

JUDY GRAHN: A LESBIAN POET'S CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE LITERARY TRADITION

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents in Heaven, Joe and Lu Gonzales,  
and to the many courageous women of my life with teeth like white geese and  
muscles like rope ladders.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the value and contribution of the poetry of Judy Grahn, a lesbian feminist activist whose work exemplifies the political issues of the second wave of feminism in mid-twentieth-century America. It is a historical overview of the rise of feminism and the place poetry held in that movement. It also argues for Grahn's introduction into the university curriculum because her work is an authentic piece of authorship conceived from her own experiences on the frontlines of activism. Grahn belongs in the literary canon as a representative voice for all marginalized people.

This paper is also an analysis of Grahn's 433-line poem, "A Woman is Talking to Death," and an illustration of how its content reflects the historical social struggle of women and minorities.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The second wave of feminism in the early 1960s saw the reemergence of political activism for American women who were fighting for equity in the work place and in the home, and for reproductive rights. Second-wave feminists were not purely politicians but artists, musicians, and most importantly poets. Enter Judy Grahn, a radical lesbian activist with a fierce commitment toward rescuing women from the pervasive misogyny of patriarchal America. Grahn was born in Chicago to working-class parents in 1940. By the age of eight, she and her family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where her playmates were the impoverished children of Mexican migrant farmworkers and the Navajo. Growing up in New Mexico, Grahn was surrounded by myths and stories of the nearby Organ Mountains and the rich culture of Latino and Native-American spirituality, which influenced her artistic sensibilities, and as early as nine years old she knew she was a poet. By the age of twenty-five, after a life-altering illness which put her in a coma for three days, she awakened “with a ferocious courage” ready to dedicate her life to her art and to women’s rights (Grahn *A Simple Revolution* 85). The recovery from illness gave her the courage to face every fear that keeps women in a submissive or dormant position. She reflected on her recent dishonorable discharge from the Air Force for being a lesbian, an experience that was later recounted in her poem “A Woman is Talking to Death,” and focused

from that point forward on a journey to explore all that was possible for her as a poet.

By 1968, poetry had pervaded the women's liberation movement as a means of communication between newly emerging feminists and those already on the front lines. Poetry—the writing of it, the reading of it, the dissemination of chap books—acted “as a tool for consciousness-raising, creating a sense of unity, and spreading theories” (Ossip). Women were coming together and sharing ideologies in coffee houses, consciousness raising groups, and rallies where the first order of business was to set the fiery tone of activism. This inspiration was accomplished through poetry. Often a poet would step forward to share her experiences with sexism or abuse with women who were suffering from the same oppression. The speaker's poems were a means to reach out, to express, and most importantly to galvanize the rage that most feminists were experiencing at the time. As Grahn notes, “Poetry became the grassroots tool for joining women in common expression” (Grahn *A Simple Revolution* 183). Poetry is for more than self-expression or an art form for its own sake. She believes that “A poet of the world is of use in the world. An activist poet stirs the world to action” (113). According to Reed, poetry not only reflects feminist issues but, more significantly, is “one of the main tools used to identify, name, formulate, and disseminate those issues” (92). By the late 1960s women of all classes and races were finding commonality in their struggles with the workplace, child rearing, uneven hiring practices, pay, and other pressing issues. Women began

to write their own poetry about these issues. Both Lilian Mohin and Adrienne Rich described poetry as “a potentially revolutionary medium for women because of its linguistic intensity combined with its privileged relation to our consciousness” (Montefiore 7). Grahn and other like-minded poets began to explore topics that were common to the women they knew. They wrote about the lives they were living. They wrote about women loving women, the beauty of vaginas, the sorrow of abortion. They wrote with “enthusiasm and zeal” creating “new meanings with words and crafting new political positions on language” (Enszer *The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives* 4). For example, Pat Parker, a contemporary and dear friend of Grahn, concludes her poem “Exodus” with “and lay with you” instead of “and lay beside you.” This change in diction from “beside” to “with” evokes “the movement to greater camaraderie between women” (Enszer “Have Fun”). Grahn reinvents the use of words such as “dyke” and “butch” that had been used against lesbians just as African Americans took back the *n* word to reclaim its meaning within their culture (Gale). She writes in *The Work of a Common Woman*:

I am the wall at the lip of the water  
 I am the rock that refused to be battered  
 I am the dyke in the matter, the other  
 I am the wall with the womanly swagger  
 I am the dragon, the dangerous dagger  
 I am the bulldyke, the bulldagger

and I have been many a wicked grandmother

and I shall be many a wicked daughter. (98)

Kate Gale writes, “Just as Dr. Martin Luther King said that riot is the language of the unheard, Grahn’s poetry is the language and perspective of the unheard.”

Grahn offers her voice up for every woman who has been silenced.

The sharing of women’s poetry was done with enthusiasm and with the intent to raise the consciousness of women who, prior to the 1960s, had no voice, who had spent years of male domination in isolation. Through poets like Judy Grahn, Pat Parker, Olga Broumas, Cherie Moraga, Joan Larkin, and Susan Griffin, a woman could discover her place within the feminist movement regardless of her education or class. Her life experiences such as “abuse, sisterly solidarity ... men as oppressors ... reform and revolution” were being clearly conveyed by the poets of her day (Ossip). According to Jan Clausen, “it can be said that poets have made the movement possible” (Dame 6).

Women of the second wave of feminism, those women participating in the rise of feminist political activity in the late 1960s, readily identified with the words of the poets because the language was accessible and the subject matter was radical in its juxtaposition with what women had experienced in their school days. This radical departure from the traditional, poetic language is evidenced in Judy Grahn’s “I’m not a girl”:

I’m not a girl

I’m a hatchet

I'm not a hole

I'm a whole mountain. (Hogeland *The Judy Grahn Reader* 16)

Marge Piercy describes Grahn's voice as "authentic as a chainsaw, strong as oak, emotional and blunt" (38). And Enszer adds, Grahn "balances bitterness and exuberance; she evokes histories that have been missing and simultaneously canonizes and humanizes everyday women" (Enszer "Have Fun"). Grahn's language celebrates the capacity of women to survive and their strength to endure despite their social or personal oppression.

A plethora of poetry emerged from the ground roots of the women's movement and women like Judy Grahn shared their work freely without regard to copyrights but as an act of sisterhood. Grahn and Pat Parker read their work in the lesbian owned co-ops in Berkeley "to a small though intensely attentive audience of militant dykes and friends" (Grahn *A Simple Revolution* 134). Copies of her work were handed sister to sister, reprinted, used to name women's projects, and ended up as quotes on posters and T-shirts (Backus 815). Sharing a woman's poetry was a sharing of the "realities of the lives of women" (815). Women were reclaiming those lives no longer isolated or locked in the belief that they were in competition with each other. Distributing poetry was an easy enough endeavor because it required few to no resources. If a poet had paper and pen, she was the manufacturer and producer of her own revolution. Poems were "nailed to trees and telephone poles, taped to windows, and slid under doors" and thus the poet's voice—her call to action—was proliferated (Ossip).

Additionally, lesbian and feminist poetry was regularly published in lesbian / feminist newspapers such as *The Furies*, whose mission was aimed at creating a new society. The editors of *The Furies*, who published numerous works by Judy Grahn, believed that poetry was a tool for creating that society (Enszer “Have Fun”). As Enszer states:

By including poetry in *The Furies* ... the newspaper’s editors ... created a cultural document and experience that reflected and reinforced their visions for social change. Word by word, line by line, poems were constructing a new reality and a new world in which lesbians could live.

(Enszer “Have Fun”)

By rediscovering these iconic publications of the second wave of feminism, women in the twenty-first century can come to better know our own place in time and history. The wealth of poetry that emerged from that period stands as a marker to the growth, the strength, and the political gains made by those revolutionary activists and poets. And Judy Grahn was most certainly on the front lines of the lesbian / feminist revolution. Her work raised awareness about the invisibility of the lesbian in society as in the following excerpt from “A Woman is Talking to Death”:

that same week I looked into the mirror  
and nobody was there to testify,  
how clear, an unemployed queer woman  
makes no witness at all,

nobody at all was there for

those two questions: what does

she do, and who is she married to? (Hogeland *The Judy Grahn Reader* 24)

Grahn's work holds up as a consciousness-raising tool for today's young gay women since gains still need to be made in the LGBTQ social struggle. She believes that a poet defines "the culture around her, giving it name, substance and rhythm so it can grow into a full life" (Grahn *The Highest Apple* 71). Access to her work through classrooms and universities needs to be broadened and taught. Women and men need to read their own herstory and history and see themselves in it to come to their present positions (both personal and political) with a clear understanding of their goals ahead. Grahn's poetic body of work is a primary source for that understanding of what occurred in the second wave of feminism and to this country in the middle of the twentieth century. Introducing Grahn's work into the classroom is the best platform for disseminating her vision and offering lesbian feminist fiction as a historical teaching tool.

