i

THE POET AS WOMAN: SHAPES OF EXPERIENCE

A STUDY OF POETIC MOTIVATION AND CRAFT IN TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN POETS

INCORPORATING A SELECT ANTHOLOGY

by

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Abstract

The virtual absence of women's viewpoint from the field of poetry and its criticism can be attributed to the subordinate position of women in western culture throughout history. Aesthetic standards, though seemingly comprehensive in their authority, nevertheless reflect this absence, being largely the product of a male perception of reality. Women poets have been discouraged and discriminated against in publication, a situation still not overcome despite current popularity, a result of their achievements in this century. The poetry of women has been seen by most men as unimportant or subsidiary to theirs. A contributory factor is that women have tended to focus on intensely observed personal experience, whereas male poets have been able to identify with the governance of men in dealing with broader issues. Thus, in addition to being held back, women have had to struggle against a lack of understanding and respect for their work. In order to bring about a desired situation in which women can participate with equal freedom and authority along with men in matters pertaining to poetry, what is needed is, first, a recognition that the problem exists, and second, an appreciation of women's literary importance past and present in contributing to aesthetic human experience.

This thesis is an attempt to foster such recognition by showing a) that there has always existed, albeit frequently submerged, a distinctly feminine tradition in poetry, and b) that contemporary writing bears out that tradition while carrying it further in response to twentieth-century experience. As described and documented here, this tradition has a separate existence, a viability and its own validity. Part of the problem
in extending the aesthetic to include the woman's viewpoint is that dominant trends in our century's poetry reflect the unparalleled technological advances in the culture favoring formalistic concerns and innovations at the expense of women's characteristic concern for meaningful content.

The Historical Introduction begins with women's songs in Biblical times, tracing a tradition as it reaches its first peak of individualistic expression in Sappho, is seen in the medieval composition of courtly lays, is manifested sporadically both prior to and towards the end of the Renaissance in Europe, and begins gathering momentum in the seventeenth century. The veritable explosion of poetic energy we are now witnessing is the result of increased activity within the last hundred or so years, during which women have produced an historically unprecedented amount of poetry of high calibre in English, sufficient to permit comparative analysis and evaluation.

The Critical Commentary, the major focus for the thesis, is an examination of the quality and range of this body of work as exemplified in the appended Anthology. Consisting of 133 poems, it presents selected twentieth-century work by American, Canadian, English and Australian poets. The poems deal with being a woman, or an artist, or both, giving voice to authentic feminine experience. Because the poets seemingly emphasize content, in its fittest expression, the discussion of the poems, like their organization in the Anthology, is predicated on content-categories derived from a study of themes and subject matters.

The conclusion emerging from this tracing of a woman's tradition in poetry and from the close examination of its present flowering is that
the voice and perspective of half of humanity is being restored in its more equitable ancient proportion to our culture, with attendant implications in the realms of publishing, editing, criticism, standards and teaching. Findings herein demand that standards of criticism should in all justice encompass the woman's viewpoint, incorporating and giving weight to this tradition, enabling women to be recognized as full equals in all aspects of poetic endeavor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.  Historical Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.  Critical Commentary on the Poems in the Anthology</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Notes</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.  List of Works Consulted</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.   Appendix:  Anthology: Shapes of Experience</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Poems of Twentieth Century Women Poets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section One</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Two</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Three</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Four</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Five</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Six</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Seven</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.  Index to Poems in the Anthology</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

The great number of women poets successfully writing and publishing poetry today is a phenomenon without precedence in history. As more women join their ranks we can expect that, before too long, at least as many women as men will be publishing, bringing about the possibility in poetry of a hitherto unattained equality between the sexes. The social and literary factors involved in this development have far-reaching implications for the art.

From the literary point of view, the more that women engage in writing, the more they define poetry in their own terms; the more women's poetry jostles with men's and develops its own criteria, the more it challenges an aesthetic that is historically the product of men exercising a near-exclusive dominance in the field of poetry and its criticism. Once one grants that this aesthetic—i.e., the body of critical principles and opinions about taste and the beautiful in art as related to poetry—has developed so one-sidedly, and that conditions now exist for correcting that imbalance, a number of questions arise. What is meant by revising the aesthetic? Can it be done? How is women's poetry presently influencing the aesthetic? If taking the woman's viewpoint into account means that the aesthetic has been deficient, in what way is it still so, and what changes are we to look for? Finally, what is promised by such an action? These are questions I hope to answer as I go along. But to indicate direction, I would say, taking the last question first, that what is promised is a changed outlook towards poetry in which, for the first time, we acknowledge and begin restoring to our Western culture the voice and viewpoint in poetry of a half
of humanity which has never yet had equal representation there. The fact that it could not, given the handicaps which women were forced to labor under in history, means that even the little of their poetry that made itself manifest and survived must be brought into a new light of recognition. Once started on such a course, it is possible, as I have found, to discern in women's poetry certain consistent characteristics which distinguish it from the poetry of men. If the aesthetic is to benefit, these characteristics, which amount to a tradition, need to be appreciated and given their due.

The social side of this is implicit in the notion of equality. What I mean by equality in poetry between the sexes is published poetry by women equal to that of men in quantity, quality, authority and influence. That equality, despite its current popularity, the poetry of women does not yet enjoy, nor is female past achievement given anything like the recognition accorded male poets of the past. The work of women in poetry has been treated with condescension at best, with the result that prejudice and neglect have kept us from knowing and appreciating the full contribution of women to our poetic heritage. Thus, it is not simply a question of the aesthetic, but of justice, making any literary discussion of women in poetry a discussion also of the underlying social factors which prevent, allow or (as in current, and certain ancient times) encourage women's participation. Equality will not be brought about until all the obstacles in its way are identified and overcome.

This thesis is an attempt, therefore, to define the problem, record success to date in confronting it, and offer suggestions for its solution. The springboard for my argument is the poetry itself, and its appreciation. To this end I have compiled the appended Anthology. In pleading for a
revised and enlarged aesthetic, I also hope to share my enthusiasm for, and
pleasure in, the excellence of a large body of poetry with those readers
who are as yet unacquainted with its range and achievement.

In structure, the thesis consists of three main parts: an Historical
Introduction, a Critical Commentary, and an Anthology. The Historical
Introduction attempts to trace a woman's tradition in poetry as revealed
by a study of women poets in the Western world up to and including the
emergence of English as a language. This discussion, which takes us up to
the twentieth century, necessarily entails some reference to governing
styles and periods. The Critical Commentary bases its discussion on the
poems in the Anthology which consists of the selected work of twentieth
century poets writing in English. The seven chapters of the Critical
Commentary are prefaced by a Foreword and are each addressed to a corres­
ponding section of the Anthology. The chapters and the sections share
headings in common. Under each of the section headings I have grouped all
those poems which have seemed to me, in the choosing, to fall most easily
within that particular category, with some natural overlapping. These
categories, described by the thematic headings of both chapters and
sections, I derived from a study of the poems themselves: there was no
attempt to fit them into some pre-existing scheme.

Arrangement of the Anthology in this way permits a comparative study
of treatment and form, with the main emphasis on content. This is not to deny
a certain interest in seeing how several poets approach a common theme.
The Anthology assumes that women's poetry needs to be approached on the
basis of content leading the form, a premise discussed more fully later.
Although the categorical headings emphasize the area of experience shared
by the poems, I wish it understood that I believe it is not the experience itself but the shaping by the poet of that experience as it is perceived and its expression disciplined within the form, that gives a poem its meaning. In the present context, analysis by content-category is simply the most convenient way to do justice to the material. The Anthology is intrinsic to the thesis both as a source book and as the concrete evidence upon which the thesis rests. The principle of selection governing the Anthology is its most important aspect, since it gives the thesis its focus.

The Anthology consists only of poems in which the speaker talks about being either a woman, or artist, or both. I have isolated certain works from the rest of a poet's output and from the mainstream generally (as any anthologizer perforce must do), only in order to ascertain how the author explicitly defines herself as woman and poet or uses herself to generalize from the particular. This concentration lets us see her as she sees herself, concerned with the problems, affirmations and aspirations inherent in living both roles and both realities. What is heard is the voice of authentic feminine experience, providing insight into half of humanity, and illustrating the improved status and success of women poets in this century.

The most immediate effect of this success has been to encourage even more women to write, accelerating the process whereby women have made a great advance in overcoming a legacy of oppression. Such an advance cannot help but have a humanistic effect; however, the body of women's poetry offers much more along the same lines: it projects a vision of life that is humane. Its most consistent feature is a concern for life in its most caring aspects. This concern, characterizing the collective vision of women's poetry in
all its variety, was never more needed in the aesthetic dimension of human experience, or indeed, in everyday life, than now. While women do not have the sole prerogative of humanistic utterance in poetry, in their own work they are passionately committed to such principles. This is a consequence not of biology or nature, but of women's position in history. The value they place on love and friendship in poetry has its roots in the hard soil of their long oppression and in their exclusion from public affairs. History has given their poetry both its limitations (of scope) and its strengths. Their particular vision is needed to counteract, in male contemporary poetry and its critical commentary, an overly formalistic emphasis on language and technique: a concern with stylistics at the expense of content. An appreciation of the values present in the woman's tradition can restore a moral concern for the quality of life to an aesthetic that has all but forgotten it in taking the content of a poem for granted while concentrating on its formal qualities.

The milieu of poetry is far from totally accepting that women are at home in it, even today, though the current scene does admit of liberal support. This eases the situation for women considerably, though it conceals a great deal that is still prejudicial to their interests. In the past, recognition of women poets did not come as a natural consequence of literary merit alone, but in most cases, as an often belated result of their courage and perseverance in challenging an environment hostile to their aspirations. Though such hardship is no longer imposed, other hardships of a related nature are. It is still harder for women to get poems published than for men. Prejudice against women takes many forms.
In the world of poetry, prejudice persists as a subtle sort of oppression hard to pinpoint because it expresses itself in underlying attitudes, usually of a derogatory and condescending nature. This hidden bias works to poetry's disadvantage in two ways: in discriminatory practices in publication which come to the fore in the grossly inadequate representation of women poets in anthologies, and in views expressed in critical reviews and evaluations having women as their sole or partial focus. The fact that prejudice is often unconsciously manifested in such cases makes it harder to deal with and overcome. Besides, women are still faced with the conflict arising from being a woman with the social roles of wife and mother, and being a poet with a creative mission, as the poems dealing with this problem in Section Six testify. The cultural environment, with its social institutions of marriage and the family, continues to elicit from women essentially the same kinds of responses as it did in the past. However times and systems have changed, what has not changed for women is society's expectation of them: women in civilization are still a class of beings subordinated to the interests and authority of men.

The biggest change in women's status is in the area of increased freedom to pursue individual interests comparable to those enjoyed by men. This freedom has liberated an enormous amount of creative energy. Judging from the part of it which has gone into the writing of poetry, it appears that women's productivity in this sphere will soon equal, perhaps exceed, men's, thus ending men's agelong dominance in poetry.

We are approaching a turning point in literary history. It is absurd
to think that this can happen without affecting critical opinion. But
where, among the influential critics, does one see the slightest interest
in what is happening? There is not even awareness. Essentially, the
problem is a set of mind, incurious and unimaginative, which, when it
notices women's poetry at all, treats it as a species of men's. There
exists no recognition that the large and fast-growing body of poetry
written by women needs to be approached on the basis of standards conforming
in general to what women find important. There is not even a recognition,
in scholarly terms, that such a problem exists, or that this body of work
has its own inner dynamic, which we may call the women's viewpoint,
developed out of a response to historical conditions. All this is only
just being recognized in the women's liberation movement and its press.
Without a more general awareness of this problem, especially among the
critical fraternity, women's contribution continues to be regarded as
an auxiliary to men's, which it no longer is, and not enough is learned
to facilitate the enlarged aesthetic which must inevitably flow from an
understanding of the issues involved.

In day-to-day affairs, the situation is this: poetry written by
women, when it is deemed "good" enough to be published along with poetry
written by men, is generally evaluated along the same lines, and judged
accordingly. That is to say, that what is considered worthy of print is
what conforms to standards evolved from a nearly exclusively male corpus
by male critics and publishers over a span of centuries that takes us
into our own with hardly a change. The same bias is evident in studies
and reviews of women poets and is not necessarily restricted to men, for
women tend, like minorities, to internalize the dominant cultural view of
themselves.
In countering practices bound to a male tradition, this thesis hopes to contribute to a new critical approach. The work of women poets needs to be apprehended in its own light, which is the light of its considerable past and present achievement. So far, that contribution has been assimilated within the male aesthetic which it helped shape and modify. I speak not only of written poetry but of an oral tradition that goes back to the triumphant hymns of Biblical antiquity, has always been present in the popular songs of the people and been taught by mothers to their children, can be heard in the chants, ritual songs and lullabies of North American Indians, in Black women's gospel and blues songs, and in many other manifestations of the lyric impulse. Until about a century ago, the occasions for a more formal type of poetry known to have been written by women have been so rare in history as to stand out as exceptional. In the present century, for the first time in poetry, women emerge as a strong and influential group whose poetry resists being assimilated as formerly that of individual women was in the male corpus. Women's poetry is overtly proclaiming its independence from a dominant aesthetic which is more interested in linguistic form and analysis than in exploring a poem's capacity for giving shape to human experience. We can now see that the poetry of women has all along been quietly engaged in creating its own humanistic aesthetic, a process which, due to the overwhelming preponderance of male poetry, editors, publishers, literary historians and critics, has barely been noticed, if at all. Thus, in approaching the work of women by its own light, one soon perceives its development in the twentieth century as part of a vital continuum. To go back to the beginnings that inform our present knowledge is to follow the discontinuous,
usually tortuous, path pioneered by women poets throughout the ages leading up to and including our own. While the limits of the present study preclude a thorough and definitive investigation that would do justice to the subject, even such a journey through readily available material as constitutes my Historical Introduction yields certain insights.

For me, these have led to the conclusion that a revision of standards in regard to what determines excellence in poetry is due, or even overdue. The reasons are that prevailing standards a) reflect the attitudes and concerns of past eras in which men dominated the fields of poetry and poetry criticism, and b) reflect the cultural values of the present era in which technology and innovative form are overvalued at the expense of content wherein women poets take their bearing. A new critical approach would recognize that both these underlying criteria affecting taste and judgment have had the effect of obscuring the actual nature and extent of the contribution made by women poets to poetry and to its ongoing aesthetic.

The idea that the feminine sensibility (as cultivated by historic processes) has slowly been evolving its own intrinsic aesthetic would, before now, have been premature. It is not likely to have occurred to men, from a male outlook, or have been formulated by women who, until now have had neither the confidence nor the necessary distance from themselves to do so. Oppressed people do not begin to think of themselves as such until some liberating circumstance or action frees them to see their condition as it really is. Then energy is released for change, as in the present women's movement. On the other hand, there is that in our thinking which impatiently denies that the sex factor is relevant to any discussion of the arts. Women artists who have won a place in the male
world of the arts are often foremost in expressing such an attitude, since they can say that women's work need only be good enough, i.e., be recognized by men as deserving space alongside their work, to earn its rewards. This simply is not true for more than a token handful of women, and does not take into account the pervasive prejudice against women in the arts as elsewhere. Nor does it consider the numbers of women too discouraged or disinclined to fight for recognition, or the vast number too oppressed by the demands of child-raising and wifely service to find time to think of, let alone concentrate on, developing their talents.

Where women have refused to internalize guilt for doing work other than housekeeping or child rearing and have transcended limiting circumstances, joy in writing has often been the sole reward, no other being granted. Where good writing has been acknowledged and eventually given a place in the pantheon, it has been because the product of an isolated female assertion posed no great threat to men and could be safely assimilated into their canon.

Whereas the majority of women poets today have no problem in writing in a self-conscious voice that overtly proclaims their sex and, in fact, seem to prefer doing so, in the past women often found it more freeing to avoid reference to their sex. They fitted themselves to a male tradition when there seemed no other way to write. The secular among these poets do not so much transcend sex in their work as they ignore it; able to forget their bodies and the demands made upon their sex, they project themselves into the world as minds and craftsmen. This is the traditional practice of men who write "objectively" from their greater advantage in being able freely to do so.
Male advantage lies also in the language, which is formed in their image. The universal person who stands for the mass is "man"; women and children are subsumed in "mankind." The norm in the arts is also male: "mastery" and "craftsman" defining excellence, while the pronouns referring to the neutral terms, "artist" or "poet," are "he" and "his." Man takes this status for granted, but for woman, the obliteration of herself in an identification with "man" and "mankind" has a certain poignance. Man asserts his maleness in such usage, woman loses her femaleness. Still, the linguistic exercise of a freedom from sexual role limitations—always easier for men than for women—has had a special fascination for the latter, since, in actual fact, role detachment was virtually impossible for women to achieve before the advent of this century. The difficulties of gaining an audience that was not hostile to them has led many a woman writer into an implicit denial of her identity. Other women have taken what seems a neutral position by simply addressing themselves to topics such as nature or society or philosophy, topics which look out on the world and do not require self-identification. Here a few examples may be in order.

Among those abjuring the feminine voice I think first of all of such early twentieth-century poets as Marianne Moore and Edith Sitwell, both elegant and polished, both putting emphasis on the form and the intellectual play of wit; I think of Elizabeth Bishop, whose poetry displays an endless curiosity in observing and detailing aspects of the natural and man-made worlds; I think of any number of the younger Black American poets like Nikki Giovanni whose poetry mainly expresses a revolutionary anger against the white society; I think of an historically important poet like H.D. concentrating her powers of classical control on a passionate nostalgia for
the pagan world; and I think of the Canadian poet Margaret Avison: intensely religious, possessing a compassionate eye for the minutiae of life which she celebrates in the spirit of Christian affirmation. Since a consideration of their work falls outside the major emphasis of this thesis, these poets are either not represented here or are represented by poems of interest in that they are at least marginally concerned with female identity.

While the poet's creative involvement with the world allows that person temporarily to dispense with the fact of her (or his) sex as an irrelevant, or merely not interesting enough, point of departure in poems, the majority of women seem not to have chosen the option; at least not exclusively. Perhaps they could not. At present, it seems they no longer wish to: the condition of their being women has come to be felt as too richly immediate a source of subject matter, the mainspring, in fact, of inspiration. As women come to see their destiny in a new light, in which they opt for and declare other aims in life than those the past has laid on them, their feminine experience takes on new dimensions reflected more accurately and vividly in their writing than in any purely social manifestation. Those women poets who are publishing now represent, in my opinion, a culmination—-an articulation perhaps—of what women have been struggling to achieve in their identification as artists; that is, as independently motivated beings risen above the secondary, dependent female role civilized society has cast them in. This aspiration towards what should be a birthright is called feminism. It is, of course, not new.

Feminism is an inevitable response to institutionalized inequality between the sexes. It is a positive term for women, despite the pejorative uses men have put it to; but feminism takes its definition from the idea of masculinism, which is not a term with any currency. Feminist, by the same
token, is also a loaded word setting the advocate of women's rights apart as belonging to a peculiar category of troublesome, even ridiculous, women. These connotations are hostile. Women's poetry is working to restore the proper sense of these terms to mean the advocacy of justice and full human dignity for women. Given the opportunity for full expression which an advance guard has won for them, women—in poetry as in other spheres—are inevitably taking that opportunity to its logical conclusion. Poetry, for women and men alike, has always been a means of self-discovery, of putting the world in order.

Meanwhile, we have the problem before us of how ideas of worth in poetry are to be brought in line with contemporary reality. Poetry has been transmitted as a male tradition. Poets since the dawn of literacy have largely been men, carrying forward their own tradition in a field for so long held exclusively by them that all its attitudes, values and judgments took on (and still are viewed as possessing) the stamp of universality. In actual effect, the field of aesthetics in poetry derives from the comments of male poets and critics sharing their interest. In saying this I do not underestimate the contributions made by women who have occupied a place of central importance in the oral tradition which is the great root of written poetry, and by women whose written poetry, though scant, has often by its innovativeness been prophetic of future developments.

Here I would like to offer an explanation of how I arrived at my conclusions. As a poet myself with a paramount interest in poetry, I was drawn to investigate how other women define themselves in their work as poets. Reading twentieth-century women poets in English, I soon noted certain recurrences: a preference for certain themes and emphases, in which I began to hear correspondences with women poets of the past. As I
started re-reading those I knew, discovering others as I went along of whom I had been unaware, or knew of only slightly because of the neglect and obscurity in which they have lain, these correspondences were verified. Women throughout history, I found, had a common approach to poetry which they shared because of their life-experience as women. Though differing greatly from one another in cultural background and as individuals, they give evidence of a tradition that has maintained itself throughout centuries-long breaks in its continuity.

The woman's tradition does not take its inspiration from forms and styles practised by earlier women primarily, but from the material, literary and non-literary, of the contemporary life to which it responds. Like men's poetry, women's is an expression integral to the human need for making beautiful, ordered structures out of the raw material of life. What distinguishes the female from the male tradition is that it is qualified by being the product of feminine response to a male-dominated world.

The history of difference in the ways men and women have experienced their lives—the one dominant, the other subordinate—has in the poetic sphere presented women with a special need to tell it their way, from the way it feels to them. Partly that impetus is given in the biological functioning that provides women with a profound fund of experience uniquely their own; whether women become mothers or not, they must of necessity live with the physiological facts of the female body, which entails the potential for motherhood. Poetically, they can identify with the potential for creating life earthlike out of their own bodies. Perhaps for this reason there sounds throughout the poetry of women an unmistakable, continuing assertion of the value of love, especially in its more tender, caring aspects. Today women have the freedom to talk frankly
of their bodies, their menstrual cycles, pregnancy and the great mystery of giving birth, the physical and spiritual impact of which only they can experience directly. They also talk with authority of nursing and raising children and of creating home environments that nurture and support the people living in them. Or, conversely, they oppose the traditional spheres for women's activity as settings that are no longer viable for human love, growth, and development.

Women are at present in a renaissance: their perceptions of themselves and of their place and functions in society are undergoing re-evaluation in all spheres including the arts. The result in poetry is an uninhibited articulation of their experience as women and as poets. The volume and vitality of this poetry forces a long-overdue reappraisal of an aesthetic which, as the articulated product of men, has addressed itself mainly to the work of men. Such a reappraisal must include a reconsideration of the past with special attention paid to re-instating the work of women in its true human importance, resulting in a more just representation of human capability and achievement. The current energy of women's poetry furnishes both the occasion and the opportunity for this advance. The renaissance among women, furthermore, is bringing about a reconsideration of women's place in history which reveals, to those of us concerned with literature, that now that we know what we are looking for, women's poetry has been present through the ages. It is to this reviewing of the women's tradition that I now turn.
HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION
Though I begin, predictably, with Sappho, as the first lyrical poet of consequence in the recorded history of the western world, it is more likely that she represents the culmination in excellence of a long line of composers before her. The Old Testament gives us reason to believe a strong lyric tradition flourished among women centuries before it culminated in the celebrated Greek poet. The Songs of Deborah, Miriam, and possibly the prayer of Hannah, point to such a tradition, which may also be the basis of the women's songs in the Song of Solomon. Authorship, of course, cannot be proven, but the Song of Deborah, ascribed to the twelfth century, B.C., and generally held to be the earliest of all the songs, "is undoubtedly," according to J. H. Gardiner, "the song of triumph which was composed and uttered by Deborah herself to celebrate the great victory of her people."¹ Of the Song of Miriam, another writer claims: "it is the general opinion of scholars" that the original shorter version was "the song which Moses or Miriam or both of them together composed..."² Such opinions support the idea that women such as Deborah and Miriam who held positions of prestige and authority in pre-literate tribal societies actually composed the poems they are credited with singing. Unfortunately we know nothing of these ancient singers apart from what the patriarchal redactors of the original documents saw fit to include, but it seems logical that, far from being isolated cases, the songs of women in the Bible attest to an old and venerable custom among them.

In the matriarchal world of the Aegean, such a tradition must also have been carried forward in order to arrive at its high level of sophistication in Sappho. By the sixth century in Lesbos, music, poetry and the dance have developed to a high art. Where once a poet with
Sappho's power of utterance might have been a prophetic bard among her people, the status Sappho of Lesbos enjoys is that of the island's most cultured ornament; she is entrusted with preparing young women for their roles as similarly cultured matrons in a society which gives first place to the arts among women's accomplishments. Sappho was not the only female poet in Mitylene, nor did the tradition end with her. Erinna of Telos, a poet much admired in antiquity, is usually cited as Sappho's pupil along with the poet Damophyla of Pamphilia. In the centuries that follow, these are succeeded by others of whom we know little: they include: Corinna of Tanagra or Thebes, an elder contemporary of Pindar whose themes centered on legends of her native Boeotia, and who like Sappho was honored by the suggestion that she be added to the nine lyrical poets; Praxilla of Sicyon, who, according to Eusebius was well-known in mid-fifth century B.C. for her hymns, drinking-songs and dithyramb Achilles, and whose songs celebrated Dionysus; Anyte of Tegea at the end of the fourth century who wrote epigrams as well as poems on animals and the countryside; and many others known by reputation only or represented in the Greek anthology: e.g., Clitagora, "whose songs are mentioned in a fragment of the comic poet Cratinus," and Nossis, who wrote erotic verse as well as dedications. As the earliest and most unparalleled of these poets, Sappho has a symbolic importance further thrown into relief by the dearth of poets that follows after: in the remaining centuries of pagan antiquity, a total absence of women poets; for many centuries afterwards, their virtual disappearance from the scene. Her contribution takes on an importance, seen in this perspective, that I want to consider at some length; but first, a brief synopsis of the ground to be covered.
After the fourth century B.C., a silence nearly as of death descends on the female poets of antiquity and beyond. Woman's voice with one exception is not heard from again until approximately the tenth century A.D., a lapse of some fourteen hundred years. If there were any female poets who managed to gain audience in this time, records of them have been either lost or destroyed. The exception is the poet Sulpicia, an aristocratic Roman of the first century B.C. "Only six brief and very personal poems have come down to us—all concerned with the difficulties of her love for the young man Cerinthus," her translator L.R. Lind tells us in his anthology of Latin poetry, adding that, "Except for a few fragments by other ladies, these six poems make up the extant body of classical Latin poetry by women." A thousand years has to pass before we hear again from a woman who writes. Thus, in advancing a "history" of women poets, one becomes aware of a sad kind of paradox: in history, women have no history. At least, not up until the last few years, since when it has begun to be apparent that a history can be reconstructed. In contrast to women's poetry, men's has a richly abundant and unbroken tradition that goes back to Homer; a tradition moreover, that has been richly examined and described. Relative to men, then, in the practice of poetry women are still close to their beginnings.

The earliest name of a female poet to appear in Christendom, is that of Hrotsvitha of Gandesheim, a writer of Latin verse hagiography in the mid-tenth century. She is followed, in the twelfth century, by another nun, the remarkable St. Hildegard of Bingen. A Christian mystic of extraordinary talents, Hildegard wrote lyrical and dramatic poetry, medical and scientific treatises, corresponded with ecclesiasts, popes and emperors, and was
famous for her visionary writings. She wrote words and music for a lyrical cycle of songs which have been said to contain "some of the most unusual, subtle, and exciting poetry of the twelfth century." Her *Ordo Virtutum* is our earliest surviving morality play by more than a century. Discussing her achievement in his study of *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages*, Peter Dronke, an author to whom I am much indebted, finds her play "not only the first of its kind, but perhaps unique in the means it uses--both intensely lyrical and filled with dramatic unpredictability, with suspense." He notes with surprise that there is nothing in earlier literature to account for its qualities. She is "one of the most brilliant and original minds of the entire Middle Ages," he claims, critical of the fact that scholars have failed to give her her due. Dronke's responsibility to his material in bringing attention to a great writer admirably remedies such neglect. Also pertinent to this thesis is his statement that she "was as convinced as any of the love-poets of the unity of human and divine love, and recorded this conviction with freshness and splendour, in a way that is unparalleled in theological writing before or since." In exalting love, Hildegard not only anticipates the Renaissance poets who profess a religion of love, but manifests a bond with her secular sisters, in whose poetry throughout the ages love plays a leading role.

From this time on, the names of secular female poets begin to appear sporadically; a quick summary gives us: Marie de France and the Comtesse de Die in the same century as Hildegard, the "Perfect Lady of Florence" in the thirteenth century, Christine de Pisan in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth. In the mid-fifteenth, there are the anonymous authors of *The Flower and the Leaf*, and *The Assembly of Ladies*, believed to be women.
Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, appears at the end of the sixteenth
in conjunction with a Renaissance stirring of women writers in continental
Europe. The seventeenth brings a quickening in the emergence of several
poets writing in English during approximately the same period, though the
eighteenth century does not see this promise carried much further. I
will speak more fully of these later. It is not until well into the
nineteenth century that illustrious names begin to cluster. A large number
of women have become engaged in the craft by this time (of whom only a few
are remembered), but they are still a pitifully small aggregate compared
with the numbers of men publishing poetry. I shall expand on all of this
in due course, after resuming my discussion of Sappho.

The matter of Sappho is too familiar to require more than the selective
perspective afforded by this commentary. Considering how long she lay
unknown, cut to ribbons, as it were, and that her corpus consists of not
much more than fragments rescued from antiquity, her feminine form can be
said to have exercised a near-magical influence over the ages: she is at
the same time archetypal and alive, as modern as any contemporary. In
recalling the salient features of her impact upon the world, what captures
the imagination most, as Barnstone so strikingly observes, is that "In
Sappho we hear for the first time in the Western world the direct words
of an individual woman"; a poet unlike Homer, moreover, who "emerges
through her poetry as a completely realized personality." She was, in
addition, a brilliant innovator according to her editors and translators.
The historian Werner Jaeger believes: "The Greek spirit needed Sappho to
explore the last recesses of the new world of personal emotion." He goes
on to explain:
From her poems it is clear that Eros was a passion which shook its victim's whole being, and held the senses no less than the soul. . . . its amazing power to grip and transform the whole personality, and the vast sweep of the emotion which it set free. . . . No masculine love poetry among the Greeks even approached the spiritual depth of Sappho's lyrics.13

In most Greek poetry written by men woman is the mother, mistress and wife. Sappho presents a different image, unique in this as in other respects. To quote Jaeger again, "In Sappho's poetry woman is seldom incarnated as mother or lover—only when a friend enters or leaves her band of maidens." Further:

The Greek poet was a teacher, and the two functions were never more closely identified than in Sappho's thiasos of girls consecrated to music . . . To the masculine heroism of tradition, Sappho's songs, quivering with the rapture of complete and harmonious friendship, added the ardour and nobility of the feminine soul. They depict an ideal third world between childhood and marriage—an age in which women were educated to the highest nobility of spirit.

Alas, women may sigh, for the relatively golden age of their sex. But we have not to overlook, in Jaeger's romantic turn of speech, that marriage—then as so often even now—was the threshold that terminated the adolescent holiday, putting an end to the reaching and soaring of the feminine spirit which had now to confine itself within domestic matters. Though married and the mother of a daughter, Sappho was able to overcome the common lot, doubtless because of the great reverence her poetry and reputation as a teacher inspired. Jacquetta Hawkes points out, in Dawn of the Gods, that Sappho's civilization was still close to the much earlier one of Minoan Crete, where, along with men, women worshipped their own Goddess (together with the young god), and shared in her power both psychologically and socially. This certainly applies to Sappho, whom Hawkes describes as a "leader of a religious group devoted to the worship of Aphrodite and the Muses."15 What we have of the poetry, in which Aphrodite is mentioned
oftener than any other deity or person, does, indeed, emphasize the part religion played in everyday life. Hellenic Greece came to revere Sappho herself as semi-divine. That judgment of her immortality has been vindicated in the historical process, Sappho's stature having maintained itself against the hostility of the Church, grievous destruction of her poetry, and ignorance of her existence during the centuries her memory was expunged from the records by narrow religious forces in history. The medieval period might have seen her eclipse, had not some of the remains of her work come to light with the revival of learning in the Renaissance. With this, and other archaeological finds, Sappho's eminence was gradually restored. Her resurrection corresponds to a period in which European women slowly began to raise their heads and regain something of their ancient prerogative. For, in beginning to reassume the role of the poet and teacher—an ancient profession (perhaps poetry is the oldest?)—women very slowly began to recover prestige in a field that men had usurped entirely as their own. The spirit of Sappho is only just now reaching its zenith in the present renaissance of women poets.

Sappho celebrated the love of friends primarily, though much of this is framed in a passion that after classical times came to be thought of as sinful. When the poetry of love reappears in the much later period of an advanced Christian culture in the popular narrative form of the romance, or lay, it is on the basis of a profoundly altered conception of love. But the interesting thing is that, along with the new literary forms giving shape to this altered conception, exists a probably much older form of love-poetry, much of it composed and sung by women. These songs stress the friendly nature of love between men and women, an emphasis found far more
often in women's poetry than in men's, and recalling Sappho, in that friendship also furnishes the motive for love in her poems, albeit love between women.

In his study of the rise of the European love-lyric, Peter Dronke calls attention to the researches of the German philologist Theodor Frings, on this popular tradition of women's songs. Frings, he says, has concerned himself chiefly with what a Carolingen capitulary of 789 called winileodas—literally, it seems, 'friend-lays,' songs for a lover (an ordinance forbidding nuns to compose such disgraceful songs)—and what were called cantigas de amigo in medieval Spain and Portugal: love-songs in which the woman speaks, or in which she is the dominant figure, and tends to be the active lover rather than the passive loved one. Professor Frings has pointed out instances of such poems of women's love in the most diverse cultures: in ancient Egypt, in China, in Greece, Scandinavia, Serbia, Russia.

After citing one of Sappho's poems as "a perfect instance of the purest winileod," Dronke comments on Frings' insights in showing how the moods and 'chains of experience' (Erlebnisketten) of the woman in love reverberate in aubade, pastourelle, and chanson de toile, and in numerous dance-songs of medieval Europe, including some by troubadours and Minnesinger.

Dronke himself notes (in the study referred to earlier) that the earliest surviving love-poetry in a Romance vernacular—called kharjas, and composed in the Spanish dialect of Moslem Spain—are plaints of girls lamenting a man's absence or his abandoning of them. In this respect kharjas are similar to the eighth century Anglo-Saxon love-laments Eadwacer and Wife's Lament in The Exeter Book. The Spanish songs date from the ninth century onwards, and occur as the final verses of Arabic and Hebrew poems written in classical language. They are usually short cantigas de amigo of the following type; the translation is Dronke's:

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Ah tell me, little sisters, how to hold my pain!
I'll not live without my beloved— I shall fly to find him again.
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Very exciting is a mid-eleventh century manuscript known as the Munchen Clm 17142, "a chaotic, strange collection of Middle Ages fragments" which Dronke has translated and which contains "fifty love-letters and lover's messages in verse . . . some composed by men but more by women." The setting indicated by these poems is "a convent in which both the sisters and the young girls en pension can associate with the outside world," but whose closest links are with a scholar or magister who teaches them the liberal arts and with whom they correspond in verse without interference or censorship. Dronke praises these verses for their variety of tone and their conversational immediacy; of their writers he says: "Their little verse communiques are alive because they formed so intimate a part of their daily lives." Other manuscripts containing women's songs are the Cambridge in the eleventh century and the Carmina Burana in the early thirteenth. Such poetry of the people continued in France and Germany until the early fourteenth century. Dronke claims that at least two of the Regensburg verses (from the Munchen Clm mss.) "show us beyond a doubt that a number of cultivated, witty and tender young women in an eleventh century convent in South Germany imposed on the clercs who frequented their society the values of amour courtois." Meeting on more equal terms with men than had presumably been possible in the earlier centuries of institutionalized Christendom, they were able to recapture something of the authority exercised by Sappho, though of course in a different framework, and with a psychologically more complex conception of love wrought by feudalism and the influence of Christian teachings on human passions and behavior.

To the classical passion described so realistically by Sappho is now added the new quality of romance. It is a quality compounded of the legends
of such ill-fated lovers as Tristan and Iseult, and of the inspiration of Ovid's *Art of Love*. It exists in a tension created by marriages arranged in the interests of property which leave no room for tenderness and human concern in the relationship. The romance of chivalry also exists in a tension created by the opposition of the Church to any sexual passion even within marriage, and by the cruel penalties imposed for adultery, the consequences always being more harsh for women than for men, as in early Roman times.  

Inspiration for the literature of courtly love develops out of the typical situation of attraction between two young people where one is committed to a loveless marriage of convenience. In this sense, as an opponent of forced affection and submissive obedience, courtly love in its early stages (as the subject-matter of the lays, particularly those of Marie de France) is the would-be intimacy of quickly made friends who yearn to consummate their relationship as lovers. This possibility being thwarted, there is often a tragic element in the lays. But since the erotic impulse flares under the pressure of a dangerously charged situation, the passion generated comes to be seen with time as an over-riding force of god-like power. Hence the religion of Love, which blends pagan and Christian values and is an inseparable component of courtly love. In its first expression, then, before it becomes a set of codified conventions, the motivation for courtly love is essentially radical: the release of a natural inclination to make room for sexual love between young men and women in a stratified society which does not allow for it. The need for a more flexible approach to the sexes gathers momentum in the train of many changes taking place in mid-twelfth century, and, as in ancient times,
a poet—again a woman—leads the way in giving direct and moving expression to the personal desire for love. Influenced by the popular tradition of romances and legends, the mode now is narrative and, to that extent, more distanced and objective than the songs of Sappho or the later often naive "friend-lays."

"Marie de France," Professor Charles W. Dunn tell us, "is the first writer known to have composed lays of courtly love." She is thus the first of a group of poets whose work—embodying the new conventions—laid the foundation for the treatise of Andreas Cappelanus on The Art of Courtly Love, a systematization of current attitudes and mores among the nobility which enjoyed great popularity and authority over other such treatises of the time. Marie de France is variously believed to have belonged to an aristocratic French family that had settled in England as a result of the Conquest, and to have been King Henry II's sister. The dates of composition of her lays are given as c. 1175-1190. Though she claims Breton origins for her plots, the shaping of the material of the form is her own. Professor Dunn sees her as supreme in her field:

no matter where she discovered her materials or genre, she is unrivalled for the skill with which she develops a simple or even trifling plot into a subtle study of the frustrations, perplexities and raptures of courtly love. Others who followed her example may have elaborated upon her technique, but she remains the Jane Austen of the courtly lay.

To convey something of the flavor of her style, here is a very small excerpt from near the beginning of her lay, "The Nightingale":

There was near Saint Malo, a town of some importance and renown. Two barons who could well afford houses to suit a lord Gave the city its good name By their benevolence and fame. Only one of them had married. His wife was beautiful indeed
And courteous as she was fair,
A lady who was well aware
Of all that custom and rank required.
The younger baron was much admired,
Being, among his peers foremost
In valor, and a gracious host.
He never refused a tournament,
And what he owned he gladly spent.

The reader may perhaps see in this, as I do, a style and convention
inherited by Chaucer, who brought both to perfection two centuries later.

In its peregrinations, the courtly lay enjoyed a great vogue,
employing nearly four hundred troubadours among whom, surprisingly, were
several women. Nina Epton in *Love and the French* mentions "seventeen"
female poets,²⁵ citing the "Comtesse de Die"—a well-known *trobairitz*
or feminine troubador who stressed the sincerity of her poems about her
lover."²⁶ James J. Wilhelm, who has translated one of them in his
*Medieval Song: An Anthology of Hymns and Lyrics*, attributes four or five
remaining poems to her.

In evaluating the impact of the lay on literature, what is important
is that its emergence had revolutionary implications. Along with the
romances of the troubadours, the lay influenced the taste for poetry in a
new direction. "The courtly poets," says Dunn, "raised love to the same
important level as religion and warfare within the realm of poetry."²⁷
From here, the poetry of love came to occupy an ascendant place over both
ecclesiastical verse celebrating saints and martyrs, and heroic verse
celebrating war and warriors. The underground tradition had surfaced.
That the personal lyric flourishes today in the short poem is a measure
of its deep roots in folkways, while the romantic narrative, as a form,
was still achieving new heights in England as recently as the nineteenth
century. The relevance the courtly lay has for the women's tradition in
poetry, apart from its significant origin in a woman poet, is its concern with love: imaginatively idealized, yet personal love, one of the major themes that has consistently occupied women lyricists throughout history. The troubadours being, of course, mostly men—wanderers hoping for court favor—their songs of love and beauty tended towards extravagant praise and idealization of a particular lady. The interests of pecuniary advantage could not help but give insincerity and artificiality a place in courtly expression which it did not have in Marie de France, or, for that matter, in any other female poet who has ever addressed herself to love. However, out of the vogue of the lay came fresh developments in poetry in which women, as so often in literary history, again made a significant contribution, this time not as poets, but mainly as patronesses.

Eleanor of Aquitaine's role in launching the literary tradition which grew out of such poetry and the customs it reflected is well established. As powerful patrons of the arts and letters she and her daughter, the Countess Marie de Champagne, were virtually the founders of the new system. Between them they supported, influenced and encouraged the writers in their midst, themselves initiating "Courts of Love" modelled on feudal courts, and having their origin in the south of France, first home of the troubadours. In these courts, problematic amatory matters were discussed and adjudicated according to ethical precedents already indicated in the romances and lays. "All the factors for the creation of a new literature were there in a favoring atmosphere," says historian Amy Kelly in referring to a period in Eleanor's life when, as Duchess of Normandy prior to her marriage to Henry II of England, she entertained the troubadour Bernard de Ventadour at her court in Angers. Later, Countess Marie,
coming from her own court to her mother's at Poitiers, where she took up residence, commissioned and worked with Andreas Cappelanus to produce the already mentioned text, De Arte Honeste Amandi. Although the model for it was Ovid's worldly Ars Amatoria, the medieval guide was apparently undertaken in full moral seriousness, and nowhere is this more evident than in the woman's point of view Andreas' courtly Art in its main focus projects. In the words of Kelly, whose distinguished biography of Eleanor and her times lends many insights, whereas in the work of Ovid, man is the master, employing his arts to seduce women for his pleasure, in Andrés work, woman is the mistress, man her pupil in homage, her vassal in service.

Marie, we are told, drew on her own past experience in the south of France, on the Arthurian code of manners and on the poetry of the troubadors, in instructing the cleric, whose somewhat reluctant hand is seen in his moralizing concessions to church doctrine. She thus made these familiar materials the vehicle for her woman's doctrine of civility, and in so doing, she transformed the gross and cynical pagan doctrines of Ovid into something more ideal, the woman's canon, the chivalric code of manners.

This criticism of Ovid I take to refer to his explicit instructions, in Book One of the Art of Love, How to Seduce a Virgin, where he depicts girls as game to be hunted, "or possibly only to have fun with,/ Someone to take for a night" (11.90,91); approves the rape of the Sabine women; and rationalizes his "Art" by depicting women as criminally lustful, greedy for gifts and cash, and not to be trusted: "it is right to deceive the deceivers,/ Right that the woman should grieve . . ."(11.657,658). Trading on women's desire to be treated as equals, cynically he advises:
Don't always show in your talk that you know you are going to get her—
What you are eager to be, tell her, is **ONLY A FRIEND**.
I have seen this work, on the most unwilling of women—
**ONLY A FRIEND**, who was found more than proficient in bed!

In contrast to Ovid, the "woman's doctrine of servility," as Kelly
refers to it, addressed itself to married women, mainly, not virgins; it
required courtesy above all, and a loyalty that came from the heart: the
lover was enjoined to be a real "friend" who placed the reputation and well-
being of his **amie** above his own. Secrecy was for this reason essential.
That virgins were not to be seduced by deception is shown in the lay
entitled "Eliduc," by Marie de France, in which a young princess falls into
a deathly swoon on discovering that the foreign knight she has exchanged
love vows with is a married man. The tale is further interesting for the
insight it gives us into the humanistic side of **courtoisie**. The man's
wife not only brings her rival back to life (with the significant aid of
supernatural powers) when she learns of the situation, but in order that
the lovers may marry, retires to a convent, where eventually the former
princess is "welcomed as a sister." In this resolution of amor with
**caritas** can be seen a protective attitude, a sisterly feeling among women,
that is as foreign to the writing of Ovid as it is to the writing of most
male poets.

One cannot discuss the love-literature of this period without at
some point referring to the behavior which it both grew out of, and in the
dialectical way of such things, affected. "Life and letters are inextricably
intermixed," as C.S. Lewis has been moved to explain in defense of non-
literary asides. I would claim indulgence, then, for referring again to
the social conditions which suddenly allowed a few advantageously placed
court women to exert an enormous influence extending beyond letters. Kelly makes the point that, however limited the expression of female authority in Poitiers, its most immediate effect was to successfully challenge institutionalized male authority. Though this new female power was soon lost in the return of men from wars and crusades to their seats of dominance, the ideal of *amour courtois* which grew up in Poitiers had, as has been well said, more than a little to do with freeing women from the millstone which the Church in the first millennium hung about her neck as the author of man's fall and the facile instrument of the devil in the world. The court of Poitiers gave its high sanction to ideals which spread so rapidly throughout Europe that the "doctrine of the inferiority of women has never had the same standing since." The code of André [Andreas Cappelanus] gives glimpses of a woman's notion of society different in essential respects from the prevailing feudal scheme, which was certainly man-made. Kelly's noting of the difference between female perceptions of a "man-made" society and male perceptions of that society is most germane. Doubtless the "woman's notion of her society" has always differed in some essentials from the prevailing notion, a fact which the literature of women best reveals, and which other evidence such as the practices of midwifery, herbal medicine and witchcraft confirm. Unfortunately the literature of women is all too scarce. In the case of Eleanor, not herself a writer, it is indisputable that she and her authoritative daughter in particular, were at least very much involved in the shaping of the new poetry, as an integral part of the shaping of the new manners. Marie de Champagne, in addition to the hand she had in directing Andreas' treatise, was also responsible for collaborating with Chrétien de Troyes, a poet considered by C.S. Lewis to be the best of the period. De Troyes himself, in his *Lancelot*, credits Marie with both the story and the treatment of the poem.
Courtly love, as women helped to promote and define it, though it remained a practice of the élite, is a first tentative step taken in the direction of female emancipation. In its rebellion against loveless marriage, the code challenged institutional authority for the first time, not only on behalf of women, but most importantly, on behalf of the concerns of everyday life to which, and for which, women speak. In its implications for the future, the connection between poetry and women's liberation at this early stage is not to be overlooked.

The leadership exercised by cultivated women in medieval society seems almost inevitable when we remember that the feudal system, working hand in glove with the Church, used women to bolster its power, disposing of them as chattels in arranged marriages. Girls coming into marriageable age had, from our modern viewpoint, nothing to lose in any imagined form of protest but the chains binding them in servitude to husbands often twice or more their age, who could, moreover, easily divorce them (and often did) when the gain or advancement that had been the original motive for the marriage was secured. Women had no rights at all; never was the sex more in an inferior position than in such marriages. No wonder, then, that ladies who by birth had the social advantage of some education and leisure formed the majority audience for a poetry in which, for the first time, they were revered; a poetry which reversed the customary relationship between the sexes, declaring women superior; a poetry in which a man pledged voluntarily what a wife was forced to pledge: a life of submissive service and unfaltering loyalty, in the name of love. Kelly's contribution to an understanding of the nature and significance of feminine involvement in this period deserves a final
quotation here. Speaking further of those aristocratic ladies who turned courtly love into a system, she says:

Of course, they rationalize a conduct that has outburst the rigid feudal scheme for women; but disillusion speaks also in those noble ladies, who, though they divine some unattainable ideal value in life, know that actually they remain feudal property, mere part and parcel of their fiefs. It is plain that each and every one of their judgements in the queen's court is an arrant feudal heresy. Taken together they undermine all the primary sanctions and are subversive of the social order.

The immediate legacy of twelfth century courtly love, was, therefore, not a social one, but literary: women's position did not change for the better and Church doctrine held firm, continuing to place crippling restrictions on how men and women, but especially women, might love. Such prescriptions can only be said to have served male interests of power, property and succession. Men remained dominant, especially those who already were; for the conflict in male interests which developed with the temporary privilege which joined women and other, male, inferiors in a common cause was ended for a time with the return of the lords to their domains. But the literary tradition of courtly love--its creative offshoot, as it were, lived on, responsive to new influences in which women lost their relatively brief say. That an influential literature was powerfully dictated by women as its sponsors and critical audience for a time is one of those interesting accidents of history that, in retrospect, can be seen as foreshadowing a very distant eventuality. Meanwhile, there were historical counterforces to any such ascendancy of women which were operating to redirect the poetry of courtly love back into the mainstream of the male viewpoint and tradition.

To discern the at first slender, but distinctive, form of a woman's tradition in poetry as it tentatively emerges in history, is clearly to
have to trace those beginnings from within the context of an overpoweringly male presence in poetry. Though the feminine voice gains increasingly in the succeeding centuries both in strength and affirmation, progress is uncertain and slow for a very long time. The lay, for instance, which in its written form begins with Marie de France, undergoes changes in which men turn it into something else: the allegory of love. This reaches its epitome in *The Romance of the Rose*, completed by the second of its authors almost a century after Marie de France's last composition. In "this new scholastic approach," according to Dunn, individuals are converted into universals, and passions are dissected into separate abstractions. The perplexed lover, as it were, no longer consults his heart; rather, the heart is anatomized by the psychiatrist. But by this time also, the Virgin Mary has superceded the lady upon her pedestal, for the Church, as from its beginning, had found a way to absorb the threat to itself, just as the lady had found a way to turn feudal practice to her advantage. This is the situation in which the allegory of love, embodying, as C.S. Lewis has said, "the fully-developed sentiment of courtly love," arrives in England, making its first appearance there with Chaucer, in the fourteenth century. In Chaucer's treatment of it we can see what time, temperament and sex have wrought upon the religion of love. For by the time it has reached England, Chaucer has no problem as a Christian in seeing himself as Love's faithful servant and most disinterested advocate: the heretical and revolutionary aspect of the religion of love--its insistence on adultery--has all but disappeared. There has also occurred--with the notable exception of *Troilus and Cressida*--a shift from the particular to the abstract as Dunn has said, and an idealization of qualities rather than of the lady herself. The poetry of
abstractions, like the poetry of the later Elizabethan courtiers which focuses on a one-dimensional, disdainful lady, moves away from the personal and direct, real-life statements characteristic of women writers (as in letter-writing, diaries, treatises on behavior and, especially, poetry) to modes of utterance encouraging concentration on the form.

The feminine figure has been deprived of its basic humanity in most of these poetic developments by men. A not negligible cause is the growing influence of that element of Platonism most prominent in the Symposium. The concept of attaining spiritual or divine beauty through a commitment to love which is at first only able to apprehend it through a response to sensual beauty becomes fused with Christian ideals in a way, in poetry, that grows to supercede the more down-to-earth aspects of the secular poetry of love found in the women's tradition. It is not accidental that Chaucer, who humanized the allegory of love, was extremely sympathetic to women, unlike so many of his writing predecessors and contemporaries. For Chaucer shares with women that sense of dramatic immediacy, that essential focus on human life, which gives his genius its most endearing quality. But Chaucer (along with Langland, perhaps) is an exception to his times. In England a trend toward abstraction that had begun with the original Romance of the Rose became more pronounced, actually robbing women of the limited advantage they had, for a short while, gained.

Apart from a shadowy feminine presence felt in fifteenth century allegory, which I will have more to say about in a moment, there are no female poets arising with the Renaissance; at least, not in England, where, thanks largely to Chaucer, English as a literary language has come into its own. We hear of a female poet in thirteenth century Italy known as
The Perfect Lady of Florence who is, however, such a rarity for her
times that her existence as a woman is disputed. Her translator, James
J. Wilhelm, says she is often considered a construct of the male poets
of her day, a supposition I find gratuitous in view of the poem I
reproduce here, which is so much more a personal statement than a conventional
one, that I quote it as an example of the feminine tradition. In sounding
a tone we find in the work of much later women poets who complain of male
oppression, the poem has the ring of authentic feminine experience. It
projects a yearning for escape from an oppressive life that strongly
anticipates Emily and Anne Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and others, like
"L.E.L." in the nineteenth century who are less known. The early dating
of this sonnet makes it the first we have from a woman's hand:

I want to go away from vanity
And leave the world and serve my God.
Because I see on every side of me
Madness and unchecked evil and great fraud:
Sense and courtesy are still expiring
And fine value and goodness of every kind;
And so I want no husband, want no sire;
Leaving the world is all that's on my mind.

When I recall how man with ill's adorned,
I suddenly am disdainful of all the race
And towards my God all of my body's turned.
My father makes me stand with pensive face.
He turns me away from service to my Christ.
What man will come to claim my dowry's price?

In English poetry, outside of Elizabeth I whose poetic exercises are the
least of her enormous symbolic impact on poetry, there is no body of
influential shapers to restore a woman's viewpoint to poetry. Instead,
the very concept of the lyric has lapsed to a new low: that of an artificial
and soulless ideal to which men appeal in vain for sexual favors:
predictably, since they have set it up that way.
Before this development, however, something interesting happens to the allegorical form. In the fifteenth century, two unknown female authors leave their imprint upon the form in such a way as to suggest that whatever anonymity women found it prudent, or were forced, to return to in this newly male-ascendant era, the little they had had of literary self-expression had generated a taste for more. Henceforth women would not suffer themselves to be completely silenced. The first of these mysterious women is the author of The Flower and the Leaf, "that fusion of the courtly and the homiletic allegory," which C.S. Lewis cites for its originality and historical importance. The second is the "remarkable woman" who wrote the Assembly of Ladies, a work which again Lewis cites as representing "a wholly different, and, in some ways, a not less interesting modification of the tradition"; though he goes on to say, gratuitously: "Taken as allegory, it is as silly a poem as a man could find in a year's reading." So much for disdainful male superiority! He mitigates his condescension by adding that the author is moved, by a purely naturalistic impulse, to present the detail of everyday life; and if her poem were not hampered by being still attached—as with an umbilical cord—to the allegorical form, it would be an admirable picture of manners. Indeed, if only the first four stanzas survived, we might now be lamenting the lost Jane Austen of the fifteenth century.

An ambiguous compliment; but in criticizing the poem for its defects, he also tells us

the dialogue is admirable and perhaps better than Chaucer's earliest attempts. Nor does this realism fail when the lady begins to tell her dream. We soon forget that it is a dream, or an allegory. . . . the detail of the poem shows power akin to genius.

That such an author, comparable in genius to the early Chaucer, was constrained to work anonymously suggests the loss to literature of many
another similarly intimidated writer. The odds against a woman being free
to participate in the literary world of men in order to develop and sharpen
her own expression and its intrinsic form are high in history.

The allegory of love continued to enjoy a popularity well into the
Elizabethan period, The Faerie Queene being the last and most complex of
its monuments. But by then, the feelings exalting an ideal of romantic
love have become ossified within a set of conventions, as poets compete
for variety and perfection in the form, often taking their matter second-
hand from Italian and French sources for their Englishings. The Eliza-
bethan lyric is a chamber art form, as someone has described it, with
its own conventions, one of which is variations on a theme. The content
is now as abstracted from actual persons and experiences of love as it
can get. Invitations to love or complaints against a lady furnish, in
all but the best poets, an excuse for the exercise of wit and manner, an
indulgence, not of men subservient to the women their poetry addresses
itself to, but in most respects of privilege and position, their actual
superiors.

Two themes dominate the Elizabethan love lyric. In the "Gather-
ye-rosebuds-while-ye-may" theme borrowed from Catullus, young women are
exhorted to yield to sexual love, with the implied threat that old age
will soon render them unattractive and undesirable (an attitude which,
by becoming conventionalized in poetry, has been influential to the
extent that it has become an unstated convention in life). In the other
theme, women are attacked for their disdainfulness, inconstancy and
cruelty in refusing to satisfy the lover on his terms. This denigration
of women is usually airily dismissed in discussions of Elizabethan love
poetry where it is taken for granted that real feeling is not the issue in this genre. And indeed, several centuries of self-conscious styling and the impact of English temperament and culture on the continental heritage have divorced the lyric from both its pagan roots in ritual observance and its medieval folk roots in popular expression. Among the several modalities of the lyric, love poetry remains dominant, but chivalry as the animating aspect of the lay and romance is now an end in itself; poets are no longer defenders of women as the Love-advocate Chaucer was, and could—given the social and literary climate—still be in his time.

The image of woman has, in fact, suffered a new setback. And so have women: in the creative explosion of the English Renaissance, women are so appallingly absent that one wonders to find even one or two women outside of queens mentioned in history. The denial of women's rights to a creative life still lingers in contemptuous male attitudes; e.g., Douglas Bush slightingly refers to Christine de Pisan, a French writer, as "that doughty feminine invader of Grub Street." She wrote poetry, books setting forth prescriptions for ideal conduct in manners and morals, and a book in defence of women after reading Matheolus. Born in 1364, she is the earliest of a succession of continental women who also published a variety of Renaissance literature. Widowed at twenty-five, de Pisan supported herself by her writing, bringing to mind the English writer, Aphra Behn, who lived two centuries later. Like her, too, de Pisan was a feminist, possibly the earliest. As for English Renaissance poets, we have the poem of a certain Anne Askewe, burned in the Tower at the age of twenty-six for abjuring Catholicism in favor of Protestantism; written just before her death in 1546, this poem is all that apparently
remains of her. At the end of the century and beginning of the next, the scene is enlivened by Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, sister of Sir Philip Sidney and co-author with him of many works including a metrical version of the Psalms. A very learned woman, she also wrote prose and translations. Of that great surge of creativity that was the Renaissance, only these lone female voices in English poetry! Continental women wrote as translators, as authorities on morals and manners, and as poets: their poetry is in the courtly love tradition. After de Pisan, the poets include: Laura Terracina, Catherine and Madeleine Des Roches, Marie de Romieu and Louise de Labé ("the Sappho of her time") in the sixteenth, and Charlotte de Brachart at the outset of the seventeenth.

By this time English women have become emboldened enough to be making a genre of tracts and pamphlets in defense of women, as the publications of Jane Anger in the sixteenth, and Esther Sowernam, Rachel Specht and Constantia Mundi in the seventeenth century testify. Apart from these spirited and forward-looking women, the picture is bleak. While the lady has retained the pedestal raised for her in the literature of courtly love, she is no longer evident (as in twelfth century France and the English court) as a person with her own ideas, feelings and standards of cultural expression in the arts. The setback has been remarked upon by the psychologist Erich Neumann in The Great Mother, an analysis of mythological, archaeological and aesthetic evidence of the feminine archetype. I quote him in part, where he discusses Renaissance painting:

The change of the times is evident in the Renaissance picture of Venus. With the development of the patriarchate the Great Goddess has become the Goddess of Love, and the Power of the feminine has been reduced to the power of sexuality.
Whatever respect and admiration is owed to woman from ancient times, has been by now safely enthroned in the Virgin Mother, a defused Christian variant of the generic Great Mother archetype symbolizing earth's power as giver and taker of life. The Virgin, a passive vestige of this dynamic concept, has been deprived of all real power save that of intercession with her humanly born Son. In consequence, women are prey to all kinds of vilification predicated on their sex alone. Such distortions of human sexuality, and of women's role, have characterized the majority of poetry written by men in which women are imaged; among the few obvious and honorable exceptions are Shakespeare, of course, and to a certain extent, Donne. The basic enmity towards women that underlies the Elizabethan love lyric—the continuation of a trend highlighted by Jean de Meuns' misogynistic ambiguities in the second part of the *Roman de la Rose*—remains to find expression in the Cavalier, and to a lesser extent metaphysical, poetry of the seventeenth century. Elizabeth died at its dawning, and Spenser's idealization of the Virgin Queen as Goddess and emblem of national power is the last medieval courtly gesture, made in deference to the exercise of real feminine power (as opposed to mere aristocratic elevation, or the primitive notion of woman's generative power). Christian culture continued to imply that the sexual love of women was dangerous and antithetical to the love of God, though the Renaissance had brought classical enlightenment to the fore as expressed in secular Aristotelianism, the neo-Platonists and Christian humanists. The Restoration was to bring about its own reactive changes to narrow doctrines. But literature has its own laws, in common with the other arts, and, in following these, as Bush has pointed out in his *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry*,
"Humanism ceased to be humanistic when it made style a supreme object," an observation, incidentally, that fitly describes the formalistic preoccupation of twentieth century leaders in poetics, at whom we will be looking further on. The classical heritage affected Renaissance poetry in England in stimulating production of a vast body of mythological ballads and drama, while the medieval enthusiasm for Ovid reached new peaks in the production of sensuous sonnets and lyrics, and also new declines: as in Suckling's anti-courtly reaction of an appetitive, and rakishly witty art. It only awaited Swiftian execration of women of fashion (in sexual terms that convey a special loathing) to show how easily moralists and aesthetes alike submerge their differences in the patriarchal stream which makes of women its favorite scapegoat.

