

The Lesbian Poet¹

I've given talks about being a presidential candidate, and a talk about being a poet in the world, which was essentially the same talk, and once I addressed being a lesbian on a panel called From Pop to Porn. I was on a panel about Censorship and Acid Migration in books, I was on a panel called Shakespeare's Sisters, I was on a panel called I think marginalization, representation and the sub-culture of queer. I don't think I've ever addressed exactly the twin topics of lesbianism and poetry which is kind of the area I've been invited to address. Ed² said it was something about the area of feminism, gay or lesbian issues, something like that, that tradition. I drew a figure in my notebook, three circles that joined at one point, and lunged at it—that's it, my spot, but then I realized it was poetry or the poetics of it that I was needing to address and I've hardly been anywhere other and I want to honor the place that I stand. I have to say it's literally the poetry project, St. Mark's church that I'm talking about—I came out here as a poet and a dyke maybe all in one reading. I read with Joe Ceravolo in 1977 and I read my love poems to a woman, Rose, and it seemed that I was everything, all at once, after that. It wasn't that I wasn't a poet before that, but I'm addressing some kind of surge, a moving forward that happens at some points in a poet's life, so I

1. "The Lesbian Poet" is a talk I read at St. Mark's Poetry Project in May of 1994 as part of the Revolutionary Poetry Symposium.

2. Ed Friedman, Director of St. Mark's.

mean I was all there, body and soul after that. I think we all write our poems with our metabolism, our sexuality, for me a poem has always been an imagined body of a sort, getting that down in time, it moves this way and that, it is full of its own sense of possibility.

I was making my marks. I think we need to line poetry up with all the other arts. We are simply making marks, marks of sound, marks on paper. We are notating our own mortality. My friend David Rattray died last spring and I went out to visit him several times in Amagansett, a beautiful place to die. He was a person who talked constantly and during his waning months I would often whip out a notebook to get down what he said. This is the same guy I had devised a signal with, earlier in our friendship. We were riding on a train and I would lift my hand at various points in his monologue which meant he should stop. I couldn't breathe. He was talking that much. One day sitting in his house I told him how when I was a dieting nineteen-year-old in Boston I would close my eyes and see the day as an empty page with horizontal stripes which represented meals. David said that's interesting because the first writing occurred in Egypt, and the parchment represented the Nile and its first use was to indicate future shipments of food and how much. Rafts and rafts of the stuff. Poetry, not prose.

It indicates desire. My poem is a menu.

My girlfriend just called and she's in a restaurant with friends and do I want to come by. First Avenue and 10th. Sapporo East. I go shooting forward sitting right here. I don't go. I know that she wants me.

Last summer I was standing alone on a hill with my dog and a car as an amazing shower of meteorites *flash*

flash had stained the sky orange. It was so sensational and I was utterly alone with my animal. I knew I was a man. It was utterly clear, there was no thing of woman at all. I was standing in nature alone, this guy. It was a terrifically human feeling. Alone. Completely full.

I would watch the birds and the water and the trees. I was only notation. Now a glob of purple lilacs is dunking over my power book which is perched on a huge dictionary. The building I've lived in for seventeen years has walls like skin. Its doors and footsteps, loud Chinese spoken in the hallway, piano music have pierced my poems again and again. Its pipes, phones, newscasters are writing my poems. There's no plaque on the outside of 86 E. 3rd. I'm not dead. My poem is a plaque of all of them, their moving, its inside. Boom. Another door slams. Monumental Wednesday.

A lesbian is just an idea. An aesthetic one perhaps. Hugh Kenner explains that Sappho is the standard for each poetic age and like David's parchment thesis, it may not be true, but I buy it. I trot it out in workshops all the time. We have so little of her, quotes existing in someone else's poems or those ratty pieces of parchment riddled with holes, "I burn *blank blank blank*." Swinburne said you should fill in the holes, "I burn *incredible lilacs in a big heaping shaking blaze*." Mr. Longline. Pound aestheticized the absence. Which also seems too precious a thought, but that's modernism—swinging quietly in the breeze of the death machine. John Ashbery said, I would put it all in, then I would take it all out. He never made up his mind. I don't think he really needed to, evolving a style that took his wavering into account.

