

L o o k i n g f o r M y

She usually sat in the bouncer's stool, in the exact corner of the bar where she could spot trouble before it came through the door or erupted inside. She made her beer last, like a woman who couldn't afford not to take care of herself, like a woman who had had to learn how to drink alone. She talked to no one except Pat the bartender, gray-haired and small and every inch a femme, or to the old-timers, the women who wafted in with their great blond bouffants and blouses with necklines and ruffles and cleavage, trailed by their mates in plumage at once more modest and far more dangerous, dark pants, white shirts, short hair.

It took a few visits, in fact, to know she was a woman, not just some guy who needed to see dykes to get it up and was allowed to stay because the women knew that he'd call the cops if they tried to throw him out. The first time we came through the door she stared at us for as long as she needed, legs apart, one elbow on the bar, cigarette stuck in her mouth. She didn't bother even to nod. She gave us a good look, without dropping her eyes,

without showing want or apology. She wore, as she always did, heavy blue work pants with a knife-edged crease, steel-toed black work shoes, perfectly polished, a pressed denim shirt, top button open, sleeves neatly rolled to a wide cuff above the elbow. Always, a pack of cigarettes in the pocket. Always Camels. Never, even in the bitter winters of upstate New York, a cap, a scarf, or a sweater. The most she would concede, when there was no other way, was a short wool jacket that zipped up the front. Nothing that would disguise the uniform. Nothing that would endanger the perfect ducktail. Nothing that would permit something as ordinary as the raw force of nature to erode the body she had constructed.

The bar had been there since the 1950s, built near factories and working-class row houses that would be demolished to make way for a turnpike in the relentless '60s. Progress beached the Riverview on an alley that dead-ended into massive concrete pylons instead of letting someone slip home the back way. By the time we walked through the door hand in hand in the late '70s, river and view had long gone. Inside, no one had bothered to keep up with the times. Pat the bartender and owner lived in the apartment above. She kept the front room downstairs for the jukebox and the bar, so that the regulars could hitch up their stools and have a quiet chat. The back room was for the younger crowd, for playing pool, for dancing, for touching in safety out of sight of the street, for looking. Across the back wall floated a '60s hippie painting, a white-skinned woman with flowing black tresses and crimson lips, a monstrous paint-by-numbers Ophelia, unbeatified mother of all casualties of love, a silent reproach to those of us still looking for our own kind, stubbornly chasing heartbreak.

We went there because in the 1970s lesbians like me—white, middle-class, college-educated—went to places called lesbian bars. It was folk wisdom (perhaps the goddess actually had decreed it) that every respectably sized city had a lesbian bar. Besides our beds, there was nowhere else but a lesbian bar for a lesbian to go and be a lesbian, to be known as a lesbian, nowhere else to know herself as a lesbian. Without the guidance of queer theory, I had accepted this cultural imperative. My first lesbian bar, in another big northeastern city, was a downtown businessmen's joint by day that turned into a highly profitable women's bar by night. They paid off the cops so that after the straight people fled to the suburbs, they could pack the rooms with young women, making desire and betrayal as thick as the smoke in the air.

When we had time to kill on our way to sex, or when sex wasn't an immediate possibility, or when