Cheri Register suggests that the teaching and sharing of feminist fiction can serve as a forum to better "understand what female experience is" (Hogeland *Feminism* x). This sharing of feminist fiction would work to humanize our culture "which has historically served predominantly male interests" (Hogeland *Feminism* x). When Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar produced *The Madwoman in the Attic* (the go-to resource for feminist fiction) in 1979, they came to realize that they

were not only recovering female literature but “a whole (neglected) female history” (xii). This neglect must never occur again. Educators and scholars must bring to light the works of even the most obscure feminist fiction for it is the literary foundations by which our culture may thrive. The teaching of works by lesbian activist poets “helps women claim for their own the power of language, and with it, their own identity and history” (Brayfield). In her work, Grahn resurrects the long-hidden female-based tribal culture of European myths where the female deity is “almost always more powerful than the male” (Walker 346) and thrusts this culture directly into the hands of modern women. She asks women to recognize their ancient, innate strength so that passivity—social, personal, political—is no longer a road block on their journey. Grahn’s poetry compels a woman “to bestir her memory, her mysticism and her claim to powers” (Grahn *The Highest Apple* 133). She attempts to restructure the traditional “patriarchal myth of female / male structure” by pulling to the surface the mythical qualities of women’s history (86). This remembering of our ancient history is essential in saving our own lives. We begin to live beyond the mundane world of our present as we reconnect to each other and to our universe. Rediscovering ourselves and our strengths leads to understanding our significance to the world—“We *mean*, and our meanings activate us” (11). If female fiction is not given its due, we run the risk of falling out of history again. As Grahn states:

We fall out of poetry except as the objects of it, and as the underlying developers of it, “Muses.” Without our names and stories of who we are,

we fall out of meaning into a kind of slavery, a no-world, a no-place of worms without even a worm's grace. (11)

Female texts cannot afford to be returned to the obscurity of a dusty history.

Judy Grahn's poetry is an essential component of this recovery.

Rediscovering and implementing the works of Grahn into the curriculum might be met with criticism from some traditional corners. Action must be taken because in today's United States we are challenged by a new organized backlash and violent expressions of intolerance of the Other. Permission to express intolerance by Neo-Nazis and Alt-Right groups is practically green-lighted when our government officials look the other way as these hate groups proliferate their messages through social media. Now, more than ever, universities, the beds of democracy, must look to expose all learners to the history and the worth of the lesbian / feminist perspective. Representations of lesbian voices, Grahn's as well as those of other lesbian writers, are needed. Lesbian texts reflect a diversity, a voice of our time, toward a more meaningful education. However, the introduction of diverse texts cannot be nominal with a token nod to "Lesbian Literature Week" or a course focused on what Zimmerman calls the "honorary heterosexuals or sexless spinsters" such as Dickinson, Cather, Rainey, and Hughes (Zimmerman "Lesbian Studies" 22), writers who may have masked their homosexual sensibilities by writing in code (Zimmerman "What Has Never Been" 465). For far too long, lesbian students have never met themselves in their university texts. Instead they meet what Adrienne Rich

described as the “terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome” (Rich “When We Dead Awaken” 21). Anecdotal evidence for the argument of Grahn’s inclusion into the curriculum comes from poet Elliot Femynye batTzedek who writes about her falling in love with Grahn’s poetry at the age of twenty-four and wishing she had been introduced to it earlier in her Creative Writing studies. Instead, she writes:

I knew I was supposed to like certain poets ... Supposed to prefer strong masculine rhymes to the feminine rhymes forced to dwell in doggerel and limericks, this latter message reinforced by the inclusion of only three women writers in the official curriculum: Woolf, Plath, and Sexton, all offered as interesting second-tier writers, and all with the strong suggestion that something about being a successful but uterus-endowed writer caused a suicidal bent. (batTzedek)

batTzedek continues her argument for Grahn’s inclusion by describing how reading her work changed her as a writer. She knew that women lined up to hear Grahn’s work, that they wept because “someone was finally saying The Truth,” and she recognized the power of Grahn’s work “as a force of both content and construction.” batTzedek asks, “Why isn’t ‘A Woman is Talking to Death’ required reading alongside ‘Howl’ as classics of 20th century poetry and voices of dissent?” Bonnie Zimmerman believes:

[I]t is imperative that all faculty take responsibility for learning the basics of lesbian scholarship, reconstruct syllabi and reading lists to reflect that scholarship, educate ourselves and others to handle the particular dynamics that arise when lesbian and gay perspectives are addressed in the classroom. (Zimmerman “Lesbian Studies” 21)

By adding lesbian fiction to our curriculum, we educate students of the contributions of *all* people that populate this nation. After attending a public performance of Judy Grahn’s poetry, Peggy Brayfield, Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, remarks, “I am convinced that [Grahn’s] is an important voice to be heeded by students of the poetic tradition, as well as by feminists and poetry lovers generally.” The rediscovery of Grahn’s work will lead to a better understanding of lesbian values and transform our interpretation of traditional texts. Lesbians will find themselves in the texts, no longer alienated from their own culture.

Introducing Grahn’s poetry into the university curriculum might be perceived as a revolutionary act, and rightfully so given that her work is a manifestation of the revolution she set out to ignite over forty years ago. She knew she wanted to effect change through her poetry and she knew the best way to do that was to write about the women themselves. Therefore, her subject matter falls far away from that of the canon of traditional poets when she created the “She Who” series that examines the women whose qualities are not valued, accepted, or admired by society. She writes about “the woman with enormous

knees, the woman who hates kittens, the woman who plants potatoes, the woman whose toes grew together, the woman who screams on the trumpet” (Grahm *A Simple Revolution* 173). Poet batTzedek writes that “Grahm sounded familiar, like my people, working-class people.” Kate Gale describes Judy Grahm as the poet who writes outside the lines and margins:

To not worry about whether there are any margins. To embrace marginality ... To call out your own name and the names others have called you either out loud or when you weren't listening, but you heard anyway, and you know anyhow. To call yourself a she-bitch and a dyke and to claim your titles in song, that is the poetry of Judy Grahm. It is not quiet, it does not whisper. At most churches you wouldn't hear it, in most choirs you wouldn't sing it, at some schools, you wouldn't teach it.

Quite possibly the simplicity of Grahm's diction and her unorthodox subject matter might lead academicians to judge her work as lesser. But as Reed points out poets like Grahm broke away from the literary traditions because they viewed them as stifling and fixing female subject matter into gender roles (Ossip). Instead, Grahm writes from an outsider's perspective because she understood early in her life as a lesbian that she would only be perceived as Other. And given that she was Other, she had little stake in the poetic traditions. She had no one to answer to and no literary bar to reach. Instead she intentionally kicked away the traditional poetic precepts and began a new tradition that was “anti-literary, anti-traditional, anti-hierarchical” (Montefiore *Feminism and Poetry* 69-

70). This behavior was definitely in keeping with the second wave of feminist activism that was continually redefining what it meant to be a woman in America. The quality of her work is balanced by the immediacy of her words and how they speak directly to women and their experience. This accessibility along with her style created a new tradition. Grahn's work, though some of it written over forty years ago, continues to activate and awaken readers' "female-centered power" (86) and alert them to the possibilities for social change.

## CHAPTER 2

## “A WOMAN IS TALKING TO DEATH”

## Section One

“A Woman is Talking to Death” is a “series of meditations” divided into nine sections that address the powerless position of women and people of color, as well as urban issues throughout a cross section of America (Grahm *The Highest Apple* 33). Most of Grahm’s poetry focuses on many of these urban issues; however, “A Woman is Talking to Death,” through its 443 lines, best portrays the full perspective of the political and personal inequities faced by American lesbians and other minorities in the mid twentieth century. The narrative succinctly illustrates the political ideologies of its time, the early 1970s, and is perhaps the best depiction of Grahm’s revolutionary philosophy toward the patriarchy. Grahm presents several autobiographical experiences to illustrate the sometimes brutal and clearly uneven practices of civic agencies, such as the police and the military, upon women—specifically lesbians. The poem is presented as a polemic of nine scenarios, each depicting various victims of inequality. It examines the dishonored position of lesbian lives in relation to the historically revered position of the white male who, so often, is depicted in literature, as well as popular culture, as the hero or martyr. This reverence, Grahm reveals, is at the expense of lesbians and other marginalized persons of society who do not fit into that template. “A Woman is Talking to Death” argues

that the more credence we give to the historically sanctioned power of white male privilege, the more harm is done to those who are perceived as Other (Grahm *The Highest Apple* 33). This credence, this relinquishing of female or lesbian power, is tantamount to death, thus Grahm presents the persona of Death (the powers in society that work against women) as a distinct character and antagonist to the poem's narrator. Throughout the poem, the narrator thoughtfully ponders or angrily rants against Death's schemes and manipulations illustrated in the form of social inequities. She contemplates the cost she and her sisters have had to pay to maintain any semblance of power or personal respect for the lives they live. In fact, the title itself, "A Woman is Talking to Death," can describe both a powerless woman talking herself to death as well as a powerful woman who is challenging Death, "staring him down" (batTzedek). batTzedek describes this ambiguity of meaning "not in the deconstructionist sense of language having no ultimate, fixed meaning, but as a stance of social dissidence that intends to disrupt how those in power use language."

Margot Backus describes Grahm's poem as a "long elegy enumerating the losses inflicted on the human community under patriarchy" (816). Truly, the poem's tone reads like a eulogy to the loss of liberties, to the loss of female history or power:

They don't have to lynch the women anymore  
 death sits on my doorstep  
 cleaning his revolver

death cripples my feet and sends me out  
to wait for the bus alone. (Grahm lines 166-170)

Restitution, then, is in order so history may accurately reflect female lives and labor so those lives “are made visible and mourned” (Backus 821). The “political energies” that are summoned by the end of the poem are “engaged not by the fantasy of ruling but by the experience of powerlessness”; by the responsibilities women as victims have toward each other (Montefiore 80).

