in the city. One of us was explaining  
the paintings of dead men, while the other choked  
on the stale air. The halls were narrow as children's  
coffins. As your fingers traced the braid round  
the nape of my neck, I lifted my skirt to avoid  
the curse of lust in a public place. Even then,  
you did not guess I wore the feathers of a gypsy.

The future  
you envisioned for me was bleak, but less  
so than yours. Without crystal or leaves,  
you foresaw my fatal flaw: the capacity to be happy.  
You wasted your wind berating me. You  
were fearful and trembling and sicker than death.

Your tragedy  
was that you deflected your agony with eloquent  
edifices, built to explain why you gave me up  
when I was never yours to give.

My tragedy  
was that your buildings were so expertly  
mirrored, my messages died on carrier pigeons  
crashing into images of boundless sky.

**Mary Cassatt, After Destroying  
the Letters of Edward Degas**

I didn't burn them and they weren't about love.  
You can think what you want. I want  
you to. Imagination is a caress. Imagine

my portrait of him. I destroyed that too.  
Not because he was the only man I ever  
painted, except for my father and brothers,

but because I was giving up men  
as subjects. I could never get them to touch  
without blurring. His dancers weren't like women

I've known. He refused to connect them, to let  
them look at each other. He called it control.  
Even his whores were solitary, madonnas

out making a living while someone else  
cuddled their children. I am interested  
in something different. I love colors

like goddesses. Each one must be honored  
and a place set for her at the christening  
of each canvas, even if she chooses

not to attend; especially then. I love form  
like the shifting earth: its lap, its curves,  
its familiar kiss. He wrote about my body

calling it maternal, ultimately feminine.  
He wrote that my works were substitutes  
for the babies I deserved to have. He lacked

imagination. I never craved motherhood, virgin  
or otherwise. I always imagined myself  
as the infant in my pictures, the girl-christ, the

cherub. When there was no child but a lone  
woman at her desk, I imagined myself  
as the beloved letter for which she licked

the ugly tasting envelope. The answer,  
in a masculine slant of unjoined figures,  
had words so bland they tore themselves

to shreds in boredom. Imagine  
that. No flames. No passion. Only  
the drypoint of a newborn's cry.

**Edith Lewis Comforts Willa Cather  
as They Spend a Night  
Lost in the Mesa Verde Canyons of Colorado**

We are not lost. As a child, I was  
lost often, by which I meant separated  
from my mother. She dropped my hand to wander  
in the dry goods store, where majestic bolts  
of fabric loomed as high as pastel cliffs,  
blocking the sun of the one I loved;  
the one who did not love me, enough.

In this stone womb, twilight is as long as birth.  
The moon rises yellow and round  
with my vow: I will love you for the rest  
of our lives, even if we survive  
this night; even if we survive the next forty years.  
You will forget Isabelle, forget Louise.  
You will love me enough.

You will write of tonight on the mesa:  
*it was possession.*  
And yes, we are possessed, unborn, children  
as pure as the silver whispers in the sky.  
We can never be lost if we are together.  
We are love. The world is our store.  
Take my hand. Kiss the silence.

**Another Version of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas***

*before her:*

my voice is slit in two; the whispering  
girl at home, silent almost / the whispering  
woman who is answered by another whispering woman.  
the question is California. there are only men  
left in my family. and even the lesbians  
are getting married. i learn to speak of Paris.

*during her:*

my voice is one half of two voices  
fused as one. it is not only that we  
can imitate each other perfectly  
with the practice of years, decades, of hearing  
one another hiking on that path  
from outer ear to inner,  
incessant repetition,  
making it hard to remember what comes from outside  
and what does not.  
no, it is not only that.  
it is that we have only one voice; one voice in the plural.

*after her:*

my voice is many voices. an echo.  
low and raspy. knives thrown against canyons  
with the lonely scrape of metal on stone.  
grief did not silence me because i had to speak  
for her.  
but never for the one i would have been without.