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M u s e u m

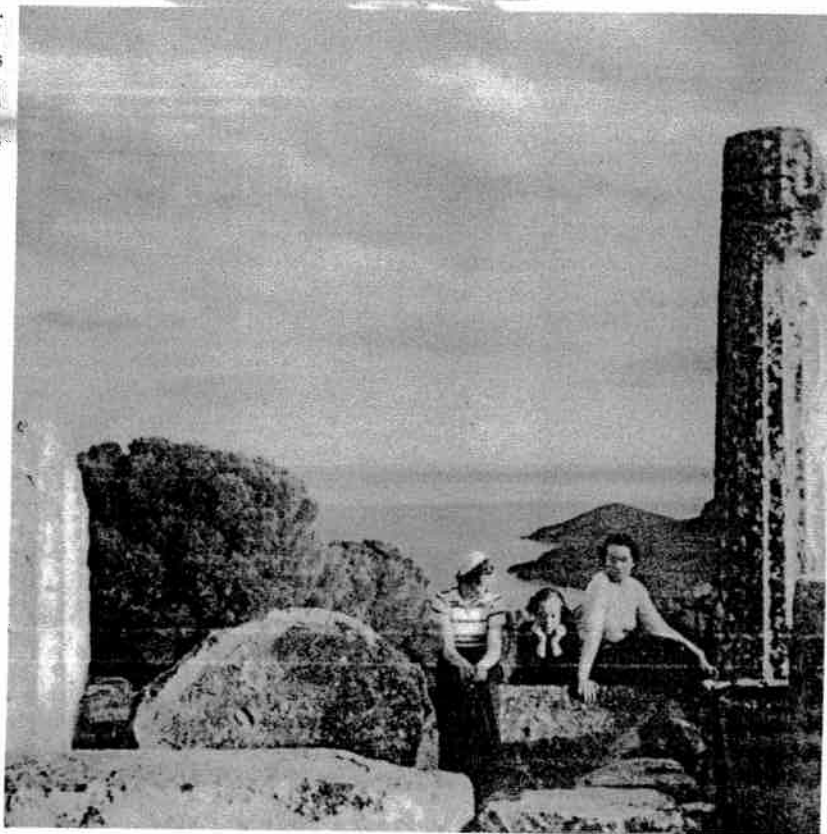
Catherine Lord

we needed a good line to get sex, we talked lesbian shop talk, gossiping about who was and who wasn't, trading information about the few books written for us, or the songs sung for us, or the one or two films in which we could see ourselves. Blissfully uninterested in our mothers, our grandmothers, or any abstraction from genealogy into history, we made it up as we went along, inventing ourselves as lesbians into order to create the ground upon which we needed to stand. Though we couldn't have said so, our lesbian bodies were making lesbian culture by filling the only space we had that permitted us to desire each other in public, that allowed us to make a public of each other.

To recognize each other, to be sure of each other, to test each other, we took care to look more or less exactly like each other. We dressed so as to reject a femininity imposed by the patriarchy while policing ourselves for any inadvertent lapses into masculinity, balancing with difficulty on the thin line by which we believed we could separate sex from gender so that we could have sex without gender. In practice, this meant a studiously unstudied costume of turtlenecks, open shirts (white, denim, or plaid), the full range of

jeans from pegs to bells, the full range of shoes so long as nothing had a heel, no lipstick, and no jewelry but womyn-signifier jewelry. Worry about being a sexual object was epidemic. Like the straight feminists from whom we had caught this concern, we spurned power trips, inequality, and domination. Barricades formed by wavy drawings of labia, behind which even thinking about penetration was suspect, were a hazard of our lives. More likely we were worried about being sexual subjects. Most likely we worried about being mistaken for the girls our mothers warned us about, which is to say the butch/femme couples who repelled our mothers, or so they would have insisted had we only known to ask.

Why you were interested in a woman who dressed anything like me, or thought anything like me, I only understood years later, when you showed me a book you had loved for a long time. A series of photographs by an American artist traveling in Greece with a few of his friends, the book intercut landscape and architectural fragments with snapshots of young American intellectuals producing for the benefit of Europeans a look



of lean, casual, tailored, sensible elegance that was virtually identical for male and female. That was my look, you explained, an American girl in Europe in the 1950s, bestowing on me a past I had neither lived nor seen nor dreamed of until the moment you wanted me to see in myself, to take for myself, an understated mannishness that, unimaginable as a costume for a young French girl of good middle-class family, was naturally your secret desire. Your gender of choice was American. (No matter, when I bought a copy of the book for myself years later, that it had actually been published in the 1930s. No matter, when I looked at it carefully, that it actually contained only a few photographs of the artist and his ambiguously eroticized friends. No matter that not having been born American, the image could never be a natural fit for me, either as gender or as nation.)



Much of this we couldn't put into words when we needed them, since we barely spoke each other's language. (You had had a Miss as a teacher, and I a Mademoiselle, but as children we couldn't have foretold that their lessons might have been useful to our pleasure.) You were a young French *femme*, a term that had nothing to do with the femme I supposed you must be, suspected you of being, wanted you to be: lipstick, perfume, jewelry, short skirts, heels and all. Unable to conduct extended conversations with each other no matter how much we loved each other, we spent a great deal of time in bed. No matter what we did and discovered there, you were, to my amusement and despair, reluctant to admit the existence of lesbians, except for some reason as a possibility among librarians, with whom you had a few improbable flings. You were suspicious of a term that would ghettoize you, as you put it, dismissive of a political strategy that used visibility as a tool to build identity. As *femme* /femme, you insisted on choice in appearances.