“A Woman is Talking to Death” begins with a delicate refrain that appears several times throughout the length of the 443-lined poem: “my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me / my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands” (Grahm lines 2-3). Grahm’s language is the language of a lesbian writer who calls attention to and praises the muscularity of her female lover. Traditional male poets do not describe their female lovers in this fashion. Grahm pushes the imagery of lesbian lovemaking—one woman atop the other—and assertively states the direction and tone her poem will take. The image of “my lovers teeth” as “white geese” evokes a sense of freedom derived from smiles and laughter in their coupledness; the “rope ladders” are a means by which these women climb above the patriarchal fray and escape the real world as outlaws. The two women become a vessel, an old-fashioned ship’s sails and ladders, “going to an ancient land. The two lovers together, now one flying above and now the other” (Grahm *The Highest Apple* 33). Backus describes the refrain thusly:

The narrator proceeds from her own bodily and emotional experience, affirming first the reality and the value of her own experiences of eroticism and love, both of which have been discounted and pathologized in patriarchal society. (Backus 826-827)

Notable is the lack of a possessive apostrophe in “lovers” immediately implying that the speaker is proclaiming an intimacy with *all* women, her sisters in this journey. This poem speaks for all lesbians who have been dispossessed by the patriarchy. Additionally, the absence of the possessive apostrophe is a liberation from the rules of punctuation; the rules of possession so fervently practiced in the patriarchal framework of language. Grahn decisively liberates herself and her readers from the binding rules of language and its punctuation as well as the male traditions of possession. Women who love women have freed themselves from a heterosexual context; they do not own each other. They are unshackled and released by way of their “rope ladders.” With this opening refrain, Grahn proclaims her anthem of sisterly dedication that will grow in strength and meaning by repetition throughout the poem.

The gentle image of the opening refrain appears in stark contrast to the violent narrative that immediately follows. The narrative depicts the accidental death of a young, white man on the Bay Bridge one cold, “February midnight” by a Black, middle-aged male driver who cannot stop his car in time and kills him. The bridge as the setting is an important image of a crossroads or crossing over. The poetry of the second wave was a counterpoint to the traditional texts of the

American and British canon being taught thus far and lesbian poets were at a crossroads in their work. They wished to speak in their own lesbian voices, voices that encompassed the joys, the confusions, or even the pains of being lesbian in the mid-twentieth century. They understood that meant writing the unknown, the never before written. Therefore, the lesbian poets of the second wave, like Judy Grahn became their own heroines, so to speak, as they found themselves at a crossroads but with no clear roadmap for their journey. The urban city with its potential for violence against women became their subject matter. Grahn sets "A Woman is Talking to Death," upon the Bay Bridge, to depict that same state of lesbians and lesbian poets at a crossroads. She writes that the poem is:

a transition from patriarchy and its violent, anti lesbian, misogynist and racist / colonial history. I say "transition from" because it is not yet a transition *to* the next place, because the "next place" had not yet, in 1973, emerged in words or images. We were on the bridge leading to this next place; the poem told us what we were leaving, and that we were on our way to somewhere else. (*A Simple Revolution* 175)

Grahn's attempts to travel to "somewhere else" is illustrated in the speaker's struggles described throughout the narrative and her voice is sharp and plainspoken.

The large white man who is killed on the bridge acts as a symbol of the assuming power held by the patriarchy. He is bigger than life as he confidently

straddles his motorcycle perpendicular to traffic, arrogantly taking up the lanes “as if it could stop anything” (line 10). His head is thrown back and he howls in laughter at his actions. He is on top of his world with the self-assuredness that he has been allowed to express his entire life. His stance represents the attitude of white male privilege which has never been conquered by any other social entity. This behavior and attitude will appear later in the poem in the form of police officers, taxi drivers, and generals. It is the behavior of men who believe in and rely on their positions of power. The young man, wearing “a peacoat and levis” is the fully realized all-American male—standing “perfectly relaxed as if he’d stopped at a hamburger stand” (lines 10-11). The abrupt and accidental death of the young man, an American representation of the hero, taken down by a Black man, the stereotypically menacing Other, immediately establishes a societal conflict and thus, a losing proposition for the Black driver. Grahn notes:

The poem confronts and challenges the Christian mythic system of celebrating the heroism of martyred white men, by revealing it as arrogant, as wasteful, and as intolerably harmful to the people of the society who don’t fit that definition. (*The Highest Apple* 33)

The Black man understands (as does the lesbian narrator) that the attending police officers will not accept the accidental nature of the young man’s death. They will take the driver “to 4 different hospitals / til they [get] a drunk test report to fit their / case” (Grahn lines 145-147). The Black man’s fate of fifteen to twenty

years in jail is sealed by the very nature of the races of the two men involved.

Grahn clearly defines the irony of this social injustice:

the arrogant young man who thought he  
 owned the bridge, and fell asleep on it  
 he died laughing: that's a fact.  
 the driver sits out his time  
 off the street somewhere,  
 does he have the most vacant of  
 eyes, will he die laughing? (lines 159-165)

The young white man died laughing but the Black driver will suffer a different death long before his body dies. He is the “innocent victim of social death ... whose sufferings historically have been ranked as inconsequential relative to or even as justified in light of the death” of the mythical white male (Backus 824).

A phrase that occurs multiple times throughout the poem originates with the description of the newly dead white man on the bridge: “no / child left *in* him” (Grahn line 50). In this case, his testicles have been severed and his “seminal tubes were all strung out behind” which conveys two ideas: 1) the literal reproductive organs no longer hold the potential for producing a child, and 2) the childlike, life-affirming innocence of the man is gone. This phrase, “no child left *in* him,” appears again in line 134 to describe the six policemen who “beat the hell out of [the driver]” indicating their utter lack of humanity and their violent nature, and an illustration of male privilege. Throughout “A Woman is Talking to Death”

the same phrase is used to describe other people who engage in violence or oppressive acts against women. The policemen who respond to a rape victim in Section Seven are spoken of as having “no child *in* them ... [They] grabbed her like a corpse and heaved her / on their metal stretcher into the van, / crashing and clumsy” (Grahm lines 392-394), which illustrates a malicious disregard for a victim whose assault is not taken seriously. The speaker includes herself in this phrase when she fantasizes about killing the man who beat her in a public sandwich shop: “I called him a spic, and / killed him. my face healed. his didnt / no child *in* me” (lines 334-336). The repetition of the phrase reminds the reader of the ever-present violent nature of social systems that work against women every day. Grahm conveys that this constant exposure to violence, sexism, racism, and oppression of all kinds, is a *death* to women’s self-actualization. Thus, Death as a character makes his appearance in the poem.

The character of Death is a manifestation of all social systems that work to suppress women and minorities. That suppression may take the form of institutionalized or overt sexism and racism; it is embodied in the form of rape, violence against women, the lack of LGBTQ civil liberties, or failure to support the disadvantaged in society. As batTzedek puts it, Death is “a symbol for everything that terrorizes, diminishes, or represses [women’s] assertion of a radical human equality.” Hence, the characters in “A Woman is Talking to Death,” who behave in this oppressive manner, are in collusion with Death; they are depicted as predatory entities bent on a path of systematic suppression of all

who fail to fit into the social norm. Besides the policemen of Sections One and Seven, the characters who collude with Death include the indifferent sandwich shop owner of Section Six who merely “looked up from / working on his sandwich” (Grahn lines 332-333) when he witnesses the speaker being beaten and replies, “There’s a pay phone / right across the street” (line 335). Perhaps he ignores the danger she faces because he believes she is getting what she deserves. The shop owner’s disregard for the welfare of the beaten narrator feeds the homophobia of the city; he feeds Death and allows Death to grow stronger. Additionally, the generals, who arrest and discharge the speaker from military duty for being a lesbian (Section Three), conspire with Death as they order: “dont anybody / speak to this woman” (lines 232-233). They force a breach between the women who have shared their bodies, their laughter, the spiritual elements that keep women alive. The generals work for death and threaten those who will speak to the narrator with a dishonorable discharge. These same generals look the other way as 150 soldiers are drowned in a horrific military maneuver gone terribly wrong. Instead of questioning authority and saving their own lives, the young soldiers aboard amphibian tanks unwittingly agree to work for Death by obeying orders toward their deadly end. The speaker asks, “was the general their lover?” (line 269) because that is the only explanation for their passivity in this unexpected crisis. The first lesson a recruit learns is to follow orders without question and, being in a subservient position of the rank and file, the young soldiers behave as told. These generals

represent the patriarchy's hold on the underling. They arrogantly assume they control that sector of society that had better follow orders if they know what's good for them, regardless of the generals' own culpability for the military tragedy.

Backus states:

Death ... whether in retaliation for resistance or, more frequently, as the cumulative result of a "slow wear down" ... continues to anchor a system of social death that keeps marginalized people struggling to stay afloat in a perpetually contingent environment. (821)

Grahn conveys that if those oppressed do not stand up against their oppressors, they too are in collusion with Death.