When women take up again the lyric tradition in resumption of an ancient initiative, they naturally take their forms from the men directly preceding them; that is, from a male tradition. Though some of Sappho's work had begun to be known through its recovery in the Renaissance, it took a while for her example to mean something to women. Aphra Behn (1640-1689) daringly addresses a poem to a female lover and, in another poem, makes an oblique reference to Sappho; but this is already in the context of Restoration comedy.

Behn occurs as something of an apocalypse in history. Firstly, a lone female, she stands out as a lusty reformative spirit in a libertine age, her criticism of mores and manners making a point of the need for change in marriage customs, and her works openly celebrating enjoyment of the senses. She was often termed a Sappho by jealous contemporaries who thought so to cast a slur on her. Secondly, her breaking through the
exclusively male stronghold that the literary and dramatic scene in England had been up until that time leads to a gradual involvement of more and more women in writing. Unfortunately, she has suffered great neglect at the hands of publishers and professors, information about her having been made available only in fairly recent years. Her extraordinary personality and achievement have been vividly brought to life in a biography by George Woodcock, published in 1948, and more recently, in a critical analysis of her work by Frederick M. Link, in 1968. Woodcock refers to "Mrs. Behn" as "the first great woman in English literature." Her combined works, he says, "equal or surpass all but the best of her contemporaries."

In addition to poems, Behn produced a series of plays and novels for which she is perhaps better remembered, and a number of translations. In this versatility she resembles the continental women already mentioned. But Behn was more than just a woman in the literary vanguard (though this is quite enough in itself): as Woodcock asserts, she was unprecedented in bringing about a number of highly significant changes:

First, she represents a revolutionary influence on the social life and literature of her age, and in her work can be traced the beginnings of a number of changes in writing and thought that have had a real influence on the literary and social development of subsequent centuries. She was the first woman to earn her living by writing, and in her struggles to overcome male prejudice and jealousy, became a pioneer in the fight for women's emancipation.

Her forceful and witty style is seen in the following quotation from the epilogue to her play Sir Patient Fancy (her best, according to Woodcock), in which she attacks the anti-feminists who are always harrassing her:

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[Quotation from Sir Patient Fancy]
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I here and there o'erheard a Coxcomb cry,
Ah, Rot it—'tis a Woman's Comedy,
One, who because she lately chanced to please us,
With her damn'd Stuff, will never cease to teaze us.
What has poor Woman done, that she must be
Debar'd from Sense, and sacred Poetry?
Why in this Age has Heaven allow'd you more,
And Women less of Wit than heretofore?
We once were fam'd in story and could write
Equal to Men; cou'd govern, nay--cou'd fight.
We still have passive Valour, and can show,
Wou'd Custom give us leave, the active too,
Since we no Provocations want from you.
For who but we cou'd your dull Fopperies bear,
Your saucy Love, and your brisk Nonsense hear;
Indure your worse than womanly Affectation,
Which renders you the Nuisance of the Nation

And if you're drawn to th' Life, pray tell me then,
Why Women should not write as well as Men.

Behn's success stung the critics who charged her with plagiarism and
indecency, for here was a woman who dared to compete with men as their
equal. As in the past, women's oppression in 1670 was such that
the lot of the average woman was an intellectual barrenness, a complete
isolation from contemporary scholarship. . . . But she fought so well
that she established once and for all the right for women to make a
vocation of literature. . . . By 1690, with Aphra Behn's pioneer work
and the influence which women like Sarah Churchill and Mrs. Masham
began to wield in political life, the intellectual subjugation of women
was clearly ended.

Alas, it should have been, but was it? The evidence, in women's poetry,
at least, suggests that women feel subjugated intellectually, sexually, and
otherwise, up to this very day. Still, Woodcock summarizes what, up to
the time of his writing, were surely the most exciting two decades in
women's literary history, superceded only by our own most recent decades
which surpass in breadth and promise anything that has gone before.

Three other women of note wrote poetry in roughly Behn's period; of
these, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1624-1674)--a brilliant
writer by many accounts—was, after Behn, one of the first English women to publish her work, though she enjoyed none of the latter's popularity. Katharine Philips, (1631–1664), known as "the matchless Orinda," was, on the other hand, much admired. Marrying at the age of sixteen, her home became the centre of a fashionable coterie of distinguished contemporaries, Behn among them. According to Bush, Philips "continued the Platonic cult of the earlier age in her poems to her women friends," a practice in conformity with her warm advocacy of friendship between women. Besides writing poems, plays and translations, she was one of the two most celebrated letter writers of a century which saw that genre raised to an art. Among these contemporaries, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1661–1720), comes closest to sharing Behn's feministic outlook. Repeatedly in her poems she expresses resentment against a governing aesthetic which acts on the presumptuous view that "man" as a term for human kind means men, principally. She also writes poems in praise of women's genius and courage. She published her first book anonymously, probably in response to the scorn for women poets she had opportunity to experience during her youth at court. "Did I, my lines intend for publick view, / How many censures, wou'd their faults persue," she gloomily reflects in a poem where she observes that some men have made reputations as wits solely on the basis of such faultfinding while the rest simply dismiss feminine writing as "woman's work." "Alas! a woman that attempts the pen, / Such an intruder on the rights of men," she says with a kind of weary resentment. Towards the end of the century she retired with her husband to the country, where she wrote The Petition for an Absolute Retreat, a poem belonging, says E.M.W. Tillyard, "to the
authentic seventeenth century poetry of retirement," and which he
praises in terms significant for the women's tradition. "One would
think," he says, referring to so firmly established a tradition as the
"retirement myth," that it was
ready to go stale. Yet that myth, far from forcing Anne Finch to the
frigid and the inert, gave her the means of expressing a singularly
fresh set of personal feelings.  

Finch lived into the eighteenth century, publishing in 1713 a volume
entitled Miscellany Poems, which contained nature poems praised for
their freshness and lyricism, a forward looking poetry which "in cadence
and spirit resembles the nineteenth century."  

Poets such as Philips and Finch are referred to by Woodcock as
talented amateurs who never rose to Behn's status on account of their
wealth and position which served to insulate them from the artist's
social and economic necessity of struggle; for example, he considers
that Behn's brilliant accomplishment owes as much to her necessity to
earn a living as to her innate gifts and character. I personally find this
hypothesis convincing. The professional drive which sharpened and
developed Behn's skills, ensuring a consistently high productivity,
also meant she competed with men on terms they had to accept. Behn
enjoyed an equality she boldly imposed, which makes her something of a
wonder. She enabled the host of professional women who came after her
to follow up the advantage she had gained for them, though this was
neither easily nor quickly accomplished. The important thing, as Woodcock
says, is that the female writer had come to stay. Behn won her own place,
and thereby a place for all women, not only through courage and competence,
but through innovative techniques and daring ideas that came to affect
the future course of writing. Though her influence has been mainly felt in the spheres of the novel and drama, we have to allow that the poetry owes at least its spirit to Behn's consciousness of her woman's role in shaping a literature representing woman's viewpoint, while in craft, it is easily the equal of her male contemporaries.

The seventeenth century is remarkable not only for the pioneering work of Behn, but for that of her elder contemporary Anne Bradstreet, who left England in 1630 to take up life in the New world, where she became its first poet of consequence. Her first work was published, without her consent, in London, by her brother-in-law, under a long title beginning The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America. (He apparently was not averse to setting up his kinswoman as Sappho's equal in this echo of Plato's compliment.) But it was not till later--from 1650 on--that Bradstreet began to come into her own as a mature poet writing more than merely capable conventional verse. This was when her work began to take on life as she turned to domestic subjects, writing out of her own experience much as did Behn, but with the huge difference of being confined within a conventional, Christian woman's world of the home. In a Foreword to the Puritan poet's collected works, the poet Adrienne Rich has this to say:

Anne Bradstreet was the first non-didactic American poet, the first to give an embodiment to American nature, the first in whom personal intention appears to precede Puritan dogma as an impulse to verse. . . . The web of her sensitivity . . . in its texture is essentially both Puritan and feminine . . . her voice is direct and touching. . . . Her individualism lies in her choice of material rather than in her style. . . . To have written poems, the first good poems in America, while rearing eight children, lying frequently sick, keeping house at the edge of wilderness, was to have managed a poet's range and extension within confines as severe as any American poet has confronted. If the severity of these confines left its mark on the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, it also forced into concentration and permanence a gifted energy that might, in another context, have spent itself in other, less enduring directions.
Bradstreet celebrated the patriarchal order of her life as she knew it and, within her Biblical frame of reference, generally defers to male superiority. Nevertheless, like Behn and Finch, she speaks bitterly of having her poetic gift denied, as in these lines from "The Prologue:

   I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
   Who says my hand a needle better fits,
   A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
   For such despite they cast on female wits:
   If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
   They'll say 'tis stol'n, or else it was by chance.

She also takes great pride in the proven superiority of a woman who had been one of England's greatest and most celebrated rulers; here is part of a poem "In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory:

   Now, say, have women worth? or have they none?
   Or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?
   Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long,
   But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong.
   Let such as say our sex is void of reason,
   Know 'tis a slander now but once was treason.

Such feelings of just resentment and pride have analogues in all the seventeenth century women poets mentioned so far, and indeed, in many of those to come. They are feelings that form the basis of a growing feminism.

The feature most shared in common by the poets discussed thus far is the energy that their poetry derives from its emphasis on personal experience. Women till now wrote best, it would appear (meaning those who survived the course), when—like Sappho, giving form to her most intimate feelings and passions, like Behn, satirizing injustice and speaking frankly as a woman on matters of sex, and like Bradstreet, reaching for beauty while struggling merely to stay alive in a harsh, new environment—they wrote of the daily life, in its personal and concrete relations with
people and with things. Theirs is a humanly-focused art. In their determination to rise above oppressive conditions, such women poets strike a universal chord: one that is not limited to women but sounds for all human creatures.

In its follow-up to a century of such promise, the eighteenth century does not give much cause for rejoicing. Mary Worthy Montagu is the century's most frequently noted female writer and she continues the feminist tradition along with the epistolary one. Albert C. Baugh in his *A Literary History of England* cites her as Pope's "great rival for epistolary fame in his half-century." In poetry, she utters lines that are amazingly akin to those of the thirteenth century Florentine lady whose poem I quoted earlier; here is Lady Montagu in an extract from her poem, "In Answer to a Lady who Advised Retirement:"

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In crowded courts I find myself alone,
And pay my worship to a nobler throne.
Long since the value of this world I know,
Pity the madness, and despise the show.
Well as I can my tedious part I bear,
And wait for my dismission without fear.
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Her poem, "A Caveat to the Fair Sex" is, in its turn, a diatribe against marriage that closely foreshadows the early twentieth century poems of Anna Wickham on this theme. The following excerpt from the beginning of "A Caveat" is offered for comparison:

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Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name;
For when the fatal know is ty'd,
Which nothing, nothing can divide;
When she the word obey has said,
And man by law supreme is made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state and pride.
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*See "The Wife" and "Divorce" by Anna Wickham in Section Five of the Anthology.*
Among other poets of the eighteenth century are Jane Elliot, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Anna Seward; Mrs. Joanna Baillie takes us into the nineteenth century and is best known as a playwright. These and other poets, for the most part, live on in obscure anthologies. Barbauld wrote a poem entitled "The Rights of Women," in which she not only calls on women to rise and assert their rights, but goes so far as to advise:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{Try all that wit and art suggest to bend} \\
    \text{Of thy imperial foe the stubborn knee;} \\
    \text{Make treacherous Man thy subject, not thy friend;} \\
    \text{Thou mayst command, but never canst be free.}
\end{align*}
\]

This role-reversal takes us back to Eleanor of Aquitaine and her times, but Barbauld is concerned with justice, not with courtesy. Justice, she fears, can never mean freedom for women, since love softens and subdues them. Women must resign themselves to their biological destiny, learning, "In Nature's school, by her soft maxime taught,/ That separate rights are lost in mutual love." The humbling and humiliating power of love is a theme we find repeated many times in twentieth century women poets.

With the precedents for women to write firmly established by now, we begin to hear from many more women whose major emphasis in writing is poetry. The nineteenth century produces several great names as well as many lesser ones. It is close enough to our own time to be, in the long historical view, barely separate from it; in terms of attitude, however, the nineteenth century seems worlds apart from ours. The Victorian age is unsympathetically regarded, in one popular view, as a period outgrown and surpassed (an attitude of superiority which may afford some future historian no little irony, considering the horrors brought about by twentieth century "enlightenment"). This general prejudice may account, in part, for the decline in appreciation of a poet of the
stature of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Though she has been greatly, and it is valid to say unjustly, overshadowed by her famous husband who outlived her by many years of productivity, Barrett Browning was, in her own age, more revered than he, a fact that is often put down to the overly sentimental taste of the times. Her poetic peers placed her foremost among their number, apparently appreciating her difference from themselves, for she was immediate and contemporary in her concerns, as well as being considered exemplary in her craft. Their approval of a poet who responded to the immediate present is worth noting, since most of the great Victorians nostalgically looked towards the past (and can be thought of as escapist in that sense). Today she is ranked least among those Victorians, even below the two other great women poets of the century, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. Of the first rank, only Emily Brontë has a lesser place (together with her sister Anne, who wrote very little) and that probably owes as much to her outstanding contribution in the sphere of the novel, where she is accorded full honors, as to the rather limited range of her sad, still music. Of Barrett Browning’s considerably large corpus, only her sonnets glorifying her love for Robert are widely circulated today; the rest of the poems are mostly consigned to oblivion. Undoubtedly fine, the sonnets are hardly adequate to do this poet justice. Much more exciting, in my opinion, is her verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, unique in its form. Though its faults are invariably cited, where critics have even deigned to comment on the work, its virtues remain largely ignored. A recent book-length study of the poet’s work—whose stated purpose is to call attention to an undeservedly neglected writer
(the only such study I have been able to find)—condescends to judge it, in Plato's phrase: a "noble error."

_Aurora Leigh_ deserves special attention here because of its theme, which is central to this thesis. Written in nine books of flowing and often beautiful blank verse, the work is primarily a portrait of the artist as a young woman; in it are documented the struggle and milieu of a woman of the times who is driven by the inner necessity of her calling to repudiate the traditional woman's life of submissive service in the name of duty, love and marriage, in order to pursue an independent career as a writer and thinker. In the course of her narration, the heroine comes to realize that art without love is as barren as life without art— the latter the choice offered by the would-be lover-and-husband who is fired with the ideals of Christian Socialism—and she comes to an artistic impasse. The pair are finally united as the lover, a nobly-intentioned philanthropist, broken and humbled by the failure of his applied ideals, arrives at self-knowledge as illuminating as the heroine's, and as in need of being balanced by its opposite. "The book," writes Elaine Showalter, "shocked critics with its heroine's need to define her own life, and to do her own work, rather than accept a man's vision of her, however affectionate."69 The book challenged other deeply held prejudices in regard to women as well, but the public was enthusiastic nevertheless and its author continued to write despite sustained illness, four miscarriages and the birth of a son. _Aurora Leigh_ is a chronicle which abounds in astute observations of life and art; particularly incisive are her delightful vignettes of contemporary characters, dramatically realized with an economy and wit comparable
to Chaucer's; for example, this description from the Fifth Book, of Lord Howe's wife at a party attended by the heroine:

"His wife is gracious with her glossy braids, And even voice, and gorgeous eyeballs, calm As her other jewels. If she's somewhat cold, Who wonders, when her blood has stood so long In the ducal reservoir she calls her line (ll. 582-586)

or this of Sir Blaise Delorme "(thirty-five and mediaeval)" whose

brow is high, And noticeably narrow: a strong wind, You fancy, might unroof him suddenly, And blow that great top attic off his head So piled with feudal relics. You admire His nose in profile, though you miss his chin; But though you miss his chin, you seldom miss His ebon cross worn innermost, (carved For penance by a saintly Styrian monk Whose flesh was too much with him,) . . . (ll. 669-678)

Finally, a sardonic characterization of the hero, Romney Leigh, put into the mouth of an arrogant young German student; the lady referred to in parenthesis is the villainess of the story whose lack of scruples in trying to win Romney have earned her the heroine's contempt:

"Choose a wife Because of her soft skin? Not he, not he! He'd rail at Venus' self for creaking shoes, Unless she walked his way of righteousness; And if he takes a Venus Meretrix (No imputation on the lady there) Be sure, that, by some sleight of Christian art, He has metamorphosed and converted her To the Blessed Virgin . . . (ll. 761-769)

Barrett Browning excels in other descriptive writing as well. The book's main fault is a narrative plot that falls into the melodramatic indulgences of the age; there is a strong Dickensian flavor in her depiction of feminine types: a young working class girl who retains her innate nobility throughout a degrading and brutal set of occurrences
caused by the ruling class's oppression of the poor, and a scheming, evil 
woman of that class. The poet's social indignation is here undermined by 
a sensibility which to us seems exaggerated and sentimental. We cannot 
believe in such characters or accept her view of the working poor as mostly 
horrible and repulsive victims, hopelessly reduced to crime and self-
destruction. The fact that Elizabeth Barrett was house-sequestered for so 
long must partially exonerate her for such faults. The poem is unrivalled, 
however, in the critical self-examination of its central character, 
Aurora, who is a portrait of the author. The Second Book dramatically 
presents the basis of the conflict between Aurora and Romney. In the 
excerpts I am about to quote, she has just rejected his proposal of 
marrige. Romney is hurt and bewildered by her refusal to see the compliment in his offer: was he so wrong, he asks her, in taking "The woman to be 
nobler than the man," and herself the noblest of women in understanding 
the nature of love? Was he so wrong "In saying bluntly, venturing truth on love,/ 'Come, human creature, love and work with me,'" instead of 
courting her with romantic phrases and flourishes? Breaking in "With 
quiet indignation," Aurora argues:

You misconceive the question like a man,  
Who sees a woman as the complement  
Of his sex merely. You forget too much 
That every creature, female as the male,  
Stands single in responsible act and thought,  
As also in birth and death. Whoever says  
To a loyal woman, 'Love and work with me,'  
Will get fair answers, if the work and love,  
Being good themselves, are good for her—the best  
She was born for. Women of a softer mood,  
Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,  
Will sometimes only hear the first word, love,  
And catch up with it any kind of work,  
Indifferent, so that dear love go with it:
I do not blame such women, though, for love,  
They pick much oakum; earth’s fanatics make  
Too frequently heaven’s saints. But me, your work  
Is not the best for,—nor your love the best,  
Nor able to commend the kind of work  
For love’s sake merely. (II. 433-452)

In the Eighth Book, the poet’s case for art is presented by Romney who, now  
owning Aurora to have been right all along, quotes words she spoke to him in  
a former argument:

’You will not compass your poor ends  
Of barley-feeding and material ease  
Without the poet’s individualism  
To work your universal. It takes a soul  
To move a body: it takes a high-souled man  
To move the masses even to a cleaner sty;  
It takes the ideal to blow an inch inside  
The dust of the actual; and your Fouriers failed,  
Because not poets enough to understand  
That life develops from within.’ (II. 427-436)

Aurora’s author presents this dialectic as a realistic issue that doubtless  
injects her own passionate commitment to social justice as an artist. Between  
the poles of that conflict, she gives us a psychologically accurate description  
of the agonizing burden of self-doubt, loneliness and increasing isolation that  
can overcome the woman who elects to follow a personal directive in opposition  
to the prescribed social one, especially when that choice involves denying  
her own rising sexuality and the call of love and companionship. For a woman  
in the nineteenth century to write of such a dilemma was to take up an issue  
that women had scarcely dared to perceive as one. From this time on, the  
conflict between being a woman and a writer is one that increasingly occupies  
women poets.

A typical critical attitude towards Barrett Browning is seen in E.K. Brown’s  
editorial comment in *Victorian Poetry*: comparing her in this anthology to her  
husband (unfairly, surely), he finds her style "thin and monotonous"; he also  
regrets the "domination of her temper [which] has in the end done her poetry
a disservice." The fault seems to lie, once again, in that she was too much "a woman of her special time."\footnote{70} Other editors decry the effects of her moral earnestness upon the form: "she felt that form in literature was less important than substance," a representative comment informs us,\footnote{71} treating as a fault what has been the mainstay and vindication of feminine genius in poetry. Like Behn two centuries earlier, Barrett Browning was stirred to indignation against any form of injustice, but even this is not allowed her, being ascribed to Carlyle's influence on her thought. Her courageous espousal of many unpopular causes (as exemplified in such poems as \textit{Casa Guidi Windows}, \textit{Poems before Congress}, and \textit{A Curse for a Nation}) certainly demonstrates how she felt. Her social conscience, incidentally, was not shared by her husband who was "indifferent" to such matters according to critics. The power this dedication gave her poetry is evident in "The Cry of the Children," a poem cited as having a role in helping to pass long-needed legislation against the employment of young children for long hours in the mines and factories. "The Cry of the Children" has been called "one of the most affecting humanitarian poems in the language."\footnote{72} This, by the same editor who finds her style "thin and monotonous." As for anyone's special influence in determining the passionate moral substance of her poetry, everything in this resolute and gifted woman's biography shows that her moral conviction is her own; her mentors, whether they were Plato, Wordsworth or Carlyle, were chosen because they fitted the needs of her own deeply felt faith and strong sense of integrity. In love, she chose a man whose commitment to art was equal to her own, and whose whole-hearted admiration for her artistry and person bespeaks a sympathetic sharing of her interests. Her
father, while exerting a tyrannical dominance over her physical freedom, nevertheless had supported and encouraged her intellectual growth, so that, long before she married at the age of forty, she had cultivated an independent mind. Her poetic efforts as a child of nine already give evidence of a staggering erudition. Thus her emotional susceptibility to ideas of freedom and justice as a Victorian was backed, not by its romantic heritage alone, but by the broad learning of an acute intellect. Indeed, it has had to be acknowledged that "she possessed technical skill and originality" along with other poetic accomplishments which entitle her to a place among the foremost women poets of England. Through this kind of compliment comes uncomfortably close to the "she's-good-for-a-woman" kind, it at least puts her in a better perspective than what most critical evaluations have allowed.

It need hardly be belabored here that the crucibles wherein a female poet's life and art were forged were, up until the twentieth century, hardly conducive to their success. Yet this is a fact all too easily dropped in aesthetic evaluations. It took the combination of deep conviction and an undefeatable courage for women like Behn and, to a lesser extent, Barrett Browning to assert themselves against the limitations of their societies. The focus, in *Aurora Leigh*, upon the conflicts between the woman and the artist would in earlier times have appeared un-Christian, self-indulgent, lacking in decorum and foolishly futile besides. Most women had to overcome their sexual yearnings for the fulfillment of love, in order to write—as *Aurora Leigh*, mirroring her author, almost did, and as did in real life such writers as the Brontë sisters, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. That Rossetti stayed single under the strong impress of religion, that Dickinson yielded to the strong demand of her genius for an intensive
solitude in which to unfold itself—these are individual circumstances which rationalize the general circumstance that women were stunted by too little room in which to grow and expand. The threat of having to forgo love, the economic security of marriage, and possibly, children, was enough to successfully subdue most women who might have had creative inclinations or promptings towards a professional career in writing. The choice was cruel. No woman's poetry of the past has remained untouched by such considerations; feminine genius bears the character of the feminine experience it was molded in.

The poets mentioned so far differ as greatly from one another in form of expression as in circumstance: they have only their femaleness in common, and all that denotes. But the denotation is generic: a common experience of constricted potential, of being answerable to a man's world, and of an endurance strengthened in adversity. Of this combination each makes her own distinctive shape; each finds her own characteristic adjustment to the great questions and challenges of life. Sharing a woman's position in the culture, they speak from within their own sensible spheres. They cannot, as men do, speak from a platform in the polis, i.e., from a security and confidence of being at home in the affairs of the populace. They have no use for intellectual abstractions other than those which derive from the struggle to express the ineffable, the mystic yearnings which so often appear in intense and solitary natures. And women, as we have seen were perforce solitary in striving to define themselves.

Christina Rossetti had more contacts with the mid-Victorian world than most women, becoming associated through her brothers with the Pre-Raphaelites who printed her first poems in their magazine. All the same she led a typically secluded life, in the company of a mother she was deeply attached to
Rossetti wrote a sonnet sequence on love which begs comparison with Barrett Browning's. Unlike hers, Rossetti's shorter sequence is permeated with the dying fall of renunciation and loss. She could write lively and uninhibitedly imaginative poems as well, as the beautiful lyric "A Birthday," and the spell-casting, erotically charged "Goblin Market" prove. The latter is striking as an original narrative blend of fairy-tale, moral allegory and sensuous texture, but unlike The Faerie Queene, which this may seem to describe, Rossetti's fast-paced tale of two sisters is almost naive in its simplicity. Nevertheless, her prevailing tone lacks energy, the spiritual denial of the body that sets the tone resulting in a poetry that is often pale and languishing. Her religious poetry is convincing enough in its ardent, but the thought, I find, is too often conventional. Where the sensuous side of her nature suddenly breaks through restraints, her form, like that of the saint in Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Theresa is illuminated from within; otherwise, the longing for rest in death continually expressed throughout her poetry suggests a lack of vigor which strikes me as decadent, so that I cannot agree with much present critical opinion which gives her first place over other women poets. Her influence on the poetic development of her times is in keeping with the tradition of her sister poets, her popularity having focused attention on the work of the Pre-Raphaelite poets in whose innovativeness she shares. As a female Christian mystic who wrote poetry she is a fairly rare figure, inviting comparison with Hildegard of Bingen.
Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, the same year as Rossetti whose preoccupation with death she may be said to share, and with whose life of withdrawal her own may be compared. There the resemblance ends. Dickinson's poetry has a vigor and tension that points to its origins in the New World; but more of this in a moment. In coming to Dickinson, I agree with Conrad Aiken who calls her "one of the finest poets in the language." This is one of the rare times a male critic drops the word "woman" to qualify his praise. Dickinson's genius resists confinement: in the tradition of her feminine forerunners, she creates her own distinctive form out of the particular needs of her content: its thought, its emotional intensity, its purpose. Probably in greater degree than her predecessors, she "was primarily interested not in form but in what she had to say," as Alfred Leete Hamson, a co-editor of her collected poems comments. Making a more specific point, another editor notes that her imagery is taken from "the woman's world of her house, her callers, her village landscape, and especially her religion." So, also, it will be recalled, was the imagery of Anne Bradstreet, first among American poets in bring to life the New World in her work. More in touch with the practical aspects of the domestic life than their earlier sisters of the court or fashionable drawing-room, these poets write of subjects as mundane as the everyday thoughts and features of their woman's housewifely life. There is a certain daring in this, an assumption that the material will be interesting to men. In the shift of poetry to North America can be read a change in woman's position which gives her more artistic room in which to move. The American woman poet draws strength from a new sense of standing, as compared to that of women in the old world. Possibly it is
the redundancy of class differences in a pioneering community; possibly
the feeling of participating in the work of a country and culture still in
the making. There is a breadth of freedom waiting to be seized.

Yet Dickinson is not yet ready to explore the broader possibilities:
she meets the challenge of the New World from a corner in it, where in
privacy she is free to create her own individualistic poetic world. Her
poems reveal her to us as both a mystic and at the same time a most perceptive
observer of everyday reality. Though in Puritan America she sought what we
today call inner space, the outer space around her—the ground of a new
culture—undoubtedly had its effects upon her. Aiken, for example, believes
she was aware that "she came to full 'consciousness' at the very moment when
American literature came to flower," and that she was stimulated and
influenced by what was going on. He suggests she was disposed to adopt the
then current and popular Emersonian doctrine of mystic individualism. This
serves as a way of explaining that Dickinson chose to serve her God by serving
her Muse. Her poetic compulsion may well have made it necessary for her to
remove herself from an environment in which she saw God himself as being
confined: made to function within the narrow and rigid rules of a closed
Puritan form.

Other critics find Dickinson very much a product of her New England
tradition in different ways; Allen Tate, for instance, believes that the
decaying vigor of Puritanism presented the very best literary situation
for a probe of its deficiencies. According to this view, she needed first
to dissociate herself from the forces that had shaped her so that she could
perceive herself in relation to them. Thus her poetry comes to be an
intensely personal revelation, "of the kind," says Tate in comparing her with
Donne, that both Donne and she strove for "in the effort to understand their relation to the world." Her biographer Thomas H. Johnson says: "She did not follow traditional theories but developed her own along highly original lines," adding that "Actually she was creating a new medium of poetic expression." He goes on to show that her poems employ meters derived from English hymnology, which she freely adapts. Tate observes, in this respect: "There is, in spite of the homiletic vein of utterance, no abstract speculation, nor is there a message to society; she speaks wholly to the individual experience." As Aiken puts it, "Grammar, rhyme, meter--anything went by the board if it stood in the way of thought or freedom of utterance."

Such observations point up two areas of poetic kinship Dickinson shares with the majority of poets being reviewed. In the first place, women poets tend to speak out of the intensely personal experience. Secondly, they evolve their forms out of the needs of such expression. I have already commented on the link between Bradstreet and Dickinson. The latter is also related to another poetic "pioneer": Sappho. Critics often refer to these two as "pure" poets, a compliment that, by putting the emphasis on form, seems to me to miss the mark. One way or another, the poets I have discussed so far demonstrate qualities of uniqueness which ultimately derive not from formalistic perfection, but from their woman's estate of feeling and perception. The same is true of poets yet to be discussed. The ground those of the past share with those of the present is seen so remarkably in the Anthology as to confirm that, in general, the female poet (to repeat the claim made for Dickinson) is "primarily interested not in form but in what she has to say."
Emphasis on content is, of course, no special prerogative of women. But subject matter in their poetry is typically to do with the content of lives experienced in a framework of subjection to men; therein lies a difference. A state of oppression is bound to produce a set of values that is intrinsic to it. There is, though, a positive side to what in women's situation would seem, and usually is, a limiting circumstance. The life of home and family to which most women were for millenia restricted resulted in their developing a range of skills and capacities, of both an emotional and mental nature, which stress the gentler forms of life, in which care and compassion dominate over the competitive and war-like nature of the world run by men. Women have traditionally been seen as complementing men and completing them, by bearing the next generation. Men have never seen themselves as complementing and completing women. The false dichotomization of human experience into halves favoring the male complement has systematized an inequality from which both sexes suffer. Patriarchal society has deprived most men of the closeness to life that fosters loving and protective tendencies: this sphere has been assigned to women. Thus a woman's world is one which men, socially defined by their superior place outside it, see only in relation to themselves, never as it really is. To bring the woman's viewpoint into aesthetic consideration, as this thesis argues, is to begin to recover realms of seeing and experiencing which the poetry of men does not or cannot project. It is to begin overcoming a one-eyed perception of "man's" achievement and attain a wholeness of vision heretofore missing. More profoundly, even, it is to recover an essential part of our own basic humanity which has suffered a history of oppression that begins with the oppression of sex-role stereotyping.
"She might have been the faithful and devoted servant of a husband," says a reviewer hypothesizing about Emily Dickinson's "dreams of a connubial happiness . . . [which] failed to be realized." Insinuating that her reclusive singleness was not her free choice, and that she was not happy with it, this reviewer displays a typical male attitude in ascribing to Emily a dream of loving servitude to a man, his own attitude revealed in the word "servant," a position one can hardly believe he would desire for himself. Servitude notwithstanding, many women look with pride upon their accomplishments in the home and family which, though a private and unrecognized arena for the exercise of skill and imagination, may require as much managerial enterprise and creativity as most public arenas. It is scarcely so viewed by most men. Their uncomprehendingness, the arrogant presumption of man which fails to give woman her full share of humanity even where she fulfills the role expected of her, forms the substance of many poems written by women as complaints or protests. From such involvement Dickinson spared herself.

In her self-containment Dickinson can be seen as the very opposite of Barrett Browning, whose intellectual and emotional commitment was to the people of her time. Yet Dickinson, in preferred retirement in her father's house, where her mind was free to engage in its marvelous speculations and observations, and Barrett, studiously at work but unhappy to the point of losing the will to live in her enforced seclusion, had this in common: their position as women dictated the direction of their art. Their being women kept them from directly experiencing the creative stimulus and exchange which men of literary bent have always been able to find in each other's company. Books became Barrett's great source of inspiration,
Dickinson drew on her correspondence with notable contemporaries and on her own powerful private resources for hers. Though marriage liberated Barrett from the tyranny of her father, which held her cloistered, her work continued to bear the marks of long isolation from the literary and social world. Dickinson's work gained where Barrett's suffered, but the aesthetic sensibility each developed was in despite of constraints imposed upon it. Their feminine experience is merged with that aesthetic.

Though an emphasis on content is characteristic of women poets, such an approach may be said to characterize whole epochs, the Victorian being a case in point. According to E.K. Brown, "It seems to have sought technical excellence in a variety of directions, always remembering that the form of a poem should flow from its substance." The same can be said of women poets in their search for technical excellence. From this point of view the Victorian period provided a sympathetic climate for the blossoming of feminine poetic genius at this time. The Victorian penchant for moral earnestness gave women room for expressing and mastering in form feelings and opinions which complemented or were in accord with men's. Such female poets enjoyed great popularity, even if they sometimes offended against a prudish morality as did Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*. This gain in acceptance augured both for an increase in the number of women writing and for the further development of genius. As Virginia Woolf has so wisely observed:

How true this is for women as a body, and especially in poetry! For there,
unlike letters, treatises, novels and other prose genres in which women were already at home by the nineteenth century, women were just beginning to gain confidence. They were after all challenging a very old, male-defined field jealously guarded by men as their own pride and inheritance. The times were coming round for a more equitable balance of affairs in which women's claim to their own tradition would be vindicated by the unlimited numbers of poets able to carry it forward.

Nineteenth century women's success in meeting the challenge is reflected in several ways: partly by the publication, in 1848, of two very similar historical anthologies of British female poets, one in Britain, one in the U.S.A.; partly in the publication of individual poems and collections by a large number of contemporary women poets, mostly British, and by the emergence for the first time in Canada, of two female poets, Isabella Valancy Crawford and E. Pauline Johnson. I shall only say of these two that Crawford's imaginative, indigenously north-western vitality, and Johnson's rhythmically attuned identifications with the landscape, along with her spirited expression of Mohawk Indian culture, bring a content into poetry in English that was not there before, and that enriches it. Both published towards the end of the century, as did the few American poets whose names I shall mention presently.

In the anthologies of British female poets of the period no poet is more praised than Mrs. Hemans, who wrote novels as well. Echoing the encomiums of her contemporaries, Baugh speaks of her "lofty intentions, moral purity, and generous nature." She was an extremely prolific and adventurous poet, expressing herself in dramatic, narrative, lyrical and meditative forms in poetry. Her English editor, Frederic Rowton,
lauds her works as "a perfect embodiment of woman's soul." He extols her "intensely feminine" spirit, characterizes her as pure, refined, home-loving, chaste, clinging in affection, gentle, religious, and more to the same effect; a choice of words that tells us more about male prejudice and the mores of the period than about the poet. Her American editor, George W. Bethune, does exactly the same. She may be remembered as the author of that much-abused ballad, "Casabianca," beginning: "The boy stood on the burning deck," a poem about youthful heroism based on a true event. Felicia Hemans typifies the Age of Sentimentality.

Rivalling her in popularity was Laetitia Elizabeth Landon, known as "L.E.L." whose works, far from sharing Mrs. Heman's exuberance, are permeated with melancholy and thoughts of death. Also popular was Caroline Sheridan (The Honorable Mrs. Norton), granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who, besides novels, writes poems in the taste of the times with such titles as "The Mother's Heart," and "The Arab's Farewell to his Steed," but, also, poems out of her own life's hardship. A biographical note on her in a twentieth century anthology tells us that she was unhappily married enough to leave home, after which her husband brought a charge of misconduct against her which was dismissed. He then failed to pay her allowance, and even claimed her literary royalties, presumably because at that time a woman's money belonged to her husband. This injustice caused the poet to write to Queen Victoria, not without effect, concerning divorce-reform and the legal status of women.

It also turned her into a pamphleteer. Her most direct style is seen in this sample from her poem of tribute "To the Duchess of Sutherland" (a friend who saw her through her trials):
For easy are the alms the rich man spares
To sons of Genius, by misfortune bent;
But thou gav'st me, what woman seldom dares,
Belief—in spite of many a cold dissent—
When slander'd and malign'd, I stood apart
From those whose bounded power hath wrung, not crush'd, my heart.

The following lines from one of her poems quoted in excerpt by Rowton provide yet another instance of a kind of poem consistently found in the women's tradition: the lament against injustice and oppression:

Warriors and statesmen have their meed of praise,
And what they do, or suffer, men record;
But the long sacrifice of woman's days
Passes without a thought, without a word.

Before leaving the nineteenth century I want to mention two more poets who contribute to that tradition: Mary Howitt, who, like Barrett Browning, pleads for the children of the poor, and also, writes on the glories of the eastern past, on birds, flowers, and on Christ—in all of which she exemplifies her period; and Mrs. Amelia Opie, whose moral sentiments include indignation against war:

Alas! to think one Christian soul
at War's red shrine can worship still,
Nor heed, though seas of carnage roll,
Those awful words—THOU SHALT NOT KILL!

O Lord of all, and Prince of Peace,
Speed, speed the long-predicted day
When War throughout the world shall cease,
And Love shall hold eternal sway!

With this prayer, which the twentieth century has bitterly answered with wars of unprecedented, world-wide magnitude and horrors of annihilation, we approach the end of a century unrivalled in previous history for its recognition of women poets. A few, born around mid-century or later, lived on into the twentieth where they appear in anthologies. Notable among these are: the British poets Alice Meynell (1850-1923), Mary
Coleridge (1867-1907), Charlotte Mew (1869-1928); and the American poets Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935) and Louise Imogen Guiney (1861-1920). Many poets who were born in the last quarter of the century went on to produce some of the early present century’s best and most innovative poetry. I will name these after speaking of Gertrude Stein, in 1874 born just a hundred years ago today.

The present resurgence of interest in Stein is owing at least as much to her dynamic personality and acuity as an art collector as to her writing; and indeed, in approaching her writing it is hard to separate her celebrated literary style from her equally celebrated social style. In the most individualistic and unrepresentative way, she heralds an egalitarian sense among women that is new. For instance, when women insist, as they do today in all parts of the world, in setting values and standards, they are at last exercising the same artistic freedom that men have exercised with full confidence even under regimes that were politically hostile to them. Stein acted with this confidence and freedom. Her attitude is summed up in a saucy little quatrain which, in its own way, announces a new day in the balance of aesthetic affairs involving women:

I am Rose my eyes are blue
I am Rose and who are you
I am Rose and when I sing
I am Rose like anything

She manages in this to make fun of the sing-song tradition, of the romantic tradition of the Rose, and yet assert her independence in choosing to be as singing a Rose as she sees fit; i.e., in her own repeating rhythm and by her own definition, which challenges the old one. Stein’s bold originality and superb confidence in her own powers signals a new era in writing for
women, though her stylistic influence has been felt mostly in male writing. Her poetic and revolutionary prose style influenced Hemingway, and indirectly through him, succeeding generations of writers up to the present. Stein is still cited in the implications her form has had for the development of concrete poetry.

From the year of Stein's birth to the century's end, the names of women poets born into this period who later helped shape this century's taste crowd increasingly. The year 1874 is the birth date also of Amy Lowell, who was to figure so prominently in the Imagist dispute with Ezra Pound, and of Anna Hempstead Branch. After them come other Americans: Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914), Lola Ridge (1882-1941), Sarah Teasdale (1884-1933), Elizabeth Maddox Roberts (1885-1941), Elinor Wylie (1885-1928), H.D. (1886-1961), Marianne Moore (1887-1972), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), Babette Deutsch (1895- ), Louise Bogan (1897-1970) and Leonie Adams (1899- ). There are fewer English names to record: Anna Wickham (1884-1947) leads, with Dame Edith Sitwell (1887-1964), V. Sackville-West (1892-1962) and Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893- ) coming after. In Canada there is Marjorie Pickthall (1883-1922). Undoubtedly there were many more born in these years who later published; I have listed only those whose names at least occur frequently in anthologies or who are otherwise widely read on this continent. The number sufficiently represents the gathering strength of the woman's voice as it comes into its own in the twentieth century. Here my historical sketch ends.

A fitting conclusion to this Introduction is an untitled poem by Margaret Atwood from *Power Politics* which beautifully rounds off what I have been saying and appropriately gives the poet the last word;
At first I was given centuries
to wait in caves, in leather
tents, knowing you would never come back

Then it speeded up: only
several years between
the day you jangled off
into the mountains, and the day (it was
spring again) I rose from the embroidery
frame at the messenger's entrance.

That happened twice, or was it
more; and there was once, not so
long ago, you failed,
and came back in a wheelchair
with a moustache and a sunburn
and were insufferable.

Time before last though, I remember
I had a good eight months between
running alongside the train, skirts hitched, handing
you violets in at the window
and opening the letter; I watched
your snapshot fade for twenty years.

And last time (I drove to the airport
still dressed in my factory
overalls, the wrench
I had forgotten sticking out of the back
pocket; there you were,
zippered and helmeted, it was zero
hour, you said Be
Brave) it was at least three weeks before
I got the telegram and could start regretting.

But recently, the bad evenings
there are only seconds
between the warning on the radio and the
explosion; my hands
don't reach you

and on quieter nights
you jump up from
your chair without even touching your dinner
and I can scarcely kiss you goodbye
before you run out into the street and they shoot
CRITICAL COMMENTARY

on the Poems

in the

Anthology
The number of women born in the present century who have published or are now publishing poetry is happily difficult to ascertain; certainly it is a large enough number to defy a chronological listing here that would account for all. The present Anthology represents forty-five poets of whom twenty-five are American, fifteen Canadian, five English and one Australian. There are 133 poems in all, well under half the number I originally intended to include as pertinent to this thesis. Represented are women who are currently leading in the top ranks of American and Canadian poets being published, as well as women dead now who had distinguished careers as poets, and others who are just becoming known.

Current success in publishing has been more than a little due to the climate of acceptance for women which had its origin in the rapid growth of the women's liberation movement of the sixties, now become a pervasive influence affecting all aspects of our culture. This connection with a popular cause has its drawbacks; indeed, some poets acclaimed by the movement have resisted being identified with it, not willing to have the success of their poems limited to the temporal success of the movement. From the critical point of view, one has to approach with caution a popularity which is as much a result of the market place as of informed taste and opinion. For, the popularity of the movement having created a market for its literary products, publishers, editors, booksellers and other people in the communications media have not been slow to pursue this advantage. That it also works to the advantage of women poets is not the point, although the breakthrough for many of them is of no mean
importance.

What must interest anyone concerned with aesthetic standards in poetry—and this, of course, includes the poet—is the danger to criteria in the kind of popularity I have described, as well as the danger to a lasting place in poetry for the poet once the social conditions which gave rise to it have changed. We have to guard against a liberalized male attitude to women (compounded of sympathy for their cause and the bigger fact that their writings sell) which can conceal a basic indifference to what women are saying. Given a market, reviewers will dutifully help sell books; and the appetite for women's poetry is growing with the growing number of women aspiring to be poets. We are catching up with the past, which is all to the good. But we must take this poetry seriously enough to appreciate what it demands of us. Also, the success of leading women poets should be seen in relation to the substructure of the women's movement if we would appreciate that what women are saying, they are saying not as individuals only, but as poets speaking for a mass. It is important that the critical awareness of this mass be given direction to enable it and the public at large to demand the best in poetic expression.

As an example of my contention that men are not really listening to what women poets are currently saying, let us briefly consider a trio of the most popular poets being read today, from the point of view of their publishing success. These might include Sylvia Plath, although she is no longer among the living, Diane Wakoski and Margaret Atwood. Poets of individual uniqueness and power, they are sufficiently "feminine" to be admired for their frank and ruthless stripping away of all the false conventions surrounding women, and they are sufficiently "masculine,"
in their handling of form, to be admired by male poets as tough, enviable competition. But if these female poets—and others like them—project an androgynous ideal, they also all three excoriate man's role in a society which has cynically used and abused women: they all feel oppressed by men. Feminist expression of outrage has been getting louder and clearer in the past decade than ever before. That men countenance such criticism in poetry—the men, at least who help put these poets in touch with their public—indicates that they are not threatened by it: they do not take the poetry, what it is saying, seriously. Insulated by their assumption of their own aesthetic invulnerability (where profit is not the motive), unable to imagine an order in which their supremacy does not rule, men are liberally willing to grant women the space they take, it still being a subsidiary one.

My concern with criteria is a concern also that women should be not only competent enough in their craft to merit approval, but clear enough in their overall approach to poetry to continue going where their experience leads them. In my opinion, the best women poets—those in whom the tradition finds its finest expression—are the ones in whom a balanced tension exists between an intensity of feeling wedded to a moral concern, and its tightly controlled expression.

One needs to see women's poetry not within, but alongside, the male tradition. An immediate advantage of looking at both streams this way is that it helps us see where poetry is going. This is important for at least the reason that women will be exerting a far greater influence on the aesthetic than was previously possible. In predicting this, I base myself not only on the poetry in its increasing plenitude and excellence,
but on the expectation that women will soon be entering the critical arena with position papers, theoretical innovations and critiques having their locus in a self-confident feminine viewpoint. It is still too early to say whether this will take the form of pronouncing manifestoes and bonding in cliques and schools, as has been the way with men; there is no reason, after all, that it should. Women's way may be quite other.

But the current self-consciousness of women poets as manifested in their poetry, essays on poetry, and reviews, is just a step away from engaging itself spiritedly at the theoretical level. The results of such an initiative can only be of benefit to all persons and causes concerned.

Once we accept that the most active principles governing women's poetry stem from a humanism that has its roots in women's inferior status and yet supportive role in history, we can begin to appreciate that what their poetry defends is the right to be itself. What it attacks---by the proof of this Anthology, at least---is destructiveness in all its diverse forms: wars, overweening arrogance, lusts and oppressions. The need for an improved aesthetic is the need, therefore, for a humanistic approach to balance anti-humanistic currents in the field of poetics.

In stressing this, I partly have in mind the critical theories of such formalists as René Welleck, Austin Warren and, at times, Northrop Frye; but in identifying with poets and how they think, I am more interested in the significance to poetry of the avant-garde extremes to which formalism has been taken by the writers and theorists of Concrete Poetry. If it is merely faddish, Concrete is also a logical development of a climate of formalism fostered by the universities. Though international in origin, the popularity of Concrete in the U.S.A. and Canada is the
result of a trend that has been gathering strength and momentum since the fifties. Its early antecedents are usually given as Gertrude Stein, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and W.C. Williams. The coterie known as the Black Mountain group founded by the now deceased Charles Olson has been most influential, especially among west coast poets in contributing to the trend. An inevitable sequel to their "Projective Verse" approach, Concrete Poetry comprises a variety of experimental forms which attempt to give expression to the technologically determined way of life that constitutes most of our environments. The question is whether or not such an art can rise above its environment. The motive, the revitalization of the language in terms of the times, is hardly new: it can be considered as having always been a task laid on the poet. The Canadian poet Duncan Campbell Scott put it nicely in an essay, in 1922, entitled "Poetry and Progress." "The desire of creative minds everywhere is to express the age in terms of the age, and by intuition to flash light into the future," he says. Concrete poetry believes it is doing this. Women's poetry believes it is doing this. And because the aims and methods of the two are diametrically opposed, I believe it is important to enquire into the philosophy of Concrete and briefly spell out some of its implications for the future direction of poetry.

Together with Spatial Poetry, Concrete constitutes a wave-of-the-future approach to the old form-content argument, Concrete saying that the one is equivalent to the other. This, by now, is familiar to us as the idea put forth by the communications prophet Marshall McLuhan, in his formula (or maxim): the medium is the message, and its playful corollary, the medium is the massage. Put more bluntly, this means that the packaging is more important than the product. Indeed,
apart from its own playfulness, Concrete prides itself on minimal or no reference to personal thoughts, feelings and emotions. It has developed as a particular preoccupation with images, objects, and finally, with the poem itself as an object governed only by formal considerations of structure and design. The very elements of language are objectified in Concrete Poetry, so that the formal concern which previously governed what a poet had to say in any given poem now devolves upon itself. Only the briefest of descriptions must suffice here: the range, aims and various positions within this movement are given with thoroughness and clarity in Concrete Poetry: A World View, a survey and Anthology edited and introduced by Mary Ellen Solt. In this book, the theorists and leaders of Concrete themselves admit the difficulty of defining their poetry. One thing clear to a non-partisan reader is that a major part of its theory has declared its rejection of all matters of concern to the bulk of humanity not involved in art expression. Here are some typical statements from the Introduction:

"the value of each word is modified by the fact that the poem belongs no longer to a flux but to a static system." (quoted is Pierre Garnier, France, p. 32)

The new poem should be thought of less as "art" and more as "transmitted energy." (the quotes are of Garnier, pp. 33-34)

This phrasing recalls Olson's in his 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," where he says that the poem "must, at all points, be a high-energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge." The Garnier/Olson language, with its phallic implications, presents a very male view of how to keep pace with change. Worse, it betrays a mechanical determinism which can only produce
a poetry of means in which ends are subsumed. In its emphasis on form, Concrete Poetry declares its symbiotic relationship with technological advances in today's world. Though it sees itself positively and hopefully attuned to what it calls "present reality," Concrete Poetry's emulation of the technological reality means it has chosen a model with anti-human implications over other possible models of reality. The dominant philosophy of Concrete has no aesthetic distance from the culture and therefore no new perceptions to offer that are not already offered in the advertising media. Formalism taken this far has turned its back on a more human definition of the world.

In contrast, the poetry of women insists on the worth of the individual. In their collective expression, love and hate are still real, as are all the emotions, passions and ideas which belong to the flux of life. Women have not been given to poetic rationalizations, but their poetry speaks for them. It addresses itself to problems of the age in the optimistic hope that these problems can be solved. This poetry operates on the optimistic assumption that, if men begin to see the adverse implications in their support of a social system that oppresses women and children, such men will want to stop using themselves as unwitting agents of the system, thus ending the oppression of women in particular, and people and the environment in general. It is a large assumption. But that is where the women's avant-garde in poetry is, at present.

Most of the poems I have included in this Anthology exemplify a new style of personal candor. In them, all personal relationships take on political significance; this is new enough to be prophetic. The avant-garde nature of the poetry is evident in subject matter, tone, rhythm of
speech, imagery and all the other uses of language and poetic form. If men tend to make a fetish of form, women assert a different kind of initiative, fighting for recognition of a living content to the form, the form of their experience. Women's poetry is, after all, the product of conditions—sexual, social and political—which up to now required of women specific behaviors very different to those required of men. Where male bias sets itself up as a universal frame of reference for aesthetic principles, women's poetry is saying that a body of poetry such as theirs has its own concerns and content, which must of necessity dictate its own forms and develop its own standards.

In the present Anthology, women poets voice protest with an energetic, creative fervour confirming their traditional concern for the quality of life and its preservation in loving, personal forms. They are asserting against the pressures and rationalizations of a death-dealing culture the prior claims of life: the primary importance of friendly and loving relationships, the profound experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, the responsibilities of parenthood and a refusal to go along with repressive institutions and violence in the service of power politics. They are also absorbed with the process of making art and of resolving the problems this poses for a woman. The embattled lyric impulse in today's angry women poets needs then to be understood not as a social phenomenon simply, though it is that, but as an infusion of new blood into an academically constricted aesthetic.

A word about the order in which I have approached the Anthology and its discussion. I start in the first Chapter with Experiencing One's Body because of its primacy or physical immediacy, and also, because a woman's
body offers a very different kind of inspiration for women themselves than for men. Pursuing this logic, I turn next in Chapter Two to poems which respond to the most immediate threat to the body: violent attack upon it; Repudiation of War and Violence being a Section in which women voice their fear, grief and anger at men's brutal disregard for life. Such emotions have their roots in more personal relationships; thus, Chapter Three: Anger Against Male Presumption and Oppression, is devoted to poems which react to the offensive ways in which men use their positions of social and sexual dominance. This abuse is felt most keenly in the areas of Love, Romance and Sex, the Section which the next Chapter takes up. A natural sequel, the Section on Motherhood and Marriage forms the subject matter of Chapter Five. The two final Chapters address themselves to the poet's sense of her identity. Defining Oneself as Artist, concentrates on poems in which the poet discusses her art and also her problems in pursuing it, the most central of which is the incompatibility of her two roles: the one of a woman who is expected to conform to society's expectations of her, and the one of an artist who must follow the dictates of her own, often non-conforming, creative impulse. The Chapter: What Does it Mean to be a Woman? completes the Critical Commentary by looking at poems in which women raise general questions about themselves that the poems in the preceding Sections, in their specific focus, have not dealt with. I proceed now with this discussion.
The "thin fire" that ran through Sappho's body draining her of blood and speech and thrilling her senses as she spoke of her beloved in the presence of a male rival is still probably one of the most graphic descriptions a woman poet has given us of the effects of physical passion or love—however we wish to interpret it—upon her mind and body. In the twentieth century we are again in a time when it is possible for women poets to speak frankly of such things. For, from what we can gather of the interim centuries, it was not possible, nor was it even thinkable, that women should publicly profess their intimate reactions to sex and love. A split had developed between body and mind that is now coming to be regarded as false by many more people than was formerly the case. With the enormous recent changes in mores and morality, especially in regard to sexual behavior, it has become commonplace for the body to be openly discussed in candid terms, a situation to which women poets may justly be said to have contributed.

In this Section, as in the Anthology as a whole, women reveal themselves with scrupulous, often painful, honesty, and with an intensity attained through skilful control of all the resources of the craft. The effects are often striking and sometimes startling. The poems in Section One cover a range of hitherto "silent" or suppressed subjects such as menstruation, masturbation, clitoral orgasm, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, birth and abortion. Undoubtedly, this current freedom to explore poetically areas
formerly forbidden is due to a general lifting of taboos in the western
culture. But women's readiness to reveal their inner privacy indicates
something more: a desire to give a shape to experience—a gamut of
experiences and viewpoints—that has never been put into poetry before; an
eagerness to exploit all the opportunities for becoming known and under­
stood that the present climate of acceptance allows. Here women can be
seen in all their human dimensions.

The dimension that defines woman as woman is primarily the biological
or physical one. But, unlike the male being whose sex likewise identifies
him, she is socially controlled to stay within boundaries that limit her
to her biological role and functions. In the main, to be a woman in our
culture is to be made aware, before anything else, of one's body—not as an
athlete, dancer or practitioner of Yoga, say, might—that is, as a basic,
individual resource to be strengthened and disciplined toward a transcendent
goal, but as a possession desired by others: a possession exciting
interest accordingly as it measures up to ruling standards of sexual
desirability. Appearance, the major emphasis in this, has determined
women's lives to a degree that many women now recoil from, though the
emphasis on the body was probably never greater than it is now. Women's
physical beauty, then, is not a subject that will be found in this Section,
though for male poets that subject has been an age-old preoccupation.
Women poets may extol the beauty of another woman in poems of love and
friendship, but typically, the tribute does not assume a physical focus.
A notable exception to the general case is Diane Wakoski, who is character­
istically much concerned (often, it seems, to the point of obsession) with
beauty of appearance as an indicator of sexual desirability, though her
poem "Belly Dancer" in this Section has a different focus. An example of
the importance she ascribes to physical beauty is seen in "Isolation of
Beautiful Women" in Section Seven of this Anthology. But "Belly Dancer"
affirms that it is woman's sensual awareness of her sexual power, not
the idealized notion of her beauty, that is the magnet of her bodily
attractiveness to both women and men alike.

The poems in Section One reflect women rejoicing in their bodies,
and conveying joy in the senses, mostly in regard to body use and function.
The poets may embrace sensuous delight by celebrating the erogenous areas
of the body associated with reproduction, as does Anne Sexton, or they
may refer to sex playfully, in an exercise of witty innuendo as does
Gwendolyn MacEwan; the approach varies with the individual and the mood.
To be sure, not all experiencing of the sexual nature of the body is
similarly joyous and relaxed, nor, in dealing with the more painful
aspects of sexual identity and relationship, do the poets spare themselves.
At the most negative end of the spectrum are poems in which sexual activity
and its effects are described in chilling projections of terror, shock,
horror, anger and hatred. The exploitive behavior which produces such
reactions is bitingly condemned in poems by Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol
Oates. In another kind of poem by May Sarton, where the persona has
ordered the digging of an artesian well, she suffers the resultant activity
as a rape of the earth, but feels the grateful relief of a mother at delivery
of a living child when the much-needed water is struck and pours forth.
Body reaction and body awareness are complex issues in these poems. They
express a range that includes the deeply disturbed philosophical meditations
of Adrienne Rich, as well as the puzzled but sympathetic reaction of
Diane Wakoski's "Belly Dancer" to the women in her audience whose fearful, fascinated response to her movements she sees as a measure of their repressed desires for sensuous expression. Within this wide range also, are poems exploring legendary and pre-human themes. MacEwan experiences possession by an archetypal demonic female spirit in "Lilith," while in "The Godhead as Lynx," a yearning for impossible release from intellectual and moral responsibility is given utterance by Sarton in a fantasy of shedding human form where she would submerge herself in some dim prehistoric world of animal existence.

On the purely negative side, along with the poems depicting revulsion from loveless sexual encounter, are three poems which concur in regarding the effects of menstruation as baneful. Somewhat analogous in their shared sense of curse, loss and guilt are the poems centering on abortion, while the subject of masturbation is treated dramatically by Anne Sexton in a poem which starkly projects the persona's suffering of a joyless alternative to shared sexual fulfillment.

At the positive end, again, on a par with the poems rejoicing in the body are three dealing with pregnancy and giving birth. In choosing a subject with which to begin paying close attention to the text, pregnancy has seemed to me the most logical place to start, since pregnancy and its culmination in giving birth constitutes for most women the fundamental feminine experience (the menstrual cycle in this respect being endured simply as an unavoidable nuisance). I begin, then, with Pat Lowther's "May Chant" as the first of the poems for extended discussion.

In "May Chant," the subject of pregnancy is reduced to essentials, shorn of all impinging social circumstances; what we are given is the
archetypal mother in labor, bearing down, crying out. The poem begins with this image of labor, powerfully compact in its physical immediacy, which then expands into mythical time and space, a vast encompassing. It borrows its means from the primitive practice of mimetic ritual: the labor of the pregnant woman is enacted in order that the actual birth and delivery of the child will be facilitated, the action meanwhile being supported by chanting and invocation to the ancestor-gods. These gods, in the poem, are identified with the immanent child, the eternal son born to suffer and die by the hands of others. The woman at the center of this mystery of life and death becomes the primordial Earth-Mother herself. The ritual function of the poem is announced in the title: the chant, with its urgent "Come down" repeated five times (once each in the first and third stanzas, three times in the magic-invoking central stanza which calls down the gods), is attenuated towards the end of the poem where it gives way to a prophecy that resolves the tension created at the beginning. In this subsidence the mother draws breath to proclaim her saving role in man's self-destruction. What gives her this power is her role as creator; she is the healer and restorer of man torn and fragmented by his own inhumanity: she renews life even as she bodies it forth whole in the beginning: in her the cycle of life forever defeats death. In the throes of labor as she cries (calls out in pain, laments, calls to) "the child Come Down," she suffers, along with the physical contractions, the pangs of foreknowledge. She experiences herself as a link of the "bloody cord" of mortality; this child of her flesh is also born to suffer and die, and her being is stretched in an ecstasy of "knowing" life and death as opposites of the same existential truth. Only
to woman is given this power, through and in her own body, of experiencing
the central immutable rhythm of existence, says "May Chant."

The poem achieves its elemental proportion in the first two lines,
beginning with the word "May" set, for greater elliptical force, on a line
by itself, and followed by "and I squat in labor," which catapults us
into the primitive awesomeness of the occasion. Before pursuing the image,
let us consider some connotations of "May." The fifth month of the year,
it is a time of growth, fertility and springtime ritual observances that
go back to antiquity. In many rural parts of England, a Queen of the May
is crowned with flowers in a circle dance around a Maypole on the first day
of the month. As a folk-derivative of the Tree-of-Life, the pole recalls
ancient tree worship, the tree being also a symbol of world-axis. 1 Tree
spirits were credited, among other things, with helping "women to bring forth
easily." 2 Squatting, of course, is a very primitive mode of giving
birth alone and unaided, so that already in this poem a huge stretch of
time and space has been telescoped in word-symbolism and image.

The third line continues to pull inward, tightening the tension by
omitting the preposition "to" where it would normally occur. The
elliptical grammar of "crying the child" makes "the child" a direct object
of "crying," so that what is conveyed is an almost supernatural act: one
cries tears in usual grammatical speech, here what is cried is a solid
body, a foetus about to make its painful entry into the world. And indeed,
its cry is prefigured in the mother's crying out,

        Surely I am only
        a partway unwound
        spiral of bloody cord
experiencing herself as a portion of the endless spiral of births, one
in a long line of such suffering mothers. "Come down" is in this sense
a prayer commanding the son down from his mother's cross as well as his
own; it is not only he, on his "male cross," who is in a long line of
"others and others/before him."