## **time, place, desire**

the claustrophobic greens of late July  
afternoons  
as dark as dusk  
last December, driving  
across the nascent mountain ranges  
plowed solid on the Cross Bronx Expressway  
winter is an incessant memory  
a song through the static of the car radio  
the echoing voice of a woman  
who just must be a dyke  
winter is a frozen place  
a formless knowledge  
informing even the dawning of August

snow is a closet  
cold as Colorado, that March, watching  
her buying apples, lettuce seeds, an ax  
i am innocent, visiting, i want  
to tell her, i want  
to ask her how she lives  
in a state that hates her, i want her  
she smiles like i just must be a dyke  
nervous in Aspen, the ax  
looks relaxed in her hand, shining like a silver necklace  
after this last cup of latte together, i'm definitely catching  
the bus, connecting in Denver  
going home, toward summer, my lover

each season insinuates the others  
every place breathes deep its comparisons  
if i bury the bearded iris bulbs this autumn  
they will bloom this spring  
not as beautiful as California  
but not as bald as those forced stems  
in Provincetown, that white October  
when she thought she just must be a dyke  
but wasn't  
by November  
the rock garden frosted, i stayed until the season started  
licking the shells of sea animals  
souvenirs, repressed in the folds of my body

lust is a map and a calendar, i only want  
to wander  
and nest, simultaneously  
i stuff my Swiss army knife into my knapsack and plant  
shade-loving perennials, i polish  
the chrome of my motorcycle and paper  
the walls with designs for root cellars  
my girlfriend says i'm schizophrenic  
every Sunday  
the librarian (she just must be a dyke)  
inspects my selections:  
*A New England Gardener's Year*  
*Handbook of Exotic Adventures*

mint is frightening, it sprawls rudely in June  
Hawaii is threatened by typhoons in September  
i could infuse oil with basil and a hint of chives  
i could visit Funafuti and dive the Dateline  
straddle today and tomorrow like a native  
but there is Monday morning, my job, its benefits  
if you just must be a dyke, my first lover  
advised: fall in love with your own survival  
she did clip my nails, but not my desire  
i still want  
to be every woman  
i ever wanted, even for a moment,  
the one of us enduring everywhere

## the last decade of patriarchy

1.

our old wounds got older  
and less lonely    our fantasies fled our heads  
to become schemes we swirled  
like a dangerous coffee of safety

2.

a damp morning in any city  
what a young woman sees is an old lady    sleeping  
on the street    a random newspaper page  
blows across the banged blue leg  
the word *post-feminist* justifies its own column

heading other words  
*career    motherhood    having it all*  
*the arrival of equality    reverse*  
*discrimination    the wind still blows*  
the old woman could not read such words  
even if her eyes were not swollen shut with cold

3.

there are conversations in restaurants:  
“i no longer long to be chic;  
even my boots are last year’s color.”  
“i’m too old to be called a chick;  
it wounds my fragile psyche.”

the two women did not kiss then  
but they would

they would think that kiss was enough  
for a small revolution

they would learn how much more was required

4.

*we don't want lifestyles*  
*we want our lives*

*in this world, every woman is homeless*

*take back the night*

*reproductive rights for all women*

all those words on our banners  
in calligraphy, embroidery, blood and old stockings

we were marching  
again and again and again  
there was publicity  
but it wasn't for us

5.

it had been ten years since i was married  
but there were no anniversaries  
no roses, no child support, no dinners  
unless i made them

i was blue tired of the fumes of the factory  
my mother died of cancer  
no one to watch the kids during the day  
at least at night they sometimes slept

you think prostitution isn't a solution?  
all remedies are partial  
in this god-forsaken world

6.

religiously, on sunday mornings  
he fetches *The New York Times* and espresso  
i pull out the magazine first  
: another article on illiteracy  
: an advertisement for effective resumes  
: a photo-spread on Caribbean colors for livable living rooms

then we make love  
he is gentle  
i am not

i want to wound  
i want to be lonelier than lonely

i have my fantasies: personal solutions

are political ones no one  
lives on the other side of my windows

7.