I spent a lot of time in the back room of the Riv, sitting at the chipped formica tables, drinking, playing pool, making out, watching Marion, watching you. I had never been so close to a woman like you. I had never been so close to a woman like Marion. We watched her intently, as if she came from another species. She watched us back, knowing we came from another species. We stalked each other patiently and delicately across a divide none of us had a word to name, much less a language to describe, in a territory where none of us would find her native language useful.

Marion stayed on after the other old timers had drifted away, giving up their bar to us '70s dykes and our feminism, after Pat had gotten sick and passed the Riv on to a younger woman who was more in touch with the times. After Marion was the only one left we could ask her a fraction of what we really wanted to know, and she could begin to show us how to play pool, perhaps because she needed a decent partner, perhaps because it amused her to watch us reinvent an erotic script she knew by heart. During the days she worked as a forklift operator in the same factory that had employed her for 30 years. She was the best they had. She was a man. No one had ever

figured it out, or given it away. Except for the union, she stayed out of politics, stayed out of trouble, minded her business. She'd had her share of good times, her share of women, plenty of women. Some of them had made her a home, and she had defended them, made love to them, supported them. What with one thing and another, though, nothing had worked out like she'd planned. No one had made it through with her, so she went back to the Riv. It wasn't home, but it was the only place left to be the butch she was, even amongst women who couldn't see or want or own up to wanting what she was.

Now that I'm in another city, now that Marion must be dead or beyond caring, now that I no longer drink, now that the two of us have memorized every inch of the bodies of other women, no matter how much we loved each other, I can safely map my desire onto her history, turn her absent body into my museum, my shrine, my school, into my home, my church, my country.

She was a great big butch, a big soft beautiful butch, a real stone butch. Her face and neck and forearms and hands were a flushed brown. The rest of her body, which never saw the sun, was a white so fragile that you could see the blue veins through the skin. Her breasts hung down, her nipples a dark purplish pink, exactly the color of her cunt. Even in the morning, her skin never entirely relinquished the marks made by the wide cotton strap she wrapped round and round herself to hold her breasts flat. Her belly was soft and big and hung in rolls. Like a man's, her hips were small, her legs thin. She was one of those women who hadn't much hair on her body, except for her pubic hair, which was entirely gray. Her hands and feet, small for the rest of her, seemed at odds with the hard muscles of her arms and shoulders and the tendons that stood out in her neck. Undressed or dressed, she inhabited her body in the same way, performing the smallest action with the careful precision of an athlete, or a lover, who knows it will be more beautiful if no motion is wasted, claiming with certainty the right to part whatever was in her way, to occupy any territory it pleased her to claim. She took her pleasure in controlling by looking, by staying silent, in giving abandon by never dropping her eyes. She was impossible to touch.

Now that I can map her history onto my desire, now that it's too late, I know that every atom of her body had been irrevocably altered by a litany beyond my imagining—police beatings, rape, evictions, firings without notice or explanation, medical abuse, endless small stupid everyday humiliations, and, though she was always too much of a gentleman to blame them, abandonment by women who couldn't bear to wake up outcast every morning of their lives. I learned the long way round, not by listening to Marion, who understood the value of silence, who would have seen no reason to relive her pain for a woman who would not comfort her with her body, the only way it could possibly have counted. I learned to map her, body and soul, by means she would have mocked, the books and the libraries, the careful collections that gave me the stories of those like her and those who wished her dead.

Only now that we are lost to each other, all three of us, could I make you a monument in the history I want to give to you, that I want you to give to me, that I want to take from you so that I can have the strength to go on. Only now could I build you a museum, a museum I would surround by a moat. Inside the walls, we could savor the memory we know we must have of a resistance so deep and wild it could never be vanquished by anything as ordinary as contempt or violence or laughter. In my struggle, I want you to be a heroine, a revolutionary, a *guerrillere*, a woman warrior, an amazon. In my struggle, I want to know your body. Now I could want your body. Now I can say that they ought to name the town after you, or the street, or at least the bar, which had closed when I went back to look. f