The poem takes on fresh meaning, for in thus crying the child down
from his crucifixion, the poet gives us an image of the Mater Dolorosa,
grieving as an emblem of the whole race of injured mothers deprived of
power and authority in life. The sons have been raised above them in
pride and pre-eminence. But the exalted male child claiming to be
of the race of gods must descend to mortality, for in coming down out of
the mother, he comes from no heaven but from the human vessel of flesh,
blood and bone who bore him: hence he is no superior of hers but her
equal, who shares her fate. That the mother feels this fleshly symbiosis
as a primary truth of her role in creation, even as she calls out in
transport to a succession of divinely exalted sons, is seen in her third
despairing call upon the "King of the kissing killing/ mistletoe." This
is a formulation which evokes Christ again, though it may with equal
validity refer to Diana's priest, The King of the Wood, or to a Druidic
deity and his form of worship. While all these gods are resurrected ones,
associated with earlier vegetation gods deriving from pre-historic agri-
cultural and probably matriarchal societies, the mention of mistletoe most
readily brings to mind Christmas, giving emotional emphasis to the still
living Christ over gods no longer worshipped. The ambivalent description
"kissing killing" in this context suggests, through association with the
kiss of Judas, man's betrayal of what he most worships. Unlike Dionysus
and Osiris, this King is not named except by title: his identity, though ambiguous, may be inferred both from the naming of his manner of death (on the cross) and from the reference to mistletoe, associated by us with Christmas and venerated as a symbolic plant in varying ways throughout Europe and in other parts of the world. The English custom of kissing under the mistletoe during the festivities celebrating Christ's birth no doubt lingers on as a vestige of ancient Druidic practice. Used by the Celts in their fertility rites, the mistletoe symbolizes regeneration and cure, and its gathering is usually determined by the phase of the moon. It is significantly rootless, unlike the holy tree the oak, that it feeds upon: it is a parasite which takes its substance from the "mother." The reference to mistletoe in this poem, reinforced by the symbolism of May and the cross, makes it clear that the speaker identifies her sex with the tree as a rooted constant from which man derives his nourishment and ultimately, his being.

Sir James G. Frazer has imaginatively depicted a time in which pre-Christian Romans, borrowing from bloodier Asiatic rituals, practiced a type of magic in which the effigy of a young man was tied to the trunk of a cut tree and brought into the sanctuary of Cybele, a Phrygian fertility goddess whose son-lover Attis he represented. In this early "crucifixion," the divine son represents a sacrifice to the powerful force of nature, a sacrifice deemed to hasten and ensure her general resurrection, and so guarantee an abundance of food. He does not "die" for the sins of humanity, but for its good, its beneficence. He renders service and honor to the feminine principle in nature, and so to woman. Civilization has, however, demoted both woman and nature to secondary place, gaining control over
both. Thus, the poet calls down the gods, not in a spirit that pays
tribute, but in a tone of pain and protest:

Dionysus Come down
Osiris Come down
King of the kissing killing
Mistletoe
Come down.

That the son of woman should exalt himself with supernatural pretensions
is an inversion of the natural process by which man is born of, and, in
a certain sense, created by, woman; he comes down (from the womb, the
tree, the cross), rather than ascends, from her. The parasitic mistletoe
which kills in its "kissing" furthermore implies repudiation and betrayal:
so does man betray his origin in exalting himself above it, assuming
authority over the earth, his mother, instead of reverencing her in due
homage.

Accordingly, in response to the call, no gods appear; "It is the men
who come." They sing the ballad of the murder of John Barleycorn, a
personification of malt liquor. Neumann has this to say about the symbolism
inherent here:

The woman is a giver and transformer of nourishment, but at the same time
we find the negative meaning of the symbol in the death mill as an
attribute of the Terrible Mother. The death of the grain god in the
mill was later transferred to Christ, and it still survives in the English
ballad "John Barleycorn." Thus the mill becomes a goddess of death . . .

but it was my child
my husband
they killed

protests the persona. It is not the earth that kills: killing is done
by men, the earth merely receives. Man against himself betrays the mother,
the spouse. But she cannot by her nature (unless made to go against it,
driven mad by the power of Dionysus) do other than receive him back into
her bosom, giving him a new wholeness, a new birth, as the earth does in metamorphosing flesh and blood into vegetation, and then back into animate life, completing the cycle of death and life. "It is I," says the mother now darkly identifying with myth herself, who

under the scalped earth
will cry
the good of his blood
and meat
Come down
to the roots of things

and who, by her healing power will restore life to the fragments of his butchered body, as Isis did for Osiris. This last "Come down" becomes a celebration of the mystery, a holy communion which exalts man as child wedded to the earth; no godhead. With natural order restored, the poem rises on a note of prophetic affirmation as the persona, fully entered into the Good Mother aspect of the Earth-Goddess, promises salvation: she will

in the darkness of germination
stealthily gather
his scattered members
and bind them whole

There is no period ending the poem, just as there is no punctuation throughout it: the process is a flowing continuity. The poem ends, death taking its place in a natural perspective as an ongoing activity of life. The mother's centrality has been attested by evocation and chant and the prophecy has been given: the labor does not end. Also, the poet has claimed the woman's prerogative of poetic utterance as part of the heritage which recognizes her role in creation. George Thomson here comments on this "mother-right:"
Just as magic was for a long time the special province of women, so we
find all over the world that inspiration in prophecy and poetry belongs
especially to them. The evidence is all the more striking because their
part in primitive life is not nearly so well documented as the men's.

Lowther uses the prophetic tone as her mother-right. By affirming woman as
the creator and savior as against man the prideful destroyer, Lowther depicts
woman as having a certain superiority by virtue of her enduring metaphorical
affinities with the Whole.

A similar sentiment imbues Sandra MacPherson's poem "Pregnancy." As
the title indicates by its unadorned directness, this poet takes a more
modern functional view of the bearing phase. There is no conjuring here,
where pregnancy is de-mythologized in the first two lines:

It is the best thing,
I should always like to be pregnant.

This woman, then, has a choice: she does not have to assume the burden
for mankind. The modern woman chooses her time as well. How different
from the past in which women had to submit to their expected role, in the
course of which they really did enact nature's inexorability. Here the tone
is confident, even cosy and domestic, as in the use of the words "tummy" and
"yoghurt." But in the third couplet the poem suddenly undergoes a yeast-like
expansion: the woman is equated with "A queen," who "is always pregnant with
her country." Sheba is mentioned along with a reference to pagan figures of
feminine authority identified in myth, but the questions of proof and origin
leave the poet unmoved. It is enough that the woman simply is. But, "Preg­
nant," she warns us in the ninth couplet, "I'm highly explosive"—

You can feel it, long before
Your seed will run back to hug you—
Squaring and cubing
Into reckless bones . . .
And so, muses this liberated woman of our time, "The queen's only a figurehead." The poem moves dramatically towards its close, "the moon slooping

Through its amnion sea,

Trapped, stone-mad . . . and three Beings' lives gel in my womb.

The woman has encapsulated nature, no longer at its mercy, though she still feels herself at such a time the continuous medium through which the cosmos courses.

The third poem on pregnancy is by Genevieve Taggard, the earliest of the three poets and, in both attitude and treatment of form, the most traditional. "With Child" places its emphasis on the human issue rather than on the mother. It is permeated with a poignant sense of mortal brevity and the ultimate loneliness of the individual. The poet's concern with time makes itself felt with the opening words: "Now I am slow." She uses thesis and antithesis to reveal an ambivalence towards the process of generation that is also evident in her choice of antiphonal words and descriptive phrases charged with first positive, then negative meaning. Hence she is both "a sleek beast" and "a worn one," at the same time "musing and mellow," yet "stupid as a stone." Patterned rhyme and meter provide a music that rises and falls according to the semantics of the poem, giving a formal beauty to the communication. The poem is symmetrically structured in three stanzas of six, eight and six lines respectively, which pay equal attention to the three human principals involved. The first stanza dwells on the speaker as the subject of the condition, the second addresses the father as the loving partner who has done his part, and the third is concerned with the new life stirring within the mother's
The middle stanza in addition encompasses the three lives, beginning: "You cleft me with your beauty's pulse, and now/ Your pulse has taken body."

In this vivid phallic image, with its echo of the rock being struck by Moses, the speaker pays tribute to the male principle, ascribing beauty to it as well as power, even though she is of necessity turned inward now, "torpid," with "Earth's urge, not mine—my little death, not hers." In her commitment to love, the poet as woman accepts her exchangeability, her life's replacement by another life. "Big with this loneliness," she now leaves the lover alone to ponder their love, while "the pure beauty" that "yearns and stirs" within her, turns

With secrets of its own, its own concerns,
Towards a windy world of its own, toward stark
And solitary places.

It is "defiant," this unborn life struggling in the dark to be "untangled from these mother's bones." Experiencing herself at the centre of the mortal struggle, the poet cannot help but feel a death-grief, even as she rejoices in the beauty of life and love.

Of the three poems on pregnancy, this is the only one that relates it to the concepts of love and beauty. Taggard's sense of the precious brevity of life directs her feeling and compassion towards the human condition, even though she, too, in her condition is insular, like the other two poets discussed. Lowther's physical stance, in squatting, is one of protest, and of asserting kinship with the earth. MacPherson comfortably agrees that woman's biological centrality demands respect (though behind her relative complacency one senses the debt owing to the pill.) Taggard is alone in giving weight, along with her own image of
heaviness, to the beloved begetter of the child, the evenly weighted balance of her form exquisitely in harmony with the statement. What these poems have in common is a shared experience exclusive to women, but the fact that no two women's experience is the same is reflected in the fact that no two poems are alike. Each poem is unique in its perceptions, being expressive of individuality rather than of mass.

Closely related to the above poems is Anne Sexton's "In Celebration of My Uterus," and to a lesser extent, her poem "The Breast." The former begins as a paean of triumph celebrating avoidance of surgery that would have removed the speaker's uterus; returned health has vindicated her in refusing the operation and her gratitude rises to a dithyramb of praise "in celebration of the woman I am." Like most of Sexton's poems, this one seems to be autobiographical. The poem catalogues a variety of women, each caught by the poet's camera-eye in a particular activity of the moment, and all, like the poet "singing" their gladness at being women, i.e., child-bearers. The last stanza addresses the uterus as "Sweet weight" in a prayer that asks the poet be allowed to do the things an ordinary woman can, intermittently qualifying the itemized requests with a modest "(if that is my part)"). She is ready to render any appropriate service, in thanksgiving, for which she asks only:

let me sing
for the supper
for the kissing
for the correct
yes.

Along with this poem which, in its tone and its abundance of listing, breathes a holy "yes" to life and the generosity of the womb, is "The Breast," in which the poet relates her joy at sexual self-discovery. Here
triadic stanzas enforce the more even rhythmic structure. Sexton glories in the milk-giving function of the breast as well as in its sensual delights:

Now I am your mother, your daughter, your brand new thing--a snail, a nest, I am alive when your fingers are.

Above all she is "mad the way young girls are mad,/ with an offering, an offering ..." Sexton's rhythms are urgent, as though she were being driven to utterance as a sybil demonically possessed.

Less passionate in utterance is the poem "Lilith" by Gwendolyn MacEwan, in which the poet makes an explicit claim for possession. She begins on a note of prophecy:

Have no doubt that one day she will be reborn horrendous, with coiling horns, pubis a blaze of black stars

The poem goes on to tell how the vengeful spirit has entered her and taken over:

And I have felt her mindless mind within my mind urging me to call down heaven with a word.

Unable to rid herself of the demon by the exercise of reason, the poet compromises:

See you in my dreams, Whore of Babylon, Theodora utterly unquiet fiend, thou Scream

The sudden immediacy and tone of the address creates here an excitement akin to that felt in poems ritualistically employing repetition for a large part of their effects. "Lilith" does not rhythmically convey agitation in the way that, for instance, Sexton does: MacEwan describes,
rather than presents. But these sinister last lines, rising in a phonic pitch of controlled intensity create their own kind of magic. The rhyming vowels in each line silently stretch and purse the mouth in their alternations, helping form the silent "Scream" the poem ends on.

Ritual is again the mode in a short poem by Miriam Waddington which borrows its title from its first line. This, and the second line are repeated as a refrain at the end of the poem:

Women who live alone
beware the menstrual crone!

The crone is clawed like a bird or crab: she is the legendary harpy in this incantation used as a charm against evil. Of the other two poems on the subject, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Menses" is interesting for its unusual viewpoint, which is that of the woman's but given to a man to convey as his own. The dramatic monologue of this speaker, husband or lover, enables him to both comment on her condition and quote her. Millay, the woman, stands outside of herself, as it were, too ashamed to speak in her own voice about behavior which is so reprehensible, so irrational and yet, so helpless. "I shall be better soon," she promises at the end, being allowed the last word: "Just Heaven consign and damn/ To tedious Hell this body with its muddy feet in my mind!" Lynn Lawner's "May Song" (which is more of a lament) expresses deep grief and a sense of cosmically proportioned loss in twelve short lines. At a time when everything is bursting into flower, she feels, upon menstruating, that the potential life within her is wailing, drowned "in a tomb/ Of red seas, where no Moses" will struggle his celebrated way to a "quivering shore." She is the deprived, would-be mother who might have borne a prophet, and with each
The poems on abortion take the theme of loss and guilt a step further. Here the woman wilfully interrupts a natural process and is herself responsible for death. The personas presented by Gwendolyn Brooks and Anne Sexton cannot escape the moral implication of their acts, though in Brooks' poem circumstances given imply that her persona—a poor black working-woman—had little real choice in carrying out her desperate decisions, acted on more than once. Sexton gives us no mitigating context for her decision, just a hypnotically related account of the trip to and from the abortionist's, the thrice repeated refrain "Somebody who should have been born/ is gone," punctuating the tale with whiplash effect of castigation and self-hatred.

Brooks' "The Mother" is distinguished by the persona's understanding of the tragic, though haunting, nature of the necessity. "Abortions," she says, naming the deed at the very outset, "will not let you forget. You remember the children you got that you did not get." The second sentence is brilliantly telling in its assertion and denial: "the children you got" shows how deeply imbedded in the mother's psyche is the reality of these children "you did not get." Brooks lingers yearningly over such children in images she creates of them, images that show this is a mother who knows what it is to have children:

You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.
The language of appetite reveals the almost devouring nature of her maternal love. Loving children with such a passion, the speaker underlines the heavy sacrifice she endures in having to destroy embryonic children who are an actual physical part of her being. The poem is one of atonement for loss more than for guilt, an exorcism of the unforgettable unborn. In the second stanza, she relates how she has attempted in mind to give birth and suck to them; has tried by a sort of sympathetic magic to overcome her "crime" of denying life to them. But she cannot: though gone, their reality remains with her. "How is the truth to be said?" she asks wretchedly, finally formulating an answer:

You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.
Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved All.

Sexton's "The Abortion" is marked by a muted tone of self-condemnation that, in the final stanza, cuts through like a knife as the poet confronts herself with the truth of what she has done and faces the implications. The poem describes her driving south from her home state to Pennsylvania, where she "met a little man, not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all . . .
he took the fullness that love began."

No fairy-tale encounter, though on her way she had noted the humped landscape "wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair," which suggests her mind's self-protective dissociation from her purpose in a retreat to the innocent, safe plane of childhood. This divided state of mind is beautifully conveyed by the psychological accuracy of the presentation: an
alternation of the inner voice in the conscience-stricken, italicized refrain, with the observations of the recording eye, giving a detailed report of the scenery. Finally rejecting this as a subterfuge leading to "loss without death," she concludes by bitterly accusing herself: "say what you meant,/ you coward . . . this baby that I bleed."

Before leaving Sexton, who contributes the most poems to this Section, let us look at "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," a poem in which she again uses a refrain, each traditionally rhymed stanza (oddly in harmony with the untraditional subject-matter) ending with the same dirge-like line. The poem is addressed to a lover who has left the persona for a rival he has married. "The end of the affair is always death," begins the poem starkly. The statement is ambiguous in that it seems to refer both to the speaker's love-relationship and to the feeling of let-down following the act of masturbation. The refrain, "At night, alone, I marry the bed," contains both meanings. The speaker's hurt, shame and resentment are turned against herself in this agony of thwarted love and desire; the lover is not judged or blamed. Like any good traditional ballad, this one has its sensational aspects, projected in imagery, rather than in reportage, though there is, of course, an analogy here. In the last stanza, the speaker vents her repressed hatred in a safely generalized direction upon the "boys and girls" who are this night enjoying the satisfaction she is missing in her loss. The spectre of becoming old, of lost opportunity for love, informs the savagery of the final lines:

The glimmering creatures are full of lies. They are eating each other. They are overfed. At night, alone, I marry the bed.
The frequent use of periods, of short declarative sentences in the poem gives it something of a percussive rhythm, once more showing Sexton's control over, and mastery of, her craft.

The self-lacerating frankness of such poems is a new thing in women's poetry. With what seems to be relief that they can truly be themselves at last, women poets have begun taking full advantage of the freedom from precedent established by poets of the twentieth century in which no subject is any longer sacrosanct. Speaking out openly, women release a flood of pent-up emotions, feelings and perceptions about themselves, and the world in relation to themselves. They shed conventions about behavior--for instance, modesty--in a way that must forever change our general notions of "feminine" psychology. An example is the viewpoint of a "Belly Dancer," as perceived by Diane Wakoski in the following lines, where the speaker refers to the men who "simper and leer" at her sensuous, self-delighting gyrations:

They do not realize how I scorn them;
or how I dance for their frightened,
unawakened, sweet
women.

This scorn of those who only see them as sexual objects of gratification, not as people with needs and desires of their own which have been stifled and repressed, is repeated in Margaret Atwood's poem (untitled) from _Power Politics_. Here the emotion is immediate and intense, compounded of fear and shock as the poet speaks from the bed, as it were:

What is it, it does not
move like love, it does
not want to know

a beginning which is followed by more experiences of negation urgently
building up to an anxiety that climaxes in short gasps of interpretive insight:

wounded, you are hurt, you hurt
you want to get out, you want
to tear yourself out, I am
the outside

This woman is experiencing her body in terror and alienation as being merely used by a lover suddenly perceived as a stranger—he is not even trying to communicate: he is using her to prove his existence, affirm his identity. Discovering his dependence on her, he desperately wants to free himself, recover his maleness without giving anything of himself away. The speaker has been utterly rejected, in the name of love. The popularity of such verse with women suggests that the truth of their lives has never been told before, certainly not with such stinging clarity and perfection. This poetry produces a shock of recognition in women. A similarly effective poem is "A Girl at the Center of Her Life," by Joyce Carol Oates.

This poem deals with the first sexual encounter of a young girl. It involves a different kind of anguish, where lack of any real relationship, or love, has left the girl in a state of angry shock, shame and bewilderment. "This man, half a boy," has driven her to the field where they have lain, and now, distanced from her, he waits at the car for her to collect herself. The poem is an incisive portrait of a girl who, without having been aware of the consequences of her actions, finds herself suddenly at the cross-roads of her identity. The sexual shock of becoming known to herself as a woman becomes part of the shock of realizing that the act has cost her the carefree innocence she had before; she has lost her protected place in
society. In the very act of becoming a woman she is found guilty of being one. Stunned, she is unable to grasp all that has happened. The fields, indifferent to her chaos indicate she should have been wary to know "you must curve/ and calculate to get/ where you're going," as the boy presumably knew who led her here. We get a brief glimpse of him, waiting for her at the car. He is "puzzled" but he stands apart from the feminine dilemma. The experience for him has been different. For, in her first knowledge of sex the girl grievingly knows herself cheated of love and humiliated by being now in the category of a fallen woman: she has "lost her virginity;" the boy on the other hand has lost nothing. In fact he has gained his manhood; as a "man" now he takes his place in the world of men. She is forever inferior to him from this day on. The girl is all alone and has just understood her crisis: her society victimizes girls who have failed to prize and protect their virginity as a marketable product. She is in a turmoil of rage and resentment at this injustice: she has just felt the full weight of female oppression. Feeling lost, soiled, betrayed, she can only suffer, mute as a beast, in a situation for which there is no help and from which there is no escape back into the unknowing freedom of childhood. The drama is powerfully portrayed. Oates' choice of detail is relentlessly, psychologically deliberate, her imagery along with the rhythm profoundly moving, as in this conclusion:

A young girl, in terror not young, is no colt now but a sore-jointed cow whose pores stutter for help, help, and whose sweaty skin has gathered seeds upon it, and tiny dry bits of grass.

It is something of a relief to turn from such starkly probing studies in pain to sexual experience framed in a happier mode. The subtitle of
Emily Sion's "All Anatomy" informs us the poem is a "Sculpture of a Self-Gloried Clito-Orgasm," which may mean the orgasm is not a shared but a solitary experience. The distinction is not important. The relevant point here is the plastic contour of the poem-act itself, in which the arrangement of lines and modelling of significant words and images makes a shape of gathering excitement and release. The final metaphor of "all anatomy" dissolving "into hooves of light" conveys the flight of the poetic imagination as well as the pounding intensity of the physical experience. This poem veers towards the Concrete but remains geared to its idea, or subjective content. In "Womb: Some Thoughts and Observations," Gwendolyn MacEwan uses the idea of the body as her subject rather than the body itself. The first of these "Thoughts" is a poem reporting a conversation in which the poet allows us to share her whimsical responses. The poem owes much of its humor to its tone of girlish ingenuousness. The idea is also funny, topped off by the last line which ends with the words "exacting act," in which the rhyming syllables contribute to the bawdily suggestive conclusion the rather coy speaker has come to in pursuing her thoughts. The second poem adopts a more sophisticated tone in its "Observations." Unfortunately, coyness fails here as it strains for a witty effect achieved effortlessly in the first poem. Partly, the fault is that the idea here is too complicated for the space that is taken. The central image of Salome as a research scientist pretending, from her "lab in Argentina," to "free women from the tyranny of the Moon" while secretly entertaining men in her chamber who "come and go in cycles, like eternal tides," becomes a rather belabored joke.
In most of the other poems in this Section, the body is experienced as being too deeply involved with existence to allow for the kind of distance interposed between the speaker and her body here in MacEwan. In "An Artesian Well," May Sarton goes so far as to identify with the assaulted earth, and in "The Godhead as Lynx," she yearns so much to be divested of her human form, that she feels bound to pray for mercy. "Kyrie Eleison, O wild lynx," she prays, recognizing her responsibility to "our own/ God." Addressing "The mother-lynx in her pre-human place," she speaks of the bed she longs to inhabit:

To submerge self in that essential fur,  
And sleep close to this ancient world of grace,  
As if there could be healing next to her.

But of course there cannot, for this god-like matrix is a cruel one "that devours without a qualm." The speaker must lay aside "the beauty of the lynx/ To be this laboring self who groans and thinks."

Finally we come to the ghazals of Adrienne Rich, two poems from a sequence entitled "Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib." A note on the title to help explain the form: Ghalib is a distinguished Urdu poet of the nineteenth century, his ghazals a form of Middle-Eastern verse consisting of couplets, each complete and unrelated to each other, a single poem usually comprising five such couplets, in which all elements are linked only by rhyme and structure. In tribute to an older culture and its artist, Rich adapts this form to suit the English language and her own, western reflections on love, humanity and existence. She links her poems first, by dating them in a sequence like a diary, each poem centering on a theme, the whole constituting a serial poem in which a collage of images, observations and moods combine to reveal the poet's state of mind over a period of time.
The poems are dense, fascinating, and illuminating as they open up under scrutiny to reveal their inmost connectedness.

In the first of these excerpts, the poet meditates on oppositional themes of similarity and difference, individuality and conformity. The second poem, dated a week later, explores the nature of relationship, taking the preceding questions a step further in her probe of the meaning of things. Because the questions were only momentarily resolved in the prior poem, the second proceeds with an increasing sense of despair at what is taking place in the American environment, ending with a cry of anguish.

In this latter poem beginning with a moment of sexual/spiritual communion, the poet comments on the necessity of Socratic love between teacher and student, conjectures on living outside the law, considers how words sometimes escape the "electronic jungle," but is finally unable to resolve the conflict rending her: how can beauty still live within the death-camp, where it must appear an illusion? Metaphysics, for the poet, begins with the body. "When your sperm enters me, it is altered," says the poet starting out with an intensely physical focus. She draws a parallel between the body and the mind in the next line: "When my thought absorbs yours, a world begins." In this complex shift of focus, she appears to say that though each subsumes the other's essence, each remains whole. Thus it should be between teacher and student:

If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student, he is simply practicing rape, and deserves at best our pity.

One must take risks, as in living outside the law—a temptation. But what is "outside?" Looking out an "open window," the poet hears "electric
fences trilling." Fear and terror are everywhere diffused. She hallucinates: "What are you doing here at the edge of the death-camps, Vivaldi?" And what is the poet's ordered music doing in an environment that defeats a humanly possible, loving way to live? There are no answers. Rich here recalls the following lines from a poem by Phyllis Webb, "And in our Time:"  

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what can love mean in such a world
and what can we or any lovers hold in this immensity
of hate and broken things?
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The question is one being asked ever more insistently by the women poets of today. In more recent poems, Rich's revulsion from the American involvement with war and violence has taken a feminist turn as she resists despair in an identification with women who are learning to say "no" to the men they hold responsible (see "Trying to Talk with a Man," Section Two).

If there is any one conclusion to be drawn from the poems in Section One, it is surely that, for many women, thought is experienced in direct relation to how they experience their bodies. The wide range of subject matter, the subtleties in perception and the variety of treatment in the work show how rich a source the body can be to the poetic imagination. The like of these poems has not been seen before. Therein lies their special value. For in a time of sharpened conflict between the sexes, the liberated consciousness in poetry provides new insights, drawing attention to issues of profound concern to all. Insisting on physical primacy, these poets probe the basic and inescapable questions of birth, sex and death, restoring to our culture a feminine viewpoint on these mysteries that the race once respected but which history has all but effaced from the records.
Chapter Two

Repudiation of War and Violence

The literature of war has tended more and more in our century to reflect a growing disillusionment that goes beyond grief for the brutal and senseless loss of life and property to the futility of it all, war having proved that, far from solving any problems, it just creates more. Being directly involved with war to a greater extent than ever before through enlistment in civilian as well as armed services, women in the last sixty years have become vocal about their disillusionment, joining in the general popular outcry. Out of all this mixed involvement has developed an anti-militaristic reaction which does not distinguish between just and unjust wars, i.e., those waged in defense of homeland or "freedom," and those waged for territorial, economic or political gain. All war is seen as indefensible. The seemingly justifiable war against Hitler and fascism elicits the same revulsion from women poets in their moral disgust with killing as do the most recent atrocities committed by Americans against the Vietnamese. Writing during World War Two, one poet stands apart from the rest of the poets in submitting to war as a natural and therefore necessary evil. In this she is untypical of the times and an exception to the rule of protest that unites the rest of the poets in this section.

The poets thus range in their expression from this fatalistic lament of the woman traditionally bereaved of her men by war, written by Kathleen Raine, to the poems of the alienated women of today who angrily see war
as an aspect of male dominance carried to its most violent and conscience-less extreme. Most of the poets fall into this latter category. Somewhat in between is Nan Braymer, a poet of the older generation whose protest shares a politically-minded approach with the better-known poets writing today, except that, unlike them she identifies herself with the anti-war movement which includes men and women alike. The poets of a younger generation like Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich regard war as a crime predominantly caused and carried out by men. These poets imply that, historically, war can be traced to the unequal relationship between the sexes. They reflect, in their poems, a current feminine disillusionment with war which has come to be a disillusionment with men for their role in it. This is strongest in the poems where politics, for the persona, begin in the home, in domestic relationships. The social structure that defines personal relationships keeping women subordinate and dependent is the same structure, say these poets, as the one which men of power use to their advantage in vying for positions of control and prestige in the world. The spirit of revolt that burns through this Section of the Anthology and the next, on male oppression, is accordingly the result of an outlook which does not separate the two questions but sees war as the inevitable extension of the many forms of oppression used against women, unforgivable because it is knowingly perpetrated against helpless children. The poems of Dilys Laing and Denise Levertov focus on this crime. Indeed, Levertov has devoted an entire book of poems to protesting the Vietnamese war. To understand what has brought women to their present angry rejection of the violent world of men, it may be useful to review briefly the events leading to this outcome.
The movement of popular protest in the fifties and sixties saw thousands of women become more broadly involved in political activism than they ever had before in the suffragist and labor movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A generation of youth was becoming part of the political process on campuses, in ghettos, in song and in choosing "life-styles" that ran counter to the culture. The singer Joan Baez who rose to the status of a folk-heroine in her crusade for peace epitomized for many young women the new feminine spirit of assertion we find in poetry today. No longer could thoughtful, idealistic women easily excuse non-participation in the public sphere. Protesting in marches and meetings alongside men they experienced an equality which taught them to see politics as a pervasive process, not limited to government but part of their own everyday life. In relinquishing the passive role they entered a new consciousness of their potential political power. This consciousness is articulated by the poets currently protesting war, and they are different consequently from earlier women poets who, however angry or heartbroken, write from a sense of being onlookers. Though conditioned along with everyone else by the "hot" and "cold" wars of our century to regard war as inborn and inevitable, the new poets reject war as insupportable, refusing to see it as simply a regrettable flaw of human nature which it is useless to challenge. For one thing, they protest, it is no part of their feminine nature. It has taken only a third of a century to produce such a change, it being probably the first time in history that women have articulated so damning a criticism of men's mismanagement of human affairs.
To see how far women have come towards this embittered attitude, one has only to recall that in ancient times women were sometimes as militaristic and violent as men. Evidence is provided by the Song of Deborah with its pride in Jael, by the legend of the Amazons, and by early warlike societies such as the Spartan and certain North American Indian, in which women having a large measure of status and power (e.g., Iroquois and Haida) gave their support to the warriors. Then, of course, there are figures like Boadicea and Joan of Arc. In literature, there is Christine de Pisan who in the fifteenth century was a fervent admirer of Joan,² and Aphra Behn who in the seventeenth took pride in antique heroines who "cou'd govern, nay--cou'd fight." In opposition to the usual feminine ideals, women in the nineteenth and present centuries have also supported wars they felt were morally justified. Elizabeth Barrett Browning excused violence in a cause she saw as worthy when, in supporting Napoleon, she took this "parental" view of history:

Children use the fist
Until they are of age to use the brain;
And so we needed Caesars to assist
Man's justice, and Napoleon to explain
God's counsel.³

These examples of another kind of tradition than the one I have traced in this thesis show that women do not always stop short of violence in their passion for moral justice and will rise to its defence, making common cause with men who take up arms in apparently similar good faith. The present turning away from men that we see in this Anthology is because the poets see men—not only those in power but their lovers and husbands—betraying ideals of moral and social justice. Many women will no longer readily
excuse or give their loyal support to men who lend themselves to indefensible actions, including sexist actions which in the past were not regarded as offensive. Speaking for such women, the poets here would break the traditional symbolic alliance between Venus and Mars by getting rid of him entirely.

However women were wont to bestow their sympathies in the past, the poets in this Section show no sympathy for any kind of actual violence, though their frustrations may lead them into fantasies of revenge. Collectively, the poems imply that a way must be found to reconcile men and women individually, and thus the world, in a peaceful coexistence that recognizes survival is conditional upon ending the exploitation of women and children, of minorities and of militarily weaker nations. From this it may be inferred that a substantial number of female poets writing at this time differ from male poets in locating the responsibility for war. Most of the women here place it with men whom they identify with the social system, i.e., the patriarchal structure that reinforces general male advantage over women. This is qualitatively different from holding—as do most male poets on war—that responsibility rests with abstract categories such as government or nation: categories representing the tacit, if not active support of women who are in a subordinate position within them. Such support these poets make it known they have withdrawn.

Women in this Section feel keenly their helplessness to alter significantly the viewpoints of men who practice or support aggression. Raine sees war as a natural disaster clear of human responsibility; her viewpoint borrows from religion the idea that the sacrifice of sons and
lovers is the price women pay for their role in creation. Holding men responsible for war, the other poets make moral judgments, though as women without authority they despair that their appeals will be heeded. This is true even of Braymer in whose poem men are brothers-in-arms against war. Though she seems to indict the government, she, like Levertov, cannot refrain from holding her countrymen to account, which brings her to a pitch of frustration since there is no clear culprit for her to vent her rage upon. Atwood, Rich and Laing suggest the culprit is male supremacy. Like war, of which it is a product, male supremacy has existed for so long that it passes in the world for the natural and inevitable human order. In contradiction to Raine's poem, the poems of these three poets imply that war is neither natural nor inevitable: it is merely historic. Nearly all the poems show a revulsion for brute force, and where the threat of physical attack is immediate, the reaction is "gut" fear. When, for instance, Joy Kogawa identifies with a chicken being slaughtered in a peaceful country lane, her exaggerated response indicates the extent to which women in civilization have been terrorized by fear: the fear women more physically vulnerable than men feel when confronted by violence and blood-lust.

From the sense of vulnerability so strongly conveyed in Kogawa, we move to poems expressing horror and hatred. Human destruction and crimes against nature carried out as a part of war are mourned over and cried out against in anguish and despair. Profound grief such as Edith Sitwell's on the occasion of the dropping of the first atomic bomb, has evolved in time to outraged anger in poets writing about the war in Vietnam. These
poets take a political stance towards what they see as their country's criminal involvement in a war against the peaceful and innocent. As in Laing's poem written during World War Two, it is the brutality of destruction when it is knowingly conceived against children and their mothers that sickens the poets most and challenges their comprehension, however much this century has conditioned them to accept war as an end result of male ambition and folly.

Here a question of feminine guilt raised in the last Chapter begs some attention. This is the guilt and remorse expressed in the poems on abortion. The emphasis on life and creation in Section One throws these poems into relief, showing how heavily women bear the results of destruction when they themselves are guilty of preventing an individual life from coming to birth. Thus when men decide upon and carry out legalized mass murder against the living, women are apt to recoil in horror at the magnitude of the crime, feeling it with an almost physical sense of identification. Similarly, poets who identify with the earth as mother, giver of life, may experience injury to the earth as symbolic wounds. The world no longer seems viable to the persona in Rich's poem where a husband tests bombs in the desert with confident efficiency or, in another poem, rises from their bed to go out and defoliate the fields. Planned violence seems so basically foreign to the women writing, especially when they have a share in it, that what they feel most is the unnaturalness of the act, as in Brooks' poem on abortion, or the unreality of the act, as in Sexton's poem on the same theme.

The very idea of war is humanly outrageous to women like Edna St.
Vincent Millay, who, on merely reflecting in her poem "that the world is ready to go to war again," lashes out in fury. Her fit of rage includes the entire "detestable race" which she excoriates for its stupidity and avidity for self-destruction. Her anger, like Sitwell's grief on the morning of the explosion of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, addresses itself to "Man." Both poets undoubtedly refer to the human race, but the ambiguous word "man" throws emphasis on the male culprit in the context, since it is doubtful that their criticism would be levelled with equal force at women who, like themselves, are without power to bring about, declare, conduct, or fight, wars. The poems address those most responsible: the rulers and technological experts of a male-dominated order which has brought the world to the brink of destruction. Without saying "man" specifically, Levertov in her poem also points a finger of accusation at those in the armed forces whose mission is to kill. This poem combines anger and grief so tellingly as to suggest itself as a first choice for closer examination.

"You who go out on schedule/ to kill. . .:" thus Levertov begins the poem entitled "Two Variations." Of all the war poems, Levertov's is the most immediate, putting the reader on the judgment seat along with the men of the armed forces in the first part of the poem, and in the second "zeroing in" to the testimony of a victim of war so pitiable as to make the crime against her cry out for justice. The poem is a powerful condemnation of the callous, indifferent brutality of modern warfare. The twofold structure of this poem gives it its peculiarly effective strength, the two viewpoints—the one omniscient, the other
subjective—acting like the two lidless eyes of the survivor which are
"open forever," in their horrific seeing. In them is forever re-enacted
the napalm deaths of her five children; the converging viewpoints of the
two parts of the poem fixing the image so that the poem itself is a
continuous "seeing."

The first "Variation" entitled "Enquiry," which begins by challenging
the killers, ends with the prophetic judgment that the kind of seeing they
have created will remain throughout history to accuse them with the
knowledge of their inhumanity. The rhythms of the voice intoning its
charges are terse and deliberate with such repetitions as "and buy . . .,
"and sell . . .," "and sleep?"; "She is . . .," "she whose . . .," "she
will . . .," "She saw . . .," "she began . . .," producing an iteration
that suggests the technique of police interrogation. The grimness of the
charge weights each relentless line:

    do you know
    there are eyes that watch you,
    eyes whose lids you burned off,
    that see you eat your steak
    and buy your giriflesh
    and sell your PX goods
    and sleep?

The prosecuting voice points out that the young mother will never now sleep:

    She saw
    her five young children
    writhe and die;
    in that hour
    she began to watch you
    she whose eyes are open forever.

In the context of this horror, the confident buying and selling of women
and rations respectively by men who eat steak in a country where the
meagre staple is rice conveys the imperialist arrogance of an invading military force succinctly and damningly. The men responsible—each one—
for both their individual and collective war crimes are on trial in this poet's tribunal, though their guilt is already proved, since the evidence she presents literally speaks for itself. Levertov brings us face to face with it in the second "Variation" where we are made to see through the eyes of the victimized mother, as well as hear. "Seeing," as this part of the poem is called, is the thought we overhear voicing itself in her mute testimony. The poet brings us in close:

        Hands over my eyes I see
        blood and the little bones;
        or when a blanket covers
        the sockets I see the
        weave; at night the glare softens

But her new power to see now is only a vision of "gray/ on gray"; the living and the dead seem interchangeable; her youngest son pulls at her breast but there is no milk;

        he
        is a ghost; through his flesh
        I see the dying of those
        said to be alive, they
        eat rice and speak to me but
        I see dull death in them

The monotone of these observations: deadly, hopeless, uncomplaining, is like the sound of the tell-tale heart, in Poe's story, which falls on the guilty—here, all who are implicated in furthering American military aggression. The reader who must see, with the victim's own eyes, as upon a screen the tortured death of the children that is being enacted, is not spared either. The poem ends with this image, or rather, with the apocalyptic moment that preceded the dying. Contrasted to the mention of hands at the beginning where the mother tries to shield herself with them
from the hurt of the light and the sleepless nightmare is the mention of a hand at the end. This is the poem's open-ended conclusion:

eyes that see a
hand in the unclouded sky,
a human hand, release
wet fire, the rain that gave
my eyes their vigilance.

The hand of a man, not of God; thus in looking back at the poem we can see why the speaker views the family altar without emotion, as she views everything else that has lost its meaning. The gods are "gone" from the human heart, as in Sitwell's poem where the first shock of an eastern people's being subjected to terror of an unprecedented magnitude had not yet been assimilated by either the poet or her contemporaries, Levertov reminds us we have become inured to atrocity.

Thus, without ever mentioning Vietnam, the author of "Two Variations" indicts the guilty hand of her countryman in a statement that is expressly political. It invokes social conscience and moral responsibility through an approach that is intensely personal, though the appeal is through indirection of method, emotion in the poem being carried by image, rhythm, tone and structure, rather than by argument. Levertov documents a human tragedy; she does not generalize. She uses close-up techniques to give sight and sound to the horrors technology is capable of when criminally conceived and used against the defenceless and their defenders.

Contemporary poets Atwood, Rich and Braymer share Levertov's politically involved concern. In this they differ from the poets writing during World War Two who can only rage against, or mourn, man's inhumanity, without feeling themselves in any way responsible. The difference can be traced to the hideous ending of that war with atomic bombs exploded over
entire cities, a shock to the world which Sitwell's poem eloquently registers. People in the west were left burdened with guilt, while apprehension mounted over the arms race and stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Along with men, women who formerly would not have become involved in public action greeted new outbreaks of hostilities with organized indignation, demanding nuclear disarmament and an end to all war. Being implicated now in injustice, women felt a responsibility to fight against it, as the new anti-war poems show. This has been true even in Canada, where we are not directly involved with continuing military aggression in the east.

Passivity, unless politically practiced as a counter-weapon to violence, no longer is relevant. This awareness, and an acceptance of responsibility for making their opinions known about war are the contribution today's women poets are making to better understanding and political change. Their sense of responsibility entails making themselves heard and accepted as equals in authority not only in the councils of the world, but where conflict, like outmoded charity, begins: in the home. Or where Atwood and Rich unflinchingly say: in the relationship between lovers.

Atwood exposes the myth of civilian non-involvement in presenting a persona who is guilty merely through association with what the newspapers, with their accounts of war and warring politics, bring home. Presumably writing about herself, the writer-persona could just as well be male, for her point is that none of us can claim private space any more. Violent aggression anywhere in the world can at any moment pull us in. Rich speaks of such danger, and of guilt-by-association also, though she links her persona's problem more intimately to the cause of war by showing her...
married to a man in the government service of testing lethal military weapons. Braymer, in her late seventies, writing from the centre of the struggle, broods over Vietnam from Monday through Friday, her "requiem" ending in an impassioned prayer to God to avenge the betrayed by striking down the guilty who subject the people of one country after another to implied stations of the cross. In their varied reactions to present crisis, what these poets have in common is their conviction that a way must be found to undo the legacy of violence that leads masses of men—the oppressed along with their rulers—to dominate over those with even less power than themselves, and to kill in the service of dubious or downright indefensible "ideals." Because the task seems so huge and hopeless, expressions of courage are often overtaken in the poems by expressions of despair.

In contrast to these living contemporaries, the four poets included here who were writing at the time of World War Two convey a sense of looking at someone else's perfidy and madness from a distance that variously contains them. However necessary the war against fascism may have been, the killing and maiming on both sides aroused a horror to which these poets—Dilys Laing, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell and Kathleen Raine—violently react: theirs is a humane rather than a political response. Raine's poem is totally apolitical: it is a woman's lament that could have been written in any age, though its dating together with its reference to the desert and sea in the third stanza identifies it with the North African campaign.

"Mourning in Spring, 1943" is a poem in which Raine calls upon
young women to join with her in grieving for "our lover, dying all over the world." Beginning with an impassioned call:

O you girls, girl friends, you who have also loved
The fertile gods Osiris, and Adonis
Whose garden has flowered for centuries from our blood,

the poem ends with this flat finality:

And now our sterile wombs and broken hearts
Are the measure of war's disaster, and love's price.

Raine identifies herself with mother goddesses in a way that differs from ancient fertility rights pertaining to the goddesses as these have been represented in most books on mythology. She responds to the deaths of the male vegetation gods as a shedding of the mother's own blood, as if the flesh and blood between them were indivisible. In this context, giving birth is itself a sacrifice. If the ritual sacrifice of men to the earth is barbaric, it is also the way of nature, she suggests, drawing a strange parallel between primitive sacrifice of the vegetation deity to ensure the earth's fertility, and the sacrifice of men to war. Presumably, since their bodies go to nourish the earth and, in time, become it, their deaths are justified. War is simply a part of the life-death cycle and therefore neither avoidable nor evil, since evil implies choice. This leaves the poet without bitterness towards an enemy; a Mater Dolorosa, she has no heart for anger. (One recalls a different maternal tradition in Clytemnestra's revenge on her husband for the sacrifice in time of war of her daughter Iphigenia.) In her grieving over the loss of sons and lovers, the poet sees them as one and the same manifestation of the adored male child:

Our sons, our darlings that we have cherished from the world's creation,
These were the lovers that wiped all tears from our eyes
Raine's sorrow is focused exclusively on the loss of the men engaged in fighting; in her identification with mythical and Christian models, and in continuing a traditional kind of lament, she seems strangely oblivious to bombs raining from the skies on defenseless civilian populations. Civilian casualties amounted to at least half the deaths recorded in World War Two. This estimate no doubt includes the inmates of Hitler's infamous death camps which Raine could not have known about in 1943. Still, though lyrically moving in its keening rhythm and choice of language, for me, at least, the poem stands curiously apart from the twentieth century reality of war which does not discriminate in its human target. In this concern I am not alone, other poets in this Section reacting to the technological horrors of World War Two with violent agitation as early as 1939.

Raine invokes religion and myth in a way that contrasts with Pat Lowther's poem in Section One where the speaker also identifies as archetypal mother. In Lowther, there is a causal relationship between the context of giving birth and the poet's anger that the sons proclaim themselves gods only to go about desecrating the life that has been given them. In Raine, the occasion for the reference to the gods is the death of sons, which the mothers are not related to, except in mythological implications which the poet does not carry through. Her earth-mother is left impotent and "sterile" with the death of the men, whereas the powerful mother in Lowther's poem binds her lover's scattered members together to make him whole again, in the image of Isis restoring Osiris. Raine's interpretation of the myth seems to be overlaid with Christian adoration of the Son by a
sorrowing mother who has no such primitive power. All woman can do, in her image, is nourish with her blood the flowering garden belonging to the "fertile gods." This seems an odd inversion of the concept that it is mother earth who is fertile, vegetation being merely an expression or manifestation of her fertility. How her blood is related to the sacrifice of men's blood as exacted by war is not clear, unless we accept that, in spilling their own blood, the men are by extension spilling their mothers'. This appears to be the poet's conclusion in stating that women pay the price of war. Raine implies that women live only in the manifestation of what they have nourished. Though a triumph of the patriarchal point of view, the poem conveys love and compassion so strongly that its appeal to the emotions has the irresistible effect of drawing one in to share its ritual of mourning.

The four poets mentioned above differ from the newer voices in that they can still see themselves without guilt, as apart from what Millay calls the "detestable world" bent on destroying itself. Seemingly dashed off in a white heat of rage, her "Apostrophe to Man" is a poem of extraordinary energy created by the poet's having packed thirty verbs—all but three of them active ones—into a poem of twelve lines. Written upon hearing that the world was about to embark on yet another war, it is a stinging denunciation of man who, claiming superior ability to guide the affairs of the nation under which the populace shelters, has stupidly and tragically abrogated the thinking role to himself, bringing terror and the threat of annihilation upon the world. Her sense of outraged betrayal is made succinct in the epithet ending the poem:
Breed, crowd, encroach, expand, expunge yourself, die out, Homo called Sapiens.

This withering conclusion shares some affinity with the following lines of Sitwell from "Dirge for the New Sunrise," the first of "Three Poems for the Atomic Age" (the other two not included here) which the poet dates to the minute and hour of the world's first atomic bomb dropped by the United States on Hiroshima:

But I saw the little Ant-men as they ran  
Carrying the world's weight of the world's filth  
And the filth in the heart of Man—  
Compressed until those lusts and greeds had a greater heat than that of the Sun

Despite the scorn evident in these lines, the tone of this moving poem is deeply elegaic. It marks the black close of the war Millay inveighed against at its beginning. Sitwell writes from the shocked center of her being, reaching into classical antiquity for this first image: "Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel," and following it up with: "Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross." The parallel construction superimposes the second image upon the first, doubling and strengthening the sense of suffering endured by the speaker as she hangs "between our Christ and the gap where the world was lost." Beauty, innocence and love are also lost; what is left is a horrible travesty: "The living blind and seeing Dead together lie/ As if in love." The poem concludes with an epitaph: "Gone is the heart of Man," all hope abandoned in the infernal regions where a "murdered Sun" no longer sends its "holy Light." Because she identifies with Christ in his innocent suffering, Sitwell is more sinned against than sinning in this total betrayal of the sacred heart. Religion provides its own kind of distance.
Dilys Laing dates "Afternoon Tea," Fall, 1939, which places her poem at the start of the war but later than Millay's would appear to be. She depicts three women, German, English and Jewish, practising "a lost world's rite of tea and toast and butter," as they gather in a neutral land to speak of what is on their minds:

Freed of our flags, we strive to comprehend
The rupture of a world we love in common.

Nationality and its symbols become restrictive to people such as these who recognize only their common humanity in their shared love of life; war is incomprehensible to them as to the speakers in most of the poems in this Section. The last stanza of Laing's formally balanced poem of four quatrains ends with this unforgettable image:

The decorous room with sanity encloses our bodies, but our outraged thoughts are fled to cities where our sisters, screaming mad, hunt for small corpses in the wreck of houses.

The most untenable tragedy of war for Laing, as for Levertov, is the fact of child murder, a barbarism Laing equates with insanity. Millay's poem views war itself as insane.

The current feeling that one is oneself a cause of war if one is not actively opposing it is stated with clarity and force in "It is Dangerous to Read Newspapers." As in her poem with which I have concluded the Historical Introduction, Atwood gives a brief pictorial synopsis of events leading up to the present dilemma of the speaker, here less a symbolical woman than an actual person, a writer, seated at her desk. Even as a child building sandcastles in the security of the sandbox, she was not safe: elsewhere, hastily dug pits were "filling with bulldozed corpses."
Positive and negative are nicely contrasted in these convex and concave images. This speaker was born into war, grew up with it; while she was still a schoolgirl, bombs were falling and now, though she sits "quietly as a fuse," "the jungles are flaming." The poet creates a sense of the inversion of the natural order, a feeling of incomprehension similar to the one in poems already discussed:

the names on the difficult maps go up in smoke.
I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical toys, my body is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely lethal.

From being neither safe herself, she has become dangerous to others within her home sanctuary. Newspaper communications destroy the peace that art would fashion:

Each time I hit a key on my electric typewriter,
speaking of peaceful trees another village explodes

Why? Because, suggests the poem, the writer shares the same advanced technology that permits bombs to be acquired, tested and dropped and news of the victims to penetrate her domestic enclosure. Benefiting from this technology, she cannot claim immunity from the disasters dictated by the evil ends to which technology is directed.

Atwood's use of the long "o" in this poem deserves notice, as does her craft in exploiting the phonetic variations of the vowel. The long "o" is repeated in the words bulldozed, combed, grown-up, soldiers, go, smoke, photo, explodes; the vowel is variously sounded in sandbox, corpses, detonated, bombs, stockpile, body, love, pocked, stop, another. The
cumulative effect of sounds and eye-rhymes reinforces the meaning of the
words which add up to a sinister compilation. Her brilliantly economical
technique is again exemplified in a like manner in the middle three
lines of those last quoted, where she uses the long vowel "e" to produce
a grim lip-tightening effect by repeating the sound in quick succession,
a device that stretches it to a tension that is released in the word
"explodes" which terminates the poem.

In "Trying to talk with a Man," Rich also gives a brief background
to the present state of a speaker who is trying to maintain a former
peace with the world and failing. The poet sketches a comfortable middle-
class existence of record collections, home movies and afternoons on the
riverbank "pretending to be children:" the life "we've had to give up to
get here." "Here" is a desert where "we are testing bombs," the speaker
including herself in this, though clearly it is the man's job: she has
merely come along as wife. What is later implied is that the relationship
itself has the potential of a bomb. Meanwhile there is a silence

> that sounds like the silence of the place
> except that it came with us
> and is familiar
> and everything we were saying until now
> was an effort to blot it out.

The silence is the inadmissible fact of their complicity, their guilt in
"pretending" innocence while going along, like the rest of the people in
the given-up neighborhoods, with government policies promising death. The
silence is a fear and a defence. The wife wants to break it but here she
is more vulnerable than at home, and face to face with the ugly implications
besides:
Out here I feel more helpless
with you than without you

She is unable to communicate the sick dread she feels under talk of "people
caring for each other/ in emergencies." Her problem is the man whose
excitement over his job of authority makes him oblivious, perhaps impervious,
to her feelings and so to the widening distance in their relationship. He
has become a threat to her, a stranger: his "dry heat feels like power,"
his eyes are "stars of a different magnitude" reflecting "lights that spell
out EXIT." He paces the floor
talking of the danger
as if it were not ourselves
as if we were testing anything else.

Danger for Rich, as for Atwood, is diffused throughout the oppressive
atmosphere, searching out the person whether she is alone in the silence
of her thoughts or isolated within the complicit silence of a community that
refuses to acknowledge the crisis always exploding.

In her earlier poem dated 1967, Rich presents a speaker as yet not
alienated, though she broods over her sleeping love with a frustration
close to despair. "Everything, even you,/ cries silently for help," run
her thoughts: "What can I do for you?/ what can I do for you?" It is
interesting to compare the following lines from this poem, "Night Watch":

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I stand in my old nightmare
beside the track, while you,
and over and over and always you
plod into the death cars
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with lines from Atwood's poem in the Historical Introduction, where the
speaker remembers the months between

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running alongside the train, skirts hitched, handing
you violets in at the window
and opening the letter; I watched
your snapshot fade for twenty years
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In "Night Watch," Rich is still bending protectively over the lover, seeing him as victim. In "The Phenomenology of Anger," a poem from her most recently published book (as is "Trying to talk with a Man"), despair has hardened to bitter hatred. "Fantasies of murder" are not enough for the speaker, because "the killer goes on hurting." Her frustration seeks an outlet instead in a dream in which violence is used constructively: acetylene, used in melting metal, ripples from her body

perfectly trained
on the true enemy
raking his body down to the thread
of existence
burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
world; a changed
man

The man has become so robot-like in his imperviousness to human reason and feeling that the speaker can only think of matching him with a corresponding hardness that comes close to madness. Behind such dreams and fantasies is the reality of living with a man she has come to perceive as a human monster:

This morning you left the bed
we still share
and went out to spread impotence
upon the world

I hate you.
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
assuming a depth
they do not possess, drawing me
into the grotto of your skull
the landscape of bone

Because it is not informed by the heart, the brain has become a wasteland. Sitwell's vision of the atomic age has been poetically confirmed.
A poem that works up to a similar desperate pitch of hate is Braymer's "Five-day Requiem for Vietnam." Entirely different in its focus, however, it is the voice of a seasoned political worker reacting to the impersonal "Voice" of the broadcaster "tabulating death like baseball scores." Or, the "Voice" may be that of a government leader; no matter, whoever he is he has her spending Monday in a rage of sick horror and impotence, listening. Tuesday she is roused to moral indignation, asking:

Who made them crawl in mud
who taught them to murder
who sent them to die or even worse to live
legless or blind or just remembering

--listing the horrors, with the afterthought "--And what would Jesus say?"

ending the stanza with a mocking denunciation of the culture. Wednesday she pleads "What must we do before you hear us?"--presumably addressing the government who has the power to do what individuals, even in the mass, cannot. Speaking as a voice of public protest she details her exasperation:

We march, teach, write, sing our anger
paint banners in our blood,
burn up cards that bid us to the slaughter,
and in the ultimate scream ignite our flesh.

Braymer speaks with a sense of the unity between men and women in the struggle against war. Yet Thursday she is given over to despair and shame for her country and its people "who let such monstrous things go on." Friday her anger turns righteous: "I who am not at home with prayer/ find myself muttering Lord, strike them dead." Greater than the sum of its modes: part private citizen, part public orator, part Biblical lamentation, part confession, part political harangue, is the frustration running through this poem representative of a generation frayed with the unceasing conflicts of a world at war, people whose social concern will not let them rest. A
Marxist-minded protestor, the speaker devotes all her energies to publicly fighting for peace while her younger feminist sisters conduct their often more individualistic battles involving a single male figure. In Braymer, the angry response has totally eclipsed resigned or private despair.

We have come a long way from the woman presented as passive victim in Kogawa's "The Chicken Killing." Violence is so omnipresent a threat for the speaker in this poem that, on a walk through a quiet country lane, even the drying rice in the fields takes on military suggestiveness for her, appearing "propped in lines like soldiers on parade." Walking on, she sees five men clustered around a chicken in a dramatic scene that has the flavor of an Aztec blood-sacrifice:

Sweat cloths around foreheads, open undershirts, black cloth boots, 
One with knife, one grinning toothless—
Plump white chicken held feet first flutters while blood
Drips from the slit in its neck

The bird struggles, "Then flung aside, dies," as the speaker continues her walk down the "trembling road,"

Feeling on my neck the slight saltiness of a question--
I am dangling feet first from the sky
--Perhaps if I do not struggle--

With this echo of the archetypal woman punished for her lack of proper respect, Kogawa leaves us with Hera, hung from the sky for insubordination to her Lord and master: an image to make any woman of spirit rage. Whether the fear is well-founded in this poem, it is there, and with good reason: so well have women been intimidated.

But the more prevalent fear of war with its threat of real, indiscriminate attack is not only well-founded: it functions as a stimulus to mass action in which the common determination to oppose organized killing
builds a strength of resistance. In Levertov and Braymer, anger informed by grief challenges the murderers with a prophetic denunciation and calling down of vengeance which recalls both the great prophets thundering against war and corruption and, recovering a feminine tradition, the Furies. Women as Furies present a far more hopeful response to atrocity than do women as passive victims subdued by patriarchal dominance; read in this sense, the poems in this Section and in Section Three decrying male presumption and oppression manifest a life force, a commitment to the future, that is one of the few bright spots in a time and culture grievously being destroyed by its obsession with violence and death.
Chapter Three

Anger Against Male Presumption and Oppression

As a group, the poems in this Section are probably more rooted in the feminist tradition than any other in the Anthology. We may recall that poetic protest against male presumption—taking heart from Aphra Behn's example—began to gather momentum three centuries ago, the time of women's first beginning to be effectually heard in secular poetry. The struggle for women's suffrage in the early part of our present century, followed by the present liberation movement with its far more comprehensive consciousness of their unequal position in society, has had a profound effect on contemporary women poets, providing them with fresh material. In questioning anew the attitudes and practises of male dominance, women today are without reserve: as poets they are exposing the most intimate domestic and physical relationships in addition to the public ones of drawing room, street and pulpit. No area escapes their scrutiny. As a result, most men are being found guilty of forms of presumption that many of our grandmothers, conditioned to accept feminine roles defined for them by religion and social custom, would have approved as the natural order.

What are the forms of male presumption to which contemporary women react? The poems speak of two main forms which, together with the types of female response to them, I shall take up in turn. The greatest form of presumption is the deeply imbedded notion that women exist to serve men. Women are expected to serve men not only as gratifiers of their sexual desires, but, as wives, to provide the personal attentions of a servant
catering to a variety of needs and desires, including the creation of a home environment to reflect the husband's social status; as mothers, to take on the full responsibility of infant and child care, serving the children's needs till they are old enough for independence; and, in any capacity—as young women, lovers, wives, mothers and daughters—to function as ego and morale boosters: centers of warmth, understanding and shelter for men from the competitive public world. Though the poems do not deal with women in the paid work force, the fact that women are hired to do predominantly the same kind of routine service jobs that they do in the home speaks for itself.

The poets' direct response to these basic forms of oppression in all but two of the poems here is pain and anger. The anger is sometimes experienced as liberating and sometimes as destructive. In tracing their anger to its source, the women in poems by Sharon Stevenson, Lynne Lawner and Joyce Carol Oates speak of having tried to please men whose self-centeredness and insensitivity drove the women eventually to turn their backs on them. The desire to please is a natural consequence of love, it would seem, but these poets find that it is expected by men as their due, without need for reciprocity. This is so typically the case that women soon learn to please as the price of acceptance and approval by the master sex, not only in matters of love (and marriage, as Oates so bitterly protests) but, in general: as we see in Dorothy Livesay, Stevie Smith and P.K. Page, poets who react to traditional male dominance with dismay or sorrow rather than with anger. Among characteristic responses merely implied by the poems in this Section are the following: lack of self-confidence and initiative; fear of failure; fear of the responsibility
of success; fear of being thought unfeminine; fear of having to earn a life-long living in a society that channels women into the dullest, low-paying jobs; and fear of becoming alienated and unloved. To these must be added the fear of rape expressed by Kogawa in the previous Section. Because of all these fears, women accept, or adapt to, their inferior roles, cheerfully making the best of them in some cases, becoming ill with nervous and psychic disturbances because they are unable to adapt, in others. Section Three presents women who have run the gamut of such experiences, and who either vehemently reject the men they hold responsible, or like Livesay and Page, leave them to the reader's judgment. Theirs are the only two poems not overtly concerned with protest.