even with low heels and dressed in a dark blue success suit  
she stumbles  
again and again  
on that same crumbled curb outside the mirrored building

the dimensions of her office are exactly  
the same as those inhabited by men

on her desk is a pile of papers  
she has learned to call documents  
just as she has learned to call  
her job a career  
just as she has learned to speak English

to feel lucky  
to forget the women walking the streets  
the woman sleeping on the street  
the wind swirling newspapers across her  
the blood crusting almost-blue

8.

we took back the night  
every year for years

we reclaimed the moon  
even after men had walked there

we had our rituals  
we taught them to our children

we loved each other  
and our love was a revolution  
and our revolution was love

it wasn't enough  
it was everything

we grew older and older  
there are no words which can remember us

9.  
you think to be unnamed  
is to be safe?

you think buying coffee  
from Nicaragua is brave?

You think your home  
is comfortable?

You think there are no wounds  
if you can't see them?

You think things are different  
now?  
yet?

10.  
the Goddess, the Goddess, the goddesses  
i've read my ninety-ninth book  
on pre-patriarchal  
it's my last  
i've memorized those slashes on their pots  
(etched by women)  
i've dreamed those womb-like hearths  
(shaped by women)

there is still wind and there is still fire  
the origins of inventions  
no longer concern me

i am writing a book about post-patriarchal culture  
can you read it?

i am sipping a cup of mottled coffee  
can you join me?

i am living my life as if—

will you?

## **six celestial paradigms**

1.

an ocean splashed with pink    the early sunset  
a cloud    or the idea of a cloud  
on the cavewall of the sky    painted  
as if with the blood of berries    and animals as large as Lasaux  
by hands    going soft with the conceit of reason

this is what we mean when we say    philosophy

2.

i like my ceilings white    trite as a canvas  
i have no imagination    or have only that  
my face horizontal    parallel    yellowed by the luminous light bulb  
my hair a collection of brushes    tipped with grease  
it takes more than talent    more than a flare for aesthetics

the pale nucleus of beauty    is stained ugly with ambition

3.

to argue the stars    into a different arrangement  
the dog, a bull    the bull, a lion  
and the lion an alibi    or perhaps entrapment  
each pinpoint of light    is an unalterable fact  
but everything is perspective    devoted to a verdict

this is the rule of law    the law of rules

4.

Your faith is evidenced    in every symmetry  
your sun is always perfectly centered    in the cyclops sky  
your full moons are two half-moons    your horizon bisected  
drawn and quartered    with religious precision  
you invented instruments to measure the density    of shadows

this is how you designate    reality

5.

There have not been stars sighted here (except the hazy sun)  
let alone any planets with rings or otherwise  
since the great blackout of 1969 (recall riots, the  
burst in the birth rate nine months later)  
still, the figures for telescope sales are astronomical

figure it out: the body the asteroid of sex

6.

The night is a black velvet cape studded with sequins, with diamonds  
with shards of fuselage no no no  
the night is the night god damn it  
god damn you god damn every last one of them  
mutating my damp dark reality into image, into cliché

yes, this is death or success



**the last moment of summer**

the first red leaf  
is unnoticed, deep  
in the heart of the forest

a fox—or is a feral dog?—creeps  
along the edge  
of the receding water

when the doctors tell you that you're dying  
you may try  
for levity: "isn't everyone?"

the tilt of their heads  
the wings of their eyebrows  
answer, "ah, you, very soon."

the loon's cry is plaintive  
but without pity  
echoing low across the salt pond

when they tell you that you will not  
survive  
time itself is an accomplishment

now it is autumn

## **April**

is national poetry month  
I spend it recovering from surgery  
accomplishment measured not in metaphor or meter  
but in tubes removed from their beds of flesh