The witness to the tragic accident on the bridge in Section One is the speaker of the poem, a young lesbian who also wears a pea coat and Levis. Being female, however, her clothing will identify her as lesbian and hence she is regarded as suspect. Her clothing will later place her in danger in Section Six: "dressed as I am, a young man once called me / names in Spanish / then he called me queer and slugged me" (Grahn lines 322-324). Unlike the young man who is revered and then mourned as the lost American male, the speaker's clothing places her in a perilous circumstance—a lesbian alone on a frighteningly windy bridge with no one to corroborate her story. The many fears she experiences in that moment of witness, epitomizes the experience of being young, gay, and female in a patriarchal world. She fears the narrow eighteen-inch walkway of the bridge, engineered by the arrogance of men, so that "in the

dark / stiff wind it seemed I would / be pushed over the rail” and drowned (lines 39-41). She grips the Black driver’s hand because “the wind was going to blow us off the bridge” (line 62); they are brought together to stand against the agents of Death—the wind, the drowning, and the police. Seemingly disparate in context, this imagery appears again in Section Three as the speaker is dishonorably discharged for her lesbianism. Here, the motifs of wind, drowning, and the police are replicated when the commanding general orders all personnel to not speak to her:

the dayroom, when  
 I entered it, fell silent til I had gone; they  
 were afraid, they knew the wind would blow  
 them over the rail, the cops would come,  
 the water would run into their lungs. (lines 234-238)

This repetition of motifs and phrases throughout the poem’s nine scenarios, weaves a connection among the various characters whose desperate stories never intertwine but are linked through the same frightening motifs of wind or drowning.

The speaker also fears the oncoming cars approaching “like mad bulls” (line 56); and interestingly she states that she “was scared, much / more than usual” (line 56) indicating she lives in a chronic state of fear most of her days. Her statement of fear is a reminder of the day to day fears that permeate the lives of every woman who must navigate a misogynistic world: The constant fear

of being raped if she finds herself in a lonely place or the fear of not being taken seriously in the workplace or doctor's office, the fear of being a displaced homemaker without financial support for her children. In addition to her fears, the young speaker understands that her witness statement will be rendered invalid once the police realize she is a lesbian—"an unemployed queer woman / makes no witness at all" (lines 116-117). She is merely "the woman who stopped on the bridge / and this is the man who was there / our lovers teeth are white geese flying / above us, but we ourselves are / easily squished" (lines 121-125). The reemergence of her lyrical refrain juxtaposes with the deadly scene before her. She is an honest, loving woman who justifiably fears the authorities if she remains behind to act as a witness for the Black driver. When the fearful speaker decides to leave the driver alone on the bridge, she too falls into a collusion with Death:

'I can't stay with you,  
I'm too frightened of the bridge, besides  
I have a woman waiting  
and no license—  
and no tail lights—'  
So I left—  
as I have left so many of my lovers. (lines 84-90)

Her act of leaving is a betrayal to the driver just as she betrayed the women who were her lovers during her military stint by signing a confession of "what [they] /

had done together” (lines 243-244). Her fear and subsequent act of leaving the desperate Black driver to face the consequences alone serves Death and makes him stronger: “keep the women small and weak / and off the street, and off the / bridges, that’s the way, brother” (lines 126-128). However, the speaker follows with her first inklings of rebellion against these social injustices: “one day I will leave you there, / as I have left you there before, / working for death” (lines 129-131).

By the end of Section One several motifs and phrases have been established that will connect all the scenarios back to Grahn’s theme that women must no longer be paralyzed by their fears (which only feeds the patriarchal oppression) and instead move closer and closer to each other. Loving each other, helping each other rise, will provide the support women need to prosper. By denying Death’s power and giving energy to women, women will successfully rescue themselves. Backus suggests that by naming and identifying the entity of Death, he becomes a “negotiable power” thereby vulnerable to defeat (Backus 816).

### Sections Two and Three

Most of the nine sections of “A Woman is Talking to Death” begin with one line that conveys the tone and establishes the theme of that section. Section Two begins with, “They don’t have to lynch the women anymore,” referring to the dark history of atrocities inflicted on women, which are no longer necessary. Or

as Backus puts it, “the forces of social death, once in place, appropriate the emotional and physical energies of the living without too much mass-scale repressive intervention” (Backus 821). This section depicts Death in a grander, more pervasive presence in women’s lives, ever ready to work against women, leaving them no chance for joy or life:

death sits on my doorstep  
 cleaning his revolver  
 death cripples my feet and sends me out  
 to wait for the bus alone,  
 then comes by driving a taxi.  
 the woman on our block with 6 young children  
 has the most vacant of eyes  
 death sits in her bedroom, loading  
 his revolver (lines 167-175)

This scenario anticipates that of Section Seven, which discusses a woman who has escaped her abuser, runs to a bus stop but is found lying in the snow wearing only a bathrobe and no shoes who reveals, “a taxi driver beat her up / and raped her, throwing her out of his / care” (lines 369-371). Death establishes the rules for male domestic abuse; the rules that require a woman to understand her place, make babies, and then make it work without the financial or emotional support that actually do make things work. These scenarios—a woman with vacant eyes contemplating death, a woman raped by a taxi driver after running

away from domestic abuse, searching for safety—are the modern versions of the European witch hunts where Death works to hunt and destroy the independent people whose demeanor and philosophies are different from their society's. Death will put an end to those who have “stopped on the wrong bridge,” who “have teeth like / any kind of geese, or children / *in* them” (lines 189-192). Death will put an end to anyone who stands their ground or fights back. Section Two and Seven reinforce that “they don't have to lynch the women / very often anymore” (line 166) because women have learned Death's rules, as has the Black driver of Section One, and will fearfully and dutifully abide by them. Grahn's use of “lynch” with its historically horrific connotations reinforces Death's authority.

An irony that is played out over and over in scene to scene is depicted in Grahn's flippant language but intentionally cynical statements regarding the women's behaviors. From Section Two: “What were those other women up to? had they / run over someone?” (lines 188-189). And Section Seven:

what on earth was she doing there  
on a street she helped to pay for  
but doesn't own:  
doesn't she know to stay home? (lines 372-375)

The language conveys an ironic humor and underscores the attitude so prevalent today that blames the woman for the cruelty heaped upon her. Blame the rape victim for what she was wearing. Blame the domestic abuse victim for nagging

her husband to aggravation. Blame the homeless woman for not being able to play the economic system to her advantage. This blame game is clearly depicted in Section Eight:

a mock interrogation

Why did you get into the cab with him, dressed as you are?

I wanted to go somewhere.

Did you know what the cab driver might do

if you got into the cab with him?

I just wanted to go somewhere.

How many times did you

get into the cab with him?

I dont remember.

If you dont remember, how do you know it happened to you? (lines 402-411)

Death, the social constructs that continuously work against the advancement of women's lives, stands unconquerable. Today women have learned the lessons of Death quite well: remember you are merely a woman with no voice, no power, no believability, no recourse. Grahn's frightful manifestation of Death is a successful image that works well in conveying the impotence of women and the strength of patriarchal constraints.

Grahn believes that "A Woman is Talking to Death" "demands that we take responsibility for our own racism, and for our contribution to the suffering of

others” (Grahn *A Simple Revolution* 175). By Section Three she has established the numerous ways women and men suffer from a societal “Death.” Next, she begins to explore and define what our responsibility is to each other. If Death is all pervasive, then perhaps, it is women’s responsibility to recognize that fact and do something in response. When the narrator begins the section by warning, “This woman is a lesbian be careful,” the poem’s tone shifts; a change is on the way. As Grahn does with much of her language, the line can hold two meanings: it can be a warning from the patriarchy that this woman is a subversive pariah or it can stand as a warning from the narrator declaring herself a potential threat to the established powers that be—this woman does not observe the heterosexual norm and your threats are therefore worthless. Section Three describes the narrator’s growing awareness of the suffering of women at the hands of men and her growing commitment to women. She is learning “to swim” so to speak, the one skill needed in case the wind ever successfully pushes her off the bridge. The setting of Section Three takes place in a military hospital where Grahn once worked as a nurse’s aide. Her experience as a nurse’s aide, caring for her female patients, led her to understand how often women are hospitalized because of male abuse. Grahn recognizes that Death, the patriarchal lack of understanding or compassion for women’s health concerns, is responsible for putting women at risk. Section Three initiates the speaker’s emerging understanding of women’s health plight as well as her solution to it. The speaker’s declaration, “This woman is a lesbian be careful” is described by

Backus as “an explicit *non serviam*” as the narrator proclaims her resistance to patriarchy and her “emotional and erotic allegiance to women” (Backus 829). The narrator is “reclaiming her own life and body” (829) and has begun the process of denying Death. The act of caring for “one friendly patient, already / claimed [by Death]” (Grahm lines 206-207) becomes a mutual act of salvation: “I combed her hair, it / was my job, but she took care of me as if / nobody’s touch could spoil her” (lines 209-211). This mutual devotion of two women giving care to the other through the act of touch, depicts a newly founded commitment toward each other despite Death’s inescapable presence. These women will no longer be passive while dealing with Death; they will instead make a choice to give strength to each other.

Saving women’s lives as a conscious act of devotion was a common motif that appeared in many female utopian novels during the second wave of feminism. All-female societies, as depicted in books such as *The Wanderground* by Sally Gearhart, portray female protagonists who take up the charge of leading women not *into* the fray but *away* from the social horrors depicted as Death by Grahm. These female utopias are not a retreat so much as a revision or a redefining of what life is meant to be. The plots reexamine what is held precious to women and how to preserve and perpetuate life. The utopian motif is a means to escape and a depiction of the choice to not participate in the patriarchy that keeps women suppressed. Grahm believes that to be fully committed to the

revision of women's and men's lives, one must look upon each other as "lovers"; "the responsibility as one of love" (*A Simple Revolution* 175). Grahn writes:

Once a group has coalesced around love ... how far in any direction does this radiate? The poem expands love beyond couple relationships to love that encompasses layers of commitment, even to strangers, and especially to those in need of compassion and resistance to whatever is oppressing them. (175)

The bond forged between women emerges in Section Three as the speaker gains strength from the patients for whom she cares. The speaker's voice returns to her ironic humor as she sarcastically but tenuously comments, "ho ho death, ho death / have you seen the twinkle in the dead woman's eye?" (Grahn lines 212-213) as she watches her dying patient's spark of resistance to the patriarchy. She is pointing out to Death that though he is responsible for the dying woman's situation, her death will be on her terms; the woman will sparkle with a female life-strength until she can hold on no longer. We can all learn from the last moments of this female resistance.