Related to the idea that women exist to serve men is the form of male presumption that takes male superiority for granted. This attitude allows men automatically to assume male priority in public or private life in a way that ignores or takes precedence over women's own interests and desires. This hurts most in intimate relationships. The lovers addressed in these poems inescapably serve to focus the poets' grievances against men who disregard the responsibilities that women—as people with their own goals and potentials—have to themselves. This leads Margaret Atwood to expose in all his absurd pretentiousness the self-made hero—actually, the average egotistical male—who confidently assumes leadership in any given situation, convinced he has the qualities to lead. Her satire evidently proceeds from a more favorable sense of her own strength than is conveyed by other poets. Atwood's scornful laughter is not shared, for instance, by Smith, who sees no humor in a situation which victimizes humanity through making victims of women; hers is a more commiserating, if no less critical, view. Smith sees men as willing dupes of religions
which confer a spurious superiority on their half of the race, the root of all evil in Christian cultures being, she says, the myth of Eve's responsibility for man's fall. The patriarchal religions of the world have enabled men to take it over in the belief it is their right, a justification, actually, of their greed and will to power. The world runs on the male belief that they are superior in knowing how to govern, to think in large and abstract terms, to invent, and--though the poets do not spell it all out--on the conviction of their superiority in practical and artistic knowledge, in strength, in initiative and in their ability to make enormous sums of money: a value in western culture which bestows authority and influence on such men with the absolutism of religion.

Indeed, male presumption makes man lord of all creation, woman being his most valuable, because humanly exploitable, possession. Because the bond between them is biological rather than purely economic, as in the case of slaves of both sexes, man can lean on woman for all his deepest needs: for mothering, for nourishment, for fulfillment of all kinds and, in a crude sort of way, for fun. In one of Lynne Lawner's two poems here, the man is depicted using her as he would an agricultural property: because she yields to him, he expects to live off her feminine resources of love as he would off a field of grain. Women as food for men is the theme of two other poems besides Lawner's. Livesay is distressed when a lover treats her not as the individual she presumes he loves, but as any woman required to satisfy his sexual appetites; in this he is no different from the black man who, despite having a history of oppression like herself, orders her about as she prepares a meal for him, secure in
his assumed male privilege. In Pat Lowther's poem, the woman is expected to deny her intelligence so that she will be more "digestible" to the man who wants to consume her. Here the poet is able to resist with spirit and humor. Up till the recent past, the prohibitive cost of such defiance kept women in check, as Page shows in depicting a daughter's life of sacrifice to a tyrannical father typical of a bygone day; though her subject and mode exclude resentment, the tragedy of a selfishly exercised paternal authority makes its own statement. Dilys Laing angrily repudiates Pope Pius XII for his assertion of the teaching of the Church fathers that women should humbly resign themselves to being men's burden for the purpose of procreation. Finally, in this overview of the Section, Denise Levertov is overcome with revulsion at being the object of degrading male catcalls on the street. To be a woman, according to the witness of these poems, is to be vulnerable to all such attacks on human dignity.

For closer examination, I will take Livesay's "The Taming," first, since in its uneasy submission to male dominance it seems naturally to succeed the poem last discussed in detail at the end of the previous Chapter: Kogawa's "The Chicken Killing." Both poems deal with female submission, and both poets introduce a chicken to point up the speaker's sense of herself as helpless (though for different reasons) in confrontation with the male. In Kogawa's poem, the chicken suffers violent death as the object of a cruel sort of game; in Livesay's poem, the chicken is merely served up by the speaker as food for a stranger. Despite the very real difference in tone as well as use of imagery in these poems, the speaker is passive, venting no anger or protest, though Livesay, at least,
suggests that these particular emotions are being smothered. She gives them only enough space to show under the surface of the poem, as it were: as in the following lines where the persona realizes the lesson she was unwittingly taught

that night
when you denied me darkness,
even the right
to turn in my own light.

This is the same lesson taught her by a black stranger whom she did the kindness of preparing him a meal. Impatient with her for not cooking it to his taste, he rudely corrects her with the command: "Do what I say, woman." The poet shows that, despite his forbears once having been slaves in America, his superiority as a man gives him the arrogance to treat her as his slave. Her willingness to serve is taken for granted: it is what makes her "woman." Sexual compliance is an extension of this learned obedience, though the speaker finds this lesson particularly painful in the context of love. Still, she seems to accept it. The man must be catered to in matters of appetite at the price of woman's having to forgo the pleasures and fulfillments of love. Her subservience is underlined in the lover being shown to use almost the same words as the black man to subdue her to his desires:

Do as I say, I heard you faintly
over me fainting,
be woman.

"The Taming" asks to be completed with the phrase "of the Shrew," an ironic afterthought in view of the speaker's seemingly meek and ready compliance. Yet women are "tamed" by being reduced to a captivity in which self-sacrifice is the only viable means of earning approval. To be or
not to be "chicken:" this is the question Kogawa and Livesay raise. There is the further possibility in Livesay's poem that the speaker's docility reflects her pleasure in being used, sexually, at least, as she is; which would indicate to me, at least, that some people learn to find an advantage in conditions they accept as definitive. "That's what it is to be a woman," one can hear a host of women sighing as they accept their inferior position.

The three poems by Sharon Stevenson present as opposite a view as we will find. They trace the progress of a love-relationship, each poem representing a consecutive stage in its development. From her initiation into the beloved's character in "First Incision," the speaker proceeds through an interim report after "4 & 3/4 Months" of male presumption, to her own reflexive "incision:" a cutting perception of how each views the other in "Lover's Anatomy." The tone in this progression changes from one of shocked pain, in the first poem, to a mixture of fear, hurt and anger in the second, to cold, withering scorn in the third. In "First Incision," the lover is charged with blithely trying to remodel his woman into an ideal he has obtained through his researches on other women who pleased his tastes. The sustained reference to music in this poem carries a wry echo of: "If music be the food of love, play on . . ." The woman's pain in being used as an object to suit his moods is captured in the last stanza where he is shown as "comforting" her over her violent objections by saying "it was all for/ fun &/ good vibes." The flippant, fashionable slang emphasizes his insensitivity. The second poem reveals what a few months of this sort of treatment have done to love. He is hurt at her mistrust, since she came to him with "open hands." He just
cannot understand why her love "couldn't build cocoons" for his plans "to nest in." The woman as man's warm shelter: the mother-womb from which he still demands protection and time to mature in, is typical of men's presumption. This emotional parasitism hardens the speaker's response into something like disgust by the third poem. "Lover's Anatomy" is brilliant in its terse opposition of the images each has of the other. He has not changed, but by now the woman is no longer emotionally vulnerable: resistance necessary to her self-esteem has stiffened her so that she now sees him as no more important to her than her toenail, which she defines as

useful, necessary
to be clipped
if painful

In coming to this conclusion Stevenson speaks for a new generation of angry women who have liberated themselves from stereotypical expectations of subserviency and who are asserting in their poems that they are their own woman.

Here, for example, is Lynne Lawner in a short poem which begins with the title "In your Arrogance," continuing:

You think that when a woman yields
You own at least what you, harrowing, hurt.

Refusing to be owned as the lover's cultivable property, the speaker, like Stevenson's, refuses to be also the victim who will show a mother's love in forgiving her beloved, and who will always be there for him. Though she identifies herself as a golden Demeter in her earth imagery, she will not lend her traditional "healing" powers to such irresponsible male weakness. "This is not your harvest, these are not your fields!" she warns,
withdrawning her bounty. In "Tongue of Crisp Oleander," Lawner again uses natural imagery, here perceiving the lover as a flowering shrub or strong tree-trunk (a male vegetation god?) until she experiences his response to her love as "grenade-hard seed," a shift that tips the language towards military imagery:

You move through me as rifle-fire,
No recognizing rain
Engendering destiny, desperation . . .
But we never touch.

No love exists where there is not a mutuality of perception, say these poets. The man who uses the woman as slave to his sexual appetite, as engenderer of his seed, or—as in Margaret Atwood's poem—as adoring mother, nurse, validator of his manhood and camp follower all wrapped up into one, may temporarily possess her body, but at the expense of love, and certainly at the expense of the soul. "My beautiful wooden leader," begins this untitled poem from Power Politics, Atwood sardonically putting the man in his place from the start. "General," she mocks,

you enlist
my body in your heroic
struggle to become real

Her contempt for the pitifully posturing hero mounts with each line until, in the last stanza, she has him silhouetted in the frame of her ridicule as in a fade-out ending to a cowboys-and-Indians movie. That is the level of his mentality, she implies, entertaining the audience with this image at his expense:

Magnificent on your wooden horse
you point with your fringed hand
the sun sets, and the people all
ride off in the other direction
There is no charity here, as in Livesay, nor implicit appeal, as in Lawner. The persona is at the furthest reach of feminist scorn for the man puffed up with pretentious notions of his fitness to lead. Her emphasis on his static, "wooden" quality as military hero shows what she thinks of man's progress. The wooden horse conjures up Troy, the fringed jacket, Wild Bill Hickock. Whether posing as a Greek hero or a whiteskinned brave in buckskin, today's man is equally absurd in his regressive behavior. There are no more frontiers to conquer. Atwood and Lawner both use a military metaphor, but Atwood's speaker has the distanced superiority of a critic holding up a pathetic performance to ridicule.

Pat Lowther invokes the comic, too, in a defiant response to the man in "Baby you tell me," who, like the tormentor in Oates' poem, "Pain," tries to dictate to the persona how she should think. In Lowther, the man wants his woman to "crunch down on/ the gristliest parts" of her brain so as to make her "more digestible," but she refuses to do his "dirty work" for him. She lets him know that, if he thinks he has her where she is vulnerable: i.e., has discovered her "soft spot" or fontanelle, he is mistaken; she will not be bullied or manipulated this way:

Anybody's going to eat me
he's going to know
he's had a meal.

(Shades of chicken again!) Humor is grim in these poems but the language of hurt is grimmer.

It becomes quantitative, a savings account of oppression in Joyce Carol Oates. "Conversational pity urged me on/ and gave me funds," she
says in the foreboding opening lines of "Pain," the third of five poems in a series relating a failed marriage. Here, the speaker's disturbing use of the monetary word "funds" suggests a limited amount of exchange capital, hardly a definition of love. But is love the issue? In telling her story of disillusionment, the speaker claims that all she got for her investment of pity was a false intimacy, "like garments flung down to music."

She assuredly does not mean to invite compassion for the man, yet this criticism of a cheap and shallow performance she has after all bought with dubious collateral reveals a naive expectation at best. Whatever her hopes for this ill-conceived marriage, they have been quashed by a husband who has made her pay more than she bargained for, in the form of insulting and egocentric demands that she remodel herself along the lines he dictates. This recalls Stevenson, but Oates is more specific, quoting:

> Learn to smoke before a mirror, you said:
> Get rid of corny gestures. I think, I know,
> I want, you said . . .

She bitterly refers to "timed and pre-thought" love-making which she calls "half-lies" as opposed to "true sins" more difficult to locate. The poet is not sure whether they exist in pain or in the poetry of pain. "The tinkle of knives is true, my friend," she tells him, resolving the issue. She compares his treatment of her to a series of abortions or perhaps refers to abortions he insisted on her having: the case is not made clear to the reader. Whatever it was, it has taught her to wield her own knife in defense, cutting away his "words" and "symbols"-lies which obscure the real pain this "song of hate" means to exorcise. She is through with rationalizations:
A woman, I think of no symbols, recall none, have no thoughts, feel pain. Symbols belong to men. There are no symbols, there is only pain.

A poem that responds to men's degrading behavior towards women with a similar, if less intense, grief is Denise Levertov's "The Mutes."

Since it has no sharp, personal focus, it is able to take more room for understanding. "The Mutes," like "Pain," is concerned with the oppressive use men make of language-communication. "Those groans men use/ passing a woman on the street" to signal the response of their flesh to her femaleness, wonders the speaker: are they a sort of ugly song meant for music, or are they the muffled roaring of deafmutes trapped in a building that is slowly filling with smoke?

Perhaps both, she thinks with some compassion, and yet she has to admit that it is some sort of tribute: "it's not only to say she's/ a warm hole."

Struggling with her assaulted feelings she tries to find a justification for the cause, names it a word in grief-language, nothing to do with primitive, not an ur-language; language stricken, sickened, cast down in decrepitude.

But such explanations do not help. She is victimized all the same: she must bear her discomfort and outrage without a sign or else invite further odious attention. The corruption sticks to her, the noise pursuing her, forcing a change in the way she walks, in her feelings and perceptions, and finally, defeating her, as it joins with the jarring rhythm of the advancing and receding subway trains. She is by now depleted of energy.
"Life after life after life goes by," she interprets miserably:

\begin{verbatim}
without poetry,
without seemliness,
without love.
\end{verbatim}

One hears the faint echoes in this of "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything," along with "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow ... ".

That language which has been raised to such heights in poetry should have fallen so low, in the dehumanized sounds meant to attract her as a woman is finally felt by the speaker to fall with the crushing weight of an inconsolable grief.

Laing deals with misuse of language also, in her poem punningly entitled "Pius Thought," where she comments on the two-sidedness of an address given by Pius XII, prefacing her poem with a quotation from it. Though the "twelfth of his name piously" pronounces that woman "was by God created equal with man," he nevertheless advises, says the poet, that

\begin{verbatim}
the Convert preaches
that woman must be humble and mute
and lay her down under the burden of man
and be his brute.
\end{verbatim}

Anger here finds outlet in a bawdy pun. Woman is reduced to the status of an ass for men to ride upon; the poet fights language she finds hypocritical with her own deliberate double-entendres.

The two remaining poems by Smith and Page are as different from each other as they are from the rest of the group. In "How Cruel is the Story of Eve," Stevie Smith accuses the Christian religion of giving women a mother-of-the-race image which is shameful and demeaning to all, but which hurts women most since it justifies men in subjugating them and punishing them for their "sin" of being made in that image. Lamenting
the evil construction put on the innocent pleasure of touch between lovers, she charges that the tenderness of love has been sacrificed to the exchange value of marriage, which profits only the male sex:

Put up to barter
The tender feelings
Buy her a husband to rule her
Fool her to marry a master
She must or rue it
The Lord said it.

Variations on the opening refrain are set between such stanzas, their lament--

Oh what cruelty
In history what misery

--a commentary on the evils she lists. Made slaves, women soon learn cunning, playing the master's game in order to win necessary concessions. In unfolding her sermon-like jeremiad, Smith anticipates a foreseeable objection:

It is only a legend
You say? But what
Is the meaning of the legend
If not
To give blame to women most
And most punishment?

The poet derives some comfort from the thought that had men and women taken the exemplum of Eve to heart, they would have forsworn sexual contact and the race would have died out long ago. She concludes on a mournful note, however, shifting ambiguously to find nature culpable rather than man:

Oh dread Nature, for your purpose
To have made them love so.

She does not see an end to the misery because the life-instinct works
through natural desire which, on the women's side, makes them submit to
and endure their oppression, even to finding their "happiness" there.

In the only poem of this group that focuses on a relationship that
is not a sexual one, Page gives us a beautiful portrait of a daughter
sacrificed to her father's tyrannical domination. Though "Portrait of
Marina" calls to mind the daughter of Pericles, the allusion carries
little more than the musical echo (like a ship's bell, perhaps?) of a
name signifying a motherless heroine whose life has been conditioned by
having begun with a shipwreck. Beyond that, and the suggestion of contin­
uity, I find no parallelism, Shakespeare's independent and resourceful
heroine having little in common with Page's martyred victim whose enforced
virtue of submission and obedience to a selfish father is in no way
like the moral virtue which distinguishes the daughter of Pericles,
enabling her to triumph over adversity. In her portrayal of yet another
father-daughter relationship of a type that is not depicted in the play,
Page may be seen as gracing the gallery with an historically important
addition. "Portrait of Marina" is actually a series of portraits symbolically
contained within the framework of a wool-embroidered picture of the old
skipper's "last shipwreck," of which Marina is "the sole survivor."
Structurally, the poem may also be said to resemble the waves of the
sea, in its overlapping images. Married to the sea, the mariner (whose wife,
Marina's mother, is never mentioned) is depicted virtually tying his
daughter to him with a wool cord, in his old age; in his youth, by his
naming of her in hopes she would become "a water woman, rich with bells."
To the actual Marina, land-bound to his domestic calls,
the name Marina simply meant
he held his furious needle for her thin
fingers to thread again with more blue wool
to sew the ocean of his memory.

This scene frames itself in the memory of a great-great-grandchild—
"a dimity young inland housewife," who has inherited the picture along
with other Victorian memorabilia of her forbears. The dignified cadence
of iambic pentameter is in keeping with the nostalgic flavor of continuity
and tradition here, a patient rhythm that captures the time-contained,
static quality of a tale of days gone by. Separated into three parts, the
poem gives first a history, proceeding as the story behind the picture,
then a close-up of the embroidered shipwreck with the ghostly image of
Marina unforgettably superimposed upon it, and finally a sort of epitaph
on her. This last is set in contrast against the ebb and flow of the real
sea which Marina's father effectively throughout her life prevented her
from having any real contact with. It was always "Father's Fearful Sea."
The quality of her life is graphically captured in this description from
the central portion:

She walked forever antlered with migraines
her pain forever putting forth new shoots
until her strange unlovely head became
a kind of candelabra--delicate--
where all her tears were perilously hung
and caught the light as waves that catch the sun.

With this beautiful image of pain and grief one is left to muse upon
the generations of women, countless as tears or waves, whose lives
were lived in a similar service of attendance upon a father's tyrannical
demands. Page tells the story without the psychological interpretation
typical of so much contemporary writing, and without making any moral
judgment of the characters. Her portrait, executed with exquisite economy, makes us feel as well as see and hear. In poetically reconstructing a tragedy, largely of the past, she quietly reminds us of the widespread wreckage of girls and women in the long wake of a paternal dominance based on patriarchal religion and culture.
Chapter Four

Love, Romance and Sex

Love: "They who give it large names are liars, or/ They are fools," says Babette Deutsch in her sonnet in this Section. "No, no, not love, not love. Call it by name," attempts Edna St. Vincent Millay in a poem emotionally addressed to a "lady," the speaker denying hate in trying, by naming, to find a "road leading outward" from the place of her suffering. "This fever and this folly," is one of the ways in which Dorothy Livesay describes the problematic falling in love of an older woman with a youth. "This love, so blessed," praises Carolyn Kizer in her "Epithalamion" of sexual communion. "A woman in love is all the trees of an orchard," carols Joan Finnegan in an ecstatic cataloguing of the blessings a woman in the first flush of love is romantically fired with. "Lust," sings Adrienne Rich. "Love..." "One/ whose name has been, and is/ and will be, the/ I AM," pronounces Margaret Avison in a poem which joyfully submits, through its speaker, to the revealed experience of God's love.

These give some indication of the varieties of emotion commonly termed love, as experienced by women, and of the range of feelings and perceptions which, in the testimony of the poets, resists a common definition. The present Section contains a fair sampling of that variety and range. A few poems are less descriptively "love" poems, in the more general sense, than they are poems having to do with simple sexual or casual erotic
relations. The tone in such compositions is typically untroubled, as in the poems of Rich and Sexton here which are frankly celebratory. Romance, on the other hand—when by romance we mean the idealistic aura surrounding fabled lovers, and the corresponding haze of hopeful expectations and illusions traditionally roused in young women’s breasts as part of their social conditioning for marriage—is notably absent in these poems. Romance as a defeated hope for mutually tender love is present, however, in the disillusionment, pain and alienation of poems mourning love’s failure to blossom from the early promise (the promise calling forth Finnegans’s exuberant reactions). Take, for example, what Sharon Stevenson in "Flower Song" has first thought to be "a lilac/smelling so garish/for joy," which painfully for the speaker turns out to be

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the folding up of the
white narcissus
you call love
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—a self-absorption on the part of the beloved that ends by gorging on itself. Thus from radiant youthful awakening through the changes and faceted varieties that with such linguistic inadequacy go by the single name of love, we read a complexity that has rarely if ever been rivalled by the poetry of men dealing with the subject. Between extremes of affirmation and rejection, we are admitted to the vulnerable inner places where women either ambivalently rue unseasonable or ill-matched loves, or as in Deutsch’s poem, come to terms with the given heterosexual condition by insisting that the lover faces up to its limitations.

The one exception to these experiences of sexual love is provided
in Avison's poem which celebrates union with God as an all-embracing form of truth and ecstasy. The vow of forsaking all others that is taken in a Christian marriage ceremony is made to seem but a metaphor for the bliss awaiting the lover of Christ. The inclusion here of a poem of such intensely religious focus may seem dubious or unwarranted under a Chapter and Section heading which seems to concern itself solely with human sexual relationships. But as a statement of the transfiguring power of what is felt as love, "The Word" seems to me to be not too far-fetched a choice since, in essence, it represents an aspect of the same generous impulse that animates other poems of celebration in this Section. One difference is that in love poems about human lovers the identity of the beloved is irrelevant insofar as the reader is concerned, but in Avison's poem, though Christ is simply addressed as "you" and not more specifically identified, his identity is made to dawn slowly on the reader through the context of the words. In this manner the poet recreates the sense of revelation she experiences in Christ, taking us along with her. He is named finally as the "I AM": the forever springing manifestation of the love of God-in-us. "The Word" is a skilful shaping of the poet's shared, almost stammering delight upon realizing that "Forsaking all" means that Christ implores her to "so fall/ in Love," that she becomes "One" with him. Exploring what his "being all-out" means, she experiences the joy of total submission; the universe opens before her, throbbing with his "rivering fire." The poem is startling in its blend of a diction which combines speech that is almost gaily colloquial with utterance of a formal dignity: the one mode conveying
the excitement, the other restraining, controlling it. The approach is
disarmingly intimate: one is immediately taken into the speaker's
confidence as she says—as though picking up a phrase that has just been
dropped—"Forsaking all—you mean/ head over heels, for good,/ for ever . . ."
pursuing the question through its several possibilities as the opening
phrase echoes with its other allusions throughout the poem.

Anyone who has experienced love as miracle will immediately enter
the emotion informing this poem—experience of Christian revelation. As a
woman's poem, it is different from comparable poems by Herbert, Donne
or Hopkins, for instance, with whom one is immediately tempted to
associate it. But Avison does not project as they do a masculine will that
has to be subdued. She does not have to plead or pray: her yielding is
spontaneously light and joyous, offering no resistance. Since truly
religious poetry is rare at any time in the modern world, Avison is
unusual to the extent that she may seem worlds apart from the present
concerns of women. But though she may be atypical of her times, she is
not atypical of her sex, having antecedents that go back to Hildegard
in the Middle Ages. A more recent connection with Christina Rossetti,
however, may come more quickly to mind. The love women have to offer as
their subject for poetry has always embraced the whole human range of love'a
power and possible meanings.

Thus several of the poems fall into a "male" category which the
medievalist Peter Dronke has termed the "courtly experience": a
sensibility, condition or concept not limited to any historic time,
place, social class or elite (in the way that \emph{amour courtois} is usually
limited) but occurring as a "universally possible" human phenomenon. However, women are not covered by his terms of definition. He claims that the "universal courtly experience" is "essentially a man's conception of love," distinguishing it from the "universal womanly experience" that is the well-spring of winileodas and their descendants. Winileodas, it will be recalled from the Historical Introduction, are women's "friend-lays" or songs for a lover. Dronke cites the following poem by Sappho: "Paralysis," as "a perfect instance" of such a song in its purest form:

Sweet mother, I can no longer work at the loom, stricken with love-longing for a boy by the slender Aphrodite. (Diehl 114)

To his example I would add another, though the lover addressed here is (untypically, from Dronke's point of view of the "purest winileod") a woman. The poem is Sappho's "Seizure:"

To me that man equals a god as he sits before you and listens closely to your sweet voice and lovely laughter--which troubles the heart in my ribs. For now as I look at you my voice fails, my tongue is broken and thin fire runs like a thief through my body. My eyes are dead to light, my ears pound, and sweat pours down over me. I shudder, I am paler than grass and am intimate with dying--but I must suffer everything, being poor. (Diehl 2, Barnstone 9)

Both these poems have their corollaries in this Section. Livesay's "The Skin of Time" is an extended variation on the theme of "Paralysis," and it is interesting to see how in Millay's poems, the tradition of
passionate attraction to another woman is carried forward in its courtly expression. The poems by Sappho depict love-attraction in its simplest form before it is imbued with the Christian idealism which has shaped our conception of love. The erotic passion she describes undergoes changes, in a Christian culture, which reflect the influence of Jewish and Islamic as well as Christian thought, and represent a refinement on the Greek attitude to love; they also tend to idealize and abstract the image of the female beloved along with ennobling her. We will not find such a mode here, but we will find some of the elements of the sensibility informing it: a sense of fatality, the idea of love-service or serious committed passion, reverence and worship. The "courtly experience" is thus not necessarily limited to men. Though women in history did not produce enough love-poetry to qualify as courtly in Dronke's terms, his recognition of the unity between the popular and courtly love lyric implies that it is possible for women's songs to participate in feelings of love which are not conventionally role-oriented in the masculine tradition. I take his phrase: "the universal womanly experience," as broad enough to embrace everything possible to the human imagination: this easily includes a conception of the beloved which takes its form from the "courtly experience" and its "sensibility." However, I have slender poetic evidence to support this opinion, the poems of Millay being the only pure though limited examples of the courtly sensibility I can offer (several of my own which qualify even better, being inadmissible as evidence). The respective poems by Livesay and Lowell here have some, but not enough, courtly aspects to qualify them in a strict sense. In her mystical
experience of the divine lover, Avison's total and joyful surrender represents yet another aspect of the courtly sensibility; she parallels poets who experience divinity in a human love. The love this sensibility inspires is always experienced by the poet as a revelation of a higher truth, its mysterious force endowing the beloved with such beauty that the poet is forever subjugated by its power. Such a beloved is by definition seemingly unobtainable, being raised to perfection, and as Muse is likely to enforce a helpless and sometimes cruel devotion. In its gentlest guise, courtly love produces pure joy in adoring contemplation of the beloved.

One would not readily expect to find in our present pragmatic and sex-obsessed society current examples of such a fatalistic view or experience of love, especially among women. I have already discussed this question in part. The twentieth-century tendency has been for women to rebel against love as a subjugating force associated with male dominance: this is so from the early poems of Millay to the most recently published of any number of poets. But the courtly experience persists, bearing out Dronke's premise of its universal and timeless occurrence. Perhaps not strangely, in view of women's different experience of men (looking at courtly expression as a male norm), it persists in them as a continuation of the Sapphic tradition, where love for a woman or youth is how inspiration is most directly conceived by the poet. Fateful love and loss are in the tapestry-like enchantment of Millay's haunting "Aubade," and in her two other thematically related poems. Worshipful love is in the reverential, tender tone of Lowell's "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," which, in place of the
usual unsatisfied longing, rejoices in domestic serenity. "The Skin of Time" by Livesay is, like Lowell's poem not grounded in the courtly experience, but shares something of its animating strength: in Livesay, love is felt as the mischievous force of Eros; in Lowell, as the inspiring beauty of Aphrodite, though these forces are not personified by their Greek names. Except for loss, which sinks its victims into a veritable Hell of suffering, these loves beatify their poets, even if only for a brief while which is experienced as timeless. Livesay's intimation of immortality, for example, is merely the promise of a "full joy" she laments not having been able to consummate. In their commitment, the elevating joys sponsored by a human beloved are not so different from the mystical joy spoken of by Avison.

The true poems of courtly sensibility differ in two main respects from the others in the group: first and more importantly, in their sense of the tragic, and second, in the fact that they are mainly addressed to women (which does not, by itself, have any significance, as Sexton's "Song for a Lady"—which is not a courtly poem—makes clear). The three poems by Millay as noted above: "Aubade," plus the other two—"Evening on Lesbos" and "What Savage Blossom," center on a tragic love for a lost "lady." These poems exist in a stasis of profound grief, and indeed, stasis is of the essence in the world of the courtly lover, where love exists in limbo or suspended between heaven and hell. In "Aubade," the experience is sensuously conveyed by the texture of the poem: an enchantment of words, cadence, imagery and mood which creates its own otherworldly perfume. With its last line: "But never did I arise from loving her,"
the poem receives its courtly signature. "Evening on Lesbos" mourns the
loss of the beloved to a rival, its central stanza fixing the moment with
brilliant clarity:

Twice have I entered the room, not knowing she was here.
Two agate eyes, two eyes of malachite,
Twice have been turned upon me, hard and bright.

There is something inhuman in this apparition for the persona, since she
is excluded from sharing the secret life behind the glassy barrier of
impenetrable cat-like eyes. The repetitions of "Two" and "Twice" in the
poem emphasize the shock the lover feels on finding herself an ousted
third. "What Savage Blossom" speaks further and more bitterly about the
obduracy of the beloved; its lines are heavy with recrimination. All
three poems lament the loss of a beloved in tones that convey the ineffable
quality of an unconsummated romantic passion. The speaker is bound to
the past in an eternal torment of suffering that stands in contrast to
former joys either experienced or romantically envisioned.

"Madonna of the Evening Flowers" is like a fragrant and soothing balm
after such pain. It is filled with the tired satisfaction of work
accomplished, a suddenly felt need, a loneliness and then the need answered.
The speaker, going in search of the beloved, finds her in the garden amid
a profusion of blooms, "with a basket of roses" on her arm, almost as
in a valentine; except that the poem never descends to sentimentality in
its sensitive evocation of that hardest of things to express poetically: a
loving, domestic space. Lowell depicts the beloved with a restraint that
merely emphasizes the passion the language so coolly contains;
But I look at you, heart of silver,  
White heart-flame of polished silver,  
 Burning beneath the blue steeples of the larkspur,  
And I long to kneel instantly at your feet,  
While all about us peal the loud, sweet Te Deums of the  
Canterbury bells.

To the extent that they embody or share in the courtly experience, the poems that are addressed to women raise an interesting area for discussion, as does Livesay's poem which speaks of the love of an older woman for a youth. All of these depart from the heterosexual norm typical of the large body of courtly poetry written by men. In that body, woman is elevated as a symbol of beauty, virtue and perfection; she becomes for the man an image of the unattainable, all the more desirable because, being a fleshly woman, she can be obtained: the suit must only be persistent and worthy enough. Now it has not been expected of women that they should have or express a similar drive for perfection; their socialization in history has directed them to far more serviceable ends. In men's poetry, for instance, they have an artificially high place that is in extreme contrast to the actual positions they held. Serving men as Muses, excluded from writing poetry themselves, they could hardly reverse roles and call on themselves for inspiration. Nor was there a poetic convention identifying the Muse as male.

Simply, there has not been a Muse for women. Aspiring female poets have had to work around that difficulty; and since the main corpus of women's poetry is the product of little more than a hundred years, we have little enough revealing information of how their inmost urgings and aspirations were motivated. It is only very recently that private feelings have had a conventional climate in which to make themselves known.
On the surface, we may be sure that most women "went along" with the images made of them, living up to expectations and demands as people do, in society. In life as in literature, however, men were free to make of women what they willed: etherealized paragons of virtue, or menacing devil-women: the two stereotypes rampant in literature. As poets, men had Muses to invoke, allowing them whatever direction inspiration might take. Women, on the other hand, should they be moved to idealize an object of desire, were seldom free to take such liberties with men, or with each other for that matter (Aphra Behn being perhaps the only one who dared). As a married woman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning could eventually extol her love for Robert in passionate verse, but then he acknowledged his wife as his superior and worshipped her, in turn, as a real woman, not as a distant idol. Not too many women poets have been as lucky, from the evidence. Anne Bradstreet wrote feelingly of her happiness with her husband, and Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti wrote painfully of their renounced loves, but these were not, in the courtly sense, poets who found their identity in the loved one. Yet looking back over the centuries, it can be assumed that women of a certain temperament shared by men needed, no less than they did, the outlet of a convention in poetry for expressing the ardor of a literary imagination tuned to absolutes. Though a fairly recent example, there is Barrett, for one, fortunate in finding a perfect love and having the ready vehicle for it. There is, of course, nothing in women's poetry to compare with that large host of male love-singers, courtiers and poets who dedicated themselves, more or less sincerely, to the praises of feminine perfection, a few of whom had a passionate vision of truth and
beauty. Among these, Dante's spiritual vision of Beatrice as a guide to heavenly truth stands highest. In the secular vision, there is the model of Petrarch's love for Laura, a lady embodying perfection and thus calling forth perfect devotion, though the lover in this case is left more physically frustrated than spiritually fulfilled; this is the model so well elaborated in the Elizabethan love lyric. The feminine reach for perfection, whether divinely or secularly inspired has its comparable expression in Christian mysticism as in pagan celebration; we find in in Hildegard of Bingen as in Sappho, in the religious poems of Rossetti as in the classically pagan evocations of Millay and H.D. (not included here).\(^5\) The objects of elevation in such poetry have in common that they epitomize a perfection which has the poet "be-Mused."

However, of those few women who have dared to profess inspiration in a feminine source, not all are necessarily ardent souls in need of an object to idealize. Rather, the choice of a feminine ideal may reflect, as in contemporary poets, a heightened sensibility to the offensiveness of occupying a subservient place in men's lives; or simply, the choice may reflect an exercise of taste. The point is really that love poems addressed to women exist: a Sapphic response to the beauty and power of eroticism as personified in the goddess of Beauty and her offspring, Love; a response sometimes qualified by the courtly experience which owes at least part of its allegiance to later gods. The variety of experience in even so small a group of poems as are included here which focus love on either a woman or a youth show how subtle and richly complex the topic of love, given its place in women's hearts, can be in their poetry.
The rest of the poems in this Section, in so far as they reflect hostility or resentment, or find pleasure in the state of being in love or making it, are of a very different character, having nothing of the worshipful or tragic in them. They are more consonant with the resolutely pragmatic, anti-metaphysical spirit of the times (which may be changing, however), though to begin with, we have a poem which, in its romantic tone, harks back to the nineteenth century. Joan Finnegan gives expression to the first intoxication of love in an exuberant poem that relies mainly on description: "A woman in love is all the trees of an orchard/ drunk on the vin rose of April," she begins, the poem borrowing its title from the first line. Finnegan ecstatically rolls off a list of all the sense-identifications with nature that accompany the well-known romantic vision. The poem contains a striking image that redeems the cliches of the rest of the poem:

Her flesh
having been set fire to in the night,
burns all day long down into the low bushes
of her bones.

Mostly the poem does not create this sense of immediacy because, speaking in the third person, the poet does not allow us to experience the emotions through her, but generalizes from them instead. The majority of the other poems celebrating a similar set of emotions do so in the first person and in the sexual context of two people in bed. Rather instructively for the modern temper, however, they do not call the experience of mutuality, love:

Sex, as they harshly call it,
it fell into this morning
at ten o'clock, a drizzling hour
of traffic and wet newspapers.
So begins Adrienne Rich in the first of her "Two Songs," wryly playing on the idea of how people used to "fall in love"; here that phrase is debunked as out-of-date, romantic. City traffic and annoyingly wet newspapers are the more common setting for contemporary "love" encounters and suggest their casual, short-lived nature.

I'd call it love if love
didn't take so many years
but lust too is a jewel
a sweet flower

says Rich sagely, rejoicing in what is and feeling a kind of wondering gratitude that is

pure happiness to know
all our high-toned questions
breed in a lively animal.

The second "Song" describes an act of coitus as a moon-race in which both "make it." On recovering they acknowledge each other with courteous civility in language

picked up
through cultural exchanges . . .
we murmer the first moonwords:
Spasibo. Thanks. O.K.

The lovers, speaking different languages are cultural strangers, though communion in the space age remains possible and still, on a body level, satisfying. It is the same in Sexton's poem "Dec. 11th," where the lover's "tongue half-chocolate" and "steel wool hair" suggest a black lover. Though in attempting to reach the ecstasy of climax they "gnaw at the barrier because we are two," they also achieve harmony in union:

We are bare. We are stripped to the bone
and we swim in tandem and go up and up
the river, the identical river called Mine
and we enter together. No one's alone.
There is again joyful affirmation of communing with a bed-fellow in Sexton's "Song for a Lady." As in Rich's first song, rain is found here too. It forms a running counterpoint to the joy rising in the poem, being characterized throughout as "bad," "like a minister," and even "sinister" in its dropping "like flies" on the couple in bed, as if its suggestions of fertility and indiscriminate breeding were a moral rebuke. Nevertheless the speaker feels herself caressed in religious terms though she acknowledges the lady somewhat incongruously, in consumer terms, as "a national product and power." On this tribute she concludes with gratitude and comic tenderness in which there is also exultation:

O my swan, my drudge, my dear wooly rose,
   even a notary would notarize our bed
   as you knead me and I rise like bread.

These lovers, unlike the heterosexual ones in Rich are not cultural strangers. The speaker recognized their sameness: like the lady she, too, is a "national product and power" in her role as a domestic consumer and glamor-girl. But they also speak the same language of love. In the face of religious and social disapproval, this sameness of role and sex becomes sufficient justification for their defiance of the conventions.

In "The Skin of Time" by Dorothy Livesay, the speaker and the object of her love are strangers across a generation of time. Here the dominant emotion is one of falling wildly in love, and having to check the fall, though the persona soars euphorically for a while, "Stunned with this joy, this prize." Feeling the unseasonableness of such a passion, and wishing she were old enough to be safely beyond it, she movingly protests:
How can I cry to age:
Deepen my wrinkles,
Smooth out love's fierce rage?

How can I cry, when I
Feel timeless, ageless, high

But though she argues with herself, she cannot sustain "this fever and this folly," for it is tied, like a kite, to the self-centeredness of youth:

I cannot soar forever at your will,
Nor flutter down whenever you are still.

Nor, on reflecting, is she free to love him: the "conclave" of her memories keeps her "home." Comparing herself to "the simpler man" in this context (a husband?) who can cheerfully accept the mystery of aging, she, "midway between" his position and that of the youth can only see

in the wrinkle's seam
The stitch that shrouds me from
A wider room:

—the age difference that has kept her from experiencing the "full joy" she is sure was in her reach. She rebels that maturity in years should mean sacrificing her impulse to youth—to regeneration through love:

   Last spring he came; and I
   Stood helpless by:
   Masked in the skin of time,
   The stuttering tongue of rhyme.

Instead of having been able to speak love fluently, freely "rhyming" her body with the youth's, she has to use her poet's tongue, stuttering, in her chagrin of frustrated desire. Beneath the wrinkled mask of age is a passionate young woman. Poetry here functions as a timeless, inferior substitute for life lived in the flesh, which also has its "ageless" moments. Surely women poets in the past could not speak with such heart-breaking frankness of a very common phenomenon: the love of age for youth,
the artist's need to identify with the sexual energy of innocence in its creative call to celebration.

There are only two poems which speak happily of a heterosexual relationship that is consummated and that is not casual. "Epithalamion" by Carolyn Kizer celebrates a night in which the lovers are committed to each other. The poem is an elaborate metaphor of the lovers as protean sea-creatures taking their identity from the elemental dimension of their union. The speaker muses: "You left me gasping on the shore/ A fabulous fish, all gill/ And gilded scales," meticulously reconstructing the details of her full joy. The room is likened to a bay in which the two-as-one float, "reel" in each other, are beached, pile up as logs, pitch, rise, rock, touch, founder, swoon, swim, drown, and revive at dawn. The sea is felt as a presence in a wealth of imagery and descriptive detail, the rhythm of the lines falling and rising like the waves of passion overcoming the exhausted lovers, who lie "Sanded, on this pure, solar lift of hour,/ Wreathed in our breathing." The speaker expansively envisions the continuity of such happiness:

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We will exceed ourselves again;
Put out in storms, and pitch our wave on waves.
My soul, you will anticipate my shouting as you rise
Above me to the lunar turn of us,
As skies crack stars upon our symmetries
Extinguished as they touch this smoky night,
And we exhale again our fume of bliss.
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Singing above the restless volume of this poem is a spirit which soars in a sense of freedom and equality rare in other poems of love by women. It is expressed here as weightlessness, the buoyancy and depth of the physical union a result of love that feels itself "blessed" in its balance and
containment. "Possession" by Lynne Lawner presents a very different view of love. The speaker in this poem confesses that,

Each time his will abdicated,
The undisputed acreage
Of what he owned of me
Grew

Since he did not try to impose on what was not covered in this contract, the speaker recounts how she was gradually won over, so that her body

Was signing away lands, stocks, estates
To turn over to him,
Over and over.
I'd come a long way for someone scared to trust.

This woman clearly sees marriage in terms of self-abdication and property rights. Her values are expressed in the language of real estate; she joyfully accepts the man's right to own her, in fee of love granted, and in gratitude that he has not presumed too far on his accorded privilege.

Love, suggests Susan Musgrave in "Once More," must be a free and voluntary offering. The speaker in this poem addresses a persistent, self-centered suitor for whom she feels she is the "day's feed":

Everything that I didn't want to know
about you
you told me in the first five minutes
we were alone.
After that
there was nothing more
worth mentioning.

As a woman, the speaker is expected to be interested, sympathetic and grateful for this mark of attention. The suitor burdens her with his problems, demanding her support. Though she tries, she feels her endurance worn down with the price he exacts. "I could last," she temporizes; but it is in the conclusion of the poem that her own defeated hopes for a
relationship of reciprocal caring shows: "What might vanish/ is the 
offering I never made." An even more bitter disillusionment marks Sharon 
Stevenson's "Flower Song," where the persona's lover is so narcissistically 
consumed by his own self-love that he holds her at arm's length, not 
merely insensitive to her "centre," but unwilling to let her share his. 
Joyce Carol Oates calls this sort of condition "Vanity," in a poem that 
generalizes that all loving is in vain; there is no hope even of communing: 

The beloved is a cage 
you cannot enter. 
Others enter cheaply 

and 

If you lie at night with someone 
it is always someone else.

The object of one's love cannot even be held in dreams, she claims, for 
the beloved is elusive: "nimble of foot and vain/ and immortal" there. 
In the poet's judgment, we make gods or demi-gods of those we love, and 
suffer accordingly. This is not too far from the courtly experience, 
viewed negatively. 

Babette Deutsch states flatly in "Dogma" that "Love is not true." 
It is neither "strict as number," nor as "enduring." Nor is it free; 
beside it, only 

the grave's narrower 
Than the little space in which this passion moves, 
With a door that opens inward: he who loves 
Measures his paces like a prisoner. 

Mainly, the speaker is incensed at the "large names" love is given, 
an enlarging that leads to falseness and illusion. Softening her first 
denial in a direct address to one with whom she obviously has a love 
relationship, she admits that neither "algebraist" or "dictator" could
teach them "much of truth or tyranny." Presumably the couple have experienced both, a point the poet makes by ending her poem: "Look at me. Do not speak. But this is love." Deutsch's sonnet delivers its message in short declarative or imperative phrases which convey the force of the argument. Millay's sonnet # xli flows with a rhythm that is different but no less decisive. Both octave and sestet are composed of a single sentence each, the conclusion of which follows from a colon, giving an air of finality to the statements; its closures are made to seem inevitable. There is a measured argument of protest that the speaker, "being born a woman and distressed by all the needs and notions of my kind" should, on that account, be obliged by a man's mere presence to find his "person fair" and feel "a certain zest" for bearing the weight of his body on hers. Feminine resentment at being time and again "undone, possessed" through what she calls nature's design leads her to scorn the man who thinks to profit by her sexual susceptibility. Perhaps she enjoys this aspect of their relations, but she refuses to let it suffice as love. She therefore refuses to remember such a man (who presumably is not interesting to her in more intellectual or individual ways)

    with love, or season
    My scorn with pity,--let me make it plain:
    I find this frenzy insufficient reason
    For conversation when we meet again.

This, as in Deutsch, is the woman's defence against male conceit, a coup-de-grace that gives both poets the superior last word. It is a weapon at least as old as Aphra Behn and her contemporaries.
Whether love is any worse off today than it was in former times is debatable. It is at least clear from these poems that what used to be called true love in popular custom is regarded with great scepticism today. For this, the alienating conditions of modern life are undoubtedly responsible. Freer relations between the sexes have also created new opportunities for women to be sexually and psychically exploited under the illusion that they were forming relationships of love. No wonder, then, that the great majority of the poems in this section are unromantic in their treatment of love, refusing to give it the aura of an idealized state of being. The most positive statements here are those dealing with the pleasures of love-making. Yet sexual encounter enjoyed merely for its own sake, without love, ignores the individuality of the person as much as does the infatuation with romance or the courtly idealization of the love-object. Hence there is a great deal of unhappiness and compromise with half measures reported. At least half the poets represented express negative feelings and outright disillusionment with love. It is not so much that they have had romantic hopes disappointed as that they have been bitterly hurt in having their feelings and self-respect violated by insensitive and egotistical sexual partners. The poets imply that what they expected of love was a shared tenderness and a respect for the individuality of both partners. The speakers in the poems simply celebrating sexual encounter avoid the problem: they bring no such hopes to the brief relationship, to be defeated. They are realists with a limited but realizable goal. The trouble comes when love is the great hopeful issue,
and men traduce love by devaluing it. As a group, the poets are about evenly divided in whether they experience love and sex affirmatively as a life-giving impetus, or decry love, experiencing it as a failure--mostly on the part of men--to live up to its hopes. The unhappy social, as well as personal, repercussions of such failure are seen in the next section on Motherhood and Marriage.
Motherhood and Marriage

In this Chapter we deal for the first time with a social institution: marriage. I have paired it with motherhood because, though independent of a social contract, motherhood has come to be seen as a function of marriage through the institution of the patriarchal family. The existence of a prehistoric matriarchate in which women exercised at least comparable authority with men has been brilliantly argued by a succession of scholars challenging the deeply-entrenched notion that the patriarchal family is the basic unit that always has been, is and will remain, the foundation of human society.\(^1\) Unfortunately, few examples of matriarchal organization exist today since, as George Thomson has said, "It lies buried beneath the civilizations erected on it."\(^2\) Nevertheless it has been shown that, in achieving a control over nature (with whom woman in her fecundity was magically identified) men gradually brought women under control as well. Progress toward civilization has entailed a combination of intimidation, force and cunning in which the physical and intellectual subjugation of women gained a men's elite the patriarchal dominance it has held in history. At the same time the patriarchal rulers gained control of other men, thus achieving a domination over human productivity as well as reproduction. The study of ancient literature in itself reveals how men gradually abrogated the sanction of divine law to justify and make unassailable the otherwise indefensible right to rule over women and children. As men
became more self-sufficient in the mode of production, they became more possessive of property and progeny with the result that collective marriage as practised between an unknown number of clans in the early stages of tribal evolution broke down. Thus, from its beginning, monogamous marriage as we know it takes on the social character of male dominance. It is this character that is causing the breakdown in marriages today as reflected by the poems in this Section. While increasing numbers of women are choosing not to get married, existing social structures and the weight of tradition still lead most women into marriages where there is strong pressure for them to dissolve their own developing identity in one which supports the man's role in society.

The traditional marriage requires women to make motherhood a career at the expense of other needs and interests they may have. A man has no similar obligation laid on him, the idea of making fatherhood a career—assuming it is just as natural for him to stay home and raise children—being so ludicrous and repellent to most men as to reveal the threat to their assumed superiority. Women's socially conditioned and often self-accepted servitude as wives and mothers is maintained as the natural order because it profits men, leaving them free of all responsibility save that of earning a living for the family. Women earn a living too, by their work in the home, but not being recognized as productive and therefore worthy of pay, such work is taken for granted. In a great many cases, the wife's dependence upon a husband for support encourages her being treated as a minor; the era of television has been rife with demeaning stereotypes of the scatter-brained, child-like wife, e.g., Gracie Allen: a comic butt
whose role was to reinforce her comedian husband's superiority. Present fiction shows "the little woman" syndrome is far from extinct: in Margaret Laurence's most recent novel, The Diviners, an English professor continually addresses his five-foot-eight wife, a novelist, as "little one" and "child," and before making love to her plays a game of reward in which she must answer to: "Have you been a good girl, love?" It would appear that Ibsen's A Doll's House is as true a mirror of contemporary reality as it was in his own day. Even if a wife seeks and can get paid work in addition to the work she does in the home, the economic preferment given men means she is still belittled, made to feel subsidiary. Required by the economic system, habits of male dominance strongly persist. This is the realistic background to the misery and resentment expressed in the poems on marriage; the poems on motherhood tend mostly to bypass the marital state.

For the most part, the poets distinguish clearly between the two subject matters, the poems on marriage falling into one distinct group, those on motherhood into another; one poem forms a bridge between the two groups which are almost evenly divided. Marriage is treated as the main theater of a conflict of interests between the sexes. Motherhood is treated as a close kinship relation: between daughter and mother where the former is the speaker, and between mother and child or children where the poet speaks for the mother. One poem in which a marriage of love is successful stands in isolated contrast to the rest of the group. The poem which acts as a bridge between the groups depicts an unhappy wife and mother whose sense of self-worth has been undermined by the social inferiority of her role and by the corrosive wear on body and spirit of unrelieved housekeeping and child care.
Because most of the poems on motherhood stress the primacy of the mother's role in child-development, they reverse the superior importance the patriarchal order of society has assigned to monogamous marriage over the original authoritative importance of the mother. Motherhood is shown as the base from which women derive their emulative emphasis on love and their care for the peaceful continuity of life. The absence of fathers in these poems reflects the division of roles in society which makes mothers, but not fathers, primarily responsible for nurturing and tending their mutual offspring. In two poems where fathers are mentioned, one is a brute who beats his wife and terrorizes their child, the other an outsider to the tie of kinship the daughter feels with the mother. A speaker who is not a mother speaks ruefully of the maternal love she has lavished on a lover, making almost a god of him. A poem about an unmarried mother depicts her as a victim of social conditioning: though the newborn child still feels a part of her, she succumbs to pressure that she give it up out of a sense of moral wrong in having conceived it illegitimately. In two poems war comes between mothers and their children. In short, though the nine poems in this group treat the relationship from as many viewpoints, the natural social unit is seen not as the family with the father at its head, but as the mother and child. When resentment against the domestic role which enslaves and exhausts her spills over onto the children, it signifies not a failure of love but indicates a reaction anyone might have to others with an unqualified claim on their energies. Oppressed and exploited peoples know well this resentment. The truth about motherhood is far from the sentimental image of it cultivated by both the patriarchal tradition and the commercial media. A daughter's love for her mother,
with whom she identifies herself is very different, for instance, from a son's, who may see himself as the young god. A mother's love for her children may compensate her for the conditions of her oppression.

While love is implicit in poems about the bond between mother and child, love is rare enough to be exceptional in poems about marriage. Denise Levertov is the only one in the marriage group to depict mutual love in the relationship. Her poem "The Wife" is a delightfully vigorous affirmation of joy and gratitude in being so blessed. The other poets writing on marriage present mostly dismal, frightening or profoundly pathetic comments on the situation. Perhaps the most central of these is "Leda," by Mona Van Duyn, a poem which gets to the crux of the issue, for which reason I will take it up first. Because of its satirical distance from the subject, this poem is easily the wittiest of the lot, developing a woman's viewpoint of the myth of Leda with sharp sagacity and humor.

Van Duyn begins her poem with a quotation, set off above it, of the last two lines of Yeats' poem, "Leda and the Swan," i.e., "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/ Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" "Not even for a moment," Van Duyn comes back. The rest of the poem in four quatrains tells why. To begin with, gods no less than men are satisfied when they see a flattering image of themselves reflected in the eyes of the woman they have chosen. That supreme egotist Zeus "knew for one thing, what he was;" he was not about to share godly prerogative with a mere object of desire. Brute force, in its poetic beauty of inevitability, as Yeats saw it, was simply the necessary means to an end. But it involved
deception. Mastered by winged beauty as much as by violence, Leda had no choice but to surrender. In this essentially male victory, woman loses her conscious individuality according to Van Duyn's reading of the myth:

In the first look of love men find their great disguise, and collecting these rare pictures of himself was his life.

Her body became the consequence of his juice, while her mind closed on a bird and went to sleep.

The poet now completes the shift from myth to present domestic reality. She makes the point that myth fixes a moment in time which, from then on, has the force of an epiphany, whereas life is continuous and repetitive. In real life Leda is both commonplace and tragic; she suffers the fate of women indifferently dropped into marriage from a momentary perch of romantic glory in which they are raised to godly heights (but without godly knowledge or power). Thenceforth they live without beauty and without love, these having been but a delusion to get them pregnant. They do not know it, but they have been had. "Later," says Van Duyn, presenting Leda as prototypical, "with the children in school, she opened her eyes/ and saw her own openness, and felt relief." But whereas the myth leaves Leda frozen in "a glassy shape,/ stricken and mysterious and immortal" after the rape, the real Leda is not, "for such an ending, abstract enough.

She tried for a while to understand what it was that had happened, and then decided to let it drop. The irony in letting "it drop" is a sad one; what Zeus let drop was an object he had no further use for, what the woman lets drop is a question she cannot even formulate, let alone answer: the question of why she is immortal in myth and romance and insignificant in life. Van Duyn puts a twist on this irony with gleeful black humor:
She married a smaller man with a beaky nose, and melted away in the storm of everyday life.

Such a conclusion represents the "real" area of choice: in the fall from dimly remembered winged heights, with their storm of passion, the woman has no viable options. The final ignominy is feminine dissolution; the myth remains, pure and gemlike in its power of truth, but the essence of that truth here is that the woman whose body furnishes the substance of the myth has no position of importance in the stormy affairs that rule everyday life.

Between myth and individual reality stands society, whom Sylvia Plath, in her terrifying poem "The Applicant," personifies as a job interviewer. To be a successful candidate for membership in our society is to qualify according to strict norms. "First, are you our sort of person?" asks a disembodied voice, ruthlessly beginning to strip an implied male applicant of all dignity and defences. "Our sort" demands utter conformity to his prejudices. He asks embarrassing questions:

Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

In other words is he handicapped or sexually abnormal? The interviewer sounds disappointed with the answer: "No, No? Then/ How can we give you a thing?" This, after all, is the liberal white society; it takes pity on those whom it humiliates. Since the applicant's hand is empty, the voice has a solution for it,

a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
This is the "thing," then, that is offered as a recompense for having nothing; even the poorest man can afford it. It is a hand "guaranteed" to serve till death and then "dissolve of sorrow," a phrase that recalls Van Duyn's image of the wife who "melted away." Society is even willing to offer the man, naked in his helplessness and want, a suit that is "Black and stiff, but not a bad fit./ Will you marry it?" The suit is actually a coffin, impervious to damage and so, also guaranteed, and in asking his truculent question the interviewer is coercing the man into a marriage that will be the death of him: "Believe me, they'll bury you in it." The aggressively direct tone of false intimacy catches the North American idiom of this slick brutality disguised as concern. The hapless citizen obviously needs to be educated to know what he needs:

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.

And forthwith the man's help-meet, his fellow victim, is triumphantly delivered up from the dark confines where she is kept, naked as himself, for just such an emergency; his complement and his salvation. She is presented as "A living doll," an investment whose value will increase with age: "in twenty-five years she'll be silver,/ In fifty, gold." Moreover, says the salesman, "it works"—the essential pitch for an article of dubious value. Having now run through his spiel, the bureaucrat throws in a threat to clinch the deal, his hard-sell insistence bringing the poem to a bludgeoning close:

My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

And the poem ends with what is a command rather than a question. Plath's
savagery is equal in technique to the technique she ascribes to her antagonist, in this chilling dramatic monologue, though one is inclined to wince at the pain which pushes the writing to its brilliant extreme of counter-attack. Unlike the other poets who also find marriage oppressive, Plath shows that, as the institution supporting the ruling class in power, marriage is as destructive of the man as of the woman.

The remaining poems criticizing marriage have their viewpoint in the wife as speaker, and so express aspects of her personal suffering. Let us take the poems of Anna Wickham, which are the most traditional, first. In them marriage is seen as a prison in which the wife is suffocatingly confined, with husband as jailer. An English poet of the early twentieth century unappreciated in her own time and long out of print, Wickham projects poetically as a vital and passionate woman who delights in the senses; this is remarkable enough for the times she was writing in, but she combines it with an equally remarkable feminism, indignantly denouncing male injustice towards women. The two poems here belong to the latter category: "The Wife" is a complaint in three stanzas employing rhyme in couplets and triplets; "The Divorce" is another such lyric, with a refrain repeated at the end of each of its three stanzas. Though fitting her form to her matter, Wickham was conscious of the limitations of traditional technique, as in this extract from a poem entitled "Note on Rhyme":

Rhymed verse is a wide net
Through which many subtleties escape.
Nor would I take it to capture a strong thing
Such as a whale

Yet she does capture the whale of women's traditional longing for freedom.

Did she think free verse, then, not suited to the subject of unfree women?
One wonders. The poems here strongly resemble their feminist forerunners in the seventeenth century both in form and tone of protest. "The Wife" is terse and direct; the woman's common complaint, "I spend my days/ in dull sequestered ways," still true of millions of housewives despite the enormous changes that have taken place in the world over the last half century. Wickham speaks for all women, especially among the poor, whose lives are burdened with the never-ending round of children, meals and cleaning, who cry: "My brain dies/ For want of exercise." For such victims of marriage, especially those for whom divorce is insuperably difficult to obtain, there is no relief: "I am a man's wife/ For all my life." "Divorce," despite its title, offers no escape either. The speaker merely longs, with a desperation near panic, to escape her enforced lowliness in the valley where marriage keeps her a prisoner in her home, for a high estate of freedom-seeking adventure on the hills. Up there is "the hero" who calls to her to join him in his life of challenge and excitement. "Let me out to the night, let me go, let me go," cries the wife in a repeated refrain. Wickham sees the prospect of "fighting, victory or quick death" as a freedom vouchsafed the male only in an existence which derives its worth from the vital and necessary struggle she demands to join.

Babette Deutsch, of the same generation as Wickham, regards woman in a somewhat different light, as the natural victim in "Marriage." The wife is compared to a tree which submits to being plundered of its fruit, maimed and broken. Her lot is in the very nature of things: "A wife is one who cannot cease to give/ Flowers of her body, and graftings from
her soul." Living with the man, she will never own herself nor be "whole," for he will "go on having as much of" her as he can take. She is his instrument of pleasure, he her seasons: "the wind that makes the leafage sing/ And strips the branches that it quivers through." Despite its harsh statement, the poem has a musical eloquence which, like its metaphor of the tree, attests to gentleness and beauty in the face of rough elements, softening their impact.

"A Married Woman's Song" by Joyce Carol Oates is the second of a trilogy of which the third, "Pain," was discussed in Chapter Three. The bitterness of the latter is prefigured in this second poem which speaks of the exhausted love of a marriage in which the husband has made the young wife suffer the failure of his previous marriage. "I need help," she admits miserably:

Marriage auspiciously
Drapes you in white, and then
rapes you with hung
Bodies of broken birds.

Such is her experience. She feels "paid/in full for taking another wife's man"; though in having made such a mistake what crushes her most is her own surprise.

Marriage auspiciously
Drapes you in white, and then
rapes you with hung
Bodies of broken birds.

I never thought I'd disband
My youth so young, recover ties
with dead cancerous kin,
And imagine childhood a land
Across a river.

The couple shun each other now in a mechanical round of avoidance, having nothing to say to each other. "Is it possible," she asks appalled, "you'll move on, you'll never see/ What violence we've done, you and me?" Though this speaker like Deutsch's sees herself as victim, she accepts part of the responsibility; she is not nearly as passive a sufferer, which may
reflect the change in temper of the times, not forgetting that there
have always been passionate fighters like Wickham.

In "Habitation," Margaret Atwood goes further than any of the poets
discussed in defining marriage as a shared responsibility, though her
conception of it is extremely bleak:

> Marriage is not
> a house or even a tent
> it is before that, and colder

---it is a remnant of the ice age where those who have managed to live
through it draw together for warmth. Squatting primitively, "eating
popcorn" outside unpainted stairs "at the back"--she does not say of what--
the speaker presents herself and the man with her as entirely alone in a
desolate landscape, a wilderness hostile to all life. Her target of
criticism is not marriage itself, apparently, but the alienating quality
of life in an environment

where painfully and with wonder
at having survived even
this far

we are learning to make fire

Marriage, Atwood here implies, is at best a primitive solution to the
inhumanity of the world around us.

Denise Levertov's "The Wife" is as far in the opposite direction as
it is possible to go in these nervous times. Affirmatively joyous, the
poem is a celebration of married love, the persona earthily comparing herself
first to

A frog under you,
knees drawn up
ready to leap out of time,
then to a snuffing dog seeking a scent, an "answer" to the question of
whether her love is sufficient. Giving up, she realizes that "It's enough
to be/ so much here," especially when she catches the man's

mind in the
act of plucking
truth from the dark surrounding nowhere

as a swallow skims a
gnat from the
deep sky.

Delighting equally in animality as in perception of the mind's winged victories, the love the speaker feels makes her "laugh for joy." The sound is slightly startling for being heard so seldom in women's poetry.