At the huge hospital door, I am released  
a nonnative butterfly at a spring wedding  
the huge world flutters gales against  
what I hope will soon be scars

Home, on my porch, I try to read Cavafy,  
Piercy, Rich, Rilke, or even Plath,  
but the white spaces on the pages  
absorb all my diluted attention

So I turn to the catalogs accumulated in my absence  
the models mapped with this season's swimsuits  
look oddly unfinished—unbisected by incisions  
no neat detours around the navel's pothole

My yard seems wide as the Asian Steppes  
mother of those wild tulips cultivated by the Dutch  
great great grandmother to the single red cup  
blooming from a bulb buried by someone I once knew

Someone who could strut, smooth-skinned, in a bikini,  
someone whose wings could skirt the sun, someone  
who read poems celebrating April's cruelties, believing  
herself strong enough to survive them, laughing

## **perspective**

1.  
almost blue, the river  
at least from a distance

close: hazel  
(the color of her eyes after  
i no longer loved her)

closer, closer: cupped  
in the hand that had once touched  
her and drawn to the mouth that  
had more than once—: clear

2.  
the year we were both dying, the plumber  
& i, we continued working  
certainly, we needed the money  
(hopeless medical procedures are the most expensive)  
but we also wanted to belong to the world  
and believe that things were fixable  
that morning, he came when i called him  
(the dying sometimes swear allegiance)  
into my bald and scrawny apartment  
where my kitchen sink was clogged  
nothing as simple as i'd hoped, the elbow  
trap, instead, we were at the main drain,  
corroded, tumescent, and even leaking,  
oh Larry, i asked, is this really very serious?  
sweetheart, he said, his face blank as the ceiling  
which terminated his gaze, you of all people  
should know this: it's only plumbing.

3.  
this is the expectation: resolution  
deconstructed, we remain reflexive Hegelians  
(thesis, antithesis, synthesis)  
we want all our images neatly bundled and tied

we crave details that accrete into meaning  
we want alms in the form of answers  
to questions we believe are begging

who was that woman  
with the hazel/not-hazel eyes and why  
did we break-up, if we did, and what  
was i dying of, if i really was, and if  
i was, why am i not dead yet?

or is it all about the river and the drainpipe,  
connected through metaphor  
or symbol, Lethe or Oshun  
or samsara itself?

i can offer no satisfactions, i have nothing  
my darling, there are only desires  
those exquisite ropes that lash us  
to this astonishing raft of life.

## **water**

1.

if my deepest dreams are always water  
bluely clear, teasingly salty water,  
then i am forever swimming underwater  
arms outstretched into the future  
palms turned outward, cupped,  
arcing back toward my battered body  
to move it forward into more water

2.

before i dream, i rock in bed  
still feeling the motion of my yellow kayak  
the slap  
of the bow  
as the wave reaches for the stern

the striped bass jump  
the river the color of weak tea  
the sun behind the clouds  
the bridge in the distance  
the city farther in the distance

when i paddle i think of my doctors  
the ones who said i would die  
the ones who saved my life  
my strokes are strong  
with defiance, with gratitude

3.

sometimes there are simple facts  
that startle:

the Inuit kayakers spent weeks at sea  
but could not swim

my cancer could recur

i am not dead

4.  
the CT machine  
like a submarine  
with a paradox:  
one enters the metal  
to let it plumb one's depths

three month check-ups

solstices and equinoxes  
find me in the belly of this beast  
scanning for my future

5.  
i have no desire for ashes to ashes  
for dust, for dirt, for the dark dank soil

dying is not romantic

but someday (not soon)  
i will be water to water

bury me at sea

**poem to be read at my memorial service**

If I could, I would thank each of you  
for being here, but naming names  
could be embarrassing. What if I mentioned you,

who had called me beautiful  
when I was gaunt and bald, but you  
had decided my former beauty was no match

for your abhorrence of funerals? Or failed to mention you,  
there in the far aisle, scribbling in your Filo-Fax  
self-satisfied with your juggling of your schedule

to fit me in one last time. And you  
hoping Amazing Grace will not be sung and you  
hoping it will be, and you

wondering when this charade will be over and you  
can go home. I could allude to you  
who never called me during my illness or you

who telephoned but asked me only what I wanted to say to you  
now that you  
were apologizing. Are you still waiting for me to forgive you?