Here marks a hint of a turning point in the narrator's response to Death. Her tone shifts, and her voice grows more assertive. She audaciously addresses the general who is the representation of Death and the cause of mass war casualties:

Here, general, hold this soldier's bed pan  
for a moment, hold it for a year—

then we'll promote you to making his bed.  
 we believe you wouldn't make such messes  
 if you had to clean up after them. (lines 224-228)

The speaker is nearly ready to take on a more direct confrontation with Death as she begins her narrative of Section Four.

### Sections Four and Five

Section Four begins with a distinct shift in Grahn's writing style. She moves from a stanzaic form to prose. Four paragraphs, each constructed of eleven to twelve lines of grammatical prose, make up two or three lengthy sentences. While the sentences are long, her diction is short and curt creating a rapidly terse narrative emphasizing the speaker's rapid thought processes of confession or exasperation. The section is titled "A Mock Interrogation" and it continues the questions presented in Section Three of the narrator's humiliating military tribunal for homosexual acts. batTzedek describes this title as, "'mock' in that [it is] imagined, fake, not real" while simultaneously it is a story of "those with power mocking those without." Questions, interjected between the lengthy paragraphs, come at the speaker in an accusatory tone and feel like an assault beginning with "Have you ever held hands with a woman?" (Grahn line 271) and continue with, "What about kissing? Have you ever kissed any women?" (line 275). In response, the speaker fires back with her newly emerging consciousness about female strength and the necessity to protect women as if

they are her own flesh and blood. She takes up the position of the above mentioned utopian commitment to women and answers the question, “Have you ever held hands with a woman?” (Grahm line 271) with an emphatic:

Yes, many times—women about to deliver, women about to have breasts removed, wombs removed, miscarriages ... women who had been run over, beaten up. deserted. starved ... women who were happy, who were celebrating, who were dancing in large circles or alone ... women who simply wanted to hold my hand because they liked me. (line 272)

The speaker answers the interrogator’s questions with courage and honesty—yes, I kissed a woman or yes, I purposely held her hand with the intentions of saving our lives.

When asked, “Have you kissed any women?” the young narrator goes on to speak of Josie, the “beautiful” as well as “handsome” girl she knew at thirteen and “who [she] had loved at such a distance for months” (Grahm line 278). Josie, who must leave school and returns pregnant, is described in terms of the poem’s opening and delicate refrain as having: “white teeth and strong brown muscles” with a “child *in* her” (line 278). However, because Josie is the victim of Death and ostracized for her pregnancy by her classmates, “Her eyes were dark as the water under a bridge” (line 278); the imagery returns to the precariousness of the bridge that represents potential danger. Through these repeated images, Grahm creates a motif that links the speaker’s lovers, friends, female strangers, and

every woman in the poem as one symbiotic entity reliant on each other's love to survive. Therefore, to offer her love, the narrator boldly walked

across the front of the class and looked deep into Josie's eyes and I  
picked up her chin with my hand, because I loved her, because nothing  
like her trouble would ever happen to me, because I hate it that she was  
pregnant and unhappy, and an outcast. (line 278)

Grahn's narrator is taking a stand amongst her classmates and against the patriarchy that makes outcasts of women who are the victims of Death like Josie. The speaker also demonstrates Grahn's call to women to commit themselves to each other's lives; to coalesce around love.

The speaker's tone grows in defiance as she answers in the affirmative to having kissed women because it "was a way to say yes we are still alive and loveable, though separate" (line 284). In this section of the narrative the speaker gains strength by finding her voice and speaks for the multitude of women who have none. Her sense of urgency builds as she emphasizes the importance for love and compassion and the necessity to reject victimization. She describes a wish she holds for herself and for the rape victim she tries to help:

I wanted her and me to own and control and run the city we lived in, to  
staff the hospital I knew would mistreat her, to drive the transportation  
system that had betrayed her, to patrol the streets controlling the men who  
would murder or disfigure or disrupt us, not accidentally with machines, but

on purpose, because we are not allowed out on the street alone— (line 284)

Here is the first attempt at a rally cry in the poem for women to reject victimization by Death. And when asked, “Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?” (line 285) the speaker’s response is to turn those words around in what batTzedek describes as an “intentional reversal of the language used to accuse her.” The narrator answers:

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing ... I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for ... These are indecent acts, lacking courage ... Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly. (line 286)

The rhythm and tone of this final prose paragraph, along with the repetition of the phrase “I am guilty of” calls to mind the Catholic Act of Contrition:

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. (“Act of Contrition”)

Once again, Grahn intentionally reverses language and creates new meaning; this time by imitating the rhythms and tones of a prayer born from a domineering patriarchal body and through having the narrator speak in the same rhythm and tone as the Catholic prayer. The result is a surprisingly ironic, newly conceived Lesbian Act of Contrition, amusing in its satire while simultaneously poignant. This act of contrition leads the speaker to a newly formed idea; an idea that will guide her throughout the rest of her narrative. During her self-condemnation she admits she has been guilty of “lacking a certain fire behind the eyes,” like the sparkle in the eyes of the dying patient of Section Three, “which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra” (line 286). The speaker now recognizes what feeds Death—the continued belief in one’s subservience to him, and she regrets having fed him for so long. Notable is Grahn’s switch to the lower-case *d* in “death” in this line and all subsequent lines in the poem. The speaker, in her recognition of her slowly emerging strength, is also discovering the potential power she wields by denying Death’s hold over her.

Section Four is the poem’s turning point toward resistance and the speaker’s expression of regret for not having resisted Death sooner. The narrative comes full circle from the imagery of holding the hand of a woman in labor to the sharing of resources and love with other women. Backus writes that this suggests “a circularity, a restoration within the stanza of a circular unity within which the integrity of individual women is recovered through their

connections with other women” (833). Certainly, the section marks the emergence of the speaker’s inner strength and a foundation for activism.

Grahn returns to her original stanzaic form in Section Five where the meter is iambic or trochaic but with an irregularity that underscores the tension building in the content: “Bless this day oh cat our house / help me be not such a mouse” (lines 306-307). In a whirlwind of thirty lyrical lines, this section condenses and revisits the heartbreaking crimes committed upon women. Grahn focuses on the irony of how women have been locked up, put away, and thereby controlled, all under the patriarchal pretext of protection; “death tells the woman to stay home” and in that vulnerable state of seclusion, death “breaks in the window” (lines 308-309). When women are made to believe they are weak, they will ultimately believe they are vulnerable. Thus, they will never come to understand the power they have against Death.

Consequently, women have never had the opportunity to explore the world for themselves, to make something of themselves. Their potential is aborted because it was left unexplored:

“I was allowed to go  
 3 places, growing up,” she said—  
 “3 places, no more.  
 there was a straight line from my house  
 to school, a straight line from my house  
 to church, a straight line from my house

to the corner store.”

her parents thought something might happen to her.

but nothing ever did (lines 287-296).

This state of suppression has been wasteful. It is a death of generations upon generations of women who were protected to death. And consequently, the world is denied the contributions, the products, the discoveries women might have made had they been given the opportunity. Our society might look quite different today had women had more of a hand in policy-making or designing cities.

On the other hand, Grahn, in her reversal of language, recognizes that this exclusion from the world of men has ironically offered women a freedom, if you will—a freedom from the world of men and the opportunity to live separately from a society that does not condone or recognize women’s power and therefore asks nothing of them in return. If women will separate from the patriarchy, they are no longer put upon to contribute to society and Death, leaving more resources and love to give to each other:

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me

my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands

we are the river of life and the fat of the land

death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman?

if we use each other up

on each other

that's a little bit less for you  
 a little bit less for you, ho  
 death, ho ho death. (lines 297-305)

The anaphora used in these lines and earlier lines of Section Five underscore the speaker's developing cognizance of her own power. The repetition indicates a building up of strength and positivity as she blatantly talks back to Death as if taunting him. But immediately Grahm juxtaposes this optimistic language of salvation with one more horrific reminder of how women have and always will be threatened against revolutionary acts as the speaker describes a punishment inflicted on an adulterous wife of feudal Europe:

her husband would sometimes tie her  
 down, catch a mouse and trap it  
 under a cup on her bare belly, until  
 it gnawed itself out, now are you  
 afraid of mice? (lines 312-316)

Backus describes this stanza as Grahm using "direct appeals to our own bodily knowledge to make the death and social death of women under patriarchal capitalism palpable and worthy of grief" (827). The image absolutely evokes a physical as well as emotional reaction. And the position of this stanza at the close of Section Five serves a warning to any woman contemplating a rebellion against the patriarchy. The section reinforces the silencing of women throughout history by referencing a feudal Europe; it reminds us that historically, the

fundamental rights of man include violence against women. Thus, Section Five's narrative travels from a consciousness raising discussion of a young woman's restrictive childhood, to an outward rejection of Death, to a violent depiction of the consequences of rebellion—a reminder to every woman to live in a “straight line” (Grahm line 291).