But our progress, alas, must carry us downward again to Wickham's valley of despair where most of our poets find their troubled inspiration. "In the Park" by the Australian poet Gwen Harwood dramatically presents a wife and mother dragged down by everyday triviality and the relentless taking care of children. Her low opinion of herself is intensified when "Someone she loved once" passes by. Recognized and forced to exchange pleasantries while her children "whine and bicker" and tug at her outdated clothes, she is only too aware of the man's real sentiments of pity, scorn and relief, or so she interprets them. "From his neat head unquestionably rises/ a small balloon . . . 'but for the grace of God . . . .!'" She painfully tries to rescue her pride: "'It's so sweet/ to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,'" she pretends, projecting the stereotyped image in women's magazines of the successful happy mother. But as he leaves, smiling, she sits nursing her youngest child, "staring at her feet./ To the wind she says, 'They have eaten me alive.'" In this powerfully realized scene, Harwood gives us a close-up of the most
typical feminine malaise suffered in a society that imposes upon women roles that they are led to believe are their own free choice. Should they fail to find fulfillment in these roles, the blame falls on the individual as responsible for her own personal failure. The feelings of inadequacy and inferiority presented in this poem are a reflection of the objective reality faced by women in which they are treated as inadequate and inferior, and therefore feel so. The protagonist's resentment, anger and burning sense of shame turn inward a social injustice which she has no means of turning outward: an illustration of how women are victimized in modern society not only outwardly but, consequently, inwardly. Harwood's poem, a sonnet in form to match its traditional subject matter, leads into the second group which concerns itself solely with the state of motherhood and the relation between mothers and children.

"The Children of The Poor" is the first in a series of sonnets called "The Womanhood," by Gwendolyn Brooks. She uses the octave in this poem to describe childless people as compared, in the sestet, with "we others," a category which does not necessarily limit itself to mothers. The series title, however, indicates the focus. Her attitude as mother is directly stated in the opening line: "People who have no children can be hard," a judgment which carries with it the suggestion of a sigh. Brooks clearly does not envy them in the description which follows, though she observes that objectively their condition is a freer and more carefree one. In contrast,

we others hear
The little lifting helplessness, the queer Whimper-whine; whose unridiculous Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.
Yet despite its "curse," its "malocclusions, the inconditions of love," having children, Brooks maintains, creates an ineffable sweetness that was not there before, which is a value in itself.

Something of this sweetness is recaptured in a poem by Lori Whitehead called "Mother Singing," in which a grown daughter looks back on shared moments of closeness with her mother. In this shift of viewpoint from parent to child, we find a harsh judgment of the father: "Dad tapped the wheel with his ring and drove too fast,/ so much the fat, the quick rich business man." Though distanced from his daughter, he earns her affection with his good-natured singing on these long night drives, an affection amounting to love when he "hummed," letting daughter's and mother's voices blend in song. The daughter remembers the pride of sharing a sweet secret of kinship with her mother along with the joy of being treated as an equal, the mother

hugging my comrade's shoulder, proud
(for once I was sure) of my harmony, of the free ease with which we met in the old songs;

Thinking of her as if she were herself now mother to that mother, the speaker is wistful: "I felt you there, I felt I almost knew you, and I knew/ that I was lost in nowhere, lost in you."

Diane Wakoski goes back further in her evocation of childhood sympathy with a mother who, in this instance, is a victim of her husband's brutality. The context for this remembering is an old feeling of fear and helplessness. "Wind Secrets" begins:

I like the wind
with its puffed cheeks and closed eyes.
Nice wind.
The speaker is reliving her childhood here, reverting to an old escape mechanism for coping with unbearable experience. But the memory of it persists:

I would hear mother crying under the wind.
"Nice wind," I said
But my heart leapt like a darting fish.

The wind is remembered because "It was the first thing I heard/ besides my father beating my mother." At such times the glowing coals from the stove would look at her "with angry eyes," accusing her for her helplessness. Even now she is still vulnerable:

Nice wind.
Nice wind.
Oh, close your eyes.
There was nothing I could do.

The mother as victim: a familiar theme; but, in "Industrial Childhood" by Sharon Stevenson, victimization is refused by the mother and so it is not passed on to the next generation. This mother was a woman of sturdy courage and independence in the face of poverty and hardship. Her daughter remembers being left "to comfort/ you, older brother," while the mother went off to work, the mother's strength being assumed by the child as part of her own. This was the mother's life:

In the morning she made cans.
In the evening she waited on tables
and carried a milk bottle, broken, for protection.

Nor did she neglect to pass on her love of music and learning to the children, leaving them to be guarded by a recording of "Peter and Wolf" (sic) in the mornings, and later in the mining town to where they moved reading them "Fenimore Cooper" at bedtime. Forming a collage of impressions, the child who is now the poet constructed a world which took its features
from both the real in her environment and the imaginative, herself
knowing only the black shot slate
outside the window
the lacy women
who must have carried milk bottles, broken,
somewhere,
and the magic Indians who could
do everything
but survive.

Stevenson's poem of a mother whose example provided instruction in the
practical ways of survival as in the ways of the imagination points up
an important aspect of woman's historic role in society as culture-bearer
and educator of her children.

With the next poem, "To My Son," by Babette Deutsch, we return to
the mother as speaker. In its advice to a son at war, this poem carries
on the protective and spiritually nurturing tradition noted above. Addressing a child who is caught, far from home, in the "Gehenna" of mutual
murder, the mother continues to offer what love and wisdom she still may:

\[
\text{I cannot hide you now,  
Or shelter you ever,  
Or give you a guide through hell,}
\]

she regrets, facing even her limitations as a poet in that last line which
seems to allude to Dante, but she can give her son her counsel:

\[
\text{You, in an obscure room in a masterless school  
Must find the faith that cements  
The promises public events and private blunders have broken.}
\]

She would not have him become cynical; he must wrestle alone "In the
stony night like the Jew/ Compelling the awful angel." For it is "love
of the impossible," says this mother,
that forms the dove and the lion.
It is love of the impossible
That brings the soul to its own.

Another mother, in a newer, more terrible war, leans over the crib of her infant in sleepless anxiety, in Adrienne Rich's "Night-Pieces: For a Child." Here fear is uppermost. As the child starts awake, and, still in a dream screams at the sight of her, she is appalled, thinking, "Mother I no more am/ but woman, and nightmare." She is indeed in need of comfort herself, as we see in the second poem entitled "Her Waking." Now it is she who jerks "astart in a dark/ hourless as Hiroshima;" the nightmare is pervasive. Relieved to find the child still breathing, she sees her "murderous dream" recoil "back into the egg of dreams." "All gone," she says, as to a child awake, speaking her thoughts:

But you and I—
swaddled in a dumb dark
old as sickheartedness,
modern as pure annihilation—

we drift in ignorance.

Helpless against the horror of present events, she is reduced to wishing only for the comfort of "some gentle animal sound" from the child, yearns for a physical connection that would afford her the relief of giving, in a mindless communion: "If milk flowed from my breast again . . ." A confession of momentary weakness perhaps; but this poem does not hesitate to say that a woman cannot always be expected to be the pillar of strength demanded of a mother, especially in a threatening world that leaves her no means to protect either herself or those whom she loves.

Some women, in fact, refuse the role after finding that the generosity
and strength of their love is taken for granted by men without a parallel: love being given in return; this is the feeling motivating Eleanor Wylie's sonnet # XII. It is written in an "autumn" of "sallow droppings on the mould," a beginning to the poem which is the only clue to the speaker's present attitude toward the love relationship. In a former time of contentment, says the poet addressing the lover,

Sometimes you have permitted me to fold  
Your grief in swaddling bands, and smile to name  
Yourself my infant, with an infant's claim  
To utmost adoration as of old.

Both the Christ-child and the average infant are suggested here. But an infant is dependent in a way that the lover is not. The sestet tells of a dream in which the speaker bore a son resembling Christ. She then switches to an earlier, Hebraic-Christian archetype in which she is Eve rather than Mary:

Torn from your body, furbished from your rib,  
I am the daughter of your skeleton,  
Born of your bitter and excessive pain.

Autumn has brought thoughts of travail and death: the woman's fate as well as the man's. But who is there to comfort her? In images which merge to depict woman as daughter of pain as well as mother of pain, the poet seems to be saying that to be leaned upon as mother, always, is asking too much of her, and is besides, too one-sided a view of her humanity. Demanding consideration and respect for her own share of human suffering, she concludes quietly: "I shall not dream you are my child again." The poem also questions the implications of religion and myth which put her in secondary position to God and man.

The two final poems in the Section are written from viewpoints
different from each other and from the rest of the group. Anne Sexton writes in the persona of an "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," the poem focussing on the "Child" to whom it is addressed with the first word. "Your lips are animals"; she observes fondly, "you are fed/ with love. At first hunger is not wrong." In their mutual innocence, the mother and child form a natural unit:

You sense the way we belong.
But this is an institution bed.
You will not know me very long.

The doctors are enamel. They want to know the facts.

We can see that society, with its "institutions," is going to part this pair.
But the doctors are intruders, in the mother's eyes, irrelevant in their need to "chart the riddle" of paternity. Thus she remains uncommunicative; indeed, she does "not know." The child's is "the only face" she recognizes:
"you," she says, "drink my answers in./ Six times a day I prize/ your need."
But when the doctors return to badger her with their questions, she reconsiders, fearing that her silence will harm the child: "My voice alarms/ my throat. 'Name of father--none,'" she satisfies them. "I hold/
you and name you bastard in my arms." She has assumed the guilt laid upon her. And now, having nothing more to "say or lose," she steels herself to accept the view that in the long run the child is only a "fragile visitor," who together with her must at this initial stage "unlearn" their relationship. Yielding to the necessity of giving up the child for adoption as her only wise way, she heartbreakingly disengages herself:

I choose your only way, my small inheritor
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more.
With this she denies her own instinctual feeling of natural oneness with the child to accept the Christian view of feminine guilt for motherhood outside marriage, and to subside in passive resignation. She has allowed society to deprive her of her own flesh and blood and to name her, in its own terms, Magdalen rather than Mary. The poem offers an interesting comment on Wylie's where the persona, not being at the mercy of society as is the young mother here, refuses any designation victimizing her and based on sacrosanct models of patriarchal religion. Sexton's poem also offers an example of formalized structure so skilfully subordinated to its theme that its presence is barely noticeable, except that it is felt (which might also be said of most of the sonnets in this Section). Sexton's eleven-line stanzas each maintain an a-b rhyming pattern throughout all of their lines, without its ever seeming obvious or repetitive. The effect, on the contrary, is to weld each stanza into a unity that expresses how the mother feels about herself and her child.

"Evolving an Instinct" is a poem on the same subject but from an unthreatened position of maternity which leaves the mother free to develop her love. Sandra MacPherson discusses the variety, and probes the range of feelings and perceptions, a new mother discovers in her relationship to her child, the poem focussing on this total immersion of the consciousness in its new experience. The main point she makes is that motherhood is a learned relationship, not the product of blind instinct. Each new response to the child is consciously evolved as it is called forth. "Evolving an Instinct" is therefore a poet's view of the learning process that a mother, taught by her child, goes through in following an inclination
to be protective and loving. This is very different, of course, from the traditional view that maintains motherhood to be automatic feminine instinct, and condemns the woman who, for whatever reason, fails to exhibit the protective love for her children that is deemed "natural." We saw the unhappy effects of such a view in Gwen Harwood's poem: "I am learning protection," begins MacPherson in a series of short declarative sentences in this first stanza which ends with the line, "I learn to love." Between learning protection and learning love, she states:

I purposely look silly.
I bark and whine.
I waddle in new motherhood.
My wings drag their sheen in dirt.
I hobble that my young may fly.

It is interesting that she compares herself to a dog, a duck, and possibly an insect newly out of its chrysalis, since we have encountered such images in women's poems earlier in this chapter: in Sexton's infant "fisted like a snail," whose "lips are animals;" in Rich's mother longing to hear "some gentle animal sound" from her child and have the milk flow from her breast again in simple mammal response; in Deutsch's advice to her son, that uses the images of the dove and the lion; in Stevenson's "Peter and Wolf" image of the mother's protective love for her children; in Brooks' descriptive naming of the young ones' "whimper-whine." Such references to animality, which in MacPherson's poem are insisted upon, provide a corrective balance to the often one-sided image of motherhood idealized and abstracted in the religion and literature of men. The child, in "Evolving an Instinct," is female, a further indication of the poet's delight in creating her own world. In this connection, it may be noted
that the sex of the child in the poem by Sexton is deliberately left unspecified even though the mother is identified in a Christian context as a fallen madonna, which assumes a male child. In MacPherson's poem the persona can capitalize on her new female self-awareness. "What is it to be another's keeper," she asks, subtly appropriating the biblical context of brothers. She pursues her questioning:

   Am I an animal trainer? Is it fun?
   Is it beautiful?
   Am I a warden? Do I have the keys?

These are all profound questions; the task at hand cannot be taken for granted since it is the most serious thing in the world, as the mother here approaches it. Already she feels the threat of distance opening up between her and the new small identity so much part of herself. Her housekeeping duties call her, reminding her that she is in a sense mother to things as well as people; mother indeed to the earth. Earth is to all things as she is to her child: an environment that nourishes:

   Feed the dog, water the violet.
   I am mammal.
   Milk fattens the earth.
   I love many and they know it not.
   Keep the body ticking.
   I am an atmosphere she can breathe in.

As set down, these fragmented thoughts mirror the mental processes of a modern mother who must take note of and organize a multitude of different duties and concerns in her daily round. The new mother is already taking stock of the domestic world she is given to rule, learning to think in its terms. From now on, she will not have the peace to pursue any personal goals, a realization that is implied through the psychological technique
here employed. She is also beginning to sense that the comprehensive love she is learning may go unappreciated and unreturned, since the "many" she loves "know it not." The lines following those last quoted enter on a new apprehension of what the freshly domesticated identity she has acquired may mean in actual terms:

I am a newspaper to mess.
This is learning protection,
Learning to love.

Thus the premise stated cheerfully at the beginning of the poem is repeated at the end with a definite note of alarm in the word "This." Its immediate referent conjures up only the most negative and unpleasant images, a newspaper being subject not only to many indignities but to being discarded when its immediate interest and utility are over. So "This" is what all the excitement of evolving a new "instinct" as mother is going to settle down into, the poet seems to be saying. It is the first intimation of a disillusionment that is only too well amplified in the poems we have just discussed, and so, in a way, brings us full circle to where we began with the institution of marriage.
Chapter Six

Defining Oneself as an Artist

Artistic endeavor has always been within historic times for women a question of working within limits dictated by male authority. So in coming to poetry in which women look at themselves as artists, it is well to remember that they have been no freer in being able to write as poets and gain recognition as such than they have been free as women. This will let us see the difficulties, the limitations of scope, the confusion, the anger, the resolution of conflicts and finally, the achievement, in context.

The reputation of the modern poet is contingent upon publication. What women could hope to publish has therefore necessarily influenced the kinds of poetry they wrote when not writing for themselves (like Emily Dickinson) or their friends (like Katharine Philips). Poetry exists not only by its aesthetic right: to find an audience it must either create its own by sheer confidence in its authority, or please the dominant tastes and biases of its time. If the poet is a woman, she not only has reason to lack such confidence, but her work faces the additional handicap of sex discrimination. These pressures on a woman's freedom of creativity are far from outlived, as evidenced by Kenneth Rexroth who, in introducing a recent selection of poems by four young women poets, had this to say:

As any teacher of 'Creative Poetry' will tell you, the majority of students who write poetry are women and usually they write better than the men. After about the age of twenty-five they begin to disappear. What happens to them? The answer is apparent upon even the most cursory survey of literary magazines and small presses. They find it very hard indeed to get published. Many anthologies of genuinely young poets, many series of poetry booklets contain no females whatsoever.
It is good to have a poet of Rexroth's stature acknowledging this situation and doing something about it. But with the next sentence he equivocates. "Perhaps it would be possible to correct this imbalance," he ventures. But having by his own example proved the possibility, why this lack of conviction? Should we infer from it that Rexroth has no faith in other men's encouragement of women, knowing women are regarded as inferiors and yet resented and feared as competitors? Whatever, his comments reinforce what women already know, i.e., that poetry is not judged simply on its own merits. Prejudice against women extends to their creative output. Female poets are treated as women first and poets second. For that reason alone, we will have to keep on using the qualification "women" poets for some time, not in deference to a sub-class, but in assertion of women's presence until such time as the woman's voice is fully accepted in its own right, all vestiges of prejudice in publishing having been overcome.

The woman's viewpoint, as I have tried to define it, is neither better nor worse than the man's: it is simply her own, a result of historical conditioning. Women wrote about what concerned them most, this being the life immediately touching their confined existence as a class of people subservient to a dominant class. Characteristically, women's poetry does not deal with subjects which interested men such as heroism, war, the broad panoply of public event, the realms of intellectual investigation, e.g., philosophy and science: in short, the world from which women were for the most part excluded. The poetry of women, from the time of Sappho, is typified by an emphasis on personal life. The male poet does not centre on himself as subject until at least the seventeenth century, the major shift
from an outward vision to the emotional life of the individual not taking place until the advent of the Romantic movement. This development, while favoring the kinds of expression with which women were most at home, has not resulted in men's coming to share women's vision of the nature of reality and art. Men's art has come to be dominated by an ego-centered consciousness of the world, the modern poet being more concerned with his own reactions to the world than with the reactions of others, as he was in earlier poetry. Women's talking about themselves, on the other hand, has come to be a necessary revision of the false images men have made of them. For man's vision of woman "is not objective," as Eva Figes has written, but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be, and it is to this mirror image that woman has had to comply. Man has also been required to live up to an image, but since it was made for him by his father it was more likely to fit in with his own desires: bravery could mean the courage to make straight for what you want. Well, this courage "to make straight for what you want" is slowly being acquired by women as they gain the necessary confidence to change their lives. In discussing themselves as female and as artist in their poetry, women are really recreating themselves in a new social image. The old tradition of writing from a base of immediate experience now serves women as a means of redefining themselves, in which process they are projecting excitingly exact images which correct those of the "distorting mirror" of the past. This emendation has nothing in common with Romantic-decadent subjectivity and pessimism: it is realistic and hopeful, a necessary counterbalance to less life-giving trends in poetry where a kind of moral exhaustion has led to statements which are valued by men more for their ingenuity of construction than for their aptness of observation.
Though women poets no longer have to model themselves on male expectations and standards, being involved as a group in evolving standards of their own, the concept of a liberated consciousness and of their own potential strength as a group force is still very new in finding a voice. Most women writing in the twentieth century are still reacting to the effects of centuries of oppression; many such poets have internalized the prejudice against women, sharing it themselves, often unconsciously. Some of the poems in the next Section: What Does it Mean to be a Woman? exemplify this better than the ones here. Rather curiously, as it seems to me, none of the poems in the present Section express any regret that women have been denied the experience of a man's world on which to draw for inspiration. Possibly, this means that most women have been satisfied with what sources they had, not envying men their broader or more violently active lives. Still, however unlimited the range of the imagination, very few female poets have been able to escape the adverse effects of their social conditioning. Those who were most themselves had to withdraw from public life in order to be so, like Emily Dickinson, or could be themselves because born into aristocracy which bestows its own special confidence and freedom, like Edith Sitwell. Most poets would not deliberately choose the former option, and have no choice in the latter. To gain the public audience without which poetry exists in limbo, the majority have had to struggle.

That many women are their own mean detractors in poetry is painful but not surprising, considering their situation. How many male poets do we find who make a separation between being a man and a poet, with a need to derogate their maleness in order to affirm themselves as artists? The
question seems ludicrous. But for women the conflict is real. It has caused some poets either to cast off their sex as a shameful burden, or simply not to recognize it. One could always get rid of the nuisance of being a woman by writing from a position of sexual neutrality which felt like freedom. Divorced in their identity as artists from their biological and social identity as women, such poets have responded to the world in some abstract sense that assumes a common humanity with men though the compliment is not returned. For women to write exclusively as men is the indulgence of a curious if pleasant conceit, as if such poets were not female creatures whose lives had been formed and informed by the fact of having been born with a sexual body, and by having experienced the world from the disadvantaged position of a woman in patriarchal society. It is customary to view such poets as artists who have transcended sexual considerations, as if that were necessarily a virtue. Though taking the pressures of circumstance into account, some women writers today would judge female poets who refuse to acknowledge sexual politics as either apolitical or unfeeling towards their sex. The only male-identifying poet I have included here is Marianne Moore, since her poem reveals how the worship of male standards of perfection can and does coerce women into a false position of denying their own (a point I will enlarge upon in my discussion of the poem, where I hope to make it clear). Moore was far from apolitical, in her support of right-wing party politics. In poetic form, however, she was radically innovative (albeit with a highly controlled elegance). The models for both the political allegiance and the poetry seem to me to be elitist male as epitomized by Dryden and Pope, Moore's polished wordcraft being nothing if not the poetry of controlled intellectual wit and reason. Women with great
intellectual acuity have often felt at odds with their sex, having sometimes
to repudiate qualities in themselves that threatened them with being
labelled feminine, i.e., unworthy of their better or masculine selves,
since an aggressive intellect has supposedly been the man's sphere and
emotion plus intuition the woman's. Artistic identity allows women to
disavow themselves as such while justifying themselves as poets.

More overt examples of feminine self-denigration are furnished by
Anne Wilkinson and Elinor Wylie in this Section, where the theme of
conflict between being a woman and an artist is dealt with from a variety
of standpoints. Lynne Lawner, for example, speaks of futilely abasing
herself as a woman in order to avoid domestic segregation and gain admittance
to the inner sanctum of the poetically elect: the male gods who grant the
honors. Phyllis Webb depicts the poet's loneliness and alienation in a
world that is unmistakably male, though she neither reacts positively to
being a woman nor shows any need to deny the fact she is one. Margaret
Atwood, Anna Wickham and Mona Van Duyn each find, in their own way, that
their sexual need as women gets in the way of their poetic. The attitudes
of women in the past who have shaped themselves into molds acceptable to
men are pilloried by Caroline Kizer and, to a lesser extent, by Amy Lowell
and Dilys Laing, who are more compassionate in their criticism. A happy
few in this Section experience no conflict in being women who are artists,
and consequently draw strength from their wholeness of identity. Denise
Levertov is outstanding in this respect, being perfectly at home with
herself, while Muriel Spark and Elizabeth Sewell also identify themselves
positively as both women and poets. These exemplify the kind of women
who, in my opinion, have truly transcended the social limitations of
sex which deny them freedom to be themselves as people and artists along
with men.

Before proceeding with individual poems, I want to draw attention to
two sub-divisions I have distinguished in this Section, the poems
falling more or less neatly into classifications I have called a) Defining
the Poet, b) Conflicts Between Being a Woman and a Poet, and c) Inspiration
and Craft: the Poetic Process. In this last group, to which I have not
yet referred in my discussion, the poet focuses on the process by which the
poem takes its shape and direction from the initial inspiration. Problems
of identity are mostly put aside, in this category, where the poet's
preoccupation is with craft and technique and the more mysterious matter of
the animating principle or Muse.

There is momentary liberation for any poet in the pure pursuit of
excellence, or in discoveries made while mentally tracking down the source
of energy for the poem once the initial urge to write it has set the conscious
process in motion. Poems about making poems offer a respite from the social
passions, allowing for a concentration of joy in the formal struggle for
self-discipline and perfection. In such poems sexual identity is usually
irrelevant and properly so, except for probings of the source or sources
of inspiration which invoke the Muse, who, being feminine in our tradition,
imposes again the question of sexual identity. Where process, as distinct
from inspiration, is the sole focus, the poems can be read as the artist's
self-communion. Words, in the last analysis, must be the poet's central
preoccupation. How words are used to shape aesthetic structures having
meaning and yielding insights is the process wherein the poet finally defines
herself.
In subdivision a) Defining the Poet, we see the poet in the process of discovering, asserting and evaluating the nature of her role. These poems are concerned first of all with identity. Thanks largely to their own efforts, the opportunity for women to function as poets is today no longer the uphill struggle it was in the past. But the poets will not let us forget, in what has been won, how recently women were under pressure to justify themselves, while creating the identities being denied them.

Anna Wickham is a poet who passionately responded to the pressure, fighting back in poems which define the crusader for justice perhaps as much as they define the poet. "Resolution" is such a poem, a statement of poetic purpose that seems wrung from necessity. In the first three lines, the poet defies tradition to limit her freedom to say what she perceives, and is, as a woman:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I will not draw only a house or a tree,} \\
\text{I will draw very Me;} \\
\text{Everything I think, everything I see!}
\end{align*}
\]

But her aggressive stance in defense of her truth is undermined by the anxiety of knowing the centuries' old resistance she is up against, and she betrays a feeling of impotence in the resentful, uncertain prophecy with which the poem ends: "The thing that is, may make the blind gods pause." The blind gods are soul-less projections of established male power she hopes to disturb by the strength of her endurance and determination to be a complete personality instead of a truncated one. Wickham, in the first quarter of the century, still needs to fight for the basic right to exist in her own image; still is obsessed with the woman poet's need to clear a space for herself.
Dilys Laing, in "The Maker," has already done that; taking her space for granted, she speaks as a voice of authority among male voices, taking to task spokesmen for a world view she finds destructive. "It is the fashion to speak in the falling cadence of disillusion. The world ends with a whimper, not with a bang," she begins, with an obvious reference to T.S. Eliot. Showing scorn for the rationale of objectivity which purports merely to record or foretell events without accepting responsibility for influencing them, she says angrily: "I hate that falsehood. I hate the time’s defilement of art by politics." She ends by stating her own optimistic position as unequivocably as she has stated her opposition to the cult of despair:

It is the gift of the poet

to contradict chaos, to hear the YES! of the womb

and loud along the ear of man to say it,

making another space, and a new time.

The "YES! of the womb"--a lovely phrase, suggesting that the poet as creator has as much responsibility to life as to art. Laing sees the one affirming the other. The artist, she believes, should not be granted special license for the self-indulgence of despair, art being by one definition a celebration of life. To disclaim responsibility for the moral effects of self-indulgent behavior in writing is politically irresponsible: as injurious to the cause of art as to the overall culture in which people are influenced by art. Laing implies that women, possibly more than men, have no stake in an aloof, elitist position which grants the artist immunity from social obligations, permitting him to lift art above other human concerns.

A claim for poets which leaves the sexual issue momentarily aside is
made by Muriel Spark in "Against the Transcendentalists." Deceptively modest in tone, it is a poem which wittily snipes at all persons, including poets, who make large claims for their visions. "Poets are a meagre species," says Spark, "There is more of everything than poetry." If this seems to deprecate the importance of poets to society, what does it say about the importance of women in poetry? Is Spark indulging in ironies? Women have been so minimally present there as to be treated in literary history as insignificant. Whatever her meaning, she makes no bones about her own function as a poet, however, speaking out like Laing against what is fashionable in poetry, in order to assert the right to be herself. In stressing that her choice is to write about what is concrete and locally particular, in her environment, she automatically supports the similar traditional emphasis of other women poets. But this is ancillary to what the poem says. Spark does not presume to speak for anyone but herself in arguing for the individual vision. Though in the scheme of things poetry occupies a modest place, like philosophy, poetry is not without its own excesses, she points out: it has concerned itself with such indulgences as "Delphic insanity,/ Drunkenness and discrepancy." Rejecting such grand preoccupations for herself, she reserves

The right not to try to
Fulfil the wilderness or fly to
Empyreal vacuity with an eye to
Publication, for what am I to
Byzantium or Byzantium
To me? I live in Kensington
And walk about, and work in Kensington

Kensington apparently offers no scope for godly, Romantic or symbolic Yeatsian pretensions. In the absence of a civic law laid down for poetry,
Spark sets forth three texts: the first of which is appropriately, "The word," the second, "Love your neighbor." The latter she qualifies as meaning "let him love/ His neighbor, and he his," implying that this will leave the poet in peace to develop "his" craft. But the rhetoric she has borrowed for her platform has swept the poet off her Kensingtonian feet. Abandoning the claim for modesty, she takes to the pulpit, stepping up her allusions with a parody on "Who is Silvia" as she continues in high gear with her harangue:

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Who is Everyman, what is he  
That he should stand in lieu of  
A poem? What is Truth true of?  
And what good's a God's-eye-view of  
Anyone to anyone  
But God?
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Debunking is proving great fun. So is making the formal shape of the poem, as the prepositions "to" and "of," left up in the air at the end of lines show. The poet has a point to make, however, beyond stating goals and questioning purposes. Her justification is that, "In the Abstraction/ Many angels make sweet moan/ But never write a stanza down." This acclaims the superiority of poets over mystics and preachers. Spark concludes her peroration by resigning "The seven-league line" to global hoppers in hopes that, should Byzantium appear in Kensington, "The city will fit the size" of the span of her eyes and hand, physical limitations

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that understand  
This law of which the third  
Text is the thing defined  
The flesh made word.
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According to the third text, the poet is no less than God's equal. "The thing defined" is what takes its godly substance from the material
fact of being human: a view shared by most of the poets in this Anthology, and nowhere explored in greater depth than by Denise Levertov, who is represented by eight poems in this Section. Half of these fall within the present subdivision. "Song of Ishtar" identifies the poet with the primitive goddess who takes her identity from both the moon and the earth. "She is a sow/ and I a pig and a poet," sings Levertov in an ecstasy of cosmic identification which assumes a matriarchal order:

When she opens her white lips to devour me I bite back and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire we rock and grunt, grunt and shine

In the love-play between the goddess and the poet-as-pig, Levertov, it seems to me, is metaphorically assuming one of the forms of the "White Goddess" herself. Her bold, fearless joy in this communion suggests to me that, being in the goddess' own image, the poet is experiencing herself as a woman and therefore writing with a female anima. Her imaginative relationship with the goddess is an identification with creative female power. The female poet is both earthly and unearthly, a shape of divinity in her apprehension of the principle governing the Whole. The mystery she celebrates is her knowing that the physical and spiritual purposes correspond: the void gives birth, earth-body and heaven-soul being "married" opposites and existence a manifestation of desire between them. The sow and the female poet are not sexual opposites but separate affinities—the physical and the spiritual—of one identity.

The metaphysic of this "Song" is explored from a different angle in "The Earth Worm," a definition of poet which again uses the idea of darkness
bodying forth creation. But the creative principal here is male: phallic, yet humble in the patriarchal tradition of man's dust-like insignificance before God:

The worm artist
out of soil, by passage
of himself
constructing.

By working himself upward and outward, this creature creates his "Castles of metaphor" and "dungeon turrets," pinnacles of heaven and hell. In throwing off "artifacts" as he tills himself, the artist "is homage to/ earth," who is presumably his mother, the substance from which he takes life. In reshaping it, however, he is not the equal of divinity: not, at least, in the way that the singer in "Song for Ishtar" is the equal of the goddess. What I hear in the two poems is a difference between Levertov speaking of her personal experience, which defines the poet as a woman, and Levertov speaking of the poet in the abstract, where the poet is defined as "he." The first-person account has a liveliness and immediacy lacking in the third person where she generalizes about the function of the artist and the process of making a poem. In this distancing, Levertov pays her respects to what artists of either sex have in common; she shares in this phenomenon, but it is not as uniquely her own as is the experience of being herself: a person who, in addition to perceiving as might a male poet, perceives as a woman. Sometimes her artistry triumphs over the distancing of the third person viewpoint, as in "The Jacob's Ladder" further on in this Section: a poem which presents an experience by transmitting it directly. That is not the case in "The Earth Worm" which, as a general statement about artistic process, neither transcends its means or has anywhere near the ebullience of the moon-sow-poet rocking in the cradle of the universe.
Levertov returns to a more personal identification in "The Illustration," whose title refers to a picture attempting to represent "Folly/ sinking into a black bog," which the poet remembers from her childhood. For the child, the figure, with a will-o-the-wisp shining before its closed eyes and intended as a parable of "'The Light of Truth,'" meant "a mystery of darkness, of beauty, of serious/ dreaming pause and intensity." That image was a pre­
saging, for the adult poet, of the Muse who comes and goes "across the lake of vision." Coming at a time when the Muse has been long gone, the recollection of this persistent image teaches the poet to affirm

Truth's light at strange turns of the mind's road,
wrong turns that lead
over the border into wonder,
mistaken directions, forgotten signs

The Muse moves in mysterious ways, revealing for Levertov in "Illustration," her "place/ of origin, a well/ under a lake" where her wonders are performed. "The Well" is another variation on this theme. The Muse is the familiar pictorial figure of the woman with a pitcher at the spring. Levertov finds her face resembles

the face of the young actress who played Miss Annie Sullivan, she who spelled the word 'water' into the palm of Helen Keller, opening the doors of the world.

The poet depicts herself standing on a bridge where a stream enters a lake, "transformed" through seeing

... this calm act, this gathering up of life, of spring water
and the Muse gliding then in her barge without sails, without oars or motor, across the dark lake.
Knowing "no interpretations of these mysteries," nevertheless her heart leaps in wonder.

Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word 'water'
spelled in my left palm.

In all these feminine images there is an immediacy for Levertov; a source of recognition. Though it has often been remarked of female artists that they are in a difficult position with regard to a Muse, who is perceived as a woman and therefore not available to them as inspiration, Levertov suggests otherwise. Precisely because the Muse's habitat is her own feminine source--the dark part of her own identity, the poet can acknowledge her as her own. Levertov draws comfort from knowing that the Muse is not gone but merely out of sight, contained within. The concept is again one that is oriented in the immediate physical world, rather than the abstract world of the Idea.

Though Phyllis Webb is far from drawing life from a certainty of the indwelling of the Muse, she too in "Poet" identifies as a woman enclosed, in this case a nun who is "promised." In her devotion to the truth, she has "walked on words of nails/ to knock on silences." She has veiled her mouth, punctured her fingertips "to fill one thimble/ with blood for consecration," and proved her sacrifice and compassion at the stations of the cross, where she tried with verbs "to compass the bitter male/ in this changed chancellery." Pacing in her cell of flesh she has finally "curiously" heard "the tallest of mouths

call down behind my veil
to limit or enlargen me
as I or it prevails.

The mysterious power of utterance is enclosed not in, but along with, this
poet. It is an awful angel compelling her endurance in a cloister where
she cannot find rest or shelter. The trouble is, the voice reflects the
world.

"Lament" is a more desperate statement of the poet's search for
salvation. Here Webb plunges immediately into the crux of her spiritual
distress:

Knowing that everything is wrong,
how can we go on giving birth
either to poems or the troublesome lie,
to children, most of all, who sense
the stress in our distracted wonder

The speaker's vision is black indeed, her lack of any positive social
identification, of any joy in life, blinding her to hope. She can see
only pain in futurity: giving birth to poems or children continues everything
that is "wrong," repeats the cycle of "the troublesome lie" of compromising
with the conditions of life. "Where," she asks, in a passionate cry, is
"that virtuous land/ where one can die without a second birth?" This is
a wished for annihilation so complete as to deny poetry its spiritual or
creative function. We make Edens out of need, merely to comfort the
imagination, she laments; poems can only equivocate regarding that necessity:

That place of perfect animals and men
is simply the circle we would charm our children in
and why we frame our lonely poems in
the shape of a frugal sadness.

This is a kind of "dying fall," however exquisite, that would draw Dilys
Laing's rebuke. Yet the viewpoint in Webb's poems is a woman's and
stated in a woman's terms. Webb's is the feminine condition so vulnerable
to the whips and scorns of man's inhumanity that it finds its most fitting
analogue in the stations of a male god's passion. Imaging herself as a
chaste seeker after truth, in her recoil from the pain of physical existence,
Webb does not manifest that biologically-centered identification with the earth which is the spiritual mainstay of so many other female poets. She has to create out of her own existential despair, even less grounded than Levertov's "worm artist" whose radiant "Castles of metaphor" are thrust up from his earth-dark, material condition. Webb also uses "castle" in this way, making it an "image for the mind" in "The Glass Castle," a poem not included here. In it she says she "has lived there as you must/ and scratched and gathered diamond dust." In that "poise of crystal space" she balances, claiming "the five gods of reality/ to bless and keep me sane." To be able to do this is in itself an act of faith.

Whatever they are suffering, many poets are able to find a justification in writing poetry that compensates for their trials, as for example, Anne Sexton in "Said the Poet to the Analyst." "My business is words," she announces, putting herself on a par with the doctor whose "business is watching my words." Comparing words to labels, coins, "or better, like swarming bees," she feels "broken" when he interprets her words to get at "the source of things;/ as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic." She works best like the "magic jackpot" she once drew from a nickel machine. Should the doctor deny the validity of her comparison, finding in it a meaning other than that of an embarrassment of riches, then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny and ridiculous and crowded with all the believing money.

The hidden sources of creativity are the poet's wealth, not her sickness. They are to be defended from all onslaughts if the poet in the person is to survive.
In "Death of a Poet," Mona Van Duyn relates a struggle in which she lost out to a power greater than her own:

There was something obscene about wrestling that baby-faced boy, women don't usually wrestle, except for a comic or grotesque effect, but this was fighting for my life—I recognized him instantly.

Though she does not name him, the better to convey the experience of an actual physical struggle against her own inclinations, the baby-faced boy is Cupid. The poet is up against the deceptive innocence of powerful erotic attraction, so often soft and appealing in its awakening of tender emotions. The second stanza of this narrative is a biographical summary of the poet's hopes and adventures after leaving home, an interpolation that makes the point that heretofore, in aiming to "make a name" for herself as a poet, she "could always cope" with the people to whom she was attracted. Through hard work, willingness to learn and patience, she was well on the way to achieving her goal. The third stanza abruptly returns us to the theme begun in the first. Proceeding with grimly realistic details of the fight, the poet maintains a matter-of-fact tone to underline the non-romantic nature of this struggle with brute passion:

I was surprised at my own endurance. At one point I felt the gristle of his nose give in under my palm and his eyelids leak under my gouging nails

She would have killed him then, she says, but he got loose and touched her, so that she was momentarily overcome. Though the fight lasted all night, "All that I'd call fight/ took place in the first half hour." The rest was merely hanging on.

Now that it's over I am blessed, if you can call it that—that is, I am of the world totally and helplessly.

What I fought for is gone, though I go on writing poems as usual.
The triumph of the procreative force over the poet is actually due to the latter's capitulation. She ends by saying "I believe in his power, beyond the power of words, beyond himself even, flexed in my own belief." Even the form itself, in its long discursive line obsessed with narration, bears out the poet's conclusion. This is, at the same time, an instance of how poetry can "lie" when it is being true to form. Van Duyn is obviously very much still alive as a poet, contrary to her denial.

Indeed art has a life of its own in the hands of a skilled technician, and may overcome the artist with as authoritative a power as that wielded by Van Duyn's Cupid. "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein" by Margaret Atwood is a poem of horror and fascination raising vital questions about the relationship of the maker to the thing made. The poem anatomizes the subject with a Gothic intensity that brilliantly presents the poet as evil artificer victimized by her own presumption. The "performer" in this ten-part study is in the grip of a power beyond her control. The scene is set sparely and dramatically:

I, the performer
in the tense arena, glittered
under the fluorescent moon. Was bent
masked by the table. Saw what focused
my intent: the emptiness

The air filled with an ether of cheers.

My wrist extended a scalpel.

The "tense arena" sets the scene as a contest for survival. In the darkness, the moon is the presiding deity. The focus of intent, the "emptiness," suggests the primordial nature of this contest: in the Beginning was the Void. The "ether of cheers" evokes a ghostly angelic chorus.
The wrist, as though autonomous in this sickly air, extends its maleficent instrument, while over the firmament, as though televised by modern technology, broods the mystique of the operating-room. Fear and fascination are compelled by the traditional taboo against meddling with the profound mystery of life: we are witnessing a madwoman armed with science, who is about to challenge the Creator. The poem mounts in dramatic intensity with each part or "speech," words being this Frankenstein's instruments with which she brings into being her mechanical monster: he who will inhabit the poem, taking it over from the poet. He is seen from the beginning as an opponent who refuses to take shape and has to be fought and subdued before his maker can achieve mastery over him. Or, through him: "0 secret/ form of the heart, now I have you," gloats the anatomist when "the thing falls," the poet satanically engineering the fall. In the fourth speech she debates what ornamental features to bestow on the creature, and what significance and dimension she ought to give him. In the fifth she is appalled by her success: "I was insane with skill:/ I made you perfect." She realizes she is "in the presence/ of the destroyed god:" her creation is "a rubble" of fleshly parts. "Knowing that the work is mine/ how can I love you?" she asks accusingly, in fear now of accepting responsibility for the enormity she has produced. The next speech sees it take on life: it is a raw infant, "human and distorted" and starved. "I have nothing to feed you," says his begetter, pulling "a cape of rain" around her as she runs, asking herself now, in anguish: "What was my ravenous motive?/ Why did I make you?" The artifice has taken on a threatening reality. In the "Speeches" that follow, she accuses it of stealing from her everything it
needed including her joy and her ability to suffer; in turn it accuses her of murder. "Can't you see/ I am incapable?" she cries, for indeed she has put all her power into the creation. "Blood of my brain,/ it is you who have killed these people," she charges, hoping to deflect responsibility. Genius is taking its revenge. Who is guilty in creation, humankind or its Creator? Where is the reality in art, where the illusion? What is the end result of technology? Having assumed God's prerogatives in attempting her "impious wonders" the ambitious magus is devoured by her own sense of failure in letting loose her evils upon the world. She watches impotently now as automatic skill, the brilliance of technique, takes over; the "sparkling monster" gambols, dances:

His happiness
is now the chase itself:
he traces it in light,
his paths contain it.

She is reduced to being the "gaunt hunter/ necessary for his patterns."

In this role-reversal, the speaker's feelings of persecution confirm the paranoia that attended her opening performance. Her creation has become real enough to have his own speech. "Doctor," he says, rising up with electric energy to encompass the world, and dwarfing her as she cowers:

you dangle on the leash
of your own longing;
your need grows teeth.

You sliced me loose

and said it was
Creation. I could feel the knife
Now you would like to heal
the chasm in your side,
but I recede. I prowl

I will not come when you call.
The god-poet has given birth to a man-monster who has usurped control. Art has a life of its own, as much a threat to its conceiver as is the child who grows up to take the world into his own destructive hands. Art, implies this poet, can be a truthful if pitiless revelation of one's own darkest hidden inclinations, showing how, in the society at large, the lust for power and control over people has created a technology that has got out of control.

Locating her own creative power as a demonically ambitious god-in-the-brain, Atwood is understandably appalled at its potential for evil. In Webb, the brain is a refuge as well as a prison, a place, though terrible, of prophetic illumination. Unlike Levertov and Sexton, these poets view their creative gift with apprehension, as being close to madness. Levertov is on the friendliest of terms with her Muse who is no threat at all. As in Sexton, the Muse inhabits a womb-like realm which, precisely because it is natural, of the flesh--the good earth bringing forth--is where the spirit makes her home. Centered in a fleshly reality, inspiration for these poets is a source of comfort and strength. It is tempting to deduce from these contrasted poems that when the poet is not in touch with a centre she experiences as the feminine principle, the form of which in utterance is the Muse, she is existentially in limbo, in danger of falling into a man's created hell. Hades, Gehenna and Hell are male conceptions of guilt, punishment and terror; if there is a female-created hell it does not exist with comparable authority. As we can see in the poems, the poets who identify with the horrors of a hellish existence use a male referent; the poets who identify themselves as part of the everlasting life stream, use a female referent. The Word made flesh is after all a metaphor for the
male seed made flesh through the agency of the woman's body. Denied her own divinity, robbed of herself through being robbed of her authority as a Creator in a godly image, woman is denied her birthright, unless she is able to assert herself in a way that, at least partially, reclaims it.

There is nothing biologically deterministic about this; people make their own social and cultural history out of the materials available from nature and previous history. The poets make their statements rather more subjectively, but out of similar materials, in the context of a present reality strongly conditioned by the past.

It is a truism that one's source of strength is often where one is weakest and most vulnerable. In the second group of poems, one of the two main conflicts between being a woman and a poet is that love or the need for love interferes with the quest for perfection. The other conflict is caused by social interference: woman has been labelled as unfeminine if she pursued an artistic goal, and a failure as a woman if she did so in preference to marriage and raising children. But women poets have their own inner conflicts with this choice. In "The Shadow Voice," Atwood lets her genie, her dark alter ego, do the talking. Given such preference, it is not surprising that the voice of the craft scorns love and the inclination towards children as inimical to the poet's best interests. Interestingly, the moon is again invoked, as in the Frankenstein poem:

My shadow said to me:
what is the matter

Isn't the moon warm
enough for you
Why do you need
the blanket of another body

Whose kiss is moss.
If the body's kiss stands for death, then the moon's distant purity stands for rigorous, disciplined chastity. The shadow voice, employing medieval allegory, refers to the decay and corruption implicit in a happy picnic scene: "Flies crawl/ over the sweet instant." Does the poet feel drawn towards children? They are seen bending down the trees in their war games, practising for adulthood. There is no hope of love or comfort there.

"I give water, I give clean crusts," the voice argues relentlessly,

Aren't there enough words
flowing in your veins
to keep you going

No question mark: this conclusion has the finality of a decision. The writer's life blood depends on the word-flow.

Where being a woman gets in the way of being an artist, in Atwood, in Wickham the pull is more even, her speaker in "A Woman in Bed" being stretched between the choice of "sacred" delights of the flesh, and the "lust of words." She begins with the writer's nightmare of frustration when the right words won't come:

Sometimes when I go to rest
I lie and struggle for expression,
And failing, fall to sick depression,
And beat my breast.

But, "an added sadness" that almost drives her mad is that her "breast is round."

How can I, being woman
dedicate nights
Which should be sacred to delights,
To this lust of words, which is so broadly human?

Daytime helps her solve the problem. Well-clothed she can forget her skirt, hide her breast under "a workman's shirt/ And hunt the perfect phrase," the woman in her put off till another night of conflict,
The speakers in "Lens," by Anne Wilkinson and "Self-Portrait," by Elinor Wylie both regard the womanly aspect of their identity negatively in juxtaposing it with the poetic. Both poets use the metaphor of the lens to argue that the hardness and clarity of poetic perception is superior to their frailty as women. In "Lens," there is a side by side comparison which soon yields to an extension of the metaphor itself; the woman is so to speak forgotten in the excitement of making the poem. In Wylie's sonnet, order of precedence is given to the poet's mind as lens, in the octave, and "the little rest" that constitutes the poet is given short shrift in the sestet. Wilkinson sees her duty as being

To keep and cherish my good lens
For love and war
And wasps about the lilies
And mutiny within

She will use poetic perception to focus and control emotion. So far so good. The second stanza begins:

My woman's eye is weak
And veiled with milk
My working eye is muscled

In the next stanza we have a restatement:

My woman's iris circles
A blind pupil,
The poet's eye is crystal
Polished to accept the negative.

It is not simply that Wilkinson sees in the opposition that flesh is weak: specifically, it is weakness in woman that she sees. The remainder of the poem is literally devoted to developing the images of the "good lens";

In my darkroom the years
Lie in solution.
Develop film by film.

One of the merits of these films is that, being superior to the momentary
recordings of the "veiled" eye with its "blind" pupil, they can be held up to the light to reveal the past. The skilled poet can even command death, "a dancer/ Disciplined to the foolscap stage" to "expose/ His moving likeness on the page." Art is indeed long.

Wylie in "Self-Portrait is less concerned than Wilkinson with possibilities of the "negative." Wylie's "lens of crystal" calms "Queer stars to clarity, and disentangles/ Fox-fires to form austere refracted angles." The polished substance of her craft is "Graved with the Graces in intaglio/ To set sarcastic sigil on the woman." So the poet mocks herself. The two final lines complete this feminine self-deprecation: "This soul, this vanity, blown hither and thither/ By trivial breath, over the whole world's length."

The ambivalent position women poets find themselves in is well summed up in the first lines of Amy Lowell's poem "The Sisters." "Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot/ We women who write poetry," she muses, remarking that it is queerer still there have been so few:

I wonder what it is that makes us do it
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
Already mother-creatures, double bearing,
With matrices in body and in brain?

Her meditation singles out Sappho to praise and "Mrs. Browning" to criticize for allowing herself to be "squeezed in stiff convention" and for deferring to her husband in matters of art. Queen Victoria comes in for harsher comment but the poet-critic goes "dreaming on,/ In love with these my spiritual relations." After imagining herself paying a visit to Emily Dickinson for whom she shows great respect, she concludes her reveries
with a word for women poets of the future, hoping that they may turn to her as she has to the "older sisters:"

I understand you all, for in myself--
Is that presumption? Yet indeed it's true--
We are one family. And still my answer
Will not be any one of yours, I see.

Despite their individual differences, the poet takes pride in the achievements of a sisterhood which has had to show "the strength of forty thousand Atlases" in their "everyday concerns."

Dilys Laing also finds an occasion to linger over regrettable aspects of the traditional situation which gave women so little scope for rebellion. In "Sonnet to a Sister in Error," she affectionately chides Anne Finch for having been "no hellion/ intent on setting the broad world to rocking."

But she commiserates

Staunch Anne! I know your trouble. The same tether
galls us. To be a woman and writer
is double mischief, for the world will slight her
who slights the "servile house," and who would rather
make odes than beds. Lost lady! Gentle fighter!
Separate in time, we mutiny together

The sisterhood comes in for criticism of a far less loving kind in Caroline Kizer's scathing poem, (part Three of) "Pro Femina." She intends her satirical scourge as a kind of exemplum; in facing up to past weaknesses such as shifts and submissions unworthy of the artist, she judges the sinners while, at the same time, demonstrating that self-criticism is a way in which women poets of the present are learning to avoid the pitfalls that entrapped their less wary older sisters. Aggressive and blunt, she wastes no time getting down to business:

I will speak about women of letters, for I'm in the racket.
Our biggest successes to date? Old maids to a woman
And our saddest conspicuous failures? The married spinsters
On loan to the husbands they treated like surrogate fathers.
Showing no mercy, she itemizes all the unworthy stereotyped feminine roles women have assumed in either trying to cope with their difficulties in being accepted as writers, or in deferring to men. Considering the lengths some women have gone to in order to "stay in good" with the men, she is furious. "How they must have swaggered,/ When women themselves indorsed their own inferiority!" she fumes. Such women she calls "vestals, vassals and vessels rolled into several," and is contemptuous that they tried "to please a posterity that despises them."

But we'll always have traitors who swear that a woman surrenders Her Supreme Function, by equating Art with aggression And failure with Femininity. Still, it's just as unfair To equate Art with Femininity, like a prettily packaged commodity When we are the custodians of the world's best-kept secret: Merely the private lives of one-half of humanity.

Kizer takes comfort in the sisterhood's having produced "some sleek saboteuses" whose undermining of male dominance the men of the day were too slow-witted to perceive. She reserves special venom for those who aped men "In the expectation of glory: she writes like a man!" She concludes with a positive platform: "If" women poets face up to their faults and set about changing their image, they will, she promises, deserve their calling. Facing up means, among other things, submerging self-pity "in disciplined industry," standing up to "be hated," "Keeping our heads and our pride while remaining unmarried," or, if wedded, killing "guilt in its tracks when we stack up the dishes/ And defect to the typewriter." Finally, mothers must believe in the luck of their children,

Whom we forbid to devour us, whom we shall not devour, And the luck of our husbands and lovers, who keep free women.

It is a political speech, a ringing piece of feministic wit refreshing for
Its candid, if harsh, appraisal of the conflicts dogging the determined female writer. Its basic dactylic rhythm gives it a humorous yet driving force that serves the argument well.

This brings us to the third grouping in the Section in which the poetic process itself occupies the poet's attention. I have included poems here which actually fall between two categories, that of the poet defining herself, as in the first group discussed, and that of the poet concerned with inspiration and how it works. One of these poems is Lynne Lawner's "Where are the Wings," which appears to be a lamentation or prayer addressed to the Muse in desperation of the poet's not having attained the goal she set for herself. As such, the poem is related to Mona Van Duyn's "Death of a poet," where poetic inspiration is conquered in battle by the erotic. Lawner's poem is more concerned with how the most determined courting of poetic inspiration can end in failure, even with sex at its service. Perhaps it is because she seeks transport in the amorphous figure of a Pegasus or in the visitation of a Romantic winged poesie that will lift her out of herself that she is doomed to disappointment. Her painstakingly formal shaping of the poem shows the intensity of her pursuit of that which she says eludes her. Poetry is not a Muse in this poem but a male god for whom the poet abases herself in order to be granted space in the empyrial realm. She asks such questions as:

Where are the wings
for whom I made myself brittle
and portable

and
Where are the sliding feathers
for whom I shifted weathers:
the storms of continence
the deadly still-air of yielding
the mental gelding,
the fleshly trance--
enduring any shit to shun
the domestic sun?

In sacrificing her integrity to avoid the domestic role and to win acceptance
as an artist, the speaker deludes herself that sexual humiliation is the
path to spiritual glory. Seeing herself as prey, she becomes it:

How low, how alien, how inconstant
must I grow to be played on,
to be preyed on
by your musical descent?
what horrors study
what odd beds lie in
to make a body
for a god to die in?

There it is: the poet, in supposedly opening herself up to immortality, is
instead reaching for death. The gods do not die; if anything they are
infinitely protean, taking names and shapes according to the times they
live in. Ours is an age of ascendant feminine stirrings in which women
poets are making figures of their own nascent authority, as in their own
way did those neolithic peoples who fashioned female figures in token of
women's generative power. Lawner's petition, on the other hand, is a well-
worth urn that brims with a self-defeating despair which can breed nothing.

Poetry as process is the transmitting of experience through language,
and Elizabeth Sewell, in "The Analogue," catches the poet's most central
preoccupation with the word as vehicle.

I ask my words
For livelier ways,
(I am to blame
That let them stiffen.)
This almost seems a direct answer to Lawner. In "The Analogue," the successful way of the poet is shown to consist not in asking to be received into the classical preserve of pre-existing godly paradigms, as Lawner sees it, but in subduing "The kindling body to its silent mime" of things in nature. The heart must "think no shame/ To lie among the parched stones, feeling the glassy pulses of the heat." In asking that words "Gently undo/ The sinews of our rhythms" Sewell means to "Set free

Bodily analogy;
Blessedly construe
In each syllabic gesture something's praise.

Then can the poet "Grow with a tree,/ And speak the universe in a paraphrase."

Inspiration through identification with what is: this is the abiding mystery, the never-ending source of energy that Denise Levertov, also, demonstrates. In "To the Muse" she pursues the investigation into identity we considered a few pages back. Having claimed the Muse as her own, she now addresses her as a revered equal. She credits "a wise man" with saying that the Muse is "not one who comes and goes/ but having chosen/ you remain in your human house." The Muse at home walks in the garden, sits at the hearth, gives joy at even the most meager table,

and wife or husband
who does not lock the door of the marriage against you, finds you not as unwelcome third in the room, but as the light of the moon on flesh and hair.

When the house seems empty of inspiration it is only that the Muse is hiding herself "in secret rooms:"

The host, the housekeeper, it is who fails you. He had forgotten to make room for you at the hearth
or at the table, or failed to leave doors unlocked. But while he
cries out that she is faithless and has failed him, she is all the time
"indwelling/ a gold ring lost in the house." How then to find this
shining circle?

No more rage but a calm face,
trim the fire, lay the table, find some
flowers for it: is that the way?

Not even the wise man who "spoke words" of comfort can say. As housekeeper,
she must tend the house, create a structural harmony that will free space
for the Muse to appear in. Perhaps, says the poet tentatively, feeling her
way, it is more a matter of becoming aware of openings, a passage: "--perhaps/
looking down, the sight/ of the ring back on its finger?" Unity lies within,
as this symbol of marriage implies.

The wise man in his spiritual attainment can give the true seeker
insights, but it is in being at home with herself that the poet finds
inspiration for a personal poetics. Sewell in "The Analogue" expands a
"Bodily analogy" to say where poetry has its roots; Levertov finds her
analogy in the "human house," with its Biblical connotations of many mansions.
But it is her house, not her father's. In "Illustrious Ancestors," Levertov
pays homage to a Judaic-Christian patriarchal past for teaching her, through
patient, practical example and hard work, how to practise devotion. She
would like to establish a connection between these spiritual forefathers and
herself by following their example; she would make

poems direct as what the birds said
hard as the floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

Accepting her heritage as a gift, she applies its lessons.
"The Jacob's Ladder" is a poem that is the process it describes: the writing of a poem. It begins: "The stairway is not/ a thing of gleaming strands"; nor is it an "evanescence for angels' feet" which need not touch the stone." "It is of stone," says Levertov, insisting on the materially hard nature of the climb towards perfection. She describes how it takes on color only because of the "doubting/ night gray" of the sky behind it.

The stairway has sharp angles, and is solidly built:

One sees that the angels must spring down from one step to the next, giving a little lift of the wings;

and a man climbing must scrape his knees, and bring the grip of his hands into play.

Laboring so, "Wings brush past him./ The poem ascends." This is the mystery, the moment beautifully conveyed, when divinity touches the poet. One feels the miracle of human ascendancy in such a poem. The last of Levertov's poems to be discussed here is "At the Edge"; it is also about poetic process.

How much I should like to begin a poem with And—presupposing the hardest said—

begins the poet, clarifying: "the moss cleared off the stone,/ the letters plain." Allowing herself to get momentarily carried away by the possibilities, she pulls back, since, "not desiring apocrypha/ but true revelation," it is no use for her to pretend there is something concrete and visible to be discovered. Her ideal poem

may not be carved there, may lie
--the quick of mystery--
in animal eyes gazing
from the thicket
It may be an unknown presence, "fierce, terrified," but whom "no And may approach suddenly." So we see that over and over, in Levertov, there is the notion of mystery, and of a state of readiness and waiting upon it that is the poet's necessary condition for inspiration.

Phyllis Webb states something very similar in "Poetry," the first of two poems jointly titled "Two Versions":

Fidelity
as in love
is in poetry
an unexpected satisfaction.

The poet, she suggests, is not surprised by anything she sees: in all appearances there is an ambiguity which it is the poet's gift to fathom;

for,
like a monk in meditation,

poetry
is cloaked in sheer
profundities of otherness

Its secret is, "nothing denied/ until entirely known." This allows poetry, even "in the chaste embrace/ of faithful lovers," to "freely ravage the pulse of evil." The poet's privilege, however, is dubious; as a mad prophet her or his fate is set and cannot be happily transcended. The second poem, "In Situ," presents the poet "in his tree of hell"; this is a "vision tree," deterministic since it "imparts immaculate necessity/ to murder, ignorance and lust." The poem has a one-line refrain repeated four times: "The world is round. It moves in circles." Webb sees no way out. As in the first "Version" of the theme, "Poetry, the poet's curse," is again compared to the semblance of "a simple monk in meditation," descriptive phrases about "its otherness" and "ambiguous nakedness" being restated in the new context.
Thus the points made concerning repetition and ambiguity are conveyed through the form as well. The poet is viewed as a captive "madman," wild with his vision of a world from which there is no exit. The poem ends with its refrain of circular movement. Webb's circle is no gold ring; she is alone in a universe that has no domestic hearth. Considering Webb and Levertov together, it would appear that a sense of mystery or otherness is all, beside their genius, they have in common, Levertov writing from a sense of things affirming sanity, Webb writing from her vision of insanity. Poetry is usually, for the poet, a dangerous enterprise, leading as it will to confrontation with truths the poet finds scarcely bearable. Atwood, for example, makes us appreciate what it feels like to be driven "insane with skill," and Lawner makes us feel the desperation of a poet who looks in the wrong places for inspiration. Surfeit or lack: either way the poet faces danger. When it is a gloomy vision itself that threatens the poet, only the power of the form imposed upon the raw material, controlling and containing it, can save the poet for another day of heroic artistry. "In Situ" takes the reader into the hell Webb claims is the poet's necessary condition; whether one shares this view or not, her mastery of statement is so commanding that one receives a sort of second sight despite oneself. The experiencing of pain becomes its opposite, rendered intensely pleasurable. It is the poet's triumph--Webb's or another's--to ensnare us with their "Sheer/ profundities of otherness."

Miriam Waddington's "Semblances" tends to bring us down from such heights through its style of reasoned argument. But like the poems we have been looking at, this one too, is concerned with what is and is not, a
difference from the others being its calm approach. The poet trusts that
ambiguities may, through intelligent ordering be merged and resolved. She
begins by naming what is real for her: "I have a wall and a bare tree,/
With my window I have three"; but the "you" that she next names as possessed
by her eyes is "not there": this fourth is the construction of the "inward
eye." She uses the metaphor of the tree, as in Webb and Sewell, to
"postulate/ Something deeper and more great/ Than what can here be sensed
or seen." The "inner core" of things can be deduced, says Waddington,
and if we knew how, "we could extract/ From possibilities the fact,"
though these propositions, she admits, fail to answer. What it comes to
is that nothing is as it seems; in all of it there is "A poem still not
felt or written." Waddington ends with the hope that harmonizing the
elements of her vision will allow her to "possess/The undisclosed, both
more, and less." The form her poem takes is a gestation, through nine
quatrain, of this conclusion.

Our next to last poem is by Marianne Moore, whose opening statement
proceeds from the title: "The Mind, Intractable Thing"

   even with its own ax to grind, sometimes
   helps others. Why can't it help me?