Painters taught me to look at the edges, that's when

you aestheticize, when you get to the edge. In the poem you're turning around. The flickering lights of the fading lines re-erupting one quarter inch down, unpredictable, rude. She hopes to give the impression it's barely been mined this mineral being, yet it shines like prophecy itself, an accident. Sentence chips, poetry fading into prose, hunks of it waning. Making Frankenstein with our lips. He's laughing at what I wrote. You said she has a really big cunt. Isn't that the worst thing he shrieks. It's an insult. You know they like it tight. Isn't that why men leave their wives after they've had babies. Suddenly he's looking up a hole. But, it's different for us. We love it. Huge with desire. An incredible dripping cave.

Edmund White states in *Esquire* that there's no real culture in America now. That's why he lives in Europe. What with AIDS and "Kamikaze feminism." To Ed we are dead, we women, with our zany demands. As a literary lesbian vis à vis gay men I'm more alone than ever before. The awesome mortality AIDS conjures up leaves fags ever more protective of their lineage. Melvin Dixon pleading at the 1992 Outwrite conference in Boston, "Who will call my name when I'm gone." We will, I whisper but I've never been so aware of the conversation between lesbians and gay men, not going on. Men want to be remembered by men. When a man dies, it's the need to be valued by men, not women, that counts. History, and we still know who keeps that.

When I teach workshops I've always brought in both women and men, poetic models, but actually I've got many more fathers. I was writing poems, like I said, before I came out and wanted to get ahead, to know what you had to know to be in the conversation. It was mostly

men who were doing the talking. For many years my favorite poets were Jimmy Schuyler, John Wieners and Robert Creeley. My three favorite living poets, I'd emphasize and was proud that I had met them, they had signed my books and with one I was actually friends, Jimmy, and the other two—Creeley, I know him and John Wieners I always see him in Filene's basement or catching a smoke on a rainy day under the roof of the Harvard Coop. Hi John, I go. Yeah, yeah, yeah, he says, talking softly. I think he's my uncle, my uncle John. Where's the mothers. Gertrude, Gertrude Stein, of course. And all the living women I know.³ Recently I began claiming men, a new idea. To not be ashamed of their influence on me, who was undoubtedly female, lesbian. I began demanding

3. I guess I could name a few. Danine Ricereto, Alice Notley, Deborah Weinstein, Camille Roy, Rae Armantrout, Tracie Morris, Kellie Cogswell, Joan Larkin, Michelle Tea, Lee Ann Brown, Leslie Scalapino, Karin Cook, Sapphire, Kristin Stuart, Carla Harryman, Shannon Ebner, Bernadette Mayer, Susan Wheeler, Jan Heller Levi, Ann Rower, Cecilia Dougherty, Brenda Coultas, Lyn Hejinian, Stephanie Grant, Susan Howe, Maggie Nelson, Cynthia Nelson, Dodie Bellamy, Jennifer Blowdryer, Mary Beth Caschetta, Elaine Equi, Tom Carey, Diane DiPrima, Eliza Galaher, Jennie Portnow, Tory Dent, Barbara Barg, Honor Moore, Ann D'Adesky, Lucia Berlin, Harryette Mullen, Kathe Izzo, Jane King, Barbara Guest, Heather Lewis, Jill Johnston, Linda Smukler, Lynn Tillman, Madeleine Olnek, Rose Lesniak, Bea Gates, Ann Lauterbach, Amy Gerstler, Holly Hughes, Gerry Pearlberg, Myra Mniewski, Laurie Weeks, Robyn Selman, Kathy Acker, Anne Waldman, Sarah Messer, Josie McKee, Elinor Nauen, Susie Timmons, Adrienne Rich... (actually you can pick up a copy of *The New Fuck You! adventures in lesbian reading* [Semiotext(e), 1995] edited by Liz Kotz and myself)... Marilyn Hacker, Maggie Estep, Erica Hunt, Lori Lubeski, Gail Scott...

my lineage, if I felt I had it. I brought almost solely their poems in. That quiet poem by Allen Ginsberg in *Howl*—"Transcription of Organ Music." "I remember when I first got laid, H.P. graciously took my cherry, I sat on the docks of Provincetown, age 23, joyful elevated in hope with the Father, the door to the womb was open to admit me if I wished to enter." "I Know a Man"—"As I sd to my friend, because I am/always talking, John, I/sd, which was not his/name..." Jimmy Schuyler counting counting then looking up at the sky in a quiet explosion. Pretty ejaculatory. I have to say I began to perceive a male shape, a conversation with God the Father. A conversation man to man, because of course I am not alone in my mortality, men are also making marks. And showing their marks like a man. Masturbating, having sex with God. It strikes me that the act of creativity, male creativity is a conversation with a masculine God, a self-fulfilling act of male conception, something roomy. I know that I can't see like a man, fuck like a man, not exactly. His literature doesn't fit me. Nor should it. He makes art for different reasons from me. To perpetuate himself. To rewrite woman.