### Sections Six and Seven

The consequences of being ostracized from society is depicted in Section Six as the speaker, “dressed as I am” (the antithesis of the white American hero in her pea coat and Levis), recounts an incident when a young man calls her names in Spanish then slugs her. The days following the incident lead the speaker to feel more and more murderous toward anyone who speaks Spanish and realizes how violence begets violence through “the simple association of one thing to another, / so damned simple” (lines 340-341). Grahm illustrates how one violent act can create a chain of violent retaliations; what she calls “criss-cross oppressions which people use against each other and which continually divide us” (*The Work of a Common Woman* 112). The speaker fantasizes that she smashes a chair over the “bastard's head” in an uncharacteristic act of revenge; no child *in* her. Here, Grahm demonstrates how the human impulse to inflict violence as a means of retaliation is a long-held method of controlling a people and keeping everyone in her place. When the oppression of a group becomes extreme, its members will lash out at each other, instead of at their oppressor.

Upon looking back at the incident, the speaker wonders if perhaps the man who beat her was Josie's baby—"all the chickens come home to roost, / all of them" (lines 358-359). Perhaps Josie's child, having been born into a world created by Death, got started in life with many oppressive strikes against his success. Consequently, he lashes out against those he sees as inferior to him—the lesbian. Violence is a circular pattern, Grahn suggests, like the adage, "all the chickens come home to roost" and the more Death inflicts violence on young men, the more violence will be incurred by the speaker and anyone else considered Other. Section Six demonstrates that the hate we create in this world will inevitably be inflicted upon us.

As mentioned earlier, Judy Grahn sets "A Woman is Talking to Death" amongst the gritty reality of city living. The city is a character in her narrative; it reflects the honest dirt of a real life, a real woman's experience of the day to day dread women face. In Section Seven, that dread is battery and rape. Grahn states:

We do not take the sacred, the political, the social, the details of everyday, and carry them "away" or split them from each other. We place them all together in the real lives of real women in the present, in the raucous, dangerous, tumultuous marketplace/urban/warzone/suburb of modern life. (*The Highest Apple* 88)

In Section Seven the speaker describes this urban warzone as she comes upon a woman who has been raped and beaten by a cab driver and thrown from her

attacker's taxi onto the city street "wearing / a bathrobe and no shoes...she had turned the snow / pink, under her feet" (Grahm lines 364-367). The speaker and her lovers rush to embrace the woman and they comfort her despite the taboo of touching they instinctively understand as lesbians in public:

I am a pervert, therefore I've learned  
to keep my hands to myself in public  
but I was so drunk that night,  
I actually did something loving  
I took her in my arms, this woman,  
until she could breathe right (lines 376-381)

The introductory line of Section Seven, "Death and disfiguration" anticipates the connotation of "I am a pervert, therefore I've learned / to keep my hands to myself in public" (Grahm 379-377). The speaker understands early in her life that being lesbian makes her suspect and the act of touch makes her a target for criminal accusations. Therefore, she must always refrain from touching—lovingly touching a child, offering a hand in friendship, hugging in public. The result of not being free to act on her affectionate impulses has disfigured her Self. For her entire life she has been required to suppress natural behaviors to the point that now she truly is a pervert. She is a perversion of her natural spirit. Many lesbians suffered through this perversion of Self prior to the emergence of civil discourse on LGBTQ rights. Some believed the act of homosexuality was a psychological inversion, an abnormality, and an abomination from a religious

perspective. The belief became internalized and many lesbian lives were never fully realized as was expressed earlier in Section One—“our lovers teeth are white geese flying / above us, but we ourselves are / easily squished” (lines 123-125). The speaker has taken great pains to become a model minority. She will not touch anyone in public and therefore keeps herself and her lovers safe from possible blame. However, the effects of the alcohol allow her body to act on her natural, compassionate impulses and to respond lovingly to the beaten woman.

The image of the lesbian women coming to the aid of another woman is an example of what Carruthers describes as the “Lesbian civitas ... a society predicated upon familiarity and likenesses, rather than oppositions” (304). The following defines why the caring for this poor victim is a dangerous act for the lovers:

What is most troublesome in this image to the general public ... is its use of the lesbian bond to signify that wholeness, health, and integrity which are minimized or negated by the death-devoted sickness of male-inspired civilization. (304)

For far too long, the lovers of women were viewed as sick individuals through the eyes of the patriarchy when, in reality, the lives of lesbians were centered around a need to separate from society in order to heal.

The victim, too, has become disfigured, literally by the beating, and by the daily presence of Death in her city. She is treated brusquely by the police, who represent Death, and she cries, “I’m 55 years old’...and that said everything”

(lines 387-388). By fifty-five years old, Grahn suggests, a woman should be allowed to finally live her life without the constant fear of rape and abuse. A woman should not have to tackle the daily restrictions of what to wear for fear of becoming a target; or worse, being blamed for putting herself out there as a target. And most especially, a woman who is already the victim of domestic abuse, who has run from her abuser so swiftly as to leave in her bathrobe and bare feet, should not have to face still yet another round of assault from the public transportation systems to which she ran for safety. But the ugly truth that Grahn illustrates is that a woman will always be a target no matter her age, her clothing, or her belief in the decency of others.

The scenario ends with the speaker and her friends leaving the woman in the hands of the careless and bored policemen, though she implores, “don’t leave me.” This plea harkens back to Section One of the Black driver who begs the speaker to stay for him and bear witness to the traffic accident. The speaker expresses her shame and regret in the leaving: “we left, as we have left all of our lovers / as all lovers leave all lovers / much too soon to get the real loving done” (lines 399-401). The speaker leaves the battered woman in the same fashion she left the Black driver, for fear that somehow blame will fall upon her and her companions because that is how Death operates.

### Sections Eight and Nine

Section Eight recalls the accusatory tone of Section Four and is also titled “a mock interrogation,” revisiting the disturbing, rapid questioning of the rape victim whose story is described in the previous scenario. This section (discussed earlier for its ironic language), reveals Grahn’s diction as sharp and biting. The battered woman is further victimized by those civic officials who are employed to protect but instead cause greater harm by blaming the victim. The mocking nature of the senseless questions—“How many times did you / get into the cab with him?” create an absurdity furthering Grahn’s depiction of a topsy-turvy world that blames the injured for their injuries. The world is a circus, Grahn seems to say, and Death is its ringmaster.

Montefiore, in describing “A Woman is Talking to Death” remarks: “The effect of this long poem when read in its entirety is to redefine ‘love’ so as to mean not only eroticism but political commitment and the loyalty of the dispossessed to one another” (73). This commitment and loyalty is illustrated in Section Nine as a call to arms, woman to woman, and revolt against Death; to move into a realm created for and by women. The speaker rejects her society and refuses any further collusion with a system that does not work for the well-being of all citizens. Section Nine is titled “Hey you death” where the speaker calls out Death, challenging him on his past actions. The speaker begins with a fresh version of a recurring theme:

ho and ho poor death

our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us  
 our lovers muscles are rope ladders under our hands  
 even though no women yet go down to the sea in ships  
 except in their dreams. (lines 413-417)

Though the speaker and her lovers are at a crossroads and do not know where they are headed, the *yet* (line 416) in her expression implies that leaving Death is imminent.

Carruthers states, "Grahm idealizes but does not sentimentalize the Lesbian bond, because she makes us aware of the facts of aloneness, the penalties of her choice, and the tenuousness of her dream" (315) as the speaker acknowledges that sometimes societal oppressions drove women to suicide. But for those who did not "invent a quick and meaningful end / for themselves," Death slowly drove their journeys:

everyone else knows how very slow it happens  
 how the woman's existence bleeds out her years,  
 how the child shoots up at ten and is arrested and old  
 how the man carries a murderous shell within him  
 and passes it on. (Grahm lines 420-424)

But this deadly journey is now behind the speaker. She holds no illusions about the future and acknowledges those who have been lost along the path. She chooses life on her terms, and under the premise of coalescing around love:

we are the fat of the land, and

we all have our list of casualties  
to my lovers I bequeath  
the rest of my life (lines 425-428)

The speaker rejects the myth of the old patriarchal system and vows to give herself fully to those who also reject Death. She offers her entire being to the optimistic possibility the act will give life to her lovers. And in so doing, she releases herself from Death's hold on her:

I want nothing left of me for you, ho death  
except some fertilizer  
for the next batch of us  
who do not hold hands with you  
who do not embrace you  
who try not to work for you  
or sacrifice themselves or trust  
or believe you, ho ignorant  
death, how do you know  
we happened to you?  
wherever our meat hangs on our own bones  
for our own use  
your pot is so empty  
death, ho death  
you shall be poor (lines 429-443)

Grahn believes that “real loving is that decision to no longer agree to victimization” (*The Highest Apple* 33). The speaker chooses to participate in real loving, to “go somewhere else, out of the myth...And the myth of death shall be left behind, and shall be ‘poor’” (33).

Notably, the speaker does not romanticize the future. Though she bases her future on love, she “does not look to others to teach her love; her love comes with integrity. Love is a disciplined school of self-knowledge, self valuation, learned through the world of work and fact” (Carruthers 315). The love that will sustain the world for women will be a construct between groups of women across time (Backus 834). As Backus describes it, the speaker’s life will “enable a newly collective prophetic voice to emerge, invoking into being life-affirming connections between women and so speaking powerfully in opposition to the forces of social death” (834). From these actions, Grahn has created a speaker who represents a prophetic voice “that speaks collectively rather than individualistically and from an immanent rather than transcendent perspective” (Backus 816). Of course, this immanent perspective originates with Judy Grahn herself who states in the introduction of her poem, “This poem is as factual as I could make it” (*The Work of a Common Woman* 112). The autobiographical nature of the poem results in an authentic lesbian voice which conveys an unrestrained depiction of oppression like no other.