It is an unexpected confession from a poet celebrated for her intellectual
mastery of the craft. What, then, is Moore's vision of perfection, in
which the mind fails her? "O magnifico,/ wizard in words—poet," she
apostrophizes, as she shows the mind refracting gorgeously verbalized
images on her eye's "half closed triptych." But these images defy her
efforts to render their essence. The mind's capacity is somehow beyond her:

   You understand terror, know how to deal
   with pent-up emotion, a ballad, witchcraft.
   I don't. O Zeus and O destiny!
The poet, in her expostulation seems to be half-mocking herself for even this much display of emotion, half-admitting that she feels an inadequacy in the areas indicated. She attacks the mind for failing to control her words when it seems, rather, she should be acknowledging that it is fear of facing up to her feelings that is getting in the way of a more emotionally-informed expression. Is it that she places too much importance on the mind's ability to control what it understands? She does not allow for other equally important factors in inspiration, her uncritical worship of the mind attributing to it qualities which belong more properly to a combined function of heart and mind, or what one might call sensibility. For example, she praises the creative mind for courage: "Unafraid of what's done,/ undeterred by defeat," this "wizard" has "made wordcraft irresistible." She despair of being able to match its best expression: "as near a thing as we have to a king." And so this queen of wordcraft finds fault with her kingly instrument rather than with a self-confessed inability to allow terror and pent-up emotion their own head. The poem therefore ends with this amazing declaration: "craft with which I don't know how to deal." One recalls Margaret Atwood's somewhat analogous conclusion in "Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein," where the wizardly "doctor," through too successful a mastery of craft, lost control of the thing made. An intellectual will imposed on the poetic process seems to make for poets who are dissatisfied with the direction of their creativity.

Finally we have the light-hearted comic relief of "Arse Poetica," by Erica Jong, which presents a kind of do-it-yourself course in creative writing on the lines of combined cookbook and sex manual. It is also a
satirical side-swipe at the would-be-poet who thinks poems can be cooked up according to a recipe. Though cooking as a metaphor for making images is not new, the problem of how to live and write as a poet is ever new, Jong recognizes. Doubtless taking off on Ovid, she seizes the opportunity to set herself up as a successful authority, setting forth the problem in part I, and following it with instructions in parts II and III, the last of which is the funniest. By being outrageous in language, style and imagery, Jong insinuates that making a poem is serious stuff, not at all like this gimmickry, and that one ought not to consult sources other than oneself for inspiration. "Arse Poetica" in its prose form does not even pretend to be a poem, though that sort of distinction seems unimportant. Laughter, especially bawdy laughter, is all too rare in women's poetry. Its existence proves that the range of inspiration is lively and infinite wherever the human imagination is at work, and that whatever mystery touches the poet with its wings, the source of poetry is deeply human.
Chapter Seven

What Does it Mean to be a Woman?

In a large sense, the question that heads this Chapter has already been answered. Previous Chapters have focused on how women have defined themselves in reacting to specific facets of their lives. What remains to be examined are the poems which treat the fact of femaleness as a general experience inclusive of many facets. Though in this Section as in preceding ones there is a multiplicity of viewpoints, three attitudes can be seen to dominate: one which is critical of women's compliance in their own inferior status, one which is angry and often assumes a defensive superiority in regard to their victimization, and one which confirms inferiority as woman's destiny. Poems in which women are unhappy with their sex outweigh in number those in which the poets rejoice that they are women.

Considering the increasing dissatisfaction of twentieth-century women with their history of subservience, and taking into account also the general spiritual affliction of the western culture, the negative feeling in these poems is not surprising. Nor, in so many of them, is the lack of joy in positive feminine identification. What it means to be a woman cannot be separated from the culture, and ours is one which shows little real respect for the humanity of women. Even the time-honored role of mother has been tarnished. While we cannot regret that women no longer have to define themselves in traditional spheres, it is clear that we do not give adequate recognition to the work they still carry on in the home. And while they
still do not have much tenure or a forceful voice outside it, it is equally clear that the value systems which have defined the proper roles for woman as those of wife and mother (or denied her femininity as spinster) are losing their validity. Now that western countries have given them a choice in whether or not to bear children, many women are no longer accepting motherhood as their biological fate, their natural fulfillment, or even, their desire. Partly this is because, in North America, hardly anyone aware of what is going on has faith, any more, in the prospect of a marriage or any other form of sexual union lasting a lifetime. This brings to the fore a real dilemma.

For the first time in history women of child-bearing age are facing an option that was formerly settled for them by society. They are having to decide, individually and alone, whether or not to have children, marriage being a secondary consideration, if at all one. It is a new and somewhat terrifying responsibility, the source of much perplexity and doubt. For however much they may feel a desire for maternity, many women know that sooner or later, in all probability, their children face being brought up by only one parent, the mother; or by parents who arrange to look after them jointly, each having gone a separate way. Concern for the children is mixed with concern for themselves. Given that society discriminates against women economically and otherwise, their choice is not easy, nor can it be ignored. In a sense, the future rests upon it.

This stress is fairly recent. Other conflicts have been building all along, to finally erupt in the positive challenge of the women's movement, which seeks to resolve conflict through bringing women's real position into
line with their changed status in society. But the movement is less than a
decade old. Female poets were reflecting women's desire to assess themselves
and put their womanhood in perspective long before the movement took shape.
It has taken time to shake off ingrained attitudes, and the poems can only
show the unevenness of the process. The confusion the poets as a group
show in this Section as to where their strengths as women lie, and the
scorn they heap upon their sex in their concern for an image of themselves
they can accept, form a moving graph of the times. Their poems are a sort
of seismic register of the shocks women have sustained through shifts in
the social structuring of sex roles. There have been no guide-lines for
a critical self-appraisal. Nor have women had a history of their own to
bolster them in a sense of their worth. It is encouraging, therefore, to
note a change in the poetry from attitudes of defeat and resignation earlier
in the century to current attitudes of rebellion, shared initiative and
self-confidence, that hint at a new order. If, until recently, it was
still considered a curse to be born a woman, this is no longer so. The
tyrranny of male domination is being vigorously contested. When women still
flog women in their poetry, it is because they are demanding an end to
slavish attitudes which reinforce inferiority. The newest poems coming
out of these struggles and this consciousness indicate the shape of things
to come. It is instructive to compare these poems with poems of the way
women have lived up to now.

Most of the poets in this Section are self-critical, criticize their
sex as a whole or in part, see women as victims, weep helplessly, resign
themselves, express self-hatred, show suspicion and resentment of men,
rebel against women's social and sexual roles, take refuge in feeling superior, or render autobiographical accounts in which they document their efforts to overcome the negative images society has framed them in.

"Woman," by Pat Lowther, is a poem in this category, although the autobiographical voice could be Everywoman's. Nothing is included that might differentiate the speaker's experience from the experience of any other woman up until the time that contraceptive devices became available to her. It is necessary to add this because the poem treats biology as destiny, which it no longer is, if ever it was. I take it that the poet speaks for "Woman" in the abstract, or woman in history. Reviewing her life, the poet starts out with a mental concept:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{I think I wanted to be} \\
& \text{wings, the essence of wings} \\
& \text{or a universal symbiote}
\end{align*}
\]

She describes herself as a child who climbed trees and sang there, while "Feathers grew like leaves." Her mind expanded with light until it split "like a robin's egg." But, "still singing I took possession of the sky."

It was then she became aware of the "closed system" of her material existence: "Symbiosis had failed." Lonely, encapsulated in "cold space," she felt herself "a virus in the universe." The language hints that the poet is speaking in the context of original sin, as the beginning of part Two confirms:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Knowledge coarsened my flesh} \\
& \text{I grew heavy} \\
& \text{Stumbling down endless flights of stairs}
\end{align*}
\]

Here then is a parallel of the Fall. Inheriting earth and sea between the "poles of my knees/ an omen" she "Shrank/ into my body and beyond." In
the "warm thick cave of genesis," she became a slave to the whimpering womb
that hollow mouth that never says Enough until too late

Lowther lets the Christian myth lapse here, where the woman's real agony begins. Part Three presages a desperate rebellion. "Shrunken" now "between walls," she thinks of "electric storms/ in a bird's brain," and "of a tree/ as a slow paradigm/ for an explosion." Because the singing spirit of the child is still within her and will not be denied,

Some day there will be
feathers and blood
on the inside of the window.

It is a prophecy already fulfilled in the countless lives of women.

For those who no longer feel prisoners of their sex, the "window" can be opened, offering, like the metaphorical lens and shutter in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law," a more hopeful view. Adrienne Rich's poem documents stages in a contemporary woman's life and times. The poem incorporates quotations and allusions in each of its ten parts giving it the quality of a meditation on the relation of literature to life. Part One depicts a woman of the older generation who, though in the prime of her life, is living in the past, pathetically arrested by nostalgia for what she sees as her peak period, her success as a young "belle." Her

mind now, mouldering like wedding-cake,
heavy with useless experience, rich
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
crumbles under "the knife-edge/ of mere fact." Meanwhile her "nervy,
glowering" daughter "grows another way." Part Two takes us into the mind of this daughter who balks at the advice "They" have given her to look out for herself while ignoring the plight of others. She is deeply disturbed. In Three, the poet declares: "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters."

Nature, she says,

gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-flowers
the female pills, the terrible breasts
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes' heads and orchids.

She records a fight between two women whose frustration and spleen are turned against each other:

The argument ad feminam, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours,
ma semblable, ma soeur!

The Baudelairian adaptation shows them victims of their socialization. Part Four speaks of women's gifts as "no pure fruition, but a thorn." By way of illustration, the poet alludes to Emily Dickinson writing, "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—." In the two "snapshots" that follow, we see first a woman grooming herself to resemble a polished artefact, and next developing graces to ornament a man's life while denying herself the reach of her mind.

Part Seven begins with a quotation from Mary Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on the Education of Daughters concerning the need for a certain security in life; for which work, says Rich, "she was labelled harpy, shrew and whore."

Commenting next on Diderot's remark that women "all die at fifteen, Rich reflects:

Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were—fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition—
stirs like the memory of refused adultery
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.
Part Nine turns bitter as the poet wonders: "Times precious chronic invalid,—/ would we, darlings, resign it if we could?" Most women seem to have accepted the role of mediocrity, content with mere talent and "Bemused by male gallantry." There have been few applicants for the honor of being punished, as women brutally were, for casting "too bold a shadow," or for smashing "the mould straight off." "Well," begins the last part, "She's long about her coming, who must be/ more merciless to herself than history." The poem closes on a vision of that woman of promise.

Something of the same ground is covered by Erica Jong in "Alcestis on the Poetry Circuit," in which the mode is sharp and satiric. The case is succinctly put in the first stanza:

The best slave
does not need to be beaten.
She beats herself.

Jong's point of departure in this poem is the indignation she feels regarding the tragedy of women poets who took their own lives, in consequence of which society was spared the task of further punishing them for casting, as Rich says, "too bold a shadow." The poem makes points of the many ways in which women absorb and adapt to the master-sex ethic. They are quicker in every way to excel him by their self-abuse, they anticipate him, defer to him, follow his injunctions blindly, and content themselves with small talents rather than risking posing a threat to him intellectually or creatively. Though Jong's lines fall with heavy sarcasm, her purpose is corrective. Like other poets in this Section, she condemns the passive ways in which women have succumbed to the inferior roles assigned them.

Joyce Carol Oates takes up the theme in "Lines for Those to Whom
Tragedy is Denied." As the title suggests, the view in this poem is narrowed to a particular class of women, none of whom fall into Jong's category of gifted suicides. Oates reacts to the meaningless lives of a group of wealthy bored middle-class women who are no less victims of class and sex than their economically disadvantaged sisters. With nothing to do, the women of this milieu are wholly auxiliary to their husbands' lives, and in a lesser degree, to their children's. What disturbs the poet most is the inability of these women to communicate a sense of their humanity, which they seem to have submerged:

These women have no language and so they chatter
In the rhythm of stereotype that is won
After certain years and certain money.

The triviality of their speech, chunks of which she records, is an affront to a writer for whom language is life-blood, and the substance of lives traded for security and so manifestly deprived, a horror. She sees them as "metronomes or pendulums/ As their laments swing from one to the other"; of the five ladies, two, she tells us, "are divorced and/ Sad to say divorce awaits the others like death." They sit at a table in the polished Oak Room of the exclusive club, while under the drone of their talk, "their younger selves dream and drown." It is dubious if they remember what once was real to them: love, the boy husbands, the young wives they were, the babies so loved and feared. "When they were real were they real?" wonders the poet with a certain sardonic edge, comparing them to their energetic, successful husbands. "Ah, manly men!", she mocks, "--and stripped clean of the garments/ Of tawdry questions; What am I?" It is at least sadly certain that the sense of uselessness these women have about
themselves and which they convey, is real, muses the poet, fixing the five-o'clock scene with the poignant timelessness of a Rembrandt:

The table, the floor, the panelled walls are real
And real the density of bodies and
The images, like angels, of ladies settled and bizarre
As certain birds bred for color and song and beyond
Their youth's charm.

Harsh as this judgment of a class of women is, as poetry, its long melancholy lines convey an unmistakeable empathy with its subject.

There is no similarly evident feeling of compassion in Louise Bogan's poem of the twenties, entitled "Women." Measured and concise in form, it is a statement of undisguised contempt for her sex. In faultless quatrains, the poet lists women's faults: "Women have no wilderness in them," she begins: no ambition, no sense of beauty or responsiveness to nature, no adventure in their spirit, no flexibility, no self-critical perception. By the fourth stanza we are into an implicit comparison with their superiors.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

Bogan ends with a laconic dismissal of even the qualities of compassion and love which have been traditionally associated with women: "As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills/ They should let it go by."

They seem to have no judgment whatsoever, poor creatures. The poem pretends a severe objectivity, but it has the superiority of tone of a poet who regards her strength as masculine, and must deny in herself and others any quality that suggests feminine inferiority, which she endorses. In taking the male norm as her standard, Bogan's criticism of women belongs to the self-oppressing type Rich and Jong view with such dismay.
Denise Levertov's "Hypocrite Women," on the other hand, is as stringent an act of self-criticism as it is a criticism of others of her sex whom she sees sharing her guilt. Their crimes are, first of all, that women seldom speak "of our own doubts, while dubiously/ we mother man in his doubt!" Levertov cites a specific occasion to illustrate the point: a seminar in which "a white sweating bull of a poet told us/ our cunts are ugly." The shock of this crudity is barely sustained when she follows it up with "--why didn't we/ admit we have thought so too?" adding with parenthetical humor, "(And/ what shame? They are not for the eye!)." In taking up the challenge to her sex, she is careful to balance negative with negative; she refuses the man's game, as he has set it up, of superiority versus inferiority. She refuses to be humiliated. In fact she goes one better than his bald insult, offering a description that is far more poetic: "They are dark and wrinkled and hairy,/ caves of the Moon." Women like herself, says the poet—not defending but including them in her self-criticism—have been cowardly not to own up to cold, anti-life feelings which they share with men. Fearful of confirming the kind of contempt exemplified by the "bull of a poet," women "play and plead," "Whorishly" concealing their true feelings. Levertov feels along a deeper level in expressing pain for the way women have mutilated what was hopeful in themselves: their dreams; with what frivolity we have pared them like toenails, clipped them like ends of split hair.

It is the vanity of dancing to the man's expectation of her that Levertov regrets most in her sex, and which she "splits no hairs" over. She would have women claim their full humanity with honesty and courage, free of the fear of disapproval.
While self-criticism is spirited and therapeutic, in the case of poets like Levertov, in others it is apt to be self-damning and negative. In "A Woman in Her Secret Life," Oates pursues her pessimistic studies of her sex, this time speaking in the first person. "There is nothing of airplanes in me," she begins, recalling Bogan's line: "Women have no wilderness in them," her image also bringing to mind Lowther's "I think I wanted to be/ wings." But here, "Nothing gets remembered/ in me except what turns to bone." The speaker feels herself part of natural forces—their unconscious instrument; she grows away from her family only "to pollute myself in the bone/ of strangers, of men," who efface her features. She is without a past, without even an identity: "a saint's stare burned blind by wind/ a life yawned away in flesh." This is perhaps the bleakest vision of all concerning humanity.

Though outrageous if taken at its word, May Swenson's poem "Woman" offers a witty and amusing contrast to such gloom as Oates'. "Woman" is a graphically shaped poem whose design on the page is a pair of vertical zigzags which could be said to resemble the lower half of a human figure with legs bent at the knee. The gist of this poem is stated in the upper part of it, which one might view as the hips. Beginning with the premise:

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Women
should be
pedestals
moving
pedestals
moving
to the
motions
of men
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on the left, the right side expands the idea that women should be "little horses," rocking horses to be exact; the line of poetry drawn across the
bend of the crotch summing it up: "the gladdest things in the toyroom."

Women, the poem goes on to say, should be ridden until "the restored/ egos
dismount and the legs stride away," these legs, of course, belonging to
men. The last-quoted line is drawn across the knees. The lowest part of the
poem ends with a repetition of the original premise. It is hard to tell
whether or not this poem is meant as a joke, though I strongly suspect it
is. The oversweet tone of the language certainly suggests the poet is
laughing up her sleeve. On the other hand, the poem may be intended simply
as what it appears to be: a Concrete rendering, not of what woman is, but
of what she ought to be, in traditional opinion. Even so, it is a mocking
satire upon what men require of women. Swenson does not engage herself at
a personal level of sexual identity. For instance, "Sun" is a poem in
which she salutes the title object as masculine and independent, superior to
the dependent moon-earth relationship she identifies as the feminine principle.
And in "A Bird's Life" (not presented here), Swenson makes the sun feminine
in the guise of a hen, Mother Light to the birds whose life is metaphorically
hatched anew each dawn. The subtle, serious whimsy of this poet prevents
the kind of direct identification invited by the bulk of the poets in this
Anthology.

"Woman to Woman" by Lynne Lawner returns us to the soberly negative
approach to women's lot. Comparing the relationship between two women to the
relationship between a woman and a man, she finds the latter one superior.
Her argument is simply that men and women can breed, while "woman to woman
is wave upon wave/ And breeds something pure, useless and dumb." This
may mean merely that she finds the heterosexual relation more to her taste,
but it implies that as people, women have no creative effect upon each other, though it does allow, sadly, that women can create a useless sort of beauty between themselves. I therefore read this poem as Lawner's considered opinion that woman is only justified through expressing her function as a reproducer of the race. If Lawner is speaking of sexually-oriented, or Lesbian love between women, her terms "pure, useless and dumb" only apply if one sees the producing of children as the only goal and justification of physical love between people—a narrowly religious view that belongs to past rather than present reality. If she is talking of friendship on the one hand and sex on the other, she is comparing two unequal things. A poet whose underlying assumption is that "men's needs" come before women's is confirming that heterosexuality bestows on men the rights of a master sex. The motive of the poem is seen in its sorrowing personal denial of a female beloved. In generalizing from the particular, though not intending to offer criticism, helpful or otherwise, of women, the poem nevertheless does them a disservice. "Woman to Woman" sings as a lyric. As a statement of women's place, it has none of the saving grace of wit and humor which enliven Swenson's "put-down."

We move now from poems employing various critical attitudes to those expressing commiserative ones, within which women's suffering serves as the motif. To begin with, woman's lot is symbolized, for Dilys Laing, in the pain borne by Christ's mother. "Stabat Mater" expresses a woman's compassion for what women are made to endure through man's inhumanity to man. It is the mother men crucify: "In love's long execution she/ is fixed upon the human tree." What is done to her son is done to her, as the poet's use of
couplets helps to underline. The poem ends: "and since the day that he was born/ she has felt the stabbing thorn." One is tempted to view this last image as phallic and infer that Laing is also charging man with his sexual domination of women, a suggestion supported by the more obvious insinuation in "Pious Thought," Laing's poem in Section Three.

Though not, like Laing, a feminist, Edith Sitwell shares her religious sensibility: both are Christian idealists in the warmest human sense.

Sitwell's "Tears" is a poem which comes out of the same period as her poem in Section Two lamenting the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. The weeping in "Tears" is of a magnitude to cover the earth, drenching it in sorrow, as its opening lines presage:

My tears were Orion's splendor with sextuple suns and the
Million
Flowers in the fields of heaven, where solar suns are setting—

Sitwell's long run-on lines fall like sheets of rain, as she weeps for "the/ splendors within Man's heart with the darkness warring"; for "the beautiful queens of the world, like a flower-bed shining--"; for Venus intellectualized; for "love changed" to scientific progress; and finally, for "darkened Man, that complex multiplicity" of natural elements. Her final line: "Hard diamond, infinite sun," unifies two processes, which might be called the physical and the spiritual: the dark one of the earth, with the equally mysterious one of the sky—both necessary to life. Sitwell grieves for an endangered world in which the balance of nature has been lost. Her tears form part of the dark fall-out. The past tense, however, indicates that, at the time of writing, the poet had recovered her Christian optimism.

The weeping of women is also the theme of "Lake-Song," by Jean Starr Untermeyer, a poet of the same generation as Laing and Sitwell. Written
in the twenties, this poem represents women's misery as paralleling a rhythm in nature: the lapping of lakewater. The tone has a sort of twilight gloom:

So ever do we cry,
A soft, unmutinous crying,
When we know ourselves each a princess
Locked fast within her tower.

Given how her imagination has been stirred, it is still hard to see why the poet has chosen to characterize women solely through passive tears and not angry or rebellious ones. Her ending to the poem furnishes the clue: "The fertile tears of women/That water the dreams of men." Woman's grief then is useful, and even necessary, and thus must be accepted as inevitable. Mutinous tears, one supposes, would disturb the "natural" order. It is instructive to compare "fertile tears" with "fertilisante douleur" (Rich's reference, in "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law") in order to see the changes in women's outlook wrought in the fifty years that have passed between these poets' publication of their respective poems. Women poets of today are not apt to express so fatalistic a masochism as Untermeyer, and indeed, as she demonstrates in "Snapshots," Rich's response to such sickness of spirit is medicinal.

"Translations," by Rich, gives us one more poem concerning sorrow. But here there is a specific orientation. Rich is sadly vexed that women become each other's enemies; they give their loyalties to the men they love, who betray them, rather than to each other, which would be in their better interest in overcoming a common oppression. Reading contemporary poets her age and younger translated from other languages, she discovers that any one of them has something in common with the others: certain words recur,
Rich visualizes this woman, in a sort of filmic sequence of images, going about her daily work, and calling to a man over the phone; it rings unanswered in his bedroom, as he tells the woman with him, "Never mind. She'll get tired." It is this sister who becomes her enemy and will in her own time light her own way to sorrow.

This is the "political," or divide-and-rule way of grief Rich says is "shared, unnecessary," and therefore, not to be treated as inevitable. Where a politics of oppression becomes unbearable enough, poets like Rich imply, a politics of revolution is sure to arise.

One of the points most hammered in this thesis has been that women define themselves through love. Rich says they have gone about it in a way that wrongs their sisters. It is mainly to them she addresses her latest poems. Diane Wakoski, however, is obsessed with women being wronged by men who do not love them enough, or for the right reasons. She addresses herself to men. Her two poems in this Section take up the cause of two kinds of women she sees typed by men: the outwardly plain, unattractive kind, and the outwardly beautiful one. If men marry the plain woman, they desert her for the beautiful one: both are maltreated, exploited. Men, she complains, are unworthy of the women who love them; this leaves women yearning to be loved with sensitivity and understanding, for themselves.

In "Reaching Out with the Hands of the Sun," Wakoski speaks in
the voice of a woman who insists she is unloved on account of her lack of physical beauty:

I am pooh-poohed every time I say it.
"a woman of your intelligence,"
etc., etc., believing such a superficial thing.

But Wakoski bitterly protests she knows different. She has "ruled," walking everywhere disguised, omnisciently observing the life around her. She knows that "even the poets" (meaning men) whom she exalts, "Upset their lives, leave their good wives," for a beautiful woman "when one walks by."

The plain ones

with fat thighs
or small breasts
or thin delicate hair

would trade all the wealth of their "opulent hearts," their minds and their bodies, "for some beauty/ they could recognize." Though one can protest that Wakoski does not speak for a great many women, one cannot doubt the feeling behind such an extreme statement.

"A Poet Recognizing the Echo of the Voice" is a sort of companion piece to the above. In its three subtitled parts, Wakoski gives us the other woman's story. Part One, "Isolation of Beautiful Women," speaks in the first person plural of the loneliness of women whose beauty fires men's imaginations and dreams; women who are plundered for their riches but whom men do not ask to "share their lives." Such women "live: the (loneliness/ that men run after," their feminine substance hardening under the pressure, like "the precious rocks of the earth." Though the poet sees women ravaged
by men's "failure to understand and love us," and by men's "unwillingness to face the world/ as staunchly as we do," she finds some comfort in women's indestructibility:

We are the earth.
We wake up
finding ourselves
glinting in the dark
after thousands of years
of pressing.

The metaphor is expanded in Part Two: "Movement to Establish My Identity." Woman is conceived as a mine for whose riches men are willing to cover themselves with dirt and work hard. Wakoski puns on the synonymity of women and possession:

Mine is a place.
Mine is a designation.
A man says, "it is mine,"
but he hacks

In the third part, "Beauty," the speaker wonders what would happen to her if she stopped doing and being all the things people admire, expect, enjoy, demand and dream of her. "Who would I be?" she questions:

Where is the real me
I want them all to love?

We are all the textures we wear.

And so women seek the man who looks beyond the textures, the one who "will not punish us/ for our beauty," but will be its match:

the one
we all anticipate
pretending these small pedestrians
jaywalking into our lives
are he.

The poem concludes with the image of women burning
in our heads at night
  the incense of our histories, finding
you have used our skulls
  for ashtrays.

Though Wakoski's typical persona never finds her male equal, her anger and recriminations demand a certain respect. She is never submissive and resigned.

If anything, she is a warrior, superior in strength to the male she both beseeches and berates.

Wakoski demonstrates an interesting tendency in women. In common with minorities having a history of oppression, women often view themselves as morally or otherwise superior to those to whom they are subject, and in this they are in fact encouraged. Though such superiority may be true in individual cases, such attitudes are largely defensive. They present no threat to the people with power. It is only the women who call upon other women to resist their being made inferior, who draw men's group enmity. We have seen this feminist impulse at work throughout the Anthology. In quite a different context are the poems by Wakoski, May Sarton, Mona Van Duyn, and Elinor Wylie here, each of whom, in her own way, settles for male domination. They represent women who draw their strength from having made the best of a bad bargain. Their poems praise woman for her special genius, for her wisdom, and most of all, for her endurance.

In "Dutch Interior," May Sarton muses on a seventeenth-century genre painting with sympathetic identification. She responds to "the charm" of "This safe enclosed room where a woman sews," approving its traditional air:

  The atmosphere is all domestic, human,
  Chaos subdued by the sheer power of need.
  This is a room where I have lived as a woman.

The poet thinks of the cold, wild danger of the elements, especially of the
sea which, as the domain of men, lies outside the realm of this painting. "How many from this quiet room have drowned?" she conjectures. The figure bent to her sewing keeps all grief within herself, outwardly calm, "remaking chaos into an intimate order." The trouble with this image is that it reinforces a stereotype of the ideal woman who makes the best of her passive lot. Sarton admires the woman's home-making role, her ability to absorb the shocks and conflicts of the outside world: she provides a haven of peace for others. But to fix woman in the role of quiet world-centre is to doom her there, denying her the right and obligation to conduct her own struggle for existence, as Anna Wickham so eloquently protests in her poem "Divorce," in Section Five. It is also to deny her the opportunity of defining herself as an individual in the many ways that man has. Sarton's admiration and compassion for the woman who waits out her "storm" patiently by making a human place in the world is as conservative as her genre subject.

Elinor Wylie, in "Let No Charitable Hope," takes a pragmatic, or what some might call a "realistic," approach. She refuses comparison with the eagle and the antelope, or with what these images of freedom and wild grace convey. She was born to human loneliness, she is bound to human conditions, which are especially hard on the female. But she does not deny the necessity for struggle and independence:

I am, being Woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get.

The passing of the years "In masks outrageous and austere," cannot subdue her spirit; they have not deserved her fear and they have not escaped her smile. She is strong, she endures.
Mona Van Duyn's female prototype in "Leda Reconsidered" endures because she is wise in the ways of men and gods, who are after all the same thing. In this poem Van Duyn gives us a sequel to "Leda," discussed in Chapter Five. As a symbol, Leda is, of course, the woman who has to submit to a superior force: she has no choice. In reconsidering the myth, Van Duyn comes to the conclusion that Leda, having had time to size up the situation, and, being wise in the ways of necessity, chose to submit. This seems, at first to bestow a certain dignity on Leda. But let us examine the poem.

"Leda Reconsidered" is a psychological portrait of Leda's mind during the time the swan came out of the water "and came toward her." She is from the first a match for the god; awaiting him calmly, she has

    the look of a woman
    with a context in which she can put
    what comes next

She considers him objectively, assessing herself as she must appear to him, and then deciding on what she will do. She is too circumspect

    to see, to take
    of what was not hers, of what
    was not going to be offered.

Besides, she is "not that hungry for experience." Nor is she "short-sighted" enough to reach "past the bird, short of the god,/ for a vulnerable mid-
point," and hold on there, though this option, too, goes through her mind before being dismissed as a possible "major injustice to the world's/
possibilities." Here is the crux of the matter, for, despite her noting his cool arrogance, "she saw him/ as the true god." She is moved to see "the pain of his transformations," which wins her compassion:

    She saw what he had to work through
    as he took, over and over,
    the risk of love,
and she is moved, too, by his dream, his wish to be received by the world "in the image of what is brave or golden." She is perceptive enough to see through his ambitions to their vanity, and can thus feel a certain maternal superiority. How very different this is from Yeats' vision of the helpless girl with her "terrified, vague fingers." This Leda is sure of herself, almost as if she were in control of the situation.

But Van Duyn has to come to terms with the myth, however smoothly she does it. With no change in mood or rhythm, we suddenly have the anomaly of a shrewdly insightful Leda naively confessing to herself that she had never tried "To love with the whole imagination." She even wonders if, for her as for the god, there is "a form for that?" Worse, she denigrates her sex with no apparent reason:

Deep, in her inmost, grubby female center
(how could he know that,
in his airiness?)
lay the joy of being used,
and its heavy peace, perhaps,
would keep her down.

So she accepts the act of surrender for herself, finding her joy in the god's pleasure. Unlike Yeats' Leda, she does not raise the question of whether she "put on his knowledge with his power." This woman has her own power, her way of dealing with reality. She does it so well that he gratefully comes on her "almost with tenderness." The poem closes with the image of her hand moving through his plumes "to touch/ the utter stranger." There is, after all, no human communion. Leda and Zeus are of different species. Thus Van Duyn confirms the male in his godly dominance, taking the kind of folk-wisdom view that the woman anyway gets what she wants out of it. For this she is prepared to stay "down," though the "perhaps" admits that she
may find it difficult. The flaw in the argument is, that while it is deeply
human to take joy in being used as an equal, there is something slavish in
submitting to the pleasure of being used as an inferior. Carried to an
extreme, such pleasures form the basis of pornography, e.g., The Story of O.
Van Duyn's interpretation leaves woman in her traditional rut, which is
perhaps all one can do with a myth highlighting woman's sexual desirability,
rather than man's imperialistic greed, as a root cause of war. For however
Leda may personify Greece, her role in the myth reinforces the Greek rationale
that the motive for making war on Troy was the recapture of Helen. Van Duyn
shows how women can confuse the use made of them in the male desire for
conquest and domination with the simple biological use of their sex, submission to male authority being accepted by such women as the necessary human
design.

"Morning Laughter," by Gwendolyn MacEwen, is a tribute to womanhood
which implicitly rejects man as the norm against which woman's worth is to be measured. It is a daughter's testament of love and gratitude addressed to her mother. The poet claims the biological bond between the two as the continuing source of her strength and joy. The poem begins with the unborn child

trailing long seed, unwombed
   to the giant vagina, unarmed,
no sprung Athene

and follows the course of birth and growth of the poet. As she rejects a
patriarchal origin in Zeus, so she rejects male deification in her "common
coming, a genesis/ sans trumpets and myrrh." Years have "tied the sweet
cord" between mother and daughter, their hopes hoisted to a "common
denominator" of "blood and bone." Knowing now "in my own rebellious belly/
the stuff to people further days," the poet rejoices in the adult bond between
them. They move in harmony, sharing laughter, the mother smiling at the
pen the daughter

picks, armed to bring light
into terrible focus
and the paper builds worlds but makes no prodigal.

The idea of maleness is delicately negated in the poem, as the above
quotations show. The poet, in her testament, wishes to

acknowledge now, armed and still insolent
that what is housed in the fragile skull
—light or learning or verbal innocence—
grows from the woman somehow who housed the whole body,
who first fed the vessels, the flesh and the sense.

We have met this close sense of kinship before, in Section Five, notably in
Lori Whitehead's poem "Mother Singing."

In "The Tightrope," Anne Wilkinson begins with a birth which "stranded
me here." Her progress since then has been uncertain and beset with danger.
She is as alone as Elinor Wylie's persona, without that woman's fiercely
grounded resourcefulness. Wilkinson's speaker teeters crazily on her existen­
tial tightrope, and seems mostly to be "Waiting":

But I am two times born
And when a new moon cuts the night
Or full moons froth with my
And witches' milk

I walk the tightrope
Free and easy as an angel

So again, to be a woman is to be given a second life, a biological hold on
reality that enables her to overcome all hardships.
As may have been remarked throughout these chapters, the moon occupies an established place in the poetry of women. This Section has its share with two more such poems, one by Anne Sexton, one by Denise Levertov. In "Moon Song, Woman Song," Sexton speaks as though she is the moon; she is "alive at night," and "dead; in the morning," no romantic goddess and "No miracle. No dazzle." The speaker, weary with experience, and proud with the sense of her primacy, shows only contempt for the world she depicts as male. Still, she has a certain responsibility for the man "tall" in his "battle dress"; she "must arrange" for his journey. As regards herself,

I was always a virgin,
old and pitted.
Before the world was, I was.

The view of herself is harsh, but her view of mankind is harsher. She invites inquiries: she is not "artificial," she maintains with some scorn. Her reproachful conclusion is in a very human voice:

I have looked long upon you,
love-bellied and empty,
flipping my endless display
for you, you my cold, cold
coverall man.

The voice has a marked affinity with Wakoski's in this Section.

In the poem by Levertov concerning the moon's influence, the poet contrasts two kinds of women. "In Mind" projects first, "a woman/ of innocence, unadorned," who is simple, kind, clean and modest, but who has "no imagination." The other woman is one with whom the poet clearly identifies: a

turbulent moon-ridden girl
or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rage, feathers
and torn taffeta,
who knows strange songs--
This woman, however, is "not kind." Following her nature, she is unconcerned with socially approved behavior. Pulled by the lunar mystery, she leans to its laws.

Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Battle," is a poem in a very different mood which also juxtaposes two women. The speaker is a poor young black woman, artless and direct. "Moe Belle Jackson's husband/ Whipped her good last night," she says confidentially, relating how her "ma" heard about the fight from the landlady. The speaker thinks indignantly of how she would like to have taken a knife to the man:

> But if I know Moe Belle,  
> Most like, she shed a tear,  
> And this mornin' it was probably,  
> "More grits, dear?"

Here, in dramatic capsule, is the "kind" forgiving woman who has helped the world go round by giving violence and arrogant abuse her love. Brooks ironically lets her have the last word in this short monologue.

We end with Levertov's "Stepping Westward," a poem of self-definition that speaks of womanhood with a humanity that embraces the world in embracing itself. Levertov approves the full range of her sexual being:

> If woman is inconstant,  
> good, I am faithful to  
> ebb and flow, I fall  
> in season

This is a "time of ripening," not of sin or woman's frailty. But, says Levertov, if her part "is to be true,/ a north star," she can approve her nature with the same equanimity, being at one with the natural universe. Levertov is one of those rare contemporary beings who feel no conflict in what or who they are; experiencing herself as part of the wholeness of
life, she can rejoice that

There is no savor
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be
what, woman,

and who, myself,
I am

Bearing burdens, she can transmute them into experience that nourishes her growth, and be grateful, conceiving them as "gifts, goods." They become a basket

of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me

in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.

With this lovely sensory image—at once so optimistic and so practical—we leave the poets, the living, like Levertov, each going her own creative way. Perhaps she stands a little apart in this, among today's poets. Her commitment to fighting war and injustice, however, puts her in the forefront of the political struggle against oppression along with those whose central cause is the freeing of women's full humanity from its past yoke.

What is new in this century, judging from the sensitive gauge of their poetry, is that an increasing number of women have learned that, in ideological isolation from each other, they have little or nothing with which to counter male domination. These poets are successfully challenging the stereotype of women who must look to men to validate them. Many of the poets now dead, like Bogan, Laing, Sitwell, Wylie and Wilkinson in this Section, express attitudes that are conventional for their times, Laing being the only one of these five to speak on behalf of women's liberation. Like her sister
feminist in England, Anna Wickham, she has passed almost into poetic oblivion. Of the others in this Section, all very much alive and publishing, Jong and Rich are obvious feminists, and only Lawner and Sarton seem to adhere uncritically to the past, approving traditional roles for women. Among the rest are Lowther, on the verge of rebellion; Oates, alienated, and appalled by what she sees of women's state; Wakoski, independent and angry, but all the same craving men to love her and confirm her sense of her worth; Swenson, viewing the scene with an ironic eye but staying aloof within her poetic identity; MacEwen, implying the superiority of a matriarchal scheme over the traditional one; Brooks, balancing her compassion between the self-punishing victim and the proud, angry one; Sexton, scornful as the omniscient, primal virgin mother who is weary with her son's failure to live up to his humanity; and finally, Levertov, balanced and whole in her approach to life, presenting an image of woman and poet that is nothing less than inspiring.

The variety of attitudes does not lend itself to a simple generalization. We can discern patterns among them, that is all. What it means to be a woman denotes, in this century, not a fixed or predictable state, but a state of change. We are participating in a process that has suddenly grown more agitated and more hopeful than many among us have ever dared to believe. Poetry which places self-determination as the goal for women is not only revolutionary, but may well be making the only political prediction of our times that the future bears out. Amid the intense self-analysis of women's poetry today, the only certain thing is that the poetry will transcend the need for defense and counter-attack, becoming free to embrace brothers as well as sisters, and, indeed, helping to liberate a world which has long suffered the oppression of women.
III.

NOTES
Historical Introduction

5. Campbell, p. 446.
10. Dronke, p. 31.
17. Ibid., p. 8.
18. Ibid., p. 29.
19. Ibid., p. 221 ff.
20. *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians*, ed. Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines. References to penalties for adultery will be found in the following pages: 36, 51, 81, 102, 175, 228.
21. **Lays of Courtly Love in Verse Translation** by Patricia Terry, p. xi.

22. Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, p. 165, p. 184. Kelly offers the surmise about Marie de France being King Henry II's sister, Dunn the surmise that she was of an aristocratic French family.


24. Ibid., p. 3


26. Ibid., p. 29.


28. Amy Kelly, p. 87.

29. Ibid., pp. 162-63.

30. Ibid., pp. 163-64.


35. Ibid., p. 166.


37. C.S. Lewis, p. 158.


40. C.S. Lewis, p. 247.

41. Ibid., pp. 249 ff.
42. see Elizabethan Lyrics From the Original Texts, chosen, ed. and arranged by Norman Ault.


44. The Female Poets of Great Britain, ed. Frederic Rowton, pp. 8-10.

45. Not in God's Image, p. 186.


50. These two poems are respectively: "To the Fair Clorinda, who made Love to me, imagin'd more than Woman," and the epilogue to Sir Patient Fancy, both quoted in George Woodcock's The Incomparable Aphra (London: T. V. Boardman & Co. Ltd., 1948). The former poem is quoted entire by Woodcock, pp. 114-115, the latter, p. 136.


52. Ibid., p. 9.

53. Ibid., p. 136.

54. Ibid., p. 236.


56. Quoted in By A Woman Writt, ed. Joan Goulianos, p. 71. The lines are from Finch's poem "The Introduction."

57. E. M. W. Tillyard, Some Mythical Elements in English Literature, pp. 89-90.


61. Ibid., p. 15.
62. Ibid., pp. 195-98.


64. The poem is quoted in The Distaff Muse: an Anthology of Poetry Written by Women, comp. Clifford Bax and Meum Stewart, p. 29.

65. Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

66. Ibid., pp. 37, 38.

67. Loc. cit.

68. Virginia L. Radley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

69. Women's Liberation and Literature, ed. Elaine Showalter, p. 121.


75. The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, p. x.


77. Conrad Aiken, loc. cit.

78. Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," in Sewall, p. 23.


80. Tate, in Sewall, p. 27.

81. Aiken, in Sewall, p. 15.

84. Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 66.
85. The Female Poets of Great Britain, ed. F.R. Rowton.
86. The British Female Poets, ed. George W. Bethune.
88. The Distaff Muse, p. 73.
89. Not in God's Image, p. 321.
90. see Rowton, The Female Poets of Great Britain, p. 422.
91. Ibid., P. 419.
92. Ibid., p. 291.
93. Gertrude Stein, "I am Rose," in A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, ed. Oscar Williams, p. 774. (The source for this quote is simply given as G. Stein.)
94. "It is a truism of the Lost Generation," says a reviewer, "that she [Stein] influenced Hemingway's style crucially. He took her schematic use of sound patterns and transmogrified it into the spare, stylized prose that became the most pervasive literary parlance of the century." From a review (of Charmed Circle by James R. Mellow) by Martha Duffy in Time, March 4, 1974, p. 70.
95. See Concrete Poetry: A World View, ed., with an Introd. by Mary Ellen Solt, pp. 21, 47, 86.

Critical Commentary: Foreword

2. For example: see review article on Atwood by A. W. Purdy in Canadian Literature No. 47, Winter, 1971, pp. 80-4. Ambivalent towards a writer he feels forced to admire despite basic disagreements that he doubts she would countenance from him in person ("besides, she's a woman, even though very intelligent"), he reveals his chagrin at being bested by a female poet. He ends by paying her "a high compliment. Atwood may even deserve it."

4. In citing Wellek and Warren (Theory of Literature) and Frye (Anatomy of Criticism) I mean to point up a related, general tendency especially among The New Critics to see the poem as a self-sufficient object, with laws intrinsic to itself and not to be judged by extra-artistic considerations.

5. See Concrete Poetry: A World View, pp. 12, 47 ff., 85, 86.


7. Or Spatialisme, a term coined by Pierre Garnier, spokesman for the concrete movement in France, who in 1963 circulated a manifesto, which several poets signed, accommodating all types of experimental poetry; "Reserving," says an editor, "the name 'concrete' for poetry working with language—material, creating structures with it, transmitting primarily aesthetic information." See Concrete Poetry: A World View, pp. 32 ff. for further discussion.

8. Ibid., p. 13, p. 27, p. 48.


Critical Commentary: Chapter One


5. Frazer, op. cit., p. 405.


Critical Commentary: Chapter Two

1. Denise Levertov, Relearning the Alphabet.


4. A History of The Modern World, third ed., R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, p. 841. The authors state here that Second World War statistics "reported some fifteen million military deaths and at least that many civilian fatalities. ... and no one could begin to estimate the complete toll of human lives lost in the war, directly or indirectly, from the bombings, the mass-extermination and deportation policies of the Germans, the post-war famines and epidemics."

Critical Commentary: Chapter Four


2. Dronke, MLREL, p. 2. See also my reference to his discussion of the secular women's tradition, pp. 24, 25 in the Historical Introduction.


4. see n. 50, Historical Introduction.

5. The poems of H.D. do not lend themselves to this thesis, her poetry being mostly committed to a celebration of the classical Greece so beloved by the Romantics.

Critical Commentary: Chapter Five


Critical Commentary: Chapter Six

1. Four Young Women: Poems, ed. and Introduced by Kenneth Rexroth, p. x.

2. Eva Figes, Patriarchal Attitudes, p. 17

3. See discussion pp. 77-80 in my Foreword to the Critical Commentary on the Poems in the Anthology.

IV.

LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED
List of Works Consulted

A. Historical Introduction and Critical Commentary on the Poems in the Anthology


Wickham, Anna. THE MAN WITH A HAMMER. London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1916.


B. Anthology


Finnegan, Joan. It Was Warm and Sunny When We Set Out. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1970. For "A Woman in Love is all the Trees."


-----. *Overland to the Islands.* Highlands, North Carolina: Jonathan Williams, 1958. For "Illustrious Ancestors."


Untermeyer, Jean Starr. "Lake Song." In Untermeyer Anthology, as noted directly above.


-----. *Songs*. By John Oland [pseud.]. N. d. For "Divorce."


APPENDIX

V.

ANTHOLOGY

Shapes of Experience:
Selected Poems of Twentieth Century Women Poets
SECTION ONE

Experiencing One's Body

Margaret Atwood . . . . . . . . from Power Politics, p. 46.
Joyce Carol Oates . . . . . . . . A Girl at the Centre of her Life
Adrienne Rich . . . . . . . . from Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib, 7/23/68
Emily Sion. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . All Anatomy
May Sarton. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . An Artesian Well

Gwendolyn Brooks . . . . . . . . The Mother
Anne Sexton . . . . . . . . . . . . The Abortion

Lynne Lawner. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . May Song
Edna St. Vincent Millay . . . . . . . . Menses
Miriam Waddington . . . . . . . . Women Who Live Alone

Pat Lowther . . . . . . . . . . . . . . May Chant
Sandra McPherson . . . . . . . . Pregnancy
Genevieve Taggard . . . . . . . . With Child

Anne Sexton . . . . . . . . . . . . Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . In Celebration of my Uterus
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . The Breast
Diane Wakoski . . . . . . . . . . . . Belly Dancer
Gwendolyn MacEwen . . . . . . . . Lilith
May Sarton. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . The Godhead as Lynx
Gwendolyn MacEwen . . . . . . . . Womb: Some Thoughts and Observations
What is it, it does not
move like love, it does
not want to know, it
does not want to stroke, unfold

it does not even want to
touch, it is more like
an animal (not
loving) a
thing trapped, you move
wounded, you are hurt, you hurt,
you want to get out, you want
to tear yourself out, I am

the outside, I am snow and
space, pathways, you gather
yourself, your muscles

clutch, you move
into me as though I
am (wrenching
your way through, this is
urgent, it is your
life) the
last chance for freedom
There may be some way back
she thinks, past familiar homes
that will look painful now
and the hammer of cries in her blood,
past the unchanged sky that is any sky—
“What time is it?” is her mind’s question.

This field is any field beyond the town,
and twenty miles from her parents’ house.
Twenty miles takes you anywhere,
In the country you must curve
and calculate to get
where you’re going, accounting for great
blocks of farms selfish with land, and creeks,
and uncrossable boneyards of rock and junk.
This is any field, then, being so far.

Its silence and its indifferent rustling
of mice and birds of any field
make her want to cry in a delirium:
“Let me be off to soak in hot water,
bright hot water, or to brush my hair
in a girl’s fury drawing the hairs out
onto the gold-backed brush—”
At the place of her heart is
a hot closed fist.
It is closed against the man who waits
for her at the car....

How to release to the warm air
such a useless riot of hate?
Lacking love, her casual song
fell swiftly to hate, a dark vengeance
of no form, and unpracticed—
A dragonfly skims near, like metal.
Into her eyesight burns the face
of this man, half a boy,
who stands puzzled
on one shore, she on another.
Her brain pounds. ... Who will not see
what she has become? Who will not know?
There is no confronting this blunder
of pains and lusts opened
like milkweed, scattered casually with wind,
soft and flimsy, adhesive to human touch
and delicate as a pillow’s suffocation.
A hypnosis of milkweed!
A young girl, in terror not young,
is no colt now but a sore-jointed cow
whose pores stutter for help, help,
and whose sweaty skin has gathered
seeds upon it, and tiny dry bits of grass.
7/17/68

Armitage of scrapiron for the radiations of a moon. 
Flower cast in metal, Picasso-woman, sister. 

Two hesitant Luna moths regard each other 
with the spots on their wings: fascinated. 

To resign yourself—what an act of betrayall 
— to throw a runaway spirit back to the dogs. 

When the ebb-tide pulls hard enough, we are all starfish. 
The moon has her way with us, my companion in crime. 

At the Aquarium that day, between the white whale's loneliness 
and the groupers' mass promiscuities, only ourselves. 

7/23/68

When your sperm enters me, it is altered;  
when my thought absorbs yours, a world begins. 

If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student, 
he is simply practising rape, and deserves at best our pity. 

To live outside the law! Or, barely within it, 
a twig on boiling waters, enclosed inside a bubble. 

Our words are jammed in an electronic jungle;  
sometimes, though, they rise and wheel croaking above the treetops. 

An open window; thick summer night; electric fences trilling.  
What are you doing here at the edge of the death-camps, Vivaldi?
ALL ANATOMY

(SCULPTURE OF A SELF GLORIED CLITO-ORGASM)

the sun convulses the hill

splits the plain's ten layers
splits the horizon resisting
splits the sunfall recalled

the reined sun

gallops
gallops
gallops
gallops

unbridles

till all anatomy

dissolves into hooves of light
AN ARTESIAN WELL

The well-drillers
Came in winter.
Their dinosaur,
Rigid and slimy,
Toweréd over the house;
For days it loomed there
Smothered in snow.

At last they roused it.
The steel phallus
Began its pounding
Through the thick clay,
Through layers of sand,
Searching out rock—
Tons of violence
Against tons of inertia.
Could any good
Come of this battle?

Stopped by a boulder,
They exploded their way down,
Brutal, with dynamite—
Sprayed the house with mud.
What had happened below?
What frightful splinters?
What shudder?
What shattering?
Could any good come of this
Rape of the earth?

It went on all day—
No escape, no haven—
Through what resistance,
Toward what anguish?
I who paced the floors
Had commanded it.

And locked together
In gritty patience,
We pressed cold faces
Against the cellar wall,
Listening, listening
For the hard rock.
And at last
The stone resounded:
We had reached the ledges.

In that troubled year
I had not seen luck's face
But at last I did.
Eighty-five feet down
Under our hands,
Under the clay,
Under the sand,
Under the boulders,
Under the long drought
In the hard ledges,
We struck it—
Five gallons a minute.
Flowing water
Sprang out in a fountain.

I wept like a woman
Who, after long labor,
Sees the living child.
I felt like the earth.
the mother

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my
dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have cased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.

Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?

You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you

All.
THE ABORTION

Somebody who should have been born is gone.

Just as the earth puckered its mouth, each bud puffing out from its knot, I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where Pennsylvania humps on endlessly, wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair, its roads sunken in like a gray washboard; where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly, a dark socket from which the coal has poured, Somebody who should have been born is gone.

the grass as bristly and stout as chives, and me wondering when the ground would break, and me wondering how anything fragile survives; up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man, not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all... he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin like a high window looking nowhere. The road was as flat as a sheet of tin. Somebody who should have been born is gone.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead to loss without death. Or say what you meant, you coward... this baby that I bleed.
MAY SONG

What wails from my womb
And undoomed drowns
Before thought of? Who crowns
This inch-king in a tomb
Of red seas, where no Moses
Decked with roses
Thorns his sweet way
To a quivering shore?
Each month I must say,
“A prophet I bore,
Who no more steals breath,”
I move towards my death.
Menses

(He speaks, but to himself, being aware how it is with her)

Think not I have not heard.
Well-fanged the double word
And well-directed flew.

I felt it. Down my side
Innocent as oil I see the ugly venom slide:
Poison enough to stiffen us both, and all our friends;
But I am not pierced, so there the mischief ends.

There is more to be said; I see it coiling;
The impact will be pain.
Yet coil; yet strike again.
You cannot riddle the stout mail I wove
Long since, of wit and love.

As for my answer . . . stupid in the sun
He lies, his fangs drawn:
I will not war with you.
You know how wild you are. You are willing to be turned
To other matters; you would be grateful, even.
You watch me shyly. I (for I have learned
More things than one in our few years together)
Chafe at the churlish wind, the unseasonable weather.
"Unseasonable?" you cry, with harsher scorn
Than the theme warrants; "Every year it is the same!
'Unseasonable!' they whine, these stupid peasants!—and never
since they were born
Have they known a spring less wintry! Lord, the shame,
The crying shame of seeing a man no wiser than the beasts he
feeds—
His skull as empty as a shell!

("Go to. You are unwell.")

Such is my thought, but such are not my words.

"What is the name," I ask, "of those big birds
With yellow breast and low and heavy flight,
That make such mournful whistling?"

"Meadowlarks,"

You answer primly, not a little cheered.
"Some people shoot them." Suddenly your eyes are wet
And your chin trembles. On my breast you lean,
And sob most pitifully for all the lovely things that are not and
have been.

"How silly I am!—and I know how silly I am!"
You say; "You are very patient. You are very kind.
I shall be better soon. Just Heaven consign and damn
To tedious Hell this body with its muddy feet in my mind!"
Women Who Live Alone

Women who live alone
be_wa_re the men_{strual crone!
bird track track of crab
old age's crumbling scab;

with her shrivelled hands
she tightens migraine bands
and in caverns of grief
she's Ali Baba's chief.

She tilts the turning moon
to your rhythmic ruin,
women who live alone
be_wa_re the men_{strual crone!
May Chant

May
and I squat in labor
crying the child Come down
Surely I am only
a partway-unwound
spiral of bloody cord
crying the child Come down
from his male cross
and the others and others
before him

Dionysus Come down
Osiris Come down
King of the kissing killing
Mistletoe
Come down

It is the men who come
tall singing
John Barleycorn is dead
but it was my child
my husband
they killed
and it is I
under the scalpeled earth
will cry
the good of his blood
and meat
Come down
to the roots of things
and I who will
in the darkness of germination
stealthily gather
his scattered members
and bind them whole
Pregnancy

It is the best thing,
I should always like to be pregnant,

Tummy thickening like a yoghurt,
Unbelievable flower.

A queen is always pregnant with her country.
Sheba of questions –

Or briny siren
At her difficult passage,

One is the mountain that moves
Toward the earliest gods.

Who started this?
An axis, a quake, a perimeter,

I have no decisions to master
That could change my frame

Or honor,
Immaculate. Or if it was not, perfect.

Pregnant, I'm highly explosive–
You can feel it, long before

Your seed will run back to hug you–
Squaring and cubing

Into reckless bones, bouncing odd ways
Like a football.

The heart sloshes through the microphone
Like falls in a box canyon.

The queen's only a figurehead.
Nine months pulled by nine

Planets, the moon sloping
Through its amnion sea,

Trapped, stone-mad . . . and three
Beings' lives gel in my womb.
Now I am slow and placid, fond of sun,  
Like a sleek beast, or a worn one;  
No slim and languid girl—not glad  
With the windy trip I once had,  
But velvet-footed, musing of my own,  
Torpid, mellow, stupid as a stone.

You cleft me with your beauty's pulse, and now  
Your pulse has taken body. Care not how  
The old grace grows, how heavy I am grown,  
Big with this loneliness, how you alone  
Ponder our love. Touch my feet and feel  
How earth tingles, teeming at my heel!  
Earth's urge, not mine—my little death, not hers;  
And the pure beauty yearns and stirs.

It does not heed our ecstacies, it turns  
With secrets of its own, its own concerns,  
Towards a windy world of its own, towards stark  
And solitary places. In the dark,  
Defiant even now, it tugs and moans  
To be untangled from these mother's bones.
The end of the affair is always death.
She's my workshop. Slippery eye,
out of the tribe of myself my breath
finds you gone. I horrify
those who stand by. I am fed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Finger to finger, now she's mine.
She's not too far. She's my encounter.
I beat her like a bell. I recline
in the bower where you used to mount her.
You borrowed me on the flowered spread.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Take for instance this night, my love,
that every single couple puts together
with a joint overturning, beneath, above,
the abundant two on sponge and feather,
kneeling and pushing, head to head.
At night alone, I marry the bed.

I break out of my body this way,
an annoying miracle. Could I
put the dream market on display?
I am spread out. I crucify.
My little plum is what you said.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Then my black-eyed rival came.
The lady of water, rising on the beach,
a piano at her fingertips, shame
on her lips and a flute's speech.
And I was the knock-kneed broom instead.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

She took you the way a woman takes
a bargain dress off the rack
and I broke the way a stone breaks.
I give back your books and fishing tack.
Today's paper says that you are wed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.

The boys and girls are one tonight.
They unbutton blouses. They unzip flies.
They take off shoes. They turn off the light.
The glimmering creatures are full of lies.
They are eating each other. They are overfed.
At night, alone, I marry the bed.
Everyone in me is a bird.  
I am beating all my wings.  
They wanted to cut you out  
but they will not.  
They said you were immeasurably empty  
but you are not.  
They said you were sick unto dying  
but they were wrong.  
You are singing like a school girl.  
You are not torn.  

Sweet weight,  
in celebration of the woman I am  
and of the soul of the woman I am  
and of the central creature and its delight  
I sing for you. I dare to live.  
Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.  
Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.  
Hello to the soil of the fields.  
Welcome, roots.  

Each cell has a life.  
There is enough here to please a nation.  
It is enough that the populace own these goods.  
Any person, any commonwealth would say of it,  
"It is good this year that we may plant again  
and think forward to a harvest.  
A blight had been forecast and has been cast out."  
Many women are singing together of this:  
one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,  
one is at the aquarium tending a seal.
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting,
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
one is straddling a cello in Russia,
one is shifting pots on the stove in Egypt;
one is painting her bedroom walls moon color,
one is dying but remembering a breakfast,
one is stretching on her mat in Thailand,
one is wiping the ass of her child,
one is staring out the window of a train
in the middle of Wyoming and one is anywhere and some are everywhere and all seem to be singing, although some can not sing a note.

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
let me carry a ten-foot scarf,
let me drum for the nineteen-year-olds,
let me carry bowls for the offering
(if that is my part).
Let me study the cardiovascular tissue,
let me examine the angular distance of meteors,
let me suck oh the stems of flowers
(if that is my part).
Let me make certain tribal figures
(if that is my part).
For this thing the body needs
let me sing
for the supper;
for the kissing,
for the correct
yes.
THE BREAST

This is the key to it.
This is the key to everything.
Preciously.

I am worse than the gamekeeper's children,
picking for dust and bread.
Here I am drumming up perfume.

Let me go down on your carpet,
your straw mattress — whatever's at hand
because the child in me is dying, dying.

It is not that I am cattle to be eaten.
It is not that I am some sort of street.
But your hands found me like an architect.

Jugful of milk! It was yours years ago
when I lived in the valley of my bones
bones dumb in the swamp. Little playthings.
A xylophone maybe with skin
stretched over it awkwardly.
Only later did it become something real.

Later I measured my size against movie stars.
I didn't measure up. Something between
my shoulders was there. But never enough:

Sure, there was a meadow,
but no young men singing the truth.
Nothing to tell truth by.
Ignorant of men I lay next to my sisters
and rising out of the ashes I cried
*my sex will be transfixed!*

Now I am your mother, your daughter,
your brand new thing — a snail, a nest.
I am alive when your fingers are.

I wear silk — the cover to uncover —
because silk is what I want you to think of.
But I dislike the cloth. It is too stern.

So tell me anything but track me like a climber
for here is the eye, here is the jewel,
here is the excitement the nipple learns.

I am unbalanced — but I am not mad with snow.
I am mad the way young girls are mad,
with an offering, an offering . . .

I burn the way money burns.
Can these movements which move themselves
be the substance of my attraction?
Where does this thin green silk come from that covers my body?
Surely any woman wearing such fabrics
would move her body just to feel them touching every part of her.

Yet most of the women frown, or look away, or laugh stiffly.
They are afraid of these materials and these movements
in some way.
The psychologists would say they are afraid of themselves, somehow.
Perhaps awakening too much desire —
that their men could never satisfy?
So they keep themselves laced and buttoned and made up
in hopes that the framework will keep them stiff enough not to feel
the whole register.
In hopes that they will not have to experience that unquenchable
desire for rhythm and contact.

If a snake glided across this floor
most of them would faint or shrink away.
Yet that movement could be their own.
That smooth movement frightens them —
awakening ancestors and relatives to the tips of the arms and toes.