I am not that kind. But I would like to acknowledge you  
who lit candles for me, and you  
who prayed and offered your type O blood

and you, who gave me a book on dying and healing,  
suggesting the chapter: *visualize your  
own funeral*. The still-living authors

proclaiming the wonders of writing your  
own eulogy, imagining people crying over you,  
already missing you! Can I tell you,  
tell them, this did not make me happy,  
or even resigned. I know you,  
you who shared poems and letters with me

are longing for some image  
some aesthetic to rescue you  
by now any anaesthetic would be welcome to you

all of you, who gave what you  
could and took what you  
dared and came here today to show yourselves

and each other that you did—you  
did—care. I would thank each of you  
if I could

but all my gratitude has been cremated  
and all that remains is  
nothing

nothing of your  
petty transgressions, or mine,  
nothing

except this horrible fact: you  
are alive. And I,  
I am

not.



## **a child's garden of verses**

what i wanted was everything    in other people's gardens  
twirling vines of purple flowers always in bloom  
smells that spiraled from the grass    sophisticated  
like cigarette smoke    gathering at my vinyl sandals  
like the spring-pink braided garlands    in the library book on Heidi  
like the double-heart ankle bracelets    adorning the whores on the corner  
what i wanted was    a garden

a space    a sanctuary    a possibility  
among the company of mountain-goat girls    and black-eyed women  
feeding them    the vegetables of my labors    tomatoes  
as huge as tires    red as the freshest stains on the sidewalk  
potatoes    that grew salted and fried on towering stalks  
i would cultivate corn    with rainbow-colored kernels    beans  
that had seeds of butter    pumpkins with faces    round as babies

i would have fruit trees, too    cranberry sauce    blueberry pies  
oranges that did not need to be peeled    nectarines    and cherries  
with edible pits    there would be flowers, naturally  
white blossoms    of all sizes    all breeds  
buds folded, roses    swimming, water-lilies    tiny, soft as moss  
i would bring home strays    like the striped-lilies  
bent, exhausted    abandoned near the highways    dead by July

what i wanted was a fence    low enough to be hugged  
far from barbed wire    no chains, no locks    what i wanted was a fence  
wood, not metal    i would always keep it painted  
bright inviting colors    like a trellis laced with morning glories  
all day, every day    what i wanted was a fence  
with a gate that opened    and shut  
what i wanted was a garden    a verse from someone else's childhood

## Notes

The biographical information for Elizabeth “Tex” Williams, Dora Miller and Louise Barbour Davis is derived from Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1985). The biographical information for Berenice Abbott is from Erla Zwinger, “A Life of Her Own,” in 16 *American Photographer* 54-67 (April 1986). The biographical information for Margaret Bourke-White is from Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (Harper & Row, 1986). The biographical information for Laura Gilpin is from Martha A. Sandweiss, *Laura Gilpin: An Enduring Grace* (Amon Carter Museum, 1986).

The biographical information in “Käthe Kollwitz, Graphic Artist, Sketches a German Working Class Woman” is derived from Martha Kearns, *Käthe Kollwitz: Women and Artist* (Feminist Press, 1976).

The biographical information in “The Animus of Diane Arbus, Photographer” is derived from Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

The quotes from Nicole Brossard and the translations in “nightshade” appear in *Trivia* 13. Some references in Part VI of “nightshade” are to the murder of Rebecca Wight and the attempted murder of Claudia Brenner by Stephen Roy Carr on the Appalachian Trail.