## CHAPTER 3

## CONCLUSION

Judy Grahn's poem, "A Woman is Talking to Death" is important to reexamine and study as a historical and literary document of the second wave of feminism. The content as well as the language captures the tone and rhetoric of lesbian voices of the mid twentieth century. More importantly and, perhaps I should say, unfortunately because the struggle for gender equality continues, "A Woman is Talking to Death" continues to function as an effective vehicle for change in our current American political and social climate. The university study of Grahn's work in history and literature classrooms is essential and will serve young citizens who seek to find their voices in the twenty-first century.

Judy Grahn's work resonates with many readers on many levels. It was created when the phrase "The personal is political" (meaning whatever political belief systems a woman holds originate from her personal life experience) rang out like a town crier amongst the activists of the 1960s and 70s. It follows then, that a poem so deeply personal and autobiographical would be the vehicle for a political lesbian feminist statement of Grahn's time.

The concluding lines especially resonate with feminist poet Elliott Femyne batTzedek as she describes the lines' impact on her life:

For all these years the full force of what radical re-envisioning could mean has lived in me as this single line. It is my talisman, my shield, my own

resistance to violence in this violent, resisting world: death, ho death / you shall be poor. It is a wish and want and warning. It shines across a world of brass words, these few polished to glossy by constant use as a prayer for understanding, as a celebration of each day death might go hungry.

During the second wave of feminism, when activists were at the crossroads of moving away from patriarchy, many were uncertain of where they were headed. They understood that their political as well as personal situation was undesirable and had been for centuries. They understood that women's lives and potential had been undermined for far too long and the 1960s through the 1970s would usher in the change that was needed if women were to be taken seriously as half the population. Grahn's poem, "A Woman is Talking to Death," was born from that frustration and sentiment harbored by so many activists of that time. The poem functions simultaneously as an anthem to the struggles of women, specifically lesbians, and their capacity to save their lives. Judy Grahn created a work in which many lesbians can see their own experiences reflected in the words. Most importantly, "A Woman is Talking to Death" conveys that women who see their lovers as white geese flying and who celebrate their rope like muscles, possess an innate strength that gives them agency to define their own lives.

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APPENDIX

“A WOMAN IS TALKING TO DEATH”

A Woman is Talking to Death  
*Judy Grahn 1973*

**One**

Testimony in trials that never got heard

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me  
 my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands

we were driving home slow  
 my lover and I, across the long Bay Bridge, 5  
 one February midnight, when midway  
 over in the far left lane, I saw a strange scene:

one small young man standing by the rail,  
 and in the lane itself, parked straight across  
 as if it could stop anything, a large young 10  
 man upon a stalled motorcycle, perfectly  
 relaxed as if he'd stopped at a hamburger stand;  
 he was wearing a peacoat and levis, and  
 he had his head back, roaring, you  
 could almost hear the laugh, it 15  
 was so real.

"Look at that fool," I said, "in the  
 middle of the bridge like that," a very  
 womanly remark.

Then we heard the meaning of the noise 20  
 of metal on a concrete bridge at 50  
 miles an hour, and the far left lane  
 filled up with a big car that had a  
 motorcycle jammed on its front bumper, like  
 the whole thing would explode, the friction 25  
 sparks shot up bright orange for many feet  
 into the air, and the racket still sets  
 my teeth on edge.

When the car stopped we stopped parallel  
 and Wendy headed for the callbox while I 30  
 ducked across those 6 lanes like a mouse  
 in the bowling alley. "Are you hurt?" I said,

the middle-aged driver had the greyest black face,  
 “I couldn’t stop, I couldn’t stop, what happened?”

Then I remembered. “Somebody,” I said, “was *on* 35  
 the motorcycle.” I ran back,  
 one block? two blocks? the space for walking  
 on the bridge is maybe 18 inches, whoever  
 engineered this arrogance. in the dark  
 stiff wind it seemed I would 40  
 be pushed over the rail, would fall down  
 screaming onto the hard surface of  
 the bay, but I did not. I found the tall young man  
 who thought he owned the bridge, now lying on  
 his stomach, head cradled in his broken arm. 45

He had glasses on, but somewhere he had lost  
 most of his levis, where were they?  
 and his shoes. Two short cuts on his buttocks,  
 and that was the only mark except his thin white  
 seminal tubes were all strung out behind; no 50  
 child left *in* him; and he looked asleep.

I plucked wildly at his wrist, then put it  
 down; there were two long haired women  
 holding back the traffic just behind me  
 with their bare hands, the machines came 55  
 down like mad bulls, I was scared, much  
 more than usual, I felt easily squished  
 like the earthworms crawling on a busy  
 sidewalk after the rain; *I wanted to*  
*leave*. And met the driver, walking back. 60

“The guy is dead.” I gripped his hand,  
 the wind was going to blow us off the bridge.

“Oh my God,” he said, “haven’t I had enough  
 trouble in my life?” He raised his head,  
 and for a second was enraged and yelling, 65  
 at the top of the bridge—“I was just driving  
 home!” His head fell down. “My God, and  
 now I’ve killed somebody.”

I looked down at my own peacoat and levis,  
 then over at the dead man's friend, who  
 was bawling and blubbering, what they would  
 call hysteria in a woman. "It isn't possible"  
 he wailed, but it was possible, it was  
 indeed, accomplished and unfeeling, snoring  
 in its peacoat, and without its levis on.

He died laughing: that's a fact.

I had a woman waiting for me,  
 in her car and in the middle of the bridge,  
 I'm frightened, I said.  
 I'm afraid, he said, stay with me,  
 please don't go, stay with me, be  
 my witness—"No," I said, "I'll be your  
 witness—later," and I took his name  
 and number, "but I can't stay with you,  
 I'm too frightened of the bridge, besides  
 I have a woman waiting  
 and no license—  
 and no tail lights—"  
 So I left—  
 as I have left so many of my lovers.

we drove home  
 shaking, Wendy's face greyer  
 than any white person's I have ever seen.  
 maybe he beat his wife, maybe he once  
 drove taxi, and raped a lover  
 of mine—how to know these things?  
 we do each other in, that's a fact.

who will be my witness?  
 death wastes our time with drunkenness  
 and depression  
 death, who keeps us from our  
 lovers.

he had a woman waiting for him,  
 I found out when I called the number  
 days later

“Where is he” she said, “he’s disappeared.”  
 “He’ll be all right” I said, “we could  
 have hit the guy as easy as anybody, it  
 wasn’t anybody’s fault, they’ll know that,”  
 women so often say dumb things like that, 110  
 they teach us to be sweet and reassuring,  
 and say ignorant things, because we dont invent  
 the crime, the punishment, the bridges

that same week I looked into the mirror  
 and nobody was there to testify; 115  
 how clear, an unemployed queer woman  
 makes no witness at all,  
 nobody at all was there for  
 those two questions: what does  
 she do, and who is she married to? 120

I am the woman who stopped on the bridge  
 and this is the man who was there  
 our lovers teeth are white geese flying  
 above us, but we ourselves are  
 easily squished. 125

keep the women small and weak  
 and off the street, and off the  
 bridges, that’s the way, brother  
 one day I will leave you there,  
 as I have left you there before, 130  
 working for death.

we found out later  
 what we left him to.  
 Six big policemen answered the call,  
 all white, and no child in them. 135  
 they put the driver up against his car  
 and beat the hell out of him.  
 What did you kill that poor kid for?  
 you mutherfucking nigger.  
 that’s a fact. 140

Death only uses violence  
 when there is any kind of resistance,

the rest of the time a slow  
weardown will do.

They took him to 4 different hospitals  
til they got a drunk test report to fit their  
case, and held him five days in jail  
without a phone call.  
how many lovers have we left. 145

there are as many contradictions to the game,  
as there are players. 150

a woman is talking to death,  
though talk is cheap, and life takes a long time  
to make  
right. He got a cheesy lawyer  
who had him cop a plea, 15 to 20  
instead of life  
Did I say life? 155

the arrogant young man who thought he  
owned the bridge, and fell asleep on it  
died laughing: that's a fact. 160

the driver sits out his time  
off the street somewhere,  
does he have the most vacant of  
eyes, will he die laughing? 165

## **Two**

They don't have to lynch the women anymore

death sits on my doorstep  
cleaning his revolver

death cripples my feet and sends me out  
to wait for the bus alone,  
then comes by driving a taxi. 170

the woman on our block with 6 young children  
has the most vacant of eyes  
death sits in her bedroom, loading  
his revolver 175

they don't have to lynch the women  
 very often anymore, although  
 they used to—the lord and his men  
 went through the villages at night, beating &  
 killing every woman caught  
 outdoors. 180

the European witch trials took away  
 an independent people; two different villages  
 —after the trials were through that year—  
 had left in them, each— 185  
 one living woman:  
 one

What were those other women up to? had they  
 run over someone? stopped on the wrong bridge?  
 did they have teeth like 190  
 any kind of geese, or children  
*in* them?