So my hare feet
and my thin green silks
my bells and finger cymbals
offend them — frighten their old-young bodies.
While the men simper and leer —
glad for the vicarious experience and exercise.
They do not realize how I scorn them;
or how I dance for their frightened,
unawakened, sweet
women.
Lilith

Have no doubt that one day she will be reborn horrendous, with coiling horns, pubis a blaze of black stars and armpits a swampy nest for dinosaurs. But meanwhile she lurks in her most impenetrable disguise— as me— trying to make holes in my brain or come forth from my eyes. And I have felt her mindless mind within my mind urging me to call down heaven with a word, avenge some ancient wrong against her kind or be the crazed Salome who danced for blood. Ah God, her seasons kill the sickly moon, and all my fine achievements fall beneath her feet like skulls. And I would claim I cannot answer for my deeds; it is her time. But when I try to prove she is assailing me there comes instead an awful cry which is her protest and her song of victory. See you in my dreams, Whore of Babylon, Theodora, utterly unquiet fiend, thou Scream.
THE GODHEAD AS LYNX

Kyrie Eleison, O wild lynx!
Mysterious sad eyes, and yet so bright,
Wherein mind never grieves or thinks,
But absolute attention is alight—
Before that golden gaze, so deep and cold,
My human rage dissolves, my pride is broken.
I am a child here in a world grown old.
Eons ago its final word was spoken.
Eyes of the god, hard as obsidian,
Look into mine. Kyrie Eleison.

Terrible as it is, your gaze consoles,
And awe turns tender before your guiltless head.
(What we have lost to enter into souls!)
I feel a longing for the lynx's bed,
To submerge self in that essential fur,
And sleep close to this ancient world of grace,
As if there could be healing next to her,
The mother-lynx in her pre-human place.
Yet that pure beauty does not know compassion—
O cruel god, Kyrie Eleison!

It is the marvelous world, free of our love,
Free of our hate, before our own creation,
Animal world, so still and so alive.
We never can go back to pure sensation,
Be self-possessed as the great lynx, or calm.
Yet she is lightning to cut down the lamb,
A beauty that devours without a qualm,
A cruel god who only says, "I am,"
Never, "You must become," as you, our own
God say forever. Kyrie Eleison!

How rarely You look out from human eyes,
Yet it is we who bear creation on,
Troubled, afflicted, and so rarely wise,
Feeling nostalgia for an old world gone.
Imperfect as we are, and never whole,
Still You live in us like a fertile seed,
Always becoming, and asking of the soul
To stretch beyond sweet nature, answer need,
And lay aside the beauty of the lynx
To be this laboring self who groans and thinks.
WOMBS: SOME THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS

1
She had this little red bean with 10 ivory animals in it carved in India. 'Isn't it marvellous, Gwen,' she said, '10 ivory elephants inside this little red bean?'

and the bean was like, you know what, yes, like a womb, that's what I said, a womb with 10 ivory elephants in it, and I thought I wouldn't mind 10 ivory elephants in mine, if it came down to that, I wouldn't mind it at all, I'd enjoy it in fact-

now I've become rather over-selective,
I seek the lover who can accomplish this exacting act.

2
Salome the Immortal has a lab in Argentina where she seeks to free women from the tyranny of the Moon, yet I fear that all this Menstrual Research is a front, for men are seen to enter Salome's private room. Besides, they come and go in cycles, like eternal tides.
SECTION TWO

Repudiation of War and Violence

Denise Levertov . . . . . . . . Two Variations
Dilys Laing . . . . . . . . . . . . . Afternoon Tea
Kathleen Raine . . . . . . . . Mourning in Spring, 1943
Edith Sitwell . . . . . . . . . . . Dirge for the New Sunrise
Margaret Atwood . . . . . . . . It is Dangerous to Read Newspapers
Adrienne Rich . . . . . . . . . . . Night Watch
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Trying to Talk with a Man
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 5,6,7, from The Phenomenology of Anger
Joy Kogawa . . . . . . . . . . . . . The Chicken Killing
Edna St. Vincent Millay . . . . . Apostrophe to Man
Nan Braymer . . . . . . . . . . . . Five-day Requiem for Vietnam
i  Enquiry

You who go out on schedule
to kill, do you know
there are eyes that watch you,
eyes whose lids you burned off,
that see you eat your steak
and buy your girlflesh
and sell your PX goods
and sleep?
She is not old,
she whose eyes
know you.
She will outlast you.
She saw
her five young children
writhe and die;
in that hour
she began to watch you,
she whose eyes are open forever.

ii  The Seeing

Hands over my eyes I see
blood and the little bones;
or when a blanket covers
the sockets I see the
weave; at night the glare softens
but I have power now
to see there is only gray
on gray, the sleepers, the
altar. I see the living
and the dead; the dead are
as if alive, the mouth of
my youngest son pulls my
breast, but there is no milk, he
is a ghost; through his flesh
I see the dying of those
said to be alive, they
eat rice and speak to me but
I see dull death in them
and while they speak I see
myself on my mat, body
and eyes, eyes that see a
hand in the unclouded sky,
a human hand, release
wet fire, the rain that gave
my eyes their vigilance.
Afternoon Tea

To MARGARET ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY

The dusky Chinese tea, tasting of shadow,
hot from the thin cups, comforts our dry throats.
Our thoughts are all of war. We speak our thoughts.
The window opens on the sunlit meadow.

The rusks are sweet. Our taste of them is bitter.
Our tongues are heavy with a lost world’s grief
as still we practise, for a short while safe,
a lost world’s rite of tea and toast and butter.

A German woman and an English woman
and a young Jewess in a neutral land—
freed of our flags, we strive to comprehend
the rupture of a world we love in common.

The decorous room with sanity encloses
our bodies, but our outraged thoughts are fled
to cities where our sisters, screaming mad,
hunt for small corpses in the wreck of houses.
O you girls, girl friends, you who have also loved
The fertile gods Osiris, and Adonis
Whose garden has flowered for centuries from our blood,
Though love was different for each of us,
Know now, he is dying, our lover, dying all over the world.

Dying all over the world—his death will stain
The green fields crimson, extinguish the bright south,
Make the north frigid for ever, embitter the ocean,
Make the east to the west, his funeral blackens the sun’s path.

These were our men, whose destiny is the desert,
And those who were last seen struggling in the sea,
Though not for long—the waves now have washed them away
And their ears and mouths and hearts are muted with sand.

These were our men—now nameless among death’s millions,
Our sons, our darlings that we have cherished from the world’s creation,
These were the lovers that wiped all tears from our eyes,
And now our sterile wombs and broken hearts
Are the measure of war’s disaster, and love’s price.
Dirge for the New Sunrise

Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel,
Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross,
I hang between our Christ and the gap where the world was lost

And watch the phantom Sun in Famine Street—
The ghost of the heart of man . . . red Cain
And the more murderous brain
Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death
Of his mother Earth, and tore
Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.

But no eyes grieved—
For none were left for tears:
They were blinded as the years
Since Christ was born. Mother or Murderer, you have given
or taken life—
'Now all is one!

There was a morning when the holy Light
Was young . . . The beautiful First Creature came
To our water-springs, and thought us without blame.

Our hearts seemed safe in our breasts and sang to the Light—
The marrow in the bone
We dreamed was safe . . . the blood in the veins, the sap in
the tree
Were springs of Deity.

But I saw the little Ant-men as they ran
Carrying the world's weight of the world's filth
And the filth in the heart of Man—
Compressed till those lusts and greeds had a greater heat than
that of the Sun.

And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky
As if in search for food, and squeezed the stems
Of all that grows on the earth till they were dry—
And drank the marrow of the bone;
The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone—
Or black as thunder lie and grin at the murdered Sun.

The living blind and seeing Dead together lie
As if in love . . . There was no more hating then,
And no more love: Gone is the heart of Man.
It is dangerous to read newspapers

While I was building neat
castles in the sandbox,
the hasty pits were
filling with bulldozed corpses

and as I walked to the school
washed and combed, my feet
stepping on the cracks in the cement
detonated red bombs.

Now I am grownup
and literate, and I sit in my chair
as quietly as a fuse

and the jungles are flaring, the underbrush is charged with soldiers,
the names on the difficult
maps go up in smoke.

I am the cause, I am a stockpile of chemical
- toys, my body
is a deadly gadget,
I reach out in love, my hands are guns,
my good intentions are completely lethal.

Even my
passive eyes transmute
everything I look at to the pocked
black and white of a war photo,
how
can I stop myself

It is dangerous to read newspapers.

Each time I hit a key
on my electric typewriter,
speaking of peaceful trees

another village explodes.
NIGHT WATCH

And now, outside, the walls
of black flint, eyeless.
How pale in sleep you lie.
Love: my love is just a breath
blown on the pane and dissolved.
Everything, even you,
cries silently for help, the web
of the spider is ripped with rain,
the geese fly on into the black cloud.
What can I do for you?
what can I do for you?
Can the touch of a finger mend
what a finger’s touch has broken?
Blue-eyed now, yellow-haired,
I stand in my old nightmare
beside the track, while you,
and over and over and always you
plod into the deathcars.
Sometimes you smile at me
and I—I smile back at you.
How sweet the odor of the station-master’s roses!
How pure, how poster-like the colors of this dream.

1967
Out here in this desert we are testing bombs,
that's why we came here.

Sometimes I feel an underground river
forcing its way between deformed cliffs
an acute angle of understanding
moving itself like a locus of the sun
into this condemned scenery.

What we've had to give up to get here:
whole LP collections, films we starred in
playing in the neighborhoods,
lakery windows
full of dry, chocolate-filled Jewish cookies,
the language of love-letters, of
suicide notes,
afternoons on the riverbank
pretending to be children

Coming out to this desert
we meant to change the face of
driving among dull green succulents
walking at noon in the ghost town
surrounded by a silence

that sounds like the silence of the place
except that it came with us
and is familiar
and everything we were saying until now
was an effort to blot it out --
Coming out here we are up against it

Out here I feel more helpless
with you than without you
You mention the danger
and list the equipment
we talk of people caring for each other
in emergencies -- laceration, thirst --
but you look at me like an emergency

Your dry heat feels like power
your eyes are stars of a different magnitude
they reflect lights that spell out: EXIT
when you get up and pace the floor
talking of the danger
as if it were not ourselves
as if we were testing anything else.
Is there no way out but these?
The enemy, always just out of sight
snowshoeing the next forest, shrouded
in a snowy blur, abominable snowman
—at once the most destructive
and the most elusive being
gunning down the babies at My Lai
vanishing in the face of confrontation.
The prince of air and darkness
computing body counts, masturbating
in the factory
of facts.

6. Fantasies of murder: not enough:
to kill is to cut off from pain
but the killer goes on hurting
Not enough. When I dream of meeting
the enemy, this is my dream:
white acetylene
ripples from my body
effortlessly released
perfectly trained
on the true enemy
raking his body down to the thread
of existence
burning away his lie
leaving him in a new
world; a changed
man

7. I suddenly see the world
as no longer viable:
you are out there burning the crops
with some new sublimate
This morning you left the bed
we still share
and went out to spread impotence
upon the world.
I hate you.
I hate the mask you wear, your eyes
assuming a depth
they do not possess, drawing me
into the grotto of your skull
the landscape of bone
I hate your words
they make me think of fake
revolutionary bills
crisp imitation parchment
they sell at battlefields.
Last night, in this room, weeping
I asked you: what are you feeling?
do you feel anything?
Now in the torsion of your body
as you defoliate the fields we lived from
I have your answer.
THE CHICKEN KILLING

Walking along the dusty country lane
Along drying rice propped in lines like soldiers on parade
And blue pantalonned people in the distance pantomiming
Two men standing, three crouched in ritual stance
Sweat cloths around foreheads, open undershirts, black cloth boots
One with knife, one grinning toothless —
Plump white chicken held feet first flutters while blood
Drips from the slit in its neck
Conveniently draining its veins as it struggles
Then flung aside, dies, leaping through the air —
I walk past down the trembling road
Tasting the sound of dusty feet and
Feeling on my neck the slight saltiness of a question —
I am dangling feet first from the sky
— Perhaps if I do not struggle —.
Apostrophe to Man
(on reflecting that the world is ready to go to war again)

Detestable race, continue to expunge yourself, die out.
Breed faster, crowd, encroach, sing hymns, build bombing air-planes;
Make speeches, unveil statues, issue bonds, parade;
Convert again into explosives the bewildered ammonia and the
distracted cellulose;
Convert again into putrescent matter drawing flies
The hopeful bodies of the young; exhort,
Pray, pull long faces, be earnest, be all but overcome, be photo-
graphed;
Confer, perfect your formulae, commercialize
Bacteria harmful to human tissue,
Put death on the market;
Breed, crowd, encroach, expand, expunge yourself, die out,
Homo called sapiens.
Nan Braymer

Five-Day Requiem for Vietnam

Monday: The Voice again,
same hollow tones, same pitch,
tabulating death like baseball scores:
one hundred gassed in tunnel, eighty bagged—
the ghastly figures of the new arithmetic,
the body count by ghouls.

Tuesday: Who made them crawl in mud,
who taught them murder,
who sent them to die or even worse to live
legless or blind or just remembering
gutted corpses, spilled brains, bleeding sockets,
armless children, breastless mothers?
—And what would Jesus say?

Wednesday: What must we do before you hear us?
We march, teach, write, sing our anger,
paint banners in our blood,
burn up cards that bid us to the slaughter,
and in the ultimate scream ignite our flesh.
What must we do?

Thursday: Again and once again
the master pulls the strings,
demands consensus, and the puppets dance.
I tremble for my country
that we must walk with downcast heads,
ashamed.

And what will history tell of us
who let such monstrous things go on?

Friday: I who am not at home with prayer
find myself muttering Lord, strike them dead!
let the betrayed not go unavenged forever!
Spain, Guatemala, Santo Domingo, Vietnam—
how many other stations of the cross?
SECTION THREE

Anger Against Male Presumption and Oppression

Dorothy Livesay . . . . . . . The Taming
P.K. Page . . . . . . . . . Portrait of Marina
Dilys Laing . . . . . . . . Pius Thought
Stevie Smith . . . . . . . How Cruel is the Story of Eve
Denise Levertov . . . . The Mutes
Pat Lowther . . . . . . Baby you tell me
Sharon Stevenson . . . First Incision
. . . . . . . . . . Lover’s Anatomy
. . . . . 4 & 3/4 Months
Lynne Lawner . . . In your Arrogance
. . . . Tongue of Crisp Oleander
Margaret Atwood . . . from Power Politics, p. 7
Joyce Carol Oates . . . Pain
THE TAMING

Be woman. You did say me, be woman. I did not know
the measure of the words

until a black man
as I prepared him chicken
made me listen:
—No, dammit.
Not so much salt.
Do what I say, woman:
just that
and nothing more.

Be woman. I did not know
the measure of the words
until that night
when you denied me darkness,
even the right
to turn in my own light.

Do as I say, I heard you faintly
over me fainting:
be woman.
Portrait of Marina

Far out the sea has never moved. It is
Prussian forever, rough as teazled wool
some antique skipper worked into a frame
to bear his lost four-master.

Where it hangs
now in a sunny parlour, none recalls
how all his stitches, interspersed with oaths
had made his one pale spinster daughter grow
transparent with migraines — and how his call
fretted her more than waves.

Her name
Marina, for his youthful wish —
boomed at the font of that small salty church
where sailors lurched like drunkards, would, he felt
make her a water woman, rich with bells.
To her the name Marina simply meant
he held his furious needle for her thin
fingers to thread again with more blue wool
to sew the ocean of his memory.
Now, where the picture hangs, a dimity
young inland housewife with inherited
clocks under bells and ostrich eggs on shelves
pours amber tea in small rice china cups
and reconstructs
how great-great-grandpapa at ninety-three
his fingers knotted with arthritis, his
old eyes grown agatey with cataracts
became as docile as a child again —
that fearful salty man —
and sat, wrapped round in faded paisley shawls
gently embroidering.
While Aunt Marina in grey worsted, warped
without a smack of salt, came to his call
the sole survivor of his last shipwreck.

* * *
Slightly off shore it glints. Each wave is capped
with broken mirrors. Like Marina's head
the glinting of these waves.
She walked forever antlered with migraines
her pain forever putting forth new shoots
until her strange unlovely head became
a kind of candelabra — delicate —
where all her tears were perilously hung
and caught the light as waves that catch the sun.
The salt upon the panes, the grains of sand
that crunched beneath her heel
her father's voice, "Marina!" — all these broke
her trembling edifice. The needle shook
like ice between her fingers.
In her head
too many mirrors dizzied her and broke.

---

But where the wave breaks, where it rises green
turns into gelatine, becomes a glass
simply for seeing stones through, runs across
the coloured shells and pebbles of the shore
and makes an aspic of them
then sucks back
in foam and undertow —
this aspect of the sea
Marina never knew.
For her the sea was Father's Fearful Sea
harsh with sea-serpents
winds and drowning men.
For her it held no spiral of a shell
for her descent to dreams,
it held no bells.
And where it moved in shallows it was more
imminently a danger, more alive
than where it lay off shore full fathom five.
Pius Thought

"No one can say woman is inferior... nevertheless wives must submit themselves to their husbands as the Church does to Christ."—Pope Pius XII, UP, Oct. 2, 1957.

Woman—said the twelfth of his name piously (and his fiat ringed the earth) was by God created equal with man in dignity and worth.

Nevertheless—said he—the Convert preaches that woman must be humble and mute and lay her down under the burden of man and be his brute.
How cruel is the story of Eve
What responsibility
It has in history
For cruelty.

Touch, where the feeling is most vulnerable,
Unblameworthy—ah reckless—desiring children,
Touch there with a touch of pain?
Abominable.

Ah what cruelty,
In history
What misery.

Put up to barter
The tender feelings
Buy her a husband to rule her
Fool her to marry a master
She must or rue it
The Lord said it.

And man, poor man,
Is he fit to rule,
Pushed to it?
How can he carry it, the governance,
And not suffer for it
Insuffisance?
He must make woman lower then
So he can be higher then.

Oh what cruelty,
In history what misery.

Soon woman grows cunning
Masks her wisdom,
How otherwise will he
Bring food and shelter, kill enemies?
If he did not feel superior
It would be worse for her
And for the tender children
Worse for them.
Oh what cruelty,
In history what misery
Of falsity.

It is only a legend
You say? But what
Is the meaning of the legend
If not
To give blame to women most
And most punishment?

This is the meaning of a legend that colours
All human thought; it is not found among animals.

How cruel is the story of Eve,
What responsibility it has
In history
For misery.

Yet there is this to be said still:
Life would be over long ago
If men and women had not loved each other
Naturally, naturally,
Forgetting their mythology
They would have died of it else
Long ago, long ago,
And all would be emptiness now
And silence.

Oh dread Nature, for your purpose,
To have made them love so.
Those groans men use
to tell her she is a female
and their flesh knows it,

are they a sort of tune,
an ugly enough song, sung
by a bird with a slit tongue

but meant for music?

Or are they the muffled roaring
of deafmutes trapped in a building that is
slowly filling with smoke?

Perhaps both.

Such men most often
look as if groan were all they could do,
yet a woman, in spite of herself,

knows it’s a tribute:
if she were lacking all grace
they’d pass her in silence:

so it’s not only to say she’s
a warm hole. It’s a word

in grief-language, nothing to do with
primitive, not an ur-language;
language stricken, sickened, cast down

in decrepitude. She wants to
throw the tribute away, dis­
gusted, and can’t,

it goes on buzzing in her ear,
it changes the pace of her walk,
the torn posters in echoing corridors

spell it out, it
quakes and gnashes as the train comes in.
Her pulse sullenly

had picked up speed,
but the cars slow down and
jar to a stop while her understanding

keeps on translating:
‘Life after life after life goes by

without poetry,
without seemliness,
without love.’
Baby You Tell Me

Baby you tell me
to grow teeth in my cranium
and crunch down on
the gristliest parts of my brain
so as to make me more
digestible

I say there are diners enough
with dear, sharp extensions
of their fingernails
manufactured for the purpose
with clubs ready to strike
at the pulse
of a hidden fontanel
(everybody’s got a soft spot)
and teeth filed to approximate perfection.
I won’t do your dirty work for you.

Anybody’s going to eat me
he’s going to know
he’s had a meal.
FIRST INCISION

You were out counting
speakers in women’s breasts
checking them, you said,
for tuning
& constant music to suit
the mood

They were all so much more pleasant
than I
that when you came home
you tried to insert a speaker
in my left breast
with a head set for
marxism, literature,
music

I screamed & struggled
you were comforting
as the knife struck
the first incision
said it was all for
fun &
good vibes
You wonder why I don’t trust you
finally perceiving it
after 4 & 3/4 months
you say it with wonder

I’m not trying to justify this
but just remember
just recall
the open hands
I wore

& the harshness of your voice

as you wondered again
& again

why my love couldn’t
build cocoons
for your plans
to nest in

LOVERS’ ANATOMY

You think me your own
curling eyelash
that follows every crisp
of thought
every turn of body

I, in turn, see
you as my toenail
useful/necessary
to be clipped
if painful
IN YOUR ARROGANCE

You think that when a woman yields
You own at least what you, harrowing, hurt.
But you cannot use my healing heart,
Though pared to a sickle, to cut down
What goldness grew when you were gone:
This is not your harvest, these are not your fields!

"TONGUE OF CRISP OLEANDER"

Tongue of crisp oleander, bole of green plane—
My mouth has never done anything but reach towards your pink tendrils,
My thighs but open peacefully to your grenade-hard seed.
You move through me as rifle-fire,
No recognizing rain,
Engendering destiny, desperation . . .
But we never touch.
Margaret Atwood

My beautiful wooden leader
with your heartful of medals
made of wood, fixing it
each time so you almost win,

you long to be bandaged
before you have been cut.
My love for you is the love
of one statue for another: tensed

and static. General, you enlist
my body in your heroic
struggle to become real:
though you promise bronze rescues

you hold me by the left ankle
so that my head brushes the ground,
my eyes are blinded,
my hair fills with white ribbons.

There are hordes of me now, alike
and paralyzed, we follow you
scattering floral tributes
under your hooves.

Magnificent on your wooden horse
you point with your fringed hand;
the sun sets, and the people all
ride off in the other direction.
Conversational pity urged me on
and gave me funds. Your intimacy was false
like garments flung down to music—

Learn to smoke before a mirror, you said:
Get rid of corny gestures. I think, I know,
I want, you said... Pain once felt is felt always.

Never mind the limbs wrapped about one
another, stirred of themselves, muscles
timed and prethought. Never mind half-lies.

But where are true sins? Not in pain but in song?
The tinkle of knives is true, my friend,
and we who pass through here die

and rise and live pinkly again, buttoning
dresses that look familiar,
powdering cheeks, forehead, sweaty nose—

One abortion is pretty much like another. It is
the mind that holds them, events crashing through
time, through years. A mind like glue. No anesthetic
is totally vomited away. Symbols rise about me,
tonight. Words. Now no symbols but things, heavy
tables rooted to floors, very safe—

Doors never open by themselves, no police,
windows look to no future, and mirrors have
not much to say. Symbols? What are symbols,

what are your words? Think, you said, can't you
think? Think. Now I think but not of you
and not of men, surgeons with perpetual knives,

I think of my song only which is a song of hate
ill with sins of no fever, no belief, only prepared
dirge of scooped-out babies prepared—

A woman, I think of no symbols, recall none, have
no thoughts, feel pain. Symbols belong to men.
There are no symbols, there is only pain.
SECTION FOUR

Love, Romance and Sex

Adrienne Rich ........ Two Songs
Lynne Lawner ........ Possession
Joan Finnegane .... A Woman in Love is all the Trees
Anne Sexton ........ Dec. 11th
Dorothy Livesay .... The Skin of Time
Anne Sexton ........ Song for a Lady
Margaret Avison .... The Word
Babette Deutsch .... Dogma
Edna St. Vincent Millay. Sonnet xli
.................. Aubade
.................. Evening on Lesbos
.................. What Savage Blossom
Amy Lowell .......... Madonna of the Evening Flowers
Joyce Carol Oates ... Vanity
Susan Musgrave ...... Once More
Sharon Stevenson ..... Flower Song
Carolyn Kizer ...... Epithalamion
1.

Sex, as they harshly call it,
I fell into this morning
at ten o’clock, a drizzling hour
of traffic and wet newspapers.
I thought of him who yesterday
clearly didn’t
turn me to a hot field
ready for plowing,
and longing for that young man
pierced me to the roots
bathing every vein, etc.
All day he appears to me
touchingly desirable,
a prize one could wreck one’s peace for.
I’d call it love if love
didn’t take so many years
but lust too is a jewel
a sweet flower and what
pure happiness to know
all our high-toned questions
breed in a lively animal.

2.

That “old last act”!
And yet sometimes
all seems post coitum triste
and I a mere bystander.
Somebody else is going off,
getting shot to the moon.
Or, a moon-rise!
Split seconds after
my opposite number lands
I make it—
we lie fainting together
at a crater-edge
heavy as mercury in our moonsuits
till he speaks—
in a different language
yet one I’ve picked up
through cultural exchanges ...
we murmur the first moonwords:
*Sposibo, Thanks, O.K.*
POSESSION

Each time his will abdicated,
The undisputed acreage
Of what he owned of me
Grew,
And mere blond hair rose shocks of corn
To his electric gaze.
Soft shifts in sleep
So as not to wake me with the rudeness
Of his restless dreaming of me told me
What did I want more than his saying,
“Let me do what you want”?  
Often at dawn I found him
Poised leanly above me,
Jealous of light and of sea air,
Not daring to touch.
And all that time a body
Was signing away lands, stocks, estates,
To turn over to him,
Over and over.
I'd come a long way for someone scared to trust.
a woman in love is all the trees

A woman in love is all the trees of an orchard 
drunk on the **vin rosé** of April, the summer dusk 
of cities, warm, murmuring under the heavy close 
gardenias of the sky

and she is all the valley turning green

her smile is the original Mona Lisa. She blushes 
when she remembers her lover's hand. Her flesh, 
having been set fire to in the night, 
burns all day long down into the low bushes 
of her bones.

she is all pride and perfume and depth of voice 
and moves naked in her clothes 
as though she heard music perpetually

down the gay and sunny streets of the tourist town, 
her passage through Parry Sound, his name 
on her lips, makes all the holidayers 
seem like mourners in the meadows of Kerry

envying, sensing, remembering 
they follow her with their eyes

a woman in love is all reception; 
without stretching she may put her arms 
around the earth. She is an accordion 
of dreams 

and under her lowered lashes she plans 
her next enchantment, composes lullabies

when she sings at her dresser before a meeting 
graves open and death listens 
in the cemeteries

half-hoping
December 11th

Then I think of you in bed,
your tongue half chocolate, half ocean,
of the houses that you swing into,
of the steel wool hair on your head,
of your persistent hands and then
how we gnaw at the barrier because we are two.

How you come and take my blood cup
and link me together and take my brine.
We are bare. We are stripped to the bone
and we swim in tandem and go up and up
the river, the identical river called Mine
and we enter together. No one's alone.
I

The tawny corridor—your eyes—
I tread unwarily; and yet
Dashed with surprise:
We are suddenly met.

We face a sudden pause
From wordy tangle
(Clashed in a show of claws,
Playing jungle).

I had not noticed how you stood
Ungrown, ungracefully, drooped:
Your narrow fingers loped along,
Gesticulated, groped...

Ideas shook you, but your tongue
Lagged centuries behind:
Still was I unaware, and flung
Your images from mind.

Until that corridor of light,
A corner turned—your eyes!
I soar on, singing; tunnelled flight—
Stunned with this joy, this prize.

II

Across a generation
Caught
The eye exchanges truth
My skipping-rope comes out
My heart
Plays hopscotch with your youth.

What help is there, this side?
How can I cry to age:
Deepen my wrinkles,
Smooth out love's fierce rage?

How can I cry, when I
Feel timeless, ageless, high
As heaven's hemisphere?
How can I cease to live
Borne by your breath, my dear?
III:

O ease me from this fever and this folly
Stop with a word the swirling carousel:
Shrill tune and shrieking images
Confuse me as I whirl.

And from this joy release me, from this high
Excitement kiting me through air:
The world kaleidoscoping falls away
As, fanned by you, I fly.

Break, break the guiding ropes, the taut
Intensity of thought to thought—
I cannot soar forever at your will,
Nor flutter down whenever you are still.

IV

The inner and the outer room
Of my lord's world I pace
There is no antidote to bliss
Within, unless a bliss outblown.

Ongoing, I outstretch the air
So high my greening grows
My hands are stems, my blood the life
Teeming along these boughs.

But inward, inward stem the storm
Spread fire on these walls:
The image of the waking wood
Sustains the body's fall.
V

Though I be desperate, I dare
No tyranny of power;
The democratic act
Is second nature now.

My first wild will is curbed
Not from commonsense:
Because a sea of hands around
Votes in my innocence.

I cannot choose the way
Of loving you, alone;
The conclave of my memories
Keeps my allegiance home.

VI

“Accept with grace” was ever the aim—
Consummation is otherwise:
To have a habitation and a name
And time to dust the dark behind the eyes.

The simpler man can pass,
Move into mystery, unbound:
Let drop the pipe and glass
Held in the too-fast hand.

You, aging, face your dark
Living to yesterday;
Relinquishing the spark,
Intent on keeping gay.

But I, midway between
See in the wrinkle’s seam
The stitch that shrouds me from
A wider room:

Persistent certainty
That leaping from world’s rim, a boy,
Youth circumnavigating light
Would fire me to full joy.

Last spring he came; and I
Stood helpless by:
Masked in the skin of time,
The stuttering tongue of rhyme.
SONG FOR A LADY

On the day of breasts and small hips
the window pocked with bad rain,
we coupled, so sane and insane.
We lay like spoons while the sinister
rain dropped like flies on our lips
and our glad eyes and our small hips.

"The room is so cold with rain," you said
and you, feminine you, with your flower
said novenas to my ankles and elbows.
You are a national product and power.
Oh my swan, my drudge, my dear wooly rose,
even a notary would notarize our bed
as you knead me and I rise like bread.
The Word

“Forsaking all”—You mean
head over heels, for good,
for ever, call of the depths
of the All—the heart of one
who creates all, at every
moment, newly—for
you do so—and
to me, far fallen in the
ashheaps of my
false-making, burnt-out self and in the
hosed-down rubble of what my furors
gutted, or sooted all
around me—you implore
me to so fall
in Love, and fall anew in
ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every
capillary of your universe
throbs with your rivering fire?

“Forsaking all”—Your voice
never falters, and yet,
unsealing day out of a
darkness none ever knew
in full but you,
you spoke that word, closing on it forever:
“Why hast Thou forsaken . . . ?”

This measure of your being all-out, and
meaning it, made you
put it all on the line
we, humanly, wanted to draw—at
having you teacher only, or
popular spokesman only, or
doctor or simply a source of sanity
for us, distracted, or only
the one who could wholeheartedly
rejoice with us, and know
our tears, our flickering time, and
stand with us.

But to make it head over heels
yielding, all the way,
you had to die for us.
The line we drew, you crossed,
and cross out, wholly forget,
at the faintest stirring of what
you know is love, is One
whose name has been, and is
and will be, the
I AM.
DOBMA

Love is not true: mathematicians know
Truth, that’s alive in heaven, and in the mind—
Out of our bodies; you will never find
Love strict as number, and enduring so.
It is not free: alone the grave’s narrower
Than the little space in which this passion moves,
With a door that opens inward: he who loves
Measures his paces like a prisoner.

They who give it large names are liars, or
They are fools. More softly, you and I,
Slow to assert what we can never prove,
Wonder what algebraist, what dictator
Can teach us much of truth or tyranny..
Look at me. Do not speak. But this is love.
I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity to find
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume of life designed,
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.
Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity,—let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.
Aubade

Cool and beautiful as the blossom of the wild carrot
With its crimson central eye,
Round and beautiful as the globe of the onion blossom
Were her pale breasts whereon I laid me down to die.

From the wound of my enemy that thrust me through in the dark wood
I arose; with sweat on my lip and the wild woodgrasses in my spur
I arose and stood.
But never did I arise from loving her.
Evening on Lesbos

Twice having seen your shingled heads adorable
Side by side, the onyx and the gold,
I know that I have had what I could not hold.

Twice have I entered the room, not knowing she was here.
Two agate eyes, two eyes of malachite,
Twice have been turned upon me, hard and bright.

Whereby I know my loss.

Oh, not restorable

Sweet incense, mounting in the windless night!
Do I not know what savage blossom only under the pitting hail
Of your inclement climate could have prospered? Here lie
Green leaves to wade in, and of the many roads not one road
leading outward from this place
But is blocked by boughs that will hiss and simmer when the
burn—green autumn, lady, green autumn on this land!

Do I not know what inward pressure only could inflate its petals
to withstand
(No, no, not hate, not hate) the onslaught of a little time with you?

No, no, not love, not love. Call it by name,
Now that it’s over, now that it is gone and cannot hear us.

It was an honest thing. Not noble. Yet no shame.
MADONNA OF THE EVENING FLOWERS

All day long I have been working,
Now I am tired.
I call: "Where are you?"
But there is only the oak tree rustling in the wind.
The house is very quiet,
The sun shines in on your books,
On your scissors and thimble just put down,
But you are not there.

Suddenly I am lonely:
Where are you?
I go about searching.

Then I see you,
Standing under a spire of pale blue larkspur,
With a basket of roses on your arm.
You are cool, like silver,
And you smile.

I think the Canterbury bells are playing little tunes,
You tell me that the peonies need spraying,
That the columbines have overrun all bounds,
That the pyrus japonica should be cut back and rounded.
You tell me these things,
But I look at you, heart of silver,
White heart-flame of polished silver,
Burning beneath the blue steeples of the larkspur,
And I long to kneel instantly at your feet,
While all about us peal the loud, sweet Te Deums of the Canterbury bells.
Joyce Carol Oates

Vanity

Hard as strangulation are the decrees of the beloved and remote.
Across this distance songs cry,
composed for distance.
The beloved is a cage you cannot enter.
Others enter cheaply.
Never can you stroke the faces of the near into the face of that beloved. No medicine will drug you. No faked photographs will wed you in embrace.
If you lie at night with someone it is always someone else.
The distance between you fills slowly with time and snow.
Years are field grass whining.
Even in dreams the beloved is nimble of foot and vain and immortal.
We sit at the river  
you, drunk already,  
and I  
your days feed.  
Everything that I didn’t want to know  
about you  
you told me in the first five minutes  
we were alone.  
After that  
there was nothing more  
worth mentioning.  

You are almost  
too grim. You are  
only a madman  
in all the spaces I can’t fill.  
Try singleness for awhile.  
Try forgetting about  
the purpose of everything—  
nothing ever happens;  
diversity boils down to this.  

Somehow  
my body will survive.  
Though not for long.  
I toss you  
random pieces from my thigh,  
fingernail parings,  
a section of hair.  
I could last. What might vanish  
is the offering I never made.
FLOWER SONG

from out here
at the end of your
arms
that far removed
from your centre
& having a centre of my own
it takes a while to
see
the folding up of the
white narcissus
you call love

at first I thought
it a lilac
smelling so garish
for joy

now petal after petal
turns brown
moves away
in careless death

do not seek to know your love
you think
as we watch
your white narcissus
fold to its centre

from out here
at arm’s length
I see
how the petals
begin
to gorge
on each other
EPITHALAMION

You left me gasping on the shore,
A fabulous fish, all gill
And gilded scales. Such sighs we swore!
As our mirror selves
Slipped back to sea, unsundering, bumped gently there,
The room a bay, and we,
Afloat on lapping, gazes laving,
Glistered in its spume.

And all cerulean
With small, speeding clouds: the ceiling,
Lights beyond eyelids. So you reel'd in me,
Reeling.

Our touch was puffed and cloudy now,
As if the most impaled and passionate thought
Was tentative in flesh.
This frail
Smile seemed, in our bodies' wash,
Like a rock-light at sea, glimmering
With all the strength of singleness in space.

Still, you will not turn aside,
Your face fallow, eyes touching,
So I cling to your tendrils of hair,
Our two tides turning
Together: towards and away
With the moon, motionless and sailing.

O my only unleaving lover,
Even in expiring, you teach again.
Thus we may rest, safe in this scaling
As beached, we lie,
Our hulks whitening, sun scaling.
While the small sea-foam dries,
And the sea recedes and the beach accedes,
Our bodies piled like casual timber
Sanded, on this pure, solar lift of hour,
Wreathed in our breathing.

We will exceed ourselves again:
Put out in storms, and pitch our wave on waves.
My soul, you will anticipate my shouting as you rise
Above me to the lunar turn of us,
As skies crack stars upon our symmetries,
Extinguished as they touch this smoky night,
And we exhale again our fume of bliss.

This is my shallow rocking to Orion:
Curling to touch the seaweed at your side.
Wrap my mermaid hair about your wrists
And seal my face upon your resinous eyes.

Foundered on fumy wastes, we rest
Till dawn, a gilded layer, lies
Across the pallid sky.
The world’s a tinted shell borne up where waves embrace.
Its thin, convolving valve will close and clasp
This love, so blessed:
Our sea-life, swooning as it swims, to reach
Tentacular and cleaving arms that touch
A milky flank, a drowned, reviving face.
SECTION FIVE

Motherhood and Marriage

Mona Van Duyn . . . . . . . Leda
Anna Wickham . . . . . . . The Wife
Margaret Atwood . . . . . . . Divorce
Joyce Carol Oates . . . . . . A Married Woman's Song
Denise Levertov . . . . . . . The Wife
Sylvia Plath . . . . . . . . . The Applicant
Babette Deutsch . . . . . . . Marriage
Gwen Harwood . . . . . . . In the Park
Gwendolyn Brooks . . . . . The Children of the Poor
Adrienne Rich . . . . . . . Night Pieces: For a Child
Lori Whitehead . . . . . . . Mother Singing
Babette Deutsch . . . . . . To My Son
Sharon Stevenson . . . . . Industrial Childhood
Elinor Wylie . . . . . . . . Sonnet # xii
Diane Wakoski . . . . . . . Wind Secrets
Anne Sexton . . . . . . . Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward
Sandra McPherson . . . . Evolving an Instinct
LEDA

“Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?”

Not even for a moment. He knew, for one thing, what he was.
When he saw the swan in her eyes he could let her drop.
In the first look of love men find their great disguise,
and collecting these rare pictures of himself was his life.

Her body became the consequence of his juice,
while her mind closed on a bird and went to sleep.
Later, with the children in school, she opened her eyes
and saw her own openness, and felt relief.

In men’s stories her life ended with his loss.
She stiffened under the storm of his wings to a glassy shape,
stricken and mysterious and immortal. But the fact is,
she was not, for such an ending, abstract enough.

She tried for a while to understand what it was
that had happened, and then decided to let it drop.
She married a smaller man with a beaky nose,
and melted away in the storm of everyday life.
The Wife

I have no rest,
I am a guest at best,
I can be driven from the house,
Like bat or mouse,
If I please not the house's lord,
For bed and board.

I spend my days
In dull sequestered ways,
Without right to praise.
My brain dies
For want of exercise,
I dare not speak,
For I am weak.

'Twere better for my man and me,
If I were free,
Not to be done by, but to be.
But I am tied,
Free movement is denied.
I am a man's wife,
For all my life!
Anna Wickham

Divorce

A voice from the dark is calling me.
In the close house I nurse a fire.
Out in the dark cold winds rush free,
To the rock heights of my desire.
I smother in the house in the valley below,
Let me out to the night, let me go, let me go.

Spirits that ride the sweeping blast,
Frozen in rigid tenderness,
Wait! for I leave the fire at last
My little-love's warm loneliness.
I smother in the house in the valley below,
Let me out to the night, let me go, let me go.

High on the hills are beating drums.
Clear from a line of marching men
To the rock's edge the hero comes
He calls me, and he calls again.
Out on the hill there is fighting, victory or quick death,
In the house is the fire, which I fan with sick breath.
I smother in the house in the valley below,
Let me out to the dark, let me go, let me go.
Habitation

Marriage is not even
a house or a tent

it is before that, and colder:

the edge of the forest, the edge
of the desert
  the unpainted stairs
at the back where we squat
outside, eating popcorn

the edge of the receding glacier

where painfully and with wonder
at having survived even
this far

we are learning to make fire
II. A MARRIED WOMAN’S SONG

Like quaint carved figures in a weather clock
we take turns with the air.
Once awash with love’s clamorous flock
Of whispers, and exhausted in
our private lair
Now we make faces and excuses
We exit privately and walk
Slowly, endlessly around the block.
Husband and wife, there’s some terrible mistake we must bear.

The other year my lungs were strong
and fiercely cried for any prize.
My hull was featureless and long-Legged, supple, sleek and muscled
and my eyes were wise.
Now I’m stuck with a bemused body.
I thought I could shovel out
The debris of this flat, and civilize
This man. I thought a lot.
It’s vats of garbage I’ve got

to get rid of, maybe dump surreptitiously
in someone’s unwatched lot.
I need help. Marriage auspiciously
Draper you in white, and then
rapes you with hung Bodies of broken birds. A dot
Marks the spot of incision.
The law makes no provision
For bodies of previous wives
this common husband has brought

Me in sleep, like flowers of cartoon husbands, sheepish and staid.
Begin in joy and soon
Measured by tedious changes of weather
blockade of words made
To drive against what cannot change.
My love, it’s not your tirade
Against life that wearies me
It’s not your failure that buries me,
young lungs sobbing, paid
In full for taking another wife's man.
Instead it's my own surprise.
I never thought I'd disband
My youth so young, recover ties
with dead cancerous kin,
And imagine childhood a land
Across a river. It's just sad.
Greenhouse babies are never young
But toadstool white from inoccupation
I'm one more woman you can add

To the bones in your body's secret foundation,
O American man, second-generation
From home and livelier memories! You give
Excuses for living, you have no time.
One night I very well might
Have killed for you, but now that fight
Is over. I won. In your pantomime
Of a life are fossils that we
Must resurrect. Or not? Is it possible
you'll move on, you'll never see

What violence we've done, you and me?
What somnambulists' raid
Our drowsy love achieved, without aid
Of brain or will? I cannot find the key
to the back door of this wreck.
If I stay home you'll go out, you'll walk.
I'll amuse myself with the debris
Of two loves—no, three—
If only we could talk—
giving in would be a victory.

Someone handed me a mop and said
"Clean things up, fast."
My family has some money, is vast
And tiresome with love; your family is—
keeping clear.
Have you any family? They've led
To all of this? A raft of drifting
Fate, a shrug of shoulders, a bed
Too rumpled for use? We are married
And with this ring
Wrapped in our embrace and buried
In a watery grave, we would still be married,
All your women and you and me.
THE WIFE

A frog under you,
knees drawn up
ready to leap out of time,

a dog beside you,
sniffing at you, seeking
scent of you, an idea unformulated,

I give up on
trying to answer my question,
Do I love you enough?

It's enough to be
so much here. And
certainly when I catch

your mind in the
act of plucking
truth from the dark surrounding nowhere

as a swallow skims a
gnat from the
deep sky,

I don’t stop to ask myself
Do I love him? but
laugh for joy.
First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something's missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit——
Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through the roof.
Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
MARRIAGE

Not any more, not ever while I live
With you, shall I be single or be whole.
A wife is one who cannot cease to give
Flowers of her body, and graftings from her soul.
I came to bud for you like a young tree;
And though I should not give you any fruit,
Here is one orchard where your hands make free.
Something is always tugging at my root.

Though you abandon what you once found sweet,
I shall be like a birch whose bark is torn
By fingers scratching difficult, incomplete
Confessions of an outlived love and scorn.

And though I wither near you, patiently
As any bough that any wind can break,
You will go on having as much of me
As winter from a stricken limb can take.

You are my winter, as you are my spring.
However we pretend, this will be true.
You are the wind that makes the leafage sing
And strips the branches that it quivers through.
In the Park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt.
Someone she loved once passes by — too late
to feign indifference to that casual nod.
From his neat head unquestionably rises
a small balloon . . . "but for the grace of God . . . ."

They stand awhile in flickering light, rehearsing
the children’s names and birthdays. "It’s so sweet
to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,"
she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
To the wind she says, "They have eaten me alive."
I

the children of the poor

People who have no children can be hard:
Attain a mail of ice and insolence:
Need not pause in the fire, and in no sense
Hesitate in the hurricane to guard.
And when wide world is bitten and bewarred
They perish purely, waving their spirits hence
Without a trace of grace or of offense
To laugh or fail, diffident, wonder-stared.
While through a throttling dark we others hear
The little lifting helplessness, the queer
Whimper-whine; whose unriddulous
Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.
And makes a curse. And makes a sugar of
The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.
NIGHT-PIECES: FOR A CHILD

THE CRIB

You sleeping I bend to cover.
Your eyelids work. I see
your dream, cloudy as a negative,
swimming underneath.
You blurt a cry. Your eyes
spring open, still filmed in dream.
Wider, they fix me—
—death’s head, sphinx, medusa?
You scream.
Tears lick my cheeks, my knees
droop at your fear.
Mother I no more am,
but woman, and nightmare.

HER WAKING

Tonight I jerk astari in a dark
hourless as Hiroshima,
almost hearing you breathe
in a cot three doors away.

You still breathe, yes—
and my dream with its gift of knives,
its murderous hider and seeker,
recoils

back into the egg of dreams,
the vanishing point of mind.
All gone.
But you and I—
swaddled in a dumb dark
old as sickheartedness,
modern as pure annihilation—

we drift in ignorance.
If I could hear you now
mutter some gentle animal sound!
If milk flowed from my breast again.

1964
MOTHER SINGING

Oh, those stark nights, the endless highway
turning like a deadly desert snake
under the headlights, under my innocence!
Only then was I sure of you, my mother,
where I sat between you, you and him.
Dad tapped the wheel with his ring and drove too fast,
so much the fat, the quick rich business man.
But when his voice ran bumbling basso profundo
under his blanket of skin like a good natured marble,
I almost loved him. But loved him more
that he hummed, letting us sing:

Low and harsh from the cigarettes, your head
swaying while your finger twirled in the dark
the hair at my neck, while you leaned and grinned
with the chorus, hugging my comrade's shoulder, proud
(for once I was sure) of my harmony, of the free
ease with which we met in the old songs;
child mine, my mother, flapper, born only to sing,
even then as a jack rabbit rushed his blinking
worm-eaten life at our wheels, in the night, the miles,
I felt you there, I felt I almost knew you, and I knew
that I was lost in nowhere, lost in you.
TO MY SON

Now the blackout of frontiers
Between home and Gehenna
Kills the light in the eyes
That would speak to you, throttles
The word in the throat, estranges
Us from ourselves. Our soiled pledges
Lie among broken bottles for the ragpicker's sorting
When the bombers are still.

How shall we talk
To you who must learn the language
Spelled on the fields in famine, in blood on the sidewalk?
Child (shall I say?),
When the night roars, remember
The songs we sang, lapped in the warmth and bright
Of the nursery:
Malbrough s'en va t'en guerre
Ne sait quand reviendra.
Farewell and goodbye to you, Spanish ladies,
Farewell and goodbye to you, ladies of Spain.
Memory stifles thought
Where the lamp throws a stain on the floor.
Youth is the time to dance.
No more: we have lost your music.
The iron that rings the brain,
The weight in the hollow
Breast where the heart should beat,
Remain.

I cannot hide you now,
Or shelter you ever,
Or give you a guide through hell.
You are ignorant, you are unarmed, and behind your
Scornful smile you, too, are afraid.
History threatens you at each street corner,
The seas are sewed up, and the colors fade
On every map you studied early and well.

The driven exile discovers
Midway in an obscure wood
What does not bloom for the fool:
The flower whose root is despair.
You, in an obscure room in a masterless school,
Must find the faith that cements
The promises public events and private blunders have broken.
Are you alone?
This I would have you remember
(Who felt your heartbeat before you had breath to cry with):
You must wrestle alone
In the stony night like the Jew
Compelling the awful angel.
If you fight in the dark
With your self till you force a confronting,
You will be blessed in the morning.

You will be blessed recalling
The question you asked as a child:
How can I change myself
When I have nothing to change
My self with? Then I smiled,
Finding an answer: your will.
Now I know it is love of the impossible
That forms the dove and the lion.
It is love
Of the impossible
That brings the soul to its own.

Though I can hardly reach you and never prove
What the event will teach you,
I who am helpless to move
You from the road you choose,
Or alter the face you will meet there,
Leave you these words with my love.
INDUSTRIAL CHILDHOOD

My mother played us
Prokofiev's Peter and Wolf
when I was 3 in Hamilton
she went off to work
leaving him to guard us.

In the morning she made cans.
In the evening she waited on tables
and carried a milk bottle, broken, for protection.

Left me to comfort
you, older brother,
You understood why the wolf was destroyed.

My mother read us
Fenimore Cooper
when I was 5 in Sudbury
in the big bed.

I didn't understand the colours
of leaves
knowing only the black shot slate
outside the window
the lacy women
who must have carried milk bottles, broken,
somewhere,
and the magic Indians who could
do everything
but survive.
XII

In our content, before the autumn came
To shower sallow droppings on the mould.
Sometimes you have permitted me to fold
Your grief in swaddling-bands, and smile to name
Yourself my infant, with an infant's claim
To utmost adoration as of old,
Suckled with kindness, fondled from the cold,
And loved beyond philosophy or shame.

I dreamt I was the mother of a son
Who had deserved a manger for a crib;
Torn from your body, furbished from your rib,
I am the daughter of your skeleton,
Born of your bitter and excessive pain:
I shall not dream you are my child again.
Wind Secrets

I like the wind
with its puffed cheeks and closed eyes.
Nice wind.
I like its gentle sounds
and fierce bites.
When I was little
I used to sit by the black, potbellied stove and stare
at a spot on the ceiling,
while the wind breathed and blew
outside.
“Nice wind,”
I murmured to myself.

I would ask mother when she kneeled to tie my shoes
what the wind said.

Mother knew.

And the wind whistled and roared outside
while the coals opened their eyes in anger
at me.
I would hear mother crying under the wind.
“Nice wind,” I said,
But my heart leapt like a darting fish.
I remember the wind better than any sound.
It was the first thing I heard
with blazing ears,
a sound that didn’t murmur and coo,
and the sounds wrapped round my head
and huffed open my eyes.

It was the first thing I heard
besides my father beating my mother.
The sounds slashed at my ears like scissors.
Nice wind.

The wind blows
while the glowing coals from the stove look at me
with angry eyes.
Nice wind.
Nice wind.
Oh, close your eyes.
There was nothing I could do.
UNKNOWN GIRL IN
THE MATERNITY WARD

Child, the current of your breath is six days long.
You lie, a small knuckle on my white bed;
lie, fisted like a snail, so small and strong
at my breast. Your lips are animals; you are fed
with love. At first hunger is not wrong.
The nurses nod their caps; you are shepherded
down starch halls with the other unneeded throng
in wheeling baskets. You tip like a cup; your head
moving to my touch. You sense the way we belong.
But this is an institution bed.
You will not know me very long.

The doctors are enamel. They want to know
the facts. They guess about the man who left me,
some pendulum soul, going the way men go
and leave you full of child. But our case history
stays blank. All I did was let you grow.
Now we are here for all the ward to see.
They thought I was strange, although
I never spoke a word. I burst empty
of you, letting you learn how the air is so.
The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me
and I turn my head away. I do not know.

Yours is the only face I recognize.
Bone at my bone, you drink my answers in.
Six times a day I prize
your need, the animals of your lips, your skin
growing warm and plump. I see your eyes
lifting their tents. They are blue stones, they begin
to outgrow their moss. You blink in surprise
and I wonder what you can see, my funny kin,
as you trouble my silence. I am a shelter of lies.
Should I learn to speak again, or hopeless in
such sanity will I touch some face I recognize?
Down the hall the baskets start back. My arms fit you like a sleeve, they hold
catkins of your willows, the wild bee farms
of your nerves, each muscle and fold
of your first days. Your old man's face disarms
the nurses. But the doctors return to scold
me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.
I should have known; I should have told
them something to write down. My voice alarms
my throat. "Name of father—none." I hold
you and name you bastard in my arms.

And now that's that. There is nothing more
that I can say or lose.
Others have traded life before
and could not speak. I tighten to refuse
your owling eyes, my fragile visitor.
I touch your cheeks, like flowers. You bruise
against me. We unlearn. I am a shore
rocking you off. You break from me. I choose
your only way, my small inheritor
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more.
Evolving an Instinct

I am learning protection.
I purposely look silly.
I bark and I whine.
I waddle in new motherhood.
My wings drag their sheen in dirt.
I hobble that my young may fly.
I learn to love.

Her body is not yet like mine.
She is carnation pink
And little more mobile
Than a flower plot in wind.
I am the gardener. I've set up a fence.
How she adorns the fence!

What is it to be another's keeper?
Am I an animal trainer? Is it fun?
Is it beautiful?
Am I a warden? Do I have the keys?

The predator is the ground between us.
It snaps when I walk.
It sulks about the crib.
It deadens my voice halfway to her ear.
She cries into the microphone of distance.

Feed the dog, water the violet.
I am mammal.
Milk fattens the earth.
I love many and they know it not.
Keep the body ticking.
I am an atmosphere she can breathe in.
I am a newspaper to mess.
This is learning protection,
Learning to love.
SECTION SIX

Defining Oneself as Artist

a) Defining the Poet

Anna Wickham, Resolution
Dilys Laing, The Maker
Muriel Spark, Against the Transcendentalists
Denise Levertov, Song for Ishtar
Phyllis Webb, Poet
Anne Sexton, Lament
Mona Van Duyn, Death of a Poet
Margaret Atwood, Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein

b) Conflicts Between Being a Woman and a Poet

Margaret Atwood, The Shadow Voice
Anna Wickham, A Woman in Bed
Anne Wilkinson, Lens
Elinor Wylie, Self-Portrait
Amy Lowell, The Sisters
Dilys Laing, Sonnet to a Sister in Error
Carolyn Kizer, Part Three from Pro Femina

Phyllis Webb, Where are the Wings
Elizabeth Sewell, The Analogue
Denise Levertov, To the Muse
Phyllis Webb, Two Versions
Miriam Waddington, Semblances
Marianne Moore, The Mind, Intractable Thing
Erica Jong, Arse Poetica

c) Inspiration and Craft: The Poetic Process
Resolution

I will not draw only a house or a tree,
I will draw very Me;
Everything I think, everything I see!

I will have no shame,
No hope of praise or fear of blame!
These things are mean things, and the same.

I am the product of old laws,
Old effect of old cause.
The thing that is, may make the blind gods pause.
It is the fashion to speak in the falling cadence
of disillusion. The world ends with a whimper,
not with a bang, and it is merely prudence
thus to foretell and so to feel the temper
of now and tomorrow, the poet being only the doctor
to take the pulse and diagnose the ailment,
always considering death the one known factor.
I hate that falsehood. I hate the times's defilement
of art by politics. It is the gift of the poet
to contradict chaos, to hear the YES of the womb
and loud along the ear of man to say it,
making another space, and a new time.
Against the Transcendentalists

There are more visionaries
Than poets and less
Poets than missionaries.
Poets are a meagre species.

There is more vanity, more charity,
There is more of everything than poetry
Which, for personal purposes,
I wish may preserve
Identity from any other commodity
Also from Delphic insanity,
Drunkenness and discrepancy
Of which there's already a great plenty.
And so I reserve
The right not to try to
Fulfil the wilderness or fly to
Empyreal vacuity with an eye to
Publication, for what am I to
Byzantium or Byzantium
To me? I live in Kensington
And walk about, and work in Kensington
And do not foresee departing from Kensington.
So if there's no law in Kensington
Adaptable to verse without contravening
The letter to prove
The law, I'll make one.

The first text is
The word. The next is
(Since morals prevent quarrels
And writers make poor fighters
Love your neighbour, meaning
Your neighbour, let him love
His neighbour, and he his,
Who is Everyman, what is he
That he should stand in lieu of
A poem? What is Truth true of?
And what good's a God's-eye-view of
Anyone to anyone
But God? In the Abstraction
Many angels make sweet moan
But never write a stanza down.
Poets are few and they are better
Equipped to love and animate the letter.

I therefore resign
The seven-league line
In footwear of super-cosmic design
To the global hops
Of wizards and wops;
Hoping that if Byzantium
Should appear in Kensington
The city will fit the size
Of the perimeter of my eyes
And of the span of my hand:
Hands and eyes that understand
This law of which the third.
Text is the thing defined,
The flesh made word.
Denise Levertov

Song for Lhiter

The moon is a sow
and grunts in my throat
Her great shining shines through me
so the mud of my hollow gleams
and breaks in silver bubbles

She is a sow
and I a pig and a poet

When she opens her white
lips to devour me I bite back
and laughter rocks the moon

In the black of desire
we rock and grunt, grunt and
shine

The Earth Worm

The worm artist
out of soil, by passage
of himself
constructing.
Castles of metaphor!
Delicate
dungeon turrets!
He throws off
artifacts as he
contracts and expands the
muscle of his being,
ringed in himself,
tilling. He
is homage to
earth, aerates
the ground of his living.
Months after the Muse
had come and gone across the lake of vision,
arose out of childhood the long-familiar
briefly forgotten presaging of her image—

'The Light of Truth'—frontispiece
to 'Parables from Nature,' 1991—a picture
intending another meaning than that which it gave
(for I never read the story until now)

intending to represent Folly
sinking into a black bog, but for me having meant
a mystery, of darkness, of beauty, of serious
dreaming pause and intensity

where not a will-o’-the-wisp but
a star come to earth burned before the
closed all-seeing eyes
of that figure later seen as the Muse.

By which I learn to affirm
Truth’s light at strange turns of the mind’s road,
wrong turns that lead
over the border into wonder,

mistaken directions, forgotten signs
all bringing the soul’s travels to a place
of origin, a well
under the lake where the Muse moves.
The Muse
   in her dark habit,
trim-waisted,
    wades into deep water.

The spring where she
   will fill her pitcher to the brim
wells out
   below the lake’s surface, among
papyrus, where a stream
   enters the lake and is crossed
by the bridge on which I stand.

She stoops
   to gently dip and deep enough.
Her face resembles
   the face of the young actress who played
Miss Annie Sullivan, she who
   spelled the word ‘water’ into the palm
of Helen Keller, opening
   the doors of the world.

In the baroque park,
   transformed as I neared the water
to Valentines, a place of origin,
I stand on a bridge of one span
and see this calm act, this gathering up
of life, of spring water

and the Muse gliding then
   in her barge without sails, without
oars or motor, across
   the dark lake, and I know
no interpretation of these mysteries
   although I know she is the Muse
and that the humble
   tributary of Roding is
one with Alpheus, the god who as a river
   flowed through the salt sea to his love’s well

so that my heart leaps
   in wonder.
Cold, fresh, deep, I feel the word ‘water’
   spelled in my left palm.
I am promised
I have taken the veil
I have made my obeisances
I have walked on words of nails
to knock on silences
I have tokened the veil
to my face
mouth covered with symbol
I have punctured my fingerbase
to fill one thimble
with blood for consecration
in a nunnery
I have faced each station
of the cross and to each place
have verbs tossed free, so pale
to compass the bitter male
in this changed chancellery
and I have paced four walls
of this cell. I have paced
for the word, and I have heard,
curiously, I have heard the tallest of mouths
call down behind my veil
to limit or enlarge me
as I or it prevails.
Phyllis Webb

LAMENT

Knowing that everything is wrong,
how can we go on giving birth
either to poems or the troublesome lie,
to children, most of all, who sense
the stress in our distracted wonder
the instant of their entry with their cry?

For every building in this world
receives our benediction of disease.
Knowing that everything is wrong
means only that we all know where we’re going.

But I, how can I,
 craving the resolution of my earth,
take up my little gag of sweet pretence
and saunter day-dreamy down the alleys, or pursue
the half-disastrous night? Where is that virtue
I would claim with tense impersonal unworth,
where does it dwell, that virtuous land
where one can die without a second birth?

It is not here, neither in the petulance
of my cries, nor in the traces of my active fear,
not in my suicide of love, my dear.
That place of perfect animals and men
is simply the circle we would charm our children in
and why we frame our lonely poems in
the shape of a frugal sadness.
My business is words. Words are like labels, 
or coins, or better, like swarming bees. 
I confess I am only broken by the sources of things; 
as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic, 
unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings. 
I must always forget how one word is able to pick 
out another, to manner another, until I have got 
something I might have said ... 
but did not.

Your business is watching my words. But I 
admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance, 
when I can write my praise for a nickel machine, 
that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot 
came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen. 
But if you should say this is something it is not, 
then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny 
and ridiculous and crowded with all 
the believing money.
DEATH OF A POET

Mona Van Duyn

There was something obscene about wrestling that baby-faced boy,
Women don't usually wrestle, except for a comic or grotesque effect,
but this was a fight for my life—I recognized him instantly.
I keep thinking how it must have looked, with him half my height,
and so slippery with sweat I couldn't keep hold, even with my nails,
and I'd hold his head back by the curls so he couldn't reach my own

hair.

Once when we were locked together on the floor, his face
was right under mine. I looked into his tea-colored eyes
and saw clear through them to the blank bottom of the teacup.
It startled me so much I let go and rolled away,
and then he rolled on top of me. I felt his little genitalia pressing,
cool, and hard as marble. It was only for a moment.
What was dreadful was catching glimpses of freckles and a cute nose,
and dimples at the base of each fat, fierce finger.
All the while, as I said, it was a fight for my life.