4. Rather than fool with the talk I gave at St. Mark's, I've decided to footnote some of my meanings. When I talk of "unwriting" myself, I'm thinking of it as the act of shedding. You can put on your mother's clothes, or you can take them off, but you're still her daughter. It's a performance of being that I'm after. Being female of course means something different to women than it does to men. It's a given that I'm alive, so I don't have to be "conceived" again. To stand in that place more firmly, though, I find myself consciously breathing *out*, exhaling, unwriting, so to speak. The huge fact of my body has all the momentum of literature. When I'm dead I'll have shed a lot. I leave it to girls *and* boys.

If I were to start unwriting⁴ myself, Eileen Myles, I would begin with my name. That's the title of the poem, I own her. When I came out I felt that philosophically I could jump off the wheel, that being a lesbian meant not giving birth, that the buck would stop with me and I liked that. My parents were post World War II working class Bostonians who it seemed did not achieve many of their dreams or ambitions, and me deciding not once but many times not to reproduce would keep my sights upon the horizon of my own life, a bold and egocentric move, I felt. Since then of course being a lesbian has proved to have nothing to do with childlessness—many of my friends have dug up some sperm and gone ahead so it's a personal decision it seems, a female one and not related to my lesbianity. This is so heavy. I want to throw this damn speech away. I want to say something else about my femaleness, which is what interests me, not feminism. Femaleness is owning my woman's insides.

In a culture wild about dick it's essential, I think, to do some kind of owning, of what's inside your belly, the invisible. Your private use of your ovaries, uterus—I don't mean your pussy, your clit, the things that everyone values when they're citing our sex. All you need to do is hit your thirties and meet some male gynecologist or female, they went to the same school, who wants to yank your uterus out, just for the fun of it, and it never occurs

We know what rewriting means, it occurs *on* something you're not. The problem is that men don't think they're women. If they came out of the sky they'd be rewriting that. Admittedly, it's difficult to be here for all humans. That's why we write at all. We're shedding thinking. More men ought to start unwriting themselves. Soon.

to him that this is castration, or that a small discharge leaking out of the tip of his dick would *ever* cause a doctor to calmly suggest we might cut off his balls. I began a practice of naming, owning, praying after that, liking every node and tube and squeaky tunnel in my female belly. I want it there, it's mine. My poem rumbles through it all, unbelievable, and as the month turns the poems get manic, crazy, weird, sullen and bloody, stay at home, the words I use narrate a female cycle, probably much more than a female orgasm.

When I came out as a Lesbian poet I named my first book *Sappho's Boat*. Very definitely because my earlier book's content was half in and out and a bookstore called Oscar Wilde wouldn't carry it because it wasn't gay enough. I wanted to be in the store. You want gay, here's *Sappho's Boat*. I feel self-conscious about lesbian things, in nature like I said I'm nobody, this human, a man. I claim my femaleness, first if you want take it from me, any of it, my dark possessions. It's my poetic dilemma, it seems. To include the body, mine, the woman's as I see it, to approach this blood as part of the score. It should show up regularly in the culture's poems, this female conversation, because most of the poets who write bleed every month until they pass childbearing years. I'm waiting to watch the room change.

There is a word in Italian, *affidamento*, which describes a relationship of trust between two women, in which the younger asks the elder to help her obtain something she desires.

Women I know are turning around to see if that woman is here. The woman turning, that's the revolution. The room is gigantic, the woman is here.

My man, Ed White, wrote an article in *The New York Times* about gay fiction. The woman he mentioned was Gertrude Stein. It's a pity she's dead. Yet the fact that our century's greatest poet is a lesbian is nothing to sneeze at. That her work can be seen as clicking with the rhythms of a female body, and she looked like a man, *what a butch*, is fine. She studied circulation, the circulation in the human body, in college, it's wonderful. That she was a student of William James and stands in the line with Emerson and Thoreau is cool. Is radiant with the undercurrency in American literature that assures us that the moment of being is central and true. That a woman, unwriting herself, flooding the world with her details, standing in such an endangered place could be free.