### **Three**

This woman is a lesbian be careful

In the military hospital where I worked  
 as a nurse's aide, the walls of the halls 195  
 were lined with howling women  
 waiting to deliver

or to have some parts removed.  
 One of the big private rooms contained  
 the general's wife, who needed 200  
 a wart taken off her nose.

we were instructed to give her special attention  
 not because of her wart or her nose  
 but because of her husband, the general.

as many women as men die, and that's a fact. 205

At work there was one friendly patient, already  
 claimed, a young woman burnt apart with X-ray,  
 she had long white tubes instead of openings;  
 rectum, bladder, vagina—I combed her hair, it  
 was my job, but she took care of me as if 210

nobody's touch could spoil her.  
 ho death, ho death  
 have you seen the twinkle in the dead woman's eye?

when you are a nurse's aide  
 someone suddenly notices you 215  
 and yells about the patient's bed,  
 and tears the sheets apart so you  
 can do it over, and over  
 while the patient waits  
 doubled over in her pain 220  
 for you to make the bed *again*  
 and no one ever looks at you,  
 only at what you do not do

Here, general, hold this soldier's bed pan  
 for a moment, hold it for a year— 225  
 then we'll promote you to making his bed.  
 we believe you wouldn't make such messes

if you had to clean up after them.

that's a fantasy.  
 this woman is a lesbian, be careful. 230

When I was arrested and being thrown out  
 of the military, the order went out: dont anybody  
 speak to this woman, and for those three  
 long months, almost nobody did: the dayroom, when  
 I entered it, fell silent til I had gone; they 235  
 were afraid, they knew the wind would blow  
 them over the rail, the cops would come,  
 the water would run into their lungs.

Everything I touched  
 was spoiled. They were my lovers, those 240  
 women, but nobody had taught us how to swim.  
 I drowned, I took 3 or 4 others down  
 when I signed the confession of what we  
 had done together.

No one will ever speak to me again. 245

I read this somewhere; I wasn't there:  
 in WWII the US army had invented some floating  
 amphibian tanks, and took them over to  
 the coast of Europe to unload them,  
 the landing ships all drawn up in a fleet, 250  
 and everybody watching. Each tank had a  
 crew of 6 and there were 25 tanks.  
 The first went down the landing planks  
 and sank, the second, the third, the  
 fourth, the fifth, the sixth went down 255  
 and sank. They weren't supposed  
 to sink, the engineers had  
 made a mistake. The crews looked around  
 wildly for the order to quit,  
 but none came, and in the sight of 260  
 thousands of men, each 6 crewmen  
 saluted his officers, battened down  
 his hatch in turn and drove into the  
 sea, and drowned, until all 25 tanks  
 were gone. did they have vacant 265  
 eyes, die laughing, or what? what  
 did they talk about, those men,  
 as the water came in?

was the general their lover?

#### **Four**

A Mock Interrogation 270

Have you ever held hands with a woman?

Yes, many times—women about to deliver, women about to have breasts removed, wombs removed, miscarriages, women having epileptic fits, having asthma, cancer, women having breast bone marrow sucked out of them by nervous or indifferent interns, women with heart condition, who were vomiting, overdosed, depressed, drunk, lonely to the point of extinction: women who had been run over, beaten up. deserted. starved. women who had been bitten by rats; and women who were happy, who were celebrating, who were dancing with me in large circles or alone, women who were climbing mountains or up and down walls, or trucks and roofs and needed a boost up, or I did; women who

simply wanted to hold my hand because they liked me, some women who wanted to hold my hand because they liked me better than anyone.

These were many women?

Yes. many.

What about kissing? Have you kissed any women?

275

I have kissed many women.

When was the first woman you kissed with serious feeling?

The first woman ever I kissed was Josie, who I had loved at such a distance for months. Josie was not only beautiful, she was tough and handsome too. Josie had black hair and white teeth and strong brown muscles. Then she dropped out of school unexplained. When she came back she came back for one day only, to finish the term, and there was a child in her. She was all shame, pain, and defiance. Her eyes were dark as the water under a bridge and no one would talk to her, they laughed and threw things at her. In the afternoon I walked across the front of the class and looked deep into Josie's eyes and I picked up her chin with my hand, because I loved her, because nothing like her trouble would ever happen to me, because I hated it that she was pregnant and unhappy, and an outcast. We were thirteen.

You didn't kiss her?

How does it feel to be thirteen and having a baby?

280

You didn't actually kiss her?

Not in fact.

You have kissed other women?

Yes, many, some of the finest women I know, I have kissed. women who were lonely, women I didn't know and didn't want to, but kissed because that was a way to say yes we are still alive and loveable, though separate, women who recognized a loneliness in me, women who were hurt, I confess to kissing the top of a 55 year old woman's head in the snow in boston, who was hurt more deeply than I have ever been hurt, and I wanted her as a very few people have wanted me—I wanted her and me to own and control and run the city we lived in, to staff the hospital I knew would mistreat her, to drive the transportation system that had

betrayed her, to patrol the streets controlling the men who would murder or disfigure or disrupt us, not accidentally with machines, but on purpose, because we are not allowed on the street alone—

Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women? 285

Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing, I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly; I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly.

### **Five**

Bless this day oh cat our house

"I was allowed to go  
3 places, growing up," she said—  
"3 places, no more. 290

there was a straight line from my house  
to school, a straight line from my house  
to church, a straight line from my house  
to the corner store."

her parents thought something might happen to her. 295  
but nothing ever did.

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me  
my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands  
we are the river of life and the fat of the land  
death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman? 300

if we use each other up  
on each other  
that's a little bit less for you  
a little bit less for you, ho  
death, ho death. 305

Bless this day oh cat our house  
 help me be not such a mouse  
 death tells the woman to stay home  
 and then breaks in the window.

I read this somewhere, I wasn't there: 310  
 In feudal Europe, if a woman committed adultery  
 her husband would sometimes tie her  
 down, catch a mouse and trap it  
 under a cup on her bare belly, until  
 it gnawed itself out, now are you 315  
 afraid of mice?

### **Six**

Dressed as I am, a young man once called  
 me names in Spanish

a woman who talks to death  
 is a dirty traitor 320

inside a hamburger joint and  
 dressed as I am, a young man once called me  
 names in Spanish  
 then he called me queer and slugged me.  
 first I thought the ceiling had fallen down 325  
 but there was the counterman making a ham  
 sandwich, and there was I spread out on his  
 counter.

For God's sake I said when  
 I could talk, this guy is beating me up 330  
 can't you call the police or something,  
 can't you stop him? he looked up from  
 working on his sandwich, which was my  
 sandwich, I had ordered it. He liked  
 the way I looked. "There's a pay phone 335  
 right across the street" he said.

I couldn't listen to the Spanish language  
 for weeks afterward, without feeling the  
 most murderous of urges, the simple

association of one thing to another,  
so damned simple. 340

The next day I went to the police station  
to become an outraged citizen  
Six big policemen stood in the hall,  
all white and dressed as they do 345  
they were well pleased with my story, pleased  
at what had gotten beat out of me, so  
I left them laughing, went home fast  
and locked my door.

For several nights I fantasized the scene 350  
again, this time grabbing a chair  
and smashing it over the bastard's head,  
killing him. I called him a spic, and  
killed him. my face healed. his didnt.  
no child *in* me. 355

now when I remember I think:  
maybe *he* was Josie's baby.  
all the chickens come home to roost,  
all of them.

### **Seven**

Death and disfiguration 360

One Christmas eve my lovers and I  
we left the bar, driving home slow  
there was a woman lying in the snow  
by the side of the road. She was wearing  
a bathrobe and no shoes, where were 365  
her shoes? she had turned the snow  
pink, under her feet. she was an Asian  
woman, didn't speak much English, but  
she said a taxi driver beat her up  
and raped her, throwing her out of his  
care. 370

what on earth was she doing there  
on a street she helped to pay for  
but doesn't own?  
doesn't she know to stay home? 375

I am a pervert, therefore I've learned  
to keep my hands to myself in public  
but I was so drunk that night,  
I actually did something loving  
I took her in my arms, this woman, 380  
until she could breathe right, and  
my friends are perverts too  
they touched her too  
we all touched her.  
"You're going to be all right" 385  
we lied. She started to cry  
"I'm 55 years old" she said  
and that said everything.

Six big policemen answered the call  
no child *in* them. 390  
they seemed afraid to touch her,  
then grabbed her like a corpse and heaved her  
on their metal stretcher into the van,  
crashing and clumsy.  
She was more frightened than before. 395  
they were cold and bored.  
'don't leave me' she said.  
'she'll be all right' they said.  
we left, as we have left all of our lovers  
as all lovers leave all lovers 400  
much too soon to get the real loving done.

### ***Eight***

a mock interrogation

Why did you get into the cab with him, dressed as you are?

I wanted to go somewhere.

Did you know what the cab driver might do 405  
if you got into the cab with him?

I just wanted to go somewhere.

How many times did you  
get into the cab with him?

I dont remember.

410

If you dont remember, how do you know it happened to you?

### **Nine**

Hey you death

ho and ho poor death

our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us  
our lovers muscles are rope ladders under our hands  
even though no women yet go down to the sea in ships  
except in their dreams.

415

only the arrogant invent a quick and meaningful end  
for themselves, of their own choosing.

everyone else knows how very slow it happens  
how the woman's existence bleeds out her years,  
how the child shoots up at ten and is arrested and old  
how the man carries a murderous shell within him  
and passes it on.

420

we are the fat of the land, and  
we all have our list of casualties

425

to my lovers I bequeath  
the rest of my life

I want nothing left of me for you, ho death  
except some fertilizer

430

for the next batch of us  
who do not hold hands with you  
who do not embrace you  
who try not to work for you  
or sacrifice themselves or trust  
or believe you, ho ignorant  
death, how do you know  
we happened to you?

435

wherever our meat hangs on our own bones  
for our own use  
your pot is so empty  
death, ho death  
you shall be poor