My life—it was all I could have wanted, after I left home.
I held my spotted wand before the copulating world,
and it threw forth images ring-straked, speckled, and grisled,
so that I knew they were mine as soon as I saw them.
I believed in the power of words, both birthright and blessing,
and I worked hard, but with luck, luck in the skimming of experience,
I'd make a name for myself sooner or later.
and I could trust the men in my life to sit tight on household matters.
In some ways they are really more domestic than women.
I could always cope. I waited, at the rim of the well,
and they filled my glass, all the people I was attracted to,
and most of the pitchers that came out were meaningful and

brimming.

I was surprised at my own endurance. At one point I felt
the gristle of his nose give in under my palm and his eyelids
leak under my gouging nails. I would have killed him then,
I would really and truly have killed him once and for all,
if I could have. But he got loose a little and somehow touched me.
After a minute, when I got my breath, I asked him his name.
I was far enough in the contest and it was the thing to do.
I knew he wouldn't tell me, it would be embarrassing
spoken out loud. But I had always known of him.
I've felt intimations of that strength before, at home,
in my mother's obsessed preference, her almost professional tricks,
in my father's pre-empted eyes, which couldn't meet my eyes.

Have you ever really fought all night? All that I'd call fight
took place in the first half hour. The rest of the time
we were only clutching and wiggling a little, and even so
I don't quite know how I managed to hang on.
Now that it's over I am blessed, if you can call it that—
that is, I am of the world totally and helplessly.
What I fought for is gone, though I go on writing poems as usual.
I am shriveled in a secret place, though I don't limp.
His strength—I can't describe it—it was not muscular,
in fact he felt soft under the sweat, like soft rubber.
But I believe in his power, beyond the power of words,
beyond himself even, fixed in my own belief.
Speeches for Dr Frankenstein

I

I, the performer
in the tense arena, glittered
under the fluorescent moon. Was bent
masked by the table. Saw what focused
my intent: the emptiness

The air filled with an ether of cheers.

My wrist extended a scalpel.

II

The table is a flat void,
barren as total freedom. Though behold

A sharp twist
like taking a jar top off

and it is a living
skeleton, mine, round,
that lies on the plate before me

red as a pomegranate,
every cell a hot light.

III

I circle, confront
my opponent. The thing

refuses to be shaped, it moves
like yeast. I thrust,

the thing fights back.
It dissolves, growls, grows crude claws;

The air is dusty with blood.

It springs. I cut
with delicate precision.

The specimens
ranged on the shelves, applaud.

The thing falls Thud. A cat
anatomized.

O secret
form of the heart, now I have you.

IV

Now I shall ornament you.
What would you like?

Baroque scrolls on your ankles?
A silver navel?

I am the universal weaver;
I have eight fingers.

I complicate you;
I surround you with intricate ropes.

What web shall I wrap you in?
Gradually I pin you down.
What equation shall I carve and seal in your skull?
What size will I make you?
Where should I put your eyes?

I was insane with skill:
I made you perfect.

I should have chosen instead
to curl you small as a seed,

trusted beginnings. Now I wince before this plateful of results:
core and rind, the flesh between already turning rotten.

I stand in the presence of the destroyed god:
a rubble of tendons, knuckles and raw sinews.

Knowing that the work is mine how can I love you?

These archives of potential time exude fear like a smell.

You arise, larval and shrouded in the flesh I gave you;

I, who have no covering left but a white cloth skin
escape from you. You are red, you are human and distorted.

You have been starved, you are hungry. I have nothing to feed you.

I pull around me, running, a cape of rain.

What was my ravenous motive? Why did I make you?

Reflection, you have stolen everything you needed:
my joy, my ability to suffer.

You have transmuted yourself to me: I am a vestige, I am numb.

Now you accuse me of murder.

Can't you see I am incapable?

Blood of my brain, it is you who have killed these people.
vii

Since I dared
to attempt impious wonders

I must pursue
that animal I once denied
was mine.

Over this vacant winter
plain, the sky is a black shell;
I move within it, a cold
kernel of pain.

I scratch huge rescue messages
on the solid
snow; in vain. My heart's
husk is a stomach. I am its food.

ix

The sparkling monster
gambols there ahead,
his mane electric:
This is his true place.

He dances in spirals on the jee,
his clawed feet
kindling shaggy fires.

His happiness
is now the chase itself:
he traces it in light,
his paths contain it.

I am the gaunt hunter
necessary for his patterns,
lurking, gnawing leather.

x

The creature, his arctic hackles
bristling, spreads
over the dark ceiling,
his paws on the horizons,
rolling the world like a snowball.

He glows and says:

Doctor, my shadow
shivering on the table,
you dangle on the leash
of your own longing;
your need grows teeth.

You sliced me loose

and said it was
Creation. I could feel the knife.
Now you would like to heal
that chasm in your side,
but I recede. I prowl.

I will not come when you call.
Margaret Atwood

The shadow voice

My shadow said to me:
What is the matter

Isn't the moon warm
enough for you
Why do you need
the blanket of another body

Whose kiss is moss

Around the picnic tables
the bright pink hands hold sandwiches
crumbled by distance. Flies crawl
over the sweet instant

You know what is in those baskets

The trees outside are bending with
children shooting guns. Leave
them alone. They are playing
games of their own.

I give water, I give clean crusts

Aren't there enough words
flowing in your veins
to keep you going
A WOMAN IN BED

SOMETIMES when I go to rest

I lie and struggle for expression,

And failing, fail to sick depression,

And beat my breast.

By blows, I cannot escape

The utter irritation

Of my poor soul's frustration,

For so I know my shape.

And often have I found

An added sadness,

Bringing me to madness,

Because my breast is round.

How can I, being woman,

Dedicate nights

Which should be sacred to delights,

To this lust of words, which is so broadly human

But through the well-clothed days

I can forget my skirt,

I hide my breast beneath a workman's shirt,

And hunt the perfect phrase.
I
The poet's daily chore
Is my long duty;
To keep and cherish my good lens
For love and war
And wasps about the lilies
And mutiny within.

My woman's eye is weak
And veiled with milk;
My working eye is muscled
With a curious tension,
Stretched and open
As the eyes of children;
Trusting in its vision
Even should it see
The holy holy spirit gambol
Counterheadwise,
Lithe and warm as any animal.

My woman's iris circles
A blind pupil;
The poet's eye is crystal,
Polished to accept the negative,
The contradictions in a proof
And the accidental
Candour of the shadows;
The shutter, oiled and smooth
Clicks on the grace of heroes
Or on some bestial act
When lit with radiance
The afterwords the actors speak
Give depths to violence,

Or if the bull is great
And the matador
And the sword
Itself the metaphor.

II
In my dark room the years
Lie in solution,
Develop film by film.
Slow at first and dim
Their shadows bite
On the fine white pulp of paper.

An early snap of fire
Licking the arms of air
I hold against the light, compare
The details with a prehistoric view
Of land and sea
And cradles of mud that rocked
The wet and sloth of infancy.

A stripe of tiger, curled
And sleeping on the ribs of reason
Prints as clear
As Eve and Adam, pearled
With sweat, staring at an apple core;

And death, in black and white
Or politic in green and Easter film,
Lands on steely points, a dancer
Disciplined to the foolscap stage,
The property of poets
Who command his robes, expose
His moving likeness on the page.
Self-portrait

A lens of crystal whose transparence calms
Queer scars to clarity, and disentangles
Fox-fires to form austere refracted angles:
A texture polished on the horny palms
Of vast equivocal creatures, beast or human:
A flint, a substance finer-grained than snow,
Graved with the Graces in intaglio
To set sarcastic sigil on the woman.

This for the mind, and for the little rest
A hollow scooped to blackness in the breast,
The simulacrum of a cloud, a feather:
Instead of stone, instead of sculptured strength,
This soul, this vanity, blown hither and thither
By trivial breath, over the whole world's length.
THE SISTERS

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot
We women who write poetry. And when you think
How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,
The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
With matrices in body and in brain?
I rather think that there is just the reason
We are so sparse a kind of human being;
The strength of forty thousand Atlases
Is needed for our every-day concerns.
There's Sapho, now I wonder what was Sapho.
I know a single slender thing about her:
That, loving, she was like a burning birch-tree
All tall and glittering fire, and that she wrote
Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,
A frozen blaze before it broke and fell:
Ah, me! I wish I could have talked to Sapho,
Surprised her reticences by flinging mine
Into the wind. This tossing off of garments
Which cloud the soul is none too easy doing
With us today. But still I think with Sapho
One might accomplish it, were she in the mood
To bare her loneliness of words and tell
The reasons, as she possibly conceived them,
Of why they are so lovely. Just to know
How she came at them, just to watch
The crisp sea sunshine playing on her hair,
And listen, thinking all the while 'twas she
Who spoke and that we two were sisters
Of a strange, isolated little family.
And she is Sapho--Sapho—not Miss or Mrs.,
A leaping fire we call so for convenience.
But Mrs. Browning—who would ever think
Of such presumption as to call her "Ba."
Which draws the perfect line between sea-cliffs
And a close-shuttered room in Wimpole Street.
Sapho could fly her impulses like bright
Balloons tip-tilting to a morning air
And write about it. Mrs. Browning's heart
Was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay
Stretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek
And speculating, as I must suppose,
In just this way on Sapho; all the need,
The huge, imperious need of loving, crushed
Within the body she believed so sick.
And it was sick, poor lady, because words
Are merely simulacra after deeds
Have wrought a pattern; when they take the place
Of actions they breed a poisonous miasma
Which, though it leave the brain, eats up the body.
So Mrs. Browning, aloof and delicate,
Lay still upon her sofa, all her strength
Going to uphold her over-topping brain.
It seems miraculous, but she escaped
To freedom and another motherhood
Than that of poems. She was a very woman
And needed both.

If I had gone to call,
Would Wimpole Street have been the kindlier place,
Or Casa Guidi, in which to have met her?
I am a little doubtful of that meeting,
For Queen Victoria was very young and strong
And all-pervading in her apogee
At just that time. If we had stuck to poetry,
Sternly refusing to be drawn off by mesmerism
Or Roman revolutions, it might have done,
For, after all, she is another sister,
But always, I rather think, an older sister
And not herself so curious a technician
As to admit newfangled modes of writing—
"Except, of course, in Robert, and that is neither
Here nor there for Robert is a genius."
I do not like the turn this dream is taking,
Since I am very fond of Mrs. Browning
And very much indeed should like to hear her
Graciously asking me to call her "Ba."
But then the Devil of Verisimilitude
Creeps in and forces me to know she wouldn't.
Convention again, and how it chafes my nerves,
For we arc such a little family
Of singing sisters, and as if I didn't know
What those years felt like tied down to the sofa.
Confound Victoria, and the slimy inhibitions
She loosed on all us Anglo-Saxon creatures!
Suppose there hadn't been a Robert Browning,
No "Sonnets from the Portuguese" would have been written.
They are the first of all her poems to be,
One might say, fertilized. For, after all,
A poet is flesh and blood as well as brain;
And Mrs. Browning, as I said before,
Was very, very woman. Well, there are two
Of us, and vastly unlike that's for certain.
Unlike at least until we tear the veils
Away which commonly gird souls. I scarcely think
Mrs. Browning would have approved the process
In spite of what had surely been relief;
For speaking souls must always want to speak
Even when bat-eyed, narrow-minded Queens
Set prudishness to keep the keys of impulse.
Then do the browning Gods invent new bances
And make the need of souls. But Sapho was dead
And I, and others, not yet peeped above
The edge of possibility. So that's an end
To speculating over tea-time talks
Beyond the movement of pentameters
With Mrs. Browning.

But I go dreaming on,
In love with these my spiritual relations.
I rather think I see myself walk up
A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell
And send a card in to Miss Dickinson.
Yet that's a very silly way to do.
I should have taken the dream twist-ends about
And climbed over the fence and found her deep
Engrossed in the doings of a humming-bird
Among nasturtiums. Not having expected strangers,
She might forget to think me one, and holding up
A finger say quite casually: "Take care.
Don't frighten him, he's only just begun."
"Now this," I well believe I should have thought,
"Is even better than Sapho. With Emily
You're really here, or never anywhere at all
In range of mind." Wherefore, having begun
In the strict center, we could slowly progress
To various circumferences, as we pleased.

Good-by, my sisters, all of you are great,
And all of you are marvelously strange,
And none of you has any word for me.
I cannot write like you, I cannot think
In terms of Pagan or of Christian now.
I only hope that possibly some day
Some other woman with an itch for writing
May turn to me as I have turned to you
And chat with me a brief few minutes. How
We lie, we poets! It is three good hours
I have been dreaming. Has it seemed so long
To you? And yet I thank you for the time,
Although you leave me sad and self-distrustful,
For older sisters are very sobering things.
Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting.
No, you have not seemed strange to me, but near,
Prightfully near, and rather terrifying.
I understand you all, for in myself—
Is that presumption? Yet indeed it's true—
We are one family. And still my answer
Will not be any one of yours, I see.
Well, never mind that now. Good night! Good night!
Sonnet to a Sister in Error

"Whilst the dull manage of a servile house
Is held by some our utmost art and use."
—Anne, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720)

Sweet Anne of Winchilsea, you were no hellion
intent on setting the broad world to recking.
The long court dress concealed the long blue stocking,
the easy manner masked the hard rebellion.
With light foot stirruped on the Muses' stallion
you ambled privately, afraid of shocking
the Maids of Honor who excelled at mocking
the matchless rose with stitches small and million.

Staunch Anne! I know your trouble. The same tether
galls us. To be a woman and a writer
is double mischief, for the world will slight her
who slights "the servile house," and who would rather
make odes than beds. Lost lady! Gentle fighter!
Separate in time, we mutiny together.
I will speak about women of letters, for I’m in the racket.
Our biggest successes to date? Old maids to a woman.
And our saddest conspicuous failures? The married spinsters
On loan to the husbands they treated like surrogate fathers.
Think of that crew of self-pityers, not-very-distant,
Who carried the torch for themselves and got first-degree burns.
Or the sad sonneteers, toast-and-teasdales we loved at thirteen;
Middle-aged virgins seducing the purile anthologists
Through lust-of-the-mind; barbiturate-drenched Camilles
With continuous periods, murmuring softly on sofas
When poetry wasn’t a craft but a sickly effluvium,
The air thick with incense, musk, and emotional blackmail.
I suppose they reacted from an earlier womanly modesty
When too many girls were scabs to their stricken sisterhood,
Impugning our sex to stay in good with the men,
Commencing their insecure bluster. How they must have swaggered
When women themselves indorsed their own inferiority!
Vestals, vassals and vessels, rolled into several,
They took notes in rolling syllables, in careful journals,
Aiming to please a posterity that despises them.
But we’ll always have traitors who swear that a woman surrenders
Her Supreme Function, by equating Art with aggression
And failure with Femininity. Still, it’s just as unfair
To equate Art with Femininity, like a prettily-packaged commodity
When we are the custodians of the world’s best-kept secret:
Merely the private lives of one-half of humanity.

But even with masculine dominance, we mares and mistresses
Produced some sleek sabotuses, making their cracks
Which the porridge-brained males of the day were too thick to perceive,
Mistaking young hornets for perfectly harmless bumblebees.
They try to be ugly by aping the ways of the men
And succeed. Swearing, sucking cigars and scorching the bedspread,
Slopping straight shots, eyes blotted, vanity-blown
In the expectation of glory: she writes like a man!
This drives other women mad in a mist of chiffon
(one poetess draped her gauze over red flannels, a practical feminist).

But we're emerging from all that, more or less,
Except for some lady-like laggards and Quarterly priestesses
Who flog men for fun, and kick women to maim competition.
Now, if we struggle abnormally, we may almost seem normal;
If we submerge our self-pity in disciplined industry;
If we stand up and be hated, and swear not to sleep with editors;
If we regard ourselves formally, respecting our true limitations
Without making an unseemly show of trying to unfreeze our assets;
Keeping our heads and our pride while remaining unmarried;
And if wedded, kill guilt in its tracks when we stack up the dishes
And defect to the typewriter. And if mothers, believe in the luck of our children,
Whom we forbid to devour us, whom we shall not devour,
And the luck of our husbands and lovers, who keep free women.
WHERE ARE THE WINGS?

Where are the wings
for whom I made myself brittle
and portable,
one of a number of little glittering things
hawked
in the marketplace, talked
over by dirty boys
exchanging toys,

and scorned
sororities of chests, adorned
with golden chains,
and bellies that begged for legal pains,
naming me barren —
carrion
of a milked-silked generation
without veneration?

Where are the sliding feathers
for whom I shifted weathers:
the storms of continence
the deadly still-air of yielding,
the mental gelding,
the fleshly trance —
enduring any shit to shun
the domestic sun?

Since dung my dowry
I go in search of oxen, bulls,
instead of flowery
fools,
and like the Breton serf,
when he asked her,
I would rather sleep first
with my master.

Where are the claws and hooks
for whom all calms are crooks
robbing the rush
of anguish
that seeds the placid womb
and from the daily tomb
extracts steel epitaphs to blaze
in the urban haze?

And where is the beak that babbles
of the beautiful troubles
between men's legs
and moonward soarings of mythic stags,
and drowns out lovers' doting,
each word an abortion?
is savage chirping distortion,
is it better hating?

How low, how alien, how inconstant
must I grow to be played on,
to be preyed on
by your musical descent?
what horrors study,
what odd beds lie in,
to make a body
for a god to die in?
THE ANALOGUE

I ask my words
For livelier ways,
(I am to blame
That let them stiffen)—go
Over the waterfall
And tumble on the smooth bones
Of the rocks, beat, beat,
The damp air carrying all
The smells of summer, hot and blue,
White spiders bracketing green fern;
And the short cries of birds.

Even so,
Heart, think no shame
To lie among the parched stones,
Feeling the glassy pulses of the heat.
How I must call
The kindling body to its silent mime
I do not know,
But I shall learn—
Find every creature's time,
Cricket-chirp minute,
Shake down my hair and let it blow
Among the greening willows,
Or scratch my hard nail down a twig's horny shell
And bleed with the sap in it.

Gently undo
The sinews of our rhythms. Set free
Bodily analogy;
Blessedly construe
In each syllable gesture something's praise.
We have mysteriously to be
All beings that we see,
Moving to nights and days:
Crow with a tree,
And speak the universe in paraphrase.
I have heard it said,  
and by a wise man,  
that you are not one who comes and goes  

but having chosen  
you remain in your human house,  
and walk  

in its garden for air and the delights  
of weather and seasons.  

Who builds  
a good fire in his hearth  
shall find you at it  
with shining eyes and a ready tongue.  

Who shares  
even water and dry bread with you  
will not eat without joy  

and wife or husband  
who does not lock the door of the marriage  
against you, finds you  

not as unwelcome third in the room, but as  
the light of the moon on flesh and hair.  

He told me, that wise man,  
that when it seemed the house was  
empty of you,  

the fire crackling for no one,  
the bread hard to swallow in solitude,  
the gardens a tedious maze,  

you were not gone away  
but hiding yourself in secret rooms.  
The house is no cottage, it seems,  

it has stairways, corridors, cellars,  
a tower perhaps,  
unknown to the host.  

The host, the housekeeper, it is  
who fails you. He had forgotten  
to make room for you at the hearth  
or set a place for you at the table  
or leave the doors unlocked for you.
Noticing you are not there
(when did he last see you?)
he cries out you are faithless,

have failed him,
writes you stormy letters demanding you return
it is intolerable

to maintain this great barracks without your presence,
it is too big, it is too small, the walls
menace him, the fire smokes

and gives off no heat. But to what address
can he mail the letters?

And all the while

you are indwelling,
a gold ring lost in the house.
\textit{A gold ring lost in the house.}
You are in the house!

Then what to do to find the room where you are?
Deep cave of obsidian glowing with red, with green,
with black light,
high room in the lost tower where you sit spinning,
crack in the floor where the gold ring
waits to be found?

No more rage but a calm face,
trim the fire, lay the table, find some
flowers for it: is that the way?
Be ready with quick sight to catch
a gleam between the floorboards,

there, where he had looked
a thousand times and seen nothing?

Light of the house,

the wise man spoke
words of comfort. You are near,
perhaps you are sleeping and don't hear.

Not even a wise man
can say, do thus and thus, that presence
will be restored.

Perhaps

a becoming aware a door is swinging, as if
someone had passed through the room a moment ago—perhaps
looking down, the sight
of the ring back on its finger?
ILLUSTRIOUS ANCESTORS

The Rav
-of Northern White Russia declined,
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, "prayed
with the bench and the floor." He used
what was at hand—as did
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.

Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.
The Jacob's Ladder

The stairway is not
da thing of gleaming strands
a radiant evanescence
for angels' feet that only glance in their tread, and need not
touch the stone.

It is of stone.
A rosy stone that takes
a glowing tone of softness
only because behind it the sky is a doubtful, a doubting
night gray.

A stairway of sharp
angles, solidly built.
One sees that the angels must spring
down from one step to the next, giving a little
lift of the wings:

and a man climbing
must scrape his knees, and bring
the grip of his hands into play. The cut stone
consoles his groping feet. Wings brush past him.
The poem ascends.
How much I should like to begin
a poem with And — presupposing
the hardest said —
the moss cleared off the stone,
the letters plain.
How the round moon
would shine into all the corners
of such a poem and show
the words! Moths and dazzled
awakened birds
would freeze in its light!
The lines would be
an outbreak of bells
and I swinging on the rope!

Yet, not desiring apocrypha
but true revelation,
what use to pretend the stone discovered,
anything visible?
That poem indeed
may not be carved there, may lie
— the quick of mystery —
in animal eyes gazing
from the thicket,
a creature of unknown size,
fierce, terrified, having teeth or
no defense, but whom
no And may approach suddenly.
TWO VERSIONS

1. Poetry

Fidelity

as in love

is in poetry

an unexpected satisfaction;

or, rendered into French,

The Importance of Being Earnest becomes

L’important, c’est d’être fidèle!

discoverable after promiscuities,

flirtations,

flights of fancy;

this is to say that

genius is no scarecrow,

for instance:

murder in South Kensington

is not strange fruit on any poet’s tree;

for instance:

the hoodwinked eye of ignorance

lurks sinister beneath the professorial gown;

or,

extremes of possibility are not always

the greatest possible extremities,

for,

like a monk in meditation,

poetry

is cloaked in sheer

profundities of otherness,

its ambiguous nakedness its serene capacity

for wisdom: nothing denied

until entirely known.

And so, in the chaste embrace

of faithful lovers

poetry may

freely ravage the pulse of evil

that throbs in the dark incestuous part

of every earnest lover’s earthly heart.

2. In Situ

The poet in his tree of hell

will see life steadily and see it well.

The world is round. It moves in circles.

The poet in his vision tree

imparts immaculate necessity

to murder, ignorance and lust.

The world is round. It moves in circles.

Poetry, the poet’s curse,

will look for better or for worse

like a simple monk in meditation

cloaked in apparent deprivation

in its ambiguous nakedness

glows the raiment of its otherness.

The world is round. It moves in circles.

With laughter on his haunted face,

a madman captive in a leaf’s embrace,

the poet wildly shakes his tree.

The world is round. It moves in circles.
I have a wall and a bare tree,
With my window I have three,
Adding you it comes to four
That my eyes have in this hour.

At this hour you are not there,
My eyes encounter only air,
Yet my inward eye can build
Your features, mold them, and be held

Not by your face but what you mean—
Just as the tree must postulate
Something deeper and more great
Than what can here be sensed or seen;

Just as still objects have no tongue
And yet imply their right or wrong,
We can deduce an inner core
Which lives inside the fleshless door.

And knew we how, we could extract
From possibilities the fact,
Or read the accent of a face,
And value even empty space.

But at best this is not much
For such as love or even such
As hope to love, but look aside
And love their sight objectified.

It comes to this: the things we know
Change, they diminish or they grow,
You are not what you seem at all
As tree is tree or wall is wall.

In all this sense-deceiving color
There lies a kernel, richer, fuller,
Than any which I have yet bitten,
A poem still not felt or written;

But if I join my wall, my tree,
My window, you, in harmony,
Then perhaps I may possess
The undisclosed, both more, and less.
THE MIND, INTRACTABLE THING

even with its own ax to grind, sometimes
helps others. Why can't it help me?

O magnifico,
wizard in words—poet, was it, as
Alfredo Panzini defined you?
Weren't you refracting just now
on my eye's half-closed triptych
the image, enhanced, of a glen—
"the foxgrape festoon as sere leaves fell"
on the sand-pale dark byroad, one leaf adrift
from the thin-twigged persimmon; again,

a bird—Arizona
catch-up-with, uncatchable cuckoo
after two hours' pursuit, zigzagging
road-runner, stenciled in black
stripes all over, the tail
windmilling up to defy me?
You understand terror, know how to deal
with pent-up emotion, a ballad, witchcraft.
I don't. O Zeus and O Destiny!

Unafraid of what's done,
undeterred by apparent defeat,
you, magnifico, unafraid
of disparagers, death, dejection,
have out-wiled the Mermaid of Zennor,
made wordcraft irresistible:
reef, wreck, lost lad, and "sea-foundered bell"—
as near a thing as we have to a king—
craft with which I don't know how to deal.
I

Item: the poet has to feed himself & fuck himself.

II

Salt the metaphors. Set them breast up over the vegetables & baste them with the juice in the casserole. Lay a piece of aluminum foil over the poem, cover the casserole & heat it on top of the stove until you hear the images sizzling. Then place the poem in the middle of a rack in the preheated oven.

Roast for an hour & twenty minutes, regulating heat so that poem is always making quiet cooking noises. The poem is done when drumsticks move in their sockets & the last drops of juice drained from the vent run clear. Remove to a serving dish & discard trussing.

III

Once the penis has been introduced into the poem, the poet lets herself down until she is sitting on the muse with her legs outside him. He need not make any motions at all. The poet sits upright & raises & lowers her body rhythmically until the last line is attained. She may pause in her movements & may also move her pelvis & abdomen forward & back or sideways, or with a circular corkscrew motion. This method yields exceptionally acute images & is, indeed, often recommended as yielding the summit of aesthetic enjoyment. Penetration is at its deepest. Conception, however, is less apt than with other attitudes.

This position is also suitable when the muse is tired or lacking in vigor since the poet plays the active role. Penetration is deepest when the poet’s body makes an angle of 45 degrees with the muse’s. A half-erect muse will remain in position when this attitude is adopted since he cannot slip out of the poem.
SECTION SEVEN

What Does it Mean to be a Woman?

WOMAN

I

I think I wanted to be
wings, the essence of wings
or a universal symbiote

As a child I climbed trees
and sang in the branches.
Feathers grew like leaves,
levitation became possible
An upwind under the leaves
lifted me like a rising song
The lightline of horizon
funneled into my eyes,
expanded again inside,
splitting my mind like a robin's egg.
Cracked but still singing I
took possession of the sky

Just past the first star
I grew aware of my blood
in its closed veins, a closed system.
Symbiosis had failed.
I was lonely as god
before the invention of colour

Space cold and pure.
encapsulated me,
a virus in the universe.

II

Knowledge coarsened my flesh
I grew heavy
stumbling down endless flights of stairs

At landfall I clawed
in fear of air I'd marked
with curlicues of flight

Earth and salt sea
rocked between the two
poles of my knees
an omen, for I shrank
into my body and beyond
into the warm thick cave of genesis.

Remembering lonely sky I became a slave
to the whimpering womb,
that hollow mouth that never says Enough
until too late.

III

Shrunken between walls
I think of electric storms
in a bird's brain

I think of a tree
as a slow paradigm
for an explosion

There is still a delicate network of cracks
like a tree's branches
behind my eyes-
resembling lightning also.
Some day there will be
feathers and blood
on the inside of the window.
SNAPSHOTS OF A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

1.

You, once a belle in Shreveport, 
with henna colored hair, skin like a peachbud, 
still have your dresses copied from that time, 
and play a Chopin prelude 
called by Cortot: “Delicious recollections 
float like perfume through the memory.”

Your mind now, mouldering like wedding-cake, 
heavy with useless experience, rich 
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy, 
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge 
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter 
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way.

2.

Banging the coffee-pot into the sink 
she hears the angels chiding, and looks out 
past the inked gardens to the sloppy sky. 
Only a week since They said: Have no patience.

The next time it was: Be insatiable. 
Then: Save yourself; others you cannot save. 
Sometimes she’s let the tapstream scald her arm, 
a match burn to her thumbnail;

or held her hand above the kettle’s snout 
right in the woolly steam. They are probably angels, 
since nothing hurts her any more, except 
each morning’s grit blowing into her eyes.

3.

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. 
The beak that grips her, she becomes. And Nature, 
that sprung-lidded, still commodious 
steamer-trunk of tempora and mores 
gets stuffed with it all: the mildewed orange-dowers, 
the female pills, the terrible breasts 
of Boadicea beneath flat foxes’ heads and orchids.

Two handsome women, gripped in argument, 
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream 
across the cut glass and majolica 
like Furies cornered from their prey: 
The argument ad feminam, all the old knives 
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours, 
ma semblable, ma soeur!

4.

Knowing themselves too well in one another: 
their gifts no pure fruition, but a thorn, 
the prick filed sharp against a hint of scorn.

Reading while waiting 
for the iron to heat, 
writing, My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun— 
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum, 
or, more often, 
iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird, 
dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

5.

Dulce ridens, dulce loquens, 
she shaves her legs until they gleam 
lke petrified mammoth-tusk.
6.
When to her lute Corinna sings
neither words nor music are her own;
only the long hair dipping
over her cheek, only the song
of silk against her knees
and these
adjusted in reflections of an eye.

Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before
an unlocked door, that cage of cages,
tell us, you bird, you tragical machine—
is this fertilisante douleur? Pinned down
by love, for you the only natural action,
are you edged more keen
to prise the secrets of the vault? has Nature shown
her household books to you, daughter-in-law,
that her sons never saw?

7.
"To have in this uncertain world some stay
which cannot be undermined, is
of the utmost consequence."

Thus wrote
a woman, partly brave and partly good,
who fought with what she partly understood.
Few men about her would or could do more,
 hence she was labelled harpy, shrew and whore.

8.
"You all die at fifteen," said Diderot,
and turn part legend, part convention.
Still, eyes inaccurately dream
behind closed windows blankening with steam.
Deliciously, all that we might have been,
all that we were—fire, tears,
wit, taste, martyred ambition—
stirs like the memory of refused adultery
the drained and flagging bosom of our middle years.

9.
Not that it is done well, but
that it is done at all? Yes, think
of the odds! or shrug them off forever.
This luxury of the precocious child.
Time’s precious chronic invalid,—
would we, darlings, resign it if we could?
Our blight has been our sinecure:
mere talent was enough for us—
glitter in fragments and rough drafts.

Sigh no more, ladies.
Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime—
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mould straight off.

For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

10.
Well,
she’s long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,
poised, still coming,
his fine blades making the air wince
but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
pulpable
ours.

1958–1960
Erica Jong

Alcestis on the Poetry Circuit

(In Memoriam Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Wickham, Sylvia Plath, Shakespeare's sister, etc., etc.)

The best slave
does not need to be beaten.
She beats herself.

Not with a leather whip,
or with sticks or twigs,
not with a blackjack
or a billyclub,
but with the fine whip
of her own tongue
& the subtle beating
of her mind
against her mind

For who can hate her half so well
as she hates herself?
& who can match the finesse
of her self-abuse?

Years of training
are required for this.
Twenty years
of subtle self-indulgence,
self-denial;
until the subject
thinks herself a queen
& yet a beggar—
both at the same time.

She must never go out of the house
unless veiled in paint.
She must wear tight shoes
so she always remembers her bondage.
She must never forget
she is rooted in the ground.

Though she is quick to learn
& admittedly clever,
hers natural doubt of herself
should make her so weak
that she dabbles brilliantly
in half a dozen talents
& thus embellishes
but does not change
our life.

If she's an artist
& comes close to genius,
the very fact of her gift
should cause her such pain
that she will take her own life
rather than best us.

& after she dies, we will cry
& make her a saint.

She should mistrust herself
in everything but love.
She should choose passionately
& badly.
She should feel lost as a dog
without her master.
She should refer all moral questions
to her mirror.
She should fall in love with a cossack
or a poet.
These women have no language and so they chatter
In the rhythm of stereotype that is won
After certain years and certain money.
Or perhaps they once rose naked from the sea
And the stereotype rose from them, like a snapshot
Snapped by envious fingers, an act of love
They never noticed.
The ladies are metronomes or pendulums
As their laments swing from one to the other
Around the heavy oak table, rooted to the floor
Like many another oak: here the roots are bolts.
The floor is parquet, polished and indifferent
To the tappings of expensive feet.
No matter what these ladies say, no matter,
It is crime to listen to the language of ladies
Who have no language.

Fifteen years ago when we were first married
we lived on an army base; we had no money;
we saved to go to the camp movies, which cost
a dime. We saved all week... for the movies.
The army has cleared out, marched away, the soldiers are
Grown out of their boys’ uniforms and some are
Rotted entirely out of them and some, like your husbands,
Are important now and very expensive.

The car broke down in Kansas City, on our
way to his mother in Texas. And I broke
down, with the baby and all, and he sat
talking to me and kidding in the car, in
the rain... in Kansas City.... That was
nineteen years ago.

Of sorrow their diamonds are stereotypes, again,
And no tears can quite equal their brilliance.
Bloated out of themselves like corpses in water
Such suburban ladies stare upon their former bodies,
Girls’ bodies, and it is the innocence of plant and algae
They seem to taste, and not human guise.

Then Michael was born, and then I got pregnant
again and we were afraid to write home;
between his family and mine what choice did
we have? I had the baby, that’s Perry at
Yale. He’s going to Italy this summer....
There are five ladies here and two are divorced and
Sad to say divorce awaits the others, like death.
Their husbands never dream away time in Kansas City.
Never do they dream of khaki and mud and never youth
Without power, never the submersion in shapes
Unshaped like the good silky leather gloves
Tangled around the straps of leather purses.
Their husbands account for the success of airlines
And the thick red carpets of certain restaurants.
Ah, manly men!—and stripped clean of the garments
Of tawdry questions: What am I?
The latest light-toned lipstick cannot quite disguise
The bitter bitter set of your skulls' teeth, ladies.
And you are educated, or were.
Your milk-curdled glands stir
At the fate of adolescent children, your children,
Who will not obey. No fur to your bodies, ladies,
But the pelts of animals killed for you.
These pelts gleam and glisten
In the five o'clock light of the Oak Room
Of the club. We are very wealthy here and
Very liberal about Negroes.

We never argued, never fought.
Then that night he told me, before guests, that the house was sold; he said, "Your taste was never good."
It seemed to begin then . . .

In the depths of the table over which they lean
Their younger selves dream and drown
And the gold of their trinkets which is real
And heartbreaking in beauty, and the pink
Of their gentle besieged ears, and the perfumed wires
They wear as hair, and the droning question of
Their chatter grow heavy, heavy
In the absence of men and the absence of sky and
Cloudy wet mornings in other cities, minor cities,
And the rapid jerky heartbeat of youth with no
Gold to it but youth.
Do the ribbed wonders of the brain still hold
In terraces without nerves the outlines
Of faces, of love? And what was love? And who were
Those boy husbands, those wives; and who were those babies
So loved and feared? When they were real were they real?
Now it is certain that the time of day is real.
The table, the floor, the panelled walls are real
And real the density of bodies and
The images, like angels, of ladies settled and bizarre
As certain birds bred for color and song and beyond
Their youth's charm.
Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
of our own doubts, while dubiously
we mother man in his doubt!

And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees
the sweet rain drifting through western air
a white sweating bull of a poet told us

our cunts are ugly—why didn’t we
admit we have thought so too? (And
what shame? They are not for the eye)

No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy,

caves of the Moon . . . And when a
dark humming fills us, a
coldness towards life,
we are too much women to
own to such unwomanliness.

Whorishly with the psychopomp
we play and plead—and say
nothing of this later. And our dreams,

with what frivolity we have pared them
like toenails, clipped them like ends of
split hair.
WOMEN

Women have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.

They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,
They do not hear
Snow water going down under culverts
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,
They stiffen, when they should bend.
They use against themselves that benevolence
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them
A shout and a cry.
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills
They should let it go by.
A Woman in Her Secret Life

There is nothing of airplanes in me
Orchards draw up my hair in struck
crazy strands
I am drawn from rivulets
easing slyly into banks

A sunny silence pierces
my bones of porcelain and milk
Life pauses for years between
a thing and a verb....
Nothing gets remembered

in me except what turns to bone.
My father sat at a kitchen table
yearning with eyes shut from
us: he had a secret age and a secret
wage, a union man. My mother
braided all our hair
together.

If I forget my family it is
to pollute myself in the bone
of strangers, of men, to give up
my face to their faces' imprint.
There is nothing of men in me
except the strange raw texture
of their love

There is nothing
of erasures in me or sharp
corners, no rewinding,
a saint's stare burned blind by wind
a life yawned away in flesh.
Women
should be pedestals
moving pedestals
moving to the motions of men
were pedals
sweet oldfashioned painted rocking horses
the gladdest things in the toyroom

The pegs of their ears so familiar and dear to the trusting fists To be chafed feelingly and then unfeelingly

To be joyfully ridden rockingly

To be chafed
feelingly
and then
unfeelingly

To be joyfully
Ridden rockingly

To be chafed

The pegs of their ears so familiar and dear to the trusting fists To be chafed feelingly and then unfeelingly

To be joyfully ridden rockingly

To be chafed

The pegs of their ears so familiar and dear to the trusting fists To be chafed feelingly and then unfeelingly

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To be joyfully ridden rockingly

To be chafed
SUN

With your masculine stride
you tread insidious clouds and glide
to the unobstructed parapet of noon-blue

ruthless rip through cumulous veils of sloth
spurn their sly caresses and erect
an immediate stairway to passion’s splendid throne

From yourself you fling your own earth-seed
and orbits organize in the wombless infinite
for your disciplined planets

radiant boys
that imitate your stamping feet
in the elliptic dance of fire

You are not moon-dependent on desire
in round rhythm leashed to a mineral despot
like that satellite in female furrow sown

that white rib plucked from Adam-earth
but appended still
eclipsed beneath his dark chest
writhing to his will

one-sided shield turned to the urgent tide
compelled to yield to the night-sky slime
she that marble-smiling sinks in moss

At dawn rubbed thin a mutilate
she melts and faints in the cold cloud curd

while you are up afor the first ringing word
of potent joy the sharp-tined golden shout
divine and glistering your beard with dewy flames
sprinting to the pantheon and your god-like games
WOMAN TO WOMAN

Woman to woman can cleave and crave,
But the restless heart and the aching bone
Beat for the meeting of sea and stone,
For woman to woman is wave upon wave.

As a pier that with the soft foam merges,
Harsh, then tender, men’s needs move
Till strangeness shapes familiar love:
When turbulence ends, new life emerges.

No more, no more, sweet image, come,
Come trembling down to a still-water grave.
For woman to woman is wave upon wave
And breeds something pure, useless, and dumb.

Stabat Mater

In love’s long execution she
is fixed upon the human tree
The tree is fashioned like a cross
the cross is image of her loss
Loss and cross and tree are one
in the person of her son
In her hands the wounds are wide
in her feet and in her side
and since the day that he was born
she has felt the stabbing thorn.
Tears

My tears were Orion's splendor with sextuple suns and the
million
Flowers in the fields of the heaven, where solar systems are
setting—
The rocks of great diamonds in the midst of the clear wave
By May dews and early light ripened, more diamonds beget­
ting.
I wept for the glories of air, for the millions of dawns
And the splendors within Man's heart with the darkness warr­
ing,
I wept for the beautiful queens of the world, like a flower-bed
shining—
Now gathered, some at six, some at seven, but all in Eternity's
morning.
But now my tears have shrunk and like hours are falling:
I weep for Venus whose body has changed to a metaphysical.city
Whose heart-beat is now the sound of the revolutions—for love
changed
To the hospital mercy, the scientists' hope for the future,
And for darkened Man, that complex multiplicity
Of air and water, plant and animal,
Hard diamond, infinite sun.
LAKE-SONG

The lapping of lake water
Is like the weeping of women,
The weeping of ancient women
Who grieved without rebellion.
The lake falls over the shore
Like tears on their curven bosoms.
Here is languid, luxurious wailing,
The wailing of kings’ daughters.

So do we ever cry,
A soft, unmutinous crying,
When we know ourselves each a princess
Locked fast within her tower.

The lapping of lake water
Is like the weeping of women,
The fertile tears of women
That water the dreams of men.
You show me the poems of some woman
my age, or younger
translated from your language

Certain words occur: enemy, oven, sorrow
enough to let me know
she's a woman of my time

obsessed

with Love, our subject:
we've trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine
or the satellite
of a hostile power

I begin to see that woman
doing things: stirring rice
ironing a skirt
typing a manuscript till dawn

trying to make a call
from a phonebooth

The phone rings unanswered:
in a man's bedroom
she hears him telling someone else
Never mind. She'll get tired.
hears him telling her story to her sister

who becomes her enemy
and will in her own time
light her own way to sorrow

ignorant of the fact this way of grief
is shared, unnecessary
and political

1972
REACHING OUT WITH THE HANDS OF THE SUN

And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all
heartache

On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied: 'To be born woman is to know —
Although they do not talk of it at school —
That we must labour to be beautiful.'
“Adam's Curse,” W. B. Yeats

Atun-Re
the sun disk
whose rays end in hands
shines above us in New York
California
Egypt
sometimes even Alaska.
Walking across the desert,
he puts his scorching hands over our eyes
and turns vision into sounds,
waves
as the ocean,
drawing the pupils away from rattlesnakes & blurring
the hawks
that sail so unconcerned with heat
above our heads,
when we ride across the snow
and shaggy trees of Alaska
the sun's many hands
rub thick bear skins & tallow against the apples of our faces,
when we float down the river
without barks of gold or flutes or beautiful boys in the heavy
linen sails,
the sun's hands reach into the Nile
and pull out a glimmering eel
or a water lily,
holding it against the banks,
motioning for us to expect life anywhere,
even though it's not at once seen,
the hands coming from the rays of that disk
hold oranges, dates, figs, nuts
all those sweetmeats
that give a woman fat thighs
and a puffy face.

What am I to believe in this world?
The whirling sun disk
that speeds years away
puts out such rays with hands attached to each
that fling me one day against
the rough edges of mountains,
one day caress me, push me against the long mustaches I love;
my face varies from plain to dignified;
my figure from straight to plump;
my eyes from bright to small & sad;
my mouth, always a straight line — as if crossing a “t”
and I see the world change around me;
only one thing never changes.

Men remember,
love,
cherish,
beautiful women,
as I've said,
like April snow
like silk that rustles in a fragrant chest,
like a machine dripping with oil and running smoothly.

I am pooh-poohed
every time I say it.
   “a woman of your intelligence,”
   etc., etc.,
believing
such a superficial thing. “Only the
foolish
misguided,
the men with no balls,
or the ones that don't really matter,"
love a woman for her beauty
her physical self.
But I know different.
I've ruled,
I've walked with the mask of a falcon,
perhaps Horus
over my head,
walked everywhere, stiff & disguised,
walked in stone watching
the life around me,
the loving,
and not loving,
without sounds to interrupt or change history.
I've watched and know
that even the poets
whose blood is most filled with sun's light
and whose hands are wet
coming out of the rays of the moon,
love beautiful women,
writh, turn,
upset their lives, leave their good wives,
when one walks by.
And we,
with fat thighs,
or small breasts,
or thin delicate hair,
pale faces,
small eyes,
with only our elegant, small-wristed hands
to defend us
trying to catch one of the hands
on a ray from the sun,
loving our men faithfully
and with hope,
surely we deserve something more than platitudes.
We are the ones who know
beauty is only skin deep.
But we also know
we would trade every ruby
stuffing and jamming our wealthy opulent hearts,
would trade every silver whistle
that alerts our brain,
keeps us sensitive and graceful to the world;
would trade every
miracle
inside our plain & ugly blood factories,
these bodies that never
serve us well,
for some beauty
they could recognize;
that would make the men stop
turn their heads,
twist their minds & lives around
for us/
for those of us who love them
and who never stop.
Whose hands are always radiating
out
ready to touch
the men
with fire
direct from the solar disk
who
brood
are dark often
with hands that come from the
unseen side
of the moon.
A POET RECOGNIZING THE ECHO OF THE VOICE

I. Isolation of Beautiful Women

"How were you able to get ten of the world’s most beautiful women to marry you?"
"I just asked them. You know, men all over the world dream about Lana Turner, desire her want to be with her. But very very few ever ask her to marry them."

paraphrase of an interview with Artie Shaw

We are burning in our heads at night, bonfires of our own bodies. Persia reduces our heads to star sapphires and lapis lazuli. Silver threads itself into the lines of our throats and glitters every time we speak. Old alchemical riddles are solved in the dreams of men who marry other women and think of us. Anyone who sees us will hold our small hands, like mirrors in which they see themselves, and try to initial our arms with desperation. Everyone wants to come close to the cinnamon of our ears. Every man wants to explore our bodies and fill up our minds. Riding their motorcycles along collapsing grey highway they sequester their ambivalent hunting clothes between our legs, reminding themselves of their value by quoting mining stock prices, and ours.

But men do not marry us, do not ask us to share their lives, do not survive the bonfires hot enough to melt steel. To alchemize rubies.

We live the loneliness that men run after, and we, the precious rocks of the earth are made harder, more fiery more beautiful, more complex, by all the pressing, the burying, the plundering, even your desertions, your betrayals, your failure to understand and love us, your unwillingness to face the world as staunchly as we do, these things which ravage us, cannot destroy our lives, though they often take our bodies. We are the earth. We wake up finding ourselves glinting in the dark after thousands of years of pressing.
A woman wakes up
finds herself
glinting in the dark,
the earth holds her
as a precious rock
in a mine

her breath is a jumble
of sediments,
of mixed strata,
of the valuable,
beautiful,
of bulk.

All men are miners,
willing to work hard
and cover themselves with pit dirt,
to dig out,
to weigh,
to possess.

Mine is a place.
Mine is a designation.
A man says, “it is mine,”
but he hacks,
chops apart the mine
to discover,
to plunder,
what’s in it/ Plunder,
that is the word.
Plunder.

A woman wakes up
finds herself
scarred
but still glinting
in the dark.
only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair.

"For Anne Gregory," W. B. Yeats

and if I cut off my long hair,
if I stopped speaking,
if I stopped dreaming for other people about parts of the car,
stopped handing them tall creamy flowered silks
and loosing the magnificent hawks to fly in their direction,
stopped exciting them with the possibilities
of a thousand crystals under the fingernail
to look at while writing a letter,
if I stopped crying for the salvation of the tea ceremony,
stopped rushing in excitedly with a spikey bird-of-paradise,
and never let them see how accurate my pistol shooting is,
who would I be?

Where is the real me
I want them all to love?

We are all the textures we wear.
We frighten men with our steel,
we fascinate them with our silk,
we seduce them with our cinnamon,
we rule them with our sensuous voices,
we confuse them with our submissions.
Is there anywhere
a man
who
will not punish us
for our beauty?

He is the one
we all search for,
chanting names for exotic oceans of the moon.

He is the one
we all anticipate,
pretending these small pedestrians
jaywalking into our lives
are he.
He is the one
we all anticipate,
beauty looks for its match,
confuses the issue
with a mystery that does not exist:
the rock
that cannot burn.

We are burning
in our heads at night
the incense of our histories, finding
you have used our skulls
for ashtrays.
DUTCH INTERIOR

Pieter de Hooch (1629-1682)

I recognize the quiet and the charm,
This safe enclosed room where a woman sews
And life is tempered, orderly, and calm.

Through the Dutch door, half open, sunlight streams
And throws a pale square down on the red tiles.
The cozy black dog suns himself and dreams.

Even the bed is sheltered, it encloses,
A cupboard to keep people safe from harm,
Where copper glows with the warm flush of roses.

The atmosphere is all domestic, human,
Chaos subdued by the sheer power of need.
This is a room where I have lived as woman,

Lived too what the Dutch painter does not tell—
The wild skies overhead, dissolving, breaking,
And how that broken light is never still,

And how the roar of waves is always near,
What bitter tumult, treacherous and cold,
Attacks the solemn charm year after year!

It must be felt as peace won and maintained
Against those terrible antagonists—
How many from this quiet room have drowned?

How many left to go, drunk on the wind,
And take their ships into heartbreaking seas;
How many whom no woman's peace could bind?

Bent to her sewing, she looks drenched in calm.
Raw grief is disciplined to the fine thread.
But in her heart this woman is the storm;

Alive, deep in herself, holds wind and rain,
Remaking chaos into an intimate order
Where sometimes light flows through a window-pane.
She had a little time to think
as he stepped out of water
that paled from the loss of his whiteness
and came toward her.
A certain wit in the way he
handled his webbed feet,
the modesty of the light that lay on him,
a perfectly clear, and unforgiveable,
irony in the cock of his head
told her more than he knew.
She sat there in the sunshine,
naked as a new-hatched bird,
watching him come,
trying to put herself
in the place of the cob, and see
what he saw:

flesh comfortable, used,
but still neatly following the bones,
a posture relaxed,
almost unseemly, expressing
(for the imagination,
unlike the poor body it strips and stirs,
is never assaulted)
openness, complicity even,
the look of a woman
with a context in which she can put
what comes next
(no chance of maiden's hysteria
if his beak pinched hold of her neck-skin,
yet the strangeness of the thing
could still startle her
into new gestures,)
and something—a heaviness,
as if she could bear things,
or as if, when he fertilized her,
he were seeding the bank she sat on,
the earth in its aspect of
quiescence.

And now, how much would she try
to see, to take,
of what was not hers, of what
was not going to be offered?
There was that old story
of matching him change for change,
pursuing, and at the solstice
devouring him.
A man's story.
No, she was not that hungry
for experience. She had her loves.
To re-imagine her life—
as if the effort were muscular
she lifted herself a little
and felt the pull at neck
and shoulderblade, back
to the usual.
And suppose she reached with practiced arms
past the bird, short of the god,
for a vulnerable mid-point,
and held on,
just how short-sighted would that
be? Would the heavens in a flurry record
a major injustice to the world's
possibilities?

He took his time,
pausing to shake out a wing.
The arrogance of that gesture!
And yet she saw him
as the true god.
She saw, with mortal eyes
that stung at the sight,
the pain of his transformations,
which, beautiful or comic,
came to the world
with the risk of the whole self.
She saw what he had to work through
as he took, over and over,
the risk of love,
the risk of being held,
and saw to the bare heart
of his soaring, his journeying,
his wish for the world
whose arms he could enter in the image
of what is brave or golden.

To love with the whole imagination—
she had never tried.
Was there a form for that?
Deep, in her inmost, grubby
female center
(how could he know that,
in his airiness?)
lay the joy of being used,
and its heavy peace, perhaps,
would keep her down.
To give: women and gods
are alike in enjoying that ceremony,
find its smoke filling and sweet.
But to give up was an offering
only she could savor,
simply by covering
her eyes.
He was close to some uncommitted
part of her.
Her thoughts dissolved and
fell out of her body like dew
onto the grass of the bank,
the small wild flowers,
as his shadow,
the first chill of his ghostliness,
fell on her skin.
She waited for him so quietly that
he came on her quietly,
almost with tenderness,
not treading her.
Her hand moved into the dense plumes
on his breast to touch
the utter stranger.
LET NO CHARITABLE HOPE

Now let no charitable hope
Confuse my mind with images
Of eagle and of antelope;
I am in nature none of these.

I was, being human, born alone;
I am, being woman, hard beset;
I live by squeezing from a stone
The little nourishment I get.

In masks outrageous and austere
The years go by in single file;
But none has merited my fear,
And none has quite escaped my smile.
Morning Laughter

To my mother, Elsie MacEwen

umbilical I lumbered
trailing long seed, unwombed
else the giant vagina, unarmed,
no sprung Athene
—cry, cry in the sudden salt
of the big room, world
—I uncurled plastic limbs of senses,
freed the crashing course of menses,
—hurled

I hurled the young tongue's spit
for a common coming, a genesis
sans trumpets and myrrh, rejected
whatever seed in love's inside
fought and formed me from
an exodus of semen come
for the dream of Gwen,
the small one,
whose first salt scream
heralded more and borrowed excellence.

years have tied the sweet cord;
morning laughter, ships of daughter
and of mother move together
in clumsy grace;
you look to a roof of brass clouds
crash loud as the known world knows us;
and each motion's intrinsic as I reach
beyond roofs for a clutch of that first seed.

wary we speak from a fringe of meanings,
circle and pat-a-cake in cat-paw diplomacy,
each hope hoisted to a veined rainbow,
our common denominator, whose colours
are all blood and bone,

wary we speak from a fringe of meanings,
each tongue censored with love and its
cat-paw circling

—now foetal in the world's wide womb,
—now known in my own rebellious belly
—the stuff to people further days
—now forced by some grim reason
to hark down the bonds of the blood
—can still remember from that womb walking,
sideways out of that womb,
glorious from that womb, bent and insolent.

—morning laughter with your young daughter—
smile at the pen she picks, armed to bring light
into terrible focus
and the paper builds worlds but makes
no prodigal ...

who would erase the scribbled slate
of gone years, their jumbled algebra,
their rude designs
junked under a rainbow, all blood and bone
that links the mother and the morning daughter—
and acknowledge now, armed and still insolent
that what is housed in the fragile skull
—light or learning or verbal innocence—
grows from the woman somehow who housed the whole body,
who first fed the vessels, the flesh and the sense.
Gwendolyn Brooks

the battle

MOE BELLE JACKSON's husband
Whipped her good last night.
Her landlady told my ma they had
A knock-down-drag-out fight.

I like to think
Of how I'd of took a knife
And slashed all of the quickenin'
Out of his lowly life.

But if I know Moe Belle,
Most like, she shed a tear,
And this mornin' it was probably,
"More grits, dear?"

Denise Levertov

In Mind

There's in my mind a woman
-of innocence, unadorned but

fair-featured, and smelling of
apples or grass. She wears

a utopian smock or shift, her hair
is light brown and smooth, and she

is kind and very clean without
ostentation—
-but she has
no imagination.

And there's a

turbulent moon-ridden girl

or old woman, or both,
dressed in opals and rags, feathers

and torn taffeta,

who knows strange songs—

but she is not kind.
[The tightrope]

High as fear
The tightrope,
Thin as silk the string
My feet are walking walking
Since my mother cried
And the doctor cut the cord
And stranded me here.

Numberless as clowns
Are my beginnings —
Teeter, crazily totter,
Windmills for arms;
The long street breathless
And I more breathless than windows,
Waiting.

But I am two times born
And when a new moon cuts the night
Or full moons froth with my
And witches' milk

I walk the tightrope
Free and easy as an angel,
Toes as certain of their line of silk
As the sturdy ones
Whose feet are curled on earth.
I am alive at night.
I am dead in the morning,
an old vessel who used up her oil,
bleak and pale boned.
No miracle. No dazzle.
I'm out of repair
but you are tall in your battle dress
and I must arrange for your journey.
I was always a virgin,
old and pitted.
Before the world was, I was.

I have been orangeing and fat,
carrot colored, gaped at,
allowing my cracked o's to drop on the sea
near Venice and Mombasa.
Over Maine I have rested,
I have fallen like a jet into the Pacific,
I have committed perjury over Japan,
I have dangled my pendulum,
my fat bag, my gold, gold,
blinkedy light
over you all.

So if you must inquire, do so.
After all I am not artificial.
I looked long upon you,
love-bellied and empty,
flipping my endless display
for you, you my cold, cold
coverall man.
Stepping Westward

What is green in me
darkens, muscadine.

If woman is inconstant,
good, I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall
in season and now

is a time of ripening.
If her part

is to be true,
a north star,

good, I hold steady
in the black sky

and vanish by day,
yet burn there

in blue or above
quilts of cloud.

There is no savor
more sweet, more salt

than to be glad to be
what, woman,

and who, myself,
I am, a shadow

that grows longer as the sun
moves, drawn out

on a thread of wonder.
If I bear burdens

they begin to be remembered
as gifts, goods, a basket

of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me

in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.
INDEX TO POEMS IN THE ANTHOLOGY
Chronologically Arranged by
Name of Author
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atwood, Margaret</td>
<td>Untitled poem from <em>Power Politics</em>, p. 46</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is Dangerous to Read Newspapers</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled poem from <em>Power Politics</em>, p. 7</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Habitation</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speeches for Dr. Frankenstein</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Shadow Voice</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avison, Margaret</td>
<td>The Word</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogan, Louise</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braymer, Nan</td>
<td>Five-day Requiem for Vietnam</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks, Gwendolyn</td>
<td>The Mother</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Children of the Poor</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Battle</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deutsch, Babette</td>
<td>Dogma</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To My Son</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnegans, Joan</td>
<td>A Woman in Love is all the Trees</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harwood, Gwen</td>
<td>In the Park</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jong, Erica</td>
<td>Arse Poetica</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alcestis on the Poetry Circuit</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kizer, Carolyn</td>
<td>Epithalamion</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part Three from <em>Pro Femina</em></td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kogawa, Joy</td>
<td>The Chicken Killing</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laing, Dilys</td>
<td>Afternoon Tea</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pius Thought</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Maker</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sonnet to a Sister in Error</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stabat Mater</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawner, Lynne</td>
<td>May Song</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Your Arrogance</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tongue of Crisp Oleander</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possession</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where are the Wings</td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woman to Woman</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levertov, Denise</td>
<td>Two Variations</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Mutes</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Wife</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song for Ishtar</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Earth Worm</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Illustration</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Well</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To the Muse</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illustrious Ancestors</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Jacob's Ladder</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At the Edge</td>
<td>408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hypocrite Women</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Mind</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stepping Westward</td>
<td>444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livesay, Dorothy</td>
<td>The Taming</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Skin of Time</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowell, Amy</td>
<td>Madonna of the Evening Flowers</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Sisters</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowther, Pat</td>
<td>May Chant</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baby You Tell Me</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MacEwen, Gwendolyn</td>
<td>Lilith</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Womb: Some Thoughts and Observations</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morning Laughter</td>
<td>440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McPherson, Sandra</td>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evolving an Instinct</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millay, Edna St. Vincent</td>
<td>The Mind, Intractable Thing</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musgrave, Susan</td>
<td>Once More</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oates, Joyce Carol</td>
<td>A Girl at the Centre of Her Life</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vanity</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married Woman's Song</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lines for Those to Whom Tragedy is Denied</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Woman in Her Secret Life</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title/Translation</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rage, P. K.</td>
<td>Portrait of Marina</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plath, Sylvia</td>
<td>The Applicant</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raine, Kathleen</td>
<td>Mourning in Spring, 1943</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich, Adrienne</td>
<td>From Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib, 7/23/68</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Night Watch</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trying to Talk with a Man</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5, 6, 7 from the Phenomenology of Anger</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two Songs</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Night-Pieces: For a Child</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Translations</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarton, May</td>
<td>The Godhead as Lynx</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Artesian Well</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dutch Interior</td>
<td>436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexton, Anne</td>
<td>The Abortion</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Celebration of my Uterus</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Breast</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dec. 11</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Song for a Lady</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Said the Poet to the Analyst</td>
<td>388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moon-Song, Woman Song</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewell, Elizabeth</td>
<td>The Analogue</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sion, Emily</td>
<td>All Anatomy</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sitwell, Edith</td>
<td>Dirge for the New Sunrise</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tears</td>
<td>426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Stevie</td>
<td>How Cruel is the Story of Eve</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spark, Muriel</td>
<td>Against the Transcendentalists</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevenson, Sharon</td>
<td>First Incision</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lover's Anatomy</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 &amp; 3/4 Months</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flower Song</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industrial Childhood</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swenson, May</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taggard, Genevieve</td>
<td>With Child</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untermeyer, Jean Starr</td>
<td>Lake Song</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van Duyn, Mona</td>
<td>Leda</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of a Poet</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leda Reconsidered</td>
<td>437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waddington, Miriam</td>
<td>Women Who Live Alone</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semblances</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakoski, Diane</td>
<td>Belly Dancer</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wind Secrets</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reaching Out with the Hands of the Sun</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Poet Recognizing the Echo of the Voice</td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webb, Phyllis</td>
<td>Poet</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lament</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two Versions</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitehead, Lori</td>
<td>Mother Singing</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wickham, Anna</td>
<td>The Wife</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Woman in Bed</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson, Anne</td>
<td>Lens</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Tightrope</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wylie, Elinor</td>
<td>Sonnet xii</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Portrait</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let no Charitable Hope</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>